A Man’s Caftan and Leggings from the North Caucasus of the Eighth to Tenth Century: Introduction

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In September 1995 the Metropolitan Museum was offered by a dealer in London a linen caftan trimmed with silk and fur and a pair of silk leggings with linen feet. They had been recently restored, and they date in all probability to the eighth to tenth century A.D. The garments had been auctioned in an unrestored condition in 1994 at the Stuttgarter Kunst-Auktionhaus Fritz Nagel, where they were described as Tang dynasty textiles.

To any student of Near Eastern and western Central Asian art it was immediately apparent that the textiles described above belong to a unique body of material recovered over several decades beginning at the start of the twentieth century from the site of Moshchevaja Balka, in the northwest Caucasus region. Most recently, similar types of garments decorated with identical silk pieces have been recovered from this site, which lies above the Bolshaja Laba River near the Laba Pass leading over the mountain range. Four seasons of excavations were carried out between 1969 and 1976 by Anna A. Ierusalimskaja, curator since 1962 of northern Caucasian antiquities in the Oriental Department of the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. All the materials excavated at Moshchevaja Balka by Ierusalimskaja and her predecessors at the beginning of the twentieth century are now gathered together in the Hermitage Museum’s Oriental Department collection.

Correspondence in 1995 with Anna Ierusalimskaja, a friend and colleague of many curators at the Metropolitan Museum, confirmed Moshchevaja Balka as the probable place of origin for the caftan and leggings being offered to the Museum and revealed the century-long history of excavation and looting of graves at the site. This information, which was published in her book Die Gräber der Moščewaja Balka: Frühmittelalterliche Funde an der nordkaukasischen Seidenstrasse (Munich, 1996), explained the appearance on the art market of the examples offered to the Museum. In the final report, Ierusalimskaja also offers a detailed history of the excavations and of the subsequent transfer of Moshchevaja Balka materials between various museum collections in Russia before their ultimate disposition in the Hermitage Museum.

The significance of the caftan and leggings acquired by the Trustees of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1996 at the recommendation of the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art is immense. Textiles and complete garments are almost never recovered from excavations in the Near East, where climatic conditions lead to the destruction of most perishable organic remains. Quite exceptional are a few fragmentary textiles of Sasanian seventh-century date excavated by David Stronach at Shah-i Qumis in northern Iran, an archaeological project supported by the Metropolitan Museum. A share of the finds from Shah-i Qumis is now part of the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art’s collection, and the proposed acquisition of the Moshchevaja Balka caftan and leggings, of slightly later date than the Shah-i Qumis textiles, was therefore of particular relevance. In the effort to acquire the pieces, the department was enthusiastically supported from the start by the head of the Museum’s Textile Conservation Department, Nobuko Kajitani, who assisted us in the examination leading to their purchase, and by the specialist in the history and development of the caftan garment in Asia and Europe Elfriede R. Knauer. These two colleagues subsequently agreed to take on the complex task of correctly restoring and publishing the caftan and leggings. The results appear in this volume: by Kajitani, “A Man’s Caftan and Leggings from the North Caucasus of the Eighth to Tenth Century: A Conservator’s Report,” pages 85-124; and by Knauer, “A Man’s Caftan and Leggings from the North Caucasus of the Eighth to Tenth Century: A Genealogical Study,” pages 125-54.

A final event in the history of this acquisition occurred in 1999, when Jacqueline Simcox, a well-known dealer in textiles based in London, wrote to the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art offering

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as a gift forty-three objects including garments and fragments of decorative textiles as well as items made of wood, leather, bone, shell, bronze, and gold (see Kajitani, Figures 5–18). Many of these items had either exact or close parallels with published finds from Moshchevaja Balka. These objects, of considerable archaeological and ethnographic significance, had been offered for sale at the Stuttgarter Kunst-Auktionhaus Fritz Nagel on November 15, 1996, but went unsold. Enquiries at that time by the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art revealed that the material was still available but at a price higher than what the Museum felt prepared to pay. Our delight, therefore, on receiving the offer of Jacqueline Simcox a few years later was considerable, and we are indebted to her for making possible this important addition to the department’s collection of objects that provides a cultural context for the caftan and leggings.

An expression of appreciation and respect for the archaeological fieldwork and scholarly study of the Moshchevaja Balka site and finds by Anna Ierusalimskaja is appropriate here. Without her investigations the extraordinary remains now preserved in the Hermitage Museum would have remained lost to the world of scholarship. While discussions of the textiles and related materials, their place of original manufacture, and their proper cultural context will inevitably continue, the importance of the meticulous and thorough documentation of Anna Ierusalimskaja cannot be overestimated. Working under often austere conditions in a difficult period of modern history and under financial restrictions, she published the results of her studies and made available to scholars for consideration the extraordinarily rich archaeological heritage of this remote region. Throughout the long period of her researches, Ierusalimskaja never hesitated to share her unique materials and preliminary ideas with colleagues in a generous fashion; she remains in this and in many other respects a model for us all.

The following articles by Nobuko Kajitani and Elfriede R. Knauer describe the site of Moshchevaja Balka and the nature of the finds from the shallow graves situated above the mountain river valley. The environment in which the graves were found, on rock terraces overhung by a cliff face, naturally protected and preserved the fragile materials. While the location of Moshchevaja Balka on trade routes linking Central Asia, the Near Eastern lands, southern Russia, and the Black Sea explains in part the varied nature of the finds, questions remain: who were the people buried in these graves; and what role did they play in the acquisition and transfer of the goods that have been discovered? Local merchants and foreign traders appear to have come together at this site near the Laba Pass, and their possessions continue to be fascinating and enigmatic.