What does a hoard found in Afghanistan tell us about trade in Pompeii?

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One of the most beautiful and striking objects from Pompeii is an ivory carving of a young woman, found in House 1-8-5 on Via dell’Abbondanza. Both the material from which it was made — elephant ivory — and the style of the carving leave no doubt that this was an import from India. Although the carving now appears as an exquisite statuette, she was originally part of a piece of furniture, probably the leg of a small table. Almost no ivory carvings of this period survive in India itself, so stylistic comparisons are with stone sculptures, particularly those decorating Buddhist stupas. However, a hoard discovered at Begram in Afghanistan includes a large number of ivory carvings. Among these are three female figures that were originally furniture legs, similar to the Pompeii carving. Most of the Begram ivories, however, are decorative panels that had originally been fastened to wooden chairs, settees and stools.

The Begram hoard was found during excavations in an early city in Afghanistan, possibly ancient Kapisha, the summer capital of the Kushans who ruled much of western Central Asia and northern India during the early centuries AD. Sealed in two rooms within a palatial building, the hoard was originally thought to have been the treasure of local rulers, accumulated over centuries and concealed during the city’s sack by the Sassanians in the 3rd century AD. Recent work, however, shows that the material all belongs within a narrow time frame in the later 1st century AD, roughly contemporary with the destruction of Pompeii.

The objects stored in these two rooms were mainly imports, and it is now suggested that they may have been the stock-in-trade of a wealthy merchant, sealed in these two strongrooms during some crisis and never recovered. They provide a remarkable snapshot of international trade at the time of Pompeii’s final days.

Begram was located at the junction of three trade routes: one leading west to the Parthian and Roman Empires, one east to the oasis towns of Central Asia and the Han Chinese Empire, and one south to the kingdoms of India. Begram owed its importance to its strategic position at the confluence of the Ghorband and Panjshir rivers, controlling two passes through the Hindu Kush mountains.

The mountainous region of Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan was also the source of many prized minerals, some of which had already been exploited for around 4,000 years by this time. In the 1st century AD this region traded lapis lazuli (a brilliant blue stone available only from Badakshan in northern Afghanistan), turquoise from the Hindu Kush, and aromatics, spices and medicines from the Himalayas such as costus, spikenard, lycium and malebathrum. Timber from the Himalayas was also exported, mainly to the Parthians and other states in the Gulf.

Tiny lacquer fragments in the northern strongroom (room 13) are all that remain of numerous lacquered wooden bowls and boxes imported from China. Trade links between China and the west had existed since early times and had flourished since the 2nd century BC. Traders transported goods along routes
connecting the oasis towns that grew up around the Tarim Basin and other southern Central Asian regions between China and northern India, known collectively as the Silk Road. For considerable periods, Han China was able to establish control over much of the Silk Road, and at the time of Pompeii’s destruction was just entering a new phase of military campaigning to push back the Xiongnu nomads and regain control of Silk Road territory under the enterprising general Ban Chao. China’s best known export was silk, which reached as far as the Roman world; the Han also exported other fine textiles, lacquerware and other luxury goods through the Silk Road towns. They also engaged with their nomad neighbours, trading manufactured goods such as silks for the horses raised by the nomads, or bribing them with luxuries, and even Chinese princess brides, to prevent raids. A series of rich nomad (possibly Scythian) burials at Tillya Tepe, west of Begram towards the Amu Darya river, contained silver mirrors, typical examples of such Chinese luxuries, as well as locally manufactured objects strongly influenced by Chinese artistic subject matter and style.

Camel caravans passing from Begram through the Central Asian oasis towns such as Kashgar, Kucha and Turfan, acquired their orchard and garden produce for onward trade to China. These included grapes, saffron, beans and pomegranates. However, the Central Asian products that were supposedly the most highly valued by the Chinese were the “Heavenly Horses” of Ferghana, a region northeast of Begram. Merchants travelling along the Silk Road carried not only goods but also ideas: Buddhism spread from India to China along this route during the 1st century AD.

Room 13 at Begram also contained a number of chairs and couches decorated with ivory panels, while in the southern strongroom (room 10) a large number of footstools with ivory decoration were stacked along the eastern wall, along with ivory furniture legs. Some pieces were executed in bone, though the majority are of ivory. Stylistically Indian and made from Indian ivory, a few pieces may nevertheless have been made in workshops in Begram rather than imported, since unworked ivory was also discovered in the city. Raw materials such as ivory were major exports from South Asia as well as manufactured goods.

In the 1st century AD, the Indian subcontinent was divided between many principalities. The major players were the Western Shakas in western India; the Satavahanas in the Deccan; the Chera, Chola and Pandhya kingdoms in the south; and in the north the Indo-Parthians (Pahlavas) and Kushans; and there were also numerous smaller kingdoms. At the time of Pompeii’s destruction, the great Indo-Parthian kingdom that had controlled the whole region from the Parthian Empire’s eastern borders to the northern Ganges valley was rapidly losing territory to the expanding empire of the Kushans, originally Central Asian nomads. By 100 AD, the Kushans controlled the northwest and the Ganges valley as well as western Central Asia. It is unclear whether Begram was still ruled by Indo-Parthians in 79 AD or had already fallen to the Kushans.

India exported fine cotton textiles; gemstones including beryl, carnelian, agate and onyx; spices such as pepper; aromatics and drugs; ivory and tortoiseshell; pearls and timber. Goods reached Begram along a route from Taxila in Gandhara (northwest South Asia); apart from the ivories, few Indian imports were found in the Begram storerooms. One exception is a ceramic vessel in the form of a kinnari (mythical bird-woman). Taxila was the meeting point of several routes: a long established road led southeast to the cities of the Ganges Valley, while the Indus river provided a major highway to the ports of the western Indian Ocean.
It was by this route, probably through the port of Barbaricon at the mouth of the Indus, that the greater part of the goods found in the storerooms had reached Begram. These were products of the Roman world, luxury items sought for their prestige value and exoticism since many were made of materials that were available locally, such as glass and bronze. Similarly Roman wine was imported to the region (though no wine amphorae were found in the Begram storerooms) despite the production of wines locally in Arachosia (southern Afghanistan). Roman imports stored at Begram also included materials not found in the region, such as ostrich eggs from North Africa made into rhyta (drinking vessels), coral from the Mediterranean, and vessels of Egyptian porphyry stone.

Bronzes imported from the Roman world to Begram include both tableware and statuary with Classical subjects. Certain subjects were particularly popular: for example, statuettes of the Hellenised Egyptian child-god Harpocrates have been found at both Begram and Taxila. Many of the Roman imports at Begram have counterparts in objects found at Pompeii: these include bronze vessels and statuettes of Heracles.

A series of plaster medallions found at Begram would have been used as moulds for making decorations on metalware that was produced locally. They would also have been used as samples to show potential customers. Some were small scenes in relief while others were partially three-dimensional. Examples of such 3-D decoration in the Roman world include a silver dish from a villa at Boscoreale destroyed in the same eruption as Pompeii.

South Asia had a flourishing glass industry, producing in particular a great variety of beads that were widely traded. Roman glassware, however, was technologically the most advanced in the world in the 1st century AD, and was in demand as far away as China. Workshops in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt used glass-blowing, invented in this area in the 1st century BC, to mass-produce everyday glass vessels, making glass a commodity available to ordinary households. Glass-blowing was also part of the repertoire of techniques used to create works of incredible sophistication and complexity, such as the four rare and highly prized cameo glass objects found at Pompeii.

Other luxury glassware included vessels in unusual shapes, such as fish; beautiful painted goblets; jars decorated with gold leaf; vases with trailed decoration; and fine coloured glass cups — examples of all of these were found in the Begram storerooms. There were also mosaic (millefiori) bowls. Made with coloured glass rods, mosaic glass had a long history in West Asia and Europe. The painted glass goblets from Begram bore typical scenes from eastern Roman life, including hunting, fishing and the harvesting of dates. One depicted the famous Pharos lighthouse at Alexandria.

Begram is far from being the only eastern site where Roman and other traded goods have been found, but, like Pompeii, it represents a moment caught in time. Both settlements therefore give a snapshot of international trade links that connected a large part of the Old World in the 1st century AD. Distinctive pieces, such as the Indian ivory figure from Pompeii and the Roman glassware at Begram, are visible, indisputable evidence for the trading network. They stand proxy for the huge volume of other traded commodities, such as silks, spices and aromatics, that have left little or no physical trace.

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