

# Josef Strzygowski, 'Das Problem der persischen Kunst'

Edited with an introduction by Yuka Kadoi

Among several publications written by the Vienna School of Art History professor Josef Strzygowski (1862 – 1941) during the first few decades of the twentieth-century, 'Das Problem der persischen Kunst' (1911), deserves a detailed art-historiographical investigation.<sup>1</sup> Published in the *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, this article is of particular interest as a mirror of stormy exchanges amongst two of the early 20th-century giants in the emerging research field of what came to be known as 'Islamic art history' – namely the Habsburg art historian Josef Strzygowski and the Prussian archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld (1879-1948).

Despite its overarching title, however, this article was not meant to narrate Persian art history in a traditional sense. It should be read as Strzygowski's furious response to the criticism of *Amida: matériaux pour l'épigraphie et l'histoire Musulmanes du Diyar-Bekr* (1910) from Herzfeld who had published a long, critical review on *Amida* in an earlier issue of the same journal.<sup>2</sup> Strzygowski, whose anger towards Herzfeld boiled over, wrote this article in a sloppy way. His failure to control emotions is reflected throughout the article, leaving several spelling mistakes and flamboyant, 'Baroque' expressions uncorrected.

Chronologically speaking, it was Strzygowski who seems to have initiated the academic conflict with Herzfeld. A year before the appearance of his 'Das Problem der persischen Kunst', Strzygowski had published a review article on Herzfeld's *Der Islam* article, entitled 'Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst und das Mushatta-Problem' (1910), in the *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*.<sup>3</sup>

Given that it was published a decade after his eponymous *Orient oder Rom* (1901), it is also possible to regard this article as a milestone in the change of Strzygowski's non-western art discourse – from something vaguely 'Oriental' by digress to tangibly 'Persian'.

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<sup>1</sup> See Yuka Kadoi, 'Strzygowski and Pope: the reformulation of Persian art history across the trans-Atlantic world', in *Orient oder Rom? History and Reception of a Historiographical Myth (1901-1970)*, eds. Ivan Foletti and Francesco Lovino, Rome: Viella, 2018, 38-39, for a brief reference to Strzygowski's 'Das Problem der persischen Kunst'.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Herzfeld, 'Max van Berchem u. Jos. Strzygowski: Amida: matériaux pour l'épigraphie et l'histoire Musulmanes du Diyar-Bekr', *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, 9, 1911, 397- 435.

<sup>3</sup> Josef Strzygowski, 'Ernst Herzfeld: Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst und das Mshatta-Problem', *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, 4, 1911, 179-183. See also Ernst Herzfeld, 'Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst und das Mshatta-Problem', *Der Islam*, Vol. 1, no.2, 1910, 27-63 and 105-144.

## Josef Strzygowski, 'Das Problem der persischen Kunst'<sup>4</sup>

It should be desirable to discuss the critical 'reckoning'<sup>5</sup> of my Amida research (published above, p. 397f.)<sup>6</sup> objectively among orientalists, regardless of its harsh personal tone. In his various writings that I have criticised as unsound contributions to Islamic Art, those 'close peers and almost all classical archaeologists and historians' are quoted by Herzfeld as witnesses to support his arguments (at the beginning of the page 398). My 'Orient oder Rom',<sup>7</sup> 'Kleinasien'<sup>8</sup> and 'Amida'<sup>9</sup> are meant to provide valuable inspiration towards those who are mentioned [by Herzfeld] to embark on new fields of research, yet just like them, he remained focused on the traces of classical (and Persian) monumental art.

Mschatta has shown me otherwise, as I had learned from my previous projects in Egypt. When I started writing 'Amida', I intended to evaluate it as the most significant macro-decorated façade, apart from Mschatta. While studying its decorative elements, questions as to Persian Hellenism caught my attention; then, hitherto unknown Mesopotamian vaulted churches manifested themselves, and, finally it became impossible not to consider certain questions related to the evolutionary history of Islam, particularly with regard to its Persian preconditions. I was doing my utmost best not to evade raising vexing questions, and I believe to have considerably expanded the horizon of my research field, namely new art history. It may well be possible that I occasionally failed or went too far when I attempted to answer the questions – this is normal when moving into completely uncharted fields – however, the main point is that I have never shied away from the high significance of Persia. On the contrary, I very much appreciate that it is now spelled out in black on white: my assumption of a paramount importance of Persia in the field of art might otherwise be an illusion. I had already noticed this perception from the works of Herzfeld, among others, and I believe it was certainly necessary for me to define the problems and to provoke negative scholarly responses so as to speed up the debate. We shall see what will

<sup>4</sup> Originally published as 'Das Problem der persischen Kunst', *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, 11, 1911, 505-512. Translated by Thorsten Hanke.

<sup>5</sup> [Translator's note] As for 'Reckoning' (Abrechnung), it is not clear whether Strzygowski refers to Herzfeld's essay or rather sarcastically comments on Herzfeld's style, implying that the latter was providing a stinging assessment of Strzygowski's work.

<sup>6</sup> [Editor's note] This refers to Ernst Herzfeld, 'Max van Berchem u. Jos. Strzygowski: Amida: matériaux pour l'épigraphie et l'histoire Musulmanes du Diyar-Bekr', *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung*, 9, 1911, 397-435 (see note 2).

<sup>7</sup> [Editor's note] This refers to Josef Strzygowski, *Orient oder Rom: Beiträge zur Geschichte der spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst* (1901).

<sup>8</sup> [Editor's note] This refers to Josef Strzygowski, *Kleinasien: Ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte* (1903).

<sup>9</sup> [Editor's note] This refers to Max van Berchem and Josef Strzygowski, with a contribution by Gertrude L. Bell, *Amida: matériaux pour l'épigraphie et l'histoire Musulmanes du Diyar-Bekr* (1910).

evolve with regard to the Persian problem in the coming years. Thanks to recent debates, the scientific community has come to know what is actually of concern to the art historian.<sup>10</sup>

Among the monuments that can be testimony to solve the problem, I know the cultural landscape around central Persia from my own projects in the west as well as Münsterberg, Grünwedel and Stein,<sup>11</sup> among others, in the east. Thus in general terms it appears to me that, when anthropomorphic Greek art was moved deeply into the east by Alexander the Great, it fully developed into Buddhist figural art, while in China it even encouraged the artists to carefully observe nature and represent it in a peculiar figurative form.<sup>12</sup> This mode of figurative representation typical of Greek and Chinese art is entirely missing in 'Persia', that is to say the areas between Syria and India. There everything is represented in a decorative way and becomes ornamental particularly in the northern region. What the Greeks brought into the land was reshaped in this spirit. Therefore in Persia one must not take the scarce remains of monumental architecture and figural sculpture as the starting point of judgement but has to search for traces of decorative techniques and the minor arts. Herzfeld suggests that some aspects of the minor arts made an impact on the architecture of later Islamic times (p. 402). Unrightfully. It was already self-evident in the pre-Islamic art of Persia, just like the *mélange* of the various local styles of the Christian Orient. In my opinion, while engaging himself with the debate of the Persian problem and monuments such as Mshatta and Amida, Herzfeld has so far embarked on his work at the wrong end; only with his recent excavations at Samarra has his work moved in the right direction.

I would need to respond in individual essays to the collection of statements that Herzfeld uses for challenging my research methodology, like his 'Genesis' article in the journal 'Der Islam'.<sup>13</sup> This is a rather demanding task and can only happen in the future. But some things I would like to point out immediately. Most importantly, Herzfeld commits a grave error at the beginning of his 'reckoning', accusing me of a mistake that is fundamental to my book: the west wall of the two facades of Amida would not have been built, as I assume and the inscriptions say, by Ilaldi 1116/7 at the lower level, 1124/5 at the upper level, but the lower storey would be Umayyad up to the level of the imposts, thus the mosque would have looked already in Umayyad times like both extant court facades. Where does this discovery come from? Has Herzfeld ever been to Amida and did he conduct decent fieldwork in order to be able to discover such a coarse error of observation by me? No, he also makes a judgement on the basis of the photographs published by me. What Herzfeld is arguing against me can therefore easily be judged by anyone else. One shall now look at Fig. 63, p. 250, and Plate XIII, p. 1, of my Amida section. There can be seen a change in colour,

<sup>10</sup> [Translator's note] the meaning of the original sentence ('Es ist schon viel damit gewonnen, dass die Gelehrtenwelt weiss, um was es sich dem Kunsthistoriker eigentlich handelt') is ambiguous and not entirely clear.

<sup>11</sup> [Editor's note] Hugo Münsterberg (1863-1916), Albert Grünwedel (1856-1935) and Aurel Stein (Stein Márk Aurél; 1862 -1943).

<sup>12</sup> [Editor's note] I hereby use the term 'figurative form' as an euphemism for the original term 'Rassenform'.

<sup>13</sup> [Editor's note] This refers to Ernst Herzfeld, 'Die Genesis der islamischen Kunst und das Mshatta-Problem', *Der Islam*, Vol. 1, no. 2, 1910, 27-63 and 105-144 (see note 3).

material and condition at the height of the impost; but this is not due to 1116/7, but unmistakably to the modern and indeed inhomogeneous renewal of the arches.<sup>14</sup> Also the second 'fact', that the lower among the free columns<sup>15</sup> conjunct with the end of this 'older base', implodes, because precisely in the only example for that (Fig. 63) this base does not terminate behind the end of the lower column but, because it is not restored, continuous upwards.

Herzfeld composes his entire 'reckoning' with this kind of argument. His attempt to ridicule my argument is typically made by referring to the entire monument, although I am talking about part of the monument as a subject matter: he suggests my attribution of the column-mosque of Konia as Persian at p. 399, while I merely discuss the window-sequence underneath the roof. At p. 410, he implies that I characterise the columniation at the facades of Pisa, Lucca and Pistoja as typically Armenian, while I just talk about the Armenian style of the applied arcades at the basement of S. Michele in Lucca. Above all, it is the remarkable way in which he exaggerates rather drastically. When I focus on the Tuscan and Oriental tendency towards chromatic change of layers, he puts (p. 410, respectively p. 418) Pisa and Uratu next to each other. When I hint on the role of stucco technique in the development of 'Persian' art, he (p. 426) takes a sentence out of context that does not imply this. When I compare Spanish with Mesopotamian church architecture, it is not said that this happens because of the continuing vaulting and the mounting of the barrel vaults – in this case the comparison surely appears ridiculous. I believe Herzfeld, who is just familiarising himself with the field, has no understanding of the seriousness and validity of the problems that I dare to approach. Obvious lack of knowledge – the monastery Hosios Lukas ζ. B. is located for him (p. 403) in Athens – coincides with bold judging. When I regard the Greek squinch-vault as Persian, I share this opinion with Choisy, who I have already quoted in *Amida*, p. 264. Because of a text passage of St. Nilus, which I considered original, as has been confirmed in the meantime, he pours scorn on me (p. 415), and a masterpiece of dialectics is provided in the case of the ruins of Abdein and Kasra ibn Wardan, both attributed to the time of Justinian. These buildings were erected by builders of Justinian, he claims, as if this matter were finally settled. In my book on Asia Minor [*Kleinasien*], p. 121f, I have objectively and unbiasedly for the first time offered for discussion everything pro and contra a dependency of these buildings from Constantinople and the legitimacy of the hypothesis to assume Justinian's architect as creator, and recently gave my opinion with regard to Butler in *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, XVIII, p. 279f,<sup>16</sup> and *Amida*, p. 193. Herzfeld does not care about the complexities; he decrees and thus spoils everything fruitful of the problem – in a way that only an amateur, a beginner can be. As such, Herzfeld should at least be trustworthy when he claims things based on his own observations. In *Amida*, p. 265, I discuss the 'basilica' in Mar Gabriel and state that there should be more of this kind of (hall)churches in Mosul,

<sup>14</sup> [Original note] That is particularly obvious at Plate 70 of the just published treatise by Preusser, *Nordmesopotamische Baudenkmäler*.

<sup>15</sup> [Translator's note] Strzygowski uses the term 'vorgestellte Säulen', thus in all probability refers to the columniation, as seen, for instance, at an amphiprostyle.

<sup>16</sup> [Editor's note] This refers to Strzygowski's short book review on Howard Crosby Butler, *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria in 1904-5, Division II, Ancient Architecture in Syria* (1908), in *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1909, 278-280.

but the sphere of the Hellenistic basilica generally terminates at the border defined by the Euphrates. In response to this point, Herzfeld replies (p. 413), saying 'but Mosul is crowded with basilicas!' If Herzfeld knows the difference between basilica and hall-church, he knowingly gives wrong testimony.<sup>17</sup> According to Miss Bell in *Amurath to Amurath*, p. 257,<sup>18</sup> there are no basilicas in Mosul, rather the type of the hall-church dominates. This is now also confirmed by Preussler (*ibid.*) for the region of Mosul.

I have been fighting for 20 years for the acceptance of the role of Constantinople, which is so significant for the Occident. Nowadays I would caution with respect to the Orient itself. Byzantium takes more than it gives. Herzfeld, who knows everything in depth, mocks my efforts. To what degree he is justified may be made clear, among other things, by a letter, which I received from Robert Eisler, the author of 'Weltenmantel und Himmelszelt':

'By coincidence I learn while browsing the journal 'Der Islam', II, p. 241, that one of your opponents (Herzfeld) in the dispute about the origin of the mosaics in the Dome of the Rocks claims in an attempt to prove that byzantine master masons created the mosaics of their buildings on behalf of the Arab dynasties that the Arab word 'Fasafisa' or 'Fusaifisa' for 'mosaic' would be a Greek loanword, that is to say = ψήφος. You would earn lasting merits if you would finally briefly reject this deeply rooted mistake. The material necessary for this task can be found in the *Orientalist. Lit. Zeit.* August (Nr. 8) 1908 p. 370. Mentioned in the *Mischna-treatise Negaim XI7* is a 'summer dress', which comprises 'polychromic' or 'colourful' pieces. There the underlined word reads j'DEDSP-S-P-S-'N and it was usually (compare ζ. B. Kennedy in *Gheynes Enc. Bibl.* 5288 Mitte) vocalized 'psseplwsln' because it was taken for a plural of the Greek ψήφος = mosaic-cube. Yet *paspasu* is already in the Assyrian the notation of a colourful bird, and as I have shown *ibid.* (the emendation is since then generally accepted) was the colourful garment of Joseph at Old Testament, Gen. 37 originally called 'kathönesth paspasim' (in the Masoterian text by means of Haplographie in 'k. pasim' distorted). This Assyrian 'paspasu', hebr. *paspasim*, aram. *paspasin* is of course identical with the above mentioned Arab expression for mosaic, meaning colourful work, and it is not justified to draw the conclusion that the Arabs were denoting mosaic-techniques with an allegedly Greek loanword.'<sup>19</sup>

My study on Amida is not a monograph. If I were intending to supply the latter, I would have been obliged to go to Diyarbakır. I was carefully presenting the material that I have consulted regarding Amida and Mesopotamia – also the 'Armenian' church in Nizib (p. 414), which is Mesopotamian but not Armenian, judging by the appearance of its exterior; but it was my main concern to advise my colleagues of new art history about the valuable

<sup>17</sup> [Translator's note] The original text reads: '(...) sagt (...) verantwortlich falsch aus (...).'

<sup>18</sup> This refers to Gertrude Bell, *Amurath to Amurath* (1911).

<sup>19</sup> [Original note] [Even if [it] needed to be admitted that the New Hebrew still retained or revived the old, in the Hebrew having become obsolete word, the vocalization of the Arab shows that the Arab rapporteurs were thinking about the Greek word when using the word for mosaic. In strict philological terms it is here barely possible to take a definite decision. F.E.P.]

role of the Orient, particularly Persia, concerning the development of both Christian and Islamic art.

My intentions are clearly defined in the preface: the practical success of the book shall be the fitting out of expeditions into Mesopotamia, Armenia and Persia. Today I would also add: let us not forget the centre of Persian Hellenism in the east by any means. We will presumably get here from India. Only when taking into account the inspirations that India and China received from there, and when assessing the contrasting 'Persian' against this, it is possible to sense the forces that must have been taking effect in order to allow the emergency of a great power in the field of decorative arts. For the understanding of Persian Hellenism, one must not consult the rock-reliefs, nor the scant remains of the monumental architecture that is bereft of its decoration: entirely different aspects of technology and material come into consideration. I wish I had again the means for the necessary expeditions at my disposal; as it stands now, I have been forced in recent years to defend my convictions at the 'green table'.

I just would like to list how many travellers, who were motivated by the writings of myself with an introduction to monuments as well as a plea for critical thinking, went to the Orient in the last decade. Herzfeld himself belongs to them. There was never anybody to whom it occurred to 'rap my knuckles' at any word during the journey. It was my job to point to the necessity of such journeys. With the Berlin financial means at his disposal, it would be Herzfeld's task to provide faultless publications of the monuments. That is what we need, and not his theories on the genesis of Islamic art and now the cheapish mocking of a book that, in its own manner tries to find a way, which Herzfeld himself cannot yet recognize in his blindness. Let's hope that my intervention encourages him to follow me in one point: I have been silent and working for twenty years before I dared to express the convictions that I have gained. Now I know very clearly that I risked my neck when I argued against Herzfeld. I would have wished that my relation to him would have emerged from an institution like the one I hinted at in *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum, Geschichte und deutsche Literatur*, XV (1905), p. 33.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, I would like to allow myself also here (as I now do in 'Der Islam') to evaluate critically some of the works by Herzfeld. Contrary to my conviction concerning the importance of Persia and the dependence on Egypt, he embarked on his 'Samarra' without any insight. This is particularly true with the origin of the pier mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, about which Kuda'i says it was built like the minare [minaret], based on the example of the mosque of Samarra.<sup>21</sup> Given my experiences in Egypt, I was convinced that this statement is correct. Herzfeld goes to Samarra and says, no, but this is wrong: it can be said with certainty that the local mosque there has no masoned piers; it could only be wooden or slender stone posts (*Samarra*, p. 22). I would have perhaps trusted the scholar, who was

<sup>20</sup> [Editor's note] This refers to Josef Strzygowski, 'Die Schicksale des Hellenismus in der bildenden Kunst', *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum, Geschichte und deutsche Literatur*, 15, 1905, 19-33.

<sup>21</sup> [Editor's note] Al-Kuda'i (d. 454-5 AH) was a Fatimid historian. His now lost treatise is often cited as a source for the stylistic relationship between the mosque of Ibn Tulun and that of Samarra. See Richard J. H. Gottheil, 'The Origin and History of the Minaret', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1910, 146-147, which says 'Strzygowski (*Jahrbuch der Königl. Preuss. Kunstsammlungen*, 1904, p. 246) also accepts the testimony of al-Kuda'i' (p. 147, note 1).

unknown to me at that time (1907), had not at the same time the French General de Beylié<sup>22</sup> sent me the photographs of a mosque in Samarra, which indeed represented the type of the pier mosque of Ibn Tulun. What was this: a casual error or deliberate concealment? In 1909 Sarre published a plan by Herzfeld of this (Samarra) mosque,<sup>23</sup> yet it is not used in my 'Amida'; I cannot recall whether this happened accidentally or because of mistrust, although it did not change anything essential concerning my conclusions. In the meantime, Herzfeld continued his work on Samarra; in the first volume of the 'Archäologische Reise im Euphrat- und Tigris-Gebiet', p. 90, he states: the great mosque had wooden columns. On the other hand, the 'reckoning' p. 420 states: the mosque would have had columns, that is to say an octagonal brick core with four marble columns each at the corners. What shall we say about this? The outbursts against me were not justified. Like the Tulun mosque, the mosque has its brick pillars with columns in the corners, just more lavishly fitted.

Not satisfied with this, Herzfeld now performs the same comedy with regard to stucco ornamentation, which I defined 'Persian', yet as in the case with the pillars of the Tulun mosque, he considers it specifically Egyptian. I do not know how often he had been to Samarra, whereas Miss Bell indeed saw immediately what I was looking for there: stucco ornamentation was formulated just how de Beylié once found the piers. Herzfeld overlooks everything because he is lacking the general understanding and scholarship in the fields of Christian and Islamic art. Eventually he will, I hope, start considering things at Samarra more carefully. We have to thank Viollet,<sup>24</sup> who discovered a wealth of stucco ornamentation in Samarra, which exceeds everything that I expected in Persia. I expect that, with regard to the buildings at the Haram in Jerusalem and the sepulchral steles of Cairo, about which one may read in my monographs in the 'Der Islam', Herzfeld should get some insight in relation to the problem of Persian art, particularly in the context of the first Christian century as the most important question to address. It is hoped that he curbs his ambition to play a role in the field of art history, until he at least becomes somehow acquainted with Samarra.

Another, not unimportant point that I have to defend myself against Herzfeld is his approach to dating methodology. Just as he now, in the twinkling of an eye, visualises to himself an Umayyad base for the west façade at Amida, Umayyad buildings sprout everywhere like mushrooms from the ground in the short span of time before the relocation to Bagdad (750). What has been achieved by these good princes! And we know from the emerging of the Amr Mosque in Cairo, the evolution of the Qubbat al-Sakhra (Dome of the Rock) and the modest Amra (Qusayr 'Amra), what is to be expected. Butler has added a lot that, although not dated, fits into this pattern. These are all small, modest buildings either built organically in the local manner or fairly incoherently pieced together. Only the great mosque of Damascus could have been constructed in a truly monumental scale, but it was

<sup>22</sup> [Editor's note] Léon de Beylié (1849-1910) was a general and archaeologist who published an article, entitled 'L'Architecture des Abbassides au IXe siècle, voyage archéologique à Samara, dans le bassin du Tigre', in *Revue Archéologique* (1907).

<sup>23</sup> [Editor's note] This refers to Friedrich Sarre, 'Reise in Mesopotamien', *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin*, 1909, 423-439. I am most grateful to Jens Kröger for this information.

<sup>24</sup> [Editor's note] The French archaeologist and architect Henry Viollet (1880-1955) carried out archaeological missions in Mesopotamia (1906-1910), including Samarra.

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equally incorporated into the old church of St. John and an older Temenos, thus also patchwork and nowadays hardly reconstructible. Under these circumstances it is foolhardy to attribute everything that has been discovered there, gems like the Mschatta and Amida façades, examples like Ukhaidir, Rabbat Amman and Harran, to the Umayyads. How oversimplifying this methodology is. One may excuse an old art historian when he disagrees, given his long experience. The confrontation needs to happen; it is not cantankerousness. I do not regard the spread of Islam as a creative force to the extent which Herzfeld has argued in his Genesis essay in the 'Der Islam'. With the advent of Islam, rather it comes to light in the first place what Hellenistic Asia was offering throughout the centuries in terms of creativity and originality of handcrafted artifacts. Rather than Islam itself, it was the Turks who did much earlier decisively intervene, and it is with them that the Persian mass is starting to shift. The 'reckoning' suggests to me the danger of a new potential conflict. As the 'Persian' reputedly comes from good old Egypt, the great monuments of the Islamic Golden Age in Asia Minor and Egypt, p. 426, are deduced 'tutti quanti' from the Ayyubid architecture of Syria. If such styles can emerge on artistically exploited ground in the twinkling of an eye, then one can certainly expect everything from Islam. I, for my part, judge these evolutionary historical questions somehow differently.

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