

## Study of Sacred Animals' Bas-relief in Sassanid Metal Works Art in Mazandaran

Ali Mahmodi Alami<sup>1</sup>, Moahammad karim Yousef Jamali<sup>2</sup>, Naser Jadidi<sup>3</sup>

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### Abstract

The Sassanid era is one of the most brilliant in the Iranian civilization in terms of various arts development. The coastal areas of the Caspian Sea, especially Mazandaran, has long been the site of artistic manifestation with countless examples of art works kept in different museums inside and outside the country. The Sassanid art particularly depict life and glory of the kings. With a deep insight into the works, one can easily find the use of a vast array of birds, animals, plants, gods and mythological beings in symbolic ways. After reviewing and researching all the works created in the Sassanid period, a common feature attracts opinions, and that is the similarity and harmony of decorative motifs in all of these works, especially bas-reliefs, metal wares, fabrics and seals. The purpose of this research is to investigate the images of sacred animals on the Mazandaran artifacts of the Sassanid period, in response to the question of what is the relationship between the designs of sacred animals and the motifs on discovered metal works of Mazandaran. The results of this study clearly show that in most of the concepts and representations in the works produced in every part of this civilization, a common goal was pursued, and it is a struggle against evil forces. The symbolic emblems of sacred animals in Iran can be found in close connection with the beliefs and religions of that era, some of which are manifested in the form of boar and lion in the body of gods and goddesses.

**Keywords:** Sassanid, Mazandaran, Metal Art Works, Sacred Animals' Bas-reliefs, Metal Plates.

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1. PhD Student of Ancient History of Iran, Department of History, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran.

2. Professor of History of Iran, Department of History, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran, Yousef\_jamali2000@yahoo.com (Corresponding Author).

3. Assistant Professor of History of Iran, Department of History, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran.

## **Introduction**

Mazandaran is historically important and due to its natural surrounding has been the source of significant events. In other words, Mazandaran has always been a suitable ground for the development of political events and religious movements due to its special geographical location, so it has attracted the attention of central governments in different periods. After Alexander and his successors, Gilan and Mazandaran had a state of independence. King Goshnasb governed Mazandaran in this era, and his dynasty ruled the area about nine hundred years from 330 BC to 529 CE. The survival of the government and command of the Goshnasb dynasty continued in Tabaristan until the time of Sassanid king Pirouz. During this time, Turks attacked Khorasan and the borders of Turpuristan (Tabaristan).

The Sassanid collapse paved the way for the Turks of Transoxiana to invade Mazandaran. There are many narratives about the first Arab attack on Tabaristan including that Muslims entered Tabaristan during the caliphate of Omar (Mel'gunov, 1985: 29), and some other writers say that in 30 AH during the caliphate of Uthman, Sa'id ibn 'Aas sought to conquer Tabaristan and managed to capture the coasts of Royan and Damavand. But it did not take long until the Tabaristani people again rebelled and refused to obey the Arabs. After Sa'id ibn 'Aas, Mosghaleh bin Hebeira went to the province during the caliphate of Mu'awiyah but was killed.

By studying myths about the metal creation, we can see metal bond with sky, heaven and goddess. Accordingly, one of the most important features and uses of this element is the fight against devil phenomena.

In Iran's mythology, metal is sacred and of great importance. In other words, metal is considered to be the source of goodness and blessings. Based on these beliefs, Iranians have also linked the origin of heaven, earth and human to metal. Thus, before devil rush on Ormazd creation, the sky was created like a shield or a metal wall, so that Ahriman could not approach the limit of Ormazd (Bahar, 2002: 189).

Metal and sky bond is clear in the creation of the first human being and the king. Kiumarth was the first in Iranian beliefs who made of metal and heavenly jewels, and after his death, seven kinds of metal were created from his body on earth. In ancient beliefs, "*Amesha Spenta* (*Aməša Spənta*) was the first creatures of Ormazd with a duty to fight devil. One of these "Amesha Spenta" is Shahrivar associated with metal in material creation who uses metal as a tool to fight devil. The sacredness of metal, along with its bond with the sky and Shahrivar, caused the devils not to destroy or harm it (Faranbagh Dadeji, 1999: 66-49).

## **Metal and Eternity**

Anti-devil feature of metal has made the element unbreakable, immortal, indifferent, and indestructible. The most important manifestation of metal bond with immortality in Iranian thought is the role of metal in the end-of-world events. In Zoroastrian thoughts, amongst *Amesha Spenta*, Shahrivar has the most important duty in these events. Shahrivar blocks the escape route of devil by molten metal and throws him into hell (Tafazoli, 2002: 80).

The heavenly and sacred character of metal in various myths can also be seen in metal empowering aspect. In such sayings,

metal is a means to overcome the evil, so that the owner of the metal is protected from evil, and has a supernatural power that sometimes comes to rule and monarchy. An example of this belief is manifested in holy rings (Khazaeli, 1962: 372).

The crown of kings is another example in terms of empowering aspect of metal. Since the coronation of kings means the transfer of power, it seems that one of the coronation philosophies has been to keep away from evil and to obtain holy powers. In the Iranian mythology, Naahid (Venus) is praised for her crown (Pourdavood, 2002: 148).

### **Problem Statement and Research Questions**

In Iran's mythology, metal is sacred and of great importance. In the thought of the Persians, metal is considered to be the source of goodness and blessings. Based on these beliefs, Iranians have also linked the origin of creatures such as heaven, earth and human to metal. Thus, before devil rush on Ormazd creation, the Creator created the sky like a shield or a metal wall, so that Ahriman could not approach the limit of Ormazd. Special conditions of natural history of Mazandaran doubled the necessity of using metal in agriculture and in other applied and artistic fields. The remaining evidence of the ancient sites as well as the discovered works of prehistoric, historical and Islamic parts of this province indicates the richness of the metalwork industry in Mazandaran (Bahar, 2002: 182-189).

The art of the Sassanid era has illustrated many of the manifestations of life and glory of kings. With a deep look at the works created in this era, one can easily find that the use of a vast array of birds, animals, plants, gods and mythological beings in

symbolic ways is observed in these works. A remarkable point is that mythological and animal designs used by Sassanid metal artists have been made for certain purposes since the artist has been able to explain the various scenes and subjects to a considerable extent through these designs as the symbols of a particular subject, myths of that era, and inspiration by the predominant species or animal species in the ecosystem of the region.

The most important questions in this research are: to what extent animal bas-reliefs have religious roots? What was the relationship between sacred animals' bas relief in Sassanid art and bas-reliefs on metalwork artifacts in Mazandaran?

In answering these questions, it is assumed that myths and symbolic reliefs are always rooted in religious thoughts and are an expression of the supernatural thinking of ancient people. Symbolic and mythological reliefs on the metal artifacts of Mazandaran, rooted in the historical coexistence of this territory with other parts of Iran, retained its original nature despite the difficulty of communicating with the central regions of Iran. The manifestation of this fact can be seen on metal artifacts from these areas.

### **Literature Review**

So far, several studies have been conducted on this issue separately. For example: The book "The Beautiful Silver Sassanid Dishes" by Mohammad Hejazi (1956); "The History of the Coin (from the earliest to the Sassanid period)" by Malakeh Malakzadeh Bayani (1971); "Metalworking of Iran during Achaemenid, Parthian, Sassanid Eras" by Ann. C. Gunter and Paul Jett (2004) translated by Shahram Hyderabadian; "Seven Thousand Years of Metalworking in Iran" by

Mohammad Taghi Ehsani; exploring Iranian Art of Sassanian Metals and the Beginning of the Islamic Period" by Arthur Upham Pope and Phyllis Ackerman (1999) translated by Najaf Dari Bandari and an encyclopedia entitled "Investigating the Collection of Sassanid Metal Works of vessels-Sculptures-Coins" by Bakhtiari (2001). But less research has been conducted as an independent study that thoroughly and independently examines bas-reliefs of sacred animals in the Sassanid metalwork art in Mazandaran.

### **Sassanid Metal Art**

In the course of a quarter century, the Sassanids, who considered themselves as inheritors of the Achaemenid dynasty, created national art with courtly features that paralleled with Roman and Byzantine art in terms of glory and majesty and sometimes even boasted its glory. According to some scholars, the evolution of Sasanian art is as follows: First, the art of the third millennium, which is still an adaptation of the Greek Parthian elements. Then the middle period, which covers the fourth and fifth centuries, and the exclusion and evasion of alien elements grow. In this period, art is influenced by indigenous and national thought, which was still alive in the unconscious of the people and the nation. Finally, is the art of the sixth and seventh century which is approaching the end of this evolution and at the end of this stage, there would no longer be any traces of Greek and its related thoughts (Mousavi Kouhpar, Khorashadi, Nistani and Mousavi Hajji, 2017: 14).

One of the most significant arts of Sassanid era is metalwork that ranked second to bas-reliefs. Metal has one of the divine blessings that first excavated by human

beings from the earth relying on their powerful thought and it was valuably used in the metal industry. And when the historical era began in Iran, metal working knowledge also evolved. Various hand engraving and carving works on Sassanid era's metal works indicate Iranian powerful thought and art in the field of metalworking knowledge. The art history of Sassanid era's metalworking indicates various styles that might be studied based on similarities among various ears (Gunter, 2004: 32).

In the Sassanid period, we are faced with a variety of metal works that indicate the importance of the metalworking industry in this era. The metal works of this era include metal coins, circular plates, royal plates of hunting, plates with rimmed external surfaces, bowls, pots, ewers, rhytons, and other objects. Due to the close proximity of the Parthian and Sasanian periods to each other, it is very difficult to accurately distinguish between the metalworks of these two old periods. Most Sassanid dishes are decorated with political and religious concepts (Gunter, 2004: 33-32).

The carved bas-reliefs on dishes belonged to the Sassanid period have often common themes in the carving and sculpture of that era. Engraving and carving on metals, especially on trays, cups, bowls and golden and silver jars have got a special status (Sarfaraz & Firoozmandi, 2010: 302).

### **Animals' Symbols**

Animal reliefs are among those that have been dominant and frequent in many ancient civilizations, including Iran. Cassirer believes that in the course of primitive human's worship, animals were worshiped and regarded sacred by humans at one stage as worshipping a variety of phenomena and

things that surround them. Cassirer regards them as "the gods of the moment," and such worships lead to functional gods (based on their interests and their function in life) (Kassirer, 1925: 76-75).

Hence, animals were worshiped and considered sacred on the basis of use for meat, skin, bone and, in general, their many benefits, and on the one hand, the fear of their brutal nature or their deadly traits. In addition, animals gained a magical form and in other words, they found divine powers, but in this way, human beings, with a greater understanding of themselves, initially formulate themselves in the form of animals and then their successors. Accordingly, in the process of art history, we encounter with goddesses in the forms of animals, animal-human and humans. On the other hand, the animals' magic was mentioned previously. In this connection, James Frazer, an ethnographic researcher who has carried out extensive research based on mythology, divides magic into two types. The first type refers to the contagious magic (contact law) and the second type is the homeopathic magic (the law of similarity). In this regard, the ancient man using the second magic depicted animals for their magic, their hunting and increasing their numbers and for the use of their godly powers. These motifs are found in ancient handicrafts in the form of animals, animal-human, etc. (Frazer, 1890: 120)

#### **Investigation of Sacred Animals' Reliefs in Metal Works of Mazandaran Cow**

Among animals, cow was regarded as a useful animal in ancient Iran, and the cruelty towards this animal and its killing in Zoroastrianism has caused the anger of the animal, and especially that of Haoma. In the

Iranian tradition, cow was thought to be as one of the economic pillars and it was known as precious animal with totem-like role. Cow bas-relief can be found on artistic works in the Sassanid era. In Avesta, Moon Posht (back moon) indicates moon and cow bond. Moon and cow showed attachment not only in creation, but also cow's horns indicate moon crescent and has similar shape. In Sassanid era's artistic works, the relationship between cow and moon is evidently clear. According to many researchers, bulls, in addition to being a symbol of masculine power, are also associated with the feminine principle (Werness, 2004: 61).



**Fig 1.** The Bas-relief of lion Attack on a Cow on a Sassanid Dish

#### **Cock (Rooster)**

Cock derived from Kherous root in Avesta means "roaring" (Pourdavoud, 2007: 316). In the Sassanid art, cock bas-relief is seen in artistic works. Due to cock's importance in religious literature and its accompany with Soroush goddess, it seems that, cock is a symbol of the beast seen with Soroush goddess.



**Fig 2.** The Golden Belt Buckle with the Cock Symbol and Decoration of More than Forty Pieces of Red Ruby in the Sassanid Empire

## Dog

The Zoroastrian religion has given a lot of importance to dog, in the Avesta, which we have today, only in the part called Vendidad, it talks about dog and cattle dogs have been bestowed on other dogs. Despite great value the Zoroastrian religion attaches to dog, it is rarely seen in the Sassanid art. Dog is another beneficial creature that has been valued by the Iranian people for its extraordinary features. According to Vendidad, dogs have been respected in their religious rituals in terms of their impact and ability. Hence, the persecution of dogs has been severely punishable. According to these beliefs, anyone who harasses a dog will have a hard time in the hereafter, and will be in a poor life and will fail in his affairs in this world.

We should refer to the "dog's look and "bershnoon" as important religious rituals in which the presence of a dog is required. "Dog's look" is a ceremony in which the dead body is shown to a four-eye dog - the two dots that look like eyes above the eyes.

Bershnoon refers to a complex washing ritual to clean the dirtiness from man's body.

We read in the third paragraph of the fifteenth chapter of the Vandadid:

It is the second of these sins when a man gives bones too hard or food too hot to a shepherd's dog or to a house-dog; 'If the bones stick in the dog's teeth or stop in his throat; or if the food too hot burn his mouth or his tongue, he may come to grief thereby; if he comes to grief thereby, the man who has done the deed becomes guilty. The forty eighth chapter (Fargard) of "Arda Viraf" book says: "This is the soul of the" guy "(follower of lies) who kept back the food of the dogs of shepherds and householders; or beat and killed them.' In "Denkard" deafening a dog that guides the herd is a crime. Any unjust behavior of shepherds with dogs is a crime, including the unjust use of dogs and the inattention to giving dog rewards in cases that seem necessary.

## Horse

Horse in the Zoroastrian tradition and ancient Iranian myths has a special place. As it is inferred from the Mazdayasna Sunna (law) and various texts, some of which mythical, Zarathustra cured Vishtaspa's black-haired horse as a miracle. His horse that had fallen into the abdomen with four arms and legs (maybe it had got a sever colic) and all had given up their hope. In Kay Kāvus's Letter of Zoroaster, it has been said, one day the hand and foot of Vishtaspa's black and worthy horse are gassed in his stomach, and all doctors are unable to cure it. The king is depressed and he seeks help from Zarathustra who was in prison as the last resort. Zoroaster heals the horse and as a result Vishtaspa, his wife and his son, Esfandiar all believe in He believes in his prophecy.

It is said in one of the Avestan parts about the value of a horse: the value of the best and most preferred horse of one land is equal to eight pregnant bulls. The angel of

rain, Tishtrya, has turned into a mighty white horse with golden ears and golden tail is confronted by Apaosha as a horrible black horse with black ears and black tail. Finally, conquers the demon of drought. Tishtrya then causes the rains to fall freely upon the earth and all is well again. The surprising point is that due to the high status of the horse among the Aryans, all the derivatives of it are created to make names. Kay Lohrasp" = swift horse", "Vishtaspa = old horse", " Kirsāsp = lean horses", " Tahmasp = powerful horse", " Arjasp = valuable horse" There are also other examples that are occasionally seen related to dog and we know the special status of dog is in ancient Persia and among Zoroastrians.

The horse and the sun are two monsters that all Indo-European nations have linked them to each other. In Mithraism, white horse symbolizes the water goddess and black horse represents the demon of drought. The importance of this animal has been such that the motif of this animal can be seen in the Pazyryk carpet. The horse is an animal that has always been praised and respected as a noble and merciful steed. Eventually the horse was a sign of the sun.



**Fig. 3** Silver Plate, Sackler Gallery  
([www.mandagarana.com](http://www.mandagarana.com))

Horse is usually a symbol of power, social status and dignity, and is also associated with war, courage, and physical strength. In the Greek art, horse's image, often sacred by the gods, has been used extensively. In the art of the Vedic era, horse is the symbol of the universe and the kingdom. In China, horse is considered as a dragon family, and in Africa, horse is also associated with the power and authority of the rulers. In Europe of the 19th century, horse has been linked to the free soul of the nature (Werness, 2004: 220-226).

### **Winged Horse**

Winged horse is another animal whose motif is derived from religious concepts and its root has to be sought in the Avesta. Tishtrya is a goddess to whom the eighth Yasht of Avesta belongs. Tishtrya comes in three forms, one of which is a winged horse. In Sassanid art, the motif of a winged horse is seen on plates and seals.

### **Capra**

Every ancient tribe described goat as one of the natural causes of profit, for example, in Lorestan, goat is described as the beast of the sun and its dependent, and sometimes symbolizes the angel of rain because the moon has been associated with rain and the sun with heat and drought since the ancient times. In addition, the ancient people believed that the capras' horns were effective in the fall of the rain since there is a relationship between the curved horns of the capras and the crescent of the moon. Wherever a capra is seen with its particular agility, it signifies water and plants. The capra symbolized the abundance of creatures and there was a magical power in its horns.

### Ram

Ram seems to be a very powerful and mythical animal and is considered respectable by the people as it is a symbol of fertility. The motif of a ram as one of the horned animals is considered to be an animal attributed to the sun.



Fig. 4 Harper, 1981: 218 (Silver Plate, Metropolitan Museum)

The ram symbolizes the creative impulse and the symbol of the soul at the moment of the genesis (Sirlo, 2009: 347). Ram is the universal symbol of male sexual power and male deities, symbolizing the fertility forces of nature (Werness, 2004: 341). Ram is a symbol of the male sexual power and male gods. In general, ram symbolizes the fertility forces of the nature. Such a concept for rams is roughly shared by all nations.

### Boar

In Zoroastrianism in the Sassanid period, there is a marvelous tendency toward personification of heavenly phenomena and subjective and abstract concepts. One of these examples is the symbol and motif of Bahram. Bahram or Verethragna (*vərəθraγna*) in the Avestan language is a goddess of Aryans and god of war. The

fourteenth Yasht of the Avesta book called Bahram Yasht talks about the emergence of Bahram goddess in ten different forms (Bahram Yasht., Par. 27-1). The fifth time, Verethragna appears in the figure of a live boar with sharp teeth, and in Mithra Yasht, Bahram in boar form also accompanies Mithra deity (Mithra Yasht, chapter 18, Par. 70). This form of the Verethragna was popular in the Sassanid period, due to the fact that it is a suitable symbol to show leadership and strength (Pourdavoud, 1347: 459).

The visual features of the boars' bas-reliefs on Sassanid artifacts indicate that they have no decorative aspect. Strong teeth and eyes, where penetrating look is created by making a small cavity in the pupil produce a convincing effect of the animal that has supernatural force. Meanwhile, the meaning of boar is a symbol of fearlessness and irrational motive that tends to commit suicide and on the other hand it means immortality and disorientation. The degree of boar is superior to the dragon or the monsters and is lower than the lion (Sirlo, 2010: 648).



Fig 5. Silver Plate, Los Angeles Museum (www.sassanids.com)

Boar is a symbol of power, stability, and courage, a bold and brutal attack. Boar is also



a goddess symbol that has opposite and dual aspects. This dichotomy is also clearly seen in ancient Middle Eastern culture. In these cultures, boar is associated with fertility on the one hand, and with death and evil forces on the other. In Sumerian and Sami cultures, there are also different stories in which wild boars having different roles. In the Egyptian culture, boar has a dual existence. In the Greek culture, we often face with boar; sometimes it has a supporting aspect and is a military and warfare force. In the Hindu culture, boar is considered one of the victim animals, and is also associated with the fertility and goddess of the dawn. In Japan, boar is a symbol of the moon with a combination of fear and admiration (Werness, 2004: 48-50).

### Phoenix (Simurgh)

Phoenix or Simurgh in Avestan narratives and Shahnameh is an extraordinary creature. The wide feathers cover the width of the mountain when flying, there are four wings with good colors on each side, and a large eagle beak and with face like that of human. Simurgh is a goddess and divine bird; hence, some believe that Simurgh is considered as a Totem and guardian angel of the Scythians (the family of Rostam). Simurgh is one of the most important mythological elements manifested in the atmosphere of Persian culture and Persian literature. The role of Simurgh has been different in different periods of Iranian art, but during the Sassanid era, it is widely activated and is seen in various artworks of that period including plastering, metalworking, textiles and Taq-e Bostan's bas-reliefs. It is therefore one of the Sassanid iconographic symbols.



Fig. 6 Silver Plate with the Relief of Simurgh, British Museum (Crimson, 1971: 219)

Harper (1978) has shown that the legendary Simurgh was actually a charismatic beast that distributed plant grains among humanity. The generality of the reliefs of animals on containers determines the valuable concepts that these objects possess. But until now, it has been proven that the association of single animals with religiously significant symbols is impossible. Like the hunting reliefs on some of the Sassanid silver dishes which themselves are hidden (Harper, 1965: 185-195).

Simurgh is probably the same bird that is mentioned in the Avesta. The role of Simurgh in Iranian mythology is the symbol of the world of animals, birds and fish, or in general, a symbol of the earth, the sky, water and the circus of animals. As a result, it had gained a great deal of recognition in ancient myths. Decorating dishes with the relief of the mythical animal, Simurgh, which is placed inside an emblem, is seen on a couple of eighth century's Sogdian golden plates (Harper, 1978: 95).

### Lion

In semiotics, lion symbolizes all huge and scary things of nature, as well as the sun,

because lion is actually a night hunter and is more interested in the shadow. The connection between lion and the sun seems to be more relevant to their glorious appearance and pure physical presence than their nature. Lion is a symbol of fire and light and is connected to feelings and emotions. It also represents the earth. Lion is the king of earthly animals and symbolizes power and the principle of masculinity as its heavenly counterpart (eagle) does. The wild female lion is a symbol of the great mother (Werness, 2004: 254-255).



**Fig. 7** Silver Plate of the 4th Century, Hermitage Museum (Harper, 1981: 225)

### **Glorious Animal Symbols**

Khvarenah (an Avestan word for glory or splendor) is one of the basic concepts in the Iranian culture. The Khvarenah also takes on animal symbols: In the Avesta, a hunting bird named Varghan has been mentioned. According to the words of the Avestan and Ancient Persian, late Pourdavoud believed that the lexical meaning of "Varghan" is considered any creature with wings and further said that "Varghan" must be another term for "saēna hen" and he considered both as hawk (Pourdavoud, 2007: 305). In the art of the Sassanid period, the role of this bird is seen in the crown of Sassanid kings (especially after the second era of Bahram II),

which is like the wings of the hawk. Another manifestation of Goddess Khvarenah is in the form of a ram, this beast is not only one of the bodies of the goddess of Verethagna, but also a ram and a sign of the kingdom. The relief of the ram is repeatedly seen in the Sassanid art, and necklaces that are seen on the neck of these rams are based on its sacred relief.



**Fig. 8** Sassanid Silver Plate, Sackler Gallery ([www.sassanids.com](http://www.sassanids.com))

### **Analysis of Metalworking Artifacts from Mazandaran**

#### ***Silver plate with the relief of lion's prey***



**Fig. 9** Plate; Material: Silver; Working Method: Bas-Relief, Carving; Diameter: 28.6 Centimeters; Weight: 1285 g; Location: Sari; Ancient Iran Museum (Archaeological Museum of Ancient Iran)

This plate dates back the era of Crown Prince Ardashir II Sassanid circa 375 AD. The bas-

relief refers to the king's horse riding while haunting a lion, there's a lion under the horse's foot. This Sassanid plate excels in terms of artistic aspect and design power over other Sassanid plates (Masoumi, 2007: 114). The artist created an opposition in this relief and shows up horses and lions down on the earth against two parallel horizontal rows. He paralleled the prince and the wounded lion, in two vertical rows. The man is waiting for the attack on the hunter, but the artist did not care much about the reality of the scene. The side view of the king in this dish is to the right. The position of the king on horseback as well as his dress appearing in two opposite directions may surprise the viewers. But this did not matter to the artist. Regarding this relief, it can be said that this scene of the conflict between humans and the most abusive animal is very interesting due to the expressive power used in it. In this relief, the most interesting part is the lion's view.

A sequence of triangle reliefs with flowers and seedlings create conventional perspective. The crown that prince has, is not seen on coins. His coronet, decorated with spiral ornaments, is similar to the crown of Jupiter I or Shapur II, and thus the work dates back to the end of the third or fourth century. Such a history is suited to the bas-reliefs of shapes and the manner of carving the breasts of the hunter striving to draw the bow (Girshman, 1364: 225).

The hunter is straight on the horse and has been pointing like a Parthian shooter. The hunter's image is on the left side of the dish. On the right is a lion with vertical position and another lion is horizontally below the horse's feet. The presence of small hills in two rows makes us notice the perspective. Each small hill has an interesting

plot. Beautiful flowers on the plant stems in the hills give a special shape to the dish. The designs are naturally drawn, interesting and beautiful motifs fit in the circular shape of the container. Some motifs of the container are placed on other motifs; the foot of the horse is on the leg of the lion.

The hunter's weapon is an archer and a sword. A small point that is surrounded by circles is used to indicate the beard. The mustache of the hunter is a straight line that screwed up and goes upwards, and such a twist is seen on the bas-reliefs of Shapur II, Shapur III, and Artaxerxes II in Taq-e-Bostan. The king's crown has not been seen on the coins; his coronet belongs to the late third or fourth century. We see this relief in the Freire Gallery.

#### *Artifact Mirror Plate in Chalous*



**Fig. 10** Mirror Frame; Material: Silver; Work Method: Embossing; Carving; Diameter: 13.7cm; Weight: 218g; Location: Chalous; Location: Museum of Ancient Iran (Archive of the Museum of Ancient Iran)

This object has a row of dashboard lines and a circular separator strip and its edge is broken and incomplete. In the central medallion of the dish, the duck's relief is represented as a profile in a circle consisting of a wheat cluster. The relief has six flowers which are different from each other. Pictures are beautifully decorated and have a special

elegance, and the flowers are similarly tied together. Animals are portrayed in realism. All these reliefs were common in the Sassanid period. The adornment on this small plate shows that the hammer work has been used for shaping, and cutting and carving have been certainly used as well. This metal has a uniform thickness. Carving and engraving have been used to create such patterns including the branches.

***Legged Bowl Artifact with the Relief of Four Rams Discovered in Sari***



**Fig. 11** Legged bowl; Material: White zinc; Late Sassanid; Work Method: Embossing and Carving; Height: 10.8cm; Diameter of Opening: 16.7cm; leg Diameter: 3.6cm; Weight: 438; Gram; Place of Discovery: Sari; Location: Kurdish Sari Museum

This bowl, probably made at the end of the Sassanid period, has a semi-circular shape, with a flat edge on a long, circular leg. On the outer surface of it, the relief of four rams and a goat with beard which have been seated. The ram seems to be a very powerful and mythical animal and it is considered respectable by people as it symbolizes fertility. The relief of ram as one of the horned animals is considered to be among animals attributed to the sun.

In general, the relief is elegant. It has been relieved symmetrically. The top surface of the bowl is twice its leg height. Probably the upper surface is screwed on the leg. The

leg of the dish is simple and does not have a high thickness. It is believed that these containers were relatively common at the end of the Sassanid period. There is also a decisive evidence of their use both in worldly celebrations and in religious ceremonies, and maybe used as occasional dishes too.

***Silver Bowl with the Relief of a Crested Chicken***



**Fig. 12** Bowl; Material: Silver; 7th Century AD; Working Method: Hammering, Carving and Bas-Relieving; Opening Diameter: 23.2cm; Height: 7.2cm; Weight: 795g; Location: Mazandaran; Location: Museum of Ancient Iran (Archives of Ancient Iran Museum)

The shape of this dish is a small half-sphere. The inner part is simple. The body decorations consist of a central medallion, in which a crested chicken with a long tail and a necklace with three pieces of jewelry can be seen. Around this, the hemisphere body is divided into four equal parts, and the four distinct parts of this relief are divided by a row of petals with a heart pattern which are then placed in a vertical column. The edges of the dish and the central medallion have two pearls shown strips and margins. Inside each section, the image of a woman with loose-fitting clothes having thin and

transparent fabric is seen below the grape tree with a large cluster while holding a musical instrument. The woman has long hair that is closed and has a necklace like a ball and a scarf which slides down to the ground and hangs on her neck (Girshman, 1350: 216). The show of flute, pipe, horn and tear in the hands of women, shows their role in the music of the Sassanid era. An important point is the grapevine tree, which is seen alongside each of these female musicians. This relief induces a symbol of force and fertility. The decorations of this dish are not common in the Sassanid period, but the show of female musicians has been considered as tradition in this period.

***Gilt Silver Decanter with the Relief of Jigger Lady with Rooster and Pigeon Motif from Kelardasht***



**Fig 13.** Silver Decanter with Jigger Motifs; Silver and Partly Gilt; Century: 7.6 AD; Length: 25.5 cm; Diameter: 14.2 cm; Diameter: 6.6 cm; Weight: 940 g; Place of Discovery: Kelardasht; Stored in: Museum of Ancient Iran (Archives of Ancient Iran Museum)

This is a beautiful silver gilt decanter with four different forms of a lady dancing on its four sides. The image of a rooster and a

pigeon is also bas-relieved on both sides and the image of jiggers is separated by four stripes. In one state, the branch of the flower on the right hand and the dish that is supposed to contain the seeds of the fruit is on the left hand. On both sides, a pheasant is seen. The long hair, the hat, the garment, the necklace, and the position of this lady's breast are displayed similarly in all four pictures. What women hold is the end part of the scarf, which is twisted in both hands.

In the other image, there is a ring in the right hand and a flower in lady's left hand. Given the fact that in this image the dance is embodied with the tip of the toe, it can be well understood that the right-hand ring was used as a castanet with which cross-sectional tracks were played to suit such a situation. In the other image, the long branch of the tree with flowers and leaves is on her right arm and incense in the left hand, and on both sides, there is a partridge. In the fourth image the lady is holding the bird on the right hand upwards and a fox in the left hand and again the image of partridge is seen on her both sides. Regarding the motifs of these animal species, it can be said that the metalworker has inspired the animals around his environment, and given the abundance of these animals in the northern region, it can be concluded that the artifact discovered in Kelardasht is made in the same area. The lady's dress is long in all four pictures with ruffles on the bottom of it appearing when dancing (Sami, 2010: 185).

On the four sides above the dish, four small reliefs can be seen. First is a lady that looks like playing a rope game, the second lady seems as if holding the right hand on the chest and extending the left hand and the third and the fourth ones are ladies crossing legs and playing the oud (lute). The long

hair, the hat, the garment, the necklace, and the position of this lady's breast are displayed similarly in all four pictures. The edges of the grapevine leaves which are displayed around all four images create the illusion that there is a vintage ceremony in the vineyard. Overall, this decanter is the finest silver Sassanid vessel. This decanter's master art makes the joy and passion of the grape harvesting season very vivid. Some of the reliefs of this container are constantly depicted in the scene and several other motifs, such as the dog and the child, are rarely pictured and in some cases removed (Harper, 1971: 505).

#### ***Gilt Silver Decanter with a Rooster Relief***



**Fig. 14** Decanter; Material: Gilt Silver; Working Method: Hammering, Carving and Gilding; Height: 17.2cm; Maximum Diameter: 10.2cm; Weight: Approximately 730g; Location: Mazandaran; Location: Boston Museum ([www.sassanids.com](http://www.sassanids.com))

In this relief, the rooster has a halo around its head which expresses the sanctity of this animal and shows that the rooster is not a typical bird in Sassanid art. Considering the scarf round neck, it is also a symbol of glory and reign in this period. There are two birds in the circular frame and a pair of tiny trees with fine details having decorated the pot,

which is different from the other examples of the Sassanid period. The narrow and tall neck with a spherical body gives the pots a distinctive shape.

Birds have two special characteristics, a light halo surrounded by their heads, and the necklace with three egg-like hangings symbolizing monarchy and kingdom and are directly linked to the kings. This triplet hanging with three pendants in the neck of the bird is seen in the dishes of Mazandaran, and another example of this is apparent on Sassanid fabrics. The decorative trees inside the pot have a central body with twin branches, which are twisted to the bottom and two extra stems that have risen upward to the edge of the pot. This design is a reminiscent of the trees displayed in the Khosrow II Archway in the Taq-e Bostan. Of course, the plants were more natural and cohesive there. The design of this silver pot dates back to the late Sassanid period. In Avesta, this bird is a companion of the angel who is the protector of man against the evil, and when he announces the morning, he awakens man for prayer. The bird was both a symbol of monarchy and a sign of true religion in the Sassanid era and even in the early Islamic period. We see this relief frequently in textiles of the Sassanid period.

#### **Conclusion**

Myths naturally reflect the life and way of thinking of our ancestors and usually raise the most important issues that human beings have in their minds and teach people how to interact with events and problems. Sometimes myths appear in animal symbols. This is clearly seen in the metal artworks of Mazandaran.

Considering the study of Sassanid dishes and objects obtained from Mazandaran and

comparing them with similar dishes and objects, it can be concluded that these objects were made at a close time. By examining these dishes, it can be said that it was often modeled by metalworkers and even other artists in later periods. Both in terms of forms and motif, it can be said that some dishes have been unique to this period and are rare, and perhaps it can be sampled in other arts including textiles, bas-reliefs, etc.

According to the research carried out on dishes obtained from Mazandaran, which included various scenes, and by comparing them with Sassanid dishes similar to those obtained from other regions, it can be argued that the purpose of the bas-relief of animals had been to express the peak of power and the superiority of the kings to the other people and their supernatural power at that time. An example of this can be seen in royal hunting scenes relieved on Sassanid plate. For example, the plate kept in Iranian museum, obtained from Sari, shows the hunting of two lions by the Sassanid king (Shapur). The purpose of this relief was to demonstrate the strong power of the king to suppress the enemies of the region. Other motifs used in Mazandaran during the Sassanid period are plant, animal, birds.

Consequently, due to the research carried out in this project, we can confirm the hypotheses presented in response to the questions related to the Sassanid metal containers and metal objects obtained from Mazandaran. In confirmation of the hypothesis presented in the response to the question of the extent of the existence of religious and beliefs in the reliefs of sacred animals examined, it can be stated that in most of the concepts and representations in the works produced in all parts of this civilization, a common goal is pursued and it

is a struggle against evil and evil forces. The symbolic emblems and reliefs of the sacred animals in Iran can be closely linked with the beliefs and religions of the time, some of which are manifested in the form of boar and lion in the body of gods and goddesses. The myths and iconic motifs are always rooted in religious thought and are an expression of the supernatural thinking of the ancient people.

Also, in confirming the hypothesis presented in the answer to the question about the relationship of the reliefs of the sacred animals in the Sassanid art with motifs created on the metal artifacts belonged to Mazandaran, It can be said that the relieving of these animals' motifs is beyond their normal role because of the many animals and birds that live in the studied area, only those which are rooted in mythology or in religious thought, or have sacred status have been relieved on metal work, and this is their own. It can be a sign of the sanctity of these animals to other animals. And this can be a sign of the sanctity of these animals to other animals.

But the point is that none of these Sassanian metalworking workshops have been discovered until today, but we are sure that all Sassanid metalworkers of Mazandaran follow a single management. As a result, by examining the works of the Sassanid period in Mazandaran and other regions, we can reach the culture, religion, and art of those days to some extent, and even through the technique of the construction and material of these works, we can find out the political power of the kings of that time.

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## بررسی نقوش جانوران مقدس در هنر فلزکاری ساسانی در مازندران

علی محمودی عالمی<sup>۱</sup>، محمدکریم یوسف‌جمالی<sup>۲</sup>، ناصر جدیدی<sup>۳</sup>

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### چکیده

یکی از درخشان‌ترین دوره‌های تاریخ فرهنگ و تمدن ایران از نظر ترویج هنرهای گوناگون، دوره ساسانی است. پس از بررسی و تحقیق درباره آثار تهیه‌شده در دوره ساسانی یک وجه مشترک در همه آنها، نظرها را به خود جلب می‌کند و آن تشابه و هماهنگی نقوش تزئینی در همه این آثار به‌ویژه نقوش برجسته، ظروف فلزی، پارچه‌ها و مهرها است. هدف از این پژوهش، بررسی نقوش جانوران مقدس روی آثار فلزی مکشوفه از مازندران در دوره ساسانی، در پاسخ به سؤال چستی ارتباط نقوش جانوران مقدس در هنر عصر ساسانی با نقوش خلق‌شده روی آثار فلزی مکشوفه از مازندران در دوره ساسانی بوده است. نتایج حاصل از این پژوهش که بر اساس هدف از نوع تحقیقات بنیادی و بر اساس ماهیت از نوع تحقیقات تاریخی به شمار می‌رود آشکارا نشان می‌دهد که در غالب مفاهیم و بازنمایی‌ها در آثار تولید شده در جای جای این تمدن یک هدف مشترک دنبال می‌شود و آن مبارزه در مقابل نیروهای شیطانی و اهریمنی است. نقوش و نشان‌های نمادین و اساطیری جانوران مقدس به کار رفته در ایران را می‌توان در ارتباطی تنگاتنگ با اعتقاد و مذهب آن روزگار دانست که تعدادی از آنها همانند گراز و شیر در کالبد خدایان و ایزدان تجلی یافته‌اند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: ساسانی، مازندران، هنر فلزکاری، نقوش جانوران مقدس، ظروف فلزی

۱. دانشجوی دکتری تاریخ ایران باستان، دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی واحد نجف‌آباد، اصفهان، ایران.

۲. استاد تاریخ ایران، دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی واحد نجف‌آباد، اصفهان، ایران. Yousef\_jamali2000@yahoo.com (نویسنده مسئول).

۳. استادیار تاریخ ایران، دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی واحد نجف‌آباد، اصفهان، ایران.