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Symbolic Figures in Sassanian Rock Reliefs and Stucco

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Abstract

Symbolic figures, in addition to decorative aspects, are indicator of culture, religion, art and political and social structures of a government and country in ancient times. During the Sassanid era, symbolic figures flourished further with the mixture of religion and polity and their examples can be seen in most of the remaining artworks from the same era that could found during archaeological excavations. Investigation of symbolic figures in the Sassanian rock reliefs and stucco is a necessity but unfortunately, has not been independently and elaborately addressed to this date. It is necessary to investigate this significant aspect using archaeological and historical evidence. This study, which is considered as a kind of fundamental research based on its objective and a historical one with respect to its nature and methodology, obviously indicate that the dominant symbolic figures in Sassanian rock reliefs and stucco have had religious origins.

Keywords: Sassanian; Zoroastrianism; Stucco; Rock Reliefs; Symbolic Figures.

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Introduction

One of the ethnic and indigenous indications of every nation is relying on the achievements which are the outcome of that nation's beliefs and attitude towards the surrounding world. With a profound look at the history of the ancient people, we can perceive the fact that a huge part of every nation's beliefs and views was consisted of the gods and mythologies related to that era. Reflection of this attitude can be concretely perceived in the artworks created by that nation.

These creation and inventions are in fact, indicative of mentalities of the artists who had risen from among people; consequently, they would later cause the continuation and expansion of those arts. One of the most significant approaches for being familiar with culture, art, and beliefs which are prevalent in a society that the artworks created in which are studied, is to notice the symbolic figures employed in these art relics; this can reveal many of the hidden concepts beyond the appearance of an artwork to us. The Sassanian art is also among the conceptual arts replete with purposeful reliefs. This art while creating a state of ecstasy, exhilaration, cheerfulness, and reminding of a scene or object will never disarm the viewer and confront him/her with a fait accompli or a complete position. Rather, it leaves some place for a viewer's self-expression, reflection and imagination. Among the rock reliefs and stucco remained of this period, there are some specific abstract mysterious symbolic figures that each one represents a specified concept.

Some of these symbolic figures contain mythical aspect and others represent courtier, political, military, and social characters and individuals. Diversity and multiplicity of these kinds of symbolic figures

are so high that it would be difficult to keep them in mind all together and find out their significance by remembering and suggesting them mentally. On the other hand, some of these symbolic figures and badges, especially those about whose concept no semiotic studies have been performed, are still ambiguous.

Symbolic figures in Sassanian stucco and rock reliefs are highly abundant and diverse. In the following, several common and particular figures which have been rarely considered in research related to the Sassanian period are dealt with. The identified symbols in the present study are discussed and investigated.

Many scholars researched about Sasanian artwork like cloth, coin, Rock Reliefs and Stucco and other things. For instance, Georgina Herrmann in part of *The Iranian Revival* investigated rock reliefs of Sasanian Empire (Herrmann, 1977). Roman Ghirshman in some books introduced and analyzed Sasanian artwork (see Ghirshman, 1971: 2000). *A Newly Discovered of Sasanian Rock Reliefs* is new book in this regard (Hasani, 2014). Recently Seyed Rasoul Mousavi Haji and Ali Akbar Sarfaraz published a book on Sasanian rock reliefs and investigated the ancient glorious monuments (see Mousavi Haji and Sarfaraz, 2017). Symbolic figures and special signs are varied and in multiplicity where some are not semiotics. Symbolic figures in Sassanian rock reliefs and Stucco are very important that we will be investigated in this article.

Symbolic Figures

The symbolic figures investigated in this study include boar, lion, royal hunting, the goddess Anahita, the goddess Nikeh, and

Simurgh which are evaluated and undergone semiotics.

1- Boar

Boar figures in Taq-i Bustan, Kermanshah are represented in two forms: first, in the royal hunting scene, that on the left wall displays the boar hunt assembly, followed by rowing women in a boat whose clothes are designed with circles in which boar heads are carved (Christensen, 2003:494) (Fig. 1). Among the stucco of this period, only one stucco tablet has been discovered from Damghanbeh Tepe wall on which a boar head has been carved in a round frame (Ghirshman, 1971: 200) (Figs. 2-3).

Semiotics and Concepts of Boar Figure

Boar had a particular respect and esteem among Iranians during the Sassanian period, and since it has been known as God Bahram, people used to depict this figure on their artworks (Amouzegar, 1997: 19). Hereby, they gave sacredness to the intended relics by carving the figure of Bahram, the god of war and victory (Asil, 1999:213).

According to the authors, the boar hunting assembly in Taq-i Bustan is one of the unique and noteworthy examples in Sassanian art reflecting a specific concept in the arts of that era; because in this relic, a combination of boar-hunting assembly, presence of the king with a holy aura around his head and boar are represented that all encompass particular symbolic concepts of the Sassanian period inclined to the king's goals. The most appropriate interpretation about this gathering can be stated as follows: this is a symbol of divine splendor of the king which is intended to legitimate and indicate the greatness of his power. Indeed, displaying the royal hunting assembly is intended to express the bravery and strength which is

embedded inside the king in the form of divine power or splendor and this bravery feature as well as being one of the characteristic of God Bahram and is shown in the physically embodiment of a sharp-toothed boar; in other words, only the king is permitted to hunt a boar with his divine status and position (representative of God Bahram). This scene can be generally seen as a religious one attempting to grant divinity to the king's status and show the king's greatness and power.

In the stucco tablet with a boar figure discovered in Damghan, boar head with hair standing upright as a crown, powerful teeth, and eyes that by making a tiny cavity in which, a penetrating look has been produced in the pupils, are simple concepts through which a persuasive effect of an animal with extraordinary power has been created (Pordada, 1979: 306). This boar figurine can be compared with boar-head that found at Barzeh Ghavaleh Tepe in Loristan province (see Gravand and Zeynivand, 2014, Fig 6) (Fig 4).

Image relating to boar-head in Sassanian art have been frequently performed on cloth, silver dishes, and stucco representing the national and people-friendly aspect of this figure. Another reason might be the fact that Varsarghaneh, has accompanied Mehr in an earthly journey (Shaeitis and Pope, 1999: 795).

In Sassanian far-off religious texts, we see an extensive reflection of God Bahram indicating the importance of this god. Some examples of these texts will be mentioned below:

In BahramYašt, it has been stated that, "Bahram, the Ahura-created person, appeared to him embodied as a male rapacious, sharp-toothed and a raider boar

for the fifth time” (Doustkhah, 1991: 434; Loconian, 2010:184).

Yasna Hat 59: “We admire Bahram, the god-created and victorious person” (Pourdavoud, 1978:71).

In Khorda Avesta, God Bahram is one of Amschāspand Ordibehesht’s colleagues. In Ardaviraf Nameh, Bahram is one of the gods who accompanied Ardaviraf’s soul after passing Činvat Peretum (Afifi, 1995: 87).

Minoy-e Kherad also states that, “The powerful Bahram along with Soroush, the fourth day after death, would accompany benefactors’ souls (Minouy-e Kherad, 1985: 12).

Bundahis: Bahram is the banner-holding god and no one is more powerful than him who

has always been holding the banner representing gods’ victory (Bahar, 2001: 112).

One of the points which have been considered in all the texts is the powerfulness and warlike morale of Bahram. In the artworks belonging to this god, it has been tried to demonstrate the same characteristics by presenting a tough face, sharp teeth and an aggressive position of a boar.

In chronometry of ancient Iran, the twentieth day of every month was called Bahram day (Bahram Rouz). That protection of this day is undertaken by this god (Afifi, 1995: 462). It should be noted that the most prestigious fire ceremony of Zoroastrians called Bahram, indicates the status of this god among the Iranians per se (Amouzegar, 1997: 25).

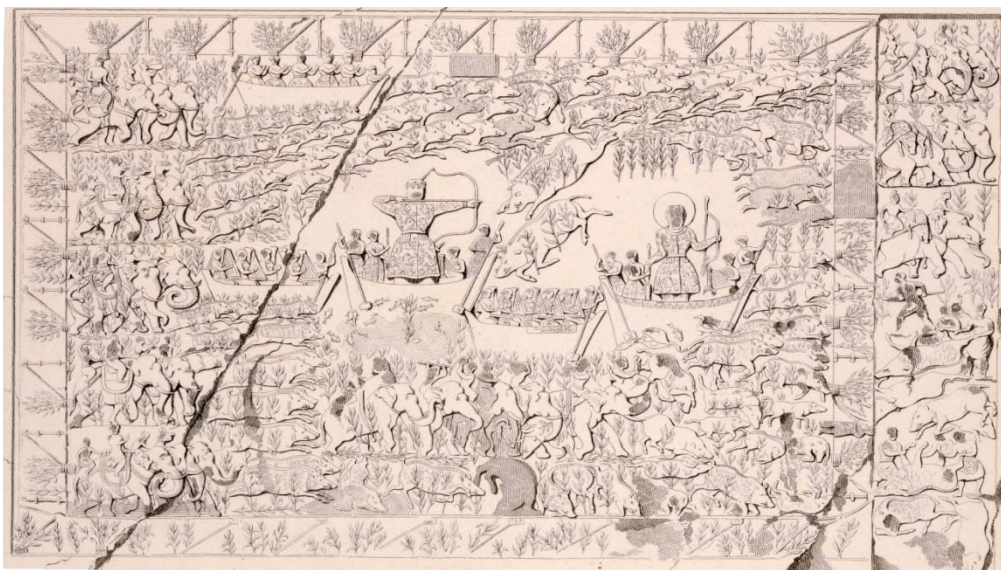


Fig. 1. Taq-I Bustin, Boar Hunting Scene (Flandin and Cost 1851: Pl. 10)



Fig. 2. Sassanid Relief of a Boar (6th/7th century AD), plaster, from Umm az-Za'atir (Iraq) Museum of Islamic Art (Berlin).



Fig. 3. Boar Figure, (the Archive of National Museum)



Fig. 4. Boar Figure, from site of Barzeh Ghavaleh in Loristan province (Gravand and Zeynivand 2014, Fig 6)

2- Lion

Lion figure has been carved on Sassanian rock reliefs in two different forms: first, Sar Mashhad Rock Relief in southern Kazeroun; in this scene, Bahram kills a lion and cuts another lion into two halves (Figs. 5-6). It shows the danger has been warded off as the king protects the queen by his left hand and keeps her behind. The crown prince, who is standing behind the queen, is paying his respect to these two; witnesses of the scene are indifferent about what has had occurred; not because killing a lion who was attacking the king and the queen is a typical and everyday event, but due to the fact that the king and the queen find no reason to be excited. The picture has not been inspired by a real event; limitations of such symbolic themes are clearly evident (Hartsfield, 2002: 330).

The next figure is a quite different subject belonging to a huge rock relief of Shapour I at the historical site of Tange Chougan, Bishabour, which depicts the victory of the Iranian king over three Roman emperors. Our intended figures on the right side of the second frame are two shackled lions which have been offered as gifts to the king (Christensen, 2003:248).

A stucco piece at the Hajiabad site, 60 km south of Darab, belongs to a lion head. On this piece, a very projected lion head has been carved and locks of mane around the lion's face are in the form of sunlight or a heterogeneous circle. In the frontal view, the lion's eyes and snout are circular and its open mouth with upper and lower canine teeth indicate its roar (Azarnoush, 1983: 127-129) (Fig. 7).

These lion figures can be compared with hemispherical bowl with the depiction of a lion encircled by a row of pearls that discovered from Qouri Qalehcave (Alibaigi et al., 2017, Fig 6). Also this figurine

compared by three angry lions that discovered from Zahhak Castle (Ghandgar et al, 1383: 201, Fig. 2). There is also a lion stucco discovered from Nisa site, in Turkmenistan, and architectural decoration with lion-head from Dastva in Shooshtar (see Omrani and Moradi, 1393)

Lion's Semiotics and Concepts

Lion's figure is one of the old symbolic ones in Iran and Mesopotamia, whose presence in Mesopotamia can be seen between 4500 and 3500 B.C. (Row, 1990:67). Also, during the Elamite era, according to illustrated figures of seals, this animal has been accompanied with some changes and lion's images were integrated with parts of other animals (Hints, 1992:193).

For the Median and Achaemenid people in Iranian carvings and artworks, lion has been considered as one of the manifestations of Mitra or Mehr, who had been a big Aryan angel and after Ahura Mazda, she has been considered to be more honorable and cherish than the other angels (Ghaemmaghami, 1966:108).

Lion along with sun symbol in Iran indicate the settling of the sun power in this animal. In the Iranian myths, god "Zorvān" has a lion head and a human body and it is called a demon by some people. Lion is the symbol of sun on the earth and eagle is a symbol of sun in the sky. The figure of eagle with lion in the Iranian art represents the linking of the earth and sky. In the Iranian religion of Mithraism, the fourth rank of Mitra is the lion's position; due to the same reason, on the painting tableau, rock reliefs and Iranian artworks, there are abundant examples of lion (Mobini, 2010: 44).

Semiotics of lion in rock reliefs and stucco can be considered from two different angles. The reason for this segregation

includes the difference of subject and concept of the scenes in these two sections. In Sar-Mashhad Rock Relief, the presence of lion as an aggressive and evil force can be seen; the king is standing in front of the lion with a destructive power that wants to damage the king and the royal family and kills the lion. In Iran, kings and clergymen believed that the role of a king was to overcome the destructive and evil forces that were active in the kingdom. The great celestial battle of truth and falsehood was a force in which the king was also involved, but it seems that the role of a king in establishing order and peace for the divine realm in his kingdom with the aid of Ahura Mazda was emphasized.

History of kings' fighting with lion dates back to the Achaemenian period as most significant motif of seals or tablets found in the Persepolis is the figure of the champion king. In most of the plates belonging to Sassanian eras, the victorious king has been depicted. Interpretation of these scenes is like reflections of the old exemplum of hunting and war and serves as the defeat of worldly and spiritual enemies embodied as beasts. As it has been endorsed by the rock relief of Bahram II, related to the early Sassanian period in Sar Mashhad, in this rock relief, the king simply kills those lions that not only have attacked him, but also have attacked his family and the great priest (Abeddoust and Kazempour, 2009: 102). Also, a lion stucco in Yazdgerd castle has been discovered (see Keall 1977: Pl. VII) (Fig. 6).

The figures of the roaring lions' heads among Hajiabad stucco whose manes are

scattered around their faces can be considered as a reflection and symbol of Mitra. In other words, lion is a manifestation of the convent and promise goddess (Farboud and Jaafarpour, 2007: 70), and a symbol of reign of solar force (Copper, 2001:235; Ghaffarian, 1998: 159).

Finally, the lion stucco image can be analyzed as follows: lion is the symbol of highly luminous sun which is rich in virtues and vices induced by his status (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 2006:111).

Duality of the lion symbol in Sassanian rock reliefs and stucco can be seen in religious beliefs and Iranian' religious traditions since Achaemenid to Sassanid periods.

The divine and good nature of lion has been created in the artworks of the Sassanian as well. Lion is the symbol and material embodiment of the Goddess Mitra on the earth who always observes the covenants and promises among human beings and assists Ahura Mazda in fighting with the demon.

However, on the role of lion as a symbol of evil and being inauspicious, one must return back to the Achaemenian era, and it must be investigated in artworks of that period. In these relics, where the lion is a symbol of evil and an aggressive force, it is merely the duty of the king to confront with this evil through his divine power. These motifs which have been continued to the Sassanian period can be seen on Sar-Mashhad Rock Relief. In other words, these figures can be regarded as a warning to the enemies of the kingdom.

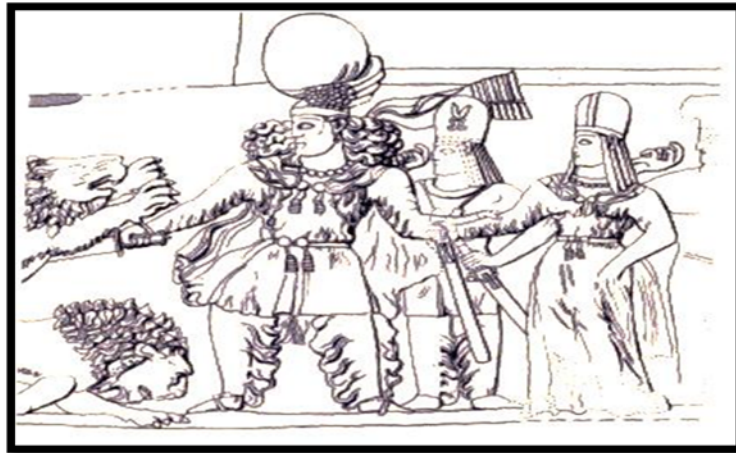


Fig. 4. Sar Mashhad, Battle of Bahram II with Lion (Flandin and Cost, 1858:186)



Fig. 5. Sar Mashhad, Battle of Bahram II with Lion (Herrmann, 1977: 106)



Fig. 6. Hajiabad, a Stucco Piece of Lion Head (Archive of the National Museum)



Fig. 7. Yazdgerd Castle, a Stucco Piece of Lion Head (Keall, 1977: Pl. VII)

3- Royal Hunt

The only motif of this royal banquet exists on the rock relief at Taq-i Bستان. In two lateral fronts of the great Taq-i Bستان, royal hunting grounds have been carved as reliefs. The grace of this valuable historical work is due to the fact that it demonstrates a Sassanian hunting ground with all its details. On the right side of the arch, a hunting assembly has been carved out. Hunters are chasing bears; in this assembly, the king's face has been carved at three places. At the bottom, the king riding on a horse at a gallop, is chasing the bears and throwing arrows towards them. The figures on the left side of the wall show boar hunting. On the upper part, a boat is seen in which some women are sitting and they are singing and clapping. In one of them, the king has been depicted in a larger than the normal size holding a bow and is stretching its string (Mousavi Haji, 1995: 211-212; Christensen, 2003:491-493) (Figs. 1, 8).

The only stucco example of the royal hunt assembly is a plaque found at the Chale Tarkhan site located in the south of Tehran and 20km from Shah Abdol Azim near the city of Rey. This plaque, as Thompson argues, is related to Bahram and Azadeh. Here, a camel is demonstrated moving to the right side, with Bahram and Azadeh riding in the frontal view. Bahram has stretched his

bow to kill three gazelles which are depicted in a vertical way, opposite the camel and Azadeh is also playing music. On this plaque, the lowest gazelle is demonstrated as a horned animal whose hoof and ear are linked together by an arrow. The upper gazelle, while trying to escape, is moving forward a gallop (Thompson, 1976: 18-22) (Fig. 9).

Semiotics and Concepts of Royal Hunt

Sassanians believed that their reign had the divine providence. The divine aspect of king's responsibility was due to that fact that kingship was considered as a divine seat, with the king being a righteous vicegerent of God on the earth. This celestial power is evident from king's battles and hunting assemblies. Hence, demonstrating the figure of the royal hunt was a suitable tool and a common theme of the artists in various fields (Pope, 2008:67; Elahi, 2005:60), including a display of king's physical power and dexterity that are somehow a symbol of the king's warfare.

The hunting in Iran during the Sassanian period, like ancient Mesopotamia, was given the first rank. It included epic and extraordinary scenes, with a special place for a king of kings. The hunted beasts had symbolic meaning; however, lack of texts regarding Taq-i Bستان has led to various religious, seasonal and geographical interpretations of them (Harper, 2006:144).

Sassanian artists by carving hunting scenes of beasts such as lion, boar, and bear in a narrow and compact space suggest the bravery and prowess of kings to the viewers and visualize the kings' championship and power (Ehsani, 2003:109).

Sassanian kings, by creating royal hunting scenes and assemblies, tried to

highlight not only their power and championship but also their successful hunting, a symbol of their divine power. They wanted to show that such power has been entrusted in them by the God; hence, in royal hunt assemblies, the king's presence is highlighted and seems more significant.

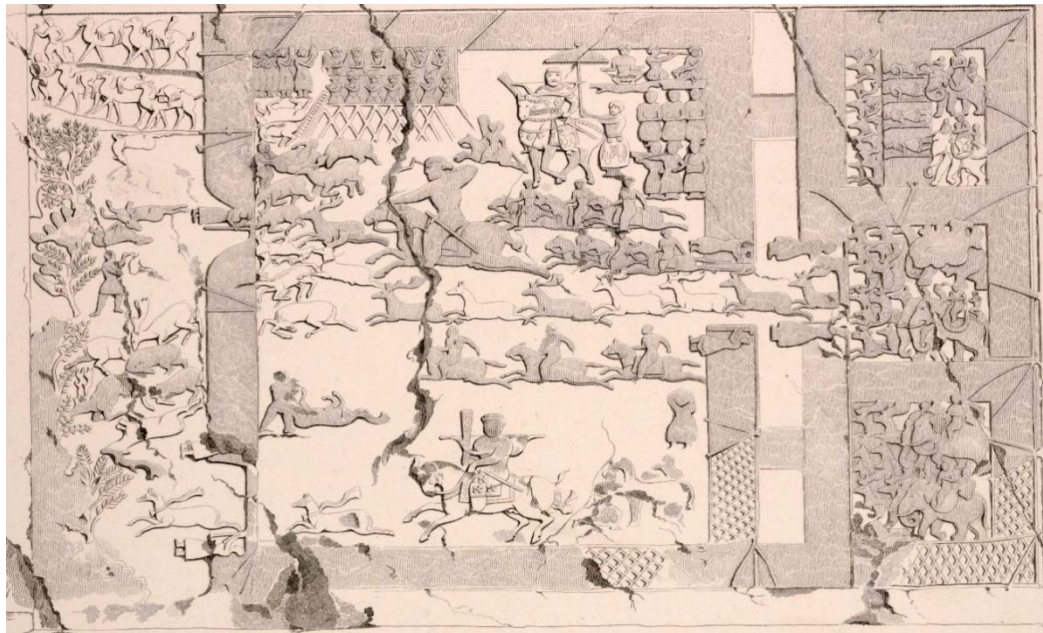


Fig. 8. Taq-i Bustan, Royal Hunt Assembly (Flandin and Cost, 1851: Pl. 12)



Fig. 9. Chal-e Tarkhan, Hunting Scene of Bahram & Azadeh (internet)

4- Anahita

A magnificent investiture ceremony of Pirouz I at Taq-i Bustan or at the end large arch is the reason for the existence of this statue-contained porch. Since arch itself is a Sassanian narrative of investiture ceremony and frequently displayed during the first Sassanian century. Here, three statues are depicted; the king who is standing between Ahura Mazda and Anahita and two diadems which are being granted to the king (Herman, 1994: 150; Mousavi Haji, 2008:87) (Figs. 10-11).

Another figure of Anahita is located at the ancient site of Naghsh-i Rostam (near the Persepolis). In this scene, contrary to the common tradition of Sassanian period, it is the first time that the goddess rank promotion, is granted to Nareseh (Herzfeld, 2002: 331).

The stucco image of this goddess at the Bandian Dargaz site, Yazdgerd Castle near Ghasr-i Shirin and Hajiabad in Fras province are as follows:

Bandian: On a private door of the hall, in the west, there are reliefs of three lily bushes, with each having three leaves. These bushes are carved behind a woman wearing long frilly dress with sleeves covering her hands up to the wrists; she is performing religious ceremonies in a hall with pleated sumptuous curtain. The woman is holding a pitcher and pouring water on the ground. Certainly, this layout is that of Anahita (Rahbar, 1997: 14).

Hajiabad: This type of small stucco statue is three-dimensional and is 31cm high, 17.9cm wide and 12.7cm thick. Only a small part of the woman's neck which is standing upper than the beady edge of the collar is remained. She is wearing a long frilly dress with long sleeves. Although this woman's left hand is placed on her left breast and it has been

covered, its prominence can be clearly seen under her hand. Her right hand whose thumb has been disappeared is put on her right knee. Her shoulders are too wide, her right knee is a little bended and has moved inward (Azarnoush, 1994: 123-124) (Fig. 12).

Yazdgerd Castle: At this site, an in-built pyramidal pillar from the room Number 11 has been found which is entirely painted with a red color on which a naked woman is standing and two dolphins can be seen on her both sides in a fully projected manner. She is holding the twisted tails of the two dolphins in her hand (Fig. 13). Since in the ancient Greek mythology, the role of the naked woman involving with sea and dolphins is attributed to Aphrodite. The figure of the above-mentioned bell in Yazdgerd castle is related to this goddess (Keall, 1977: 7; Khanmoradi, 2006: 67-68). The figure of the naked woman hanging two fishes from her hands, are inspired by the Aphrodite worshipping ritual in the ancient Rome and Greek art. However, its meaning should not be necessarily related to the western kind (Frye, 1995: 52; Herman, 1994: 78).

Semiotics and Concepts of Anahita

Fertility statues are known as mother goddess examples of which have founded at Sarab tepe in Kermanshah (as old as 9,000 years) and the Susa ancient site. She is considered as the Iranian counterpart of Aphrodite, the beauty and love goddess in Greece (Amouzegar, 1997:22).

In Greek mythologies, Aphrodite has been the counterpart of Anahita in Iran, an example of which was found at Yazdgerd Castle. Aphrodite represents a goddess born from the meerschaum; and is one of the twelve selected Olympian gods and goddesses (Dickson Kennedy, 2006: 23).

Aphrodite is the goddess of love, beauty, flowers, sea, animals, gardens, and even goddess of death (Warner, 2007: 291; Behmanesh, 1992:24). She has been titled as the goddess of chastity and probity and is comparable to Iranian Anahita. However, she has both good and bad deeds together. In Greek mythologies, sensuality, love-makings and her support of prostitution reminds ones the Babylonian Ishtar and is never comparable to virtuous Anahita. In Athens and Cornetiuous, prostitutes in Aphrodite's temples were engaged in sacred prostitution (Vali, 2000:151).

Anahita is one of the sublime goddesses in Zoroastrianism that had been frequently mentioned and admired in Avesta and Pahlavi texts. Nahid is another name of water goddess in Avesta mentioned as "Anāhitā" and "Ābān" with the attribute of "Arədvī Sūrā" means thriving and powerful and has been highly admired (Afifi, 1995: 634). In Zādseram's Selections, Anahita has been mentioned with "Arədvī Sūrā" attribute and descends to the earth accompanied with Espanarmaz to prevent the harms from wizards and demon (Zādseram's Selections, 1987: 25). Yašt V of Yašts Book is called "Ābān Yašt" where Ahura Mazda told Zoroaster: O' Zoroaster, Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā who has spread her skirt everywhere, is curative, demon-fighter and God believer, upon my will, she would be the one who would purifies sperm of all men and refine the wombs of all women for generation (Doustkhah, 1991: 297).

History of this goddess's presence in Iran dates back to the eras before Zoroaster's emergence; she was known as a pre-Zoroaster goddess. By emergence of Zoroaster, his worship caused other gods to be obsolete. During the Achaemenian Dariush I, despite the religious negligence and indulgence, there was no trace of other gods and only Ahura Mazda had been mentioned and admired by Dariush. In other words, Ahura Mazda alone undertook all the duties of other gods. Over time, during the Ardeshir II period, we see the re-emergence of Anahita in his inscriptions and it paved the way for the return of other Zoroastrian gods and goddesses. During the Sassanian period, major changes occurred in Zoroastrian religion, which are aligned to the political objectives and interests of Zoroastrian priests and kings. During this period, the gods, in order to legitimize the Sassanian kingship, appeared in human bodies; and in teachings of this Zoroastrian period, protest and fighting with pre-Zoroastrian gods are forgotten and instead, they are replaced with strong presence of these gods and goddesses as Ahura Mazda's (the Great God) assistants in religious texts and other artworks, including rock reliefs. During the Sassanian period, in addition to the sublime position of Anahita which has been mentioned in religious texts, the status of this goddess even during Narseh's period reaches such a high extent that she grants the king diadem, which was usually received by the king from Ahura Mazda's hands.



Fig. 10. Taq-i Bustan, Pirouz's receiving from Ahuramazda in Presence of Anahita (Flandin and Cost, 1858: 9)

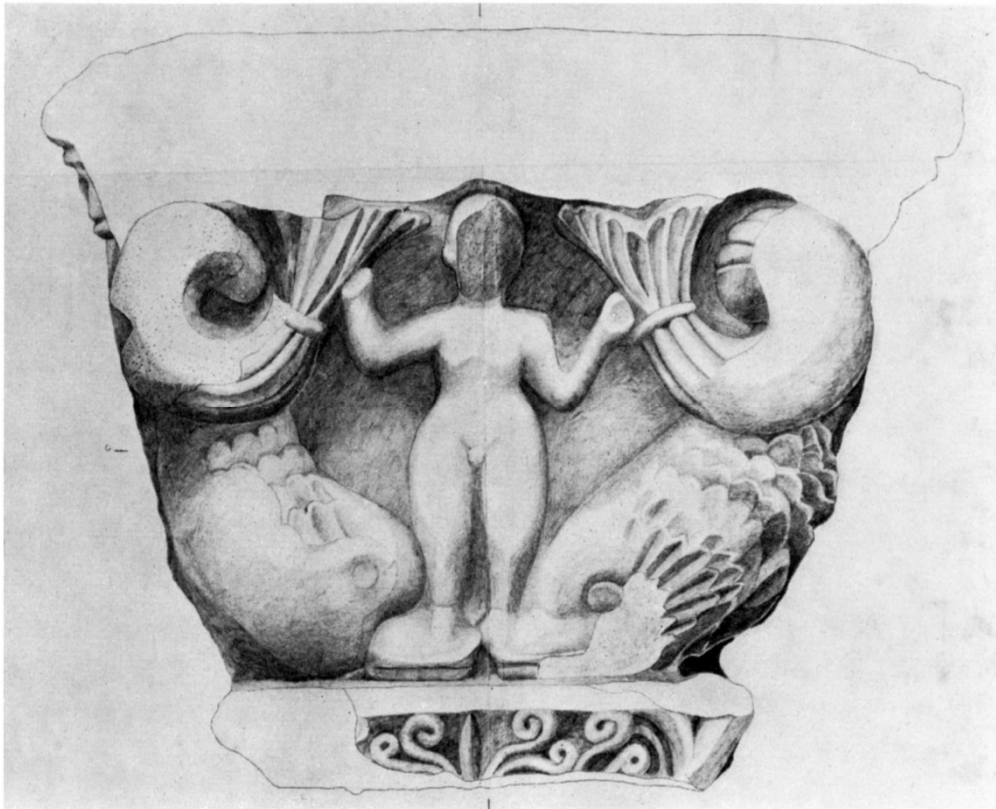


Fig. 11. Aphrodite Statue in Yazdgerd Castle (Keall, 1977: Fig. VI)



Fig. 12. Hajiabad, Plaster Statue of Anahita (Azarnoush, 1994: Pl. XXI)

5-The Goddess Nike

The Goddess Nike promises victory. In rock reliefs of Taq-i Bustan carved on the forehead of the arch are both influenced by Nike of Greek-Roman periods (Figs. 13-14); exactly like small angels who are granting a necklace in silver plates to champions (Ackerman, 2008: 993). Both winged figures have tiny rings with ribbons and they are jeweled; and also, they are holding dishes. Small wings on their Alice tapes highlight their nature as guardians (Hrper, 2006: 143; Christensen, 2003: 478). In Taq-i Bustan, although Helenian influence is obviously seen, a balance between these two styles has been

established (Shaietes and Pope, 2008:784). In the victory scene of Shapour I (Tang-e Chougan, Bishabour), the goddess of victory with large and extensive wings has been carved who is flying above the horse toward Shapour. One of the wings of this angel covers the other wing and the angel is holding a decorated element in her hand (Ghirshman, 2000: 88).

Two stucco pieces have been found with Nike's figure carved on them; one in Zakhak Castle in Hashtroud which has a partial rectangular or trapezoidal shape whose lower side is shorter than the upper one and in the middle of it, a figure of a woman's bust in

frontal view in a projected fashion with two wings which are extended upward from her shoulders is depicted; the wings demonstrate the religious aspect of this figure (Ghangar et al., 2004: 203) (Fig. 15). Another figure of this goddess exists in Yazdgerd Castle in Kermanshah which can be observed on six stucco pieces of Yazdgerd Castle. On these pieces, Nike, has appeared in the scene alone or along with some other people. In one of the images, two Nike goddesses are embracing each other (Khanmoradi, 2006:68-67).

Semiotics and Concepts of Nike Goddess

History of the presence of flying goddess Nike and wreath can be seen on the mural inside the room of Zeus Temple in Dura-Europos (College, 2004: 94). This Greek goddess visualizes victory and is considered as one of Athena's title (Smith, 2005:355).

Greeks believed that she was the messenger of gods and considered as the first progeny of the Greek gods. Usually, she had been depicted with wings while she was quickly flying (Grimal, 1968:622).

In religious Mazdist literature, there is a story known as "Arda Virafnameh" that can be regarded as an equivalent to goddess Nike. During this journey, Arda Viraf is guided by a sacred angel, winged Soroush, and is traveling among the Elysian and hellish people (Taheri and Sadegh, 2008:76).

Presence of this small angel can be seen in rock reliefs and stucco of the Sassanian

period. Here, this type of scene which is influenced by the west, the solid and religious state of human is transformed into live forms and this commences a new style of Iranian sculpture. This type of scene has more tendencies toward king's victory than description of events (Ibid, 1971: 156). In the relief of Shapour, victory had been considered as a celestial gift for Shapour so that the durability and strength of his governance would be effective. Without divine and celestial support and confirmation, victory and conquest would not be possible. They were gods and goddesses who supported warriors and assisted them in battles (Mohebbi, 2011: 18).

In stucco of Zakhak and Yazdgerd castles, being messengers and promising the victory are associated. In the relief related to Zakhak Castle, a winged woman probably belongs to Nike. Significant and considerable presence of Nike in artworks remains of the Sassanian period must be considered as the result of strong cultural-artistic relationship that Iran used to have with the western world during historical periods. Perhaps, the presence of this goddess can be considered as the result of one thing: Nike has in common with the angel winged Soroush mentioned in the story of Ardâ Virâf and the same common element, opened the door for the ease of accepting Nike by the Iranians. However, Nike should be regarded as a result of cultural relationship existed between Iran and the western world.



Fig. 13. Taq-i Bustan, Figure of the Goddess Nike (Fukai and Horiuchi, 1983)



Fig. 14. Taq-i Bustan, Figure of the Goddess Nike (Source: internet)



Fig. 15. Zahhak Castle, a Bell with the Figure of the Goddess, Nike (National Museum Archive)

6-Simurgh

The only existing image of Simurgh exists on the Sassanian rock reliefs related to a

cuirassier in Taq-i Bustan. On the ending wall of the large porch, at the bottom of the investiture ceremony scene, there is a

cuirassier whose presence is an obvious and clear symbol of war. On a bust of this cuirassier, under his armor, a figure of Simurgh has been carved and the decorative margin of this unique gown indicates important symbols associated with the ancient Mesopotamia (Harper, 2006: 143) (Fig. 16 and 17). In two sites of Chal-e Tarkhan and Yazdgerd Castle, stucco samples of this mythical animal have been found.

In Chal-e Tarkhan two plaques were found that on each of them, two beady medallions including the left side view of the Simurghs can be seen. Figures of Simurgh in addition to stuccos can be observed on cloth and metal objects and all these reliefs indicate that Simurgh has been a special kingship symbol. For example, in Taq-I Bustan, Simurgh figure is also observed on the king's gown and murals of Afrasiab in the central Asia support this theory. Also, sacredness of Simurgh figure on Sassanian seals confirms the guess that Simurgh has been among the particular kingship privileges (Thompson, 1976:30-31).

Among the stuccos in Yazdgerd Castle, five reliefs with Simurgh motif were discovered. On these pieces, a combined creature is seen whose head is like a bird with two ears above its head with mane which can be seen on its head and at the back of its neck (Khanmoradi, 2006:101) (Fig. 18 and 19).

Semiotics and Concepts of Simurgh

Simurgh is a mysterious bird, and is considered as one of the most popular birds in Iranian mythologies; and is regarded as a secret of mysterious role of angels and god's invisible aids and divine help (Shaygan, 1994: 321). The oldest existing references which

have reported about Simurgh, are Zoroastrian. This bird has been mentioned as "Meregho Saeno" and in Pahlavi it has been mentioned as "Sina- Mru" (Simorgh) which means leader and master of birds and the first creature. In Avesta, and Pahlavi works, this high-flying bird has nest on the top of a tree in the middle of the Farakh Kart Sea. Whenever this bird arises from that tree, a thousand branches would be broken and it spreads the seeds. Simurgh in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, is a huge, consuler and talking bird that nested above the Alborz mountain ridge. Its guidance was right and resulted in goodness and help people (Nayeri, 2009: 216 and 217).

This bird, according to the symbolic features and indices, has been introduced as an aspect of "Khvarenah" in Sassanian civilization and art. Due to the same reason, Varghân or a mythical bird of Avesta has been explicitly mentioned in this book is considered as a manifestation of "Khvarenah" in the form of three birds, including Simurghs, Homa and falcon is a bird which exists in the real world and nature (Movahedi, 2002:125).

By reflecting on the aforesaid issues, particularly, emphases mentioned in Avestan and Pahlavi texts about this bird, Simurgh must be considered as a bird which has one of the most important divine privileges namely, Khvarenah. Presence of this bird verifies the divine nature of the kingship and is among the other elements of governance's legitimacy. The charismatic feature of Simurgh has caused special and particular significance of this mythical bird during the Sassanian period and its considerable attendance in artworks.

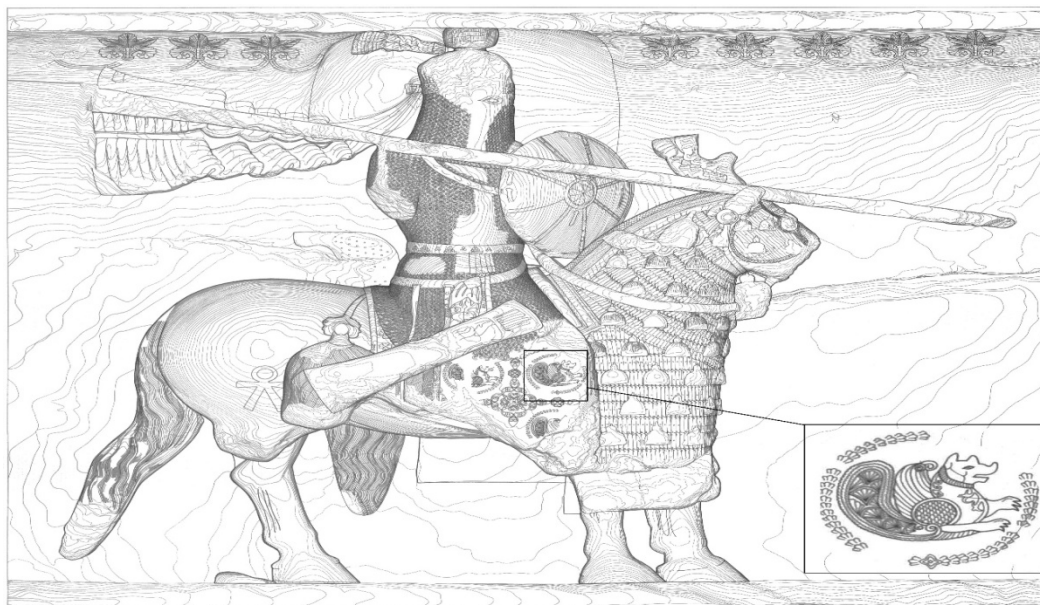


Fig. 16. Taq-I Bustan, Figure of Simurgh on the Cuirassier's Gown (Fukai *et al.*, 1983: Pl. VIII)



Fig. 17. Taq-I Bustan, Figure of Simurgh on the Royal Hunt scene (Fukai *et al.*, 1983: Pl. XVI)



Fig. 18. Chal-e Tarkhan, a Stucco Piece with Simurgh Figure (Harper, 1978: 118, no. 50)



Fig. 19. Yazdgerd Castle, a Stucco Piece with Simurgh Figure (National Museum Archive)

Conclusion

Based on the current study, it seems that most of the symbols employed in the Sassanian rock reliefs and stucco have religious themes driven from the dominant religious beliefs of the time which have had an undeniable effect on the creation of symbols. Sassanians by creating religious symbols in their artworks sought to legitimize their kingdom and represent it to be a divine kingship; this was done through embodiment of Mazdist gods and goddesses and their motifs and figures. Sassanian kings desired to suggest that their kingdom were a celestial trust granted by gods to them.

Among the symbols applied in rock reliefs and stucco, some animals such as **boar** and lion, each representing one of the gods of the Mazdean religion. Different themes of these rock reliefs and stucco indicate a particular concept and symbol that being in any forms (evil or good), they have been inclined towards the will of Sassanian kings.

Knurl as another one of the symbolic badges, has religious concept by itself, examples of which can be seen on rock reliefs, on Ahura Mazda's crown and on the big arch

of Taq-i Bistan. The influence of other nations including Greece, Rome and Mesopotamia on Sassanian rock reliefs and stucco is evident (Nike, Aphrodite, Life Tree and Knurl) which have had a considerable reflection. Given the dynamic art during the Sassanian period, these motifs (reliefs) were then accepted and with respect to the power of the Iranian indigenous art during the Sassanian era and the existing similarities they have been merged and their reflection can be observed in the art of this period. These motifs should be considered as an indication of the dynamicity of these eras rather than blind imitation. In other words, it has taken a specific form by being mixed with the indigenous art. At last, this must be necessarily pointed out that all other common motifs such as Simurgh, royal hunt, and Anahita as other above-mentioned figures have religious themes and the entire attempts of artists aimed at representing a divine manifestation of the king to disarm the viewer against the religious and worldly awesomeness and greatness of the king and to courtesy in front of these God's representatives.

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واکاوی برخی از نقش‌های نمادین در گچ‌بری‌ها و نقش برجسته‌های دوره ساسانی

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چکیده

نقش‌های نمادین در دوران باستان افزون بر اینکه دارای جنبه‌های تزئینی است، بیانگر مسائلی مهم در زمینه فرهنگ و هنر و ساختارهای اجتماعی و سیاسی حکومت‌ها است. نقش‌های نمادین در دوره ساسانی با توجه به درهم‌تنیدگی و آمیختگی دین و سیاست بسیار کاربرد داشته است چنانکه در بیشینه آثار هنری به‌جامانده از دوره ساسانی می‌توان نمونه‌هایی زیادی از آنها را مشاهده کرد. نگارندگان در این مقاله به واکاوی نقش‌های نمادین در گچ‌بری‌ها و نقش برجسته‌های دوره ساسانی می‌پردازند چنانکه نخست به توصیف نقش‌های مورد نظر پرداخته و سپس تحلیل این نقش‌ها را با توجه به باورهای دینی دوره ساسانی انجام خواهند داد. دستاورد این پژوهش که بر اساس هدف، از نوع پژوهش‌های بنیادی و براساس ماهیت و روش، از نوع پژوهش‌های تاریخی به شمار می‌رود، آشکارا نشان می‌دهد که بیشتر نقش‌های نمادین گچ‌بری‌ها و نقش برجسته‌های دوره ساسانی با دین پیوند خورده است و هر یک از آنها نماد یکی از ایزدان/ایزدبانوان آیین زرتشتی است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: دوره ساسانی، آیین زرتشتی، نقش نمادین، نقش برجسته، گچ‌بری.

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