

Original Research Article

Naturalism in Sassanid Art*

Shohreh Javadi**

Assistant Professor, Department of Advanced Studies of Art, University of Tehran, Iran.

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Abstract | The Persian Sassanids Empire, were the originators of a magnificent culture and art representing the 'Parthian' and 'Achaemenid' legacy with all its naturalistic manifestations. There are numerous architectural works, reliefs, paintings, woven fabrics, antique dishes, metal objects, glass things and war ordnances that have been remained from this era due to the presence of treasured coins with symbolic engravings and the calligraphy of Pahlavi era. The Sassanid art is considered as the 'Modern Persian Art' comprising the past traditions, and has established the Persian Paradise or Earthly Heaven in the history of world architecture by presenting the magnificent and distinctive landscapes in the form of holy sanctuaries/worship places, palaces and hunting grounds. Additionally, in the fields of architectural decoration, relief, fabric designs, ancient utensils and objects, the Sassanids were applying the natural elements in a symbolic form. The Sassanid art has been appeared in a wide range of lands from 'Fars' (Persia) to 'Ctesiphon', 'Kermanshah', 'Sistan' and 'Azerbaijan', relying on the naturalistic ideas and believes in the goddess of Mehr and Anahita, and following the Zoroastrian believes, as valuable works in various branches of art has been remained accordingly. Most of the architectural works of this time, including worship places, palaces, hunting grounds and 34 'reliefs', have been established t next to the Natural elements such as mountains, water and trees in the heart of Nature. The Sassanid can be considered as the greatest landscapers in the history of Iran (Persian land), as the worship places, palaces and hunting grounds, and their 'relief' on mountain walls and cliffs can be referred to as the great indication of these architectural works.

Keywords | *Nature, Art & culture, Relief, Rituals, Belief, Sassanid Empire.*

Introduction | The ancient Iranian people had used to worship the manifestations of Nature in the form of various myths they were creating in connection with the Natural elements, and were offering sacrifices and vows either in the heart of Nature or in the specific worship places. They were respecting for the Sun as symbol of divine light by honoring the Goddess Mehr/ Mithra, and were associating the sanctity of pure water with 'Anāhitā', the goddess of fertility and the guardian of pure water, and praising these favorable and vital elements. This Nature based believes and ritual along with the respect for water, plants, Sun and light were continuing from Zoroaster (Zarathustra)'s time to the Islamic era that is still firm and established.

The sanctity of Nature and its related elements was either originating from the need and fear or connecting to the desire of protecting these favorable powers for survival. These fears and needs, together with the rituals of offering vows and sacrifices to the goddess have been common among the nations and peoples around the world, from the East to the West since ancient times. Water and plants have always been considered as essential elements for prosperity and health of human beings, plants and animals, as men has always tried to preserve and protect them, and created sacred myth to be safe from hurt. The goddess of 'Mehr' and 'Anāhitā' were being created in this way and have had a special place among the Aryan- Persian for centuries, as by the arrival of Zarathustra and Ahuramazda, they became the two companions of Ahuramazda, and remained as the

**Corresponding author: +989123357286, shjavadi@ut.ac.ir

manifestations of sunlight, fertility, and the purity of waters. The Natural signs of these goddess were tree, spring, rivers, moon, sun, sky, stars, mountains, rocks and caves. The tree is considered as a symbol of generating life due to having the characteristics of fruitfulness and greenery, which the goddess of Anahita was resembling it; as many worship places in Iran have been dedicated to it, which were located near to the Mehr temples and according to Bahar (1998), mostly were built next to the flowing waters and springs.

Research background

There has been a lot of information about Sassanid art from the past until now, that is not to be mentioned here; however, the analysis of Sassanid art based on religion, beliefs, symbolism, architectural location and the related decorations is a subject that the author has considered in cooperation with a professional team of experts on history, archeology and architecture and doing field study during the last fifteen years; the research outcome has resulted in publishing two books entitled "Sassanid Reliefs" (Javadi & Avarzamani, 2007) and the "Colorful recreation of Sassanid rock reliefs" (Javadi & Avarzamani, 2019), and the articles "Nature and landscape elements in Sassanid art and culture" (Javadi, 2015), "The Relief of Khosrow Parviz in Taq-e Bostan" (Javadi, 2007) and "Shrines & Nature" (Javadi, 2007).

This research paper has been prepared in relation to the previous articles, especially in addressing the subject of "Nature and landscape elements in Sassanid art and culture" (Javadi, 2015). To present this article, the outcome of field visit and the mentioned books and articles have been considered.

Hypothesis

Creating myth from the Natural elements in the goddess forms of 'Mehr' (Sun) and 'Mah' (Moon) or 'Mitra' and 'Anāhitā' was initiated during the Sassanid era, and their sanctity and worship continued until the time of Zoroaster and Islam.

Naturalism in Sassanid art

The Sassanids are the greatest landscapers of Persian art and even the world. The remaining works of them in the fields of architecture, decorations and handicrafts from the ancient dishes and objects to the fabrics and carpets, all are attached to the Natural patterns like water, plants, moon, sun, the motifs of birds and animals such as lions, cows, eagles, crows, fish, ducks and peacocks which are all related to the goddess of Mehr and Mah. Among the remaining architectural works, we can mention the 'Ardeshir Pāpakan Palace' in Firuzabad/ Firooz-Abad, which is located on top of a hill, facing to a spring, that is a clear example of combined architecture of Parthian and

Sassanid by manifesting porch, chamber and three huge domes (Fig. 1).

Among the other significant monuments of this era, the temple-caves of Taq-e Bostan in Kermanshah/ Kermāshān, can be referred as one of the famous campus (Pardis) of Sassanid era and the hunting ground of Khosrow II. The mentioned porches or caves have been decorated with reliefs of various goddess of Mehr, Anāhitā and Ahuramazda in the scenes of coronation and king hunting along with the various carvings and natural symbols. These religious buildings attributed to the government, have been located in the heart of the splendid cliffs facing to a boiling spring, which has been surrounded by the ancient trees, sanctifying the temple's garden and the hunting ground of the king. Worship, coronation and hunting are among the glorious customs and rituals of the Sassanid's kings that have been recorded on their relief. There are thirty-four reliefs belong to the Sassanid era in relation to the Nature which are considered as the most significant documents of the religious-political government of this time representing the traces of their religion and naturalistic beliefs. Among the decorations of various Sassanid arts, depiction of the earthly and heavenly elements can be observed in connection with the goddess and the king as the shadow and symbol of them who is the representative of Ahuramazda, manifested in the shape of water, plants and birds, especially ducks. The reliefs and the motifs depicted on dishes, objects (Fig. 2), coins, cloth, seals and the remaining medals, frequent examples of the mentioned symbolic elements can be observed. The thoroughly examination of Sassanid reliefs at Taq-e Bostan to write the book "Colorful Recreation of Sassanid Stone Inscriptions of Taq-e Bostan" (Javadi & Avarzamani, 2019), revealed the original and significant outcomes about the relations between the Nature and its elements in the Sassanid era; when these inscriptions were colored and matched both with the fabric arts of this era and the other related artworks, the results showed how much the Sassanids were thoughtful about sanctifying and honoring the Nature, according to what mentioned in the book. Considering that, the Natural



Fig. 1. Ardeshir Palace in Firuzabad. Source: NAZAR Research Center Archive, 2013.



Fig. 2. The ancient dishes belonging to Sassanid Era. Source: Riazi, 2003.



elements like water, mountains, rocks and caves, and the related myths, or the goddess associated with these icons, were highly important to them, all aspects of their lives, culture, and artworks were in connection with the Nature. Water and sky, together with the creatures and animals on earth, from birds like eagles, peacocks, ducks, herons, crows and roosters to the other sacred animals such as cows, goats and snakes, all were related to their beliefs, pointing to the goddess and kings; the king himself was resembling the God's representative and also was being portrayed as a holy person (Fig. 3). The role of lotus' bud and flowers, the sunflowers and the birds such as eagles, peacocks, ducks, herons, crows and roosters can frequently be observed on the brass and cumin trays, showing the birds with strings of pearls on their beaks. These elements and signs are related

to water and the goddess Anāhitā. The silk and fine fabrics related to this era are also adorned with a variety of patterns derived from the Nature and naturalistic beliefs (Fig. 4). The role of 'pit fire' (Atashdan) and the sacred fire, the ray of light over the head of BAHRĀM, the pearl and the crescent moon on the coins (Fig. 5) all are religious symbols that are associated with the goddess of sun and moon.

The Sassanid architectural works and reliefs in relation to the Nature

The architectural art during this era has been constituted in the form of worship places, palaces, hunting grounds and reliefs in the heart of Nature, next to mountains, rocks, water and ancient trees. The palace and temple of Shiz (Takht-e Soleyman) in Azerbaijan that comprises the Palace

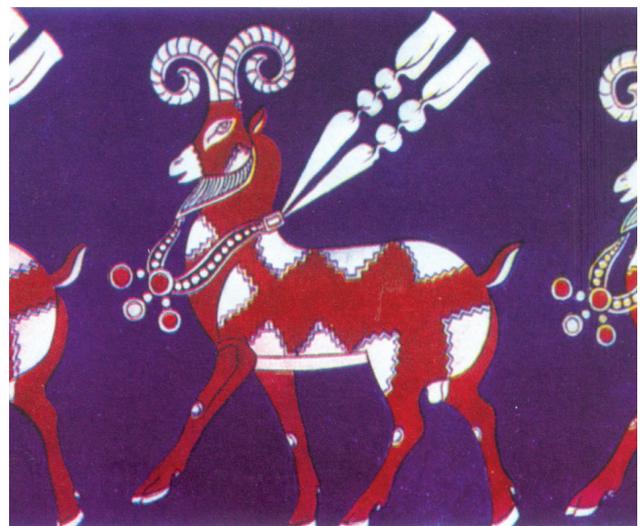


Fig. 3. Horse and goat in motifs from the Sassanid Era. Source: Javadi & Avarzamani, 2016.



Fig. 4. The role of birds on the fabrics belonging to the Sassanid Era. Source: Riazi, 2003, 339-357.



Fig. 5. The Sassanid Coins. Source: Amini, 2006, 254,363.

of Khosrow Parviz near the great lakes, the ‘Char Taghi’ of Anahita Temple and the other building that is supposed to be related to the Mehr Temple, together make a magnificent complex; another palace has also been located there, later in the Ilkhanate era, which are still remained until today; similar to other buildings of this era, the monument is associated with springs and water, as the building’s image is being reflected in the water. The Temple-Cave of Taq-e-Bostan, with magnificent relief locating in the heart of the huge rocks (Fig. 6) is being reflected on a flowing stream arising from a spring. This place is one of the most famous Sassanid campuses/Padis, which is known as Khosrow Parviz hunting ground. The goddess of fertility, Anāhitā, who blesses and protects the flowing waters, has been engraved on the reliefs of the great cave of Taq-e Bostan (Fig. 7), together with the Natural landscapes’ symbols



Fig. 6. Taq-e-Bostan. Source: NAZAR Research Center Archive, 2013.



Fig. 7. The Goddess of Anāhitā in the relief of Taq-e Bostan with a crown of pearls along with a jug of water. Source: The NAZAR Research Center Archive, 2013.

such as pearls, water jugs and the crescent moon; the goddess of Mehr/ Mitra, with the symbol of the Sun crown and the lotus icon has been seen in the scene of Ardeshir's coronation given by Ahuramazda with the presence of Mehr in the arch of Bostan (Fig. 8).

Similarly, the symbols of pearls, the flowers' buds and blossoms, the moon, the sun and the stars can also be seen on the crowns of kings and the goddess (Fig. 9).

The reliefs of 'Tang-e Chogan' on the heart of the huge rocks overlooking the Shapur River (Fig. 10) include five rows of carvings on the left side of the river, which represent the victories of Shapur over the Roman emperors; and on the right side of the river, another relief from the scenes of the King's victory over the Romans has been depicted in different way that represents the Sassanid lithographs on the height of the huge rocks near the water.

The relief of 'Farhād Tarāsh on Bisotoun Mountain', also known as Farhad Tash or Fara Tash, represent a view of a royal promenade and hunting ground with three elements of 'green space', 'water' and 'architecture' (Fig. 11); the monument is located in Bisotoun area and should be considered as one of "the key architectural plan of Sassanid in the region" (Mansouri & Ajourloo, 2008, 55).

This is part of an unfinished carved work, framed a huge relief with a stone bench/ raised platform (Soffeh), located at the foot of the rock; down this are there is a collection of Sassanid fountains, with gardens and palaces; the Temple of Anāhitā in Kangavar (Fig. 12), which is also known as Khosrow Palace, a huge building, can be mentioned as examples of this kind of monuments, that its columns still have remained until now.

During the past times, a water stream was flowing in this place, and today there is a bath and a mosque near this location, which shows that it has been a cherished place from the past until now; additionally, its nearness to water



Fig. 8. The coronation of Ardeshir, given by Ahuramazda in the presence of Izad-Mehr, Mitra. Source: The NAZAR Research Center Archive, 2013.



Fig. 9. The clothing designs of Sassanid Kings and goddess. Source: Javadi & Avarzamani, 2016.



Fig. 10. The relief of Tang-e Chogan. Source: NAZAR Research Center Archive, 2009.

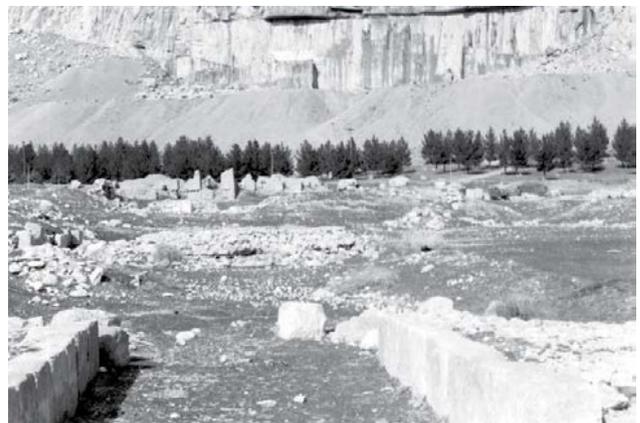


Fig. 11. Farhād Tarāsh on Bisotoun Mountain. Source: Mansouri & Ajorloo, 2008.



Fig. 12. The Temple of Anāhitā in Kangavar. Source: Nazar Research Center Archive, 2013.



reveals its connection with Anāhitā, the goddess of fertility and the guardian of waters. This place also supposed to be related to the Parthian-Sassanid era as a hunting ground. However, there is no contradiction between the presence of hunting ground and the place of worship, since in Sassanid times, both were existed in a same place. For example, Taq-e Bostan, the Khosrow Parviz hunting ground in Kermanshah, is one of the Sassanid campuses where prominent works of caves decorated with the reliefs of Anāhitā and Mehr/ Mitra can be observed.

The Temple of Anāhitā in Bishapour, next to the Sassanid palaces, is a dominant example of a water temple (Fig. 13). This temple with the symbols of 'pool', 'water' and half-timbered statues of 'cows' whose images are reflected on the water, is resembling one of the most magnificent ritual and symbolic manifestation of Anāhitā Temple. The Sassanid kings had to offer sacrifices to the goddess of fertility in a formal and glorious ceremony every year, at the time of harvest, and in order to deciding a blessed year for the farming people and the country.

The people of those time were also praying in special places, that were related to water and trees and sometimes in small local temples, where they used to resort to the goddess of water, fertility and blessing. Many of these natural places and elements, such as water and trees, have still remained as remembrance of praying the Anāhitā, which in somehow are entangled with the recent religions and beliefs of Islamic culture, that people are still coming to these places.

Conclusion

The Sassanid's represent the Nature elements in their architecture and reliefs at its highest level, and show the manifestations of them in other arts as well. The intuitions and preferences of Sassanid's craftsmen, reached to its highest level relying on the Naturalistic beliefs, as they

could create the most magnificent landscapes, such as the worship places, palaces, hunting grounds and reliefs near the mirages, pools, springs, rivers, at the foothills and over the huge rocks and caves with giant trees, which are still remained, and are remembrance of the old tradition of sanctifying the Nature that root backs in the rituals of Mehr, Anahita and Zoroaster. The use of Natural elements such as water, various flowers and plants, birds and animals has been due to the symbolic and sacred aspects of them.

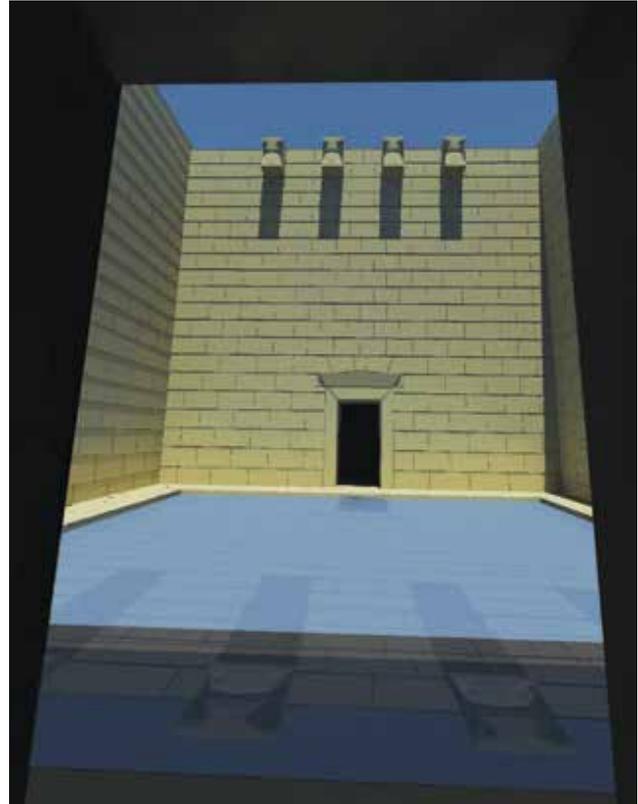


Fig. 13. The Temple of Anahita in Bishapour. Source: Alehashemi, 2009.

Endnote

*This article is a rewrite and completion of the article "Nature and landscape elements in Sassanid art and culture" (2015), which is based on new field findings and the completion and analysis of the author's previous content.

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