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On the Sasanian horse-shaped rhyta. A type of Sasanian wine vessel in historical perspective

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Abstract: *Among the vessel types employed in Sasanian toreutics the horse-shaped rhyta attract attention. They combine the functionality with figural shape. The article aims in setting them within the development of the Iranian drinking vessels with figural elements, and placing them within art-historical sequences. This proves that they match Sasanian decorum and that the fashion continued after the fall of the dynasty.*

Key words: Art History, Sasanian Art, Sasanian Toreutics, Wyvern Collection, Cleveland Museum of Art, Rhyta, Wine Vessel

A special place among Sasanian toreutic objects is occupied by the vessels, identified as rhyta, in the shape of saddled horses. Two such specimens are known: one from the Wyvern Collection (inv. 2845) [Figs. 1-3] and the other from the Cleveland Museum of Art (inv. 1964.41) [Fig. 4].¹ Both objects are very similar to each other, representing the same visual but, most likely, utilitarian type, while they differ, quite significantly in detail. Both vessels were made of silver, partially gilded. They depict heavily built horses, sitting on their bellies, with bent front and hind legs. In both cases, the vessels consist of two parts – a front and a back. The dividing line runs behind the shoulder, coinciding with the girth line. In both cases, similar elements of the horse harness are shown. The backs of both horses are covered by a clothes decorated with rosettes, with four nodular protuberances placed in pairs, two above the shoulder, obliquely, almost on the neck of the mount, two vertically on the back, behind the girth line. Two large convex phalerae were placed on the breastplate of both horses. The vessel from the Cleveland Museum of Arts shows two chest straps – one horizontal running from under the saddle across the horse's chest and diagonal between

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¹ Harper, 1978: 28-30; 1983; 1988.

the top of the saddle and the phalera. The horse in the Wyvern Collection has only one strap running from the top of the saddle across the breast. In both cases, there are under-tail straps running along the rump, coming together under the closely tied tail. The bridles of both horses connect to the muzzles, but no shanks are shown. Neither are the reins.

Undoubtedly, both vessels represent the same functional and visual type, but clear differences are discernible. The horse from the Wyvern Collection is much thicker. The functionality of the vessel seems to have dominated the need to maintain a resemblance to the actual horse. Its neck droops baggily, melding with the breast, allowing for an increased volume of liquid, but, as a result, it looks more like a bloated wineskin than a seated horse. The forelock is also not preserved, leaving a hole on top of the head, between the ears, while this element steers clearly in the case of the rhyton from the Cleveland Museum of Arts. The heads of the two horses also differ. The flared neck and breast disrupt the proportions of the horse from the Wyvern Collection, its head becoming disproportionately small. Its eyes are directed forward, like those of a predator, which enhances the bizarre expression. The bridle is also drawn clumsily and incorrectly, due to the bloating of the lower part and the widening of the cheeks by the improperly worked-out eyes. The straps along the cheeks cannot then naturally overlap behind the ears, so the craftsman had to place a rather clumsy half-loop, descending toward the not-preserved forelock.

The horse's manes are also depicted differently. In the case of the rhyton from the Cleveland Museum of Arts, the mane is trimmed short, with two longer tufts, while the mane from the Wyvern Collection is long, falling symmetrically to the sides.

A very noticeable difference between the two objects is the strap hiding the joining of the front and back and the girth in the case of the vessel from the Wyvern Collection. The covering of the saddlecloth is different – the rosettes on the saddlecloth from the Cleveland Museum of Arts are vertical and resemble crosses, while they are diagonal on the saddlecloth from the Wyvern Collection. What is noteworthy is that the pattern of the saddlecloth in the front part of the rhyton from the Wyvern Collection consists of alternating fields, one filled with a grid, the other with a rosette, is different from the back part, which is covered with diagonal rosettes. Also different is the edge of the cap, which in the front part imitates the pattern of the strap going around the horse's log and in the back part resembles a braid.

The phalerae on the two horses also differ. In the case of the vessel from the Cleveland Museum of Arts, they are figural, with half figures depicted, while on the vessel from the Wyvern Collection they are cancelled half-spheres clearly reminding Parthian bowls. It should also be noted that no phalerae appear on the stripes of the harness from the Cleveland Museum of Arts, except for the two on the chest, while the straps of the row of the horse from the Wyvern Collection are decorated with minor disks.

The horse from the Wyvern Collection is adorned, typically for the harness of the Sasanian kings, with ribbons attached to the collar at temple level, and the tassels hanging from the back of the saddle. It seems that the rhyton from the Wyvern Collection is more of a functional vessel and less of a figural sculpture. Certainly, this object deserves scholarly interest and requires further research. It does, however, indicate the recurrence of the form of the figural horse-shaped rhyton in Sasanian toreutics. Moreover, given the inconsistency of the saddlecloth design, it should be considered whether the present state was not compiled from two sets matched and unified secondarily. This inconsistency in the decoration system and the prominently utilitarian nature of the vessel argue against possibly seeing it as a modern product, but further research can shed more light on the issues of manufacturing technology and the possible phasing of individual pieces. Should it turn out that the differences between the parts, in fact, are due to the origin of the two original sets, this fact would confirm the popularity of this form of vessel.

Rhyta had been used in Iran since pre-Achaemenid times and remained in use through the Sasanian period. Their usual form was a horn ending in an animal protome. In most cases, Achaemenid and Parthian rhyta ended in protomes with outstretched front limbs, which increased the dynamism of the depiction by suggesting the running of an animal, with the same direction as the flow of fluid from the vessel.² It should be noted, however, that already the Achaemenid rhyta had endings in the form of animals with their front legs bent backwards, as if they were sitting.³ It should be taken into account, however, that the Achaemenid conventions of showing the dynamic movement of animals used silhouettes with bent front legs depicting a violent leap. However, it seems that the decision to show bent front legs to protomes may have had also practical considerations – the lack of protruding limbs made it easier to drink, allowing the mouth to be closer to the opening, while at the same time reducing the number of delicate, easy to break, elements. Nevertheless, it should be noted that both forms coexisted in parallel, only in the Sassanid period the forms with extended legs seem to have disappeared.

In the context of the development of the type of Sasanian vessels in question, three Achaemenid rhyta with protomes of horses with upturned legs seem particularly relevant: from the Erebuni Historical and Archaeological Museum-Reserve (inv. 19) [Fig. 5],⁴ from the Sarikhani Collection (inv. A.MW.1070) [Fig. 6],⁵ and form

² Ghirshman, 1964: 29-32; Colledge, 1977: 113, 116, fig. 37; Pfrommer, 1993: 178-179, 186-187, 190-193, pl. 4, 6; Kawami, 1996a; Thomas, 1996; Pilipko, 2001: 288-296; Jäger, 2016; Curtis, Sarikhani Sandmann & Stanley, 2021: 78-81; Franke, Sarikhani Sandman & Weber, 2021: 105-106, 366; Spier, Potts & Cole, 2022: 99, 218-222; Fraser, Llewellyn-Jones & Bishop-Wright, 2023: 42.

³ Ghirshman, 1964: 111; Kawami, 1996b; Lukonin & Ivanov, 2012: 88-90; Jäger, 2016; Curtis, Sarikhani Sandmann & Stanley, 2021: 80; Franke, Sarikhani Sandman & Weber, 2021: 95; Fraser, Llewellyn-Jones & Bishop-Wright, 2023: 42-43, 76.

⁴ Lukonin & Ivanov, 2012: 88; Almagor, 2021: 11.

the Shumei Family Collection (the catalogue number missing)⁶. In all cases, the horses are shown in bridles, with saddle straps running across the breasts and hair gathered in forelock between the ears. In the case of the rhyton from the Sarikhani Collection, the elements of the harness are made of gold, so that they clearly contrast with the surface of the vessel, as is the case on the rhyton from the Cleveland Museum of Art. It can be said that if the beaker connected to the body of the horse was replaced with the hindquarters of the animal we would get a form identical to the ones discussed. What seems significant, in the Achaemenid rhyta, the protome is separated from the goblet by a ring and was made as a separate element. A similarly clear division is preserved in the Parthian rhyton from the Sarikhani Collection (inv. A.MW.1055), where the gilded harness and the forelock can also be found, but the horse itself has its legs stretched forward.

A vessel of Achaemenid provenance that should definitely be referenced in the context of the Sasanian vessels under discussion is the second of the rhyta from Erebuni (inv. 20) [Fig. 7].⁷ The rhyton, with a design analogous to Achaemenid rhyta presented earlier, with a figural ending at the bottom and a bent, conical beaker, which differs from other examples of the period in that instead of a protome, the lower part is occupied by a full-figured representation of a horse with bent all four legs with a rider. The mount is stocky, with short legs and a powerful neck which resembles the discussed rhyton in the Wyvern Collection. The elements of the harness and the typical Achaemenid saddlecloth are clearly marked. The recumbent horse with all legs folded up is a definite analogy to the discussed rhyta from the Wyvern Collection and the Cleveland Museum of Art. The main differences are that the Erebuni figure is merged with the beaker, and the figure of the rider. Naturally, while the horse-shaped rhyta in question are divided around the girth, in the case of the Erebuni rhyton the merging of the figure with the cup occurs behind the horse's rump. The deformation of the proportions of the horse's torso seems to correspond with a vessel from the Wyvern Collection where the similarly bulky body of the mount appears to be the result of practical requirements. Naturally, both the saddle and the rest of the harness are Achaemenid, but the idea of depicting the entire horse as a silver vessel seems to have already been developed, even if it appears with the beaker and the rider.

An important analogy for the horse-shaped rhyta in question is a silver vessel in the shape of a standing horse from the Louvre (inv. MND 2114; Bj 2207.2) [Fig. 8].⁸ The artefact differs stylistically from both Achaemenid and Sasanian objects, and seems closer to the Wyvern Collection vessel because of the belt encircling the saddle

⁵ Franke, Sarikhani Sandman & Weber, 2021: 95, 365; Curtis, Sarikhani Sandmann & Stanley, 2021: 80.

⁶ Thomas, 1996.

⁷ Lukonin & Ivanov, 2012: 89; Jäger, 2016; Almagor, 2021: 11; Fraser, Llewellyn-Jones & Bishop-Wright, 2023: 43.

⁸ Harper, 1978: 29-30.

and belly of the horse. It should be noted, however, that vessels in the shape of standing horses seem to derive from ceramic vessels in the shape of these animals, with origins still prehistoric.⁹ As an example, may serve a Late Sasanian terracotta horse from the Bastan Museum (inv. 503), which also marks a belt going around the horse's body, overlapping the saddle.

Another example of a vessel related to the horse-shaped rhyta discussed is the "silver container" in the shape of an antelope.¹⁰ The animal lies on its belly on bent legs in a position identical to the horses under discussion. A braid-shaped line runs down the middle of the torso, and a similar one is found between the head and neck. The strap is in the same place as the rhyton from the Wyvern Collection although, naturally, it does not go around the saddle. It seems, therefore, that the antelope "silver container" functionally repeats the model of the rhyta in question, even though it depicts a different animal. This allows us to assume that vessels of this type were shaped in the likeness of different animals, although it is difficult to determine what kind of principles guided the choice. Again, for rhyta in the shape of recumbent animals, analogies can be found even pre-Achaemenid times.¹¹

Rhyta in the shape of horse heads should also be included among the analogies. They represent, admittedly, a different tradition or a slightly different concept of rhyton, excellently represented in Attic ceramics and objects from Thrace,¹² but also known in pre-Achaemenid Iran.¹³ Two Sasanian examples show the bridled horse heads, one is in the Cincinnati Art Museum (inv. 1960.495) [Fig. 9],¹⁴ and the other in the Louvre (inv. MAO 132) [Fig. 10].¹⁵ It should be noted that the rhyton from the Cincinnati Art Museum depicts a rather archaic cheek-pieces tail, rarely seen in Sasanian iconography. While these objects do not provide a direct formal or functional analogy (they must have been used differently because of their shape), they do indicate that horses were a relatively common subject of vessels of this type.

The vessels in the form of an animal standing on four legs has remained in use. An excellent example is a silver rhyton-aquamanilla from Central Asia in the shape of a horse with an armoured warrior sitting on it, published by Marschak without naming the collection.¹⁶ A similar shaped vessel, made of bronze, can be found in the Wyvern Collection, where a horse in a Sasanian row is ridden by a monkey.

Given the above, the rhyta in question are part of the tradition of Iranian vessels, represented by both luxury objects made of precious metals and rather simple

⁹ Ghirshman, 1964: 38, 287-290; 1973.

¹⁰ Grabar, 1967: 71, 132.

¹¹ Ghirshman, 1964: 97, 322-329.

¹² Fraser, Llewellyn-Jones & Bishop-Wright, 2023: 146-150, 215-221.

¹³ Ghirshman, 1964: 79.

¹⁴ Ghirshman, 1962: 221; Grabar, 1967: 71, 130.

¹⁵ Ghirshman, 1962: 204.

¹⁶ Marschak, 1986: fig. 220.

ceramics. Closed vessels in the shape of recumbent animals, it seems, must have been opened in the middle of the torso to fill with liquid. The opening at the top of the head of the horses in question, with a plug in the form of a forelock, may have served to stabilise the pressure of the fluid inside, thus ensuring an even flow of liquid. In the case of the antelope vessel, this function seems to have been performed by the possible openings in the animal's pointed ears.

The discussed rhyta are a valuable source of information regarding the Sasanian horse harness. The saddle seems to be the most interesting. In the case of a rhyton from the Wyvern Collection, the body of the animal is harnessed with a strap running over the saddle. It is difficult to say whether this is actually a type of harness or a convention related to the way animals are depicted as vessels. This convention should be linked to earlier rhyta, where similar girdles separated the figural part from the cup. It seems that since this element is also found on the bodies of unsaddled animals, it could be considered only as an ornament.

The saddle is clearly of the horned type however the “horns” definitely do not look like stiff elements of the wooden tree and suggest rather the soft saddle as proposed by Stepanova.¹⁷

It is very difficult to say anything firm about the meaning of the horse shaped rhyta. Naturally, the harnessed horses appeared in variety of contexts. They might be associated with Mithra or Tishtrya,¹⁸ especially if assumed white, they might have some funerary meaning as they appear in such circumstances in Roman and Sogdian art, they could also represent auspicious message by themselves, as the harnessed horses represented lavish, expensive and manly joys. It should be remembered that the only direct association of a text with a harnessed horse comes from a Sasanian seal from a private collection where the inscription states *prnbg* which translates to “the god Xwarrah”. If we allow non-royal understanding of the idea and understand it as generic good fortune, charisma, radiating inner light, the semantic content would not be distant from above mentioned symbol of specific kind of abundance.

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¹⁷ Stepanova, 2020.

¹⁸ Compareti, 2024: 24, 32, 65.



Fig. 1. Horse-Shaped Drinking Vessel. The Wyvern Collection, inv. 2845



Fig. 2. Horse-Shaped Drinking Vessel. The Wyvern Collection, inv. 2845



Fig. 3. Horse-Shaped Drinking Vessel. The Wyvern Collection, inv. 2845



Fig. 4. Horse-Shaped Drinking Vessel. The Cleveland Museum of Art, inv. 1964.41 [source: <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1964.41>]



Fig. 5. Achaemenid rhyton with horse-protome. The Erebuni Historical and Archaeological Museum-Reserve, inv. 19. Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 6. Achaemenid rhyton with horse-protome. The Sarikhani Collection, inv. A.MW.1070. Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 7. Achaemenid rhyton with rider figure. The Erebuni Historical and Archaeological Museum-Reserve, inv. 20. Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz



Fig. 8. Horse-Shaped Drinking Vessel. The Louvre, inv. MND 2114; Bj 2207.2. Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz

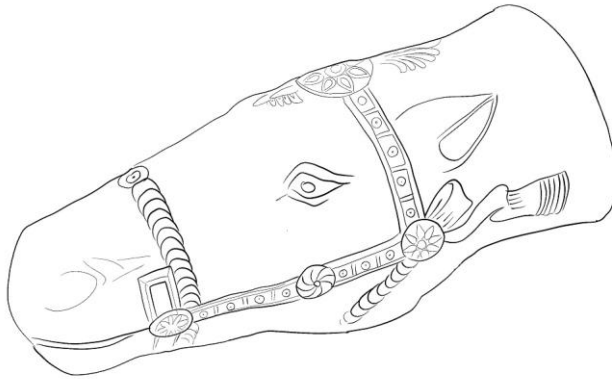


Fig. 9. Horse-Shaped Drinking Vessel. The Cincinnati Art Museum, inv. 1960.495. Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz

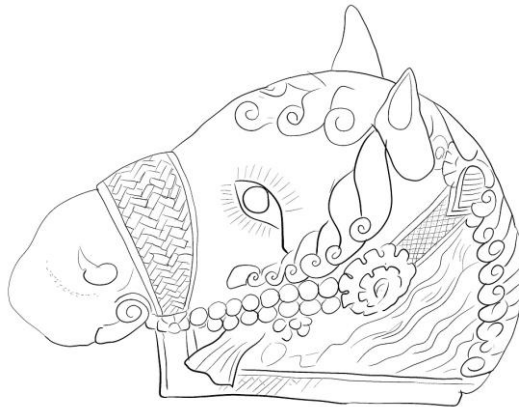


Fig. 10. Horse-head rhyton. The Louvre, inv. MAO 132. Drawing by Patryk Skupniewicz

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