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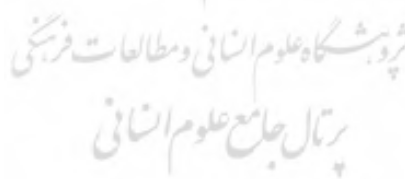
The Good Shepherd Motif on Sasanian Seals


Amir Khanmoradi¹,  Mostafa Ekhtesasi²,  Ehsan Khonsarinejad³ 


Abstract


The artistic background of the Good Shepherd motif can be traced to ancient eras of the East and the West. This motif later gained prominence in early Christian art. The ram-bearer (carrying a sacrificial or an offering animal) first appeared in Near Eastern art and later became an important motif in Greco-Roman art to represent certain roles of the god Hermes. This motif was considered by Christian converts as a symbol of Jesus Christ, as they represented him in the figure of a young shepherd caring for his flock. This theme can also be seen on some Sasanian seals, which can be considered as the Good Shepherd motif. In this article, the authors introduce the aforementioned motif depicted on these seals and examine their possible connection with the Christian communities. The motif of the Good Shepherd, as seen on the seals, demonstrates modifications in the original iconography. These changes can be observed in the longer dress of the ram-bearer or the engraving of celestial symbols. These modifications are probably a sign of the localization process of an imported motif in the Sasanian Empire.

Keywords: Good Shepherd; Christian; Seal; Motif; Sasanian.



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Introduction

The study of seals from the Sasanian period has led to the introduction of a group that is based on the subject of their motifs and sometimes their inscriptions, attributed to religious minorities such as Jewish and Christian in the Sasanian Empire (Lerner, 1977; Shaked, 1997; Gyselen, 2006; Friedenbergh, 2009). Although there are varying opinions regarding the attribution of these seals to Jewish or Christian communities, a group of researchers have questioned the attribution of some of them to the aforementioned communities in completely contradictory opinions (Soudavar, 2017; Maksymiuk, et al., 2021). Despite the ongoing dispute regarding the interpretation of the motifs and even the inscriptions of this group of seals, a number of these artifacts can be attributed to religious minorities in the Sasanian Empire, especially those that are usually in line with Biblical narratives, such as the Binding of Isaac, Daniel in the lions' den, Jonah and the fish, and so on (see Westenholz, 2000). It seems that the motifs of these seals were derived from specific Abrahamic topics, which were favored by Jewish and Christian communities. One of these religious motifs, *the Good Shepherd*, was especially considered by the Christian community. The artistic background of it can be traced back to the pre-Christian times in the art of East and West. This motif was probably recognized by early Christian groups and soon became a popular symbol for introducing Christ as a devoted shepherd to Christian converts. The motif, which has the highest frequency in the artistic imagery of the early Christianity, has not been discussed or examined in the Sasanian sigillographic studies. This issue can indicate the possible presence of another theme related to the Christian community (i.e. the Good Shepherd) on

Sasanian seals.

Background of *the Good Shepherd*

The motif, known in the Christian art as *the Good Shepherd*, depicts a man carrying a lamb or ram. This style of illustration had a relatively long history before the rise of Christianity. Perhaps some of the oldest known examples of this type can be found on Hittite reliefs from Zincirli Höyük and Karkemish (Fig. 1). These reliefs depict men carrying a sacrificial goat on their shoulders. Earlier in Near Eastern art, carrying a sacrificial animal was usually depicted by showing the bearers holding the beast in front of their chest with both hands or under their left arm so that their right hand was free for invocation, saluting, etc. (Klauser, 1958: 28-29) (Figs. 2-3). But the Hittite style seems to have achieved far greater popularity in Western art than other Near Eastern styles, so much that it was often used in Greco-Roman art to represent the god Hermes. In the early instances of the Christian Good Shepherd, the character sometimes held a ram or a lamb with one hand, while the other hand was free or held a bucket. This method of illustration is somehow similar to the Middle Eastern prototypes that the sacrificial animal is held with one hand or under the arm and the other hand is free for saluting.

According to the Greek mythology, Hermes was born on Mount Cyllene and invented the lyre from a tortoise shell a few hours after his birth. He then proceeded to use the lyre to make the guardians of Apollo's cattle fall sleep and steal the animals. Apollo was upset by this act and complained to Zeus. Eventually, Apollo and Hermes reconciled. Apollo received the lyre as a gift from Hermes, and in return entrusted the care of the stolen cattle to Hermes (Westenholz, 2000: 85; Graves, 2017: 60-63; Thomas,



Fig. 1. Drawing of Men Carrying a Sacrificial Animal from Karkemish (a) and Zincirli Höyük (b/c) Reliefs (Klauser, 1958: 28).

2020: 95-133). According to Pausanias:

At Tanagra... There are sanctuaries of Hermes Ram-bearer and of Hermes called Champion. They account for the former surname by a story that Hermes averted a pestilence from the city by carrying a ram round the walls; to commemorate this, Calamis made an image of Hermes carrying a ram upon his shoulders. Whichever of the youths is judged to be the most handsome, goes round the walls at the feast of Hermes, carrying a lamb on his shoulders (Pausanias 9.22.1).

Titles bestowed upon Hermes also refer to his function as a shepherd and the keeper and the savior of flock, such as Epimelios (keeper of the flocks), Nomios (shepherd), Kriophoros (ram-bearer) and Melosoos (he who rescues sheep) which was less common. All these titles indicate the role of Hermes as a shepherd and his continuous connection with herds of domestic animals. His cult as a pastoral god was particularly predominant in Arcadia

and Boeotia. Hermes Epimelios had altars at the Agora of Koroneia in Boeotia and at Troizen (Stroszeck, 2004: 233).

After Calamis and Onatas introduced the statues of Hermes Kriophoros, this imagery became one of the most popular subjects for Greek sculptors (Klauser, 1958: 29-30). In these sculptures, Hermes is depicted with a ram or lamb beside him, in his arms, or on his shoulders (Mead, 1906: 52) (Fig. 4). Representations of Hermes Kriophoros or Moschophoros, first appeared as bronze statuettes in Arcadia in late Archaic Greece (550-480 BC). Terracotta figurines of Hermes Kriophoros have been reported from Sicily in the 5th century BC and from 600 to 450 BC in Locri (Westenholz, 2000: 84-86). These findings demonstrate the popularity of Hermes as the patron deity of sheep herding.

The reproduction of Kriophoros imagery continued in Roman times, alongside many other artistic traditions of Greeks. The bust of Hermes carrying a ram, discovered in the western part of the Corinthian Forum and the bearded



Fig. 2. Bust Found During the Archaeological Excavations in Mari (Parrot, 1939: 12-13).



Fig. 3. Drawing of the Babylonian Seal No. 946 in the National Library of France (Ward, 1910: 135, fig. 380)

Hermes Kriophoros statue housed at the Warburg Institute in London are among the most important Roman examples (Fullerton, 1990: 165-167, 169-170) (Figs. 5-6).

The Good Shepherd in Biblical Narratives and Early Christian Art

The long-time interactions of the Jews with the Mesopotamians and the presence of some of their groups in that region had made them familiar with many of the literary and artistic themes of the Near East. As a result, many ancient fables¹ are found in Jewish religious texts,

mostly in altered and allegorical forms (For more information, see Pritchard, 1969; Smith, 2001; Matthews and Benjamin, 2006; Walton, 2006). One of these Near Eastern allegories was the idea of the king-shepherd, in which many Mesopotamian kings introduced themselves as the shepherds of their people. One of the Mesopotamian kings who proclaimed himself as the king-shepherd of his people was Hammurabi, the great king of Babylon (Westenholz, 2000: 84). Such proclamations have undoubtedly been considered by the Jews during their

emergence of Judaism, especially in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

¹ The fables that were created before the



Fig. 4. Hermes the Ram Bearer, No. 54 of the Archaeological Museum of Athens (Stroszeck, 2004: 231).
 Fig. 5. The Bust of Hermes Carrying the Ram, No. 686 of the Archaeological Museum of Ancient Corinth.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hermes_the_Ram_Bearer,_Roman_period,_AM_of_Corinth,_202812.jpg

Babylon exile. As a result, there are many allegories and interpretations regarding good shepherds and even bad shepherds in the Jewish literary contexts. King David was *par excellence* considered as the shepherd of the people of Israel (2 Samuel. 5:2; Also see the Book of Jeremy: Jr 23, on good and bad shepherds).

The religious narratives assert that the metaphor of the shepherd has a special allegorical significance regarding the leadership and guidance of the believers (Psalm 23:1-6). Other religious texts also make repeated references to pastoral metaphors (Zechariah: 11, Ezekiel: 34, Jeremiah: 23). But perhaps the ultimate form of the good and savior shepherd metaphor is reflected in the Christian biblical literature. In *the Gospel of John*, Jesus Christ is introduced as the Good Shepherd, a compassionate shepherd

who cares for his flock and saves the lost sheep (John 10:11). Alternate but similar versions of this narrative can also be traced in some parables (Luke 15: 4-7; parallel in Matthew 18: 12-14).

These passages reveal valuable insights into the subject of the good shepherd and the imagery that later formed in early Christian art. There are some important features in these narratives that should be taken into account. The first shepherd characteristic of Jesus is in line with aforementioned description of leadership. The second attribute is related to sacrifice, which means that Jesus is willing to sacrifice his life to save the sheep. The third feature, the unconditioned love, is based on the care and upkeep of the livestock. But the fourth point that deserves more attention is that of a good and devoted shepherd who finds the lost

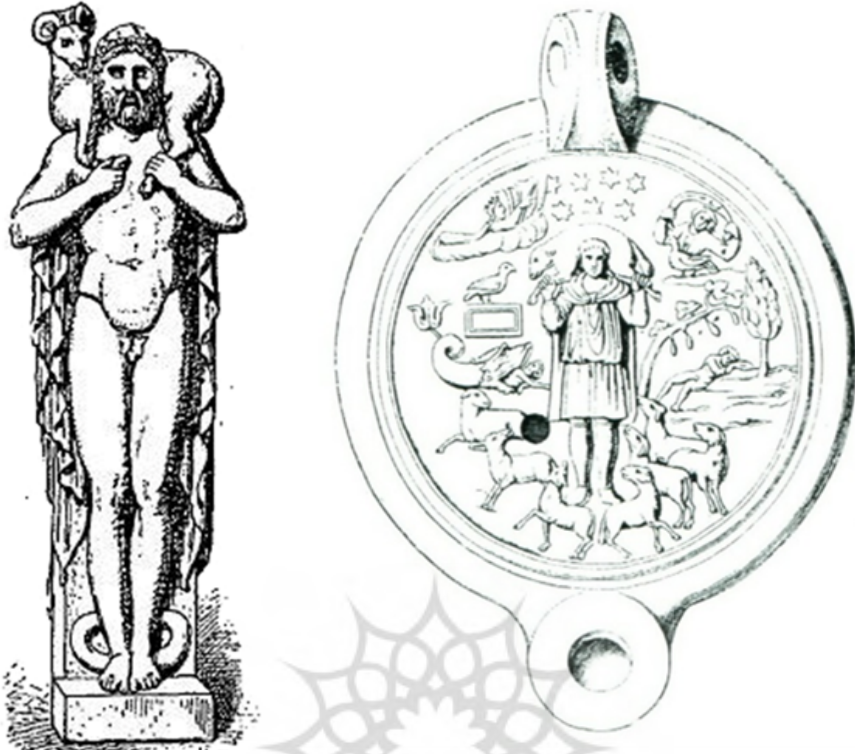


Fig. 6. Drawing of the Statue of the Bearded Hermes Kriophoros at the Warburg Institute in London. http://www.mediterranee-antique.fr/Auteurs/Fichiers/MNO/Menart_R/Vie_Privee_Anciens/T4/VPA_419.htm
 Fig. 7. Drawing of the Wulff Lamp (2nd - 3rd AD), Bode Museum (Effenberger and Severin, 1992: 69).

sheep and carries them back to the herd on his shoulders. These characteristics remind us of the pastoral functions and titles assigned to the Greco-Roman god Hermes, (see background of the Good Shepherd in this paper) which are surprisingly consistent with the attributes of the Good Shepherd in the Christian biblical literature. Therefore, it would not be surprising that the Christian converts used the same ancient traditions for introducing the characteristics of Christ. Thus, the Greco-Roman imagery of Hermes Kriophoros and Moschophoros pioneered the idea of sculptures and images of the Christian Good Shepherd in the third to fourth centuries (Provanzano, 2009: 56-57). In the early days of Christianity, when Christians were still perse-

cuted, the best way to hide their motifs from the hostile Roman world was to use the prevalent artistic elements in order to produce a new concept (Huskinson, 1974: 71). In this new concept, the Christian Good Shepherd was portrayed as a robust young man, a shepherd who was able to defend his flock against wolves and other predators. In some instances, he is seen with a shepherd dog or a jug of milk (Biernacki and Klenina, 2016: 374-376).

Most of the Good Shepherd imagery in early Christianity is seen on clay lamps (Fig. 7), which depicted the figure along with other pagan characters on discs. Although there is no evidence that the lamps were made specifically for the followers of the new Abrahamic religion,



Fig. 8. Ceiling Painting in the Tomb of Callistus in Rome (3rd century AD)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Good_shepherd_02b.jpg



Fig. 9. Ceiling Painting in the Tomb of Priscilla in Rome (3rd century AD)
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Good_shepherd_01_small.jpg

Christians may have deliberately purchased these particular lamps because the original motif of the pagans had taken on an allegorical meaning for them. In the Christian house of prayer in Dura Europos, which dates back to the 3rd century, the figure of the Good Shepherd can be seen in one of the wall panels. From the late 3rd century in Rome, the Good

Shepherd appeared in burial contexts. This motif can be seen in the mosaics of the cemetery under St. Peter's, in the wall paintings of the Tomb of the Aurelii, and in the Catacombs of Via Latina, Domitilla, Priscilla and Callistus (Figs. 8-9). The popularity of this motif continued after Christianity received imperial recognition in 313 AD (Westenholz, 2000: 85;



Fig. 10. Modern Impression of an Elamite Cylinder Seal Depicting under the Arm Style of Animal Carrying. Middle Elamite period (1480-1450 BCE), Metropolitan Museum of Art, No. 43.102.39 <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/323999>

Marchioni, 2018: 42, 46-47, 57, 65, 80, 85, 90-91, 100, 110, 114, 122). After that event, the Good Shepherd became popular not only within the borders of Rome, but also around the ancient world. Almost everywhere, even where a small Christian community lived, the motif was used.

The Good Shepherd on Sasanian Seals

The Greco-Roman motif of Kriophoros or Moschophoros, which later came to be known as the Good Shepherd in early Christian art, is almost non-existent in Iranian art before the Sasanian period. In the Elamite era, they used the same ancient Near Eastern artistic style of putting a sacrificial animal under the arm (Fig. 10). This method for depicting the act of carrying the offerings continued in the Achaemenid art. In the reliefs of the gift-bearers of Persepolis, some of the sacrificial animals are held under the arm (Fig. 11). After the collapse of the Achaemenian Empire and the occupation of the Near East by the Greeks, many ancient aspects of the Near Eastern art were placed alongside those of the Greeks.

In Iran, this motif seems to have first appeared on a Parthian period seal discovered in Nisa, which depicted a man carrying a stag on his shoulders. A goat is standing next to his feet (Fig. 12).

The motif may have been related to the Greek ram-bearer figures that were used to represent Hermes. Bader has noted the similarities of this motif and those of the Christian Good Shepherd, but he has also suggested that the seal might be representing a local narrative (Bader, 1996: 399, 455, Fig. 50). Although, since such a motif has not been reported in Iranian art before the presence of the Greeks, it seems that we should consider it in relation to the elements of Hellenistic art. Therefore, it may have been integrated with aspects of indigenous art in which a stag¹ has replaced the rams and lambs of the Greek representations.² Although it is difficult to relate the Nisa seal to the Christian communities and motif of the Good Shepherd, placement of a goat at the feet of the ram-bearer may indicate a Christian influence. Placing sheep or

¹ The stag is considered to be one of the most prominent animals in the Parthian art, possibly having ties to the Parthian kings and the royal family. The stag is seen as an important decorative motif on the crown of the Parthian kings (see the Parthian coins in Sellwood, 1980: Type 33).

² Bader has referred to the carrying of a ram (Bader, 1996: 399 & 455, Fig. 50), but in the presented drawing, a stag is depicted on the man's shoulders (Fig. 12).



Fig. 11. A Man holding a Lamb? under His Arm. Western Stairway of Hadish Palace at the Persepolis (Razmjou 2004: 112, Fig. 2).



Fig. 12. The Motif of the Stag-bearer? on a Seal Obtained from Nisa (Bader, 1996: 399 & 455, Fig. 50).

rams at the feet of the ram-bearer (who already had an animal on his shoulders), was a new element usually used by Christians for depicting the Good Shepherd (Jensen, 2000: 33; Sánchez and García, 2014: 16). In this new iconography, Jesus Christ (as the King of Martyrs) is the Good Shepherd, the lost sheep of human nature is placed on his shoulders and the two sheep at his feet are the Two Martyr Apostles (i.e. Peter and Paul, representing the whole apostolate, who are together the symbol, the columns, of the Church) (Palmer, 1859: 2-3, 42, 70). With the rise of the Sasanian Empire (224-651 AD) and the definite presence of religious minorities in the territory of this empire, the possible connection between such a motif and the Christian communities can be more easily understood. Among the vast compendium of the discovered Sasanian seals and seal impressions, the theme of carrying a ram or lamb (the Good Shepherd) can be observed on three seals.

The first seal is in the National Museum of Iran (the Nayeri collection, No.

NMI 5740). This is made of brown agate with 2.0 x 1.9 x 1.6 cm dimension. This hemisphere-shaped seal is engraved with a beardless-man, who wears a wide and long, pleated Roman tunic and a belt tied around his waist. He is carrying a ram on his shoulders. His face is engraved in profile and he looks to the right, but his body is depicted in frontal view. On both sides of the figure, the symbols of the crescent and the star can be seen' (Fig. 13). The symbols of the crescent and the star are first reported on Sasanian coins from the middle of the fifth century, during the reign of Peroz (459-484 AD) (Gyselen, 2008: 13). If such celestial symbols were also first used about this time on the Sasanian seals, the National Museum seal may as well belong to the middle of the 5th century AD. The owner of the seal may have used these symbols due to

¹ There is an inscription on this seal, but it only consists of a few repeated Pahlavi letters without any specific words (personal correspondence with Hassan Rezai Baghbidi and Rika Gyselen).



Fig. 13. The Motif of the Good Shepherd on the Seal of the Nayeri Collection
(Courtesy of Dr. Jebrael Nokandeh. National Museum of Iran, No. 5740).

their wide-spread popularity among the Sasanians. Although, this could be interpreted as the sign of a localization process by using well-known symbols of the Sasanian society alongside a non-native motif (in this case, the Good Shepherd). The symbols of the crescent and the star can also be seen on the seal of Melkite, “the great (wuzurg) catholicos” in the region (kust) of Ardān and Balāsagān (Fiey, 1995: 6-9). Therefore, the usage of heavenly symbols by Christians can be considered as a sign of the cultural influence of the Sasanians on the Christian society, which can even be traced on the seals of their high-ranking clergy.

The second seal is in a French private collection. This oval artifact is made of agate, with 1.9 x 2.32 x 1.33 cm dimensions. On this seal, like the previous instance, a beardless man carrying an animal on his shoulders can be seen, whose body is engraved in frontal view and his head is displayed in profile (Fig. 14). His clothing is also similar to that kept in the National Museum of Iran. He is wearing a long pleated over the knee length tunic fastened by a belt. There is a ram on either side of his feet. This seal has a

Pahlavi inscription, “Šāhēn, protection of the gods” (Gignoux and Gyselen, 1982: 53, PL:VI). At the first glance, it seems that there is no harmony between the motif and the inscription of the seal; A Christian motif in combination with an Iranian name and a Zoroastrian moral (invoking the gods), which is usually seen on Zoroastrian seals. Despite its inscription, however, this seal has been considered as a Christian artifact (Gyselen, 2006: 66-67, No. 110). Gyselen also argues that the plural formulation could be due to a confusion of the (Mazdean) lapidary, the final *-t* of singular *yzdt* read *-yn* (Gyselen, 2006: 29-30). If this is the case indeed, it seems that there is no contradiction between the inscription and the Christian concepts. On the other hand, certain Zoroastrian mottos such as truth and righteousness, which encompass general moral concepts, could also be used by other religious minorities of the Sasanian realm, especially the Christians. In some cases, it can even be assumed that the Christians modified the traditional Zoroastrian motifs, such as a man standing next to a fire altar in a worshipping posture. In these scenes, undesired elements



Fig. 14. The Motif of the Good Shepherd on a Seal Kept in a Private Collection
(Gignoux and Gyselen, 1982: 13.2, 4.6).



Fig. 15. The Motif of the Good Shepherd on the Auctioned Seal at the Christie's (Jullien et al.).

have been altered, a cross has replaced the fire (on top of the altar) or the priest holds a cross instead of the usual Barsom (Shaked, 1997: 18). In the imagery of the Binding of Isaac on Jewish and Christian seals, the engraved altar is actually a Zoroastrian fire altar. The fire altar is very common in Sasanian art, especially in glyptic material. While reflecting local beliefs and customs, these examples point to the presence of common cultural practices among Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians (Freidenberg, 2009: 21-22). They also indicate the localization of religious motifs with the aid of common culture and art in the context of Sasanian society. As discussed earlier, it seems that the Christian community of the Sasanian Empire tried to use the traditional Sasanian motifs to show their religious beliefs. Although, we should also consider that the Christian community faced numerous obstacles in certain periods, and at least until the regulation of the structure of the Church and the formation of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in 410

AD (Young, 1972: 43-57, 69-73), they could not readily use the essentially Christian motifs. The Good Shepherd motif could cause further scrutiny, as it implicitly included metaphorical concepts of the leadership and guidance of Jesus Christ among the Christian community. As a result, religious minorities, including Christians, mostly used traditional Sasanian motifs to represent their beliefs. The Christians were occasionally harassed due to their assumed connection with the Eastern Roman Empire, which was deemed to be the nemesis of the Sasanian Empire (Lerner, 1977: 28).¹ Therefore, it is possible that the application of the

¹ Some scholars have argued that the Iranian society of the late Sasanian period was more open towards religious minorities, especially Christians (see Greatrex, 2009; Daryaei, 2010; Payne, 2015). It should be noted, however, that the authors are discussing the situation in the 5th century and earlier. This period was manifested by outbreaks of persecution, with varying intensity and duration (see Brock, 1982; Asmussen, 1983; Wood, 2012).

modified Sasanian motifs for representing the religious beliefs of Christians was as a result of mutual cultural influences and political restrictions imposed by the Sasanians.

The third Sasanian seal that depicts a ram-bearer was presented for sale at the Christie's in 2005 (Fig. 15). The artifact was previously owned by an American private collection, which purchased it in the 1980's. The jewel of this item, which has been dated to c. 5th century AD, is 1.8 cm high and is made of banded agate. This bezel was later mounted on a size 11 gold ring (1.62 cm). This seal is also similar to the previous examples in terms of style and motif. A beardless man is carrying a ram and his clothing is exactly the same Roman tunic that can be noticed on the previous seals. This seal is engraved a Syriac inscription, "I Bābōy, (I am) a leader/the head".

The name "Bābōy" was used by Christians, especially some of their leaders during the Sasanian period. The names of these leaders are preserved in the corpus of East-Syrian synodical literature (See Chabot, 1902). As a result, it seems that the third seal was used by a Christian according to its Syriac name. Furthermore, the word leader (*rš'*) is inscribed on this seal, which in the broad sense can easily be attributed to a Christian bishop named Bābōy. It is typical in Syriac literature to use the word leader for high-ranking religious leaders. On the whole, the combination of the Good Shepherd motif with the inscription shows that this seal is undoubtedly a Christian artifact and it belonged to a high-ranking Christian leader.¹

¹ The motif and inscription of this seal has been studied in detail by Jullien and her colleagues (Jullien et al.). It must be noted that the three discussed seals were not obtained from controlled or scientific archaeological

Conclusion

All three seals have similar characteristics in terms of style and theme, including the presence of a beardless man, the act of carrying a ram on the shoulders, and a simple Roman tunic. Thus, they seem to represent the same concept. But in order to provide a more accurate interpretation of this motif, there are two possible approaches. The first way is to place this motif in the Kriophoros/Moschophoros group. In that case, we should consider this motif as only the figure of the ram-bearer, which the Greeks used numerous times to represent the god Hermes. In other words, we should assume it as a motif that, regardless of its resemblance to ancient motifs or even contemporary instances, has been engraved solely because of its popularity in the partly Hellenized community of the seal owner, or as Bader points out, the possible reflection of a local story.

The second approach is based on an almost contemporary iconography in the Sasanian period (Maksymiuk, et al., 2021: 8). This approach is used to interpret and study the concept of motifs that are not normally considered part of the Sasanian illustrative traditions but have made their way into the realm of Sasanian visual arts as a result of certain religious and political considerations. It seems that the motif of the beardless man carrying a ram, as seen on Sasanian seals, can be compared to those of the Good Shepherd in the 3rd century AD, that were used to depict Jesus Christ according to the biblical narratives. Interestingly, the seal described by Gignoux and Gyselen, (Gignoux and Gyselen, 1982: 53, PL: VI) in addition to the carrying of a ram on the shoulders, shows two rams next to bearer's feet. This style, depiction of two or more rams next to the man, is usually excavations.

traceable in the representations of the Good Shepherd since the beginning of the third century AD (refer to Figs. 6-7). This factor can pave the way for the interpretation of the ram-bearer motif of the Sasanian seals and their relationship with the Good Shepherd. Therefore, it can recall the issue that seals with this theme could have contained Christian concepts that are derived from Christian sacred narratives. Many Sasanian seal engravings bear Judeo-Christian religious themes.

As a result, it would not be surprising if the seals that depict a man carrying a ram were actually related to motif of the Good Shepherd, a motif that was very popular among the Christian community. This issue can be confidently confirmed by examining the inscrip-

tion and motif of the seal presented at Christie's auction. The motif of the Good Shepherd, as seen on the introduced seals, demonstrates modifications in the original iconography. These changes can be observed in the longer dress of the ram-bearer (as compared with the shorter Roman tunics) or the engraving of celestial symbols (crescent and star) on one of the Sasanian seals (No. 5740 of the National Museum of Iran). These modifications are probably a sign of the localization process of an imported motif in the Sasanian Empire.

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