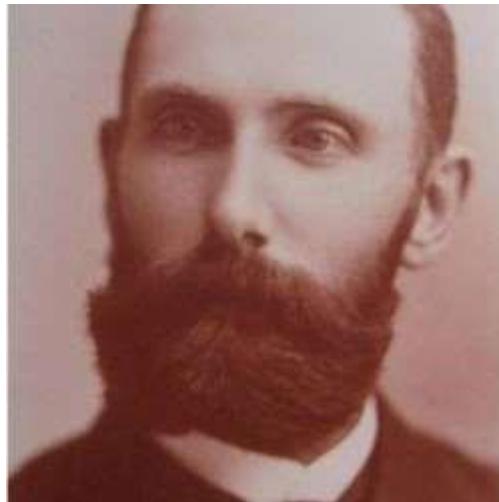


ON THE POLYCHROMY OF ANCIENT PALMYRA AND ON NOMADS AND NETWORKS IN ANCIENT KAZAKHSTAN IN WASHINGTON DC

July 3, 2012 Alex Nagel Conservation, Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2012, Museum Archaeology Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Central Asia, Charles Lang Freer, Claudia Chang, Ernst Herzfeld, Fertile Crescent, Joseph Marcopoli, Kazakhstan, Mediterranean, Moritz Sobernheim, Near East, Oglata, Palmyra, Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington



Many greetings from the Smithsonian!

With Syria and its UNESCO world heritage sites in the news these weeks, it is time to look at one of those sites described as one of the surviving wonders of antiquity: Palmyra. Also, we are in the preparation of an exciting exhibition with a wide array of objects from yet another fascinating part of the world, [ancient Kazakhstan](#), that will open soon to the Sackler Gallery here in the Smithsonian in Washington, DC.

We are in the first week of July 2012. First thing Monday morning, was catching up on the latest news from Kazakhstan for our upcoming exhibition highlight [Nomads and Networks: The Ancient Art and Culture of Kazakhstan](#). One of our colleagues, Claudia Chang, in Kazakhstan had reported [earlier](#) this week on this blog and we will continue to run a [parallel blog on our exhibition and ancient Kazakhstan on our website](#) starting soon before the exhibition opening in August here in Washington, DC.

Also this Monday, before a meeting with our colleagues from the [embassy of Kazakhstan](#), I presented some current research on pigments and paints on ancient near eastern stone monuments to a wider public in the Smithsonian Institution's Smithsonian Congress of Scholars Research Tent on the Mall. Despite some heat waves, a good number of visitors came to some twenty presentations from units in the institution, and asked also many questions about the role of pigments on stone monuments in the Ancient Near East. By studying materials that still contain much of the pigments, we can learn more about the aesthetics of the ancient world. Palmyra, "the Place of Palms" as it was known to the Romans, in modern Syria, flourished as a colourful caravan oasis on the trade route linking the Mediterranean with West and Central Asia. Most of the monuments visible on the site today date from the first three centuries CE, including the large colonnade streets and the extensive cemeteries around the city.

In 1908, while on a trip to Aleppo, the rich Detroit business-men Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919), see himself above, acquired a lime stone relief from the site from the dealer Joseph Marcopoli (F1908.236). Originally, reliefs like this one would have marked the tombs of wealthy Palmyrene citizens, either in tower-tombs or complex hypogea below ground. According to an Aramaic inscription, it is the portrait of Haliphat, daughter of Oglata, son of Harimai. This stele is dated 543 of the Seleucid era, which corresponds to the year 231 in the Christian calendar. The stone relief is one of many from Palmyra still preserving traces of the original polychromy. Some of these can be even seen with the naked eye, like the jewellery on the left hand or in details of her necklace.



Microscope images would make painted details much more visible and a red colorant on the statue has recently been identified by scientific analysis. Qualitative elemental analysis of a small sample taken shows the presence of Al, Si, Ca and Fe with a strong presence of iron.



The Freer|Sackler – Smithsonian's Museums of Asian Art also houses also a collection of archival materials related to the modern exploration of Palmyra, among them a plan of the ruins, donated by Ernst Herzfeld (1879-1948). The plan was made shortly before Freer acquired the stone relief from Palmyra, with the ancient cemeteries indicated around the citywall, together with a series of glass negatives related to an expedition to Palmyra, carried out by Herzfeld's colleague Moritz Sobernheim (1872-1933) in 1899. Sobernheim had photographed and made squeezes of some of the inscriptions, which later became part of Herzfeld's collection and are available for research, documenting the very early stages of archaeological fieldwork in the ancient Near East.

