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GREECE VIII. GREEK ART IN CENTRAL ASIA, AFGHANISTAN, AND NORTHWEST INDIA

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viii. GREEK ART IN CENTRAL ASIA, AFGHANISTAN, AND NORTHWEST INDIA

The emergence of Greek art as a phenomenon following the expedition of Alexander the Great was a major cultural event in Central Asia and India. Its effects were felt for almost a thousand years, down to the early Islamic period. This phenomenon is interesting not only because of the brevity of the actual Macedonian political presence in Asia, but also because of the mechanism of all kinds of influences impregnating one another during this period. The first real impact was produced between the last third of the 4th century B.C.E., and the beginning of the 3rd century from Alexander to the early Seleucids, when Bactria (q.v.) and the other eastern satrapies of the Achaemenian Empire were still geographically and politically connected with the Mediterranean world. It is quite possible that the most ancient objects of eastern origin found in the treasure of the Taḵt-e Sangin sanctuary on the right bank of the Oxus River/Āmu Daryā (q.v.) in Tajikistan were part of the acquisitions of the

Hellenistic armies that more than once ravaged the Achaemenian sanctuaries. The establishment of the Parthian kingdom on the Iranian plateau in the middle of the 3rd century B.C.E. brought about a division of the eastern territories with the founding of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom. This was followed by a renewal of the Greek political expansion initiated by Alexander in the direction of the Indian area. The testimonies of Central Asian art that have come down to us thus depend on the political vicissitudes, alternating between Greek and nomadic expansion. Among the objects found over more than a century and a half in the territories that today correspond to the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union and with Afghanistan and Pakistan only few can be attributed to a purely Hellenistic archeological context. The main examples are the sanctuary of the god Oxus at Taḵt-e Sangin and the remnants of the capital of eastern Bactria, namely Āy Ḵānom/Aï Khanum (q.v.) in northern Afghanistan. At Āy Ḵānom, Macedonian political power was upheld from the beginning of the Seleucid period to the disappearance of the city around 145 B.C.E. under the attacks of the Saka nomads from north, followed by that of Yüeh-chih (Yuezhi). A thorough excavation of this city has shown the fidelity of the settlers to their Mediterranean roots, and, in the case in point, to canons of the purest Greek art. However, the artistic testimonies, which are mainly datable to the first half of the 2nd century B.C.E., demonstrate a strict traditionalism, which can be explained by the geographic isolation of the city from the West from the 3rd century on. This is apparent in local artistic productions, such as the use of pebble mosaics (PLATE I; Bernard, 1975, pp. 173–80; these mosaics recall the well-known parallels that were then already out of fashion in the West, such as those of Pella in Macedonia, Eretria in Euboea, Motya in Sicily, etc.), sculptures, or certain aspects of architectural decorations (on Corinthian capitals see Bernard, 1968).

The transmission of Hellenic influences within Asia follows the itinerary of travelers, soldiers, and settlers without there being any commercial network to speak of. The latter was not to appear before the 1st century B.C.E., after the fall of the last Hellenic sovereigns of Central Asia and India. This absence of a commercial network led to a dearth of Mediterranean imports, the volume of which within the Hellenized Central Asian domain appears low in comparison with the one further west in the Parthian domain (e.g., Nisa, Susa). These imports essentially boil down to small statues and some other objects like the

plaster moulds discovered at Āy Ḵānom (Bernard, 1971, pp. 432–35) or Begrām (q.v.), where the transmission of Mediterranean iconographic models was no doubt encouraged.

This geographic isolation, however, does not appear to have prevented the development of a technically advanced artistic school (PLATE II). The local production of stone sculptures, using a fine white limestone from northern Afghanistan and the Hissar mountains (between the Amu Daryā and Zarafšān valleys), is attested by the discovery of an unfinished statuette of a crowned youth (PLATE IV, not only in the shape of the clothes (e.g., the finds from Nisa), but also in the naturalistic and vigorous character of the portraits (Veuve, 1987, Portrait of Straton: pls. 52–53; see also AFGHANISTAN viii, pl. XX.1). This category of figurative art notably develops in the coinage which, from one historical period to another, reflects the evolution of portraiture, proceeding from a realistic style to the more symbolic styles of later artists who, though still Hellenized, were influenced by Iranian or Indian arts. The official royal art exemplifies this evolution between the Hellenistic realism of royal portraiture (PLATE V), which, on the coins, for example, shows the gradual aging of the rulers' faces, and the frontal and hieratic style of portraits of Parthian or Kushan sovereigns (statuary of King Kanishka: Schlumberger, pp. 64–65; Schlumberger, Le Berre, and Fussman, pp. 118–19, pls. 60–61; Stavisky, pl. XVII; coins: Rosenfield, pl. III).

The examples of statuary known today mainly belong to the religious (or funerary) realm (PLATE VI). They include monumental statues like that of Zeus-Mithra in the Āy Ḵānom temple with indented niches, as well as small-size bronzes of divinities, like those of Heracles (Bernard, 1974, pp. 302–3; on the iconographic importance of this hero in the Indian domain, see Santoro, 1991, pp. 269–309). But most of the production is represented by portraits of donors (temples at Āy Ḵānom and Taḵt-e Sangin, and later in the Kushan period at Dal'verzin Tepe, PLATE VII, in southern Uzbekistan and Delbarjin near Balḵ; qq.v.). Curiously enough, the statuettes and terracotta figurines that were so widespread in the West and in India, and later up to the early Middle Ages in Central Asia, are almost totally absent among the finds of Āy Ḵānom. It is not yet known why this type of ex-voto appears to be alien to the domestic religion in Hellenistic Bactria.

The presence of sculptures in the round or bas-reliefs with complex scenes does not appear to be attested in the Graeco-Bactrian world. As for small statuary, we might mention a battle scene decorating the ivory handle of a sword from Taḵt-e Sangin (Litvinskiĭ and Pichikyan, pp. 5–18) and the more ancient toilet trays of Gandhara, which reproduced usually imported originals, especially from the 1st century B.C.E. Examples of complex scenes in large statuary, however, did not appear before the Yüeh-chih and Kushan periods. The sculptures of the Khalchayan palace in the Sorḵān Daryā valley represent a battle and groups of enthroned sovereigns. With the equestrian hunting scenes, these images are well known in the Iranian Parthian and in the Central Asian world (e.g., Dura Europos, Nisa). They best symbolize the art of the first settled nomads, in which the techniques of Hellenized artists are adopted to serve Iranian themes (PLATE VIII). In the geographically closest case to Khalchayan, namely that of bone plates of the nomadic necropolis of Orlat near Samarkand, battle and hunting scenes are carved in a non-Greek style that graphically resemble nomadic and Indian products (e.g., mirrors found in the steppes, the Taḵt-e Sangin plate, etc.: Ilyasov and Rusanov, pp. 107–59).

In the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom, the iconography appears to be essentially limited to themes and motifs of a Mediterranean origin, except for a small number of figurines in bone, wood, or terracotta that express native cults. The branch of Hellenic art that appears to have gone through an actual renewal of its iconography was that of the Indo-Greeks, who soon became Indianized, as shown by their coinage, which features gods from the Hindu pantheon (e.g., coins of Agathocles (PLATE IX) and Pantaleon; see Audouin and Bernard, pp. 7–41; Bopearachchi, pl. 7, series 9–10 and pl. 9, series 6). The image of Buddha, however, does not appear until the 1st century C.E. (PLATE X), the reason lying in the doctrine of Buddhism as such and the fidelity to the rules set by Ašoka (q.v.), who had made the cult a state religion. The Greek and Graeco-Aramaic inscriptions discovered at Qandahār (bibliography in Rapin, 1992a, p. 391) shows that, starting with the mid-3rd century B.C.E., Buddhism appealed to a largely Hellenized society that tradition-ally remained attached to its religion. The earliest dated examples of the anthropomorphic representation of Buddha belong to the period of Kaniška (ca. 130 C.E.?), but the most ancient representations may already have appeared before our era, when Greek and Indian sovereigns made place for the newcomers of Scythian or Parthian

nomadic origin. In the earliest representation, Buddha is portrayed sitting in a frontal position, the “royal” position following an iconographic treatment that can be compared to that of the settled Scythian nomadic sovereigns Maues or Azes I (q.v.) in the first half of the 1st century B.C.E. (Cribb, 1999–2000, pp. 151–89). It is not clear whether the comparison between religious and royal iconography follows an evolution of the doc-trine, but it is certainly true that these changes definitely confirm the transfer of power into the hands of the newcomers.

Polychromy appeared to be an important element of architectural decoration, but figurative painting was rare. Its existence, however, was attested by two finds at Āy Ḵānom (fragments of a shield discovered at the arsenal and of a painting decorating the main niche of the naos of the temple with indented niches). But as far as we know, at the difference of examples found at Nisa in Parthia, the decoration of the walls in Bactria seems to have rather consisted of carpets and paintings on canvas, since the technique of mural painting was not used before the Kushan period. The Delbarjin painting representing the scheme of the Dioscuri was previously ascribed to the Hellenistic period, but it is nowadays thought to date from the 2nd or 3rd century C.E. and to be related to an Oriental theme (Lo Muzio, pp. 41–71).

Unlike the study of art objects, which are better known due to their number, as they include not only field finds but also chance finds on the antique market, the study of architecture is limited to the sites that are actually explored by archeologists (Āy Ḵānom, Taḵt-i Sangin, Delbarjin, Samarqand-Afrāsiāb, Begrām, Taxila). Like their plastic art, the architecture of these sites reflects the Graeco-Bactrian civilization, which is at times a synthesis, at times a juxtaposition of elements belonging to cultures in touch with each other since the Achaemenian period: Greek, Mesopotamian, Iranian, nomadic or indigenous. At Āy Ḵānom, the vigor of the Hellenistic element is supported by institutions of Greek culture as warrants of political power, manifesting themselves in the shape of libraries, a theater, and a gymnasium. The large number of columns and the systematic use of a Greek decor lend the buildings a Mediterranean aspect. However, the outlines of the temples, as well as those of the palace and residences, point to an Oriental Iranian and Mesopotamian origin. Here the aspect of the worshipped divinities probably showed a

syncretic character contrasting with the official pantheon illustrated in the coinage (Bernard, 1976, pp. 245–75; idem, 1981, pp. 108–20; Rapin, 1992b, pp. 101–24; Lecuyot, 1993, pp. 31–45, pls. 1–2). Although examples going back to the Hellenistic period are almost totally unknown, it appears that the Indo-Greek domain produced the same mechanisms of architectural syncretism between Hellenistic contributions and a native background. We might mention the example of the Jandial temple at Taxila, where the Ionic columns and the overall Mediterranean aspect are combined with an arrangement of space that reveal an Oriental (perhaps Hindu) cult, even though it may belong to a post-Hellenistic period (Rapin, in Invernizzi, ed.).

See also AFGHANISTAN viii-ix; ARCHAEOLOGY v; ART IN IRAN iv; BACTRIA;CENTRAL ASIA.

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