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**AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARTISTIC, ARCHITECTURAL,  
ENGINEERING AND CULINARY EXCHANGES BETWEEN  
ANCIENT IRAN AND THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD**

ABSTRACT. This paper provides a prefatory synopsis of the impact of ancient Near Eastern influences upon Greece and southern Italy during the Achaemenid (559 BCE-333 BCE), Parthian (250 BCE-224 CE) and Sassanian dynasties (224-651 CE) with respect to: (1) the arts (Darius-Persephone motif, silverware, motifs such the *Senmurv*, etc.); (2) architecture (Apadana palace, *Iwan* vaults, decorative masks, *Bandes Lombardes*, etc.); (3) technology (communications, Qanat aqueducts, windmills, etc.); and (4) culinary arts (transmission of cooking styles, etc.). Roman influence on ancient Iran in arts, architecture and technologies is also examined (e.g. dam-bridges, mosaics, etc.). The importance of Roman-Persian border regions such as Commagene, Cappadocia, Palmyra, Dura Europus, Hatra and Armenia as East-West conduits is emphasized.

***“The Two Eyes of the Human Race”:*  
Greco-Roman Civilization and Ancient Persia**

Apharban, the Persian ambassador representing Sassanian king Narses (r. 293-302 CE) during negotiations with the Roman general Galerius<sup>1</sup> in the aftermath of his victory over Sassanian forces in 291-293 CE stated the following to his Roman hosts:

*“It is clear to all mankind that the Roman and Persian empires are like two lights, and like (two) eyes, the brilliance of one should make the other more beautiful and not continuously rage for their mutual destruction.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Galerius became emperor in 305-311 CE.

<sup>2</sup> Peter the Patrician, fragment 13; translation made by Canepa (2010, p. 133).

Apharban was clear: Rome and Persia were essentially perceived as the two major civilizations of antiquity in the West, as India and China were in the Orient. Neither the Roman nor the ancient Iranian (Achaemenid, Parthian, Sassanian) empires were “racial” empires in the manner expostulated by 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century European nationalist discourse. These were essentially multifaceted civilizations engaged in complex interrelationships and exchanges in the domains of arts, architecture, technology, engineering, theology, governance, commerce and militaria<sup>3</sup>.

Much of previous European scholarship in Classical Studies, however, has often been characterized by a distinctly Eurocentric approach, namely the attempt to present the Greco-Roman and Persian civilizations as insulated and even “*self-contained*” entities<sup>4</sup>. Western writers and Classicists have often emphasized the antagonistic aspect of East-West relations, especially with respect to the wars of the Greeks and their Roman successors against the empires of pre-Islamic Persia. In this endeavor, Greco-Roman sources are often selectively cited to portray a seemingly endless array of

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<sup>3</sup> Drijvers, 2009, pp. 442, 445.

<sup>4</sup> Drijvers, 2009, p. 453.

wars between the “*West*” (i.e. the Greco-Roman world) that is portrayed as democratic and civilized versus the “*East*” (i.e. ancient pre-Islamic Persia). As noted by Isaac, proto-racism is certainly evident among ancient Greek thinkers notably with respect to their beliefs of inherent (hereditary) superiority, along with the ethnocentric right towards imperialist expansion and rule upon the “*feeble*” Asiatics<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, there are also positive praises of ancient Iran by Greek writers, such as Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*. Drijvers for example notes of the Roman and Sassanian Persian emperors’ recognition of each other as rulers of equal rank and respect who often sought to establish friendly relations and communications<sup>6</sup>. Selective Eurocentric historiography however tends to downplay such information. This is seen for example with the late Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) who has proposed that the contemporary “*Clash of Civilizations*” is due to the Western world’s commitment to democracy over millennia in contrast to the virtually monolithic non-Western world, especially the modern-day Islamic world<sup>7</sup>. The late Edward Said (1935-2003) argued that such paradigms

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<sup>5</sup> Isaac, 2004, pp. 513-514.

<sup>6</sup> Drijvers, 2009, pp. 450, 454.

<sup>7</sup> Sen, 1999, p. 16.

reinforce simplistic if not Eurocentric (or racist) views of history and current events<sup>8</sup>. In tandem with the continued East versus West paradigm, is the related notion of Orientalism. First coined by Edward Said, Orientalism is the dynamic in which the West perceives the “Orient” in both a distorted and stereotyped fashion while concomitantly viewing it as a lesser civilizational “*other*”<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the Orientalist paradigm can lead to the fallacy that “*Oriental*” achievements during antiquity in domains such as the arts, architecture, engineering, etc. are of an inferior variety in comparison to the Occident. This perspective in turn can lead to the assumption that all civilizational developments in the West have developed in isolation and independent of all non-European influences.

Eurocentricism is being increasingly challenged by a new generation of western scholars. Martin Bernal (Cornell University-retired 2001), author of the 1991 text *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, has noted that Eurocentricism has downplayed the role of “non-Aryan” civilizations with respect to ancient Greece, a claim heavily criticized by Western historians. Nevertheless, as noted by Binsbergen Western

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<sup>8</sup> Said, 2004, p. 293.

<sup>9</sup> Said, 1978, pp. 38-40, 56-57.

scholarship has been challenged by “...*the Eurocentric denial – as from the eighteenth century CE – of intercontinental contributions to Western civilization*”<sup>10</sup> and that “...*Eurocentricism is the most important intellectual challenge of our time*”<sup>11</sup>. Canepa’s recent studies in particular have outlined the ancient world as an intercontinental and cross-cultural system of interaction between the Roman, Sassanian Persian and Chinese Sui-Tang Empires<sup>12</sup>.

This paper endeavors to provide an introductory overview of the exchanges that existed between the Greco-Roman and ancient Iranian worlds from the Achaemenid (559-330 BCE), Parthian (250 BCE-224 CE) and Sassanian (224-651 CE) eras. The domains emphasized in this article are the arts, architecture, culinary arts, technology and engineering.

### **Achaemenid Empire (559-330 BCE)**

Influences from the Iranian plateau region upon the Mediterranean theatre were already underway even before the onset of the Achaemenid Empire in 559 BCE, notably with respect to Qanat aqueduct technology. The

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<sup>10</sup> Binsbergen, 1996-1997, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Binsbergen, 1996-1997, p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Canepa, 2010, pp. 121-144.

Achaemenid era also gave rise to a number of influences that reached ancient Greece and southern Italy, notably in the domains of Persian gardens, the architecture of the city-palace of Persepolis, the arts such as rhythons, the Persephone-Darius theme as well as communications technology.

### **Qanat aqueducts and Persian Gardens**

The Qanat system that originates in ancient pre-Achaemenid Iran<sup>13</sup> is a subterranean aqueduct water delivery system designed for dry, arid regions lacking lakes, rivers and fresh water. This is essentially a hydro management system that provides a reliable supply of water that leads to higher hygiene and sanitation, resulting in higher living standards. The Cultural Heritage News Agency of Iran reported in 2014 on the excavation of Iran's oldest system of Qanats, dated back to 5000 years ago<sup>14</sup>. There are currently over 170,000 miles of Qanat aqueduct systems within the borders of

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<sup>13</sup> English, 1968, p. 170.

<sup>14</sup> April Holloway, Archaeologists uncover 5,000-year-old water system in Iran, *Ancient origins: Reconstructing the Story of Humanity's Past*, June 7, 2014; available on-line: <http://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/archaeologists-uncover-5000-year-old-water-system-iran-001727> (accessed October 29, 2015).

contemporary Iran<sup>15</sup>. Iran's Qanat system spread far beyond its borders into the Mediterranean as far away as Sicily and Spain<sup>16</sup>. The tunnel of Eupalinos on the island of Samos for example, built sometime in 550 BCE, extends for approximately 1 kilometre in order to supply water to the ancient Greek city of Pythagorion. At both ends of the Eupalinos tunnel are Qanat-type tunnels<sup>17</sup>. Later Roman engineers at the time of Emperor Claudius (r. 41-54 CE) used the Qanat system to drain the Fucine Lake by constructing the Claudius Canal, which stretches for approximately 5.65 kilometres<sup>18</sup>.

The establishment of the Qanat system allowed for the one of the most enduring legacies of ancient Persia upon the Greco-Roman world and its European successor: the Persian gardens. These originated in Pasargadae, the imperial capital of Cyrus the Great.<sup>19</sup> It was at Pasargadae where the Achaemenids developed, refined and expanded the design and arena of the Babylonian-Assyrian garden, resulting in the *Pari-Daeza* (Old Iranian: *Park*,

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<sup>15</sup> Wulff, 1968, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> Wulff, 1968, pp. 94-105.

<sup>17</sup> Apostol, 2004, pp. 30-40.

<sup>18</sup> Grewe, 1998, pp. 94-96.

<sup>19</sup> Even after Pasargadae was no longer the imperial capital after Cyrus' death in 530 BCE, construction was to continue later during the reign of Darius the Great (r. 522-486 BCE). The site continued to be inhabited into Seleucid times (Mallowan, 1985, p. 396).

*Walled Garden*) or the “Persian Garden”. The term *Pari-Daeza* referred to the enclosed hunting grounds of the Median kings<sup>20</sup>.

The construction at Pasargadae was like Persepolis, an international collaborative project that involved Ionian Greek, Lydian and Urartian influences in masonry and massive stone works. Like its Mesopotamian predecessors, the Persian garden at Pasargadae relied on a mathematically based geometric design. These had 900 meters of channels of carved limestone transporting water through the garden. This was an irrigation system of open ditches and stone water-channels<sup>21</sup>. The garden itself was planted with a variety of fruit and Cyprus trees, flowers such as roses, lilies, jasmines and exotic grasses. Arrian has described the gardens as “*a grove of all kinds of trees...with steams...*” and encompassed by a large area of “*...green grass*”<sup>22</sup>. The basic design of Cyrus’ gardens has exerted its legacy in Europe. The Greeks adopted the Persian garden after Alexander’s

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<sup>20</sup> Frye, 1984, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> Stronach, 1985, p. 847. The design was such that water would enter small basins every 15 meters within the garden.

<sup>22</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis*, VI, 29.



conquest of Persia, followed by the Romans and succeeding European civilizations that built parks and gardens on the Persian model<sup>23</sup>.

### **Persepolis: Palace of 100 Columns and Greece's Odeon**

One of the most enduring legacies of the Achaemenids is their city-palace of *Parsa*<sup>24</sup> known by the Greeks and the West as *Persepolis* (Greek: City of the Persians). With its construction ordered by Darius I in c. 520 BCE<sup>25</sup>, Persepolis featured a series of palaces such as the *Apadana* (the courtyard), *Tachara* (summer palace), and the *Palace of 100 Columns*<sup>26</sup>. These synthesized an array of artistic styles and motifs from the Near East, Egypt, the Southern Caucasus as well as Iranian motifs<sup>27</sup>. The prototype of the Apadana structure, for example, had appeared centuries earlier in the Erebuni fortress in ancient Armenia in c. 780 BCE<sup>28</sup>. Persepolis itself is

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<sup>23</sup> Sackville-West, 1953, pp. 282-291.

<sup>24</sup> Porada, 1985, p. 793.

<sup>25</sup> Guaitoli & Rambaldi (2006, p. 164) claim 500 BCE, however previous studies of tablets and inscriptions suggest the earlier date of approximately 520 BCE (Hicks, 1975, p. 110).

<sup>26</sup> Also known as the Throne Hall as well as well as the Imperial Army Hall of Honor.

<sup>27</sup> Bahar & Kasraian, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Chahin, 1975, p. 419.

actually composed of several more distinct structures (palaces, various buildings, etc.)<sup>29</sup>, with construction on the site having continued to the late Achaemenid era until Alexander's arrival and his destruction of the site in 330 BCE<sup>30</sup>.

Two of Persepolis' structures were to influence the Greco-Roman realms: The Palace of 100 Columns (also known as the Throne Hall and/or the Imperial Army's Hall of Honor) and the Apadana Palace. The Palace of 100 Columns was to leave its imprint on ancient Greece in the form of the Pericles' Odeon in Athens<sup>31</sup>. The Greek orator, historian and statesman Pericles (495-429 BCE) had first constructed the Odeon in 435 BCE<sup>32</sup>. This was done to provide shelter from the harsh weather for theatre audiences as

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<sup>29</sup> In addition to the Apadana, Tachara, and The Throne Hall, there is also the Palace of Artaxerxes I, Palaces D, G, and H, the Tripylon Hall/Council Hall or 3-Gated Hall, the Hadish, the Treasury, the Harem, and the Garrison/Hall of the 32 Colonies. The site also features several other prominent works such as the Gate of Nations, various quarters, storerooms, stables, an incomplete gateway and other unfinished structures.

<sup>30</sup> Shahbazi, 1978, pp. 487-500. Darius' initiative was continued by his son Xerxes who continued construction at the site, a project to be continued to the final days of the dynasty.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of secondary sources outlining architectural parallels between the Odeon and the Palace of 100 Columns consult Wickkiser, 2008, p. 144, footnote 47.

<sup>32</sup> Consult Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, 13.

well as a venue for chorus rehearsals<sup>33</sup>. According to the Greek writer, historian and biographer Plutarch (45-120 CE): “*The Odeon, or music room, ...was constructed, we are told, in imitation of the king of Persia's pavilion [Skênê]. This was done by Pericles's order.*”<sup>34</sup> The Greek Odeon was basically modeled on the Palace of 100 Columns of Persepolis. The Greeks learnt of this structure during the Greco-Persian wars, specifically at the time when Xerxes was carrying a portable version of the Palace of 100 Columns during his invasion of Greece in 480 BCE. The dimensions of Pericles’ Odeon (68.50 x 62.40 meters) are remarkably close to the Palace of 100 Columns (68.50 x 68.50 meters) featuring 10 x 10 columns in comparison to Pericles’ 9 x 10 columns<sup>35</sup>. Interestingly, Pericles’ original Odeon was also covered with timber extracted from Persian ships that had been captured by the Greeks during Xerxes’ failed invasion. The Odeon however was razed to the ground during the First Mithradatic War (87-86 BCE) but subsequently rebuilt by Ariobarzan II (Ariobarzanes) Philopator of Cappadocia (r. 63-51 BCE). The Odeon and its architecture was well-known by the later Roman

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<sup>33</sup> Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *de Architectura*, Book V, Chapter 9.

<sup>34</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, 13, 5-6.

<sup>35</sup> Farrokh, 2007, p. 63.

Empire, thanks in large part to the Roman historian and architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's<sup>36</sup> *de Architectura*<sup>37</sup>.

### **Persepolis: The Apadana and Calabria's Cattedrale di Gerace**

There are possible indications of the presence of a Medo-Persian community in Calabria, Southern Italy dating back to 500-450 BC<sup>38</sup>, however more research is required in this domain. It is possible that such arrivals may have arrived as a result of the Achaemenid Empire's expanding Mediterranean maritime trade networks. Alternatively surviving vessels from the defeated Persian fleet in the aftermath of the Battle of Salamis (480 BCE) may have also arrived to Calabria. It is also possible that a number of features seen on the columns at the *Cattedrale di Gerace* in Calabria may have influences from the Apadana columns at Persepolis<sup>39</sup>.

The influences of the Apadana in Calabria may have arrived through the possible settlements and/or Achaemenid maritime routes discussed

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<sup>36</sup> Marcus Vitruvius Pollio was born sometime in 80-70 BCE, died sometime after c. 15 BCE.

<sup>37</sup> Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *De Architectura*, Book V, Chapter 9.

<sup>38</sup> Spatari, 2002, p. 321.

<sup>39</sup> Spatari, 2002, pp. 306, 311-313.

earlier, but this thesis requires further research. What is now agreed upon in the scholarly literature is that the legacy of Persepolis' architecture was to continue in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, centuries after the destruction of Persepolis by Alexander. Examples include Achaemenid type structures recently excavated in Qarajmairli in the Republic of Azerbaijan<sup>40</sup>, as well as other Achaemenid based sites discovered in Tsikhia Gora<sup>41</sup>, Dedoplis Mendori<sup>42</sup>, Samadlo<sup>43</sup> and Armazi<sup>44</sup> in Georgia. A Replica of the Apadana palace in particular has also been discovered in Georgia<sup>45</sup>.

### **Persepolis: The Apadana and Athens' Panagia Gorgoepikoos Church**

One of the artistic styles of the Apadana palace is seen in Greece almost 1500 years after its first appearance at Persepolis. This is the theme at

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<sup>40</sup> Babaev, Gagoshidze, & Knauß, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> This pertains to the discovery of a Column Capital & Base at Tsikhia Gora, which is a near replica of the Persepolis Double-Bull Motif.

<sup>42</sup> A complex of ten temples have been unearthed in Dedoplis Mendori (Gagoshidze, 1992 & Kipiani, 1987, 2000) that are interpreted as local Zoroastrian fire temples (see also Akhvledinai & Khimshiasvili, 2003). The capitals were built with the assistance of Achaemenid architects in the styles of the Persian courts (Tsetskhladze, 2001, p. 474).

<sup>43</sup> Akhvledinai & Khimshiasvili, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Lang, 1987, p. 416.

<sup>45</sup> Allen, 2005, p. 95.

(the central façade of the eastern stairway) of the Apadana at Persepolis in the c. 450s BCE: this shows a lion attacking a bull that in turn looks back at its attacker. It is generally believed that this represents the Leo slaying Taurus theme of the spring equinox celebrated on March 21 as the Nowruz (ancient new year festival of Persia)<sup>46</sup>. The (beast slaying prey) theme is mirrored in a mural in Athens' 12<sup>th</sup> century CE Byzantine Panagia Gorgoepikoos Church that depicts a predator attacking its prey; as in the Apadana display, the prey is gazing at its tormentor.

### **Greco-Persian Rhythons**

Artistic exchanges between the Iranian and Greek (later-Roman) worlds also began in the Achaemenid era, especially during the Greco-Persian Wars. Herodotus, for example, has noted of the Greek capture of scores of Persian rhythons following Achaemenid defeat at the Battle of Plataea (479 BCE)<sup>47</sup>. The captured Persian Rhythons typically featured heads of beasts (notably rams and bulls), which Greek artisans began to synthesize into their own rhyton crafts. This resulted in a Greco-Persian or east-west artistic

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<sup>46</sup> Kia, 2015, p. 24; for an overall analysis of the scholarly views on the subject of Nowruz at Persepolis in general, consult Llewellyn-Jones, 2013, p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> Herodotus, IX, 80.

fusion. The Athenian rhyton housed at the Museo di Archeologia Ligure in Genova for example displays a clear Persian influence with the ram's head, but now incorporated into a distinctly Hellenic-style artwork.

### **Darius the Great and Persephone**

While the presence of a possible Medo-Persian colony in Calabria is possible, parallels have been found between facets of Achaemenid and Mediterranean arts, especially between the statue of the seated Mediterranean Goddess *Persephone* (daughter of Demeter and Zeus; also known as goddess Kore, the Maiden) from Tarentum, Magna Graecia<sup>48</sup> (in modern Apulia, southern Italy) and the relief of the enthroned Achaemenid king Darius I who reigned in 522-486 BCE. The Tarentum Persephone which was sculpted sometime 480-460 BCE or after Darius' reign, shows a number of near parallels with the relief of the king.<sup>49</sup> Both images share the following: a small stand for resting the feet while enthroned, large open

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<sup>48</sup> Currently housed at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

<sup>49</sup> The Tarentum statue's hands have been broken off, so it is not possible to know what items the Goddess was grasping. The Darius relief shows Darius grasping a lotus flower (or pomegranate?) with his left hand and holding a scepter at an angle with his right hand.

sleeve for the left hand, and the positioning of the arms (left hand set lower with right hand raised higher).<sup>50</sup>

### **Communications technology**

Perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of the Achaemenid Empire on the Greco-Roman world and the West in general is the postal system. According to Greek soldier-historian Xenophon (430-354 BCE), it was Cyrus the Great who ordered the implementation of a system of mail delivery for every citizen situated in all of the empire's regions<sup>51</sup>. By the time of Darius I (r. 522-486 BCE), the Achaemenid Empire had succeeded in implementing a comprehensive "*Pony Express*" system for the delivery of mail. Riders and horses were specially bred for speed to ensure the highest possible efficiency for mail deliveries. Stations were placed in regular intervals measuring one day's journey for each horse-rider. Thus a letter being delivered along the critical Sardis (Lydia) to Susa (Persis) road spanning 1,677 miles could now be delivered in 7 days. The Achaemenids had also developed a system of fire towers relaying their own system of

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<sup>50</sup> Spatari, 2002, p. 186.

<sup>51</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* (tr. W. Miller, 1968), VIII, vi, 17-18.



“*Morse-Code*” from station to station<sup>52</sup>. Prior to the implementation of the empire-wide postal system, the dispatch of messages along the Susa-Sardis road would have taken approximately three months.

Mazzarino has noted that the Greeks adopted crucial elements of Persian communications technology, notably the postal system that was then passed on to the Romans<sup>53</sup>. The Roman Empire then in turn introduced the postal system into continental Europe, a communications system that has survived into the modern information age. The legacy of the Achaemenid postal system has been summarized by the Greek historian Herodotus (484-425 BCE)<sup>54</sup>: “*There is nothing in the world that travels faster than these Persian couriers...nothing stops these couriers from covering their allotted stages in the quickest...time...neither snow, rain, wind, nor darkness.*”

### **Parthian Empire (250 BCE-224 CE)**

After the conquest of Achaemenid Persia by Alexander by 331 BCE, Greek and Iranian arts were to achieve a remarkable synthesis in the

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<sup>52</sup> Mazzarino, 1966, 75-83. The efficiency of this ancient Achaemenid system survived in Iran for over 2000 years until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the telegraph finally rendered it obsolete.

<sup>53</sup> Mazzarino, 1966, 75-83.

<sup>54</sup> Herodotus, VIII, 98.

Bosphorus, Central Asia, Armenia and Anatolia. The Parthians in northeast Persia began to re-assert Iranian independence against the Greco-Macedonian Seleucids from c. 250 BCE, having completely ejected them from Persia by 129 BCE<sup>55</sup>. Roman imperial ambitions were checked at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE<sup>56</sup>, marking Parthia as a new Iranian Empire rivaling Rome. Rome and Parthian Persia now entered into a dynamic series of exchanges in the realms of arts and architecture. Critical conduits in that relationship between the empires were the buffer regions between them: Palmyra, Commagene, Cappadocia and Armenia. Another border city of note was the frontier city of Dura Europus that changed hands several times over the centuries between the Roman Empire and the ancient Iranian (Parthian and Sassanian) empires. It was within these crossroads regions where Greco-Roman and (Parthian) Persian arts and architecture were synthesized, much as what took place in the Bosphorus and Central Asia.

### **Commagene and Cappadocia: Fusion of Hellenic and Iranian Arts**

The artworks of the kingdom of Commagene in central Anatolia (163 BCE-72 CE) provide a unique display of the Greco-Iranian synthesis of arts

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<sup>55</sup> Farrokh, 2007, p. 123.

<sup>56</sup> Traina, 2010, pp. 211-219.

and ideas. A sculpture at the site of Nimrud-Dagh in Commagene central Anatolia displays king Antiochus I Theos (70-38 BCE) attired in Iranian dress (loose-fitting trousers, tunic, cloak, riding boots) shaking hands with the Greek God Herakles. The latter is portrayed holding his staff with his left hand and characteristically nude in the Hellenic style. In a sense the handshake between Antiochus and Herakles symbolized a pact or agreement between the Orient and the Hellenic West. There is another relief of Antiochus I at Nimrud Dagh in which he shakes hands with the combined (Iranian) Mithra and (Hellenic) Apollo divinities. Mithra-Apollo is now fully attired in Parthian-style Iranian dress and Phrygian cap but with sunrays emanating from his head as with the Hellenic Apollo. Both reliefs of Antiochus exhibit the Greek artistic disposition towards the fine, polished and realistic portrayal of human faces and forms with even the stance of the feet positioned in the Classical Greek style. By the same token, there are also Medo-Achaemenid artistic influences of the immobility, (almost) flat planes and the shallowness of the relief itself, reminiscent of the figures inscribed at Persepolis<sup>57</sup>. As noted later in this paper, Armenia in the southern Caucasus as well as central and east Anatolia, notably Commagene and Cappadocia,

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<sup>57</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, pp. 66-67.

were to be important conduits for the flow of architectural and artistic ideas between ancient Iran and the Greco-Roman worlds.

### **The *Iwan* vault system**

Perhaps one of the most significant Parthian architectural innovations was the *Iwan*: a new type of chamber that was barrel-vaulted and open-fronted on one (or more) sides of a courtyard. As noted by Keall “*The Iwan...replaced the archaic Greek Megaron type of Hall where columns were placed in the portico*”<sup>58</sup>. There was now a fundamental shift in architecture, especially with respect to the Hellenic column system. In Hellenic architecture the pillar is fundamental with the walls added, whereas with the Parthian innovation, the walls were built first followed by pillars that were now added as decorative motifs. As seen later in this text, this system of architecture, inherited by the later Sassanians of Iran, was to also influence Roman architecture, especially from the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards<sup>59</sup>. While bricks were often the primary building block of Iranian structures, the Parthians do appear to have borrowed the Roman technique of utilizing

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<sup>58</sup> Keall, 1993, p. 175.

<sup>59</sup> Koshelenko, 1963, pp. 69-71.

hewn blocks of stone or ashlar masonry as evidenced at Hatra in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE<sup>60</sup>.

### **Decorative masks for buildings**

The Parthian artistry of decorative masks was to exert its influence upon the Greco-Roman world. This was the technique of using masks as decoration motifs as seen in Parthian artistic sites in Qom and Ecbatana in Iran. This theme is also found in buildings at Hatra in modern Iraq and Dura Europus in modern Syria. The Romans adopted this motif, including cutting the heads short at the chin level<sup>61</sup>. By the later Sassanian era, Iranian artisans were inserting depictions of human faces into niches decorating arches, a motif that would be found in later European architecture, notably at Angers, Saint-Aubin in France.

### **Wall Paintings**

Greco-Roman style wall and mural paintings, a tradition traced as far back as the ancient Minoan palace of Knossos in Crete, had its influences upon Iranian architecture, especially in the Parthian palace at Kuh-e

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<sup>60</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 36.

<sup>61</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 37.

Khwaja<sup>62</sup>. Mural paintings can be found in abundance at Dura Europus, however (though of the Iranian style) these particular paintings also betray distinct Greco-Semitic influences as well. Interestingly these often portray images of Parthian cavalymen as well as Mithrauem in which the hunting exploits of the Persian God Mithra are illustrated.

### **Palmyra: Fusion of Greco-Roman and Iranian arts and architecture**

Palmyra was a chief trading city along the Roman marches in Syria. The city featured a strong local army and was connected to the Silk Route. By the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Palmyra had developed a sophisticated and robust artistic tradition combining the Hellenic and eastern styles. While the architecture of Palmyra is distinctly Greco-Roman, its decorative arts of bas-reliefs are strongly influenced by the Iranian tradition<sup>63</sup>. Of special interest are the double columns topped with “leaf-motif” capitals of the Persian style that first developed during Achaemenid times at Persepolis. The almost exact same design (columns with Persian-style capitals) is seen with the four pairs of columns at the entrance of the Library of Celcus at Ephesus (near

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<sup>62</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 41.

<sup>63</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 69-85.

modern Izmir, Turkey)<sup>64</sup>. The “leaf-motif” capitals are also situated upon columns in the *Cattedrale di Gerace* of Calabria discussed earlier. Interestingly, Plutarch complains that cultural exchanges (especially in arts and architecture) in Ephesos had led to its “*barbarization*”<sup>65</sup>.

### Sassanian Empire (224-651 CE)

Even after the overthrow of the Parthian dynasty in 244 CE, Persia’s exchanges of artistic and architectural themes with Rome were to remain vigorous during the Sassanian era (3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). It was during this era where Iranian artistic and architectural themes made a significant impact upon the West, much as the latter also influenced the Iranian world. In this dynamic, Armenia remained an important conduit for the transmission of Sassanian and more ancient Near Eastern artistic and architectural styles to the Roman world<sup>66</sup>. By “Roman” we are also referring Byzantium, which was essentially a continuation of Rome<sup>67</sup>. While true that Armenian arts and

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<sup>64</sup> Spatari, 2002 pp. 312-313.

<sup>65</sup> Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 288.

<sup>67</sup> As noted by Frye (1972, p. 361) the Latin language was used in armies of Byzantium until the time of Emperor Justinian (r. 527-565 CE) with Latin inscriptions appearing on coins until the time of Emperor Heraclius (r. 610-641 CE).

architecture had strong links to Iranian as well as Syrian and Anatolian styles, Armenia was to develop its own unique system of arts and architecture. Examples of artistic East-West exchanges are seen in silverware, mosaics, textiles and associated design motifs, Christian arts, clothing and fashion styles, with many of these exchanges originating long before the Sassanian era. It was in Sassanian Iran however where the ancient artistic traditions of not only Iran's past but also that of the Near East were to be synthesized and exported westwards.

In practice, the routes of influence were multivariied and complex. The arrival of artistic influences to the West were achieved through: (1) voluntary movement by (Manichean and Christian) missionaries<sup>68</sup>, (2) diplomatic missions which often bought “gifts”, “tributes”, and “awards”, (3) skilled craftsmen in search of employment, and (4) merchants in search of lucrative trade opportunities<sup>69</sup>. All of these factors facilitated the flow of

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<sup>68</sup> Note that missionaries were not always arriving voluntarily as at various times during the Sassanian dynasties, religious groups could be expelled depending on the ideology of the Sassanian leadership. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE for example, Kartir, the high Zoroastrian Magus who wielded powerful influence in the government, records of his persecutions of Buddhists, Manicheans and Christians. The arrival of the latter two groups into the Roman Empire also led to the introduction of Sassanian artistic motifs. One primary medium in this transmission was through the appearance of monuments built by these eastern Christian communities.

<sup>69</sup> Azarpay, 2000, p. 68; Canepa, 2010, pp. 126-127.



ideas and visual arts between the empires. Roman conquests of regions adjacent to the Sassanian Empire also led to contacts with eastern artistic influences. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE Sassanian arts were making a significant imprint on eastern Anatolia, Syria, the Arabs, the Caucasus-Black Sea regions, Coptic Egypt and even Germanic and other “Barbarian” peoples thrusting into central and western Europe, the very same regions where the Romans were seeking to expand their influence<sup>70</sup>. As noted by Drijvers, the border regions (especially Syria, the Caucasus and Anatolia) situated between Rome and Sassanian Persia, were characterized by “...a culture shared in common on both sides of the frontier”<sup>71</sup>. Later workshops in the post-Sassanian Byzantine Empire and Abbassid Caliphate continued to produce Sassanian motifs and export these to Europe<sup>72</sup>. The Sassanian arts were in a sense reviving a more ancient Eurasian tradition such as those of the Cimmerians and Scythians, just as the Romanesque arts were asserting their influence on Roman-ruled regions. Sassanian architecture also influenced the Romans. Even after the fall of the Sassanians in the 7<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, pp. 284, 289, 298, 302.

<sup>71</sup> Drijvers, 2009, p. 449.

<sup>72</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 315.

century CE, their architecture continued to resonate in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries architecture of the Byzantine, Islamic, Romanesque and Moldavian traditions<sup>73</sup>. In like manner, Roman arts and architecture also interacted with and significantly influenced the Sassanians as well.

**Romano-Sassanian exchanges in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries:  
architecture, mosaics and engineering**

There are parallels between early Sassanian and contemporary Roman architecture, especially in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. One of these pertains to strong (architectural) parallels between the *Basilica di Massenzio* in Rome built by Emperors Maxentius (r. 306-312 CE) and Constantine the Great (r. 312-337 CE) and the Sassanian palace at Firuzabad in southwest Iran built by the founder of the Sassanian dynasty, Ardashir I (r. 224-242 CE)<sup>74</sup>. The Firuzabad palace, built in circa 224 CE, predates the *Massenzio* by almost a century. Firuzabad's triple-*Iwan* ingress, large wall design and floor plan are characteristics shared with Rome's *Basilica di Massenzio*<sup>75</sup>. The Sassanian

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<sup>73</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 293.

<sup>74</sup> Ardashir's palace is located almost two kilometers (1.2 miles) north of Fars province's old city of Firuzabad.

<sup>75</sup> Spatari, 2002, pp. 265-267.

triple-dome system appears to have also influenced later Roman-Christian arts.

Anatolia, the Near East and Armenia in the southern Caucasus continued to act as vital conduits for cultural, artistic and architectural exchanges between the Roman Empire and Persia. As noted by Curatola and Scarcia: “...domed spaces in Christian buildings in Europe derive from the Armenian model, which, in turn, comes from Sassanian Persia: This can be attributed to geographic proximity and also to the fact that for long periods Armenia was contained within *Eranshahr*.”<sup>76</sup> Another one of Firuzabad’s architectural legacies is the system of connecting the top of columns with parabolic or “horseshoe” type arches. This system is essentially the origin of the *Bandes Lombardes* (pilaster wall strips), possibly first transmitted to the West from Milan. This is seen in the early Romanesque Christian architecture of Italy, Spain, Germany and Dalmatia<sup>77</sup>. Later this was to become the system of twin arches as seen in the façade of Ctesiphon, capital of the Sassanian Empire. This system is then seen at the Golden Gate church at Split (Spalato), Croatia (4<sup>th</sup> century CE), the Saint-Pierre Church in Isere

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<sup>76</sup> Curatola & Scarcia, 2007, p. 92. The term “*Eranshahr*” is the Middle Persian term for the Iranian empire of the Sassanians.

<sup>77</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 192.

at Vienna (5<sup>th</sup> century CE) and later at Saint-Germain-des-Prés (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE).

Roman prisoners captured by Shapur I in 260 CE were to leave their imprint on mosaic arts that were foreign to Persia at the time. Shapur I's palace at Bishapur has several mosaic works built by Roman mosaicists, numbers of which are now housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris. Examples of these mosaic works include portrayals of the Iranian nobility of the time, including noblewomen playing harps, reclining, with others standing and bringing flowers and garlands<sup>78</sup>. Roman influence can also be seen in the walls of Bishapur. These feature Hellenic key-type designs, dentils, leaf-scrolls in bright red, yellow and black colors, all of which betray a distinctly Roman imprint<sup>79</sup>. Interestingly a commemorative monument erected at Bishapur in 266 CE features a pair of Roman-type Corinthian capitals that were built by Syrians who hailed from the Roman Empire<sup>80</sup>.

Captive Roman engineers were also put to work in the construction of several engineering works in southwest Iran, notably bridges that acted as

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<sup>78</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, pp. 140-147.

<sup>79</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 140.

<sup>80</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 151.

dams<sup>81</sup>. The remains of the “*Band-e Qeysar*” (Caesar’s bridge) are the eastern most surviving bridge built by Roman engineers outside of the Roman Empire<sup>82</sup>. This measured at 1500 paces when it was completed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, and despite the collapse of parts of the structure over the centuries the bridge continues to be used by local farmers along the Karun River for irrigation purposes. This bears testament to the exemplary skills of Roman engineers, a fact that was duly appreciated by the Sassanians. It is agreed by major researchers that the Roman dam-bridge design system profoundly influenced Iranian civil engineering techniques<sup>83</sup>, especially with respect to hydro-engineering<sup>84</sup>. It is also agreed that the middle Persian word /Stra/ (street, paved road) is derived from the Roman /Strata/ (paved road), however this term had probably entered the Iranian lexicon earlier during the Parthian era<sup>85</sup>.

Just as Roman expertise benefited Iranian engineering, arts, architecture and urban development, the Romans were to also learn considerably from

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<sup>81</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p.137.

<sup>82</sup> Schnitter 1978, p. 28, fig. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Huff, 1989, pp. 449-455.

<sup>84</sup> Smith, 1971, pp. 56-61.

<sup>85</sup> Kurz, 1985, p. 563.

the Iranians with respect to agriculture and irrigation<sup>86</sup>. Three domains of Iranian engineering were to influence the Roman and succeeding European worlds: the windmill, the water wheel and the watermill. The development of windmill technology is a prime example of East-West cooperation. The Greek inventor Heron (born in c. 10 CE) was the first to build a wind-powered machine, but unlike modern wind machines, the shaft and rotating blades were built horizontally. Heron's machine however never advanced beyond its prototype stage. Neither the Greeks nor the later Romans developed Heron's machine for agricultural uses or for the generation of power. Heron's technology however was known to the Iranians, thanks to the efforts of the Sassanian dynasty to preserve Greek knowledge and scholarship<sup>87</sup>. It was by the late Sassanian era or early Islamic era (7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), when the first true windmill appeared in the east Iranian regions. It is generally agreed that ancient Iranian engineers had completely re-designed Heron's machine by inverting the shaft holding the blades from

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<sup>86</sup> Kurz, 1985, p. 563.

<sup>87</sup> See for example Agathias (tr. 1975), *Historiae*, 2, 28, 1-2; Secondary sources on this topic include Gheverghese, 1991; Drijvers, 2009, p. 451; Garsoïan, 1985, p. 592; Zarrin'kub, 2002, p. 239.

the original vertical to an upright position<sup>88</sup>. The redesigned shaft and rotating blades were placed within a mud-brick tower featuring “air ducts”. These allowed the air to rotate the blades within the tower. Originally designed as corn-mills, these early windmills had blades built of tough fabric resembling sails<sup>89</sup>. The Arabian caliphates adopted the windmill design and through them, this technology was exported to the West, finally reaching England by 1137 CE<sup>90</sup>.

The water wheel (also known as the “*Na’ura*” or “*Persian wheel*”) is essentially a wheel with posts and buckets fastened to it. As the wheel rotates, it brings to the top water collected from the bottom. While it is generally agreed that the waterwheel originated in Persia<sup>91</sup>, it may also have been invented outside of Persia proper in Iranian-speaking Soghdiana in Central Asia<sup>92</sup>. What is certain is that the waterwheel was to spread to both the western world as well as China<sup>93</sup>. The watermill, which is essentially a

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<sup>88</sup>James & Thorpe, 1994, pp. 392, 394.

<sup>89</sup> The early windmills in eastern Persia could have up to 12 such sail-blades within them.

<sup>90</sup> James & Thorpe, 1994, p. 394.

<sup>91</sup> Selin, 2013, p. 282.

<sup>92</sup> Laufer, 1934, pp. 238-250.

<sup>93</sup> Kurz, 1985, p. 563.

water wheel fitted with paddles and operated by the water's current, is believed to have originated in the Sassanian Empire (either in Iran proper or Mesopotamia) sometime before 350 CE<sup>94</sup>.

A prominent example of Greco-Roman and Sassanian architectural synthesis is the Iwan-e-Karkha near ancient Susa in southwest Iran. The Iwan-e-Karkha, built during the reign of Shapur II (r. 309-379 CE) had its foundations laid along the rectangular Greco-Roman design to then combine with the Iranian motif of a square hall topped with a dome – a wing then extends from this square hall-cupola structure. The wing is then divided into five segments through a series of arches lying on each side of wall<sup>95</sup>. The design of these arches may be derived from the earlier Parthian architecture system of domed vaults of 200-100 BCE situated at Shahr-e-Qumis (Hecatompylus) along modern Qosheh (on the road between Tehran and Mashad in northeast Iran). Armenia and Anatolia appear as East-West conduits of this type of architecture to the West. The pivot of this east to west transition appeared in the Armenian cathedral of Echmiadzin built in c. 611-628 CE. The oriental design of the Armenian Church may explain, at

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<sup>94</sup> Selin, 2013, p. 282.

<sup>95</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, pp. 181, 183.



least in part, the architectural parallels seen between the original Iwan-e-Karkha and three monasteries built in Spain and France including the Saint-Philibert de Tournos (built 11-12th Centuries CE)<sup>96</sup>. The earlier Parthian domed vault system of arches also has design parallels with the Basilique d'Evron (built in 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) located in Sainte Suzanne, France.

There has also been a Sassanian influence in military architecture. After decades long archaeological studies of European-Roman and Iranian sites, Ghirshman concluded that “...*the design of [Partho-Sassanian] cities involved the robust circular design which was very efficient at defending against flank attacks...western military engineers were to draw upon this concept in the Middle Ages*”<sup>97</sup>. The circular architectural system for cities was adopted by the Arabian caliphs for the design of their capital in Baghdad<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>96</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, pp. 288-289.

<sup>97</sup> Ghirshman, 1964, p. 35.

<sup>98</sup> As noted by Levy: “*With the foundation of Baghdad...His [Caliph Al-Mansur] new buildings were of Persian design...it is evident from the architectural terms employed in Arabic that it was by Persian builders that such features were introduced as arches and domes, porticoes and balustrades, windows, ventilators, and water-sprouts*” (1953, pp. 74-75).

### Architectural exchanges in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE

There also appear to be links between the Sarvistan palace of Sassanian king Bahram Gur (r. 420-438 CE) and structures built in the Italian mainland during and after the Roman Empire. The Sarvistan design, which became standard during the Sassanian era, features the typical triple-*Iwan* entrance behind which lay a square hall reception area with long rooms situated on both sides leading then to the palace's residential apartments built around a central court area<sup>99</sup>. The floor plan of the Sarvistan palace built in the c. 420s CE appears to have influenced the construction of a number of structures in 5<sup>th</sup> century southern Italy. This is in essence the concept of combining the basilica design with the cupola<sup>100</sup>. These have been identified as the *Basilica di San Paolo fuori le Mura*, the *Chiesa Matrice San Nicola di Mammola* and the *Cattolica di Stilo* built in Calabria during the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, with the *Basilica Veneziana di San Marco* in Venice (built 1100-1300 CE) having been constructed atop more ancient structures (possibly Mithraeum?) that employed the Sarvistan floor plan<sup>101</sup>. The link in architecture appears to be

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<sup>99</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 181.

<sup>100</sup> Spatari, 2002, p. 289.

<sup>101</sup> Spatari, 2002, pp. 275-291.

again the Armenian and central Anatolian regions, notably the Göreme Churches of Commagene that have utilized the Sarvistan design floor plans<sup>102</sup>.

### Silverware

Sassanian decorated silverware often featured the theme of the royal hunter, the banquet, enthronements, and other regal themes<sup>103</sup>. This art form, already popular among the nomads of the Eurasian steppe and Eastern Europe, became highly popular among the Romans as well. As noted by Ghirshman: “...plates, bowls, round or boat-shaped drinking vessels with plain or festooned rims, jugs and ewers. The technique employed (notably in the third and fourth centuries, when this art was at its acme) was one of piecemeal assemblage: that is to say, the elements of the decorative motifs were made separately then soldered to the object after gilding. Unknown to Greece and Rome, this technique was exclusively Iranian”<sup>104</sup>. The earliest examples of this type of artwork may be traced back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE in Ziwiye in northwest Iran. Perhaps the best-known Sassanian bowl is the

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<sup>102</sup> Spatari, 2002, pp. 271-277, 289.

<sup>103</sup> Azarpay, 2000, pp. 68-69.

<sup>104</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 204.

“*Cup of Solomon*” that was reputedly given by Saladin to King Charlemagne. The cup however is a Sassanian work depicting the enthroned king Khosrow I (531-579 CE) within a rock-crystal cameo surrounded by three rows of glass rose patterns inset in the bowl’s polychrome design. A possible Greco-Roman influence during the late Sassanian era (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) would be the appearance of nudity on Sassanian silverware<sup>105</sup>, a development not seen in previous Iranian arts, although this feature may have alternatively arrived through Gupta India.

### **Overview of Artistic Motifs**

A number of animal themes from Iran that were to influence the Roman world originally hailed from modern-day Luristan in Western Iran. The arrival of these ancient West Asian themes into Europe was made from two routes of influence. The first ingress of these styles into Europe was from the Iranian-speaking Scythians and later Sarmatians of Eastern Europe who arrived into the Roman-ruled portions of central and southeastern Europe. These were to influence the rise of the Merovingian and later Romanesque

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<sup>105</sup> See for example the depiction of dancing girls in a 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century CE Sassanian (boat-shaped) bowl of an enthroned king and a boat-shaped bowl from the same period depicting a nude dancing girl (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore).

styles of arts<sup>106</sup>. The second route of ingress was through the Sassanian Empire, especially through its metal-works and woven silk works.

There are at least two eastern bird motifs that have parallels in the Romano-Byzantine world and their European successors. The first is the mythological *Senmurv* entity combining facets of the peacock, griffin, lion, dragon and dog. The first prototype of this appears in the late Parthian-era (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) Qaleh-e-Yazdegerd castle situated in western Iran's Kermanshah region<sup>107</sup>. This pose foreshadows the Sassanian *Senmurv*, a favorite motif frequently represented in silks, silver and stucco, especially by the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.<sup>108</sup> The exact same design is then found in a Byzantine textile with the *Senmurv* and roundel motif (8<sup>th</sup> century CE) as well in a Sassanian fabric once used to wrap the relics of St. Lupus of Troyes. The second bird-motif is the Sassanian *Tawoos* (peacock; modern Persian: *Tavoos*). This is first seen in a 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE stucco type artwork excavated from the remains of Ctesiphon, capital of the ancient Parthian-Sassanian empires, situated approximately 40 kilometers from

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<sup>106</sup> Sulimirski, 1985, pp. 149-199; Farrokh, 2007, pp. 282-283.

<sup>107</sup> This is located in room 1 of the castle.

<sup>108</sup> Herrmann, 1977.

modern-day Baghdad. This peacock motif in which the bird spreads its tail has been preserved among the modern-day Kurds of the Yezidi sect<sup>109</sup>. The almost exact same display of the peacock is found in St. Mark's, Venice (c. 976 CE), Constantinople (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), as well as a (post-Islamic) textile from Moorish Spain.

The Sassanian lion motif seen often on Sassanian silverware and silks, variously symbolized the throne, prestige, the heroic royal hunter, power, guardian of the Iranian realm as well as the protection of sacred (Zoroastrian) domains<sup>110</sup>. The lion or leonine creature is seen at the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire at Persepolis (c. 515-333 BCE). The Achaemenid lion motif survived the fall of the Achaemenids and appears as the seated lion at Cappadocia (c. 130 BCE-130 CE). The lion motif then appears repeatedly in the Sassanian era, such as the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE Sassanian metal ewer featuring two confronted lions wearing (or “branded” with) the star symbol. Nearly a century later in c. 425 CE at Roman Antioch, an almost identical version of this lion appears in a passant pose wearing Sassanian style ribbons. The Sassanian lion motif with star

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<sup>109</sup> The ingress at the Yezidi temple in Iraqi Kurdistan also features the peacock God in the same frontal format with its spread tail.

<sup>110</sup> Feltham, 2010, p. 4.

symbol then appears centuries later in an 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries mosaic in Thiers, France. Other variations of the Sassanian lion motif appear in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries as well, such as the mosaic at Lescar, France (12<sup>th</sup> century CE), a fragment of Byzantine silk in the Cologne Cathedral, Germany (12<sup>th</sup> century), and the mosaic from the Palatine Chapel of Palermo dated to 1131.

Sassanian hunter motifs are often depicted in metalwork plates, such as a plate of Shapur II hunting lions (4<sup>th</sup> Century CE), a drinking bowl depicting King Pirooz or Kavad hunting ibex and boars (5<sup>th</sup> Century CE), and a plate showing Pur Vahram hunting boars (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE). There are numerous parallels between the Sassanian hunter motif and those seen in later Romano-Byzantine and European arts. One example is the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century CE pillow of Byzantine origin at the Vatican which depicts two dismounted hunters with spears whose stance is almost identical to an earlier 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE Sassanian silverwork dish displaying a Sassanian king hunting boar. Another is an 8<sup>th</sup> century CE Byzantine silk work depicting an emperor hunting lions. This was donated to the Church of St. Calmin (Mozac, France) by King Pepin the Short (751-768 CE) in 761 CE. Notably the Persian carpet of Pope Pius IX (1792-1878) depicting a hunter slaying a lion was woven in Tabriz, Iranian Azerbaijan in 1542.

Another Iranian (Sassanian and Soghdian from Central Asia) motif that has inspired Western arts is that of parallel and confronted figures. These are exemplified by the aforementioned Sassanian ewer (4<sup>th</sup> century CE) of the two confronted lions, a 4<sup>th</sup> century CE Sassanian textile featuring (confronted) peacocks, a late Sassanian or early post-Sassanian (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century CE) textile depicting confronted horses, and several other art pieces too numerous to list here. There are several 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries examples of the Sassanian-Soghdian confronted theme housed in the Romano-European theater: the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE silk textile Shroud of Saint Columbia, St. Sens Cathedral, in France originating from Zandan (near modern-Bukhara); the fluvial Persian Silk at Pibrac, France depicting confronted beasts, (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE); the Persian Silk in Le Mans, Notre-Dame de la Couture, depicting confronted lions and Zoroastrian Fire Altars (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE); the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE Persian textile of Saint-Josse (housed in the Louvre), depicting confronted Elephants and (Islamic) Kufic script; and the 12<sup>th</sup> century silk Shroud fragment of St. Sernin of Toulouse depicting confronted peacocks and unicorns, originally from Moorish Spain (Andalus) (Cluny Museum, Paris). The confronted theme is also represented in indigenous Romano-European arts, especially in Italy. Examples include:



the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century depiction of the confronted griffins (with a sacred tree between them) at Sorrento and the 12<sup>th</sup> century mosaic vault from the Roger Rooms of the Norman Palace at Palermo depicting (confronted) leopards and peacocks. European arts have continued to portray the confronted theme up to very recent times. A prominent example is the late 19<sup>th</sup> century CE British coat of arms from Sydney, Australia, featuring a confronted lion opposite a unicorn; this is remarkably reminiscent of more ancient Sassanian-Soghdian styles. Other ancient Iranian motifs found in Romano-European arts include the motif of two animals with a single head seen for example at the 12<sup>th</sup> century Church of Saint-Gilles in Beauvais<sup>111</sup>. The 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century CE Tagh-e-Bostan capital depicting a divine figure with raised hands is essentially parallel to a 12<sup>th</sup> century capital at Saint-Lizier, France<sup>112</sup>.

### **Oriental legacy in Western Christian arts**

References have already been made with respect to Near Eastern influences upon Western Christian and secular architecture, however there are also two additional non-European themes seen in the Christian arts: the

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<sup>111</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 299.

<sup>112</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 301.

“*divine pointing*” gesture and the “*Celtic Cross*”. At the 3<sup>rd</sup> century rock reliefs of Nagshe Rostam in southwest Iran (c. 250 CE), one of the Magi at the triumph scene of Shapur I is engaged in “*divine pointing*” (raised hand with forefinger pointing as a sign of respect). Centuries later, this same “*divine pointing*” is seen in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Christian arts, notably in the fresco of the “*Journey of the Magi*” in the church of Vicq (Indre), the stained glass medallion depicting Moses in Saint-Denis and the depiction of “*Moses before the audacious serpent*” on the Cross of St. Bertin (housed at the Museum of Saint-Omer)<sup>113</sup>.

The origins of the shape and design of the “*Celtic Cross*” can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE *Surp Neshan* (Armenian: Holy Seal) Basilica located near Abaran in the Republic of Armenia. The *Surp Neshan* itself can be traced to Persia, notably the ancient Iranian national standard of *Drafsh-e Kaviani* (Middle Persian: Banner of Kaveh) which appeared at least as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE or earlier among the Parthians of Persia. The motif for this can be found on the world’s oldest Persian carpet dated to c. 2500 years ago, discovered in Pazyryk, Siberia. However the earliest clear depiction of the “*Celtic Cross*” design can be seen yet further back in

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<sup>113</sup> Ghirshman, 1962, p. 294.

history, before Pazyryk, to the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The stela of king Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883-859 BCE), as well as the Stela of king Shamshi-Adad V (r. 824 to 811 BCE) show both kings wearing the “*Celtic Cross*” around their necks. Remarkably both kings in the Stele also engage in the “*divine pointing*” gesture centuries before the Persian Magi at Naghse Rostam. Both Stele were discovered in Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), modern northern Iraq, and are now housed in the British Museum. Here is a clear case of an Oriental theme originating in Babylon, to then appear in Siberia to become the national standard of pre-Islamic Persia to then re-appear in Armenia. The Armenian form of the cross is remarkably parallel in design to the “pagan” “*Celtic Cross*”, as well as the cross seen on the Le Comté de Toulouse shield (dated c. 770s-early 800s CE), the medieval Crusader Cross of the Teutonic Knights, and even the German *Eiserne Kreuz* (Iron Cross).

### **Exchanges in Clothing and Fashions** **Female attire in ancient Iran**

Greco-Roman female attire had a significant impact on the attire of the women of ancient Iran. This can be seen in a panel featuring a royal hunt in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Sassanian site of Taghe Bostan. The panel clearly depicts female harpists dressed in the Western (Greco-Roman) fashion. The

ladies wear elaborately embroidered robes as well as heavy necklaces, complex headdresses and earrings. As noted by Holmes-Peck, the general silhouette of the dresses worn by these women of the late Sassanian era: “*harks back to Graeco-Roman origins...Sasanian female fashion appears to have been frequently influenced by the West...*”<sup>114</sup>. Holmes-Peck further avers that an earlier Sassanian relief (late 3<sup>rd</sup> century-early 4<sup>th</sup> century CE) of the investiture of king Narseh (r. 293-302 CE) shows the Goddess Anahita wearing distinct Greco-Roman female dress of the “*fluttering “wet” drapery*” type<sup>115</sup>.

Western influence upon female Iranian dress can be traced to the earlier Parthian era. The Roman Stola in particular was the most prevalent female dress during Parthian times<sup>116</sup>. The same Stola is also evident in the numerous funerary busts at Palmyra during the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE. Even earlier representations of the Stola are provided at Hatra, where (like Palmyra and the Parthian Empire proper) the item was especially popular. Roman mosaic craftsmen of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE at Bishapur show early

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<sup>114</sup> Holmes-Peck, 1964, p. 106.

<sup>115</sup> Holmes-Peck, 1964, p. 106.

<sup>116</sup> Holmes-Peck, 1964, p. 106.

Sassanian noblewomen with Greco-Roman type dresses, a Western influence evident throughout the Sassanian era. One notable example is the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE Sassanian plate depicting the great king and hunter Bahram Gur (r. 420-438 CE) accompanied by his Greek female companion Azadeh, who wears a distinct Greco-Roman dress<sup>117</sup>. Another example of Western inspired female dress is seen with the Nike depictions<sup>5</sup> at the top of the large vault archway at the aforementioned site of Taghe Bostan.

### **Iranian male attire**

There has also been an East to West influence in clothing, notably with respect to male attire. The arena of transmission was (again) Palmyra. Palmyran arts portray male nobility during the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE as wearing traditional Iranian costume: embroidered trousers and long-sleeved embroidered tunics<sup>118</sup>. Boss' examination of clothing and military gear of the Roman world in the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE has led him to conclude that: “[Iranian] *costume was ... adopted by the Roman army.*”<sup>119</sup> A famous Roman depiction of male Iranian dress is provided on a mosaic of the three

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<sup>117</sup> Holmes-Peck, 1964, pp. 107-108.

<sup>118</sup> Widengren, 1956, pp. 241-244.

<sup>119</sup> Boss, 1993, p. 56.

wise men at the *Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo* in Ravenna, Italy<sup>120</sup>. These wear richly adorned and colorful tight trousers, tunics, Kandys cloaks, and short half boots or shoes.<sup>121</sup> Another influence from ancient Iran on Romano-Byzantine and later male European clothing has to do with epaulettes. As noted by Boss, colored shoulder tufts (described in Emperor Maurice's (r. 582-602 CE) *Strategicon*) "...have a Persian ancestry"<sup>122</sup>. These types of shoulder type military decorations are seen amongst Sassanian costumes in Tagh-e-Bostan. These show surprisingly modern looking rectangles reminiscent of epaulettes on the shoulders of modern military officers. This feature, however, may be of Central Asian origin with similar features visible in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE wall paintings of present-day Panjekent.

### **Hair style**

It would appear that the hairstyle of goddess Kore with long thick strands of braided hair as depicted in Greco-Roman arts preceded the "Kore" hairstyle seen on the later late 3<sup>rd</sup>-early 4<sup>th</sup> century CE Sassanian rock relief

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<sup>120</sup> Azarpay, 2000, p. 72.

<sup>121</sup> Widengren, 1956, pp. 256-258.

<sup>122</sup> Boss, 1993, pp. 66-67; see also discussion by Farrokh (2005, p. 22).

at Nagshe Rustam in southwest Iran portraying Anahita (Persian goddess of fertility and war). Perhaps the first known archaic goddess with the “Kore hairstyle” that may be identified with Kore (or perhaps an older version of Kore) has been uncovered in Crete (c. 640 BCE), followed by the Athenian Kore (c. 500 BCE). The “Kore” hairstyle also appears in Etruscan Italy, notably the Etruscan couple portrayed on the “*Sarcophagus of the Spouses*” (late 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE). The Kore Mediterranean theme evolves towards the Isis-Persephone goddess holding a sistrum in the temple of the Egyptian gods, Gortyn (Roman capital of Crete) (180-190 CE). The late 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century CE portrait of Anahita is remarkable in that the Iranian goddess’ hairstyle is almost exactly the same as that seen in earlier Greco-Roman arts. This would suggest that the Kore hairstyle in Persia was a borrowing from the contemporary Roman Empire.

### **Exchanges in the Culinary Arts**

One of the least known aspects of Greco-Roman and Iranian relations pertains to their culinary exchanges in antiquity. While the contemporary image of the ancient Persians is often portrayed as the militarized “other” in western media and entertainment outlets, there is another less known Roman image of the ancient Persians, perhaps best illustrated by the Roman

biographer Cornelius Nepos (c. 100-24 BCE). The latter characterized the same ancient Persians as the *Luxuriose Vivere*<sup>123</sup> (luxurious living) in reference to their propensity for the refined life.

The art of cooking is a long-standing tradition on the Iranian plateau. Ancient Persia is believed to be the first known region to develop piping technology for streaming natural gas to kitchens in the 550s BCE or perhaps earlier. The ancient Greeks certainly knew of Persian cuisine, at least as outlined by Xenophon in his *Cyropaedia*<sup>124</sup>. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) for example refers to Persian cuisine as thus: “*In Media and the district of Psittakos in Persia there are fires burning, a small one in Media, but a big one in Psittakos, with a clear flame. So the Persian king built his kitchen nearby. Both are on level ground, not in high places. They can be seen night and day.*”<sup>125</sup>

Greco-Roman sources continue to report on Persian cuisine and also hint on its influence on the Roman Empire. This is seen in the Parthian era with the Roman *Apicius* cookbook reporting on two favorite contemporary

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<sup>123</sup> Cornelius Nepos, *Vitae VII* (Alcibiades), II.

<sup>124</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, VIII, viii, 16.

<sup>125</sup> As cited by James & Thorpe (1994, p. 302).



Roman dishes bearing Iranian origins. The first is the recipe for cooking “*kid or lamb in the Parthian manner*” (ingredients included rue, onions, small amount of asafoetida, and ground peppers). The second dish reported by the Apicius is the “*chicken in the Parthian manner*”, which like the first dish, also contains asafoetida<sup>126</sup>. The latter ingredient is essentially a resin that played an important role in Iranian cooking and was adopted by the Romans who termed it as the *Laser Parthicum*<sup>127</sup>. The importance of the culinary arts to aristocratic Persian boys endures into the Sassanian period, as portrayed by the Pahlavi treatise “*Khosrow ī Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē*” (King Khosrow and the Page).

There has been considerable interchange between the Greco-Roman world and ancient Persia with respect to certain types of nuts, vegetables and fruits, notably the almond, pistachio, rhubarb, apricot and peach. The almond was a favorite delicacy of the ancient Iranians<sup>128</sup>. The original chain of almond trees began from ancient Western Media and extended to the eastern parts of the ancient Persian Empire into modern-day Afghanistan.

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<sup>126</sup> Apicius (tr. Flower & Rosenbaum, 1959), *The Roman Cookery Book*, pp. 151, 191.

<sup>127</sup> Kurz, 1985, p. 564.

<sup>128</sup> In Islamic times the Persian pharmacopoeia of Abu Mansur discusses the medicinal value of the *Badam e Talx* (bitter almond) and the *Badam e Shirin* (sweet almond).

According to Macedonian author Polyaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) almonds were a daily furnishing of the table of Persian kings<sup>129</sup>. Almonds spread from Media Atropatene (modern Iranian Azerbaijan) to Eastern Anatolia. Reporting during the Parthian era, the Greek geographer-historian Strabo (c. 64 BCE-24 CE) cites the almond as being a major ingredient of baked goods in northern Media<sup>130</sup>. The Greeks who obtained the almond from Anatolia exported this to Italy, most likely through Greek traders and settlers stationed in Sicily and Calabria. The almond was then introduced by the Roman Empire into the European continent.

The pistachio was also a favorite delicacy in ancient Persia. Polyaeus reports that terebinth oil was among the furnishings situated upon the table of Persian kings<sup>131</sup>. The pistachio plant was first located in eastern Iran's Khorasan region and was unknown by other peoples. An interesting citation from King Astyngias of the Medes (r. 585-550 BCE) in the aftermath of his defeat by Cyrus the Great (r. 559-530 BCE), has him exclaiming: “*Woe, how*

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<sup>129</sup> Polyaeus, *Strategica*, IV, 32.

<sup>130</sup> Strabo, *Geographica*, XI, XIII, II.

<sup>131</sup> Polyaeus, *Strategica*, IV, 32.

*brave are these terebinth-eating Persians*”<sup>132</sup>. The Achaemenids were the first to commercially cultivate the pistachio in ancient Iran to then export this to neighboring countries more than 2500 years ago. By the Parthian era Strabo reports<sup>133</sup>: “*The youths of the Persians were taught to endure heat, cold and rain; to cross torrents and to keep their armor and clothes dry; to pasture animals, to watch all night in the open air and to subsist on wild fruit, as terebinths [Pistacia Terebinthus], acorns, and wild pears*”. The Zoroastrian *Bundahishn* holy text mentions the pistachio as among fruits fit to eat. By the Sassanian era the pistachio was considered a delicatessen and was mostly used in baking and in cookies. Nevertheless despite the western usage of the Persian term *Pista* for the pistachio, the seed for the pistachio tree was first exported to Italy from Syria by Lucius Vitellius the Elder, the Roman proconsul stationed in Syria in 35 CE<sup>134</sup>. Yet another type of eastern nut to find favor in the Greco-Roman world was the walnut. The Persian walnut, termed as the *Persicum* by the Greeks, was considered to be the best

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<sup>132</sup> Nikolaus von Damaskus, as cited from Hehn, Engler, & Pax (1911, p. 424).

<sup>133</sup> Strabo, *Geographica*, XV, III, 18.

<sup>134</sup> Pliny (translated by J. Bostock, & H.T., Riley, 1890), *The Natural History*, XIII, 10.

of its variety<sup>135</sup>. The Romans adopted the *Persicum* and ensured its spread by cultivation throughout continental Europe<sup>136</sup>. The hazelnut in turn was exported from the Roman Empire into Persia<sup>137</sup>.

Like the asafoetida the Romans were to adopt another delicacy from the Iranian realms for their cookery: the rhubarb plant. In practice, the rhubarb did not come directly from Persia but from the Iranian-speaking regions of the Black Sea<sup>138</sup>, which the Roman philosopher and natural historian Pliny (23-79 CE) described as “*ex regionibus supra Pontum*” (countries of the Black Sea/Pontus)<sup>139</sup>. The Roman and Greek names for the Rhubarb (*Rha*, *Rheon*) demonstrate its linguistic origins in Pahlavi (Middle Persian) – *Revas* (Modern Persian: *Rivas*).

Contacts with ancient Persia resulted in the introduction of the apricot and peach to the Roman world. The Romans termed the apricot as the *Prunus Armeniaca* and the peach as the *Amygdalus Persica*. In practice

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<sup>135</sup> Kurz, 1985, p. 565.

<sup>136</sup> Pliny (translated by J. Bostock, & H.T., Riley, 1890), *The Natural History*, XV, 44.

<sup>137</sup> Kurz, 1985, pp. 565-566.

<sup>138</sup> Kurz, 1985, p. 565.

<sup>139</sup> Pliny (translated by J. Bostock, & H.T., Riley, 1890), *The Natural History*, XXVII, 128.

however these fruits had been most likely bought over from China by Silk Route traders, first to Persia (c. 2<sup>nd</sup> or 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) and later to Armenia and the southern Caucasus (c. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE)<sup>140</sup>. Apricot and peach trees appeared in Rome by the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

More difficult to trace are the origins of cutlery in the Greco-Roman and later, the Western worlds. The ancient Greeks were known to eat with their hands with cutlery making its appearance among the Romano-Byzantines in 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. This raises the question of the possibility of some Sassanian Persian influence on the origins of Romano-Byzantine cutlery. Spoons and knives for dining dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE or earlier have been discovered in Pasargadae<sup>141</sup>. The fork however is absent from the ancient Persian archaeological finds and is apparently a Romano-Byzantine invention dated to at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE.

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<sup>140</sup> Laufer, 1919, p. 539.

<sup>141</sup> Currently housed at the National Museum of Iran.

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