The Image Debate

Figural Representation in Islam and Across the World

Edited by

Christiane Gruber

GINGKO

This book is dedicated to one of its authors, Mary Nooter Roberts (known to all as Polly), who died before seeing the book in its finished form.

First published in 2019 by
Gingko
4 Molasses Row
London SW11 3UX

Copyright © selection and editorial material Christiane Gruber; individual chapters, the contributors.

The rights of Christiane Gruber to be identified as the author of the editorial material, and of the individual authors as authors of their contributions, has been asserted by them in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereinafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781909942-34-9
eISBN9781909942-35-6

Designed and typeset by Goldust Design
Printed in Italy by Printer Trento

www.gingko.org.uk

Contents

Religious Imagery and Image-Making in Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia

MICHAEL SHENKAR

The pre-Islamic Iranian world occupied an extensive region between the Eurasian steppe belt and the Persian Gulf on the northern–southern axis, and between the Zagros Mountains and the Indus valley on the eastern–western one. From the first millennium BCE and until the Arab conquests in the seventh–eighth centuries CE, this region was dominated and mainly populated by the various Iranian-speaking peoples (as some parts of this area remain to the present day). This essay surveys the use of figural images in cultic practices of some of the major Iranian cultural and political entities that existed in this period, offering a broad perspective on the perceptions of images in ancient Iranian worship.

NOTIONS OF THE DIVINE IN THE IRANIAN WORLDVIEW

Describing the religious customs of the Achaemenian Persians in the fifth century BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote: 'I know that the Persians have these customs: it is not their custom to erect statues, temples and altars, but they even make fun of those who do, because – as it seems to me – they have not considered the gods to be of human form, as do the Greeks' (Herodotus 1.131).[1] Although his technical observations proved to be correct – the cult of the Achaemenian Persians was indeed aniconic, his interpretation was certainly wrong. There is clear evidence that from the dawn of their history and throughout the entire pre-Islamic period, the Iranians conceived of their deities as fully anthropomorphic beings. This is evident already from the Avesta, the earliest source of the Zoroastrian religion, which describes various deities as having eyes, arms, riding chariots, etc. However, throughout their history, Iranians often tended to represent their gods in aniconic form, and to denote the divine presence without a figural image.[2]

Figure 1. Bust of Atar on a fire-altar, agate seal, Iran, 224–651 CE. *Bibliothèque Nationale* C 2971 (1849). After R. Gyselen, *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles sassanides de la Bibliothèque Nationale et du Musée du Louvre. I. Collection générale*, Paris, 1993, 20.I.8, p. 104, pl. XVI.

This dichotomy is expressed in the two notions paramount to the ancient Iranian worldview, which are articulated in the Zoroastrian scriptures, *menog* and *getig*. *Menog* is described as the world 'which is non-material, non-sensual, intelligible, incorporeal and unperceived by the senses, while *getig* stands for the material, earthly (world), that which can be apprehended through the senses'.[3] Zoroastrian literature makes it clear that the gods were perceived to have a fully anthropomorphic form in *menog*, but in *getig* they were manifested by symbolic and for the most part non-figural entities, such as natural elements. The gods in their *menog* form could be seen and comprehended only by those few endowed with exceptional abilities such as the prophet Zoroaster himself. The highest priestly rank in the Sasanian empire, called *Ohrmazd mowbed*, was also distinguished by the ability to see in the world of *menog*. Claiming such exclusive capabilities for the limited circle of chosen priests may have further contributed to the institutionalization and canonization of the aniconic cult in western Iran, where priesthood (especially in the Sasanian period) was associated with great, centralized empires.

This tension between the original belief that the gods are identical in form to humans, but at the same time they are not visible as such in our world by ordinary people, is at the origin of Iranian aniconism. The veneration of a sacred fire is the most eloquent expression of this principle. The flame is

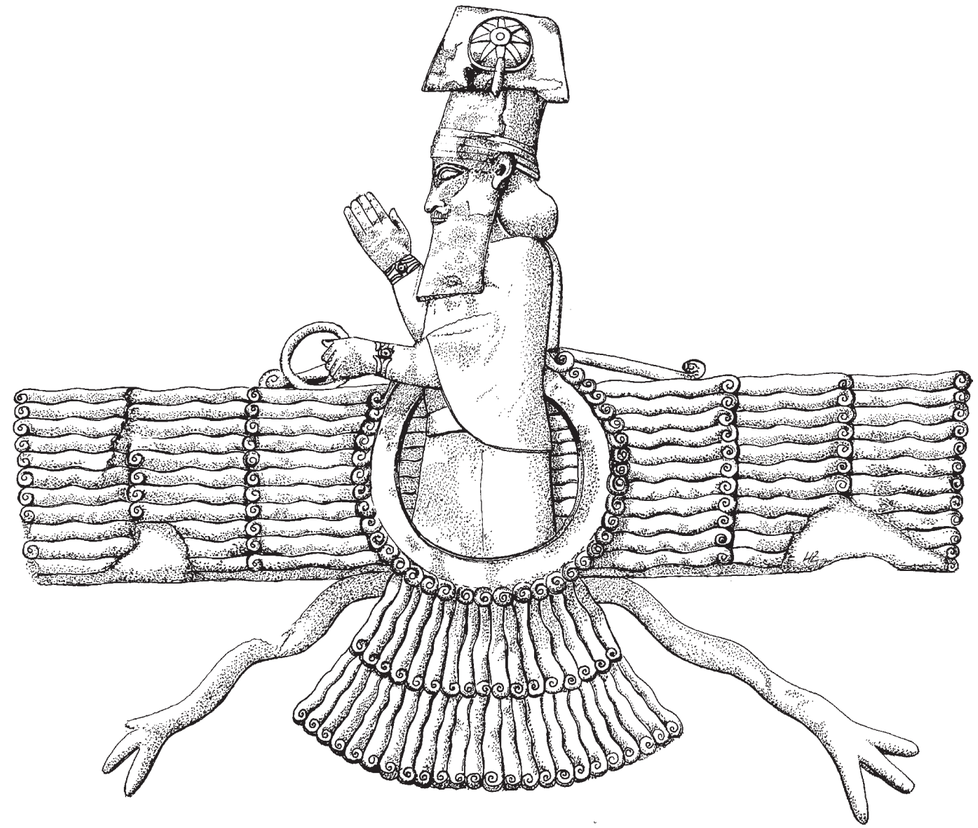

Figure 2. The Figure in the Winged Disk, Behestun rock-relief, 522–486 BCE. After U. Zurkinden-Kolberg, *Iconography of Deities and Demons* http://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/idd/prepublication.php

the tangible manifestation in *getig* of the god Atar who has an anthropomorphic shape in *menog*, which nevertheless remains invisible to the commoners. Interestingly, outside of immediate ritual contexts, for example on Sasanian and Kushano–Sasanian coins and seals, Atar was sometimes depicted as a male bust on top of the fire-altar (Figure 1).[4]

THE ACHAEMENIAN AND THE HELLENISTIC PERIODS (SIXTH – SECOND CENTURIES BCE)

The cultic practices reflected in the Avesta do not align with concepts of divine statues or closed temples. Rather, the veneration of the Avestan gods was celebrated under the open sky in the presence of fire. The earliest sanctuary associated with the Iranians, that of Tepe Nush-i Jan in Media (seventh century BCE), was found devoid of any figural representations, but housed an altar with traces of intense burning.[5] After the rise of the Achaemenians in the sixth century BCE, we do not find any closed temples in western Iran, and the Achaemenian royal cult seems to have been conducted under the open sky in front of the sacred fire.[6] In full accord with Herodotus' account, it did not include the worship of statues. It seems that closed sanctuaries may have existed in eastern Iran. The temple at Dahan-e Golaman in Sistan has been known since the 1960s, and in recent years two more structures dated to the Achaemenian period were excavated in Uzbekistan and interpreted as sanctuaries.[7] The monumental altar, perhaps part of an open-air sanctuary, recently excavated at Cheshme Shafa in northern Afghanistan (ancient Bactria) fits well with the Achaemenian tradition as attested to in Western Iran.[8] Be that as it may, the supposed temples in eastern Iranian world did not produce any evidence for anthropomorphic cult either. Achaemenian royal worship, as can be gleaned from iconography and from the archaeology of major cities in western Iran, was centred on the sacred fire and devoid of cultic images. However, the dynasty also officially supported and sponsored a variety of other cults among many peoples within the vast empire, and the Persian kings undoubtedly participated in worship in temples that included statues of these gods. It is possible that divine statues existed even in the sanctuaries of the Persepolis area, given its strong Elamite religious background.[9]

Figure 3. Marble fragment of a foot of a monumental statue, 'Temple with Indented Niches', Ai Khanoum, 3rd century BCE. Photograph courtesy of Frantz Grenet.

Aniconism does not imply abhorrence of figural representations of the divine. In fact, Darius I introduced (based on Assyrian and Urartian prototypes) the first semi-anthropomorphic representation of the Iranian god Ahura Mazda, the 'figure in the winged disc' that depicts the patron god of the Achaemenian dynasty and the highest deity of Zoroastrianism (Figure 2).[10] This figure consists of an upper anthropomorphic part clad in royal robe and headdress, emerging from a winged disc with a bird's tail. It holds a ring in one hand, while the second is lifted in the gesture of benefaction. This creation, so it seems, was dictated by the needs of imperial propaganda and formed part of the process of constructing a new imperial ideology and identity, rather than a reflection of any religious 'reform'.

A certain 'reform' in cultic practices is attributed to another Achaemenian king, Artaxerxes II, by the Babylonian priest Berossus, who lived in the Hellenistic period. Berossus writes that Artaxerxes II installed statues of Anahita, one of the most important goddesses in the Zoroastrian religion, in the sanctuaries of several central cities of the empire.[11] Indeed, it is Artaxerxes II who mentions the name of the goddess in his royal inscriptions for the first time.[12] However, no traces of these sanctuaries have been identified so far, and as a matter of fact both closed temples and anthropomorphic statuary of the Iranian gods are found in the archaeological record only from the Hellenistic period onward.[13] Small fragments of an unidentified anthropomorphic statue were uncovered in western Iran for the first time only in the Hellenistic 'Frataraka Temple' in Persepolis.[14]

Another important example of the new cultic imagery that spread to the Iranian world with Greek culture is the marble fragment of a foot of a huge acrolithic statue decorated with a lightning bolt that once stood in the main hall of the 'Temple with Indented Niches' in the Hellenistic city of Ai Khanoum in Bactria (Figure 3).[15] This statue, which perhaps represented Zeus associated with an Iranian or Babylonian divinity, was probably the most venerated god in the city, and the temple was undoubtedly attended by both Greek and Bactrian speakers. The most interesting case, however, is the Takht-i Sangin temple situated in today's southern Tajikistan, which was dedicated to the god Oxus, the personification of the river Amu Darya. This major regional sanctuary produced a wealth of evidence in the form of various cultic statues made of bronze and clay. Especially significant is a small bronze statuette mounted on a votive pedestal, inscribed with a dedication to the god Oxus and showing Silenus Marsyas playing a flute (Figure 4).[16] There is every reason to think that in this case the image of Marsyas (himself a river-deity) was chosen to represent the local god Oxus. This would make this small statuette the earliest preserved fully anthropomorphic representation of an Iranian deity.

The Hellenistic period proved a turning point in the history of Iranian cultic practices. The influence of Greek culture, which was much stronger in eastern Iranian lands such as Bactria, transformed the religious landscape in the cities of eastern Iran. With its abundance and, more importantly, accessibility and pervasiveness of divine anthropomorphic imagery, Greek religious practices helped to popularize anthropomorphic statues of deities in the cults of eastern Iranian peoples. Western Iran, which was less influenced by Greek culture and received fewer colonists from Greece and Macedonia, largely retained its characteristic aniconic worship. After the Hellenistic period, a clear divide in cultic practices emerged between the iconic east and aniconic west.[17]

Figure 4. Bronze statuette of Silenus Marsyas from Takht-i Sangin, 3rd–2nd centuries BCE, National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan M. 7010. Photograph courtesy of Gunvor Lindström, DAI Eurasien-Abteilung.

THE PARTHIAN PERIOD (SECOND CENTURY BCE – THIRD CENTURY CE)

Little is known about the cult and general religious situation under the Parthian Arsacids who succeeded the Seleucids as sovereigns of the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia in the second century BCE and held power longer than any other Iranian dynasty. This lacuna is due to the paucity and ambiguity of both written and material sources.[18] Temples of ancient Mesopotamian and Greek gods continued to thrive in the western Semitic and Greek-speaking regions of the empire. We know that sanctuaries dedicated to the Iranian gods situated in Seleucia-on-the-Tigris, the economic and political

centre of Babylonia, also housed their images. One of the most spectacular statues found in Mesopotamia is a bronze figure of Heracles modelled in typically Greek style (Figure 5). However, thanks to the Parthian inscription on its thigh, we learn that it was identified as the image of the Iranian god Warhagn (the Avestan god of victory Vərəθraγna).[19] Captured by the Parthians in the southern region of Messene, it was brought to Seleucia to be installed in the temple of Apollo/Tir. One can surmise that this temple also housed the cultic statue of Apollo himself, recognized by the Parthians as Tir, and other divine statues. On their coins, the Arsacid kings often put images of Greek deities such as Heracles, Nike, and Tyche (Figure 6).[20] Like the statue of Heracles from Seleucia, it is plausible that they were sometimes identified with comparable deities from the Iranian tradition, and that representations of these gods in the Greek style were erected in the temples dedicated to them. In these cases, such images appear to be adaptations of mostly Greek divine imagery.

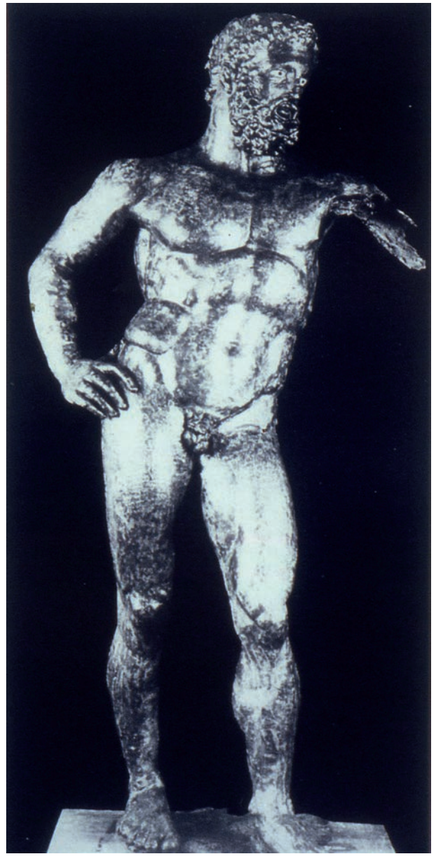

Figure 5. Bronze statue of Heracles/Warhagn, from Seleucia on Tigris, 151 CE. Photograph courtesy of Frantz Grenet.

This Greco–Iranian syncretism spread beyond the borders of the Parthian empire, into the Hellenistic kingdom of Commagene, whose ruler Antiochus I erected stelae celebrating his dedication to a series of gods identified by their Greek and Iranian names as Zeus-Oromasdes, Apollo-Mithras-Helios-Hermes, and Artagnes-Heracles-Ares (Figure 7).[21] However, there was no consistent rule, and Greek gods were also worshipped under their own names alone, without any Iranian interpretation.[22]

Moreover, the cult in the central and eastern regions of the Parthian Empire, which were inhabited by speakers of Iranian languages, is poorly known. However, it was certainly less influenced by Greek religious practices than Mesopotamia. Greek gods do not appear in the theophoric names on the ostraca (sherds with inscriptions) found in the Arsacid royal complex of Old Nisa.[23] These ostraca also suggest that 'places of worship' of the originally Mesopotamian goddess Nana existed in the vicinity of Old Nisa, but the nature of her cult is impossible to establish.[24] We can only speculate that given the iconic nature of her cult in Parthian Mesopotamia and later in Central Asia,[25] it is likely that her worship in Nisa also included images.

Figure 6. Silver coin of Mithridates I bearing an image of Heracles on the reverse, Seleucia on Tigris, 171–138 BCE. London, British Museum 1891,0603.1 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 7. Stone stele from Arsameia showing Antiochus I of Commagene shaking hands with Artagnes-Heracles-Ares, 70–38 BCE. Photograph courtesy of Christiane Gruber.

SASANIAN IRAN (THIRD – SEVENTH CENTURIES CE)

The corpus of materials for the next period of western Iranian history is incomparably larger, and the Zoroastrian written sources prove more reliable. At its height, the Sasanian state was a cosmopolitan empire, in which various religious communities and cultic practices coexisted and interacted.[26] The founder of the dynasty, Ardashir I, who from the onset declared himself on his coins as the 'Mazda-worshipping Divinity/Lord',[27] initiated an unprecedented state-sponsored programme of construction of Zoroastrian religious institutions as well as the religion's elevation to a position tightly associated with the new dynasty.

The reigns of the first Sasanian kings in the third century CE must be considered the formative period of Zoroastrianism. The early Sasanians promoted their aniconic cult, which made no use of anthropomorphic imagery. The place of the cult object that personified the divine was reserved solely for the constantly burning sacred fire (Figure 8).[28] It seems that this Sasanian tradition continued the aniconic fire-cult practised by the Achaemenians, which in turn was continued by the local rulers of Pars during the Hellenistic and the Parthian periods.[29]

The most interesting and so far unresolved question remains the genesis of the fire-temples as closed structures intended exclusively for the worship and sustaining of the constant sacred fire. Classical sources attest to the custom of keeping the 'fire of a king' in Iran, which goes back to the Achaemenian period.[30] Although no temples are ever mentioned in connection with these fires, it is evident that they were kept burning during the entire period of a king's reign and could not have been maintained in the open, but rather must have been housed within some structure. The institutionalization of such structures and their elevation to exclusive ritual centres perhaps occurred under the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardashir I. As a result, these Achaemenian royal fires may have served as the predecessors and prototypes of the Sasanian fire-temples. Relatedly, the aniconic fire-temples of modern Zoroastrians are the direct descendants of Sasanian sanctuaries.

Figure 8. Fire-altar on a gold coin of Ardashir I, Hamadan, 224–240 CE. London, British Museum OR.9662 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Aniconism, however, does not automatically imply iconophobia, far less iconoclasm. In fact, the centralization and unification of the cult and the establishment of a powerful Zoroastrian priestly hierarchy supported by the monarchy went along with an innovative programme of creating fully anthropomorphic images of Iranian gods. The triad of the most important western Iranian gods, Ahura Mazda, Anahita, and Mithra, was given complete anthropomorphic form in what was probably an intentional and well-considered move by the Sasanian kings (starting already with Ardashir), to elevate their own semi-divine status as the gods' representatives through a striking visual parallelism between the figure of the king and that of a god. This is most eloquently expressed in the equestrian relief of Ardashir at Naqsh-e Rostam (Figure 9).[31] Here, the king, placed on the left, reaches out for the royal diadem which is being offered to him by Ahura Mazda. The remarkable pictorial and conceptual similarity between the investiture reliefs of Ardashir and the stelae of Antiochus I of Commagene indicates that Ardashir drew upon Hellenistic and Parthian legacies and concepts.

For the most part, throughout the Sasanian period, representations of deities were limited to three media only: coins, seals, and monumental rock reliefs. One exception is a group of eight column capitals found in various locations in western Iran and currently kept in the Taq-e Bustan Park, at Chehel Sotun Palace in Isfahan and at the Iran-e Bastan Museum in Tehran. All of them display the upper part of the body of a deity offering a diadem (Figure 10).[32] From the Hellenistic period onwards, the diadem was the primary and essential symbol of kingship in the Iranian world. The so-called 'investiture scenes', depicting a deity (usually Ahura Mazda) granting a diadem to a king, became a central motif in Sasanian royal iconography. Unfortunately, none of these

Figure 9. Rock relief of Ardashir I showing him receiving the royal diadem from Ahura Mazda, Naqsh-i Rustam, 224–242 CE. Image in the public domain.

capitals comes from scientifically controlled excavations and therefore we do not know in what type of monumental public building(s) they were originally installed. The fact that most of them bear the image of a king receiving the diadem on the opposite side makes it likely that these buildings were palaces rather than temples.

Despite the aniconic nature of their cult, it seems that non-divine figurative imagery was still present in at least some Sasanian fire-temples. A small fire-altar found at Barm-e Delak carries a relatively long inscription dated to the third year of Shapur I (243–244 CE) that mentions the ruler's victory over the Romans (Figure 11).[33] The altar is explicitly called 'fire-altar' (*adurgah*) in the inscription and was intended to be placed in the fire-temple (*adur*). Remarkably, the sides of the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, fortunately identified by inscriptions, as Shapur himself, his father Ardashir, and two courtiers: Aspez, the Head of the Court, and Abnon, 'The Official in charge of the Sleeping-quarters', who, according to the main inscription installed the fire-altar. Since none of them is a divinity, we might conjecture

Figure 10. Column capital, Taq-e Bustan Park, Chehel Sotun Palace, Isfahan. Photograph courtesy of Matteo Compareti.

that it was regarded as an expression of special piety and honour to have one's image depicted on the side of an altar – metaphorically supporting the throne (*gah)* of the god Atar/Adur. This altar also offers an excellent illustration that the early Sasanians did not abhor figural representations in general, but strictly avoided divine imagery in cultic contexts.

Other altars from Sasanian Iran are always completely devoid of images.[34] One might perhaps suggest that in the later periods a stricter avoidance of iconic representations in the ritual context had developed. In any case, figural representations uncovered in Sasanian temples are never found in cultic contexts such as altar rooms. A notable example is the fire-temple at Mele Hairam in modern Turkmenistan, which perhaps dates from the third–fourth century CE.[35] The antechamber included fragments of paintings depicting human figures,[36] while the main room to which it led and where the fire-altar was located, are free from figural imagery. The most spectacular finds from this temple are two groups of bone objects carved with figural scenes. The first group shows an equestrian, a nude youth, and enthroned princely figures.[37] The second group shows Zoroastrian ritual utensils, a fire altar, and figures with a *barsom*, a bundle of twigs or rods used in the Zoroastrian worship.[38] It is noteworthy that these reliefs, which originally must have been attached to objects (furniture, boxes, or weapons?), were found in the southern rooms of the temple that were not connected with the cult.

Figure 11. Fire-altar from Barm-e Delak. After R.N. Tavoosi, 'An Inscribed Capital Dating from the Time of Shapur I', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 3, 1989, p. 26, Figure i.

Figure 12. The goddess Nana on a Kushan gold coin of Vasudeva, minted in India, circa 190–229 CE. London, British Museum IOC.356 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

KUSHAN AND KUSHANO–SASANIAN BACTRIA (FIRST–FOURTH CENTURIES CE)

The Kushan Empire in eastern Iranian lands brought together nomadic steppe cultures, Greek artistic legacies, dominant local Bactrian traditions, and influences from Indian civilizations to the east and the Parthian empire to the west. The kings of the Kushan dynasty continued the iconic worship prevalent in the Bactrian region (northern Afghanistan and southern parts of what is modern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) since the Hellenistic period and developed it with imperial ambition and grandeur. Statues of gods drawn from Hellenistic and Indian traditions that display Iranian elements were installed in the temples. Images of these gods also were minted on coins as tangible evidence that the royal house was supported by an unprecedented number and variety of deities, a numismatic message propagated to the empire's population (Figure 12).

Figure 13. Sandstone statue of Kanishka from Mat sanctuary, Mathura, circa 1st century. Mathura Government Museum. Image in the public domain.

Figure 14. Mithra on a Kushano-Sasanian gold coin minted in Afghanistan, third century CE. London, British Museum 1986,0641.1 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Uniquely for the Iranian world, the Kushan kings went beyond being mere rulers by divine sanction and representatives of gods on earth. Addressed in the inscriptions as 'sons of gods' and 'worthy of divine worship', their statues stood alongside those of gods within sanctuaries. Some of them have survived, like the standing statue of the king Kanishka from the sanctuary of Mat in the vicinity of modern Mathura (Figure 13). The Kushan kings also created the first iconography of a deified king in the Iranian world, equipping it with flaming shoulders, a nimbus, and showing the king rising from the mountains like the Sun god.[39]

The Kushans lost Bactria to the Sasanians under either Ardashir or his son Shapur I. Direct Sasanian rule, whose exact duration is uncertain, was followed by the establishment of a vassal kingdom governed by the rulers related to the Sasanian dynasty, who bore the new title *Kushanshah*, hence the modern appellation of Kushano–Sasanians (third-fourth centuries CE).[40] The latter are known mostly from coins, whose chronology is hotly debated.[41] The coins also constitute the most significant (although not exclusive) source for the cult in Bactria in this period. Five deities are attested on Kushano–Sasanian coins.[42] Three gods continue from the Kushan pantheon: Ardoxsho, Oesho,[43] and Nana. The last, who was the most important deity of Kushan Bactria, appears on only one type, minted in Kabul, as a frontal bust placed on an altar.[44] Another god, Mithra (Bactrian Miiro), is well-attested to in the Kushan pantheon. However, his new Kushano–Sasanian iconography owes nothing to the Kushan image, but rather reveals numerous direct Sasanian influences in the headdress and details of clothing (Figure 14).[45] He is also shown enthroned, which was not the way to depict a deity in Sasanian Iran but was found in the Kushan iconography of gods. The image of Mithra, moreover, proves an interesting case. Instead of retaining the well-established Kushan iconography of Miiro, the Kushano–Sasanian engraver chose to show the god as the Sasanian Mithra, but adjusted him to Bactrian cultic conventions by showing him enthroned and by retaining the god's name in the Bactrian language. Unfortunately, we do not know whether the actual cultic statues of Mithra in the Bactrian temples followed the old Kushan iconography or resembled the 'Sasanian' image on the new coins. In addition, a new goddess, Anahita, is introduced from the west, but her statues are shown on coins in exactly the same manner as the 'old' Kushan gods (Figure 15). Unlike the Kushan coinage, the composition of a king worshipping before a statue of a deity

Figure 15. A Kushano-Sasanian gold coin showing a king pouring a libation before the statue of Anahita, minted in Afghanistan, third century CE. London, British Museum1986,0812.1 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

(Oesho and Anahita) becomes a common reverse design on Kushano–Sasanian coins.

For the first time since they parted ways in the Hellenistic period, the aniconic western and iconic eastern parts of the Iranian worlds met in Bactria, with the former conquering significant parts of the latter. However, despite the arrival of western Anahita and the replacement of the Kushan iconography of Mithra with the Sasanian version, it seems that in their essence, cultic practices in Bactria remained distinctively pre-Sasanian. Instead of the promotion of the aniconic Sasanian cult, we find not only the continuation, but even the flourishing and deliberate promotion of the iconic cult centred on statues. The Kushano–Sasanian kings did not just limit themselves to figural images of gods on coins (also found in Sasanian Iran), which by themselves might simply allude to the divine favour of a specific deity without intending to reproduce his actual cultic statue faithfully. Rather, some coins display a composition showing a king pouring a libation before the statue of a deity. Also, newcomers such as Anahita – who was not worshipped by means of statues in Sasanian Iran, although she was represented anthropomorphically on coins and reliefs – had not one, but two distinct types of cultic statues reproduced in detail on Kushano–Sasanian coins. The Kushano–Sasanian rulers, who judging by their distinctive Persian royal names were probably related to the Sasanian dynasty, not only promoted their devotion to the statues of local Bactrian gods by placing scenes of libation on their coins, but even adjusted Persian-Sasanian deities to fit Bactrian cultic practices. They thus presented themselves as active participants in this particular type of iconic worship.

In addition to the images found on coins, fragments of actual cultic statues dating from the Kushano–Sasanian period have been discovered in Bactria. This material has been overlooked by western scholarship despite its importance to the discussion of religion and cult in Kushano–Sasanian Bactria. In 1974–77, a Soviet–Afghan archaeological expedition excavated a sanctuary (Temple X) at the important Kushan and Kushano–Sasanian town of Dilberjin, some 40 km northwest of Balkh.[46] In the upper level of the sanctuary, dated by the excavators to the late Kushano–Sasanian period, a throne with the remains of three seated deities made of clay was excavated.[47] The almost life-size figures are enthroned frontally. Only small fragments of the central character have survived. The right-hand statue depicts a naked male figure wearing a necklace made of square plaques and a torque with a palmette-shaped pendant (Figure 16). His head is missing, but part of the beard painted with black colour is visible around the neck and locks of hair are preserved on his shoulders. Interestingly, this statue was separated from the other two by a partition-wall made of rows of mud brick and the throne under it was raised by two additional rows. The statue on the left, the largest of the three, was probably a goddess but unfortunately was found badly damaged. Near the throne, fragments of two heads from statues made of painted clay were found, one male and one female that seem to belong to the central and to the left enthroned statues.[48] Because the only god on the Kushano–Sasanian coins to be depicted half-naked, with similar curly locks of hair and a necklace, is Oesho/βαγο βορζανδο, I have suggested identifying the right-hand statue with this important deity.[49] The identities of the two other members of the triad are, unfortunately, impossible to establish and even their inner hierarchy is uncertain. Compositional logic dictates that the central statue should depict the most important deity in the triad, but the goddess on the left is larger than the other two statues and 'Oesho' is placed higher than the others and deliberately separated from them by a wall. Be this as it may, finds from Temple X indicate that statues of gods in Kushano–Sasanian Bactria were made of painted clay. It is possible that especially venerated statues in major sanctuaries included precious materials, such as gilded wood and ivory, although evidence for this hypothesis remains lacking.

This material from the Kushano–Sasanian Bactria can be used to 'verify' the information contained in the inscriptions of the Sasanian priest Kartir, carved between 280 and 293 CE.[50] These inscriptions are the most important primary source for the history of Zoroastrianism, given their established date and clear historical context. In the second half of the third century, a certain priest Kartir was granted the highest religious power in the expanding empire by successive Sasanian kings. Elevated to the rank of the nobility and made a judge, unprecedented powers were gradually concentrated in his hands. It seems that his actions shaped the doctrines, institutions, and priesthood of the Zoroastrian religion. If, following Schindel,[51] we place the beginning of the Kushano–Sasanian coinage around 280 CE, this period is the apogee of Kartir's career when, during the reign of king Wahram II, he seems to have enjoyed unrestricted religious authority. In a famous passage in his inscriptions he states that as a result of his activities, 'idols were destroyed and the dwellings of the demons demolished and the places (thrones) and the seats of the gods were established'.[52] I have argued elsewhere that Kartir employs the term 'idol' (*uzdes*) here as a generic, polemical, derogatory name for his religious opponents, and it is not to be understood as a record of the destruction of cultic imagery belonging to real individuals.[53] The Kushano–Sasanian material positively rules out any all-encompassing, programmatic destruction of cultic images by the Sasanians in the third century.[54] It does show clear evidence of Persian influence, but iconic cultic practices in Bactria remained unchanged from the Kushan period and were not replaced by the Sasanian aniconic cult, as one would expect if Kartir's words are taken at their face value. Moreover, as the numismatic evidence shows, the Kushano–Sasanian kings deliberately chose to depict themselves in veneration before the statues of deities, fully embracing the iconic cult. Last but not least, they also manufactured new statues for old and new gods alike.

Figure 16. The right-hand statue from Temple X, painted clay, Dilberjin, Afghanistan, 3rd century CE. Drawing with elements of reconstruction by Alena Ruban, after Irina Kruglikova, 'Raskopki Zapadnogo Khrama v Dil'berdzhine (Afghanistan) v 1974–1977 gg.', *Problemy istorii, filologii, kul'tury 7* (1999), p. 30, fig. 8.

SOGDIAN CULTURE (FOURTH – EIGHTH CENTURIES CE)

The Sogdian culture that flourished in the fourth to eighth centuries in what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan can be described as the culmination of the eastern Iranian anthropomorphic cult as well as its most aesthetically accomplished and refined manifestation.[55] In this period, the Sogdians, an eastern Iranian people, had spread well beyond their homeland all the way up to northern China. They were the driving force behind the complex network of commercial and cultural interactions between China and Central Asia, which we call today the 'Silk Road'.[56] Since Sogdiana was significantly less influenced by Greek culture than its southern Bactrian neighbours, it seems that anthropomorphic statuary spread in Sogdiana together with the unprecedented urbanization boom caused by massive migration from the south in the fourth and fifth centuries. These Bactrian migrants built temples very similar in their layout to the southern Hellenistic and Kushan sanctuaries. These sanctuaries housed anthropomorphic statues of Sogdian gods and were decorated with wooden reliefs and figurative paintings close in style to the Bactrian murals.

Our knowledge of the *realities* of the Sogdian cult is based primarily on the excavations of the two temples in Panjikent, the best-researched Sogdian city. Panjikent was the capital of an independent principality in the Upper Zeravshan region, some 60 km to the east of Samarkand.[57] Highly valuable information is also provided by the wall paintings uncovered in the palace and houses of private citizens in the same city and, to a much smaller extent, in other Sogdian centres, such as Samarkand, Varaksha, and Shahristan.[58] The paintings, terracotta plaques and decorated ossuaries present a rich gallery of various divine images (Figure 17).[59] The

Figure 17. A four-armed goddess on a dragon, wall-painting Panjikent Temple II/5–6, 6th century. After B. Marshak, *Iskusstvo Sogda*, St Petersburg 2009, p. 17.

material from the Panjikent temples and the wall-paintings unambiguously show that the Sogdian cult was centred on anthropomorphic representations of deities.[60] The Chinese and Arabic written sources that describe statues and 'idols' in Sogdian temples also confirm this.[61]

Like the Kushan and the Kushano–Sasanian cults, the main ritual in the Sogdian temple was the kindling of fire and the pouring of libations on a portable fire-altar in front of statues of the Sogdian gods, which were made of unbaked clay and placed in niches.[62] None of the statues that stood in the *cellae* of the Panjikent temples are preserved, but numerous fragments of statues of the goddess Nana seated on her lion were found in other areas in Temple II (Figure 18). One of the complete statues measured 4 metres in height.[63] Medieval sources narrating the Arab conquest of Sogdiana that mention the burning of idols by the Arabs in Sogdian cities, make it clear that the statues were often made of wood, adorned with lavish garments of silk, and decorated with the most elaborate designs. According to the Muslim historian al-Tabari (d. 923 CE), even the nails used to fasten the garments to the wooden bodies of the idols were made from gold and silver.[64]

One such statue survived, hidden in a cave in the mountainous region of the Upper Zeravshan, near the village of Sarvoda in modern Tajikistan (Figure 19). It was accidentally discovered in 1979 by local children, and since then has been housed in the National Museum of Antiquities of Tajikistan in Dushanbe.[65] This is the only fully-preserved (non-'Greek') cultic statue from the pre-Islamic Iranian world. Measuring 1 metre in height, the statue shows a middle-aged man with long, straight moustaches and carefully carved genitals. The body, the head and the legs were made from a single piece of birch wood, while the forearms were affixed separately; the right hand is bent and originally held some shafted object. The slightly crouching posture of the figure suggests that it was originally seated on some high seat. The statue was naked when it was found, but holes from nails indicate that it was once clothed and more holes around the neck, and in the ears and fingers were probably made to attach the jewellery that once decorated the god. Further investigations in the cave by the archaeologists revealed several items hidden with the statue that undoubtedly belonged to its original attire. These included a leather boot, chainmail armour, the remains of the scabbard of a sword, the finial of a sceptre depicting three goat heads, a dagger, nine mirrors, and a brass plaque in the form of a crescent moon combined with a sun that was part of the god's headdress. Despite the survival of so many details, the god's identity is difficult to establish. The crescent moon combined with a sun is one of the standard and ubiquitous elements in

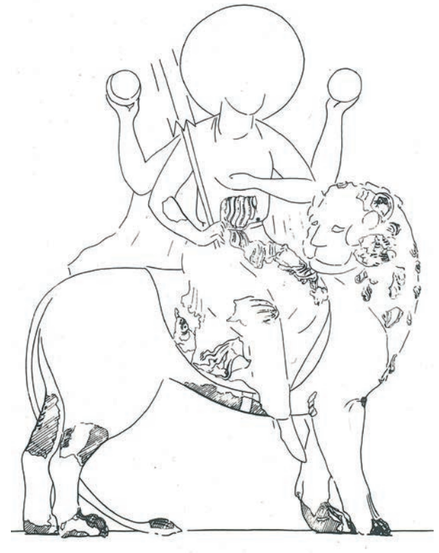

Figure 18. Graphic reconstruction of a statue of Nana, Panjikent, Temple II, X/13, 7th–first quarter 8th century. After Valentin Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy i problemy religii Sogda (V–VIII vv)*, St Petersburg 2009: Figure 121/1.

Sogdian divine and royal crowns. In Sogdian painting, goats are associated with an unidentified female goddess, always depicted enthroned on the same seat together with her male consort, who is associated with camels. The relatively modest size of the idol, the fact that the items associated with it were not made of precious metals, and the find's location in an area remote from any major Sogdian city, seem to indicate that this idol was originally housed in the sanctuary of one of the local villages.

Sogdian culture collapsed following the Arab conquest of Sogdiana in the eighth century and the gradual Islamization of the population that took place throughout the Abbasid period (750–1258 CE). Nevertheless, during the first half of the ninth century, in the important region of Ustrushana, temples that undoubtedly contained divine images continued to be supported by the patronage of local rulers, the most famous of whom was the renowned Abbasid general Haydar ibn Kavus (*al-afshin*) (Figure 20).[66] In some rural and mountainous regions, traditional Sogdian religious practices and thus the worship of statues, might have continued until the early tenth century.

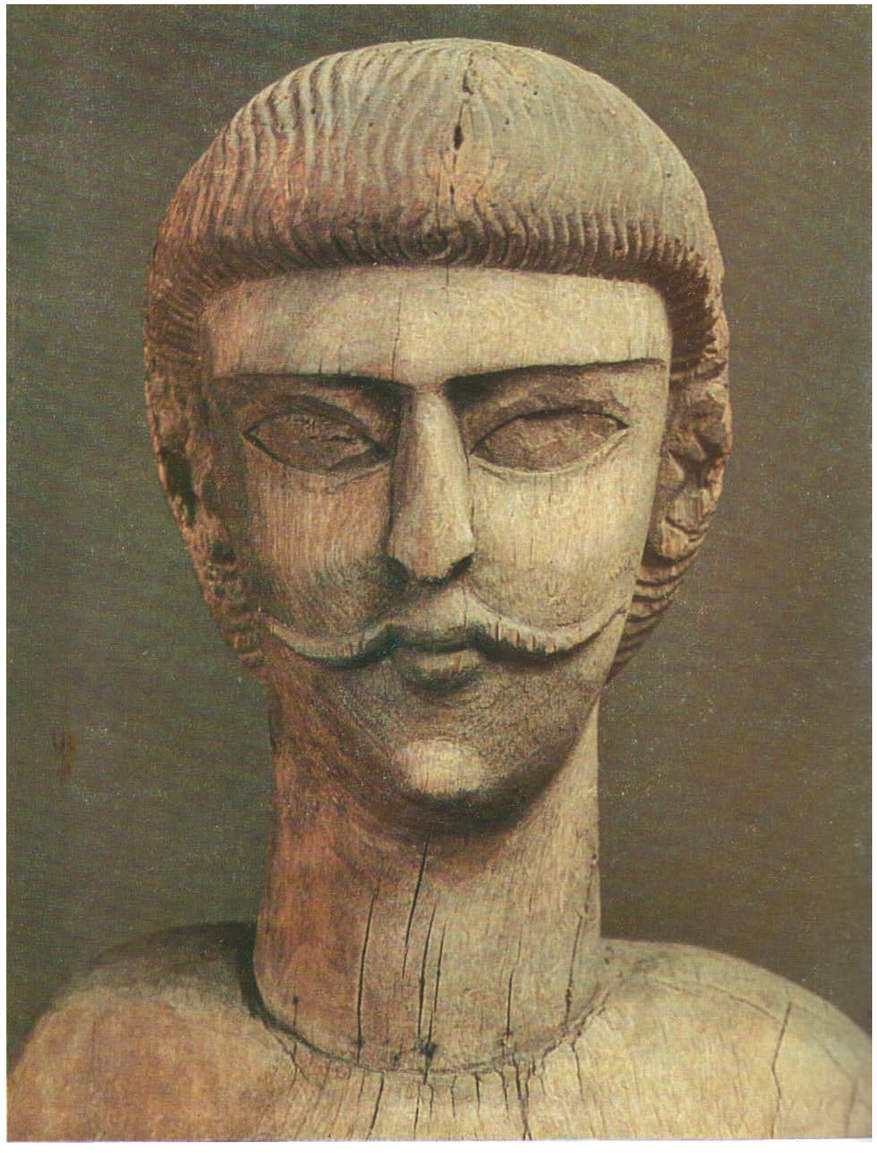

Figure 19. Sogdian wooden statue found near Sarvoda village, 6th–7th centuries. After Evgenij Zejmal', ed., *Drevnosti Tadzhikistana*, Dushanbe 1985.

CONCLUSIONS

The first statues of gods appeared in the Iranian world during the Hellenistic period, and until the Parthian period we mostly witness the adoption of Greek imagery. The division between the eastern Iranian lands that embraced divine images and western Iran that remained aniconic emerged in the Hellenistic period. We should not underestimate these differences, as they may be manifestations of different perceptions of the divine presence. Iranian aniconism was anchored in the notions of *menog* and *getig* as described in the Middle Persian Zoroastrian literature. In the Sasanian period, the aniconic cult was probably further substantiated and advanced by the priests, who perhaps derived part of their authority from their claim to possess the unique ability to see the 'real', anthropomorphic appearance of the gods in *menog*. In contrast, in Bactria and Sogdiana, commoners could 'directly' experience the anthropomorphic statues of gods in sanctuaries, which were perceived as 'houses of gods' that were served by priests. In these areas, leading artisans were charged with creating spectacular divine imagery and this was plentiful in both public and private spaces.

Late Sasanian Iran – with its aniconic cult and avoidance of divine representations in religious spaces combined with an abundance of figural imagery in non-ritual contexts – closely parallels early Umayyad art and architecture. It is therefore not inconceivable that the strict aniconism of Umayyad mosques combined with the lavish use of figural imagery in private princely residences was at least partly inspired by the pattern that the Arabs observed in the Sasanian areas they conquered. This pattern, in turn, was possibly adopted and adapted by the Umayyads as a pictorial model for their own nascent empire.[67]

Figure 20. A fragment of the wall-paintings from the palace of the rulers of Ustrushana depicting the goddess Nana, late 8th–early 9th century CE. After Sokolovskij, *Monumental'naya zhivopis' dvortsovogo kompleksa Bundzhikata,* St Petersburg 2009, Figure 71.

NOTES

1. Albert De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*, Leiden 1997, 76–121.
2. Michael Shenkar, 'Aniconism in the Religious Art of Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 22 (2012), 239–57; idem, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic Iranian World*, Leiden 2014, 175–79.
3. Shaul Shaked, 'The Notions *mēnōg* and *gētīg* in the Pahlavi Texts and their Relation to Eschatology', *Acta Orientalia* 33 (1971), 59.
4. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 90–93.
5. David Stronach and Michael Roaf, *Nush-i Jan I. The Major Buildings of the Median Settlement*, Leuven 2007.
6. Michael Shenkar, 'Temple Architecture in the Iranian World Before the Macedonian Conquest', *Iran and the Caucasus* 11.2 (2007). For a recent discussion of Achaemenian religious architecture and cult, see also Matthew Canepa, 'The Transformation of Sacred Space, Topography, and Royal Ritual in Persia and the Ancient Iranian World', *Heaven on Earth: Temples, Ritual, and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World*, ed. Deena Ragavan, Chicago 2013, 324–39.
7. Claude Rapin and Mutalib Khasanov, 'Sakral'naya arkhitektura Tsentral'noy Azii s akhemenidskogo perioda po ellinisticheskuyu epokhu: mezhdu lokal'nymi traditsiyami i kul'turnym transferom', *Cultural Transfers in Central Asia: Before, During and after the Silk Road*, ed. Shahin Mustafaev et al., Paris 2013, 42–59.
8. Frantz Grenet, 'Mary Boyce's Legacy for Archaeologists', *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 22 (2012), 30–31.
9. Wouter Henkelman, *The Other Gods Who Are: Studies in Elamite-Iranian Acculturation Based on the Persepolis Fortification Texts*, Leiden 2008, 469–73, 547f.; idem, 'Humban and Auramazdā: Royal Gods in a Persian Landscape', *Persian Religion in the Achaemenid Period/La religion perse à l'époque achéménide*, ed. Wouter Henkelman and Céline Redard, Wiesbaden 2017, 273–346.
10. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 47–50.
11. Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*, vol 1, London and New York, 2007, 556–7. Canepa, 'The Transformation of Sacred Space', 321, correctly notes that the passage does not explicitly mention temples, but only statues and thus cannot be taken as evidence for the construction of temples by Artaxerxes II. However, the cultic statue cannot be set up in the open air and must have been lodged within its 'house' – a closed temple. Therefore, those who trust Berossus' account about statues must also credit Artaxerxes II with the introduction of the temples.
12. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 364, 403, 564.
13. On temples in the Iranian world in the Hellenistic period, see: Michael Shenkar, 'Temple Architecture in the Iranian World in the Hellenistic Period', *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, ed. Anna Kouremenos et al., Oxford, 2011, 117–40; Laurianne Martinez-Sève, 'Les sanctuaires autochtones dans le monde iranien d'époque hellénistique', *Topoi. Orient–Occident* 19 (2014), 239–77; Canepa, 'The Transformation of Sacred Space', 339–42.
14. Pierfrancesco Callieri, *L'archéologie du Fārs à l'époque hellénistique: quatre leçons au Collège de France, 8, 15, 22 et 29 mars 2007*, Paris 2007, 61–62.
15. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 61–62.
16. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 128–9.
17. Michael Shenkar, 'The *Great Iranian Divide*: Between Aniconic West and Anthropomorphic East', *Religion* 47.3 (2017), 378–98.
18. Albert De Jong, 'Religion in Iran. The Parthian and Sasanian Periods (247 BCE–654 CE)', *The Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World. From the Bronze Age to the Hellenistic Age*, vol. 1, ed. Michele Salzman, Cambridge 2013, 23–36.
19. Paul Bernard, 'Vicissitudes au gré de l'histoire d'une statue en bronze d'Héraclès entre Séleucie du Tigre et la Mésène', *Journal des savants* (1990), 3–68.
20. For an overview of Parthian coinage, see Fabrizio Sinisi, 'The Coinage of the Parthians', in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Coinage*, ed. William E. Metcalf, Oxford 2012, 275–97.
21. Herman Brijder, 'Antiochus I's Self-Proclaimed Religious Programme & Divine-Ruler Cult, and the Festivals for All the People of His Kingdom', in *Nemrud Dağı: Recent Archaeological Research and Conservation Activities in the Tomb Sanctuary on Mount Nemrud*, ed. Herman Brijder, Berlin 2014, 164–9.
22. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 51, no. 39, 118.
23. Michael Shenkar, 'La religion à Nisa d'après les ostraca', *Annuaire du Collège de France 2013–2014* 114 (2015), 519. On the religious material in these texts, see De Jong, 'Religion in Iran', 31–33.
24. Shenkar, 'The *Great Iranian Divide*', 382–3.
25. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 116–28.
26. Richard Payne, 'Iranian Cosmopolitanism: World Religions at the Sasanian Court', *Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Universal Rulers, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Myles Lavan et al., Oxford 2016, 209–30.
27. Michael Alram, 'Early Sasanian Coinage', *The Sasanian Era (The Idea of Iran 3)*, ed. Vesta Curtis and Sarah Stewart, London and New York 2008, 17–30.
28. On the Sasanian cult, see Michael Shenkar, 'Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135.3 (2015), 471–98.
29. Shenkar, 'The *Great Iranian Divide*', 384–386.
30. Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 571. This practice also continued in the Parthian period. See De Jong, 'Religion in Iran', 30.
31. Shenkar, 'Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm', 490.
32. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 160–161.
33. For the recent translation and an extensive philological commentary and discussion, see Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst 'Observations on the Middle Persian Barm-e Delak Inscription', *Zur lichten Heimat: Studien zu Manichäismus, Iranistik und Zentralasienkunde im Gedenken an Werner Sundermann*, ed. 'Turfanforschung' Team, Wiesbaden, 2017, 103–121.

34. For example, see the fire-altars from Takht-e Solayman in Rudolf Naumann, 'Sasanidische Feueraltäre', *Iranica Antiqua* 7 (1967), 72–76.
35. The construction of this temple is dated by the excavators to the Parthian period (first century CE), but this dating is questionable. No coins or ceramic material were found in the temple itself and its layout resembles late Sasanian fire-temples. Similarly, stucco reliefs found at Mele Hairam are firmly dated to the late Sasanian period. See Barbara Kaim, 'Un temple de feu sassanide découvert à Mele Hairam, Turkménistan méridional', *Studia Iranica* 31.2 (2002), 219–20. For other examples, such as Takht-e Solayman and Bandian, see Shenkar, 'Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm', 487–9.
36. Mele Hairam Fire Temple Project: http://www.archeo.uw.edu.pl/iran/engmh_tekst.html.
37. Barbara Kaim, 'Bone Reliefs from Fire Temple at Mele Hairam, South-West Turkmenistan', *Iranica Antiqua* 45 (2010), 321–35. The fact that these reliefs were made in the late Parthian period bears no implications for the dating of the temple itself to the Sasanian period. The prestige objects adorned with these carvings could have been stored for many decades, and even centuries.
38. Barbara Kaim, 'New Evidence of Zoroastrian Iconography of the Late Parthian Period', *Iranica Antiqua* 51 (2016), 201–13. This group is dated by the excavator to the late Parthian period, but it might also be early Sasanian given the style, the rendering of the fire-altar, and the sword of the character as illustrated in figure 6.
39. Michael Shenkar, 'Royal Regalia and the "Divine Kingship" in the pre-Islamic Central Asia', *Parthica* 19 (2017), 55–75
40. Étienne de La Vaissière, 'KUSHANSHAHS i. History', *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition (2016), available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kushanshahs-01.
41. Nikolaus Schindel, 'KUSHANSHAHS ii. Kushano-Sasanian Coinage', *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition (2016), available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kushanshahs-02–coinage.
42. For a recent survey and discussion, see Fabrizio Sinisi, 'The Deities on the Kushano–Sasanian Coins', *Electrum* 22 (2015), 201–25.
43. Oesho is an important composite deity that combines Shaivaite iconography with a name referring to the Iranian atmospheric god Vayu. On the Kushano–Sasanian coins, Oesho appeares under a new title, *burzawand yazad* in Middle Persian and *βορζοανδο ιαζαδο/βαγο βορζανδο* in Bactrian, which means 'the exalted god' or 'the god who possesses the heights'. See Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 154–7.
44. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 121, fig. 99.
45. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 107–108.
46. Irina Kruglikova, 'Raskopki Zapadnogo Khrama v Dil'berdzhine (Afganistan) v 1974–1977 gg.', *Problemy istorii, filologii, kul'tury* 7 (1999), 6–60.
47. Kruglikova, 'Raskopki Zapadnogo Khrama', 6–8; Shenkar *Intangible Spirits*, 156.
48. Kruglikova, 'Raskopki Zapadnogo Khrama', 7, figs. 7, 13.
49. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 156.
50. Prods Skjærvø, 'Kartīr', *Encyclopædia Iranica* 15.6 (2011), 608–28.
51. Schindel, 'KUSHANSHAHS'.
52. Shenkar, 'Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm', 479.
53. Shenkar, 'Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm', 479–84.
54. I have argued against the existence of an iconoclastic movement in early Sasanian Iran which was postulated by Mary Boyce; see Shenkar, 'Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm'.
55. Boris Marshak, 'Sogd V–VIII vv. Ideologiya po pamyatnikam iskusstva', in *Srenyaya Aziya v rannem Srednevekov'e*, ed. Galina Brykina, Moscow 1999, 175–92.
56. Étienne de La Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History*, Leiden 2005.
57. Valentin Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy i problemy religii Sogda (V–VIII vv)*, St Petersburg 2009.
58. Marshak, 'Sogd V–VIII vv.'.
59. For a recent discussion of the Sogdian religion and pantheon, see Michael Shenkar, 'The Religion and the Pantheon of the Sogdians (5th–8th centuries CE) in Light of their Sociopolitical Structures', *Journal Asiatique* 305.2 (2017), 191–209.
60. Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*.
61. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 39–44.
62. Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*.
63. Shkoda, *Pyandzhikenstkie khramy*, 78, fig. 121.1.
64. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 41.
65. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 112.
66. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, 41.
67. Shenkar, 'Rethinking Sasanian Iconoclasm', 491–2.