Imperial Matter

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This book is an extended investigation into the power of things to make a difference in shaping the conditions of imperial power. It is also an effort to bring together an eclectic range of scholarly conversations on imperialism and matter, and draw forth from this convergence what might be called a uniquely archaeological approach to explaining both the perdurance and the fragility of imperial sovereignty. It may come as little surprise to learn that a book under the title *Imperial Matter* presses anthropological engagements with problems of empire and colonialism up against the growing body of social and political thought that has come to be known as the “material turn.” But perhaps less anticipated, and maybe even a bit jarring to our disciplinary sensibilities, is the intrusion of ancient Persia into this encounter of otherwise steadfastly contemporary bodies of thought. One of my main intentions in writing *Imperial Matter* is to demonstrate that the cultural production of ancient Persia can be taken seriously as an untapped wellspring for theoretical reflection on the material constitution of imperial sovereignty. Ancient Persia figures here neither as a misrepresented “Other” calling out for post-Orientalist rediscovery, nor merely as a compelling archaeological case study for extending ideas that derive from the canons of Western philosophy and social theory. Rather, my goal is to explore how the earliest politico-religious thought of ancient Persia, long marginal in the Western academy, can profitably contribute to political and material theory as we know it today. At the center of this effort is what I am calling the “satrapal condition,” an analytic framework built out of the Old Persian word for sovereignty. The term plays on the dual meanings of the word *condition*, calling up the variable work of material things both in reproducing “conditions” of subjection and subordination, and in placing limits or “conditions”
on imperial sovereignty, thus rendering it perpetually aspirational and incomplete. An investigation of satrapal conditions entails a close examination of the practical entanglements among humans and a range of political things that I call *delegates, proxies, captives,* and *affiliates,* whose capacities for action depend on their material properties as well as the cultural and political logics in which they are enlisted.

Empirically, these ideas are put to work through an archaeological examination of the Achaemenid Persian Empire (ca. 550–330 b.c.) and especially its northern territory of Armenia and neighboring regions. The data in this book include both my own findings from excavations of a settlement in the modern Republic of Armenia known as Tsaghkahovit, as well as the discoveries from new and old investigations conducted by others in Iran, Turkey, and the South Caucasus. Given various evidentiary limitations that will become clear in due course, Achaemenid Armenia offers difficult terrain for an examination of satrapal conditions. In a sense, the time and place under view represent an archaeological no man’s land, geographically distant from the contemporary cities of ancient Greece, Mesopotamia, and Iran, sociologically removed from the transformative developments in human history that have long captivated archaeological attention (e.g. the emergence of social complexity), and largely unseen in the eventful pages of Eurasia’s documentary history in the mid-first millennium B.C. Moreover, during the centuries in question, the people of the mountains appear to have been resolutely uninterested in the kinds of social technologies that make ancient societies most visible to us today: writing, ostentatious burials, large visible settlements, and so on. There is, in short, little glamor in this kind of archaeology at the extreme margins. But there is the opportunity to shift our vantage on the ancient world and denormalize the empirical and conceptual sources of contemporary archaeological thought. It can only be hoped that, in time, future fieldwork and methodological advances will bring to light new data to support or force a reconsideration of the arguments advanced in these pages.

The deep origins of this book reside in my doctoral dissertation, completed at the University of Michigan in 2008. While *Imperial Matter* bears resemblance to that project in its empirical commitments rather more than its conceptual ambitions, the kernels of an argument on the capacity of material things to exert their own force in the lived experience of empire can be found in that earlier work. The dissertation came about under the guidance of a number of advisors who played a critical role in shaping my thinking on complex societies of the ancient world. I am deeply grateful to Norman Yoffee, both for his friendship and for his unstinting support for a career that has taken shape at the intersection of anthropological and Near Eastern archaeology. I also owe a tremendous debt to Margaret Cool Root for leading me to discover the sublime pleasure of studying ancient Persia, and for a pioneering body of scholarship on the visual production of the Achaemenids whose influence can be felt across this book. The work and guidance of Carla
Sinopoli and Susan Alcock urged me to think concertedly about what might constitute a distinctly archaeological contribution to the study of empires. I also owe a great thanks to John Cherry for his years of mentorship. Unbeknownst to them all, these individuals “visited” me regularly in the writing of this book as shoulder angels, pressing me to refine my ideas and cautioning me to pursue new lines of reasoning with care and clarity.

In its current form, this book came together in earnest once I joined the vibrant intellectual community at Cornell University, first as a Hirsch Post-Doctoral Fellow in Archaeology (and visiting professor in anthropology), and then as a member of the faculty in the Department of Near Eastern Studies. A number of colleagues at Cornell offered guidance and encouragement throughout the writing process. As a mentor, Kim Haines-Eitzen provided invaluable advice at various stages of this project, and I am truly appreciative of her and the current chair of Near Eastern Studies, Lauren Monroe, for their unflinching support and friendship. I also thank Sturt Manning for his constant encouragement, and Catherine Kearns, who helped me as a research assistant in 2011–12. The Bret de Bary Interdisciplinary Mellon Writing Group on Material Culture in 2011–12 provided an extended opportunity to gather with fellow scholars who share an interest in matters of ontology and materiality, and I am grateful to Elizabeth Anker, Elisha Cohn, Renate Ferro, Noor Hashem, Stacey Langwick, Adam T. Smith, and Saiba Varma for many engaging conversations around stimulating texts, some of which found their way into this work. The introduction and chapter 1 of Imperial Matter were discussed at a workshop of the Cornell Institute of Archaeology and Material Studies, and I am particularly thankful to John Henderson for sharing thoughts that helped me sharpen my concepts. I also want to thank colleagues in an anthropology writing group for their comments on those same two chapters, namely Chris Garces, Saida Hodžić, Hiroku Miyazaki, Paul Nadasdy, Lucinda Rainberg, and Marina Welker.

It would be difficult to overstate how influential the fieldwork conducted at Tsaghkahovit was in formulating the ideas that lie at the heart of this book, quite apart from the intriguing data generated at the site. The excavations were carried out under the auspices of the Project for the Archaeology and Geography of Ancient Transcaucasian Societies (Project ArAGATS), and I am deeply grateful to my friends and fellow co-directors, Ruben Badalyan, Adam T. Smith, and Ian Lindsay, for ensuring that Project ArAGATS continues to thrive as the longest-standing international archaeological research initiative in the South Caucasus. It could have become isolating to be one of the lone historical archaeologists on a team of prehistorians if not for their unfailing support for the work at the Iron Age settlement of Tsaghkahovit. I am especially grateful to Ruben Badalyan for securing the permits for fieldwork, and for facilitating artifact restoration, illustration, and photography. I also thank team members Roman Hovsepyan, Belinda...
Monahan, and Maureen Marshall for their archaeobotanical, zooarchaeological, and bioarchaeological analyses, and Lilit Ter-Minasyan and Hasmik Sargsyan for their architectural and artifact drawings. I was lucky to welcome a wonderful group of trench supervisors over the years, including Catherine Kearns, Kathryn Weber, Jacob Nabel, Elizabeth Hardy, and most especially Elizabeth Fagan, a trusted colleague who periodically directed the excavations when family obligations pulled me away. As director of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography and former co-director of Project ArAGATS, Pavel Avetisyan has been a steadfast supporter of our investigations on the Tsaghkahovit Plain, and I thank him genuinely for that. I have benefited greatly from conversations with fellow historical archaeologists in Armenia, Mkrditch Zardaryan and Inessa Karapetyan. I am also especially thankful to the people of the village of Tsaghkahovit for their tireless work in the trenches, their friendship, and their hospitality. The Tsaghkahovit community’s needs are great, and it is unfortunately the case that the employment opportunities Project ArAGATS has afforded over the years have not enhanced the community’s prosperity to the same degree that the community has enhanced our understanding of their region’s rich past.

The fieldwork and research for this book were made possible by the financial support of a number of institutions, to which I am most appreciative, including the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, the President’s Council of Cornell Women, the Fulbright Scholar’s Program, the University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School and Center for Russian and East European Studies, and the Social Science Research Council. Much of this book was written during the 2013–14 academic year, while I was a fellow with the American Council of Learned Societies. The ACLS afforded me the time to develop part 1 of this book in a way that would not have been possible without a year’s leave from teaching.

I had the benefit of several opportunities to experiment publicly with the ideas in this book, when they were still germinating, through lectures at the University of Binghamton’s Department of Anthropology, Columbia University’s Seminar on the Ancient Near East, and a comparative conference on imperial states at the University of Chicago. I thank the organizers for providing these forums to present the concepts in this book when they were still in development.

In no small measure, the book is stronger thanks to the suggestions and assistance of a great many colleagues too numerous to list. I would especially like to single out Margaret Cool Root, whose close readings of various draft chapters saved me from many embarrassing missteps. I also extend my thanks to Bruce Lincoln, who was generous enough to indulge an archaeologist wanting to explore various crevices of Persian studies in which, without the requisite languages, she arguably has no business. Rémy Boucharlat helped me tremendously in securing illustrations of sites in the Achaemenid imperial heartland. The two anonymous
reviewers and the reader for the University of California editorial committee offered much insightful feedback, for which I am greatly appreciative. Any remaining errors are of course my own alone. I am also thankful to Eric Schmidt and Maeve Cornell-Taylor at University of California Press for their efforts in seeing this book to production, to Roy Sablosky for his skillful copyediting, and to project editor Francisco Reinking for shepherding the book through the final stages.

It is my remarkable good fortune to have a family that has been endlessly supportive throughout the process of researching and writing this book. I often recall a quiet twilight car ride in Armenia in the summer of 2014, when my four-year-old son, Avedis, broke the silence to ask how my book was coming along. It was one of many such occasions when I felt overwhelming gratitude for Avedis’s uncanny maturity, genuine curiosity, and basic trust that it was all just a matter of time. My daughter, Ani, was quite literally by my side throughout the writing process. When it comes to meeting a deadline, there is no better incentive than a pregnancy. Ani’s newborn presence in my life provided much needed perspective during the final months of this project. All the while, from the very beginning, my dear parents and in-laws have been a constant source of love and support.

Finally, this book simply would not have been possible if not for my colleague, collaborator, and husband, Adam T. Smith. I thank him for his unwavering encouragement and enthusiasm, for the care with which he commented on draft chapters, for his penetrating insights on matters of politics, materiality, and much else besides, and for his impactful scholarly oeuvre, which has so profoundly shaped my own thinking. Adam repeatedly gave me the one precious thing that is in shortest supply for parents of small children: time. On countless days and nights, and with unrelenting patience and good humor, he kept the ship afloat while I disappeared to write. For all these reasons and more, I dedicate this book to him.