

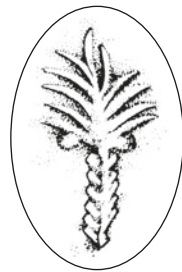
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MICHELE MINARDI\*

## “PERSIAN RIDERS” ON A POST-ACHAEMENID TERRACOTTA MOULD FROM THE BHIR MOUND, TAXILA

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the iconography and the style of a fragmentary terracotta mould unearthed in the early 2000s by a Pakistani archaeological team in a post-Mauryan context at the site of the Bhir Mound, Taxila. The mould bears the impression of two mounted horsemen galloping during a hunt or a fight. Their well-defined attributes, such as their attire and the trappings of their horses, indicate that these characters were undoubtedly meant to illustrate Achaemenid Persian riders. The object, by its very nature crafted to copy or replicate a prototype through a cast, is discussed in context considering the historical implications that it conveys. It is here argued that its “anachronistic” imagery, not isolated as one may think, may be evidence of the persistence of formal elements from Achaemenid times in the northwest region of India between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, a long time after the empire’s demise.

### KEYWORDS

Achaemenid Empire; Persian riders; transmission of iconographies; artistic legacy; Central Asia; north-west India; Taxila; the Bhir Mound.

### Introduction

During a recent visit to the Taxila Museum, I had the chance to take a closer look at a fragment of a relatively small terracotta mould (~ 9.4 x 6.9 cm) published by M. Bahadar Khan and his associates in 2002. The item was discovered at the site of the Bhir Mound, the place considered by some to have been the earliest of the settlements of Taxila.<sup>1</sup> The mould, as it is preserved, and despite the incorrect description of it that appeared in the original publication,<sup>2</sup> clearly bears the depiction of two archers mounted on galloping horses (Figs. 1-2). As we shall see, the outstanding characteristic of this representation is that the riders seem to be characterized as Achaemenids/Persians (from the point of view of identity and/or status); moreover, for the first time, this kind of iconography, which is much better known in the imagery of the Achaemenid west, is found in India, remarkably in a post-Achaemenid archaeological context.

The mould under scrutiny was found in a “layer 6” of one of the forty-two 5 x 5 m squares opened in the “Stadium Area” (so named because the area used

to be a sports ground) of the site of the Bhir Mound.<sup>3</sup> This area was not chosen for what some colleagues term “vertical excavation”.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the *layers* identified in its squares were assigned to the “occupational periods” IV and V of the reconstructed chronological sequence on the basis of two other deep soundings carried out in the northeastern part of the same site (Fig. 3).<sup>5</sup> These “occupational periods” (henceforth, periods) have been recognised as corresponding to the most recent archaeological phases of the Bhir Mound. According to the authors of the report, such periods in the Stadium Area were “very difficult to distinguish them from one another [sic]”.<sup>6</sup>

Although Period IV is dated by Bahadar Khan *et alii* as being between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC (300 to 200 BC), so well into the Mauryan age (for Taxila very possibly 303 to 190 BC),<sup>7</sup> the more recent

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<sup>1</sup> BAHADAR KHAN *et alii* 2002, 24-28 with references to the previous excavations at the site (MARSHALL 1951a-c; SHARIF 1968). Cf. CALLIERI forthcoming, who proposed the Hathial ridge as the possible original Achaemenid settlement of Taxila.

<sup>2</sup> “A terracotta mould depicting a warrior holding a sword in his right hand, riding on a charging horse. The warrior is wearing an [sic] helmet and armor. Another warrior is seen, riding on another horse, parallel to the first warrior” (BAHADAR KHAN *et alii* 2002, 177).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*. No stratigraphic sections relative to the archaeological work done in the “Stadium Area” are published.

<sup>4</sup> In other words, the excavation in the Stadium Area was limited to the clearance of some of the most recent structural remains encountered during the work and it did not reach the most ancient stratigraphic units (and eventually bedrock).

<sup>5</sup> BAHADAR KHAN *et alii* 2002, sections illustrated at p. 30, fig. 2, and 38-39, figs. 4-5. In the drawing of the section of the area “AQ & AR” (*ibidem*, 30), layer 7 is erroneously marked as belonging to Period III (in the whole excavation report this layer is said to belong to Period IV along with nos. 6 and 5). But layer 7 seems actually the topmost layer (although not the topmost stratigraphic unit, as layer 6 overlays a structure built over layer 7) of the preceding Period III, which is overlaid by layer 6, and already contained a Mauryan coin (*ibidem*, 206-207, pl. XXIII).

<sup>6</sup> BAHADAR KHAN *et alii* 2002, 51-52. Cf. MARSHALL 1951a, 87, who wrote that there were “overlappings in the buildings of strata II and III”.

<sup>7</sup> Taxila before Alexander entered India (326 BC) was already an important centre of Asia that, under the Achaemenids, was quite possibly the capital city of an Indian district under their control (CALLIERI forthcoming with references). Seleucus



Fig. 1 - The Bhir Mound, Taxila. Fragment of terracotta mould with Persian riders (author's photo).



Fig. 2 - Outline of the fragmentary mould from the Bhir Mound, Taxila (author's drawing).



Fig. 3 - The Bhir Mound, Taxila. Satellite image of the site (©Google Earth). The "Stadium Area" is the square one on the northwest encircled by a fence.

Period V has been ascribed by them to the “2<sup>nd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> century BC”.<sup>8</sup> However, the excavators did not rule out further occupation of the site up to ca. AD 50, basing their argument on ceramic evidence.<sup>9</sup> Be that as it may, the latest period of organized occupation of the Bhir Mound (including Marshall’s “stratum I”) may be relative to the first Indo-Greek city of Taxila before the re-foundation/reorganization of Sirkap undertaken by Azes’s heirs.<sup>10</sup>

Despite stratigraphic concerns, it is possible to focus on two important pieces of information relative to the archaeological context of the mould under discussion: the specimen was not a surface find (it comes from a layer 6, numbered from top to bottom),<sup>11</sup> and it does not seem to have been an intrusive object from an unrecognised filling (and, if this was the case, from a surface cut not later than about 50 AD, *supra*). Consequently, it appears that the specimen was found in a stratigraphic unit belonging to the later phases of the Bhir Mound, to be dated between the end of the Mauryan period and the Graeco-Bactrian/Indo-Greek periods; dating it later is unlikely. On the safer side, we may then assume a 1<sup>st</sup> century BC dating for its finding context, that is, a time at the end of the excavators’ Period V, or, in other words, prior to the Sakan re-foundation of Sirkap that sanctioned the end of organized settlement in the Bhir Mound area. As I will try to argue in the following pages, this does not mean that the item itself might very well be more ancient.<sup>12</sup>

### The “Persian riders”

Notwithstanding its relatively small dimensions, the Taxila fragmentary mould is rich in visual detail. The preserved imagery is vertically split into three parts: (1) a topmost register, which is almost completely lost, separated from the central one by a continuous pattern of intersecting pairs of lines (a band of stylized leaves inspired by a guilloche);<sup>13</sup> (2) a main and central register bearing the depiction of the horseback archers; and (3) a very partially preserved lower register, separated from the main one by a string course of a garland of two-foiled elements (i.e., overlapping elongated laurel leaves with a terminal dot, uncommon in Hellenistic friezes). Contrary to the upper register, and despite its limited preservation, the top part of the lower register still displays some relevant features: on the left of the terracotta cast we can observe what it appears to be leaves (of a tree?), while toward the right of the object, we see what may be the uppermost part of a stag’s antlers. Hence, plausibly, a secondary frieze with animals and vegetation decorated the lower part of this object.

At the centre of the composition, the two mounted archers are shown rushing off to the right (considering the inverted resulting cast) on their steeds. Their

bowstrings are pulled back, and arrows are notched: they seem to aim at a now lost enemy, or at game, which ought to have been represented in front of them. The bows, characterized by accentuated curved tips of the limbs (as shown by the single preserved case), are only partially visible; they are kept on the left side of the horses and hidden by the animals’ heads. Apparently, both riders are drawing the bow and simultaneously holding the reins with their right hands. As a matter of fact, it seems more likely to consider the alignment of the bow string, not only with the bulging element at the base of the horse’s neck (from which the reins depart) but also with the reins, as conceived for the sake of composition (*infra*). The horses are small-bodied, and the rider/horse ratio seems unnatural.

Of the two horses, only the one in the foreground is almost entirely preserved (only its hind hooves are missing). Its mouth is open as it gallops in a conventional, unrealistic, “flying” stance with parallel stretched front legs.<sup>14</sup> The overlapping of the two riders, and the fact that in the resulting cast the foreground horseman seems to have a more projecting relief, generates a sense of depth. In the extreme left area of the fragment we can observe what seems to be part of the hind leg of another animal, and its position suggests that it is another horse; thus, the

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ceded Taxila to Chandragupta in 303 BC, and the area seems to have come later under the aegis of the Graeco-Bactrians with the conquests of Demetrios about 190 BC (BERNARD, PINAULT, ROUGEMONT 2004). These events may be related to the end of the Mauryan Bhir Mound and the beginning of its last occupational phases (BAHADAR KHAN *et alii* 2002, “Period V”, or, MARSHALL 1951a, “stratum I”).

<sup>8</sup> BAHADAR KHAN *et alii* 2002, 34-35.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 35; cf. MARSHALL 1951a, 87. According to Marshall, the city of the Bhir Mound was deserted approximately in the early part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, although some occupation continued afterwards, as indicated by some “few fragmentary foundations” identified by him on the surface of the site (i.e., Marshall’s “stratum I”; MARSHALL 1951a, 110).

<sup>10</sup> OLIVIERI 2021 with references.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. section of trench “AQ-AR 56” (BAHADAR KHAN *et alii* 2002, fig. 2).

<sup>12</sup> Ancient items may be obviously found in much later contexts. This is exemplified for Taxila by an Achaemenid seal unearthed in a 1<sup>st</sup> century AD context of Sirkap and labelled by Marshall as “Assyrian” (MARSHALL 1951c, pl. 207, 7 = s. no. 1; described in MARSHALL 1951b, 677) showing a Persian worshiper adoring a winged scorpion man below a crescent (cf. 5<sup>th</sup> century BC seal of Barikkia, son of Rušnapātu from Nippur, LEGRAND 1925, cat. no. 900; BREGSTEIN 1993, cat. no. 234).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. e.g., guilloche on a silver Hellenistic bowl published in Pfrommer 1993, 118-119 (catalogue no. 5 – see the photo, not the drawing) ascribed to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.

<sup>14</sup> As it is well known, an iconographical scheme already commonly employed in Neo-Assyrian, Elamite and Persian imagery (cf. e.g., the “seal of Kurash” from Persepolis, an heirloom still used at the time of Darius, discussed in GARRISON 2011 with comparanda; or the “Darius Seal”, British Museum no. 89132).

hunting or fighting party originally depicted may have been composed of three riders.<sup>15</sup> Considering that the height of the central band of the mould measures approximately 5.5 cm (from top to lower garland) and that the length of the almost completely preserved stallion is about 7 cm, the complete mould, assuming the presence of a third horseman in front of the group, could have originally been square in shape, with a side measuring approximately 16.5 cm.<sup>16</sup>

Our two riding archers conform to representations of Persian horsemen in the attire once believed to have been an ethnic “Median” riding dress.<sup>17</sup> They both wear a tall, flexible hood, the Persian *kyrbasia* (or *bashlyk*), folding both on the side and forward on their foreheads, covering the nape of their neck, and with ear flaps tied under the chin (it is unclear whether the cover used to shield the mouth if necessity arises is attested). This headdress has several well-known parallels, such as those worn by Persian riders depicted on a Central Asian silver gilded disk (a phalera?) in Achaemenid style from the “Oxus Treasure” with hunting scenes (Fig. 4, discussed *infra*), or those worn by the battling Persian warriors on the so-called Alexander Sarcophagus from Early Hellenistic Sidon (Fig. 5). As with these latter Persians (portrayed in detail in Hellenistic art), the hoods of the Taxila’s horsemen are secured to their foreheads by strings of fabric that flutter on the back of the head. Such fillets thus look like diadems, and they are fashioned in a way that is remarkably similar to the ones for example recognisable on satrap emissions of Western Asia Minor from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century – beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC<sup>18</sup> (and, later, on the earliest numismatic portrayals of the Fratarakas of Persis).<sup>19</sup> In addition to the *kyrbasia*, both riders wear the customary trousers (*anaxyrides*) and long-sleeved light upper garments<sup>20</sup> fastened by a belt knotted at their waists (there are long hanging belt strings on both the riders’ bodies). It is difficult to determine whether or not a caftan is being worn over the upper long-sleeved garment. Apparently, however, the horsemen from Taxila do not sport a *kandys*, but rather they wear a variation of this other customary element of the “Median dress”: the foreground archer is in fact shown wearing a billowing cloak. A feature similar to this is displayed by a sard stamp seal kept in the British Museum bearing the depiction of a Persian warrior on the verge of spearing two hooded (Central Asian?) enemies flying in a chariot (Fig. 6). This latter scaraboid, allegedly found in Mesopotamia, is quite possibly the work of a Greek craftsman from Asia Minor active about 450 to 300 BC (as indicated by the style of the sitting hound on its reverse)<sup>21</sup> who dealt with Persian-inspired imagery. In “Graeco-Persian seals,”<sup>22</sup> however, billowing garments are rare,<sup>23</sup> and it is known that fluttering drapery is not generally characteristic of Iranian arts and crafts before the influx of Hellenism in Asia. Another

typical element missing from the inventory of the riding gear of the Taxila’s horsemen is the *akinakes* (the short sword emblematic of mounted fighters in the Achaemenid army),<sup>24</sup> with its distinctive scabbard and suspension system, which, for instance, the warrior on the above-mentioned scaraboid displays. Nor, in the Taxila depiction, do we find any trace of a quiver or of a bow-case (*gorytos*), as would be expected from bowmen. Such elements, however, are also lacking in most of the closely related and comparable depictions of riders on “Graeco-Persian” seals (sometimes the quiver is only partially represented and is emerg-

<sup>15</sup> The position of this fragment of animal leg, because of its being so close to the background/more advanced rider (the two should have overlapped), suggests that it is unlikely that it was a leg of game. Perhaps we may speculate about an original complete scene with two separated but partially overlying groups of archers compositionally similar to that documented in the Achaemenid-era Tatarli paintings (with both Persians and Scythians mounted archers: see SUMMERER 2010, figs. 3, 12 and 12a).

<sup>16</sup> Not considering the potential presence of a fleeing animal or of antagonists. These, one could argue, could have been actually represented separately in another mould.

<sup>17</sup> On this, see STRONACH 2009; 2011.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g., specimens published in CURTIS, TALLIS 2005, 203. Cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VIII.3.13 (Cyrus “had also a fillet about his tiara, and his kinsmen also had the same mark of distinction, and they retain it even now”). The Taxila riders quite possibly represent noble Persians.

<sup>19</sup> See CALLIERI 2007, 113 (*ibidem*, 144-146 for a discussion of the reliefs from the “Temple of the Fratarakas”, where a similar accentuated long “diadem” seemed to be worn by an orant). On the diadem and its use between the Achaemenid and the Hellenistic worlds, conveniently see OLBRYCHT 2014 with references.

<sup>20</sup> Persian riders are seldomly depicted wearing a set of armour (e.g., on the preserved short side of the Çan sarcophagus, see SEVINÇ *et alii* 2001, figs. 11-13), even when represented in martial activities and not hunting.

<sup>21</sup> As noted by BOARDMAN 2001, 309 and 311 (no. 864); on the Classic crouched hound, see VERMEULE 1968; 1972. Note also that the horses on this artifact are rearing and not “gallop flying”. On hypotheses about the origins and provenances of the “Graeco-Persian” seals, see the recent POGGIO 2020, 82-83 with references.

<sup>22</sup> According to DUSINBERRE 2013, 69: “This collection of Achaemenid elite visual imagery, linked very closely through iconography and in a recognizable way through style, used to be characterized as ‘Graeco-Persian’; a current trend is to categorize the style as ‘Achaemenid Anatolian’ or as the more fluid ‘Achaemenid koine’.” The latter label seems more appropriate. On the “uncritical categorization of large numbers of art works as ‘Graeco-Persian’” and the use of this label, see ROOT 1991.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., BOARDMAN 2001, pl. 890 (standing Persian rider/hunter in front of a groom recovering the master’s spear). Most of the known “Graeco-Persian” riders have neither a billowing *kandys* nor a cape. The *kandys* could have also been worn with arms put through the sleeves, or even thrown away before action (cfs. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VIII, 3.10; *Anabasis* I, 5.8).

<sup>24</sup> As argued in MINARDI forthcoming. The *akinakes* is missing as it is any other dagger of the sort, such as the ensuing type with four-lobed sheath.



Fig. 4 - “Oxus Treasure”. Detail of an embossed silver disk with hunting Persian riders (©British Museum).



Fig. 5 - Sidon. Detail of a Persian sculpted on the so-called Alexander Sarcophagus (Istanbul Archaeological Museums, author’s photo).



Fig. 6 - Scaraboid seals, said to be from Mesopotamia (©British Museum).



Fig. 7 - Detail of the Çan sarcophagus (Çanakkale Museum of Troy, Creative Commons).



ing with its upper part from the hidden side of the horse),<sup>25</sup> on some coins depicting “Persian riders” of the Achaemenid royal mints,<sup>26</sup> and on the “Oxus Treasure” disk (Fig. 4), just to cite a few examples.

Unquestionably, the preserved horse of the Taxila depiction similarly shares the Persian appeal of his master: the animal displays a series of visual features most of which we may affirm are distinctively Achaemenid-inspired. First of all, the steed’s mane is short, trimmed, or pulled, as is common in Persian representations of horses; its tail, although not held with a knot, is fashioned in tufts, with the longer one at the end. It is not currently clear whether the horse’s forelock is tied up and pulled back, but this might be the case. Even more specifically Persian are the elements of its trappings, such as the type of horse bit and the features of its saddle: the bit is clearly hook-shaped, and the rectangular saddle blanket is not only embroidered with a band of animal figures (stylized due to the miniature dimensions of the composition)<sup>27</sup> but it also displays a decoration of typical stepped lappets in Achaemenid style on the back. Furthermore, along its lower border, the saddle blanket shows the edging ornaments characteristic of Achaemenid specimens, and it even displays a typically “bent forward”, curvilinear, portion (e.g., cfs. Figs. 4, 7).<sup>28</sup> The horse bridle is completed by an elliptical *prometopidion*.<sup>29</sup> In general, the horse trappings of the Taxila horse(s)<sup>30</sup> may be compared with those fitting the dying Persian mount (originally conceived in a Greek milieu) in the very descriptive “Alexander Mosaic” kept in Naples.<sup>31</sup> The horse trappings of the Taxila stallion, however, seem peculiarly organized across the reins: as already noted above, from the bit the reins seem to join a big inclusion in the terracotta, which might have been employed to represent a phalera (not a typical element of the iconography of the Persian riding gear). From there, the reins go up to the saddle and are oddly aligned with the bowstring of the archer; they end, in both horses, with an oval-shaped element located on the back of the horse’s neck and almost aligned with the curved frontal part of the saddle (a girth?).<sup>32</sup>

Lastly, on the back of the foreground rider, we find a bulging element in the shape of a crossed square; it is perhaps an emblem or banner that in the cast resulted as stamped into the background and that resembles a numismatic punch.

#### Discussion. “Graeco-Persian” art in India?

I would suppose that the Taxila mounted archers were intentionally designed as having a distinctive riding attire, and depicted mounting horses with equally distinctive features, in order to specifically represent Achaemenid horsemen. Additionally, the iconography used is remarkably akin to that of the

combat and hunting scenes that gained popularity in the “Achaemenid Eastern Mediterranean” with the contribution of Greek and local arts.<sup>33</sup> Taking into account the safest chronological *terminus* of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC for the archaeological Indian (secular) context of the mould, this is evidently significant: Persians (not in an ethnic sense) seem to have been depicted long after the end of the Achaemenid rule over India. Furthermore, aside from the fluttering drapery blowing back in the wind as one of the riders gallops along, and aside from some of the features attested in the horses’ trappings (*supra*), the riders’ heads, which superimpose the upper garland of the scene; the types of garlands themselves; and, technically speaking, the support of the imagery itself (a terracotta mould) are all additional elements that underline a Hellenistic (chronologically and historically

<sup>25</sup> E.g. (mounted archers without *akinakes*), BOARDMAN 2001, pls. 889 and 904; (mounted archers lacking both dagger and quiver or *gorytos*), pls. 889, 924, 927 and 929; cfs. (mounted archers with partially visible quiver) *ibidem*, pls. 889 and 904. The same variants are attested also for mounted spearmen. The weapons might have been considered concealed on the other side of the horse or simply superfluous to the image.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., CURTIS, TALLIS 2005, 200, no. 327.

<sup>27</sup> Cfs. stylized animal bands of ornaments decorating the chariot of Darius III (MORENO 2020, pl. XI; also illustrated in details in GIULIERINI *et alii* 2020, 25-26), the trousers of a Persian warrior (MORENO 2020, pl. XIII, misplaced fragments); and the saddle of a Persian rider (*ibidem*, pl. X) on the “Alexander Mosaic” (on this, see *infra*).

<sup>28</sup> Cfs. e.g., CURTIS, TALLIS 2005, 226, no. 209; the horses depicted in the well-known Achaemenid “carpet” of Pazyryk; the clearly Achaemenid-inspired rider on a gold votive plaque from Mir Zakah (FRANCFORT 2013, 148-149; *contra* Francfort who considers the piece “pre-Achaemenid Bactrian”); and a Persian rider depicted in the Early Hellenistic “Alexander Sarcophagus” (such details are painted on the marble). In later times, saddles decorated with stepped lappets (or similar devices) are still in use/represented (e.g., the Hellenistic painted horseman of the Marisa tomb, see JACOBSON 2007; the horse from the wall painting of Old Nisa, see INVERNIZZI 2011, figs. 16-17; or the saddled elephant on a phalera from Taxila, *infra*, here fig. 8). Note that in the Achaemenid-time Tatarli paintings, the stepped lappets decorate the saddles of both Persians and Scythians (who are mainly characterized by their pointed hoods; SUMMERER 2010, 124-125, fig. 3).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. e.g., gold statuette of horse from the “Oxus Treasure”, discussed in MINARDI, BETTS, KHOZHANIYAZOV 2021 (illustrated in fig. 14) with references.

<sup>30</sup> The horse wears a snaffle bridle (constituted by the following elements: crownpiece, browband, throatlatch, cheekpiece, chin piece, and nose band). Note that browbands and chin pieces are rare in Achaemenid depictions of horses. For further details, see MINARDI, BETTS, KHOZHANIYAZOV 2021 with references.

<sup>31</sup> The mental image that this kind of representation evokes is relatable to “the spirit of monumental narrative”, as already observed by BOARDMAN (2001, 311) in relation to the intaglio of the scaraboid here illustrated in Fig. 6.

<sup>32</sup> A feature of the saddle? Cf. FACCENNA, FILIGENZI 2007, 270, pl. 103, no. 1.1.

<sup>33</sup> Scenes gathered and discussed by POGGIO 2020.

more appropriate than “Greek” in our case) input to the composition.

The mould, naturally, must have been crafted from a primary item, a *cliché*. This might have been the original work of a coroplaster or, perhaps, the mould is the product of the work of an artisan who wanted to copy an object to transfer its visual contents to a new support. Regarding the material of such a prototype, minute details such as the (hinted-at) embroidered passing animals decorating the saddle of the foreground horse (which do not result as incisions but emerge from the cast, as well as all the other lines describing the saddle) and the fact that the foreground horseman surfaces noticeably from it, make me hesitate in viewing the mould as being obtained from an embossed/chased metal artifact.<sup>34</sup> Whatever the process behind the manufacture of this mould, we can easily argue that it was crafted with the intent to copy or reproduce (with a technique that was widespread in Asia after Alexander) a model or prototype that could have been, considering its visual features, an ancient one. The Achaemenid-style disk-shaped earrings with a notch from the Bhir Mound, found either in gold or replicated in terracotta (both mould and cast were found), all from “stratum III” according to Marshall, show that this technique was used in Taxila to reproduce and replicate metal objects, in this case, objects of Achaemenid origin.<sup>35</sup>

It does not seem that the mould was employed to decorate vases.<sup>36</sup> It is arguably most likely that it was employed to cast some bas-relief decoration on a flat surface or on a small (or part of a larger) item made of plaster or clay (a *pinax*? an ornamental tile, or a decorative brick?).<sup>37</sup> In either case, I have failed to find any close comparisons: terracotta depictions with a bas-relief decoration showing Persian Achaemenid riders are not a subject attested in the west in either the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC or later. As far as I know, nothing similar to this finding, that is, an accurate depiction of Achaemenid horsemen or soldiers (designed after so-called Graeco-Persian models), has been documented from an excavation in post-Alexandrine Central Asia and northwest India.<sup>38</sup> The existence of such a small mould implies that an artisan or workshop had clients willing to pay for the reproduction of such imagery. Nothing in the later arts of “Greater Gandhāra” resembles such a composition, although it is known that some Achaemenid features survived within this artistic language, including, for instance, the quite-pertinent-to-the-present-discussion “Achaemenid saddle” (Fig. 8).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> We do not have many comparanda, but details such as the saddle’s embroidered decoration were plausibly commonly painted on sculpted/modelled bas-relief depictions (*supra* note 28; see e.g., Fig. 7 here, and cf. the overpainted details of the Persian saddles in the “Alexander Sarcophagus”, here Fig. 5).

In the toreutic specimen illustrated here in Fig. 4, these same minute elements are just suggested and simplified (the bowmen embossed on the silver sheet are less detailed than those on the Taxila mould). The “Graeco-Persian” seals, rich in details, are intaglio-carved stone artifacts belonging to the goldsmith’s fine art, and for this reason can only be partially compared (they obviously lack some minute details on the horse saddles there depicted). If the prototype for the Taxila mould had been a metal artifact, it could have been taken, for instance and speculating, from the decoration of a door (cf. the fragment of two bronze bands of the Assyrian Balawat Gate in the British Museum, measuring in height 27 cm). This would explain the rich details and the bas-relief imagery organized in multiple registers. But it is more likely, and less speculative, due to, for instance, the lack of incisions (i.e., of fine protruding lines in the mould) to consider the possibility that the Taxila specimen was crafted by a coroplaster to exactly cast decorative terracottas or that it was created by copying a terracotta prototype for replicas of the same material.

<sup>35</sup> YOUNG 1946. Material analysed in FABRÈGUES 2006 who concludes by stating that: “the Taxila Bhir Mound earrings suggest direct influences from Persia during the fifth to fourth century BCE, when the northwest was under Achaemenid rule; and the Sirkap earrings suggest indirect Achaemenid influences through the intermediary of the Parthians during the first century CE”.

<sup>36</sup> This may be argued considering the flatness of the mould. Cf. *dinos* of marble from Pergamon (*vase de Pergame*) held in the Louvre displaying a central band decorated by images of horsemen (approximately 30 cm in height) delimited by a frieze of leaves and a guilloche (<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010276707>).

<sup>37</sup> Imagery on multiple registers is suitable for the décor of such media. Cfs. e.g. (for Asia), a Chinese Han brick (BÉGUIN 2000, 68–69) with a series of impressed figurative panels, which include a mounted archer hunting a large ungulate, and a dragon (modelled after an archetypal Greek *ketos*, BOARDMAN 2003; MINARDI 2016 on the vectors of such thematic diffusion). In India, the much later decorative “terracotta bas-reliefs” from Harwan, Kashmir, also display a stamped decoration organized in superimposed registers, including depictions of mounted bowmen notching arrows “in Parthian posture and costume” (SHOKOOHY 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Might have the depiction originally represented a scene of battle between Persians and some enemies, perhaps some Greeks? An ivory belt plate from a grave of the site of Tilla Bulak, Uzbekistan, and ascribed to the period between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC and the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (GRUBER, IL’YASOV, KANIUTH 2012) may be iconographically compared with the Taxila imagery. The rectangular plaque (restored in antiquity before being buried) is engraved with a scene representing the fight between two groups of mounted warriors (who are mostly archers). This imagery is characterised by some Hellenistic features, such as a *cymatium* frame, the presence of a Beotian helmet worn by one of the left-side fighters, and a soldier’s heads (of the right group) positioned over the image frame. The right-mounted archers wear soft hoods (“Phrygian caps”) so that the scene may represent a clash between “Greeks” (Graeco-Bactrians?) and “Persians”; in this case, observing the available drawings, the latter quite possibly are Parthians (instead of Sakas, as argued by GRUBER, IL’YASOV, KANIUTH 2012 and by FRANCFORT 2020, 39–43, who also analyses in detail the scene and its context).

<sup>39</sup> E.g., the “Persepolitan zoomorphic capitals” and other decorative features. For some considerations on the Persian “echoes” in the arts of post-Achaemenid Asia, and on the vexed question on the origin of the “Persian features” in Mauryan art and architecture, see MINARDI 2020 with references. Another “roundel” with elephant and riders, in all ways similar to the specimen published by GHAFOR LONE, ULLAH KHAN 2018 here



Fig. 8 - Mohallah Mohra Shah Wai Shah, Taxila. Embossed silver disk depicting an elephant with riders (after GHAFUOR LONE, ULLAH KHAN 2018, fig. 7; present location unknown).

There is then the possibility that the mould prototype could have been older than (and not just immediately preceding) the mould itself; hence, it would have a higher chronology than the post-Mauryan period, although this seems unlikely to me, besides being rather conjectural according to the data at our disposal.<sup>40</sup> Keeping in mind that the Taxila terracotta had no intrinsic value, and that it plausibly belonged to a coroplaster's workshop, we can convey only a few hypotheses about its possible origin. First of all, the mould could have “travelled” up to Taxila (with some other specimens?): in this case, it should have been derived from a *cliché* or of an object that was crafted in the west (of India) and then brought to India by an artisan(s). Otherwise, the prototype of the mould (which must in this case have existed) but not the mould itself might have been introduced from the west and then copied in Taxila (or planned to be made) through a matrix. Eventually, we may even contemplate the possibility that both the original *cliché* and the mould were manufactured in Taxila at a certain moment in time or, perhaps, in two different moments separated by a certain gap of time (for instance, considering the available archaeological data, our mould could have been crafted during the Mauryan period and discharged in the following one). In any of such cases, and due to the incontrovertible visual features of the image, even considering the plausible hypothesis of a local manufacture, it remains a fact that the original primary item must



Fig. 9 - Seleucia-on-Tigris. Bulla with seal impression (after BOLLATI 2007, fig. 3d).

have been created by an artisan well acquainted with the western Iranian world and who was aware of its iconographic environment (and *heritage*). Be that as it may, copies of such a prototype were quite likely made through our post-Mauryan terracotta mould in order to replicate, at Taxila in India, items bearing the imagery of Persian soldiers centuries after the empire's end. The mould imagery, emerging in post-Mauryan, possibly Graeco-Bactrian, Taxila, certainly had iconographic Achaemenid forerunners. It is an “echo” of the past, possibly a small but significant datum on the persistence of Persian themes in the arts and crafts of Asia.<sup>41</sup> Such Achaemenid resilience in

illustrated, was recently published by CARTER 2015, cat. 69, 249-251. These specimens may come from a hoard accidentally found in Taxila in the year 1996 and illicitly trafficked outside Pakistan (GHAFUOR LONE, ULLAH KHAN 2018). It is also noteworthy that a small fragmentary clay elephant with riders and a saddle that seem decorated by triangular lappets (MARSHALL 1951c, no. 77; cf. *supra* note 28) was discovered by Marshall at the Bhir Mound in “stratum III” (MARSHALL 1951b, 455). Hence, these depictions may have a Mauryan origin.

<sup>40</sup> In considering the possible cultural background of the primary craftsman, neither the Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid west (the “Graeco-Persian” antecedents and comparanda are striking), nor the early Hellenistic east and the Seleucid west, nor the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek areas can be excluded. The only almost certain datum is that, due to the stylistic features here discussed – and due to its context, it is quite difficult to suppose that the mould was crafted in the Achaemenid period. Moulds and models that are copies of older specimens can be kept and used in workshops for very long periods of time to replicate originals (as for instance discussed in MINARDI 2015 with references). But thinking about this eventuality for a work such as the small mould here considered would mean giving too much significance to a specimen more artisanal than artistic, thus lacking the reason for being hoarded.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. MINARDI 2020.



Fig. 10 - Cyprus. Statuette of a Persian rider said to be from the Temple of Apollo Hylates at Kourion (©MET).

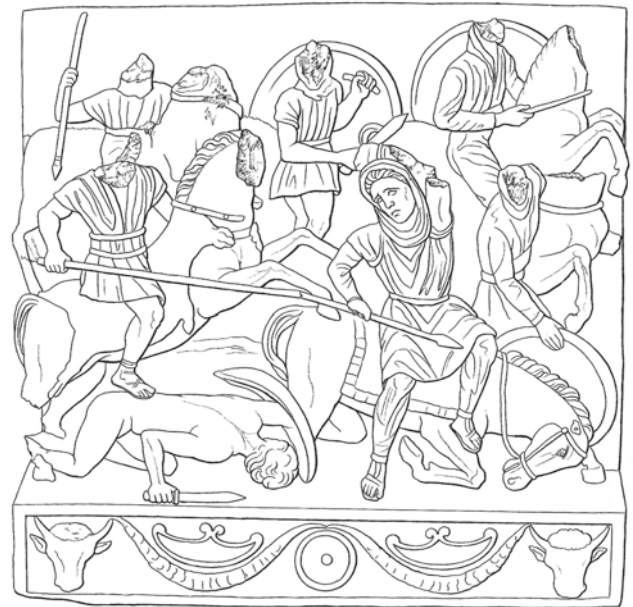


Fig. 11 - Perugia. Drawing of an Etruscan urn from the  *necropoli del Palazzone* (after KÖRTE 1916, pl. CXII, no. 4).

Taxila is revealed by some local coins dated to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, which still show on the reverse the image of a personage in the guise of an Achaemenid satrap.<sup>42</sup>

Another example of such an iconographic tradition, which is similar in subject, medium (terracotta), and technique (partially usage of moulds) but dissimilar in context and function (a series of figurines instead of a small decorative bas-relief), is attested in the Near East: in Syria, handmade figurines with stamped/moulded faces representing “Persian riders” (mainly defined by their *kyrbasia* shown folded on one side) are well known both in the Achaemenid and Seleucid periods.<sup>43</sup> Such figurines, although rare, were also unearthed at Seleucia-on-Tigris.<sup>44</sup> From Seleucia we also have the attestation of bullae stamped with “Graeco-Persian” seals<sup>45</sup> (e.g., a specimen with the image of a mounted “Persian” wearing a *kyrbasia* and hunting; Fig. 9). “Graeco-Persian” seals were also found in the Bhir Mound “strata II and III”,<sup>46</sup> as well in the general area of northwest India, where they also seem to have been locally produced (Callieri 1996; 2004).<sup>47</sup> We may be able to follow the traces of such iconographic persistence even further westward. Hellenistic terracottas shaped as Persian riders were discovered in Cyprus; the latest possibly dates from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.<sup>48</sup> A particularly fine case from the island is an entirely mould-made horseman probably copied from a bronze original of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (Fig. 10).<sup>49</sup> In this context, it might be useful also to cite the particular case of the “Alexander Mosaic” of

Pompeii (as it is known, certainly inspired by a painting, possibly manufactured in a Hellenistic milieu, and retrieved in a Roman context),<sup>50</sup> which can be considered as another example of the transmission of

<sup>42</sup> BERNARD 1987, 188-189 (also cited in CALLIERI 2004). On the imprint left in India by the Persian domination and for a full discussion, based on material culture evidence, of this debated issue, see IORI unpublished PhD dissertation; 2019; forthcoming with references; OLIVIERI, IORI 2020.

<sup>43</sup> MOOREY 2000; STRONACH 2009; JACKSON 2019; see also LYONNET 2005.

<sup>44</sup> MENEGAZZI 2009. And at Susa (MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2002, cited in MENEGAZZI 2009, 67-68). Another specimen of “Persian rider” was possibly found in Tajikistan at the site of Saksanokhur, see LITVINSKII, MUKHITDINOV 1969, fig. 6 (modelled horse rider with caftan, trousers, and high cap).

<sup>45</sup> BOLLATI 2007, 126.

<sup>46</sup> E.g., MARSHALL 1951b, 677; 1951c, nos. 8 (winged? stag, stratum III), 9 (lion, stratum II), and 10 (horse and bull, stratum II). Cf. *supra* note 12.

<sup>47</sup> “Graeco-Persian” seals seemed to have been diffused, possibly along with the elites who used them, in all the regions of the empire (cf. e.g., the case of Susa, AMIET 1973, 26-27).

<sup>48</sup> KARAGEORGHIS, MERKER, MERTENS 2016, 173-174. We also have examples of terracottas in the shape of mounted archers of the Parthian period (e.g., the ceramic relief plaque in the British Museum no. 135684). In this case, the horse trappings include phalerae, and the rider has fastened at his thigh a dagger with a four-lobed scabbard (typologically coming after and substituting for the *akinakes*).

<sup>49</sup> KARAGEORGHIS, MERKER, MERTENS 2016, 262.

<sup>50</sup> MORENO 2020; see also GIULIERINI *et alii* 2020.

traditional imagery; in this case, it is related to, and not from, Achaemenid Persia in the Mediterranean area.<sup>51</sup> The same lost original Greek painting of the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC copied by mosaicists, (or better, in this case, the cartoons derived from it)<sup>52</sup> had also inspired some Etruscan carvers of urns (ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> century BC), which bear the most recent representations of “Achaemenid Persians” I am aware of expressed by the *ellenismo medio-italico* (Fig. 11).<sup>53</sup>

The finding is unfortunately too sporadic to enable us to move beyond what has been argued up to this point. The information that could be obtained from a fragment of a terracotta mould such as the one here under scrutiny is limited, albeit, important: this is the first “Graeco-Persian” object of such a degree of complexity excavated in north-western India. Arguably, if this item had been “found in the market”, no expert would have been able to fathom its archaeological context or provenience from its style and iconography. This is all the truer considering that, on the one hand, the mould might have been, as argued above, “imported” and that, on the other, it is impossible to rule out a local manufacture. What we do know (and it is important to underline this knowledge) is that the specimen was likely used to decorate some terracotta items that could have been manufactured in Taxila. Particularly striking to my mind is the theme of the representation (not generically the fighting or the hunting scene, common throughout history and rendered with similar iconographic schemes) with its well-defined characterization as Achaemenids of the riders depicted.

When evidence is looked in total, even though the data are scant, it strongly suggests the possibility that in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> century BC, from Cyprus to India, both in religious and domestic contexts, images of “Persian soldiers” (iconographically rooted in the previous periods) were conceivably still *visually recognizable* by some of those people with different cultural backgrounds whose territories were once under the Persian domination. Moreover, apparently, and such does seem to be specifically the case for the Taxila mould, iconographic schemes originally elaborated in the western Mediterranean part of the Achaemenid Empire (and subsequently embraced and perhaps diffused by the Hellenistic civilization) were transmitted in its territories. The evidence regarding the existence of a Persian artistic legacy in Eastern Iran (e.g., 1<sup>st</sup> century BC – 1<sup>st</sup> century AD Chorasmia)<sup>54</sup> and India (i.e., the debated question about Mauryan art) is still too fragmentary, but it is, in my opinion, eventually emerging: Persian iconographic features persisted in different areas, and quite possibly at different levels, and were transmitted in different ways, depending on local contexts and on the historical courses taken in the aftermath of the impact of the Hellenistic civilization. Such an artistic legacy is seen in those former areas of the empire in which archaeology has high-

lighted phenomena of socio-economic control and acculturation through studies of the material culture.<sup>55</sup> In parallel, a Persian visual legacy (e.g., the Persians on the Etruscan urns) also existed within the Hellenistic culture.

In this light, we may also re-evaluate evidence such as those toreutic and ivory objects from the so-called Oxus Treasure and the Oxus Temple (Tajikistan) with a distinctive Achaemenid style<sup>56</sup>: some of them, besides the “Achaemenid specimens” (or those crafted in Central Asia during the Achaemenid period), might be very well be post-Achaemenid and still manufactured in Central Asia according to a tradition of which we do not know much yet due to the lack of archaeological and historical data.<sup>57</sup> This might be the case with the perforated gilded silver disk showing a multiple-quarry hunting scene and framed by a guilloche border (detail here at Fig. 4) that is the only depiction *so far known* of an object decorated in Achaemenid style, generically considered of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC<sup>58</sup>, “to adopt the compositional motif of the juxtaposition of the hunting scenes in one figurative field”.<sup>59</sup> Such a specimen, which measures

<sup>51</sup> And a concrete “Persian presence” in the west as noted by ROOT 1991, 12: “Of course I understand the reasons why the painting prototype of the Alexander mosaic is treated as a work of Greek art. My point here, however, is to drive home the fact that monuments such as this belong equally – but for different reasons – within the discussion of evidence for a Persian cultural presence in and impact upon the west.” According to Root (*ibidem*), the same is valid for the “Alexander Sarcophagus” here also considered in the discussion.

<sup>52</sup> MORENO 2020, 92-93.

<sup>53</sup> The small series of urns from Perugia, which have, as a theme of their decorations, the fight of Alexander against the Persians (KÖRTE 1916, pls. CX-CXII), are the only ones in Etruria depicting these latter not as “generic oriental” (e.g., wearing Hellenistic armours and Phrygian hats, or looking like Attis), but specifically as Achaemenid soldiers (wearing the *kyrbasia*, in some cases misunderstood by the Etruscan craftsmen).

<sup>54</sup> On the Achaemenid-inspired features in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC/1<sup>st</sup> century AD art of Chorasmia, see MINARDI 2020, where it is argued that these were a legacy of the past and had been derived from Achaemenid models.

<sup>55</sup> For India, *supra* note 42; for Central Asia, my arguments are detailed within an overview of the available data in MINARDI 2020; forthcoming.

<sup>56</sup> I refer to this generically, as an analysis of such specimens is out of the focus of this paper.

<sup>57</sup> During the excavations of the “Oxus Temple” B.A. Litvinskiĭ and I.R. Pichikyan unearthed various objects in Achaemenid style along with Hellenistic specimens. The archaeologists rightly argued that the formers could be representative of “the art of Achaemenid Bactria” of which we do not know much owing to a chronic lack of data (see e.g., LITVINSKIĪ, PICHIKYAN 1995; 1999 with references to sword handles, scabbards and jewellery).

<sup>58</sup> As the dating of the items from the “Oxus Treasure” only follow stylistic considerations.

<sup>59</sup> POGGIO 2020, 62.

9.8 cm in diameter and, judging from its imagery, is possibly an element of horse trappings (and less likely a shield-boss),<sup>60</sup> seems to indicate the use of specific iconographic features that had originated in the western part of the empire (“the Eastern Mediterranean under Persian rule”) and that apparently spread afterwards into Asia.<sup>61</sup> This example appears to be similar to that of the Taxila terracotta mould, chronological gap aside.

*Conclusive remarks*

To sum up, the terracotta mould bearing the depiction of Achaemenid Persian riders from the Bhir Mound, due to its archaeological context, and taking into account some of its stylistic features, seems to be a post-Achaemenid period specimen, notwithstanding its rather significant “Graeco-Persian” (or rather, western Achaemenid) imagery, and the possibility that it might have been fashioned from an earlier, old prototype. As an item deprived of intrinsic value, and possibly once in the possession of an artisan workshop (this was not an “elite portable device” as seals were), the mould acquires significance in contemporary eyes when it is placed in the archaeological context of the Bhir Mound, a site with an ephemeral, but possible, Achaemenid past.<sup>62</sup> This find (whatever its origin, it was locally used to replicate imagery of Persian riders following modes of representational expression with imperial roots),<sup>63</sup> is in my opinion an indicator, although a modest one, of the diffusion and the persistence of Achaemenid iconographic themes in northwest India or, more generally, in Achaemenid Asia. It is noteworthy that such an artistic and cultural stimulus, as indicated by some other scant but important evidence (such as the mentioned examples of the locally made “Graeco-Persian” seals, and the numismatic portrait of a “satrap” from Taxila, and some items of the “Oxus Treasure”), which often

appears in post-Achaemenid phases, seems to have originated in the westernmost parts of the Achaemenid sphere. Considering that “into the context of the western (Achaemenid) periphery” we actually have important sources of the “centrally-mandated images of power”,<sup>64</sup> this seems not to be accidental. The gap in our knowledge about the arts and crafts of Achaemenid Asia, a real dearth compared with the already scant evidence coming from the western portions of the empire,<sup>65</sup> is still too wide for us in order to reach certain conclusions, but data regarding the circulation and the reception of formal elements, and the legacy that these left in some of its former provinces (not just in the west, but also in the east and in different forms), are gradually surfacing. Even archaeologically, the phenomena of acculturation that took place in the satrapies of India in the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century BC have been only recently started to be re-assessed thanks to extensive and stratigraphic archaeological fieldwork activities.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>60</sup> As already noted in CURTIS, TALLIS 2005, 221.

<sup>61</sup> Although, besides the iconographic scheme of juxtaposed multiple hunting scenes, the Persian riders of the Oxus disk are a visual match with the image of the satrap? on horseback on numismatic specimens of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC of “royal mint” (e.g., CURTIS, TALLIS 2005, no. 327), and with those on some “Graeco-Persian” seals (conveniently see the examples in POGGIO 2020, 82-83 with figs. 68-69).

<sup>62</sup> Data relative to Persian material culture and architecture are scant, and the material culture from all the stages of the Bhir Mound seem strongly Gangetic, as noted by CALLIERI 1995, 294; see also CALLIERI forthcoming and IORI forthcoming.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. *supra* note 40.

<sup>64</sup> ROOT 1991, 12.

<sup>65</sup> On this, see the recent considerations made by P. Briant (BRIANT 2020, 15-17 with references) about the Achaemenid impact in Anatolia.

<sup>66</sup> OLIVIERI, IORI 2020; IORI forthcoming.

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