‘RUINOUS MONUMENT’: TRANSPORTING OBJECTS IN HERBERT’S PERSEPOLIS

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The Characters are of a strange and unusual shape; neither like Letters nor Hieroglyphicks; yea, so far from our deciphering, that we could not so much as make any positive judgment whether they were Words or Characters . . . Nor indeed could we judge whether the writing were from the right hand to the left, according to the Chaldee and usual manner of these Oriental Countreys; or from the left hand to the right, as the Greeks, Romans, and other Nations. . . .

Thomas Herbert, Some Yeares Travels (1664)
As part of his journey to Persia in 1626, travel writer Sir Thomas Herbert visits the ruins of the ancient political center of the Persian Empire, Persepolis. Rather than narrating the customs, dress, or histories of the inhabitants as he does elsewhere in his travelogue, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile*, Herbert gives a detailed account of the size, structure, and material of the palace. He sifts through the stones of the rubble and imagines what they would have looked like when the structure was intact before Alexander the Great’s conquest. Herbert’s account describes an encounter with Persia’s past, and is defined by the objects that remain after its fall. In a narrative primarily concerned with the inhabitants of a foreign place—whether the natives of the early modern period or the ghosts of the ancient past—why does Herbert dwell on the stones that once made up the palace of Persepolis?

This moment in Herbert’s narrative is one he cannot escape. In fact, he goes back to the section “Persepolis” with each successive edition of his travelogue, reimagining it by linguistically reconstructing it through narrative. The fragments, then, continue to call to him long after its first publication in 1634. As the contributors to this volume suggest in their essays about non-human literature and culture, these seemingly mundane objects are in fact full of potential and power. Like the objects that called to Jane Bennett, inspiring her book *Vibrant Matter* and resurfacing in her essay “Powers of the Hoard,” Herbert’s stones beckon to him to return to Persia and to dwell in its past. Persepolis—as a term, concept, space—withstands the test of time, carrying with it a layered story that resides in the stones which “draw us near and provoke our deep attachments to them.”

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1 Herbert acted as an attendant to English ambassador Sir Dodemore Cotton on an embassy to Persia begun in 1626 sanctioned by King Charles I and the East India Company.
The essays of this volume underscore the animal, mineral, and vegetal agents of literary and cultural texts; of particular interest to me are the agentic objects that reorient the subject in a foreign encounter. The animals of Sharon Kinoshita’s essay are facilitators of exchange between the Christian and Islamic worlds, often associated with a variety of movements brought about by gifting or bartering. Her description of “the medieval culture of empire: a set of shared courtly forms and practices signifying imperial power” underscores the mutuality of exchange that can exist among cultures. Peggy McCracken explores an episode from *Roman d’Alexandre* in which Alexander the Great, during his tour in India, encounters a forest filled with “flower maidens” who offer their bodies to the warriors in a mutual exchange of desire. The forest, which can restore virginity to its maidens, acts as the one place Alexander cannot successfully conquer; though a forest of women offering themselves to their male visitors suggests the potential for conquest, that the space can transform the maidens back into virgins makes it impossible for Alexander to truly hold power over the forest or the virgin territory.

Kinoshita’s animals and McCracken’s flower maidens demonstrate the ways in which space determines identity. This concept extends to Valerie Allen’s discussion of the earthiness of fossils and minerals in her essay, “Mineral Virtue,” where the stones take on properties of the space from which they come. This is particularly relevant to Herbert’s narrative where he explains that the “ruinous monument” of Persepolis “was extracted and cut out” of “whole mountains of excellent blacke Marble.”² According to Herbert, Persepolis is literally extracted from the Persian

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landscape, which is where he believes the stones inherit their virtue.

“The Persian qualities of the stones transport Herbert to a different place and time in much the same way that Kellie Robertson’s “Exemplary Rocks” travel through space. She explains that

the mineral suggests something about the human relationship to the world that a human being cannot, unprompted comprehend by itself . . . . Stones allow for a projection into the space of the other, a conscious leap made through the medium of an ostensibly unconscious instrument.

Though the objects of Persepolis seem stationary, moments such as the one cited in the epigraph that begins this essay underscore the effect and power that reside in the relics themselves as they move Herbert between temporalities. In fact, Herbert moves back and forth between the characters inscribed on the marble table on which the writing is etched to determine how to place Persia on the timeline of civilization by determining the direction in which the script should be read. To draw his conclusion, Herbert must rely on what he knows of the languages of the East (many of whose scripts, by moving from right to left, model for him a “backward” tendency) and the West (whose scripts he sees as moving temporally as much as lexically forward, literally in the “right” direction). For Herbert, the meaning of the Persian writing is insignificant. Rather than wonder at the engraver’s message, Herbert questions the characteristics of the Persian language: he relies, in other words, on the stone to tell a story about the Persian Empire.

Herbert’s desire to “read” the stone—or, rather, decipher its visual components—comes from his initial interactions with Persepolis in the 1634 edition of his
narrative. He opens “Persepolis” with the moment of conquest when Alexander the Great

more easily gaue a Period to this glorious Citie, by one blaze, at the whoorish counsell of the Athenian Thais, so that, through his riot and her villany, this Imperiall Citie felt the flames of Warre, which Alexander afterwards deplored with teares, but helpless.  

He continues the description of Persepolis, however, as though the ancient site still stands in all its splendor:

. . . the wals are rarely engrauen with Images of huge stature, and haue beene illustrated with Gold, which in some places is visible, the stone in many parts so well polisht, that they equall for brightnesse a steele mirrour: this Chamber has its wals of best lustre. But Age and Warres, two great consumers of rare monuments, has turned topsie-turuie, this, as many other things, and left nought but wals to testifie the greatnesse of that glory and triumph it has enjoyed.

The Persia Herbert shows us is one he imagines before its destruction: The engraved walls have not yet eroded, their images have not yet the absence of their illustrious gold, and the marble of which the palace is made has not yet lost its luster. Similar to the forest of Alexander’s flower maidens, Persepolis is a site that, though historically devastated by Alexander’s conquest, refuses to yield to its destruction. In fact, even Alexander, according to Herbert, “deplored” his act “with teares, but helpless.” Herbert imagines this moment as though

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4 Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaile*, fol. I2r.
it is unfolding before him, a moment he is brought to by the power of an encounter with the non-human. That his passage reads within the present tense further underscores Herbert’s insistence to remember a moment of history during its time of greatness. I use the term “remember” deliberately here, because it is through remembering that Herbert is able to exist within this ancient time. Indeed, only a few pages before, he describes seeing his reflection in the marble in an act that quite literally remembers his body into the Persian past.

Herbert has to remember not to get carried away, though. As Jeffrey J. Cohen states in his short essay from the inaugural edition of *postmedieval*, “Stories of Stone,” “stone loves nothing more than story” and that all stone is possessed of hydrous motion, and that mobility might even be said to constitute an agency, a desire, posing a blunt challenge to anthropocentric histories.⁵

Were Herbert to fully embrace the power of the stones, he would lose his own sense of agency, and his sense of self. The conjunction, “but” in the middle of the passage—only one example of the many rhetorical reroutings in the section—is indicative of a compulsive need to bring himself back to the present, to what really lies before him. “Age and Warres,” he tells us, “two great consumers of rare monuments, has turned topsie-turuie, this, as many other things.” To remind himself that Persepolis exists to be consumed—by age, by war, by travelers’ voracious eyes—is to fight against Persepolis’ ability to consume him. Keeping the inanimate lifeless, the dead buried and gone, Herbert

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freezes Persepolis in time as a place to which he can return, and on which he can continue to act.

But the stone continues to act on Herbert as well. Over the next fifty years, he returns the call of the Persian stones by revisiting and revising “Persepolis,” the epigraph to this essay, in fact, is excerpted from just such a revision in the 1664 edition of his travelogue. Turning to the Persian writing of the marble table, Herbert attempts to reorient himself by using the script to offer his own narrative about the story of the stone. Having previously asserted his inability to tell whether the Persian script moves from right to left in the manner of “Oriental” writing or from left to right like “Greek” or “Roman” scripts, he then ventures a firmer speculation, saying “by the posture and tendency of some of the characters . . . it may be supposed that this writing was rather from the left hand to the right, as the Armenian and Indian doe at this day.”  

For Herbert, the Persian script demonstrates a Persia that is eastern yet like the west, antique yet moving forward. The objects of this ancient past not only represent the multiple temporalities of Persia, but also transport Herbert between these temporalities with each encounter of “Persepolis.”

Even as he moves away from Persia, and eventually towards England, he will never exist in a world in which he has not been touched by the ancient stones. By succumbing to their power with every return, Herbert can continue to travel back and forth to a Persepolis that is both other and familiar; it straddles a middle space that facilitates a mutual exchange between cultures that Herbert hopes will place England within the realm of cultural empire that Kinoshita has outlined. The essays of this volume, with their focus on the animal, mineral, and vegetable, encourage a more expansive dialogue between subject and object, human

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6 Herbert, A Relation of Some Yeares Travels, fol. v.4r.
and non-human. By considering an aspect of literature and culture that has been largely ignored, these essays have encouraged me to approach Herbert’s Persepolis with a new perspective, one that attends to a variety of voices that transcends place and time.