

## COMPOSITE CREATURES IN SASANIAN ART ACCORDING TO SOME NUMISMATIC AND SPHRAGISTIC EVIDENCE

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The reign of the Sasanian Dynasty (224–651) received great attention in the works of Muslim authors who usually referred to this period as the “golden age” of pre-Islamic Persia.<sup>1</sup> It is however worth noting that objects of art incontrovertibly attributable to the Sasanians are not very numerous. To be precise, the entire production of pre-Islamic Iranian arts is not very big especially when compared to other civilizations of the past that were in contact with Persia and Central Asia such as the Greco-Roman, Indian, and Chinese. Among those specimens that can incontestably be considered as products of artists active at the Sasanian court there are few archaeological sites whose investigation continues (slowly) at present, less than forty rock reliefs, and very few objects of toreutic or other luxury arts (Harper 2006; Callieri 2014). In the last thirty years, scholars mainly focused their efforts in specific fields of study such as numismatics and sphragistics (Gyselen 2006; Callieri 2014).

Sasanian coins, seals, and sealings present in some cases fabulous creatures that are composed of parts of different animals. Such creatures are not always clearly identifiable because they are just partially represented. This is the case of a group of controversial coins of Bahram II (276–293) embellished on the obverse with unusual double or triple busts in profile. In the first variant, the king is represented together with his queen in profile facing right. In the second variant, the king and his queen both face a third person smaller in size and completely shaven, probably the crown prince (Choksy 1989). Not only is the presence of the queen and crown prince completely unusual in Sasanian coinage but one specific crown of the queen presents a very peculiar shape resembling an animal head in profile, possibly a wild boar or a dog (fig. 1). Starting from the ambiguity of this animal head, some scholars proposed to reconstruct also its body although not very naturalistically since a composite winged creature with a dog’s head, lion’s paws, and a peacock’s tail that is commonly called *senmurv* (or *simurgh* in Farsi), considered to be typically Sasanian, was preferred (Gyselen 2010, 198–9, 204–5). This identification is extremely problematic and requires some discussion.

### Senmurv and pseudo-senmurv

Simone Cristoforetti has studied very interesting texts from the Islamic period that suggest a different identification for the composite animal commonly called *senmurv* in Persian traditions. In fact, that creature should be identified with a representation of *xwarrab*, that is to say, “glory” or “charisma,” a very important concept rooted in ancient Iranian culture that was essential to sovereigns to rule and heroes to win over their (monstrous) opponents (Cristoforetti 2013). Two passages studied by Cristoforetti are particularly interesting for the representation of fantastic creatures. In the early tenth century, Mas’udi [II, 282] wrote that Khusraw II Parvez (590–628) had nine personal seals, one of which presented the image of something called *Khurasan khurra*, literally “glory of Khurasan,” a region intended here to mean “east,” “orient.”<sup>2</sup> Some centuries later, between the end of the eleventh century and the beginning of the twelfth, the great Muslim scholar Biruni (who was quoting Iranshahri)

1 For example Biruni (who was born in Khwarezm and was well acquainted with pre-Islamic Central Asian and, generally speaking, Iranian traditions) spoke about the Sasanians, explicitly associating them with the mythical Kayanids: Cristoforetti 2013, 340. See below.

2 In fact, E. Herzfeld used the Latin expression “gloria Orientis”: Herzfeld 1938, 157.

described those *Kburasan kburra* as “flying foxes” that appeared in antiquity on the occasion of a “spring festivity” and represented the wellness of the Kayanids [vol. I P. 260].



Figure 1.

In the Pahlavi text *Karnamag i Ardashir i Papagan*, the first Sasanian king was explicitly associated with a manifestation of *xwarrah* that was following him in the shape of a very controversial creature whose aspect cannot be determined since all Pahlavi manuscripts (written during the Islamic period) present a corrupted form to describe it [chap. VII. 11–24]. That same episode about the trials of the first Sasanian king Ardashir can be found in Firdousi’s *Shahnameh* (late tenth-early eleventh century) written in Farsi. One scholar expected to find a description of the *xwarrah* following Ardashir as a ram (Grenet 2003, 43) but this is not the case since Firdousi always used the very problematic term *ghorm* (Cristoforetti 2013, 344).<sup>3</sup> It is not easy to decide what the *ghorm* looked like. Actually, in Farsi *ghorm* can mean “male mountain goat” although in some written sources it is described as a composite creature, for instance, in a unique *Shahnameh* manuscript at present in the British Library [Ms. C. III 24]. In that text, the *ghorm* is explicitly described as the creature representing the glory that was following Ardashir; it had “the wings of the *simurgh*, the tail of a peacock, the head and hooves of Rakhsh,” that is, the horse of Rustam, the principal hero of Persian mythology. Moreover, in a Persian text composed in Mughal India (*Kitab-i mustatab-i Buhayra*), the creature following Ardashir is described as a “flying dog” rendered as “*ghorm-i ziyān*” (Cristoforetti 2013, 342).

Other Pahlavi (but also Avestan) sources can be very useful in order to propose a concrete shape for the abstract concept of *xwarrah*. According to Michael Shenkar, *xwarrah* could appear as fire in the *Mihr Yasht* [10.27], *Wizidagiha i Zadspram* [5] and *Denkard* [7.2.7], a *vareghna* bird (falcon?) in the myth of Yima [Yt. 19.30–34], a ram in the *Karnamag* (but, as observed above, this identification is probably incorrect), and an enigmatic flying creature in *Denkard* [816.13] and *Pahlavi Rivayat* [22.10]. In Persian literature of the Islamic period and specifically in the *Shahnameh* there are several references to *xwarrah* as a nimbus or luminous aura that legitimated kings of the Kayanid Dynasty and heroes of the Iranian epos (Shenkar 2017, 57).

Just as in the problems in the *Karnamag*, the word that described a manifestation of *xwarrah* as a flying creature in *Denkard* and *Pahlavi Rivayat* was written in a corrupted form that expert philologists proposed to reconstruct in different ways. According to one hypothesis, that term could be rendered in origin as *tannin*, literally “sea dragon,” that is another composite creature (Shenkar 2014, 132–3). This emended term, possibly referring to a fantastic creature, definitely presents a solution to many figurative problems and constitutes a precise parallel with Sogdian art to be discussed below. It could also be considered a perfect alternative to every translation of that passage in the *Karnamag* already attempted in the past. Scholars such as D. D. P. Sanjana (1896, 16–18) and C. F. Horne (1917) preferred to translate the creature following Ardashir

<sup>3</sup> There are other episodes dealing with the creature called *ghorm* associated with *xwarrah* in the *Shahnameh* and other Islamic period Persian texts. For example, in his second trial Rustam and his horse Rakhsh are going to die in a desert when suddenly a *ghorm* appears and leads them to a water source [*Shahnameh*, ed. Khalegi-Motlagh 1990, 24–25]. In the *Darabnameh* (an eleventh-twelfth century Persian romance), Queen Hōmay, who was the daughter of Bahman and granddaughter of Isfandyar, could find her way through terrible mountains just by following the *ghorm* sent by God to help her [*Darabnameh*, ed. Safa 1977, 328].

in the *Karnamag* as “eagle” because, in their opinions, a bird of prey could better represent the appearance of *xwarrah* in a concrete form (Compareti 2009–2010; Cristoforetti 2013, 342). Other problematic interpretations associated with the manifestation of *xwarrah* as a protection for Ardashir can be found in at least two more passages of the *Karnamag*. In both cases the *xwarrah* assumed the aspect of an animal, probably an onager [chapter VIII.7] and a bird [chapter X.7]. It should be assumed that, according to written sources, manifestations of *xwarrah* included a plethora of forms (fire, bird, dragon, onager) while the *senmurv* was exclusively a giant (and magical) bird (Compareti 2016.a, 25). It should not be ruled out the possibility that also the ram was another manifestation of *xwarrah* although such an identification has not been proved and it is just based on one lecture of the *Karnamag* that still presents several problems.

The so-called *senmurv* actually points to the representation of *xwarrah* in figurative arts as well. Its mistaken identification with the magical bird of Iranian mythology should be reconsidered (Compareti 2006; 2016.a; 2016.b). For this reason, the name “pseudo-*senmurv*” should be preferred for the composite creature of pre-Islamic arts while the real *senmurv* has always been described and represented as a colossal bird, especially in Islamic book illustrations since the Mongol period.

Several museums include in their collections art objects embellished with pseudo-*senmurvs* that have been uncritically attributed to Sasanian Persia in the past. However, none of these items come from controlled excavations and it cannot be ruled out that they probably represent the result of post-Sasanian, Central Asian, or Byzantine production (Compareti 2016.a, 15). Actually, very few pseudo-*senmurvs* can be considered authentically Sasanian. Examples of pseudo-*senmurvs* appear twice in the late Sasanian rock reliefs of the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan: on the garments of the colossal archer in the wild boar hunting scene (fig. 2) and on the fabric that covers the legs of the horse rider in the rear of the grotto itself (fig. 3). As was suggested in some recent publications, a better chronology could be proposed for the rock reliefs in the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan (Mode 2006; Compareti 2016.a; 2016.b). The two lateral hunting scene panels in low relief should be

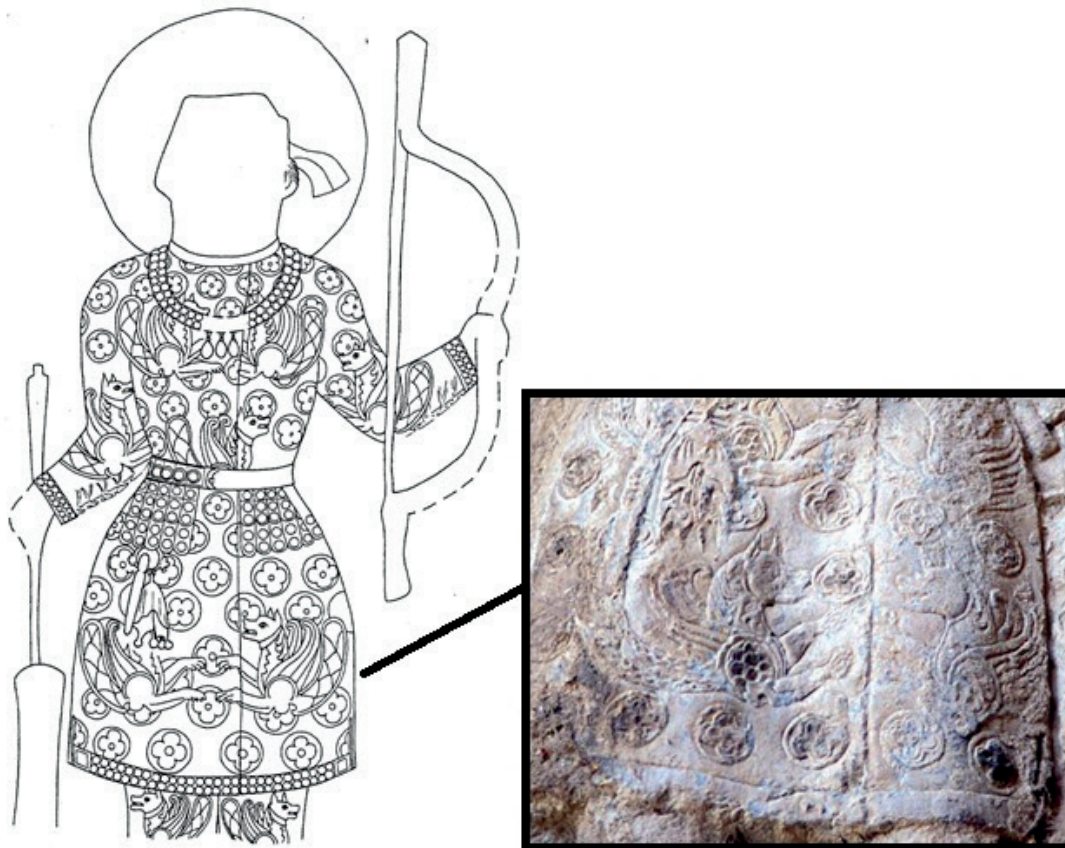


Figure 2.

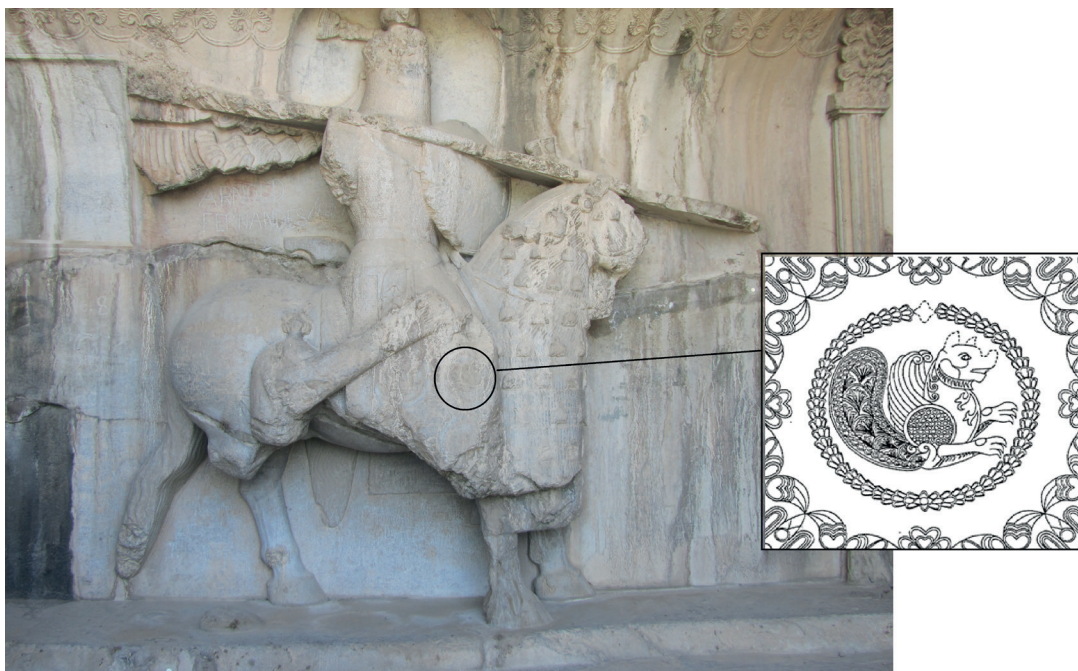


Figure 3.

dated to the first phase of construction of the site while the high reliefs in two levels in the rear of the grotto would have been executed some time later. It is highly probable that the horse rider on the lower level in the rear of the grotto replaced another panel that could have been originally decorated with hunting scenes as well. The main evidence in support of this hypothesis is not only the completely different style of those groups of sculptures but also the fact that the equestrian figure is carved much more deeply into the back of the grotto than the hunting panels. According to Markus Mode, it could even be possible to hypothetically reconstruct that replacement panel with a scene of a relevant person hunting lions (Mode 2006).

As a matter of fact, there is no way to be completely certain about such a reconstruction although one neo-Assyrian relief from the Northern Palace at Ninive, room C, panels 8–9 (at present in the British Museum WA 120861–2) could offer very interesting insights. This relief was probably executed around 645–635 BCE at the time of King Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE) and it represents the royal hunt in an open space, possibly a private park. On the top of a hill a pavilion practically identical to the structure in the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan dominates the scene (fig. 4). Details such as the arch facing the observer or the crenellations on its top definitely call to mind the architecture at Taq-i Bustan. That Assyrian pavilion was definitely decorated internally with reliefs and the one facing the arch at the rear of the structure is even clearly reproduced: it shows the king hunting lions from his chariot (Matthiae 1998, 71; Collins 2008, 116). It is worth observing that the lion is represented twice in the same scene: still alive while attacking the king and already dead under the chariot. This seems to be a “formula” found quite often in Sasanian art as a possible allusion to the infallibility of the royal hunter (De Francovich 1984, 89–98). However, it should not be considered a purely Sasanian invention since it clearly existed already in Mesopotamian art some centuries earlier. The same structure in the larger grotto at Taq-i Bustan with an arch and crenellations above seems to be actually rooted in Mesopotamian or, at least, in neo-Assyrian art although its functions and meaning are still a matter of debate. If one should consider Mode’s hypothesis in the light of that relief from Ninive then there would be no doubt that he was definitely accurate in his reconstruction.

Taq-i Bustan is probably the controversial monument par excellence of Sasanian art. Its chronology is still debated among scholars, some of whom prefer an early chronology (Callieri 2014, 156–7), while others opt for a later one (Mode 2006). More evidence in support of the arguments for a



Figure 4a. Bigger grotto at Taq-i Bustan



Figure 4b. Assyrian relief from North Palace, Ninive Room C, Panel 8-9. British Museum (WA120861-2)

later chronology has recently been presented by Gianroberto Scarcia (2013; 2017). According to written sources and local legends studied by Scarcia, the site could be attributed to Bastam (called also Bistam, Bishtam, or Vishtam, etc.), a maternal uncle of Khusraw II Parvez who had Parthian origins and rebelled against the Sasanians (Shahbazi 1989). He was able to control a vast territory in western Iran and even mint coins in his name until his final defeat and execution around 600 CE most likely in a place not far from Taq-i Bustan (around Hamadan according to Dinawari). Local people (including also Kurds, Azeri, and Armenians) still call that site Taq-i Bastam, “the arch of Bastam,” and not Taq-i Bustan, “the arch of the garden”. In his book *Mukhtasar Kitab al-buldan*, al-Faqih al-Hamadani (ninth-tenth century) called Taq-i Bustan simply *Wastan* which is another form for Bastam (Massé 1973, 261). Also in the *Mojmal al-Tawarikh* (twelfth century), the site is called *Bishtam* that was another name for Bastam (Mohl 1842, 126).

All these arguments proposed by Mode and Scarcia could suggest a different scenario for the construction of Taq-i Bustan. The monument could have been started by Bastam who, in all probability, was inspired by western elements or simply wanted to present himself as the continuator of traditions possibly even rooted in ancient Mesopotamian civilization. He promoted the representation of hunting scenes including his own portrait as a sovereign wearing garments embellished with specific symbols such as the *xwarrah* as a composite creature (fig. 2). As already mentioned above, Bastam had Parthian origins and he maintained very tight relations with eastern Iran and his Central Asian homeland. He was also appointed as governor of Khorasan by Khusraw II Parvez when he was still in good terms with the Sasanians (Shahbazi, 1989). Details of his garments, such as the belt with hanging straps, and some of his weapons (such as the quiver or the bow case) were definitely adopted from the steppes. It is not ruled out that those decorative elements also observed at Taq-i Bustan do not represent examples of Sasanian fashion but rather Central Asian importations. At this point, one could wonder if the composite creature symbolizing *xwarrah* itself is really a Sasanian creation and not another importation from Central Asia.

The concept of *xwarrah* was definitely very important in Zoroastrian scriptures but it does not appear in Achaemenid royal inscriptions. In fact, it was used in Achaemenid times as a component in theophoric names without any particular emphasis other than Zoroastrian deities or concepts (Gnoli, 1999). Nor in early Sasanian times was the term considered particularly attractive. It started to become central to Persian culture and propaganda only during the fifth century CE when Pahlavi terms such as *xwarrah* (in the formula “*xwarrah abzud*” “the glory increased”) and also *kay* (Kayanid) appeared on Sasanian coins (Panaino 2004, 556–62; Daryaei 2009, 24, 34;

Daryaee 2013, 18–19).<sup>4</sup> In no case do those inscribed coins present images that could be openly associated with the concept of *xwarrah* while it is in eastern Iranian lands (that is to say, in Central Asia) where very interesting information can be found.

### Senmurv and pseudo-senmurv in Central Asia

Representations of a winged creature with a dog's face and peacock's tail started to appear as countermarks together with the Pahlavi inscription "*xwarrah*" on seventh-century Hunnish coins from southeastern Afghanistan (Göbl 1967, 156–7). Slightly later those same epigraphic countermarks could also be found on some Sogdian coins (fig. 5). In this case the inscription should be read as "*farn*" which is *xwarrah* in Sogdian language (Compareti 2006, 188; Shenkar 2014, 139). Numismatic evidence strongly supports what has already been deduced from Islamic written sources although additional information can be found in Sogdian art.



Figure 5.

Mural paintings from Penjikent present religious scenes and reproductions of banquets or receptions that in all probability really took place in the houses of rich Sogdians. Deities and important people very often appear together with a beribboned composite creature flying in front of them. It has been proposed with very convincing arguments to identify such a creature as a figurative manifestation of divine protection or glorification (Azarpay 1975; Belenitskii, Marshak 1981, 71–3). A very clear parallel could be traced between the creatures in Sogdian paintings and those in Sogdian epigraphic countermarks in order to establish their identification exclusively with *farn* (*xwarrah*) and nothing else.<sup>5</sup>

The painted program of the so-called "Blue Hall" at Penjikent (room 41, sector VI) is probably the most celebrated example of Sogdian art. Its name derives from the lapis lazuli color used as a background for the better preserved portion, recently restored by the capable personnel of the State Hermitage Museum, that includes scenes from the story of Rustam (Marshak 2002, 24–52). This hero can be recognized several times in the painted program because of his leopard skin garments and his reddish horse, Rakhsh. Some scholars identified the beribboned creature flying in front of him as a representation of *senmurv* that is described in the *Shahnameh* as a protector of Rustam and his family. However, it is more probable that it is a symbol of *farn* (glory), possibly even the personal *farn* of Rustam since it is repeated identically several times in the painted program. Only in one portion of the Blue Hall is Rustam depicted as fighting with a bow against another horse rider whose shape is not well preserved although his flaming shoulders point to a very important enemy. Not only does the *farn* appear in front of Rustam but there is also a bird that looks like a white owl behind the hero (fig. 6). Most likely that is a representation of the *senmurv* observing the duel and possibly protecting Rustam in one particularly dangerous trial. This is also the only scene showing Rustam fighting with a bow. It corresponds pretty well with the description of the duel between Isfandyar and Rustam in the *Shahnameh* although no inscription appears in that portion of the painted program (Compareti 2015, 37; 2016.a). Cleaning by the Hermitage restorers of

4 The term (or title) *kay* appeared much earlier than the fifth century on Kushano-Sasanian coins possibly minted in Bactria: Rezakhani 2017, 204.

5 Another characteristic of Sogdian art was the representation of deities together with their symbolic animal that was very often reproduced on both sides of thrones. This is the case of a late fifth-century painting in Temple II at Penjikent where a goddess can be observed sitting on a zoomorphic throne whose support was shaped like a winged dog with a small horn on its head and a flower on its cheek: Belenitskii, Marshak 1981, fig. 34. Boris Marshak explicitly associated this winged doglike creature with the image of our pseudo-*senmurv* and from a mere iconographical point of view his observation is undoubtedly correct. In this case, that Sogdian painting would represent the very first image of an almost complete pseudo-*senmurv* (just its tail is covered by the rug on the throne) that is on the contrary absent in contemporary Sasanian art.



Figure 6. The part of rustam painted program under restoration recently exposed (the state Hermitage). Penjikent, Room 41/Sector VI

fragmentary parts of the Blue Hall that are still unpublished revealed another giant yellow bird in an area that is not far from the scene just described. In all probability it is a representation of the *senmurv*. This does not exclude the possibility that the magic protector of Rustam appeared twice (or more times) in the scenes of the Blue Hall. Frantz Grenet proposed identifying the white bird that looks like an owl behind Rustam at Penjikent as a reference to a very long battle that continued also into the night (Grenet 2015, 427). This is just one possibility although the comparison with Islamic book illustrations could suggest the owl as the more probable candidate to represent the *senmurv*.

Representations of fabulous creatures and above all the *azhdaha* (dragon) and *senmurv* (or *simurgh* in Farsi) appear very frequently in Persian art during the Islamic period. After the Mongol conquest of Persia at the time of the Ilkhanids (1256–1353) many Chinese elements typical of the

Song Dynasty period (960–1279) began to be adopted, especially for the decoration of Islamic illustrated manuscripts (Vogelsang, 2013). In this manner, the *azhdaha* (dragon) and *senmurv* of Persian epics were represented respectively according to the iconography of *long* and *fenghuang*. The latter has been commonly translated by Western scholars as “phoenix” although such an identification is not that obvious (Compareti 2016.c, 121). Only a small group of Ilkhanid or Inju’id Persian book illustrations dated to the 30s-40s of the fourteenth century present the *senmurv* as a bird whose iconography is not based on Chinese models (Swietochowski, Carboni



Figure 7. Shahname, Shiraz (?) Inju’id, 1333 (St.Petersburg, State Public Library)

1994, 33, 71, 82). In fact, the *senmurv* looks like a bird of prey that is not flying in the air, with some kind of element above its head, probably feathers like an owl, the comb of a rooster, or even horns. Written parts of those same books identify the *senmurv* beyond any doubt, for instance in a *Shahnameh* from the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg [ex Dorn 329]. Here the *senmurv* looks vaguely like an owl above some rocks with its body in profile and the head frontal



Figure 8. Birth of Rustam Shahname, Diez Album Isfahan (?), c. 1335 (Berlin Staatsbibliothek)

(fig. 7) exactly like the white bird in the Blue Hall at Penjikent. However, one unique illustration in the so-called Diez Album [Fol. 71, S. 7] depicting the birth of Rustam presents a *senmurv* completely differently while dialoguing with Zal (fig. 8). It could recall the giant yellow bird recently restored in the Hermitage and unfortunately still unpublished. In that same restored portion two men appear beside an object that looks like a metal basin: one person is kneeling like Zal in the Diez Album scene while the standing man has his right hand inside the basin. The entire scene could represent the evocation of the *senmurv* by Zal, Rustam's father, who had to burn one feather of that same magical bird in a metal burner to summon it as in the Diez Album.



Figure 9. Sasanian epigraphic seal  
The British Museum (120341, EG20)

Parallels offered by Persian Islamic book illustrations constitute an important term of comparison with Sogdian mural paintings. It seems very probable that the Ilkhanid and Inju'id *senmurvs* just considered could be the last representatives of more ancient local artistic traditions whose only pre-Islamic specimens survived just in Sogdian paintings at Penjikent. All representations of *senmurvs* after the fourteenth century followed Chinese models.

### Senmurv and pseudo-senmurv in Sasanian sphragistics

According to Muslim authors, Khusraw II had one personal seal embellished with a foxlike winged creature that possibly resembled the pseudo-*senmurv*. Before the period of that king there is no trace of this creature in any written sources nor in Sasanian art so it is possible that the pseudo-*senmurv* was introduced into Persia just during the reign of Khusraw II. The only place from where this symbolic fantastic animal could have been introduced is Central Asia and specifically Bactria or even Sogdiana. Here the term *farn* was even reproduced on coins embellished with the image of the pseudo-*senmurv*. If the first construction stage at Taq-i Bustan was started by Bastam, it is then obvious to find there also typical Central Asian motifs since he was of Parthian descent and ruled for a while in Khorasan. After suppressing the rebellion of his maternal uncle, Khusraw II also took control of Bastam's monument at Taq-i Bustan and ordered his statue to be represented with the symbol of glory from Central Asia (*farn*) on his own garments. He probably wanted to appropriate that composite creature and use it as a trophy.

A single Sasanian seal in the British Museum (120341, EG 20) presents the image of a fantastic creature very similar to our pseudo-*senmurv* (fig. 9). Also an inscription in Pahlavi appears in the



lower part (Bivar 1969, pl. 13). It is to be read *'pzw'n* (*abzud*) which is part of a formula usually written *xwarrah abzud*, "the glory increased," pretty common on Sasanian coins minted after the fifth century (Daryaee, 2009, 24, 34; Daryaee 2013, 18). The formula *xwarrah abzud* can be found on an unusual series of gold coins of Khusraw II Parvez accompanying the bust of a deity encircled with flames whose identity has not been clearly established (fig. 10). According to one scholar, the deity could be Adur or the personification of *xwarrah* or, less probably, Anahita (Gyselen 2000). Why in the British Museum seal does only the word *abzud* appear? Could we imagine that, possibly, the word *xwarrah* of the usual formula has been substituted by a figurative representation of that concept? This is just a hypothesis and it is not supported by



Figure 10. Unidentified deity on a golden coin of Khusraw II



Figure 11. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna; Inv. Ar. Pap. Nr. 17 Vienna 1894, p.142.  
"God gives long life to whoever follows Him"  
A. Hölder, PYPYRUS ERZHERZOG RAINER. Führer durch die Ausstellung. Wien, 1894, p.142.

other similar findings. The seal is in fact extremely rare and it corresponds quite precisely to the special seal of Khusraw II described by Mas'udi. Its chronology has been established by Bivar (1969, 81) as late Sasanian on epigraphic bases although it could even be proto-Islamic since Pahlavi was still used in Persia and Central Asia at least until the tenth century.

It is worth noting that also in Islamic art our pseudo-*senmurv* started to appear quite early and specifically on seals. The National Library of Austria includes in its collection also the so-called "Archduke Rainer Papyrus" (Inv. Ar. Pap. Nr. 17) that presents an epigraphic image of a pseudo-*senmurv* in ink from an original clay seal considered to be Omayyad (fig. 11). Unfortunately, the Arabic inscription on the seal is not useful to identify the composite creature on it being just an Islamic religious formula "God gives long life to one who follows Him" (Creswell 1940, fig. 686).<sup>6</sup> So, the use of Pahlavi on the seal in the British Museum studied by Bivar strongly suggests that it is an object to be dated to the Sasanian period.

### A complex origin

Ancient representation of winged composite creatures in Sogdian art can be observed for the first time outside Sogdiana proper. As is well known, Sogdian merchants had begun to found colonies in other parts of Central Asia and China at least since the fourth century CE (De La Vaissière 2005). In the vicinity of Xi'an, an entire cemetery of foreigners has been individuated by Chinese archaeologists who even excavated some sixth-century tombs which belonged to important Sogdian immigrants as is recorded in their epitaphs. Among the most interesting creatures appearing on that group of funerary monuments there is a winged horse with a fish tail on the Shi Jun/Wirkak sarcophagus (The Institute of Archaeology of Xi'an 2005, fig. 50). Elements such as the crescent above its head, the floating ribbons, and stylistic detail of the wings recall something similar observed

6 I wish to thank Aila Santi who called my attention on this specific object discussed in her unpublished dissertation: *L'iconografia protoislamica del Senmurv*, Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità, Corso di laurea in Archeologia e Culture dell'Oriente e dell'Occidente, Università di Roma "La Sapienza", 2011-2012.



Figure 12.

occasionally in Sasanian art although not exactly on creatures like this (fig. 12).

Prototypes for that kind of winged horse should be searched for in Greco-Roman and Etruscan funerary art that reveals also more ancient Mesopotamian components. Not only are several features represented identically (such as the coiling tail) but also the association with funerary rituals appears very clearly. Typical composite creatures appearing very often on Etruscan and Roman sarcophagi were horses, bulls, lions, rams and dogs with the tail of a fish and sometimes wings. The most representative of these creatures was probably the *ketos* (pl. *kete*) that was part dog and part fish although sometimes it could resemble an Indian *makara* (Compareti 2016.c).<sup>7</sup> It could be represented as the vehicle of maenads or other minor Classical aquatic deities although it presented also negative connotations since it was also the monster that had to devour Andromeda in the myth of Perseus and, according to some traditions, even one of the creators of Medusa and her terrible sisters, the Gorgons. Apparently there were several *kete* in Greek mythology (Angelini 2010). Those fantastic animals were considered to be *psychopompi*, namely creatures that accompanied the soul of the dead in the underworld according to Classical culture and art. They could have been introduced into Bactria, Sogdiana and probably India during the invasion of Alexander the Great (Compareti 2016.c). Luxury arts could have been the main means of transmission although coinage too should not be neglected. In fact, silver coins reproducing the head or entire body of *ketos* on the obverse have been minted in ancient western Anatolia at least since the sixth century BCE (Kagan, Kritz 1995).

After becoming extremely popular in the new “Asian milieu,” those creatures probably started to be re-elaborated by local artists who maintained in a first instance their funerary touch as can be observed in sixth-century “Sino-Sogdian” sarcophagi and on some slightly later terracotta ossuaries recovered in the region



Figure 13. Detail of a Sogdian ossuary from Tuytepa (Tashkent) possibly seventh century CE (History Museum of Uzbekistan, Tashkent)

<sup>7</sup> Creatures resembling those in Greco-Roman sarcophagi appear in some rare Sasanian seals as well: Ritter 2010, pl. XIV.

corresponding to the Sogdiana motherland (fig. 13). Around the seventh century and, on a much larger scale in the first half of the eighth century, composite winged creatures began to appear frequently in non-funerary contexts, especially in Sogdian paintings from Penjikent where they represent the divine protection of deities, kings, heroes, and rich patrons. The observation by some scholars of Zoroastrian religion about an improbable use of “monsters” to represent such an important Iranian concept like *xwarrah/farn* (Hintze 1999, 85-6) is actually proved to be on the contrary very likely since, in origin, those flying creatures had positive connotations rooted in Hellenistic art and culture that was going to be accepted by Christians and Muslims without any problem. As already observed above, one of the most interesting composite creatures repeated several times in front of the same person (probably Rustam) was depicted in the so-called Blue Hall at Penjikent (fig. 6). This could suggest that different deities of the rich Sogdian pantheon had a specific composite creature to manifest their own protection. However, such identifications require more archaeological investigations and specimens in order to allow a precise correspondence.

As can be observed on seventh-century Hunnish and Sogdian coins (fig. 5), the composite winged creature with a dog's head was explicitly associated with the Iranian concept of glory that from Central Asia began to be imported into Persia at the end of the Sasanian period. Slightly later that creature started to be represented also in Byzantine and Islamic arts and soon spread to the Near East, the Caucasus, western and eastern Europe at least until the beginning of the thirteenth century. Its exact meaning among Muslims and Christians is still a matter of debate although it was definitely considered a very appropriate decoration for religious and secular purposes.

### Conclusion

At this stage of our investigation two main points should be maintained as firmly established. Firstly, there is no reason to consider the composite creature under examination as a representation of the mythical bird *senmurv* since every hint points to its identification as a symbol of *xwarrah* both in pre-Islamic and Islamic arts. Secondly, it appeared in Persian art very late just at Taq-i Bustan which is a monument almost contemporary with the Hunnish and Sogdian coins accompanied by explicit epigraphic countermarks. In all probability, its introduction into official Sasanian art should be attributed to Khusraw II Parvez as Muslim authors appear to confirm.

Every hint collected in this paper strongly suggests that the composite creature symbolizing *xwarrah* was adopted from Central Asia in the very late Sasanian period and was not a genuine Persian invention. The same representation of the *senmurv* as something connected with the family of Rostam in Sasanian art seems to be very unlikely. In fact, the Sasanians wanted to be associated with the mythical Kayanids as the term *kay* that had started to appear on their coins at least since the fifth century strongly suggests. Since the Kayanids and their main representative (and Zoroastrian hero) Esfandiyar were enemies of the “pagan” house of Rostam, it would be highly unlikely to find any reference to the *senmurv* in the Sasanian milieu (Compagni 2016.a). According to Dinawari (ninth century) and other Muslim authors as well (but not Firdousi), Rostam was the heretic par excellence who refused to convert to Zoroastrianism and wanted to remain faithful to his original religion (Browne, 1900, 205–11).

Several aspects of the transmission of iconographical forms from Central Asia to Persia are not completely clear but they could be used in order to propose a better identification for other fantastic creatures appearing in Sasanian art. For example, the crown of Bahram II's wife is most likely embellished with a wild boar or griffin head but not a pseudo-*senmurv*.<sup>8</sup> This could be considered correct on chronological bases since the representation of the symbol of *xwarrah* at such an early stage of Sasanian history is very unlikely. On the contrary, its presence on a seventh-century seal perfectly matches the historical situation of the late Sasanian Empire.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth observing that on some early third-century Kushano-Sasanian coins, “sub-king (or governor) Ardashir” wears a zoomorphic crown shaped like a bird in profile. This bird has been identified with the (real) *senmurv*/*simurgh*: Loeschner 2010. In addition such an identification is accurate since, as was discussed in the present paper, the *senmurv* should be associated with eastern Iranian lands such as Zabulistan (Rostam's kingdom) or Bactria (Kushano-Sasanian Ardashir's kingdom) but not Sasanian Persia. One unexcavated Kushano-Sasanian seal from a private collection even presents the entire figure of a wild boar as a headdress of an important person, possibly a king: Shenkar 2017, fig. 21.

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