The State of Research on Sasanian Painting

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Despite very recent discoveries – which are, however mainly fortuitous ones – the archaeology of pre-Islamic Iran is still badly known. This is particularly true for the Sasanian period (224-651), a kind of "golden age" for Persian art and culture that is remembered in later Islamic sources as the apogee of the Persian Empire.[1] It is a well-known fact that written sources are practically absent in pre-Islamic Iran if one excludes official inscriptions in Pahlavi on rock reliefs and the coinage. For this reason, the archaeological investigation should have an important role in the reconstruction of the Sasanian past. Unfortunately, this is not the case for a series of reasons that are beyond the goal of the present paper and, so, it is useless to mention them here. The research, however, developed greatly in the last few years and now many prejudices have been abandoned or they have been shown to be incorrect. Slowly, some important discoveries started to give a better interpretation to several aspects of Iranian culture and history of the Sasanian period. The state of our knowledge such as concerning specific aspects of Sasanian art can still be considered at an embryonic stage. This is the case of Sasanian painting too.

Painting still represents one of the aspects least investigated of Sasanian and, more generally, of pre-Islamic Persian art because of the extremely fragmentary state of the wall-paintings recovered in Iran.

[1] On the Sasanians see now: Daryaee (2008); ibid. (2009).

An up-to-date study on Sasanian painting was recently published by An De Waele who is also the author of the entry on Sasanian painting in the Encyclopaedia Iranica (electronic version).[2] In order to avoid repeating the results already advanced by De Waele, the present paper will focus other aspect of Sasanian painting and some new discoveries of the pictorial graffiti and even painting dated to the same period.

The Pre-Sasanian Period

Because of the undeniable admiration by Classical and Muslim authors, it seems that painting had a prominent position in the decoration of Sasanian buildings.

Monumental painting in Persia existed during the Achaemenid period (539-330 B.C.)[3] but the few fragments of it we have do not allow us to say much about it. Geometrical decorations embellished the architectonic elements at Pasargadae (dated to the reign of Cyrus II the Great, 559-530 BC) and at Persepolis (period of Darius I, 522-486 BC),[4] while the only specimens of human figures come from Susa, all recovered at the Shaur building (period of Artaxerxes II, 404-359/58 BC). Their style does not appear so different from the Persepolis and Susa reliefs, with a preference for the reproduction of figures in profile.[5]

The archaeological activity which has started in Iran in the last years allowed the discovery of a few new paintings dated to the Achaemenid period (most likely to the 6th-5th century BC) at Dahan-e Gholaman (Sistan). The paintings represent extremely

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[2] De Waele (2004). On Sasanian paintings see also: *Луконин* (1977: 210-21); Scarcia (2003: 105-07); Marshak (2002.a: 11-12).

[3] Traces of wall-paintings even earlier were discovered in the Province of Fars (District of Bayza) during the excavation of the site of Tell-e Malyan (c. 3200 BC): Nickerson (1977: figs. 2, 6-8). Another pre-Achaemenid site with geometrical paintings dated before 6th century BC is that of Baba Jan: Goff (1970: pl. III a-d). On Greek sources about evidences of Achaemenid paintings see: Marshak (2002.a: 8).

[4] Nunn (1988: pl. 108-109). Also at Persepolis were recovered Achaemenian graffiti : Herzfeld (1941: pl. LXXII); Roos (1970).

[5] Perrot, Le Brun, Labrousse (1971: 40, fig. 19); Calmeyer (1985-87: 577); Nunn (1988: pl. 110); Boucharlat (1989: fig. 1); ibid. (1997a: 61, colour pls. XIV-XV); ibid. (1997b: 502, fig. 665). Some paintings on pottery and walls recovered in Anatolia are considered specimens linked to the Achaemenid expansion in the region: Boardman (2000: 200, figs. 5.84-85a,b).

stylized animals and hunting scenes.[6] Four painted wooden beams embellished with scenes of Persians fighting pointed cap nomads are now part of the Archäologische Staatssammlung, Munich.[7] The origin of these painted panels is unknown but it was argued that, most likely, they could have been produced in Achaemenid Anatolia. Paintings dated to the Seleucid period (c. 312-162 BC) were found at Susa but they are not fully-documented.[8]

There is clear evidence for the Parthian domination in Persia under the Arsacid dynasty (c. 250 BC-226 AD)[9]. Specimens of Parthian painting and graffiti were recovered at Assur (1st-2nd century) and Hatra in Mesopotamia (today Northern Iraq),[10] and Lakh-Mazar (Khorasan Province Birjand, Kuch village)[11] while recently even at

[6] Sajjadi, Moghaddam (2004: fig. 9); Sajjadi (2007).

[7] Summerer (2007).

[8] Boucharlat (2002: 330). According to Bivar there is some evidence to support a chronology for a part of the paintings at Kuh-e Khoja (Sistan) to the Seleucid period: Bivar (2003). According to the Syriac version of the Pseudo-Callisthene, Alexander himself ordered an image of the goddess Nana to be painted in a temple in Samarkand: Axunbabaev, Grenet (1990: 371); Grenet (2004: 1061).

[9] Iranian elements can be observed in the wall paintings (and graffiti) of Syrian cities such as Dura-Europos (1st-2nd century). See: Кошеленко (1966: 178-89, figs. at pp. 183, 185); Colledge (1979:148-49); Schlumberger (1970: 106-111, figs. at pp. 104-111); Ghirshman (1962: 47-50, figs. 59, 61, 63a-63c.); Downey (1994); Leriche (1996: 589-92); Millar (1998). For the graffiti at Dura-Europos, see: Goldman (1999). For Palmyra (2nd-3rd century AD), see: Giuliano (1963); Colledge (1976: 83-87, 221-34, pls. 114-18; 1987); Browning (1979: 25, 36-37). For Edessa (early 3rd century) see: Leroy (1957: 317, 324-25, 334, 342, pl. XXII; 1961: 161-67, fig. 1-2); Segal (1970: 9-16, 40, pls. 1-3, 16.b, 17.a, 43-44); Drijvers (1994: 409); Lieu (1997: 174). Iranian components linked to Parthian art appear also in northern regions far away from Persia, as the funerary paintings at Pantikapaeum (today Kerch, in Crimea), dated cautiously to the 1st century: Maenchen-Helfen (1957-58: figs. 1-2); Blavatskij (1959: 932-34); Ghirshman (1962: 265, fig. 341); Античные государства Северново Причерноморья (1984: pls. CVII 2-3, CIX 1).

[10] Andrae (1933 reprint 1967: 111-14, fig. 46, pls. 61-62); ibid. (1938: fig. 78); Кошеленко (1966: 189, fig. at p. 183); Ghirshman (1962: fig. 60); Шлюмбержер (1985: 108, fig. 101); Downey (1985-87: 585); Neugebauer (1954: fig. 1); Venco Ricciardi (1992: fig. 13); ead. (1996); al-Salihi (1996). For the graffiti at Hatra, see: Al-Shams (1981); Venco Ricciardi (1998); ead. (2004). As it will be discussed briefly below, the hunting scenes in the graffiti at Hatra display already a typical iconographic solution very appreciated in Sasanian art.

[11] Henning (1953); Mizbani, Salimi (2002: 2, 17). Other graffiti representing human heads in profile with Parthian inscritptions have been found at Kal-e Jangal, Southern Khorasan but they are not enough investigated: communication through Sasanika mail-list by Mehr Kian, archaeologist and director of Ayapir Cultural Heritage Base (Iran).

Nisa (Turkmenistan) – the first Arsacid capital – some remains have been found during excavations.[12]

The paintings of Hatra are particularly interesting because they present many characteristics which are a prelude to the Sasanian artistic production. Archaeological excavations suggest a late Parthian chronology for the paintings, executed just before the destruction of the city perpetrated by the Sasanians at the time of Shapur I (241-272): in fact some murals were unfinished possibly just for this reason.[13] The scenes are divided in bands separated by geometric or vegetal frames and represent hunters on horseback in the act of shooting arrows at their prey (fig. 1) or piercing them with a lance.

[12] Invernizzi (1992); ibid. (1998); Curtis (2000: 24); Pilipko (2000). From Mansur-Tepe (Turkmenistan) come paintings of a bearded face and a female face on fragments of vases dated to the 2nd-1st century BC: Кошеленко (1977: fig. 76); Koshelenko, Lapshin, Novikov (1989: figs. 7-10); Gajbov, Košelenko, Novikov (1991: figs. 6-7). The same authors refer about murals now disappeared (ibid.: 88). For very recently Parthian fragmentary paintings from Qaleh Zahak (Iranian Azerbayjan), see: Qandgar, Esmaili, Rahmatpour (1383/2004: 202-203).

[13] Venco Ricciardi 1996: 164

What is surprising in these paintings is the treatment of the theme of the royal hunt. In fact it is reproduced exactly as it appears in many works of art of the following Sasanian period (especially metalwork), according to a sanctioned court typology.[14] The horses are always represented harnessed and in the position of the "flying gallop" – according to a well known scheme in Parthian art but probably originated in the art of the steppe[15] – while the hunters wear soft garments and sometimes a headgear, with the bust depicted frontally but with the head in three-quarter view.[16] The paraphernalia

[14] On a discussion about the central or provincial Sasanian metalwork production, see: Harper, Meyers (1981). See also: de Francovich (1984: 96-97, figs. 131-33).

[15] Кошеленко (1966: fig. at p. 201); Ghirshman (1962: 264-66, fig. 119, 340-46); Lo Muzio (2003).

[16] It is correct to assert that Parthian art has a preference for the frontal representation of human figures - see for example: Schlumberger (1960: 262-64); Bianchi Bandinelli (1966: 323-24); Schlumberger (1966: 385-86); Ghirshman (1962: 1-12) - but this consideration cannot be applied in general because exceptions do exist. In fact, the archer in mother of pearl from Shami dated to the 2nd-1st century BC and the archer in the relief of the Berlin Staatliche Museen dated to the 1st-3rd - see: Ghirshman (1962: fig. 125.a, 340) - both are depicted in profile. Regarding Sasanian art, it is clear that there is a general preference for the

reflects a Sasanian custom of the early period, as does the presence of the quiver.[17] In the scene with the hunter wearing a turban and killing a boar with a lance, it is possible to observe the shape of a second dead animal in the lower part of the mural. According to a widely accepted theory, in Sasanian art the dead animal is the same one reproduced twice, alive on the right side of the composition confronting the knight (or fleeing from him)[18] and lying under the horse's legs, alluding to the infallibility of the hunter, usually a royal character protected by Ahura Mazda.[19]

In the so-called North Palace at Hatra other paintings were recovered during archaeological excavations. Such paintings are Hellenistic in style and in the subjects depicted (Aphrodite and Eros?) even if at least one hunting scene clearly denotes typical Iranian elements.[20] As it will be observed below, in Sasanian art there are many borrowings from Hellenistic art as for example in the Bishapur mosaics.

The Sasanian Period

Hunting and battle scenes were the favorite themes in Sasanian painting according to Ammianus Marcellinus, the Roman historian who participated in the attack of the

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reproduction of human figures in profile or in a three-quarter view but frontal representations do exist even if rare. The Sasanian Emperor is reproduced frontally in some official representation when sitting on the throne with his hands on the hint of the sword: Schlumberger (1960: 290-91); ibid. (1966); Harper, Meyers (1981: 99-122). In Sasanian seals the frontal view is a privilege of divinities and heroes: Gyselen, Gignoux (2000: 301-2). The frontal representation of the king on Sasanian coins is not normal and the explanation of such an iconography on some specimens is still open to discussion: Gyselen (1993: 128); Gyselen, Gignoux (2000: 294). Possibly, Khosrow II adopted frontality on his coins as a result of Byzantine influence: ibid. (2000: 301-2). In Kushan coinage there is a similar resolution in the difference between the representation of the king (frontal with the body but with the face in profile) and the divinities such as the Buddha (always frontal): Rosenfield (1967: pls. I-XII, especially pl. V.88); Tanabe (1974).

[17] Overlaet (1993: 93).

[18] The different typologies of metalwork with hunting scenes are analyzed in detail in: Harper, Meyers (1981: 40-98).

[19] De Francovich (1984: 89-9). See also: Gignoux (1983: 117-8). Also in the *Megalopsychia* hunt mosaic at Antiochia (5th-6th century), where Sasanian influence is very clear, there is the scene of a hunter (Tiresias) in the act of piercing a leopard: Lavin (1963: fig. 7).

[20] Al-Salihi (1996).

Emperor Julian (360-363) against Ctesiphon. On the way to the Sasanian capital he observed a pavilion with paintings described as hunting and battle scenes.[21]

According to Byzantine sources, the Emperor Heraclius (610-641) would have seen during the plundering in the Sasanian domain in 628 "Khusrau's own image in the domed roof of the palace, as though enthroned in Heaven, and around it the Sun and the Moon and the Stars."[22] However, from the text it is not clear if this was a painted image or a statue.

The Islamic sources, although more numerous, do not say much about mural paintings in Persia dated to the Sasanian epoch. At the time of Mas'udi (10th century) there still existed a palace in the district of Istakhr, in the province of Fars, with remains of Sasanian paintings. Tabari (838/39-921/23) and Ta'alibi (11th century) refer to the paintings of the exploits of the Sasanian Emperor Bahram V Gor (421-439) in the palace of Khavarnaq, ordered by the Lakhmid king Mundir (c. 430-473) of Hira.[23] The Lakhmids (or Nasrids) were an Arabic dynasty who ruled in what is today northeastern Saudi Arabia and southwestern Iraq, vassals of the Sasanians, at whose court Bahram V lived as a hostage according to an oriental custom.[24] Other Islamic sources celebrate the paintings or mosaics of Ctesiphon with their scenes of the capture of Antioch by Khosrow I Anushiravan (531-579)[25] and in the Hudud al-'alam (10th century) it is clearly written that the buildings of the Sasanian kings at Balkh were embellished with paintings.[26] According to Yaqut (1179-1229) – who was quoting Ibn al-Faqih – Khosrow

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[21] Dimand (1972: 17-18); Goldman, Little (1980: 292); Marshak (2002.a: 11); Drijvers (2006).

[22] L'Orange (1953: 19-20).

[23] Arnold (1938-39 reprint 1967: 1811); Morgenstern (1938-39 reprint 1967): 1373, note 4; Peters (1977-1978: 104-5, note 79). According to M. Dimand (1972: 18), it was the same Emperor to order the realization of such paintings in his palace. On the paintings discovered at Hira defined "Sasanian in character" by the excavator, see: Talbot Rice (1931: 280-82); ibid. (1934: 54-57).

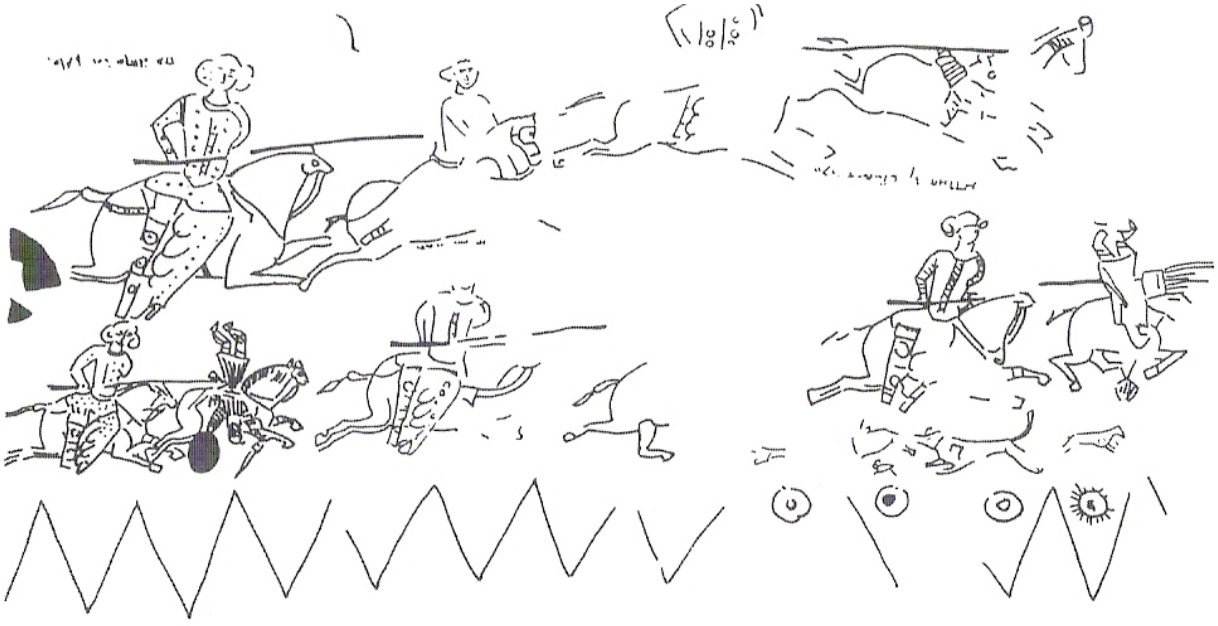
[24] The episode calls to mind the habit of keeping Chinese hostages at the Kushan court. According to the records of the Chinese Buddhist traveller Xuan Zang (c. 600-664), one of the buildings at Kapisha (Afghanistan) still "bore paintings of the hostages on the walls" at the time of his visit in 7th century: Rosenfield (1967: 37).

[25] Деникe (1938: 20); Arnold (1965: 63); Dimand (1972: 18); Schippmann (1993: 136); Kröger (1993: 447).

[26] Minorsky (1970: 108).

II Parvez (590-628) was depicted in the paintings of the castle of Dukkan, near Kermanshah, triumphant over the Chinese Emperor, the Turk Qaghan, the Roman Emperor and the king of Sind.[27] The famous Persian author Nizami (c. 1141-1209) speaks about Sinnimar, the architect who built the Khavarnaq who was helped by Shida, a skilful painter, architect and astronomer active at the court of Bahram V Gor.[28] Nizami also celebrates Shapur who was the most famous painter at the time of Khosrow II.[29] A few hints concerning Sasanian paintings can be found in the *Shahnama* by Firdusi.[30]

The first specimen of a painting ascribable to the Sasanian period is a battle scene recovered at Dura Europos, executed in a crude technique and dated to the time of the Persian occupation, between 253 and 256[31] (fig. 2).



[27] *Луконин* (1977: 210-19); Gray (1979: 315); Creswell (1979a: 408); Grube (1989: 201); Fontana (2002: 77). For some information on the probable identification of this castle during the '60ies of the last century by the archaeologist Leo Trümpelmann: Fowden (2004: 285).

[28] Soucek (1972: 11-12); Bernardini (1992).

[29] Soucek (1972: 15-18).

[30] Fontana (2002: 85).

[31] Grenet (1988: 138-43); Leriche (1996: 592).

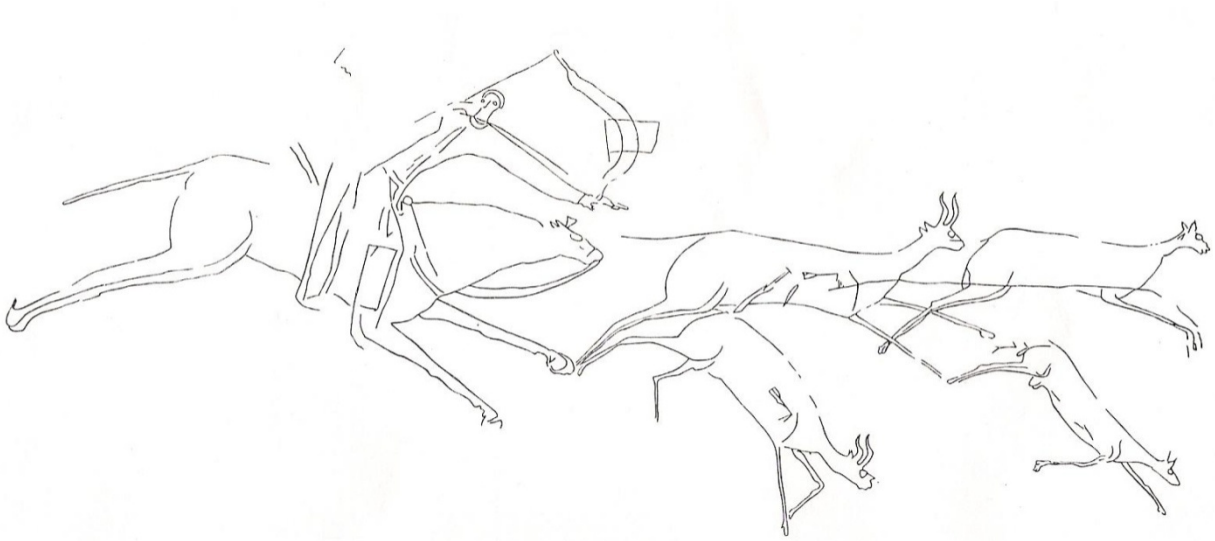
A detailed study on this painting already exists so it will not be discussed here, however it is important to draw attention on its remarkable similarity with the roughly contemporary Ardashir I relief at Firuzabad (3rd century)[32] and to the fact that it is considered the work of Persian occupiers and not the result of "oriental influences".

At Dura Europos were also discovered graffiti dated to the Sasanian occupation period[33] (fig. 3).

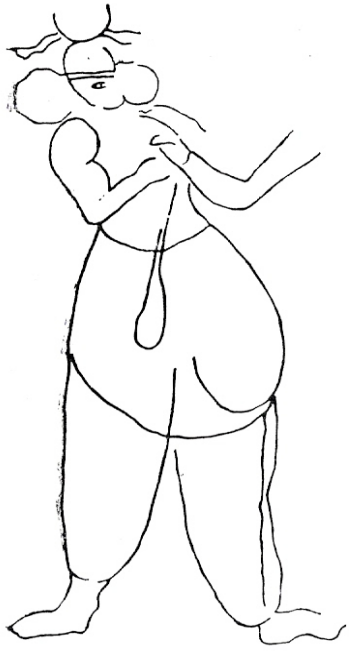
[32] Ghirshman (1962: figs. 163-64, 166-67); Goldman, Little (1980: 287). This point was stressed also by De Waele (2004: 349-50). Regarding the thopos of the "individual duel" fought by a Sasanian general it would be interesting to remember as Bahram Chobin during 6th century and Sambat Bagratuni in the beginning of 7th century decided the end of a battle (or of a war) against Central Asian people (most likely Turks) challenging the chief of their opponents in an individual duel. On individual duels in Panjakant mural paintings: Azarpay (1981: fig. 60).

[33] Goldman (1990: fig. 2); ibid. (1999: 42, fig. C.6). Anyway, strong Parthian stylistic formulae still exist in these drawing.

Other graffiti considered Sasanian appear (as already observed) at Hatra (fig. 4)



probably at the Bactrian site of Kara Tepe (southern Uzbekistan)[34] (fig. 5)



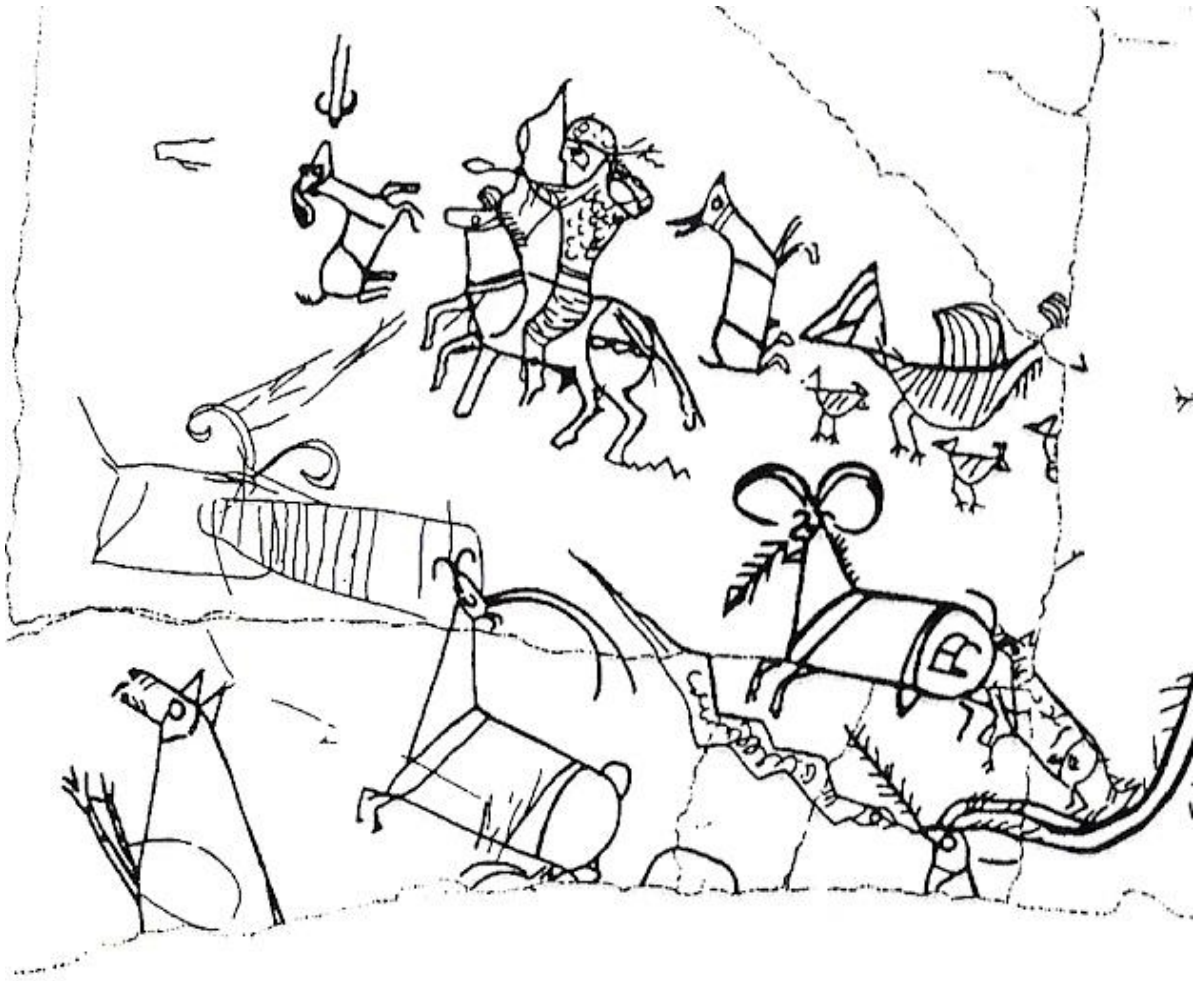
Lakh-Mazar (Khorasan)[35] (fig. 6)

[34] Goldman (1999: 38); Ставиский (1982: 39, fig. 11). The site is a Buddhist one.

and Bandyan[36] (fig. 7).

[35] Yamauchi (1996: 143-45, figs. 6.3.1-6.3.4); Mizbani, Salimi (2002). The lion from Lakh-mazar is depicted more realistically than the many representations of lion huntings on Sasanian metalwork or at the Sar Mashad rock relief: Harper, Meyers (1981: pls. 14, 25, 37); Trümpelmann (1975).

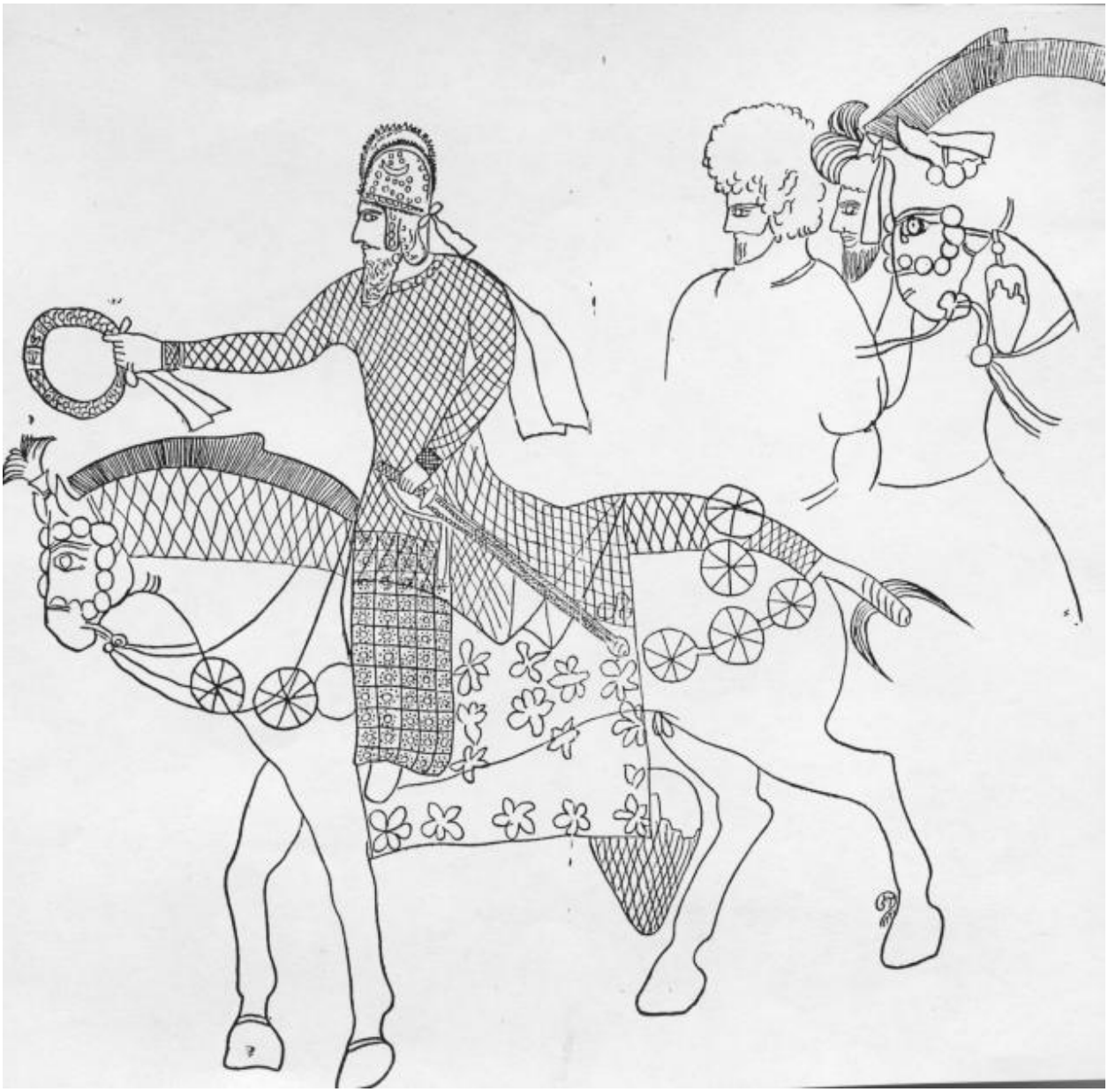
[36] Rahbar (2004: 12).



Also in such cases the main subjects appear to be the human figure together with animals and hunting scenes. In one graffito at Bandyan in a hunting scene the (royal?) archer is depicted wearing a coat of mail in the act of shooting an arrow in the direction of a horned animal which seems already dead. A second animal appear on the opposite side of the hunter in the same position as the first one. It is not clear if this is a local version of the Iranian iconographic formula already observed in the paintings and in the graffiti at Hatra (figs. 1, 4).

Other animals appear in the graffito at Bandyan and one ram (?) presents a brand on its thigh perhaps because this hunt happened in a royal *paradeisos* or royal park.

The most interesting graffiti are those at Persepolis most likely dated to the period immediately preceding the coronation of Ardashir I (224-241) as Emperor[37] (fig. 8).



Here the figures are represented in profile, standing or equestrian, all bearded and wearing garments and paraphernalia unquestionably adopted by official Sasanian art

[37] Herzfeld (1941: 308, figs. 401-402); Calmeyer (1976: figs. 3-4); Ramjou (2004); Callieri (2006).

such as the lattice decoration on the caftan and the circular ornament on the shoulders[38]. In two cases the king holds the beribboned ring, a symbol recurrent in Parthian and Sasanian art with a connection to the *xwarenah* or glory of Ahura Mazda (or another deity) bestowed on the Emperor or to the concept of contract between a sovereign and a god[39]. Floating ribbons – one of the peculiarities of Sasanian art[40] – appear tied to the crown and the shoes of the royal figures and to the horse legs as well. The harnesses of the horses present another element characteristic of the Sasanian period as do the so-called hanging tassels which adorn the animal mounted by the Persian Emperor.[41]

Among the works of art at Bishapur, in the province of Fars, there are the famous mosaics discovered by the French archaeologist Roman Ghirshman, who recognized a strong similarity with the contemporary Roman mosaics of the Syrian province.[42] Bishapur was founded by Shapur I around 260, possibly exploiting the numerous Roman slaves deported to Persia after the Sasanian victory over the Emperor Valerian (252-268) which happened not far from Edessa. It can be noted immediately that there is preference for figures depicted in a three-quarter view and in profile[43]. One of the main

[38] On a study of the Sasanian garments mostly obtained from sculpture, metalwork and post-Sasanian textiles, see: Kawami (1992); Goldman (1993); Scerrato (1994a); Goldman (1997).
[39] Tanabe (1984: 34-35); Kawami (1987: 41 note 251); von Gall (1990); Vanden Berghe (1988); Kaim (2009). This ornament has important links with the textile decoration in official representation of the king: Jeroussalimskaja (1993: 116); Domyo (1997: 19).
[40] Kuwayama (1976: 396-402); Bromberg (1983: 256-261); ibid. (1990).
[41] The detail was first noted by Tanabe (1980); *ibid*. (1990: 53; 1998: 98). The hypothesis of the Japanese scholar is supported by the presence of the same elements in a unique silver plate decorated with an enthronement scene, unquestionably linked to Sasanian royal kingship (its provenence is obscure). The two hanging tassels are applied to the extremities of a crescent on the top of the throne of the central royal figure surrounded by his entourage: *Sasanian Silver* (1967: cat. 12). Six elements resembling the same tassels appear also in a frieze at Naqsh-e Rostam, they are attached to an insigna supported by a page behind a riding royal character: Sarre (1922: pl. 83).
[42] Ghirshman (1962: 140-46). On the Roman-Dionysiac features of such mosaics, see von Gall (1971); Keall (1990: 288); Balty (1993); Balty (2006). At the Louvre Museum (where some of those mosaics are dispayed) it is reported also about decorative paintings (flowers) in the same hall where the mosaics where recovered. Very fragmentary traces of mosaics with a Greek inscription were discovered also at Susa: Ghirshman (1952: 9-10, fig. 11). Floor mosaics existed also at Ctesiphon - see: Monneret de Villard (1966: 279); Kröger (1993: 447) - and in western Persia: Balty, Briquel-Chatonnet (2000, *non vidi*). On an interesting description of a mosaic depicting Khosrow I fights against Byzantines: Shahbazi (2001: 342).
[43] Ghirshman (1956); ibid. (1962: 180-86).

characteristics of Sasanian royal representations, the floating ribbons, appears in the mosaic tied to the hair of a female harpist.

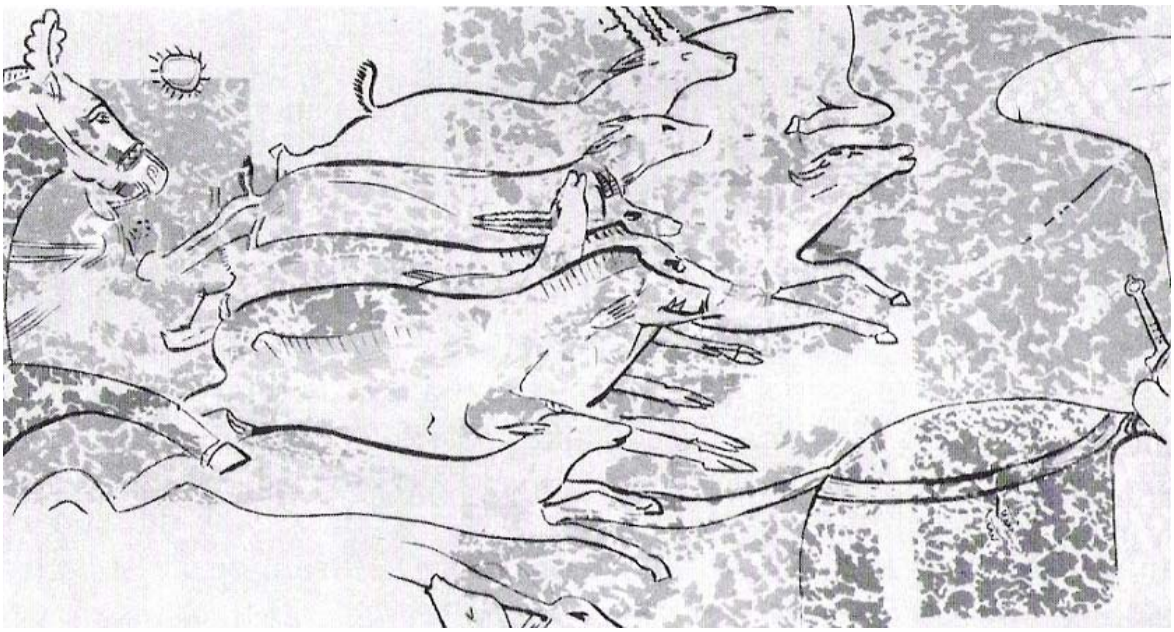
A large mosaic from Tell Khwaris (Iraq), formerly kept in the Archaeological Museum of Baghdad seems to be late Sasanian or early Islamic and it was argued that, possibly, it represents a Christian subject.[44] Unfortunately, few details had survived: it is possible only to recognize a stag in front of a tree and tulips on the ground, couples of peacocks and other birds along the frame and geometric design (fig. 9).

The recent discovery of important Sasanian mural paintings at Gor (Firuzabad, Fars) and few information about them by D. Huff caused a great sensation among

[44] Costa (1971); Hauser (2007: pl. 8). Some buildings in Iraq considered to be late Sasanian have in some cases painted decorations: Finster (1976: 90-91).

students of pre-Islamic Iranian art: a new aspect of Sasanian history of art will probably start after their publication. At present they are only partially known through some indistinct pictures in the Internet.[45]

In Persia proper, Sasanian paintings surviving in a not too fragmentary state of preservation are all dated to the 4th century. A fragmentary mural painting from Susa considered to be early Sasanian was recently proposed to be Parthian[46] (fig. 10).



It is possible to state that the only human figure (and his horse) partially preserved at Susa, in the act of shooting an arrow, is reproduced larger than the hunter behind

[45] http://www.chn.ir/news/?section=2&id=29609 (I owe to the kindness of Touraj Daryaee this web page). See also: http://www.cais-soas.com/News/2006/February2006/19-02.htm. During a recent workshop on Sogdiana organized by Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst on November 28th-29th 2007 in Berlin, Prof. Huff kindly informed me that the mural paintings present several people and one of them is bringing an animal like an offering (possibly dedicated to a divinity?). Although the ceramics found in the room of the paintings at Gor should be dated to the Islamic period, the paintings do not look Islamic at all and there are also some enigmatic architectonic elements difficult to identify and date.

[46] Ghirshman (1952: 11-12); ibid. (1962: 183, fig. 224); Boucharlat (1987: 358); De Waele (2004: 354). For the "Parthian hypothesis, see: Gasche (2002: 187).

him, alluding to a certain importance of the archer which is emphasized by his precious garments embellished with lattice decoration. Although the painting is in a poor condition, it does not seem that the rear part of the horse was adorned with the hanging tassels characteristic of the Sasanian Emperor, so an identification with a generic royal character fits better. A very interesting element of the mural at Susa is the disc resembling a naïve reproduction of the sun painted in front of the smaller horse on the left of the composition. In fact it is extremely similar to at least one of the round decorations that appear together with the zigzag band in the painting at Dura Europos[47] (fig. 2). It is not clear if the element has a symbolic meaning (maybe even astronomical-astrological) but, while in the Dura Europos mural it could easily be a decoration, its presence at Susa raises some doubts. Nevertheless, if the fragment from Susa is really a sample of Parthian art, the presence of such elements in that painting proves once more that the Sasanians were deeply indebted to the Parthian artists for their own artistic production.

Scarce fragments of mural paintings were recovered at Iwan-e Karkha (not far from Susa) in a very bad state of conservation.[48] In one fragment it is possible to see the final part of an object identified as a sheath and in another one a lattice decoration, possibly part of the garments of a noble figure.

The last Sasanian paintings dated to the 4th century (attributed to the reign of Shapur II) were recovered at Hajyabad, in Eastern Fars.[49] The paintings are badly damaged, but the archaeologists reconstructed the general composition of the panels of

[47] Goldman, Little (1980: 285, fig. 2). Two similar elements appears also besides the head of the king in a silver plate of the Pushkin Musem (Tchedine, Russia) possibly post-Sasanian and produced in the provinces external to Persian Empire: Harper, Mayers (1981: pl. 21).
[48] Ambrosetti (1961); Ghirshman (1962: 181); Gyselen, Gasche (1994: 34, pl. X); De Waele (2004: 355-58). For Ghirshman the paintings were executed according to the fresco technique.
[49] Azarnoush (1977: 172-73); ibid. (1994: 167-82, figs. 157-62, pls. XXVIII-XXXV); De Waele (2004: 358-65). During the excavations the archaeologists realized that there were other paintings. Such paintings result still unexcavated: Azarnoush (1994: 167).

a large battle scene, with frontal or in three-quarter view human busts inscribed in roundels, separated by vegetal or geometrical decorations[50] (fig. 11).

The paintings are executed according to the usual secco technique. While the rest of the battle scene is too fragmentary, an hypothesis for the disposition of the paintings with human busts can be proposed, even if the identification of the characters is not clear. M. Azarnoush – the excavator of the site – refused to identify the anthropomorphous figures as divine beings, preferring to discern, cautiously, the portraits of the lord of the Manor House and other important members of the Sasanian family, among whom is Hormizd II Kushanshah (c. 302-309).[51] It could be argued that this is in contrast with the precepts of Sasanian art concerning the frontal representations discussed above. The same chronology of the site of Hajyabad is based on the identification of some stucco busts with royal figures reproduced frontally

[50] Parallels with a decorative pattern particularly exploited in Persia and in Central Asia were rightly recognised by Azarnoush (1994: 174-75).
[51] The characters wear garments embellished with small roundels arranged in groups of three very spread in Sasanian fashion: Goldman (1993: figs. 22-28, 32).

portraits of Shapur II.[52] In the description of a very well preserved stucco bust, the final part of the diadem of the crown is defined as "a leaf-like decorative pattern, now mostly broken." Because of its fragmentary state it is not possible to say much on this decoration. However, it does not look so much as part of a diadem, resembling in another way the part of an element depicted behind the head of the bust, as for example a rayed halo.[53]

For the following period, the only traces of Sasanian secco painting come from Tepe Hissar-Damghan (5th-6th century)[54] and Ctesiphon (6th century).[55] The paintings from the two places are extremely damaged and it is possible to discern only a few details but it is clear that they represented human figures.

Recently a new Sasanian site dated to the 5th-7th century was excavated at Mele Hayram, in southern Turkmenistan. The archaeologists who investigated the site are convinced that it is a fire temple and on the southern and western wall of the room IV traces of mural paintings were found. Unfortunately a complete record of the pictorial

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[52] Azarnoush (1994: 102-5, 109-10, stuccoes catalogue nos. 17, 20, pl. VII); Catalogue Roma (2001: cat. 151). The busts are attributed to Shapur II because of the particular kind of crown considered by Azarnoush (1994: 181) characteristic for each Sasanian Emperor. Unfortunately, the validy of such a theory was criticized by several scholars: Harper, Meyers (1981: 65-66, 125, 138-39); Peck (1993: 413-15).

[53] Azarnoush (1994: 104). On early Islamic stuccoes from Chal Tarkhan-'Eshqabad representing a royal character reproduced frontally and with a rayed halo: Sarre (1922: pl. at p. 152); Erdmann (1943 reprint 1969: pl. 37); Ghirshman (1962: fig. 229); Thompson (1974: fig. 2); ibid. (1974b: pls. II, figs. 1-2, XX.I). Bivar (1998: 106-8, pls. XIV.c, XV.b) cautiously recognized in the lost paintings of the 38-meter Buddha niche at Bamyan the portraits of Shapur II and Bahram I Kushanshah, both represented - according to Sasanian artistic formulae - in three-quarter view and, curiously enough, with a halo behind their head. On other studies on these "royal figures", see: Tarzi (1977: 7, 11, pls. 9, 12); Tanabe (2004); Compareti (2008). This latter detail was studied extensively by K. Tanabe (1984: 42), in whose opinion "the disk-nimbus symbolizes the celestial world of the righteous dead or *fravashis* whom the Zoroastrians regarded as living eternally in the endless light of Ohrmuzd, *asar roshnin*". So the paintings at Bamyan (and, consequently, also the Hajyabad ones) should be considered subsequent to Shapur II's reign or contemporary but executed by artists not familiar with central Sasanian art even if the royal portraits are in three-quarter view. The royal figures as the big representation of Surya-Mithra on his chariot at Bamyan do not wear garments embellished with the typical decoration with pearl roundels (very diffused in Central Asia from the 6th century onwards), present in other paintings at Bamyan: Tarzi (1977: pls.D 57 155, D 58 156, D 59 157, A 5).

[54] Schmidt (1937: 336-38, figs. 174-75); Ambrosetti (1966); Adle (1993); Dyson (1997); De Waele (2004: 365-68). The technique is not reported but it seems most likely to be the same of the other Sasanian sites. The site could be post-Sasanian: Marshak (2002.a: 12).

[55] Schmidt (1934: 18); Morgenstern (1967: 1373); Reuther (1967: 532-33); Christensen (1971: 461); Kröger (1982: 88-89, pl. 29); ibid. (1993); Invernizzi (1997); Sims (2002: fig. 25); De Waele (2004: 368-70).

decorations does not exist yet but, according to the excavations reports, the subjects of the paintings would have been geometrical and vegetal designs while the so-called pearl roundel motif appears.[56]

According to V. Lukonin and B. Marshak the vase found at Merv (Turkmenistan) during the excavation of a Buddhist site is actually a specimen of (late) Sasanian painting showing a complete cycle of the life of a person who could be identified, possibly, as its owner[57]. It is interesting to note that the theme of the cycle also includes a religious aspect which is definitely Zoroastrian in character.

Even if the paintings reported in this list are very few and in many cases too fragmentary, some peculiarities proper of Sasanian pictorial art can be traced. Since the Persians were always depicted as being fond of hunting, the first thing to be noted is that the animals are normally represented in the act of the "flying gallop." In the representation of human figures the main characteristic of the face are the eyes, rather big and open wide, while the bodies are slim with the arms held tightly to the chest. The artists did not seem to search for naturalness in reproducing human subjects, in fact the figures are depicted with a certain stiffness, evidently fixed by precise rules observed, for example, also in Sasanian metalwork. This last consideration is in favor of the existence of a well established Sasanian pictorial school with a long tradition. In P. Harper's opinion, the particular treatment of drapery in a post-Sasanian silver-gilt plate kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, possibly produced in Tabaristan (the Caspian region of Iran), could be dependent on a painting tradition not yet investigated by scholars. The suggestion would be supported by the fact that such a style influenced later some Byzantine and Western paintings.[58] Stiffness confers solemnity to the scenes and allows a parallel with contemporary Byzantine art. Very interesting decorative

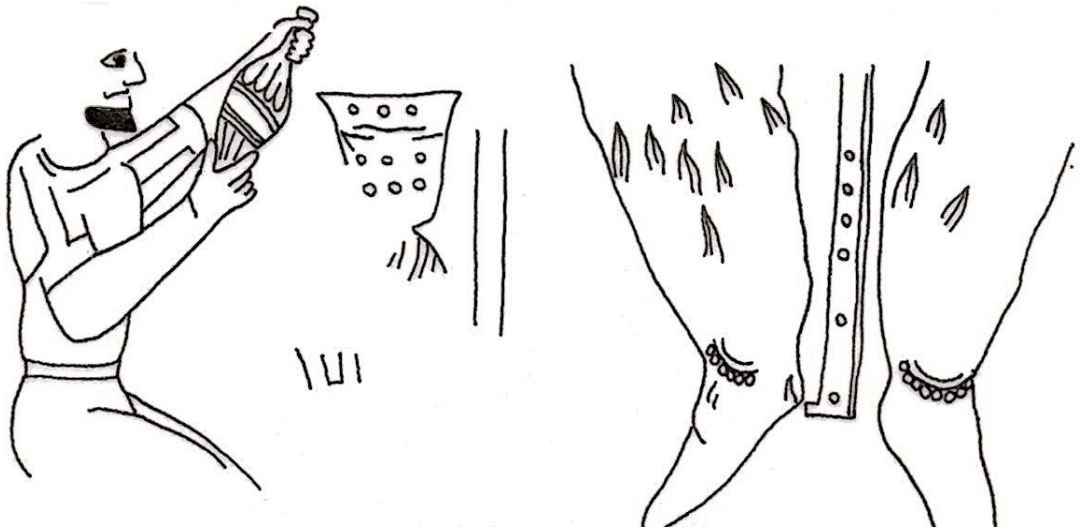
[56] Kaim (2002: 218).

[57] *Луконин* (1977: 219-21); Marshak (2002.a: 12). On a recent study on this vase: Manassero (2003). For a Sogdian attribution of that vase, see: Mode (2009).

[58] Harper (1972: 164).

elements borrowed from Sasanian art can be observed especially in Byzantine mosaics and paintings dated to the period between the 5th and 9th centuries.[59]

The characteristics just enlisted above can be observed in a unique fragmentary wall painting recovered at Paykand and reconstructed by the Russian archaeologists.[60] It is possible to recognize the figure of a kneeling bearded person with a bottle in his hands in front of the leg of a second figure with fur trousers (another peculiarity of Sasanian art observed for example in some metalwork) bigger in size who probably represents a divinity (fig. 12).



The style of this mural painting is definitely extraneous to Sogdian canons as observed at Afrasyab, Varakhsha, Panjakant and at the same site of Paykand. This fragment allows one to consider the existence of a second Sogdian school of painting

[59] Among the most interesting mosaics there are the specimens from Antioch (5th-6th century), see: Wilber (1937); Lavin (1963: 199-204, figs. 2, 7); A. Grabar (1971: 685-86, pl. VI. 2, VII. 1); ibid. (1980: 106, figs. 113, 115); Ghirshman (1962: figs. 405-6). See also the beribboned birds from the church of St. Demetrius at Nikopolis and St. Vitale at Ravenna: Kitzinger (1951: fig. 19); Bromberg (1983: 258). For the paintings, mostly from Cappadocian churches, see: Thierry (1970: 470, figs. 7-8, 12, 23; 1976: fig. 39, scheme 10); A. Grabar (1971: pl. XV, fig. 2); Bromberg (1983: 258). For a very interesting hypothesis on a Byzantine derivation for the hunt of Bahram V Gor, see: Fontana (2000: 17-18, note 7).

[60] Семенов (2001: 35); Семенов, Адыов (2006: fig. 2).

earlier than the one commonly known at the sites just mentioned, which is definitively linked or even derives from Sasanian models probably because of its vicinity to the Persian Empire.[61]

It would be possible to insist on the secular character of Sasanian painting in agreement with Ammianus Marcellinus. However, hints to the enigmatic religiosity of the ruling class are constant in Sasanian art and scholars, such as Bivar, even consider some hunting scenes – represented especially on metalwork – as a reference to esoteric Mithraism.[62]

Painted bowls with magic inscriptions were recovered in Mesopotamian sites dated to the period between 600 and 650. They are an example of popular belief and had an apotropaic role represented by the figure of the demon bound with ropes.[63]

Examples of secco paintings probably dated to the Sasanian period with religious scenes (apart the busts of Hajyabad considered not divine) appear at Kuh-e Khoja,[64] Ghulbyan[65] (Faryab Province, northwestern Afghanistan) and Dokhtar-e Noshervan[66]

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[61] Compareti (2006.a: fig. 20).

[62] Bivar (1995). On hunting as one of the main occupation of the ruling class under the Sasanians, see: Gignoux (1983). Religious representations appear intermingled with battle and hunting scenes also in the Bandyan stucco panels (5th century), which rendering is connected with pictorial art exactly as for the Taq-e Bostan friezes: Rahbar (1998: pls. III-X, figs. 5-10). On Taq-e Bostan and Sasanian pictorial art, see: Christensen (1971: 460-61); Morgenstern (1938-39 reprint 1967: 1373, the same author reports traces of pigment on the monument); Genito (1999: 382; 2001: 135); De Waele (2004: 371-72). In her study on Afrasyab paintings Silvi Antonini (1989: 130) observes as the water scene in these Sogdian paintings "is reminescent of the walls of the Great Grotto in Taq-e Bostan". Scarcia and Marshak agree on the uncertainty of the real religion professed by the Sasanian sovereigns: Scarcia (2000: 190, note 70).

[63] Franco (1978-79: 234, fig. 2); Harper, Skjærvø, Gorelick, Gwinnett (1992: 45, figs. 2-3); Simpson (2000: 59, pl. 31).

[64] Herzfeld (1941: pls. CI-CIV); Ghirshman (1962: 41-45, figs. 55-58); Kawami (1987, figs. 16, 23, 26-27). Herzfeld and Ghirshman attributed a religious significance to many scenes while Kawami was more coutious. The Kuh-e Khoja paintings - even if mostly redated to the Sasanian period - display unique characteristics regarded as the unrepeatable result of the encounter of Hellenistic, Iranian-Central Asian and even Buddhist elements: Colledge (1979: 149-50); Schlumberger (1970: 56-59); Downey (1985-87: 582-83); Schlumberger (1986.a: 1046); Kawami (1987a: 25). In this last author's opinion there were three styles in the painting decoration of the site, Buddhist, Hellenistic and Sasanian: Kawami (1987a: 25). At least one painted fragment is considered belonging to the Parthian period: Facenna (1981); Catalogue Roma (2001: cat. 140). On the chronology of the site, see: Kawami (1987a); ibid. (1987b: 153-54); Mousavi (1999); Ghanimati (2000:144-46). See also note 8 of the present article.

[65] Grenet, Lee, Pinder-Wilson (1980); Lee, Grenet (1998); Grenet (1999). The painting is dated to the 4th or early 5th century (Lee, Grenet 1998: 81). On new discoveries of possible pre-Islamic fragmentary paintings in Afghanistan, at the fortress of Chehel Burj, see: Lee (2006: 238-41).

(in Afghanistan as well), localities quite far from the core of the Persian Empire, where elements belonging unquestionably to the Sasanian repertoire (though not only) appear in local contexts and executed according to the style characteristic of every Central Asiatic region of Iranian culture.[67] An important detail common to every mural painting just mentioned is the presence of donor (or donors) in typical Iranian dress praying in front of the divinity. The donors wearing caftans and high boots can be observed almost everywhere in Central Asia and also in rare late Gandharan paintings.[68]

Finally, some remarks can be made about a supposed pre-Islamic tradition for illustrated manuscripts. In Sasanian art illustrated manuscripts should have occupied a prominent place but unfortunately no one of these celebrated volumes has been preserved. The Islamic sources reveal the existence of the portraits of the twenty-seven Sasanian sovereigns – everyone reproduced with his proper garments, crown and weapons – collected in a book observed by two Arabian authors around the 10th century. Mas'udi saw it in 915 at Istakhr, not far from Persepolis.[69] Around the middle of 10th century Istakhri described a manuscript practically identical observed in south Persia.[70]

In D. Talbot Rice's opinion, the same Istakhri, while recording a not well identified monument, was talking about the paintings now lost, that would have adorned the cave of Shapur I at Bishapur.[71] The book quoted by the two Arab authors probably served as a base for the Mojmal al-Tawarikh, a text composed in Persian in 1126 by an

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[66] Klimburg-Salter (1993: fig. 2). On Dokhtar-e Noshervan painting and Sogdian art see: Mode (1992); Marshak (1995/96: 309-10, note 5).

[67] On pre-Islamic Central Asian painting see the bibliography quoted by: Косолапов, Маршак (1999); Marshak (2002.a); Silvi Antonini (2003).

[68] Khan (2000); Kurita (2003: fig. 868); Khan, Mahmood-ul-Hasan (2004). The same scheme can be observed in some terracotta panels from the Kurita Collection which are considered to be 4th century Bactrian (and, most likely, non-Buddhist): Carter (1997). Donors do not appear in published Buddhist mural paintings from Tapa Sardar (Afghanistan): Silvi Antonini, Taddei (1981).

[69] Carra de Voux (1897: 150-51).

[70] Monneret de Villard (1923: 982); Arnold (1965: 63, 82); Dimand (1972: 18); Gray (1977: 14); Fontana (1997: 463); ead. (1998: 34).

[71] Talbot Rice (1946).

anonymous writer with the description of the costumes of the Sasanian Emperors surviving unfortunately without images.[72]

Most likely, the Sasanians promoted the translation of Greek and Indian works especially during the 5th-6th centuries. In particular, the Islamic sources relied on Pahlavi versions of the Pancatantra (possibly illustrated) and of an astrological text entitled Tankalusha embellished with illustrations copied from the original Greek.[73]

According to B. Marshak there is still another piece of evidence about the Sasanian component in the art of illustrated manuscript: this is a fragment of a Manichaean book recovered at Turfan by a German expedition in the beginning of the last century and now kept in Berlin. The style of this painting is clearly different than the other specimens of Manichaean miniatures recovered in Xinjiang because, according to the Russian scholar, its model was a Sasanian illustrated manuscript which is now lost.[74]

Another aspect of Sasanian miniature known through literary sources is represented by the Manichaean tradition of illustrated manuscripts. Mani himself is celebrated by Christian and Islamic authors as an exceptional painter, a fact that presupposes the diffusion of pictorial art in Persia during the early Sasanian period even if no Manichaean manuscript has survived in Persia proper.[75]

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[72] Mohl (1841: 258-68).

[73] Nallino (1922: 356-362); Борисов (1939). On the problems related to the Pahlavi versions of the Pancatantra: Raby (1987/88: 390-91); Raby (1991); De Blois (1991); Marshak (2002.a: 12).

[74] Marshak (2002.a: 12).

[75] Cumont (1913); Monneret de Villard (1923 translated in English and published in: *A Survey of Persian Art*, eds A. U. Pope and Ph. Ackerman, V, London, New York, 1938-39 reprint 1967: 1820-28); Arnold (1924: 14-23); Gray (1961: 15); Christensen (1971: 202-5); Piemontese (1995); Klimkeit (1998: 271-75); Sims (2002: 20-2). An Arabian source speaks of the violent persecution against the Manichaeans at the time of the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir (908-932) when many precious books were publically burnt and molten gold and silver cast from the fire: Gray (1961: 15). The unique specimens of Manichaean illustrated manuscripts and paintings were recovered in the beginning of 20th century during the first European explorations in the Tarim Basin (Eastern Turkestan, nowadays Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China), see: Cumont (1913); Monneret de Villard (1923); Von Le Coq (1973); Catalogue New York (1982: 174-82); Chao (1996); Klimkeit (1998: 275-82); Gulácsi (2001). On the existence of a Sogdian miniature school deduced from details in mural paintings from Panjakant, see: Marshak (1999: 133-34).

A unique fragment of an illustrated manuscript on paper cautiously dated to the 9th century has been defined "the link of the pre-Islamic Iranian paintings with the Muslim world of Persian miniatures"[76] (fig. 13).

The scene seems to depict a bearded man teaching two younger disciples under a tree. The spiraliform folders on the long tunics worn by the three figures remind one of the technique already observed depicting something similar on the garment of a figure on a piece of metalwork considered by Harper to come from Tabaristan. The miniature probably represents exactly what the American scholar had already hypothetically

[76] Porter (1997: 10). The figure was published also by: Shishkina, Pavchinskaja (1992: 26). The language of the manuscript is Arabic.

conjectured.[77] Considering its chronology and its clear connection with the Central Asian Manichaean illustrated manuscripts this fragment could hardly be considered a work produced in Persia, however it is still the only evidence which can give an idea of pre-Islamic miniatures on Iranian soil.

The Post-Sasanian Period

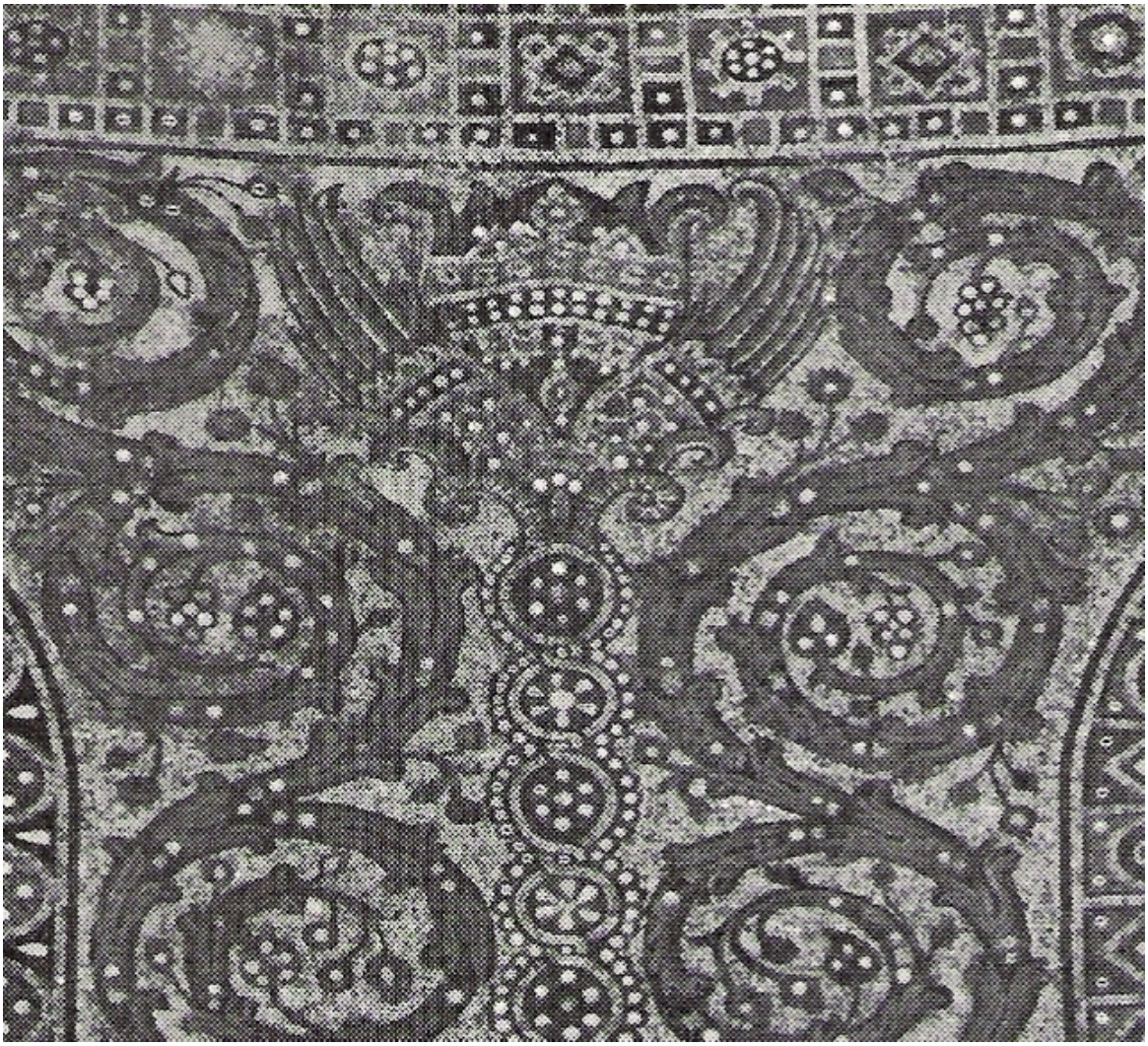
Apart from illustrated manuscripts an important Sasanian component can be observed in Islamic mural painting, especially in the works of art of the Umayyads (661-750) – still influenced by Hellenistic elements – and the Abbasids (750-1258), which were more Iranized.[78]

One of the first examples of direct Sasanian influence on early Islamic art is given by the mosaics in the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem, c. 692.[79] Here spread wings – a typical symbol of Sasanian kingship – are depicted together with vegetal elements (fig. 14).

[77] See note 58 of the present article.

[78] Ettinghausen (1962: 18, 20, 26, 29-30, 34-35, 42-43, 61, 63, 92, 147, 160-161, 170, 185); Arnold (1965: 62-65, 82); Monneret de Villard (1966: 278-86); Dimand (1972: 61-63); Gray (1979: 313-16); Grube (1989: 200); Bloom (1991); Grube (1994: 418); O. Grabar (1997: 808); Baer (1999); Fontana (2001); ead. (2002: 17, 23, 37-38, 76); Sims (2002: 23-30). For a specific study on Sasanian elements in Islamic art treated more generally, see: Rosen-Ayalon (1984). On the Sogdian influence on Islamic painting, see: Azarpay (1981: 171-80); Raby (1987/88); O. Grabar (1997: 807). It is highly probable that an important pictorial tradition existed among the Arabs before Islam exactly as for other artistic expressions: Monneret de Villard (1966: 255, 257); King (2004). Specifically on pre-Islamic Arab paintings, there are the fragments from the palace B at Shabwa, Hadramawt (nowadays north-western Yemen), to testify the presence of a pictorial tradition which intermingled Hellenistic and local elements in South Arabia, see: Audouin (1991: figs. 7-9). Other fragmentary paintings from present day Saudi Arabia were found at Qaryat al-Faw: Nicolle (2005: 14). The chronology of the paintings is still disputed but it could be fixed among 3rd and 5th centuries. On some traces of early Islamic pictorial decoration from Kufa (Iraq): Fontana (2002: 17-18, fig. 1).

[79] Ettinghausen (1962: figs. at pp. 18, 21, 23); Monneret de Villard (1966: 286-87); Gautier-van Berchem (1979: 278-81, 286-96); Ettinghausen Grabar (1987: fig. 7); O. Grabar (1989: 67-81, figs. 29-30); Talbot Rice (1991: figs. 3-5).



The motif of the spread wings continued to be used as a favorite decorative element also in later monuments in the Holy Land as in the mosaics of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem.[80]

In the paintings at Qusayr 'Amra (Jordan, second quarter of 8th century) the Sasanian Emperor is represented together with the other five "kings defeated by Islam" although not too realistically. Four of the kings can be recognized because of inscriptions in

[80] Hunt (2000: 253-55, fig. 9). According to a legend spread in the Christian world, during the invasion of Palestine by Khosrow II (614), the Persians spared the Church of the Nativity because they recognized in its mosaics the representation of the Magi Kings: Harvey, Lethaby, Dalton, Cruso, Headlan (1910: 19-20). I heard a very similar story about the figure of a (later, possibly Safavid) "Persian king" represented on the Armenian Church of Ečmjacin that prevented its destruction.

Greek and Arabic above their heads. The painter (or the painters) had probably some idea of Sasanian symbols of kingship as the spread wings on the crown of the Persian royal figure which are reproduced too simply[81] (fig. 15).

The main source of inspiration for such mural paintings seems to be Hellenistic art and it is not excluded that Byzantine painters worked on them.[82] In any case, as already observed above, the only literary sources for this kind of representation can be found in the works of Muslim authors who were describing the kingdoms in relationship with Sasanian Iran.[83]

[81] The spread wings on the crown of the Sasanian Emperor at Qusayr 'Amra did not appear in the pictures of the painting but only in the reproductions by A. L. Mielich: Fontana (2002: fig. 3b). On the spread wings in Sasanian art see now: Compareti (2009.a); Fontana (forthcoming). Sasanian representatives have been reproduced in Chinese art too: they appear together with an inscription which identifies them. The representation of a "man from Persia" appears in a painting on silk dated to 5th century but his garments and headgear are probably an invention of the artist: Compareti (2003: 202).

[82] O. Grabar (1954); Ettinghausen (1962: fig. at p. 31, appendix figs. 1-4); Arnold (1965: 57); Almagro, Caballero, Zozaya, Almagro (1975); Blazquez (1981); O. Grabar (1989: 63-67, figs. 25-26); Sourdel-Thomine, Spuler (1990: figs. 32-34, 36-37, pls. VI, VIII-X); Fontana (2002: 22-25); Fowden (2004). Creswell (1979a: 408) criticized the interpretation by O. Grabar.

[83] See note 27 of the present article.

Not all the scholars agree on the interpretation of that specific subject with the neighboring kings who were defeated by Islam and some prefer to consider them as the brothers of the Umayyad Caliph.[84] As noted above, Islamic literary sources about mural paintings of the time of Khosrow II mention explicitly that neighboring sovereigns were represented as subjects of the Sasanian king and an inscription at Qusayr 'Amra would identify one of the six kings with Roderic, the last Visigot ruler of Spain who was defeated by the Umayyads in 711-712. If at least one king represents a historical character, then also for the other five it could be supposed the same. Unfortunately, the other inscriptions do not help to identify exactly those royal characters who are called Kisra (that is to say Khosrow or "Sasanian Emperor" in general), Kaesar (Byzantine Emperor) and Negus (the sovereign of Abyssinia). It was noted that, if the Persian king at Qusayr 'Amra represents a real figure, then he should be considered Yazdigard III (632-651) or his son Peroz who lived exiled in China at the court of the Tang Emperor Gaozong (650-683).[85]

A very interesting identification for the six figures at Qusayr 'Amra was proposed by M. Di Branco. Starting from the word "Muqawqis" written in kuphic style on the robe of the "Byzantine Emperor," he demonstrates that the painting had at least two phases: during the second one, some names have been added like Kaesar and, most likely, Roderic. The presence of the Muqawqis (the patriarch of Alexandria) would point to the other figures as the relevant people addressed with an embassy by the Prophet Muhammad: not only the Muqawqis but also the Byzantine Emperor, the Sasanian Shahanshah, the Negus, the Ghassanid sovereign and the Prince of Yamamah.[86]

[84] Blazquez (1981: 163-168).
[85] Almagro, Caballero, Zozaya, Almagro (1975: p. 57, pl. XVII.a).
[86] Di Branco (2007).

An attempt to recognize one of the foreign ambassadors in the Sogdian painting of the western wall at Afrasyab (ancient Samarkand) with Yazdigard III has been already proposed by M. Mode (fig. 16).[87]

He based such an identification on the comparison between that figure and the king in the reliefs of the boar hunt at Taq-e Bostan: in fact, they have similar faces and headgear (not crown) and their garments are embellished with so-called *Simurgh* motifs although in the Sogdian inscriptions which can be observed in the same scene at Afrasyab there is no mention at all of any Sasanian king. However it must be said that

[87] Mode (1993: 59-75). The hypothesis by Mode was accepted uncritically by: Fowden (2004: 284).

Taq-e Bostan has been attributed to Khosrow II (590-628) or Ardashir III (630)[88] but never before to Yazdigard III although it could be considered that a kind of common iconography existed for all the Sasanian sovereigns, especially in the last part of that dynasty.

Recent studies demonstrated that also the Sogdians had very clearly in mind such a concept of royal exaltation as it can be observed in the paintings of the so-called "Hall of the Ambassadors" at Afrasyab, dated around 660. At Afrasyab almost every wall was dedicated to a different land: China was represented on the northern wall, India (and, possibly, the Turks) on the eastern one while the western and southern walls were reserved to festivities celebrated in Samarkand, most likely to be identified with the local New Year (*Nawruz*). It is worth observing that the sovereigns in the painting are represented bigger than normal people and, so, it is not possible to explain why the figure identified by Mode as Yazdigard III is so small. Most likely, also the Chinese and the Indians on the northern and eastern walls are celebrating their own festivities with a search for synchronization with the Samarkand *Nawruz*.[89]

As F. Grenet has recently observed, the "Hall of the Ambassadors" cycle should be considered the work of professional astrologers[90]. The astrological-astronomical element at Qusayr 'Amra is represented by a zodiac cycle painted on a dome of the building and not by specific gestures or attitude of those kings. It is very likely that at Qusayr 'Amra too were active professional astrologers although it is impossible to connect the six kings with that zodiac since the two paintings appear on different walls.

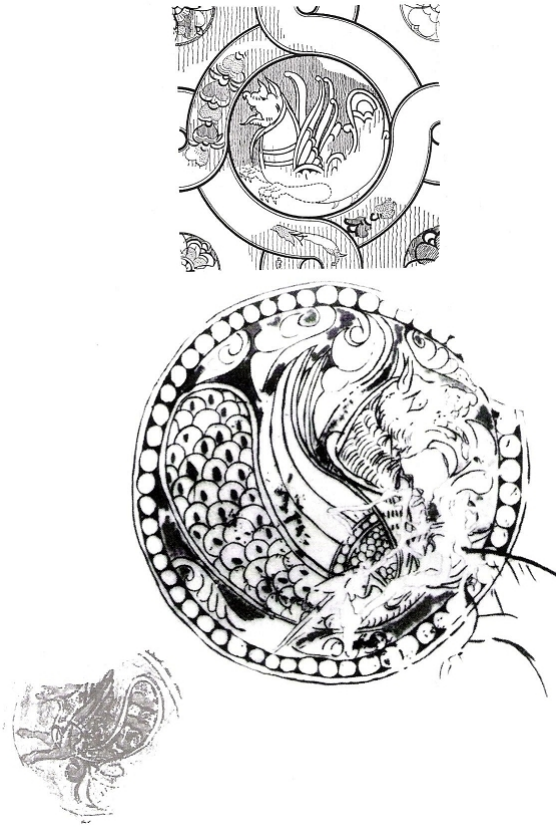
There are other elements at Afrasyab borrowed from late Sasanian art such as the so-called *Simurgh* on the garments of a foreign envoy considered above. Among the most debated late Sasanian symbols of kingship the so-called *Simurgh* is a very

[88] Tanabe (2006).

[89] Compareti, Cristoforetti (2005); Compareti (2006.b); ibid. (2006-2007); ibid. (2007); ibid. (2009.b). M. Mode did not accept such an identification and exposed his conclusion in a recent article: Mode (2006).

[90] Grenet (2006: 49).

representative one. This is a winged creature with the face and the forelegs of a dog, paws of a lion and a long tail which resemble that of a peacock or a fish. Even if some students of Iranian culture have proposed identifying this monstrous creature with a manifestation of the royal glory,[91] it is interesting to observe that the so-called *Simurgh* was accepted and represented often in early Umayyad art and coinage.[92] Single representations of so-called *Simurgh* within circular frames (often pearled) were recovered at Qasr al Hayr al Gharbi (Syria, first half of 8th century), at Qasr al Hallabat (Jordan, first half of 8th century) and at Khirbat al-Mafjar (Palestine, second quarter of 8th century)[93] (fig. 17).



[91] Bausani (1978); Marshak (2002.b: 37); Compareti (2006.c).
[92] Treadwell (2008: 377, fig. 8).
[93] Hamilton (1959: figs. 251-54); Ettinghausen (1962: fig. at pp. 35, 37, 39); ibid. (1972: 17-65); Schlumberger (1986b: 14-16, pls. 34-38, 40.b); Sourdel-Thomine, Spuler (1990: pls. XII-XIII); Fontana (2002: 27-34, tav. 4).

At the same sites many other decorative elements and subjects clearly appear to have been borrowed from Sasanian art because they were highly esteemed by the Umayyad ruling class. In another painting which embellished the pavement at Qasr al Hayr al Gharbi, for example, the figure of the animal hunted by the archer is reproduced below his horse (fig. 18) according to a very well known Sasanian formula.

The same position of the archer riding the horse reminds one of many Sasanian silver dishes while the floating ribbons attached to his body are clearly rooted in Sasanian official art. Above the hunting scene there are two musicians under arches exactly as it can be observed in Sasanian metalwork. The association of hunt and banquet scenes is possibly an allusion to the funerary sphere although there are not many parallels in Sasanian art.[94] A second painting was found together with the one just observed although its characteristics seem to be a mixture of Hellenistic and Iranian

[94] Compareti (2007: 20).

features. In fact, the pearl roundel containing the bust of a female figure is definitely borrowed from Persia but the subjects inside and outside the circular frame belong to the pagan traditions of the hellenized east (fig. 19).

Other painted pearl roundels embellished the buildings of the Abbasid period at Samarra (Iraq, end of the 9th century)[95] according to a taste which is definitely Iranian (also Hellenistic) in derivation but close to Central Asian specimens. This observation appears very clearly in the representation of human faces and in the attitudes of the figures who are depicted in the act of hunting and dancing (fig. 20).

[95] Herzfeld (1927); Ettinghausen (1962: appendix figs. 5-6); Otto-Dorn (1964: 98-114); Esin (1973/74: 71-88); Creswell (1979b: 242-43); Ettinghausen, Grabar (1987: fig. 107); Sourdel-Thomine, Spuler (1990: figs. 126, 128, pls. XXII-XXIII); Fontana (2002: 37-39).

Very similar elements survived in pictorial art (and not only) for many centuries after the fall of the Sasanians, and their effects were perceived even out of the sphere of Islamic dominion, as far as in Norman Sicily in the decoration of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo and the Cefalù Cathedral (both dated around 1140)[96] and a series of so-called *Simurgh* can be observed in the Armenian Church of St. Grigor of Tigran Honenc' (1215), now in Eastern Turkey (Vilayet of Kars).[97]

The winged creature transporting a woman in the Cappella Palatina was a subject known in Persian art and represented at least on one enigmatic Sasanian silver dish where the monster is a giant bird with big pointed ears. Most likely, the origin of the scene in the Sasanian metalwork can be traced back to Indian art[98] although V. Lukonin had proposed to identify it as a representation of the equinox: the two naked figures in the lower part of the scene are holding a bow and an axe which are respectively allegories for the sun and the moon, that is to say, day and night[99]. Its meaning should

[96] Monneret de Villard (1950); Ettinghausen (1962: figs. at pp. 45-46, 48-49); Scerrato (1985: 359-398); Gelfer-Jørgensen (1986); Grube (1994); Scerrato (1994b); D'Erme (1995).
[97] Cuneo (1988: 658-59); Donabédian, Thierry (1989: fig. 384); Schippmann (1993: fig. 132).
[98] Azarpay (1995).
[99] Луконин (1977: 95). See also: Marshak (1998: 88).

then be searched within the sphere of Sasanian culture. As very recent investigations are trying to demonstrate, it appears more and more evident that the astrological element was highly esteemed by the Sasanians exactly as in all the other peoples in contact with them. So it should not come as a surprise if old theories about Iranian culture which were originally considered not too convincing will be reevaluated in the future. For the moment it would be enough to suggest that even an identification of the giant bird of the Sasanian dish with the concept of time within the frame of Zurvanism could be a possible alternative to the Indian hypothesis.

In Persia, the first paintings (both wall-paintings and ceramics) dated to the Islamic period were recovered at Nishapur, at the time, capital of the Samanid Emirate (875-1005).[100] Paintings dated to the Seljukid period (1037-1194) are known from central Persia and Anatolia[101] again according to stylistic tradition deeply rooted in Central Asian art but with many elements borrowed from Sasanian Iran. The same observation can be advanced for western Central Asia as in the paintings of Lashkari Bazar (Afghanistan) dated to 11th century (Ghaznavid period, 962-1186)[102]. According to Islamic literary sources, numerous illustrated manuscripts existed in Persia during the Seljukid domination but they were mostly lost and the few specimens which have survived are just a minimal part and very hardly datable.[103]

Islamic illustrated manuscripts belong to a different tradition although several details could be considered a borrowing from pre-Islamic period. Too many specimens are known to be considered here although at least two frontispieces recently

[100] Wilkinson (s. d. 1973); Grube (1980: 23, fig. 2); Wilkinson (1986); Fontana (2002: 77-83); Sims (2002: 24-40). During the visit at the site of Paykand in Autumn 2002 and 2003 by the present writer, some painted structure dated to the Samanid period had been excavated but unfortunately no particular decoration survived.

[101] Grube (1980: 24-25, fig. 3); Grube (1989: pls. 4, 6); Fontana (2002: 88-91, 105-7); Sims (2002: 26-40).

[102] Schlumberger (1952); ibid. (1978); Otto-Dorn (1964: colour pls. At pp. 139, 141); Fontana (2002: 84-86). On other Islamic paintings at Samarkand dated to the Qarakhanid period (12th-13th century) see: Karev (2003); ibid. (2005).

[103] Sims (2002: 32).

reconsidered deserve particular attention. They are part of the Miscellany Collection H. 2125 of Topkapi Saray Museum (Istanbul) and share several elements with the paintings of the western and southern wall of the so-called "Hall of the Ambassadors" at Afrasyab. In fact, not only the representation of the parade and royal banquet in the two frontispieces remind us of the Sogdian paintings at Afrasyab but also the theme itself of an important festivity inherited by the Turkish and Mongol invaders directly from traditions rooted in Central Asian pre-Islamic culture.[104] The "Buddhist background" recognized in these two miniatures by E. Esin approximately thirty years ago[105] actually denotes local features, most likely Sogdian ones or, in any case, strong Iranian peculiarities.

Conclusion

All the paintings dated to the post-Sasanian period which were just mentioned display Iranian elements borrowed from Sasanian and Central Asian artistic traditions readapted according to the taste of the different local artists. Sasanian features were very popular among Muslim painters who continued to reproduce subjects rooted in pre-Islamic Iranian culture. However, while the Central Asian (particularly Sogdian) component has been studied for a long period, covering a great amount of material, for the Sasanian one it is not yet possible to say much. A new field of investigation is given by the study of the 7th century paintings at Afrasyab and especially the astronomical-astrological features of the scenes depicted there. Unfortunately, it is not yet possible to say how important the Sasanian borrowings were in those Sogdian paintings although the excavations of several bullae from the fortress Kafir Kala (not far from Samarkand), covering a long span of time, are showing in many cases iconographical formulae

[104] Compareti (forthcoming).
[105] Esin (1977).

typical of Sasanian official art (and Pahlavi inscriptions too).[106] It is extremely difficult to decide a chronology for those bullae and, so, to know if such formulae have been borrowed from Sasanian art or arrived together with Persian immigrants who escaped the Arab advance or even arrived with the Arabs who were great admirers of Sasanian culture and absolutely un-iconoclastic.

In a few words, those students of Sasanian art whose interests focus on paintings are still obliged to rely mainly on post-Sasanian production, a fact destined to change if the renewed interest in modern Iran for pre-Islamic archaeology will allow the discovery of new instructive relics exactly as has happened during the excavations in Gor.

Captions for the figures

Fig. 1: Hatra, Parthian mural painting of the building A, west wall (Venco Ricciardi 1996: fig. 6).
Fig. 2: Dura Europos, House of the Sasanian Battle Mural (Goldman, Little 1980: fig. 7).
Fig. 3: Dura Europos, Sasanian (?) graffito (Goldman 1999: fig. 7).
Fig. 4: Hatra, Parthian graffito (Venco Ricciardi, 1998: fig. 7).
Fig. 5: Kara-tepe, drawing of a "Sasanian visitor" (Ставискии 1982: fig. 11).
Fig. 6: Lakh-mazar, Sasanian (?) graffito (Yamauchi, 1996: 6.3.4).
Fig. 7: Bandyan, Sasanian graffito (detail after Rahbar, 2004: fig. 8).
Fig. 8: Persepolis, Sasanian graffito of north wall of the "harem" (Calmeyer 1976: fig. 3).
Fig. 9: Tell Khwaris, Sasanian (?) mosaic (Costa 1971: pl. XXXV).
Fig. 10: Susa, mural painting possibly late-Parthian (Ghirshaman 1982: fig. 224).
Fig. 11: Hajyabad, Sasanian mural painting (reproduction after Azarnoush 1994: pl. XXXV).
Fig. 12: Paykand, "western Sogdian" mural painting (reproduction after Семенов, 2001: fig. At p. 35).
Fig. 13: fragment of an illustrated manuscript on paper, Central Asia (?) private collection (reproduction after Porter, 1997: fig. at p. 10).
Fig. 14: Dome of the Rock, detail of the mosaic, intermediate octagon, inner face (O. Grabar, 1989: fig. 29).
Fig. 15: Qusayr 'Amra, Umayyad mural painting (detail after Fontana, 2002: fig. 3b).
Fig. 16: Afrasyab, detail of the painting on the western wall of the so-called "Hall of the Ambassadors" (Альбаум 1975: fig. 4).
Fig. 17: different kinds of Umayyad *Simurgh* from Qasr al Hayr al Gharbi, Qasr al Hallabat and Khirbat al-Mafjar (reproduction after Fontana, 2002: fig. 9c, 11c, tav. 4).
Fig. 18: Qasr al Hayr al Gharbi, Umayyad mural painting (detail after Fontana, 2002: pl. 8).
Fig. 19: Qasr al Hayr al Gharbi, Umayyad mural painting (detail after Fontana, 2002: pl. 9).

[106] Cazzoli, Cereti (2005).

Fig. 20: Samarra, Abbasid painting from the Ghawsaq palace (Otto Dorn, 1964: fig. 31).

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