

The Scene of Bear Hunt on the Sasanian Silver Plate from the Wyvern Collection. On Segmented Image-Building in Sasanian art

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Abstract: The silver plate in the Wyvern Collection, London, depicts a scene of the mounted bear hunt. The article examines the scene from an iconographic perspective, researching the composition, the traditions of similar themes in Sasanian and related arts, as well as the details of depicted elements of material culture. The research confirms the origin of the plate from the territory of modern Afghanistan and associates the scene with the model represented in art of the Kushan Empire on which Sasanian elements were placed. The iconographic details can allow dating of the plate to the fifth/sixth centuries AD.

Keywords: Sasanian Iconography, Sasanian Art, Sasanian Silver, Hephtalite-Sasanian Art, Sasanian Heroic Encounters, Sasanian Compositional Conventions, Kushanshahr

Introduction

The Wyvern Collection in London possesses a silver plate with a depiction of a mounted figure killing a bear (N. 2223; Fig. 1). The catalogue entry attributes the plate's origin to the Sasanian Kingdom, possibly from the former Kushan lands, and dates it to the 5th-7th

I would like to thank The Wyvern Collection for granting the excellent picture of the plate and allowing me to use it in this publication.

century (Aimone 2020, 184-186). Although the mentioned region was occupied by the Hephtalites for most of that period, it does not undermine the fact that the scene represents the Sasanian tradition and is well-settled in Sasanian iconography. Even if actual production did not occur nominally under the reign of the dynasty, the object unmistakably reflects the aesthetics and iconography of the Sasanian era. It is indeed manufactured provincially and must be associated with the eastern part of Greater Iran, which will be confirmed through the analysis that follows.



FIGURE 1. The plate from the Wyvern Collection (No. 2223)

The objects that are not retrieved from systematic archaeological excavations often raise justified suspicions. The question, however, is whether researchers of Sasanian art are in a position to simply ignore them. The large amount of forged items on the antiquity market is an undeniable fact; however, given the turbulent history of Afghanistan, which was incorporated into the Sasanian Kingdom for a significant period, expectations towards archaeological findings must be reduced. It is surprising that despite these historical conditions, the items are being found (Mleziva 2016). It is also important to bear in mind that current political situation has an impact on researchers. In 2019, I expressed my doubts about a Kushano-Sasanian plate from the Al Sabah Collection (Skupniewicz 2019), which indeed displays several unusual features that can clearly be attributed to its eastern, provincial origin. The fact that a war being waged in the land of probable origin of the item, where my fellow citizens were involved, somehow radicalized my views, as both illegally

excavated and forged items could possibly serve to strengthen the opposite side. In 2024, the political situation does not blur the perception of the works of art.

The items in private collections require special analytical attentiveness. Far greater care is required in their examination. Surprisingly, the items happen to be discussed without any formal analysis (Shayegan 2020; Azarnouche and Grenet 2023). Such an approach might be excused by the arbitrary confidence of the authors, who are often leading experts in the field; however, it does not support any discourse regarding the formal aspects of the works of art from non-archaeologically attested sources.

Despite the relatively small quantity of comparable material, it is possible to determine the aesthetic principles governing the image-building in Sasanian art. It is possible to discern the conventions and the repertoire of the detailed techniques employed by the artisans. Such an approach excludes any possibility of “bursts of genius” or the actions of exuberant artistic personalities. Nonetheless, when discussing toreutics and sigillography, we are in fact dealing with forms of applied art that never was an aesthetic avant-garde. In contrast, with regard to rock reliefs, we are referring to strong political-religious statements, where legibility was the main desired feature. The assumption is thus made that the works of Sasanian toreutics did exist within a specific, and quite stiff, aesthetic environment with limited modes of artistic expression, governed by quite specific decorum. The presence of unidentified modes in a work of art of with unknown archaeologically attested origin must induce special attention and suspicions. Modern imitations of Sasanian art often include modern elements and sometimes reveal a lack of understanding of the functional aspects of the depicted fragments of material culture or decorum. That is why it is crucial to compare the works of art with the systematically sequenced elements, with transparent modes of identification of the elements of the repertoire and the ways of their application. It is important to avoid comparison with randomly selected analogies but place the elements in methodologically clear set.

The aim of the current article lies not as much in the object itself, in terms of its materiality, but in the composition of the scene, in what can be grasped as visual principles or conventions within Sasanian art. This conventional character of the Sasanian “heroic encounters” (Garrison 2013) or “icons of violence” provides a unique opportunity to reconstruct the process of image-building from a more technical perspective. The word “technical” is not used here to describe the actual methods of metalworking, which have been already discussed by Harper and Meyers (1981), but in terms of the ways of composing the image and structuring the repetitive elements. It is impossible to conclude with certainty how these “stock images” or rather “stock fragments” were transferred, and the existence of “cartoons” or “pattern books” were suggested. This, being one of the plausible options, cannot be found as the ultimate one. It is known that oral transmission could sustain unaltered texts. Thus, the training of artisans in rigid frameworks of applied forms, combined with the demand for traditionally decorated and recognizable items, likely referring to known narratives, might result in the survival of styles and formats over

a longer duration. Notwithstanding, changes that allow for proposing systems of references in the set of Sasanian “heroic encounter” scenes are observable. Such systems may serve in dating the objects; however, the actual aim of the current paper is to examine the idea of how art was conceptualized.

Such an analysis, applied to the scene of the bear hunt on the plate from the Wyvern Collection, leads to the conclusion that the scene is well set in the aesthetic principles and the elements are consistent with the time and place of manufacture. At the same time, the immediately perceived alleged inconsequence of the position of the hunter, his horse, and the prey clearly results from the image-building practice and influence of the local post-Hellenistic traditions.



FIGURE 2. Axis distribution

The Scene

The scene depicts a rider on a standing horse holding a spear with both hands on the right side, and a bear in front of a tree with a spearhead thrust into its body on the left. The round plate was divided vertically into almost equal halves (Fig. 2). The vertical axis runs alongside the chest of the horse, and at the bottom, it passes through the mount’s front left hoof, which is extended slightly to the right. The head of the horse is turned downward, accentuating the vertical dimension and is placed on the right part of the pictorial field. The left half is tightly packed, occupied by the horse rider and filled with details. Comparing the two sides together, it is noticed that the right side contains a much plainer

surface, with the bear and the tree being the largest elements. The horse's head and the lance cross the vertical axis, breaking symmetry and emphasizing the domination of the left side. Not only is it visually captivating, but also the extension of the elements marks their direction.

The horizontal axis (Fig. 2) runs alongside the back of the horse, under its mouth and through the bear's head. Again, the dominance of the left side is marked in this dimension, with the left quarters filled with active objects: the upper part features the rider while the lower section represents the horse. On the right side, the lower quarter is occupied by the bear, placed slightly diagonally, above which protrudes a stylized tree.

This way, the rider is not geometrically central, but he dominates the scene. His torso is bent obliquely to the right to convey the sense of pressure over the right side. The line that can be drawn along the rider's body joins the top of the vertical axis and is roughly parallel to the line along the bear's body. Both are connected by the line of the spear, creating an oblique, asymmetrical H-shaped form (Fig. 3).

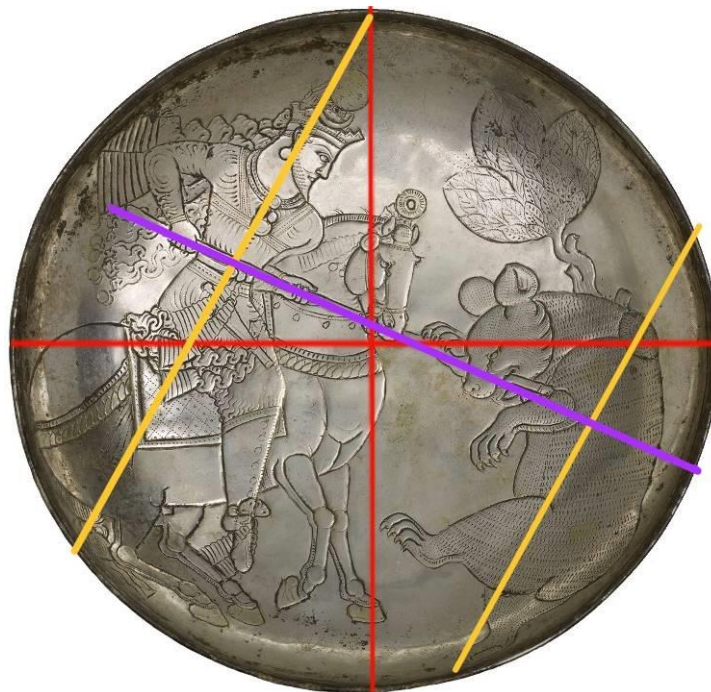


FIGURE 3. Axis and composition directions

The horse is depicted standing on three legs; the front right leg is somewhat raised, with the knee slightly lifted and the hoof turned backward. The left leg is straight. The hind legs are a little bent as if the horse delicately squatted on them. The neck is rounded and the head is turned downward to the chest. The musculature and joints of the horse are marked with clear lines. The mane is trimmed and over the head protrudes a disc shaped object. The saddle-cloth is diagonally checkered, which is marked by the dotted lines.

Inside of each square a central circle is placed. From beneath the saddle-cloth, the chest and rump straps run. The dense rows of tear shaped pendants are attached to the upper parts of the straps. The pendants are vertical on the rump and oblique on the chest, implying a sense of movement and suggesting that they are not attached to the leather from both ends. The tail is tied with the ribbons hanging down in a typical Sasanian manner. Three pendants hang obliquely from below the back of the saddle-cloth. The horse's head is shown slightly turned towards the viewer, although not in actual three quarters, as the back (left) eye is only partially visible. Except for the disc at the center of its head, the horse also has a decorative disc with a fluted ribbon on its temple. The cheek strap is decorated with a row of dots. Four tear- or almond-shaped pendants are suspended from the reins.

The rider is shown with his torso depicted frontally, while the visible leg and head are in profile; however, the crown seems to be shown frontally. The torso is disproportionately small in comparison with the head and leg. The torso and the head are bent forward, that is to the right, while the leg is almost vertical, with a slightly bent knee. The rider is wearing a long sleeved tunic reaching the mid-thigh. The edges are densely folded, which is depicted through rows of parallel lines. This mode of treatment is one of the fundamental Sasanian depictions of the "royal hunt" (Harper and Meyers 1981). He is wearing a double torque or necklace, with a disc in front of the neck, from which two tear-shaped pendants are suspended. Through the chest runs the horizontal strap of apezak, with a disc at the center of the chest and two suspenders going over the shoulders. The element running around the neck is decorated with rows of circles, while the straps of apezak are covered with a single line of dots. Behind his back float two lines decorated with disc-shaped suspensions.

The protagonist is wearing two belts: the upper one with a clasp of two circles in front of the belly, from which flow down two fluted ribbons, and the lower one decorated with a row of circles. On the thigh, over the lower part of the tunic and seemingly under the ribbons, a sheathed dagger is shown. The sheath terminates in a rectangular shape and widens up to the cross guard of the weapon. Two ribbons, with fluted edges, flow in a wavy horizontal line from the sheath. The personage is wearing knee-reaching boots with an upper edge decorated with a row of dots. In front of the shin runs a row of six circles. At the front of the ankle, an ornate bow is depicted, from which two fluted ribbons flow. A disc clasp is depicted on the side of the ankle. The foot is shown in "ballerina" manner, typical for the Sasanian depictions of riders.

The face of the personage is shown in a sharp profile. He is wearing a pointed beard and large earring with a ball-shaped gem, probably a pearl. Over the temple, he has a pronounced crescent-shaped element. His crown consists of the lower band and two stepped crenellations on either side, with an upward crescent between them. The lower band is decorated with a row of small circles, most likely pearls. A square gem is carved over the temple. This allows us to suppose that the lower band belongs to the face, with the

frontal crown sitting atop it. The crown terminates with the korymbos covered with triangles composed of three dots. Two large ribbons float down from the crown, and two short ones are shown tied below the korymbos.

The protagonist is holding a spear with two hands. The shaft is almost parallel to the shoulder line or nearly perpendicular to the axis of the torso. The right arm of the rider is turned back and down while the left one is held tightly to the body with the elbow hidden behind the torso. The shaft runs under the rein and below the horse's mouth, which is unrealistic, but spatial relations in Sasanian "heroic encounters" were usually conventional.

The bear is depicted slightly obliquely to the vertical axis, but not stretched alongside the brim of the plate. It is shown biting the spear shaft and holding it with the right front paw raised and the left front paw directed down. Its left hind paw is raised and the right hind paw stretched down. The head of the spear penetrating the bear's body is not visible; however, a bar protruding from the weapon can be seen over the bear's left front paw. There is a tree behind the bear. Three of its branches seem to have been cut, and a three others are covered with stylized leaves.

The Scene in Light of Sasanian Compositional and Iconographic Conventions

The scene contains several unusual features that may lead to a better understanding of the structural principles of Sasanian image creation. As stated before, the focus is primarily placed on the relation between the overall composition and the detailed elements, especially concerning well-known conventions.

Compositional Formula

The Sasanian or Sasanian-influenced (not necessarily originating from the territory of the kingdom) "heroic encounters" can be grouped into fifteen categories based on the direction of depicted actions, basic positions of the protagonists and victims, which define the layouts of the elements within the pictorial fields. Most of the known formulae seem to aim at packing the action within limited boundaries, framed by circles or squares that are especially suitable for plates. Some motifs are arranged along the horizontal axis, while others appear in depictions around vessels. The latter does not require much compactness. The listed formulae sometimes overlap in details and are not always treated as canonical. Nevertheless, they create a reasonable foundation for discussing compositions in an analytical way.

The most commonly recognized Sasanian compositions are those featuring a rider in combat, typically with a beast, where one beast is shown as dead and extended vertically along one of the edges of the scene. While the killed bear is often depicted stretched along the bottom edge, it is important not to view this as a defining characteristic, as the fallen opponent is well attested in other models and is not restricted to combats with dangerous animals.



FIGURE 4. Confrontation formula

Confrontation (Fig. 4). When the rider, the direction of his attack, and the vertical body of the beast are all directed toward the center of the pictorial field, heading decisively toward each other, the impression is of a vigorous confrontation.¹

Confrontation on Foot (Fig. 5). This motif appears similar to the horse formulas, but it emphasizes the vertical character of the composition by featuring a large human figure. This formula includes images of heroes armed with swords and spears.

¹ Examples:

- a plate from Anikovska in the Pushkin Museum, Tcherdyne (Harper and Meyers 1981, 70-72, 222, pl. 21. Regarding earlier battle or man versus man combat scenes, see Skupniewicz 2019, 324-326);
- a seal from Brussels, the Musées Royaux (657; Ritter 2010, 293, Taf. XVIII - B6013);
- Parthian seals from Old Nisa. They reveal the origin of the model, just like their predecessors showing the riders charging standing human opponents (Gaibov and Košelenko 2008);
- “Odaenathus Mosaic” from Palmyra. Although not representing directly the Sasanian iconography, the piece clearly follows the principle adopted by Sasanian art;
- a plate from Khorasan (Maršak 2017, 698, fig 251);
- a bowl from Vereino showing a hunter with a lance (Hermitage S-8; Marshak 2004, 49-50, fig. 36; Maršak 2017, 712, il. 266-267).

Sigillography:

- a seal from the Brussels Royal Museum (Inv. 657; Ritter 2008, 190-191, 293, tab. XVIII - B6003).

Chase (Fig. 6). It is created when the direction of the rider's movement and attack are identical to that of the vertical beast, so that the victim seems to be escaping from the attack.²



FIGURE 5. Confrontation on foot formula

² Examples:

- a plate in the Freer Gallery of Art (34.23; Harper and Meyers 1981, 61-64, 216, pl. 15; Gunter and Jett 1992, 106-113);
- a plate from the Arthur Sackler Gallery (S1987.109; Gunter and Jett 1992, 118-120);
- a plate from Chilek (Maršak and Kikiris 1969; Harper and Meyers 1981, 83-85, 231, pl. 30);
- a plate from Kutais in the Hermitage (S 58; Harper and Meyers 1981, 85-86, 232, pl. 31; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 110);
- a plate from Nizhne Shakhrovka (Harper and Meyers 1981, 86-87, 233, pl. 32; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 108);
- a post-Sasanian plate from the Hermitage (S-1; Harper and Meyers 1981, 140-142; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 109-110);
- a plate from Tououcheva in the Hermitage (S255; Harper and Meyers 1981, 238, pl. 37; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 107).

Chase on Foot (Fig. 7). This model repeats the general layout of the above formula; however, the protagonist is depicted standing on foot rather than mounted. The dead animal is not placed under the feet of the ruler.³



FIGURE 6. Chase formula

³ Examples:

- the Plate displaying Yazdegird I killing a deer in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1970.6; Harper and Meyers 1981, 63-64, 217, pl. 16; Skupniewicz 2009, 51-52);
- the Klimova plate from the Hermitage with a hero killing a leopard with a sword (S42; Harper and Meyers 1981, 74-76, 225, pl. 24; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 107-18);
- the Nizhni Novogrod plate, where the king uses a lasso, also in the Hermitage (Harper and Meyers 1981, 82-83, 230, pl. 29; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 108).

Escape (Fig. 8). This composition is created when the rider's movement is directed beyond the image, while the beast and the hero's attack are directed toward the center, creating the impression that the rider is escaping the animal chasing him.⁴

Double Escape (Fig. 9). The hero's horse and the beast move toward the opposite edges of the frame. The hero is depicted at the center turned toward the escaping beast, creating the illusion that his is shooting at the animal while riding away from it.⁵



FIGURE 7. Chase on foot formula

Chase-confrontation. In this formula, the rider and the prey move in the same direction, though the beast turns its head around to face its pursuer.⁶ The twisted head of

⁴ Examples:

- the Cleveland Museum of Art plate (62.150; Harper 1978, 38-39; Harper and Meyers 1981, 215, 60-61, pl. 14);
- the Hermitage plate showing Shapur (S-253; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 107);
- the Pur-e Vahman plate in the Hermitage (S-247; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 112);
- a bowl attributed to the Hephtalites in the British Museum (Harper and Meyers 1981, 130-131; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59; Bakker 2020).

Reversed, i.e., right and left sides switched:

- the Shemakha plate (Harper and Meyers 1981, 48-50, 209, pl. 8);
- the Kushano-Sasanian plate from a private Japanese collection (Tanabe 2001).

⁵ Example:

- the Sari plate in the National Museum of Iran, 1275 (Harper 1978, 33-34; Harper and Meyers 1981, 52-55, 211, pl. 10).

⁶ Examples:

killed prey is frequently seen in the depictions of the lions spread below the fight scene, which is one of the minor conventions.

The remaining visual formulas that follow were frequently employed in Sasanian silver vessels. Yet, they do not constitute a development of the basic model with the animal vertically positioned as the hero's opponent.

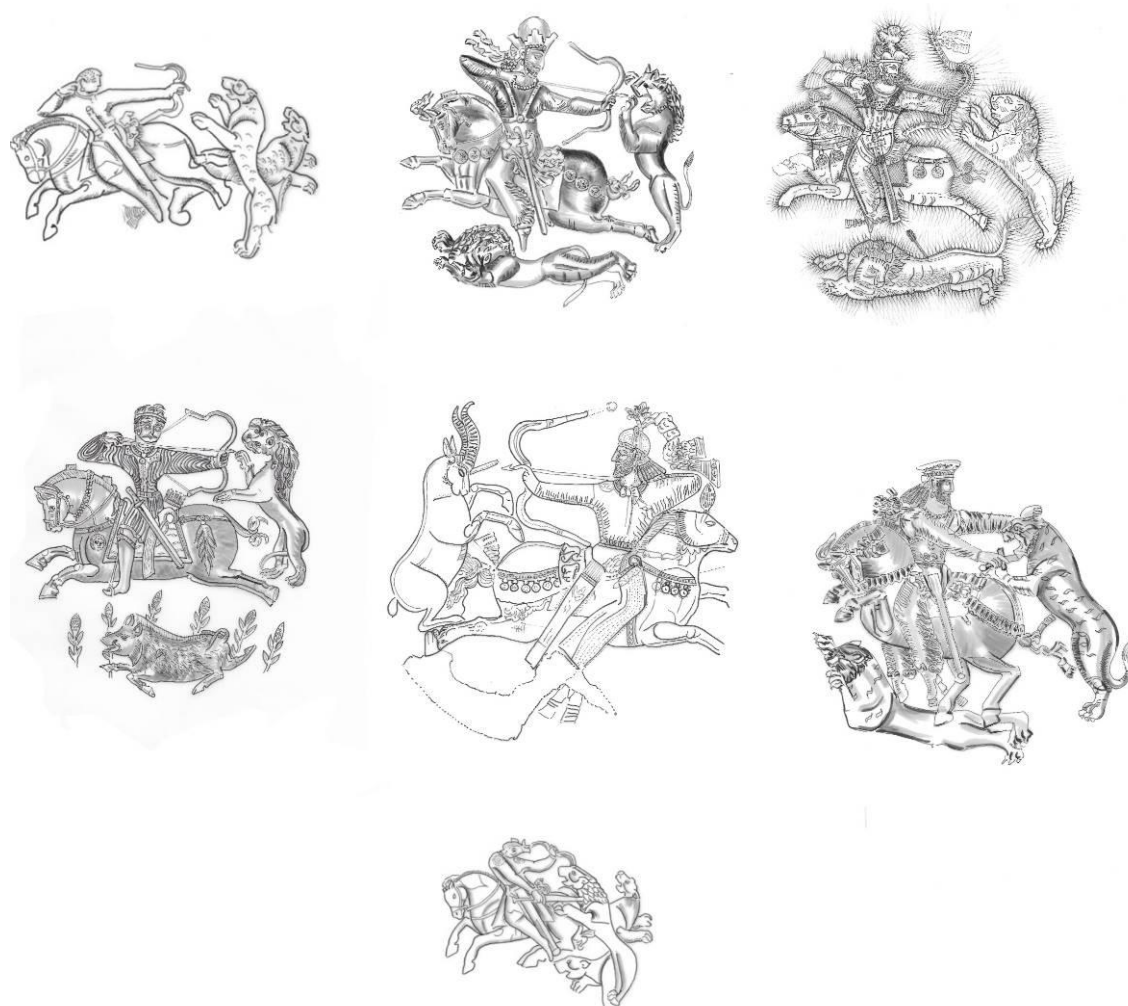


FIGURE 8. Escape formula

- the Krasnaya Polyana plate in the Abkhazian State Museum (47-71; Harper and Meyers 1981, 50-52, 210, pl. 9; Sangari et al. 2024);

- a bowl from Vereino in the Hermitage (S-8; Marshak 2004, 49-50, fig. 36; Maršak 2017, 712, il. 266-267).



FIGURE 9. Double escape formula

Rider Thrusting a Spear down Diagonally (Fig. 10). The rider strikes with his two-handed spear diagonally downward or forward, or he throws the javelin in that direction, aiming at the beast placed either horizontally or along the vessel's edge. In principle, the described composition schemes do not depend on the weapon, which qualifies for the next set of non-compositional analytical elements, i.e., props. Using a shafted weapon in the diagonal direction of attack radically modifies the composition and the dynamics of the pictorial field, which change from strictly horizontal or vertical elements to a combination of horizontal and diagonal movements.⁷

⁷ Examples:

- the Saksankhur clasp (Marshak 2002, 9, fig. 10; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59);
- the Synya Family plate (Baulo 2002; Skupniewicz 2009, 62-63);



FIGURE 10. Rider thrusting a spear down diagonally formula

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- the Burnes plate, now lost, known from the drawings (Harper and Meyers 1981, 55-56, 212, pl. 11a-b);
 - a Bowl attributed to the Hephtalites in the British Museum, 1963,1210.1 (Harper and Meyers 1981, 130-131; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59; Bakker 2020);
 - stucco fragments from Chal Tarkhan (Harper 1978, 113-114; Skupniewicz 2009, 59-60);
- Backward thrust is depicted on a vase from Yuldus (Šlyahova 1977, 289-291; Harper 2006, 128, 150, fig. 71; Skupniewicz 2009, 60-61).
- Sigillographic examples:
- Sasanian (Magistro 2000; Ritter 2008, 191-192, 294, tab. XIX) and Sogdian (Kafir-Kala, see Begmatov 2020, 9);
 - backward thrust on a seal from the Louvre (AO 2216; Ritter 2008, 189-199, 293, tab. XVIII - B6033).
 - Sogdian paintings from Afrasiyab.
- On Foot:
- the Al Sabah Collection plate.

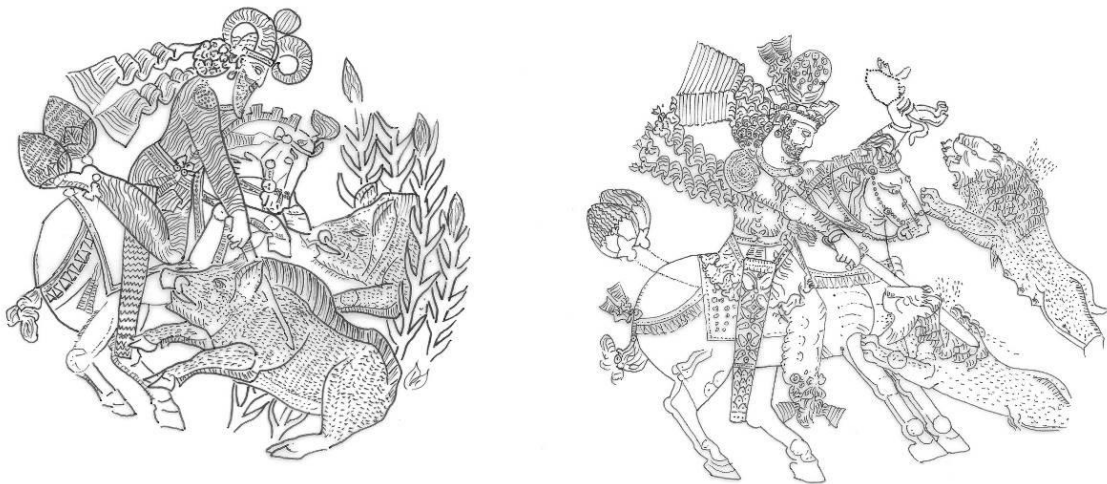


FIGURE 11. The hunter is attacked by two beasts diagonally from below formula

The Hunter Attacked by Two Beasts Diagonally from below (Fig. 11). Two beasts jump at the hero from the bottom right of the pictorial field diagonally upward. What is crucial for further consideration is that this formula only includes heroes armed with swords.⁸

The Hunter on Foot Is Attacked by Two Beasts Diagonally from below (Fig. 12). The only representation of this formula applied to foot combat does not come from toreutics but from the rock relief at Sar Mashhad. The relief represents the king killing lions with a sword. The beasts spring out to the king, who is standing on both feet, wielding a sword with one hand. A female figure and two others have been sculpted behind him.

Escape-confrontation (Fig. 13). The formula is exemplified by a plate from the Fabricius/Blumka Collection (Harper 1978, 58-59; Harper and Meyers 1981, 77-79, 84-85, 227, pl. 26), where the rider is confronted with an attacking bull, shown as a protome. The protagonist's horse turns his head away. There is no victim stretched under the hooves of the mount. It seems that this is a local, eastern variant of the confrontation formula, in which the vertical body of the beast has been replaced by its front part. Moreover, the horse reversing its head is an element of the local post-Hellenistic heritage.

⁸ Examples:

- the "Kushanshah Bahram" plate from the Hermitage (S24; Harper and Meyers 1981, 72-74, 224, pl. 23; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 108);
- a plate with a king combating the tigers from the British Museum (124092; Harper and Meyers 1981, 76-77, 226, pl. 25).



FIGURE 12. The hunter on foot is attacked by two beasts diagonally from below formula

Animals Shown Realistically, i.e., Horizontally. This is a rare formula in the Sasanian iconography including scenes of fighting with beasts, which preferred to stretch the beast vertically and/or horizontally, or shorten it to a protome. It appears in the hunting scenes with no heroic touch; however, in the case of the Copenhagen vessel, we have a scene in which the rider shoots a single goat. This scene does not correspond with the scenes of “hunting”, whose characteristic feature is the multitude of species and abundance of animals. Showing the pursuit of a single victim gives the scene, in the formal layer, heroic features. Nevertheless, showing the animal’s entire body horizontally, without reduction to the front part, or showing it in a diagonal jump, is an exemption from the principles of constructing scenes of heroic struggle with animals. The general rarity of the most natural display model indicates that the visual language of the Sasanian iconography referred, in terms of composition, to the inherited patterns, not to the observation of nature.⁹

⁹ Examples:

- the David Collection bowl in Copenhagen (2/1984; Harper 2006, 146, fig. 66);
- a Late Parthian graffiti from Hatra (Harper 2006, 79; Skupniewicz 2009, 60-61);



FIGURE 13. Escape-confrontation formula

The Hunter Kills the Animal He Mounts. This is a unique formula, represented by a plate from the British Museum (124091; Harper 1978, 34-35; Harper and Meyers 1981, 57-60, 214, pl. 13). It may also be reflected in one of the stuccos from Chal Tarkhan, where the act of killing a deer itself is not clearly emphasized. Instead, the rider mounts an animal, holding its antlers (Harper 1978, 116).

The Hero with a Bent Knee Fights the Boars in the Reeds (Fig. 14). It depicts the main character wielding a spear at hip level, aimed at the attacking wild boar in the right,

- the Al Sabah Collection plate (LNS 1623 M, the brim; Harper 2015; Skupniewicz 2019).

while at the same time, he bends his right knee to hold back the charging wild boar in the left.¹⁰



FIGURE 14. The hero with a bent knee fights the boars in the reeds formula

Mixed (Fig. 15). Some representations combine features from several distinct formulas, depicting multiple animals, which brings them closer to scenes of “hunting” that involve different species and life-threatening encounters, thereby placing them within the genre of combat with beasts. Similarly, the beasts are most often depicted in accordance with the aforementioned formulas.

The discussed scene on the plate from the Wyvern Collection represents the features typical of several conventions and cannot be clearly attributed to a single one. The bear and the tree over it mark a visual vertical boundary on the right side. Therefore, the features of the “Confrontation” model can be observed. The closest parallels are provided by the Anikovska plate (Fig. 16; Harper and Meyers 1981, 70-72, 222, Skupniewicz 2019: 324-326), where the scene reveals the protagonist killing bears with the javelins, and also by the Bactrian, Kushan, or pre-Kushan gem from Jonathan Collection¹¹ (Fig. 17; Gaibov

¹⁰ Examples:

- the Shelby and White Collection plate (Harper 2006, 123-125, 148, pl. 68-69; Skupniewicz 2009, 50-51);

- a plate from the Tomb of Feng Hetu (Harper 1990; 2004; 2006, 123-125, 148, pl. 68-69; Skupniewicz 2009, 50-51).

¹¹ A similar low directed lance held by both hands by a rider on an apparently standing horse can be found on an ivory openwork panel from Begram. The vague difference here is that the prey is chasing away and does not pose a threat. Another example of a low directed lance held by two hands by a rider on a galloping horse without any depicted target can be found in the relief from Gandhara in Guimet

and Košelenko 2013) that almost exactly repeats the compositional layout of the plate from the Wyvern Collection; however, instead of the beast fight, the rider faces a warrior on foot.

At the same time the bear is placed at the lower right part of the plate in a slightly diagonal position which makes the scene resemble the model “Thrusting a Spear down Diagonally”.¹² The Anikovska plate (Fig. 16) may belong to this model, as the javelin held by the protagonist is slightly diagonal; however, the general direction of the attack is horizontal. Within the examples of this formula, the closest parallel is provided by the Burnes plate (Harper and Meyers 1981, 55-56, 212, pl. 11a-b), where the body of the killed lion is stretched alongside the rim of the plate. A noteworthy point is that there have been two similar engraved plates. One of them, now lost, shows the rider bent forward in the saddle in a way clearly reminiscent of the plate from the Wyvern Collection. This similarity may not be a concrete clue as the original vessel is lost and the existing drawings differ. The Burnes plate is compositionally related to the Synya Family plate (Fig. 18; Baulo 2002; Skupniewicz 2009, 62-63), where the bull being killed is placed in a very analogical place. However, it is shown turning away from the protagonist. An example of a related composition, belonging to the “Mixed” type and with reversed sides, can be found on the slab excavated in Taq-e Bostan (Fig. 19; Moradi and Compareti 2019). The scene depicts combat between humans, with the target lying below the hooves of the protagonist’s mount. However, instead of stretched horizontally, it is slightly oblique, aligning its position with that of the bear on the discussed plate.

The plates with diagonal spear thrust are related with the conventional depictions of the mounted victory scenes in Greco-Roman world and Christian iconography (Magistro 2000; Skupniewicz 2018), especially when the shafts are held with one hand. These depictions of downward thrust are well attested in Achaemenid battle iconography and seem to derive from Neo-Assyrian art (Skupniewicz 2018; Tuplin 2020). However, from the Parthian period, the dominant depicting of lance combat with humans in Iran featured shafts held underarm, horizontally at hip level, usually with two hands (Skupniewicz 2016). The plate from the Wyvern Collection, together with the gem from the Jonathan Rosen Collection, Gandharan relief from the Guimet Museum and the ivory plate from Begram (see footnote 11), represent the same attempt of reconciliation of the dynamics of the downward thrust model with the well-recognized, current way of depicting lance

Museum MG17046. Perhaps a fragment in the lower register of the battle scene on the bone plaque from Orlat should be understood as an echo of this formula. It should be noted that a lance held diagonally by a rider with one hand on a standing horse appears on Indo-Scythian kings’ coins; however, no object of attack is shown there. The under-hand downward diagonal attack of a rider on a galloping horse is attested on Attic red-figure ceramics.

¹² A diagonal lances is also attested in the depiction of a rider on slow-pacing horse hunting a deer, in a wall painting in Panticapaeum (Gorončarovskiy 2009, 41-42).

wielding.¹³ This group forms a separate composition model, in which, the confrontation of the sides and general directions follow the “Confrontation” model. The position of the victim would generally follow “Thrusting a Spear down Diagonally”, while the lance would be held at hip level, with two hands, perpendicularly to the torso and depicted in slightly oblique manner. This would require a break with the Sasanian prevalence of showing the protagonist upright and stable, deprived of dramatic expression and full of almost boring composure. This procedure would disrupt the obvious compositional relationships and blur the axial order of the composition. Sasanian “heroic encounters” present a preference for stable and defined layouts with well-set and marked horizontal and vertical dimensions while avoiding diagonals that might dramatize the scene. Such prevalence for stability should be understood as the means to avoid the slightest doubt regarding the outcome of the clash. The protagonist is depicted gaining victory effortlessly as drama assumes tension, and tension comes with some uncertainty. The stark exception from this principle is represented by the scene on the plate from the Hermitage with “Kushanshah Bahram fighting boars” (Fig. 20; Harper and Meyers 1981, 72-74, 224, pl. 23; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 108). In moderate form, a similar forward tilt of the protagonist can be observed on the plate from the British Museum attributed to Bahram V fighting tigers (Fig. 21; Harper and Meyers 1981, 76-77, 226, pl. 25). Both plates represent the same model: the hunter is attacked by two beasts diagonally from below. The possibility of its eastern specificity has been already proposed (Skupniewicz 2020). Here, the main personage is shown with the straightened torso but diagonally, in a fashion reminding the plate from the Wyvern Collection and the gem from the Jonathan Rosen Collection. The plate from the Hermitage is believed to have originated from the Kushan lands captured by the Sasanians. It is justified to assume that the Greek taste for competition and dramatic suspension survived in Bactria and, in combination with typical Sasanian forms, resulted in adoption of rather stiff Sasanian forms to more dynamic compositions.

The Rider, the Horse, the Bear, and the Tree

The position of the protagonist and his mount has been briefly analyzed in Aimone’s catalogue entry of the discussed plate, who, rightly, compares it with the plate from the British Museum attributed to Bahram V and a plate from Fabricius/Blumka Collection, as discussed above. The latter comparison seems to be especially apt, as in both cases, the horses are shown with the right front leg slightly lifted in an analogous manner. Similar leg position is shown on the post-Sasanian “Khorasan plate” published by Maršak (2017, 698,

¹³ The relation between the depictions and the actual combat technique, as well as the origin of both, is beyond the scope of the current paper. A thorough discussion, without a definite answer, is provided by Gaibov and Koshelenko 2008; Gaibov and Košelenko 2013.

fig. 251), but also used in the portrayals of the armored riders on the seals of spahbedan (Gyselen 2001; 2007; 2008; Skupniewicz 2017). In the battle scene on the slab from Taq-e Bostan (Fig. 19; Moradi and Compareti 2019), the horse is depicted standing, but its front leg is raised significantly higher, reminiscent of triumphal rock reliefs. This depiction is most closely related to the portrayal of a horse on a plate from the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (S1987.123; Gunter and Jett 1992, 139-141).



Figure 15. Mixed formulae

It should be pointed out, however, that there are more examples of Sasanian-related mounted “heroic encounters” where the horses are shown standing. In addition to the two

examples provided by Aimone, similar layouts can be observed on the boar hunting scenes in Chal Tarkhan stucco (Harper 1978, 113-112; Skupniewicz 2009), Saksankhur clasp (Marshak 2002, 9, fig. 10; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59), Sogdian plate in Sasanian style, featuring the “heroic encounter” of a rider with lions (Fig. 22; Maršak 1971, 120; Skupniewicz 2009, 59-60), and several instances of sigillographic cases (Ritter 2008, 189-199, 293, Tab. XVIII, 191-192, 294, Tab. XIX - B6033; Magistro 2000; Begmatov 2020, 9). Naturally, the gem from the Jonathan Rosen Collection repeats the model of the horse standing in the battle scene (Fig. 17; Gaibov and Košelenko 2013).



FIGURE 16. Anikovska plate from the Hermitage



FIGURE 17. The scene from the gem from the Jonathan Rosen Collection

In the above group of related scenes, the majority includes the depiction of the lance-wielding riders, who hold the shafts overhead with two hands, directed diagonally down. Only two examples include swordsmen. Furthermore, the depiction of the lance bearers who carry the weapon with two hands and downward on galloping mounts is significantly lower: there is one depiction of a flying gallop on the Synya Family plate (Fig. 18; Baulo 2002; Skupniewicz 2009, 62-63), and two depictions of a rearing horse or a galloping horse with hind legs on the ground on the bowl attributed to Hephtalite kept at the British Museum (1963,1210.1; Harper and Meyers 1981, 130-131; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59; Bakker 2020), and on the lost Burnes plate (Harper and Meyers 1981, 55-56, 212, pl. 11a-b). Even though the stylistic analysis of Sasanian art operates in statistically small samples, and the current shape might reflect a preservation pattern rather than actual motif representation, the standing horse seems to be connected with a downward lance thrust motif, while the other horse positions are less frequent.

The standing horse appears three times in “heroic encounters” in association with swords but without a firm connection to fixed sword position: once in “The Hunter Is Attacked by Two Beasts Diagonally from below” formula, and twice when the sword is

held behind rider's body with its tip upward. What seems significant concerning the formula of "The Hunter Is Attacked by Two Beasts Diagonally from below" is that it also shares features with the image of rearing horses, as exemplified by the plate representing Kushanshah Bahram fighting boars from the Hermitage (Fig. 20; Harper and Meyers 1981, 72-74, 224, Pl. 23; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 108). This suggests relative independence of the horse pace from the compositional layout, while the connection with the lance held upward is well attested. It seems, therefore, that "heroic encounters" on standing or slow-pacing horses were likely to be matched with the lances fitting the frames of the Sasanian decorum.



Figure 18. the Synya Family plate

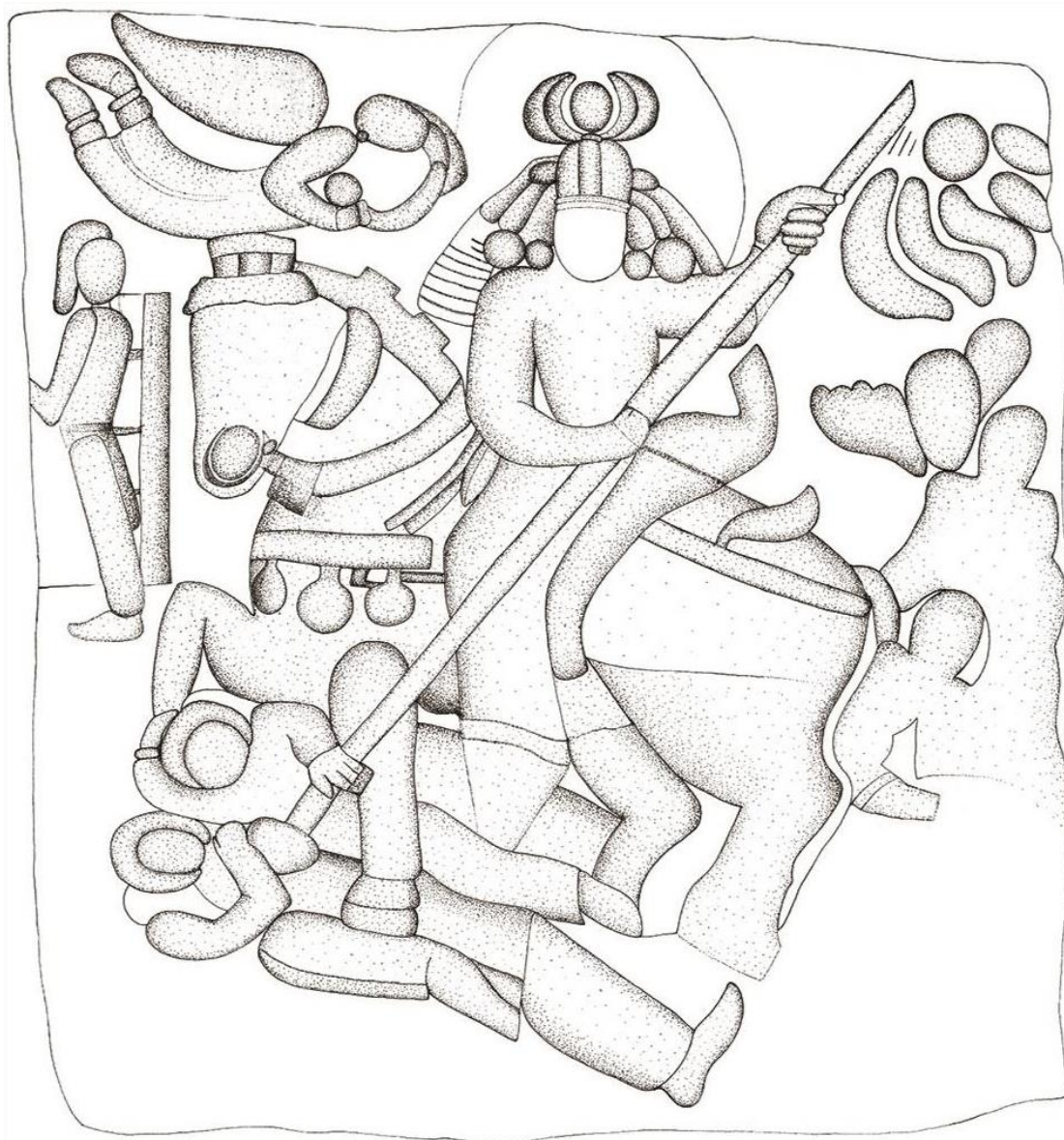


FIGURE 19. Combat scene on the slab from Taq-e Bostan

The lance held at hips level alongside or across the horse's neck, in a "bayonet grip", is typical for depictions of mounted combat of armored warriors in Parthian, Sasanian, and Sarmatian art.¹⁴ The style seems to derive from the Hellenistic manner of wielding lance, held with one hand at hip level and underarm (overview: Skupniewicz 2018).

¹⁴ Examples include:
Parthian:

The two-handed low grip remained a feature in Iranian and Central Asian iconography of mounted fighting until modern times, and was also prescribed in Mameluke combat manuals. It is not the aim of the current paper to establish the level of realism of such a way of lance wielding, especially in armor and without stirrups.¹⁵ However, it is difficult to imagine that such an artistic convention lasted for centuries over such a vast area without a foundation in real practice to support its legibility. What is important for the current study is that the horizontal lance hold, in Sasanian art, is generally reserved for combat between humans.¹⁶ However, horizontal two-handed lance grip by a rider galloping against a deer occurs in Gandharan reliefs in the Guimet Museum (MA12145, MA12158, MA6354). The dead prey at the bottom of the scene seems to emphasize the relation with the Sasanian patterns. It should be highlighted that the heavy-armored riders on standing horses, who hold their lances diagonally downward, are depicted on Indo-Scythian coinage, although without the target shown.

Moreover, it should be highlighted that exception for the plate from the Wyvern Collection, the bowl attributed to Hephthalite from Vereino in the Hermitage (S-8; Fig. 23; Marshak 2004, 49-50, fig. 36; Maršak 2017, 712, il. 266-267) and graffito from Hatra (Harper 2006, 79; Skupniewicz 2009, 60-61), there are no Sasanian or Sasanian-related depictions of that mode of lance wielding in mounted combat with the beasts. The Sasanian combat scenes depicting humans retain a consistent style similar to the “heroic

-
- the Rock relief of Gotarzes Geopothros in Behistun (Vanden Berghe and Schipmann 1985; Kawami 1987; von Gall 1990, 11-13; Mathiesen 1992; Mielczarek 1993; Kawami 2013; Lushey 2013);
 - the Tang-e Sarvak III rock relief (Kawami 1987; von Gall 1990; Mathiesen 1992, Mielczarek 1993; Nicolle 1996; Nikonorov 2005; Skupniewicz 2007; Kawami 2013; Skupniewicz 2015; 2021);
 - a terracota plaque from Babylonia in the British Museum (91908; Sekunda 1994; Nicolle 1996; Skupniewicz 2016; 2021).

Sasanian:

- the rock relief in Firuzabad (von Gall 1990, 20-29; Mielczarek 1993; Nicolle 1996; Nikonorov 2005; Canepa 2013; Nikonorov 2020);
- the rock reliefs in Naqsh-e Rostam: NRm3, NRm5, NRm7 (von Gall 1990, 30-35; Mielczarek 1993; Nicolle 1996; Canepa 2013; Nikonorov 2020);
- a mural in Dura Europos with warriors chasing the fleeing enemies.

Sarmatian:

- a silver cup from Kosika (Brzezinski and Mielczarek 2002).

¹⁵ For some relevant discussions on this matter, see Gaibov and Koshelenko 2008; Gaibov and Košelenko 2013.

¹⁶ It must be pointed, however, that two-handed lance grip in beast-combat context appears on the murals from Panticapaeum, where one of the riders is shown on a galloping horse while the other on a slow-pacing mount (Gorončarovskiy 2009, 42).

encounters” with the beasts.¹⁷ The protagonists are calm and reserved. Although their horses are shown in a flying gallop, the armored riders seem almost immovable. Their opponents tumble helplessly, or are about to collapse after a powerful hit. The entire dynamism is expressed by the defeated one. The victory is seemingly effortless, the viewer cannot, by any means, find any chance for the losers. They are doomed while the winners present themselves straightened up, not losing any drop of dignity.



FIGURE 20. Kushanshah Bahram fighting boars

¹⁷ The relation of art of Panticapaeum with Sasanian iconography begs for further study. The analogies seem important and cannot be ignored; however, the geographic distance makes comparisons problematic.



FIGURE 21. Bahram V fighting tigers

The bowl from Vereino (Fig. 23) refers to these models showing the rider on the horse in a flying gallop, holding his lance at the right hip level with both hands and alongside the mount's neck. The key difference is the posture of the rider that is bent forward as if he is pushing the lance. His head is pushed towards the prey and slightly raised. His knee is bent, framing the horse's chest and even if the toes point down, they do not form stylized "ballerina foot", which is typical for the Sasanian toreutic. The style and dynamism reveal the remnants of the Hellenistic traditions molded into Sasanian-inspired formats. Except for the proportions, the rider appears realistic. Another notable difference between this depiction and Sasanian scenes of lance combat is the unusual positioning of the lance, which passes under the horse's head. This suggests that the horse is attempting to turn its head away from the ferocious tiger and place it over the shaft. The same detail is observed in the plate from the Wyvern Collection (Fig. 1). The horse's mouth crosses over the lance shaft which in turn runs over the rein. The image on the plate bears some relation to the Vereino bowl (Fig. 23), particularly in its depiction of Sasanian lance combat.

However, significant differences between the two must also be noted. The realistic posture and dynamism are different from the Sasanian stylization of the plate from the Wyvern Collection.



FIGURE 22. Sogdian plate with the lion hunt

The horse with its head turned is not a typical motif in Sasanian art. Usually the mounts are shown as similarly composed as their riders, well trained, obedient and resilient. The exception is the plate from the Fabricius/Blumka Collection (Fig. 13; Harper 1978, 58-59; Harper and Meyers 1981, 77-79, 84-85, 227, Pl. 26). The horse on the plate from the Wyvern Collection (Fig. 1) is not turning its head away from the bear, but it is not

in obedient, composed profile of other known horses in Sasanian iconography either. Horses turning their heads away are quite frequent in Hellenistic and Roman art. Also, a horse displaying such a gesture is depicted on a bowl from Kvacpileevo (Maršak 2017, 718, fig. 272). This might lead to the conclusion that Hellenistic aesthetic traditions remained vigorous in the area and merged with Sasanian influences in local productions.



FIGURE 23. Rider with a lance from Vereino bowl

In search for the Sasanian origins of the scene discussed in this paper, it is crucial to examine the images of protagonists on foot and armed with spears fighting beasts. Within this thematic group, a distinction must be made between two categories: 1) a “realistic” depictions of hunters, which are clearly directed toward the prey, slightly bent toward it, standing on spread legs with knees bent in order to generate maximum energy (Skupniewicz 2009, 52-56); 2) the other group consists of “royal” or “princely” images, where the crowned protagonist stands tall, equally unimpressed by the approaching beasts as their mounted counterparts (Skupniewicz 2009, 50-52). The impression of disdain seems even greater in the depictions of hunters on foot because of the proximity of the

killed animals. It is especially striking in two examples of “The Hero with a Bent Knee Fighting the Boars in the Reeds” formula (Harper 2006, 123-125, 148, Pl. 68-69; Skupniewicz 2009, 50-51). In this convention, the enigmatic foot position seemingly refers to a narrative. The composition constitutes a fixed motif, but the boars surrounding the personage, of which one already touches his foot, cannot affect the steadfast stability of the royal stance. It is clear that rapid moves could result in the crown falling. It is impossible to determine the meaning of the odd leg position. Does it mark the act of running? Is it a kick stopping a boar in its charge? Or is the protagonist treading on its head to deal with the others? Whatever the intention of the artisan, the lack of effort and lack of realism is striking. Running requires both legs bent, and no efficient kick is possible for human anatomy just by raising the foot. Naturally, the principles of human anatomy might not limit the members of the Sasanian royalty, as presented in art, and their weakest kicks were sufficient to stop or even kill a charging boar. The significance of the convention may not be revealed without investigating textual sources. At the moment, the convention must be treated as a motif that requires further research. The importance of the reference for the study of the Wyvern Collection plate is the fact that all the “royal” or “princely” depictions of the combat with beasts on foot display the same way of holding the lance: the left arm is hidden behind the torso, and the right arm is moved backward and bent at the elbow downward. A similar way of wielding lances is depicted on the reliefs in Naqsh-e Rostam. However, in these reliefs, the lances pass over the necks of the mounts. At the same time, the relief in Firuzabad shows the riders with the back arms closer to the bodies. The hind arm of the rider on the Tang-e Sarvak frieze corresponds to the former monument but the front left hand is not visible there at all. It seems therefore that Tang-e Sarvak might still follow the Hellenistic tradition of depicting mounted combat, still vivid in Roman art (Maksymiuk and Skupniewicz, forthcoming). Considering the discussion above, the body position of the protagonist on the Wyvern Collection plate displays the closest resemblance to the Sasanian “heroic encounters”, where the protagonist is shown on foot and armed with a spear fighting beasts. The “on foot” convention was applied to the mounted depiction, even if, or exactly because it reminded the conventions of combat between humans. In contrast, the horse position was conventionally applied to the depictions of downward lance thrust.

Bears, in the Sasanian context, were depicted in both “heroic/princely/royal” and “non-royal/realistic/hunting” scenes (Fig. 24).¹⁸ The majority of depictions (70%) show the

¹⁸ “Heroic/princely/royal”:

- the Krasnaya Polyana plate in the Abkhazian State Museum (47-71; Harper and Meyers 1981, 50-52, 210, pl. 9; Sangari et al. 2024);

- a plate from Anikovska in the Pushkin Museum, Tcherdyne (Harper and Meyers 1981, 70-72, 222, pl. 21);

protagonist facing a bear on foot. Half of the examples depict the hunter on foot, holding a spear as a weapon. In one instance, a bear is caught by a lariat from horseback, while another one shows an unarmed protagonist fighting with the beast. Three out of ten depictions display javelin as a weapon, with two of them featuring the protagonist on horseback. The prevalence of spears being wielded by hunters on foot likely stems from the nature of the prey, which was probably difficult to kill with arrows.

Javelin is not typically depicted in Sasanian iconography as a weapon for fighting beasts, except for scenes including bears, only once the javelin was shown in a scene of onager hunt (Maršak 2017, 490, fig 10), and once in a single fragment of a javelin thrower without a target preserved (Harper and Meyers 1981, 57, 62, 213). This proves that the depiction of a protagonist on foot, using a spear, was a preferred way of creating scenes of combat with bears. This supports the idea that the Wyvern Collection plate employs the pattern originating from the foot protagonist, applied to a rider.

Bears do not have any specific preferred stylistic convention of depiction in Sasanian art. Fur is shown in many forms, from triangular or scale shaped tufts¹⁹, from “paired line drapery style”²⁰ to the rows of commas analogical to the Wyvern Collection scene.²¹ The

- a plate in the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin (I.4925; Harper and Meyers 1981, 68-70, 221, pl. 20; Skupniewicz 2009, 56-57);

- a plate with the depiction of Shapur II from the Shogakukan Collection (Tanabe 2001, 178-180; Skupniewicz 2009, 51-52);

- a seal from the Piruzaan Collection (Gyselen 1997, 1; Ritter 2008: 90-91, 259, Taf. X, A2015).
“Non-royal/realistic”:

- a bowl from the Cleveland Museum of Arts (66.369; Harper 1978, 53-54; Skupniewicz 2009, 54-55);

- a vase from the Cleveland Museum of Arts (1961.200; Marshak 2004, 52, fig. 42; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59);

- a vase from the Hermitage (S-57; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 115, tab. 75-78; Skupniewicz 2009, 54-55).

“Ambiguous/heroic foreign”:

- a vase from the National Museum of Iran (579; Harper 1978, 51-52);

- a bowl from the Freer Gallery of Art in post-Hellenistic/Bactrian style, associated with the Sasanian corpus by Marshak (45.33; Gunter and Jett 1992, 148-154; Skupniewicz 2009, 154-157).

¹⁹ Examples:

- a bowl from the Freer Gallery of Art in post-Hellenistic/Bactrian style, associated with the Sasanian corpus by Marshak (45.33; Gunter and Jett 1992, 148-154; Skupniewicz 2009, 154-157);

- a vase from the Cleveland Museum of Arts (1961.200; Marshak 2004, 52, fig.42; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59);

- a plate with the depiction of Shapur II from the Shogakukan Collection (Tanabe 2001, 178-180; Skupniewicz 2009, 51-52).

²⁰ A plate from Anikovska in the Pushkin Museum, Tcherdyne (Harper and Meyers 1981, 70-72, 222, pl. 21).

²¹ Examples:

shoulder whirs appear on the Krasnaya Polyana plate in the Abkhazian State Museum (47-71; Harper and Meyers 1981, 50-52, 210, pl. 9; Sangari et al. 2024), and a plate from the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin (I.4925; Harper and Meyers 1981, 68-70, 221, pl. 20; Skupniewicz 2009, 56-57). Similar treatment of fur is attested on the Fabricius/Blumka plate (Harper 1978, 58-59; Harper and Meyers 1981, 77-79, 84-85, 227, pl. 26), the plate from the Hermitage with “Kushanshah Bahram fighting boars” (Fig. 20; Harper and Meyers 1981, 72-74, 224, Pl. 23; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 108), and Bahram V fighting tigers (Fig. 21; Harper and Meyers 1981, 76-77, 226, pl. 25). This might indicate shared local tradition.

Bears do not have conventional shapes in Sasanian art either. They vary from humanoid forms as on the plate from the Museum für Islamische Kunst to mole-like depictions like what is on the bowl from the Cleveland Museum of Arts (1961.200; Marshak 2004, 52, fig.42; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59) or the bowl from Freer Gallery of Art in post-Hellenistic/Bactrian style (45.33; Gunter, Jett 1992, 148-154; Skupniewicz 2009, 154-157). Although, shape alone cannot serve as a reasonable comparative feature, it is noteworthy that well-rounded bear heads appear in sigillographic material (Frye 1973, D.131, D258).

The depictions of trees accompany the Sasanian “heroic encounters” with bears on the plates. Examples can be found on objects in the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin, the Anikovska plate in the Pushkin Museum, the Tcherdyne plate (Harper and Meyers 1981, 70-72, 222, pl. 21²²) and a bowl in the Freer Gallery of Art (45.33; Gunter and Jett 1992, 148-154; Skupniewicz 2009, 154-157). The trees are not stylistically related; however, the tree engraved on the Anikovska plate shares a tripartite form with the discussed plate from the Wyvern Collection. The presence of trees as elements for dividing scenes is attested on the bowls, exemplified by the Hephtalite bowl from the British Museum (1963.1210.1; Harper and Meyers 1981, 130-131; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59; Bakker 2020), and Vereino in the Hermitage (S-8; Fig. 23; Marshak 2004, 49-50, fig. 36; Maršak 2017, 712, il. 266-267). Of these two, the Vereino bowl represents the tripartite tree crown convention.

- the Krasnaya Polyana plate in the Abkhazian State Museum (47-71; Harper and Meyers 1981, 50-52, 210, pl. 9; Sangari et al. 2024);

- a plate from the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin (I.4925; Harper and Meyers 1981, 68-70, 221, pl. 20; Skupniewicz 2009, 56-57).

²² Concerning earlier battle or man versus man combat scenes, see Skupniewicz 2019, 324-326.



FIGURE 24. Protagonist fighting bear in Sasanian iconography

Elements of Material Culture Depicted on the Wyvern Collection Plate

The tunic and the belts of the protagonist on the plate in question are typical for Sasanian iconography and cannot serve as a source for identification or attribution. The boots, however, are a distinctive feature as they are uniquely depicted in Sasanian scenes, where riders are usually shown wearing baggy leggings that cover their legs, including their shins. In a confirmed Sasanian context, the riders wearing the boots of this type are shown on the stucco from Bandiyān (Rahbar 2008, 21, 39, fig. 27; Harper 2006, 70, 100, fig. 37). The same fashion is also depicted on the bowl attributed to the Hephtalites now preserved in the British Museum (1963,1210.1; Harper and Meyers 1981, 130-131; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59; Bakker 2020), on a vase from Yuldus (Šlyahova 1977, 289-291; Harper 2006, 128, 150, fig. 71; Skupniewicz 2009, 60-61), and on the post-Sasanian vase of Pur-i Vahman in the Hermitage (Trever and Lukonin 1987, 86-87, 112). The personages not mounted on horses wearing similar footwear are better represented in later Sasanian works

of art; however, it seems that iconographically the boots of this type, with the ribbons floating down from the bow at the front of ankle, were introduced to the iconography quite late and were first used in eastern peripheries of Iran.

The rider on the Wyvern Collection plate does not have a quiver attached to the hip, nor is the sword's handle visible on the other side. The almond-shaped tassels are not waving behind his saddle.²³ Typically, the Sasanian depictions of the heroic riders show them with all these three elements. On the Fabricius/Blumka plate (Harper 1978, 58-59; Harper and Meyers 1981, 77-79, 84-85, 227, pl. 26) and in the depiction of the lance-wielding personage on the bowl from the British Museum (1963,1210.1; Harper and Meyers 1981, 130-131; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59; Bakker 2020) the quivers are missing; however, the tassels are visible, and on the Fabricius/Blumka plate, the sword is held in hand. The riders on the Vereino bowl in the Hermitage appear without tassels and swords. Nevertheless, there are cases for unstrung bows on their sides that correspond with the battle scene executed on a stone slab excavated in Taq-e Bostan (Moradi and Compareti 2019), where the protagonist does not have tassels or sword but has a bow case. At least one of the riders on the vase from Yuldus (Šlyahova 1977, 289-291; Harper 2006, 128, 150, fig. 71; Skupniewicz 2009, 60-61) does not have tassels or possess any archery equipment. The rider on the post-Sasanian plate from Khorasan is shown without tassels; however, he has a sword in his hand and is turned to the left. Therefore, one may assume that the quiver is on his other side, although it is not marked (Maršak 2017, 698, fig 251). The lack of any of these elements dismisses the Wyvern Collection plate from the typical Sasanian iconography of riders, which suggests that the application of the foot model to the rider's figure is plausible. Again, it should be reminded that the archery equipment was not depicted alongside the armored riders, who hold lances on Indo-Scythian coins and also on the golden clasp from Saksankhur. This likely stems from the earlier Scythian way of holding the gorytoi on the left hip, with short balled swords hung on the right side or in the middle. The bows are visible, suspended on the left side, on Indo-Scythian coins, when the riders are depicted with whips or axes that do not interfere with lances in the depictions. The bows of Indo-Scythian kings are already of the new type, that is, with extended stiff "ears"; however, they are still carried in the old fashion, i.e., on the left side. This means that the combination of the long bladed swords with large, powerful "Hunnic" bows was not yet fully developed and the coins represent a transition phase leading to the combination of the swords hanging on the stripes on the left hip and bows on the right one. Still, the iconography of the royal Indo-Scythian coinage might have impacted the pictorial conventions in later eras. This way, the convention of a lance held diagonally underarm associated with a standing horse might have referred to the earlier local patterns.

²³ For a recent overview of tassels in Sasanian iconography, see Potts 2024.

The lack of a sword is partially compensated by a dagger at the protagonist's hip. One exception is a plate from the Malaya Pereshchepina (S-272; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 107, 126), where the riders do not possess daggers. On the other side, all the protagonists in the Sasanian "heroic encounters" on foot have daggers, sometimes together with a sword. The reluctance to show riders with daggers can be explained by large quivers hanging on a strap attached to the belt, which does not allow the daggers being hung on the right thigh covered by the arrow-case. The quiver would not only cover the dagger visually but sheer size and weight of the device would disable placing of another weapon there, especially while riding when rhythmic movement would inevitably result in displacement of one of the items making the access to ammunition problematic. It is reasonable to believe that the swords became a part of the protagonist's equipment for practical reasons. Alternatively, the message was carried by the swords and quivers, so the daggers were avoided in depictions together with the archery equipment.

From the daggers attested in Sasanian iconography, the closest in form to the discussed scene is the depiction on a plate from the tomb of Feng Hetu, which Harper has associated with the post-Kushan territories of the Sasanian Kingdom (Harper 1990; 2004; 2006, 123-125, 148, pl. 68-69; Skupniewicz 2009, 50-51). On this plate, the personage is shown without a sword too.

The spearhead on the plate from the Wyvern Collection is sunk in the bear's body; however, a crossbar is clearly visible, which makes the spear a unique example of a weapon with clear hunting function in Sasanian art. The depictions of lances carried by armored warriors on the Spahbedan seals (Gyselen 2001; 2007; 2008; Skupniewicz 2017) and the lance head on the gem from the Jonathan Rosen Collection (Gaibov and Košelenko 2013²⁴) have the wider element behind the heads, which functionally seems to approximate them to European Carolingian and post-Carolingian examples; however, these are distinct from the perpendicular bar shown on the discussed scene. Bars of this type were typical for the hunting weapons, especially in boar hunting, but certainly useful against any prey with the capacity of a furious charge. Such a device would prevent ferocious animals from continuing to attack despite penetration. The spear thrust, which failed to cause immediate shock, could not stop the charge, even if the wound was lethal.

The possibility of the existence of such specialized devices could explain the crescent-shaped heads on the weapons on plates from the Synya Family Collection (Baulo 2002; Skupniewicz 2009, 62-63) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1970.6; Harper and Meyers 1981, 63-64, 217, pl. 16; Skupniewicz 2009, 51-52). These instances seem to

²⁴ At this point, one needs to emphasize the similarity between the Indo-Scythian lances and the lance held by the rider on the gem from the Jonathan Rosen Collection. They are relatively short, with large heads and a ball at the butt. This supports the longevity of the local visual conventions in the Kushanshahr area.

indicate a forked head. The forked or trident heads are attested in scenes of beast combat in the iconography of Panticapaeum and in the Late Roman Empire (Gorončarovskiy 2009, 43-44). The forked head would serve the same purpose as the crossbar, i.e., preventing over-penetration, but it would allow to inflict two or three wounds with a single strike. The relative difficulty in welding, particularly concerning technological complexity, especially in highly stressful situations of a big game hunt, might be a downturn.

Conclusions

The above analysis of the bear hunt scene confirms its late creation in Kushanshahr, as proposed by Aimone (2020, 184-186); however, his argumentation, limited by the format of a catalog entry, requires elaboration and in-depth analysis.

The scene is related to the British Museum 124092 with a king in combat with lions (Harper and Meyers 1981, 76-77, 226, pl. 25) and with the Fabricius/Blumka Collection plate (Harper 1978, 58-59; Harper and Meyers 1981, 77-79, 84-85, 227, pl. 26). Notwithstanding, the depictions of the combat of the protagonist on standing or low-paced horse are more frequent. The plate represents the lance position not typical for the Sasanian hunting scenes. It does not seem to derive directly from the battle scenes either. It is likely that the artisan compiled the convention of the bear hunt on foot with the rider. It is very clear that when the plate is turned to the left, the asymmetrical H-shaped composition typical of spear hunting on foot becomes visible. The dagger at the hip of the rider and the lack of quiver or flying tassels support this supposition. These lacking elements strengthen the relation with the Fabricius/Blumka plate (Harper 1978, 58-59; Harper and Meyers 1981, 77-79, 84-85, 227, Pl. 26). They also associate the scene with the one on the bowl from Vereino in the Hermitage (S-8; Marshak 2004, 49-50, fig. 36; Maršak 2017, 712, il. 266-267), the gem from the Jonathan Rosen Collection (Gaibov and Košelenko 2013), and with the ivory plate from the Begram and Gandharan relief at the Guimet Museum. The latter examples also provide the most explicit compositional references for the discussed scene with possible further association with the Panticapaeum murals (Gorončarovskiy 2009, 41-43). It is reasonable to see the model represented by the Jonathan Rosen Collection gem, Begram ivory, and the Gandharan relief being the source of the layout or compositional structure on which the “skins” or pictorial conventions of the Sasanian silverware were executed. This way, the artisan managed to avoid the formula “Thrusting a Spear down Diagonally”, which would be preferred in similar cases in Sasanian art. At the same time, the on-foot combat convention with the shaft held horizontally in a “bayonet hold” approximates the depiction to the way the armored lancers were usually depicted in Sasanian iconography. The bowl from Vereino seemingly applies the convention to animal combat, however, remains formally far more independent from Sasanian sources. The rider’s body moves forward in an effort to push the lance, which seems to be related to the scene on the gem in the Jonathan Rosen Collection and subsequently with the discussed

scene from the Wyvern Collection plate. The dramatic expression in “heroic encounter” and rider’s torso bent forward are not typical of Sasanian art as this feature was already compromised in the “Kushanshah Bahram” plate in the Hermitage (S24; Harper and Meyers 1981, 72-74, 224, pl. 23; Trever and Lukonin 1987, 108), which is also an example of the Sasanian art from eastern peripheries of the kingdom. The straight stiffness of the figure of the protagonist on the discussed plate results from the direct application of the Sasanian on-foot model on the local layout; however, deviations from the principle of rigid verticality had occurred earlier in Kushanshahr.

The boots of the rider associate the depiction with the stuccos from Bandiyān and the bowl from the British Museum (1963,1210.1), which is attributed to the Hephtalites. It must be pointed out that an iconographically similar process, where Sasanian models have been applied to compositions featuring overlapping, entangled, and interwoven scenes, can also be observed. The same type of boots gained popularity in later Sasanian toreutics. This allows us to date the plate to the mid fifth-seventh century, either a late Kushano-Sasanian product or an imitation of the Sasanian style under the Hephtalite reign. The relation of the dagger of the personage depicted on the Wyvern Collection plate suggests a rather earlier date, specifically in the fifth and sixth centuries. The relaxed treatment of Sasanian conventions (lack of quiver, sword and tassels) might suggest a lack of understanding of the symbolism, which in turn supports the origin of the artifacts from the time of Hephtalite occupation in the area.

The scene was composed of Sasanian “stock images” grouped in a composition that recalled Kushano-Sasanian patterns, but with a modified Sasanian layout. It is possible that the convention of two-handed low thrust against low target was quite a popular formula, though not attested by any Sasanian examples. The gem from the Jonathan Rosen Collection, the Panticapaeum mural and the Begram ivory panel may support this idea.

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