CHAPTER 5
GRAVEN IMAGES: IRANIAN ANTHROPOMORPHISM

1. Cultic Statuary, “Idols” and “Idol-Temples”

1. Western Iran

At the beginning of the twentieth century the American Iranist A.V.W. Jackson confidently stated that “the Persians from the earliest antiquity had no idols in the sense of representations of the godhead set up as objects of worship”,¹ and that “throughout the history of the religion of Irān, idolatry played no part”.² Almost a century later, Boris Marshak, a prominent Central Asian archaeologist, agreed that “ancient Iran had neither cult statuary nor an iconographical tradition of its own”.³

Indeed, the excavated Median and Achaemenian sanctuaries have not produced any evidence for the employment of cultic statues. However, the Babylonian priest Berossus, writing in Greek in the Hellenistic period, credited Artaxerxes II with the introduction of statues of Anāhitā into several temples in the cities of the Empire.⁴ The Roman historian Curtius Rufus also mentions a chariot in a royal Achaemenian procession, adorned with statues of Nin and Bel and divine statues in Persepolis destroyed by Alexander of Macedon.⁵ Despite Berossus’ claims, cultic sculpture is not found in Iran before the Macedonian conquest. This comes as no surprise, since only a few examples of freestanding sculpture are known from Achaemenian art.⁶ Moreover, to date, no closed temples that could house such statues and serve as the “House of God” have been uncovered in Achaemenian Western Iran.⁷ Anthropomorphic cultic statuary was seemingly never part of the royal Achaemenian cult, although the gods themselves were perceived by the Persian kings as anthropomorphic beings.⁸ Herodotus concluded that the Persians did not think of their gods in human form because they tended not to erect anthropomorphic statues. Interestingly, the Greek historian Hecataios of Abdera says of Moses in his Aegyptiaca:

He [Moses] had no images whatsoever of the gods made for them, being of the opinion that God is not in human form rather the Heaven that surrounds the earth is alone divine and rules the universe.⁹

The Greeks were mistaken about the anthropomorphic status of the Jewish God, and used a similar rationale to draw similarly mistaken conclusions about Persian deities.

Although there is no reason to think that the Hellenistic period was marked by a profound change in cult practices, in this period the first archaeological evidence appears for the existence of cultic statues set within temples whose plans were taken from the repertoire of Oriental architectural types.¹⁰ In addition to the examples discussed in Chapter 3, we should also note the as yet unpublished fragments of

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¹ Jackson 1914: 274.
² Jackson 1915: 151.
³ Marshak 2002c: 8.
⁴ See p. 16.
⁵ See p. 16–17.
⁶ The statue of Darius I originally made in Egypt and found in Susa. See Root 1979: 68–73; Ladynin 2011, and fragments of two or three statues from the same site: Root 1979: 110–114.
⁸ See also the brief discussion of Iranian anthropomorphism by Duchesne-Guillemin 2002 in a short entry in the EIr.
⁹ Diod. Sic. 40.3.4 (tr. LCL).
¹⁰ See Shenkar 2011.
a marble statue uncovered by Iranian archaeologists in recent excavations in the “Frataraka Temple” in Persepolis.\textsuperscript{11} There is a complex debate, however, as to whether these statues represent Greek or Iranian deities, or perhaps both.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the depiction of deities in human form in the Iranian world existed from the Achaemenian period onwards. The iconographic repertoire of Achaemenian imperial art is rich in human-shaped and theriomorphic representations and, in that sense, may indeed be labeled as a successor to Mesopotamian and Elamite artistic traditions.\textsuperscript{12} At least some of the anthropomorphic deities portrayed on seals and tablets from the \textit{Persepolis Fortification Archive} may indeed represent cultic statues,\textsuperscript{13} which possibly existed in the sanctuaries in the Pars region—essentially an amalgam of heterogeneous Elamite and Iranian cults.\textsuperscript{14} Although compared to Eastern Iran very few sanctuaries have been excavated and studied in the West, on the basis of our current archaeological data the only case where traces of a cultic statue have been found is in the “Frataraka Temple” at Persepolis from the Hellenistic period. The clear absence of closed temples in any of the Achaemenian centers of Western Iran\textsuperscript{15} speaks for itself that the royal cult, to which the kings were personally devoted, was not characterized by a pronounced image-orientated ritual and was conducted under the open sky. This does not necessarily mean that they did not sponsor and participate in cults that included anthropomorphic cultic imagery and did not attend sanctuaries originally belonging to non-Iranian religious traditions, which housed such statues.

In the Parthian period, Strabo describes a religious procession in which the image of the god Ōmanos was carried by Magi in Cappadocia.\textsuperscript{16} Unsurprisingly, the practice of bearing a cultic image of a deity in processions is also known in Mesopotamia. Human-shaped images were kept inside temples and they would be revealed to common people on special occasions, once or twice a year.\textsuperscript{17} It is, however, important to note that when Mesopotamian deities were exhibited outside the temples during the year, their images were usually represented by a non-anthropomorphic icon.\textsuperscript{18} In addition, although sculpture finds become more numerous in the Parthian period, only a handful can be shown to represent deities.\textsuperscript{19}

We know that the statue of Heracles-Vǝrǝθraγna from Mesene was set up in the temple of Apollo–Tīr in Seleucia of Tigris.\textsuperscript{20} The soldiers of Lucius Verus captured in 164 CE a statue of Comaean Apollo from the same city,\textsuperscript{21} and Flavius Josephus alludes to the domestic idols venerated by a “Parthian” wife of Anilaesus.\textsuperscript{22} However, these data relate to predominantly Graeco-Semitic Mesopotamia and evidence for such cults on the Iranian plateau is almost entirely absent.

The Parthian coins depict numerous anthropomorphic images of Greek gods and often show kings interacting with them. It is possible that they were in fact modeled on cultic statues, which existed not only in Mesopotamian temples but also on the Iranian plateau, but any archaeological evidence as to their existence is yet to appear. According to Boyce “it is presumably largely due to Zoroastrian iconoclasm in the Sasanian period that no such cult statues survive in Iran itself”.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Garrison2000} See Garrison 2000 and especially his forthcoming study of Achaemenian divine iconography: Garrison pre-publication.
\bibitem{Garrison2000b} Garrison 2000: 143, n. 64. The seal from Gorgippia (see p. 68) might also portray a cultic statue of Ištar.
\bibitem{Henkelman2008} Henkelman 2008: 58, 336–337.
\bibitem{vanderToorn1997} However, it is possible that the monumental building, which is currently being excavated by the Italo-Iranian team at Tol-e Ājor on the Persepolis plain, might be a temple. See Chaverdi, Callieri and Gondet 2013. One must, nevertheless, wait to see if the final results of the excavation provide convincing data for the religious function of the building.
\bibitem{van der Toorn1997} See p. 17.
\bibitem{Orman2005a} van der Toorn 1997: 233; Orman 2005a: 114.
\bibitem{Orman2009} Orman 2009: 142–143.
\bibitem{A general discussion of Parthian sculpture is found in Colledge 1977; Colledge 1986; Kawami 1987; Mathiesen 1993.} A general discussion of Parthian sculpture is found in Colledge 1977; Colledge 1986; Kawami 1987; Mathiesen 1993.
\bibitem{Mathiesen1993} See p. 11.
\bibitem{van der Toorn1997} See p. 18.
\bibitem{Orman2005a} See p. 17.
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