

ART IN IRAN XII. IRANIAN PRE-ISLAMIC ELEMENTS IN ISLAMIC ART

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Numerous Iranian pre-Islamic elements have contributed significantly to the formation and development of Islamic art, and they can be easily recognized in various contexts, from town-planning to architecture, from the continuity of techniques of both manufacture and decoration to iconography and some of its symbols. Among the latter, one may mention the Sasanian crowns illustrated in the mosaic of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (dated 691), or the interesting image on the reverse of an Arab-Sasanian dirham of 694-99, preserved in four examples (Treadwell, n. 95) and showing a lance within an arch. The lance “was one of the formal symbols of the Prophetic and caliphal power” (Grabar, p. 94; see also Whelan, n. 77), and when placed within an arch, it also represented an *axis mundi* connecting the earth to the sky, in the sense of the vault of heaven (see Fontana, forthcoming).

The most striking example of such town-planning is the round city of [Baghdad](#), the ‘Abbasid capital founded by caliph Abu Ja‘far al-Manṣūr in 762. This circular plan, originally derived most probably from the structure of Assyrian

military camps (circular or oval enclosures), was a characteristic feature of major Parthian and Sasanian towns. Baghdad is particularly similar to the Sasanian circular cities of Ardašir I, especially *Ardašir Kōrra*, later known as *Firuzābād*, which according to Ebn al-Faḡih was built on the model of Dārābjerd (see *DĀRĀB ii*). There is evidence in the Islamic architecture of some planimetric solutions and building techniques suggesting that they were derived from pre-Islamic Iranian precedents.

The plan of the Sasanian *čahār ṭāq* (q.v.) has met with considerable success in Iranian religious architecture. According to some scholars (cf. Finster, p. 91, n. 320), the mosque (of uncertain date) in the village of Yazd-e K̲vāst, on the border between Fārs and Isfahan, was established on a *čahār ṭāq* (Siroux; see also Smith, p. 106). The Masjed-e Diggarān at K̲azāra, near Bukhara (11th cent.; Nil'sen, fig. 76), had a similar plan, surrounded by a corridor (on the Islamic *čahār ṭāq* functioning as *emānzāda*, see Huff, 1982; Boucharlat).

Two buildings in *Dāmḡān* share similar significant features, namely a Sasanian building at Tepe Hissar/Heṣār (*FIGURE 1*) and the Tārik-k-āna (a mosque dating from the 8th century, *FIGURE 2*). The vestibule of the Sasanian building (divided into three aisles) shows two arcades resting on massive round piers and side walls supporting three parallel tunnel-vaults opening into the courtyard, a layout also used in the Tārik-k-āna (Schroeder, p. 934). Both in the Sasanian building and in the Tārik-k-āna, the round piers, constructed of baked bricks, are set vertically and horizontally in alternate courses, without foundations (the same alternate courses are employed also in the Masjed-e Diggarān at K̲azāra, see Nil'sen, fig. 8); moreover, their diameters are nearly the same. The later Friday Mosque (Masjed-e jāme') of Nā'in (dating from ca. 960, Schroeder, p. 935), while possessing narrower round pillars, is entirely covered with stucco decoration like the Sasanian building at Tepe Hissar (for other Iranian mosques deriving from Sasanian architectural prototypes, see Monneret de Villard, pp. 115-16).

Lionel Bier was skeptical of the supposed influence of Sasanian palace architecture on early Islamic architecture. Making reference to Gertrude Bell (pp. 44-51), who in Bier's words, in her survey of the Sasanian palaces "was sometimes obliged to make analogies with the better-preserved palace at Ukhaidir [Oḡ-ayžer] in Iraq to fill in the missing parts," Bier sarcastically states: "Put less delicately, it seems to me a fine example of how Sasanian architecture can be influenced by early Islam" (1993, p. 59).



Although the *ayvān* and the domed chamber are certainly the most important elements of Sasanian architecture surviving in the Islamic context, Bier hesitates to acknowledge a precise correspondence between the continuity of the Sasanian court ceremonial which survived into the Islamic period, and the continuity of form and function of the architectural background, which is not clearly recognizable either in the sources or from the archeological evidence (Bier, 1993, p. 59). Concerning the Umayyad throne complex at Mošattā/Mšattā (dated to 743-44), now a ruined structure in Jordan, Bier states: “neither the triconch nor the pillared hall is known in Sasanian palace architecture ..., the Sasanian audience was connected primarily, if not exclusively, with the iwan hall, with or without a domed chamber in back” (1993, p. 59). With regard to the affinity between the pillared hall/ayvān with a square domed chamber at Tepe Hissar near Dām’gān and the ‘Emārat-e Kōsrow at Qaṣr-e Šīrin (dated 590-628; FIGURE 3), Bier (1993, p. 60) says: “the Imaret-i Khusraw is a fantasy based partly on Damghan itself, the arrangement at Damghan must remain an anomaly.” However, the same complex is in the *dār-al-‘emāra* at Kufa, in Iraq (FIGURE 4; II level, most probably dating back to the reconstruction of Zīād b. Abihi, 670-67), and, as regards the three-aisled hall, Mas‘udi (VII, pp. 192-93, rev. ed., V, p. 6), in the 10th century, makes reference to the prototype of Hīra. The last section of Bier’s study, however, is focused on the most probable methods of transmission of elements from Sasanian to Islamic architecture.

The Sasanian four axial ayvāns fronting a domed room (see the “domed chamber” of the so-called “fire temple” at Bišāpur, 3rd century; Huff, 1993, p. 54; Azarnoush, pp. 84-86) can be found in ‘Abbasid palaces of the 8th and 9th centuries (see the *dār-al-‘emāra* of Marv, dated 747-55; FIGURE 5, the most important palaces of Sāmarrā’, and probably al-Manṣūr’s palace in Baghdad).

The synthesis of the Parthian four ayvāns opening in a courtyard and the Sasanian complex formed by an ayvān and a domed chamber in the back is also used in the Ghaznavid palaces at Laškari Bāzār (11th cent.; Schlumberger, 1978) and Ġazni (12th cent.; Scerrato, 1959). In the Islamic religious buildings, the four ayvāns opening on a courtyard (with a domed chamber) appear later in Iranian Saljuq architecture.

The triple-ayvān structure of Parthian origin (see some examples in Hatra, Reuther 1938a, fig. 105a, c-d), is clearly recognizable in the Bāb-al-‘Āmma, the monumental facade of the ‘Abbasid palace called Jawsaq al-Kāqāni, built at Sāmarrā’ by the caliph al-Mo’taṣem in 836, overlooking the Tigris. The palace of Firuzābād features a particular *bayt* formed by an ayvān flanked by two

rooms that can also be seen in Sarvestān (Bier, 1986, argues convincingly for its 9th-century date); an ayvān with a pair of flanking rooms and a portico of three arches is in the ‘Emārat-e Kōsrow at Qaṣr-e Šīrīn and the castle of Ok-ayzer (2nd half of the 8th cent., [FIGURE 6 a-b](#)), located about 50 km south of Karbalā’.

While the horseshoe shape of the arches of the transepts and the lower arcade arches of the Omayyad mosque at Damascus (705-15) derive from Syrian Christian architecture, the horseshoe arches of ‘Ammān and Ok-ayzer originate from Sasanian prototypes, such as those at Tāq-e Gerrā, probably dating back to the Middle Sasanian period, and al-Ma‘āriḏ, a 6th-century residential house at [Ctesiphon](#) (Reuther, pp. 509-14).

The two staircase minarets of both mosques at Sāmarrā’ (9th cent.), as well as the minaret of the mosque of Ebn Ṭulun in Cairo (876-79), derive their forms from the ancient ziggurats (see the famous Iranian example of [Čōgā Zambil](#), 13th century BC.E.). The ziggurats are at the origin of an important Islamic architectural pattern, namely the stepped elements employed as crenellations. Probably an ancient symbol of the sacred mountain (see Garbini), its iconography originated in the Iranian plateau in the 4th millennium BC.E. (see Elamite seals from Susa, dating back to ca. 3000BC.; Garbini, p. 89, and note 30). This architectural feature was employed for the first time as crenellation of religious buildings (temples, altars, ziggurats) in Assyria in the 2nd-1st millennium BC.E., retaining its original symbolic value, but possibly with the addition of the apotropaic one as well. From Assyria it spread over the Near East, both as an architectural element and as a symbolic-decorative motif derived from it, and in the Achaemenid Persia as well (crenellations are employed in the [Apadāna](#), at Persepolis; cf. Genito for stepped fire altars; see also the coins of the independent sovereigns of the post-Achaemenid Fars; cf. Callieri). In its original meaning of sacred mountain, it represents the *axis mundi* and the sovereign as the guarantor of the world order (the rock-cut relief of [Bisotun](#), shows Darius wearing a crenellated crown). During the following Parthian and Sasanian periods stepped elements were employed in similar ways (elements of crowns, crenellations of buildings, components of architectural decoration; cf. Reuther pp. 521-23; fire altars on coins). Stepped elements lost a great deal of their significance in the Islamic period, although they were employed as crenellations in many buildings, beginning with the Umayyad era (see, e.g., the palaces of ‘Ammān and Kerbat-al-Mafjar, but also the Great Mosque of Cordoba, and the Fatimid mosques in Cairo). The



apotropaic meaning of crenellations was probably preserved only in Yemen. In continuity with the Iranian pre-Islamic past, stepped elements have also been employed, with their symbolic significance, in several products of the early Islamic period, including coins, architectural decoration, various art objects, etc. (see al-Khamis; Fontana, 2003).

The apotropaic function of quadrupeds (felines and horned animals) and birds (birds of prey) placed near the spouts of ewers or other wares is no longer evident in Islamic art crafts, yet these zoomorphic sculptures survive as decorative motifs in metalwork from the Umayyad period (e.g., the so-called “Marwān ewer,” bronze, ca. 750, held at the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo; [see Sarre]; or the 12th-13th century brass ewers from Khorasan, inlaid with copper and silver; [FIGURE 7](#)).

The anthropomorphic or, more frequently, zoomorphic ware shape (*askoi*) is another pre-Islamic artistic feature that was widely employed in Persia and continued to be used in the Islamic period (for ceramic specimens, see Ettinghausen, 1969; Melikian-Chirvani, 1990, esp. figs. 99-101, pl. IA-B; idem, 1991). Furthermore, the Islamic metalwork produced bronze zoomorphic sculptures that were used as ewers, with a small reservoir that retained its ancient function (see, e.g., the *askoi* from northern Persia, [FIGURE 8](#), and the bronze deer-shaped ewer, [FIGURE 9](#)).

The quintessential example of continuity of techniques, both in manufacture and decoration, are the metal vessels that were produced with similar stylistic features even after the Sasanian Empire had ceased to exist as a political entity, and retained the same shapes and the same iconographic themes, including investitures, audiences, hunts, battle scenes, and animal motifs. In Islamic painting and sculpture we can observe the preservation either of typical Sasanian motifs (Arnold) or of Iranian-Central Asiatic somatic-stylistic features (see the Central Asiatic paintings from Mirān, 3rd century C.E., National Museum, New Delhi; M. Bussagli, ill. pp. 18, 24-25), recognizable, for example, in an Omayyad painting from Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Ġarbi (National Museum, Damascus; Schlumberger, 1986, pl. 37), in a stucco sculpture from Kērbat al-Mafjar (Archeological Museum, Jerusalem; Otto-Dorn, color pl. p. 71), and, further, in the famous Sāmarrā’ paintings (9th cent.).

A major vehicle of transmission of Iranian pre-Islamic elements in the Islamic art was iconography (Grube, 2005a, p. 24, ns. 74 and 88; idem, 2005b, pp. 270-72), such as the so-called “flying gallop” (see a Parthian painting from the



mithreum of Dura Europos, 2nd century C.E., Musée du Louvre, Paris, and a Sasanian painting from Susa, 4th century, in Ghirshman, figs. 49-50, 224), frequently combined, in the Sasanian period, to a fluttering ribbon (see, e.g., the Sasanian 5th-cent. plate in gilded silver, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. No. 34.33; see also the hunting scene in *Splendeurs des Sassanides*, pl. p. 189), as we can see in a floor painting from Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Ġarbi, 724-727 (FIGURE 10). Brief mention should also be made to other iconographic themes and their diffusion (see Rosen-Ayalon), such as the *senmurv* (see Harper; Schmidt), the male or female figure lifted by an eagle (see Grube and Johns, pp. 244-47), and popular legendary episodes such as the hunt of the Sasanian king Bahrām Gōr with his slave (Simpson; Fontana, 1986, idem, 2000; for other important iconographies, see Ettinghausen 1969; idem 1972).

Survival of Iranian pre-Islamic elements in Islamic art can be traced up to the Safavid, Qajar and Pahlavi periods, in architecture, iconography, stone relief, and a variety of decorative arts (see Huff 1971, pp. 164 ff.; Melikian-Chirvani 1990; idem, 1991; idem, 1996; Lerner 1980; idem, 1998; Luschey-Schmeisser; Grube, p. 24, ns. 74, 88, and pp. 270-72).

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