

Before *Serindia*: The Achaemenid Empire Along and Astride the Silk Roads

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Both in popular perception and specialized literature, the Achaemenid Empire, for over two centuries the most important player from the Aegean to the Indus, is rarely evoked in correlation with the complex of socio-cultural dynamics which shaped the spaces of what has become known as the Silk Road(s). Building on the case study of the Pazyryk carpet on the one hand (King 2021, 353-361, Linduff and Rubinson 2021, 88-97), and of the spread of an artistic motive such as the quatrefoil on the other (Kim 2021), this paper explores the rich and complex nature of the commercial networks that flourished across Central Asia under the aegis of Achaemenid Great Kings. Both archaeological and literary evidence shall be discussed (especially the *Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria*: Naveh and Shaked 2012, and now King 2021, 315-320). If taken together and read against the grain, such material is significant for the following reasons. First, it suggests the existence - and the scale - of commercial activities directly fostered or indirectly promoted by the imperial administration in Central Asia, an area of crucial importance within the Achaemenid domains, but for which our evidence is rather scanty and difficult to assess. Second, it shows how the Achaemenid “Imperial Paradigm” (Henkelman 2017) affected the social and economic landscape of Central Asia even after the demise of the Empire itself, thus considerably shaping the world of the Silk Road(s) a century before the *Ancient Sogdian Letters* (de la Vaissière 2005, 43-70) or Zhāng Qiān’s famous report.

Keywords: Achaemenid Persian Empire, Bactria, Eurasian Steppes, Pazyryk, Sakā, Sogdiana, Chorasmia

“Some delegates had dubious credentials: there were various khans and beks who turned out to be traders and who spent the duration of the Congress selling carpets in the markets of Baku” (Figes 1997, 671).

Introduction: Before and Beyond the Silk Road

“Every history – so the opening of a famous and contentious book – has a background” (Tarn 1938, xix). This is true, a fortiori, for the histories of the Silk Road. There are many reasons, not all strictly pertaining to Academia (Rezakhani forthcoming), to choose the fascinating world that dawned in the wake of the Graeco-Bactrian Empire’s demise (Hoo and Wiesehöfer 2022), which saw the rise of the Kuṣāṇa (Benjamin 2018, 173-203, Morris 2019a, Rezakhani 2022), and experienced the first Chinese efforts in projecting power over Central Asia through envoy Zhāng Qiān (Liu 2022) as the starting point for that increased connectivity across Ancient Afro-Eurasia (Versluys forthcoming), which, in 1877, Baron von Richthofen subsumed under the concept of the *Silk Road* (Chin 2013). There are arguably no less-compelling grounds to turn the clock back as early as the Bronze Age, when for the first time (agro)pastoral communities spanned social, political, and economic networks stretching from modern Turkmenistan to Mongolia and likely even beyond (Kuz’mina 2008, Chang 2018, Lyonnet and Dubova 2020, Beckwith forthcoming).

However, these are not sound arguments for bracketing out of this history the Teispid-Achaemenid Persian Empire (Jacobs and Rollinger 2021). Starting from a relatively marginal region in Southwestern Iran and coming out of several centuries of Elamite-Iranian acculturation (Henkelman 2008), around the Middle of the 6th century BCE, Cyrus II launched a sweeping wave of military campaigns, which resulted in his (and Cambyses’) conquest of the whole Ancient Near East and beyond (Briant 2002, 31-106, Waters 2014, 35-57). Emerging victorious from a vicious civil war, Darius I further extended the imperial domains towards the steppes of Central Asia, the Indus valley, Macedonia, Thrace, and eventually Greece. For the next century and a half, Darius’ heirs firmly held sway over the first hyperpower the world had ever seen (Rollinger and Degen 2021a, Degen and Rollinger 2022). The Empire was a globalized and globalizing player of unprecedented might and scale, its reach truly spanning the known world, its impact distinctively perceived way beyond the territories directly under the purview of the Great Kings, their satraps, and local administrators (Rollinger forthcoming a). Critical for its success were its sophisticated bureaucracy and an incredibly efficient infrastructural network (Henkelman 2017, Henkelman and Jacobs 2021, King 2021, 266-314, Henkelman forthcoming). Both were backed by an unmatched military (Manning 2021) and an ideology of universal rulership (Rollinger 2021), which cherry-picked the most useful elements from its Near Eastern forebearers while leaving behind a legacy of lasting influence (Degen 2022). The resulting, stunning wealth (Thomas 2021) made participation in, or acquaintance with, the imperial structure and its representatives, an alluring enterprise for individuals and groups within and without the political reach of the Great King.

Comparative research on a world-historical scale carried out in the wake of the so-called Imperial Turn has greatly sharpened our understanding of the imperial phenomenon and of the inheritance empires all over the world left behind (Meier 2020, Bang, Bayly, and Scheidel 2021, Rollinger forthcoming b). For the sake of the argument, the following features are worth stressing here. Empires fuel enormous economies of scale within and across the territory they (claim to) rule. This is due, among other factors, to their ability to shape human and natural landscapes in order to satisfy their (élites') needs of extraction and control (Weaverdyck et al. 2021). Moreover, they provide internal security, which reduces transaction costs. Furthermore, both the court and the bureaucracy demand human and natural resources as part of their metabolism (Hornborg 2021). To secure an entry ticket in this risky business – for violence, or at least the threat thereof, always looms large in imperial history – but at the same time rewarding business was therefore the overarching goal of a whole array of social actors. From officers purportedly acting in the interest of their King (while following their own agendas, with an eye on their pocket and political purchase) to local élites down to merchants, freebooters, and even humble peasants, imperial economies transformed societies within and beyond their political reach, kick-starting dynamics outlasting the Empires themselves (Hall 2021, Rollinger forthcoming a 2020b).

The Persian Empire duly fulfills all this checklist's boxes. The question to be asked therefore is: what evidence, if any, do we have during the Achaemenid period of phenomena such as long-distance (private and institutionally sponsored) trade, increased connectivity, wide-ranging circulation of goods, artistic styles, and ideas – and even conflict over resources such trade generated (King 2021, 362-365 on Bactria)? In world-historical studies, this is usually a staple of research concerning Rome, China, and the Indian Ocean trade. The Arsakids and the Kuṣāṇa may also enter the picture (though less frequently and more often than not in the rather unflattering role of middlemen between the first two (Benjamin 2018 and, critically, Morris 2019b)). As for the Xiongnu (Di Cosmo 2002; Brosseder 2019), they are rarely discussed as actors in their own terms. When it comes to the Achaemenid Empire, however, it stands out by its absence: the goal of this paper is to at least partially fill such a gap.

The lack of primary sources, coupled with the biased and lopsided nature of the written evidence (Graeco-Roman accounts and royal inscription, with indigenous testimonies providing fundamental corrective, albeit spatially uneven and chronologically patchy) takes a toll on Achaemenid History as a whole. Concerning matters of economy, not only is this field as a subdiscipline still in its infancy (Kleber 2021), at an imperial scale, it is hampered by the uneven balance of our dataset. The Western half of the Empire is in fact both richer in documentation and better studied than Iran, with the notable exception of the Persepolis archive. In the case of Central Asia and India (note King 2019; 2021, 266-314 on Arachosia), the situation is even more challenging. However, the present paper argues that the question above can be answered positively and that Central Asia makes for a remarkably rewarding case study against which to test the impact of the Achaemenid Empire before, and beyond, the Silk Road(s). In what follows, material culture and archival documents are investigated

to show that the establishment of the Achaemenid “Imperial Paradigm” (Henkelman 2017) across the territories of Bactria, Sogdiana, Chorasmia - and its impact beyond these satrapies, in the steppe world - not only caused trade to flourish and arguably contributed to transregional economic growth, in its wake, moreover, administrative procedures were also developed, the legacy of which can still be detected in Late Antiquity and all the way down to the Umayyad takeover of Eastern Iran and Mā Warā’ an-Nahr (Henkelman and Folmer 2016, 208-210, Azad 2020, King 2020). Against this backdrop, far from unleashing the first Eurasian Age of Discovery or acting as a harbinger of a “World System or Human Web” (Benjamin 2018, 9-12), envoy Zhāng Qiān was arguably setting foot on well-trodden paths, entering *This Earth far and wide, with many Lands in it* (Henkelman forthcoming), which, in days then long gone by, the Achaemenids claimed as theirs.

From Bactria with Profit

Let us start from the State Ėrmitage, where the Pazyryk carpet is showcased. One of the museum’s most valuable exhibits, this extraordinary handiwork of remarkable dimensions (1.89 x 2 meters) and exquisite craftsmanship - a single skilled artisan would have needed some 18 months to produce it (Rudenko 1970, 302, King 2021, 358), and undoubtedly ranks as a luxury good, accessible only to the most exquisite circles of steppe societies. However, the uniqueness of the Pazyryk finds (remarkable per se, for they were made of perishable material and were only preserved thanks to the Siberian climate) concerns above all the style of their sumptuous decorations. Both the carpet as well as the saddles and their decorations, together with numerous other artifacts - like bridle harnesses - related to the equestrian world (an obvious indication of a key component of the local economy: Linduff and Rubinson 2021, 39-47) that make up a considerable part of the Altai grave goods are in fact adorned with processional and hunting scenes clearly reminiscent of Achaemenid courtly art as known from both the Persepolis reliefs and glyptic (Wu 2005, 273-277; 2007, 125, Francfort 2021). Of course, the salient question revolves around 1. the reasons why and 2. the ways in which objects graced with such artistic motifs, symbolically dense and linked to specific cultural codes, social dynamics, and power relations (i.e. belonging to an imperial culture: Payne et al. 2016, Rollinger forthcoming b) eventually reached Sakā territories.

As for the origin of the Pazyryk artifacts, a Central Asian – Bactrian - context has been suggested since the earliest studies (Rudenko 1970, and King 2021, 358). In recent decades, archaeological and scientific investigation of similar items found in contexts apart in space and time (Tillyatēpe in Afghanistan: Sarianidi 1989, 236 and Noyon uul in Mongolia: Polos’mak 2015 and now Abdullaev 2020 and Morris 2021a, 196-197) but united by their having belonged to élites at once linked to the steppe world and willing to display consumption practices of cosmopolitan and aristocratic (imperial) overtones, make the hypothesis of the Pazyryk objects having originated in Achaemenid territory extremely likely. Albeit perhaps counterintuitively, the chronology of the burial in which the carpet was found (Linduff and

Rubinson 2021, 15, Francfort 2021, 136) is suggestive of the above.

There reason, therefore, is because items of such quality and value ought to be regarded as family, if not even group, heirlooms, passed from one generation to the next and jealously treasured: paradoxically, a dating of the carpet's deposition, around 250 BCE, only highlights that prestige objects linked to the Achaemenid world were still enjoyed decades and sometimes centuries after the Empire's demise. This brings even further to the foreground how prized and coveted such objects must have been when the King of Kings was the dominant political force across the whole of Eurasia. A story preserved by Xenophon (*Anab.* 7.3.18) is indicative of the appeal Achaemenid textiles exerted over élites across the Empire and beyond its borderlands, thus providing a nice comparative scenario against which to picture the social life of an artifact such as Pazyryk by virtue of the social capital attached to it.¹ Timasion the Dardanian heard that Seuthes, a Thracian strongman, possessed Persian drinking vessels and carpets. Therefore, he asked to be gifted with an exemplar thereof, noting that owning one helped in making Seuthes a great man in the region. Put otherwise, possessing (or claiming) fluency with Persian visual culture and courtly lifestyle provided prestige, and likely political purchase, even in territories miles away from actual imperial control, as clearly demonstrated by recent archaeological discoveries in Southern Kazakhstan (Sdykov and Lukpanova 2014). Two further considerations support such an assumption.

To begin with, it has recently been shown (Chang 2018) that Bactria enjoyed sociopolitical (and probably economic) relations with the Central Asian steppes - including areas of Eastern Kazakhstan such as the Tarbaghatai region, thus bordering the world of Pazyryk (Stark 2020, 81-82) - already at least two centuries before the Achaemenid conquest. The discovery, at Tarbaghatai, of lapis lazuli mines, this stone prominently featuring in a famous inscription (DSf: Schmitt 2009, 127-134) together with carnelian and turquoise among the precious goods brought to Susa from Bactria, Sogdiana, and Chorasmia to grace the royal palace, lends substance to the possibility that the Empire succeeded in accessing these resources beyond the Badakhshan mines of Eastern Bactria.

Another case in point is the Kyzylkum desert. Here imposing mining facilities have long been discovered (Vinogradov et al. 1965, 117), which were active at least since the 7th century BCE (Trudnovskaja 1979, 105) supplying individuals and groups both across Central Asia (Manilov 1974, 56) and further beyond, as far as the Southern range of the Urals (the site of Prokhorovka: Trudnovskaja 1979, 108, where, moreover, luxurious Achaemenid vessels have been discovered (Yablonskij and Treister 2019, 137, King 2021, 359). Such findings are therefore indexical of the Empire's attempt to tap into already existing local networks spanning considerable distances across Eurasia (Rouse 2020 on the role of pastoralists in these networks) in order to profit from the resources flowing through them. It is worth stressing here that archaeological evidence survives demonstrating the active involvement of mobile shepherds in the mining of semi-precious stones in the steppes of Central Asia since the Bronze Age (Vinogradov et al. 1965, 125, Bonora 2020). This implies that the

¹ My thanks are due to Dr. Julian Degen (Universität Trier) for having made me aware of this passage.

Great Kings' access to these highly symbolic resources - advertising domination over nature, a pivotal element of Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology - was conditioned on the ground by negotiating dynamics, one outcome thereof likely being the procurement, by the Sakā élites who controlled these networks of extraction and circulation, of symbols of social prestige and political influence like objects speaking the language of the Achaemenid court. As conspicuously suggested, for example, by the archaeological record of burials such as Taksai (Sdykov and Lukpanova 2014), being able to fulfill such demands allowed indigenous élites to acquire stunning wealth, which could then be redeployed to negotiate one's own position within local societies. Timasion the Dardanian was very well aware of this and the same can arguably be said of the steppe élites across Northern Central Asia: the Pazyryk carpet is an eloquent, but likely not isolated, case in point.

Beyond other burials discovered in the area (most notably Tuekta, Bashadar, and Ak-Alakha: Linduff and Rubinson 2021, 47-60), this mention is due to the spread of an ornamental design such as the quatrefoil (a cruciferous arrangement of four-leaf projection radiating from a mutual hub). Widely attested across the Near East, in China it became ubiquitous during the late Spring and Autumn period, most likely (Kim 2021) thanks to the spread of Achaemenid visual culture from Central Asia through the steppes, possibly due to the circulation of prestigious objects such as carpet or jewelry items comparable to those discovered at Prokhorovka or Taksai.

The existence of active textile production in Achaemenid Central Asia is further supported by evidence coming from Persepolis. The archive, in fact, records (mostly female-run) specialized *ateliers*. According to PF 1790, 5 *araššara*, or skilled weavers, received yearly 4 sheep/goats each as rations (Hallock 1969, 487 for text and translation, Safaee forthcoming for a commentary on this and comparable evidence). Such evidence is suggestive of the value of this branch of the imperial economy and probably shows the – relatively high - prestige enjoyed by the workwomen. If considered that, from Greece to Sogdiana, Achaemenid textiles were indexical of social latitude (King 2021, 73, Llewellyn-Jones 2021), it follows that a satrapy such as Bactria, by virtue of its key role in the Achaemenid Northeast (Briant 2002, 743-753, Wu 2020), was likely endowed with infrastructure comparable to those recorded at Persepolis. The paleozoological finds of sites such as Kyzyltēpe (Wu et al. 2015, Wu 2018, now King 2021, 332) are important in this respect, for they hint at the existence of a pastoral economy, which was largely capable of supplying the raw material to satisfy both regional and (trans-)imperial demand.

If these premises at least partly account for the presence of an artifact such as the Pazyryk carpet deep in the Altai (and for the other Achaemenid-style objects in the frozen tombs), debate is still ongoing concerning the modalities of this phenomenon. Due considerably to the authority of Briant's model of Achaemenid court society across the Empire (2002, 302-347), scholars usually claim that such furnishings reached the steppe according to dynamics of unequal exchange. As a reward for military assistance (Hdt. 7.64-66, Arr. *Anab.*, 3.8.3), the Great King would have gifted local élites with luxury objects, the production and flows thereof he jealously supervised, thus stressing in whose hands real power rested (Wu 2005,

321-380).

Similar arguments doubtless hit the mark, if only one bears in mind the importance, in Achaemenid ideology, of claiming control over both the “World” and the role of the steppes in this discourse of imperial self-representation (Rollinger 2021; Rollinger and Degen 2021b). However, this is only one side of the coin. Empire studies have recently stressed the importance of trade activities undertaken on behalf of (and exploiting) imperial institutions and infrastructures, highlighting the inordinate profits resulting therefrom at 1. an inter-, 2. intra-, and 3. trans-imperial scale (Rollinger and Gehler 2022, 6-14). Crucially, scholars have also demonstrated that the (far from disinterested) agents of these transcontinental and, indeed, global endeavors were not only (imperial) élites. On the contrary, they made for international communities (Colburn 2017, Rollinger forthcoming). A glaring example thereof is provided by Marduk rēmanni, a Babylonian merchant who, in the aftermath of the Persian conquest of Mesopotamia, was not only able to preserve his business, but even expanded it in volume and radius towards the Iranian Plateau (Payne et al. 2016, 18). None of this would have been conceivable in the absence of the flywheel provided by the economies of scale triggered by the Achaemenid administrative machine and its boundless demand for goods and resources (Rollinger forthcoming b).

Against such a backdrop, the question is 1. whether the available evidence bears traces of commercial activities in Central Asia of both institutionally driven and private nature and, moreover 2. whether anything can be said about who might have profited from active participation in the socio-economic whirlwind (Meier 2020) set in motion by the Empire along and (as shown by Pazyryk) across its borderlands: not only in Bactria, but also in Sogdiana and Chorasmia, the latter two being strategically crucial hubs towards the steppe world in the light of their tight links with the Fergana valley, the Ustiurt Plateau, and the Sarygamish Basin (Stark 2020, 83). To date, clues of trade flows through Achaemenid territories, and of taxation thereof by satrapal authorities, come exclusively from Egypt (Briant and Descat 1998; King 2021, 350) and Asia Minor (Bresson 2020, 220), where evidence is more plentiful. However, carefully combing the recently published *Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria* (Naveh and Shaked 2012) allows for some interesting conclusions, in the light of which the social life of objects such as the Pazyryk carpet acquires further, fascinating details.

The Silk Road in a Scrap of Parchment

Originally part of a larger lot acquired on the antiquities market in the early 2000s by Nāṣer Ḥalīlī, the 30 parchments (and 18 wooden tallies) known as *ADAB* stands as one of the most valuable sources on the Achaemenid East discovered in the last half-century (Naveh and Shaked 2012; Briant 2009). Each of these documents offers an insight of unprecedented depth into the administrative dynamics of Bactria and Sogdiana. Moreover, they also provide access to a staggering amount of information on officials (and their respective social networks) who, although vital for the functioning of the imperial paradigm (Henkelman

2017), ranked lower than the satrap and the King's court, which instead provide the almost exclusive focus of extant literary sources. As for the tallies (Naveh and Shaked 2012, 231-258), it was recently demonstrated (Henkelman and Folmer 2016) that they record credit transactions, which allowed the satrapal administration and its representatives to recruit members of pastoral groups active across imperial borderlands (such as semi-desert steppes and piedmonts: Weaverdyck et al. 2021, 313-317) to have them attend to the livestock of the satrap and perhaps, in some cases, of the King himself. Both the Persepolis archives and the *ADAB* (A8 records "camels grazing on a hill") in fact testify to the strategic importance of breeding these ungulates for the empire (PF 1787, King forthcoming). Camels were, however, but one item within a mobile capital portfolio available to the imperial administration through steppe élites intermediation (particularly via Sogdiana: Stark 2020, 83). Supporting a cavalry at least 30000 strong (Curt. 7.4.30) required constant access to flourishing herds as well as the services of specialized personnel to breed superior mounts.

Plenty of evidence suggests that cattle trade across the steppes represented a major entry in the Northeastern satrapies' budget. First, mention should be made of the results of the palaeontological analysis carried out on Kyzyltöpe's osteological record, the latter being a crucial transregional Achaemenid administrative center (Wu et al. 2015, 105-106; Wu 2018; 2020). Indeed, the evidence coherently suggests a market-oriented agro-pastoral economy in an ecological context particularly suitable for establishing exchange networks with the steppe world. As argued by Lauren Morris (2021c, 697), "the regular, seasonal horizontal and vertical migration of mobile pastoralist groups in Central Asia helped to carve out preferred routes of transregional mobility across marginal landscape and could instigate the formation of periodic markets in areas occupied by sedentary agriculturalists or border fortresses to exchange primary and secondary produce." Similar dynamics are attested along China's Northern borderlands both around the same time of the *ADAB* (under the kingdom of Zhào 趙, 403-222 BCE, evidence exists of markets supplying steppe élites from Mongolia to Manchuria with luxury goods in exchange for horses) and later, (Skaff 2012, 68-69: note here the crucial role played by Bactrian and Sogdian powerbrokers) as well as in territories once under Achaemenid rule (emblematic is the account of the 10th century CE *Tā'riḥ -i Buxārā*: Stark forthcoming). The establishment by the Assyrians of a highly sophisticated system of trading centers (known as *kāru*: Vér 2020, MacGinnis 2020) across the Eastern borderlands of their Empire to acquire horses in exchange for luxury goods comparable to those discussed in these pages (Radner 2021) provides further compelling comparative evidence.

The main takeaway of the dataset presented so far is that it suggests structural features of the socio-political and economic dynamics of Central Asian imperial history over the longue durée. Against such a backdrop, that horse breeding represented one (if not the) cornerstone of Pazyryk economy helps contextualize the frozen tombs' finds into a model of the economies of scales fueled across Central Asia by the consumption needs of Achaemenid administration and military. Much like what is known concerning another influential steppe political player, the Comanche Empire (Hämäläinen 2008, 141-239), it can be argued that

Pazyryk élites exploited their livestock surplus to supply the satrapal economy in Bactria and Sogdiana with valuable mounts and in return purchased luxury goods such as the carpet from Achaemenid Central Asia. Evidence of similar sumptuary economies (like the Tillyatêpe graves: Peterson 2020) also suggests that such prestige objects were crafted upon commission (Morris 2021c, 730 stressing steppe élites agency in these exchange networks).

The *ADAB* provide critical first-hand evidence supporting the present argument, not least because of their administrative origin, not hampered by those ideological and literary agendas which loom large in the narrative account of Greek and Roman sources (Degen and Rollinger, forthcoming). *ADAB* C6, for example, records a list of objects including, “purple wool,” a fabric from Cappadocia, “black harnesses” and other items “decorated with a picture” (Naveh and Shaked 2012, 217-219, King 2021, 355-357). As for *ADAB* C7, it again sports decorated harnesses, a (Cappadocian?) blue-colored object, hemp cordage, perhaps used for manufacturing bridles and, remarkably, a number of horses are mentioned, which is unclear due to the text’s damaged status. Although laconic, these two fragments proffer capital testimony of the existence of long-range commercial activities in Achaemenid Central Asia for the following reasons. First, remarkable is the conspicuous absence of clues betraying an institutional context, which on the contrary can clearly be detected in other parchments, such as *ADAB* C1, C4, or the Vahuvakhšu letter (*ADAB* A1: King 2021, 348-352, cf. below). Moreover, the mention of decorated textiles and pigments such as purple and blue, with their high value-to-volume ratio, suggests that the two fragments came from customs registers, preserving traces of goods in transit along the Achaemenid road system (Henkelman forthcoming) and being taxed by the satrapal administration (King 2021, 356-359). Odd at first glance, the Cappadocian origin of the recorded textiles becomes likely against Strabo’s testimony (15.3.21) noting that, because of its quality, Cappadocian wool was often used for manufacturing clothing supplying the Achaemenid court.

Such a reading of the evidence at the same time dovetails with and provides adequate context to a testimony coming from the Byzantine-epoch *Sylloge on the history of animals* (2.474: Henkelman and Folmer 2016, 195-200) which, despite being almost 1500 years later than the *ADAB*, betrays a distinctive Achaemenid background noise: “The Bactrian merchants and others on camel-back trading missions to the Indian lands take carpets to Parsa; and they sell such patterned ones for high prices. The Persians value them greatly and the Indian king sends them as gifts to the Persian king.” Remarkable is, moreover, that even the *Mahabharata* (2.47.21-22: Morris 2021a, 198) knows of “fabrics of large size, splendid in a thousand colors and delightful to touch” imported to India from Balkh. Admittedly, the poem’s chronology is fiercely debated (Dwivedi 2019, 426), but the cumulative values of these testimonies once read against the background of both the *ADAB* and the Persepolis archive suggests a dense network of socio-economic entanglements hinged around Central Asia and stretching far beyond, the origins of which are unthinkable without duly considering the Empire’s impact on this region of Eurasia.

Moreover, given the symbolic value of fine textiles in the Achaemenid world (Llewellyn-Jones 2021), it can be argued that the Bactrian satrap or even a steppe magnate - with

whom Achaemenid strongmen in Central Asia enjoyed tight relationships (Minardi 2021), took advantage of the inter- and trans-imperial connectivity supported by the imperial infrastructural apparatus (Colburn 2017; Rollinger, forthcoming a) to access resources advertising, both within and outside their own social context, membership to the highest echelons of court society (Francfort 2021). Or, if anything, their ability to claim acquaintance with those networks of power and prestige: as shown by the language of the glyptic (Tuplin 2020), social life is after all a matter of aspirations as much as of hard facts.

Additionally, the already mentioned Egyptian portolano (Briant and Descat 1998, King 2021, 356-357) provides a close comparison with the *ADAB* scrolls, for it records both the type and quantity of the goods registered at the imperial customs as well as the rate at which they were taxed. This last piece of information is absent in *ADAB* C6 and C7 (as noticed by King 2021, 357). However, beyond their fragmentary state, there are other, stronger arguments allowing the assumption that the taxation rate was also recorded. The first is the mention (in C7) of horses, which could be understood precisely in these terms based on the parallel case of *ADAB* A1, which concerned fiscal issues involving several members of the satrapal administration and their respective social networks. It in fact records the charging (deemed unlawful by the plaintiff) of a tax to be levied upon entry into a settlement's territory (like Kyzyltēpe: Wu 2018) under the satrapal administration's purview. Since documentary and epigraphic evidence from both Egypt and Asia Minor shows that imperial officials kept meticulous accounts of goods and men passing through their territory while, more importantly, charging fees proportionate to cargoes registered at their customs (Briant and Descat 1998, 72-77; Bresson 2020), the horses recorded in *ADAB* C7 could be taken as indexical of the caravan's size, measured according to the number of its animals and perhaps the cargo volume (King 2021, 357-358). That the animals themselves accounted for a commodity of utmost value, justifying painstaking (and sometimes rapacious) taxation to be levied on their movement is spectacularly demonstrated by the case of Vahuvakhšu and his camel keepers.

Keep Camel and Carry On

Between November and December 353 BCE, Vahuvakhšu wrote a vocal grievance "to my lord Akhvamazdā" (arguably the Bactrian satrap) complaining about the outrageous behavior of Bagavanta - a regional subordinate of Akhvamazdā - and a clique of his associates active in the territory of Khulmi/Taşqurghan against a group of camel-drivers in his employ. According to Vahuvakhšu's testimony, Bagavanta and his men allegedly unduly charged the camel drivers with a tax (hlk'), and upon their refusal seized 34 sheep, one bull, and two donkeys. They finally jailed the unfortunates (Naveh and Shaked 2012, 68-75; King 2021, 348). While providing invaluable insights into Ancient - not only Achaemenid - Bactria's sociology of power (King 2020 on an instructive Late Antique dossier), *ADAB* A1 stands out as a key testimony for this paper's argument. In fact, it forcefully suggests 1. the existence of

long-distance trade within and across satrapal territories and 2. the management thereof by individuals, such as Vahuvakhšu, at once entrenched in the imperial administrative ranks and actively funding (private?) caravans (King 2021, 337-347). Moreover, it shows the economic interests revolving around such undertakings, which must have been enough to justify the attempt of a local powerbroker such as Bagavanta (and his acolytes) to interfere, apparently not unsuccessfully, in the affairs 1. of the satrap Akhvamazdā, 2. of his subordinates, and 3. perhaps even of the Great King (Hyland 2020, 254). Note that, after all, in the text the camels are explicitly mentioned as belonging to his house.

That Vahuvakhšu's camel keepers were likely leading a caravan and that it consisted of a remarkable number of animals is shown by what Bagavanta and his men unduly appropriated. A 10% rate would imply a herd of 340 sheep, 20 donkeys, 10 bulls, and an unspecified number of camels: with a 5% rate the figures double (as noted by King 2021, 351). That these are not outlandish estimates is borne out by the Persepolis archive: a single tablet records a herd of 435 grazing camels, divided into five age groups in turn further distinguished by sex (NN 0757, King 2021, 341). The ultimate clue supporting this hypothesis, however, is the tax (hlk') levied by Bagavanta - of which, note, the lawfulness is not questioned, but the amount, therefore implying the structural nature of the taxation of both moving livestock and of the goods they carried by the satrapal administration. Similarly to what is suggested by the Egyptian portolano, also in Bactria, tax levies upon transit through certain territories under imperial control and proportional to the size of the caravan comprised a conspicuous source of revenue for the local administration, to the point of fostering competition among officers to secure control of these flows and their respective incomes (King 2021, 348-361 for a full discussion of this key text, from which the here reconstructed scenario is taken).

However, Vahuvakhšu hints at another tax (nhmrnyt'), which Bagavanta allegedly unlawfully squeezed out of his ill-fated camel drivers when they entered a certain settlement (mt', probably Khulmi: Naveh and Shaked 2012, 74, King 2021, 349). This suggests that, beyond the animals, the camel drivers were transporting other goods that the satrapal administration was interested in (over)taxing. *ADAB* C6 and C7 provide valuable clues supporting the claim that artifacts like the Pazyryk carpet and other valuable textiles accounted for a considerable share of the cargo of caravans such as the one sponsored by (or at any rate under the responsibility of) Vahuvakhšu (King 2021, 353-362).

Yet, it can be argued that, in addition to textiles (finished products as well as raw materials, as suggested by the Cappadocian wool recorded in *ADAB* C6), other goods were accessible to imperial élites in Central Asia - and their counterparts in the steppes - thanks to the Achaemenid infrastructural system and, above all, by virtue of the economies of scale fueled by the entire imperial administrative apparatus both in the territories under its direct control and across its borderlands (Rollinger forthcoming a, Versluys forthcoming). Beyond jewelry (Sdykov and Lukpanova 2014, 183-203), luxury tableware (Yablonskij and Treister 2019), and small portable items decorated with quatrefoil patterns (Kim 2021, 232-239), other notable examples are products such as dried fruit and nuts, the spread of which from the Indus to the steppes all the way to Anatolia ought to be understood in the light of imperial expansion

across Eurasia. The Persepolis tablets show that these goods' consumption accounted for social prestige, being a staple of the royal table (Henkelman 2010). Purchasing them, therefore, meant claiming acquaintance with imperial culture (Spengler 2019; King 2021, 359-360). In Central Asia, sites such as Kyzyltëpe or Koktëpe likely accounted for crucial hubs trading (and taxing) these commodities to Sogdiana, Chorasmia, and the steppes beyond (Wu et al. 2015; Wu 2020).

Moreover, if indeed *ADAB* C6 and C7 are fragments of customs logbook(s), the recorded pigments might shed light on another aspect of the social life of minerals such as lapis lazuli, carnelian or turquoise, which is parallel but not opposed to the imperial conspicuous consumption attested by the Susa inscription (DSf). Their use as exquisite dyes is a possibility, but equally if not more suggestive is the hypothesis that they were used to carve seals, given their role as indispensable tools for the satrapal administration and prestige objects culturally related to the highest echelons of imperial court society (Henkelman 2017, 47-54; Tuplin 2020). Against this backdrop, Ctesias' bizarre story (*FGrHist* 688 F 45 (6) of a Bactrian merchant losing 477 gems and precious stones in a clumsy attempt to ford a river throws open a window of dizzying depth into the social, political, and economic implications that the mobilization - if not caused, certainly increased by several orders of magnitude - of Bactria's legendary mineral wealth (Thomas 2021, 114-118) by and through the Achaemenid imperial economy entailed for a broad spectrum of individuals both belonging to and being entangled with the local administration.

Back to the steppe world, that élite networks such as Pazyryk's saw in the Northeastern satrapies (and their borderlands) a source of luxury goods to be (re)embedded in their own cultures both to advertise one's (group) being conversational with imperial court society and for reasons of strictly local politics at different regional scales, which is suggested by spectacular finds of lavish drinking paraphernalia originating from Achaemenid territories unearthed in remarkable quantities in many burial mounds from Siberia to the Caucasus (Treister 2010, Ebbinghaus 2018). The tomb of an élite female excavated at Filippovka is a case in point: her sumptuous jewelry in fact likely originated in a Bactrian atelier and it has been recently suggested that goldsmiths and other specialized craftsmen from Central Asia partook in the production of luxury objects commissioned by steppe élites (Yablonskij and Treister 2019, 131; King 2021, 358-359 on the Filippovka burial). A comparative study of similar artifacts of ascertained Achaemenid origin suggests that stylistic and decorative choices were made targeting the tastes of steppe élites (Shablavina 2021). These implied reworking and adapting motives which, albeit embedded in an imperial (Achaemenid) artistic tradition held as prestigious from the Aegean to the Altai, were at the same time flexible enough to suit the cultural and symbolic worlds of those purchasing items graced by them (Wu 2007).

Finally, worth noting is that the latter point singles out a distinctive feature of the sociocultural dynamics usually argued to have begun during the Golden Age of the so-called *First Silk Road Era* (Benjamin 2018). This paper modestly suggests that a self-conscious use of these terms ought to duly consider the Achaemenid Empire and the economies its existence fueled along and across its Northeastern borderlands, with which both the Pazyryk

culture and the broader world of the Eurasian steppes were inescapably entangled and from which it greatly profited (Beckwith forthcoming).

Conclusion: Alice in Borderland

Sīmǎ Qiān's *Shǐjì* 123 (Leese-Messing 2019, 498-513) portrays Central Asia as an uncharted space to be conquered and Zhāng Quiān's voyage is usually seen as a history of intellectual discovery, cultural entrenchment in, and power projection over, a terra incognita at least up to Alexander's invasion. But every history has a background. This paper has made the case for the Achaemenid Empire representing precisely one – critical – such background for the history of Northeastern Central Asia and the steppes before, and beyond, the Silk Roads. As an imperial borderland, some features of its sociocultural dynamics, and the consequences thereof, have been stressed. Central Asia was fully integrated into the imperial framework and deeply entangled with networks reaching far and wide beyond it, and to such networks, the Empire claimed social and economic, if not directly political access. On both sides of the borderlands, local societies interacted with the Empire and mutual gains resulted from the connectivity generated by its needs for products, peoples, and a wide array of resources. More than just a prequel of any Silk Road, therefore, Central Asia was a space where the Achaemenid imperial impact was ubiquitous. The demand for resources and skilled manpower triggered and fueled “complex processes of adaption and adoption, resistance and integration, emulation and opposition, all of it at the very same time” (Rollinger and Gehler 2022, 22). Against such a background, the Pazyryk carpet provides telling evidence that, as Darius I claimed, “the spear of the Persian man has gone forth far” (DNa § 4 : Schmitt 2009, 103): perhaps further, and earlier, than whatever envoy Zhāng Qiān could ever have guessed as he entered Bactria, as far as he knew, for the first time.

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