

---

*Daryoosh Akbarzadeh*   
Teheran

A NOTE ON SASANIAN-BUDDHIST  
OBJECT OF GYEONGJU NATIONAL  
MUSEUM\*

---

**Abstract:** Although Korean and late Sasanian texts are silent about mutual relations, archaeological evidences provide a different perspective. This paper deals with an object known at Gyeongju National Museum of the Republic of Korea. The loop was discovered in Bunhwangsa Buddhist Temple in Geun-jik (Gyeongju) region in 2001. Gyeongju's loop includes a round form made of clay, with a pearly chain (running) in the border and two birds (ducks most probably) appearing in the center of the motif while they are trying to hold a stalk of a herb. Many scholarly works have been published about it and interpreted it as the 'tree of life.'

The author believes that this herb (as distinct from a plant) is a sacred lotus. In fact, the birds try to hold it in their beaks. So, an expert creator of the object used known Sasanian artistic elements on the one hand and combined them with a famous Buddhist element on the other hand. It is possible the creator attempted to immortalize his work with this sacred lotus: in a Buddhist temple, only such an element was allowed to be introduced.

**Keywords:** Silla; Sasanian; Gyeongju National Museum; loop; lotus; tree of life

## **Introduction**

The Sasanian dynasty was undoubtedly one of the brightest periods in ancient Iran. Apart from the wonderful tangible and intangible heritage, the cultural bonds with the nearby and distant countries are also important

---

\* The article supported by Laboratory Program for Korean Studies (the Republic of Korea).

features of this period. Iran's cultural ties with the Far East, especially China, are part of this.

Clearly, not only the sixth century AD can be evaluated as a wonderful period in bilateral links between Iran and the Orient in Sasanian Period (Akbarzadeh 2017, 10), trade and travels of Iranian Buddhists to that region (since pre-Sasanian times) must also be added to the picture. Besides, much has been said about the role played by the Sogdians in bilateral trade and religious ties between Iran and the Far East. The (Zoroastrian) Sogdians played an undeniable role in transferring and promoting religious beliefs of Mazdaism and Sasanian art (Vassière 2005).

Unlike the bright beginning of the Sasanian period, the collapse of the kingdom was most effective in the impact made by the Persian art and culture on the Far East. This impact can be comprehended through Persian texts as well. According to them, the final Zoroastrian savior will come from the Far East. Meanwhile, the political migration of Yazdgerd III's royal family to China along with thousands of musicians, artists, and army generals as well as the dream of the return of one of Yazdgird's survivors to liberate Iran from the hands of Arabs were the main reasons for these two events (impact of the art and emergence of the savior) (cf. Akbarzadeh 2013, 12).

### **A Sasanian-Buddhist Object at Gyeongju National Museum**

This paper deals with an object known at Gyeongju National Museum of the Republic of Korea. This loop (Pl. 1: 1) was discovered in the Bunhwangsa Buddhist Temple in Geun-jik (Gyeongju) region in 2001 (Geun-jik 2009, 120). At least in Korea, several works have been published about the object (Kim 2017, 116). In Iran, I personally referred to it as one of the Sasanian objects which was obtained from Korea (Akbarzadeh 2017, 34). In this paper, I try to challenge previous opinions and focus on a hitherto unexamined artistic aspect of the object (Pl. 1: 1).

The form of the object reminds us of Sasanian bullae in the first place (Gyselen 2002, 40-41). These objects, mostly from the sixth century, have a round form while a pearl chain encircles the main motif (in border); the pearl running definitely cannot be called sunshine (see Cheng, Ma and Sun 2010, 164). Such pearl running can be seen frequently on Sasanian coins or textiles with animal and bird designs from the Central Asia to China.

Gyeongju's loop includes a round form made of clay, with a pearly chain (running) in the border and two birds (ducks most probably) appearing in the center of the motif while they are trying to hold a stalk of a herb.

## Discussion

Obviously, the color, the round form and especially the pearl running (as part of the Sasanian royal art or belonging to distinguished people; cf. lion-hunter scene from Nara; Ghirshman 1971, 333) along with the half-faced birds motif do not leave any doubt that the loop is a Sasanian heritage artifact or is at least strongly affected by Sasanian art. Although a reference to Sillian round form objects (the same size) is quite possible, placing these motifs in the center plus other Sasanian artistic elements and the style all contribute to our attribution of it to the Sasanian period. Moreover, I would not say such an object was made by Sillian artisans; it seems it was faultlessly made by a professional creator (artist) who was very familiar with this technic, form and design.

While the bird motifs were normally a part of Sasanian art ranging from rock arts to seals and bullae (Gignoux and Gyselen 1987, Plan. XVI ff.), it seems that the motifs of birds (or other animals) facing each other were popular from Central Asia to the Far East. Additionally, these birds (animals) carry a kind of a herb or protect a plant. Such a technic with birds sitting face to face including a sacred herb or plant is not seen in southern Sasanian art, i.e. Fars, Khuzistan, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The profile-portrayed birds from the object of Gyeongju try to hold a stalk of a herb, but contrary to some known motifs (cf. birds or horses in Cheng, Ma and Sun 2010, 160-165), these two birds do not have ‘ribbons’ on their necks. Two half-faced ducks from China (in the Hermitage Museum at present) carry ribbons on their necks, a kind of trifurcation herb (Zoroastrian sacred number?) in their beaks, face to face, but each one in a separate pearl design (Pl. 1: 2). It may be called a kind of ‘fine art.’

However, several face to face ducks with the same technic can be cited (Cheng, Ma and Sun 2010, 160). It is quite possible to see such ribbons on horses’ legs, too. In the following figure (Pl. 1: 3), where ducks are depicted in the corner, we find it in Central Asia.

Meanwhile, the question raised by the author is what kind is the herb in the beaks of the birds from Gyeongju National Museum. I do not take it

---

<sup>1</sup> Due to these significant differences between southern and the Great Khorasan art to the Far Eastern art (like face to face, ribbons, herbs/plants...), I think that we see the two ‘art schools’ here. Because of Zoroastrianism, the southern school reflects a kind of soulless art while the northeast or Khorasan School, because of Buddhism and the influence of Central Asian peoples, reflects an art that is attractive, flexible and full of pleasant colors. Meanwhile, the author does not refer to Khosrow II as a radical king while his bas-relief in Taq-Bostan (Kirmanshah) is a beautiful, non-religious and tangible scene!

to be a plant; Iranian artists (Sasanian, Manichean, and Sogdians) knew well the difference between a herb and a plant. However, scholarly published works described the herb as the ‘tree of life.’ The following stone (Gyeongju) motif may have contributed to this confusion (Pl. 1: 4).

The second key question is what kind of connection can be seen between Sasanian birds (and other elements) with a Buddhist temple in Gyeongju (Silla). If most of the elements are Sasanian, why was it installed in such a temple? The temple was built by Queen Seondeok (reign: 632-647 AD) with the aim to keep the monarchy. Furthermore, it seems the temple was not open to the public.

In answer to the two questions, the author believes that this herb is a sacred lotus. In fact, the birds try to hold the sacred lotus in their beaks. Clearly, lotus is a significant element of Buddhism; Buddha seats mostly over a lotus (as do other distinguished Buddhist figures, too). This element can frequently be seen in artifacts of Central Asia to China where Iranian Buddhists enjoyed considerable freedom of cult. Kardir (cf. Gignoux 1991), chief priest of Sasanian early kings, proudly mentioned how he punished followers of other religions, including Buddhists.

If we interpret the herb as a lotus, it is quite reasonable to attribute the term ‘Sasanian-Buddhist artifact’ to the loop of Gyeongju National Museum. In this regard, two face-to-face half-portrayed birds with two visible legs, half open wings, pearl running, round form, clay material and color, bullae design of the object, all reflect Sasanian heritage while the lotus is a heritage of Buddhism. The creator(s) tried to zoom out the lotus where its branches are hanging to the bottom. The branches created another circle (like a pearl running) in the center where the flowers of the herb can be seen above the head and under the legs of the birds. This second circle creates a specific point of view. Maybe these two circles (pearl running as an outer one and lotus branches as the inner one) created a better space to portray the birds. Such circles (pearl running) can be seen in many Sasanian objects, for instance Khosrow II’s coins.

However, it is hard to compare this herb with the herb(s) in the beaks of the birds of ‘Yidu’ stones in China. These birds were suggested as a part of Zoroastrian (Sogdian) ausruries (see Lerner 2013, 129). Lerner explained that these birds (falcons according to her) carried herbs in their beaks as a part of a voyage to the spiritual world (after death). However, it seems to me these birds (as per direction of their flight, direction of their eyes, position) appear to be in a slowing down position (material world) rather than flying up towards the sky (Lerner 2013, 130, 134)! If I am right, probably

we witness here another crossing of Zoroastrianism and Buddhism elements; is it plausible to suggest that the ‘green herb’ in the beaks of the birds is a sign of a ‘new life’ or a kind of return to the material world (reincarnation), which is known in Buddhism?

## Conclusion

Historical relation of Silla and Iran dates back to ancient times. Although Korean and late Sasanian texts are silent about mutual relations, archaeological evidences provides a different perspective. Apart from many known objects, two Sillians appeared in Khanqan’s banquet (or hunting scene) along with Sogdians (Iranians) (Compareti 2006, 178). China definitely played a significant role in this regard.

Sasanian objects in Korea can be divided into two categories. The first one comprises objects imported by trade, personal favorites and traces of Sasanian art in some objects. The second one comprises significant objects which were most probably made in Silla, like the loop of Gyeongju National Museum.

Over the past decade, the author has published many scholarly works on Silla and Iran’s historical relations connected with the collapse of the Sasanian Empire and possibility of Iranians’ arrival in Silla after the fall of Sasanian (cf. Akbarzadeh 2014, 3). It is quite possible that Firuz’s survivors (Yazdgird’s son) asked for help and permission to stay in Silla when they lost political and military support in China. Clearly, Iranians, like other foreigners, faced many difficulties with rebels of An-Shan and Taoist minister Li Mi (Compareti 2009). Persian texts widely refer to a visit to Silla in an epic style. *Kush-nama* tells that ‘an Iranian prince (and his companions) who escaped from Iran to China because of the Arabs’ invasion confronted difficulties there after a while and finally sought asylum from Taehur, Silla’s king’ (Matini 1997, 991 ff.).<sup>2</sup> Faridun (who plays a significant

<sup>2</sup> KN was written by Ḥakim Irānšān b. Abal-Khayr between the years 501-04 (1108-11) dealing with the eventful life of Kuš the Tusked, the son of Kuš. A unique manuscript of the work is found in a collection held in the British Library (OR 278 0). In Part II, after the death of his father, Kuš is appointed by Žahḥāk the ruler of an area known in Persian literature as Čīn (China) and Māčīn. There are two Māčīns in the text; Be/asilla is, as an island, a part of the second one and ruled by Taehur King. Some Iranians who were living in China escaped from there because of difficulties and asked the king for help. Taehur receives Iranian prince Ābtin and his accompanies warmly and he stays for a time on the island known variously as ‘Be/asilā’ (Silla) or ‘Jazira’ (Island). Ābtin also marries Taehur’s daughter. See also Matini 1997, introduction, and for the term ‘Be/asilla and Be<sup>h</sup>-Silla’, see Akbarzadeh and Lee 2019, 53.

role in Zoroastrian resurrection) was born from a Sillian mother according to *Mojmal-al-Tavarikh*.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Persian texts testified to connections with Silla, and this land has appeared as a land of dreams, land of the final savior.<sup>4</sup> The question arises: is it possible that one of those Iranian survivors is responsible for such an object as the loop of Gyeongju National Museum?

On the one hand, the expert creator of the object used Sasanian artistic elements and combined them with a famous Buddhist element on the other hand. It is possible that the actual creator (who was a Zoroastrian or Zoroastrian-Buddhist because of a merger of these two communities in the Far East) immortalized his work with this sacred lotus. In a Buddhist temple, only such an element was permitted. So, the creator made a unique artifact which I would like to call 'Sasanian-Buddhist artifact' of Gyeongju National Museum. He revealed his identity through Sasanian elements and at the same time respected Buddhism since two Sasanian birds are holding a lotus. Finally, can one suppose that this Iranian belonged to the architects of the temple whose owner permitted its display there?

The thin stalk of this herb with beautiful crushing leaves and the birds' attempt to hold it indicate that its suggested connection with the tree of life should be rejected. Possibly, the creator selected ducks due to the association between lotus and water (which can be seen)! Lotus is a ubiquitous element in numerous objects of the Gyeongju area. It is also known as an element in Sogdian art and Manichean art (cf. Gulacsi 2001, 147). Furthermore, this claim (combination of Iranian artistic elements with Buddhist elements like the lotus) is supported by Dunhuan's paintings (caves, Pl. 1: 4).

---

<sup>3</sup> *Mojmal-al-Tavarikh va-al-Qassas* (Bahar 2010, 27) reads: "The mother of Afridun is the daughter of king Be/asilla (Korea)."

<sup>4</sup> Jahan-nam (1964, 92): 'Basilla is the farthest part of the Chinese land and it is very flourishing and prosperous. Whoever arrives there would never wish to return to their homeland.' See also *Al-Tanbihyah-wa-al-Ashraf* by Masudi (2010, 26), *Nokhbat-al-Dahr* by Shams. Ansari Dameshghi (2003, 213), Matini (1997, 2241-2243); *Mojmal-al-Tavarikh va-al-Qassas* (Bahar 2010, 481 and passim).

## References

- Akbarzadeh D. 2013.** Some Notes on KN, 6<sup>th</sup> *International Seminar on Kush-nama Research*, 9-25. Seoul.
- Akbarzadeh D. 2014.** A Note on Mazdean Escatology and the Fall of the Sasanians. *Iran Nameh*, 29:2, 3-9.
- Akbarzadeh D. 2017.** A Chinese Loanword in a Zoroastrian Pahlavi Text, *International Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 16, 9-19.
- Akbarzadeh D. and Lee H. S. 2018.** A Political-Philological Note on a Persian Toponym: Ba/esillā. *International Journal of Manuscriptia Orientalia*, 24/1-2-72, 53-58. St. Petersburg. <https://doi.org/10.31250/1238-5018-2018-24-2-53-57>.
- Al-Tanbiyah-wa-al-Ashraf 2010.** *Ali H. Masudi*, trans. A. Payandeh, 4th edition, Tehran.
- Bahar M.T. (ed.) 2010.** *Mojmal-al-Tawarikh-va-al-Qassas*. Tehran.
- Compareti M. 2006.** A Reading of the Royal Hunt at Afrāsyāb Based on Chinese Sources. In M. Compareti and E. de La Vaissière (eds) *Royal Nawrūz in Samarkand: Acts of the Conference held in Venice on the Pre-Islamic Afrāsyāb Painting*. 173-84. Rome.
- Compareti M. 2008.** Afrāsiāb ii. Wall Paintings. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, I/6, p. 577, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afraziab-ii-wall-paintings-2> (accessed online 14 April 2020).
- Compareti M. 2009.** The Last Sasanians in China (Chinese-Iranian Relations XV). *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/china-xv-the-last-sasanians-in-china> (accessed online 14 April 2020).
- Geun-jik L. 2009.** The Developments of Royal Tombs in Silla. *International Journal of Korean History*, 14, 91-124.
- Ghirshman R. 1971.** *Iranian Art (The Iranian Art in Parth-Sasanian Periods)*, trans. B. Fravashi. Tehran.
- Gignoux Ph. and Gyselen R. 1987.** *Bulles et sceaux sassanides de diverses collections*. Paris.
- Gignoux Ph. 1991.** *Les quatre inscriptions du mage Kirdīr*. Paris.
- Gulacsi Z. 2001.** *Manichean Art in Berlin Collections (I)*. Brepols. Turnhout.
- Gyselen R. 2002.** *Nouveaux matériaux pour la géographie historique de l'Empire Sassanide: sceaux administratifs de la collection Ahmad Saeedi*. Paris.

- Jahan-nama 1964.** *M. Najib Bakran*. M. A. Riyahi (ed.). Tehran.
- Kim H. 2017.** An Analysis of the Early Unified Silla Bas-relief of Pearl Roundel, Tree of Life, Peacocks, and Lion from the Gyeongju National Museum, Korea, *Journal of Silk Road*, 116-133.
- Lerner J. 2013.** Yidu: A Sino-Sogdian Tomb?, Sogdian, Their Precursors, Contemporaries and Heirs. *Sogdians at Home and Abroad Conference*, 13-14 Nov, 2008, 129-145. St. Petersburg.
- Matini J. (ed.) 1997.** *Abal-Khayr*. Tehran.
- Ansari Dameshghi Sh. 2003.** *Nokhbat-al-Dahar fi Ajayeb-al-Bar va-al-Bahr*, trans. H. Tabibiyan. Tehran.
- Cheng J., Ma Z., Sun J. 2010.** *Silk Road: The Surviving Treasures from the Northwest China*. Beijing 2010.
- Vassière E. 2005.** *Sogdian Traders*, trans. J. Ward. Leiden, Boston MA.

Daryoosh Akbarzadeh  
Research Center for Languages and Inscriptions  
Research Institute for Cultural Heritage and Tourism  
Teheran, Iran  
d.akbarzadeh@richt.ir



1



2



3



4

Pl. 1: 1. The Sasanian-Buddhist Object from the National Museum of Gyeongju (by author)

Pl. 1: 2. Two birds facing each other, each in a pearl running (Hermitage Museum, by author)

Pl. 1: 3. Compareti 2008; also National Museum of Seoul 2009, 196-7

Pl. 1: 4. Kim 2017, 116