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Women, Dance and the Hunt: Splendour and Pleasures of Court Life in Arsacid and Early Sasanian Art

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Despite the long history of research on ancient Iranian monarchies, scarce sources considerably limit our knowledge of Iranian court life in the past. This is particularly true for the Arsacid and early Sasanian periods. Iranian written sources, including chiefly early Sasanian royal inscriptions, are occasional, while external information is not only incomplete but its scientific value has frequently been questioned. Ancient authors are primarily focused on conspicuous wealth and ceremonial splendour perceived as signs of licentiousness and decadence.[1] However, that consumption-focused approach is employed to describe the dynasties of ancient Iran often enough to raise doubts about the impartiality of the authors and the reliability of their reports. Given the above, even the smallest piece of information available from archaeological sources becomes vital.

The present study is designed to indicate one more, though probably still incompletely exploited, source of information about court life, namely the architectural decoration of palaces. We largely rely on the assumption that wall, floors and ceilings were decorated to prioritise certain chambers in the overall room hierarchy that must have been established based on the nature of activities intended for such chambers. Viewed in this light, the decorative themes that occur in palatial architecture, if carefully examined, are capable of helping to reconstruct at least some aspects of court life. Its epicentre is usually perceived as lying in the royal capitals. Indeed, ancient authors enumerate several chosen by the Arsacid kings as their seasonal abodes.[2] The most frequently mentioned among the Arsacid royal capitals is Ctesiphon or a coronation city and a royal winter residence.[3] Regrettably, neither the palace at Ctesiphon nor royal structures once existing at Ecbatana and Rhagae or at Hecatompylus[4] have been archaeologically ascertained. Thus, the structures revealed at Old Nisa continue to be

the only known Arsacid edifices that can be directly linked to royalty. They have implications for our present study as their decoration provides an in-depth look into certain aspects of royal ideology that give us a better understanding of the reasons for the presence of some specific motifs in architectural decoration of the Arsacid period. Although the functions of some of these structures still await identification, it seems evident that Old Nisa became a large ceremonial centre of the Arsacid dynasty after major constructional alterations either in the final years of Mithradates I or soon after his demise.[5] Essential structures of the centre include the Square House, the Red Building, the Square Hall, the Round Hall and the Tower Building.

Unearthed during recent excavations in the central sector of the site, the Red Building represents an earlier phase in this monumental complex. The Red Building is square in plan, with its main entrance from the north, through a deep portico flanked by two small rooms. Both the front wall of the platform on which the Red Building stands and the rear wall of the portico are faced with a frieze of stone slabs decorated by a continuous series of flutings under a bead and reel pattern. The walls of the Red Building used to be plastered red purple. Coloured plaster was also applied over the floors in two rooms of the Building. The practice of applying dark red purple plaster can be traced back to Achaemenid palatial structures. As argued by the excavator, the colour purple might have carried specific meaning for both the Achaemenids and the Arsacids, and its use may be assumed to have pointed to a link between the Red Building's decorations and royal ideology.[6]

In addition to the Red Building, there was also the Square House in the northern sector of the site, built in the early construction phase of Old Nisa. The purpose of the Square House appears clear from the equipment revealed in place.

Invernizzi argues that the Square House was a ceremonial banquet hall in which royal guests rested on banquettes or benches constructed along the walls.[7]

Sumptuous banquets held at the royal courts of ancient Mesopotamia and Iran have a long history and are richly documented by written records and iconographic sources. Whether official or not, banquets were intended to emphasise the wealth and power of the monarch and to express kingship by means of the copious size of portions, extravagant menus and luxurious tableware. An invitation to a royal banquet was an official declaration of royal favour, an acknowledgement of one's high rank and privileges, as well as a method for strengthening alliances and loyalty, and for uniting élites around the monarch.[8] Therefore the ancient authors' view of banquets as providing nothing but entertainment to the monarch can hardly be upheld; in fact, banquets were a crucial element of court rituals designed both to enhance the social prestige of the royal court and to strengthen royal power.

Wine, the large-scale consumption of which is proven by capacious storage vessels and *ostraca*, surely constituted an important component of banquets at Old Nisa. It is supposed that wine was served from ivory rhytons stored in the Square House when it ceased to serve its original purpose and became a treasury.[9] Manassero, following Hoffmann's tracing of changes with regard to the meanings of rhytons with animal foreparts, concludes that, given that rhytons were generally a symbol of Dionysus in the Hellenistic period, the Square House rhytons were used to pour libations in honour of Arsacid heroized ancestors.[10] The acceptance of Manassero's view entails the assumption that the rhytons were not used for this purpose until the fortified residence had been transformed into a memorial and ceremonial centre for the Arsacid dynasty; according to Invernizzi, this change of function occurred during the reign of Mithradates I or his immediate successor.[11]

It was after the reign of Mithradates I that the monumental structures (except the Red Building) of the central complex were built. These included the Round Hall, which is adjacent to the south-eastern corner of the Red Building, and which is interpreted as a mausoleum or *heroon* of an Arsacid ruler. Discovered among surviving fragments of colossal male and female statues once adorning the Round Hall, a fragment of a statue of Mithradates I is deemed by Invernizzi to support the view that it was actually that king for whom the *heroon* was constructed.[12] Similar monumental clay statues were also used to decorate the Square Hall built during the second construction phase at Old Nisa. Invernizzi believes that the statues from the Square Hall and the Round Hall represent mythical or deified ancestors of Mithradates I.[13]

The purpose of the Tower Building remains unclear. This is the tallest structure of Old Nisa, built in the vicinity of the Square Hall and the Round Hall, and which once had remains of a columned building on the top, as mentioned by early excavators. Regrettably the remains were not properly recorded before they became no longer traceable.[14] In addition fragments of wall-paintings, which have been discovered outside their original context during recent excavations, cannot be identified in terms of dating and their precise original location within the columned building. However, several fragments have been successfully matched to reveal a scene depicting a battle between two groups of mounted men dressed in the Iranian style.[15] Whether historical or mythological, the scene was obviously intended to glorify the military achievements of the Arsacids and, as such, sat well within the ideological programme of the ceremonial centre.

If the current initial and still imprecise timeline for Old Nisa's construction[16] proves correct, it appears reasonable to suggest that the process of the creation of a dynastic centre was accompanied by the adoption of Hellenistic patterns of the presentation of royal power and majesty. This was surely not driven by anything other than ideological motives and the need to present an Arsacid ruler as one of the monarchs of the Hellenistic East, and the equal of his peers in terms of power.

The particular nature of the structures at Old Nisa prevents their examination from being truly fruitful and yielding extensive information about court life, except the previously mentioned role of banquets. However, when combined with information from coins datable to the time of Mithradates I, it adds to the reconstruction of some aspects of the Arsacids' royal ideology which was undoubtedly mirrored by court life.

Whether the Round Hall, Tower Building and Square Hall were constructed during or after the reign of Mithradates I, it was at this very time that changes in royal ideology occurred. These changes are traceable chiefly in coins minted under Mithradates I. Prior to the conquest of Media and Mesopotamia, coins already started to bear the legends *basileos theou* or *basileos megalou theopator(os)*, which, according to Dąbrowa, suggests the beginning of a ruler cult inspired by Hellenistic culture.[17] Those coins continued to depict the ruler wearing the traditional satrapal headgear, sometimes referred to as the *bashlyk*; his later drachms and tetradrachms, however, portrayed the ruler wearing a royal diadem.[18] Deemed an attribute of royalty but of debatable origin, the diadem seems to be associated with Dionysus in the Hellenistic period.[19]

The iconography and legends on coins show that some elements of royal ideology were modified by successors of Mithradates I. These modifications generally consisted of a return to Iranian traditions.[20] Regrettably their impact on various aspects of court life cannot be identified with certainty. It seems highly likely that elements such as audiences, banquets and hunts, which were deeply rooted in the Eastern tradition, would have been subject only to qualitative and quantitative changes. Sadly, a paucity of sources prevents any in-depth study.

A similar paucity affects studies of almost every aspect of court life, including royal women, otherwise a rewarding topic that is readily addressed by modern scholars.[21] It is only very infrequently that royal women are treated at any length in Greek or Latin sources. The exception here is Musa, a slave concubine whom we see promoted to royal consort (of Phraates IV) and mother of a royal successor (Phraataces).[22] Usually, however, ancient authors point to a large number of concubines at royal and noble courts. Concubines are normally referred to collectively with other goods, for instance "his treasures and his concubines",[23] and, as a rule (except for the case of Musa), anonymously. Anonymity, however, did not necessarily entail their unimportance for court life, as there were cases when concubines gave birth to rulers.[24]

As for royal consorts, the sources usually record only the queen's name and rarely give her titles. Those that record titles prove that rulers could have several wives, each holding the title of queen.[25] These were chosen from the royal family, sometimes including such close relatives as half-sisters, and probably also from Parthian noble families.[26] And since marriages were traditionally designed to strengthen internal or external alliances, queens of foreign origin were not infrequent: Phraates II (138–127 BC) was married to Laodice, a daughter of Cleopatra Thea and Demetrius II Nikator; Mithradates II (124/123–88/87 BC) to a daughter of Tigranes, king of Armenia; Sinatruces (77 BC) was probably married to a Mesopotamian woman; Orodes II (57–38 BC) to Laodice, a daughter of Antiochos I Theos and Isias Philostorgos of Commagene; and Vonones I (8–9 AD) to a Scythian princess.[27]

Royal women surely formed a part of the ruler's innermost circle and their public appearance was one of the methods to manifest royalty, as suggested by the fact that Tiridates I, the king of Armenia and founder of the Armenian line of the Arsacid dynasty, went to Rome together with his consort in 66 AD. Riding on horseback next to her husband and wearing a helmet instead of a veil, she made an immense impression upon the Romans.[28]

Ancient sources seem to indicate, however, that Arsacid royal women did not play any more prominent role: they lived in the seclusion of the women's chambers or harem, lacking any involvement in court intrigues and not participating in entertainments. Nevertheless, the actions of the royal consort upon the demise of the king of Adiabene,[29] or those of Queen Talasi'asu of Mesene who, upon her husband's death, was able to enthrone her juvenile son,[30] as well as the appearance of a female portrait and the legend "Lady Rangodeme" on the reverse of coins minted by otherwise unknown local ruler of eastern Iran in the first century BC,[31] along with other representations of royal women in art of the Arsacid period, all seem to challenge this view.[32] Although it is beyond question that depictions of men largely outnumber depictions of women and that this is typical for Near Eastern art, we should remember that at Old Nisa, among fragments of clay statues and paintings, there were some female representations.[33] Representations of women occur also in the court art of local Parthian rulers and neighbouring monarchies.[34] There is no need to cite familiar examples from Hatra or Dura Europos. There is, however, a rock relief at Tang-e Sarvak (Khuzestan) that deserves more attention, for it shows a ruler of Elymais seated and most probably accompanied by his consort.[35] Yet other examples worth mentioning are the painting from Kuh-e Khwaja (Sistan), which shows a king and queen seated in three-quarter view on an elaborate throne,[36] and female busts in stucco found with male busts at Qaleh-i Yazdigird (western Iran).

Discovered in the 1970s, the castle at Qaleh-i Yazdigird is chiefly known for its rich architectural stucco decoration.[37] Given the fact that we still have no archaeological record for any royal Arsacid palace (this being understood to mean a structure combining state administrative and royal residential functions), this Parthian noble's seat can serve as a complementary source of information on royal court life. This is valid only on the assumption that nobles mirrored kings as much as possible, including specifically their court life and residential design, but this seems a reasonable assumption, given tendencies throughout history.

Since the excavations at Qaleh-i Yazdigird have not been completed, neither the ground plan of the castle nor the precise function of each of the only partly unearthed rooms can be determined. Nevertheless, a group of three large rooms (nos 1, 5, 11) is striking, the ground plans and layout of which are deemed by the excavators to have echoes of the complex of the northern *eyvan* of the residence at Parthian Assur.[38] These three rooms have yielded the largest quantity of decorated stucco fragments. If indeed one of the rooms (no. 11, according to the excavators) had the form of and served as an *eyvan*, that is the most important and formal part of a castle, then the neighbouring rooms, although separated by corridors, might have been used for less official but still public purposes.

Geometrical and stylised floral patterns lavishly employed for stucco decorations at Qaleh-i Yazdigird resemble those of Parthian Uruk, Assur and Seleucia. For the present study, however, more important are certain figural motifs that are relatively abundant at Qaleh-i Yazdigird but which rarely occur in Mesopotamian residential decoration. A good starting point for the list of the Qaleh-i Yazdigird figural motifs is the male and female busts. These differ from one another in terms of size, hairstyle and clothing. One of three largest busts was found in fill of Room 1. It depicts a man with his hair gathered in two bunches, within a medallion with an egg-and-dart pattern around its border (Figure 12.1). It is enclosed within a square frame, the upper part of which is decorated with vine scrolls and grape clusters. Although his face has been damaged, a diadem round the temples
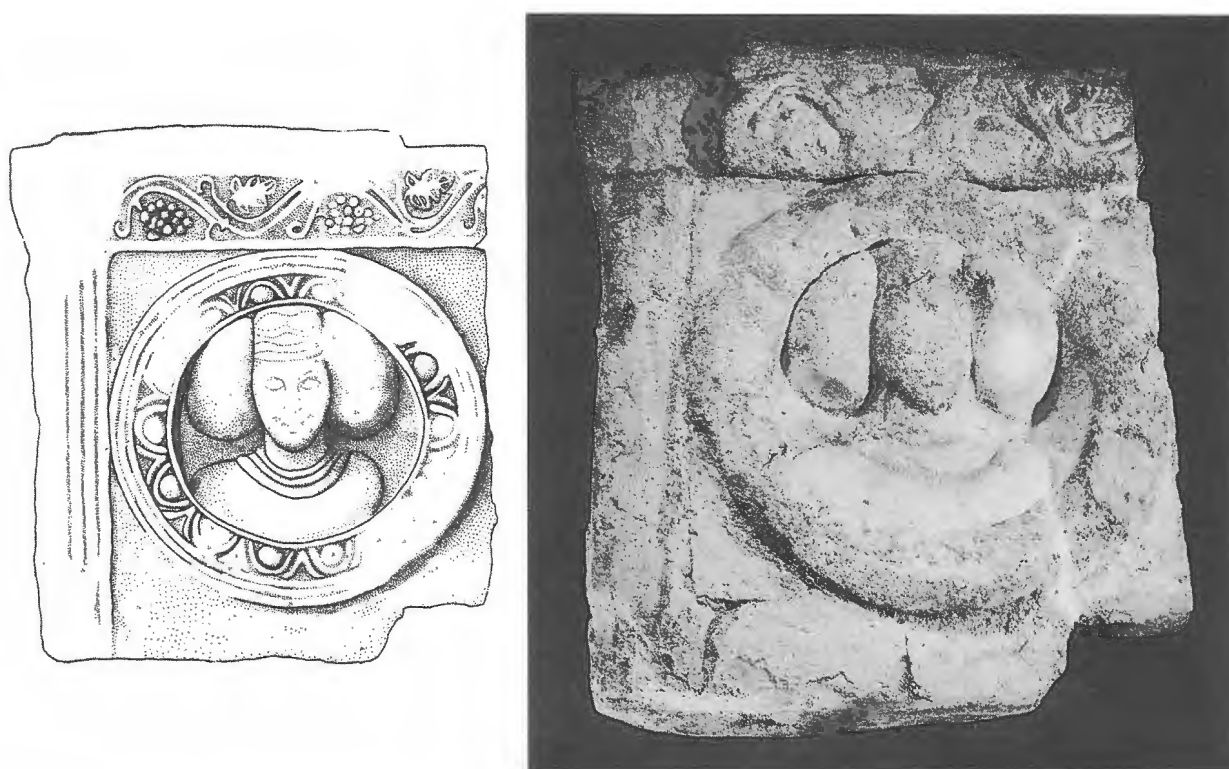
Figure 12.1: Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Portrait of a Parthian noble in medallion: a) after Keall 1980; b) courtesy of the National Museum of Iran, Tehran.

is still visible, indicating that he was of princely rank, if not higher.

Similar in size and following the same rule of composition, but far more poorly preserved, is a medallion with a female portrait, found in room fill in the western sector of the site (Figure 12.2).[39] A folded garment drapes over her left shoulder to form a V-shaped neckline and leaves her right shoulder uncovered. Similarly dressed is a female depicted within a much less elaborate medallion from Room 11. Unfortunately, her head is not preserved (Figure 12.3).[40] Interestingly, such a garment is not used for other female busts, whether much smaller examples enclosed within rhomboid frames,[41] or those on figured capitals.[42]

Assuming that the busts once decorating the walls at Qaleh-i Yazdigird depicted real people, it is probable that those who enjoyed the highest prestige had their busts set within medallions. Regrettably the lack of any information about either the inhabitants of Qaleh-i Yazdigird or, indeed, general principles for Parthian residential decoration prevents their identification. Of course, the fact that the man is shown wearing the diadem and enclosed within a medallion tempts us to see him as an owner of the castle, and the women as his wives or family members.

Because of the prevailing presence of motifs rooted in Greco-Roman iconography in the decorations of Qaleh-i Yazdigird, a feature which is examined in detail below,

the formal similarity between these medallion busts and *imagines clipeatae* ("framed portraits" in Latin) should not escape our attention, although the origin, purpose and meaning of the latter continues to be a matter of debate.[43] The oldest known public building exhibiting portraits within medallions is a monumental structure at Delos dedicated to Mithridates VI of Pontus (120–63 BC) and built *c.* 102/1 BC, that is when the king was still alive. Inscriptions which accompany the busts identify them as friends, courtiers, foreign allies and associates of Mithridates.[44] In the Roman world, this specific type of portraiture was used to honour both living heroes and deceased ancestors.[45]

In terms of chronological and territorial distances, the portraits of Qaleh-i Yazdigird have closer ties with portrait medallions that are painted on the walls and vaults of houses and temples at Dura Europos,[46] which show perhaps deities or actual house owners.[47]

The examples referred to above are strong indicators that in any studies on the meaning and purpose of such portraits, due consideration should be given to the original location where they were displayed. Therefore, if Qaleh-i Yazdigird was indeed a residence of a local noble, it is very likely that the people depicted within the medallions were from its owner's innermost circle but not necessarily from his closest family.

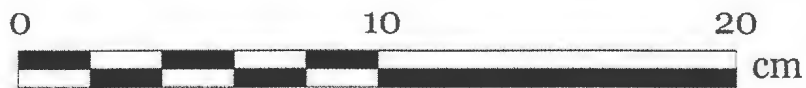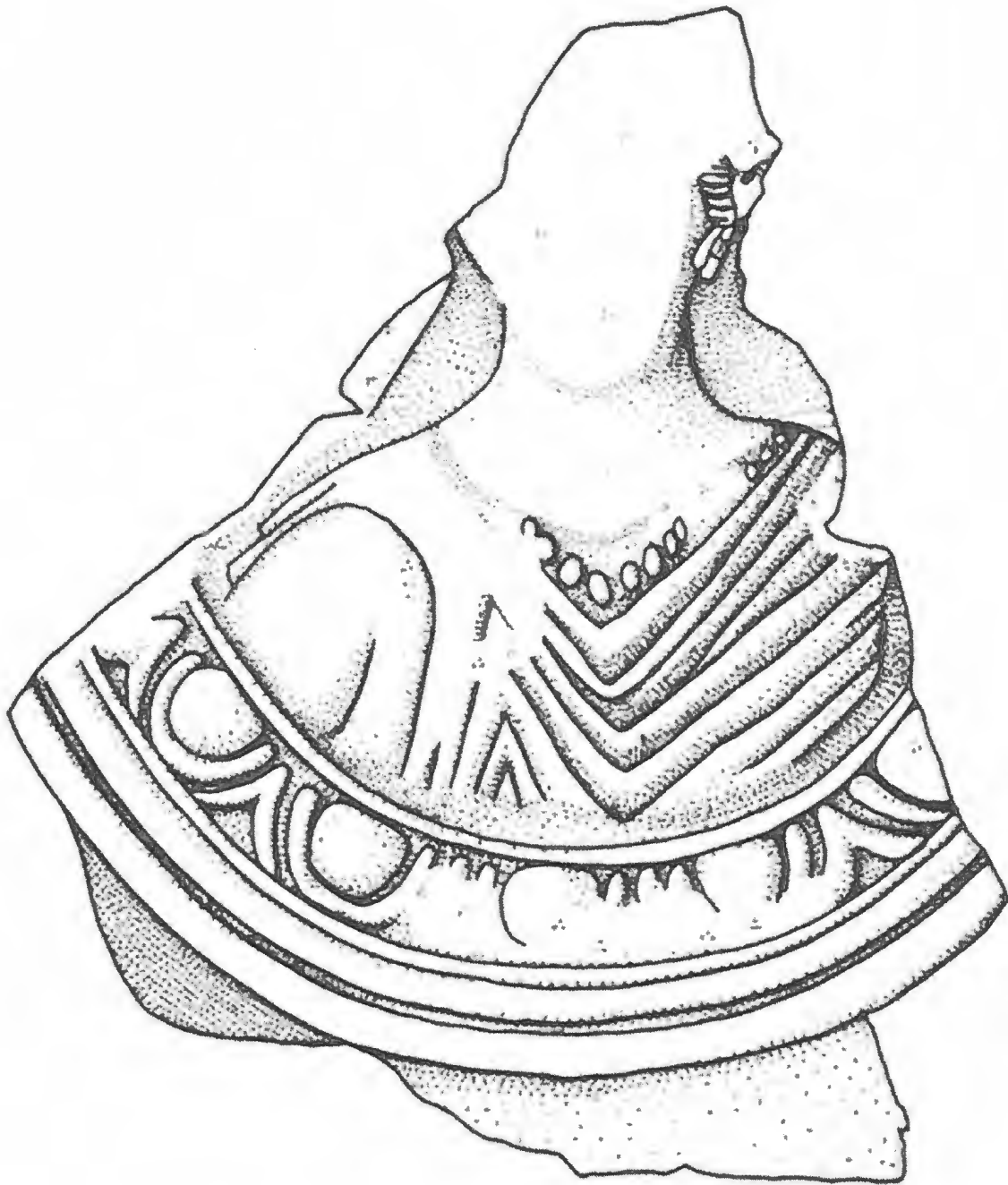Identification of other male portraits from Qaleh-i Yazdigird, including the one contained within a *medallion*

Figure 12.2: Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Female portrait in medallion (after Keall 1980).

or *peopled scroll* (Figure 12.4),[48] is even more difficult, if not impossible.

With its origin traceable back to Late Classical Greek and Hellenistic art, the *peopled scroll* motif gained popularity in Eastern and Western art of the first millennium AD. While the motif seems linked with the cult of Dionysus[49] in Roman culture, it is far from being evidently associated with Dionysus in the Qaleh-i Yazdigird context, for the male portrait enclosed by the peopled scroll shows a typical Parthian hairstyle and bears no Dionysian connotations whatsoever.
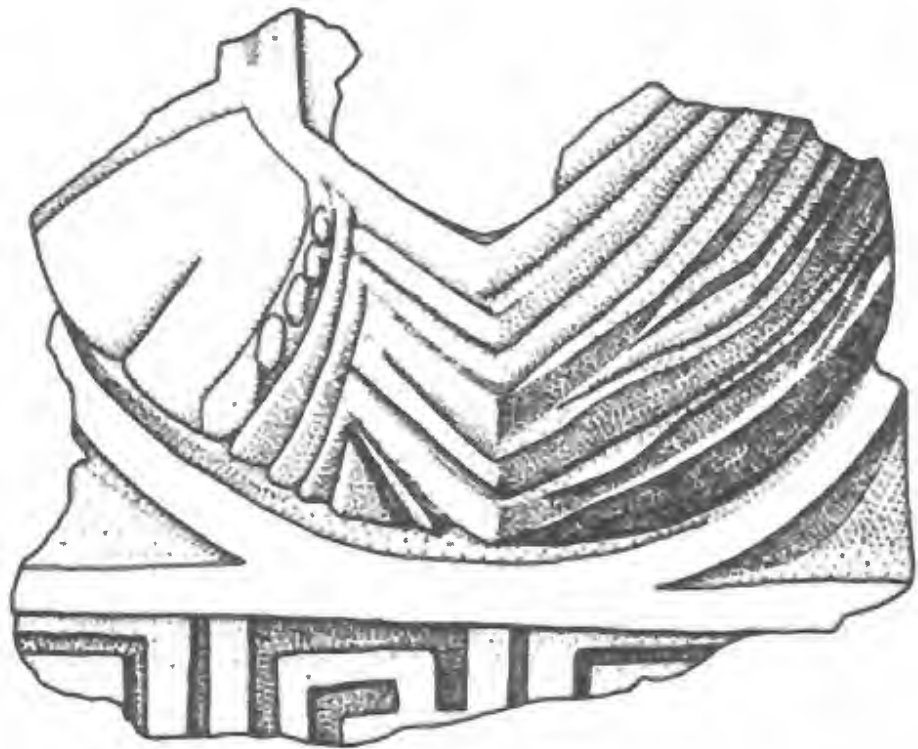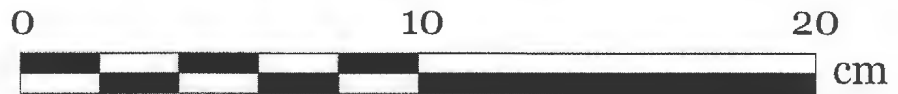
Figure 12.3: Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Female portrait in medallion, head missing (after Keall 1980).

Similar problems of identification are encountered for the female busts emerging from acanthus leaves on stucco engaged column capitals. Common in Hellenistic architecture, human-headed capitals have been found also at Assur, Warka and Seleucia in the Parthian period.[50] However, due to the isolated nature of these Parthian finds, any reconstruction of the decorative programme for the buildings to which they originally belonged is precluded. In Hellenistic and Roman architecture, themes connected with Dionysus were used to decorate such capitals.[51] This is probably also the case for one of the Qaleh-i Yazdigird engaged capitals, which portrays a nude figure holding two dolphins by their tails (Figure 12.5).[52] The Greco-Roman tradition links dolphins with Apollo, Aphrodite or Dionysus. However, the way the figure is holding the dolphins undoubtedly echoes the Near Eastern tradition of representing the Master/Mistress of the Animals.

Deeply rooted in the Near Eastern tradition, including specifically Iranian art, are hunting scenes. These are also present at Qaleh-i Yazdigird. They decorate yet another fragmentary engaged half-column, the surface of which is divided into rectangular panels enclosing a nude hunter or animals in an alternating arrangement.[53]

Outnumbering the scenes with Near Eastern origins, however, is a group of stucco reliefs the theme of which

originates within the Western tradition. The reliefs show scenes with clear Dionysian connotations, such as two Erotes playing with a feline animal, a figure picking a grape cluster from a stylised vine, a reclining nude male reaching for a grape cluster with his right hand (Figure 12.6) and dancers.[54]

The decoration of the engaged half-column reconstructed on the basis of fragments discovered in fill of Room no. 11 also without question has its origins in Dionysian iconography. The surface of the half-column is divided into panels separated by guilloche scrollwork (Figure 12.7). The reconstruction shows a central top panel containing a male figure easily identifiable as Pan, because he is holding pipes and has the hindquarters and legs of a goat (Figure 12.8). The Pan panel is flanked by two more panels, each containing a nude female resting her left arm on a high plinth, her left leg flexed across in front of her right, and her right arm held up to her brow. A similar female figure occupies the central panel in the decorative band immediately below, while each side panel contains a male figure shown in Parthian dress. In the lowermost band, a female figure is depicted wearing a draped robe in the central panel, while Pan appears in each side panel. The position of arms and legs leaves no room for doubt that all these personages are
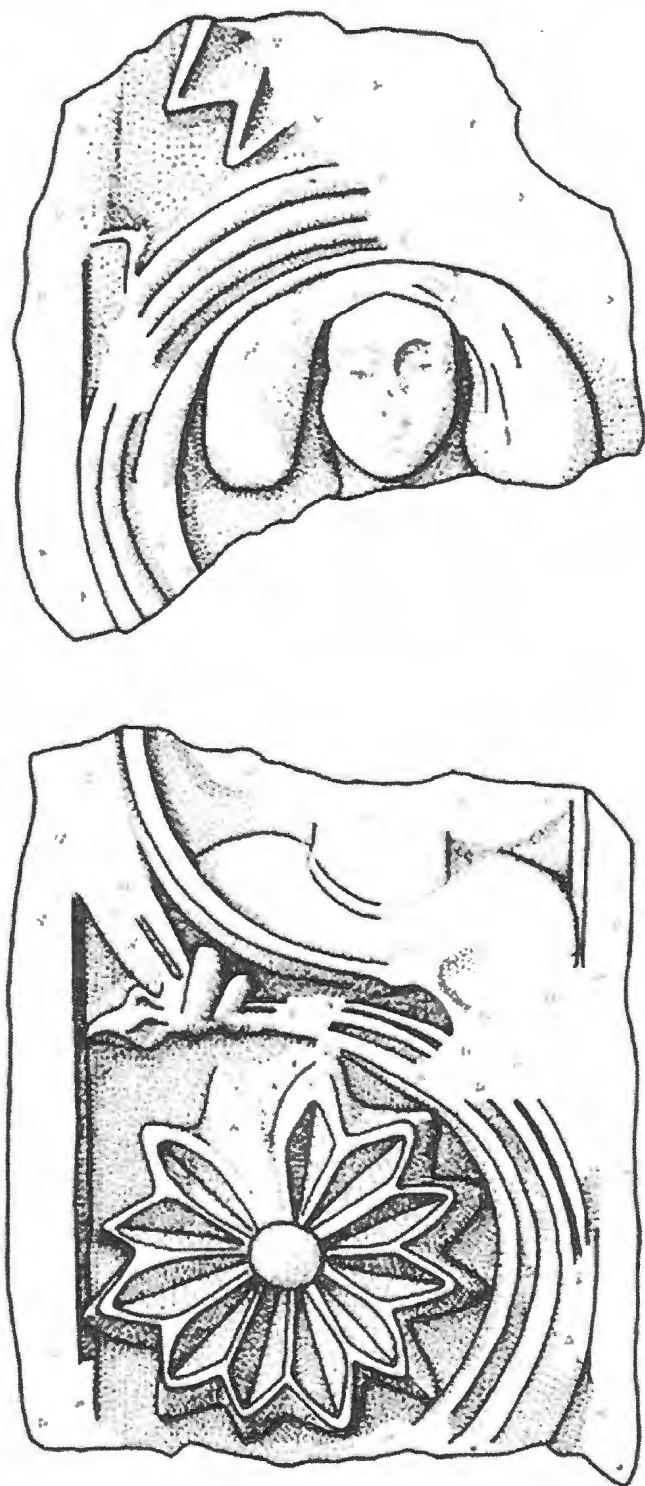
dancing. And written sources are unanimous in declaring that dancing frequently accompanied banquets and played an important role in the court life of the Achaemenids, Arsacids and Sasanians.[55] Depictions of dance seem quite popular in art of the Arsacid period. Among good examples are bone plaques discovered over one hundred years ago at Olbia in the Crimea, datable to the first to second centuries AD.[56] The object which they originally decorated cannot now be reconstructed. They show a ruler enthroned and accompanied by courtiers, nude female dancers and nude male acrobats. Other examples come from Mele Hairam and Merv (Marw), which yielded two bone plaques showing young male nudes[57] and a terracotta plaque depicting a female dancer, respectively.[58] While female nudes are traditionally identified with goddesses or specifically with Anahita in an Iranian context, nudity itself does not necessarily allude to divinity; this is suggested by another bone object from Mele Hairam which seems to denote nothing but human youth. The object is decorated with a bearded man, a woman clad in a long robe, a beardless man (therefore presumably in his youth), and a young female nude (Figure 12.9). Of course, as far as the Qaleh-i Yazdigird scene is concerned, it is possible, because of the presence of Pan, that the female nude might actually be a maenad.

The presence of personages usually linked to the Dionysiac sphere next to "Parthians" at Qaleh-i Yazdigird shows how Dionysian iconography from the Greco-Roman world was reinvented in the Parthian idiom. This phenomenon is also manifested in another, though perhaps less spectacular way in the Qaleh-i Yazdigird decoration when a Dionysian motif and a traditional Near Eastern symbol of power and authority are combined to form a single decorative motif: a footed kantharos (wine vessel), an attribute of Dionysus, between merlons.[59] In Near Eastern architecture before the Achaemenids, a merlon, that is an element used in fortified structures, served a primarily military purpose and, when used in sacral buildings, denoted power, governance and prestige. But already in the architecture and art of the Achaemenids, merlons lost their defensive role in favour of decorative purposes, while probably continuing to convey their symbolic meaning. This was also the purpose of the terracotta merlons from Old Nisa.

Because of fundamental differences between Zoroastrianism and the cult of Dionysus, it seems quite impossible that Dionysian scenes or elements kept their original religious meaning in residential decorations of the late Arsacid period, when Zoroastrianism was already well established within Iranian society. However, certain general messages underlying the Dionysian iconography might have not been rejected or forgotten. For example, Erotes could be deemed never-aging children, or images of perfect youth, or the grapevine could be construed as a symbol of fertility, plenitude and abundance. It seems that Dionysian scenes and attributes present in the decorations
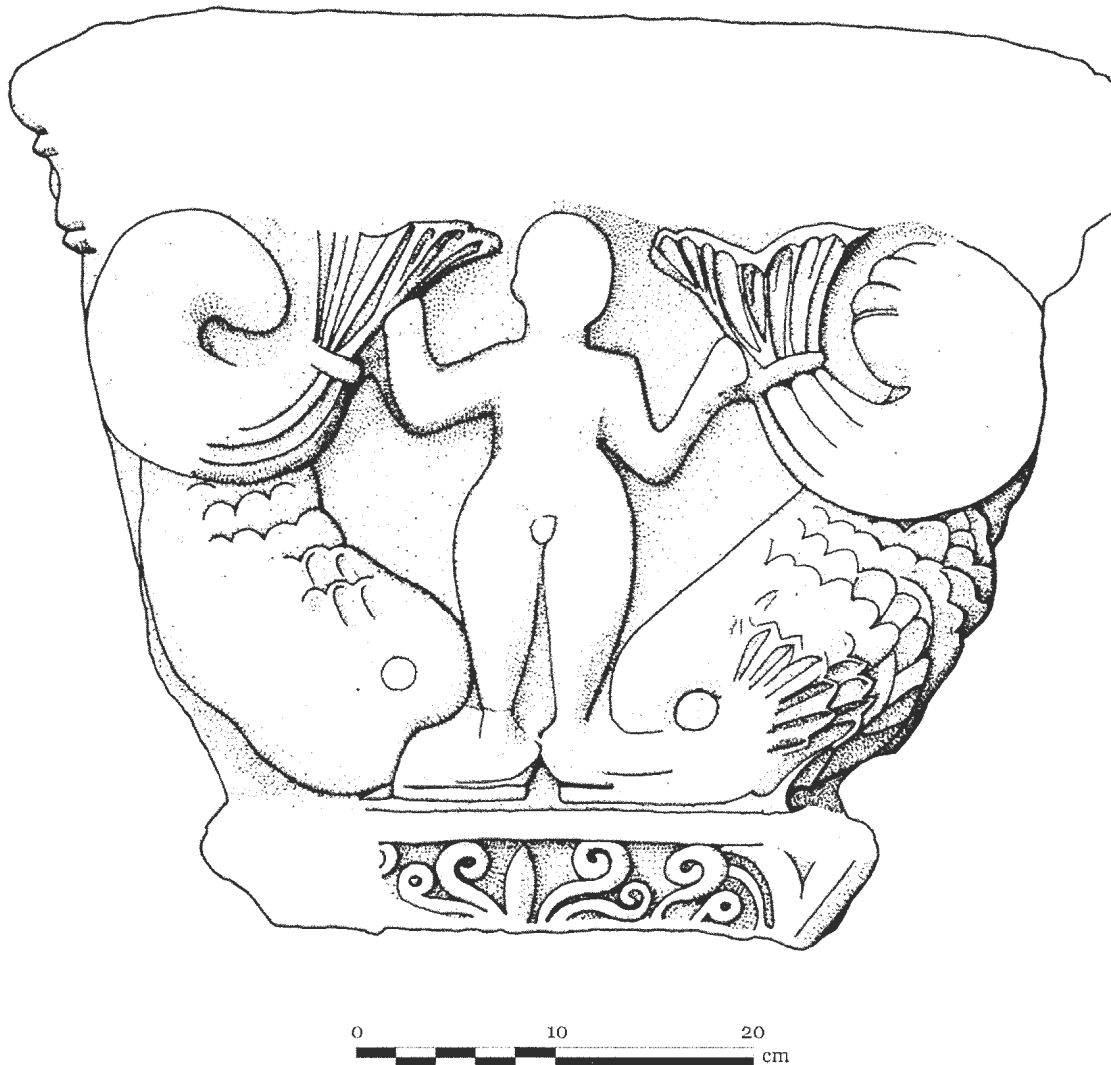
Figure 12.4: Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Male portrait in vine scroll (after Keall 1980).

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                                              cm

Figure 12.5: Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Nude (female?) figure holding two dolphins by their tails (after Keall 1980).

of Qaleh-i Yazdigird were intended to reflect a banquet, its light-hearted atmosphere and pleasures beefed up with wine and dance, thus alluding at the same time to the prosperity and wealth of the castle's owner.

To understand how and why Dionysian scenes were so favoured at the Arsacid court, it is necessary to refer to Hellenistic royal ideology, which largely drew on the myth of Dionysus's conquests in the East. As argued by Versnel, Dionysus became a model for Hellenistic kings, since he defeated mortal adversaries rather than supernatural opponents and conquered real territory.[60] His mythical achievements made him, like Heracles, a royal god. Alexander the Great regarded Dionysus as his heroic-divine predecessor for the conquest of the East,[61] while some Hellenistic kings openly identified themselves with Dionysus.[62]

In the Hellenistic period, a diadem was a symbol of Dionysus. Mithradates I, who ceased to wear a traditional

bashlyk in favour of a diadem after his conquest of Media and Mesopotamia, a shift clearly seen on coins minted before and after the campaign, seems to draw on this very aspect of Dionysus as a victorious god. The iconography of coins issued by successors of Mithradates I proves that the diadem was not the only sign that the Arsacids adopted some elements of Hellenistic ideology. This should not, however, be understood to mean that the Near Eastern tradition and Iranian elements of royal ideology were completely abandoned by the Arsacids. Just the opposite: traditional customs were particularly valued by Parthian nobles, who deemed tradition a valid basis for political and cultural identity.[63] After all, the concept of a victorious king was deeply rooted in Iranian ideology. Nevertheless, confronted with powerful neighbours both to the east and west, the Arsacids adopted elements of the Hellenistic tradition, thus putting themselves on the same plane as their neighbours. In the course of time, the Zoroastrian religion and Iranian
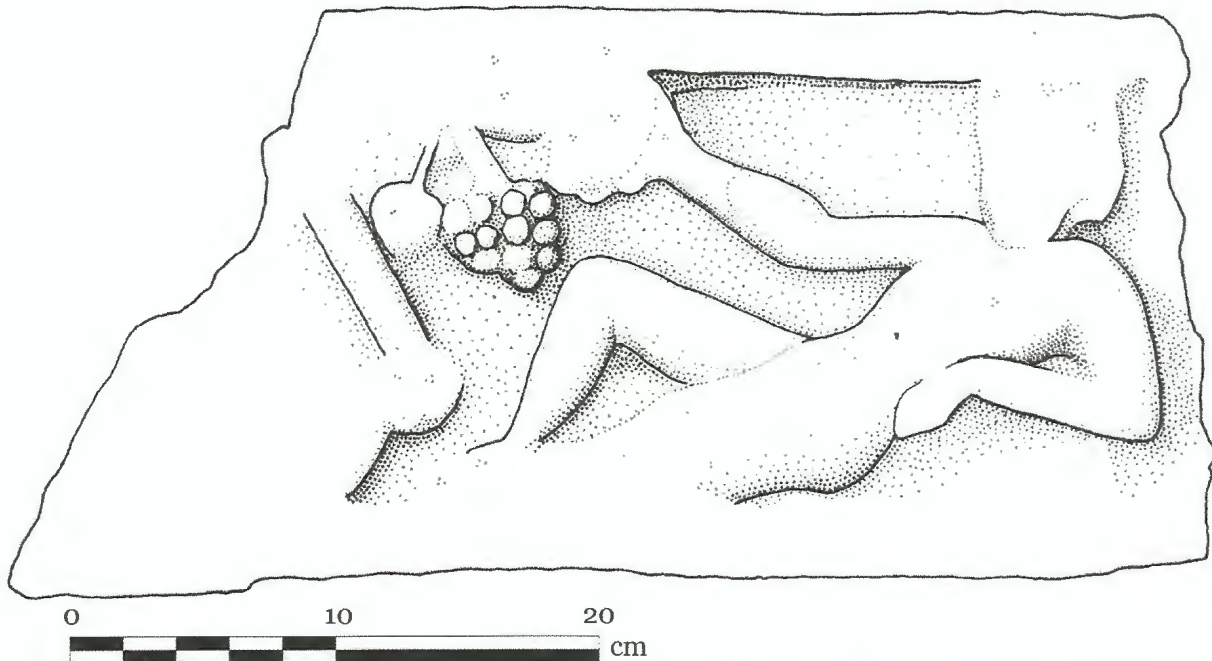
Figure 12.6: Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Reclining nude male reaching for a bunch of grapes from vine (after Keall 1980).
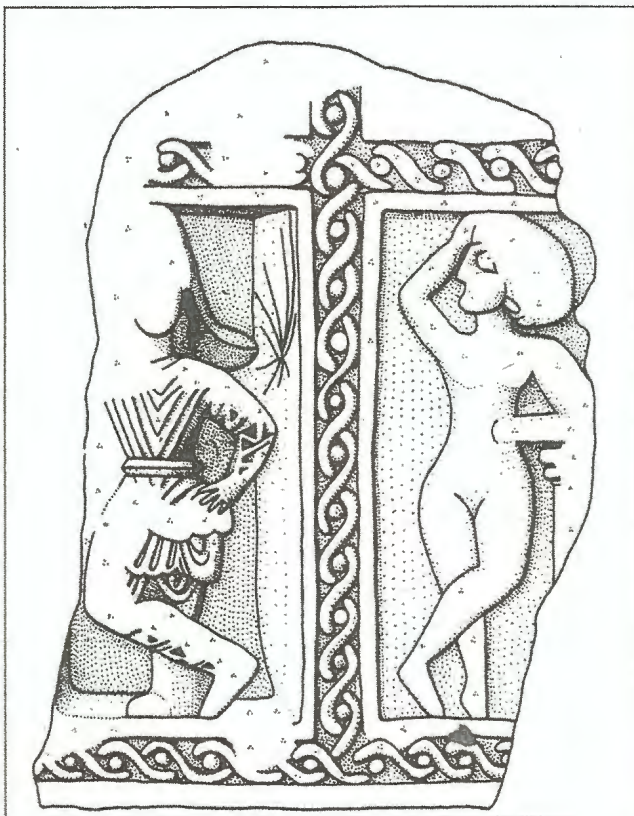

Figure 12.7: Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Fragment of engaged half-column: a) after Keall 1980; b) courtesy of the National Museum of Iran, Tehran.

tradition began to prevail. The latter particularly appreciated hunting and banqueting, which explains why the decoration of Late Arsacid Qaleh-i Yazdigird accommodates so many elements of Dionysian iconography with its wine, joy and revelry, so appropriate to the atmosphere of the banquet.

As no Arsacid royal palace has survived or been discovered to date, we must rely solely on our assumptions or suppositions that their decorations included royal hunting and banqueting scenes, the latter incorporating some Dionysian elements. The suggestion concerning the
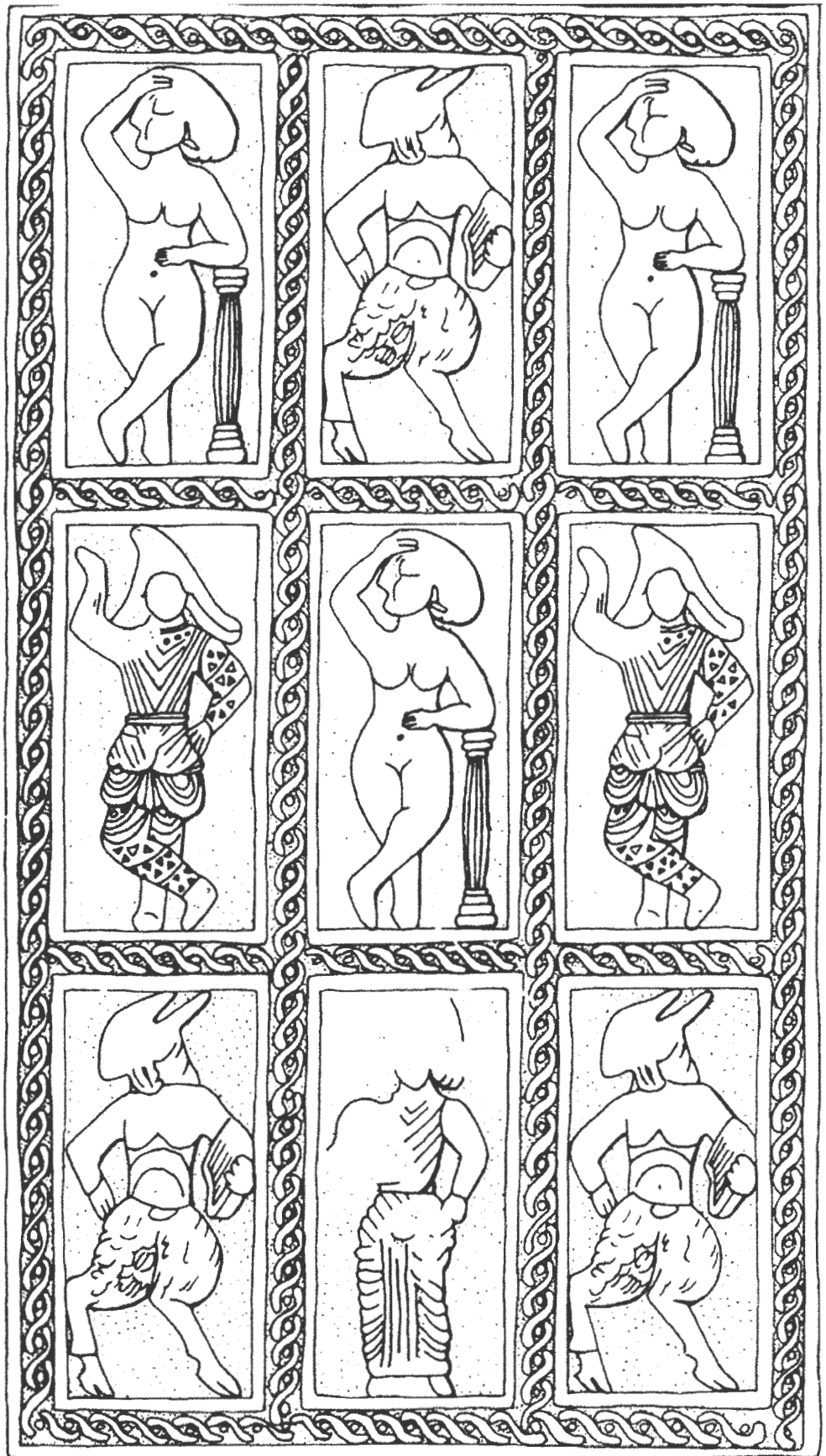
Figure 12.8: Qaleh-i Yazdigird. Reconstruction of the decoration of engaged half-column (after Keall 1980).

Figure 12.9: Mele Hairam. Bone hilt decorated with images of a bearded man, a woman wearing a long robe, a beardless man and a nude female.

Figure 12.10: Bishapur. Dionysiac heads (after Ghirshman 1956).

inclusion of a Dionysian component is further strengthened by the fact that motifs for the floor mosaics in two rooms at Bishapur included masks of satyrs, Silenos, Pan and maenads (Figure 12.10) beside half-naked female musicians, dancers and flower bearers (Figure 12.11).

Ghirshman, who first excavated Bishapur, was sure that he had unearthed a sector of a palace of Shapur I, with

mosaic rooms serving banqueting purposes.[64] For Lukonin, however, the mosaics echoed Zoroastrian feasts, including specifically Nowruz, that were celebrated in the royal palace.[65] Von Gall, emphasising the Dionysian nature of the mosaic images, argued that they relate to Dionysus as a god of victory and linked them with the triumphal reliefs of Shapur I in the nearby gorge. Such an interpretation

Figure 12.11: Bishapur. Woman playing the harp (after Ghirshman 1956).

was rejected by Balty, who claims that all surviving scenes show a royal banquet.[66] Recently a new interpretation for the mosaics and a new purpose for the mosaic rooms have been proposed.[67] Drawing on Azarnoush's identification of the entire complex as a fire temple, Callieri views the mosaic rooms as a space for the Zoroastrian community to gather for a common ritual meal that included wine. In his attempt to explain the presence of Dionysian motifs in a Zoroastrian fire temple, Callieri concludes that they were picked for their eschatological connotations. As there is no mention in Zoroastrian religious texts of any ritual banquets, their existence here is explained as evidence that common religious practice departed from orthodoxy. However, such a departure appears to us hardly possible, given that the Bishapur complex was almost undoubtedly a royal foundation.

As far as the eschatological dimension of the mosaic motifs is concerned, the Greco-Roman world did indeed use Dionysian iconography in funeral contexts, which saw Dionysus as a lord of death, rebirth and eternal renewal. However, the concept of birth, death, the journey into the underworld and rebirth is foreign to Zoroastrianism. And Zoroastrian meals dedicated to the souls of the departed did not necessarily take place in temples,[68] although it is possible that some ritual community meals were consumed there.[69]

Attention should also be drawn to the fact that Azarnoush's identification of a large cruciform hall at Bishapur as the main room of a fire temple is based on alleged similarities between ground plans of the hall and room no. 104 in the Sasanian residential building at Hajiabad. Azarnoush identified this room at Hajiabad as a temple of Anahita.[70] However, the asserted similarities are in fact superficial: the hall at Bishapur is a *chahar taq*, while the asymmetrical rectangular room at Hajiabad shares common features with another room of the same complex (room no. 175) rather than with the *chahar taq*. Moreover, if it is accepted that the faithful did not have access to the main room of fire temples, the enormous size of the cruciform room at Bishapur (22.75 m x 22.75 m) seems excessive even for a royal foundation (Room A at Takht-e Sulaiman is not larger than 7.65 m x 7.65 m.).[71] First and foremost, however, neither Bishapur nor Hajiabad has yielded any decisive evidence proving the functions of the rooms that are being compared.

Although Muslim authors assure us of the existence of a fire temple at Bishapur, their reports are rather laconic. Al-Mas'ūdī mentions that the city of Sabur (Bishapur) in the province of Fars has a temple founded by Dara, son of Dara.[72] However, the immediately following sentences leave it unclear whether the temple was actually located within the limits of the town of Bishapur. This is because of a certain

lack of precision about location in al-Mas'ūdī's writing: while reporting about Firuzabad, he mentions a fire temple in the town, founded by Ardashir, son of Babak (Papak), which he had visited, and which was located one-hour's distance from the town.[73] So if al-Mas'ūdī mentions a structure as being in a town, it is likely he means merely in its vicinity. As far as Bishapur is concerned, the location of the temple outside the town seems to be confirmed by Istahri, Ibn Hauqal, Idrīsī and the anonymous author of *Hudud al-Alam*, who mention two temples, both located near the gates of Bishapur.[74]

Given all these concerns, it is more likely that the structure at Bishapur is a royal palace rather than a temple. If this is indeed the case, the mosaics may be viewed as evidence for the continuation of the tradition of using Dionysian motifs which, in addition to depictions of female musicians and dancers, seem suitable for reflecting the atmosphere of court banquets.

Written sources prove that the pomp, opulence and ceremony of the Sasanian court dazzled the king's subjects and foreign élites. Surrounded by their courts, the members of which are known from royal inscriptions and late or post-Sasanian texts,[75] Sasanian kings travelled between their imperial centres together with their closest family, that is royal consorts, numerous concubines and their offspring. The family and the harem also accompanied the king on war campaigns, sometimes becoming the booty of his enemies.[76] Traditionally, audiences (rather poorly documented for the Arsacid period), banquets and hunts, all reflected in Sasanian literature and art, continued to constitute an important element of court life.[77] Just as in the Arsacid period, royal guests participated in banquets, which, in addition to the pleasures of the table, offered an opportunity to discuss state affairs. Guests were seated according to protocol in a strict hierarchy[78] that symbolically reflected the king's control over the empire. The king himself reclined on the cushions of a banqueting couch[79] large enough to share with an important guest.[80] Royal banquets were organised for various significant occasions, including annual religious feasts.[81]

The presence of female musicians and dancers among mosaic depictions at Bishapur suggests that music and dance were an indispensable part of royal banquets. This is further confirmed by written sources which point to banquets taking place not only in palace rooms but also in royal gardens.[82] It is beyond any doubt that, on the one hand, banquets constituted a royal prerogative, involving the consumption of sophisticated meals and top quality wine,[83] watching female dancers and listening to music and songs. It is also beyond any doubt, however, that on the other hand, with their clear hierarchy of seats, banquets built an image of the king as the central figure within his empire.

The decoration of some rooms at Bishapur also included stone and stucco reliefs which, unfortunately, have not survived to the extent necessary for a complete reconstruction of their scenes. Nevertheless, given the fact the Iranian epic tradition couples royal banquets with hunts to form a symbiotic pair, it is plausible that the fragment of the stone relief from the Eastern Mosaic Hall, which shows a charging horseman, used to be part of a hunting scene. Since Ammianus Marcellinus mentions Persian houses as being richly decorated with scenes representing a king hunting game,[84] it seems reasonable to assume the presence of such scenes in a royal palace, the more so as fragments of hunting reliefs were identified at Ctesiphon.[85]

To sum up, the decoration of both the Arsacid noble residential structure at Qaleh-i Yazdigird and the royal palace at Bishapur does reflect the pleasures of court life: hunts and banquets. Although banquets played an essential role in the court life of ancient Iranian monarchies, they are, however, rarely depicted in art. This is a contrast to the many written sources that describe the wealth and splendour of royal banquets, with their strict rules of protocol and hierarchy.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this overview of architectural decoration in the Arsacid and early Sasanian periods:

1. There is a clear discrepancy between the programme of interior decoration of palaces and the official art of rock reliefs and coinage as far as decorative themes are concerned, with the former abstaining from scenes of a religious or military nature. Because a similar trend is seen in Achaemenid art, this discrepancy can be deemed a specific element of the Iranian tradition.
2. Elements of Greco-Roman Dionysian iconography that were adopted by the Arsacids survived until Sasanian times, gradually losing their prevalence, as proved by the decoration of the Sasanian manor house at Hajiabad.[86] The house's wall decoration still displays some elements rooted in the Hellenistic world: figures of a nude child with a bunch of grapes in each hand, medallion portraits and portrait busts, among which Azarnoush managed to identify two portraits of the Sasanian king Shapur II, a bust of Shapur II's son Ardashir, and a bust of Shapur II's vassal, Bahram II Kushanshah. Several other busts represent unidentifiable figures from the Sasanian nobility, all of them "most distinguished personalities of the empire".[87] Portrait busts were also used, in addition to depictions of female dancers and musicians, to decorate late Sasanian residential houses at Kish and in the vicinity of Ctesiphon.[88] Having no religious content, these motifs were taken over by early Muslim rulers to accentuate their royal power and prerogatives.

Notes

1   A rather different picture of traditional court life is given by Ferdowsi in the *Shahnameh* where sumptuous banquets and light-hearted revels are, however, interlaced with episodes of battle and heroism.

2   See Jacobs 2010, p. 87–88.
3   Pliny, *N.H.,* 6.122; Strabo, 16.1.16; Josephus, *Ant. Iud.,* 18.48–50; Amm. Marc., 23.6.23.
4   For Ecbatana see Polyb., 10, 27; Strabo 11.13.1, 16.1.16; Curtius Rufus, 5.8.1; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.3; for Rhagae – Athenaios, 12.513f–14a; for Hecatompylus, see Strabo, 16.1.16.
5   Invernizzi 2001, p. 147; Invernizzi 2001a; Lippolis 2009, p. 54; Lippolis 2010; Pilipko 2007, p. 156.
6   Lippolis 2009, p. 57–59.
7   Invernizzi 2000.
8   Chaumont 1966, p. 471–497.
9   Invernizzi 2001a, p. 301, argues that this might have occurred during the reign of Artabanus III in the first century AD.
10 Manassero 2012.
11 Invernizzi 2001, p. 147.
12 Invernizzi 2001, p. 141–147; 2001a, p. 308–309; 2004.
13 Invernizzi 2001, p. 147–148.
14 Invernizzi 2001a, p. 303; Pilipko 2001, p. 197–198.
15 Pilipko 2000, pl. I:2.
16 See Pilipko 2001, p. 339–352; Pilipko 2007, p. 256.
17 Dąbrowa 2008; Dąbrowa 2011, p. 258.
18 Curtis 2007, p. 62.
19 Fredricksmeyer 1997.
20 Neusner 1963, p. 45–48; Wolski 1990; Wolski 1977, p. 210; Vardanyan 2001; Curtis 2007.
21 Gaslain 2003; Huber, Hartmann 2006; Brossius 2006, p. 106–110; Lerouge 2007, p. 340–341, 344; Dąbrowa 2010, p. 126.
22 Bigwood 2004; Bigwood 2008; Strugnell 2008.
23 Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.43,1.
24 Vonones II and his Greek *concubine* had five sons who held the thrones of *Parthia* and Armenia: see Karras-Klapproth 1988, p. 95–96.
25 Minns 1915, p. 28, 31, 35; Bigwood 2008.
26 Bigwood 2004, p. 44–45; Bigwood 2008.
27 Huber, Hartman 2006: p. 486–487; Bigwood 2008.
28 Dio Cassius, 83.1.2.
29 Josephus, *Ant.Iud.* 20, 26; Gregoratti 2012.
30 Shayegan 2011, p. 113.
31 Alram 1986, nos. 1269 and 1269A.
32 There are also stories of warrior women and heroines such as Gurdafarid, Gurdya and Jarira in Firdausi's *Shahnameh* that give us a picture consistent with ancient Iranian tradition.
33 Pilipko 2001, p. 257, 278.
34 Deams 2001, p. 49–50.
35 Kawami 1987, pl. 45.
36 Kawami 1987a, p. 43.
37 Keall, 1977; 1980; Herrmann 1977, p. 67–72.
38 Keall 1977, p. 5.
39 Keall 1980, fig. 6, 3.
40 Keall 1980, fig. 6, 2.
41 Keall 1980, figs 7, 7–8.
42 Keall 1980, figs 7, 2 and 5.
43 Winkes 1979, p. 481–484.
44 Chapouthier 1935, p. 13–42; Erciyas 2005, p. 134–146.
45 Fejfer 2008, p. 233–235.

46 Rostovtzeff 1936, p. 265–308, pls X–XI.
47 Pollard 2000, p. 55.
48 Keall 1980, fig. 7, 6.
49 Toynbee, Ward-Perkins 1950, p. 1–2, 25.
50 Mercklin 1962, p. 30–33, abb. 152, 91–96.
51 Webb 1996, p. 18.
52 Keall 1980, fig. 12.
53 Keall 1980, fig. 12, 1–2.
54 Keall 1980, fig. 9, la and b; fig. 8, 3; fig. 8, 4, fig. 10, 3; fig. 10, 6; fig. 10, 7.
55 Shahbazi, Friend 1993.
56 Pharmakovsky 1907.
57 Kaim 2010, p. 324, pl. 2.
58 Pugachenkova 1962, p. 123, fig.3.
59 Keall 1980, fig. 10, 1, 2 and 4.
60 Versnel 1970, p. 250–253.
61 Alföldi 1985, p. 125.
62 Tondriau 1953.
63 Lerouge 2007, p. 359; see also Curtis 2007, p. 7–25 for a revival of Iranian traditions in post-Hellenistic Iran.
64 Ghirshman 1956, p. 179.
65 Lukonin 1967, p. 183.
66 Von Gall 1971; Balty 2006, p. 29–44.
67 Callieri 2008; 2009, p. 53–55. This new interpretation was accepted by D. Huff 1993, p. 54, but L. Bier 1993, p. 58, and R. Boucharat 2006, p. 48 seem to remain undecided.
68 See e.g. Boyce 1996; Dhabhar 1932, p. 397.
69 Hultgård 2004, p. 381.
70 Azarnoush 1987; 1994, p. 81–88.
71 The size of the main room in smaller temples discovered recently in Iran does not exceed 5 × 5 m: see Moradi 2009.
72 *Les prairies d'or*, p. 78.
73 al-Mas'ūdī clearly mistook the palace of Ardashir, which lies about 5 km from the city of Ardashir Xwarrah, for a fire temple.
74 See Schippmann 1971, p. 142–143.
75 Wiesehöfer 2007, p. 61–63.
76 Narseh's family was captured by Galerius (Christensen 1936, p. 233) and the harem of Peroz by the Hephthalites (Tabari, I: 877).
77 Daryaee 2009, p. 50–52.
78 *Letter of Tansar*: 44; T. Daryaee 2007.
79 Harper 1979; for reasons of propaganda, the king depicted on Sasanian silver vessels does not lean back on the cushions of his banqueting couch but sits upright in an enthroned pose.
80 Garsoïan 1989, p. 146, 515; 2004.
81 About Khusrau Anushiravan celebrating six Gahambars, see Dhabhar 1932, p. 325.
82 For a Parthian banquet in a garden, see Wardrop 1914, p. 4–5.
83 For different types of wine see *Husraw ud Rēdak* 56–58, trans. Monchi-Zadeh, 75; Daryaee 2006; Daryaee 2009, p. 51.
84 Amm. Marc., 24.6.3.
85 Kröger 1982, p. 22–30, pls. 4–6.
86 Azarnoush 1994, p. 93–182.
87 Azarnoush 1994, p. 238.
88 Kröger 1982, pl. 28.

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