

Zoroastrian Symbols on Sasanian Glyptic Monuments Discovered on the Territory of Georgia (*Ātaš-dān* and Pomegranate Flower)

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Abstract: The arrival of Sasanian gems in the Kingdom of Kartli mainly starts from the 4th century, and their intensive spread begins from the second half of the 5th century and continues throughout the Sasanian period. Archaeological excavations have confirmed the presence of distinctive Sasanian glyptic motifs during this time, including the crescent moon with eight-pointed star, the pomegranate flower, the Zoroastrian fire altar (*ātaš-dān*), birds, gazelles, etc. This article examines the glyptic monuments featuring the Zoroastrian symbols of the *ātaš-dān* and the pomegranate flower found in Georgia. The study of these motifs is of great importance for analyzing the cultural, religious and political interactions of Kartli in the late antique and pre-feudal periods.

The Zoroastrian fire altar, i.e. *ātaš-dān*, in which the sacred fire was kept, is one of the symbols of Zoroastrianism. The *ātaš-dān* was considered a pillar of the Sasanian throne. Impressions depicting *ātaš-dān* (three instances) have been found in the regions of Samtvro, Pikrisgora and Karsniskhevi, dating back to the 4th to 6th centuries. Moreover, in Sasanian glyptic art, the pomegranate flower is associated with the triad of the three main deities of the Zoroastrian pantheon: Ahuramazda, Mithra and Anahita. Impressions featuring the pomegranate flower (two instances) have been found in the cemeteries of Samtvaro and Pikrisgora, dated to the 4th-5th centuries AD.

The research has established that the studied glyptic monuments are an integral part of Sasanian art, which reflected the political and religious processes in the region. Symbols related to the Zoroastrian religion brought from Sasanian Iran date back to the 4th-6th centuries AD. They are not recorded in large numbers on the territory of the Kingdom of Kartli. Accordingly,

the distribution of seals with Zoroastrian symbols in the Kingdom of Kartli is not regarded intensive.

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, Sasanian Kingdom, Kingdom of Kartli, Iberia, Glyptics, *Ātaš-dān*, Pomegranate Flower

Introduction

In 224 AD, Ardashir I (224/225-240/241) defeated Artabanus V (216-224), the last representative of the Arshakid dynasty in Media. In 226, Ardashir was crowned as the king and the Sasanian dynasty came to rule Iran. The Sasanians were well aware that building a united, strong state with the religious syncretism they inherited from Parthia was impossible, and thus they put emphasis on ancient Zoroastrianism. Accordingly, from the mentioned period, the kingdom of Kartli was bordered by two powerful states: on the one hand, the Roman Empire, where Christianity was formed as a guiding doctrine, and on the other hand, Sasanian Iran, in which Zoroastrianism was the state religion.

Our area of interest is to determine to what extent the Zoroastrian doctrine penetrated into the Kingdom of Kartli and to what extent it took hold in the 4th-6th centuries. In clarifying the mentioned issue, a significant emphasis is placed upon the study and analysis of glyptic materials. Without investigating glyptic monuments, it becomes challenging to conduct a thorough study of cultural, economic, and religious aspects of Kartli and the surrounding region. Glyptic art serves as a contemporary historical document that sheds light upon the social and cultural development of various periods as well as religious beliefs. Images on engraved gems allow us to get familiar with the material, religious, and spiritual culture of the era when it was created. Furthermore, it allows us to identify the precise physical features of historical figures.

Sasanian glyptic monuments, found in the territory of Georgia, have been studied by K. Ramishvili (1979). Also, Sasanian gems have been investigated by K. Ramishvili, K. Javakhishvili, K. Ramishvili, and M. Mshvildadze. However, glyptic materials featuring Zoroastrian symbols discovered in Georgia have not been analyzed in detail within their historical, political, cultural, and religious contexts.

***Ātaš-dān* and Pomegranate Flower**

In the 3rd century, Sasanian gems do not appear to have been widely circulated in the territory of Georgia. The introduction of these gems into the Kingdom of Kartli mainly begins in the 4th century, with a significant increase in their prevalence occurring in the second half of the 5th century, continuing throughout the Sasanian period. As a result of archaeological excavations, seal impressions from this period have revealed characteristic

Sasanian motifs, including a crescent moon with an eight-pointed star, a pomegranate flower, a Zoroastrian fire altar (*ātaš-dān*), a bird, a Persian gazelle, etc. (Mshvildadze 2017, 77-87).

It should also be noted that the themes depicted on glyptic monuments are often repeated on Sasanian art pieces in general. Frequent repetition and limitation of themes, according to V. Lukonin, are indicators of the canonicity of Sasanian art, which was established immediately after the creation of the centralized state of Sasanian Iran (Borisov and Lukonin 1963, 31-35).



FIGURE 1A. Georgian National Museum 282 (© the author)



FIGURE 1B. Georgian National Museum 282 (© the author)

In this study, we are particularly interested in the glyptic monuments with Zoroastrian symbols (*ātaš-dān* and pomegranate flower) found in Georgia, though their numbers are relatively limited.

Ātaš-dān

First of all, we would like to highlight the gems featuring the image of the Zoroastrian fire altar (*ātaš-dān*). The *ātaš-dān* was an important symbol in Zoroastrianism, representing the sacred fire that was associated with the sun deity in Sasanian glyptics. Also, the *ātaš-dān* was regarded as a pillar of the Sasanian throne. Samples of glyptic art depicting the image of the *ātaš-dān* have been found in the territory of Samtavro, Pikrisgora and Karsniskhevi.

1. Inv. №282 (Fig. 1a). It was discovered in the Samtavro necropolis (burial ground), Site S Jar burial №82 in 1939.¹ It is dated to the 4th century AD.

Dimensions: length of the intaglio mouth: 9 mm; width: 8 mm; height of the ring: 22 mm; diameter of the arc: 20 mm.

¹ Some researchers opine that this signet-ring should be associated with the inventory of the mentioned tomb (Javakhishvili 1972, 18n92).

This object is a signet-ring bronze with a conical signet part. The upper part of the seal shield is oval and slightly protruding. Its surface features a Sasanian character, which may represent a schematic image of a fire altar. Additionally, there is a cruciform shaft with an enlarged head at the top, adorned with crescents at various points along its length. A dotted frame encircles the image, which has been created through casting. The depiction is very vague and gives a low relief on the print. The seal consists of a plain, circular arc and a massive printing part in the form of a rounded cone.

2. Inv. №811 (Fig. 2a). This item was discovered in Karsniskhevi in 1955. It is dated to the 6th century AD (Ramishvili 1979, 64-65, 133).

Dimensions: length of the intaglio face: 11 mm; width: 7 mm; height of the ring: 12 mm; diameter of the arc: 2 mm.

It is a signet ring made of pink carnelian, featuring a dark brown spot on one side, which is shaped like a lightning bolt. The ring has a hole for inserting a string and is flat and oval in shape, with the edge on the cut side.

The surface depicts a fire altar (*ātaš-dān*) that consists of a base and a column divided into three parts. At the top of the column, there is an oval groove, accompanied by lines scattered throughout, which schematically represent flames of fire. The carving on the stone is done schematically, characterized by rough lines and grooves that create a low but distinct relief on the seal. The seal is completely polished, although the expression is dull.



FIGURE 2A. Georgian National Museum 811 (© the author)



FIGURE 2B. Georgian National Museum 811 (© the author)

3. Inv. №60 (Fig. 3.3a). It was discovered at Pikrisgora necropolis (burial ground), tomb №31 in 2014. It is dated to the 4th-5th centuries AD (Mshvildadze 2017, 92-102).

Dimensions: length of the intaglio mouth: 12 mm; width: 6 mm; height of the seal: 17 mm; inner diameter of the arc: 13 mm; outer diameter of the arc: 23 mm.

This seal is made from honey carnelian stone and displays a schematic image. It lacks a clear narrative and does not demonstrate a high level of craftsmanship. However, the stone is well cut and polished and the ring is completely polished. The arc of the ring is round in shape, flat on the inside and bulging on the outside, with the upper part of the arc cut off to form a typeface. The mouth is oval and flat.

The depiction of the Zoroastrian altar occupies an important position on the coins of the Sasanian dynasty representatives from the 3rd century; for example, on the reverse of the copper coins of King of Kings Ardashir I, while the obverse displays the *Shahenshah* himself (Lukonin 1969, 39). Kartir, known as the intellectual founder of Zoroastrianism, was the creator of the first state religion laws and served as its apostle (Trever and Lukonin 1987, 27).



FIGURE 3A. Reverse of Inv. №60; Great Mtskheta Archaeology state museum (© the author)



FIGURE 3B. Inv. №60; Great Mtskheta Archaeology state museum (© the author)

Pomegranate Flower

Another symbol related to Zoroastrianism is the pomegranate flower, which has been found depicted in the necropolises of Samtavro and Pikrisgora.

Pomegranates have been a symbol of fertility and reproduction since ancient times and, therefore, were associated with fertility cults, particularly with female deities. In ancient Mesopotamia, it was one of the main attributes of the marriage ceremony of the gods, notably served to Enlil (Lion 2003, 3-7). According to the royal annals of Sargon II, the pomegranate held an honorable place among the gifts offered to the deities (Lion and Michel 2003, 11-14). The pomegranate was a symbol of Demeter and was a cult plant associated with Hera and Aphrodite. It was also one of the attributes of the Iranian goddess

Anahita, the patron goddess of the Sasanian dynasty. In Rome, the pomegranate on Juno's hand symbolized marriage. Its red flowers were seen as an expression of love, from which wreaths were made for newly married couples on their wedding day (*Encyclopedie des symboles* 1989, 289-290). For the Jews, it was considered a symbol of the land promised by God: "Keep the Lord's commandments, for your God is leading you to a gracious land, to a land of wheat and barley, grapes and figs and pomegranates" (II Faith, 8:6-8).

Stylized plant shoots and flowers are one of the hallmarks of Sasanian art. A similar ornament decorates metal vessels, ceramics, and other objects. There is an opinion that the emphasis on three pointed leaves and the depiction of three-petaled flowers or three-part flowering plants in Sasanian glyptics is related to the triad of the three main deities of the Zoroastrian pantheon: Ahuramazda, Mithras and Anahita (Ramishvili 2000, 61). Being presented with the pomegranate flower by a Shah or his wife often signified the granting of privileges (Trever 1937, 5-41).

1. Inv. №187 (Fig. 4). It was found in stone tomb №203 in Samtavro necropolis in 1939.

Dimensions: length of the intaglio mouth: 19 mm; width: 18 mm; height of the blade; 20 mm; diameter of the blade: 6 mm (Ramishvili 2000, 60-61).

This is a milky chalcedony pendant in an elliptical shape, featuring an enlarged hole for string insertion. The surface, on the cut side, is flat and oval. On the face, a depiction of a pomegranate flower has been carved. Despite the schematic nature of the image, all the characteristics of the pomegranate flower are clearly highlighted, including a "belly" indicated by an oval groove. Three thick, pointed leaves outlined with a double line. At the base of the trunk, shoots extend outward on either side, leading to the portrayal of outstretched wings of a bird. Many analogues of this imagery can be found in Sasanian glyptics of the 5th century AD.



FIGURE 4. Georgian National Museum 187 (© the author)

2. Inv. №59 (Fig. 5a, b). It was discovered in tomb №31 in Pikrisgora necropolis in 2014. It is dated to the 4th-5th centuries AD (Mshvildadze 2017, 92-102).

It is a stone seal bearing an image of a pomegranate flower. The main elements of the image, including the pomegranate flower and the soil strip, are carved clearly. The stone is well cut and polished. Moreover, the ring is fully polished.

The signet ring is crafted from carnelian stone. The arc of the ring gradually widens towards the shoulders. It is flat inside, bulging from the outside. In the middle, there is an arrow. The upper part of the arc is cut off and represents the surface. The surface is oval and flat. The depiction of the pomegranate on Sasanian glyptic monuments features a canonical, highly stylized form characterized by an elongated oval shape resembling a “belly” flower, concluded with three pointed petals (Ramishvili 2000, 60-61).



FIGURE 5A. Great Mtskheta Archaeology state museum-reserve 59 (© the author)



FIGURE 5B. Great Mtskheta Archaeology state museum-reserve 59 (© the author)

Pomegranate flower may have been represented on the well-known Pityakhsh cup from Armaziskhevi, where a nobleman holds a flower in his hand in a characteristic manner. One of the clear examples of the symbolic meaning of the pomegranate is the silver cup of the Baltimore Museum, where the wife of the Shah, dressed in ceremonial clothes, is covered with a headdress decorated with ram’s horns and pomegranates. According to researchers, it seems that in some cases the pomegranate, or its flower, was identified with the main Zoroastrian symbol, that is, the flame of fire. This should explain its prominent role in court rituals. For example, the investiture scene on one of the reliefs at Barmi Dilak (East of Shiraz), where Magupati Kartiri presents the queen with a pomegranate flower instead of the traditional crown of power (Lukonin 1969, 112).

Conclusions

As a result of the research, it has been established that the studied glyptic monuments are an integral part of Sasanian art, which reflected the political and religious processes in the region. Symbols related to the Zoroastrian religion brought from Sasanian Iran date back to the 4th-6th centuries AD. They are not recorded in large numbers on the territory of the Kingdom of Kartli. The distribution of seals with Zoroastrian symbols in the Kartli Kingdom is limited. Accordingly, the widespread adoption of Zoroastrianism during the 4th-6th centuries AD, as evidenced by the glyptic material found in the territory of the Kartli Kingdom, is not well-documented.

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