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SASANIAN TRADITIONS IN SOGDIAN PAINTINGS: HUNTING AND FIGHTING SCENES

DAVIDE CIAFALONI · GERI DELLA ROCCA DE CANDAL

THE study of the Sasanian influence over the origins and development of Sogdian painting was in the past decades characterised by two main issues: the rather evident nature of a foreign influence over a series of iconographic and stylistic elements, and the danger of reading these elements in a misleading perspective, linked to modern political ideologies. This problem was very effectively summarised in MARSHAK 1996: despite acknowledging the presence of many and complex influences, Soviet scholars were prone to consider Sogdian art as independent and homogeneous, whereas Western scholarship was more inclined to consider it as the testimony of a late Sasanian provincial production. Recent scholarship smoothed these issues into more nuanced perspectives, particularly when dealing with the Afrasyab pictorial cycle, and eventually preferred to identify the deep nature of Sogdian art in a rich and prismatic variety of different influences, namely Sasanian, Chinese, Byzantine and Indian (for a selected bibliography see MODE 1993; COMPARETI 2004; COMPARETI, DE LA VAISSIÈRE 2006; COMPARETI, CRISTOFORETTI 2007), but also recognising a great deal of originality in the Sogdian ability in reprocessing these external influences (MARSHAK 2002). However, if the presence of a contact between Sogdian painting and Sasanian art – and particularly Sasanian monumental reliefs – is widely acknowledged, this acknowledgment appears only quite superficial, rarely discussed on the grounds of a precise, philological comparison. The aim of this contribution is to fill this gap, suggest some specific iconographic parallels, and therefore provide a solid structure to a well-known scholarly debate.

Some scholars are inclined to consider that iconographic and stylistic conventions of Sasanian origin were used in the Sogdian context exclusively as ‘formulas’ deprived of their original meaning,¹ with particular reference to those conventions regarding the heroisation of the ruler’s figure (e.g., COMPARETI 2009, 124). This position is supported by the comparison between the two different political contexts: the powerful, centralised organisation of the Sasanian Empire, with its need for a homogeneous and strong figurative ideology, and the ‘archipelago’ of scattered Sogdian City-States, with no real need for such an assertive and aggressive political syntax. This said, we believe that the reconsideration of some iconographic formulas in Sogdian art might yield some rather interesting results, if approached from a purely traditional figurative method. For instance, one could observe how these formulas, which arose as an expression of the formal art of the Sasanian court, have been later adopted by Sogdian artists in a very different ideological context, namely that of a mythological narration. In this sense it seems possible to identify some paintings in which the different context has at the same time completely eclipsed the original meaning but also stressed the original source of inspiration.

The hunting and fighting scenes in Sogdian art display quite evidently the iconic power of the great Sasanian models, and indeed the fact that these scenes are not so common in the Sogdian context might have eased the absorption process of external influences. The fighting motif which appears to be the dominant feature in the epic painting known as the Rustam Cycle, in Penjikent, displays a series of patterns which are remarkably similar to those originally developed for the great Sasanian rock reliefs. Apparently the influence of Sasanian formulas was long-lasting, if we consider that the murals of the Rustam Cycle date to the early 8th century AD, *i.e.*, to a rather late stage of the Sogdian artistic development.

¹ The concept of ‘formula’ was first used in this context to identify the derivation of some particular Iranian iconographic elements in Sogdian art (AZARPAY 1975). We choose to follow this definition since we too believe that the icono-

graphic elements maintain at least part of their original semantic value. Several examples in the following paragraphs will show some effective applications of the concept of ‘formula’.

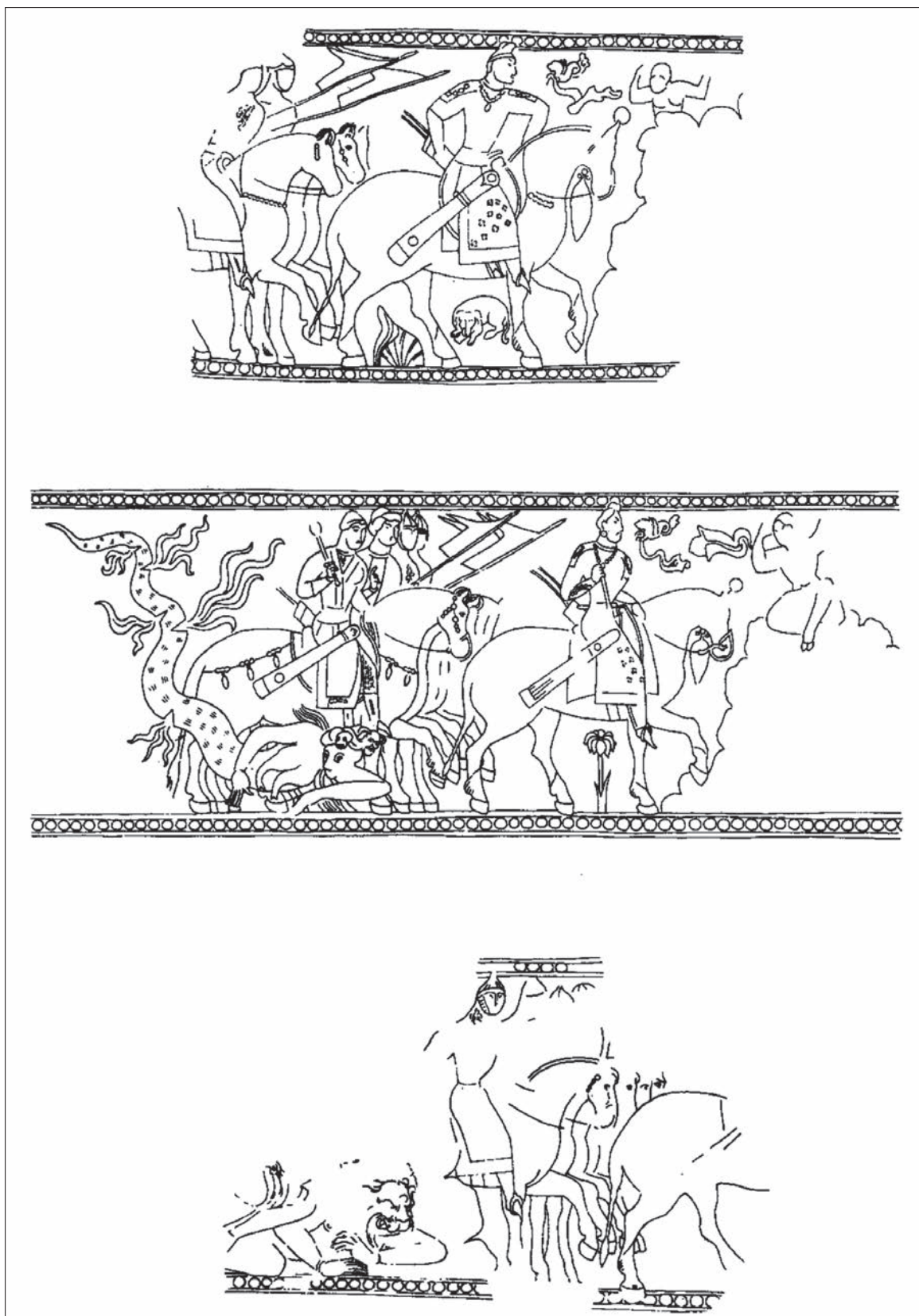


FIG. 1. Drawing of the mural from Penjikent room 41/vi («Rustam and his fighting men» – after MARSHAK 2002, 33, fig. 14).

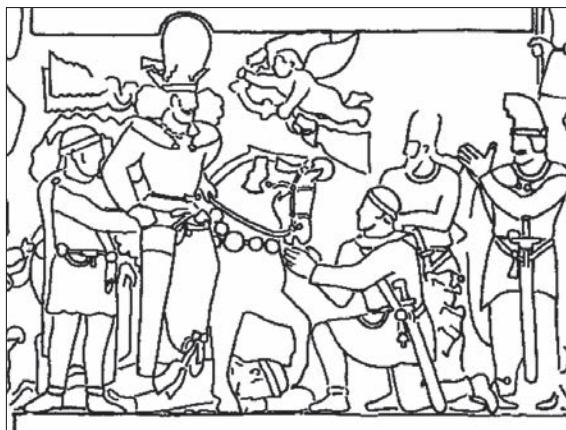


FIG. 2. Triumph relief of Shapur I at Bishapur III (after VON GALL 1990 [= Bishapur II], Abb. 12:b, p. 100).

Particularly, in the scene of Rostam's triumphant return followed by his armies after the slaughter of the dragon (MARSHAK 2002, 45, fig. 22; CHUVIN *et alii* 1999, pl. 202) both the general attitude and the individual positions recall those of the Sasanian rock reliefs (FIG. 1): the hero's horse advances with the left foreleg lifted exactly like in the reliefs produced for the Sasanian court, for instance the relief of Ardashir I (AD 226-242) in Naqsh-i Rostam (NRm1) (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 53), which can reasonably be considered the model for the later relief portraying the triumph of Shapur I (AD ~241-272) in Darab (*ibidem*, no. 58), despite the lack of absolute certainty pertaining the attribution of this particular relief to the founder of the Sasanian dynasty (HERRMANN 1969). The same pattern is then repeated in other reliefs of Shapur I, for instance in Naqsh-i-Rostam (NRm6) (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 57; for a recent photograph see CANEPA 2009, 64, fig. 4), in Bishapur III (FIG. 2) (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 60; VON GALL 1990 [= Bishapur II], Abb. 12:b) and in the relief of Bahram I (AD 273-276) in Bishapur V (FIG. 3) (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 52). Indeed, the structure and the dimensions of the horses are quite different: if the Sasanian mount is rather hefty, with a clear derivation from the imperial Roman formulations of the quadruped (as they appear in the triumphal arcs from Titus to Septimius Severus: MACKINTOSH 1973), then the Sogdian horse is elegant and delicate, with fluid outlines and a lighter weight in the internal graphism of the body, sharply contrasting the highly emphasized musculature of the Sasanian royal horse.

In spite of the expectable differences in the *realia*, Rostam's pose also seems to reproduce a Sasanian model of the ruler as it appears on the reverse of a double denarius of Shapur I, showing the hand in a victorious gesture (CANEPA 2009, 70, fig. 8). Another element which further accentuates the resemblance is the foot turned downwards, a rather common Sasanian formulation. Needless to say, the formula of the triumphant Sasanian ruler must have been well known thanks to the numismatic circulation and the trade of Sasanian silverware outside the boundaries of Persia.² The aim of this article, however, is to point out that in order to explain some very complex similarities between Sasanian and Sogdian art, it is not sufficient to look at coinage and silverware alone. The



FIG. 3. Investiture of Bahram I, Bishapur V (Photo D. Ciafaloni 1990).

² This posture is a convention in many Sasanian silver plates (HARPER, MEYERS 1981, pls. 9-10, 13-15, 17-18, 20, 25-26, 28-32, 37-38), and one of the longest-standing formulas devel-

oped by Sasanian artists in order to codify the theme of the 'royal hunter'.

same iconographic formula also appears on some spāhbed *bullae*, where the military chief is portrayed on horseback and with a spear in the right hand, while the horse advances with the lifted left foreleg (see, for instance, DARYAEE, SAFDARI 2010). In this case too the posture is very similar to that of Rustam in the Penjikent murals. Unlike coinage, however, spāhbed *bullae* were not meant for exchange nor for a particularly wide circulation, so it seems unlikely that they ever got to have any effective influence over Sogdian art.

But it is also possible to argue a different source of indirect knowledge of the great royal reliefs of central Persia by assuming the existence and circulation of pattern sketch-books. This sum of intermediate accounts is likely then to have been invigorated by eyewitness descriptions of provincial Sasanian reliefs in the eastern boundaries of the Empire. The existence of provincial reliefs in the Eastern Sasanian Empire has been proven by the recent discovery of the Rag-i-Bibi relief (GRENET 2007), on which more will follow in the next paragraphs.

Furthermore, the fact that the two highlighted formulas (*i.e.*, the horse with the lifted foreleg and the ruler's victorious gesture) are used to identify the figure of the hero Rustam leads to the assumption that this choice is not random, but rather a precise selection within a wide range of formulas handed on in the course of time.³ The application of patterns traditionally reserved to the Sasanian regality onto the heroic figure of Rustam suggests a very interesting evolution of these symbolic formulas in a culture that, for geo-political reasons, did not have a cult of regality *per se*. This hypothesis is corroborated by the analysis of the scenes of equestrian duels: in the same register of the Rustam Room (FIG. 4) the hero is at first opposed to Avlad, then to the leader of the *divs*, and finally to an older *div* (MARSHAK 2002, 36, fig. 16). It seems that the original models for the Sogdian formulation of these fighting scenes are the great reliefs of Firouzabad and Naqsh-i-Rustam representing the victory of the Sasanians over the Parthians. In the impressive Tang-i Ab relief, near Firouzabad (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 50; for a clear reproduction see VON GALL 1990, Abb. 3:20-30), Ardashir I's victory over the last Parthian ruler Artabanus IV is commemorated in a tripartite composition: represented from left to right are first a squire on horseback fighting against a Parthian horseman, then the Sasanian heir Shapur tossing and killing the Parthian vizier Dādbundādh, and finally the main character, Ardashir, tossing and killing Artabanus (FIG. 5). The tripartition of the scene effectively accentuates the dynamism of the entire composition in what is arguably the only Sasanian relief representing events which took place at different stages of time, and is remarkably similar to the complex narrative composition of the Rustam Room. This narrating ability in a continuous and articulate manner is one of most mature features of the Penjikent paintings, and it would not appear so unreasonable to assume a direct or indirect acquaintance with the great Sasanian relief. And apart from the general structure, there are also several compositional formulas in the Cycle of Rustam which recall those of Tang-i Ab. For instance, the slain enemy horses, with the forelegs bent downwards and the hind legs raised upwards symbolising fall and ruin are comparatively very similar to the ones which appear in the Penjikent scene known as the «Tale of a hero and three animals» (MARSHAK 2002, 85, fig. 35). In this painting (FIG. 6) the horse of a slain enemy appears almost fluctuating in the air, a characteristic which very much reminds of the Tang-i Ab horses, the only difference being that in the latter case the hind legs are wide open showing the genitals, whereas in the Sogdian painting the legs are paired under the belly. This said, the figurative formula used to suggest the sudden and definitive collapse of the horse is the same.

Pivotal and repeated elements in the Rustam Cycle are the horse duels among heroes. The mounts are always represented in the codified position of the 'flying gallop' (*ibidem*, 35, fig. 15; 41, fig. 18; 47, fig. 23) exactly like in some reliefs in Naqsh-i-Rustam. In particular the relief (NRM5) of Hormizd II (AD 302-309) (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 76; VON GALL 1990, 30-31, Taf. 9) displays the pattern of the enemy falling off its mount and turned downwards (FIG. 7), remarkably similar to the one which appears in the earlier relief of Tang-i Ab (FIG. 5), enough to allow the assumption that a fixed pattern has been re-applied. This faithfulness to the *Verfolgungsschema* (VON GALL 1990,

³ Interestingly, it appears that a Sogdian fragment of the Legend of Rustam might actually be a translation of a Sasan-

ian text (AZARPAY 1981, 28), thus suggesting even tighter bonds between literary tradition and artistic production.

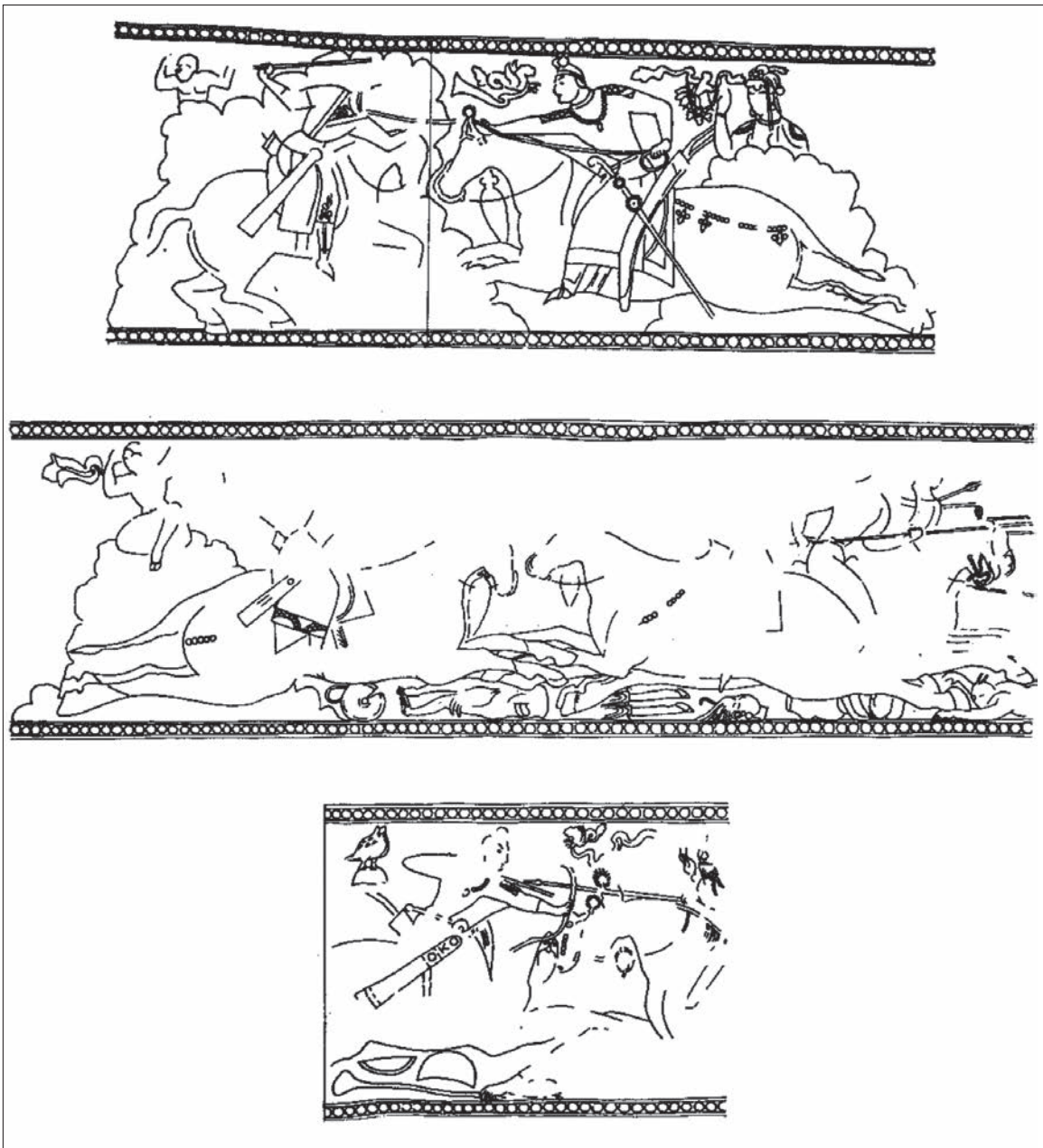


FIG. 4. Drawing of the mural from Penjikent room 41/v1 («Combats from the Rustam Cycle» – after Marshak 2002, 36, fig. 16).

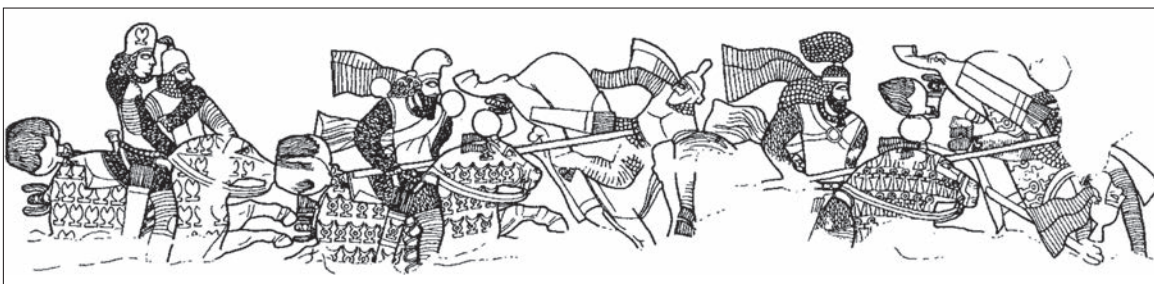


FIG. 5. Firouzabad battle relief, Tang-i Ab (after VON GALL 1990, 20, Abb. 3).

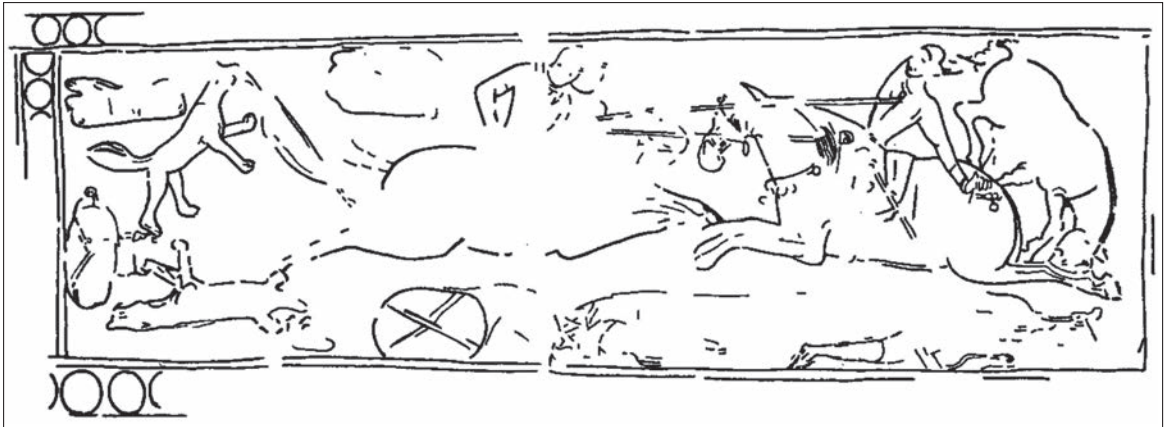


FIG. 6. Sketch of the mural from Penjikent room 41/vi (detail of the hero and three animals) (after MARSHAK 2002, 85, fig. 35).



FIG. 7. Jousting scene of Hormizd II, Naqsh-i Rostam (NRm5) (Photo D. Ciafaloni, 1990).

Abb. 4:a) suggests the existence of pattern sketch-books or of models of some sort used in different occasions and times for the rulers' celebratory purposes. How and when these pattern sketch-books eventually ended up in the hands of the Sogdian artists we shall try to explain in the following paragraphs.

In the double-register relief of Naqsh-i Rostam (NRm7), generally attributed to Bahram II (AD 276-293) (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 72) or alternatively to Bahram IV (AD 388-399) (VON GALL 1990, 30-34, Taf. 10), the upper register displays the codified formula of two fighting horsemen (the same that often appears in the Rustam Cycle), but the lower register is quite innovative in that it introduces the new formula of the succumbing horseman mounted on a horse with deeply bent hind legs and straight forelegs (FIG. 8). This pose stresses the initial moment of the horse's downfall, *i.e.*, its collapse caused by the potency of the enemy's strike. The same formula, applied to a reared up horse with the forelegs stretched against the enemy, appears in another Naqsh-i Rostam relief (NRm3) (FIG. 9) (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 71; VON GALL 1990, 34-36, Taf. 12-13). In consideration of its repetition, this pattern too must have been codified and in fact it is alluded to in the Sogdian Cycle of Rustam, applied to the figure of Avlad, chief of the evil *divs*, who attempts to oppose the tremendous dash of the victorious hero: the horse on which Avlad is mounted lifts the forelegs and

moves backwards on the hind legs (FIG. 4, upper register), thus suggesting the idea of downfall before the opposing vigour. Indeed it is not by chance that this pattern is applied to the evil character on which Rustam will eventually prevail: in fact the original, more pronounced Sasanian formulation is used to represent the downfall of the ruler's opponent. The same pattern is used again to depict Raksh, Rustam's horse, in the attempt to free itself from the coils of the dragon (CHUVIN *et alii* 1999, pl. 201; MARSHAK 2002, 41, fig. 18). The scene (PL. 1:a) conveys a sense of uncertainty, suggesting that not even the positive hero is absolutely safe from a potential defeat. The re-interpretation of the formula is more nuanced, but from a psychological point of view the Sasanian structure remains the same.

The active presence of another Sasanian pattern is visible in other parts of the Sogdian narration of Rustam's deeds in Penjikent. In room 50, sector XXIII (AD ~740), Rustam is once again the main character of a complex mural painting (FIG. 10) and is shown on a rigid mount while listening to the report of another hero standing before him (MARSHAK 2002, 116, fig. 66). The resemblance between the posture of Rustam's horse and that of Shapur I in the Darab relief (FIG. 11) is really quite striking, with the paired forelegs and the hind legs wide open, symbolising both firmness and potency. Similarly, one can observe how Rustam's pose is almost identical to that of the Sasanian ruler, who is portrayed laying out his left arm over the head of the defeated Roman emperor and keeping the reins with the right arm turned far backwards. Finally, if it is true that the Darab relief constitutes the first formulation of Shapur I's victory over the Roman emperors, as



FIG. 8. Double combat of Bahram II (or Bahram IV), Naqsh-i Rustam (NRm7) (Photo D. Ciafaloni, 1990).



FIG. 9. Two fighting horsemen, Naqsh-i Rustam (NRm3) (Photo D. Ciafaloni, 1990).

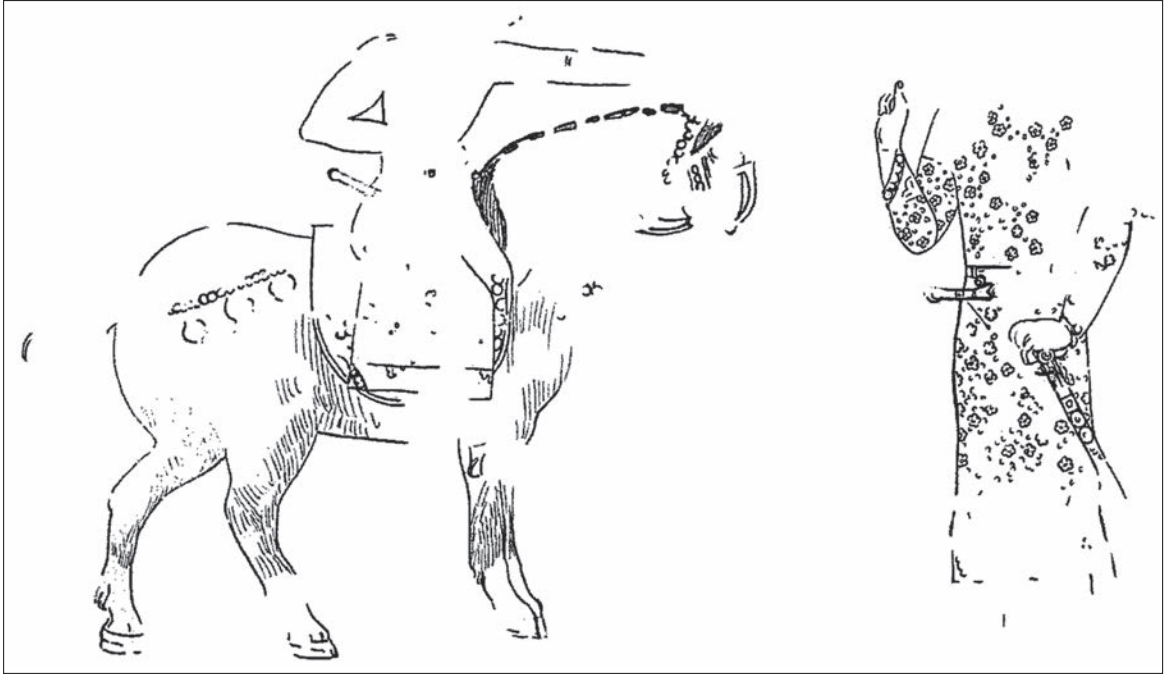


FIG. 10. Rostam listening to the hero's report. Penjikent, room 50/xxiii (after MARSHAK 2002, 116, fig. 66).

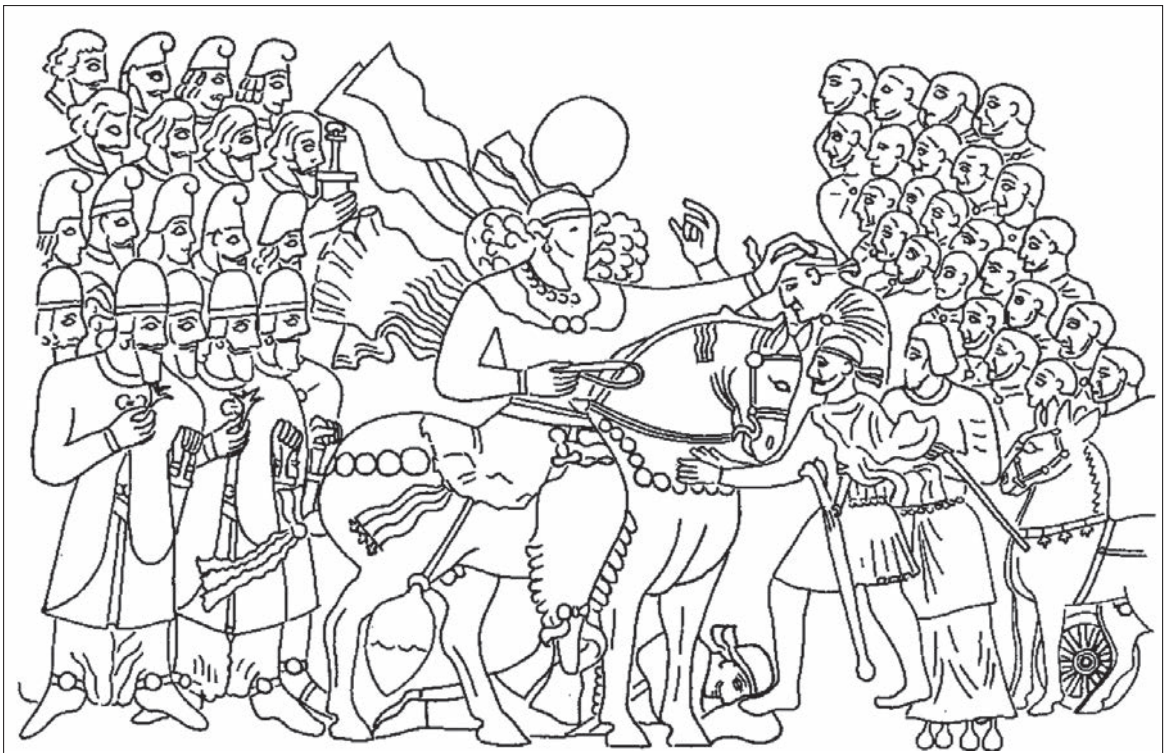


FIG. 11. Triumph relief attributed to Ardashir I at Darab (after VON GALL 1990, 100, Abb. 12:a).

some scholars suggest (LEVIT-TAWIL 1992), it is easier to understand the iconic importance of this monumental sculpture and its likely relevance in the diffusion of Sasanian royal formulas beyond Persian frontiers, and in Sogdia particularly.



FIG. 12. Particular of the investiture of Shapur II and his triumph over the Roman emperor Julian, Taq-i Bustan I (after VANDEN BERGHE 1983, pl. xxxvi).

In the Sasanian reliefs the figure of the defeated enemy appears lying on the ground, trampled by the horse of the victorious ruler, and usually the face is turned towards the observer, one arm folded under or around the head, almost in a resting position, and the other lying along the side (*pattern 1*). See, for instance, the following reliefs: Ardashir I's investiture in Naqsh-i Rostam (NRm1), and the triumph of Shapur I in Bishapur I, II, III (FIG. 2) (HERRMANN, HOWELL 1980, pls. 4-6; VANDEN BERGHE 1983, nos. 59-61), although in Bishapur I the figure on the left has both arms alongside the body (HERRMANN, HOWELL 1983, fig. 1). *Pattern 1* also appears in the lower register of the relief of Bahram II or Bahram IV in Naqsh-i Rostam (NRm7) (FIG. 8) (VON GALL 1990, 33, Abb. 4:b). On the contrary, in the upper register (VON GALL 1990, Abb. p. 33, 4:c) the right arm of the succumbing figure is planted against the ground in an attempt to avoid its fate (*pattern 2*), and this gesture also appears in the Darab relief (FIG. 11). *Pattern 2* is revised at a later stage in relief I at Taq-i Bustan, representing the investiture of Shapur II (AD 309-379) (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 79; for a recent photograph see CANEPA 2009, 109, fig. 19), into a more detailed and graphically complex manner. The figure of the succumbing Julian (FIG. 12) appears in the usual position, but it is turned more towards the observer, probably in order to better display the features of the Roman appearance and clothing, and the fall of the left arm is slightly more accentuated, in an attempt to increase the general sense of motion.

The rigid and codified patterns worked out by the Sasanian court artists appear to be the model of inspiration for the portrayal of the defeated enemies in the Sogdian paintings, although in the latter case the postures and gestures are far more vivid and polymorphic. In the Penjikent murals of room 41/vi a defeated figure is portrayed on the ground, under the clogs of the two opposite ranks of horsemen (MARSHAK 2002, 60, fig. 29). The figure is on its back and the arms are straight, *i.e.*, in a position similar to that described as *pattern 1*, the only difference being that both arms are straight (FIG. 4, middle register). This pattern is often repeated, probably due to its higher dramatic appeal in an essentially narrative context, such as that of the Sogdian mural paintings, which in fact lacked the need for the codified formality and rigidity of the royal Sasanian reliefs.

A recall to *pattern 2* appears in the Penjikent murals (PL. 1:b): room 1/xxi («Fable of the blacksmith and his ape» and «Tale of the resurrected tiger»: MARSHAK 2002, pl. XIII), room 1/vi («Rings and dragons» Cycle: *ibidem*, 148, fig. 99) and room 6/iii («Meeting of Sungod and Nanaya»: *ibidem*, 119, fig. 69). Here the figures lying on the ground are arranged quite vividly, with the arms turned in different ways and the head sometimes leaning downwards. In consideration of this variety of positions one might argue that *pattern 2* constituted a generic model of reference, with variations on the theme applied at a later stage.

In the «Cycle of the Amazons», in room XXI/1 in Penjikent, a supine masculine figure (AZARPAY 1981, pl. XIX) might be understood as a complex and imaginative recomposition of *pattern 2*, with the head turned below and backwards, the right arm along the body but with the elbow resting on the ground and the left one bent backwards. Another warrior, lying supine with its right arm under the head and the left one along the body (PL. II:a) (AZARPAY 1981, pl. XVII) recalls the pattern of the succumbing Julian the Apostate in Taq-i Bustan III (VANDEN BERGHE 1983, no. 79), and the same can be maintained in regard to a female warrior, probably to be identified as the queen of the Amazons (PL. II:b) (AZARPAY 1981, pl. XX). Besides, in this particular case the political relevance of the character further explains the application of a pattern originally elaborated for a defeated enemy ruler (the Roman emperor in the Sasanian reliefs). These parallels are more speculative than specific, but given the absence of other major artistic points of reference in the close proximity to Sogdian borders, and given the high unlikelihood of a completely autonomous Sogdian production, the acquaintance with Sasanian patterns appears most likely. Needless to say, however, the sources of mediation are very difficult to determine.

The recent discovery of stucco reliefs with fighting scenes in the Zoroastrian temple of Bandyan (5th century AD), in Eastern Khorasan, provides a new, essential artistic point of reference in the region (RAHBAR 1998, pls. III-V and pp. 219-220, fig. 5). The succumbing figures are characterised by a marked graphism of the details, which very much reminds of the succumbing Julian in Taq-i Bustan. At the same time the horsemen appear more dynamic than those in more traditional Sasanian reliefs (although only the lower part is still visible), and therefore more similar in style to the Sogdian ones. These stylistic similarities, together with the later dating and with the geographical closeness of Bandyan to Sogdia make it very likely that this site was a direct source of inspiration for Sogdian artists. The Bandyan discovery also provides a good element of comparison for the Penjikent complex fighting scenes (*i.e.*, involving many horsemen), otherwise difficult to evaluate due to the higher compositional complexity of the Sogdian murals and to the scarcity of remains of Sasanian wall paintings.⁴ But the comparison with stuccoes should be pondered carefully, and at present it is not possible to consider it definitive: new discoveries are not unlikely, and at the time of writing the available material is still quite limited. As a consequence, it might be easier to invert the terms of the comparison and find connections by looking at the Sogdian murals on hunting, however scarce these may be. The mural from the Palace of the Penjikent Citadel, datable to the 6th century AD, is by far the most accurate and complex testimony of this kind in Sogdian art (FIG. 13). The painting has been exhaustively studied (MARSHAK, RASPOPOVA 1990), underlining the scene's vitality and dynamism: these features are rightly considered to be elements of Sogdian originality, and precise comparisons are found with central Asian clothing, weaponry and even attitudes. The two scholars point out that the resemblances with the Sasanian art are quite limited, holding as an example the highly graphical representation of the ibexes' muscular partition, which does not appear in Sasanian art and is much closer to the contemporary Sogdian silverware.⁵ But the unbridled and vital run is also reminder of an important Western antecedent, the hunting scenes of Parthian age at Hatra in the «Residential building A» (VENCO RICCIARDI 1996, 154). Despite the precarious state of conservation of the first scene, it is worth focussing on the stretched gallop with the legs set as far-between as possible,⁶ the horseman's pose (despite the different weapon), stretched forward, and particularly the frantic animals' movements, the fall of which is most chaotic (FIG. 14). All these elements recall closely the peculiar aspects of the Penjikent mural. It is well known that the Sasanians incorporat-

⁴ See, for instance, the following scenes in Penjikent: the opposite ranks of warriors in the third register of room 41/v1 (N-W corner) (MARSHAK 2002, p. 60, fig. 29); the battle scene in room 6/III (*ibidem*, 128, fig. 68); the battle in the 'Ring and dragons' Cycle (*ibidem*, 148, fig. 99). In these cases the vigorous dynamism of the assaulting horses is not comparable to the static nature of the monumental Sasanian horses, *e.g.*, in Bishapur II (VON GALL 1990, Abb. 12:b).

⁵ Comparisons with crouched ibexes decorating silver bowls are particularly pregnant (MARSHAK 1986, 25-28, Taf.

20-21). The accentuated muscular partition is typical of schools A and B in the definition of the Russian scholar (*ibidem*, 66).

⁶ Even the boar hunt represented in the second scene (VENCO RICCIARDI 1996, 160) displays a certain degree of dynamism, but not as evident as in the first scene. Another graffito from building A (EADEM 2004, 211, no. A28N/G1+G2, fig. 6) represents a mounted archer in a rather static pose on a hefty horse with a small muzzle, arguably in Sasanian garments (the state of conservation is precarious).



FIG. 13. Mural from Penjikent, «6th c. AD building», room XIII (after MARSHAK, RASPOPOVA 1990, 82, fig. 6).

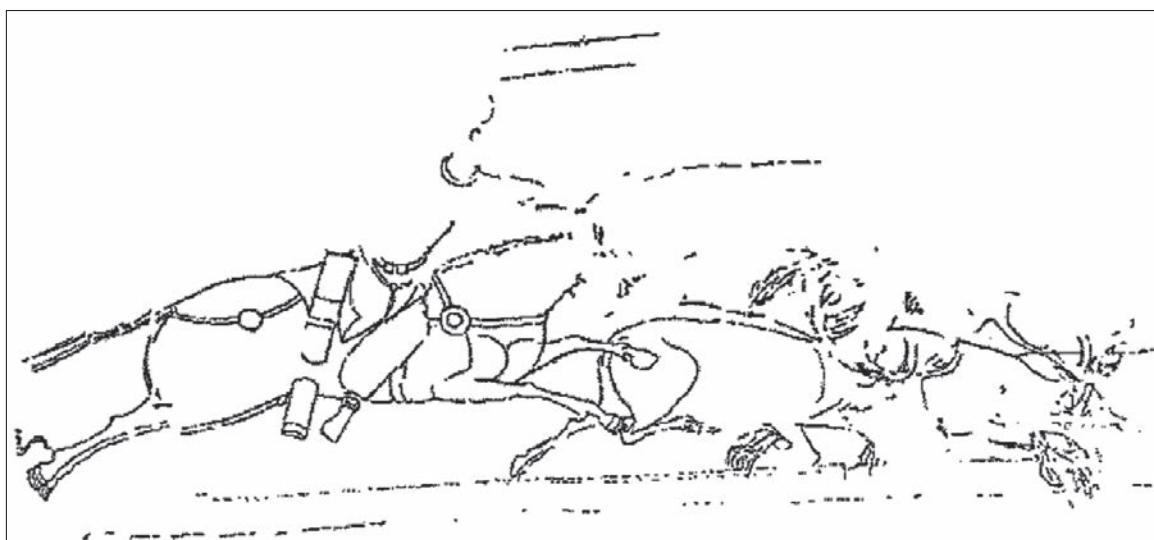


FIG. 14. Hunting scene from «Residential building A» at Hatra (after VENCO RICCIARDI 1996, 154).

ed, developed and transmitted many stylistic elements developed by the Parthians (VANDEN BERGHE 1987), so the comparison turns out to be quite useful. Apart from the well known testimonies of Dura Europos (most recently DE WAELE 2004, 344-352),⁷ similar features, characterised by a strong dynamism, are also identifiable in the hunting scene from Susa, the dating of which – early or late 4th century AD – is still widely debated (*ibidem*, 353-355).⁸ Most likely the Penjikent hunting

⁷ The formula of the 'fluctuating' horse and horseman, which already appears in the Tang-i Ab relief, shows in this site too (DE WAELE 2004, ill. 5:347). Since the Tang-i Ab relief is attributed to Ardashir I, the murals of Dura Europos must date to a later period. Considering the substantial Sasanian influences, it seems reasonable for the most likely dating to fall after the conquest of the city by Shapur I in 256 AD (*ibidem*,

349). This detail seems to confirm the important 'model' function held by the relief in Tang-i Ab.

⁸ Despite understandable reservations due to this scene being only the reproduction of a lost mural, still it seems possible to identify a certain degree of vividness and dynamism in the representation of the flight of the animals. This mural can therefore be considered an important antecedent of the

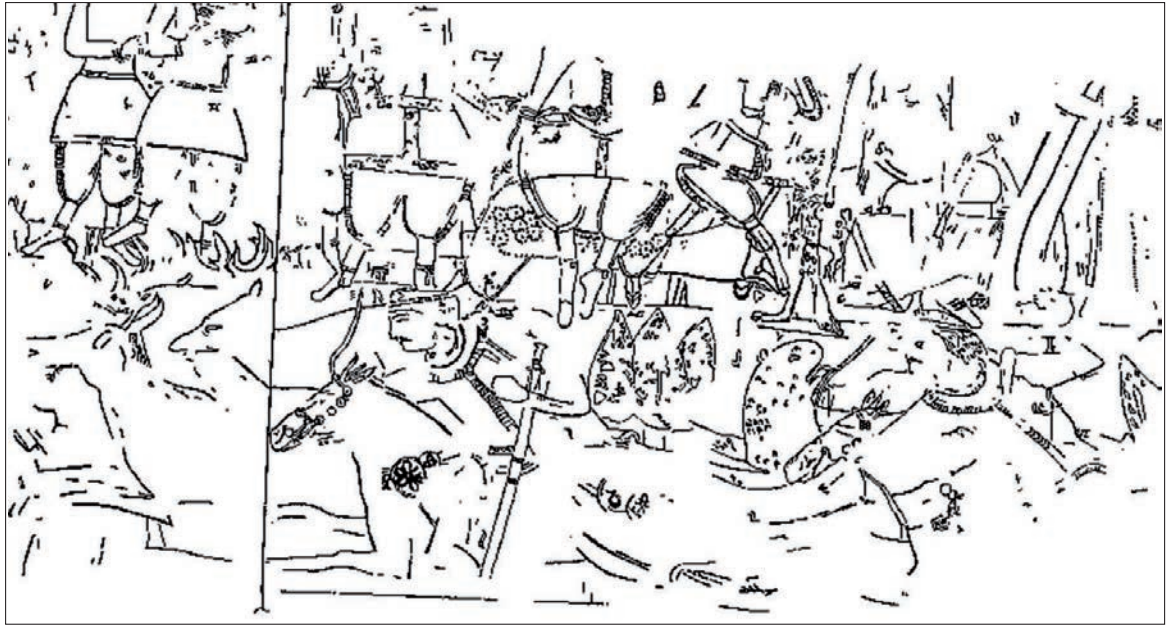


FIG. 15. Painting from the *cella* of the temple of Dzar-tepa (II)
(after BERDIMURADOV, SAMIBAEV 2001, 52, fig. 4).

scenes incorporate some royal or princely connotations, although it can not be considered royal propaganda in a proper sense (MARSHAK, RASPOPOVA 1990, 89-92). Other fragmentary Penjikent examples, dated to the 8th century, draw inspiration from the same pattern and have already been collected and studied (*ibidem*, 91-92). Among these, a remarkably elegant fragment represents two horsemen shooting arrows and accompanied in the upper part by a bird with a floral *nimbus* in its beak (RASPOPOVA 1980, 67), and an elegantly dressed horseman accompanied by a dog, unfortunately quite fragmentary (AZARPAY 1981, 46, fig. 16), both suggest once again the original Parthian hunting formula re-interpreted at a much later stage and in a graphically decorative manner. This is clear particularly if one looks at the robes and at the rather slim proportions of both the human figures and the animals. This iconography presents again the vexed question of the hunting in pursuit of *farn* and the consequent identification of the main characters, usually princely figures or wealthy patrons after a higher social status, into heroised ancestors (MARSHAK, RASPOPOVA 1990, 89-91). This topic lies outside the scope of this study, which aims to offer an exclusively iconographical analysis, but it is useful to stress the fact that the adaptation of Iranian formulas appears consistent with the social relevance of the portrayed Sogdian characters.

Another fundamental testimony is the hunting scene that decorates the cell of the temple of Dzar-tepa (BERDIMURADOV, SAMIBAEV 2001), datable to the late 4th or early 5th century AD (FIG. 15). This scene is set in the lower register of a complex mural composition which includes, in the upper register, representations of divinities and believers. Despite the presence of stylistic links with the Bactrian and Kushan art (*ibidem*, 59-63), the compositional pattern appears to be that of the Parthian-Sasanian tradition: some of the *realia*, in particular, find a precise comparison in the Sasanian iconography of the same period (*ibidem*, 63-64).

One important difference between Sasanian and Sogdian hunting scenes is that in the depictions of the Sasanian 'royal hunter' the animals are usually quite small and inexorably destined to succumb following a recurrent pattern, whereas in the Sogdian paintings the animals are larger and al-

most heroised too. See, for instance, the Penjikent ibexes' connotations with an almost human eye, or the humanised Dzar-tepa panther.

It has been observed that around the 4th and 5th century AD the planning of Sogdian citadels was affected by a progressive and constant adoption of Sasanian models, particularly in Penjikent, Paykand and Bukhara (GRENET 1996, 269-283). The citadel is «franchement dissociée», *i.e.*, located in a lateral position next to the lower city (*ibidem*, 372), the latter maintaining its rectangular and orthogonal plant. This style of urban planning resembles closely that of some among the most important Sasanian royal cities: Gundishapur, Bishapur, Ivan-e-Kerkha. A slightly different application of this plan is also visible in Herat, in Bactria. This aspect of city-planning, featuring an evident Sasanian influence, is contemporaneous to the adoption and revitalisation of Sasanian figurative patterns in Sogdian art. The most ancient pictorial testimonies, *e.g.*, Dzar-tepa, date to the same period of the new Sasanian urban-planning models. But the later Sasanian formulas, still active in the Rustam Room or in the Cycle of the Amazons, might be understood in the light of the displacement of skilled labour in the mid-7th century, the consequences of which are particularly visible in the production of silverware. This displacement has been duly identified and studied (MARSHAK 1986, 82) and is usually considered to be the cradle of Sogdian metal production.

Iranian influences have also been identified in the Sogdian religious architecture, particularly in Penjikent. The Iranian *atashgah* tradition, visible in a lateral room of the *ayvan* of the temple of Penjikent, looks like a local adaptation to the original Iranian architectural formula (SKHODA 1998, 130). The reception might be explained in two ways: through the direct sight of the geographically closer Iranian temples, *e.g.*, the temple of the Oxus, and possibly as a consequence of the labour of itinerant builders. The temple's renovations, together with a slight adaptation, took place in the 5th century AD (*ibidem*, 127-129), thus matching the general trend. Sasanian influences are also visible in Kafyr Kala on materials that can be dated to the 5th century AD, mainly on seals and reliefs, and particularly on a relief with a beribboned disk and a crescent, of distinct Sasanian flavour (LITVIN-SKY, SOLOV'EV 1990, 72-73).

All this seems to indicate that the end of the 4th and the whole 5th century AD were periods of the wide adoption of Iranian formulas, and therefore of a constant stream of models and patterns from the Iranian area to Sogdia and beyond. Due to the scarcity of supporting evidence it appears almost impossible to state with certainty if this happened thanks to an indirect transmission or to the direct sight of the Sasanian monuments, but it would be reasonable to assume that it was the result of an interaction between these two sources of influence.

The direct sight of Sasanian monuments close to Sogdia, though hard to prove, would be an interesting and reasonable option. Until recently the only testimony of a Sasanian rock relief in the proximities was that reported by J. P. Ferrier (1856, 229-230): a sculpture carved in the rock representing an enthroned ruler administering justice in front of the court, discovered in the range of the Tir Band-i Turkestan but yet to be found again. The recently discovered relief of Rag-i-Bibi (FIG. 16) does not match the description and is geographically very distant from the position indicated by Ferrier, so at the time of writing it counts as the only available testimony (GRENET 2007, 247). Dated to the reign of Shapur I, around AD 260, it represents a riding ruler hunting a rhinoceros (represented twice: running and slain) under a mango tree. The ruler is followed by two horsemen and a high-ranking figure in Kushan garments is portrayed beside the head of the royal mount. For the purposes of this study two elements are particularly important: first, the codified 'flying gallop' pose (most recently TAKEUCHI 2004) is identical to that found in the Penjikent murals and is repeated several times. It follows that apart from other media of inspiration (metalware, textiles, etc.), the direct acquaintance with a monument of this order of proportions (length 6.5 m, height 4.9 m) may have played a decisive role in the adoption of this pattern. There are several other elements which certainly contribute to a very strong visual impact: the considerable depth, which makes it look almost like a full-relief artwork; the addition of plaster details in order to increase the effect of three-dimensionality, like in other Sasanian reliefs; and finally the accentuated polychromy, of which substantial traces are still to be seen nowadays (for the presence of these elements of Sasanian rock reliefs in central Persia see HERRMANN 2000, 43-44). The relief, placed at 105 m above the



FIG. 16. The relief at Rag-i Bibi
(courtesy of F. Grenet).

valley of the Pul-i-Khumri river and 1 km south of the village of Shamarq, is carved inside a natural niche hard to reach, but just visible to the naked eye from the Shamarq road which passes below the cliff in the valley (GRENET 2007, 245). It is therefore most likely that it could be seen and appreciated by passing-by travellers and traders. The uneasy position, far but still visible from an important passage road, seems to be a typical and rather widespread characteristic of many Sasanian reliefs (HERRMANN 2000, 41). Second, the fantastic creature portrayed on the buckle of the Sasanian ruler's belt, a «winged lion with twisted fish tail» (GRENET 2007, fig. 8) is almost identical to the *simorgh* that flies towards Rustam in a scene of the Rustam Room. This second detail further corroborates the conjecture

of a direct connection of some sort. Indeed the source of influence for the transmission of this pattern might also be different, e.g. Heftalite models, or Turkish coins (*ibidem*, 261 f.), but it is hard to imagine that such an impressive and relatively close monument passed unnoticed. Furthermore, it has also been pointed out that carvings like the great relief of Firouzabad (almost 18 m long, the longest among the royal Sasanian reliefs) «would have been visible to travellers on the old Sasanian road and may have been carved with public viewing in mind» (HERRMANN 2000, 419), and indeed this characteristic position applies to the Rag-i-Bibi relief too, hard but not impossible to spot. Despite being visible from the road beneath, the very fact that these carvings were so uneasy to reach might have further attracted the interest of a limited yet selected public: it is in fact not unreasonable to think that the eyes of travellers and traders were naturally more trained in the analysis of the surrounding environment.

Far more difficult is to demonstrate if Sogdian traders or envoys were ever able to see the great Sasanian reliefs of central Persia with their own eyes. Some scholars maintain that the access to cities and royal sites where these monuments were situated was restricted (HAUSSIG 1983, 165-168; HERRMANN 2000, 40-41). But the sites of Naqsh-i Rostam, Naqsh-i Rostam and Darab were all close to cities likely to be visited by Sogdian envoys and traders. The royal message conveyed by the reliefs was of course not meant for all, but delegations of allied, subdued and neighbouring nations, as well as princes and governors, must have had access to at least some selected places of power, namely the royal residences where the ruler gave audience, and there is no reason to believe that these delegations were not allowed to witness the splendour of the Sasanian propagandistic apparatus. Rather, one would think that they were encouraged to do so.

The tradition of later artists drawing inspiration from earlier palace and rock reliefs as well as paintings is indeed very ancient. A recent contribution by David Stronach points out that the artists who worked at the Apadana in Persepolis drew inspiration from the Assyrian paintings of Til Barsib (or from a later, lost reproduction), but also from the reliefs of the age of Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC), almost certainly still visible in the Achaemenid period, although in decay (STRONACH 2002). Furthermore, the style of representation of the victorious Achaemenid ruler in the Behistun relief reveals for instance the important influence of the Sar-i Pul rock relief (end of the 3rd millennium BC) (ROOT 1979, 196-201). In this case the remarkable temporal distance did not prevent the latter relief from maintaining its strong inspirational value, thanks also to the favourable position on the road between Ecbatana and Babylon (*ibidem*, 196).

Likewise, a relief like Rag-i-Bibi, along with similar ones yet to be discovered (or indeed re-discovered), and other ones now lost, must have constituted a source of attractions and interest for centuries. Northern Afghanistan was easy to reach from Sogdia and was regularly crossed by travellers and traders, if not else because on the route to India, from where other interesting figurative

suggestions came to Sogdia (GRENET 2003, COMPARETI 2006-2007). Unfortunately, however, it does not seem possible to assess with precision when the earliest foreign influences reached Sogdia. Besides, one should not underestimate the potential mediations of the Kushan or Heftalite art (GRENET 1996, 383-385).

Bearing in mind that in the late 6th century AD the Sogdians were the trading representatives of the Turks, the chance that Sogdian traders or envoys witnessed some of the Sasanian reliefs in central Persia is still hard to prove, particularly if one is to believe that a Sasanian trading blockade of some sort was active against the Sogdians (DE LA VAISSIÈRE 2005, 227-232). Indeed the history of Menander Protector suggests the idea of a Sasanian trading blockade, but a careful interpretation offers a definitely more nuanced reading. It is certainly true that for strategic as well as commercial reasons the Sasanian rulers tried to prevent foreign traders from visiting the central provinces of Persia, allowing however free trade in frontier cities like Merv (*ibidem*, 230), but there are good reasons to believe that this policy was not very successful. Besides, according to Menander (10:1), at least one embassy of the Turks was granted audience by the Sasanian ruler, and it must have took place in some important Sasanian centre of power, although Menander fails to specify where exactly (BLOCKLEY 1985, 110-117). One should always bear in mind that Menander was a Byzantine historian, *i.e.*, that his account is often based on second-hand (if not third-hand) sources, and that his history embraces a very limited period of time (558-582 AD): in other words, despite the lack of evidence to support the hypothesis that Sogdian embassies and traders managed to visit central Persia, it is also difficult to believe the contrary, *i.e.*, that it seldom happened. At any rate, it is possible to advance a few suggestion in regard to the location of the audience: if for instance one assumes that it took place in Istakhr-Persepolis,⁹ there is no reason to believe that the envoys were forbidden from seeing the reliefs. In fact it would appear most likely that they were allowed and probably even encouraged to witness a demonstration of the Sasanian rulers' prestige and might. Had the audience took place in Ctesiphon, other significant artworks may have been witnessed by the envoys, probably paintings: a passage in Ammianus Marcellinus (24:6:3) describes the Sasanian rulers' taste for hunting and fighting scenes (ROLFE 1940, 456-457). On the contrary, the Ctesiphon stuccoes with hunting scenes are rather static and formal: quite distant, in this sense, from the dynamism of Sogdian hunting scenes (KRÖGER 1982, pls. IV-VI:22-30). But as we have already said in regard to the Bandyan reliefs, the comparison with stuccoes should be pondered with great care.

In conclusion, this short reappraisal aims to stress how the scenes of hunting and fighting stimulated a process of identification between Sasanian royal iconography on one side and Sogdian mythical imagery on the other. Furthermore, hunting scenes were particularly suited to absorb Iranian formulas due to the very high status of the portrayed Sogdian personalities, usually kings and princes. From a chronological point of view it seems possible to identify the late 4th and 5th century AD as a period in which the Sasanian formulas were widely adopted, especially if we bear in mind the concurrent findings in urban planning and architecture. This is particularly relevant if we consider that diplomatic relations between the Sogdians and the Sasanian Empire were not always that friendly, and commercial relations were at times discouraged (GRENET 1996, 386-388).

The re-vitalisation of these formulas observed in Penjikent around the mid and second half of the 8th century seems connected to a strong impulse towards narrative and mythological themes, as it appears clearly in the Penjikent murals, where the ancient heritage of these formulas, never completely abandoned, renews its effectiveness. This phenomenon might be explained in different

⁹ A recent study on the ideological function of Istakhr-Persepolis and including Naqsh-e Rostam (CANEPA 2010) examines in detail the role played by the Achaemenid monuments in the development of the earliest Sasanian art. It is difficult to imagine that such a wide and complex 'area' could only be subject to an internal fruition, *i.e.*, addressed to the court alone. As a matter of fact the key features of the great

propagandistic art of the Ancient Near East (cult of the sovereign, its partial identification with the divinity, victory over the enemy) suggest that this great 'area', «intended as a whole» (*ibidem*, 546), had also a highly propagandistic effect on spectators who were not necessarily members of the royal entourage.

ways. First, one might consider the more or less constant commercial exchanges in the frontier city of Merv, an «important interface between Persian and Sogdian merchants» (DE LA VAISSIÈRE 2005, 183). Second, the arrival from Persia of members of the Sasanian royal family escaping from the Arabs and on the way to China (around the mid 7th century) might have renewed and somehow consolidated the influence of Sasanian art in Sogdia (COMPARETI 2009). Finally, and for similar reasons, it is worth considering the possibility of a consistent transfer of Iranian artists of Sasanian formation in Sogdia between the second half of the 7th and the early 8th century as a consequence of the Arab invasion (IDEM 2011, 37-38).

The existence of pattern sketch-books seems supported by findings confirming other concurring influences (urban planning and architecture), since these too must have required some kind of hard support in order to be conveyed and transmitted. Finally, we would like to remark that we are deeply aware of the relevance of other sources of influence (coins, *bullae*, stuccoes, etc.), but the limits of this contribution and the need to offer a thorough analysis of the derivations from the monumental art only allowed us to focus on this medium. However, the aim for the future is to extend the area of our research to the whole and complex iconographic panorama of the Iranian derivations in Sogdian art, both in painting and other media.

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PL. VI:a. Rostam fighting against the dragon («Rostam Cycle»),
Penjikent, room 41/VI (after MARSHAK 2002, 41, fig. 18).



PL. VI:b. A fallen warrior. Particular from a mural («Fable of the blacksmith and his ape»),
Penjikent, room 1/XXI (after MARSHAK 2002, 81, pl. XIII).



PL. VII:a. A fallen warrior. Particular from a mural («Amazon Cycle»),
Penjikent, room 1/XXI (after AZARPAY 1981, pl. XVII).



PL. VII:b. A fallen Amazon. Particular from a mural («Amazon Cycle»),
Penjikent, room 1/XXI (after AZARPAY 1981, pl. XX).

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SOMMARIO

ZHORES KHACHATRYAN, <i>The tomb of Sisian (second half of the 1st century BC)</i>	9
MOHAMADREZA NEMATI, FARHANG KHADEMI NADOOSHAN, MEHDI MOSAVI KOHPAR, ALI REZA HOZHABRI NOBARI, <i>Parthian burial traditions at Veliran, Northern-Central Iran</i>	87
MARCO MORIGGI, <i>An Aramaic inscription in the Hong-e Yār-ʿAlīwand rock relief (Elymais)</i>	107
DAVIDE CIAFALONI, GERI DELLA ROCCA DE CANDAL, <i>Sasanian traditions in Sogdian paintings: hunting and fighting scenes</i>	111
ULF JÄGER, <i>Incense-burners with long handles from pre-Islamic Central Asia. A preliminary survey</i>	129
GABRIELE ROSSI OSMIDA, <i>Interventions of recovery and restoration conducted at the site of Haroba Kosht (Turkmenistan)</i>	145
<i>Gli autori di questo numero</i>	179
<i>Tavole</i>	181