The Image Debate

Figural Representation in Islam
and Across the World

Edited by
Christiane Gruber
Religious Imagery and Image-Making in Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia

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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 the 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.

NOURISHING 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). 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

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 considered the gods to be of human form, as do the Greeks' (Herodotus 1.131). 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

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Figure 2. The Figure in the Winged Disk, Behistun rock-relief, 522–486 BCE. After U. Zeylindorff-Kulberg, Iconography of Deities and Demons. http://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/idd/prepublication.php
the tangible manifestation in pigt of the god Atar who has an anthropomorphic shape in swagg, which nevertheless remains invisible to the commoners. Interestingly, outside of immediate ritual contexts, for example on Sassanian and Kushan–Sassanian coins and seals, Atar was sometimes depicted as a male bust on top of the fire-altar (Figure 1).

**THE ACHAEMENID 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 full accord with Herodotus’ *Histories*, which nevertheless remains a certain ‘reform’ in cultic practices is attributed to another Achaemenid 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. Indeed, it is in the name of the goddess that Artaxerxes is known to this day.

Aniconism does not imply abhorrence of figural representations of the divine. In fact, Durian I is introduced (based on Avestan 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). 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 benefit. 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’.

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 scultphricle 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). This statue, which perhaps represented Iran 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 royal 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 stone pedestal, inscribed with a dedication to the god Oxus and showing Silenus Marsyas playing a flute (Figure 4). There is every reason to think that in this case the image of Maraya himself (a river-god) 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.

**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. 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.

**THE Sasanian Period** *(Second Century CE – Sixth Century CE)*

Although the Sasanians were Zoroastrian, they tolerated and accommodated a number of other religions, including Manichaeism. Under the rule of the Sasanian dynasty, many Greek and other foreign deities were assimilated into Zoroastrianism. The most important example of this process is the Hellenization of Zoroastrianism, which resulted in the creation of a new religion called Manichaeism. The Sasanians also introduced a number of new cultic practices, such as the construction of temples and the use of anthropomorphic statues.

**THE POST-ISLAMIC PERIOD** *(Seventh Century CE – Present)*

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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). 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.

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). However, there was no consistent rule, and Greek gods were also worshipped under their own names alone, without any Iranian interpretation.

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. 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. We can only speculate that given the iconic nature of her cult in Parthian Mesopotamia and later in Central Asia, it is likely that her worship in Nisa also included images.

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). Captured by the Parthians in the southern region of Mesopotamia, 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.

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

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, 78–38 BCE. Photograph courtesy of Christiane Gruber.
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. 15 The founder of the dynasty, Ardashir I, who from the onset declared himself on his coins as the “Mazda-worshipping Dignity/Lord”, 16 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). 17 It seems that this Sasanian tradition continued the aniconic fire-cult practiced by the Achaemenians, which in turn was continued by the local rulers of Pars during the Hellenistic and the Parthian periods. 18

The most interesting and so far unresolved question remains the genesis of the first-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. 19 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 centers perhaps occurred under the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardashir I. As a result, these Achaemenian royal fires may have served as the precursors and prototypes of the Sasanian fire-temples. Relatedly, the aniconic fire-temples of modern Zoroastrians are the direct descendants of Sasanian sanctuaries.

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 most eloquently expressed in the equestrian relief of Ardashir at Naqsh-e Rostam (Figure 9). 20 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 stela of Antiochus I of Commagene indicates that Ardashir thrust 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). 21 From the Hellenistic period onwards, the diadem was the primary and essential symbol of kingship in the Iranian world. The so-called “investment scene”, depicting a deity (usually Ahura Mazda) granting a diadem to a king, became a central motif in Sasanian royal iconography. Unfortunately, none of these capitals comes from scientifically controlled excavations and therefore we do not know in what type of monumental public buildings 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 cults, it seems that semi-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). 22 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 ‘quarters’, who, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, Aspez, the Head of the ‘quarters’, who, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main inscription installed the altar are engraved with representations of four characters, according to the main installation installed the fire-altar. Since none of them is a divinity, we might conjecture...
that it was regarded as an expression of special piety and hence to have one’s image depicted on the side of an altar – metaphorically supporting the throne (gaš) of the god Māt/ Afān. 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. 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-altar at Mele Hairam in modern Turkmenistan, which perhaps dates from the third–fourth century CE. The antechamber included fragments of paintings depicting human figures, 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 apsarine, a nude youth, and enthroned princesses. The second group shows Zoroastrian ritual utensils, a fire altar, and figures with a lance, a bundle of twigs or rods used in the Zoroastrian worship. 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.

**KUSHAN AND KUSHANO-SSASANIAN 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).

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 Kamihika 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, and showing the king rising from the mountain like the Sun god. 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 local kingdom governed by the rulers related to the Sasanian dynasty, who bore the new title of Kushano–Sasanian Bactria (first–fourth centuries CE). The latter are known mostly from coins, whose chronology is hotly debated. The coins also constitute the most significant source for the cult in Bactria in this period. Five deities are attested on Kushano–Sasanian coins. Three gods continue from the Kushan

Figure 11. Fire-altar from Bar-i-Delak, after R.K. Yazdi, ‘The Invaded Capital Dating from the Time of Shapur I’, Bulletin of the Asia Institute 3, 1989, p. 26, Figure 1.  

Figure 12. The goddess Nana on a Kushan gold coin of Vasudeva, minted in India, circa 190–219 CE. London, British Museum 1043/10 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

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

Figure 14. Mithra on a Kushano-Sasanian Bactria coin minted in Afghanistan, third–fourth century CE. London, British Museum 1881,0611.1 © The Trustees of the British Museum.
Figure 15. The right-hand statue from Temple X, painted clay, Dīlārjīn, Afghanistan, 3rd century CE. Depicting elements of an enthroned deity, men’s dress, and a necklace, it has been suggested identifying the right-hand statue with this important deity. The identity 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 goddesses on the left are larger than the other two female statues.39 Because 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 mud bricks and the throne under it was raised by two additional rows. The statue on the left, the largest of the three, was once considered 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.40 Because the only god on the Kushano–Sasanian coinage to be depicted half-naked, with similar curly locks of hair and a necklace, is Orosh (Ira ὴρος, Orosh). I have suggested identifying the right-hand statue with this important deity. 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 goddesses on the left are larger than the other two statues and Orosh is placed higher than the others and deliberately separated from them by a wall. To be 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 gilted 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 Kushano–Sasanian period, carved between 280 and 293 CE. 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. Elated to the rank of nobility and made a judge, unprecedented powers were greatly concentrated in his hands. It seems that his actions shaped the doctrines, institutions, and priesthood of the Zoroastrian religion. If, following Schindel,41 we place the beginning of the Kushano–Sasanian coinage around 280 CE, this period is also the apogee of Kartir’s career, during the reign of king Wahram II. He seems to have enjoyed unrestricted religious authority. In a famous passage in his inscriptions he says that he ‘created the faith, destroyed and the dwellings of the demons demolished and the places (thrones) and the seats of the gods were established’,42 I have argued elsewhere that Kartir employs the term ‘idol’ (uzde) 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 cultural imagery belonging to rival individuals.43 The Kushano–Sasanian material positively rules out any all-encompassing, programmatic destruction of cultural images by the Sasanians in the third century.44 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 is traditionally expected if Kartir’s words are taken at their face value. Moreover, as the mammoth evidence shows, the Kushano–Sasanian kings deliberately chose the depictions 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.

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.45 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’. Since Sogdiana was significantly less influenced by Greek culture than the southern Bactrian neighbours, it seems that anthropomorphic statuary spread in Sogdiana together with the unprecedented urbanization boom caused by the gold trade 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 statuary and were decorated with wooden reliefs and figurative paintings close in style to the Bactrian murals. Our knowledge of the realities of the Sogdian culture is based primarily on the excavations of the two temples in Panjikent, the best-known Sogdian city. Panjikent was the capital of an independent principality in the Upper Zeravshan region, some 60 km to the east of Samarqand. Highly valuable information is also provided by wall paintings uncovered in the palaces and houses of private citizens in the same city and, to a much smaller extent, in other Sogdian centres, such as Samarkand, Voxtarqand, and Kandahar. 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.45 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’. Since Sogdiana was significantly less influenced by Greek culture than the southern Bactrian neighbours, it seems that anthropomorphic statuary spread in Sogdiana together with the unprecedented urbanization boom caused by the gold trade 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 statuary and were decorated with wooden reliefs and figurative paintings close in style to the Bactrian murals. Our knowledge of the realities of the Sogdian culture is based primarily on the excavations of the two temples in Panjikent, the best-known Sogdian city. Panjikent was the capital of an independent principality in the Upper Zeravshan region, some 60 km to the east of Samarqand. Highly valuable information is also provided by wall paintings uncovered in the palaces and houses of private citizens in the same city and, to a much smaller extent, in other Sogdian centres, such as Samarkand, Voxtarqand, and Kandahar.

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.45 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’. Since Sogdiana was significantly less influenced by Greek culture than the southern Bactrian neighbours, it seems that anthropomorphic statuary spread in Sogdiana together with the unprecedented urbanization boom caused by the gold trade 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 statuary and were decorated with wooden reliefs and figurative paintings close in style to the Bactrian murals. Our knowledge of the realities of the Sogdian culture is based primarily on the excavations of the two temples in Panjikent, the best-known Sogdian city. Panjikent was the capital of an independent principality in the Upper Zeravshan region, some 60 km to the east of Samarqand. Highly valuable information is also provided by wall paintings uncovered in the palaces and houses of private citizens in the same city and, to a much smaller extent, in other Sogdian centres, such as Samarkand, Voxtarqand, and Kandahar.
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.

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. 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. 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-Tabarî (d. 923 CE), even the nails used to fasten the garments to the wooden bodies of the idols were made from gold and silver.

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. This is the only fully-preserved (non–Greekt) 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 armours, 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 material from the Panjikent temples and the wall-paintings unambiguously shows that the Sogdian cult was centered on anthropomorphic representations of deities. The Chinese and Arabic written sources that describe statues and ‘idols’ in Sogdian temples also confirm this.

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Both 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 Karun al-Ghfîlî (Figure 20). 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 18. Graphic reconstruction of a statue of Nana, Panjikent, Temple III, 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.
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.  

**Conclusions**

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

For the recent translation and an extensive philological commentary and discussion, see Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst *New Light on the Major Sasanian Writing*. New York 2008, 17–30.

For the recent translation and an extensive philological commentary and discussion, see Prods Skjærvø, *Kartīr*, *Iranica Antiqua* 19 (2017), 55–75.

For an overview of Parthian coinage, see De Jong, *Religion in Iran*, 175–79.

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