

# Some Formal Remarks on “Shapur Cameo” and a Few Points on Practical Methodology in Researching Sasanian Iconography

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## Abstract

The famous “Shapur Cameo” from the collection of Bibliotheue Nationale is an important object and appears in various studies of Sasanian art, as well as of arms and armour. Studies focus on dating of the object, identification of the scene or identification of the depicted personages without asking the basic question whether the cameo is surely genuine. The conclusion of the article is that the arguments pointing to its nineteenth century origin prevail. It must be stated that the Sasanian elements are employed in very skilled manner both in terms of composition and majority of depicted details, however indecisive nature of the picture which does not clearly define the victor, unclear clothes or garb of the Persian figure, archaic sword of the Roman figure, his awkward position, and not tied tails of the horses, allow to believe that the person who designed the cameo was not fully aware of Sasanian realia. The Sasanian elements are gathered from the limited range of references. The separate argument is that cameos are not type of art favored in Sasanian Iran.

**Keywords:** Shapur Cameo, Sasanian Art, Formal Approach, Sasanian Forgeries, Sasanian Imitations.

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### Introduction

Sardonyx “Shapur Cameo” (fig. 1) from the collection of Bibliothéue Nationale (inventory number *camée.360*, reg. L3558) is one of the well-recognisable, iconic almost, objects of Sasanian art depicting the mounted warriors in combat. The cameo was acquired in 1893 and became important part of a “corpus” of Sasanian art (Ghirshman, 1962: 152; von Gall, 1990: 56-57; von Gall, 2008: 148-149; Gyselen, 1993: 198; Nicolle, 1996: 18; Nikitin, 1997: 109; Ritter, 2010: 51-52, Taf IX; Shayegan, 2020-21; Shayegan, 2022; Spier, 2022; Skupniewicz, 2007; Skupniewicz, 2015; Skupniewicz, 2020). In fact, it is unique in several ways which might result in raising doubts whether it is in fact genuine Sasanian work of art. I am not the first one to express such doubts. The inspiration for the article was personal communication with Judith Lerner who expressed her opinion that the cameo was modern made but at the time she did not provide

arguments to support the idea. Nevertheless, it is her initial impulse which sparked the interest in studying the piece. The questions regarding genuinity of the well-known objects are important to ask and such studies are important to carry, especially in light of number of items lacking archaeological context or clear provenance, which appear in recent publications but also in light of new material with clear origin. At the same time, it must be borne in mind that the imitations of the Sasanian objects have plagued the publications of art history of pre-Islamic Iran for decades already. This is emphasised by frequent appearance of the Sasanian-looking objects on the auctions with their wide circulation thanks to internet. Imitations of Sasanian silver were commonly manufactured in Iran until now, as the tourist souvenirs or objects of historically inspired modern art, without intention of being sold as actual historical artefacts. Thus, they should not



Fig. 1. Cameo Representing Capture of Valerian by Shāpur; Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Inv. No. *camée.360* (reg.L.3558); Photo after Ghirshman (1962), Pl. 195.

be labelled as “forgeries”, however, when confiscated by Iranian police from the gangs of criminals ready to traffic, without a remorse, own national heritage, such objects are intended to be marketed as Sasanian, these object become ones, the criminal intention makes the object a forgery (Abedini Iraqi, Mohajeri Nejad, Mortazei, 2020). Even without original craftsmen’s intentions. At the same time scholars rarely have the “moral comfort” to exclude the un-provenanced objects from their studies<sup>1</sup>, given the rarity of the well-attested material and scant corpus of existing Sasanian art. In lack of the said “moral comfort” the scholars have even more pronounced moral obligation to challenge the un-provenanced material from any available side, as accepting of the forgeries may result in inflated price of a particular object, which in itself, is a buyer’s problem, but scholarly, it adds false clues in reconstruction of the aesthetics of the period.

This is even more important in case of Sasanian art where even renown scholars of linguistic and historical backgrounds appear not to have developed the tools of formal or structural-formal analyse to include in their studies objects very unlikely to be stylistically related with any of the Sasanian art (For example: Shayegan, 2020-21; Invernizzi, Piacenti, 2017), studying superficial traits and rushing into semantic conclusions which seem to remain favoured result of any art study (Shayegan, 2020/21; Shayegan,

2022; Spier, 2022b)<sup>2</sup>. In his eagerness to combine the works of art with historical personages and events, Shayegan ignored impossibility of stylistic association of the cameos, which he examined, with any form of the Sasanian art (Shayegan, 2020/21). In fact, Shayegan and Spier, in their passion for Iranian/Sasanian content, are not bothered with trivialities like style, workmanship or actual fitting the objects within an idea of Iranian aesthetics of the Sasanian era.

The hunger for new or re-interpreted material goes as far as re-examining of the items rightly attributed as fakes by the museum curators (Invernizzi and Piacenti, 2017)<sup>3</sup>. Curators who decide to withdraw their objects from the exhibition and mark it as forged are acting against their own interest and, at first sight, undermine the standing of the institution which employs them, not to mention the value of the collection, however that is why such actions are well-considered and any attempt to ignore them must be found a kind of scholarly desperation. At the same time, it is perfectly well-understood that Invernizzi and Piacentini really wanted to prove survival of one of the ancient Mesopotamian motifs in Sasanian iconography, based on forgotten example of silver plate, but exactly such desires are exploited by the forgers who address their craft to educated people operating in certain set of associations. And the problem which must be never forgotten is that the forgers or imitators make their products to look like the originals, that is the name of the game and the objects which do not provide any similarity are neither imitations nor forgeries. The

<sup>1</sup> This phrase was used by Lauren Morris and Rachel Mairs in context of the forgeries and illicit objects related to Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic Asian artefacts, during the conference “Entangled Pasts and Presents. Temporal Interactions and Knowledge Production in the Study of Hellenistic Central Asia” held on 24-26 March 2022 in Freiburg.

<sup>2</sup> Bibliotheque Nationale - alleged Shapur 1970/392; alleged Ardashir - camee.359, reg. K.159; note

<sup>3</sup> British Museum - silver plate - inv. 133024, reg. number 1962,1210.1

function of scholars is to enable assessment on several perspectives and getting deeper than superficial similarities.

The researchers' desperation can be well-understood, but it may lead to ethically-doubtful studies which, in turn, may lead to a question of amount of responsibility or participation in destruction of nations cultural heritage and/or introducing the forged items into scholarly discourse. Modest number of the new Sasanian objects with well attested provenance is further blurred by premature identifications of the famous works of art without stylistic or iconographic research, as is the case of Rag-e Bibi rock relief (Grenet, 2006; Grenet, Lee, Martinez, Ory, 2007; Maksymiuk, 2012; Maksymiuk, Kubik, Skupniewicz, 2020). The objects claiming to be Sasanian found in recently published catalogues might provide vague information about aesthetics of the era and some technical aspects of image-making if proved genuine. We are, therefore, facing the situation where criminal gangs acquire their commodity regardless genuine Sasanian, historical imitation or modern forgery just to fulfil the demand of antiquary market but the scholars are deprived of tools to counter the supply. With the large private collections being financially powerful, and the museums being in desire of novelties in the exhibitions, the objects enter the catalogues without proper discussion, often based on authority of single person. This practice, however, as was shown in case of Rag-e Bibi relief (Maksymiuk, Kubik, Skupniewicz, 2020), is hardly limited to private collections and portable items. It is, thus, important to continue stylistic and iconographic/iconological studies of Sasanian art. Limitation to semantics without well-studied formal aesthetics, workmanship, functionality and principles of image-building seems the dead

end of modern reflexion on ancient Iranian art. On the other hand, stylistic studies would surely prove helpful in prevention of hastily made historical or semantic conclusions, making them more reliable. Not challenging the form of the objects of unknown provenance would lead, sooner or later, to include obvious forgeries into the research field and affect possible conclusion.

Such approach is a double edged sword. It allows detection of doubtful objects, even rejection of the forgeries, however it provides instructions to both sides of the conflict - the scholars, collectors and museum curators, as well as the forgers, who are, this way, better equipped to match the expectations. In fact, interesting problem, for the future elaboration, would be analysing of the stylistic features of the evident imitations, already in circulation, which might allow defining the workshops or the formal and semantic trends in imitation manufacture. It is almost certain that they would relate with the development of the academic interests developed in time.

The below article aims in re-assessment of the "Shapur cameo" from formal and iconographic perspectives. The question asked is not whether it belongs to third or fourth century, or whether it depicts Shapur I capturing Valerian or generic scene of a Sasanian warrior ceasing a Roman (von Gall, 1990: 56-57; von Gall, 2008: 148-149; Gyselen, 1993: 198; Nikitin, 1997: 109; Shayegan, 2020-21; Shayegan, 2022), but the article is to inquire whether the cameo fits within the frames of the Sasanian aesthetics at all, and only if so, could it be securely dated? The assumption here is that the aesthetic principles of the era are coherent and the images are built according to certain principles, using the artistic means developed in course of the training of the artisans.



Fig. 2. NRm7 Relief in Naqsh-e Rostam, Lower Scene. Photo by E. Shavarebi, after Syväne I, Maksymiuk K. (2018) *The Military History of the Third Century Iran*, Siedlce., p. 62.

Such approach is somehow deterministic and does not allow much space for individual creativity, but even the most inventive and revolutionary artists can operate within the frame of the visual sensitivity of their times and it is the time which allows greater or lesser dose of individualism. Common formulae both in composition and form of the surface elaboration do not allow to expect that Sasanian Iran was a place of particular taste for artistic freedom.

### The Cameo

The cameo is oval, 10,3 cm wide, 6,8 cm high and 0,9 cm thick. It is made of black and white sardonyx. The black layer constitutes the background of the scene and the undecorated back of the gem itself. Over the black surface a combat scene with surrounding oval frame and a line marking the ground level, was carved in white layer with the top layer which must have originally been rusty-reddish, in parts skilfully used by an engraver to achieve color effects on the surfaces.

The scene is almost symmetrical. It consists of two riders heading towards the center on the horses depicted in “flying gallop”, with legs outstretched to the sides. The line running below them emphasises the horizontal dimension of the composition, making the oval visu-

ally seeming longer. The vertical line of the composition runs exactly between the riders, the horizontal one goes slightly above the backs of the horses. The mounts are depicted disproportionately small. The rider on the right is slightly higher, his horse's head and outstretched front legs are shown above the head and legs of the rider on the left. The back hooves of both mounts touch the oval frame running around the cameo.

The rider on the left is shown with the torso directed frontally to the viewer, slightly bent towards the center of the pictorial field. The hips are hidden below the pteryges, however insufficient space reveals anatomical error even more clear due to disproportionately short legs enforced by the small size of the horse. His leg bent on the mount's trunk. His left arm is bent in the elbow and raised with the hand open, pointing the fingers up. His right arm is extended behind, slightly bent. In his right hand he is holding a Roman short sword. Rider is shown bare headed with the round head, depicted in three quarters, with wide nose and pronounced eye-lids. He is shown clean shaven, with short hair and. He is wearing muscle cuirass with pteryges on the shoulders and the hips. The pteryges on the hips and thighs consists of three layers of rectangular pieces while on the

shoulders - of two rows. Over the left shoulder he has a military cloak clasped over the right shoulder. The edge of the cloak floats behind him on the left. From behind the pandulamentum runs the baldric and a sash ties the cuirass just below the chest. An attempt was made to keep the cloak and sash in darker layer of the stone. The darker, reddish element by the rider's lower belly is part of the "horned saddle". The rider is wearing tight trousers and the boots reaching mid-calf, laced in front. His horse has the lock over the forehead. The remaining part of the mane is depicted running loose, skilfully employing the darker, reddish layer of the gem, creating the impression of darker hair. Similarly, the reins were cut higher in the same layer, which provides good contrast between body of the horse and the stripes. The rear stripe is decorated with a short ribbon hanging freely. The tail of the horse floats in waves horizontally. As the kit of the rider represents western style, he will be further referred as the Roman or roman rider.

The rider on the right is shown bent towards the center, with broad shoulders depicted frontally, right arm extended to the front, with the hand grasping the left, raised, wrist of the rider on the left. The left arm of the rider on the right rests with the hand clinched on the sword hilt. The rider's leg is bent only slightly, in contrast with the rider on the left. The foot of the rider on the right is stretched in position of the "ballerina foot". The rider is athletic, with muscular limbs and proportionally drawn body. He is wearing an apszak suspender over his chest, with the stripes cut in the reddish layer of the onyx, with fine contrasting effect, lost over his right shoulder where deeper cut must have been required or the reddish layer proved thinner. The rider has a hem of a garment or armour shown around

his neck and the cuffs of the sleeves over his wrists, nevertheless what appears the pronounced abdominal musculature and the navel are visible. Below the navel a belt with a central knot is shown. His head is also shown in three quarters, bearded face with fleshy lips, elegant moustache and almond-shaped eyes with prominent eye-lids. The curly beard terminates in a knot. The rider is wearing tight fitting, hemispherical helmet with smooth surface and a brim around the skull and pronounced cheek pieces (only the left one being visible). The cheek-piece has sharp protrusion covering part of the face under the cheeks bones. The top of the helmet is decorated by a fluted ball of the *korymbos*, smaller elements of the same shape are affixed to the rider's shoulders. From behind of the helmet and back float the ribbons in sharp, dense waves. His hips are covered by *pteryges*, however due to the sword strap covering it partially, the number of layers of the "feathers" cannot be determined. Most likely, there is one layer of the long straps and the layer of the shorter ones on top. The thigh of the man is covered by the wavy stripes, the rest, from knee down, is smooth until the ankle, where the strap with the clasps and ribbons falling down in wavy pattern are located. His sword is long, carved entirely in the reddish layer of the gem, with rectangular sheath chap, suspended on the strap passed through the scabbard slide widening at the edges and integrated in the surface of the sheath.

His horse has the bun on the top of the head but no other parts of the mane visible. Decorated grille is marked with the cheek strap and nose band but no visible shanks. From below the ear, the place where cheek strap terminates, hangs the first almond-shaped tassel cut in upper, reddish layer. From mount's mouth to the left hand, resting on the sword run reins,

attempt is seen to make them in the reddish layer but the effect is nearly invisible. Another tassel hangs above and in front of rider's knee, without the place of attachment visible. Third tassel hangs from behind the *pteryges* and is linked by the thin strap with the largest tassel, directed diagonally up over the rump of the horse. Horse's trunk is covered by a caparison. Its edges are visible over upper front and hind legs. The tail of the horse waves horizontally with carefully worked free floating hair.

The rider on the right will be further referred to as the Persian or Persian/Iranian rider.

The cameo was carved with considerable skill possible to observe in treatment of minute details and expert employment of natural layers of the stone, in order to produce quasi colorful effects. The shapes are carved softly and the only clumsiness is in design of the rider on the left, in Roman attire where proportions failed in both realistic and idealized, Sasanian sense.

### The Cameo and the Heroic Encounters in Sasanian Iconography

The composition of the scene engraved on cameo belongs to repertoire of formulae attested among *heroic encounters* in Sasanian art<sup>1</sup>, however the representations of the riders in single combat where both combatants are depicted with similar dynamism is a formula of limited usage. It seems that the Iranian, and to some extent to some extent, Sarmatian or Bosporan/Pantikapaionian (Von Gall, 1998; Goroncharovskii, 2002/2003; Gorončarovskij, 2003), aes-

thetics preferred clear, contrasting designation of the winner and defeated (Ciafaloni, Della Rocca de Candali, 2011). The majority of depictions clearly mark the vanquished as doomed and either absorbing the potent energy of the blow or being abducted by the dynamism of the hit, tumbling like a billiard ball. Winners are usually depicted in self-restrained postures, somehow effortlessly putting an end to their enemies. 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 and was labelled by Garrison as *heroic encounter*. Such title allows, rightfully, avoiding futile discussion about division between the actual combat scenes between humans, the scenes of fighting life-threatening beasts and the scenes of effortless, non-heroic hunt. The popular formulae of the *heroic encounters* which I have defined elsewhere do not include the dramatic effect of uncertainty, even in the rare, most balanced versions where the combatants are shown almost heraldically the victor is clearly marked. The examples of such formula of *confrontation of the riders* in related art (excluding the cameo under discussion) may be found on:

- The lower scene of Naqsh-e Rostam battle frieze NRm7 (Fig.2) (being a kind of compromise between symmetrical, heraldic order and necessity to point the defeated party) (Von Gall 1990: 31-32; Nikonorov 2020).
- Possibly on the frieze in Bandiyan, where only lower register of the scene was preserved (Rahbar 2008: 21, 39; Harper, 2006: 70, 100, fig. 37).
- The scenes of possible *amazonomachia* (Fig. 3) on bronze harness fragment acquired in Yemen (Antonini, 2005; Skupniewicz, 2021a).

<sup>1</sup> The term "heroic encounter" was introduced by Mark Garrison (Garrison, 2010) for Achaemenid art. It seems to be semantically more correct than "icons of violence" proposed by Skupniewicz, 2018, 2019, 2020

- The mural with a fragment of the battle of Ebenezer from the wall paintings in the synagogue in Dura Europos (NB1) (Von Gall 1991, 16, 50, 61 tab 17; Nicolle 1991, 45; Nicolle 1996, 14; 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<sup>1</sup>. The riders in the Dura Europos mural are depicted unarmoured, wielding short shafted weapons, held underarm. This is the only scene where the combat is shown without clearly designated victor.
- The formula was quite keenly adopted in Sogdian art.

As was convincingly demonstrated by Goldman and sustained by von Gall, the formula originates in Greek imagery and the above examples must be found the attempts to translate it to Iranian taste. The confrontation of two equally dynamic powers must have been visually attractive but as a compromise the vanquished combatant was marked by body and lance position. In the case of the “Shapur Cameo”, the rider on the right side is marked as the victor however in very subtle manner. He holds the hand of the Roman with his right while having his left hand resting firmly on the sword, grasping the hilt. His horse is higher than the opponent's. The scene should be, therefore included in the Iranian version of *confrontation of the riders* formula. It must be emphasized, that the formula did not gain wide popularity in Sasanian and Sassanian-related art. Actually, there is only one direct example of the formula on Naqsh-e Rostam battle frieze NRm7,

where the defeated personage is clearly marked by posture. Employment of the scheme in Dura Europos mural and on mythological scene from Yemen, might also refer to its suitability for “historical” or “ancient”, thus somehow exotic, subjects, without direct political meaning.

### Definitely Sasanian Elements

The horses are shown in canonical, Sasanian stylisation. Both mounts were shown in flying gallop, with both front and hind legs spread horizontally in posture which, although unrealistic, emphasizes their swiftness. They have bulky trunks, short muscular legs, wide short necks and small heads. The heads of the steeds clearly share features of the horse-heads shown on the rock reliefs with elaborated, eyes and eye-brows, slightly dropped mouth and accentuated jaw muscle and nostrils. Also, there are pronounced harness elements marked. Both horses have their tails untied, in sharp contrast with other Sasanian iconography, where the mounts' tails are either tied in a bow, or tightly covered, perhaps pleated first and then slipped into a smooth sleeve of thin leather or textile.

The Persian rider is shown in typical pose frequently represented in Sasanian art. His frontally shown shoulders, right hand extended to the front and the left hand resting on the sword hilt remind immediately of Shapur I's rock reliefs but also of relief in Salmas (Fig. 4) (Shavarebi, 2014; Maksymiuk, 2017). Extending the formula to depictions of the personages not necessarily holding a sheathed sword, one would include the figure of Ahura Mazda on the Ardashir I's relief in Naqsh-e Rostam and several representations on the silverware with the personages using the swords against life-threatening beasts (Skupniewicz, 2019; Skupniewicz, 2020). One might ar-

<sup>1</sup> Goldman, little believe that the mural from the synagogue „is derived from Hellenistic models”, 1980, 287



Fig. 3. Possible Amazonomachia Scenes from the Bronze Horse Harness Element from Yemen. Drawing by Eleonora Skupniewicz

gue that such treatment of the torso and the arms is one of the most common patterns in Sasanian figurative representations and it is related with the depictions of the archers. In the latter situation, the position is, obviously, enforced by the

action which does not contradict its conventional function in art.

The sword of the Persian rider definitely refers to the swords known from Sasanian iconography, it must be long-bladed, hidden in a scabbard with

rectangular chape and what appears flat, disc pommel (Trousdale, 1975; Masia, 2002; on adoption of the device in Roman Empire: Bishop, 2020: 44-49). As all the Sasanian swords in iconography pre-dating seventh century (and many later as well), this piece is suspended by a scabbard slide, however instead of narrow knob constituting the loop for the strap and affixed to the surface of the sheath, the scabbard slide seems cut out in form of two semi-circular openings.

The thigh of the Persian rider is covered with horizontal stripes but it is smooth below. It could be interpreted as laminated limb defence combined with a high-reaching, Greco-Roman styled greave, even if such greaves were not shown on the battle relief in Firozabad (Fig. 5), however exactly the same pattern appears on the legs of the victorious riders on relief NRm7 in Naqsh-e Rostam (Von Gall 1990: 31-32; Skupniewicz 2015; Nikonorov 2020). The weathered surface of other reliefs in Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 6) makes it difficult to assess if such solution was common or exceptional and whether it reflected actual type of armour with a metallic greave, or were the laminar layers protecting just thighs and lower leg was just in tight trousers. Especially that other combat reliefs in Naqsh-e Rostam seem to clearly represent the fully segmented arms covers. This, on the other hand would seem surprising as the Sasanians preferred being portrayed in loose leggings or wide, baggy trousers. Neither the Sasanian riding boots, in the early period, reached that high, as they were usually reaching slightly over the ankle, sometimes with the wide trousers tucked in them. Higher boots appeared in the late Sasanian period but even these did not reach high enough to make impression of the smooth surface covering the knee. Also, usually the shanks of

the Sasanian boots had decorated edges. Even with some difficulties to interpret the image and fit it to possible reality, the fact remains that the armoured rider on NRm7 and the Persian rider on "Shapur cameo" are depicted with the same, or highly analogical, leg covering.

Both riders are depicted sitting in the horned saddles<sup>1</sup>. This type of saddle is well attested in Sasanian art. The saddle horns, especially the front ones, overlapping the upper part of the riders' thighs (the rear ones are most often covered with the underside of the tunic), are visible on all Sassanian rock reliefs, depicting riders, except for Taq-e Bostan which is significantly later, and on numerous examples of toreutics: the Shemakha plate (Harper, Meyers, 1981: 48-50, 56-57, 209, pl. 8), the Krasnaya Polana plate (Harper, Meyers 1981: 50-56, 210, pl. 9), a plate from Tourucheva (Harper, Meyers, 1981: 238, pl. 37; Trever, Lukonin, 1987: 107, pl 8-9) and a plate from Mes Aynak (Mleziva, 2016: 98, 102-103; Skupniewicz, 2020). The front horns of the saddles also appear on the platform from the Al-Sabah collection, which might not be fully reliable, as it does not come from documented source and contains numerous stylistic and compositional anomalies (Skupniewicz, 2019). The Persian rider's horse is covered by the caparison just as attested by the Firozabad and Naqsh-e Rostam combat reliefs. Caparisoned horses were an old tradition reaching Achaemenid era but originating in neo-Assyrian tradition (Stepanova 2012, Skupniewicz, 2014). They might be of protective value and determined the construction of some of the Sasanian bardings. The tassel on the breast of the

<sup>1</sup> On the horned saddles in Iranian/West Asiatic context, see: Herrman, 1989; Nikonorov, 2002; Nikonorov, 2005; Nikonorov, Arzhantseva, 2012; Stepanova, 2016; Stepanova 2017

mount is shown unsupported, it seems to hang directly from the caparison. Similarly such position of the tassel is found on NRm 5, but not on other Sasanian art pieces showing the caparisoned horses<sup>1</sup>.

The very act of grasping an opponent appears in Sasanian, or Sassanian-related toreutics. That includes grasping the beast being transfixed with the sword as is evidenced by: Kushano-Sasanian plate from private, Japanese collection (Tanabe, 2001; Skupniewicz, 2020), Klimova plate from the Hermitage with a hero killing a leopard with a sword (Harper, Meyers, 1981: 74-76, 225, Pl. 24; Trever, Lukonin, 1987: 107-18; Skupniewicz, 2020), side decoration of the vase from Hermitage S-60 (Trever, Lukonin 1987: 115-116, Pl. 86; Skupniewicz, 2020), central decoration on the plate from the Arthur Sackler Gallery (Gunter, Jett 1992: 177-179; Skupniewicz, 2020), and often found on depictions on sigillography (Ritter 2010: 90-98, Taf. X; Skupniewicz, 2009: 52-53; Skupniewicz, 2020). The same pictorial model was applied to the scenes of the hero holding a feline cub while killing its infuriated parents, as seen on the plates with tigers combat from British Museum (124092) and Hermitage (Harper, Meyers 1981: 76-77, 226, Pl. 25.), Bowl identified as Hephtalite from British Museum, OA 1963-12-10.1 (Harper, Meyers, 1981: 130-131; Skupniewicz, 2009: 58-59; Skupniewicz, 2020) and on recently excavated plate from Mes Aynak (Mleziva 2016; Skupniewicz, 2020). The connection between this model and Achaemenid iconography, stemmed from Assyrian sources, was noticed earlier (Skupniewicz 2020). However, grasping of the raised hands of the “supplicants” standing on foot is also a motif in several Sasanian rock reliefs. Thus, the grasping was an important mo-

tif both as “heroic encounter” and in triumphal context.

The ribbons floating behind the Persian rider and the *apezak* he is wearing on his chest are almost obligatory elements of the Sasanian regalia. The ribbons usually were attached as diadem to the headgear, but larger were also attached to the king's back, which is illustrated on the discussed cameo, just like three *korymboi* one over the head and two smaller ones, over the shoulders. Also, mount has the mane formed into a bun over forehead, as the horses of Sasanian kings in other depictions, and the almond-shaped tassels are attached to the horse harness. Although his helmet is difficult to associate directly with other Sasanian work of art, its cheek-piece seems very similar to the defeated personage on NRm 3. In fact, except for the decorations and nišan on the bowl of the helmet on the rock relief and replacement of the plume with a *korymbos*, these are very analogical headgears.

The position of the Roman rider with the right hand moved backwards and sword held upwards reminds some pieces of the Sasanian toreutics: plate from Chilek (Harper, Meyers, 1981: 83-85, 231, Pl. 30; Maršak, Kikiris, 1969; Skupniewicz, 2020), plate from Fabricius collection (Harper, Meyers, 1981: 77-79, 227, Pl. 26; Harper, 1978: 58-59; Skupniewicz, 2020), and “Khorasan” style plate quoted by Marshak (Maršak, 2017: 698, Drawing, 251; Skupniewicz, 2020). It can be also found on Sogdian murals (Skupniewicz, 2020). The cameo under discussion would be the earliest example of such model which does not seem related to any functional movement in the swordsmanship (Skupniewicz, 2020), however might originate from an attempt to show the actual fighting stance with inadequate skill in depicting spacial relations.

<sup>1</sup> On similar devices decorating rumps of the horses in Far East, see: Kidder, 1990



Fig. 4. Relief in Salmas. photo by E. Shavarebi, after Maksymiuk (2017), p. 99.

### What Does Not Seem To Work?

Having the elements which set the cameo in Sasanian imagery defined, it is time to gather the features which move the object away from Iranian aesthetics of the time. Leaving aside the unusual art form which, in Sasanian art, is cameo, or rather suspicious collection to which it belongs. Among four cameos from Bibliotheque Nationale which are attributed as Sasanian, three are clearly nineteenth century productions and definitely cannot come from Late Antique Iran. Although very recently Shayegan dedicated an article to one of them, somehow confirming positive opinion on the origin of entire group, he did not offer any form of stylistic analyse or arguments supporting this position, taking the genuinity for granted. Naturally, comfortable excuse for the clearly visible stylistic differences would be employment of the Roman craftsman to make them. The problem is, however, that the style, even though

classical, still imitates some Sasanian features like stylisation of the dress folds (and in case of “Shapur cameo”, the above listed details), so the question would arise, why the Roman craftsman, abducted to make items in foreign style, imitates the style he was brought to avoid? If the Roman stone-workers were employed to create Shapur I’s triumphal reliefs, their function was limited to actual stone-working and there does not seem to exist significant Western influence on the image-making, with all the formulae being carefully studied to fit in the clearly Iranian visual language and greco-roman influence is clearly subdued to the new royal expression. Shayegan’s comparison with the Kushano-Sasanian coins is equally unjustified, as it ignores body position of the main personage of the “cameo with the bull”. The man is not simply standing in front of the bull, but has left arm stretched horizontally and the right lowered diagonally, the

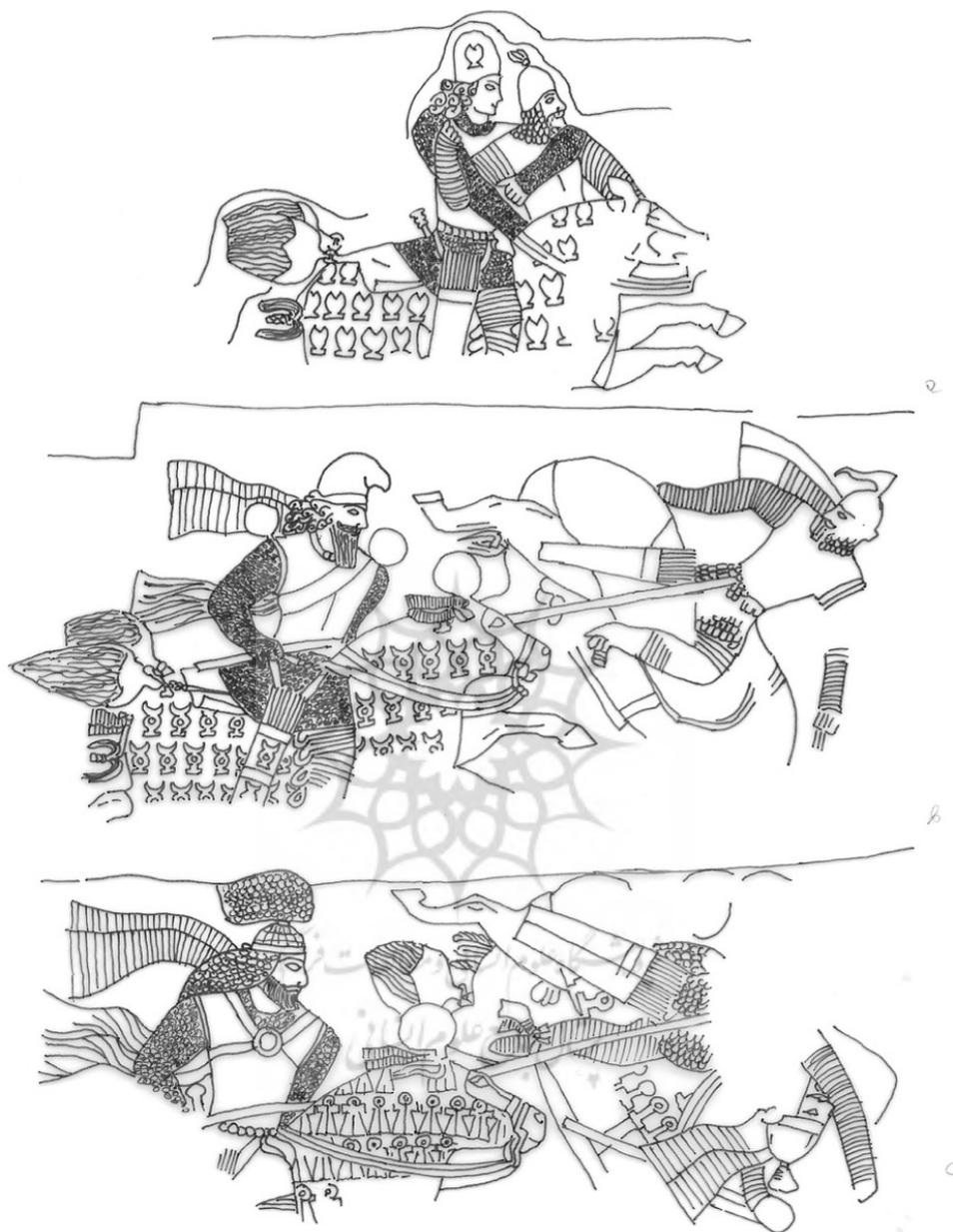


Fig. 5. Firozabad Relief. Drawing Patryk Skupniewicz.

way it was mentioned above in regard of the royal heroes killing the beasts with the swords. It is impossible to state what scene originally the stone-engraver wanted to depict (if there was in fact the full scene at any time) but it clearly was

more dynamic and involved some action. The knowledge of Sasanian aesthetics in 1890s was lower than it is today, to the items were accepted as genuinely ancient and for over a century, they shaped modern views on Sasanian art.

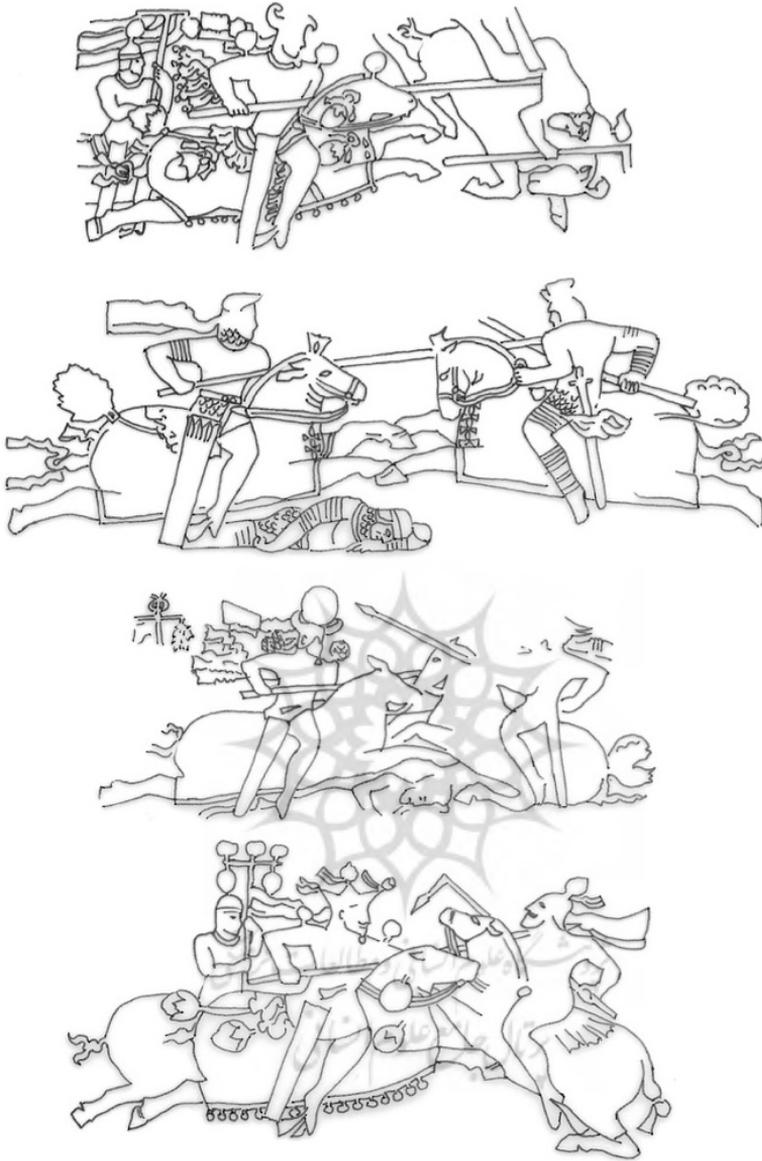


Fig. 6. Naqsh-e Rostam Battle Friezes. Drawing Patryk Skupniewicz.

What attracts attention in composition of the “Shapur cameo” when compared with other combat scenes, and generally, *heroic encounters* in Sasanian art is that the layout is reversed. Generally, in vast majority of the scenes including violence, and all scenes de-

picting fighting between humans, the winner and his attack are directed to the right, regardless from the direction of the horse, as in representations of men fighting beasts the heroes perform the attack in the direction opposite with the gallop of the mount, which when bow is used,

take form of the “Parthian shot”. In scenes of combat between humans this never happens. The attack has very defined direction and is never visually weakened or compromised by the confusing horse movement. The victory needs to be complete and there can be no suggestion made that the kill was achieved when running away. Thus, in line with the tradition reaching at least Achaemenid times, the victor moves from left to right. The only two exceptions from this principle are plates from Shemakhta and Krasnaya Polana (Fig. 7), which may be explained by technicalities of the manufacturing process when the cartouche was applied in mirror view, or local variations of the formula. It needs to be pointed that in both these exceptional cases the royal hero attacks in the direction opposite to the direction of the gallop, thus they represent “reversed escape” and “reversed double escape” models (Skupniewicz 2020). Therefore, these two exceptions cannot explain mirror view of direct “confrontation” formula and cannot provide an excuse for employment of the reversed composition in the scene of combat between the humans. Similarly, leaving aside wrong convex-concave situation, the reversal cannot be excused by “sigillographic” confusion of the gem cutter if the “original” was carved or to be stamped, as the cameo is far to big to serve as a stamp and it is made, with all effort invested, to be observed in original.

Sasanian art extremely rarely allows heads being shown in three-quarters. The iconography proves that preferred way was showing left profile or full frontal view. Exceptionally right profiles appear, as was illustrated above. Three quarters projection is equally rare. It might appear in toreutics when the heads are shown in volume, neverthe-

less such view is unknown in scenes of combat between the humans. It might be used in the relief from Salmas (Fig. 4) (Shavarebi, 2014; Maksymiuk, 2017), but rather crude technique might suggest an attempt of both three quarters and full frontal. The three-quarters heads appear quite frequently on the seals of the nomadic rulers of Kushanshahr, which are definitely later than any possible dating of the discussed cameo and are not directly related with the Sasanian patterns (Begmatov, 2020; Gyselen, 1993; Gyselen, 1997; Gyselen, 2007; Harper, 1973; Lerner 1976, Lerner, 2010; Lerner, Sims-Wiliams, 2011).

Another element which misses comparison in ancient Iranian art is depiction of the winner in helmet and the loser bear headed. Sasanian and earlier Iranian formulae allow depicting victorious rider crowned, in diadem or bare headed while it is the vanquished one who wears the helmet (Skupniewicz, Lichota, 2017; Skupniewicz, 2018). The bare headed victor can be observed on the Firozabad frieze (Fig. 5), the figure of Ardashir (von Gall, 1990; Harper, 2006; Canepa 2012; Grabowski 2009; Grabowski 2014; Nikonorov 2020), the battle relief at Tang-e Sarvak (Fig. 8) (Vandenberghe, Schipmann, 1985; Kawami, 1987; Kawami, 2013; von Gall 1990; Mathiesen, 1992; Skupniewicz, 2021), the cup from Kosika (von Gall, 1997; Brzezinski, Mielczarek, 2002; Harper, 2006: 41), other battle reliefs show the kings in crowns, not helmets. This may be referred with Xenophont's account of battle of Cunaxa (Cyr. 1.8.6), where Cyrus the Younger, the throne pretender, had to ride into battle bare-headed to facilitate his immediate recognition which became the reason of his doom. Naturally, relation between a crown and a helmet could be argued,

however in iconography, the primary function of crown is always making clear display of power, not suggesting any protective value (Skupniewicz, Lichota, 2017; Skupniewicz, 2018). According to visual principles which can be observed in combat scenes in Iranian art, the winner should wear a crown or remain bare headed and the loser should wear helmet. The examples from Pantikapaion, which reveal strong Iranian influence, allow depicting both the victor and the defeated in helmets.

It is very difficult, if possible, at all, to determine what is the Persian rider on the cameo wearing. On the one hand his shoulders and arms are covered by the sleeves, on the other hand, his abdominal musculature and navel seem visible. From below the belt hang the straps of *pteryges*, suggesting that the personage would wear *lorica musculata*. The suggestion that it is the type of armour is emphasized by the partly laminated leg cover and helmet worn on head. This would associate the depiction with Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 6) reliefs where the anatomical cuirasses seem to be depicted and Kushano-Sasanian coinage where this armour type is clearly shown (Jäger, 2006; Skupniewicz, 2007; Skupniewicz 2015a; Skupniewicz 2015b; Skupniewicz 2021; Pugachenkova 1966). In both instances the cuirasses are supplemented by the laminated sleeves which are also present on Firozabad (Fig. 5) and Tang-e Sarvak (Fig. 8) reliefs as well as on the Dura Europos graffiti. This type of armament was used since Hellenistic times and the *lorica musculata* without laminated sleeves appears in Achaemenid-Anatolian iconography, making that type of breastplate the reference to the ages-old tradition (Allan 1986; Head 1992; Bittner 1985; Sekunda 1992; Jäger 2006). Such interpretation poses one main problem

- there is no distinction between the cuirass and the sleeves, while it is clearly marked on the Roman rider, on the cameo, wearing the same type of armour. The wide opened hem around the neck also suggests a tunic rather than the armour ridge. It was suggested that there could be a kind of long-sleeved vest integrated with *apezak* (Skupniewicz, 2007) but such a solution is unknown in Sasanian costume. It cannot be the coat the coat clasped at the breast which might look like *apezak* as there are only ribbons floating behind the personage and there is no trace of such differentiation on the surface of the cameo. So, the Persian seems to wear a tunic of thin material, tight enough to allow impressive musculature but terminating at the bottom with the *pteryges*. What is even stranger, the folds of the tunic are visible behind the rider, protruding from below the straps of the *pteryges*. Attempting to follow the realism of the depiction, the straps would have to be worn over the tunic or there were several layers of tunic, coat and armour among which the engraver got lost and stopped controlling what is under and what is above. This way the straps might not be actual *pteryges* but the straps hanging out of the belts which came to fashion in the late Sasanian period, possibly under Turkic influence and are attested on the hunting reliefs on the side walls of the great grotto at Tāq-e Bostān. These, however, have no protective function, so could not constitute an armour element and did not exist in first two centuries of Sasanian reign.

*Pteryges* on the hips is not otherwise attested for the Sasanian armoured horsemen. Usually, the groin and upper thighs area is covered by a mail or scale skirt, securing the places where the leggings are suspended. Even on the sculpture on the capital from Bisotun,

exhibited in Tāq-e Bostān, where there is a shoulder *pteryges* visible, the groin area and upper thighs are covered by mail (Compareti 2006; Compareti 2014; Compareti 2018; Compareti, 2019). Neither Kushano-Sasanian coins, nor battle reliefs confirm employment of *pteryges* by the riders. The closest depictions of armoured personages actually wearing *pteryges* in combination with Iranian dress come from Palmyra and Hatra, they pre-date the Sasanians and seem to belong to the Semitic borderland culture (Downey, 2007). Also, they do not show the anatomical cuirasses but either lamellar or segmented types.

It seems that the cameo engraver did not fully realised in what garb he was depicting the Iranian rider. Naturally, realism was not the goal of Sasanian art, but dress was important semantic element and it is unlikely that it was mixed up. Combination of tunic with *pteryges*, leg armour and helmet does not make any sense. Even if the actual armour was to be worn under the tunic, the *pteryges* would constitute the inner layer and would not cover the tunic.

The Roman rider holds the *gladius* type of sword which was not used by the Roman cavalry at the time of the Sasanians (Bishop, Coulston, 2006: 154-155; Bishop, 2016: 74-75; Bishop, 2020). It must be reminded here that on the triumphal reliefs of Shapur I, the Roman tributaries carry the swords of the actual types so the Sasanian artists were fully aware of the armament of their western adversaries. It is true that Vegetius complained (Veg. II.15-16), in fourth century, about prevalence of the long slashing *spathae* over shorter swords and prescribed re-application of *semi-spathae* but that only confirms that the classical Roman infantry sword was long abandoned and was associated with the long gone “glo-

ry days” of the Roman Empire (Bishop, Coulston, 2006: 154-155; Bishop, 2016: 74-75; Bishop, 2020). It should be also noted that the glades sword was abandoned in cavalry use much earlier.

The tails of both horses are not tied. As long as this would fit the image of the Roman, it is surprising at the image of the Persian. The Sasanian horses have the tails either covered with a smooth “sleeve” or tied in elaborated bow (Herрман, 1989; Ilyasov, 2003).

The position of the Roman rider is unparalleled among the defeated personages from known Sasanian iconography. The analogies from late and post-Sasanian silverware, with the winner of the clash holding his sword with tip up (Skupniewicz, 2019; Skupniewicz, 2020), however the Roman on the discussed cameo is actually being captured and should be understood as the defeated side. Still, holding his sword, he remains posing danger to his Persian adversary, probably greater danger than he is under. The principle of clear recognition of the winner and loser is not preserved here. Naturally, the Persian rider is slightly bigger, his horse is a bit higher but his victory is not definite. The seat of the Roman is not matching any of the Sasanian riders in combat. This might be explained by alleged foreign status of the personage, but there is absolutely no comparable material to evidence that the difference in seat (even if existed) would be transmitted in art. Probably that is also a reason of clumsy proportions in his rendering.

Another doubt may rise from detailed depiction of the Roman in combat. Unlike the Achaemenids who took all the measures to differentiate in combat the Persians from the Scythians/Saka, Greeks or Anatolian peoples (Benzel, 1996; Bernard, Inagaki, 2000; Boardman, 1971/2002; Boardman, 1976; Briant, 2020;



Fig. 7. Shemakha and Krasnaya Polana Silver Plates. Drawing Patryk Skupniewicz.

Casabone, Gabrielli, 2006; Casabone, Gabrielli, 2007; Ma, 2008; Moorey, 1985; Moorey, 1998; Šmotlakova, 2014; Tuplin, 2020), the differences in armament between the combatants in Sasanian monumental art are rather nuanced and the victors and the vanquished wear the same or similar armour type (with minor

differences in scale rather than mail skirt, helmets instead of crowns and/or helmet types), use the same type of weapon and employ similar combat technique. The exception is the mural from Dura Europos with Persian mounted lancers defeating significantly different opponents, however this latter piece does not belong

to monumental art and definitely does not include royal personage. It is possible that the kings wanted to be represented while defeating equal, or next-to-equal opponents. Depicting the opponent in kit significantly different, might be understood that he was not worthy royal effort and thus the combat was not a valid challenge. That is why the combat reliefs are so difficult to interpret, especially with the paradigm of assumed political events deserving artistic portrayal. It is different in the triumphal reliefs where ethnic variety of the subdued peoples only illustrates royal power. In triumphal reliefs, the king is never challenged.

### Conclusion

The methodological function of the arguments listed above is a structural dissection of the artwork with an aim to define the image-making process, important "organs" and features which can allow determination of the actual "species" or specimen's identity. The semantic functions were left aside, as these are the first ones and the easiest to falsify. The forgers are fully aware of the expectations of the researchers. Actually they only create supply where the demand already exists, and, as the efficient manufacturers, they know their customer. That is why formal analyse must reach into structural and functional layouts, knowledge of which should work in similar manner as palaeontologists work, who recognises the size, the age and the species based on a single bone or the bone fragment. This way, the paleontologist can reject the incorrectly reconstructed skeleton, made of the bones found in the same area and thus believed to belong to the same animal. Incorrectly assembled bones will lead to incorrect reconstruction which can be recognized through the knowledge of the principles govern-

ing the functioning of the living organisms. Naturally this metaphor cannot serve as comprehensive explanation of functioning of formal analyse, nevertheless, it illustrates general idea. Naturally, human activity includes more variables, of different nature, then phenomena of nature. Nevertheless, I wanted to outline the methodological correlation.

When considering the above listed arguments one needs to assess validity of each of them.

Composition with the *confrontation of the riders* is infrequent in Sasanian art, but it is sufficient to know one site - Naqš-e Rostam to have it, together with the horses "flying gallop position", sword shape of the Persian rider, his leg covering, the horned saddles, the caparison and the elements of the helmet. Single visit to Bishapur would provide the model of a rider extending his right hand to grasp the hand of the tributary while holding his left on the sword-hilt. They can be found in the other media but very limited and basic knowledge, of single place is sufficient to have them copied. The fact that unique features found in Naqš-e Rostam, like smooth shin in tight, almost anatomical depiction, which might depict a greave, reflect a short-lived, or otherwise restricted fashion in Sasanian dress, but might, as well, represent a stylistic preference in the sculpture itself.

What is also important, even the details generally correct, like employment of the scabbard slide, appear to have faults like the exact shape of the device which widens at the ends and does not seem to have marked edges.

The arguments against Sasanian origin of the cameo are more difficult to reject. One might argue that the side dynamics, the heads section or clarity in picturing the victor, are of lesser impor-

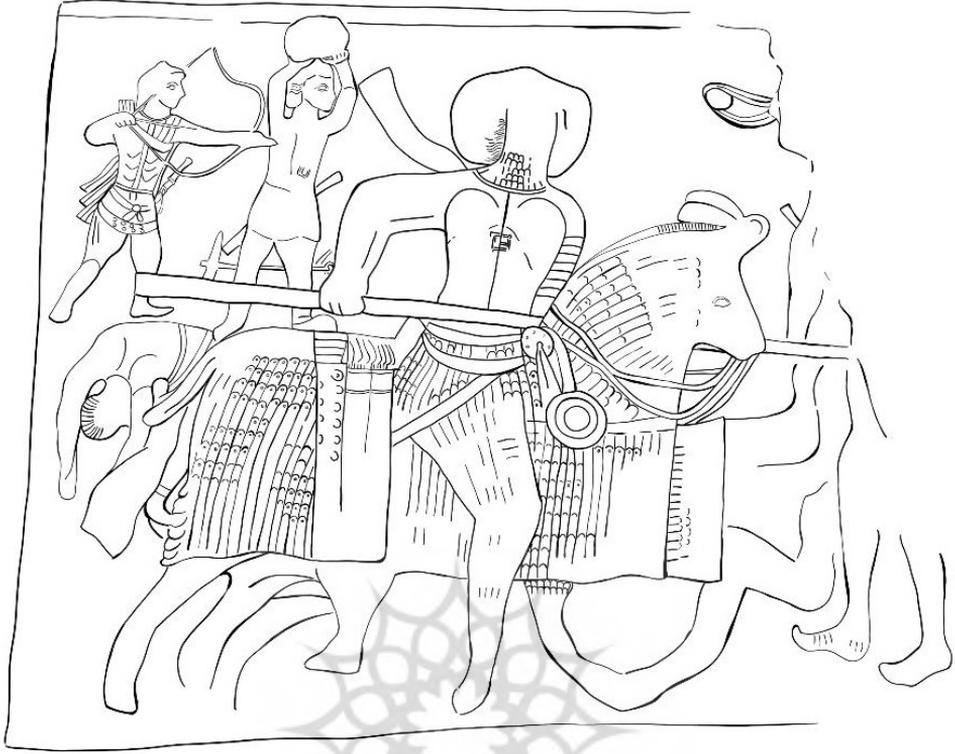


Fig. 8. Tange Sarvak Battle Frieze. Drawing by Eleonora Skupniewicz.

tance as they could result from Roman origin of the craftsman, who might be employed to perform the object in the style he or she mastered. But then, why would this person follow some Sasanian pictorial traditions while ignoring the others? Why would the artisan depict the outdated Roman sword if that was a weapon of his own motherland? How could the person provide such confused picture of the robes of the Sasanian rider? Would he, or she, not understand functioning of the armour? How would the artisan miss the tied tails of the Persian horses? It looks like the Persian features are combined with the western without the pattern and the Persian, in fact means Naqš-e Rostam and Bishapur.

It is definitely true that the discussed cameo contains the greatest amount of

the Sasanian stylistic and iconographic features of all "Sasanian" cameos from the collection Bibliotheque Nationale but inconsistently assembled and blended with the foreign features. In the light of above the cameo is unlikely to originate from Sasanian era. Nevertheless, it is of extraordinary artistic quality and should be rather attributed as an example of 19th century gem-cutting, illustrating the skill in producing quite convincing imitation of Sasanian aesthetics, based on limited sources. Actually this requires amazing attention to detail and great sense of observation. Having that in mind, the cameo remains important source on Sasanian aesthetics as it provides information on its perception and modern artisan's observation of the formal features.

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