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## A Historical Figure at the Origin of Gesar of Phrom

Frantz Grenet

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# The Many Faces of King Gesar

*Tibetan and Central Asian Studies  
in Homage to Rolf A. Stein*

*Edited by*

Matthew T. Kapstein  
Charles Ramble



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## A Historical Figure at the Origin of Gesar of Phrom

Frum Kēsar, *King of Kābul* (737–745)

*Frantz Grenet*

For a long time, Tibetologists had surmised that the name of the hero Gesar of Ling had something to do with ‘Caesar’. A new impulse in the research came in 1966, thanks to Helmut Humbach who proposed a triple identification:<sup>1</sup>

- The first, in which in fact he followed George Roerich and Rolf Stein,<sup>2</sup> is between Gesar and a certain king Phrom Gesar, obviously ‘Caesar of Rome’, mentioned without localisation in the *Li yul lung bstan pa*, a partly legendary chronicle of Khotan known only through a Tibetan translation.<sup>3</sup>
- A second identification, proposed by Humbach himself, is between Phrom Gesar and a historical figure, a king of Kābul: Frum Kēsar, whose name inscribed in Bactrian as *fromo* (or *foromo*) *kēsaro* he had just deciphered on coins (Figure 3.1). The form Frum, like its Tibetan rendering Phrom, reflects the initial aspirate of Hrum, the Greek form of the name of Rome which at this time designated the Byzantine empire.
- Finally, and this is the third, Humbach recognised Frum Kēsar in the Chinese name *Fulin kiso* (pinyin, *Fulin Jisuo*) which in the *Tangshu* designates the third ruler of the Turki Shāhi dynasty of Kābul. This ruler is mentioned as having reigned between 737 and 745 with the consent of the Chinese.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, we had the explanation for the ethnonym ‘Drugu’ sometimes attached to the Tibetan Gesar: this means ‘the Turk’. Recent research has shown that this ‘Turki-shāhi’ dynasty in Kābul belonged originally to the Khalaj confederation and that it had come to power sometime after the mid-seventh century.<sup>5</sup> At some stage they were replaced by a Hindu dynasty, the ‘Hindu-shāhis’, but there is no agreement about the date: according to

1 Humbach 1966–67: I, 20–23, 64–65. At the same time Göbl 1967 (ref. NumH 247–251) published the coins. Other important specimens were subsequently added, see lastly Vondrovec 2014, II, 553–55, 674–78.

2 Roerich 1942: 309; Stein 1959a, 241.

3 Emmerick 1967, 69.

4 Chavannes 1973 [1903], 132 (*Fulin kipo* [pinyin, *Fulin Jipo*] with a mistake in the final character).

5 Inaba 2005.



FIGURE 3.1 Frum Kēsār (737–745): a) copied on Khosrow II; b) 'genuine' portrait

some it was in c. 760, shortly after the reign of Frum Kēsār's son; according to others, it was one century later.<sup>6</sup> Frum Kēsār's personal name has not been transmitted on his coins or by Chinese sources.

## 1 The Historical Setting of Frum Kēsār the Kābulshāh

Humbach's proposals were widely accepted by Tibetologists at that time,<sup>7</sup> but their successors do not seem to have been aware of some further developments in research. I have in mind mainly two conference papers, one by Nicholas Sims-Williams,<sup>8</sup> the other by Minoru Inaba,<sup>9</sup> presented in 2007 and 2008 respectively. More recently Andrea Piras has taken up the question again, but mainly from the general viewpoint of Byzantium's prestige among the Turks.<sup>10</sup>

6 Both viewpoints are presented in Vondrovec 2014, 568. The numismatic evidence is not conclusive and the Chinese sources do not document the situation in this period.

7 Stein 1981b; Uray 1985; and more recently Martin 2001.

8 Sims-Williams 2008, 123–28. See also Sims-Williams 2011 [2015], 40. The same author has now published a Bactrian inscription issued in 757 by a prince Frum Kēsār, probably a grandson of the first Frum Kēsār, in order to commemorate his victory over an 'Indian prince': Sims-Williams 2020.

9 Inaba 2010.

10 Piras 2013. See also Martin 2011, 127, who unfortunately missed the contributions by Sims-Williams and Inaba.



FIGURE 3.2 Coin of Khosrow II countermarked in the margin by Frum Kēsār

Nicholas Sims-Williams, having improved and completed the decipherment of coin legends by Humbach from new specimens, has shown that Frum Kēsār had countermarked some Sasanian or Arabo-Sasanian coins by inscribing in their margins a proclamation in Bactrian: 'Frum Kēsār, the lord, the prince, who smote the Arabs and thereby saved prosperity' (Figure 3.2). The translation 'prosperity' for the pair of nouns *sarbo sabato* (\**čarv-čavat*) literally 'fat and fatness', is hypothetical but highly probable in view of Persian *čarb o čarbiš* which has the same meaning.

For his part, Inaba compared and critically reassessed all information pertaining to Frum Kēsār in the Chinese sources as well as in the chronicle *Li yul lung bstan pa*, underlining several important facts. Firstly, it seems probable that before his relatively brief reign of eight years this ruler had been associated in power with his father, as viceroy of the eastern possessions of the kingdom of Kābul: Gandhāra and Uddiyana. In this capacity, even before 725 he had concluded a marital link with the kingdom of Khotan, giving his daughter in marriage to the king. Earlier, in 701, such an alliance is attested between the kingdom of Kābul and the small Hephtalite kingdom of Kadagistān which controlled several passes to the north of the Hindukush. In 710 the Tarkhān Nēzak, the ruler or an ally of this Hephtalite kingdom and main figure of the anti-Arab resistance, sought refuge in Kābul. Inaba also contemplates the possibility of another marital link with Kashmir, then at the apex of its power under Lalitāditya. This all-out diplomacy could rely upon a network of Buddhist foundations patronised by the Kābul kings, who at the same time expressed a certain eclecticism in dedicating statues to Hindu deities and on the reverse of some of their coins including Zoroastrian symbols such as the fire god or the fire altar (Figure 3.3), while using the Zoroastrian calendar in their Bactrian inscriptions.





FIGURE 3.3 Tegin Khwarāsān shāh (c. 680–737)

## 2 ‘Caesar of Rome’

In spite of these recent advances in research, no explanation has yet been proposed for this victory over the Arabs proclaimed through coins countermarked by *Frum Kēsar*. I know of no parallel for such an initiative, but it is tempting to put it in relation with another exceptional initiative by the same ruler, namely his assumption of the title ‘Caesar of Rome’. It has long been noticed that the 730s, which in the West marked the furthest advance of the Arab invasion that was stopped at Poitiers, were in the East a time of standstill and even of temporary retreats. Between 734 and 739 Samarkand and Bukhara were several times retaken by the local aristocracy, calling for help from Turkish tribes who were sometimes commanded by the *qaghan* himself, urging the Umayyad califs to dispatch emergency reinforcements from Iraq.<sup>11</sup> As early as the 720s, prophecies were circulating through the Eastern Muslim world, announcing that Arab power was doomed to last only one century, a period that indeed had just expired.<sup>12</sup> Such prophecies are attested simultaneously among Syriac Christians and in Sogdiana, where they are echoed in a call for help sent by the Samarkand king to the Chinese emperor:

11 See in particular: Gibb 1923; Bol’shakov 1973, 143–55; Frye 1975, 74–103; de la Vaissière 2007, 44–54.

12 Hoyland 1997, 264, 299–301, 331 n. 227; de la Vaissière 2007, 45–46.

As for these Arabs, they are due to be powerful only for one hundred years altogether; this year this total is exhausted. If Chinese soldiers come here, my people and I will certainly manage to destroy these Arabs.<sup>13</sup>

Among those who continued to resist, it seems that the view prevailed that the Arabs were on the way out. But, given this general atmosphere, one wonders which particular victory Frum Kēsar decided to commemorate, and why this victory, obviously achieved at the time of his accession or some time before, prompted him to assume from the beginning of his reign the title ‘Caesar of Rome’ instead of some other title that was more familiar in these countries.

The kings of Kābul were likely to have confronted the Arab armies on two fronts: one in the southwest, between Sistān and Zābulistān (this last region comprised Ghazni and Qandahār); and one in the north, beyond the passes of the Hindukush (Figure 3.4). In the first case the clash was met by the kings of Zābul, a junior branch of the kings of Kābul, known in the Arab sources by their title *Rutbīl*, a rendering of the Turkish title *eltābir* which designates a ruler of second rank.<sup>14</sup> In 727 they inflicted a resounding defeat on the army of the governor of Sistān who was trying to submit them to tribute, after which a status quo lasted until 769 when the ‘Rutbīl’ actually became tributaries, although remaining powerful. One could contemplate the possibility that the future Frum Kēsar, then crown prince of Kābul, exercised a command in this campaign; but, as this happened ten years before his accession to the Kābul throne, one should also consider an alternative on the northern front. Here, between 734 and 745, a period corresponding exactly to the reign of Frum Kēsar, the Umayyad governors had to deal with the persistent agitation of a rebel, al-Ḥārith b. Surayj al-Tamīmī, who managed to temporarily capture several cities, including Balkh and Termez. Though himself an Arab, he obtained support from local converts and from non-Muslims. Among the latter, Ṭabarī names several Turkish rulers of Tukharistān but not the Kābulshāh, which could be an omission.<sup>15</sup> It is indeed possible that Frum Kēsar took part in these upheavals, either by allying himself with al-Ḥārith or by taking advantage of the general confusion to capture some territories north of the Hindukush. In this case it is there, rather than in Kābul, that he put his victory proclamation

13 Chavannes 1973 [1903], 204–205, citing *Cefu Yuangui* 999, 15 v°.

14 Bosworth 1968, 73 on the episode of 747; Bosworth 2008.

15 Blankinship, trans., 1989, 107–108. For an overall view of the activities of this rebel see the many references to al-Ḥārith b. Surayj in the Index (where he is sometimes confused with his ally al-Ḥārith b. Surayj al-Mujāshīṭī); also, in the following volume, Hillenbrand, trans., 1989.

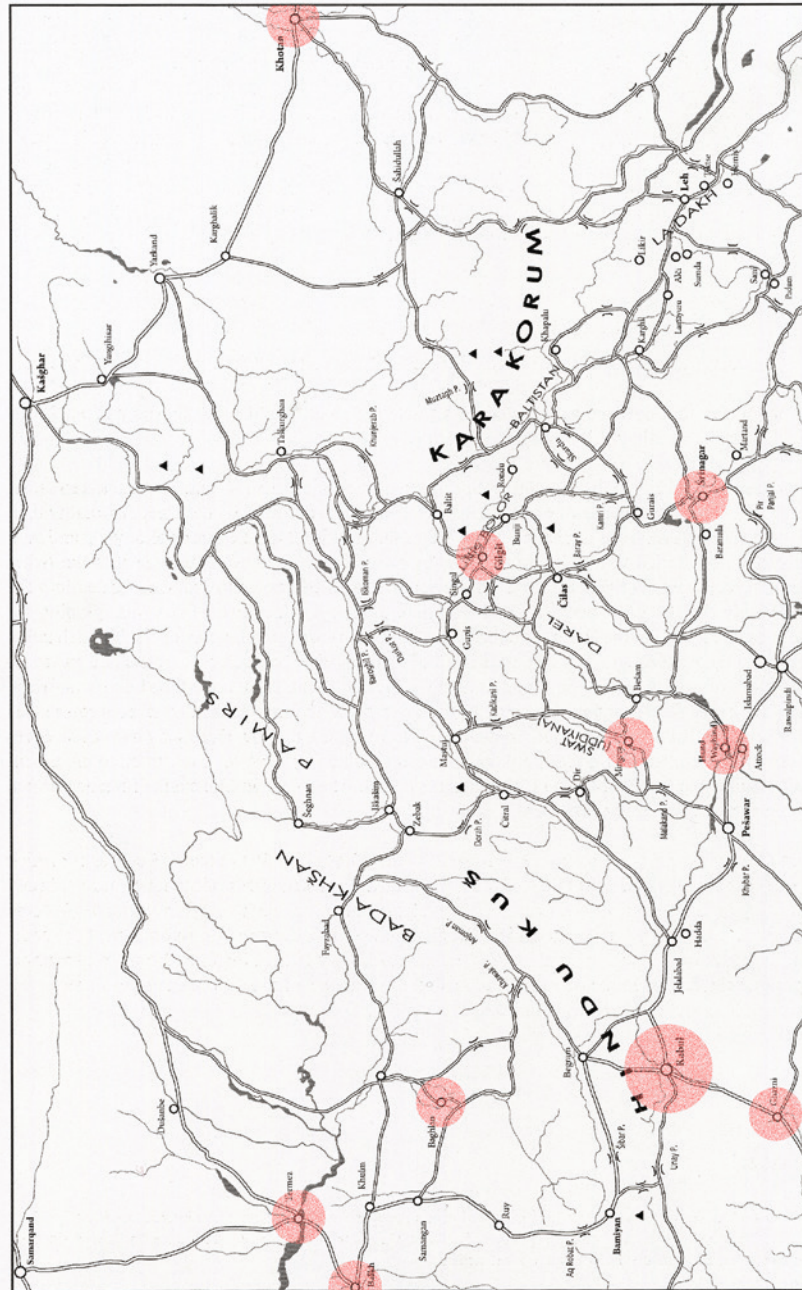


FIGURE 3.4 Map; places mentioned in the chapter are marked in red.

on Sasanian and Arabo-Sasanian coins that were circulating locally. In fact, a countermark *for* appears on coins which are known to belong to the northern territories, and Nicholas Sims-Williams' hesitation to recognise it as an abbreviation for *Fromo/Foromo* because they were issued in Frum Kēsar's own kingdom is perhaps not justified.<sup>16</sup>

One cannot but wonder to whom the title 'Caesar of Rome' might mean something in these regions. Frum Kēsar's father, named Tegin (Figure 3.3), carried on his coins the title *Khwarāsān shah*, 'king of Khurāsān', in Chinese (with the terms in disorder) *Wusan teqin sa*. One could suppose that, like his son later on, he had been viceroy of the eastern marches under his predecessor and had kept his former title after ascending the throne.<sup>17</sup> One could also contemplate the possibility that the term Khurāsān, 'the Levant', designated the kingdom of Kābul *lato sensu*, the reference point in this case being the defunct Sasanian empire. If so, *Khwarāsān shāh* could be seen as an amplification of the Sasanian title *Khwarāsān spāhbed* that had been held by the commander-in-chief of the Eastern quarter of the empire.<sup>18</sup> The function had disappeared after the fall of the Sasanians in 642 and, if this second interpretation is the correct one, it would have been revived on a higher plane a few decades later by the king of Kābul, a territory which had not been part of the late Sasanian empire, in a claim to *translatio imperii*. Something similar can be observed in Samarkand in c. 660, with the propaganda of King Varkhuman, depicted enthroned on the southern wall of the reception room and receiving New Year gifts from foreign ambassadors, notably Chinese and Tibetan, both a spatial position and a function which had belonged specifically to the Sasanian King of Kings.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever interpretation one chooses for the '*tegin* of Khurāsān', it is more difficult to understand what Byzantium and its Caesar had to do with Kābul in 737, the accession year of Frum Kēsar. I must admit that I have no straightforward explanation at the moment and I can only sketch out some directions.

The first is the prestige Byzantium was gaining thanks to its resistance to Arab attacks. After sustaining huge territorial losses in the seventh century, the empire had pulled itself together. In 718 the emperor Leo III had been able to repel the last combined terrestrial and maritime attack attempted against the

16 Sims-Williams 2008, 123 n. 2.

17 In which case the situation could perhaps be compared with the so-called 'Eastern Alkhan' rulers of the late fifth century, who titled themselves *Mirāsān shāh*, *Mirāsān* being the equivalent of Pahlavi *Khurāsān* in the Bactrian language where *Mir* designates both the god Mithra and the Sun.

18 Gyselen 2019, 269–77.

19 Grenet 2020 [2018].

capital. In 740 he won a brilliant victory at Akroinon in Western Anatolia. In this period Byzantium appeared as the only empire able to stand up to Islam, while China, despite repeated appeals by Central Asian kings, was never in a position to send armies, except in 722 and 747 in Bolor on the Upper Indus, and in 751 to the river Talas, the last and unsuccessful foray.

Moreover, Byzantium occupied a special position in the geographical symbolism of Eurasian peoples. This was structured by the concept of the 'Kings of the World' who shared the four quarters between themselves. The idea, probably Indian in origin, was taken over in the fourth century in Manichaean literature as well as by Chinese Buddhism. One finds it subsequently in treatises derived from Sasanian political literature, then in the world vision of Muslim geographers.<sup>20</sup> The great powers balance each other variously according to time and space. The diplomatic protocol of Khosrow Anushervān assigns the West to the Byzantine emperor, the North to the Hephthalites (or the Turks in another version), the East to the Son of Heaven, while the King of Kings looks towards the south. One century later, in the mid-seventh century, a Chinese envoy describes a royal pavilion at Kushāniya in Sogdiana decorated with paintings showing Byzantium and Iran sharing the West, China occupying the North and Turks and Indians sharing the East, while here again the local ruler holds the South. One could therefore suppose that Frum Kēsar, no longer satisfied with his status as a local sovereign, wished to join this 'family' of emperors by proclaiming himself the putative son of one of them. But whom could he choose? Not the Turkish *qaghan* from whom the Kābul kingdom had become emancipated since the onset of his dynasty, nor the Indian *rājas* he probably scorned, nor the Sasanians whose last claimants were kept as protégés by the Kābulshāhs between c. 730 and c. 760.<sup>21</sup> Neither could he satisfy his pride by linking himself with the Chinese emperor who never called another ruler his 'son', reserved the title 'son-in-law' for those who in fact were, and otherwise conferred fictitious military grades or titles expressing a flat obedience, such as 'King who respects transformation'. He was left with the *basileus*, a distant but most prestigious brother-in-arms, inaccessible enough not to be asked permission, and whose heir carried the title *kaisar*. It has been supposed that a similar logic of choice by elimination later on prompted the Uighur *qaghans* to embrace Manichaeism in order not to officially acknowledge China-patronised Buddhism, or the Khazars to become Jews in order to avoid both Islam and Christianity of Byzantine obedience. The more precise hypothesis put forward by János Harmatta, according to whom the title 'Caesar' would

20 Grabar 1954, 185–87; Maricq 1958, 374–84; Grenet 2003, 207–11.

21 Stark and Agostini 2016; Grenet 2017b, 331–32.

have been actually bestowed on the Kābulshāh by a Byzantine embassy otherwise unknown, has little to recommend it.<sup>22</sup> The unique precedent which could be adduced, namely Justinian II appointing the Bulghar khan *kaisar*, cannot be seriously compared, for this khan had just re-established him on the throne and had become his son-in-law. On the contrary, what importance could a king of Kābul have, even if locally victorious over the Arabs, in the eyes of Emperor Leo III?

### 3 Back to Gesar of Ling

There is a last question that is no less tricky: how could this local king of Kābul give his name to a national hero of Tibet? If we compare the little we know of the bearer of the name Frum Kēsar with Gesar's legend, we realise at once that these characters have hardly anything in common, except for their names. The largely legendary information given in the ninth-century chronicle *Li yul lung bstan pa*, at least in the surviving Tibetan version, does not really bridge the gap, for the historical material is already very blurred. There is, however, an intriguing overlap between, on the one hand, Frum Kēsar's proclamation of his victory over the Arabs, in Bactrian *taziiano*, otherwise *tazigano*, and his consecutive safeguarding of 'prosperity', and on the other hand one of Gesar's last exploits: his victory over 'King Tazig', to the west of his kingdom of Ling, and his taking of his 'treasury'.<sup>23</sup> David-Néel and Lama Yongdan, in their summary of the epic, were at a loss to explain how a Tibetan king could have vanquished the Tazig, whom they understood to be Persians according to the modern meaning of Tajiks as 'Persian speakers'.<sup>24</sup> But if the Tibetan king was originally a king of Kābul and the Tazig were the invading Arabs, the story has another ring.

The Tibetan court probably knew of the existence of Frum Kēsar, but there is no attestation of direct diplomatic relations, and in any case he was not a

22 Harmatta and Litvinsky 1996, 380. This 'romanophile' atmosphere, with Byzantium now in the role of the real Rome, might also explain the motif of the Roman she-wolf on a high-quality golden bracteate with an imitation Greek inscription, issued in the Kābul-Zābul kingdom (Vondrovec 2003 [2007], 168: 10); the hoard in which it was included is attributed to the late seventh/ early eighth century. This iconography is also attested in Sogdiana by a bracteate from Panjikent (Raspopova 1999), in a context attributed to the seventh century. A slightly later date is not excluded, as well as for the Gharwal hoard. It is also present on an 'exotic' wall painting in the palace of Shahrīstan in Ustrushana, from the end of the eighth century (Azarpay 1988).

23 It figures as the last in the telling of David-Néel and Yongden 1931, 294–330. This section of the epic is not included in the version from Ling edited by Stein 1956.

24 *Id.*, 297 n. 1.

protagonist of Tibetan history. Or, rather, there was such an episode, but it had occurred before his accession and on this occasion Kābul and Tibet were in opposite camps: in 724, two years after the Chinese had foiled a Tibetan attempt to annex Bolor, the then king of Kābul and father of Frum Kēsar sent to the Chinese court an embassy conveying a call for help from a Chinese princess who was married to the king of Tibet. The idea was to set up an anti-Tibetan coalition associating Kābul-Zābul, Kashmir and China. The matter rested there.<sup>25</sup>

At this point one could ask whether the mere title ‘Caesar of Rome’ did not create a deeper impression than the actual achievements of its bearer. Through the influence of Chinese Buddhist literature, Tibet shared the ideology of the four ‘Kings of the World’. In Tibetan legends Gesar often appears as king of one quarter of the world: first, as Phrom Gesar, in the West in a tenth-century text from Dunhuang (Pelliot tibétain 958), which is still consistent with the original situation; then, in the later epic of Ling Gesar, his conquests also extend in the northern regions (on which see George FitzHerbert’s observations in chapter six).

A last possibility would be to suppose that the deeds of Frum Kēsar gave rise to legendary or semi-legendary tales which eventually migrated to western Tibet, like so many materials from the Central Asian cultures which in the course of the centuries were completely reworked. One of the intermediaries could have been Khotan. This is suggested by the *Li yul lung bstan pa* and this was probably also the case for another Tibetan hero, Pehar, whose name (and some functions) derive from Farn, the Iranian god of Fortune, through the Khotanese form Phārra.<sup>26</sup> One could compare the case of another warrior king, Bahrām Chubin, general of the Sasanians, victorious over the Turks, then failed usurper of the throne for only one year (590–591). Despite his short and finally unsuccessful career, quite early on he inspired an independent epic cycle, the *Bahrām-Chubin-nāme*, whose material was later on incorporated in Ferdowsī’s *Shāhnāme*; he was also claimed as an ancestor by several Muslim dynasties of Central Asia, and in Zoroastrian apocalyptic his figure inspired that of Bahrām Varjāvand, the general who will help the saviour in the end of time.<sup>27</sup>

A similar case of the transfer of a royal and heroic propaganda, not in literature but through visual arts, can be argued in the case of a silver gilded vase which once belonged to Paul Pelliot and has now been acquired by the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum (Figure 3.5). Recently I was able to identify it as

25 On this episode see Inaba 2010, 451–52.

26 Grenet 2000, 177–78.

27 Czeglédy 1958.

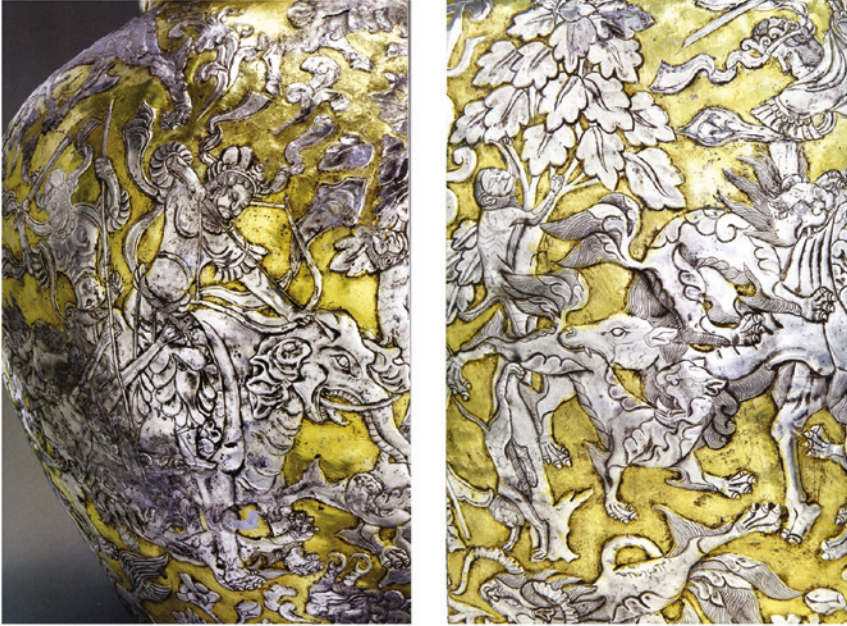


FIGURE 3.5 Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum vase, two details

a product of the so-called ‘late Baroque’ style of the art of Imperial Tibet and hence to propose a date in the second half of the eighth century.<sup>28</sup> The scenes show a king riding an elephant. He wears a beribboned crown distantly copying Sasanian crowns and he is fighting monstrous lions, while a younger ruler also with a crown, probably his heir, fights on camelback. The stylistic details are typical of Tibetan silverware of that time, but the theme of the royal hunt on elephant back finds its best parallel in the paintings at Varakhsha, the country residence of the Bukhara kings. These paintings have been recently reattributed to the 730s and interpreted as a symbolic image of the king fighting the enemies of the country, which, considering the date, could well be the Arabs. The iconographic theme was eventually reworked in Tibet by a royal or aristocratic workshop, where artists trained in the Sogdian tradition were at the same time familiar with the productions of Tang China. The theme they adapted does not lead us very far from Frum Kēsar and is perhaps quite close to the original figure of Gesar.

28 Grenet 2017a.



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