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Jacques DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN

ART AND RELIGION UNDER THE SASANIANS

The Sixth Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology, Oxford 1972, gave me an opportunity to correct and supplement the paper *Art et Religion sous les Sassanides* I had read two years before to the Accademia dei Lincei and which appeared in 1971. My second incursion into this field — where angels fear to tread — is humbly offered to Jean de Menasce.

I owe my first acquaintance with the problem to articles and books by Phyllis Ackerman, Lars-Invar Ringbom, Dorothy Shepherd, Vladimir Lukonin, Richard Ettinghausen and others, but have never felt at ease with their idea that some pieces of Sasanian silver reflect Iranian fertility cults of more or less erotic character. In my Rome paper I stressed the unlikelihood of such rituals at the Sasanian court. In one case I tried, admittedly without much conviction, to steer a middle course between this and the secular interpretation, by appealing to myth or legend, as distinct from actual practice. This case we shall presently reexamine, and I shall pursue the same course in a reappraisal of certain other pieces, with hope of better success thanks to the help of several articles, either published in the meantime or belatedly brought to my attention, by André Alföldi, Oleg Grabar, A.D.H. Bivar, Hubertus von Gall, and of studies, as yet unpublished, by Guitty Azarpay and Martha L. Carter.

My exposition will be in three stages of increasing dimensions and will proceed from the clear to the less clear.

Let me start with an example of purely artistic borrowing. The silver bowl from Kustani, in the Hermitage, is a Greek-inspired work representing the legend of Syleus without any Iranian reinterpretation [1]. A category of representations on which agreement will be equally easy is that portraying flying figures. A first variety shows children floating in mid-air. This is a clear instance, well studied by Phyllis Ackerman, of artistic borrowing from the Graeco-roman world, for no Iranian source is likely to have adorned Šāhpuhr's triumph with the motif of a child carrying a diadem through the air for the king [2]. Similar "flying children"

[1] "Art et Religion sous les Sassanides", pl. VII, fig. 3.

[2] L. Vanden Berghe, *Archéologie de l'Iran ancien*, 1959, pl. 77 b.

are seen on several silver plates in connection with Dionysos or with the moon-chariot [3].

The adult equivalent of the flying child, the winged Victory, appears at Taq-e Bostan [4] : for her Iranian counterpart Herzfeld and Camilla Trever suggested Haurvatāt and Ameretāt. This raises the very question we are examining. Although a survival of actual rites or cults is in this case obviously out of the question — since nobody, child or woman, ever flew in the air — it is by no means impossible that the artistic borrowing (whether for political motives or not) [5] reflected some conceptual borrowing or assimilation. That the *putti* or *erotes* were indeed adopted as personifications of the *x^{v}arənah* seems proved by parallels, human or animal, on the Panjikent frescoes, as appears from Guitty Azarpay's forthcoming study, an extract of which was submitted to the Oxford congress [6]. The reinterpretation could entail some adaptation to the Iranian context. This is probably why at Vēh-Šāhpuhr, in a decoration whose dionysiac character is established by masks, a winged genius or angel wears the typical "Phrygian" cap [7]. Although this kind of headgear was far from unknown to the Greeks, it seems probable that the Graeco-roman artist of the otherwise purely Graeco-roman mosaics has here made a concession to the beliefs of his Iranian patron.

Winged horses appear on the Metropolitan plate, investigated by Prudence Harper [8], showing the Dioscuri (alias Castor and Pollux : an astral myth), therefore placing the piece in the same category as those with the lunar chariot mentioned before. The same two horses are to be seen again on a plate published by Oleg Grabar [9], who writes that in Iranian texts they symbolize goodness — I would prefer "heavenly bliss". Other myths, known or unknown [10], may be illustrated on other objects. The "Gōpatšāh"-seals [11] show an Iranian reinterpretation of the Assyrian winged bull.

[3] V. Lukonin, *Iran II*, 1967, fig. 208.

[4] H. von Gall, "Entwicklung des Thrones in Iran", *AMI*, 1971, Taf. 37, 1; L. Vanden Berghe, *Archéologie de l'Iran ancien*, 1959, pl. 128 a and c.

[5] *Infra*, p. 107 sq.

[6] G. Azarpay, "Some iconographic formulae in Sogdian painting", *Summaries of papers, Sixth Congress of Iranian art and archaeology, Oxford 1972* (here after *Summaries*), p. 6.

[7] H. von Gall, "Die Mosaiken von Bishapur", AMI 1971, Taf. 31, 3.

[8] cf. "Art et Religion...", pl. VI, fig. 1.

[9] *Sasanian Silver, Late Antique and Early Medieval Arts of Luxury from Iran*, University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1967, fig. 24.

[10] Cf. O. Grabar, *Ibidem*, p. 66.

[11] "Art et Religion...", pl. XI, fig. 1 and 3.

What are we to make of the abduction of a naked woman by an eagle? [12] Anahita was not a naked goddess. The Avesta described her girdle, shoes and coat, besides her crown, ear-rings and other jewels. This is reflected in the two most likely representations we have of her : at Taq-e Bostan and at Naqš-e Rostam [14]. We do not known how she looked in the first statues of her made by order of Artaxerxes II. But we may surmise that such a statue was represented on the Parthian terracotta [15] already so interpreted by Ringbom and others. A similar case of a statue in an *aedicula* is found, for instance, in a Roman relief in the Treves Museum showing the goddess of Peace. We shall deal later on with a fourth instance of a fully garbed Anahita (there are at least two more).

In contrast with all these, what are we to make of the naked or *déshabillé* women on Sasanian silver? A fragment of a plate in the Hermitage is given by Lukonin [16] as an Anahita. Is it not simply a girl in the nude, dancing with a scarf? This secular interpretation, advanced by Herzfeld and adopted by Daniel Schlumberger, cannot be indiscriminately applied since, as Ettinghausen writes, "certain attributes such as foxes, felines, monkeys and children seem to exclude a secular meaning" [17].

On the other hand, Oleg Grabar, in a penetrating study on the problems of interpretation raised by Sasanian silver (cf. supra, n. 9), writes as follows : "Almost all the attributes found with the women on silver objects can be given a liturgical or ceremonial significance... Yet women as such — and especially women with erotic connotations — hardly ever appear in the accounts of Iranian religious beliefs of Sasanian times..."

In my Rome paper I compared the Hermitage plate referred to above (cf. n. 12) with the female version of the Etana myth — a version apparently represented on the Hasanlu vase also. I made a further alternative suggestion, that there may be a connection between this plate and the story of the boatman Paurva who, according to the Avesta, was changed into a bird and rescued by Anahita. But this connection is of course too vague to be conclusive. And the woman abducted by an eagle on the Hasanlu vase is fully garbed and the time-gap is enormous. For the highly stylized character of the Hermitage plate probably indicates a late, even post-Sasanian date. It has been studied by Alföldi in one of

[12] *Ibidem*, pl. V, fig. 1.
[13] L. Vanden Berghe, *Archéologie...*, 1959, pl. 128 a.
[14] *Ibidem*, pl. 30 c.
[15] *A Survey of Persian Art*, IV, pl. 134 B.
[16] *Iran II*, fig. 172.
[17] R. Ettinghausen, "A Persian Treasure". *Arts in Virginia*, 8 (1967-68), p. 41.

the two articles he published [19] on the Nagyszentmiklós treasure. Not only has he compared the plate with two very similar pieces in the said treasure, but he has also set them against a vast background of objects and legends in Muslim and Central Asian art, all of them going back to the Indian story of Garuḍa abducting the snake-woman Naga. He has also pointed out that the interpretation put forward by Mavrodinov [19] of the scene as a *descensus* of Anahita should have been *a priori* excluded, owing to the presence of the two little personages below who, armed with bow and mace, have obviously been trying to prevent the abduction, just as in the Veda the eagle who seized Soma had to fight enemies or in Ugrian epic poems in Western Siberia, an archer tried to prevent Karesh, the giant bird, from abducting the hero.

If, then, the naked woman on the Sasanian plate (and on one of the Nagyszentmiklós pieces) is not Anahita, who is she? A Gandhara sculpture in the Delhi Museum representing the abduction of the Naga-woman shows her fully dressed. The clue to our Sasanian plate has been provided by A.D.H. Bivar's publication [20] of a seal of Hellenistic style in an unknown Punjab collection, as he was kind enough to point out to me by letter. Here is his description of the seal : "A girl, draped below the waist, is carried through the air by a flying eagle, whose tail, spread fanwise, is visible behind her legs. Its right talon holds her thigh. Her head is slightly tilted back, and her left arm passes downwards, and seems to extend around the bird's beak. A feature important for the interpretation", Bivar goes on, "is the rope-like object which passes up from behind the girl's shoulders, behind the eagle's neck, and is most naturally understood as the girdle of the girl's dress, ending perhaps in a tassel".

Bivar refers to Alfred Foucher's interpretation of the eagle as Garuḍa. Foucher suggests the neck and head of a cobra which the Nagas were thought to have behind their shoulders could explain the uncertain object which in the Gandhara renderings (as on our gem) passes upwards from the girl's neck to the beak of the eagle. The popularity of the theme in Gandharan art may well be explained by its having been interpreted there in the manner suggested by Foucher. Yet, Bivar adds, the appearance of our gem tends to confirm what can be inferred from its style, that the rendering derived from an important Hellenistic work traces of which have been seen elsewhere. He writes : "Since the style of engraving is purely Hellenistic without any indication of Indian workmanship, it is

[18] *Cahiers archéologiques*, 1952, p. 43 sq.

[19] *Archaeologica Hungarica*, 1943, pp. 94 sq. and 225 sq.

[20] In the *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, 1961, pp. 316 sq. Here fig. 1.

natural to interpret the scene in terms of Greek legend, and this presents no difficulty. A parallel myth to that of Ganymede existed concerning the abduction of the nymph Aegina by Zeus himself in the form of an eagle. This was a favourite subject with gem engravers".

For our Iranian plate I cannot think of any *interpretatio iranica*, since Anahita, for the reasons mentioned earlier on, is out of the question. The interpretation of the painting in the Capella Palatina, similar to our Sasanian plate, as an apotheosis of the king, does not of course apply to Anahita. However, it will be sufficient, for the moment at least, to have traced the motif back to its Greek origin, and to have pronounced the word nymph, a key-word, I think.

The following particulars are not inconsistent with our interpretation of the woman as a nymph : flowers, fruit, children, animals. For these were frequent attributes of nymphs [21]. Nymphs were also associated with water, dance and music. I think this might give the clue to the problem of many so-called Anahitas. Even if we could take one woman as representing the goddess, what are we to make of several women appearing on the same vase, unless we accept Dorothy Shepherd's interpretation of them as several aspects of this deity, an interpretation not borne out be any parallel or any text, and already refuted by Ettinghausen [22]? Until Bivar's publication the only explanation appeared to be either that they represented the priestesses of Anahita or the king's harem or servant-girls in his bath.

The notion that we have to do with nymphs will account for the presence of flowers, fruit, water, animals, children, music and dance. But this is not all. A particular motif, the grapes and vine-scrolls, suggests another connection and has in fact been interpreted by Ettinghausen as dionysiac. This does not contradict my interpretation, for nymphs *were* connected with Dionysos : together with satyrs they formed part of the god's escort and were assimilated to maenads or bacchants. This will account for the nude scarf-dancer surrounded with scrolls and grapes on a plate in the Hermitage [23]. The point is, as I shall try to show, that such representations do not necessarily reflect any survival of the dionysiac ritual, any more than, in general, naked women attest the existence of fertility cults. Why, then, have the motifs survived? Another reason, of political character, is suggested by Hubertus von Gall. He has shown [24]

[21] Cf. W. Ruge, "Nympha", Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie...*, XVII, 2.

[22] P. 36 of the article cited supra, n. 17.

[23] Lukonin, *Iran II*, fig. 181.

[24] "Die Mosaiken von Bishapur, AMI, 1971, pp. 193 sq.

that Šāhpuhr's triumphs represented in the rock at Vēh-Šāhpuhr imitated Roman triumphs, more specifically the Hellenistic, oriental variety, best illustrated in Ptolemy II's great pomp in honour of Dionysos as described in Athenaeus. This type of triumph included processions of wild animals, precious vases and crowns, and hetaerae versed in the various arts of the muses.

The same dionysiac motifs, originally adopted for political not religious reasons, also account for the Badaxšan silver plate in the British Museum with its several dionysiac elements, notably the vine-scrolls, the panther, vase, etc., and its version in the Freer Gallery, in which the main personage, Dionysos, has apparently been misinterpreted by the copyist as female. According to von Gall, Dionysos has been replaced by Anahita, but this is unwarranted. Incidentally, as von Gall has pointed out, the panther drinking from a wine-amphora is a grotesque feature alien to the authentic dionysiac cult, but it is part of the dionysiac iconography in general use in the Roman empire, and is found for example on a mosaic with Bacchus and Ariadne at Treves.

Following the line of my argument, the maenad on a vase in the Barnett collection [25] only proves the success of dionysiac iconography and the persistence of its motifs, not the survival of dionysiac elements in Iranian fertility cults. Even less do these luxury objects prove, as Dorothy Shepherd suggested at Oxford [26], the existence in Iran of salvationist mystery cults. Nor does a combination, on many other objects, of dionysiac symbols, vine-scrolls, dancing nymphs, animals, children, or the so-called Paradise in the Abegg collection [27].

Other pieces will, I think, become less mysterious with the help of our two clues : *nymph* and *dionysiac triumph*. But before we look at them, we may pause to ask ourselves if it is mere chance that such should be our two clues. The moment we think of it, it appears quite natural that the interpretation of objects, the vast majority of which were used to pour water or wine, should depend upon two notions respectively symbolic of water (nymphs) and wine (Dionysos).

So far as wine is concerned, such objects were related, as Oleg Grabar has pointed out [28], to the bacchic poetry of Abu Nuwas. They may, nevertheless, reflect the adoption and adaptation of certain fables and

[25] Fig. 19 of Ettinghausen's article cited in n. 17.

[26] D. Shepherd, "The Diadem, a clue to the religious iconography of Sasanian art", *Summaries*, p. 79.

[27] "Art et Religion...", pl. X.

[28] *Sasanian Silver*, 1967, p. 67.

legends, and perhaps a certain amount of religious syncretism. The Artemis-Anahita syncretism is attested in Asia Minor, Kangavar, Susa, etc. Three objects illustrate, I think, the Artemis-Anahita syncretism, while showing the pertinence of our two clues, nymph and dionysiac triumph, in elucidating such pieces. The central figure in a large bronze platter in the Hermitage [29], with her long dress and mantle and crown, has long since been recognized as Anahita. She is surrounded by numerous fertility symbols, both vegetal and animal. Amongst them several dancing girls, interpreted by Ringbom as priestesses or hierodules, may now be said to be nymphs, the escort of Artemis in several myths. It is as if Artemis, while changing into Anahita, had retained her retinue of nymphs.

On the famous plate in the Bibliothèque Nationale [30], it would seem that she has preserved her character as lady of the beasts (*potnia thērōn*) and lunar deity, surrounded by her dancing nymphs. The same goddess, unless it is Cybele, is riding a lion to the sound of a horn in the middle of the Šaxarovka plate [31]. Instead of nymphs, here are gladiators fighting animals. Such games had been introduced by Antiochus IV Epiphanes into the Greek world [32] : they were also part of the festivities during a triumph. They are attested on a Sasanian jug in the Cleveland Museum. Their presence on the Šaxarovka plate may be due to their triumphal, hence dionysiac, character, combined with the notorious affinity between Artemis and Dionysos [34] — in which case our second clue (the dionysiac triumph) would again prove effective. But, more simply perhaps, the *potnia thērōn* was, by her nature, likely to be associated with the combat of animals.

Only one piece seems to reflect an actual practice. This is the unique, painted ceramic vessel excavated at Merv and studied by Martha Carter at the Oxford congress [35]. She interprets it as a banquet scene of the "Great Nouruz".

The four Chorasmian bowls with a four-armed goddess (seventh century) [36] illustrate the contamination, reminiscent of the Kuṣāṇa coinage,

[29] L.I. Ringbom, "Zur Ikonographie der Göttin Anahita", *Acta Academiae Aboensis*, 1957, fig. 13.

[30] "Art et Religion...", pl. VI, fig. 3.

[31] *Ibidem*, pl. VIII, fig. 2.

[32] Cf. K. Schneider, Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie...*, Supplement III, 762.

[33] Lukonin, *Iran II*, figg. 191 and 192.

[34] Cf. Wernicke, Pauly-Wissowa, II, 1, 1364.

[35] M.L. Carter, *Summaries*, p. 12. [See now *Acta Iranica* I, 1.]

[36] G. Azarpay, "Nine inscribed Choresmian bowls", *Artibus Asiae*, 31, 1969, pp. 185-203. Fig. 2 reproduced here as fig. 2.

between an Iranian deity (probably *Spnd'rmd*) and some form of the Indian goddess (perhaps Śrī, the equivalent of the Khotanese *śśandrāmata*). Although Sasanian in style these bowls are not really true products of the Sasanian empire.

In conclusion I think we should distinguish three types of survival of iconographic motifs :

1. the purely artistic reproduction of motifs on secular objects, although the reproduction may have been prompted partly by political motivations. There may have been an association with court poetry, but no religious interpretation that we can think of;

2. the mythological, where myth survives *qua* myth or has been reinterpreted as legend or fable;

3. the survival of iconographic motifs as expression of actual religious practice. We should be careful in using Sasanian silver as evidence for such practice — especially for fertility cults with erotic connotations, or for salvationist mystery cults. [37]

[37] John Hinnells has kindly revised my English.

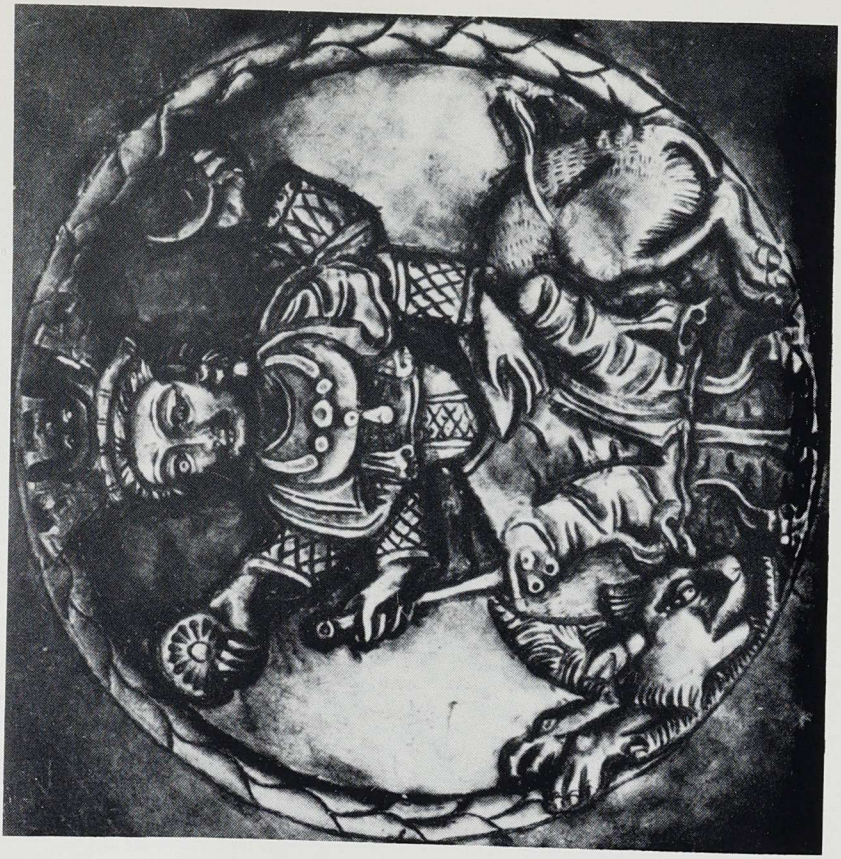

Fig. 2.

Fig. 1.