



## RED DEER

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**RED DEER**, *Cervus elaphus*, in Persian: *marāl* and also *gavazn* and *gāv-e kuhi*

i. *Natural history.*

ii. *In Persian art.*

### i. NATURAL HISTORY

The red deer ranges from Europe to Northeast Asia, its appearance changing gradually, until, from Central Asia eastward, it becomes quite similar to the North American wapiti (

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## ii. IN PERSIAN ART

As the red deer is a forest-dwelling species, not many Persians of the plateau are familiar with this animal or, on occasion, even aware of its existence. Judging from the perspective of Persian art, this appears to have been particularly the case throughout the Islamic era— despite the fact that extensive areas, chiefly in western and northern Iran (but outside the plateau area), were covered by prime hardwood forests during most of this period.

Thus the stag (unlike the ibex and mouflon) is very rarely seen in Persian ceramics, metalwork, carpets, etc., of the Islamic era. In the paintings of Safavid times, which show a multitude of identifiable wild animals, deer are depicted perhaps less than half a dozen times. Yet, when alluding to Greek art, Ghirshman states that “the stag was an animal motif that originated in the East” (Ghirshman, 1964, p. 334). It is in fact depicted repeatedly, with distinction and originality, in many of the more ancient cultures of Iran, which arose in the northern and western regions of the country. This is especially true with the art of Amlash (9th–8th century BCE), in the mountainous region southwest of the Caspian Sea, and that of Luristan (8th–7th century BCE) in the Zagros range. In Central Asia the Scythians, nomads of Iranian origin, whose royal tombs have become famous, produced beautiful objects, among them some in the shape of stags. A variety of objects from the Achaemenid and Sasanian eras also show representations of the marāl stag.

The small bronze stag figures from Amlash are admirable productions, their antlers often abounding with haphazardly placed tines (ibid., p. 36). A grazing stag, represented on a bronze cup from Luristan, is an unusually realistic work (ibid., p. 334). A Luristan horse bit is composed of winged does on either side of a rigid crossbar suckling their fawns, but nevertheless bearing highly stylized antlers (ibid., p. 61). A Sasanian ewer, showing in full a beautifully modeled strutting stag on either side, is a sumptuous work in bronze and silver (7th century CE; Ghirshman, 1962, p. 202).

The earliest record [this author] found in the Islamic period of a representation of a red deer stag is a polychromed and carved ceramic plate from the Rey-Kāšān region (*Survey of Persian Art*, p. 604, showing an alarmed-looking stag and ascribed to the 11th century. In this, as in a painting of what came to be called Shiraz school and produced much later (ca. 1420 CE) for Prince Bāysonḡor, depicting a stag near Majnun in the desert (*ibid.*, p. 863), it is clear from the awkwardly shaped antlers (whose tines point both forward and back), that neither artist was really familiar with this animal, the stag, being felled by the sword of a huntsman (p. 894). There is also a papier maché, lacquer painted bookbinding of the 16th century, illustrating a number of different animals as well as what is perhaps the most authentic looking stag, even though its antlers are once again rendered incorrectly (*ibid.*, p. 974).

Finally, sculpted steel animals, characteristically with gold inlay or encrustation, have been produced in Iran since the Safavid era, and have endured as a popular form of contemporary metalwork into the 20th century. Very attractive deer figurines are to be seen among these. What kind of deer, however, is best not asked.

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