

Mounted Combat Scenes on the Bronze Plaque from Sana'a, Amazonomachia in Yemen?

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Abstract

The cavalry battle scene depicted on the Himyarite bronze plaque, being possibly a part of horse harness, reveals some relation with Iranian iconography of Parthian and Sasanian times. The relation is not direct and there are numerous differences with the Iranian fighting scenes. The composition does not directly refer to any of the Parthian or Sasanian battle reliefs or toreutics and seems to follow earlier, Hellenistic traditions, enriched by the Iranian and local detail. The direct confrontation, without immediate determination of the victorious and defeated sides, was avoided in Iranian iconography which aimed in glorification of royal heroism, being always victorious and only victorious cosmic power. The differences between the equipment of the depicted personages, clashing in cavalry combat, allow to identify the scene as a local version of classical amazonomachia with some Iranian iconographic elements added. Generally, the long lances were in Parthian and Sasanian times perceived as Iranian element of warfare and included to Iranian iconography of royal power, even if the tactical idea of employment of long lances, most likely, reached Iran with the Macedonians. It is possible that the female warriors in capalin/morion types of helmets of post Hellenistic origin clash with the warriors wearing scale armour covering entire body. The possibly-female warriors are shown in garments or nude and they seem to refer to iconographies of Athena-type goddesses in oriental environments. The latter motif of naked Amazon in combat is not popular in mainstream classical art but is occasionally attested. Scale overalls may refer to Roman imagery of heavy cavalry of Sarmatian origin. The piece, together with another rock relief, prove knowledge of Iranian-type heavy cavalry among Himyarites who attempted to follow or imitate the prestige of both great empires of the time.

Keywords: Parthian art; Sasanian art; Himyarite art; Amazonomachia; Armed female figures; Iconography of combat.

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* The results of the research carried out under the research theme No 107/20/B were financed from the science grant granted by the Ministry of Education and Science (Poland).

Article info: Received: 18 May 2021 | Accepted: 27 June 2021 | Published: 1 July 2021

Citation: Skupniewicz Patryk. (2021). "Mounted Combat Scenes on the Bronze Plaque from Sana'a, Amazonomachia in Yemen?". *Persica Antiqua*, Vol. 1 (1): 69-86.

<https://doi.org/10.22034/PA.2021.133724>

Introduction

In an article published in 2005, Sabina Antonini has presented a bronze plaque, found on the market in Sana'a, most likely originating from the illegal excavations of the local site, with two almost identical mounted combat scenes, separated by a panel with monograms and framed from the top and the bottom with narrow stripes containing hunting scenes (Fig. 1) (Antonini, 2005). Antonini has labelled the plaque "a Himyarite artifact in the Partho-Sasanian style" and briefly analyzed its technical aspects as well as the iconography. She has rightly pointed out the correspondence of two of the riders to the one depicted on a Parthian tile found in Babylonia (Fig. 2) and to a depiction of heavy armored adversaries of the Roman cavalry on the Trajan's column, in Rome. Furthermore she has highlighted the connection between the said scenes and local art works and some late Parthian examples and finally to one of the Sasanian "jousting" scenes from Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 3). The style and artistic quality of the object suggest rather local production imitating Persian patterns, than an import from Iran. It seems, however, that this exceptional object has clues for numerous in-depth studies, including the research on the circulation of the iconographic *formulae* of the mounted combat as well as the iconography of the weapons in ancient Near East, that involved possible religious or mythological content (Azarpay, 1975; Ciafaloni and Della Rocca de Candal, 2011).

Description

The two mounted combat scenes

are framed in horizontally stretched rectangles of herring-bone ornament and separated by a smaller vertical panel with monograms. The crude stylization makes the details difficult to interpret. The scenes are very similar, almost identical. Both show two confronted riders with heads in profile, armed with lances on galloping horses shown with the hind legs on the ground (i.e. not in flying gallop). The body of a dead personage lies on the ground between the combatants. The dead man is turned with the head toward the center of the plaquette, i.e. to the right in the left panel and to the left in the right panel. This is the only mirror element in the main panels. However, the hunting scenes in the upper margin are also arranged in a heraldic fashion. Antonini (2005: 3) has pointed out that the partially missing silver in the panels might have resulted from the state of preservation, though in both panels exactly the same spots are covered with silver sheet, which suggests that the contrast between the areas covered with silver and those left in bronze must have been intentional. Especially in the light of the fact that the bronze was originally at least partially gilded, one might expect that the three colors (silver, gold and bronze) were used to create an artistic effect. The color of bronze in the parts where the silver foil was damaged is different from the rest of the plaque.

The left rider is shown with silvered head on a silvered horse, with torso and limbs scratched in bronze. Except for the helmet, the rider is not armored. One can observe the belt and the cuffs of the tunic as well as the details of the foot wear with the tip pointing upwards. A cloak is floating behind the rider. The lance is held with the right hand behind the rider, pointing slightly upwards, but



Fig. 1. Antonioni's Plaque. On the Top Left Panel, Below Right Panel (Drawn by Eleonora Skupniewicz)

the shaft is covered by the body of the rider and the horse. The helmet of the personage reaches the apex, a pronounced piece on the forehead which might be a large

diadem or an artistic interpretation of a visor over some Hellenistic or Roman helmets; alternatively this could be an echo of Boeotian/pilos-type helmets (Waurick, 1988: 157-163; Sekunda, 1995:



Fig. 2. Parthian Terracotta from Babylonia, BM inv no 91908; Courtesy Nadeem Ahmad

19-39). It seems that the helmet has cheek pieces. The horse has decorative necklaces and an elaborate head-harness. The strong chest musculature of the steed is marked with pronounced curved lines; the mane seems trimmed. No details of a saddle are visible, however one can observe a *shabraque* with tassels. The entire figure on the right is silvered, riding a non-silvered horse. The whole body of the rider is covered with a scale pattern; his left hand is holding the lance horizontally, with the shaft hidden behind his body and the horse. The rider's helmet is plain with a lower rim, hemispherical or slightly conical, perhaps with a protective coif or neck-guard. No details of the horse harness are discernible.

The second panel repeats the layout described above with some differences

– the rider on the left does not have a silvered head but has a silvered cloak, no details of the robes are visible on the body except for the scratches on the foot defining the footwear – shoes or sandals. The shape of the chest may be interpreted as a female breast. Therefore one cannot rule out that the personage is a woman naked except for the cloak. The personage on the right is again fully covered with silver sheet with a scale pattern, wearing a helmet with a relatively wide brim. A dead body lies between the riders with a triangular object between his legs that might represent the arrow case slung from the belt or tied or the folded lower rim of the tunic hanging from below the armor. Although none of the riders is shown hit, i.e. defeated, the shafts of the lances of the personages on the left sides of the panels are shown raised hence

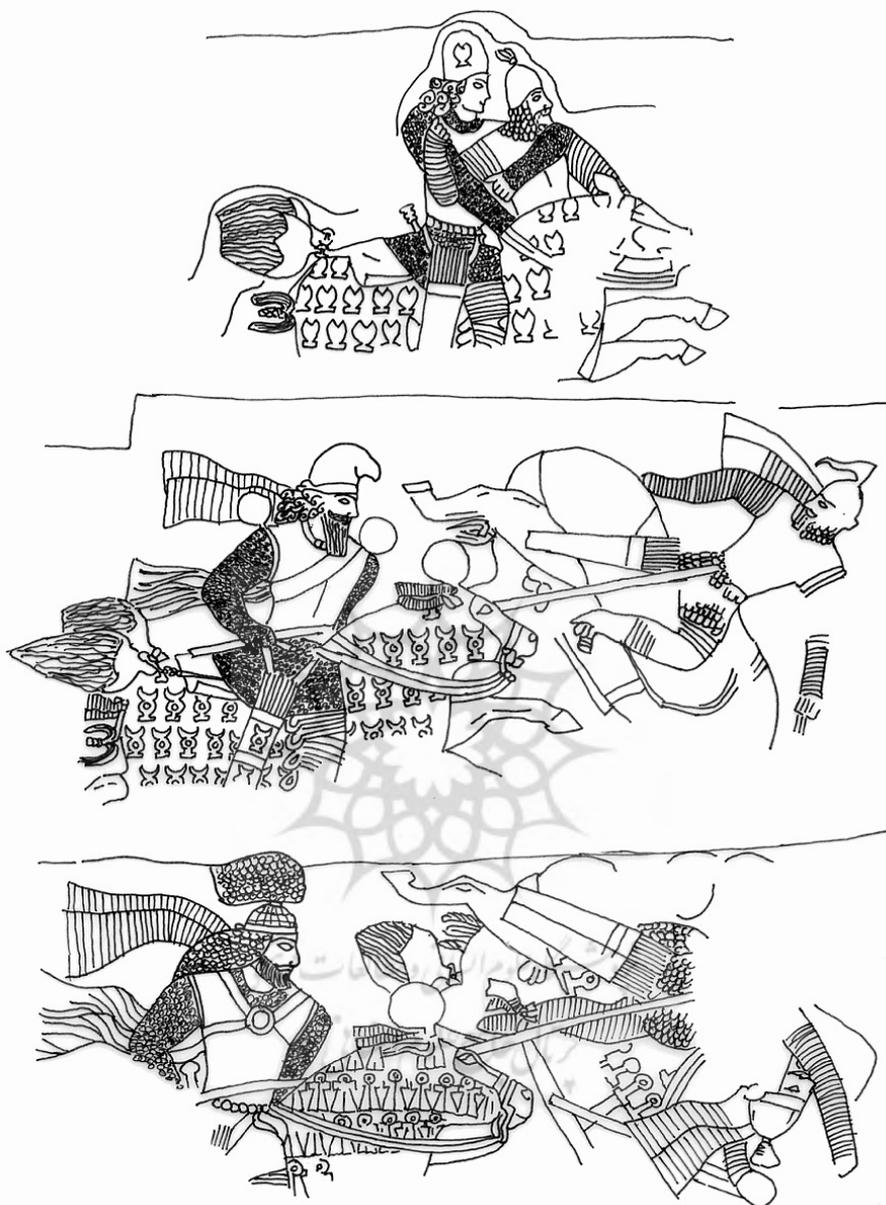


Fig. 3. Naqsh-e Rostam (Drawn by Patryk Skupniewicz)

pointing the opponent while the scales of the personages in the scale armors are held horizontally, pointing the enemies' mounts. No lance heads are visible so no definite result of the combat can be declared.

The composition of the plaque. The "twin picture"

Two almost identical scenes repeated in the row are a very rare arrangement in the art of Parthian and Sasanian Iran. Two combat scenes, one on top

of the other, are known from Naqsh-e Rostam (NRm7) reliefs but, despite the similarity of the subject, the scenes are clearly different and the effect of vertical repetition is very different from a horizontal one (Bivar, 1972; von Gall, 1990: 30-33; Mielczarek, 1993: 39; Nicolle, 1996: 12-13, 16; Skupniewicz, 2006: 163-165; Nikonorov, 2020). A similar situation can be observed on the Kosika cup where the combat scene is accompanied by a somewhat similar boar hunt scene (1st century BC) (von Gall, 1997; Goroncharovski, 2002). The source of inspiration for two almost identical scenes could be the belt or leggings/shoes clasps or horse harness *phalerae* where the scenes were occasionally repeated symmetrically. Such portable luxury objects were exchanged, traded, taken as trophies and were perfect transmitters of motifs. Antonini has suggested that the object in question could have been part of a horse harness, perhaps the chest strap (Antonini, 2005: 1), therefore the decorative function of the twin motif could relate to the twin front *phalerae*. The plaque does not show a heraldic scheme, therefore we probably deal with a transformation of the idea of symmetrical clasps/*phalerae* into single object and in a non-heraldic row.

The object that matches the compositional idea of the discussed Himyarite plaque is (despite the difference in scale and in the themes represented) the early Sasanian rock relief at Salmas with two repetitive scenes of mounted investiture, which vary only in the details of the personages' gear (Hinz, 1965; Shavarebi, 2014; Maksymiuk, 2017).

The battle relief at Firuzabad (Fig. 4) falls into the category of the "twin scene" as the depictions of Ardashir and Shapur vary merely in details, creating a visual impression of doubling one

and the same motif, however the figure of a Sasanian beardless personage in mounted wrestling with Parthian warrior changes the layout (Bivar, 1972; von Gall, 1990: 20-30; Mielczarek, 1993: 38-39, 49, 62-63; Skupniewicz, 2006: 154-160; von Gall, 2008: 149-150; Skupniewicz, 2015; Nikonorov, 2020). It should be emphasized that both the Salmas and the Firuzabad reliefs belong to the early stage of development of Sasanian art (Ardashir's reign, AD 224-242). The idea of the "twin scene" did not come *ex nihilo*. It is most likely that Sasanian artisans decided to use existing formulae from other media in creating a new iconographic program for rock reliefs.

An example that fits in the same category could be a bronze plaque from Old Nisa, now lost, depicting two mounted lancers charging two infantry soldiers or a duel of foot warriors and a rider chasing a fleeing infantryman (Pilipko, 2001: 321-322). The duel of the foot warriors seems less likely because of the difference in the size of the two combatants and the lance position held by the left figure underarm, targeting diagonally down. Underarm spear employment occasionally appears in the iconography of foot soldiers, but the overarm thrust prevails; furthermore the warrior's hand is moved far back behind his body, which is typical for mounted lance wielding warriors. Unfortunately the latter piece is known only from the archival photo and had been badly corroded hence the difficulties in proper reading. It cannot be excluded that it would be the closest parallel to the plaque under discussion, despite the fact that the scenes on the Old Nisa plaque vary to the higher extent. Similar composition might have been used on the battle scene on the partly damaged sheath from Takht-i Sanghin where infantry warrior



Fig. 4. Firuzabad Frieze (Drawn by Patryk Skupniewicz)

in the right part is being attacked by the mounted lancer while from the left part only another foot combatant is preserved (Litvinski, 2010: 31, pl. 31-32, fig. 3).

It is possible that the stiff distinction of the scenes evolved from the Hellenistic battle scenes where the main scene was visually divided only by means of visual accentuation. The Old Nisa plaque could be a step forward in emphasizing the division between the scenes and formal framing on the Sana'a plaque a further stage in the process. Perhaps this relatively new compositional model was also applied to the Salmas relief which was made at the early stage of development of Sasanian rock sculpture. It should be noted here that "Hephtalite" silver plates provide examples of hunting scenes in a row, but the distinction is not marked (often deliberately blurred), the scenes vary one from another, and they are distributed over the rounded body of the vessel, hence do not fall into the category of twin picture (Nikonorov, 1997: vol. 2, 18, 78, fig 46; Skupniewicz 2009, 58-59; 61).

The scene composition. The "symmetrical combat"

The Iranian combat imagery of Parthian and Sasanian times, or even the related, to some extent, Sarmatian or Bosporan/Pantikapaionian (Goroncharovski, 2002) and, further in time and space, Sogdian art, denote a preference for a clear distinction among the winning and the losing parties (Ciafaloni and Della Rocca de Candal, 2011). The majority of depictions clearly mark the defeated party as being hit, helpless against the inevitable doom. Winners are usually depicted in self-possessed postures, somehow effortlessly killing their opponents. Naturally such a layout had been known for millennia in Near Eastern

art, where the royal combat or hunt represented a confrontation of the forces of order against the forces of chaos. The dynamism of chaos was confronted with the power of cosmic order represented by the king. Two opponents charging each other are a motif lacking this definitiveness. Nevertheless, except for the upper scene of Naqsh-e Rostam battle frieze NRM7 (being a kind of compromise between symmetrical, heraldic order and necessity to point the defeated party), which was quoted by Antonini, there are some examples of such layout in the art if Dura Europos and some associations are provided by the Sarmatian art too. The relief YM37, quoted by Antonini (2005: 13, fig. 9), from Sana'a Museum does not seem to show riders in heraldic position, but another layout – a rider in combat with a giant lion, the same formula as on the tile from Babylonia and probably on another Himyarite relief, with an armored rider and his attendant. Antonini is not clear in this regard. She says that the object "features the iconography of a horseman in heraldic position", but later she relates the object to clearly unsymmetrical pieces. The closest piece to the object in exam seems to be a fragment of the battle of Ebenezer scene from the wall paintings in the synagogue in Dura Europos (NB1) (Nicolle, 1991: 45; James, 2006: pl. 4). Although the mounted combat is only part of the entire mural, it is likely that it was entered as a fixed compositional motif or a formula, here fitted into the wall decoration. Goldman (Goldman and Little, 1980: 287), believe that the mural from the synagogue "is derived from Hellenistic models". The riders in the Dura Europos mural are depicted unarmored, wielding short shafted weapons, held underarm. What emphasizes the resemblance between

the wall painting and the Sana'a plaque, is the fact that despite the overall symmetry, the horses are deliberately marked with different colors, the rider in darker tunic was placed on a bright horse, while the one in brighter clothes mounts a dark horse. Although the bright horses on the plaque are placed on the left and the dark ones on the right, the fact remains that a similar differentiation formula has been employed. It is possible, or even likely, that the riders on the synagogue wall are hurling javelins, although their postures were adopted from lance fighting iconography.

In Sasanian art scenes with strict symmetrical confrontation of the riders are not known to the present author. Later Persian miniature painting provides numerous examples of this layout, but it is difficult to establish a clear link between these pieces and the earlier iconography (Azarpay 1982; von Gall, 1990: 56-57; Rahbar, 2008: 21-22, 39, fig 27; Nikonorov, 2020). It must be pointed out that the depiction of symmetrically placed warriors, without clear indication of the winning and defeated sides, was foreign to Sasanian aesthetics. It cannot be found in Parthian art either. Except for the Old Nisa battle mural, where some Hellenistic patterns were clearly followed, and the state of preservation does not allow to reconstruct the entire work (Pilipko, 2001: 275-277; Invernizzi, 2011: 200-203), Parthian depictions of mounted warriors show them either without any target or, if present, in a clearly weaker position (an infantryman, a hunted animal) and marginalized (Gaibov and Koshelenko, 2008; Skupniewicz, 2015).

All riders on the Sana'a plaque hold their lances with a single hand, underarm. Such a lance position (Nicolle's style D) appears in Greek iconography in the 4th

century B.C. and fully blossoms in the Hellenistic era (Nicolle, 1980: 6-7, Pl. III). On Parthian seals from Old Nisa and in a graffito with a heavy armored horseman from Dura Europos (Wójcikowski, 2013: 238-239). This way of holding shafted weapons should not be mistaken with the couched lance – a technique invented in European Middle Ages. The single handed underarm grip was replaced with two handed grip, alongside and across the horse's neck (Nicolle's style G). In vast simplification, following Mielczarek, one could name the single handed underarm hold (Nicolle's style D) "*contarii* grip", the double handed grip across the horse's neck "*clibanarii* grip", and the double handed across the neck "*catafractarii* grip", both would refer to Nicolle's style G. Mielczarek (1993: 42-49) does not observe that the shaft position in Sasanian art was a matter of stylization. For the time being it is difficult to determine when the shafts were allowed to be shown across the main personages or their mounts or when Persian art has adopted such a strange stylization. It cannot be excluded that the objects strictest in this style are forgeries (Grabar, 1967; Skupniewicz, 2009). Naturally such a simplified nomenclature ignores *xyston* vs. "*cavalry sarissa*" (in Hellenistic armies) discussion, but this phrasing, with all its shortcomings, may simplify the language in use. Such a lance hold is attested in Himyarite art as well as overarm grip (Keal, 1998; Potts, 1998: 187-189, fig. 3; Yule and Robin, 2005-2006; Skupniewicz, 2009). It should be stated here that the Sasanian art does not provide examples of *contarii* grip (Sekunda, 2001). There are either single handed overarm thrusts or *catafracti/clibanarii* lance holds.

Personages on the right. *Catafracti*

Both riders on the right side of both

panels are all covered with the scale pattern which obviously represents scale armor. Antonini has correctly referred it to a Parthian tile from Babylonia with the depiction of an armored rider hunting a lion and the Trajan column depictions of armored adversaries of the Roman cavalry. In all these examples the riders seem to wear scale overalls, although on the Trajan's column, the horses are covered with scales too. This corresponds to the literary descriptions of Parthian heavy cavalry (Pugachenkova, 1966: 35-37). One cannot exclude the existence of a *topos* here (Skupniewicz and Maksymiuk, 2018). Scale armor is clearly attested in the Roman and in the Iranian contexts, but the overall or long coat covered with the scale pattern appears also on Coptic image of St Meros (Walter, 2001: 185-186, 191, fig. 11), suggesting that the scale armor became a part of a widespread visual language, with a mythical/religious flavor. Occasionally, scale pattern of the Sasanian arms and armor is interpreted in religious terms as a reflection of the *Simorgh* or *Verethragna's* hawk (Skupniewicz, 2006: 153; Wójcikowski, 2013: 239-242), however, despite some symbolic function, the depictions from Sana'a or Trajan's column cannot carry the same meaning. Scale pattern does not necessarily reflect the feathers, equally well it could symbolize the fish/lizard/snake scales (of a water/chthonic deity?) or leaves as often seem on garlands (a vegetation deity?). Scale overall could derive from iconography of *aegis* lest the Gorgon head (Kropp, 2013: 186).

In her study Antonini (Yule and Antonini and Robin, 2004) has omitted quite an important and close reference, namely the slab from Zafar (Fig. 5) where another rider almost fully covered with scales was depicted (Skupniewicz, 2016). The main difference between these

representations is that the Zafar relief shows the rider holding the lance in overarm position and keeping a buckler in his left hand. He is accompanied by an infantry attendant, which relates the picture to the Tang-e Sarvak relief and visually justifies the crowded composition of Dura Europos synagogue wall painting. Most likely the Zafar frieze was compositionally related to the Babylonian tile mentioned above and the Tang-e Sarvak relief. It seems to repeat the pattern of yet another Himyarite relief which Antonini (2005: 13, fig. 9) quotes as a reference for the other personage on the discussed plaque.

The helmets of the riders in scale armor cannot be clearly attributed to known types. To some extent the headgear of the heavy cavalryman in the left panel could correspond to Roman helmets or to the helmets of the defeated warriors in Naqsh-e Rostam reliefs, given the nearly hemispherical body and distinct neck guard. The remaining kit of the personages at Naqsh-e Rostam is at variance with those in our plaque, which show separate scale elements but include segmented limb defenses and a plate cuirass.

The helmet of the armored rider from the right panel is even more puzzling. It reminds of a bowler hat and with some likelihood it is an attempt to depict a variation of the Boeotian helmet. The poor understanding of this headgear allows to believe that the depictions on the plaque rather follow another art piece, probably a well-established motif, than real life objects. The lack of belts, swords or archery equipment and the conventionally floating cloak support this idea.

The scale overall is not an impossible armor construction, especially if made of a long coat with lower parts tied on

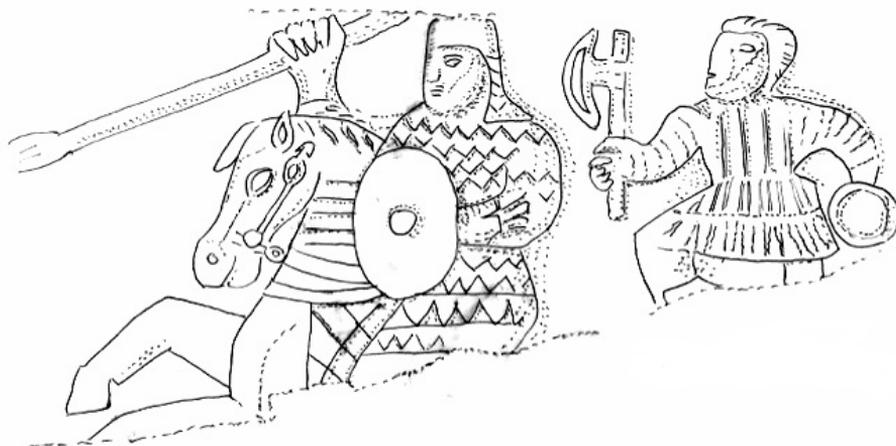


Fig. 5. Himyarite Heavy Rider Frieze from Zafar (drawn by Patryk Skupniewicz)

the inner part of the leg, not different from cowboy coats. Long coat of mail armor placed between two layers of textile was discovered in the Sarmatian Vosdvizhenskii kurgan (Kozhukhov, 1999). It might be tied around the legs to provide confident protection. The long armors of Indo-Saka kings might be in fact coats covered with bronze plates and later Central Asian armors of the same tradition with their wide, lamellar or laminar skirts could reflect a similar idea of limb protection. It is also possible that the armored rider on the Tang-e Sarvak relief presents an analogous solution of the leg armor.

Personages on the left

Antonini has connected the personages on the left parts of the panels with depictions of Parthian riders. This is correct in terms of position of the horse and the personage, the floating cloak and a certain dynamism in the depiction; however details do not seem to be interpreted correctly. In such a crude stylization a long sleeved robe, a cloak, the trousers and the shoes are not elements that could allow a firm attribution of a rider to any iconographic

milieu. More important seems the specific helmet worn by the personages on the left in both panels.

The helmets with the raised triangular front panel or diadem were a characteristic feature of the iconography of armed female personages, interpreted as Athena-type goddesses (Skupniewicz and Maksymiuk, 2021). One may argue whether the element came from raising the front of the Hellenistic helmets deriving from (or related to) Boeotian type or development of Attic helmets, but the important thing here is the certain uniformity of the helmets worn by the armed female personages. The closest geographic parallel is provided by the iconography of Allat-Athena from Palmyra, Hatra, Dura Europos and Kharaba (Hoyland, 2001: 185-187, pl. 28a). The depictions of the goddesses from Palmyra have an accentuated triangular front, which is not as clear in Hatra and Dura Europos (Downey, 1977: pl XXX, 114-117, XXXI, 119-123; Winkelmann, 2004: 254-255).

The women in helmets with raised front, creating a triangular front are present in the *rhytons* and silver figurines from Old Nisa, in Dalverzin Tepe

terracotta, Dilberjin murals and in the coroplastics of Afrasiab (Pugachenkova, 1978: 74-75, pl. 52). The face on the mural from room 16 in Dilberjin is shown in profile, which allows to see the helmet analogous to the one depicted on the plaque in exam. The state of preservation of the clay "Athena" figure from Khalchayan does not allow a full reconstruction of her helmet, however it is clear that there was an element in front of the helmet's body (Pugachenkova, 1971: 76-78). Pugachenkova (1989) pointed out that the attendants of the Sun god on the ceiling in Bamiyan could represent two goddesses of the discussed type. This supposition seems attractive in explaining "twin" scene composition of the plaque from Sana'a.

Only the Dalverzin Tepe terracotta shows the female personage in armor (except for an occasional *aegis* acquired from Athena's iconography) which clearly demonstrates that the standard depictions of the armed female deities of the Near East and Central Asia did not include body protection. On the other hand the demoniac figures from Gandhara and Kizil wear helmets very similar to the type described above, which might suggest that this headgear was not exclusive to female deities (leCoq, 1905: 51, fig. 41, 60, pl. 72). Alternatively, a foreign and possibly ideologically competitive imagery could have been adopted here, especially since the demons, unlike the majority of the goddesses in question, are shown wearing armors. Personage in a helmet of similar type was depicted on recently discovered ivory belt fittings from Tilla Bulak (Gruber and Il'yasov and Kaniuth, 2012).

The female rider on the right panel of the discussed object seems to be presented naked. This naturally may be a false observation coming from

the poor preservation of the plaque, especially in the light of the fact that no other helmeted goddess has been depicted naked, and nudity, which is an attribute of Aphrodite, would not fit in the iconography of Athena (Skupniewicz and Maksymiuk, 2019). On the other hand, visual conventions of Greek art were foreign to the East, where the idea of a goddess of war and fertility was acceptable. It should be recalled here that both helmeted and naked female figures are occasionally interpreted as Allat. Also putti riding different creatures were a relatively common motif, and a mere transition of the visual principle could have occurred. The fact remains that this would have been a unique depiction of a female figure, nude except for the cloak and the armor, participating in mounted lance combat. The analogy can be count in an *amazonomachia* scene on Etruscan decorated urn from Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden where the female rider being defeated by the male opponents, dressed in hellenic garb, was depicted nude. This means that the Amazons might be occasionally depicted naked which in turn, was possibly related to the erotic aspects of the exotic female fighters lore.

Female combatants appear as heroines in the *Shāhnāma* and in the *Dārāb Nāma*. In the latter, the main female warrior-personage - Burān Dokht - has been identified by Hanaway as Anāhitā, disguised to fit the expectations of an Islamic audience. Masculinization of the heroine went as far as describing her as wearing a moustache (Hanaway, 1982: 287). The bearded Tyche is known in Parthian coinage (Sinisi, 2008: 235-237). Perhaps this would explain the alleged moustache of the helmeted figure in the Tang-e Sarvak relief (Haerinck, 2003: 223-227). The heroine's nudity is

an important motif in the *Dārāb Nāma* story; revealing her nudity to Alexander resulted in ceasing the fighting between them.

Female soldiers in Sasanian armies are attested in Roman sources, which possibly refer to the classical legend of the Amazons and to the “barbarity” of the Persian. High status female graves of Iranian-speaking nomads (although not in Iran itself) were occasionally equipped with weapons which could advocate their ability to participate in fighting (Jordan, 2009). Women of pre-Islamic Arabia could reach high social status and occasionally they are described as participating in combats during the Islamic conquest (Hoyland, 2001: 149). The pictorial narrative in Panjikent includes the episodes depicting female warriors, however no difference in war-kit used by the Amazons and male fighters is observable.

Conclusion

In the conclusion to her article, Antonini has suggested that the difference in the kit of the riders on the right and left parts of the panels could result from ethnic differences; therefore the scenes could refer to the Partho-Sasanian war. This supposition is an inaccurate one. The Sasanian mutiny was a civil war within the Iranian realm, so the ethnic differentiation could not be emphasized. The Firuzabad relief shows the scenes from the final clash between Arsacids and Sasanians distinguishing them through the headgear, protective sleeves and skirts only. Expecting huge variances between noble houses of Iran would not be correct. Also it is difficult to find depictions of helmeted, mounted warriors wearing no armor. Odaenathus’ triumphal mosaic from Palmyra (Gawlikowski, 2005) consists of

two panels: one with Bellerophon killing the Chimera with a lance, and the other with a horse archer hunting tigers in the layout typical for Sasanian silverwork (Harper, 2008; Skupniewicz, 2009). Both personages are shown in Iranian costume and wear helmets, which seem to be of a different kind than the ones on the Sana’a plaque. On the Parthian Hung-i Kamalwand relief, there is a rider with a lance wearing a pointed headgear, which might represent a helmet (Mathiesen, 1992 vol. 2: 121-122, fig. 2); it should be noted that the pointed hats appear on other Parthian reliefs in a fully civilian context, so they do not necessarily refer to helmets. Also the nature of the scene is not known. The mosaic itself serves the purpose of heroization and most likely does not represent the actual war-kit of the period.

The subject of the plaque is difficult to determine. What seems evident in the light of the above arguments is that the depictions follow conventions which must have carried some mythological meaning associated with the figure of a warrior goddess engaged in a cosmic combat. The use of elements of female goddess iconography might allude to an epic with human warrior heroines, marked by the elements borrowed from the religious iconography, perhaps analogous to the narratives from the *Shāhnāma* and *Dārāb Nāma* or the Panjikent murals.

Despite the lack of clear indication of victors and defeated, there are features allowing us to believe that the female personages are getting the upper hand. Their lances are pointing higher than their opponents’, and most commonly in Partho-Sasanian art the winners move from left to right. This, however, would contrast in classical *Amazonomachia*, especially with its possible erotic context

where the female fighters are always shown as being defeated, subdued to male, patriarchal power. Most likely, the position of the lances does not determine the victor. Again, Sasanian rock reliefs can provide good analogy as the defeated personages there are shown with their lances placed higher, often broken.

The iconographic elements preeminently come from Parthian aesthetics. The riders were shown in profile, which is generally perceived as foreign in Parthian art. However it definitely exists (Pietrzykowski, 1985). For the horse we find parallels in Gotarzes and battle scene in the Tang-e Sarvak reliefs (von Gall, 1990: 11-19; Nikonorov, 2020). Sasanian art continued using the motif of the rocking horse with the rider but the gallop with hind legs on the ground was abandoned in favor of the “flying gallop”. The specific helmets of the personages on the left parts of the panels do not appear in Sasanian art either. Conventionally depicted armored riders relate to Parthian terracotta slab and Trajan’s column as well as textual references describing Parthian heavy armored riders as covered with scales. The lance position typical for Hellenistic and present in Arsacid art is not documented in Sasanian iconography, where it was fully replaced with *catafracti/clibanarii* grips and overhead (two and single-handed) technique.

It is difficult to assess whether the “twin scene” formula of the plaque

followed the early Sasanian Salmas and/or Firuzabad reliefs, or earlier sources, which were applied by the craftsmen working for early Sasanian court to rock reliefs.

In the light of the above, it should be stated that the subject of the scene is a mounted clash between the Amazons and the male riders. One of the Amazons is shown clad in robe, the other - naked. The female warriors follow the traits of iconography of female deities of Athena type, suitable for the depiction of fighting, armed women. Their male opponents are shown in stylised armour of the Iranian heavy cavalry. Thus, the object follows the traits of Western and Iranian iconography, giving the Greek story oriental flavour (Skupniewicz and Maksymiuk, 2019). Had the object been indeed a part of the horse harness, the scene including expert horsewomen would be very much in place, perhaps similarly to female/Amazon maska of some Roman parade helmets, where the figure of a warrior woman was unlikely to relate to female sex or barbarian origin, but rather to expert horsemanship.

As to the chronology of the plaque in exam, considering all the above, a date as late as the 5th century, as proposed by Antonini, is hardly acceptable; the late 2nd/first half of the 3rd century seems a more reasonable time span.

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