Achaemenid Echoes in the Wall Paintings of Akchakhan-Kala, Chorasmia, and their Broader Significance for Central Asia

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"L'arte non viene mai trasmessa attraverso un 'contagio' passivo, ma solo attraverso una fecondazione voluta e raggiunta in un'ideale di congiunzione."

(Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli 1963)

Abstract

In recent years the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition (KAE) carried out archaeological fieldwork at the royal Chorasmian seat of Akchakhan-kala unearthing a large corpus of wall paintings. This imagery was made during Stage 3 of the life of the site's main complex, beginning between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD and ending in the early 2nd century AD. Among the formal elements employed in this imagery, an unanticipated use of Achaemenid iconographic models is apparent. Most of these archetypes have already been introduced in recently published articles. However, the question regarding their source and ways of transmission was left open to further inquiry. This paper aims to refine the argument and to give way to further analysis and discussion in attempting a clarification of what has already been sustained. Eastern Iranian Chorasmia once was under the Achaemenid sway, and its very foundation as a polity was quite probably due to an intervention of the Persians. But the Akchakhan-kala's paintings were produced much later than the time of the Achaemenid Empire's demise. What we may therefore be witnessing is the persistence of Achaemenid iconography as an artistic legacy, the origins of which would be reasonable to track in a centre of the "Upper Satrapies". Despite the scarcity of available evidence on the very existence of an Achaemenid aulic art and heritage in the East, it is here argued that it might be possible to consider the new Chorasmian evidence as its "echo", although the chronology of the original transmission into the polity of such a legacy is still elusive. This paper will also introduce a further, and previously neglected,

element issuing from the Akchakhan-kala's mural art and belonging to the set of Achaemenid visual "echoes": the motif of the stylized lion's heads with curled mane. Of clear Achaemenid ascendency, this motif decorates the shoulder area of the kandys worn by one of the colossal Avestan deities from the site's columned throne hall. This painted fabric decoration confirms the substantiality of the basic interpretation of the "Achaemenid echoes" coming from Chorasmia, allowing at the same time to development of some further assumptions.

Keywords: Chorasmia, Achaemenid Empire, artistic legacy, transmission of iconographies, Central Asia, Upper Satrapies, Eastern Hellenism

1. Introduction[1]

In a recent paper (Minardi 2018), I have tried to underline the originality of the visual art expressed by the painted colossal deities of Akchakhan-kala and to give it context. These divine figures, originally about 7 m tall, seem to fully be a Chorasmian artistic invention and one of Zoroastrian character (Grenet 2018). Even though originality, style and artistic inventiveness apart, resides in the deities' general iconography incorporating Achaemenid archetypes, an array of features of Eastern-Hellenistic nature supplement their composition. The deities thus seem to bear witness to all the centuries that had passed between the arrival of the Persians in the "pre-Aral" and the 1st century AD, at which time they were painted on the end wall of the throne room of Akchakhan-kala's Central Building; this was at the epochal threshold of the Kushan expansion (Minardi 2018: 115-119).

[1] In this paper I find myself forced to indulge in self-citation for two reasons: the first is because this article is intended to clarify some points of my current research focus, which it further pursues, and the second is because the matter here discussed is strictly related to first-hand evidence that, as part of the team of the KAE, I have recently helped to recovery from the ground and study. I am also aware that in the bibliography of this paper, too many of the articles that list me as author or co-author are marked as "forthcoming". This is unfortunately unavoidable: these papers deal with arguments preliminary to the contents of this one, and some of them, which were written several years ago, are experiencing a delay in publication that is beyond anyone's control. Also, for reasons of space and style, I cannot here repeat all their numerous bibliographic references, and instead I have made cross-references to my past works.

That the art of Akchakhan-kala is being studied with an emphasis on the diachronic permeability of its society is nothing but natural. Chorasmia had always been part, even from a political point of view with the Achaemenids (Minardi 2015: 46-47, 80-81; forthcoming 2021a), of the complex network of cultural relations that existed in Asia, although it had not been Hellenized as all its of southern neighbours were in the aftermath of the *anabasis* of Alexander. Its apparent "isolation" (or its being a "periphery"), is for the most part ascribable to this historical circumstance since consequently, the polity remained *terra incognita*. The historical datum, in addition to a factual (but relative) geographical remoteness, had favoured Chorasmia's "individuality": the pre-Islamic history of the country is characterized by a cultural development without major caesurae until the advent of the Arabs. Unlike the other areas of sedentary Central Asia, Chorasmia was never colonized by the Greeks (there is no *Alexandria* in the lower reaches of the Oxus), and it came into contact with the Hellenistic civilization, and with its regional declinations, more gradually and possibly even deliberately at a later time: cut off from the Achaemenid political system after the defeat of Bessos (Minardi 2015), the polity somehow remained at the periphery of the Hellenistic world until Kushan rule in Asia flourished, the country's elite fully joined the *koiné* of its Hellenized peers only in the 2nd century AD.[2] This is a point of crucial importance that is easily overlooked because it concerns an area of Asia whose history finds little or no coverage in the surviving historical sources (Minardi 2015). Its importance emerges immediately, even from a quick overview of the archaeological evidence: Chorasmia can be considered as a case study, and it is a remarkable ground for fieldwork, for the diachronic examination of culture contact between Iranians, and Eastern Iran and Hellenism. That is also the reason why extra-ordinary, and usually quite rare, material evidence relative to pre-Sasanian Zoroastrianism is found in the polity: this is not a matter of preeminence in the sphere of early Zoroastrianism (a concept once theorized and nowadays dismissed) but the outcome of historical processes. The one area of Eastern Iran that maintained old cultural

[2] At the time of the apogee of the Kushans, a Chorasmian king consciously decided to partake of the dominant cultural climate of his times with the erection of his new seat, Toprak-kala, bringing Chorasmia further into a zone united by a significant level of elite interaction (Minardi 2018; 2020). His choice, perhaps initially dictated by different reasons (Dodson et al. 2015), was eventually ideological.

patterns and did not fall under a Hellenistic influence of higher degree was Chorasmia. Hence, the root of the artistic "archaism" of the Avestan gods of Akchakhan-kala may be sought locally, in a country where the Achaemenids seem to have left a lasting cultural imprint. On the other hand, we cannot exclude a priori the possibility that Achaemenid formal elements might have reached Chorasmia at a later time (together with new crafting techniques around the 3rd century BC? – as discussed below) from a source that had earlier received this Achaemenid input (such as a former satrapal centre). There is more than enough evidence, overall, to argue that about the turn of the 1st millennium AD, the Chorasmian "archaism" was quite possibly so, a local *persistence*, albeit data on its initial chronology are scant. The question is still open because nothing earlier, and nothing later,[3] than the Akchakhan-kala's evidence explicitly witnesses the same kind of artistic perception. Yet, this lack of data might very well be a matter of chance, in other words of an "archaeological accident": the same existence of the therianthropic "bird-priest" used to represent the Avestan *Sraosāvarəz* at such an early period was unknown before our discoveries.

Looked at in the round, the evidence strongly suggests that Eastern Iranian Chorasmia experienced a unique relationship with the Hellenistic civilization, and that this long-drawn-out series of contacts was filtered by its Asiatic declinations. Mainly for this reason, I consider it unlikely that the archaism of some of the Akchakhan-kala's paintings is proof that an "Achaemenid-style Persianism" was as a conscious choice of the Chorasmian royalty in "consequence of the development of a new form of kingship and dynastic identity in a world where the Graeco-Macedonians dynasties had all but disappeared and Iranian dynasties were on the rise" (Strootman 2020: 218). I do not see in Akchakhan-kala any "clear" evidence that such a phenomenon was due to the development of "a new form of monarchy (…) based on a blending of Iranian and Hellenistic practices" (ibidem). The evidence from Chorasmia does not fit this broader theoretical pattern well. Some Hellenistic practices may have naturally entered the country, as we are dealing with an archaeological context of the 1st century BC/1st century AD – 2nd century AD. The local indigenous era, which lasted

[3] Although we are now aware that Zoroastrian themes were also represented at Toprak-kala (Grenet 2018; Minardi 2018).

successfully for seven centuries up to the Arab conquest starting in 712 AD, is probably one of these. However, this era also marks the cultural continuum of the country, and the archaeological data likewise show the important role played by tradition: the local (pre-Sasanian) Zoroastrian religion certainly permeated the life of both the elite and commoners of the polity, from the public to the private/funerary spheres (Minardi forthcoming 2021b). The Central Monument of Akchakhan-kala, for instance, which is the second major architectonic emergence of the site, was a building devoted to public open-air ceremonies for all strata of the population (Minardi and Khozhaniyazov 2015; Minardi 2016b). The whole of Akchakhan-kala was very possibly conceived and used, apart from administrative and possibly other residential purposes, for religious Zoroastrian seasonal festivals (Grenet 2010; Minardi et al. forthcoming); these festivals did not originate in the 1st century BC (neither in the Iranian world nor in Chorasmia, as confirmed by the Isakovka bowl – Livshits 2003).[4] The king(s) of Akchakhan-kala was a Mazda-worshipper: his regnal fire altar was kept in a room adjacent to the throne hall of the palace (Sinisi et al. 2018) while the whole pictorial programme of the royal complex was done according to Zoroastrian themes reflecting a complex symbolism and a specific doctrinal message. It is plausible to think that priests with knowledge of the Avesta were supervising the work of the artists and artisans, both local and foreigners, who were active at Akchakhan-kala under royal patronage. The reason why this new royal and ceremonial centre was re-founded in Stage 3 (and fully decorated according to an organic visual programme) rests unfortunately obscure as historical sources are particularly thin on the ground.

1.1 Roots of Chorasmian art

Much of what we would like to know about the pattern of local-foreign artistic relations in Eastern Iran, and the transmission of iconography and skill it dictated during Achaemenid times is beyond recovery: we will probably never know with certainty whether a Persian-derived (for

[4] The Isakovka bowl is a silver Achaemenid phiale bearing a Chorasmian epigraph inscribed, according to Livshits, probably not before the 3rd century BC. It used to be the possession of the Chorasmian "King Amurzham, son of King Wardan". It constitutes an early record of Zoroastrian festivities in the country (Grenet in Betts et al. 2016: 136; discussed also in Minardi 2015).

themes and contents) mural art existed in Chorasmia at that time, as we will hardly obtain new data from those centres of the Empire (in the eastern satrapies) from which possibly such an artistic input may have come. Archaeology may however one day cast some new light on both issues. Further, it might be imaginable that this (unknown) aulic art spread in Chorasmia at a later post-Achaemenid (Seleucid?) date.[5] It seems that in Chorasmia the modelling and painting traditions had existed long before Akchakhan-kala Stage 3, although not much evidence can be found before the 3rd century BC, or, thus earlier than the "Hellenistic period" (Minardi 2018: 112-114). The artists who made the Akchakhan-kala's paintings certainly did so under the direction of one or more masters who headed of one or several workshops. Such workshops owned models (i.e., their material patrimony, such as cartoons) and had the knowledge (i.e., their immaterial patrimony, such as techniques) to employ and to adapt them according to the demands of their royal customer (for the archaeological evidence in this regard, see Minardi 2018; on the use of pattern books and cartoons in Persepolis, see Roaf 1983). Additionally, the contribution given by foreigners to the imagery of Akchakhan-kala is more than a conceptualization; it is shown in the emblematic case of *ketos*, a high-relief of Greek character from the Altar Area of the Central Building (Minardi 2016a). Besides this fragment of a painted modelled sculpture in clay, there are the contemporary Hellenistic formal elements and features, including painting techniques and iconographies, that were adopted in Akchakhan-kala (Minardi 2018). On the other hand, the Avestan deities are not Hellenistic at all. They

[5] R. Ghirshman in 1962 (1964: 357) and D. Schlumberger in 1969 (1970: 169) already contemplated the possibility of a transmission of Achaemenid formal elements from Persia into the architecture of Mauryan India through the Seleucid Kingdom (*contra* Bussagli [1984] 1996: 92-93 who believed in the persistence of an Achaemenid stratum). Schlumberger also (idem: 171) considered the numerous objects of Achaemenid taste from the "Oxus Treasure", following his dating with a *terminus ante quem* of 170 BC (cf. Cunningham's c. 200-180 BC – Curtis and Searight 2003: 220), as the fruit of "*un artisanat local, qui maintenait en Bactriane, à l'époque de la domination grecque, les traditions de l'époque précédente*". This is debatable because most of the objects of the Treasure seem to be "Achaemenid Persian" in style and to date from the 5th to the 4th centuries BC (Curtis and Searight 2003: 220). It should be noted that no Parthian coins were found in the hoard (ibidem) and that the objects may well be "Achaemenid Central Asian".

appear flat, painted without any attention to volume[6] and space: they are icons. If not for the iconographic elements of western origin that can be singled out in their compositions, it would be hard to believe that they are so *recent*. The Avestan gods are archaic even when seen within their very context when compared to other elements of the vast visual programme enacted by royal patronage in the Ceremonial Complex of Akchakhan-kala (e.g., the riders of the northern corridor – Minardi et al. forthcoming). Their Hellenistic features, although they look as they were "grafted" onto their visual framework, are re-elaborated and re-interpreted (such as the *corona muralis* of Sraoša or the *velificatio* motif of the second god). The kind of Hellenism to which the arts of Akchakhan-kala relate to, conforms to its Eastern-Hellenistic declinations. Historically for Chorasmia the main source of this influence is most likely the Bactrian area, and less likely the Parthian Empire (Minardi 2016a; 2018).

Nothing similar to the Akchakhan-kala's Avestan deities, or to the "red ibex" from the Western Area of the same site (Minardi et al. 2018), is so far known outside the polity in the period in question. On the other hand, the wall paintings of Akchakhan-kala show too many elements echoing Achaemenid models to be considered the fruit of a 1st century AD extemporary artistic innovation. But, albeit plausible, we do not even know whether an art influenced by Persia had existed within the area of the "Upper Satrapies"; the gap in our evidence is huge on this regard (Francfort 2013). All things considered, I am inclined to think that Chorasmia (a territory once under the control of the former Bactrian satrapy and sheltered, mainly geographically, from a direct "impact" with Hellenism) was the place where visual art that had received an original input from a courtly Achaemenid *centre* had the chance to develop locally and continuously (as sustained in Minardi et al. 2018). Some of its elements might have had the chance to survive within an enduring tradition preserved for centuries into the elite and religious sphere. Before the Achaemenids, this Chorasmian elite, as the polity and so its art, did not exist (Minardi 2016c; forthcoming 2021a). Hence, we may consider the "archaic" traits of some of the Chorasmian paintings (apparently the most sacred ones) the fruit of a local tradition. This tradition was handed down from a first currently ungraspable

[6] If not for the timid effort given by the doubling of the contour line on right sides of the deities' bodies.

Achaemenid input and preserved thanks to the lack of that "*grandissimo potere di penetrazione dell'arte ellenistica"* (Bianchi Bandinelli [1963] 1978: 51) that affected other Iranian and Indian contexts. The place from which this artistic input was originally irradiated from remains uncertain; but keeping in mind the fact that the first stage of the Chorasmian material culture is a Yaz-III-derived one (Minardi 2015: 61-84; forthcoming 2021a), and considering the historical links between, Sogdiana and Bactria (Briant 1984) and Chorasmia (Minardi 2018; 2020), this was possibly the satrapal seat of Bactra. New archaeological data on Chorasmian visual arts may transform this view in due course, making us redistribute the emphases we presently place on the various factors involved, but for the moment, the idea of a local heritage lasting for a long, albeit currently indeterminable time, seems the best option. And whether new crafting and artistic methods mediated by Hellenism developed in Chorasmia not earlier that the 3rd century BC, this does not signify that these found a completely empty canvas.

The formative stages of the Chorasmian art are obscure (Minardi 2018: 112-113). Before the discovery of the Akchakhan-kala's corpus of paintings there were no data on any Achaemenid aulic artistic imprint, inspiration or legacy in the polity;[7] there was also no evidence of an explicit Zoroastrian art at this early period. Being the mural and plastic art of Akchakhan-kala expression of a coherent programme implemented with the use of an array of different techniques, we may say that at this 1st century AD-stage it was already formed albeit still experimenting and perhaps developing a new canon that will never be: this formal language will dramatically change not much later in the decoration of the "High Palace" of Toprak-kala.

2. Achaemenid elements in the visual art of Akchakhan-kala: the evidence so far

Akchakhan-kala was a Chorasmian royal seat dominated by a Ceremonial Complex. In its last main stage of life at about the turn of

[7] The Achaemenid influence is clear in the material culture of the polity and in the paraphernalia of the elite emulated by the lesser elite (Minardi 2016c; forthcoming 2021a). This paper discusses aulic art.

the 1st millennium AD[8], the walls of the complex were profusely decorated with wall paintings and other decorative features (Kidd and Betts 2010). The site was not archaeologically explored in Soviet times by the "Khorezm Expedition"; it was rediscovered by the KAE[9] only in the early 2000s. The extraordinary painted imagery unearthed during its excavation constitutes the larger corpus of (religious) mural art of such antiquity so far known in Central Asia.

The three, perhaps originally four, colossal anthropomorphic deities that are part of the corpus (Betts et al. 2015; 2016) were discovered among the fragments recorded during the excavation of the main hypostyle hall (Minardi et al. 2017) of the Central Building (i.e., the palace) of the Ceremonial Complex of the site (i.e. the palace and adjacent structures). One of these gods, who bore on his tunic the explicit Zoroastrian symbol of the therianthropic "bird-priest", was recognised with the *yazata* Sraoša (whose identification is further confirmed and discussed in Grenet and Minardi forthcoming 2021). The second *yazata* to his left might be Tištrya (Minardi 2018), or an allegorical depiction of the ensemble of the Fravashis (Grenet in Betts et al. 1392), and the third one may be Spandarmad (idem: 1395).

[8] Akchakhan-kala certainly was one of the most significant sites of the polity of Chorasmia in its Early Antique 3 period (*ca*. mid-1st century BC – early 3rd century AD). This royal seat was founded around the 2nd century BC and abandoned in the 2nd century AD. During its main stage (Stage 3, which begins around the 1st century BC/1st century AD, coinciding with the start of the Antique 3 period) the Ceremonial Complex underwent a thorough transformation in architecture and decoration. At the end of Stage 3, Akchakhan-kala was abandoned and was then despoiled and robbed of most of its construction elements (e.g., the wooden features of its architecture) and of its valuable materials, probably mostly reemployed in the subsequent royal seat of Toprak-kala, which was founded afresh nearby.

[9] A joint project of the University of Sydney and the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, Karakalpak branch, co-directed by Alison V.G. Betts and Gairatdin Khozhaniyazov. Research and fieldwork in Karakalpakstan during the years 2016-2019 were supported by the Australian Research Council DP170101770 grant (Co-PIs: A. Betts, M. Minardi, F. Grenet and M. Karlybaev). The grant also supported conservation and restoration work on the Akchakhan-kala wall paintings which was carried out by the restorers: Natacha Akin, Hélène Blanpain, Mélodie Bonnat, Nina Robin, Marie Smaniotto and Steven Van de Velde. In earlier publications the site, also spelled Akshakhan-kala, was called Kazakl'i-yatkan (or Kazaklӯ-yatkan). The name has been changed from this local one to the name registered in the official heritage record of Uzbekistan.

These "icons" ought to be considered in their specific context which is quite well known thanks to field archaeology. The deities, contrary to what may seem to be the case, were not isolated figures; they were part of a complex doctrinal message, a metaphoric religious narration developed through a visual system that art, in media such as wall paintings and modelled high-reliefs, helped to express and convey. The colossal figures were painted on the end wall of the main elite and representative space of a royal and ceremonial seat, along with a tapestry-like painted representation of a *paradeisos*, a proper a lush garden with deer, kulans and birds, which also covered the column shafts of the hypostyle hall (KAE unpublished, article in preparation). In the same structure, in a secluded adjacent space, the remains of a regnal fire altar were also discovered (Sinisi et al. 2018). Other elements of this religious "narration" were exposed in all the other spaces so far excavated (e.g., a procession scene linked to the "portraits gallery" involving the multitude of the Fravashis – Minardi et al. forthcoming). The constituent trademark of the Chorasmian deities is their Achaemenid-derived iconography. As a consequence, they are similar to each other, stereotyped (cf. Roaf 1983: 99 on Persepolis), albeit with key differences in their attributes. If any part is missing from the depiction of one of them, it can be supplied with a high degree of confidence from the others. Unfortunately, none of the visages of the deities have been preserved.

The gods are shown frontally, but with their heads in full profile. This is one kind of representation used among others in Persia, for instance, in depictions of throne bearers at Persepolis and Naqš-e Rostam. With the scheme of the throne bearer, moreover, the god with upright arms holding up a canopy of sky (as mentioned, it may be Tištrya) shares the "atlas position". General shape apart, also Sraoša seems to follow a Persepolitan model (Fig. 1; except for his raised right arm quite probably holding a weapon) if we observe the particular way in which both his belt and the suspension system for his *akinakes* are represented. Strikingly, the bottom line of Sraoša's trousers is defined by his dagger belt in exactly the same manner as in the Achaemenid depictions of matching equipment associated with tunic and trousers: the tunic is not caught and dragged up by the thong of the scabbard; this is a proper *stilema*. The *akinakes*, with its typical scabbard, was quite probably itself a visual iconographic vestige rather than a weapon still in use in Chorasmia during the 1st century AD (at that time such

daggers, conceived for horsemen, following a widespread fashion usually had a four-lobed scabbard – see Schiltz 2006).

There are certainly some differences in proportions and style between Achaemenid and Chorasmian specimens, due to the different periods in which they were made, the media used and their contexts (e.g., Sraoša's sword has a bent hilt and it is decorated with a pattern, as if fully bejewelled, in a fashion as none of the Persian specimens known).[10] This is why the words "echo" and "archetype" are here carefully employed in defining these Persian iconographic loans. Further, is worth noting again that two of the deities are definitely wearing a *kandys* thrown back on their shoulders with empty sleeves and fur trimming (Kidd in Betts et al. 2016a; Minardi 2018).[11] The third deity, identified as Spandarmad, is in my opinion instead sporting a cape (cf. *Yašt* XXX, 126-128),[12] perhaps to indicate her different sex in this context,[13] embroidered with a pattern representing mountains or tree bark. Also, as we shall see, the *kandys* of the other gods were conceived as embroidered, or decorated with applied bracteates, on their outer sides. At least one of the gods, Sraoša, wears trousers decorated with birds (*anaxyrides*), and all of them have an ornate belted tunic (*chiton)* with short sleeves covering an undergarment with long ones (cf. Xenophon, *Anab*. I. 5. 8). The long tunics are apparently dissimilar to Achaemenid ones; in two out of three cases (excluding the undeterminable case of Spandarmad), there is a central band displaying a series of framed designs. On one case, they are the series of *Sraosāvarəz*, and in the other case, they are more complex scenes representing king(s) and priests wearing the *padām* in a ceremonial setting (Grenet 2018; Minardi 2018; Grenet and Minardi in preparation). The short sleeves of the tunics are likewise decorated with

[10] But see: Curtius III. 3, 18; cf. Xenophon, *Anab.* I. 2, 27, and I. 8, 29. Cf. with the representation of Darius' scabbard in the famous Apulian Darius Vase held in the *Museo Nazionale Archeologico di Napoli.*

[11] It is here worth quoting Schmitt 1990: "Pollux (*Onomasticon* 7.58) […] calls the candys 'sleeved' (*kheiridōtós*) and 'fastened along the shoulders' (*katà toùs ṓmous enaptómenos*). Sometimes the candys may have been edged with fur (probably beaver). Apparently it was worn only when the climate or weather was such that the tunic (called *khitṓn* by Xenophon) and the trousers were not warm enough."

[12] Anāhitā is "[…] *vêtue d'un précieux manteaux aux nombreux plis dorés*". Cf. also idem, 129. "*Elle a revêtu un vêtement de castor* […]". (Transl. Lecoq 2016).

[13] Although, as noticed by Kidd (in Betts et al. 2016a), the *kandys* is not exclusively a male garment. On the women's robe in Achaemenid times, see Goldman 1991.

these scenes. The presence of a central band as the main decorative element of such tunics (cf. with the purple royal chiton with white middle, the *chiton mesoleukos* described by Xenophon)[14] is not exclusively "Parthian" (as already noted by Kidd in Betts et al. 2016: 131); it is found also in the costumes of the steppe dwellers from Antiquity (e.g., Amazons on Greek painted ceramics, *Sakās* from an Achaemenid seal from the Oxus Treasure, perhaps a Chorasmian individual depicted on a gold plaque from the Oxus Treasure, a *Sakā* dancer from Butkara I) to Late Antiquity (Minardi 2013: 136-137). In the case of Chorasmia, the decoration of these bands with images might be related to an input from the so-called Parthian milieu (Dura, Palmyra, Hatra), but this is not a key interpretative element because all of the depiction deals with Avestan imagery (with an apparent emphasis on the priestly class).

Auxiliary to this archaizing iconographical framework, there are some standout elements derived from Eastern Hellenism. These features, mainly the *corona muralis* for Sraoša and the *velificatio* motif for Tištrya, are accompanied by those elements found in minor decorations such as the boat with zoomorphic figureheads and oarsmen depicted on Sraoša's necklace (Minardi 2018: 115; fig. 11; cf. Gandhāra – Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007: 276) or the framed gazelle decorating Spandarmad's garment (Minardi 2018: 117-118, fig. 13). Even the iconographic creation of the Zoroastrian "bird-priest", although perhaps elaborated in Chorasmia (Grenet and Minardi forthcoming 2021), re-enacts a model of western origin (i.e., the siren/harpy) reshaped to fit a vision of the local religious sphere (Minardi forthcoming 2021c). These elements, re-elaborated and, in the case of the mural crown and the canopy of sky, stylistically reinterpreted, are *de facto* Hellenistic in origin.[15] The mural crown (Minardi 2013; Minardi in Betts et al. 2016a) has its closest visual and chronological comparison is with a *tyche nagaradevatā* from Butkara I (Minardi 2020),[16] and the *velificatio* again apparently precedes similar

[14] Xenophon, *Cyr*. VIII.3, 13; cf. Curtius, III.13, 17 (on the tunic worn by Darius III): "*purpureae tunicae medium album intextum erat"*. Discussed in details by Collins 2012. Cf. the tunic worn by Darius III in the so-called Alexander Mosaic from Pompeii.

[15] The mural crown is neither a primarily "Levantine element" (in the area a Romano-Hellenistic one) nor exclusively an attribute of the *tyche*.

[16] Cf. also with the towers of alternate height (and two merlons) on a Bactrian silver

depictions (e.g., the wind god Oado on Kanishka's coins) that found a certain favour in the Gandhāran area under the Kushans (Hallade 1965). I have already argued elsewhere about the origins of such Hellenistic and Eastern Hellenistic formal elements, and about the reasons for their presence in Chorasmia: this is due to historically favoured links through the "Oxus axis", following the river towards the south, in particular with Bactriana, spatially related to Chorasmia via Sogdiana (Minardi 2018; 2020; on the numismatic evidence, Sinisi 2018). Other depictions, soon to be published, this time of "knights" and horses from the northern corridor of the same Central Building, seem to further endorse this argument (Minardi et al. forthcoming). There is nothing formulaic "Parthian" (on the misleading role of this art historical label, see Sinisi 2014) in the art of Akchakhan-kala. Instead, there are visible links with the Hellenistic-influenced arts of the East, along with the Persian "echoes" here discussed.

3. A new element: the embroidery with lions' heads on the *kandys* of the god with the canopy of sky

In 2019, in parallel with fieldwork at Akchakhan-kala, the restoration of the wall paintings fragments belonging to the possible depiction of the Avestan *yazata* Tištrya proceeded. Upon further observation of the fragments, a new element was identified that confirms the remarkable existence, and possibly the persistence, of elements of Achaemenid origin in the art of Chorasmia. The intricate red-coloured drawings located on the god's right shoulder, and thus on the exterior of his *kandys*, had been tentatively interpreted as solar symbols (Kidd in Betts et al. 2015: 1387); now with closer scrutiny, they clearly appear to be the remains of depictions of lions' heads (Figs. 2-4). Only two heads are partially preserved, one of which enough to be identified. Others were likely painted on the lost portion of the shoulder area. The painter seems to have intended the whole *kandys* to be externally decorated with a pattern of these applied or embroidered lions' heads.

The characteristic stylization of the lions' mane, given by elongated "fingers" each terminating with a semi-spiral-shaped finial, is evidently Achaemenid in origin. This is proven by the existence of several Achaemenid gold appliques currently held in various museums

phalera with the depiction of a war elephant (Seipel 1996: 261, fig. 126).

(Fig. 5b),[17] by a well-known decoration on glazed bricks from Susa now held in the Louvre (Fig. 5a), and in a Achaemenid glyptic specimen displaying the same recurrent motif (Moorey 1978, fig. 4). The lion's head motif was popular at the earthland of the empire and it was from there irradiated towards the steppes, as shown by later evidence from some of the kurgans of Pazyryk (Fig. 6; first half of the 3rd century – see below), and Berel' 11 (early 3rd century BC – Samashev et al. 2000: 16, fig. 28). In the Altai area, different decorative elements are found displaying lions (and their "animal-style" transformations) with a similar stylized treatment of the mane often ending with circles.[18] Another lion's head, this time fashioned as a bronze buckle, from Berkara (modern Kazakhstan, published in Stark 2012, fig. 7.12) illustrates the same stylistic convention for the feline's mane. This object, Achaemenid in style and made with a cast, could be, in my opinion, a piece manufactured in Achaemenid Central Asia.[19]

Further, the lion's skin folds and the details of the Chorasmian drawing, especially in the case of the area of the lion's eye, are quite close to the mentioned specimens from Susa. The use of such a motif is so far unique for Chorasmia. It is only the second case in which the imagery of a feline has been employed (Caspian tigers were the only cats once part of the local fauna) in the whole corpus of wall paintings from the site (the other one on a diadem worn by one of the framed figures from the corridor of the Central Building – Kidd and Betts 2010, fig. 9). This supplementary element confirms that models with Achaemenid antecedents stylistically transformed by the passing of time were employed by the artists active in Akchakhan-kala. The evidence for this is straightforward. The question that now need answering, considering that these elements could not have originated indigenously, is where they did come from and when they were

[17] E.g., Miho Museum, Royal Ontario Museum, Princeton University Art Museum, MET, Brooklyn Art Museum, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Chicago Oriental Institute Museum. Some of these specimens are considered in Kantor 1957 and Moorey 1978.

[18] The motif also found its way to the west, as attested by a painted frieze of a Macedonian tomb at Dion (the "Soteriades Tomb", dating at the end of the 4th century BC – Boardman 1970).

[19] On its dating: Stark 2012: 4th/3rd century BC; Arbore Popescu et al. 1998: 3rd/2nd century BC.

adopted in the area south of the Aral. This issue raises many further questions.

4. Persistence of an unknown artistic tradition? Achaemenid heritage in the "Upper Satrapies"

The motif of the lions' heads that decorate the exterior of the *kandys* worn by Tištrya is only the latest of several formal elements with a clear Achaemenid iconographic ascendency recognized in the painted imagery of Akchakhan-kala. The stylization of the lions' manes and facial features reveal Persian archetypes rendered freehand by painters in their Chorasmian 1st century AD style. The presence of other similarly originated visual elements shows that we are not dealing with isolated features but instead with an artistic "package": the workshop(s) active at Akchakhan-kala had either access to models (a cartoon in the case of the "red ibex") or (but much less probably) those who supervised the work had them and the artists had to conform. To the main visual features of this "package" (e.g., the *kandys*, the *akinakes* etc.) and the lions, we ought to add others formal elements (discussed in Betts et al. 2015; 2016), such as Sraoša's Egyptian-shaped torque and his "colourful" trousers. Further, the third partially preserved colossal deity, possibly Spandarmad, wears a mantle embroidered on the exterior with a *pelta* motif evoking tree-bark or mountains of Near-Eastern ascendency. This latter motif, together with the pattern of triangles (or toothed lines) used in the secondary decorations of the deities' garments and equipment, and the amply used floral and geometric pattern decorating Sraoša's bejewelled *akinakes* and Tištrya's tiara (Ghirshman's *étoile à quatre rayons*),[20] are all earlier attested by materials found in the mounds of Pazyryk-5 and Pazyryk-1. All of these motifs have been found, not by chance along with our well-known Persian lions' heads, on various pieces that were buried in the Altai in the first half of the 3rd century BC. Furthermore, Srōsh's *corona muralis* displays towers of alternate height and colour (red and white) surmounted by a series of "horned" merlons (Fig. 7). Both features again echo Persian models, including depictions of embroideries from Achaemenid Susa showing battlements (Fig. 8,

[20] Discussed by Minardi in Betts et al. 2016a: 133-134. Examples contemporary to Akchakhan-kala include specimens from Tillya Tepe.

right). The same battlements – i.e., with "horned" towers of alternate colours – are also seen in a woollen saddlecloth from Pazyryk-5 (already noticed in Azarpay 1959: 136-137; Fig. 8, left).[21] Unlikely all their known antecedents, however, the Chorasmian towers seem to display rectangular niches (unnoticed before) below their horned crenellation, and dentils (or, perhaps, beam heads) further below before their arrow-shaped embrasures (Fig. 9). Structures with niches, dentils and horns appear in the architecture represented in the early 2nd century BC numismatic emissions of the Fratarakas from Fārs, and in what may be their actual Persepolitan and other unknown models (Callieri 2007: 118-122).[22] In Persis, moreover, the Fratarakas used the four-rayed star as an emblem (hoisted on a standard, and thus possibly having a symbolic and religious meaning – De Jong in Callieri 2007: 123-124) and they sported a *kandys* thrown on their back (with a decoration of circles on the cuffs). But while in Persis, the former core area of the Achaemenid power, we can observe both the persistence of tradition (Callieri 2007: 145; also due to the physical proximity to observable models; see also Boucharlat 2014:128, on the "Median" tombs of Zagros), and the employment of the new means provided by Hellenism for "*nuove forme di rappresentazione"* such as numismatics (idem: 114, 127), earlier for Pazyryk and later for Chorasmia, we ought to consider similar patterns of transmission but in a different, geographically detached from Western Iran, context.[23] These shared

[21] The Achaemenid towers display "horns", which might be corner stepped merlons (cf. Temple of Bel, Palmyra), whereas the Chorasmian, Persepolitan and mentioned Frataraka examples have two upright points/horns on each merlon. In the second numismatic series of the Fratarakas the "horned merlons" are changed with the stepped type (Callieri 2007: 125), hence it seems that both types shared the same semantic. The Chorasmian example also differs in that it has what may be a continuous crenellation (see fig. 9a-b). Horns also belong to fire, or incense, burners (e.g., on Kushan numismatic emission with the representation of a standing king Vasudeva in armour). Horned altars comprise a large and diversified group of objects and are found over a long period of time through a wide geographical area (including e.g., Parthian Assur – Andrae and Lenzen 1933, Pl. 36).

[22] Comparanda already noted in, Minardi in Betts et al. 2016a: 132. On the debated chronology and symbolism of the Fratarakas, the chronology which might be higher but not lower, see the recent Sarkhosh Curtis 2010, Engels 2013 and Müseler 2018 with references.

[23] The politically driven desire of the lords of Fārs for emulation is clear in that they do not just wear a *kandys*, but, in later numismatic emissions of the 1st century BC, they seem even to borrow for their self-representation from the royal tombs of Naqš-e

iconographic elements, characterized by a strong symbolic charge, are comparable, but as I have repeatedly noted, there is not much of Hellenistic in the deities of Akchakhan-kala and there are no apparent direct links (if not perhaps for a "common background") between Chorasmia and the Fratarakas of Persis.

Data from Pazyryk suggest the possibility that additional types of crafts, besides models conceived for paintings and sculpture, might have contribute to the diffusion of Achaemenid iconographic elements in Asia: these would have been carpets and embroidered textiles. The lions' heads of Achaemenid taste were found in barrow 2 (Pazyryk-2: ca. 300-282 BC) and barrow 1 (Pazyryk-1: ca. 295 BC), whereas the most famous carpet from this necropolis and other "woollens" came from barrow 5 (Pazyryk-5: ca. 250 BC). The lions' heads from Pazyryk are more ancient than the Chorasmian painted specimens and, like the horned one from Pazyryk-1, closer to their original models. Scholars had already considered the idea that at least the famous carpets from barrow 5, including, I believe, the one with the tower pattern discussed above, were actually Achaemenid, possibly manufactured in Bactria.[24] This is more than suggestive: textiles, which are easy to transport but less to manufacture, were a favoured vector of diffusion of motifs and iconographies throughout antiquity.[25] They were also a vector of complex polychromatic designs. Their manufacture may also have been

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Rostam the iconography of the king in front of a fire altar (Callieri 2007: 125).

[24] Francfort (2008: 38). On the provenance and technical analysis of the "Great Carpet" from Pazyryk-5, see also Lerner 1991 and Böhmer and Thompson 1991 with references. A Middle-Assyrian period document from Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta attests that the representation of cities on textiles already existed at the end of the 2nd millennium BC, and, thus, it is quite probable that the motif of enclosures with towers also existed (Barrelet 1977).

[25] From the "Babylonian" textiles and carpets of Cyrus's tomb (Arrian, *Anabasis* VI. 29. 5) to the representation of textiles incised at Persepolis with passing lions and their matching real specimens found in Pazyryk-5 (Rudenko 1970, pl. 177, A). Even the Fratarakas's standard might be counted among those textiles kept in sacred places for veneration and display (above). It is interesting to recall here that inside Cyrus's tomb there was also a "*kandys"* of "Babylonian" workmanship (*Anabasis* VI. 29. 6). Bactrian and Kushan textiles, such as those from Sanpula and Noin-ula hint at the fact that the Bactrian area witnessed an important high-quality and long-lasting tradition of textile decoration and weaving. Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* VIII. 74) records how expensive the Babylonian textiles were during the time of Nero (37-68 AD) and also mentions the invention of *polymita* in Alexandria (which Plautus, *Ps*. 1. 2, described as being "purple, embroidered with beasts all over").

connected to oral transmission of mythopoetic (Tuck 2006). That textiles from other areas of the Empire were imported into Achaemenid Bactriana is also confirmed by an Aramaic document of the 4th century BC ("purple wool, a garment of Cappadocia, gifts… purple brocade"; Naveh and Shaked 2012, C6). It is not perhaps by chance then, that we can observe a certain correspondence between wall paintings depicting motifs and patterns of textiles and the patterns on actual textiles, over time and space from Persia to Pazyryk and Akchakhan-kala. And considering the fact that Chorasmia was once the northeastern-most enclave of the Empire, it might have been one of those focal areas between sedentary and semi-nomadic cultures in which contacts and exchanges occurred over time (and perhaps continuously; Minardi 2015: 82-83 with references).[26]

Taking into account the historical context of Ancient Chorasmia on the whole, we have to exclude an artistic mediation of Achaemenid models from the steppes into the polity (cf. Francfort 2005: 340). The Achaemenid-inspired features in Akchakhan-kala art, which are quite close to their Persian originals even though more recent than those found in Pazyryk and Berel', also appear to underline the fact that certain forms were diffused via Central Asia.[27] As far as we know, there are no formal elements of steppic origin in the art of Akchakhan-kala.[28] State formation in Chorasmia was the result of a political process ignited by an Achaemenid intervention (Minardi 2015 contra Rapoport et al. 2000).[29] Because of the Achaemenids, political

[26] A trade route from Chorasmia to the foothills of the Southern Urals existed in the second half of the 1st millennium BC (Bolelov 2013: 247-248) apparently since the end of the 5th century BC (idem: 246) through both the Jaxartes/Syr Darya delta and the Ustyurt Plateau. According to Bolelov (2013: 249; 353, Map 25), the presence of mostly 4th- and 3rd-century Chorasmian ceramic material in the barrows of the area testifies that Chorasmia, which in his opinion had established itself as a separated *satrapy* of the Achaemenid Empire in the mid/late 5th century BC, intensified its commerce flow with the steppes because of a newly gained independence from the Persians.

[27] From Pazyryk-5 comes a "fork for check-straps" of saddlery decoration clearly inspired by a *ketos* (Rudenko 1970, pl. 117, C – not considered in Minardi 2016a). This element, as the barrow dates ca. 250 BC, also points towards transmission from Central Asia to the steppes as we are aware that such Greek dragons arrived in Asia with the Greeks (Minardi 2016a: 175).

[28] The only exception might be the roundel in the upper portion of Srōsh's scabbard (Minardi in Betts et. al. 2016: 134).

[29] In this work, Tolstov's speculative "Greater Chorasmian Theory" is still evoked

development in the area followed new and complex trajectories. The non-artistic material culture of the country proves this point. Arguably in consequence, new iconographies (and arts and crafts) likewise entered the country with the Persians. As I noted elsewhere, this probably means that, after the conquest of the lower reaches of the Oxus, an *agent* of the Achaemenid central power, arguably the same satrapy under the control and political influence of which the territory of Chorasmia was until the defeat of Bessos, extended its jurisdiction over these lands.[30] Chorasmia was subdued because of its strategic position, and it became a Persian outpost near the *Sakās*, a bridge towards the both dangerous and useful steppes

The real challenge in considering the presence of Achaemenid formal elements in the art of Chorasmia at the turn of the 1st millennium as a *persistence*, is that there is no evidence of mural art in the country before the "Hellenistic age". Also, evidence of mural art from the Achaemenid capitals is scant: the figurative fragments unearthed at Susa currently appear to be isolated (Boucharlat 2010: 402-403; on the paint applied to the reliefs of Persepolis, see also Roaf 1983: 8; Ambers and Simpson 2005). However, archaeologists are aware that the lack of painted material from the early epochs is quite likely due to the fragility of the evidence and to missing (and missed) archaeological finds. The painted corpus of Akchakhan-kala is eloquent in this regard. Yet at Akchakhan-kala the modelled and painted sculptural evidence so far retrieved has no Persian qualities but, instead, bears the mark of a "traditionalist" Hellenism (the *ketos*). In Chorasmia, and Asia, the unbaked clay modelling technique seems to have been an innovation brought by Hellenism. Evidence seems to indicate that it was apparently introduced into the polity not earlier than the mid-3rd century BC, and possibly even in the early 2nd century BC (Minardi 2016a).

We may consider the hypothesis that both these techniques, mural painting and (less likely, as also recently noted in Francfort 2013: 116) unbaked-clay modelled and painted sculpture, and their material realizations, existed earlier in Chorasmia, as well as in Central

(Rapoport et al. 2000: 24-25). This point is discussed in Minardi forthcoming 2021a.

[30] Political continuity marked the transition from the Achaemenids to Alexander (Briant 1996: 887-889; Naveh and Shaked 2012: 16). Chorasmia was left outside the territories ruled by Alexander.

Asia, and that only with the input of Hellenism they did become technically improved and widespread, due to the birth of that *industria artistica* typical of the Hellenistic age. At least this can be considered as a plausible hypothesis for mural art. From this perspective, even though evidence for earlier periods is scant, the Akchakhan-kala's paintings may reveal themselves as the last output of an original contribution inherited from the Achaemenid sphere. This ancient contribution appears no less clearly than the other one discernible in its art, that is the contribution from its Hellenized south, from which Chorasmia was nonetheless still partially detached. Both inputs are conveyed with originality by the aulic art of 1st century AD Chorasmia, in all the complexity of an artistic creation. But if on the one hand, the Hellenistic element was "current" at the time that the Akchakhan-kala paintings were made, the Achaemenid component was instead already an archetype as proven by the fact that it is only related to the sole iconographical aspect of the works. Hence, I believe that the Persian iconographic archetypes discernible at Akchakhan-kala cannot be separated from the notion of artistic continuity: there are no surviving contemporary parallels of such pregnant "archaic" iconographic echoes in the aulic art of Central Asia.

In the former Achaemenid Asiatic domains, besides the important mass of data evidenced by material culture studies (that cannot be discussed here for reasons of space; see for instance the collection of articles in the recent Genito and Maresca 2019; see also Minardi 2016c), late reflections of an Achaemenid stimulus, of different significance, can be recognized in architecture. Elements such as Mauryan pillars and columns,[31] Graeco-Bactrian (Schlumberger 1970: 27; analysed in Bernard 1976) and Arsacid (Lippolis 2009: 56-57) column bases, and, contemporary to Akchakhan-kala, Gandhāran-Persepolitan types of columns and capitals from north-western India (Faccenna and Filigenzi 2007: 77-80) are well-known examples of this. The column bases of Akchakhan-kala are of a composite type (a stepped plinth underneath a rounded torus) that was locally elaborated on models quite similar to those of the mentioned "Persian Graeco-Bactrian" specimens (for further details, see Minardi et al. 2017).[32]

[31] Cf. note 5 above.

[32] The same columned architecture, as a marker of elite and representative space, enters Chorasmia with the Achaemenids in the 6th century BC (Minardi et al. 2017).

5. Conclusive remarks

In a country characterized by *porous conservativism,* the religious element and its legacy may have run in parallel and continuity with the artistic one. The imagery we are contemplating is linked to the generally conservative concepts of Iranian kingship and religion. At first glance our deities may seem to be isolated icons, but in truth they are central to a visual system (*yazatas* – *paradeisos* – Fravashis) metaphoric expression of a complex religious message. The centrality of the *yazatas* is, at present, also emphasized by the lack of focal representations of royal figures whose depictions are relegated to accessory, although significant, elements of the visual programme, such as the panels in the central band of the colossal Tištrya (Minardi 2018, fig. 15; Grenet 2018, fig. 8). It seems that the Chorasmian king, whose dynasty was celebrated via painted inscriptions found in the corridor of the Central Building, was neither willing to boast of a divine nature[33] nor wanting to explicitly exalt the relation of his house with important foreign ancestors, if not with his *Fravashis* (although Bīrunī records something on this regard, possibly for a later period).[34] Akchakhan-kala was not conceived as a *hierotheseion* (by a king who defined himself *Philoromaios Philhellen*) or transformed into a memorial centre after its main stage of life. Instead, it was abandoned: in the early 2nd century AD the Ceremonial Complex was deserted and despoiled, unlike, for instance, Old Nisa, which became a "huge memorial and ceremonial centre for the Arsacid dynasty" (Lippolis 2009: 54). At the new seat of Toprak-kala, the royal dynasty may have been celebrated by following a tradition renewed by Kushan influence. However, the "High Palace" of Toprak-kala, similarly to the palace of Akchakhan-kala, lost its status and was despoiled and transformed into

[33] The only preserved portrait of a possible king of Akchakhan-kala (Minardi 2018, fig. 16) does not show the nimbus that a later (late second 2nd century AD, Sinisi 2018: 175) Chorasmian king with similar headgear and diadem adopted for his numismatic portrait in a Kushan fashion.

[34] Al-Bīrunī (transl. Sachau 1879: 40-42) records how the kings of Chorasmia during Late Antiquity were proud of their (legendary?) ancestral heritage, perhaps to be linked to the Achaemenid kings (Minardi 2015: 116-117) and that the country was "colonized" in the year "980 before Alexander" (*Anno Alexandri* 304 corresponds, according to the same scholar, with the birth of Christ). This might have been a late propaganda boast of the Chorasmian ruling dynasty; nonetheless, it is worth recalling in this context.

a utilitarian building, probably a fort, after a short span of time (Minardi 2020: 200-201 with references).

It may be that Achaemenid archetypes, which that *de facto* had undergone a long process of transformation in style and content, were knowingly employed at Akchakhan-kala under active royal and religious patronage mainly for political reasons and in relation to a certain propaganda construct (which cannot be in any way a Persian *revival*). This is merely speculation, however. We have to considered that the country was, at the time of Akchakhan-kala's Stage 3, chronologically and geographically far detached from the former centres of Achaemenid power (unlike the Fratarakas of Persis or, later, the Sassanids) and was surrounded by elites who were adopting Hellenism as a shared "language". The message conveyed by the Avestan deities might have been consciously attached to a fabled past inherited by the royal dynasty, but the lack of historical sources means that we have no indications. Nevertheless, the means of visually displaying this conjectural political decision were clearly not re-created in imitation of contemporary models (of long-lost, unknown to us, Achaemenid anthropomorphic deities?), as their style and iconography demonstrate (why was not a Hellenistic garb not instead chosen?). If this were the case, odd Achaemenid models would have been selected: we have gods that look like throne bearers instead of gods who look like kings (why, of the various possibilities available, this position of the body was chosen is unclear); we have an out-of-fashion *akinakes* in a "classic sheath" (a relic that may have been attached to some symbolic quality and status).[35] One of the gods even re-elaborates the Achaemenid "atlas pose" adapting it to a *velificatio*, reversing again to a ritual/cosmic context a representation inherited from Egyptian and

[35] A 5th-century BC non-functional bronze *akinakes* fused in one piece with its scabbard was discovered in Romania, at Medgidia (Schiltz 1994, fig. 169). The *akinakes*, among the objects carried in procession by some foreign delegations at Persepolis and a piece of equipment shared among most "nations" of the Achaemenid Empire (according to their allegoric representations), certainly had a status and symbolic role (a gold *akinakes* is mentioned as a gift/token of honour bestowed by the Persian king, e.g., Xenophon, *Anabasis* I. 2, 27, and I. 8, 29). The dagger had a specific kind of scabbard used to secure the weapon to the thigh of a horseman while riding. This scabbard was later supplanted by the four-lobed one (see above; probably originated in a nomadic milieu around the 3rd century BC, Schiltz 2006: 279), thus with a different strap system, perhaps because of its increased efficiency while riding (on the symbolic value diffusion and origin of this latter type, see Schiltz 2002).

Mesopotamian art that in Persia had become decidedly political (Root 1979: 150-153).[36] The Chorasmian gods hence seem to be the result of a new interpretation of old iconographies. As a matter of fact, the artistic language of the mural art of Akchakhan-kala does not try to show its "Persianism", but instead it ostensibly tries to conform to the dominant Hellenistic *koiné* that surrounds it. What in fact the art of Akchakhan-kala hints at, and what a few generations later is perfectly demonstrated by the art of Toprak-kala (e.g., in its Hellenistic Iranian goddesses – Minardi 2020), is that instead of resisting external stimuli and pursuing "Persianism", the Chorasmian elite of Akchakhan-kala manifested through its art a willingness to partake more of the cultural *koiné* of its southern peers.[37] That is why some foreign artists and craftsmen, possibly (geographically) Bactrians, were called upon and employed in the Akchakhan-kala's royal complex. That is why the regnal fire of the king had precious imported components of Indian elephant ivory (Betts et al. 2016b). Bactriana was also the former satrapy from which, as in the clearly documented case of the first stage of the Chorasmian material culture with ceramics derived from Yaz-III types, similar Achaemenid elements may have been employed by its elite and then diffused into Chorasmia during the centuries of the Persian domination (*contra* Francfort 2013: 116). Artaxerxes II, as recorded by Berossos, ordered the erection of cultic statues of Anāhitā (plausibly after the same official model)[38] in the main centres of the Empire, including Bactra (discussed in Briant 1996: 695-696).[39] This signifies that an aulic courtly art there existed. However, at the time of Akchakhan-kala Stage 3, such archaic features were absent in

[36] Tištrya, in my reconstruction (Minardi 2018), displays a canopy of heaven with his star, Sirius, at the centre. The god's iconography reminds us not only of throne bearers, and their Egyptian models (used as late as the Roman times, e.g., the zodiac of Dendera), but also the god Shu.

[37] The propagandistic and political "*renouveau iranien*" of the Kushan Empire has to be separated from the development of arts, crafts and architecture by that time heavily influenced by the past Greek colonization (Fussman 1977). Cf. *supra* the Fratarakas employing the means provided by Hellenism for their new forms of representations.

[38] Roaf (1983: 147) hypotheses that the statue of Darius found at Susa was designed after wooden models (which were easier to transport and are mentioned in the Treasury tablets). On Berossos and Persian religion, see Jacobs 2013.

[39] According to Boyce and Grenet (1991: 6-7), there are no doubts about the Zoroastrian faith of the Bactrians. Regarding Avestan geography and Zoroastrianism in Central Asia, see Grenet 2015a; 2015b.

Hellenized Bactriana (and Parthia). Therefore, it is implausible to think that the origin of such "Persianizing" elements of Chorasmian art in the 1st century BC/1st century AD were generated outside the local sphere. Later in the 2nd century AD, at Toprak-kala, this "Persianism" almost completely disappears with the breakthrough of Eastern Hellenism (even if some secondary echoes still persist, such as the torque worn by a frontally-shown sculpture of a "bird-priest" – Grenet 2016: 82, fig. 10).

This interim conclusion prompts another set of questions. The place from which these Persian formal elements did originate from, is arguably acknowledged; it is the former Achaemenid satrapal *centres* of the empire (which did not include Chorasmia). Unfortunately, we do not have material data on the process at the origins of such models (see Francfort's analysis 2013). It is plausible to consider that in the satrapal capitals of Central Asia, later the Upper Satrapies, under the stimulus of the central Achaemenid power before the impact of Hellenism, a courtly art was implemented, but we do not have material evidence about the quality and diffusion of the official and courtly art developed east of Persia. We do not even know whether this art allowed local variations (also according to the natural resources available for its manufacture) or remained standardized after its models. We do not know how it existed side by side with earlier local traditions and how they interacted. In this regard, apart from other classes of material such as imported toreutics and those specific sumptuary vessels and derived ceramic shapes, which trace conflict, exchange and emulation processes among elites in Achaemenid Asia and the steppes (e.g., see Treister 2013 on Achaemenid material of the first-half of the 5th century BC found in barrows of the southern Ural area dating in the late 5th- early 4th century BC), we are still in the dark.

Now the case of Akchakhan-kala, which bears material traces of these emulation and artistic processes, is giving us hints about our unsolved queries. In other words, the Chorasmian evidence may give us a glimpse of ancient iconographic models once employed in the aulic/religious art that existed in Central Asia under the influence (whether factual or mediated and inherited) of the Achaemenids. One example cannot prove that a whole process was under way, but the pattern here is suggestive. The date at which these models "arrived" (one fact is clear: they were originally not indigenous) in the polity is still the major open question, although we do know that it was long

before the 1st century BC/1st century AD. Another available datum is that nothing chronologically akin to and iconographically comparable to the Chorasmian gods it is currently known outside the polity. The anthropomorphism of the Chorasmian Avestan deities might, on the other hand, be attributable to a Hellenistic influence. Whether this was the case, and, again, how early this input might have been, is impossible to compute with accuracy because the issue started, as seen above earlier with the cult of Anāhitā in Bactra, at the time of Artaxerxes II. Their transmission into Chorasmia could have occurred late in respect to the beginning of the Achaemenid sway in the country. It may even have been in parallel with the widespread use of the wall painting and clay modelling (with the aid of moulds) techniques in Asia, but again, the iconography had to be more ancient. Certainly, the image of the therianthropic "bird-priest", as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere (Minardi forthcoming 2021c), owes a debt to Greek models: the iconographic creation of the *Sraošāvarəz* belongs to the "innovative" Hellenistic-influenced side of the imagery of the site (this image, however, renders a vision handed down by the *Vendīdād*). Be that as it may, it seems that the art of Akchakhan-kala knew and employed several Persian archetypes that seem to have persisted; yet they were adapted and modernised in style and used in association with features contemporary to their time by reason of the absence of a sudden clash with the Hellenistic civilization. The employment of these archaizing features, which were ripe in this art while mixing with local and external formal elements, will dramatically cease with the adoption of the new forms derived from Hellenism (of Kushan times) by the elite of the 2nd century AD.

There is another factor to take into account: we should be aware of the extraordinary force of tradition in Chorasmia. This is seen not only in the persistence of crucial elements such as the Zoroastrian funerary ritual (Minardi forthcoming 2021b), but also in the Aramaic script used for the Chorasmian language until the Arab conquest, in the use of the Zoroastrian calendar (on this two latter points, De Jong 2015), in the conservative ceramic characteristics (there are no fish-plates in Chorasmia), and in the fact that a local era (the Chorasmian Era) endured for more than seven centuries (the latest date available is 738 Ch.E., and the earliest is 188/9 Ch.E. – Minardi 2015: 122-124).[40]

[40] As mentioned above, in this case it may be possible to envisage an indirect Seleucid

According to the available data, this era appears to have started in the 1st century BC (*terminus ante quem* 26 BC), thus within the timeframe of the realization of the complex painted imagery of Akchakhan-kala. The monumentalizing of the Ceremonial Complex and its lavish Stage 3 decoration might even be related to the establishment of this era, which would likely have been linked to the access to or consolidation of power of a new ruling dynasty.[41] It is also a fact that the material culture of the country shifted in this period (towards the Antique 3 – Minardi 2015: 127).

We are all aware of the fact that it is quite difficult to demonstrate the persistence of a tradition that is almost completely unknown. However, the extraordinary character of the painted imagery of Akchakhan-kala seems, in conclusion, to suggest for the first time that this aulic art might very well have existed. We are not beyond the realms of possibility. Besides, the Akchakhan-kala corpus of wall paintings demonstrates that a rich painting tradition had existed not only in Chorasmia but also, more in general, in Central Asia. The fact that this evidence comes from the "periphery" of the Achaemenid empire, and again, later, from the "periphery" of the "Graeco-Iranian world", is explained by the unique (in comparison with the rest of sedentary Central Asia) cultural and historical trajectory of the country. Contrarily, for what it concerns the preservation and transmission of iconographies and the elaboration of style through the centuries in Asia, we do know plenty of extraordinary examples. The process took a variety of forms; the ones that better known are those related to the most powerful *artistic civilization* of Antiquity, the Hellenistic one. The "stucco" material from Tepe Shotor, Hadda (Tarzi 1976), is one of the most incredible examples of such processes and of their successes (discussed in Minardi 2015b). This does not exclude the possibility that other kinds of imagery may have survived and been transmitted thanks to Hellenistic techniques and practices. Perhaps the Akchakhan-kala's deities may be considered as a comparable example relative to the

model (Minardi 2015: 124).

[41] The Chorasmians had sent an ambassador to Han China in 110 BC (Minardi 2015: 57 with references; F. Grenet pointed out to my attention that Pelliot 1938 has to be added to the references). The term "dynasty" is here properly used, because epigraphs from Akchakhan-kala mention kings and sons of kings (cf. above note 4 on the Isakovka inscription).

persistence and survival of Achaemenid models, albeit in the shape of iconographic echoes and not pure forms.

D. Schlumberger (1960: 152-153), before the discovery of Ai Khanoum had already confronted a similar issue relative to Greek Bactria, and only a partial solution to it has been found: *"...la Bactriane n'est pas un mythe, elle est seulement inexplorée. Le vrai problème n'est pas de décider s'il y a eu des monuments dans la Bactriane grecque ou s'il n'y en a pas eu. Il est de savoir si les monuments disparus se rattachaient exclusivement à l'art grec, ou au contraire simultanément à cet art et à un art indigène, de tradition sans doute achéménide, et s'il y a donc eu dans les cours bactriennes un art mixte comparable à celui que nous connaissons, dans le même temps, à la cour des Mauryas."*

The still growing body of archaeological evidence has possibly started to document the traces, or echoes, of this Achaemenid tradition of which Schlumberger did not have any doubts.

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Figures

Fig. 1 – Akchakhan-kala, Central Building of the Ceremonial Complex, wall paintings depicting Avestan deities. From left to right: Srōsh, and possibly Tištrya and Spandarmad (©KAE, interim reconstruction based on 1:1 tracing).

Fig. 2 – Akchakhan-kala, detail of the *kandys* of the second with lion's head (©KAE; image rotated and colours enhanced; fragment under restoration).

Fig. 3 – Akchakhan-kala, 1:1 tracing of the lion's heads decorating the *kandys* of the second god (©KAE).

Fig. 4 – Akchakhan-kala, interim reconstruction based on 1:1 tracing of the lion's heads decorating the *kandys* of the second god (©KAE).

Fig. 5 – Achaemenid comparanda. A: Glazed brick, Susa (detail after Caubet 2010: fig. 349); B: gold bracteate (©Brooklyn Museum, Acc. no. 70.142.6); C: bronze buckle from Berkara, Kazakhstan (after Arbore Popescu et al. 1998, cat. no. 442). Not to scale.

Fig. 6 – Examples of decorations in shape of lion's heads from Pazyryk (after Rudenko 1970: A: detail of Pl. 148 a, barrow 1, felt; B: fig. 75 c, leather, barrow 2; C: fig. 116, leather, barrow 1). Not to scale.

Fig. 7 – Akchakhan-kala, 1:1 tracing of the mural crown worn by Srōsh with towers of alternate colours (©KAE).

Fig. 8 – Examples of patterns on textiles of bicoloured-towers with two merlons: left, Pazyryk-5 (after Rudenko 1970: pl. 177 b); right, Susa (on glazed bricks, detail after Caubet 2010: figs. 380-381).

Fig. 9 – Akchakhan-kala, detail of the 1:1 tracing of the mural crown worn by Srōsh with hypothetical reconstructions of the "horned" crenellation of one of its red towers (©KAE).

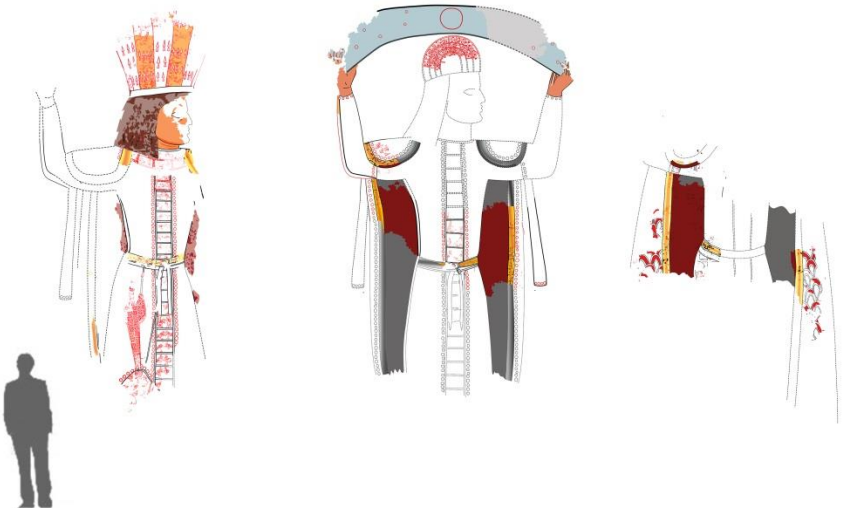

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

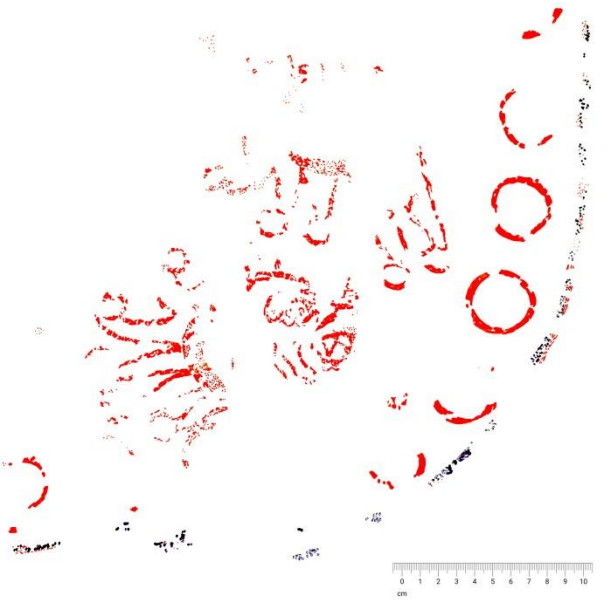

Fig. 3

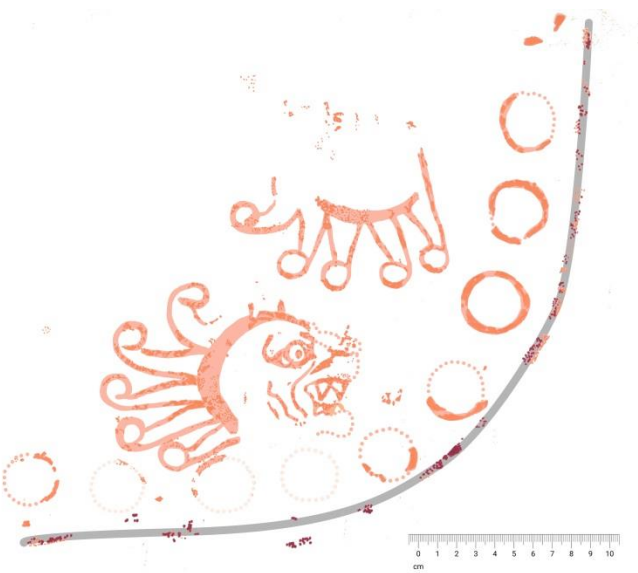

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

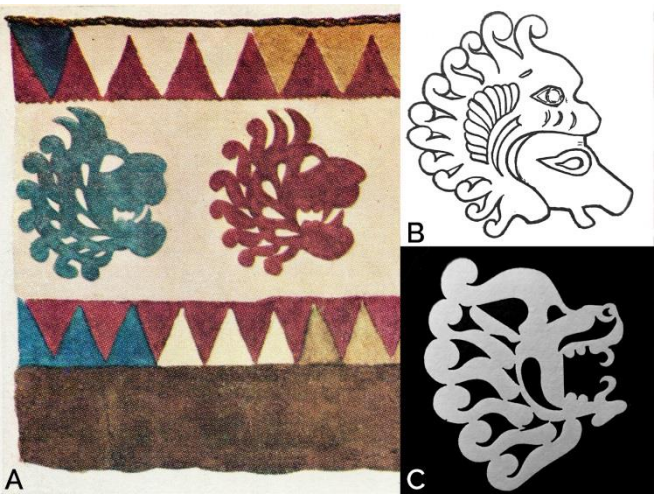

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

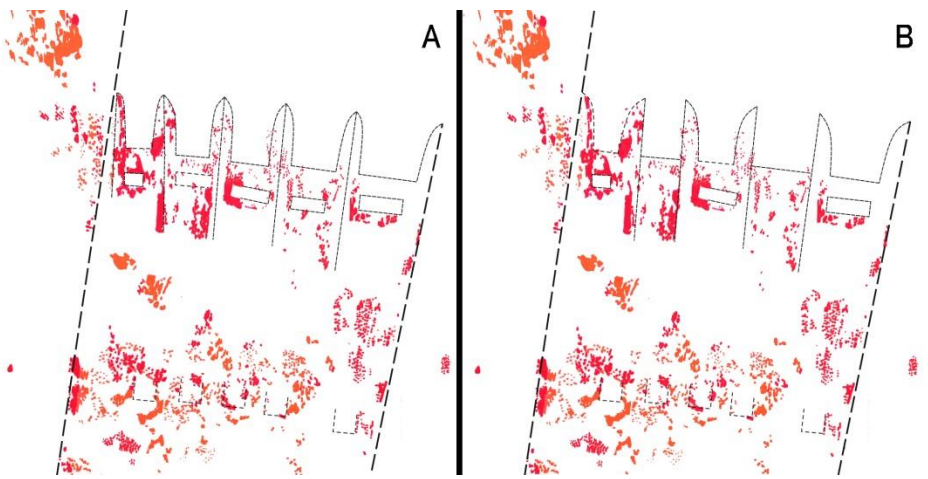

Fig. 9