

The Hybrid Creatures in Iranian and Indian Art

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Abstract

For thousands of years, humans have brought mythical creatures to life in stories and work of art. We find these motifs in art of Assyria, Egypt and Greece as well as Iran and India. In Iran, the main influence of mythical creature at Persepolis and earlier at Pasargadae is Elamite. The Elamite influence is particularly clear in the colossal human-headed winged bulls in the Gate of nations at Persepolis. The other hybrid creatures are seen on gold plaque, seals, bracelets and bowls from different period. The Indian specimens can be seen in the relief carvings on the *torānas* and balustrades of *stūpas*. In this paper, first we will mention the use of these hybrid creatures in pre- Achaemenid and neighboring civilizations, then compare mythical animals in Iranian and Indian art and will show the influence of Iranian motif on Indian's art.

Key words: Art, India, Iran, Hybrid, Motif, Mythical animal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of human history, people have lived in close contact with animals— usually as hunters and farmers — and have developed myths and legends about them. All kinds of creatures, play important roles in mythology. A myth can give special meaning or extraordinary qualities to common animals. However, other creatures found in myths, many-headed monsters, dragons, and unicorns, never existed in the real world.

In some mythological traditions, the gods take on animal form. The ancient Egyptians portrayed their gods as animals or as humans with the heads of animals; this motif also was common in Mesopotamia, although supernatural animals such as Pegasus, the winged horse, were not gods themselves, they were often created, given power, or protected by the gods. Wings on human or animal body is sign of divinity and symbol of power of protection. May be we could say that

winged animals is the result of mixing characteristics of different gods.

Often, mythical animals are hybrids. It means they have mixtures of different species. For example, griffin, a combination of eagle and lion, or some hybrids are blends of human and animal like. The Centaur is half man, half horse. Sphinx is lion like animal with human head.

We can find hybrid animals in many works of some archaeological sites of Iran like Marlik , Sialk, Jiroft, Lurestan, Hamedan, Nihawand and etc. In India between 2nd century BCE to 6th-7th centuries CE we can see variety of mythical animals in sculptures of Barhūt, Sanchi, Amarāvati, Gandhāra, Mathura as also the paintings of Ajanta and etc.

By study the history of Iran and India, we find that relation between northern India and Iranian world date back to very ancient times. During the second half of the third millennium BCE a group called Indo- Iranians cut off from

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the main body i.e. Indo- European people, left primitive homeland in the North Central Asian steppes (Chatterji, 1942, p.12). This group also splitting into Iranian and Indo- Āryan. The Iranians moved into and across the Iranian plateau and the latter group moved south east probably via Afghanistan into the Indian subcontinent (Punjab) and also southwest via the Iranian plateau into northern Mesopotamia (Windfuhr, 2010, p.5). Besides of these, it may be said that historical events, trade, the exchange of man power and religious beliefs were so many channels through which the art of Achaemenian, Parthian and Sassanian Iran entered India. However, relations existed between Iran and India were not permanently established until the end of the fourth century BCE from the time of King Darius I (522-486 BCE), when he conquered and occupied the Indus Valley and north of India became satrapies of the Great King (Hallade, 1963, col. 1-2). Darius in Naqš-i-Rustam's¹ inscription (*DNa*), mentions several countries which India is one of them, that seized outside of Persia and ruled over them.

θātiy Dārayavauš xšāyaθiya vašnā Auramazdāhā imā dahyāva tyā Adam agarbāyam apataram hacā pārsā adamšām patiyaxšayaīy manā bājim abaraha : Māda Ūvja parθava Haraiva Bāxtriš suguda Hinduš

(*DNa*) 15-25

(Tr.) "Saith Darius the king by the favor of Ahuramazda these are the countries which I seized outside of Persia; I ruled over them; they bore tribute to me;... : Media, Elam, Parthia, Aria, Bactria, Sogdiana, ...,Sind ... (Kent, 1953, pp 137-8).

In 326 BCE, Alexander the Great conquer the lands of Persian empire and crossed the Indus

river and moved on to the plains of India. But Chandragupta Maurya (the first true emperor of India) overthrew the Greek power but maintained diplomatic relations with Seleucus Nicator² (Craven, 1997, pp 35-36). Aśoka (272-231 BCE) the greatest Mauryan emperor ruled over a vast empire that extended from Afghanistan to the very deep south of India that large scale art in stone first appeared (Dehejia, 1997, p 42). Aśoka's palace at Pātaliputra built about the 3rd century BCE seems to have equaled in splendor the Achaemenian palaces at Susa and Ecbatana with many Iranian elements or rather elements and motifs that had come through Iran from far more distant and more ancient origin and majority of this imported motifs belongs to mythical animals which are abound in the relief carvings on the *toranas* and balustrades of *stūpas* (Hallade, 1963, col.4). In fact the artistic elements of Achaemenid became observable in India almost three quarters of a century after fall of Achaemenid. However the Aśokan pillars are indigenous and owes nothing to Persia and reveals more differences than similarities (Harle, 1994, p 22; Dehejia, 1997, p 44).

2. HYBRID CREATURES IN NEIGHBORING CIVILIZATIONS OF IRAN

The ancient nomadic Iranian people subjugated by neighboring Assyria³ between 911 and 609 BCE. At the end of the 7th century, the Assyrian empire, was finally destroyed by a Chaldean-Median coalition, who were to establish a kingdom in Iran, and Assyrian rule in the Near East came to an end. In 539 BCE, both became incorporated in the Achaemenid Empire, one as the "megasatrapy" of Assyria, the other, as the

¹ Naqš-i-Rustam, is an archaeological site located about 12 km northwest of Persepolis, in Fars province, Iran. King Darius I the Great (522-486 BCE) and three other Achaemenid kings ordered their monumental tomb to be carved into the cliff.

² Alexander's successor

³ Assyria (1365-609 BCE) was an ancient kingdom situated on the middle course of the Tigris and occupying the northeastern part of what is modern Iraq. In the northeast, Assyria skirted the spurs of the Zagros mountains; in the southeast, it was separated from its neighbors by the Lesser Zāb, and to the west stretched the desert (Dandamayev, M., and Grantovskii-ĭ, È., online Encyclopaedia Iranica).

satrapy of Media. Although the political power of Assyria was gone, but culture and religion of Assyria lived on (Parpola, 2004, p 18).

Some researchers believe that the main influence in Persepolis and Pasargad, is Assyrian and it particularly clear in the colossal human-headed winged bulls in the ‘Gate of All nations’ at Persepolis, but there are differences between them especially in the reliefs decorate rooms of palaces (Curtis & Razmjou, 2006, p 54) (Fig. 1). But “Herzfeld” believed that the Iranian colossi do not descend directly from the Assyrian but from Urartian⁴ (Herzfeld, 1941, p 248).

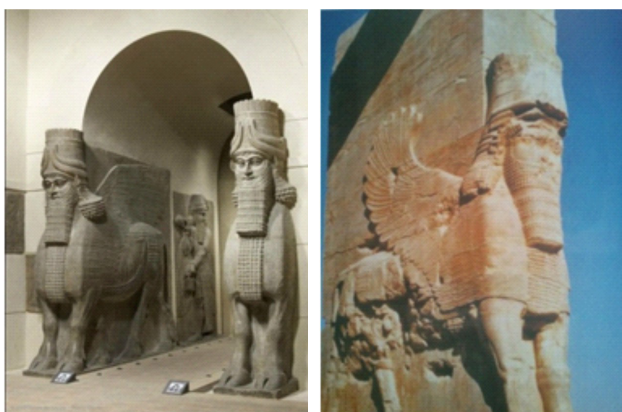


Fig. 1. Left: Neo – Assyrian winged bull or Lamassu from Khorsabad, Iraq, louvre Museum; Right: Achaemenid period, Persepolis, gate of all nations or gate of Xerxes, Iran

By some original sources, we found that, the Iranian colossi did not have the Urartian or Assyrian origin but Elamite.

3. HISTORY OF HYBRID CREATURES IN IRAN

The use of hybrid creatures in Iranian plateau, goes back on the time of Elamite empire. Elam is centered in southwestern part of Iran.

Elamite people had very dynamic idea that created the most bizarre mythical creatures. This theme had been entered throughout entire Mesopotamia.

Tempt- Ahar, an unknown Elamite king (circa 1500-1350 BCE), informs us that he has had a temple of baked brick for the god Inshushinak, and has set up in it statues of two guardian spirits, “Lamassu” and “Karibatu”. Another inscription that mentions Lamassu belongs to Shilhak-Inshushinak⁵ (Hinz, 1972, pp. 64-65). Ashurbanipal⁶ in one of his inscriptions says that “I broke the winged lions and bulls watching over the temple, all there were. I removed the winged bulls attached to the gates of the temples of Elam, until they were not, I overturned.” (Smith, 1871, p. 230). These guardian statues inside the temples or at the gate of temples can be sphinxes, griffins or other hybrid which protected there. We do not know whether Elamite imitated Egypt’s sphinx or they created these creatures themselves.

We find many hybrid animals in other region of Iran, like a winged Ox in a painted goblet found in Nihāwand district, (Fig. 2) which show

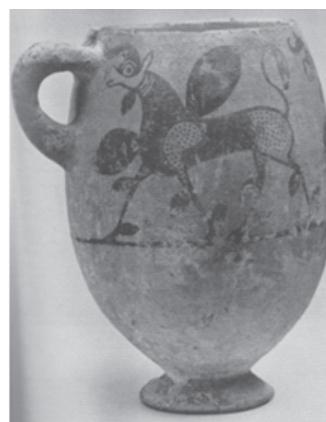


Fig. 2. Goblet with handle at the end of second millennium BCE, Nihāwand, Iran (Pope, 1945, 9)

⁴ “Urartu, the Biblical Ararat, Gr. Alarodii, is the aboriginal name for Armenia, before the immigration of the Armenians from the Balkans” (Herzfeld, 1941, p194). “In the 9th century BCE, it is mentioned (in Urartian sources: “Biainili”) as a confederacy of tribes in the region of Lake Van and in the upper valley of the River Zāb. Gradually, the tribes expanded into the Anatolian mountains between the upper Euphrates and Lake Urmia.”(Kleiss, 2008)

⁵ Elamite king (about 1150-1120 BCE)

⁶ Assyrian King, son of Esarhaddon (about 668-627 BCE)



Fig. 3. Left: Winged-horse, Tepe- Sialk of Kashan , about 9 or 10 century BCE, National Museum of Iran; Right: a bronze plate of Parthian era, Masjed Soleymān, Khūzestān, Iran

the primeval ox a mythical creature out of whose blood had first sprouted the useful plants. Most interesting, however, is the origin of this particular version of the beast, for it bears witness to international exchange: it came from the Indus Valley (Pope, 1945, 8).

4. COMMON HYBRID CREATURES IN ART OF IRAN AND INDIA

The mythical animals represented in early Indian reliefs are varied and include winged lion, horned lion, winged deer or stag, winged bull with elephant face, winged otter, winged goat, winged lion with fish tail, human faced lion and many other creatures (for more information see, Murthy, 1985). In this paper, I can discuss only several of these creatures like winged horse, griffin, bull man, and sphinx.

4.1 Winged horse (Pegasus in Greek mythology)

The winged horse, Pegasus, is an Occidental motif, in use as early as the Mycenaean period⁷, where it is seen on a number of intaglios (Denoyelle, 2011, 3). This motif was especially popular in the Near East, and probably local artisans inspired, in their crafting from mythological horses. We can find many example

of winged horse on seals and dishes in Iran (Fig. 3).

In India we get depiction of winged horse on one of the reliefs of the balustrade of stūpa at Sanchi and Amarāvati sculptures and also Karnataka (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Winged horse, Karnataka, India (www.commonswikimedia.org)

4.2 Griffin

Griffin was the name used in medieval Europe, and today in studies of art, for a fabulous composite animal, typically having the body (winged or wingless), hind- legs and tail of a lion and the head and foreparts of a bird, usually an eagle, and sometimes with ears of a donkey or mule (Álvarez-Mon, 2011, 334). There is the idea that they guarded a treasure of gold and the home of griffin was north India where people dug

⁷Mycenaean is the term applied to the art and culture of Greece from ca. 1600 to 1100 BCE.

up gold dust from the desert (Murthy, 1985, p 10).

It seems that some kind of griffins with equine-like ears appears during the late 2nd millennium BCE in Assyria (Álvarez-Mon, 2011, p 313). The eagle headed griffin as a guardian of the north western entrance to the Chogha Zanbil ziggurat⁸ underline the significance of this creature at the Elamite period. Two inscriptions of the king Untash- Napirisha reveal that he dedicated the griffins to the god Inshushinak. By the 1st millennium BCE, lion – headed griffins and eagle-headed griffins seems to have become favorite motifs in Luristan and Susa (Álvarez-Mon, 2011, p. 344). The origin of the Mesopotamian griffin may be traced back to the representations of a lion headed bird in the late Uruk⁹ and early dynastic periods. This creature is generally identified as the Anzu¹⁰ (Álvarez-Mon, 2011, p.336).

Popularity of the griffin in the Achaemenid period may represent yet another inheritance of symbiosis of Elamite and Persian cultures. The representation of lion headed and bird headed griffins are seen in decorative glazed tiles from Susa, monumental stone reliefs from Persepolis, glyptic art and Achaemenid jewelry.

In India the griffin with lion body and eagle or parrot's beak and with wings find at Sanchi reliefs and also at Mathura (Fig. 5).

4.3 Bull- man

The figure of the 'bull-man', with human head and torso but taurine horns, lower body and legs first appears on proto-Elamite cylinder seals (early third millennium BCE). The bull-man, is seen as a supporter of the throne of god in Neo-Babylonian tablets or as a protective demon in Kassite period, but generally appears as a beneficent creature and barrier to evil (Black & Green, 2004, pp.48-9). It represented a combination of human genius and the strength and power of the bull.

The Elamite king Shilhak-Inshushinak rebuilt a great temple at Susa which was dedicated to Inshushinak, the great god of the Susa. On the panels of molded bricks which were used to decorate the facade of the monument, the figure of the bull-man has been shown wearing a tiara with several tiers of horns that protecting a palm tree alternates with a Lama goddess (Fig 6).



Fig. 5. Left: gold armband, Achaemenid period, 5-4th century BCE (<http://www.britishmuseum.org>); Right: griffin at the *stūpa* of Sanchi, second half of 2nd century BCE (Kramrisch,1954, pic13)

⁸ It was built about 1250 BCE by the king Untash-Napirisha, mainly to honor the great god Inshushinak.

⁹ "Uruk was one of the most important cities (at one time, the most important) in ancient Mesopotamia". (Mark, 2011)

¹⁰ In Sumerian and Akkadian mythology, Anzu is a divine storm-bird and the personification of the southern wind and the thunder clouds.



Fig. 6. Left: panels of molded bricks Susa, Iran (www.louvre.fr) ; Right: bull- man in ancient Indian temple (<http://www.sphinxofindia.rajadeekshithar.com>)

4.4 Sphinx

Sphinx is male and female human-headed lion with or without wings. It seems that the oldest sphinx is Egyptian. It was carved in honor of Pharaoh Kafre in Egypt's fourth Dynasty (2613-2494 BCE) (Regier, 2004, p. 23). In the near east, sphinx is seen on Assyrian cylinder seals (ca.13-11th century BCE) (Hall, 1994, p. 47).

At the Achaemenid period, sphinxes were in use at Persepolis and Susa palaces. For example, a glazed brick relief found at Susa palace depicts two sphinxes, with the body of a winged lion,

which sit facing each other and their human heads turned back. At Persepolis also found on limestone relief, a seated bearded male sphinx facing right with raised left forepaw (Fig. 7).

The earliest sphinxes in India dating to the first century BCE up to the first and second century CE. These belong for the most part to the period of the Kuṣāna dynasty and follow the style of Gandhāra art. Examples have been found in the sculptures of Sanchi, Amarāvati, Barhūt and Mathura. A male with a lion body and wings and a female with a lion body and wings occur each



Fig. 7. Left: a seated bearded male sphinx facing right with raised left forepaw, Persepolis, Iran (www.Britishmuseum.org); Right: The type of sphinx without wings in an Indian temple (<http://www.sphinxofindia.rajadeekshithar.com>)

only once in the whole range of Mathura sculptures. Sphinx with male head, like Egyptian Sphinxes occurs in the sculpture of Sanchi (Murthy, 1985, p.18, 27) (Fig. 7).

5. CONCLUSION

The mythology and the art of Iran and India are full of hybrid creatures. It seems that these motifs entered in India about 3rd century BCE at the time of Aśoka and he used many Iranian elements or rather elements that had come through Iran together with a variety of obviously indigenous motifs in making his palace. It was in fact, these motifs reached India through the end of the fourth century BCE when Achaemenids conquered and occupied the Indus Valley. In India, the majority of mythical animals, are in the relief carvings and balustrades of stupas. In Iran these motifs are seen on gold plaque, seals, bracelets and bowls as well as columns and carvings on the wall of Achaemenid's palaces. With comparing hybrid creatures between Iran and India, we find many similarities among them. Although there is the idea that some hybrid creature like winged ox came from the Indus Valley.

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