

Patryk Skupniewicz

<https://doi.org/10.26485/AAL/2024/70/4>

## REMARKS ON THE GESTURE OF DARIUS ON ALEXANDER MOSAIC FROM POMPEI

**ABSTRACT** The Alexander Mosaic from Pompeii is one of the icons of the Hellenistic art in Italian rendering. Theatrical gesture of the defeated Persian king has been approached in literature from different angles however always assuming originality of artistic transmission. Current paper offers a different view situating the gesture within visual conventions, attempting to contextualise it within the frames of common visual semiotics. The gesture can be derived from the Neo-Assyrian depictions of the defeated enemies asking for mercy and possibly surrendering to the victors. Similar convention continued in Achaemenid art and is safe to assume that from there it was adopted in Hellenistic visual communication. It is possible that the Sasanian depictions continue to employ the same convention. Association between the artistic model and actual battle-field custom, even is not confirmed otherwise, is likely as presentation of an unarmed right hand seems clear mark of defencelessness, a basic condition of surrender.

**Key words:** Alexander Macedon, Darius, Mosaic, Pompeii, Hellenistic art, The gesture of Persian king, visual communication

**ABSTRAKT** Mozaika Aleksandra z Pompei stanowi chyba najbardziej rozpoznawalne dzieło sztuki hellenistycznej, nawet jeśli dotarło do nas w italskiej wersji. Teatralny gest pokonanego króla perskiego był rozpatrywany w literaturze fachowej z kilku perspektyw, zawsze jednak zakładających oryginalność artystycznego przekazu. Niniejszy artykuł proponuje odmienne podejście, sytuując ów gest w zbiorze konwencji wizualnych, usiłując też nadać mu kontekst wewnątrz wspólnych ram semiotycznych. Gest można wywodzić z przedstawień pokonywanych wrogów, błagających o litość lub poddających się, w ikonografii neo-asyryjskiej. Podobna konwencja trwała w sztuce achemenidzkiej i wolno przypuszczać, że stamtąd została zaadoptowana w sztuce hellenistycznej. Możliwe również, że przedstawienia sasanidzkie stosują tę samą konwencję. Związek pomiędzy konwencją artystyczną a obyczajem wojennym, nawet jeśli nie został inaczej potwierdzony, wydaje się bardzo prawdopodobny gdyż uniesienie nieuzbrojonej prawicy stanowi oznakę bezbronności a ta jest podstawowym warunkiem poddania się, wobec niemożności kontynuowania walki.

The Alexander mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii is one of the best recognized works of antiquity. It is a well-known object, therefore not requiring a separate presentation (Fig.1).<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that research to date on this brilliant monument, for the most part, seems to have focused on non-specific issues, such as questions regarding the author of the original painting of which the Mosaic is supposed to be a copy, the date of its creation, the patron or commissioner of

the original painting, or which of Alexander's battles was depicted, or to whom the spears constituting the dense diagonal rhythm in the background, further dynamizing the entire composition, belonged. These questions, posed often enough, have not lived to see unanswerable answers. As it seems, the otherwise important questions of equipment and clothing are the least debated, although even in the case of the interpretation of the material culture relics depicted in the Mosaic, there is not a complete consensus among researchers. The method of interpreting the material culture relics depicted in the Mosaic is not fully consensual<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Cohen 1997, Polanski 2002, pp.171-192; Andrae 1999, pp.38-52; Andrae 2003, pp.62-77; Dunbabin 199, pp.38-52; Bernhard 1980, pp.462-477; Havelock 1972, pp.221-224; Boardman 199, pp.253-257; Palagagagia 2015, pp.8-9.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Cohen 1997, pp. 51-142; Polanski 2002, pp. 171-192.



Fig. 1. Mosaic of Alexander from the House of Faun from Pompeii.  
Public domain – Berthold Werner

It seems that the method of hastily combining art with the preserved literary text, i.e. immediately combining non-specific categories of sources, has also failed with regard to the Alexander Mosaic. This state of affairs may be due to the relative poverty of written sources, but it seems rather that the primary problem is the great predominance in the discourse on the work in question, of reflections related to classical philology, archaeology or ancient history over art history. The natural result of this state of affairs is a preference for posing questions from non-artistic fields, or even treating the Mosaic more, as a source (one of the sources?), than as an object of study itself.<sup>3</sup> Placing the work in a sequence of iconographic formulas is an attempt to restore the proper context, moving away from the dominant perspective of the viewer and closer to the “image building” perspective.

Unfortunately, the perspective of the actual creator, which must include such technical issues

as choices of composition, formal means or fixed solutions of scene construction, must be considered unavailable. Nevertheless, it should be noted the dependence of artists on visual traditions, the tendency to use tried-and-true and recognisable solutions, which we may consider unoriginal nowadays, and yet it should be remembered that in none of the eras did artists function in an aesthetic vacuum and educated formulas always constituted a proper point of reference. At the same time, it should be noted that the interpretation of the content that will be formulated as a result of formal observations does not aspire to definiteness, it is a “by-product” of the analysis of visual formulas, unless it is supported by a proper inscription.

So far, Mosaic studies seem focused on the question of what the observer perceives rather than what is presented. Such a perspective is, of course, justified, not only by tradition going back to Philostratus the Younger, but by the natural fact that the observer is the subject of the act of observation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the observer necessarily uses a set of his own experiences and knowledge, generally anachronistic to the works of antiquity. The search for a related observer in the writings of antiquity is a non-specific method that would have to be considered as belonging to the phase of iconological interpretation, often bypassing the pre-iconographic and iconographic phases.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, 1997, pp. 51-142; Polanski 2002, pp. 171-192; Höschler 2003, pp. 1-17; Sekunda 1984; Sekunda, 1992; Sekunda 2001 pp. 13-41; Jedraszak 2010, pp. 4-9; Markle, 1977, pp. 323-33; Markle, 1978, pp. 483-497; Conolly 2000, pp. 103-112; Markle 1982, pp. 86-111; Head 1992, pp. 33-39; Bittner 1985; Z. Żygulski jun. 1998, pp. 61-65; Warry 1995, pp. 70-85; Connolly 1981, pp. 64-74.

The study of gesture in art is not the same as the study of gesture as such.<sup>4</sup> Gesture in art naturally remains gesture, but there is no spontaneity in it. It has been carefully studied and chosen deliberately. Therefore, proposals to look for sympathy for the perishing Persians in the Alexander Mosaics or the slaughtered lions in the Assyrian reliefs must be considered a manifestation of modern sensibilities not grounded in the Hellenistic visual tradition.

It is difficult to determine whether the long-lasting functioning of gestures and compositional formulas in art should be attributed to the reluctance towards novelty of the artists cultivating them, a reluctance resulting from training and implemented schemes, or to the conservatism of investors expecting works that refer to familiar material, accepting only slight deviations from tradition. However, it should be noted at the same time that this conservatism functioned to varying degrees in different periods and cultures. Despite the fact that Hellenism must be considered a period revealing the preference of originality and endowing artists with considerable artistic freedom, and even favouring aesthetic experimentation, it should be noted that most of the examples of scenes of battle or military triumph refer to a small number of formulas, of relatively easy to identify origin, which were commonly reproduced in later periods.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the Mosaic is no exception. It is a work that can be placed in a sequence of conventional formulas. Their repetition discredits consideration of gestural emotional expression only in the context of the personal reception of the Mosaic of a viewer, followed with the immediate transition to working with literary sources. Such an approach does not treat the Mosaic as an expression of a particular “visual language”.

I therefore postulate treating Alexander’s Mosaic as, brilliant in its expression, employment of the fixed formulas. The genius of the Mosaic is proven, among the others, by the difficulty of the scholars in spotting its fixed and repetitive formulas. Nevertheless, Paliadeli recognised that the Mosaic is a modification of a possible Hellenistic original, and one must not speak of a direct copy, due to the unknown degree of interference by the designers of the work.<sup>6</sup> Skupniewicz also wrote about

the repetitive motifs in the Mosaic, finding eschatological content in the work. He divided the fixed visual arrangements into the “compositional formulas” or broader structural themes, and the rules for building individual scenes, which he identified as “icons of violence” as the third fixed element he defined the “props” or minor, repetitive elements of imagery. He considered the composition of the Mosaic to be symmetrically divided into an Alexander part and a Darius part. He referred the Alexander part to the numerous group of depictions of the victorious horseman present in Achaemenid and Greek art of the classical period, which he considered the originating fragments of the Assyrian reliefs<sup>7</sup>. He also pointed out the continuation of the motifs in Roman art and later Iranian iconography, with which he proved the vitality of the conventions used. The Darius part was referred to the chariot kidnapping scenes present in pre-Hellenistic art, raising the argument of the Persian king’s alleged effeminacy in the eyes of the Macedonians. Darius’ gesture would thus express the helplessness of the rape victim (Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> The mosaic would thus confront the part of conquering king, Alexander, with the part of kidnapped king, Darius. However, the author seems to have ignored the possibility of reading the gesture as an established convention. By relating the gesture to the convention of kidnapping, he failed to notice a simpler reading of the scheme, one that does not require combining the battle formula with the mythological formula, but leaving all the elements of the composition within the battle convention.



Fig. 2. The fragment with Darius from the Mosaic of Alexander. Public domain – CC0

<sup>4</sup> I am paraphrasing here a statement of Hölscher: “war in art is art, not war”, which became one of the greatest methodological inspirations in my research, Hölscher 2003. It clearly points that the study of art differs from the study of the phenomena depicted in art.

<sup>5</sup> Pirson 2014; Skupniewicz 2018A; Skupniewicz 2018B; Skupniewicz 2021; Skupniewicz, Lichota 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Paliadeli 2019.

<sup>7</sup> On the funerary context of the Achaemenid Anatolian art see: Šmotlakova 2014.

<sup>8</sup> On the various aspects of rape in the visual tradition: Cohen 2010: 146-160.



It should be noted that in the works most similar in convention, or essentially repeating the layout of the Mosaic, namely the relief from Isernia (Fig. 3)<sup>9</sup> or the similarly similar decorations on the Apulian vase from Ruvo (Fig. 4)<sup>10</sup> and Italo-Megarian bowl from Museum of Fine Arts Boston (Fig. 5),<sup>11</sup> the main fleeing figure on the chariot is also shown with his arm extended towards his pursuer, while the lack of powerful expression that characterizes the Mosaic, the relative poverty of spatial means does not allow for sophisticated interpretations and the search for emotional explanations. It should be noted that even if the Mosaic and its closest related works were copies of the same earlier painting, the complete abandonment of the alleged emotional dimension in the Isernia relief or the Ruvo vase indicates the primordial function of convention. The gesture had to be legible in non-emotional terms, its depiction constituting a sufficiently clear message being a part of visual communication system. A similar scene on a lost Apulian vase from the Hamilton collection shows a figure fleeing on a chariot from a mounted pursuer, who hits him with a lance. In this case, "Darius" does not extend his arm toward the assassin but touches his head with his right hand.<sup>12</sup> A gesture relatively common in depictions of figures dying or being defeated in classical art. The arm extended toward the pursuer was replaced with another gesture which suggests their conventional and similar, enough to allow substitution, meaning. It should also be noted that a similar gesture of an arm thrown above the head is made by a Persian youth on a dead horse being killed by Alexander in the Mosaic. This shows that the representations belong to one common system of visual transmission of content. Thus, the gesture of Darius in the Mosaic should be considered as belonging to a kind of rhetoric. The greatness of the Mosaic as a work of art is confirmed by the fact that, as a result of the mastery of the performance, the gesture, without losing its peculiar decorum, remaining within the semantic convention, seems to carry more than the content defined by the sign.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that the motif of a rider with a spear pursuing figures on a chariot can be found on an Achaemenid Anatolian seals, where

a warrior in typical Achaemenid costume attacks "Scythians" riding on a chariot. The affinity of this scene with the Mosaic has already been pointed out by Boardman (Fig. 6).<sup>14</sup> The chariot, as a vehicle of honor, being a designator of power and authority, is not an obvious attribute of the defeated figure. It might mark the victory over the high status opponent however it might be a development of the earlier visual traditions. Iconography since the Bronze Age, associates figures on chariots with heroic victory, as can be seen, in the Achaemenid context, on a cylinder seal with a scene of a heroic encounter with a lion from the British Museum, or on a painting from Tatarli,<sup>15</sup> where the chariot is not used in battle, but stands behind the main victorious figure. It should be noted that on the seal with the rider attacking the Scythians on a chariot, the discussed gesture of the arm extended towards the pursuer is not depicted, but nevertheless it indicates an affinity with Achaemenid art, where, in turn, the gesture of the arm extended towards the pursuer is also attested. Examples include an Anatolian seal with a scene of a Persian horseman's pursuit, wielding a spear, behind two "Scythians" from the Hermitage, or a fragment of a seal impression from Dascylium, and a battle scene on a pectoral in the Miho Museum collection (Fig. 7), the origin of which is unknown, however, the details of the furnishings coincide with Anatolian iconography, where an armored horseman with a bow is shown following a horseman in Scythian costume, who extends one hand towards his pursuer, while in the other he holds a bow raised upwards.<sup>16</sup>

There are known instances of the use of the gesture in question in Achaemenid sigillography, the context of a battle on foot, as in an imprint from the Louvre collection,<sup>17</sup> or Persepolis.<sup>18</sup> More difficult to interpret is the image from a cylinder seal from the Aylesbury County Museum,<sup>19</sup> where it may be about a defensive action. Similarly, on a seal from the British Museum,<sup>20</sup> one of the defeated opponents of a Persian warrior raises his hand upward. It's hard to tell if this is the same gesture. In most cases, the defeated extend their hands toward their pursuers by slightly raising them; in the case of the seal, the hand is clearly

<sup>9</sup> Museo Archeologico, Roma inv. 135.11(18).

<sup>10</sup> Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Naples 81951 (H3220).

<sup>11</sup> Museum of Fine Arts Boston, inv. 99.542.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen 1997.

<sup>13</sup> See the discussion in Cohen 1997: 97-111, 152-161; 169-174.

<sup>14</sup> Boardman 1970/2001: 311, fig. 864; Tuplin 2020: 423-424, 450, fig. 37; Hermitage 375.

<sup>15</sup> Summerer 2007A; Summerer 2007B.

<sup>16</sup> Tuplin 2020.

<sup>17</sup> AO29963, Tuplin 2020, 442.

<sup>18</sup> PES2454, Tuplin, 2020, 444.

<sup>19</sup> AYBCM2003.91.109, Tuplin 2020, 442.

<sup>20</sup> ANE124015=OT114, Tuplin, 2020, 444.

raised upward and slightly toward the pursuer. Despite some difference in form, it is important to note the identical situational context, and the compositional limitation – placing the arm more horizontally would take the place of the winged disk between the figures, and in such a small space, could be interpreted as an active defiance of the victor, or a gesture of resistance.

The source of the gesture of the arm extended toward the pursuing warrior in Achaemenid art appears to be Assyrian iconography where, in battle scenes, opponents fleeing from the victorious Assyrians extend a hand toward them with the thumb touching the tips of the other fingers. In the case of a relief from the northwest palace at Nimrud, a fleeing figure with his hand extended toward his pursuer both the pursuers and the fleeing figure are depicted on chariots (Figs 8-10). Similarly, an Urartian bronze disk depicts a chase scene between chariots, where a figure on a fleeing chariot extends his arms toward his pursuer. These depictions seem to be one of the appropriate sources for the motif in question, linking the gesture to the vehicle.<sup>21</sup>

Considering the above examples, the figure of Darius from Alexander's Mosaic of Pompeii should be placed in a sequence of iconographic patterns that, from the context, should be interpreted as a desperate gesture of the defeated, recognizing his defeat. The gesture may represent a cry for mercy. Perhaps the extension of the empty, unarmed right hand toward the opponent may have signified surrender, the cessation of battle and a plea to spare his life. However, given that on Assyrian reliefs or on the Urartian disk, mercy is never granted,<sup>22</sup> perhaps the gesture is a rhetorical figure, a formula that emphatically points to the defeated. It should also be considered that the refusal to accept surrender is an equally important message. It illustrates resolutely the victors, who fight to the complete destruction of the enemy and do not stop at mere domination or conventionally understood defeat, so they do not take prisoners. The gesture would then have to be interpreted as actually coming from the realities of the battlefield, belonging to the war culture of the Middle East, surrounding the submission to the mercy of the victor, the recognition of being defeated, although the consequence did not have to be the acceptance of surrender at all, and it seems that

the same war culture that developed the gesture in question valued decisiveness and ruthlessness higher than the acceptance of surrender.

In a battle scene on a pectoral from the Miho Museum, a Scythian horseman fleeing from the main character points his right hand toward the pursuing Persian in the gesture in question, while he holds his bow up in his left (Fig. 7).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the pursued charioteer on the Achaemenid Anatolian seal in the British Museum also holds his bow in the air proving inability to inflict damage (Fig. 11). Showing an unarmed right hand is a show of helplessness but raising the weapon upward so that it no longer poses a threat was a gesture of surrender in the Hellenistic period. The alleged misunderstanding of this message led to the slaughter of the Macedonian soldiers attempting to surrender at Kynoskephalai, although we may be dealing with a similar phenomenon to the earlier cases – surrender did not guarantee invulnerability. It is conjectured that the gesture of raising arms in a gesture of surrender may have originated from an earlier tradition and the Scythian rider on the pectoral from the Miho Museum is trying to show his intention to surrender in both ways, which strongly substantiates the interpretation of the gesture of the outstretched hand as recognizing oneself as defeated and being at the mercy of the victor.

The seal with the rider chasing the chariot from the British Museum is in itself an evidence that the motif of the war cart escaping the mounted warrior did exist in Achaemenid iconography and from there could spread to the Hellenistic art (Figs. 3, 5). It is also likely, that the scene of warriors pursuing escaping chariots could be adopted from the Assyrian art (Fig. 8).

Perhaps one can find a relation between the gesture of the hand extended towards the pursuing enemy and the gestures of supplicants in Roman triumphal iconography, as in the relief of Marcus Aurelius, but also in the Sasanian reliefs, where surrendering and pleading for mercy figures extend empty hands towards the oncoming king, who grasps them, thereby accepting the act of surrender. It seems that, although Sasanian triumphal reliefs, unlike "battle" reliefs, do not accentuate the aspect of combat, they nevertheless symbolically represent an extension or elaboration of the symbolic surrender to the mercy of the enemy. While in the Assyrian, Urartian or Achaemenid contexts, lack of mercy and failure to accept surrender were

<sup>21</sup> The chariot in a battle scene on bronze disc. Karlsruhe Badisches Landesmuseum. Inv. No. 89/18. from: Seidl (2004: fig. 74). Bilcan Gökce, Kenan Işık & Hatice Değirmencioglu p. 117; SEIDL iconografie Urartus: 299.

<sup>22</sup> Seidl 2004; Reade 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Moorey 1985; Moorey 1986; Casabonne, Gabrielli 2006; Bernard, Inagaki 2000; Benzel 1996.

regarded as images of a presentation of power, the Sasanians valued acceptance of the enemy's surrender. Perhaps as a restoration of the cosmic status quo, where a Sasanian king is naturally predisposed to rule over other rulers. The British Museum seal mentioned above shows a defeated warrior raising his hand upward, much like the surrendered opponents of Sasanian kings. Perhaps the expected response to the gesture of surrender is the grasping of the offered forearm, symbolically confirming the fact of capture. Such a situation can be seen on the so-called Shapur cameo from the Bibliothèque Nationale, but the logic of the message here is disturbed by the dynamics of the depiction and the fact that the defeated Roman is holding a sword that appears potentially threatening to the Persian horseman on the left. On the other hand, the weapon held in the free hand could be compared to the bows held by the pursued enemies of the victorious Persians on the Miho Museum pectoral (Fig. 7) and the British Museum seal (Fig. 11) and the sword should be interpreted as the raising of the weapon upward in an act of surrender. This does not change the fact that the scene shows a very dynamic confrontation, with little emphasis on the Iranian's superiority, which is a very unusual procedure in Sasanian "icons of violence" or "heroic encounters." Doubts about the ancient provenance of the object have been expressed before, so perhaps the inaccuracies are due to the inability to place the gestures and attitudes in their proper semantic contexts, before the 19th-century engraver who compiled the elements of the two Sasanian reliefs found in Naqš-e Rōstām.<sup>24</sup> Given the above observations, one would expect the Roman to be depicted in flight, or in some other hopeless situation, or in a steady scene of triumph rather than in a violent confrontation.

It should be noted that in Roman iconography, the arm outstretched behind is a sign of success, the gesture marking the victor, whether in battle or hunting. It should be noted, however, that in this context, the head of the depicted figure is facing the viewer, or slightly in the direction of move, so that the outstretched arm should be interpreted as a theatrical emphasis of the feat accomplished. Perhaps the gesture should be referred to the rhetorically raised arm of the orators. However, on Trajan's Column, armoured horsemen pursued by Roman cavalry, most often interpreted as Sarmatians, less often as Parthians, make a similar gesture, but pointing their outstretched arms in the direction

of the ride.<sup>25</sup> The context seems to indicate a kinship between the gesture of the fleeing armoured cavalymen and the gesture of the fleeing Darius in question and the visual tradition it represents. However, the legibility of this affinity is disrupted by the different direction of the gesture itself. The pursued do not extend their arms toward their pursuers, demonstrating the lack of weapons in their hands, therefore the resulting helplessness, but extend their hands in front of them, indicating theatricality or a rhetorical dimension rather than a gesture that could be read on the battlefield. It seems that a reasonable, albeit speculative, explanation would be a misunderstanding of the proper shape of the gesture by the sculptors making the relief, who may have wanted to avoid confusing a gesture of triumph with a gesture of surrender, perhaps described by witnesses to the clash. It should be emphasised that the battle equipment of the same horsemen was also depicted conventionally, rather attempting to reflect the description than making a faithful image from nature. It can be concluded that the sculptors reversed the described gesture of the attempted cavalymen, so that it could not be mistaken for a gesture of triumph.

In the aforementioned article, Paliadeli pointed out compositional inconsistencies within the Mosaic,<sup>26</sup> indicating far-reaching modifications to the assumed original painting that the Mosaicists were said to have copied. The author rightly assumes that the original work could not have deviated from the rules of Hellenistic and Late Classical art, and she also explores the observations of earlier authors regarding the Mosaic, indicating that its Mosaicists creatively modified the designs. The most important conclusion, in the context of discussing the Darius gesture, is that there was an unknown size of space between the "Alexander side" and the "Darius side", and that the alleged original design must have been much more elaborate. To some extent, this undermines Skupniewicz's concept of thematic polarity between the two halves, but the Skupniewicz refers to the shape of the Mosaic itself, an autonomous work, made of stock images/compositional designs available in Hellenistic era. He considers the discussion of its possible originals to be baseless, as there can be no meaningful consideration of the relationship of an existing work of art to non-existent paintings that have not even been described, but only mentioned. So, the Mosaicists still might employ available

<sup>24</sup> Skupniewicz 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Gamber 1964; Pugachenkova 1966.

<sup>26</sup> Paliadeli 2019.

elements of the “visual language” to achieve their desired content.

Paliadeli, focusing on the shape of the hypothetical original makes entirely correct conclusions, which can be strongly supported by the observations of Skupniewicz, who distinguished several compositional principles shaping battle scenes in Hellenistic art.<sup>27</sup> Admittedly, he also included among these compositional principles the “double scene” or “twin scene,” the clearest example of which would be the relief from the long side of the Čan sarcophagus,<sup>28</sup> the Himyarite bronze harness and the early Sassanian triumphal relief from Salmas.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted, however, that the concept of a “twin image” as a confrontation of two polarized scenes, is unknown. The cited examples come exclusively from the territory dominated by Iranian culture, so they may not have found their way into the repertoire of Hellenistic compositional models, and their viability can be explained by the cultivation of Iranian tradition, rather than by borrowing mediated through Hellenistic aesthetics. The repetition of the scenes in Eastern iconography never confronts them with each other, which also emphasises the same direction of movement within the scenes.

Following Paliadeli’s observations, one must agree that the original layout of the work, which the creators of the Mosaic may have been inspired by, corresponded to a compositional model that Skupniewicz defined as “flanked triumph”, i.e. a method of depicting a central duel scene with a heroic victor crushing his enemies flanked either by hosts supporting both sides, as in the case of the epitaph relief from Payava,<sup>30</sup> the tympanum of a Nereid monument from Xanthos,<sup>31</sup> an epitaph from Limyra<sup>32</sup> and a group of Etruscan urns.<sup>33</sup> The scene of victory over the enemy flanked by the arrays or single allies of the main dramatis personae can be found in Achaemenid art of Anatolia, as exemplified by the Greek-Achaemenid seal and the decoration of the wooden tomb structure at

Tatarli.<sup>34</sup> The main fight scene with a lion on the short side of Alexander’s Sarcophagus<sup>35</sup> also includes galloping horsemen, but represents a different formula “victim in the center”, which, although well defined, should be rather treated as an elaborated “icon of violence” or “heroic encounter” than a principle governing placement of the scenes in the pictorial field.

A much more common variation of the “flanking triumph” formula was the flanking of the main scene by battles of minor importance instead of the supporters of the main/central characters. Examples here include battle depictions from the Alexander’s Sarcophagus,<sup>36</sup> scenes on stelae from Bithynia,<sup>37</sup> and a group of Etruscan urns.<sup>38</sup> Obviously, the formula is related to the above-described model of an odd sequence of scenes, where sometimes the central scene acquires a special meaning, which may be due to common genesis or ordinary affinity of formal models.

Applying another of the compositional methods Skupniewicz signaled out, to reconstruct a potential Mosaic prototype, namely “medallions”/“vignettes” or “sacrifice placed in the center”, is impossible. In the case of “medallions”/“vignettes” the scenes would have to be of similar size, meanwhile, given Paliadei’s observations, the scene with Darius’ chariot was “trimmed” to the format of the Mosaic. It seems an obvious consequence of this conclusion that the representation could not have existed in an imaginary vacuum, so it represented some known type, and the most likely would be the motif illustrated above of a horseman pursuing a fleeing chariot. Such a horseman can be seen in relief on a vase by C. Popilus, and to enhance the effect he is accompanied by an infantryman with a round shield. In this case, the fragment becomes consistent with the traditional motif of chariots fleeing from pursuit, with figures extending their arms toward their pursuers, outlined above. The area “lost” between Alexander’s part and Darius’s part, then, would be much larger than the relatively minor shifts proposed by Byvanck

<sup>27</sup> Paliadeli 2019; Skupniewicz 2018A; Skupniewicz 2018B.

<sup>28</sup> Ma 2008; Sevinč, Korpe, Tombul, Rose, Strahan, Kiesewetter, Wallrodt, 2001; Šmotlakova 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Antonini 2005; Antonini, Yule, Robin 2004; Hinz 1965.

<sup>30</sup> Pirson 2014, p.230, plate 34; Ma 2008, p.244, fig. 3; Nefedkin 2006, p.8, fig. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Pirson 2014, pp.229-230.

<sup>32</sup> Pirson 2014, p.235.

<sup>33</sup> Pirson 2014, pp.252-274.

<sup>34</sup> Sumerer 2007, pp. 3-30; Sumerer 2007, pp. 129-156; Šmotlakova 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Havelock 1972, pp. 191-192, figs. 150-152; Boardman 1999, pp. 237-240, fig. 237; Palagia 2015, pp. 8-9; Pirson 2014, pp. 248-349, figs. 40-41.

<sup>36</sup> Havelock 1972, pp. 191-192, figs. 150-152; Boardman 1999, pp. 237-240, fig. 237; Palagia 2015, pp. 8-9; Pirson, 2014, pp. 248-349, figs. 40-41.

<sup>37</sup> Pirson, 2014, p. 236, fig. 25.

<sup>38</sup> Pirson, 2014, pp. 225-274.



and by Andreae.<sup>39</sup> A slight narrowing of the image area could be helpful in transferring the work to a different format, but cutting off the extreme parts would be an easier procedure. Removing the narrow zigzag strip posed the same technical problem as removing one or two figures and the interweaving of threads and their internal reconciliation was not a problem for the creators of the Mosaic. Thus, if Alexander's scene was the center of the picture field, to the right of it would be the depiction of Darius fleeing on a chariot from a pursuing horseman, or a horseman and an infantryman. Since Darius managed to escape the battlefield each time, the pursuit was unsuccessful, so it is neither possible nor right for the Great King to be pursued by Alexander himself. The viewer knows that the pursuer will not reach his goal, so the Macedonian is depicted triumphantly killing the Persian warrior, symbolically triumphing over Persian power, rather than ineffectually pursuing the fleeing ruler. It seems that to the left of Alexander's triumph scene a battle scene with the dominant direction of the action to the left, similarly stretched as Darius' escape, or two minor skirmish scenes must have been placed. If the relief from the C. Popilus vase was to be accepted as a guide an important clue of the large battle composition which included the elements known from the Alexander Mosaic, the scene left to the central triumph of Alexander, would either two "icons of violence": "rider attacking an infantry soldier and "rider attacking an infantryman behind him", or it would be a variation of the "victim in the centre" model. "Victim in the center" is a self-contained scene, including a group consisting of, at least, two hunters (in this case replaced by the warriors), one with a spear or sword, sometimes a horseman, and another, usually with an axe, sometimes a second horseman appears closing the composition on the right. Examples include mosaics from Pella, Alexandria,<sup>40</sup> the lion-hunting relief from the short wall of the Alexander Sarcophagus,<sup>41</sup> the tumulus wall paintings from Alexandrova<sup>42</sup> or the lion-hunting scene, third from the left on the wall painting from Vergina.<sup>43</sup> The formula always includes more

than one victor and victim, so it is multi-figured, inscribed in a horizontal rectangle, simultaneously, but sometimes the scene itself is flanked by two horsemen, as in the case of the lion hunt from Alexander's sarcophagus. At the same time, in Hellenistic art, it seems to be reserved for scenes of fighting beasts, although in the upper part of the plaque with battle depictions from the Orlat, the place of the deer, lion or boar is taken by two horsemen turning around. The rider on the left hits his opponent with a long lance, meanwhile the hurried warrior on the right strikes with an axe, fulfilling the regularities of the Hellenistic art of image construction<sup>44</sup>. However, if the alleged Mosaic prototype were to represent this model, it would represent a surprisingly multifigural work, as this model is mostly applied to scenes with a few at most participants. On top of that, the definitive entrapment of Darius' chariot contradicts the final outcome of the situation, where the king managed to escape. Naturally, the use of such an arrangement cannot be ruled out, but it is much less likely than a "flanked" triumph. It should also be noted that if the original Mosaic were to represent a formula with a "victim in the centre", there would be no need to reconstruct any space between the scene with Alexander and Darius, since the missing part would be to the right of the chariot and would include Macedonian warriors attacking from there. In this way, the scene with Alexander would be assured a central position, with unwavering importance between two battle compositions flanking it heraldically. The "medallions"/"vignettes" would require scenes of equal size with a rather compact format, possible to fit into a circle or square and would not emphasise the importance of the central part. It must be stated however, that, as the relief from M. Popilus vase runs around the vessel, it is difficult to mark exactly the edges of the suspected original as the sculptors put all the effort to connect the scenes and unify the composition. Thus, the reconstruction would remain speculative.

A brief consideration of the composition of the hypothetical Mosaic pattern indicates that originally Darius' gesture would not necessarily have been addressed solely to Alexander, but to another mounted warrior following him. The necessity to introduce a certain ambivalence in the direction of the gesture (after all, Darius must have

<sup>39</sup> Andreae 1959 10-11; Byvanck 1955: 29-30; Pakiadeli 2019: 158.

<sup>40</sup> Dunbabin 1999, pp. 12-15, 22-26; Palagia, 2015, p. 6, fig. 7; Sekunda 2013, pp. 64-66, figs. 3,6, 3,7.

<sup>41</sup> Havelock 1972, pp. 191-192, fig. 150-152; Boardman 1999, pp. 237-240, fig. 237; Palagia 2015, pp. 8-9; Pirson 2014, pp. 248-349, figs. 40-41.

<sup>42</sup> Vassileva 2010, pp. 39-44.

<sup>43</sup> Briant 1991, 211-255; Palagia 2015, pp. 4-7; Brekoulaki 2011, pp. 209-213; Boardman 1999, pp. 192-196.

<sup>44</sup> Nikonorov 1997, vol 2, pp. 17, 75, fig 43; Olbrycht 1999, pp. 204-207, fig 59 a-b, Mode 2006, pp. 419-454; Ilyasov, Rusanov, 1997/98, pp. 107-143; Abdullaev, 1995, pp. 151-162; K. Abdullaev, 1995b pp. 163-180.



simultaneously surrendered directly to the pursuing horseman, as well as to Alexander himself in the center of the pictorial field), which dramatised it considerably and resulted in modern speculations that stem not so much from an analysis of the rhetoric of ancient art, but from an attempt to capture the emotions of the modern viewer of the work. Similarly, it is difficult to say whether the polarisation of the victorious part of Alexander and the fleeing/rescued part of Darius was a conscious effort by the creators of the Mosaic, whereby they added a new dimension to familiar motifs, or whether it was the result of a practical procedure aimed at placing the most dynamic and significant passages and fitting them into a preset format. Naturally, since, as indicated above, the Mosaic motifs were circulating, their compilation did not necessarily result from copying a single work. It seems that the idea of copying presupposes as little interference as possible by the performers, so the freedom with which the creators of the Mosaic used familiar motifs would be indicative of the fact that they made compilations, from one or more sources.



Fig. 3. Hellenistic limestone relief from Isernia. Isernia, Museo Archeologico. inv 135 11(18). Drawing – Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 4. Apulian amphora from Ruvo. Naples Museo Nazionale Archeologico, inv 81951 (H3220)). Drawing – Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 5. Italo-Megarian clay bowl. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, inv. 99.542. Drawing – Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 6. Seal with a Persian warrior chasing two "Scythians". Hermitage Museum, inv. 375. Drawing – Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 7. Miho Museum pectoral. No inv. number in catalogue. Drawing – Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 8. Assyrian relief depicting battle of Til-Yuba. British Museum 1851,0902.8.a. Drawing – Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 9. Assyrian relief depicting battle of Til-Tuba.  
British Museum 1851,0902.8.c.  
Drawing – Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 10. Assyrian relief depicting battle of Til-Tuba,  
riders 1851,0902.8.b.  
Drawing – Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 11. Anatolian seal with the chariot chase. British  
Museum GR 1911.4-4-5.1.  
Drawing – Patryk Skupniewicz

## Bibliography

- Abdullaev K., 1995a. *Nomadism in Central Asia. The Archaeological Evidence (2nd-1st Centuries B.C.)*. In Invernizzi A. (ed.) *In the Land of Gryphons: Papers on Central Asian Archaeology in Antiquity*, Firenze: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 151-161.
- Abdullaev K., 1995b. *Armour of Ancient Bactria*. In Invernizzi A. (ed.) *In the Land of Gryphons: Papers on Central Asian Archaeology in Antiquity*, Firenze: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 163-180.
- Andreae, B. 1977. *Das Alexandermosaik aus Pompeji*. Recklinghausen: Aurel Bongers.
- Antonini S., 2005. *A Himyarite Artifact in Parthian-Sasanian Style*. In *Scritti in onore di Giovanni M. D'Erme. Vol. 1*, edited by Michele Bernardini and Natalia L. Tornesello, 1-15. Napoli: Napoli Univ. degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale.
- Antonini S., Yule P., Robin C.J. 2004. *Le harnachement du cheval d'un Haşbahide, découvert dans une tombe de Zafār*. Arabia, 2: 194-204.
- Arnheim R. 1978. *Sztuka i percepcja wzrokowa. Psychologia twórczego oka*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe.
- Baughan E.P. 2008. 'Persian Riders in Lydia? The painted frieze of the Aktepe tomb kline' *Bollettino di Archeologia on-line*, Volume special G/G1/3, [www.archeologia.beniculturali.it/pages/pubblicazioni.html](http://www.archeologia.beniculturali.it/pages/pubblicazioni.html), 24-36.
- Benzel K., 1996. *Torque with a pectoral depicting a battle*. In O'Neil J.P. (ed.) *Ancient Art from Shumei Collection*, New York.
- Bernard P. 1964. *Une pièce d'armure perse sur un monument lycien*, Syria 41, 195-212.
- Bernard P, Inagaki H., 2000. *Un torque achéménide avec une inscription grecque au musée Miho (Japon)*. Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres 4, 1371-1437.
- Boardman J., 1971/2001. *Greek Gems and Fingerrings. Early Bronze Age to Late Classical*, London.
- Boardman J. 1976. *Greek and Persian Glyptic in Anatolia and Beyond*, Revue Archéologique, Nouvelle Série, Fasc. 1, Études sur les relations entre Grèce et Anatolie offertes à Pierre Demargne, 1, 45-54.
- Boardman J. 2000. *Persia and the West. An Archaeological Investigation of the Genesis of Achaemenid Art*, London.
- Brentjes B. 1990. *Zu den Reiterbildern von Kurgan-Tepe*. Iranica Antiqua, vol. XXV. 173-182.

- Briant P. 2020. On "Achaemenid impact" in Anatolia. In A.P. (ed.) *Dahlén Achaemenid Anatolia: Persian Presence and Impact in the Western Satrapies 546-330 BC. Proceedings of an International Symposium at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 7-8 September 2017, Boreas 37*, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, 9-36.
- Brzezinski R., Mielczarek M. 2002. *The Sarmatians 600 BC-AD 450*, Oxford: Osprey.
- Casabone O. Gabrielli M., 2006. *Brèves remarques sur un torque achéménide au musée Miho (Japon)*, Colloquium Anatolicum 5, 85-90.
- Byvanck, A.W. 1955. *La bataille d'Alexandre*. *BaBesch* 30: 28-34.
- Casabone O. Gabrielli M., 2007. *A Note on Persian Armours*. In Delemen I. (red.) *The Achaemenid Impact on Local Populations and Cultures in Anatolia*, Istanbul, 265-270.
- Cohen A., 1997. *The Alexander Mosaic. Stories of Victory and Defeat*, Cambridge.
- Gamber von O., 1964. *Dakische und Sarmatische Waffen auf den Reliefs der Traianssäule*. *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen sammlungen in wien* 60 (XXIV), 7-34.
- Gorelik M.V., 1982. *Zaščitnoe voorużenie persov i mid'an achemenidskogo vremeni*. *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii* 3(161), 90-106.
- Havelock, C.M. 1972. *Sztuka Hellenistyczna*, Warszawa.
- Head D. 1992. *The Achaemenid Persian Army*, Stockport.
- Hinz, W. 1965. *Das sassanidische Felsrelief von Salmās*, *Iranica Antiqua* 5, 148-160.
- Hölscher, T. 2003. *Images of War in Greece and Rome: Between Military Practice, Public Memory and Cultural Symbolism*, *Journal of Roman Studies* 93, 1-17.
- Ilyasov J.Ya., Rusanov D.V. 1997/98. *A Study on the Bone Plates from Orlat*. *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 5. 107-159.
- Ma J., 2008. *Mysians on the Çan Sarcophagus? Ethnicity and Domination in Achaemenid Military Art*, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 57/ 3, 243-254.
- Moorey P.R.S., 1985. *The Iranian Contribution to Achaemenid Material Culture*, Iran. *Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* XXIII, 21-38.
- Moorey P.R.S., 1998. *Material Aspects of Achaemenid Polychrome Decoration and Jewellery*, *Iranica Antiqua* XXXIII, 155-171.
- Nikonorov V. P. 1997. *Armies of Bactria*, vol 1-2, Stockport: Montvert.
- Nikonorov V.P. 2020. *Sasanidskiye boevye reliefy i proishozhdeniye temu konnoy dueli na pikah v proklamativnom iskusstve doislamskogo Irana*, *Arheologicheskie Vesti* 29, 215-238.
- Nikonorov V.P., Hudyakov Yu.S. 1999. *Izobrazheniya voynov iz orlatzkogo mogilnika*. In O.A. Mytko (ed.), *Evraziya. Kulturnoe nasledye drevnih civilizatsiy*, Novosibirsk: Novosibirskiy Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 141-156.
- Olbrych M.J. 1999. *Seleucydzi i Kultura Ich Epoki*. In Wolski J. *Dzieje i Upadek Imperium Seleucydów*. Kraków: Enigma Press. 136-208.
- Olbrycht M.J., 2013. *Konnica wielkiego króla. Uwagi na temat taktyki jazdy irańskiej w epoce Achemenidów*. In R. Kulesza, M. Stępien, E. Szabat, M. Daszuta (eds.) *Świat starożytny. Państwo i społeczeństwo*, Warszawa, 50-59.
- Paliadeli, C. 2019. *Alexander Mosaic and Its Lost Original. A Working Hypothesis*, *Peri Graphikes. Pittori, tecniche, trattati, contesti tra testimonianze e ricezione*, Adornato G., Falaaschi E., Poggio A. (eds.). Milano: LED, 151-172.
- Pirson F. 2014. *Ansichten des Krieges. Kampfreiefs klassischer und hellenistischer Zeit im Kulturvergleich*, Wiesbaden: Dr Ludwig Reichert.
- Polański T., 2002. *Ancient Greek Orientalist Painters. The Literary Evidence*, Kraków.
- Pugachenkova G.A. 1966. *O pantsirnom voorużenii parfyanskogo i baktrijskogo voynstva*. *Vestnik Drevney Istorii* 2, 27-43.
- Pugachenkova G.A. 1987. *Obraz Kangyuytsa v sogdiyskom iskusstve i iz otkrytiy Uzbekistanskoy iskusstvovedcheskoy ekspeditsii*. In Pugachenkova G.A. (ed.) *Iz hudozhestvennoy sokrovishchitsy Srednego Vostoka*, Tashkent: Izdatelstvo Literatury i Iskusstva. Accessed online: <http://kronk.spb.ru/library/pugachenkova-ga-1987-5.htm> (14/02/2021).
- Reade J.E. 2018. *The Assyrian Royal Hunt*. In Brerenton G. (ed.), *The BP exhibition. I am Ashurbanipal king of the world, king of Assyria*. London: Thames and Hudson, 52-79.
- Ritter N.C. 2010. *Die altorientalischen Traditionen der sasanidischen Glyptik. Form-Gebrauch-Ikonographie*, Wien: LIT, Berlin.
- Sekunda N. 1988. *Achaemenid Military Terminology*. *AMI*, 21: 69-77.
- Sekunda, N.V., 1992. *The Persian Army 560-330 BC*, Oxford.
- Sevinč N., Korpe R., Tombul M., Rose C.B., Strahan D., Kiesewetter H., Wallrodt J. 2001. *New Painted Graeco-Persian Sarcophagus from Qan*. *Studia Troica* 11, pp. 383-420.



- Skupniewicz P.N. 2018A. *Mozaika Aleksandra Wielkiego i hellenistyczne ikony przemocy*, Istorija Religij Ukrainy Vol 28, 3-16.
- Skupniewicz P.N. 2018B. *Hellenistyczne estetyczne modele ujmowania walki konnej a Mozaika Aleksandra w kontekście eschatologicznym. Studium formalne*. In Minta-Tworzowska D. (ed.), *Estetyka w archeologii. Obrazowanie w pradziejach i starożytności*, Gdańsk: Polska Akademia Nauk, Muzeum Archeologiczne w Gdańsku, 317-342.
- Skupniewicz P.N., 2021. *Mounted Combat Scenes on the Bronze Plaque from Sana'a, Amazonomachia in Yemen*, *Persica Antiqua*, 69-85.
- Skupniewicz P.N., 2022. *Some Formal Remarks on "Shapur Cameo" and a Few Points on Practical Methodology in Researching Sasanian Iconography*, *Persica Antiqua I*: 75-99.
- Skupniewicz P.N., Lichota M. 2017. *Diadem on the head from Khalchayan battle scene and possible reconstruction of the composition*. In Maksymiuk K., Karamian G. (eds.) *Crowns, hats, turbans and helmets. The headgear in Iranian history. Vol. 1. Pre-Islamic Period*, Siedlce, 69-95.
- Summerer L., 2007. *From Tatarli to Munich: The Recovery of a Painted Wooden Tomb Chamber in Phrygia*. In Delemen I. (ed.), *The Achaemenid Impact on Local Populations and Cultures in Anatolia*, Istanbul, 129-156.
- Summerer L., 2007b. *Picturing Persian Victory: The Painted Battle Scene on the Munich Wood*, *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia* 13, 3-30.
- Šmotlakova K., 2014. *Iconographical Themes on Funerary Monuments in Achaemenid Anatolia*. In Hrnčiarik (ed.) *Turkey through the Eyes of Classical Archaeologists. 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of cooperation between Trnava University and Turkish Universities*, Trnava, 38-49.
- Tuplin C. 2020. *Sigillography and Soldiers: Cataloguing Military Activity on Achaemenid Period Seals*. In E. Dusinger, M. Garrison (eds.), *The Art of Empire in Achaemenid Persia. Festschrift in honor of Margaret Cool Root*, Leiden.

Patryk Skupniewicz  
 ORCID 0000-0002-8119-5449  
 Uniwersytet Przyrodniczo Humanistyczny  
 w Siedlcach  
 varaz777@yahoo.com