


The New Interpretation of the Scene of “Šābuhr Killing Deer” on the Sasanian Silver Plate from the British Museum

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Abstract

The silver plate from the British Museum (inv. 124091) usually attributed as depicting “Šābuhr killing deer” does not have a direct parallel in Sasanian iconography. The attempts were made to explain the image in perspective of relation to Mithraism, however no detailed analysis was done. The plate represents features typical for the Sasanian silver but, at the same time it is modelled upon Mithraic tauroctony. This makes the scene a possibly important argument in discussion regarding the very existence of Iranian Mithraism. The fact that the scene is not a direct copy of the Roman tauroctony arguments for association with Iranian imagery. The scene had to be understood in Iranian terms, despite referring to Roman depictions. This supports the view of Iranian, pre-Zoroastrian Mithraic cult.

Keywords: Iranian Mithraism; Sasanian Iconography; Sasanian Silver; Mithraism; Tauroctony; Sasanian Art.



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Introduction

The silver plate from the British Museum (Fig. 1) (inv. 124091) with a depiction of the Sasanian king sitting astride on a deer while killing it with his sword is a well recognised piece, frequently published and used in multiple studies ranging from iconography of power to analysis of the sword types (Harper, 1978: 34-35; Harper, 1983: 120, pl.120; Harper and Meyers 1981: 57-60; 133-134, 214, Pl. 13; Marschak: 25-26 1986, 428: 5; Skupniewicz, 2019a; Skupniewicz, 2020; Trever and Lukonin, 1987: 55). Although the scene does not represent the most common Sasanian type of royal hunt, or rather “heroic encounter”, as was defined by Garrison (Garrison, 2013), genre, formally and structurally it is well-set in known Sasanian aesthetics and compositional principles. Exhibition in one of the world’s most attended museums and number of publications made the plate very recognisable piece, nonetheless obscure in terms of its interpretation. The studies focus on the crown type and subsequent identification of the personage, taking for granted that the depictions on the silverware were to reflect any actual historical personages, or identification of the deer. Admitting the unique nature of the plate the researchers avoid structural approach towards the image-making and structural-formal analysis. The studies of the material and manufacturing techniques were carefully carried but they cannot firmly place the image in the frames of visual language of the Sasanian art (Harper and Meyers, 1981: 57-60, 147-161, 170, 189-190). The article aims in examination of the plate from structural perspective, which is perfectly suitable for researching the art

of late pre-Islamic Iran where the conventions are clearly defined. The forms are repetitive both in terms of compositional structures and minor details, as well as technical workmanship. It is possible to state that the genre of the Sasanian “heroic encounters” is made of “block elements” which are assembled when building each scene. It is impossible to say with any dose of certainty how these “block elements” were distributed, spread and conveyed through the generations of the artisans. It is clear that the silversmiths were traditionally trained to follow the requested formulae, however possibility of existence of cartouche books cannot be excluded. Also, the very technical form of the great part of the Sasanian silver, where the pre-prepared detailed elements were fitted to cover the cut wholes on the surface of the vessels, might support the idea of existence of the fine elements assembled according to the final order. Such a vision of the smiths travelling with ready-made fragments applied to the surface of a vessel might allow to explain some extraordinary features like the wrong direction of rider’s leg on Sari plate, but also, general approach to image-building among the Sasanian artisans. What needs to be stressed, however, is the fact that despite these fixed elements and a limited group of formulaic ways in which these elements were assembled to create the “heroic encounters” or the “icons of violence”, the possible permutations of the “block elements” and employed formulae was very large. Despite that, the Sasanian silver occasionally employs the same composition, or compositions differing in minor details. Obviously, this cannot



Fig. 1. The Silver Plate from the British Museum (inv. 124091) © The Trustees of the British Museum

result from mass production of the silverware but must indicate conservative taste and prevalence of known motifs over experimentation. In such an artistic milieu, any unorthodox employment of “block elements” and compositional formulae, must have been deliberate and premeditated. Artistic originality in modern sense could not have yet existed. That is why all unique compositions raise immediate suspicion of forgery unless originating from legitimate source. Unique usually means that the artefact

does not represent the visual language recognised so far. For exactly the same reason legitimately provenanced items are so important for understanding the principles of syntax of Sasanian aesthetic. The “Šābuhr killing a deer” plate from The British Museum was revealed before modern studies of Sasanian art allowed convincing imitations, and is well settled stylistically and in craftsmanship. Therefore the depicted scene must be treated as illustrating an important semantic content, which is evidenced by the mod-

elling in precious metal, and which was recognisable for the viewers, as the image-building principles were quite strict.

The Plate and the Scene

The plate is almost round in shape, with the diameter 17.9-18 cm. Its total height is 4,5 cm, excluding the foot ring 3.7 cm. It weighs 394,7 grams. The plate was acquired in 1908 from the art dealers Durlacher Brothers and it was claimed to originate from Anatolia. XRF analysis suggests a composition of 94.3 – 94.7% silver, 3.8 – 4.5% copper and 0.9% gold. Neutron activation analysis results indicate the content of 95.6% silver, 3.72% copper and 0.66% gold, while the alloy of the foot is slightly different and consists of 95.8% silver, 3.53% copper and 0.64% gold. The different composition of the foot ring suggest its later addition or replacement (Harper, 1978: 34-35; Harper, 1983: 120, pl.120; Harper and Meyers, 1981: 57-60; 133-134, 214, Pl. 13; Marschak: 25-26 1986, 428: 5; Skupniewicz, 2019a; Skupniewicz, 2020; Trever and Lukonin, 1987: 55).

The scene occupies the greatest part of the inside of the plate. It is framed by a gilded circle which marks the flat part of the plate, leaving the outside with only a narrow ring constituted by the upward projecting wall between the previous circle and the edge. Most of the elements of the composition are in relief, a typical Sasanian technique of pre-worked fragments covering adjusted holes on the surface of the plate, with further details either repoussed or scratched on them. The exception are the ribbons floating behind the personage, behind the *korymbos*, behind the head and the back

of the personage, and hanging from his ankles, which were scratched directly on the surface of the plate. The largest element of the scene is a deer shown in “flying gallop” with a human figure in the Sasanian royal garb holding one of the antlers with the left hand while thrusting a sword into the animals neck. The human figure is slightly disproportionately small in comparison with the deer’s body. Further below, alongside the fragment of the circular gilded frame another, smaller deer was depicted. Its head is slightly raised and legs bent, skillfully arranged to match the format.

The composition is stable with clearly defined axes. The vertical axis is clearly marked by the profile of the human figure and the front of his leg pointing downwards. The horizontal axis is defined by the upper contour of the body of the central deer. This makes the lower part of the scene denser and “heavier”, covered almost completely with the large bodies of the deers, whose horizontal position sets the composition even further. The upper half of the format is dominated by horizontal elements: man’s torso and head, placed almost centrally and the main deer’s neck and head projecting diagonally upwards right, with the antlers directed upwards left. The upper part of the scene is thus more dynamic and the visual centre of the action can be defined as a circle centred around man’s shoulder, about the middle of the upper half of the vertical axis. Following the vertical division, it is the right side which is dynamic in contrast to the left side. This, together with the suggested direction of the movement of the main deer, being the largest visual mass of the

depiction, creates impression of right direction movement of the energy within the scene. This dynamism is weakened through strong settling of the composition within the cross of the very well defined axes, clear anchored by the body of the deer at the bottom and backwards, i.e. left, direction of the main deer's antlers.

The silhouette of the personage is vertically stretched. His head, disproportionately large, is directed right in full profile, his shoulders are fully frontal. Only one of his legs is visible. It is slightly bent in the knee as the thigh is slightly oblique, with the shin perfectly vertical. The feet are shown stretched downwards in a "ballerina feet" formula. The neck occupies the majority of the shoulder width. The eyes are disproportionately large but depicted in profile. The nose is pronounced. The jaws and lower cheeks are covered with beard which is tied in the lower part creating a ball shaped tuft. The beard is covered with dots giving an impression of hair. The part of the ribbon or a thread used for tying the beard waves back in a form of a small elongated, almost horizontal rectangular. The moustache is almost in a crescent shape. The personage is wearing a large earring hanging in a form of the elongated trapezes widening to the bottom. He is wearing a large crown, under which his curly hair falls to his neck and reaches his shoulders. They are depicted in a form of three rows of the tufts placed in almost square segments. From behind the crown protrudes a neck part which covers the upper portion of the hair. The neck cover terminates in a strip cover with a row of

circles. The crown used to be seemingly all gilded, however the fold layer was partially worn out. The crown consists of a narrow band running across the skull at temple height. Over the band, there are crenelated elements visible, and above them stands a globular korymbos, with the top of the crown visible behind. The one in the middle has a crenellation on both ends as it is shown horizontally, the front and back one are slightly bent to the front and the back accordingly and have the crenellation only on the sides directed to the center of the head. The centre of the frontal element is decorated with a vertical row of small, gilded circles. The bigger gilded circles decorate the sides of the element. Over the crenellated elements protrudes relatively large ball, or korymbos, covering partly hemispherical top of the crown. The ball is divided into three semicircular zones filled with the rows of points. From behind the korymbos two small ribbons stretch upwards. The ribbons are decorated by the thick rhythm of the lines crossing it and the four triangular three-point motifs which mark their edge. To the left side of the head float two ribbons, originating at the back of the man's head between the tufts of hair and the crenellated element of the crown.

The personage is wearing a tight tunic with long sleeves, reaching the mid-thigh. The collar of the tunic is depicted as a stripe with a row of circular decorations. The cuffs were also marked with the stripes however not decorated otherwise. On the shoulders, there are round elements or orbiculi filled with what appears as a floral decoration and

surrounded by the rhythm of the small circles. The tunic is belted at waist. The belt consists of two straps: the upper, which is narrower and decorated with repetitive dots, and the wider, lower, which features a pattern of small circles. The clasp is made of two wheels with a tie coming from behind it and the two ribbons hanging from it. From the front upper thigh and below the buttocks at the back runs the strap on which the large quiver is suspended. The belts, straps, collar and cuffs were gilded. The textile of the tunic was depicted in parallel wavy lines. Only in places where excess of the material would hang loosely under the sleeves, by the belt and the sides of the torso, the series of the comma-shape incisions appear. At the center of the torso runs a vertical line of large commas, probably depicting a strap or embroidery. The lower edge of the tunic is depicted in typical wavy patterns, it terminates with the strap filled with repetitive dots. The personage is holding the sword with his forefinger hooked over the quillons. The pommel is visible behind the hand which suggests that the handle is either bent, allowing pistol grip, or that the pommel is very large. The latter option seems less plausible as there are no attested Sasanian sources with such excessive pommels, while the bent ones are known.

The left arm of the personage is extended horizontally and slightly bent upwards holding deer's antlers. The right arm runs diagonally across the chest and in the hand of the personage there is a sword with the cross-guard and triangular finials turned with the sides out.

The leg of the personage is covered

by decorated legging with wavy pattern at the back/left side and a vertical stripe at front. The stripe is decorated with the running points. The surface of the leg itself, otherwise plain, is decorated with irregular, small circles. The legging has a round clasp at the ankle with a decorative bow in front, from which two ribbons hang. The quiver, which hangs from the hip and is suspended by the strap encircling the personage's waist, is slightly oblique, directed somewhat backward, i.e., to the left. It is the entire length of the leg and is a significant visual element within the scene.

The body of the quiver is divided into two zones by three gilded straps, with the linear dot pattern. The lower part of the quiver is covered by the net of rhombs while the upper is decorated by a floral ornament, reminding a variation of a palmette. On the top of the quiver, the notches of the arrows are visible.

The deer on which the personage is sitting is shown with both the front and back hinds spread horizontally. The back hooves are not visible as they reach outside the golden circular frame. The head, on the extended neck, is directed to the right. The eyes are open and turned upwards. The body, except for the head, is covered with a dotted pattern imitating fur. The antlers have dotted lines along the arms. At the point where the sword thrusts into the body, the dotted lines imitate pouring blood. The deer's head, ears, hooves, tail, and lower belly are gilded. The lower deer is similar to the bigger one, with the main differences being the legs bent as if it was sitting on them, and the head turned upwards rather than to the right.

The Scene and the Sasanian Image-Building Principles

The scene is unique among the Sasanian “heroic encounters” (Garrison, 2013) or “icons of violence” (Skupniewicz, 2018). It clearly belongs to the group of depictions showing a crowned personage in heroic struggle with the life-threatening beasts or animals signifying strength, power, speed or combination of these features. In a typology of the scene layouts proposed by Skupniewicz, the discussed plate, together with the stucco from Chal Tarkhan (Harper, 1978: 116; Trever and Lukonin, 1987: 72, il. 47), create separate thematic groups (Skupniewicz, 2020). The relation of the British Museum plate with the stucco relief was also pointed out earlier (Bivar, 1995: 33-35). Formally, from the structurally-compositional perspective, the objects represent quite different lay-outs. The differences in robes and headgear of the protagonist can be easily explained by the different time of execution. The different treatment of the surfaces must depend on different media, but the compositional models are also very different. Although in both cases the personages are shown riding the deer, on the British Museum plate the rider kills his mount with a sword, while on the Chal Tarkhan stucco, the rider is holding the apparently broken-off antlers. The deer on the stucco is shown jumping or galloping with the hind legs on the ground while on the silver plate it is shown in the flying gallop. The deer on the stucco is much smaller in proportion and there is no second deer at the bottom. Thus, the both scenes seem to be clearly thematically related but the British Museum plate follows the principles

of the image-building characteristic for the toreutics, even if there are no direct analogies for the composition.

Composition-wise the discussed plate generally follows the common pattern of the heroic encounter scenes in Sasanian art. The profile of the protagonist marks the vertical axis of the scene, dividing it roughly into halves of which is dedicated to the victor and his splendour while the other half is showing actual fighting or killing. Such division of the composition, although not an absolute principle¹,

¹ The exceptions can be found whenever the compact circular format was not necessary, with the closest examples on the vessels with multiple hunt-scenes running around the body of a vessel: al-Sabah collection plate (LNS1623M), possibly Hephthalite bowl from British Museum (OA1963-12-10.I) and a bowl from Ermitage (S-8). Similarly the horizontally extended composition runs around the vase at David Collection bowl in Copenhagen (2/1984). What requires some highlight here is that in all these cases the prey is not depicted in clear vertical position but in more realistic manner which might be a feature of local, post-Hellenistic aesthetics.

Also the plates from Shemakha (now in Museum of the History of Azarbaijan, inv. number unknown) and Krasnaya Polana (now in Abkhazian State Museum, 47-71) spread the hunter from the prey avoiding clear marking of the vertical axis. The same phenomenon can be observed on the royal battle reliefs which are also horizontally extended and leave the vertical axis not marked. The possible exception here might be NRm3 which the the most compact of the royal battle scenes where the royal profile seems to mark the middle of the scene, however not exact frames are provided.

Opposite means were applied on the plate from Fabricius collection and plate from Chilek (Museum of History and Culture

highlights the absolute domination of the protagonist, who not only occupies half of the format, leaving the other half of the scene in a state of suspension, but whose dynamism also pushes the prey to the margin, regardless of the direction in which the opponent is being defeated.

Usually, the victorious character of the protagonist is emphasised by the deceased victim stretched at the bottom of the scene. This model, of pre-Achaemenid origin, was applied both to the battle scenes as well as depictions of a combat with the beasts. In the case of the discussed scene on the plate from the British Museum, the principles of Sasanian image-building within the genre of repetitive depictions of combat with humans and ferocious animals —icons of violence, as such conventionally fixed formulae should be termed— are attempted to be fulfilled (Skupniewicz, 2019a; Skupniewicz, 2020). The division of the compact format, the fallen prey lying stretched at the bottom of the scene clearly relates to the said Sa-

of Uzbekistan), plate from the tomb of Feng Hetu (Datong City Museum) and related plate from the Shelby White Collection, where the silhouettes of the personages constitute the axis instead of their profile. Far more dynamic and complicated is composition on the silver plate with the depiction attributed as Kushanshah Bahram killing the boars from Ermitage (S24) where the traditional stable composition was disturbed and the main directions were intentionally blurred, which might be an example of survival of local Hellenistic tradition of image-building.

It is worth to note that the division of the sides occurred not only on heroic hunt scenes where a proponent faced life threatening of powerful beasts, but also applied in the leisure hunt scenes.

sanian tradition of image-building. The fact that the protagonist is placed on the prey enforces several concessions.

First, and the clearest from the formal point of view, is disturbance in traditional order of proportions. Although the head of the protagonist is disproportionately large to emphasise the crown, which is the mark of the status, as happens often in Sasanian toreutics, the deer which in this case acts both as a mount and a prey, so plays a role of two animal figures, is excessively big. In general, the horses in Sasanian art are small, which seems a deliberate modification of proportions. Leaving aside any possible discussion of how big the horses could actually be, it is clear that the proportions are governed by convention, possibly semiotic in nature, as clearly no rideable war-horses would have had heads smaller than humans. On the British Museum plate, the size of the deer on which the main protagonist rides, not only exceeds the proportions of typical horses in Sasanian art but also surpasses the size of any realistically proportioned deer or any living cervidae, with the exception of elk. Naturally, the animal depicted on the plate is a kind of deer, not an elk. The disturbed proportions serve the purpose of fitting the unusual scene in conventional format which also enables application of the traditional artistic measures or “block elements” that are in line with decorum of the Sasanian “icons of violence”.

The position of the main personage, who extends the left arm to grasp a target to stab it with a sword held in the right hand is well attested in Sasanian art (Skupniewicz, 2019a; Ghasemi, 2022). It is related to the convention where the pro-



Fig. 2. The Plate with Tigers Combat from British Museum (124092), Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz

tagonist holds another object with the extended left, be it a tiger/lion cub or a bow. The formula was defined as one of the three basic conventions of depicting sword wielding protagonists in Sasanian iconography, representing both mounted as well as on foot¹. The formula clearly

¹ Mounted: The plates with tigers combat from British Museum (124092) (Fig. 2). (Harper and Meyers, 1981: 76-77, 226, Pl. 25; Skupniewicz, 2020: 72-73)

Kushano-Sasanian plate from private, Japanese collection. (Tanabe, 2001) (Fig. 3)

Bowl identified as Hepthalite from British Museum, OA 1963-12-10.1. (Harper and Meyers, 1981: 130-131; Skupniewicz, 2009: 58-59).

Mes Aynak plate, National Museum of Afghanistan 013.63.289. (Mleziva, 2016; Skup-

derives from the Achaemenid iconography which in turn borrows from Assyrian sources. The depictions of a hero holding an opponent or a beast, fantastic or real are present in most of surviving media:

niewicz, 2020: 72-73) (Fig. 4)

On foot: Klimova plate from the Hermitage with a hero killing a leopard with a sword, S42. (Harper and Meyers, 1981: 74-76, 225, Pl. 24; Trever and Lukonin, 1987: 107-18; Skupniewicz, 2020: 72-73) (Fig. 5).

Side decoration of the vase from Hermitage S-60. Trever and Lukonin, 1987: 115-116, Pl. 86. Plate from the Arthur Sackler Gallery S1987.143. (Gunter and Jett, 1992: 177-179).

Depictions on sigillography. (Ritter, 2010: 90-98, Taf. X; Skupniewicz, 2009: 52-53; Skupniewicz, 2020: 72-73)

sigillography, reliefs and painting (Skupniewicz, 2020). It could be noted here that the visual convention of showing a personage holding a bow in the left hand and a short sword or a spear in the right one, is also attested in Achaemenid coinage, which possibly associates the Sasanian depictions of men holding objects while stabbing the beasts with their Achaemenid predecessors even stronger (Skupniewicz, 2019a; Skupniewicz, 2019b; Skupniewicz, 2020; Ghasemi, 2022).

In case of the discussed plate from the British Museum, this convention rooted in distant antiquity serves a very different purpose from the related heroic schemes, whether mount or on foot.

First of all, in the Achaemenid iconography from which stems the discussed model, all depictions involve "Confrontation" formula, i.e. where both the victor and the victim are turned towards each other. This, in the Sasanian examples of mounted hunt, where the formula developed for depicting combat on foot, becomes problematic, as if the confrontative character was to be sustained, the horse head would get in between the beast and the protagonist. This takes place in case of the British Museum plate (124092 - Harper and Meyers, 1981: 76-77, 226, Pl. 25.; Skupniewicz, 2020) with a lion hunt and the royal personage holding the cub in extended arm (Fig. 2). In order to match the formula with the directions on the attack and movement of the visual masses, the model "*The hero with his left arm raised and right arm shown diagonally across the torso either thrusting or slashing the beast with the sword*" was applied to the composition-

al formula "*The hunter is attacked by two beasts diagonally from below*". In order to achieve such combination, the protagonist must not hold its prey but the cub. The direction of the attack was also modified from the horizontal thrust to the downward cut, which allowed reconciliation of the old, already pre-Achaemenid theme to mounted scene (Skupniewicz, 2022).

In majority of the depictions the direction of the horse was changed to avoid such a cumbersome combination¹. This way, despite the general model being "*Escape*", where direction of the movement of the beast and the protagonist's horse are the same, as if the personage hit the target while riding away of it, the dominant figure faces the attacking prey. Diminishing the size of the horses allowed preserving the convention almost identically with the Achaemenid original on the Kushano-Sasanian plate from the private collection in Japan (Tanabe, 2001; Skupniewicz, 2020) (Fig. 3) where the protagonist holds the ear of the tiger being killed. In case of the bowl, usually attributed as Hehtalite, from British Museum (OA 1963-12-10; Harper and Meyers, 1981: 130-131; Skupniewicz, 2009: 58-59; Skupniewicz, 2022) (Fig. 4) and Mes Aynak (013.63.289; Mleziva, 2016; Skupniewicz, 2020: 72-73) plate (Fig. 5), the

¹ Bowl identified as Hephtalite from British Museum, OA 1963-12-10, (Harper and Meyers, 1981: 130-131; Skupniewicz, 2009: 58-59; Skupniewicz, 2022); Kushano-Sasanian plate from private, Japanese collection - (Tanabe, 2001; Skupniewicz, 2020).

Plate from Mes Aynak - National Museum of Afghanistan 013.63.289. (Mleziva, 2016; Skupniewicz, 2020: 72-73).

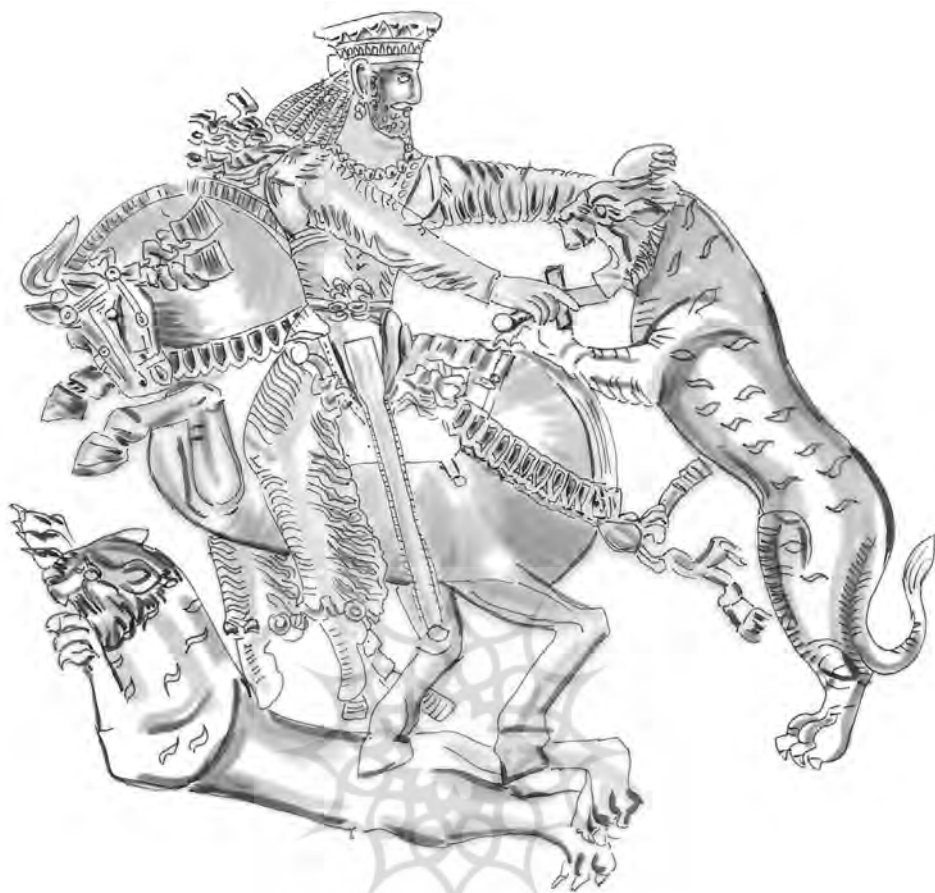


Fig. 3. Kushano-Sasanian Plate from a Private Japanese Collection, Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz

victorious rider does not hold the killed beast, but a bow and a cub respectively. Nevertheless, all these three examples represent the same general model of *Escape*, modified to match the requirements of the pictorial convention “*The hero with his left arm raised and right arm shown diagonally across the torso either thrusting or slashing the beast with the sword*”.

The foot versions of the model in Sasanian art, usually follow the Achaemenid pattern directly, i.e. apply “*Con-*

frontation” formula¹. The exception here is the Klimova plate from the Hermitage (S42) (Fig. 6) with a hero killing a leopard with a sword (Harper and Meyers, 1981: 74-76, 225, Pl. 24; Trever and Lukonin, 1987: 107-18; Ghasemi, 2022), where the prey is directed outside the format which makes it the “*Chase*” formula. The

¹ Side decoration of the vase from Hermitage S-60 (Trever and Lukonin, 1987: 115-116, Pl. 86; Skupniewicz, 2020); Plate from the Arthur Sackler Gallery S1987.143. (Gunter and Jett, 1992: 177-179), sigillography (Ritter, 2010: 90-98, Taf. X; Skupniewicz, 2009: 52-53; Skupniewicz, 2020).



Fig. 4. Bowl Identified as Heptalite from British Museum, OA 1963-12-10.1.

relation with the Achaemenid sources remains clear as the personage holds the beast by the ear, that is in closely related manner to the scene on the plate from the Japanese collection. It is also important to not ignore “Chase” type scenes on foot¹, which mark transformation of the Achaemenid models.

The discussed plate from the British Museum, despite clearly referring to “*The hero with his left arm raised and right arm shown diagonally across the torso either thrusting or slashing the beast with the sword*” formula vastly differs from the all listed above. The head of the killed prey is turned outside the format and the protagonist sits on the prey. So, despite the

same direction of movement, the scene cannot be classified as the “Chase” model. Skupniewicz classified it as “*The hunter kills the animal he mounts*”, however this group consists of two examples, the discussed plate from the British Museum and above mentioned stucco, from which Chal Tarkhan was established somehow artificially, as the principle of the visual masses movement or general directions which governed the proposed classification could not have been applied here. It is clear that the artisans who designed the scene made the effort to fit it in the common decorum both in terms of composition and formulae applied. Still, the scene stands out from the remaining examples and its origin and the subsequent meaning must be searched beyond the sets of compositional conventions of Sasanian icons of violence.

Interpretation

Not being able to relate to the plate from

¹ Plate with Yazdegird I killing a deer, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1970.6 (Harper and Meyers, 1981: 63-64, 217 Pl. 16; Skupniewicz, 2009: 51-52; Skupniewicz, 2020); Nizhni Novograd plate, where the king uses a lasso, also in Hermitage (Harper and Meyers, 1981: 82-83, 230, Pl. 29; Trever and Lukonin, 1987: 108).



Fig. 5. Mes Aynak Plate, National Museum of Afghanistan 013.63.289., Drawing by Eleonora Skupniewicz

the British Museum (Fig. 1) directly with the Sasanian visual conventions, allows widening of the search range to other cultures. However, given the amount of conceptual effort made to approximate formally the scene to the visual formulae of the time, it must be assumed that the form was to be perceived as Iranian, therefore the attractiveness of the scene was not placed in copying foreign exotic theme barely understood or not understood at all. The subject, seemingly, needed to be legible within the Iranian imagery. Had the motif been borrowed from outside of Iran merely for exoticism, the attempts

would be made to preserve its original form. Such was the treatment of the motif of “triumph of Dionysus”, vintage or Dioskuroi in Sasanian toreutics. Leaving aside the question of validity of the idea of *interpretatio Iranica*, whether the Iranians necessarily attributed their local meanings to the borrowed motifs and had them explained within their local imagery, the fact remains that the efforts were made to preserve foreign aspects of the originals. The fact that the discussed scene on the plate from the British Museum follows Iranian fashions but cannot be clearly related to known Sasanian patterns, allows to



Fig. 6. Klimova Plate from the Hermitage with a Hero Killing a Leopard with a Sword, S42,
Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz

conclude that the subject was understood well on the ground of Iranian traditions, but was not commonly depicted. In such case, finding its direct association beyond Iran suggests that the original idea must had, nevertheless, been Iranian.

Tauroctony. When searching for a reference for a visual structure which includes a man holding his prey with the left hand while stabbing it with the blade held in the right hand, and sitting on it with extended right leg, the closest par-

allel would be provided by the scenes of tauroctony from the Mithraic cult spread over the territory of the Roman Empire. The scenes of tauroctony are depicted in variety of media, which include a freely standing sculpture, stone reliefs of different sizes, rock reliefs, metalwork, ceramics, wall paintings, gem stones and coins (Bricault and Veymiers, 2021; Boschung, 2015; Boschung, 2021, Alvar and Bricault, 2021, Capus, 2021c; Radbauer S. 2021; Amrhein, 2021; Lenk, 2017; Dal-

gish, 2017a). They differ in style, which is greatly dependent on the region and period that they were made, availability of the trained artisans, artistic traditions and, obviously, medium. Regardless of these differences, the tauroctony is quite a fixed icon and usually consistent in the set of depicted elements (Adrych, 2017; Boschung, 2015; Boschung, 2021; Campbell, 1968: 2, pass; DalGLISH, 2017a; Dirven, 2016). The scene depicts the god Mithra, dressed in Iranian garb slaying a bull with a short sword. The bull is usually pressed against the floor with gods left knee, usually sharply bent. Mithra's right leg is always stretched, often directed outwards to the right, but sometimes almost vertically down. The god holds the bull's head, usually by nostrils, but sometimes by one of the horns, with the left outstretched hand thrusting the sword down in its neck. In most cases he holds the sword in the dagger/knife hold, i.e. with the blade directed outside the pinky finger. The bull has often one of the front legs stretched to the front and the other bent sharply back. Often the bull is most likely attacked by a scorpion, for and snake. Again these details are often omitted in some depictions, usually the smaller ones or the ones made in provinces. In the tauroctony from Dura Europos only a dog was shown. In larger compositions the scene is usually flanked by two torch-bearers: Cautes (torch up) and Cautopates (torch down) but in many cases the scene is independent. In elaborated structures, other images of Mithraic imagery surround the central scene (Adrych, 2017; Boschung, 2015; Boschung, 2021; Campbell, 1968: 2, pass; DalGLISH, 2017a; Dirven, 2016).

Structurally, the tauroctony icon is almost identical with the depiction on the plate from the British Museum under discussion. The protagonist sits on the victim, holds its head, in case of the discussed plate by the antlers, in Mithraic iconography, usually by the nostrils, but often by the horn. The victim is killed by a sword thrust in the neck. That is enough to state relationship between both models. Subsequently, a hypothesis of shared semantic content would be justified. It is true that Bivar has already proposed Mithraic explanation for the discussed plate, however not really elaborating his point (Bivar, 1995: 33-35). He did state clear relation with Chal Tarkhan stucco and that both represent "a solar deity" in "a delivery allusion [...] to a religious myth, but in this case, of course, unknown to us" (Bivar, 1995: 35). Referring to the lost narratives is a justified method in approaching Sasanian art. The likelihood that the remnants of the visual culture would refer miraculously preserved remnants of narrative literature is extremely low. At the same time, the motifs which appear in iconography more than once, are clearly indicating shared imagery, and probably, refer to the same narrative. What appears methodologically flawed in Bivar's proposal is the lack of pre-iconographic study and formal-structural research. In fact, Bivar's line of thinking, leads to the conclusion that identifying the scene with Mithraic content, seems rather superficial. Without providing more details of his idea, Bivar leaves the reader with an impression that as the motif is unknown otherwise, and in case of Chal Tarkhan, a halo was shown behind the personage,

than the scenes must relate to an unpre-served myth of a “solar deity”, whom in Iranian milieu was Mithra. Given the fact that origin and history of ancient Iranian Mithraism was one of the topics studied by Bivar (Bivar, 1979; Bivar, 1998; Bivar, 2005), his focus on semantics and rather a relaxed approach to formal research and *motifkunde* could be well understood. Current paper provides some art historical arguments to Bivar’s, historically-oriented, intuition.

The formal similarity of the scene with the tauroctony motif was marked in former studies (Campbell, 1968: 247-248; Grabar, 1967: 54-55; Harper and Meyers, 1981: 59). Association of the British Museum plate with the iconography of the Roman Mithraism allows further interpretation of other Sasanian art works in this light, but ultimately, it evidences existence of Mithraic creed in the Sasanian empire. Its existence in a form that exceeded the limited space allowed by Zoroastrianism or be reduced to the function of “sun deity”, or “solar deity” (the difference which was marked by Bracey) (Bracey, 2017: 119-120, 123) with individual mythologies, ethics, praxis and sense of identity (Pourshariati, 2013). The scene differs from usual Sasanian or Kushan iconography of Mithra (Bracey, 2017; Callieri, 1990; Grenet, 1993; Grenet, 2006; Shenkar, 2013: 102-114; Sinisi, 2017) as it, most likely, refers to a different set of ideas (Adrych *et al.*, 2017: 9; Dalglisch, 2017b: 157) or quite a different cult, i.e. possibly a different understanding of the god¹. If the discussed scene on the plate

¹ Diversification between a god and the ideas is greatly inspired by: Adrych, Bracey, Dalglisch, Lenk, Wood, 2017: 9; Dalglisch, 2017b: 157.

from the British Museum was addressed to the Iranian audience not as an imported, exotic image, which is supported by clearly Iranian forms and conventions applied, than the content must have been legible for the designed recipient of the message as their own. On the other hand, if the form is related to the core icon of western Mithraism, then it must have been shared in both forms of this cult. The conclusion, therefore, is that the discussed scene represents the visual aspect of Iranian, implicitly original, Mithraism.

There are, however, discrepancies which require further discussion.

Bull/deer. The most striking difference between the tauroctony scenes and the discussed plate is the type of animal which is being killed. The very name tauroctony refers to bull, while the protagonist of the scene from the plate from the British Museum slays a deer. The semantic connection between bull and deer has been already proposed by Windfuhr already in context of the deer figures of Sarmatian kurgan in Filipovka². At the same time Windfuhr proposed to identify the discussed scene from the plate from the British Museum in context of Mithraic tauroctony³. The educated speculations of Windfuhr are focused specifically on the reconstruction of the elements of religion of the steppe nomadic Iranians and are more concerned with the astral symbolism than setting the images in the cultural system known from the written sources or on analyse of the iconographic forms of Iranian art. Current paper offers very different perspective. Although

² Windfuhr, 2006; Gasparini, 2020: 22-23.

³ Windfuhr, 2006: 52-54.

the astronomical phenomena are indisputable fact, their cultural attribution requires more critical approach. There is no actual source to confirm existence of the god called Mithra worshipped among the Sarmatians. In itself it does not disqualify such supposition, however Mithraic identification of deers among the Sarmatians instantly implies analogical explanation of the same motif in the closest cultural relation, i.e. Scythian art. This, in turn, creates a methodological concern, as in Scythian pantheons in Herodotus, Mithra is not mentioned.

It must be remembered that in Iranian languages, as in other Indo-European languages, there is a relationship between the bull and the deer: the cow/bull is *gāv*, and the deer is *gavazn* - a hypothetical old Iranian **gavazana* (*gava* + *zana* - "of the cow kind", "of the cow species"). This word is not attested in known Old Persian or Avestrian texts, but already existing in Middle Iranian forms (Middle Persian *gavazn* and similar Sogdian and Choresmian versions), as well as versions found in geographically and typologically distant New Iranian languages (n.p. Pashto and Tāleshi) attest to descent from a common Old Iranian ancestor¹. In hunting nomenclature of most European cultures, the male deer is called a bull². Thus, specifically among the cultures with preserved aspects of pastoral nomadism, the deer could be re-

placing the bull, or to be more exact the bull and deer shared mythical identity. It is true that the deer would never act as a domestication agent, and a fowl could not symbolise nurturing abilities of a cow, however the symbolism of bulls refers rather to its strength, power and occasional ferocity. In such sense deer and bulls could reflect dynamic and dangerous power of nature and their meanings are mutually interchangeable. Such identification would be especially valid in a warrior brotherhood where hunting was culturally important and defining pastime, and subsequently hunting nomenclature, would be the common mode of communication. The equivalent of Chal Tarkhan stucco with a protagonist riding a deer could be, in such interpretation, a column base from Muzeul National Brukenthal in Sibiu (A 3440/7274) with depiction of Mithra with a torch (Cautes?) riding a bull (Natea, 2021: 192-193). Similarly, the right scene in the bottom register of the medallion from Caesarea Maritime identified by Ratzlaff as Mithra grasping the bull can be interpreted as the personage actually riding it (Ratzlaff, 2020: 162-163).

Crown. The personage in the scene from the British Museum plate wears a crown of Šābuhr II while Mithra in the Roman iconography is always shown wearing "Phrygian cap". Such clear identification of the personage seems to contradict identification of the scene as a mythological icon. This crown, however, cannot be seen as an absolute determinant. The functioning of the royal figure in Sasanian toreutics is unclear. Several, unless most of the personages cannot

¹ I am grateful to Professor Anna Krasnowolska for sharing this linguistic analyse in private communication.

² Such an interchangeable semantics might explain why the Achaemenid formula of lion attacking bull was easily replaceable by lion attacking deer in Scythian milieu.

be identified clearly through the crown type, some surely do not wear any of the known crowns. At the same time the post-Sasanian plates and stucco still keep depicting the royal figures, which suggest rather a wide circulation and relative popularity of the motifs. For the “diplomatic gifts” they seem rather modest, especially if compared with the amount of silverware not decorated with the scenes involving the royals. Functioning of the crowned personages in the heroic scenes might not necessarily serve heroisation of the depicted figure identified by a crown, but rather marking a royal character of the otherwise recognisable protagonist. Having a series of scenes known from Firdawsi as involving Bahram V, where none of the scenes really show the crown of Bahram V, it becomes evident that the narrative used by Ferdawsi did not refer to this king from the very beginning and either it was the poet, who made such identification himself, or his direct source (the last in the line of transition) already attributed the narrative with Bahram V. This example illustrates difficulties with treating the crowns as allegedly historical markers in the scenes depicted on the Sasanian silver vessels. It is possible that the royal figures were auspicious, especially in a successful hunt or defeating dangerous beasts. The auspiciousness relate to the ultimately high status and ordering function of the world, however the figures reminding those from the coins must have clearly related to wealth and prosperity.

Alternatively, the crown might serve a function of conveying some meaning related to a name linked to a crown. In case of Šābuhr, the name means “a son of

a king” which can have esoteric associations, specifically in the light of the story of birth of Šābuhr I, where his mother is sentenced to death after an attempt to kill Ardashir, but is saved in secret, to disclose his royal identity in due time (Kārnamag-i Ardaxšir-i Pāpagān, X-XI; Šāhnāme: 556-557). Similarly, the son of Šābuhr had to be revealed as a royal out of hiding (Šāhnāme: 563-564). This hidden status which requires an act of revelation matches very well to the initiative process within a mystery cult, where the cognition of the spiritual mystery leads to obtaining a new status is usually the very core of cultic activity. The realisation of the divine nature and its liberation from the material world was the goal of the Manichaean gnosticism, which exemplifies presence of such mystery cult orientation in Iranian imagery. Unfortunately the Mithraic doctrine remains largely unknown and is being reconstructed from dispersed sources (Pourshariati, 2013).

It is not impossible that the intention was to depict Šābuhr as a religious figure or a person initiated in the mysteries.

Sword. The personage in the scene on the plate from the British Museum is holding his weapon the sword way, i.e. the blade protrudes over the index finger. What is more, the weapon is held in so-called “Italian grip”, with the index finger hooking the cross-guard (Masia, 2000; Skupniewicz, 2019a; Skupniewicz, 2020). Although the blade was not shown in the entire length, it is clear that the long bladed Sasanian sword was intended even if the blade of this kind would transfix the neck of the deer, which was not depicted. The Sasanian swords are very different from the dagger-like swords related with

Mithraic iconography (indicated by the reversed or knife-grip and sometimes depicted before stabbing and equally rare showing of scabbards) and occasionally found in the mithraea (Peretti, 2021: 465, fig. 5; Capus, 2021b: 504-505; Massa, 2021: 334, fig. 1; Griffith, 2021: 306, Fig. 5; Michel-von Dungern, 2021: 204-205; Szabo, 2021: 200-201; Tutilā, 2021: 194-195; Kemkes, 2021: 382-383; Boschung, 2015: 218, 220-221, figs. 1, 3-4.). The difference cannot be explained simply by the difference between the idea of a sword in Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran. It rather stems from the fact that the Mithraic iconography was transferred west when the fashion for long-bladed swords did not yet fully develop in Iran (Winkelman, 2006; Winkelman, 2009). The adoption of the long-bladed swords coincided with the introduction of larger bows which required bigger gorytoi (Skupniewicz, 2021; Skupniewicz, 2022). This enforced a switch in the layout, as long bladed swords were cumbersome to draw from the right hip, especially on horseback, and were moved to the left side, while the bow and arrows case was placed on the right hip. Thus, the Mithraic icon reflected reality before this technical change. As was stated above, the image is adjusted to the Sasanian tastes, even if originally the idea came from Iran, significantly earlier.

Left knee. In Roman tauroctony scenes Mithra is shown crushing the bull with the left knee. This formula was identified by Bivar as “Mithraic hold” and related to one of the conventions of depicting warriors in combat where the victor steps on the body of the defeated (Bivar, 1995; Bivar, 1998; Bivar, 2005). Such identifica-

tion cannot be sustained, as it is based on superficial observation and misses the fact that similar convention of the victors stepping with one leg on the fallen foes are present in Neo-Assyrian and Greek/Hellenistic art without sound suspicion of Mithraic context. Bivar also missed the fact that the position of one of the legs is sharply bent and the other stretched, characterise the defeated person in the battle scenes already in Greek classical art, but is well attested in Achaemenid, Hellenistic and even Roman iconographies¹. So, if one was to speculate about

¹ According to the principles of clear communication, the defeated figure had to be shown in an unambiguous manner. One of the positions of the dying victim is to be shown kneeling on a bent left leg with the right leg straightened. This is a method commonly used, known from the Čan sarcophagus, Bithynian stelae, but also Etruscan urns. The most recognisable example of such convention would be the Persian being killed by Alexander on the mosaic from the House of Faun from Pompeii. Decebal on Trajan's column is shown committing suicide in this position, but one can also see a reference to this position in a battle scene on a plaque from Orlat. In the western Mediterranean, the defeated enemy was shown hunched over, on all fours, which is sometimes interpreted as a reference to sexual violence. In depictions “confronting” the horseman with the infantryman, the latter is often shown upright, facing the protagonist dynamically, often his upright position is emphasized by an oval shield - thyreos, and the infantryman's head, according to the principle of isokefalia, is placed at the same level as the horseman. Basically, then, the position of the victim matches the visual formula used, although sometimes, as in the case of the stele from Kadyand, we have the victim kneeling on his

the meaning of the position of Mithra in the tauroctonies, it would rather lead to a paradox of an ultimate winner being shown in a conventional pose of a victim. It might imply hidden connection between the sacrificer and the offering. To some extent such view might be seen as Mithra making a self-sacrifice, or at least participating in the role of the offering. That would be a farfetched conclusion based on an iconographic convention and interpretation of the visual language of the era. Definitive confirmation of such speculation is impossible to obtain at the current stage.

The fact is that the specific position of Mithra is a part of the icon, however the left, crushing leg is frequently hardly visible, in other cases the god simply stands on both legs in front of the bull. So, if the image was adjusted to fit the audience of the Sasanian kingdom, the conventional knee position was omitted as not legible within the frames of the Iranian visual culture of the time.

Flying gallop. The deer depicted on the British Museum plate under discussion was shown in “flying gallop”, with both front and hind legs stretched which is the typical convention of picturing the mounts in a dynamic motion. The protagonist rides the galloping deer which is very different from the Roman icon of the god crushing the sacrificial bull to the ground. At the same time, Roman Mithraic iconography provides examples of Mithra and bull in motion, which surely precedes the final act of killing (Dirven, 2015: 32, 35, 44). There is, mentioned above, depiction of Mithra riding a bull (Campbell, 1968: 257; Natea, 2021: 192-193; Dirven, 2015: 32; Ratzlaff, 2020: 162-163) but there are also scenes of the god dragging or carrying the bull or *Mithras Taurophorus* (Campbell, 1968: 257; Ratzlaff, 2020: 162; Dirven, 2015: 32, 35, 44). Combination of these phases - riding and killing, which required strict separation for the Roman viewers, was allowed in Sasanian aesthetics which can be supported by the triumphal reliefs of Šābuhr I.

Conclusion

The scene of “Šābuhr killing a deer” on the silver plate from the British Museum (inv. 124091) is related to tauroctony icon from the Roman Mithraic iconography. The idea of imagery of Mithra in the Sasanian art is in scholar literature, associated with the god’s function of the “solar deity” and one of few *dēvas*, or original Iranian “pagan” deities worshipped before Zarathushtra’s reform, allowed to Zoroastrian pantheon. The discussed scene allows to propose existence of genuinely Mithraic iconography, i.e. iconography related to the mystery cult of the god Mithra.

Conclusion

The scene is not a direct copy of the Roman pattern and the general layout was adopted to current Sasanian principles of image-building. Therefore it is not “western exotica” of obscure, foreign meaning and if any form of *interpretatio Iranica* ever existed should be expected to look this way. However if the Mithraic content was directed to local Mithraic community then it would rather be a re-adoption or an example of genuinely Iranian motif developed in Iran, but we do not have any examples of its earlier stages. It is possible that the icon was

left leg with his right leg extended, but with a rigidly upright body and a large shield.

developed in the Roman Empire based on the Mithraic lore and that the Iranian Mithraists did not create religious images and might have been mildly iconoclast. Mazhjoon rightfully noted that the attire of Roman Mithra is stereotypically Persian, as transmitted to the Roman imagery from the Greek sources (Mazhjoon, 2021: 141-144.). A similar idea was expressed by Adrych, Bracey, Dalglish, Lenk, Wood (2017: 169). This could support the view that the image was constructed in the Roman Empire, however it would still refer to the same, shared symbolic reality. At the same time, it must be remembered that in general the Iranian costume did not change radically into Parthian era, and the Roman iconography did not offer a single grab of Mithra. What Mazhjoon seems to miss, is that the cloak type depicted on Roman Mithraic monuments is different from Achaemenid *kandys*¹ and reminds rather later Iranian cloaks from Parthian and early Sasanian iconography, the baggy leggings worn over trousers did not replace the latter but covered them in logic of riding gear. Richly embroidered trousers remained rather tight in Iranian fashion of Parthian period. The convention was thus adjusted to current state of affairs and was not a mere copy of imagined Iranians of the past². If Iranian Mithraic cult was to be a secret society, the images could pose potential danger of revealing, even unintentionally, the secrets to the outsiders. Original Iranian reluctance towards depicting deities is well attested and it was only gradually

compromised in official art. Such process would not concern the religious societies but the adoption of the cult in Roman territory, with possible significant changes, placed it in new cultural environment where it faced new expectations. Presence of the Mithraic reference on the discussed plate from the British Museum might be inspired by the images from the territory of the Roman Empire, but easily adoptable to the local visual culture, as they referred to the known myth.

The other possibility, of iconography of the Roman Mithraism stemming from the unpreserved Iranian roots, cannot be fully excluded. As it was mentioned, the images of the personages holding the victim with the left hand while thrusting the short sword with the right hand are very common in Achaemenid iconography. In the Roman milieu, these images would receive new stylistic features, including three-dimensional approach.

The interpretation of the plate in Mithraic terms allows to state that the Roman Mithraism had Iranian roots and that the members of the Mithraic societies must have been the audience of that sort iconography.

It should also be mentioned that the discussed plate does not exhaust the examples of Sasanian toreutics with possibly Mithraic references. Firstly, there is a group of plates depicting killing a bull which may refer to the tauroctony, secondly, the heroic encounters which involve the deers should also be included in this group³.

¹ Mazhjoon, 2021 confuses the *kandys* with the tunic.

² Mazhjoon, 2021: 141-144; Adrych *et al.*, 2017: 159, 169.

³ Parthian plate from al-Sabah Collection; Metropolitan Museum of Art plate 1970.6. Fabricius Collection plate, Synya Family plate.

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