

DECONTEXTUALIZATION AND THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINS: A PERSIAN
ARCHITECTURAL FRAGMENT IN THE ACKLAND ART MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT

Lyla Halsted: Decontextualization and the Search for Origins: A Persian Architectural Fragment
in the Ackland Art Museum
(Under the direction of Glaire Anderson)

The Ackland Museum in Chapel Hill, North Carolina acquired a stone fragment from Mr. and Mrs. Osbourne Hauge in 1998. This piece has been referred to since as a “Stone Balustrade with Animal and Vegetal Decoration” by the museum. The museum catalogue emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of the piece rather than its nature as an architectural fragment due to a lack of information about the object’s origins. In order to move beyond the lost provenance of the object, I will analyze its relation to similar fragments in the Metropolitan Museum, Cleveland Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago and the David Collection in Copenhagen. I will incorporate fragments from the Hegmataneh Hill Museum (in Hamadan, Iran) in order to expand the corpus of known fragments beyond Euro-American collections. This thesis will examine these objects in relation to their current contexts and as a network of pieces rather than decontextualized fragments.

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Introduction

The 1979 Iranian Revolution generated a rupture in diplomatic relations between Iran and much of the world, especially the United States. However, foreign policy was not the only field irrevocably changed by the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Along with the abrupt break in relations between Iran and the U.S. came the sudden rupture of scholarly discourse between the two nations. In the field of Islamic art, the study of Persian architecture in situ became dangerous if not impossible for Euro-American scholars, leaving not only countless sites outside the realm of close study, but also isolating Persian architectural fragments in American museum collections. These objects, separated from potential sites of origin and suddenly impossible to study beyond the theoretical realm of previous scholarship, were either moved into storage or displayed with incomplete labels, not to be revisited by scholars who could no longer engage actively with the Persian sites from which they came.

The story of one of these fragments centers on the Ackland Art Museum in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, which acquired a Persian stone fragment as a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Osbourne Hauge in 1998. This piece has been referred to since as a “Stone Balustrade with Animal and Vegetal Decoration” by the Ackland Museum. All mention of the object in exhibition materials emphasizes the physical description and aesthetic appeal of the fragment rather than its purpose or its nature as an architectural fragment, presumably due to a lack of information about the object’s creation and functionality. The provenance of this object prior to its purchase in 1966 by the Hagues from the Hage Baba Gallery in Tehran, Iran is unknown.¹ Even the use of the term

¹ Letter, Mr. and Mrs. Osbourne Hauge to Ackland Museum, 1998, curatorial files, Ackland Museum of Art, Chapel Hill.

“balustrade” in the label, the only signifier of the object’s architectural context, is not substantiated by any information about its function, but rather attributed to the object retroactively in order to classify it in the museum collection. In the absence of information about a precise origin, date, architectural context or purpose, how can one approach this object? As a piece currently on display in the Ackland galleries of “Art from Southern and Western Asia,” how has this object been analyzed and what connotations does it evoke in this environment? Are there comparable objects still in situ and how are comparanda displayed and interpreted in other contexts? How might similar fragments in other museum collections help scholars generate a productive discourse around the Ackland piece which presents it, not as a unique masterpiece, but as part of a group of objects? In the absence of knowable origins, how can these objects take on meaning beyond their aesthetic value?

The Ackland fragment is not the only piece of its kind; there are similar fragments in the Metropolitan Museum, Cleveland Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago and the David Collection in Copenhagen. In addition to images of these objects, I will examine the Ackland fragment itself, Gigapans (gigapixel panorama images which utilize billions of pixels to produce high definition detail) of its surface, and the epigraphy of the Metropolitan fragments. The Ackland Museum curatorial files related to the object include letters to and from the museum staff, the Hauges, and curators at other institutions that detail the acquisition of the object and the attributions that were subsequently made in relation to its current label. The curatorial files record the Ackland Museum’s initial contact with the object and document how it came to be situated within the Museum’s collection. I will also draw from several personal interviews conducted with scholars and curators in Iran during my fieldwork in Tehran and Hamadan in the summer of 2015 in order to situate the objects not only in American and European scholarly

discourse, but in Iranian architectural history as well. Finally, I will analyze similar fragments at the Hegmataneh Museum in Hamadan.

The earliest scholarship to examine these objects centers on the dynastic classifications of the Metropolitan and Cleveland fragments. Howard Hollis, in “An Iranian Balustrade,” classifies the Cleveland fragments as representing Mongol court culture in its hunting scenes.² M.S. Dimand, in *A Handbook of Muhammadan Art*, attributes the Metropolitan fragments to the 14th century Il Khanid period and translates its epigraphy. He claims that the fragments “are said to come from Hamadan,” a small city in Western Iran.³ Later scholars like Eva Baer and Scott Redford have mentioned these fragments in their studies of Seljuk stone and stucco carving of the 13th century.⁴

Hollis, Dimand, Baer and Redford appear to be the only scholars to have published work on these objects. Their claims about these fragments are all rooted in a single methodology; they aim to situate the objects in relation to monolithic chronological and dynastic categories. Hollis classifies the Metropolitan fragments as “Mongol.” What is at stake if the fragment is indeed “Mongol;” what do these classifications mean to a museum visitor? Furthermore, the attributions used to dynastically classify these objects are contradictory. Hollis and Redford classify the same object using two very different signifiers; can we determine whether the Cleveland fragment is really Mongol or Seljuk? What does this contradiction say about the arbitrary nature of these essentializing terms in light of the fact that the dates and precise original locations of the objects cannot be verified?

² Howard Hollis, “An Iranian Balustrade,” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 26.2 (Feb, 1939): 19.

³ M.S. Dimand, *A Handbook of Muhammadan Art*, (New York: Hartsdale House, 1947), 99-100.

⁴ Eva Baer, “Group of Seljuq Figural Bas Reliefs,” *Oriens*, 20 (1967); Scott Redford, “Thirteenth Century Rum Seljuq Palaces and Palace Imagery,” *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993), 219.

The only fragments featured in Euro-American scholarship are those of the Metropolitan and Cleveland Museums. The Hegmataneh fragments, presumably unknown to Hollis, Dimand, Baer and Redford, are placed here in conversation with the Euro-American fragments for the first time. Since they have yet to be studied in Euro-American scholarship, these objects contribute new elements of iconography and style that complement and inform an analysis of the previously known fragments. As the only ones to be displayed as a group, the Hegmataneh fragments take on a different character than those displayed as solitary masterpieces in other museum collections. Furthermore, they expand the corpus of known fragments beyond the boundaries of Euro-American museum collections.

In the absence of more scholarship surrounding this group of fragments, and the impossibility of locating their precise original locations, my primary methodological framework consists of a comparative study of the architectural fragments themselves as well as their display by their respective museums. My analysis relies primarily on the methodological framework of Barry Flood in *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval Hindu-Muslim Encounter*⁵. In this work, Flood applies James Clifford's notion of "routes not roots" (from *Routes: Travel and translation in the 20th century*) to material culture and architecture in order to underline the ways in which networks and permeable cultural boundaries inform objects. It is Flood's willingness to question the monolithic nature of "origins" which makes applying his frameworks here so useful. Flood's rejection of hybridity and the possibility of monolithic origins, like Clifford's earlier work, anchors my argument against dynastic attribution as the primary approach to these objects. I will also utilize Eva-Maria Troelenberg's rejection of aesthetic displays of Islamic art (in "Regarding the Exhibition: the Munich exhibition

⁵ Finbarr Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material culture and medieval Hindu-Muslim encounter*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3-4. ; James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 6.

Masterpieces of Muhammeden Art (1910) and its scholarly position”) in conjunction with Stefan Weber’s argument for a comparative, historical and cultural approach to contextualizing objects on display (in “A Concert of Things: Thoughts on objects of Islamic Art in the Museum Context.”)⁶

This thesis will therefore examine in tandem seven large fragments (and several smaller, damaged pieces) not in relation to their supposed common origins, as posited by previous Anglo-Persephone scholarship, but rather in relation to their current contexts and as a group of objects rather than as decontextualized, scattered fragments. The Ackland fragment will thus be re-initiated into a group of related pieces related by strong iconographical and stylistic similarities. Although its original position in situ cannot be reconstructed, the object can take on alternative narratives when considered alongside the related fragments, which produces a different conception of architectural context in the absence of known origins. The aim of this thesis is to utilize the contemporary display and recent acquisition history of the Ackland fragment and its comparanda to foreground their position within a group of similar objects rather than as fragments valued primarily for their aesthetic appeal and mysterious historical origins.

⁶ Eva-Maria Troelenberg, “Regarding the Exhibition: the Munich exhibition *Masterpieces of Muhammeden Art (1910)* and its scholarly position,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June, 2012): 6. ; Stefan Weber, “A Concert of Things: Thoughts on objects of Islamic Art in the Museum Context,” *In Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf, (London: Saqi Books), 2012.

Chapter 1: Atop a Pedestal in the Ackland Museum

Of the objects in the Ackland Museum's collection of Islamic art, the stone architectural fragment in the gallery dedicated to "Art from Southern and Western Asia" is one of the most prominently displayed objects (Figure 1). A sandstone rectangular piece with incised designs on both sides, the fragment's ornamentation extends upwards at one end, terminating in a raised square projection. On closer examination of the object itself, one notices that the two opposite sides of the fragment are decorated with different designs. On one side, a large eight-pointed star-like motif is surrounded by looping arabesques and a quadruped kneeling in the bottom right corner (Figure 2). The end of the fragment is decorated on either side by a large flower with sixteen petals in the square vertical projections. Below these flowers are twin lions perched atop columns, rendered so that their bodies are visible from the sides and their faces seen when approaching the object from its end. The side opposite the star-like design is covered with animal figures including two lions pouncing on a bull beneath what appear to be two dogs chasing a hare (Figure 3). The designs are carved in relatively high relief, especially around the flowers and lion figures.

The fragment is a focal point of the permanent collection, yet upon closer examination of the object and its label the viewer is left with many unanswered questions. The artist, patron, city of origin, exact date, and precise function of the fragment are unknown. While this lack of information about a centuries old architectural fragment is not uncommon, the nature of this piece as a mysteriously isolated architectural element complicates the viewing experience further. It is a fragment of a building, yet the building itself is either no longer extant or remains

unknown, making the fragment not only of unclear origin, but also unknown function. Visiting the Ackland and encountering this piece, one might assume it to be an isolated, anomalous object, floating alone in a sea of inconclusive attributions and unknown facts. Given just this fragment to consider, one might never imagine the complex system of objects to which this piece belongs.

To begin an analysis of the object's current presentation, it is necessary to contemplate the Ackland's classification of the piece. The term "balustrade" is used in every mention of the object in the Ackland curatorial files. In fact, the word "balustrade" has been this object's classification since its entrance into the United States.⁷ It is unclear how much information the Iranian gallery owner who sold the Hauges the piece possessed about the object, or if he chose the word "balustrade" to describe it. The Hauges used the term in their letters to the Ackland, and it has since been the primary classification of the object. It is important to note, however, that this classification of the object as a fragment from a railing is based on comparison to similar objects and not on any definitive knowledge about its function or origin.⁸ Considering that no such object remains in situ in its original position and that the accuracy of this term cannot be verified, I will refer to the object as an architectural fragment rather than a balustrade.

Located in a corner of the Ackland dedicated to Islamic art objects, the fragment is joined by objects like a mosque lamp and lintel (Figure 4). The fragment's pedestal stands in the center of the floor, allowing the piece to be viewed from all sides, highlighting its relief sculpture. There are many other pieces on pedestals throughout the collection, notably figural sculptures. Given its place among so many sculptures in this gallery, it is worth noting that the curatorial

⁷ A balustrade, as defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary, is a decorative railing, usually on a balcony, terrace or staircase.

⁸ Letter, Carol Gillham to Sahar Amer, 1998, curatorial files, Ackland Museum of Art, Chapel Hill.

files refer to the piece as a “sculpture” several times, especially in texts written to accompany the piece during exhibitions.⁹

Given the classification (accepted by the Ackland) of the object as a balustrade, an architectural element necessary for the construction of a stair or balcony, it is ironic that the object is displayed on a pedestal as a fine work of figural sculpture. The very title presents it as an architectural element designed to provide a visual barrier or demarcation between spatial zones, yet its display contradicts its classification. Although it might be argued that a balustrade is not necessarily purely functional, the display and references to the fragment in the curatorial materials related to it give little to no impression that the object is a fragment. The term “balustrade” suggests that we see the object in its entirety. Since the object was cut from a larger piece of stone, it is impossible to assume that the piece in the Ackland is a complete portion of railing. Labelling the object as a fragment conveys its ambiguous provenance and architectural context more than its sculptural qualities or an imagined decorative function. Considering its rectangular shape with equally pronounced relief carvings on either side, placing the object on a pedestal like the figural sculptures of the permanent collection seems to be a logical display option, however it is important to recognize the connotations related to sculpture this choice entails.

Visitors experience the piece primarily as a sculpture in the museum today. With its current position in the gallery and the information on its label, the viewer is drawn to the Ackland fragment by its elaborate designs and figural representations. Observing viewers engaging with the work in the gallery, one notes how they circumambulate the pedestal upon which the object rests, peering at the designs and taking note of the differing patterns on either side. The reverence with which visitors approach the podium (and other pieces in the same

⁹ Catalogue Worksheet, 1998, curatorial files, Ackland Museum of Art, Chapel Hill.

gallery) suggests that this fragment, if not labelled as such, is treated as an aesthetic masterpiece in the Ackland. With the exception of its title of “balustrade” there is no allusion to its architectural origin. Its position atop a white pedestal, separated from any sort of architectural context, suggests that we are looking at it largely for its aesthetic value. As the Ackland only possesses one fragment, cut from its original position, the current method of display is perhaps the only feasible option.¹⁰

Its display certainly corresponds with that of the other objects in the gallery, either placed atop pedestals or hung from the white walls. The viewer experiences the fragment aesthetically, like the other pieces displayed nearby, although there is little contextual information available in comparison to the surrounding pieces. While the mosque lintel’s label lists a dynasty, and more detailed provenance, the fragment is decontextualized by its relatively vague label. This is not an intentional erasure, but rather a result of an unclear provenance. There have been exhibitions, however, where works were exhibited in a similar way with the intention of consciously erasing their context.

In 1910, the Munich exhibition, “Masterpieces of Mohammedan Art” focused on exactly what its name suggests. Works of Islamic art were exhibited as masterpieces, to be admired primarily for their aesthetic value rather than their history or function. The title of the exhibition emphasized the “masterpiece” specifically.¹¹ This is a term laden with a largely positive connotation. The works exhibited became superior examples of their kind, valued above those which did not make it into the exhibition catalogue. They were judged based on their isolated aesthetic, formal qualities rather than their cultural or historical identities. Ultimately, they

¹⁰ The object could perhaps be placed in a display case, but the Ackland does not possess objects of similar size and shape to make that option feasible.

¹¹ Troelenberg, 6.

became unique objects to the viewer, not members of a larger tradition or group of objects, but rather rare masterpieces.

Returning to the significance of the term “masterpiece,” one can be certain that by definition such an object exhibits a “mastery” of the medium, design or technique utilized. If this object is a masterpiece, it must be unique in its superior craftsmanship and design. This is intriguing because many of the objects in the 1910 exhibition were not necessarily one of a kind. They included carpets, vessels, mosque lamps and other objects which are often created in sets or multiples.¹² Like those objects, the Ackland fragment appears to be a lone masterpiece, yet research proves that it is far from unique. In fact, Oleg Grabar argues that within the field of Islamic art “it is as though there are no masterpieces, no monument which emerges as being so superior to the others within a comparable series that a qualitative or developmental sequence can be built up.”¹³ Consistent with Grabar’s assertion, the fragment, though certainly one of a kind in the Ackland’s collection, is not the only of its kind in the world. The similarity of other fragments to the one at the Ackland makes it difficult to analyze the piece as a technically or stylistically superior masterpiece. Rather the existence comparanda introduces a new method of analyzing the Ackland fragment, as a member of a group of objects. How does the existence of the other pieces complicate this fragment’s identity? How are those objects displayed?

¹² Troelenberg, 14.

¹³ Oleg Grabar, “An Art of the Object,” in *Islamic Art and Beyond: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2006), 15.

Chapter 2: Fragmented Families: Comparable objects in Euro-American Collections

The piece at the Ackland Museum does not bear an inscription, and consequently does not carry with it the explicit identity of its patron or artist. Rather than an inscription, it is its iconographical program which hints at its identity. This program of lions, bulls, dogs and hares is enough to provide the fragment with its current label, attributing it to “Iran,” and to “1200-1350.” The attribution originates from another object, one with an inscription, which the Ackland has used to situate its fragment. The Ackland object belongs to a group of related pieces, linked by shared size, material and iconography. When analyzed individually, most of these objects remain silent, but comparative study reveals that as a group, these pieces have a great deal to share.

In the early 1930s and 1940s, several of these pieces were sold to museum collections in the U.S. and Europe. Although not all of those original acquisitions are accounted for today, five documented fragments remain.¹⁴ The first to be acquired by an American museum was a piece sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by the Turkish art dealer Hagop Kevorkian in 1932.¹⁵ Also referred to as a “balustrade” by the Metropolitan, the piece is decorated on one side by a star-like design intertwined with arabesques alongside a floral design in the same orientation surrounded by additional arabesques (Figure 5). The other side depicts a lion attacking a quadruped, possibly a stag on one half of the rectangular space (Figure 6). The remaining half is filled with a geometric design repeated sixteen times in a grid-like pattern. The end is decorated

¹⁴ Hollis, 19 ; Arthur Upham Pope. “The Historic Significance of Stucco Decoration in Persian Architecture,” *The Art Bulletin* 16.4 (Dec., 1934). ; Baer ; Redford, 219.

¹⁵ “Online Collection,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/448658>.

much like the Ackland fragment, with twin lions and columns, though the columns are of smaller scale on the Metropolitan fragment.

The key to the Ackland fragments' attributions is the figural imagery on both objects, which is similar enough to lead to the use of this fragment to date that of the Ackland. When the Ackland fragment was acquired, the curators were aware of the Metropolitan fragment, and consulted with the Metropolitan Museum about the similarity between the two pieces. Ultimately, the Ackland piece took on an expanded date range of 1100-1350 because it was unclear if the two pieces were indeed created together, and how frequently such objects would be commissioned.¹⁶ The chronology of the Metropolitan object might also have been lost to an ambiguous history, had its patron not thought to have it inscribed.

The epigraphy of the Metropolitan fragment is what sets this piece apart from all others I will discuss here. It is the only of the known fragments in the U.S., Europe, or indeed the world to be inscribed. Not only is the object inscribed, but the inscription is a veritable museum label itself. When translated from the original Arabic, the epigraphy reads: "The owner is Hajj Hasan, son of Ibrahim, son of M. May god pardon him in his sins" and "Work of Sharaf ibn Muhammad."¹⁷ The fragment provides not only the name of the patron and artist, but also the date of completion, 1303-4 CE (703 AH). The object identifies the man who commissioned it, Hajj Hasan, the artist, Sharaf ibn Muhammad, and its date of completion in the fourteenth century, providing, in a few short lines, the Ackland fragment with its identity. Although it is unclear if records of Hajj Hasan and Sharaf ibn Muhammad have been lost, or indeed ever

¹⁶ Letter, Dr. Stephano Carboni to Carol Gillham, Feb. 7, 2003, Curatorial files, Ackland Museum, Chapel Hill.

¹⁷ Online Collection," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/448658>.

existed, the precise date is in itself a very important data point and the sole justification for the Ackland date range.

The object in the Metropolitan was acquired over sixty years prior to that of the Ackland fragment, yet the attitudes of the curator of the Metropolitan Near Eastern Art collection at the time, M.S. Dimand, illuminate the treatment of this new addition to the collection. Dimand writes that the object “is said to have come from Hamadan.” Dimand does not elaborate on this designation, although the date is considered by Dimand to indicate a “Mongol” design.¹⁸ The year 1303-4 corresponds to the Il Khanid period in Iran after the Mongols invaded in 1220.

The Il Khanids were a Mongol dynasty in Iran, most notably led by Hulagu Khan, the grandson of Ghengis Khan. By 1258 Hulagu had sacked Baghdad, and the fragment’s date of 1303-4 would have fallen long after his death, toward the end of the Il Khanid dynasty in Iran. The attributions made by Dimand and later curators along with the inscription have determined the ways in which later acquisitions of similar objects were handled.¹⁹ As the only inscribed Iranian fragment known to Western scholars, it occupies a unique position in the scholarship about this class of objects. Its inscription situates it, as well as anything that resembles it. The inscription is not only useful for making attributions, but also gives a rare glimpse into patronage in fourteenth century Iran. It raises questions about the significance of this particular fragment, given that it would have been a small part of a much larger commission, and yet bears a full inscription.

The Metropolitan possesses a second fragment, similar to the first and acquired at the same time. The piece is not inscribed, but is decorated on both sides by arabesques and vegetal

¹⁸ Dimand, 99-100.

¹⁹ Hollis; Pope; Catalogue Worksheet, Curatorial files, Ackland Museum, Chapel Hill.; Baer, 113.

motifs (Figure 7).²⁰ The designs are in relatively low relief, and worn away in certain areas. Unlike the Ackland and first Metropolitan fragments, this piece's iconography lacks any animal figures. It does, however, share two motifs with the Ackland piece. The first is the eight-petalled flower, similar in shape to a lotus, depicted on either side of the Ackland fragment in a square section near the end of the object above the twin lions (Figure 8). The same eight-petalled flower is carved into this Metropolitan fragment at the center of two symmetrical vegetal motifs (Figure 7). The second similar motif is the pair of columns found at the end of both pieces (Figure 2, 7). The columns are incised with an interlocking geometric design reminiscent of Samanid, Ghaznavid and Seljuk brickwork, particularly the minaret of Jam (1149 C.E.) and the Friday Mosque of Isfahan (11th century) (Figure 9, 10).²¹ Both the flower and column motifs are very common in Persian stone carving, not only in the Seljuk and Il Khanid periods, but in later periods as well as pre-Islamic Iran.²² The second Metropolitan fragment shares the attribution of the first, despite its lack of epigraphy. It is unknown if they were created together or acquired separately and sold together to the Metropolitan Museum.

Having considered the history of display for the Ackland fragment, one might wonder how the Metropolitan Museum has chosen to display its pieces. Despite the obvious attributional significance of the inscribed fragment, the piece is in storage.²³ Black and white photographs of the piece on a pedestal might hint at a brief period of display when it was newly acquired. The theory that this piece was once displayed briefly is supported by its frequent appearance in a

²⁰ "Online Collection," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/448658>.

²¹ Flood, 98. ; Oleg Grabar, *The Great Mosque of Isfahan*, (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 49.

²² Pope, 245.

²³ "Online Collection," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/448658>.

variety of articles and museum publications in the 1930s and 1940s.²⁴ It has not, however, been displayed since the 1940s. It is unclear why the museum chose to remove it from the galleries and not install it in the “Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia” galleries, dedicated to Islamic art. The second fragment, the piece lacking an inscription, has never been displayed. The only images of it depict it in its crate, which it has presumably not left since its acquisition.²⁵

Another seemingly related fragment, also unavailable for viewing, is in the Cleveland Museum of Art. Acquired only six years after the Metropolitan fragments, it is similar to the others in dimensions, but bears no inscription.²⁶ The Cleveland fragment is carved on both sides with a lion attacking a bull and other quadrupeds engaged in a dynamic chase scene (Figure 11). Of all the known fragments, this piece boasts the most animal figures, with twelve on each side. The chase scene is far more animated than the others, as the animals crawl under each other to escape their pursuers. This fragment shares iconography with the others in its twin lions at the end and columns which are almost identical to those of the Metropolitan fragments. The center of the piece is punctured by a large square opening whose purpose was likely functional but is otherwise unknown. It is dated to 1303-4 due to its strong resemblance to the inscribed Metropolitan fragment, illustrating the significance the lone inscription carries in relation to similar objects. It too is attributed to Hamadan, although the city’s name is followed by a

²⁴ Including the works of Dimand, Hollis and Pope.

²⁵ “Online Collection,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/448658>.

²⁶ “Collections”, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Accessed January 4, 2016, <http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1938.15>.

question mark in the museum records. The object was purchased from the J.H. Wade Fund in 1938. The fragment has never been displayed.²⁷

Significantly, the Cleveland Museum speculates that this fragment and those of the Metropolitan Museum come from the same building.²⁸ It is here that examining these objects as a group begins to reveal more than considering them separately. The Cleveland and Metropolitan pieces are strikingly similar in both style and iconography. The Ackland piece is very close to all three in design as well. All four of the fragments possess the columns on their ends, and all but the first Metropolitan fragment depict lions attacking bulls with twin lions on the ends. Were these fragments indeed part of the same building? When placed side by side, three of the fragments (the inscribed fragment, the Cleveland fragment and the Ackland fragment) exhibit several virtually identical elements including iconography, scale and materials. For example, the lions perched on the columns at the end of the pieces are nearly identically rendered, as are the columns upon which they perch (Figures 2, 7, 11). The lions depicted on the Ackland and Cleveland fragments' chase scenes are also strikingly similar in form, noticeably the angle of their heads and the carved incisions indicating their manes. The inscribed, Cleveland and Ackland fragments are all of almost equal scale and are all carved from stones of similar color and texture.

It is tempting here to revisit the Ackland fragment's date ranges, 1100-1350. Given the similarities between these fragments and the date of the Metropolitan fragment, one might be inclined to narrow the date range of the Ackland piece to the fourteenth century. This would be based entirely on formal analysis, however, without any substantial evidence except a physical

²⁷ "Collections", The Cleveland Museum of Art, Accessed January 4, 2016, <http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1938.15>.

²⁸ Hollis, 19.

resemblance. There is simply not enough information available about these objects and the frequency with which they were made to date them to the same period. Certainly no claims can be made about the fragments' original sites. We cannot attribute them to the same building, time or region simply based on formal analysis; but we can begin, here, to put them in conversation with one another, something that has been impossible for viewers to do in the last few decades while the objects have been in storage. Their similarities do not provide enough evidence to definitively connect them to the same building or year, but they are sufficient to link them to one another as related objects, even if the extent of that relation is has yet to be determined.

The last American fragment is located at the Art Institute of Chicago. Acquired in 1947, the piece is titled, "Architectural Fragment."²⁹ It is the only American fragment to avoid the "balustrade" classification. It is also the only piece besides the Ackland fragment on display in the U.S. Furthermore, it is displayed, albeit on a pedestal, but positioned perpendicular to the wall, almost as though it takes part in the room's architecture (Figure 12). By placing it against the wall, the museum enables the visitor to view the designs on both sides as in the Ackland, but now with the awareness that the object was a piece of a larger structure, now lost and replaced by the museum wall. This particular fragment is dated to the 13th and 14th centuries, but not attributed to Iran or any particular region. It is located in the Asian art galleries and is composed, like the Metropolitan, and Cleveland fragments, of limestone.³⁰

The Chicago fragment is carved with figural depictions, including a single lion attacking a bull, a chase scene of dogs and hares, and twin lions flanking the ends. Much like the other fragments, it is topped by a cubic segment decorated with vegetal motifs, possesses two

²⁹ "Collections," Art Institute of Chicago, Accessed 2/5/2016, http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/60898?search_no=2&index=7

³⁰ Ibid.

geometrically ornamented miniature columns, and arabesque motifs throughout. The lion attacking a bull is extremely similar in size, orientation and style to that of the Ackland fragment. The reliefs are in good condition, perhaps the best of the American fragments. The figural panels are bordered by a twisting pattern of interwoven lines, somewhat similar to the vegetal border of the uninscribed Metropolitan fragment. The other three fragments do not have borders around their figural depictions or ornamental panels.

The Chicago fragment is not mentioned in the scholarship on these objects. While the Metropolitan and Cleveland pieces have played a dominant role in publications on such fragments, the Chicago fragment, perhaps due to its slightly different classification, has not been analyzed in reference to the other pieces despite its striking resemblance to elements of each.³¹ Thus far, three strategies have arisen to the display of these objects. Either they are placed upon a freestanding pedestal, arranged as an extension of the wall (still atop a pedestal) or kept in storage. A fourth type of display offers an arresting alternative. The final fragment examined here is in Copenhagen, in the David Collection Islamic art galleries.³² It is significantly smaller, and appears to predate the other fragments by virtue of its more simplistic designs. Its lion figures share a head and differ significantly from the more naturalistic figures of lions on the other pieces (Figure 13). The vegetal motifs and arabesques are also much thicker, and lack the precision of those on the other objects. Despite the differences in technique, this fragment exhibits three of the motifs of the others. Twin lions perch atop columns on the end, small flowers carved below each lion's belly. The lions are worn away, their heads almost completely rubbed off. Their hindquarters, however, are strikingly similar to those of the Metropolitan,

³¹ Baer, Hollis, Pope, Redford.

³² Islamic Art: Stone and Stucco," The David Collection, Accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/materials/stone-and-stucco/art/11a-b-1978>.

Cleveland, Chicago, and Ackland fragments. The columns are identical to those of the others, and the flowers, much smaller than on the Ackland or Metropolitan fragments, are stylistically very similar. It is surprising to find these similarities despite the slightly smaller scale of the piece and the level of wear to its surface. The object's condition seems to support its place as the oldest of the fragments, with significantly worn away surfaces, especially on its ends and in spots along its edges. It is dated to 1200 C.E., one hundred years prior to the dated Metropolitan fragment, and it listed as produced by the Seljuks in Iran. Hamadan is again the tentative attribution.³³

The fragment was acquired in 1978, though the David Collection does not list its provenance.³⁴ Of far more interest is the fact that this piece is the only one, besides that of the Ackland and Art Institute of Chicago, to be on display. It is not, however displayed on a pedestal as a sculpture, or as a perpendicular attachment to the wall. It was split in half and is displayed on the wall as twin bas-reliefs.³⁵ Instead of the end of a balustrade, the piece comes to resemble a wall carving. Visitors view it mounted on the wall in two pieces, spread across the wall not unlike a butterfly with almost perfectly symmetrical wings. This appears at first to be a unique and mildly destructive method of display. The limestone would have had been cleaved down the middle, perhaps contributing to the slightly damaged ends and edges. However, this unusual act of bisection is not unique, as a look back at the Ackland fragment reveals.

The Ackland piece is bisected by a thick white band that indicates that it was once cut in two (Figure 2). The clamps and divider down the center indicate where the two pieces have been

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Islamic Art: Stone and Stucco," The David Collection, Accessed November 4, 2014, <http://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/materials/stone-and-stucco/art/11a-b-1978>.

³⁵ Ibid.

rejoined. Though not noticeable from the side, viewing the piece from above or either end betrays its bisection with clearly visible separated edges. In 1963, when the Hauges first set eyes on the Ackland fragment, it was split in two and displayed on the wall of the Tehran gallery which decided to divide it in order to view both sides at once, exactly like the David Collection display. The Hauges gifted the piece to the Ackland which decided, with their permission, to reassemble it.³⁶ Was the David Collection fragment also cut in half in Iran? Does this indicate that these works were typically displayed in this way in Iranian museums and galleries?

The physical bisection or division of a single piece into smaller sections certainly has a precedent in Islamic art. Illuminated manuscript pages, like those of the Mongol Shahnama (a fourteenth century copy of an illustrated volume of the Persian legendary Book of Kings), were removed from albums by European collectors to be sold or gifted as individual pieces.³⁷ Although the fragments in the David Collection and Ackland Museum are still displayed with their individual parts adjacent to one another, they still participate in the physical alteration of Islamic art objects in order to please audiences or glean a profit.

The Euro-American fragments clearly possess striking iconographical similarities, and although all five pieces have never been included in the same study of the objects, they certainly overlap occasionally in the existing scholarship.³⁸ Taking note of their display (or lack thereof) raises questions about how the display practices of various museums are informed by the previous scholarship on these objects. The methodological approaches taken by scholars like Baer, Redford, Pope and Hollis, the only scholars to publish in English (and indeed to my knowledge French or Persian) on these pieces, illuminate some of the display decisions discussed

³⁶ Letter, David Walker to Carol Gillham, October 30, 2002, curatorial files, Ackland Museum, Chapel Hill.

³⁷ Barbara Brend, *Islamic Art*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 140.

³⁸ Baer, Hollis, Redford.

in this chapter. Furthermore, analyzing the chronology of these publications in relation to the socio-political climate in Iran reveals why so many of these pieces remain in storage. A group of pieces, already architectural fragments, becomes doubly fragmented by essentializing methodologies and political upheavals that divide rather than unite them.

Chapter 3: The Quest for Attributions: Routes or Roots?

Analyzing the Euro-American fragments based on their formal qualities and display provides an overview of the objects; but an equally important perspective involves also considering their positioning in existing scholarly literature. All five scholars to write on these objects utilize dynastic classification as their primary approach. The use of dynastic periods as the primary taxonomy of objects of Medieval and Pre-Modern Islamic heritage has a long history. Dynastic classification places objects into pre-determined temporal, geographic and cultural categories, requiring the objects to fit into an existing taxonomy. This approach focuses on the object's origins and situates the moment of creation as the object's most important signifier. Furthermore, as Gulru Necipoglu argues, dynastic classifications can become entangled in contemporary political structures. Necipoglu proposes an alternative periodization which avoids geographical classification or dynasties in favor of "chronological slices" which combine "temporal with spatial, socio-cultural and artistic" characteristics.³⁹ While situating the pieces in the larger historical chronology of various dynasties does place them within a larger discourse, I will illustrate how, like Necipoglu, one can critically analyze these classifications to generate a new methodology that does not rely as heavily on dynastic origins.

While some scholars declare the Euro-American fragments to be the work of the Turkish Seljuks (who took Hamadan as one of their capital cities), others point to the Mongol Il Khanids. The Seljuks were Turkish peoples, belonging to the tribal federation of the Oghuz, whose empire

³⁹ Gulru Necipoglu, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches," *Islamic Art and the Museum*. ed. Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf. (London; Saqi Books, 2012), 65.

stretched from Anatolia into the Iranian Peninsula from the 11th to 13th centuries.⁴⁰ The Seljuks took Isfahan as their capital, employed Persian architects to execute their artistic visions.

Isfahan's Friday Mosque dates to the Abbasid era, however, Nizam al-Mulk, the Persian vizier to the Seljuk Sultan Malik Shah, was responsible for construction atop the original Abbasid site.⁴¹

Amongst the additions was the Gunbad-I Khaki in 1088, a monumental brick dome over a prayer hall of the Friday mosque. Brick architecture is a notable characteristic of Persian architecture of this period, regardless of patron. Interlocking brick patterns form the basis of interior decoration in the Friday Mosque. The Seljuks in Western Iran reigned until 1157, and the city of Hamadan also served as a Seljuk capital before its destruction at the hands of the invading Mongols in the thirteenth century.⁴² In 1243 the Anatolian Seljuks of Rum were also defeated by the Mongols.⁴³

Genghis Khan, the infamous Mongolian conqueror, invaded Iran in 1220. With the sack of Abbasid Baghdad in 1258, the entire Islamic world reeled from Mongol conquest. Hulagu Khan led a campaign across Iran in 1256 (ultimately ending with the sack of Baghdad), and established a capital in north-western Iran at Maragheh. It was from this settlement that the descendants of the Mongols in Iran became known as the Il-Khanids.⁴⁴ The Il-Khanids did not

⁴⁰ Bosworth, C.E.; Hillenbrand, R.; J. M. Rogers.; Blois, F.C. de; Darley-Doran, "Saldjūkids." *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2016. Reference. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). 10 April 2016
<http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/saldjukids-COM_0984>

⁴¹ Grabar, 49.

⁴² Baer, 120.

⁴³ Grabar, 57. ; For the most recent publications on the Seljuks, see Sheila R. Canby, Deniz Beyazit, Martina Rugiadi, A. C. S. Peacock, and Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Court and Cosmos: The Great Age of the Seljuq*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016). ; *The Seljuks of Anatolia: Court and Society in the Medieval Middle East*.

⁴⁴ "Il Khan" literally translates to "the subservient khan." Yuka Kadoi, *Islamic Chinoiserie: The Art of Mongol Iran*, (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2009), 5.

destroy Persian culture despite their destructive campaigns; in fact, they hired Persian bureaucrats and adapted to Persian customs. As a result of the conquests of Hulagu and his ancestors, Persian artists and architects were exposed to a wide variety of styles from East Asia, and the period was characterized by “internationalism of styles forms and patterns in almost all media of Iranian decorative and pictorial arts.”⁴⁵ A traditionally pastoral, nomadic people, the Mongols patronized Persian architecture, like the Seljuks, at the hands of Persian architects. They too added to the Friday Mosque in Isfahan, contributing a lateral prayer hall with a mihrab of extremely detailed incised ornament. The Il Khans are remembered for their use of color, primarily vibrant blue tile and brickwork which carried on into the later Timurid dynasty. The last Il Khan ruler reigned until 1135, after which successor states battled for dominance.⁴⁶

Returning to the fragments’ dynastic attributions, Eva Baer, who analyzes the Metropolitan fragments, insists on their Seljuk qualities.⁴⁷ In terms of chronology, her classification of the objects dated to 1304 (via the epigraphy) as “Seljuk,” is noteworthy considering that by the late thirteenth century, the Seljuk rulers were vassals of the Mongols.⁴⁸ In terms of architectural patronage, the Mongol Il Khanids dominated the region around Hamadan, although techniques of previous periods continued to be utilized in courtly commissions along with adapted designs from lands of the Mongolian conquest. Even individual rulers, like Mesud II, the sultan of Rum in 1304, cannot be placed into definitive categories given complex and blurred boundaries of political and social identity formation in this particular region. As Oya

⁴⁵ Kadoi, 237.

⁴⁶ Hillenbrand, 212.

⁴⁷ Baer, 107.

⁴⁸ Robert Hillenbrand. "Saljuq." Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press, accessed February 11, 2016, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T075354>.

Pancarioglu points out, the Seljuks themselves identified their domain not as “discrete territories with defined boundaries on the ground” but rather as “contiguous terrains in a state of flux.”⁴⁹ The sultanate was by this point losing ground in the Iranian peninsula, while the Il Khans gained power. These fragments cannot be classified neatly as either Seljuq or Il Khanid because no pure classification existed at the time of their creation. Two cultures (if indeed we can call them that) intersected and fused to the point of becoming a complex web of ideas and styles rather than isolated forms. The Seljuks of Rum differed from the Seljuks of Hamadan, and even within the Iranian Peninsula, Seljuk and Il Khanid buildings and decoration existed side by side in some instances. Geza Fehervari elaborates on this in “Some problems of Seljuk Art,” a lecture given at a colloquium on “The Art of Iran and Anatolia from the 11th to the 13th Century A.D.,” held in London in June 1973. Fehervari points out the weaknesses surrounding monolithic dynastic classifications like “Seljuk,” notably that there is little unity in what scholars refer to as “Seljuk.” The works in Anatolia under the Seljuks are distinct from those of Iran, and certain motifs referred to as “Seljuk” actually predate the dynasty as well as continue after its decline.⁵⁰

Given the diverse nature of the players involved and the long history of conquest in the region, many patrons and their commissions would likely fall somewhere between “Turkish” and “Mongolian.” In fact, even those categories are not necessarily historically accurate. Most of these sorts of classifications are rooted more in modern political boundaries than in the social, political, and ethnic environment of the time.⁵¹ Necipoglu notes how Arthur Upham Pope

⁴⁹ Oya Pancarioglu, “The House of Mengüjek in Divriği: Constructions of Dynastic Identity in the Late Twelfth Century,” In *The Seljuks of Anatolia: Court and Society in the Medieval Middle East*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013), 46.

⁵⁰ Geza Fehervari, “Some problems of Seljuq art,” In *The Art of Iran and Anatolia from the 11th to 13th Century A.D.* (London; University of London, 1973), 9.

⁵¹ Necipoglu, 65.

dismisses the Seljuk Turks as “lacking in the graces of civilization” likely due to the colonial entanglements of Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the twentieth century which generated a hierarchy of races where the Turks “occupied the lowest position.”⁵² The categories “Seljuk” and “Mongol” were imbued, in the historiography of Islamic art, with politically charged significances which essentialized dynasties based on European colonialism rather than anything inherent to the historical moment itself. This sort of essentialism is summarized by Flood as “operating through a collapse of all possible identities into a single monolithic identification, producing as singular, static, and undifferentiated what was often multiple, protean and highly contested.”⁵³ In addition, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom argue, “this focus on dynasties, posits that artistic (and social and political) change was generated from the top, as indicated by the recurrent use of such words as “princely,” “courtly,” “empire,” and “sultans” ... they tend to focus on masterpieces...”⁵⁴ The use of dynastic classification can elevate pieces to an implied aesthetic perfection, traced back to kingdoms and empires that were not nearly as unified or clearly demarcated as their names might suggest. In fact, dynastic classification can create the illusion that certain groups, like the Il Khanids, suddenly entered Iran and introduced entirely new traditions. Historically, however, Chinese and East Asian artistic traditions pre-date the Il Khanids in Iran, largely due to the importance of the Silk Road and sea routes through the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf.⁵⁵ Decorative motifs one might refer to as “Il Khanid” likely reflect a longer history than their classification would suggest.

⁵² Ibid, 66.

⁵³ Flood, 3.

⁵⁴ Sheila Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field,” *The Art Bulletin* 85 (2003): 161.

⁵⁵ Kadoi, 7.

How are these classifications supported by scholars? Baer's Seljuk classification comes from her analysis of contemporaneous textiles and architecture from Iran and Anatolia. She argues that "reminiscent features of Seljuq style are found, for instance, at the entrance facade of the mihrab of the Gunbad-I 'Alavyian (Alavian Dome, a small domed mosque with a subterranean tomb chamber) in Hamadan (Figure 14) which, dating shortly after 1300, is thus contemporary with the Metropolitan Museum slabs."⁵⁶ However, Baer does not elaborate on these "reminiscent features." It is difficult to discern the inherently "Seljuk" identity of the designs in this context, especially since the same monuments could be classified (and indeed are) as Il Khanid.⁵⁷ She also notes that, "similar carvings occur at the mihrab of the Imamzada Abil-Fail wa-Yahy at Mahallat (an *Il Khanid* shrine), built in 1308."⁵⁸ She does not provide images or support of this comparison of the fragment to a prayer niche.⁵⁹ Beyond her dynastic classification, Baer narrows the geographical location of the fragment to a single city. Based on the similarities she perceives in style and iconography of the interior stucco decoration of the Gunbad-I Alavyian, Baer attributes the Metropolitan fragment to Hamadan.⁶⁰

Baer addresses M.S. Dimand's scholarship on the Metropolitan fragments, and surprisingly, does not share his classification of the objects. Dimand definitively classified them as "Mongol."⁶¹ What Dimand means by this term is unclear. Presumably he is referring to the Il

⁵⁶ Baer, 122.

⁵⁷ Dimand argues that the resemblance to the Gunbad-I Alavyian is evidence of the Metropolitan fragment's Mongol heritage; Dimand, 100.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Indeed Baer does not cite these images, nor are they referenced in other publications.

⁶⁰ Baer, 119

⁶¹ Dimand, 60.

Khans, but the term “Mongol” alone could allude to a wide variety of contexts and temporalities. Dimand also makes the Hamadan attribution, but his brief section on the fragments does not substantiate the claim. In fact, Baer’s brief comparison of the iconography to the interior of the Gunbad-I Alavyian is the only scholarly support for the classification, although it permeates the scholarship on these objects. Actually, while the reliefs inside the domed mosque are of similar depth to those of the fragments, there are no lions and bulls, no hunting scenes and certainly no stone in the Alavyian structure. The walls are stucco, and the only obvious similarities are the arabesque and vegetal designs that snake across the surface of the walls (Figure 15).⁶²

Returning to dynastic categories, Howard Hollis, like Dimand, posited in 1939 that the Cleveland fragment was surely linked to hunting culture in the Mongol court.⁶³ What is exclusively “Mongol” about a hunting scene? The use of the term “Mongol” by both Hollis and Dimand reflects the time of their scholarship more than that of the fragments. To Dimand and Hollis, writing in the early twentieth century, the Il Khanids were yet to be recognized as an offshoot Persianate civilization of the Mongol empire, making it difficult for Hollis and Dimand to generate a term besides “Mongol” for the dynasty. Dynastic classifications allow scholars to quickly position objects of lost origin within an existing historical context; but these classifications clearly provide little insight when the objects themselves date to a period of blurred dynastic boundaries and fluid cultural identities still in the process of being understood by modern scholarship.

Beyond dynastic attributions, some scholars, like Baer and Scott Redford speculate about the original purpose of the fragments. Baer posits that the “stone reliefs under discussion

⁶² Based on my own visit to the Gunbad-I Alavyian in July of 2015.

⁶³ Hollis, 19.

originate from staircases of secular buildings or palaces.”⁶⁴ Redford implies that the pieces belonged in palace pavilions, and that the fragments provide evidence for these palaces, arguing that, “the short front ends of these slabs [fragments] depict two-story kiosk-like structures accessed by a set of stairs from the rear.”⁶⁵ Here Redford creatively uses the Metropolitan fragment as a miniature model for its larger architectural context. Redford departs from the fragment after this suggestion, however, and the rest of his discussion focuses on the features of Seljuk palaces.⁶⁶ Without a fragment in situ, scholars can only hypothesize about the original architectural and decorative purpose of the pieces.

All the discussions presented by the aforementioned scholars center on uncovering the origins of these fragments. Whether via iconography, form, or style, the scholarship surrounding these objects orbits their long lost pasts. The field of Islamic art is certainly characterized by this quest, with historiography “focused on the dating of artifacts and attributing them to a specific place of origin.”⁶⁷ Aside from the fixation on origins, the scholarship on these objects (with the exception of Baer) considers them separately. Even Baer’s analysis is not really comparative, but rather separated into subsections to consider the pieces individually. Considering this body of scholarship today, the search for monolithic origins and concrete categories might seem somewhat outdated. Taking a closer look at the chronology of these scholars’ work illustrates that indeed, these conversations have not been revisited for quite some time.

The scholarship that began to emerge around these objects shortly after the acquisition of the Metropolitan and Cleveland fragments in the 1930s continued until the 1980s. However, in

⁶⁴ Baer, 120.

⁶⁵ Redford, 219.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Avinoam Shalem, “Multivalent Paradigms of Interpretation and the Aura or Anima of the Object,” 107.

the last thirty or so years, one is hard pressed to find any mention of these objects in journal articles, books or museum exhibitions. Of the works consulted here that directly reference the fragments, only the Redford comes after 1980. The lack of interest in displaying these pieces in recent years, as well as the decline in publications after the 1980s, is intriguing. Why has there been no mention of these objects in recent scholarship?

The Iranian Revolution, which took place in 1979 and culminated in the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is one potential explanation for the decline in scholarship about Iranian fragments by Euro-American scholars. In the years following the turbulent revolution and the capture of the American embassy in Iran, travel between Iran and the United States became both difficult and unadvisable.⁶⁸ Even today, there is no American embassy in Iran and a grueling process awaits those who attempt to acquire visas to enter the country for research. It is likely that as a result of the tenuous political situation in the country, American scholars have had difficulty accessing Iranian sites and archives, especially to research objects currently in American or European collections. This would account for the decline in interest in these fragments and their virtual abandonment by many museums. It is not difficult to imagine why these objects did not generate much scholarly interest for decades, considering that nothing more can be definitively said about their original contexts without visiting Iran and searching for similar objects still in situ.

Tracing the scholarship that does exist today about these objects leads one in frustrating circles of competing attributions. They cannot be firmly tied to Hamadan, they cannot securely fit into any particular dynastic category, and their purpose cannot be inferred based on the paucity of extant stone architecture from the fourteenth century in Iran. In addition to their puzzling origins and the competing attributions surrounding these objects, the very medium of

⁶⁸ Blair and Bloom, 18.

the objects adds another layer of mystery. The Ackland fragment, according to its label, is composed of sandstone. Every other fragment explored here, however, is carved from limestone. Given the similarities between the Ackland, Cleveland and Metropolitan fragments, it is significant that the Ackland is cut from a different stone. Whether the difference can help make any attributions is unclear. If the Ackland fragment is made of a different material than the others, presumably it would not have been used in the same building as the others. Yet there is no way to be certain, given that none of these objects are tied to extant buildings and we have no knowledge about use of limestone versus sandstone in such a context. Both types of stone were certainly available in Iran in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁶⁹ To add to the uncertainty surrounding the Ackland fragment, it has not been examined since its acquisition to ascertain if it is indeed sandstone. According to Caroline Culbert, former Assistant for Academic Programs at the Ackland Museum, the object came into the collection with the sandstone identification.⁷⁰ Short of chemically testing it, which would damage the piece, only a close inspection by a geologist could confirm the designation, something that has yet to take place for this particular object.

If we consider the jumble of attributions and uncertainties surrounding the Ackland fragment, an interesting conundrum presents itself. We cannot pinpoint the precise origins of this object. We cannot provide a definitive, concrete identification of style, date, patron, location or use. We are left, instead, with a complex network of similar objects with evident connections to one another, either through method of display or pattern and technique of decoration. If we turn

⁶⁹ Pope, 21.

⁷⁰ Personal Interview, Caroline Culbert, November 17, 2014, Ackland Museum, Chapel Hill. One should note that the words in Persian for limestone (Sang-e Ahak) and sandstone (Sang-e Ablaq) are very different. They both include the term "Stone" (Sang), but the pronunciation and written forms of the terms are not so similar as to suggest frequent confusion between the two.

away from attribution and origins and instead examine the object's connection to others and its recent history, we are treading on more stable ground. Finbarr Flood, in his book *Objects of Translation*, proposes a relevant methodological alternative. He suggests that one study James Clifford's notion of "routes, rather than roots," emphasizing the interactions between cultures, individuals and objects rather than monolithic classifications.⁷¹ Roots are not as static as they might appear. Flood illustrates these points in his examination of Hindu-Muslim encounters and the nebulous connection between two cultures previously considered to be "pure."

Often, hybridity is the logical progression from a rejection of pure origins; however hybridity proves to raise its own concerns as an alternative framework. Flood's analysis points out how there can be no true hybridity because there is no original purity in regards to culture, which is by its very nature a *mélange* of ideas, peoples and histories.⁷² In terms of the Ackland fragment, this can be applied to the Seljuk/Il Khanid divide in attributions. Scholars seem determined to classify it (and the related objects) as one or the other. They are seeking a concrete, irrefutable point of origin that would place the fragment in one of the two dynastic categories. Flood's framework, however, blurs these lines. Instead of focusing on a pure origin, he focuses on movement and exchange. Considering the fragment in this context frees it from the entanglements of attribution.

In the absence of a point of origin and a specific date, the fragment cannot be "Seljuk" or "Il Khanid." Even with a precise original location and date, it is difficult to declare the fragment as belonging to one or the other. If, for example, the fragment was part of the palace of a Seljuk prince or Hulagu Khan himself, then perhaps such an attribution would be possible. But there is simply not enough information available to make such a claim. Focusing the scholarship

⁷¹ Clifford, 6. ; Flood, 3-4.

⁷² Flood, 5.

surrounding these pieces on their dynastic classifications is not a particularly sound methodology when the patrons of the pieces are themselves unknown. Even the identity of the named Metropolitan fragment patron is shrouded in mystery. Dimand seems to imply that he might have belonged to the Il Khanid aristocracy, given the courtly attribution of the piece based on its workmanship and the expense of the commission; however these claims cannot be substantiated without locating records that name the individual.⁷³

Due to the interest in their historical origins and making attributions, almost no mention is made in the available publications about the provenance of these objects or the sudden interest in acquiring them in the 1930s followed by their subsequent relegation to storerooms. Their display is also ignored as an inconsequential detail. Scholars have grappled with the unknown, rather than examining that which we definitively know. If, instead of losing oneself in the labyrinth of potential dynastic origins, one focuses on what the current display of these objects reveals and how they can function as a group, a whole new discourse can develop. However, this new discourse depends on a broader scope, one not limited to Euro-American collections.

I have problematized the methodological approaches to these objects thus far, and presented a new approach to analyzing them. However, in order to complete the narrative of this group of pieces I will add another group of comparanda outside the Euro-American discourse. In order to do so, I wish to return to the socio-political climate that has made studying the fragments' origins so difficult. While in the years following the violence of 1979 travel to Iran became difficult if not impossible, the current Iranian government allows for American scholars to conduct fieldwork under certain conditions. No Euro-American scholar, after Baer in 1967, has produced a publication reflecting a visit to Iran with the intention of studying these objects. Would one find any in situ which others might have missed decades ago? Do Iranian museums

⁷³ Dimand, 100.

possess any of these objects? When presented with images of the fragments in Euro-American collections, would Iranian scholars recognize this object group? Having conducted the necessary fieldwork, in the next section I will answer these questions by presenting an alternative case of display in Iran and add new fragments to this group of objects.⁷⁴ Having completed the known group of comparanda, I will revisit their display and links to one another, relying on networks rather than static origins.

⁷⁴ To my knowledge they have not been studied in Persian scholarship either, however Persian journal publications are difficult to access, even in Iran, so I cannot be certain. However, based on the curators' testimonies and general lack of knowledge about the objects in Iranian scholarly circles, it seems likely that the pieces have never been formally studied.

Chapter 4: Expanding the Corpus: Hamadan Fragments and Display Practices

In the arid city of Hamadan, located in the Western Iranian Peninsula, the Gunbad-I Alavyian stands in stark contrast to its increasingly urban surroundings.⁷⁵ Presumed to be a mausoleum, the Gunbad-I Alavyian is named for the Alavi family believed to be buried in its subterranean tomb chamber. The Alavis were a prominent aristocratic family in Hamadan whose rule of the city extended from the late thirteenth century into the early fourteenth century. A square structure with a now destroyed dome, the mausoleum is dated to the early fourteenth century with an interior that houses elaborate stucco decorations in medium to low relief (Figure 15).⁷⁶ The interior is entirely covered in stucco reliefs, from the ruined ceiling to the floor. At the far end of the mausoleum, an ornate mihrab indicates the direction of prayer, and under it, stairs lead down into the family's subterranean tombs (Figure 16).

Eva Baer's suggestion in her article "Group of Seljuk Figural Bas Reliefs" that the structure bears a certain resemblance to the Metropolitan fragment's design links not only the Metropolitan fragment to this mausoleum, but all the Euro-American fragments that share a similar iconography and style. Baer's connection to this monument is useful, not only because she links the stylistic elements of the fragments to those of the stucco designs inside, but because this is the only extant monumental structure in Hamadan contemporaneous to the fragments. Although it is an important point of comparison, formal analysis reveals that the building's

⁷⁵ Mohammad Karim Pirniya, *Memari Irani (Iranian Architecture)*, (Tehran, Iranian University of Science and Industry Press, 2014), 337.

⁷⁶ Bernard O'Kane, *Studies in Persian Art and Architecture*, (Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 67 ; Donald Wilber, *The Architecture of Islamic Iran*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969) ; Arthur Upham Pope, "Architectural Ornament." *In A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, (Tehran: Soroush Press, 1977).

designs differ from those of the fragments in many ways. The forms in the Gunbad-I Alavyian are more animated; the walls give the illusion that the vines and arabesques pulse with life. The detailed arabesques are multi-layered and intertwined in varying levels of relief. While the reliefs of the fragment are on the same plane and fairly static, those of the Gunbad-I Alavyian reflect a more detailed, multi-dimensional style (Figure 2, 15). The complexity of the mausoleum's forms is due in large part to the medium; stucco is far more pliable than stone.

Despite these differences, Baer's link to the Gunbad-I Alavyian is certainly a productive comparison. There are few extant buildings in Iran with such elaborate programs of incised design from the time of the fragments' construction.⁷⁷ In terms of architecture, the mausoleum serves as a rare look into early fourteenth century Persian architecture in situ. Aside from its chronology and incised designs, the Gunbad-I Alavyian also shares another important link to the Euro-American fragments; it stands less than a kilometer from the Euro-American fragments' Iranian counterparts.

The Hegmataneh Hill Historical Site and Museum occupies a large swath of land on the edge of the modern city limits of Hamadan. Although not widely studied in Euro-American scholarship, Hegmataneh was the site of ancient Median and Achaemenid settlements (678-300 BCE) that were first excavated in 1983.⁷⁸ The site comprises the exposed foundations of the ancient city and a museum (constructed in 1995) to house the artifacts that were uncovered in 1983 and subsequent excavations (Figure 17).⁷⁹ At first glance, this site of ancient Persian civilization seems to have nothing to do with fourteenth-century architecture. The museum

⁷⁷ Personal Interview, Cambys Navai, July, 28, 2015, Daneshgah Shahid Beheshti, Tehran, Iran.

⁷⁸ Hegmataneh is currently on the tentative list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. "Hegmataneh" UNESCO World Heritage Foundation, accessed 2/10/2016, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5272/>.

⁷⁹ "CAIS Archaeological and Cultural News of the Iranian World," The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies, accessed 3/10/16, http://www.cais-soas.com/News/1993-97_news.htm.

features Achaemenid gold coins, serving vessels and figurines, seemingly unrelated to the Euro-American fragments.⁸⁰ However, the walled back courtyard features fig trees growing between displays of large stone slabs (Figure 18). At first glance, the stones are indeed carved, but not with figural imagery or with any motif immediately comparable to the fragments' decoration. However, just a few feet away five objects, partly concealed by a tree, lean against the back wall of the museum (Figure 19).⁸¹ There, in the open courtyard of the Hegmataneh Museum, are five stone fragments that appear strikingly similar to the Euro-American fragments. They lean against the walls on raised stone supports, separated from the rest of the courtyard by waist-level glass dividers.

Of the pieces in Hamadan, only two are completely intact.⁸² The first is a fragment identical in shape and relative size to the Ackland piece; this particular fragment also features twin lions atop miniature pillars supporting a square projection on one end (Figure 20). The only visible side (the other side leans against the stone support) is decorated with arabesque and vegetal motifs. The second intact fragment is once again similar in shape and size to that of the Ackland, but is purely vegetal in its iconography (Figure 21). Instead of twin lions, two Achaemenid flowers (a flat, eight-petal flower) decorate the projecting square element. The designs are much simpler, with two large flowers in the main body of the piece surrounded by

⁸⁰ The curatorial assistant, Maryam Tabatabai, when presented with my images of the fragments, directed me to the back courtyard of the museum.

⁸¹ I was only able to locate these fragments at the suggestion of the students working inside Gunbad-I Alavyian, who were able to recognize my photographs of the Euro-American fragments as comparanda to those in the Hegmataneh Museum.

⁸² By "intact" I mean that they are the same shape and size as the other fragments. All the Euro-American fragments possess a square vertical projection and a large rectangular body. Only the first two Hegmataneh fragments fit this description. The others appear to be small portions broken off from larger fragments that would fit the same description as the Euro-American pieces.

linear geometric patterns. In comparison to the other fragments discussed thus far, this one is in very low relief.

Although the other three fragments are quite small, their iconography makes plain that they belong to the same group of objects as the first two. The third piece is just one half the size of the other two, with only the portion decorated by twin lions and columns supporting a still fully intact square projection (Figure 22). Below that motif is a partial damaged scene that features what appear to be simplified human figures atop an abstracted quadruped. The piece has suffered significant damage and abrasion, and the reliefs are low, making it difficult to discern more than a very basic outline of these figures. The fourth piece is missing the twin lions and square projection portion and is only the lower main body of the fragment (Figure 23). Here, a lion bears striking similarity to those depicted in the Ackland and Metropolitan fragments. The mane of this lion is incised with the same curved lines found in the Euro-American fragments. Opposite this lion is a creature that bears a human face and beard as well as a lion's body and wings. This fantastical being resembles the bearded sphinx sculptures of Persepolis from the sixth century BCE (Figure 24). Both the lion and the sphinx attack a bull, not unlike the two lions attacking the bull on the Ackland fragment. The scene includes other smaller animals; a donkey stands in the lower left corner and a small quadruped crouches below the bull. The small animal of uncertain classification beneath the bull is almost identical, in shape, size and style, to a quadruped on the upper right corner of the Ackland fragment (Figure 25).

The final piece in the Hegmataneh Museum is only a very small section of stone depicting a lion attacking a bull, surrounded by animals in a hunting scene (Figure 26). From the breaks in the stone and visible border on the bottom left, the final piece seems to have been the bottom left portion of a larger element. Notably, the style of the lion and bull differ significantly

from those previously discussed, with visible claws, disproportionate bodies and large round eyes. While the other figural fragments reflect more graceful animals in the throes of movement, this piece's figures are static and in low relief. Their hind legs are of exaggerated length in proportion to their front legs, and their limbs curl almost as though they bear no weight, creating the illusion that they float in the space of the composition

To my knowledge, based on fieldwork in Tehran, Ardebil, Tabriz, Kermanshah, and Hamadan, the Hamadan fragments are the only comparanda to the Ackland fragment on display in Iran. If others exist, they belong to private collections and are not publicly known. The objects, as Maryam Tabatabai, Assistant Curator at the Hegmataneh Museum explained, are not labeled because they only recently went on display. They belonged to a local museum that closed some years ago, perhaps the museum mentioned in Carboni's letter.⁸³ When construction began on the Hegmataneh museum, they were moved to the courtyard. Tabatabai hesitated when asked about the purpose and future labels of the objects. "We aren't exactly sure what they are. We think perhaps they were *sardar* (stone door toppers for entryways and walled enclosures) but there aren't any left in situ. The labels will unfortunately be rather vague."⁸⁴

Even in Hamadan, scholars are puzzled by these pieces. Not only is their presence in Hamadan (let alone in Euro-American collections) seemingly undocumented by scholars in Iran, but the lack of objects like this in situ leaves scholars puzzled by their function. Dr. Seyid Mohammad Naghi, Curator of the Avicenna Museum in Hamadan, had never seen anything remotely like them despite his specialty in Il Khanid architecture.⁸⁵ In Tehran Dr. Cambys

⁸³ Letter, Stephano Carboni to Carol Gillham, Feb. 7, 2003, Curatorial Files, Ackland Museum, Chapel Hill.

⁸⁴ "Motasefaneh motmaein nistim. Shayad sardar boodan, vali asari azeshoon namoondesh. Ehtemalan hargez nakhahim danest." Personal Interview, Maryam Tabatabai, July 26, 2015, Hegmataneh Museum, Hamadan, Iran.

⁸⁵ Personal Interview, Seyid Mohammad Naghi, July 27, 2015, Avicenna Museum, Hamadan, Iran.

Navai, Professor of Architecture at Daneshgah Shahid Beheshti (University of the Heavenly Martyr), himself a practicing architect and scholar of Perso-Islamic architecture, was surprised by both the existence of the Hamadan fragments and their unknown function. “You found these in Hamadan?” he asked with obvious surprise, “Are they tombstones? Perhaps part of a minbar? Or entrance components of a garden gate?”⁸⁶ The fragments are ultimately just as mysterious in their country of origin as in Euro-American collections.

Once again, the lack of scholarship on these pieces should not be misconstrued as a fault of either Euro-American or Iranian art historians. As Robert Hillenbrand points out in “Studying Islamic Architecture: Challenges and Perspectives,” Islamic architecture as a field developed in Europe and America only in the last hundred years. Scholars are limited in respect to archival research by political and economic constraints of Islamic nations, and are often limited by the linguistic complexity of the region (for the “Iranian world” Hillenbrand argues for a knowledge of Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Urdu, but also French, German, Russian and Italian).⁸⁷ Although all fields of art history face their own challenges, Islamic architecture faces not only a paucity of scholarship, but in the case of Iran, a great difficulty of access to materials, both by Euro-American scholars and Iranian scholars. Libraries and archives in Iran since the Revolution are deemed by Hillenbrand as “far from rich.”⁸⁸ For Euro-American scholars, accessing Iran is

⁸⁶ “Ina too Hamadan boodan? Shekle sang-e ghabran. Chian, sang-e ghabran? Qhesmat-e manbar? Shayad dar-e vooroodi-e bagh? Personal Interview, Cambys Navai, July, 28, 2015, Daneshgah Shahid Beheshti, Tehran, Iran.

⁸⁷ Robert Hillenbrand, “Studying Islamic Architecture: Challenges and Perspectives,” *Architectural History* 46 (2003): 6.

⁸⁸ Hillenbrand, 5.

difficult enough. For Iranian scholars, accessing Iranian objects abroad is equally difficult, and Iranian archives and museums are limited in their collections by financial restrictions.⁸⁹

Hillenbrand alludes to pre-Revolution Iran as a leader amongst Islamic countries in its support of art historical research and in the wealth of its archives. Although he does not reference the transition period between pre and post- Revolution Iran, it is not difficult to imagine the loss of resources in the aftermath of the Revolution. One could argue that this loss could certainly be linked to the fragments. It is very possible that their provenance was once documented, but in the process of closing libraries, burning books, or closing borders, this information was lost.

Semantics: Fragments, not Balustrades

If nothing else, this fieldwork confirms the (internationally) enigmatic nature of this particular group of objects. Despite the lack of concrete origins, however, the fact that five fragments are on display in Hamadan, and in no other major Iranian city, might suggest that they did originate from the surrounding area. The presence of the Gunbad-I Alavyian, if not a carbon copy of the fragments in terms of style, is still suggestive in its attention to incised design. In terms of chronology, the Metropolitan fragment's date aligns with the construction of the mausoleum. What the testimony of Iranian scholars does make clear is that the fragments are almost certainly not balustrades. There is no Persian word for balustrade. In fact, even with the help of architectural dictionaries, it is difficult to express to Iranians what a "balustrade" is in Persian. As Dr. Navai pointed out, "we [Iranians] don't emphasize stairs and ledges like Europeans did. Have you ever seen a balustrade in 14th century Iranian architecture? No. Because decorative handrails and dividers are not a part of the Il Khanid or Seljuk tradition, at least not in the way you are suggesting with this object." The term "balustrade" already

⁸⁹ As Hillenbrand quips, the Islamic Republic of Iran's government does not prioritize funding for the study of art. Hillenbrand, 6.

presented here as insufficient is clearly not a classification rooted in any scholarly discourse of Persian architecture.

Julia Gonnella argues that often in the context of Islamic art, aesthetic terminologies are based on antiquated European conventions, and thus works are situated in a Western hegemonic framework.⁹⁰ The museum label is in this case the site of the classification of the fragments. Exhibition labels are, according to Michael Baxandall, culturally determined. They do not describe the object on display, rather the text on the label “describes the exhibitor’s thinking about the object.”⁹¹ When the objects are displayed in Iran, they are never referred to as “balustrades,” but in American and European collections, with exception of the Chicago fragment, they all carry that classification. The difference in labelling in these different contexts illustrates dissimilar ways of conceptualizing the fragments in reference to the exhibitor’s own culture. Although I do not argue for a uniform conceptualization of these objects across cultures, in the remainder of this chapter I would like to emphasize the ways in which the term “balustrade” is being applied to the pieces in their current display, and the cultural relativism that the label illustrates. Not only is the term largely unrelated to the object historically and linguistically, it reflects far more about the exhibitor’s current cultural milieu than any inherent quality of the objects themselves.

The role of display

Although there is no consensus about the function or context of these pieces, scholars can agree on one point: the fragments pose questions that traditional taxonomies (formed in Euro-

⁹⁰ Julia Gonnella, “Islamic Art versus Material Culture: Museum of Islamic Art or Museum of Islamic Culture?” *Islamic art and the Museum*, ed. Benoit Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf. (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 147.

⁹¹ Michael Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karl and Steven D. Lavine, (Washington: Smithsonian Museum Press, 1991), 38.

American and Iranian scholarly discourse) are not adequate to answer. Perhaps their origins were lost in the hundreds of years since their creation, or in the more than thirty years since the violent upheaval of the Iranian Revolution. Where does this leave us? Even having located multiple fragments in Hamadan, and speaking with many Iranian experts on Iranian art and architecture, I can find no clear origins for these objects, nor a concrete purpose. This lack of classificatory information is perhaps the strongest evidence for applying Flood's approach to these objects. If returning to the source gives us little by way of traditional methods of tracing origins, it is time to employ a comparative approach that privileges networks and display.

Although we do not know what these objects were, we do know how they are displayed. The Metropolitan and Cleveland fragments are in storage. The Chicago fragment is on a pedestal against the wall. In the David Collection the two sides of the fragment hang on a wall like a symmetrical stone butterfly. The Ackland fragment stands alone on a pedestal. The theme here is isolation; the objects are single pieces, sometimes split in half, but always independent of any other object in the gallery. It is here, finally, that the Hegmataneh fragments enter the group of objects and provide an entirely alternative method of display. The Euro-American fragments will likely never be united in a single display. But in Iran, in their admittedly haphazard position outside leaning against a wall, the Hegmataneh fragments are experienced together. They are not identical and certainly exhibit different levels of conservation, but all the same, they illustrate that they are not unique pieces. They form part of a larger group of objects with similar formal qualities that suggest a tradition, now lost, in which these objects were perhaps uncommon, but by no means one of a kind. It is important to emphasize that this grouping is not necessarily a suggestion of a concrete a pre-existing link, rather it is intended as a construction, a way to look at these objects in a different way. The canon of any field of art history is arbitrarily based on

accessibility, collecting practices and commodification. Grouping art objects is a function of art historical enquiry, however in order to avoid generating new monolithic classifications one must endeavor to understand what precisely a grouping contributes and the justification behind it. I am not suggesting that the group of fragments is comprehensive or concrete; they represent the various iterations of a similar design in several very different museum contexts. In this case, this grouping allows a broader analysis of Persian architectural fragments and their display (or lack thereof).

Experiencing the Hegmataneh fragments is very different from standing before the Ackland fragment. Under the bright lights of the gallery, the Ackland piece sits neatly atop its pedestal, surrounded by equally pristine objects from a wide variety of geographic contexts. The methods of display reflect the conventions of contemporary American museum culture, with the variety of juxtaposed objects signaling to the viewer “the cultural relativity of his own concepts and values.”⁹² The Hegmataneh fragments sit open to the elements, in the shade of trees surrounded by other stone objects with incised designs. One gets the feeling that these pieces were once an architectural convention of sorts, a motif in courtly expression common enough to be repeated (with slight variations) in the examples on display. This is a radical departure from the careful placement of the Euro-American fragments on pedestals and walls and an even further departure from those relegated to storerooms.

The Hegmataneh fragments are outside, leaning against the museum building, and can be experienced as a group within a courtyard filled with relatively contemporaneous stone sculpture and fragments from the same region. Michael Baxandall would argue that “cultural difference is not built into the display.” What Baxandall means here is some mechanism in the display itself which draws attention to the fact that objects from a society geographically or temporally remote

⁹² Baxandall, 40.

from the exhibition space are being presented to the viewer. This could take the form of objects from different regions in as single space, or references to a distance between the subject position of the curator and that of the object. The curators in Hamadan are Iranians, displaying objects from an Iranian past to a majority Iranian audience. Of course, contemporary Iran does not represent the same cultural milieu as the fourteenth century. As Benedict Anderson argues, contemporary nations are “imagined communities” which are “invented” to legitimize sovereignty and unify populations. They are constructions which derive their “authenticity” from imagined connections to a common past.⁹³ Baxandall presents three elements as contributing to an object on display: the object’s own narrative and maker, the exhibitor’s impression and display of the object, and the viewer’s impression of the object’s display.⁹⁴ In the case of the Ackland, there is a marked cultural difference between the object being displayed, other objects in the gallery, and the viewer or curator, with the added ambiguity of the object’s unknown past. In the Hegmataneh museum, all three elements are local. The objects were found nearby, the exhibitors live and participate in the culture of the environs of the museum, and the viewer is, if not from Hamadan itself, usually a Persian-speaking Iranian national.

How does the Hegmataneh display change our conception of these objects? Although I do not suggest it as an ideal display solution, it does generate meaning differently. Exhibition is a field, not a static entity.⁹⁵ Analyzing the effects of the display decisions and experience of the viewer allows for an understanding of how the object has been received by both the exhibitor and the visitor, a marked departure from previous efforts to focus on the object’s maker and moment

⁹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1983), 6.

⁹⁴ Baxandall, 34.

⁹⁵ Baxandall, 36.

of creation. By placing the fragments together, one images them as related, even if they might display minor stylistic differences. A group display leaves space for the viewer's comparative analysis, and provides more than a single example for examination. Displaying the objects together, perhaps in an exhibition, would raise questions about their differences and similarities and the effect of grouping pieces of Islamic art. The way they are currently exhibited, each in isolation or not on view at all, does not reflect the many layers of their current or historical existence. They are not solitary objects (and never were), but rather are linked by membership to a group of objects, and considering them together would draw attention to this relationship. The isolated display of the fragments in Euro-American collections reflects, one could argue, Svetlana Alpers' notion of the "museum effect": the "tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art like our own."⁹⁶ These objects are fragments. They can never be restored to their original position and context, and so the way they are "seen" is as isolated objects of visual interest. Certainly, their designs suggest that they were meant to be of some visual interest, but how much does this isolation impact the viewer's impression of the object as aesthetic? There is no ideal display, and I do not intend to present one, but every display resonates differently and it is important to acknowledge the role of the exhibition of pieces in their reception and meaning formation.

Contemporary contexts and the formation of meaning

When one discusses the "history" of an object, it is not just the object's origins that form its narrative. Someone created the Ackland fragment, but after the moment of creation it existed for at least six hundred years. The moment of completion is not the only temporality that defines the piece. Objects, one could argue, are perpetually "en route," dispersed by war, natural disasters, collecting or commodification. Though it is unclear where this architectural fragment

⁹⁶ Svetlana Alpers, "A Way of Seeing," 27.

was located for the majority of its existence, we do know that it was put on display twice in recent years: first in an Iranian gallery, then in the Ackland. These moments of collection and display form a small, but still relevant part of its history. Objects that have had a history of movement experience a multiplicity of cultural spaces. In his analysis of Medieval Islamic art displayed in Europe, Avinoam Shalem points out that “[the objects’] histories usually share experiences of two, if not more, cultural spaces.”⁹⁷ They become transcultural or cross-cultural, and in this case move from a private to a public domain.⁹⁸ To a certain degree these ideas support an examination of a social life of objects, but also their history. Exploring the implications of the Ackland fragment’s collection and display and the ways it has recently been handled in relation to its sister fragments is just as relevant to its historical narrative as its original purpose. As Stefan Weber, Director of the Pergamon Museum of Islamic Art, points out in his article, “A Concert of Things: Thoughts on objects of Islamic art in the museum context,” objects have more than a single meaning. This suggests that there are many layers of meaning, significance and history surrounding each object, something that museums often cannot articulate in the brief text of a label.⁹⁹

Related to display is a side effect of aesthetic isolation of objects, commodification. When removed from their moments of creation, and placed in a gallery, “objects are transformed in the meanings that they may be said to carry: they become moments of ownership, commodities.”¹⁰⁰ Obviously, there was once enough of a market for these objects to result in

⁹⁷ Shalem, 103.

⁹⁸ Shalem, 103-104.

⁹⁹ Stefan Weber, “A Concert of Things: Thoughts on objects of Islamic Art in the Museum Context,” *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, 36.

¹⁰⁰ Spencer Crew and James Sims, “Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue,” 159.

their collection and subsequent inclusion in major museum collections. Thinking about them as a group draws attention to the movement of these pieces, from Iran to private collectors and to museums around the world. The display of the pieces in Europe and America, either as bas reliefs or as sculptures, suggests the separation of these pieces from their origins via a complex system of buyers and sellers in various countries. Flood's use of "routes" can be applied here to imbue the movement of the fragments with a significance scholars have yet to explore. With each sale or donation, the fragments acquired a new identity, a new significance.

In my discussion of each fragment, I provided the identity of the donor. In the case of the Ackland fragment, the Hauges are of course the collectors who later donated the piece. Osbourne Hauge was a retired Foreign Service officer and an avid collector of Asian and Islamic art. Many of the pieces in his collection have been donated to prominent Islamic art museums like the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington D.C.¹⁰¹ In their correspondence with the Ackland the Hauges do not elaborate on why they chose the piece, however. The Metropolitan fragments' donor, Hagop Kevorkian, however, provides a very comprehensive perspective on his collecting practices. Marilyn Jenkins-Madina's analysis of collecting of the "Orient" at the Metropolitan provides a critical analysis of the collectors and dealers of Islamic and Pre-Islamic pieces. Kevorkian, a Turkish art dealer, conducted excavations in Iran in the early twentieth century, and provided the Metropolitan Museum with hundreds of objects from his digs.¹⁰² Jenkins-Madina draws attention to the fact that the Metropolitan Museum's Islamic collection is largely a reflection of a small clique of dealers and collectors like Kevorkian whose aesthetic criteria

¹⁰¹ "Osbourne Hauge," The Washington Post, accessed 4/1/2016, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A20394-2004Aug20.html>.

¹⁰² Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, "Collecting the 'Orient' at the Met: Early Tastemakers in America," *Ars Orientalis* (2000): 72-74.

formed the cannon of objects in the collection.¹⁰³ As Moya Carey and Margaret Hayes argue, Islamic art (like most art) has had “one hand (then as now) in the pocket of private collecting and connoisseurship.”¹⁰⁴ The position of the known fragments in museum collections is a direct result of collecting practices. Oleg Grabar goes so far as to suggest that “weaknesses” in the study of Islamic art (and the field as a whole) could be a result of collecting practices that omit or foreground certain histories, objects, regions and aesthetics.¹⁰⁵

The acquisition history of the fragments, after they were collected and sold or donated to museums eventually manifested into different methods of display, or lack thereof. Suzanne MacLeod, in her analysis of the recent history of the Sultanganj Buddha in the Birmingham Museum, argues for a self-reflexive analysis of a museum object’s current location and engaging a framing rather than a classificatory approach. Furthermore, as she points out, “space can and does impact directly on the meanings of objects, limiting the ways in which they are able to signify.”¹⁰⁶ In the absence of a clear historical and cultural context, it is these notions of space and current framing that provide us with an alternative context for the object today.

Trying to isolate the roots of the fragments might be possible one day, but for now, studying their acquisition and relation to one another is far more fruitful. The acquisition of all the Euro-American fragments prior to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 imbues their presence in their respective museums with a political narrative that has not been acknowledged in existing

¹⁰³ Jenkins- Madina, 87.

¹⁰⁴ Moya Carey and Margaret Hayes, “Introduction: The Historiography of Islamic Art and Architecture,” *Art Historiography* 6 (2012): 3.

¹⁰⁵ Oleg Grabar, “The Implications of Collecting Islamic Art,” in *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850-1950*, ed. Stephen Vernoit, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 198.

¹⁰⁶ Suzanne MacLeod, “Out of Time and Place: The recent history and curious double life of the Sultanganj Buddha,” in *Sculpture and the Museum*, ed. Christopher R. Marshall, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 169.

scholarship, likely because it has no bearing on the object's formal qualities. Yet this political history is a part of every curator's experience with the fragments, and plays some part in their framing of the fragments' display or lack thereof. I would argue that the Metropolitan's decision not to display its fragments in the years since the revolution reflects a hesitance to present information about pieces whose histories were lost in political upheaval.¹⁰⁷ The strained relations between the U.S. and Iran have undoubtedly shaped the conception of all these objects in U.S. collections, and though many Persian pieces are displayed, those in the Metropolitan are typically album pages, ceramics, carpets or metalwork. Architecture, deeply linked to geographical origins in most analyses, presents far more difficulties to scholars than pieces that are easily transported and largely self-contained.

The similar iconographies of the fragments, like the lions, bulls and miniature pillars have been used to connect the pieces temporally, but can also link them to a shared social milieu in which these symbols participated. Aside from their iconography, they are all currently located in museums. They might have moved across space and time, but remain linked. They likely were created in a similar, albeit unknown Persian social and political environment, and the Euro-American fragments all travelled across land and sea only to have found their way back into a shared space, the Euro-American museum. One's first instinct when encountering the Ackland fragment is to attempt to answer the many questions surrounding its origins. It is only after examining the other fragments and their display that new priorities emerge and routes become as significant as absent roots

¹⁰⁷ Of course, the Metropolitan displays many Persian objects. It is worth noting that the architectural fragments on display in the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia galleries, like mihrabs for example, are installed as they were in their original architectural contexts. Mihrabs are set into the wall in the galleries, tympana are placed above archways, etc. The lack of knowledge about the fragments' architectural origins might make it difficult to include them in the galleries in this way.

Conclusion

The Ackland fragment remains a mystery; there is still no consensus on its origin, function, or the precise meaning of its iconography. However in this thesis I have argued that there is still much to be learned about this object regardless of its lost origins. My examination of its current display in the Ackland illustrates the ways in which aesthetic qualities are foregrounded in the absence of a known provenance. I introduced five comparanda in Euro-American museums in order to bring the Ackland fragment into conversation with pieces of stylistic and iconographical similarity. The fragments were produced more than once, and there were likely more than those analyzed here; some might have been destroyed and others sold into private collections or never discovered at all. Most likely, they represent an innovation or importation which did not develop beyond the production of a relatively small number of pieces. It is very possible that even in their original context they were an unusual amalgamation of iconography, stone carving and architectural component. Perhaps one day new fragments will be discovered, or their likeness will be revealed in manuscript illuminations. Until then, an alternative approach has been taken here which relies on a comparative study of all the known fragments in light of their iconography, display, and collection.

In addition to direct comparison of the objects, I utilized a historiographical approach to analyze the ways in which prior scholarship focused on dynastic classification. I have proposed an alternative methodological approach which centers on movement and networks rather than monolithic classificatory taxonomies. Finally, I expanded the corpus by analyzing five fragments in Hamadan alongside the Euro-American objects. In critically considering the collecting,

commodification, and display practices at play in relation to these fragments I presented a narrative which did not rely solely on origins. I have sought to generate a new discourse around the Ackland fragment which not only complicates its current position and identity, but which brings together eleven objects that I believe have never been united in scholarly analysis. Perhaps one day these pieces will be physically united in an exhibition which would allow them to be experienced together rather than in isolation. Such an exhibition would raise questions similar to those presented here with the added resonance of the physical proximity of the objects.

Even when considered together the fragments are enigmatic, but beyond their object group they represent an even larger mystery. What is the state of Perso-Islamic architecture as a field? How are Persian objects being studied outside of their origins, and what are the limitations the complex political history of Iran has presented for scholars today? What does the current positioning of Islamic art objects contribute to art historical enquiry? The answers to many of these questions are still forming as Islamic art history develops as a field and as the study of Persian objects continues. Perso-Islamic art history will likely always grapple with the legacy of the Iranian Revolution; however what is changing is the ways in which scholars conceptualize this legacy. This study is merely a small contribution to a growing field of scholars who are finding new ways to approach Islamic art, a field with a relatively short history and emphasis on self-reflexive historiography. Although the Ackland fragment sits atop a pedestal, and its roots are lost, it is not alone and its meaning is not occluded. Each day, with each museum visitor, each students' question, each scholar's new theory, the fragment generates new discourses creating new roots, not linked to a particular time or space but instead to movement and circulation of people, ideas and objects.

Figures

Figure 1- Unknown Artist, “Balustrade with Arabesque and Animal Decoration,”1100-1350, Sandstone, H. 66.8 cm L. 77.5 cm W. 12.2 cm. Ackland Museum Permanent Collection, Chapel Hill, Photo by author.



Figure 2- Unknown Artist, “Balustrade with Arabesque and Animal Decoration,”1100-1350, Sandstone, H. 66.8 cm L. 77.5 cm W. 12.2 cm. Ackland Museum Permanent Collection, Chapel Hill, Photo: Ackland Museum.



Figure 3- Left view of “Balustrade with Animal and Vegetal Decoration,” Photo: Author.



Figure 4- Galleries of Southern and Western Asia, Ackland Museum, Chapel Hill, Photo: Author.



Figure 5- Mohammad Sharaf, "End of Balustrade," 1303-4, Limestone, H. 70.8 cm W. 13.3 cm L. 82.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum Permanent Collection, New York. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 6- Mohammad Sharaf, *End of Balustrade*, 1303-4, Limestone, H. 70.8 cm W. 13.3 cm L. 82.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum Permanent Collection, New York. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 7- Unknown Artist, *End of Balustrade*, 1303-4, Iran, Limestone, H. 66.7 cm L. 78.7 cm W. 13.3 cm. Metropolitan Museum Permanent Collection, New York. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 8- Unknown Artist, “Balustrade with Arabesque and Animal Decoration,” 1100-1350, Sandstone, H. 66.8 cm L. 77.5 cm W. 12.2 cm. Ackland Museum Permanent Collection, Chapel Hill, Photo: Author.



Figure 9- Minaret of Jam, 1149, Sharak District, Afghanistan. Photo: Archnet.



Figure 10- Interior column, Friday Mosque, 11th Century, Isfahan, Iran. Photo: Author.



Figure 11- Unknown artist, “Balustrade,” 1303-4, Hamadan?, Limestone, H: 66.70 cm W: 83.80 cm L: 10.60 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland. Photo: Cleveland Museum of Art.



Figure 12- Unknown artist, "Architectural Fragment," 13th/14th century, Limestone with carved decoration, 72.6 x 12.2 x 77.5 cm, Art Institute of Chicago. Photo: Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 13- Unknown artist, Two Limestone Reliefs, c.1200, Hamadan?, Limestone, H: 47 cm L: 62cm. The David Collection, Copenhagen. Photo: The David Collection.



Figure 14- Gunbad-I Alavyian, 13-14th Centuries, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by author.



Figure 15- Interior view, Gunbad-I Alavyian, 13-14th Centuries, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by author.



Figure 16- Interior Mihrab, Gunbad-I Alavyian, 13-14th Centuries, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by author.



Figure 17- Ruined foundations of the Achaemenid city of Hegmataneh. Hegmataneh Hill Museum. Hamadan, Iran. Photo by author.



Figure 18- Stone Slabs, Hegmataneh Hill Museum, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by Author.



Figure 19- Back Courtyard, Hegmataneh Hill Museum, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by Author.



Figure 20- Fragment 1, Hegmataneh Hill Museum, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by Author.



Figure 21- Fragment 2, Hegmataneh Hill Museum, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by Author.



Figure 22- Fragment 3, Hegmataneh Hill Museum, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by Author.



Figure 23- Fragment 4, Hegmataneh Hill Museum, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by Author.



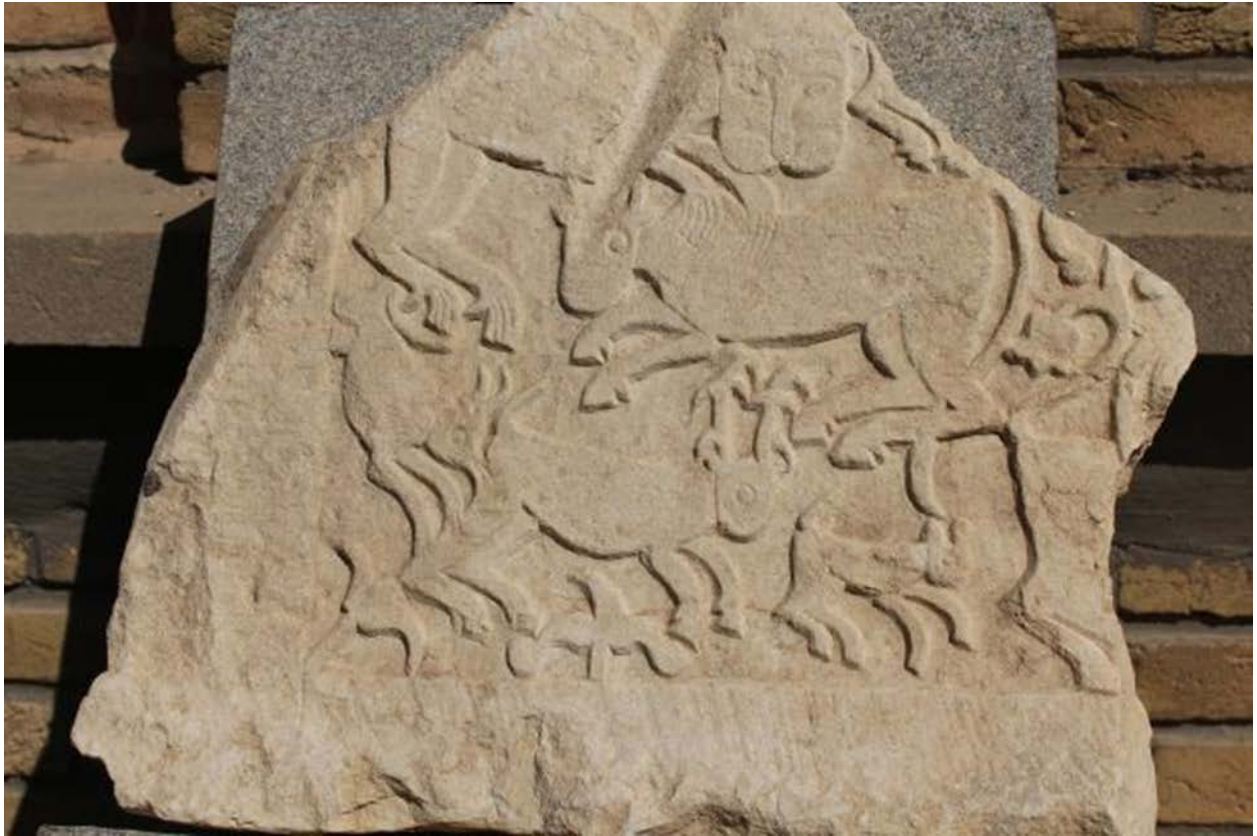
Figure 24- Relief Sculpture, Persepolis, Fars, Iran. Photo by Author.



Figure 25- Detail of Ackland Balustrade, Ackland Museum, Chapel Hill. Photo by Author.



Figure 26- Fragment 5, Hegmataneh Hill Museum, Hamadan, Iran. Photo by Author.



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