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Written Assessment of Dr. Ladislav Stančo's habilitation thesis "Bactria / Tokharistan in the 3rd–4th c. AD. Selected problems of settlement patterns and material culture"

I was asked by Prof. Petr Charvát, Professor of the Faculty of Education, Charles University Prague, in his capacity as President of the Habilitation Commission to write an assessment of Dr. Ladislav Stančo's habilitation thesis entitled "Bactria / Tokharistan in the 3rd–4th c. AD. Selected problems of settlement patterns and material culture". It is a pleasure for me to do so.

Dr. Stančo's academic achievements are known to me for many years. I follow his multifaceted publications closely and always with great reward. I had repeatedly occasion to attend his presentations at conferences in Europe and Russia (most recently in Berlin in November 2017). In addition, I had the pleasure of his attendance of a workshop I had organized in September 2017 at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (NYU) on new archaeological and numismatic research pertaining to 3rd-5th century Bactria/Tokharistan and Sogdiana.

My own scholarly expertise – although focused on a different region (namely Sogdiana, to the north and northwest of Bactria-Tokharistan) – is close to Dr. Stančo's main interests: Antique and Late Antique cultures in Western Central Asia and their connections with the Mediterranean world. Like Dr. Stančo, I conduct since many years archaeological fieldwork in Uzbekistan (both stationary excavations of settlement sites, as well as intensive and extensive archaeological field surveys).

Motivated by my own research on territorial fortifications in the Bukhara oasis my scholarly interest has, over the past years, shifted precisely to the chronological focus of Dr. Stančo's habilitation theses: the 3rd/4th centuries CE – the so-called "Kushano-Sasanian period" (to be used mostly with reference to Khorasan and Bactria/Tokharistan, including the Middle Amu-Darya micro-region). In several ways, this is a rather peculiar period during the history of western Central Asia. In order to fully grasp the importance and achievements of Dr. Stančo's thesis it is important to understand these

particularities and their consequences for our historical knowledge of the region during these centuries. Let me therefore start with some general comments on the topic, before I will set out to discuss Dr. Stančo's thesis in detail.

Historians of Central Asia are, unlike their colleagues concerned with other 'civilizations' of the Ancient World (such as the Mediterranean world, the Near East, or East Asia), up to a relative late moment in history (arguably as late as the 10th century CE, when the first local histories, such as the *Tarikh-i Bukhara*, the *Tarikh-i Nishapur*, or the *Tarikh-i Sistan*, were composed), almost completely dependent on outside sources for the reconstruction of historical narratives. Inscriptions (both monumental and on small objects) are relatively rare (certainly so, if compared to the Graeco-Roman and the Chinese world) and archival material is almost completely lacking.¹ In order to learn about the dynastic history and the course of events (even in its broadest strokes) historians of pre-Islamic Central Asia have to rely heavily on Greco-Roman authors and Chinese Dynastic histories and encyclopedias. Of particular importance, for most of the centuries prior to the Muslim conquest,² are Chinese sources on the "Western regions", due to their more direct access to and greater interest in Central Asia. Thus, many aspects of the history even of 'superpowers' like the Kushan Empire in Western Central Asia and Northern India, are largely known to us thanks to Chinese written sources. This dependence becomes fully apparent in periods when we lack the testimony of Chinese sources – as it is (by and large) the case for the 3rd to early 5th centuries CE (due to the lack of diplomatic engagement with western Central Asia during the political crisis of post-Han China). As a consequence, the Kushano-Sasanian period still appears to historians – at least to those who rely only on narrative historiographical sources – to a large degree as a 'dark age'. The centuries between the downfall of the Great Kushan Dynasty and the beginning of Türk suzerainty still remain some of the most enigmatic and disputed periods in the history of western Central Asia. Major questions concerning even basic political and cultural developments are still poorly understood. For example, the extent and the character of Kushan-shahr as a polity – especially vis-à-vis the western Sasanian dominions – is still largely unclear, and even the order and absolute dates of its rulers – mostly attested only through coins – is still a matter of considerable debate among numismatists. Yet, it is clear that this period was one of important political, social, demographic, and cultural changes in the regions between Hindukush and Syr-Darya: the sudden rise of (Sasanian) Iran as a new hegemonic power in the Middle East, the ascent of Sogdiana as one of the main cultural and economic power-houses of Eurasia, and the subsequent influx of new populations and elites from the north, labeling themselves and/or labeled by others as "Huns" (Chionites, Kidarites, Hephthalites).

One of the consequences of this (almost) complete lack of historiographical (narrative) sources is the increased importance of archaeological data (together with numismatic and epigraphical materials). This is the reason why Dr. Stančo's academic oeuvre in general and his present habilitation thesis in

¹ Note however that one of the only four "archives" known so far from pre- and early Islamic western Central Asia covers also the Kushano-Sasanian period.

² The only real exception are the years 330-327 BCE, the years of Alexander's sojourn in Bactria and Sogdiana, for which we dispose of excellent accounts (by later authors), which provide a unique 'spotlight' on the wider region for the Late Achaemenid period.

particular are of great importance not only to archaeologists and art historians, but also to a wider audience of historians of Antiquity and Late Antiquity. Yet, dealing with this period also poses particular challenges: in particular it requires acute awareness of detail discussions in numismatic research, and interpretative cautiousness considering the many uncertainties of the chronological framework and course of events.

Let me now, after these brief introductory remarks, turn in detail to Dr. Stančo's thesis. His work comprises, after an introduction, a total of 4 chapters, which greatly vary in size and scope (chapter 1 "General characteristics of the landscape" amounts to a total of only 8 pages, while chapter 3 "Selected types and groups of material culture" is 113 pages long). It closes with concluding remarks, a lengthy bibliography, a list of "written sources", and an index. As the author makes clear in his introduction, this thesis is a collection of individual studies pertaining to the overall topic (chronologically and spatially). Some of them have been already published as articles in journals (and were, thus, known to me), others are currently in press as book chapters). Only some few chapters or subchapters (introduction, chapters 3.2 and 3.4) had been specifically written by the author for the present thesis.

In order to tie these various chapters together, the "introduction" is naturally of particular importance. And it achieves this goal fully. The author effectively introduces the key parameters of his study, details the major research questions and the specific challenges faced by his study, and he critically reviews the results of previous research. It is admirable how he succeeds to incorporate his unique in-depth micro-regional knowledge of a particular micro-region (the Sherabad oasis) into the broader historical picture of Antique and Late Antique Bactria-Tokharistan ("Kushan-Sasanian period in Tokharistan: an overview"). Particularly insightful is his discussion of the (still surprisingly few) available radiocarbon dates from the region for the period under question (pp. 18-19).

Chapter 1 "General characteristics of the landscape" is less of an independent chapter than essentially an introduction for chapter 2. In a total of only 8 pages (some of them mostly containing photographs and maps), the author details a number of important environmental parameters. In my opinion it would have made more sense to present all this as an introductory subchapter of chapter 2, but this does not negatively impact the value of the discussion.

Much more substantial is, indeed, chapter 2 on settlement patterns in the Sherabad oasis during Antiquity and Late Antiquity. Contrary to the title, the author does not only discuss the archaeological data for the Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian period, but also for the Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic ("transitional") period, as well as the "Early Middle Ages" (5th-8th centuries CE). It is important to stress here that this part of his study is not only based on an admirable command of decades of soviet-period archaeological fieldwork (no small achievement in itself, considering the rather unsystematic character of earlier archaeological works and their problematic state of publication), but on many years of archeological fieldwork conducted and directed by the author himself. Thus, this study elicits new primary data for the history of the region. The results are impressive. Particularly important – and historically consequential – is the author's observation that only in the Kushan period an oasis proper

formed in the Sherabad area. This invites a number of interesting questions concerning the dynamics of historical landscapes (e.g., the role of royal patronage in the formation of historical landscapes).

The by far largest chapter is chapter 3 “Selected types and groups of material culture”. It represents a collection of previously published studies (e.g. chapter 3.1 “Late Antique Fine Ware Dishes” in *Parthica*) and new chapters. For a poorly archaeological audience these studies are doubtlessly the richest of the entire thesis. Chapter 3.1 exemplifies impressively how, by way of an excellent control of the material together with a sound methodology, the study of even seemingly narrow groups of material (in this case: one particular type of dish), can contribute to the broader discussion of cultural innovation and exchange. I have to admit that I was particularly impressed by chapter 3.4 – the best-informed discussion of rotary quern stones in Central Asia I have ever read. It demonstrates the author’s ability to turn a seemingly inconspicuous group of material – rotary quern stones – into a fascinating subject and to tease out unexpected historical implications, all starting from the author’s own fieldwork results.³

No less impressive and valuable is chapter 4. It represents a detailed and up-to-date discussion of “Roman” imports into (western) Central Asia. Again, the author successfully demonstrates a surprising and highly commendable command of the archaeological material involved – not only from his own “home region”, but from far beyond (Sogdiana, Margiana, Choresmia, Syr-Darya regions, Tianshan, etc.). This part of Dr. Stančo’s study will doubtlessly become a much needed “hard fact” corrective amidst so many superficial discussions of “Silk Road exchanges”. It demonstrates the enormous potential of archaeological research in order to overcome stereotypical and fragmentary written evidence (be it Pliny the Elder, or the Hanshu). The author demonstrates convincingly that “the small number of Roman coins found both in Central Asia and western China clearly shows that the principal artery of the Roman eastern trade must have been led a different way, apparently by sea, across the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, not overland.” (p. 217) This is an important research result with broad implications, challenging some key assumptions of present-day “Silk Road studies”.

As mentioned above, the thesis is concluded by a summary (“concluding remarks”), an exhaustive bibliography (listing more than 260 titles!), a list of written sources, and even an index. All this adds additional scholarly value to the present study. The only critique I would like to offer pertains to the

³ I would like to add to the author’s (impressive) corpus three more fragments of rotary quern stones from our own fieldwork at and around Bashtepa since 2015 in Bukharan Sogdiana (see the unpublished field report STARK *ET AL.* 2015; they will soon be published in KIDD/STARK FORTHCOMING). As they are relatively small in size (15-22 cm diameter, 4.6-8 cm height), they seem to belong to hand mills. Their discovery is significant for the question of when rotary querns started to supplement and subsequently replace simple saddle querns. Although rotary querns represent only a very small percentage within a corpus of over 50 grinding stones found at Bashtepa (the rest are saddle querns), their appearance at Bashtepa is associated with a relatively early *terminus ante quem*, provided by the end of the settlement cluster and intensive farming in the hinterland of Bashtepa not later than the early 2nd century CE. This is supported by a set of 18 radiocarbon samples from our excavations at Bashtepa and the complete lack of so-called Kyzylkyr ceramics in the area (dating 3rd-4th centuries CE). Most likely, these rotary querns date to the time when a dozen of small settlements and individual farmsteads, surrounded by wheat and barley fields (macrobotanical remains from Bashtepa, traces of field systems and irrigation structures in the surroundings) flourished in the area between the 1st cent. BCE and the 1st century CE. This would make them the earliest rotary quern stones in western Central Asia, and raises questions concerning the dating of early examples from nearby Choresmia.

fact that overall, the author has made only few – perhaps too few – efforts to edit the manuscript in its final form. For instance, from footnote 20 we learn that chapters 2.3.1 to 2.3.3 were taken out from a larger book manuscript and remained unchanged since at least June 2016. It must be regretted that the author did not attempt to update at least the bibliography. Some important works clearly appeared to late for him to be taken into account.⁴ Others, however, could have been known to the author.⁵ In one case – the first appearance of the term “Tokharistan” in a Bactrian inscription on a Silver cup – the author mentions the find as still unpublished, although the respective publication by N. Sims-Williams appeared already in 2015 (SIMS-WILLIAMS 2015).

All this is not to diminish by any means the enormous quality of the present thesis. As I tried to show above, its scholarly value far exceeds the limits of Central Asian archaeology during the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. It represents in fact an important contribution to the much broader discussion of Late Antique History (in Central Asia and beyond).

With this thesis the author demonstrates a firm control of a vast and very diverse body of archaeological material, a profound knowledge of primary sources and secondary scholarly literature, as well as a supreme methodological rigor. For all these reasons, Dr. Stančo’s contribution certainly deserves to be accepted as a habilitation-dissertation as it meets all relevant criteria. Therefore I advise the bodies involved in Dr. Stančo’s habilitation process to accept this work as habilitation-dissertation and continue the process of Dr. Stančo’s habilitation.

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⁴ For example: MORRIS 2017; REZAKHANI 2017, OMEL'CHENKO 2016; ALRAM 2016.

⁵ For example: ALRAM 2014; BROSEDER 2015; FALK 2015; MAXWELL-JONES 2015; VONDROVEC 2014; PFISTERER 2013.

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