

# The Iconography of Zoroastrian Angelology in Sasanian Art and Architecture

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**Abstract** Historical depictions of angels are a suitable means of tracing transculturality in the ancient world. For more than four centuries, and as far as the end of late antiquity, two great world powers, the Sasanian Empire, the last pre-Islamic Persian empire, and its neighbor, the Roman Empire, ruled the Near East and the Mediterranean—sometimes as well-disposed partners and, sometimes as rivals. Choosing Zoroastrianism as the empire-wide religion, Sasanians developed and complemented their in-house religious iconographic canon. The Sasanian canon contains some iconographical elements borrowed from previous or neighboring cultures, which the Sasanian artists translated, alongside their own creations and “iranianized” in a proper Zoroastrian mode. The cultural legacy of the Sasanians in turn became a great source of inspiration for medieval art and architecture both in Europe and Asia. In this article, significant examples from the religious canon of Sasanian iconography are studied in reference to the cross-cultural entanglements of angels.

## Zoroastrian Angels: Term and Function

Zoroastrianism, named after its prophet Zarathustra, is one of the world’s oldest religions. It is the religion of the Iranian peoples and dates back to the second millennium BCE, in Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> When worshippers moved to the Iranian mainland, it became the religion of three great empires, the Achaemenids (550–330 BCE), the Parthians (247 BCE–224 CE), and the Sasanians (224–651 CE). Zoroastrianism is still a living religion in Iran, western India and Pakistan, as well as in the western diaspora.

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<sup>1</sup> For a general and brief introduction and selection of texts, cf. Skjærvø (2011) and Boyce (2006).

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Zoroastrianism has a wide range of different spiritual beings besides its supreme god, Ahura Mazdā, who represents an angel-like concept. For the purposes of this article, angels will be defined from a theological view as “spiritual beings who mediate between the transcendental realm of the sacred and profane world of man” (Coudert 1987, 282). Although the use of the term “angel” in Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) may differ from Zoroastrianism in some aspects, some of the main concepts are the same. Today, many scholars believe that the concept of the angel in Judaism after the Babylonian exile (as well as later, in Christianity and Islam) was taken from Zoroastrianism (Boyce, Grenet 1991, 404–405, 411, 419–421). This likelihood allows us to compare concepts among these cultures and observe their similarities as a successful example of transcultural phenomena.<sup>2</sup> The function of angels—at least in religions based on revelation, Zoroastrianism among them—which emphasizes the gap between God and man, is to mediate between heaven and the earth (Coudert 1987, 282–3). This main function, *inter alia*, is my initial point regarding the identification of “Zoroastrian angelology” and its related iconography of religious “Sasanian art,” which shall be investigated first.

## Sasanians and the Term “Sasanian Art”

The term “Sasanian art”<sup>3</sup> implies a variety of categories including cultural, geographical, historical, ethnic or religious aspects, as well as places and objects which are all categorized as and characterized by artistic and creative works. Sasanian art refers more specifically to the art produced by an ethnic aggregation within Iranian nations, namely the Sāsān family in Persis (NP. *fārs*), as well as ultimately the art of a great dynasty and power of late antiquity that, for more than 400 years, stretched from the eastern boundaries of the Roman Empire to the Indian subcontinent.<sup>4</sup> The Sasanian Empire (MP. *Ērānšahr*) was founded by Ardašīr I (224–239/40 CE) after he defeated the last Arsacid king of kings, Artabanus IV (213–224), and declined with the last Sasanian king of kings, Yazdgird III (632–642). In regard to its cross-cultural negotiations with the Roman civilization, the Sasanian Empire marks one of the most important and influential historical periods of late antiquity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A short bibliography on this matter is found in Gray (1929, 1–2).

<sup>3</sup> For a general overview of Sasanian art cf. Erdmann 1937; Schippmann 1990, 107–139, Harper 1978; Shepherd 1983; Harper 1981; Harper 1983; Harper 1987, 585–94.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview on the history of Iran in the Sasanian Era cf. Christensen 1944; Daryaei 2008. For a sociological-historical overview cf. Daryaei 2009; and for a very brief but informative introduction in German cf. Schippmann 1990.

<sup>5</sup> For some aspects of cultural exchanges between Sasanians and Romans cf. Canepa (2009).

Far beyond their political borders, from Western Europe to North Africa, China, and India, the Sasanian cultural heritage has always played an important role in the formation and development of both European and Asiatic medieval art and architecture, and was influential throughout the Islamic ages.

The proper definition of the term “Sasanian art” refers to the art of the court of the Sasanian Empire produced from 224 to 650 CE. This body of work commonly includes both courtly art as well as propaganda art of the Sasanian kings, covering a range of geographical and historical realms. But Sasanian art communicates more than this. It is, for example, simultaneously Zoroastrian art, and possesses many impressive and remarkable spiritual dimensions. I will address this Zoroastrian aspect of Sasanian art first.

## The Concept of Spiritual Beings or the So-Called “Angels” in Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism, as the most eminent Iranian religion and, specifically, as the official religion of the Sasanian Empire in the course of late antiquity in western Asia and the Mediterranean region, has left an important imprint on the genesis of the *weltanschauung* of Iranians and their neighbors over the past millennia. Sasanian art depicts and is marked by Zoroastrian beliefs and ideology and can be better understood within the frame of Zoroastrianism in both their official theological and folk religious forms. The angel-like figures—*yazatas* (“the adorable ones”)—or deities are one of the main elements within Zoroastrian cosmogony and theology. As a result, *yazatas* are the key to understanding the concept of angels both in the Iranian realm and the world that adopted significant cultural aspects from it. This may also lead to another understanding of the iconography of Sasanian art, which was and is one of the most controversial topics in the field of Iranian studies and art history.

Zoroastrianism recognizes various classes of spiritual beings besides the supreme being Ahura Mazdā<sup>6</sup>: the divine heptad *aməša spəntas*<sup>7</sup> and the major and minor deities, the *yazatas* and *frauuāšis*.<sup>8</sup> In practice, every fifteen year-old Zoroastrian has to choose a patron angel for her or his protection (Dhabhar 1909, 22) and through worship, meditation, and acts/efforts, endeavors to always carry the angel with him or her.

<sup>6</sup> On Ahura Mazdā cf. Boyce (1984, 684–7).

<sup>7</sup> On *aməša spənta* cf. Boyce (1989, 933–6), Narten (1982).

<sup>8</sup> On *frauuāši* cf. (Boyce 2001; 2001a, b).

## Zoroastrian Angelology

### Av. *aməša spənta* (MP. *amešāspand*, [*a*]/*mahraspand*)

The term *aməša spənta* applies to Ahura Mazdā himself, and to all the divine beings he has brought into existence (Boyce 1989, 933–6), including *frauuāšis* and *yazatas* and literally means “beneficent immortals” or “immortal holy ones.” These are the highest spiritual beings created by Ahura Mazdā, and they work with him as “archangels” or “ministering angels” (Dhalla 1972, 26), helping to overcome all evil. As the *Yashts*, hymns to lesser divine beings, confine the list to a divine heptad, *aməša spənta* is used more often in a restricted sense, to refer to the greatest of them,<sup>9</sup> as follows (Narten 1982, 1): Each of the *aməša spənta* is also connected with one of Ahura Mazdā’s good creations<sup>10</sup>: Av. *vohu- manah*-/MP *wahman* (“good mind” or “good purpose”) presides over cattle and their associated products (e.g. Y.33.6, 28.1, 31.10); Av. *aša- vahišta*-/MP *ardwahišt* (“best righteousness”/“best order”) presides over truth (*aša*) and fire (e.g., Y.34.4, 43.4, 9); Av. *xšaθra- vairiia*-/MP *šahrēwar* (“desirable dominion”/“well-deserved command”) presides over metals<sup>11</sup>; Av. *spənta- ārmaiti*-/MP *spandārmad* (“holy devotion”/“life-giving humility”) presides over the earth (e.g., Y.30.7, 47.3); Av. *hauruuiāt*-/MP *hordād* (“wholeness”) presides over water; Av. *amərətāt*-/MP *amurdād* (“immortality”) presides over the plants (e.g., Y.33.8, 34.11, 51.7).

Together with Ahura Mazdā at their head, who is linked to the “just man” (Y.33.6), these six form the divine heptad and can be interpreted in abstract terms as well as personified as concrete beings.

### Av. *frauuāši-* (MP. *frawahr*)

*Frauuāšis* can be understood as man’s immortal soul as well as each person’s guardian angel (MacKenzie 1971, 33). In Zoroastrianism, each person is accompanied by a guardian angel (Y.26.4, 55.1) which acts as a guide throughout life. These angels originally patrolled the boundaries of the ramparts of heaven,<sup>12</sup> but volunteer to descend to earth to accompany individuals until the end of their days. Ahura Mazdā advises Zarathuštra to invoke them for help whenever he finds himself in danger (Yt.13.19–20). If it were not for their guardianship, animals and people could not have

<sup>9</sup> Also cf. Boyce (1989, 933–6).

<sup>10</sup> In *Šāyest nē-šāyest* (ŠnŠ XV.5) we can read: “(In) that material world of Mine, I who am Ōhrmazd, (preside over) the just man, and Wohuman over cattle, and Ardwahišt over fire, and Šahrewar over metals, and Spandarmad over earth and virtuous woman, and Hordad over waters, and Amurdad over plants.” Cf. Kotwal (1969, 58–9).

<sup>11</sup> For the evidences regarding this link cf. Boyce (1989, 933–6).

<sup>12</sup> *Bundahišn* VIa. 2–3, cf. Pakzad (2005, 89–90).

continued to exist, because the wicked “lie” (Av. *drūj-*) (Kellens 1996, 562–3) would have destroyed them all (Yt.13.12–13).

These *frauuāšis* are the celestial prototypes of all created beings, the guardian angels of believers. They possess a dual character or nature: angels on the one hand and, on the other, beings with human qualities, attributes, and thoughts (Davidson 1971, 112). The *frauuāšis* also serve as an ideal towards which the soul must strive and, ultimately, after death, become one with the souls they protect (e.g. Y.16.7, 26.7, 26.11, 71.23, Yt.22.39) (Dhalla 1977, 232–234 and 375–378).

### Av. *yazata* (MP. *yazad*)

The rest of the *aməša spəntas* excluded from the divine heptad, are classified as *yazatas*, which literally means “adorable ones” or “ones worthy of worship.”<sup>13</sup> Using the term “angel” for Iranian *yazatas* is a controversial debate among Iranists. Mary Boyce and other scholars believe that the position and function of *yazatas* make them conceptually similar to the angels of Semitic monotheistic religions, but suggest the term *yazata* should remain untranslated (Boyce 1975, 196). On the other hand, some scholars and specifically Pārsi and Irāni scholar-priests do use the angel terminology (Dhalla 1972, 26ff., 87ff., 96ff.; ’Ušidari 1992/1371, 368). Regarding the main definition of angels and being aware of differences between some aspects of angels in Semitic religion terminology versus Zoroastrianism, the term “angels” will be used here to express the general concept of heavenly beings under Ahura Mazdā, i.e. the Zoroastrian *yazatas*. Generally, *yazata* is a collective term for all the Zoroastrian divine beings. These are deities worthy of being honored or praised and who, like the heptad *aməša spəntas*, can personify abstract ideas and virtues, or concrete objects in nature. *Yazatas* can be defined as direct or indirect emanations of Ahura Mazdā and can be considered as hypostatizing his qualities or attributes (Boyce 2001, 22). *Yazatas* also try to help people and protect them from evil (Dk.3, 66; cf. de Menasc 1973, 50–9, 71ff.). Although the title *aməša spənta* may be applied to any of these divinities, *yazata* is usually reserved for the lesser ones (Boyce 2001, 22).

<sup>13</sup> Pokorny considers *Yazata-*, *yaz-*, *yasna*, *yájati*, *yajná*, ἄγιος to all be derivatives of a Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root *īagʰ-* (*īagʰ-*) “*religiös verehren*” (“religiously venerate”), cf. Pokorny (1959).

## Angels in Sasanian Art: Notes on Their Iconography

The question of which of the Zoroastrian angels or deities are depicted in Sasanian art is controversial among scholars. In terms of depicting angelic groups of deities, not many anthropomorphic depictions of the archangels or *aməša spəntas* have been identified. A rare example of those depictions, as identified and discussed by Franz Grenet (1986 and 1993), can be found on Sogdian ossuaries of the eighth century. Apart from this example, the presence of *aməša spəntas* in Sasanian art is limited to other non-anthropomorphic images and attributes which must be discussed separately.

Most Indo-Iranian gods, deities, and angels, however, possess anthropomorphic features, and most of the known anthropomorphic, angelic representations of Zoroastrian deities belong to the common *yazatas* and *frauuašis*. Furthermore, with respect to iconographic matters, the depiction of supernatural beings in Sasanian art and architecture can be divided into two groups: those with and those without wings. In general, when observing their depictions in Iranian art from the Persian Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550–330 BCE) to the Sasanian Empire, it is possible to say that in most cases the presence of wings is among the iconographic elements of the so-called mixed and/or mythical creatures and, to a lesser extent, to the gods or deities, especially in their anthropomorphic forms.

Ahura Mazdā, Mithra, and Anāhitā are the main *yazatas* whose anthropomorphic depictions can be found on Sasanian rock reliefs (Herrmann and Sarkhosh Curtis, 2002; Jacobs 2006; Bier 1989). The main scenes in which they appear are the so-called investiture scenes,<sup>14</sup> in which a king receives the ring of glory, *xvarənah*, from Ahura Mazdā or Anāhitā. The *yazatas* are shown mostly in a frontal position and in profile and, rarely from the front or in a three-quarter profile. In all of these cases, the figures appear static and are firmly rooted to the ground. This is not the case, however, with the angels on the toreutics where these figures can also be found dancing and floating. The figurative, decorated silver and gold vessels (Grabar 1967; Harper 1981) boast a rich display of angelic deities. From this group, I am going to investigate the so-called dancing girls, whose iconography has been the subject of debate.<sup>15</sup>

The *frauuašis*, as we will see later, appear mostly in winged anthropomorphic forms. Among the most prominent examples of anthropomorphic winged figures in Sasanian art are those found on the arch of the greater *īwān*<sup>16</sup> of Tāq-e Bostān in Kermānshāh, in the western part of Iran. Other examples are naked male winged figures on Sasanian silver vessels, which can also be identified as personifications of

<sup>14</sup> On investiture and investiture scenes cf. Brosius et al. (2006, 180–8).

<sup>15</sup> For more details on different views—secular, religious, or erotic—regarding the “dancing girl” cf. Ettinghausen (1967), and also Sarre (1922); also Bier (1989).

<sup>16</sup> *īwān* is a typically Iranian rectangular type of construction, which consists of a vaulted rectangular hall, walled on three sides and open on one end. Cf. Grabar (1989, 153–5).

*frauuuāšis*.<sup>17</sup> Apart from the two geniuses of Tāq-ē Bostān, no other anthropomorphic winged figures have been found on Sasanian architecture. The anthropomorphic appearances of gods or angels are denoted with other attributes and distinguishing features. Besides the seals, the main sources for pictorial depictions of winged figures in Sasanian art include bullae, amulets, toreutics, textiles, and coins.

## **Yazatas Depicted in Sasanian Toreutics and Rock Reliefs**

### ***Dancing Girls***

The dancing or floating female figures—in most cases naked or clad in diaphanous garments—on numerous Sasanian bowls and vessels are titled, in the earliest theory by Ernst Herzfeld, as “dancing girls.”<sup>18</sup> This assumption seems to be generally correct, but Herzfeld neither identifies the figures, in particular the attributes and symbols carried by them, nor does he make any suggestions regarding their function and importance. These figures are accompanied by different attributes, such as birds, children, foxes, bears, floral patterns, bunches of grapes and vines, vessels, etc. and in some cases they appear within an architectural composition of arcades and columns (Bier 1989).

Based on a boat-shaped bowl from the seventh century<sup>19</sup> preserved in The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (Fig. 1),<sup>20</sup> its main scene depicting a king receiving homage by courtiers and/or a deity, with two nude female dancers with scarves (Fig. 2), Roman Ghirshman reasons that the dancing female figures in this “banquet scene,”<sup>21</sup> (Harper 1978, 216) are “court dancers” (Ghirshman 1953, 54).

I would like to abandon the theory of secular interpretation of the dancing figures shown on Sasanian bowls and vessels. Richard Ettinghausen mentions that, beside other non-representational elements of the scene, the fact that the female images are shown to be larger<sup>22</sup> than the king may indicate that it is a symbolic matter rather than a normal profane staging of courtly life. The most widely held theory on the iconography of the Sasanian vessels’ female nudes has been presented by Hovsep

<sup>17</sup> However, not discussed in this paper, there is another group of nude, wingless, male figures which I identify as personifications of “*apām napāt*.”

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Ettinghausen (1967, 36).

<sup>19</sup> Although associated with silver vessels made in Iran during the Sasanian dynasty (224–651 CE), the vessel’s shape and decoration suggest that this object dates from the early Islamic era.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Harper (1981, Pl. 36).

<sup>21</sup> The dancing female figures are identified as being either totally or partially female nudes in erotic scenes, cf. Ghirshman (1953, 54).

<sup>22</sup> In the hierarchical imagery system of the art of ancient orientals, the proportions of the figures, as well as objects in some cases, are crucial in declaring the significance of power.



**Fig. 1** Boat-shaped silver bowl ( $8 \times 26.2 \times 9.5$  cm), hammered and carved, Iran, seventh century. Carved in relief with engraved and chased details. The main scene shows an enthroned king receiving homage, flanked on the right by a courtier and on the left by a noble or princely figure, or a deity holding a diadem. The bowl is adorned with dancing figures, whose scarves (*left and right*) wave backward toward the main scene. Source: The Walters Art Museum Baltimore. Photo published in Harper (1981), 237, Plate 36



**Fig. 2** Dancing figures (details of the boat-shaped silver bowl in Fig. 1) carved/cast in relief with engraved and chased details. The dancers swing long scarves, their ends flying backward toward the main scene with the king. The dancers' hairstyles, as well as the ribbons on the diadems, strongly suggest divine aspects. Source: The Walters Art Museum Baltimore. Photo published in Harper (1981), 237, Plate 36

Abgari Orbeli, followed and extended by Dorothy Shepherd (1964, 1980). Two prominent examples of vessels showing dancing female figures are a silver bottle from Iran with a gilded background, probably from the fourth or early fifth century<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 3), and another one from the fifth or sixth century, which is now housed in the Musée du Louvre<sup>24</sup> in Paris (Fig. 4).

Both vessels show four dancing figures, each holding different attributes. Orbeli has identified the dancing figures as the Iranian *yazata* Anāhitā. Shepherd,

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Ettinghausen (1967, 28–29, plate 1–4).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Martiniani-Reber and Bénazeth (1997, 105, plate 43).



**Fig. 3** Dancing figures on a vase with gilded background, Iran, probably fourth or fifth century. Two of four dancing figures can be seen. The different objects carried by each figure are attributes connected to the four aspects for which the Iranian *yazata* Anāhitā is responsible, namely water, vegetation, agriculture and fertility. The diadems are attributes of divine beings. Source: Virginia Museum. Photo published in Ettinghausen 1967, 29, Figs. 3 and 4

expanding on this theory, interpreted the symbolization of the different objects carried by each figure, as well as their attributes, according to the four aspects for which Anāhitā is responsible, namely water, vegetation, agriculture, and fertility.<sup>25</sup> The topknot and diadem of this figure, as attributes of deities, are important features which support this theory's validity. The main obstacle to this theory might be the Avestan record of Anāhitā in her hymn, Yašt 5, in which she has been described as a beautiful young maiden with firm and large breasts, clad in a beaver mantel, and wearing a jeweled crown (Gray 1929, 55 ff.) as in Yt.5.78:

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Martiniani-Reber and Bénazeth (1997, 105, plate 43). The goddess is also responsible for the warriors. No attribute of this aspect of her in this context is available.

**Fig. 4** Dancing figures on a vase with gilded background, Iran (probably Reshy, Deylamān), fifth or sixth century. The *yazata* Anāhitā with bird and mythical plant attributes. These attributes, as well as the scene composition marked by a beaded line on the upper part, point to a divine figure. This form of vessels belongs to the typical fashion of the second half of the Sasanian Era. Source: Le Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales, Paris. Photo published in *Les Perses Sassanides: Fastes d'un empire oublié* (224–642) 2006, 105, Obj. 43



Arədwī Sura Anāhitā flowed up to (him) in the form of a beautiful, very strong maiden, well built, high girdled, erect, noble in respect to (her) illustrious lineage, dressed in golden shoes, who was completely adorned, splendid. Some waters she made stand still, the others she (made) flow onward. She left a dry passage across good Wītahwaitī (Malandra 1983, 126).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The original reads as follows: *upa.tacaṭ. arəduuī. sūra. anāhita./kaininō. kəhrpa. srīraiīā./ ašamaiīā. huraoḃaiīā./uskāṭ. yāstaiīā. ərəzuuaidiīō./raēuuṭ. ciḃrəm. āzātaiīā./zaranīia. aoḃra. paitišmuxta./yā. višpō.pīsa. bāmiia./arəmaēštā. aniiā. āpō. kərənaoṭ./fraṣa. aniiā. fratacaṭ./ huškəm. pəṣum. raēcaiīṭ./tarō. vaṇuhīm. vītaṇuhaitīm.*

Also, Yt.5.123:

Good Arədwī Sura Anāhitā stands, wearing a golden plastron (beaver pelt mantle), yearning for the prayer at the libation, thinking this in her mind (Malandra 1983, 129).<sup>27</sup>

Elsewhere in Yt.5.127 we read:

Holding *barəsmān*<sup>28</sup> in her hand in the correct way, showing off her four-lobed golden earrings, Arədwī Sura Anāhitā of good birth is wont to wear a necklace about her beautiful throat. She laces herself around the waist both so that (her) breasts (maybe) well-formed and so that they swell out (Malandra 1983, 129–30).<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, we know of her representation on two Sasanian rock reliefs: one in an investiture scene of Xusrō II (590–628), in the tallest grotto at Tāq-e Bostān (Fig. 5), on a series of stone capitals from the same site,<sup>30</sup> and one at Naqš-e Rostam. Both the description of the goddess in her Avestan hymn and representations of her on plastic arts should be seen as allegorical and metaphorical accounts. The artists did not feel the need to depict her as she was described in literary or religious texts. Each of those iconographic types has been considered and planned in different contexts for different reasons and is understandable only within the context of the Zoroastrian religious structure of Sasanian society and state. The expectation of finding a detailed parallel representation of the deity as mentioned in Avestan text in Sasanian visual sources is an inexperienced expectation and likely cannot be met. The images and texts in ancient oriental conventions were always supposed to complete and accompany but not represent, reproduce or imitate each other.

The female figures on Sasanian vessels have, in most cases, been illustrated in a so-called hedonic scene. Even if their hedonic accounts are not directly present in the Avestan and Middle Persian Zoroastrian corpus, we are well aware of such hedonic cults in ancient Iran because they are mentioned in various sources, among them the Persian Book of the Kings, *Šāhnāme*. The so-called pre-Zoroastrian cult of nude goddesses has a long-known history in western Iran and Mesopotamia which makes a syncretistic composition of two or more figures possible. Many of the iconographical features of Anāhitā are comparable with those of old Egyptian-old Syriac Anat and the ancient Mesopotamian Innana/Ištar.<sup>31</sup>

According to another theory regarding such naked female figures, Alexander Strelkoff and Jean Duchesne-Guillemin count them as priestesses of Anāhitā, rendering homage to her by dancing a ritualistic dance (Duchesne-Guillemin 1971, 377–388 (Planche I–XI)). Subsequently, Kurt Erdmann and Lars-Ivar

<sup>27</sup> The original reads as follows: *zaranaēnəm. paiti.dānəm./vaṇuhi. hištaite. dražimnō./arəduuī. sūra. anāhita./zaoθre. vācim. paitišmarəmnə./auuq. manayha. mainimna.*

<sup>28</sup> *Barəsmān* or *barsom* is the sacred twig bundle which is an important part of the Zoroastrian liturgical apparatus, cf. Kanga (1988, 825–7).

<sup>29</sup> The original reads as follows: *bāda. yaθa.mqm./barəsmō.zasta./frā.gaošāuuara. sīspəmna./caθru.karana. zaranaēni:/minum. barəq. huūāzāta./arəduuī. sūra. anāhita./upa. tqm. srīqam./manaθrim:/hā. hē. maiḍim. nīiāzata./yaθaca. hukəṛəpta. fštāna./yaθaca. aḡhən. niuūāzāna.*

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed description of the capitals cf. Compareti (2006).

<sup>31</sup> On the Babylonian-Akkadian goddess cf. Zgoll (2003), Wegner (1991), Meinhold (2009), Levit-Tawil (1992).



**Fig. 5** The great *īwān* of Tāq-e Bostān. Investiture scene of Xusrō II (590–628) in the tallest grotto, Kermānšāh, Iran. The upper part of the central scene depicts the investiture of Xusrō II (590–628). The king is standing in the middle, the *yazata* Anāhitā stands to the right of the king, and the Zoroastrian supreme god Ahura Mazdā to his left. In keeping with the most important attributes of a water goddess, Anāhitā pours water from a vessel she holds in one hand and a ribbon-decorated ring, symbolizing divine glory and power (*x<sup>v</sup>arənah*) in the other. The lower part of the scene features a mounted warrior, an allegory for the armed *frauuaṣis*, the Zoroastrian guardian angels. Photo by Shervin Farridnejad, IIS Archive

Ringbom see them as Anāhitā's attendants and/or hierodules (Ringbom 1957). Many of the hedonic scenes are interpreted as Dionysian or Bacchic imagery in Parthian and Sasanian Iran. The great popularity of these scenes is remarkable given that a real trace of such a Dionysian cult in Sasanian Iran has not been found. Furthermore, the imagery of Dionysus/Bacchus himself is absent. On the other hand, this may contrast with the popularity of wine drinking ceremonies in Persian courts, which have been well-illustrated in Pahlavi literature, as well as the Persian Book of Kings. We can agree with Ettinghausen that, even if a kind of Bacchus cult had existed within the boundaries of Iran, it was later assimilated into an Anāhitā/Anāhit cult or some sort of fertility cult. In this way, it could be possible to interpret those attributes as implying a hedonic cult of Bacchus (Ettinghausen 1967).

## ***Frauuāšis* Depicted in Sasanian Rock Reliefs and Toreutics**

### ***Winged figures of Tāq-e Bostān***

As mentioned before, the *frauuāšis* are the only anthropomorphic winged deities to have been identified in Sasanian religious art to date.<sup>32</sup> Both male and female figures are depicted in the iconography.

The site of Tāq-e Bostān,<sup>33</sup> situated in northwest Iran, seven kilometers from the modern city of Kermānšāh, includes a series of monumental rock reliefs and comprises a big (Figs. 5 and 6) and a small grotto. Tāq-e Bostān was the camp of the Sasanian kings on their royal hunts. The greater *īwān* (Fukai and Horiuchi 1969, 1972, 1983; Fukai et al. 1984) contains several scenes: the investiture of Xusrō II on the upper part of the back wall, a mounted warrior in the lower part and two royal hunt scenes on the right and left walls. The great *īwān* is surrounded by a triumphal arch which rests on two pilasters with finely-carved floral patterns (Fig. 6). Above the arch, two winged female figures levitate on opposing sides. These figures have often been compared to the Greco-Roman Νίκη/Victoria and Τύχη/Fortuna<sup>34</sup> (see Kai Töpfer's contribution to this volume) and are undoubtedly one of the most prominent examples of cross-cultural negotiation processes in Persian art and the Persianate world (see Ebba Koch's contribution in this volume, especially Fig. 7,

<sup>32</sup> With the exception of the armed mounted figure on the upper part of the greater grotto of Tāq-e Bostān.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Vanden Berghe (1984), Kleiss and Boehmer (1996), as well as the very detailed and valuable four volumes by Fukai and Horiuchi (1969), (1972), (1983), and Fukai et al. (1984).

<sup>34</sup> For the links and connections between Tāq-e Bostān and Byzantin iconography cf. Mackintosh (1978); also cf. Fukai et al. (1984, 167–77) (Appendix II: Flying Victory—Its Prototypes and Diffusion). Tanabe asserts that “It is clear that the flying genii are obviously modelled after the goddesses Nike and Tyche, but her significance within the Sasanian dynastic iconography is unknown.” Cf. Fukai et al. (1984, 43); this must be discussed in a separate article as despite Tanabe's opinion, the iconographical role and significance of these flying figures is rather clear.

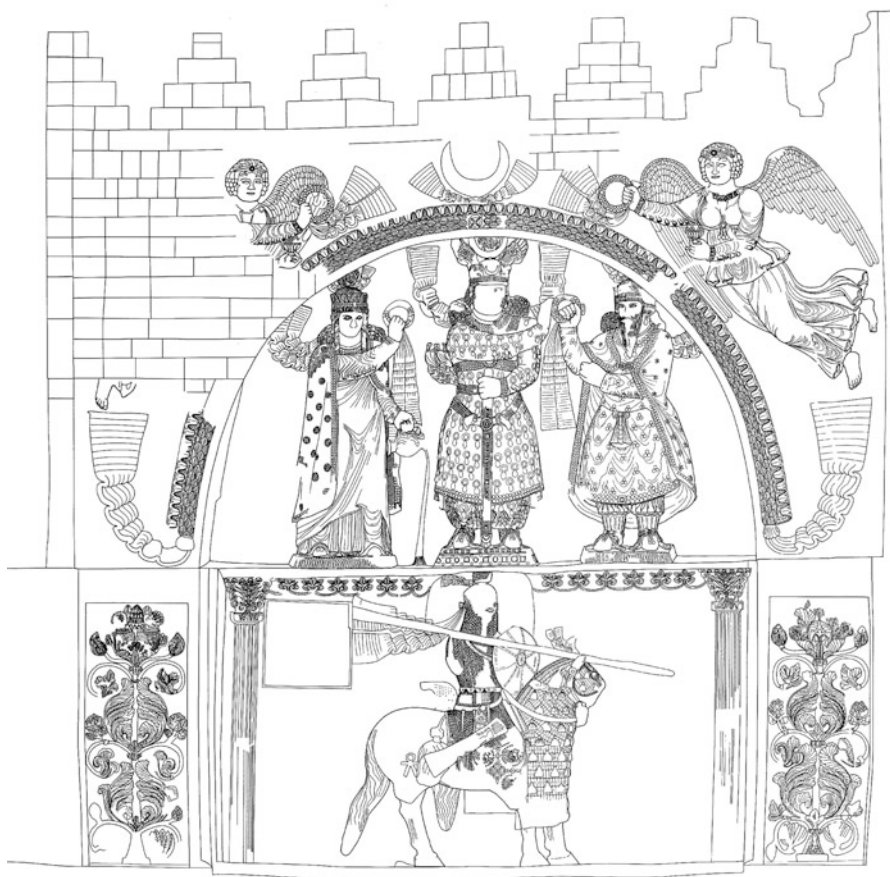


**Fig. 6** Line art rendering of the great *iwān* of Tāq-e Bostān. Source: Fukai and Horiuchi 1983

which clearly shows the continuation of its iconography in Islamic art and architecture).

All that remains of the left figure is her head and left arm. The figure to the right is completely preserved (Figs. 7 and 8). She has a pair of long, pinnate wings and wears (in the Greek) a *chiton* with an *apoptygma*.<sup>35</sup> She is carrying a diadem—a ribbon-decorated ring—in her right hand. In her left hand, she offers a bowl, presumably filled with pearls, which she holds on its pedestal. Valuable offerings of a similar kind were also presented by heavenly beings in early sixth century China (see Fig. 9 in the chapter “Winged Immortals and Heavenly Beings Across the East Asian Skies”). This being faces the viewer while her legs are shown in profile. Her short hair is gathered on top of her head, differing from the flowing

<sup>35</sup> For a more detailed description cf. Fukai et al. (1984, 42 ff).



**Fig. 7** The winged figure of a *frauuāši* on the right corner of the great *īwān* of Tāq-e Bostān. She wears a *chiton*-style garment with *apodygma* and carries a diadem—a ribbon-decorated ring, an allegory for divine *xʿarənah*—in her right hand and a bowl full of pearls in her left. Her iconography shows clear parallels between the Greco-Roman Νίκη/Victoria and Τύχη/Fortuna. Photo by Shervin Farridnejad, IIS Archive

hairstyles of the females depicted on Sasanian vases. Other features recall well-known shapes of Sasanian female figures: her face is round and her almond-shaped eyes are open wide. Her short neck lends a powerful impression of exuded strength.

These two winged geniuses above the taller grotto at Tāq-e Bostān are perhaps the most frequently studied winged figures in Sasanian iconography. Herzfeld



**Fig. 8** Line art rendering of the winged figure at the right corner of the great *īwān* of Tāq-e Bostān. Source: Fukai and Horiuchi (1983)

identified these flying figures as *aməratāt* and *hauruuatāt*, both of which are Zoroastrian female archangels (Herzfeld 1920, 75). As in the majority of cases, these two archangels appear together, both of them in Avestan are female, and according to the concepts that they represent, namely immortality and wholeness, it is possible that they are presenting the king with the *xvarənah*,<sup>36</sup> as symbolized by a ribbon-decorated ring. This identification, however, has no direct textual support from Avestan or Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts. Another possible identification of the flying winged figures, which seems most plausible, is with the *frauuāšīs*.<sup>37</sup> The Avestan term *frauuāši* is grammatically female (Bartholomae 1904, col. 992). The *frauuāšīs* are believed to have wings,<sup>38</sup> even among Zoroastrians in Iran today. In *Frawardīn Yašt* (Boyce 2001a), the thirteenth Avestan hymn devoted to the *frauuāšīs* and the longest of all the *Yāsts*, it is said that they will grant good fortune

<sup>36</sup> *xvarənah*, lit. “glory” is the magic force or power of luminous and fiery nature. On *xvarənah* cf. Gnoli (1999, 312–9).

<sup>37</sup> Tanabe mentioned this possibility only marginally and in a footnote, but does not discuss it. Cf. Fukai et al. (1984, 46, n. 21).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Boyce (1977, 161, n. 47), and the author’s observations and dialogues with Irani Zoroastrians.

to the man who worships them, as was done by the righteous Zarathustra. This could be a suitable explanation for the appearance of *frauuāšis* above the king's investiture arch, which could have been meant to bring him fortune, glory, victory, and prosperity.<sup>39</sup>

The *frauuāšis* are, according to *Frawardīn Yašt*, an army of armed warriors who help righteous men in their battles against demons and devil powers (Yt.13.45).<sup>40</sup> In fact, their brawny impression—in contrast to the rather delicate figures on the silver vessels described earlier—makes this identification plausible. Another fitting iconographic interpretation of *frauuāšis* as warriors is the armed mounted warrior of the lower part of the greater *īwān* of Tāq-e Bostān (Fig. 5) (Gall 1971, 230–3; Kellens 1973).

### *Winged Figures in Toreutics*

Moreover, in addition to the rare appearances of female *frauuāšis* evident in Sasanian art objects and architecture, other depictions of *frauuāšis* on Sasanian vessels show them as small male figures or child-like beings. Since Middle Persian lost the grammatical gendering of terms, *frauuāšis* were also considered male beings. Furthermore, some iconographic parallels between these and the Greco-Roman *putti* can also be found, which at the same time present another example of cultural and artistic entanglement in late antiquity. In some aspects, like those winged figures of Tāq-e Bostān, a Roman iconographical element has been borrowed to incorporate a completely different concept.

A silver-gilt plate from the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin (Harper 1981, 221) (Fig. 9) shows a royal hunting scene, in which a *frauuāši*—like those female figures at Tāq-e Bostān—offers the ribbon of victory (Av. *xʷarənah*) to the king. This is the kind of iconography in Sasanian art which can be seen on many other movable objects, including a fourth-century Kušāno-Sasanian silver plate from the ancient Gandhara-region (present-day Pakistan) (Fig. 10), now in the British Museum. Again, a *frauuāši* brings the king a diadem symbolizing *xʷarənah*. The scene arrangement evokes the investiture scene of the greater *īwān* of Tāq-e Bostān.

### Conclusion

Angelic iconography is present in most religious beliefs. Both the theological concepts of heavenly figures and their visual representations in art and archeology testify to cultural regenerations and prove to be a fascinating field for observations

<sup>39</sup> For a descriptive account on *frauuāšis* cf. Dhalla (1972, 143–50), Boyce (2001).

<sup>40</sup> See also in Bundahišn VIa.3, cf. Soraki (2005, 90).



**Fig. 9** Silver-gilt plate, Iran, seventh or eighth century (diameter: 19.9–19.3 cm; h. 4 cm). This plate is part of the Novo Bayazid treasure discovered in 1907 near Yerevan, Armenia. It shows a typical Sasanian royal hunting scene in which a *frauuāši* offers the diadem to the king as an allegory of royal and divine victory (Av. *xvāraṇah*). Source: Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo published in Harper (1981), 221, Plate 20

from a transcultural vantage point. As the last great pre-Islamic Persian Empire, Sasanians and their religious iconographical canon with its wide zone of cultural and political authority, were the most important bridge between the ancient Near East and medieval European and Islamic worlds.

It may seem difficult at first glance to establish reliable iconographic classifications for the angelic figures in Sasanian art. The differing points of view and scholarly approaches, which range from religious to profane interpretations, make it even more complicated to establish a multilateral concept regarding the depiction of angels in Sasanian art.

Furthermore, dividing the depiction of Zoroastrian deities/angels in the Sasanian art into two groups of winged and non-winged figures allows us to distinguish



**Fig. 10** Kušāno-Sasanian silver plate from Rawalpindi, Pakistan, fourth century (diameter: 23.7 cm). The central scene of investiture in two registers is surrounded by a broad band featuring musicians, banquet figures holding vessels and plants, and an isolated plant. In the upper register of the main scene, a flying but wingless *frauuaši* brings the king a diadem symbolizing *xʷarənah*. Source: The British Museum London. Photo published in Harper (1981), 109, Fig. 35

between the iconography of *yazatas* vs. *frauuašis*. As constituent parts of Zoroastrian cosmogony, angels (*yazatas* and *frauuašis*) mediate between heaven and earth and Zoroastrianism associates these beneficent immortals with all kinds of good creations. The way they are commonly depicted in the art of the Sasanian Empire (including architecture, but also on moveable objects such as bowls, plates, vessels, seals, sealings, bullae, amulets, toreutics, textiles, and coins) inevitably ties them to

their Roman and ancient Near Eastern kin, Victoria and Ištar/Inanna in particular, and their similar role as tutelary deities.

With respect to the depictions of such angelic figures, the religious Sasanian iconographic canon reveals a transcultural phenomenon; due to the usage of both Greco-Roman and Ancient Near Eastern sources for embodying genuine Zoroastrian concepts of angels, Sasanian art leaves an important legacy of inspiring sources to the medieval Byzantine and Islamic era.

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