



HELMET I. IN PRE-ISLAMIC IRAN

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Helmets came into use in the Middle East at a very early date. Among the oldest recovered specimens are Sumerian bronze helmets of the mid-3rd millennium B.C.E. from the royal cemetery of Ur. During the 9th-7th centuries B.C.E., bronze and iron helmets of different types became widespread in the Assyrian Empire. In the Caucasus region, local craftsmen influenced by Assyrian industry produced several types of Urartian helmets, mainly in bronze but some also in iron. The Iranian tradition of helmet making is very old. Elam produced hemispherical bronze helmets with decorative figures of deities and also one of a bird—perhaps a type of raptor. (See Figs 1-54 for this and the following examples.) The figures were first sculpted in bitumen, then overlaid with thin layers of silver and gold; and further details were incised, such as figures of gods. Some of them are masterpieces unequalled in ancient Near Eastern art. They can be dated to the 14th century B.C.E. (Muscarella, 1988, pp. 223-29). A number of bronze and iron helmets dating from the 9th-8th centuries have been found at western Iranian sites (e.g., Ḥasanlu, Mārlik, Safidrud). They are either conical or hemispherical, and some of them are richly decorated.



Figures 1-33. Pre-Islamic helmets, 14th–2nd centuries B.C.E. 1. Elam, 14th cent. B.C.E. 2. Luristan. 3. Marlik. 4-8. Ḥasanlu. 9. Safidrud. 10. K̅vorvin. 11-12. Luristan. (Nos. 2-12 dated to the first third of the first millennium B.C.E.) 13. Achaemenid helmet, from Egypt. 14. Achaemenid helmet, from Olympia. 15. Oxus Treasure (British Museum). 16-17. Helmets represented on seals. 18. Achaemenid helmet, from Azarbaijan. 19. Achaemenid helmet depicted on a 5th-cent. B.C.E. Greek vase. 20. Achaemenid helmet represented on a rock relief, Lycia. 21. Achaemenid helmet (Glasgow Museum). 22. Scythian helmet, from the Kuban, 7th-6th cent. B.C.E. 23-24. Scythian helmets, Checheno-Ingushetia, 7th-6th cent. B.C.E. 25. Scythian helmet, 7th-6th cent. B.C.E. 26. Scythian helmet (Greek helmet of the Thracian type, refashioned by Scythians), Nymphai, 7th-6th cent. B.C.E. 27. Saka helmet from the Altai region, 7th-6th cent. B.C.E. 28. Saka helmet from the Talas valley, 7th-6th cent. B.C.E. 29. Saka helmet in the museum of Samarkand. 30-31. Saka helmet, from the Talas valley, 7th-6th cent. B.C.E. 32-35 and 37-38. Helmets represented on coins of the Greco-Bactrian kings (32. Eucratides I; 33. Amyntas).

Figures 34-58. Pre-Islamic helmets, 2nd century B.C.E.–7th century C.E. 34. Archebius; 35. 36. Helmet of the Greco-Bactrian king Eucratidus I, on a bronze medallion from the Temple of the Oxus. Antialcidas; 37. Menander. 38. Antimachus. 39-40. Bronze cheek-plates of Hellenistic helmets, from the Temple of the Oxus. 41. Parthian helmet of a clay sculpture, from Old Nisa. 42. Parthian helmet, represented on Ardašir I's rock-relief at Firuzābād. 43. Parthian helmet, graffito from Dura-Europos. 44. Kushan helmet depicted on the coin of Kujula Kadphises. 45. Kushan helmet on the coin of Huviška. 46. Kushan helmet, terrakota from Kitab (Kashka-Darīa[Kaška-Daryā] region). 47. Kushan helmet from Taxila. 48. Kushan helmet, from a sculpture, Khalchayan. 49. Kushan helmet (reconstruction by M. Gorelik), Charsada (Čarsada). 50. Sasanian helmet, on a rock-relief at Naqš-e Rostam. 51. Sasanian helmet (Brussels museum). 52. Sasanian helmet (Iraq Museum, Baghdad). 53. Sasanian helmet (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). 54-58. Sogdian helmets (54. from Varakhsha [Varaḡša]; 55-58. from Penjikent).

Ancient Iranian languages provide a number of terms relating to helmets. The list of a fully-equipped warrior's armament in the Avesta (*Vd.* 14.9) includes *sāravāra-* ("head-cover," *AirWb.*, col. 1572; see also *EIr.* II, p. 490); but the usual Avestan term for helmet is *xaoḍa-* (*AirWb.*, col. 531), which parallels Old Pers. *xaudā-*. Cf. Osset. *xud*, *xodæ*; New Pers. *ḳöi*, *ḳöd*, *ḳōd* (Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 180), Pers.-Tājik *xoi*, *xod* (Abaev, 1989, pp. 243-44). The Avesta mentions metal



helmets made of bronze, gold, and iron (*Yt.* 9.30, 13.45, 15.57). Sometimes the shape is also indicated. Thus *urwi-xaοδα-* (*Yt.* 9.30) designates a helmet with a pointed top (Brandenstein and Mayerhofer, 1964, pp. 45-46; Malandra, 1973, p. 284). Middle Persian has several terms for helmet: *sārwār* (*sārwār i batimen* “bright helmet”), *xōd*, *xoy*, and *targ* or *tarak* (*AirWb.*, col. 1572; Taffazzoli, 1993/94, pp. 191-93).

Classical authors provide some information on Persian helmets of the Achaemenid period. According to Herodotus (7.84), the cavalry of Xerxes included some Persians who “wore helmets of bronze and wrought steel.” Xenophon reports that mounted warriors, charioteers, and soldiers forming the king’s bodyguard wore helmets; and he adds that the helmets worn by rulers were of gold, i.e., gilded (*Cyropaedia* 6.1.51, 6.4.1-2, 7.1.2; *Anabasis* 1.8.6). Helmets are also mentioned in Babylonian documents of the Achaemenid period (Ebeling, 1952, p. 208). In later Greek and Roman sources, when the inhabitants of Central Asia are described, helmets—*kranos* or *galea* (helmet of leather)—are mentioned, but only in connection with Arians (Diodorus 17.83; Curtius 8.4.33; see Litvinsky and P’yankov, 1966, p. 43).

Of the few actual finds, the most interesting is a bell-shaped helmet of gilded bronze from Olympia, which bears a Greek inscription stating that it had been captured from the “Medes” at the beginning of the 5th century, possibly in the battle of Marathon (Mallwitz and Herrmann, 1980, p. 96, Pl. 58). Helmets are also represented on a number of art objects. A fine example is that worn by a warrior depicted on a gold plaque from the Oxus Treasure (Dalton, 1964, pp. 73-74, Pl. XV, no. 84).

In the 6th century B.C.E., bronze helmets of the Kuban type (named after finds in the basin of the Kuban River) were in use among the Scythians of Central Asia and the northern Black Sea. These were cast, and egg-shaped, deeper towards the back and with a wide opening in front. They were provided with longitudinal crests and holes along the edge to fasten the helmet to a mail piece. Their origin is disputed; some argue for the Middle East, others for China. In the 5th to 3rd centuries B.C.E., modified Greek helmets of the Corinthian, Chalcidian, Attic, and Thracian types were in use (Chernenko, 1968, pp. 74-98, figs. 39-59).

During the Hellenistic period, certain types of Hellenistic helmets, especially the Boeotian type and its local variants, became popular in Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The clearest evidence is provided by the portraits of Greco-



Bactrian rulers on their coins and by bronze and iron moveable cheekpieces discovered in the Oxus temple in Bactria.

Helmets of the Parthian period are known from works of art. A sculptured head from Nisa (2nd–1st cent. B.C.E.) wears a bowl-shaped helmet with corrugated visor, high crest, and moveable cheekpieces. This type of helmet probably goes back to Hellenistic prototypes. Ares and Athena depicted on the rhyta from Nisa wear helmets of different types. A late Parthian helmet appears on the rock-relief in Firuzābād (see [ARDAŠIR I ii.](#)). It is a hemispherical helmet of a noble Parthian with a neck-guard surmounted with a knob and a plume. Graffiti from Dura-Europos depict late Parthian conical helmets of several rows of metal plates fastened together with rivets (Du Mesnil du Buisson, 1936, pp. 192-97, fig. 16; Rostov-tzeff, 1933, p. 216, pl. XXXIII/2; Ghirshman, 1962, figs. 62, 100, 165; James, 1986, pp. 118-28, figs. 13-18; Gall, 1990, p. 69; Invernizzi, 1999, pp. 22-24, fig. 6, pl. A).

Several types of helmets were in use in Central Asia in the Kushan period. In Bactria there were conical ribbed helmets. One of the Khalchayan sculptures shows an egg-shaped helmet with a low visor projecting forward and a horizontal welt running along the edge of the bowl. Remains of a Kushan helmet made of narrow vertical plates of iron were found in Charsada (Čarsada).

The helmet was a standard item in Sasanian armor (Ṭabari, tr. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 248-49). Finds of early Sasanian helmets include one from Dura-Europos consisting of two halves riveted to two bars and provided with a pointed apex; a mail piece was attached to its lower edge. Many figures represented on Sasanian rock reliefs of the 3rd-4th centuries C.E. wear hemispherical helmets with neckpieces and bindings along the base. On Naqš-e Rostam No. 5, the cap is ornamented and has a knob on the top, while a mail piece is attached to the lower edge (Herrmann, 1977, p. 7, Pls. 1-3). The greater *ayvān* of Ṭāq-e Bostān attributed to Kōsrow II (591-628) shows a different kind of helmet, namely the “segmented” or “four-spanged helmet” [spangen helmet] (Fukai and Horiuchi, 1972, Pl. 36; Fukai et al., 1984, pp. 69-70); several helmets of this type are known. These are egg-shaped, made of four vertical iron segments fastened below with a horizontal bronze rim, from which come wide bronze bands crossing at the top. To these bands the iron segments are riveted; the latter are covered with thin, silver leaves for ornamentation. The horizontal rim has holes in its lower part through which a piece of chain mail extending from the shoulders was attached to the helmet (Granicsey, 1948-49,



pp. 272-81; Harper, 1978, pp. 89-90, fig. 31; Overlaet, 1982, pp. 193-96, Pls. I-V). For a detailed discussion about the origin and typology of Sasanian helmets, see von Gall, 1990, pp. 69-72.

Monumental art of Central Asia indicates that in that region several other types of helmets were used in the 6th-7th centuries. The most common was a sphero-conical helmet, which was hemispheroid in its lower half but gradually turned into a cone towards the top and was surmounted with a finial ornament. The rim was decorated with festoons. Often it was provided with a narrow bar protecting the nose and with cheekpieces. A piece of chain mail attached to the helmet covered the neck, shoulders, and almost the whole face except the eyes. Such helmets were most often constructed of metal plates, although there were also some made of multiple scales mounted on leather background (Shishkin, 1963, p. 163, Pl. XVII; Belenitskiĭ, 1973, Pls. 8, 9, 12, 21; Raspopova, 1980, p. 84, figs. 57-59).

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