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CUPRINS/CONTENTS

30/1

STUDII/STUDIES

Ana ĐURIČIĆ, More than Floors and Domes - Contexts around Ovens in the Late Neolithic of the Central Balkans	11
Aurora PEȚAN, Cetatea dacică de la Cucuiș – Dealul Golu (jud. Hunedoara) în lumina datelor LiDAR	31
Vasile IARMULSCHI, Fibule de tip Kostrzewski G din silvostepa carpato-nipreană	41
Ghenadie SÎRBU, Jaroslav PESKA, Tomas TENCER, Sergiu HEGHEA, O necropolă plană sarmatică descoperită în bazinul râului Răut (Republica Moldova), grație unor cercetări non-invazive	53
Adina VELCESCU, Les amphores découvertes dans la zone portuaire de Callatis (Mangalia, Roumanie) dans les années 1960-1970	61
Ioan MUNTEAN, The Sanctuaries of Iuppiter Dolichenus in the Danubian Provinces. A functional interpretation	83
Csaba SZABÓ, Women and Roman religion in Dacia: the epigraphic evidence	99
Remus FERARU, Gladiatori și spectacole în amfiteatru în cetățile grecești din Pontul Euxin.	123
Vladimir PETROVIĆ, The Epigraphic Testimonies from Timacum Maius (Eastern Moesia Superior): The Important Clues for the Character and Organization of Naissus Region	135
Ioan Carol OPRÎȘ, Axiopolis. Stadiul actual al cunoașterii	143
Fatih Hakan KAYA, Musa ALBAYRAK, Martin HENIG, Ergün LAFLI, Earrings from Nicaea in Bithynia (south-eastern Marmara)	179
Nizam ABAY, Grylloi: A Being with Mixed Depictions from Konya	205
Cüneyt ÖZ, Repair of ceramics in Antiquity: Examples from Myra (Lycia)	215
Parastoo Masjedi KHAK, Seyed Mehdi Mousavi KOUHPAR, Hasan Kohansal VAJARGAH, Cui QILONG, Six Sassanian artworks engraved with hunters: king, crown prince, aristocrat, or pretender to the throne?	221
Khachik HARUTYUNYAN, Newly Discovered Inscriptions from the Armenian Cathedral of St. James in Jerusalem	235
Yaroslav CHENTSOV, The problem of the attribution of burials of medieval nomads on the territory of the Ukrainian steppe on the example of three burials from the Novosilsky kurgan complex	249
Maria-Venera RĂDULESCU, Cavalerul în turnir, temă iconografică redată pe cahle medievale din Muntenia	261

RECENZII/REVIEWS

- Tudor ULIȚĂ-SÎNJOAN, Recenzie: Lee I. Levine, Zeev Weis, Uzi Leibner, *Ancient synagogues revealed 1981-2022*, Israel Exploration Society, 2023, 300 p., ISBN 978-965-221-129-3. 271
- Aurora PEȚAN, Recenzie: Alexandru Berzovan, *At the Borders of the Great Steppe. Late Iron Age Hillforts between the Eastern Carpathians and Prut (5th-3rd centuries BC)*, Mega, Cluj-Napoca, 2022, 310 p., 35 pl., ISBN 978-606-020-494-7. 273
- Claudia-Valentina POPÎRȚAC, Recenzie: Maria Alexandrescu Vianu, *Une cité antique à travers ses sculptures. La sculpture en pierre à Tomis à l'époque du Principat (Ier-IIIe siècles)*, Editura Istros a Muzeului Brăilei „Carol I”, Brăila, 2022, 300 p., ISBN 978-606-654-492-4. 276
- Florian BOIȘTEANU, Recenzie: Lucrețiu Mihăilescu-Bîrliba, Ioan Piso (ed.), *Romans and Natives in the Danubian Provinces (1st-6th C. AD)*, Harrassovitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2023, 618 p., ISBN 978-3-447-12096-8. 278
- Tudor ULIȚĂ-SÎNJOAN, Recenzie: Annamária-Izabella Pázsint, *Private Associations in the Pontic Greek Cities (6th century BC–3rd century AD)*, Peeters, Leuven – Paris – Bristol, CT, 2022, 386 p., ISBN 978-90-429-4718-4. 280

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31/1

SIX SASSANIAN ARTWORKS ENGRAVED WITH HUNTERS: KING, CROWN PRINCE, ARISTOCRAT OR PRETENDER TO THE THRONE?

PARASTO MASJEDI KHAK, SEYED MEHDI MOUSAVI KOUHPAR
HASAN KOHANSAL VAJARGAH, CUI QILONG

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on six Sassanian plates that have caused contradictory opinions about those depicted on them. Considering these works and a historical context, the authors have assessed the prevailing opinions and expressed their own views and probabilities. As such, the person engraved on the four Sassanian works is probably a prince who ruled northern and northeastern regions of Iran during the 4th and early 5th centuries AD and was in contact with nomadic tribes between Iran and China.

ABSTRAIT: SIX ŒUVRES SASSANIDES GRAVÉES DE CHASSEURS : ROI, PRINCE HÉRITIER, ARISTOCRATE OU PRÉTENDANT AU TRÔNE ?

Cet article se concentre sur six plaques sassanides qui ont suscité des opinions contradictoires sur celles qui y sont représentées. Compte tenu de ces travaux et du contexte historique, les auteurs ont évalué les opinions dominantes et exprimé leurs propres points de vue et probabilités. Ainsi, le personnage gravé sur les quatre œuvres sassanides est probablement un prince qui régna sur les régions du nord et du nord-est de l'Iran au cours du IV^e et du début du Ve siècle après J.-C. et qui fut en contact avec des tribus nomades entre l'Iran et la Chine.

KEYWORDS: Silver Plates; Sassanians; Iran; China; Northern Wei.

MOTS-CLÉS : plaques d'argent ; Sassanides ; L'Iran; Chine; Wei du Nord.

Introduction

Ardašir I, with a revolt against last Parthian king Artabanus, established the Sassanian Empire which officially endured for 424 years, from 224 to 651 AD. During this period, several members of the Sassanian family and for a short period of time, rebels from important clans ascended the throne.

Islamic sources like *Al-Tanbīh wal-Ishrāf* mentions images of twenty-seven kings from the Sassanian dynasty¹ among them, there were twenty-five male and two female royals. Today, based on archaeological, numismatic and classic sources, about 40 people in Iran ascended the throne during that period, which apart from Sassanian kings, included military commanders as well as members of noble families such as Mihran (Bahrām Chobin, 590-591 AD; Shahrbaraz, 629 AD), Ispahbudhan (Vistahm, 591-597 AD; Farrukh Hormozd, 630-631 AD). The emergence of people outside the house of Sasan as kings of Iran or similar efforts by Sassanian princes and nobles who were not legitimate to sit on the throne appeared at the beginning of the weakness of this dynasty and the situation became intense in later years in a way that between 623 AD and 628 AD, more than ten people reached the power whose names and terms are not well known.²

After the downfall of Sassanians, in 651 AD, and the retreat of Sassanian princes to Transoxiana, at least four people named Pērōz/Firuz (651-677 AD) who was the son of Yazdegerd III, Narseh (677-709 AD) who was the son of Pērōz III, Bahrām (or Bahrām VII, 709-710 AD) and Khosrow or Khosrow V (728-729 AD) claimed their kingship over Iran. Yazdegerd and Sassanian princes, in the hope of help from Chinese emperors (Taizong 599-649 AD and Gaozong 649-683 AD) from the Tang dynasty, moved toward that region. According to Chinese sources, these princes, despite many efforts and the help from Turkish forces, failed to achieve their goals and remained in the Chinese court as military commanders.³

¹ Al-Mas'udi 2010, 99-100; Tafazzoli 2014, 277.

² Jalilian, 2012.

³ Compareti 2003; Daryaei 2003.

Numerous artifacts survived from this period. It can probably be said that silver and golden plates of the Sassanian era are among the most significant and beautiful works left from this period. Some even believe that whatever the purpose of making and using the reliefs was, it was transferred to Sassanian plates from the 4th century AD.⁴ In fact, the plates replaced the reliefs and the tradition of producing silverware continued during the reign of Šāpur I or Bahrām I until the time of Khosrow I.⁵

The research on these works began at least in the mid-nineteenth century with the publication of some Sassanian specimens present in the National Library of France by Chabouillet. Preliminary studies were mostly about classification and chronology of these artifacts.⁶ With the studies by people like Orbeli and Trever (1935) and later by Harper, a new stage began for interpreting the content and nature of these works. In his study, Harper identified and introduced three styles of silver plates. Studies on these plates showed that they are classifiable into three principal groups of Early, Middle, and Later.⁷ Brunner, too, on the basis of inscriptions on some of the works, classified them into three groups where the first is related to the early 4th century AD, the second group to the time interval of 500-695 AD and the third group to 700 AD.⁸

Except for a few limited pieces, most of these artifacts have been obtained from unauthorized excavations or farmers' activities and from illegal antique markets, and therefore the archaeological context from where these artifacts were unearthed remains unclear, a problem that exists with most Sassanian plates.⁹ The fact that these specimens are out of the archaeological context has made it difficult to determine their date on a specific chronology. Nevertheless, by matching the crown form of some samples with the identified crowns of Sassanian kings, it is possible to date and identify the person engraved on the plates. It should be noted that Harper, Erdman, and Herzfeld pointed out that crowns depicted on Sassanian rock reliefs and vessels do not always correspond to designs on official coins.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the sorting of these plates is still valid based on the role of the kings through comparing them with coins. The study of Sassanian coins goes back to the 18th century and perhaps a book published by Silvestre de Sacy can be considered as the oldest work on Sassanian coins.¹¹ One of the most comprehensive research on the typology and classification of Sassanian kings was conducted by Robert Göbl, the result of which was the publication of a valuable book entitled *Sassanian Numismatics*.

This research will focus on six Sassanian vessels. It will point to opinions about those periods (in samples that have already been published), about the characters engraved and then the authors will evaluate them and correct some of the comments. These six works, except for three samples, do not have detailed information about their finding location or even when these plates were made.

Introducing Specimens

As mentioned before, six Sassanian works will be studied in this research. Among them, two have been obtained from Iran's Mazandaran province, with one being kept in the Iranian National Museum and other at the Cleveland Museum of Art in the United States. The third sample is in the Azerbaijan Museum in Tabriz. The fourth sample is in the Cincinnati Museum. The fifth is being preserved in the Shamakhi History-Ethnography Museum in the Republic of Azerbaijan. The last sample obtained in China is being kept there.

The first specimen in the Cleveland Museum of Art is a circular stone plaque and has been registered with the number D. 19-1/4 in. 63.258 (Fig. 1). This is a unique Sassanian artwork in terms of its material and type that is engraved on a stone from the Bronze Age.¹²

This work, which has the engraving of lion hunting, is a Bronze Age stone disc and is found in Bronze Age cultures of Gorgan/Hesar in North-northeastern Iran. The rider is depicted holding a bow in the left hand while pulling the string with his right hand. His aim is a lion that is about to jump towards him from the front. Another lion (or the same?) is engraved underneath the horse's foot and is dying. An arrow archery bag is engraved on the right and a sword grip on the left of the rider. His beard is passed through a ring at the bottom, and he is shown wearing an earring. The rider is crowned with a crescent and two cylinders with two spherical balls above. A ribbon is hung on the crown of the crescent. At the bottom of the crown is another.

⁴ Harper 1983.

⁵ Akbari 2019, 184.

⁶ Harper 2000.

⁷ Herrmann 1977, 125.

⁸ Brunner 1974, 109-121.

⁹ Herrmann 1977, 125; Orbeli 1938; Harper and Meyers 1981, 8.

¹⁰ see Harper 2000.

¹¹ Silvestre de Sacy 1793.

¹² Masjedi Khak and Khazaie Kouhpar 2022.

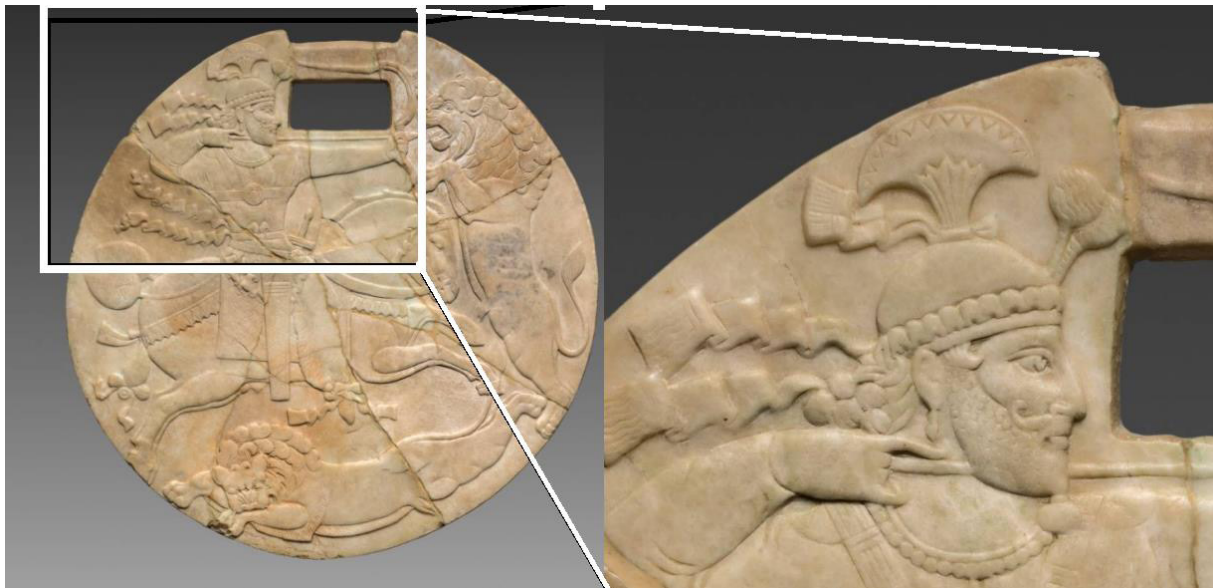


Fig 1. A stone disc in the Cleveland Museum of Art, discovered in Sari.

The second specimen kept in the Museum of Ancient Iran is similar to the first one. It is a silver plate with engraving of a rider hunting two lions (Fig. 2).

On the silver plate kept at the Museum of Ancient Iran (Fig. 2), image of a person is engraved who is mounted on a horse. He is shown turning backwards and with a bow ready to release the arrow toward a fleeing lion. Another lion (?) is also under the rider's foot that is already dead or dying. The fallen lion rests his head on his left hand and seems to have bitten, and in this respect is similar to the Sari Disc kept in the Cleveland. The rider has a crescent at the top of his crown, and like Cleveland, there are two cylindrical projections with two spheres at the top.



Fig 2. Sassanian silver plate at the Museum of Ancient Iran, discovered in Sari.

Except for the differences in the direction of movement of lions and horses, and subsequently the king engraved on a silver plate in the National Museum in terms of releasing the arrow in the Parthian shot, the two plates are similar. However, the small space on the stone disk caused the artist to remove some of the details, and perhaps this limited space caused the artist to remove the margins instead of reducing the proportion of designs, turning around the horse's head to the centre of the image.

Regarding the finding location of these two works, it is reported that the silver plate was apparently found in 1954 along with another plate (Fig. 1) with identical engraving near the Sari railway station.¹³

Various opinions have been expressed about the two aforementioned Sassanian-era works and the nature of the person engraved. About the silver plate Vanden Berghe says: "The image is probably one of the sons of Šāpur II (perhaps Šāpur III) who intended to hunt two lions".¹⁴ Sami, however, attributes the image to Ardašir II while he

¹³ Sami 2009 Vol.2, 120; Vanden Berghe 1959, 7.

¹⁴ Vanden Berghe 1959, 7.

was a crown prince¹⁵ but he does not give a reason for that. Another view on the plate is by Ghirshman. He tells about the silver plate as: since the victory over the animal (lion) is a royal privilege and there is no crown image on any coin, he is a Sassanian prince who dreams of becoming the king. Regarding the date of the work, he believes that the half-crown of the prince engraved on the plate is similar to the half-crown of Hormozd I and Šāpur II, and therefore this work belongs to the late 3rd or the early 4th century AD.¹⁶ Regarding the Sassanian disc, the catalogue of the Cleveland Museum of Art has attributed this to Ardašir II.¹⁷ Kaveh Farrokh and his colleagues believe that this person (on the Sari silver plate) is probably Šāpur III.¹⁸

But apparently the researchers have not paid much attention to similarities between the two people engraved on disc and plate. Shepard (1983) and Masjedi Khak & Khazaie Kouhpar (2022) have pointed to the similarity between the two, with Shepard considering both as Ardašir II. The basis of this viewpoint is their similarity with a relief image of Ardašir II at Taq-e Bostan. But Masjedi Khak and Khazaie Kouhpar in their research found this attribution as incorrect. They argue that Shepard was probably mistaken while calling Ardašir II in Taq-e Bostan similar of the two engraved people based on their crown depictions because the lower part of Ardašir's crown in Taq-e-Bostan is broken and this has made the crescent above the plate and disc similar to Ardašir's crown, but in fact Ardašir's crown, like other recorded examples of Sassanian kings, has a single sphere not a crescent. In addition, the material used in Ardašir II's sphere is obviously different from those depicted in the Sassanian plate and disc. In Taq-e Bostan, the ball is made of net or alike through which even the pleat of the king's hair is visible and clear, while they are completely different in disc and plate samples which seem to be made of metal or other strong material on which the decoration is created and thus no hair design could be seen. Masjedi Khak and Khazaie Kouhpar explain the character of these two works based on places of their finding and production (at least the Sassanian disc, which belongs to the Bronze Age culture of northern Iran) along with historical events that occurred in those regions and express the possibility that the person in question is Kāvūs (Kayous), the son of Kawād I (Kavadh I) and the elder brother of Khosrow I (Anoširavān), who according to the law of inheritance and seniority was to replace Kawād I after his death, but he rebelled and considered the throne as his right (Ibid).

The third plate is kept in the Museum of Azerbaijan in the city of Tabriz. Little is known about it and is almost anonymous. The aforementioned work is said to have a history of about 3rd-4th centuries AD.¹⁹ Farrokh et al. find the nature of the person engraved unclear, despite its similarity to the above two works and the attribution of the National Museum silver plate to Šāpur III. In this plate, the scene is similar to the Sari plate. The depicted personality is riding a horse with a bow in his hand and ready to release the arrow toward a lion that is fleeing and has its back to the man. Another lion (?) is beneath the foot of the horse and like the other two plates, places the



Fig 3. Sassanian plate at the Tabriz Museum.

¹⁵ Sami 2009 Vol.2, 120.

¹⁶ Ghirshman 1962, 209.

¹⁷ Shepard 1983.

¹⁸ Farrokh, Moshtagh Khorasani and Dwyer 2018.

¹⁹ Yasinzadeh 2010, 64; Farrokh, Moshtagh Khorasani and Dwyer 2018.

head on his left hand as if his hand were inside his mouth. This plate has differences in detail, for example, the person does not have a beard ring and has a cape on his back and the bottom ribbon of the crescent is not visible in his crown. This person has an upward crescent at the top of his crown and two bars at the top of his forehead, at the end of which there are two spheres. So far, no comment has been made about the person engraved on this plate.



Fig 4. Sassanian plate in the Cincinnati Museum, USA.

The fourth plate in this research is the one being preserved at the Cincinnati Museum of the United States. This also lacks enough details and has been registered with an accessing code of 1957.387. Its finding location is also exactly unknown and Iran, or in general Central Asia, was recorded for the same. The material used in it is white bronze (Bronze with high percentage of tin) and was purchased by the Kevorkian Foundation. The approximate date or name of the person engraved on the plate is not mentioned on the museum page, but the Wikimedia site attributes it to the late Sassanian and the early Islamic era (7th or 8th centuries AD). Like other plates mentioned in this research, this also depicts a horse rider in the posture of hunting lions. Here, the rider, unlike previous designs, is using a sword instead of a bow while hunting the lion. While a lion is jumping from behind to the rider and the horse, the rider seems turning back in a squeaky manner and hitting the lion's right arm with the sword in his right hand. However, like other plates, another lion (or the same) is fallen under the horse and is dead. The rider is wearing a crown with a serrated edge just above his forehead. In the upper part, a crescent-shaped crown is carved upward, which is decorated. Although the decoration is different from other crowns, unlike the previous three where persons are depicted with two cylinders, they are not seen here.

The fifth specimen of this study is the one found at Shamakhi in Azerbaijan and is currently being preserved at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Republic of Azerbaijan.²⁰ Dan attributes its manufacturing to the third century AD and calls it a royal hunting scene but does not mention which Sassanian king he might be. Harper says it can be classified into Group 1.²¹ Group 1 includes the most ancient vessels whose dates reach to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD.

Like the plate of the Cincinnati Museum, here the rider turns backwards like Parthian shot and targets an ibex with a bow. The crown of the engraved person is a little different from the aforementioned four and has a form like a leaf but is similar in general. However, this person, too, like in the plate of the Cincinnati Museum lacks cylinders and spheres in his crown.

The last study sample is a silver plate that was found in China. This was discovered in 1981 in a grave in Xiaozhan village of Datong city in China's Shanxi province.²² This plate was recovered from a grave that is related to the Northern Wei dynasty. The deceased is named as Feng Hetu, an officer in a military academy and was responsible for the supply and maintenance of horses for the imperial cavalry unit.²³ It must be remembered that Feng Hetu

²⁰ Dan 2018.

²¹ Harper 1983, 47-48.

²² Harper 1990; Ma 1983; Fu 2019.

²³ Ma 1983.

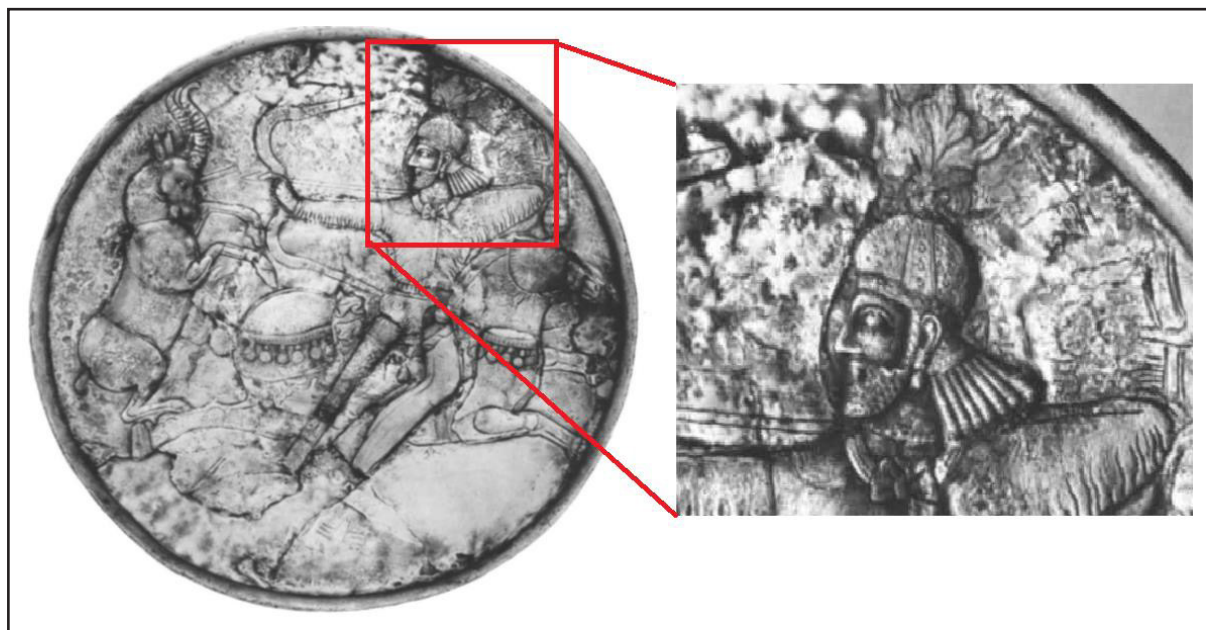


Fig 5. Engraved depiction plate from Shamakhi (Harper 1983, pl. 18).

belonged to Xianbei,²⁴ one of the non-Chinese nomadic tribes and was known as Five Hu.²⁵ Xianbei is a Chinese transcript of a native name. The language of the Xianbei people may be close to some Turkish words of the late Mongolian language. Interestingly, the hair colour of the Xianbei people was different from native people as Chinese sources mention about the different hair colour of Wang Dun, who was trying to usurp the throne. The sources tell that he had light hair colour which he inherited from his mother who was from the Xianbei tribe.

In the middle of the 2nd century AD, one of the elites of Xianbei called Tanshihuai succeeded in uniting the scattered people of his community and established a new Xianbei Empire, but it collapsed after his death. In the early 3rd century AD, tens of Xianbei tribes lived under three rulers who dominated an area from the Yellow River toward the east to the vicinity of present-day South Korea.²⁶ The Northern Wei Empire founded by the people of Tuoba was one of the branches of Xianbei.²⁷ By this way, it was distinguished that Feng Hetu was from a powerful tribe and also had the important backing and travelled in various parts in order to perform his duties.

In the plate discovered, a scene depicts a person hunting for a boar with a spear. In this scene, there are three boars attacking the man. The person hit the above boar attacking him on the right with a spear but there is another boar simultaneously approaching him from below while a third attacks the person from the left direction whose head the man hit with his right foot. The type of head covering of this person is not clear enough, but the ribbon as well as the pearl decoration that extends from his forehead to the back indicates he had head covering. Although he lacks a crescent that was visible in the previous samples but unlike the two plates of Cincinnati and Shamakhi, the person engraved on this silver plate has two cylindrical rods with two spheres on top of them. Some Chinese researchers call him Bahrām I (fourth Sassanian king)²⁸ and some others attribute its manufacturing period to the 3rd-4th century AD (Fu 2019). Based on its decorations, Fu believes that the work was probably produced in Central Asia. Although he has tried to relate this work to Central Asia and even further east but his statements and arguments are based on insufficient information.

As far as Ma is concerned, he links the engraved person to Bahrām I based on physical features such as beard, eyes, and nose, as well as the existence of a plate depicting him boar hunting. He says that if the person is really Bahrām I or the work was made during his time, then this is approximately of 273-276 AD that was contemporary to Emperor Wu from the Western Jin Dynasty.²⁹ Fu has, however, attributed the engraved hat, costume, and the person to the late 3rd and the early 4th centuries AD.³⁰

²⁴ Harper 1990.

²⁵ Holcombe 2019a.

²⁶ Holcombe 2019a.

²⁷ Pearce 2019.

²⁸ Ma 1983.

²⁹ Ma 1983.

³⁰ Fu 2019.



Fig 6. Plate recovered from Feng Hetu's grave (Skupniewicz 2019, Fig. 9)

If we consider the period of Feng Hetu as contemporary to the plate and if this could have been a gift of an Iranian delegation to China, the time of its making goes back to the early 6th century AD.

Discussions

Six Sassanian works were introduced during the course of this study, none of which until today, matches the identified Sassanian crowns. All these works are presumed to belong to the periods between 3rd-4th centuries and the 7th-8th centuries AD. Nevertheless, these six crowns have something in common which is unlikely to have been accidental. The identified elements in Sassanian crowns include: Korymbos, Crescent in front of the crown and above the forehead; Vector placed around the crown; Wings and head of a bird that can be seen in some crowns, and Light ray blades. In his study on Sassanian coins, Gobl introduced a group of eight crowns,³¹ none of which is identical to the crowns under study.

For convenience, we identify the elements distinguishing the six plates from the formal forms. Actually, these elements are not repeated in any of the known Sassanian crowns. The first is a crescent at the top of the crown. Although in Sassanian crowns there is a large sphere (Korymbos) at the top, this is clearly different from the crescent in the aforementioned six crowns in terms of their shape as well as the nature. Korymbos is actually a type of hairdressing, in which, the king's hair is placed in the shape of a ball above the head and may be covered with netting or fabric, but the crown crescent in these plates (five plates) there is no hairdressing, rather they are made of metal or other solid material that contain decorations as well (Fig 8). These five works are different from each other in terms of decoration and in case of the Shamakhi Plate, there are some differences in details, but in general, they are similar.

The second distinguishing element of these works is two cylindrical rods attached to the two spheres at the end. Although there are crescents on the crowns of some Sassanian kings, none of the kings has this image on their

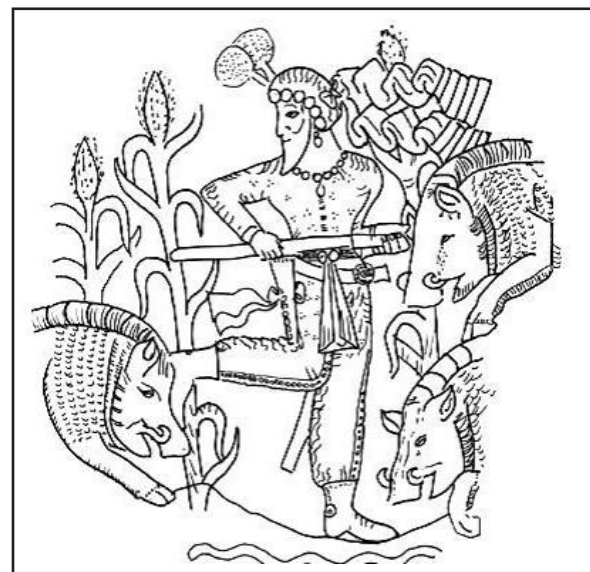


Fig 7. Depiction and design in Chinese plate (Skupniewicz 2019, Fig. 9)

³¹ Gobl 1971, Table XIV.

identified crowns. Analysis and symbolism of these two spheres require separate interpretation, which is beyond the scope of the current study. These two rods and spheres are exactly repeated in four works, namely the Cleveland Disc, the Sari Silver Plate, the Tabriz Plate, and the Datong Plate. In brief, the combination of these two elements can be shown as follows:

- Crescent with two rods and a sphere: The Cleveland Disc, the Sari silver Plate, the Tabriz Plate.
- Crescent: The plates in Cincinnati and Shamakhi museums.
- Two rods and spheres: The Datong Plate

Assuming that the persons depicted on these six works are one and the same, the question arises as who the person actually is? Is he a king or a claimant to the throne? It is possible that this is related to the period when he was a crown prince, then why do we not see any trace of it in the official crowns? Was he just a member of a noble family?

Based on the proposed dating for these works, it is possible that the crowns belonged to one person. As a result, the proposed dates must be closer to each other. Harper, while categorizing the Sassanian plates, puts the Sari and Shamakhi Plates in one group considering them the oldest. In this case, the Sassanian disc of Cleveland, which was obtained from the place of the silver plate of the National Museum (Sari's plate), belongs to this time. The Tabriz Plate also belongs to the same time interval. Chinese archaeologists have also attributed the Datong Plate to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. The only different dating in this period is for the Cincinnati Plate, which most likely to be flawed and this work too is closer to the suggested time frame for other plates. In fact, in this case, all the works are closer to each other temporally. Do these works belong to the third and fourth centuries? The plate found in China and the person buried in the tomb provides information about the historicity of these artifacts.

Based on the inscription on the gravestone, the person buried inside was Feng Hetu. Ma says that calculations by Zhiwen shows Feng Hetu was born in 438 AD and died in 501 AD i.e., he lived during the rule of Gaozong (471-499 AD) that was the peak of the cultural and economic prosperity of the Northern Wei dynasty.³² His death, according to the inscription, was in 501 AD which was the second year of the rule of Emperor Xuanwu from the Northern Wei dynasty.³³ While Harper has written the death of the man in 504 AD,³⁴ but he seems to mean the time of the deceased's last resting place because Feng Hetu's burial site was elsewhere, and he was moved to a new grave in his hometown two or three years later. If we consider Feng Hetu's life to be the time of making the plate if the plate was a gift from the Iranian delegation, in the recorded documents, Iranian representatives went to China ten times, all in the period between the second half of the fifth century (567 AD) and the beginning of the sixth century AD.³⁵ Were they official representatives of the Sassanian Empire or merchants or any other possible group? Ma writes the years of ten Iranian delegations to Chinese courts in the following order: (1) 455 AD, (2) 461 AD, (3) 466 AD, (4) 468 AD, (5) 476 AD, (6) 507 AD, (7) 571 AD, (8) 518 AD, (9) 521 AD, (10) 522 AD.

Ma also enumerates four possible scenarios for the plate, although he himself considers the first as the more probable one:

1. This plate was initially transferred from Iran to Qiuci or Yandi and then it fell into the hands of the Northern Wei dynasty following its establishment and later it was given to Feng Hetu as a reward.
2. It was brought to Yiwu, an ancient city in Mongolia, by a special Iranian envoy and then given to Feng Hetu as a gift.
3. Feng Hetu himself could have acquired it from Shanghu or from Iranians residing in Luoyang.
4. The people of the Feng Hetu tribe got it from the western region or from Wangshen complexes or other places such as Hejian.

According to the inscription on the tomb of Feng Hetu, one can at least be sure that if these works belong to one person, their date will not be much later than 504 AD, although it is probably older than this and after one hand to another finally reached to Feng Hetu long after the plate was made.

Now, if these riders were one, which class they belonged to? The Nobility? The royal family? Or Prince? or King?

It is very much unlikely that this person was an aristocrat/noble for several reasons. First, hunting lions, which is represented in four works, is an act of royal monopoly, and such by the nobility is a kind of attack on the legitimacy and credibility of the king himself. Second, the type of crown is a sign of kingship, and based on reliefs depicting nobles with hats distinguish them completely from the crowns discussed in this research. In addition, it is unlikely

³² Ma 1983.

³³ Fu 2019.

³⁴ Harper 1990.

³⁵ Fu 2019.

that any of the nobles would be allowed to order a plate with their depictions on them like Sassanian kings (in terms of the proportion of works remaining till date). Also, Sassanian artists and craftsmen produced these works upon the order of the kings, and assuming that a king would have ordered a plate to honour a noble, but accepting that he would order several more plates with royal insignia such as the crown and the lion hunting seems improbable. Even if it were so, which nobleman was so worthy that not even his name is mentioned? And what important job he could have accomplished to deserve such respect? In addition, although some people were allowed to have a crown, this was only with the permission of the king. Procopius mentions in this regard:

“When the Mirranes, defeated in battle and with the greater part of his men lost, came back to the Persian land with the remainder of his army, he received bitter punishment at the hands of King Cabades (Kawād). For he took away from him a decoration which he was accustomed to bind upon the hair of his head, an ornament wrought of gold and pearls. Now this is a great dignity among the Persians, second only to the kingly honour. For there it is unlawful to wear a gold ring or girdle or brooch or anything else whatsoever, except a man be counted worthy to do so by the king.”

(Procopius. 1914, Book I, Chapter 17: 26-28).

Even, in case of permission to put the crown on the head, the issue of making plates and royal relics with the depiction of a person other than the king is a separate issue that makes us more confident that he is either a king or a crown prince.

Another question is whether this person was a rebel and a claimant to the monarchy? The answer is somewhat convenient with high probability of correctness. But such a possibility with regard to the period discussed in this research is very weak. It is because the fact that apart from Kāvūs, all usurper kings and rebels came to power years after the date of Feng Hetu’s tomb. And only Kāvūs remained in this period.

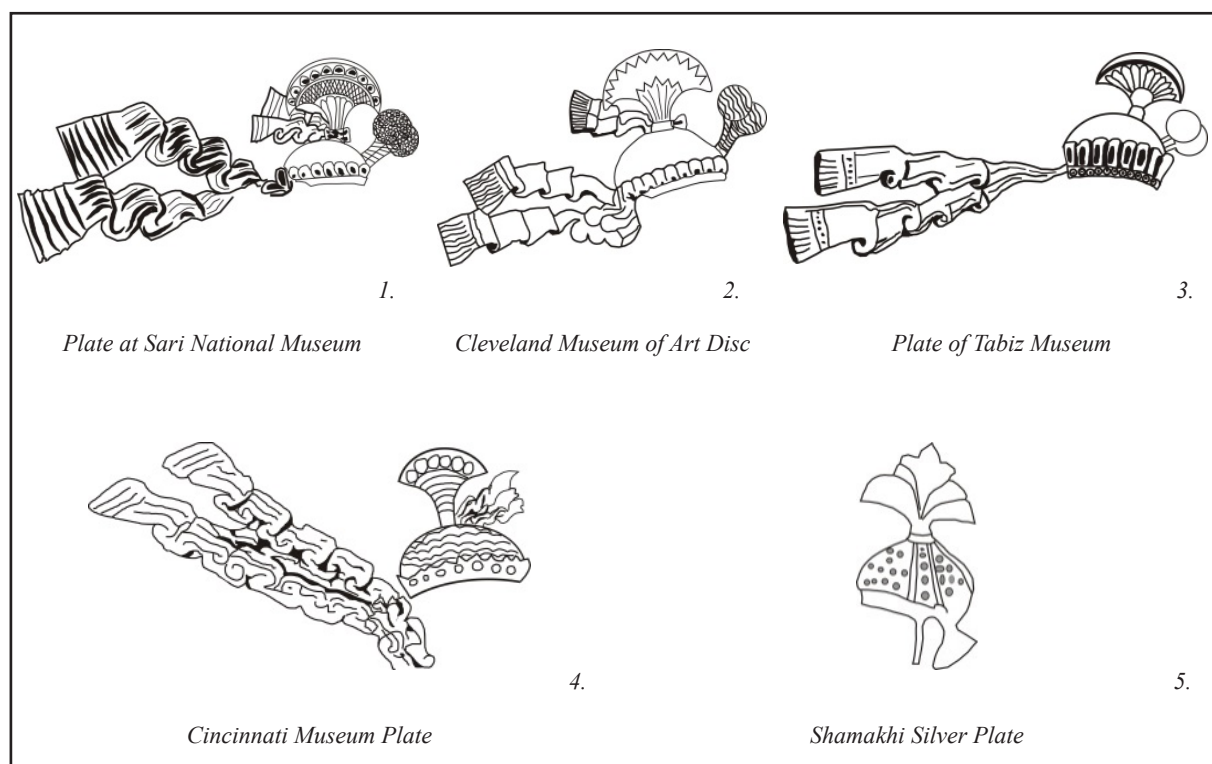


Fig 8. The design of five crowns with crescent-like projections on top of them.

Among the remnants of the Sassanian period, a person with a very similar headgear can be found. He is Prince Šāpur Sakanshah, who left a memento of himself and two inscriptions while visiting Persepolis. This person is the son of Hormozd and the brother of Šāpur II.³⁶ In this case, the time interval between the reign of Šāpur II and the death of Feng Hetu can be considered as an approximate date for the plates studied in this research.

³⁶ Daryaee 2001.

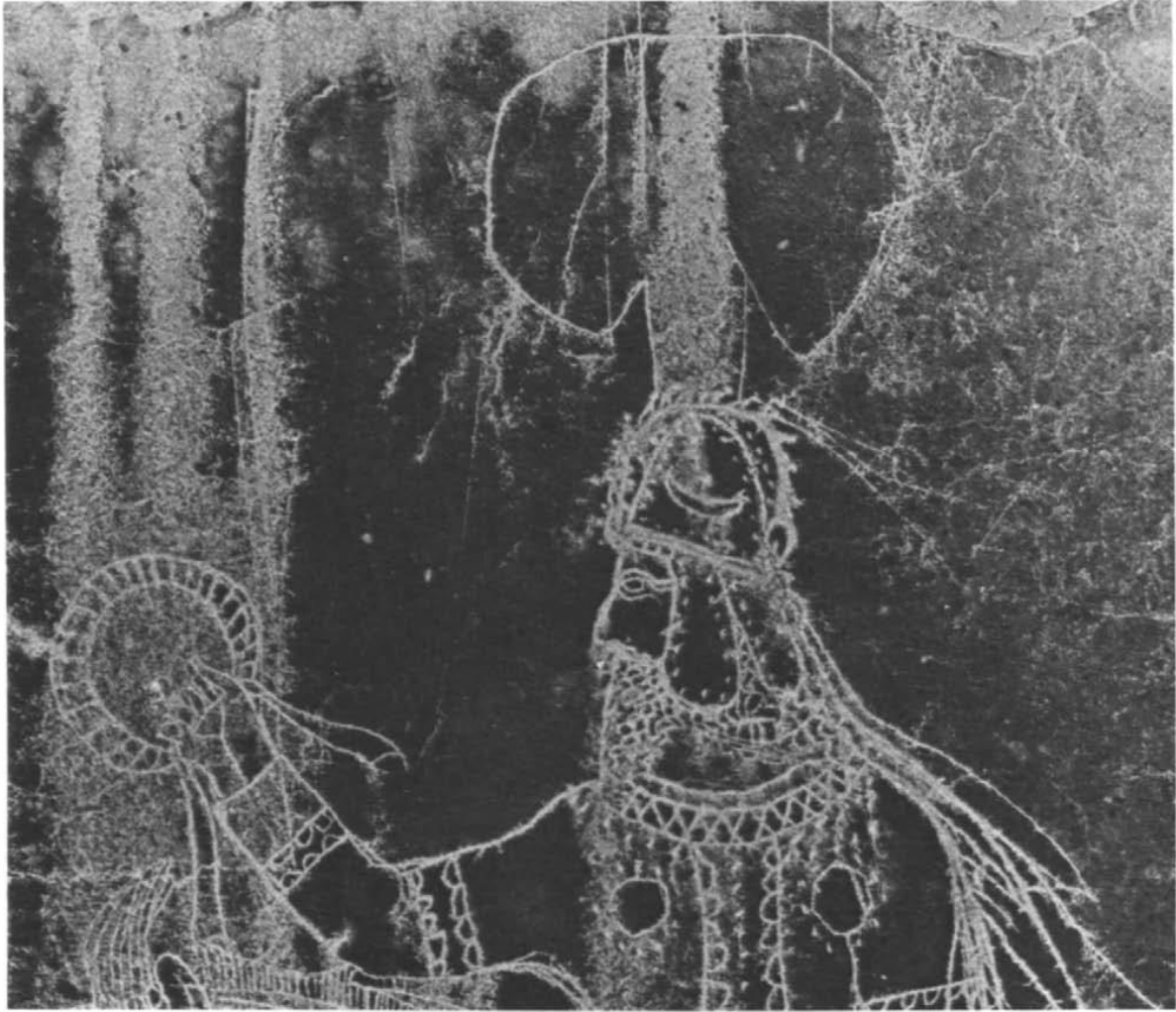


Fig 9. The Image of Sapur Sakanshah carved on Takht-e-Jamshid with a similar crown (Harper 1983, Fig. 19)

Conclusion

Given the great importance of Sassanian plates in terms of artistic and aesthetic nature as well as archaeology, due to the lack of inscriptions and being out of their archaeological context, they cannot be dated with ease. Here, some points can be noted:

First, several plates of Ardašir II can be confidently attributed to another person but there is no credible evidence showing that this person was Ardašir II.

Second, these plates cannot represent usurper kings of the empire either, because the time period of these works is definitely much prior to the time this group of kings took the helm of power. The nobility was also not allowed to make crowns and several plates with designs of hunting lions and, hence, they can also be excluded from such probabilities.

Third, these people are also not the remnants of Sassanians after the collapse of the empire, because like usurper kings, they are out of the time period of these plates.

Fourth, if these people are not even one person, they are definitely Sassanian princes, and leaving aside a little caution, we can claim that they were the crown prince's not the kings. Despite the existence of six plates with engravings, there is not a single coin or relief showing one of the elements depicted in these crowns. As such, a prince wore a new official crown after ascending the throne, and therefore there were no traces of the crown of previous era on coins or other artifacts, an issue that has already been raised by some researchers before. For instance, Richard Frye say that it seems that some wore special crowns to determine successors and for other purposes.³⁷

³⁷ Frye 1984, 302.

Taking into account the aforementioned points, at present, the approximate date of the plates under study could be between 302 AD and 504 AD.

Although the identity of the engraved personalities cannot be documented and firmly discussed, the depiction on the Cleveland Disc as well as on the plates of Sari and Tabriz can be considered one person with confidence. There is possibility that these six works belong to one of the 15 kings who ascended to the throne during the aforementioned period, either Šāpur Sakanshah or Kāvūs.

The available inscriptions from Feng Hetu's tomb make it easy to suggest an end date for these plates, but due to the nature of ethnic life of the Xianbei people and also the presence of nomadic tribes in the Sassanian territorial domain, especially in eastern and northeastern regions, an exact dating cannot be possible. Invasion of tribes in northeastern Iran before the Sassanian period has also been reported. After a battle with the Romans, Ardašir I was involved in the east of the empire, the nature of which is unknown³⁸ and the question remains as whether he was involved in a battle with the tribes that invaded his territory?

The Sassanian Empire, at least since the reign of Šāpur I, witnessed rising conflicts in eastern and northeastern regions.³⁹ In the inscription of Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, the names Abarshahr in Khorasan, Herat and Merv are mentioned, which show that the realm of Šāpur I and Ardašir was extended to northeastern regions.⁴⁰ The Sassanian conflict with invading tribes in Central Asia dates back to at least 350 AD when Xionite tribes invaded the territory of Šāpur II. The tribes seem to have been the same Hun.⁴¹ After defeating the northeastern tribes, Šāpur used them to advance his military goals in the war against the Romans.

Around 425 AD, simultaneously with the rule of Bahrām V, Hun tribes crossed Merv and advanced towards Khorasan⁴² and Bahrām sent gifts to king of Huns to deceive him.⁴³ Between 443 and 451 AD, during the reign of Yazdegerd II, several wars with Hun took place in northeastern regions of the Sassanian Empire. During the reign of Pērōz in 459 AD, battles with the Hun continued and then the headquarters of Pērōz's military operation was located in the Gorgan region. He later went to a war with the Hun in 483 AD and was killed.⁴⁴ During the reigns of Kawād and Khosrow I, wars continued with the tribes invading eastern and northeastern parts of the empire.

It is possible that this Sassanian plate might have been looted before 504 AD and could have even gone hand in hand several times among the nomadic people before reaching Feng Hetu, thus it may be years or centuries old since its making. At the same time, it is also possible that the object reached him directly and in a shorter period of time. To find a clearer answer, we have to wait for archaeological findings in Iran or other regions.

³⁸ Fray 2007, 471.

³⁹ Ghafouri 2016, 159.

⁴⁰ Fray 2007, 472.

⁴¹ Kim 2019, 32.

⁴² Ghafouri 2016, 180.

⁴³ Ghafouri 2016, 181.

⁴⁴ Ghafouri 2016, 181-182.

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Liste des illustrations

- Fig 1. Un disque de pierre du Cleveland Museum of Art, découvert à Sari.
- Fig 2. Plaque d’argent sassanide au Musée de l’Iran antique, découverte à Sari.
- Fig 3. Assiette sassanide au musée de Tabriz.
- Fig 4. Assiette sassanide conservée au Musée de Cincinnati, États-Unis.
- Fig 5. Plaque de représentation gravée de Shamakhi (Harper 1983, pl. 18).
- Fig 6. Plaque récupérée de la tombe de Feng Hetu (Skupniewicz 2019, fig. 9)
- Fig 7. Représentation et dessin dans une assiette chinoise (Skupniewicz 2019, fig. 9)
- Fig 8. Le dessin de cinq couronnes surmontées de projections en forme de croissant.

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