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SASANIAN WALL PAINTING

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Murals found on sites within the territory of the Sasanian Empire (224- 650 CE; see SASANIAN DYNASTY) are considered Sasanian. While their main function is decorative, their secondary function can be derived from location, theme, and dimension, and is important because it reflects a world-view. Wall paintings were excavated at only seven sites in Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and have received less attention than Sasanian rock reliefs and silver ware, or Sasanian coinage. In the following, a survey of all known Sasanian wall paintings, mentioning iconography, location, date, and function, is complemented with an evaluation of the murals within the context of Sasanian art and within the tradition of Near Eastern wall paintings from the era of the Parthians to the rise of Islam.

Chronological survey. At Gōr (see FIRUZĀBĀD), Iran, a painting described in official press releases on the internet (CAIS; CHN) as four members of the Sasanian imperial family, and interpreted as two women, a man, and a child with a calf, was discovered in a structure, interpreted as a palace. According to L. Niakan, this decoration can be dated to the reign of Ardašir I (224-42), but further information has not yet been published.

At Dura Europos, Syria, a painting was found in the reception room (?) of an ordinary dwelling. This battle scene with horsemen, smaller than life-size, included persons on couches, an archer, a figure with flower, and geometric designs (FIGURE 1; for a detailed description, see Little, pp. 182-89). Stylistic

criteria and the history of Dura Europos provide arguments for a tentative dating of the mural to between 253 and 256 (Goldman and Little, pp. 283-84, 289, 293, fig. 1). Painted names point to the possibility that the mural commemorated a historical event, such as the entry of Shapur I (240-272) in Roman Syria. If this battle scene is interpreted as the victory of Shapur I, the mural would show Sasanian auxiliaries fighting with Romans or Palmyrene auxiliaries (Little, pp. 191, 198; Gall, p. 54). The gaze of the incoming people would fall on the painted wall, and so the scene was designed to catch the attention of the visitors, arousing their admiration for Sasanian political and military power.

At Susa (see SASANIAN SUSA), remains of paintings were found in the central chamber at the back of a court in the so-called *Ville Royale*, assumed to have been the residence of an important person. These fragments are interpreted as a hunting scene, twice the life-size, with a crescent, stars, and clouds (FIGURE 2), and hunting was a favorite pastime (see HUNTING IN IRAN). Roman Ghirshman (1952, pp. 8-9; 1962, p. 183) dated the paintings to the first half of the 4th century, but other archeologists (Gasche, p. 172; Steve, p. 509) prefer a 2nd century date in the Parthian period. These large and colorful murals must have pleasantly impressed the spectators.

At Ayvān-e Kerkha, Iran, fragments of wall paintings, showing human figures, were excavated in a triple *ayvān*, opposite the southern gate of a palace known as Ṭāq-e Ayvān. The history of Ayvān-e Kerkha and iconographic characteristics date these murals to the Sasanian period (Gyselen and Gasche, p. 33, pl. X). Ghirshman (1952, pp. 10-11; 1962, p. 183) dated the paintings to the second half of the 4th century. It has been argued that *ayvān*s served as official reception pavilions (see PALACE ARCHITECTURE), and thus the wall decoration might have had an ideological intention, signifying perhaps, the monarch's prestige in this important royal city.

At Hajiabad (see HAJIABAD i. INSCRIPTIONS), Iran, *ayvān*s 149 and 214 in the residence of a prominent person had wall paintings. In *ayvān* 149, the mural consisted of human heads and a combat scene, supplemented with geometric and floral designs (FIGURE 3; for a detailed description see Azarnoush, pp. 167-74). On the basis of stucco decoration, Massoud Azarnoush (pp. 92, 238 and pl. C) has dated the paintings to the 4th century. If these *ayvān*s are indeed audience halls, it seems probable that these murals did not play a merely decorative role. Azarnoush (pp. 180-82) has argued that the main portrait, larger than life-size, would represent the master of the residence, while

portrait A, smaller than life-size, could probably be identified with the Kushano-Sasanian ruler Hormozd I (second half of the 3rd century; cf. Bivar, "History;" Cribb, p. 177) and the features of portrait B could identify him as Hormozd's political subordinate. According to this interpretation, the painting seems to illustrate good relations between the inhabitants of this residence and the Sasanian elites. The faces have big and mostly forward staring eyes that direct the visitor's gaze to the wall painting.

At Tepe Hissar, murals were discovered in the residence of an important person. The building is of an uncertain date, though some scholars (Schmidt and Kimball, pp. 327, 330, 336-38) argue that it was occupied during the reign of Kawād I (r. 488-96 and 499-531). The wall paintings are located in two rooms adjacent to an audience hall (?), and a horseman is clearly recognizable (FIGURE 4).

At Ctesiphon, Iraq, wall paintings of life-size figures with raised hands and a bird were found in dwelling I at Maʿāredh. This house is dated to the 6th or 7th century on the basis of stucco work ("Wissenschaftliche Berichte," pp. 331-32; Schmidt, p. 18; Kröger, pp. 81, 89). West of the throne room of the Ṭāq-e Kesrā (see AYVĀN-E KESRĀ) is a bathhouse, the walls of which were painted with decorative motifs. This complex was part of the Sasanian palace (Upton, p. 193; "Wissenschaftliche Berichte," p. 332; Schmidt, p. 18). These murals were probably pure decoration, but symbolical connotations cannot be excluded.

Kuh-e Khʷāja is not included in this survey because the interpretation of the wall paintings is very uncertain. Scholars have suggested dates that range from the Achaemenid to the Seleucid, Parthian, Sasanian and early Islamic period (Herzfeld, p. 293; Kawami, 1987, p. 153; Ghanimati, pp. 140-41, 145; Bivar, pp. 3, 5; Kawami, 2005, p. 189).

Wall paintingswithin the context of Sasanian art. The known wall paintings appear to be secular and belong to the repertoire of public art in the service of royal propaganda. Most murals confirm the observation of the Roman author Ammianus Marcellinus (ca. 330-91): "for nothing in their country is painted or sculptured except slaughter in divers forms and scenes of war" (24.6.3, tr. Rolfe, II, pp. 456-57). Battle scenes stressed the power and prestige of the monarch, and the painting at Dura Europos is, for example, comparable to the reliefs Firuzābād I and Naqš-e Rostam IV and VII. The hunt was a favorite recreation of the king and his nobility (Erdmann, p. 353), and hunting scenes, which would refer to the court life, also occur in rock reliefs and on silver

ware. Some scholars (Ghirshman, 1951, p. 300; Porada, p. 210; Shepherd, p. 1088; Harper, p. 588) have argued that the reliefs Ṭāq-e Bustān V and VI were created under the influence of wall painting. At Hajiabad, the murals seem to illustrate the residents in a social context, and are thus comparable to the many Sasanian busts in stucco, silver, or bronze that also carried important social connotations.

The fragments were discovered in secular contexts in the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon, as well as in the less important cities, and the buildings range from residences of prominent persons to ordinary dwellings. Since the rooms of most wall paintings appear to have served as reception rooms or audience halls, they must have had a public function, and their ideological significance would have been more important than their decorative role.

Data concerning plastering, color pigments, and painting techniques are scarce. At Susa the plaster consisted of tempered loam, at Hajiabad of mud, and at Ctesiphon of stucco. At Hajiabad, *secco* technique, and at Ctesiphon both *secco* and *fresco* technique were used (Ghirshman, 1952, p. 8; Kröger, p. 88; Azarnoush, p. 179).

Up to now, most questions about the painters remain unanswered. It is not known, for instance, whether they were court residents or temporally hired craftsmen, or whether they were considered as artists or artisans (De Waele, p. 378).

Sasanian wall paintings within the tradition of Near Eastern wall paintings. The rupture between Parthian and Sasanian art should not be overestimated. Murals in residences at Assur and Hatra, where scenes with horsemen were found in the Parthian Palace, residential building A, and the North Palace (Andrae and Lenzen, pls. 61-62; Salihi, pl. III, nos. 1-2; Ricciardi, pp. 154-56, 160), reveal similarities between Parthian and Sasanian wall paintings. A battle scene in the tower at Nisa is comparable to the mural at Dura Europos (Pilipko, p. 73). Parthian elements, such as the flying gallop, the Nisean horse breed, and tripartite haircuts, were integrated in Sasanian art.

Various finds prove that Sasanian wall paintings influenced the art of the Sasanian neighbors as well as Islamic art. Reflections of Sasanian art are found, for example, in the Kushano-Sasanian paintings of Ghulbiyan near Fāryāb, the paintings from the Buddhist sanctuaries at Bāmiān and Doḵtar-e Nošervān, and the Sogdian (see SOGDIAN ART) paintings of Afrāsiāb,

Panjikant, and Varaḵša near Bukhara (Rowland, pp. 38-40; Ghirshman, 1962, pp. 316-18; Azarpay, p. 27; Schippmann, p. 136; Grenet, pp. 66-67). The adaptation of Sasanian elements in Islamic painting is documented by murals in the Umayyad castle of Qaṣr-al-ḥayr-al-ḡarbi, Syria, and the Abbasid (see ʿABBASID CALIPHATE) palace at Samarra, Iraq (Rice, p. 31; Schippmann, p. 139).

Figurative wall paintings seem to have played an important role in the Sasanian Empire, though their transient nature makes it impossible to determine more precisely its relative status within the context of Sasanian art.

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