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Original Research

# The Beribboned Ram in Sasanian Art and Its Possible Religious Associations

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**Abstract:**

Isolated rams or a couple of rams beside a central tree represented the most popular subject on Sasanian sphragistics. This animal could have been a religious symbol in Sasanian art especially when embellished with ribbons or a necklace. By focusing on contemporary parallels in Sogdian art and much earlier specimens in Mesopotamian art, this paper argues that the ram could be the symbolic animal of a deity associated with the planet Venus among ancient Iranian peoples. The best candidate in Sasanian Persia seems to be Anahita, the Zoroastrian goddess of water and fertility whose name is still connected to the planet Venus in modern Iran.

**Keywords:** ram; symbolic animals; Planet Venus; Anahita; Sasanian art; Sasanian sphragistics

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## 1. Introduction

The study of Sasanian sphragistics represents one of the greatest and most recent achievements by specialists of pre-Islamic Persian art. Unfortunately, most of Sasanian seals, bullae, and seal impressions kept in museums or private collections do not come from controlled excavations. Not only the inscriptions but also the images reproduced on these objects constitute a very interesting amount of iconographical material for the study of Sasanian art and culture.Isolated rams or beribboned rams and two rams beside a central tree represent the most popular subject on Sasanian sphragistics. Not only ribbons but a necklace too sometimes embellishes the ram. The curved horns are always represented frontally even though the animal is in profile (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Sasanian seal impressions of Zoroastrian magi embellished with a ram and a beribboned ram with a necklace. After: Gyselen 1995: fig. 3 a-b.

Among the most important findings of Sasanian seal impressions embellished with the image of rams that archeologists found during controlled excavations, one should mention those from Qasr-i Abu Nasr in Fars Province (Frye 1973) and Takht-i Sulayman in West Azerbaijan Province (Göbl 1976: pls. 16, no. 63/135; 40, no. 55/403-408).Decorative motives that include beribboned rams immediately called the attention of scholars and experts of Iranian studies. According to Frantz Grenet, this animal should be considered a symbol of *farr* also spelled *farreh* (Avestan *xwarenah*, Middle Persian *xwarrah*), a very important Iranian concept sometimes translated as "glory" or "charisma" that mythical kings needed to rule and heroes to defeat their enemies. One of the most active scholars active in the field of Sasanian sphragistics, R. Gyselen, accepted Grenet's identification (Gyselen 2006a; Gyselen 2009: 169).
In Grenet's opinion, the association between the ram and the glory that was following the first Sasanian king Ardashir is explicitly reported in the very famous Middle Persian short text *Karnamag i Ardashir i Papakan* "Book of the Deeds of Ardashir, Son of Papak" (Grenet 2013: 204). Unfortunately, this is not very precise since, as Grenet himself recognized, in every extant manuscript of the *Karnamag i Ardashir i Papakan*, the form used by the anonymous scribes to describe the glory that was following Ardashir is illegible (Grenet 2003: 43). In the same story reported some centuries later in the *Shahname*, Firdousi always used the ambiguous term *ghorm* and not *bare* as one might have expected. This *ghorm* was most likely a composite fantastic creature actually resembling the winged dog with a peacock tail of late Sasanian art that can be observed at Taq-i Bustan (Compareti 2021a: 33-34) (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Composite creature symbolizing *xwarrah* on the garment of the warrior on the back of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan. Photo: author.

As I have tried to demonstrate in another study of mine, the winged dog with a peacock tail is a representation of *farr*/*xwarrah* and not the *simurgh*/*senmurv* of Iranian mythology. It would have been introduced into Persia from Central Asia (specifically from Arachosia-Zabulistan, in the territory of modern Afghanistan) during the late Sasanian period (Compareti 2021a: 186). Moreover, it is worth observing that a deity with a flaming halo occurred sometimes on the reverse of Khusraw II Parvez (690-628) coins and probably on one late Sasanian column capital from Isfahan (Compareti 2018: 23) (fig. 3).

Figure 3. The deity with a flaming nimbus in Sasanian art. After: Compareti 2018: fig. 2.3

Even though the identity of this deity is far from being defined, the flaming nimbus could be associated to the idea of *farr*/*xwarrah* in Sasanian art. This detail could refer to the manifestation of *farr*/*xwarrah* that authors often described in Persian texts of the Islamic period (above all the *Shahnameh*) as the royal splendor emanated from the body of kings, heroes, and representatives of the Kayanid legendary dynasty. Such an identification would suggest that the late Sasanians already had at disposal some symbolic representations of the abstract idea of *farr*/*xwarrah* in visual arts.Other manifestation of *farr*/*xwarrah* in Iranian visual arts appeared in Kushan numismatics and Sogdian paintings. On the reverse of second century CE Kushan coins, there is sometimes the image of a god called in Bactrian ΦΑΡΟ or ΦΑΡΡΟ that corresponds to Middle Persian *xwarrah*, Sogdian *farn* (fig. 4).

Figure 4. Reverse of a second century Kushan coin embellished with the image of ΦΑΡΡΟ. The British Museum. Sketch after: Shenkar 2014: fig. 121.

This deity could be represented according to slightly different iconographies although the most interesting one was definitely based on the one of Greek Hermes (Shenkar 2014: 135-136). Much more interesting is the plethora of flying composite creatures that Sogdian artists included very often in eighth century paintings from Penjikent. Those creatures presented usually the rear part of an animal, wings, a fish coiled tail and ribbons attached to their legs. Among the most popular animals, there were winged camels and winged horses such as in room 1, sector XXIV and room 12, sector XXV at Penjikent (fig. 5).

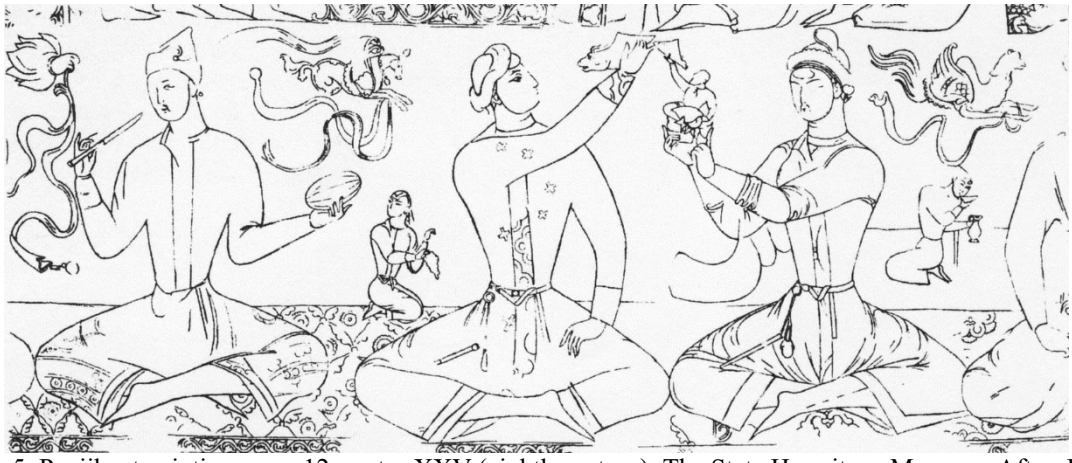

Figure 5. Penjikent painting room 12, sector XXV (eighth century). The State Hermitage Museum. After: Baulo, Marshak 2001: fig. 4.

It is however worth observing that, among the fantastic winged creatures used in Sogdian art to point at the divine protection of local deities or "glory", "charisma" (*farn*) already observed above, the ram is completely absent. Animals such as rams, goats, ibexes, etc. with ribbons attached to their neck are attested in several Sogdian

silver vessels. Unfortunately, those animals never appear with Sogdian inscriptions that could shed light on their identification (Marshak 1971: T 18, T 20, T 27, T 28). The association between *farn* and ram does not sound convincing at all in Sogdian art.Epigraphic countermarks on some seventh century Sogdian silver coins present the inscription *farn* with composite flying creatures resembling the winged dog with a peacock tail in late Sasanian art (Nikitin, Roth 1995). One Sogdian seal impression from Kafir Kala (not far from Samarkand) was embellished with a wild boar and the inscription *farn* under its neck (Begmatov, Berdimurodov, Bogomolov, Murakami, Teramura, Uno, Usami 2020, 12). Finally, one unexcavated golden seal in the State Hermitage collection presents an enigmatic haloed deity sitting on an elephant with the Sogdian inscription "the god *farn*" (Lurje 2010: 904). It is therefore clear that Sogdian artists could choose among several fantastic creatures and animals to express in visual arts the symbol of *farn*. The winged dog with a peacock tail observed in late Sasanian art at Taq-i Bustan was just another creature of this list.Sasanian artists adopted external decorative elements with great ease. Two Sasanian rock reliefs representing Shapur I victorious over the Romans (Bishapur II and III) included also the image of an angel presenting a beribboned diadem to the Persian king (fig. 6).

Figure 6. Winged putto with diadem in early Sasanian Bishapur reliefs (Bishapur II). Photo: courtesy D. Waugh.

This could be an early representation of the *farr*/*xwarrah* modeled on the Greek Nike or winged victory (Compareti 2021a: 178). Some centuries later, Khusraw II adopted the image of the winged dog with a peacock tail from eastern Iran without any problem and reproduced it on his equestrian statue at Taq-i Bustan (Compareti 2021a: 68). Sasanian artists already knew at least two figurative representations of *farr*/*xwarrah* both adopted from abroad. The beribboned ram could be another symbol for representing the abstract idea of *farr*/*xwarrah* although such an association still needs to be firmly demonstrated. The ribbons attached to the neck of the ram or other animals could allude to the diadem that embellished the crown of Sasanian kings. However, they do not seem to be a Sasanian invention either. In fact,

not very elaborated ribbons appeared already on Kushan coins and in Hatrean and Elymean sculptures of the Parthian period (Sinisi 2017: 833, 850-851).

In some cases, special animals had to be embellished with ribbons in order to render them recognizable. This is probably the case of the deer hunting panel reliefs inside the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan. In the lower level of that panel not only the king is riding with his bow around his neck and quiver in hand but at least two attendants are embellishing one female deer with ribbons and setting her free (fig. 7).

Figure 7. Detail of the deer hunting panel in Taq-i Bustan larger grotto. Photo: courtesy Dan Waught.

In order to render the phases of this enigmatic part of the deer hunting panel, the artists active at Taq-i Bustan repeated the animal at least three times. After being embellished with a ribbon and set free, the female deer was allowed to pass through a passage in the enclosed hunting park that some attendants prepared for her. The hunter did not shoot at the deer and was not supposed to do any harm to the animal as the position of his bow and quiver clearly demonstrates (Compareti 2016: 74-76). For this reason, floating ribbons attached to specific animals could be a decoration actually used during the Sasanian period that attendants were used to attach in order to avoid the king to shoot at them in the royal park. It is not clear why something similar did not occur in the wild boar hunting panel at Taq-i Bustan. Images of wild boars that appear quite often in Sasanian seals and sealings never presented any ribbons. On the contrary, ribbons appear very often attached to the neck of rams, (winged) horses, birds, and deer.Rams embellished with ribbons represent a very popular motif on late Sasanian stucco decorations (Kröger 1993: fig. 47) and unexcavated silver vessels attributed to the Sasanian milieu (Gunter, Jett 1992: cat. 19; Halilov, Kosharly, 1985: fig. 2) (fig. 8).

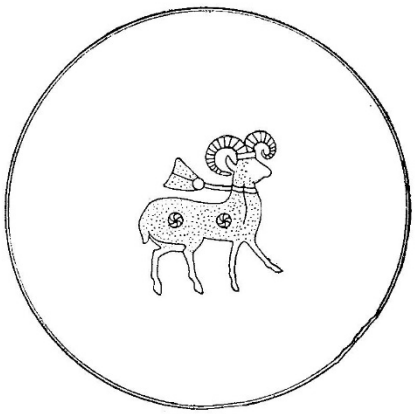

Figure 8. Unexcavated Sasanian silver vessel embellished with the image of a beribboned ram from Azerbaijan. After: Halilov, Kosharly, 1985: fig. 2.

One fifth century fragmentary stucco decoration from the Kish palace (Iraq) presents only the head of a ram above spread wings (Kröger 2006: fig. 2). Ribbons are attached to the neck of the ram and the base of the spread wings (fig. 9).

Figure 9. Stucco decoration from the Sasanian palace at Kish (Iraq). The Field Museum of Natural History. After: Kröger 2006: fig. 2.

Spread wings supporting astrological-astronomical elements appeared as very important devices on Sasanian crowns. They were most likely used to exalt or glorify stylized images of stars, sun and crescent that possibly were religious symbols. In fact, Christians of the Sasanian Empire used spread wings to support the cross that definitely is a religious symbol (Compareti 2020: 162-166). It would be then obvious to consider other elements (such as the beribboned head of a ram or, in theory, another animal) supported by a (beribboned) pedestal formed by spread wings as very important ones, possibly, even religious symbols. Ram's horns occurred on crowns to be possibly associated to the Kushano-Sasanian dynasty of Bactria (Gyselen 2006b). They occurred also on the crown of a wife of Shapur III (383-388) as demonstrated by her personal seal at present kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (fig. 10).

Figure 10. Sasanian seal embellished with the bust of a queen. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. After: Gyselen 2006b.

It is moreover worth observing that most of the inscribed seals and seal impressions belonging to Zoroastrian magi of the Sasanian period were embellished with images of rams and beribboned rams (Gyselen 1995: 128, 132). This seems to reinforce the hypothesis about some connections between the image of the ram and Zoroastrian deities.Sasanian seals presented very often inscriptions that only in rare cases described the subject on the seal itself. There is, for example, one Sasanian seal that was once kept in Berlin whose inscription in Middle Persian clearly reports the name of the deity with a rayed nimbus and a horse chariot as "the god Mithra" (Callieri 1990: 87). None of the inscriptions on Sasanian seals that belonged to Zoroastrian magi described the ram nor other subjects. It is therefore worth searching for traces of rams used as religious symbols in ancient regions neighboring Persia where archaeological investigations gave some important results.Mesopotamian cultural elements had a great impact on other civilizations of the ancient world such as the Greek, Persian and Central Asian ones. The ram was actually associated to Semitic goddesses of the Syro-Mesopotamian area who had some connections to the planet Venus. Among those goddesses, one could mention Inanna/Ishtar and Asherah. The former was an eastern Semitic goddess while the latter was a western Semitic goddess whose name appeared even in the Bible (Ackerman 2008: 9-19). Inanna/Ishtar and Asherah had two symbolic animals: the lion and the ram (or goat or ibex). Confronted rams appeared very often in religious scenes that include Inanna/Ishtar standing on the lion (fig. 11).

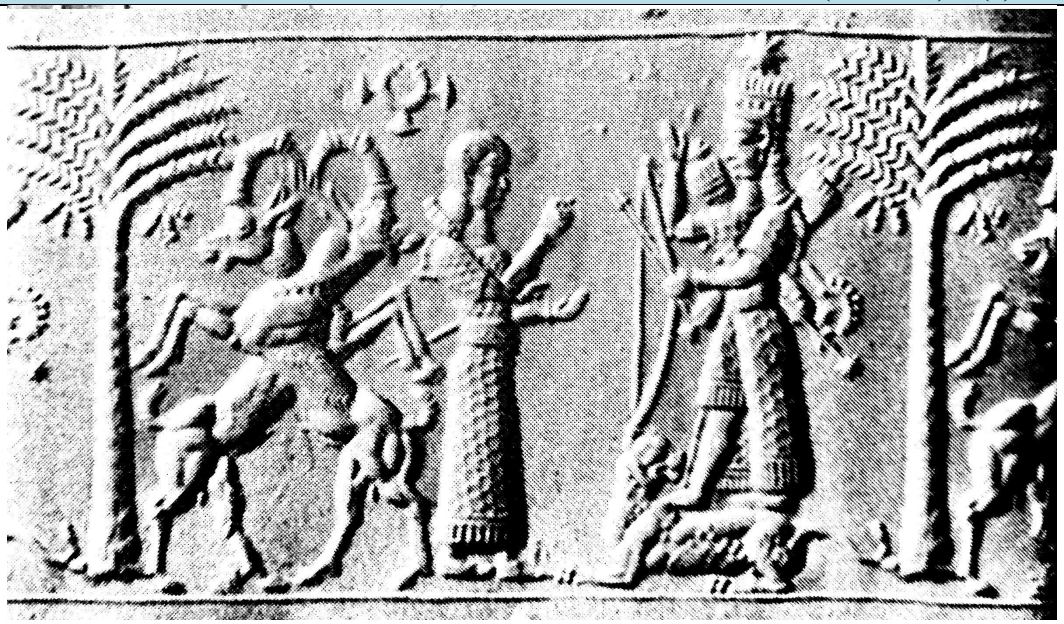

Figure 11. Neo-Assyrian seal with Ishtar standing on the lion and two rams next to her. The British Museum. After: Collon 1987: fig. 773.

Several Mesopotamian seals displayed this scheme (Collon 1987: fig. 773). In other cases, Inanna/Ishtar stands on the ram or even a couple of prone horned animals such as in an eighteenth century BCE terracotta panel from Babylonia at present kept in the Louvre Museum (Caubet, Bernus-Taylor 1991: 32) (fig. 12).

Figure 12. Terracotta panel from Babylonia (eighteenth century BCE). Louvre Museum. After: Caubet, Bernus-

Taylor 1991: 32.

Two confronting rams beside a central tree have been probably associated to Asherah at least since the ninth-eighth century BCE along the Syro-Palestinian coast (Ackerman 2008: 19-29; Ornan 2016: 20-22) (fig. 13).

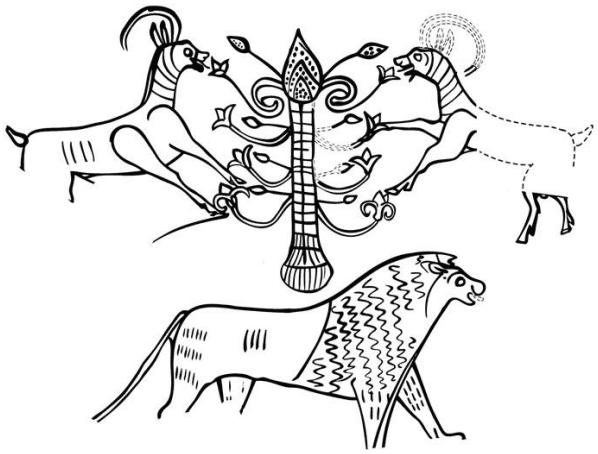

Figure 13. Epigraphic painted ceramic shards from Kuntillet Ajrud, Sinai Peninsula (c. ninth-eighth century BCE). After: Ornan 2016: fig. 3.

It is therefore obvious that the lion and ram were the symbolic animals of Syro-Mesopotamian goddesses associated with the planet Venus. These animals were probably interchangeable in the eyes of Mesopotamian artists and astrologers.Greek astrology-astronomy received many elements from Mesopotamian, Syro-Palestinian, and Egyptian cultures. Greco-Roman artists were used to represent Aphrodite Pandemos ("Aphrodite of sensual love") as a woman fully dressed while riding a ram (Fleischer 1984: 98-100; Schmidt 1997: 292-295) (fig. 14).

Figure 14. Aphrodite Pandemos from Elis, Greece (c. second-third century). After: Fleischer 1984: fig. 976.

Persians (and other Iranian peoples as well) attached great importance to astrology-astronomy that was mainly the result of the elaboration of Mesopotamian and Egyptian concepts by Greek astrologers. Its introduction into Persia and Central Asia was probably due to the invasion of the Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great in the late fourth century BCE. However, it seems less probable that Persians and other Central Asian peoples associated the lion to the goddess of the planet Venus since they already used it as the symbolic animal of Nana who was originally a Mesopotamian goddess and always played a major role in pre-Islamic Central Asia and, less incisively, Persia too (Shenkar 2014: 119-128). Archaeologists have being focusing their interests on Sogdian sites in modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (such as in the case of Afrasyab, Penjikent, and Varaksha) since the Soviet period. The main religion of pre-Islamic Sogdiana was a local form of Zoroastrianism that was not dominated – as one might expect – by Ahura Mazda such as in Persia but (as already mentioned above) Mesopotamian Nana. This goddess could have presented syncretic characteristics as it happened with other imported deities. She could have absorbed other Iranian goddesses perceived as women such as Anahita/Nahid (Shenkar 2014: 69; Grenet 2021: 188). For sure, Nana and Inanna/Ishtar presented many common traits already in Mesopotamian religion. Akkadian texts explicitly superimposed Nana to other Mesopotamian goddesses. Among them, also Inanna/Ishtar were clearly reported. By the Neo-Assyrian period, Nana had become an important deity and "emancipated from the shadow of Inanna" (Buccellati 1982: 17). Divine couples appeared on some occasions in Sogdian paintings such as in the case of Nana and her "husband" Nabu/Tish who corresponded to the Avestan rain god Tishtrya. Sogdian artists had borrowed original Mesopotamian elements typical of the patron of scribes Nabu and superimposed them to Sogdian Tish. They even had adapted Indian traits for Nana and Nabu since the sixth century CE (Compareti 2017). In one fragmentary painting from Afrasyab, there is a representation of another divine couple under an arch while holding in the right hand a dish with a small representation of their symbolic animals: a camel for the god and a ram for the goddess (Shenkar 2014: pl. 21). That divine couple was very popular in Penjikent too. It occurred at least three times in paintings from private houses such as in rooms 2 and 13, sector XXIV and room 28, sector XXV. Both deities forming that divine couple share one throne shaped as a camel on the side of the god and a ram on the side of the goddess (fig. 15).

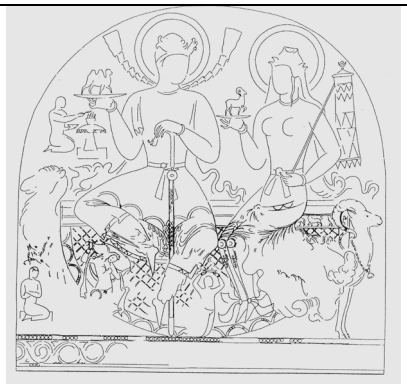

Figure 15. Fragmentary mural painting from Penjikent room 28, sector XXV (c. 740 CE). The State Hermitage. After: Shkoda 2009: fig. 124.11.

Both of them hold in the right hand a miniature image of their symbolic animal standing on a dish, as it was common in Sogdian art (Shenkar 2014: figs. 128-130). Sogdian artists usually depicted curved ram's horns in a realistic way with only one horn visible on the animal in profile while, as already observed above, Sasanian standards favored the horns frontally represented in any circumstance.The camel was definitely a typical Central Asian animal while the ram could actually be compared to the symbolic animal of other Syro-Mesopotamian-Greco-Iranian goddesses with strong astronomical-astrological connections. Scholars proposed two identifications for the god with a camel but they did not pay much attention to the goddess with a ram. According to F. Grenet and K. Tanabe, he could be the personification of *farn* (Avestan *xvarenah*) that is "glory" or "charisma" while, for B. Marshak and V. Raspopova, he could be Washaghn (Avestan Verethraghna, Middel Persian Wahram), the Zoroastrian god of war and victory (Compareti 2021b: 91). M. Mode (2003: 160-164) too preferred to identify him with Washaghn and even cautiously proposed to identify his wife with Wanonch while S. Farridnejad (2018: 414-418) proposed Washaghn and Ashi. However, as already observed above, Iranian peoples already had at disposal other symbolic images to represent the abstract idea of *farr/xwarrah/farn*. For this reason – and keeping into account that deities such as Inanna/Ishtar/Aphrodite/Venus had also a ram as their symbolic animal – the Penjikent goddess under exam could actually be associated to the personification of Venus. That planet was called in Sogdian (and is still called in Persian) Nahid. This name corresponds to Avestan Anahita (Middle Persian Anahid), the Zoroastrian goddess of water and fertility. As many scholars have already observed, the main goddess of Central Asia was Nana while Anahita/Anahid/Nahid was a very popular Zoroastrian deity of Persia and the Caucasus. The Sasanians probably introduced (or, reintroduced) her into Bactria and the rest of Central Asia only after the conquest of the Kushan domain in the third century CE (Shenkar 2014: 75).If we could assume that the goddess sitting on a ram was Anahita /Nahid /Venus then the god sitting on a camel next to her should be her husband or lover who, according to Greek Mythology, was Ares/Mars. Both Classical Aphrodite /Venus and Ares/Mars presented planetary associations and they corresponded, in the Iranian cultural milieu, to Anahita / Anahid / Nahid and Verethraghna / Wahram / Washaghn. Both functions and planetary associations of this divine couple corresponds pretty well in the Greco-Mesopotamian and Iranian cultural milieu. One could argue that Arsacid Persia could be an ideal intermediary in the transmission of religious iconographies from Hellenistic Mesopotamia to the Iranian world.

A unique bronze statuette of Heracles from Seleucia (the name of Greco-Arsacid Ctesiphon) presents a bilingual inscription on his groin in Greek and Parthian. His identity is clearly reported as Heracles in Greek and Warhagn (= Verethraghna) in Parthian (Shenkar 2014: 11). Such an iconography clearly based on Hellenistic prototypes was probably still used in pre-Islamic Persia at least until the early Sasanian period as it can be observed in one rock relief attributed to Ardashir I at Naqsh-i Rajab (Shenkar 2014: 159-160). At least two late Sasanian column capitals once kept in the park at Taq-i Bustan present on one side the image of a bearded deity clad in armor. He could be actually Wahram whose iconography did not correspond anymore to Hellenistic standard that were very popular during the Parthian and, possibly, early Sasanian periods (Compareti 2018: 24). There is no symbolic animal and, therefore, it is not possible to say if the camel was associated to Wahram/Mars in late Sasanian art such as it probably happened in Sogdiana for Washaghn. On another column capital from Bisutun preserved in the park at Taq-i Bustan, there is an image of a goddess without any symbolic animal either (fig. 16).

Figure 16. Column capital from Bisutun kept in the park at Taq-i Bustan, Kermanshah. Photo: author.

Some characteristic traits that allowed to compare her with an image of Anahita in the upper part of the back of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan are represented by her garments and textile decorations resembling a flower or, more likely, a star (Compareti 2018: 25) (fig. 17).


Figure 17. Image of a goddess in the upper level on the back of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan. Photo: courtesy D. Waugh.

Astrology-astronomy seems to represent a very appropriate cultural sphere in order to propose better hypotheses for the identification of the Sogdian goddess sitting on the ram who could be Anahita. If her symbolic animal can really be considered as rooted in Mesopotamian culture, then it seems obvious that, even in Sasanian Persia, the ram could allude to the same deity. In fact, the transfer of decorative motifs from Mesopotamia or Greece to Central Asia had to pass necessarily through Persia. However, archaeological investigations allowed very important results in Central Asia while in Persia there are still many lacunae especially such as regarding the Sasanian period. Scholars mainly focused on Sasanian seals and coins that, unfortunately, only in a few cases are coming from controlled excavations. Despite this problem, Sasanian sphragistics present a very wide range of motifs not necessarily accompanied by inscriptions. For this reason, the study of Sasanian sphargistics could shed some light on a very problematic period for Persian history and

artistic production.It is worth observing that Sasanian seals or seal impressions embellished with beribboned rams that belonged to Zoroastrian magi or high-ranking officials present in many cases also astronomical-astrological symbols such as the star and crescent (fig. 1).

Figure 1. Sasanian seal impressions of Zoroastrian magi embellished with a ram and a beribboned ram with a necklace. After: Gyselen 1995: fig. 3 a-b.

Moreover, at least three Sasanian seals and seal impressions in the collection of the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin are embellished with a ram's head supported by spread wings. In one specimen from that same collection, the spread wings appear above the head of the ram while a star and a crescent are depicted on the left. R. Gyselen (2016: 35) compared this kind of images with the MFT 40.75 seal impression that presents a beribboned ram's head with wings in the place of horns supporting the star and crescent motif (fig. 18).

Figure 18. Sasanian inscribed seal impression (MFT 40.75). After: Gyselen 2016: fig. 35.

Other Sasanian seal impressions present interesting combination such as in the case of a creature with the body of a bird and ram head in the Berlin museum and the British Museum collections (Bivar 1969: pl. 26.3) (fig. 19) or the person with a ram head in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (fig. 20).

Figure 20. Sasanian seal impression in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. After: Grenet 2013: fig. 2.

Figure 19. Sasanian seal impression in the British Museum. After: Bivar 1969: pl. 26.3.

Grenet (2013: 204) identified the latter as a personification of the god Xwarrah although, as already observed above, such an idea presents several problems. The bird with a ram's head could have astronomical-astrological connections as the representations of one of the mansions of the moon in the sixteenth century *Kitab al bulhan* kept in the Bodleian Library in Oxford seems to suggest. The fantastic creature in the Oxford manuscript is actually composed by a bird with a bull's head but it is, in any case, very similar to the one in Sasanian sphragistics. The same creature appears among the external decorations of the early tenth century Armenian church of the Holy Cross on Aght'amar island (Van Lake, Turkey) where other typically Iranian motifs appeared (Compareti 2014: 23-25). Such a high concentration of interesting elements suggest that the ram was a very important Zoroastrian religious symbol possibly alluding to a deity with strong astronomical-astrological ties and some associations to Sasanian kingship. Anahita could be a very good candidate because of the comparison with the iconographies of other Syro-Mesopotamian deities. She was a very important deity during the Sasanian period and, in fact, she was the only one to appear in Sasanian rock reliefs along with Ahura Mazda and Mithra (Shenkar 2014: 69-70). As it is well-known, the first Sasanians were described as high priests of the Anahita temple in Istakhr (Shavarebi 2018). However, much more investigations need to be done in order to propose a definitive identification for the deity possibly represented by the beribboned ram. In this paper, I just wanted to present some hypotheses not limited to ancient Persian art but open to the whole Iranian world.

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