



KHALCHAYAN

KHALCHAYAN (lat 38°17'37" N, long 67°58'44" E; = Khalchiyan, Surxondaryo prov., southern Uzbekistan), site of a settlement and palace of the nomad Yuezhi, with paintings and sculptures of the mid-1st century BCE.

The site of Khalchayan, in the valley of the Surkhan Darya (a northern tributary of the Oxus or [Amu Darya](#)), was occupied by the Yuezhi, a nomad group who migrated into this region, ancient Bactria, in the middle of the 2nd century BCE, after they were driven out of their homeland in the Gansu province of northwestern China by a rival nomad clan. [Bactria](#) comprised the region between the Hindu Kush and Hissar mountains, in what is today northern Afghanistan and the southern tracts of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The Yuezhi, and perhaps other nomad groups also (the Sakas), overthrew the Hellenistic Greek dynasty which had ruled there since the mid-3rd century as successor to the post-Achaemenid governments of [Alexander](#) and the Seleucids (see [BACTRIA i](#)). Prior to the Greeks, Bactria was a province or satrapy of the Achaemenid empire for two centuries between the 6th to 4th century BCE. The five clans of the Yuezhi, within a century of their arrival, united under the banner of the strongest group, the Kushans (see [KUSHAN DYNASTY](#))—the name which they carried thereafter—and its leader [Heraus](#) (Gk. Heraios). The palace at Khalchayan was built by Heraus, no doubt in proclamation of newly acquired status, probably in the middle of the 1st century BCE (the date is disputed), though the site dates from the preceding Hellenistic period.

Khalchayan was excavated by Pugachenkova between 1959 and 1963. The paintings and almost life-size sculptures (in clay, painted) recovered from the



palace, now housed in museums in Tashkent, rank among the most remarkable finds of the ancient world. The sculptures were ranged in the entrance portico, and in three large compositions (reconstructed by Pugachenkova) covering the upper part of three walls in the main hall of the palace; the fourth wall was decorated with paintings which have survived only in fragments. Two panels depict Kushan rulers, other members of the ruling aristocracy, and a Parthian ally (their nomad neighbor to the west), all shown frontally, seated or standing, watched over by patron deities drawn from West Asian, Iranian, and Hellenistic pantheons (Cybele, Mithra, [Heracles](#), Athena, Nike). The third panel, with figures on horseback, probably represents the victory of the Yuezhi/Kushans over their rivals in Bactria, the nomad Sakas. Sculptured garlands and putti, and figures involved in Dionysian revelry, formed an upper register above the panels. The palace at Khalchayan was evidently a dynastic cult center of the Kushans (evincing a practice shared with the Parthians); one of the figures, of which only the head survives, was possibly that of an ancestor.

The Khalchayan sculptures represent a most significant watershed in the history and art of Bactria. Historically, they reflect the rise of the Kushans as a political power in Bactria, soon to form an empire which encompassed the neighboring kingdom of Gandhara, across the Hindu Kush mountains, and Mathura in northern India. Artistically, the Khalchayan sculptures, as the first major sculptural expression of the nomad Kushans, brought to the fore the indigenous local and nomad traditions of Bactria, which until then, under the mainstream political and cultural powers of the Achaemenid Persians and Hellenistic Greeks, existed at the margins of artistic activity. At the same time, the synthesis which the sculptures present of local, nomad, Achaemenid, and Hellenistic styles and iconographies point to four centuries of prior intermixture in Bactria between these different cultures. The 'language' of the Khalchayan sculptures sets an artistic norm which continued in Bactria for almost a millennium.

The most striking feature of the sculptures is the literal mode of realism used in the depiction of the personages, rendering each as a highly individualized portrait ([Figure 1](#)). Another striking feature is the wide range of local facial types represented, mirroring the mixed population which no doubt characterized Bactria, a geographical and cultural crossroads, throughout its history. It can be assumed that the portraited treatment derived from Hellenistic traditions laid down in Bactria in the previous period. Prototypes

for realistic portraiture were present in numerous representations of Greco-Bactrian kings on coins (Figure 2), if not in sculptures produced at the time (in marble, limestone, stucco, clay, terracotta, bronze), which reflected instead the idealized (rather than portraitized) realism of Classical Greek principles, to which the Bactrian Greeks, far from their homelands, and faced with the constant threat of nomad invasions, adhered with self-conscious conservatism. A contrast can be observed between the impressionistic rendering of the Khalchayan faces and the more precise technical treatment of Greco-Bactrian coins and sculptures.

What is more important to observe is that the realism of the Khalchayan sculptures owed as much to the local indigenous culture in Bactria as to Hellenistic traditions. Long before portraitized realism became a serious preoccupation of the Greeks, realistic, almost portraitized faces, can be seen in some of the gold plaques of the Oxus Treasure (found in southern Tajikistan), made locally in Bactria during the Achaemenid period (Figure 3). The plaques reflect an indigenous tradition, evident also in the local faces depicted (seen also in two heads in gold in the Treasure, also locally made, of about the same date), and represent the antecedents of the Khalchayan sculptures which appeared four centuries later.

This indigenous manner of representation can be recognized also in the Hellenistic period, in many examples from the Greek city of Ai Khanum (in northeastern Afghanistan; see [ĀY KĀNOM](#)), existing at the periphery of artistic productions, among terracottas, ceramics (figurines, handles of vessels and emblemata decorated with human figures and busts, moulds for masks), and the minor arts (figurines, figured pendants in silver, ivory and bone). Individualized local faces appear (Figure 4), rendered with an impressionistic realism, and can be distinguished from productions which followed Classical Greek prototypes. It is remarkable to observe this local manner of representation in objects found in Bactria which date from as early as the Bronze Age, 2nd millennium BCE, in a stone head from Mirshade (Uzbekistan, not far from Khalchayan) and a series of small copper trumpets used for hunting, with strikingly individualized renderings of local faces (Figure 5). The indigenous antecedents of the Khalchayan sculptures, therefore, can be traced back not only to the Achaemenid (and Hellenistic) period in Bactria, but to the Bronze Age, though evidence is absent for the intervening centuries.

Two significant conclusions emanate from this, which are contrary to the generally held view that Khalchayan was little more than a direct continuation



of Hellenistic Greek realism in art into the Yuezhi/Kushan period, with the addition of a few local details (faces, dress). Firstly, there were two traditions of realism in Bactria, an indigenous tradition (with beginnings, it would appear, in the Bronze Age) and the Greek. Secondly, each played an equally important role in the creation of the Khalchayan sculptures. Arguably, it was the existence of an indigenous tradition of realism and individualization which made it receptive to Greek/Hellenistic norms and techniques, the borrowings evident in the more precise portraiture of the Khalchayan sculptures compared to the Oxus Treasure gold plaques. Furthermore, the continuation, for almost a millennium, of the impressionistic portraitized realism of the 'Khalchayan language' in the arts of Bactria (and other parts of Western Central Asia) could only have been possible if this expression was already a part of the indigenous cultural base.

The individualized depiction of a wide range of local faces was evidently a major preoccupation of the local artistic tradition in Bactria (and other regions of Western Central Asia). It is possible that this preoccupation was linked to the tribal society of Western Central Asia, and to issues of tribal identity based on ethnic affiliation. It is well known that, from as early as the Bronze Age, there were periodic migrations into Western Central Asia from the north, of nomad tribal groups from the Eurasian steppe, which became a part of the local population. The nomad presence in Bactria can be recognized in the quality of agitation and continuous movement in the Khalchayan faces (when compared with quieter Greek depictions), which can be linked to the restless, continuous movement of 'animal style' compositions, typical of nomad art (horse trappings, belt buckles, personal ornaments), many examples of which have survived in Bactria (Figure 6). The bold vigor which the Khalchayan sculptures emanate, conveyed largely by their impressionistic (rather than refined) treatment, can perhaps also be linked to nomad qualities required for survival on the open steppe.

Local and nomad traditions were understandably overshadowed during the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods by the mainstream expressions of the Persians and Greeks. Equally understandably, they came to the fore when the nomad Kushans took control, and led to the creation of the Khalchayan sculptures, setting a norm which persisted in Bactria, and elsewhere in Western Central Asia, for almost a millennium.



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