



The “Kosrow Cup”: Looking Anew into the Persian Grail¹

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Introduction

The “Kosrow Cup,” also known as the “Cup of Solomon” (“Tasse de Salomon,” Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France, camée no. 379), is not only one of the most celebrated objects in the Cabinet des Médailles, but also probably the most famous Late Antique Iranian artifact (fig. 1). This luxury item measures 28.2 cm in diameter, weighs 2109.85 g, and comprises a gold frame inlaid with cameo-cut discs of rock crystal, garnet, and green glass, as well as smaller fragments of garnet. The largest gem is the central medallion, made of very pure rock crystal, with a diameter of 7.5 cm, finely engraved in cameo with the figure of a Persian king from the late Sasanian period (sixth–seventh century CE). The cup is mounted on a pedestal with a height of 1.25 cm.² The preciousness of the materials, the peculiar shape of this vessel, and the technique of goldsmithing make it a unique piece among the remains of Sasanian art.

Four perforations in the cloisonné garnet rim would have allowed the dish to be fixed vertically, presumably on a base that left the back of the cup free to let light through. Without expert advice, it cannot be confirmed that these perforations are original, but this is unlikely. Although relatively unobtrusive, the perforations pierce the frames of the cells’ *bâts*, and four set garnets had to be removed to create them. These perforations are not aligned on the axes and have distorted the thin outer gold border, probably due to the cup having been hung for a long period of time, especially the perforation at 6 o’clock. We are certain that the cup was fixed vertically because an image of it survives from the late seventeenth or

early eighteenth century. In an engraving by Nicolas Guérard (c. 1648–1719, the famous “Graveur du Roi”) of the *Trésor de Saint-Denis*, the cup is seen hanging on the wall among other luxurious objects collected in the abbey (figs. 2–3).³

The cup has undergone many transformations and repairs during its thirteen-century-long life. Several of these are still visible, including attempts to reattach loose gems to the frame.⁴ For some gems, such as a large rock crystal disc at 2 o’clock or a large garnet disc at 7 o’clock, the setting frame was redone and fixed with nails and solder in a different metal, at a time when the original goldsmithing technique was either no longer known or too expensive. For other inlays, such as the two pieces of glass below the same rock crystal disc, the gold setting was forced open to replace the cut glass with a tool that left disfiguring marks. The hands through which the cup passed had, indeed, varying degrees of skill.

Too famous to be ignored and far too fragile to travel abroad,⁵ the “Kosrow Cup” was recently the subject of a major 3D replication project by the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, on the occasion of the exhibition *Imagining the Divine* (2017–2018). All the challenges of replicating this object with a 3D scanner lay in reproducing the transparency and brightness of the various materials that compose the cup.⁶ This replication experience had the additional advantage of highlighting an aspect of the object never described in any catalogue: its transparency, and the play of light and reflections that appear in the heart of translucent gems of different colors, responding to the glitter of the gold on the surface.

Its renown, which goes far beyond connoisseurs of Sasanian art, is also based on the legend of its transmission between East and West, between the



Fig. 2. Engraving by Nicolas Guérard showing the “Kosrow Cup.” From Felibien 1706: pl. 4. Source: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k15130225/f595.item.r=Dom%20Michel%20F%C3%A9libien.zoom>.



Fig. 3. Detail of an engraving by Nicolas Guérard showing the “Kosrow Cup.” From Felibien 1706: pl. 4.



Fig. 4. The Strelka Plate. © The State Hermitage Museum, inv. S-250. Photo by Vladimir Terebenin.

Sasanian court and the later Carolingian court, as well as its association with the legend of the Grail, via the Iranian myth of the Jamšīd cup or the Kay Kōsrow cup. Although secondary, these semi-historical or pseudo-mythological aspects continue to captivate the imagination of all who encounter this unusual object. Besides the central rock crystal medallion, it is particularly noted for its assemblage of gold and gem ornaments. Having no clear typological precedent, it remains at once the most refined and the most enigmatic of the luxury items of Late Antique Iran.

Identifying the Problem

If this cup is paradoxically the most famous Sasanian object and the least studied according to modern criteria, then it seems to pose an insoluble problem. The main difficulty in apprehending this object lies in its visual character, which

appears quite ambivalent: on the one hand, the motifs engraved on the gems show striking parallels with iconographical representations of “official” dynastic Sasanian art (the most easily recognizable parallel being undoubtedly the Strelka silver plate, fig. 4)⁷; on the other hand, the workmanship, goldsmithing techniques, and use of gold and polychromy hopelessly elude reliable comparison with artifacts identified as being of unquestionably Iranian tradition. This situation has led to two prominent positions in the history of Sasanian art regarding the “Kōsrow Cup”:

a) The central image of the rock crystal medallion depicting the enthroned king has been extensively commented upon (fig. 5), while, conversely, very little study has been devoted to the other aspects less related to iconography, perhaps also because they require direct observation of the object in the Cabinet des Médailles and further technical analysis.

b) Art historians have either been reluctant to fully categorize it as “Sasanian,”⁸ or they have wavered over its attribution to one of the two identified artistic styles: the official style of the royal workshops attached to the imperial capitals, or the “Sasanizing” style of the provincial centers, which are thought to be infused with more diverse and inclusive influences, while remaining under the control or influence of the official art. However, this approach is based primarily on the methodology used to distinguish the two major classes of Sasanian luxury silver vessels (see Frantz Grenet’s synthesis on these two styles),⁹ and nothing proves that it can be positively applied to a gold vessel inlaid with gems.

In fact, many of the questions raised by this unique object have remained and may remain unanswered for a long time. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why no monograph addressing all its aspects has yet been dedicated to the cup, despite its fame. It is becoming urgent that scientific and technical analyses be carried out, which will no doubt provide answers to some of these questions. On the technical level, at least three types of influence seem to overlap in a manner that reveals a highly eclectic work:

1. An official, royal iconography in a typically Sasanian style, conforming to the toreutic codes of the imperial school of the East;

2. A technique of gem-inlaid goldsmithing *à jour*, for which no precise equivalent is known, and which has been compared to the famous electrum vase from the Szeged-Nagyszéksós treasure (Hungary);

3. Finally, the use of another inlay technique: garnet cloisonné. Unlike the *à jour* goldsmithing technique, this is widely attested across a vast territory during the Late Antique period, but its diffusion has long been attributed to the era of the Great Migrations and to so-called “Hunnish” influences. Endless discussions have been conducted since the late nineteenth century to determine whether the Iranians were the initiators or the inheritors of this craft.¹⁰

The present contribution does not claim to offer definitive solutions to the problems raised by the object, but it aims to explore some new avenues of reflection while drawing attention to the methodological biases that have marked the different stages of analysis proposed so far.

State of the Art, Art of the State

One of the first contemporary historians to take a close interest in the “Kosrow Cup” was Roman Ghirshman, who often used superlatives to describe it: “the most beautiful of cups.”¹¹ He identified the figure as a portrait of King Husraw/Xosrōy I (= Kosrow, 531–579 CE) and referred to the famous Arabic verses of the eighth-century poet Abū Nuwās, which are frequently cited to illustrate the prestige enjoyed by Sasanian luxury objects, and the royal effigies they represented, far beyond the Sasanian world: “We have built above Kosrow a sky of wine, hemmed in at its edges by stars. If Kosrow, the son of Sāsān, were given back his soul, then he would surely select me above every boon companion.”

Ghirshman describes the cup as adorned with “rock crystal, red and white glass rosettes” (instead of rock crystal, garnet, and glass), and refers to “embedded rubies” in the frame surrounding the central medallion and the outer rim (instead of garnet). According to him, this reflects “the taste for polychromy that [...] characterises Iranian art from the very beginning.” The combination of noble materials (gold, rock crystal, and ruby) with common colored glass, he argues, “did not offend the eye of the prince.”¹² He immediately looks for elements of comparison with other artifacts, for example, a silver horse’s head found near Kerman and now in the Louvre Museum,¹³ which he believes came from a throne similar to the one represented on the cup, with theriomorphic legs. He also draws parallels with the Strelka Plate, in which he also sees a portrait of Husraw I on an identical throne, and with the Qazvin Dish (Irān Bāstān Museum of Tehran), where, according to Ghirshman, King Husraw II (591–628 CE) is enthroned in a similar posture, seated in a niche surmounted by merlons and a crescent (comparable to the greater cave of Tāq-e Bostān, Kermanshah). He believes he spots the same royal pose in a painting from Bāmyān, in the cliff of Doktar-e Nōšervān (Nigār),¹⁴ where a deity is seated on a throne with horse protomes.¹⁵ This search for iconographic parallels is certainly a first step toward understanding the object, but it also had the effect of confusing the issue and misleading subsequent researchers.



Fig. 1. The “Kosrow Cup” (“Coupe de Chosroès”). © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques, camée 379. Source: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b550099436>.



Fig. 5. Central part of the “Kosrow Cup,” with the rock crystal medallion. © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques, camée 379. Source: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b550099436>.



Fig. 7. Two different rosette cuts on the reverse of the “Kosrow Cup.” © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques, camée 379.

More recently, the question of the identification of the figure engraved on the central rock crystal medallion has been addressed with renewed interest. One of the latest works dedicated to this object provides a synthesis of the different attributions,¹⁶ fluctuating mainly between Husraw I and Husraw II. While at the end of the eighteenth century this figure was seen as “a Parthian king,” from the mid-nineteenth century onward, the style of the cameo began to be associated with Sasanian Persian art, and comparisons were established with the numismatics of the period and the typology of royal headdresses. “Solomon” eventually gave way to “Chosroes.” In 1842, Adrien de Longpérier was the first to propose an identification with Husraw I, and half a century later, in 1898, Edmond Drouin proposed Husraw II.

The royal headdress consists of the diadem, with its ribbons floating down the king’s back, and a row of pearls on which lie two lateral merlons (shown in profile), with three-stepped crenellations, in the middle of which a crescent moon is placed. The cap is surmounted by another, larger crescent, on which rests the *korymbos*. On the basis of the relative size of the components of the Type I of Husraw II’s coins and the number of degrees of the merlons, Inès Villela-Petit rejects the identification with this king and argues in favor of Kawād I (488–496, 499–531 CE).¹⁷ Her interpretation is supported by a *dinar* on which the crown is very similar to that of the cameo (on the drachms, Kawād’s crown has two beaded rows rather than one), but also corresponds to the crown type on the drachms of Pērōz (459–484). Villela-Petit does not, however, completely rule out the attribution of the cup to Husraw I.¹⁸ As Rika Gyselen correctly points out, the differences of style of crowns on coins and plates are essentially irreducible. Any attempt at identification based on the same methods could therefore be misleading.¹⁹

In contrast to the coins and the majority of Sasanian silver vessels, it might be possible to observe the very concept of late Sasanian kingship, as it was perceived from the second half of the fifth century onwards, both by the Persians themselves and by neighboring peoples, friends and foes alike. The majestic posture, the absence of any element that could personalize the central figure, and the sober and highly conventional “dynastic” style seem to describe a timeless, universal power meant to transcend time and space.

Prudence Harper had expressed doubts about the Sasanian attribution on the basis of elements “unparalleled on Sasanian monuments”: first, the fact that the king is enthroned alone; then, the gesture of his extended last finger of his right hand; and, finally, the pointed corner of the king’s garment.²⁰ This last feature is very similar (though not identical) to the king’s garment on the Cherdyné Dish (Pērōz’s ram hunt) in the Hermitage Museum,²¹ but also to those of the four attendants on the Strelka Plate.²² Despite some visible nuances, this type of skirt is therefore attested on at least three different materials (a silver plate, a bas-relief, and the “Kosrow Cup”), so even if it is a rare feature, it is certainly not unparalleled.

It is true that no parallel is known of a royal hand holding a sword with the little finger raised, but in general, the positioning of the hands on the sword hilt conforms to Sasanian iconographic standards when the king is depicted from the front: his left hand holds the grip of a long sword, which is suspended between his legs by a scabbard slide system.²³ The sword was generally carried on the left, so it was the left hand that slid the sword toward the front of the body. It is noticeable, however, that the sword on the “Kosrow Cup” has no visible crossguard, or that it is hidden by the left hand (cf. the positioning of Šābuhr III’s hands, end of the fourth century CE, fig. 6). The right hand seems to be delicately wrapped around the pommel.

At least one literary source (dating from the tenth century) confirms that this posture – the king seated on the throne, with both hands on a vertically held sword – was characteristic of official representations of several Sasanian kings, including Husraw I (but not Husraw II). This source is an Arabic summary of a lost book entitled the *Kitāb al-Šuwar* (“Book of Portraits”),²⁴ which contained color illustrations of each Sasanian monarch with his or her attire and regalia, including the weapon(s) associated with him or her. The illustrations are not reproduced in the summary, but they are briefly described. For instance, Husraw I is depicted wearing a white garment embroidered with multicolored motifs and sky-blue trousers. His official portrait showed him seated on his throne and resting on his sword. He shared this posture with his father Kawād I, as well as with two other fifth-century rulers, Yazdgerd II (438–457) and his son Pērōz I (457–484).



Fig. 6. Detail of the relief of Šābuhr III in the smaller grotto at Tāq-e Bostān, after Fukai and Horiuchi 1972: pl. 67. The forefinger of the left hand is passed behind the crossguard.

Harper considers the “Kosrow Cup” “less certainly of Sasanian manufacture,” comparing it to the Strelka Plate and suggesting a production location further east: “Those details unknown on Sasanian monuments, such as the cut of the royal skirt and the profile view of the theriomorphic legs on the throne, have parallels in Central Asian monuments. Is it possible that this is a Central Asian work of art?”²⁵

Apart from the central medallion depicting a king, another decorative motif engraved on the gems has been the subject of comparative analysis: the rosette. However, this motif is so widespread in the Late Antique period, especially between the second and eighth centuries, that it cannot provide a reliable basis for dating or locating the object. The rosette is a stylized motif with a decorative function, most often repeated in bands across the field or to fill empty space, as if to escape a *horror vacui*.²⁶ There are, in fact, two types of rosettes on the cup, more easily observable on the reverse side (fig. 7): first, the four-hearted rosette with a clear depression in the heart-shape petals on the nine gems surrounding the central medallion; and second, the two outer rows of larger discs, each decorated with a small circular depression marking the center of the flower, around which four heart-shaped petals are

arranged, separated by thinner, almond-shaped sepals.²⁷ As far as Sasanian art is concerned, the second and more elaborate floral motif can be found both on silver objects (as noted by Harper)²⁸ and on textiles, or rather textile representations, such as those depicted in the bas-reliefs of Tāq-e Bostān on the costumes of the king and the musicians, as observed by Shinji Fukai.²⁹ There is no evidence to suggest a more imaginative interpretative reading, such as an astral symbol or the like.

Harper also identifies possible connections with polychrome gold objects, including the famous bowl from the early fifth century found at Szeged-Nagyszéksós. This cup from the Hungarian treasure, with a shape closer to a chalice than to a dish, and which has no central medallion, is often mentioned as a parallel to the “Kosrow Cup,”³⁰ although the technique of inlaying gems or glass roundels (probably red, now lost on the Hungarian cup) does not seem to be exactly the same.³¹ Harper makes it clear that this goldsmithing technique was widespread throughout the first millennium CE and is not a characteristic feature of “Hunnic” manufacture or Iranian art. In regards to the “Kosrow Cup’s” manufacture, she does not support an Iranian origin: the shape of the crown and the Middle Persian inscription engraved on the foot³² are not sufficient criteria to confirm Sasanian workmanship.³³ It is certainly significant that a prominent art historian of the Sasanian period expresses so many caveats about the style of this “best known, but still enigmatic” object, as she later describes it.³⁴ In the end, she sees it as either “Iranian imagery modified by influences from Central Asia and the Eurasian steppes,” or as “a provincial Sasanian work made in a region having contacts and interchanges with both the northern steppe model and the Persian realm.”³⁵ Regardless of Harper’s intricate hesitations, Villela-Petit takes the late Sasanian style for granted and explains the “Hunnic” influences through the cordial links between the Persian court and the Hephthalites.³⁶

Apart from the rosette motif mentioned above, another iconographic element has also been discussed: the protomes of winged horses on which the royal throne stands. Representations of double Pegasi are not uncommon in Sasanian art.³⁷ The winged horse can underscore the divine nature of a figure.³⁸ According to Zoroastrian ideology, the horse signifies the movement through space, and any deified entity characterized by movement or

travel in the air has this animal either as an avatar or as an attribute.³⁹

In Sasanian art, the winged horse as a symbol of royal or divine mount, or as protomes decorating the legs of thrones, must have implied ascension and apotheosis.⁴⁰ In the Sogdian paintings (notably in the “Small Hall” of the palace of the *Afšīns* of Ustrushana at Shahrīstan, and in Panjakent),⁴¹ one divine figure (Mithra?) is illustrated seated frontally on a throne supported by horse-protomes. The hero Rostam appears in the same scene as a king in a Pegasi-drawn chariot, who has been identified as Kay Kāvus (Shahrīstan and Panjakent III/6).⁴² The meaning of the Pegasi in the Sogdian paintings, which have a strong narrative and mythological dimension, cannot be expected to be exactly the same as in the enthronement scenes of Sasanian monarchs on the “Kosrow Cup” or the Strelka Plate. But, they share at least an aerial, and possibly a solar, dimension. On the Strelka Plate (fig. 4), the two creatures are placed on pedestals facing each other, but their heads are turned toward the throne.⁴³ They wear the characteristic head tuft of the Sasanian horse harness that can be observed on a seal depicting Mithra’s chariot drawn by two similar creatures.⁴⁴ On the “Kosrow Cup,” by contrast, the winged horses turn their backs to each other and do not wear the head tuft. The way in which the back wing is positioned – in front of the muzzle and the bust – shows strong similarities with the models found on some Sasanian seals depicting Pegasus.⁴⁵

To sum up, it can be said that the differences in the representations of the winged horses on these two vessels are far more significant than those seen in other comparable elements and cannot be explained solely by differences in material. The iconographic choice of these two creatures (in fact evoking four) may have served to reinforce the solar character of the Sasanian king, recalling the official status of the royal cult to Mithra and the public ceremony held during the Mihragān festival. In view of the alignment of the gems around the central medallion, which seem to radiate from and around the king, as well as the bright, gleaming aspect of the cup, its solar significance should not be overlooked.

Gold, Garnet, Green Glass, and Crystal: The Color Symbolism

Recently, Frantz Grenet discussed this object in two lectures at the Collège de France.⁴⁶ Without taking a position on the problem of the king’s attribution, Grenet focused more closely on the question of chromatic symbolism, which, in ancient Iran and India and as part of the Indo-European ideological heritage, is linked to the division of social classes. Setting aside the golden color of the frame, the three other colors, white, red, and blue/green, would, according to Grenet, correspond respectively to the priestly class, the warrior class, and the working class. Royalty, whose role is to unify and protect these three classes, would serve as the common denominator. However, the king’s image is represented in a transparent white cameo, whereas one would expect him to be associated with red, since he belongs to the warrior class. This discrepancy, however, does not appear to be problematic. First, because the requirements of goldsmithing take precedence over symbolic associations: it seems unlikely that a red stone large enough to form the central medallion (diameter 75 mm) could be found. While such a size might be possible with carnelian, it is not the case with garnet.

Apart from technical considerations, the choice of rock crystal for the central medallion may also be explained by the special place this stone occupies in lapidary traditions. In the ancient world, it was universally regarded as a highly auspicious gem. In the Greco-Roman world, it was highly valued and imported at great expense from India.⁴⁷ In the Persian context,⁴⁸ a Zoroastrian lapidary describes a “sky-colored” stone, with white flakes that could plausibly refer to rock crystal.⁴⁹ Among its virtues are the ability to bring peace and to banish physical pain. It is said to possess apotropaic powers, believed to ward off demons and other evil creatures. It also brings intelligence and prevents confusion of the mind. Thus, the purity and transparency of rock crystal were thought to grant the holder clarity and inner lucidity. In the ninth-century Sogdian lapidary, a stone called “Fortunate by itself” is described as a white gem with black reflections: it brings wealth to the household and protects against evil spells. “It has many other virtues,” the text states, indicating that both the stone and its powers were widely known.⁵⁰

On the other hand, the possession of an object that would combine precious metals with gems of different colors seems to have been one of the prerogatives of the highest class of the Sasanian aristocracy, and, by natural extension, of the king himself. This can be deduced from the Arabic version of a text on court protocol entitled “The Protocol of Ardashīr.” Although, the formalization of court literature is generally dated to the reforms of Husraw I, the text is retrospectively attributed to the founder of the dynasty in order to confirm its authority:

We (= Ardashīr) constituted society into classes and made the state of each class vary according to its entitlement to the rank of the dress of honor, the dress of daily use (= of daily rituals), the dress of work, and the dress of warlike virtue. And when these well-known classes, which men were forced to accept, became steady among the people, we allowed all the superb gold, silver and jewels to certain men, but we excluded certain jewels from this privilege. Then we forbade the privilege of jewels to others, while allowing them gold. Finally, we forbade the privilege of gold, silver and jewels to others.⁵¹

Following the logic of this royal protocol, only members of the ruling class had the right to order and possess gold and silverware adorned with precious stones.⁵² This protocol seems to have been revised, recalling the social reforms of Husraw I, who granted greater rights to the small landowning nobility rather than to the large aristocratic families. In any case, only the court had the absolute right to use noble materials with complete freedom. Not only the exceptional quality of the “Kosrow Cup,” but also this new textual evidence, points to a commission made to the royal goldsmiths’ workshops.

Another question is raised by the presence of a common material alongside others that are not only noble but also of exceptional quality and size: emerald green glass. The glass is remarkably pure (no bubbles are visible), and its color comes essentially from copper, with small amounts of iron, titanium, and manganese.⁵³ One hypothesis for the choice of glass rather than a precious stone is the requirement for the goldsmith to use not only a translucent material, but also one of a color complementary to red and white. Deposits of translucent blue or green quartz (such as fluorite) are unavailable in Iran or the Middle East,

and iron-bearing beryl (such as emerald) is generally found only in small sizes.⁵⁴ This may be the reason why, in the words of Roman Ghirshman, “the assemblage of noble materials with common coloured glass did not shock the eye of the prince.” It is unlikely that the use of green glass was simply dictated by coincidence.

Sasanian art is political, and the choice of the four colors (gold, purple-red, emerald green, and translucent/white) could also convey monarchic propaganda. These four colors were visible on the famous hanging crown of Husraw II, according to al-Thaʿalibī, who described it as follows:

Among these (wonders and rare objects in Kosrow Parwēz’ possession) was also the great crown, containing sixty *mann* of pure gold, inlaid with pearls that resembled sparrow’s eggs, garnet rubies by which the darkness is illuminated and which are used to light up the dark nights, and emeralds at the sight of which the eyes of vipers fade away.⁵⁵

As Matthew Canepa has clearly demonstrated, according to the diplomatic rhetoric of visual art between the Romans and the Sasanians, the luxury objects exchanged as gifts had to be interpretable by both the commissioner and the recipient. The images, therefore, had to have both “indigenous roots” and be “adapted for a new, cross-cultural use.”⁵⁶ In the context of diplomatic interactions, images of enthroned sovereigns “in transcendent glory” were one of the two most common motifs (the other being royal hunting scenes), and these images were intended to “project the sovereign into the throne-room ritual of the host.”⁵⁷ This analysis finds a particularly fitting example in the “Kosrow Cup,” whose portrait medallion can quite literally be projected, like a hologram, when light shines through the rock crystal.

According to Canepa, “the object (= the “Kosrow Cup”) was a likely choice for a gift from a Sasanian king of kings to his Roman brother.”⁵⁸ If this line of analysis is accepted, then the only element of adaptation or “response” to the recipient may be the chromatic choice: the four colors on the plate could, in this case, “respond to” the four imperial colors of Byzantium.⁵⁹ The case of Hagia Sophia is particularly telling, as the aesthetics of its colors have been described at length.⁶⁰ These four colors in the interior decoration of Hagia Sophia are briefly mentioned by Procopius: gold, purple (αλουργός) or red (φοινίξ), green (χλωρός), and

white (λευκός).⁶¹ The columns and stones with which the church is adorned reminded him of a meadow in full bloom. Of course, it would be an overstatement to claim that the Sasanian goldsmiths conceived the cup in an aesthetic dialectic with the Byzantine architects of Hagia Sophia. Yet it is not unlikely that the cup is the product of an attempt to reproduce the early Byzantine aesthetics of light and colors as reflected in the sixth-century architectural and interior decoration, according to the principles of a hybrid visual culture governed by imperial ideology.⁶²

Whatever the underlying motives, the royal goldsmiths certainly aimed to create an optical illusion: on the one hand, the yellow gold sparkles as it reflects the frontal light; on the other, light passes through the transparent stones and glass. Combined, these two effects give the object its extraordinary brilliance and a fascinating sense of depth and perspective.

At the Crossroad of the Garnet Routes

The "Kosrow Cup" has sometimes been at the center of debates among historians of jewelry about garnet cloisonné, since it was wrongly considered a prototype of this technique.⁶³ The cup has, in fact, been used as an argument for the purported Iranian origin of this art.⁶⁴ None of the arguments seem to have been based on direct observation or a precise description of the technique employed in the cup. Today, the cup is only rarely mentioned in the yet prolific literature on garnet studies. Even among the reference publications, it is impossible to get a complete picture of the issue. For example, Birgit Arrhenius only takes into account the relief-cut rosettes on the cup⁶⁵ and believes that there is no evidence of cut garnet-plates in Sasanian gem art.⁶⁶ She nonetheless points to the high quality and rarity of relief-cut rosettes in garnet.

On the other hand, the current expert in garnet studies, Noël Adams, does mention the cup in her monograph but without describing the cloisonné technique.⁶⁷ She makes only a very brief reference to the rosettes⁶⁸ and states: "What it (= the cup) does represent is one of the few surviving sumptuous objects which reflects the shared tastes and technologies of the Byzantines and Sasanians."⁶⁹ She notably demonstrates that a tradition of garnet cloisonné was present in both the

Sasanian and Eastern Hunnic empires. It probably drew from traditions in Western Asia, and it was introduced into the Sasanian culture through contact with regions where both the technique and access to garnet were equally possible. She also shows that two fundamental aspects of early garnet inlaying were access to trade routes and the development of lapidary tradition in urban centers.⁷⁰

As previously mentioned, there are two types of garnets inlaid in the cup: first, the three rows of nine reddish-purple discs of three different sizes that alternate with the rock crystals. Their size is exceptional (34mm, 21mm, and 18mm in diameter). As a point of comparison, garnet seal stones above 15mm are relatively unusual in the ancient world.⁷¹ Garnets formed in pegmatites of north-east Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northwestern India are possible sources of some larger garnet gemstones.⁷² Analyses confirm the Indian origin of the cup's garnets.⁷³

These garnet discs are cameo-cut on the reverse, using the same technique as the rock crystal, perhaps in the same workshop. This reverse-cut pattern was intended to be seen through transparency and, in this respect, is comparable to another rock crystal Sasanian cup discovered in Susa.⁷⁴

The rosette patterns on these gems are of two different types (one with four heart-shaped petals and the other with stipules and a round center, see above and fig. 7). Adams regards the relief garnet on the "Kosrow Cup," in line with the rock crystal carving, as later products from regions in Central Asia or Afghanistan in contact with the Sasanian empire.⁷⁵

This rare "ajouré" setting (without metal backing) has naturally been compared with a remarkable gold bowl now on display in the Reiss-Museum in Mannheim, discovered in Szeged-Nagyszéksós in eastern Hungary. It is a hemispherical bowl made of electrum with an annular foot, the glass or stone inlays of which are no longer present.⁷⁶

The second type of garnet setting of the "Kosrow Cup" is represented by the two borders (one around the central medallion and the other on the rim of the cup). Dark orange-red garnet stones are polished flat on both sides and inlaid into cloisonné workcells. The one surrounding the central medallion is made up of 23 small rectangular flat plates, of which only eight are still in place. In some cells, traces of the paste used to fix the gems

can be seen. The outer rim was composed of 170 convex garnets, 95 of which are still in place.

These two cloisonné garnet parts have been compared to objects from the treasures of Wolfshheim (Mainz-Blingen, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany) and Pietroasa (Romania), sometimes attributed to the Goths. In the former, a rectangular golden plate with round and square garnets was discovered, inscribed with a Middle Persian inscription in monumental script (<ʾrthštr> *Ardaxšīr*),⁷⁷ evidence of the transfer of prestige objects during Late Antiquity.⁷⁸ It should be noted, however, that the techniques used seem to be quite different: in the famous Pietraosa bowl (with leopard handles), the gold frame is cast, while the cloisonné border of the “Kosrow Cup” seems to be more of a “bâté.”

The Sasanian garnet intaglio and its potential influence on Byzantine techniques are becoming better known,⁷⁹ but the same cannot be said for the use of garnet cloisonné, since the remains of these inlaid ornaments have only survived in the periphery of the empire.

If we follow the typology established by Adams, then the garnet cloisonné of the cup would be of Class I, style B (“Medallion style”),⁸⁰ but of course this needs to be confirmed by specialists. This style was a common feature of Late Roman jewelry and continued throughout the fourth century, where there was an increase in the popularity of this technique in gold jewelry.⁸¹

The lack of evidence from the heart of the empire is a blind spot in the history of the transmission of the technique, but the widespread use of this technique as a Late Antique tradition indicates that it was part of the material culture of the Sasanians, either through the influence of Byzantine urban centers in the west or through contacts with Central Asia and North India.⁸² The technique is so widespread through intercultural contacts and trade routes that it must have been adopted by the Sasanians, who already possessed sophisticated lapidary techniques, notably in seal production.⁸³ They were probably not the initiators of the goldsmithing technique of “grenat cloisonné,” but they were surely intermediaries in the commercial transfer of the raw material. It is a well-known fact that Persian merchants sought to establish a monopoly on the garnet trade in Sri Lanka (Serendib), whose mines have been known since antiquity.⁸⁴ Ancient texts record primarily the Indian source of this stone: Aristotle

(*Mete.* 4.9.387b.17) gives the earliest instance of *anthrakas/anthrax* from India; Strabo also speaks of Indian *anthrax* (15.1.67, 69), and Pliny (*HN* 37.92) speaks of *carbunculus*,⁸⁵ but later al-Bīrūnī describes the two main sources of the *laʿl* (“garnet”), a word of Indian origin according to him: Badakhshān and Sri Lanka (Serendib).⁸⁶

Some surviving texts in the language of the Sasanians, Middle Persian, mention precious items, including some in *yākand* (literally “ruby,” but the term could also refer to garnet).⁸⁷ According to the story entitled *Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud Nihišn ī Nēw-Ardaxšīr* (On the Explanation of Chess and Backgammon), the king of India sends a set of chess to the Persian court: “16 pieces made of *uzumburd* (emerald) and 16 pieces made from *yākand*.”⁸⁸

Another Zoroastrian text, the *Zand ī Fragard ī Jud-Dēw-Dād* (A Commentary on Chapters of the Widēwād), suggests that garnet (*yākand*) may have had a special place among other gems, perhaps because of its hardness. This book, devoted to the Zoroastrian laws of ritual purity, indicates the type of purification that applies to each element soiled by contact with impure matter (*nasā*). The materials are thus hierarchically classified according to the degree of complexity of the purification ritual. Gold is considered the least contaminated material because a single purification (washing with bull’s urine, rubbing with dust, and then washing with clear water) is sufficient to make it usable again.⁸⁹ Some exegetes seem to think that the treatment of gold and crystal is similar. Silver, if it has been worked, must be purified twice, iron three times, and stone six times. The opinions of the exegetes are divided regarding gems, as some consider them to belong to the rank of iron rather than stone. The *yākand* is explicitly mentioned by the two major exegetical schools, who agree on its case: it must be purified as a “stone.” The more conservative of the two schools mentions *yākand*, emerald, and crystal together, to be purified as stones.⁹⁰ This opinion likely followed a debate on the status of these particularly precious and coveted gems. According to another prescriptive Zoroastrian text, *Šāyest nē Šāyest* (Proper and Improper), pearl, amber, and coral, mentioned together with *yākand*, turquoise, and jet fell into the same category of “stones,” while all others had to be treated as “wood.” As one would expect with dead organic matter, ivory could not be purified once soiled.⁹¹

Even if garnet is only mentioned incidentally, this text proves its diffusion and importance. Archaeological surveys conducted in Iran should be able to tell us more about the diffusion of this gem. To take just one significant example: in the Veshnavah ex-votos – a natural sanctuary in Central Iran – a substantial quantity of garnets (silicates varying from red to purple), mostly beads, were found.⁹² Analysis of this material indicated the existence of important relationships between the Indo-Pacific and the Veshnavah site.⁹³ Objects and amulets were deposited as offerings into water at a designated spot and were then carefully, partially covered with stones.

To return to the cup, it shows an example of highly sophisticated jewelery with a combination of two setting techniques: ajouré and cloisonné. At present, there is no way of determining where such workshops may have been located, or whether the goldsmiths were fixed in one place or peripatetic.

We can assume, however, that goldsmiths travelled from city to city to perfect their skills. At least one case is known to us, that of the Persian Anastasios (d. 628), before his conversion to Christianity. When he was still called Magundat, this Zoroastrian cavalryman deserted the army and became an apprentice silversmith (*argurokopo*) to a Persian Christian from Mabboug/Hierapolis in Syria. He then moved to Jerusalem to work with another Christian silversmith, who introduced him to a priest. After his conversion, his admission to the monastery brought an end to his career as a silversmith.⁹⁴

Solomonic Symbolism

The Solomonic dimension of this object is another interesting aspect of its long and mysterious history. Before the eighteenth century, when the terms “Parthian” and then “Sasanian” were first used in connection with it, it was recorded as “Hanap Salomon” in the inventories of the treasury of Saint-Denis. It is, in fact, the most famous Solomon-related item from the early Middle Ages.⁹⁵ As has been shown, the label “opus Salomonis” has the power to transform decorated objects by associating them with the world of the sacred and magic. They are also consecrated as objects symbolically linked to the Temple of Jerusalem:⁹⁶ this label claims that the treasure to

which the cup belongs is part of the *mirabilia* of the Temple of Jerusalem and that the Church is the sacred frame that has preserved it as a liturgical object. According to the *Grandes Chroniques de France* (a compilation begun in 1274), it was the monks of the abbey of Saint-Denis who defined the cup as the “dish of Solomon.” This association could be traced back to the obscure thirteenth-century tradition according to which it was donated by Charles the Bald to the abbey.⁹⁷ According to the legend, he inherited it from his grandfather Charlemagne, who himself received it as a gift from the Caliph Hārūn al-Rašīd (786–809 CE).⁹⁸ In the absence of concrete evidence, it is not clear whether the Solomonic label originates from the pre-Carolingian (Muslim?) history of the cup (as Andreas Fischer assumes),⁹⁹ or from a Christian milieu (as Allegra Iafraite maintains).¹⁰⁰ The latter hypothesis could be supported by the frequent and well-documented recourse of Carolingian rulers to Old Testament models.¹⁰¹ If Charlemagne used the model of David, Charles the Bald was paired with Solomon, as the illustrations in *S. Paolo Bible* might attest.¹⁰² The transfer of the cup by the Crusaders following the sack of Constantinople in 1202–1204 remains a plausible, yet fragile, hypothesis in the absence of anything better.¹⁰³ Regardless of the aspirations of the Carolingian kings, it should also be noted that, in addition to the shape and precious material of the cup, the association of the majestic enthroned figure depicted on the rock crystal medallion with the biblical king must have been relatively natural, given his regal and glorious appearance, sitting on a throne supported by fantastic animals. In any case, it is quite coherent to see this object as a perfect example of “cultural appropriation,” which illustrates the processes and patterns of integration of an unknown element into a new culture.¹⁰⁴

“Science de Caprices”¹⁰⁵: Deconstruction of an Epigraphic Utopia

In June 1969, the distinguished Hungarian orientalist János Harmatta (1917–2004) came to Paris to study the Sasanian seals of the Cabinet des Médailles. His work in Iranian epigraphy, particularly the publication of the Parthian documents of Dura Europos (1957, 1958) and the deciphering of the Bactrian inscription of Surkh Kotal (1964),

was then authoritative. He was also interested in the Sasanian seals (1964), but only from a historical perspective.

During his visit to the Cabinet des Médailles, he met a young, talented epigraphist, Philippe Gignoux, with whom he became friends.¹⁰⁶ Thereafter, J. Harmatta seems to have lost interest in Sasanian seals, perhaps because another inscribed object, whose splendor far surpassed all the Sasanian seals in the world, had attracted his attention in the Cabinet des Médailles: the “Cup of Chosroes.” He had the opportunity to study this fascinating object in the early summer of 1969.

Yet it was not until 1992 that his ideas on the transmission of this cup from the court of Husraw to that of Charles the Bald, and the alleged influence of its symbolism on the Grail’s legend, and above all his reading of the “inscriptions” were published. This was the starting point of an epigraphic utopia, which has left lasting and damaging traces in the discipline, particularly within French-language publications.¹⁰⁷ Harmatta’s misleading hypotheses were first presented in a lecture read in Brussels on June 20, 1992 at a formal session of the International Union of Academies (Union Académique Internationale, of which he was president from 1977 to 1979), and then published in French in an article entitled, “La coupe de Xusrō et l’origine de la légende du Graal,” *Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques* 3.1 (1992), 449–60. No information is given as to why this article appeared 23 years after his visit to the Cabinet des Médailles.

Harmatta was not present in person at the June session. His text was therefore read by one of his colleagues and “aroused the enthusiastic admiration of the Assembly,” of which Shaul Shaked was a regular member.¹⁰⁸ Harmatta claimed to have read seven different inscriptions on the foot of the cup, which he said are unique testimonies to the object’s transmission history (fig. 8).¹⁰⁹ The first inscription is engraved in cursive Pahlavi script. The drawing reproduced by Harmatta (fig. 8, inscription no. 1) is not only much less precise than, for example, that of Ernest Babelon (fig. 9), but it adds a word that does not exist here: <zlyn>. Harmatta reads: <s IC IIII III zlyn s[ng]>, “the gold weight is 107 staters” (1 s = 16.2 g; the weight of the cup excluding the gems would be 1733.4 g; the total weight of the cup is now 2109.85 g).¹¹⁰ He observes that this inscription

must have been engraved during the manufacturing process, in the royal workshops where control and indication of weight were required. Having already worked on the inscriptions on Sasanian silver plates, he certainly knows that the first s that he reads as an abbreviation of “stater” does not have the expected shape,¹¹¹ but he eludes the question. The correct number is not 107, but 307, since what Harmatta believes to be an s could actually be the first signs of the number 3.¹¹² The word <zlyn> would be the adjective *zarrēn*, meaning “golden, made of gold,” but the word is never attested on any plate, for the simple reason that this is the only inscribed gold vessel we currently have. By comparison, the word *asēm* “(in) silver” is found on some rare dishes made of this metal, and one inscription on a silver bowl with gold inlay includes *zarr asēm* “gold-and-silver.”¹¹³ The word <sng> *sang*, “weight,” placed at the end of an inscription, clearly indicates that the number refers to weight, but the attested cases are not numerous.¹¹⁴

Technically speaking, this inscription is a grafito. It is not hammered in dotted lines (“pointillé”) like other inscriptions on the silver plates, but is rather awkwardly scratched into the inner side of the pedestal (fig. 10).¹¹⁵ It was therefore not meant to be read once the object was finished, because when it is turned over, the inscription appears upside down. In the case of silver dishes, it has been shown that inscriptions may not date from the manufacture of the object and may have been added when it was transferred to a new owner.¹¹⁶ Though in the case of the “Kosrow Cup,” assuming that the inscription indeed gives the weight of the gold alone, it would indicate, as Harmatta suggested, that it was added sometime between the goldsmith’s workshop and that of the jeweller.

The inscription can be read as <III–C IIII III PRG>: 307 <ud> *nēm*, “(the weight is) 307 (*dēnār*) [and] a half.” An alternative reading was offered by Christopher Brunner: <III–C IIII III PN s> “307 (*dēnār*) by weight (*sang*),” which raises some difficulties.¹¹⁷ For instance, the letter s would never appear as an abbreviation of *sang* “weight” (as it stands for the abbreviation of *stēr* “stater”), and never at the end of the formulation. Moreover, the arameogram <PN> has, to my knowledge, only been recognized on one of the Māzandarān bowls,¹¹⁸ where it was read by Brunner as an equivalent of <PWN> *pad* “by.” Although the

Inscription n° 1

Inscription n° 2.

Inscription n° 3.

Inscription n° 4.

Inscription n° 5.

Inscription n° 6.

Inscription n° 7.

Fig. 8. Seven inscriptions published by Harmatta in 1992: 453. According to him, numbers 1–5 are in Middle Persian, number 6 in "Hephthalite" (Bactrian), and number 7 in Arabic.

Sur la paroi intérieure du pied annulaire, en or, on lit une inscription tracée à l'aide d'une pointe légère, en caractères pehlvis, indéchiffrables, dont voici le fac-simile :

Dimensions :

Diamètre : vase entier, 0^m 2825^d ; disque central, 0^m 075^m ; grands disques, 0^m 034^m ; moyens disques, 0^m 021^m ; petits disques, 0^m 018^m. — Largeur des cloisons : épaisses, 0^m 004^m ; minces, 0^m 0015^d. — Les écussons triangulaires et les grands losanges ont environ 0^m 015^m de côté ; les petits losanges, 0^m 012^m. — Les hyacinthes de la lèvre mesurent 0^m 007^m sur 0^m 004^m ; celles de la bordure intérieure, 0^m 012^m sur 0^m 006^m. — Profondeur centrale, 0^m 030^m. — Hauteur du pied, 0^m 0125^d. Pl. XLV, fig. 379.

Fig. 9. Extract from Babelon 1897: 215, showing the dimensions of different parts of the object and a sketch of its inscription.



Fig. 10. The Middle Persian inscription on the inner side of the pedestal of the “Kosrow Cup.”
Photo by the author.

araméogram <PRG> has not yet been identified in the weight formula on Sasanian vessels, it is well documented in Middle Persian literature,¹¹⁹ and it is hardly surprising that a half-measure should appear in a figure giving the weight of a metal as precious as gold.

It is astonishing that this inscription looks so careless, as if hastily made, and that it is not in pointillé like the other inscriptions on metalware. The metrological information is also incomplete, as there is only a number, without the reference value (*dēnār*). This type of wording is also attested for the silver dishes, but it is rare.¹²⁰ On a purely hypothetical basis, if one considers that the average weight of a gold coin under Husraw II is 4.57 grams,¹²¹ then the weight of the gold of the cup would be 1,405.27 g, and the complete set of gems would weigh about 744.7 g (if one considers the initial weight of the cup to be 2,150 g). These figures need, of course, to be confirmed by specialists.

Disappointing as it may be, this is the only existing inscription on the cup. The other six inscriptions are the fruit of the fertile imagination of a scholar inspired by the luster and prestige of the cup:¹²² nos. 2–3: scratched in cursive Pahlavi

script: <?twl ZY bwlčyn> and <?twl bwlčyn> *Ādur (i) Burzēn* “The Burzēn Fire,” the name of the Fire temple in northwestern Iran where the king made an offering of the cup in exchange for divine support;¹²³ nos. 4–5: <blčyn; bwlčyn> “Burzēn,” which would also refer to the same Fire temple; no. 6: scratched in cursive Bactrian script: *ιρκιρ*, a name of Turkish origin, consisting of two elements *irk* “strength, sovereignty” and *ir* “man.” For Harmatta, this would prove that the cup became the property of a Turkish chief who was the master of a Hephthalite principality;¹²⁴ and last but not least, no. 7: *bismillāh* “in the name of God,” an Arabic inscription with Kufic characters, which is “sufficient to demonstrate that the cup ultimately fell into Arab hands during the conquest of Khorasan.” What Harmatta mistook for inscriptions are nothing other than accidental marks and scratches, which are very numerous on a relatively soft metal such as gold (especially when it is 97% pure, as in this case) and are visible throughout the frame.

A question that one may ask is why a scholar such as János Harmatta needed to fabricate this elaborate narration. It is not unlikely that he might have been inspired by a comparable

historical reconstruction published at the same time.¹²⁵ The American medievalist George Beech wrote a similar story about the vase of Eleanor of Aquitaine (Louvre Museum) which, in addition to its beauty, shares at least two characteristics with the "Kosrow Cup": its main part is made of rock crystal, and it belonged to the Treasury of Saint Denis. Based on the (genuine) inscriptions found on this vase, it was possible to reconstruct the history of its transfer from Sasanian Iran through Muslim Spain and then to Aquitaine. It was probably intolerable for János Harmatta that "the masterpiece of Sasanian goldsmiths and one of the most venerable treasures of France" would be deprived of a sublime medieval odyssey between East and West. He must therefore have felt it was his task to compose an exceptional narrative to do justice to the extraordinary splendor of the object.

The hopeless quest for inscriptions naturally led him to another quest for a legend: the origin of the Grail. Harmatta tried to explain the origin of the Grail legend on the basis of Iranian symbolism, in particular the "Cup of Kay Kosrow," a divination tool that first came into the hands of another mythical king, Jamšid.¹²⁶ In this second fanciful construction, he refers to the authority of Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin,¹²⁷ apparently without noticing that the latter makes a mockery of these assumptions.¹²⁸ Compared to his predecessors, he tries to present new arguments to uphold his theory: because of its miraculous nature and the fact that it was made of gold and shining precious stones, the Grail has its magical power renewed on Good Friday, just as the Cup of Kay Kosrow is "recharged" at the time of Nowruz. Another supposed parallel he notes is the fact that both the Grail and the Cup of Kay Kosrow are preserved in fortresses: Corbenic/Chastermarveil for one, and the fortress Kangdēz for the other. Harmatta concludes: "This description corresponds exactly to the appearance of the Cup of Xusrō."¹²⁹

J. Harmatta is probably one of the last defenders of the Persian Grail fantasy, which is a pure product of the thinking of the first decades of the twentieth century.¹³⁰ Only his epigraphic utopia seems to have survived him. Thus, it was high time to pull this sword out of the stone.

Conclusion

As might be seen, a reflection on this stunning and intricate object invokes historical, technical, and literary aspects that invite a collective and holistic research approach for further scholarly treatment. This article has attempted to underline some visual details that have not been sufficiently discussed until now and, above all, to draw attention to the combination of goldsmithing techniques with *ajouré* and *cloisonné*. The exceptional character of the object shows the mastery and expertise of various workshops of lapidaries and jewelers. It seems that Harper's caution in attributing it to the Sasanians is somewhat exaggerated. It is certainly possible that the image of the king reflects criteria better known by the toreutic schools of Central Asia (especially in consideration of the shape of the throne and the garment), but it is also possible that itinerant craftsmen reproduced these eastern patterns in a courtly environment in the heart of the empire, preferably in Ctesiphon, where all the trade routes converged, including the one that carried the garnet via the Persian Gulf.

One avenue of reflection that I try to explore concerns the choice of the four complementary colors which, in the context of diplomatic exchange, would have conveyed a political message: that of competing aesthetically with contemporary Byzantine art, and thus symbolically asserting dominance over its techniques and visual practices. This cup is beyond doubt a celebration of light and transparency. It is therefore difficult to blame scholars such as Harmatta for having lost all sense of reality and indulged in reverie in front of this "Persian Grail," for it indeed hypnotizes all its admirers.

Notes

1. Acknowledgment: In February 2021, I had the privilege of examining the object while it was in temporary storage at the Bibliothèque nationale de France on the François Mitterrand site, during the renovation of the Cabinet des Médailles and the construction of a new museum to display its treasures. I would like to thank Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet (Chief Curator in the Department of Coins, Medals, and Antiquities, in charge of the collections of glyptics, sculptures, bronzes, and decorative arts) for granting me access to

the object despite the pandemic context. I also thank Anca Dan for organizing the visit to the Bibliothèque nationale de France. I extend my gratitude to Carol Bromberg, Frantz Grenet, and Judith Lerner for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. The publication of the color plates in this article has been generously sponsored by the Collège de France (Paris).

2. All measurements and technical descriptions are found in Babelon 1897: 213–19, who attributes the piece to Husraw (= Kosrow) II.

3. The image (fig. 2) is accompanied by a short comment: “Espèce de sous-coupe [sic!] d’or ornée de cristaux de différentes sortes de couleurs. Au milieu l’on y voit un Roy assis dans son trosne [‘A kind of gold sub-cup adorned with crystals of different colors. In the middle we see a king sitting on his throne’]”; (Felibien 1706: 543).

4. It is interesting to note that the discs that came off – two of which, one rock crystal and one garnet, were lost – were not only the larger ones but also those cut in a curved shape to match the rounded edge of the vessel.

5. It has been exhibited many times in Paris, most recently in 2006 at the Musée Cernuschi (Demange ed. 2006: 96, no. 35). Its last trip outside France was in 1979 for an exhibition in New York. During the renovation of the Bibliothèque nationale de France on the Richelieu site (2017–2022), a large photograph of the cup covered part of the scaffolding – a prediction of its future exhibition in a venue worthy of it, in a new museum that opened in 2022.

6. For details on the Ashmolean Museum project, see the dedicated page on its website: <https://www.ashmolean.org/khosrocup> (accessed on August 12, 2024).

7. For a description of this plate, see Demange ed. 2006: 94–95, no. 34.

8. For instance, Prudence O. Harper has expressed her hesitation on several occasions, as in Harper 2006: 161.

9. Grenet 2024: 454.

10. See, for example, De Linas 1877: 233ff.

11. Ghirshman 1962: 204–6.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 204, fig. 243.

14. Ibid., 318.

15. More recent examinations, however, have highlighted the differences in the holding of the sword and in many other details (Klimburg-Salter 1989, pl. 87). The drawing reproduced by Ghirshman (after Godard, Godard, and Hackin 1928: 65–74, fig. 25) was, in fact, likely inspired, at least in its central part, by the

medallion of the “Kosrow Cup” (Harper and Meyers 1981: 120, n. 114). This circular reasoning about the origin of the motif has probably not been beneficial to subsequent studies.

16. Villela-Petit 2014.

17. Ibid., 733, as did before her Cottevielle-Giraudet in 1938, but on the basis of different motifs.

18. Villela-Petit 2014: 739.

19. Gyselen 2018.

20. Harper and Meyers 1981: 111.

21. See Harper 1979: 55; Harper and Meyers 1981: 228, pl. 27.

22. Harper and Meyers (1981: 111): “The attendants (on the Strelka plate) have another form of dress, unknown in Sasanian art except on the side walls of the niche attributed to Khosrow II at Taq-i Bustan. The skirt, with an embroidered hem, curves downwards from the centre to form rounded corners at the sides. At Taq-i Bustan this garment is worn by courtiers but never by the king himself.”

23. Moshtagh Khorasani and Akbarzadeh 2023.

24. Hamza al-Isfahānī, trans. Šo‘ār 1346/1967: 46–59; Hoyland 2018: 71.

25. Harper 1979: 57; Harper and Meyers 1981: 110–15, 129.

26. The media are very varied: Roman lamps from Syria, Palmyrene tomb paintings, the paintings and textiles from Dura Europos, Christian mosaics from Antioch, and, in the Umayyad period, the paintings at Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbi (see Overlaet 1993: 139, no. 136).

27. On the typology and distribution of the different rosette patterns, see, among others, Day 1952: 42–48, who takes the famous silk (*tirāz*) of Caliph Marwān II (744–750) as a starting point of comparison; and, more recently, Stewart 2020, who focuses on Christian patterns and also considers the “Kosrow Cup” (ibid., 79, fig. 13d). According to R. Ettinghausen, the rosette motif is a commonplace that appears to have had royal associations (1972: 36–38), but his arguments are hardly convincing.

28. Harper 1987: 56–57, no. 16. The back of the rhyton in the shape of a saiga antelope head (New York, private collection) is the only Sasanian example in which the rosette appears alone and is not repeated.

29. Fukai et al. 1983: pl. 13 (the harpist seated in the royal boat on the boar-hunting panel), and pl. 19 (the king entering the hunting ground on the deer-hunting panel); 1984: 125, figs. 57.9–10, 131, figs. 63.1–2, 138–39: “This floral design, consisting of four calyxes and four petals spreading from the same core, belongs to the same type as those found on the costume of musicians

in the boar-hunting scene. Those of the musicians are double-flower design with petals placed between the calyxes. The heart-shaped flower design can be found on the gold drinking vessel (Bibliothèque nationale, Paris), although the calyxes do not converge in the centre.” The large grotto of the Tāq-e Bostān monument is literally covered with reliefs featuring multiple variations of rosettes. These mainly decorate the textiles, including the costumes of the figures and the royal saddlecloth.

30. Harper 2006: 140.

31. Giumlía-Mair 2013: 19–20. This Hungarian cup was cast using the lost wax technique, based on a wax model that the author interprets as being of “Iranian origin,” though no further justification is provided.

32. On this inscription, see below, the section entitled, “‘Science de Caprices’: Deconstruction of an Epigraphic Utopia.”

33. “At present, there is no way of determining where and by whom the rock-crystal medallion was carved,” Harper 1979: 58; Harper and Meyers 1981: 115.

34. Harper 2006: 139.

35. *Ibid.*, 140.

36. Villela-Petit 2014: 742.

37. For instance, a Sasanian dish represents the Dioscuri, accompanied not by a pair of horses but by two winged horses (Harper 2006: 91–92, fig. 62). The duplicate image of Bellerophon was reinterpreted as the constellation Dōpahikar (The Gemini).

38. Ettinghausen 1972: 11–16. It is also widely attested on Sasanian personal seals (Ritter 2010: 121ff.).

39. Azarnouche 2022b.

40. Ettinghausen 1972: 14.

41. Shkoda 1980: 61–62; Sokolovskii 2009: 45, 63, 148–49.

42. Grenet 2021: 178–79.

43. Harper 1979: 56.

44. Ghirshman 1962: 243, no. 298; for discussions about the Mithra seal and its parallels, see Callieri 1990. Grenet (1993) discusses the Bāmiyān painting with four white winged horses drawing Mithra’s chariot which seems consistent with the description of his vehicle in his Avestan hymn (*Mīhr Yašt*, Yt 10.125: “Four coursers pull at [Mithra’s] chariot, all of the same whiteness, they are immortal, having been reared on supernatural food; their front-hooves are shod with gold, their hind-hooves with silver; all are harnessed to the yoke ...,” trans. Gershevitch 1967: 134–35).

45. Compare with Gyselen 1993: pl. 37, no. 40.A.16.

46. “L’argenterie de prestige en Iran sassanide et en Asie centrale: Un mode d’expression politique et idéologique,” January 28, 2021 (<https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/frantz-grenet/course-2021-01-28-15h30.htm>) and February 4, 2021 (<https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/frantz-grenet/course-2021-02-04-15h30.htm>) (both accessed on August 12, 2024).

47. Vickers 1996.

48. The name of this stone is known in Manichaean Parthian: <bylwr> *belūr*, Pers. *bolūr*; <byrwlyyn> *berūlēn*, “made of crystal,” from Gr. βήρυλλος “beryl.” Sometimes the word is confused with the name of “glass”: <bgyng> *ābgēnag*, “crystal; glass”; Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 11, 122.

49. *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 64.7, 13, 19, 26, 30b, trans. Williams 1990: I, 230–33, II: 111–13.

50. Azarnouche and Grenet 2010: 32, 43; Grenet and Azarnouche 2007: 171. The authors propose to recognize it as rock crystal.

51. For the text of the Protocol (*āyīn*) of Ardaxšīr, see Grignaschi 1966: 94, 114, with modifications.

52. According to the Armenian chronicle of Movses Dasxurants’i, Šābuhr II (309–379) organized a magnificent banquet for all the noble families of Persia (including Armenians). The ranks and degrees of precedence at the royal table were designated by “goblet and wine-slip (zuṛsn)” (Movses Dasxurants’i II 1, trans. Dowsett 1961: 61). Procopius (*History of the Wars*, I.17.26–28) observes that, at the time of Kawād, wearing golden ring, girdle, brooch, and similar items was a special privilege that had to be granted by the king. He could also revoke this privilege, as in the case of Pērōz Mihrān (Mirranès), who was defeated at the Battle of Dara in 530 and had his gold and pearl head ornament seized. Military decorations could likewise be confiscated in cases of misconduct, and the soldier would then be referred to as *a-payrāyag*, meaning “ornamentless” (Azarnouche and Petitjean 2022: 342–44).

53. I owe this information to Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet (Cabinet des Médailles), based on analyses of the cup conducted by Gérard Panczer (Institut Lumière Matière, Lyon) in June 2024.

54. Azarnouche 2022a: 184.

55. al-Tha’alibī, trans. Zotenberg 1900: 699–700.

56. Canepa 2009: 156–57.

57. *Ibid.*, 161.

58. *Ibid.*, 163.

59. On the tradition of the four-color palette in Byzantine art and its link to the four elements (despite the much-debated absence of blue), see James 1996: 66–68. On color symbolism, see *ibid.*, 104–9, as well as recent studies on colors by Michel Pastoureau (for instance, Pastoureau 2022). James shows that, beyond hue and the organization of color, other qualities such as brightness and glitter become particularly important,

especially in the production of mosaics (pp. 119–23).

60. Schibille 2014a, 118ff, and 2014b, 37: the Byzantines were, instead, much more interested in the luminosity and brilliance of a color than in its hue.

61. Procopius, *On Buildings*, I.1.59–60: “One might imagine that he had come upon a meadow with its flowers in full bloom. For he would surely marvel at the purple of some, the green tint of others, and at those on which the crimson glows and those from which the white flashes, and again at those which Nature, like some painter, varies with the most contrasting colours.”

62. An ideology that would later be adopted by Muslim leaders. The spectrum of the four colors is also part of this tradition, as seen, for example, on the famous Marwān silk (Day 1952: 41–42).

63. Babelon 1897: 213.

64. Among the competing theories, the one defended by Ščukin and Bažan (1995) states that the rapid spread of the earliest Late Roman cloisonné in the Eastern Mediterranean, Near East, and Iberian Caucasus is related to the policy of the Sasanian kings, who revived Achaemenid cultural traditions. The discovery of Sasanian objects in a cemetery north of the ancient Iberian capital of Mtskheta (Georgia), dating to the late third and early fourth century CE, later led to the assumption that Georgia could be one of the formative regions of this Late Antique cloisonné style.

65. Arrhenius 1985: 47, fig. 30.

66. *Ibid.*, 121.

67. Adams 1991: 34.

68. *Ibid.*, 288.

69. *Ibid.*, 97, n. 6.

70. Adams 2000: 17.

71. Adams 2011: 13, 17.

72. *Ibid.*, 18. The famous “šābuhr” intaglio in the Bibliothèque nationale (B.N. 1970.392), made of garnet almandine, measures 3.75x1.26x0.73 cm. Source: <http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/ark:/12148/c33gbrxxv>.

73. Information kindly provided by Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet (Cabinet des Médailles). If most specialists of Sasanian art remain silent on the cup’s garnet, it is because they mistake it for glass (Harper 2006: 140, probably after Ghirshman 1962: 205; or Babelon 1897: 213, 214, who is unclear, describing the gems either as “verre coulé” or as “bordure de hyacinthes et de verres grenat”). Christensen believed the cup was adorned with alternating red and white enamel rosettes (1944: 398). However, seventeenth-century historians such as J. Doublet described the gems in the rim as hyacinths and the rosettes as “very beautiful garnets,” along with

emeralds (for the glass) and “a large white sapphire cut” (for the rock crystal); Doublet 1625: 342. The only inventory of the Saint-Denis treasure that correctly identifies all the materials is that of 1634; see De Montesquiou-Fezensac 1973: 166, no. 76.

74. Tallon 1995: 106–7.

75. Adams 1991: 288.

76. Périn et al. 2000: 143–44, no. 19.12.

77. Ghirshman 1962: 222–23: “La plaque a une face moulée en ménageant des ajours pour des grenats ronds et en losanges, sur l’autre face l’inscription moyen-perse. L’objet a été réemployé comme pectoral avec un pendentif orné de grenats incrustés.”

78. Adams 2000: 22. It appears that the inscription is engraved and not in pointillé, as Adams claims.

79. Spier 2007: 87; Adams 2011: 13.

80. Adams 2000: 24, 55.

81. *Ibid.*, 24–26.

82. *Ibid.*, 42. The theory of a Sasanian conscious revival of Achaemenid jewelery tradition seems not to be relevant.

83. Adams 2000: 41; Spier 2007: 87–90.

84. Howard-Johnston 2017: 296–98. For Sasanian archaeological traces in Sri Lanka, see De Saxé 2016. In his book on precious stones (*Kitāb al-Jamāhīr*), al-Bīrūnī (al-Hādī ed., 1374/1995: 145) records the gifts sent by the Lord of Serendib to King Husraw I: pearls or precious stones obtained by diving, silkworm cocoons (?), and teak wood. “Rubies” (or garnets?) are also mentioned among the gifts from the kings of China and India.

85. On the problem of gem taxonomy and the identification of gemstones named in ancient texts, see Thoresen 2017: 172–74. “Anthrax” was probably a generic term that could have referred to ruby, red spinel, or, most often, red garnet. Theophylact Simocatta refers to “anthrax” as adorning the tiara of King Ōhrmazd IV (r. 579–590), but this could also denote garnet: “He was sitting on the royal throne, his attire that of a tyrant and very costly, the gold gem-studded tiara gleaming brightly with its inset of rubies (anthrax) around which ran an abundance of pearl. Glistening in his helmet and emerald green he amplified his splendour, so that the eye of the beholder was all but petrified by insatiable amazement” (IV.7).

86. In his *Kitāb al-Jamāhīr*, al-Bīrūnī (al-Hādī ed. 1374/1995: 113, 117, 118–19, 121) gives a fairly precise location of different *yāqūt* mines on the island. The Sanskrit name for garnet is *rāhu-ratna* (“Rāhu’s gem”). According to some sources, the Badakhshān deposit was only discovered in the ‘Abbasid period (Dehkhodā, s.v. la‘l). Al-Bīrūnī identifies garnet and pearls as

noteworthy parts of the Treasure of the Sasanian kings (p. 143). On pearls, see Walker 2018. Elsewhere, in his *Chronology of Ancient Nations* (*Āthār al-Bāqiya*), al-Bīrūnī reports that gems were associated by the Persians with calendar festivals: the ruby with Nowruz, the emerald with Mihragān (trans. Sachau 1879: 208), and the pearl with the first day of the month of Ādur (IX.1), the day on which Jamšīd first pulled it from the seabed (trans. Dānāserēšt 1363/1984: 343. This passage is missing in Sachau’s translation).

87. This is a widespread confusion: gems published as rubies from the Hellenistic era and the Western Roman Empire often turn out to be garnets (Thoresen 2017: 172).

88. *Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud Nihišn ī Nēw-Ardaxšīr*, Daryae ed., 2016: 9, 17–18.

89. *Zand ī Fragard ī Jud-Dēw-Dād* 25.2, Moazami ed. 2021: 170–71.

90. *Zand ī Fragard ī Jud-Dēw-Dād* 25.7, *ibid.*, 174–75.

91. *Šāyest nē Šāyest*, Mazdapour ed. 1390/2011: 39–40.

92. Bagherpour Kashani 2022, i–25. A large number of jewels were deposited into Chale Ghar 1.

93. *Ibid.*, 288.

94. *Martyrdom of Anastasios the Persian*, BGH 84. 8, 10 (Flusin ed. and trans. 1992, I: 48–51; II: 226–31: “This is a good illustration of the way in which Sasanian and Byzantine gold and silversmiths were in close contact at the beginning of the seventh century”). Before his beheading, Anastasios had a vision that foretold his martyrdom: he saw himself standing on a mountain and was ordered to drink from the cup that was offered to him: a golden wine cup, inlaid with gems (*ibid.*, II: 206).

95. Iafrate 2015: 33, n. 13; 2016: 348–51.

96. Iafrate 2016: 327–32.

97. *Ibid.*, 349–50.

98. For similar narratives, see *ibid.*, 349, n. 72. For other objects of the Treasury of Saint-Denis associated with Solomon, see *ibid.*, 350, n. 74. This includes the rock crystal vase called the Aquitaine vase, discussed below.

99. Fischer 2014: xii–xiv. The dated assumption that the cup made the trip from Baghdad to Aachen as a diplomatic gift from the Caliph to Charlemagne (along with the tent, the water-clock, and the elephant named Abū’l-‘Abbās) does not seem unlikely to this author, although the vessel does not appear in the list of presents. According to him, “the Abbassid court in Baghdad was doubtless aware that members of its Frankish counterpart cherished Solomon as they did.

For Muslims and Christians alike, the vessel related to Solomon was an appreciated gift. In this case it was deliberately chosen and labelled in order to meet with the Frankish addressee’s cultural premises, which the donor successfully anticipated to elevate the value of his gift. The ‘cup of Chosroes’ thus turned out to be highly prestigious for both the recipient and the donor and brought lustre to each ruler” (p. xiv). One point that is not taken into account in this reconstruction is that the Abbassid court could hardly ignore the iconographic codes present on the object (at least on the royal portrait) that allowed, without possible confusion, its identification as a royal Sasanian production.

100. Iafrate 2016: 350–51, n. 76.

101. Iogna-Prat 2003.

102. Schade 1959; 1960. See Diebold 1994 for a more balanced analysis.

103. Canepa 2009: 162–63.

104. Fischer 2014: xiv.

105. See below note 111 for this quote from Harmatta 1974: 191.

106. In a letter to his mentor Jean de Menasce (dated June 24, 1969, Jean de Menasce archive, BULAC, Paris), Philippe Gignoux describes “Professor Harmatta from Budapest” as a “charming man,” whose readings of Pahlavi inscriptions often coincide with his own, a scholar “very well positioned to undertake this work” on inscribed seals. He also regrets that Raoul Curiel, who was then away, was unable to meet him. See also Harmatta’s obituary by Ph. Gignoux, where he describes his “remarkable qualities as a humanist” and his “almost universal erudition” (Gignoux 2005: 291).

107. To mention only three of them: Gyselen 1993: 197–98; Tallon 1995: 106–7; Villelat-Petit 2014: 742–43, and 742, n. 38.

108. Shaul Shaked, whom I asked about this case in March 2021, had no recollection of this session, but he acknowledged that it was common practice at the time to exchange jokes about Harmatta’s decipherments of Pahlavi inscriptions. This confirms what Philippe Gignoux wrote to me on the same subject (February 2021): everyone in the Iranist milieu knew that Harmatta read inscriptions where there were none, but out of friendship and respect for him, no one dared to refute his claims.

109. “Grâce à l’obligeance de M. R. Curiel, j’eus la possibilité d’étudier très soigneusement la coupe et de constater que plusieurs inscriptions, de langues et de caractères différents, avaient été gravées ou grattées sur son pied. Je voudrais exprimer ici mes remerciements cordiaux pour la possibilité que l’on m’a donnée ainsi que pour les excellentes photographies que le Cabinet a

mises à ma disposition. Ces inscriptions permettent de jeter un coup d’œil sur certaines périodes de l’histoire de la coupe de Xusrō pour lesquelles nous ne disposons d’aucune source historique” (Harmatta 1992: 451).

110. According to this calculation, the remaining weight for the gems would be 376.5 g, which seems much too light. Probably several dozen grams were lost with the dropping of a garnet disc, another of rock crystal, and many smaller fragments of glass and garnet. The repairs, some of which are clearly visible, must also have altered the weight.

111. Harmatta 1974: 192ff. He assumes that the first sign indicates a measure of weight (which he identifies as Middle Persian *stēr*), followed by the number. In this article, published in 1974 and dedicated to epigraphy and methodology, he quite unexpectedly makes a sharp remark to his colleagues: “De nos jours, l’iranistique se transforme, malheureusement, de plus en plus en une science de caprices” (p. 191). The target of this remark must surely have been more easily recognizable to his contemporaries than it is to us.

112. See for example, Gyselen 2014: 94, table 2, and compare with number 306, in *ibid.*, 94, table 1.

113. Skjærvø 2000.

114. See Gyselen 2014: 88–89. The word appears only in inscriptions in cursive script.

115. For a comparison with silver vessels, see Gyselen 2014: 78–82.

116. *Ibid.*, 83.

117. Brunner 1974: 121.

118. Brunner 1974: 119, no. 36; Gyselen 2014: 121, no. 14.

119. For instance, it is included in the arameogram lexicon *Frahang ī Pahlavīg* (Nyberg, Utas 1988: 61, 67, 111). The word “half” can also be written without an arameogram, as in <nymdyn’l> *nēm-dēnār* “half-dēnār” (*ibid.*, 109).

120. *Ibid.*, 92, type 8.

121. Gyselen 2004: 71. On gold coinage, see also Schindel 2006.

122. One hypothesis I would not dwell on is that Harmatta did not “imagine” these inscriptions out of thin air (as a practical joke on his colleagues engaged in a “science de caprices”?), but that he genuinely believed he was reading them.

123. Harmatta 1992: 452–54.

124. At about the same time, he applied a comparable theory to another inscribed object: a seal from the Foroughi collection, on which he read one inscription in Middle Persian and the other in Runic script. According to him, the seal belonged to *xāqān* Jig at the time he occupied Iranian territories in the early seventh century (Harmatta 1993).

125. Beech 1992.

126. The motif of Jamšīd’s cup is absent from both Zoroastrian literature and Ferdowsi’s *Šāhnāme*. In the latter, it is Kay Kosrow’s cup that is mentioned as an astrological-divinatory object in the episode of Bīžan and Manīže. In Zoroastrian literature, the hero Jam(šīd) is associated with several instruments, including a “*paymānag*,” which seems to be a measuring standard. The shift from this unclear instrument to the notion of a “cup” occurred within the Persian language, where the assonance of *jām* “cup” and “Jam” is particularly favorable (Azarnouche 2012: n. 46). In addition, a powerful syncretism between the figures of Jam and Solomon may have nourished the imagination surrounding the golden cup. In one of the epic poems imitating the *Šāhnāme*, the *Bahman-nāme*, the hero Bahman discovers Kay Kosrow’s cup inside Rostam’s mausoleum, and it is described as being made of gold, ruby/garnet (*yāqūt*), and glass. Other accounts describe it as made of red garnet (*la‘l-e sorḡ*). See Aydenlu 1398/2019 for a detailed analysis of all occurrences of Jam’s and Kay Kosrow’s cup in Persian literature.

127. Duchesne-Guillemin 1962: 275–76. Harmatta does not mention the most elaborate work on the subject, Ringbom 1951.

128. “[Ces reconstructions] introduisent un élément humoristique dans un ordre d’études qui en est trop dépourvu” (Duchesne-Guillemin 1962: 276).

129. Harmatta 1992: 458.

130. Duchesne-Guillemin (1962: 276) mentions only European scholars, but at least one major Parsi scholar also engaged with this topic: Sir Jahangir C. Covajee (Covajee 1939). His book had a significant influence on the way Henry Corbin connected the Eastern theosophy of Sohrawardi, in which Kay Kosrow is a major figure, with the “hermetic” legend of the Holy Grail, in his article “La Lumière de Gloire et le Saint Graal” (Corbin 1971: 141–210).

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