

Classical Humanities Society of South Jersey December, 1997

Bruce Routledge (University of Pennsylvania): How Hazael's Horse-Bridle Got to Greece

In *Iliad* 23:740-745, Achilles takes near sensuous pleasure in gifting an exquisite piece of metalwork brought from the Near East, careful to show that what makes this piece truly valuable is its complex & honourable history of ownership & exchange. We might gain a new perspective on the meanings people attached to objects, if we wrote biographies of things the way we write biographies of people, following an object through its life, from manufacture to destruction, to highlight the different ways the object was used, valued & exchanged by different people in different social settings. Achilles seems to have known this already before the Trojan War. We will look at another luxuriant object brought to the Greek World from the Near East, tracing its complex history of ownership & exchange to highlight its value as a marker of important social & historical trends, 900-600 BC.

In 1984 excavations at the Temple of Hera on Samos (close to the Ionian coast of Asia Minor) uncovered a thin bronze frontlet (11" x 7") from an ornamental horse's bridle with figures standing out in relief, from a debris layer deposited around 600 BC with offerings made during the life of the 7th-century BC Temple of Hera.

The iconography of the frontlet, nude women holding their breasts depicted frontally & in association with lions, shows that the bridle originated in the border area between modern Turkey & Syria. An identical, more corroded, example had been discovered at this same temple in 1957, but on this one an inscription runs down one side in Aramaic, a Semitic language, closely related to Hebrew, first spoken in central Syria, but eventually spread throughout the Middle East as the "lingua franca" of the Assyrian & Persian empires.

The relationship of the Aramaic alphabet, & its closely related cousin the Phoenician alphabet, to the earliest Greek alphabets is important. While the date of transmission continues to be debated, it is clear that by the middle of the 8th-century BC the Semitic alphabet had been adapted to write Greek (Homer & Hesiod) & enabled literacy to spread through the Greek World.

The inscription has historical interest. It reads "This, Hadad gave to our lord Hazael from 'Umqi in the year our lord crossed the river." All of the proper names in this inscription are already known to us, so we can place the inscription into a detailed historical context. Hazael, the "lord" in the inscription ruled Damascus from about 844 BC until about 800 BC. He is mentioned repeatedly in II Kings 8-13 as a court official who came to the throne by suffocating his predecessor with a wet blanket in his sick-bed.

Hadad, the Aramean storm god, was probably one of the patron gods of Damascus. Finally, 'Umqi was a Neo-Hittite state located in what the disputed area modern Syrians call the 'Amuq & modern Turks call the Hattay, bordering on the Mediterranean.

The inscription was added to the bridle-piece after it was made; the position of the lion's head required the author to split a word in half. This fact, & the role of the god Hadad in "giving" the plaque to Hazael the King, indicates that it was taken from 'Umqi as war-

booty.

Another bronze-cheek piece with an identical Aramaic inscription was excavated in the Temple of Apollo at Eretria in Euboea at the turn of the last century, so corroded that the inscription was not readable until viewed in infra-red light in the early 1980's. This cheek-piece is decorated with a familiar North Syrian scene of a man holding two lions by the tail. Another identical, but uninscribed, example was found at the Eretrian Temple of Apollo from around 700 BC. Further uninscribed examples have also been found at the Temple of Hera in Samos.

The inscribed cheek-piece from Eretria seems part of the same bridle-set as our forehead-piece. We can see how the set fit together by looking at a 9th-century carved horsehead, from roughly the same time as our bronze frontlet & found just 25 miles north of 'Umqi. The frontlet shows a nude goddess in relief & the blinker shows a sphinx in relief.

So, a horse's bridle, complete with a front piece & 2 cheek pieces was made in 'Umqi in NW Syria between 900 & 840 BC, then taken to Damascus as war-booty by Hazael sometime in the last third of the 9th century, where the Aramaic inscriptions was added. This bridle passed into the Aegean world between 800 & 700 BC, at which time the forehead & cheek pieces were probably separated from one another. These two pieces were then offered as votives at two different Greek temples separated by some 220 miles of the Aegean Sea. Finally, though the context of the inscribed cheek-piece from Eretria is not clear, it may have been deposited in the soil as much as 100 years before the example from Samos.

900-600 BC in the eastern Mediterranean, known as the Geometric & Early Archaic periods in Greece, & the Iron Age II period in the Levant, saw the initial appearance of both the Hebrew Bible & the epic poems of Homer as written texts, as well as the emergence of the "polis" in Greece & the first world-empire in Assyria. Near Eastern objects, ideas & institutions were incorporated into an emergent Greek world, reaching outwards through colonization & trade.

Sometime around 1200 BC, a chain-reaction of crises swept across the Aegean & Middle East, promoting movements of peoples & the collapse or decline of most of the great powers of the day, with a reconfiguring of the political & cultural landscape most noticeable in the Levant, where a series of small, often ethnically defined, states arose beginning in the 10th century BC, including Israel & Judah & the city-states on the coast of Lebanon, such as Tyre & Sidon, which the Greeks called Phoenicia, & the Aramean & Neo-Hittite states in what is now Syria & S Turkey.

Of the Aramaean kingdoms, those kingdoms of south & central Syria whose inhabitants spoke Aramaic, the most important was centred on Damascus & as we already know this kingdom plays an important role in the story of the bronze bridle piece from Samos.

Further north, along the modern Syrian-Turkish border, a series of small kingdoms perpetuated the language & traditions of the long-dead Hittite empire, originally in central Turkey. These Neo-Hittites may have also spoken Aramaic or Phoenician in every-day speech, including Umqi/Unqi, where the Samos bridle piece was probably first

made.

The Levant was then an important center for the production of luxury goods in precious metals, bronze and ivory. The Phoenicians, active & accomplished in sailing & sea-trade, had already sent out colonists to Cyprus & Crete by the 9th century BC. But the most potent, strategically brutal, & best organized military force the world had seen up to that time was in Assyria, now northern Iraq.

From the 9th century, the Assyrians aggressively expanded. This meant almost yearly military campaigns into Syria, most ending with the submission of local kings, the extraction of booty, & the levying of tribute obligations. Around 740 BC, the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-Pileser III changed this policy. He conquered the Aramean & Neo-Hittite kingdoms, dispossessed or deported their ruling classes, & reorganized them as Assyrian provinces with governors of his own choice. By 722 BC Assyria had annexed the kingdom of Israel & 22,000 people were deported from Samaria -- the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

South of Israel, Judah, Philistia & Phoenicia co-operated with the Assyrians, acting as facilitators of trade & buffers in the push to conquer Egypt, as in 664 BC the Assyrian King Esharhaddon did. The tightening grip of Assyria on the east seems to have encouraged the Phoenicians to look west & found many new colonies, particularly in Sicily & Southern Spain. After 640 BC, the Assyrian empire declined, & fell to the Babylonians in 609 BC, who took over most of the Assyrian Empire except Egypt. By 600 BC Phoenician commercial activity shifts from the Lebanese coast to Carthage in Tunisia.

In Greece, the 9th century saw small-scale societies & settlements grow in hierarchy & complexity. Aristocratic wealth was displayed in elaborate burial offerings that suggested competition for prestige. Levantine goods, like metals bowls & cauldrons appear among the grave offerings, especially at sites in Euboea.

In the 8th century, across the Greek world, population growth spurs the foundation or growth of many sites, coupled with the reorganization of existing sites & their surrounding countryside into the "polis". Many new temples are founded, often on the outer edges of city territories. Some, such as at Olympia & Delphi, take on a pan-hellenic character, binding colonist to mainland Greeks & city to city through common festivals & rituals. A significant increase in votive deposits in temples begins towards the end of the century. The earliest examples of Greek alphabetic writing occur during the eighth century as well.

Towards the end of the 8th century, the orientalizing period in Greek art, the numbers & kinds of Near Eastern objects found in the Greek world increase dramatically, especially in temple complexes. At the same time, Greek art & especially vase painting begins to move away from its reserved geometric patterns & incorporate motifs such as griffins, sphinxes, lions & grazing stags, common in Near Eastern art.

In the 7th century the trends continue, polis citizenship & pan-hellenic values become institutionalized under aristocratic families & tyrants; temple offerings increase in quantity & elaboration with particular emphasis on oriental goods like bronze cauldrons; & contact between Near East & Greece increases as Greeks serve as mercenaries in Near

Eastern states like Egypt, Babylon & perhaps even Judah.

How does the complex history of our Bronze Bridle relate to these large-scale events & what can the various meanings attached to this piece by those who possessed it tell us about social & historical developments in general? Let us begin with the Bridle's manufacture in the kingdom of `Umqi.

Horses, metals & ivory were three of the most important commodities during the Iron Age of the Near East, linked not merely as useful & pretty things but rather as a package connected to royalty. Horses in particular were part of an iconographic package in which the king on horseback or carriage took the role of hunter that was given to lions in non-human scenes.

N Syria was a source for metal, ivory-work & horses, combined in the creation of horse trappings, often in bronze, but also in ivory. The motifs are very repetitive: nude goddesses usually associated with lions, either male or female deities dominating lions, & griffins or sphinxes. The deities continue the ancient motif of the "mistress or master of the animals", a symbol for the domination of nature in the earliest art of the Near East. The nude goddess probably represent the Canaanite Astarte, who combines fertility & warfare amongst her concerns. She is at times associated with lions, & of course the dual military & hunting role of royal horses makes Astarte a good symbol for carrying the message of the king as subduer of man & nature.

Our bridle, made around 850 BC, got its inscription after taken as booty to Damascus by Hazael. Warfare is the business of the god, the spoils of warfare are the god's, & the god uses it as he or she chooses. The inscription of booty makes this relationship clear. This relationship replaces the original owners of objects with the deity, who has both sanctioned the warfare & the possession of its booty. So, our Bronze Bridle has been transformed from a symbol of royalty to a symbol of conquest, marked by the addition of an inscription.

But how did this get from Damascus in ca. 830 BC to Samos & Eretria a century later? We have some clues. Between 841, just after Hazael came to the throne & 732 when Damascus fell to Tiglath-Pileser III, the Assyrians attacked Damascus at least six times. The city was looted at least twice. Booty from Hazael is recorded on a label from the Assyrian city of Ashur, & two pieces of ivory, one from the Assyrian capital of Nimrud & one from the provincial capital of Arslan Tash, bear fragmentary inscriptions in aramaic, that include Hazael's name & may be somewhat similar to the inscription on our Bronze Bridle. So the horse bridle probably left Damascus through Assyrian conquest. But how did it get to the Aegean?

Facts: 1) From the end of the 8th century "oriental" objects are found most commonly in temples & relatively rarely in settlements & burials; 2) "oriental" objects are most commonly associated with temples dedicated to Hera, Apollo, Artemis & to a lesser extent Athena; 3) these sanctuaries are often on the borders of city territories or develop into pan-hellenic centers; 4) "oriental" objects come from many different parts of the Near East; 5) the most common objects are bowls & cauldrons with animal heads attached to the rim, these may have been used in rituals as well as being offerings to the

god or goddess; rarer finds such as our horse bridle are usually older than the context in which they are used.

Based on the initial publication of our bridle, in which the text was mistranslated to suggest that it may have actually been sent directly by Hazael to Samos, some scholars have suggested the Near Eastern rulers may have made offerings directly to Greek deities in these temples. Herodotus indicated that both Lydian & Late Egyptian kings did make offerings at Greek temples. Finds from the Temple of Hera at Samos show that over half of the non-local offerings originated from the Near East. However, they came from such diverse locations that it seems unlikely that individual Near Eastern rulers were sending them.

Did Phoenician traders make these dedications as they sailed through the Aegean on trading missions? Mobile traders may explain how certain objects reached the Aegean. We also know there was considerable movement of precious objects within the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrian king took in booty & tribute, & redistributed it as gifts to provincial officials & important dignitaries. So things flowed in & out of Assyria at this time, & perhaps our bronze bridle made the transition from gift to commodity after passing back to the coastal Levant. Yet the consistency of the Near Eastern objects in Greek temples does not match the randomness suggested by the dedications of passing sailors.

It has also been suggested that aristocratic Greeks shifted the focus of their social competition from individual displays of elaborate burials to communal displays of elaborate temple offerings, after the emergence of the "polis" & its emphasis on community membership, as well as the important role that temples on the borders of city-territories played in defining membership within a particular "polis" community. Certainly, Near Eastern objects formed a general category of luxurious goods, the dedication of which helped to reinforce the leadership of aristocrats within the early "polis".

However, the selection of objects still seems too specialized to simply represent the possessions of wealthy Greeks. Furthermore, the general absence of comparable Near Eastern objects in burials & settlements suggests that the temple offerings were something special. So while the offerings may have been made by aristocratic Greeks to strengthen their position in the new "polis", the objects were not selected randomly but rather for their propriety as religious objects.

Clearly, our bronze bridle was not offered to Hera because it was a functioning object. It had already been separated from its cheek pieces & could not have been put on a horse. But perhaps there is something in the iconography of this piece that would have made it appropriate to Hera. It has been argued recently that Hera of the *Iliad* & early Archaic Greece, was not quite the wife & mother goddess of classical Greece. Iconographically she is connected with the "mistress of the animals" motif & occurs frequently with lions. Furthermore, in the *Iliad* she appears as a vengeful savage goddess. As Zeus states to Hera (4.31-36) "If you could pass through its gates & high ramparts & could eat raw Priam, his sons & all of Troy besides, then, then only might you heal completely your anger." Consume raw-flesh in anger is associated with Astarte & the Egyptian goddess Hathor,

with whom she is often equated. Furthermore, by the Iron Age, Astarte seems to have been defined as the wife of Ba'al the storm god of Syria & Phoenicia, parallel with Hera, the wife of the Greek storm god Zeus. So Astarte offers a good analogy for Hera & hence her imagery would have made a very suitable offering.

This implies that Late Geometric & early Archaic Greeks had an intimate knowledge of Near Eastern images & mythology. The beautiful things from the east not only played an important role as generic symbols of wealth & status, they were also important for the specific exotic knowledge they both symbolized & contained. These images & ideas were incorporated into & helped develop the ways in which the Greeks understood & represented their world. At the same time these ideas were not merely imitated, but actively selected & developed.