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PROOFS

Iran and the East – Displaying the Persian Connection

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Abstract

The narrative of historical progress created through museological engagements with the pre-Islamic Persian Empires is often focused on the era's legacy in the Near East and Mediterranean. However, these Empires were not solely or even primarily defined by their connections with their western neighbours. Most of their territories were based in an area now termed Greater Iran, and a great deal of their wealth was located in Western and Central Asia. Rather than being seen as the eastern peripheries of a western-facing empire, these regions should be understood as central to the success and cultural endurance of the pre-Islamic Persian empires.

In this paper I will use a single object to highlight the myriad of associations between ancient Persia and its eastern neighbours that could be presented within museum displays. By contrasting these with the narratives prevalent in museological practice I intend to demonstrate the need for a re-orienting of these traditions.

Introduction

Far from functioning as a space for storage and display, the primary significance of a museum is as a space for dialogue, presenting opportunities for interactions among visitors, professionals, objects and cultures. By developing narratives and networks within which collections can be placed, museum professionals and scholars contribute to the framing of these dialogues, orienting them according to certain evidence categories that can range from object shape to textual references. For objects belonging to the pre-Islamic Persian Empires, and particularly the Achaemenid Empire, this scholarly orientation in Europe and America has, until recently, focused on Persian connections to the West, to their Mediterranean and Mesopotamian predecessors, neighbours and successors.² However, this focus excludes the wider cultural constellations to which the pre-Islamic Persian Empires belonged, particularly their strong reliance on their eastern territories in Western and Central Asia, creating opportunities for exchange that extended all the way to modern day India and China. Instead, connections to these eastern geographies were long relegated to the field of Silk Roads studies, focusing on a later chronology, and a more circumscribed set of exchange routes.

These trends within academic scholarship have also limited the associations available to interactants within museums, curbing the potential dialogues that these spaces could stimu-

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2 An alternative to this Eurocentric view can be seen in the approaches of prehistorian Hermann Parzinger, who brings a broader view to the materials (Parzinger 2004; Cugunov *et al.* 2006). Similarly the works of scholars focusing on Central Asia and China like Armin Selbitschka highlight these connections (Selbitschka 2018).

late. Though scholarship has begun to connect these vast regions as part of a move towards more polyvocal and interdisciplinary studies, there is a lag in the application of these changes within museum contexts. In this paper, I will briefly explore what a re-oriented approach to pre-Islamic Persian networks might look like, specifically focusing on the Achaemenid period, presenting new avenues for museologically displaying connections between ancient Persia and its eastern neighbours.

I begin by presenting the constellation of associations around a single object, highlighting wider trends of interconnectivity between Persia and its eastern neighbours in order to present an alternative framework for structuring exhibitions. These are not necessarily direct connections or transfers, but a complex network that consists of conceptual and material artefacts as nodes that are transformed and reconsidered in a new aesthetic vocabulary with each transition through time and space. These transformations can make the influences difficult to recognise, but I hope my examples will highlight some of the possibilities. Following this, I will briefly present some examples of how these complex interconnectivities have been exhibited in the past, highlighting the pitfalls and potentials of mirroring these strategies for earlier materials.

The Object

The artefact that I want to highlight (HM 1687-93; Fig. 1) comes from the Hermitage Museum's collection and was found in barrow burial five at Pazyryk, a Scythian site in the Altai Mountains north of modern day China, excavated by Sergei Rudenko in 1949 (Rudenko 1953: 19–51). The intricately knotted pile carpet has 3,600 knots per decimetre squared; it is about 1.83 by 2 m in size and is made up of several areas or bands (Rudenko 1968: 41–55). The central largest area consists of 24 square panels containing stylised lilies. Around that is a band of 42 winged lion panels, followed by 24 deer, more stylised lotus flowers, and a larger band of 28 sets of riders and horses. Finally, another band of 92 griffin panels completes the design. Though the carpet's design is muted by age, the colours are still very vivid, scarlet deer, golden lotuses and riders in bright blue trousers.

It is unclear exactly where this carpet was made. Throughout scholarship it has been identified as a local copy of an Achaemenid original, or perhaps a piece imported from Armenia or Persia. More recent dendrochronological studies have determined that the original 5th century date given to the carpet by Rudenko is incorrect and it would have been interred in the early 3rd century, past-dating the Achaemenid period and the other nearby kurgans, adding a further layer of complexity to its narrative (Slusarenko 2000). However, the carpet still shows continuity of motifs and considering the interactions across this broad Eurasian realm, we can begin to see various influences and parallels in the artefact's materials, iconography and place of deposition.

Tracing Connections

Due to the organic nature of textiles, they do not tend to preserve very well in the archaeological record. The Pazyryk example was uncovered in a tomb that had remained encased in permafrost from the time of its creation to the time of its excavation. However, this is quite unique and early Persian fabrics, at least up to the Sasanian period, tend to be identified through their impressions on ceramics, or in small traces corroded into metals. This despite

their being ample textual and iconographic evidence for the strong cultural associations to fabrics, from tents to carpets to clothing (Sekunda 2005).

Of the many possible evidences for Persian textiles, two are particularly significant to this paper. The first is textual, from Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. In book 5 chapter 5, Cyrus the Great has just captured three forts and his expedition to conquer Babylon is well underway. However, the king's uncle Cyaxares is jealous of his nephew's success, and particularly of his grand companion of men. In order to set his uncle's heart at ease Cyrus leads him away from the main camp and orders Median carpets to be spread out before them. This passage is full of references to tents and carpets, and we know from other text fragments that Persian camps were veritable cities made of cloth (Xen. *Cyrop.* 8.5.2–14), not only practical for the travelling court, but also as opportunities for display promoting an image of power (Morgan 2016: 292). These itinerant practices are not dissimilar from those of their Eastern neighbours, for which we have more preserved textile evidence.

The material discrepancy that we encounter for Persian textiles means that we must search for parallel examples coming from other more durable material types including architectural decors, sealstones, stone reliefs and metalwork. Our second piece of evidence comes from the category of architectural decoration, namely the coloured brickwork at Susa. These polychrome depictions include Persian dress, presenting us with highly decorative fabrics including several with square patterns (LM AOD488) as well as stylised lotus flowers akin to those of the Pazyryk Carpet (BM 132525) and several Assyrian carpet reliefs (see BM 118910, 118913 and 124962). A cross-material deployment of similar iconographical traditions highlights a possible network of derivation where designs found in ephemeral textile traditions along with luxury goods and permanent architecture were spread across vast geographies.

One particularly important motif to consider in the study of Eurasian artistic exchange in this period is that of the horse. Both the Persians and the Chinese traded with the steppe nomads to obtain their superior horses. These interactions influenced Persian regional relations and China's imperial development, and they helped shape the later more official system of exchange that began to emerge in the 2nd c. BCE. It is thanks to the Han's access to horses through their western neighbours in Ferghana that the unified dynasty was strong enough and contributed to their ability to oppose their northern adversaries, the Xiongnu (Tao 2007: 91). The trade of and transport on steppe-horses played a defining role in this period for economic, cultural and military transformations across several Eurasian cultures groups and these "heavenly horses" as they would be called in the Han Era (206 BCE–220 CE), also stimulated interactions with the areas surrounding the Ferghana Valley, including Bactria, Sogdiana and Parthia (Liu 2010: 18). It is evident that horses were an interconnecting commodity across the region and their accessibility is also linked to the spread of trade in several other important products not only including textiles but also pottery and metals (Wilkinson 2014: 47).

The horse depicted on the Pazyryk Carpet appears similar to those presented on the Apadana relief at Persepolis with a "bobbed tail and tied-up forelock" (Rubinson 1990: 52). The Pazyryk horses and that depicted at Persepolis appears to have a sturdy plains stock, recalling the description of the large Nisaeen horses by Herodotus (Hdt. *Hist.* III.106.2). His digression into horse types alongside the great variation in horses etched into the royal structures provide context to the contemporary valuation of different horse breeds

throughout the contrasting landscapes of the vast Persian sphere of influence and exchange. This also corroborates the evidence of horses being used as tribute and traded as luxury goods, presenting a possible pathway through which the carpet's iconography could have been disseminated.

Another faunal motif to consider is that of the deer. The specific deer depicted on the carpet is best identified as a Persian fallow deer previously common to Anatolia, the Levant, Mesopotamia and western Persia (Rudenko 1968: 42). The classification can be made based on its large antlers, long tail and spotted body which can also be seen in other representation, particularly in zoomorphic luxury goods such as ivory scabbards (Litvinskiy & Pichikiyan 1981: 136–152), metal finials (HM S-273) and gold figurines, all dating to the 5th–4th c. BCE. Besides the spots, the deer's body is also filled with coloured dashed lines and irregular curved shapes. Reinhard Hubel (1970: 14) suggests that these markings indicate organs and a spine, but a simpler explanation is that these designs are decorative. They mirror the carpet's other motifs and may be derived from the tradition of cloisonné metalwork that we see in Achaemenid art, particularly in the eastern regions of the empire, and the animal style art of the Scythian steppe. Similar examples can be found among the 4th c. BCE Oxus Treasure (BM 123912) and the Hermitage Museum's Central Asian collection (HM Z-556).

The next motif is more fantastical, a mythical animal hybrid, the lion-griffin or winged lion which is the most frequently repeated design on the Pazyryk Carpet (Rudenko 1958).³ This apotropaic figure is one central to Achaemenid royal art, and it is present in wider regional motifs of kingship often further mythologised through the inclusion of horns. On occasion, its protective royal function is superseded by its role as a foe for the royal hero. However, this symbol is also related to imperial China in the form of a *pixiu* or *bixie* (Rudenko 1958: 101–122; Watt 2004: 104–105). In a geographical sense, the Pazyryk Carpet functions as a link between the Persian and Near-Eastern iconographic tradition for winged lions and their later appearance in Far-Eastern contexts from the Spring and Autumn period (722–479 BCE).⁴ The creature's shape, expression and horns are so reminiscent of the Persian version (LM Sb3322, Sb3323; MET 54.3.2; OIM A28582) we can assume a gradual transferal of royal Persian motifs eastward by this period (see also Francfort *et al.* 2000: 796–800; Francfort 2003: 32). This is further corroborated by the appearance of east-Achaemenid style griffin- and lion-headed bracelets, found previously on the Susan acropolis (LM Sb2761-2) and in the Oxus Treasure (BM 124017) but also depicted within the Apadana reliefs, in a Xinyuan kurgan burial of the 4th c. BCE (Debaine-Francfort 1989: 199, pl. II/2; Laing 1995: 11). This area was just beyond the fringes of the Chinese dynasties, inhabited by (semi-)nomadic tribes active in transferring motifs of luxury from the west into the realms of early China and vice-versa.

A less fanciful, but equally revealing, depiction of lions is also available to us in another textile from the same Pazyryk burial (HM 1687-100).⁵ This fragment incorporates a procession of lions in the same style as the lion friezes evident in the brickwork of Susa (LM AOD489c), as well as those of the preceding Babylonian empire now housed at the Pergamon Museum

3 The eagle-griffin is also present on a saddle cloth fragment from Pazyryk barrow burial 2 (HM 1684-325).

4 Another interesting link is a bronze winged lion found in Helmand, Afghanistan now kept at the British Museum (BM 123267).

5 Also compare the patterns depicted on this fabric to the Frieze of Archers at Susa (LM AOD488).

(VA Bab 01379-1407), and the stone carvings of Persepolis (OIM A24068) (Piotrovsky 1974: 24; Parzinger 2004: 54). The use of this textile as a horse's breastband, once again highlights the possible influence of highly portable fabrics on foreign iconography. An additional lion parallel from Pazyryk can be found in an earlier burial, barrow 1 that dates to a century before our Pazyryk Carpet. This burial included a felt carpet fragment sporting a panel of stylised lion or wolf heads (HM 1295-52) that are a clear adaptation of a Persian motif seen in both gold ornaments (RMO B1960/11.1) and architectural decorations (LM Sb3336) belonging to the heyday of the Achaemenid Empire (Francfort 2003: 32). Lions were not indigenous to the Altai mountains, nor to China, and their adoption, albeit in a transformed, and in the case of the *bixie*, mythologised visual vocabulary shows a clear derivation from Near Eastern royal iconography.

Expanding the Cross-Over

If we cast our net wider than the Pazyryk Carpet and its significant parallels in stone reliefs and gold adornments (ex. BM 1947,0712.365 and 1936,1118.140), we can identify several other goods that show cross-overs, including the metal vessels for which the Achaemenids, and later Parthians and Sassanians, were known (Harper 2002: 97–98). One example of this, albeit a late one, is a silver box found in Zhao Mo's tomb at Nanyue of the 2nd c. BCE (Laing 1995: 11–17). Contrary to the vagueness surrounding the fabrication of the Pazyryk Carpet, this object has been identified as a local manufacture, presenting an interesting example of the transfer of both iconographic and fabrication knowledge (Nickel 2012). The lobed Persian vessel was not, however, adopted wholesale, and there are clear signs of modification as the vessel was fitted with a footing and inscription (Rawson 1991).

The 2nd c. BCE date associated with this silver box makes it a difficult comparison for the 4th c. BCE Pazyryk Carpet. It is important to remember that the Eurasian connections embodied in the motifs at Pazyryk occurred prior to the formal meeting of the Persian Empire and their eastern Asian counterparts during the late 2nd century. However, as we have seen a lack of formalised connections does not mean a lack of influence as cross-regional exchange was already occurring in the early Bronze Age (Wilkinson 2014) and throughout the pre-Han dynasties (Rawson 2013). The nomadic tribes acted as intermediaries leading to a longer period of transition needed to get motifs across from Western Asia to the East, as well as a broader spectrum of possibilities for the transformation of these motifs along the way. It was only in the late 2nd c. BCE that the Han Empire would first send an ambassador that far west,⁶ though their interest for western goods is already clear from earlier tombs (Kost 2017). The Han's ability to build a stable empire gave them the resources to engage in these kinds of large-scale missions, and the initial contact soon bloomed into a long relationship of trade. Under the Sassanians (224–651 CE), artefacts and motifs were traveling more directly and more quickly than those of their Achaemenid predecessors, leading to less morphing of the iconography. This also is visible in the expansion of exchange routes, for example the Sassanid motif of the horseback lion hunt that was able to transfer from a metal bowl (CMA John L. Severance Fund 1962.150) to a Chinese textile found in Japan (Feltham 2010: 15).

6 For an overview of Chinese sources discussing these early interactions see Tao 2007.

Exhibiting Change

It is at this point that we begin to see exchanges presented in museum narratives as cross-cultural parallels of single objects within the context of the Silk Roads exchange. One example is the appearances of a Sassanian vessel alongside a Tang Era (618–907 CE) bowl in the Art of China Gallery at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. While this type of display is interesting in displaying trade and influence, it often lacks opportunities for the visitor to gain any kind of contextual depth. It is only really in the discussion of later Islamic period materials, particularly those of the Safavids, Ming and Qing (18th c. CE), where copies of Chinese motifs and Persian shapes can be traced, that a more nuanced discussion is included. However, in recent refurbishments these themes have begun to emerge within wider regional and chronological frameworks. A significant recent example of this is the references to Central Asian trade, Persian glass- and metalwork vessels, as well as the use of Iranian cobalt blue for Ming vases, in the newly renovated China section of Room 33 in the British Museum. However, despite this gallery's forward-thinking approach, in other similar collections it remains rare to see a more engaged discussion of these wider iconographical cross-overs and their long-term history. Museologically speaking, the norm is to only set aside small sections of larger permanent galleries, whether those belonging to Asian or Islamic Art, in order to contrast only a few objects of the same type, iconography and form, the most direct transfers possible with little information as to the *longue durée* of these connections.

Even in Silk Roads exhibitions which should be oriented towards a varied exchange across a broad geographical terrain, the focus tends to be on later periods of direct trade or singular hubs of exchange rather than complex constellations. *Traveling the Silk Road* at the American Museum of Natural History (14/11/09–15/08/10), though immersive and impressive, is one example that cuts out a long period of exchange and cross-cultural development. The focus is on 600–1000 CE and considering silk trade with the steppes was already happening in the 2nd millennium BCE (Ligabue & Salvatori 1989: 71), there is 1000 years of history that remains unrepresented in this chronological framework. The Ashmolean's Asian Crossroads permanent gallery follows a similarly late chronology (roughly 400–1400 CE) and still speaks of an overland Silk Road rather than using a term that better highlights the plurality of engagements. In an attempt to highlight cross-cultural transfers, they use a CONNECT label for a select few objects in the gallery, but even this seems too little for an exhibition that is meant to be entirely focused on the thematics of exchange.

Despite these current shortcomings there are opportunities for the future that promote an alternative focus, and some museums are already well on their way to presenting a more connected view. A significant contribution to this will be the recent rise in research pertaining to the Central Asian steppe, exemplified most recently by the British Museum's blockbuster *Scythians* exhibition (14/09/17–14/01/18). Presenting a view that included issues of provenance, material-textual source conflicts, geographic diversity, public obscurity, cultural legacies and cross-regional exchange, this exhibition presented an image of what future museological treatments of this region could be like. After all, the diverse and dispersed cultures that make up this broad geography are significant for many of the more traditional museum collection staples. They mark out the contact zone not just between Persia and

China, but across many well-researched cultural spheres, also engaging with agents from the worlds of ancient Greece, Mesopotamia and India.

These cultural connectors illustrate Frederick Bohrer's (2003: 16) concept of the "exotic". Rather than denoting the problematic notions of occident and orient, words that have changed meanings countless times across millennia of use, the exotic defies the idea of a single cultural binary, instead presenting broader notions of social differentiation that can derive from a combination of conceptual, historical and geographical distance. While Bohrer uses this term to discuss the reception of Assyrian art in the 19th century, it can equally be deployed for the Central Asian example. Their histories as a (semi-) nomadic and complex constellation of groupings long remained alien to mainstream discussions and scholarship of the great pre-Islamic Empires, and within museums it is only recently that their material cultures have been given conceptual and physical space for display. Their hybridity remains problematic, and these cultures are still struggling to establish a place within traditional departmental and permanent gallery divisions of Graeco-Roman, Perso-Mesopotamian and East Asian culture. These spatial and intellectual subdivisions that disorient the Scythians within collections and displays, also have a wider impact of disassociating the interconnected worlds of ancient history for our museum audiences. So, while the success of the British Museum's temporary exhibition, *Scythians*, increases their museological engagement, there is still a great deal of work to do.

Looking Forward

Later periods of history have had a longer tradition than the Scythians of being displayed in a dialogic fashion. Displays of late Antiquity and the early medieval period have more successfully integrated wider geographical ranges. However, this has as much to do with the progress of museological interpretation strategies as it does with a tradition of museological marginalisation for this period, still thought of by many visitors as the 'dark ages'. Already holding a hybrid status, these histories are woven into narratives that are often defined by their connections to more established disciplines. They begin as kaleidoscopic systems of knowledge and thus are more easily displayed as such. Recently this dependence on other periods has shed much of its associations of historical hierarchy, or of centre and periphery, instead expanding to a more constellatory approach that presents itself as a series of nodes and edges, one that takes into account notions of connectivity, diversity and mobility. The recent *Crossroads* exhibition at the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam (15/09/17–02/04/18) and the Connecting Early Medieval European Collections (CEMEC) project from which it stems, highlight the affective ways in which scholars have managed to engage with this period, and share its significance with a wider public, presenting cross-cultural connections, spatial intersections and thematic overlaps through geographically, temporally and stylistically diverse objects. Such examples can provide useful prototypes for the re-thinking of the interconnectivity of ancient Eurasia.

I've chosen to highlight this single textile as an example of a possible node for discussing the diverse cross-cultural influence and exchange pertaining to pre-Islamic Eurasia. This flexible constellatory structure fits into the "gateway" museological approach based in concentric or pyramidal structures of meaning (Francis *et al.* 2011). This interpretive approach is oriented towards engaging a variety of audiences through linked narratives, with an overarching theme exemplified by a key object or objects and associated large-scale interpretation,

followed by expansion and more detailed descriptions, and finally the expert level labelling that gives the intricacies of each object and sub-theme. Thus, the Pazyryk Carpet as a gateway object comes to exemplify the theme of complex Eurasian constellations of exchange, with the other objects presenting more localised or thematically circumscribed connections, and each label giving detailed provenance that presents a detailed network of cross-cultural influences that can be studied further.

However, I understand that a complete overhaul of existing permanent displays is neither financially possible nor practically desirable for many institutions and embedding key object dialogues within existing exhibits can be equally effective. The various museums making up the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin for example engaged in an exchange among themselves where key cross-cultural interactions and influences were highlighted by connecting individual objects across their museums (Beyer *et al.* 2016). So, when moving through each museum you could follow a path of object relations, presenting an overarching vision to the visitor of exchange and dialogue through time and space. This could equally be done for well-established Asian and Middle Eastern, Iranian or even Mediterranean departments in a single museum, providing an opportunity to explore new combinations, bring difficult-to-categorise pieces out of storage, and engage museum visitors with new and significant narratives. Thus, rather than promoting a frantic re-design, museums can opt for a slow and fragmentary integration of alternative connections within existing long-term displays and planned temporary exhibitions as a feasible way to bring these alternative links into practice.

New exhibitions and research initiatives like *Scythians* and the Berlin-based artefact linkages show steps in the right direction, as we work towards a new, more inclusive vision of the ancient world. With small changes we can reposition our interpretive strategies to better highlight a diversity of connections, many that may not be easily visible on the surface, but nonetheless provide compelling narratives that connect collections and audiences in new and interesting ways.

Abbreviations

British Museum (BM)
 Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA)
 Hermitage Museum (HM)
 Louvre Museum (LM)
 Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET)
 Oriental Institute Museum (OIM)
 Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (RMO)
 Vorderasiatisches Museum (VA)

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Fig. 1: Pile Carpet. Wool; knot technique. 183x200 cm. Pazyryk Culture. 5th-4th c. BCE. Inv. no. 1687/93. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum. Alexander Koksharov, Leonard Kheifets