

# An overview of the Depiction of Female Figures on Sasanian Silverwork

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Abstract

The demonstration of female figures on Sasanian silver vessels was an interesting subject to Sasanian silversmiths which caused much dispute among the scholars over whose character the female figure represents. Are they representations of the goddess Anahita or members of her cult? Is there any connection between them and the cult of Asiatic Dionysus? The other question that arises is whether they are secular objects or bearing a religious significance. This paper aims to review previous studies and then, on the basis of an iconographical study and also referring to the Sasanian religious text, present a new interpretation of themes.

Keywords: Anahita, Avesta, Female Figure, Sasanian, Silverwork, Zoroastrian

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Introduction

From the surviving objects of Sasanian silverwork, it seems that, after the royal figure depicted on the body of silver vessels, the numerous female figures, in dancing or walking pose, might be the next in terms of quantity. In addition, a small subset of female figures includes musicians playing the flute, guitar, or harp. The motifs are depicted on the body of a variety of vessels such as vases (Figures 1, 2), ewers (Figures 3, 4), plates (Figure 5), and bowls (Figure 6) with vase predominating. The exterior surface of the vessels, particularly in ewers and vases, is usually divided into two to four or six segments in the form of arched frames, each showing a female figure with number of distinctive details, often holding different objects.



Figure 2 Silver vase showing a female holding a panther and a bird, National Museum, Tehran (source: Ghirshman 1962: fig. 256).

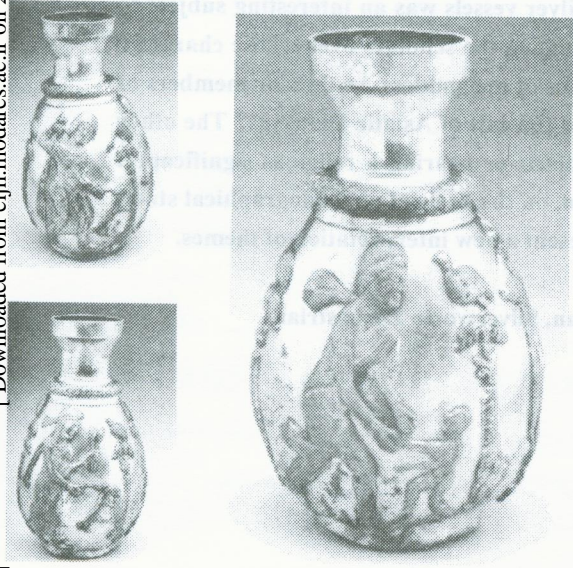


Figure 1 Silver vase showing a female in various poses, Sackler Gallery (source: Gunter & Jett 1992: 33).

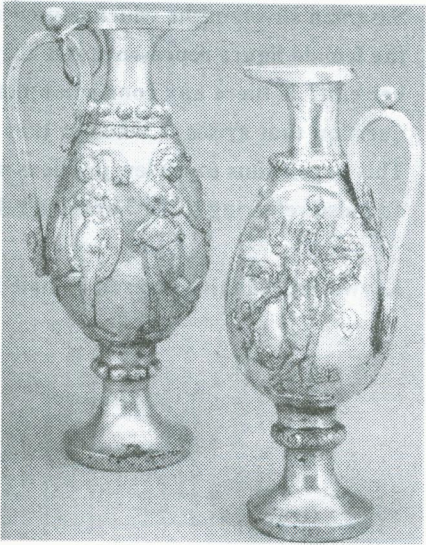


Figure 3 Silver ewer decorated with female Dancer, Sackler Gallery (source: Gunter & Jett 1992: 36).





**Figure 4** Silver-gilt ewer with female figure (right) holding a ewer in her hand, Metropolitan Museum of Art (source: Harper 1978: 18).



**Figure 5** Silver-gilt plate showing female dancer with vegetal decoration. Cleveland Museum of Art (source: Lukonin 1971a: 181).



**Figure 6** Silver bowl with female musician, National Museum, Tehran (source: Ghirshman 1962: fig. 257).

The things that women hold include either end of a shawl in each hand, with shawl forming an arch above the head (Figure 5); they are also shown while holding the hand of a small nude male child, a bird, a dog or panther and a single flower or a bunch of flowers (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4). They also sometime hold a bowl heaped with fruit (Figure 3). Considering these objects with female decoration it is said that in the reign of Shapur II, his chief priest *Aturpat*, by editing the text of the Avesta, “transformed the nature of the cult of Anahita, associating the goddess more closely with the worship of vegetation, of water, of flowers” (Lukonin 1971: 182).

Harper has shown the details of the above mentioned objects in her careful iconographical study of such motifs (1971: Figures 1, 2, 3, 4); from those items some are constantly depicted in the scene and a few others such as dog, panther, and child are sometimes omitted on some vessels (Harper 1971: 505). In terms of clothing, the women appear in three forms: utterly dressed,



stark naked and semi-nude diaphanously clad; the later predominated over the other types (see Figure 3). Although Lukonin suggested that such products might belong to the first century of the Sasanian period (1971: 182), Harper agrees with a date around the 6th century AD (1983: 1121). Such depictions of the female figures on the Sasanian silver vessels have caused much dispute altogether.

### Review of the previous studies

As mentioned above, the female motif caused so many different points of view among the scholars studying the Sasanian silverwork. Orbli has discussed the matter by focussing on a drawing figure surviving from a lost ewer (Smirnov 1909: Pl. XLI, no. 79) and some other vases in the Hermitage Museum of Art. He, in comparison of the figure with two rock-relief of Anahita in Naqsh-e Rostam (Figure 7) and Taq-e Bostan (Figure 8) and also her characteristics and duties mentioned in the Avesta, has concluded that such representation of the female figure is the personification of Anahita in Sasanian art (1938: 734-5). In contrast, Hanfmann believes that such a motif clearly shows the Persian imitation of the Mediterranean prototype of the *Horae* with attributes of the four seasons, but bearing a Persian cultural significance (1951: 211).

In another investigation, Shepherd considered this subject matter by studying a silver plate and a vase held in the Cleveland Museum of Art (1964: Figs 17, 20). She believes that it might represent merging of the cult of Dionysus with some aspects of the worship of Anahita during the Hellenistic

period, continuing through into the Sasanian period (Shepherd 1964: 82). She also mentioned that artists from the Seleucid and Parthian periods had imitated the Greeks. Their way of rendering the female figure was used as a prototype. So, the four figures depicted on the Cleveland vase, each according to the symbols, which they hold, show different characteristics or attributes of the goddess Anahita. For instance bucket and bird are her symbols as a goddess of water; vine and flower her symbols as goddess of vegetation; the dog is her symbol as guardian of home and flocks; the bowl of fruit is her symbol as goddess of agriculture; and the child and pomegranate her symbols as goddess of fertility (Shepherd 1964: 84).



**Figure 7** Investiture of Narseh, Naqsh-e Rostam (photo: Mousavi Kouhpar 2005).



Considering the arched frame which appears with the majority of such motifs, into which female figures of this type are placed, Trever suggests that it may be meant to indicate a shrine dedicated to Anahita (1967: 132; Azarpay 1976: 41). It might be objected because the framing is merely an artistic device, to distinct the figures. But there are many ways of doing this, and the choice of an architectural device must have been informed by something. Thus, it may have a double function, at once separating scenes showing different aspects of the goddess and, at the same time, suggesting a context of worship at a holy place.

In contrast to the above mentioned point of views, Grabar argued that there is no evidence in what we know of Sasanian religious beliefs to make such an identification with Anahita. In the form in which the women appear on the vessels, Grabar judges them to be a mere secular motif (1967: 60-65). As noted above, another exhaustive iconographical study on this motif was carried out by Harper but she did not attempt to deal with the meaning of the scene. She curiously tried to find out the derivation of each icon and finally concluded that there was a common artistic language in the mid-first millennium A.D. between the eastern Mediterranean countries and the Near East (1971: 514). She also added that the Near Eastern artisans copied some sets of design, in particular those of the seasons, from the West (1971: 515).

In an other study carried out by Richard Ettinghausen, he compared some female figures that appeared on Sasanian vessels with a few

examples of the Dionysus motif and suggested that the motifs were derived from the west and were then adopted by the Iranian artisans (1972: 3-10). Martha Carter, in her study of the royal festal theme on Sasanian silverwork, tends to regard the female figure as bacchantes connected with different types of Sasanian festival such as *Muzdghiran*, *Nowrouz*, *Sadhak*, *Khuramroz*, *Vaharjashn*, *Tiraghan*, *Mihragan*, and *Abhrizagan* (1974: 201). She also suggests that the main use of such vessels was in the court for the important celebration of *Nowuruz* (1978: 61).

Some other scholars have strongly suggested that the female on such motif, according to their iconic similarity with the lady who appeared in the rock relief of Naqsh-e-Rostam and Taq-e-Bustan would necessarily be the representation of the goddess Anahita. Their main evidence is the similarity of the globe shape above the lady's crown, and also the ewer held in her hand at Taq-e-Bustan (Figure 8) with its parallel appearing on the body of silver vessels (Figure 4); and also the necklace worn by Anahita in Naqsh-e-Rostam and the bucket held in her hand (Figure 7) with its parallel among the female figures on the body of silver vessels (Orbli: 1938: 734-5; Shepherd: 1964: 84). Contrarily, other scholars have mentioned that there is no evidence in religious or any other documents to explain the nudity of Anahita; she is royally clad (Marshak 1998: 89), while a majority of ladies on silver vessels appeared in nude form; so the females on silver vessels might present characters other than Anahita (Grabar: 1967: 60-5; Harper: 1971: 515; Carter: 1974: 201).





**Figure 8** The investiture of Khusro II, Taq-i-Bustan (photo: Mousavi Kouhpar 2005).

**Discussion**

As already noted, the scholars' different views of this type of motif emphasise that the female figure was an important subject among the Sasanian motifs, which still requires more attention. Therefore, I think some points have to be addressed that might have been ignored in previous studies. It seems that there is a constant and unilinear view to this scene in some previous studies, which led to two different types of interpretations, absolutely secular or definitely religious significance. The same attitude is also true about the main parallel or reference of rock relief of Naqsh-e Rostam and Taq-i-Bustan that almost all scholars have referred. So, here I intend to give my view about the interpretation of the scene based on the existing evidence and also religious sources. Before that, based on the

evidence from previous studies, I do not intend to challenge the idea that such a style would have been influenced by West and would agree that showing the female in such form was, definitely, under the influence of the contemporary motifs that occurred in the eastern Mediterranean region (Levit-Tawil 1992: 217). Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that we shall see a process from the imitation of a foreign form and style along with the transformation of concept, which is going to be discussed here, into Iranian culture.

The environmental condition of Iran had a profound effect on the life, culture, thought, and religion of the people (Mousavi 2004: 150). For them, having access to the sources of all needs was always a great wish demonstrated in their art and other monuments. Thus, they created different characters concerned with one or other natural



resources or phenomena, personified in their myth and religion in the form of a male or female. It seems that, according to archaeological documents, the women from the primary agrarian societies were the symbol of fertility and abundance. Therefore, it is not surprising that several mother goddess statues were found during the archaeological excavation of the prehistoric and historical sites of Iran (Majidzadeh 1991: fig. 51, 52). In this relation, it is necessary to mention that in most of religions, the fertility and fructification have been imagined in female form (Hinnells 1973: 23).

A long chapter, *Aban Yasht*, in the Avesta is dedicated to the goddess Anahita, and demonstrates the importance of her character among the other Zoroastrian's deities. There, she is introduced as the source of life and all waters on the earth, likewise the source of all fertility, purifying the seed of all males, sanctifying the womb of all females and purifying the milk in the mother's breast (*Aban Yasht* 1: 1-5). We also know that at the city of *Istakhr* located in the Sasanian homeland, province of *Pars*, there was a famous temple dedicated to Anahita in which the Sasanian ancestor, *Papak*, was chief priest. The other important document that emphasises Anahita's dignity in that period is her participation in the investiture ceremony of Sasanian kings while offering the power ring to them (see Figures 7, 8).

Although in some rock reliefs, Anahita is shown in royal attire (Marshak 1998: 89) this does not mean that she would not have appeared nude, because the royal and political subjects are quite different from religious and symbolic concepts. I

think this subject does not preclude the existence of such depiction of Anahita on other objects. First of all, it should be considered that there is a clear difference between her clothing in the Naqsh-e Rostam and Taq-i-Bustan rock relief (compare Figures 7 and 8). A differentiation of dress in these scenes is obviously visible; her garment at Naqsh-e Rostam is very skin-tight and transparent while she is fully dressed in quite different types of clothing in Taq-i-Bustan. Secondly, even if we accept the clothing as the only criterion for her recognition on the silver vessels, which type of clothing, as worn on those rock bases, should be preferred as the main criterion?

Although the clothes that Anahita would wear are described in details in the Avesta (*Aban Yasht* 30: 126-129; Carnoy 1964: 279; V. S. Curtis 1993: 13), it is indeed difficult to specifically define which of the above mentioned types corresponds with Avesta's form. Moreover, the cloth that she and her companions wore on the rock relief is an official form and is also extremely affected by the local culture and regional climate. Thus, it does not follow that she would not appear nude in other scenes.

On the other hand, the description of her lovely body in the Avesta (*Aban Yasht* 1: 7, 4: 15, 19: 78; Farahvashi 1991: 168; Pouredavoud 1999: 237, 241, 267) seems to be extraordinarily close to some female figures appearing on the silver vessels. For instance, in my view, the best personification of her body, according to description given, might be the female figure appearing on the Cleveland Museum plate, though; she appeared fully naked (Figure 5). Therefore,



neither the dressed nor the undressed form can support the idea that the naked or clad female on silver vessels is or is not a depiction of Anahita.

Hereafter, I would like to present my own interpretation of female figures on silver vessels. Although it is scientifically not acceptable to give a firm identification of the female figures discussed here, considering previous studies and assent to some of those identifications, I intend to focus on other points which seems to be connected with Anahita's other characteristic mentioned in the Avesta, which may help us to identify some female figures on silver vessels.

First of all, it is necessary to raise some questions that may arise at the first sight of the vessels such as: for what reason do the female figures, known as the cult, bacchante, and priests of Anahita, appear on the body of silver vessels? What does it mean when they bear some objects such as fruits, flower, doves, etc and likewise what does it mean if they are holding a child or beaver in their hand. Moreover, what is the meaning of the arched frame surrounding the ladies?

To find out some reasons, I reviewed the *Aban Yasht* and found some phrases that might lead to a closest interpretation of the scene. In one hymn, it is emphasised that marriageable girls must supplicate to Anahita for her patronage and to provide them with a brave husband. The phrase in continuation also suggest that young pregnant women at the time of childbirth must likewise supplicate Anahita for having an easy birth (*Aban Yasht* 21: 87). The other hymn tells us that she has thousands of lake and rivers each having a beautiful house, with hundreds of shiny windows

and thousands of well-built columns, built upon thousands of columns (*Aban Yasht* 23: 101). In the other hymn, it is said that she (Anahita) wears a dress that is made from the skin of three hundred of female beavers, an aquatic and beautiful animal with exuberant fur. If such skin could be supplied timely, it will radiate shiny (*Aban Yasht* 30: 129).

Considering the above description of Anahita in Avesta, we may note that the indication of female figures on silver vessels, in most cases young women, at least some of them, instead of being priestesses of Anahita, which there is no strong reason to suppose, might be a group of marriageable girls, each of whom offers different types of gift to her temple in the hope that their wishes be fulfilled. It is not surprising because throughout the *Aban Yasht*, to be granted their wishes, Zoroaster and all good worshipers are recommended to sacrifice and giving oblation to Anahita. In addition, the appearance of a child in some scenes can support this idea that the lady who holds the child's hand might be the one who wishes to have an easy birth or in another sense she might be Anahita herself as symbol of the sacred midwife who made childbirth easy for the ladies (figures 1, 3). The arched frame with the well-designed column within which the ladies are placed might be the symbol of her house described in *Aban Yasht*.

## Conclusion

In sum, apart from that, whom the ladies figure might identify, the elements appearing on the scenes are evidently connected with some characteristics of Anahita. As she has been



described as a life given goddess, the four important symbols of life can be recognised within the scenes, which include the human in the form of a baby; the animal in the form of dove, dog or beaver; the water with its symbolic signs, the ewer and bucket; and vegetation in the form of different types of flowers and fruits. Therefore, I think, without any sentiment about the exact identification of the ladies, we shall consider the message behind the scenes that, without doubt, expresses the thought, religion and culture of people on that time.

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