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Preliminary report of Māhūr tomb, a Mithraism relic at Dezfūl, Southern Iran

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Abstract: *Tomb of Māhūr is located at a village called Mahur Berenji, district of Sardasht a part of Dezfūl, Khuzestan province, Southern Iran. This tomb has been discovered by Karamian and Astraki in 2018. There is a four-legged cross symbol in the above part of the tomb entrance.*

Key words: Iran, Māhūr Tomb, Khuzestan, Parthian period, Sasanian period, Mithra

Introduction

Tomb of Māhūr is located at a village called Mahur Berenji, district of Sardasht a part of Dezfūl, Khuzestan province, Southern Iran. This important structure has been discovered by Karamian and Astraki in 2018. Unfortunately before this study, the tomb has been looted by illegal excavators, however, authors could record some information for future researchers.

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Area of the study

The tomb is located in the area which includes a vast area of the archaeological complex, the chronology of the site is somehow problematic, however, the very well known Sasanian town of Gondēšāpur is located 16 km far from Māhūr tomb. Gondēšāpur is placed south of Šāhābād (modern Eslāmābād; a village situated 14 km southeast of Dezfūl), in Khuzestan province, southwest Iran.

Characteristics of GPS Surveying of the Māhūr tomb are: 32°22'45.8 N 48°38'40.9 E; 296 meters above the sea level. It is situated 100 meters at the southwestern part of Mahur Branji Olia village. It is placed in the natural rock a part of mountains region of this area. A seasonal river is located in the western part of the village, it used to be the permanent river in ancient times [Fig. 1]. There is another Sasanian monument in vicinity, called Papilan bridge, located 6 km from Māhūr tomb. The specification of the bridge, the materials used for its construction (it is made of unshaped stone and gypsum mortar) and its architectural style support Partho-Sasanian origin. These monuments indicate the importance of the region in terms of archeological research during the historical periods of Iran.



Fig. 1. Location of Māhūr tomb, district of Sardasht a part of Dezfūl, Khuzestan province, Southern Iran

Specification of the tomb

Tomb is carved in rock, around 1 meter above the surrounding modern-day ground, the light of the entrance is rectangular, 70 cm in height and 50 cm in width. The rock above the entrance was, seemingly, artificially flattened to create vertical rectangular panel (currently badly weathered) or was grounded later and thus erasing the depictions. In the lower part of the elaborated area, a deep concave cross was carved in the rock, with the horizontal arms slightly longer from the vertical ones. Over the left horizontal arm the convex Greek letters: Theta and Pi were placed [Fig. 5].

A short, 1 m long corridor leads to the tomb chamber. The chamber is almost square in plan 2,3 m by 2,25 m. The chamber is 2 m high. The ceiling is flat, the edge where the walls support it is rounded. In the center of the chamber there is the gravel pit 80 cm long and 60 cm wide with 20 cm deep. The size of the gravel pit suggests that the human bones were deposited there [Figs. 2; 3; 4].

There were several forms of burials during the Parthian and Sasanian periods. Among them, there are two types possible to reconstruct for Māhūr tomb, cremation or leaving of the dead in the open air, usually at the tops of the sacred mountains to enable the scavenger birds, like vultures and crows, eating the soft tissue of the dead, then placing the remaining bones inside the tombs. The pit inside the tomb, suitable in size for the remnants deposit, advocates the latter form of the burial practices.



Fig. 2. Southern view of the Māhūr tomb; fot. G. Karamian 2019



Fig. 3. Southern view of the Māhūr tomb with scale; fot. G. Karamian 2019



Fig. 4. Inside of the Māhūr tomb; fot. G. Karamian 2019



Fig. 5. Stylized cross symbol and two Greek letters Theta and Pi in the upper part of the entrance of Māhūr tomb; fot. G. Karamian 2019

Discussion

In opinion of current Authors, the tomb belongs to the ancient Iranian cult of Mithra. The religion which inspired Roman mysteries cult and is impossible to believe that it completely disappeared from its land of origin. The recent archaeological excavations provide direct evidence of popularity of Mithraic cult in Iran which is far from surprising, however has not been revealed so far¹. Although the Roman Mithraism underwent its own evolution and must be treated, in its developed form, as an eclectic creed within Roman system of beliefs, it must have included large number of traits from its genuine source². It is not the place to discuss the possible roads of transition of, now lost, Iranian mystery religion to the Roman soil. The general idea of the Authors is to argument belonging of the Māhūr tomb to Mithraic religion, still vivid in Parthian and Sasanian Iran. The main argument would employ the symbol of cross present over the tomb entrance, which, as evidenced below, would not belong

¹ ALIBAIGI et al. 2017; SHEKARI NIRI 2019.

² Presentation in: CHALUPA 2016: 67-75; GORDON 2017: 281-286; interesting perspective in SÁNCHEZ 2019: 131-132.

to Christian system of beliefs. The most plausible form of burial in Māhūr would be exposure of the body on a hilltop, bones being cleaned by the scavenging animals and bones placed in the special basin carved in the floor of the tomb. Thus, the tomb would act as a large, rock carved *astōdān*³. Possibly, the portable ossuaries could be placed inside as well. This form of burial is not typical for the Christians, rather reminds of the rock carved tombs of the Achaemenid kings who must have followed the guides of the Iranian religion⁴. It is true that in the Parthian period alternative forms of burial are recorded⁵ however it is impossible to assess their cultural or religious consequences. Parthian slipper-coffins might be limited to Semitic population and rich grave inventories do not negate possible cleaning of the soft tissue before deposition⁶. Continuation of the 'sky burial' in some forms of Lamaism allows to suppose that the idea of cleaning the bones from the soft tissue was of Central Asian origin and might have been exercised the most strict way, far from Semitic and Hellenic centres. Māhūr tomb seems to follow the typically Iranian burial type and thus must be associated with the Iranian system of beliefs. Neither Mazdaism nor Zoroastrianism provide the explanation for the cross decorating the entrance to the tomb. It can be explained on the ground of the clues deduced from what is known about original Mithraism.

Mithraic symbolism or visual language remains obscure, despite two centuries of research of Western Mithraism and more recent attempts to research original, Iranian version of the religion⁷. The main difficulty comes from shortage of sources and their ambiguity. Also, relation between Roman Mithraism and its Iranian origin is assessed differently by different scholars. From denial of any deeper connection to almost uncritical acceptance of mutually interchangeable elements. The latter are usually represented by the students of Iranian history like Bivar⁸ and Soudavar⁹ who tend to draw far reaching conclusions based on sophisticated interpretation of the limited sources. Although it seems impossible that the Roman religion which took the name of Iranian god and some utensils, did that from the mere taste for exoticism¹⁰. Therefore discussion of the Mithraic semantics should be carried in balance between scant available data and vast material of the images or meanings common in various cultures which not necessarily are related with actual Mithraism. Instead, the focus is

³ SHAHBAZI 1987; RUSSEL 2000; GRENET 2000; KHOSRAVI, ALIBAIGI, RASHNO 2018.

⁴ Naturally the ossuaries were used both by Jews and, possibly, Central Asian Nestorians, however their function was far less important than in case of the Persians. Also, the funerary rite was radically different – the corpses were deposited in the tombs and only after natural decomposition, were cleaned and stored in ossuaries.

⁵ RUSSEL 2000; GRENET 2000.

⁶ RUSSEL 2000.

⁷ BIVAR 1998; BIVAR 2005; CHALUPA 2016, 67-75; GORDON 2017, 281-286; SOUDAVAR 2017.

⁸ BIVAR 1979; 1998, 2005.

⁹ SOUDAVAR 2017.

¹⁰ CHALUPA 2018, 67-75; GORDON 2017, 281-286.

made on what is specific to Mithra/Mehr and what can be associated with the visual culture shared between Roman followers of Mithras and Iranian followers of Mehr.

The Sasanian seals with the depictions of crosses can hardly be found related to Christianity¹¹. The seal No 67, represents the ram and the cross, but there is no basis for Gyselen's assumption that the cross is Christian [Fig. 6]¹². The seal dates back to the 6th century, but without any inscriptions¹³. The ram in native Iranian religions is one of ten symbols of *xwarrah* (glory)¹⁴. The connection between Miθr and *xwarrah* is confirmed by the *Mihr Yašt* (Yašt 13.95), where *hamišeḥ-bahār* (the sunflower) is supported on the dual support of Miθra and Aṗam Napāt¹⁵.



Fig. 6. The seal BM inv. 119857 (drawing by Eleonora Skupniewicz)

The depiction of the beribboned ram is distant from the Lamb of God of Christian religion. The picture of the Lamb of God is victim oriented, the victim which is sacrificed in order to protect the God's people. Leaving aside the age of the animal, which with a dose of misunderstanding might make a ram out of lamb, the animal depicted between the latin crosses on the Sasanian seal does not carry the sacrificial message. The ram is beribboned or rather diademed, as the royal prerogative of the diadem, being a stripe of white cloth worn on the monarch's head, was still vivid in Sasanian Iran¹⁶. Naturally, the Lamb of God remains the King of the Universe in Chalcedonian, trinitarian creed, but there is no such iconography of the Lamb reigning, without any reference to its blood sacrifice or direct innocence, known. If a ram was to represent Christ, we would expect some references in Western Christianity. The monophysitic or Nestorian views would not differ much here as Christ in His victorious epiphany is usually depicted in human form. The Apocalyptic reference to the Lamb of God associates Him with blood and sacrifice while

¹¹ GYSELEN 2006.

¹² GYSELEN 2006: no. 67, 56-57.

¹³ Here we can refer to other seals from the British Museum collection, on which the ram is accompanied by a Pahlavi inscription, e.g. BM inv. 119851 or BM inv. 119846.

¹⁴ GNOLI 1999; SOUDAVAR 2009: 425; CRISTOFORETTI, SCARCIA 2013: 342-343.

¹⁵ SOUDAVAR 2010.

¹⁶ KAIM 2009.

the personage dressed in white represents victorious Christ. Naturally, the dogma identifies both pictures, but the context approximates human hypostases with victory while the Lamb with sacrifice and protection. The shift to make the Lamb a ram and switch its semantics from sacrificial to royal does not seem justified.

What is more, Aries, or Ram, is the sign marking the mid-way between Capricornus and Cancer, the signs of Winter and Summer solstices. So, the Ram or Aries is naturally placed between the solar extremities. What is important here is, that the Mithrea had symbolic entrances in Cancer and Exits in Capricornus marking the solstices. The fact that the Spring solstice actually comes, now, in Pisces is less relevant here as the solar equinoxes and solstices are not exactly synchronised with the movement of the constellations at ecliptic. Nominally, it is Aries which is placed in between of the solstices. To the possible explanation of the symbolism of the latin cross, with the horizontal bar exceeding in length the vertical one¹⁷.

It is equally impossible to match the mark of the latin cross with the figures of the scorpions as depicted on another Sasanian seal, with the Christian symbolism.



Fig. 7. The seal BM inv. 120354 (drawing by Eleonora Skupniewicz)

According to Gyselen the seal is the Christian one [Fig. 7]¹⁸. Two scorpions and two crosses separated by inscription are placed on the seal. Both in Christianity and orthodox Zoroastrianism, the scorpions represented devilish danger and taking an assumption that, allegedly, the Scorpions were, in some Near Eastern lore, related to fertility¹⁹, keeps them away from the Christian understanding of the cross, as much as from another ancient fertility symbol – a goat. Also, an ambiguity of the scorpions need to be mentioned, as they might, occasionally appear as the fertility symbols but also accompanied Nergal, Oriental equivalent of Hades. Equally strange seem two crosses accompanying the scorpions. If the reference was made to the cross of Christ's martyrdom, then doubling would not make any sense. Two crosses might, with mind's

¹⁷ On far more complicated astrological identifications of the elements of the Western Mithraic iconography, see: NAGY (2015); these views, although greatly interesting seem to ignore any possibility of vivid connection between Iranian and Roman Mithraisms

¹⁸ GYSELEN 2006: no. 97, 62-63; GIGNOUX 1976: 145.

¹⁹ GYSELEN 2006: 36.

great effort, refer to a kind of docetic denial of real suffering of God on a cross, so one might be a cross where human Jesus died while the second might represent the sign of eternal salvation brought by Christ, however docetism denied any positive function of cross. Not to mention that the latin crosses do not remind the tools of crucifixion. There is no need to remind here in detail how popular symbol was a cross and svastika among pre-Christian societies globally²⁰. Simplicity of the pattern might direct the interpretation to any pagan solar cult, however the solar per excellence deity in Iran was Mehr/Mithra, whose Roman hypostases was named Sol Invictus, Invincible Sun. Relation of Miθra with the sun is clearly marked in *Yašt* 10.13²¹. Despite the fact that in *Avesta* Miθra is not identified with ten sun, in the Parthian era Miθra was turned into a solar deity²². On Kushan coinage Miθra is depicted with the attribute of Greek Sun-god Helios²³. Direct identification of Miθra with Helios is also found on inscriptions of Antiochos I of Commagene at Nemrud Dağı²⁴, as well as in iconography of the site (Miθra is surround by the sun's rays on his Phrygian cap)²⁵. It must be also admitted that the Roman Mithraic culture reveals certain dose of ambiguity. On one hand Mithras is identified with *Sol Invictus*, on the other hand, in mithraic iconography sun on the chariot is depicted separately from the bull-slaying god, thus denying direct and simplistic identification.

In Roman mithraistic iconography the scorpions accompany the tauroctony, placed below the bull, often attacking beast's testicles²⁶. The latin crosses accompanying the scorpions in Iranian cultural environment would rather associate with Mithra than Christ. Important are also proportions on the seals with the crosses, which are significantly smaller from the scorpions. If the former were to represent the Christian signs they would occupy either the central position or would otherwise be marked as more important than the insects.

The seal from the Mohsen Foroughi's collection [Fig.8]²⁷ repeats the motif of two scorpions with the crosses, this time, flanking the hand with forefinger and thumb linked and what appears a diadem around the wrist. Again, the symbolic weight of the crosses is secondary, they are placed at the side of the depiction as one of two elements flanking the main depiction. Such marginal position of the cross would not suit Christian idea of the Cross marking central point in history and God's plan of salvation. Naturally, in magical thinking, the religious symbols might appear in order to strengthen the power of intention. This, however, excludes the crosses on

²⁰ SOUDA VAR 2017: 80: "the four-legged cross is an ancient symbol of the Sun that Iranians called *chalipā*".

²¹ SCHMIDT 2006.

²² FOLTZ 2013: 171.

²³ BIVAR 1979: 741-743.

²⁴ CROWTHER, FACELLA 2003: 47; ROSE 2013.

²⁵ BURILLO-CUADRADO, BURILLO-MOZOTA 2014: 32, Fig. 3.

²⁶ See, e.g. seal from Yale University, no. NCBS 914; bronze plaque from Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 1997.145.3; marble statue from British Museum, inv. 1825,0613.1.

²⁷ GYSELEN 2006: no. 62, 56-57; GIGNOUX, GYSELEN 1982: 10.40.

the seals from purely Christian interpretation and, subsequently, requires reconsideration of the possible origin. Especially if the central depiction represents the veneration gesture known from Sasanian rock reliefs and other Sasanian seals²⁸, additionally symbolically reinforced by the fillet or diadem²⁹. The main semantic trait here is that the combination of a scorpion with a cross was a motif attested in sigillography and that they were used to envelope the central message. This might suggest an abstract, general meaning illustrating the views of cosmic powers intentionally curbed to support the wearer.



Fig. 8. The seal from the Mohsen Foroughi's collection (drawing by Eleonora Skupniewicz)

In Iranian imagery the scorpions associate the crosses with mithraistic imagery. It does not seem likely to limit the meaning of the cross to the solar symbol and might mark seal wearers' sun sign. Duplication of the image and surrounding a core meaning with it suggests more general and deeper semantic content. Also, the presence of the same shape crosses on the discussed tombs without descriptions of the scorpions or other zodiac signs support the idea of more thorough interpretation.

In tauroctony images scorpion is shown directly below the bull. When looking at the zodiac, and placing Taurus on the top (Inslér³⁰ identified the tauroctony scene as Sun in Taurus), the sign directly below is Scorpio. The idea identifying Mithras with the Sun and the tauroctony as lunar eclipse should be refuted as both the Sun and the Moon are represented in the iconography of Mithraea independently. Also the idea that Mithra represents Leo fighting Taurus does not find support in celestial order (Leo does not border Taurus and no major solar positions occur in both signs) or with the preserved knowledge regarding Roman Mithraism where the lion is identified with Cautes and not Mitra (see below). Then, the axis of Taurus-Scorpio would constitute the vertical beam of the cross. The horizontal beam would spread between Leo and Aquarius. The identification of Cautes with lion might further refer to

²⁸ On the symbolism of the hand in Sasanian iconography see: BRUNNER 2012: 121-122.

²⁹ SOUDAVAR 2009: 435: ten thousand *xwarrah*.

³⁰ INSLER 1979: 532-538.

mithraistic iconography where Cautes and Cauropates flank the central scene³¹. Additionally, Lion is the fourth of the seven grades of mithraic initiation which means that it marks exact middle of the vertical ladder of the grades, so exactly where, in visual depiction would get the horizontal bar of the cross³².

This identification ignores two other elements – a snake and a dog, also attacking sacrificial bull. They seem to concentrate on the blood running from the victims neck, semantically related rather with the wound and the sword, thus constituting the other, additional semantic context and belonging to seemingly another complex of meanings (possibly connected to position of Sirius which if identified with Tištriya and played important role in Iranian pre-Islamic religions). Position of Cautes and Cauropates was not strictly fixed as they appear either to the left or to the right in different Mithraea which can easily be explained by difference of perspective affecting the circular movement of the mystery – either from the scene towards the viewers or opposite. Cautes representing Leo and marking south holds his torch up, while in this case Cauropates would reside in Aquarius (the opposite of Leo in Zodiac), represent north and hold the torch down³³. This would allow to simplify the tauroctony to the sign of cross, however it must be borne in mind that the position of the torches cannot represent the direction of the movement as from Cancer (where the entrance to Mithraeum was placed) till Capricornus (where the exit was placed) the amount of sunlight diminishes and increases from Capricornus to Cancer. Thus the position of the torches does not illustrate dynamism or direction of the movement but seemingly, rather refers to its extremities. So, the raised torch of Cautes would mark Sun entering Leo in its highest and Cauropates would mark entering Aquarius in its lowest. Lucinda Driven³⁴ convincingly associated Cautes and Cauropates with celestial movement however at the same time they are limited to the side parts of the mystic drama, marking the gates the Sun passes in the annual voyage. Symbolically Cautes or Leo is the keeper/guardian of the entry gate to the Mithraeum while Cauropates guards the exit gate³⁵. The other flat diagonal line runs between Pisces and Libra where Nauruz and Mihragar are located. Strangely, these two festivals are not recorded in Western Mithraism but remained important part of Iranian culture.

Even though the solstices and equinoxes would create regular cross if marked on the circular calendar, they belong to the zodiac signs flanking the Leo-Aquarius line, theoretical horizontal line of the Mithraic cross. That is why the proportions of

³¹ DRIVEN 2016: 22-24.

³² CHALUPA 2008: 198

³³ DRIVEN 2016: 22-24.

³⁴ DRIVEN 2016: 20-26.

³⁵ GORDON 2017, 302; DRIVEN 2016, 23-24.

the cross in the discussed tomb emphasise the horizontal line being slightly longer than the vertical one³⁶.

Theta (θῆτα, written as ΘΘ or ΘΘ) is the eighth letter of the Greek alphabet. In its archaic form, written as a cross within a circle, and later as a line or point within a circle. In classical Athens, theta was also known as the ‘letter of death’ because it was the initial letter of thanatos (death). The Egyptians used the sign of a point in a circle to represent the god Ra, the probable origin of his use as an astrological symbol of the Sun³⁷. Theta had the same value in isopsephy as Helios (ΘΗΤΑ = 318 = ΗΛΙΟΣ)³⁸. Theta in Greek numeric system symbolises number 9. In ‘arcanum esoteric roman name’ 9 symbolises the chariot³⁹. According to the *Mihr Yašt* (Yašt 10.68) Miθra is a warrior driving a chariot⁴⁰. On the imprint of the Sasanian seal from Berlin (formerly in the Berlin State Museum, now lost) the depiction of the radiate bust above a chariot drawn by a winged horses is accompanied by an inscription *hwmtryh ZY p’lswmy* (‘perfect friendship’)⁴¹, being an allusion to the god’s name. Miθra is personification and deification of the very idea of ‘alliance’(covenant, agreement, treaty)⁴². It cannot be excluded that theta, marking the middle of the name Miθra written in Greek alphabet would stand for the theophoric name, being its center, not an initial. Why would the Iranians use Greek alphabet in the notation is unclear, however the shape reminding the shield and further, the sun-shield might support the argument.

Pi (written Π π) is the 16th letter of the Greek alphabet. In the Greek system of numbers it means 80. This number is assigned to Serapis-Mithras⁴³. According to Adrian Bivar, Serapis is derived from the Iranian epithet Mithra, *xšaθra-pati-* (Lord of the Realm), and therefore the cult of Serapis is a continuation of the pre-Semitic, Mithraic religion of the Medes⁴⁴. Pseudo-Nonnos states that the mithraic trials lasted a total of 80 days. After them the initiated one reached full perfection. This ‘perfection’ is the seventh, highest level of initiation, called ‘father’ (pater). ‘Father’ identified himself with the Sun and gold, that is, with Mithras himself⁴⁵.

Again, it is also possible to associate Π with ‘Pater’ or Iranian ‘padar’ which might refer to the grave owner’s status among the initiates. Thus ΘΠ might stand for ‘father in Miθra’ or ‘Miθra’s initiate of “father” level’. Again, selection of Greek might be found awkward when applied to the traditional Iranian creed, however the Greek

³⁶ What requires further research is possible connection between the opposition of European festivals of the nights 31/04-01/05 (Walpurgisnacht) and 31/10-01/11 (Halloween, All Saints Day, Dziady) which coincide with the vertical beam of the proposed cross.

³⁷ BARRY 1999: 73.

³⁸ FIDELER 1993: 224, 359.

³⁹ FLOWERS 1995: 123.

⁴⁰ BOYCE 1996: 30; ASSASI 2013.

⁴¹ GRENET 1993: 89, Fig. 2; CALLIERI 1990: 86-87; Zobacz także SHENKAR 2015: 110-113.

⁴² POURSHARIATI 2013: 18 (with literature).

⁴³ FLOWERS 1995: 123.

⁴⁴ BIVAR 1998: 30; BIVAR 2005.

⁴⁵ CHALUPA 2008: 188. OSEK 2010: 479-480.

alphabet and language were widely used in Iran. Naturally, it cannot be excluded that there were more decorations, perhaps painted or plastered which were erased and left the almost empty field above the entrance to the tomb.

Although the light effects could not be as elaborated as suggested by Gawlikowski, Jakubiak, Małkowski and Sołtysiak for mithraeum in Dura Europos, the grave in Māhūr is also oriented on North-South axis with the entrance from the South⁴⁶.

In the light of above the cross above Māhūr tomb should be related to the complex of beliefs related to Mithra.

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⁴⁶ GAWLIKOWSKI et al. 2011: 172-173.

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