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Move Objects to Shift Meaning: Tracing the Relocation of a Painting by Oswald Onghers in Frankfurt Cathedral

1 Treasury and Endowment of Frankfurt Cathedral in Church and Museum

For centuries, the Church of St Bartholomew (Frankfurt Cathedral) had a richly decorated interior, and numerous precious objects in the church's treasury. Although many of these items have been lost or destroyed, a selection of the remaining objects is nowadays on display in the two exhibition areas of the Dommuseum Frankfurt or guarded in the museum's storage rooms. These objects are categorised as artworks and handled accordingly. Other objects are still an integral part of the church's endowment – such as the oil painting by Oswald Onghers depicting St Bartholomew, which will be taken as an example in this paper. This painting entered the Church of St Bartholomew in 1678 and is still on display in the church itself. This poses certain challenges with regard to handling art according to museum standards. This article will shed light on how art-historically based categories of valuing an object are applied in all three of the contexts mentioned above – museum, storage room, and church.

The painting, like almost every object from the treasury, has been relocated several times and was even moved to architecturally different parts of the building. Pictorial evidence gives information about at least four different positions which I shall discuss in this article. I read these locations and relocations not only as a descriptive part of an object's biography, but also as presenting different spatial situations in which visitors would see and experience the object. Thus, they hint at ascribed meaning and importance. Moreover, if the objects are later exhibited in a museum, or in fact included in any kind of display, they can only be read in context with known previous contexts of visibility. As such, church interiors always represent a complex system of iconographic references and offer numerous connections between architecture, permanent furniture and movable objects. I will analyse the different spatial situations and elaborate their specific parameters in terms of being a context of visibility for this painting as an exhibition-like display situation.

2 The Object, Pictorial Sources and Different Locations: A Painting by Oswald Onghers

The oil painting by the Flemish painter Oswald Onghers (1628–1706), entitled "Saint Bartholomew", dates back to 1670 (fig.1). It was originally commissioned for Frankfurt Cathedral and is still there. In this oil painting, the saint, who was an apostle, is skinned alive by three men as a reaction against his successful preaching in India. His hands are tied above his head to a tree without leaves. He is almost naked and his view is directed upwards. His face expresses pain and sorrow. One man in the background to the left is holding a rope that binds St Bartholomew's body to the tree; another to the right side of the painting has already started the skinning and parts of St Bartholomew's skin are hanging over his arm. The third man, in the front left of the composition, sharpens his knife, introducing an indicator for time into the scenery: Bartholomew's martyrdom is ongoing as we look at it and there is more to come since this knife is only now being prepared for future action. In this way, the viewer is immersed in the martyrdom experience. Two inscriptions are added to the painting: first, the painter's signature "osw. Onghers Pinx. An° 1670"; second, a family crest memorialising the donor Johann Karl von Franckenstein with his initials I.C.V.F.

The painting is dated to 1670 but its first documented appearance in Frankfurt Cathedral was only in 1678 – as part of the so-called altar of St Bartholomew. In an oil painting by Christian Stöcklin from 1774, this altar dedicated to St Bartholomew is shown in detail located in the southern transept (fig. 2). The altar itself came into the church much earlier, having been donated by 1325. But the painting by Onghers was added in 1678 when Johann Karl von Franckenstein (d.1691), auxiliary bishop of Worms, made an endowment for the renovation of the altar to his soul's merit in heaven. Elsbeth de Weerth argues that Onghers' painting likely entered the cathedral as a panel painting, before subsequently being changed into part of a retable,[1] that is to say that it was (re-)manufactured as an upright altarpiece with rounded upper edges. The motif is painted in a detailed manner. It can be assumed that a contemporary viewer of Stöcklin's painting could easily identify the panel painting by Onghers. This is the first known position of the altar.[2] The earliest photographs of the Church of St Bartholomew,

1 Elsbeth de Weerth, *Die Ausstattung des Frankfurter Domes* (Frankfurt am Main: Bischöfliches Ordinariat, 1999), 181.

2 According to Römer-Büchner, this position is most likely not identical to the initial position that was chosen for the altar in this church: Benedict J. Römer-Büchner, *Die Wahl- und Krönungskirche der deutschen Kaiser zu St. Bartholomäi in Frankfurt am Main* (Frankfurt am Main, 1857), 43–44.

Figure 1: Oswald Onghers, St Bartholomew. Oil on canvas on wooden panel, 247 x 143 cm, 1670. Photo: Axel Schneider, Frankfurt am Main.

taken by Carl Friedrich Mylius (1827–1916) in 1866, show the altar in the same position.[3]

3 (DAF) Domarchiv Frankfurt am Main; Cf. August Heuser and Matthias Theodor Kloft, *Der Dombrand von 1867*, Exhibition Catalogue (Frankfurt am Main: Henrich Druck und Medien, 2004), 34.

Figure 2: Christian Stöcklin, Interior of Frankfurt Cathedral. Oil on canvas, 1774. Photo: Galerie J.P. Schneider jr.

The altar stayed in the transept until about 1900,[4] when it underwent restoration.[5] After restoration, it was moved into the vestibule,[6] and later into the historical cloister. A photograph published in Dillmann 1929 (fig. 3) shows the altar against plain and undecorated white walls in the eastern part of the historical cloister; with stairs and a metal handrail to the left. [7] During the Second World War, the altar remained in the cloister and was severely damaged when the church was hit by bombs in 1944. The wooden frame was destroyed by flames and the painting damaged. After the war, the painting alone was restored. It was turned into a

4 It was replaced by another altar dedicated to the holy kin. Cf. Matthias Theodor Kloft, *Frankfurt am Main: Kaiserdom St. Bartholomäus,* 3rd ed. (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2002), 34.

5 1908 by L. Windschmitt (DAF, IV.22.B. und IV.22.3.).

6 cf. Personal notes by Elsbeth de Weerth, (edw); Source of information not yet verifiable.

7 Josef Dillmann, *Der Dom zu Frankfurt am Main: Ein Führer zu seiner Geschichte und seine Kunstwerke* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Kreuer, 1929), 62–64. Photo: Dr. Paul Wolff.

panel painting. A new frame with a new design was added.

From the 1960s, the painting was displayed on a wall in the church next to the staircase leading to the organ gallery. At some point after 1994, it was relocated once again, and hung on the western wall of the northern aisle (fig. 4) where it stayed to the present day.[8]

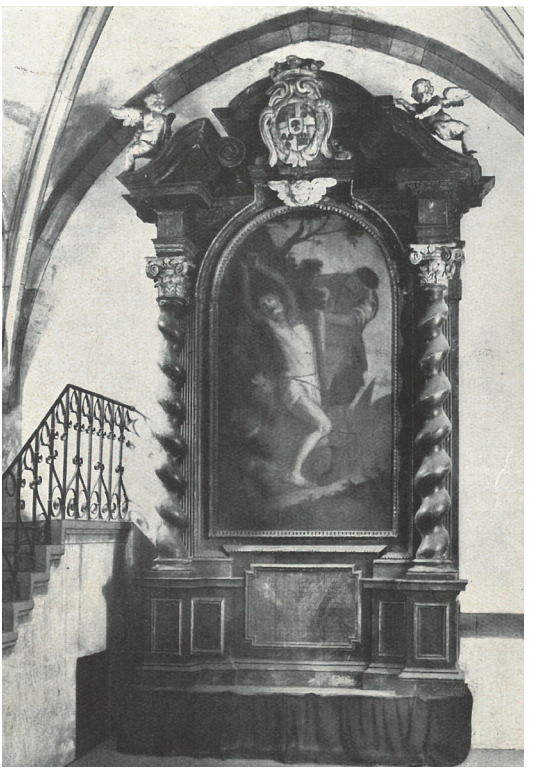

Figure 3: Altar in the historical cloister. Photo by Dr Paul Wolff. Published in Dillmann 1929, annex.

These four positions (altar retable in the southern transept, historical cloister, and panel painting on the cathedral's wall in two different locations) differ significantly in terms of their spatial parameters and the interrelations between the object, and other objects, architecture and visitors. I will now further describe these positions with a special emphasis on reconstructing the structural parameters of an object's visual appearance.

The painting could, of course, not move itself, but was moved by actors. The traceable results of their decisions may give us some idea of the motives for changing an object's position or the way of presenting it. Unfortunately, there are limits in historical research to the amount of additional information available about the different actors. Still, this is a promising perspective and a good starting point for further research that does not fit into the frame of this publication. While keeping the arranging persons in mind, this paper will focus on the arranged – the object.

8 De Weerth, *Ausstattung*, 180.

Figure 4: Frankfurt Cathedral northern aisle in 2020. Photo: Dommuseum Frankfurt/ Johann Kelm.

3 Different Locations in Detail

3.1 Southern Transept: To the Merit of Donors and People

In Stöcklin's oil painting, Onghers' depiction of St Bartholomew is visible as part of the altar. In this reproduction of the painting, the altar itself is shown in a light reddish colour[9] just below the lancet window. The glass paintings as well as the window architecture were directly connected to the altar's aesthetic appearance.[10] In front of this picture-in-picture composition, a stone balustrade limits access to the transept's altars and sculptures. Based on the other staffage in the painting, the balustrade would appear to be as high as the visitors standing in front of it. However, this is unlikely to be the true measurement.[11] Since all figures

9 The red colour of the altar in this painting does not correlate with later photographic depictions, which show a rather dark wooden architecture.

10 Cf. Justin E. A. Kroesen, *Seitenaltäre in mittelalterlichen Kirchen. Standort – Raum – Liturgie*. (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2010), 24.

11 This probably occurred because Stöcklin painted the church interior and architecture, while another painter, Johann Ludwig Ernst Morgenstern, painted the staffage figures.

appear to be too small compared to the church's interior, it is more promising to measure the balustrade against other objects. It seems to be slightly lower than the altar plate itself. Therefore, I assume the altar was fully visible to a visitor standing in front of it – despite what the Stöcklin painting suggests. Onghers' painting, as part of the altar, was visibly approachable while physical access was limited. The view along the right-hand chapel aisle also includes the altarpiece, leading the visitor from the northern part towards the altar. The painting is located between a sculpture of St Mary and an ambry in which the relic of St Bartholomew was kept. Compared with other altars, it was a very important and richly decorated side altar.[12]

Stöcklin's painting shows the interior of Frankfurt Cathedral in the 18th century. Easily visible are the light grey walls, the windows – decorated with patterns in the longitudinal, and traditional pictures in the intersectional nave. The view opens towards the choir section of the church following the visitor's path from the northern part to the high altar. Stöcklin chose to show the two altars to the left and right of the choir stairs as well as the small side chapel dedicated to St Mary. For (parish) priests, vergers and visitors of the 19th century, this all-encompassing ensemble of endowment was the standard method of reading a church interior – rather than focusing on single objects. Objects are placed in relation to other objects in a way prescribed by liturgical needs or to foster iconographic interrelations: In both Stöcklin's painting and Mylius' photograph, the altar is decorated with items such as candles, an altar cross, and a gospel book. The altar's location and the items on it indicate that it was in active use.

The inscription in the painting memorialises the donor Johann Karl von Franckenstein and includes a prayer for mercy on his soul. This reference to the donor was originally strengthened by a stone statue of von Franckenstein,[13] which stood just next to the altar. The epitaph above the statue makes reference to the donation of the Onghers painting to the altar of St Bartholomew. These two objects are therefore visibly connected by multiple layers of meaning. To a visitor wandering around, a third location connects to the altar and the statue – the place where Bishop Franckenstein was buried, in the middle of the intersection of the church's two naves.[14]

12 The term *side altar* should not lead to the assumption that these altars were of minor importance in comparison to the high altar. The term merely describes the altar's position in the church. cf. Kroesen, *Seitenaltäre*, 24.

13 cf. De Weerth, *Ausstattung*, 230–32.

14 cf. Andrea Hampel, *Der Kaiserdom zu Frankfurt am Main: Ausgrabungen 1991–1993* (Nußloch: Rolf-Angerer Verlag, 1994), 104.

3.2 In the Cloister: Discarded with Care

In comparison to the earlier pictures, the photograph by Dr Paul Wolff, published in Dillmann 1929, shows the altar in the cloister with neither altar cloth, nor candles, nor cross – indicating that it was not in use. While the parts of the altar appear to have been reassembled in their previous order, it is noteworthy that there is no altar plate. In the cloister, the altar was not visible to visitors, and no service was conducted at it. It was 'stored' in a very reverent and careful manner, and can be regarded as a passive object within the church treasury.

At that time, the cloister was a common location for storing objects which were considered old-fashioned or otherwise unsuitable for the church itself, yet too old and too *valuable* to be completely discarded. At least one more Baroque-style altar was brought to the cloister at about the same time as well as several stone sculptures and oil paintings.[15]

3.3 Cathedral/Southern Transept: Partly Restored

After the altar was damaged during the Second World War, it was decided that only the oil painting, the former retable part, should be restored. It was converted to a panel painting. The rounded corners were cut again in order to produce a rectangular form suitable for a panel painting, and a very simple frame was added. The original altar framing was inscribed with hints at the donors. These were later destroyed and are lost to today's viewer.

Very little information is available about the first location for this painting as a panel painting after the Second World War. No picture has yet been found in the archives. It was put "next to the staircase leading to the organ gallery".[16] Cathedral inventories mention it among the paintings hanging below the gallery of the main organ.[17] Here, the painting's decorative qualities seem to be the priority for the choice of location as well as the fact that it was a long-term treasury object. As in any case, the architectural structure of the church also limits the choices. Panel paintings need a wall suitable in size for their presentation, and space is limited. It is simply impossible to put all treasury objects on display. The painting was brought back to the church but not reintegrated into liturgical acts. Both

15 Dillmann, *Seine Geschichte und seine Kunstwerke*, 62.

16 According to former museum director Gabriel Hefele, the painting was next to the staircase leading to the organ gallery: "Aufgang zur Orgel Treppe/ Auskunft Hefele 24.2.92" (edw 3.3.3.32/1093).

17 "Nicht in Inv. 1957. Dort Zusatz von 1960: 'Nachzutragen: 2 Bilder, die im Südschiff unter der Orgel hängen'". (edw 3.3.3.32/1092).

facts – the recategorisation of the object as a panel painting and the choice of position – lead us to the conclusion that, in this placing of the object, criteria such as art-historical value were for the first time prioritised over liturgical needs or function within the church treasury.

The corresponding statue and epitaph were treated in a similar manner. The statue was also severely damaged by bombs, underwent restoration and was reinstalled in the church in a different position.[18] However, in their new positions, the connection between the statue and the painting was not evident. Both were treated as individual objects. Their distance from the burial place of Bishop Franckenstein increased.

3.4 Cathedral Nave/ Western Wall: Hide and Seek

Sometime after the extensive restoration of Frankfurt Cathedral between 1991 and 1994, the painting was finally put in its current location – the western wall of the cathedral nave.[19]

Meanwhile, the corresponding statue and epitaph also changed position, again separated from the painting. The small donor inscription in the painting is no longer legible because of the rather dark and high position of the painting on the western wall. In this position, it is unlikely to catch a visitor's eye until they make their way out of the church. For some time until the end of 2019, it was introduced to the visitors with a small white plaque,[20] attached to the wall below the painting. The text read (in German)[21]: "Oswald Onghers (1628–1706)/ Martyrdom of St Bartholomew 1670/ Oil on canvas [...]", and looked just like the explanation plaques in the museum presentation in the adjacent (former) cloister. In 2019, it was the only painting inside the church itself with such a plaque. The

18 Cf. Kloft, *Kaiserdom St. Bartholomäus*, 19.

19 The publication about the restoration, published in 1994, depicted the western wall still without the Onghers painting: Der Magistrat der Stadt Frankfurt am Main, Hochbauamt. *Sankt Bartholomäus-Dom Frankfurt am Main: Innere Gesamtinstandsetzung*, Schriftenreihe des Hochbauamtes zu Bauaufgaben der Stadt Frankfurt am Main (Frankfurt am Main Hochbauamt, 1994), 136. A photograph in the personal archives of Elsbeth de Weerth suggests August 18, 1995 as a possible date for the placement in the cathedral. The painting stands on the floor of the church leaning against a wall. (edw 3.3.3.32/ not yet registered).

20 The sign was partly broken and dirty, and therefore removed by the team at the Dommuseum Frankfurt.

21 The original transcription of the plate reads: *"Oswald Onghers (1628–1706), Martyrium des hl. Bartholomäus 1670, Öl auf Leinwand, Stiftung des Johann Karl von Franckenstein für den Bartholomäusaltar".*

presentation was therefore different from other panel paintings in other positions in the church.

4 Conclusion

While Onghers' painting never entered the exhibition spaces of the museum itself, one could argue that it was musealised. It is a good example of museum-like intervention outside an actual museum – even before the actual Dommuseum Frankfurt was founded, and without the object officially entering the explicitly defined exhibition area. As the example of the (removed) plaque illustrates, the Dommuseum Frankfurt also applies its aesthetic principles concerning presentation to objects in the church building itself.

The areas of responsibility are fluid. And so are the possibilities of perception for each visitor. Nowadays one may look at the painting while or after attending a church service and read it as part of the church's interior decoration, the space itself as a place for religious and liturgical acts. Or one may visit Frankfurt Cathedral out of curiosity and see the painting in its current location as a symbol of the historical significance of the cathedral and its treasury. In both cases, the connection between the statue of von Franckenstein and the painting is neither self-explanatory nor evident. This used to be different. In his 1929 guide to Frankfurt Cathedral, Dillmann writes that visitors should bear in mind that the connection was evident in the previous location: "At the stairs on the eastern wall stands an old baroque altar, an altar to St Bartholomew, which used to stand near the burial place of the Franckenstein family."[22]

As the painting and statue are in two separate locations today, the political and social circumstances under which both objects were originally commissioned and produced are obscured. They were both made and placed to symbolise the importance of the donors and their families, to highlight their connection to this particular church and their deep devotion to the faith. Subsequent relocations, and especially the destruction and removal of the original frame, interrupt this layer of representation, which was deeply embedded into a whole iconographic reference system throughout the church. In contrast, in the later locations, the objects have been treated as single objects, which are supposed to stand for themselves. This resembles the museum idea of the 'autonomous piece of art'

22 Dillmann, *Seine Geschichte und seine Kunstwerke*, 62: *"Im Treppenaufgang steht an der Ostwand ein alter Barockaltar, ein Bartholomäusaltar, der früher im Dom bei der Gruft der Herren von Franckenstein seinen Platz hatte."*

even more than one would expect at first sight given the fact that the painting is still displayed in an actual church.

The relocations of the painting also show musealisation as a nonlinear process. One important decision in this process is the categorisation of an object. The painting of St Bartholomew was changed from panel painting to altar retable painting, and back to panel painting again. In order to fit its current categorisation, even the size, thus the display detail, was changed twice. Possible motives for the different locations range from precise embedding into iconographic references to finding just a spot where some valuable/old/arty part of the treasury might fit.

The recategorisation to panel painting after the Second World War meant the painting could be hung inside the church again. This can be read as an act of re-evaluation and upgrading – yet this new value is very different from the painting's previous connection to liturgical ritual, donor's merit and intercession for the soul, with a focus instead on the painting's art-historical background. In this case, the object changes its ascribed category from liturgical architecture to decorative endowment.

It was not the establishment of the Dommuseum Frankfurt that introduced this differentiation. Much earlier accounts hint at the multiple functions of objects as part of the treasury, the liturgy, and as being of art-historical importance. In 1914, Kaufmann wrote: "Easily the room [the cloister] could be effectively used to place some of the sculptures, inscriptions, sarcophagus pieces, etc. which currently are in the city's Historical Museum. The room could as well be decorated with beautiful religious-historical motive paintings – worthy of Frankfurt's great past."[23]

Here three aspects concerning the placement are mentioned: Firstly, the objects that were originally part of the church should be presented in architectural connection to the church itself. Secondly, objects which have been removed from the church can subsequently be presented as artworks. And thirdly, the objects in their interplay with each other and the surrounding architecture should reflect the historical importance of the site.

23 Carl Maria Kaufmann, *Der Frankfurter Kaiserdom: Seine Denkmäler und seine Geschichte* (Kempten und München: Verlag der Jos. Kösel'schen Buchhandlung, 1914), 7. *"Wie leicht ließen sich die Räume zur Aufstellung so mancher jetzt im städtischen historischen Museum befindlichen Domskulpturen, Inschriften, Sarkophagteile usw. wirksam ausnützen, auch malerisch mit schönen religiös-historischen Fresken ausschmücken, wie sie der großen Vergangenheit und dem Pietätsgefühl Frankfurts würdig wären."*

These principles are still relevant in today's placement of objects and lead to a simultaneous multi-layered function: Frankfurt Cathedral used to be and still is a church, a historical site and a museum-like place at the same time. The exhibition parameters for each object vary accordingly and ascribed meaning is frequently shifted between these positions.

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Leila Tavangar Ranjbar

Social History of an Elephant Oil Lamp in the Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī Museum

1 Introduction

The museum of Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī exhibits objects from the Imam Reżā[1] shrine. These include objects that reflect a broader cultural history, as well as 'religious' objects. Items from both categories have been gifted to the collection over several centuries, either as private offerings or in the form of religious endowments. The museum is located in the Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī shrine complex (figure 1), which is one of the most important pilgrimage centres for Shiites, situated in Mashhad in Iran's Khorasan Province. The shrine complex currently covers about one million square metres, making it one of the world's largest religious sites, and receives around 28 million pilgrims a year.[2] With an area of 18,000 square metres and 8,000 objects on display, the museum itself hosts about one million visitors a year.[3]

The Āstān-e Quds Museum's 'Rażavī Shrine's History Collection' includes an oil lamp shaped like an elephant, which was made in India, and endowed to the shrine in 1777.[4] It might be considered surprising that a Hindu figure is to be found at an Islamic institution. The figure raises various questions about a museum that is part of a religious institution but which also has links to other aspects of social history and culture. These aspects include the background contexts of collections, international relations with dedicators, and matters of political representation. Besides this elephant oil lamp, the collection contains further objects made in India and Lahore, prompting investigation of the exchange of goods between the regions, and how these objects reached the collection. One might also ask about the role these items played in the shrine, and what happened to them

1 "The eighth Imam of the Emāmī Shiʿites." (765/768/770–817/1818/819) W. Madelung, "ʿAlī Al-Reżā," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed November 30, 2020, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/Alī-al-reza.

2 Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī's tutelage, "Annually 28 Million Pilgrims to the Shrine of Imam Reza," IRIB News Agency, accessed November 8, 2020, https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/2184896/.

3 Razavi Museum, "An Introduction to Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī Museums," About Us, accessed August 15, 2020, https://museum.razavi.ir/137952/.

4 Research Department and Introduction of Objects, Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī Museums.

Figure 1: The Āstān-e Quds-e Razavī Complex. Aerial view. Photo: Google Earth, accessed November 2, 2020, https://www.google.com/earth/.

once they were no longer in use. This paper will follow the elephant oil lamp's history as a representative example for investigating these questions, thereby bringing to light information not only about the object, but also about the museum.

2 Theory and Methods

The underlying theoretical approaches here are the 'history of an object', and the 'biography of an object'.[5] Giorgio Riello discusses the former in the sense of "historical analysis of the relations between objects, people, and their representations".[6] So, studying the history of this object means following the very special dynamics of the lamp in terms of its relations with other objects; its relations with the people who produced, owned, and endowed it, and its path through the administration of the museum up to its display. While specific information about the oil lamp may be lacking in some of these areas, there is nonetheless a benefit

5 Represented by Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

6 Giorgio Riello, "Things that Shape History: Material Culture and Historical Narratives," in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources,* ed. Karen Harvey (New York: Routledge, 2018), 28.

to conducting this analysis. Indeed, the oil lamp may still be considered representative of certain social practices, such as the collection's lighting instruments sometimes being used in ceremonies. As such, analysing the object takes us along paths that help us to answer research questions about the museum.

It is quite common in cultural studies in such contexts to use the metaphor of the 'biography', and to follow the 'life' of an object from its production, through social changes, and perhaps finally to its 'death'. Although it isn't possible to fully reconstruct the 'life' of this lamp, considering the biography of an object can serve "the express purpose of highlighting exceptional features"[7] in order to better focus on probable changes in its use and meaning. While 'biographies of things' are themselves a controversial research paradigm,[8] following the elephant oil lamp's biography might not only offer information on the object itself, but, again, also allow insights into many aspects of Iranian shrine museums and their collections.

Besides reconstructing the 'biography' of the lamp, we can also trace its history through its material form, which will be the starting point of the analysis, in section 3. Such analyses could prove informative regarding the lamp's specific cultural contextualisation, whether in terms of real practices, or symbolic imaginaries.[9] Further information can also be gained from documentation at the Museum Research Department, the two inscriptions engraved on the object itself, and various historical documents. These historical documents are held at 'The Document and Press Centre of Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī', which includes archives of old official manuscripts. The centre holds administrative records dating from the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722)[10] to the present day, comprising some 283,000 pages. The historical documents used for this paper are mostly from the Qajar era (1786–1925).[11] In this paper, I have mentioned each document's identification code to refer to the specific source used.

7 Karin Dannehl, "Object Biographies: From Production to Consumption," in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, ed. Karen Harvey (New York: Routledge, 2018), 172.

8 Peter Braun, "Objektbiographien erzählen," in *Kulturelle Zyklographie der Dinge*, ed. Ralf Adelmann et al. (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019), 51–69.

9 Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, ed., *Religion in Cultural Imaginary: Explorations in Visual and Material Practices* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2015).

10 Rudi Matthee, "Safavid Dynasty," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, published July 28, 2008, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/safavids.

11 Abbas Amanat, "Historiography viii. Qajar Period," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed July 28, 2020, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/historiography-viii.

3 The Elephant Oil Lamp: Physical Features and Symbolic Meaning

This brass oil lamp,[12] which is moulded in the shape of an elephant (figures 2 and 3), has a rectangular oil storage chamber, and has slight fractures in its spout and in its wick-section. The lamp is 15.5 centimetres wide and 14.5 centimetres tall. The elephant has another spout, which sits under the abdomen. There are decorations on the head, body, ears, legs, and cover of the elephant. The cover is a seat, called a *houdah,* which is positioned on the back of an elephant, and indicates the wealth of the animal's owner. There are also two inscriptions on the elephant's body,[13] which will be described later.

Figures 2–3: Elephant oil lamp at the central museum of Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī. Photo: Leila Tavangar Ranjbar 2019.

In Hindu tradition, the elephant has various symbolic meanings. Mythical elephants carry the universe and represent "the fertility that springs from heavenly

12 Inventory number: 920532.

13 Reported from the Research Department and Introduction of Objects, Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī museums.

waters."[14] The elephant is also found among the *vāhanas*, the deities' particular vehicles. These 'vehicles' are animals, which thus become mythical, and symbolically related to their deities. The elephant is paired with gods such as Indra and Srī-Lakšmī[15]. Sometimes the *vāhanas* are given a particular name; for instance, Indra's elephant *vāhana* is called 'Airāvata'. One of the most famous examples of elephants in Hindu tradition is the elephant-headed god, Ganeša. It should be noted, however, that the elephant represented in the oil lamp does not stem from these examples. Nevertheless, these facts indicate the elephant's importance in Indian culture, and its presence in India's everyday life. In addition, the elephant's *houdah* is suggestive of the context and representation of court life; that such an elephant might carry a king or a god is a very positive connotation.

4 The Early "Life" of the Elephant Oil Lamp

To understand something of the historical context surrounding the start of this object's life in the shrine, we first turn to the period of its dedication. One of the inscriptions on this object indicates the *waqf* (endowment) date, which coincides with the reign of Karīm Ḵān Zand in Persia (1751–79).[16] In this period, the region Khorasan, the home of the shrine, was ruled by Šāhroḵ Šāh Afšār (1748–96).[17] His domain further extended to an area between the territories of Karīm Ḵān Zand to the West and Dorrānīs[18] to the East (figure 4).[19] Significantly, the *waqf* occurred not long after Persia, under the rule of Nāder Šāh Afšār (1736– 47),[20] invaded the Mughal empire, defeating it in 1739.[21] The king of India made peace with Nāder after this, presenting him with valuable treasure.[22] A number of these objects were endowed to the shrine of Imam Reżā, including sixty thousand volumes of

14 Anneliese Keilhauer and Peter Keilhauer, *Die Bildsprache des Hinduismus: Die indische Götterwelt und ihre Symbolik* (Köln: DuMont, 1983), 26.

15 Eckard Schleberger, *Die indische Götterwelt: Gestalt, Ausdruck und Sinnbild: Ein Handbuch der hinduistischen Ikonographie* (Köln: Eugen Diederichs, 1986), 178, 186.

16 John R. Perry, "Karim Khan Zand," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed June 15, 2020, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/karim-khan-zand.

17 Ernest Tucker, "Nāder Shah," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed September 10, 2020, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/nader-shah.

18 The Dorrānīs period lasted for about a century, from 1747. See D. Balland, "Afghanistan x. Political History," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed June 15, 2020, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afghanistan-x-political-history.

19 Maḥbūba Tehrānī, *Karīm Ḵān Zand* (Tehran: Ketāb-e Pārsa, 2007), 62–63.

20 Tucker, "Nāder Shah."

21 Stephen F. Dale, "India xvi. Indo-Persian Historiography," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed June 15, 2020, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/india-xvi-indo-persian-historiography.

22 Tucker, "Nāder Shah."

precious manuscripts, some of which still form part of the collection.[23] Although the king's endowment to the shrine was generally in the form of jewellery or valuables, one might consider the possibility that further objects were donated by other members of his corps during the war.

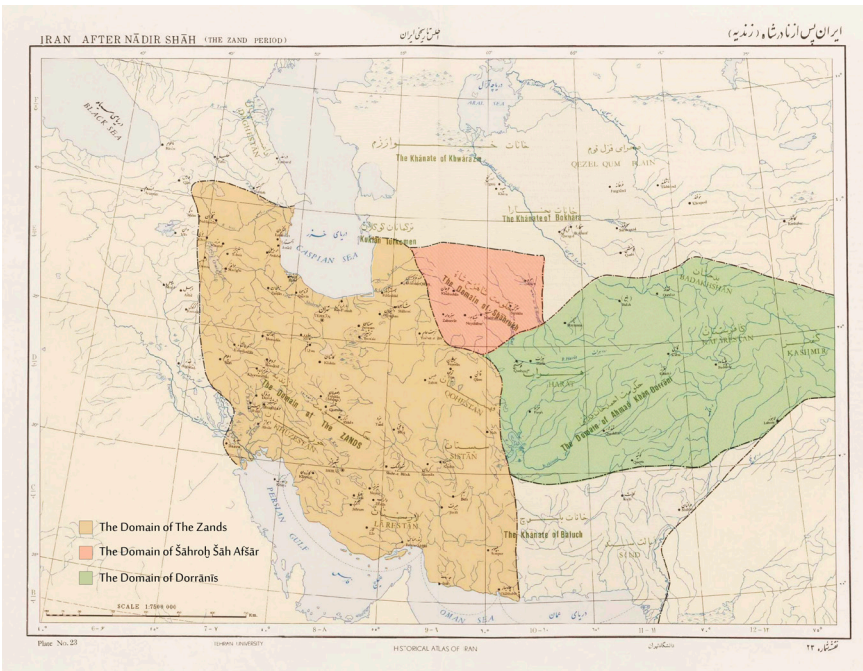

Figure 4: Historical map of the domain of the Zand dynasty. The elephant oil lamp was endowed to the shrine during the reign of Karīm Ḵān Zand. Photo: Nasr, Seyyed Hoseyn/ Zaryab, Abbas et al. (1971): Historical Atlas of Iran. Tehran: Institute of the Geography, University of Tehran. Map No. 23 (The map is edited by Ehmad Chehrghani), © Institute of the Geography, University of Tehran.

Various hypotheses could be posited as to how the oil lamp came to the shrine complex from India: a pilgrim might have endowed it to the shrine, or perhaps it reached a Persian bazaar. There might be yet further possibilities, nonetheless all

23 Mehdi Salah, "The Role of Hindi Captives in the Cultural and Artistic Developments of Nader Shah's Era," *Journal of Subcontinent Researches* 7, no. 23 (2015), https://doi.org/10.22111/jsr.2015.2207.

are underpinned by India and Persia's relations during that period making such transfers possible. As neighbouring countries, India and Persia were connected from their early history. One of the pinnacles of this connection was the Mughal period of India. During that time, with the immigration of several poets, writers, and artists from Persia to India, Persian language and literature spread through India, and a style of Hindu-Persian art was created. After about 700 years of the Persian language and culture's presence in the region, Mughal India developed positive political and trade relations with Karīm Ḵān Zand's government. During this period, some immigrants returned to Persia from India. All these connections illustrate how the transfer of objects between these two regions was enabled.

5 The Object's Path to the Shrine

Two inscriptions are to be found on the cover of the oil lamp, on the body and leg of the elephant, which may aid our understanding of the object's path to the collection. The inscriptions are in Persian, and written in Reyḥān[24] script. Judging by the surface on which the first writing is engraved, one can guess that the writing of this text coincided with the object's creation.[25] Therefore, it is deduced that the lamp was first produced, then someone subsequently decided to endow it to the shrine. The first inscription reads *reʿd ḥalvā-ye šāh*,[26] the meaning of which will be discussed in section 6. Below this, a second inscription[27] was engraved, indicating the dedication of this lamp to the shrine of Imam Reżā by Moḥammad Ḥoseyn Eṣfahānī in 1191 AH (1777 AD).[28] This second inscription mentions the term *waqf*, a popular mechanism for giving objects to the shrine, which will be explained below. Further explanation will be given thereafter, for other key ways objects came to the shrine; namely gifts (*hedīyyeh*), vows (*nazr*), and direct purchase of the lighting instruments pragmatically needed to light the shrine. Sometimes these mechanisms are similar in their operation, but some differences can nonetheless be found between them.

24 A Perso-Arabic style of calligraphy. "This script (also called *rayḥānī*), reputedly devised by Ebn al-Bawwāb" (died 1022–23). Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Yūsofī, "Calligraphy," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed November 10, 2020, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/calligraphy.

25 According to the information on the oil lamp from the Research Department and Introduction of Objects, Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī museums.

26 Research Department and Introduction of Objects, Āstān-e Quds-e Razavī museums.

27 "*Waqf-e Āstān-e Imam Reżā ʿalayha Salām Nemūd Moḥammad Ḥoseyn Sifahānī Sena 191*". Waqif's last name is attributed to Isfahan, a city in Iran.

28 Research Department and Introduction of Objects, Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī museums.

5.1 Waqf

Encyclopedia Iranica describes *waqf* as a charitable endowment.[29] The legal form of *waqf* was very often used to supply required objects, such as light, furniture, or food, to an institution. In our case, it was one of the ways used to give lighting instruments to the Āstān-e Quds. In various historical periods, the shrine's lighting was a matter of particular interest to Muslim kings and rulers, perhaps due to light's symbolic meaning within the religion, and its centrality to Shiite belief. The legal form of *waqf* differs from a more private vow, as "the one who gives something to the shrine as part of the *waqf* process can demand something in return,"[30] for example prayers from the shrine's staff. Additionally, the item is usually endowed with its use restricted to a particular purpose, such as a lamp meant for lighting. Some objects have this function mentioned in their inscriptions, and it is thus forbidden by the *waqif*, the donor, for the object to be used in any other way. In the case of a vow or gift, by contrast, the donor does not submit a request in exchange for their offering to the Āstān-e Quds complex, making it easier to process the thousands of objects reaching the shrine. Since the time of Ayatollah Ṭabasī's shrine custodianship (1980–2015), this has led Āstān-e Quds to consider replacing *waqf* with vows and gifts.[31]

5.2 Offerings and Gifts

Part of the Āstān-e Quds museum's collection has arrived as offerings from kings, commanders, elites, or, indeed, ordinary pilgrims throughout history. In addition to their religious purpose, offerings are also made to show respect to the Rażavī shrine in a social setting. Sometimes foreign rulers or elites give gifts to the collection, mostly with a political purpose of representation, or as part of diplomatic exchange. For example, one of the current collections of the museum is 'The Gift Hall of Ayatollāh Seyyed ʿAlī Ḵāmena-yī',[32] offered to the Āstān-e Quds museum by the current supreme leader of Iran.

29 "Waqf," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed February 7, 2020, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/waqf-crossref.

30 Ḥešmat Kafilī (The chief of Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī museum), interview by the author, December 2019.

31 Kafilī, interview.

32 Information obtained from field studies and observations in the museum.

5.3 Vows

Lighting a candle is a sacred task in Iran, particularly given light's religious significance in the narrations about the Imams. Pilgrims also vowed candles in exchange for the fulfilment of their wishes. Vows, in this sense, are obligations or promises made in exchange for the attainment of their ambitions. If the wish is fulfilled, the vowed offering is made – the candle is offered and lit. Some pilgrims made a vow with different kinds of lighting instruments. Most of these objects are now available in the treasuries and the museum of Āstān-e Quds.[33]

6 Practices with Lighting Instruments

Our object is described as an "oil lamp" in the museum inventory. Elements of its appearance provide indications about its possible use. Engraved on the object one finds the three-word inscription *reʿd*[34] *ḥalvā*[35]*-ye šāh*.[36] Though the significance of this is somewhat unclear, the first word probably points to a burning plant, the second to a kind of sweet confection and the third is the title of a ruler. At least the first two notions are reminiscent of a ritual in which something is given. It nonetheless remains unknown whether such a ritual would have taken place in India, or outside or inside the shrine, or, indeed, what its purpose might have been. As this object is on display in a collection named "Rażavī Shrine's History", which includes the shrine's former objects, it is probable that the object was used ritually in the shrine. I will reflect further on the displaying of the shrine's ritual objects in section 8.

We can further see an S-shaped curve at the back of the lamp, which indicates that this object was hung with a chain, probably from a ceiling. Perhaps it was meant to provide light, or perhaps, like some of the other objects in the collection, it was an offering preserved to show respect for the one who offered it. We do, at least, know that lighting instruments might have had various functions within the shrine, and that there is a full range of festivities in which light plays a significant role.[37]

33 ʿAzīz-Allāh ʿAṭārodī, *Tārīḵ-e Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī* (Tehran: ʿAṭārod, 1992).

34 Fresh, soft and thin branches. Dehkhoda Dictionary, "Reʿd," Vajehyab, accessed March 10, 2020. https://www.vajehyab.com/?q=%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%AF&f=dehkhoda.

35 A kind of sweet confection. Without a clearer context, this is suggestive of the Hindu god Ganeša holding sweets in his paw (translation by author).

36 King (translation by author).

37 From the archive of "The Document and Press Center of Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī".

6.1 Feasts and Illumination

On some occasions, such as the night of the Shiite Imam's birthday (*velādat*), the shrine is illuminated, and light is used to evoke a unique festive atmosphere. Examining the museum's lighting-related documents shows an increase in orders of candles, tallow, wax, and burning oils or other consumables [38] related to illumination on special occasions like Eid-e Qorbān, ʿEid-e Qadīr,[39] ʿEid-e Feṭr, and Prophet Moḥammad's birthday.[40] Another practice that used illumination was the Salām ritual (*majles*). Archived documents inform us that this ritual was, from the Qajar era onwards, held once a year in the Āstān-e Quds complex,[41] showing a simulacrum of Imam Reżā.[42]

Some ceremonies held in the Āstān-e Quds complex probably had more political than religious significance. As this complex was a focus of people's respect and attention, it could provide an appropriate place for political representation. For example, the Qajar documents report the shrine's illumination[43] on the occasion of Nāṣer al-Ddīn Šāh Qajar's (r.1848–96)[44] birthday. Another document shows an illumination in the Āstān-e Quds complex[45] to celebrate Aḥmad Šāh Qajar's (r.1909–1925)[46] birthday. Besides the king's birthday, his coronation was another occasion for illumination,[47] alongside the king's and prince's weddings. Lastly, one of the most considerable illumination occasions is the feast of Nowruz.[48] On this occasion, special programmes were held in the complex, most notably for the moment of entering the new year, which continues to be celebrated with special music.[49]

38 From the archive of "The Document and Press Center of Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī".
39 Document number 21553 (year: 1896).
40 Document number 28829 (year: 1758).
41 From the archive of "The Document and Press Center of Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī".
42 Sālem Ḥoseyn-Zāda, "Negāhī be Anjām-e Marāsem-e Jašn va Sorūr dar Javār-e Bārgāh-e Malakūtī-ye Imam Reżā," *Daftar-e Asnād*, no. 2 and 3 (2007): 252.
43 Document number 15544 (year: 1886) and document number 42444 (year: not clear).
44 The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Nāser al-Dīn Shāh," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed November 10, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Naser-al-Din-Shah.
45 Document number 30567 (year: 1911).
46 M.J. Sheikh-ol-Islami, "Aḥmad Shah Qājār," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed August 15, 2020, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahmad-shah-qajar-1909-1925-the-seventh-and-last-ruler-of-the-qajar-dynasty.
47 Document number 18270 (year: 1913).
48 The Iranian new year (solar calendar), which starts with the first day of Farvardīn, the first month of the spring, and lasts 13 days. It is celebrated with special rituals.
49 Special music is played in *Naqāra-ḵāna* (shrine music building) at the moment of the change of the year.

6.2 Mourning

Shiite religious mourning is also performed in this complex, and also involves lighting instruments. On two nights of the year, special mourning ceremonies take place in the Āstān-e Quds complex: One on the night of *ʿĀšurā*, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Ḥoseyn (d. 680), and the other commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Reżā. These rituals, with candles and candlesticks, are still held annually, and involve special presentations and ceremonies.

6.3 The Ritual of Closing and Opening the Shrine Doors

Special rituals for opening and closing the shrine complex's doors have been common since the Safavid dynasty. Until 1921, the shrine was empty at night, and its doors were kept closed until sunrise; though on certain nights of the year, the doors were closed for fewer hours or not at all. The closing and opening rituals involved a special presentation of keys. Lighting instruments also played a central role in this ritual, as a silver candlestick was placed on top of the silver box containing the shrine doors' gold and silver keys. The shrine's staff then kissed the box, and delivered the keys to their superior to open or close the doors.[50]

7 Resting in Treasuries

Like other lighting instruments, the elephant oil lamp was probably transferred to the shrine *ḫazāna* (storage room) when no longer in use in the shrine complex. The *ḫazāna* houses a collection of diplomatic and other gifts, and the objects endowed by pilgrims and travellers. Over time, some shrine objects lost their function but, due to the religious value of having been used in the shrine, they were not thrown away. Other objects had been obtained from excavations or had been bought to complete existing collections during periods of expansion of the shrine complex. When the modern museum was established in the 20th century, objects were brought from the *ḫazāna* to showcases.

50 Moḥammad Eḥtešām Kāvīyānīyān, *Šams al-Šomūs* (Mashhad: Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī, 1975).

8 Being Exhibited in a Museum

The idea of creating a museum in the shrine complex was first introduced during Moḥammad Valī Asadī's vice-custodianship (1926–1935).[51] After several preparatory stages, its construction started in 1937, and it was officially inaugurated in 1945.[52] After the Islamic Revolution (1979), plans were developed to extend the shrine's space, one of the most important of which was the expansion of the Āstān-e Quds museum. Since then, new collections have been launched on various topics, often based on the expansion of endowments. The current collections are: 'Collection of Qurʿans and Manuscripts', 'Ayatollāh Seyyed ʿAlī Ḵāmena-yī Gifts Museum', 'Carpet Museum', 'Stamp and Postal Items Collection', 'Marine Collection', 'Hall of Maḥmūd Farščīyān', Banknote Collection', 'Astronomy Collection', 'Museum of Anthropology', 'Collection of Visual Arts', 'Coin Collection', 'Weapon Collection', 'Medal Collection', 'Dishes Collection', and 'Clock Collection', as well as the central 'Rażavī Shrine History Collection'.

The lighting objects[53] were displayed at the museum on the first day.[54] They are now part of the Rażavī Shrine History Collection, and are one of the most valuable assets of the collection. Only a few of the lighting instruments from the Rażavī Shrine History Collection are on public display in the museum.[55] In general, most of this section's objects belonged to or were used directly in the shrine. So, unlike some other collections that are not religiously affiliated, such as the marine collection, the objects once used in the shrine retain a kind of sacredness for some visitors.

9 Conclusion

By reconstructing the history of the elephant oil lamp, we can identify conceptual changes in various periods. While we cannot determine the lamp's full 'biography', especially as its production and ritual use within the shrine remain unclear, we can see how it was contextualised as part of greatly differing social practices: the object was first created as a lamp, then it was endowed to the shrine. After a possible period of use, it was transferred to the shrine storage rooms, and then

51 Seyyed Mahdi Seyyed Qoṭbī and ʿAlī Sūzančī Kāšānī, "Mūza-ye Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī," *Šamsa,* no. 38 and 39 (Spring and Summer 2018): 6.

52 Seyyed Qoṭbī and Sūzančī Kāšānī, "Mūza-ye Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī," 17.

53 Here, the term 'object' reflects the fact that these items are no longer being used for their primary function, which was lighting.

54 Alī Moʿtamen, *Tārīḵ-e Āstān-e Quds* (Mashhad: Āstān-e Quds-e Rażavī, 1975).

55 Most of them are still kept in the museum catalogues.

it was taken out and displayed in the museum. Referring to Giorgio Riello, certain aspects can be considered characteristic of the oil lamp's social and material interrelatedness. It came from India, a culture where the elephant was an important entity, and arrived in Persia as part of close cultural relations between the regions. It was an object endowed to a shrine, together with thousands of lighting objects, as part of its collection and for use in illumination rituals. Later it became a museum object, contextualised by other lighting objects.

Moreover, focusing on the physical aspects and reading the text on its body provides essential information. For instance, the object's date can be linked to the possible relations between Persia and India in the mentioned periods, including war, trade, immigration, and diplomacy. An inscription on its body also indicates that this object was endowed to the shrine via a *waqf* process.

Historical documents, mostly from the Qajar era, provide a general idea of how the lighting instruments were used or are still being used, beyond their primary function of illumination, in related rituals with special formalities. The elephant oil lamp is to be found in an arrangement that indicates its cultural background in India, forming part of a prominent display of lighting instruments in the current museum.

In summary, the different strands of collecting objects, the foreign and regional connections, the representational function of some objects in the museum indicating respecting other cultures or honouring the donors, and the rituals and ceremonies inside the shrine, all show that the museum and shrine complex form part of a whole network of social relations and practices. The shrine complex is a site of pilgrimage, linked even to international politics, with historic official and court traditions of Persia preserved in the vast institution. The various mechanisms for collecting objects continue to play a role in the complex. Newly collected objects – some of them antique – are currently being added to the treasury, and will perhaps form future museum collections.

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