

Name: Yungfong TANG (aka Frank TANG)

Class: ARTS 2A, Winter 2023, De Anza College

Due Date: Mar 6, 2023

Title: Hunting without Arrows- The Royal Hunt of Shapur II in Silver Plate

Artwork: Shapur Plate, Iran, Sasanian period, Reign of Shapur II, 4th Century, Silver and gilt,
National Museum of Asian Art - Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC

Dimension: H x Diam: 5 x 24 cm (1 15/16 x 9 7/16 in).

Date of Visit: October 12, 2022

I saw this “Plate, Iran, Sasanian period, Reign of Shapur II, 4th Century, Silver and gilt” with a red description sign titled “The Royal Hunt” in the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington DC (Fig 1-3). It depicts the Sasanian King Shapur II hunting boars. It is a finest Sasanian imperial art¹. Four lives, the king, his horse and two boars, balanced fill the plate. It is one of the earliest Sasanian artistic renditions of a king hunting².

The scene is full of action and tension to emphasize the King’s ability to control over mayhem and disturbance and renders the message that “The king is the personification of order over chaos; he subdues the wild environment with his strength.”³ The royal hunt was a typical theme in the Sasanian court art with a total of thirty plates known today⁴. It was created not for food serving but display, as gifts to adjoining vassal courts⁵. Because the Sasanian imperial held silver monopolization, only the royal authority could commission it. This piece is well preserved without damage.

¹ See Fig 3.

² See Fig 3.

³ By an anonymous female museum curator of the ancient Near East, Antonietta Catanzariti, quoted by Paul Rutherford in Rutherford, Paul. “Zooming in on the Shapur Plate.” *Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art*, 2 Sept. 2020, asia.si.edu/zooming-in-on-the-shapur-plate/.

⁴ See Fig 3.

⁵ “Plate: The King Yazdgard I, Slaying a Stag: Sasanian: Sasanian.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/326007.

King Shapur II is identified by his idiosyncratic crown. He ruled 71 years from 309 to 379 CE⁶ as the longest-reigning monarch of the Sasanian dynasty⁷. Shapur II was the son of Hurmuz II⁸ who died several months before Shapur was born. Persian nobles crowned him by placing the crown on his mother's belly and made him the only king crowned in utero.⁹ Shapur therefore reigned a few months longer than his life¹⁰ and was known as Shapur the Great¹¹. Shapur engaged in numerous warfare. He counterattacked Arab invaders and drove them out to the Arabian interior. He built Wall Arabs to prevent invasion. He attempted to capture Nisibis thrice but failed. He defeated Kidro-Chionite invaders and later captured many towns through siege operations. He stopped Constantius II to re-capture Bezabde and forced him back to Antioch. Emperor Julian invaded Sassanian then was killed. Shapur II negotiated with his successor Emperor Jovian to reach a peace treaty. That treaty gave Shapur II the control of Nisibis and fortresses located in Roman Mesopotamia, Armenia and Georgia.¹²

His crown is easily distinguishable¹³. His crown, right dropping flap, and right forearm were made in high relief to create a three dimensional effect (Left on Fig 7). Shapur II is in a three-quarter view facing right. His facial hair is thick and stylized, suggesting an image of a mature king. His eyes are stylized and focusing on prey. His mouth is confident and calm. He

⁶ Farrokh, Kaveh. *The Armies of Ancient Persia: The Sassanians*. Pen and Sword, 2014.

⁷ Kia, Mehrdad. *The Persian Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia [2 volumes]: A Historical Encyclopedia*. ABC-CLIO, 2016. 278.

⁸ Beale, Thomas William. *The oriental biographical dictionary*. Periodicals Service Company, 1881. 377.

⁹ Crawford, Peter. *Constantius II: usurpers, eunuchs and the Antichrist*. Pen and Sword, 2016.

¹⁰ Beale, Thomas William. *The oriental biographical dictionary*. Periodicals Service Company, 1881. 377.

¹¹ Tucker, Spencer C., ed. *Middle East Conflicts from Ancient Egypt to the 21st Century: An Encyclopedia and Document Collection [4 volumes]*. ABC-CLIO, 2019. 1156.

¹² Farrokh, Kaveh. *The Armies of Ancient Persia: The Sassanians*. Pen and Sword, 2014.

¹³ Persian historians have very clear description about the crown wore by Shapur II:

"Shapur I... wears a crown with four large notches on the sides, front and back. This crown also bears a larger version of ... globe or sphere-like objects. There are also two dropping flaps that cover the king's ears. ... The crowns of Shapur II ... are like ... [the one] worn by Shapur I ... with only a few minor changes. The notches of Shapur II's crown are more pronounced and seem to tip outwards. On the rim of the crown under the notches, we see a number of hooked gold decorations that seem to twirl forward. The sphere sits between the three front and side notches." (Ayatollahi, Habibullah, and Ḥabīb Allāh Āyat Allāhī. *The book of Iran: The history of Iranian art*. Alhoda UK, 2003. pp.155-56)

wore a big earring. The sphere on top of his crown is big. His detailed head is similar to the profile view found on his silver coin¹⁴ (Right on Fig 7). The artist uses gold to render his crown and cloth but silver for his face and hands.

His hands show a realistic hunting action. His left hand holds the bow and left index finger aims at his prey. His right index finger and pinky brilliantly reveal the motion of bowstring pulling. The bow is full of tension. The artist did not render the bowstring nor any arrows he possessed. A large empty quiver with curly decoration is on his right side below his hip without any arrows. Other Royal Hunt plates (Fig 4 - 6) also show an empty quiver on the king. It is unclear why the quiver is empty, bowstring and arrows are lacking. Could this carry a symbolic meaning? Carved lines depict the decoration on his cloth. The pattern on his stomach cover and the trousers renders the Zoroastrianism fire¹⁵. Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the Persian empire starting 539 BCE until the arrival of Islam around 600 CE. His trousers drapery exaggerate the beauty of the fire.

The artist depicted the charging steed by rendering its two rear legs touching the ground with a leaping pose. The front right leg is in high relief and casts shadow over the boar. Hocks, knees, and fetlocks are marked by circles. Pastern and hoof are highly detailed and accurate. Mane is stylized. The tail is knotted up as a bowtie. Persians do not cut the tail of their horses¹⁶. They tied them up to ameliorate appearance and to avoid dirt sprawling or filthy sweeping. Shell shape plates are attached to the breast collar and the breeching. One fire shaped pom pom on top of the head and two attached to the crupper. Carved square patterns decorate the rectangle saddle blanket. Detail lines are clearly hammered on the head piece, the cheek piece, the strap junctions,

¹⁴ “Drachme (Silbermünze) - Recherche: Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin.” *Recherche*, recherche.smb.museum/detail/1525579.

¹⁵ Adams, Scott. *The Story of World Religions*. The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc, 2011.14-15.

¹⁶ Gordon, Thomas Edward. *Persia Revisited* (1895). E. Arnold, 1896. 154.

the throatlash, and the girths. The eye stares at the wild boar, mimicking the unruffled facial expression of its master. The details of the horse suggest the artist pay extra attention to the anatomy and harness of the horse.

Two wild boars are illustrated in similar size and artistic style. The right boar is still alive, hinted by its leaping legs, terror looking eyes, and jumping pose. The lower boar is dead, suggested by its body position below the horse, and the shaft of an arrow pierced into its right front haunch¹⁷ (Fig 8). All their joints were clearly marked with circles. Their pointed ears, curved canines, and big noses are rendered in high relief and distinctly realistic. Both horse and two boars are in profile view. The artist overemphasized its muscle on the cheek, the neck, the hips, and legs. Four different hammered patterns render its fur: long lines, dots, short strokes, and mostly a larger trident pattern. The composition of the fur pattern skillfully illustrates the muscle structure of the boars.

The artist soldered nineteen different pieces¹⁸ of silver together to form this plate. High reliefs of the crown and the beard are likely the work of granulation. The artist gilded gold on the area of the crown, the cloth, the horse, and most part of the boars but left the background, the face and hands of the King as silver. Hammered lines draw the decorating patterns on the cloth, furs on the boars, details of the horse, and the flying scarfs.

For comparison, we found two other Sasanian Royal Hunt plates from The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Fig 4 and 5 shows a plate of Shapur II hunting four rams, two male and two female. The body gesture of the king and his steed is similar to the boars plate. The artist neither renders the bowstring and the arrows. But in this plate, the artist lightly depicted an arrowhead above his left thumb. Joints on animals are also clearly marked. Body of the ram is in high relief

¹⁷ Ruther, Paul. "Zooming in on the Shapur Plate." *Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art*, 2 Sept. 2020, asia.si.edu/zooming-in-on-the-shapur-plate/.

¹⁸ See Fig 3.

but the legs are by hammered lines. The transition between them is badly finished and looks unnatural. Hammered lines illustrate an arrow pierced into the body of the left female ram. The chest of the right female ram appears a wound. The overall quality is worse than the boars hunting plate. Fig 6 shows another ram hunting by a different king. All four rams are male. Based on the crown, the king is identified as either Peroz (r. 459–484) or Kavad I (r. 488–497, 499–531). The aiming arrowhead is shown. The artist rendered the tensed bowstring by a lightly hammered line in this plate.

Compared against *King Ashurnasirpal II hunting lions* (Fig 9) (ca. 865-860 BCE) which was made more than 1,000 years prior in Assyrian, the two works show two different kinds of kingship. *King Ashurnasirpal II hunting lions* is a gypsum wall relief with a huge size. Both show the king against wild beasts riding with leaping horses jumping over a wounded prey. Both show the kings aiming their prey with a tensed bow: Shapur II aiming forward but Ashurnasirpal II aiming back. The Shapur II plate emphasized his individual courage and his emotional quality to control over the chaos. The Ashurnasirpal II relief focuses on his military leadership. Shapur II is fighting boars by himself on his steed. Ashurnasirpal II is on his three-horses chariot with his well-trained troop. The Shapur II plate downplayed the weapon in the art but the Ashurnasirpal II relief shows many arrows on the lions and the arrow the king is holding. The arts communicate that Ashurnasirpal II is leading a strong military force, and Shapur II has the quality to lead any.

Shapur Plate is one of the finest Royal Hunt plates by the Sasanian Persian emperor in the fourth century CE. The artist de-emphasized the weaponry of the King but focused on the inner calmness of the king through his facial expression and body gesture, his horse riding skill and his courage of fighting the wild boars himself. The artist pays extra attention to the anatomy

of the animals and carefully depict all the details. It is a fine art to appreciate the ancient Persian culture and history.

Bibliography

Adams, Scott. *The Story of World Religions*. The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc, 2011.

Ayatollahi, Habibollah, and Ḥabīb Allāh Āyat Allāhī. *The book of Iran: The history of Iranian art*. Alhoda UK, 2003.

Beale, Thomas William. *The oriental biographical dictionary*. Periodicals Service Company, 1881.

Crawford, Peter. *Constantius II: usurpers, eunuchs and the Antichrist*. Pen and Sword, 2016.

“Drachme (Silbermünze) - Recherche: Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin.” *Recherche*, recherche.smb.museum/detail/1525579.

Gordon, Thomas Edward. *Persia Revisited* (1895). E. Arnold, 1896.

Farrokh, Kaveh. *The Armies of Ancient Persia: The Sassanians*. Pen and Sword, 2014.

Kia, Mehrdad. *The Persian Empire: A Historical Encyclopedia [2 volumes]: A Historical Encyclopedia*. ABC-CLIO, 2016.

MeisterDrucke. “Bowl, Iran, Sasanian Period, 4th-5th Century (Silver and Gilt).” *MeisterDrucke*, www.meisterdrucke.uk/fine-art-prints/Persian-School/436853/Bowl,-Iran,-Sasanian-period,-4th-5th-century-(silver-and-gilt).html.

“Plate: British Museum.” *The British Museum*,
www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1908-1118-1.

“Plate: Sasanian: Sasanian.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*,
www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/324670.

“Plate: The King Yazdgard I, Slaying a Stag: Sasanian: Sasanian.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/326007.

“Plate with King Hunting Rams: Sasanian: Sasanian.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*,
www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322973.

Rutherford, Paul. “Zooming in on the Shapur Plate.” *Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art*, 2 Sept. 2020, asia.si.edu/zooming-in-on-the-shapur-plate.

“Shapur II - Google Arts & Culture.” *Google*, Google,
artsandculture.google.com/entity/m011kn_.

Tucker, Spencer C., ed. *Middle East Conflicts from Ancient Egypt to the 21st Century: An Encyclopedia and Document Collection [4 volumes]*. ABC-CLIO, 2019.

Illustration

Fig 1. Author visited the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington DC, October 12, 2022.

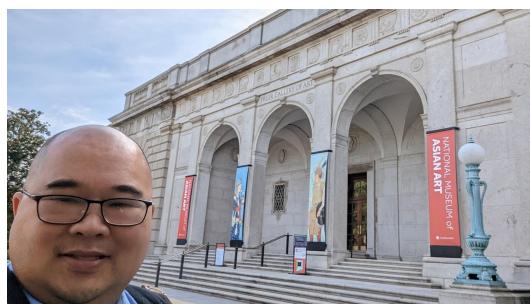


Fig 2. *Shapur Plate*, Iran, Sasanian period, Reign of Shapur II, 4th Century, Silver and gilt, National Museum of Asian Art in Washington DC. H x Diam: 5 x 24 cm (1 15/16 x 9 7/16 in).



Fig 3. Label and description about the work in National Museum of Asian Art, Washington DC.



Fig 4 & 5. *Plate* (ca. 310 - 379 CE), Sasanian culture, Iran, Silver, partly gilt. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. H x Diam: 4.8 × 23.2 cm (1.9 x 9.13 in).



Fig 6. *Plate with king hunting rams* (ca. mid-5th–mid-6th century CE), Sasanian culture, Iran, said to be from Qazvin, Silver, mercury gilding, niello inlay. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. H x Diam: 4.6 × 21.9 cm (1 7/8 x 8 5/8 in). The king is either Peroz (r. 459–484) or Kavad I (r. 488–497, 499–531)



Fig 7. Left: The zoom-in view of the details of the crown, the face, and the right hand of King Shapur II in this plate. **Right:** Drachm (Silver coin) (ca. 309 - 379 CE), Sasanian culture, Silver. Iran. *Museum für Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Deutschland.* Diam: 2.6 cm, Weight: 3.3g. Depicting head of King Shapur II.



Fig 8. The zoom-in view of the right front haunch of the lower wild boar shows the shaft of an arrow piercing its body, rendered by lightly carved lines.



Fig 9. King Ashurnasirpal II hunting lions, Gypsum wall relief, Neo-Assyrian Period, reign of Ashurnasirpal II, 865-860 BCE. Panel 19 of Room B (Throne Room) at the North-West Palace, Nimrud (Kalhu), Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq. The British Museum, London.

