

# Aspects of Achaemenid Art



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# Aspects of Achaemenid Art

## *A look into the native and the foreign*

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## *Introduction*

Persian, in particular Achaemenid Art has been a matter of discussion for a long period of time, with topics varying from its appraisal on one side, to mere criticism on the other. While certain scholars have tried to categorize this art as something distinctive and unique, again others have wondered ‘*Is there anything Persian in Persian Art?*’.<sup>1</sup>

On initial sight, the art of the Achaemenids does seem to be an accumulation of copies from either contemporary or preceding surrounding cultures. This fact naturally gave rise to large amounts of criticism in the non-academic as well as academic circles. However, it is exactly within this fact that a major problem resides. By judging this book merely by its cover, one tends to push it aside as something which is not interesting or original and thus common. In other words, why would one study a Persian *Lamassu* when there is the original Assyrian one? Surely, questions should arise even when looking at mere copies, which Persian Art certainly is not. Questions such as why certain aspects of other cultures were incorporated in this art while others were left out, to what extent this was done deliberately, and for what reason.

According to some scholars (e.g. Moorey), there is an initial distinction that needs to be taken into consideration, and that is of the differences between the folk art of the Persian people and the official art of the Achaemenid Empire.<sup>2</sup> There are however more divisions within this art which will be made clear in the chapters below. Taking the official art of the Achaemenid Empire (i.e. imperial art) into notion, it is clear that the growth or popularization of the type was initiated with the ascension of Darius the Great to the throne.<sup>3</sup> Before this period, the empire still resided in a condition of expansionism which prevented it from settling down and concentrating on other matters. It is in this type of art that foreign, non-Persian and even non-Iranian elements are most evident, and as shall be discussed below, this was done deliberately to quite an extent. Another perhaps deliberate trait of imperial art is that of its conservatism, which unlike the arts of other empires in the Near East included both style and subject matter.<sup>4</sup> Similarly initiated under Darius’ rule, both of these characteristics continued almost entirely unchanged until the

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<sup>1</sup> Moorey 1985, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Moorey 1985, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Merrillees 2005, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Boardman 2000, 125.

fall of the empire by the hand of Alexander the Great, where after certain features even continued until Parthian and Sassanid times. As Casson puts it:

*'Art was thus, in a sense, fettered to the traditions of the House of Achaemenes, at least in those works which were done for monarchs of the empire.'*<sup>5</sup>

The less visible and clearly less known folk and peripheral art of the empire has similarities with imperial art, but in the sense of individualism it ranks much higher. As the citation above mentions, and as shall be discussed below, this type of art was freer in its creation and thus more diverse than the rather artificial imperial art.

The term 'art' is comprised of many things such as sculpture and architecture, wood and metalwork, ceramics and much more. To include all of these in this paper would be either impossible, or it would mean giving too little of well deserved attention to many of them. As such, I have chosen to focus on iconography for this paper, since it is one of the most common and most diverse of arts in the ancient Near East. Iconography of the Persian period is most common on cylinder and stamp seals, and on reliefs at for example palaces and royal tombs. It is essential to mention the fact that at times cylinder seals were used as stamp seals, showing the growing popularity of the latter.<sup>6</sup>

This paper is divided into three chapters, with the first and second discussing the foreign and native aspects of Achaemenid Art consecutively. The final chapter takes an analytical approach on matters, discussing the ideologies behind the art and more.

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<sup>5</sup> Upham Pope 1981, 350.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell/Searight 2007, 133-83.

## *Foreign aspects of Achaemenid Art*

As mentioned earlier, the obvious foreign features in Achaemenid Art are mostly visible in imperial art. It is for this reason that the main focus of this chapter leans more towards this type of art, while the next chapter about native aspects concentrates more on the folk and peripheral art. It should be needless to say however, that this division is certainly not absolute and that there are overlapping features to take into consideration.

It has already been pointed out by me that other divisions within Persian Art are possible. Looking at imperial or peripheral & folk art, a distinction could be made between the deliberate and non-deliberate adoption of foreign traits into local art. Moreover, this adoption of traits was not merely one-sided, so even though much that was foreign was implemented in the art of Persia, much that was Persian was taken by conquered peoples as well.<sup>7</sup> The deliberate use of foreign traits, which was often conducted under royal order, was done so with a purpose.<sup>8</sup> It is however worth mentioning that the theory of this being imposed by Darius as an overall order<sup>9</sup> is purely based on the empirical evidence we have (i.e. there are no written documents confirming this as a fact). Before getting into more details about this, it is essential to go through some of the key foreign features that are encountered in Persian Art.

The next two subchapters bring forward another possible division in the art of this period, namely that of western and eastern traits. The importance of this lies in the fact that eastern influence is all but Iranian in nature, while western influence varies amongst others from Greek and Egyptian to Hittite and Mesopotamian. The Persians themselves being Iranian would adopt other Iranians features more easily as they would see them as something more natural or perhaps even native. Moreover, the Iranian features in Persian Art have deeper roots coinciding with the longer history that they would have had together. Western features on the other hand, would have been something new as they were encountered while the empire expanded in the corresponding direction. This however cannot be applied on all western features since some were already incorporated in the art of perhaps more eastern cultures such as the Elamite. The Elamite case is a fine example since they had raided Mesopotamian cities and empires for centuries

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<sup>7</sup> Kuhrt 1995, 700.

<sup>8</sup> Boardman 2000, 125-6.

<sup>9</sup> Merrillees 2005, 85.

before the Persians had even arrived. As such, they had brought a great deal of objects back with them as loot, and consecutively incorporated certain western features into their own art.<sup>10</sup> To the Persians it would have seemed as if they were using Elamite features, but for us who are able to see the bigger picture, it is obvious that they were not doing so.

This brings us to the next and final important division within Persian Art, namely that of direct and indirect influence. Direct influence occurs only when a civilization comes into actual contact with another where after certain aspects of art (or any other cultural trait for that matter) are either deliberately or otherwise incorporated into their own culture. As shown in the example of Elam above, indirect influence occurs when these aspects are relayed through one or more other cultures before reaching their destination (i.e. the culture under study).

When studying the art of Achaemenid Persia, it is essential to take all of the divisions mentioned above into consideration. Without them, one tends to generalize and end up with prejudgments rather than scientific facts. This way of careful studying not only prevents these flaws, but it aids a great deal in the improved understanding of the art as well. Therefore, it is vital to make use of these divisions where needed in the next chapters, wherein the significant aspects of Persian Art is discussed.

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<sup>10</sup> Calmeyer 1974, 137.

## *Eastern influence*

Art on the Iranian plateau before the arrival of Persians had already been influenced to some extent by surrounding cultures, though it had retained certain independencies witnessed in artifacts from the *Ziwiye* hoard, the *Luristan* bronzes and more recently *Jiroft*.<sup>11</sup> One of its important general aspects, being that of decoration over presentation, was later slowly and unintentionally incorporated into Persian Art. These and other Iranian elements in Persian Art are certainly traceable, but by no means is this easily done.<sup>12</sup>

One rather common feature is that of counterpoised figures or symmetrical endings, which can be seen in sculpture, iconography, ceramics and metalwork.<sup>13</sup> These figures of animals or mythical beings were already commonly used in earlier cultures of Mesopotamia, but the diversity in themes and their symmetrical positioning was an Iranian feature.<sup>14</sup> This is shown in the front page illustration of a Persian bracelet from the Oxus treasure, as well as in illustrations 1 to 3 below.



(1) *Armenian gift bearer, presenting a vase with counterpoised figures of griffins on handle and sprout (Apadana staircase at Persepolis, Iran)*

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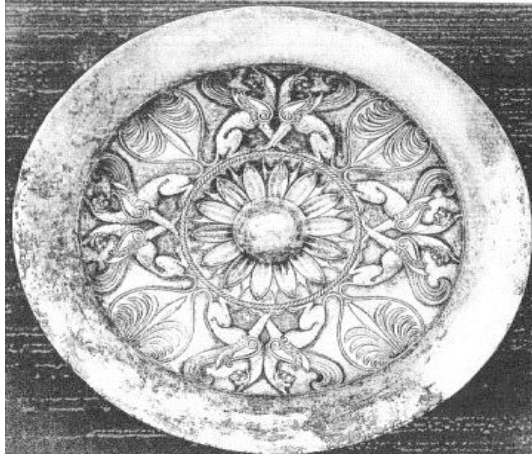
<sup>11</sup> Frankfort 1996, 333.

<sup>12</sup> Moorey 1985, 21.

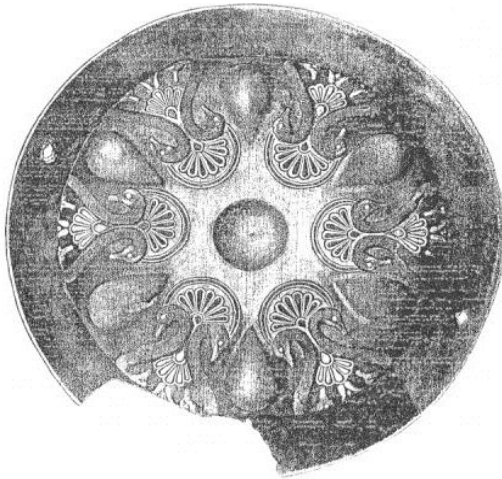
<sup>13</sup> Upham Pope 1981, 360.

<sup>14</sup> Moorey 1985, 33.





(2) Gilt silver dish depicting four counterpoised griffins as well as four symmetrically positioned palmettes (Sofia, Bulgaria)



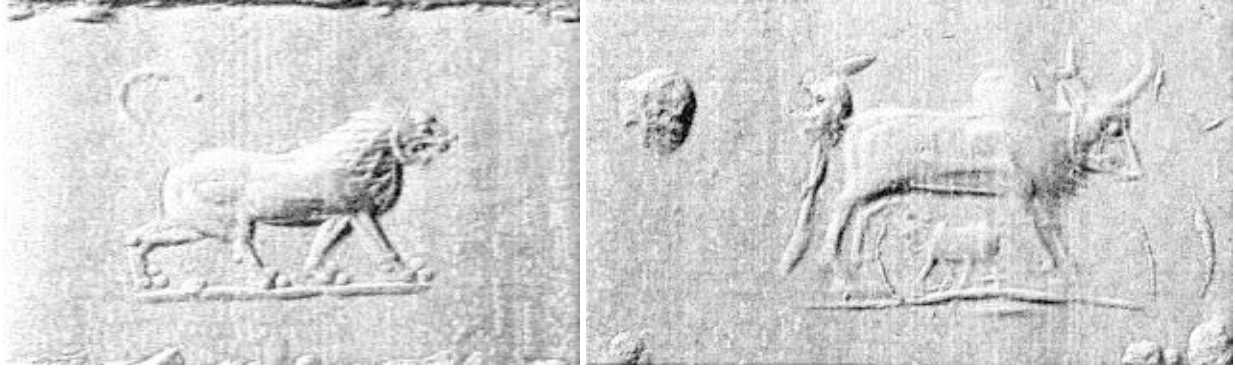
(3) Silver phiale depicting six counterpoised swans with palmettes covering their heads (Moscow, Russia)

The Iranian interest for the various fauna (and to a lesser extent flora) around them<sup>15</sup>, in particular that of the horse, played a major role in their choice of recreating these animals in all of their art<sup>16</sup> (*illustrations 4 and 5*). The so called equestrianism which is evident in the art of all Iranian tribes has its roots in a nomadic lifestyle where horses played a significant role, and which was a typical facet of all Iranian peoples.<sup>17</sup> Even when some of the former (e.g. Medes & Persians) chose sedentary life over the nomadic, horses retained their important role both in art as well in everyday life (*illustrations 6 to 9*).

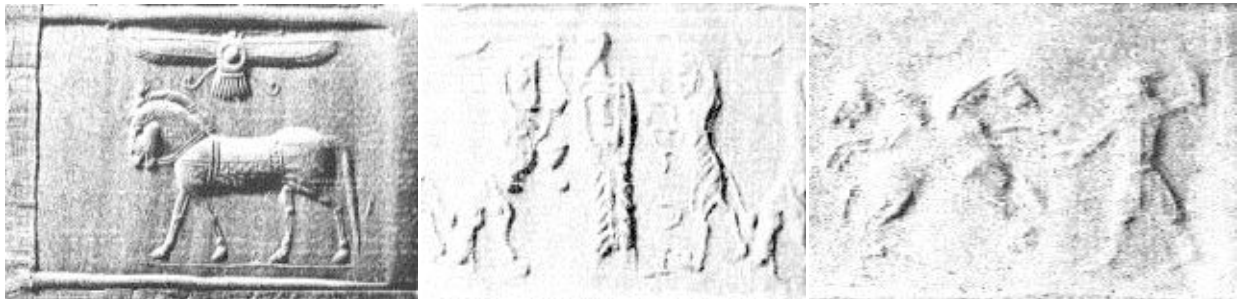
<sup>15</sup> Upham Pope 1981, 365.

<sup>16</sup> Moorey 1985, 35.

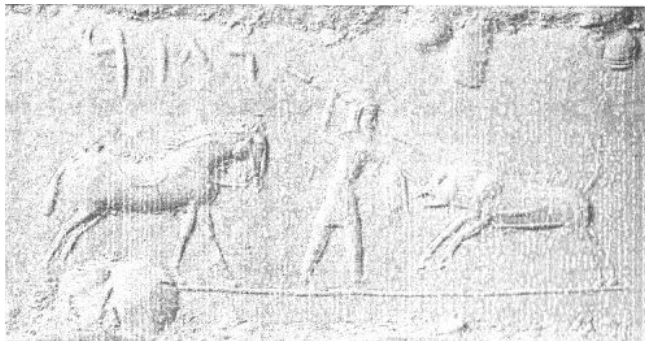
<sup>17</sup> Moorey 1985, 22.



*(4) Seal impressions of a sole lion and (5) that of a cow nurturing its young (British Museum, London)*



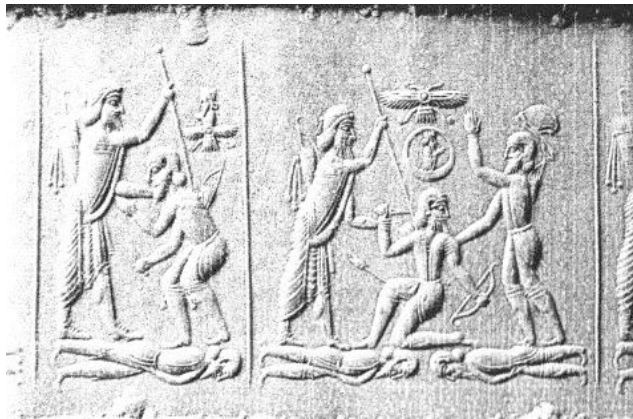
*(6) Seal impressions of a sole horse in garment with a winged disk hovering above, (7) that of a man in Persian dress, between two horses standing on their hind legs, (8) and that of a man in a striking position with two counterpoised horses standing on their hind legs (British Museum, London)*



*(9) Seal impression of a man in Median dress, descended from his horse, hunting a boar with a spear (British Museum, London)*

The biggest contributors to the Persian account of this so called ‘animal art’ were Scythians, who more or less retained their (equestrian) nomadic lifestyle even after the rise and fall of the Persian Empire. By looking at Persian Art in its entirety, it is certainly fair to say that the main source of eastern influence in Persian Art was that of the Scythians. Almost equally common are the Median aspects in Persian Art which cover a whole different area of features, namely that of clothing.

Viewing Persian iconography, the occurrence of both Persian and Median dresses are amongst the most common in them. Both are worn on occasions by Persians while Medes are always depicted in their own native clothing. A Persian dress consists of a full skirt (or perhaps wide trousers) with vertical central pleats and diagonal folds, a separate upper part with hanging sleeves or cape and shoes with and without straps (*illustrations 10 & 11*). The Median costume on the other hand consists of a belted tunic or jacket, trousers or leggings, a covering coat with long sleeves called a *kandys* and boots or shoes (*illustrations 9, 12 & 13*).<sup>18</sup> The headdresses for figures without crowns consisted of a cap or a hood for both Persians and Medes.<sup>19</sup>



(10) Seal impression of Persian soldiers in war with (unclear) enemies who are either wounded or dead while two winged disks (one with and one without male bust) and an encircled male bust hover above (British Museum, London)



(11) Seal impression of a Persian man attacking a winged bull with bow and arrow while a winged disk and encircled male bust hover in between (British Museum, London).

<sup>18</sup> Merrillees 2005, 85.

<sup>19</sup> Merrillees 2005, 96-7.



(12) Seal impression of Medes battling winged bull and antelope (?) with short sword (British Museum, London)



(13) Seal impression of a Mede attacking a Greek with a spear while a winged disk is hovering above (British Museum, London).

It is interesting to see that the Median dress is worn by Darius III and some of his entourage, as depicted on the famous Alexander mosaic. Constructed long after the fall of the Persian Empire, its creator was obviously quite well informed on the details and the importance of Median influence in Persian clothing.

Apart from the clothing mentioned above one more object can be attributed to the Medes, this being the Median short sword or *akinakes*.<sup>20</sup> This sword was used by almost all Iranian tribes<sup>21</sup>, although it is often depicted in a sheathed state in Persian Art as it had a more symbolic meaning for Persian monarchs and was thus practically never used in actual combat. It is only shown unsheathed and being used in scenes where (usually) the king is fighting a bull, lion or a mythological being on his own (*illustration 14*).

<sup>20</sup> Moorey 1985, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Calmeyer 1974, 11.



(14) Seal impression of a Persian king (?) attacking a lion with an akinakes while another Persian man attacks a bull with a sickle (British Museum, London).

Although they were already in use in the west as well, bracelets should be taken as an eastern influence for the Persian account for they were already used by Iranian tribes before they came in contact with any western culture. Moreover, the zoomorphic design which was used in both areas had a greater variety of design in the east.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, certain other objects depicted in Persian Art (e.g. the battle axe & the cased composite bow) are of the Iranian type, while the same objects of a different type had already been in use in the west as well.<sup>23</sup>

Since it does not often apply on iconographic art, merely the main examples of style in Persian Art shall be discussed now in short. The use of rich color contrasts may have been the most common Iranian trait in Persian Art.<sup>24</sup> As an example, the bracelet in the front page illustration was originally set with many colorful stones where now merely gaps remain. This is still evident in later and even modern Iranian Art, in for example the use of colors in Persian miniature paintings. In addition to this use of colors, a more free treatment of patterns points out the origin of this style towards the more dynamic and free use of ornament in the east.<sup>25</sup> Finally, decoration of objects in an unusually high *repoussé* technique shows an eastern source as well, evident in the skill of Iranian sheet metal industry.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Moorey 1985, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Moorey 1985, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Moorey 1985, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Moorey 1985, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Moorey 1985, 34.

## *Western influence*

In contrary to the aspects discussed in the previous chapter, western influence on Persian Art has received widespread attention by scholars. The Mesopotamian traits, often Assyrian or Babylonian in origin, are mostly visible in large imperial art, while the Greek characteristics are more often found in the smaller artwork of Persia. To a lesser extent, Egyptian and Hittite features are also found, though the latter is merely seen in architecture.

At the start of the Persian period a strange blend of styles and themes is visible, which could be designated as an intermediate state.<sup>27</sup> In this period, the blending is visibly accidental (e.g. clothing which is half Persian and half Mesopotamian) and shows the artist's lack of knowledge on the new rulers. As the empire settled down and conquered peoples adapted to the new situation, this accidental blending reached a more professional level as it became more accurate and deliberate in character. The art which is in this sense more 'Persianised' was created by artists who either forcefully or voluntarily moved to the Persian heartland and were living in or around it for a significant period of time.<sup>28</sup>

The Egyptian features in the art of the empire are mostly decorative in nature (*illustration 15*) and similar to the Greek ones, they are more common on small objects.



(15) Seal impression of a Persian royal falcon, an (incense) altar and a winged bull, decorated on the top and bottom sides by wedjat eyes (British Museum, London).

The most common and reoccurring Egyptian feature is the presence of Bes in Persian iconography. While other Egyptian deities were often left out in areas outside of the borders of

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<sup>27</sup> Merrillees 2005, 87.

<sup>28</sup> Boardman 2000, 132.

the Egyptian satrapy, Bes occurs even on objects which were found in the Persian heartland. One reason for this might be the role of Bes as the protector of households. Throughout its entire existence the Persian Empire remained in the hands of the house of Achaemenes and it was done so by measurements taken by its rulers. The protection of the Achaemenid household was of utmost importance and perhaps the best foreign deity to take the role of its protector was Bes. Thus it is such that Bes is often depicted as an aid to the king, either as an ordinary hunting partner (*illustrations 16*) or as an important figure in rituals (*illustration 17*).



(16) Seal impression of a Persian king fighting a lion with a bow and a (hunting) dog, while aided by a Bes figure carrying a hunted animal on its back (British Museum, London).



(17) Seal impression of a Persian king, a winged disk with bust and four wings, royal griffins and a Bes figure standing on top of two royal griffins while holding two antelopes(?) (British Museum, London)

One of the few examples of Egyptian influence on a large object is the famous winged figure stele at Pasargadae, where the figure clearly wears an adaptation of an Egyptian crown (*illustration 17*).



(17) Stele of a winged figure wearing an Egyptian crown. The inscription reads 'I Cyrus the King; an Achaemenid' (Pasargadae, Iran).

It is essential to mention the fact that the inscription above the figure was added after the reign of Cyrus the Great, thus putting the identity of the figure in question. However, the identity of this figure as Cyrus is fairly probable when focusing on its Assyrian traits and their meaning. Clearly depicted as an Assyrian genius, it could have meant to give Cyrus the same identity as the former, namely that of a protective being. In addition it would be rather odd to add a description presenting the figure as Cyrus if it did not actually represent him.

As mentioned before, such Mesopotamian influence on Persian art is abundant, both in large imperial art as well as in smaller objects. A good example of the latter are the depictions in a collection of sixteen seal impressions (nr.381) in the *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum (Stamp Seals III)*, where a mixture of Persian and Mesopotamian styles and themes are used.<sup>29</sup> Use of text on these seals is rather uncommon, but wherever the theme of an illustration is that of prayer, the words *dingir.duĥ.duĥ* (literally 'holy words') or prayer is often inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform. Other used languages include Aramaic and to a lesser extent Old Persian as well.

Concerning weaponry, the importance of bow and arrow as a royal weapon and the common use of the spear by high dignitaries is ultimately Assyrian in origin.<sup>30</sup> As such it was incorporated in large imperial art as well as in smaller art of the Persians. However, merely the symbolic status of these weapons was taken from Assyrians, as the weapon types themselves were of Iranian origin.

<sup>29</sup> Mitchell/Searight 2007, 136.

<sup>30</sup> Merrillees 2005, 107-11.



An ancient Mesopotamian theme, the master of beasts theme is a popular one in Persian art. It is not an important theme merely for its popularity but rather for its use in dating.<sup>31</sup> While in Mesopotamian art the arms of ‘the master’ are always bent, in Persian art the stance of the arms varies (from older to newer) between stretched, diagonally raised and bent (*illustrations 19 & 20*).



(19) Seal impression of a Persian king in a master of beasts theme  
(British Museum, London).



(20) Seal impression of a Persian king in a master of beasts theme  
(British Museum, London).

It is worth mentioning the fact that the Persian depictions of this theme are often non-mythological in character in contrary to the Mesopotamian ones which frequently make use of mythological beings, either as the ‘master’ or the beasts being held.

Another common theme with a Mesopotamian (i.e. Assyrian) origin is that of figures in a so called ‘Atlas pose’, holding up either objects or figures of high importance.<sup>32</sup> As shall be discussed further in the next chapters, and similar to the master of beasts theme, the Persian equivalent makes almost no use of mythological beings for this theme (*illustrations 21 & 22*).

<sup>31</sup> Merrillees 2005, 100-6.

<sup>32</sup> Merrillees 2005, 107.



(21) Seal impression of a winged disk with bust, held up by two winged genii in an Atlas pose, while an encircled bust hovers inbetween (British Museum, London).



(22) Seal impression of a winged disk, held up by two Persians in an Atlas pose, with a Bes figure inbetween them and an Old Persian discription to the left (British Museum, London).

The two illustrations above bring us to the last common Mesopotamian feature in Persian art, namely that of the winged disk. Ultimately Egyptian in origin, the Persian winged disk was borrowed directly from the Assyrian type. The bust of a male figure which regularly appears in the center of the winged disk and also occasionally encircled or on crescents<sup>33</sup> has been the center of major discussions, as noted by Boardman:

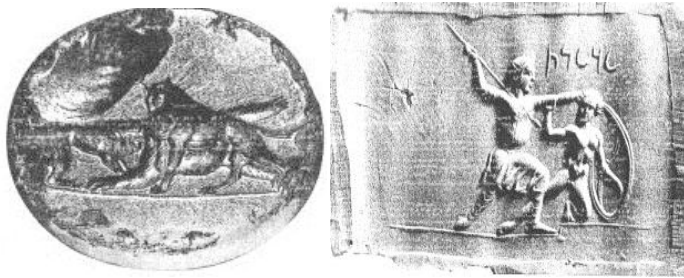
*It may be noted that the identification of the figure in the Persian winged discs as Ahuramazda has been much queried recently, but it is he who is most regularly invoked in the early royal inscriptions, not any other 'hero' or god, and the accompanying image regularly shows the disc-borne god.<sup>34</sup>*

<sup>33</sup> Merrillees 2005, 115-8.

<sup>34</sup> Boardman 2000, 146.

A full discussion on this matter would distort the subject of his paper and it certainly deserves a paper on its own. As such, in a previous paper I have proven beyond much doubt that the identification of the winged disk figure as Ahuramazda is very improbable. The problem mainly resides in the fact that while trying to interpret this figure, many scholars tend to see it as a complete copy of the Assyrian winged disk. The former being a representation of the god Assur, it is thus often taken as a given fact that the Persian winged disk must be a (main) deity as well.

Without a doubt as equally important as Mesopotamia, was the Greek influence in Persian art. The Greek features are mainly visible in architecture, and more importantly for this paper, in small objects (generally) from satrapies bordering the Greek lands. Contrary to popular belief and in spite of the many wars between Persia and the Greek states, the movement of Greek peoples and goods alike throughout the empire was free and unhampered.<sup>35</sup> This resulted a mixture of themes and styles on many objects such as seals and coins (*illustrations 24 & 25*).<sup>36</sup>



(24) Seal impressions of wolves attacking a bear and (25) a man attacking another with a spear (British Museum, London).

In the illustrations above, the depth and 3D effect which is given to the figures is clearly a Greek attribute. Yet other Greek features in Persian art were the occurrence of Greek myths, figures and themes.<sup>37</sup> A good example is a seal impression of a head and forequarters of a lion, bull and horse around a central boss (nr.516) and a similar one with flexed human legs (nr. 524), both in the *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum (Stamp Seals III)*.<sup>38</sup> Although not as common as Mesopotamian features in Persian art, Greek influence certainly is one of the most important since it brought previously unknown styles (namely depth and liveliness) to the ancient Near East.

<sup>35</sup> Boardman 2000, 203.

<sup>36</sup> Boardman 2000, 175-6.

<sup>37</sup> It is perhaps interesting to mention the fact that (amongst others) the name of the Greek goddess Artemis and Alexander are used as a first name even in present day Iran, showing the long lasting Greek impact.

<sup>38</sup> Mitchell/Searight 2007, 166-8.

## *Native aspects of Achaemenid Art*

Native aspects in Persian art are rather scarce, specially when focusing on imperial art. As mentioned before, the art of the empire was (mostly) deliberately chosen and artificially constructed, thus leaving little room for either natural adaptations or more ‘Persianity’. It is certainly due to this, as well as a tendency by scholars of merely focusing on the grand art of the Persians, that the existence of anything truly Persian in this art is often questioned.

Nevertheless there are Persian aspects to be found, even in the highly influenced Imperial art, which can be found with the correct approach. Difficult as it may be, an objective and at times non-empirical approach is the key to understanding Persian Art better. By looking past the obvious, one can observe small details well incorporated and at times hidden within the borrowed, which can be called Persian. However, when looking merely at the empirical, this is unfortunately the only evidence found. The idea behind the art of the empire is what makes it truly Persian, and this matter shall be fully discussed below in chapter four. In short we can state that the art of the empire was heavily influenced both deliberately and directly; the latter mainly due to the arrival of peoples from all over the empire and their work on Persian Art.

The peripheral & folk art of Persians, though less influenced than imperial art, still holds a great deal of borrowed themes, styles, figures and the like. Besides this minor difference between these two arts, there are two major (linked) dissimilarities to point out. The first is the fact that peripheral & folk art was to no extent ordered or regulated by the state, thus letting it evolve more freely and naturally. The end result, as will be shown below, is at times quite different from what we see in for example the grand art at Persepolis or Pasargadae. The second difference is the fact that peripheral & folk art was differently influenced in various parts of the vast empire. As an example, a seal from the eastern parts of the empire would have more Iranian features, while a seal from the western parts could naturally have more Greek traits.

Both of these arts shall be discussed in the following two subchapters where, similarly to the subchapters above, matters are clarified with the aid of illustrations and more in depth examples.

## *Imperial art*

The first striking aspect of imperial art is certainly its grandeur and ability to awe anyone in the empire who visited it. Despite the fact that the common repetitiveness seen in this art tends to make things monotonous and generally turn off modern visitors who are in their opinion ‘used to better’, in its day and age it would have been the best tool for royalty to showboat their wealth, power and status. To leave an even bigger impression on subjugated peoples, many powerful icons belonging to preceding and surrounding empires were incorporated into imperial art. That which the Persians thus achieved was the use of international styles and materials in a coherent manner<sup>39</sup>, and where choice played a role it was undoubtedly not done haphazardly.<sup>40</sup>

This newly formed empire and its new large centers drew a large amount of newcomers who all aided in the building of palatial structures, houses, decorations and so on.<sup>41</sup> This is attested in many written sources including some by the Persian kings themselves, who boast about the numerous craftsmen and materials they ordered to be brought in for the building of their magnificent palaces.<sup>42</sup> Although there was a great amount of deliberate acts and choices in defining and making imperial art, nowhere are the foreign aspects simply taken over in their simple and original form.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, both the foreign aspects and the final form of imperial art where all of these hold together in a coherent manner are to be seen differently from their past meanings. Calmeyer notes:

*Das letzte Beispiel lehrt uns, daß Vorbilder mehrerer Bereiche kombiniert wurden und daß es sich nicht um bloße Übernahme, sondern um Neuinterpretationen handeln konnte, die die Auffassung der Achaimeniden von ihrer Herrschaft ahnen lassen.*<sup>44</sup>

The ideology behind both the choices and the change of meaning is something purely (royal) Persian and it will be fully discussed in chapter 4 below.

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<sup>39</sup> Frankfort 1996, 348-9.

<sup>40</sup> Frankfort 1996, 361.

<sup>41</sup> Kuhrt 1995, 661.

<sup>42</sup> Kuhrt 1995, 676-8.

<sup>43</sup> Boardman 2000, 125-6.

<sup>44</sup> Calmeyer 1974, 135.

As mentioned before, one of the most obvious of native trends in imperial art is the resilient continuing of style and theme. This is undoubtedly connected to the fact that this type of art was controlled by the Achaemenids and the fact that it seemed to work as a tool for holding the empire together and showboating power and status.

One main difference between pre-Achaemenid and Achaemenid Near Eastern Art is the break in the mythological trend that was ushered not only by royalty, but by common people as well.<sup>45</sup> The latter is mainly witnessed in Persian peripheral & folk art (discussed in the following subchapter) and the former in the art of major centers. In both cases however, there is a decline in the use of mythological themes and beings. Some of those themes and beings were nevertheless still used, but it is rather evident that their employment in imperial art was done deliberately for adding important value to this art for foreign visitors to recognize and understand.<sup>46</sup> However, this was not the case for all mythological creatures since the griffin, often used in both major and small arts of the empire can be traced back to an Iranian point of origin. The griffin is perhaps the most important mythological entity in Persian art, as it is the only one that is not borrowed from a preceding empire. The depictions of this creature could slightly differ from art to art (*illustrations 26 & 27*), though the general idea of a griffin was a fusion between a lion and an eagle, portraying ultimate power.



(26) Remnants of a Persian capital decorated on top with two counterpoised griffins (Persepolis, Iran).

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<sup>45</sup> Moorey 1985, 35.

<sup>46</sup> Calmeyer 1974, 146.



(27) Seal impression of a Persian griffin with on the top left side a fly (British Museum, London).

It is essential to note that such application of mythology was merely used for the decoration of the buildings, since the use of the latter was not for any gods, but solely for the king and the empire.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, seals found within and around large centers often depict purely themes and characters concerning royalty and the state. Occasionally using themes used by preceding empires (*illustration 28*), they have a clear absence of any gods.<sup>48</sup>



(28) Seal impression of a Persian royal lion hunt, with descriptions in Old Persian cuneiform to the left (British Museum, London).

From the list of borrowed mythological creatures or creature parts, the bull and lion were the most common basis for the eventual ‘product’, both personifying might and strength.<sup>49</sup> These

<sup>47</sup> Boardman 2000, 140-2.

<sup>48</sup> Boardman 2000, 166.

<sup>49</sup> Merrillees 2005, 123.

creatures could appear completely in disguise, while others (e.g. horse-based ones) were often turned into a mythological entity by the simple addition of wings to the animal.

On the other hand, the great variety of regular animals on seals and the non-royal figures competing in hunts is another native aspect of Persian art, both seen in imperial and peripheral & folk art (*illustration 29*).<sup>50</sup>



(29) Seal impression of a hunting scene with a Persian kings hunting different kinds of animals with a bow (British Museum, London).

Mention worthy are the final two important borrowed and slightly adapted themes of the so called atlas posed figures and that of the one-on-one combat between (often) the king and an animal or mythological being. The only noticeable difference in the latter is that in the Persian depictions the king often has one leg up and upon the creature he is fighting against.<sup>51</sup> This could possibly mean the defeat of the creature, shown similarly in the manner Darius the Great is depicted on the *Behistun* relief with one leg upon the defeated leader of the uprising. Another interpretation is the attempt by the artists to add a more dynamic and alive depiction of the battle. The atlas pose theme with its Mesopotamian roots differs merely due to the reduction of mythological beings in the Persian period, while to a lesser extent and mostly in peripheral & folk art these creatures are still used in this theme (*illustrations 21 & 22*). In imperial art however, the depiction of anything but humans in the atlas pose completely disappeared in the Persian period (*illustration 30*).<sup>52</sup> Similar to other major arts of the Persians this too had its own meaning and the choice for not depicting simply any human but all of the peoples of the empire in these scenes, was done so deliberately.

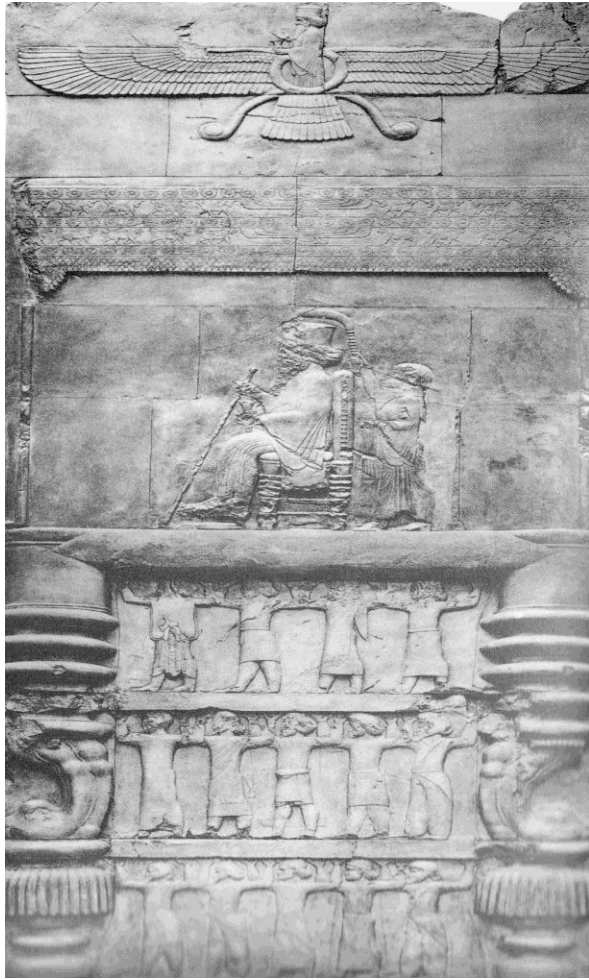
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<sup>50</sup> Boardman 2000, 212.

<sup>51</sup> Merrillees 2005, 100.

<sup>52</sup> Merrillees 2005, 107.





(30) *Darius the Great sitting on his throne, accompanied by his son behind him and a winged disk figure hovering above, with the whole platform being held but peoples of the empire standing in an atlas pose (Persepolis, Iran).*

The final two clearly evident changes that were applied in the Persian period were minute alterations to the way figures were depicted. Besides the obvious adjustment in clothing which was discussed above, the hair of the figures changed into a ‘page-boy’ style with straight hair radiating from the crown to the outer rim formed into rows of tight curls.<sup>53</sup> The beard of the figures also changed from a square-ended type into one with long pointed endings.

In general it could be said that the imperial art of the Persians consisted of many borrowed themes and figures, with the native ones relatively scarce. That which is truly (imperial) Persian however, is the way in which the borrowed was reused and its meaning reassigned.

<sup>53</sup> Merrillees 2005, 95.

## *Peripheral & folk art*

The Persian art which is repeatedly studied reviewed and described in books and media is often only the imperial art. Persian peripheral & folk art in all its uniqueness and importance is often all but forgotten or left out. Contrary to the mostly deliberate imperial art, Persian peripheral & folk art is unique for the degree of unintentional influence that it has, making it a natural blend of native and foreign.<sup>54</sup>

This type of art certainly created styles as hybrid as, and rather similar to the imperial monumental art, but it did not have any restrictions on subjects, originality of treatment or a license to change.<sup>55</sup> This amount of tolerance of regional culture and art generated a large variety of designs and themes, merged and entirely local alike. Consequently it meant that within the vast empire art could differ significantly from one place to another.<sup>56</sup> The eastern regions of the empire produced art that was nearly entirely Iranian and at times even Persian. Similar to imperial art the use of a variety of animals was quite common and the use of supernatural themes and figures was reduced significantly, illustrating the native way of life of Persians.<sup>57</sup> In general it could be said that Persian folk & peripheral art held on to its eastern roots (mentioned in chapter 2.1) a lot longer and better than imperial art.

The foremost remaining and common Persian aspect in folk & peripheral art is the so called Achaemenid dentate crown (*e.g. illustrations 28 & 29*).<sup>58</sup> This type of crown which is only depicted as worn by Persian royalty and the winged disk human bust is entirely absent in large imperial art, but rather common in smaller imperial art and peripheral & folk art.<sup>59</sup> This type, also known as a spiked crown, perhaps has a deeper meaning to it than hitherto considered by scholars. I would like to bring forward a different interpretation of this type of crown, namely that of designating it as a fiery crown. A more in depth explanation of this matter is given below in the next chapter.

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<sup>54</sup> Upham Pope 1981, 346.

<sup>55</sup> Boardman 2000, 150.

<sup>56</sup> Boardman 2000, 152.

<sup>57</sup> Merrillees 2005, 122.

<sup>58</sup> Merrillees 2005, 85.

<sup>59</sup> Merrillees 2005, 97-9.

A small but perhaps significant difference between Persian depictions and Mesopotamian ones is the fact that key figures on the latter often face left, while on the former nearly all important figures face right.<sup>60</sup> The possible significance of this difference lies in its meaning and either fortunately or unfortunately it is still open for discussion.

In the western part of the empire, peripheral & folk art often consisted of a blend of the local and the Persian. This could for example generate coins with a Persian figure or theme on one side and a Greek one on the other or an Assyrian one (*illustrations 28 & 31*) with Persian aspects. Illustrations 32 and 33 show Greek style and theme influences consecutively on Persian depictions.



(31) Seal impression of a Persian king with four prisoners of war roped behind him, while he attacks an Egyptian king with a spear (British Museum, London).



(32) Seal impression of a man with the head of a lion for a crown and the feathers of a peacock and the head of an ibex(?) as his hair (British Museum, London).



(33) Seal impression of a scene presenting one of Heracles' labors (private collection, London).

<sup>60</sup> Merrillees 2005, 100.

While their appearance in the art of the ancient Near East is not that common in general, the depiction of women during the Persian period became even rarer. In imperial art they are completely absent while in peripheral & folk art they are found in low quantities (*illustration 34*). This uncommonness of women could have a meaning similar to the reduction of the supernatural in Persian art, namely that of depicting everyday life where women did not have a place in scenes such as hunting and battles.



(34) Seal impression of a seated man in Median dress and a woman bringing him provisions (British Museum, London).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the major use of gold, silver and electrum in all possible arts and all over the empire could perhaps be called a Persian ‘fashion trend’. While these materials had already been in use both in the west and the east of Persia long before the establishment of the empire, the nearly obsessed manner in which not only Persian royalty but also common Persians used gold, silver and electrum, can be seen as something purely Persian. It is not without a reason that (mainly Greek) stories about Persians often consist of mentioning their large amounts of gold and wealth.

As mentioned before, similar to imperial art, Persian peripheral & folk art borrowed much from local cultures which resulted in a large variety and blends of themes and styles throughout the empire. However, the freedom of choice which it retained set it apart from the perhaps somewhat monotonous imperial art. Moreover it maintained more than imperial art, the part that was either Persian or Iranian and which can be called native.

## *Analyses of aspects*

By now it should be clear that while Persians borrowed, merged and incorporated much from the surrounding and preceding cultures<sup>61</sup>, they did not do this randomly and without a purpose. Understanding the purpose(s) and ideologies behind their actions concerning art will give us a much better view on what Persian Art is. However, before starting this analysis it should be made clear that it was a distinctive cultural attribute of Persians which drove this entire ‘art movement’. As Herodotus stated:

*But of all men the Persians most welcome foreign customs. They wear the Median dress, deeming it more beautiful than their own, and the Egyptian cuirass in war...*<sup>62</sup>

The fact that this was the first time that so much of the Near East had been governed by a single, new and very literal dynasty added to the movement.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the free pass through of all peoples, in particular the Greeks who were so keen on observing and recording, adds to our knowledge of Persians and their art. It should be noted however that our primary Greek source, being the writings of Herodotus, should be approached carefully. One should keep in mind that Herodotus lived between 484 and 425 B.C., putting his stay in Persia roughly during the reigns of Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I, which concludes in the fact that merely the information during this period was directly observable by him. It goes without saying that the same applies to any other writer or source.

With the aid of this information that is available to us and through careful observation, it will become clear that Persians often changed both the use and meaning of objects, figures, styles and themes in their art and architecture.<sup>64</sup> In particular the major imperial art had as a role, demonstrating the cultural diversity and massive resources of the empire and how the Persian king could mobilize them.<sup>65</sup> The former is noticeable equally well in the inscriptions of these kings. The idea was to show the king, supported by and on top of an empire which consisted of many peoples whose individual character was emphasized but who were all drawn together in

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<sup>61</sup> Calmeyer 1974, 147.

<sup>62</sup> Calmeyer 1987, 11.

<sup>63</sup> Boardman 2000, 151.

<sup>64</sup> Frankfort 1996, 374.

<sup>65</sup> Kuhrt 1995, 669.

harmonious union to serve the ruler. This theme, which is shown in iconography by the figures in atlas pose carrying the king (*illustration 30*), is taken from any Assyrian prototype. However, as mentioned before the Assyrian depictions often show mythological beings as the carriers of the throne while the Persian ones only use humans, or to be more precise peoples of the empire for this role.<sup>66</sup>

Preservation of the empire and the Achaemenid dynasty certainly takes a central role in the meaning behind much of Persian Art. As such, many significant and well known objects, figures, themes and styles retained much of their old appearance, albeit often with a different ideology behind it.<sup>67</sup> It is clear that the Persian idea of governance was to refrain from harsh rule and mandatory changes to a certain type of standard as much as possible. This reassured a relatively stable empire with the Achaemenid household on top of the hierarchy. However, this was not the only reason for this Persian choice in art, as general symbolism and religious ideology played a major role as well. Two examples were already mentioned above in the previous chapters, namely that of the figures facing right and that of the dentate crown.

On the ‘figures facing right’ issue I would like to propose a new theory, since it is too striking and too common to be designated as a mere accidental feature. The word for right in both Modern and Old Persian<sup>68</sup> could also mean righteous or correct, and perhaps as a way of depicting this, the important figures in Persian art are shown facing the right (i.e. correct) direction. Being righteous and upholding truth were both extremely important acts, according to Persian ideology which was in turn derived from Zoroastrianism and is evident in many inscriptions of Persian kings. Farfetched as this theory may seem, it can be seen as a possible explanation for the occurrence of this aspect since Persians were known for their use of symbolism and the importance it held in the empire.<sup>69</sup> As mentioned before and in a similar manner of symbolic interpretation, I would like to suggest a new theory for the so called Persian dentate or spiked crown as well. While this type of crown is entirely absent from large imperial art, it is the oldest type of Persian crown and has in its roots possible connections with Zoroastrianism. Clearly, this crown had a more elaborate meaning than merely that of

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<sup>66</sup> Calmeyer 1974, 137-40.

<sup>67</sup> Upham Pope 1981, 397-8.

<sup>68</sup> *Rāst* in Modern Persian and *Ar(š)ta* in Old Persian.

<sup>69</sup> Calmeyer 1987, 14-5.

representing royalty and power. This is evident in many depictions where (important) figures seem to be touching the crown worn by either humans or mythological beings (*illustrations 35 & 36*).



(35) Seal impression of a Persian king(?) touching the crowns worn by two scorpion-men (British Museum, London).



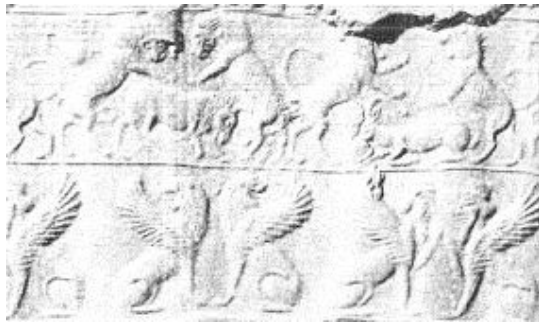
(36) Seal impression of a Persian king holding a short sword in one hand and touching the crown of a winged bull-man with the other, while both looking in the direction of a palm tree and an ibex (British Museum, London).

This type of crown apparently carried an additional religious meaning with it and I do not believe it to be a dentate or spiked crown but rather a fiery one. Once more, this theory should be approached with the understanding that symbolism was of utmost importance to Persians. On many depictions<sup>70</sup> the flame rising from a Persian fire altar resembles the shape of these crowns and this similitude is not the only compelling portion of this theory. In Zoroastrian religion fire represented purity and the ultimate good and thus for kings who so often claimed to be righteous and to uphold these values, it is almost a given that they would in some manner associate themselves with fire. The widespread depictions of these kings and other important figures touching this type of crown sustain this theory even more.

<sup>70</sup> A good example is seal number 75 on page 120 of the *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum (Cylinder Seals VI)*.

Another interesting theory, suggested by Talbot Rice, revolves around the rather common depiction of a lion sinking its teeth into either a bull or an ibex (*illustrations 37 & 38*). As he states:

*The motif is that of a lion swallowing an ibex or similar animal. This animal symbolizes a constellation, the stars of which were in the ascendant during the winter solstice; it is swallowed by the lion, which represents the sun, overcoming in this case an unwelcome winter.*<sup>71</sup>



(37) Seal impression of human & lion-headed sphinxes (lower part) and lions attacking various animals (higher part) (British Museum, London).



(38) A lion attacking and sinking its teeth in a bull (Apadana staircase at Persepolis, Iran).

This is a possible explanation for these depictions, especially when one takes into consideration the importance of symbolism and the probable connection with Zoroastrianism where the battle between light and dark takes a central role. The celebration of the passing of the longest night is an ancient one, and even in modern Iran and certain surrounding countries this so called *shab-e Yalda* is still commemorated. However, other theories concerning these depictions have been presented over the years as well and although the more common animals obviously should carry some sort meaning, the debate on this subject still continues.

<sup>71</sup> Upham Pope 1981, 380.



## Conclusion

It is an unfortunate fact that Persian Art is often criticized for being a mere copy of the art of other cultures. As evident in the introduction of this paper, some even wonder about the existence of anything Persian in Persian art. Yet others might rephrase it into slightly more politically correct words such as the following:

*No one could say that the monumental arts of the Persians were copy of the arts of another empire, yet they owed everything to the arts of others.*<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, all of this comes down to one point which is shared by a number of scholars: the so called fact that all Persian art was in one way or another derived from other cultures. It is certainly evident that Persians incorporated much from other cultures into their own art. However, to say that this included every aspect of Persian art is utterly wrong. This paper has shown that Persians did retain some of their native art features, especially in their peripheral & folk art. Moreover, the whole concept of this type of uniformity<sup>73</sup> which is particularly apparent in imperial art can be called Persian.

While analyzing and studying Persian art one should surely keep in mind the divisions mentioned in the introduction of this paper. Still, this is not the only recurring need in this field of archaeology. Concerning Persia, many scholars tend to overuse the concept of diffusion, so that when for example one artifact is found elsewhere and with some non-Persian features, that type of artifact is immediately labeled as being entirely foreign. This is especially true for the Hellenic oriented scholars who often place matters in an 'east versus west' framework to begin with. I would in addition like to point out to the fact that the general comparison between the art of Mesopotamia and that of Persia is a wrong one, for Mesopotamia is a region with many different peoples and subsequent empires, while Persia is one empire which emerged from one peoples. A better comparison would perhaps be between Mesopotamian and Iranian art. In any case however, the important link between art and textual evidence should be kept in mind, as the latter is the best tool for comparison and control of the former.<sup>74</sup> Conversely, there are dangers

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<sup>72</sup> Boardman 2000, 219.

<sup>73</sup> Boardman 2000, 152.

<sup>74</sup> Calmeyer 1987, 20.

included in this type of analysis that one should be wary of. Inscriptions, especially royal types, could be misinterpreted and taken as the norm for the whole empire, while in fact this is not always the case. It is as such that Persians are often depicted as extreme propagandists who in this manner controlled their subjects. This is too much thinking in modern concepts of state control, and the evidence mainly from peripheral & folk art and (Greek) written sources, show that the tight grip of Persians on subjugated peoples was not all that tight.

It is a fact that most studies on this subject (i.e. Persian Art) and the subsequent conclusions are based more on indirect historical, rather than on direct archaeological evidence.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the body of information has not significantly changed during the years since the Iranian revolution of 1979 when all the borders to the former Persian heartland were closed to most foreigners. The many conflicts in the Middle East have contributed furthermore to the lack of archaeological evidence on this matter. Fortunately, in more recent years the amount of archaeological research in Iran and neighboring countries has risen, and cooperation between foreign and local archaeologists is becoming a common trend. This will not only result in better analyses of this subject in the (near) future, but it will undoubtedly aid in its objective study as well. It is interesting to notice that older studies on this subject are more Persian-friendly, as newer ones are (to say the least) not. Without a doubt political influence played a role in this distinction, although the present and future cooperation between foreign and local archaeologists will unquestionably fade the political influence away.

In conclusion it should be at least clear that Persian art does exist as an individual type, with or without foreign aspects, and that it certainly deserves more attention in the form of archaeological research and analysis.

*...Achaemenian art was an important link in the chain of transmission, since in it, at the close of the period in which the Near East had been the centre of highest culture, many traditions, both of barbarians and of Greeks, assumed a new form.*<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Calmeyer 1987, 21-2.

<sup>76</sup> Frankfort 1996, 378.

## *Kings of Persia*<sup>77</sup>

### Pre Achaemenid Empire

- Teispes (of Anshan) c. 650-620 B.C.
- Cyrus I (son) c. 620-590 B.C.
- Cambyses I (son) c. 590-559 B.C.

### Achaemenid Empire

- Cyrus II the Great (son) 559-530 B.C.
- Cambyses II (son) 530-522 B.C.
- Bardiya (Smerdis) (brother) 522 B.C.
- Darius I (son of Hystaspes, descendant of Achaemenes) 522-486 B.C.
- Xerxes (son) 486-465 B.C.
- Artaxerxes I (son) 465-423 B.C.
- Darius II (son) 423-405 B.C.
- Artaxerxes II (son) 405-359 B.C.
- Artaxerxes III (son) 359-338 B.C.
- Artaxerxes IV (Arses) (son) 338-336 B.C.
- Darius III (second cousin) 336-330 B.C.

### Post Achaemenid Empire

- Alexander the Great 330-323 B.C.

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<sup>77</sup> Kuhrt 1995, 648.

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### Illustration acknowledgements

The illustrations used in this paper are from the articles/books which are listed in the bibliography, and from the following book and websites:

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