

## **The camel that escaped the Nazis: Paul Jacobsthal and a Tang camel at the Ashmolean, Oxford**

KATHARINA ULMSCHNEIDER AND SALLY CRAWFORD

### SUMMARY

In the Asian and European crossroads gallery, on the first floor of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the visitor is greeted by a large, Chinese, pottery camel. The braying camel stands proudly in a display cabinet with a second, much smaller, camel and other artefacts symbolic of the travel and transport connections between East Asia and the West along the ancient Silk Roads. Modestly labelled ‘Model of a camel, Tang Dynasty, China, soft whiteware, painted. Baxandall loan, EALI891.1’, there is, however, much more to this camel than initially meets the eye. Though there was no record of it in the Ashmolean archives, the camel was once the property of refugee academic Professor Paul Jacobsthal. In this article, the forgotten history of the object and the owner who brought it to Oxford is traced. This history offers a timely insight into the links between Oxford and its WWII refugee academic community, as well as reminder that the legacy of those who found refuge in Oxford is in danger of being lost.

### THE TANG CAMEL IN THE ASHMOLEAN (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

The Ashmolean Museum’s Eastern Art online catalogue database describes accession number EA2012.189 only briefly: as an earthenware figure of a camel, with brown glaze, measuring 52 x 36 x 19.5 cm max. (height x width x depth), and dating to the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907).<sup>2</sup> Standing on a small plinth, the figurine displays all the physical hallmarks of a Bactrian camel. Bactrian camels have two humps on the back (in this case standing proud, indicating that the camel was well-nourished), manes on their neck and throat, and woolly fur, which helps them to tolerate extreme temperatures. Their wide, two-toed feet, long eye-lashes, and closeable nostrils make them very well adapted to the harsh climate of the steppes, deserts, and mountains of central Asia, where they are thought to have originated.

There can be little doubt that the Tang Chinese potters were well accustomed to these animals, and attempts were made to closely reproduce these physical features – the humps, hairy ears, shoulder and neck mane - on the camel figurine. It would have been constructed from flat sheets of earthenware clay pressed into moulds. Decoration consisted normally of a white clay slip as a ground, onto which a glaze would then be poured or splashed. Subsequent firing gave the glaze

---

<sup>1</sup> Room 28, Asian crossroads.

<sup>2</sup> <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/object/EA2012.189>.

a hard, glass-like finish - in this case of a dark chestnut colour. Again, the potters introduced realism into their work. Though seemingly just loosely applied, the dark, chestnut brown glaze closely mirrors the woollier, and often darker bits of fur found on the mane (neck and throat), humps, front upper legs, and even tail of some Bactrian camels. The camel's character is also displayed with great realism – mouth wide open, head turned up and backwards, it is braying, evoking the notorious bad temper which characterizes these animals.<sup>3</sup>

Pottery camel figurines of the Tang period are relatively common, having been made as funerary objects for burial in the tombs of the elite, rich officials, or even merchants.<sup>4</sup> Many of them are depicted carrying loads, symbolising their use as haulage animals for traded goods along the Silk Roads, which had re-opened following Tang Dynasty conquests and expansion into central Asia, thereby ushering in a golden age of foreign contacts, commerce, and flourishing of the arts, such as poetry, painting, and pottery.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately the Ashmolean camel does not have an associated archaeological record or context. A Thermoluminescence sample, taken from the firing hole in 1994 by the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art, Oxford, confirmed it as dating to the Tang Period.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the credit line 'presented by Mrs Baxandall', nothing more was known about the camel or its former history.

## DISCOVERING THE CAMEL'S FORMER OWNER

The research project 'Persecution and Survival: the Paul Jacobsthal Story' started by the authors at the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford, in 2011, followed by an exhibition at the Oxford Town Hall in early 2012, would eventually lead to the discovery of the history of the camel and its extraordinary journey from Germany to Oxford in the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> The project was based on exploring the Institute's unpublished archive of German refugee archaeologist Professor Paul Ferdinand Jacobsthal, about whom astonishingly little was known either in Germany or in England apart from a basic biography. Born in Berlin in 1880, Jacobsthal became a leading German art historian and classicist. He was the Professor of Archaeology at Marburg University and Director of the Archaeological Seminar (Institute) there. Although he had been baptized as a Protestant, his parents

<sup>3</sup> M. Tregear, *Chinese Art* (1980), pp. 104-5, fig. 86, for another Tang Dynasty earthenware tomb model of a braying camel. E.H. Schafer, 'The Camel in China down to the Mongol Dynasty', *Sinologica - Zeitschrift für chinesische Kultur und Wissenschaft*, 2 (1950), pp. 165-93; pp. 263-89.

<sup>4</sup> For example E.R. Knauer, *The Camel's Load in Life and Death: Iconography and Ideology of Chinese Pottery Figurines from Han to Tang and their Relevance to Trade along the Silk Routes* (2011), or M. Sullivan, *The Arts of China* (1973), pp. 143-4, fig. 118, depicting a Bactrian camel from a tomb in Sian, Shensi, China.

<sup>5</sup> C. Clunas, *Art in China* (1997); V. Hansen, *The Silk Road* (2012); P. Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A new History of the World* (2015).

<sup>6</sup> Eastern Art Archive EA2012.189: RLAHA Report on Thermoluminescence Analysis sample 766c81, 1 December 1994.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.arch.ox.ac.uk/jacobsthal-project.html>

had both been Jewish. Jacobsthal, a first world war veteran, carrier of the iron cross, and holder of a full professorship at Marburg from 1912, had narrowly survived the first round of sackings of Jewish professors in 1933, but as time wore on he was hindered from travelling, partaking in congresses, and publishing his work. In October 1935, following the ‘Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service’ (*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*), Jacobsthal was finally dismissed from his post on racial grounds (‘aus rassischen Gründen’). Overnight he lost everything he had lived and worked for. He was 55.<sup>8</sup>

With the help of his friends, including Professor John Beazley, he came to Oxford University and found refuge at Christ Church, where he was employed as a researcher, lecturer, and in 1937 Reader in Celtic Archaeology at the University. Apart from a brief period of internment in 1940, Jacobsthal and his wife Guste lived the rest of their lives at Oxford, Jacobsthal dying in 1957 and Guste surviving until 1964.

As part of the research project, the team were able to interview a number of people who remembered the Jacobsthals in Oxford. These witnesses included Kay Baxandall, the daughter of Jacobsthal’s former neighbours in Oxford, the eminent physicist Sir Francis and Lady Simon. Sir Francis, alias Franz Simon, and his wife were themselves refugees. Simon, formerly the director of the Institute for Physical Chemistry at the Technische Hochschule in Breslau, then Germany,<sup>9</sup> had voluntarily resigned his post when invited to Oxford in 1933 by Frederick Lindemann.<sup>10</sup> Based at Christ Church, Lindemann had already been instrumental in bringing a series of other important Jewish physicists to Oxford, perhaps none better known than Albert Einstein.<sup>11</sup> After his arrival, Simon was set to work at the Clarendon Laboratory, which Lindemann headed, and during the war became associated with work on the atomic energy project.<sup>12</sup> The Simon and Jacobsthal families became close friends, a friendship which was to last for the next three decades, and resulted in Lady Simon eventually becoming the executor of Mrs Jacobsthal’s will.

The following extracts are taken from an interview with Mrs Kay Baxandall in 2011, conducted by Dr Megan Price as part of the Jacobsthal research project.<sup>13</sup>

Baxandall: ‘I never saw his [Jacobsthal’s] room in college, but he must have had one. Oh yes, that front room [Kay indicated a photograph of Jacobsthal’s home office]. I brought you

<sup>8</sup> S. Crawford and K. Ulmschneider, ‘Life Between the Nations – The Wartime Correspondence of German Refugee Archaeologist Paul Jacobsthal’, *British Archaeology*, 115 (2010), pp. 30-3; idem, *Persecution and Survival: The Paul Jacobsthal Story* (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Wrocław, Poland.

<sup>10</sup> P.W. Bridgman, ‘Sir Francis Simon’, *Science*, 131.3414 (1960), pp. 1647-54.

<sup>11</sup> A. Grenville, ‘Sebastian Flyte, Meet Albert Einstein ...’, *Journal of the Association of Jewish Refugees*, 4.2 (February 2004), p. 5; idem, ‘Sebastian Flyte, Meet Albert Einstein ... (Part 2)’, *Journal of the Association of Jewish Refugees*, 4.4 (April 2004), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> A. Fort, *Prof: The Life of Frederick Lindemann* (2004), pp. 122-3, 302-7, fig. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Institute of Archaeology, Oxford (IoAO) *Jacobsthal Archive*, Oral Records.

photographs of the camel that stood on the windowsill. It was so typical. I see on the back of one of the photographs that he bought it in 1924 in Germany. It's not a terribly valuable specimen or he would never have been able to afford it. And he's now ... in the Ashmolean in their study collection. Since the refurbishment, I don't know where he is. They can't have got rid of him. They would have had to let me know. ... It is Tang Dynasty. It is genuine, but somehow the glazing is not quite up to scratch'.<sup>14</sup>

Megan: 'And he was able to bring that out of Marburg was he?'

Baxandall: 'Yes, and he brought all his furniture too. You see at that stage one was still allowed to do that. That is why he was able to take what is quite a big house. I think he had somebody living upstairs. ... These things all went to my mother [Lady Simon] – I suppose out of gratitude for the various things she did for him as an executor.'

Megan: 'There must have been an awful lot of stuff to get rid of [from Jacobsthal's house].'

Baxandall: I only ever saw the downstairs room, which was his study – I can picture this very clearly. It had a great big desk in the window with the camel on the windowsill. On the left there was a bookcase and behind there was a bookcase; in fact there were bookcases on three sides of the room and a door and that was it. I suppose there must have been another chair, which I was put to sit down in.'

## THE CAMEL TRAVELS TO OXFORD

Thus the Tang camel presented to the Ashmolean Museum had belonged to Jacobsthal, but when and where had it been in Marburg, and how had it come to Oxford? The Jacobsthal archives at both the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford, and the Vorgeschichtliche Seminar at the University of Marburg include correspondence between Jacobsthal and his former German colleagues. One letter provided a crucial mention of a camel in Jacobsthal's possession.<sup>15</sup> It is described as a 'Tang camel', and had its pride of place ('stable'), in the Archaeological Seminar at Marburg. There it would have been seen and known by everyone: staff, colleagues, and students, perhaps acting as some sort of institute mascot.

<sup>14</sup> This turned out not to be the case, Shelagh Vainker, personal communication, November 2015.

<sup>15</sup> See below, Merhart to Jacobsthal, 23 May 1946, Vorgeschichtliches Seminar der Philipps-Universität Marburg (VSPUM), Nachlass Gero von Merhart, Privatdienstliche Korrespondenz J. We are grateful to Dana Schlegelmilch for drawing our attention to these letters.

In the dark days following Jacobsthal's dismissal from his post in October 1935, the camel became a symbol of the turmoil in his personal life. It is precisely in these last few weeks of his life in Germany, that it makes an appearance in the records again. Jacobsthal poignantly summarized his situation in a private letter to his seminar colleague and close friend, the prehistorian Gero von Merhart, dated 14 March 1936:

The next few months and life circumstances will be even more crazed and tempestuous than the past ones. Today a word from us – as I, as we - were unable to say goodbye – my wife was suffering from a stomach ulcer and I was terribly occupied. I am writing from the photographic room, in which I established a makeshift existence in the last 12 days of my badly battered Marburg career. My office is now the library for Near-Eastern Art and Architecture ... the camel is located in my bedroom at the Kaffweg, the rubber tree is waiting ... The Celtic contents of my two cabinets are stowed in 11 boxes, which will accompany me. Occasionally I have a chat with Philipp or Jorns – the last remainders of my normal existence, which I am leaving without sentimentality, but with a strong conviction of its senselessness and utter futility ... One day all of this will be once more your concern, but not mine ...'.<sup>16</sup>

Between October 1935 and March 1936, the camel had moved from the Archaeological Seminar in the University to Jacobsthal's long-term private flat in Marburg, Kaffweg No. 9, which, for the time being, he was keeping on even as he was negotiating his move to Oxford.

What happened next is still shrouded in mystery. There is no mention in the letter of the intended final destination of the journey, nor the date of his departure. Official German sources show that Jacobsthal was at Marburg in November and December of 1935, preparing the hand-over of the seminar to his unknown successor, though he vanishes from the German records shortly thereafter, only to re-appear in 1937 as Reader in Celtic Archaeology at Oxford.<sup>17</sup> British records, most importantly among them his Home Office file (parts of which are still redacted), however,

---

<sup>16</sup> 'Die nächsten Monate und Lebensumstände werden noch verrückter und stürmischer sein als die verflossenen. Da ich, da wir Ihnen nicht mehr adieu sagen konnten – meine Frau hatte ihr Magengeschwür und ich was grässlich okkupt – heute ein Wort. Ich schreibe in dem Photozimmer, wo ich mich für die letzten Tage meiner schwer ramponierten Marburger Existenz notdürftig etabliert habe; in meinem Zimmer ist jetzt die Bibliothek für vorderasiatische Kunst u. Bauforschung, ... das Kamel steht in meinem Schlafzimmer auf dem Kaffweg, der Gummibaum wartet ... Der keltische Inhalt meiner beiden Schränke ist in 11 Kisten, die mich begleiten werden. Ab und zu Schwatz mit Philipp oder Jorns - letzte Überbleibsel meines normalen Daseins, aus dem ich ohne Sentimentalität, aber mit der Überzeugung von der Sinnlosigkeit und mangelnder Notwendigkeit scheide'. Jacobsthal to Merhart, 14 March 1936, VSPUM, Nachlass Gero von Merhart, Privatdienstliche Korrespondenz J.

<sup>17</sup> F. Jagust, 'Paul Jacobsthal (1880-1957)', in G. Brands and M. Maischberger (eds.), *Lebensbilder: Klassische Archäologen und der Nationalsozialismus, Band 1, Forschungscluster 5: Geschichte des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts im 20. Jahrhundert* (2012), pp. 65-74.

reveal that he had visited Britain and managed to secure funding and a place at Christ Church Oxford by the end of 1935.<sup>18</sup> Money (from the Rockefeller Foundation) was to be paid to him from March 1936, and he and his wife, Guste, were now waiting for the right moment to make the move abroad. This journey, as the Home Office file reveals, took place on 4 April 1936. The camel may have travelled directly with him then.

At Oxford, the Jacobsthals first moved to 5 Keble Road,<sup>19</sup> ‘a large very Victorian sitting-room with permanently burning [fire at the] chimney and also 2 very English bedrooms’, where they were

‘being cooked for by a mother and two ... daughters in an English way – i.e. mutton, pies and custard in turn. Instead of the A. S. [Archaeologisches Seminar, in Marburg] a very poetic room at Christ Church with fire, lounge chairs, a view onto a beautiful baroque façade, the “monastic library”. Here I have my photos and LT [LaTene] manuscripts ... I cannot live here in a cleverly constructed solitude as I did in Marburg after the [First World] War, but have to drink plenty of port and sherry in my dinner-jacket, and talk scholarship and pleasant trivialities. I positively enjoy the manifold possibilities to talk to knowledgeable local and visiting scholars in our subjects. We both gratefully enjoy this civil-aristocratic-learned atmosphere, friendliness, and friendship.’<sup>20</sup>

Five months later, the Jacobsthals were on the move again, this time to 6 Fyfield Road, ‘a self-contained 3-bedroom flat in ... North Oxford, a collection of excessively respectable Victorian villas with gardens, each with a ... car, 1-2 dogs, and a cat.’ ‘In our house’, Jacobsthal writes, ‘the respectability is tempered by our landlady, an ... American, who is a pilot, drives a car, rides horses, collects Chinese and [Georg] Kolbe sculptures, and now studies.’<sup>21</sup> The new address, he continues

<sup>18</sup> Detailed in K. Ulmschneider and S. Crawford, ‘The “Cheshire Cat”: Paul Jacobsthal’s Journey from Marburg to Oxford’, in S. Crawford, K. Ulmschneider and J. Elsner (eds.), *The Ark of Civilization: Refugee Scholars and Oxford University 1930-1945* (in press 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Bodl. Spec. Coll. Jacobsthal Papers, Alien Pass p. 1, stamped 18/6/36.

<sup>20</sup> ... ‘ein grosser stockviktorianischer sitting-room mit ewig-brennendem Kamin und 2 auch sehr englische bedrooms, wo wir von einer Mutter mit 2 ... Töchtern englisch bekocht werden, d.h. Hammel, pies und custard abwechselnd essen. Statt A.S.: ein sehr poetischer Raum in Christ Church mit Feuer, Klubsesseln, einem Blick auf eine schöne Barockfassade, die “Klosterbibliothek”. .... ‘Und ich kann mich hier nicht, wie seit dem Krieg in Marburg, einer raffiniert gezimmerten Isolation ergeben, sondern habe in dinner-jacket viel Port, Sherry zu trinken und zu quatschen, Wissenschaft und Trivialitäten. Positiv geniesse ich die vielen Möglichkeiten zum Gespräch mit ortsansässigen oder durchreisenden klugen Leuten unserer Fächer. Und wir beide geniessen dankbar diese civil-aristokratisch-gelehrte Atmosphäre und Freundlichkeit und Freundschaft. Jacobsthal to Merhart, 14 June 1936, VSPUM, Nachlass Gero von Merhart, Privatdienstliche Korrespondenz J.

<sup>21</sup> Bodl. Spec. Coll. Jacobsthal Papers, Alien Pass p. 3, stamped 24/9/36; ... ‘einer abgeschlossenen 3 Zimmerwohnung in dem totcorrecten [sic] Nordviertel von Oxford, einer Sammlung von victorianischen Villen in Gärten, zu jedem Haus gehört ein ... Auto, 1-2 Hunde, und eine Katze. Bei uns im Haus ist die Korrektheit dadurch gemildert, daß unsere Wirtin eine .... Amerikanerin ist, die Pilotin, Autofahrerin, Reiterin, Sammlerin von Chinaskulpturen, Kolbeplastik ist

to explain, was a great improvement for him and his wife Guste, and there can be little doubt that given the mutual Chinese sculpture interests, the camel would have been a point of conversation between Jacobsthal and his landlady.

Eight months later, the Jacobsthals moved once more, to 14 Norham Road,<sup>22</sup> before finally, six months later, settling into their own home on 118 Banbury Road ‘stylistically not without problems, 1895, with embarrassing influences of Ruskin in its ornament, but dead solid’, in October of 1937.<sup>23</sup> It is at this address, that the camel finally came to rest, standing on the windowsill of Jacobsthal’s study at the front of the house. There it greeted their visitors and friends, such as the Simon family, the Andrewes family,<sup>24</sup> and Martyn Jope, Jacobsthal’s co-worker on a book on *Early Celtic Art in the British Isles*.<sup>25</sup> It was Jope, who at the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies held at Oxford in 1983, twenty-six years after Jacobsthal’s death, reminded Celtic Scholars not only of the outstanding contribution that Jacobsthal had made to the fields of Classical and Celtic Art, but his passion for what Jope described as ‘the whole gallery of real and imaginary animals’, and, perhaps most poignantly, his fascination for ‘strange things’ from the Orient: ‘a fine ceramic camel stood in his rooms throughout his Oxford days’.<sup>26</sup>

#### THE CAMEL IN GERMANY

Back in Marburg, the movement of the Tang camel and its owner to Oxford had left a gaping hole at the Archaeological Seminar. As soon as the war had ended, and postal services resumed, a rapid and lengthy exchange of letters and news recommenced between Jacobsthal and his old Marburg friend Merhart. While not directly hit, the Archaeological Seminar had sustained damage by bombs going off in surrounding streets, including holes in the roof and blown out windows. One of the more bizarre occurrences was Merhart’s attempt, recounted to Jacobsthal in a letter of May 1946, to construct makeshift windows for the Institute: ‘the ... dying regime ... entrusted me with the professional excavation of a store of advertisement boards near the train station’ which contained ‘colourful cardboard Henkel-Persil-billboards [i.e. the washing detergent]’. Von Merhart repurposed the billboards to replace the empty panes so that, when the Liberation army came

---

und jetzt studiert.’, Jacobsthal to Merhart, 15 October 1936, VSPUM, Nachlass Gero von Merhart, Privatdienstliche Korrespondenz J.

<sup>22</sup> Bodl. Spec. Coll. Jacobsthal Papers, Alien Pass p. 3, stamped 10/4/37.

<sup>23</sup> Jacobsthal to Merhart 21 August 1946, IoAO Jacobsthal Archive 49/331. See also K. Ulmschneider and S. Crawford, ‘Post-War Identity and Scholarship: the Correspondence of Paul Jacobsthal and Gero von Merhart at the Institute of Archaeology, Oxford’, *European Journal of Archaeology*, 14.1-2 (2011), pp. 231-50, for Jacobsthal’s experiences of Oxford.

<sup>24</sup> Helen Forde, personal communication, 2012, vividly remembers seeing Jacobsthal’s camel there.

<sup>25</sup> Published posthumously under Martyn Jope’s name only: M. Jope, *Early Celtic Art in the British Isles* (2000).

<sup>26</sup> M. Jope, ‘Paul Ferdinand Jacobsthal’, in D.E. Evans, J.G. Griffith and E.M. Jope (eds.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies held at Oxford from 10th to 15th July, 1983* (1986), pp. 15-18.

marching in, it ‘found itself greeted aptly from my windows by snow-white animated looking portraits of shirts’.<sup>27</sup>

The provisional window dressings, however, served a more serious purpose, and were soon replaced by proper glass panes, as the seminar building, including Jacobsthal’s former administrative rooms, became a makeshift shelter and ‘collecting point for fine arts’ and antiquities. But perhaps most poignantly, the memory of the room where Jacobsthal’s camel had stood for so many years continued to persist at Marburg. ‘Your Tang-camel-stable is still being used archaeologically’.<sup>28</sup>

Kay Baxandall records that the camel came into Jacobsthal’s possession in 1924, but how and why he acquired it still remains to be established. What can be shown is that during his twenty-three years service at Marburg University, Jacobsthal had been instrumental not only in establishing the first Chair in Prehistory in Germany, but also in building up the artefact and cast collections for the seminar. Like Beazley and many other classical scholars of his age, he had travelled extensively to museums all over Europe, taking notes, drawing sketches, and recording his observations on the objects in their possession. His notebooks from 1926, for example, show him visiting museums in Paris. Interleaved with his notes are names and addresses of galleries and art dealers, occasionally including lists of objects and prices, indicating that he was building up knowledge of items surfacing on the antiques market at the same time.<sup>29</sup> That this was more than a passing interest is attested by Jacobsthal’s copious correspondence with dealers and his surviving photographic albums, which show that his expert opinion on artefacts was widely sought not only by museums and art dealers, but also by owners of private collections.<sup>30</sup> This in-depth knowledge of a vast range of archaeological material would have facilitated his acquisition of items not only for the Seminar, but also his own, private, collection, and that of his wife, who, it turns out, was keenly interested in bronze animals.<sup>31</sup>

When Jacobsthal was dismissed from Marburg, he was asked to draw up a report of the present state of the seminar for his successor, detailing - and he felt justifying - what had been done and achieved since his appointment in 1912. In the, as it turned out futile, hope of at least retaining some access to the seminar collections after his departure, Jacobsthal not only carefully ensured that everything he had bought from official and research funds throughout his tenure in Marburg was staying at the seminar, but, in addition, ‘donated’ some of his own artefacts and equipment to the

---

<sup>27</sup> IoAO Jacobsthal Archive 49/335.

<sup>28</sup> Merhart to Jacobsthal, 23 May 1946, VSPUM, Nachlass Gero von Merhart, Privatdienstliche Korrespondenz J.

<sup>29</sup> IoAO Jacobsthal Archive, Notebooks 53-5.

<sup>30</sup> For example, IoAO Jacobsthal Archive, 49/40, 49/45. Classical Art and Research Centre, Beazley Archive, Oxford, Jacobsthal Albums.

<sup>31</sup> IoAO Jope-Jacobsthal Archive 1/33, 12 March 1948.

University. The camel is not mentioned in these records, corroborating that it had been acquired from his own funds and was part of his personal collection.

#### THE CAMEL AND THE REFUGEE SCHOLAR

Jacobsthal's decision to acquire a Tang Chinese pottery camel at first glance may seem a rather unusual choice. For his British collaborator Jope it was chiefly explained by the fascination of a classical and celtic scholar by strange things from the Orient and his general liking for animals. However, this is a much too narrow reading of Jacobsthal's character, interests, and scholarship. More broadly it is also illustrative of the difficulties many refugee scholars faced in carving out their spaces in a foreign academic culture, where their expertise did not necessarily fit established patterns, or their continental ideas carry favour.<sup>32</sup> In Germany and Britain before the war, Jacobsthal's formidable reputation as a scholar was based on his research in Classical art history and archaeology, although by the late 1920s he had already begun to publish articles on the influence of Ancient Greek art on European Celtic art.<sup>33</sup> But pre-war Oxford had no need of any more Classical art historians, as John Beazley of Christ Church was already in post. Thanks to his developing research into links between Greek and Celtic art, Jacobsthal was able to re-present himself as a Celtic archaeologist, and offer new courses at Oxford. His magisterial two-volume book *Early Celtic Art*, written and published in English by Oxford University Press in 1944, established him in British archaeology as a Celticist.

What was a necessary re-invention on Jacobsthal's part to secure himself a post and future at Oxford, was not, however, in any way a reflection of his full interests. Like many of his fellow refugees, Jacobsthal was an internationalist. From at least the early 1920 onwards, he had been concerned with a much broader picture – trying to set Greek art in the widest chronological and geographical framework, extending from Ireland in the West to China in the East. He was intrigued by the artistic links between East and West, and was ahead of his time in trying to trace their lines of communication. Jacobsthal identified representations of animals as a key to recognising and tracking cultural contacts. His archive at the Institute of Archaeology shows that he collected photographs, cartoons and images of animals drawn from around the world. His personal collection of animal art, as far as we have been able to trace it to date, was eclectic: from the camel, through his prehistoric Scythian (Ordos) animal-figure bronzes,<sup>34</sup> to a humble modern wicker frog still surviving in the institute's archives – all part of what Jope called his 'gallery' of animals (Fig. 2). It

<sup>32</sup> B. Bujić, 'Shipwrecked on the Island of the Blessed: Egon Wellesz's New Beginnings in Wartime Oxford', in Crawford, Ulmschneider and Elsner, *Ark of Civilization*, in press.

<sup>33</sup> P. Jacobsthal and A. Langsdorff, *Die Bronzeschnabelkannen* (1929); P. Jacobsthal and E. Neuffer, *Gallia Graeca: recherches sur l'hellénisation de la Provence* (1933).

<sup>34</sup> Baxandall, personal communication, 2011.

is against this background that the acquisition of the Chinese camel begins take on a deeper meaning. Far from being just a beautiful representation of an animal, the camel provided a physical manifestation of the way ideas and goods were carried from East to West, a symbol of the way art and culture were shared and transmitted.

This long-standing curiosity about the relationship between western and Asian art and culture, found some, albeit limited, expression in his work: in 1944 he published an article drawing attention to similarities between a Roman and Chinese bronze.<sup>35</sup> Judging by the images and letters in the archives, however, the relative lack of publications on this topic appears to have been a result of the lack of time remaining to him to finish all the work he had set himself, rather than due to a lack of ideas or interest. One of the *Reports of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum* records a donation to the Museum in 1938 of a 'Bead: red, green, and white glaze with patterns of knobs and trellis-work. Pre-Han or Han', by 'Dr P. Jacobsthal', confirming yet again that from early on his personal collection and interests reached far beyond the classical and western worlds and was by no means restricted to animals.<sup>36</sup>

Another *Report of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum* shows that the Chinese bead was not the only artefact donated to the Ashmolean Museum by Jacobsthal. In 1936 an entry under 'Etruscan donations' reads 'Dr P. Jacobsthal: bronze belt-hook, seventh century, closely parallel to examples from Populonia (see Not. Scavi, 1925, p. 360) and perhaps itself from that site'.<sup>37</sup> Why then had he never thought of donating his camel?

## THE CAMEL AS A SYMBOL

As Merhart's letters show, the camel was closely linked to Jacobsthal's identity as a scholar and head of the Archaeological Seminar at Marburg. When Jacobsthal was forced out of his post, the camel as a metaphor offered Merhart a way of expressing his feelings at the loss without becoming too personal or sentimental (or touching on the unpleasant political realities of what had happened to Jacobsthal) with an esteemed colleague. It is possible to see Jacobsthal, however, using the camel in a different way, as a defiant symbol and statement of his determination to continue as an academic no matter where the necessities of the situation took him. The camel was a performance of Jacobsthal's identity, not hidden away in a private space inside his house, but standing proudly on the windowsill, publicly visible, looking out onto a busy Banbury Road.

It is a wonderful coincidence that the object symbolising Jacobsthal's dislocation from Germany to Oxford should be a camel – travel is what camels are meant to do, they are always on

<sup>35</sup> P. Jacobsthal, 'A Roman and a Chinese Bronze', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 48.4 (1944), pp. 349-51.

<sup>36</sup> *Reports of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum* for 1938, Chinese donations, p. 14. We are very grateful to Stephen Leach for drawing our attention to this and the following entry.

<sup>37</sup> *Reports of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum* for 1936, Etruscan donations, p. 15.

the move. They are the perfect symbol of the nomad, travelling between the nations. Jacobsthal and Merhart were clearly aware of this further meaning. The ‘camel stable is empty’ also allowed Merhart to pose a question about whether Jacobsthal would return to Marburg to take up his former place. The camel, however, remained resolutely in Oxford. Along the way it left an impression on Jacobsthal’s former colleagues, friends, and their children, becoming, as it had been in Marburg, closely identified with its owner, as recalled by Helen Forde, and mentioned by Martyn Jope.

The camel’s travels, of course, did not end with the death of its owner. Although originally made as a funerary item, the camel was not interred with Jacobsthal. After his widow Guste’s death it travelled within the Oxford refugee community to Lady Simon, and then passed to her daughter Kay Baxandall, where it came to rest on yet another windowsill, just round the corner from its former home.<sup>38</sup> It was Kay Baxandall who first brought it to the attention of the Ashmolean Museum in 1993. As transpires from a series of letters between the curator and Kay Baxandall, the camel – not surprisingly under the circumstances - had accumulated a certain amount of dirt over the years, which nearly relegated it to the Ashmolean reserve collections. Thanks to the efforts of the then conservator, however, it was eventually cleaned up, dated, and, apart from a brief sojourn into storage during the remodelling of the Museum, has been displayed ever since. Its history, however, remained untold.

Jacobsthal, of course, was only one of many European academics who found a refuge at Oxford. By 1938, the records of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) show that there were more refugee academics at Oxford than at any other British University.<sup>39</sup> The presence of a large number of brilliant academics at Oxford, many of them, like Jacobsthal, great figures in European scholarship, had a profound and lasting impact on the University and the city in which they lived. Some of the history of this academic community and their descendants is archived in the SPSL, in University records, and in correspondence, diaries and publications. Much, however, is more ephemeral, surviving only in the memories of people like Kay Baxandall.

The relatively scant memory of Jacobsthal is due to a number of factors. Jacobsthal’s abrupt displacement from Marburg and his decision not to return to Germany after the war mean that Jacobsthal himself is not a familiar name to German scholars. Because of his age – 55 - when he arrived in Oxford, and the fact that he was teaching a new discipline at a university where there was no undergraduate degree in archaeology meant that, aside from the specialized world of Celtic scholarship, there are very few British archaeologists who recognize his name. The émigrés arrived in Oxford in two distinct waves. Jacobsthal was in the first, which numbered a small number of

---

<sup>38</sup> Shelagh Vainker, personal communication, 19 November 2015.

<sup>39</sup> L. Brockliss, ‘Welcoming and Supporting Refugee Scholars: The Role of Oxford’s Colleges, in Crawford, Ulmschneider and Elsner, *Ark of Civilization*, in press.

people who arrived soon after the Nazi takeover. The second, more numerous wave resulted from the Anschluss of Austria in 1938. The later refugees at Oxford benefitted from a more receptive environment, and the ground having already been prepared by those who had come before. The earlier arrivals generally found it more challenging to integrate into the system, unless they were particularly needed, such as the scientists.<sup>40</sup> It seems ironic that, in the same way that Jacobsthal's groundbreaking achievements were largely obliterated through war, exile, and his untimely death before he had published his innovative work on British Celtic art, so too the link with 'his' camel was lost on transfer to the Museum, which was unaware of its connections with Jacobsthal. We hope that this article provides a step towards restoring both their legacies.

On 16 November 2012 the camel was gifted to the Museum in perpetuity and has finally found its 'ideal permanent home'.<sup>41</sup> Tracing the history and biography of the camel, even just part of its long way, has perhaps above all highlighted the changing meaning and symbolism attached to this figurine by different people across different times. To the Ashmolean Museum its primary interest lies in the physical object in itself: a Tang Chinese camel, symbol of the Silk Road and connections between East and West, its purpose as a burial object, representing the status and identity of the person that was buried with it, and its role as a piece of art and what it says about the society that made it. It would likely have been similar considerations that induced Jacobsthal to purchase the camel in the 1920s, just as he was beginning to branch out into new areas of research, away from purely classical archaeology.

To Jacobsthal's colleagues and friends, the camel was linked directly to the presence and personality of the man. Jacobsthal gave it a 'stable' in the Archaeological Seminar, where it stood for a decade, well known to students and staff. When its owner was dismissed from his post, the camel temporarily moved to his bedroom in Marburg and subsequently fled the Nazis with him to Oxford. Eventually it found its new home on the windowsill of the Jacobsthals' front room at 118 Banbury Road, where it became a familiar sight. To us, researching the life and legacy of Paul Jacobsthal, the camel has an additional symbolism, representing the fragile nature of the historical record, demonstrating how easily the narrative of refugee academics to Oxford, who brought and gave so much to their new home, might be lost.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Kay Baxandall, Jas Elsner, Helen Forde, Chris Gosden, Anthony Grenville, Collin Harris, Stephen Leach, Megan Price, Alison Roberts, Dana Schlegelmilch, Peter Stewart,

---

<sup>40</sup> We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to the potential disadvantages of being one of the earlier refugees at Oxford.

<sup>41</sup> Letter of K. Baxandall to A. Topsfield, 13 December 2012.

Shelagh Vainker, the Vorgeschichtliches Seminar at Marburg, and all our volunteers for their kind help, advice, and suggestions. Any errors are our own.