

Bulletin of the Asia Institute

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Note from the Editor

Beginning with the present volume 32, the *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* will be published under the auspices of the Yarshater Center for the Study of Iranian Literary Traditions at UCLA.

For almost four decades, since its last iteration in 1987, the *Bulletin* has been published with masterful editorial expertise and exquisite bookcraft by Carol Altman Bromberg, seconded in the early years by Richard N. Frye and Bernard Goldman, and advised by a small and distinguished editorial advisory board.

It is worth retracing briefly the major stations in the *Bulletin's* evolution, as was already put to pen in the first volume of the new series in 1987 (ix–xi). The *Bulletin* first saw the light of day as the *Bulletin of the American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology* in July 1931, and was edited by Arthur Upham Pope, director of the American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology, who was aided in this endeavor by his wife Phyllis Ackerman. The Institute had been established the year before in New York City, with a charter stipulating its works in the following terms:

to encourage and extend an appreciation of Persian art in its various forms by promoting research and assisting scholars, organizing and assisting archaeological expeditions and excavations, organizing and assisting exhibitions of Persian art and congresses, both national and international, publishing books and other material, and assisting in the conservation of ancient Persian monuments [Ibid., ix].

Subsequent development would see the name of both the Institute and the *Bulletin* changed: the former's designation morphing into the Asia Institute(s) in 1940, while the latter became known as the *Bulletin of the Iranian Institute*. It perdured until 1946 when due to a lack of funding it fell into desuetude. In the late 1960s, the Institute was re-established under the directorship of Arthur U. Pope at the Narenjestān mansion in Shiraz through the patronage of the Iranian

imperial house, and the *Bulletin* was revived as the *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*. Richard N. Frye, Director of the Asia Institute beginning in 1969, edited three issues of the *Bulletin* in 1969, 1971, and 1973, focusing on Iranian and Central Asian art and archaeology. From 1975 to 1978, the date of the *Bulletin's* final issue in Iran, the journal was led by Mahyar Nawabi. A decade later, in 1987, the *Bulletin* returned to American shores, whence it once arose, and prospered for four decades prior to its final relocation to UCLA, where the Yarshater Center will provide a permanent home.

At UCLA, the *Bulletin* will set forth its work animated by the selfsame philosophy that has characterized its past endeavors, openness to the world, capaciousness in perspective, and the desire to serve, and be guided by, the community of scholars worldwide, as has been exquisitely noted by the editors of the inaugural volume in 1987:

We feel that it is essential that the *Bulletin* retain not only its original breadth of interest but also its international character. Parochialism is entirely out of character for those lands of the ancient world whose cultures are our subject here. Achaemenid, Hellenistic, Parthian, Sasanian, and Islamic Iran may have had their shortcomings, but narrowness of view or limited scope of influence was not one of them [Ibid., vii].

As before, the *Bulletin* will cover all different facets of the Iranian world (art, archaeology, literary traditions, and history) and emphasize its synergies and entanglement with the cultures of eastern, southern, central, and western Asia, as well as the Mediterranean. The cultural markers of the Iranian world neither emerged nor were fostered in isolation, but were the result of cross-fertilization and intellectual borrowings from neighboring cultures. This broader outlook shall continue to inform the *Bulletin's* work.

Note from the Editor

A few words of thanks are in order. I am exceedingly indebted to Carol Altman Bromberg for her prodigious and indefatigable editorship over the past decades, and for deeming us worthy to carry on this task, following in the footsteps of such illustrious predecessors. It gives me great satisfaction to know she shall remain engaged in the progress of the *Bulletin* as the editor emerita.

A great debt of gratitude is also owed to the distinguished members of the editorial advisory board who have been judiciously guiding the work of the *Bulletin*. We pay homage to those among them who have passed away in recent years: Guitty Azarpay (University of California, Berkeley); Nina Garsoïan (Columbia University); and Shaul Shaked (Hebrew University of Jerusalem).

I would also like to welcome three distinguished scholars who have agreed to join the editorial advisory board: Lothar von Falkenhausen, Stephanie W. Jamison, and Robert Rollinger.

The present issue encompasses contributions by Samra Azarnouche, Anca Dan, Frantz Grenet, Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, Robert Rollinger, Fabrizio Sinisi, and Joseph Wiesehöfer, to whom I am grateful for their patience, while the *Bulletin* was transitioning to UCLA.

M. Rahim Shayegan



Designating the King in the Womb of His Mother: From Assyrian through Sasanian Times

ROBERT ROLLINGER AND JOSEF WIESEHÖFER*

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The Peace of Nisibis in 298 CE was a major setback for the Sasanian imperial agenda. After a disastrous defeat in late 297 by the *Caesar* Galerius, who had even been able to capture the *šāhān šāh*'s wife and children, Narseh (293–302 CE) had to conclude a rather disadvantageous treaty with the Roman Empire. The treaty stipulated not only the loss of large parts of northern Mesopotamia but also the cession of substantial territories east of the River Tigris.¹ Although Narseh received back his family members and was eager to present this result as being in accordance with the Zoroastrian principles of the Sasanian Empire and probably as a new phase of his reign,² the territorial loss can be regarded as initiating an imperial crisis that also affected the person of the king and the ideological foundations of Sasanian kingship. This situation did not come to an end with the short reign of Narseh's son and successor Öhrmazd II (302–309 CE) but became even worse when Öhrmazd died and his succession caused turmoil and confusion. If he was inaugurated as *šāhān šāh* at all, the reign of the "shadowy person,"³ Ādur-Narseh, a son of Öhrmazd II, lasted only a few months before he and one of his brothers were killed. Since another brother fled to the Romans, there was only one legitimate heir left: the future *šāhān šāh* Šābuhr II (309–379 CE). This prince was in a specifically precarious position, at least if we believe the Greek historiographer Agathias, who wrote his *Histories* in the sixth century CE:⁴

(2) They (i.e., Narseh and Öhrmazd II) were succeeded by Šābuhr (Σαβόρης), who enjoyed an exceedingly long reign, the length of which coincided exactly with the length of his life. Indeed, when he was still in his

mother's womb, the future offspring was called to the throne (ἔτι γὰρ αὐτὸν κυούσης τῆς μητρὸς ἢ μὲν τοῦ βασιλείου γένους διαδοχὴ ἐκάλει πρὸς τὴν ἀρχὴν τὸ τεχνησόμενον). Since it was uncertain whether the queen would give (3) birth to a male or a female child, the nobles proposed a special reward for the magi (μάγοι) if they would foretell the future. Accordingly, they brought out a mare in the last stages of pregnancy and told the magi to predict what they thought would happen in its case. In this way, they would be able to find out in a few days whether the prediction had come true, which would enable them to form an estimate of the chances of fulfillment of whatever would be foretold in the case of the human being. Now I cannot say exactly what the precise nature of the prediction in the case of the mare was, since I have not received accurate information on that point, but, whatever it was, it proved correct. (4) When the nobles realized that the magi knew their art to perfection, they urged them to expound their knowledge of future events with regard to the woman as well. When the magi said that a male child would be born, they no longer delayed, but putting the diadem around the mother's womb, they proclaimed the fetus as emperor, conferring upon it the distinction of a name and a title when, I suppose, it had only just reached that stage of development at which it was capable of making a few slight jumping and throbbing movements inside the womb. (5) Thus, they took for granted what, in the natural order of things, is uncertain and obscure, though they were not far off the mark in their expectations, which were fulfilled to the letter and beyond it. Soon after, in fact Šābuhr was born. Possessed of the royal title at birth, he grew up on the throne and he grew old on it, living to the ripe old age of seventy (Agathias, *Histories* 4.25.2–5, after Frendo 1975 with slight changes).⁵

The passage is of utmost interest, since it conveys an entirely unparalleled procedure for selecting a new king in Sasanian history. It is important to note that the event unfolded within the context of a dire and accelerating state crisis, which demanded extraordinary countermeasures, either in reality or staged as a master narrative, in order to strengthen and reinforce the institution of kingship. The latter point is particularly important to emphasize, since our source is neither contemporary nor indigenous. Agathias wrote his *Histories* more than two hundred years after the event, and in his work, he adopts a perspective that looks at the Sasanian Empire from the outside. The passage in question is part of an extended excursus on Sasanian kings, starting with Ardashir (Artaxares) I (224–239/40 CE) and ending with Husraw (Chosroes) I (531–579 CE) (Agathias, *Histories* 4.24–29), “a complete chronological record of the reigns of the kings of Persia” (τῶν Περσικῶν βασιλέων διαδοχὴ καὶ ὁ τῶν ἐνιαυτῶν κατάλογος) as Agathias calls it (Agathias, *Histories* 4.30.2). There is a long-standing scholarly debate on Agathias’ sources and the historical value of this entire passage, but this is not our major concern here.

Instead, our focus is on the discourse rather than the “facts.” Henning Börm is the scholar who has most recently treated this passage in depth.⁶ However, he was predominantly interested in the question of historicity and in the historical context of the passage. Although he remained somewhat indecisive about whether the story as such – the selection of a new king while still in his mother’s womb – reflects a historical fact,⁷ he praised the “ingenious solution” of the contemporary magnates to end any factional conflict and harmoniously agree on the only prince who was still available. Moreover, Börm rightly highlighted that the elites’ capability to join forces and to overcome their differences was a feat of collective state leadership and obviously successful, since the child on the throne was not challenged by any rival until he (Šābuhr II) reached full age, about sixteen years later.

As already mentioned, Börm left open the question of whether the selection of Šābuhr as a fetus took place as reported by Agathias or whether the story was just a post-festum invention.⁸ However, by also referring to earlier skeptical voices such as that of Otto Seeck, he considered it “much more likely” that the tale was a later construction.⁹ But

the issue was not really relevant for Börm, since he concentrated on the “power struggle in Ctesiphon” and its outcome. Nevertheless, the case remains important since the ways of argumentation and the language of power used in the narrative matter and shed new light on the historical context and on “deeper history” as well.

Let us begin with an analysis of the passage. There are at least three strata that constitute the story and must be described. First, there is the central scene: Šābuhr is elected king while still in his mother’s womb. The main actors here are the nobles at court, whereas the queen mother is completely passive. The leading role of the nobles is highlighted by a second stratum of the story that nevertheless forms an integral unit with the central scene. Since the nobles’ election process obviously follows traditional lines and, therefore, carries legal value, one immediately wonders what would happen if the queen were to give birth to a girl. Apparently, this would contradict the traditional law of succession and therefore had to be avoided. At the same time, it demonstrates that such a scenario was theoretically possible, since the election of an unborn female child would have carried legal force as well.¹⁰ In any case, to prevent such a result, another group of actors is introduced: the magi, with their expertise in soothsaying. In a moment that is somewhat Herodotean, their qualifications are tested and finally approved. This is the only moment in the entire story when even a hint of divine assistance comes into play. Although not explicitly mentioned, the magi’s apparent competence may be understood as being linked to divine guidance, as the test case itself explicitly is. The association of a horse with an oracle concerning kingship is deeply rooted in Iranian historical tradition, or at least our classical sources attribute this tradition to Iran.¹¹ The most prominent case of course is Herodotus’ famous story on how Darius I became king.¹²

The third stratum of the story is again of Herodotean quality and concerns Agathias himself. It is the way he presents the story as such and tries to lend credibility to his account. Agathias’ statement that he is unable to certify “the precise nature of the prediction in the case of the mare” since, as he frankly confesses, he has “not received accurate information on that point,” is a well-known literary strategy to claim credibility for the central point of his story, namely,

the election of Šābuhr as king while still in his mother's womb. Before we now widen our perspective, it is essential to remember that Agathias' story centers around a situation of serious crisis that affected the Sasanian state in general and the legitimation of the new king in particular. Thus, the question is not only whether the story was invented, but also whether it follows certain narrative patterns whose framework and *Sitz im Leben* form part of a genuine strategy that is rooted in ancient Near Eastern history and thus in deeper history. That this is indeed the case we shall strive to demonstrate in what follows.

In a famous sample of oaths, generally referred to as the "Succession Treaties of Esarhaddon," imposed on the imperial vassals and magnates in March–April 672 BCE, the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) regulated the future of his empire.¹³ Whereas his younger son Ashurbanipal was designated king of Assyria, his older son Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was installed as king of Babylonia. With Esarhaddon's death in 669 BCE, the two brothers took their offices.¹⁴ However, the intended harmony was soon blurred since the relationship between the siblings appears not to have been definitely fixed although the queen mother Zakitu had imposed an oath of loyalty to his brother on Šamaš-šuma-ukīn.¹⁵ This *de facto* had put him in the position of a vassal king.¹⁶ Against this backdrop, the period leading to the outbreak of civil war in 652 BCE can be defined as a time of smoldering crisis, when both brothers were eager to demonstrate their legitimate rule.¹⁷ It is during this time that the initial lines of a Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual inscription of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn (668–648 BCE), preserved on a clay cylinder from Sippar and reportedly "damaged by enemy disturbances,"¹⁸ provide detailed information on how the Babylonian staged his legitimacy:

RIMB 2, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, B.6.33.1, 1–8:¹⁹

(1–5) Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, mighty king, king of the Amnānu, king of Babylon, capable (and) judicious, shepherd, favourite of the gods Enlil, Šamaš, and Marduk, king of the land of Sumer and Akkad, I – (6–8) in the womb of (my) mother who bore me (lit. "in the place of creating of the mother who bore me"), the queen of the gods, the goddess Erua, gladly appointed me to be lord of the people.

Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is introduced as king of the Amnānu and king of Babylon, as well as king of the land of Sumer and Akkad, and he is legitimized by prominent Babylonian gods (Enlil, Šamaš, and Marduk).²⁰ However, a specific and exceptional form of legitimization follows in lines 6–8. Erua – another name for Zarpanītu, the consort of Marduk – is said to have "appointed" (ḫé-en-še₂₁-a; *tambi*) Šamaš-šuma-ukīn for exercising "lordship of the people" (nam-en-na lu-lu; *enūt nišī*) already "in the place of creating of the mother, the one who gave birth to me" (ki ulutim ama ugu-ḡu₁₀; *ašar nabnīt ummi ālittīya*). Although the latter expression is somewhat awkward,²¹ it clearly refers to the mother's womb.²² The passage, like the inscription itself, is replete with archaic and uncommon wording in genuine Babylonian style.²³ But, it is the parallel with similar phrasing and claims in the inscriptions of Ashurbanipal (see below) that leaves no doubt about its interpretation. Grant Frame's translation already prepared the ground for this comprehension of the passage, but he was too optimistic when he noted that "the motif of an individual being chosen by a deity to be a ruler while still in his mother's womb is well attested in ancient Mesopotamia."²⁴ As Ulrike Bock's detailed analysis of this motif has shown, the idea of being designated in one's mother's womb for a specific reason, namely, to become ruler of the land, is relatively rare in ancient Mesopotamia.²⁵ It is actually only attested for Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, his brother Ashurbanipal, and Rīm-Sîn of Larsa in the second millennium (nineteenth/eighteenth century BCE). However, Rīm-Sîn's case probably belongs to another group of motifs, in which the designation in the womb is not directly connected to kingship.²⁶ Thus, the motif of divine calling for a specific purpose is a peculiar phenomenon for the period of crisis and tension between the two brothers Šamaš-šuma-ukīn and Ashurbanipal. Apparently, it draws on legitimization models from ancient Mesopotamian tradition, specifically the motif of "designation in one's mother's womb" and increases them by directly adding the nomination for kingship. As already mentioned, the same motif is attested in three inscriptions of Ashurbanipal. All three texts were composed after the civil war in the mid to late 640s BCE, but they draw on older material and earlier text editions:

RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 9, i 1–5:²⁷

(i 1–5) I, Ashurbanipal, the creation of (the god) Aššur and the goddess Mullissu, the senior son of the king of the House of Succession, the one whom the god Sîn nominated in distant days, while (he was) in the womb of his mother, for shepherding Assyria and (the one for whom) the gods Šamaš (and) Adad declared the exercising of its kingship through their firm decision(s)

RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 11, i 1–7:²⁸

(i 1–7) I, Ashurbanipal, the creation of (the god) Aššur and the goddess Mullissu, the senior son of the king of the House of Succession, the one whom (the god) Aššur and the god Sîn – the lord of the (lunar) crown – nominated in distant days to be king (i 5) and created in the womb of his mother for shepherding Assyria, (and the one for whom) the deities Šamaš, Adad, and Ištar declared my exercising the kingship through their firm decision(s)

RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 13, i 1–25:²⁹

(i 1–14) I, Ashurbanipal, great king, [strong king], king of the world, king of Assyria, king of [the four quarters (of the world)], creation of the hands of (the god) Aššur (and) the goddess Mullissu; one who was chose[n by the gods Sîn, Šamaš, (and) Adad]; beloved of the god Marduk (and) the goddess Zarpanītu; (i–5) favorite of the god Nabû (and) [the goddess Tašmēt[u]; pious prince, [ca]pable govern[or], true shepherd, leade[r of a] widespre[ad population], one who prays piously [without ceas]ing; who (i 10) extols for [everlas]ting days the praise(s) of the gods Aššur, Mull[issu, Bēl (Marduk)], (and) Nabû; son of Esarhaddon, ki[ng of the world, king of Assyria]; (grand)son of Sennacherib, kin[g of the world, king of As]syria; descendant of Sargon (II), ki[ng of the world, king of Assyria], governor of Babylon, king of [the land of Sumer and] Akkad, (i 15–25) provider of cult centers, one who c[ompletes shrine]s, one who (re)confirms inter[rup]ted *sattukku*- (and) *nindabû*-offerings [...], one who reveres the deities Aššur, Mullissu, [Sîn, Šamaš, Adad, Mar]duk, Zarpanītu, Nabû, Tašmē[tu, Ištar of Nineveh], Ištar of Bīt-Kidmuri, [Ištar of Arb]ela, (i 20) Ninurta, Nergal, (and) Nusku; who constantly followed them from [his] ch[ild]hood until *he became an adult* and who continu[ally] re[vered] their [di]vinity. [I] cons[tantly] knelt do[wn] at their feet in supplication and prayer. While (I was still) in the womb of my mother, the great gods [nominated] me to [be king]; they spread their

benevolent protection over [me; ...] th[ey] r[equired] my [priestly servic]es.

In all three cases, Ashurbanipal (668–631 BCE) is designated and nominated as king while still in his mother's womb. In RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 9, it is the moon god Sîn who nominates (*izkaru*š) the unborn Ashurbanipal for the office of shepherdship over Assyria (*rē'ūt māt Aššur*; line i 4) already in his mother's womb (*ina libbi ummīšu*; i 4). In RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 11, Sîn is joined by the god Aššur. Together, they nominate (*nibīt šumīšu izkurū*; i 4) and create (*ibnūšu*; i 5) Ashurbanipal in his mother's womb (*ina libbi ummīšu*; i 5) for the purpose of exercising kingship (*šarrūtu*) and shepherdship over Assyria (*rē'ūt māt Aššur*, i 5). In RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 13, the relevant passage (i 23) is somewhat damaged. However, the phrasing of the unborn's nomination appears to match that found in the case of Šamaš-šum-ukīn (*[ibbū]jinni*) whereas the agents are described simply as “the great gods” (*ilāni rabūti*). They did so “in my mother's womb” (*ina libbi ummīya*) for a certain reason (*ana [šarrūti]*).

One may consider whether the nomination of an unborn child for kingship is due to Egyptian influence on Assyrian and Babylonian royal ideology. This would perfectly fit the historical context, since both Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal successfully campaigned against Egypt and temporarily incorporated the Nile Valley into the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Egyptian influence has also been suggested in other cases,³⁰ and there was a considerable Egyptian community in Mesopotamia, as well as Assyrian presence in Egypt.³¹ But in this special case, the Egyptian impact may have served as a *stimulus* at best. It is true that the nomination of the unborn heir apparent for kingship was an integral part of ancient Egyptian royal ideology, at least since the New Kingdom. But this nomination is generally expressed in a way that does not play a crucial role on the mother's womb. Instead, Egyptian texts assign a prominent role to the god Amun, thus highlighting the divine father's role in the king's conception and legitimacy. When the divine father is not foregrounded, an abstract concept such as the divine “egg” (or “nest”) as the place of the unborn is introduced,³² as the example of the triumphal stele of Pi(anch)ye demonstrates:

“I am born from the womb, grown in the divine egg. God's seed is with me.”³³

At least in Egyptian texts, the womb remains also a somehow abstract concept since it is not further specified. This is demonstrated by two examples from the time of the New Kingdom:

Thutmosis III (Pillar in the temple of Wadi Halfa, Urk IV, 807):

“He (Amun) bestowed upon him his heritage (already) in the womb, because he knew that he (the king) would take care of him.”³⁴

Amenophis II (Sphinx stele, Urk. IV, 1278):

“Grown out of the womb he (already) wears the White Crown. He has conquered the world when he was still in the egg.”³⁵

This only changes with texts from ancient Kush when the abstract womb becomes the “mother’s womb” and thus more specified.³⁶ A very early example is stele SNM 1851 from Jebel Barkal. Since the name of the king has been erased the monument can only roughly be dated to the Third Intermediate Period.

SNM 1851 § 2.³⁷

“I said about you (when you were still) in the womb of your mother: You will be lord of Egypt. I recognized you (already) as son, when you were (still) in the egg: You will be lord of what I have created.”

A similar example is attested on a stele of Pi(anch)ye, where an inscription appears in the gabled triangle at the top:³⁸

“I said about you (when you were still) in the womb of your mother: You will be lord of Egypt. I recognized you (already) in the seed, when you were (still) in the egg: You will be lord.”

All these examples share the “recognition/choice” of the presumptive pharaoh by Amun already in the “mother’s womb.” Thereby, the unborn becomes the son of a god.³⁹ This is very similar to the “nomination” of the unborn in Mesopotamian texts, although in those cases, other gods take over this task. We also face this recognition in combination with a specific purpose, namely, becoming lord of Egypt. But, this is also enhanced by specific Egyptian elements,

particularly the prominent role of the divine egg. As far as Šamaš-šuma-ukīn and Ashurbanipal are concerned, the idea of nomination and installation as future kings while still in the womb may well have been inspired by ancient Egyptian conceptions. Yet it was realized within the framework of a specifically Mesopotamian language of power. This distinction is important since our next example also originates from Egypt but appears to have been driven by Mesopotamian ideas and conceptions.

An exceptional source of Darius I’s (521–486 BCE) self-presentation as a legitimate king is the so-called canal steles from Egypt. They can be divided into two groups. Whereas the trilingual Kabrit and Kubri (or Suez) steles appear to represent nearly the same text, the hieroglyphic Maskhuta stele exhibits a different tradition, with different phrasing and wording.⁴⁰ All monuments are related to Darius’ ambitious and successful project of interlinking the River Nile with the Red Sea by means of a gigantic infrastructural undertaking that combined artificial canals and natural lakes, thereby creating a connection between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.⁴¹ Unfortunately, all texts are badly damaged and contain many lacunae. The Maskhuta stele has parallels with the hieroglyphic text of the famous statue of Darius from Susa, although both texts are far from being duplicates.⁴² Apparently, on the Maskhuta stele, Darius is presented as the son of the goddess Neith, whereas the Darius statue introduces him as the offspring of the god Atum.⁴³ In any case, it is the special relationship between Darius and his “mother” Neith that deserves our special interest here. It is the topic immediately at the beginning of the Maskhuta stele:⁴⁴

[... King (Darius) ...], born of Neith, mistress of Sais, image of Re, who has placed him on his throne in order to complete what he has begun here below.

[... master] of all that the sun’s disc encircles. While he was still in the womb (of his mother) and had not come forth on earth, she (Neith) knew him to be her son and ordered him [...]

¹[nṯr nfr ...n] mšī.n Nī.t nb(.t) š:w twt n(.i) R^c rdi.t.nṣf ḥr nš(.t)ṣf r smnḥ.t š:ṣ.nṣf

²[... nb] n(.i) šnī(.w) nb n itn iwṣf m ḥ.t n prī.nṣf tp.ī t: rḥ.nṣ n.tt s:ṣ pw wd{.t}ṣ nṣf [...] ⁴⁵

Due to its fragmentary character, the passage leaves room for some interpretation. This becomes especially clear when we focus on the way David Klotz analyzed the two lines, i.e., by combining them with another passage only attested on the Susa statue.⁴⁶ It remains open for discussion whether the phrasing “[master] of all that the sun’s disc describes” refers to universal rulership⁴⁷ or is just an epithet describing the sun disc.⁴⁸ It is also unclear whether this line is directly related to the subsequent specification of the unborn king. Be that as it may, it is rather plain that the unborn Darius is not only acknowledged and thus nominated by his mother when still in her womb; he is also made future king for a certain reason and according to orders that are related to his future obligations as pharaoh. The passage is part of Egyptian tradition since it only mentions the unspecified “womb.” But it also lacks Egyptian traits such as the divine egg, and Amun plays no role at all in this context. In other respects, however, the passage is related to the motif that we have already observed with Šamaš-šuma-ukīn and Ashurbanipal, although the differences are also striking. For it is only here that the mother receives exceptional agency. It is not her “passive” womb as the setting of decisive events that matters; rather, she is the active figure who takes care of the nomination and is responsible for assigning tasks to the future king. Apparently, the Maskhuta text is especially interested in fostering Darius’s legitimacy for which there was an obvious need.⁴⁹ Darius was not only an usurper in a Persian context, but also in a pharaonic Egyptian one.⁵⁰ Against this backdrop, he created a new model of a legitimate Egyptian pharaoh by applying a special strategy that combined ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian traditional concepts in a unique way.

Let us now return to Agathias’ description of how Šābuhr was nominated king. With the Near Eastern examples in mind, we gain a much more nuanced view of the strategy employed to boost the *šāhān šāh*’s legitimacy. We can safely assume that the coronation event is an invention *post festum*. It is an artificial construction, like the nominations of Darius, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, and Ashurbanipal. What we are seeing are master narratives that convey royal ideology rather than historical fact. It should also be clear that the Agathian narrative was not invented from scratch, but drew on motifs and components deeply rooted in ancient

Near Eastern history. This, in itself, is not new. Recent research has demonstrated on many levels the vibrancy of ancient Near Eastern traditions throughout Sasanian times. This is especially true for conceptions of kingship, royal performance, and rituals.⁵¹

The historical setting for the motif under discussion is a period of crisis, when legitimacy and royal succession were seriously challenged. Such a situation demanded an adequate and vibrant response. This applies to all the cases we have discussed: those of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, Ashurbanipal, Darius I, and Šābuhr II. From a comparative point of view, the case of Šābuhr II is the most difficult to analyze as it is the only one for which we do not have a contemporary and native testimony of this kind of response, but only a later report from outside Iran that merely *reflects* the story and its patterns. As we have seen, there is also an Agathian footprint in the story, as classical historiography left its marks. But beyond this specific “twist,” there is still enough substance in the narrative to recognize the constitutive elements of an “ancient” story pattern. This is also true for other parts of Agathias’ excursus on Sasanian kings and their deeds (Agathias, *Histories* 4.24–29).⁵²

In Late Antiquity, there must still have been a certain awareness of this pattern, at least enough that the circles at court who assigned it to Šābuhr II and disseminated it in the empire could be confident that it would meet a certain degree of credibility. Even Agathias appears to have been convinced that its general outline was based upon “truth.” But the master narrative around Šābuhr also has its own special traits, and these characteristics reveal interesting details about the specific historical circumstances, as well as the peculiarities of the inventors of the story. These inventors had access to historical tradition and were closely connected to the court and to kingship. The story of Šābuhr II is the only one, in comparison with its predecessors, in which human agency is highlighted and divine agency is almost entirely absent. No god or goddess is mentioned. Instead, it is the nobles at court who are said to have been entirely responsible for what transpired. Only with the magi a hidden divine element is added as a kind of appendix that does not really matter. The role of the mother is also reduced to that of a passive auxiliary, an altogether insignificant presence.

It is the nobles at court who are the central players in the story, and this is entirely different from what we have seen in the cases of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, Ashurbanipal, and Darius I. These nobles are presented as a collective, without any prominent individual figure, but their joint action well corresponds to what we know from the constitutive role of aristocratic councils in elevating a candidate to the Sasanian throne.⁵³ It is true that we are unaware of the details of agreements that must have been made in 309 CE.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, we may discern traces of them from the inscription ŠPs-I, set in Šābuhr's second year in Persepolis, when the *šāhān šāh* was a two-year-old toddler (311 CE).⁵⁵ The inscription was set by an adult (half-)brother of Šābuhr II, also named Šābuhr, who is introduced as “Sagānšāh, (ruler of) India, Sagestān (Sīstān), and Tūrān up to the coast of the sea.”⁵⁶ He was en route from Staxr to his eastern territories when he paused at Persepolis (called *Sadstōn* “[Hall of a] Hundred Columns”) – an old and renowned place of legitimate kingship – in order to feast with his retinue, a group of distinguished magnates, all of whom are mentioned by name and title.⁵⁷ Some of them may well have been among the agents behind the extraordinary and homogeneously acclaimed measures of 309 CE. The inscription, its placement at the southern entrance of the Tačara in Persepolis, the collective feasting of some of the leading magnates in the retinue of the *Sagānšāh*, both honoring ancestors who were responsible for building the visible vestiges of past grandeur, and paying homage to the newly crowned, infant *šāhān šāh*, all show an awareness of the crisis that was just overcome. What is more, one may argue the need was felt to enhance the ideological foundations of the still fragile kingship by showing in simultaneity the narrative of royal continuity (from the unnamed rulers of the past called merely “those who build this house [i.e., *Sadstōn*]” to the infant, Šābuhr II, who is explicitly praised). All of this is also reflected in Agathias' story, but shrouded in elements of an established narrative tradition.

Thus, what we have is an ancient story pattern, “updated” and presented in a “modern” guise, tailored to the specific imperial needs at the heart of the Sasanian Empire in the early fourth century CE. As we have seen, the first years of the fourth century were marked by a profound crisis, and, as Henning Börm has ably demonstrated, this crisis was overcome only through the collective

endeavors of the Sasanian nobility. Against this backdrop, the master narrative is as much linked to the past as it is bound to the circumstances of the time of its revitalization and adaptation.

Notes

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1. Mosig-Walburg 2009: 91–155. Weber 2012; Weber 2024.

2. Shayegan 2020; Shayegan 2012; Weber 2024.

3. Schindel 2013: 816.

4. For Agathias, see Cameron 1969/1970; Bleckmann 2021: 39–46.

5. ἀλλὰ Σαβὼρ μετὰ τούτους ἐπὶ πλείστον ὅσον καὶ μήκιστον χρόνον ἀπόνειο τῆς βασιλείας, τοσούτοις ἔτεσι κρατήσας, ὅποιοι καὶ διεβίω. ἔτι γὰρ αὐτὸν κυούσης τῆς μητρὸς, ἡ μὲν τοῦ βασιλείου γένους διαδοχὴ ἐκάλει πρὸς τὴν ἀρχὴν τὸ τεχθῆσόμενον. ἦν δὲ τὰ τῶν ὠδίνων ἀμφίβοла ἐς ὅποιαν γονὴν ἀν' ἀποβαίειν. τοιγάρτοι ἅπαντες οἱ ἐν τέλει ἄθλα προὔτιθεσαν. καὶ γέρα τοῖς μάγοις ἐπὶ τῇ προαγορεύσει τῶν ἐσομένων' καὶ τοῖνυν ἦγον ἐς μέσον κύουσιν ἵππον, καὶ ὡς πλησιαίτατα προελθοῦσαν τοῦ τόκου, ἐκέλευόν τε αὐτοὺς ἐπ' αὐτῇ πρώτῃ μαντεύεσθαι, ἅπερ ὄντο ξυνεχθῆναι. οὕτω γὰρ ὀλίγαις ὕστερον ἡμέραις γνώσεσθαι ἡγοῦντο τὴν πρόρρησιν ἐς ὃ, τι χωρήσει, ταύτῃ τε εἰκάζειν παραπλησίως ἐκβήσεσθαι καὶ ὅποσα σφίσι ἐπὶ τῇ ἀνθρώπῳ προαγορευθεῖη. ἃ μὲν οὖν αὐτοῖς ἐπὶ τῇ ἵππῳ μεμάντευται, οὐκ ἔχω σαφῶς ἀποφύνασθαι· οὐ γάρ μοι τὸ ἀκριβὲς τούτου γε περὶ ἀπήγγελλται· πλὴν ἀλλ' οὕτω ἕκαστα προὔβη, ὅπως ἐκείνοις ἐτύγχανεν εἰρημέναι. γνόντες δὲ ἐνθένδε οἱ ἄλλοι, ὡς ἄγαν τοῖς μάγοις διηκρίβωτο τὰ τῆς τέχνης, προὔτρεπον καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ γυνάμει, ἅττα ἔσεσθαι γνοῖεν, διεξιμέναι. τῶν δὲ φησάντων ἄρρενα παῖδα τεχθήσεσθαι, οὐκ ἔτι ἐμέλλησαν, ἀλλὰ τῇ γαστρί περιθέντες τὴν κίδαριν, ἀνείπον βασιλέα τὸ ἔμβρυον· ὀνόματί τε ἀπέκριναν τὸ ἄρτι ἐκτυπωθὲν καὶ διοργανομένον, ἐς ὅσον, οἶμαι, διάττειν ἔνδον ἡρέμα καὶ ὑποπάλλεσθαι. οὕτω δὲ τὸ ἀφανὲς τῇ φύσει καὶ ἄδηλον ἐς τὸ βέβαιόν τε καὶ ἀνωμολογημένον τῇ δοκῇ μεταλαβόντες, ὅμως οὐ διήμαρτον τῆς ἐλπίδος, ἀλλὰ καὶ λίαν ἔτυχον τοῦ σκοποῦ, πολλὰ πλέον τῶν δοκηθέντων. τίκεται γὰρ οὐκ ἐς

μακρὰν ὁ Σαβώρης σὺν τῇ βασιλείᾳ, ἐννεάζει τε αὐτῇ καὶ ἑγγηράσκει, εἰς ἑβδομήκοντα αὐτῷ ἔτη διανυσθέντος τοῦ βίου.

6. Börm 2024.
7. See the discussion below.
8. Börm 2024: "... either actually still unborn or – more plausibly – only a few weeks old."
9. Börm 2024: 34 n. 70. Seeck 1920: 2334.
10. Indeed, as later Sasanian history shows, especially in times of crisis, even females could become "king." Wiesehöfer 2021.
11. Rollinger 2018.
12. Rollinger 2018.
13. Fales 2012; Lauinger 2012; Lauinger 2013.
14. For a general overview on the history of this period, see Brinkman 1984: 85–104; Frame 2007; cf. also Beaulieu 2018: 211–17.
15. SAA 2, No. 8 (Parpola and Watanabe 1988: 62–64).
16. The situation is perfectly described by Frame 1995: 248: "The exact relationship between the two brothers is unclear, but Šamaš-šuma-ukīn seems in effect to have been a vassal of the Assyrian king, though an especially favoured vassal."
17. Cf. Zaia 2019 who shows Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's eagerness to perfectly act as a "Babylonian" king.
18. Frame 1995: 249.
19. The first line of each verse is Sumerian, the second Akkadian. Text and translation by Frame are also reproduced at <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ribo/babylon6/withlem>.
20. For the archaic title "king of the Amnānu," see Zaia 2019: 254.
21. Frame 1995: 250 n. 6.
22. Bock 2012: 24f.
23. Zaia 2019.
24. Frame 1995: 250 n. 6.
25. Bock 2012: 24–26: "Motiv i/B/β: GN beruft PN im Mutterleib zu einem bestimmten Zweck."
26. Bock 2012: 22–24: "Motiv i/B/α: GN beruft PN im Mutterleib ohne Erwähnung eines besonderen Zwecks." This motif is deeply embedded within Mesopotamia's tradition and very well documented by Bock. For Rīm-Sin's text (prayer 'E'), see Bock 2012, 319 (text "B.I.1.20"), and ETCSL transliteration: c.2.6.9.5 (lines 3–4): The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (<https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>), with the translation: "whom you summoned from the holy womb ... has been elevated to lordship over the Land."
27. The text is traditionally referred to as "Prism F." It "reworked the contents of all earlier reports of the military campaigns" and is "dated to the post canonical eponymy of Nabû-šar-aḫḫēšu, governor of Samaria

(probably 645)," Novotny and Jeffers 2018: 179–82. For text and translation, see also <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/riao/pager>.

28. Generally referred to as "Prism A" or "Rassam Prism." It "made full use of the contents of earlier inscriptions" and "could have been written on clay prisms during either 644, 643, or 642," Novotny and Jeffers 2018: 222.

29. Often referred to as "Prism J"; "it was likely written on prisms no earlier than Ashurbanipal's thirty-first regnal year (638)," Novotny and Jeffers 2018: 271f.

30. Kaelin 1999.

31. Huber 2006; Karlsson 2022.

32. Lohwasser 2000: 96 with references. The idea of the "divine egg" (*swḫ.t ntr*) is attested since the 18th dynasty (Blöbaum 2006: 185).

33. Pi(anch)ye, Triumphal stele, lines 1–2. See Blöbaum 2006: 185, n 3., and Lohwasser 2000, 95 with slightly different translations of the passage.

34. Lohwasser 2000: 96.

35. Lohwasser 2000: 96.

36. Lohwasser 2000: 96.

37. Lohwasser and Sörgel 2020: 18 (transliteration and translation), 161 (commentary).

38. Lohwasser 2000: 95: "Piye, Stele, 3. Jh., Giebel-feld, Z. 1-6."

39. Cf. Lohwasser 2000: 94f. with further examples (Senkamaniskēn, Anlamani, Irikeamanote).

40. Wasmuth 2017: 125–35. Mahlich 2020: 25–37. For the Serapeum stele(s), cf. Wasmuth 2017: 133f.

41. See also Klotz 2015.

42. Mahlich 2020: 55.

43. Mahlich 2020: 143.

44. For text and translation see Wasmuth 2017: 144; Mahlich 2020: 136. Cf. also Blöbaum 2006: 190, n. 39.

45. Transliteration after Mahlich 2020: 135.

46. Klotz 2015: 280: "[The good god, who delights in Maat,] / [chosen by Neith, Lady of Sais] / [to be lord] of the whole circuit of the sun, / While he was still in the womb, / And had not come forth on earth." For a translation of the inscriptions on the Susa statue, see Kuhrt 2007 478f. Cf. also Wasmuth 2017: 100–24; Mahlich 2020: 66–74, 139–41.

47. So Wasmuth 2017: 144: "[...] von allem, was die Sonne umkreist."

48. So Mahlich 2020: 136, n 373: "[... Herr] des gesamten Umkreises der Sonne."

49. Wasmuth 2017: 144. Cf. also Blöbaum 2006: 176 who highlights that there are only two examples in Egyptian history attested where the concept of being the son of god is part of the pharaoh's official name: Amasis and Darius I.

50. Rollinger 1998; Rollinger and Degen 2021a.

51. Rollinger 2012: 732–37; Shayegan 2012; Rollinger and Wieseheöfer 2022; Rollinger and Wieseheöfer 2023.

52. This important aspect deserves further investigation, which, hopefully, will be undertaken elsewhere. Here, we highlight just two examples that may illustrate the case. A) In chapter 24, Agathias describes the campaigns of Šābuhr I in a way that could have directly emerged from a Neo-Assyrian royal inscription: “The carnage was so terrible that he (Šābuhr I) actually filled in the mountain gorges and ravines with the corpses of the slain and levelled the sloping summits of the hills and rode over them, crossing mountain ridges as though they were level plains.” Compare this, e.g., with how Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) staged one of his campaigns into the Zagros region in 884/3 BCE: “For three days the hero explored the mountain. His bold heart yearned for battle. He ascended on foot (and) overwhelmed the mountain. He smashed their nest (and) scattered their flock. I felled 200 of their fighting-men with the sword (and) carried off a multitude of captives like a flock of sheep. With their blood I dyed the mountain red like red wool, (and) the rest of them the ravines (and) torrents of the mountain swallowed” (RIMA 2, A.O.101.1, i 50b-53 = ‘Ashurnasirpal II 001’ on <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/riao/pager>). See also Rollinger 2014. B). In chapter 29, Agathias presents a rare example in classical historiography for staging the Achaemenid king Xerxes in a positive way as a hero of the past. He does so by referring to two of Xerxes’ feats: “... the famous Xerxes who opened up the seas to cavalry and the mountains to shipping.” In contrast to the outside, Hellenocentric perspective of classical historiography, Agathias interprets the bridging of the Bosphorus and the erection of the Athos canal not as examples of “oriental” hubris but as major achievements in mastering nature. This is exactly how Xerxes and his Persian entourage may have perceived these activities, revealing an “eastern” perspective on history and tradition. There are further examples that show the quality of Agathias’ excursus in offering a Persian inner perspective and good knowledge of contemporary practices. Again, in chapter 24, Agathias notes: “Now since the Segestani were subdued by his father Vahram II it was only natural that the son should be given the title Saghanshah, which is Persian for “king of the Segestani.” This perfectly reflects the title “Sagānšāh” as documented in contemporary Sasanian inscriptions (see below). For larger contexts on Agathias’ knowledge of ancient Near Eastern traditions, see also Huber 2004: 380–87.

53. On succession in Sasanian Iran, see more recently

Shayegan 2023: 241–43: “Altogether, it appears that the designation of the royal successor had to be approved through an acclamation by Persian and Parthian grandees, in order to be effective. The inscription [of Paikuli] suggests that the right to contest an undesired candidate by the nobiliary council was based on procedural precedence from the time of Šāpūr I and encompassed the possibility of contestation by a rival candidate. The non-observance of this procedure could invalidate the king’s accession ... The factors, which seem to matter throughout the Sasanian empire, were certainly (1) the king’s belonging to the royal house of Sasan; (2) his being the elected choice of the leading faction(s) of the nobility; (3) his being of (ethical and religious) rectitude (protector of the Mazdean faith); and (4) possessing the ability to protect the empire of the Iranians, Erānšahr, which we may ascribe to the king’s military prowess. Bodily soundness and the concept of primogeniture might have been at work circumstantially.”

54. Börm (2024: 38) notes: “We do not even know how exactly the Sasanian Empire was governed between 309 and 325.”

55. See Back 1978: 492–94; <https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/sabuhr-sakansah-inscription-persepolis-sps-i/>; and especially Shayegan 2012: 437f. with discussion. There is a slight confusion concerning the placement of the inscription. Back 1978: 518, n. 360 states: “Aus Persepolis und zwar vom südlichen Eingang zum Thronsaal (Hundert-Säulen-Saal) des Darius.” This is misleading, since Darius’ palace, the so-called Tačara, is not identical with the “Hundert-Säulen-Saal” (*Hall of a Hundred Columns*). Shayegan 2012: 437, clarifies that the inscription was: “on the north wall of the portico of Dareios’ Tačara palace at Persepolis.” The website (<https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/sabuhr-sakansah-inscription-persepolis-sps-i/>) does not give any information about the text placement. According to Erich Schmidt, the inscription is carved “on the southern face of the east jamb of the doorway which links the portico with the main hall” of Darius’ Tačara (Schmidt 1953: 223, n. 11). See also Schmidt 1953: 217, fig. 90, 219, fig. 92, and plate 157, where he notes “on the southern doorway of the main hall” (of the Tačara).

56. The phrasing “up to the coast of the sea” (*tā drayā danb*) may imply the notion of a rule reaching as far as the eastern borders of the world. This ancient Near Eastern concept was connected by the Achaemenids with India but also with regions to the east of the Caspian Sea bordering the Sakā (Scythians); see Rollinger and Degen 2021b; 2021c.

57. The text localizes the event at Sadstōn “[Hall of a] Hundred Columns,” which may refer either to the Apadāna or to the place terrace in general. As Shayegan 2012: 438 highlights, “the name of Persepolis (*Parsā*) appears to have been unknown to the Sasanians.”

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Abbreviations

RIMA: The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Assyrian periods (2 = Grayson A. K. 1991).
RIMB: The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Babylonian Periods (2 = Frame 1995).
RINAP: The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period (5/10 Novotny and Jeffers 2018).
SAA: State Archives of Assyria (2 = Parpola and Watanabe 1988).

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Rethinking the Achaemenid World Order: Space, Religion, and Communicative Strategies*

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Introduction

The present essay explores a number of conceptions and policies, generally associated with the rule of Darius I (522–486 BCE), which *mutatis mutandis* defined the Achaemenid Empire's constitution until its fall. These pertain to (1) the empire's boundaries, both real and imagined, as well as the perception of the "other"; (2) the regulation of the empire's religious landscape, which allowed for the individuation of religious practices within a regimented and ordered universe; and (3) communicative strategies that facilitated the royal discourse's espousal of the intellectual perceptions/predispositions of local audiences.

The Boundaries of Empire

The mental maps of the Achaemenid Empire have been discussed recently by a number of scholars, among them Anca Dan,¹ Pierre Briant,² Robert Rollinger and Julian Degen,³ Hilmar Klinkott,⁴ and John Hyland.⁵ Rollinger's contributions in particular have shown the extent to which the Achaemenids were tributary to Mesopotamian *Vorlagen*, and, like their predecessors, marked bodies of water on the fringes of the empire as the *limes* of their world, in this superimposing intellectual conception of space on the topographical reality of their polities. There is much merit in this approach, but once again *both* Old Iranian and Mesopotamian traditions must come to bear to form a more complete and capacious vision of the Achaemenid political space.

Following the rise and expansion of the Persian

Empire under Cyrus and Cambyses, the territorial additions of Darius I seem in contrast modest and wanting, although they would profoundly define the topographical shape of the empire for centuries to come by establishing the empire's water-bound extremities as its borders. Upon the consolidation of Darius' rule, we are informed of a number of imperial campaigns in the four corners of the realm. The first one was undertaken in the third year of the king's rule, thus, in the years 520/519 BCE, in the immediate aftermath of Darius' successful defeat of the "liar-kings," and was led against one of many Iranian tribes of the northern steppes identified as Sakā, of which the Achaemenid inscriptions knew a variety. This campaign was directed against the *Sakā tigraxaudā*, "the Sakā with the pointed hat," most likely on the eastern frontiers of the empire. The second campaign took Darius to Egypt probably in 519/518 BCE, a year after the expedition against the *Sakā tigraxaudā*. The Bisotun inscription (DB) mentions an Egyptian rebellion while Darius I was fighting insurgencies during his first year, upon his reconquest of Babylonia in December 522 BCE (DB 2.5–8). What is more, Egyptian documents show that beginning in April 521 BCE, part of Egypt recognized another leader as Pharaoh, namely, an indigenous prince by the name of Petubastis (IV), which could indicate that Achaemenid rule in Egypt was contested in 521 by a local rebellion against Persian domination.⁶ Petubastis IV's rule must have lasted until the campaign in 519/518 of Darius, whose reign in Egypt is again attested on an inscription on the occasion of the demise of the Apis Bull in August 518 BCE in Memphis and its burial in November 518 BCE (a third document attests to Darius'

rule also in Thebes in February 517 BCE).⁷ It was most likely during this campaign that Darius also erected a number of stelae celebrating the establishment of the “Suez Canal,” which, as we shall see, report on how the king “seized Egypt from Persia,” and ordered a canal to be dug to permit ships to sail from the Nile all the way to the Persian Gulf (*abiy draya taya hacā Pārsā aitiy*, “towards the sea that goes [flows away] from [the shores of] Persia”).⁸ The third campaign of Darius would take him in 513 BCE to the Danubian and Cimmerian regions, against the western Sakā (who most likely were called later in Achaemenid inscriptions the *Sakā tayaiy paraḍraya*, “Sakā who are beyond the sea”).⁹

On all these campaigns, it appears that the boundaries of the realm were “rounded off” to attain the natural, water-bound frontiers of the “ordered” world, whose perimeters could have been inspired by the projection of a mytho-epic space, referred to as a continent/clime (*karšuuar-/n-; kišwar*) in the Avesta and later Middle Iranian cosmological texts, and typically presented as the locus of the Iranian (Aryan) abode/expanse (*airiio.šaiiana-/airiiana- vaējah-*).¹⁰ But before assessing whether the mytho-epic geography of the Avesta, as elaborated by Sasanian Zoroastrian cosmogony, may be drawn upon to elucidate Achaemenid conceptions of the imperial space, we shall succinctly outline its principal tenets.

In the Avesta, and subsequent Late Antique Zoroastrian traditions, we often encounter the concept of the “seven-partite earth” (*haptō. karšuuairi- zam-*), or that of the “seven climes or continents” (*hapta- karšuuān-*). A case in point being the Yasna 57, where Sraoša, the obstruction-smashing *yazata*, is mentioned as the first sacrificer to Ahuramazdā and the *aməša- spənta-* (the Life-giving Immortals), the one who facilitates the Immortals’ coming down to the “seven-partite earth”:¹¹

sraošəm ašīm huraodəm
vəṛəθrājanəm ... yazamaide
yejhe amaca vərəθraynaca
haozqθpaca vaēdiiāca
auuāin aməša spənta
aoi haptō.karšuuairim zqm

We sacrifice to Orderly Sraoša of the Rewards,
the obstruction-smashing ...

on account of whose force and obstruction-smashing
strength,
good lineage and knowledge,
the Life-giving Immortals came down
to the seven-partite earth.

Yasna 57.23

In a number of passages of the Avestan hymn *Zamyād Yašt*, celebrating the royal fortune and glory, the archetypal, mytho-epic king, Haošiiarha Paraḍāta, is mentioned to have ruled over the “sevenfold earth” (*būmī- haptaiθiiā-*), over both demons and men, sorcerers and witches, potentates and poetasters:¹²

yaṭ uparhacaṭ
haošiiarhəm paraḍātəm
darəyəmcit aipi zruuānəm
yaṭ xšaiiata paiti būmīm haptaiθiiqm
daēuuānqm mašiiānqmca
yāθβqm pairikanqmca
sāθrqm kaoiiqm karafnqmca
yō janaṭ duua θrišuuā
māzainiianqm daēuuānqm
varəniianqmca druuatqm
ahe raiaa ...

(the Kauuian fortune) which followed
Haošiiarha Paraḍāta
for a long time thereafter,
so that he ruled on the sevenfold earth
over daēuuas and men,
sorcerers and witches,
potentates, poetasters, and mumblers;
he who smashed two-thirds
of the Giant daēuuas
and the Lieful ones who made a choice.
On account of his wealth ...

Yašt19.26

What is more, in the selfsame *Zamyād Yašt*, we find the “seven climes/continents” (*hapta- karšuuar-/n-*) also in conjunction with the villain Turanian Fraṇrasiian who was combing the countryside in quest of Zarathustra’s glory (*x’varənah-*):¹³

yejhe taṭ x’arəno isat
mairiio tūiriio fraṇrase
vīspāiš auui karšuuān yāiš hapta

*pairi yāiš hapta karšuuqn
mairiō apataṭ fraṇrase
isō xʼarənō zaraθuštrāi*

Whose was that Fortune,
which the Tur(an)ian villain Fraṇrasiian sought
across all the seven climes,
over the seven climes, wherein
the villain Fraṇrasiian ran about
seeking the Fortune of Zarathustra.

Yašt 19.82

The names of the continents constituting the *haptō.karšuuairi- zam-* “the seven-partite earth” (Y.57.23; V.19.13) are well attested in several passages of the Avesta, among others in two lists of the *Mihr Yašt* (Yt.10.133) and the *Viḍēvdād* (V.19.39), where the seven climes are named thus: Arəzahi; Sauuahi; Fradaḍafšu; Viḍaḍafšu; Vourubarəšti; Vourujarəšti; and Xʼaniraθa. From among these, one in particular, the luminous continent of Xʼaniraθa (*karšuuar- yaṭ xʼaniraθa-bāmiia-*)¹⁴ – called Xwanīrah in Middle Persian garb – is described in later Middle Persian anthologies as forming the central continent that is surrounded by the other six, and being in size equivalent to them all put together:

*ān rōz ka Tištar wārān kerd ka-š zrēh az-iš būd hēnd
hamāg gyāg nam bē grift 7 pārag bē būd pārag-ēw
čand nēm-ēw mayān 6 pārag pērāmōn ud ān 6 pārag
čand ī Xwanīrah u-š kišwar nām nihād ud keš bē būd*

On that day, when Tištar created the rain, whence the seas sprung up, all places became wet. Seven parts came to be; one part, which was (in size) as much as one half (of all the parts), was in the middle and the other (six parts) around it, and those six parts were equal to Xwanīrah (in size). They are called climes (*kišwar*), for they were furrows (*kiš*).

Bundahišn 8.2¹⁵

This Xʼaniraθa/Xwanīrah, judging from the extant Avestan material, and the more explicit Middle Iranian cosmogonical texts, is the place where the mythical Mount Harā (*harā- bərəzaiti-*, “the tall Harā”), its high peak, Mount Hukairiia, and Lake Vourukaša (*zraīia- vouru.kaša-*, “the Vourukaša Sea”), whereinto the heavenly waters (coming from Hukairiia) flow, are all located.¹⁶

What is more, Xʼaniraθa/Xwanīrah is bound by two (mythical) rivers, called in the Avesta Raṇhā (named Ārang in Middle Persian texts and placed in the west) and Vaṇhʼi Dāitiā (named Wehrōd and located in the east in Middle Persian texts), which delimit the boundaries of the central clime/continent. Xwanīrah and the other continents are said to be separated from each other by many obstacles, that is, bodies of water, forests, and other barriers, so that only divine guidance (*pad parwānagih ī yazdān*), or miracle/magic (*pad warzāwandih*), would grant passage into other climes:

[8.4] *az kišwar ō kišwar juḍ pad parwānagih ī yazdān
ud warzāwandih tā šudan nē šāyēd* | [8.5] *čiyōn
gōwēd kū mayān ī Arzah ud Sawah ud Xwanīrah zrēh
dārēd čē bahr-ēw az (ān) zrēh ī Frāxkerd pērāmōn bē
‘dāšt/’gāšt az mayān ī Fradadafš (ud Widadafš) wēšag
dārēd mayān ī Worubaršn ud Worujaršn kōf ī buland
bē rust kū tā az kišwar ō kišwar paywand bē bawād
kū tā ēk ō did šudan nē šāyēd*

It is not possible to go from continent to continent, but with the guidance of gods and (the use of) miraculous power/magic. It is thus said that between (the continents) Arzah, Sawah, and Xwanīrah there is a sea, for a portion of it is encompassed by the Frāxkerd (Vouru. kaša) Sea. Between (the continents) Fradadafš and Widadafš there is a forest. Between (the continents) Worubaršn and Worujaršn there high mountains have grown, so that they may be some link between the continents, (but) also that it is not possible to cross from one to the other.

Bundahišn 8.4–5

In short, what is perceived to be the central clime, and associated with the mythical continent of Xʼaniraθa/Xwanīrah, the abode of the Iranians, is in the Zoroastrian geography hermetically closed, and its frontiers are demarcated by two rivers that signal its finitude. These rivers, however, following the later Zoroastrian tradition, run (north to south) crossing the oceans (*pad zrēhihā wid-erēnd*) and eventually flow back into the mythical Vourukaša Sea, having received the waters of other rivers and tributaries during their course around the earth:

[11.1] *gōwēd pad dēn kū ēn 2 rōd az abāxtar nēmag az
Harburz Ōhrmazd frāz tazēnīd ēk ō Xwarwarān šud*

kū Ārang ud ēk ō Xwarāsān šud kū Weh rōd xwānēnd
 [11.2] *az pas ī awēšān 18 rōd az ham bun-xān frāz tazīd*
hēnd ud pad ham Harburz andar zamīg frōd šud hēnd
ud pad Xwanīrah ō paydāgīh mad hēnd čiyōn abārig
āb az awēšān pad was-maragīh frāz tazīd estēnd ...
 [11.4] *awēšān āb hamāg abāz ō ēn 2 rōd gumēzēnd ī*
ast Ārang rōd ud Weh rōd [11.5] *awēšān harw 2 pad*
kanārag ī zamīg gardēnd ud pad zrēhīhā widerēnd ud
hamāg kišwar xwāreṇd az ān zahāfīh/zahābagīhā ud
pas harw 2 pad zrēh ī Frāxkerd ō ham rasēnd ud abāz
ō bun-xān rasēnd (ī) aziš bē tazīd hēnd

[11.1] It is revealed in the (good) religion that these two rivers (God) Ōhrmazd caused to flow forth from the north side of (Mount) Harburz, one towards the West, which they call Ārang, and another that goes towards the East, which they call the river Weh. [11.2] After these, 18 rivers flowed forth from the same source, namely, the selfsame Harburz, went into the ground and become visible again in Xwanīrah, when other bodies of water flowed forth in great number from them ... [11.4] All bodies of water mingle again with those rivers, which are the Rivers Ārang and Weh. [11.5] Both circle the edge of the earth and cross over the seas, and all countries drink from those springs. Thereafter both (rivers) meet at the Frāxkerd Sea, the very source, whence they (first) flowed forth.

Bundahišn 11.1–2, 4–5

As such, these two mythical, “globe-roaming” rivers have been associated with multiple rivers throughout history. A case in point being Raṇhā/Ārang that has been identified in the later Zoroastrian tradition with the Tigris as well as the Nile (which could be perceived as the continuation of the selfsame river across the ocean); and Varḥvī Dāitiā with the river Indus (*Mīhrān rōd/Hindugān rōd*) and more:¹⁷

*jud az ēn 3 zrēh ī *meh u-š pas tazēnīd az Harburz*
az abāxtar kanārag 2 rōd ī Ārang ud Weh ud Ārang
*ast Diglit tazān ō *rōn frōd-šudān ud Weh-rōd ō *rōn*
*ul-āmadān būd pad 2 sar bē *gašt bē ō zrēh šud hēnd*

Aside from these three *large seas, he [God Ōhrmazd] made flow from (Mount) Harburz, from north, two rivers Ārang (Raṇhā) and Weh[rōd] (Varḥvī Dāitiā). Ārang is the Tigris whose course was in the direction of the setting (sun); and the (course of) Weh River was in the direction of the rising (sun).

Wizdagīhā ī Zādspram 3.22¹⁸

[11a.1] *Ārang rōd ān ī guft kū az Harburz bē tazēd*
ud āyēd pad Sūrag būm kē Šam-iz xwānēnd ud pad
(E)giptōs būm kē Misr-iz xwānēnd bē widerēd u-š
*ānōh rōd ī nēw *Egiptōis xwānēnd* [11a.2] *Weh rōd pad*
Xwarāsān bē widerēd ud pad Sind būm šawēd ud pad
Hindugān ō zrēh rēzēd u-š ānōh Mīhrān rōd xwānēnd
ud Hindugān rōd-iz xwānēnd

[11a.1] The River Ārang is the one that, it is said, flows forth from (Mount) Harburz and comes to the land of Syria, which they also call Šam, and crosses (over) to the land of *Egypt, which they also call Misr, wherein they also call it the ‘good river of Egypt.’ [11a.2] The Weh River goes across the East to the land of India and pours into the sea in India, where they also call it the ‘Mīhrān River’ – they also call it the ‘River India.’

Bundahišn 11a.1–a.2

Completing this picture is the reality of salt seas and their relation both to Xʷaniraθa/Xwanīrah and the cosmic Vourukaša Sea. Intriguingly, the latter, although the fabled repository of all sweet waters, appears to be related to, or connected with, the three large salt seas of the Iranian world, which serve as purifiers of waters flowing into the Vourukaša Sea, a function also shared by the mythical rivers Raṇhā and Varḥvī Dāitiā. These salt seas are identified in the later Zoroastrian traditions as the Persian Gulf (Pūitkā/Pūydīg)¹⁹; the Caspian Sea (Kāmrōd); and the Black Sea (Syāwbun).²⁰ Thus, the picture that emerges from all this is the idea of a mytho-epic Iranian expanse bound by a network of water frontiers, to wit: the outer salt seas to the northeast (Kāmrōd), west (Syāwbun), and south (Pūitkā/Pūydīg) – with the latter, that is, the Persian Gulf, being connected with the mythical Vourukaša Sea – and two mighty rivers circling the earth and connected possibly with these salt seas and, like them, mingling eventually in the Vourukaša Sea.

When we contrast the tenets of the Zoroastrian/Avestan geography with the Achaemenid imperial space under Darius and his successors, a few commonalities stand out. The Achaemenid geography recognized several levels of spatial division, best observed in the expanded Achaemenid titulature in Old Persian inscriptions, which remained relatively consistent in its structures from its beginnings under Darius I to the end of Artaxerxes III Ochus’ rule.²¹ In general, Darius’ titulature shows a tripartite structure:

[1] *adam darayava^huš* | *xšāyaθiya vazarka* |
xšāyaθiya xšāyaθiyānām |

[2] (*xšāyaθiya pārsaiy*) | *xšāyaθiya dahayūnām*
(*vispazanānām* / *paruzanānām*) | *xšāyaθiya*
ahayāyā / *haruvahayāya būmiyā* (*vazarkāyā dūrai*
apiy) |

[3] *vištāspahayā puça* | *haxāmanišiya* | (*pārsa*
pārsahayā puça ariya ariyaciça) |

I, Darius | great king | king of kings |

(king in Persis) | king of the lands (of many races/all
races) | king on this (great) earth (far and wide) |

son of Vištāspa, | an Achaemenid | (Persian, of Persian
descent, Aryan, of Aryan seed) |

The first sequence exhibits the king's titles in terms of waxing exaltation: "great king" > "king of kings"; the second expresses the spatial expanse of the kingship, again in expanding order: "king in Persis" > "king of the lands (of many races/all races)" > "king on this (great) earth (far and wide)." And the third sequence indicates the king's social context in terms of widening circles, from his more immediate kinship relation ("son of Vištāspa") to his broader ethnic belonging "Aryan, of Aryan seed." Of interest in this context is the opposition between *xšāyaθiya dahayūnām* (*vispazanānām/paruzanānām*) (DNa 10–11; DE 14–16) "king of the lands (of many races/all races)" and *xšāyaθiya ahayāyā būmiyā vazarkāyā dūrai apiy* (DNa 11–12)/*xšāyaθiya haruvahayāya būmiyā* (DSb 7–9) "king on this (great) earth (far and wide)"/"king on the whole earth," with the former referring to the empire's spatial reality, its manifold provinces (*dahayau*), and the latter to the vaguer notion of the inhabited: *būmi- vazarkā- dūrai apiy/haruvā- būmi-* "the great earth far and wide/the whole earth."

The concept of *būmi-* does not primarily pertain to a concrete imperial space, but represents a higher geography, whose cosmogonical pertinence may still be discerned.²² Indeed, *būmi-* is often associated with Ahuramazdā's act of creation (*baga vazarka A^huramazdā haya im|ām būmim adā haya avam asm|ānam adā*, "the great god Ahuramazdā who placed/set this earth (*būmi-*), who placed yonder sky"; DNa 1–3). In another passage, the earth is described as a creation in turmoil

(*būmi- yaudaⁿtī-*), that needed to be reset in its proper place/foundation (*°-šim gāθavā niyašā-daya-*): *A^huramazdā* [*ya*]θ|ā *avaina imām būmim yau[daⁿtim]* | *pasāva-dim manā frābara mām* [*xšā*] | *yaθiyam akunauš adam ... vašnā A^huramazdāh[ā]* | *a|dam-šim gāθavā niyašādayam*, "When Ahuramazdā saw this earth in turmoil, he then gave it to me. He made me king ... By the greatness of Ahuramazdā, I seated it down on its place." Thus, this otherworldly dimension of *būmi-* appears to represent a different concept than the actuality of the realm (*xšaça-*), whose components and four quarters the inscriptions often depict:

ima xšaçam taya ada|m dārayāmiy hacā sakaibiš
tayaip pa|ra sugdam amata yātā ā kūšā hacā hiⁿda|uv
amata yātā ā spardā tayamaiy A^hurama|zdā frābara
haya maθišta bagānām m|ām

This is the realm that I hold: from the Scythians who are beyond Sogdiana, from there all the way to Kūš/Nubia, from India, from there all the way to Sardis, this (all) Ahuramazdā gave me, he who is the greatest among the gods.

DH 3–7 = DPh 4–9²³

Whereas the imperial space encompasses a sample of regionally organized provinces and concrete frontiers, the *būmi- vazarkā- dūrai apiy/haruvā- būmi-* is more capacious, less tangible, and of a different ontological order. It may well be an equivalent of the idealized central clime known from the Avestan/Zoroastrian traditions as the X^aniraθa/Xwanīrah, or even the totality of the (seven) continents, the *haptō.karšuuairi- zam-* "the seven-partite earth," as these notions do not seem to have been unfamiliar to the Achaemenids.

Indeed, according to Ptolemy (Ptol. 5.8; 5.14), the river Volga was called by Scythians settled in the northern shore of the Black Sea 'Pā (< **Rahā-*), a designation that indubitably refers to the mythical river Rañhā.²⁴ This report, which likely reflected realities of the late Hellenistic period, could also intimate that the concept of Rañhā as the western frontier of X^aniraθa (or the imperial space) was also known to, or observed by, the Achaemenids, although it remains to be seen whether it could have referred to waters other than the Volga in the sixth century BCE. In this context, we should be reminded of the stelae

(reportedly) erected by Darius I on the proximity of waterways in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, during some of his major campaigns, possibly to mark the limits of the realm. The significance of these “end of the world” stelae are well-known and much discussed in scholarship.²⁵ Among their many purposes is the desire to demarcate the outer boundaries of the realm, evoking the sovereign’s prowess in accomplishing an unprecedented act, hence projecting power for the benefit of internal and external audiences.

A number of stelae are extant or attested for the reign of Darius I. The more important ones are those inscribed in the empire’s three cuneiform languages (Elamite, Akkadian, and Old Persian), as well as late Egyptian, and placed all along Darius I’s recently established “Suez” canal.²⁶ In the Old Persian variant, the series of stelae commemorate how the king “seized Egypt from Persia,” and ordered a canal to be dug to allow ships to sail from the Nile (through the Red Sea) all the way to the Persian Gulf (*abiy draya taya hacā Pārsā aitiy* “towards the sea that goes (flows away) from [the shores of] Persia”):

[baga] vazarka A^huramazdā
haya avam asmānam adā |
haya imām bū[m|i]m adā
haya [mar]tiyam adā
ha[ya š]iyātim adā martiyahay|ā
haya dārayava^hum xšāyaθiyam aku[nau]š
haya d[ā]rayavahauš xšāyaθiyahyā xšaça[m frābara
taya vazarkam
taya [^huvasam ^hu]mar[ti]yam

adam dārayava^huš | xšāyaθiya vazarka xšāyaθiya
xšāyaθiyānām xšāyaθiya dahyūnām v[ispazan]ānām
[xšāyaθiya] hayāy|ā būmiyā vazarkāyā dūrai y apiy
[v]ištās[pahayā p]uça ha|xāmanišiya

θātiy dārayava^huš xšāyaθiya ada[m p]ārsa a^hmi[y hac]
ā pā|rsā mudrāyam agarbā[ya]m

adam nī[ya]štāyam imām [yauviyā]|m kataniy hacā
pirāva nāma rauta taya mudrāyaiy danu[vatiy ab]|iy
[dr]aya taya hacā pārsā aitiy

pas[āva] iyam yauviyā | [akaniya] | ava[θā yaθā]
adam niyaštāyam ut[ā nāva] āyatā hac[ā mudrā]|yā
ta[ra imā]m yauviyām ab|iy pārsam [ava]θā yaθā
mā[m kāma āha]

A great god is Ahuramazdā,
who created yonder heaven,
who created this earth,
who created man,
who created happiness among men,
who made Darius king,
who bestowed on King Darius this realm,
which is far and wide
which is with good horses and with good men.

I (am) Darius the great king, king of kings, king of
lands of many races, king on this great earth far and
wide, son of Hystaspes, an Achaemenid.

King Darius proclaims: I am a Persian; from Persia, I
seized Egypt.

I ordered this canal to be dug, from a river called Nile,
which flows in Egypt, towards the sea that goes (flows
away) from (the shores of) Persia.

So, this canal was dug as I had ordered, and ships went
from Egypt through this canal to Persia, as was my
desire.

DZc = Darius at Suez

Other stelae, reported by Herodotus, were apparently erected on the occasion of Darius I’s bridging the Bosphorus, around 513–511 BCE, during the king’s ambitious expedition to submit, or push back the Sakā tribes in the Danubian and the Black Sea regions.²⁷ Much like the Nile-Red Sea canal in Egypt, spanning a pontoon bridge over the Bosphorus was an engineering feat, requiring considerable imperial resources warranting the placement of commemorative stelae, such as those described by Herodotus: στήλας ἔστησε δύο ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ λίθου λευκοῦ ἐνταμὼν γράμματα ἐς μὲν τὴν Ἀσσύρια ἐς δὲ τὴν Ἑλληνικά, “he [Darius] placed two stelae of white stone (marble) upon/next to it, engraving one in characters in Assyrian, and another in Greek”; these, however, were apparently carried off by Byzantines before Herodotus’ lifetime.²⁸

Herodotus knows of yet another stela during Darius’ Scythian expedition, that is, the one erected at the source of the Tearus river while en route to the Danube river: ἐπὶ τοῦτον ὦν τὸν ποταμὸν ἀπικόμενος ὁ Δαρεῖος ὡς ἐστρατοπεδεύσατο ἡσθεῖς τῷ ποταμῷ στήλην ἔστησε καὶ ἐνθαυτα γράμματα ἐγγράψας λέγοντα τάδε, “having arrived at this river, Darius

took position, delighted at the river, and placed a stela there, engraved with writing, saying thus ...”²⁹ This stela, apparently in cuneiform script, for which we have partial archaeological evidence at our disposal, seems to have been extant until the mid-nineteenth century.³⁰ Although the content of the inscription has been rightly rejected in scholarship, including its somewhat maladroit use of the royal titulature, there is, however, a point worthy of consideration. The title of Darius in this stela is reported as: Δαρειός ὁ Ὑστάσπεος Περσέων τε καὶ πάσης τῆς ἡπείρου βασιλεύς, “Darius, son of Hystaspes, king of Persians and of the entire land/continent,” the latter of which may represent *mutatis mutandis* the Old Persian expression *haruvā- būmī-* “the whole earth.”³¹ If so, it is significant that this expression was used at the outer western boundary of the realm.

Most recently, the fragment of a stela written in Old Persian, and mentioning the name of Darius I, has been excavated in the city of Phanagoria located in the Taman Peninsula, on the Cimmerian Bosphorus connecting the Maeotian Lake (Sea of Azov) to the Black Sea,³² and appears to attest to the presence of Persian troops on the northern shore of the Black Sea. This fragment, whose origin has been diversely interpreted in recent scholarship, but which undoubtedly belongs to the reign of Darius I, could be yet another indication that Darius was marking bodies of waters (seas; straits; rivers) at the periphery of his realm with “end of the world” stelae:

(1) [-.....d-a-r-y-v-(h)[-u-š:x-š-y-θ-i-y-h-y-a:-----]

(2)[a-d-m:d-a-r-y-v-(u)-š:x-(š)[-y-θ-i-y:-----]

(3)[-.....p-r^u-u-v-m:a[-.....]

(4)[-.....vⁱ-i-y-t-(r)-y-m:a[-.....]

(5)[-.....a-d-m:a-(k^u)[-u-n-v-m:-----]

(6)[-.....]:m-r-t[-i-y-----]

[A great god is Ahuramazdā ... who bestowed] on [King Dar]ei[os] [(dāraya)vah[auš xšāyaθiyahyā]] [this realm ... I am Dar]i[us] the [great] k[ing] ... [be]fore (*[par]uvam) ... I [traver]sed / [resti]tuted ([*viyata-]rayamⁱ / [*niyaçā]rayamⁱ) I m[ade/did] (adam *a[kunavam]) ... man/men (*marti[ya-])³³

If indeed the fragment found in Phanagoria belonged to a stela erected in the more immediate vicinity of the Taman Peninsula, and was not carried off from afar, then its presence in combination with the testimonies of the *Tabulae Iliacae* – namely, the Roman Chronicle (*Chronicon Romanum*, also called *Tabula Capitolina*) and the Getty Table³⁴ – that traditionally place the date of Darius I’s Scythian expedition (to the year 513/512 BCE), but also mention his crossing of the Cimmerian Bosphorus, Κιμμέριος Βόσπορος,³⁵ could intimate that a majority of the waterways, as was the case of the Thracian Bosphorus, or the river Tearus, were adorned with stelae during Darius’ campaign:

ἀφ’ οὗ Ἀρμόδιος καὶ Ἀριστογείτων [Ἴπ-]
παρχον τὸν τύραννον ἀνείλον [καὶ]
Δαρειὸς ἐπὶ Σκύθας διέβη ζεύ[ξ]α[ς τὸν]
Κιμμέριον [Β]ώσπορον, ἔτη φκη’.

From which time, Harmodius and Aristogeiton killed the tyrant Hipparchus, and Darius against the Scythians crossed (over) by bridging the Cimmerian Bosphorus, 527 years.

Inscriptiones Graecae XIV, no. 1297, col. II, ll. 22–25

The last piece of evidence in Darius’ marking the boundaries of his empire pertains to the campaign directed against the *Sakā tigraxaudā*, “the Sakā with the pointed hat,” and their leader Skunxa, most likely on the eastern fringes of the realm. Although we do not possess a stela documenting this campaign, it was nonetheless deemed sufficiently important to alter the completed Bisotun relief and its accompanying inscriptions, to add the likeness of the defeated Saka king Skunxa in the row of “liar kings,” and engrave – with the addition of a supplementum – the fifth column narrating, among others, the king’s Sakā campaign, a new Old Persian variant below the relief (see fig. 1).

The Bisotun inscription reports as follows:

[θāti]y dārayava^huš xš[āyaθiya pa[sāva had]ā kār[ā a-]dam [aš]iyavam abiy sak[ām pas[a]vā [sakā taya]i(y) xau[dā]m tigrām barati[y i[maiy patiš mām ā]iša [ya-] (d)iy abiy draya a[vā[rasam d]rax[t]ā [ava hadā kār]ā visā viyatarā[yam [pasāva] avaiy sak[ā adam] ajanam aniyam aq[rbāya hauv basta ānayatā] abiy mām ut[ā]šām haya maθ[išta skuⁿxa nāma avam aq[rbāya]

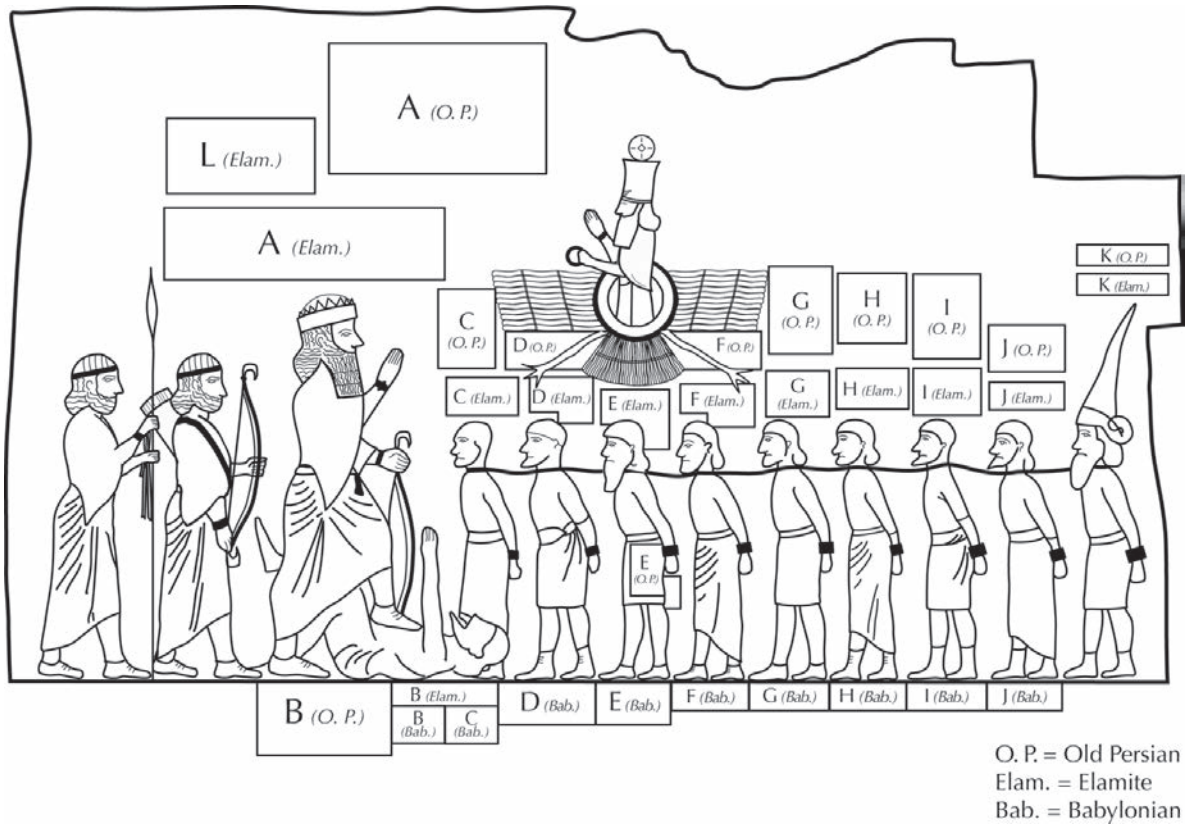


Fig. 1. Darius and the liar-kings on the relief of Bisotun. Drawing by Jill Curry Robbins following King and Thompson 1907: plate 13.

[basta]m ānaya [abiy mām] avadā aniyam maθ|ištam
akunavam ya[θā] mām kāma pasāva da|hayāuš manā
abava

[θāti]y dārayava^huš xšāya[θi]ya avaiy[sa]k[ā] ari[k ā-]
ha utā naiy A^huramazd[ā-]šām aya[diya] A^hurama[z-]
d[ām] ayadaiy vašnā A^hurama[zdā]ha yaθā mām kāma
[avaθādi]š akunavam

θāt[iy] [dā]rayava^huš [x]šāyaθiya [haya] A^huramazdām
yadāta[iy] [avahay]ā [yāna]m [ahatiy] utā jivahayā utā
m[artahay]ā

King Darius proclaims: Then I went with the people in arms to Scythia. Then the Sakā/Scythians who wore the pointed cap, they came against me. When I arrived at the sea/body of water, I crossed it with the entire army by means of tree *trunks¹/*wooden rafts². Then I smashed those Scythians. Some they seized, and some were brought bound to me. And they seized the one who was greatest among them, named Skunxa. He was

brought bound to me. There I appointed another (to be) the greatest as it was my desire. Then the land became mine.

King Darius proclaims: Those Scythians were evil and did not sacrifice to Ahuramazdā. I sacrificed to Ahuramazdā. By the greatness of Ahuramazdā, I did with them as I wished.

King Darius proclaims: the one who sacrifices to Ahuramazdā, he shall receive (his) reward both when alive and in death.

DB 5.30–36

Once more, we see the king establishing boundaries at the junction of a body of water, which the inscription calls a “sea” (*drayah-*). Uncertainty surrounds all elements of this report, from the location of the *Sakā tigraxaudā* to the identity of the waters that were crossed (*viyataraya-*).³⁶

As commonly accepted, the *Sakā tigraxaudā* are mentioned invariably in conjunction with eastern lands and are therefore distinct from the western *Sakā* (the so-called *Sakā tayaiy paraḍraya* [DNa/DSe]).³⁷ They may therefore be associated with those *Sakā* whom Darius in his inscriptions in Hamadān (DHa) and Persepolis (DPh) places on the farther side of Sogdiana (*ima xšaçaṃ taya adam dārayāmiy hacā sakaibiš tayaiy para sugdam amata yātā ā kūšā hacā hindauv amata yātā ā spardā*, “this is the realm I hold, from the *Sakā* on the far side of Sogdiana [*para sugdam*], all the way to Nubia, from India all the way to Sardis”; DHa 4–6), while describing the realm expanse, again in loose correlation with water frontiers: Sardis (Aegean); Nubia (Nile); India (Indus); and the *Sakā* (Jaxartes).

All this brings us to our main query, namely, to what extent was Darius’ marking of the realm’s waterways during his early major campaigns a means to designate the *limits* of the empire, or validate its *universality*? In recent scholarship, a valiant effort has been made to address this question by referring to Ancient Near Eastern precedents, to understand the mental geography of the Achaemenid Empire as a function of its dialogue with the Mesopotamian past and the emulation of its *Vorlagen*. Whereas there is much merit in these efforts, and much truth in the Achaemenid indebtedness to the Mesopotamian intellectual legacy, there are also limits to be observed, for there is a proper Iranian worldview and cosmogony to be considered as well, whose traces, albeit faintly present in the Achaemenid world, may, if duly probed, still open up other interpretative venues to qualify Darius’ marking of his empire.

In this context, we may see Darius’ early campaigns at the frontiers on the waterfront as an attempt to reach the boundaries of an idealized central clime/continent (such as the Xʾaniraθa/Xwanīrah) that is bound in the east and west by two mythical waterways that cross the oceans, circle the earth, and connect with salty seas to flow eventually into the cosmic waters of the Vourukaša. Indeed, whereas the placement of stelae in the Danubian/Cimmerian regions and in Egypt may well have made use of Ancient Near Eastern practices to demarcate the realm’s confines, it did so, as it appears, within an Iranian cosmogonical framework; the rivers crossed and borders delimited by Darius on the western fringes (the Tearus; Danube; possibly the Don;

and the Volga) could have been an attempt at identifying the manifest, visible tributaries of the cosmic Raṇhā, whose name is attested in the late Hellenistic period for the Volga (Pā; Ptol. 5.8; 5.14), and thus at exploring the natural waterways defining the western boundaries of the realm. A cosmic Raṇhā that, were we to follow the later cosmogonical traditions, would have crossed the ocean and been identified with the Nile. In this light, it may not be surprising that the waters of the Danube and Nile were reportedly kept in the Achaemenid treasury (Plu. *Alex.* 36.2), as they must have symbolized the realm’s expanse, but also been the actualization of confines marked by the elusive cosmic river Raṇhā. In the same vein, Darius’ crossing of a body of water in his campaign against the *Sakā tigraxaudā* in the East was precisely fulfilling what his later deeds in Egypt and in eastern Europe would also accomplish, namely, establishing the realm’s idealized *limes*. In the campaign against the *Sakā tigraxaudā*, the identity of the *drayah-*, which the king reportedly traversed, remains still unresolved. It either refers to a sea, such as the Aral Sea, or rivers, such as the Oxus and Jaxartes – if we were to pay heed to the expression *Sakā tayaiy para sugdam*. However, it could also have referred to cosmic waterways that define the eastern boundary of the central clime, and were associated with the tributaries flowing into the mythic Vanhʾi Dāitiia (and eventually into the *zraiaah- vouru.kaša-* “the Vourukaša Sea”), which in later traditions was identified with the Indus river (*Mihrān rōd/Hindugān rōd*).³⁸

If this conjecture were to hold, then the unknown expanse beyond the frontiers of the realm would not perforce be the bitter seas and the vacuity beyond them, but other climes that ontologically belong to the world of being that are separated from the central clime by the presence of obstacles or waterways that are themselves realizations of cosmic waters. If indeed Darius’ policy had been about reframing the frontiers of the realm within a Mazdean geography, by giving credence to the idea of a central clime delimited by cosmic rivers, then how is this limitation to be reconciled with the universality claim we detect not only in the spirit of the inscriptions, but also in the garb of expressions, such as *būmī- vazarkā-dūraiṣ apiy/haruvā- būmī-*, “the great earth far and wide/the whole earth,” which appear to lay claim to the whole inhabited world? As we have

argued above, the concept of *būmǝ-* does not refer to the imperial space, but is pregnant with a cosmogonical connotation, since it often occurs in association with Ahuramazdā's act of creation. Thus, it is conceivable that the Achaemenids, beginning with Darius I, began to perceive the actuality of the realm (*xšaça-*) as bound by the emanations of the cosmic rivers Raṇhā and Vaṇhī Dāitiā, but still maintained their idealized claim over all climes/continents, the whole earth (*haruvā- būmǝ-*), which was bestowed upon them by Ahuramazdā in conjunction with the creation of the world.

It is in this vein that we have to understand the expression *dahayāva tayā para draya*, "the lands beyond the sea" (DPe 14–15). It certainly refers to mainland Hellas – as it follows upon *yaunā tayaiy^huškahayā utā tayaiy drayahayā* "Ionians who are on dry (land) and those who are (on islands) in the sea" (DPe 12–14) – whose inhabitants are more specifically called *yaunā tayaiy paradraya dāraya^{ti}*, "Ionians/Greeks who dwell beyond the sea" (XPh 23–25), but certainly encompasses also other *ethnea* that are qualified as *paradraya*, "beyond the sea," such as the Danubian/Cimmerian Sakā, the *Sakā tayaiy paradraya* (DNa; DSe). Although both of these people are said to be held within the bounds of the empire, *imā dahayāva tayā adam adaršiy*, "these are the lands I hold" (DPe 7–9)/*imā dahayāva tayaišām adam xšāyaθiya āhām*, "these are the lands, whose king I am" (XPh 14–16), they still seem to be different, being located outside the immediate confines of the realm, possibly being cast off the Achaemenid commonwealth.

Ordering the World

But how was this realm, which Darius reshaped by casting it into the mold of Mazdean geography, structured? Or more precisely, what intellectual and religious tenets would have regimented it, affording the king to hold sway (*dar-*) over its diverse constituents, the *dahayāva paruzanā/vispazanā* "the lands of many races/all races" (DNA 10–11; DE 14–16). One of the cardinal questions in Achaemenid studies is still concerned with how the Achaemenid Empire shaped its religious landscape,³⁹ and whether we may speak of an Achaemenid policy in religious matters that was distinctly at odds with the state of affairs in

prior empires of Mesopotamia and was characterized by the willingness of the central authority to afford limited autonomy in religious practices to the empire's heterogeneous constituents. Or, what is more, whether beyond this perceived permissiveness, the empire was even supportive of local cultural practices by economically sustaining them, or even assertively regulating their rituals.

Many examples have been discussed in the past to make a case for an Achaemenid religious policy that would, as a matter of state doctrine, facilitate local religious or cultural practices, especially around the *Reichsautorisation* idea, which has been vigorously discussed in Iranist quarters and among Biblical scholars in the past decades.⁴⁰ This dossier is beyond the scope of the present study, although we shall still draw on some of that evidence, but also pay heed to other documentation – that has either been adequately explored in recent time, or is still in want of being more fully probed – which we hope shall shed additional light on the religious landscape of the Achaemenid Empire.

Although the Achaemenids were indebted to the traditions of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and other cuneiform cultures, such as the Elamites, theirs was a distinct religious world, shaped partially by their Indo-Iranian heritage, as reflected in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions. In a nutshell, the epigraphic material conveys the following picture as to the exalted position of Ahuramazdā and his synergy with the great king: Ahuramazdā is represented as the greatest of gods (*maθišta bagānām*), who had set the cosmos in motion (*dā-*) and regulated the world through order (*arta-*). The concept of Order, although *functionally* ever present in the Achaemenid inscriptions in the very act of Ahuramazdā's establishing the cosmos ("this earth"/"yonder sky"), does however rarely occur in an explicit manner as an overarching principle, as it frequently does in the Avesta (*aša-*):

*iθā āt yazamaidē ahurəm mazdqm
yə gəmčā ašəmčā dāt
apascā dāt uruuarāscā varj^hhiš
raocāscā dāt būmimčā
vīspācā vohū*

Table 1

In life	In afterlife
(<i>maniyāiy</i>) <i>šiyāta ahaniy jīva</i> when you think: ‘may I be <u>happy</u> (<i>šiyāta</i> -) when <u>alive</u> ’	<i>utā marta artāvā ahaniy</i> ‘and a <u>follower of Order</u> (<i>artavan</i> -) when <u>dead</u> ,’
<i>avanā dātā parīdiy taya A^huramazdā niyaštāya</i> (then) <u>follow the law which Ahuramazdā has set down</u>	<i>A^huramazdām yadaišā artācā barmāniy</i> (and) <u>you should sacrifice to Ahuramazdā according to</u> <u>*Order (<i>artācā</i>) in the heights</u>

Thus, we worship Ahura Mazda
who has placed both the Cow and Order,
both the good waters and plants,
both the lights and the earth,
and all good things⁴¹

In Xerxes’ *daiva*- inscription (XPh), we find probably the most explicit reference to *arta*- as an organizing principle in the expressions *artācā barmāniy*, and *artavan*- , with the latter qualifying the followers of Order, in contrast to *Lie* (*drauga*-), the principle of chaos and evil:

**tuvam kā haya | apara yadiy maniyāiy šiyāta ahaniy
| jīva utā marta artāvā ahaniy | avanā dātā parīdiy
taya A^huramazdā niyaštāya A^huramazdām yadaišā
q|rtācā barmāniy |*

*martiya haya avanā dātā pariyaita taya A^huramazdā
n|ištāya utā A^huramazdām yadaiy q|rtācā
barmāniy hauv utā jīva | šiyāta bavatiy utā marta
artāvā | bavatiy*

You, whoever (you are), who (shall come) hereafter,
when you think: ‘may I be happy (*šiyāta*-) (when) alive,
and a follower of Order (*artavan*-) (when) dead,’ (then)
follow the law which Ahuramazdā has set down; you
should sacrifice to Ahuramazdā according to *Order
(*artācā*) in the heights.⁴²

The man who follows the law which Ahuramazdā has
set down and sacrifices to Ahuramazdā according to
*Order in the heights, he shall be not only happy while
alive, but also a follower of Order when dead.⁴³

In this passage, a parallelism has been created
between, on the one hand, the happiness of man,
more precisely, the state of him being “happy”
(*šiyāta*-), which translates into him following
(*pariy-ay*-)⁴⁴ the law (*dātā*-) set down (*ni-štāya*-)

by Ahuramazdā in the material world (“when living” *jīva*-), and on the other hand, the blessedness of man, that is, the state of him being “a follower of Order” (*artāvan*-) in the afterlife (“when dead” *mar*-), which consists in sacrificing to Ahuramazdā, in accordance with the (cosmic) order (*artācā* < **artā hacā*) fashioned in the heights (*barmāniy*) (see table 1).

The inscriptions also admonish men not to leave the “right path” (*paθi- tayā- rāstā*-) established by Ahuramazdā:

*martiyā hayā A^huramazdāhā framānā hauv-taiy gastā
mā θadaya paθim tayām rāstām mā avah^hardā⁴⁵ mā
sta^mbava*

O man, may the command of Ahuramazdā not seem
foul to you! Do not leave the straight path, do not
oppose (it)!

Intriguingly, this “right/straight path” is also
known from the Avesta as the one leading “up
to Order” (*ā ašāt*) for the followers of Order
(*ašauuan*-):

*razištahe paθō aēšəmca vaēdəmca
yō asti razištō ā ašāt
vahištəmca ahūm ašaonqm*

the seeking and finding of the straightest path,
which is the straightest up to Order
the best existence of the followers of Order.

Y.68.13

What does all this mean? Simply put: happiness is
gained in the material world by following Ahuramazdā’s law, in addition, however, those who also (correctly) sacrifice (*yada*-) to Ahuramazdā while alive, shall progress on the “right path” that leads

Table 2

<i>šiyāta-</i> in life	<i>artavan-</i> in afterlife
in order to be <u>happy</u> (<i>šiyāta-</i>) in the <u>material world</u>	in order to be <u>a follower of Order</u> (<i>artavan-</i>) in <u>afterlife</u>
the <i>homo mazdeanus</i> is to <u>follow the law</u> set down by Ahuramazdā	the <i>homo mazdeanus</i> is to <u>sacrifice according to</u> <u>*Order in the heights</u>

to Order, and will eventually be blessed in the afterlife as followers of Order. Thus, we have the schemata shown in table 2.

But what about the king's law that holds together in orderly fashion the empire's diverse constituents, and strikes fear into the hearts of his subjects?

θātiy dārayava^huš xš[ā]yaθiya vašnā A^huramazdāha im[ā] dahayāva tayā adam aqarbāya[m] apataram hacā pārsā adamšā[m] patiyaxšayaīy manā bājim aba[ra]ha tayašām hacām aθahaya ava [a]kunava dātām taya manā avadi[š] adāraya

King Darius proclaims: By the greatness of Ahuramazdā, I ruled over these lands which I seized in addition to Persia. They bore me tribute. They did whatever was told them by me. My law held them (in place).

DNa 15–22

(θ)[ātiy dārayava^huš xšāyaθiya vasiy ta]ya duš[kar-tam āha ava naibam a]kunav[am] dahayāva [ayauda] aniya [ani](y)am aja ava a[dam] akunavam [vašnā] A^huramazdāhā yaθā a[niya a]niyam naiy jatiy ci[nā] gāθavā kašciy astiy d[ātām] taya manā haca avanā tar[sati]y yaθā haya tauviyā tayam skauθim naiy jatiy nai[y] vimardatiy

[Thus, proclaims King Darius: much that had been done] badly I made [good]. The lands [were in turmoil]. They smashed [one] another. By the greatness of Ahuramazdā, I made it so that they did not smash one another [until] everyone was in his place. (Now) they fear my law, so that the mighty does not strike the weak, or destroy him.

DSe 30–44

How does this law relate to that of Ahuramazdā, and where does the king's law fit into the fabric

of Order, phenomenological or transcendental? It seems that a scantily noticed tri-partite structure governs the distribution of these ordering principles and laws: the law of Ahuramazdā, which is said to be set down (*ni-štāya-*), regulates, in the material world, the ethics of the Mazdean man, the *homo mazdeanus*, as well as his orderly sacrifice to Ahuramazdā, if he were to partake in the cosmic order in the afterlife; the king's law, which is reminiscent, in the (phenomenal/material) world of the cosmic order (*arta-*) that Ahuramazdā has fashioned in the heights (*barzmani-*), concerns the remaining constituents of the empire, the *homo imperialis*.

In sum: the law of Ahuramazdā is about the Mazdean man, his happiness, his proper sacrifice, and his afterlife; the king's law seems however to project itself on other members of the empire, maybe on the *homo imperialis* beyond Persia. However, both Ahuramazdā's law and the king's law appear to operate as ordering agents; in this they are the different *modi essendi* of the self-same cosmic order, but for different audiences. Thus, we have the schemata shown in table 3.

If, indeed, the Persians did not impress upon their subjects their own *Götterwelt*, then how did they translate their political dominion into the realm of the sacred? It seems that theirs was a subtle form of cultural imprint that demands further scrutiny. Their approach toward extraneous theologies and practices was one of orderly arrangement. This means that rather than carrying off the gods of the conquered, for these endured the ascendancy of the Iranian pantheon, the Achaemenids would resort to structuring and arranging their subjects' religious practices, rituals, laws, and even pantheon, as if this ordering was reminiscent of the re-enactment of an original act of creation by their supreme god Ahuramazdā, who had set the cosmos in motion by ordering it.

Table 3

<i>homo mazdeanus</i>		<i>homo imperialis</i>
in order to be <u>happy</u> (<i>šiyāta</i> -) in the <u>material world</u> ↓	in order to be a follower of Order (<i>artavan</i> -) in <u>afterlife</u> ↓	in order to be <u>happy</u> (<i>šiyāta</i> -) in the <u>material world</u>
follow (<i>pariy-ay</i> -) the law (<i>dāta</i> -) set down by Ahuramazdā	sacrifice (<i>yada</i> -) according to *Order (<i>artācā</i>) in the heights	the king's law (<i>dāta</i> -) holds them together (<i>dāraya</i> -)

Persepolitan Archives

The first piece of evidence is the testimony of the Persepolitan archives, which predominantly consist of Elamite tablets. These tablets, in particular the Persepolis Fortification Tablets that were administrative records on clay belonging to the reign of Darius I, from the end of the sixth to the beginning of the fifth centuries (509–493 BCE), represented records of locally produced commodities distributed by the royal administration at Persepolis (*Pārsa*) to different officials and entities under the purview of Persepolitan accountants, for a wide range of purposes, including cultural and religious services.⁴⁶ Striking in these documents from the heartland of the realm is the Persepolitan administration's willingness to enable the religious services of a great variety of gods, including Iranian – such as Ahuramazdā, Spēntā *Ārmaiti* (*Išpandaramattiš*), and the *frauuāši* (*Irdanapirutiš* = *Artāna Frawartiš*) – Elamite, and Babylonian divinities, among them, Humban, Napiriša (Nafir-iršara), Adad, and “Earth”; altogether many kinds of religious services were performed by sundry types of priests, parading both Elamite and Old Persian titles, such as the *šaten*, the *maguš*, the *lan-lirira* (= *zaotar*), the fire-priest *ātarvaxša*-, and others.⁴⁷ Intriguingly, however, Ahuramazdā does not appear to occupy in the Persepolitan tablets the selfsame exalted and uncontested position it commands in the Achaemenid inscriptions of the same period. At first glance, there seems to be a profound rift in our documentary evidence between the ideological picture depicted in the inscriptions, where Ahuramazdā reigns supreme (although other divine creatures also populate this thrifty place, be they the *aniyāha bagāha*, literally the “other gods,” or be they Mithra and Anāhitā), and the pantheistic

festival we observe in the Elamite tablets. There is no doubt that the resolution of tensions prevailing between contemporaneous sources, radically at variance with each other, holds the key for evaluating Achaemenid religious policy *in toto*. Much effort has been spent in scholarship on reconciling the contradictory testimonies on the state of Achaemenid religious affairs.

As mentioned previously, the Elamite tablets knew of a variety of gods, and a variety of religious services to honor them. Among the principal services on record, the one designated under the name *lan* was celebrated on a grand scale by the administration, judging from the large quantity of provisions recorded for it, and was either listed in conjunction with the names of deities, such as *Druva*, *Huvarira*, Earth, *Visai Bagā*, and occasionally Ahuramazdā, or without specification altogether. As Ahuramazdā itself is rarely mentioned in these tablets, it was traditionally assumed that the *lan* service ought to have been the official service for the supreme deity itself. This interpretation reposed on the presumption that Ahuramazdā dominating the religious sphere according to the royal inscriptions ought to have been equally predominant in Elamite tablets, even though its name was only infrequently mentioned therein. The *lan* service, however, is now proven to have been the main vehicle for the liturgical services of a multitude of gods, including, but not exclusively being the monopoly of, Ahuramazdā.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Persepolitan archive could suggest, as it has been argued in recent years, that cultural practices on display in Persepolis were indicative of the Persian-Elamite acculturation process, that is, the long process of cross-cultural interactions between Elamites and Persians on the Iranian plateau over the span of several centuries prior to the formation of the empire, which would have

decisively shaped Persian identity in spite of its Indo-Iranian heritage.⁴⁹ Accordingly, Achaemenid religious practices could have been shaped by this cultural phenomenon, whereby Elamite (or Babylonian-Elamite) gods, such as Humban, were adopted, and worshipped along with Iranian divinities, many known to us from the Mazdean pantheon. Thus, an argument could be made that Persian exposure to the Elamite culture, and its subsequent adoption of Elamite divinities – possibly also the impact of elements of Mesopotamian imperial legacy⁵⁰ – may have been instrumental in creating an aptitude of permissiveness, an accommodating disposition toward religious *others*. But acculturation may not be the sole explanation to account for the crown's largesse vis-à-vis a plethora of divine beings in Persepolis, and once more an attempt is to be risked, in light of recent developments in Avestan studies, to seek inspiration.⁵¹ In a nutshell, the extant Avestan corpus is the juxtaposition of two liturgical recitatives, one long and unitarian (but encompassing several variants)⁵² forming an anthology we have come to call the *yasna*, and which not only initiated the long liturgy in praise of Ahuramazdā, but also that of other divine entities; and the other liturgy being a collection of minor recitatives/rituals for individual divinities.⁵³ Thus, there is good reason to consider the *lan* service, that is, the most important liturgy performed for a panoply of gods among the “acculturated” Persians, as a liturgy *akin* to the *yasna* ritual, even though surely not identical with it, as they belong to different cultural contexts.⁵⁴ In both cases, that is, in the *yasna*'s long liturgy, and in the *lan* ceremonial, Ahura Mazdā/Ahuramazdā is praised, without being the exclusive recipient of the sacrifice, since other divine entities worthy of sacrifice are also populating these liturgies. This proposition would also have the benefit of reconciling the diverse and polyvalent rituals performed in the heartland of the realm with the rigid tenets of the Achaemenid inscriptions. But beyond all, and returning to our initial inquiry, considering the *lan* service to be comparable to, or *wesensgleich* with, the *yasna*, means that one could make the Mazdean substratum itself, or the polyvalence inherent to it, responsible for the Achaemenids' ability to assimilate the Elamite *Götterwelt*, as it would have been bestowed with an intellectual vision affording the embrace of other divinities and religious practices.⁵⁵

The Bible

Another piece of evidence is provided by the testimony of the *Ketuvim*, more particularly the Book of Ezra. Only decades after Cyrus the Great liberated the Jewish Diaspora from its Babylonian exile in 539 BCE, granting to it the right of return to Judea, we are informed through the testimony of the Bible, the Book of Ezra, that by virtue of a royal edict or *framāna*-, whose historicity may be contestable, a certain Ezra (whose existence as a historical figure has also been contested), a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, was dispatched from Babylon together with his retinue, bestowed as he was with considerable financial means, to revive the Temple of Jerusalem⁵⁶ (Ezra 7.6: “this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given”). Ezra's mission as the king's imperial emissary consisted in: (1) assessing the extent to which the Law of Moses had been applied in Jerusalem (Ezra 7.14: “You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand”); (2) appointing magistrates and judges to administer the selfsame law (Ezra 7.25: “And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates – all who know the laws of your God”); (3) instructing those who were unaware of it (Ezra 7.25: “And you are to teach any who do not know them”); and finally, (4) punishing *forcefully* those not abiding by the law, that Ezra possessed (Ezra 7.26: “Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment”). The Bible, while speaking of the law of Ezra's god, or the law of Moses, refers to nothing, but the Torah, as a teacher of which Ezra is introduced from the outset. What is of importance in this context, where the law of Ezra's god (*dāthā dī-ēlāhākh*⁵⁷) designates the Pentateuch, is its juxtaposition to the “law of the king” (*dāthā dī mal'kā*) – דָּתָא דִּי-אַלְהָא דִּי-מַלְכָּא (*dāthā dī-ēlāhākh w^o dāthā dī mal'kā*)⁵⁷ – subtly signaling that the canon, which Ezra was required to impose upon the Jewish *ethnos* owed its enforceability and validity to the king's law, and was thereby sanctioned by the entire weight of the empire.

It furthermore suggests that what the empire intended to impress on Jerusalem's community was not an efflux of Iranian Mazdean beliefs, but possibly an interpretation of the Torah itself, which on account of it being supported by the empire, might have had the authoritative potency of the king's law, thus, intimating it had been regulated and put into order by the empire. What do we precisely mean with the Persians arranging or ordering the Torah? And what type of an imposition of imperial power is that? We certainly do not suggest that the Persian king or his scribes were actually engaged in the interpretative process of Jewish laws, but merely that the empire had permitted or facilitated the imposition of the Torah as a normative set of laws on the Jewish *ethnos*, hence in a certain sense strengthening the formation of Jewish identity.⁵⁸ The ordering thus was not the actual arrangement of the Torah, or Moses' Law, but its incorporation into the larger frame of Persian norms, ideology, and ultimately cosmogony. The Persian king of kings fulfilling Ahuramazdā's divine design, his sanctioning the Law of Moses was a re-enactment of Ahuramazdā's cosmic ordering, hence permitting the Law of Moses to be interwoven into the larger fabric of Ahuramazdā's orderly arrangement of the universe. Indeed, it seems that notwithstanding the disparity of religious beliefs and ritual practices, the Achaemenids would seek to domesticate these heterogeneous theologies and practices by casting them into the regulating framework of the empire's laws and *mores*, which on earth were fulfilling the same function that the cosmic ordering of Ahuramazdā did in the yonder, without either altering the essence of the religions being *ordered*, or being altered by it.

The Egyptian Pantheon

A similar pattern we may observe in the actions of the early Persian kings in Egypt. Following the conquest of Egypt in 525 BCE, on a now remote but vast oasis in the Western Desert, the Kharga Oasis,⁵⁹ the Persian king Darius erected and completed a number of temples dedicated to Egyptian gods, and what is more, initiated extensive irrigation projects by introducing the *qanāts* to the area (notably in 'ayyn Manāwir and Qasr el-Ghuweita), which may have served the creation of Persian-style paradises.⁶⁰ Although the origin of

some of these temples, especially those in Qasr el-Ghuweita, and further north in Hibis, may go back to the Saite period,⁶¹ the bulk of the construction, the wall decorations of the Hibis Temple,⁶² in conjunction with the substantial *qanāt* installation,⁶³ identify the Kharga Oasis project as an Achaemenid imperial program and the one responsible for it as Darius, whose cartouche is well attested on the walls of the Hibis Temple, and on two occasions at the temple of Qasr el-Ghuweita.⁶⁴ At the Hibis Temple, Darius is depicted on elaborate high-reliefs as Pharaoh, sporting the fashionable Egyptian double-crown.⁶⁵ Striking in this context, however, is not the Persian king's depiction as Pharaoh, but the extensive representation of Egyptian gods on the walls of the sanctuary (Room A).⁶⁶ Although the temple is dedicated to the god Amun, the king is nonetheless represented making offerings to a myriad of Egyptian gods (including the Theban triad of Amun, Mut, Khonsu), neatly organized, whenever applicable, according to the regions, whence their cult had originated. Altogether the walls of the sanctuary bear the representations of some 700 divinities from Upper and Middle Egypt, partaking in this pantheic festival.⁶⁷

Beholding these reliefs, one may not escape the impression that this assembly of divinities represented yet another imperial project, signaling yet another *modus* of Persian *ordering*, this time not organizing the Law of Moses, but the Egyptian pantheon. Again, this does not mean the Persians re-organized the cult of these divinities, altered their underlying beliefs, or theophanic projections, but that the Achaemenids, by dint of assembling these gods *en bloc* within a pantheic frame, had structured their relations with the king, incorporated them within the ideological frame of the empire,⁶⁸ an empire that in essence *thought and pronounced order*. A subtle imprint that symbolically was reminiscent of Ahuramazdā's act of cosmic ordering.

What is more, both in the case of the Exiles' return to Jerusalem, which on the basis of ravages inflicted to the region of Yehuda by the Neo-Babylonians still qualified under the early Teispids and Achaemenids as a post-collapse society (as has been persuasively interpreted most recently for the Benjamin region in Judaea),⁶⁹ and in the case of the Kharga Oasis, the empire was investing substantially in barren land, erecting sanctuaries and temples as part of a yet-to-be-defined

building program.⁷⁰ Surely, Darius' imperial engagement intended to pull the empire's hinterland into the empire's fold, but there is more. And that more seems to reflect Darius' desire to impress the empire's imprint also in the realm of the divine on its constituents, by contributing to its (future) revitalization through orderly excellence, that is, *fraša*-.⁷¹

Communicative Strategies

In a realm whose confines were redefined in terms of the Mazdean geography, whose religious landscape subtly and nimbly was ordered by Darius I to befit the idealized re-enactment of Ahuramazdā's cosmic ordering, we witness the emergence of a sophisticated communicative strategy, which aimed at accommodating the mental sensibilities of varied target groups. Indeed, the political discourse of the central authority is often cast in multiple molds, each directly composed for the benefit of a specific (aural) audience, whom the narrative deems as an exclusive silent interlocutor. On the face of it, compositional strategies geared toward individual audiences, whose intellectual makeup, in terms of political predisposition and/or mytho-epic affinities, the state's discourse would take into account, appears an expedient way to communicate with the realm's subjects. But, beyond the act of political expediency, one wonders whether this individuation process is akin to the ordering impetus we witness under Darius and the political system he lastingly forged. Indeed, one is tempted to conjecture that by reformulating the king's proclamations in the intellectual mold of the empire's subjects, the crown would also manifest its ordering presence in the realm of the woven words. As the investigation of this line of inquiry is beyond the scope of this study, in the following we shall merely provide a glimpse at the individuation process in Darius' communicative strategy.

The Bisotun Inscription

In the sixth century BCE, following the death of king Cambyses on his Egyptian campaign, the Achaemenid throne was held or seized by one or several individual(s), whose identity/ies remain(s) contested, as our main sources provide

conflicting information, before Darius I's own usurpation. Two different traditions report on the events following Cambyses' demise and Darius' accession.⁷² One is the Bisotun inscription itself, in which one magus (priest) called Gaumāta is depicted as the usurper who seized power by pretending to be the royal prince Bardiya, Cambyses' brother and heir.

The other tradition comprises the reports collected, among others by Herodotus and Pompeius Trogus, as captured in the Epitome by Justin, that attribute the usurpation of Cambyses' throne to two magi, eventually eliminated by Darius and his helpers. In the accounts of Herodotus and Justin, within each magian couple, we find one crown-bestower, Patizeithes in Herodotus, Oro-pastes in Justin; and one puppet-king, Smerdis and Mergis, respectively, who due to their physical resemblance to Bardiya, could be substituted for the defunct prince. As I have argued in extenso in prior publications,⁷³ the divergence between the two narratives, that is, the one reflected in the Bisotun inscription and the traditions captured by classical authors, are in reality two different redactions targeting each a specific audience. The text of the Bisotun inscription, couched in the literary tradition of the Ancient Near East, was targeting possibly a non-Iranian, Mesopotamian, audience, whereas the stories reflected in the writings of Herodotus, Aeschylus, and Hellanicus of Lesbos, among others, most likely represented the oral re-composition of the events by Darius I's scribes. In doing so, the latter had recourse to Iranian epic themes, which were best suited to make the story of Bardiya's murder – without Darius' role being revealed – believable to the larger Iranian population (*kāra*-) of the empire. This distribution is borne out by the structure of the Bisotun inscription. Indeed, it decisively distinguishes between three discrete conceptions: the *dipi*- ("inscription"); the *dipiciša*- ("transcript?"; Elamite *tuppi-me*); and the *haⁿdugā*- ("report"), as we may observe in table 4.

Here, the physical inscription itself is the *dipi*-, which not only can be read (*patiparsa*-), but also, as other passages indicate, is written (*ni-paiθa-/nipišta*-), may be seen (*vaina*-), and, what is more, may be destroyed (*vikan*-), and is in need of being preserved (*paribara*-). Aside from the *dipi*-, there is the *haⁿdugā*-, which unlike the *dipi*- may not be read or seen, but has to be reported, spoken of (*θaha*-). Clearly, it stands for the dissemination

Table 4

<i>dipi-</i> "inscription"	<i>vaina-</i> "see" <i>niyapaiθa-/nipišta-</i> "wrote; written" <i>patiparsa-</i> "read" (<i>naiy/mā</i>) <i>vikan-</i> "(not) destroy" <i>paribara-</i> "preserve"
<i>haⁿdugā-</i> "report"	(<i>naiy</i>) <i>apagaudaya-</i> (<i>naiy</i>) <i>kārahayā</i> <i>θaha-</i> "(not) conceal, (not) reveal to the <i>kāra-</i> " <i>xšnau-</i> "hear; listen"
* <i>dipiciça-</i> "transcript?"	<i>patišam kun-</i> "reproduce?" <i>ariyā utā pavastāyā utā carmā</i> * <i>grāfta-</i> <i>ah-</i> "captured (recorded) in Aryan, as well as on clay and on parchment" * <i>niyapaiθiya-</i> <i>utā patiyaθraθiya-</i> <i>paišiyā</i> * <i>mām</i> "written and read in my [= Darius'] presence" * <i>frāstāya-</i> "send out"

or oral retelling of Darius' narrative to an Iranian audience (*kāra-*). As we may observe in the following two passages:

θātiy dārayava^huš xšāyaθiya nūram θuvām varnavatām taya manā kṛtam avaθā kārahayā θādiy mā apagaudaya yadiy imām haⁿdugām naiy apagaudayāhāy kārahayā θāhāy A^huramazdā θuvām dauštā biyā utātaiy tau^hmā vasiy biyā utā dargam jīvā

King Darius says: now let what I have done convince you. Tell it thus to the people in arms, do not conceal it; if you were not to conceal this account from, and tell (it) to, the people in arms, (then) may Ahuramazdā be your friend, may you have a large progeny, and live long.

DB 4.52–57

θātiy dārayava^huš [xšāya]θiya yadiy imām haⁿdugām apagaudayāhāy naiy θāhāy [k]āra[hay]ā A^huramazdā<i>y jatā biyā utātaiy tau^hmā mā biyā

King Darius says: if you were to conceal this account from, and not tell (it) to, the people in arms, (then) may Ahuramazdā strike you, and may you not have any progeny."

DB 4.57–59

Darius admonishes against concealing (*apagaudaya-*) his story, and encourages people to retell it. One may argue that the third term **dipiciça-*, and its Elamite counterpart *tuppi-me* are also bound to express a distinct concept. What this latter nuance might be, ought to be inferred from the use of actions that are associated with the **dipiciça-* (or *tuppi-me*) in the famous paragraph 70 of the Old Persian variant, where we read:

*θātiy dārayava^huš xšāyaθiya vašnā A^huramazdāha ima *dipi[c]i[çam] taya adam akunavam patišam ariyā utā pavastāy[ā] utā carmā *grāftam āha *pat[i]šam[c]iy [*nāmanā]fam akunavam *pa[t]i[ç]a[m] *^hu[vādā[tam akuna]va[m] utā *niyapai[θ]i[ya u]tā patiyaθraθiya paišiyā mā[m] pasā[va] ima *dipi[ciça] m f[r]āstāyam vī[s]padā antar dahayā[v]a kāra *hamā-[t]axšatā*

Said Darius the king: by the greatness of Ahuramazdā this transcript/copy that I reproduced (replicated), was captured (recorded) in Aryan, as well as on clay and on parchment. I (also) replicated (thereupon) my signature, and reproduced my genealogy. It was both written and read in my presence; afterwards, this transcript/copy I sent out everywhere in the lands, where the people in arms were applying themselves (in my service?).

DB 4.88–92

It appears from the above context that **dipiciça-* is that which may be “captured (recorded)” on clay and parchment (*pavastā- utā carman-*), “written and read (loud) in the presence” of the king (*niyapaiθiya- utā patiyaθraθiya-*), and be “sent out” (**frāstāya-*) everywhere in the lands (*vispadā aⁿtar dahayāva*). Clearly, this **dipiciça-* ought to be a mobile document, and as such distinct from the inscription itself (*dipi-*) and its oral rendition (*haⁿdugā-*). As the Elamite etymon *tuppi-* implies, *tuppi-me* ought to be a written document, but one that could be duplicated from a *Vorlage*, and placed on different writing surfaces to be disseminated, but also one that could have required official authentication by dint of the king’s signature (**nāmanāfa-*), and genealogy (**huvādātam*), that were reproduced thereupon; in brief: a “transcript.”

In sum, the dissemination of the Bisotun narrative may have taken place on two levels: an oral Old Persian variant (*haⁿdugā-*) of the Bisotun inscription was circulated, and an Old Persian written transcript (**dipiciça-*) of the selfsame inscription, recorded on clay and parchment, sent to the four quarters of the empire. It was probably the oral *haⁿdugā-* that gave rise to the stories captured by our Greek sources, but since neither its content, nor that of the “other copy in Aryan,” are known to us, this remains merely an informed speculation.

Variants of Darius’ Stelae at Suez

Above, we have seen the Old Persian version of the extant four stelae erected by Darius at the “Suez” canal. The stelae, for which we do not possess a proper expression in Old Persian – the inscribed statues of Darius in Egypt DSⁿ and DS^{ab} are called *patikara- aθangaina-* “stone relief” that could have been appropriate, but is not otherwise attested – are a unique genre. They are not monumental inscriptions, referred to usually as *dipi-*, nor are they mobile objects, such as the **dipiciça-*, nor are they an oral report, the *haⁿdugā-*. The stelae permit to encapsulate simultaneously the royal proclamations in one structure that may be placed on the realm’s peripheries. Stelae introduced by Darius could display the royal narrative, simultaneously redacted in multiple languages, and cast in different literary traditions, for the reception of varied (and elusive) audiences:

the Old Persian variant possibly intended for the consumption of the Persian ethno-class in the provinces; the Egyptian variant, created for dissemination (maybe also as an oral composition based on the written transcript of the stelae) among Egyptian élites. It is thus not surprising that the little that survives from the hieroglyphic texts shows the adoption of Egyptian literary norms and traditions, in this case the narrative structure, as shown by Alan Lloyd who compares the structures of the two extant variants (both the Maskuta and the Kabret/Kubri texts) of the Suez stelae with the structure of the *Königsnovelle*.⁷⁴ This narrative structure established some time ago by Alfred Hermann (*Die ägyptische Königsnovelle*, 1938) has been described as follows: the story begins (1) with the king either having a dream, or his being informed in his palace of a matter of consequence; (2) the king’s plan meets with the enthusiastic approval of his courtiers; (3) the course of action proposed by the king is ordered; and (4) a short report is made.⁷⁵ This seems to be precisely the structure that Lloyd has established,⁷⁶ which we have reproduced below:

Darius was in his palace in Persia. The issue of a water link between Egypt and Persia was raised, the rationale being the delivery of tribute. Inspectors were required to go to Egypt in order to dig the canal and this was done. This made it possible for a fleet laden with goods/tribute to sail from Egypt to Persis. The texts then proceed to describe the praise for his achievement by princes and inspectors ... Darius then orders the achievement to be recorded on a stele.

Preliminary Conclusions

In the early years of Darius I, a number of policies and conceptions were instituted, which appear to have had a lasting impact on the constitution and self-definition of the Achaemenid world.

(1) Foremost among them was the concept of empire that, inspired by Mazdean thought and imaginary, marked the imperial space *xšaça-* as an expanse delimited by a network of waterways (rivers and salty seas) reflecting the material realization of cosmic rivers (such as Rañhā and Vanhī Dāitiā). In contrast to this political realm, the concept of *būmī- vazarkā- dūraiṇ apiy/haruvā- būmī-*, “the great earth far and wide/the whole

earth," lays claim to the whole inhabited world and is of a different ontological order, as it is predominantly associated with Ahuramazdā's cosmogonical acts of creation. It may be thus argued that beginning with Darius I's reign, the actuality of the realm (xšaça-) was perceived as being bound by the emanations of the cosmic rivers Raṇhā and Vaṇh^{vī} Dāitiā, while still maintaining an idealized claim over other climes/continents, the whole earth. The *haruvā- būmī-* may thus be akin to the totality of the (seven) continents, the *haptō.karšuuairī- zam-*, "the seven-partite earth," and the imperial space to the central clime, the X^{anira}θa, known from the Avestan/Zoroastrian traditions and geography.

(2) The imposition of a Mazdean geography could also indicate that the imperial confines were subjected to the subtle ordering hand of Ahuramazdā. Living according to Order appears to have had diverging implications for the realm's respective constituents: for the Mazdean man, it means following (*pari-ay-*) the law set down (*ni-štāya-*) by Ahuramazdā, to gain happiness (*šiyāta-*) in life (= in the material world), as well as (correctly) sacrificing (*yada-*) to Ahuramazdā – that is, according to the "Order in the Heights" (*artācā*) – in order to be eventually blessed in the afterlife as a follower of Order (*artavan-*); for the non-Mazdean citizens of the empire, the *homines imperialis*, they are held together by the ordering nature of the king's law (*dāta-*), and in this state may also experience happiness (*šiyāta-*). Since Ahuramazdā's law and the king's law appear to operate both as ordering agents, they are merely different *modi* of the selfsame cosmic Order, but for different audiences. It is the king's law that operates as an ordering hand (in codifying, assembling) in Judea and Egypt and bestows the nimble impress of the empire.

(3) The communicative strategies of a realm thus delimited and ordered by Darius I also appear endowed with the ability to espouse the intellectual perceptions/predispositions of local audiences by casting the royal discourse into their mental framework. Whether this individuation process in the compositions of the royal discourse is akin to the ordering mechanism we have seen in the religious landscape, by affecting also the realm of the woven words, we may suspect, but not clearly formulate at the present.

Notes

* A shorter version of this article, titled "Rethinking the Achaemenid World Order: The Imperial Space," will appear in *Entangled Worlds: Ancient Iran and the Classical Mediterranean* © 2027 J. Paul Getty Trust, www.getty.edu/publications.

1. Dan 2013: 83–121.
2. See Briant 2021: 49–78.
3. Rollinger 2020: 383–98; Rollinger 2021: 815–830; Rollinger and Degen 2021: 187–224.
4. Klinkott 2021; Klinkott 2022.
5. Hyland forthcoming.
6. See Wijnsma 2018: 160–61, table 1.
7. See Wijnsma 2018: 160–61, table 1.
8. Differently, see Wasmuth 2017: 229.
9. On the Scythian campaign of Darius, see Tuplin 2010: 281–312.

10. The Aryan space, is mentioned in sundry passages of the Avesta, among them in the Mihr Yašt, where Miθra approaches the gold-adorned top of Mount Harā, whence he gazes upon the entire Aryan abode (*vīspa- airiīō.šaiiana-*): *yō paoirīō zaraniō.pīsō/srīrā *barəšnauuō gərəβnāiti/aḍāt vīspəm ādiḍāiti/airiīō.šaiianəm səuiištō* "[Miθra] who as the first the gold-adorned/beautiful heights seizes/whence he looks upon the entire/Aryan abode, he (Miθra who is) the most rich in life-giving strength" (Yt.10.12–13). In a number of passages, among them, the *Vidēvdād* and the *Ābān Yašt* (Yašt 5.104) dedicated to *Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā*, the *yazata* associated with waters, the Aryan expanse is linked with the river Vaṇh^{vī} Dāitiā: *tqm yazata/yō ašəuuu zaraθuštrō/airiēne vaējahi vaṇhuiiā dāitiiaiīā*, "to her (Anāhitā) he sacrificed/Zaraθuštra, the orderly one/in the Aryan Expanse of the (river) Vaṇh^{vī} Dāitiā (the Good Lawful one)." In the *Vidēvdād* (V.1.2), the Aryan expanse is also qualified as Ahuramazdā's first creation: *paoirīm asaṇhəmca šōiθranəmca vahištəm frāθβərəsəm/azəm yō ahurō mazdā/airiianəm vaējō vaṇhuiiā dāitiiaiīā*, "as the best of places and abodes I first fashioned forth/I, Ahura Mazdā/the Aryan Expanse of the (river) Vaṇh^{vī} Dāitiā (the Good Lawful one)." The unpublished Avestan texts used and cited in this essay have been generously placed at my disposal by Prods Oktor Skjærvø.

11. For the Yasna 57, see Kellens 2011: 80–81; Hintze 2000: 281; Kreyenbroek 1985: 34–37; and Dehghan 1982: 25–26. For the Pahlavi exegesis and translation of the Yasna 57, see Kreyenbroek 1985, and Dehghan 1982.

12. For recent editions of the *Zamyād Yašt*, see Hintze 1994; Pirart 1992; and Humbach and Ichaporia 1998.

13. On this passage, see Hintze 1994: 346–52; and Pirart 1992: 106–108.

14. Yt. 10.15.

15. The text follows the edition of Pakzad 2005.

16. In the *Ābān Yašt* (Yašt 5.3), *Anāhitā* is compared to a great, roaring river that one may hear from afar, as large a body of water as all the other rivers together (*yā asti auuauuaiti masō/yaθa vīspa imā āpō/yā *zəmā paiti frataciṇti*, “who [Anāhitā] is as much in extent as all these waters, which flow forth around the earth”); she flows from Mount Hukairiia to the Vourukaša Sea (*yā amauuaiti frataciti/hukairiāṭ haca barəzaṇhaṭ/aoi zraiiō vouru.kašəm*, “who [Anāhitā] flows forth forcefully, away from the tall Hukairiia, to the Vourukaša Sea”); Yt.5.3 (= Y.65.3).

17. See Yarshater 1983: 352.

18. The text follows the edition by Gignoux and Tafazzoli 1993.

19. In the *Vidēvdād* (V.5.19), the relation of the Pūitikā and Vourukaša Sea are clearly described in the following terms: *yaoždiia taciṇti āpō/zraiiāṇhaṭ haca Pūitikāṭ/auui zraiiō vouru.kašəm*, “the waters to be purified flow/from the Pūitikā Sea/toward the Vourukaša Sea.”

20. On the three salt seas in the later Zoroastrian traditions, see *Bundahišn* 10.7–9; 10.14–15; *Wizdagihā ī Zādspram* 3.17–21: *zrēh ī Frāxkerd ud ō bē 3 baxšihist u-š 3 zrēh aziš būd xwānihēd Pūydiḡ ud *Kamīrōd ud Syāw-bun*, “the Frāxkerd (Vourukaša) Sea was split in three, and from it emerged three seas that were Pūydiḡ, Kamīrōd, and Syāw-bun”; and *Vidēvdād* 5.19. See Boyce 1975: 45; Moazami 2014: 137; and Agostini and Thrope, 2020: 137.

21. See Shayegan 2011: 247–57.

22. Compare the still pertinent, but diverging, remarks of Herrenschildt 1976: 43–44, who ascribes a duality of references to *būmī*-, both “earth” and “empire”: “Dans le corpus vieux-perse, il y a deux preuves à mon interprétation de ‘*būmi*’ en ‘empire’. La première, ressentie par Émile Benveniste, consiste en la qualification par *vazraka* de la ‘terre’ dans le titre qui nous préoccupe ; ‘roi sur cette grande terre’ ... La seconde preuve est l’emploi de la ‘terre’, toujours *būmi*, dans un contexte bien connu où apparaît d’ordinaire le ‘royaume’ (*xšaça*).” See also Frye 1977: 75–78, who refutes a political definition of the term *būmī*-, see also Calmeyer 1982–83: 105–187, pls. 16–24; 141–222.

23. Old Persian texts follow mostly the edition minor by Schmitt 2009, with diverging numbering.

24. This was still known to Ammianus Marcellinus (22.8.28), who also refers to Ptolemy’s ‘Pā as “R(h)a”’: Huic R(h)a vicinus est amnis in cuius superciliis

quaedam vegetabilis eiusdem nominis gignitur radix proficiens ad usus multiplicis medelarum.

25. See Liverani 2017: 91–98; Liverani 2010: 240; and Rollinger 2021.

26. See Posener 1936: 48–87; Wasmuth 2017: 125–86; and Colburn 2019: 158–61.

27. See Tuplin 2010: 294–98.

28. Hdt. 4.87.2.

29. Hdt. 4.91.2.

30. The base of this stela seems to have been extant in the early twentieth century as reported by Eckhard Unger (Unger and Weissbach 1915: 10, 13), who was able to localize it in the vicinity of Pınarhisar (Bunar Hissar): “... [die] drei Quellen von Jene oder Jenno, eine Stunde nordwestlich von Bunar Hissar, die einen bedeutenden Ruf in der ganzen Umgegend genießen und in vollstem Maße verdienen. Sie liegen nahe beieinander und direkt an der Heeresstraße des Perserkönigs. Die größte Quelle, Bökük Kamera genannt, ist eine Doppelquelle”; and “Die Ostquelle, welche im Altertum als die bedeutendere gelten mochte, hat noch jetzt in der Mitte der Nordeinfassung den Sockel einer Stele in ursprünglicher Lage ... Der Sockel ist 0,69 m lang, 0,40 m breit und 0,20 m dick ... das Material ist, wie das der anderen Steine ... der im Orte anstehende Muschelkalk.” In addition, a cuneiform inscription was reported a half a century before by General Jochmus (Jochmus 1854: 44), who was told of an ancient Assyrian (اسکی صوریائی) inscription with letters in the shape of nails: “the mysterious inscription in letters described as resembling ‘nails’ could not be found.” See also West 1985: 296; and Tuplin 2010: 295.

31. Of different opinion, see Schmitt 1988: 36.

32. On the Old Persian stela fragment and its discovery, see Kuznetsov and Nikitin 2017: 154–59; Avram 2018/19: 169–78; Kuznetsov and Nikitin 2019: 1–7; Tsatskhladze 2018: 71–76; Rung and Gabelko 2019: 83–125; Shavarebi 2019: 1–15; Avram 2019: 15–24; Schmitt 2019: 34–49; and Tsatskhladze 2019: 113–51; more recently, also Avram 2022: 75–108; Kuznetsov 2023: 59–84; and Tsatskhladze 2023: 1–27.

33. The reading of the fragment follows Schmitt 2019.

34. On the Roman Chronicle and the Getty Table, including an English translation of the relevant passages, see more recently, Rotstein 2016: 58–66. For English translations of the Roman Chronicle and the Getty Table, see Burgess and Kulikowski 2013: 309–10, col. B, l. 8 (Roman Chronicle); and Burstein 1984: 157–58, 161–62 (Getty Table). For a more recent German translation, see Montenegro 2004: 279–88. On the Getty Table, and the definitive resolution of the date of

Darius' Cimmerian campaign, see Burstein 1984: 160–61, ll. IIB 32–37: “In *FGrH* 252 B8 the assassination of Hipparchus, the brother of the Athenian tyrant Hippias (514), and Darius I's Scythian campaign are both dated to the year 513/12. The Getty *Tabula Iliaca* proves that this puzzling entry ... is merely the result of Cutter d's arbitrary combination of two separate entries from his source, the original *Chronicon Romanum*. This discovery eliminates from the *Chronicon Romanum* one of the principal chronological errors ascribed to it on the basis of *FGrH* 252 B.16. The solitary kappa in line 37, which was cut directly under the eta of ἔτη in line 36, is all that Cutter d inscribed on the Getty *Tabula Iliaca* of what clearly was the *Chronicon Romanum*'s date for Darius I's Scythian expedition ΦΚΗ = 513/12.” Still of import is the study of the Roman Chronicle by Sadurska 1964: 78–83, who – like Balcer 1972: 128, before Burstein's publication of the Getty Table – interpreted Darius' crossing of the Cimmerian Bosphorus as a misinterpretation of the king's traversing the Thracian Bosphorus: “le Bosphore de Thrace a été défini erronément comme Cimmérien.” For the passage of the Getty Table referring to Darius' Scythian expedition, on the basis of Burstein's reading (158), see below:

Ἀφ' οὗ Ἀρμόδιος καὶ Ἀριστογεί-
των Ἰππαρχὸν τὸν τύραννον
ἀνείλαν, ἔτη.
Ἀφ' οὗ Δαρεῖος ἐπὶ Σκύθας ἐ-
στρατεύσεν, ἔτη κ.

From the time Harmodius and Aristogeiton
killed Hipparchus, the tyrant, years.
From the time Darius campaigned
against the Scythians, years, 20.

35. Avram 2018/19: 181–82.

36. See Rollinger and Degen 2021a: 188–89, 205–7; and Rollinger 2021: 825.

37. See Rollinger and Degen 2021a: 193–97.

38. It is noteworthy that at least in the epic tradition, such as in the *Šāhnāme*, *daryā* signifies both “sea” and “river”; for example, the Yellow (or Yangtze) river is referred to as the *daryā-ye Čīn* and the Indus and Nile rivers are called, respectively, *daryā-ye Sind* and *daryā-ye Nīl*; Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988: 177, v. 202; and Wolff 1965: 377–78. Of interest is also the mention of *daryā-ye Baykand* (دریای بیکنند), which refers to the city of Pokent by the Zarafšān river, a former tributary of the Oxus; for the reference in the *Šāhnāme*, see Khaleghi-Motlagh 1988: 327, v. 18, n. 22.

39. Not only do we have an incomplete comprehension of the Achaemenid religions, in spite of

new documentation and research that has markedly enriched our knowledge (Henkelman 2008), and dedicated symposia on the question (Henkelman and Redard 2017), but also, furthermore, we lack an adequate comprehension of the relation (if any) of the Achaemenid Mazdeism with extant Avestan recitatives, which were composed between the latter half of the second millennium to the first half of the first millennium BCE.

40. See Frei 1995: 1–35; Frei 1996: 5–31; Rüterswörden 1995: 47–61; Wiesehöfer 1995: 36–46; Kuhrt 2000: 257–79; Briant 2000: 235–45; Kuhrt 2007: 117–42; Schmid 2007: 23–38.

41. YH 37.1.

42. For the expression *artācā barzmaniy*, with *artācā* < **artā hacā* (corresponding to Av. *ašāt hacā*), and *barzmaniy(a)* as loc. sing. in -i(y) or in -iā, see Skjærvø 1999: 28, 41–43. For a different interpretation of *artācā barzmaniy* as related to *rtu*– “rechte (Opfer-)Zeit,” and a stipulated adjective *brazmaniya*– “mit rechtem Zeremoniell,” compare Schmitt 2014: 214 and 154; also, the convincing critics of Skjærvø 2011: 327–28. More recently, following Schmitt, see Kellens 2017: 16–17.

43. XPh 46–56.

44. Compare also Schmitt 2009: 168, n. 53; and Schmitt 2014: 146, who emendates this to **pariyaiti*.

45. On the form *ava^harda* < *hard* “leave” + *ava-*, see Skjærvø 1999: 48; compare also Schmitt 2009: 104, n. 59; and Schmitt 2014: 235–36, who assumes a form *rad* “leave” unattested in Old Iranian.

46. On the importance of the rich Persepolitan glyptic material, which does not constitute the subject of the present study, see more recently, Garrison 2018: in particular 15–116; see also Henkelman 2008: 65–179.

47. See Henkelman 2008: 305–84; Skjærvø 2005: 53–54.

48. See Razmjou 2004: 103–17; Henkelman 2017a: 273–346.

49. See de Miroschedji 1985: 292–96; de Miroschedji 1990: 69–72; de Miroschedji 2003: 34–36; Stronach 1997: 37–39, 49; and Stronach 2019: 46–66; Henkelman 2008: 41–57; Henkelman 2011: 584; and Tavernier 2011: 243.

50. See Gaspa 2017: 172.

51. The Avestan corpus consists of two chronologically distinct groups of compositions: The Old Avesta, which is commonly dated to the second half of the second millennium BCE, and consists of ritual metric texts (the *Gāthās*) and the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti* written in archaic rhythmic prose; and the Younger Avesta, which contains a great variety of compositions, such as hymns to individual deities (*Yašts*), prayers and litanies,

religious and legal texts, as well as mythical narratives, that are deemed to have been composed slightly before the Achaemenid inscriptions. These two bodies of compositions were compiled to form two liturgical collections, possibly by the Achaemenid period, that were used as recitatives in rituals. The most important of these liturgical recitatives, the long liturgy, which is referred to as the standard *yasna*, was used in this unified ceremony in praise of Ahuramazdā and other divine entities, worthy of sacrifice; see Kellens 2012b: 553–54: “L’Avesta que nous possédons n’est pas une mosaïque hasardeuse de ‘writings,’ mais la juxtaposition de deux liturgies, l’une longue et unitaire, l’autre morcelée en rites mineurs. La première est savamment agencée afin de produire un sens déterminé et elle est ancienne. Il arrive que les textes avestiques eux-mêmes en dépeignent le cursus et il semble qu’elle ait eu pour aboutissement doctrinal l’élaboration du calendrier théonymique, qui donne sa structure au recueil des liturgies brèves (surtout les *Yašts*). Le récitatif de la liturgie longue est lui aussi une anthologie. Son assemblage a consisté à souder, dans une visée ritualiste précise, des textes d’âge et, peut-être, d’écoles diverses.”

52. See Cantera 2014: 6 (and 64): “on a obtenu une image de la liturgie longue beaucoup plus riche que celle que nous avons auparavant. Elle apparaît comme une liturgie avec un bon nombre des variantes qui présentent des variations significatives par rapport à la forme basique, la cérémonie quotidienne qu’on appelle le *Yasna*.” Also Kellens 2012b: 554.

53. See Kellens 1998: 451–519; Kellens 2012a: 49–58; Kellens 2012b: 551–58; Kellens 2017; Cantera 2014; Cantera 2017: 21–68.

54. See Kellens 2012b: 557; Kellens 2017: 15.

55. There is a capacious quality to the first seven chapters of the standard *Yasna*, the *vīspe āšahe ratuuō* “all the *ratus* of Order (*aša-*),” where all the *yazatas* “divine beings worthy of sacrifice” and *ratus* “prototypes; models,” are enumerated at the beginning of the long liturgy with sacrificial times and texts that have been ascribed to them with the expression: *niuuāēdaiiemi haṇkāraiemi (daθušō ahurahe mazdā)* ... “I announce and organize (the sacrifice of Ahura Mazdā who has put all in place) on account of ...” (Y.1.3–18); see Kellens 2006.

56. Collins 2017: 52–61.

57. Schmid 2007: 32; and Kiel 2017: 323–45.

58. Collins 2017: 61.

59. Agut-Labordère 2018: 359–77; and Colburn 2018: 86–114.

60. See Agut-Labordère 2016: 324–25; and Colburn 2019: 95–130.

61. See Lloyd 2007: 107–11; and Cruz-Urbe 2008: 73–82.

62. Wasmuth 2017: 225–39, esp. 238: “Alle hier relevanten Teile der Dekoration sind unumstritten peserzeitlich und im Namen Darius erstellt.”

63. See Wuttman 2001: 109–36, esp. 134: “la présence de vestiges datés du V^e siècle avant J.-C. ... nous incite, dans l’état de nos travaux, à formuler l’hypothèse de l’implantation quasi simultanée, à l’époque perse, de l’essentiel du réseau.”; Rossi and Ikram 2018: 510–21.

64. See Darnell 2007: figs. 1–2; Darnell, Klotz, and Manassa 2013: 1–31; Agut-Labordère 2016: 324; and Colburn 2018: 96–97.

65. For Darius’ relief on the Western Wall of the Hibis Temple, Room L, see Davies 1953: pl. 26.

66. See Cruz-Urbe 1988: 1–43; Davies 1953: pls. 2–5; and Colburn 2019: 114–23.

67. See Sternberg-el Hotabi 1994: 238–54.

68. See Colburn 2019: 122–23; and Zivie-Coche 2008: esp. 8: “Thus the Egyptian pantheon, or at least a large part of it, was brought together on the walls of the cella of the Amun temple at Hibis. The naos was, in effect, conceived of as a microcosmos wherein the gods of Egypt were gathered and the yearly rebirth of Osiris celebrated.” Of different opinion is Kessler 2003: 213: “Ich glaube deswegen auch, dass die topographische Auflistung der Götterformen im Sanktuar keine theologische Zusammenfassung im Kontext einer Amunreligion darstellt und kein theologisches Handbuch sein soll; auch ist sie inhaltlich für mich keine spezifische Neuerung der Perserzeit.”

69. On Jerusalem representing a post-collapse society, see Schniedewind 2019: 106–16.

70. See Wuttman 2001: 135.

71. On the concept of *fraša-* as referring to the eschatological idea of renewal and rejuvenation of existence (*ahūm frašəm kar-*), see Lincoln 2012: 189–201; Skjærvø 2005: 79.

72. Shayegan 2020: 137–38.

73. Shayegan 2012; and Shayegan 2020: 137–67.

74. See Lloyd 2007: 101–4.

75. Jansen-Winkeln 1993: 102: “Die Geschichte kann z.B. beginnen, indem der König einen Traum hat, oder ihm werden (im Palast) Botschaften gebracht oder Meldungen erstattet, er breitet während einer Thronsetzung einen Plan aus, dem die Höflinge dann begeistert zustimmen, gelegentlich aber auch widersprechen, wobei sich später freilich herausstellt, wie recht der König hatte, es kommt mithin oftmals zu Dialogen, die in einem Lobpreis des Königs durch sein Gefolge enden können, darauf folgt die Ausführung des Befehls

oder Plans, die teils ausführlich geschildert, teils knapp berichtet wird." See also Spalinger 2011: 363.

76. Lloyd 2007: 102.

Abbreviations – Inscriptions

DB	Darius, Bisotun
DE	Darius, Elvand
DH	Darius, Hamadan
DHa	Darius, Hamadan, a
DNa	Darius, Naqš-e Rostam, a
DPe	Darius, Persepolis, e
DPh	Darius, Persepolis, h
DSb	Darius, Susa, b
DSe	Darius, Susa, e
DSn ^a	Darius, Statue Fragment (at the Louvre), a
DZc	Darius, Suez, c
XPh	Xerxes, Persepolis, h

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On the Early History of the Image of Mithra in the Indo-Iranian Borderlands

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The study of the development of divine iconography has important implications at various levels, from the history of art to that of religions. This is especially true of the ancient Iranian world and the regions that were in contact with some of its areas both in the West and the East, due to the scarcity of written sources. Visual evidence, therefore, plays a crucial role, although it requires an awareness of the problems involved, meaning a specific approach to its study that includes a proper assessment of the contexts as well as of the methodological issues we face.

Needless to say, these considerations cannot be disconnected from the objective limits of the documentary basis nowadays available, even in simple quantitative terms. While these difficulties generally confine our analyses to a merely descriptive or classificatory approach, occasionally the evidence connected to some specific figures allows us to trace, at least in broad terms, a real history of these images, that is to say, it enables us to follow the iconographic development of a given subject over time. One such instance is certainly offered by the figure of Mithra, due to the wide popularity of this god in the entire Iranian or Iranized world, which is visually documented from Commagene to the Indo-Iranian borderlands across a time span extending from the last century before the Common Era to the Sasanian period and beyond. The following note is therefore offered with the aim of sketching a coherent picture of the iconographic history of the figure of Mithra up to the Sasanian period, with a special focus on the areas between ancient Bactria and the Indian Northwest, now conventionally referred to in the literature as the Indo-Iranian borderlands.

In light of the phases of Sasanian dominance in the East, which at times unified important regions in the eastern part of the Iranian world with its westernmost provinces, it is worthwhile to start from the end of the chronological spectrum covered here, and from the West, that is to say, from the Sasanian evidence. For this material, we have no serious problems in the identification of the images for various reasons, and it can therefore provide a firmer point of departure. It is a well-known fact, commonly observed in the scholarly literature,¹ that Sasanian Iran attests to a double tradition in the depiction of Mithra, or, in other words, to the coexistence of two distinct iconographic traditions. While he is always shown with a conspicuous rayed halo around the head, the god may be portrayed either bearded or beardless, with juvenile features.² The first image, that of the official imperial art, is attested by coinage and by a single appearance in rock reliefs. Coins of Öhrmazd I (271/2–273 CE)³ depict the bearded Mithra standing beside a fire altar, offering a ring to the king of kings,⁴ and the same scene was copied from Öhrmazd by his namesake, the kušānšāh Öhrmazd, for coins struck in Marv.⁵ Outside of coinage, the bearded Mithra is notoriously depicted, in an isolated instance, at Tāq-e Bostān, where he appears in a secondary role in a relief, variously attributed to Šābuhr II or Ardashīr II, celebrating the Sasanian victory over the Roman emperor Julian.⁶ In both instances, the image of the god is distinctly Sasanian-looking due to features such as beard and hairstyle, as well as to the clothing, with tunic and long trousers well in evidence.

The other version of Mithra, clearly derived

from the image of Helios, is known from a few seals, which depict the god either as a bust or in a chariot drawn by horses.⁷ Among the former cases, one example is accompanied by an inscription explicitly referring to the image as “Mihr the god.”⁸ In another instance, the deity is shown emerging from a mountain, which is thought to symbolize Mount Harā.⁹

Moving to the East, a comparable dichotomy may be observed in the evidence coming from the region of the so-called Indo-Iranian borderlands, despite the different range of media in which the images that we can consider have reached us. The beardless, juvenile version of the god deriving from the image of Helios is prominent in Kušān imperial art, commonly found on gold and copper coins on which he is explicitly named in Bactrian,¹⁰ and also known from a seal impression discovered in the early 2000s at Kafir Kala, near Samarkand.¹¹ The prehistory of this image of the god is represented by the depiction of Helios on Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins, namely the tetradrachms of the Graeco-Bactrian king Plato, on which Helios appears in two different types, that is, on a quadriga, and simply standing with a scepter,¹² as well as the bronzes of the Indo-Greek king Philoxenus, which redeployed the type introduced by Plato with the standing god.¹³ Helios is also found in a full-length portrait with Selene on Indian drachms of the late Indo-Greek king Telephus.¹⁴ Coinage further attests to a Helios-looking solar deity in a Saka context, with the tetradrachms and drachms of Maues that depict a god on a chariot with a rayed halo around the head.¹⁵

The bearded version of the figure of Mithra is instead attested, after a solitary occurrence on the so-called reliquary of Kaniška,¹⁶ on Kušāno-Sasanian coins. Apart from the already mentioned series of the kušānšāh Ōhrmazd from Marv, the most striking image of the god is certainly that found on bronzes of Ardaxšīr at the beginning of the Kušāno-Sasanian series (fig. 1).¹⁷ On these coins, Mithra is expressly identified according to Kušān practice by the Bactrian legend BAŌ MIYPO, which accompanies the image of the enthroned deity offering a diadem to the ruler portrayed on the obverse.

The god, who sits on an unusually high-backed throne with side arms, is depicted in a nearly frontal three-quarter view, only slightly turned to his left, i.e., the right for the observer. With

his outstretched right arm, he offers the diadem, whose large ties hang from the hand. His left hand rests on the hilt of a sword held vertically before his legs. A conspicuous rayed halo surrounds the diademed head, which is framed on either side by two large hair bunches, while one of the diadem ties, engraved with the typically Sasanian ribbing, is visible falling beside the deity's right shoulder. The figure wears a long-sleeved tunic and a cloak fastened at the shoulder, as well as Sasanian-style trousers, with their peculiar fine lateral pleats visible only on the right side of the legs.¹⁸ Also characteristic of Sasanian imagery are the ribbons tied at the ankles,¹⁹ which are found even in the royal image on the obverse of this series.

No direct antecedent of this image can be found in either the Kušān or Sasanian coin series, but enthroned deities are not unknown in the numismatic repertoire of the region. One of them is a bearded god with a halo of rays that had appeared long before on the coins of the Indo-Greek kings Amyntas and Hermaeus, respectively ruling c. 95–90 and 90–70 BCE.²⁰ Two versions of the image of the god are attested, one depicting only the bust, turned to the right, which is found on coins of both kings;²¹ and one portraying the god full-length, seated on a throne, known only from coins of Hermaeus and their posthumous imitations.²² Yet this deity, who is universally reputed to be Mithra,²³ in addition to the rays around the head, also prominently wears a pointed soft cap with earflaps,²⁴ an iconographic feature that provides an unmistakable key for the identification. This is not the case for other images deemed to render the iconographic assimilation of Mithra to Zeus, such as the figure of Zeus on coins of Heliocles I,²⁵ later re-deployed by his namesake Heliocles II,²⁶ to which a halo of rays is commonly ascribed due to the presence of pointed strokes around the god's head. When other Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek divine figures that clearly display a rayed halo, such as Helios on bronzes of Philoxenus,²⁷ are examined side by side with images of gods that certainly were not rayed, such as Heracles,²⁸ it can be seen that the pointed strokes, when present, are more likely to represent the leaves of the laurel wreaths often worn by various deities.²⁹ Therefore, the only real candidate for identification with Mithra in the East before the Kušān period is the figure with rays and pointed cap on the coins of Amyntas and Hermaeus.³⁰

We owe to Frantz Grenet and Michael Shenkar



Fig. 1a. Göbl 1984 type MK 1114 (reverse), zeno.ru object no. 69915.



Fig. 1b. Graphic reconstruction of Göbl 1984 MK 1114 (reverse). Image: author.

the most recent attempts at providing a real history of the iconographic development of this imagery.³¹ Despite the distinct approaches in their respective studies, both largely focused on the East for various reasons,³² starting with the differences in the available documentary evidence compared to western Iran.³³ I will very briefly summarize their interpretations here, leaving aside, for the most part, the Kušān numismatic evidence,³⁴ since the names that regularly accompany the depictions of gods on the coins of Kaniška and Huviška leave no room for doubt in the identifications.

After drawing attention to the figure of Apollo that appears on bronze coins struck in Susa by the Arsacid king Artabanus (Artabān) in 126/5 BCE,³⁵ and also including in his discussion the Commagenian Mithra-Apollo-Helios-Hermes,³⁶ Grenet mainly focused on the opposition between the Apollonian imagery of Mithra found in both western and eastern Iran³⁷ and that of a different nature attested in the East. He detected a Jovian characterization of the iconography of Mithra in the employment of features normally associated with Zeus – i.e., beard and throne – for the figure of the Iranian god appearing on Indo-Greek coins. This mirrored a process of adaptation of the image of Zeus to that of Mithra, which perhaps could be connected to a particularly high position of

Mithra – indeed, the supreme position normally occupied by Ahura Mazdā in Zoroastrianism – in eastern Iran.³⁸ The combined presence of beard and throne in the image of the Kušāno-Sasanian *Bago Miuro* was therefore interpreted as the identifying mark of a *reappearance*, with the Kušāno-Sasanian figure representing the resurfacing after the Kušān period of the old Jovian Mithra of Indo-Greek derivation.³⁹

These eastern developments had additional relevance in the reconstruction provided by Grenet, due to the impact that, in his view, they had on western Iran, as it is the bearded Jovian Mithra from Bactria that was deemed to represent the possible original source for the bearded Mithra of Sasanian official art.⁴⁰ The Jovian Mithra would have survived, alongside the juvenile version of the god found on Kušān coins, through the entire Kušān epoch up to the third century CE, thanks to cult statues inherited from the Greek period. Then, under the Kušāno-Sasanians, in addition to appearing openly as *Bago Miuro*, Mithra also became involved in a complex process of syncretism that produced the figure of *burzāwand yazad*,⁴¹ in which some of his Jovian iconographic traits were merged with features originating in the imagery of Oesho.⁴²

While Grenet, in any case, ascribed a Greek origin to both the Apollonian solar type and the

Jovian one,⁴³ Shenkar's different approach emphasized other factors.⁴⁴ He first observed that no Parthian image of Mithra is known, in accordance with the "almost complete absence of depictions of Iranian deities in Arsacid Iran".⁴⁵ He then moved to the Sasanian period, first dwelling on the rayed figure in the investiture scene on the coins of Ōhrmazd I, which he considered a borrowing from nearly contemporary Roman coins minted in Samosata that depict Sol.⁴⁶ Shenkar's interpretation reposed on a study by Rika Gyselen concerning the propaganda war between Rome and Sasanian Iran attested by coins of the middle of the third century CE.⁴⁷

Following that, Sasanian glyptic production was examined, with special attention to the motif of Mithra riding in his solar chariot,⁴⁸ for which direct reference was made to Bernard Goldman's proposal that the Sasanians imported this originally Western Asian motif from eastern Roman provinces.⁴⁹ Thus, Shenkar ascribed a crucial role to Roman contributions to the iconography of the western Iranian Mithra – actually meaning the *Sasanian* Mithra, for in his view Parthian images of the god did not exist – as explicitly acknowledged in his discussion of the image of the god on the coinage of Ōhrmazd I, which was said to have been "created in Sasanian official art based on contemporary images of Sol on Roman provincial coins."⁵⁰ In this connection, it is worth noting that Shenkar, in contrast to the seal images, emphasized the presence of the beard in the depiction of Mithra at Tāq-e Bostān.⁵¹

An analogous emphasis on the Roman element in the Graeco-Roman contribution to the iconography of Mithra is found in Shenkar's interpretation of the evidence from the East, in particular with regard to Kušān images. This allowed him to correctly point out, contrary to previous views, that the Kušān Mithra has no resemblance to the Indo-Greek images.⁵² After mentioning the unusual Mithra of the so-called Kaniška reliquary, the discussion of the Kušāno-Sasanian Bago Miuro essentially followed the lines of Grenet's proposals, as the composition with the enthroned deity, altogether absent from Sasanian (official) art, was thought to reflect a local tradition connected to the existence of statues of Mithra kept in Bactrian temples.⁵³ A significant difference, however, is that Shenkar underlined how, while features of Bago Miuro such as the sword belong to the typical attributes of Mithra as found on Kušān coins,

the dress, pose, and hairstyle of the deity are distinctly Sasanian.⁵⁴

My proposal here is to suggest another general reconstruction, with some points of contact with both the interpretations summarized above, as well as some differences. A preliminary question that must be dealt with concerns Parthian Iran, also due to the impact it has on the discussion of the developments during the Sasanian period. While I examine the Parthian evidence in detail elsewhere,⁵⁵ it must be stressed that Shenkar's rejection of a pre-Sasanian history of the image of Mithra – and of any Iranian god⁵⁶ – in western Iran has crucial consequences. In fact, as already observed by Grenet, Parthian images of Apollo/Helios do exist,⁵⁷ and among them we can even find the direct antecedent of the rayed bust attested in Sasanian glyptics.⁵⁸ The approach followed by Shenkar would translate into identifying the nameless Helios bust of the Parthian period as the *Greek* Helios, and the same image of the Sasanian period as Mithra. Now, this is not impossible in theory, but one must then be ready to admit that the Sasanian depictions featuring the rayed figure without a name may also depict Helios instead of Mithra, since they exhibit nothing distinctly Iranian. Yet this possibility is – correctly, in my view – dismissed on account of the very context of these images. Put simply, this means that, since these Helios-looking busts were produced within a Sasanian context, they cannot portray the Greek god and must therefore be identified as depictions of the Iranian deity. It is not difficult to see that this approach might easily be assimilated to circular reasoning: the iconography is interpreted on the basis of the idea that the religious background is Zoroastrian, and the Zoroastrian character of the background is indicated by the presence of images of Iranian gods. However, in our analyses, that of *context* is not merely a theoretical notion, an accessory concept of secondary importance – it is a crucial element. Therefore, the reasoning is in no way circular but, to all intents and purposes, perfectly linear: a Zoroastrian religious context produces images that, in the first instance – that is, in the absence of proof to the contrary – must be interpreted within a Zoroastrian background, regardless of their appearance.⁵⁹ The question is then why, when dealing with Parthian evidence, we cannot consider the context in terms similar to those that we employ for our discussions of Sasanian

images. Actually, Shenkar has an answer for this question: that we do not really know what the Parthian religious tradition was, and that “there is no reason to think that ... Greek deities had not become an integral part of the religious life of the Parthian elite.”⁶⁰ Leaving aside the fact that these statements remain, *de facto*, mere assumptions,⁶¹ which cannot be discussed in detail here, what we shall focus on here are the consequences that this approach has for our topic. Indeed, in Shenkar’s own words, the Sasanian official Mithra was created based on a *Roman* image of Sol from the third century CE, which is a conclusion full of implications, as can be easily understood: one is left to wonder what the image of Mithra in Sasanian official art would have looked like had Gallienus not used that of Sol on the coins he struck in Samosata. It must be stressed here that the reconstruction proposed by Rika Gyselen of a sort of “war of images” between Rome and the Sasanians in the third century is based on the employment of similar depictions on coins from both empires, which is set in the framework of a Sasanian reaction against Roman visual propaganda. Yet this in no way implies that the iconography of the Sasanian deities depicted in the coinage of Ōhrmazd was *invented* in those circumstances on the basis of Roman images.⁶² Actually, all the elements of the images depicted on these coins were already known earlier, starting with the investiture scenes employed in Sasanian art right from the beginning, in essential continuity with Arsacid practices.⁶³ Furthermore, the Sasanians had provided their religious images with a clearly Sasanian appearance since the time of Ardašīr I, i.e., several decades before Ōhrmazd, in a process that essentially meant clothing them *à la sassanide* taking inspiration from the iconography of the king, as Shenkar rightly repeatedly emphasized in his book.⁶⁴ So why revert to a Roman image of Sol when they had in Iran a local tradition of depicting Helios inherited from their Parthian predecessors? Seen from this point of view, what most likely happened is that the Sasanian official iconography “Sasanized” the image of Helios – ultimately Greek in origin – which it inherited from the preceding Parthian period, rather than the image of the Roman Sol.⁶⁵ In light of this, the question that really has to be formulated is if the Sasanians were “Sasanizing” wholly *foreign* gods – although Greek rather than Roman – in order to project them as Iranian gods, or if they were

merely “updating” western Iranian religious iconography, as they did with the royal one to characterize and distinguish their visual communication. Opting for the first solution would mean that a given Helios-looking image from western Iran ought to be identified with the Greek god if dated to 223 CE, and with Mithra if dated to 225 CE or later. In my view, this is hardly tenable, even discounting the evidence that openly runs against this approach.⁶⁶ Therefore, the anthropomorphic rendering of Iranian – in this instance meaning Zoroastrian – gods in western Iranian visual culture, which resulted from the transmission of Greek religious iconography, must be considered an already accomplished fact in Parthian times.

The process of adoption of features of royal iconography by Sasanian divine figures is especially evident in the East, with the “Sasanization” of divine images whose earlier, pre-Sasanian history is well documented. This is eminently exemplified by the Kušāno-Sasanian visual updating of the Kušan Oesho, who acquired trousers, tunic, beard, and hairstyle previously unknown in the originally Indian iconography of this god. Indeed, it is this general process that explains the appearance of the Kušāno-Sasanian enthroned Mithra, i.e., Bago Miuro.⁶⁷ However, the depiction of Bago Miuro is not the result of a simple Sasanian re-clothing of a locally derived image; it is an image imported in its entirety from western Iran, in particular from western Iranian *royal* imagery. The sword held vertically before the legs is a common feature of Sasanian imperial art (fig. 2a), including in depictions of the king of kings, such as that of Sarāb-e Bahrām or Bīšāpūr VI (fig. 2b).

As a matter of fact, this iconographic formula is the product of a longer history that extends well back into the Parthian period, as eminently shown by the early first-century CE standing figure of the Indo-Scythian satrap Zeiōnisēs/Jihonika (fig. 2c)⁶⁸ on some of his coins: he holds his weapon in precisely the same manner later found in countless Sasanian figures.⁶⁹ The debt to the Parthian visual repertoire is made clear by the two secondary human figures symmetrically placed behind the ruler to crown him, in a composition first seen on coins of the Arsacid king of kings Phraataces struck in 2 BCE.⁷⁰ In the coin depiction of Bago Miuro, this manner of holding the sword is combined with a basic image that finds its closest comparison in the figure of the last Arsacid king



Fig. 2, left to right: a. Naqš-e Rajab I (detail). Photo: author; b. Bišāpūr VI (detail). After Herrmann 1981, pl. 18; c. Tetradrachm of Zeiōnisēs/Jihonika (reverse), British Museum 1894,0506.1719.



Fig. 3, left to right: a. Göbl 1984 type MK 1114 (reverse), zeno.ru object no. 60558; b. "Husāk/Xwasāk stele" from Susa (detail). Photo: author.

of kings, Artabanus, as portrayed on the stele of the satrap of Susa Husāk/Xwasāk, dated to 215 CE (fig. 3).⁷¹

Indeed, the two images share several features: the three-quarter view employed to depict the enthroned figure; the pose with the outstretched right arm offering the ring or diadem, along with the identically depicted parallel legs; the high-backed throne; and the fact that the throne has side arms,⁷² which is a rare feature in depictions of thrones in both the Arsacid and in the Sasanian repertoire, and that these side arms are shown in perspective on both sides of the figure's legs. Also identical are minor details, such as the diadem ribbons falling behind the figure's back only on the observer's left side, or the ribbons tied at the ankles, a detail that clearly indicates where features commonly thought to be of exclusively Sasanian coining had in all likelihood originated.⁷³

The comparison leaves no doubt that the originally Parthian image was transmitted to the Sasanian repertoire. Therefore, the image of Bago Miuro is an adaptation of compositional schemes coming from Sasanian royal iconography, which, in turn, had been inherited from Arsacid royal iconography,⁷⁴ before being employed within a provincial Sasanian context such as that of Kušāno-Sasanian Bactria. This explains why Bago Miuro has at the same time a clearly Sasanian appearance and a distinct image that cannot be traced to Kusān patterns. In this context, the beard of Bago Miuro is the result of a Sasanian contribution, rather than a feature resurfacing from the older image of the Indo-Greek "Jovian" Mithra. The same holds true also for the throne, which, in any case, is not a primary iconographic mark either for the Kušāno-Sasanian version of the god or for the Indo-Greek one, as confirmed by the appearance of the latter as a simple bust.⁷⁵ The conclusion is that the significance of these "Jovian" features of the Kušāno-Sasanian Mithra must be viewed in quite a different light.⁷⁶

At this point, we are faced with a new question that comes to the fore: once the link between Bago Miuro and the Indo-Greek Mithra is severed, must we imagine that, in the East, the Helios type of the Kušān period completely superseded the ancient Indo-Greek Mithra, condemning him to an utter disappearance? Do we have to revise our understanding of a dichotomy in the depiction of Mithra in the East from the time of the Kušāns onwards? The answer is no, and it is provided by



Fig. 4. "Kaniška reliquary" (detail). After Alram and Klimburg-Salter 1999.

the so-called Kaniška reliquary (fig. 4).⁷⁷

The Kaniška reliquary has had a strange reception in the studies on the iconography of Mithra in the East, which have largely ignored it.⁷⁸ On one side of the casket, the king is flanked by the images of the moon and the sun gods – identified by their primary iconographic attributes of the moon crescent and rayed halo – who offer him their rings of investiture. Both deities are clad in a belted, long-sleeved tunic, with a chlamys clasped at the shoulder. Regardless of some peculiarities, the iconography of the figures is closely reminiscent of Kušān imperial art,⁷⁹ assuring the identification of the two gods as Māh and Mithra. However, for reasons that elude us, Mithra is depicted with beard and pointed cap, contrary to Kušān standard practice, which prefers the Helios version. Now, the pointed cap has been noted by all the authors who have dealt with the casket,⁸⁰ but none of those involved in the discussion on the iconography of the Eastern Mithra has observed that it is precisely the pointed cap that provides a fundamental and exclusive link to the old Mithra of the Indo-Greek coins.⁸¹ In this connection, the fact that the god of the reliquary is clothed like his Helios-looking alter ego

is especially significant,⁸² as it implies that the Kušan-period artist had updated the old image while maintaining its identifying features, even if they were not in line with the depiction of the deity found on coins. The impression that this represents a phenomenon specific to the visual rendering of Mithra is also strengthened by the fact that, on the casket, the moon god is portrayed according to the standard version found on Kušan coins, which is a twin-image of that of Mithra, only made distinct by the moon crescent behind the shoulder, used as the primary identifying attribute in lieu of the rayed halo.

Thus, the Kaniška reliquary attests to the survival of a two-centuries-old local version of the image of Mithra besides the Helios one common in Kušan coin art. We remain in the dark as to the reasons behind this iconographic choice. The same holds true for what concerns the first appearance of Mithra in the region in the coin series of Amyntas and Hermaeus. The inclusion of an Iranian god of primary importance in the “monetary pantheon” of two Indo-Greek kings in the first half of the first century BCE is in itself worthy of note and would require some elaboration on the religious policy of these rulers,⁸³ although this is made extremely difficult by the very limited scope of the evidence at our disposal.

The existence of this second Kušan version of Mithra, with a beard and pointed cap, also calls for a reassessment of the iconography of the Kušāno-Sasanian Bago Miuro. Contrary to previous reconstructions based on the idea of continuity, this figure in fact represents a break with *both* the Kušan Helios-type of Mithra and the god of Indo-Greek derivation. Not only do the beard and throne of Bago Miuro have a Sasanian rather than Indo-Greek origin, but the Kušāno-Sasanian version of the god notably discarded precisely the pointed cap of the ancient local Mithra which had survived up to Kušan times.

Another very significant point concerns the art-historical background to this image, or, in other words, the context of the origin of the bearded Mithra with pointed cap. Did the Indo-Greek coin engravers create this image of Mithra *ex novo*, or were they using a pre-existing one? Fortunately, here we may be able to say more, thanks to evidence from a wholly different region, namely the stone reliefs and colossal statuary associated with the sanctuaries built at several sites for Mithridates I Callinicus (c. 100–69 BCE)

and Antiochus I (c. 69–31 BCE) of Commagene.⁸⁴ These monuments attest to a remarkable coexistence of two different approaches to religious iconography: a western one of Greek derivation, found only in the reliefs, and an oriental one of local coining, which is the only one employed for the colossal figures.⁸⁵ The result is that some of the deities mentioned epigraphically are provided with two distinct images. Thus, at Nemrut Dağı, Artagnes-Heracles-Ares appears in the common image of the nude Heracles on a relief, and as a clearly oriental deity in his depiction among the colossi.⁸⁶ The image of a nude, beardless youth with a halo of rays around his head and a chlamys on his shoulders is instead employed first for a deity named as Apollo Epikoos, later identified as Mithra-Helios-Apollo-Hermes,⁸⁷ a figure otherwise depicted in oriental garb. All the oriental images of the deities share a few common features: they are all fully clothed in a costume based on a belted long robe worn over trousers, with a chlamys clasped at the shoulder, clearly inspired by the royal attire. In addition, they customarily wear conical headgear. Mithra is easily recognizable thanks to the rayed halo. The face is beardless, as in the image of Apollo, but the conical cap with a protruding point and earflaps is conspicuously worn on the head. These latter two features are of particular relevance for us, as Mithra is the only oriental male god among the three depicted who lacks a beard. This partial “contamination” of the orientalizing images by western features is not limited to Mithra; for example, the colossus that portrays Artagnes exhibits Heracles’ club. However, the general appearance of these figures remains unmistakably oriental, with the headgear playing a crucial role in this regard. Now, when the image of the Commagenian Mithra is compared to the Indo-Greek one, the pointed cap stands as a significant common feature,⁸⁸ which is of special interest due to its obvious non-Greek origin. Moreover, the chronological and geographical settings of these two images of Mithra leave no doubt that they developed independently of each other. Thus, in 90–70 BCE the coin engravers of Amyntas and Hermaeus used the same visual device that would be employed only a few decades later in Commagene to mark a divine image as Iranian.⁸⁹ Unless we assume that the craftsmen in Commagene had by mere coincidence the same idea as those working for the Indo-Greek kings, the only plausible explanation

is that the use of the pointed cap as a marker of Iranian identity for divine images was already known earlier, in a context from which it could be transmitted to both the Indo-Greek and the Commagenian visual repertoires. It is precisely this identifying function of the pointed cap that appears to be behind its employment for all the figures of oriental deities in Commagene. Therefore, it seems that by the early first century BCE Iranian deities could already be clearly marked as such through specific iconographic features, in particular the typically Iranian headgear, in regions as far apart as Commagene and north-western India. It remains to be established if that was a solution devised in Greek artistic environments, with the aim of marking the *Other*, the non-Greek – that is, the Persian/Iranian – even when depicting divine images, or if it developed in non-Greek contexts, which in this instance may mean only Iranian, to highlight the Iranian identity of the gods being portrayed. While the new pictorial evidence from the Chorasmian site of Akchakhan Kala,⁹⁰ datable to the first century CE, seems to suggest that Iranian provinces were capable of developing local forms of Zoroastrian art outside the main visual trends of Hellenistic derivation,⁹¹ the broader question concerning the dynamics behind the introduction of anthropomorphic divine imagery into the Iranian world remains largely open.⁹² The Indo-Greek evidence offers some comparative material, though it, too, is difficult to assess. Already in the early second century BCE, coins of Agathocles (c. 190–180 BCE) bear fully Indian images depicting the gods Saṃkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa,⁹³ which, however, remained isolated in the Indo-Greek repertoire. On the other hand, coins of Antialcidas (c. 115–95 BCE) show, just shortly before the Indo-Greek Mithra of Amyntas, a perfectly Greek image of Zeus accompanied by an elephant,⁹⁴ which has long been interpreted as a depiction of Indra.⁹⁵ In this case, the image represents a Greek deity adapted to an Indian one with no iconographic modification; indeed, without the elephant, it would be impossible to distinguish the god from a standard *Greek* Zeus. By contrast, on Saka coins the repertoire of Greek derivation is already combined in unprecedented syntheses in order to portray Indian deities under Maues,⁹⁶ a trend that continued to develop under the kings of the Azes dynasty. Remarkably, under these latter kings, the same approach to divine iconography

was employed to create new images of deities that, while superficially appearing Greek, may in fact hide Saka divine figures.⁹⁷

Thus, although mainly limited to coinage and, to a lesser extent, glyptics,⁹⁸ the varied documentary evidence from the Indian Northwest attests to a phase of increasing iconographic experimentation from the beginning of the first century BCE. On a broader scope, however, we are unfortunately not in a position to go beyond the identification of individual similarities, such as the use of the pointed cap discussed above, and thus, for this “initial” phase, we remain unable to reconstruct any link that might have connected different regions. Therefore, the question regarding the circumstances surrounding the emergence of the image of the bearded Mithra with pointed cap is destined to remain unanswered, at least for the time being.

What does appear certain is that, in the East, the bearded Mithra with pointed cap shows a certain degree of resilience against the impact of the god’s visual rendering that derived from the originally Greek image of Helios. This older, eastern version of Mithra was even able to resurface in official art during Kušān times, albeit only in a limited way. In western Iran, bearded gods came to dominate the scene only in Sasanian times, and only as a result of the “Sasanizing” of anthropomorphic divine iconography modeled on the image of the king. Thus, the similarity between western and eastern Iran in the coexistence of two images of Mithra is only superficial, as it is the outcome of very different and independent premises: in the West it was due to a process of streamlining of previous images and came into being only much later;⁹⁹ in the East it was the result of the persistence of a more ancient iconographic version of the god.

Notes

1. Grenet 2003: 36; 2006; Shenkar 2014: 102–5.

2. A further version of the image of Mithra may be represented by a deity with purely Apollonian features – that is, without any solar traits – if the identification with Apollo, and thus with Mithra, of a nude male figure on a Sasanian seal now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France is accepted. This non-solar Apollonian Mithra would have antecedents in the Parthian period; see Sinisi 2017a for a full discussion.

3. Alram and Gyselen 2012, hereafter SNS 2: 117–19, 128–30, Types 2a–b of Öhrmazd I.
4. Carter 1985: 242; Callieri 1990: 87; Grenet 2003: 36; 2006; SNS 2: 143–44; Shenkar 2014: 102–3; Farridnejad 2018: 368–70.
5. Göbl 1984: nos. 1026–27 for the type. Schindel 2012: 69; Sinisi 2015: 208. See also Bivar 1979: 745.
6. Carter 1981: 74–76; Azarpay 1982; Callieri 1990: 83–84; Hollard 2010; Shenkar 2014: 104; Aldrych et al. 2017: 81–105; Farridnejad 2018: 366.
7. Callieri 1990: 86–87; Grenet 1991: 149, n. 14; 2001: 36; Shenkar 2014: 103; Farridnejad 2018: 371–72. The bust in a chariot found on Sasanian sealings from Ak Depe (Gubaev, Loginov, and Nikitin 1996: 58, no. 1.3) has been interpreted as showing a bearded portrait of the god (Grenet 2003: 37, n. 3), but this is not necessarily the case and the deity might well be depicted as beardless, see Sinisi 2015: 212, n. 53.
8. *Mīhr yazd* <mtry yzdy> in Middle Persian, see Gignoux 1978: 62 (and pl. 22), no. 6.84. Cf. also Callieri 1990: 87; Grenet 2003: 36; Shenkar 2014: 103; Farridnejad 2018: 368.
9. Callieri 1990, where the possibility of a Kušāno-Sasanian origin of the seal was also considered. See also Grenet 2003: 37–38; Shenkar 2014: 108.
10. Whereas the deity is labeled as Helios in the first series of Kaniška inscribed in Greek (Göbl 1984, nos. 25, 32 for the gold series, and no. 766 for the copper issues). In contrast, the rayed bust found on the obverses of the coins of Soter Megas is unnamed, though it is often identified with Mithra (MacDowall 1978: 310; 2006; Cribb 2015: 97–98, with an explanation of the reasons behind this identification and references to the author's earlier pronouncements on the issue). See Shenkar 2014: 106, for a more nuanced approach to this image (in line with MacDowall 1975: 147), and Sinisi 2017b: 829, 876–79, on the possibility that it does not depict a deity. Bopearachchi 2021b: 14 considers it a portrait of the ruler himself.
11. Preliminarily published in Cazzoli and Cereti 2005, and fully discussed in Sinisi 2019.
12. See Bopearachchi 1991: 220–21, s. 1–3, pl. 24 for the tetradrachms with Helios in the quadriga, and Bopearachchi 1991: 221, s. 4, pl. 24 for the type with the god standing with a scepter.
13. Bopearachchi 1991: 294, s. 12, and pl. 44.
14. Bopearachchi 1991: 344, s. 1, and pl. 60.
15. Senior 2001: 1–2, nos. 2.1–2.6. The deity is accompanied by a charioteer.
16. On the reliquary, see Errington 2002.
17. See Göbl 1984, no. 1114 for the coin type.
18. The presence of these pleats and of the diadem tie only on the right side of the figure is connected to the three-quarter view employed for the image.
19. A detailed description is found in Carter 1985: 227, although flames that emanate from the back of the body are wrongly mentioned (probably due to the misinterpretation of the ribbed diadem tie next to the god's right shoulder).
20. Bopearachchi 1991: 102 and 112–18.
21. See Bopearachchi 1991: 303–4, s. 14–15 (and pl. 47), for Amyntas, and 329–30, s. 9 (and pl. 54), for Hermaeus.
22. See Bopearachchi 1991: 329–30, s. 1–5, 7–8 (and pls. 52–54) for Hermaeus' series, and Bopearachchi 1991: 330–34, s. 1–13 (pls. 54–56) for the (early) imitations.
23. Newell 1938: 89–91; MacDowall 1975: 147; Bivar 1979: 744–45; Bopearachchi 1991: 102, 115; Boyce and Grenet 1991: 163; Grenet 1991: 149; 2003: 37; 2006; Shenkar 2014: 106 (with a somewhat skeptical tune). Bopearachchi 2021a: 942–43 (and 2021b: 13–14) spoke of “a discrete allusion to Mithra by associating him to the Greek god Zeus.”
24. The enthroned Zeus-like figure on a series of Indian drachm of Hermaeus (his series 6 in Bopearachchi 1991: 328, and pl. 53) might be depicted without a beret, perhaps representing a true (Greek?) Zeus. Moreover, both the cap and the rays disappear from the Hermaeus imitation series around the mid-first century BCE (see Bopearachchi 1991: 334–43, Hermaeus posthumous issues, s. 14–22, pls. 54–60, and 122 for the chronology). Adding to the general impression of change conveyed by the disappearance of rays and beret, is the fact that the chest of the god is no longer covered, but depicted bare (as in the original image of Zeus).
25. Grenet 1991: 149; 2006; Shenkar 2014: 106. For the coin type, see Bopearachchi 1991: 222–25, s. 1–4 (and pls. 24–26).
26. See Bopearachchi 1991: 281–82, s. 1–6 (and pl. 42).
27. See n. 13 for the references.
28. Pace Stavisky 1986: 217 (cf. also Shenkar 2014: 106), who ascribed rays to the figure of Heracles on coins of Demetrius – clearly a misinterpreting of the laurel leaves that are visible around Heracles' head.
29. See Sinisi 2015: 213, n. 59. The point was already made by Bernard 1979: 244–45, apparently completely forgotten in the successive discussions on the “rayed Zeus.”
30. Cf. Grenet 2003: 37.
31. Grenet 1991; 2003; 2006; and Shenkar 2014: 102–14. For earlier studies, see MacDowall 1975; Bivar

1979; and, more systematically, Callieri 1990; cf. also Carter 1985, *passim*. Aldrych et al. 2017 gathers various essays on specific themes concerning the development of the cult and iconography of Mithra, from the Mediterranean to the Kušān empire.

32. Both authors extended their inquiries into later periods to include, e.g., the Sogdian evidence.

33. It must be noted, however, that these differences are only partly objective in nature, as they also stem from differing scholarly approaches and the resulting variation in the assessment of the evidence, particularly with regard to the pre-Sasanian period in western Iran (on which see Sinisi, forthcoming).

34. I will return to this topic in a separate article.

35. See Boyce and Grenet 1991: 39, with references to the previous bibliography, as well as Grenet 2006. For the series of Artabanus (variously identified in the literature as the first or the second king with this name), see Sellwood 1980: s. 12.28.

36. Grenet 2006; see also Boyce and Grenet 1991: 324–26.

37. The Kušān occurrences, including the problematic depiction on the coins of Soter Megas, were discussed in this context.

38. Grenet 1991: 149, citing Bivar 1979: 745, who had written of an evident descent of the Kušāno-Sasanian enthroned Mithra from the Indo-Greek depictions (reiterating a proposal already advanced in Bivar 1956: 22), and Carter 1985: 227–29. See also Grenet 2003: 37, 43; 2006. It must be stressed, however, that Grenet had originally and correctly observed that the presence of the beard might simply be explained on the basis of Sasanian iconographic canons. It is the combination with the throne, which he explicitly described as “un siège à la grecque” (Grenet 2003: 43), that led him to somehow follow, at least in part, the same interpretative path as Bivar 1979 and Carter 1985.

39. Grenet 2001: 43; 2006; however, he also suggested that this assimilation of Zeus with Mithra may have resulted simply from a reluctance to depict Ahura Mazdā in anthropomorphic form (see also Boyce and Grenet 1991: 165). It is important to underline that, in any case, Grenet referred only to iconographic features, not to a real syncretistic process centered on an alleged Zeus-Mithra figure, as instead explicitly mentioned by Bivar 1979: 747 and Carter 1985: 228–29. In Grenet’s reconstruction, the supreme eastern Iranian Mithra was merely given an iconographic form incorporating features originally associated with Zeus. Indeed, Grenet consistently regarded the solar character of this eastern Mithra as primary, regardless of his Jovian traits.

40. Grenet 2003: 36–37.

41. As already proposed by Bivar 1979: 746–47; Carter 1981: 96; 1985: 238.

42. Grenet 1991: 149; 2003: 43–44; 2006. However, Grenet has in the meantime changed his views on the last points, and now no longer believes in the resurfacing of the Jovian Mithra in Kušāno-Sasanian times, the god being shown with Jovian features only by Amyntas and Hermaeus. Thus, Mithra is no longer assumed to be in any way involved in the synthesis of *burzāwand yazad* (personal communication from Frantz Grenet). See also Grenet 2022: 1384; 2023: 98.

43. Grenet 2006.

44. See Shenkar 2014: 102–14.

45. A lack that Shenkar (2014: 102) contrasted with the abundance of images of Semitic Sun gods from Parthian Mesopotamia. Shenkar left the Commagenian evidence out of his study (see Shenkar 2014: 2, for the reasons behind his choice).

46. Shenkar 2014: 103. The Roman series was struck by Gallienus, see Gyselen 2010: 77.

47. Gyselen 2010 (in particular p. 78 on coins of Ōhrmazd).

48. Shenkar 2014: 103.

49. Goldman 1988.

50. Shenkar 2014: 113.

51. Shenkar 2014: 104.

52. Shenkar 2014: 107.

53. See the references cited in n. 41 above.

54. Shenkar 2014: 107. See also Carter 1985: 227.

55. Sinisi forthcoming.

56. Varghēn would be the only exception, see n. 61 below.

57. Some of these are discussed in Sinisi 2017a (see also Sinisi 2014: 35), including the figure of Apollo on coins from Susa previously mentioned by Grenet (see above n. 35 for the references). A dedicated discussion of these coin images will appear in Sinisi forthcoming.

58. Sinisi 2017a: 26. Graeco-Bactrian depictions of Helios in a chariot show that this image of the god had spread throughout the Iranian world as far as the Indo-Iranian borderlands beginning with Seleucid times (Sinisi 2017a: 26, n. 74), as indicated also by analogous images on Gandharan toilet trays, on which see Bopearachchi 2021b: 25–29, with references.

59. For a diametrically opposite approach, see Shenkar 2014: 2, and *passim*.

60. Shenkar 2014: 118; see also Shenkar 2017: 7.

61. There is simply no positive evidence of any sort to support these claims, and in the only instance in which a Greek-looking divine image, the so-called Heracles of Seleucia, is named in Parthian, the god is unambiguously identified as a Zoroastrian deity (as

acknowledged by Shenkar himself; see Shenkar 2014: 2, 11, 51 with n. 39, 159; see also Shenkar 2017: 7), to the point that we could call it the Varghn of Seleucia. The topic of Parthian Zoroastrianism is too large to be tackled here, see de Jong 2012; de Jong 2013: 27–36; also, Invernizzi 2005.

62. An implication that is, indeed, absent from Gyselen 2010.

63. See Sinisi 2014: 39. On Parthian tetradrachms, investiture scenes are customary as early as the second quarter of the first century BCE, and they are used regularly in countless variants until the very end of the dynasty. Indeed, the princes of Persis were already imitating Arsacid patterns in this regard in pre-Sasanian times, as shown by the graffiti from Persepolis attributed to the immediate predecessors of the Sasanians, for which see Callieri 2003. On the Parthian inheritance in Sasanian art with regard to the theme of the investiture, see Vanden Berghe 1987: 250–51.

64. See, e.g., Shenkar 2014: 51, 193 (and also Shenkar 2017: 7). The process is not exclusively Sasanian and is already attested in Commagene in the first century BCE, see below. The images of the Kušān Orlagno and Mozdooano were also clearly inspired by that of the Kušān king, see Sinisi 2019: 34, and 41, n. 51 (on Orlagno, see also Shenkar 2014: 161).

65. As indeed, confirmed by the existence in Sasanian non-official art of images of Mithra directly inspired by the iconography of Helios, such as those found on seals. Notable in these images is the apparent importance ascribed to the lack of a beard, which is a feature clearly inherited from Apollo/Helios, contrasting with the “Sasanized” rendering of the hairstyle by means of the characteristic hair bunches, the latter being obviously unknown in the original image of Apollo/Helios.

66. See above n. 61, as well as Sinisi 2017.

67. Sinisi 2015: 212–21.

68. MacDowall 1973: 220; Senior 2001: 119, no. 130.1T. Unfortunately, only a single specimen of this series is known (see Gardner 1886: 174, and pl. 32.11). For the context of Zeiōnisēs, see MacDowall 1973: 228–29, where his rule was dated to c. 30–40 CE.

69. MacDowall 1973: 220, no. 2 wrote of “a club.”

70. Tetradrachms (Sellwood 1980: 186–87, s. 57) as well as drachms and bronzes (Sellwood 1980: 186–90, s. 57–58), where two identical Nikai, one on each side, are depicted crowning the king beside the obverse bust.

71. For the stele, see Kawami 1987: 48–51, 164–67, cat. no. 5; Mathiesen 1992: 168–69, cat. no. 87, with references. The link between the image of Bago Miuro and that of Artabanus on the Husāk/Xwasāk stele was

briefly noted by Martha Carter (1985: 228); however, she did not develop the point and, as a result, the connection has been largely overlooked in subsequent literature.

72. No side arms are found on any throne depicted on Arsacid tetradrachms, where enthroned kings were customarily shown from the early first century BCE until the end of the dynasty.

73. Indeed, analogous ribbons tied at the ankles appear on princely statuary from Hatra; see, for some examples, Safar and Mustafa 1974: 61–72, nos. 2, 5, 8, 13. One may note that even the gesture of Artabanus’ left arm, whose hand holds the sword hilt, is common in Sasanian official imagery, again the result of a long history dating back to the Parthian period (attested from Parthian to Kušān contexts).

74. An alternative that cannot be completely ruled out is that the adaptation of the image to depict religious figures may already have been carried out in Parthian times, meaning that the figure of Mithra seated on a throne inspired by the enthroned king could have existed already under the Parthians. Needless to say, this would not sensibly impact the line of reasoning followed here (actually, it would only strengthen the point).

75. Indeed, it is the bust that clearly shows the primary attributes of this version of Mithra: the halo of rays and the pointed cap. It should be noted that on coins from the region, the throne repeatedly appears in combination with various gods throughout the epochs without serving as a primary, and thus discriminating, iconographic attribute, as shown by several deities known in both enthroned and standing images, starting with Zeus in the Greek period and continuing through, for example, Ardokhsho or Pharro under the Kušāns.

76. Needless to say, this reconstruction only confirms that there could be no contribution of the figure of Mithra to the iconographic synthesis that produced the image(s) associated to the epithet *burzāwand yazad*, see also above n. 42.

77. See above n. 16.

78. Before Shenkar 2014: 107 and Sinisi 2015: 212 it was never referred to in any work specifically discussing Mithra, with the only exception of the brief mentions in Callieri 1990: 92, and Smagur 2012: 208. See now Aldrych et al. 2017: 110–12.

79. Both deities hold the hilt of their sword with the left hand, although this is more immediately clear in the case of the moon god.

80. Errington 2002: 105; Shenkar 2014: 107.

81. Needless to say, the connection is only strengthened by the combined presence of pointed cap and beard.

82. While his bust is not bare, the Indo-Greek Mithra certainly wears no chlamys, which, by contrast, is customary in the image of the god on Kušan coins. The chlamys around Mithra's shoulders is also visible in the seal impression from Kafir Kala, see above, n. 11 for the references.

83. Following the observations of Boyce and Grenet 1991: 163–64. Martinez-Sève 2010: 8–9 discussed the images of the Graeco-Bactrian Helios and Zeus and their possible relationship with Mithra. The recent proposal by Harry Falk (2015-2019: 2) to consider Amyntas and Hermaeus as “adherents of Mithraism,” which is based on the use of images of Mithra on coins of these two kings, is not tenable for reasons of iconography and the history of religions alike.

84. A similar comparison, though with different intents, is already found in Bivar 1979: 748. Cf. also Grenet 1991: 149; Shenkar 2014: 107. On the religious landscape of Commagene and the policy of Antiochus I as seen from the point of view of two specialists on ancient Iran, see Boyce and Grenet 1991: 309–51.

85. The oriental iconography is, however, common also on the reliefs.

86. Cf. Boyce and Grenet 1991: 330.

87. A change that shows the evolution in Antiochus' ruler cult, see Crowther and Facella 2003 (in particular pp. 62–65). For a specific discussion of the Commagenian Mithra, see Aldrych et al. 2017: 129–57 (with references).

88. In addition to the halo of rays, of course.

89. On the hypotheses on the chronology of the Commagenian monuments, see Jacobs and Rollinger 2005.

90. Betts et al. 2016.

91. On Zoroastrian art in Chorasmia, see Grenet 2018.

92. Even in the Chorasmian case, this may still have occurred as a result of contact with religious iconography of Greek derivation, which could have triggered the process, regardless of the largely non-Greek character of the art of Akchakhan Kala. Cf. Minardi 2018.

93. Bopearachchi 1991: 175, s. 9 (and pl. 7). An Indian goddess appears on other coins in bronze of the same king (Bopearachchi 1991: 175, s. 10, and pl. 7), as well as on bronzes of his successor Pantaleon, see Bopearachchi 1991: 182, s. 6 (and pl. 9).

94. Bopearachchi 1991: 273, s. 6–8 (and pl. 39). On other coins of the same king the elephant is depicted paying homage to the enthroned Zeus, see Bopearachchi 1991: 271–72, s. 1–5, and 274–77, s. 9–13 (pls. 39–41).

95. Since at least Banerjea 1956: 162–63.

96. See, e.g., Senior 2001: 5, nos. 20.1, 22.1, 23.1.

97. See Sinisi 2003.

98. See, e.g., Callieri 2006.

99. A process that, as we have seen in examining Sasanian glyptics, was not completely successful.

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The Triumph of Dionysus and Heracles on a Gold Tray from Datong (Pingcheng, Capital of the Northern Wei Dynasty, 398–494 CE)

ANCA DAN AND FRANTZ GRENET¹

CNRS-ENS (PARIS) AND COLLÈGE DE FRANCE (PARIS)

*To the memory of Pierre Chuvin,
who brought the late wanderings of Dionysus back to light.*

... ἐν ταύτῃ παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τετάχθαι με τῇ μερίδι λέγων, ἐν ᾗ πρότερον Ἡρακλῆς
καὶ Διόνυσος ἐγενέσθην φιλοσοφούντες ὁμοῦ καὶ βασιλεύοντες καὶ πᾶσαν σχεδὸν
τῆς ἐπιτολαζούσης κακίας ἀνακαθαιρόμενοι γῆν τε καὶ θάλατταν.

... saying that God has placed me in the same position in which there
were earlier Heracles and Dionysus, philosophers and kings who
purged almost the whole earth and sea of the evil that infested them.

Julian, Letter to Themistius 1

Between June 19 and August 23, 2020, the exhibition *Mutual Learning on the Silk Roads: Stories of the Silk Road Treasures/Yi hua yi shijie: Sichou zhi lu shang de hu xue hu jian* was held at the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou.² The catalog, published in Chinese,³ included an exceptional object relevant to the ancient history of the Silk Roads: a golden vessel with a diameter of 12 cm, a rim height of 1.7 cm, and a total weight of 70.08 g (fig. 1). The object was found in the Datong (formerly Pingcheng) region, but there is no information about its archaeological context. It is currently preserved in the holdings of the Datong Museum (Shanxi Province; inv. Datong 2015).⁴ As noted in the Chinese description of the 2020 publication, this object is remarkable for its small dimensions and shallowness – which leads us to call it a “tray” rather than a “bowl” or “plate,” even though it may be compared with tiny Chinese bowls from the Tang period and later. Its material is also exceptional

for Pingcheng: it is made from a simple gold sheet with low reliefs in repoussé (formed by hammering the negative design from the reverse side and chasing from the upper side, without any loss of gold).

Below the flat rim and the arc-shaped side, on the almost flat bottom, one sees the embossing of four characters borrowed from Greco-Roman mythology, surrounded by a circular vegetal pattern with fifteen ivy leaves alternating on each side of a rolling stem (fig. 2). Two Centaurs (*ban-maren* 半馬人) pull a two-wheeled chariot synchronously toward the right and rear. The right-side Centaur, in the foreground, has his right hand with his fingers outstretched on his horse's hips and raises a horn with his left hand. Since the spout of the horn is inside his mouth, it does not seem to be a drinking vessel – a rhyton (*lai-tong* 來通) – but rather a musical instrument (Greek κέρας/Latin *cornu*) used in both military and Dionysian gatherings.⁵ The second Centaur



Fig. 1. The Gold Tray of Pingcheng.



Fig. 2. Detail of the Gold Tray of Pingcheng and its drawing, after the China National Silk Museum/*Zhongguo Sichou Bowuguan* (中國絲綢博物館), 2020.

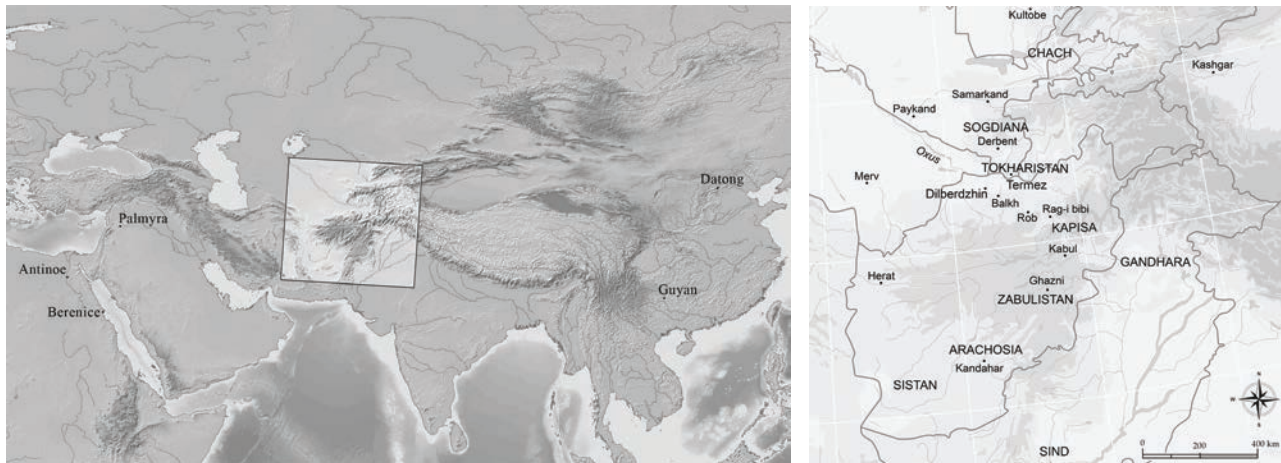


Fig. 3. Map of the toponyms mentioned in the text, with detail on Central Asia (reproduced from F. Ory, A. Dan, and F. Grenet).

makes similar movements with his hooves. His right hand clasps the barely visible front rail of the chariot's box, while his left hand is hidden behind the first Centaur. Both centaurs have their forelimbs raised and hind limbs straight, supporting their bodies. The artist drew each leg attempting to suggest the perspective of their parallel movements as if on both sides of a pole that hangs between them. In the chariot are two men, nude, with Caucasian features, distinct eyes and noses, thick hair, long beards and mustaches, carefully chiseled muscles, and exposed genitals, following the canons of Greco-Roman statuary. They stand in the chariot perpendicular to the direction of travel, facing the viewer. Both hold drinking bowls in their left hands. In their right hands, they carry specific attributes. The central figure, with long wavy hair adorned with a vegetal crown, is slightly swaying, unable to stand firmly on his left foot. He holds a long staff topped above his head with a pine cone: this is the thyrsus, which a staggering Dionysus usually clings to during Dionysian processions.

The second figure, slightly inclined toward Dionysus and the Centaurs, has short curly hair and beard, with prominent pectorals like those of a mature athlete. He carries a heavy mace hanging downward. The woody knots, carefully chiseled into its surface, suggest its identification with the club that Heracles holds when he is not drunk.

The catalog entry describes the scene as a

celebration of a drinking festival. It dates the object between 398 and 493/494 CE, when the Northern Wei (386–534 CE) had their capital at Pingcheng, before relocating it to Luoyang.⁶ The Northern Wei rulers are reputed for facilitating overland connectivity following their conquest of territories between Central China and Inner Asia. Evidence includes their ties to the Sogdian commercial networks, the numerous Persian,⁷ Hephthalite,⁸ and Jibin (Gandhāran)⁹ embassies they received from the 450s onward, as well as the earliest Chinese traces in Central Asia and Pakistan.¹⁰

Largely shared on social media,¹¹ some photos of this object (figs. 1–2) aroused great interest from scholars, who raised questions about its model, fabrication, and transmission to Pingcheng.

In this article, we try to answer these questions. First, we stress the importance of this discovery for the so-called Silk Roads archaeology. We present a critical, up-to-date synthesis of the most important golden vessels of the Late Antique period that can be compared with this tray. We emphasize the meaning of this vessel's weight, shape, and manufacture in the context of North Indian (Gandhāran) and Central Asian ("Bactrian") art. Second, we identify the ultimate roots of its iconography in the Roman Empire of Septimius Severus and of his sons. Finally, we discuss the conditions under which the Roman archetype must have reached northwestern India

(Gandhāra and Kapisa) and Inner Asia (Tokharistan, previously Bactria, fig. 3), where both Heracles and Dionysus had long-standing traditions before the third century CE. We cannot be certain where the tray was produced, whether in Kušāno-Sasanian, Hunnic (Hephthalite), or Northern Wei territories, within one of the hubs along the south-north Silk Roads, through which Buddhism and its “Hellenized” iconography entered China’s western and northern regions. But we can be highly confident that the Roman ultimate model of the tray passed through Gandhāra and Tokharistan, regions reputed not only for their wine, but also for their goldsmithing. Therefore, the importance of this exotic object in a Northern Wei context can hardly be overemphasized.

Description and Parallels of an Exceptional Vessel: Material, Weight, Shape, Manufacture, Transportation, and Function

Unfortunately, nothing is known about the archaeological site in the Datong region where this gold tray was found (fig. 3). Doubts about its authenticity can be addressed only by referencing parallels from Greco-Roman, Indian, and Hunnic repertoires, sources that would have been largely inaccessible to a forger even ten years ago (see below). The scarcity of comparable gold finds, along with the specificity of the weight standard and shape, serves as strong evidence of its authenticity.

A Rare Example of Goldware

Ancient China is reputed for its sober taste in bronze and jade. Between the Han and the Tang dynasties, there were only a few intrusions of gold and silver luxury goods, mainly in the western “Barbarian” regions.¹² This tray is one of the most important finds illustrating the Northern Wei’s cosmopolitan taste for precious metals, fashioned in foreign styles. It confirms Yang Xuanzhi’s account of Prince Yuan Cheng 元澄 (467–519), who “often gathered members of the imperial house [at his residence] by displaying various precious items: more than one hundred pieces of golden vases/pitchers (*píng* 瓶/甁) and silver jars (*wèng* 瓮), with their accessories [including]

cups/bowls (*ōu* 甌), wooden stands/supports (*qíng* 檠), plates/dishes (*pán* 盤) and boxes/cases (*hé* 盒); in addition to them, there were wine-drinking vessels [such as] quartz bowls (*bō* 鉢/鉢),¹³ bowls (*wǎn* 盥/碗) made of agate and glass(?),¹⁴ red jade (*zhī* 卮);¹⁵ [the total number of these drinking vessels] amounted to several tens. Their craft was strange and marvelous, as it did not exist in the middle kingdom (China) – all of them were from the Western Regions” (*A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang/Luoyang Qielan ji*, juan 4).¹⁶

By comparing this text with Yuan Cheng’s biography in the *Weishu*, one can understand that these treasures were accumulated between his residence in Dingzhou (Hebei Province), during the reign of Emperor Shizong (500–515), and his stay in Qinzhou (515–519). Qinzhou (present-day Tianshui, Gansu Province) was an eastern exit of the Hexi Corridor and thus one of the most important gateways to the Silk Road.¹⁷ Although the text refers to the early sixth century CE, a period later than when Pingcheng served as the capital of the Northern Wei, it still attests to the importation of significant amounts of precious ware into northern China, in a sociopolitical context which may be compared to that of the tray.

Since gold can be easily melted down and reused, very few comparable objects have survived. One of the rare examples is a small gold stem-cup of Western origin, discovered in the richly furnished tomb of the Sui princess Li Jingxun (d. 608 CE), along with another silver cup, a Sasanian coin of Pērōz (457–484 CE), gold jewelry, and glass fragments.¹⁸

The discovery of gold vessels remains exceptional also in Tokharistan and India after the Kušān period.¹⁹ They are rare even in the Roman and Sasanian empires. In Western Europe, there is only one Dionysiac gold plate (called by the Latin term *patera*) discovered in 1774 in Rennes (France), now preserved in the French National Library (BNF, MMA, inv. 56.94; see fig. 4).²⁰ It has a diameter of 25.2 cm (of which the central medallion occupies 14 cm), a height of 3.4 cm, and weighs 1,315 g. Possibly ordered by Septimius Severus himself in an imperial workshop between 208/209 and 211 CE, this *patera* is an exceptional iconographic testimony to the drinking contest between Dionysus and Heracles, represented on its medallion, and surrounded by a circular frieze depicting a Dionysian procession. It also confirms



Fig. 4. Roman gold plate discovered in Rennes, France, showing the contest between Dionysus/Bacchus and Heracles/Hercules, now in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Musée des Monnaies et Médailles, inv. 56.94.

the role the two deities and their mythology played in the expression of political power (some would say “propaganda”), as illustrated by sixteen golden coins (*aurei*) with imperial portraits of men and women from the Antonine and Severan dynasties embedded in golden crowns along the inner edge of the plate. Preserved without any damage, the Rennes plate was probably an official gift from the emperor to a member of the elite in Gallia (Lugdunensis), in recognition of exceptional merits.

In Asia, a Sasanian ewer discovered near Perm (Volga district, Russia) is now preserved in the Moscow State Historical Museum (OK 14083/ГИМ 81326). Decorated with 64 beads around its foot and featuring a fantastic dragon with horns, hooves, feathers, and scales on its handle, the ewer is probably a product of the third century Tokharistan or Sogdiana.²¹ Another ewer, accompanied by an elliptical lobed bowl and some undecorated vessels, was among the 21kg gold discovered in the Pereshchepina Treasure (now in Ukraine). This treasure was most likely the property of Kubrat, the founder of Old

Great Bulgaria, at his death between 646 and 665 CE.²² Despite the rarity of gold in Iran, it was used for objects expressing the Sasanian royal power – such as the “Kosrow Cup”, once called the “Solomon Cup,” but probably made in the time of Kawād I (488–530). This cup is preserved in Paris (BNF MMA Camée 379), where it may have arrived as a present for Charlemagne from the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rašīd in 801.²³ The gold frame could symbolize cosmic light. Three series of eighteen round medallions, alternating garnets and rock crystals on a green glass background, represent the stellar background surrounding the crystal image of the Sasanian king seated on his seven-climes throne.

In fact, all these gold objects, produced and circulated among the elites, are symbols of radiant power. If, in the end, the tray was probably used as tomb furniture, the primary purpose of its model, and up to a certain point maybe of this tray itself, must have been the sociopolitical expression of power. In the Greco-Roman world, Dionysus and Heracles, sons of Zeus and mortal women, are solar conquerors of the world, benefactors of humankind, and mythical models of Alexander the Macedonian and of his imitators. Just like the Roman and the Sasanian gold bowls, the Pingcheng tray may have been a diplomatic gift, a tribute, or at least a copy of such a prestigious item that circulated among Sasanian or Hephthalite rulers and those of the Northern Wei.

The Gandhāran Weight Standard and the Shallow ‘Tray’ Shape

The object is complete: we assume that it has not lost any gold since Antiquity. It is made from a single gold sheet and shows no traces of use. It was partially damaged by a crush which occurred underground or possibly during the excavation, but this caused no loss of metal. The horizontal rim is uneven, with cracks and pinches at irregular intervals (figs. 1–2).

The weight of 70.08 g, is a multiple of 17.52 g (4 x 17.52), a figure corresponding (down to the hundredth!) to 4 staters (of 4 drachms per stater) in Gandhāra. Kharoshthi inscriptions on gold objects from the Dal’verzin Tepe hoard indicate the average weight of the drachm as 4.38 g (the actual range is from 4.28 to 4.51 g). This standard is intermediate between Alexander’s drachm,

which followed the Classical Attic/Euboean standard and continued in Sasanian Iran (ranging from 4.32 to 4.35 g), and the heavier Bactrian/Sogdian drachm, calculated from many inscribed silver objects and Sogdian stone weights as an average of 4.47g (with an actual range from 4.40 to 4.55 g).²⁴ This precise match – the more so as the *tet-rastater* was a recognized monetary unit in the Hellenistic world – suggests a direct connection with northern India.

Although small golden bowls have been discovered in various Achaemenid, Central Asian, and nomadic contexts, the Pingcheng find is more closely comparable to the Gandhāran “cosmetic trays” (mostly made during Indo-Greek, Indo-Parthian, and Kuṣān periods, second century BCE to second century CE),²⁵ as well as to Egyptian libation trays, possibly used in religious festivals, which seem to have served as models for the Gandhāran trays. These were also decorated with reliefs of gods, at least until the fourth century. For instance, a silver and gold shallow cup from Egypt, preserved in Paris (Louvre E 25448),²⁶ which has close parallels in stone,²⁷ proves that such trays of Ptolemaic and Roman imperial times could be made not only in stone but also in precious metals.

The hammering technique used to shape the gold sheet of the Pingcheng tray is attested between India and China by a set of gold bracteates (imitations of Roman and Byzantine coins and medallions) produced in Kapisa, including one copy of a Late Roman/Byzantine image of the Roman she-wolf.²⁸ However, such bracteates are also found in Sogdiana,²⁹ as well as in the Chinese western and northern regions, including Datong.³⁰ Probably hammered in various hubs of the “Silk Roads,” they were appreciated in China as much as throughout the steppe.³¹

Despite the divine banquet represented on the tray (cf. *infra*), its fragility, shallowness, and small dimensions made it impractical for repeated use in banquets. Yet the tray could hold liquids. It was possible – though rather unlikely – to insert it into a wider container, which would have hidden the hammering traces on its back, much like the Hellenistic cups with relief medallions (for example, the silver-gilded bowl with Dionysus, Ariadne, and Silenus in the J. Paul Getty Museum, 83.AM.389; see fig. 5),³² the bronze mirrors with gold or gilded medallions covering their backs, or the golden covers of nomadic wooden



Fig. 5. Silver-gilded bowl with Dionysus, Ariadne, and Silenus, J. Paul Getty Museum, accession no. 83.AM.389.

vases.³³ In any case, the tray was made using similar techniques.

The thinness of the gold sheet and the delicate decoration, embossed from the back and chiseled on the upper surface for very fine details, including the masculine genitals, raises questions about the place where the tray could have been made, and how it could have been transported to Pingcheng, if it was not made there.

The question of the place of fabrication remains open. Due to the great fragility of the object, we initially considered the possibility of a copy made in the region of Pingcheng after an imported model. In the end, we exclude this hypothesis for three reasons:

1. There are no Chinese parallels for such a naturalistic representation of nude masculine bodies. The extreme care shown in the chiseling of the genitals – of both anthropomorphic figures and even the Centaur – has no equivalent beyond the easternmost edges of direct Hellenic influence, between Gandhāra and Tokharistan.

2. There is no precise metrological match with Chinese standards (according to Guo Zhengzhong),³⁴ unless one assumes that the actual weight of a *liǎng* 兩 under the Northern Wei (in the “new system”) was closer to 28 g than to

30 g. In this case, 70.08 g may be counted as 2.5 *liǎng*. However, values calculated from unearthed weights are never lower than 28.63 g and range up to 31 g. Therefore, as an alternative to the execution of the gold copy in Gandhāra, one must imagine that either the exact supply of gold came from Gandhāra (as bar/ingot, coins, or another weighted object),³⁵ or that the artisan or client used the Gandhāran gold standard, perhaps under Buddhist or Hephthalite influence.

3. Very fragile glass vessels, imported from India, the Sasanian Empire, and even from the Roman world found in China (and sometimes even further, in Thailand, Korea, and Japan), prove that breakable objects could travel long distances by sea and land.³⁶ Such vessels were hardly intended for use in banquets, but were appropriate for religious rituals (such as libations), or for display as prestige items in elite households, cultic places, or, most probably, in tombs.

This is why, in our opinion, the tray could be the product of a goldsmith who had access to a Roman model, who understood it, and who reworked it according to Gandhāran standards, under Kušāno-Sasanian, Hunnic (Hephthalite), or, less likely, Northern Wei rulers. It was a prestige vessel, suited for offering and display in an elite household, a temple, and eventually a tomb, evoking through its decoration the triumphal banquet of Dionysus and Heracles: two Greco-Roman conquerors of the edges of the world, heroic vanquishers of death, and divine benefactors of the human civilization.

The Roman Archetype: Septimius Severus' *Dii patrii* and Echoes in Roman Iconography of the Third Century

Dionysus and Heracles are often depicted as drinking partners in Greek and Roman art from the late sixth century BCE to the fifth century CE.³⁷ In Roman imperial times, a drinking contest staging a tired Heracles, seated or reclining below Dionysus, weakened after drinking strong wine, became common. This motif appears on the *patera* of Septimius Severus discovered in Rennes (mentioned above, fig. 4), as well as in mosaics from Antioch (in the House of the Atrium, early second century),³⁸ from Seleucia Pieria (in the House of the Drinking Contest, early third

century),³⁹ in the third-century Dionysian villa at Sepphoris (Israel),⁴⁰ and in fourth-century Apamea.⁴¹ Variations on this theme were particularly well suited for the decoration of banquet halls: the competition between Dionysus and Heracles invited participants not only to recall the mythical exploits of the god and of the hero, who civilized the known world and served as an example for Alexander of Macedon and the Roman emperors who imitated him, but also to engage in debates on vice (gluttony, drunkenness) and virtue, and on the triumph of the spirit (represented by Dionysus) over body (represented by Heracles).

On the Pingcheng tray, however, Dionysus and Heracles are not in competition but riding together in a triumphal chariot. Both the motif of competition and that of triumph spread as a consequence of the religious politics of Septimius Severus and his Syrian wife, Julia Domna. The imperial couple promoted the two main gods of Leptis Magna, the Punic-Roman city on the Mediterranean shore of Tripolitania (in present-day Libya), where the emperor was born in 145 CE.

From Leptis Magna to Rome: The Ancestral Gods of the Severan Dynasty

The two ruling and civilizing gods of Leptis Magna were Greco-Roman interpretations of two Phoenico-Punic gods: Shadrapha, identified with Dionysus/Liber Pater, and Milkashtart-Melqart, identified with Heracles/Hercules. The history of their invention, shaped by interactions between the Near East, North Africa, and the Greek and Roman worlds, is complex. Yet it deserves attention in order to understand the full range of meanings that could have been associated with the model of the Pingcheng tray in the time of Septimius Severus, and later with the tray itself.

Shadrapha/Dionysus/Liber Pater

Shadrapha (Aramaic *šdrpʾ*), called in Greek Σαδράφης or Σατράφης, was invented in the Near Eastern middle ground sometime before the fifth century BCE. His earliest known image is an Achaemenid relief reported to come from Amrit (now in the Louvre, AO 22247), which is characterized by a mix of Egyptian and Near Eastern elements.⁴² The etymology of his name is debated: according to current opinion, the name of this



Fig. 6. Limestone relief from Palmyra representing Shad-rap(h) a, now in the British Museum, inv. 125206.



Fig. 7a-b. Gold coins of Septimius Severus, issued in 194 CE (a) RIC IV Caracalla 74B, and in 204 CE (b) RIC IV Septimius Severus 25.



Fig. 8. Bronze coin of Septimius Severus (RIC IV Septimius Severus 761), issued in 204 CE.

"savior and protective genius" was composed from the Semitic roots *šd* and *ršp*, which some scholars connect to the names of Egyptian gods Shed (*šd*) and Reshep (*ršpw*), both worshiped in the Near East.⁴³ Related both to the sky and the underworld, this god possessed protective and healing powers, as suggested by the scorpion and the snake that accompany him in most Greco-Roman representations. Later, the god was not only mixed up with other healing gods (mainly the Phoenician Eshmun and the Greek Asclepius) but also identified, in an Anatolian context, with the Semitic god Baal (or one of his avatars, in the fight against the evil Anguiped) and with the Greek god Apollo.

In North Africa, Shadrapha was mixed up with the Roman Liber Pater (himself identified with Bacchus/Dionysus). In Roman times, the god took multiple forms, ranging from a young boy (because in Africa he remained a *genius*, later identified with a Roman Lar and the Greek Corybas⁴⁴) to a mature ruler, bearded, cuirassed, and armed with a spear, like an authoritarian Pater. This multiplicity of representations matched that of the Greek Dionysus, who was at the same time a child who defeated death before being born (and thus was born twice, from his mother and from his father), a young and an old god of fertility, triumphant on the edges of the world, and guarantor of prosperity and well-being for all.

Judging by the Greek evidence, A. D. H. Bivar attempted to identify Shadrap(h)a with a hypothetical Iranian ruling god, who might also have been at the origin of the Greco-Egyptian Sarapis.⁴⁵ In reality, Shadrapha has no original connection with Sarapis but is instead linked to the Egyptian Horus-Shed and Kneph, as well as the North African Baal-Hammon. Any connection with Sarapis would likely be late and mediated through the Egyptian god Kneph or the Greco-Roman Liber Pater/Bacchus/Dionysus. There is no doubt about the Phoenico-Punic origin of Shadrapha, which is well attested in Carthage at least since the third century BCE.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, one cannot exclude a secondary Iranian etymologization of his original Semitic name, either in Old Persian or at least in Greek: the Aramaic form *ḥštrpty*, which designates Apollo in the trilingual inscription from Letoon/Xanthus (358 BCE), seems to transcribe an Old Iranian form *xšaθra-pati-*, "lord of kingship/regal power," – not to be confused with Old Persian *xšaça-pāvan-* "protector of the realm,"

hence "satrap."⁴⁷ Was this a mention of the god Shadrapha, or just an avatar (or epiclesis) of the Iranian Mithra? It is impossible to say. But a confusion between the Semitic and Iranian names certainly occurred in Greek, at least in Roman times, when the Shadrap(h)a, understood as the "Satrap-god," is well attested in Palmyra (from where comes the limestone relief in the British Museum inv. 125206; see fig. 6),⁴⁸ depicted as a bearded warrior and described as "holy master, master of the whole world" (τῷ κυρίῳ ἁγίῳ κε κυρίῳ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου Σατρπάπῃ).⁴⁹ This cosmic dimension, developed through contaminations and hybridizations, is essential for understanding the religious functions and political significance of Dionysus/Bacchus/Liber Pater in the Roman imperial context in which the archetype of this vessel was made (cf. *infra*).

Melqart/Heracles/Hercules

The second god of Leptis Magna was Milkashtart or Melqart, the supreme Tyrian god, commonly identified with Heracles/Hercules.⁵⁰ He shares with Shadrapha/Dionysus/Liber Pater the function of master of the world and of a protector able to intervene in the underworld. The two gods are mentioned together in inscriptions from the second–first century BCE onwards in the Roman provinces of Tripolitania, and occasionally in Numidia and Mauritania.⁵¹ Their busts and attributes appear on coins from Leptis Magna between the first century BCE and the first century CE.⁵² Depicted together, the two gods are shown nude, either looking leftward or facing each other, on gold (*aurei*, fig. 7a–b), silver (*denarii*), and bronze (*asses*) coins issued under Septimius Severus, sometimes with the effigies of Severus' sons, Caracalla and Geta. The first monetary series started in 194 CE.⁵³ Some coins, showing the two gods facing each other, commemorate the Secular Games of 204 CE (fig. 7b). In some cases, a veiled figure is shown making a sacrifice before their nude statues, next to Tellus, the personification of the Earth (fig. 8). It has been suggested that these coins commemorate the construction of their temple in Rome (whose architecture and decoration remain mostly unknown),⁵⁴ or Septimius' visit to Leptis Magna in 207 CE. The main reason of this iconography, however, was Severus' desire to link the two *Dii patrii* directly to his dynasty. This is why, on coins dated around



Fig. 9. Marble relief representing Heracles, Dionysus, and a Satyr, from the Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican Museums, inv. 1204. Photo and drawing after Amelung 1908: 214, cat. no. 79, pl. 21.

210–212 CE, Hercules is shown crowning Caracalla, while Bacchus crowns Geta.⁵⁵

We do not know much about the statuary group or relief that may have inspired the numismatic representations, whether in Leptis Magna or in Rome. Judging by the imperial coinage, Dionysus is represented as an archaizing kouros, with long twisted wicks (reminiscent of Shadrapha, fig. 6) and vegetal crown. He holds a thyrsus in his left hand and pours wine from a kantharos in his right hand over a panther. He is slightly turned toward Heracles. In some depictions, Heracles appears either to Dionysus' right, facing the same direction, or to his left, turned toward him. Heracles is shown bearded, with short frizzy hair, holding his club pointing downward in the right hand and draping the lion skin over his left forearm.

The Evidence in Rome

The image of the two standing nude gods spread, with slight variations, throughout the Roman Empire, from Rome to the Germanic *limes*.⁵⁶ Two Vatican reliefs reflect this Severan fashion. The first is a high relief of Heracles, holding a club and cornucopia, standing next to a young

Dionysus supported by a Satyr, from the Cortile del Belvedere, Vatican Museums (inv. 1204, fig. 9).⁵⁷ The second, closer to the drawing of the Pingcheng tray, is a small funerary relief, dated between 230–240 CE, now preserved in the Galleria Chiaramonti. It represents Heracles, bearded and nude, and the young Dionysus, covered by a panther skin, seated together in a chariot pulled by a Centaur and a Centauride, and accompanied by Erotes, Pan, and a dancing Maenad (inv. 1502, fig. 10).⁵⁸

Dionysus' triumph over India, often mingled with his wedding procession, was already depicted in a chariot pulled by Centaurs as early as the first century BCE.⁵⁹ Before the third century CE, however, only Ariadne and, in some rare cases, Silenus or a Satyr shared his chariot.⁶⁰ Occasionally, Eros served as the charioteer.⁶¹ Only under Septimius Severus, however, do Dionysus and Heracles, the two gods associated in Leptis Magna, appear together in a triumphal parade. Therefore, even if the two are mentioned together in literary sources long before and after Septimius Severus, as models for Alexander the Macedonian,⁶² the iconographic archetype of the tray cannot date earlier than the beginning of the third century CE.



Fig. 10. Marble relief representing Heracles, Dionysus, Eroses, Pan, a Maenad, and Centaurs, early third century CE. Galleria Chiaramonti, Vatican Museums, inv. 1502. Photo and drawing after Amelung 1908: 63, cat. no. 21a, pl. 5.

Parallels from Thrace

Under the impetus of Septimius Severus' promotion of his *dii patria* and of the Alexander myth, Dionysus was represented together with Heracles, especially in provinces where the two gods had earlier affinities and where the Roman army had to face the enemies. This was particularly the case in Thrace, where Dionysus and Heracles were often presented as founders of peoples and cities. They were already depicted together on opposite sides of fourth-century BCE tetradrachms from the island of Thasos, in the northern Aegean.⁶³ In Roman times, they were both considered mythical founders of Nicaea.⁶⁴

Particularly important for the Pingcheng iconography is a series of low marble reliefs from the late second to early third century CE, found in the territory of modern-day Bulgaria, depicting Heracles and Dionysus. These small votive plaques, either square or semi-circular, were usually inscribed with the names of the gods to whom they were dedicated, as well as the name of the believer who made the vow. They were displayed in niches carved in stones and walls in sacred areas. Their sculptors reproduced two main models: the first derives from coins of Septimius Severus, complemented or influenced by the scene on the Roman high relief from the Belvedere. This first type is reproduced in low reliefs discovered around Suhindol (IGBulg: II.696) and Plovdiv (Archaeological Museum II.162),

respectively (fig. 11 and fig. 12).⁶⁵ These show the bearded Heracles with his club, lion skin, and a phial, standing near the young Dionysus, who offers wine to a panther from a kantharos while holding his thyrsus. The Satyr, situated on the "Belvedere" relief between the two gods, appears on the right side of the Plovdiv relief (fig. 12). In a variation of this "Belvedere" type, discovered in the region of Mesambria and preserved in the Varna Museum (fig. 13), Dionysus/Bacchus does not pour wine but instead places his right arm around Heracles' neck, just as on the Pingcheng tray (fig. 1).⁶⁶ Pan and Silenus complete the scene to the right of Dionysus. The metrical inscription on this relief is a dedication to Heracles, the mythical founder of Perinthos-Herakleia (modern Marmara Ereğli in Turkey), the capital of the province of Europa (in Thrace) since 297 CE. Heracles himself is called "Perseides," meaning "descendant of Perseus," the eponym of the Persians, who were masters of this region in Greek Classical times and against whom Roman troops were sent from Thrace.⁶⁷

The second iconographic type of the Thracian reliefs is even closer to the archetype of the Pingcheng tray (fig. 1) and the funerary relief from Galleria Chiaramonti (fig. 10). It is illustrated by a "Thracian" relief found in Panagyurishte (IGBulg: III.1 no.1055; see fig. 14). Its inscription reads: Διονύσῳ καὶ Ἡρακλῇ | Μαρκειανὸς δῶρον.⁶⁸ The young Dionysus and Heracles, both frontally nude, appear in a Roman chariot, under a



Fig. 11. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from Suhindol (Bulgaria), early third century CE. After Gočeva 2009: no. 16.



Fig. 12. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from Plovdiv (Bulgaria), early third century CE. After Gočeva 2009: no. 14.



Fig. 13. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from the region of Mesambria, early third century CE, now in the Varna Museum (Bulgaria).



Fig. 14. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from Panagyurishte (Bulgaria), early third century CE. After Gočeva 2009: no. 17.



Fig. 15. Marble relief representing Dionysus and Heracles, from Plovdiv (Bulgaria), early third century CE. Now in the Sofia National History Museum.

vine branch. There are, however, also differences from the Pingcheng tray: Dionysus is beardless and holds no vessel, but embraces Heracles with his right arm. There are no Centaurs; the chariot is pulled by panthers, which leap over a *cista mystica*, one of them ridden by a Satyr. On another relief, probably from Philippopolis (modern Plovdiv, preserved in the Sofia National History Museum, fig. 15), Heracles holds a bowl but lacks his club and lion skin; the closeness of Dionysus, who hugs him in the triumphal chariot, leaves no space for these attributes.⁶⁹ These variations show the freedom of artisans in the Roman Empire and beyond, who could adapt the various Severan models according to regional cultural practices.

The relief from Panagyurishte (fig. 14) has sometimes been interpreted as a copy of a monument in Plovdiv, possibly related to the commemoration of a triumph of Alexander the Macedonian or of Septimius Severus.⁷⁰ Both the funerary relief from the Galleria Chiaramonti (fig. 10) and the Pingcheng tray (fig. 1) could be linked to such monuments. The links between the two gods and Alexander the Macedonian, whose heroic cult spread in the Roman Empire, especially from the beginning of the third century CE, have long been established: Heracles was the mythical founder of the Argead dynasty; Alexander was worshipped as the new Dionysus. All three were considered sons of Zeus and mortal women. They traveled to the edges of the inhabited world and beyond, into the Underworld, from where they returned to life, changing the destiny of humanity for the better. In the time of Septimius Severus, they were all seen as masters of the world, credited with contributing to the spread of civilization.

From the Severi to the Northern Wei: The Pingcheng Tray in Eastern Dionysian Art

The nudity of the two gods and the careful depiction of their genitals, as well as those of one of the Centaurs, were exotic to the peoples in Inner Asia. Nevertheless, the figures themselves are attested elsewhere, and their peculiar features – such as the beard of the nude Dionysus or the absence of Heracles' lion skin – are important for understanding the transmission of the model from the Roman Mediterranean to China.



Fig. 16. Woolen wall-hanging tapestry found at Sampul (Hotan-Xinjiang), first century CE, now in the Xinjiang Museum, Urumqi, China.

Dionysus' Procession through Inner Asia

Dionysus' triumph and wedding procession (called in Greek *thiasos*/θῆσος) is one of the most frequent iconographic motifs in the Hellenic art of the Far East. The Centaur playing a kind of trumpet, for instance, was introduced into Central Asia in Hellenistic times and is still visible on a famous woolen wall hanging in the Urumqi Xinjiang Museum (fig. 16).⁷¹ Often, Centaurs, either accompanying or blending with the iconography of the Indian *kinnaras* (protective creatures, half-human, half-animal), frame Buddhist stupas or heroic rulers.⁷²

Since Alexander's arrival in northern India and his recognition of Dionysus' and Heracles' mythical traces, the Greeks interpreted local myths and cults as reflections of Indian reverence for the two sons of Zeus.⁷³ According to later testimonies of Strabo (15.1.58–59) and Arrian (*Indica* 7), Megasthenes, the Seleucid ambassador at the court of Chandragupta Maurya, emphasized the importance of the two figures in the Indian pantheon, even proposing a binary system: the Indians in the mountains were said to venerate Dionysus, while those in the plain preferred Heracles. The compatibility of the local traditions



Fig. 17. Silver “Bactrian” bowl from the Stroganoff Collection, now in the Hermitage Museum (S-75), representing Heracles hunting the Erymanthian boar at a Hephthalite banquet, sixth century CE. Photo courtesy of the Hermitage Museum.



Fig. 18. Sasanian gilded silver plate representing Heracles bringing the Erymanthian boar to King Eurystheus, fifth–seventh century CE. George Ortiz Collection, Geneva.



Fig. 19. “Bactrian” gilded silver bowl from The al-Sabah Collection, LNS 1560 M, representing Hunnic aristocrats at a Dionysiac banquet, fifth century CE. Photo courtesy of The al-Sabah Museum.



Fig. 20a–c. Sasanian gilded silver plates representing the wedding and the triumph of Dionysus, dated between the second/third and sixth century CE. a) British Museum, London, inv. 124086; b) State Historical Museum, Moscow, inv. OK 14318/ ГИМ 84845; c) National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Collection, Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1964.10.



Fig. 21. Gold pendant from Tillya Tepe, representing Dionysus, Ariadne, a Satyr, and Nike; first–second century CE. After Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 286, no. 216.



Fig. 22. Gilded silver “Bactrian” relief, second century BCE. The al-Sabah Collection, LNS 1571 M. Photo courtesy of The al-Sabah Museum.



Fig. 23. “Bactrian” silver plate representing Dionysus and two Maenads, surrounded by Dionysiac scenes; fourth–fifth century CE. The al-Sabah collection, LNS 1372 M. Photo courtesy of The al-Sabah Museum.



Fig. 24. Roman gilded silver plate representing Dionysus and the Twelve Gods, discovered in Beitan-Lanzhou (China); made in the Eastern Mediterranean, second–third century CE. Photo and drawing courtesy of the Chinese Provincial Museum of Gansu.

with the Greek cults of Dionysus and Heracles may also have facilitated the adoption of Septimius Severus' image, joining the *dii patrii*.

In the iconography, Heracles, holding Zeus' thunderbolt (Sanskrit *vajra*-), was identified with the bodhisattva Vajrapani, the protector of the Buddha.⁷⁴ Among Heracles' labors, the Central Asiatic elites (both Iranian and Hunnic) seem to have preferred his hunt of the fearsome boar on Mount Erymanthus – depicted on a sixth-century "Bactrian" silver bowl from the former Stroganoff Collection, now in the Hermitage (S-75; fig. 17).⁷⁵ This bowl – made in Tokharistan or Sogdiana – shows a Hephthalite banquet merged with a theatrical *intermezzo* staging Heracles' feast with the Centaur Pholus, prior to the Erymanthian hunt. The story is preserved in mythological sources (such as Diodorus of Sicily, *Historical Library* 4.12), but its depiction on this vessel suggests it may have been performed in theatrical shows, most probably in the form of mimes, at Hunnic courts. In any case, the confrontation between Heracles, carrying the Erymanthian boar, and the cowardly king Eurystheus, hiding in a cauldron, was a very common image in Greek and Roman art.⁷⁶ It was also known to the Sasanians, as shown on a fifth- to seventh-century gilded silver plate from the George Ortiz Collection in Geneva (fig. 18).

Dionysus, potentially identified with the Indian Siva, appears on various objects imported to or created in Gandhāra and in Bactria-Tokharistan from the Seleucid period until the Islamic conquest. This continuity over a millennium is due not only to Dionysus' mythical conquest of India and Bactria,⁷⁷ but also to the similarity of banqueting practices in the Mediterranean, India, and Tokharistan, which persisted until the Turkish conquest.⁷⁸ One piece of evidence is a fourth- to fifth-century "Bactrian" gilded silver bowl (in The al-Sabah Collection, LNS 1560 M; fig. 19), on which Dionysus, whose facial features recall Alexander the Macedonian, looks into the eyes of Hunnic aristocrats participating in one of Silenus' mystical banquets. The bowl echoes the practices of the Dionysian mysteries in the Roman Empire.⁷⁹ Yet the alternation between young and old warrior symposiasts recalls both the nomadic tradition of gathering all elite members of the community, and probably Greco-Indian or Greco-Bactrian traditions which left no trace in the preserved evidence.

The best-known Dionysian image beyond the eastern frontiers of the Roman Empire is Dionysus' marital and triumphal procession, reproduced on at least three Sasanian gilded silver dishes, now in London (British Museum, inv. 124086), Moscow (State Historical Museum, OK 14318/ГИМ 84845), and Washington, DC (Freer Gallery of Art, F1964.10; fig. 20).⁸⁰ All these plates are inspired by late Hellenistic or early Roman representations of Dionysus' wedding, which circulated on (precious) stones, vases, or other perishable media. In burial 6.2 from Tillya Tepe (fig. 21), a gold pendant depicts Dionysus drinking from a kantharos and riding a lion together with Ariadne. In front of them, a Satyr drinks from a horn, while a flying Nike crowns the pair from above.⁸¹ This original representation suggests that although the three Sasanian plates have a late Hellenistic Mediterranean archetype, their immediate model could have originated in Tokharistan, between northern India and Central Asia. This Eastern model could have represented Dionysus as a solar *triumphator* and *kosmokrator*, "master of the universe," with his marital cortege, by the early third century CE at the latest. The Afghan origin of the London plate (acquired in Kunduz, and bearing Middle Persian inscriptions), which is the earliest and most "Hellenic" in the preserved series, as well as the "Bactrian" connections of the Moscow plate, speak in favor of such an eastern model, rather than a western import into the Arsacid Empire.⁸²

The London plate (fig. 20a) shows the half-draped Dionysus, reclining and drinking from a wine bowl in a solar chariot together with Ariadne, smaller in size and almost nude, backing her husband. The vine tree behind them forms a canopy, suggestive of Dionysus' function as god of wine. The banqueting couple is followed by a hopping Heracles, carrying a club on his right shoulder and a lion skin over his left forearm. An Eros (*Amor*), clinging to a whip-like fishing line carried by another flying Eros, pours a liquid from an ewer onto two Maenads-*Bakchai*, the charioteers of the joyful procession advancing to the left. In the lower "exergue," a panther climbs into the open mouth of a krater, between bushes. The plates in Moscow (fig. 20b, probably to be dated between the fifth and the sixth century CE) and in Washington, DC (fig. 20c, probably sixth-seventh century CE) show significant transformations of the model:⁸³ they add celestial musicians on both sides of the drinking panther, to suggest

the paradisiacal location of this banquet. The solar wheel of the wagon is balanced between two *Erotes* (*Amores*). Ariadne is covered with Sasanian draperies. Both Heracles and Dionysus are transformed: Heracles is hybridized with a Satyr, now bearing a tail and a conical hat (Greek *πίλος*, Latin *pileus*), while his club is transformed into a thyrsus. Dionysus appears youthful and wears a seemingly feminine headdress, with what appear to be breasts, a feature not surprising, since on some other Sasanian works, bouncing male pectorals resemble female breasts. Rather than viewing these iconographic peculiarities of the Sasanian plates as “misunderstandings,” we prefer to interpret them as further developments within an iconographic series, which probably started at the court of Cleopatra and Mark Antony in the third quarter of the first century BCE, continued throughout the Roman Empire, and culminated in an Iranian Zoroastrian context.⁸⁴

Another image of the Dionysiac *thiasus*, which started in Hellenistic Bactria and was later supported by the importation of Roman vessels with the same theme, is that of Dionysus supported by two Maenads, either upon discovering Ariadne on Naxos or, more generally, in the middle of the procession. The god and the Maenads appear on a late-second-century BCE “Bactrian” relief, made of silver with gilding (LNS 1571 M, The al-Sabah Collection; fig. 22).⁸⁵ Almost 600 years later, the same figures decorate the central medallion of a “Bactrian” silver plate, also in The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 1372 M; fig. 23). Produced somewhere in northern India, this fourth- to fifth-century plate, bearing a Brahmi inscription, follows a Roman model, which could have originated between the second and the fourth centuries and which continues, with variations, in furniture decorations at least until the sixth century CE.

Another scene with both Hellenistic and Roman parallels shows Dionysus riding a feline. The god appears not only on the “Bactrian” or “Kušan” gold decorations from Tillya Tepe mentioned above (fig. 21), but also on a Roman silver plate discovered in an elite tomb in Beitanzhou (now in the Chinese provincial museum of Gansu, fig. 24).⁸⁶ The central medallion, featuring the god on his panther, is surrounded by portraits of the Twelve Gods, starting with Dionysus himself, and encircled by a dense vegetal crown. Although the central medallion reproduces a Hellenistic model, the plate was molded in silver

and gilded somewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean between the second and third centuries CE. The Bactrian inscription mentioning the “weight 178”⁸⁷ clearly indicates that this Roman product from the Eastern Mediterranean passed through Tokharistan before reaching China. This seems to have also been the case with many other silver vessels that circulated from Gandhāra through the Western Regions, eventually reaching Tibet and even Mongolia.⁸⁸ Most probably, this was also the path followed by the Pingcheng tray or, at least, by its model.

The Peculiarities of the Pingcheng Tray and Their Significance for the History of Cultural Transfers

The major difference between the Roman, “Bactrian,” and Sasanian representations of the young Dionysus on the one hand, and the Pingcheng tray on the other, is that on the latter, the triumphant Dionysus is nude and bearded. In Greek and Roman art, nudity was specific to young individuals (Greek *παῖδες*), who were potential passive, receptive partners (*ἐρώμενοι*) in a homosexual relationship with the adult *erastēs*. By contrast, the beard was a sign of maturity and masculinity, usually incompatible with a passive sexual role. Therefore, adult men and gods usually have their genitals covered. Exceptions occur in depictions of powerful ruling gods, symbols of masculine power and fertility, such as Zeus/Jupiter, Poseidon/Neptune, Saturnus, Vertumnus, and other nature deities, as well as Heracles the athlete, and hybrid gods who combine multiple iconographic attributes (like several *epikleseis* attached to a divine name). Furthermore, nudity could also symbolize Hellenicity, a sign that the artist and their work belonged to a culture where the beauty of the body echoed the beauty of the soul. Finally, it could be an echo of the heroic nudity seen in public images of Greco-Roman monarchs – Alexander or the Roman emperors such as Septimius Severus.⁸⁹ The Pingcheng tray reflects Greco-Roman mythical, and maybe also political, iconography, which must have seemed both exotic and exuberant to the Northern Wei.

Here, Dionysus seems to be a blend of the young, naked Dionysus, common in Hellenistic and Roman art due to the assimilation of features from the iconography of Apollo/Helios and



Fig. 25. Terracotta head of Dionysus, from Gandhāra, fourth–fifth century CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. 1979.507.2.



Fig. 26. Linen and wool textile from Antinoë, representing Dionysus; fourth–sixth century CE. Louvre Museum, inv. X 4792.

Eros, and of an older chthonic god. The bearded, older Dionysus went out of fashion in the Hellenistic world (at least until the first century BCE to first century CE Roman archaizing creations⁹⁰); however, the figure remained popular in the East. This combination of the nude and bearded figure may have originated in Gandhāra, where the mature god, introduced by Alexander's companions and the Seleucids, survived for centuries (as illustrated by the terracotta head in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 1979.507.2; fig. 25).⁹¹ Parallels are difficult to find outside the Gandhāran networks. One exception may be a nude Dionysus depicted in a Nilotic scene on a linen and wool textile from Antinoë, dated between the end of the fourth and the sixth century, which has been interpreted as “bearded” (now in the Louvre, X 4792; fig. 26).⁹² However, the scene is hard to interpret because it is isolated in the broader Dionysian iconography. Dionysus' supposed beard seems more likely an illusion, created by the contrast between the colors used for his shaded skin and the missing parts of the tapestry. Even if he were bearded, it remains difficult to determine whether the combination of a nude, youthful body and a bearded, mature face originated in Egypt (possibly through identification with, or confusion between, Dionysus

and Sarapis/Serapis, or even Osiris), in Gandhāra (as suggested by the most solid evidence), or more generally in the Roman East, across the regions connecting the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and Central Asia. Was there any connection with imperial iconography, which represented older, bearded emperors as naked heroes or gods? It is impossible to say, since the evidence is very fragmentary and the history of the reception of the Greco-Roman cults in Central Asia requires further study. In addition to Frantz Grenet's publication of a jade intaglio featuring a bust of Sarapis from Afghanistan,⁹³ further attestations of the Greco-Egyptian god in the Kušān Empire under King Huviška (r. ca. 150–191 CE) have been published by Laurent Bricault (1998) and Rachel Mairs (2007). The bearded face of Sarapis, directly inspired by Roman iconography, is identified as *Sarapo* (CΑΡΑΠΙΟ) on golden dinars, probably issued in the context of the trade connections across the Indian Ocean, through Greco-Egyptian hubs (*emporía*) established along the coast and possibly also in the Indus Valley (fig. 27).⁹⁴ Most interestingly, at Begram, a bronze statuette of Heracles, standing, with his right hand leaning on his club and his left hand holding a (now lost) vessel, shows an original hybridization with Sarapis, indicated by the calathus above his head



Fig. 27. Gold coin of the Kušan King Huviška (150–191 CE), with Sarapo on the reverse.



Fig. 28. Bronze statuette of Heracles-Sarapis, discovered in Begram; second century CE. After Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 204, no. 108.

(fig. 28).⁹⁵ The general pose, comparable to that of Heracles on the Pingcheng tray, and the unique representation of a nude Sarapis could indicate that original iconographies, mingling elements considered incompatible in the Mediterranean world, appear in the cults practiced in the cosmopolitan circles of Hellenized traders and Roman soldiers active at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The mature, nude, bearded Dionysus on the Pingcheng tray may have been influenced either by his companion Heracles (also bearded and naked, as the Heracles-Sarapis mentioned above), or by his old teacher and friend, Silenus, who had a much broader and long-lasting reception in Asia (including on the al-Sabah bowl, LNS 1560 M, fig. 19, mentioned above). Silenus was identified with the Hindu/Mathurān *Kubera*, god of wealth and god-king of *yakshas* (nature spirits), later transformed into the Buddhist/Gandhāran *Pāñcika* and *Vaiśravaṇa*. Thanks to his Hellenic iconography, he remained easily recognizable for more than a millennium, from northern India to China.

Nevertheless, one cannot exclude the possibility that the bearded, naked Dionysus was invented in the Mediterranean. In Roman times, Shadrappa takes on not only the iconography of the mature, bearded Dionysus and of a Pater figure

(like Saturnus and Sarapis), but also the Apollinian, solar features of the young, naked Dionysus. Some busts of the older Shadrappa/Liber Pater suggest that the god could have been represented at least partially nude (as Saturnus was), although no Roman example is currently identified as such. In fact, in the second century CE, Pausanias (6.25.5–6) mentions a statue from the Peloponnese (Elis), representing Neptune/Shadrappa/Corybas nude, but beardless. Since gods could be depicted with imperial features, we cannot exclude the possibility that a nude Dionysus/Shadrappa/Liber Pater might have been given the bearded portrait of an emperor – but we have no evidence linking such a hypothesis to the Pingcheng tray.

In the current state of the archaeological documentation, we cannot identify the precise location where the Pingcheng tray, or its direct model, was created. If the tray itself was produced somewhere between northern India (mainly Gandhāra) and Inner Asia, its Roman model, possibly inspired by a monument of Septimius Severus or a reproduction thereof, could have originated in the Eastern Mediterranean – in particular in Syria. There, the Palmyrene cult of Shadrappa produced a significant amount of reliefs showing a bearded warrior figure, which may have influenced the Roman

image of Shadrapha/Liber Pater/Dionysus (see *supra*, fig. 6). Alternatively, the image could have been produced in Gandhāra or Tokharistan, where a similar mix occurred, sometime during the second–third century CE, between the nude Heracles and Sarapis (as attested by the bronze statuette discovered in Begram, fig. 28).⁹⁶

Other elements of the decoration on the tray could suggest that the ultimate Roman archetype was redrawn in Gandhāra. But one must proceed with caution, as these features may also reflect adaptations made by copyists. In our study of the al-Sabah “Bactrian” bowl (LNS 1560 M, fig. 19), which was probably inspired by objects related to Roman Dionysiac mysteries, we have shown how the busts of the young and old symposiasts facing Dionysus, decorating the exterior walls, and the depiction of Silenus’ cavern in the medallion at the bottom were adapted to “Hunnish” (or more precisely, “Kidarite”) physical types and fashions.⁹⁷ On the Pingcheng tray, the two “Bactrian” bowls held by Heracles and Dionysus replace the kantharos and the libation bowl (φιάλη, *phialē*), which are frequently depicted on Roman reliefs. These vessels have been carefully chiseled from the reverse side, in order to be identified by the viewer who likely had access to similar objects. Heracles holds a “lobed” or “fluted” bowl, commonly attested in metal and glass across the Achaemenid, Hellenistic, and Roman worlds. This shape survived into the Sasanian Empire, as well as in Bactria and Sogdiana, from where it was introduced into China.⁹⁸ Dionysus, by contrast, raises another type of shallow bowl, decorated with vegetal reliefs or bosses: its model, in precious metal or glass, is attested from northern India and Central Asia to the territories of the Northern Wei.⁹⁹ Thus, even if the two bowls differ clearly in shape from that of the shallow tray itself, all are consistent with a banquet service which could have been used between Gandhāra and China, from the third–fourth to the fifth–sixth century CE. This decoration is, in fact, a *mise en abyme* of the precious container: when the tray is empty, the user can see that the bowls held by Heracles and Dionysus are full (by an artistic license, despite the motion of the chariot drawn by centaurs with their front legs raised). It is an invitation to refill the vessels and join the celebration.

Another departure from the Roman models is the ivy garland surrounding the figures. This



Fig. 29. Bronze statuette of Heracles, discovered in Aï-Khanum, second century BCE. After Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 113, no. 14.

vegetal motif is only a sketch of the Hellenistic vineyard canopy that appears on the Getty medallion representing Dionysus and Ariadne, mentioned above (fig. 5). There are no grapes, maybe because the tray was intended for a variety of drinks (such as palm or cereal-based alcohols), not necessarily grape wine. Yet one should not forget that grape wine was introduced to China by the Sogdians, notably in the Shanxi province.¹⁰⁰ Another possible explanation is that the rounded ivy leaves (usually *Hedera helix*) or vine leaves, chiseled into the gold sheet, look similar to the leaves of the Bodhi tree (the tree of enlightenment, *Ficus religiosa*), which would have been more familiar to the Buddhist believers active in the networks connecting Gandhāra with the Northern Wei. Following the Buddhist path by which the tray may have reached Datong, we could argue that the artisan’s subtle iconographic choices correspond to the features of the three groups of deities who participate in Indian feasts, according to Buddhist texts and iconography:¹⁰¹ the *karotapāṇi*, “those with cups in hands”; the *mālādhara*, “garland-bearers”; and the *sadāmatta* or *sadāmada*, “always euphoric” or “drunk.” This would explain why both Dionysus and Heracles hold drinking vessels. Dionysus wears a



Fig. 30. Gilded silver stem-cup with Dionysiac decoration, discovered in Datong; fifth century CE, now in the Datong Museum. After Watt et al. 2004: 149, no. 59.



Fig. 31. Gilded silver stem-cup with high-relief Dionysiac decoration, discovered in Datong; fifth century CE, now in the Datong Museum. After Watt et al. 2004: 150, no. 60.

crown, and an ivy garland surrounds the whole chariot. They celebrate a euphoric triumph, an invitation extended to the viewer as well.

The absence of Heracles' lion skin (λεοντή) is another peculiarity of the tray. Heracles' left arm, which should have held it, is folded over his chest and holds the drinking cup, in a gesture which recalls *Herakles kallinikos*, the "triumphant Heracles" (potentially identified with the Zoroastrian *Vərəθraγna*), reclining at the banquet in Bisotun, where he protected a Seleucid satrap of the Upper Satrapies.¹⁰² The lion skin is also absent on Heracles' bronze statuette discovered in the Hellenistic layers of Aï-Khanum (fig. 29),¹⁰³ and on the Heracles-Sarapis of Begram (fig. 28), as well as on some rare bronzes found on the shores of the Mediterranean.¹⁰⁴ Could the omission of the lion skin on the tray be the artisan's refusal to represent the remains of a hunted animal? The only certainty is that it enhanced the closeness of the two drinkers, recalling that of the *Yakshi* on the loaded Dionysian sceneries of Gandhāra. Therefore, it may be an adaptation of the artisan who made the small tray or its model, if several adaptations separate the Roman model from the Pingcheng tray, somewhere between India and China.

Conclusion

The "Silk Roads" as "Gold Roads," through which Heracles and Dionysus, Symbols of Macedonian and Roman Power, Reached China

This golden tray attests to the import of Roman goods, techniques, and ideas, including Dionysian myths and iconography, through Gandhāran and "Bactrian" intermediaries, all the way to Northern Wei China. Its ultimate model dates back to the end of the second and the beginning of the third century CE, under Septimius Severus (r. 193–211 CE), and is probably contemporary with the Roman gilded silver plate discovered in Beitan-Lanzhou, which depicts the young Dionysus on a panther, surrounded by the Twelve Gods and vegetal decoration (fig. 24, see *supra*). The tray itself is probably later: its exotic material, exceptional iconography, and fragility suggest that it arrived in Datong when this was the capital of the Northern Wei, that is, in the fifth century CE. Therefore, it may be contemporary with the silver-gilt vessels decorated with Dionysiac imagery, found near the ruins of a Buddhist temple in the southern suburb of Datong, such as the cup covered

in grapevine inhabited by *Erotes* (*putti*) in relief, recalling models from Alexandria and Antioch (fig. 30), or the gilded, footed cup decorated with pastoral figures in high relief (fig. 31).¹⁰⁵

We do not know where these silver-gilt vessels were produced, but they clearly reflect the diffusion of Greco-Roman banquet culture, including wine, metal tableware, and divine imagery, from the second to the seventh century, as it spread from the Mediterranean to northern India and Central Asia under Kušān, Sasanian, and Hephthalite rule. Literary texts refer to rare, direct contacts, both by land and by sea, between the Greco-Roman world and China, from the Han through the period of the Three Kingdoms, and into the Wei.¹⁰⁶ A growing number of archaeological finds indicate that coins, jewelry, and other precious metal objects circulated widely across the Indian Ocean and throughout Asia. Often, the Roman image was imitated or reinterpreted in the Eastern trading hubs – most probably in India.¹⁰⁷ Roman imperial coins and imitations of coins (such as bracteates, medals, medallions, or bezels with one face in relief, molded on an effigy copied from a coin or a medallion¹⁰⁸), which did not preserve their monetary value beyond India, were used as jewelry (especially pendants) in the Thai-Malay peninsula, Myanmar, Thailand, and northern Vietnam (at times under Han control).¹⁰⁹ In some cases, the iconography was changed: an artisan could combine two different Roman coins – as on the gold ring of Dhangupta, son of Dama, decorated with the laureate head of Septimius Severus facing the draped bust of Julia Domna, above the Brahmi inscription of the owner (fig. 32).¹¹⁰ In other cases, an Indian element was added to the Roman iconography (such as on the gold medallion in the British Museum, inv. 1988,0808.11, made after an *aureus* of DIVA FAVSTINA from the time of Antoninus Pius, with a corrupt legend and the addition of an Indian shrine, fig. 33).¹¹¹ Similar iconographic adaptations can be observed on metal bowls: the “Bactrian” silver bowl from The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 1560 M; fig. 19) used a Roman decoration related to the Dionysiac mysteries for a Hunnic banquet in Tokharistan. The Pingcheng tray transformed the Severan iconography of the triumphant Dionysus and Heracles by featuring Dionysus with a beard and Heracles without his club – an image that could align with the principles of a Buddhist elite banquet.

Together with glassware, coins, and jewelry of Roman and Sasanian origins, these fragile, precious goods followed the Buddhist “Silk Roads” from the southwest to the northeast.¹¹² They could have been presented as gifts in Pingcheng, the capital of the Northern Wei, reputed for its cosmopolitan taste for luxurious goods between the fourth and sixth centuries. The delicateness of the tray made it unsuitable to use in an actual banquet. It was rather a symbol of the banquet, a prestige item that could be displayed in a house, a temple, and ultimately deposited in a tomb, as were many other precious goods previously discovered in Datong. The mythology of Dionysus and Heracles, masters of the world, but also savior and psychopomp deities in the Roman Mediterranean, predecessors of Alexander, and *dii patriae* of the Severan Roman emperors, suits any context (domestic, cultic, or funerary) in which the object could be displayed to signify the social prestige of its owner.

It is impossible to say how much information about the Western regions, their peoples, and beliefs was brought by traders or envoys sent from Bosī (Persia/Sasanian Empire), Yeda/Yanwei (Hephthalite region), and Jibin (Gandhāra) to Pingcheng and later on to Luoyang, and how much a rich prince such as Yuan Chen could have known about the Greco-Roman Dionysus and Heracles, as well as about their followers, Alexander of Macedon and the Roman emperors. However, the early seventh-century Byzantine historian Theophylact Simocatta mentions a legend according to which Alexander of Macedon was the founder of China, having conquered Bactria and Sogdiana and killed 120,000 barbarians (*Histories* I.9.6). This unparalleled testimony is part of a synthesis on northern China, designated by the name of Taugast (Ταυγᾶστ). Derived from the Old Turkic form *Tabγač/Tabgatch*, and corresponding to the Chinese *Tuoba* (拓跋氏), this name belongs to the Xianbei clan which founded the Northern Wei dynasty. Theophylact’s description provides valuable information on the Chinese emperor and the conflicts between dynasties around 580 CE, and the unification under the Sui, the use of gold and the production of silk, the Buddhist religion, and contacts with India.¹¹³ In our opinion, the reference to Alexander’s legend in China is not a confusion, but a trace of the Buddhist transmission of Greco-Roman Indo-Bactrian traditions between northern India, Central Asia, and the



Fig. 32. Golden ring of Dhangupta, Son of Dama, decorated with the laureate head of Septimius Severus facing the draped bust of Julia Domna; third century CE.



Fig. 33. Gold medallion from India; second-third century CE. British Museum, inv. 1988,0808.11.

Northern Wei, predating Nestorian and Islamic influences.¹¹⁴

Dionysus the god and Heracles the hero, two sons of Zeus with mortal women, were reputed to have conquered the whole world and ruled it with divine wisdom long before Alexander (himself claiming to be the son of Zeus-Ammon), according to Neoplatonic scholarship of the third and fifth centuries, that is, the period during which the ultimate Severan model and the tray of Pingcheng were made.¹¹⁵ If the Pingcheng tray was a diplomatic gift manufactured in Gandhāra or in some other Buddhist workshop, then it was probably an exotic way of honoring and flattering the Northern Wei elites by inviting them to a Buddhist symposium in Datong.

Notes

1. We are grateful for the support received in writing this paper. We thank Prof. Rong Xinjiang (Peking University), Prof. Wu Xin (Bryn Mawr/Fudan University), Dr. Jin Xu (Vassar College), Dr. Liu Bin (Luoyang Municipal Institute of Cultural Heritage and Archaeology), and Dr. Ching Chao-Yung (Kyoto University), who translated the Chinese texts for us and generously offered various references. Anca Dan studied the tray in Datong in November 2024 and presented the results at conferences at Peking and Fudan universities (thanks to the invitations of Prof. Ching-Yuan Wu and Prof. Huang Yang). She provided the Greco-Roman interpretation, identified parallels, and wrote the draft. Frantz Grenet contributed the Gandhāran and Hephthalite expertise and revised the manuscript. The websites cited were accessed on July 1, 2023.

2. See China National Silk Museum, http://www.chinasilkmuseum.com/zz/info_17.aspx?itemid=27795.

3. China National Silk Museum/*Zhongguo sichou bowuguan*, ed., *Yi hua yi shijie: Sichou zhi lu shang de hu xue hu jian (Mutual Learning on the Silk Roads: Stories of the Silk Road Treasures)* 2020.

4. Information kindly communicated by Prof. Wu Xin.

5. For how rhytons were held in order to pour liquid into a bowl or directly into the mouths of exceptional figures, see, for example, the depiction of drinking men in the Herculaneum fresco, now in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (inv. 9024), available at: Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a7/Herculaneum_Fresco_001.jpg. See also the figure of Kubera, depicted on a silver plate from the Dera Ismail Khan District in northwestern Pakistan (third–fourth century), now in the British Museum (inv. 1937,0319.1), https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1937-0319-1. In the case of Centaurs, the confusion between a drinking horn and a musical instrument could be explained by their animal and fantastic nature, prone to excess.

6. Cf. Liu 2021: 26–29; Pearce 2023: 269–72.

7. Rong 2023; cf. Church 2024: 245–46.

8. According to the *Weishu*, Yeda/Yanwei embassies were received in the years 456, 502, 507, 509, 511, 512, 513, 517, 518, 519, 524, 530, 532. See Ching and Galambos 2020: 84–87, I.069. Information kindly communicated by Ching Chao-Jung.

9. According to the *Weishu*, embassies from Jibin were received in the years 451 (*Weishu j.* 4:105), 453 (*Weishu j.* 5: 113), 502 (*Weishu j.* 8: 195), 508 (*Weishu j.* 8: 206) and 517 (*Weishu j.* 9: 225–226). However, it is important to keep in mind that the geographical notion of Jibin was not stable: initially referring to Kapisa-Gandhāra, the term appears to have been transferred to Kashmir sometime after the period under consideration here. This information was kindly communicated by Ching Chao-Jung.

10. See Hauptmann 2024, with bibliography.

11. On X (formerly Twitter), by Xu Jin 徐津 <https://twitter.com/xujinx/status/1174014375373561862?s=20> (on September 17, 2019); on the platform Sina Weibo, <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4518181337508671> (on June 21, 2020); <https://m.weibo.cn/status/4519313061727403> (on June 24, 2020); in the local news *Youth of Zhejiang Province*: <http://m.qnsb.com/index.php?a=show&catid=114&id=109200> (accessed in 2020). An inventory of the “western” objects mentioned in ancient Chinese texts and discovered in the Pingcheng region, including the gold tray, was published by He Kun in 2022. Anca Dan and Frantz Grenet also discussed the vase in their short blog article “Classiques grecs entre l’Iran, l’Inde

et la Chine: L’héritage inespéré des vases en argent ‘bactriens,’” *Actualités des études anciennes*, August 24, 2022, <https://reainfo.hypotheses.org/25838>.

12. See, e.g., Hamada Kōsaku 1933; Bunker 1993; Carter 1995; Han Wei and Deydier 2001; Safran 2022. Cf. Ching and Grenet 2021. For the Tang discoveries, see Kieser 2015.

13. Ching Chao-Jung, personal communication: *bō 鉢/鉢*: a transcription of Sanskrit *pātra* “(alm-)bowl” or a Prakrit form of it in Chinese Buddhist texts. Here, without any doubt, the “quartz bowls” mean the ones of foreign style being different from *wǎn* 碗/盥/椀, a generic term of bowls in Chinese.

14. Ching Chao-Jung, personal communication: *liuli* 琉璃: a transcription of Sanskrit *vaiḍūrya* or a Prakrit form of it. It usually refers to lapis lazuli or beryl in Chinese Buddhist texts. But an attestation in the *Weishu* concerning traders from Tokharistan (Ching and Galambos 2020: 26–28; Text I.014) clearly refers to “glass.” Since a number of glass cups from the Northern Wei period have been unearthed in the Datong region, “glassware” is taken as the preferable meaning in this context. Wang Yi-t’ung (1984: 193) translated the term as “agate cups, glass bowls,” adopting a less widely accepted interpretation.

15. Ching Chao-Jung, personal communication: *chìyù zhī* 赤玉卮 (translated as “ruby goblets” by Wang Yi-t’ung 1984: 193): *zhī* 卮 refers to a type of pre-Han drinking vessel resembling a mug, often with three very short feet. As for *chìyù* “red jade,” it is not necessarily as hard as ruby. In the list of objects excavated by Lü Zuan (son of Lü Guang, who invaded Kucha around 384) from the tomb of Zhang Jun (307–346, founder of the Former Liang Dynasty in Liangzhou), there appear: a “pearl curtain, *liuli* drinking vessel, white jade cup, red jade recorder (*chùyù xiǎo* 赤玉簫), purple/brown jade flute, coral horsewhip, agate wine-cup” (*Jinshu j.* 122: 3067). To make a flute from a single piece of jade had already become a refined art in prehistoric China, so, in this context, “red jade” probably refers to carnelian or similar gemstones.

16. *Luoyang Qielan ji, juan 4*: ... *Chēn cháng huì zōng shì, chén zhū bǎo qì, jīn píng* (or: *Píng*), *yín wèng* (or: *Wèng*) *bǎi yú kǒu, ǒu qíng pán hé chēng shì. Zì yú jiǔ qì, yǒu shuǐ jīng bō* (or: *Bō*), *mǎnǎo liú lí wǎn* (or: *Wǎn, wǎn*), *chìyù zhī shù shí méi. Zuò gōng qímiào, zhōng tǔ suǒ wú, jiē cóng xīyù ér lái.* ... 琛常會宗室，陳諸寶器，金瓶 (or: 餅)、銀瓮 (or: 甕) 百餘口，甌繁盤盒稱是。自餘酒器，有水晶鉢 (or: 鉢)、瑪瑙琉璃碗 (or: 椀、盥)、赤玉卮數十枚。作工奇妙，中土所無，皆從西域而來。 Cited in *Taishō tripitaka*, vol. 51, no. 2092: 1016, b1–25; punctuation by Ching Chao-Jung; English translation

modified by Ching Chao-Jung from Wang Yi-t'ung 1984: 190193. Cf. Harper 2006: 129–30.

17. Ching Chao-Jung, personal communication: “Biography of Yuan Chen,” *Weishu*, j. 20: 529: “He accumulated wealth unfairly in [Qin]zhou; laymen complained [about him].”

18. See Shih 1983: 64, pl. 14 (height 5.7 cm, mouth diameter 5.7 cm), who draws a parallel with two similar silver cups (height 8 and 9.2 cm; mouth diameters 7.9 and 9.4 cm) discovered in Huhehaote (in the Inner Mongolia Province, China), together with a Byzantine coin of Leo I (457–474 CE); cf. Safran 2022: 296–97, fig. 15.5. The cup is preserved in the National Museum of China in Beijing.

19. For the Achaemenid shallow bowls and Hellenistic jewelry, see Miho Museum 2002: 214–15, nos. 123–210. For the first-century Tillya Tepe golden jewelry and vessels, see the contributions of Viktor I. Sarianidi and Véronique Schiltz in Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 211–93 (especially the gold phial in Tomb IV, cat. no. 204). For the Dal’verzin Tepe treasure, see the article of Djangar Ilyasov and Tigran Mkrtichev in Rante and Lintz 2022: 68–70.

20. See the catalogue entry: <https://medailles.ensat.fr/ark:/12148/c33gbg879>; cf., in particular, Foucher 2000: 207–8; Avisseau-Broustet and Colonna 2017: 122–27, no. 2.

21. See Moscow State Historical Museum, <https://catalog.shm.ru/entity/OBJECT/1692632?exhibition=517>. Cf. the Parthian/Kušān dragon figurine of leaded copper alloy from Afghanistan, now in the British Museum (inv. 1913.1022.1): https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1913-1022-1. Cf. Boardman 1994: 140–41.

22. Hermitage specimens Z-524, Z-525; see also the mug-jug Z-526 and the “boat” cup Z-528. Cf. Harper 2006: 136–37, fig. 83. Images are available online: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/209736>; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/209737>; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/209738>; <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/209740>.

23. See the images online from the Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b550099436/f3>; for bibliography, see the catalogue entry at <https://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/c33gbb62>; see also Azarnouche 2026: 109.

24. Sims-Williams 2016; Sims-Williams in Dan et al. 2014 [2018]: 234.

25. Francfort 1979, 2016, and 2020 (with bibliography); Falk 2010; Lo Muzio 2011; cf. Mairs 2014. The most recent inventory is Nikolaou 2023a, described in

Nikolaou 2023b, whose chronology extends up to the seventh century.

26. The cup is 2.5 cm high, 10.9 cm large with a diameter of 9.5 cm. See online the image from the Louvre: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010003964>. Cf. Endreffy 2014 and 2020.

27. See online the images from the Louvre: AF 6869 <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010026858>; AF 6870 <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010026859>; AF 6871 <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010026860>. Cf. Endreffy 2020.

28. Vondrovec 2003 [2007]: 161–64.

29. For Panjakent finds, see Raspopova 1999.

30. See Thierry and Morrisson 1994; Thierry 2000: 128–29; Wang 2004: 13–14, 33–36; Lin Ying 2005; Safran 2022.

31. Jia Jianwei 2019: 102–11; Dunhuang Academy 2023: 17–20. For the parallels with Mongolia, see Desroches 2000; most recently, with extensive bibliography, Stark forthcoming.

32. See the online catalogue with further images from the J. Paul Getty Museum: <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103VHJ>.

33. Cf. the seventh-century gold facing of a wooden beaker (9.2 cm high) from the Pereshchepina Treasure in the Hermitage Museum, inv. 1930–5: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/digital-collection/1128986>.

34. Guo Zhengzhong 2008: 10–12 (on the unearthed weights) and 94–95 table 2–2 (for the estimation of the weight units). We are grateful to Ching Chao-jung who has brought our attention to this reference.

35. Quite often, the weights of silverware produced in Iran and Central Asia are inscribed in round figures according to the local systems, or can be calculated accordingly. This may be linked to the fact that such objects were regarded as movable capital, independently of the artist’s workmanship. According to Sasanian law, they could be accepted as collateral loans (cf. Harper 2006: 167); that rule was inherited in the taxation practices of the Umayyads, who accepted silver vases as payment.

36. There is no general catalogue of the Roman finds in China, nor any extensive study on the isotopic signature of the Mediterranean glass. Examples of very fragile glass objects that traveled to China have been published by Taniichi 1986; Watt et al. 2004: 57–65 (An Jiayao); and Hoppál 2016.

37. For the earliest iconography, see Boardman et al. 1990: 154–60. At the beginning of the fifth century CE, Nonnus of Panopolis describes a symposium at the end of which Dionysus offers a golden cup to Heracles; see Nonnus, *Dionysiaca* 40.577. Also cf. Vian 1994.

38. Now mainly in Worcester (MA) Art Museum, 1933.36. See Gasparri 1986: 524, no. 109 = Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986a: 549, no. 104.
39. Now in Princeton University Art Museum, 65.216. See Gasparri 1986: 524, no. 105; Foucher 2000.
40. Foucher 2000; Talgam and Weiss 2004. Ovadiah 2013 identified the contest on a fresco fragment from Herod's Theater at the Herodion.
41. Gasparri 1986: 524, no. 106; Foucher 2000.
42. See the online catalogue with images and bibliography from the Louvre: <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010120344>.
43. Cf. the numerous hypotheses in the syntheses of Teixidor 1979: 101–6; Augé 1994; Cadotte 2007: 253–81.
44. Cf. Pausanias 6.25.5–6.
45. Bivar 1988; cf. Boyce and Grenet 1991: 476–78. *Contra* Caquot 1952; Lipiński 1993 and 1995. For the ultimate Semitic root, see Wilson-Wright 2019.
46. Cadotte 2007: 257.
47. Vernet 2021 with bibliography.
48. See the entry in the online catalogue from the British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1889-0512-1.
49. Starcky 1949: 67–81.
50. Bonnet 1988; Cadotte 2007: 283–305. For the temple, see Brouquier-Reddé 1992: 88–91; Marmouri 2017.
51. Cadotte 2007: 283–84.
52. Andropoulos 2000: 439–48.
53. For the full references, see American Numismatic Society, “Online Coins of the Roman Empire,” <https://numismatics.org/ocre/results?q=fulltext%3Ahercules%20%20bacchus>.
54. Cf. Cassius Dio 76.16.3, with Siwicki 2021; also Krawczyk 2021.
55. See, for example, *RIC* IV Caracalla 508a: American Numismatic Society, “Online Coins of the Roman Empire,” <https://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.crl.508A>; *RIC* IV Geta 155a: American Numismatic Society, “Online Coins of the Roman Empire,” <http://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.ge.155A>. For the Roman historical context, see Rantala 2017.
56. See the fragmentary relief from Cologne (Römisch-Germanisches Museum, inv. 28.580), dedicated by M. Vannius Adiutor at the end of the second century, and edited with photo and full bibliography available online: Epigraphic Database Heidelberg, “Inscription Database,” <https://edh.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/edh/inschrift/HD024415>.
57. Gasparri (1986: 549, no. 106), following Amelung (1908: 214, cat. no. 79, pl. 21), dates the piece to the Antonine period. However, the parallels presented here, along with the Severan features of Heracles, support a date between the late second and early third century CE.
58. Amelung 1908: 63, cat. no. 21a, pl. 5; Reinach 1912: 376, no. 1; Andrae 1995: 866 sq. Cf. the online database entry: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, “iDAI.objects,” <https://arachne.dainst.org/entity/1080075>.
59. See, for example, the cameo no. 9 (Chabouillet 61) in the Cabinet des Médailles, BNF, Paris, listed in Gasparri 1986: 556, no. 215, and available online with bibliography: <https://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/c33gb1ct01>.
60. For Silenus in Dionysus' chariot, see, for example, the newly discovered terracotta plate in the Cairo Egyptian Museum, inv. 7/8/27/3: Ibrahim 2022. Better known and closer in date to the Datong tray is the mosaic from Nea Paphos (third to early fourth century), in which a Satyr with a large kantharos unsuccessfully tries to jump into the chariot (Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986a: no. 130). For the general patterns of the Dionysiac triumph, see Dunbabin 1971.
61. Eros also appears as Dionysus' charioteer on Roman cameos (e.g., the blue glass paste cameo in the British Museum, inv. 1923,0401.1106, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1923-0401-1106), on the famous Sasanian dishes representing the chariot of Dionysus and Ariadna (cf. *infra*), and in the fifth-century CE mosaic of Sheikh Zouaide in Sinai; see Ovadiah et al. 1991; Olszewski 2002 (not included in Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986b).
62. For example, Seneca, *On Benefits* 1.13; cf. Djurslev 2021.
63. For example, see the British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1898-0602-121.
64. Robert 1977.
65. Gočeva 2009: nos. 14 and 16 (in the illustrations, no. 16 is incorrectly labeled as no. 12). Gočeva's no. 14 (our fig. 12) may be compared with the relief from Belvedere (fig. 9), as a Satyr appears to the right, beyond Dionysus.
66. Shopova 2011; Rabadjiev 2015: fig. 6; cf. Shopova 2017. We could not consult Martinova 2009. The fragmentary relief MND 804 = Ma 3239 in the Louvre Museum (<https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010276958>) is similar.
67. *IGBulg* V 5128, with SEG 28 602 and SEG 35 842. Cf. Sayar 1998: 171, Epigraphische Zeugnisse (EZ)1. For the findspot, Djulino in the territory of Mesambria (not Marcianopolis), see most recently Ruscu

2014: 95 n. 37. We are grateful to Mustafa Sayar for discussing this inscription.

68. Gočeva 2009: 180, no. 17 = Boardman et al. 1990: 158, no. 3256.

69. Originally suggested by M. Rostovtsev (1911: 30–34, no. 13) and later accepted by I. Venedikov (1955) and E. Penkova (1998), this interpretation is rejected by K. Rabadjiev (1998), who identifies the figure as Silenus rather than Heracles – an argument that returns to the view of the relief’s first publisher, A. Dumont (1892: 334, no. 36). Indeed, a bearded Silenus is shown supporting a young Dionysus on some Thracian reliefs (Tsontchev 1958), and combinations with other gods are also possible. This paper, however, supports Rabadjiev’s view that there is no direct mythical or religious connection between Thrace and the staging of this mythical triumph. The scene is not necessarily funerary – despite the katabasis traditions of both the hero and the god, and their potential Eleusinian or Orphic connections. Rather, the motif’s diffusion in the northern Aegean must be understood in the political context of the military cults of the Roman Empire, influenced by the imperial political communication.

70. See Rabadjiev 2015: fig. 17.

71. Watt et al. 2004: 194–95, no. 101.

72. See Stančo 2012: 82–83; for ichthyocentaurs as Yaksha variants, see Carter 1968.

73. Stoneman 2019: 80–98.

74. Cf. de Jong 2003; Hsing and Crowell 2005; Stančo 2012: 137–58; Galinsky 2019 with further bibliography.

75. For the term “Bactrian bowls,” introduced by Weitzmann (1943) with direct reference to this bowl, see the inventory in Dan and Grenet 2020–2021.

76. Boardman et al. 1990: 43–48 (W. Felten).

77. See Stančo 2012: 95–110. To the inventory of sculptures, one should now add the sixth–seventh-century CE bone plaque depicting a youthful, naked Dionysus reclining with a thyrsus and watering a peacock, revealed by Bohodir Mamaliev and Aleksandr Naymark (2023).

78. For the similarities between the Greek symposium and Indian (Brahmanic and Buddhist) feasts, see Zysk 2021 and De Notariis 2024, and for the implications regarding the Pingcheng tray, see *infra*.

79. Dan and Grenet 2024.

80. For the British Museum example (inv.124086), see: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1900-0209-2. For the plate in the State Historical Museum, Moscow (OK 14318/ГИМ 84845), see <https://nav.shm.ru/en/exhibits/1403/>; and for the plate in the Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

(inv. F1964.10), see <https://asia-archive.si.edu/object/F1964.10/>.

81. Boardman 2009: add.1; Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 286, no. 216. For a more general overview of Tillya Tepe, see Schiltz 2015.

82. Cf. Dalton 1964: 49–61; Marshak 1986: 254, figs. 174–76; Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986a: 526–27, nos. 127–28; Gunter and Jett 1992: 121–27, no. 16; Boardman 1994: 94–97; Harper 2006: 90–92; Schulz 2018.

83. For the chronology, one can examine the fluttering ends of Dionysus’s and the foremost Maenad’s garments. On the Moscow plate, the scarves terminate in a triple-triangular shape, similar to that seen on the late fifth–sixth century CE Lhasa bowl (see Dan and Grenet 2020–2021). The inverted triangles along the edges of the skirts recall the textiles depicted on the fifth–sixth century Guyuan ewer (Ningxia, China), which shows Paris and Helen. Meanwhile, the rounded ends of the scarves on the Washington, DC, plate resemble those worn by dancers on later Sasanian vessels, such as the sixth–seventh century CE bottle in the Freer Gallery (F1966.1): https://asia.si.edu/explore-art-culture/collections/search/edanmdm:fsg_F1966.1/. The faces can be compared with those on the sixth–seventh century CE ewer in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 67.10a, b), <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/30004532>, and on the bottle in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (AC1992.152.82), <https://collections.lacma.org/node/172523>.

84. Cf., for example, the cameo 25840 from the National Archaeological Museum in Naples: Gasparri 1986: 557, no. 223.

85. Francfort 2020: 81–84.

86. Watt et al. 2004: 184–85, no. 90 (B. Marshak); Carter 1995; Baratte 1996 and 2016; cf. Jianwei 2019: 112–13.

87. Sims-Williams 2009: 191, no. 1.

88. See, for example, the decorative medallion used as a phalera, representing a Satyr and a Maenad, published by Treister 2016.

89. See, for example, the larger-than-life bronze statue discovered in Kythrea, now preserved at the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia (for image, see C. Raddato, “Larger than Life Bronze Statue of Septimius Severus,” Wikimedia Commons, 2015, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Larger_than_life-size_bronze_statue_of_Septimius_Severus_depicted_in_heroic_nudity,_discovered_by_chance_in_1928_near_the_village_of_Kythrea_in_Cyprus,_Cyprus_Museum,_Nicosia_\(22275301569\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Larger_than_life-size_bronze_statue_of_Septimius_Severus_depicted_in_heroic_nudity,_discovered_by_chance_in_1928_near_the_village_of_Kythrea_in_Cyprus,_Cyprus_Museum,_Nicosia_(22275301569).jpg)), or the bronze statue of Treboianus Gallus in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, no.

05.30: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247117>.

90. See Wyler 2006.

91. See the online entry <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38226>. Contra Brancaccio and Liu 2009: 229, fig. 9, who interpret it as a bust of Silenus.

92. Picard-Schmitter 1961; Weitzmann 1979: 192–93, no. 172 (R. Brilliant); Augé and Linant de Bellefonds 1986a: 528, no. 142 (“Scène difficile à interpréter”). See the online catalogue entry from the Louvre: <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010045311>.

93. Grenet 1982: 155–57, pl. XVI, fig. 1.

94. Source: VCoins: Online Coin Show, “India, Kushan: Huvishka Gold Dinar, Serapis Reverse,” https://www.vcoins.com/en/stores/coinindia/36/product/india_kushan_huvishka_gold_dinar_serapis_reverse_very_rare_and_choice/2087774/Default.aspx.

95. See Rosenfield 1967: 78, fig. 97b; Hsing and Crowell 2005: 11–15; Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 204, no. 108.

96. Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 204, no. 108.

97. Dan and Grenet 2024.

98. For a “Bactrian” example, see Carter et al. 2015: 194–95, no. 47. The same type of bowl is represented by a sixth-century CE “Bactrian” bowl from Lhasa, depicting Alexander the Great drinking the Water of Life (see Dan and Grenet 2020–2021).

99. See, for example, the “Bactrian” bowls in the al-Sabah Collection: Carter et al. 2015: 70–79, 82–83, Cat. 6–8, 10. Several examples of “Bactrian” drinking silverware decorated with vegetal reliefs can be seen in the Datong Museum and the Shanxi Provincial Museum in Taiyuan, including figs. 30–31.

100. Trombert 2005.

101. See De Notariis 2024, with references and secondary literature.

102. Canepa 2018: *passim*; Strootman 2020: 211–14.

103. Hiebert and Cambon 2011: 113, no. 14.

104. See, for example, Boardman et al. 1988: 751, no. 420; 754, no. 491.

105. See Shih 1983: 64, pls. 3–4; Watt et al. 2004: 149–50, nos. 59–60; Marshak 1986.

106. See the evidence referring to Maes Titianos and Gan Ying, as well as the embassy claiming to be sent by “Antun” (i.e., Marcus Aurelius), in Dan 2013; more generally, McLaughlin 2010; Sartre 2021. The passages in the *Weilüe* (魏略) referring to the western regions and merchants, including the mysterious Da Qin, usually identified with the Romans who are said to have reached Jiaozhi (northern Vietnam) in 226 CE, are now translated by Hill 2004.

107. For the Roman coins and imitations of coins, see Turner 1989; Suresh 2004; cf. the map in Smagur 2018, pl. 2. For the Late Antiquity, see Darley 2014. For Romano-Sasanian examples, see Smagur 2022a.

108. See, for example, the stone medallion published by Brancaccio 2014: 35, fig. 3.

109. See Borell 2014, 2016, and 2021 with bibliography; Hoppál et al. 2024.

110. The discovery context is unknown. The ring was sold in 2008: see Classical Numismatic Group, “Exceptional Kushan Dynastic Ring,” <https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=115376>.

111. See Smagur 2022b. Cf. the online catalogue from the British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1988-0808-11.

112. Foltz 2010.

113. Boodberg 1938.

114. It is usually thought that Nestorian and Islamic influences shaped the earliest elements of the *Romance of Alexander* attested in the Old Turkic and Mongolian worlds. See Cleaves 1959; Boyle 1974 and 1980. For analogous cultural transfers between Roman, Sasanian, and Chinese elites, see Canepa 2010.

115. This Neoplatonic influence can be observed in the letter of Emperor Julian to the rhetorician Themistius, quoted as the motto of this article. For Dionysus and Late Antique rulership, see most recently Hernández de la Fuente 2021; for Heracles, see Eppinger 2019.

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Abbreviations

IGBulg: *Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria repertae*.

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Jinshu 晉書: *Book of the Jin*, by Fang Xuanling et al. Beijing, 1974.

LIMC: *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Zürich, 1981–1997, 2009.

RIC: *The Roman Imperial Coinage*. Ed. H. Mattingly et al. London, 1923–1994.

SEG: *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, 1923–. Online: <https://scholarlyeditions.brill.com/sego/>.

Weishu 魏書: *Book of the Wei*, by Wei Shou. Beijing, 1974.

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- Fig. 18
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Figure Hyperlinks

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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 jewelry 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.

aramaeogram <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-](https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/frantz-grenet/course-2021-01-28-15h30.htm)

[de-france.fr/site/frantz-grenet/course-2021-01-28-15h30.htm](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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Two Newly Identified *Šāhnāme* Stories in Panjakent Paintings

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The Prologue of the Rostam Cycle

The first proposal to compare a painted cycle at Panjakent with a story from Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāme* came in 1956–57, when the paintings now famous as the “Rostam cycle,” reassembled at the Hermitage Museum (fig. 1), were discovered in the reception hall of an aristocratic house (Room 41 of Sector VI). On the basis of associated coin finds, these paintings are now dated to around 740 CE, the final flourish of Sogdian painting at Panjakent, which had been occupied, at least in certain periods, by an Arab garrison since 722. Aleksandr Belenitskii, then director of the excavations, was by training an Arabist and Iranist with perfect knowledge of the *Šāhnāme*; he immediately recognized Rostam's exploits in the “first war of Māzandarān.” The discovery was quickly published by him in French in 1958 and subsequently in English in 1963, and caused a great sensation.¹ Since then, many studies have been devoted to this cycle, especially by Boris Marshak in his fundamental book of 2002, by me as part of an article in 2015, and, more recently, by Larisa Kulakova in 2021, following restoration work that revealed the end of the painted sequence.² Occupying most of the second register on the four walls (the lower register is devoted to separate, self-contained tales), the cycle starts with Rostam and his companions entering the country of the demons of Māzandarān, where he has been called to help after Kāvus, king of Iran, has been taken prisoner. After a sequence of exploits that partly echo Rostam's seven exploits in the *Šāhnāme* (including the fight with the army of demons, which roughly corresponds to a Sogdian written fragment found at Dunhuang),³ the poorly legible portion near the end seems to show the eagle-like

Simorg, protector of his family, and a final combat on horseback.

The register above is largely destroyed, except for a section which contains two scenes (figs. 2–3): on the left part of the northern wall, a conversation between a king (?) and three courtiers, with a small female harpist standing between them and delivering some form of discourse (as indicated by the movement of her right hand); to the left (on the western wall), a horseback combat involving several knights on each side. Marshak treated this scene separately from the story below, as he considered the registers independent of one another (or, in some cases, that the upper register continued the lower one).⁴ Since he published this idea, however, the *Farāmarz-nāme* cycle (Room 50 of Sector XXIII), elucidated by Michael Shenkar, has provided a clear example of a top-down layout,⁵ and the cycle in the “Blue Hall” of the Shahristan palace in Ustrushana a probable one.⁶

Bearing this in mind, and checking the tale in the *Šāhnāme*, the meaning becomes clear. At the beginning of his reign, King Kāvus, while resting in a garden, is persuaded by a minstrel from Māzandarān, a demon (*dīv*) in disguise, to conquer his country. Kāvus' courtiers, chiefly Zāl, try to dissuade him from this foolish enterprise, but eventually they remain loyal and decide to fight by his side, while Zāl returns to Sistān.⁷ In the first battle, the Iranians are routed and the king is made prisoner. On the painting (fig. 2, right; fig. 3), we can recognize Kāvus on the right (Marshak already identified him as a king because his patterned silk dress is richer than the others; the headgear zone is lost). Behind him, a flower indicates the garden, while the object at the bottom right is enigmatic. The minstrel, who in the *Šāhnāme* is a lute player, is a harpist here; the



Fig. 1. The Rostam Cycle exhibited in the Hermitage. The two preserved scenes of the third register are in the corner. ©The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg; photo: Vladimir Terebenin.

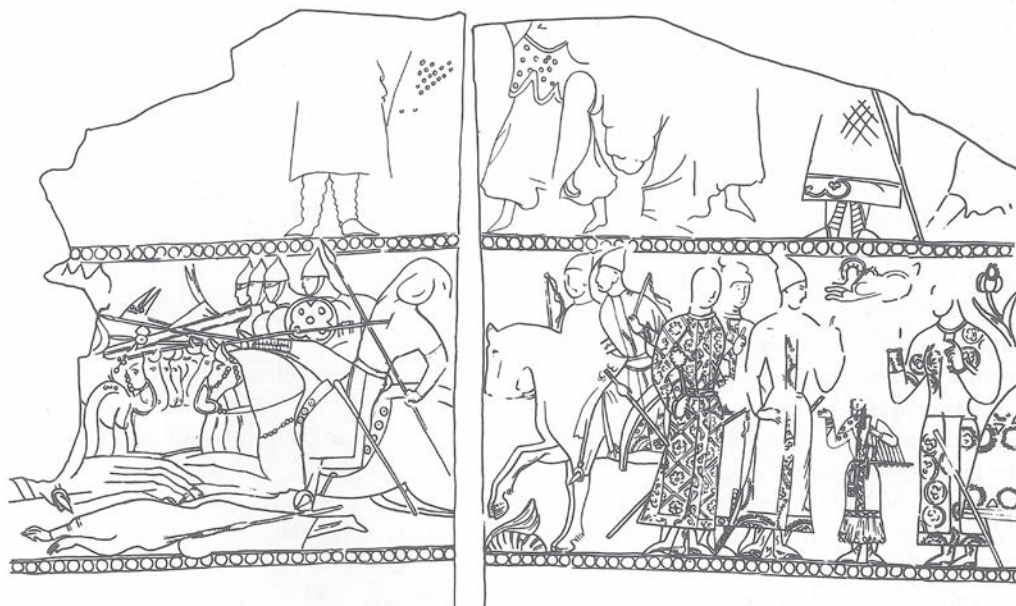


Fig. 2. Preserved scenes of the third register; from Marshak 2002, fig. 30.

Persian word, of course not gendered, is *rāmešgar*. As his or her song celebrates the charm of the pleasure girls of Māzandarān, the female gender might have appeared logical. Directly above her, a dragon is flying. This is not the *farn* “charisma, fortune,” usually depicted flying toward the heroes. In such cases, this mutable symbol never assumes the shape of a long-necked dragon (in the case of Rostam, it has a fish tail but a lion forepart), and it always carries a ring, or a ribbon, or both, none of which is present here. The dragon is, in fact, a warning of the minstrel’s devilish nature. The king is faced by three courtiers who seem to argue with him. The first seems to have his forefinger bent, the usual gesture of respect, but the second has his finger raised straight. The one in front is most probably Zāl: he has the same “Hephthalite” profile as his son Rostam (who, as in the *Šāhnāme*, is not present in this scene).⁸ To the left of the scene, two departing horsemen (the one in the foreground apparently Zāl again) create a link with the following battle, which indicates that in this register the order is right to left, contrary to the lower register. In the battle, those who come from the right, i.e., the Iranians, are on the losing side, as one of their men lies on the ground and another is unseated. The next scene is destroyed (see fig. 1). It might have shown Kāvus’ capture or Zāl prompting Rostam to restore the situation, just above the scene capturing Rostam’s arrival in Māzandarān, a scene that takes over in the lower register, if we assume a *boustrophedon* order. As for the scenes that once occupied the upper register, one can only speculate, as nothing remains. They may have depicted the early adventures of Zāl, Rostam, and the Simorg, who, indeed, appears at the end of the lower cycle.

The ‘Rings and Dragons Cycle’: Bīžan’s Story and the Ensuing War

This method also yields interesting results when applied to another painted cycle at Panjakent. Executed in Room 1 of Sector VI, it is attributed to the period 700–722 CE, slightly earlier than the Rostam and Farāmarz cycles. Marshak, who could not propose an interpretation based on the texts at our disposal, analyzed it from the viewpoint of its internal logic, calling it the “Rings and Dragons cycle.” He rightly understood that the story opposes two kings characterized by the

pommels of their swords and daggers; they share these attributes with their respective warriors, who are also distinguished by their type of armor – lamellae with wavy edges for the “Rings,” rectangular lamellae for the “Dragons.”⁹ The documentary situation is not ideal, as this was one of the earliest discoveries of an epic painted cycle, made between 1951 and 1953, at a time when the conservation methods were not yet sufficiently developed. Consequently, publications included only watercolor copies by Iulia Gremiachinska, not fully accurate, and drawings made from them.¹⁰ The originals have since been restored and are now exhibited in the National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, but their condition has worsened, and it seems that some details have been touched up.

The scenes described in the first publications, and then by Marshak, are all located on the lower register. The first one (starting from the door in the northern wall, in a right-to-left order) (fig. 4) shows a kneeling warrior who points toward a camel looking backward; its load, if any, is not visible in the preserved portion.¹¹ The “King of the Rings,” seated on his throne, is angry at what he sees and throws the contents of his cup. In the same scene, three aristocrats are banqueting (fig. 5). The one on the left is pointing his finger to his face, a convention that indicates the speaker.¹² In the next scene, to the left, the “King of the Dragons” is sitting on a folding chair, with what appears to be a floating cloth above him; seemingly indicating that he is in his camp. His *farn* takes the shape of a flying camel (the other king’s *farn* is a bird, according to Marshak, a pheasant, but perhaps rather a hawk).¹³ Then comes a battle between horsemen from both camps, followed by a combat on foot (fig. 6), in which the “King of the Rings,” on the left, shoots and kills with an arrow a young, non-royal knight of the “Dragons,” who is followed by a companion holding a mace.¹⁴ Further on is the capture of a fortress by the “Rings”: a young boy opens the gate from which a bull or cow emerges (fig. 7).

After Marshak had drawn my attention to the details of the first scene, I began to reflect on elements that recalled the story of Bīžan and the ensuing war between Iran and Turan. In brief: Bīžan, a young Iranian knight, during a hunting party, is misadvised by his mentor Gorgīn, who is jealous of his success at court. Gorgīn persuades him to approach Turanian girls. While doing so,



Fig. 4. The "Rings and Dragons Cycle," lower register: first scenes. From Marshak 2002, fig. 98.

Bīžan meets Manīže, a daughter of Afrāsiyāb, king of Turan, who falls in love with him and brings him to her father's palace. There, he is recognized and condemned to be locked in a well, into which he is thrown headlong in chains.¹⁵ His exhausted horse returns to Iran, and Giv, Bīžan's father, understands the situation. At Nowruz, King Kōsrow (Xosrō), as is his custom during this festival, looks into his magical cup and sees Bīžan's condition. He starts the war.

The details shown in the painting coincide quite well with this plot. The "Rings" are the Iranians; the "Dragons" are the Turanians. Their kings are, respectively, Kōsrow and Afrāsiyāb, already depicted as an aging man with a long beard. Incidentally, when Afrāsiyāb is eventually killed, it is proclaimed: "By the sword of Kay Kōsrow the evil of the dragon (*aždahā*) was made to disappear from the face of the earth."¹⁶ Some details are at variance, but they do not affect the story's structure. Bīžan's horse is replaced by a camel, which suggests it has returned from Turan (this is also the shape of Afrāsiyāb's *farn*). Perhaps it is not Bīžan's mount, but rather an animal messenger sent by the Turanians, carrying Bīžan's weapons? In the *Šāhnāme*, Kōsrow does not throw the contents of his cup; nonetheless, this scene takes place at Nowruz, which the banqueters of the painting are indeed celebrating (the one on the left holds a branch with flowers, see fig. 5).¹⁷

A decisive key lies, in my opinion, in what

remains of the upper register. Marshak, who presumed that this was the continuation of the story, while we now know that it was the beginning, mentioned (without an illustration) dying warriors, a king's reception, and "the hands of a man who has been hanged head down." Thanks to Michael Shenkar, I can add a photograph (fig. 8). What more do we need? One could object that poor Manīže, obliged to beg near the well in order to feed Bīžan, is not visible, nor is the structure of the well (perhaps here rather a gibbet?). But nothing subsists of the prisoner except for his hands. Marshak assumed the presence of a king, probably because, to the right, there are remnants of a platform covered with a silk fabric, with a vertical post meant to support a canopy. The king (in my opinion, Afrāsiyāb) would have been sitting here.

For the following scenes, the identifications are more tentative, but I think they are worth a try. Concerning the combat on foot, Marshak was uneasy with the fact that the king fights on foot and against an adversary of lower status. But this situation finds a precise echo in the *Šāhnāme*: Kōsrow is challenged by Šīde, Afrāsiyāb's son, who proposes to fight only on foot; after a debate with his courtiers Kōsrow accepts this breach of the protocol and kills Šīde. Also, the Turanian prince has a co-fighter, his "interpreter."¹⁸ On the painting, the small warrior between the champions is a servant of arms or a herald; he turns towards the victor while uplifting a banner. His



Fig. 5. Detail: Aristocrats banqueting at Nowruz. Watercolor by Iulia Gremiachinska. From Iakubovskii and D'iakonov 1954, pl. 37.



Fig. 6. The "Rings and Dragons Cycle," lower register: Combat on foot. From Piotrovskii and Belenitskii 1959, pl. 7, center.



Fig. 7. The "Rings and Dragons Cycle," lower register: Capture of the fortress. From Piotrovskii and Belenitskii 1959, pl. 7, left.



Fig. 3. Detail: right scene (©The State Hermitage Museum; photo Vladimir Terebenin). For color photographs, see https://warfare.x10host.com/6-10/Sogdian_murals_from_Panjakent-Blue_room-upper.htm.



Fig. 8. The “Rings and Dragons Cycle,” upper register. At the upper right: hands of a man hanged head down. National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan, Dushanbe. Photo: Michael Shenkar.

reduced size indicates his lower social status, as is the case with the harpist in the other cycle (who, consequently, is not necessarily a child). The Dragons' fortress then captured by the Rings is probably Kang, Afrāsiyāb's main stronghold. The bull or cow which appears behind the door is puzzling.¹⁹ Perhaps, as Kang is described as containing a self-sustaining agricultural estate where nothing is lacking, this is a symbol of its abundance?²⁰ The last scene is of a battle above which a small figure is sitting frontally in a chariot: a young prince, as proposed by Marshak? A deity? In this case, I have nothing to propose.²¹

As long as all evidence of *Šāhnāme* stories at Panjakent was based on scenes directly involving Rostam, the emphasis was placed mainly on their originality in comparison with Ferdowsi, and on the originality of the Sogdian fragment in comparison with both. This was linked, probably rightly, to the idea that the epic of the Sistān princes had formed a cycle independent from the Sasanian *Xwadāy-nāmag* (as mentioned by Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, II: 118), of which some original features could still be traced after it was integrated into the *Šāhnāme*.²² As more episodes are now identified in Sogdian painting, we can realize that the more they involve Kayānid kings (Kāvus in the prologue of Rostam's story and in the Shahristan cycle, Qosrow in the "Rings and Dragons"), the closer we come to the Persian poem, sometimes with striking analogies in narrative details. More than two centuries before Abū Mansur, governor of Tus, collected materials among local Zoroastrian *literati* that were eventually used by Ferdowsi, quite similar stories were circulating in Sogdiana.²³ In what form? Oral transmission? Written texts, like the unique Rostam fragment preserved in Sogdian? Illustrated scrolls with prompts for recitation accompanied by music?²⁴ A combination of all these? This is a matter for further research.

Notes

1. Belenitskii 1958; Belenitskii 1963.
2. Marshak 2002: 25–54; Grenet 2015: 423–29; Kulakova 2021: 263–69.
3. Sims-Williams 1976: 54–61; Sims-Williams, *Appendix* in Grenet 2015: 444–45; Lurje 2017: 250–52 (an attempt at reconstructing the rhythmic structure). Knowledge of the *Šāhnāme* in Sogdiana is also attested

by a list of wishes that includes several of its heroes (Kāvus, Gōdarz, Rostam, Sām, Sohrāb, Frēdōn, and the Simorg): Yoshida 2013.

4. Marshak 2002: 55–61. He thought that the battle scene comes first, and that the harpist is singing a song of praise.

5. Shenkar 2010 [2014].

6. The paintings are reproduced, but without a global interpretation, by Sokolovskii 2009. In an article in preparation with Samra Azarnouche and Michael Shenkar, we attempt to demonstrate that this cycle depicts Kāvus' attempted ascent to the heaven, followed by the "second war of Māzandarān," in which, contrary to the first, where he is taken prisoner from the beginning, he plays the main role, with Rostam as his helper. For the main conclusions, see Grenet 2020; Grenet 2022: 465–66.

7. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 2: 4–9, verses 11–151.

8. Perhaps his yellow dress alludes to his nickname *Zāl-e zar*, "Zāl the old"; Zāl being a white-haired albino, sometimes deformed in Persian as *Zāl-e zard*, "Zāl the yellow." In Sogdian, too, *zyrtk* "old" (a rare word) and *zyrt'k* "yellow" could be conflated.

9. Marshak 2002: 145–50.

10. Iakubovskii and D'iakonov 1954: pls. 34–39; Piotrovskii and Belenitskii 1959: pls. 1, 3–8.

11. This detail was not recognized in the first drawings. Marshak completed it in his book (fig. 98, here fig. 4).

12. Cf. Marshak 2002: 144, fig. 95 (in the scene of dice playing from the *Mahābhārata*).

13. Marshak misinterpreted the *farn* of the "King of the Dragons" as a bull. The identification was later corrected by Michael Shenkar. The face of the "King of the Rings" seems to have been touched up, with the addition of a short beard that is not visible on the older drawings, where this part is damaged. Only the "King of the Dragons" definitely has a beard.

14. The crown of the "King of the Rings" is simpler than the one he wears in the first scene (it seems to have smaller wings, but the detail is not completely clear). There is no reason, however, to suppose that there is more than one "King of the Rings." A crown attached to a helmet in battle would be expected to be less cumbersome than the one worn when enthroned. Moreover, since both kings wear nearly identical crowns, the differences were likely not considered significant (unlike in the case of Sasanian crowns, whose later versions provided a clear model). Here, the crown is just a general marker of royal status.

15. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 3: 333,

verses 380–83 (translation below provided by Samra Azarnouche):

“Then the king (Afrāsiyāb) commanded Garsīvaz:
Prepare heavy chains and a dark well.
Bind his hands with chains, his neck with
Rūmī fetters as strong as a bridge.
Fasten him with heavy wedges,
so that he is restrained from head to foot.
Once bound, cast him headlong into the well,
that he may be deprived of the sun and the moon.”

16. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 4: 324, verse 2395.

17. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 3: 344, verses 540–44.

18. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 4 : 212–14, verses 656–94.

19. Marshak though it was the Dragons’ *farn* deserting them, but this idea no longer holds now Afrāsiyāb’s *farn* is recognized as a camel. The bull is one of the seven animal incarnations of Wahrām, the god of war, along with the camel, but it is not otherwise attested as his iconographic symbol (the main one is the boar).

20. Khāleqi-Motlaq ed., 1386/2007, vol. 4: 236, verses 1054–1056 (translation below provided by Samra Azarnouche):

“There is food, *ayvāns*, treasures, armies
greatness, order, throne and crown.
This is the land they call ‘Paradise’ (*behešt*)
for everywhere are joy, peace, and contentment.
In every corner, a spring and a pool
as deep and wide as the flight of an arrow.”

And p. 238, verses 1061–1062:

“He (Afrāsiyāb) entered Behešt Kang with a joyful
heart
with his weapons, his army, and his gear,
He toured the whole city
and nowhere did he see a wasteland.”

For this passage, Azarnouche suggests that the cow indicates that the fortress can sustain a siege. According to a folkloric variant of this type of story, recorded in Khorazm by archaeologists, a cow, overfed with grain by the starving defenders of a fortress, is released through the gate to deceive the besiegers’ forces into thinking that the defenders are far from surrendering; see Yagodin and Betts 2009: 51–53. Similar variants likely exist elsewhere.

21. Marshak 2002: fig. 102. The list of Wahrām’s incarnations includes a boy of fifteen. This is hardly relevant here.

22. Mas’ūdi, trans. Pellat: § 541 (tome I, 201). The reading *as-Saghēsarān* “the chieftains of Sistān” for this cycle is disputed as it is only one of the forms

attested by the manuscripts. On the “Sistani cycle,” see Christensen 1932: 129–46.

23. One can add the image of Zāhhāk falling from his throne, in the portico of Temple I (Belenitskii, Marshak 1981: 56 with fig. 33). This painting is attributed to the sixth century. I quote their earlier comment, which appears very perceptive today: “Consequently, the legend of Zāhhāk was known to the Sogdians of the 6th century and had found its way to their ‘Holy history,’ which allowed to put this subject in the *ayvān* of the temple’s main building”; Belenitskii, Marshak 1973: 56 (with a partial reproduction). A fifth-sixth-century painting with Zāhhāk and Frēdōn has been identified at Kuh-e Xwāje; see Grenet and Ory 2025.

24. The presence of a *trompe-l’oeil* shaped as a harpist-caryatid next to the scene with the combat on foot (see fig. 6) is a strong indicator in this sense.

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Iranian Rock Crystal

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Rock crystal was one of the most admired hardstones in Iran from the Achaemenid age (559–331 BCE) to Safavid times (1501–1736 CE) and beyond.

It is mentioned many times in the tenth-century Book of Kings (*Šāhnāme*) and in the panegyrics celebrating the virtues and accomplishments of rulers in Persian poetry. Historians, such as Gardīzī who wrote the *Zeyn al-Akhhbār* around 1030 CE, also mention rock crystal wares.¹ Not least, practicing craftsmen such as the jeweller and gem cutter Jowharī Neyshābūrī in the twelfth century describe in the treatises they wrote the varieties of the stone, its properties, the locations of the mines and the various types of artefacts made from it.²

Yet, despite the irrefutable testimony of early Persian sources that rock crystal wares were very much in evidence at Iranian courts and in the life of the upper strata of the establishment, hardly any mention of rock crystal artefacts is made in books dealing with the art of Iran in Islamic times and none at all in the more general books purporting to provide a survey of “Islamic Art” at large – a meaningless concept but that is another story.³

There are two fundamental reasons for what will appear one day to have been an incomprehensible oversight. One is that the history of art in Eastern civilizations is written on the basis of works of art that are extant without paying much attention to the broader cultural context provided on art by historical chronicles, early technical treatises or poetry. Concerning the specific case of Iran in Islamic times, little use is made of Persian literature as a source of information. The other reason for the omission of the role played by rock crystal in Iranian art is the excessive focus on Fatimid Egypt. Rock crystal ewers inscribed to the name of Fatimid caliphs of the late tenth and

the eleventh centuries have been known to scholars since the nineteenth century. For decades, Western art historians writing about rock crystal wares from Islamic civilizations ascribed them to Fatimid Egypt as a matter of course.⁴

This may have been excusable at a time when a very limited number of Iranian artefacts were known in the West, whether made of hardstone, metal, ceramic, or glass. In the course of the twentieth century, however, their number grew exponentially, through the commercial looting of sites and to a lesser extent through archaeological excavations. Today, the situation is spectacularly different. On one hand, objects from the Iranian world have seen the light of day in tens of thousands, considerably broadening our knowledge of ornamental patterns. Rock crystal artefacts have turned up in Iran and the eastern part of Khorasan now in the modern state of Afghanistan with stretches in the south of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. On the other hand, intense scholarly activity in Iran has made available critical editions of important early Persian treatises on mineralogy, early historical chronicles, and, not least, many early Persian poets’ collected works.

All this gives good grounds for attempting a survey of rock crystal in the art and culture of Islamic Iran, first by using the evidence of the hitherto neglected early Persian literary sources and secondly by looking at the artefacts. Some, which have long been known, need to be reconsidered in the light of the data now available about the Iranian repertoire of shapes and ornamental patterns. Others, which have been dug up across the Iranian world, have been given very little attention or have remained unpublished.

Part One: The Evidence of Written Sources on Iranian Rock Crystal

The wealth of information available in early Persian sources has been left untapped in the main in previous studies dealing with rock crystal objects.

The evidence yielded by early historical chronicles has been entirely overlooked. Gardīzī, for example, describes around 1030 CE the rarities and precious vessels which had been displayed at the royal wine banquet that followed the meal to which Sultan Maḥmūd treated the ruler of Māvarā al-Nahr Qadīr Khān in 416/4 March 1025–1 February 1026. They included “a service of gold and of rock crystal wine cups (*majles-e jāmhā-ye zarrīn va bolūr*).” The context shows that the service of gold and rock crystal wine cups was rated as one of the signs of “royal magnificence”:

مجلس آراسته بود سخت بدیع از سپر غم های غریب و میوه ها لذیذ و
آینه های بدیع و نوادر.

A wine banquet had been ordained with considerable magnificence, including astonishing fragrant flowers, delicious fruits, precious gems, a service of gold and of rock crystal wine cups, magnificent disks (*ā'īnehā*)/mirrors and rarities.⁵

Early Persian Treatises on Rock Crystal

Surprisingly, the material descriptions provided by early technical treatises written in Persian have not been taken into account by art historians commenting on rock crystal in the civilizations of Islam.

The most detailed of such treatises dealing with primary substances uses the Arabic form of a Persian noun, *jowhar*, plural *jawāhir*, or *javāher* as pronounced in Persian. The *Javāher-Nāme-ye Neẓāmī* compiled by Jowharī Neyshābūrī (“The Neyshābūrī Jeweller”) has been known since at least 1316/1937 when Moḥammad ‘Alī Tarbiyat referred to it in an article on diamonds.⁶ An outstanding critical edition was established in 2004 by the great literary scholar Īraj Afshār with the collaboration of Moḥammad Rasūl Dariyāgasht. The treatise has been merely cited via a secondary source by Avinoam Shalem who does not mention the information that it yields on rock crystal even though the subject of his own article is rock crystal.⁷ Jowharī Neyshābūrī was a prac-

ticing goldsmith (*zargar*), gem cutter (*ḥakkāk*), and gemmologist (*gowhar-shenās*). His father had practised the craft before him and he succeeded him in it. Jowharī Neyshābūrī belonged to a circle of top practitioners in Neyshābūr, the vast metropolis of Khorasan. He dedicated his treatise which reads like a handbook with personal notes to the Vizier of the Khwārazmshāh ‘Alā’-al-Dīn Tekīš in 592/6 December 1195–3 November 1196. Devoid of literary figures of speech, his style is precise and direct.

The section of the *Javāher-Nāme-ye Neẓāmī* on “The rock-crystal stone and its properties” is far more detailed than the corresponding section in Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī’s *Encyclopaedia of Primary Substances* (*Kitāb al-Jamāhir fi’l-Jawāhir*) written in Arabic 150 years earlier. The importance of the testimony of a practising craftsman gravitating in the court circles of the northeast Iranian region of Khwārazm justifies submitting an English translation of this section.⁸ It begins abruptly:

بلور سنگی است سپید شفاف و برّاق، و او نفیس تر جوهری است که از آن اوانی سازند و آن را اهل هند «پتک» خوانند. و آن را صلابتی تمام است و میرد قبول نکند، و آن را ثقب به الماس توان کرد...

و شرف آن به صفا و روشنی و بی عیبی باشد. و معادن آن چند جاست. در حدود کشمیر، و شهری است که نام او بلور است و در جزایر زنگ، و در کوه های طوس، و در بلاد هند در حدود سرنديپ نیز هست. و بهترین و صافی ترین آن است که در جزایر زنگ است و چنین می گویند که در بلاد ارمنیه و بدلیس معادن بلور هست و لون آن اندک مایه به زردی زند.

و گفته اند که بلور چهار نوع است:

اول نوعی آن را «اعرابی» گویند و آن چنان است که چون شعاع آفتاب بر وی افتد لونهای بسیار در وی ظاهر شود مثل قوس قزح. دوم نوع را «غیم» گویند از بهر مشابهت به میغ.

و سه ام را «سرنديپی» گویند، و صفا [ی] آن نزدیک باشد به صفا [ی] نوع اعرابی.

و چهارم نوع آن گرفتگی آمیخته باشد و ثقبناک بود و آن نوع احسن است و اعرابی نوع اشرف.

و نوع دیگر [است] از بلور که آن را حجر «مها» خوانند و آن شفاف نباشد اما به جمیع خواص با بلور اشتراک دارد.

و در کتاب لغت الاحجار آورده اند که بلور نوعی است از زجاج.

و [بلور] در معدن خویش مجتمع شده و حجر زجاج در معادن خویش متفرّق باشد، و فرق میان بلور و زجاج بیش ازین نیست.

و از بلور نرد و شطرنج بسازند و اوانی چون قدح و کوزه و سغراق و صراحی و پیاله و غیران.

و گمان جماعتی آن است که بلور به آتش بگذازد چنانکه آبگینه و از آن انواع اوانی سازند، و آن ظنّی است خطا و ممکن نیست. لکن بلور را خرد بسایند، با قلی بیامیزند و در کارگاه آبگینه گران بگذارند و از آن اوانی کنند و بعد از آن روی آن را به چرخ و آلت‌های حکاکان راست کنند و بر آن نقشها کنند و جلا دهند و آن انواع را «بارنج» گویند و به غایت سپید و شفاف بود و با طراوت باشد.

و چون بلور گذاشته شود فرق نباشد میان او [و] حجر «مها» که آن در خراسان «شکر [سنگ]» خوانند و از وی همین نوع بتوان ساخت. و اصل جمله «مینا» از آن کنند.

و چون آن را بگذازند تنها، چنانکه چیزی با وی نیامیزد حجر زجاج سپید باشد و از آن اوانی که از بلور ساخته‌اند به مدّتهای مدید ساخته‌اند به آلات حکاکان و هر یک از آن اوانی یک پارسه سنگ بلور بوده باشد که از آن نوعی از اوانی ساخته باشند.

و چنین آورده که در قدیم پاره‌های بلور چنانکه از معدن بیرون کرده باشند به شهر بصره می‌آورده‌اند و آنجا حکاکان کامل ماهر بسیار بود و در آن شهر مقدّری بودست که پاره‌های بلور را نخست بر او می‌برده‌اند تا تقدیر می‌کرده است که از هر پاره چه توان ساخت، و آنچه به هر پاره‌ای از آن لایق بودست بر آنجا می‌نیشته است. بعد از آن به نزدیک صنّاعان می‌برده‌اند تا آنچه می‌بایست ساخت می‌ساخته‌اند و او را اجرة معین بودست از جهت تقدیر علمی را نه برای کلفت عملی.

و در قدیم خلفای مصر را بدان رغبت تمام بودست و هر چه از بلور ساخته‌اند که سر آن تنگ بوده است و بُن او فراخ هر مقدار یک درم سنگ آب که در وی می‌رفته است یک دینار زر مصری قیمت می‌داده‌اند. بدان سبب در آن قرن از آن اوانیها و غیر آن می‌ساخته‌اند و به قیمت هر چه تمامتر می‌فروخته.

و بیشتر از بلورینه طرایف که کنون افتد القاب عزیز مصر بر وی نیشته باشند. و بلور باید که با لطافت و رقت مثل هوای صافی صرف باشد و به صفا و طراوت آب صافی و عذب باشد. و اگر در پاره بلور که از وی چیزی خواهند ساخت موضعی را تقعری باشد که به حکّ هموار نتوان کرد یا روشنی موضع تمام نباشد آن را به نقشی به تاب‌گری یا به کتابه یا غیر آن پوشیده گردانند.

و هر چه در غایت کمال از اوانی بلور آن است که در قدیم ساخته‌اند. و درین تاریخ از کشمیر [و] بلور سغراقهای خرد بد رنگ تباه شکل می‌آرند کار نو و آن را قیمتی نباشد و لطفی و حلاوتی ندارد.

و از بلور انواع اشباه جواهر چون لعل و یاقوت صرخ و کبود و اشباه زمرد چنان که پیش از این ذکر شدست بتوان ساخت. بلور را بسایند و مصول کنند و بعضی از یاقوت و زمرد و عتیق و جزع و بیجاده را بدان جلا دهند، و هیچ جوهر را از جمله جواهر آن خاصیت نیست.

و از بلور نگینها سازند و آن را رنگ کنند و آن ملون باشد مثل لعل و آن را «ملون» خوانند.

و هم از بلور نگینها سازند و به جهت تسخیر نفوس جنّ به نقوش خواتیم که در علوم تنجیم بدان حاجت باشد نقش کنند و بلور صافی را به آن نوع مطلوب و مناسب است

Rock crystal is a stone, white, transparent and brilliant. It is the most costly primary substance (*jowhar*) from which they make vessels. The people of India call it *patak* [vocalization uncertain]. It is extremely hard and cannot be sawn. It can be pierced with a diamond... Its quality [lit.: "grandeur/honor"] lies in its transparency (*ṣafā*), its luminosity (*rowshanī*) and the lack of any imperfections. Mines are found in several places in the marches of Kashmir (*ḥodūd-e Kashmir*), in a land called Bolūr, in the islands of the Zang (= Zanzibar), in the mountains around Tūs [near Mashhad in Khorasan] and on the lands of India (*bilād-e Hind*). It is also found around Sri Lanka (*dar ḥodūd-e Sarandīb*). The best and most transparent is found in the islands of the Zang. They say that there are rock crystal mines in the lands of Armenia and in Bitlis. Its hue, which is not very good, leans towards yellow.

It has been said that there are four varieties of rock crystal.

The first one is called *Aʿrābī* [lit.: "of the Arab nomads"]. When sunrays touch it, multiple rays appear, as in a rainbow.

The second one is called *ghaym* ["cloud" in Arabic] because it resembles a cloud.

The third one is called Sri Lankan (*Sarandībī*). Its transparency approaches that of the Nomadic Arabian (*Aʿrābī*).

The fourth one is of varying solidity and allows drilling. That kind is the most beautiful while the Nomadic Arabian is the most distinguished.

There is yet another variety of rock crystal called the "Mahā stone." It is not transparent but it shares all the characteristics of rock crystal.

In the Book of Stones (*Kitāb al-Aḥjār*), cited by Birūnī in his Mineralogy titled "Encyclopaedia of Primary Substances (*Kitāb al-Jamāhir fī'l-Jawāhir*)," rock crystal is reported to be a variety of glass. In mines, rock crystal comes in solid blocks whereas glass comes mixed with other substances. There is no other difference between rock crystal and glass.

With rock crystal, they make backgammon and chess [boards/pieces], vessels such as cups (*qadah*), jugs (*kūzeh*), ewers (*saghrāq*),⁹ decanters (*ṣorāḥī*), phiales (*piyāleh*), etc.

Some believe that rock crystal can be melted down over fire like glass and that various vessels are made of it. This belief is mistaken and it is impossible. Rock crystal is ground down to small pieces and mixed with potash (*qilī*), melted down in glass makers' workshops and vessels are made of it. Then the surface is worked upon with gem cutters' wheels and tools, motifs are executed, and it is polished. These types [of rock crystal pieces] are called *bāranj*. They are perfectly white, transparent and delicate.

When rock crystal is melted down, it is no different from the "Mahā stone" that they call "sugar[stone]" in Khorasan. The same models can be made from it. It is a source of all glazes (*mīnā*).

When it is melted down on its own without mixing anything with it, it is the white-glass stone. Those vessels that are made of rock crystal have been made for a very long time with the tools of gem cutters (*ālāt-e ḥakkākān*). Each vessel is made from one block of rock crystal with which they make that type.

It is reported that in the old days, they took to Baṣra rock crystal blocks as they came out of the mines. There, many highly skilled gem cutters (*ḥakkākān*) were active. In that city, there was an assessor (*moqadderī*) to whom they first brought the blocks for him to estimate what could be made out of each one. What was worth making from each block was noted down there. After that, these were brought to the craftsmen (*ṣannā'ān*) for them to make what needed to be made. He [the assessor] was entitled to a predetermined fee for his scientific (*elmī*) assessment, not for manual service.

In the old days, the Egyptian caliphs were extremely keen on it [rock crystal]. Regarding any item that was made of rock crystal with a narrow top and a broad base, for each [weight] drachma of water it held, they would pay one Egyptian gold *dīnār*. This is why in that century, they made those [types of] vessels and others, and sold them for the highest possible prices.

Most of the rock crystal rarities that are currently found are inscribed with the titles of the 'Azīz [Ruler] of Egypt. The rock crystal must be fine and delicate, like pure air, and have the transparency and freshness of transparent fresh water.

If in the rock crystal block from which they want to make something, a place is hollowed out and cannot be made even by cutting, or a place is not perfectly

luminous, they conceal it with vegetal motifs (*nabāt-kārī*) or a calligraphic frieze (*ketābeh*), or something else.

Any rock crystal vessel made to perfection is one that was made in the old days. At present they bring from Kashmir newly made small flasks with poor colors and rotten shapes. Those are not expensive but are neither delicate nor attractive.

With rock crystal, one can make imitation gems, such as spinels (*la'ī*), red corundum (*yāqūt*) and blue corundum [sapphire], and imitation emeralds, as has been noted previously.¹⁰

They grind and wash the rock crystal and polish with it some of the rubies, emeralds, carnelians, and garnets. No [other] mineral has this property.

They make bezels (*negīnhā*) from rock crystal, color them and give them the hue of a spinel. These are called "colored (*molavvan*)."

They also make rock crystal bezels to defeat the souls of the djinns with the images of the seals that are required to be depicted in the science of the stars. Transparent (*ṣāfī*) rock crystal is sought after and appropriate.

After this long technical exposé, Jowharī Neyshābūrī switches to history. He tells the "story (*ḥekāyat*)" of Alexander to whom a great many precious rock crystals were brought as presents. Taking care to draw a line between legend and history, Jowharī Neyshābūrī then gives accounts of rock crystal objects drawn from "historical chronicles (*tavārīkh*)" without specifying which ones:

و در تواریخ آورده اند که چون یعقوب بن اللیث در آن وقت که [ب] نیسابور آمد و محمد بن طاهر را که والی خراسان بود ناگاه بگرفت و قصد سرای و خزاین وی کرد و او را با خویشتن می گردانید تا هر کجا چیزی نفیس بودی به وی می نمودی، تا به خزاین طرایف رسید. و محمد بن ماهر مالهایی که بدان نوع از بلورینه و غیر آن که مناسب آن بود صرف کرده بود می شمرد. چون سخن تمام بگفت یعقوب لیث غلامان را بفرمود تا به عمود جمله آن بلورینه ها را و غیر آن را بشکستند. و بعد از آن آب خواست از مشربۀ سپیدروی. چون آب بخورد مشربه را بر زمین زد. بانگی از آن بیرون آمد و به زمین بگردید و هیچ خلل و نقصان در آن مشربه نیامد.

Historical chronicles report that Ya'qūb b. Layt, at the time he came to Neyshābūr and swiftly captured

Moḥammad b. Ṭāher who was the governor (*vālī*) of Khorasan, made for his palace, seized his treasures and appropriated them. Wherever there was something precious, that was shown to him. He eventually arrived at the treasury of precious pieces. Moḥammad b. Ṭāher was counting the sums that he had spent on these types of rock crystal wares (*ān now' az bolūrīneh* [meaning the vessels mentioned in the technical exposé]) and other appropriate pieces. When he finished talking, Ya'qūb-e Layṭ ordered his bonded officers (*gholāmān*) to smash with their maces the rock crystal vessels (*bolūrīnehā-rā*) and the rest. After that, he asked for water in a white bronze mug (*mashrabe-ye sepīdrūy*). When he finished drinking the water, he threw the mug on the ground. The mug made a noise and rolled on the ground but suffered neither breaks nor loss of material (*hīch khelal va noqṣān*).¹¹

Ya'qūb b. Layṭ then mocks Moḥammad b. Ṭāher for having spent vast sums on precious objects and rhetorically asks what harm it did him [Ya'qūb b. Layṭ] to drink water in a white bronze mug. Moḥammad b. Ṭāher ought to have distributed the money to his men.

Without transition, Jowharī Neyshābūrī ends the section on rock crystal with a story told by “a respected, trustworthy and distinguished” merchant in the year 555/12 January–31 December 1160:

من به کرمان بودم. در دست شخصی از تجار صراحی دیدم مثل کنوی از بلور چنانکه به مقدار سه من آب در وی همی رفت و تنگی سر آن بدان مقدار بیش نبود که انگشتی معتدل درو فرو رفتی. و گرداگرد آن کتابه‌ای انگیزته و القاب عزیز مصر بر آنجا نبشته و آن را ده کعب در درون یکدیگر. و بر جمله آن صراحی مقدار سر سوزنی عیب نبود و بلور آن در لطافت و شفافیتی مانند هوای صرف بود و نظیر نداشت و هرگز کس مثل آن ندیده باشد و من آن را به پانصد دینار زر خراجی خواستم. خداوند آن گفت که هزار دینار کم فروشم.

I was in Kermān. I saw at the hands of a merchant a rock crystal decanter (*ṣorāḥī*) like a gourd. It took in three *manns* of water, its top so narrow that it did not allow more than a medium sized finger to go through. A calligraphic frieze in low relief (*ketābe-ye angīkhteh*) ran around [the body] with the titles of the 'Azīz [Ruler] of Egypt and that had ten cubes within each other (*va ān-rā dah ka'b darūn-e yekdīgar*). The entire decanter did not have so much as a pinhead size defect. It had the daintiness and transparency of pure air, it was peerless. Nothing like it had ever been seen. I wanted to buy it for five hundred gold *dīnārs*.

Its owner said he would not sell it for less than one thousand *dīnārs*.

This story is unusual in several respects. The merchant's account of his encounter in Kermān, related in the first person singular, is unique in early Persian craftsmen's treatises. In a few sentences, he conveys the admiration and yearning that he experienced. He notes the presence of a calligraphic frieze in square Kufic reproducing the titulature of an Ismaili ruler. In a remark that echoes a real-life experience, he describes the haggling over price that went on between the two professionals as might happen today between dealers in Iran. The vessel “like a gourd (*kadū*)” that he mentions is a type indeed called *kadū* in Persian literature, early poetry included, and is a common model in bronze and glass.¹²

One precision raises some interesting questions of art history. This is the calligraphic frieze in low relief (*ketābe-ye angīkhteh*). Such inscriptions are known on rock crystal vessels where they reproduce the titles (*alqāb*) of the Egyptian Fatimid caliphs. Does Jowharī Neyshābūrī's account point to the presence in Iran of an Egyptian rock crystal vessel? Or are we to understand that some rock crystal ewers inscribed with the titulature of the Fatimid caliphs of Egypt were made for them in Iran? The gourd-shaped model is so far known from Iranian examples, but not from Egyptian ones. This would be an argument in favor of the “made in Iran” assumption concerning the decanter seen in Kermān. The few rock crystal ewers inscribed with the names of Fatimid caliphs have distinctive shapes that differ from Iranian ones. Above all, their patterns are typical of Egyptian art as represented in various media at that period.

It is perfectly conceivable that some rock crystal ewers were made in Iran for the Fatimid caliphs given the close relations that existed between Iranian and Egyptian Ismailis at that period. They would have been eminently suitable offerings for rulers. While Jowharī Neyshābūrī mentions twice the high quality of the rock crystal ewers inscribed with the names of Fatimid rulers that were highly sought after in his own lifetime, he does not specify that they were brought from Egypt to Iran. The Iranian jeweller's silence on this score, when the jeweller goes into so much detail on every possible aspect of rock crystal, including the miserable quality of Kashmir rock

crystal vessels arriving in Khorasan in his time, is another argument that supports the hypothesis that some rock crystal ewers bearing the titula-ture of Egyptian caliphs seen in Iran were indeed made in Iran, none of which survived the vicissi-tudes of time. For the moment, however, further discoveries of texts or objects must be awaited to settle the matter.

Leaving aside this particular question, Jowharī Neyshābūrī's section on rock crystal yields ex-tremely important information on the sources of the varieties used in Iran, on the craftsmen's methods of working it, and, crucially, on the types of artefacts made from it. In passing, we learn that Moḥammad b. Ṭāher, the governor of Khorasan at the time of the invasion of Khorasan by the Safarid Ya'qūb b. Layṭ, owned many rock crystal vessels (*bolūrīnehā*) in Neyshābūr by the early ninth century.

Much of the information given by Jowharī Neyshābūrī on rock crystal is repeated in short-ened form by another practising craftsman whose specialty was pottery, Abu'l-Qāsem 'Abdollāh Kāshānī, in his treatise, "The Brides of Primary Substances and the Most Precious of Delicate Ob-jects (*'Arāyes al-jawāher wa nafāyes al-aṭāyeb*)."

The master in the art of ceramics who wrote it in 700/16 September 1300–5 September 1301 adds an intriguing detail. After reporting the sto-ries about Eskandar (Alexander) in antiquity and Ya'qūb b. Layṭ in the ninth century recounted by Bīrūnī and Jowharī Neyshābūrī, Kāshānī notes out of the blue:

از جانب فرنگ اباریق و صراحی که مقدار پنج من آب بگیرد
به خدمت صاحب سعید شمس الدین محمد صاحب دیوان آوردند
و شطرنج به غایت پاکیزه که رقعه آن یک خانه بلور بود و یکی
رنگ سرخ مثل لعل پیازکی کرده.

Pitchers (*abārīq* – pl. of *ibrīq*) and a decanter that can hold five *manns*¹³ (just over four liters) of water were brought from somewhere in Europe for His Excel-lency the late Chancellor (*Ṣāḥeb-e Dīvān*) Shams al-Dīn Moḥammad [Joveynī] as well as a very neat chess board of which one camp had a set of rock crystal and the other was of red color like *piyāzakī* spinels.¹⁴

Abu'l-Qāsem Kāshānī, who is precise about the types of objects, the materials of which they are made, their geographical provenance (very broadly in this case) and their owners of note, does not take the trouble to specify how the objects came

into the possession of the famous chancellor: A gift from Western ambassadors? From Iranian en-voys returning home? A commercial acquisition, which seems less likely?

Such as it is, this brief report is one more piece of evidence of the love of rock crystal among the great and the good in Iran. Although it is not stated in so many words, the context definitely implies that the pitchers and the decanter brought from Europe were made of rock crystal.

A third treatise written in the mid-fifteenth century, although no more than a summary digest of earlier works, deserves attention for an inci-dental mention of vessels used at the Ghaznavid court. The author, a certain Moḥammad b. Manṣūr, dedicated it to the Aq Qoyunlū sultan Uzun Ḥasan. He briefly reports the existence of very large blocks of rock crystal cited by Abū Reyḥān [Bīrūnī], Ya'qūb b. Ishāq al-Kindī, and Aḥmad b. Yūsuf al-Tifāshī but regrettably omits to name his source when mentioning examples of enormous vessels made from the materials that were in use at the Ghaznavid court:

It has been said that in the Ghaznavid King's house [sic], there were four wine jars (*khomreh*) each of which held the equivalent of two *rāviyeh* [a large leathern bottle] of the beverage.¹⁵

Interestingly, Moḥammad b. Manṣūr's account of the "story" told about the large rock crystal jars used in the Ghaznavid palace is actually a late echo of a report found in an earlier Arab source, the *Maṭālī' al-Budūr fī Manāzil al-Surūr*, "The Ascent of the Full Moons in the Mansions of Joy" written by 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī b. 'Abdallāh al-Bahā'ī al-Ghazūlī. This book, which deals with a variety of pleasurable subjects, has a chapter (no. 39) "On the properties of stones and their pres-ence in mines" (*Fī khawāṣṣ al-aḥjār wa kiyāniḥā fī'l-mayādīn*). Noted by Carl Johan Lamm in his monumental two-volume study of "Islamic Glass" published in 1929–1930, it was recently cited after him by Avinoam Shalem, who trans-lated into English Lamm's German version of al-Ghazūlī's text in an article on rock crystal.¹⁶

Shalem speculated that a noun transliterated by Lamm as *čuwāb* might be a corruption of the Arabic *ḥabb* for "grain," which would make no sense in the context. The noun which is actually *khawābi*, "large jars," the plural of *khābi'a*, is cor-rectly noted in the printed edition of the *Maṭālī'*

al-Budūr fī Manāzil al-Surūr edited by al-Tijānī Saʿīd Maḥmūd in 2017. Al-Ghazūlī, quoting al-Tifāshī (see below), writes after mentioning rock crystal in the previous line:

تصنع منه خواب للماء في كاشغر و غزنة، أخبرني من كان متصلاً
بشهاب الدين الغوري ملك غزنة إنه رأى في قصره أربعة خوابي
للماء كلّ خابية تحمل ثلاث روياء ماء من روايا الجمال، جميعها
على محمل يصعد منها إليها من بلور كل واحد من محمل ثلاث
قناطير الى أربعة.

And they make with it [rock crystal] large jars for water in Kāshghar and Ghazna. I was informed by someone who was connected to Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ghūrī the king of Ghazna that he saw in his palace four large jars (*khawābī*) for water made of rock crystal (*billawr*). Every large jar contains the [equivalent of] three leathern vessels (*riwāyā*) for water, of the camel leathern vessels type, all of them set on a howdah (*maḥmal*) from which one climbs to reach them. Every howdah [holds] three to four *qinṭārs*.¹⁷

The version of the tradition as reported by the Arab writer Aḥmad b. Yūsuf al-Tifāshī in his famous treatise on mineralogy, the *Kitāb Izhār al-Afkār fī Jawāhir al-Aḥjār*, “The Book of the Blossoming of Thoughts on the Primary Substance of Stones,”¹⁸ is actually more detailed and this precision gives it a more credible ring.

Avinoam Shalem referred to Al-Tifāshī’s treatise in his article “On Medieval Rock Crystal Sources and Resources” when citing “the splendid luminosity of Kashgar [sic] crystals.”¹⁹ Shalem, however, would not seem to have actually read the Arabic original in the Cairo edition established in 1977 by Muḥammad Yūsuf Ḥasan and Maḥmūd Basiyūnī Khafajī that he cites in a footnote. Speaking in the first person singular, the Arab polymath sounds reliable. Regrettably, he omits to state whether he met the men from Ghazna in Syria or in eastern Iran. The importance of the anonymous informants’ testimony justifies reproducing al-Tifāshī’s version:²⁰

أخبرني غير واحد من أهل غزنة (بنقل متفق على صحته) أن بالقرب
منها بينها وبين كاشغر بمسيرة ثلاثة عشر يوماً من غزنة واد بين
جبلين. ذلك الوادي طريق تؤدي إلى كاشغر و الحبلان اللذان على
الوادي من جهت كلاهما بلور خالص تقطع حجارتها في الليل، لأن
أشعته إذا طلعت عليه الشمس تمنع العمل فيه بالنهار. و تصنع منه
خواب للماء في كشميهن [أو كشمير؟] و غزنة.

و أخبرني (من كان متصلاً بشهاب الدين الغوري ملك غزنة) أنه
رأى في قصره أربع خواب للماء، كل خابية تحمل ثلاث روياء ماء
من روياء الجمال، جميعها على محامل يصعد منها الى خوابي بدرج
من بلور، كل محمل من ثلاثة قناطير الى أربعة.

I was informed by more than one inhabitant from Ghazna (in accounts on which there was agreement about their correctness) that in its proximity, between the town and Kāshghar, at thirteen days’ travelling from Ghazna, there is a river [flowing] between two mountains. This river is a road that leads towards Kāshghar, and the two mountains on the sides of the river are both pure rock crystal (*billawr khālīṣ*). The rock crystal is cut during the night because its rays, when the sun rises over it, prevent working on it during the day. They make from it jars for water in Keshmihan, [a dependency of Neyshābūr – or Keshmar?] and in Ghazna.

Someone who was connected to Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ghūrī, the King (*sic: Malik*) of Ghazna informed me that he saw in his castle (*qaṣrihi*) four jars for water, each jar (*khābiya*) containing water from the stalls of the camels, all [placed] on *maḥmals* (howdahs) from which one rises to reach the jars [contained] in a rock crystal casket (*durj min bolūr*). Each *maḥmal* bears three to four *qinṭārs* [around 50 to 60 kgs/liters].

The account of Al-Tifāshī’s informer from Ghazna “connected to the Ghurid Sultan Shihāb al-Dīn” who said that he saw in the royal castle crystal jars contained in a rock crystal casket implies the existence of a solidly established tradition of manufacturing rock crystal vessels in eastern Iran. Even if the informer’s evaluation of the capacity of the jars and of the total weight might be exaggerated, the details of the observation sound perfectly convincing.

The factual information provided by the Persian treatises dealing with the sources and characteristics of rock crystal, the techniques employed in working the semi-precious stone, and, most importantly, the types of objects made from the material yield ample evidence of the presence in Iran of rock crystal vessels and of game pieces such as chessmen. The need that the craftsmen producing handbooks felt to recount stories such as the destruction by Eskandar (Alexander) of the Achaemenid ruler Dārā’s rock crystal vessels and to report on artefacts owned by historic rulers indicates that the tradition of using rock crystal vessels was truly embedded in Iranian culture

and that these loomed large in royal palaces. The parallel testimony of Arab authors such as Al-Tifāshī, which backs up what the Iranian craftsmen report, adds useful evidence to that effect.

Early Persian Poetry on Rock Crystal

Persian poetry introduces a new dimension by providing the context in which rock crystal objects were seen and the way in which the literate elite perceived them.

The Earliest Mentions

Rock crystal is mentioned in some of the earliest poetry written by authors known only through a few verses, mostly preserved in anthologies or quoted in dictionaries to support the glosses of words. A passing line in the *Āfarīn-Nāmeḥ* (Book of Creation) which Abū Shokūr Balkhī was busy writing by 333/24 August 944–12 August 945 reveals that the hardstone was familiar enough to the Khorasani poet's readers for him to evoke it as an example of easily broken precious material:

شنیدم که دشمن بود چون بلور چو گاه شکستن نیایی مشور

I have heard that the enemy is like rock crystal
When you do not find the moment to break
[it], do not agitate²¹

Verses by Daqīqī, the immediate predecessor of Ferdowsī, who would have been a contemporary of Abū Shokūr, have been cited by Avinoam Shalem in an essay about rock crystal in the lands of Islam. Unfortunately, the scholar resorted to an English translation as he normally does for Persian and Arabic texts.²² As a result, he was unaware that the Persian original mentions glass (*ābgīneh*), not rock crystal (*bolūr*):

نگه کن آب و یخ در آبگینه فروزان هر سه همچون شمع روشن

Look at the water and the ice in a glass
See these three, colored with but one hue²³

Daqīqī here celebrates transparency but does not write about rock crystal, nor am I aware that he has done so in the few verses that have come down to us.

In the earliest Persian monumental narrative in poetical form completed shortly before 1000 CE, rock crystal vessels are mentioned several times in a quasi-ritualized manner. The *Šāhnāme* [Book of Kings], on which Ferdowsī began working at least a decade after Abū Shokūr is known to have been fully engaged in the composition of the *Āfarīn-Nāmeḥ*, lightly touches on the circumstances in which rock crystal vessels appeared at court.

Rock Crystal Vessels in the Šāhnāme and Garšāspnāme

Ferdowsī's testimony is important because the *Šāhnāme* was ubiquitous in Iranian court life. Excerpts dealing with beloved episodes from the monumental parable in 50,000 couplets about the history of Iran in pre-Islamic times would be chanted daily by an appointed official to the king, the Book of Kings *ḵvān* (*Šāhnāme-Khwān*), just as Qur'an verses were recited daily by the Qur'an *ḵvān* (*Qur'an ḵvān*).²⁴ Entire passages of the book were reproduced on glazed tile revetments that ran on the walls of palaces.²⁵ Figural tiles dealt with the most famous episodes, as did some glazed fritware or metal vessels on the royal table.²⁶ It would seem that a *Šāhnāme* manuscript was commissioned for each new ruler ascending the throne when this did not come about as a result of war or of an upheaval. In short, it was impossible to escape from the ever-present narrative. Prominent material details would be vividly remembered by those who heard it chanted and those who read it.

While the *Šāhnāme* does not mirror daily reality in the manner of an ethnographic report, the mentions of rock crystal artefacts in its different parts provide some broad indications about the types in use and their frequency. Rock crystal wine cups (*jām-e bolūr*) are mentioned only three times before the chapter dealing with the life of Bahrām Gūr as the historic Sasanian emperor Warahrān V is known in Persian. In this chapter, the words *jām-e bolūr* occur numerous times, echoing Ferdowsī's awareness of their reality in the Sasanian period.

The imaginary circumstances in which the rock crystal vessels are mentioned are likely to match those in which they actually appeared at court, whether under the Sasanian dynasty or in Ferdowsī's own time when the rulers of Iranian

lands prided themselves in maintaining what they saw as the traditions of ancient Iran.

Where Ferdowsī mentions rock crystal prior to the advent of the Sasanian Bahrām Gūr, he does so in terms that do not differ from those used in the chapters dealing with the Sasanian dynasty: Iran had no clear memory of its past prior to the Sasanian period and the *Šāhnāme* evocations of earlier events do not differ from those of the Sasanian period. The few mentions of rock crystal vessels made in the chapters preceding the reign of Bahrām Gūr are therefore equally relevant to Sasanian period usage as conceived by Ferdowsī. All occur in couplets in which the poet sings a royal wine banquet.

The first reference to a rock crystal cup crops up in the Book of Kay Qosrow. Rostam and his companions make merry in a garden where they drink themselves witless:

می لعلگون را بجام بلور بخوردند تا در سر افتاد شور

They drank red colored wine in rock crystal cups
Until turmoil filled their heads²⁷

The second reference to a rock crystal wine cup is made considerably later in the same Book of Kay Qosrow. Bīžan is invited to a banquet in the kingdom of Tūrān:

می سال خورده بجام بلور بر آورد با بیژن گیو زور

Old vintage wine in a crystal cup
Restored the strength of Bīžan son of Giv²⁸

The third mention of a rock crystal cup is found in the Book of Goshtāsp. The emperor celebrates the arrival of his son Esfandiyār by giving a huge wine banquet:

بایوانها در نهادند خوان بسالار گفتا مهانرا بخوان
بیامد ز هر گنبدی می گسار بنزدیک آن نامور شهریار
می خسروانی و جام بلور گسارنده می داد رخشان چو هور

They set up the tables [lit. trays] in the vaulted halls
He told the Master of Ceremonies: "Call the
grandees"

A cupbearer came out of each domed pavilion
And approached that celebrated Sovereign

The cupbearer would give, brilliant like the Sun
Royal wine and a rock crystal cup²⁹

In all three cases, the association of red wine and a rock crystal cup is presented by Ferdowsī as the natural thing to do. Wine, thought of as a substitute for sacrificial blood, which was variously called "the blood of the vine" (*khūn-e raz*), "the blood of the cock" (*khūn-e khorūs*) and other related metaphors, was celebrated for its deep red color and its brilliance.³⁰ It was best if the wine was visible, and rock crystal, which is both transparent and rates as a semi-precious stone, was supremely suitable for kings. In the *Šāhnāme* section called the "Book of Bahrām Gūr" which deals with the reign of the historic Warahrān V, Ferdowsī mentions rock crystal cups numerous times. The poet does so invariably in connection with the highly ritualized wine banquet (*bazm-e mey*), a major ceremony in Iran which functioned as an instrument of governance and diplomacy.³¹

After taking his place on the throne in the early morning, a moment when wine libations are traditionally held in the royal park if the season allows, Bahrām Gūr requests wine to be brought. The army chiefs arrive. A leading civilian official (*mard-e meh*) then comes, bringing camel loads of pomegranates (*nār*), apples (*sīb*), and quinces (*beh*), the fruits consumed in the course of wine libations as may be seen in Iranian manuscript painting as late as the Safavid period (1501–1736).³² The high official catches sight of a rock crystal cup filled with wine, whereupon:

یکی جام دید او پر از می بلور بدلش اندر افتاد از آن جام شور

He saw a [wine] cup (*jām*), the rock crystal full of wine
[Upon seeing] that cup, his heart was gripped with
anguish³³

Another time, Bahrām Gūr goes hunting. He arrives at a village where young women are drinking and singing with this punch line by way of celebrating his arrival:

شکارش نباشد مگر شیر و گور ازیراش خوانند بهرام گور

He hunts no preys other than lions and onagers (*Gūr*)
This is why they call him Bahrām-e Gūr³⁴

The emperor orders wine to be brought:

بفرمود تا میگساران ز راه می‌آرند و میخواره نزدیک شاه
گسارنده آورد جام بلور نهادند بر دست بهرام گور

He ordered the cupbearers that were on the road
To bring wine and wine vessels near the Shāh

A wine pourer brought a rock crystal cup
They laid it on Bahrām-e Gūr's palm³⁵

This is not just a random occasion. Drinking wine at the end of the royal hunt was traditional.³⁶ Bringing a vessel appropriate for the king was therefore imperative and rock crystal met that requirement.

The third occasion on which a rock crystal wine cup is brought to Bahrām Gūr is provided by the emperor's discovery of the treasure of Jamshīd. This episode probably echoes the memory of a discovery of a hoard of ancient Iranian artefacts, perhaps consisting of Achaemenid gold and silverware. To celebrate an event that would have been considered unforgettable, Bahrām Gūr ordains a wine banquet in the Nowbahār, the Buddhist shrine and palace complex in Balkh, in eastern Khorasan:

یکی بزمگه ساخت در نوبهار بیاراست ایوان گوهرنگار
می لعل رخشان بجام بلور چو شد خرم و شاد بهرام گور

He ordained a wine banquet in the Nowbahār
He decorated the gem-studded vaulted hall

Red wine [was] scintillating in a rock crystal cup
As Bahrām Gūr became merrily full of joy³⁷

A fourth mention of rock crystal cups during Bahrām Gūr's reign confirms that these became de rigueur during that period at imperial wine libations as Ferdowsī believed. While hunting along the river, Bahrām Gūr arrives at a palace in a park. In the rose garden full of servants, an elderly man sits on the edge of a pool (*ābgīr*) with his three daughters. These wear domed turquoise crowns (*be sar bar nahādeh ze pīrūzeh tāj*) and hold rock crystal wine cups:

یکی جام بر دست هر یک بلور بدیشان نگه کرد بهرام گور

A wine cup was in the hands of each one, made of rock crystal

Bahrām Gūr looked at them³⁸

In one passage, Ferdowsī's text implies that rock crystal was the material par excellence for the royal wine cup. The occasion here, too, is an event to be celebrated. Bahrām Gūr's falconer has spotted at the top of an almond tree the emperor's favorite hawk Ṭaghri, which had flown off, and recovers the prey bird. Bahrām's vizier (*dastūr*) Barzīn requests wine to be brought with a cup and toasts the emperor. Then a rock crystal wine cup is brought and put in Bahrām Gūr's hands:

بیاورد برزین می سرخ و جام نخستین ز شاه جهان برد نام
وزان پس بیاورد جام بلور نهادند بر دست بهرام گور

Barzīn brought red wine and a cup

First, he pronounced the name of the King of the World

Then, he brought a rock crystal cup

They placed it in the hands of Bahrām-e Gūr³⁹

Ferdowsī briefly states further that the wine cup is heavy, implying that it is larger than usual. As a singer finishes a song celebrating his virtues and his feats, the king drains the cup:

چو آن چامه بشنید بهرام گور بخورد آن گرانسنگ جام بلور

As Bahrām Gūr heard this song

He drank from that heavy rock crystal cup⁴⁰

At the end of another hunting expedition, a "large cup" is requested by Bahrām Gūr for the traditional wine libations held after the meal:

چو نان خورده شد شاه بهرام گور بفرمود جامی بزرگ از بلور

When the meal was finished, King Bahrām Gūr

Requested a large wine cup made of rock crystal⁴¹

The tone is matter of fact. Although the text respects the *Motaqāreb* meter in couplets with inner rhyme, the sentences read like ordinary prose. The implication of such lines appears to be that large size rock crystal cups were available for royal use.

The *Šāhnāme* suggests that rock crystal cups

appeared at banquets sealing international relations. When the King of Hindustān Shangul gives a banquet for his guest Bahrām Gūr, the Iranian ruler drinks wine in a rock crystal cup as they watch wrestlers demonstrating their skills:

چو بهرام برداشت جام بلور بمغزش نبید اندر افگند شور

When Bahrām [Gūr] raised the rock crystal cup
The wine shed confusion in his brain⁴²

Ferdowsī does not supply any other detail about the wine drinking. The wine rock crystal cup seems to be an obligatory implement for the ceremony.

Rock crystal wine cups were in abundant supply at the Sasanian court if Ferdowsī's verses are to be trusted. As Shangul in turn travels to Iran, in order to see the land and the abode of his daughter by then the consort of Bahrām Gūr, seven regional kings make the trip with him. At the end of the dinner given by Bahrām in the honor of Shangul and the regional kings, the obligatory wine libations are held in a "royal banquet (*majles-e shāhvār*)" ordained by the Iranian shāh while musicians and singers give a performance, underlining the magnificence of the ceremony. All the attendants have rock crystal wine cups:

چو نان خورده شد مجلس شاهوار بیاراست پر بوی و رنگ و نگار
می آورد بر خوان و رامشگران همه چامه بود از کران تا کران
پرستندگان ایستاده بپای بهشتی شد کاخ و گاه و سرای
همه جام باده سراسر بلور طبقای زرین و زرین خنور

When the meal was finished, he ordained
A banquet fit for a king, full of incense,
color and paintings

He requested wine served on trays, and musicians,
The place was filled with songs from one end
to the other

Servants stood waiting
The palace, the throne and the living quarters
turned into a Paradise

All the wine cups all over the place were of rock crystal
The trays were of gold, and of gold, the
vessels⁴³

When a royal rock crystal wine cup is mentioned for the last time in the Book of Khosrow Parvīz, the reason for the choice of rock crystal as a favorite material is made clear. In the twenty-eighth year of his reign, the Sasanian emperor goes to the park (*bāgh*) where he usually spends two weeks during the Nowruz celebrations. While the musician Bārbad, who is about to sing to the accompaniment of his harp, is in hiding at the top of a cypress, wine is brought to the emperor:

بیامد پرچهره می‌گسار یکی جام بر کف بر شهریار
جهاندار بستند ز کودک نبید بلور از می سرخ بد ناپدید

A cupbearer with the face of an angel came
A wine cup in hand and approached the
sovereign

The world ruler took the nectar from the child
The red wine made the rock crystal invisible⁴⁴

The rock crystal, transparent like glass, allowed the color alone to be seen on the palm of the drinker's hand or, to be precise, poised on the three fingers of his right hand raised to form a temporary stand. The precious material made it fit for a king.

For this reason, the hardstone was sometimes used in the construction of the imperial throne.

In the Book of Eskandar, Queen Qeydāfeh's son is seated on an ivory throne that has rock crystal columns:

رخ شاه تابان بکردار هور نشستگهش را ستونها بلور

The king's face resplendent like the sun
His seating emplacement with rock crystal
columns⁴⁵

Ferdowsī does not say that the columns (*sotūnhā*) support the throne as understood by Jules Mohl in his French translation. The poet may have had in mind the kind of slender columns topped by dragon heads that are clutched by enthroned rulers seated cross-legged on platforms from which the columns rise vertically. Columns of this type are depicted on Iranian bronze wares of the twelfth to early thirteenth century CE where they bear no weight.⁴⁶

Rock crystal was also used on thrones, probably as applications on the pediment (*pāyeh*).

In the Book of Bahrām Gūr, the emperor is seated on such a throne:

بیش اندرون ساخته هفت پیل برو تخت پیروزه همرنگ نیل
همه پایه تخت زرّ و بلور نشستگه شاه بهرام گور

In the area in front of the inner quarters, they had made seven elephants

Upon which there was a turquoise throne of the same color as the Nile

The entire pediment of the throne made of gold and rock crystal

As the seating emplacement of King Bahrām Gūr⁴⁷

While in Hindūstān, Bahrām Gūr enters a citadel (*arj/arg*) and arrives at a place (*yekī jāy*) of which the soffit (*āsemān-ash*) is made of rock crystal. As he gets close to King Shangul, Bahrām Gūr sees him “comfortably settled” on the golden throne platform (*takht-e zarrīn*) that has a pediment entirely [covered with] rock crystal:

خرامان همی رفت بهرام گور یکی جای دید آسمانش بلور
چو آمد بنزدیک شنگل فراز ورا دید با تاج برتخت ناز
همه پایه تخت زرّین بلور نشستگه برو شاه با فرّ و زور

Bahrām-e Gūr was riding on, ambling

He saw a place of which the soffit was of rock crystal

As he came suddenly close to Shangul

He saw him wearing his crown, comfortably settled on the throne

The entire pediment of the golden throne was [covered with] rock crystal

As the seating emplacement of the king, glorious and powerful⁴⁸

The structure called *āsemān*, etymologically “sky,” refers to the soffit of a dome because the sky is metaphorically compared with the dome of a square structure. Here, Ferdowsī, who uses the architectural term, has in mind a hemispherical dome pierced with circular openings at regular intervals such as can be seen to this day in some *ḥammāms* in Iran. The openings would have been closed by small rock crystal disks instead of glass ones. Such glass disks moulded with Ghaznavid royal figural motifs have come out of commercial digging in the modern state of Afghanistan.⁴⁹

The use of rock crystal in royal throne construction and in palatial architecture echoed in the *Šāhnāme* confirms the important place that the material held in Iranian art in Ferdowsī’s time, presumably continuing a tradition well established in Sasanian times.

A passing mention in the Book of Eskandar indicates that rock crystal was the preferred material for royal use where glass was otherwise the norm. At the end of a long march, Eskandar catches sight of a palace with lapis-lazuli bricks and a topaz (*yāqūt-e zard*) roof erected at the top of a peak. The lamps (*qandīlhā*) hanging from the roof are made of rock crystal:

همه خانه قندیل های بلور میان اندرون چشمه آب شور

The entire building had rock crystal lamps

At the center of the inner quarters, there was a fountain of salt water⁵⁰

The mythical character of such a palace is clear enough. Nevertheless, the use of rock crystal for making small hanging lamps similar to glass examples is implied by this description of an imaginary monument.⁵¹

The emission of light was considered to be best perceived through rock crystal, as the mention of a rock crystal cup in a comparison made by Ferdowsī in the same Book of Bahrām Gūr implies. Celebrations take place following the wedding of Sapīnūd, a daughter of the King of Hindustan, Shangul:

سپینود با شاه بهرام گور چو می بود روشن بجام بلور

Sapīnūd with Shāh Bahrām Gūr

Was luminous like wine in a rock crystal cup⁵²

While the *Šāhnāme* cannot be held to be the equivalent of a geographer’s or a chronicler’s report, the repeated rock crystal mentions show that the material was embedded in the Iranian artistic tradition: for the imaginary narrative to be evocative, it had to be connected to the reality of the environment.

The same remark applies to the *Garšāspnāme* composed in the first half of the eleventh century by Asadī Tūsī in the manner and meter of the *Šāhnāme*. By contrast with Ferdowsī, Asadī Tūsī mentions a variety of rock crystal vessels. The models go back to Iranian antiquity and con-

tinued to be made in Islamic times.

Early on, when describing the banquet given by King Asreṭ to King Zāḥḥāk in a mythical ancient Iran, the poet conjures the image of scores of rock crystal wine boats, a model that goes at least as far back as the early first millennium BCE in Iran:⁵³

دم مشک از مغز برمیغ شد دل میغ ازو عنبر آمیغ شد
ز عکس می زرد و جام بلور سپهری شد ایوان پر از ماه و هور

The whiff of musk went up from its substance above the clouds

By it, the heart of the clouds was laden with amber

By the reflection of yellow wine and rock crystal cups
The vaulted palace was turned into a sky full of moons and suns

In the last hemistich, the vaulted palace (*ayvān*) is compared with the sky which, in the Iranian tradition, is thought of as a hemispherical cupola. This sky is filled with moons, the poet says, because wine boats reproduce the profile of the crescent moon, and with suns because the wine they hold is thought of as flowing sunlight.

Later, Asadī Ṭūsī in his enumeration of the paraphernalia of a banquet given for the Khāqān of Chīn, mentions one of the earliest types of wine vessels from Iranian antiquity, the wine leg.⁵⁴ The poet does it when evoking the participants:

کمر بسته در پیش خوبان پرست همه باده و بادبیزان به دست
چنان روشن از می بلورین ایاغ کز او کور دیدی به شب بی چراغ

Their belts fastened, standing in front of the beauty worshippers,

All holding a wine vessel (*bādeh*) and a fan (*bād-bīzan*)

The rock crystal *ayāghs* [were] made so brilliant by the wine

That with them a blind man could see at night without a lamp⁵⁵

The occurrence of a Turkish word, *ayāgh*,⁵⁶ which means “leg” is a departure from Asadī Ṭūsī’s almost exclusive use of Persian vocabulary in the *Garšāspnāme*. The most plausible explanation for the adoption of a noun from a foreign

language is the need to characterize the specific vessel. Called in Persian *pāy-e bādeh/mey/sharāb*, literally “wine leg” (see previous note), the compound noun is not as easily fitted into a verse.

A third type of wine vessel inherited from the pre-Islamic past is mentioned by Asadī Ṭūsī when giving details about the banquet with which Fereydūn greets the arrival of Narīmān. In one couplet, the poet evokes the grandees of the realm holding a rock crystal *takūk* with one hand and a *pāloḡh* with the other:

هزار از بزرگان خسروپرست تکوک بلورین و پالغ به دست

Thousands of grandees devoted to the king
Holding a rock crystal *takūk* and a *pāloḡh*⁵⁷

Asadī Ṭūsī enters the noun *takūk* in the *Loghat-e Fors*, “The Lexicon of the Ancient Iranians,” compiled by him sometime in the first half of the eleventh century:

تکوک: گاوی باشد سفالین یا زرین یا از چیز دیگر که بدان شراب
خورند

Takūk: is a bull made of ceramic or gold, or any other material, in which one drinks wine.⁵⁸

The poet-cum-lexicographer supports this gloss with a couplet by Rūdakī which indicates that this was a vessel used in royal contexts. It is probably drawn from a *qaṣīdeh* [long ode] composed as a panegyric on a Samanid ruler which began with a celebration of the spring. This occasion would have been the Nowruz festival, “the festival of Fereydūn (*jashn-e Fereydūn*),” the mythical founder of the first dynasty of Iran, the Kayāniān:

خور بشادی روزگار نوبهار می‌گسار اندر تکوک شاهوار

Drink merrily at the time of the new spring
Pour out wine in the royal *takūk*

While animal-shaped vessels continued to be made for centuries, the noun *takūk* which transcribes in the Arabic alphabet the Middle Persian (*Pahlavī*) name *takōk*⁵⁹ was no longer used after Asadī Ṭūsī’s time, nor indeed was *pāloḡh*, a wine horn. Both terms gave way to other Persian names. For bull-shaped vessels, it was *gāv-e*

bādeh, “wine bull” or, for short, just *gāv*, “bull/cow.” For *pālogh*, it was *shākh-e bādeh/mey/ṣabūh* (literally “wine horn” and for *ṣabūh*, “morning-banquet horn”). Proof that *takūk* had become obsolete is provided by later dictionaries, such as the *Borhān-e Qāteʿ*, which only cite other couplets from the *Garšāspnāme* in support of their gloss of the noun *takūk*.

Asadī Ṭūsī’s choice of two archaic words in the *Garšāspnāme* points to his awareness that they perpetuated a usage preceding the Islamic period.

Indeed, the poet mentions several times vessels drawn from Iranian antiquity when describing banquets that all take place in the earliest past of Iran according to Iranian traditional historiography.

Five couplets down, he cites once more the *ayāgh*, “the wine leg,” encountered above:

می زرد بد در بلورین ایاغ چو در آب پاک از نمایش چراغ

The yellow wine was in the rock crystals *ayāghs*
In its appearance, like a lamp in clear water⁶⁰

As before, the comparison of the wine with a lamp conveys the traditional equation of wine with flowing light that Persian poetry repeatedly echoes.

In the same passage recounting the banquet given by Fereydūn in honor of Narīmān, we learn that modern rock crystal types appeared alongside those derived from ancient Iranian usage. The couplet mentions the basin with high vertical sides called *lagan*:

طبق های نقل از عقیق یمن پر از مشک کرده بلورین لگن

Noql trays of carnelian from Yemen
A rock crystal basin (*lagan*) filled with musk⁶¹

A fourth rock crystal type of object seen at one of the banquets described by Asadī, however briefly, is an early model that apparently went out of use after the tenth century CE. This is the four-lobed cup, with two elongated lobes in the central section.

Asadī Ṭūsī mentions it when describing in just two couplets a wine banquet *à-deux* briskly arranged for themselves by the marshal (*sepahdār*) leading the Iranian army and the daughter of the Roman Caesar who had arrived in Iran. The poet uses the word *piyāleh*, which in Persian refers to

a wide shallow wine cup without a handle:

نشستند و بز می نو آراستند به می یاد یکدیگران خواستند
بلورین پیاله ز می لاله شد کف می کش از لاله پر زاله شد

They sat and arranged a fresh banquet
They drank wine to the [eternal] memory of each other

The rock crystal *piyāleh* was turned into an anemone by the wine

The hand that drains the wine was filled with dew by the anemone⁶²

Bowls are compared in early poetry to the wild anemone called *lāleh*, which etymologically means “the red one.”⁶³ It applies to shallow four-lobed vessels with two longer lobes in the median area, known among others, in earthenware painted overglaze in golden colors (so-called “lustre ware”) from tenth-century CE Iran.⁶⁴ Asadī Ṭūsī says that the *piyāleh* has been turned into a *lāleh* because the red wine alone is visible in its transparent rock crystal container. He then adds that the hand “which draws the wine (*mey-kesh*) has been filled with dew” by the anemone because the rock crystal vessel, transparent like dew, is held by the hand.

The range of rock crystal types of vessels reflects Asadī Ṭūsī’s awareness of the prominent display of rock crystal ware at the Iranian court. Each time the poet describes a royal banquet, however briefly, rock crystal vessels are mentioned.

When Fereydūn, the mythical founder of the Ancient Iranian Keyanid dynasty, holds a banquet for Garšāsp, the Shāh of Nīmrūz, and Narīmān, shallow wine cups of the *piyāleh* type appear:

شد ایوان چو خرم یکی بوستان در آن بوستان گل رخ دوستان
بلورین پیاله ز می لاله شد ز بر دود عود از بر زاله شد
قنینه گرسست از می لعل فام بنالید نای و بخندید جام

The vaulted hall (*ayvān*) became like a joyous garden
In that garden, the roses were the friends’ faces

The rock crystal *piyālehs* were turned into anemones by the wine

Above, the vapor of the aloe wood came out of the dew

The carafes (*qanīneh*) were made to cry by the red wine
The flutes lamented and the wine cups smiled⁶⁵

In the second couplet, Asadī Ṭūsī makes the traditional comparison of wine with the red color of the wild anemone (*lāleh*) and evokes the vapor of slow burning aloe wood coming out of incense burners as transparent as dew. Filled with wine, the *piyāles* become *lālehs*. The poet, who provides material details in just three couplets, devotes, characteristically enough, one hemistich to rock crystal vessels, in this case the *piyālehs*.

Asadī Ṭūsī's consistency in associating royal banquets with the use of rock crystal vessels to the exclusion of any other specific objects implies that these would have been highly evocative of court usage to mid-eleventh-century readers.

Fakhr al-Dīn As'ad-e Gorgānī, a contemporary of Asadī Ṭūsī who wrote the romance *Vīs o Rāmīn* by drawing on a Pahlavi source, mentions rock crystal wine boats among royal presents. The precious gifts dispatched by the Šāhānšāh for a forthcoming wedding include large numbers of crescent-shaped rock crystal and gold cups:

بلورین بود و زرین هفتصد جام به سان ماه با زهره گه بام

Of rock crystal and of gold were seven hundred wine cups

Like the Moon with Venus at the time of dawn⁶⁶

Elsewhere, when describing the ferocious beating that the Šāhānšāh inflicts on Queen Vīs, Gorgānī uses rock crystal as a term of comparison twice within five couplets:

ز تخت شیرپا اندر کشیدش میان خاک و خاکستر کشیدش
بپیچیدش بلورین بازو و دست چو دزدان هر دو دستش بازپس بست
پس آنگه تازیانه زدش چندان ابر پشت و سرین و سینه و ران
که اندامش چو ناری شد کفیده وزو چون ناردانه خون چکیده
همی شد خورش از اندام سیمین چو ریزان باده از جام بلورین

He pulled her down from the throne with lion legs
He pulled her on the earth and dust

He dragged her rock-crystalline arms and hands
And tied her two hands in her back as [is done] with thieves

Then he hit her with a whip so much
On the back, on the bottom, on the chest and
on the thighs

That her limbs burst open like a pomegranate
And that blood flowed out of her like pomegranate juice

Her blood came out of her silvery limbs
Like wine pouring out of a rock crystal bowl⁶⁷

These verses, among others, show that in Gorgānī's mind rock crystal had an evident evocative power, which implies a well-established tradition of making rock crystal objects.

Almost a century and a half later, Neẓāmī, writing in Ganja, the metropolis of Shīrvān in what is today the Republic of Azerbaijan at the north-western end of the Iranian world, found rock crystal vessels equally evocative of magnificent royal possessions and celebrations.

When Neẓāmī tells in the *Šarafnāme* the "story" (*dāstān*) of the dispersal of Dārā's treasure, the very word "story" shows that he makes no pretence of giving a historical account but the material description of the objects, weapons, and textiles clearly reflect the reality of his time, the late twelfth century CE. We thus learn that a royal treasure included the rock crystal trays that served as portable tables when set up on trestles:

طبقهای بلور و خوانهای لعل طرایف کشان را بفرسود نعل

Rock crystal trays and spinel trays
Wore out the horseshoes of the [horses]
pulling the precious objects⁶⁸

Later, when describing Eskandar's special tray (*khwān*) laid out in a solemn royal banquet, Neẓāmī indicates that the portable tables could be poised on a central stand. This is implied by the comparison of the tray with a daffodil at the top of a green/turquoise (*sabz*) stalk:

ز بلور تابنده خوانی فراخ چو نسرين تر بر سر سبز شاخ

Of glowing rock crystal a large tray
Like a fresh daffodil at the tip of a green stalk⁶⁹

Elsewhere, the *Šarāfnāme* couplets reveal that the food bowls (*kāseh*), which would normally be made of glazed fritware in their luxury version, were sometimes made of rock crystal for the ruler. When describing Eskandar's special tray (*khwān*) at the banquet ordered by Nūshābeh, Neẓāmi writes that it supported four bowls made of pure rock crystal (*chār kāseh ze bolūr-e nāb*):

نهاده یکی خوان خورشید تاب برو چار کاسه ز بلور ناب

They had laid out a tray (*khwān*) glowing like the Sun
Laden with four bowls (*kāseh*) of pure rock crystal⁷⁰

Four rock crystal pieces carved in the Sasanian manner that have come down to us support the idea that rock crystal vessels were indeed made under the Sasanian dynasty (224–651 CE).

One is a famous phiale with a gold frame holding a rock crystal disk in the central roundel on which a Sasanian emperor is seen enthroned (fig. 1).⁷¹ Formerly preserved in the treasury of the royal Basilica of Saint-Denis on the outskirts of Paris, and now kept in the Cabinet des Médailles within the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, it has been known since the Middle Ages as the "Tasse de Salomon." This phrase obviously translates a Persian name, *Jām-e Soleymān*, "The Wine Cup of Solomon."⁷² The piece must have been acquired from a Middle Eastern source, which passed on the name and might have been Arab, Iranian, or, in the period following the fall of the Sasanian dynasty, Turkish: the phrase could be used in all three languages.

Roman Ghirshman, in a brief mention of the piece, merely noted that "the so-called 'Tasse de Salomon' would have been offered to [Emperor] Charlemagne by [The Abbasid Caliph] Harun al-Rashid."⁷³ The persistence of the Middle Eastern name might reflect the lingering memory of such a diplomatic gift.

In a recent commentary on the phiale, Zainab Bahrani, who referred to it as the "Cup of Khosrow I," noted the presence of the Middle Persian inscription on the foot [where it states the weight as is frequently the case with Sasanian precious metal vessels] and concluded that it dates "to the sixth century CE."⁷⁴ Actually, the Pahlavi inscription does not demonstrate that the vessel dates from the Sasanian period. The use of Middle Persian, or Pahlavi, as the official

language of the Sasanian Empire is referred to in early Persian sources of the Islamic period, persisted long into the Islamic period. It continued on coins struck by the Umayyad caliphs until the monetary reform of 'Abd al-Malik in 674 and for considerably longer on the coinage of independent Tabarestān. The markedly rigid rendition of the enthroned king might be used as an argument supporting a date within the Islamic period although that cannot be said to be conclusive. The question remains open for the moment. The most that can be advanced about the date of this remarkably elaborate phiale is that it might belong to the Sasanian age, but if so, it is probably closer to the fall of the dynasty in 651 than to the reign of Husraw I in the previous century.

A second object which has been described in the twentieth century as "Sasanian" similarly associates gold framework and a carved rock crystal piece shaped like a boat, probably destined to contain some make-up product such as kohl (*vasmeh*).⁷⁵ Two formalized blossoms fore and aft are separated on the long side by rhomboidal repeat patterns. These reflect a love of geometrical design that markedly increased in the early Islamic period, even if criss-cross patterns as such go back to the earliest antiquity preceding the arrival of Indo-European speakers in the lands that were to become Iran. Dug up in unknown circumstances in Shūsh (Susa), where it was bought by the French archeological expedition, it raises the same questions concerning its period as the magnificent Tasse de Salomon. Zainab Bahrani cautiously placed it in the "seventh or eighth century CE."

Closely related to the previous piece, a second rock crystal boat, 8.2 cm long and 4.7 cm wide appeared at a Geneva auction in 1985 (fig. 2).⁷⁶ Its provenance was given as "Iran or Iraq" while the heading read "an Abbasid rock crystal dish, ninth–tenth century."

Its pattern would be consistent with a Sasanian dating. The most characteristic motif, a roundel carved in sunken relief on the underside of the vessel, encloses four almond-shaped geometrical figures which join with each other at the tip. They frame a large bead that occupies the central area. This motif is repeated twice on each side. A criss-cross pattern is engraved with great regularity on the flat rim. Criss-cross patterns go back to the earliest antiquity of Iranian art and con-

tinued into the Sasanian period when they were depicted on the garments worn by royal characters.⁷⁷ They can still be seen on the garments of various characters depicted on polychrome pottery from Neyshābūr probably dating from the ninth century CE.⁷⁸

Confronted ibex head profiles carved fore and aft are noticeable for their huge horns handled as scrolls. Far more pronounced than those painted on tenth century CE glazed earthenware, they might be invoked as an argument in favor of a pre-Islamic dating, without being conclusive.

The best that can be said at this stage is that a date toward the end of the pre-Islamic period, perhaps in the early seventh century CE, is a plausible proposition, but no more. The later seventh or early eighth century CE is no less conceivable.

A third rock crystal boat 5.1 cm long and 3 cm wide surfaced ten years later at a London auction where it was also ascribed to Iran ("Persia" in the Victorian-age denomination used by the auction house) and given a date "circa eighth century [CE]."⁷⁹ Here, eight tangent roundels enclosing the same motif are carved on the underside. A pleated chain runs above the roundels. The flat rim is carved with a continuous chevron also executed with attention to regularity. Dating it presents the same difficulties as the previous miniature rock crystal boat. Both appear to have been made around the same time, perhaps in the seventh century, presumably, in the same area. A certain lack of sophistication in the execution is noticeable. Different levels of quality are interesting in themselves. They imply a well-established tradition of rock carving, with various workshops catering to different strata in the Iranian establishment on the eve of the advent of Islam or in the very early stages of its diffusion.

Panegyrists on Rock Crystal Vessels

By contrast with the imaginary narratives of Ferdowsī, Asadī Ṭūsī, Gorgānī, and Neẓāmī, the information yielded by early Persian panegyrics amounts to direct documentary evidence. Poets celebrating rulers and their surroundings refer to real life contexts.

In the generation that followed Ferdowsī's, 'Onṣorī, the main court poet attached to the Ghaznavid ruler Sulṭān Maḥmūd, mentions rock crystal four times for its color in various compari-

sons.⁸⁰ Much of the poet's oeuvre is now lost. The seventeenth century CE lexicographer Sorūrī cites one of several couplets in the *Khafīf* meter from an otherwise unknown *masnavī*, as romances in couplets with inner rhyme are called:

گاه اقبال آبگینه خنور بستاند ز تو عدو به بلور

When auspices are favorable [for him] the enemy
Grabs from you the glass vessel instead of the
rock crystal one⁸¹

The colorful maxim means that the enemy, when victorious, rifles everything regardless of value: if there are no rock crystal vessels to be carried away, ordinary glass ones will do.

The sight of rock crystal wares must have been familiar enough for 'Onṣorī to compare spontaneously melting frost over the grass of open country with rock crystal becoming dissolved, as he does in a panegyric on Sultan Maḥmūd:

بلور حل شده بینی به پی باد صبا
شکن گرفته چو زلف بتان ترکستان

You see rock crystal dissolved under the breeze
All reduced to curls like the hair of the
buddhas of Turkistan⁸²

The allusion to the curls of the hairdo of Buddhist clay figures reveals the poet's awareness of Buddhist shrines, many of which were no doubt still standing more or less intact in his time. 'Onṣorī's familiarity with rock crystal objects is again echoed in the opening couplet of a quatrain celebrating the beauty of an unnamed character. The poet evokes "the pattern of rock crystal (*naqṣ-e bolūr*)" which is a metaphorical image for the character's face enclosed by his/her two tresses:

سیمین بر تو سنگ بپوشد بسمور زلفت بشبه همی کند نقش بلور

He covers the silver-breasted, stone-hearted one with
sable

Your two tresses draw the rock crystal
pattern with jet/black coral⁸³

In a panegyric composed on the occasion of the Nowruz celebrations, which begins with the description of springtime nature, Manūchehrī Dāmghānī, a court poet contemporary, coins a

couplet comparing flowers and their smell with scents in their containers:

وان نسترن چو مشکفروشی معاینه
در کاسه بلور کند عنبرین خمیر

And that dog rose is a commercial undertaking: like musk-selling

It makes amber paste in a rock crystal bowl
[*kāseh*]⁸⁴

Such as it is, the couplet may not be the most subtle verse written by a Persian poet, but it has some documentary merit. Manūchehrī informs us that truncated conical bowls of the *kāseh* type common in pottery and glass were also made in rock crystal for court use.

Farrokhī, another court poet who was a personal friend of Sultan Maḥmūd the Ghaznavid, urges the cupbearer to pass around the rock crystal cup (*jām-e bolūrīneh*) filled with wine that has not been adulterated by being cooked. Thus, the wine will be as red as the cupbearer's own face. In a panegyric on the Amīr Abū Aḥmad Moḥammad, the son of Sultan Maḥmūd, the poet exclaims:

مجلس بساز ای بهار پدram واندرفکن می به یکمنی جام
همرنگ رخسار خویش گردان جام بلورینه از می خام

Ordain a banquet, O exquisite *vihāra*
And toss the wine in a one-mann cup

Turn into the same color as your face
The rock crystal cup with uncooked wine⁸⁵

The number of verses by early Ghaznavid poets such as 'Onṣorī and Farrokhī could probably be multiplied three or fourfold if it were not for the loss of a large part of their work which fell into oblivion as literary tastes changed. Of the four most-admired poets at the courts of Sultān Maḥmūd and his successor Mas'ūd I that Amīr Mo'ezzī mentioned a century later in a well-known couplet,⁸⁶ only two are still represented by their divans. While Farrokhī's is apparently preserved intact, 'Onṣorī's is clearly missing sections, to say nothing of his *masnavī* romances, which are lost.⁸⁷ The divans of the other two poets mentioned in Amīr Mo'ezzī's couplet, Zeynabī ('Abd al-Jabbār Zeynabī 'Alavī) and 'Asjadī (Abū Naẓar 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Manṣūr 'Asjadī Marvazī)

have not come down to us.

Yet even the few couplets by 'Asjadī preserved in anthologies show that he, too, found rock crystal evocative enough to coin metaphors mentioning the hardstone.

A quatrain of his was long remembered:

در جسم پیاله جان روانست روان در روح به جسم آن روانست روان
در آب فسرده آتش سیال است در درج بلور لعل کانست روان

In the body of the *piyāleh*, life is the flowing soul
In the spirit of its body, the soul is flowing

In frozen water there is liquefied fire
In the rock crystal casket mineral spinels are flowing⁸⁸

Each couplet is preserved in an anthology. The first one was reproduced in the nineteenth century by Moḥammad Ṣādeq Hedāyat in the monumental anthology titled *Majma' al-Foṣaḥā*, "The Tray of the Eloquent," and the second one retained the attention of Ṣā'eb Tabrīzī in his *Ṣāfine-ye Ṣā'eb* put together in the seventeenth century.⁸⁹

The first couplet deals with a theme that also occurs in another quatrain by 'Asjadī:

آن جسم پیاله بین، بجان آبستن همچون سمنی به ارغوان آبستن
نی نی غلطم پیاله از غایت لطف آبیست به آتش روان آبستن

That body of the *piyāleh*, look: it's pregnant with the soul/a life

Very much like a jasmine pregnant with Judas Tree blossoms

No! No! my fault: the *piyāleh* in its extreme kindness
Is water pregnant with fire that is flowing⁹⁰

'Asjadī, who died in 432/11 September 1040–30 August 1041,⁹¹ would have composed these quatrains sometime in the early eleventh century.

Around the same time, the Isma'īlī theologian and missionary Nāṣer Khosrow, who was an indefatigable traveller until he retired to the remote small town of Yomgān in the mountains of Badakhshān, found time to write thousands of verses that make up a large divan.

He, too, mentions rock crystal. When coining a maxim that implicitly advocates stoic resignation in the face of adversity, Nāṣer Khosrow cites a rock crystal mug and an Arab horse as signs of

their owner's wealth:

پای تو مرکب است و کف دست مشربه است
گر نیست اسپ تازی و نه مشربۀ بلور

Your legs are your steed and the palm of your hand is your mug

If there is no Arab horse and you do not have a rock crystal mug⁹²

A generation later, Azraqī Heravī writing in Herat a panegyric on Mirānshāh b. Qāvurd⁹³ draws a comparison in which he conjures the image of jugglers tossing in the air small circular caskets called *hoqqeh* in Persian, which are mostly used for keeping gems and pearls:

جابجا ابر سپید اندر هوا بین خرد خرد
همچو بچگان حواصل بر سر دریا روان
راست پنداری نعایم بر سر شاخ درخت
بیضه سیمین نهادست از بر سبز آشیان
چون بلورین حقه‌های حقعیازان جفت‌جفت
بر نهاده لب بلب، پر کرده از لؤلؤ میان

See the tiny, tiny white clouds in the air here and there
Like seaside boys riding on top of the waves

You might well think that the treats on the branches
Are silver eggs that they laid from their
turquoise nests high up

Like rock-crystal *hoqqehs* of jugglers, set in pairs,
Mouth to mouth, their insides filled with pearls⁹⁴

Elsewhere, in a panegyric on the Vizier Ziyā' al-Dīn Neẓām al-Molk, Azraqī evokes a vessel holding wine, which is a wine cup (*bādeh*), in a metaphor that describes rock crystal as the "mantle (*jāmeḥ*)" of wine:

باده‌ای باید که اندازد بانجم پر شعاع
آتشی باید که افروزد بگردون بر شرار
از شعاع آن یکی رخسارها یاقوت رنگ
وز شرار این دگر یاقوت ریزان بی‌شمار
از پی آن این یکی را گشته جامه از بلور
وز پی آن دگر را گشته از آهن حصار

We must have a wine cup that casts rays above the stars

We must have a fire that kindles sparks above the sky

By the rays of the former, faces take the color of rubies
And by the sparks of the latter, there are innumerable ruby fragments

As a consequence of those, for this one, rock crystal has been made the mantle

And as a consequence of these, for that one, a fortress has been made of iron⁹⁵

The fortress of iron is the brazier, in early Persian *ātašdān*, later *manqal*. The poet says that the fire of the desired wine will be such that a brazier must contain it.

Rock crystal was the precious material appropriate when the focus was on making the red color of wine visible in the vessel that contains it. In a panegyric on the Ghaznavid Sultan Bahrāmshāh (512/24 April 1118–13 April 1119–547/8 April 1152–28 March 1153), Azraqī uses the image of a rock crystal casket to coin a metaphor which refers to wine as "the spinels in the rock crystal casket (*la'ī-e bolūr-e dorj*)":

اکنون که تر و تازه بخندید نوبهار
ما و سماع و باده رنگین و زلف یار
آن زر سیم خمره و لعل بلور درج
یاقوت سیم حلقه و مرجان در شعار

Now that the new spring has smiled, fresh and young,
Here we are with music and red wine and the tresses of the beloved

With the gold in the silver jar and the spinels in the rock crystal casket

The rubies of the silver necklace and the coral with pearl marks⁹⁶

In the second couplet, four metaphorical images succeed each other to evoke the red wine (*bāde-ye rangīn*) mentioned in the first couplet. The first two metaphors evoke two vessels, a silver jar (*sīm-e khomreh*) and a rock crystal casket (*bolūr-e dorj*), thus placing rock crystal on the same level as silver among precious materials.

Drinking wine out of a rock crystal cup at the Ghaznavid court was such a firmly entrenched

custom that ‘Otmān Mokhtārī writing around the same time referred to it as a proverbial ceremonial. In a panegyric on the Vizier (*Ṣadr*) Abu’l-Mozaffar Moḥammad b. Abu’l-Faṭḥ, which opens with a hymn to springtime, Mokhtārī intones:

هزار نافه گشاید هوای مشک فروش
ز هر گلی که چو یک پاره بهرمان آید
کند حکایت جام بلور و باده لعل
سرشک ابر چو بر برگ ارغوان آید

The air which is a musk merchant opens a thousand musk bags

From every rose that appears like a *bahremān*-red gem

When the tear drops of the cloud fall upon the Judas tree leaves

They tell the story of the rock crystal cup and the spinel-red wine⁹⁷

In northwestern Iran, panegyrists likewise celebrated rock crystal vessels in connection with royal wine banquets. Speaking in the first person singular in a panegyric on the Shirvānshāh Jalāl al-Dīn Akhsitān b. Manūchehr (ca. 1149–1187), Khāqānī boasts with self-flagellating irony:

با بلورین جام بهر می مدارا کردمی
چون شکسته شد مدارا برنتابد بیش از این

I paid courtesy with a rock crystal wine cup

As it got broken, courtesy will not shine more than this⁹⁸

The poet, who thus indicates that he was taking part in the royal wine banquet, reveals that drinking wine in a rock crystal cup was a touch of refinement that good manners required at court.

Elsewhere, Khāqānī urges a cupbearer to bring wine in a rock crystal bowl which he metaphorically refers to as a casket (*hoqqeh*) full of rubies:

یاقوت بلور حقّه پیش آر
خورشید هوا نقاب در ده

Bring the rubies of the rock crystal *hoqqeh*

Pour the sun with its mask of clear air⁹⁹

Wine is traditionally thought of as flowing sunlight/fire. With only thin air as a veil (*neqāb*), the sun-like brilliance of the wine will be visible in all its splendor.

Models inherited from the Sasanian age were sometimes made of rock crystal. In a panegyric in rondel (*tarjī‘band*) form on three Muslim clerics, Khāqānī mentions a rock crystal *rekāb* or eight-lobed wine boat.¹⁰⁰ He explicitly links this type of vessel with “The Magians’” Tradition (*Sonnat-e Moghān*), by which the poet means the Zoroastrian tradition. This is a way of indirectly associating the *rekāb* with the Sasanian past:

خوانچه کن سنت مغان می آر
وز بلورین رکاب می بگسار
عجب است این رکاب و می‌گویی
کآمد از ماه نو شفق دیدار

Prepare a small tray, follow the tradition of the Magians
And pour the wine out of a rock crystal *rekāb*

How surprising are this *rekāb* and wine: you’d think
That something like red dusk light comes
out of the new moon¹⁰¹

The *rekāb* is compared with the new moon because its crescent shape reproduces the profile of the moon crescent. When filled with wine, which is thought of as flowing sunlight, it symbolizes the conjunction of the sun and the moon. This is conveyed in the fourth hemistich in a paradoxical image: red dusk light, with which wine is equated, although emitted by the sun, is coming out of the *rekāb* which has a crescent moon profile. Verses such as these show that Iranian literati were well aware that using rock crystal vessels perpetuated Sasanian tradition.

Rock crystal vessels, including pieces with figural scenes, had a long past in Iran. In 1996, Michael Vickers wrote that a small rock crystal cup in the Cincinnati Art Museum is typical of Achaemenid iconography, thus agreeing with the judgment previously made by P. R. S. Moorey.¹⁰² The British scholar pointed out parallels provided by rock crystal and glass fragments excavated at Taḳt-e Jamshīd (which he called Persepolis in keeping with Western Orientalist usage), but scrupulously noted that Oscar Muscarella considered it to be a modern fake.

These rare witnesses to the pre-Islamic period of rock crystal vessels and royal patterns prove that rock crystal ranked among the materials privileged for royal use long before the advent of Islam. The rock crystal vessels mentioned in Persian panegyrics from early times on show that the tradition was kept up like so much else in Iranian

culture in the Islamic period.

The list of the vessel models mentioned in early poetry ranging from the usual types of banquet wares to the more rarified models keeping up pre-Islamic usage such as the *pāy-e mey* is matched by a handful of rock crystal pieces. Measured against the relative frequency of mentions in written sources, the number of recorded rock crystal objects may seem disappointingly modest. This, however, is no surprise. Silver and gold plate which, if anything, is mentioned more often in literary sources has all but vanished.¹⁰³ It served as a currency reserve, melted down to mint coins the moment royal finances were strained, and was a privileged target for looters in wartime. Rock crystal vessels, easily broken, were doomed in societies frequently rocked by internal and external conflicts: the fragments excavated at Takht-e Jamshīd probably bear witness to the systematic destruction of the Achaemenid city and its royal treasures by the Greek invaders led by Alexander.

Part Two: The Rock Crystal Objects of Sasanian and Islamic Iran

Ironically, material evidence is available for the existence of a particularly rare model maintaining the usage of pre-Islamic times going as far back as the early first millennium BCE.

The Hermitage Museum Rock Crystal Wine Leg (Pāy-e Mey/Sharāb)

The rarefied model is represented by a vessel preserved in Europe where it was fitted with Baroque gilded silver mounts and ornaments in the eighteenth century and is now displayed in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (fig. 3).

When published in 1930 by Carl Johan Lamm, it was cautiously attributed to "Mesopotamia," meaning Iraq. The Swedish scholar put forward a tenth-century date and saw it as a lamp.¹⁰⁴ In the 1976 exhibition of "The Arts of Islam" in London at the Hayward Gallery, it was labelled "Egypt, Fatimid period, late tenth- early eleventh century," an attribution retained in following years.¹⁰⁵ In 1994, Avinoam Shalem adopted the attribution, while qualifying it with the adverb "possibly."¹⁰⁶ He unhesitatingly called it a

"lamp," going so far as to submit "a suggested reconstruction of its original state" in a sketch.¹⁰⁷

That reconstruction, however, is not plausible. As imagined by Shalem, the completed shape of the spout would jeopardize the stability of the object. The spout would have been even longer than the body of the vessel, which Shalem saw as a boat. In addition, the design of the curving spout rising high would have made the insertion of a wick rather awkward. The flame in direct contact with the pouring lip would have put the rock crystal at risk of cracking under the heat in contrast to a hanging lamp of the *qandīl* type where the glass or the rock crystal walls would be well away from the flame in the center.

The idea that the Hermitage rock crystal vessel reproduces a boat model does not agree with what is known of Iranian, and more generally, Middle Eastern boats: these are symmetrical.¹⁰⁸ While fore and aft may sometimes differ slightly in height, they are identical in form unlike the Hermitage vessel. In addition, the arched band linking the two sides of the Hermitage piece which would be odd in a boat makes sense once the form is recognized for what it reproduces, a shoe. Rounded at the heel, it curls up to a tip over the toes as is customary in the Middle East. The arched band stands for a strap keeping the footwear in place. It would have served a functional purpose in helping the drinker to tilt the vessel and to control the direction of the jet of wine spurting out of the long outlet.

In short, the Hermitage Museum rock crystal vessel that has been mistaken for a lamp is actually a wine drinking vessel of the rhyton category in the form of a foot, seen shod as is nearly always the case in Iranian artefacts.¹⁰⁹

This type usually called in early Persian sources "*pāy-e mey/sharāb*" "wine leg/foot" (*pā/pāy* means both in Persian), or, as I believe, *ayāgh*, the Turkish noun for leg, was only identified in 2000 in the present writer's monograph "The Iranian Wine Leg from Prehistory to Mongol Times" on the triple evidence of early Persian lexicography, early Persian poetry, and early Persian historical chronicles.¹¹⁰ The many pouring vessels going back to the early first millennium BCE and some rare vessels from the beginning of the Islamic period provide material confirmation of the written accounts.

The occasional use of a Turkish loanword for leg, *ayāgh*, by early Persian poets who do not oth-

erwise borrow words from languages other than Arabic, such as *Qaṭrān Tabrīzī* in the first half of the eleventh century, suggests that the wine leg was perceived as belonging to a non-Iranian culture. This implies that its erstwhile symbolism was forgotten and the *raison d'être* for the shape of the model no longer known.

In a short panegyric on a ruler of Arrān (upper Qarābāgh in the modern Republic of Azerbaijan), Amīr Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Lashkarī, *Qaṭrān* says:

خدايگان جهان لشکری که تیغ و کفش
ز جنگ وجود نخواهد بهیچ وقت فراغ
جدا میاد سه چیز از سه چیز او شب و روز
ز تن سلامت و از دل خوشی ز دست ایغ

Lord of the World, Lashkarī, whose sword and palm
Do not ever want to bid farewell to combat

May three things never be separated from three of his
features

Health from his body, happiness from his
heart, the *ayāgh* from his hand¹¹¹

Lexicography is important owing to its matter-of-fact character. It shows that the wine leg was still used in the early fourteenth century CE. In his dictionary titled *Şeḫāḥ al-Fors*, "The Correct Usage of the Iranians," Ebn-e Hendūshāh has an entry on *pay*, "[wine] leg," with a short "a" as the alternative form of *pāy* with a long "a":

ز آن می کز کام بویش تا نرفت اندر دماغ
هیچ غم از طبع اهل فضل برنگرفت پی

As long as the bouquet of that wine did not rise from
the cup into the nostrils

The [wine] leg did not lift the chagrin from
the mood of the eminent ones¹¹²

Other nouns for the wine leg were *pāy-e tarsā*, "the Christian's leg," because wine was often obtained from Christians, and *pāy-e pīl* or *pīlpā*, "the elephant's leg," hinting at its large size.

In early Persian poetry, the wine leg is mentioned at distant intervals in the eleventh century (see above) and in the twelfth century.

In the mid-twelfth century CE, Khāqānī says in a panegyric on the Shīrvānshāh Faḵr al-Dīn Manūchehr, who ruled around 1140–1160 CE:

خورده برسم مصطبه می در سفالین مشربه
قوت مسیح یگشبه در پای ترسا ریخته

Having drunk wine in a ceramic mug according to the
tradition of the crypt

And poured the Messiah's sustenance for one
night in the Christian's leg¹¹³

The first hemistich which says that wine drinking proceeded "according to the tradition of the crypt" may be understood to mean that it took place away from the common run of men. Royal wine banquets were obviously not held in fear from any quarter. This phrase would therefore appear to point to the secrecy required by the esoteric meaning of the ceremonial, in turn implying that the wine leg was reserved for such a context.

Qomrī Āmolī, who also wrote in northern Iran, in Āmol the metropolis of Ṭabarestān (now Māzandarān) muses in a quatrain written around the same time:

امروز منم همه زده رای شراب
چون دردی خم فتاده در پای شراب
در گشتی دل ز باده بحری در ده
تا بو که شوم غرقه دریای شراب

Today, I have my judgement completely stricken by
wine

Like the dregs of the jar fallen into the wine
leg

Pour out a sea of wine in the boat of my soul [lit.:
"heart"]

That I might become a drowned man in the
sea of wine¹¹⁴

By the fourteenth century, mentions of the wine leg had almost vanished from poetry. Ebn-e Hindūshāh in his entry on *pay* was reduced to quoting a verse by his own father (see above) when looking for an example of the use of the word with that meaning. Moḥammad Pādesāh, who wrote in the nineteenth century his vast dictionary under the pen name Shād, opted for a line by the utterly obscure fourteenth century poet Badr Chāchī when seeking to support his gloss of *pāy* with a couplet written as closely as possible to his own time. Badr Chāchī's couplet composed in the manner of Khāqānī was, in fact, inspired by the latter's *tarjī'band* [rondel] in praise of Jalāl al-Dīn

Manūchehr quoted above:

بکر است خم مریم صفت مهد مسیحش جام زر
خون دل مریم نگر در پای ترسا ریخته

Virgin is the jar with the attributes of Mary, the gold cup is the cradle of the Messiah

Look at Mary's heart blood poured into a Christian's Leg¹¹⁵

The couplet is a display of literary artifice rather than an allusion to objects in a real context. In the first hemistich, the profile of a jar is compared with the rotundity of pregnant Mary while the gold cup is compared with a cradle filled with the blood of birth-giving, because wine is traditionally seen as a symbolical substitute for sacrificial blood. The line may be uninspiring but verses about the wine leg are relatively scarce. The lexicographer may have retained the first one he stumbled upon to back up the meaning of *pāy-e sharāb*.

Ayāgh, from the Turkish for "leg,"¹¹⁶ an alternative name, may have been used by Asadī Tūsi and others (see above) because in some cases it fitted more easily in verse than the compound noun.

The wine leg appears to have been a relic from an even more distant past than the other vessels taken over from antiquity in Islamic Iran, such as wine boats or ewers in the shape of ancient sacrificial animals like wine bulls and wine birds. The symbolism of these was obvious and often spelled out in Persian poetry whereas the erstwhile meaning of the wine leg, no longer understood, is never explained. The wine leg can be shown through actual objects to have been in use in Iran from around the early first millennium BCE until about the eighth century CE. Later examples have not been recorded, although mentions of the wine leg still occur in literature centuries later.

As matters stand now, the only plausible provenance for a vessel in the shape of a foot or leg concealed in its footwear is Iran. In short, the Hermitage Museum rock crystal vessel is a *pāy-e sharāb* or *ayāgh* of the "rhyton" type that projects a jet of wine when raised as did the wine legs in antiquity. It would have appeared at royal banquets among other vessels perpetuating pre-Islamic usage such as the rock crystal *rekāb* mentioned by Khāqānī in a panegyric on the Shīrvānshāh Jalāl al-Dīn Manūchehr (see above). The characterization of the Hermitage Museum piece as a "Lamp, Iraq

(?) Tenth Century" by N[atalya] Venevtseva¹¹⁷ and by Avinoam Shalem can definitely be dismissed.

The Thyssen Bornemisza Rock Crystal Wine Horn (Shākh-e Bādeh)

A rock crystal vessel maintaining Sasanian tradition within the one hundred years or so that followed the fall of the dynasty in 651 CE is now known through a material example (fig. 4). This is a wine horn called in Persian literature, notably in early Persian poetry, *shākh-e bādeh*, "wine horn," *shākh-e sharāb*, "wine horn [using the Arabic loanword *sharāb* for wine]," *shākh-e šabūh*, "early morning wine banquet horn," and other phrases.¹¹⁸

Preserved in the West since at least the seventeenth century CE as shown by the gilded mounts, German or Flemish datable to the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, the rock crystal wine horn in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection lacks any engraved motifs.¹¹⁹ The curvature and the proportions come close to those of a wine horn represented among the paraphernalia of a Zoroastrian wine banquet held as part of the Nowruz celebrations that are depicted on a silver phiale in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC (fig. 4a).¹²⁰

That wine horn lies on the ground not far from a jar into which wine will be flowing through a sieve set into its mouth to ensure the desired clarity untainted by dregs. Nearby, two ewers with twisted fluting and two truncated conical footed bowls of a model known in the ninth–tenth century CE are laid on the ground. These indicate that the wine is being filtered for the royal couple depicted further away. On the left, a Zoroastrian priest, his mouth shielded by a mask to prevent his breath from soiling the purity of the wine in the ewer that he carries in his left hand while balancing the small tray (*khwāncheh*) laden with several cups on his right hand walks away toward the princely couple. The scenes depicted under the five arches of a rotunda match those of the Nowruz celebrations described by 'Omar Khayyām in the *Nowrūznāme*.¹²¹

The similarity of the Thyssen-Bornemisza rock crystal wine horn and the wine horn depicted in a minute size on the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery silver phiale is as close as it could be given the difference in scale. It extends to the deeply

engraved lines that separate succeeding simulated shallow grooves on the rock crystal piece. There is therefore good reason to assume that the Thyssen-Bornemisza rock crystal wine horn dates from the same period as the phiale in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, that is, probably from the first century following the collapse of the Sasanian Empire in 651 CE.

Like the rock crystal *rekāb* (eight-lobed wine boat) requested by Khāqānī when recommending that a small tray be prepared in keeping with “Magian,” that is, Zoroastrian, tradition, the wine horn is the legacy of the immediate Sasanian past. It is broadly contemporary with the Hermitage Museum *pāy-e sharāb* (wine leg). Objects such as these make it certain that rock crystal vessels were already made in Sasanian times. Material reality here confirms the inferences that could be drawn from the mention of rock crystal cups in the *Šāhnāme* and the *Garšāspnāme*.

Made from rock crystal of the highest purity, the Thyssen-Bornemisza wine horn was almost certainly a royal piece, like the wine horn in the scene represented on the Nowruz bowl in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

So were probably some vessels that have long been or still are summarily dubbed “Fatimid” without further explanation. No attention has been paid to their exact function.

Two Khorasani Rock Crystal Trays in Venice

That is the case with two small circular trays, two *khwānchehs* to use Khāqānī’s word, which are preserved in the treasury of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice.

The Khorasani Tray inv. nr. 126 in the San Marco Basilica

The model with a broad flat underside and a wide horizontal rim only slightly higher than the well is alien to Fatimid Egypt (fig. 5).¹²² It reproduces a shape that occurs in Iranian glazed fritware of the tenth and eleventh centuries, in particular in calligraphic pottery from Neyshābūr.¹²³ The rim is engraved with a typical Khorasani motif, a rhythmical continuous scroll carrying sixteen ibex head profiles reduced to abstraction. Shading rendered by parallel lines neatly engraved is



Fig. 1. Central inset of the phiale known as the “Tasse de Salomon.” This phrase translates the Persian *Tās-e Soleymān*. Iran, sixth–seventh century CE. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. After Hahn and Shalem, eds., *Seeking Transparency*.



Fig. 2. Cosmetic boat-shaped vessel. Iran, probably sixth–seventh century CE. Art Market. After Sotheby’s, *Islamic Art* (Geneva 1985).

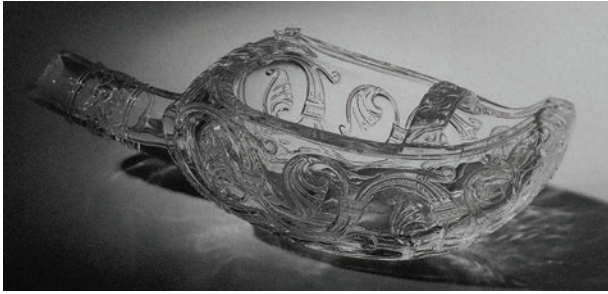


Fig. 3. The wine thought of in the Iranian tradition as the symbol of blood would have been seen as the metaphorical image of the blood of the human leg in its footwear, making it *pāy-e mey* "wine leg." Iran eighth–ninth century CE. The Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. After Piotrowsky, ed., *Zemnoye Iskustvo-Nebesnaya Krasota*.



Fig. 4a. Detail of a silver wine cup (*piyāleh*), northern Iran, eighth century CE. The bull-headed wine horn (*shākh-e bādeh*) laid on the ground has the same curvature and broad ribs as the Thyssen Bornemisza rock crystal wine horn in fig. 4. It follows the Sasanian tradition, which was kept up in independent Tabarestān. However, a late Sasanian date in the first half of the seventh century is also conceivable. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 4. Wine horn (*shākh-e bādeh*). Iran, eighth century CE. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.

a device frequently used in Iranian pottery and metalwork alike.

The Khorasani Tray inv. nr. 102 in the San Marco Basilica

A second rock crystal circular tray, 20.1 cm across, is preserved in the treasury of the Basilica of San Marco (inv. nr. 102) (fig. 6).¹²⁴ It is close enough in shape, size, and, broadly speaking, in pattern to the first tray. Both presumably entered the treasury together and are likely to have originated in the same artistic center, if not even in the same workshop.

The rim with seven wide lobes lightly indicated, of a kind found in Iranian glazed fritware,¹²⁵ differentiates it from the previous tray. It represents a strong argument in support of an Iranian provenance. Vessels with lobed rims are not recorded in tenth-century Egypt. As on the previous tray, the scrolls carrying ibex head profiles belong to the Iranian repertoire. Hatching in engraved parallel lines occurs here, too. By contrast, nothing about the tray invites speculation about the possibility of an Egyptian origin. In the light of current knowledge, there are no grounds for retaining it.



Fig. 5. Small tray (*ṭabaqcheh*) for a wine mug (*mashrabeḥ*). Iran, tenth century CE. San Marco Basilica, Venice, inv. 126. After Melikian-Chirvani, ed., *The World of the Fatimids*.

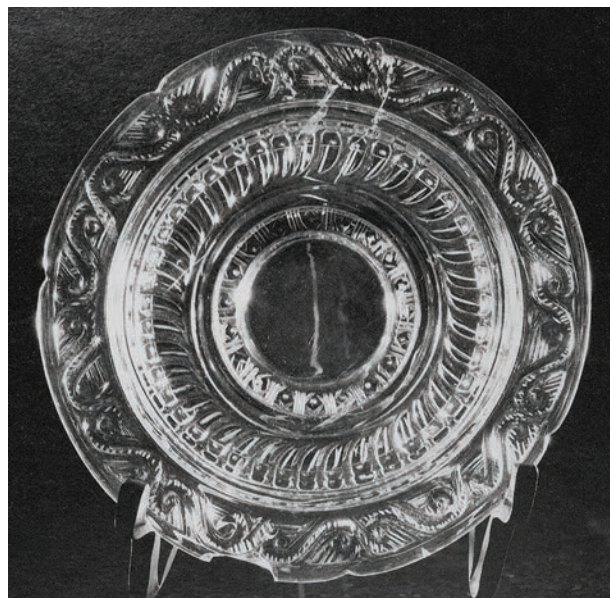


Fig. 6. Small tray (*ṭabaqcheh*) for a wine mug (*mashrabeḥ*). Iran, tenth–eleventh century CE. San Marco Basilica, inv. 102. After Curatola, ed., *Eredita dell' Islam*.

The Khorasani Toiletry Flask in The al-Sabah Collection

Some toiletry vessels were also made of rock crystal. Such was probably the destination of a hexagonal kohl flask in The al-Sabah Collection (inv. LNS 499 HS), 5.95 cm high. It associates formalized motifs of vegetal origin with elementary linear geometrical motifs (fig. 7).¹²⁶ The Swedish scholar Carl Johann Lamm attributed it to Iraq in 1930.¹²⁷ When illustrated in a book by Ernst Kühnel intended for collectors, dealers, and curators and written in the manner of a commercial catalogue just listing items with labels flatly stating period and origin without further discussion, the flask was given a “Fatimid Egypt” label.¹²⁸ In 2010, Anna Contadini reverted to Iraq, suggesting “Basra (?), ninth–tenth century.”¹²⁹ Again, no attempt was made to back up the assertion.

The profile of the shape, which has not been commented upon by previous writers, comes close to that of some miniature glass bottles excavated at Neyshābūr. One, recovered from Tapeh Madraseh in 1949, is preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 40.170.72),¹³⁰ and another, also from Tapeh Madraseh, is in the Mūze-ye Mellī-e Īrān.¹³¹ Comparison with the

latter suggests that the ex-De Béhague, now Al-Sabah, small flask is missing almost half its neck. A third miniature bottle dug up “near Tapeh Madraseh” as Jens Kröger put it, quoting the museum records, is remarkably close.¹³² If the overhanging mouth is excluded, it precisely matches the profile of the ex-De Béhague rock crystal flask. The profile of a fourth miniature bottle from the Sabz-Pūshān site¹³³ also closely compares with the ex-De Béhague flask. It has the same, almost imperceptibly incurving neck, bearing in mind that the neck of the ex-De Béhague bottle was broken off.

The carved patterns made from motifs all found in the Iranian repertoire, likewise support an attribution to Iran. They include the ibex head profile stylized into abstraction. The carefully incised lines used as a shading device are matched on Iranian glassware. A glass bowl reportedly from Neyshābūr acquired by The al-Sabah Collection¹³⁴ provides an example of such shading precisely in the same motif, the stylized ibex head profile. A fragment from a glass vessel excavated on the Tapeh Madraseh site preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art offers a second example, if not quite as clear.¹³⁵

The motif resembling an ace-of-spades made



Fig. 7. Toiletry flask, probably Iran, tenth–eleventh century CE. The al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya, Kuwait. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 8. Bottle of octagonal section with Spanish gilded silver mounts, previously Hever Castle Collection. The al-Sabah Collection, Iran, tenth–eleventh century CE. After Curatola, ed., *Art from the Islamic Civilization*. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.

from three-lobed sections of split palmettes occurs on Iranian coinage, metalwork, glass, and pottery.¹³⁶

Below, the two wings stuck in the Sasanian crown as conceived in Islamic times are carved with their tips slightly curling up as they do for instance on a coin issued by the Arab governor Salm ibn Ziyād in Marv in 67/28 July 686–17 July 687.¹³⁷ They look like stylised ibex head profiles. The ambiguity is deliberate. Ambivalent motifs in Iranian visual art are the equivalent of puns on homonyms in Persian poetry. Just as Khāqānī and others played in the same couplet on *rekāb*, the eight-lobed wine boat, and *rekāb*, the Arabic loanword for stirrup, so did the designer of the pattern engraved on the ex-De Béhague rock crystal flask in The al-Sabah Collection depict the Sasanian crown wings while making them resemble ibex head profiles.

Until proven otherwise, all the characteristics of the vessel point to Iran, most probably to the vast eastern province of Khorasan as its provenance.

A Khorasani Rock Crystal Kohl Flask in Spain

Another Khorasani rock crystal vessel has been in the West for centuries. The tall flask of octagonal section with Spanish gilded silver mounts was also attributed to Fatimid Egypt when sold at auction as part of the Hever Castle Collection on 6 May 1983 (fig. 8).¹³⁸ The attribution was retained by Ghada H. Qaddumi and Manuel Keene when the rock crystal flask was included in an exhibition of miscellaneous objects curated by Esin Atıl.¹³⁹ The entry, which only stated “Egypt ninth–tenth century,” provided no arguments to support the claim. It noted the presence of “an intricate Arabic inscription written in Kufic and rendered in relief, bestowing “blessing and felicity to the owner,” from which no conclusion was drawn.

It is possible to be more precise. The “inscription” is an invocation (*du‘ā’*) calling for God’s favors upon the owner worded according to a

common formulation on Iranian objects. It has not been recorded on published vessels of proven Egyptian origin:

بركة و يمن لصاحبه

Blessing and favorable auspices to its owner

The Kufic script has a pleated *kāf* (letter K) in *baraka*, “blessing,” and triangular apices to letter extremities that are typically Khorasani. The strict geometrical handling of the octagonal container rising from its narrow base at an angle of about 45 degrees is also characteristic of Khorasan as a comparison with some small vessels dug up in the modern state of Afghanistan (figs. 51, 52 below) shows.

When exhibited in Milan in 2010, the flask with Spanish mounts was duly entered as a “bottle, east Iranian world, ca. 10th c.”¹⁴⁰ without specifying the reasons for the revised label, which the catalogue format did not allow. That is now fully established.

A British Museum Rock Crystal Beaker from Northern Iran

A very different style is represented by a piece acquired in 1954 by the British Museum. According to the vendor, the beaker with a truncated conical body was dug up and acquired in Qazvin, the large city to the northwest of Tehran (fig. 9).¹⁴¹

The sharp, crisp shape could be that of a metal vessel. This need not be interpreted as an intended “imitation” of metalwork, a process for which clear evidence is rare in Iranian art. What is obvious about the beaker is a love of geometrical volumes with sharply marked divisions emphasized by structural features. The rim at the top is a grooved rib. A projecting ridge sloping at a very low angle up to the truncated conical body separates it from the strongly waisted stem. Fine hatching is engraved on the edges of the addorsed scrolls diverging into very slender palmettes that are very large and bold. This type of hatching is seen on other Iranian rock crystal pieces, figures included.

An Iranian Rock Crystal Decanter (Şorāhī) in Halberstadt

A decanter in the treasury of Halberstadt Cathedral (fig. 10) ascribed by Jens Kröger to “Fatimid Egypt, tenth to first half of the eleventh century”¹⁴² offers some analogy with the latter in the handling of form. The different components of the vessel are sharply separated from each other. The body with convex sides which looks like a sphere chopped off at the top and bottom supports two disks of decreasing size, the lower one very slightly overhanging the convex sides. Beading to the edges of the two disks is simulated by close notches, enhancing the metallic appearance of the rock crystal decanter. Two small disks, again of decreasing size, achieve the same crisp effect at the base of the tall neck. Two superimposed disks with simulated beading to the edges are repeated in reverse order on the stem which has a profile closely resembling that of the rock crystal beaker from Qazvin in the British Museum.

The pattern carved in low relief is entirely drawn from the Iranian repertoire. Hatching on the edges of the scrolls achieves a shading effect as it does on the British Museum beaker from Iran. Every detail thus points to an Iranian provenance for the Halberstadt rock crystal vessel made in the ninth or tenth century. The argument invoked by Jens Kröger to ascribe it to Fatimid Egypt is that “it is far superior to parallels in glass said to be from Iran.”¹⁴³

The German scholar does not specify which objects he has in mind when making a statement that owes more to subjective perception than to analysis, of which no attempt is made.

Even if such a difference in quality between the Halberstadt decanter and glass vessels from Iran were to be admitted, it would not be of much help in demonstrating the Egyptian origin of the Halberstadt piece. A vessel made from rock crystal, a much admired and expensive material used for kings, could be expected to have been made by one of the great masters of the day. In glass, a common material used at various levels of society, a wider range of the quality achieved by the makers is naturally to be observed.

In fact, the remark that there are Iranian glass parallels to the Halberstadt decanter can be turned around. It provides an additional argument in support of its Iranian provenance.

The Fermo Cathedral Fragmentary Ewer

A fragmentary vessel in the treasury of the Fermo cathedral, which has been ascribed to Fatimid Egypt until now, must be similarly reconsidered (fig. 11).¹⁴⁴

The incomplete piece lacks the top section and the handle. Comparison with a bronze bull-headed ewer in the Chicago Art Institute¹⁴⁵ suggests that it might originally have been the type of vessel called in Persian *gāv-e bādeh* ("wine bull") or simply *gāv* ("bull").

The profile of the surviving part of the body now shorn of the top section, perhaps a bull's head, precisely matches the profile of the corresponding part in the Chicago bronze wine bull. The epigraphic border carved on the rock crystal piece in Fermo is placed at the top of the remaining body, matching the emplacement of the epigraphic border on the Chicago bronze bull-headed ewer. It spells out an invocation (*du'ā'*) calling for God's graces upon a king who is hailed as a *Sayyed*, i.e., a descendant of the Prophet. Only noted in romanized characters by Avinoam Shalem whose reading calls for a slight emendation,¹⁴⁶ the invocation may thus be restituted in the original Arabic:

بركة و سرور للسيد الملك المنصور

Baraka wa surūr li'l-Sayyed al-Malik al-Manṣūr
Blessing and joy for the *Sayyed* al-Malik al-Manṣūr

The *du'ā'* in prose with an inner rhyme in *-ūr* is worded in *saj'* ("rhyming prose"), a rare occurrence in invocations of the early Islamic period. This became fairly common by the mid-thirteenth century. The peculiar *wāw* for the vowel *ū* in *surūr* deserves to be noted.

The wording of this inscription is a strong argument against an attribution to Fatimid Egypt: the Fatimid caliphs did not use the title *Malik*, "King," in their protocol.

Indeed, the pattern displays details that agree with an attribution to Iran. The formalized motif with scrolls carrying three lobed palmettes and bunches of grapes that identify it as a vine tree finds its closest equivalent on a famous small tray first published in 1961 when it formed part of the collection of the Iranian architect Mohsen Foroughi.¹⁴⁷ The tray, which ranks among the greatest masterpieces of ceramic vessels from Neyshābūr, is datable to the late tenth or early

eleventh century.

The two birds confronted on either side of the formalized vine tree are parrots. Here again, a parallel for confronted parrots is provided in Iranian art by a large hemispherical basin of the same period in The Iran-Zamin Collection.¹⁴⁸

Parrots in Iranian thinking are symbols of esoteric discourse.¹⁴⁹ Their presence on a vessel that is a wine ewer as indicated by the vine tree suggests that it was destined for the *bazm-e khāṣṣ*, "the private banquet" of the king, often loaded with esoteric symbolism.

A closer study of the Fermo fragmentary ewer with complete photographic coverage of the inscription and of all the motifs of the pattern, figural and formal, is required before a definitive conclusion can be safely advanced regarding its provenance. At this stage, Fatimid Egypt can be ruled out, leaving Iran as the more plausible proposition.

A Rock Crystal Double Inkwell

Transparency makes rock crystal the perfect material for a scribe's double inkwell, allowing inks of different colors, for instance black and red or black and gold used together in some Qur'an manuscripts,¹⁵⁰ to be instantly identified. The semi-precious stone would have been appropriate for a ruler or a vizier's "State Inkwell (*davāt-e dowlat*)" displayed on formal occasions.

Such an inkwell was acquired in the art market for the Aga Khan Museum Collection before the opening of the museum (fig. 12). Minor dents, perhaps caused in part by rough cleaning and rusty brown traces are telling traces of its recovery from underground. When displayed in public for the first time in the Louvre 2007 exhibition of masterpieces from the Aga Khan Museum, it was attributed to "Egypt, tenth–eleventh century."¹⁵¹ No attempt was made to justify the labelling which was maintained in subsequent shows.¹⁵²

The model of rectangular shape, 9.3 cm long, has the shape and proportions of Khorasani inkwells in stucco (*gach*). The carved pattern is characteristic of Khorasani design in its symmetry and rhythm, as well as in the detail of ornament. The three-lobed palmette with the uppermost lobe handled as a crook and the median lobe reduced to a triangle is typical. Nothing about the object gives reason to consider the possibility of

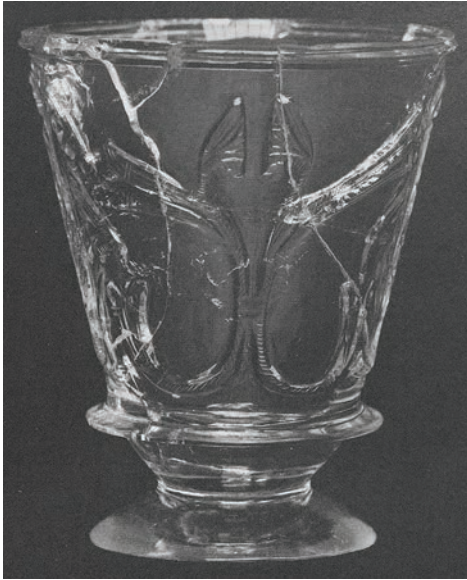


Fig. 9. A beaker (*jām/qadaḥ*) acquired from a Qazvīn vendor. Northwestern Iran, ninth–tenth century CE. The British Museum, inv. 1954.1013.1. After Hahn and Shalem, eds., *Seeking Transparency*, p. 110 fig. 3.



Fig. 10. The Halberstadt Cathedral decanter (*ṣorāḥī*), Iran, Khorasan, tenth century CE. H. 17 cm. Halberstadt Cathedral Treasury inv. nr. 49. After Hahn and Shalem, eds., *Seeking Transparency*, pl. 1 p. 257.



Fig. 11. The Fermo Cathedral fragmentary ewer, perhaps a wine bull (*gāv-e bādeh*) missing bull's head. H. 16.7 cm. Iran, tenth century CE. After Hahn and Shalem, eds., *Seeking Transparency*, pl. 2 p. 258.



Fig. 12. Double inkwell for inks of different colors, such as black and red or black and gold. L. 9.3 cm. Iran, tenth century CE. The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, inv. 00653. After Akbarinia, Junod, and Merchant, eds., *The Path of Princes*.

a provenance from Fatimid Egypt, which can be safely rejected. The inkwell was made in Khorasan, probably in the tenth century.

Some Rock Crystal Chessmen from Khorasan

Similar revisions are called for in the labelling of rock crystal chessmen that have also been in the West for centuries. Long credited in the past to Fatimid Egypt, they share the same motifs as some of the vessels examined earlier. In all likelihood, they, too, originated in Khorasan around the late tenth or the eleventh century.

Three chessmen forming part of one set which had previously been attributed to Fatimid Egypt have already been reassigned to the East Iranian world by Anna Contadini in the 2010 exhibition catalogue of art treasures from Kuwait.¹⁵³ As elsewhere, the catalogue format did not allow room to put forward arguments in support of provenance or dating.

The patterns definitely point to an Iranian provenance. In six of the panels carved on the *shāh* (king, inv. LNS 1 HS a, fig. 13), four at the back and two in front, three-lobed sections of a split palmette paired back-to-back make up a motif common in Iranian art of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The short stalks supporting them diverge and curl up to join at the tip, thus achieving a frame that resembles an ace-of-spades in Western playing cards. Such a motif occurs on glass and metal wares in tenth-century Khorasan.¹⁵⁴ On the two *beydaq* (the Arabized form of Pahlavi *piyādag*, “foot soldier”), the back is carved with four panels which enclose a Khorasani type fleur-de-lis supported by two diverging stalks.

Three other chessmen numbered HS d, e, and g, which were oddly entered in the 2010 catalogue as “Iraq, probably Basra,” with the date “ca. ninth century,” likewise display typical motifs found in the Iranian repertoire.

The *faras* (horse, inv. LNS 1 HS h, fig. 14), which is the knight in English chess terminology, is carved with ibex head profiles stylized into abstraction in the Khorasani manner. A characteristic detail is the triangle with curving sides that is separated from the head of the ibex profile by deep grooves. It is identical to the triangle within the ibex head profiles of various Khorasani bronze and glass wares. A similar motif appears in the

same emplacement on the *fil/pīl* (“elephant”), (the bishop in English terminology).¹⁵⁵

The *rukh* (castle/rook, inv. LNS 1 HS g, fig. 15) is also carved with Khorasani motifs. Clues specifically pointing to Iraq, the provenance suggested in the 2010 catalogue, are lacking. The same remarks apply to the two *baydaqs* (pawns, LNS 1 HS i, fig. 16). The presence of motifs that are common in Khorasan makes it likely that The al-Sabah rock crystal chess pieces all originated in the East Iranian province.

The Al-Thani Chessman

The same conclusion may be drawn from the motifs carved on the magnificent piece previously in the Rothschild Collection and now in The Al-Thani Collection.¹⁵⁶

The rock crystal piece (inv. nr. BELC 936, fig. 17) has the same architectural design as the al-Sabah king. The arched niche is carved on the back with two interlacing stalks carrying three-lobed palmettes at the top and bottom that are typically Khorasani (fig. 18). So is the palmette which tops the central vertical stalk, with its outer outline resembling an ace-of-spades (fig. 17). On each vertical border on the sides of the niche, two confronted ibex head profiles are lodged in the space left between the slanting rods curling down at one end and up at the other, and the edge of the border (fig. 19). They are reduced by stylization into abstract motifs enclosing a typical triangle in the central area. On the top of the niche (fig. 20), the ibex profiles are seen imbricated, confronted, and back-to-back. The Al-Thani royal chessman, a *shah*, is undoubtedly a Khorasani piece from one of the major artistic centers. Whether Neyshābūr, Herat, or Balkh is impossible to tell for now.

On Chess Pieces from Central and Eastern Khorasan

A number of chess and other gaming pieces known to have come out of central and eastern Khorasan areas within the borders of the modern state of Afghanistan reveal a greater variety of styles. That confirms the existence of a solidly established tradition of working rock crystal.

Some miniature representations of a domed



Fig. 13. Chess piece, a *shāh* "king." H. 6.8 cm. Iran, ninth-tenth century CE. Formerly in the Church of Ager, Catalonia, Spain, later The Comtesse de Béhague Collection. The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 1 HS a. The raised ibex head profile reduced to an abstract palmette with the typical Khorasani triangle in the center is one of the features that establish its Khorasani provenance.



Fig. 15. Chess piece, a *rukḥ*, "chariot" (tower/castle). H. 4.2 cm. Iran, tenth century CE. Formerly in the church of Ager, Catalonia, Spain, later The Comtesse de Béhague Collection. The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 1 HS g. The ibex head profile stylized into a palmette is visible at the base of the piece.



Fig. 14. Chess piece, a *faras* "horse" (knight). H. 3.4 cm. Iran, ninth-tenth century CE. Formerly in the church of Ager, Catalonia, Spain, later The Comtesse de Béhague Collection. The al-Sabah Collection, inv. 1HS h. The characteristic ibex head profile stylized into an abstract palmette displays at the center the triangle with curving sides common in the Khorasani rendition of the motif in rock crystal artefacts.



Fig. 16. Chess piece, a *baydaq*, "footman" (pawn). H. 2.6 cm. Iran, tenth century CE. Formerly in the Church of Ager, Catalonia, Spain, later the Comtesse de Béhague Collection. The al-Sabah Collection, LNS 1 HS i. Note two ibex head profiles stylized into a palmette, their muzzles pointed downward, the upper section. Copyright The al-Sabah Collection, Dar-al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait.



Fig. 17. Chess piece, a *shāh*, "king." H. 6.1 cm. Iran, tenth century CE. Formerly The Rothschild Collection, Paris. The Al-Thani Collection. Inv. BELC 936. The piece, structurally similar to the al-Sabah and the Doha Museum pieces, is carved from an equally transparent and brilliant rock crystal. The interlacing scrolls carved on the back carry ibex head profiles.



Fig. 19. Side view of the Al-Thani chess piece. The vertical rectangular borders on each side are carved with symmetrical scrolls terminated at each extremity with ibex head profiles. These are only faintly recognizable. The triangle in sunken relief remains visible in the left hand profile.



Fig. 18. Detail of the back of the Al-Thani chess piece in pl. 17. The ibex profiles are stylized into abstract palmettes that no longer allow them to be recognized as figural except for the crozier-like horn.



Fig. 20. In the narrow band carved on the rounded top of the niche of the Al-Thani *shāh* ("king" in the chess game), two ibex head profiles with their crozier-like horns tangent are carved in sunken relief. They dovetail with inverted identical ibex head profiles. The horns are emphasized in typical Khorasani manner.



Fig. 21. A crisply carved chess piece, 4.35 cm high, in The al-Sabah Collection, was dug up in Herat, the vendor stated (LNS 294 HS). In the shape of a hexagonal monument topped by a dome, it might be a castle (*rokh* in Persian). The style suggests a ninth century CE date. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.

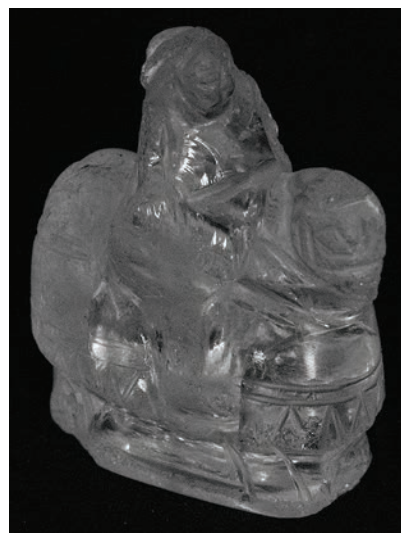


Fig. 22. The figure of a character on horseback, 4.15 cm high, in The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 643 HS), probably also dates from the ninth or tenth century CE. The subject represented would appear to designate it as a knight (*faras* or *savār* in Persian). Likewise dug up in Herat, it is handled in a geometrical style in favor at the time. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.

hexagonal monument handled in geometricized fashion are said to have been recovered in Herat and have been acquired by The al-Sabah Collection. One is a crisply carved chess piece, 4.35 cm high, inventory LNS 294 HS (fig. 21). Probably dating from the ninth or tenth century, it might be a castle, in Persian *rokh*. A character riding a steed (fig. 22), 4.15 cm high, which may date from the same period, is presumably a knight, in Persian *faras*, an Arabic loanword synonymous with Persian *savār*. A closely related variant (fig. 23) of the piece in fig. 21 is preserved in The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 294 HS c. Also dug up in Herat, it displays the same type of geometrical ribbing.

Other gaming pieces have turned up at Qal'a-i Naw in the district of Herat.

A smaller version of the king (*shāh*) in The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 573 HS a (fig. 24 seen sideways, and fig. 25 seen full front, 3.37 cm) is among the Qal'a-i Naw examples. The deeply carved fillets and the geometrical human mask wearing a crown visible when the piece is seen full front suggest a date in the tenth or eleventh century. Another piece in The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 573 HS b, has a geometricized hu-



Fig. 23. A variant of the chess piece in fig. 21, this chess piece in The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 294 HS c) also came to light in Herat, as reported by the vendor. The same type of geometrical ribbing underlines its connection with the castle in fig. 21. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.

man mask (fig. 26), which apparently wears stoles derived from the Sasanian royal stoles reduced to geometrical trapezes (fig. 27).

It might be earlier, possibly dating from the ninth or tenth century. Whether a chessman which seems likely or another kind of gaming piece cannot be determined for sure at present, at least not by this writer.

A piece that does not lend itself to easy “reading” was dug up at Qal‘a-i Naw in the province of Herat. It may be engraved with a winged quadruped, LNS 573 HS c (fig. 28). Handled in a strictly



Fig. 24. Chess pieces reported to have been dug up at Qal‘a-i Naw in the district of Fariyāb in the province of Herat display the same stylistic characteristics as those said to have come from Herat. This one in The al-Sabah Collection, 3.37 cm high (LNS 573 HS a), offers a smaller version of the *shāh* once owned by the Comtesse de Béhague, now also in The al-Sabah Collection. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 25. The frontal view of the chess piece from The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 573 HSa) seen sideways in fig. 24 shows the deeply carved fillets and the geometricized human mask topped by a crown. This suggests a date in the tenth or eleventh century CE. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Figs. 26–27. A chess piece in The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 573 HS b) is similarly said to have been dug up in Qal‘a-i Naw. The human mask is handled in the same geometricized fashion. Two stoles derived from the royal stoles of the Sasanian crown are reduced to geometrical trapezes.

geometrical style, it is probably contemporary with the grey stone figures of the ninth or tenth century from Neyshābūr. At the back end (fig. 29), a human mask wears the two-horned cap (*kolāh-e do shākh*) of the Ghaznavid rulers, courtiers, and high-level officials mentioned by Beyhaqī in his history of the first three rulers of the dynasty. When turned to the left, the piece can be seen to be carved with the profile of a horse ambling from east to west, which is done in a more fluid style. Assessing the exact character of the gaming piece (chess? some other game?) is equally problematic.

It is no easier to reach a definite conclusion with regard to five al-Sabah pieces carved with lotus leaves on their vertical bodies (LNS 383 HS a to LNS 383 HS e). They can be assumed to date from the same period as some of the gaming pieces mentioned above, that is from the tenth or eleventh century, in the absence of any specific clues. The example in fig. 30, 3.6 cm high, (LNS 383 HS a) shows the quality of the carving. The five specimens that were found together invite speculation that they may have been chess pawns, in Persian *piyādeh*, or *beydaq*, the Arabized form of the Pahlavi noun **piyādag*.

A vertical piece, 4.5 cm high, topped halfway up by a pointed dome carved with lotus leaves is handled in geometrical style, LNS 575 HS (fig. 31). If a chess piece, then it might perhaps be a queen (*farzīn*). The geometricized lotus makes a date in the tenth or eleventh century conceivable.

Clues are lacking to advance any hypothesis about the exact character of another gaming piece bought from an Afghan dealer by The al-Sabah Collection (inv. LNS 165 HS [fig. 32]). Very finely carved, the piece which is 3.8 cm high, is of great interest despite the uncertainty regarding its precise nature and the type of game in which it might have been used. The carved palmettes find parallels in Khorasani metalwork dating from the ninth or tenth century. The typical motif of two half-palmettes, confronted, and pointed down in an overall triangular composition can, for example, be seen on a glass bottle in The al-Sabah Collection [inv. LNS 114 G].

The Al-Thani Rock Crystal Lion

Alongside rock crystal vessels, Iranian masters carved some rock crystal animal figures. A highly stylized crouching lion is preserved in the Al-



Fig. 28. A chess piece reportedly dug up in Qal'a-i Naw was acquired by The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 573 HS c) with the preceding two pieces. Handled in a strictly geometrical style, it does not lend itself to easy interpretation. It is probably contemporary with the grey stone figures excavated in Neyshābūr in western Khorasan. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.

Thani Collection, inv. BELC 008 (fig. 33 and fig. 34). The piece which appeared out of the blue at a London auction in 2011 and may have come out of Afghanistan like other pieces (see below) was routinely catalogued as "Fatimid."¹⁵⁷ Its destination remains open to speculation. The underside would suggest that the object was meant to rest on a flat surface. Until a definite clue is provided by comparative material or by a written source, there is little point about venturing guesses about its function.

By contrast, the style and period can be broadly characterized. The size and the tendency to reduce the body to a geometrical volume, together with the carved geometricized palmettes (fig. 35) call to mind the animal figures carved in grey stone in Neyshābūr during the tenth century, although it does not quite achieve the same extremely schematic rendition.¹⁵⁸ This may in part be due to the properties of quartz of which rock crystal is a variety. It lends itself more easily to devising smooth transitions than the grey stone of Neyshābūr which is prone to cleave with sharp angles. The geometrical figures carved on the back of the lion are typical of the Khorasani taste for



Fig. 29. The back end of the chess piece reportedly dug up at Qal'a-i Naw, which was acquired by The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 573 HS c), is carved with a human mask. It wears the two-horned cap (*kolāh-e do shākh*) of the Ghaznavid rulers and high officials mentioned by the eleventh-century historian Beyhaqī. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 31. A vertical game piece 4.5 cm high from Qal'a-i Naw in The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 575 HS) is topped halfway up by a pointed dome carved with lotus petals handled in geometrical fashion. These allow a broad dating in the tenth or eleventh century CE. If a chess piece, then it might be a queen (in Persian *farzīn*). Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 30. Five pieces from Qal'a-i Naw acquired by The al-Sabah Collection (LNS 383 HS a-e) may be assumed to date from the same broad period of the tenth to the eleventh century CE. An example 3.6 cm high (LNS 383 HS a) illustrates the high-quality carving. Found together, the five pieces may be tentatively assumed to be the pawns of a chess set (in Persian *piyādeh* or *beydaq*). The al-Sabah Collection, Dar-al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait.



Fig. 32. Another gaming piece, 3.8 cm high, acquired by The al-Sabah Collection from an Afghan vendor (LNS 165 HS) is equally difficult to identify. Very finely carved, the piece has features that find parallels in Khorasani metalwork. The motif of two half sections of a split palmette pointed downwards in a triangular composition also occurs on Khorasani glass. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.

geometry in form and patterns (fig. 36). A tubular conduit, 4.5 cm long, was carefully bored through the chest (fig. 37) suggesting that the piece may have been a furniture fitting, such as a protome of a royal seat or of a palanquin. The royal symbolism of the lion together with the semi-precious stone invites speculation that it might have been destined for a ruler's palace.

Bīrūnī provides another argument for holding a royal destination to be a valid proposition. The Iranian polymath notes in the *Encyclopaedia of Primary Substances* (*Kitāb Jamāhir fī'l-Jawāhir*, p. 130) that "the two brothers from Rey Ḥasan and Ḥusayn" reported buying for Sultan Maṣ'ūd I "a rectangular ruby in the form of a lion (*yāqūt aḥmar mustaqīl 'ala ṣūrat asad*)" for seven thousand Neyshābūrī dīnārs. The huge sum, which was paid during the Sultan's stay in Rey, tells us that lion figures made of precious stones were keenly sought after by Ghaznavid rulers. The Al Thani lion is carved from high-quality rock crystal as might be expected of a royal piece. Whether intended for a Ghaznavid Sultan or the ruler from another dynasty is impossible to tell in the absence of specific clues.

The style of the rock crystal lion is consistent with a date around the second half of the tenth century or the first half of the eleventh century. The pattern carved on the Al-Thani lion is taken from the same Khorasani repertoire represented on the chess pieces examined in these pages. On the animal's flank seen when it is turned to the right, four ibex head profiles are carried by scrolls (fig. 33). The same profiles are not quite as clearly outlined when the animal is turned to the left (fig. 34). The head is handled in a thoroughly geometricized cartoon style that bears comparison with the best Neyshābūrī manner (fig. 37). The triangular nose is subdivided into a big lozenge flanked in the lower area by two triangles meant to be isosceles. The smooth rounded volume of the head fits the assumption of a furniture fitting such as a protome for the arms of a throne or the rods of a palanquin which would have allowed hands to grip it painlessly.

The Rock Crystal Geometrical Vessels of Tenth–Eleventh Century Khorasan

The existence of a Khorasan school producing rock crystal vessels with geometrical shapes

which has been established on the basis of comparative evidence is further borne out by a series of small pieces that came to light over the years in eastern Khorasan and were acquired from Afghan dealers by The al-Sabah Collection.

While the identity of a vendor is by no means sufficient proof of the origins of his wares, it would be unreasonable to ignore the information volunteered by dealers.

The stylistic consistency of a number of small kohl flasks (*sormehdān*) with closely related geometrical shapes obtained at the hands of several Afghan dealers makes it obvious that they represent a regional style originating in the eastern Khorasani area now part of Afghanistan. Their connection with the geometrical bronzes of the tenth–eleventh century Khorasani school leaves no room for doubt regarding their Khorasani provenance.

Foremost among the miniature rock crystal vessels is a tiny kohl flask 3.72 cm high (inv. LNS 119 HS); apparently a kohl flask (*sormehdān*) depends entirely on the geometry of form for aesthetic effect (fig. 38).¹⁵⁹ The Frankfurt-based Iranian dealer who sold it to The al-Sabah Collection mentioned that it came from Neyshābūr.

The squat body with a broad base from which the sides rise at about 45 degrees before going up vertically is poised on a narrow stand with short stumpy legs. The edges at the junction of vertical facets are subtly rounded, allowing the tiny vessel to be picked up without discomfort. As is the case with bronze ewers of the ninth and tenth centuries, a broad, compressed moulding runs at the base of the neck which appears to have been shortened and ground down to camouflage an uneven break. The narrow shoulder, very slightly convex, slopes up to the moulding at a very low angle. Despite its seeming simplicity, the form has no exact match in rock crystal or any other material.

Another kohl flask, 2.82 cm high (inv. LNS 371 HS), has a chamfered body (fig. 39).¹⁶⁰ It displays the same relish in the geometry of form and adds two-dimensional elementary geometrical figures in very low relief with edges under 0.1 cm high. The shape of the vessel, which was included in a London auction and entered The al-Sabah Collection in 1998, is fully preserved. It has suffered blunting the edge of the shoulder. The hexagonal body, which continues a pre-Islamic tradition across the Middle East, provides a link with

bronze vessels from ninth–tenth century Khorasan such as a rose-water sprinkler (*golābzān*) in The Iran-Zamin Collection.¹⁶¹ The flat base from which the sides rise at about 45 degrees before breaking up into vertical facets is typical of the group. This detail appears to be specific to rock crystal vessels. So are the deep grooves cut in parallel lines at a 45-degree angle across some facets in alternation with shorter grooves across intervening facets. On the neck, a deep groove runs around below the rim which has vertical, lightly convex sides slanting slightly inwards up to the broad flat lip. Altogether, the flask has a strong sculptural feel in its abstract style. It is close enough to the Neyshābūr piece to be assigned the same provenance.

A variant of this type, inv. LNS 490 HS, 3.5 cm high, was obtained from an Afghan dealer in Peshawar, who stated that it came from Herat.¹⁶² It confirms the favor enjoyed by this style in Khorasan (fig. 40). Here, the hexagonal sides rise from a narrower base to support the vertical facets of the chamfered body. Ornament is confined to deep vertical grooves that give a thrust to the slenderer body topped by a taller neck. Two deep horizontal grooves divide the neck into three sections. The lower section lightly flares while the median and top sections, the latter slightly recessed, have smooth convex sides. A monumental effect is achieved despite the very small size of the piece.

Contrasting with the economy of means achieved by the geometrical style in the rock crystal kohl flasks acquired by The al-Sabah Collection from Afghan dealers in Peshawar, other miniature vessels bought from the same sources are covered with motifs drawn from the Khorasani repertoire as represented in metalwork, stonework, and architectural stucco panels.

An hexagonal kohl flask in The al-Sabah Collection (inv. LNS 499 HS), 5.95 cm high, is also said to have been recovered from underground in Herat. It associates formalized motifs of vegetal origin with elementary linear geometrical motifs (fig. 41).¹⁶³ The body is poised on a broad base unevenly preserved, an average 0.3 cm high. The six vertical sides taper very slightly as they rise up to the recessed, low, angular shoulder also about 1 cm high. The shoulder slightly slopes up to the short flaring neck. The six vertical facets are handled like stucco panels carved on a monument. Strong mouldings along the edges emphasize the structural outline. In the rectangular space that is thus

circumscribed, panels within grooved rectangular frames each enclose a scroll carrying two sections of split palmettes. These panels come in clusters of two, diametrically opposed. The two intervening vertical facets, likewise diametrically opposed, are each carved with three vertical ribs. The central rib is cut across by narrow slanting ribs and the lateral ribs are cut across by angles. The giveaway detail that is typical of the Khorasani repertoire is the section of a split palmette with three lobes pressed against what resembles a bird profile with a sinuous point for a beak.

An hexagonal structure is retained in a small kohl flask 7.32 cm high and 3.56 cm wide, which entered The al-Sabah Collection in 1996, Inv. LNS 225 HS (fig. 42).¹⁶⁴ It is immediately apparent in the neck with a light flare. The six facets are separated from each other by narrow angular grooves. The neck rises above two strong circular ribs, which thus underline the contrast between its pure geometry and the rich sculptural display of abstract motifs on the body where they stand out in low relief. Motifs known in Persian as *peykānī*, after the arrowhead or *peykān* that they reproduce, occur on three facets alternating with flat kite-like motifs that have bevelled edges on the three intervening facets. Oval motifs in stronger relief project from the central area of the kite-like motifs. Both the *peykānī* and the oval motifs are seen on Khorasan bronzes of the tenth–eleventh century CE.

A bigger kohl flask, 8.98 cm high (inv. 335 HS),¹⁶⁵ of comparable proportions, but of circular section, was dug up at Qādis, a town near Qal‘a-i Naw in the Bādghīs province that historically served as the hinterland of Herat. It is important for the epigraphic border that occupies the larger part of the space on the cylindrical body (fig. 43). It is written in a plain Khorasani Kufic script with very large triangular tips to its letters. These tips are ultimately derived from bird heads of which they retain the movement. This is particularly clear in the *ṭā marbūṭā* at the end of *baraka*. The terse invocation calling for divine favors upon the owner is reduced to three words:

بركة و سرور

Blessing and merriment!

A strong circular moulding runs above the invocation, highlighting the space reserved for it and giving the cylindrical body an architectural feel.

The lid-like section at the top of the body, flush



Fig. 33. A lion-shaped fitting was presumably attached to a piece of furniture or a palanquin. The geometricized handling, while smoother owing to the nature of the medium and the requirements of comfortable handling, compares with the sculptural handling of grey stone animal figures from Neyshābūr. Eastern Khorasan, tenth–eleventh century CE. The Al-Thani Collection. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.

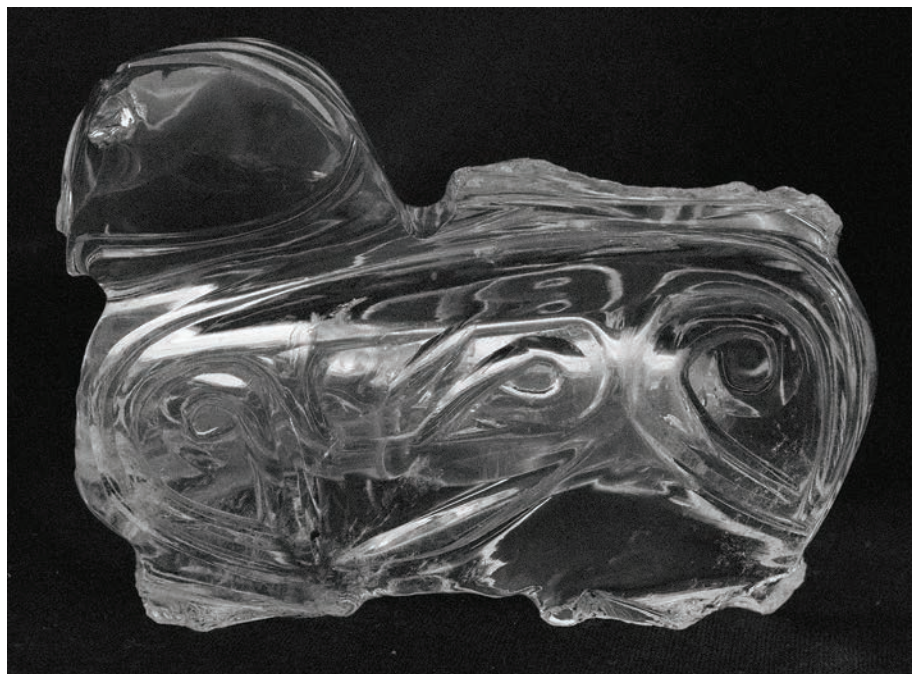


Fig. 34. The Al-Thani lion facing left. The slight variants in the carved detail may have been determined by the shape of the rock crystal piece available. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 35. Detail of the Al-Thani lion-shaped furniture or palanquin fitting. The profile of an ibex head reduced to an abstract palmette is widely used in the Khorasani repertoire of the ninth–tenth century CE. It is inherited from distant antiquity, going as far back as Scythian art from the Pazyrik finds. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 37. The head of the Al-Thani lion-shaped furniture or palanquin fitting seen full front. The circular opening was bored deep enough into the chest to accommodate a rod of circular section. The royal symbolism of the lion invites speculation that the piece might have been part of the possessions of some regional ruler claiming regal status. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 36. The Al-Thani lion-shaped furniture or palanquin fitting seen three-quarters back. The geometrical style of the motifs carved on the back are consistent with the strong geometrizing trend in Khorasani artefacts in all media from the ninth to the eleventh century CE. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 38. The kohl flask (?) (*sormehdān* in Persian) rests on two stumpy legs comparing with those of Khorasani grey stone vessels. The hexagonal shape with a light flare is typical of the Khorasani repertoire. The flat shoulder supporting a low tubular opening compares with the matching features of Khorasani *sormehdāns*. The al-Sabah Collection, Neyshābūr Khorasan, tenth–eleventh century CE. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 40. The kohl flask (*sormehdān*) LNS 490 HS, 3.5 cm high, now in The al-Sabah Collection is said to have come to light in Herat. A variant of the piece nr. LNS 371 HS in fig. 39, it has a comparable hexagonal form. The ornament confined to vertical grooves gives an additional thrust to the shape.



39. Another kohl flask (?) in The al-Sabah Collection, (LNS 371 HS) displays the same love of geometrical forms. The elementary geometrical figures carved in low relief with edges less than 0.1 cm high share the same aesthetic trend. Sold at auction as Fatimid in 1998, it no doubt originated in the same eastern region of Khorasan as the kohl flask in fig. 38. Photo: Melikian-Chirvani.



Fig. 41. The kohl flask (*sormehdān*) LNS 499 HS, 5.95 cm high, in The al-Sabah Collection, is another example of the love of hexagonal volumes that Khorasani rock crystal carvers shared with Khorasani bronze makers in the ninth–tenth century CE. Strong mouldings along the edges emphasize the architecture of form. The al-Sabah Collection, Dar-al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait.



Fig. 42. The kohl flask nr. LNS 225 HS in The al-Sabah Collection, 7.32 cm high, has yet again a hexagonal body. The six facets separated from each other by angular grooves are carved with motifs in low relief that are drawn from the Iranian repertoire. Arrowheads (*peykān*) alternate with kite-like motifs from which oval motifs project.

with its narrow lip, is carved with a chain, of which the seven angular, elongated links bend at an angle as they do on some Neyshābūr glazed earthenware vessels and on some carved stucco panels.¹⁶⁶ The large size of the links is proportionate to that of the lettering. This is in keeping with the monumentality achieved in the handling of the piece despite its small size. The geometrical character of the links is matched by the equally geometrical character of the staggered rows of imbricated triangles in low relief defined by zig-zag grooving on the moulding which supports the neck. The vigor and austerity of the piece would seem to point to a comparatively early date, probably not later than the tenth century CE. The lower half of the “lid” is designed as a dish with low vertical sides and a broad ring foot turned upside down that supports the suggested tenth-century date: the model finds parallels in eighth- to tenth-century glass, glazed pottery, and metalwork from Khorasan.¹⁶⁷

One rock crystal piece acquired by The al-



Fig. 43. The kohl flask LNS 335 HS, 8.98 cm high, acquired from an Afghan source by The al-Sabah Collection, is important for the epigraphic frieze in low relief that runs around the cylindrical body. The plain Kufic script with large triangular tips to its letters is typically Khorasani. It reproduces a terse prayer (*do‘ā*). *Baraka wa sorūr*, “blessing and joy,” are the divine favors wished upon the owner.

Sabah Collection in the Deccan, India, shows in every detail a close connection to metalwork from tenth- to eleventh-century Khorasan, inv. LNS 96 HS (fig. 44).¹⁶⁸

The object appears to be incomplete. The rim has been ground down to a flat even surface from which all irregularities have been filed away. In the process, some of the dotted circles that end the vertical bands of closely spaced dotted circles were cut through halfway up.

What is left of the volume matches the body profile of the bronze ewers signed by the Khorasani master Ahmad around the early eleventh century CE.¹⁶⁹ This does not include the sinuous profile at the very top of the body. Such refinement



Fig. 44. Acquired in the Deccan, India, an incomplete vessel in The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 96 HS, which was broken at the neck and misses its top, might have been an ewer. The remaining body matches the profile of the eleventh-century bronze ewers signed by the master Aḥmad. The diamond repeat pattern, which continues a much earlier tradition, is seen on an unpublished small pre-Islamic bronze jug in The Iran-Zamin Collection.

would have been difficult, if at all possible, to obtain when carving rock crystal.

The details of the geometrical ornament carved on the sides are matched on the high tin bronze vessels of tenth–eleventh century Khorasan. The diamond repeat pattern carved with faultless regularity can also be seen on a much earlier small bronze bottle in The Iran-Zamin Collection.¹⁷⁰ The lozenges in low relief punctuated by four dotted circles which are inserted in the diamond repeat pattern display the same love of geometrical motifs as on bronze vessels. The upper part of the shape is chamfered into broad vertical facets. Nine vertical bands punched with chains of narrowly spaced dotted circles alternating with nine plain bands are again characteristic of the geo-

metrical high tin bronzes of Khorasan from the ninth to the eleventh century CE.

The variety of rock crystal vessel types and of their patterns, together with the differences in mastery which range from superb, as in the vessel that has just been compared with bronze specimens, to definitely crude, as in one of the small flasks (fig. 52), combine to demonstrate the existence of a well-entrenched tradition established over an entire region with numerous and diverse workshops.

Herat appears to have been one of its centers as might be expected. Some pieces are known to have been dug up in or near the city. It is not unreasonable to speculate that the superbly wrought incomplete vessel with a body similar to the body of the bronze ewers signed Aḥmad originated in that major Khorasani metropolis.

Different regions may have had specific styles. When a larger number of rock crystal vessels become known, it may be possible to characterize some of these. In the meantime, one can only note certain features. A kohl flask (*sormehdān*) from Gorgān on the southeast corner of the Caspian Sea next to western Khorasan is preserved in the Mūze-ye Mellī-e Iran (fig. 45).¹⁷¹ It has been known since 1959 when Kurt Erdmann reproduced it after seeing it at the exhibition of Iranian art held in Rome, but very little attention has been paid to it.¹⁷² Noticeable for the high quality of its execution, it relies solely for aesthetic effect on the geometrical handling of the three main volumes that make up its form. The central body, vigorously chamfered, is framed by powerful mouldings above and below. The flaring, funnel-like mouth, is similarly chamfered. It rests on a base with slanting sides that abruptly break into a spreading foot. Dating can only be hypothetical at this stage. It may be inferred from comparison with a rock crystal kohl flask in the British Museum also published by Kurt Erdmann (fig. 46).¹⁷³ The latter has a base with slanting sides that breaks into a spreading foot which is comparable. A carved palmette on the body would be consistent with a date around the tenth century, which hardly amounts to great precision. The kohl flask in the British Museum is clearly shown by its close connection to the Gorgān *sormehdān* to be an Iranian piece.

A third crystal kohl flask which also came out of Iran turned up at the 1985 Geneva auction of "Islamic Art" (fig. 47).¹⁷⁴ Highly stylized and



Fig. 45. A kohl flask (*sormehdān*) in the Müze-ye Melli-e Irān which came to light in Gorgān near the southeast corner of the Caspian Sea was on view in a Paris exhibition in 1954, but was not mentioned in the catalogue. Published by Kurt Erdmann in 1959, it displays the same love of geometrical form as some Khorasani kohl flasks.



Fig. 46. A kohl flask in the British Museum shares some features with the Gorgān piece preserved in Tehran. The base with slanting sides that break into a spreading foot is comparable. A carved palmette on the body would be consistent with a date in the tenth century. After Erdmann 1959.



Fig. 47. The kohl flask (*sormehdān*) which was sold at auction in Geneva in 1985 was reported to have come out of Iran. Structurally identical to the British Museum *sormehdān* in fig. 46, it is remarkable for its carved geometricized fleur-de-lis joined at the tip in vertical bands. The fleur-de-lis alternate with arrowhead motifs (*peykān*) projecting in low relief as they do on numerous Khorasani bronzes such as rose water sprinklers (*golābdān*), and mortars (*hāvan*), among others. After Sotheby's 1985.

marked by the trend toward geometricization, it was described in the catalogue entry as "an Abbasid rock crystal flask, ninth–tenth century, bevel cut in the form of a fish with mouth, gills, fins, tail and four pad feet . . . Eastern Iran or Central Asia." The fish form does not exactly leap to the eye. On each side of the main body of oval section, two rectangular panels enclose five lobed palmettes pointed toward each other. They are typical of the Iranian repertoire. In the narrow space left between the two rectangular panels, two flower

buds (*ghoncheh*) or arrowheads (*peykān*), to use the Persian terminology, stand out in low relief, their form emphasized by a framing rib.

Julian Raby recognized the east Iranian character of the vessel in an introductory paragraph and reproduced a related rock crystal flask in the Hermitage Museum, inv. no. CA 9993, in which the evocation of a fish is more easily recognizable. The British scholar, unaware of the existence of bronze flasks of similar size in ninth–tenth century Khorasan, toned down his own attribution to eastern Iran by cautiously concluding: "Only further research, however, will reveal whether they do indeed belong to Eastern rather than Egyptian manufacture."¹⁷⁵ That it is of Iranian manufacture is no longer in doubt.

An Iranian Rock Crystal Kohl Flask in the Victoria and Albert Museum

A kohl flask in the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. M.78–1910) which was ascribed by Anna Contadini to Fatimid Egypt may be safely added to the lengthening list of Iranian rock crystal vessels (fig. 48).¹⁷⁶

It was fitted with metallic mounts in England sometime between about 1540 and 1550 according to the museum specialists in order to transform it into what Contadini described as "a casting bottle for pepper or spices." To the outsider it rather looks like a censer with its heavy chains allowing a priest to swing it and spread incense. There is strictly nothing that connects the rock crystal piece with the art of Fatimid Egypt.

The hexagonal body topped by a lightly flaring neck, also hexagonal, is typical of the geometrical forms favored during the eighth and ninth centuries CE by Iranian metalworkers and glassmakers.¹⁷⁷ The strong moulding circling the neck in the lower half is frequently seen in Iranian metalwork. A peculiar detail, unique to this piece, is the presence of four very large cavities gouged out of the body. This could be explained by the need to eliminate a flaw or an impurity while maintaining perfect symmetry.

The Victoria and Albert flask probably dating from the eighth or ninth century CE would seem to rank among the earliest rock crystal vessels from Islamic Iran. Its transparency and accomplished execution would have made it fit for a ruler's consort.



Fig. 48. A Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. M.78-1910) kohl flask previously ascribed to Fatimid Egypt was already in England between about 1540 and 1550 when it was fitted with metallic mounts. The hexagonal body reproduces a model seen in Iranian metalwork and glass of the eighth and ninth centuries. The flaring neck is typical. The base with slanting sides is concealed here by the mounts.

A kohl flask in a church at Gandersheim published by Kurt Erdmann (fig. 49) is structurally comparable to the piece from Gorgān in the Mūze-ye Mellī-e Irān, with some notable differences in the detail. The carved ornament is typically Khorasani. The characteristic ibex head profile reduced into an abstract palmette is prominent enough halfway up



Fig. 49. The kohl flask (*sormehdān*) preserved in a church at Gandersheim, Germany is structurally comparable to the piece from Gorgān in the Mūze-ye Mellī-e Irān. The carved ornament includes the typical Khorasani ibex head profile stylized into an abstract palmette. It is carried by divergent stalks at the top of the body. Halfway up the body, the same ibex head profiles seen upside down are carved with parallel grooves, a Khorasani design device. After Erdmann 1959.

the cylindrical body. Parallel grooves take the place of simply engraved hatching. A tenth century CE date seems likely.

So deeply embedded was rock crystal in the Iranian tradition that even crooks used the hardstone for their tricks. A couplet from the panegyric on the Vizier Abu'l-Moẓaffar Moḥammad-e Abu'l-Faṭḥ cited earlier echoes in passing, with light-hearted irony, the production of fake semi-precious stones such as turquoises and fake gems like rubies made by forgers from rock-crystal which was colored:

کس را گمان نبود که از گوهر بلور
پیروزه خوش آید و یاقوت آبدار

No one would believe that out of rock crystal
Nice turquoises and rubies of fine water can
emerge¹⁷⁸

* * *

The attribution to Iran of a few of the vessels that have been examined in these pages may come to be revised. Certainty is difficult to attain about hardstone artefacts when devoid of epigraphy and even if they do have inscriptions, these do not always yield ironclad proof of their provenance. Bearing these reservations in mind, the number of rock crystal vessels and other pieces that leave little doubt about their Iranian workmanship is now significant enough. It can be stated with certainty that rock crystal was highly prized in Iran. The testimony of Persian poetry yields conclusive evidence on the admiration that rock crystal objects inspired at the highest level of the social hierarchy. Indeed the fragments excavated at Takht-e Jamshīd ("Persepolis") prove that rock crystal pieces were made for royal use as early as the Achaemenid age.

It is worth noting that, by contrast, rock crystal does not seem to have been used in Arab lands until well after the appearance of Islam. Avinoam Shalem cited the Qur'anic verse 24:35 and reproduced the translation of the following words by N. J. Dawood:

الله نور السموات و الأرض مثل نوره كمشكاة فيها مصباح المصباح
في زجاجة الزجاج كأنها كوكب دري

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche that enshrines a light, the light within a crystal of star-like brilliance.¹⁷⁹

The problem with Shalem's chosen translation is that the Qur'an does not actually mention rock crystal. An English version closer to the text might read:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. Comparing His light, it is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass piece, the glass piece is as if it were a glittering star.

In a footnote, Shalem adds: "Though the term *zujāja* (زجاجة) is translated by Palmer as glass, I chose Dawood's translation: N. J. Dawood, *The Koran* (Harmondsworth Penguin Classics, 1990)." The scholar does not attempt to make a case for his preference. The Arabic *zujāja* means glass, not rock crystal. Zamakshsharī says so in his Arabic-Persian dictionary, the earliest of its kind, compiled sometime between the late eleventh century and the first three decades of the twelfth century. The Iranian lexicographer renders the Arabic *zujāja* with the Persian word *ābgīneh*, "glass."¹⁸⁰ Until shown otherwise, there is no textual evidence that rock crystal vessels were made in the Arab homeland at the time of the Prophet's life, when Iran had already been making them since the Achaemenid age (559–531 BCE), more than a thousand years earlier.¹⁸¹

* * *

The broader context of Iranian culture explains why rock crystal was given a prominent place in art. A fundamental reason for the choice of rock crystal as the Iranian preferred material for wine cups (*jām*) lay in its transparency. All Persian poets praise it for this quality and the authors of technical treatises on mineralogy rate the varieties of rock crystal according to their degree of clarity. This insistence on transparency was not primarily due to an aesthetic approach. It was caused by the primordial importance attached to the color of wine, the deep red of blood. Countless Persian poems echo the awareness that wine libations were a substitute for sacrificial blood libations, even though the substitution had taken place in very ancient times, long before the formation of the first Iranian empire (559–331 BCE).¹⁸²

Seeing the red color of the wine was felt to be an essential aspect of wine libations and the noblest transparent material was considered in Iran to be rock crystal.

When Bīrūnī writes around the early eleventh century in the chapter dealing with rock crystal from his Encyclopaedia of Primary Substances (*Kitāb al-Jamāhir fi'l-Jawāhir*) that “rock crystal is the most costly of primary substances from which they make vessels even if not used with profligacy,”¹⁸³ he voices a generally held view – Jowharī Neyshābūrī repeats this statement in the late twelfth century (see above). Bīrūnī specifies a few lines further:

شرفه بالصِّفاء و ممائلة أصلي الحياة من الهواء و الماء

Its nobility lies in its clarity and in its analogy to the two principles of life, air and water

With such a grand perception of rock crystal, it is no wonder that the hardstone was set above gold when it came to making wine vessels for kings.

As time goes on, the list of recognized Iranian rock crystal artefacts is likely to lengthen through proper archaeological excavations and occasionally through reconsidering pieces long preserved in the West. The number of very fine rock crystal objects known at this stage to have come out of the Iranian world includes previously unknown models. To cite but one example, small perfume flasks were made of rock crystal. A piece in The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 550 HS, 6.6 cm high (fig. 50) designed as a tall, very slightly tapering tower topped by a rounded dome, is impeccably wrought. Recovered from underground in Herat, as was reported by the vendor, it retains the bronze needle that kept the perfume from spilling over.

At a lower end of the quality scale, small flasks carved with a certain lack of concern for perfect regularity that approaches clumsiness in some are all known to have been dug up in the great centers making rock crystal vessels.

Pieces dug up in Qal'a-i Naw, in the province of Herat, show that the geometrical style known from “white bronze (*safīdrūy*)” vessels of the ninth or tenth century was represented by some rock crystal small jars as it was by gaming pieces illustrated above.

A small bottle in The al-Sabah Collection, inv. 298 HS, 3.8 cm high and 3.1 cm across (in the

diameter of the imaginary circle that would circumscribe its hexagonal shape), is carved in low relief with hexagonal facets on its six sides (fig. 51). Each facet is in turn carved in sunken relief with a disk. The recessed low everted neck is carved with two imbricated rows of triangular diamonds.

On another bottle from Qal'a-i Naw in The al-Sabah Collection, inv. 523 HS, 5.05 cm high and 2.85 cm in diameter, hexagonal facets are carved on the cylindrical body (fig. 52). A tiny lozenge is carved out at the center of each facet. The space left between consecutive facets, is covered with geometrical facets, also carved in low relief.

The rock crystal of both small bottles recovered from Herat is of good quality by contrast with the modest skill displayed in the geometrical carving.

This is precisely what makes the two pieces inv. LNS 298 HS and inv. LNS 523 HS very interesting. The less than average level of craftsmanship can be variously explained. The bottles could be the work of trainees in major workshops or lesser craftsmen employed in minor workshops. But either way, these pieces imply that the semi-precious hardstone was readily available, even to artisans whose limited skills hardly justified their being entrusted with the expensive material. The existence of the lesser talented craftsmen and the wide range of qualifications that it reveals is to be expected in a long-established tradition of rock crystal carving which we know was the case as proved by the Sasanian-period rock crystal pieces and fragments from the Achaemenid-age vessels excavated at the imperial palace site of Takht-e Jamshīd (“Persepolis”).

It is worth noting in passing that the rock crystal vessels and the rock crystal gaming pieces could be made in the same workshops: a gaming piece in The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 383 HS a, 3.64 cm high and 2.7 cm in diameter (above fig. 30) and a small bottle from Herat in the same al-Sabah Collection, 5.95 cm high, inv. LNS 499 HS (fig. 41) are carved with the same geometrized lotus petals. They so closely resemble each other that they might even be the work of the same craftsman.

Ultimately, it is not the number of rock crystal vessels and chess pieces recognized as Iranian artefacts that matter the most in revealing the importance of the role played by the material in Iranian culture. It is the echo that rings throughout Persian sources, from the *Šāhnāme* to trea-



Fig. 50. A perfume flask (‘atrdān) in The al-Sabah Collection, 6.6 cm high, LNS 550 HS, reproduces in miniature size an architectural model in the form of a tall slightly tapering tower. Topped by a rounded dome, the piece which is impeccably wrought, was said by the vendor to have come out of Herat. Copyright The al-Sabah Collection, Dar-al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait.

tises penned by craftsmen. That echo could be heard further back in time. Recommending rock crystal vessels for drinking wine precedes the appearance of Persian poetry. In the eighth century, Abū Nuwās, born in Ahvāz in southwestern Iran, of mixed Arab and Iranian parentage, wrote Arabic poems which are laden with Iranian nouns for wine vessels and sing the Iranian style wine ban-



Fig. 51. Small flasks handled in the geometrical style represented by ninth to tenth century white bronze (safidrūy) vessels with a high tin content have been dug up at Qal‘a-i Naw in the Fariyāb district of the Herat province. The small hexagonal bottle LNS 298 HS in The al-Sabah Collection, 3.8 cm high, is carved with hexagonal facets in low relief on each side and closely resembles metal models. The low everted neck carved with two imbricated rows of triangular diamonds enhances the similarity. Copyright The al-Sabah Collection, Dar-al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait.

quet. He urges in one of his poems:

Drink, my friend, in rock crystal cups (*kāsāti bulār*)
At a banquet enlivened by a variety of
flowers¹⁸⁴

The hint here is at the need to inhale the smell of roses while drinking wine which was later forever sung in Persian poetry. The line by Abū Nuwās, like Ferdowsī’s multiple mentions of rock crystal cups in the part of the *Šāhnāme* dealing with the Sasanian dynasty, indicates that drinking wine from rock crystal cups continued a long-established custom rooted in the pre-Islamic past of Iran.

Further evidence that rock crystal vessels were very deeply embedded in Iranian tradition may be recognized in the fact that they were celebrated across the Iranian world, in the east but also in the northwest from the very beginnings of Persian poetry. They are mentioned in the earliest



Fig. 52. Another flask that was also dug up at Qal'a-i Naw, 5.05 cm high, LNS 523 HS. The cylindrical body is carved with hexagonal facets. A tiny lozenge is carved at the center of each facet. The intervals between consecutive hexagonal facets are carved in low relief with further geometrical motifs. Copyright The al-Sabah Collection, Dar-al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait.

surviving *dīvān* from a poet writing in Persian in historic Arrān, in the modern Republic of Azerbaijan, in a manner that implies great familiarity with the hardstone.

In a joint panegyric on Amīr Jastān, the ruler of the minuscule principality at the northwestern tip of the Iranian world, and on a certain Abu'l-Ma'ālī (his Vizier?), so far unidentified in historical sources, Qaṭrān Tabrīzī coined around the mid-eleventh century a couplet about the reflections of the light of wine, contained in a rock crystal beaker (*qadah*):

شود بلور ز عکس رُختِ بلون عقیق
چو اوفتد ز قدح بر رُختِ شعاعِ شراب

The reflection of your face gives rock crystal the hue of carnelian

When the sunrays of the wine fall from the beaker on your face¹⁸⁵

The hyperbolic first hemistich celebrates the red hue of the ruler's face whose reflection colors the rock crystal of his beaker. This happens as "the sunrays of the wine" fall from the vessel, held up high, on the Amīr's face. Qaṭrān might have had in mind a piece such as the beaker acquired from a Qazvīn source by the British Museum (above, fig. 9).

If ever proof was needed that the art history of Iran is part of the broader cultural history of this ancient civilization and cannot be written without integrating the wealth of evidence yielded by literature, this is it.

Notes

1. Michael Vickers drew attention long ago to Iranian rock crystal of the Achaemenid period in "Rock Crystal: The Key to Cut Glass and *diatetra* in Persia and Rome," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 9 (1996), pp. 49–65. See pp. 54–56. He noted its use at the ancient Iranian court by citing Aristophanes (pp. 54–55), corroborated by the fragments excavated at Takht-e Jamshīd ("Persepolis") mentioned on p. 50. See Eric Schmidt, *Persepolis II: Contents of the Treasury and Other Discoveries* (Chicago, 1957), which Vickers cites for p. 9 pl. 65, nos. 7–11.

2. Moḥammad b. Abī'l-Barekāt Jowharī Neyshābūrī, *Javāher-Nāme-ye Neẓāmī*, ed. Īraj Afshār with the collaboration of Moḥammad Rasūl Dariyāgasht (Tehran, 1383/2004).

3. Art historians write about the art of England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and all the other European cultures and would not dream of lumping it all under the blanket characterization "Christian Art." Their Western colleagues writing about the art of the Arab world, the Iranian world, Anatolia under the Seljuqs and Ottomans, Moghul India, etc., do not hesitate to lump it all under the denomination "Islamic Art." Yet the differences that separate these are considerably greater than those separating the works of art of Western European nations from each other.

4. A number of examples are given in the following pages. I submitted some revisions in Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, ed., *The World of the Fatimids*

(Toronto, London, Munich, 2018). See “Fatimid Rock Crystal” pp. 103–6.

5. Abū Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Ḥayy b. al-Zaḥḥāk b. Maḥmūd Gardizī, with a preface by Mirzā Muḥammad Khān Qazvinī, *Zeyn al-Akḥbār* (Tehran, 1327/1949), p. 65. Extensively cited in my monographic essay on the wine banquet in early Islamic Iran, “The Iranian *Bazm* in Early Persian Sources,” *Res Orientales IV: Banquets d’Orient* (Bures-sur-Yvette, France, 1992), pp. 95–119. See p. 116. *Āʾinehā* is probably used here with its secondary meaning: disks hung from trappings of horses and elephants.

6. Īraj Afshār in Jowharī Neyshābūrī, *Javāher-Nāme-ye Neẓāmī*, preface p. 16.

7. Avinoam Shalem, “On Medieval Rock Crystal Sources and Resources in the Lands of Islam” in *Seeking Transparency: Rock Crystals Across the Medieval Mediterranean*, ed. Cynthia Hahn and Avinoam Shalem (Berlin, 2020), pp. 101–15. See p. 107, n. 52 citing Parviz Mohebbi, “Gemcutting,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, vol. 10, no. 4 (London-Boston, 2001), pp. 397–98.

8. *Javāher-Nāme-ye* pp. 209–12 down to l. 7.

9. Mohammad Hoseyn b. Khalaf Tabrizī known as Borhān Tabrizī, *Borhān-e Qāteʿ*, ed. Moḥammad Moʿīn (Tehran, 1362/1983, five volumes) vol. *jīm-sīn*, p. 1142 glosses *saghrāq*: *kūze-ye lūlehdār*, “jug with a tubular spout.” The lexicographer vocalizes it “with a *fatḥa* on the first letter,” i.e., *saghrāq*. This makes it a synonym of *balbaleh*, identically glossed in vol. *alif-thāʾ*, p. 296. The noun *ṣorāḥī*, from the Arabic *ṣurāḥ*, “pure/clear,” is not entered in Persian dictionaries of traditional type.

10. In the chapters dealing with the gems in question, see “Likenesses of the spinel gem that can be made artificially (*Ashbāhi ke jowhar-e laʿl-rā be-tavān sākhṭ be ʿarīq-e ṣanāʿat*),” *Javāher-Nāme-ye Neẓāmī*, pp. 123–25.

11. *Javāher-Nāme-ye Neẓāmī* p. 213. The same story is recounted by Birūnī, *Kitāb al-Jamāhir fīʾl-Jawāhir*, pp. 298–99.

12. For an example of an eighth-century bronze *kadū* from Khorasan, see Giovanni Curatola, ed., *Art from the Islamic Civilization from The al-Sabah Collection Kuwait* (Milan, 2010), p. 48 right hand vessel, and p. 49 caption 8 where the piece, inv. LNS 85M, not identified as a *kadū*, is simply called an ewer.

13. Walther Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte* (Leiden-Cologne, 1970), p. 18, writes that “the small or canonical *mann* weight (*mann-e sharʿī*) = 5/6 kg prevailed until about the mid-fourteenth century in Iran” (“Persia” in the outdated denomination of his generation of Western Orientalists). This seems a huge capac-

ity for a rock crystal vessel. Either Hinz, or Kāshānī, or a manuscript scribe may have made a mistake.

14. Abūʾl-Qāsem ʿAbdallāh Kāshānī, *ʿArāyes al-Javāher va Nafāyes al-Atāyeb*, ed. Īraj Afshār (Tehran, 1345/1966), pp. 142–43. On *piyāzakī*, a variety of spinel defined by its nuance of red, see Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, “The Red Stones of Light in Iranian Culture. I. Spinel,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 15 (2001, printed 2005), pp. 77–110, see p. 87. On Shams al-Dīn Joveynī, see Mirzā Moḥammad Qazvinī: *The Taʾrikh-i Jahān-Gushā of ʿAlāʾuʾd-Dīn ʿAṭā Malik-i-Juwaynī* (London, 1912–1937, 3 vols.) vol. 1, pp. *yā-alif* to *ʿayn-zā*, with English shortened version pp. I–XCIII.

15. Moḥammad b. Maṣṣūr, *Gowhar-Nāmeḥ*, ed. Manūchehr Sotūdeh, in *Farhang-e Irān-Zamīn* (Tehran, 1968–1969). On *bolūr*, pp. 258–61. See p. 259.

16. Carl Johan Lamm, *Gläser und Steinschnittarbeiten aus dem Nahen Osten*, ed. Friedrich Sarre (Berlin, 1929–1930, 2 vols.) vol. 1, p. 510, n. 142. Shalem, “On Medieval Rock Crystal Sources and Resources in the Lands of Islam,” in *Seeking Transparency*, ed. Hahn and Shalem, pp. 101–15. See p. 111. Lamm transliterated *khawāb* as “*čawāb(?)*” making it sound like a Persian noun *jūāb*, “barley water.” The letters *ḥāʾ*, *khāʾ*, *jīm* in Arabic and *che* in Persian all have the same shape and are differentiated by the position and number of diacritical dots, hence Lamm’s hesitant transliteration presumably based on scribal error in a manuscript.

17. ʿAlā al-Dīn ʿAlī b. ʿAbdallāh al-Bahāʾī al-Ghazūlī al-Dimashqī, *Maṭāliʿ al-Budūr fī Manāzil al-Surūr*, ed. Al-Tijānī Saʿīd Maḥmūd (Beirut, 1438/2017, 2 vols.) vol. 2, p. 249. Walther Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte* pp. 24–27 gives wildly divergent equivalents for the *qinṭār* depending on the countries. He estimates the Iranian metric equivalence to be 57 kgs (p. 26). A total capacity of 171 to 228 liters for a rock crystal vessel is not plausible. The weight cited must be understood as an exaggeration intended to convey the huge size of the vessels.

18. Aḥmad b. Yūsuf al-Tifāshī, *Kitāb Izhār al-Afkār fī Jawāhir al-Aḥjār*, ed. Muḥammad Yūsuf Ḥasan and Maḥmūd Basiyūnī Khafajī, 3rd ed. (Cairo, 1436/2015).

19. Shalem, “On Medieval Rock Crystal,” p. 104.

20. Al-Tifāshī, p. 202.

21. Moḥammad Modabberī, *Sharḥ-e Aḥvāl va Ashʿār-e Shāʿerān-e bī-dīvān dar qarnhā-ye 3–4–5 Hejrī-e Qamarī* [The Biographies and the Verses of the Poets Without a *Dīvān* [= Collected Poems]] (Tehran, 1370/1991), p. 93 couplet 168. On the *Āfarīn-Nāmeḥ* and Abū Shokūr Balkhī, *ibid.* p. 82.

22. Avinoam Shalem, “Fountains of Light: The Meaning of Medieval Islamic Rock Crystal Lamps,”

Muqarnas 11 (1994), pp. 1–11. See p. 6 where the first couplet is mistranslated “Water and ice in crystal bowl combine – Behold these three, which like a bright lamp shine.” “Lamp” which renders *shamʿ*, “candle,” also takes liberties with the meaning in the name of poetic license no doubt.

23. *Dīvān-e Daqīqī-e Tūsī*, ed. Moḥammad Javād Sharīʿat (Tehran, 1368/1989), p. 106 couplet 98. These are the only surviving verses of what may have been a long ode (*qaṣīdeh*).

24. On the *Šāhnāme* auditive and visual environment at Iranian courts, including the appointment of a Qurʾan Cantor to the King, see Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, “Le Livre des Rois, miroir du destin,” *Studia Iranica*, 17, no. 1 (Paris, 1988), pp. 7–46. On the Qurʾan *kān*, see pp. 33–34.

25. See Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, “Les Frises du Shāh-Nāme dans l’architecture iranienne sous les Īlkhān,” *Studia Iranica* 18 (Paris, 1996), 127 pages and 66 black and white plates. In 1991, I showed that the construction of the summer palace for the Mongol ruler Ābāqā Khān (1265–1281) at Takht-e Soleymān was undertaken under the sign of the *Šāhnāme* by identifying, among other things, *Šāhnāme* verses on tiles scattered around the world reproducing a specific model of which one fragment recovered by the German archaeologists on the site carries these letters from a *Šāhnāme* hemistich: [Forūmānd Sīndokh]t az-īn goft [gūy]: Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, “‘Le Livre des Rois, miroir du destin’ II. Takht-e Soleymān et la symbolique du Shāh-Nāme,” *Studia Iranica* 20, no. 1 (Paris, 1991), pp. 33–148. See pl. XIV, fig. 24.

26. *Šāhnāme* scenes on some fritware vessels have yet to be recognized for what they are. I hope to deal with the subject elsewhere. For an example of *Šāhnāme* scenes on metalwork, see the silver and gold-inlaid brass basin (*tās*) inv. 760–1889 in: Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, *Islamic Metalwork from the Iranian World 8th–18th Centuries* (London, 1982) pp. 223–29. See also the Victoria and Albert Museum large basin of the *tasht* type inv. 546–1905 (mistakenly called a *lagan*) *ibid.* pp. 202–7.

27. Jules Mohl, ed. and trans., *Le Livre des Rois par Abou’l Kasim Ferdowsī* (Paris, 1838–1878) 7 vols.; Paris reprint, 1976. Vol. 1, p. 362 l. 1817. Hereafter cited under “Mohl,” followed by volume number.

28. Mohl III, p. 312 l. 255.

29. Mohl IV, p. 558 l. 2376–2378.

30. On the metaphor of “the blood of the cock” and the echo it sends to libations of sacrificial blood at the dawn of Iranian civilization, see Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, “The Wine Birds of Iran from Pre-

Achaemenid to Islamic Times,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 9 (1995, printed 1997), pp. 41–97. See pp. 54–73 on wine-cocks, and especially pp. 54–55 for references to the blood of the bird.

31. See Melikian-Chirvani, “The Iranian *Bazm* in Early Persian Sources,” pp. 114–17 on the role of the banquet as a tool of governance and diplomacy.

32. See, for example, *The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp*, introduction by Sheila R. Canby (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011), folio 7R. The Ghazna poets meet Ferdowsī whom they host over a banquet. A young courtier raises a shallow wine cup toward Ferdowsī while one of the poets clutching a towel with one hand draws his attention to a *ṭabaq* (tray) with red pomegranates and olive yellow quinces.

33. Mohl V, p. 576 l. 296.

34. Mohl V, p. 590 l. 468.

35. Mohl V, p. 590 ll. 472–73.

36. A vivid illustration of the tradition is provided on the *tasht* of the early fourteenth century cited in n. 18.

37. Mohl V, p. 600 ll. 581–82.

38. Mohl V, p. 620 l. 817.

39. Mohl V, p. 622 ll. 838–39.

40. Mohl V, p. 624 l. 866.

41. Mohl V, p. 662 l. 1344.

42. Mohl VI, p. 30 l. 316.

43. Mohl VI, p. 66 ll. 738–41.

44. Mohl VII, p. 316 ll. 3752–53.

45. Mohl V, p. 168 l. 823; p. 169 the French text reads: “un trône soutenu [“supported”] par des colonnes en crystal” which, in practical terms, is less likely.

46. Melikian-Chirvani, *Islamic Metalwork from the Iranian World 8th–18th Centuries*, p. 122 pl. 50; p. 131 pl. 59A. The third hemistich must be pronounced *Neshassatgah-e Shāh-e Bahrām-Gūr* if it is to scan, instead of *Neshastgah-e* etc.

47. Mohl V, p. 618 ll. 788–789. The couplets are noted in identical form in *Shāhnāme*, ed. Jalāl Khāleqī Moṭlaq and Maḥmūd Omīd-Sālār, vol. 6 (New York, 1384/2005), pp. 476–77 couplets 779–780. The second couplet is missing in one of the manuscripts on which the New York edition is based: p. 477 n. 1.

48. Mohl VI, p. 24 ll. 238–40.

49. See Stefano Carboni, *Glass of the Sultans* (New York, 2001), pp. 134–36 for a detailed review of such disks, including some to the name of Khosrow Malek, the last Ghaznavid ruler and the Ghūrīd ‘Atābēg Jahān Pahlavān ‘Omar b. al-Ḥusayn Noṣrat. See further, Stefano Carboni, *Glass from Islamic Lands: The al-Sabah Collection. Kuwait National Museum* (London, 2001),

five disks (three in fragmentary condition) p. 280 cat. 73 f-i. "F" depicts a royal character in a *maḥmal* carried by an elephant. The mahout's ankus is visible and is a variant of this model. H and I depict a royal rider, his left wrist extended to allow his kestrel to perch. F definitely, and G and I probably, relate to *šāhnāme* episodes which Carboni does not mention. On p. 279, Carboni suggests they were "set in stucco windows" citing "a large near-domical object acquired by the Collection in 1997" which is "a convex piece, in which are set two concentric rows of glass roundels," adding it "was probably the element of a bathroom ceiling." "The dome of a royal bathhouse" would be a more appropriate assumption.

50. Mohl V, p. 226 l. 1507.

51. An example of an Iranian hanging glass lamp is illustrated in Shalem, "Fountains of Light." See p. 7 reproducing a lamp in the David Collection, Copenhagen, inv. Nr. 14/1964.

52. Mohl VI, p. 48 l. 513.

53. Asadī Ṭūsī, *Garšāspnāme*, ed. Ḥabīb Yaghma'i (Tehran, 1393/2014). On the identification of pre-Islamic vessels as wine boats starting in the early first millennium BCE, see Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "From the Royal Boat to the Beggar's Bowl," *Islamic Art* 4 (1992), pp. 3–111. See pp. 11–18.

54. Ṭūsī, *Garšāspnāme*, p. 70 couplets 7–8.

55. Ṭūsī, *Garšāspnāme*, p. 307 ll. 58–59. *Khūbānparast*, "the beauty worshippers," seems odd. This might be a scribe's mistake for *Khosrow-parast*, "the king worshippers" (i.e., devoted to the king), a phrase found elsewhere in the *Garšāspnāme*.

56. Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "The Iranian Wine Leg from Prehistory to Mongol Times," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* N.S. vol. 11 (1997, printed 2000), pp. 65–91. Omitted in earlier Persian dictionaries, the noun *āyāgh* is entered by Borhān Tabrizī apparently for the first time in Persian lexicography: Moḥammad Ḥoseyn b. Khalaf Tabrizī, *Borhān-e Qāte'*, ed. Moḥammad Mo'in (Tehran, 1362/1983, 5 vols.) vol. *Alif-Thēh* [= I] p. 193, where the gloss says "*Ayāgh*, rhyming with *damāgh*; a bowl (*kāseh*) and a shallow bowl (*piyāleh*) for drinking wine." In a footnote to the gloss, Mo'in, citing Chaghaṭāyī, writes: "In Turkish, *Ayāgh*, *ayāq* is a foot/leg (*pā*) and a wine cup." Eastern Turkish evidently retained the derived Persian meaning of *pā* "leg/foot" when using *ayāgh* to describe a wine leg.

57. *Garšāspnāme*, p. 372 couplet 80.

58. Asadī Ṭūsī, *Loghat-e Fors*, ed. Moḥammad Dabīrsiyāqī (Tehran, 1336/1957), p. 103. On *pālogh* and the misspelling of the noun in some later dictionaries,

see Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "Le rhyton selon les sources persanes," *Studia Iranica: Mélanges offerts à Raoul Curiel*, Tome 11 (1982), pp. 282–84. In early Persian spelling, the letter P is not differentiated from the letter B by supplying three dots under the line. There is no difference between *pālogh* and *bālogh*. The latter merely records the existence of the archaic spelling. The only other poet recorded to have been using the noun *pālogh* alongside Rūdakī and Asadī Ṭūsī is the latter's contemporary 'Emāreh Marvazī in two couplets citing other objects designated with nouns that were also obsolete by then. See *Shā'erān-e bī-Dīvān*, pp. 352 and 362. Page 352 *ketāb*, "book," at the end of a couplet, is a scribe's absent-minded misreading for *rekāb*, the eight-lobed wine boat.

59. D. N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (London, 1971), p. 81 where *takōk* is explained, not translated, as "a drinking vessel." The early Persian dictionaries thus provide the precise meaning of the Pahlavi word while early Persian poetry yields the context, often royal, in which the object appeared.

60. *Garšāspnāme*, p. 372 couplet 85.

61. *Garšāspnāme*, p. 372 couplet 73.

62. *Garšāspnāme*, p. 209 couplets 20–21.

63. *Lāleh*, "wild anemone," is derived from *lāl*, "red," which, in its Arabized spelling, becomes *la'l*, the name of the spinel thus called for its red color.

64. For example, the *lāleh*-shaped bowl in the David Collection reproduced in Melikian-Chirvani, ed., *The World of the Fatimids*, pp. 300–301 where illustrated, and p. 356, inv. nr. 7/1970. First published by Kjeld von Folsach, *Art from the World of Islam in The David Collection* (Copenhagen, 2001), p. 133 cat. 109.

65. *Garšāspnāme*, p. 296 couplets 71, 72, 73. Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "Nezāmī, Goldsmith and Jeweller" (in preparation).

66. Fakhr al-Dīn As'ad-e Gorgānī, *Vīs o Rāmīn*, eds. Magali A. Todva and Alexander A. Gwakharia (Tehran, 1349/1970), p. 87 couplet 48.

67. Gorgānī, *Vīs o Rāmīn*, p. 269 couplets 173–77. Throughout his narrative, when he evokes the delicate white nuance of a woman's skin, Gorgānī compares it with rock crystal. He does so right at the beginning when describing Vīs growing into a young woman: *Vīs o Rāmīn* (p. 46 couplet 2):

شد آگنده بلورین بازوانش چو یازنده کمند گیسوانش

Her arms became studded rock crystal pieces

Her curls became stretched-out lassoes

Later, while describing her own appearance in a long response to Rāmīn, Vīs says (*Vīs o Rāmīn*, p. 329 couplet 93):

مرا گردن بلورین سینه سیمین به نرمی قائم بر بوی نسرین

My neck is rock crystalline and my chest silvery
It is ermine for its softness and a daffodil for
its odor

When addressing Vīs in a letter, Rāmīn celebrates her skin in identical terms as part of a string of metaphors drawn from the mineral and architectural terminology (*Vīs o Rāmīn*, p. 419 couplet 4):

ستون نقره و پیرایه تاج سهی سرو بلورین گنبد عاج

Column of silver, ornament of the crown
Slender cypress of rock crystal, cupola of ivory

Gorgānī's stereotyped comparisons with rock crystal when singing the whiteness of feminine skin implies that rock crystal was much in evidence. A technical precision about studding in the first quotation shows that the poet looked at material reality. Vessels made of crystal studded with precious stones of which the only recorded specimens are centuries later were apparently already being made in early eleventh-century Iran.

68. *Šarāfnāme*, ed. Hasan Vahīd Dastgerdī (Tehran reprint, n. d.), p. 225 l. 11.

69. *Šarāfnāme*, p. 340 couplet 9.

70. *Šarāfnāme*, p. 293 l. 7.

71. Roman Ghirshman, *Parthes et Sassanides* (Paris, 1962), p. 205 pl. 244 where designated as the "Coupe de Khosroès 1^{er} dite <Tasse de Salomon> (VI^e G. apr. J.-C.)." Each roundel size, in each color (red, green, white), is represented nine times, making in all twenty-seven roundels with abstract pattern. With the central roundel, this adds up to twenty-eight, the number of days in the lunar calendar month. Some might construe this as an argument pointing to a date in the Islamic period.

72. "Solomon's Cup (*Jām-e Soleymān*)" is sung in Persian poetry: Raḥīm 'Afīfī, *Farhang-e She'rī* [Dictionary of Poetry] 3 vols. (Tehran, 1376/1997) vol. *alif-khā* [=1] p. 527.

73. Ghirshman, *Parthes et Sassanides*, p. 391 cat. 244. Soleymān, in Iranian thinking, is the archetypal king of the world. Sending it as a present to Charlemagne by Harun al-Rashid, who lived in the heavily Persianized Baghdad, would have amounted to a eulogistic gesture.

74. Zainab Bahrani, "Crystal Words: The Power of Stones in the Ancient Near East," *Seeking Transparency*, ed. Hahn and Shalem, pp. 138–39 inv. 379 H. 5

cm, D. 28.2 cm.

75. Ghirshman, *Parthes et Sassanides*, color plate p. 222 and p. 392 cat. 264, as "époque sassanide." Bahrani, "Crystal Words," p. 139 fig. 7 as "Iran, seventh or eighth century." A couplet by Ḥafeẓ hints at crescent-shaped boats holding *vasmeh*:

The world has drawn *vasmeh* over the eyebrow of
the 'Eyd

One must see the crescent of the 'Eyd in the
eyebrow of the Beloved

Dīvān-e Khwāje Hāfaz-e Shīrāzī, ed. Abu'l-Qāsem Inju'ī Shīrāzī (Tehran, 1372/1993), p. 226. Missing in the editions of Nātel-Khānlārī and Afshār.

76. Sotheby's, *Islamic Art* (Geneva, 1985), lot 188. Its unacknowledged provenance from the Iranian trade is worth mentioning. Objects recovered from underground, as this one clearly is, are not known to have been coming out of Iraq at that period or in the few years preceding it.

77. Among countless pre-Islamic examples, the painted buff wares excavated at Tall-e Maliyān, 46 km north of Shīrāz, may be cited. Earthenware vessels from the Kaftārī period in the early second millennium BCE have criss-cross borders, squares, and triangles: William Sumner, "Excavations at Tall-i Malyan, 1971–72," *Iran* 12 (1974), pp. 155–80. See pp. 164–69, notably p. 165 figs. c, e, j, k and l (line drawings) and pl. IVD (a squat jar).

78. Charles K. Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery of the Early Islamic Period* (New York, 1973), pl. in p. 48 cat. 66 and p. 23 for entry.

79. Christie's, *Islamic Art, Indian Miniatures, Rugs and Carpets* (London, 17 October 1995 and 19 October 1995), p. 113 lot 286.

80. *Dīvān-e Ostād-e 'Onṣorī-e Balkhī*, ed. Moḥammad Dabīrsiyāqī (Tehran, 1342/1963), couplets 1968, 2740, 2849, and 3228.

81. Moḥammad Qāsem b. Ḥājī Moḥammad Kāshānī [Sorūrī], *Majma' al-Fors*, ed. Moḥammad Dabīrsiyāqī 3 vols. (Tehran, 1338/1959) vol. 1, p. 434 in the entry *khonūr* "one of household utensils such as bowls, jars and such like." Also in *Dīvān-e 'Onṣorī*, p. 343 couplet 3256.

82. *Dīvān-e Ostād-e 'Onṣorī*, p. 203 couplet 1968.

83. *Dīvān-e Ostād-e 'Onṣorī*, p. 292 couplet 2740.

84. *Dīvān-e Manūchehrī-e Dāmghānī*, ed. Moḥammad Dabīrsiyāqī (Tehran, 1347/1968), p. 34 l. 522.

85. *Dīvān-e Farrokhī-e Sīstānī*, ed. Moḥammad Dabīrsiyāqī, 2nd ed. (Tehran, 1343/1970), p. 222, l. 4436 couplets 4435–4436. The poet addressing the amir says that his face has the beauty of the Buddhist

temple (*bahāra* = *viḥāra*).

86. Maḥmūd Modabberī, *Sharḥ-e Aḥvāl va Ashʿār-e Shāʿerān-e Bī-Dīvān dar qarnhā-ye 3–4–5 Hejrī-e Qamarī* [An Account of the Lives and Verses of the Poets without a *Dīvān* in the 3–4–5 Centuries of the Islamic Lunar Calendar] (Tehran, 1370/1991), p. 492.

87. Notably the romance Vāmeq va ʿOzrā of which the fragments have been collected by the Georgian scholar Inga Kaladze, *Epicheskoye Nasledye Unsuri* [The Epic Legacy of ʿOnṣorī] (Tbilisi, 1983); Persian text pp. 59–86 (372 couplets). A second romance composed in the *Motaqāreb* meter is represented by 98 couplets. The Greek names of the characters and locations point to an adaptation of, or derivation from, a Hellenistic period model. The 89 couplets of a third *masnavī* romance in the *Khafīf* meter are gathered on pp. 98–103. The mention of the *Shāh-e Ghazneyn* (p. 98 couplet 3) suggests a context contemporary with the poet.

88. Ostād-e Abū Nazar ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ebn-e Maṣṣūr-e ʿAsjadī-e Marvazī, *Dīvān*, ed. Ṭāherī Shehāb (Tehran, 1334/1955), p. 32.

89. ʿAsjadī, *Dīvān*, p. 32 n. (not numbered).

90. ʿAsjadī, *Dīvān*, p. 33.

91. ʿA. Khayāmpūr, *Farhang-e Sokhanvarān* [Dictionary of Poets] (Tabriz, 1340/1961), p. 39.

92. Hakīm Abū Moʿīn Ḥamīd al-Dīn Nāṣer b. Khosrow-e Qobādiyānī, *Dīvān-e Ashʿār*, ed. Hājī Sayyed Naṣrollāh Taqavī, 4th ed. (Tehran, 2535 Sh./1976), p. 198 couplet 15.

93. *Dīvān-e Azraqī-e Heravī*, ed. Saʿīd Nafīsī (Tehran, 1336/1957), p. 79 ll. 1960–1962. The panegyric was written not later than 466/6 September 1073–26 August 1074 when the unfortunate ruler was blinded: Nafīsī, p. 7.

94. *Dīvān-e Azraqī-e Heravī*, ed. Saʿīd Nafīsī (Tehran, 1336/1957), p. 79 ll. 1960–1962.

95. *Dīvān-e Azraqī-e Heravī*, p. 41 couplets 1054–1056.

96. *Dīvān-e Azraqī-e Heravī*, p. 38 couplets 967–968.

97. *Dīvān-e Osmān-e Mokhtārī*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn Homāʾī (Tehran, 1341/1962), p. 64.

98. *Dīvān-e Khāqānī-e Shirvānī*, ed. Ziyā al-Dīn Sajjādī (Tehran 2537 Sh./1358/1979), p. 337 l. 8. On Jalāl al-Dīn Akhsatān, see preface, p. 38.

99. *Dīvān-e Khāqānī*, p. 661 third couplet of the third *ghazal*.

100. The *rekāb* as a vessel type was identified in 1995: Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, “*Rekāb*. The Polylobed Wine Boat from Sasanian to Saljuq Times,” *Res Orientales VII au Carrefour des Reli-*

gions. Mélanges Offerts à Philippe Gignoux (1995), pp. 187–204.

101. *Dīvān-e Khāqānī*, p. 195 couplets 14 and 15.

102. Vickers, “Rock Crystal: The Key to Cut Glass and *diatrete* in Persia and Rome.” See p. 56, illustrated fig. 7. I have never seen the object, which Oscar Muscarella dismissed as “not ancient,” polite speak for “fake” in “Unexcavated Objects and Ancient Near Eastern Art,” in *Mountains and Lowlands: Essays in the Archaeology of Greater Mesopotamia*, ed. L. D. Levine and T. C. Young, p. 182 n. 142 (Malibu, 1977).

103. In an article describing the role played by silver plate at Iranian courts, I cited the *Tārīkh-e Sīstān* recounting how two treasury secretaries started selling off “vessels (*avānī*) and minting *dīnārs* from gold plate (*zarrīneh*) and silver plate (*sīmīneh*):” “Essais sur la sociologie, de l’art islamique—I. Argenterie et féodalité dans l’Iran médiéval,” in *Art et Société dans le Monde Iranien*, ed. Chahryar Adle (Paris, 1982), pp. 143–74, see p. 168. A silver-footed bowl inscribed to the name of the Amīr and commander-in-chief (*al-isfahsālār al-kabīr*) Badr al-Dīn Qarāgöz, identified in the article (pp. 144–55) whose career is echoed by several early sources (pp. 151–56), acquired by the late Edmund de Unger and now on loan in the Dallas Museum of Art was pieced together from a myriad of fragments. It was probably broken up to be melted down, a process presumably interrupted by the Mongol onslaught.

104. Carl Johan Lamm, *Mittelalterliche Gläser und Steinschnittarbeiten aus dem Nahen Osten*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1929–1930) vol. 2, pl. 68.5 and p. 17.

105. The Arts Council of Great Britain, *The Arts of Islam* (1976), p. 127 cat. 109 with reference to C. J. Lamm.

106. Shalem, “Fountains of Light,” p. 1 fig. 1 caption.

107. Shalem, “Fountains of Light,” p. 2 fig. 3.

108. As may be seen from the various boat models reproduced in Melikian-Chirvani, “From the Royal Boat to the Beggar’s Bowl,” pp. 3–111: p. 77 fig. 1; p. 78 figs. 4 and 5; p. 79 figs. 7 and 8; p. 80 fig. 11; p. 81 figs. 13 and 14; p. 82 fig. 16; p. 83 fig. 20; p. 84 figs. 23 and 24; p. 85 figs. 25 and 26; p. 86 fig. 36 (Ottoman Turkey); p. 90 fig. 41 (Ottoman Turkey); p. 92 fig. 47; p. 93 fig. 49; p. 95 fig. 34; p. 97 fig. 60; p. 108 fig. 96 (eleventh-century Armenia) fig. 97 (Fatimid Egypt); p. 111 fig. 108 (Safavid Iran). The one asymmetrical exception concerns the glazed fritware boats with a human mask at one extremity (*ibid.* p. 86 fig. 28).

109. From its beginnings in pre-Achaemenid antiquity. For burnished earthenware examples from the north Iranian regions, see Trudy S. Kawami, *Ancient Iranian Ceramics from the Arthur M. Sackler Collec-*

tions (New York, 1991), p. 150 pl. 56, and p. 151 where catalogued as "Uartian, eighth–seventh century BC"; p. 153 pl. 57, and p. 153 as "Uartian, ninth–eighth century BC"; p. 148 reproducing the highly stylized lower part of a human (female?) body with its two legs shod. The art historian was unaware of the existence of the "wine legs"/"wine feet" (*Pā-ye sharāb* in Persian means either) of the Islamic period. The identification of the type in my monographic study (above n. 56) only appeared in 2000. Wine legs of the Islamic period have been illustrated here and there but not recognized as such by archaeologists or art historians unfamiliar with Persian literature, e.g., the wine leg from Samarkand in green-glazed pottery moulded in two halves: V. A. Abdullaev, E. V. Rtveladze, and G. V. Shishkina eds., *Culture and Art of Ancient Uzbekistan* 2 vols. (Moscow, 1991) vol. 2, p. 123 cat. 564 "vessel shaped as a boot"; the glass wine leg of the seventh or eighth century in The al-Sabah Collection, inv. nr. LNS 110 kg published as a "drinking vessel ... in the shape of a stylised boot," in Carboni, *Glass from Islamic Lands*, p. 44; and earlier, the extremely important bronze leg excavated at Panjakent (Russian transcription "Penjikent") published by V. I. Raspopova, *Metallicheskie Izdzeliya Rannesrednevekovogo Sogda* (Leningrad, 1980), p. 121 fig. 80. The pointed tip shows that the leg is shod in tight-fitting soft leather.

110. Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "The Iranian Wine Leg from Prehistory to Mongol Times," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* (1997, printed 2000), pp. 65–91.

111. *Divān-e Qaṭrān-e Tabrizī* (Tehran, 1362/1984), p. 485.

112. Moḥammad b. Hendūshāh al-Nakhjavānī, *Ṣeḥāḥ al-Fors*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Alī Ṭā‘atī (Tehran 2535 Sh./1976), p. 299.

113. *Divān-e Khāqānī*, p. 378.

114. The paradox of a "sea of wine" poured into a "boat" (the name of the boat-shaped vessel) is a frequent conceit in early Persian poetry. *Divān-e Serāj-e Qomrī-e Āmolī*, ed. Yadollāh Shokrī (Tehran, 1368/1989), p. 581.

115. Moḥammad Pādeshāh *motakhalles be* [with the pen name] Shād, *Farhang-e Ānanderāj*, ed. Moḥammad Dabīrsiyāqī (Tehran, 1335/1957–1336/1957: vols. 2 and 3 later n.d.) vol. 2, p. 876. On the dates of Badr Chāchī, see ‘A[li] Khayāmpūr, *Farhang-e Sokhanvarān* [Dictionary of Poets] (Tabriz, 1340/1961), p. 80.

116. The noun *ayāgh* is missing in most early Persian dictionaries, including the *Loghat-e Fors* ascribed to Asadī Ṭūsī, down to Injū Shīrāzī’s *Farhang-e Jahāngirī*, because it was not considered to be a Persian

word. It is indeed alien to Persian phonology and typically fits into Turkish phonology.

117. N. Venevtseva in Mikhail Piotrowsky, ed., *Zemnoye Iskustvo – Nebesnaya Krasota/Earthy [=Earthly] Art – Heavenly Beauty* (St. Petersburg, 2000), pp. 302–3 cat. 280.

118. In Western scholarly literature, writers invariably refer to the type as a rhyton, from the Greek *rhein* "to flow." This is a generic term for vessels pouring wine in a jet coming out of a narrow opening. There is no reason to retain a Greek word when writing about Iranian vessels which all have specific Persian names in use since the beginnings of the written records of the language, some of which can be shown to go back to Achaemenid Persian nouns.

119. Published in Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "The Iranian Wine Horn from Pre-Achaemenid Antiquity to the Safavid Age," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 10 (1996, printed 1998), pp. 85–139. See pp. 124–25 and fig. 25.

120. *Ibid.* pp. 115–24. See p. 118 fig. 21.

121. *Rasāyel-e Khayyām. Nowrūz-Nāmeḥ: Resāle-ye Vojūd*, ed. [Mehrdād] Avastā (Tehran, 1313/1934), p. 73.

122. First published as "[a Tray] Iran, tenth century" in Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, *The World of the Fatimids*, p. 104. H. 5.3 cm, D. 20.1 cm as measured by the basilica scholars.

123. For example, the famous tray in the Louvre from the Alphonse Kann Collection. Arthur Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, 4th and rev. ed. (London, 1957), p. 18 and pl. 14B where said to be from "Samarkand." Proportions varied: see Esin Atil, *Ceramics from the World of Islam* (Washington, 1973), pp. 26–27 (inv. nr. 54.16). The tray inv. nr. 52.11 pp. 28–29 reproduces the model with different proportions. Examples closer in profile have been circulating in the art market for years.

124. Giovanni Curatola, ed., *Eredità dell’ Islam: Arte Islamica in Italia* (Milan, 1993), pp. 143–44 cat. 53. Entry by Ernst J. Grube, who credited it to "Egypt 10th c."

125. Polylobed vessels come in all shapes with varying numbers of lobes. For a dish with thirteen lobes reportedly from Ghazni, see Oliver Watson, *Ceramics from Islamic Lands: Kuwait National Museum* (Kuwait, 2004), p. 310 cat. 4.6 Carved decoration under a blue glaze. A bowl with nine lightly cusped lobes painted overglaze is illustrated in Arthur Upham Pope, ed., *A Survey of Persian Art*, 5th ed., 18 vols. (Ashiya, Japan, 1981) vol. 9, *Pottery and Faience*, pl. 697B. A deep bowl painted underglaze and overglaze with eight lobes is illustrated *ibid.*, pl. 650A.

126. Marilyn Jenkins, ed., *Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum* (London, 1983), p. 61 as "Bottle carved rock crystal, Egypt, early eleventh century AD" H. 17 cm (actually: 10.5 cm, W. 8.3 cm, as measured by the museum).
127. Lamm, *Mittelalterliche Gläser und Steinschnitarbeiten aus dem Nahen Osten*, vol. 2, pl. 71.2.
128. Ernst Kühnel, *Islamische Kleinkunst: Ein Handbuch für Sammler und Liebhaber* ["a handbook for collectors and art lovers"] (Braunschweig, 1963), p. 211.
129. Anna Contadini in Curatola, ed., *Art from the Islamic Civilization*, p. 77 cat. 45 H. 10.5 cm W. 8.3 cm.
130. Jens Kröger, *Nishapur Glass of the Early Islamic Period* (New York, 1995), p. 67 cat. 71–72.
131. *Ibid.* cat. 72. The descriptions of shapes by Jens Kröger lack precision. The neck is not exactly cylindrical. It has a light flare clearly visible in the black and white plate. It is worth noting that none of the shapes are exclusive to glass. Cat. 71 is exactly matched on a large scale by a high tin bronze decanter in the Iran-Zamin Collection. Cat. 72 is matched by a turquoise glazed jug in the same collection.
132. Kröger, *Nishapur Glass*, p. 70 cat. 86. Inv. 40.170.65.
133. Kröger, *Nishapur Glass*, p. 70 cat. 83. Inv. 38.40.231.
134. Curatola, ed., *Art from the Islamic Civilization*, p. 77 cat. 46. Inv. LNS 77G.
135. Kröger, *Nishapur Glass*, p. 145 cat. 195. Kröger refers to hatching as "diagonal notches" in the entry on a fragment also excavated at Tapeh Madraseh, which was "discarded" in the sloppy manner of the American team: see p. 145 cat. 194.
136. Curatola, ed., *Art from the Islamic Civilization*, p. 229 pl. 212 for examples of ace-of-spade-like escutcheons formed by paired together ibex-head profiles. See also Carboni, *Glass from Islamic Lands*, p. 233 color plate, right hand bottle.
137. John Walker, *A Catalogue of Muhammadan Coins in the British Museum: Arab-Sasanian Coins* (London, 1967, reprint of 1941 ed.), pl. XV, 4 described p. 81.
138. Sotheby Parke Bennett & Co, *The Hever Castle Collection, Volume Two Works of Art* (London, 1983), p. 64, lot 279.
139. Esin Atil, ed., *Islamic Art and Patronage: Treasures from Kuwait* (New York, 1990), p. 88 (plate)-89, cat. 21. LNS 3 HS. H. 10.5 cm. H. 8.3 cm as measured by the museum. Despite the claim to a theme implied by the title, the subject of patronage was not actually dealt with.
140. Curatola, ed., *Art from the Islamic Civilization*, p. 76 cat. 44. H. 17.8 cm. W. 4.4 cm as measured by the museum, revising the label in Atil, *Islamic Art and Patronage*, pp. 86–87 cat. 20.
141. Shalem, "On Medieval Rock Crystal Sources and Resources in the Lands of Islam," p. 110 fig. 3 inv. 1954.1013.1 where "a place of production located in the eastern provinces of Iran" is put forward for the beaker which is considered to be "datable to the ninth or tenth century."
142. Jens Kröger, "The State of Research on Some Rock Crystal Ewers and Related Vessels from Islamic Lands," in *Seeking Transparency*, ed. Hahn and Shalem, pp. 13–33: p. 14 and p. 257, pl. 1 where ascribed to Fatimid Egypt. H. 17 cm. Halberstadt Domschatz inv. nr. 49.
143. Kröger, "The State of Research," p. 15.
144. Kröger, "The State of Research," pp. 27–28 where it is ascribed to Egypt, and plate 2 p. 258 H. 16.7 cm.
145. Pope, ed., *A Survey of Persian Art* vol. 13 pl. 1296B where the vessel simply is called an "ewer" and is given a "twelfth or thirteenth century date." The epigraphy on the Chicago bronze piece points to the twelfth century or late eleventh century.
146. *Bi-al sayyid* [= *bi'l-sayyid*] would be bad Arabic in the first place, by using the preposition *bi* ("at" or "by" or "with," depending on the context) instead of *li* ("for"). The ligature for *li* visible in the plate is actually elongated, as is normal for the *lām* (letter L), and not short as it would be for *bi*, which is thus an unwarranted "correction" made by Shalem. Two lines above this transcription, Shalem noting in romanized characters the inscription on a rock crystal ewer in Florence, makes another mistake which breaks one of the most basic rules of Arabic grammar and could not possibly have been made on a luxury object in rock crystal. Shalem writes: *al-qā'id al-quwwād khāsa*. Together with the inaccurate English equivalents that he provides for the Arabic names of various vessels these peccadilloes point to a lack of familiarity with the language.
147. *Sept mille ans d'art en Iran* (Paris, 1961), p. 167 cat. 904 and pl. CI, 2 as "Neyshābūr, Samārqand style, ninth century." A maxim calligraphed after the words "Blessing to the *shaykh*" (here, an unnamed spiritual master) was unread at the time. It proclaims:
" [Spiritual] knowledge is the noblest of heritages [lit. 'ascendancies'] and generosity the most complex human lot/condition."
148. To be published by this writer in *The Art of Metalwork in Islamic Iran: A Cultural Study* (in preparation).

149. As echoed in numerous Persian verses, most famously in this line by Ḥāfeẓ (*Dīvān-e Khwājah Ḥāfeẓ-e Shīrāzī*, ed., Sayyed Abu'l-Qāsem Injū'ī Shīrāzī, p. 289):

الا ای طوطی گویای اسرار مبادا خالیت شکر ز منقار

O parrot that speaks secrets [= the language of esotericism]

May your beak not be without sugar [=words sweet to the soul]

150. Out of the scores of manuscripts, only a few of which have been published, see, for example, Massumeh Farhad and Simon Rettig, *The Art of the Qur'an: Treasures from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts* (Washington, DC, 2016) for alternately gold and black lines, pp. 282–83 from a Qur'an signed by Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Tabrizī in 979/1571–1572; pp. 286–87 for the Qur'an signed by the artist in Shawwāl 983/January 1576. In some early Iranian Qur'ans, the black Kufic script is vocalized with red dots, e.g., *ibid.*, a mid-eleventh century Khorasani volume, pp. 172–73.

151. Sophie Makariou, *Chefs d'oeuvre islamiques de l'Aga Khan Museum* (Paris, 2007).

152. Aimeé Froom in Laden Akbaria, Benoît Junod, and Alnoor Merchant, eds., *The Path of Princes: Masterpieces from the Aga Khan Museum Collection* (Lisbon, 2008), p. 130 cat. 44, reproduced p. 131. Inv. nr. 00653.

153. Contadini in Curatola, ed., *Art from the Islamic Civilization*, pp. 74–175 cat. 43 a: H. 6.8 cm, D. 6 cm; cat. 43 h: H. 3.4 cm, W. 2.6 cm; cat. 43 i: H. 2.6 cm, W. 2.6 cm. Previously in the Church of Ager, Catalonia, Spain, then Comtesse de Béhague Collection. Acquired 1981 by The al-Sabah Collection, inv. 1 HS a, h and i.

154. Curatola, ed., *Art from the Islamic Civilization*, p. 209 pl. 212, glass flask (LNS 114G).

155. Curatola, ed., *Art from the Islamic Civilization*, pl. 43.

156. A rock crystal king (*shāh*), The Al-Thani Collection, inv. nr. BELC 936. H. 6.1 cm. Max. W. 5.4 cm.

157. Rock crystal, carved. The Al-Thani Collection. Inv. BELC C34. L. back to muzzle: 7.4 cm. Christie's, *Art of the Islamic and Indian Worlds* (London, 2011), pp. 141–43, where characterized as "A Rare Fatimid Rock Crystal Lion."

158. Charles K. Wilkinson, "Heating and Cooking in Nishapur," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 11 (New York, 1944).

159. The al-Sabah Collection inv. LNS 119 HS said by the vendor to have come to light in Neyshābūr. H. 3.72 cm; D. 2.55 cm.

160. The al-Sabah Collection inv. LNS 371 HS.

H. 2.82 cm; W. 1.98 cm; base 1.76 cm. Bought at Christie's South Kensington, *Islamic and Oriental Works of Art* (London, 15 October 1998), p. lot 441.

161. Melikian-Chirvani, *Iranian Metalwork in the Islamic Period* (in preparation).

162. The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 490 HS. H. 3.5 cm. W. 1.91 cm.

163. The al-Sabah Collection, inv. nr. LNS 499 HS. H. 5.95 cm. W. 3.18 cm.

164. The al-Sabah Collection, inv. nr. LNS 225 HS. H. 7.3 cm.

165. The al-Sabah Collection, inv. LNS 335 HS, H. 8.98 cm. D. 4.14 cm. In the *Qāmūs-e Juḡhrāfiyā'ī-e Afghanistan*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥakim Nahez (Kabul, 1338/1959), 115–16, Qādis is described as a thriving town in the highlands, in the midst of a fertile area, at an average altitude of 1,301 meters.

166. Glazed earthenware of the ninth century: see the fragment of a polychrome bowl painted with a horseman that was excavated at Tapeh Madraseh in Neyshābūr in Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Pottery of the Early Islamic Period*, p. 24 cat. 71 and plate. The metallic (gold or silver) horizontal strap from which pendants hang is a pleated chain with slanting links.

167. Glass: Jens Kröger, *Nishapur: Glass of the Early Islamic Period*, p. 43 cat. 6. p. 42. cat. 2. Metalwork: various examples, unpublished in private collections, including a silver dish worked in repoussé in the Iran-Zamin Collection. Pottery: examples in private possession.

168. The al-Sabah Collection, inv. nr. LNS 96 HS, H. 5.6 cm; D. 4.78 cm.

169. U. P. Pulatov in A. M. Belenitski, B. I. Iskandarov, V. G. Lukonin, and V. A. Suslov, eds., *Drevnosti Tajikistana* ["Tajikistan Antiquities"] (Dushanbe, 1985), cat. 822 for an example of Aḥmad's ewers found at Qal'a-i Qahqaha. An unsigned identical ewer (missing the handle) from Childukhtarān is reproduced under cat. nr. 821.

170. To be published in Melikian-Chirvani, *Iranian Metalwork in the Islamic Period* (in preparation).

171. Kurt Erdmann, "Neue Islamische Bergkristalle," *Ars Orientalis* 3 (1959), pp. 200–205. See p. 202 and pl. I fig. 3.

172. It did not occur to Erdmann that this piece was among a number of rock crystal objects that establish the existence of an Iranian school of making rock crystal vessels.

173. Erdmann, "Neue Islamische Bergkristalle," p. 202 and pl. I fig. 2. Erdmann speculated that it might have once belonged to the Gandersheim church. Characteristically enough, he illustrated two objects owned

by the Tehran dealer (not identified as such by him) A. Rabenou, in pls. 11 and 12, to which he only referred in n. 45, which is in effect a postscript. Plate 11 shows a kohl flask (*sormehdān*), which Erdmann did not recognize, and pl. 12 an inkwell (*davāt/khālestān*) which he called a "bowl" (in German "napf") even though the cylindrical cavity looks typical. The inkwell is carved with the typical Khorasani ibex profile stylized into a palmette seen on several rock crystal pieces published in these pages. Informed by the dealer that the two objects had been dug up in "Nishapur," Erdmann stated the fact without commenting on it.

174. Sotheby's, *Islamic Art* (Geneva, 1985), cat. 187, illustration facing the entry.

175. Once again, a piece dug up in Iran was regarded as something of a surprise, merely raising the possibility that it originated in Iran.

176. Anna Contadini, *Fatimid Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London, 1998), color plate 2 and p. 36. Inv. M. 78–1910 H. 13 cm. Bought from a certain J. Hughes for the then huge amount of £120.

177. Few metal examples have been published so far. Two are illustrated in Assadullah Souren Melikian Chirvani, "The White Bronzes of Early Islamic Iran," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 9 (New York, 1974), pp. 123–51. See pp. 131–32, reproduced fig. 10 p. 131. A number are published in this writer's *Iranian Metalwork in the Islamic Period*. Among glass examples, an hexagonal blue glass kohl flask appeared in Christie's, *Art of the Islamic and Indian Worlds* (London, 2006), p. 19 cat. 17 where it was attributed to northeast Iran, with an estimated date of the ninth/tenth century, probably too late by a century.

178. *Divān-e 'Oṭmān-e Mokhtārī*, p. 154 couplet 3.

179. Shalem, "Fountains of Light," l.c. p. 5 and p. 10, n. 44.

180. Abu'l-Qāsem Maḥmūd b. 'Omar al-Zamakhsharī [known as Jār Allāh Zamakhsharī], *Pishrow-e Adab yā Muqaddimat al-Adab*, ed. Sayyed Moḥammad-Kāẓem Emām 2 vols. (Tehran, 1342/1963) vol. I, p. 147.

181. See n. 102. I have left out the rock crystal cup in the Cincinnati Art Museum considered to be a modern forgery by Oscar Muscarella, as Michael Vickers reminded readers in his 1996 article in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. I have not seen, let alone handled the piece, a prerequisite for venturing an opinion about authenticity. On the face of it, Muscarella's verdict would appear to find support 1) in the unusual association of ribbing in one area with a figural scene in the other; and 2) in the presence of an engraved border of formalized vegetal ornament on the horizontal

moulding separating the two levels of the cup which one might expect to be plain. The very presence of such a moulding has no precedent on the bronze sheet models of the cup.

182. On the symbolism of wine as sacrificial blood, see Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "The Wine Bull and the Magian Master," in *Recurrent Patterns in Iranian Religions from Mazdaism to Sufism: Studia Iranica. Cahier 11* (Paris, 1992), pp. 101–34. See pp. 108–9, 121; 132. Wine is called in Persian literature "the blood of the vine" (*khūn-e raz*). The sacrificial symbolism of wine in Iran is graphically illustrated by vessels in the shape of bulls, birds, etc. pouring out the wine. See on this subject Melikian-Chirvani, "The Iranian Wine Horn," l.c. pp. 94–97. Also, Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "Les taureaux à vin et les cornes à boire de l'Iran islamique," *Histoire et Cultes de l'Asie Centrale pré-islamique*, ed. Paul Bernard and Frantz Grenet (Paris, 1991), pp. 101–25 and 17 fig. 5.

183. Abū Reyḥān Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Bīrūnī, [*Kitāb*] *al-Jamāhir fī'l-Jawāhir*, ed. Yūsuf al-Hādī (Tehran, 1374/1414 H.q./1995), p. 294.

«والبور أنفس الجواهر التي تعمل منها الاواني لولا تبيّله و تسميه الهند يتك و فيه فضل صلاحية يقطع بها كثير من الجواهر و يقوم لاجلها مقام فولاذ الحديد حتى تنفد منه النار»

184. Noted by Moḥammad 'Alī Emāmī Shūshtarī, *Farhang-e Vāzhehā-ye Fārsī dar Zabān-e 'Arabī* [Dictionary of Persian Nouns in Arabic] (Tehran, 1347/1968), p. 93. The couplet is cited after the Cairo edition of 1372/1953, p. 270. It proves that the early pronunciation of *bolūr* in Classical Arabic was close to Persian, not *billawr* as later dictionaries have it. In the couplet it rhymes with *ma'mūr* and therefore had to be *bollūr*, with a geminated *lām* (L). This is due to the spontaneous tendency of Arabic to emphasize loanwords from Persian, as indeed from all other foreign languages.

185. *Divān-e Qaṭrān Tabrīzī*, ed., Badī'ol-Zamān Forūzānfar, Zabīḥollāh Ṣafā, and Sayyed Ḥasan Taqīzādeh, 2nd ed. (Tehran, 1362/1983), p. 36.