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A Comparative Study of the Sassanian Stamp Seal Designs with Drawings in Abd al-Rahman Sufi's *Sovar al-Kavakeb*

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Abstract

Stamp seals are incredibly significant as a category of archeological finds because of their various motifs and functions, and inquiry into such glyptic evidence will help reconstruct different aspects of human life. During the Sassanian period, stamp seals were made of precious and semi-precious stones in different shapes and designs. In this descriptive, comparative and analytical study, the data was collected through library research, and the authors attempted to study, analyze and compare the designs on several Sassanian stamp seals with the depictions of constellation signs in Abd al-Rahman Sufi's famous book *Sovar al-Kavakeb*. The results show strong similarities between the considered glyptic designs and astronomical symbols. On account of the Sassanian's deep belief in astrology and the role the constellations played in their lifestyle and ruling system, it is conceivable that such stamp seals served apotropaic purposes and were related with Sassanian's astrological beliefs connected with predicting good and bad days. The main purpose behind the application of these designs was most probably to seek the support and protection from constellations. Associating these glyptic designs with constellations is further supported by a series of animal motifs such as scorpions, snakes and bears which did not held any position in the Sassanian belief system, demonstrating that these motifs were designed for astrological prognostications. For example, from the Sassanian point of view, the motif of scorpion and snake form the class of vermin, and devilish animals and bears symbolize ruin and corruption. Therefore, such evil representing motifs were employed for no reasons other than their relation to the constellations and astrological prophecies.

Keywords: Abd al-Rahman Sufi, Astrology, Constellations, Sassanian, Stamp Seals.

Article Type: Research Article

Introduction

Stamp seals, as one of the major components of archaeological evidence, have always been of great help for scholars in studying and gaining insights into various aspects of human life, including social, political, administrative, cultural and religious. Stamp seals have a long history, and large numbers of them are known among archaeological assemblages deriving from different periods and regions. Sassanians made stamp seals of precious and semi-precious stones in different shapes and designs which have been investigated by several scholars. Among the considered aspects in such inquiries are the classification of the seals based on their designs, and their thematic analysis. Some have made an attempt to examine the symbolic facets of the designs and even to identify the potential users of particular seals. However, one specific aspect yet to receive much attention is the influence of astronomical beliefs and ideas on the formation of the designs cut on the seals. While interest in astronomy and astrology on the part of the Sassanian society may come as no surprise, these designs reflect how astronomy and astrology were used in different areas, from fixing a time for coronation and construction of cities to prediction and foresight. Thus, this paper will try to draw comparisons between the designs of some of the Sassanian seals stored at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the depictions of the constellations in *Sovar al-Kavakeb* written by Abd al-Rahman Sufi to pin down the possible

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similarities and the possible inspiration of the book's depictions from the Sassanian glyptic. The author of the book, Abu al-Hussein Abd al-Rahman ibn Umar ibn Muhammad ibn Sahl Sufi Razi, is a great Iranian figure who lived in the 10th century AD during the reign of the Daylamite empire ʿAzud al-Dawla. Translated into Persian by Khwaja Nasir al-Din Tusi, the book deals with astronomy and constellations. Abd al-Rahman made observations in the cities of Basra, Baghdad, and Shiraz and even wrote in some books that have been engaged in astronomical calculations in southern Iran for some time (Sufi, 2014).

Research Question

How the similarity and agreement between the Sassanian glyptic designs and the constellation depictions in Sovar al-Kavakeb by Abd al-Rahman Sufi can be explained?

Methodology

This descriptive study uses a comparative approach to carry out an analysis on the basis of the data collected through library research.

History of Research

Sassanian glyptic is one of the topics that various scholars and researchers have long considered. Many Sassanian seals have been identified and introduced individually in museums and collections. The most distinctive examples are kept in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, Berlin, the Louvre Museum, and the National Museum of Iran. In this regard, the two sites of Takht-e Soleiman and Qasr-i Abu Nasr have furnished the essential glyptic data. Goebl classified and described the seals from the former site in *Dietonbullen vomtacht - E - suleiman: ein beitrag zur spatsa sanidschen sphragistik* (Goebl, 2005). In his *Sasanian Remains from Qasr-i Abu Nasr,* Frye (1973) besides reporting on the excavation, studied the seals recovered from the site. Brunner (1987) published the Sassanian seals at the Metropolitan Museum. Through her descriptions, she gave a clear picture of the designs of the seals, but she failed to offer a significant analysis of the symbols and motifs. Other works has also covered the Sassanian seals, among them being that of Bivar (1969). Ackerman was another writer to deal with the Sassanian glyptic in a book chapter entitled "Sassanian Seals" (Ackerman, 2008b). Published as part of the volume *A Survey of Persian Art: From Prehistoric Times to the Present*, in this paper she discussed a number of contemporary seals. She analyzed the patterns of the seals, and perhaps her study can be considered one of the most profound researches on the motifs of the Sassanian stamp seals. Ghirshman (1991) in his *Persian Art: Parthian and Sassanian Dynasties, 249 B.C.E–A.D. 651* embarked on describing and presenting seals. Moreover, a recent study made an attempt to classify the concomitant stamp seals with a novel approach (Dehpahlavan & Hendigani, 2016) and to explore their symbolic perspectives (Marandi, 2018). However, what distinguishes the present paper from the previous works is its concentration on the designs of the Sassanian glyptic to compare them with the signs of constellations, a topic rarely dealt with in earlier studies.

Stamp Seals

The use of seals in Iran, as with many other regions of West Asia, began in the late Neolithic period and developed with the advent of civilization (Porada, 2004: 24). Seals played an essential role in the development of ancient civilizations. Their progress brought about a new stage in trade exchange. In particular, apart from proving the act of possession, sealing goods served as owner's signature. Moreover, financial and administrative orders and documents were sealed in the same way and sent to different places (Bayani, 1996: 9–10). Another function of seals is to protect the goods and the seal's owner against the influence of supernatural evil factors and spells (Ackerman, 2008b: 979; Porada, 2004: 24). As already suggested by Ackerman, prehistoric seals were probably originally and perhaps exclusively used to ward off calamities and evil eyes. Seals' motifs had no connection with the owner or even the family. Therefore, the animal motifs can point to a totemic link with larger social units. But then again, since the Achaemenid period and probably even earlier, royal and other seals not only served the role of magical protection but as a sign of identity they undoubtedly were emblems of their owners' power. These traits can also be seen in some seals of the Parthian period in which the essence is addressed, and the seal's owner only engraves her face on the seal, albeit in an abbreviated and symbolic form (Ackerman, 2008a: 979).

Sassanian Stamp Seals

During the Sassanian era, the glyptic art flourished, and artists made various types of seals. Scholars classify Sassanian seals into the two general categories of personal and administrative (official) (Frye, 1973; Bivar, 1969). Stamp seals that give only the profession and title of the owner, but not the name, should be placed in the official or administrative category (Goebl, 2005: 37). Such seals were of great importance, and it is a well-known fact that the Sassanian king Khosrow II had nine official seals, and guarding them was considered an important matter (Porada, 2004: 319). It is also known that seals were widely used by officials and the general public, religious leaders, government officials and people in business in the Sassanian period, and almost every governmental department had its particular stamps (Ghirshman, 1991: 240). During the Sassanian era, some individuals possessed named seals if they had a social status, position and title (Ackerman, 2008b: 279). Seals are referred to as personal, administrative, dignified and decorative components that contain a significant variety of aesthetic values, talismans and evil eyes reliefs, spiritual concepts and social, political and religious values (Garrison & Root, 2014: 2).

Real and imaginary animals are also the most common themes on the stamp seals from the period. Regarding the inscriptions on the seals, the most common phrase is the one that invites Zoroastrian believers to trust in the god. The messages convey that the themes on the seals are not just small, simple motifs, but they have magical meanings to appease or support the supernatural forces for their owners (Ghirshman, 1991: 244). However, the necessity of embodying religious and mythological visualization or the motifs that show the value of repelling evil and embedding spells should be considered fundamental themes. Despite their practical function, which was used as a signature on clay tablets, seals also had symbolic value (mainly in repelling evil) (Cook, 2008: 500).

Astronomy in Ancient Beliefs

In the imagination of earthly human beings, celestial bodies were like gods who always ruled over the nature and destiny of human beings. Their divine characteristics have directly impacted the daily activities and the human soul and body (Mokhtarian & Sarami, 2016: 61). In his *Athar al-Baqiyah,* Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni refers to the ancient Iranians' interest in astronomy and constellation and their beliefs about the misfortune of days or the holding of celebrations based on astronomy. For example, he notes, "if a person uses constellations while praying and goes to a plain let the heart get rid of all worldly issues, then the answer to prays becomes stronger." He also mentions that, "when Greek's ancestors prayed, they selected a time that Jupiter settled in the middle of the sky and Venus was in fortune" (Al-Biruni, 2007: 349). In Zoroastrian beliefs, we come across two categories of divine and demonic planets (Gholizade, 2013a: 62). This meaningful attention to the opinions of astronomy in the Sassanian era is so fundamental that astronomers were invited to establish cities and were consulted about the time and place of this work (Qazvini, 1994: 40). Therefore, beliefs related to astronomy and astrology have played a significant role in the lifestyle of people throughout history. In addition to the scientific discussion of astronomy, astronomical rules and astrology were also discussed, in which, according to the positions of the stars, planets, sun and moon, events and terrestrial events were predicted or the times of fortune and misfortune were determined (Hosseini, 2017: 115).

Astronomical Designs of Sassanian Seals

Perhaps the common motifs in Sassanian glyptic is generally dividable into several categories, including, human figures, animal figures, vegetal motifs, depictions of celestial bodies, and monograms, each of which split into subcategories. However, this article considers motifs with astronomical symbolic aspects, and a series of designs that correspond significantly with the representations of the constellations in Abd al-Rahman Sufi's book are examined and analyzed. Correspondence between designs on glyptic evidence and the celestial bodies is not exclusively restricted to the Sassanian period, and is attested in the earlier periods. For instance, Porada refers to the motifs of the Seleucid seals in the form of a fish-goat (Figure. 1a). She believes that such motifs entered the Seleucid art from the Neo-Babylonian period through the Achaemenids, and resemble the zodiac signs (Figure. 1b) (Porada, 2004: 259).

Certain motifs on Sassanid seals, which correspond to the constellations, are similar to the



Figure. 1: *Representation of a fish-goat motif (Seleucid period) (After:Porada, 2004: 259)*

zodiac signs, including ram (Ackerman, 2008: 994-5). Ram or April, in Persian calendar "Farvardin", (in the shape of a sheep, (Figure. 2a)) is the first month in the Persian calendar and is the name of the angel that performed the affairs of April (Mosafa, 1978: 562). Farvardin is also the name of a Zoroastrian deity. In the middle Persian, an ancient Persian language, this month is demonstrated as Farvardin (Afifi, 2004: 575). Abdul Rahman Sufi depicted this zodiac image in his book (Figure. 2b) in the form of a sheep as having its back towards the south and facing the north (Sufi, 2014).

A significant number of seals bear the motifs of cows (Figure. 3a) in different positions, similar to the Bull in the zodiac signs (Figure.3b). Sufi (2014) states that, "its shape is in a bull form that has been cut from its navel, and the position of its head is like it wants to attack with the horns. The front is to the east and the back is to the west" (Figure. 3b). Al-Biruni (2007: 333–34) puts that, "the angel of Ordibehesht (which coincides with the Bull in the zodiac symbolism) is the ultimate good, who is the angel of fire and light, and was devoted to separate good from bad in all aspects of life, including separation of truth from lies". Furthermore, Afifi (2004: 432) points out that "Ordibehesht is also the name of the third Amesha Spenta, which in the spiritual world represents truth, purity, holiness and in the material world is the guardian of fires.

Some other seals from the Sassanian era bear designs reminiscent of Khordad or Twins (of the zodiac signs) (Figure. 4a). Khordad is the name of one of the Amesha Spenta or great angels of the Zoroastrian religion who represents perfection (Afifi, 2004: 497). In the description of this month, it is stated that, "it is naked in the form of two children while one of them puts her right hand on the right shoulder of the other and the other puts his left hand on the left shoulder of the first" (Sufi, 2004) (Figure .4: a, b). Al-Biruni also believes that Khordad is an angel who is entrusted with the creation of trees and plants and the removal of filth from water (Al-Biruni, 2007: 334). Another motif on the seals that correspond to astronomical zodiac signs is a lion (Figure. 5a) that might represent Mordad or August. Sufi (2014) asserts that, "it is a lion facing west and the back is toward the north" (Figure. 5b). Al-Biruni (2007: 336) describes Mordad as an angel entrusted with the guarding of the universe and provides foods and herbal medicines" (Figure. 5b).

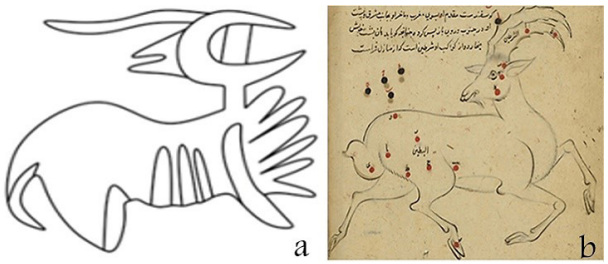


Figure. 2: *a: Representation of a ram on Sassanian glyptic (After: Dehpahlavan and Qanavati Hendigani, 2016: 60 & Brunner, 1987:78–88–96); b: Depiction of the Aries constellation in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014).*

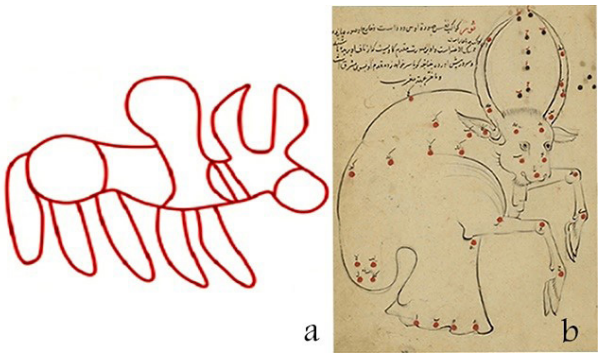


Figure. 3: *a: Representation of a bull on Sassanian glyptic (After:Dehpahlavan and Qanavati Hendigani, 2016: 60; Brunner, 1987: 78–88–96); b: Depiction of the Taurus constellation in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014).*



Figure. 4: *a: Representation of a twins on the Sassanian seals (After: Brunner, 1987: 60-113-62): b: Depiction of the Gemini constellation in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014).*

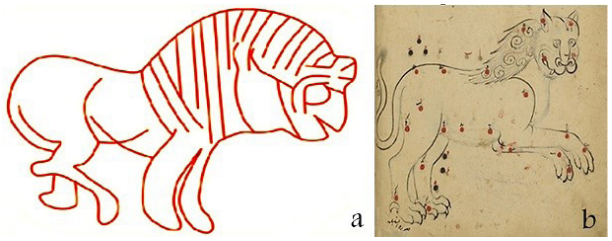


Figure. 5: *a : Representation of a lion on the Sassanian seals (After: Dehpahlavan and Qanavati Hendigani, 2016: 60; Brunner, 1987: 78-88-96); b: Depiction of the Leo constellation in the Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014).*

Another motif possibly adapted from the constellation of Virgo, also called Azra, representing the month of Shahrivar, is seen as a winged woman covered in cloth holding three ears of wheat (Ackerman, 2008b: 994–95) (Figure. 6a). Shahrivar is also the name of the fourth Amesha Spenta. This name, in the form of Khasharuiriyya (middle Persian), means the desired prince and the desired kingdom (Afifi, 2004: 567). Sufi (2014) describes it as, "a woman who has two wings and has dropped her skirt and her head is facing south, putting her left hand on her side." Al-Biruni givens the following description of it: "She is an angel who is entrusted with the seven jewels, including gold and silver and other metals which the industry depends on them" (Al-Biruni, 2007: 334) (Figure. 6b).

Among Sassanian seals, there are several instances with the motif of a scorpion (Figure. 7a), which is similar to the face of the month of Aban or Scorpio, and it is described as follows: "There are twenty-one stars in it, and the face represents its name, and the bright red star that is in her, is called the heart of the scorpion" (Sufi, 2014) (Figure. 7b). Aban is also the name of the deity of the Waters (Mosafa, 1978: 2). It is noted that scorpion and snake fall in the demonic animals class. Therefore, their depiction on Sassanian seals will have no reason other than being associated with constellations (Gholizade, 2013b: 237).

The designs on some other seals are probably related to astronomical symbols other than the zodiac signs. Notable among them are the first from, viz. Ursa Minor or the Little Bear (Figure. 8a), and the second form, i.e. Ursa Major or Big Bear (Figure .8b) (Al-Biruni, 1937: 92). The bear symbolized destruction and corruption for the Sassanians (Ackerman, 2008b: 996) Therefore, presence of the animal on the coeval seals has no other justification



Figure. 6: *a: Representation of a winged woman on the Sassanian seals (After: Brunner, 1987: 60-113-62); b: Depiction of the Virgo constellation in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014).*

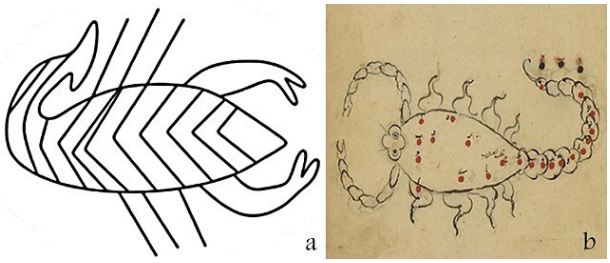


Figure.7: *a:Representation of a scorpion on the Sassanian seals (After : Brunner, 1987: 60-113-62); b: Depiction of the Scorpio constellation in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014).*

than its connection with astronomical beliefs. Other forms that are consistent with the motifs on Sassanian glyptic include the third forms, namely the ninth, tenth, twelfth and fourteenth, and eighteenth constellations (large and long snake). The ninth of them, according to Al-Biruni, "is a Dajaleh (Figure .9: a, b), because it has a long neck; it spreads both wings like a bird and the tenth form of the essence of the chair, like a woman sitting on a pulpit (Figure .10: a, b).

The fourteenth is in the form of a settled snake (Al-Biruni, 1937: 92). The twelfth face is the face of a man with a whip (Figures. 11a, b, c, d), the owner of the whip. The motif is similar to a man wielding a whip with one hand (Figure. 11: c, d). The eighteenth is a big horse or first horse, which resembles the head of a horse to his neck (Figures. 12a, b, c, d) (Al-Biruni, 1937: 92–93).

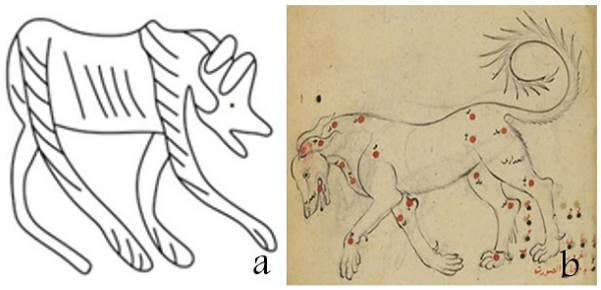


Figure. 8: *a: Representation of a bear on the Sassanian seals (After: Brunner, 1987: 81-102-105-62); b: Depiction of the Ursa Minor constellation in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014)*

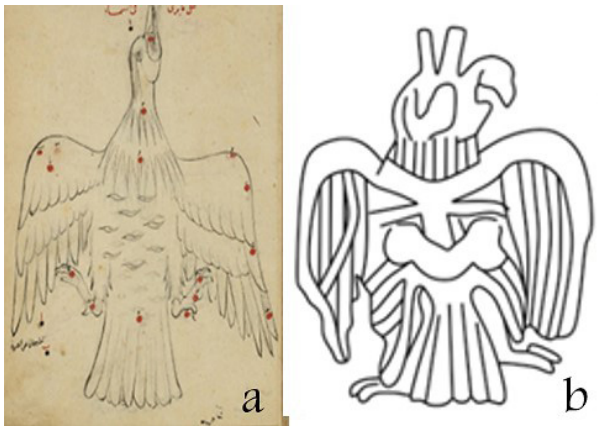


Figure. 9: *a: Depiction of the Dajaleh constellation in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014); b: Representation of a dajaleh on the Sassanian seals (After: Brunner, 1987: 81-102-105-62).*



Figure. 10: *a: Depiction of a woman sitting on a pulpit in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014); b: Representation of the woman sitting on a pulpit on the Sassanian seals (After: Brunner, 1987: 103–113)*

Other forms paralleled on the Sassanian seals should be sought among the southern constellations. Al-Biruni (1937: 92–93) describe them as the following: "The third form is the form of a stream and the fourth form is Lepus (hare) (Figure. 13: a, b)".

And the fifth and sixth represent Canis Major (greater dog) (Figures.14a, b) and Canis Minor (lesser dog), and the seventh image is bravery, which is engraved in the form of a snake (Al-Biruni, 1937: 93). The snake is another animal of the devil class and belongs to the category of demonic animals (Gholizade, 2013b: 237). Therefore, the



Figure. 11: *a: Representation of a man with whip on the Sassanian seals (After: Brunner, 1987: 103–113); b: Depiction of the man with whip in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014); c: The man with whip in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014); d: A man with whip on the Sassanian seals (After: Brunner, 1987: 75).*

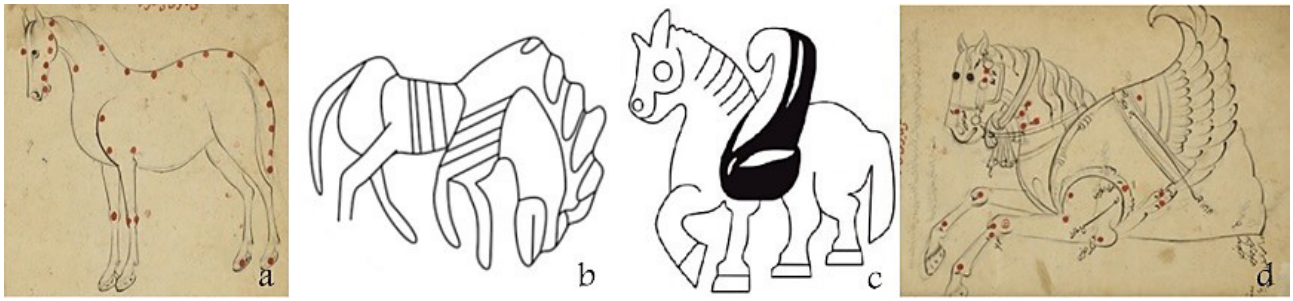


Figure. 12: *a: Depiction of the horse in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014); b and c: Representations of a horse on the Sassanian seals (After: Brunner, 1987: 81-102-105-62; Dehpahlavan and Qanavati Hendigani 2016: 56; Brunner, 1987: 112-83-56); d:Depiction of the horse in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014).*

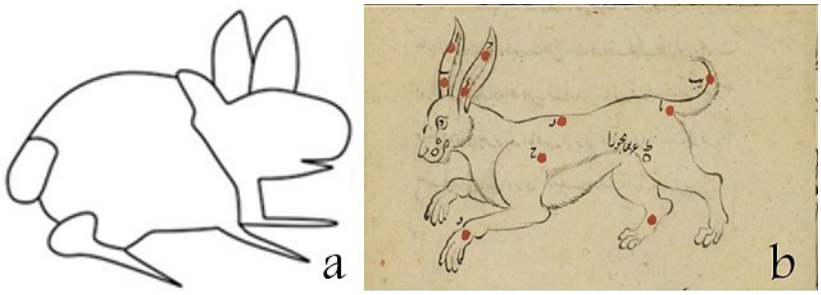


Figure. 13:*a: Representation of a rabbit on the Sassanian seals (After: Brunner, 1987: 103-113); b: Depiction of the Lepus constellation (After: Sufi, 2014)*



Figure. 14: *a:Depiction of the Canis in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After :Sufi, 2014); b: Representation of a dog on the Sassanian seals (After : Brunner, 1987: 75).*

existence of this motif on the Sassanian seals can have no other reason than its association with astronomical beliefs. The tenth image is Corvus (a crow) (Al-Biruni, 1937: 94) (Figure. 15: a, b), a bird that the ancient Iranians visualized with a feeling of fear mixed with superstitions, and thought that its feathers would preserve humankind and bring them happiness and prosperity (Hinnells, 1989: 40–41); the thirteenth is akin to an incense burner (Figures.16 a, b); and the fifteenth is Aquarius (fish) (Figure. 17: a, b) (Al-Biruni, 1937: 94). Also, several other seals show the themes of the moon and stars alone or in combination with other designs (Figure .18).



Figure. 15: *a: Representation of a crow on the Sassanian seals (After : Dehpahlavan and Qanavati Hendigani, 2016: 56; Brunner, 1987: 112-83-56); b: Depiction of the Corvus in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014).*

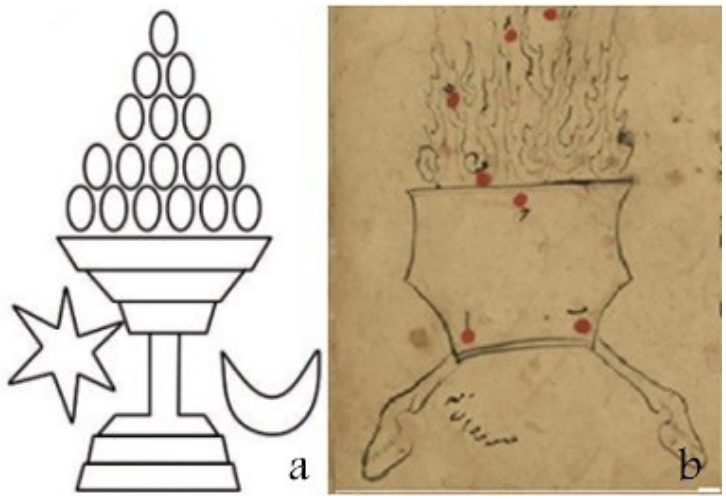


Figure. 16: *a: Representation of an incense burner on the Sassanian seals (After: Dehpahlavan and Qanavati Hendigani, 2016: 56; Brunner, 1987: 112-83-56); b: Depiction of the incense burner in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014)..*

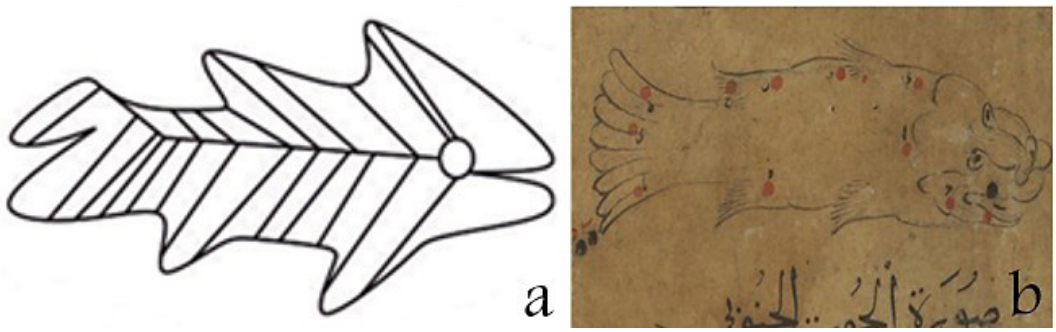


Figure. 17: *a: Representation of a fish on the Sassanian seals (After : Brunner, 1987: 103–113); b: Depiction of the Aquarius in Sovar al-Kavakeb (After: Sufi, 2014)*

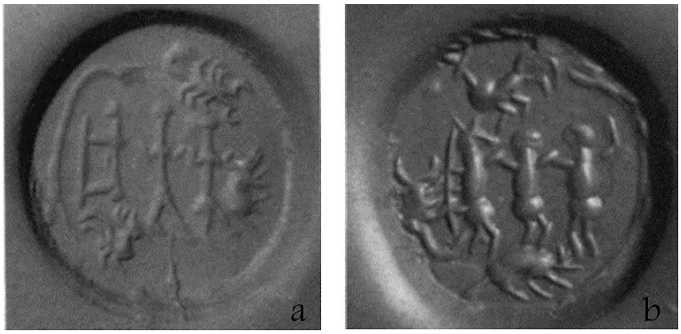


Figure. 18: *Combined representations on the Sassanian seals showing scorpion, snake, boar and dog (After: Brunner, 1987: 72–73)*

Conclusions

As mentioned, the seals of the Sassanian era as personal, administrative and dignified objects bear an assortment of human figures and animal and vegetal motifs as well as many other themes, with each of them being associated with different religious, political, cultural and social symbolic aspects. According to researchers, although these stamp seals have a worldly appearance and are used as a mark and signature, but religious and mythological themes or matters that are important in disaster relief should be considered as the main

themes of such motifs. Therefore, as mentioned before, attention to astronomy and constellation has played a significant role in the people's way of life, development and governance. Even in many cases such as scheduling the beginning of wars and coronation time for Sassanian kings, astronomers and fortune tellers played the central role. A brief look at historical texts about astronomy, such as al-Tafhim and Athar Al-Baqiyeh by Al-Biruni reveals the extent to which celestial beliefs played role in people's lives and thoughts. Thus, it is safe to attribute the similarity of the designs on some Sassanian seals to the representations of constellations to the Sassanians' belief in the talisman aspects of celestial bodies, and this raises the possibility that these motifs were more of a spell than anything else. Moreover, they have been associated with the Sassanian astronomical beliefs about the misfortune of the days, and the purposes of some of them are to seek support and protection from celestial figures, including Amesha Spenta (gods) and other heavenly bodies in the Divine army. Further evidence corroborating the attribution of the motifs on these Sassanian seals to astronomical beliefs comes from a series of animal motifs. Some glyptic designs incorporate such creatures as scorpions, snakes and bears that do not have a proper place in the Sassanian belief system. In particular, scorpion and snake constitute the most important animals of the devilish category and are among the demonic animals. Bear is a symbol of destruction and corruption in the Sassanian culture. Therefore, the remarkable similarity of these creatures, which represent destruction, harm and demons, has no other justification than their connection with the constellations. However, the motifs on the seals of the Sassanian period show high diversity. Many also involve other symbolic aspects pertinent to different beliefs and characteristics of the Sassanians' thoughts, attitudes and lifestyle.

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