

Demystification of Religious Symbols featured in the Clothes of Sassanid Emperors

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Abstract: Reliefs, coins and seals are among the outstanding examples of Sassanid art and culture. Researchers discover new things every time they study these historical remainings. A comparison between the image of the Sassanid emperors carved into rocks and their image on Sassanid coins and metal vessels can tell us a lot about the principles based on which these images have been created. A study of ornaments, cloths and especially diadems indicates that they have symbolic and mysterious shapes which are inseparable from the Zoroastrian tradition. The Sassanid royal “Deyhim” or “Farr” (diadem) opened its way into the Roman Emperor as a result of relationship with the Sassanid Empire. Later, this ornament appeared in the battle uniforms of the Croats of the Persian race who resided in the Europe and from there it moved to France and the rest of the Europe. At first, diadem was worn by the royal only but with time, it became a part of the formal suit of the mass.

Keywords: Sassanid art, Mehr, Anâhitâ, Bahrâm, Farr-e izadi (divine diadem), Cravat, Bowtie (butterfly).

Introduction

Many Persian symbols and ornaments were borrowed by Europeans and changed in form and shape with the passage of time, and then returned to Iran after centuries. In Sassanid religious-political traditions, such symbols and ornaments can be seen in and on reliefs, coins, vessels, cloths, and tools.

The origin of such symbols and ornaments belong to the Parthian (Arsacid) Empire. The focus of the present study is the divine diadem depicted on crowns, around the neck and on the covenant ring by the Sassanid emperors. This symbol was borrowed by the west and from there it was carried by the Croatians (Iranian immigrants to Europe) to France and the rest of the Europe. This adornment returned to Iran after many centuries with some changes in its form but its origin has been totally forgotten. The same fate happened for many practices and sciences which originally belonged to Persians. This matter merits further linguistic, ethnographic, historical and archeological studies.

Hypothesis

Diadem, which was one of the Persian religious-political ornaments, was carried into the Roman Empire as silk cloth was exported from Persia to Rome. Later this holy symbol was transferred by the Croatians to the Louis XIV's army. Then, under the name of "Cravat" –derived from the word "Croatian"– it was borrowed by the French and with time it became a part of the formal suit of Europeans.

Terminology

1-Verethrayna (Bahram): Verethrayna or Bahrâm was the Sassanid hypostasis of victory. Victory was his characteristic. Bahrâm was also the fire god. Many fire temples in the Sassanid Empire were named "âdash Bahrâm" or "âzar Baharam" (Fire Bahram). Bahrâm had different corporeal manifestations, such as human form or powerful creatures like the Varəyan Bird (hawk).

Extended wings represented this powerful divinity watching over the throne of the kings promising them victory and security from the harm of Ahriman (the all evil in ancient Persia).

2-Mehr (Mitra): In Persian mythology, Mehr was an ancient goddess who existed even before the Zoroastrianism. In Zoroastrianism, it is a powerful divinity whose

status is lower than Ahuramazdâ (the all good in Zoroastrianism) and is assumed to have been created by Ahuramazdâ to protect his other creations. Mehr was the goddess of covenant and safeguarded virtue and order. She loathed who soever broke covenants. Her beauty has been praised in "Mehrisht" (an ode in Avesta dedicated to Goddess Mehr). In Persian mythology, Mehr appeared before the sun did and her accompanying the sun resulted in the word "Mehr" to acquire the meaning of "the sun". She accompanied the gods Soroush and Rashan in their judgments.

3-Anâhitâ: She was a goddess with high status among ancient Persians. She was worshipped even before the emergence of Zoroastrianism. The word "Anâhitâ" means "pure". In "Abânisht" (an ode in Avesta dedicated to Goddess Anâhitâ), she has been described as a young, fair tall beautiful lady who wears a tight band around her waist and is adorned by jewelries, golden necklace and earrings, shining shoes and a gold-woven dress. Anâhitâ was powerful, beautiful and wise. She is depicted as the goddess of water, love and fertility since, according to the Persian mythology, the fountain of life springs from her essence.

4-Tishtar: This divinity is known as "Tishtarieh" in Avesta, "Tishtar" in Pahlavi Dynasty and "Tir" in modern Persian. Tishtar was the God of Rain.

The eighth ode in Avesta is dedicated to this divinity which is depicted as a white shining star. This powerful divinity is of water nature.

His battle with the demon of famine, "Apush", and his victory over the demon has been described in Avesta.

5-Farr-e Izadi (divine splendor): In the Sassanid Empire, an emperor had a unique characteristic referred to in modern Persian as "farr", in middle Persian as "farreh" and in Avesta as "khurneh".

This word means "life force", "splendor", "victory" and "fate" and most important of all a divine fire which only sparked in an emperor and distinguished him from the rest.

6-Kosti: Also referred to as "kost" or "kostik" or faith band, it was a white thin long band woven from seventy two threads. Every Zoroastrian had to wear one around his/her waist once they became fifteen years old (Oshidari, 1992: 393)¹.

7-Zonâr: It is band by which a cross is worn around the neck of a Christian. It was also the name of a girdle that Serbians had to wear to be distinguishable

from Muslims (Mo'in, 1981, V.2: 1749).

History of the Sassanid Empire

Sassanians (3rd-7th century AD) were religious people. Ardashir Paristâr, the founder of the Sassanid Empire, was the guardian of the Shrine of Anâhitâ in Estakhr city located in Varjâvand. The Sassanid Empire was essentially religious.

Sassanians united Persia and established a central government which powerfully ruled over all of the sections of this land. Upon crushing his enemies and establishing peace and unity, Ardashir declared Zoroastrianism as the formal religion of Persia. Regarding Ardashir's last words to his son Shapour, the renowned Persian poet, Ferdowsi, says:

When the king honors religion; kingdom and religion become brothers. They are two silk cloths interwoven; one product made by wisdom. In "Ahd-e Ardashir" (The Age of Ardashir), we read: "Know that religion and kingdom are two brothers..." (Abbas, 1970: 35). Therefore, establishment of a central government and declaration of Zoroastrianism as the formal religion resulted in great social, cultural and artistic changes in Persia. Understanding the Sassanid art symbols and concepts proves daunting and even impossible without understanding the context and structure of the government in that era. Religious thoughts are clearly observable in the majority of the Sassanid art, and any research about the Sassanid art inevitably takes up the form of religious semiotics for the majority of the work. This unity between religion and government cannot be seen in any artwork predating the Sassanid Empire.

Sassanid artworks indicate Sassanians' respect for Zoroastrianism. For example, the image of a fire temple can be seen on every Sassanid coin. The image of the Sassanid emperors with their characteristic symbols and adornments (bands, earrings and pearl necklaces) can be seen in Sassanid reliefs, coins, seals and vessels. These symbols, especially diadem, were tightly connected to Zoroastrian beliefs. There is no need to mention that Zoroastrianism was influenced by older religions and beliefs itself, since Mehr and Anâhitâ, the two goddesses worshipped in ancient Persia, now accompanied Ahurâmazdâ as his companions. Divine symbols such as the moon crescent, which represented Anâhitâ, and the sun, which represented Mehr, adorning the crowns and diadems

of the Sassanid emperors bespoke of their religion-based kingdom and affiliated them with Ahurâmazdâ and his companions. At the time of the Sassanid Empire, East Roman royalties wore silk clothes. Silk was exported from China to Rome through the Sassanid tradesmen. Gradually, silk cloths were woven in Persia and exported directly to Rome. The Sassanid symbols on these cloths had no meaning for the Roman, yet Roman royalties seemed to have liked these symbols and patterns because of their beauty.

Religious Symbols

Sassanid crowns featured symbols such as the sun, the moon, stars, wings, light rays and pearls. In "Asar Al-Baghie", Abu Rayhan Biruni (1973: 290) says: "Sassanid emperors wore a crown which featured the sun." Therefore, the symbol of divinities such as Bahrâm, Mitrâ (Mehr), Anâhitâ and Tishtar were manifested in the Sassanid art (Figs. 1).



Fig 1a. The symbol of Verethrayna (eagle wings) on Bahrâm I's crown. Source: Amini, 2006: 259.

Fig 1b. The symbol of Mitrâ (Mehr) on Bahram II's crown (273-276 AD). Source: Amini, 2006: 253.

Fig 1c. A Persian coin featuring the symbol of Anâhitâ (the moon crescent) on the crown of the king (belonging to the era of Yazdgerd I). Amini, 2006: 299.

Fig. 1d. Coin of Pourandokht (the Queen of Sassanid). A Persian coin featuring the symbol of Tishtar on its margin. Source: Amini, 2006: 232.

Use of religious symbols was not limited to diadems. The dress and adornments of the Sassanid emperors also featured these symbols in a mysterious fashion. Sometimes, one symbol could be seen in the crown, dress and every adornment worn by a king. The impression of these symbols persisted even in the Islamic era. Rudaki, a great Persian poet who lived in the third and fourth century AH, mentions Sassanid diadem, necklace and earrings in his poems:

With a turn, He makes one a king; and gives him diadem, necklace and earring We read in Mo'in Glossary that: "Diadem was a special band around the crown of Persian kings" (Mo'in, 1981, Vol.2: 1603). The origin of diadem can be traced back to the Parthian Empire. It is also referred to as "dâhem" or "dâdem". The image of a winged angel on Parthian coins carrying a diadem was similar to the angel depicted on Sassanid coins carrying a wavy thread

which represented the divine splendor (Fig. 2). The image of this thread rolling around the king's head seems to indicate the origin of diadem. Sassanians used headbands and wavy bands in combination to represent the new symbol of this divine authorization. This wavy headband worn by the Sassanid emperors imitated the ring of power (the ring of covenant). Sassanid silver vessels also featured the images of Anâhitâ and the Sassanid emperors, who wore a diadem (wavy thread) on and around their neck and crown. This diadem was similar in function to the Parthian diadem (cf. Soudavar, 2003: 31-37). Therefore, diadem was an ornament originally worn by kings only. Scrutiny of the image of Sassanid emperors on the coins, reliefs and seals of that era indicates that most Sassanid emperors had a diadem around their crown. The diadem consisted of a ring and two threads sometimes around the



Fig 2. Sassanid vessel with motif of Yazdgerd I in hunting. (The wavy band worn by Parthians around the head (equal to the Greek diadem). This image of diadem often carried by an angel can be seen abundantly in Sassanid reliefs, coins, vessels). Source: Soudavar, 2003: 155.

neck of the emperor as a torc with or without a band (Fig. 3). The diadem was the symbol of their divine splendor serving to distinguish the emperors from their subjects. In Sassanid reliefs, the divine splendor conferred upon the king by Ahuramazdâ or great divinities such as Anâhitâ. Sassanid emperors ordered the creation of these rock reliefs to declare their divine authority. In a relief in Naqsh-e Rostam (a Sassanid site), Ahuramazdâ is giving the divine splendor to Ardashir I (the founder of the Sassanid Empire) while the divine splendor can be seen around the head of both Ahuramazdâ and Ardashir. The same goes for the relief in which Ahuramazdâ is giving the divine splendor to Bahrâm (Fig. 4a). In another relief in the same site, Anâhitâ is conferring the divine splendor upon Narseh (the seventh Sassanid king) while the divine splendor can be seen around the crown and neck of both (Fig. 4b). Taq-e Bostan (a series of rock reliefs) also indicates the image of Ahuramazdâ giving the divine splendor to Ardashir II and the divine splendor can be seen around their crown and waist (Fig. 4c).

The ornament worn by Europeans referred to as

“cravat” is the reminiscence of the divine splendor which, similar to other Sassanid artworks, tools, ornaments, etc., were borrowed by the Europe and especially France. English glossaries hold that the word “cravat” entered the French language in the second half of the 17th century AD. Croatian mercenaries of Louis XVI’s army wore neckties, and this became a tradition among the French.

Therefore, “cravat” does not have a classic (Latin or Greek) tradition. Europeans believe that it has

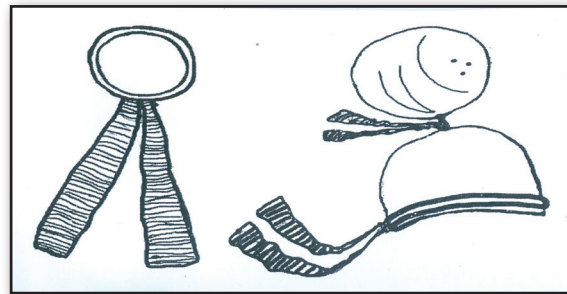


Fig 3. A ring around the lower part of the crown of the Persian king/ The ribbon attached to the ring indicates the covenant of the king.

Source: the author.

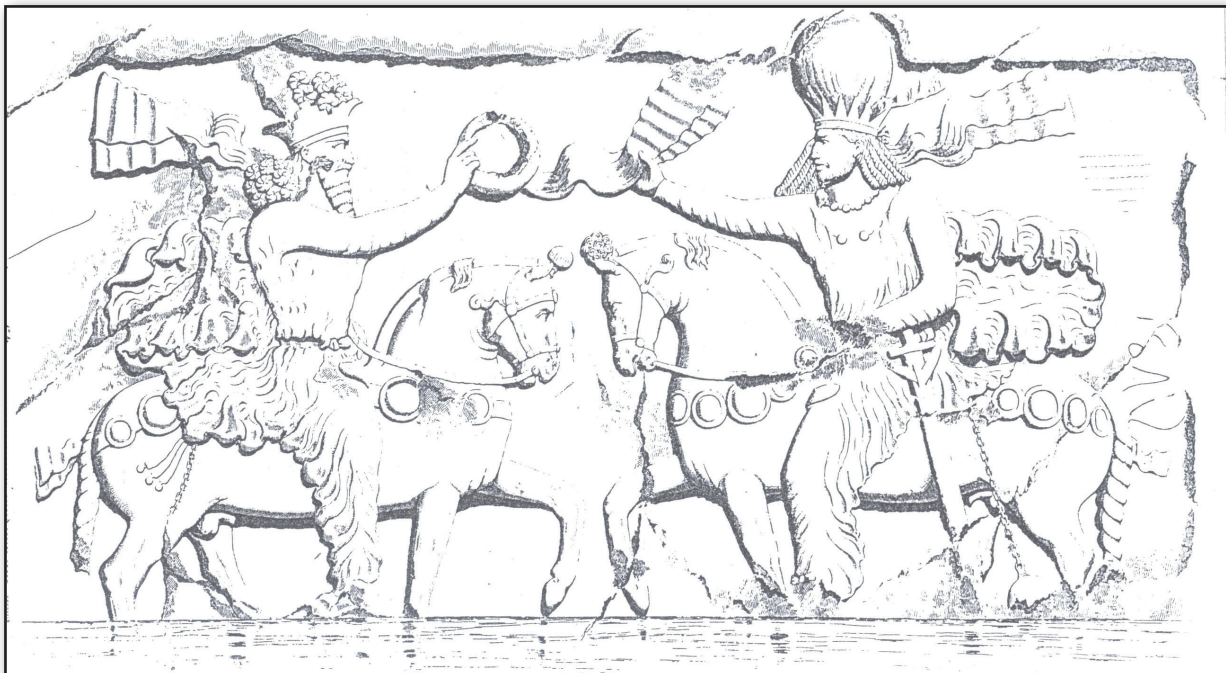


Fig 4a. Ahuramazdâ giving the crown to Bahrâm I, Tang-e Chogan, Bishapur, Fars, Iran. Source: Avarzamani and Javadi, 2009: 122.

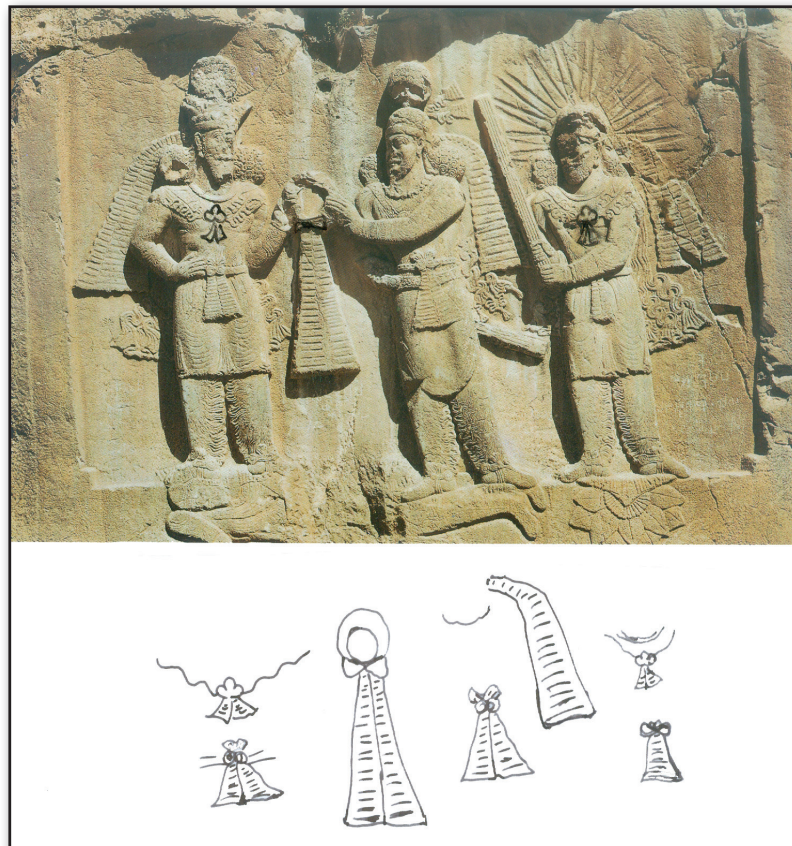
its roots in the traditions of Croatian soldiers. According to European historians, “cuirasse” became a common object in the 15th century AD, and it is assumed to be related to the word “coracea”. The

Latin word “corium” means “leather” and “coriaceus” means “leathery”. They propose that cuirasse was originally made from leather in order to justify the origin of the word! (cf. Moghadam, 1946: 30-32) Avesta (Vandidad, Chapter 14, clause 9) mentions

Fig 4b. Anâhitâ giving the crown to Narseh, Naqsh-e Rostam, Fars, Iran. Source: Soudavar, 2003: 159.



Fig 4c. Ahuramazdâ giving the crown to Ardashir II, Taq-e Bostan, Kermanshah, Iran. The plastron, the girdle and the covenant ring are held by Ahuramazdâ and the king with a wavy thread and a knot in the form a bowtie. Source: Javadi and Avarzamani, 2009: 177



14 accessories a warrior needed: “...the seventh is armor, the eighth is karr...” In Pahlavi Garpupân, we read that karr was worn around the armor like a girdle, but it was worn a bit higher than the waist – on the chest– by the Sassanid kings and high-ranking officers of the army (Fig. 5).

Almost in every rock relief and coin, this plastron is observable (see Fig. 4c and 6). Plastron was common even during and after the Safavid Dynasty as Shah Abass wore it on his chest. This object is referred to as cuirasse in French, which has been derived from the Italian word “corazza” and has its

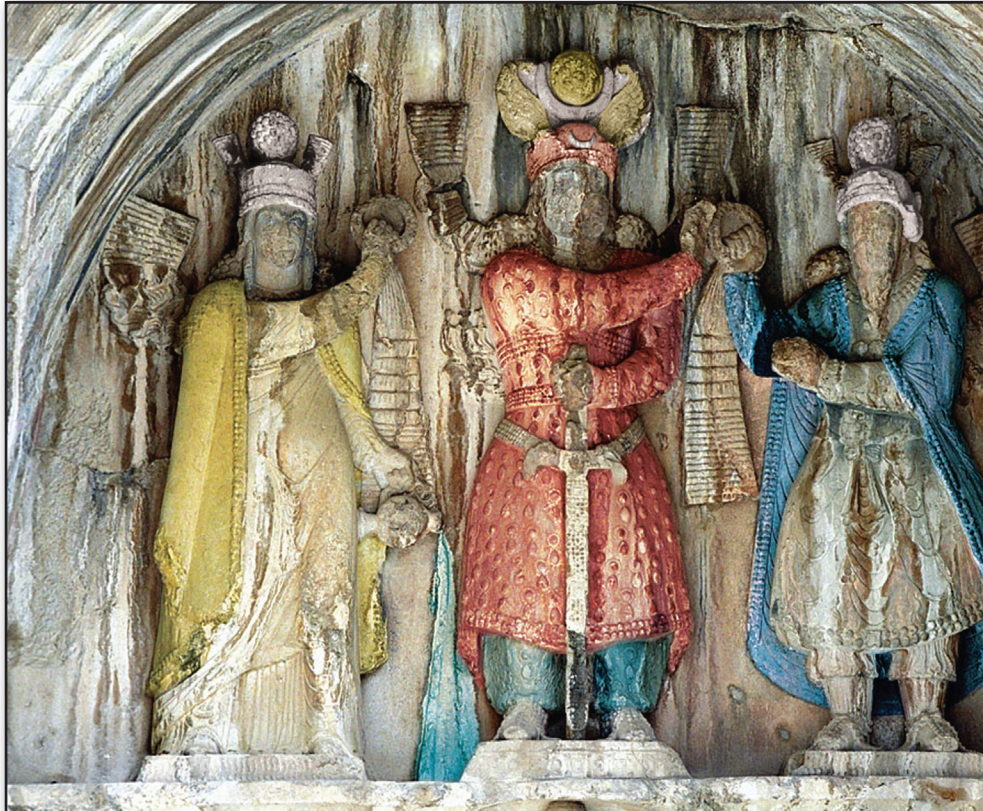


Fig 5. Ahurâmazdâ and Anâhitâ giving the crown to Khosrow II, Taq-e Bostan, Kerman-shah, Iran. Source: Javadi and Avarzamani, 2009: 191.

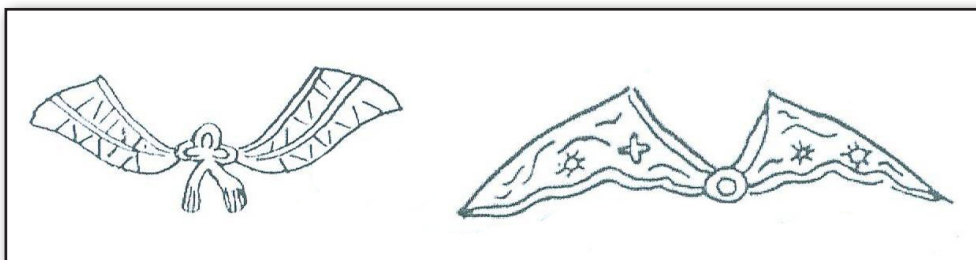


Fig 6. A necktie featuring the moon, the sun and the Persian cross (ancient Persian symbols). Source: Moghadam, 1945: 31.

roots in Avesta. Now it is clear what the origin of cravat is.

There is a lot of information in different website and articles about the Persian root of cravat, its transfer to Rome during the Sassanid Empire, Croatsians’ use of this ornament and its transfer to

French, Britain and other countries in Europe. Most of this information has been quoted from Bosnia: A Short History authored by Noel Malcolm. Quoting Dr. Nourbaha’s reports about the history of cravat, some of the sources introduce this ornament as an Islamic symbol worn by Muslim Croatsians

during the crusade wars. In his book, Noel Malcolm reviews the history of Yugoslavian tribes and posits that Serbians and Croats were of Persian origin before joining the Slavic nation. The word “cravat” or “hravat” has no root in Serbian language. This word was found carved in a rock script in the southern Russia once inhabited by the Greek. In Avestan language, “khoravat” means “friendly” (Malcolm, 1994: 7). This ornament is in fact the Persian diadem and the holy Sassanid symbol which meant covenant and friendship with Ahuramazdâ and other divinities such as Anâhitâ. Croats’ immigration from Persia to Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia was probably triggered by Manichaeans’ suppression during the Sassanid Empire. These immigrants wore a necktie similar in shape to Sassanid diadems in order to distinguish themselves from the members of other tribes.

Following the tradition of their ancestors, the Croatian mercenaries of Louis XVI’s army wore a silk cloth around their neck. Gradually, this ornament became a part of the formal uniform of the French army officers, and the word “la cravat” entered the French language and eventually spread all around the globe (Ibid).

As was mentioned before, diadem was the symbol of the divine splendor during the Parthian and Sassanid Empire. Diadem was also the holy symbol of the local kings of Pars (a central kingdom in Persia).

Rock relief of Persepolis indicates Pâpak, the king of Pars and father of Ardashir, with the divine splendor around his neck (Fig. 7).

Bâbak in his Manichaean robe and also a cravat can also be seen in the relief. Therefore, “farr” (the divine splendor) has its root in the ancient Persia and it was worn by Ahuramazdâ, the divinities and the Persian kings (cf. Herzfeld, 1960: 30-32).

Diadem was used exuberantly in Sassanid artworks to the extent that in addition to the crown and ornaments worn by the Persian kings and divinities,

it was depicted around the neck of the deer of the royal hunting grounds, around the reins of the



Fig 7. Pâpak, the king of Pars and father of Ardashir I, wearing the divine splendor around the neck. Source: Moghadam, 1946: 32.

horses of Persian kings and Ahuramazdâ, around the neck of Persian divine birds and animals, etc. Diadem was in fact a religious symbol for ancient Persians long before the Sassanid Empire.

This symbol was often referred to as “karr” (derived from the word “ke’rat” which meant “power” and “grandeur”). In the Persian literature, “farr” and “karr” were used interchangeably, and this indicates that they were one and the same. Cravat, whose origin is the Persian diadem, is also the symbol of power and grandeur in formal suit. Another point to mention is that “farr” or diadem was sometimes worn with plastron in the form of a butterfly around the neck of the Persian divinities and kings.

This type of cravat is referred to as “noeud papillon” (bowtie) by the French. Different types of bowtie are now used by both men and women all around the world (Figs. 8).

Therefore, garpupân or butterfly was a religious symbol in ancient Persia (Fig. 9). In the 19th century, when cravat was borrowed by European people from the Persian culture, some Muslims named it “Zonâr” and mistakenly considered it

of Christian origin. There is an old tradition in Mazandaran province which requires that the groom wear a red or green necktie as a symbol of his love for the bride. Similar to “kosti”, cravat was worn by Zoroastrians around the waist. This is why Persians named it “zonâr” when they began to wear it again (Ibid). Serbians also used to wear zonâr around the neck or waist.



Fig 8a. Charles II of Spain wearing a bowtie, 17th century. Source: www.hoocher.com



Fig 8b. Maximilien Robespierre, the French lawyer and politician, wearing a bowtie, 19th century. Source: www.ehow.com

Conclusion

Cravat, which is a part of formal suits and dresses in Iran and many other countries of the world and which is loathed by some as a symbol of westernization, originally belonged to the Persian culture before being borrowed by the Roman alongside Persian cloths and ornaments during the Sassanid Empire. Later, it was taken to France and other parts of Europe by Croatians. In the 19th century, this ornament returned to its place of origin with the development of the relationships of the west and the Islamic countries. Many symbolic ornaments which had their root in the west lost their meaning along the way in the passage of time and took up new shapes. For example, diadem, which can be seen in Sassanid reliefs, coins and seals, has reshaped into tie and cravat. The symbolic origin of the different forms of cravat -a simple thread with a knot, plastrons, neckties, bowties, etc.- was “farr-e izadi” (the divine splendor) which lost its spiritual and divine meaning, and nowadays is used in formal suits.

Endnote

1. Afifi (1995: 586) has also discussed “kosti” in Persian Mythology and Culture in Pahlavi Scripts.

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