



AN “OXUS TREASURE“ PIECE IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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The subject of the present article is a silver bracelet now kept in the collections of the Náprstek Museum (NpM) in Prague² (Ancient Near East and Africa Department). Its execution and some circumstances concerning its provenance render the bracelet worthy of closer analysis. The bracelet was acquired in 2003 as a donation from Ludmila Formanová, widow of the late Bedřich Forman, graphic artist, journalist and art connoisseur³. There is no specific information as to how the object came into the possession of the former holder except for a brief allusion to its reputed provenance from the now- legendary „Oxus Treasure“.

The Náprstek Museum Bracelet (fig. 1)

The item belongs to the class of bracelets with open ends terminating in animal heads. In this case the heads are those of horned griffins, facing each other. Despite its seeming sturdiness, the bracelet is very light, being hollow and soldered together from several thin silver sheets as can be well observed at several points where the surface has been damaged. The alloy, as revealed by the metal analysis⁴, consists of 86% silver, 10% copper, 0.3% lead and a still smaller (less than 0.3%) amount of zinc. The maximum outer diameter is some 90mm, the inner one 68mm. The body, as mentioned above, is composed of several – at least eight – silver sheets. The seams are easily observable on both the interior and the exterior circumference. The body consists of a fluted twisted shaft bent roughly into the shape of the letter C, „girdled“ in the central part with a narrow central smooth

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² Inv. no. P 7384. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Dagmar Pospíšilová, CSc. (the Department of Asian Cultures of the Náprstek Museum) and to Dr. Jana Součková, DrSc. for enabling me to study the object and for offering me useful information.

³ For more detail on the Forman collection in the NpM see: *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 26/2005.

⁴ The metal analysis was executed by RNDr. Jaroslav Frana, CSc. and Ing. Marek Fikrle at the Nuclear Physics Institute, Academy of Sciences, Řež u Prahy, Czech Republic.

„cuff“ bordered with „plaited“ wires. Each branch of the shaft terminates in the jewellery's chief decorative elements, the griffins' heads (fig. 2). The transition between the heads and the twisted body of each branch consists of three smooth rings and a curious and unusual form which from a single (frontal) point of view can be deciphered as probably an extremely schematized and stylized lion's head (fig. 3). The connections between the griffins' and the lions' heads bear obvious evidence of unskilled repairs. Similar traces can be observed at the points where the griffins' horns are attached. On closer inspection, the griffin figures reveal the extreme simplicity and abstraction with which the anatomical details (e.g. eyes and beaks) have been rendered. They are indicated only by several cavities or drop-shaped bulges accentuated by rims, reminiscent of settings for precious stones or glass paste inlays common in ancient bracelets. The horns attached to the griffins' heads are made of S-shaped beaded wire. The presumed lions' heads, unlike all the other parts, are highly original and, indeed, surprising, and the author is aware of no other ancient bracelet featuring such an element in terms of both depiction and its location on the bracelet's body. As was the case with the griffins, here, too, the anatomical details are mostly rendered using simple cavities and relief lines. In our search for parallels to this piece, stress will be put mainly on the iconographic motif of a griffin's head, not something that commonly appears on this type of jewellery, despite the long tradition and popularity which griffins (i.e. eagle-headed lions) enjoy in both Near Eastern and ancient art.

The Oxus Treasure⁵

The origin of the most consistent collection of Achaemenid metal artefacts (whether Persian or, more daringly, Bactrian is of little importance in this context) is intriguing and not entirely clear. The extraordinary collection known as the „Oxus Treasure“, now on display in the British Museum in London, contains some 170 golden and silver objects including vessels, votive plaques, statuettes and jewellery. Although it is for the most part traditionally dated to the 5th-4th centuries BC, it contains objects both more ancient (7th century BC) and more recent (2nd century BC). Given that it consists of numerous valuable objects collected over a very long period of time and reputedly found all together in a single spot, it may be convincingly considered to have been a temple treasure interred sometime during the second century BC⁶. It is most usually said to have been found at Tacht-I-Kuwad, on the northern bank of the river Amudarja (ancient Oxus) in southern Tajikistan (which in ancient times was part of northern Bactria), only 5km away from the „Fire Temple“ in Tacht-I-Sangin. Wherever it was actually found, the objects' journey from there to the British Museum's show-cases was a long and complicated one: the treasure seems to have been discovered in about 1877 and first to have come into the possession of some Bukharan tradesmen who intended to sell the precious objects on Indian markets. However, while transporting their valuable cargo from Kabul to Peshawar, they were taken prisoner by robbers and were later released (together with most of the treasure) only thanks to a chance intervention by a British officer called Burton. The latter bought

⁵ The elementary work in which the treasure is classified and its journey to the BM described remains: *Dalton 1926*. For more recent summaries see e.g. the catalogue *Curtis- Talis 2005*

⁶ *Dalton 1926*, p. 16., *Pfrommer 1990*, p. 122.

⁷ For more detail see: *Литвинский - Пичикян 2000, Литвинский 2001*

from them one of the bracelets, which now belongs to the Victoria and Albert Museum collections (but is on display as a long-term loan in the British Museum⁸). The remaining parts of the treasure surfaced later at the antiquities market in Rawalpindi where they were acquired in the 1880s and 1890s by Sir Alexander Cunningham (Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India) and Sir August Wollaston Franks (curator of the British Museum) to be given to the British Museum.

The circumstances in which the collection was acquired raised understandable doubts about the „treasure’s“ authenticity: 1) The items were purchased on various occasions. It is not therefore possible to state what portion of the original treasure actually came down to the Museum. Already at the time Burton probably saved only part of the treasure, which contained some three quarters of the original amount – some items had already been melted down or sold⁹. 2) The middlemen may be seriously suspected of producing forgeries imitating the genuine items. Although sometimes not easily distinguishable from the originals through smaller or greater stylistic deviations and often the lower quality of their artistic execution¹⁰, similar fakes can be found in abundance in numerous museums’ collections.¹¹ 3) Even those „Oxus Treasure“ items which do not raise any doubts as regards their originality remain problematic, as there is no way of finding out if they really all belonged to the original lot or if some were not found in another site and only later labelled as belonging to the Oxus hoard. The antiquities trade must have flourished in the late 19th century Asia and the objects from the Oxus treasure were certainly not the only ones in circulation there. Doubts about the authenticity of the lot as such (or about the possibility of discovering such an amount of valuable objects in a single site) may be dispersed by the find of an unviolated tomb in Susa.¹² The late Achaemenid jewellery originating from this tomb shows a very close stylistic affinity with the „Oxus“ finds, and given that the discovery of the tomb dates only to 1901 they could not have served as models for them.

Besides vessels, statuettes and votive plaques, the hoard contained numerous pieces of jewellery: rings, appliques and a considerable number of bracelets and torques terminating in animal heads: species represented include lions, griffins, rams, goats, water birds (heads) and bulls (protomes). The marked contrast between the gold and the colourful enamel or precious stone inlays extensively employed in Achaemenid bracelets is well illustrated by a pair of golden bracelets with lion-griffin heads and their hoops having in- swing opposite the terminals, dating to the 5th-4th cent.BC¹³(fig. 4). The piece is composed of numerous separate parts cast using the lost-wax technique on a clay core and then pieced together after some surface adjustments.¹⁴ The resulting piece is therefore hollow, as can

⁸ Curtis – Talis 2005, p. 139.

⁹ Dalton 1926, p. 14–16.

¹⁰ Dalton 1926, p. 16.

¹¹ For fakes in museums’ collections in general see <http://www.caslon.com.au/forgeryprofile4.htm>

¹² The tomb was discovered by the French expedition to the acropolis of the town. It is now kept in the Musée du Louvre in Paris.: Harper- Aruz- Tallon 1992.

¹³ For a photograph and more detail on the object see also: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/me/g/gold_griffin-headed_armlet.aspx

¹⁴ Curtis – Talis 2005, p. 135-136.

be observed a several points where the surface of the smooth body or of the animals' heads have been damaged. The monsters sport eagles' beaks and wings and lions' bodies and forelegs, but unlike bracelets from earlier periods, also goats' horns and hind legs. Depicted in a prance, their forelegs are stretched out in front of them while the hind legs cling to and follow the outline of the smooth body of the bracelet. Like the forelegs, the ornamental wings rise from the outline of the bracelet. The surface of the griffins' bodies is decorated with numerous settings (once) filled in with colourful inlays, enhancing the objects' expressiveness with a marked chromatic effect. The settings themselves were created in different ways. Remains of *lapis lazuli* have been discovered in some of them. The perfection of the execution and the emphasis on the detail employed in this pair of bracelets is evidence of the extraordinary skills of the Achaemenid goldsmiths in attaining a high aesthetic appeal. Technically, this pair may be considered the most sophisticated creations of the Oxus hoard, though the quality of execution of other (almost exclusively golden) bracelets from the complex is also very high. Another item from the hoard which features a depiction relevant to our discourse is a golden dress-ornament in the shape of a lion-griffin¹⁵ (fig. 5). The monster's winged body is compartmentalised with cavities which might originally have been incrustated. The object reflects rather statically the Scytho-Siberian style and testifies to the popularity of the fantastic creatures in the Euroasian animal style as well as to the style's influence on Central Asia.

The „Bactrian Treasure“ in the Miho Museum¹⁶

The obscurity of the Oxus Treasure's origin provoke various hypotheses about a collection of golden objects, the so called „Bactrian Treasure“ kept in the Miho Museum, Japan. The composition of the collection is relatively akin to that of the Oxus treasure (numerous bracelets with animal heads and other pieces of jewellery, golden plaques, statuettes). The Museum states that the objects were purchased in auctions before 1997, so that nothing is known about precisely where the objects were found, nor about the circumstances which brought them to the auctions. This is certainly not an argument in favour of the „treasure's“ credibility as a genuine and consistent collection. On the other hand, the exceptionally large number of items and the quality of execution must be emphasized, as well as the uniform character, well reflecting the artistic style of ancient Bactria. Even provided that the objects in question were original, the theory¹⁷ that the „Oxus Treasure“ and the „Bactrian Treasure“ might be parts of a single original lot does not seem probable: The „Bactrian treasure“ presents much more of Hellenistic work unlike the mostly Achaemenid „Oxus treasure“.

Animal-headed bracelets¹⁸

Bracelets whose ends terminate in animal heads (less commonly in animal protomes or entire animals) were widespread in Achaemenid Persia, as is well evidenced both by direct finds and their depictions in iconographic monuments. The Achaemenid bracelets clearly

¹⁵ For a photograph and more detail on the object see also: http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/me/e/ornament_from_oxus_treasure.aspx

¹⁶ For more detail on the “Treasure of Bactria“ see: *Miho Museum 2002*

¹⁷ see: Пичикян 1998/1, Пичикян 1998/2

¹⁸ the following classification and datation of bracelets is based on: *Pfrommer 1990*, p. 95–125.

and closely follow Assyrian-Urartean models. Lions' and goats' heads are attested for the pre-Achaemenid period, and the use of other animals' heads and even of protomes or of whole animals cannot be excluded for this period. A feature novel for the Achaemenid period, however, is the inlaying of certain parts of the bracelets with colourful stones.

The procession relief from the Apadana in Persepolis¹⁹ may be recalled as an example of the jewel's depiction: four of the delegations of subject peoples bring bracelets as their tribute to the King of Kings. It is mainly the delegation VI, interpreted as Lydian, that particularly merits our attention for the meticulousness with which their bracelets are depicted (fig. 6). The smooth bodied bracelets end in griffin protomes – their heads are turned outwards, big eyes, curved beaks and pointed ears are very clearly modelled while the S-shaped horns are (so far) missing. The heads are tilted towards the wings, which have a regular pattern of feathers and cling quite closely to the bracelet's body. The monsters touch each other with their outstretched (lions'?) paws with clear muscles.

This kind of bracelet entered quite early into the jewellery of classical antiquity and remained one of the most popular „oriental“ or „orientalising“ ornaments. As early as the 5th century BC the Near Eastern tradition was coupled in the Achaemenid goldsmith workshops with the Greek one and the Greco-Persian style was adopted and developed by some craftsmen who adapted the bracelet with animal heads to the canons of Greek jewellery. Even long after the end of the Persian Empire, new varieties of this kind of bracelet were produced in vast areas of Asia Minor, from Hellenistic Egypt as far as Magna Grecia.²⁰ Besides the time-tested lion, ram and ibex heads, gazelle, lynx and lion-griffin came into vogue. Unlike the Persian workshops, the Greek ones produced bracelets in which the animal's head was set off from the bracelet's body by means of a decorative cuff of varying width. The bodies, so far either completely smooth or, from the 4th century BC on, twisted from a bunch of wires of different thickness, grow still more and more decorative. Another contribution of the Greco-Persian workshops are the horns executed in beaded wire made separately and subsequently attached to the beasts' heads. They were in fashion from the 5th century to the Hellenistic period. A find originating from Pasargadae²¹ can be presented as an example of a thoroughly Greco-Persian bracelet (fig. 7). The piece, dating from the 4th century at the earliest, consists of an twisted, gently inflexed body of which both ends continue in filigree-decorated cuffs followed by ibex heads rendered in a naturalistic style which reproduces faithfully the animal's aspect. The ears and bead-wire horns were attached secondarily. The hoop having in- swing opposite the terminals (otherwise rarely present in Greek-style works) and the way the ibex's beard is executed may be considered „Persian“ elements, the filigree-decorated cuff and the twisted body on the other hand to be „Greek“ ones.

Conclusion

It may be difficult to uproot the claim that the NpM bracelet comes from the Oxus treasure – it is based on a mere oral communication made to the original holder at its acquisition. As already stated, not even the so called „Oxus treasure“ itself may be convincingly considered a uniform collection with a clear provenance. The nebulous

¹⁹ Curtis – Talis 2005, p. 133, fig. 51.

²⁰ Pfrommer 1990, p. 121–122.

²¹ Curtis – Talis 2005, p. 137.

circumstances of its discovery and its thorny path to the British Museum may on the one hand provoke doubts as to whether individual objects belong to the whole, and on the other hand may have given rise to the production of numerous imitations. Despite the variety in the typologies and styles of the objects represented in the treasure, there are some features common to all the Oxan bracelets and torques or their fragments: the use of gold (sometimes supplemented by colourful incrustation) as virtually the exclusive material; the relatively high quality of artistic execution; the emphasis placed on detail; the employment of some elements which enable us to distinguish the single artistic traditions (Achaemenid, Greco-Persian or Hellenistic, Scytho-Siberian). In the NpM bracelet, some features can be detected which connect it to the group of ancient bracelets with open ends terminating in animal heads: the iconographic motif of a griffin with an eagle's beak, its horns imitating those common in the Greco-Persian style and to a certain extent also the bracelet's twisted body. However, elements which contradict its possible ancient date strongly predominate: while the cuff in the middle of the bracelet's body and the lions' heads on the transition between the body and the griffin heads testify to the craftsman's inventiveness, they have no parallel among the bracelet's ancient counterparts. Much less original and by no means more convincingly ancient is the large number of silver sheets employed on the bracelet's body as well as their too-visible seams; as well as the excessive simplicity, even carelessness with which the heads are rendered, which makes for a certain stylistic inconsistency. In the opinion of the author, therefore, the bracelet was never part of the Oxus treasure but, being made sometime in the first half of the 20th century, may be regarded as reflecting the hoard's discovery.

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(6. 3. 2008)

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(6. 3. 2008)

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(6. 3. 2008)



Fig. 1. Bracelet from Náprstek Museum. Inv. no. P 7384.



Fig. 2. Bracelet from Náprstek Museum.
Detail of griffin head.



Fig. 3. Bracelet from Náprstek Museum.
Detail of lion head.



Fig. 4. Gold bracelet with lion – griffin heads from Oxus Treasure. British Museum, London. ANE 124017.



Fig. 5. Gold dress – ornament with lion – griffin from Oxus Treasure. British Museum, London. ANE 123924.

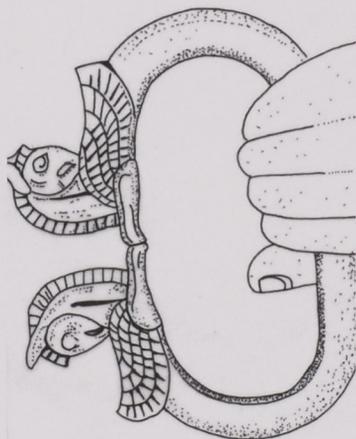


Fig. 6. Detail of bracelet with griffin heads from relief of Apadana, Persepolis.



Fig. 7. Detail of bracelet with ibex head from the tomb of Susa. Teheran 3183.

(photographs: Jiří Vaněk, drawings by Kristýna Urbanová and Petra Belaňová)