ART IN IRAN V. SASANIAN ART
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Published: December 15, 1986
Last Updated: March 7, 2013

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ART IN IRAN, History of

v. Sasanian

The art of the ancient Near East during the four centuries of Sasanian rule is richly documented. There are major remains of many different types: monumental rock reliefs, silver vessels, stucco architectural decoration, and seals. Objects in other media are less numerous but still sufficient to give a varied impression of the art of the period: textiles, wall paintings, floor mosaics, glass, and pottery. Nonetheless, the development of Sasanian art remains unclear because reliable criteria for dating (inscriptional, numismatic, and archeological) are rarely available. The original provenance of the objects is often unknown. While the dynastic rock reliefs are in situ and other architectural decoration was found during the course of scientific archeological excavations, a wider variety of works of art is without a meaningful archeological context. Included in this class are the silver vessels, the seals, and nearly all examples of the minor arts. There has never been a comprehensive excavation of a Sasanian site, revealing an extensive series of structures dating from one period or, alternately, establishing an unbroken sequence over a long time span. Undoubtedly the most significant contributions to the study of Sasanian art will come with the future archeological exploration of Sasanian cities and buildings.

Rock reliefs. Of the major remains, the dynastic rock reliefs are unquestionably the most important. In addition to illustrating the stylistic and chronological

development of one branch of Sasanian art, they offer important evidence concerning the nature of the early Sasanian state, society, and religion. The majority of the reliefs have representations of Sasanian kings, identifiable through the form of their crowns. The series begins with the first ruler, Ardašīr I (226-41), and continues with few exceptions through the reigns of his successors until Šāpūr II (309-79). There are no reliefs that can be attributed with certainty to Šāpūr II (Ghirshman, 1971, pp. 79-88; Lukonin, 1969, p. 193) but two, at Ṭāq-e Bostān, were commissioned by his successors Ardašīr II (379-83) and Šāpūr III (383 88) (Fukai and Horiuchi, 1972, pls. 64-92). After the fourth century there is an interruption in the sequence, and the final carvings, in a rock cut arched enclosure at Ṭāq-e Bostān, are dateable, in all probability, to the reign of Ḵosrow II (591-628) (Fukai and Horiuchi, 1969, pls. 4-102; idem, 1972, pls. 1-62).

Changes in the designs and in the styles of carving occur on the rock reliefs. In part, these changes are due to the passage of time but another important factor is the geographical location of the monuments. Although most of the reliefs are in Fārs in southern Iran, there are notable examples elsewhere—at Ṭāq-e Bostān in central Iran, at Salmās in Azarbaijan (Hinz, 1965, pp. 148-60), and at Ray (Herzfeld, 1938, p. 135, fig. 18), south of the modern city of Tehran. The style and appearance of the late 4th century reliefs at Ṭāq-e Bostān is strikingly different from those of the 3rd and early 4th century in Fārs in the south. This may be explained by the passage of almost half a century, but it is probably also the result of the geographical separation of the two groups of monuments. Within Fārs, the reliefs are grouped around a number of centers: 1) Fīrūzābād, 2) Naqš-e Rostam, Naqš-e Rajab, Barm-e Delak, 3) Dārābgerd, 4) Bīšāpūr, Naqš-e Bahrām, Tang-e Qandīl, Gūyom, and Sar Mašhad. The distance between these centers is sufficient to suggest that even within the southern region different groups of craftsmen may have worked at the various locations. At Bīšāpūr, the presence of foreign artisans, transported as prisoners of war by Šāpūr I from the West, is historically documented (Gagé, 1964, p. 287), and their activity is apparent in the architecture of the royal city. The unusual design of some of the victory reliefs of Šāpūr I in the neighboring river gorge is undoubtedly also the result of the presence of captive Syrian workers.

The formal development of the dynastic rock reliefs was governed by the nature of the monuments. These are proclamatory works of art, expressions of political, social, and religious concepts. As part of an official state art, the

reliefs are conservative in form and conventional in design. They are slow to reflect changes in taste and fashion and do not necessarily illustrate contemporary styles of dress or appearance. This is evident in the representations of clothing, jewelry, and weapons (Trousdale, 1975, p. 95).

The significance of the reliefs is usually clear. Some are victory monuments and record historical events, but the purpose of the majority is the glorification of the dynasty, as represented by the monarch, and of the religion, in the form of the divinity who invests the ruler with kingship. The reliefs clearly demonstrate the close relationship between secular and religious power at the beginning of the period.

The monuments of Ardašīr I depict two subjects: the historical defeat of the last Arsacid ruler and the granting of kingship to Ardašīr by the god Ohrmazd (Herrmann, 1969, pp. 65-74). The latest relief of Ardašīr I at Naqš-e Rostam illustrates this last theme and becomes one of the standard types throughout the reigns of successive rulers. Two equestrian figures confront each other, their horses standing on the bodies of dead enemies. One horseman is the king, Ardašīr, under whose horse is the defeated Arsacid monarch, Ardavān. The other horseman, bestowing upon Ardašīr the ring of royal authority, is the god Ohrmazd. His enemy, the Evil Spirit (Ahriman), lies beneath the horse's hooves; around the demon's head is a diadem of reptiles, and his legs are in the form of two serpents, a detail first observed by H. von Gall. The artisans have arranged the full sculptural forms in a well defined and balanced composition, the culmination of a long development in the course of Ardašīr's reign from low flat relief (Fīrūzābād) and crowded scenes (Naqš-e Rajab) to a clearly composed and sculptural presentation of the subject matter.

The same type of scene is represented on the reliefs of two later Sasanian kings, Ardašīr's son Šāpūr I (Herrmann, 1969, pp. 75-83), and Bahrām I (273 76), his successor (Ghirshman, 1971, pp. 76-77). Šāpūr also introduces a new series of victory monuments. They are unrelated in form to the earlier battle scene, executed during the reign of Ardašīr at Fīrūzābād, in which three pairs of contestants are depicted in a horizontal file, one behind the other. The theme of the victory scenes of Šāpūr I is the capture of the Roman emperor Valerian and the defeat of two other Roman armies. Considerable discussion has centered on the identities of the chief prisoners, represented fallen, kneeling, and standing. The generalized portrayal of the human features prevents the recognition of specific individuals although it is probable that Gordian III, Valerian, and Philip the Arab are intended (MacDermot, 1954, pp.

76-80; Ghirshman, 1971, pp. 163-72; Mackintosh, 1973, pp. 181-203).

As sculptures, the figures on the reliefs of Šāpūr I demonstrate the full modeling of the latest works carved during the reign of Ardašīr I. However, a sense of movement and rich decoration are introduced by the exaggerated curvilinear folds of the drapery and the fluttering wind blown ribbons of the royal dress.

The rock reliefs from the reign of Bahrām II (276 93) reveal new trends in the social structure of the Sasanian state. A few of the sculptures represent persons other than the king of kings. The priest Kartīr added his image and his inscriptions to already existing royal rock reliefs and to the rock faces beside these reliefs. Two sculptures, at Barm-e Delak and Tang-e Qandīl, show a female with a male who wears the cap of a prince or noble but not a royal crown. The identity of the persons in these two carvings is disputed, and it has been suggested that the males on the reliefs are royal figures who do not wear the standard Sasanian crown (Hinz, 1969, pp. 224-28; idem, 1973, pp. 201ff; Frye, 1974, pp. 188-90; Herrmann, 1977 and 1983).

The increasing power of the high nobility and the establishment of a priestly hierarchy under the leadership of Kartīr during the reign of Bahrām II are recorded in historical sources (Gagé, 1964, pp. 317-28). The reliefs described above may illustrate the rise to power of these classes of society. Kartīr and others of high rank who had previously been excluded from commissioning such dynastic monuments apparently achieved sufficient status and authority to assume this prerogative under Bahrām II and possibly during the short period of the rule of Bahrām III.

On the royal reliefs, Bahrām II is represented with his wife and members of his family (Herrmann, 1970, pp. 165-71), a subject already appearing on a relief of Šāpūr I at Naqš-e Rajab. The other reliefs of Bahrām II illustrate the theme of royal authority in a new fashion. At Naqš-e Bahrām, the king is enthroned in a frontal position (Hinz, 1969, pp. 198-209). This type of image occurs in a large, unfinished victory relief with a representation of an unknown monarch at Bīšāpūr (Lukonin, 1969, p. 193; Ghirshman, 1971, pp. 79-88) and on a badly worn monument at Naqš-e Rostam (Schmidt, 1970, pl. 94), but only at Naqš-e Bahrām does the subject achieve definitive form. The balanced presentation, with the king seated between two pairs of standing figures, is typically Sasanian.

A more radical design occurs at Sar Mašhad, where the king, Bahrām II, is portrayed in a unique scene as the slayer of lions and the protector of the figures placed beside him, his wife(?), Kartīr, and another male (Hinz, 1969, pp. 215-19; Herrmann, 1970, pp. 165-71; Trümpelmann, Sar Mašhad, 1975, pp. 3-11; P. Calmeyer in Calmeyer and Gaube, 1985, pp. 43-49). This is the earliest dynastic monument illustrating a royal hunt(?), a theme that was to become later, on the court silver plate, the primary expression of Sasanian majesty.

Some of the rock carvings of Bahrām II continue the rich high relief style of Šāpūr I. Others are carved in low relief (10 cm), a feature interpreted by Herrmann as an indication that they are later in date (Herrmann, 1970, pp. 170-71).

In the single relief attributed to his reign, Narseh (292 303), the son of Šāpūr I, returned to a more conventional statement of royalty (Schmidt, 1970, pl. 90). The king receives the ring of investiture from the goddess Anāhīd. Both figures are on foot rather than on horseback, a pose presumably not appropriate for the goddess. The basic composition resembles the investiture of Ardašīr I at Naqš-e Rajab where the monarch stretches his arm toward the god Ohrmazd. In both reliefs, the smaller figure of a descendant, and future king, is placed between the ruler and the divinity; this return to an earlier scheme was probably deliberate on the part of Narseh, who was the grandson of Ardašīr I. The over life size figures on the rock carving at Naqš-e Rostam are executed in high relief but are poorly proportioned. The linear details—drapery fold, spiral hairs curls—give a particularly decorative appearance to the monument.

A number of battle scenes in the form of equestrian combats between two protagonists are contemporary with the reliefs of the late 3rd century (Schmidt, 1970, pls. 89, 91, 95). This type was first commissioned by Ardašīr I at Fīrūzābād and is illustrated on a much smaller scale on the relief carved blocks from a building constructed during the reign of Šāpūr I at Bīšāpūr (Ghirshman, 1971, pls. 35, 36, fig. 15). The later examples, all at Naqš-e Rostam, have a simple composition and more limited subject matter than the Fīrūzābād relief. The figures do not always wear recognizable Sasanian crowns, and it is possible that in at least two instances the warrior is a member of the royal family or the high nobility rather than the king (Schmidt, 1970, pls. 89, 95). On one of the reliefs, the three pronged headgear worn by the central combatant may be a special form of helmet rather than a crown (Herzfeld, 1938, pp. 136-37).

These battle scenes have a narrative, pictorial quality lacking in the more conventional investiture and victory reliefs. A wealth of detail covering the animal and human bodies gives the representations a rather decorative appearance.

The reliefs at Ṭāq-e Bostān follow by more than half a century the latest rock carved monuments in Fārs and reveal a change in style (Fukai and Horiuchi, 1972, pls. 64-92). Commissioned by Ardašīr II (379-83) and in all probability, Šāpūr III (383-88), they are primarily proclamations of legitimacy. During this troubled period in the history of the Sasanian monarchy, the natural succession was interrupted by the accession of Ardašīr II who was then succeeded by Šāpūr III, the son of Šāpūr II (Herzfeld, 1928, p. 138).

The relief of Ardašīr II is the more conventional of the two monuments in type and design. Within the customary rectangular panel three figures carved in high relief are standing side by side. The monarch, in the center, grasps the ring of investiture extended to him by the figure on his left, possibly the god Ohrmazd, although the headdress is that of the deceased Šāpūr II. On the other side is the god Mithra, rays emanating from his head, a barsom bundle in his hands, and standing on an Indian lotus. This same divinity is associated with a Sasanian ruler of the Kushan territories who has been identified as Ardašīr II (Lukonin, 1967, p. 27). Beneath the king and the figure holding the symbol of office lies a dead enemy, probably the Roman emperor Julian (Trümpelmann, "Triumph," 1975, pp. 107-11; Carter, 1981, pp. 74-98). In the arrangement of the figures the scene resembles the investiture of Narseh, but the king wears a new form of royal dress: A beaded halter, strapped around the chest, has replaced the cloak held by a clasp, and the tunic, drawn up at the sides, falls in a rounded curve along the lower hem. The style of the carving is also distinctive. The drapery folds are rendered as a series of curving concentric lines covering the body; this stylization gives the surface of the relief an extremely decorative appearance. The crude, almost grotesque treatment of the facial features is particularly noticeable since the heads are turned outward in a three quarter view. These changes in style and quality of workmanship suggest that the monument was executed by local artisans lacking the skills of the carvers who had worked on the royal monuments in the south. Noting the apparent inexperience of the craftsmen, Herzfeld suggested that the reliefs were the work of painters rather than sculptors (Herzfeld, 1928, p. 139).

The adjacent relief with the figures of Šāpūr II and III is carved in a similar

style, but the subject and the setting are new (Fukai and Horiuchi, 1972, pls. 64-73). The two kings, standing side by side, are represented on the back wall of a deep arched niche. They are almost full sculptures in the round. Inscriptions on either side of the heads give the names of the monarchs (Herzfeld, 1924, pp. 123-24). Since no divinity is included in the scene and the emphasis is on the relationship between the two royal personages, father (Šāpūr II) and son (Šāpūr III), it is appropriate that the setting resembles an arched hall similar to the audience halls of Sasanian palaces. Šāpūr III does not wear the crown appearing on his coins and it is possible that the relief was executed before he became king of kings, during the reign of Šāpūr II (Herzfeld, 1938, pp. 113-14).

The latest relief at Ṭāq-e Bostān (Fukai and Horiuchi, 1969; idem, 1972, pls. 1-62) is generally attributed to Ḵosrow II (591 628) (Herzfeld, 1920; idem, 1938, pp. 91-158; Ghirshman, 1963, pp. 293-311; Peck, 1969, pp. 101=2) in spite of some arguments for an earlier date in the reign of Pērōz (Erdmann, 1937, pp. 79=97; idem, 1951, pp. 87=123; von Gall, 1984, pp. 179=90) and one suggestion that the monument was executed during the reign of Ḵosrow I (Gropp, 1970, p. 282). This great ayvān similar in shape but larger than that of Šāpūr II/III may well celebrate the victory of Ḵosrow II over the usurper Bahrām VI (Čōbīn) (Marshak and Krikis, 1969, p. 65; Soucek, 1974, pp. 34=35). Two winged females placed in the spandrels of the arched facade give it the appearance of a Western triumphal monument. The divinities, Ohrmazd and Anāhīd, stand on either side of Ḵosrow II. All three figures are carved on the top of the back wall of the niche. The gods do not surpass the king in height; rather, they appear as supports to the royal person. Beneath the standing figures on the back wall is a horseman in full armor, holding a lance and a shield. The identity of this horseman is uncertain. A royal device (Figure 46a) and a *sēnmurw*, the fantastic creature believed to be the bearer of prosperity, on his garment suggest that this is the warrior king.

An alternative suggestion is that the rider is the *fravahr* or genius of the king (von Gall, 1971b, p. 233; J. Kellens, *Iranica Antiqua* 10, 1973, pp. 133=38 [von Gall, 1984, has now retracted this suggestion]). The close relationship in form between the mounted warrior and certain monumental sculptures in the late antique world has also been observed (Soucek, 1974, p. 34).

Entirely new in form and design are the low relief hunting scenes carved on the side walls of the *ayvān* of Ḵosrow II at Ṭāq-e Bostān (Fukai and Horiuchi, 1969, pls. 29-102). These resemble wall paintings or mosaics rather than rock

sculptures and may be stone imitations of the wall decorations in similarly shaped audience halls in Sasanian palaces. The rock cut monument at Ṭāq-e Bostān, the last attributable to the Sasanian period, is a magnificent expression of royal authority. The large scale figures are solid masses, the body hidden beneath heavy drapery. A rich and elaborate style of workmanship is apparent in the treatment of the hair and dress. On the side walls similar attention is paid to minute details—the textiles, patterns, hair, and equipment of the human figures as well as the surface of the animal and landscape motifs. It is impossible to know whether all three parts of the decoration—royal investiture, mounted warrior, and hunting panels—are contemporary in date. Differences in style and equipment may indicate that the reliefs were executed over a period of time (Trousdale, 1975, p. 98).

A few final observations can be made concerning the Sasanian rock reliefs. It is evident that some rulers added to the reliefs of their predecessors. This is the case at Bīšāpūr where, on the relief of Bahrām I, Narseh substituted his own name in the inscription and added a dead enemy, possibly Bahrām III, beneath the royal mount (Schmidt, 1970, p. 129; *Iran* 13, 1970, pls. III, IV; Herrmann, 1981 [= *Bishapur*, pt. 2], p. 19). It has been suggested that the relief at Dārāb was begun by Ardašīr I and reworked into a victory monument by his son Šāpūr I (Trümpelmann, "Triumph," 1975, pp. 3-20).

Another fact is that the monuments are frequently unfinished, with some portions carved only in outline. The interruption of historical events (death, war, social upheavals) might explain this phenomenon in occasional instances. However, the large number of reliefs with unfinished details is surprising, and it is possible that paint or some other material was originally used to complete the scenes (Herrmann, 1980 83).

Other stone sculpture. Four busts of Narseh decorate the sides of a square tower erected by that king at Paikuli (Herzfeld, 1924, pp. 7-l0); the inscription describes his assumption of royal power. Much weathered and damaged, the busts are unique examples of a type of royal sculpture that may once have existed in greater quantity.

More unusual and much better preserved is a three times life size statue in the round of Šāpūr I (241 272) at Bīšāpūr, which is the only sizeable stone sculpture in the round to have survived from Sasanian times. The figure is carved from a natural column of stone in a grotto above the river running past the Bīšāpūr rock reliefs (Ghirshman, 1971, pp. 179ff., pls. 28-32). The king's

informal stance, frontal but with arms bent, one hand resting on his hip, presumably placed on the hilt of a now missing sword, is without parallel in Sasanian art and reflects ultimately the influence of Greco Roman prototypes. Another stone figure, terribly worn and mutilated (the entire lower portion is missing) was found at Ṭāq-e Bostān (Fukai and Horiuchi, 1972, pl. 63). Probably this is Ḵosrow II (591 628), but the surface is much abraded and no details are observable. The pose is related to that of the Bīšāpūr statue in that the royal figure grasps his sword, but the weapon is, in this instance, centered on the body.

A Middle Persian text carved on a stone column at Bīšāpūr mentions another statue of king Šāpūr I erected by Apasāy, his secretary (Ghirshman, 1936, p. 126). Regrettably nothing remains of this work of art.

Silver plate. During the long period from the end of the 4th century to the end of the 6th century, royal rock reliefs were no longer carved, perhaps because the firm establishment of the dynasty eliminated the political reasons for this type of monumental royal sculpture. In any event, the second half of the Sasanian period, beginning with the latter part of the reign of Šāpūr II (309 79), is characterized by another medium of dynastic art: silver vessels with the image of the king hunting (Harper and Meyers, 1981). A few vessels with representations of nobles and princes of the royal family pursuing animal quarry precede the adoption and exclusive use of this motif by the king himself in the latter part of the 4th century. Two examples have survived, both found west of Iran in the Caucasus (Fajans, 1957, p. 61, pl. 5, fig. 11; Lukonin, 1961, p. 59, pl. 11) and Soviet Azarbaijan (Harper and Meyers, 1981, pl. 8). A third plate, now lost but known through a drawing, was acquired in Afghanistan (Erdmann, 1936, pp. 226-27; Harper and Meyers, 1981, pl. 11 a b). The hunters on all three of these plates may be rulers of newly acquired realms: on the example found in the western Caucasus the inscription names Bahrām, probably the son and heir apparent of Bahrām I.

The earliest silver vessel with an image of a Sasanian king is also from the western part of the empire. Bahrām II, his wife, and son appear on a two handled cup discovered at Zargveshi in Georgia (Lukonin, 1961, p. 57, pls.12 15; idem, 1967, pl. 207; Harper and Meyers, 1981, pl. 12). The royal figures are enclosed within medallions, a form of portraiture employed by princes and nobles on silver plate of the 3rd and early 4th centuries (Harper, 1974, pp. 61-80). Late in the 4th century, the medallion portrait was superseded on the royal court silver by the hunting scene, and this became the standard type,

strictly reserved for the king of kings. Existing evidence suggests that from the 4th century until some time in the 6th, no person other than the Sasanian king was permitted to represent himself or his family on silver vessels.

The images on the royal silver plate are stereotyped and the representations remain largely unchanged in style and form for several centuries. Only minor variations occur in the iconography and design. Particularly distinctive is the representation of drapery in a series of short, paired lines. Gilding covers the figural scene or, on the latest examples, the background shell of the plate. Specific weapons are used, customarily the bow, occasionally a lasso. The compositions combine horizontal (horse and dead animals) and vertical (king and the bodies of the living quarry) elements. In general, there is a trend from simple compositions with few figures to more elaborate arrangements in which the numbers and species of animals increases (Erdmann, 1936, pp. 192-232; idem, 1937, pp. 79-97; idem, 1951, pp. 87-123; Herzfeld, 1938, pp. 91-158; Harper and Meyers, 1981).

The date of these vessels with royal hunters is suggested in part by the appearance of the royal crown, often identifiable through a comparison with Sasanian coins. Details of dress and equipment compared with images on securely dated monuments (reliefs, coins, seals) also provide some guidance in establishing a chronological sequence (Harper and Meyers, 1981).

Contemporary with the royal vessels are imitations of the Sasanian hunting plates produced in the countries bordering on Iran to the east and west. In the past, these works have often been confused with original Sasanian products (Erdmann, 1938, pp. 209-17; idem, 1943, pls. 61, 65, 66; Marshak and Krikis, 1969, pp. 51-81). However, on many of the provincial imitations, the differences in design, style, and notably the use of non Sasanian crown types are sufficient to make the distinction between the imitation and the original obvious. Instead of the paired line drapery style of the Sasanian court silver, there is a schematization of the folds in the form of overall parallel lines. The composition is often laid out in a triangular scheme. Gilding is applied to different parts of the design in a coloristic fashion.

A few provincial plates are closer in design and style to the Sasanian court products (Lukonin, 1967, pls. 148, 149, 150). In these instances the stylistic attribution of the vessels to provincial rather than central Sasanian workshops is substantiated by the analysis of the metal.

The use of neutron activation analysis to determine silver composition has revealed that vessels that may be called Sasanian court products on the basis of style and design are produced from silver derived from a single source (Meyers et al., 1973, pp. 67-78; Harper and Meyers, 1981, pp. 144-86). The composition of the metal of the vessels identifiable as provincial works is entirely different; the silver is derived from a number of different ores and in no instance is it the same as that from which the Sasanian royal plate is made. It is evident therefore that the extraction of silver for use at court or state workshops was controlled by the Sasanian government. Beyond the limits of direct Sasanian authority, local rulers obtained silver from various sources and produced hunting plates modeled on Sasanian court products.

Although the image of the frontal king enthroned in state was not popular as a dynastic image either on the luxury vessels or on the rock reliefs, there are two representations of the motif that may be Sasanian. On a silver plate in the Hermitage Museum (Orbeli and Trever, 1935, pl. 13; Erdmann, pl. 67), the enthronement scene (which resembles the rock relief of Bahrām II at Naqš-e Bahrām) is placed over a small hunt in the exergue. The crown of the enthroned king is the same as that appearing on the coins of six late Sasanian rulers from Kavād I to Kavād II. A more elegant gold, glass, and rock crystal bowl in the Bibliothèque Nationale has a central medallion with the frontal enthroned king, seated alone, carved in relief (Sarre, 1922, pl. 44; Ghirshman, 1962, p. 205, fig. 244). The king wears the same crown as the figure on the Bibliothèque Nationale silver plate.

Other Sasanian silver vases and ewers are decorated with motifs that refer less directly to the king of kings. These include the ram (*Romans and Barbarians*, 1976, pl. 219), possibly a symbol of (*xwarrah* or the royal fortune, and birds wearing long, jeweled necklets (*Romans and Barbarians* , 1976, pl. 220). A ewer in the Hermitage Museum (Erdmann, 1943, pl. 77) has figures of a (*sēnmurw(*. This creature appears on the garments of the king at Ṭāq-e Bostān but is otherwise rarely represented in Sasanian art (Riboud, 1976, pp. 21-42). It was probably a royal motif, and objects decorated with it may therefore be connected specifically with the monarchy (H. P. Schmidt, 1980).

A number of Sasanian silver vessels bear cult or ceremonial scenes lacking any specific reference to the king. The most numerous are vases and ewers decorated with dancing female figures holding particular attributes: vessels, fruit, plants, and animals (Harper, 1971, pp. 503-15). In its form, this type of subject is clearly associated with Dionysiac imagery. Some scholars believe

that it was adopted by the Iranians in connection with the cult of Anāhīd, the Iranian goddess of water and fertility (Shepherd, 1964, pp. 66-92; Ettinghausen, 1967/68, pp. 29-41; Trever, 1967, pp. 121-32). More probable are suggestions that the images are associated with seasonal festivals (Harper, 1971, pp. 503-15; Carter, 1974, pp. 171-202).

Plates with mythological images are rather rare, and the precise meaning of this type of subject matter, often modeled on Greco Roman prototypes (Harper, 1978, nos. 8, 13), is uncertain.

A small class of hemispherical bowls is important because the figural subjects are unrelated to royal iconography and provide illustrations of court life and activities. Manufactured in all probability during the 6th and 7th centuries for noble (*āzād*) rather than royal patrons, the vessels have scenes of vintaging, banqueting, and marriage ceremonies as well as simple geometric, plant, and animal designs (Harper, 1978, nos. 14, 15, 25). The alloy from which these small bowls (average diameter: 14 cm) are made has a high copper content and is, in this sense, inferior to the silver of the court plate. Elliptical bowls with Christian motifs, specifically crosses, also exist (Sasanian Silver, 1967, no. 53). The shape of these vessels suggests a date at the end of the Sasanian period; the production probably reflects the growing prestige and prosperity of the Christian community following the separation of the Nestorian church (484) from the Christian community in the West.

Regrettably, almost none of the surviving silver vessels, Sasanian or provincial, comes from controlled archeological excavations. Many were found in the Soviet Union, particularly in the Perm region in the Ural mountains, an area to which they were sent as articles of barter or trade in antiquity (Orbeli and Trever, 1935, pls. 5, 13, 28, 36, 39 41, 44-47). In recent years, countless other examples have been recovered, by chance, on Iranian soil. The precise use of the vessels, their general purpose, and significance is consequently uncertain. It is probable that the central Sasanian court plates with images of the king were part of a state propaganda production since both the form of the designs and the source of the material were rigidly controlled. Ancient sources speak frequently of gifts of silver plate, some with images of the king, to allies and neighboring rulers whom the monarch intended to impress (*Sasanian Silver*, 1967, p. 34ff.).

A few objects made of silver are unique. A spectacular, almost lifesize head of a Sasanian king, perhaps Šāpūr II, is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art

(Harper, 1966, pp. 136-46). Although images of rulers and emperors executed in stone and metal are familiar in the West, most large scale representations of Sasanian royalty are in relief sculpture. The original provenance of the silver head of a king in the Metropolitan Museum is allegedly Iran, but the circumstances of discovery and therefore the function of this work of art are unknown.

Other sculptures in the round made of silver also survive from the Sasanian era, but they represent animals rather than humans. Vessels in the shape of complete animals and heads of animals as well as rhyta terminating in animal heads were probably originally the property of members of the royal family and nobility (Harper, 1978, nos. 1, 5, 16; *Sasanian Silver* , 1967, no. 49). Nothing in the design or decoration of these objects refers specifically to the king.

The Middle Persian inscriptions appearing on both the Sasanian and the provincial vessels give their weight and sometimes the name of the owner (Henning, 1959, pp. 132-34; idem, 1961, pp. 353-56; Lukonin and Livshits, 1964, pp. 55-76; Brunner, 1974, pp. 109-21; Frye, 1973, pp. 2-11; Harmatta, 1973, 1974; Gignoux, 1975, 1982). This practice appears to have been customary from the 3rd century to the end of the period.

Stucco. The absence of stone architectural decoration in the Sasanian Near East is, to some extent, compensated for by the use of gypsum plaster—stucco—molded into designs and applied to the walls and ceilings of court and noble buildings. Originally brightly painted, particularly in red and blue, the stucco reliefs include a variety of subjects: hunts, banquets, royal figures, and, in great quantity, plant, animal, and geometric designs. The stucco is usually fragmentary, and the reconstruction of the overall scenes is difficult since the pieces uncovered in excavations are usually scattered over a large area. Sites that have produced a considerable quantity of this material are Kīš (Baltrusaitis, 1938, pp. 601-30; Pope, 1938, pp. 631-45; Moorey, 1976, pp. 65-66; idem, 1978; Harper, *Royal Images*, 1977, pp. 75-79) and Ctesiphon (Kühnel and Wachtsmuth, 1933; Schmidt, 1934, pp. 1-23; Kröger, 1977; 1982) in Iraq and Tepe Ḥeṣār (Schmidt, 1937, pp. 327-50) and Čāl Ṭarḵān Ešqābād (Thompson, 1976) in Iran. The last named site is, strictly speaking, not Sasanian since it has recently been convincingly dated to the late 7th or 8th century, but the designs remain close to Sasanian forms. A small amount of Sasanian stucco, consisting solely of plant designs, was discovered by the French expedition at Bīšāpūr in southern Iran (Ghirshman, 1956, pp. 149-75).

The conservatism apparent in the style and form of works produced in stucco makes it impossible to establish an absolute chronology in the absence of precise archeological data. The same motifs continue to be repeated in essentially the same form for centuries. In part, this is due to the method of manufacture: the use of molds undoubtedly encouraged the repetition of designs. Roger Moorey (1976, pp. 65-66) and Jens Kroger (in Harper, 1978, pp. 101-4 and in Kröger, 1982) have argued that the stucco from Kīš belongs to the 5th century, that from Ctesiphon and Ḥeṣār to the 6th or early 7th. These opinions are based on the archeological evidence as well as on small variations in the plant and geometric patterns. Until further works in this material are unearthed in controlled archeological excavations, the dating of stucco found in Mesopotamia and Iran will remain unclear.

Gems and seals. This large category is one of the most fruitful for the study of the art and iconography of the Sasanian period. Although the surface of the stamp seals is small, the carved images are more varied than those that have survived in any other medium. In recent years, moreover, specialists in the Middle Persian language have provided a means of establishing a relative chronology based on the changing forms of the Middle Persian letters in the inscriptions, which can then be applied on a comparative basis for those seals without inscriptions (Borisov and Lukonin, 1962; Bivar, 1969; Brunner, 1978; Lukonin, 1976, pp. 158-66; Gignoux, 1978).

Motifs are generally represented in a standard fashion. Single animals stride or are recumbent; animals attack each other; heads of animals radiate out from a central point; pairs of rams are antithetically placed on either side of a plant. Single flowers or bunches of three flowers are common, as is the human hand holding a plant or simply making a gesture in which the forefinger and the thumb are touching. Only a small number of seals represent specific Zoroastrian divinities or cult practices. The most common religious scene is the fire altar with or without attendants. Perhaps associated with a cult are single nude or draped females holding plants or fruit. Royal subjects are rare although a few examples of royal busts and full length figures have survived (Harper, 1978, pp. 142, 147). Human representations vary from simple “portraits,” in the form of a bust facing right in the impression, to elaborate images of high officials and priests dressed in the full regalia of their office. They wear tall caps decorated with floral motifs and devices or signs denoting family or rank.

A star and crescent frequently appear in the field on the face of Sasanian seals,

and the inscriptions are customarily carved around the edge of the stone. In recent years many of the designs have been convincingly interpreted in terms of astrological and religious significance (Brunner, 1978; Borisov and Lukonin, 1962, pp. 31-45). A small group of Christian seals can also be identified on the basis of the subject matter (Lerner, 1977, pp. 1-74; Shaked, 1977).

The most common shapes of Sasanian seals are pierced hemispheroids and oval bezels, the latter designed to be set in finger rings, worn on armbands, or mounted as pendants. Stones are varied, chalcedony being one of the most popular.

Textiles. The sixth seventh century rock reliefs on the side walls of the ayvān of Ḵosrow II at Ṭāq-e Bostān illustrate a variety of woven and embroidered plant, animal, and geometric patterns on the garments of assorted personages (Herzfeld, 1920, pp. 121-39; Fukai and Horiuchi, 1969, 1972; Peck, 1969, pp. 101-46; Bier in Harper, 1978, pp. 119-25; von Falke, 1913); presumably these are textiles of Sasanian manufacture. Other fabrics found in tombs at Antinoë (Guimet, 1912; Pfister, 1948, pp. 46ff.; idem, 1932) in Egypt, in Central Asia (Stein, 1928), and in the Caucasus (Yerusalimskaya, 1972, pp. 5 46) have also been attributed to Iranian workshops on the basis of their similarity to the textile patterns at Ṭāq-e Bostān and to designs on other Sasanian monuments. None of the existing textiles can be absolutely identified as Sasanian with the exception of a few simply decorated fabrics excavated in a Sasanian grave at Šahr-e Qūmes in northeastern Iran (Hansman and Stronach, 1970, pp. 142-56).
Wall paintings and graffiti. Literary sources mention the decoration of palaces with wall paintings (Ammianus Marcellinus 24.6) but only a few fragmentary murals from Susa (Ghirshman, 1962, fig. 224), Ayvān-e Ḵarka (Ghirshman, 1952, p. 21), and from Ḥeṣār (Schmidt, 1937, pp. 336-37) offer evidence for the appearance of works in this medium. The painting from Susa is a monumental hunting scene. At Ayvān-e Ḵarka, a royal headdress was depicted on the upper part of an apse. The fragments of Ḥeṣār illustrate the head of a horse and the leg of a rider. Recently excavated murals of Ḥājīābād in southern Iran—near Dārābgerd—also illustrate figural motifs (Azarnoush, 1983, pp. 172f.).

A crude fresco with battle scenes and a banquet was found in the Syrian city of Dura Europos. Middle Persian inscriptions associate it with the period of the 3rd century Sasanian occupation at this garrison city on the Euphrates River (Little in Baur, Rostovtzeff, and Bellinger, 1933, pp. 182-222). Graffiti at Persepolis belong to the decades immediately preceding the rise of the dynasty under Ardašīr I (Schmidt, 1953, pl. 199; Herzfeld, 1941, figs. 401, 402; Calmeyer,

1976, pp. 63-68). The representations include equestrian and standing figures as well as a lion and ram.

Mosaics. Although mosaics have survived in greater quantity than textiles and paintings, they come almost exclusively from a single site, Bīšāpūr, where eighteen panels with masks and heads, female dancers, musicians, and garland makers have been excavated (Ghirshman, 1956). Ghirshman interprets these 3rd century scenes as Dionysiac motifs and believes them to be an appropriate subject for the decoration of a banquet hall. Von Gall has suggested that there is a specific connection between the themes appearing on the mosaics and the victory reliefs of Šāpūr I in the nearby river gorge and considers both series of monuments illustrations of a Dionysiac pomp or victory celebration. ("Die Mosaiken von Bishapur," 1971, pp. 193-205).

At Ctesiphon, mosaics decorated the walls and ceilings of the noble residences. Some of the cubes recovered by the German expedition are made of gold glass and the original effect must have been impressive (Reuther, 1929, pp. 442-43). Syrian craftsmen from Antioch, brought east as prisoners of war in the 3rd and 6th centuries, probably played an important role in the development of this craft within the Sasanian kingdom.

Gold. References to gold received by the Sasanians as tribute and booty abound in the ancient literature (Procopius 2.6, 7, 8, 9, 11), but there was no substantial source of gold within the lands permanently under Sasanian rule. This situation may explain the fact that there was never an extensive gold coinage and that the court plate was made of gilded silver. A few gold vessels of late Sasanian date come from the tomb of a Khazar chieftain in Pereshchepina in the Caucasus (Marshak, 1972; Werner, 1984). More numerous are the golden belts and swords found by chance in recent years on Iranian soil (Ghirshman, 1963, pp. 293-311; Nickel, 1973, pp. 131-42; Harper, 1978, pp. 83-84). The form of the swords, with P shaped mounts on one side of the scabbard, differs from those appearing on early Sasanian rock reliefs. This distinctive form of suspension was adopted by the Sasanians possibly as early as the 5th century from the Hephthalites but certainly by the 6th century from Turkic invaders in the lands northeast of Iran (Trousdale, 1975, p. 94).

Glass and pottery. Recent excavations by a Tokyo University expedition in the area of Daylamān in northwestern Iran (Sono and Fukai, 1968, pl. XLI) and by an Italian mission at Choche (Venco Ricciardi, 1967, pp. 93-104) in southern Iraq have provided some information concerning the chronology and typology

of Sasanian glass and pottery. Strong influence from the Mediterranean world is apparent in the forms and designs of the glass ware, an industry prominent in the east Roman empire (Clairmont, 1963, pp. 65-67; von Saldern, 1963, pp. 7-16; idem, 1968, pp. 32-62; Harper, 1978, pp. 150-59; Fukai, 1977). The large number of Sasanian glasses decorated with wheel cut facets suggests that this form of surface embellishment was particularly popular within Iran, the alleged source of most vessels with wheel cut designs.

Early Sasanian ceramics continue many of the traditional Parthian forms. Monochrome glazed wares are common in Iraq and in those areas of Iran, around Susa, that are naturally an extension of the Tigris Euphrates valley. Other Iranian wares of Sasanian date have a red burnished surface (Wilkinson, 1963, fig. 16). Until extensive excavations have been undertaken at Sasanian sites in different parts of Iran and Iraq, it is impossible to reconstruct a comprehensive ceramic typology and establish a chronological sequence for the period.

Conclusion. Sasanian art is an expression of the social and religious institutions that developed in Iran during the first half of the first millennium A.D. A powerful central authority, the monarchy, and an established state religion, Zoroastrianism, dominated and ordered daily life. In Sasanian art there is a clear emphasis on order and clarity of design. Considerable repetition occurs in the subject matter and in the ways of portraying standard motifs. To some extent this can be explained by the fact that many of the surviving works of art had a particular political or cultic significance, and their appearance was regulated by the demands of dynastic or religious doctrine. The adherences to formal rather than realistic images predominates even in the minor arts, on seal stone, bronzes, and textiles.

Although many Sasanian motifs are familiar from earlier periods of Near Eastern art (plant forms, rams confronting a tree, human headed winged bulls, bull and lion combats, birds of prey attacking animals, there are a number of designs newly adopted from Western sources (populated vine scrolls, vintaging scenes, winged victory figures). Toward the end of the period, influences from the East—India and Central Asia—increase. These regions may be the source of the narrative and genre scenes appearing on some late silver plate (Harper, 1978, pp. 74-76). It is also probable that many of the Greco Roman designs reached the Sasanians from their eastern neighbors rather than directly from the Mediterranean world. In return, Sasanian landscape, geometric, and figural patterns were adopted and used in the art of Central

Asia.

At present, only those monuments reflecting the life and beliefs of the ruling classes have been recovered and studied in depth. Future archeological excavations at Sasanian centers may provide a better understanding of the material remains and broaden our knowledge of the art of this important period in Iranian history.

See also SASANIAN ROCK RELIEFS.

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