



A TALE OF TWO EMPIRES:

ROME ET PERSIA

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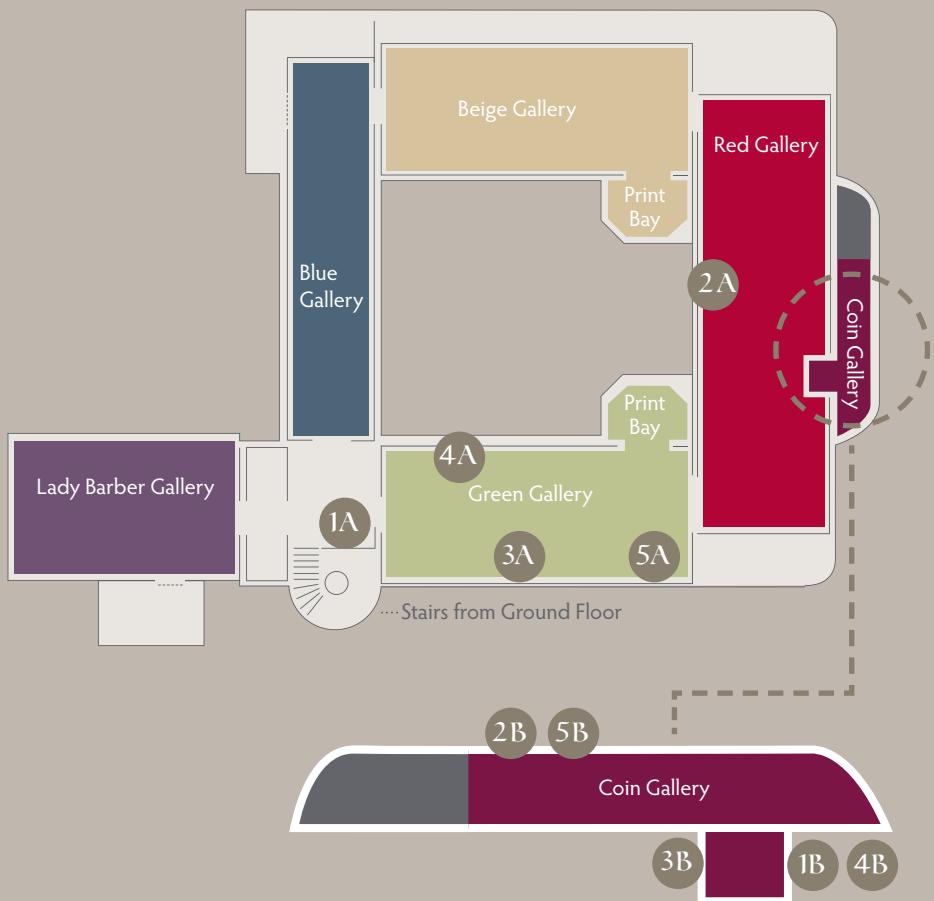
CONNECTIONS:
COINS, SEALS AND
PAINTINGS

THE
BARBER
INSTITUTE OF
FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

ROME AND PERSIA AT THE BARBER INSTITUTE

This booklet will lead you on a trail linking the coin gallery exhibition *A Tale of Two Empires: Rome and Persia* with the main art galleries and making connections between the paintings, sculptures, coins and seals on display.



Plan locating the featured artworks.

ACHAEMENID PERSIA



1A

Sculptor: Persian (Achaemenid)

Title: Head of a Guard

Place made: Persepolis (Iran), 486-480 BC

Method: Carved limestone

No. 47.7



1B

In the name of: Mausolos

Place made: Halicarnassos (Bodrum, Turkey), 377-353 BC

Method: Struck silver

Accession number: Gooo3

This spearman was once a part of the palace of Persepolis, probably from the façade of the Apadana (Audience Hall). The palace was begun by the Achaemenid Emperor Darius I and completed by his son, Xerxes I in the early 5th century BC. This fragment was most likely carved during the early years of the reign of Xerxes I. It is one of hundreds of such figures that lined the balconies, walls and walkways of the massive palace complex. The vast scene celebrated not just Persia's military might, but also the peoples the empire ruled over.

To command such a vast empire, the Persian emperors devolved authority to Satraps (local governors) like Mausolos, who ruled in Caria (Southwest Turkey) on behalf of the Persian Emperor Artaxerxes II.

Though produced in the same empire, the Persepolis spearman and the coin of Mausolos are artistically very different. The spearman is classically Achaemenid Persian, while the coin is notably Ancient Greek in appearance. This is because the Persian Empire did not impose its own culture upon its subjects, and local rulers like Mausolos had the freedom to strike coins in their own style.

DID YOU KNOW?

The word **Mausoleum**, meaning a large, often a family, tomb derives from Mausolos's name. This is because Mausolos's tomb was so large and impressive that it became one of the wonders of the ancient world.

JEWISH WOMEN UNDER THE PERSIANS



2A

Artist: Jan Steen (1626-1679)

Title: *The Wrath of Ahasuerus*

Place made: Probably Haarlem, 1668-70

Method: Oil on canvas

No. 39.22



2B

In the name of: Yazdgird I

Place made: Ahuramazd Artashir (Ahvaz, Iran), 399-420

Method: Struck silver

Accession number: So138

The Persians are generally well regarded in Jewish texts, and this probably dates back to the freeing of the Jews from captivity in Babylon after the conquests of Cyrus the Great in the sixth century BC.

The subject of the Jan Steen's picture is from the Book of Esther vii, 1-7, in both the Torah and Bible. When Haman decreed the massacre of all the Jews in Persia, Esther – the new wife of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) – held a banquet in which she revealed to him for the first time that she was Jewish. Horrified, the king then ordered that Haman be hanged. The scene draws heavily on the tradition of Perso-Jewish good relations, handed down through the shared religious texts.

Xerxes was not the only Persian Shah to take a Jewish wife. Some centuries later, the Shah Yazdgird I married Shushandokht (Susannah), the daughter of the Exilarch (leader of the Jewish community in Persia). While the other side of the coin depicts a Zoroastrian ateshtan – a fire altar of the faith of the Shahs – Yazdgird himself was noted for his tolerance towards Jews, Christians, Buddhists and other non-Zoroastrians.

Steen painted centuries later than the events depicted and portrays contemporary orientalist ideas about the Persian past. The coin shows Yazdgird in contemporary dress, but that attire would have been as alien to the historic Xerxes as Steen's Ahasuerus.

DID YOU KNOW?

Though Steen's name for the Shah as Ahasuerus seems strange to us, it is no more or less a corruption of the Shah's name than the commonly-used Xerxes, which is a Greek corruption. The Shah's actual name would have been something more like Khshayarsha.

AENEAS



3A

Artist: Giovanni di Luteri, called Dosso Dossi

(about 1486 – 1542)

Title: *Scenes from the Aeneid: The Sicilian Games*

Place made: Ferrara, about 1522-24

Method: Oil on canvas

No. 64.5



3B

In the name of: Julius Caesar

Place made: North Africa, 47-46 BC

Method: Struck silver

Accession number: Ro704

People have always been fascinated by the feats of mythical heroes and gods. Some tales capture the imagination more than others, however, and those concerning Aeneas have made him one of the better-known human heroes of ancient myth.

As a Roman hero, it is most straightforward to think of him in a Roman context, for example, the depiction of him on the silver *denarius* coin of Julius Caesar. Caesar considered Aeneas to be his ancestor.

Aeneas's mythical adventures continued to have an impact on the human imagination well after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Dosso Dossi painted this particular scene from Aeneas's adventures in the 1520s, more than 2,000 years after the supposed time of the mythical Aeneas, and 1,500 years after Caesar's *denarius* was struck. The scene

probably portrays the Trojans on the Libyan Coast, as recounted in Book I of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The three distant figures behind the left scene are Aeneas and his companion, Achates, who meet Venus 'under the trees', where she foretells their safe destiny.

Venus, the hero's mother, is an important agent in the story of Aeneas. It is because of her importance to the story of Aeneas that Venus appears on both the Dossi scene and the obverse (heads side) of the coin of Caesar.

Despite being drawn from the same set of myths, both depictions are for and of their time. Caesar's Aeneas is typically Roman – in the nude and performing feats of strength; whereas Dossi's clothed Aeneas might not look out of place in sixteenth-century Ferrara.

DID YOU KNOW?

It was Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, who commissioned the poet Virgil to write the *Aeneid* to glorify his mythical ancestor.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Alexander the Great is one of the most famous figures of ancient history. Alexander acquired semi-legendary status, representing the triumph or downfall of whatever idea the author or artist was trying to convey.

This Sienese painting was part of a series of eight panels depicting exemplary heroes and heroines of the ancient world, each apparently chosen on account of their virtues. The inscription refers to a celebrated episode in which Alexander showed kindness towards the women of the family of the Persian king Darius, whom he had just defeated in the battle of Issus. Illustrated in the background



4A

Artist: Master of the Griselda Legend (active about 1490-1500)
Title: Alexander the Great
Place made: Siena, about 1493-94
Method: Oil and tempera on panel
No. 51.4

scenes are: Alexander welcoming the captured family after the battle (right) and Alexander counselling his soldiers (left). Alexander's striking appearance signifies his status as an exemplary, if youthful, warrior. This use of the memory of Alexander seems somewhat selective, as Alexander was also known for slaughtering entire populations, selling women and children into slavery, and forcefully resettling his own soldiers instead of letting them return home.

On the coin struck not long after Alexander's death, the late king is portrayed with ram's horns associated with the god Zeus-Ammon, his mythological father according to Alexander's own propaganda. The claim to be Alexander's legitimate successor was important to his various generals, who carved his empire up among themselves. Alexander therefore became an important image on any coin of a successor state.



4B

In the name of: Lysimachos
Place made: Lysimachia (Turkey), 328-281 BC
Method: Struck silver
Accession number: G0008

DID YOU KNOW?

Alexander appears in the Qu'ran (Sura 18, 83-101). Though he is not named, general scholarly consensus agrees that the horned king refers to Alexander, and is probably drawn from depictions of Alexander on media such as the coin above.

THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI



5A

Artist: Jacopo Bassano (1516-1592)

Title: *The Adoration of the Magi*

Place made: Venice, late 1560s

Method: Oil on canvas

No. 78.1



5B

In the name of: Aduryazdan the moghpet

Place made: Iran, fifth century AD

Method: Engraved carnelian stone

Accession number: ANE.194.1982. Lent by the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

Pictured beside a plaster impression of the sealing it would have made.

The wise men who visited the Christ child in the nativity story were probably Zoroastrian priests, called magi by the Greeks but moghpetan by the Persians. Depicted tending the sacred fire on the reverse of most Sasanian coins displayed in *A Tale of Two Empires*, moghpetan would also have engaged in astrology/astronomy (inextricably linked in the ancient world), leading them in the nativity story to Bethlehem.

Bassano gives a nod to the Eastern origin of the magi in the richly coloured, flowing robes and turbans which they wear in his painting. These costumes are associated with the Islamic Persian world more

familiar to the Renaissance artist than the moghpetan of the first century. A beam of light from the guiding star above points to the Christ Child.

On display in *A Tale of Two Empires* is a seal of a moghpet called Aduryazdan, which roughly translates as 'fire of the gods'. The crescent moon at the centre of the Pahlavi inscription naming Aduryazdan and his profession shows the importance of the movements of celestial bodies. Pahlavi was the language which, alongside the Zoroastrian faith, was one of the most important expressions of the Empire's identity under the Sasanian dynasty.

DID YOU KNOW?

There are not three magi in the Bible. There are simply multiple magi bearing three gifts.

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Our collections are available to discover online at mimsy.bham.ac.uk, this includes all of the artworks in the permanent galleries, as well as any currently not on display. All of the Barber's coins currently exhibited can be found online, as well as all of the collection's Sasanian coins, and many of its Roman and Byzantine coins.

USE OF CALENDARS

In this booklet and the exhibition *A Tale of Two Empires*, we have opted to use BC/AD, rather than BCE/CE, as this usage is more widely understood and accepted. It also marks out this method of dating from AH and PYE (Islamic and Zoroastrian calendars respectively). All four dating abbreviations are explained below.

BC Years before the birth of Christ. Christian calendar.

AD Years after the birth of Christ. Christian calendar.

AH Years after the flight (hijra) of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions from Mecca to Medina. Islamic calendar.

PYE Years after the death of Yazdgird III. Zoroastrian calendar.

For further information and related events and activities please see www.barber.org.uk, or the latest copy of the Barber Gallery What's On brochure.

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