

*Some Notes on Methodology in Studies of Ancient
Funerary Cultures*

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Much ink has been spilled on interpretations of funerary rites, tomb layouts and burial inventories in the cultural spheres across global networks in Eurasian Antiquity. There are a few methodological and terminological blind-spots in the study of ancient funerary cultures, namely those of Central Eurasia, which deserve further investigation.

Firstly, “archetype” is a continuously-exploited short-cut in art-historical research on ancient archeological cultures. A reliance on a clear-cut cultural or visual archetype, seen as an antecedent of later developments and cross-cultural diffusions, is unsurprising; it allows for fast classifications of possibly related objects, particularly in curatorial work. Having the ability to label an unexpected or unprovenanced discovery on the basis of an Egyptian, Near Eastern, Chinese, or Greco-Roman “standard” can save one from the “origin unknown” museum label. These have remained the primary “archetype” cultures used as yardsticks in analyses of lesser-known or understudied artefacts. A brief look at all introductory textbooks used in the newly-minted global art history survey in higher education reveals the unyielding reliance on well-delineated primary “archetype-cultures” from the inception of the art-historical canon. Consequently, less “mainstream” cultural domains, like pastoral nomadic societies living on the geographical frontiers of those major “archetype” empires, have been pushed to the theoretical outskirts of the canon. Non-sedentary peoples are generally seen as intermediaries, traders, and “carriers” of external aesthetics and cultural values and seldom as independent designers, thinkers, and inventors.

Where do we place the vast expanse of Central Eurasia, or the Eurasian steppe, which stretches from the Mongolian-Manchurian grassland all the way to the Hungarian plain? In reality, archetypes do not work well with archaeological discoveries near hotbeds for artistic exchange, such as oases along the Silk or Eurasian steppe routes. This may be why the recent

“global” turn in art history still fails to account for non-sedentary communities whose economic models were based on various forms of migration. Artistic traditions associated with pastoralists have never been situated in the limelight of scholarly inquiries, remaining absent from major academic texts, including survey textbooks like Gardner’s, Stokstad’s, or Janson’s. Ancient nomadic art remains stuck in a discursive vacuum, between craft and “high art,” monumentality and “minor arts,” and preconceived categories of “East” and “West.” Part of this stagnation stems precisely from our attachment to the comfortable bubbles of archetypes.

The Pontic Scythians along the Northern Black Sea steppe had extensive interactions with Greek cities around the 5th-4th century BCE. Royal Scythian mounds in the Crimea and the North Caucasus have yielded sumptuous gold adornments; some notable sites from the Classical Scythian period include kurgans like Kul’oba, Solokha, Tolstaya mogila, Melitopol, Oguz, to name a few. Much of the subsequent analysis has focused on the search for Greek prototypical elements in the materiality of these items—aspects of Greek craftsmanship would then be logically attributed to the intensive trade between Greek cities and Scythian communities. It is telling that the Scythians and Sarmatians became fascinating subjects of inquiry in the canon only after many groups became essentially settled near the classical sedentary “archetype-empires.” The same could be said about another “fringe” culture which flourished in the Balkans: living on the Greek frontier and having likely interacted with Achaemenid Persians and Scythians, the Thracians have been long-favored subjects of archetype-driven studies. Elite Thracian tombs have yielded gold wreaths and silver beakers consistent with the material culture of Classical Greece. Coincidentally, other Thracian deposits, located in Dobrudzha and its steppe area, unveil animal-style objects characteristic of nomadic art further east, and even matrixes for the mass production of such [2]. Similar points about “stylistic eclecticism” can be made about portable artefacts of the eastern steppes, where Chinese chronicles have referred to otherwise reluctant, diverse and often purely opportunistic nomadic alliances by blanket exonyms like “Eastern Hu.”

So, confronted with an unprovenanced object, excavated from a borderland, how do we decide on its dominant gene? One frequently rushes to attach a canonically-recognizable cultural archetype to a group of archaeological remains from a culture marginalized by external historiographies which coincidentally tend to be written by the select few “archetype-empires” (notable authors include Herodotus, Ctesias, Pliny, Sima Qian). Even at major museums, items of steppe manufacture are placed in the side corners of Chinese and Near Eastern exhibits. Because geographically Central (Eur)Asia occupies an intermediary place in trade networks, it has become the “recycling station” for all that defies clear classification under one of the well-known archetypes. If an ancient bronze from the antiquities market bears unusually entwined zoomorphic configurations, it could instantaneously become somehow less

“Chinese” and consequently thrown into the Central Eurasian pool of “miscellaneous.” One often falls back on the convenience of blaming such ambiguities on private collectors when, in reality, the problems mostly lie elsewhere. The archetype trend can be traced back to the early 20th-century when inquiries into the Hellenistic origins of Gandharan art came to light; this period was indeed marked by European colonial quests for monumentality encouraged by the discoveries of major Mesopotamian and South Asian sites. A reliance on a Greek or Persian archetype can be observed in discussions of Bactrian or Kushan cities like Khalchayan and Ai-Khanoum, [1] said to exhibit a fusion of Greek, Persian and East Asian elements. The description of these highly eclectic city plans is based on predetermined archetypes, deemed static and stable (e.g. Greek architecture, Persian statues, Chinese heating systems). This is where such methodology does disservice not only to the marginalized, but also the archetypes, which are essentially viewed as homogenous, inflexible structures.

A related concept is equally problematic. Drawing from the work of P. Stockhammer, I am sceptical of the epistemological usefulness of the term “hybridity” beyond its purely ornamental function [6]. An object deemed “hybrid” is assumed to indicate certain cross-cultural encounters which engendered its heterogenous final state. Yet, the adoption of “hybridity” necessitates the acknowledgement of its antonymic category, “purity,” as the former becomes meaningless without the latter [5]. It suggests that there was once a pure cultural archetype, which has been somehow “diluted” to a more eclectic and less “pure” state. Is a Chinese burial any less “Chinese” because it incorporates foreign imports or locally-produced items consistent with the aesthetics of northern nomads or other trading partners? For instance, Persian pearl roundels make an appearance on murals and sarcophagi in northern Chinese funerary art in the 5th-6th century, during a time of intensive Silk Road trade with peoples further west; even earlier, in the Han dynasty, tombs in China proper, as far south as Yunnan, Guangdong and Jiangsu (e.g. Yangfutou, Nanyue tomb, Xuzhou), incorporate nomadic-style gold. In such instances, is the decorative scheme justifiably called “hybrid”? Conversely, if a steppe warrior chose to be buried with Chinese mirrors in an otherwise regular “kurgan” layout, are these mirrors to be judged against a steppe or a Chinese archetype? The entanglement of diverse characteristics creates a whole new frame which transcends an archetype-based system of analysis. The so-called eclectic becomes the new archetype.

The primary issue with archetypes is the designation of an ultimate “ancestral home” or birthplace to the objects and systems that defy our existent frame of reference. D. Napier warns of the patchiness of the archaeological record: “these objects are known to us because they are made of durable materials, not because they represent any enduring categories of thought” [4]. This insight points to the issue of “framing,” as defined by Goffman [3]. Frames demarcate ancient objects in more ways than we realize as we are pre-occupied with a search

for the roots or ancestral homes of objects and styles. One only becomes aware of frames when they are removed or switched with new ones. This happens with funerary objects as they leave their findspot or as the site is disturbed. Depositional contexts are important epistemological frames which are frequently overlooked in studies and teaching of ancient art: wealth deposits, votive hoards, tombs, unprovenanced collections put the objects they yield on divergent trajectories. Once we remove the frame of the tomb's spatiality from its inventory, or that of the deceased's body from its adornment, we permanently alter the object's biography. Now, what once functioned as part of a comprehensive burial program with its own underlying logic ends up being framed by a museum display case and can seldom be subjected to the same sets of inquiries. This is of especially great consequence in pedagogy: students would be better served in engaging with the depositional contexts and other frames as much as the materiality and visuality of the objects.

The issue of frames opens new possibilities. It is also critical that we distinguish the types of audiences to which the burial was catered. Scholarly narratives on imagined "afterlife" audiences are already abundant: from the Egyptian "Judgement of Hunefer" to Daoist immortals on Han-dynasty coffins, studies of funerary art propose that the burial is meant to continue one's regally "ensured" or morally correct life on earth into the afterlife. As such, the tomb is said to have been catered to an invented, intangible audience. There are more practical matters which continue to be overlooked. What happens when the body is exposed to the scrutiny of a real, tangible audience present at the burial itself? How does the demographic of that viewership pre-determine the tomb's interior design, the body's adornment and the performance which leads to interment?¹ Frequently, the body, coffin, and/or the tomb's interior would have been exposed to the gaze of a deceased noble's peers, including leaders of other clans, political allies and adversaries, which could be particularly consequential in reluctant nomadic alliances. It is reasonable to postulate that in both sedentary and nomadic elite funerals, continued legacy and display of wealth and status were at the forefront of planning efforts. Objects of "exotic" manufacture would have been an expedient strategy to showcase the deceased's vast network of connections and worldliness to a real-life audience. As such, what we now perceive as a "hybrid" burial program would have been a political strategy. Other frequently adopted terms, receptivity and derivation, are used in such instances; however, we should also recognize that sometimes the elite would have simply wished to be buried with the most luxurious or easily available "exotic" item, not necessarily one that had already been accepted into the local system of aesthetics.

Admittedly, it would be a folly not to recognize the entanglement of disparate cultural references. Yet transmissions happened on broader (global), regional, and local levels, and it is

¹ Wu Hung offers poses some of these questions in his study of Chinese tombs [7].

the processes of refinement, translation and reinterpretation of a shared formula on these levels which brings us even further away from archetypes or a static point A. In funerary studies in particular, a study of more practical concerns surrounding the burial can easily explain the “why” of cross-cultural encounters. The never-ending search for the origins of objects and styles could be replaced with a more conceptual approach to the issue of framing in and beyond the tomb. With such shifts, we might even see the increased inclusion of marginalized societies in pedagogy and academic writing.

References

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