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THE ICONOGRAPHIC FUNCTION
OF ARMOR IN SASANIAN ART

Patryk Skupniewicz

This article is an attempt to define the role of armor in the art of Sasanian Iran. The armor is often omitted in scenes of combat, which can be interpreted as a glorification of bravery in the face of danger. On the other hand, armor is also depicted in non-combat contexts. Royal and divine personages in armor are usually shown as wearing cuirasses derived from Hellenistic and Roman muscle-cuirasses, suggesting a link with the official iconography of Roman emperors (statua loricata) and the religious iconography of the Near East in the Roman period. In these instances, the armor acts as another form of indication of status with a symbolic content. In the late Sasanian period there are depictions of armored personages not wearing cuirasses of the type mentioned above, which suggests a growing realism, whereas one-sheet breast-plates are reserved for deities. Generally speaking, apart from some cases in which it was associated with power and richness, armor was reluctantly depicted in Sasanian art despite its wide employment in warfare, as its protective function contradicted heroism.

Keywords: Sasanian iconography, Sasanian art, armor, iconography of weapons

Armor has rarely been a semantically neutral object throughout the history of art. This derives from the special function assigned to it, at both practical and symbolical level. Although the relationship between armor and mask from an ethnographic viewpoint is not the topic of this paper, the strong semantic function of armor or elements of armament in the arts of virtually all cultures, even after the abandonment of their use on the battlefield, must be emphasized. Armor usually had a defined and special place in visual culture.

The basic question asked in this article is: when, how and why did Sasanian artisans depict armor? Although the reply may not be definitive, it may initiate a different perspective in our perception of the iconography of the Sasanian warrior. The focus will be set on body armor, whereas helmets and barding will play a less significant role in this article.1

Any study of the function of armor in Persian visual imagery of the Sasanian era can operate in two separate areas. First, in the field of art history it identifies the directions of aesthetic influences, possible semantic connotations, shared points of different visual environments, or it can identify mere

elements of Motif kunde. Second, for students of arms and armor, it may provide a tool to judge the credibility of various depictions in terms of possible reconstructions of the Sasanian panoply and its development. Naturally these two roles overlap in many instances, and although different types of conclusions are sought, both approaches are interlinked in many ways, and the main difference lies in the nature of the conclusions reached. The most useful method for this study would be to divide these depictions into discrete groups, comparing them not only with one another, but with similar depictions or motives drawn from bordering cultures, either geographically or chronologically. This study will not neglect the typology of the armors presented, what materials they were constructed of and the method of their construction.

In order to identify the role of the armor in Sasanian art the first step is to place it in its own iconographic and aesthetic context; therefore the depictions will be grouped into categories presented in a functional order and, as much as possible, in a chronological sequence. This short catalogue will include works not directly attributed to Sasanian workshops but which present strong Sasanian influence.

1. Combat scenes

This group includes the depictions of personages fighting or chasing their enemies, including the cases in which the enemies are lost due to poor preservation or were not shown at all, although the dynamism of the depiction strongly suggests a combat situation. These scenes are limited to mounted depictions. The famous Kulagysh plate depicting a combat of two warriors on foot was convincingly interpreted as a Sogdian product and follows different traditions that do not have a direct link with Sasanian art (Marschak 1986: 85, 284-290; Maršak 1992).

1.1. Battle-chase

In this pattern the adversaries are shown riding in the same direction, towards the right, however there is a clear distinction between the winning and the routed parties. Such a rendition of chasing a defeated and fleeing enemy is shown in the monumental frieze in Firuzabad (Fig. 1) commemorating Ar-
dašir I’s victory over the last Parthian ruler Artaban. The entire scene includes a depiction of the Sasanian king and the crown-prince Šahpur I, unhorsing, with long lances, escaping opponents, while the last Persian warrior – a beardless young man – strangles his adversary. All victors are shown on caparisoned horses in flying gallop (Bivar 1972; Vanden Berghe 1984: 62; von Gall 1990: 20-29; Mielczarek 1993: 38-39, 49, 62-63; Skupniewicz 2006a: 154-160; von Gall 2008: 149-150). The static and dignified poses of the winners are in contrast with the dynamic, somehow desperate, poses of their foes. The relief is often interpreted as a sequence of duels, but the riders are not separated from each other, and are all depicted facing right, which may be interpreted as a group-chase of a routed enemy. The Parthians are shown in cuirasses with laminated sleeves and leggings, scale aventails and scale skirts; their horses wear caparisons, as do the mounts of their vanquishers. The Persians wear cuirasses with chain-mail sleeves and skirts, supplemented with laminated leggings (Bivar 1972; Vanden Berghe 1984: 62ff; Allan 1985; von Gall 1990: 20-29; Mielczarek 1993: 38-39, 49, 62-63; von Gall 1997; von Gall 1998; Skupniewicz 2006a: 154-160; Skupniewicz 2006b; von Gall 2008: 149-150; Skupniewicz 2014). The defeated warriors are shown in helmets, while the winners wear non-protective headgear which identifies their social status.² The Firuzabad relief was executed in the first half of the 3rd century.

To the same group belongs the NRm5 rock relief at Naqš-e Rostam (Fig. 2), in which a royal warrior on a caparisoned horse in flying gallop is shown as felling his opponent in almost the same way as Ardašir and Šahpur at Firuzabad. He is accompanied by a young standard bearer. All warriors are depict-

² The king is shown with the korymbos, Šahpur wears an eagle- (or falcon-) topped tiara, and the young warrior wears a tiara with the same nišān sign we see on his horse’s caparison. The headgear of the latter two are sometimes identified as helmets, but the lack of aventails or cheek-pieces does not support such supposition.
ed wearing cuirasses with laminated limb protectors and scale skirts (Bivar 1972; Vanden Berghe 1984: 142ff; von Gall 1990: 30-35; von Gall 1997; von Gall 1998; Mielczarek 1993: 39-40; Skupniewicz 2006a: 164-166; Skupniewicz 2006c; von Gall 2008: 159-150; Skupniewicz forthcoming). NRm5 is dated, together with other combat scenes in the same site, to the second half of the 3rd century, but, based on its relationship with the Firuzabad frieze, von Gall places it earlier than the other ones (von Gall 2008: 149-150).

In a mural from Dura Europos (Fig. 3) showing unarmored mounted warriors on horses depicted in the flying gallop pose and armed with long lances, chasing their foes, we see the same iconographic layout, despite numerous differences in detail (James 2004: 42; de Waele 2004; Compareti 2011). The lack of armor excludes this example from the scope of the current analysis, nonetheless we notice that it follows the tradition of depicting unarmored lance wielding warriors witnessed in Parthian art by seals and a wall painting from Old Nisa (Pilipko 2006: 265-268; Gaibov, Košelenko 2008; Invernizzi 2011: 200-203).³ The Parthian relief of Gotarzes Geopotros showing mounted lancers in combat is far too damaged to be included in this study as no details of the armament are preserved (Kawami 1987a: 37-43; von Gall 1990: 11-12; Mielczarek 1993: 123). Its composition also seems to be unclear and, to my knowledge, unique in Iranian art, although it could be related to scenes of chasing an enemy in the version provided by the Dura Europos mural, where, in contrast with Sasanian rock reliefs and toreutics, no clear lines define the ground. It is also

³ Mural depicting battle of Ebenezer in the Dura Europos synagogue also depicts unarmored horsemen in combat (von Gall 1990: pl.17; James 2004, Pl. 4)
possible that the visual convention
evidenced by the Old Nisa mural
followed a Hellenistic tradition (Inver-
nizzi 2011: 200-203) before the compo-
sitional designs became fixed.
The depiction of warriors chasing a
fleeing enemy remained an enduring
motif of late Medieval and early
Modern Persian and Mughal military
painting.

1. 2. Confrontation – duel scenes

This iconographic scheme shows ar-
mored riders confronted in combat.
Although the participants are again
clearly identified as winners and losers,
they move towards each other. These
scenes can be further classified into de-
pictions of clashes of lancers, and de-
pictions of an armored warrior charging without any enemy being shown.
The scenes of dueling lancers are often labelled as “jousting” on the grounds
of a rather distant analogy with Medieval chivalry and tournaments, which
generally were non-lethal competitions. Conventionally, the scenes of clashes
between opposing lancers show the winners on the left, riding caparisoned
horses shown in flying gallop, and the defeated on the right and/or below the
horses’ hooves. Such lance duels are known from three Naqš-e Rostam rock rel-
liefs: two pairs on NRm7 and one on NRm3 (Fig. 4); the same presentation
scheme was used in a no longer preserved rock relief at Rayy (Bivar 1972; von
Gall 1990: 30-37; Mielczarek 1993: 39; Nicolle 1996: 12-13, 16; Skupniewicz 2006a:
163-165; Skupniewicz forthcoming). In all the Naqš-e Rostam reliefs the
warriors are protected by cuirasses with splinted limb protection and scale
skirts. The victorious personages all wear crowns, while the defeated ones and
the pages of the winners wear helmets with scale aventails. The state of preser-
vation, however, does not permit certainty in all cases. The Rayy relief was
already heavily weathered in the nineteenth century, and the existing drawings
of it do not allow us to clearly discern the equipment worn by the combatants
(von Gall 1990: 36-37). All these examples can be dated to the second half of the
3rd century. The subject and iconographic rendering of the “jousting” scenes
have parallels in Sarmatian and Bosporan art (von Gall 1997; Goroncharovski
2006; Skupniewicz 2014). Riders in a similar heraldic position, but unarmored,
are shown in a mural from Dura Europos (NB1) showing the battle of Ebenez-
er (von Gall 1990: 50, pl. 17; James 2006: pl. 4).
Another piece showing a clash of armored riders is the so called “Šahpur cameo” (Fig. 5) in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (von Gall 1990: 56-57; Nicolle 1996: 18; Nikitin 1998; Skupniewicz 2006c; Skupniewicz forthcoming). A Sasanian warrior rides a caparisoned horse in flying gallop; he wears a muscle cuirass and laminated thigh protectors. The plain treatment of the shins, which contrasts with all other depictions of folded, baggy trousers and leggings worn by the Sasanian nobility, suggest the use of greaves (Skupniewicz 2006c). He wears a beribboned hemispherical helmet with korymbos and cheek-pieces. The pose of the Persian hero, with upright spine, left hand resting firmly on the sheathed sword and right arm extended, is well known from the Sasanian rock reliefs showing scenes of investiture, and late Parthian or early Sasanian rock carvings (Tang-e Sarvak AWc, Mathiesen 1992: vol. 2, 138-139, fig. 21; Harper 2008: 76, fig. 5) showing heroes strangling lions. Usually the scene is interpreted as the capture of the emperor Valerian by Šahpur I, and is therefore often dated to the reign of this king, although some scholars prefer a 4th century date (von Gall 1990: 56-57, Nikitin 1998). It seems, however, that the pose of the victorious combatant, as well as the equipment he wears, fits in better with a 3rd century date; therefore the traditional chronology is still more convincing. What is different from the “canonical” confrontation layout is that the victorious rider comes from the right side.

1.3. Miscellaneous combat scenes

This group will include depictions that are either damaged or left incomplete on purpose, i.e. not showing the enemy of the main personage, or are clearly
related to Sasanian art but do not come from Persia. This group will also include scenes showing warriors fighting wild beasts.

The late Parthian relief D at Tang-e Sarvak (Fig. 6) (von Gall 1990: 13-19; Mathiesen 1992: 132-133, fig.16; Skupniewicz 2006c; Skupniewicz 2014) depicts a heavy armored rider in the center turned right attacking an almost entirely damaged, giant figure with a long lance. The warrior sits on a galloping (the relief is fairly withered and horse’s position could be interpreted as standing), caparisoned horse, and is accompanied by two small foot attendants shown in the upper left-hand corner. He wears a cuirass divided into two vertical elongated parts, which is reminds of the late Medieval čahr-ayna armor (Skupniewicz 2006c), a scale gorget, laminated sleeves and scale leggings. He is shown bare-headed in the characteristic coiffure of Parthian royal personages. His opponent cannot be identified but seems to be an unproportionally large anthropomorphic figure tightly packed into the right edge of the relief.4 In this relief one may detect traces of a tradition originating in the scheme of horsemen attacking infantrymen with lances, known from Old Nisa seals (Gaibov, Košelenko 2008). Alternatively, a precedent for this composition may be found in the 1st century BC terracotta tile from Babylonia, now in the British Museum (Fig. 7), depicting a warrior in a scale coat spearing an unnaturally large protome of a lion awkwardly fitted into the right hand edge of the tile (Mielczarek 1993: 36, fig13; Skupniewicz 2008; Skupniewicz forthcoming).

Another battle scene showing riders in combat was found in the Bandiyan fire temple, in Khorasan, dating from the mid-5th century (Rahbar 2008: 21-22, 39, fig 27). The equipment of the warriors mounted on horses in flying gallop is not preserved; therefore this piece of evidence cannot be fully included in the current study. It shows, however, that our knowledge of Sasanian military iconography is likely to develop with new finds and publications. Additionally the position of the horses reveals a close relationship with the confrontation-duel model.

A post-Sasanian piece of evidence for an element of armor is a stucco fragment from Chal Tarkhan showing a boar hunt (Fig. 8). The main personage

4 On such a compositional pattern, see Skupniewicz forthcoming.
possibly wears a scale gorget, which, however, may have been part of his regalia.

A Himyarite stone slab from Zafār (Fig. 9) shows an armored rider facing left on a rearing horse, wearing long scale armor, a helmet with an aventail, holding a shield and a lance in the over-arm manner (Yule, Robin 2007; Skupniewicz forthcoming). In the upper right corner there is a foot attendant with a buckler and a battle axe. Yule and Robin associate this piece with the Naqš-e Rostam Sasanian reliefs, dating it to the 3rd-4th centuries (Figs. 2, 4). It seems, however, that the page on foot with battle axe rather recalls the Parthian relief at Tang-e Sarvak (Fig. 6), whereas the presence of
a shield and the lance position are found in the famous Taq-e Bostan relief (Fig. 12), which will be discussed later. The Taq-e Bostan relief, however, would not necessarily provide a reliable *terminus ante quem* as it was not made in an iconographic vacuum, and the Zafār slab could have been inspired by a common source, no longer preserved. It should be borne in mind that Sasanian painting “full of carnage and slaughter” (Comparetti 2011: 6-7) has practically not been preserved at all. It should be emphasized, however, that the lance and bucker set was typical for the panoply of the Arabic frontier between the empires, as displayed in the art of Hatra, Palmyra and Dura Europos (Nicolle 1991: 16-17, 38-39; Skupniewicz 2006b; Skupniewicz forthcoming).

A plate from Isola Rizza (6th century, but not manufactured in a Sasanian workshop) shows a rider in a lamellar body armor and helmet on a prancing horse placed in the center of the plate, and spearing, with the lance held in both hands, an unarmored personage standing to the far right edge, while another, dead, enemy is lying below. This composition design is typical for Sasanian hunting scenes, but it was found fit to be applied to a battle scene by a Western silversmith (Bolla 1999; Skupniewicz forthcoming).

1.4. Single rider charging with no target represented

This way of representing the warriors, although not canonical or popular in Sasanian art, can be defined as an iconographic pattern based on the examples presented below. This group includes clear depictions in which the rider is shown in gallop and/or with his bow drawn, as well as representations of warriors on standing horses, holding their weapons in fighting position, i.e. with both hands at the hips level, or with a single hand held in an over-head position. Both poses were applied in scenes of mounted combat. The motionless mounts relate these examples to the “parade” pattern presented below. This may be a rather misleading clue, as standing horses are known in hunting scenes from Parthian until at least post-Sasanian times (Skupniewicz 2011).

The battle scene from the famous Orlat bone plates from the Orlat necropolis (Sogdiana), although neither Parthian nor Sasanian, also shows warriors on standing horses (Abdullaev 1995a: 157-161). Therefore the static position of the mount might depend on the workshop or on a specific visual tradition or school. It might have been a well-established convention or the personal preference of the craftsman. The absence of any target might suggest a military display, but the unambiguous combat position of the weapons and the relationship to scenes with galloping warriors prevails.

Three mid-third century graffitos found in Dura Europos (Fig. 10) present riders galloping toward the right, mounted on harnessed horses (James 2006: 39-40, fig. 17). Two of them are archers dressed in robes and armor which are hard to define, and on horses protected by a likewise obscure type of barding. They are considered here because they are clearly depictions of mounts
which are covered with armor. The third graffito portrays a well-known lancer on a steed covered with scale barding; the rider wearing an armor made of chain-mail and rectangular plates with laminated sleeves and leggings (Mielczarek 1993: 36, 63, 119, fig 6; Nicolle 1996: 15; James 2006, 42-43, fig 23; Skupniewicz 2006a; Wójcikowski 2014). The rendering of this example makes it difficult to determine whether the personage has a mail aventail covering his entire face, an uncovered face, or a metallic mask. It should be pointed out that if the face was depicted it would be shown en trois quarts, which is unusual for Parthian or Sasanian visual patterns. In all the Dura Europos graffiti the warriors are shown en face in accordance with the Parthian visual tradition, and it would be strange if the piece under examination was any different. Therefore it seems most likely that a chain-mail aventail covered the face of this warrior. All three examples are crude, and are made on an ad hoc basis by non-craftsmen, probably by the warriors themselves. It is clear, however, that they represent an early stage of Sasanian visual culture. All the warriors are clearly depicted in attack, but with the objects of their attack not shown.

The warrior shown on a crudely made drawing on the inner side of a shell in the British Museum (Fig. 11) of uncertain date, but probably 4th-5th centuries, is turned to the right and holds his long lance with both hands, in a way somehow reminiscent of the Firuzabad (Fig. 1) and Naqš-e Rostam (Fig. 2, 5 There are also depictions of unarmored lancers and archers in hunting scenes among the Dura Europos graffitos, as well as a rider with unclear weapons or clothing, but they cannot be included in the present discussion.)
4) reliefs, and the Babylonia tile (Fig. 7) presented earlier. He mounts an unarmored horse either standing or galloping, which cannot be determined due to the primitivism of the image, and wears a muscle cuirass with laminated sleeves and scale skirt. It is difficult to determine exactly his headgear, but he seems to be bare-headed. The shell is almost complete and shows no trace of the object of the warrior’s lance thrust.

The famous Taq-e Bostan equestrian figure (Fig. 12) (early 7th century) is shown turned to the right, on a standing horse which has its foreparts fully covered with a lamellar piece of horse-armor combining the functions of a peytral and crinet, and head protected by a lamellar chamfron (von Gall 1990: 38-47; Mielczarek 1993: 39, 67, 129, fig. 250).
The warrior holds a lance pointed right in his raised right hand, while his left shoulder, arm and hand are covered by a round shield. He wears a long-sleeved hauberk and a hemispherical helmet with a mail aventail covering the face except for the eyes. Markus Mode (2006: 393-413) has suggested that the figure is a relic of an initial stage of the reconstruction of the entire iwān and that other carved figures in high relief were to be added, replacing the side panels bearing hunting scenes, to create a full combat scene. This interpretation, however, is highly hypothetical; if we take into account the evidence provided by the British Museum shell (Fig. 11) and the stucco fragment with a galloping armored archer (Fig. 13) (Dimand 1940), it is clear that depictions of warriors without enemies did exist in Sasanian art. Furthermore, Mode’s supposition seems to ignore the already well-known compositional designs of Sasanian art, whereby the defeated enemy would either be placed in the tightly-packed right margin, or shown in the centre of the scene. On the other hand, it should always be remembered that the hunting panels of the Taq-e Bostan iwān do not have any direct parallels in known Sasanian iconography.

A late or post-Sasanian stucco fragment (Fig. 13) with an armored archer on an unarmored horse in flying gallop shows him wearing a scale body-armor with apezak or a disc suspended from the shoulders, and a helmet of a type known from preserved specimens of late Sasanian protective headgear in the shape of a kulāh/kolāf (Dimand 1940). The opponent of the warrior is not shown. This piece seems to confirm the testimony of the late 6th century Strategikon, attributed to Emperor Maurice, describing Persian warriors as wearing scale or lamellar armor over a hauberk and shooting arrows until coming into close-quarters and fighting with swords (i.e. not using lances) (Wiita 1977: 70-76; Strategikon 1984: 114). The scene seems closely related, in terms of body and horse position and other iconographical elements, to visual traditions fully represented in Sasanian “royal” or “princely” hunt iconography (Harper, Meyers 1982; Skupniewicz 2008). The lack of a prey to the right edge and below the mount’s hooves is the main difference, though. Although the obscure origin of this object may raise some doubts about its authenticity (as Judith Lerner recently pointed out in a personal communication, the object was clearly a forgery), it might be a fragment of larger piece.
as both Sasanian toreutics and Late Antique mosaics provide examples of prey and hunters in separate medallions.

II. Parade depictions

This group includes depictions of armored personages in static poses with no opponents. The term “parade” may not fully reflect their true nature as it is just an arbitrary label for scenes in which an armored warrior is not shown in a combat context, but engaged in other kinds of activities, including rituals or mere portrayals. Depictions of armored men with weapons shown in motionless or almost motionless postures and/or during religious rituals can be divided into two sub-groups: mounted and on foot. The latter sub-group includes personages shown from the waist up.

II.1. Mounted “parade” depictions

Non-combat contexts in which armored lancers are shown can be found in late Roman iconography but also in the coins of Šaka kings which portray themselves as the sole subject (Gorelik 1982a; Mielczarek 1993: 36; Nikonorov 1997 vol.2: 11, 58, fig 26; Fröhlich 2005; Cribb 2007), clearly not in a combat position (i.e. holding a lance with its tip pointing downwards or a whip).

The seals of the spāhbedān (Fig. 14) (the four generals administrating parts of the empire after the partition made by Khusro I in the mid-6th century) show them all on standing, barded mounts (Gyselen 2001a; Gyselen 2001b; Gyselen 2007: 47-53, 248-277; Gyselen 2008; Daryaee, Safdari 2009; Daryaee, Safdari 2010; Skupniewicz 2014). The compositional formula used in all seals seems related to one aspect of Roman imperial iconography exemplified by the representations in medallions of Constantius I and Justinian and on the silver dish of Constantius II. The longevity of the motif in Byzantine art is evidenced by the scene on the lid from Troyes casket (Breckenridge 1979; Maguire 1997: 204-206; von Gall 2008: 160; Walker 2012: 57-64). It is also possible that the Šaka coins might provide additional source of inspiration, however the idle lance is shown in these coins pointing slightly diagonally downwards, whereas in late Sasanian examples the lance is shown diagonally raised matching the Roman iconography. Relation with important visual statements from both West and East seemed suitable for the development of iconography of Sasanian high command.

Although among the known impressions of these seals three or four detailed types of presentation can be defined (Skupniewicz 2014), they share the same general features: all generals are shown turned right, holding their lances almost upright, slightly bent to the front, on barded horses with one front leg raised. Not all impressions allow us to identify the type of armor worn, but, where it is possible (Čihr-Burzēn, Dād-Burz-Mihr, two seals of Wahrām, two seals of Wistaxm and a seal of Ohrmazd Wuzurg) the most
likely armor-type seems to be a scale body protection with scale shoulder pieces and laminated sleeves or forearm pieces (bāzūband) (Gyselen 2001a; Gyselen 2001b; Gyselen 2007: 248-277; Gyselen 2008; Daryaee, Safdari 2009; Daryaee, Safdari 2010; Skupniewicz 2014). Although we cannot completely exclude that the artists intended to depict chain-mail, but a first glance examination definitely points towards scale armor as being more probable.  

11.2. “Parade” depictions on foot

This group is the smallest and consists of just four examples, three of which come from the fringes of the empire and were influenced by foreign iconography. Foot combat (especially beast combat and hunt), although not totally

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Fig. 14. Spāhbedān seals. A. Saeedi Collection (After Gyselen 2001).

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6 The shapes carved with a rounded pattern may be interpreted as the reinforcing ribs of the scales, or as the rings of chain-mail. Unlike in Roman art, Sasanian artisans always defined such rings in the rock reliefs; this habit probably explains the awkwardly large rings depicted in the small scale of the seals.
absent from Sasanian iconography, was relatively rare: probably because of
the famed association of horse riding and the nobility among Persians, and
there are no examples of fighting on foot in armor.

One of the personages painted on the walls of the Kuh-e Khwaja palace
(Fig. 15) is a beardless figure shown from the waist up, with a hemispherical
helmet with three plumes or a top plume and wings on the sides, probably
bearing a shield on his left shoulder: he may also have worn a cuirass, and rest-
ed his right hand on the lance shaft. The poor state of preservation and the
quality of the drawings do not allow any clearer identification. The murals
have been dated to the Parthian epoch, but a Sasanian dating is also possible.
The personage may be related to the youthful warrior in the form of the fe-
nale deity of Athena: a type of form known from the iconography of Eastern

One of the graffiti from Dura Europos (Fig. 16) shows a dismounted heav-
ily armored warrior in full frontal view, holding his lance in both hands, seem-
ingly turned to the left, and slightly hanging down (James 2006: 39-40, fig 17c).The personage wears a helmet, laminated limb defenses and armor which is
difficult to classify, perhaps of mail or of the plate-and-mail variety, similar to
the graffito showing a charging lancer mentioned above. No enemy of this
warrior was carved, but the downward direction of the lance suggests it was
shown at rest. It cannot be excended that the image was part of a not preserved combat scene on foot.

A large group of standing armored figures is found on the coins of the Kushanshahs (Fig. 17) or of the viceroy of those parts of the Kushan empire subdued to the Sasanian state (Nikonorov 1997: vol. 1, 56-59; vol. 2, 15, 71, fig. 39d; Skupniewicz 2006a; Skupniewicz 2006b; Cribb 2008). The crowned personages are shown frontally with heads turned to the left with their right hands pouring a liquid offering on an altar, and the left raised and holding the shaft of a trident. They wear muscle cuirasses with laminated limbs protectors and skirts of mail or small plates. The very design of the presentation is derived from late Kushan coinage, where the emperors were shown in long Śaka-type armor. The armor of the Kushanshahs are related to the types presented earlier in the Firuzabad (Fig. 1) and Naqš-e Rostam (Fig. 2, 4) reliefs, in the “Śahpur cameo” (Fig. 5), and in the drawing scratched on the shell in the British Museum (Fig. 11). The deities on Kushan coins were also occasionally shown in muscle cuirasses, still following a Greco-Bactrian practice (Nikonorov 1997: vol. 2, Skupniewicz 2006b, Nikonorov 2013). They can be related to the depiction of a lancer in a cuirass with laminated sleeves on a nephrite fragment from Old Termez (Nikonorov 1997: vol. 2, 15, 70, fig 38 c; Skupniewicz 2006b), or to that of a deity wearing the same type of armor in a terracotta slab from Dalverzin Tepe (Nikonorov 1997: vol. 2, 18, 77, fig 45 a). All of them apparently follow the tradition of the Hellenistic muscle cuirasses in Asia (Jäger 2006).\(^7\)

The last two examples are the half-figures of haloed personages shown on a capital now in Taq-e Bostan (Movassat 2005; Compareti 2006: 166-168, 185-186, figs. 4-6; Skupniewicz 2007). The first warrior is shown frontally with his right hand raised and holding a large ring typical of the “investiture scenes”, while his left hand rests on his upper chest. He wears a helmet most probably

\(^7\) Although it might be purely accidental, one may bear in mind that among the figurines depicting personages in muscle cuirasses from Etruria, Latium, Campania and Magna Graecia there is a group of specimens showing a personage pouring libation while his left hand rests on a no longer preserved shaft i.e in a posture similar to the one we see in the depictions of the Kushanshahs. The relation between these formulae, so distant in time and space, is not clear and deserves separate study, Richardson 1996: 100-108.
made of narrow lamellae fixed to a band with two rows of “pearls”, with a mail aventail and an additional mail neck-guard. The warrior has a plain cuirass and a chain-mail skirt; his arms are apparently unarmored or the protective layer was covered by a richly decorated textile. The second relief is in poor state of preservation; it contains only fragments of chain mail around the neck but the headgear cannot be identified, also the torso and the thighs are covered with textile tunic (Compareti 2006: 170-171, 189, fig.12). The lack of visible armor except for the neck area may suggest a formal connection of this depiction to the Chal Tarkhan stucco presented above. It is possible that the neck-guard (grivpan, grivban, garivpan see: Robinson 1967: 29-30, 220; Michalak 1987: 76; Tafazzoli 1993/94: 188-189; Moshtagh Khorasani 2010: 173) conveyed a specific meaning and was shown with otherwise unarmored personages acting, perhaps as a visual pars pro toto. The heavy rider from Tang-e Sarvak is shown with elaborate gorger, but with no head gear.

The brief catalogue presented above illustrates several contexts in which armor was depicted; at the same time it reveals that representations of armor

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* One cannot rule out that both pieces refer to the tradition of covering the armors with textile materials which developed into later kazaghan / qazagan / qazaqand (Robinson 1967: 77, 220; Khorasani 2010: 298-299). Depictions of warriors with mail pieces shown only on the neck can be found in later Islamic iconography, however Chal Tarkhan stucco would be the only Sasanian or post-Sasanian example of an armored hunter. It should be borne in mind that the Parthian terracotta discussed above shows an armored rider fighting with a lion. Also it would suggest exchangeable nature of chain mail and scale armor in Iranian imagery of the late and post-Sasanian periods.
were quite rare in Sasanian iconography. According to Ammianus Marcellinus (XXIV 6, 3), the households of Sasanian nobility were richly decorated with wall paintings with scenes of battles and hunts (Comparetti 2011: 6-17; de Waele 2004: 344-355, 365-368). From that rich and popular form of art only scant examples are preserved and published.

Another conclusion that can be drawn out of the examples listed above is that battle scenes appear only in a small portion of all known Sasanian rock reliefs, dominated as they are by scenes of investiture, triumphs and court ceremonies. On the other hand, there are more rock reliefs showing combat and armored warriors than showing hunting scenes; among the latter, only the rock relief at Rag-e Bibi (North Afghanistan) seems closely related to the hunting iconography known from toreutics (Grenet 2005; Grenet, Lee, Martínez, Ory, 2007). The Sar Mashhad relief shares some features in compositional patterns with several silver plates, but it is sharply at variance in its general layout. The Taq-e Bostan panels with their large hunting compositions are different from the scenes known from silverworks in most aspects, and were probably related to the form of decoration on carpets or paintings which are no longer preserved. The large chronological gap between the two former reliefs and the latter one should also be pointed out, as it may imply a change in aesthetics and a modification of earlier designs or canons. Perhaps the early patterns had lost their canonical character, or their original meaning became less clear; this might have led to a greater freedom and to the transfer of motives or compositional schemes among different media. The presence of armor, even in a relatively small proportion of rock-cut reliefs, proves the suitability of armored clashes for royal or state propaganda. The time gap between the latest early Sasanian rock reliefs and Taq-e Bostan is often explained by the fact that toreutics, with its numerous hunting scenes, took the leading role in royal propaganda. Indeed, a great abundance of hunting scenes in a variety of compositional arrangements can be found in silverware, although no silverwork with combat representations or armored personages can be found (Grabar 1967; Harper 1982, Trever, Lukonin 1982; Skupniewicz 2009). The above mentioned Kulagysh plate, previously attributed to Sasanian art, is now considered to be a product of a Sogdian workshop and related to Central Asian imagery (Marschak 1986: 85, 284-290; Maršak 1992). The Isola Rizza plate was not made in a Sasanian workshop either, yet it clearly follows a Sasanian pattern (Bolla 1999). It seems likely that combat and battles did not fit the decorum of silverware in the Sasanian milieu, but were related with hunting iconography sufficiently to be replaced when out of the rigid aesthetic rules of Sasanian Iran. It should be noted, however, that elements of defensive equipment appear occasionally in hunting scenes associated with Sasanian art. An early example is provided by one of the panels of a Palmyrene mosaic probably linked with Odaenathus’ victory over Šahpur, in which a hunter is shown in Iranian dress and with a kind
of Hellenistic helmet (Harper 2006a: 79-81, fig 9). The composition of the scene is clearly related to Sasanian hunting iconography: the rider is placed in the centre, while one of the tigers is shown in a rampant position at the right margin of the panel, while the second, already dead, is shown lying at the bottom. Helmets, however, had a different connotation than body-armor, especially in Parthian art.

The Chal Tarkhan stucco panel described above (Fig. 8) provides a second possible example, but the scales we see in it may not have been part of armor at all. This may lead us to the conclusion that silverware was not considered as a suitable medium for the “really serious business” of warfare, and was reserved for life’s pleasures, like hunting, feasting, or drinking, which corresponds to the very context of these luxurious vessels. The propagandistic nature of scenes of royal hunt has been emphasized too many times. However the successful hunt of the king had not necessarily to be a state-sponsored subject, but a mere auspicious depiction of wealth and pleasure.

Armored warriors are a rarity also in sigillography. Although the seals of spähbedān mentioned above (Fig. 14) are an extremely important source of evidence on administration, titulature, as well as arms and armor, they are but a tiny part of all known Sasanian seals (Gyselen 2001a; Gyselen 2001b; Gyselen 2007: 47-61, 248-277; Gyselen 2008; Daryaee, Safdari 2009; Daryaee, Safdari 2010). What is worth noting is that the seals of the spähbedān in armor were made for high ranking state officials and the theme does not appear in any private seals.

The coins of the Kushanshahs (Fig. 17) combine Kushan coinage tradition with Sasanian influences from rock reliefs (Fig. 1, 2, 4, 6, 12), which emphasize the semantics of power.9 Also the spähbedān seals (Fig. 14) are undoubtedly linked with state patronage.

On the other hand the sets of armor shown in the graffiti from Dura Europos (Fig. 10, 16) were made by persons with no artistic skill at all, probably by the warriors themselves, aware, however, of the iconographic designs of early Sasanian art. The lack of awareness of the canonical ways of presenting armor might have led them to draw inspiration from real life, rather than from ready-made patterns. Still, it is worth pointing out that the Dura Europos graffiti and wall-painting with battle scenes represent a phenomenon limited to one place, to a short period of time, and of a private character. Also the British Museum shell (Fig. 11) seems to be a crude attempt to imitate one of the royal rock reliefs or other means of royal military iconography that included quasi-divine muscle cuirass.

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9 It should be pointed that although Kushan royal armors were of a different type, Kushan coinage shows the personification of xvarenah in the form of an armored youth (Shenkar 2013: 435); other deities in Kushan and Sogdian iconographies were also depicted wearing armors (Comparetti 2009: 178, 190-193). The use of a specific type of armor – muscle cuirass – to emphasize the importance of the certain personages is apparently subsequent to the Sasanian conquest and is a result of Western influences.
A possible reason for the reluctance to represent armor may have lain in its protective value: it might have been perceived as a sign of cowardice. The examples of the depictions of unarmored warriors in lance combat in Parthian (Old Nisa painting and seals with lancers attacking foot soldiers) and Sasanian (Dura Europos wall-painting and graffitos and, possibly, the Bandiyan relief) art have already been mentioned (James 2004: 42; de Waele 2004; Gaibov, Košelenko 2008; Pilipko 2006: 265-268; Compareti 2011; Invernizzi 2011: 200-203), but these should be supplemented with examples drawn from Parthian art showing warriors in clothes and holding shields (Old Nisa painting, a bronze clasp from Teheran). In the Rostam cycle in the Penjikent wall-paintings from Sogdiana, the main hero is shown without armor in contrast to all other personages shown (Belenickij 1973: 22-27, pl. 7,9-13; Marshak 2002: 38). This may reflect quite archaic beliefs that armor revealed a fear of death. The lack of armor in the scenes showing warriors fighting with lances from horseback could be an equivalent of Greek heroic nudity, or an echo of mystic traditions providing immunity to weapons, known in Europe and in the Far East, but also present in Tajik Islamic mysticism. The traditions of Heracles and Rostam wearing the skins of large felines, that gave them invulnerability, seem to share the same Indo-European root (Melikian-Chirvani 1998). Of course nudity would not have been welcome in the depiction of Iranian knights; therefore showing them unarmed was a compromise between despising armor and the dignity of a dressed man. It is also possible that light lancers were included in Parthian and Sasanian troop types, but they probably belonged to a relatively poor stratum of the society, whereas the context of the Parthian examples – the Old Nisa wall painting and seals – rather suggests the high echelons of the nobility. De Waele thought that the unarmored lancers from Dura Europos might have been warriors recruited from among the local population (de Weale 2004: 345-346), however he overlooks the possible heroization factor, and the more obvious fact that the warriors of desert zone between the empires were usually armed with spears and bucklers, therefore employing a technique different from that of the armored lancers of Persia or the Roman contarii, catafracti / catafactarii and clibanarii. Perhaps the great popularity of hunting scenes was also a result of the reluctance to show a hero in armor, and the need for a sense of realism. The unprotected warriors became too unrealistic or were associated with the lower social strata, whereas the armored ones were not sufficiently heroic. This is probably why scenes in which personages facing/attacking life-threatening beasts became prevalent.

Therefore the reason for the rarity of depictions of armor may be found in the not sufficiently heroic nature of a figure wearing armor. On the other hand, the reason for showing armored personages seems threefold:

– Firstly, armor was the reality of the battlefield. Sasanian cavalry in the 4th century was famous for its glittering armor provided for both lancers and
archers. The false depiction of unarmored participation in scenes of fighting might have been occasionally perceived to be too much of a stylization (von Gall 1990; Mielczarek 1993: 51-66; Nicolle 1996; Nikonorov 2004; Daryaee 2005: 97-98; Farrokh 2005: 9-11, 15-19; Skupniewicz 2006a; Skupniewicz 2006c; Dimitriev 2008: 74-84; Skupniewicz 2008; Skupniewicz 2011; Zakeri 1995: 48-90)

– Secondly, armors were expensive items with an elaborate technique of construction which had to be individually fitted, required skill to be manufactured, and the sheer amount of metal required for its production made it an extremely costly item. Armor therefore proved the wealth of its wearer.

– Thirdly, the armor type associated with royal or state-sponsored iconography of the early period – rock reliefs with combat scenes, the coins of the Kushanshahs, the Paris cameo, and even the British Museum shell apparently inspired by the royal monuments – is the cuirass, i.e. a type of armor not confirmed archaeologically or by the written sources. On the contrary, Ammianus Marcellinus and Heliodorus emphasize the fact that Sasanian armor was made of small pieces of metal fitted in a way which did not restrain movement. The impression of glittering and shining, and the reference to Homeric “men of bronze” might suggest the use of large polished sheets of metal (Skupniewicz 2006a; Skupniewicz 2006c; Dimitriev 2008: 74-84). Also the depiction of metallic cuirasses might reflect the reverse process of adopting elements of political propaganda in religious art observed by Kantorowicz (1961). The patterns from the religious art of states bordering on the Sasanian kingdom would be used to strengthen the political imagery. The idea of the process was that of a transition of the forms of armor from imperial statua loricata to the iconography of the deities (Downey 1977; Downey 2006; Skupniewicz 2006b). As the muscle cuirass was present at least in the iconography of the gods of the desert frontier and Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic Bactria and Parthian art (Abdullaev 1995a, Abdullaev 1995b, Nikonorov 1997 vol. 2: 55, 56, 68, 70-72, 77, Pugačenkova1966: 27-30, Skupniewicz 2006c), it was also present in the depictions of the emperors, and was most likely still worn by Roman high officers. It was well suited for marking the high rank of the personages depicted. As noted by Jäger (2006), the muscle cuirass survived long after the fall of the Hellenistic rule in Asia and even traveled further East, changing its form. Although Jäger’s study is mostly based on iconographic material, he also provides archaeological evidence. It is therefore very probable that the cuirass was a prestige form of armor suitable for kings and the highest officials. The presence of the cuirass in the Taq-e Bostan capital (Fig. 18), where

10 Skupniewicz (2006b), independently from Jäger (2006), has strongly argued for the presence of metallic cuirasses among Sasanian élite warriors, but at that time ignored a possible symbolic content of this type of armor. Although the idea is generally correct, conclusions drawn from the examination of the iconography are naïve.

11 Though the blurred distinction between sacred and political in Sasanian Iran must be kept in mind.
it is worn by a deity, probably Verethragna, further supports this assumption (Compareti 2006: 166-167). The development of armor iconography in the East took, however, a different direction (Compareti 2009: 190-193, 199). The lack of a “prestigious model” supported depictions of lamellar or scale armors which were expensive enough to transmit the idea of wealth, immunity and shining. A special iconographic meaning of scale armor cannot be excluded either (Skupniewicz forthcoming).

The important feature of early Sasanian royal combat depictions is that the main personages generally do not seem to wear helmets but crowns, tiaras, or are bareheaded. The necessity of a clear identification prevailed over realism, and the same process can be observed in toreutics, where “princely” hunters are shown in full regalia. It should also be noted that in the battle of Cunaxa, Cyrus, in contrast with his bodyguards, fought bareheaded. The only piece that does not show the face of the personage in the state sponsored art is the Taq-e Bostan rider (Fig. 12). Therefore either it does not represent a king (even the spāhbedān on the seals are depicted with their faces shown – Fig. 14) or the process of evolution of the “realism” had gone further, and early Sasanian analogies would hardly apply to late Sasanian art.

The defeated enemies of the royal personages in early rock reliefs are always depicted fully armored, which emphasizes their high status, as if to show that no armor offers sufficient protection when challenged by the royal xvarenah, or aura of glory. The stability of the postures of the winners is also contrasted with the desperate tumbling or falling of the defeated showing the king as an unarrestable cosmic power. The first exception to this rule is the Paris cameo (Fig. 5), with a fully armored and helmeted Persian warrior capturing a Roman officer. Perhaps it is an argument for not including this example in the royal group, or for seeing in it an early stage in the process that led to the depiction of fully armored and helmeted warriors in state sponsored (and therefore representing the state and not merely private persons) artworks and their later continuation: the Taq-e Bostan rider (Fig. 12), the spāhbedān seals (Fig. 12).

The opposite orientation of the scene (from left to right) should be pointed out too. A possible explanation of the occasional switching of the direction may be the use of copies of ready-made models/drawings by the artisans. Such patterns should always be applied from the back of the picture (at least virtually) and when this was not done it produced a mirror view or the original.
the iconographic function of armor in Sasanian art

14), the stucco fragment with an armored archer (Fig. 13), and the Taq-e Bostan capital (Fig. 18), the Himyarite slab (Fig. 9) and the Isola Rizza plate that are associated with them. This might have been caused by the early compositional patterns and the iconographic canons becoming less legible, with a growing need for realism, which can be observed in the hunting scenes at Taq-e Bostan. This alleged “growth of realism” may be a shift of accentuation within the “Oriental verism” of Sasanian art, toward the expression of symbolic contents through realistically presented objects. This fashion allowed only repeated motifs and techniques, and forced avoiding aesthetic challenges. It is possible that the cuirasses in the late Sasanian period became the exclusive sign of royal or divine authority. That would explain why the spāhbedān seals which clearly follow late Roman imperial iconography in terms of the position of the rider did not copy muscle cuirasses as shown in some mounted depictions of Roman sovereigns (von Gall 2008: 160; Walker 2012: 57-64). Using the repertoire of Roman imperial iconography might have been suitable for the Iranian highest military officer, but the armor type associated with Persian royal or religious iconography was inappropriate.

This process parallels the gradual decrease in the number of depictions of cuirasses in favor of scale and mail forms of protection (which was favored by Near Eastern cavalry). A similar remark can be made with regard to the iconography of animal combats where, after an initial formative phase of patterns, fixed schemes were established and followed until the late or post-Sasanian period, when the canonical ways started being blended and modified (Skupniewicz 2009). Considering the presence of fully armored depictions in the Dura Europos graffiti (Fig. 10, 16), the Paris cameo, and later on the spāhbedān seals (Fig. 14), the stucco bearing an armored archer in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 13) and in the Taq-e Bostan (Fig. 12, 18) examples, it is justified to believe that the employment of full armor with covered head in artworks of private patronage later on were favored by high-placed officials and state sponsored art. The process continued with the abandonment of the rigid patterns of the earlier period.

The correspondence between some compositional elements of combat and hunting scenes has been hinted at several times above, but not explicitly stated. The Babylonian tile from the British Museum (Fig. 7) with a Parthian armored rider killing a lion may illustrate an early phase in which the killed beast is not yet shown as lying at the bottom of the picture, whereas the way of showing the prey unrealistically standing on two legs to fit into it at the margin was not yet developed: hence the awkwardly positioned protome of the lion. The main feature of the later iconographic pattern – a hunter in the center, and his prey on the edge – can be already observed. The Tang-e Sarvak

13 The realism in this instance refers to a relative freedom from previous iconography and to the attempt to present scenes observed in reality.
battle relief (Fig. 6) follows a similar scheme, although the opponent of the late Parthian king is a gigantic anthropomorphic figure (von Gall 1990: 13-19; Mathiesen 1992: 132-133, fig. 16; Skupniewicz 2006c; Skupniewicz forthcoming). The aforementioned mosaic from Palmyra already represents a canonical composition, and from the third to fourth century the compositional pattern is used in hunting iconography (Harper 2006: 79-81, fig 9). It is possible that the scenes showing a warrior in fighting attitude with no target represented are to be related to the same pattern, with enemies being marginalized out of the picture. Later metalwork with Sasanian roots sometimes shows a single rider in a limited area, as can be observed on the panel from a vase of the Nagyszentmiklós treasure, and on a Volga Bulgar silver plate (Bálint 2002; Marschak 1986: 98-100, pl. 123). The latter is a rather far and indirect analogy that may refer to other sources as well, however it is placed in the wider group of “Oriental silver”. A connection with the depiction of Byzantine warrior saints cannot be excluded either.

It can be concluded therefore that initially armor appeared in public and private iconography. In both cases it emphasized the wealth of its wearer. In the former context the armor type was the cuirass, iconographically related to the religious depictions of the Near East and Bactria, as well as to Roman military tradition. In both cases the armor accentuated the membership of a privileged, wealthy social stratum. Parthian representations of armored warriors probably influenced the development of Sasanian hunting iconography. In the later period the state sponsored depictions of armored personages became more realistic following a general trend in late Sasanian aesthetics. Although a relationship with Eastern art cannot be excluded, it should be noted that the crowded, highly stylized compositions of Sogdian art, with their emphasis on the effort of both the winning and the defeated parties, are very different from the Sasanian ones (Belenickij 1978: 14-20).14 Śaka coins, however, might have provided some inspiration.

It is also interesting to find partly armored personages, as on Chal Tarkhan stucco and the capital at Taq-e Bostan originating from Bisotun, who either wear a part of armor of a symbolic importance or wear a fragment which was to suggest a full panoply. This action would visually compromise the need to show the heroic personage unarmored and represent the wealth that allows wearing armor. The viewer was thus assured that the lack of armor is not a sign of poverty but noble bravado. The gorget was pointed as the possible source of the word designating heavily armored cavalry (Michalak 1987: 76) hence its special significance of a piece covering the neck, the throat, the parts joining the head with the rest of the body seems justified.

In judging the credibility of the depiction of armor in Sasanian art for the study of weapons, it should be noted that private depictions of the earlier pe-

14 There are however clear borrowings from Sasanian art in Sogdiana see: Lo Muzio 2014.
period do not provide details, whereas all later examples show a tendency towards realism, that is the description of actual equipment used in war. The early rock reliefs (Figg. 1, 2, 4), the Kushanshah coins (Fig. 17) and the Paris cameo (Fig. 5) cannot be overlooked though, as the amount of detail shown could not originate out of nowhere, and they had to remain legible. Therefore they must have been based on actual armor that was in use among the highest echelons of Sasanian society. Splendid suites of armor made of large, shining sheets of metal that referred to the depiction of gods in the Levant, and of Roman emperors, might have been reserved for the royal family, or to the highest officers as a mark of their prestige, being perhaps even less practical on horseback than more flexible constructions. The Taq-e Bostan capital provides evidence for assuming that it survived well into the late period, although at that time it might have been a mere iconographic convention.

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