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GODDESSES, PRIESTESSES, QUEENS AND DANCERS : IMAGES OF WOMEN ON SASANIAN SILVER

Abstract

This paper will address the interpretations of the “dancing girls” within four specific examples of Sasanian silver vessels. Within these vessels, we will examine both the external origins of the imagery and the internal explanations that arise. These readings are largely confined to: 1. religious (goddess or priestesses), 2. royal (depictions of noble women), or 3. decorative (with a primarily erotic connotation). After we address all of the possible meanings attributed to the “dancing girls,” we will examine the importance of these labels and ask if identity connotes value. Does this necessarily mean the works must have symbolic or metaphorical meaning? Their true meaning lies in the wiggle-room, as it were, that the imagery creates. The ambiguous nature of these figures has allowed them to be adapted to fulfill multiple needs for various social, religious, or scholarly groups. It is in their flexible nature, their iconographic malleability, that the “dancing girls” truly exert their power.

**GODDESSES, PRIESTESSES, QUEENS AND DANCERS : IMAGES OF WOMEN ON
SASANIAN SILVER**

Mary Olson

Slowly, through ancient trade and diplomacy, modern imperialism, and the dubious trade in antiquities, a silver vase made its way from a silversmith in late antique Persia to, of all places, Cleveland, Ohio. After its discovery in the 1800s, the vase remained in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad until eventually making its way to the United States. The imagery boasts a Persian origin; four female figures are illustrated in motion, elegantly holding an object in each hand. Not just Persian, more specifically the figures emerged from Sasanian Iran. The Sasanian Empire spanned from 224-651 CE and covered what is modern day Iran and spread from the Greco-Roman west to India and China in the East. And from there it entered into the realm of scholarship. In the early 1950s, Roman Ghirshman characterized the vase as a form of “art that enjoys representing either total or partial female nudity.”¹ Later, in 1964 Dorothy Shepherd saw the women as incarnations of a goddess, repeated four times.² A few years later, Richard Ettinghausen described the same figures as Bacchic celebrants.³ And now the interpretation has changed again, citing all of these possible identities. Our present view is almost paradoxically vaguer and relies more on continual reinterpretation than on tagging each figure with a discrete label.

Without a more definitive origin and identity, the images often referred to as “dancing girls” on Sasanian silver have, at different times, to different people, either reflected all of Sasanian ideology, or served as mere decorative devices to adorn silverware. Often varied, despite their though schematic appearance, the iconography depicted in addition to these “dancing girls” has led some scholars to deem them goddesses, priestesses, noble women or merely, as they are simply named, “dancing girls.”⁴ While a great deal about these types of vessels is unknown, such as their provenance and precise range of dates, the iconography of the vessels and the cultural practices of the Sasanians have historically been used to uncover the meaning behind these figures. It is useful to pause, however, to question if there is indeed a formal relationship between

1 Roman Ghirshman, “Notes Iraniennes V: Scènes de banquet sur l’argenterie sassanide,” *Artibus Asiae* 16, ½ (1953) : 51-76, 54; “l’art se plaisait à représenter la nudité féminine entière ou presque...”

2 Dorothy Shepherd, “Sasanian Art in Cleveland,” *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* (1964): 66-92.

3 Richard Ettinghausen, “A Persian Treasure,” *The Arts in Virginia* 8 (1967) : 36-41.

4 For a broad overview of women in art see: Aurelie Daems, “The Iconography of Pre-Islamic Women in Iran,” *Iranica Antiqua* XXXVI (2001). For support for religious arguments, see: Shepherd, “Sasanian Art in Cleveland.” and Phyllis Ackerman, “Cult Figurines,” in *A Survey of Persian Art Vol. I : Pre-Achaemenid, Achaemenid and Parthian Periods*, ed. Arthur Upham Pope, 195-223 (London: Oxford University Press, 1964-1965). For support for secular imagery see: Ghirshman, “Notes Iraniennes V,” and Roman Ghirshman, *Iran : Parthians and Sassanians*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons in *The Arts of Mankind Series*, ed. André Malraux and Georges Salles (France: Thames and Hudson, 1962).

the female figures on the silver vessels and representations of other women in different media, such as coins, mosaics, and rock-reliefs. An analysis of the depiction of women in Sasanian art does reveal an entrenched iconographic paradigm, despite the variety inherent in the works. The scholarly debates surrounding the “dancing girls,” formal features in the pieces themselves, and similar imagery in different media can help us understand how the interpretations have changed, and how the purported identities of these “dancing girls” have become less important than their origins.

Scholarly debate surrounding the “dancing girls” has largely oscillated between the secular, erotic, and religious. By focusing on four specific vessels, the imagery and its origins can be more fully understood through its inherently ambiguous nature. Already in antiquity there was a great deal of transmission of artistic forms from outside of Persia, particularly from the Roman Empire to the west, and so the stylistic and iconographic influences of the silver vessels are difficult to sort out. Nevertheless it can be said that although these silver vessels use a variety of adopted conventions, they joined these outside influences in a distinct way. The fact that the modern understanding of this imagery ranges between secular and religious themes proves that the attribution of the intent of the artist and the role that the individual vessels played in Sasanian society is an uphill battle.

To understand the uncertainties created in the interplay between the external influences and the internal interpretations of the silver vessels, we must first establish a basic understanding of the form of the vessels themselves. After introducing four examples of Sasanian silver and the uncertainties surrounding provenance, I will delve into the possible origins of the iconography and the problematic analyses of the works.

Attributions of the “dancing girl” figures tend to fall into four categories: the Zoroastrian goddess Anāhīta, a priestess of the same goddess, a noble or royal woman, or an aesthetic decoration. These different identities beg the question: is a specific identification possible? With the various interpretations, none of which are completely satisfactory, the female figures take on either a protean meaning or remain ambiguous form. If the female figures are Anāhīta or just decorative devices, does it change the meaning of the vessel or the importance of the art? Sasanian art, in this instance, shows a quality similar to movable type: the images are ambiguous while being specific. Adopting a more protean meaning, specific identities cannot be pinned down for the figures. Rather, a general sense of ambiguity surrounds them, as they can adopt and connote a variety of meanings to different interest groups. Rather than being a goddess or a priestess, the images have a more general sense of abundance that could have been intended to bridge a multitude of contexts rather than being confined to just one.

This paper will address the interpretations of the “dancing girls” within four specific examples of Sasanian silver vessels. Within these vessels, we will examine both the external origins of the imagery and the internal explanations that arise. These readings are largely confined to: 1. religious (goddess or

priestesses), 2. royal (depictions of noble women), or 3. decorative (with a primarily erotic connotation). After we address all of the possible meanings attributed to the “dancing girls,” we will examine the importance of these labels and ask if identity connotes value. Does this necessarily mean the works *must* have symbolic or metaphorical meaning? Their true meaning lies in the wiggle-room, as it were, that the imagery creates. The ambiguous nature of these figures has allowed them to be adapted to fulfill multiple needs for various social, religious, or scholarly groups. It is in their flexible nature, their iconographic malleability, that the “dancing girls” truly exert their power.

I : The Works

There are twenty-five silver vessels extant that depict the “dancing girl” motif,⁵ and despite the rarity of the vessels, the imagery varies between the silver objects. While the main subject, usually four or six women, appears quite regularly, their dress, their poses, and the iconography that accompanies them is never the same on any two vessels. It is in the specific iconography that most of the larger symbolic debate has become embroiled. Through the examination of four artifacts, all varied in imagery and representation, the parallels and contradictions within the iconographic vocabulary become evident.

The four pieces under consideration here include two silver vessels from the Cleveland Museum of Art, a vase from the Freer Gallery of Art, and a ewer from the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. While all of these vessels are examples of female images in Sasanian art, there are differences between them; the depiction of the women, the items that they carry, and the setting in which they are placed are all different. These discrepancies create a wide range of identities and attributions while still serving as adequate representations of the body of silver vessels. After the general appearance of these silver objects is discussed, I will then move into the origins of the imagery and then their attributions and possible identities.

1 - Silver Dish with Single Female Figure [Fig.1]

Location: Cleveland Museum of Art

Date: 5th to the 6th century CE

Dimensions: Height: 4.6 cm, Diameter: 21.6 cm

Acquired by the John L. Severance Fund

Accession number: 1962.295

No longer on display⁶

This dish is the only example of a single female figure on any silverware and is the only extant instance when one of the “dancing girls”

⁵ Oleg Grabar, *Sasanian Silver: Late Antique and Early Medieval Arts of Luxury from Iran* (Michigan: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1967), 61.

⁶ “Dish: The Goddess Anahita,” The Cleveland Museum of Art, 2006, <http://www.clevelandart.org/explore/work.asp?searchText=sasanian&recNo=14&tab=2&display=> (20 January 2008).

appears on a plate. The object is titled “Dish : The Goddess Anahita” by the museum itself, as well as by Dorothy Shepherd, a former Assistant Curator of Textiles.⁷ Many scholars drop the subtitle from the dish when referring to it, because the identity of the female figure is still debated. For instance, Richard Ettinghausen refers to the dish as “Dancing Female Figure, possibly a Maenad on a Partially Gilt Sasanian Silver Plate.”⁸ To avoid this confusion, Oleg Grabar refers to the dish as the “Cleveland Plate.”⁹ Naming conventions change from author to author and thus the silver dish will be hereafter referred to as *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* so as to describe the appearance rather than ascribing any identity to the figure.

The dish is silver with gold gilding on the female figure that highlights her clothing, and on some of the leaves of the vine that surrounds her. The figure stands on a slanted ground-plane, one leg bent and the other straight; she holds an extension of the vine that surrounds her. The vine begins at the apex of the dish, above the figure’s head and continues down past her shoulders, where she holds them on either side as they drape down her arms to flow into a curvilinear pattern that fills the dish. This motif, the arch that the vines create over her head, has been depicted before in what are accepted as Dionysiac scenes [Figs.5 and 6].

The woman’s hair is knotted on top of her head and two strands fall in front of either shoulder. Her figure is voluptuous, with broad hips and thighs, a small waist, modest breasts, and a visible pubic triangle. The garment that she wears terminates at the wrists and ankles and is form-fitting. While she appears to be wearing a garment, Shepherd describes the female figure as a “beautiful nude 'dancing' figure...”¹⁰ However; the cuffs around ankles, wrists, and neck seem to indicate that the figure is wearing a sheer outfit. The use of gilding, which terminates at these cuffs, leaving hands, feet, and face silver, supports this observation. Overall, the woman's garment serves to highlight her within her organic framework.

On no other silver vessel is there a central, isolated female figure. While there are examples of medallion bowls [Fig.7] that show one woman alone, the image is repeated and set in roundels. Prudence Harper states that these *Medallion Bowls* depict the same woman, though the representation of women on ewers and other vessels is more contested. There is little precedent in Sasanian art for multiple depictions of the same figure,¹¹ which implies that the ewers and other vases with multiple female images and depict multiple women.

7 “Dorothy Shepherd,” The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ingalls Library and Archives, 2004, http://library.clevelandart.org/museum_archives/finding_aids/textile/fa_textiles_02_background.php (20 April 2008).

8 Richard Ettinghausen, *From Byzantium to Sasanian Iran and the Islamic World : Three Modes of Artistic Influence*, Vol III in *The L.A. Mayer Memorial Studies in Islamic Art and Archaeology Series* (Leiden: E J Brill, 1972), List of Figures.

9 Grabar, *Sasanian Silver*, 61.

10 Shepherd, “Sasanian Art in Cleveland,” 82.

11 Ettinghausen, *Byzantium to Iran*, 10-12.

2. Freer Gallery Vase [Fig.2]

Location: Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
 Date: 6th-7th century CE, Sasanian period
 Material: gilt silver
 Technique: hammering, repoussé, and chasing
 Dimensions: height: 19.3 cm; max diameter: 10.6 cm; rim diameter: 6.1 cm; weight: 612 g
 Purchased in 1966
 Accession number: F1966.1.¹²

Simply named “Vase” by the Freer Gallery, this silver vessel is a more common depiction of four female figures, though their specific accessories make them anomalous. The background is the only portion of the vessel that is gilt, and all of the figures remain silver. There is beading around the circumference of the vase where the body of the vessel meets the neck and also along the base.

Out of these four women, three carry musical instruments, including panpipes, a pair of clappers, and a double horn. The fourth woman holds her hair out to either side. Between the female figures are children, each of whom are depicted with a bird, except the fourth, who holds flowers. These women at first appear to be nude, but like *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* [Fig.1], they are also wearing form fitting garments that end at the wrists and ankles. These women all have sashes, or veils of some type, draped behind them. Their hair is partially up in a topknot with some strands hanging down, though these strands do not have the same uniformity as *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* [Fig.1]. Instead, these women’s hair cascades down their backs. Additionally, the figures are wearing necklaces and have halos.¹³ While the iconography of this vase seems to point to musicians, and thus a fairly secular message, the children with birds and the women's hairstyle and dress have led some to tie it to other vessels that are often granted a religious meaning.¹⁴

3. Ewer Decorated with Female Figures [Fig.3]

Location: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C.
 Date: 6th-7th century CE
 Material: gilt silver

12 Ann C Gunter and Paul Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 191, “Vase,” Smithsonian: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Collections, 2008, <http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectId=11180> (20 January 2008), There was no information about where the vase came from before being purchased by the museum, nor is there any indication of where or when it was found.

13 The women have some sort of framing device around their heads. Whether this is a halo with religious connotations or a roundel is unclear. Representations of Anāhīta on rock reliefs do not have these “halos” nor do images of Ahura Mazda.

14 Various religious readings tie the female figures to different aspects of the goddess Anāhīta, her cult, and associated themes.

Technique: hammering, repousse, chasing, and gilding
 Dimensions: height: 32.5 cm; max diameter: 15.2 cm; weight:
 1,167 g.
 Purchased in 1982¹⁵
 Accession number: S1987.118 a-b

Named *Ewer Decorated with Female Figures* by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and in scholarship, this ewer is similar to the *Freer Gallery Vase* [Fig.2]. With regard to the ewer, the background is gilt while the figures remain silver. Most of the vases and ewers with female figures have four or six figures; however, the *Ewer Decorated with Female Figures* has only three female personages. These women are in a defined background; the shape of the vessel creates the illusion of architectural divisions seen more explicitly in some vessels, such as the *Silver-gilt Ewer with Female Figures* [Fig.8]. While the *Silver-gilt Ewer with Female Figures* has more decorative and flamboyant architectonic divisions between the figures, the *Ewer Decorated with Female Figures* is clearly referencing the same compartmentalization.

The figures all stand on ground planes and wear skirts that flare out around the ankles and wrap around their lower arms in thin strips. The women again have halos and a similar hairstyle to the *Freer Gallery Vase*. Additionally, these figures have scarves billowing behind them that end in decorative points. These figures carry a wider variety of attributes than those on the *Freer Gallery Vase* and both their importance and meaning are difficult to decipher. Each woman has a pair of objects: one holds a flower and a bird; the central figure, a peacock against her body and what appears to be a chalice in her left hand; the third woman, a child by the arm and a bowl that appears to contain fruit. Overall, the iconography and the presence of three women rather than four or six makes this ewer novel in terms of the larger Sasanian silver collection.

4. Cleveland Museum Silver Vase [Fig.4]

Location: Cleveland Museum of Art
 Date: 4th - 5th century CE
 Materials: gilt silver
 Technique: raised relief, cast, engraved, chasing
 Dimensions: maximum diameter: 11.5 cm; height: 18.5 cm
 Gifted to the museum from Katharine Holden Thayer
 Accession number: 1962.294
 No longer on display¹⁶

15 "Ewer Decorated with Female Figures," Smithsonian: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Collections, 2008, <http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectId=22666> (20 January 2008).

16 "Vase with Four Dancing Figures," Cleveland Museum of Art, 2006, <http://www.clevelandart.org/explore/work.asp?searchText=sasanian&recNo=7&tab=2&display=> (20 January 2008).

Named “Silver rhyton: Figures of the Goddess Anahita” by Shepherd and “Vase with Four Dancing Figures” by the Cleveland Museum of Art, this vase is another example of the *a priori* attribution of “religious” iconography influencing naming practices.¹⁷ The *Cleveland Museum Silver Vase* is similar to the *Ewer Decorated with Female Figures* in many of its images and conventions. The background is gilt, and the women wear similar skirts and skin-tight outfits covering their torsos.¹⁸ However, on these women, the fabric is patterned, with a wavy skirt and small embellishments on their upper bodies, indicating a patterned fabric. These women have similar hairstyles to those on the *Ewer Decorated with Female Figures* and the *Freer Gallery Vase*; however, they do not have circular framing elements (often called halos) around their heads.

While some of the items that the female figures hold are similar to the *Ewer Decorated with Female Figures* [Fig.3], other images are only seen on this ewer. The first female figure holds a bucket and a bird; the next, a vine and a flower; the third woman, a dog and a bowl with fruit; the last, a child by the arm and a pomegranate in her right hand. These specific icons have led Shepherd to identify them as four incarnations of the goddess Anāhīta. According to Shepherd, the first female is the goddess of water, the next is the goddess of vegetation, the third is the goddess of agriculture and the fourth is the goddess of fertility.¹⁹ While similar to the other silver vessels, the *Cleveland Museum Silver Vase* is also unique in ways that have given rise to divergent interpretations.

These four different vessels all have formal similarities, but not direct parallels. While some of the imagery is seen on a few of the vases and ewers, there is no real schematic repetition. Rather, the congruencies seen in the figures; all female, all in form fitting outfits, all in a relative state of motion, all within framing, and all with discernible attributes; do not allow us to draw any conclusions, or larger truths. While the vessels show a similarity, they do not follow the same strict conventions. There still exists room for interpretation and individuality within each figure.

Problems with the Works

Unfortunately, the differences seen within much of the Sasanian silver cannot be accounted for by provenance or dating. Much of the extant collection of Sasanian art has not been properly documented: where, by whom, and when these works were found is still unknown. Prudence Harper, who has examined the problem of the “dancing girls” in a series of papers and books, acknowledges

17 Shepherd, “Sasanian Art,” and “Vase,” The Cleveland Museum of Art.

18 The figures may also be nude from their navel up. What appears to be the ends to the skin-tight shirt at wrists and neck could also be interpreted as bracelets. Whether or not the women are nude, the fact remains that they do not align with Iranian conventions of modesty; Ettinghausen, *Byzantium to Iran*.

19 Shepherd, “Sasanian Art,” 84.

that “none of the vessels on which this theme is illustrated come from controlled excavations at a Sasanian site.”²⁰ Most of the vessels were found outside the borders of the Sasanian Empire, and it has often been assumed that the silver vessels would have been gifts to demonstrate the power of the Sasanian government. Ghirshman explains that trade would have been mutual between Iran and her bordering countries, that

fur and precious stones were imported from certain regions of Russia, while, reciprocally, specimens of Sassanian silver plate have been found on sites in the same parts of Russia. These commercial exchanges flourished chiefly in the reigns of Chosroes [*sic.*] I and II (sixth and seventh centuries), and this may explain the presence of late copies of works made in previous centuries...²¹

Through reciprocal trade and gifts, Sasanian art made its way out of the Persian Empire. Since then, many of the works have ended up in private collections, which only further obfuscates their provenance.

Not only is it difficult to determine the geographic origins of the silver vessels, scholars also have difficulty dating the metalwork. Production dates can vary from the early third century to the eighth century CE. Individual works are dated by the technique implemented and the composition of the metal, though this method of classification is relatively new.²² Other scholars believe that some of the silver dishes may be early Islamic copies of Sasanian works, and have been dated as late as the twelfth century CE.²³ This broad time frame does little to assist in identifying the political, cultural, and religious context in which the vessels were created.

On a more immediate level, the four vessels examined by this paper also lack records. The *Ewer Decorated with Female Figures* [Fig.3] and the *Freer Gallery Vase* [Fig.2] have no clear provenance. There is no indication of where these works came from within the Middle East, and no information about how the museum acquired them. However, according to Ettinghausen, the *Cleveland Museum Silver Vase* [Fig.4] was housed in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad for a while, after the demands of the art market spurred continual digging in Soviet satellite states. Additionally, it must be noted that due to the

20 Prudence Oliver Harper, “Sources of Certain Female Representations in Sasanian Art,” in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale sul Tema: La Persia nel Medioevo (Roma, 31 Marzo-5 Aprile 1970)*, (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1971), 503-515, 503.

21 Ghirshman, *Iran : Parthians and Sassanians*, 203.

22 The pioneers in this dating method include: Prudence O. Harper, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period, Vol I : Royal Imagery* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Gunter and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*.

23 J.H. Iliffe, “Persia and the Ancient World,” in *The Legacy of Persia*, ed. A.J. Arberry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963).

popularity of Sasanian art in the 1960s there were many forgeries produced.²⁴

To quote Ettinghausen, the

unexpected appearance of so many such objects in Western collections has raised some questions as to whether there may not be many forgeries among them, especially as they have all been excavated clandestinely without scientific supervision. The latter is the more regrettable because the 11 scientific excavations that have been made of Sasanian sites have not, unfortunately, yielded any decorated silver.²⁵

If the works are not forgeries and are truly Sasanian in origin, even though none have been found within the boundaries of former Sasanian Iran, we must now consider the civilization from which they arose.

II – Attribution of the Works

Background

The Sasanian Empire used to cover modern Iran and other satellite states in the Middle East, and was established by Ardashir I (226 – 241 CE) in 224 CE.²⁶ The Sasanians conquered the previous Parthian Empire which had ruled from 238 BCE – 224 CE, yet preferred to emulate their Achaemenid ancestors, who were conquered by Alexander the Great in 334 BCE. After Persia's submission to Alexander the Great, the Seleucid Empire was established by his successors and Greek art made its way East. Later, even after the Hellenistic rulers were overthrown by the Parthians, contact with the West continued through both trade and a series of wars, which continued well into the Sasanian period.²⁷ Much of the political program under Ardashir I revolved around establishing a strong state and national identity, which had been weakened by the many years of foreign rule. Sasanian kingship was based on inheritance, which facilitated numerous struggles for the throne, often weakening the state, until the fall of the Empire in 651 CE. Much of what we know derives from Roman authors, who chose to focus on differences and similarities between Persia and the West, focusing primarily on their military and artistic accomplishments.

Sasanian art tends to be hard to pin down. With artistic influences trickling in from the Greco-Roman west, India, and China, the Middle East became a melting pot of artistic ideas and motifs. Because Persia controlled the

24 Kamyar Abdi, "Nationalism, Politics and the Development of Archaeology in Iran," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, 1 (Jan 2001): 51-76.

25 Ettinghausen, "A Persian Treasure," 29.

26 While Ardashir I gained control from the Parthians in 224 CE, he was officially crowned king of the Sasanian Empire in 226 CE.

27 R. N. Frye, "The Political History of Iran Under the Sasanians," in *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. 3 (1)*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Silk Road, and thus the trade between the east and the west, most of the civilizations of the ancient world had to pass through Iran.²⁸ This brought about an influx of art, an exchange, moreover, hastened by the exchange of peoples. Constantly at war with the west, captives from conquered cities would be forced into Persia, bringing with them their own culture.²⁹ Some of the new styles and depictions were adopted by the Persians and underwent a reinterpretation. Images were adopted and reapplied to assert something that pertained to Persian society rather than the culture from which it originated. New interpretations were applied to older motifs, such as Dionysiac precession imagery, and in so doing, these images were transformed. Though extant Sasanian art includes rock reliefs, textiles, coins, stucco, architecture, and silver; each medium represents an example of the combination of different cultures' motifs to create new range of meanings.

Like the mix of peoples and art within the Sasanian Empire, several religions existed simultaneously. Depending on the time period or location where created, the silver vessels do not necessarily have any ties to the official religion.³⁰ Under the Sasanians, Zoroastrianism became the state religion, which was often promoted by investiture scenes on rock reliefs in the images of Ahura Mazda.³¹ In addition, Manichaeism emerged and gained popularity, and Judaism was present in the Middle East as well.³² A branch of Christianity called Nestorianism was eventually tolerated within the Empire. Islam began moving into the Middle East towards the end of Sasanian rule, in the seventh century. If the silver vessels under discussion were made at a later date, it is doubtful that patrons would be commissioning images of a Zoroastrian goddess, unless the images had long since lost their symbolic power.

One of the many interpretations of the female images on Sasanian silver is that of a goddess. The most likely candidate is the Zoroastrian goddess Anāhīta. A popular deity, Anāhīta is associated with the various female images seen not only on silver vessels, but also on rock-reliefs and coins. While there is

28 Dominique Collon, *Ancient Near Eastern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 74.

29 Garth Fowden, *Qaşayr Amra : Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

30 The early forms of Zoroastrianism are sometimes referred to as Magianism. For more information see: *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion : Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions*, trans. and ed. by William W Malanida (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

31 Ahura Mazda was the creator god in Zoroastrianism. For more information on Ahura Mazda or Zoroastrianism in general, a plethora of sources can be consulted including: *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion*.

32 Manichaeism stressed ritual and acts as a method of achieving salvation. According to Manichaeism, the "absolute identity of the individual and the collective soul. There is no individual salvation in Manichaeism, only the common 'work of religion'...Humans are at the center of attention only insofar as they are a model of the larger cosmos and its operations. Salvation at the human scale of action cannot be effected by detachment and withdrawal, but only by active engagement – carefully circumscribed and rigorously ritualized with the cosmos." Jason David Be Duhn, *The Manichaean Body: In Discipline and Ritual* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 233.

only one god in Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda, there are lesser beings created by him named *yazata*, “beings worthy of worship.”³³ These *yazata* are referred to as “gods” and “goddesses” throughout scholarship though they are not the same as the western concept of the word. Anāhīta herself was a

syncretistic goddess composed of two major and independent elements. On the one hand, she manifests the ancient Indo-Iranian idea of the Heavenly River who brings the waters to the rivers and streams of the earth.³⁴

She was also associated with fertility and considered responsible for the well-being of the entire nation. Partially derived from the other deities who preceded her, Anāhīta was popular because of her ties to fertility and prosperity.

External Sources of the Imagery

Now that we have a sketch of the political, artistic and religious status of Sasanian Iran, we need to examine the origins of the imagery. While the importance and identity of the figures within the Sasanian context is still unknown, or at least widely debated, most scholars agree that much of the imagery arrived in the Sasanian Empire from the west. Making their way east, Dionysiac imagery and depictions of the Seasons have both been quoted as the origin of the “dancing girl” motif in Sasanian art.

I : Dionysus

The eclectic nature of Sasanian society and religion was mirrored in Sasanian artistic conventions, which came to Persia from the west. Particularly ubiquitous were portrayals of the Greek god Dionysus. The only main images on *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* [Fig.1] are the figure and a vine that surrounds her, which is equated to Dionysiac imagery. Other Dionysiac imagery was adopted, including banquet scenes, sometimes depicting royalty while others showed Bacchic scenes. Because of the Greco-Roman influence on Persian art, there emerged a series of silver plates portraying banquet scenes, and others that depicted the triumph of Bacchus-Dionysus [Fig. 5]. These plates are examples of western influence on art forms and the movement of western imagery, at the very least, east.

Many scholars ascribe religious meaning to *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* [Fig.1] because of the perceived link between fertility imagery across religions. This connection is also present in the vine motif. Dorothy Shepherd maintains that the presence of the vine in scenes with a female figure

33 Jenny Rose, “Three Queens, Two Wives and a Goddess: Roles and Images of Women in Sasanian Iran,” in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World : Power Patronage, and Piety*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly, 29-54 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 37.

34 *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion : Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions*, trans. and ed. William W. Malanida (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 119.

“represent a blending of the ancient Iranian Anahita cult with that of Dionysus, the Greek fertility god, whose attribute was the vine.”³⁵ Because there was no precedent for religious depiction in Persian art,³⁶ Iranian artisans may have adopted Greco-Roman traditions. Therefore, scholars argue that a great deal of the imagery associated with Dionysus has been applied to Anāhīta.³⁷ Thus the vine on *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* [Fig. 1] would indicate fertility, the figure's divinity, and Persia's ties to western precedents. Both Dionysus and Anāhīta were associated with fertility, and because of this link the fertility imagery of the one god could be utilized to depict Anāhīta as well.³⁸

Other icons and practices specific to Dionysus may have been transmitted to the east and incorporated into Anāhīta's cult. The use of the vine is an example of the more inclusive Sasanian style, incorporating motifs and devices from other culture's art to create something new and wholly Sasanian. Shepherd believes that the activities associated with Dionysus were also incorporated into the cult of Anāhīta, which became associated with music and dancing.³⁹ Harper states that the general “festal or auspicious meaning” of the images are descendant from more general Dionysiac imagery.⁴⁰ Shepherd and Harper see the translation as more stylistic, with Sasanian art resembling the broader Dionysiac motifs. More specifically, Richard Ettinghausen references the women as “maenads in their ecstatic rite.”⁴¹ Other specific icons exclusive to Dionysiac representations have been known to crop up on Sasanian silver. A small jaguar drinking out of a jug, for instance, was a common Dionysiac motif and is present on many Sasanian plates depicting banquet scenes. Multiple Dionysiac motifs have been adopted into Sasanian art, though whether these images are given a new meaning in a Sasanian context or whether they were used wholesale remains to be seen.

One of the major arguments for the presence of Dionysiac imagery in Sasanian art lies in the use of the vine. However, though the presence of the vine has been one of the major arguments for Dionysiac associations, and thus religious connotations, vines appear as motifs in many of the religions within Sasanian Iran. To some extent, the image arose from a mixture of Parthian art

35 Shepherd, “Sasanian Art,” 82.

36 This is also still debated by scholars. Though Herodotus wrote that the ancient Persians did not worship icons or (*Ancient Iranian Religion*, 113), his writing was trying to depict the decay of the Persians into decadence. Contrary to Herodotus, Phyllis Ackerman discusses the many cult objects found. Ackerman, “Cult Figurines.”

37 For more information on Dionysiac imagery see: Gunter and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*; Shepherd, “Sasanian Art;” Harper, “Sources of Certain Female Representations;” Ettinghausen, *Byzantium to Iran*; and Grabar, *Sasanian Silver*.

38 Christopher J. Brunner, *Sasanian Stamp Seals in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.) and Shepherd, “Sasanian Art.”

39 Shepherd, “Sasanian Art,” 82.

40 Prudence Oliver Harper, *The Royal Hunter: Art of the Sasanian Empire* (New York: Asia House Gallery, 1978), 61.

41 Ettinghausen, “A Persian Treasure,” 39.

and “the new resurgence of the vine motif emanating from the West...”⁴² While this style was prevalent in the Roman west, it appears in other cultures and religious imagery. “The Manichaean ‘Tree of Life’ appears to have been visualized a huge vine tree...” while it also resembled “the Zoroastrian Hom tree, the great mythical *arbor vitae* of the Avesta.”⁴³ Wine and drinking were also important parts of Sasanian state festivals, and iconographically speaking, the vine and wine are often closely connected in western art. With a variety of religions utilizing the vine motif as their own emblem, the vine could be seen in the broader “context of abundance and life. It could be used with equal facility within a religious or secular environment.”⁴⁴ The vine, one of the motifs most often associated with Dionysus, and thus Anāhīta, was already present within the iconographical vocabulary of a variety of cultures.

While Sasanian art adopted the imagery of the west, it is not clear if Dionysiac images were revalued to instill a distinctly Sasanian meaning. Ettinghausen believes that “the iconography of the basic Dionysiac group is remarkably pure and unadulterated” and represents a style that was fully adopted “without further translation into Iranian idiom.”⁴⁵ Rather than reapplying the Dionysiac imagery to their own cultic representations, Ettinghausen believes that the copies are just that. The motifs had not been fused into Sasanian religious imagery because the Greco-Roman imagery and associated attributes were far too fixed to have been completely engulfed by another. Because the Dionysiac themes and imagery are so prevalent and readable, the “Dionysiac origins and original meanings are clear.”⁴⁶ Other scholars, such as Shepherd, believe that the Dionysiac imagery was blended with existing traditions, especially with the cult of Anāhīta, to give a new reading to the borrowed images. While Shepherd acknowledges the origins of the “dancing girl” imagery in Dionysiac banquet scenes, she believes the imagery was integrated into Sasanian society and art. Whether or not the imagery was given a new significance in an Iranian context, the imagery and iconography was clearly borrowed from the Greco-Roman west.

Due to the fact that Dionysiac imagery was consistent, Ettinghausen believes that this served an aesthetic role that was not granted an overarching message or importance in Sasanian culture. Ettinghausen believes that Dionysiac imagery in Persian art was too schematic, that it was always used the same way, and that the Dionysiac imagery functioned as a movable motif, it existed intact and separate from, though incorporated in Sasanian art.⁴⁷ Ettinghausen asserts that the Dionysiac scenes were pure copies without

42 Martha J. Carter, “Royal Festal Themes in Sasanian Silverwork and their Central Asian Parallels,” *Commemoration Cyrus 1* (1974) : 171-202, 196.

43 *Ibid.*, 196-197.

44 *Ibid.*, 196.

45 Ettinghausen, *Byzantium to Iran*, 6-10.

46 *Ibid.*, 5.

47 *Ibid.*.

translation and reapplication into Sasanian religious beliefs. Even on the silver vases and ewers, the imagery from the Dionysiac cult is nearly the same, and the figures, according to Ettinghausen, are Bacchic celebrants rather than goddesses. The works remained decorative objects.

II : The Seasons

The “dancing girls” also derive from another Greco-Roman tradition – that of the Seasons. Images of the Seasons, also referred to as *Horae*, were prevalent throughout the ancient world, and they could have been adopted into Persian art as well. Images of the *Horae* were easily manipulated because their representations carried slightly different meanings that reflected the changing spirit, with “age-old traditions and new ideas [mingling].”⁴⁸ The attributes the women carry on Sasanian silver vessels is closely linked to those that the Seasons have, and with the growing popularity of depictions of the Seasons in the Late Empire it is plausible that this motif would have made its way east.⁴⁹ Through trade routes, captured towns, and booty captured through war, the images would have filtered up to the Sasanian royalty. Though these female images are akin to the depictions of the Seasons, there is no guarantee that the content was maintained in Persia.

Like Dionysiac imagery, the portrayal of the Seasons could have been transferred into Sasanian art without the meaning behind them. The presence of Greco-Roman imagery can be seen in multiple examples of Sasanian silver. In examining a *Ewer Decorated with Female Figures* [Fig.3], Harper asserts their kinship with traditional Greco-Roman depictions of female figures. Considering both their poses and their attributes, which are

symbols of bounty, [the female figures] may have a function similar to that of Personifications in the Greco-Roman world. It has been suggested that they are related to the seasons and months, and that they are intended to personify popular seasonal festivals celebrated in Sasanian Iran. This would explain the limited repertory of attributes associated with them, and the secular rather than strictly religious appearance of the scenes.⁵⁰

Confronted with yet another instance of borrowed iconography, scholars struggle to decide whether this imagery could have been directly adopted or if it would have been incorporated into a religious context. According to Ann Gunter and Paul Jett, the *Freer Gallery Vase* [Fig.2] may be “modeled after Roman depictions of the Seasons and the Months, although they may also have had a specific meaning within an Iranian cultural setting.”⁵¹ Like with the

48 George M. A. Hanfmann, *The Season Sarcophagus in Dumbarton Oaks* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1951), 210.

49 *Ibid.*.

50 Harper, *The Royal Hunter*, 61.

51 Gunter and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*, 192.

Dionysiac imagery, Sasanian artists adopted other imagery from Greco-Roman examples. The main question, however, lies in whether or not the use of this imagery lends itself to a different interpretation of the figures or whether the Greco-Roman imagery was an appropriate decorative art for elite patrons.

Like the Dionysiac motifs, the Greco-Roman images of the Seasons may also have been utilized by the Sasanian artists as models for the “dancing girls.” The imagery of the Seasons [Fig.9] follows similar conventions, including billowing scarves above heads of the female figures on the Sasanian silver. The relationship between the attributes on the silver ewers and vases and Dionysus does not necessarily imply a connection between the Sasanian and Greco-Roman fertility cults; instead the imagery may have been adopted because of its visual appeal.

With an understanding of the origins of this imagery, we can now begin to examine the internal readings of the imagery. Emerging from the Dionysiac imagery and depictions of the Seasons, the “dancing girls” were subject to at least four identifications: the goddess Anāhīta, a priestess of Anāhīta, a noble woman, or an erotic figure. Each of these classifications has its own supporters and sites its own evidence. The problem is that often what is seen to identify the figure as a goddess to one scholar identifies that same figure as a member of the nobility to a different scholar. We will examine all four of these identifications to understand where the arguments of attribution are grounded.

Internal Interpretations of the Works

I. Anāhīta

One of the oldest attributions of the “dancing girls” is as the goddess Anāhīta, and the *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* [Fig. 1] is often considered the most concrete image of Anāhīta on a silver vessel. But what makes scholars believe that this is the goddess herself rather than yet another “dancing girl?” As Oleg Grabar states, “out of some twenty-five objects known to have used female personages as their main subject of decoration, only one is a plate and its woman is typologically quite different from other examples because she is alone...”⁵² There are no other female figures shown alone, not even on rock reliefs. Additionally, the woman's hair style corresponds to those seen in the reliefs. The style used to depict the women is considered to be the style “reserved for queens, with numerous tresses falling down their shoulders while on top of the head the hair was reunited in a high, compact bunch.”⁵³ Her hairstyle alone is not enough to make such a strong attribution, but this plate

52 Grabar, *Sasanian Silver*, 61.

53 Philippe Gignoux and Rika Gyselen, “Sceaux de femmes à l'époque sassanide,” in *Res Orientalis VII: Au carrefour des religions mélanges offerts à Philippe Gignoux* (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1995), 883-884: “de reines auxquelles était réservée cette coiffure: de nombreuses tresses tombent sur les épaules et sur la tête les cheveux sont réunis sur le haut en une touffe compacte.”

raises a series of questions pertaining to attribution and identity. Many scholars stress that because there is only one figure, she must be a goddess.

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Shepherd believes that not only is *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* [Fig.1] an image of the goddess, but silver ewers and vases with multiple women are different incarnations of Anāhīta. A *Flask depicting Six Female Figures* from the Hermitage Museum [Fig.10] has six female personages “each accompanied by symbols (such as the water bucket, pomegranate, flowers, bowls of fruit, etc.)”⁵⁴ According to Shepherd, these images are all attributes of Anāhīta, “which leaves no doubt that here we are confronted with the goddess...”⁵⁵ Yet even the attributes that the women from the *Flask depicting Six Female Figures* hold differ from those on the *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure*; on no other silver vessels do the same combination of icons appear. Another key piece in the development of Shepherd's argument is the *Cleveland Museum Silver Vase* [Fig.4], which contains four female images, each with different accessories. Shepherd asserts that these female figures are also Anāhīta and sees the various items as the goddess' attributes. Instead of four separate women, the female figures are the goddess...repeated four times, each time with a different pair of symbols which we can perhaps read as referring to her attributes as a goddess of water (bucket and bird), of vegetation (vine and flower), of agriculture (dog as guardian of the home and flocks, and bowl of fruit), and of fertility (child and pomegranate).⁵⁶

By examining the accessories that the female figures carry, Shepherd argues for the existence and persistence of Anāhīta across multiple silver vessels, not just on *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* [Fig.1].

While Shepherd tracks these icons across a few silver vessels, they never again appear in the same combination and though some of the accessories are the same, the figures themselves have undergone some dramatic changes that she does not address. In order to arrive at Shepherd's conclusion, the minutiae of the accessories are given primary importance, and by doing this she sacrifices the overarching concept. As Ettinghausen points out, the first problem with Shepherd's analysis of the *Cleveland Museum Silver Vase* [Fig.4] is the dress. In investiture scenes, such as Khusrau II's at Tāq-i Bustān [Fig.11], Anāhīta wears a long dress, following Sasanian conventions of modesty.⁵⁷ While in the *Cleveland Museum Silver Vase* [Fig.4] the female figures are clothed, in the *Flask depicting Six Female Figures* [Fig.10] and *Freer Gallery Vase* [Fig.2] the women all have skin-tight clothing indicated by the cuffs at wrist, ankle and neck. Whether or not the figures are clothed, the figures are not aligned with the ideals of modesty, nor with the ascribed image of Anāhīta. Ettinghausen states

54 Shepherd, “Sasanian Art,” 83.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*, 84.

57 Daems, “The Iconography of Pre-Islamic Women in Iran,” 64

that “in the sacred hymns of the *Avesta*, Anāhīta is described as clothed in beaver pelts and other garments, wearing a jeweled crown.”⁵⁸ While there are no examples of anyone ever wearing a beaver pelt in Sasanian art, the erotic and revealing garments the women seems contrary to other imagery of Anāhīta on different media.

Additionally, many scholars disagree⁵⁹ with Shepherd's interpretation because there is no precedent for one figure being depicted multiple times. While there was repetition in decorative motifs and pattern-work, “it is not customary in Sasanian art for the same figure to be shown four times in a single ensemble.”⁶⁰ In fact, the only example of repeated figures is on the medallion bowls at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York [Fig.7]. The female busts, shown five times “are almost identical and therefore probably one and the same person...[and] by depicting the same personage in five medallions rather than one, the artist underscored her importance and high rank.”⁶¹ Harper asserts that the repetition is due to the importance of the female personage, but this type of repetition also recalls tapestries and decorative stucco. These media utilized repetition as an artistic technique rather than as a method of lending importance to the image.⁶² While Harper believes that these vignettes are all the same person, she also maintains that the images of the “dancing girls” are separate and individual, not one figure repeated. Only in clearly delineated roundels are figures repeated, not in the more continuous friezes of vases and ewers.

Multiple images have been found of what Phyllis Ackerman has dubbed early icons of Anāhīta. Oddly enough, no other scholars mention these terracotta images as possible representations of the goddess. While the location of these figurines is unknown,⁶³ further comparisons of the depictions of Anāhīta across a wider spectrum of media could further strengthen or severely weaken the attribution of the “dancing girls” as images of the goddess. Ackerman discusses what she had named images of Anāhīta as early cultic objects. These four terracotta figurines [Fig. 12] all have elaborate headdresses and hold some of the objects that have tied the “dancing girls” to the cult of Anāhīta. Found by “commercial diggers in southwest Persia, especially near Susa and Ahvāz, [they were] attributed stylistically grounds to the Sāsānian, and possibly also in part the Parthian period...”⁶⁴ These figures are all different, yet

58 Ettinghausen, “A Persian Treasure,” 36.

59 Carter, “Royal Festal Themes;” Ettinghausen, “A Persian Treasure;” Ettinghausen, *Byzantium to Iran*; Grabar, *Sasanian Silver*; Gunter and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*; Harper “Female Representations;”

60 *Ibid.*, 36.

61 Harper, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period*, 38.

62 Carter, “Royal Festal Themes,” 172.

63 In her paper, Ackerman states that the figurines were part of the Ackerman collection. Upon her death, Ackerman donated her private collection to the Museum of Teheran, which is no longer currently open. What happened to the museum is currently unknown, at least to the author, at the time of writing.

64 Ackerman, “Cult Figurines,” 216.

similar to the different incarnations of the “dancing girls” seen on the silver vessels as well as to the more accepted images of Anāhīta on rock reliefs. These images are unique, because in other representations of Anāhīta does she have any of the iconography that Shepherd has recognized on the silver vessels. The elaborate headdresses that the figures wear are similar to those that the goddess wears on rock reliefs (see Fig. 13 for an example), with her hair plaited schematically down her shoulders. Of the figurines, “all are clothed and some wear necklaces. One holds a lotus, another a short staff, a third a disc, presumably a mirror, and a fourth a child. Probably they all represent Anāhīta...”⁶⁵ The lotus, staff, mirror, and child are all seen on the vases and ewers, though not often on the same vessel. If these figurines are representations of Anāhīta, it would lend a religious connotation to the silver vessels. However, while the “dancing girls” hold similar objects, they are not wearing the same extravagant headdresses, nor are they modestly clothed. If the figurines are indeed Anāhīta, it would support the claim that the “dancing girls” are tied to the goddess, though there still remain some discrepancies in the hair, dress and iconography.

When Anāhīta is depicted in other media, she is not accompanied by any of the iconography that Shepherd has used to identify her on silver vessels. A few rock-reliefs depict female figures that have often been designated Anāhīta and these images do not have anywhere near the complicated imagery and attributes that the “dancing girls” hold. According to Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, “[t]he two most incontestable portraits of the goddess”⁶⁶ are at Naqš-e Rostam, in the investiture of Narseh (293-302 CE) [Figs.13, 14], and Tāq-i Bustān as part of the investiture of Khusrau II (531-579 CE) or Peroz (457-484 CE) [Fig.11]. In these scenes, Anāhīta plays the same role that Ahura Mazda does in other investiture scenes [Figs.15, 16]. She is depicted with the royal hair style and crown, a vine or water around her feet, and images of power, such as the diadem and the ring of investiture.⁶⁷ Beyond these simple images, the only other thing present is a flower. These depictions of Anāhīta are boiled down to the most basic manner of portrayal, with just a crown, water or floral motif, and ring of investiture. The reason for this could be attributed to the media or the ability to reach a broader audience without clutter. However, ultimately, the lack of corresponding iconographic links between the more certain images of Anāhīta in rock reliefs casts a shadow of doubt upon the identity of the “dancing

65 *Ibid.*, 216-217.

66 Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, “Art et religion sous les Sassanides,” in *Atti del Convegno Internazionale sul Tema: La Persia nel Medioevo (Roma 31 Marzo – 5 Aprile 1970)*, 377-388 (Roma: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1971), 378. “Ce sont là plus incontestables portraits de la déesse...”

67 The crown seen in this rock relief is similar to those that are also widely accepted as Anāhīta. As described by Duchesne-Guillemin, Anāhīta is “wearing a crown adorned with two strips of pears under a row of arcs framing palmettes.” Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Symbols and Values in Zoroastrianism: Their Survival and Renewal* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966) 107.

girls.” The silver vessels, if they are Anāhīta, do not exist within the same context as the other images of Anāhīta on different media.

These images of the Anāhīta do not exist in a purely religious context. Duchesne-Guillemin points out that “Sasanian art is not always religious and when it is, it is essentially and nearly exclusively royal” as well.⁶⁸ According to Eric de Waele, the “divinities figured are not the object of a cult. They are subordinate to royal propaganda: the scene proclaims the divine order of Sasanian royalty.”⁶⁹ While these rock reliefs are the most obvious and readable images of Anāhīta, she is not shown in a devotional context – her presence serves the Sasanian state. During this period, there was no real division between church and state, and thus the figure of the goddess serves to cement the power and legitimacy of the royalty. The same thing occurs on coins where the king is placed near the goddess. Her role is to legitimize the king and his claim to the throne. Because depictions of the gods were so closely tied to promotion of the royal house, Ettinghausen challenges the religious attribution of the “dancing girls” because no other gods are depicted on silver vessels, and if they were their identity would be more evident.⁷⁰ When the gods are seen on other media, their images are simple and understandable so that their ties to political propaganda would have been easily conveyed, like it is on the rock reliefs with Anāhīta.⁷¹

After examining the arguments for and against the attribution of Anāhīta, it is clear that based on examples in rock reliefs, the images of the women on the silver vessels do not correspond to other depictions of the goddess Anāhīta. While there are some connections between what has been considered “religious imagery” and the attributes that the women carry on the silver vessels; more importantly than the objects that they carry, the figures themselves do not resemble the rock reliefs of Anāhīta. Without a more obvious tie between the “dancing girls” and Anāhīta, we must look to other interpretations that try to explain what purpose these images served, if any. So after discounting the attribution of the women as Anāhīta, let us consider those arguments that posit that the connections between Anāhīta and the “dancing girls” show that the figures were meant to be priestesses of Anāhīta.

II: Priestesses

Because of the ties between the specific iconography and Anāhīta herself, the images of the “dancing girls” are often identified as priestesses of the goddess: associated with the cult but less directly religious. On the silver

68 Duchesne-Guillemin, “Art et religion,” 386: “l’art sassanide n’est pas toujours religieux; quand il l’est, il est essentiellement et presque exclusivement royal...”

69 Eric de Waele, “L’investiture et le triomphe dans la thématique de la sculpture rupestre sassanide,” in *Archeologia Iranica et Orientalis: Miscellanea in Honorem Louis Vanden Berghe, Vol II*, ed. Louis Berghe, 811-830 (Gent, Belgium: Peeters Press, 1989), 820: “Les divinités figurées ne font pas l’objet d’un culte. Elles sont subordonnées à la propagande du pouvoir royal: la scène proclame l’ordre divine de la royauté sassanide.”

70 Ettinghausen, *Byzantium to Iran*.

71 Ettinghausen, “A Persian Treasure.”

vases and ewers with images of the “dancing girls,” there are a variety of items that reoccur on other vessels. Harper argues that “the most significant element of the design” of the silver vessels “is the set of objects or attributes which the figures hold. These include birds, animals, plants, human figures and vessels.”⁷² The women also hold fruit, flowers, and sometimes containers, and imagery that linked the figures to Anāhīta. Even if Shepherd’s attribution of the *Cleveland Museum Silver Vase* [Fig.4] as four incarnations of Anāhīta is suspect, Anāhīta does have at least four facets: water, vegetation, agriculture and fertility. Because Anāhīta was associated with so many aspects of society – water, fertility, prosperity – there is nearly no end to the different icons that could be convincingly associated with her cult.⁷³ These attributes alone have spurred the debate about the “dancing girls,” and it is Anāhīta’s loose ties to all of these images that allow it to continue. Rather than existing within a highly schematic iconography, the loose interweaving of meanings and images lends power and versatility which allows these images to apply to a variety of interpretations.

By asserting that these “dancing girls” are priestesses of Anāhīta, scholars can account for their setting and also the architectural framework that often surrounds them.⁷⁴ Duchesne-Guillemin’s interpretation of the “dancing girls” is most clearly illustrated in *Ewer Decorated with Female Figures* [Fig.3] and a now lost silver jug [Fig.17]. The jug more clearly depicts four women within a loose architectural framework, each with different accessories. Duchesne-Guillemin argues that “the motif of women under arcades reflects the type of architecture in the temples of Anāhīta.”⁷⁵ There are not, however, any extant temples of Anāhīta, so whether or not her temples contained these types of columns remains uncertain.⁷⁶ There seems to be some precedent for this architectural framework in the Middle East before the Sasanian Empire. Though not specifically found in relation to Anāhīta, “the architectural background had become in the first millennium AD part of the artistic *koine* of both the east and west.”⁷⁷ The architecture seen in Greco-Roman temples became standard and ubiquitous throughout the ancient world, and this style may have been applied to Zoroastrian religious buildings as well. While the architectural framework is still questionable, its reoccurrence suggests that it is more than purely decorative, and its prevalence on the vessels that contain “dancing girls” only strengthens its religious ties.

72 Harper, “Female Representation,” 505.

73 Rather than tying all of these attributes to specific incarnations of the goddess, Carter examines them from the perspective of festivals and celebrations. Each attribute that the women carry can indicate a different celebration or ceremony practiced in Sasanian culture. While a little beyond the scope of this study, Carter makes excellent, if brief, ties between Sasanian festivals and the additional icons that are depicted on the *Cleveland Museum Silver Vase* [Fig.4]. Carter, “Royal Festal Themes,” 201.

74 Guner and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*.

75 Duchesne-Guillemin, “Art et religion,” 379 : “le motif des femmes sous des arcades reflétait le type architectural de temples d’Anāhīta.”

76 *Ibid.*; This type of architecture is often found in Greco-Roman temples dedicated to divinities associated with water.

77 Harper, “Female Representation,” 505.

Like the elusive “fire temples,” the temples of Anāhīta have been discussed in Roman sources, yet archaeologists have yet to find the ruins of these structures.⁷⁸ Camilla Trever notes that a temple has been discovered near Persepolis with Greek inscriptions dedicating it to Artemis. According to Trever, Anāhīta is the Persian equivalent to Artemis, or at least how she was understood by Greek-speaking residents in Iran.⁷⁹ Trever points to Shapur II as a patron of Anāhīta, leaving heads of conquered peoples at her temple.⁸⁰ These temples, if they were comprised of colonnades, would be similar to Greco-Roman temples of Venus. Whether or not this favors the attribution as temples of Anāhīta or is another example of the adoption of western art and architecture into Sasanian Iran is unclear. Either way, popularly accepted temple ruins point to a central plan with colonnades, which is similar to those seen in Sasanian silver vessels.⁸¹

On other rock reliefs, female figures are identified as priestesses of Anāhīta rather than the goddess herself. A relief at Barm-e Delak [Figs.18 and 19] depicts a male and female figure, and is often named “Bahrām II addressing a Woman.” The female figure has been identified as Anāhīta in the past because of the presence of both water and vegetation, the gesture of Bahrām II, and because there probably “used to be a sanctuary of Anāhīta at Tang-e Qandil,”⁸² which was located nearby. However, De Waele disagrees with this attribution because the female figure “raises her left hand in a sign of respect for the man. Also, Anāhīta is not represented on any bas-relief in a scene of this genre and her two principal attributes, a composite crown and a ring of investiture, do not appear here.”⁸³ Due to the discrepancies between this bas-relief and the few investiture scenes in which Anāhīta is present, De Waele instead classifies the woman as a priestess of Anāhīta.⁸⁴ If the female figure is a priestess, it would account for the various symbols indicative of Anāhīta and also explain the subordination of the woman to Bahrām II. Often the various attributes that the “dancing girls” carry can be tied to priestesses of Anāhīta with more certainty than to the goddess. As evident in the bas-reliefs, connections can often be

78 Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 27; Pliny, *Natural History* V, 135. From Camille Trever, “A propos des temples de la déesse Anahita en Iran sassanide,” *Iranica Antiqua* 7 (1967): 120-132.

79 Camille Trever, “A propos des temples de la déesse Anahita en Iran sassanide,” *Iranica Antiqua* 7 (1967): 120-132, 123.

80 *Ibid.*, 126.

81 Gunter and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*; Harper *Royal Hunter*

82 Eric de Waele, “Sur le bas-relief sassanide de Tang-e Qandil et la bas-relief au couple de Barm-e Dilak,” in *Revue des archéologues et historiens d'art de Louvain* 11 (1978): 9-32, 16. “Tang-e Qandil a vraisemblablement aussi été un sanctuaire d'Anāhīta.”

83 De Waele, “le bas-relief sassanide,” 20: “elles lèvent la main gauche en signe de respect vis-à-vis du personnage masculin. En outre, Anāhīta n'est représentée sur aucun bas-relief dans une scène de ce genre et ses deux principaux attributs, la couronne composite et l'anneau d'investiture, n'apparaissent pas ici.”

84 De Waele bases his attribution on the belief that there were priestesses of Anāhīta. He comes to these conclusions by comparing the figures on the rock reliefs to silver vessels, most notably, the *Cleveland Museum Silver Vase* [Fig.4].

made between female figures and at least some of the attributes of Anāhīta, though it is safer to acquire the more oblique reference to the goddess through the attribution of priestess.

While all of these icons have been granted specific symbolic meanings, their presence and importance is largely guesswork and circumstantial. Harper states that the repetition of objects

suggests that the artists were following a well-known pattern, while an investigation of the individual forms indicates that there is little about them which may be called specifically Iranian or Sasanian. In fact, some of these objects only occur in Sasanian art on vessels illustrating this particular subject.⁸⁵

Some of these items could be related to Anāhīta's cult, while others have been related to Dionysiac imagery. Other items, as Harper mentions, are not seen in any other art forms and are sometimes only seen on one vessel. Harper explains these away by claiming that “the Near Eastern artisan knew of and to a large extent copied a set of designs, quite possibly those of the Seasons and the Months, derived from the West. Additions or variations occur but are minor elements in the overall scheme.”⁸⁶ However, if these items are not on any other vessels or extant depictions, how are they attributed to Anāhīta? Scholars can spot imagery from other traditions on the silver vessels, but when these entire component parts are added up, is it likely that they are all related to or adopted into the growing cult of Anāhīta?

While many of the attributes that the female figures carry relate to Anāhīta, they are still not enough to name the “dancing girls” priestesses with any certainty. For one thing, there are no other instances of depictions of priestesses or representatives of any of the Zoroastrian gods on Sasanian silver and there are no other images that show religious figures. While the attributes that the women hold have ties to a variety of facets of Anāhīta, how does one jump from a “dancing girl” with a child and fruit to a personification of a goddess? This iconological approach to the silver vessels reads too much into each icon. There is surely intent behind every artistic decision, but as of now, the specific symbolic meaning behind the different attributes remains a mystery. The identification of the “dancing girls” as priestesses not only diverges from other conventions in Sasanian art in regard to religious personnel, but it also does not follow the already established method of depicting authority figures in Sasanian art.

III: Nobility or Royalty

If the figures are not religiously inclined, the next possible identification places us in the realm of the aristocracy. Because depictions of women are so rare, many scholars believe that they must hold some importance

85 Harper, “Female Representation,” 505.

86 *Ibid.*, 514.

or power, though royal attributes have largely been confined to hair style and attributes. Looking at the items the women carry, Marshak states that “the figures of women...bore some symbolic meaning but were not figures of goddesses since they have no royal attributes.”⁸⁷ While scholars have pointed to the hairstyles as indicative of royal women, Ettinghausen states that the hairdos are not enough to connote divinity or royalty alone.⁸⁸

The women with their various attributes are not confined to just the “dancing girl” scenes. A silver plate from the Cincinnati Art Museum [Fig.20] depicts a banquet scene in which the women possess similar items. There is no immediate relationship between Anāhīta and these “four half-nude women presenting the king with flowers and fruits.”⁸⁹ These figures could have multiple meanings, for example power and purity, that could be important to the cult and the king. However, there may be a more oblique connection to Anāhīta, who was “revered as the patron deity of the Sasanian dynasty.”⁹⁰ Images of women in banquet scenes are often associated with similar attributes as the “dancing girls,” and while these images may either hold importance for both religious and royal ceremonies. The presence of identical iconography and similar imagery could also serve to tie the royal house to the cult of the goddess.

The “dancing girls” are not demonstrably nobles or queens, though some of the manners used to portray the female figures on silver vessels are similar to royal depictions. Images of queens and Anāhīta on coins show two modes of representation, which indicates a discrepancy between the royal and religious women. There are some images of queens on coins and rock reliefs, notably those of Bahrām II. Additionally, there were a few queens in Sasanian Iran who ruled independently, however briefly.⁹¹ The first queen to rule Persia alone was Bōrān (630-631 CE), during when she issued a unique gold dinar [Fig.21] on which she is depicted wearing her own individual crown, like any king.⁹² Bōrān is depicted in the same manner as any king. However, many of the other images of women indicate their submission to a higher authority.

87 B. I. Marshak, “The Decoration of Some Late Sasanian Silver Vessels and its Subject-Matter,” in *The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Persia: New Light on the Parthian and Sasanian Empires*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, Robert Hillenbrand and J. M. Rogers, 84-92 (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 86.

88 Ettinghausen, “A Persian Treasure.”

89 Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin, “Les instruments de musique dans l'art sassanide,” *Iranica Antiqua* Supplément VI (1993), 55.

90 Rose, “Three Queens,” 37.

91 For more information about Sasanian queens see: *The History of al-Tabarī Vol. V: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, trans. by C. E. Bosworth, in *Bibliotheca Persica Series*, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 403-405, 407-407. See also below citation.

92 Antonio Pananio, “Women and Kingship: Some Remarks about the Enthronisation of Queen Bōrān and her sister Āzarmīdūxt,” in *Erān und Anērān : Studien zu den Beziehungen zwischen dem Sasanidenreich und der Mittelmeerwelt (Beiträge des Internationalen Colloquiums in Eutin, 8.-9. Juni 2000)*, ed. Josef Wisenhöfer and Philip Huyse, 221-240 (Munich: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006).

While Anāhīta and the queens were often shown with diadems and with similar “royal” hairstyles, their gestures of subordination to the king are not present in images of the “dancing girls.” When a woman's arm is covered or inside her sleeve it is a sign of subordination, a salutation gesture that indicates that the other figure is of higher rank.⁹³ This gesture can be seen on the bas-relief at Barm-e Delak [Figs. 19 and 20] and was one of the main reasons that De Waele distinguished the female figure as a priestess rather than Anāhīta.⁹⁴ While there are no figures of differing social status on the silver vessels, the iconography of the “dancing girls” is not present on any of the coins or images of queens in art. While their dress and hairstyles may be similar, the “dancing girls” are not images of the nobility or privileged women of Sasanian society.

While the “dancing girls” do not necessarily have any religious ties, they also do not follow the conventions necessary to depict royal or noble women. There are a few extant images of queens and nobility in Sasanian art that follow strict conventions. The differences between the different silver vases and ewers and the discrepancies between all of these images and rock reliefs indicate that the silver vessels are not images of high-ranking women in Sasanian society. With the exception of their presence on rock reliefs, women are rarely shown on other media. All of the women that are depicted exist within a royal context. Much like the images of Anāhīta in investiture scenes, the portrayal of royal women serve the Sasanian state and royal house. Due to the representations in other media, the “dancing girls” cannot be considered noble or high-ranking women.

IV: Erotic, non-religious images

Another interpretation of the vases and ewers lies quite opposite of the Anāhīta debate and considers the “dancing girls” within a non-religious context. Because of the contemporary erotic reading of the vessels, it seems an inappropriate method of depicting a goddess of water and prosperity who had ties to Sasanian royalty. Rather, the imagery conforms to the ideals of beauty found within Sasanian literature.⁹⁵ Instead of stressing the characteristics of these women by intellectual or moral standards, the figures exist as mere images; they do not reveal something about the quality of the woman.⁹⁶ Nor do they tell a narrative or parable; the continuous relief that wraps around the vessels gives no indication of myth or history. Instead, the body shape of all the women is rather formulaic: large breasts, small waist, larger thighs, and long hair. In many cases, their stance and “swaying movements” have, in

93 A. Shapur Shahbazi, “Studies in Sasanian Prosopography: III, Barm-i Dilak Symbolism of Offering Flowers,” in *The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Persia: New Light on the Parthian and Sasanian Empires*, ed. Vbesta Sarkhosh Curis, Robert Hilldenbrand and J M Rogers (London: I B Tauris Publishers, 1998), 58-66.

94 De Waele, “Le bas-relief Sassanide.”

95 The little remaining Sasanian literature is mostly in the form of poetry. These poems refer to the erotic aspects such as hips and breasts. Fowden, *Qusayr 'Amra*.

96 Gignoux, “Sceaux de Femmes.”

Ghirshman's telling words, "frankly sensuous appeal..."⁹⁷ When Dionysiac themes were incorporated in Sasanian art, the female reveler and the notion of women as aesthetic objects could have been imported, and may be incarnated in the images of the "dancing girls." These portrayals of women are not venerable, instead they are closer to concubines or women from the harem whose job it was to entertain and please men.

Without a clear meaning, the "dancing girls" could also be seen as objects of pleasure not only to the Sasanians, but also to those cultures that appropriated the objects. They existed within this context in the Islamic world that subsumed the former Sasanian items of luxury. Subjects of Arabic poetry, the vessels were used for drinking. In the verse of the poet Abbs an-Nashi:

In the wine cup are images: you can glimpse smoothly
 swaying forms of lovely women
 And when the wine is shaken, and grows beaded with single
 and double pearls
 These fair ladies seem to deck themselves in golden raiment
 and to be wearing strings of pearls
 upon their breasts.⁹⁸

Whatever their meaning and importance to the royal house had been, under the Islamic princes, the silver vessels and "dancing girls" became figures of pleasure. The form became the meaning as the vases and ewers were appreciated for their visual appeal alone. It is in this tradition that they come down through the ages, as images used and reused for the visual pleasure of the owner.

More recent scholars tend to see less in the works, citing the influences and conventions of the imagery rather than ascribing meaning to every icon.⁹⁹ Beginning in the late 1930s, Persian art has slowly emerged from the deserts of Iran. As modern understanding of art changed, interpretations of the silver vessels changed as well. In recent decades, art historians have adopted a more inclusive and tolerant eye towards art, and scholars have also learned that less is more. Post-modern thought and the intangibility of truth limits the claims scholars can and are willing to make. When Ackerman could see the entire Persian universe reflected in their art, Harper now traces the foreign influences to draw conclusions about Middle Eastern culture. So where Shepherd used to see Anāhīta, Ettinghausen a priestess, Grabar a image devoid of religious meaning, Harper outlines the formal roots of the imagery: Dionysiac, the Roman Seasons, and the Parthian and Achaemenid heritage. The "dancing girls" have transformed from a goddess to an image.

97 Ghirshman, *Iran : Parthians and Sassanians*, 214.

98 *Ibid.*.

99 Harper, *Royal Hunter*; Gunter and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*; Ettinghausen, *From Byzantium to Iran*, 3-10.

Despite the clearly delineated origins of the “dancing girl” motif, all of the internal interpretations seem to be lacking in some way. Arguments that support the identification of the women as Anāhīta are also used to identify the figures as royalty. There is not one clear understanding of these figures and this ambiguity allows them to be read as any of the above mentioned identities. Like other ancient imagery, the “dancing girls” take on “different meanings according to the period, the religion...and the onlooker.”¹⁰⁰ While the images do not have one clear meaning, they have many possible meanings. Not only does this expand the possible connotations of the “dancing girls,” but it also increases their uses.

III – Use of Sasanian Art in Iran

Lacking extensive religious imagery, most of the extant images of Sasanian art served the royalty. All of the depictions, therefore, should be considered as a part of the royal visual vocabulary of the images. These images were used by the royalty to convey a cultural and political message to the general populace, to teach them about their rulers and the structure of the empire. Richard Frye asserts that “Sasanian society reflected [beliefs] in secular symbols, for example on silver plates with dancing girls rather than the oft designated Anahita.”¹⁰¹ According to Frye, Sasanian culture was rather secular in its imagery. Aside from investiture scenes on rock reliefs, religious imagery was confined to anthropomorphic, subjective imagery. Decorative themes and imperial propaganda are the most coherent and prevalent motifs, even imagery that appears to carry a religious message has been utilized by the Sasanian kings for self-promotion.

Political use of silver vessels continued after the fall of the Sasanian Empire to Arab conquerors. Even if the original intention of these vessels was not erotic or secular, Grabar points out that “most of these objects were secular ones used in princely feasts in Islamic times and, in a few instances, in pre-Islamic times as well...”¹⁰² Despite what earlier connotations these silver vessels once had, they were preserved through the ages because of their use in celebrations by Islamic princes. Grabar also asserts that because of the secular connotations they acquired, they were saved from destruction. The Islamic princes who appropriated the silver vessels continued to utilize the vases and ewers as decorative objects, and while using them they applied another layer of meaning beyond what the Sasanians perhaps knew these vessels to be.

IV – Importance of these works and attributions

100 C. Dauphin, “Symbolic or Decorative? The Inhabited Scroll as a Means of Studying some Early Byzantine Mentalities,” *Byzantium* 48 (1978) : 10-34, 34.

101 Richard Frye, “Art and Religion in Central Asian History,” in *Convegno Internazionale sul Tema: La Persia e L’Asia Centrale de Alessandro al X Secolo (Roma 9-12 Novembre 1994)*, in *Atti Dei Convegni Lincei Series, 127*, 201-204 (Roma: Accademia Nazionale Dei Lincei, 1996), 202.

102 Grabar, *Sasanian Silver*, 66.

There is a tendency to apply a meaning to art and a larger purpose to all imagery. With the advent of Modernism, the idea of “art for art’s sake” was celebrated. Because of the perceived progress of the art world it was assumed that no other cultures had developed similar goals. Harper states that “all of the subjects represented on the silver vessels are significant...they are political or social statements rather than [a] purely decorative motif.”¹⁰³ The problem with this statement is that the Sasanians were in many ways known for their decorative motifs. A number of extant silver vessels are only decorative, with interlacing patterns and zoomorphic imagery. Art can exist as an aesthetic entity; however, there is a tendency to try to fit all of the works into the larger canon of art, to make everything tie into the culture and society that created the objects in specific ways.

Art certainly can have a higher purpose, but that does not mean that all art must have a higher purpose. Artifacts become art when they are designated as such, and the beliefs of ancient cultures become subordinate to the modern notion of art, which is inclusive. Edmund Feldman, a contemporary art critic, believes that the mere persistence of art through the ages proves that it has a higher purpose. As Feldman explains, the fact that “visual arts have existed, in one form or another, throughout human history...” means that art is “practiced and prized because it satisfies vital personal and social needs...”¹⁰⁴ Feldman does acknowledge that not all works have a greater meaning to the society in which they were created, or a social purpose. Art has a social function only when “(1) it seeks or tends to influence the collective behavior of people; (2) it is created to be seen or used primarily in public situations; and (3) it expresses or describes social or collective aspects of existence as opposed to individual and personal kinds of experience.”¹⁰⁵ While art may be used for these social purposes, it is also possible that art does not fall into one of these categories. Just as scholarship had to divorce itself from judging all art from a western aesthetic hierarchy, post-modernism has challenged the ties between content and meaning in art.

When examining these silver vessels, scholars expect to find something – a deeper meaning to the society, a cultural road map to Sasanian Iran. If scholars expect to find something, they usually can. E. H. Gombrich, dated but still applicable, explains this need as a necessity of our own culture. Scholars expect to find meaning in the works so they justify the figures through speculation because the ambiguities inherent in the works partially support a variety of interpretations. According to Gombrich, “all culture and all communication depend on the interplay between expectation and observation,

103 Prudence O. Harper, “Sasanian Silver: Internal Developments and Foreign Influences” in *Argenterie romaine et byzantine: Actes de la Table Ronde (Paris 11-13 Octobre 1983)*, ed. François Baratte, 153-162 (Paris: De Boccard, 1988), 153.

104 Edmund Burke Feldman, *Art as Image and Idea* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967), 2.

105 *Ibid.*, 36.

the waves of fulfillment, disappointment, right guesses and wrong moves that make up our daily life.”¹⁰⁶ Because scholars expect to find references to gods in Sasanian art, they have. These works have then become part of Sasanian society as a mode of modern understanding. Interpretations of the “dancing girls” theme reveals as much about our own expectations within a broader art historical context as it has uncovered about Sasanian culture.

Confronting a similar problem as the “dancing girls,” C. Dauphin examines the “inhabited scroll” motif to determine whether it holds a symbolic or decorative meaning. According to Dauphin, the imagery exists within a “variety of contexts and media [and] thus precludes any attempt that one might make to attribute to the inhabited scroll a significance universally applicable to all media and in all contexts.”¹⁰⁷ The imagery existed within a Jewish and Christian context, leading Dauphin to conclude that readings depend on the intent of the patron, the artist, and the viewer. In the end, however, Dauphin decides that

an object need not necessarily be wholly symbolic or wholly decorative, nor is there of necessity a contradiction between symbolism and decoration. A symbol is a symbol only when it is “read” as a symbol...What is important is not that *we* should “read” the pavement, but what we should attempt to understand how the inhabited scroll motif was grasped by...the people of that age.¹⁰⁸

The meaning of the inhabited vines cannot be clearly confined to any one tradition or interpretation. Different uses elicit divergent responses, all of them valid. This view of a schematic though varied motif is similar to the “dancing girls” on Sasanian silver. With regard to both the “inhabited vine” motif and the “dancing girls,” one viewpoint does not necessarily discount all of the others. The “dancing girls” could have held protean meanings, holding importance, for many different meanings to many different people. The question of what these images meant to even one group of imaginary viewers is thorny at best and ultimately improvable, much less all the possible interpretations.

Borrowing from ideas of André Malraux, we could conclude that if a meaning had existed to the “dancing girls,” it is now lost to modern scholarship.¹⁰⁹ Malraux claims that art did have a grander purpose, a *raison d’être*; however, “the art of the past is closed to us altogether...it survives only as...’myth,’ transformed and transfigured as it is seen in the ever-changing

106 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion : A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, in *The A W Mellon Lectures in Fine Arts Series* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1960), 60.

107 Dauphin, “Symbolic or Decorative?,” 20.

108 *Ibid.*.

109 Malraux was a French novelist, art historian and statesman who wrote a plethora of books including: *Les Voix du silence* (1951) and *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* (1952-1954), both art historical texts. “Malraux, André,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2008, *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 31 March 2008 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-4525>>

contexts of the historical kaleidoscope.”¹¹⁰ Like the Islamic princes who used Sasanian silver, modern scholarship can only see these works through its own ideological mindset. Our own perception governs what symbolic qualities we impose upon the silverwares. Malraux uses ancient Greek statues as an example. Though these statues were once painted, “now bereft of colour, [they] have conditioned the sensibility of Europe.”¹¹¹ Western art has been modeled after a white marble aesthetic that never really existed. While art has meaning, Malraux asserts that it is lost, forever beyond modern understanding, much like the color on Greco-Roman sculptures.

In no instance is this ambiguity more evident than within the religious associations and connotations imposed upon the silver. With imagery that ties these vessels to Greco-Roman Seasons and Dionysiac themes, before linking the vases and ewers to Anāhīta, a religious context needs to be established. While some of the iconography points to a religious connotation, “before using the vases as evidence of religious syncretism, it is necessary to prove that they have a religious significance.”¹¹² By denying any religious importance to the vessels, this interpretation reflects the lack of religious iconography in other art forms and artifacts. There are no extant cult statues within the Zoroastrian tradition and “the whole idea of sculptural representation of deities is alien to the [Persians]...”¹¹³ Despite the lack of iconographical evidence, Jenny Rose states that “although [Anāhīta's] image may have disappeared from the temples, she continued to be portrayed in Sasanian art.”¹¹⁴ Anāhīta's presence in rock reliefs and coins demonstrates that the Sasanians were not shy about depicting their gods, and when such depiction was necessary, artists already had a clear iconographic template to follow. The conventions used to portray Anāhīta imply a common model, precedent, or closely followed long-standing conventions. Perhaps, if we are considering all possible interpretations of the “dancing girls” motif, another viewpoint could assert that the imagery of the “dancing girls” existed before Anāhīta. In a sort of “chicken and the egg” reversal, maybe the imagery came to Persia and then later became adopted to portray the goddess. Regardless, these practiced, schematic images are only partially present on silver vessels, so while there is some kinship, the association raises more questions than it can answer.

Art does not need to have a clear and pointed meaning, and if Sasanian silver had a meaning within its own cultural context, it cannot be ascertained in the modern day. What has been gained by the various attributions that the

110 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 62.

111 André Malraux, *The Psychology of Art: The Twilight of the Absolute*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, in *The Bollingen Series XXIV* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950), 14.

112 Duchesne-Guillemin, “Art et religion,” 384: “Mais avant d'utiliser ces vases comme témolange d'un syncretisme religieux, il faudrait prouver qu'ils avaient une signification religieuse.”

113 *Ancient Iranian Religion*, 118.

114 Rose, “Three Queens, Two Wives and a Goddess,” 39.

“dancing girl” motif as it has undergone constant change and debate? If the women depicted are Anāhīta does that make the silver vessels any more valuable, any more important than they were formerly? Much more valuable from a monetary perspective, yet from a visual perspective, the work does not change, no matter who produced it and no matter what it portrays. If Anāhīta is the figure on *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure* [Fig.1], does it make the Sasanians more pious? The necessity to compartmentalize art and images is part of the modern obsession with order. If the attribution of the silver vessels was clear and concrete, would it change how they looked or how modern society viewed them?

What we do see when we look at the “dancing girls” is ambiguities, and these ambiguities are their strength. Garth Fowden comes to a similar conclusion when examining images of women present in mosaics, paintings and stucco [Figs.22-24] at Qusayr ‘Amra. Fowden asserts that these images have survived because of their ambiguities and their ability, due to these uncertainties, to apply to a wider range of meanings. Many of the figures are depicted nude, and despite the fact that nudity was taboo (or perhaps because of it), the figures “take no thought in showing off their bodies. Yet the paintings were put there to be looked at.”¹¹⁵ Just like the “dancing girls” depicted on silver vessels, there is no clear meaning to these images, no purpose that scholars can immediately tease out. Defying any specific reading, “it is courtly luxury that is being evoked, and Plenty, the abundance that characterizes a happy reign.”¹¹⁶ These open-ended readings of abundance are more applicable to the “dancing girl” motif. On the silver vessels, the women can stand for “[a]bundance, relaxation, and eroticism; music making, singing and dancing; the showing off of fine clothing and jewelry by women...”¹¹⁷ All of these meanings are different, and yet can be depicted with broad, overarching image. Additionally, these vague meanings would have meant more to the contemporary viewer; an image of abundance could call up a whole host of additional readings. The “dancing girls” fulfill this need – having enough specific imagery to evoke precise ideals, but in different contexts they are able to convey divergent meanings.

The same idea governed the images of Abundance on the *Ara Pacis Augustae* [Fig.25] in the times of Augustus. In the Roman Empire, images filled a dual role in a similar way as Persian depictions. In both cases, the images were intelligible through a few different contexts, and depending on how the image was read, it could fulfill a number or only one of these interpretations.¹¹⁸ Images were distinct, yet remained vague, the specific figures were not important to the interpretation – the themes that they connoted were. The female figure, sometimes called Pax, other times Venus or Italia, is “filled with

115 Fowden, *Qusayr 'Amra*, 64.

116 *Ibid.*, 71.

117 *Ibid.*, 78.

118 Peter L. Brown, “Art and Society in Late Antiquity,” in *Age of Spirituality: A Symposium*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980).

symbolism and capable of conjuring up so many associations” because “many of the individual elements were already quite familiar to the contemporary Roman.”¹¹⁹ The various attributes associated with the figure can be read individually to convey an overall sense of abundance or fertility without the woman needing a distinct identity. The visual system was not overly rigid; it was instead “subject to continual expansion and changes in accentuation...Most of the change, however, was in the form of greater simplification, clarification, and above all sheer proliferation.”¹²⁰ Simple, readable images depicted a sense of things, and these vague images were understood from component parts by the modern Roman viewer. Coming from a naturalistic background, Roman art shared the same characteristic of specific though vague imagery that could function within a wide variety of settings.

Where does that leave us, aside from adrift? The “dancing girls” are specific and yet they remain vague. While they carry attributes that could lend themselves to specific meanings, fruit and children could also generally be read as abundance and life. Because the images remain ambiguous, they have survived, reused throughout the years. Perhaps the “dancing girls” did have specific meanings, but as Malraux helps us understand, the Sasanian interpretation of their own works is lost to us. What we have are versatile images that could be an image of Anāhīta, a priestess, a noble woman, or a concubine. However, no matter where the imagery comes from – Dionysiac or the Roman Seasons – the imagery, even if not the women themselves, are Sasanian.

V – Further Research

I believe that the conclusions this paper, namely that the dancing girls of Sasanian art are by definition ambiguous and that to establish precise meaning to the individual pieces is less important than establishing a broad range of possible associations, leaves ample room for further research.. The question does remain: can there be more specific identifications? Despite the many problems that hamper research within the field of Sasanian art, there are new directions and fields that can shed some light on the many ambiguities of the “dancing girls.” But the problems are indeed daunting. The lack of provenance for most of these objects limits their discussion and subsequent placement within the larger Sasanian culture. Additionally, the lack of primary source material from Sasanian Iran itself gives scholars little cultural context in which to examine the silverware. Not only are there few primary documents, but much of the scholarly debate is dated or colored by the biases of orientalist assumptions. Phyllis Ackerman and her husband Arthur Pope did much to

119 Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. by Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 175.

120 *Ibid.*, 337.

establish Persian art and archaeology as a discipline, but their interpretations of the materials seem static, even at times fantastic.¹²¹

One of the final problems with research is that the works themselves are not that accessible. The twenty-five silver vessels are scattered throughout the world. Some are in private collections, others in museums. In a few sources, works are cited as being housed in museums that no longer exist, and without any forwarding address, their current locations are unknown. Some of the silver vessels in museums are not even on display to the public, so viewing Sasanian silverware can often be quite a chore to set-up. With locations unknown, both their current location and where they were found, research on Sasanian silver lacks provenance in every time period.

While there are a number of problems that hinder further research, there are a variety of different facets that could still be pursued that could further our knowledge of Sasanian art. Here I can only sketch out a few possible avenues for further research. Perhaps a closer examination of the objects themselves would assist in a more specific understanding or would help to distinguish all the specific attributes that the women carry. It would also be helpful to continue the compositional and metallurgic examinations that Gunter and Jett began. This type of analysis also examines how the metal was made; whether the vessels use chasing, are made from one piece or a few pieces joined together, and other technical considerations. This manner of analyzing the objects may lead to more specific dating or may help to discover something of the provenance of the silverware.

Finally, by embedding the art within a Sasanian societal context, perhaps different meanings will arise. It has only recently become increasingly possible to understand the politics and cultures of Sasanian Iran as new studies emerge, particularly in the area of Christian and Jewish minority populations.¹²² In addition, the only surviving account of Sasanian political history is embedded in the ninth-century Arabic history by Tabari, which has also only recently appeared in English.¹²³ By examining the silver vessels, while keeping in mind the few middle Persian inscriptions and epics that do survive from the Sasanian period, along with the Christian and Jewish evidence, the images can be placed more firmly in a Sasanian setting. There is some evidence and written reports of festivals and other rites that could be associated with the silverware.¹²⁴ Comparison of Sasanian vessel types to Greco-Roman ones might also yield

121 Examples can be scattered throughout Ackerman's writings. She has multiple articles within the twelve volume series edited by her and her husband, Arthur Upham Pope: *A Survey of Persian Art*, ed. Arthur Upham Pope (London: Oxford University Press, 1964-1965) and was originally published in 1932, revised in 1964-1965.

122 See, for example, Richard Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia Between Persia and Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Joel Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

123 *The History of al-Tabarī*, trans. by C. E. Bosworth.

124 See, for example Carter, "Royal Festal Themes".and Guitty Azarpay, "The Allegory of Den in Persian Art," *Artibus Asiae* 38, 1 (1976): 37-48 for information about celebratory rituals.

useful conclusions, because more is known about how particular types of pottery were used in ritual settings in the Mediterranean world. Perhaps the Sasanian vessels with “dancing girls” are related to dining rituals like the symposium, or to wedding rituals, or in ablutions?¹²⁵

These different ways of examining the Sasanian silver vessels will further knowledge and the understanding of the meaning, importance, and uses of these works. Despite the problems faced in the past, which still hampers modern understanding, there are new outlets and areas that can be explored and researched. After these areas are analyzed, the purpose and application of the Sasanian silver vessels will be fully understood.

125 I thank Dr. Nancy Sultan for suggesting this comparative approach, particularly in regard to weddings. Few sources can be found within the Persian context, but there is a great deal of scholarly text dealing with Greco-Roman marriage and wedding festivals. For more information on rituals and imagery see: Douglas L. Cairns, "Veiling, *aidos* and a red-figure amphora by Phintias," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 116 (1996): 152-157; Judith Lynn Sebesta, "Symbolism in the Costume of the Roman Woman," in *The World of Roman Costume*, ed. Judith Lynn Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1994); Gordon Williams, "Some Aspects of Roman Marriage Ceremonies and Ideals," *Journal of Roman Studies* 48 (1958): 16-29.



Fig. 1 - *Silver Dish with Single Female Figure*. See text for statistics.
"Dish: The Goddess Anahita." The Cleveland Museum of Art. 2006.
[http://www.clevelandart.org/explore/work.asp?searchText=sasania
&recNo=14&tab=2&display=](http://www.clevelandart.org/explore/work.asp?searchText=sasania&recNo=14&tab=2&display=) (accessed 20 January 2008).

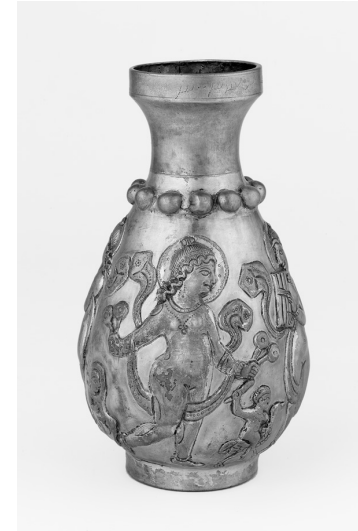


Fig. 2 – Freer Gallery Vase from the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington D.C..
See text for statistics.
"Vase," Smithsonian: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery
Collections, 2008,
[http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectId=111
80](http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectId=11180) (accessed 20 January 2008).



Fig. 3 – Ewer Decorated with Female Figures. See text for statistics.
“Ewer Decorated with Female Figures.” Smithsonian: Freer Gallery of Art
and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Collections. 2008.
<http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectId=22666> (accessed 20 January 2008).



Fig. 4 – Cleveland Museum Silver Vase. See text for statistics.
“Vase with Four Dancing Figures.” Cleveland Museum of Art. 2006.
<http://www.clevelandart.org/explore/work.asp?searchText=sasania&recNo=7&tab=2&display=> (accessed 20 January 2008).



Fig. 5 – Plate with Dionysiac motifs
5th-7th century, Sasanian period
Silver and gilt, Iran,
Purchased

Accession number: F1964.10
“Plate.” Smithsonian: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery
Collections. 2008.
<http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/singleObject.cfm?ObjectId=11148> (accessed 20 January 2008).



Fig. 6 – Detail of Fig. 5, far right figures.
Gunter, Ann C. and Paul Jett. *Ancient Iranian Metalwork in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1992, 124.



Fig. 7 – *Silver bowl. Five medallions enclosing the busts of females.*
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Purchased with the Harris Brisbane Dick Fund
Accession number: 1970.3
Harper, Prudence Oliver. *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period, Vol I: Royal Imagery.* New York: Princeton University Press, 1981, 206.



Fig. 8 – *Silver-gilt ewer with female figures.*
Iran, sixth or seventh century
Height: 34.2 cm. Maximum diameter: 13.3 cm. Weight: 1341.2 g.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Mr. and Mrs. C. Douglas Dillion Gift and Rogers Fund Harper, Prudence
Oliver. *The Royal Hunter: Art of the Sasanian Empire.* New York:
Asia House, Gallery, 1978, 60.

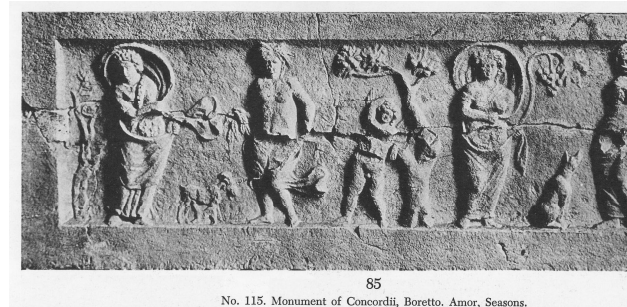


Fig. 9 – Monument of Concordii, Borotto. Amor, Seasons – example of the Greco-Roman depictions of the seasons.
 Hanfmann, George M. A.. *The Season Sarcophagus in Dumbarton Oaks*.
 Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1951.



Fig. 10 – Flask depicting Six Female Figures
 Location: State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg Russia
 6th-7th century CE
 Gilt silver
 Height: 16 cm.
 Sogdian inscription in Bukhara script
 Acquired in 1931 from Countess L S Lebedeva in Sverdlovsk,
 currently in the Marshak, “State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg: Sasanian
 Metalwork,” University of Washington : Walter Chapin Simpson Center for
 the Humanities : Silk Road Seattle : Museum Collections of Silk Road Art :
 State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg : Sasanian Art. April 2006.
<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/museums/shm/shmsasanian.html>
 (accessed 20 January 2008).



Fig. 11 – Anahita on the left. Taq-i Bustan, Investiture of Khusaru I
Tucker, Elizabeth. “Visit to Pre-Islamic Sites in Iran.” *Near and Middle Eastern Studies: The Oriental Institute, University of Oxford, UK, 1998.* <http://www.orinst.ox.ac.uk/nme/nesp/news1.htm> (accessed 20 February 2008).

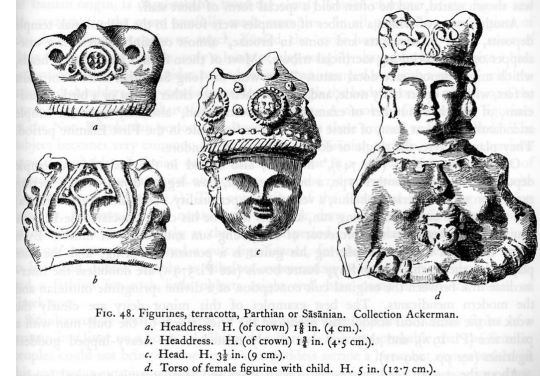


Fig. 12 – Figurines, terracotta, Parthian or Sāsānian. Collection Ackerman (1964), willed to Iran at the death of Ackerman, present location unknown. Ackerman, Phyllis. “Cult Figurines.” In *A Survey of Persian Art Vol. I: Pre-Achaemenid, Achaemenid and Parthian Periods*, ed. Arthur Upham Pope, 195-223. London: Oxford University Press, 1964-1965, 217.

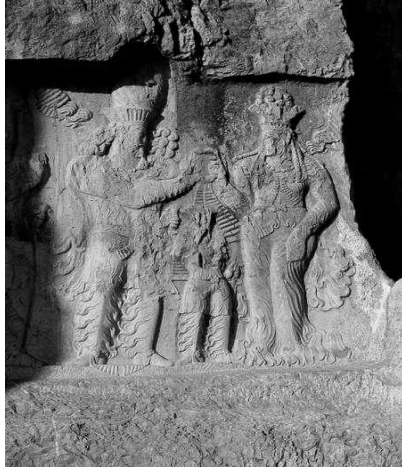


Fig. 13 - Investiture of Naresh (293-302 CE) at Naqš-i Rustam, detail – Narseh and Anāhīta.
Herrmann, Georgina and Vesta S. Curtis. "Sasanian Rock Reliefs." CAIS : The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies. http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Art/sasanian_rock_relief.htm (accessed 20 February 2008).



Fig. 14 – Investiture of Naresh at Naqš-i Rustam, goddess Anāhīta on the right.
Herrmann, Georgina and Vesta S. Curtis. "Sasanian Rock Reliefs." CAIS : The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies. http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Art/sasanian_rock_relief.htm (accessed 20 February 2008).

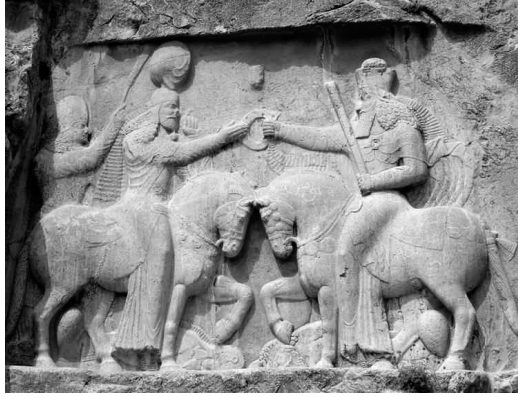


Fig. 15 – The Investiture of Emperor Ardashir I (226-241 CE) at Naqsh-e Rostam, 3rd century CE – Ahura Mazda on right.
Herrmann, Georgina and Vesta S. Curtis. "Sasanian Rock Reliefs." CAIS : The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies. http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Art/sasanian_rock_relief.htm (accessed 20 February 2008).



Fig. 16 – The Investiture of Emperor Ardashir II (379-383 CE) at Taq-i Bustan, Ahura Mazda on the right.
Choksky, Jamsheed K.. "Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran." In *Iranian History: Sasanian Dynasty*. CAIS : The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies. http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/History/Sasanian/sacral_kingship.htm (accessed 20 February 2008).

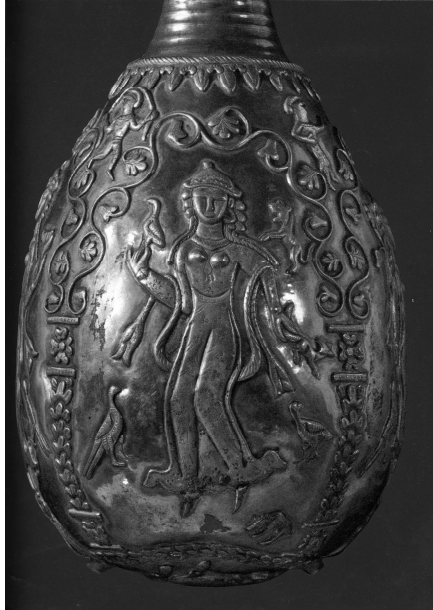


Fig. 17 – “Jug decorated with Four Dancing Girls and a Simurgh” 6th century CE. Archaeological Museum, Teheran.
 Ghirshman, Roman. *Iran : Parthians and Sassanians*. Translated by Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons. In series *The Arts of Mankind*. Edited by André Malraux and Georges Salles. France: Thames and Hudson, 1962.



Fig. 1. Le site de Barm-e Delak d'après un dessin ancien.
 D'après KAEMPFER, *Amoenitatum exoticarum*, p. 362.

Fig. 18 – Illustration of Barm-e Delak by an ancient artist.
 de Waele, Eric. “Sur le bas-relief Sassanide de Tang-e Qandil et la Bas-relief au Couple de Barm-e Dilak.” *Revue des archéologues et Historiens d'Art de Louvain* 11 (1978): 9-32, 11.

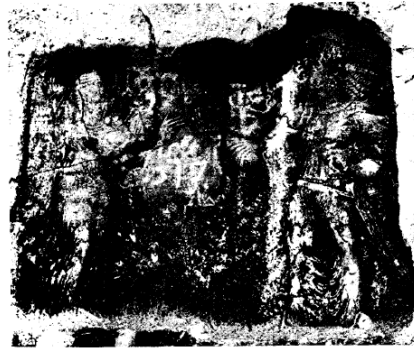


Fig. 3. Le «bas-relief au couple» de Barm-e Delak.
(Photographie de l'auteur).

Fig. 19 – Relief of “couple” at Barm-e Delak, photographed by Eric de Waele.
de Waele, Eric. “Sur le bas-relief Sassanide de Tang-e Qandil et la Bas-relief
au Couple de Barm-e Dilak.” *Revue des archéologues et
Historiens d'Art de Louvain* 11 (1978): 9-32, 15.



Fig. 20 – Partially gilt silver plate.

Diameter 33 cm.

Cincinnati Art Museum

Accession number: 1066.1090

Plate may no longer be there.

Duchesne-Guillemin, Marcelle. “Les instruments de musique dans l’art
Sassanide.” *Iranica Antiqua* Supplément VI (1993), 54.



Fig. 21 – Coin of Boran (630/631 CE)

Classical Numismatic Group. "Coin of Boran, Sasanian ruling queen (630/1)." 2 April 2007. Wikipedia Commons. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Boran.jpg> (accessed 25 February 2008).

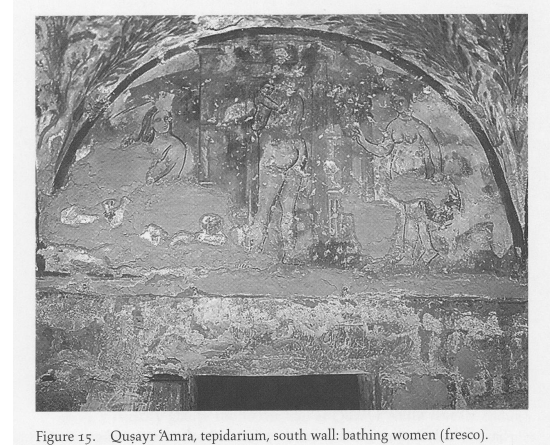


Figure 15. Quşayr 'Amra, tepidarium, south wall: bathing women (fresco).

Fig. 22 – Bathing Woman, fresco
Quasyr'Amra, Tepidarium (cold water bath), south wall
Fowden, Garth. *Quşayr Amra : Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 58.

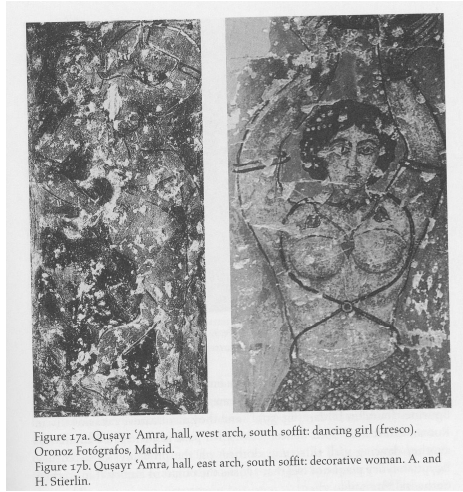


Fig. 23 – Dancing girls (frescoes)
 Quasayr'Amra hall, west and east arch soffit
 Fowden, Garth. *Quasayr Amra : Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique
 Syria*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 65.



Fig. 24 – Pensive woman with Eros (fresco)
 Quasayr'Amra hall, central aisle, northwest spandrel.
 Fowden, Garth. *Quasayr Amra : Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique
 Syria*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, 74.



Fig. 25 – “Abundance” from the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (*Altar of Augustan Peace*) Rome

Joe, Jimmy. “Roman Deities.” *Timeless Myths*. 4 February 2008.
<http://www.timelessmyths.com/classical/roman.html> (accessed 25 February 2008)

