CHAPTER 4

INTANGIBLE SPIRITS: IRANIAN ANICONISM

In studies dedicated to cultic iconography and aniconism in the Ancient Near East, the Iranian world is noticeable by its absence. Research has tended to focus exclusively on Mesopotamian, Israelite, Syrian, Anatolian, Aegean, Greek, Roman and Egyptian examples, while Iranian material remains outside of the general discussion. This situation has come about because the subject of aniconism has never been treated systematically by Iranists themselves.

In his influential book, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, T.D.N. Mettinger defines aniconism as “cults where there is no iconic representation of the deity (anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol ….” Furthermore, he makes an important distinction between what he calls “material aniconism” and “empty-space aniconism”—aniconic symbolism or sacred emptiness, respectively—both of which replace a figural representation of the deity. In a recent article, Mettinger has also observed that the distinction between iconic and aniconic refers only to material symbols, while “the mental notions of deity nurtured by the worshipers may well be anthropomorphic, even if the cult object is aniconic”. Examples of both “material aniconism” and “empty-space aniconism”, as defined by Mettinger, are undoubtedly found in the Iranian world together with examples that fall into the categories of “semi-aniconism” and “elemental aniconism”.

From the very beginning, the religious art of the Iranian people, in particular those of western Iran, has demonstrated significant aniconic trends, especially when compared with the evidence from some contemporary Near Eastern cultures. It is generally claimed that the roots of Iranian aniconism are evident in the earliest written sources describing Indo-Iranian cultic practices and religious rites. Indeed, the Avesta and the Rig Veda, the sacred scriptures of Zoroastrianism and Hinduism and our earliest literary sources on Indo-Iranian religion, make no mention of either idols or cultic statues; furthermore, they provide no detailed anthropomorphic descriptions of the deities of the Indo-Iranian pantheon. The aniconism of the Persians is also a well-known *topos* in Greek and Latin sources, which make up the major part of the available literary evidence.

1. *Material Aniconism*

The most famous manifestation of “material aniconism” among the Iranians is the worship of a warrior-god in the form of a sword thrust into the ground, as reported by Herodotus. Adoration of a sword among the Alans, who were the successors of the Scythians and the Sarmatians in the Pontic steppes, is described by Ammianus Marcellinus.

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1. Parts of this text have already appeared in Shenkar 2008/2012.
5. In Louis Gray’s words describing Avestan religion: “This Iranism was so primitive that like Vedism it had not even developed beyond the aniconic stage in the representation of its divinities”: Gray 1913/1914: 38.
6. See p. 16.
7. See p. 16
An akinakes dated to the fifth century BCE, found thrust into the artificial fill between two kurgans at Nosaki in modern day Ukraine, has been interpreted as the sanctuary and idol of Ares as described by Herodotus. Finds of weapons (spears, axes, daggers and swords) thrust into the ground are also attested in a number of Scythian burial sites. The unique stele excavated at the Scythian settlement of Ust’ Al’minsk in Crimea might be further evidence for this cult in the material culture. The stele, dated to the second century CE, is approximately three m. high and bears an image of a sword (fig. 182). It is possible that this is the same non-figural representation of the Scythian god of war that is mentioned in the writings of classical authors.

In the context of “material aniconism”, we might also mention the sole piece of evidence for the worship of standing stones or maṣṣebot in Elymais—a region closely related to Iran throughout history. A relief carved on stone at Tang-i Sarvak and probably dated to the beginning of the third century CE, shows a local king worshiping before a standing stone decorated with ribbons (fig. 183). This practice, apparently alien to the Iranian world, was probably introduced to Elymais by Semitic peoples to the west. However, it never gained wide popularity and acceptance among Iranians and is not attested on the Iranian plateau.

2. Zoomorphic Symbols

Many Avestan deities have animal incarnations. For that reason, it has become commonplace for scholars to consider various animals appearing in Iranian art as allusions to deities or as their zoomorphic representation. However, none of these animals, which are especially abundant in Sasanian art, are ever identified by an inscription, and none ever appear in clear cultic contexts. As De Jong has rightly put it, when these animals can be explained as Avestan zoomorphic manifestations, they are readily interpreted as such, but when there is no appropriate Avestan explanation, they remain “just animals” and require no further interpretation. Thus, a bird of prey is usually seen as a Vāraγna bird, a wild boar is conventionally Vāraγna (although Sasanian kings are often portrayed killing them in depictions of the royal hunt on silver plates), and a horse is Mithra, Tištrya or even Vāraγna, depending on the context and the predilection of the interpreter.