

# The “Man with Serpents” Revisited.

## On a Pin from the Bronze Age Site of Shahdad (Kerman, Iran)<sup>1</sup>

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This paper discusses a pin from Shahdad, previously well known but published with a partial and unsatisfactory drawing. More detailed observations and a new, more realistic recording of this important artifact reconsider its stylistic and iconographic links with the imagery of the Halil Rud civilization and the eastern Iranian Plateau in general, and, at its opposite cultural poles, with Mesopotamia and the Indus valley. The subject, probably a supernatural anthropomorphic being flanked by two reptiles in heraldic positions, is discussed in light of the art of the Halil Rud civilization, and the traditionally negative mythological associations of the “Man with serpents” in ancient Iranian literary tradition and lore.

**Keywords:** *Shahdad; Dasht-i Lut; Bronze Age; Southeastern Iran; Man with serpents.*

### Introduction

The early urban site of Shahdad is located on the western margin of the Dasht-i-Lut, in the southeastern province of Kerman (N 30°26'37.02"/ E 57°45'6.27") (Vidale 2006-2008: 535-537) (Fig. 1). The pin discussed in this paper was discovered here during the general surface survey carried out during A. Hakemi's winter campaign in 1971-72. Hakemi's notes do not provide information on the circumstances of the discovery or the precise find spot. The pin was described in the following terms: “Xf: triangular silver spade with a thin, long tail. The small plate is decorated with a human figure with horns and two snakes (TakIV2)”.

In Shahdad's general report (Hakemi 1997: 708, 715), the artifact was registered as 297/50 and published for the first time as object 4506, by means of a preliminary sketch (Fig. 2). While the original drawing gives the basic information on the formal type of the pin and its iconographic subject, there is little doubt that the sketch was preliminary and could be improved. At the end of the first

archaeological investigations at Shahdad, all finds were brought for storage to the National Museum of Iran in Tehran, where the pin was recorded with Museum Registration no. 9374. In 2006, one of the authors (DMPM) had the opportunity to reexamine the collection of metal artefacts from Shahdad. He then noted that the incised decoration, the alloy and its surface patina, and even the pin itself had some important differences from what had been previously recorded. New pictures were taken and the magnified details were scrutinized. All was discussed at length together with M. Mansouri (draftperson), and MV, the second author of this note. The new information supports the reconstruction shown Fig. 3, and provides a better understanding of this unique artefact.<sup>2</sup>

### Description and proposed reconstruction

The pin measures 202 mm in length and weighs approximately 20 g. For the purpose of description, it can be subdivided - from top downwards - into

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1. This paper was first presented at the workshop “Shahdad and the Bronze age of Southeast Iran” held at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> July 2011 at the University of Cambridge (UK).

2. “...Bei dieser Nadel (Katalognummer 134; Typ I.7.1.) handelt es sich um eine (Metall-)Nadel mit Ritzverzierungen auf der Vorderseite... Bei der Darstellung handelt es sich um eine zentrale, behörnte Person, welche auf beiden Seiten von schlangen- oder drachenähnlichen Wesen flankiert wird. Am oberen Rand...(sind)drei Rosetten (zu)erkennen... Den unteren Abschluss dieser Szene bildet...eine schuppenähnliche Verzierung...” (Meier 2008: 27).



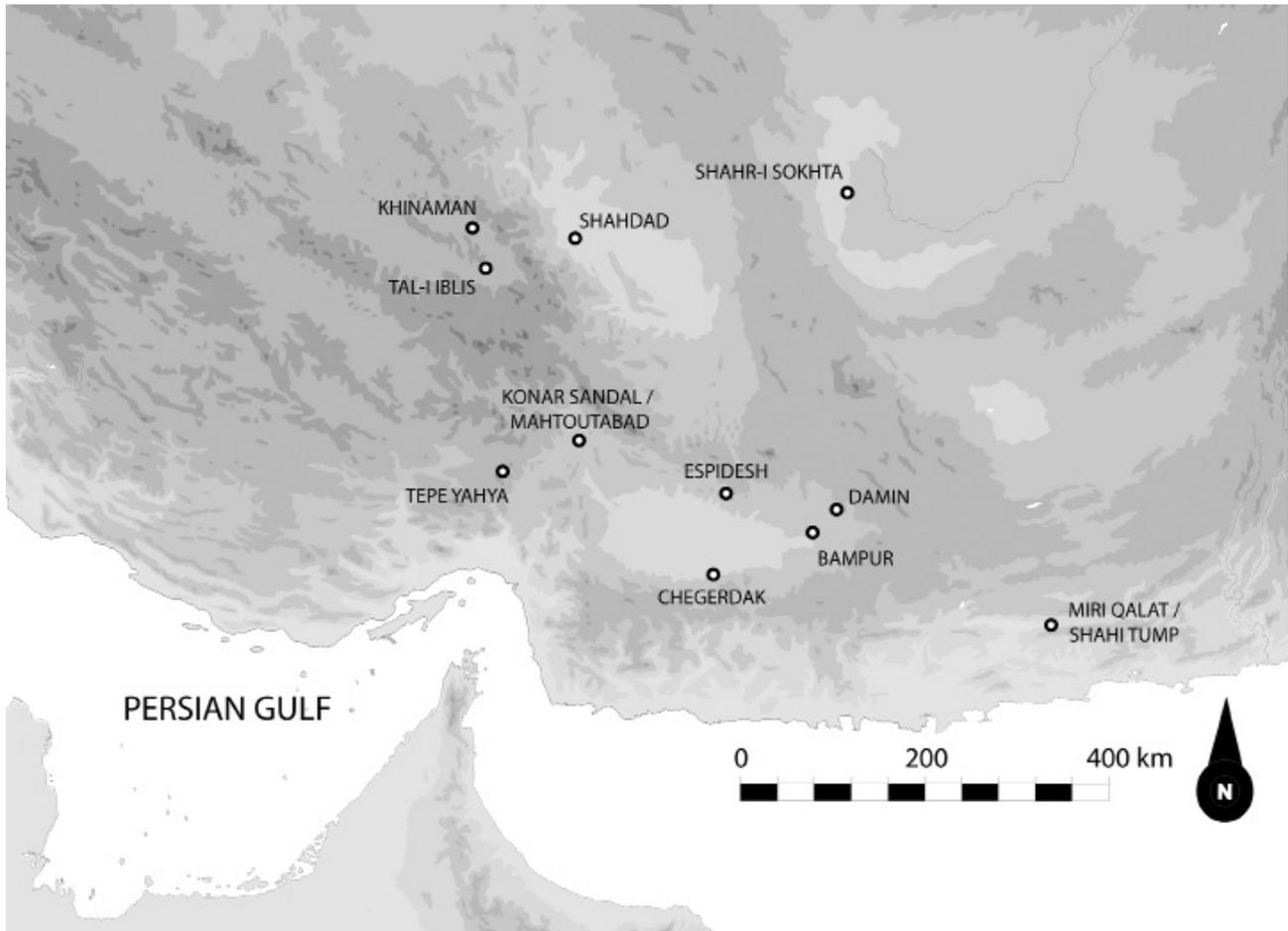


Fig. 1: A map of ancient Middle Asia, with the location of Shahdad, Konar Sandal and the main early urban sites of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. (Courtesy of F. Desset).

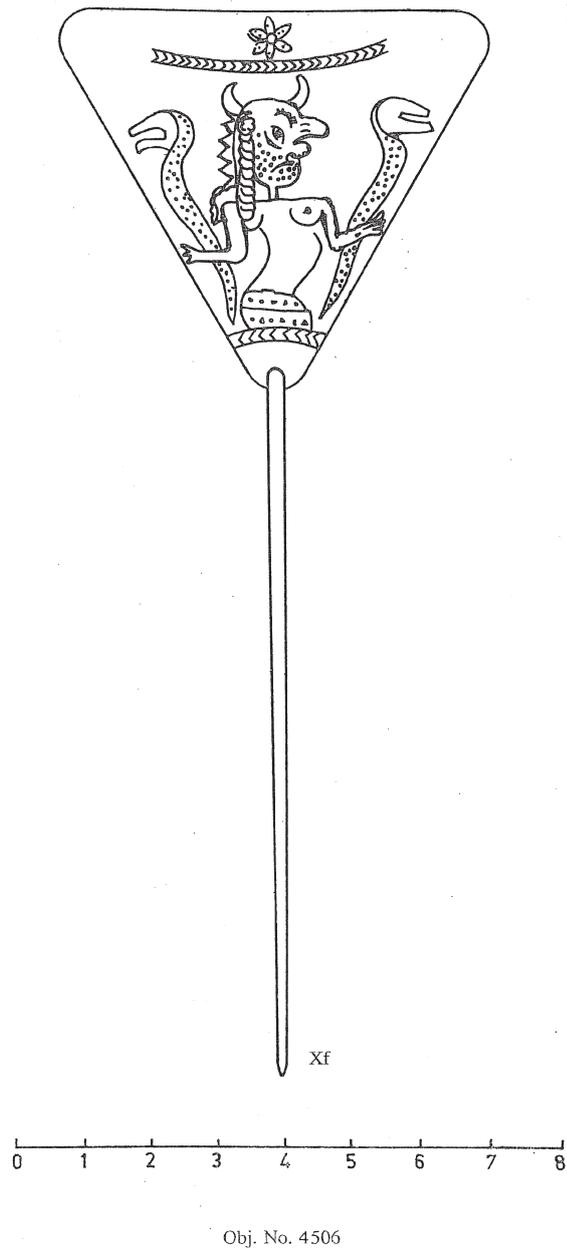
three parts: a central protruding element on top, ignored in the original sketch (Fig. 2); an inverted triangular (or sub-triangular) upper plate, about 90 mm long; and the pin shaft, round in section, with a length of about 110 mm and an average diameter of 3 mm. The shaft is slightly thicker at its rounded end. In the centre of the inverted triangular upper plate, the S-shaped appendix closely resemble a serpent's head. This is supported by lateral concentric incisions that suggest eyes. Other lines appear on the "neck" of the serpent, although these incisions are partially faded due to corrosion and weathering. If this protruding element actually represents an erect serpent's head, the inverted triangular plate might suggest the inflated hood of a cobra (*Naga naga*), with the shaft alluding to the body, although this interpretation remains hypothetical. The two corners of the base of the inverted triangle are missing, apparently damaged in symmetrical

fashion. Although we cannot exclude the idea that the head-plate ended in two stepped corners, it is probable the extremities were broken in antiquity, and that the original form of the head plate was a simpler triangular element, as hypothesized in the original sketch.

The flat inverted triangle is covered with a uniform silvery patina, as originally observed by Hakemi, but DMPM also observed a diffuse greenish coloured staining, probably evidence of an oxidized copper alloy. By contrast, the shaft of the pin is reddish brown. These colours suggest, in contrast to what was reported in the Shahdad volume, that the pin was cast with a copper alloy, like the majority of the metal finds from Shahdad.

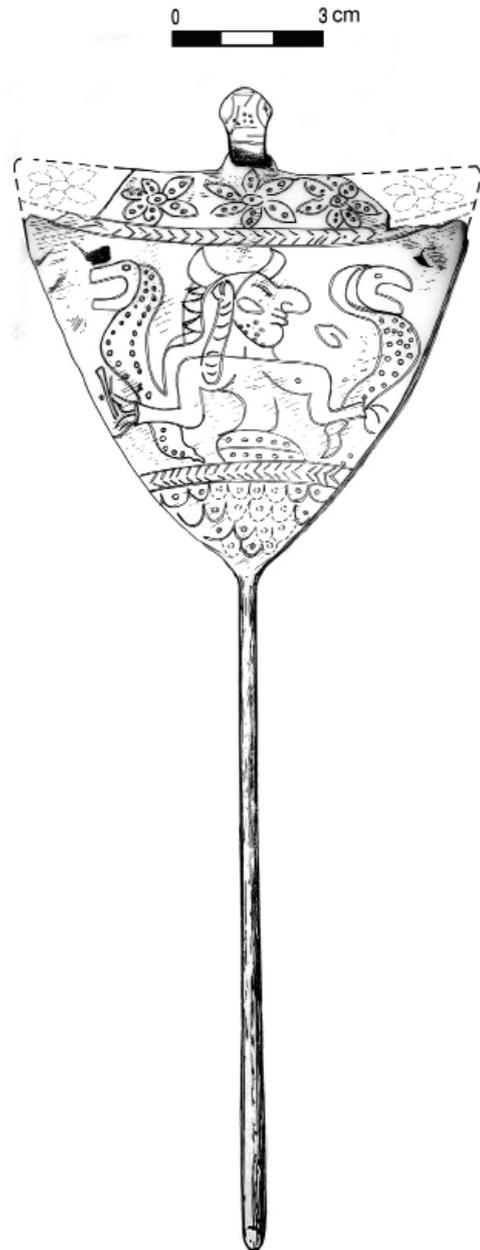
The silver shine of the head plate may indicate an arsenical copper alloy. As remarked by Giardino





**Fig. 2:** First published drawing of Shahdad pin 4506 (After: Hakemi 1997: 715).

(2010: 182-183) "...in the alloys where arsenic is abundant (at least 12%) this element concentrates on surface, and, without making the artifact more fragile, gives it a pleasant silvery look, while oxidation is less aggressive than it is with true silver" (see also Eaton & McKerrel 1976). Furthermore, preliminary analytical data on the alloy composition of pins from the Khinaman group, from Shahdad (Salvatori 1995: Tab. 1), as well as from Altyn-Depe



**Fig. 3:** The new graphic reproduction of the same pin after the autoptical examination of DMPM and scrutiny of new photographs by MV (Drawing by M. Mansouri).

(Salvatori *et al.* 2002) show that, on average, 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC pins of central-eastern Middle Asia contained ca. 4-5% or more of arsenic, evidently an intentional alloying choice. We are probably dealing with a technical and aesthetic template that, for pins, envisaged the light-coloured, silvery look resulting from this particular alloy and noticed by A. Hakemi. At present, it is not clear if the triangular head and the shaft of the Shahdad pin (that might



show a different, cuprite-rich patina) were cast as a single piece, or were made as two separate parts with different alloys, joined at a later time.

The image on the front of the triangular plate (Fig. 3) consists of three horizontal registers of different sizes, separated by two horizontal arc-shaped bands delimited by continuous lines. The upper band, hanging like a festoon, is filled with chevrons oriented to the right, while in the lower one, with a symmetrically opposed setting, the chevrons face to the left. On the back of the head plate, there is no visible decoration.

On the uppermost register, preserved in its central part (since the corners, as stated above, have been broken off), one sees a row of three flowers with six petals. Each petal is marked by two dots. Each flower, moreover, has a round corolla marked by a central dot. Two other flowers of similar size may have occupied the missing edges of the triangular plate. The central register hosts the main figure, two symmetric serpents or dragons rising in a heraldic setting from the back of the arms of a sitting horned male personage, facing to his right.

The serpents have sketchy wavy bodies, filled by round dots, rising towards the corners of the plate in upright position. Their fangs are wide open. Dots similar to these are the most conventional rendering of skin or scales in reptiles found in the art of the Halil Rud civilization. Curiously, in the serpent rising to the right of the anthropomorph, the dots were evidently incised in two parallel lines, while in the other serpent the dots fill the body at random. Furthermore, the dots or circles of this serpent seem to have been incised with greater care. Even the rendering of the heads and muzzles of the two reptiles is slightly different. The two serpents, in other words, might have been incised by different hands.

The central personage is portrayed in a seated position, following a recurrent template of the art of the Halil Rud civilization and the eastern Iranian Plateau and southern Central Asia in general. The legs are not visible, because they are conceptually represented as covered with a skirt, decorated with two horizontal dotted lines separated by a straight line. The figure is bare-chested, and tiny dots on the

lower part of the face depict beard stubble, indicates a male. The vertical braid falling on the shoulder, in the art of the chlorite artifacts, is regularly associated with male personages (as in a famous fragment of a fully plastic human figure from Tepe Yahya; see Aruz 2003: cat. 243, 344; Lamberg-Karlovsky 1970: Pl. 19c). The distinctive hairdo, thick hair marked by a zig-zag pattern falling on the back, is also commonly seen on artefacts from the Halil Rud stylistic sphere. The arms of the figure are open, its horizontal forearms outstretched and its open hands expediently sketched above the serpents. The left hand grasps a short-elongated stick or sceptre-like object. The head is badly preserved; its most recognizable features are the stubble-like pattern above the chin, a large almond-shaped eye and parts of the mouth, the latter represented in profile as two protruding lips. Badly preserved is also a line that might indicate a pronounced cheekbone.

A large protruding nose can be reconstructed just above the mouth. The lowest register (forming the lower corner of the inverted triangle) shows a scale-like dotted pattern, which might suggest reptilian skin or, alternatively, may be a common ancient Near Eastern iconographic model for mountainous areas and horizons (see below for comments; in our case, the most immediate reference might have been the massive Koohestan-e Polvar mountain range to the west of Shahdad). In short, the evidence supports the idea that the horned “Man with serpents” incised on the Shahdad pin is almost certainly a cursory but quite competent rendering of a powerful, highly suggestive icon, one that recurs on the chlorite artifacts of the Halil Rud chlorite-carving tradition.

### Comparisons with other artefacts from surrounding cultural areas

is widespread, and quite variable, within the iconographic traditions of the ancient Near East and Middle Asia. Important and well-known examples are the “*späturukzeitliche Figur des Mannes mit den Schlangen aus Elam*” (Morandi Bonacossi 1996: 68; late 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE?), ascribed, on the basis of petrographic information, to a geological basin within the Iranian Plateau; the famous specimen presented by A. Parrot (1951) as “*L’homme aus serpents*,” which is similar to the so-called



"Cincinnati Man" (Porada 1992). Another well known example of a related iconographic theme is the so-called "Berliner Schlangenbecken" in which a male figure is attacked and apparently devoured by powerful serpents (Morandi Bonaccossi 1996; Winkelmann 2003). These representations are the only fully plastic examples of the image of a male figure struggling with serpents in the ancient Near East and Middle Asia.

Even though there are no direct and univocal iconographical links between the Shahdad motif and the examples cited, they are connected by the fact that in every scene, a male figure is portrayed in association with serpents, often arranged in couples.

In contrast, more relevant iconographic matches can be seen on artefacts reportedly found in the Jiroft area south of Shahdad, as well as in the area along the Murghab River in Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. One example is a bronze stamp seal found at Gonur, showing a seated goddess wearing a dress with chevron patterns, and serpents at left and right. Similar figures holding serpents appears in compartment bronze stamp seals from Central Asia and south-eastern Iran (Fig. 4; Sarianidi 2005; stamp seals from Baghestani 1997).

Several better-known examples may be found in Madjidzadeh's chlorite corpus, recovered from illegal excavators in the Jiroft area (Madjidzadeh 2003: 16-17, 96-97, 100, 104-105, 120; see also the Tarut fragments collection in Zarins 1978: pl. 70.546). In the Halil Rud artifacts, including both vessels and "handbags" the way the serpents are incised is consistent with the Shahdad pin – for both the heads and dotted patterns of the serpents, as well as for the seated figure's features. Our image can also be compared with a seal published by E. Porada (1993: Abb. 19). The seated position, the rendering of the gown, the style of hairdo with its explicit braid, and the representation of the facial characteristics are all reflected in the Halil Rud production (as well as on the well-known Bactrian silver vessel in Salvatori 2008: 117, fig.8.9; Amiet 1986: 202, 328-329). P. Amiet discussed a "...hero holding two serpents" on a chlorite vessel with a later incised cuneiform inscription (Amiet 1986: 271, 73)<sup>1</sup>. The serpents and the "hero" in all the cited objects, are rendered in a very similar fashion

and recall the designs in a cylinder seal found at Tepe Yahya, representing a couple of seated horned figures (Pittman 2001: 263, fig.10.49). The position and stylistic details of the figures are very similar, as is their heraldic setting. Also, the six-petal rosettes in the uppermost register of the Shahdad pin recall similar patterns in the Halil Rud corpus (Madjidzadeh 2003: S.174).

In short, abundant images from the ancient art of early urban centres of the eastern Iranian Plateau (and particularly from the Halil Rud valley, Seistan and now, the western edge of the Lut), insist on presenting supernatural or mythological personages grasping serpents (for a wider comparative basis see also Winkelmann 2001), or with serpents emerging aside, or directly springing from their shoulders. Regardless of its original meanings, which might have changed significantly through time, the "man with serpents" was a powerful, impressive symbol, rooted in the ancient Iranian or even in a Proto-Indo-Iranian ideological or mythological substratum, dating back to pre-Zoroastrian times.

## Discussion

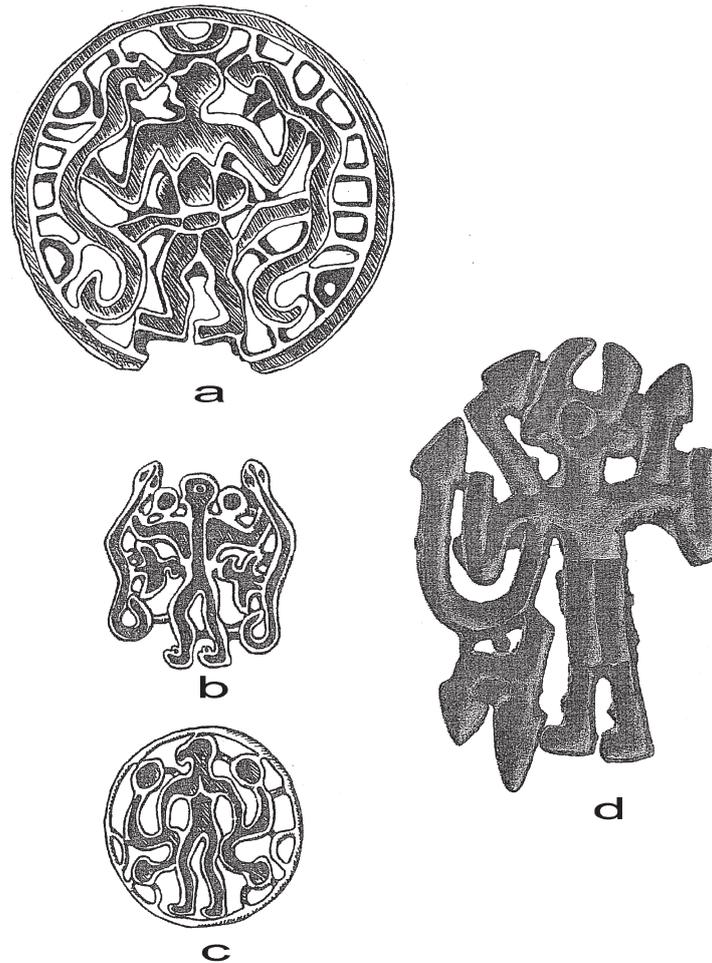
It is well known that in the Persian National epic, the *Shāhnāme* ("Book of the Kings"), evil characters have monstrous serpents springing from their back or shoulders. In the episode of *Kāveh Āhangar*, the usurper *Zahhāk Mārdoush* ("Zahāk Snakeshoulder") is described as a man on whose shoulders grow deadly snakes (Skjærvø *et al.* 1989)<sup>2</sup>

In the imagery of the Zoroastrian world, Ahriman, the personified evil, appears contaminated with serpents, as seen on the Sasanian investiture relief of Ardashir at Naghsh-e Rostam, near Takht-e Jamsheed (Persepolis). Here, Ardashir on a horse is given the rib bone diadem or symbol of kingship by Ahura Mazda, while the defeated enemies lie dead.

1. Unfortunately, there is no precise information on the provenance of Amiet's published vessel, because this latter came from the antiquities market. It is only known that it came from southeastern Iran.

2. It is also noteworthy that the name "Zahhāk" seems to derive from the Middle Persian "Aži Dahāka," where "Aži" is the word for "dragon" and "Dahāka" is the philological root of "Zahhāk." This name is evident in ancient Iranian folklore as an evil, dragon-like character, by which he also appears in the texts of the Avesta. Furthermore, in modern Farsi "آژدها" ("Aždahā") is the word for "dragon."





**Fig. 4:** Openwork copper stamp seals from protohistoric early urban sites in southern Central Asia and the eastern Iranian Plateau showing various personages flanked by snakes in heralding position (After: Baghestani 1987: a, *Abb.* 78, 390A; b, *Abb.* 82, 1, 296; c, *Abb.* 83, 407, 297; d, *Tafel* 1, 3).

The enemy fallen to the right is Ahrimān, who has serpents springing from his head (Schmidt 1970: pl.81; Hermann and Curtis 2002; later images of Ahrimān with snakes may be found in Marzolff and Mohammadi 2006).

In the lost imagery of prehistoric Iran, the man, god, demon or hero with snakes on his shoulders was not necessarily, in origin, an evil character. The negative associations may be a relatively late transformation linked to the rise of new powerful religious systems between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> millennia BC, which relegated the ancient, traditional supernatural beings such as the *Asuras* and their folkloric versions to new, inverted, deadly and destructive roles<sup>1</sup>.

The dating of the Shahdad pin, a non-stratified stray surface find, is still difficult to define. If the alloy is indeed copper with a substantial arsenic content – a hypothesis likely to be validated in the future with XRF-ED analysis – it would be fully consistent with a 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC dating. Artefacts with comparable scenes from the Indus Valley<sup>2</sup> (Collon 1993: 143f., 614) further restrict

1. Zaehner 1964.

2. Unfortunately, this peculiar piece derives not from archaeological excavations but rather was acquired at a bazaar. The early date of its original publication (De Clercq 1888) makes it reasonable to understand this piece as an original find rather than as a copy. In those days, local craftsmen or artists were not as skillful at producing modern copies as they are nowadays.



its possible chronological range within the second half of the same millennium. In Mesopotamia, representations of similar motives are known in a copper-alloy beaker from Uruk (Nagel 1968: 30-41, Abb.6 Taf. II-VIII ) as well as in a world-wide famous soft stone vessel imported from the Halil Rud valley and found at Khafajiyeh (Frankfort 1970). Another later and intriguing analogy comes from southern Mesopotamia, from the area of the ancient city-state of Lagaš. Here, two fragments of the "Gudea stela" (VA 2796a), in the proposed reconstruction, show Gudea, the powerful ruler of Lagaš following his patron, the god Ningišzida, who takes him by the hand (Wiggermann 1998-2001). From Ningišzida's shoulders (Fig. 5) arise two serpents (Suter 2000: 161-175). A similar representation is known from Gudea's seals (AO 3541,3542; De Sarzec 1884-1912: 293f., fig. K). At present, there is a growing consensus in considering Gudea a peer of Ur-nammak, therefore dating his career in the 21<sup>st</sup> century BC. probably, the Shahdad pin originated from one of the many graves exposed and eroded on the surface of the site, dated by most authors between the end of EDII and the fall of the Ur III dynasty (Hakemi 1997: 75).

The appearance of similar serpent images as divine attributes in the official state art of Girsu-Lagaš may be another hint of the close connections between the easternmost city-state of Sumer and powers such as Marhashi and Shimashki, whose

westward influence, in the last centuries of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, became overwhelming.

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*Fig. 5: A detail of Gudea's stela, showing Ningišzida, the personal deity of the ruler, with two snakes emerging from the shoulders (After: Suter 2000)."*



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