

XI.—*On a Silver Sassanian Bowl of about the year 400 A. D., found in the NW. Provinces of India.* By SIR CHARLES HERCULES READ, LL.D., President.

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Read 20th June, 1912.

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THE bowl I have the honour to lay before the Society was sent to me by an Indian correspondent, and I made up my mind at once that it should be secured for the British Museum. On my showing it to my friend Mr. Max Bonn, he was kind enough to offer to present it, and at this moment it is in process of being laid before the Trustees as a gift, through the intermediation of the National Art Collections Fund (pl. XXXV).

My correspondent's story is that during a flood on the Swat River part of the bank was washed away, and that this bowl was discovered in the ground thus exposed. Local tradition associates the spot with the palace of an Indian monarch of six thousand years ago. That may have some foundation, but there can be little doubt that so remote a date has nothing to do with the object before us.

It is a stout bowl, somewhat less than a hemisphere in shape, the metal being about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch thick, plain on the inside, and on the outside having subjects in relief, the whole apparently cast and chased.<sup>1</sup> It weighs 26 oz. 190 gr. Troy, is  $6\frac{5}{8}$  in. (168 mm.) in diameter, and  $2\frac{1}{4}$  in. (57 mm.) high. It bears traces of having been coated with a black varnish, which still remains on many of the sunk parts of the design. This design is concentric from the base. In the centre is a medallion with a bust of a young man to the left, with short curly hair and clean-shaven face, wearing a plain garment cut somewhat low at the throat; below the bust, but still within the encircling ring, are two formal leaves, presenting the appearance of a pair of wings. Beyond this medallion is a broad border, filled with a much tortured foliate design, which upon examination is seen to consist of three birds, phoenixes, peacocks, or the like, the only portions of which that retain any resemblance to the animal world being the heads and necks. To these I shall return later. Beyond again, on the side of the bowl, is the main subject of the decoration of the vessel. This consists of a hunting scene, in which

<sup>1</sup> This is the opinion of a practical silversmith, Mr. Southwick of the firm of Tiffany & Co., to whom I chanced to show it; but I myself feel by no means sure that it has not been made by hammering. Certain dendritic cracks support this theory.



A SILVER SASSANIAN BOWL †

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four horsemen are engaged in the chase respectively of the boar, lions, ibex, and tigers. Above this, on the extreme edge of the bowl, is a narrow border, consisting of a wavy line with a formal leaf in each wave.

To any one familiar with the admirable work of Smirnoff<sup>1</sup> or the collections in St. Petersburg, it is very clear that we have here the feats of a monarch of the great Sassanian line which competed with Rome for her eastern dominions for some hundreds of years, and often with success. Though Persia had been permeated with the arts, literature, and beliefs of the Greeks up to the time of the great Sassanian monarch Artaxerxes (Ardeshir), his successes in the field enabled him to follow his own inclinations and cast off the European tradition in all these directions, and henceforward the religion and arts of the Sassanian kingdom bore the impress of native talent. Thus we find in the productions of the time when the dynasty was most flourishing a style unmistakable in its orientalism, but still with an ineradicable suggestion of the arts of Greece. While this is in general true, at any rate of the more portable remains of Sassanian craftsmanship, the stock of such remains is hardly large enough to enable us to determine, on the evidence of the objects themselves, to what reign they belong. The evidence provided by the coins is in this respect of some help, for it shows that each succeeding king could be distinguished by the style of his royal head-dress. In the present case the royal diadem resembles most nearly that of King Bahram IV (Varanes, A. D. 380-404).

From long use the surface of the reliefs has been a good deal rubbed, and much of the detail is obliterated, though the general features are clear enough. The king (pl. XXXVI, fig. 1) is riding a horse proceeding to the right; his crown is formed of a crescent within which is a sphere, and on either side a horn-like projection; in the one ear visible is a pendent ornament. He holds a spear, with which he is transfixing the head of a boar approaching him beneath the belly of the horse, and of nearly the same size as the latter. The king wears a tightly fitting coat<sup>2</sup> confined by a girdle, and with sleeves, and reaching nearly to his knees, where it is looser and is shown in elegant curves behind him; on the shoulders and probably elsewhere are circular ornaments; his boots reach nearly to the knee, and, like the other figures on the bowl, he is unprovided with stirrups. The horse has a plume on its forehead, a headstall of a simple type, with the reins lying on its neck, and its mane is hogged; the saddle-cloth is quadrangular, much like that of the Household Cavalry, and has a fringe of dots and circles; from it float two pointed pear-shaped objects that in different shapes seem charac-

<sup>1</sup> *Oriental Silver: Atlas of ancient silver and gold vessels of oriental origin principally found in the Russian Empire.* St. Petersburg, 1909. Published by the Imperial Archaeological Commission. (Text in Russian.)

<sup>2</sup> This garment appears to be identical with that worn by Khusrū Parvīz in the Ajanta painting described and figured by V. A. Smith, *A History of Fine Art in India*, p. 291 (see pl. xxxviii, fig. 2).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

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teristic of the Sassanian nobles. The treatment of their surfaces with engraved wavy lines suggests a fur-like material, but they appear to be light in weight, as they are generally represented as floating in the air like balloons attached to lines fastened apparently to the saddle-cloth. In the present example they are edged with engraved lines suggesting a heavy fringe.<sup>1</sup> The end of the horse's tail is tied in a knot. Behind the boar which the king is spearing is another galloping off in the opposite direction, and in the background over his shoulder is engraved a growing plant. The second horseman (pl. XXXVI, fig. 2) is riding in the opposite direction, and to judge by his head-dress should be a personage of some rank; he has a crescent over his forehead, but without the royal sphere, and with projections on either side, while something like the end of a scarf of apparently a diaphanous material floats behind his head; in all other respects his attire is the same as that of the king, and his horse has similar trappings (though the floating ornaments on the crupper are absent) except that a part of the mane is carefully cut to hang down on one side of the neck. The rider is attacking a lion and two lionesses: one of the latter is galloping away; the second, apparently wounded, seems falling to the ground. The lion, which is provided with a sturdy mane, is attacking the horseman, with its fore-paws on the horse's haunches, while the rider, turning in his seat, transfixes the animal's throat with his sword, and raises his left arm aloft, holding a bow in the hand. The features worthy of remark here are the two weapons carried by the huntsman. The sword has a long straight blade, narrowing gradually to the point, a short guard, nearly straight, and a very long and thin hilt terminating in a T-shaped pommel. It would seem that it was intended for use as a two-handed sword, as the long grip would be useless and even awkward in one hand, for it may be noticed that the horseman, in order to get the balance of the weapon, is obliged to grasp it quite close to the guard, thus leaving the greater part of the hilt projecting uselessly and even dangerously behind his hand. The scabbard hangs rigidly along the line of his left leg; it has remains of elaborate ornament, and a chape of an angular form. The bow that the rider holds aloft in his left hand is no less remarkable as a weapon. From its form and from the shape it assumes when drawn (as seen in the succeeding figures on the bowl) this is undoubtedly what is known as a 'composite' bow. This bow, as its name implies, is constructed of a number of materials of opposite qualities, wood, horn, sinew, etc., the effect of the combination being to attain the greatest strength and at the same time the highest tensile and elastic quality. No doubt the composite make of the weapon is intended to be indicated by the parallel curves of the arches on either side of the grip. In the figure next following the rider is drawing his bow, and

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the purpose and construction of these curious objects, see Dalton, *Treasure of the Oxus*, p. 122. Cf. also figure of prince in pl. xxxviii, fig. 2.

it will be observed that while the left arm, grasping the bow, is stretched at full length, the right hand, about to release the arrow, is considerably behind his ear. If the actual power of the weapon be at all in relation to its tensile properties it would be formidable in competent hands.<sup>1</sup>

Following this figure and separating it from the next is a flowering tree, a masterpiece of artistic formalism. Each flower has six petals around a centre.

The third figure (pl. XXXVII, fig. 1) shows a horseman riding to the right, armed only with a bow, and chasing three ibex, one of which is falling on his chest, while the other two are escaping, one having an arrow buried in his neck up to the feathers. The rider wears a pointed cap of fur, cut so as to cover the hair, and has an ornament in his ear; by his right leg hangs a bow-case or quiver with straight sides, ornamented with diagonal bands of a kind of herring-bone pattern. His horse has the balloon-like appendages, similar to those of the king; in other respects his costume calls for no remark, except that from his foot floats a similar object to that behind the head of the last figure. Beneath the horse is a growing plant represented by three curved lines, each having a trefoil flower indicated by

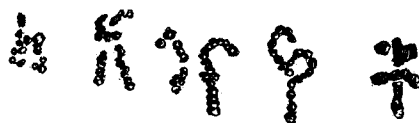


Fig. 1. Inscription on Sassanian bowl.  $\frac{2}{1}$ .

a dot and circle. Before passing to the next figure, I cannot resist calling attention to the thoroughly sympathetic treatment that the artist has bestowed on the figures of the ibex, an animal that must have been very familiar to him, or he could hardly have handled it with so complete an understanding.

The fourth figure (pl. XXXVII, fig. 2) shows a horseman riding to the left and turning in his seat to deliver an arrow at a tiger who rears behind his horse, and forms a kind of cross with a second tiger rearing in the other direction.<sup>2</sup> The huntsman appears to be bareheaded, with short wavy hair, and with an ear ornament; at his side hangs a sword in its sheath, similar to the weapon wielded by figure no. 2; from his foot floats the same appendage as is seen on the last figure; in all other respects he is similarly attired to the others. In the field on either side of his head are five characters, formed of punched dots, a method of placing inscriptions on this class of object usual among the Persians at this time (e.g. Smirnoff, nos. 60, 61, 62).

<sup>1</sup> Composite bows are commonly found in Sassanian hunting scenes: see Smirnoff, *passim*. For the distribution and construction of the weapon see Henry Balfour in *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.*, xix (1890), p. 220.

<sup>2</sup> This arrangement of lions or other animals, rearing up and forming a kind of St. Andrew's cross, is a characteristic feature of Sassanian hunting scenes; e.g. silver ewer in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Smirnoff, no. 85, pl. li.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

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Fig. 1. Ajanta cave fresco—to show the birds ending in foliage (after Griffiths)



Fig. 2. Persian noble (Khusrū Parvīz) and lady: Ajanta Cave I (after Griffiths)

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Bowls of this shape and general type are not uncommon compared with other vessels; three examples very similar to the one now before us are given by Smirnoff (nos. 67, 283, 284). One of them, no. 283, has a head in the middle of the bottom. Another, in the Franks Bequest in the British Museum, has decorations consisting entirely of busts in circles,<sup>1</sup> though they are rather oriental than classical in style. A feature that is helpful, however, is that this Franks bowl has the field between the medallions filled with floral scroll-work that strongly recalls the paintings in the Ajanta Cave no. 1, as Mr. Dalton points out. This cave is dated by Mr. Vincent Smith between A.D. 500 and 642,<sup>2</sup> and contains among other subjects a number of representations of Persians. The best known is perhaps the group thought to represent Khusrū Parvīz, with a lady and attendants, where the king drinks from a bowl not unlike in size to the type now in question, though more conical in outline (pl. XXXVIII, fig. 2). A further link with the Ajanta paintings is found in the floral phoenixes that surround the bust on our bowl. Exuberant foliage is a common decorative feature in the Ajanta paintings, suggesting a connexion with the Buddhist art of Ceylon, which provides abundant material in this direction. The admirable reproductions of the Ajanta caves published by Mr. Griffiths under the auspices of the India Office<sup>3</sup> furnish the student with all that is needful for the study of their art; though copies of certain of the paintings, which successive conflagrations have spared, are still to be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In Mr. Griffiths's second volume, pl. 121, will be seen a bird of the involved foliate type that must be intimately related to those on our bowl, and tends to show that the Persian visits to the Deccan princes were not without their effect on the native art—or possibly the converse was really the case (pl. XXXVIII, fig. 1). That this particular decorative treatment took hold in Persia is fairly certain, for in mediaeval times it is commonly found on the country's ceramic productions, and thence journeyed to China, where as the phoenix it is firmly rooted to this day. It is interesting to note that when the Chinese, as the masters of porcelain making, came to the help of the Persians in much later times, they sent them also their foliate bird as a decorative detail on the pottery that served them for models.

I consider myself fortunate in having been able to add within so short a period a second of these bowls to the fine nucleus that the museum owes to my predecessor, Sir A. Wollaston Franks. Our series of Sassanian silver plate is now by no means negligible. It is somewhat disappointing that the evidence

<sup>1</sup> Dalton, *Treasure of the Oxus*, pl. xxvii.

<sup>2</sup> V. A. Smith, *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, p. 275.

<sup>3</sup> J. Griffiths, *The Paintings in the Buddhist Cave Temples of Ajanta*, 1896, ii. pl. 104. 8 d; 107. 7 a, 7 e; 121, etc.

for precise dating is not quite conclusive, but these difficulties will disappear when more material is available for study. In the meanwhile the most useful service that one can render is to publish every piece with all promptitude, and to place what we have within the reach of all students.

It seems likely, both from the amount of wear that the surface of the bowl shows, as well as from its simple form, that it was intended to be taken from place to place for the king's use, doubtless on such occasions as the hunting expedition it illustrates. A drinking vessel for use in the palace would be more convenient when provided with a foot. As an illustration of the means by which it was no doubt carried about, I give here a figure (fig. 2) of the case of a similar



Fig. 2. Case for drinking bowl; from Fergana.

drinking bowl brought from Fergana. This is of cloth covered with leather, fastened with thongs of leather, and there is no reason to doubt that similarly shaped bowls have been carried in similar cases from Sassanian times, and it may well be that the type is even older.

#### THE INSCRIPTION.

The punched letters on the edge of the bowl were clearly executed after the rest of the work upon it was completed. How long afterwards is not easy to say. The matter being purely epigraphic, I have thought it best to ask my colleague, Mr. John Allan, of the Department of Coins and Medals, to add a note upon it at the end of my communication.

Mr. Allan says:

'The characters of this inscription belong to the north-western variety of the Brahmi alphabet; it need not have been engraved in India, however, as this alphabet prevailed beyond the Hindu-Kush as far as Kashgaria. Its date is probably 400-450 A.D.; the characters closely resemble those of the Bower MSS., brought from Kashgar in 1890 (cf. Bühler, *Indische Palaeographie*, pl. VI, coll. i-iv). As the characters are formed by dots and not by continuous lines, some of them are rather uncertain; but the most probable reading seems to be *khantīnugaka* or *khambhīnugaka*; the language of the inscription does not seem to be Indian.

No other vessel of this period appears to be known with a Brahmi inscription; Smirnoff only gives inscriptions in various forms of Pahlavi, the language of the Sassanian Empire.'