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**TABRIZ MUSEUM BATTLE DISH. FORMAL CONSIDERATIONS**

*Resume:* The plate with the depiction of the battle scene from Tabriz Azarbayjan Museum follows several Sasanian patterns. It is related to early Sasanian rock reliefs picturing a mounted combat, in Firuzabad and Naqsh e Rostam. However, the relation is limited to certain details and thorough examination of composition and iconography shows that the piece could not have been manufactured in Sasanian times. The plate fails to share visual structural elements with the rock reliefs and toreutics. It is most likely to see the object as modern imitation, probably made in 1920’s or 1930’s.

*Key words:* Tabriz Museum, Sasanian art, combat scene, art composition, Sasanian toreutics, Sasanian silver, iconographic formula.

**Introduction**

The history of Sasanian arms and armor suffers badly from the deficit of reliable sources. The main base for the reconstructions of the weaponry is usually archaeological finds followed by iconography. Literary material is customarily a secondary or an explanatory source.

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1 This article has been inspired by the communication with my friend and colleague Vladimir Dmitriev (Pskov State University, Russia), whom I would like to thank for the idea of this study.

Even the most detailed descriptions cannot take over the primary role of the assessment of the actual weapons and their depictions in art. Naturally, it must be always kept in mind that the arts have always contained specific rules of visual language, which in turn happens to be difficult to define. Given the scarcity of archaeological finds of Sasanian arms and armor, and the relatively small number of art pieces containing military depictions, every object with representations of combat seems to be of special value. The problem rises, however, with the large group of modern imitations of Sasanian art circulating the market and even exhibited in museum collections.

The goal of the current paper is to prove that the plate with the depiction of warriors in combat, from the collection of Tabriz Azarbayjan Museum (fig. 1), contradicts traditions of the Sasanian visual language. Although the plate seems to contain technical errors as well, these will not be discussed in the current paper. The evidence will be provided on iconographical terms only.

The dish in question contains depiction of two armored riders in combat. The rider on the left is shown turned to the right in a dominant position, defining him as the main personage. He holds a lance in two hands, with his left arm outstretched and right sharply bent. His horse is prancing over the second rider and his mount. This rider has his right arm raised, holding a sword over his head and his


left arm placed on the chest at the point where the first rider’s lance pierces his armor. The relations of vertical to horizontal are not really clear. There are three ways to read the composition:

(1) The belly of the horse of the victorious personage divides the visual field diagonally; the upper-left part is occupied by the dominating rider (fig. 1). That, combined with the direction of his movement, forces his opponent into lower, submissive, marginalized position. Another diagonal is marked by the lance of the main character, although the angle is smaller.

(2) One can imagine that the lance, intentionally, constituted the horizontal axis, and that the diagonal division of the plate, marked by the rearing horse’s body, would be slightly sharper (fig. 2). The vertical axis is marked by the raised head and the neck of the horse of the main personage in the upper part, rather than being marked by the necklace and the contour of the chest of the mount of the defeated character. If the lance position was the definition of the horizontal dimension, the head of the horse of the victorious character would be perceived off the vertical axis to the left. The head of the victorious warrior is somehow bent ahead with his quiver following the same angle, which seems supporting the view of the lance as the vertical factor.

(3) The horizontal dimension may be constituted by the rear hooves of both horses and be parallel to the trunks of both horses, in which case the lance would constitute the diagonal (fig. 3). The victorious rider would then be aggressively bent forward with his face directed almost downwards to the defeated personage, while the head of the horse of the winner would be turned ahead, not upward. It is clear that the main directions are not clearly defined and are left to interpretation of the viewer. This ambiguity is emphasized by further details like hooves position or sword hilt position of the main personage.

The main character wears a crenelated crown with korymbos made of curls and two ribbons floating behind his head alongside the rim of the plate. He has a beard tied at the end, has long hair and wears earrings. His torso is covered with the plain surface which may suggest a cuirass, with a collar of two rows of pearls. His arms are covered with mail sleeves, his hips are also protected with a mail skirt. His leg in baggy trousers is sharply bent with the knee raised and the foot stretched in the “ballerina” position. He has a quiver, covered with an X-shaped pattern, hanging from his hip. From behind the horse’s rump one may see a sword hilt with a round pommel of mod-
erate size. His horse is shown rearing with left front leg stretched ahead and right sharply bent. The mount’s head is stretched up high with a pronounced cheek piece covered with two rows of pearls, a ribbon floating from below the ear and a shank of the curb with a single reign hanging from the mouth. The mane is trimmed short. In front of the neck there are two small almond shaped elements. The crupper strap is covered with a dense V-shaped pattern. Two almond shaped tassels are shown above the rear, the front one has a chain linked to the saddle marked with a curved row of dots. The horse has the tail tied tightly, possibly plaited, ending with a bow.

The second rider wears a slightly elongated hemispherical helmet with a narrow plume and scale aventail. His torso is covered in segments divided with lines consisting of symmetrical curves rising at the central line of his torso. His legs and arms are covered with a dense pattern of parallel lines. He is also wearing a floating skirt covered with what may be scale armor. From his hip hangs a thick sword scabbard, covered with a decorative pattern, and from the shoulder extends a ribbon or another decorative element widening towards the end. His horse is shown pushed to the ground with the left front leg sharply bent and the right stretched ahead. The horse has a trimmed mane and a harness with a pronounced cheek strap, a wide necklace on the neck and crupper strap consisting of two rows of large discs. On the left flank of the mount one can see the fletchings of the arrows. No details of the saddle are shown; however, a saddlecloth is clearly visible.

I. The Tabriz plate and Sasanian combat scenes.

The dish clearly refers to the mounted combat scenes of the early Sasanian period, often named “jousting” scenes, especially the Firuzabad relief (fig. 4), but there is an analogy with Naqsh e Rostam NRm3, NRm5, NRm7 (fig. 5); the mural from Dura Europos (fig. 6); and so-called Shapur cameo from the Louvre Museum (fig. 7). The

most direct analogies come with the Firuzabad frieze. The victorious rider wears a plain torso cover, mail sleeves and a skirt, with raised, floating tassels, tied horse-tails — all corresponding to “Persians” — riders galloping from the left to the right. The defeated warrior wears segmented sleeves and leggings, a scale patterned aventail and a skirt — corresponding to the tack of the defeated “Parthians”. Even the torso divided with the double curvature may bear some resemblance to the Parthian being unhorsed by the crown-prince Shapur. It must be remembered that all the personages on the frieze are directed to the right, so the composition should be classified as the “chase” rather than direct confrontation⁶. The same model is found on Dura Europos graffiti and NRm3. Some of the elements reappear on the “jousting” scenes from Naqsh e Rostam (scale skirts, plain torso covers, segmented limb defenses). Additionally, NRm5 and NRm7 show a confrontation of the armored and mounted lancers (fig. 5). In all cases, however, the attackers are shown on horses depicted in “flying gallop” however on two of the Naqsh e Rostam “jousts” the defeated rider is shown on a horse pressed onto its hind legs, and on NRm7 the horse of the defeated personage is tumbling in a similar fashion to the mounts of the opponents of Ardashir and the crown prince Shapur and the defeated riders on Dura Europos mural (figs. 3, 6)⁷. In two examples of Sasanian combat depictions, the winning rider faces a sword wielding opponent: (1) on Dura Europos mural (fig. 6) a pair of combatants on the


right in the lower register consists of a vanquishing lancer and a defeated warrior armed with a sword and a round shield, (2) on the “Shapur cameo” (fig. 7) the Sasanian warrior captures a Roman officer raising his sword. There is another Central Asian example of a mounted combat between a lancer and a swordsman (who may or may not be mounted), which does not belong to the Sasanian culture or artstyle, but contains several military analogies — namely, the famous Orlat bone plaque with a battle scene.

The Tabriz dish under discussion, however, does not match any of the “jousting” rock friezes, the Dura Europos mural or the “Shapur cameo” (figs 6, 7). Generally, the compositional \textit{formula} of the rock friezes cannot be fitted into the round field provided by a round plate. They are horizontal in shape, the riders in most cases are shown on the horses in “flying gallop”. The dramatic dynamism of the Tabriz plate with both the victorious and the defeated personages in a similarly energetic action is unusual in Sasanian art. Normally the victorious rider represents ultimate composure and his feats are performed almost effortlessly. One might argue that the Tabriz plate represents a different technique, originating from a different visual tradition, perhaps a different visual language conveyed by a different type of craftsmen. However, nothing certain can be said of the very training of Sasanian artisans and the ways in which the patterns were conveyed. It is certain that the \textit{formulae} were transferred within the traditions of certain crafts. Therefore, there is no direct connection in composition layouts between arts (the rock reliefs are ruled by different compositional principles than silverware), however, the details which belonged to Persian decorative tradition remain the same.

\textbf{II. The Tabriz plate and Sasanian toreutics.}

The combat between warriors is an unknown subject within Sasanian toreutics. In fact, it is believed that the depictions of humans in combat were, at least partially, replaced by the combat with the dangerous, strong, or predatory beasts. Hence, no combat was depicted in toreutics except for in the Tabriz plate. This might not be a definite argument. The topic of fighting the beasts was not reserved to toreutics. On Sar-e Mashhad relief one may find a figure of king Bahram killing two lions with a sword\textsuperscript{8}. Although the entire relief

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does not follow the proportions from the toreutics, it is possible to di-
vide the frieze into “hunting” and “court” parts, where the “hunt”
part ends with Bahram’s left arm. In such a manner, this very hunting
scene can be related to the toreutics. Another relief containing a hunt-
ing scene is the one on the Rag-e Bibi frieze from Afghanistan (at-
tributed as Sasanian although there are reasons to believe it may have
belonged to the Arsacid period) varies strongly from the tradition of
animal combat scenes from Sasanian toreutics9. The very absence of
mounted combat scenes in the corpus of the Sasanian silverware can-
not definitely exclude the Tabriz Museum dish from the concern solely
for this reason. The Sar Mashhad and Rag-e Bibi rock friezes prove
that the convergence of topics occasionally happened, therefore, in
order to examine the Tabriz dish one needs to consider the icono-
graphic formulae of Sasanian toreutics.

II.1. Composition.

In the entire group of Sasanian hunting iconography one may
define two main genres: animal slaughter and animal combat. The
group of objects depicting animal slaughter shows the personages
chasing on horseback a multitude of prey or effortlessly killing them
while standing. Animal combat, on the other hand, emphasizes the
heroic nature of the deeds of the main character, challenging the
beasts threatening life or representing power (lions, tigers, boars,
bears, panthers, onagers, deers, bulls, wild goats)10. The animal com-

9 Grenet F. Découverte d’un relief sassanide dans le Nord de
l’Afghanistan (note d’information) // Comptes-rendus des séances de
134; Grenet F., Lee J., Martinez P., Ory F. The Sasanian Relief at Rag-i Bibi
(Northern Afghanistan) // After Alexander. Central Asia before Islam / Ed.

Ciafaloni D. Op. cit. P. 111–128; Grabar O. Sasanian Silver. Late Antique and
Early Mediaeval Arts of Luxury From Iran. Michigan, 1967; Gray B. Post-
Harper P. O. Sasanian Silver // CHI. 3 (2). P. 1113–1130; idem. Sasanian Silver
Vessels: The Formation and Study of Early Museum Collections // Mesopo-
tamia and Iran in Parthian and Sasanian Periods: Rejection and Revival.
Harper P. O., Meyers P. Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period. Vol. I. Royal
Imagery. N. Y.,1981; Rosen-Ayalon M. A Non-Royal Hunter Vessel // Bulle-
bat scenes appear to correspond to, or derive from, combat scenes, and as it was mentioned above, one may expect that they replaced the scenes of combat between humans. There is a limited number of composition *formulae* for animal combat in Sasanian art. One might expect the formal relation between animal combat scenes and battle scenes as it happened in the evolution of the animal combat *formulae*. In the history of Parthian and Sasanian art the relation of animal vs human and human vs human combat has crossed the boundaries at least several times and the *formulae* were migrating not only between the subject areas but between bordering cultures as well.

As a result of this process the depictions of the animal combat in Sasanian toreutics follow quasi-canonical, almost fixed designs both in iconography and composition. This led some scholars to conclusion that the silversmith workshops were state-controlled and followed strict propagandistic regulations. The corpus of repetitive motifs could be explained either by the way of training of Iranian artisans who found the ability to follow traditional patterns the core of mastery or the distribution of fixed *formulae* via cartons, perhaps providing drawings of the separate elements that were assembled into two-layered plates. Although no such manuals were found or mentioned in sources, the latter possibility offers some explanation as to why some plates offer a reversed, “negative” layout or why occasionally the riders’ leg is turned opposite to the direction of the movement. It should be born in mind that no traces of alleged “censorship offices” were found either. One can imagine that such errors could have happened when the pattern was transplanted onto metal without any adjustment that would have resulted with “negative” elements”. Similarly, as the elements were produced separately, the leg could be produced turned in the wrong direction and fitted to the layout afterwards. It is also clear that the fixed compositional *formulae* became more relaxed in the late Sasanian and post-Sasanian periods as if the artisans lost the awareness of their original meaning. Gradual relaxation of the *formulae* and their employment in post-Sasanian art, as well as iconographies of the cultures neighboring with Iran suggest that they were sufficiently independent from any central censorship office. Nevertheless, the fact remains that

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11 Skupniewicz P. Iconographic Function of Armor in Sasanian Art.
12 Ibid.
Sasanian toreutics followed a limited number of compositional *formulae*, which will be discussed shortly below in the context of the Tabriz Museum battle plate. It also seems natural that the battle scene would correspond with the existing visual traditions of animal combat, which emphasized heroic values of the personages and not mere *paradeisos* hunt.

The animal combat scenes are quite rigid in form and always clearly refer to the vertical and horizontal axes, with diagonal axes taking much less importance. Normally the figure of the hunter is usually turned right and occupies the majority of the pictorial field (usually the left part), with the vertical axis running usually by the edge of the personage. The hunter was usually facing a vertically positioned animal, pushed to the margin of the field, while the second beast was lying stretched below (sometimes the latter is missing). In some *formulae* there is a diagonal (upper left to lower right) direction employed but the main division of horizontal versus vertical remains obligatory. For all depictions it is crucial to determine the horizontal dimension, either by the trunk of the horse, fragments of landscape, or an outstretched beast. Only occasionally the rider’s body (or just his head) is shown slightly bent forward, emphasizing the dynamism of the composition. Excluding from this consideration the composition layouts depicting the personages fighting the beasts on foot, it is possible to find the following groups of representations:

- **Confrontation** (fig. 8) — when the rider, his horse and the beast are all turned towards the center of the pictorial field. The direction of the attack and the direction of the horse are turned against the direction of the beast. This layout seems to derive from (or at least relate to) the scenes of a mounted lancer fighting a foot warrior from Parthian art (Old Nisa bullae and, most likely, Tang-e Sarvak frieze)\(^\text{14}\). The tile from Babylonia, now exhibited in the British Museum, shows an armored lancer transfixing a giant lion which is shown partly as if at this stage the presentation of quadrupeds standing on two legs were still too unnatural\(^\text{15}\). The layout in a hunting context

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\(^{15}\) *Mielczarek M.* Op. cit. P. 36. Fig. 13; *Sulla via di Alessandro. Da Seleucia al Gandhāra / Ed.* V. Messina. Milano, 2007; *Sekunda N.* Seleucid and Ptole-
seems fully developed in Sari plate\textsuperscript{16} and “Oedanathus mosaic” from Palmyra\textsuperscript{17}. However, it should be also noted that a very similar layout (with reversed sides — a rider is shown from right to left, but as it was mentioned above this happened also in Sasanian art) can be found on one of the Thracian plaques from Letnitsa treasure\textsuperscript{18}. It is possible that the \textit{formula} was rediscovered in later Parthian art but it might have developed independently. The “confrontation” \textit{formula} shows hunters using lances, bows and javelins; in its military aspect it shows warriors wielding lances.

> Chase (fig. 9) — the rider, his horse and the hunted beast are directed to the right. The beast looks as if it were attempting to escape from the pictorial field which strengthens the impression of the marginalization of the animal. It seems that this \textit{formula} was a variation of the “confrontation” model. Although the “chase” layout does not have any direct relations in the depictions of the human combat in the Iranian art, it was clearly employed by the Longobard or Byzantine artisans who manufactured the silver plate from Isola Rizza\textsuperscript{19}. The proportions of the scene or the details of the depiction vary from the Sasanian prototypes but the adoption of the compositional idea is undisputable. It points to the close relation between Sasanian hunting scenes and combat iconography. Except for the plate from Chilek where the hunter wields the sword\textsuperscript{20}, all examples

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Левыкин А. К. Фракийское золото из Болгарии. Ожившие легенды. М., 2013. С. 180–201.
\end{itemize}
of “chase” formula depict archers. On the Isola Rizza plate the warrior on horseback uses a lance.

➤ Escape (fig. 10) — the horse is shown galloping outside (usually to the left) while the rider is turned to the center of the plate (usually to the right) performing a “Parthian shot” or thrusting with his sword or lance the beast attacking from the opposite edge (usually to the left). The ability to kill an animal while escaping accentuated the skill, perseverance, and fearlessness of the rider. The presentation of the skill and visual ambiguity make the formula very dynamic and visually attractive and, consequently, popular in Sasanian iconography. Hunters are shown wielding lances and swords and shooting with bows.

➤ Double escape (fig. 11) — this is a variation of “escape” formula where the beast is also shown turned away from the center of the pictorial field. Therefore, the personage’s mount and the prey are following opposite directions. Double escape formula provides an impression of dynamic compositional balance somehow recalling heraldic potnia theron motifs from Tillya Tepe treasures\(^\text{21}\), avoiding the direct symmetry.

➤ Two-handed lance downwards thrust (fig. 12) (normal, i.e. a rider attacking from the left to the right, and reversed, i.e. a rider turned to the right) — the rider is shown holding the lance with both hands and transfixes a beast in front of him, or stretched alongside the lower rim of the plate. The beasts are directed towards the rider. The prototype of this formula can be found on Parthian clasp from Saksankhur\(^\text{22}\). Then the formula in its mature form survived to the post-Sasanian era and it was imitated in Sogdiana\(^\text{23}\). The Bastis\(^\text{24}\) and


\(^{24}\) Skupniewicz P. Shafted Weapons of Sasanian Hunting Iconography. P. 49–64.
Sanya collection\textsuperscript{25} plates show the formula somehow transformed or enriched with the elements borrowed from other formulae. It makes them closer to the Berlin collection examples and another Tabriz Museum plate where the rider uses javelins against the prey. Therefore, the lance shaft does not mark the diagonal line. This formula might be further divided into sub-types resulting from different positions of the horses, however, for the purpose of the present paper it is sufficient to state its presence in Sasanian iconography. From the very definition all hunters use long lances.

- Hunter attacked by two beasts in diagonal directions (fig. 13). In this formula the rider who is turned right is attacked by two beasts of the same type arising from lower right part of the pictorial field. The remarkable thing is that the hunters in this formula are swordsmen. Their extended arms, together with the sword, emphasize the diagonal direction. It should be noted here, on a Kushano-Sasnian plate from the Hermitage Museum\textsuperscript{26} the vertical axis is also somehow blurred but it may be either the matter of the foreign influence or an awkward placing of the elements on the walls of the plate. It is possible to read the horizontal direction by the hooves’ position or the vertical axis by the torso of the hunter. It seems that an important part is a large quiver that might also constitute the direction but the fact remains that unlike the other animal combat scenes, this example does not provide a clear definition of vertical and horizontal.

- Chase with an animal alongside the lower rim (fig. 14). The hunter attacking from the left to the right while the beast is shown stretched in a curve alongside the rim of the vessel. The direction of the attack of the riders is horizontal or slightly diagonal. The Sanya collection plate offers a combination of “Chase with an animal alongside the lower rim” and “Two-handed lance downwards thrust”\textsuperscript{27}. Also, a now lost plate from the Burnes collection seems to be related to both formulae, however, the transfixed lion is shown


\textsuperscript{27} Бауло А. В. Указ. соч. С. 142–148.
directed towards the rider\textsuperscript{28}. One may also see a relation to “Hunter attacked by two beasts in diagonal directions” which is related compositionally to “Chase with an animal alongside the lower rim” through the position of the prey in the pictorial field.

- Animals are shown “realistically” i.e. horizontally (fig. 15). This is quite a rare formula in Sasanian toreutics represented only by two examples. It seems that after full acceptance of the vertical position of quadrupeds in Sasanian aesthetics, the sliversmiths were reluctant to use a naturalistic, horizontal pose\textsuperscript{29}. The compromise between the marginalization of the beast and the attempt to show it horizontally was offered by the old method of showing only the front part of a beast which, as it was said above, was already used in Parthian times.

- Escape — confrontation — horse with turned away head (fig. 16). This is an extremely unusual formula where the riders are shown on standing horses which turn their heads. In “confrontation” a mode rider and his horse are turned towards the prey and the horse fearfully turns the head away. It is opposite in the “escape” where the horse’s body is turned away from the beast but its head turns the direction of the attack. This motif, where the horse turns its head away, is not a native Persian element. Sasanian iconography prefers the horses either in graceful pace worthy the Vienna riding school, or spirited and full of energy, willingly subdued to the power of the horseman. Even the few depictions of the horses rearing as a result of a sudden attack do not show the steeds with their heads turned away. It seems that the horse turning the head away is the Central Asian motif, possibly of Greco-Bactrian origin. In the battle iconography context it can be found on the famous Orlat bone plaque but also in the examples of eastern Hellenistic toreutics.

- Hunter kills the animal he mounts (fig. 17). This formula seems to reflect a non-preserved narrative with the hero killing the deer he rides. The Sanya Family plate may refer to similar visual tradition, however, the rider does not kill his own mount but the identical one\textsuperscript{30}. Formally the relation can be emphasized by the fact that


\textsuperscript{30}Бауло А. В. Указ. соч. С. 142–146.
both on Shapur plate from the British Museum and Sanya Family plate there are two beasts placed in vertical registers\(^\text{31}\).

- Mixed designs. In late or post-Sasanian era the silversmiths were combining the elements of different formulae listed above, perhaps in attempt to make their products more attractive for the buyers from outside the traditional Iranian gentry. The number of beasts grew together with their variety which made the animal combat scenes closer to “animal slaughter”. The blurred distinction between the genres clearly proved a diminished understanding of the Sasanian visual language.

When comparing the Tabriz plate with the above listed compositional formulae observable in Sasanian depictions of animal combat depicted in silverware one will need to state that the plate does not only fit any of the designs but avoids the very general principles ruling the construction of the picture in Sasanian art. First of all, it is impossible to define firmly the vertical and horizontal axes. Basing on all known depictions of animal combat one would expect that the most likely factor organizing vertical direction would be the silhouette of the hunter. It is not the case in the Tabriz plate. If the horizontal direction is defined by the lance position and the vertical by the large quiver of the main personage, then the head of the horse of the winning combatant rises up high in a way not found in any of the Sasanian depiction of the horsemen. All rearing horses in Sasanian art have their heads turned down to the neck or to the chest in a somehow defensive manner. The very silhouette of the king bends dramatically to the left while his head bends right. This is position impossible to imagine in any royal or “princely” Sasanian representation. It is true that Kushanshah Bahram was depicted in the dire straits, desperately holding his steed’s neck to prevent falling from it, but his torso, neck and head create a straight line, full of royal dignity.

The diagonal division of the pictorial field, the way the plate is exhibited in the museum now does not have any analogies in Sasanian toreutics.

If the plate is turned further clockwise, where the hooves of the horses constitute the horizontal direction, then the composition becomes somehow similar to “Chase with an animal alongside the lower rim”, and the examples of “Two-handed lance downwards

thrust” types\textsuperscript{32}. The winner’s mount and the horse of the vanquished warrior would be perceived as placed in two horizontal registers, the diagonal lance thrust could refer to “Two handed lance downwards thrust” while the awkward position of the main personage’s mount would recall the heads of the galloping horses in Sasanian art. The dying warrior’s scabbard would provide the marker of the vertical direction. What is interesting, the handle of the sword of the victorious personage also seems to point the same direction. Even though placing the dish this way provides some compositional analogies to Sasanian art, there are rejecting differences still present. Firstly, the torso of the victorious rider bends deeply to the right and his face gets into almost horizontal position, which simply would not be acceptable in the visual language for a Sasanian royal family member. The heads of the personages depicted in toreutics are either rigidly straight or slightly bent towards the prey in a way that slightly increases the dynamism of the scene but does not affect the dignity of the crown wearer. The exception would be Kushanshah Bahram but even in this case the line of the body is perfectly straight.

As it was said above, the plate does not match compositionally any of the known Sasanian mounted combat depictions from rock reliefs, murals or cameo. It does not reflect any of the animal combat formulae employed on Sasanian toreutics. As it was already mentioned there were some experiments with the Sasanian “canon” allowed in the later period but they always referred to the well established formulae. The Tabriz plate cannot employ such an excuse as it seems to correspond with the 3rd—4th centuries’ examples, i.e. from the time when the “canon” was at first being developed and was probably the strongest.

\textbf{II.2. Iconographic details of the pictorial language.}

It is not always possible to discern the compositional elements from the iconographic details characteristic for the particular visual language as the “details” are expected in the right place of the pictorial field in order to fit the “canonical” forms. The disproportion of certain parts cannot be included to consideration of general compositional formula of the entire scene. They will affect the view but will not disturb the general design. Except for an ambiguous position within the

compositional frame the silhouettes of the personages and their horses or the depicted objects do not match the known Sasanian iconography.

➢ The main personage: The proportions used to depict the main personage are incomparable in the corpus of Sasanian art. The legs are far too long, especially extended shins sharply and large feet contrast with any depiction of the riders from Sasanian iconography. There are several Sasanian examples of the personages depicted on rearing horses with their knees sharply bent. The oldest one is a plate from the Hermitage with Kushanshah Bahram which suggests Eastern Hellenistic provenance of this stylization. It is not clear if any idea followed accepting the formula of the rider with a bent knee, however, in some later examples it cannot be explained by avoiding the attack of the beast. It might be adopted as a mark of the following visual tradition or it may be a part of the narrative. Some depictions (Hephtalite, Bandiyan) show riders with their legs bent embracing the trunk of the horse; however, the classical Sasanian seat is very different. The legs are almost straight, slightly bent, with stretched “ballerina” feet. It must be highlighted that in all examples of the hunters with the sharply bent legs, the right (i.e. bent) leg clinches the large quiver which is not the case in the plate under discussion. In no combat scene or any depiction of an armored warrior of the early Sasanian period, the armoured warrior is shown wearing loose leggings or baggy trousers instead of segmented leg defenses. The Taq e Bostan rider is shown with legs under a textile covering but there is a general difference in the depicted warrior equipment, on top of the time gap between Firusbad, Naqsh-e Rostam and Taq-e-Bostan. The time gap that allowed actual armament modification or at least the change of the stylization of warriors’ representation.


The torso position is also without a parallel in Sasanian art. Because of the lack of any clear definition of vertical to horizontal dimensions, the torso is in a strange diagonal squeeze which results in losing straightness typical for the riders in Sasanian iconography. Also this attempt to make the posture more dynamic resulted in unnatural widening of the personage’s neck. Sasanian quasi-canonical art showed the torsos in frontal view while the plate under discussion is not clear about the position of the main personage’s torso.

The hold of the lance with the left hand extended and the right one sharply bent and held close to the chest was not found in Sasanian art. There are several ways the lances are wielded in Sasanian Iran: (1) the double handed grip at the hips level, across the horse’s neck “clibanarii grip”, and (2) the double handed across the neck “catafractarii grip”, both referring to Nicolle’s style G, also there is (3) the double handed downward thrust discussed above as the feature defining one compositional formula, (4) the single handed downwards thrust related to Greek and Roman art, perhaps combining the visual scheme of Bellerofont killing hydra with Achaemenid motifs of the rider killing a foot soldier\textsuperscript{35}. The lance thrust with the left arm extended and the right one bent appeared in later Persian art of Safavid and Qajar eras, and was present in Mughal art as well, however, was totally strange in the Sasanian context. The only example somehow related to Sasanian Iran is the warrior in the lower, left part of the battle scene from the Orlat plate. This is a unique piece which represents a different tradition. It cannot be excluded that the technique was used as early as the first half of the first millennium AD but never found its way to Pre-Islamic Iranian visual language.

As it was said above, the designed position of the horse is not clear in the pictorial field. Whatever the place is, the position does not correspond to any of the known Sasanian ways of depicting horses. Repeatedly one can distinguish several fixed horse positions: (1) steady pace, (2) flying gallop, (2) rearing (jumping or galloping with hind legs on the ground) with the horizontal trunk position and head directed down\textsuperscript{36}. On none of the existing Sasanian monuments

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horse is shown rearing high up with the head extended. Even if the composition would be read as two horizontally placed mounts and the main personage’s horse would be in “rearing” position, then in none of the known Sasanian art-works, any horse is depicted rearing with one leg extended and the other bent sharply back. The trunk is too long and thick in proportion to its neck and head as if these elements were assembled from different musters.

➢ The defeated warrior: The position of the personage is unique in Sasanian art. None of the defeated warriors is shown astride in *en trois quarts* position, with his legs spread over the horse’s neck. None of the depictions of the swordsmen shows the right arm over the head with the blade pointing down. Swords are normally shown already submerged in preys’ bodies after a deadly blow, be it a cut or a thrust, alternatively they are held behind the men’s body pointing upwards. Naturally, considering the fact that the majority of sword wielding personages come from “royal” or “princely” iconography, it is not surprising that the *formulae* avoided showing an arm over the crowned head. It also seems important that the drawn swords do not point down. This rule also applies to the captured Roman officer from the Shapur’s cameo. Also none of the defeated personages, pierced with a lance-head, holds the hand at the place where the weapon hit the body.

The personage wears a type of a corselet not known in other depictions of armored warriors in Sasanian art. It seems a kind of segmented cuirass and may attempt to imitate the pattern from the Parthian opponent of the crown prince Shapur on Firusbad frieze. However, as the construction of this breastplate is not clear the relation is not certain. The skirt with scale pattern flows softly on the hips, in a manner very different from clearly protective scale skirts on Firusbad and Naqsh-e Rostam friezes. The scabbard also hangs from the hip without any trace of straps which is very different from Sasanian idea of depicting decorated scabbards with elaborate harnesses. The scabbard-slide, the dominant method of the fastening throughout the era is also missing. No other strap system is even suggested.

The horse is in a position not to be found in Sasanian iconography. The rear strap of two rows of *phalerae* is also unusual for any depictions of the time. The horse necklace also seems more fitting the

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Post-Sasanian, Roman or Himyarite reality or even much later horse decorations from Tibet and Central Asia. Probably it is a misinterpretation of the breast strap of the harness, often depicted on Sasanian silver, rising in a gentle curve from the mount’s chest to the saddle.

III. Chronology.

Although the plate clearly relates to the rock friezes of the early Sasanian period, it also seems to follow the patterns of the hunting scenes from Sasanian toreutics that were developed later. It is sharply visible when comparison is made between possible compositional formulae and the date of allegedly 3rd century plate.

IV. Conclusions.

Tabriz Museum plate with the depiction of the mounted combat under discussion presents only superficial relations with Sasanian combat depictions, limited to some iconographic details which are assembled in an order unprecedented in Sasanian art. Compositionally the plate does not match any of the known Sasanian formulae. Neither the position of the combatants nor of their mounts corresponds to the known Sasanian examples. The pieces of Sasanian style are gathered in a way foreign to Sasanian aesthetics showing the knowledge of the corpus of Sasanian art but different visual language. The dynamism of the composition emphasizing the effort of the victorious personage can be related only to Kushano-Sasanian plates, but even then the crowned head is shown upright in comparison to the torso. The discrepancies between the discussed piece and the known objects of Sasanian art are too vast to believe that it could represent an unknown school of Sasanian toreutics. It is also difficult to believe that it was manufactured with an intention of forgery, i.e. selling the product under the label of originality. The forger would most likely choose a more common subject and hold to the confirmed stylistic and compositional principles. Most likely the plate was manufactured in late 1920s or 1930s in the time when Iranian national awareness received influence from the modern archaeological research. It is likely that the object was addressed to the Iranians educated in a European manner, who took pride in their past, hence exact quotations from Sasanian art and rather modern general expression.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1. Plate from Tabriz Museum with battle scene. Exhibition view.
Prepared – Adam Kubik
Fig. 2. Plate from Tabriz Museum with battle scene. Alternative view 1. Prepared – Adam Kubik

Fig. 3. Plate from Tabriz Museum with battle scene. Alternative view 2. Prepared – Adam Kubik

Fig. 4. Firusbad friese. After von Gall 1990
Fig. 5. Naqsh-e Rostam combat scenes. Drawn by Author after von Gall 1990
Fig. 6. Dura Europos mural, after James 2004

Fig. 7. “Shapur cameo”. Drawn by Author
Fig. 8. "Confrontation". Drawn by Author

Fig. 9. "Chase". Drawn by Author
Fig. 10. “Escape”. Drawn by Author

Fig. 11. “Double Escape”. Drawn by Author
Fig. 12. “Two handed lance downwards thrust”. Drawn by Author

Fig. 13. “Hunter attacked by two beasts in diagonal directions”. Drawn by Author
Fig. 14. “Chase with an animal alongside the lower rim”. Drawn by Author

Fig. 15. “Animals shown ‘realistically’, i.e. horizontally”. Drawn by Author
Fig. 16. “Escape – confrontation – horse with turned away head”. After Harper, Meyers 1981

Fig. 17. “Hunter kills the animal he mounts”. After Harper 1981
Блюдо с изображением батальной сцены из Тебризского музея. 
Формальный анализ

Блюдо с изображением батальной сцены из Азербайджанского музея (г. Тебриз, Иран) имеет общие черты с некоторыми памятниками изобразительного искусства эпохи Сасанидов, в том числе — с раннесасанидскими наскальными рельефами, изображающими поединки всадников, из Фирузабада и Накш-и Рустама. Однако сходства между ними проявляются лишь в отдельных деталях, и тщательное изучение композиционных и иконографических особенностей изображения на блюде из Тебриза показывает, что данное изделие не могло быть создано в сасанидскую эпоху, поскольку не имеет типичных изобразительных и композиционных элементов, свойственных наскальным рельефам и памятникам сасанидской торевтики, подлинность которых, в свою очередь, бесспорна. Скорее всего, тебризское блюдо является весьма поздней имитацией, изготовленной, вероятно, в 1920-е—1930-е гг.

Ключевые слова: Тебризский музей, сасанидское искусство, батальная сцена, художественная композиция, сасанидская торевтика, сасанидское серебро, иконографическая формула.

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