

Adam Lech KUBIK* (Siedlce University, Poland)
Shah Nadeem AHMAD** (United Kingdom)

Bronze mace with three rams' heads from Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

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Plate 1.a Bronze mace with three rams' heads from the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Plate 1.b Bronze mace with three rams' heads from the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, the mace head.

A mace with three rams' heads is kept at the Department of Antiquities of Ashmolean Museum (Pl. 1) in the University of Oxford. It was acquired from the Bomford collection in 1971. P. R. S. Moorey¹ initially dated the mace to the early 1st Millennium BC, but a revised dating to the Sasanian period is more likely in the light of several maces that have come to light from the Arsacid-Sasanian and post-Sasanian periods. The Ashmolean mace is constructed with three rams' head

* Institute of History and International Relations; atakan-al-vefa@wp.pl
** naddem.i@googlemail.com

¹ MOOREY (1966) 47.

attached to a metal socket. It features pronounced bumps and a distinct handle ending in a closed hand holding a ball. The zoomorphic heads with almond shaped faces have markedly rounded eyes, clearly visible ears and horns. The horns also have scratches marking the segmented construction of the horn. The neck of the mace head is embellished with a “triple dot” motif. The zoomorphic head ends with a “double pearl necklace” motif, and after that transforms into a hexagonal form ending with another collar. The straight shaft finishes with the handle. The handle itself has a round cross section and starts with a polygonal bump and ends with a closed hand or fist holding a ball or orb complete with a “pearl necklace” in the upper part. The dimensions of this artifact are: its total length 56,7 cm, the mace head 5 cm x 5,8 cm.

Introduction

Maces have a unique place in the imagery, religion and tradition of Iran,² but research in the subject is very limited. An attempt to classify this kind of weaponry was made by M. M. Khorasani, who placed zoomorphic maces in the third group of his classification.³ But it must be said that Khorasani's classification only shows the simplest similarities of the shape of the maces and has not been helpful in studies on the dating or origin of Iranian maces. Some statements about a possible future typology of Iranian zoomorphic maces were presented in A. L. Kubik's work “About one group of Iranian maces in the context of the new find from Sivas, Turkey: an analysis from the Sasanian to the Safavid Period”, published in 2014.⁴ Here Kubik explored common elements among the parts of the maces which could be helpful in a future grouping or in creating a proper typology. Some similar elements in such maces may also suggest close relations between them and even suggest similar dates for these object.

Some possible further observations about animal headed maces⁵

In addition to the common elements among the parts of maces, discussed by Kubik in his work, the most obvious element in overall typology is the form of the head. All the maces

² HARPER (1985) 246; DOOSTKHAH (2002) 165 - 166; KHORASANI (2006a) 251; KUBIK (2014) 156; KUBIK (2015).

³ KHORASANI (2006a) 251 - 261.

⁴ KUBIK (2014) 154 - 180.

⁵ See KUBIK (2014), where the main theses are:

- 1) Canonical weapons of the Sasanians consisted of swords, spears/lances and javelins, and archery equipment. Other forms of weaponry do not appear as commonly in Sasanian art (including maces).
- 2) The provenance of the maces from the beginning of the Sasanian period until the rise of Islam is rather problematic. The author has shown in his work that an analysis of Kushan and post-Kushan (Eastern Iran territory) material is an important aspect.
- 3) Some of the maces in this type, independent of the type or shape of the mace, share common elements including: hand on the bottom of the handle, Heracleian knot, and a small additional bull head which can be observed also in post-Sasanian finds. This enables us to group and date more closely some of the maces/scepters with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic mace heads.
- 4) The art forms and objects from the new eastern provinces may have been absorbed and then evolved into new forms in the heartlands and main territories of the Sasanian dynasty in the late Sasanian period, most likely after the conquests of Xusro I Anushirwan.

from the third group in Khorasani's classification, known to the current authors, can be described in two ways as either single or multiple animal or human heads. Furthermore, one can divide the heads into human (male and female) or animal (bull, goat, lion, bird).

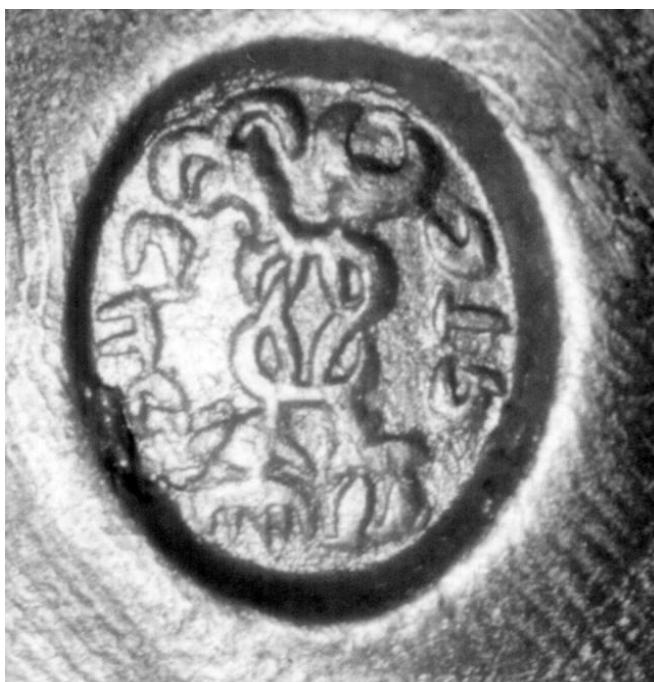


Plate 2. Stamp of the Sasanian seal from Derbent showing two animals, possibly a bull and a ram, whose long necks tie in the middle of the seal in a so called Heracleian knot plus a surrounding inscription. After: M. Gadjiev.⁶

Mace heads in the form of multiple anthropomorphic or zoomorphic heads appear to have been an important item of regalia used by the individuals of high status in Iran and Central Asia. Mace heads with multiple zoomorphic heads were also well known in Assyria and Luristan in the 1st Millennium BC,⁷ with a strong symbolic and mythological connection. Curiously, this type of regalia was abandoned in Sasanian art;⁸ nevertheless some researchers still wrongly connect the evolution of animal-headed maces, or *gorz*,⁹ with the Shahnama of Ferdowsi as a primary source for the study Sasanian arms and regalia.¹⁰ It needs to be stated that the Shahnama epic was written for Mahmoud of Ghazni, several centuries after the fall of the Sasanians. From the reports of Fakhr al-Din Mubarrak Shah we know that Mahmoud's

⁶ GADJIEV (2004) 116, ris. 1.

⁷ MUSCARELLA (1988) 288 - 289; GORELIK (1993) 60, tab. XXXI, 278 - 279.

⁸ KUBIK (2014) 159 - 160.

⁹ KOBYLAŃSKI (2000) 66; KHORASANI (2010a) 436.

¹⁰ HARPER (1985) 247 - 259; KHORASANI (2006a) 258 - 261; KHORASANI (2006b) 89; KHORASANI (2010b) 56 - 61.

eldest son, Sultan Mas'ud, used a horned mace.¹¹ We also know that some forms of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic maces survived until the Ghaznavid period¹² but in time they evolved in to the single animal predator form, most commonly a lion.¹³ It must also be noted that before the phrase *gurza-ye gāvsār* (bull headed mace) appeared in the Shahnama, a strict connection to one specific animal cannot be found in written Middle Persian sources from the Sasanian era.¹⁴ It is thus likely that Ferdowsi suited his work to his sovereign and to have changed the image of such an interesting piece of regalia to one where a mace with a single ox head had a supreme position, as seems to have been the case in the early Ghaznavid court.

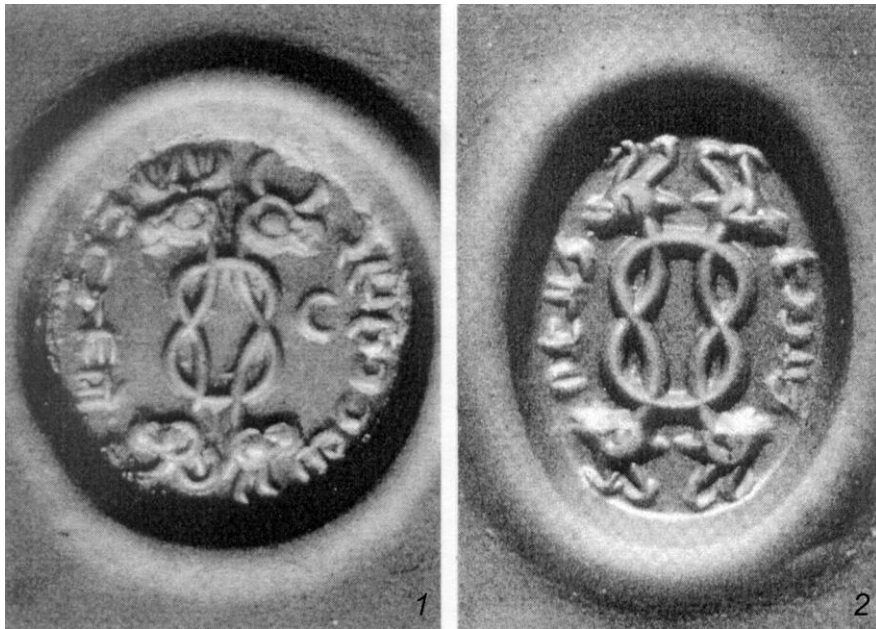


Plate 3. Stamp of the Sasanian seal from the collection of M. A. Piruzan, showing two animals, possibly (from the left) a bull, a deer and two ibexes, whose long necks tie in the middle of the seal in a so called Heracleian knot plus a surrounding inscription. After: M. Gadjeiev.¹⁵

¹¹ BOSWORTH (1963) 120; NICOLLE (1976) 134; KUBIK (2014) 165.

¹² For post-Sasanian mace as continuation of late Sasanian or Indo-Iranian tradition see: finds: mace head from Jartepa-II [BERMIDURADOV, SAMIBAEV (1999) 7 - 63], mace head from the Furusiyya Art Foundation [MOHAMED (2008) 244], possibly mace from MMA, gift of Parviz H. Rabenou, pl. 4 [KUBIK (2014) 164 - 165], illustrations: Silver dish from Hermitage Museum [OVERLAET (1998) fig. 146], Sogdian terracotta ossuary from Kaška Darya [MODE (1991/92) fig. II], Panjikent wall painting of seated king [MARSHAK, RASPOPOVA (1990) fig. 31], Panjikent wall painting of standing warrior VI/I [JAKUBOVSKIJ (1954) Tab. XXXV; BELENICKIJ, PIOTROVSKIJ (1959) Tab. III, Tab.VII], in the opinion of the current author also on a wall painting of a mounted warrior from mural at Panjikent VI/41 see: AZARPAY (1981) Plate 6-7.

¹³ KUBIK (2014) 167 - 168.

¹⁴ TAFAZOLLI (1997) 194.

¹⁵ GADJIEV (2004) 116, ris. 2.

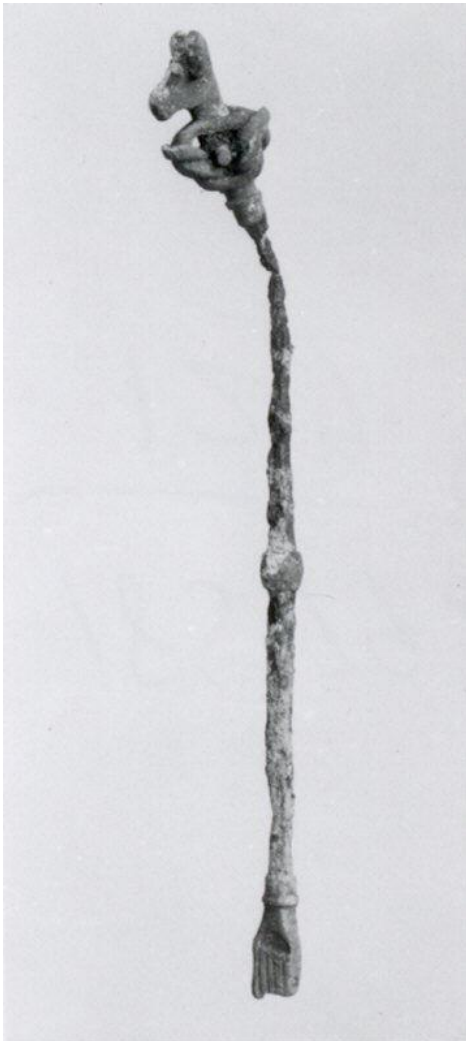


Plate 4. Late or post-Sasanian mace with three Heracleian knots ending with a bull's head from the MMA collection, gift of Parviz H. Rabenou, 1966. Available online: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/325840>

The symbolic and mythological connection between anthropomorphic and zoomorphic mace heads in the pre-Achaemenid period is well known.¹⁶ It seems that this remained true during the Arsaco-Sasanian period, when the mace is

¹⁶ see for example: JANTZEN (1972) 57.

shown as a tool used in the combat between a hero and demon on the amulet-seals published by A. D. H. Bivar.¹⁷ Ferdowsi also makes comparable references in his *Shahnama*: namely to the killing of Zakhāk by Faridun, and in the story of Bahram Gur killing a lion.¹⁸ It is therefore possible that maces which are the subject of the current paper are actually sacral/magical or status symbols with a purely ceremonial character rather than being real combat weapons.¹⁹ In fact, the Arsacid-Sasanian mace heads published and known to the author, made from such soft material as bronze, did not have any scuff marks or scratches which could indicate a use in combat. In Iran animal motifs in mace heads only appear to make a significant appearance in the late Sasanian period²⁰ (although there are some anthropomorphic mace heads dated to the Arsacid period). They are clearly related to late Sasanian art, and to certain motifs seen in late Sasanian seals: as for example the motif of an animal head and Heracleian knot a combination seen in one late Sasanian mace in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²¹ This combination is displayed even more clearly in the seals from Derbent in the Caucasus region. The Caucasus is the region where Sasanian seals seem to be popular finds from this period. K. I. Ol'shevski's excavations alone produced more than 35 of them and the collection of the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, contains more than 800 Sasanian

¹⁷ BIVAR (1967) 518; KUBIK (2014) 160.

¹⁸ BIVAR (1967) 524; HARPER (1985) 257.

¹⁹ OVERLAET (1998) 254; KUBIK (2014) 169.

²⁰ KUBIK (2014) 168.

²¹ FRYE (1973) fig. D. 25, OVERLAET (1999) 261.

seals.²² During an excavation near the citadel of Naryn-Khala, in 1979, a particularly interesting Sasanian seal was found. Its dimensions are: 1.2x1 cm and 1.3 cm in height, and it is dated to the 5th-7th century.²³ It shows two animals, possibly a bull and a ram, whose long necks are tied in the middle of the seal in the so-called Heracleian knot. There is also an inscription around the seal (Pl. 2). This piece is clearly related to two seals from the private collection of M. M. Piruzana. These again include standing animals with long necks tied in the so-called Heracleian knot (Pl. 3).²⁴ The mace showing a bull's head with its neck tied in a Heracleian knot in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, has already been mentioned (acc. Nr. 66.215, Pl. 4). The MMA mace, a gift of Parviz H. Rabenou from 1966, consists of a square iron shaft with three bronze units cast on it. At the top, three so-called Heracleian knots are shown, with a stylized ox head on the summit.²⁵ It is quite possible that in future other animal heads (for example deer, ibex or ram as on the Sasanian seals mentioned above) added on top of the so-called Heracleian knot²⁶ could be found. Sasanian maces with ram or ibex heads are already known,²⁷ and the combination of such animals with knots is well known in Sasanian sigillography.

The Ashmolean Museum mace

As mentioned above, the Ashmolean Museum mace head consists of three rams' head placed on a metal socket. The three-headed human figures exist in Arsacid-Sasanian art but it is hard to connect them to any strict mythological tradition.²⁸ However, B. Overlaet and M. Compareti²⁹ have linked the tricephalism represented on different kinds of Eastern Iranian and Indian art³⁰ (including coins³¹, paintings³² and reliefs³³) with the examples of the three-headed maces.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in regard to the mace from the Ashmolean Museum. So far the four mace heads decorated with rams' heads which can be dated to the late Sasanian period were brought to light. The first comes from Dinkha Tepe in the Ushlu valley of north western Iran. It was found by a peasant from the Dinkha village at the base of the Dikha mound where the Gadar river had eroded the mound. The mace was then presented to O. W. Muscarella.³⁴ The second mace comes from a private collection and was presented at the Iranian Art Exhibition in Tokyo in 1971 by the Japanese Committee for the 2,500 Anniversary of the

²² GADJIEV (2004) 100.

²³ GADJIEV (2004) 102.

²⁴ GADJIEV (2004) ris. 2.

²⁵ MUSCARELLA (1988) 419.

²⁶ Similar to pl. 1-2 form.

²⁷ These kinds of maces are listed later in the article.

²⁸ OVERLAET (1998) 264.

²⁹ Matteo Compareti lecture on UCI available online on : <https://vimeo.com/87109361>

³⁰ OVERLAET (1998) 264 - 265.

³¹ BROWN (1922) pl. IV ; GHIRSHMAN (1962) fig. 302c, 244, 393; GÖBL (1993) Taf. 14; CRIBB (1997) 13, 47, 50; and others.

³² STEIN (1928) 915 - 916; KAWAMI (1987) 26; TANABE (1997) 267, fig. 4.

³³ TANABE (1981) 109 - 110.

³⁴ MUSCARELLA (1988) 294 - 295, fig. 26-27.



Plate 5. So called India mace of the 7th century, from the MMA collection, gift of Steven Kossak, The Kronos Collections, 1986.

Available online:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/37682>

Founding of the Persian Empire, and was described by O. W. Muscarella. This mace had the shape of a beardless human head (in the opinion of O.W. Muscarella it is a woman's head³⁵) crowned by a ram's head. The third mace comes from the Abegg-Stiftung collection (inv. nr. 8.7.63) and was well presented by B. Overlaet in his article "Sasanian Bronze Sculptures in the Werner Abegg Collection". Its head consists of three so-called Heracleian knots, thought to be symbols of luck,³⁶ separating three beardless human heads. Each human head is crowned with a small ram's head with curved horns, while a line seen beside the face may represent a fabric cap or may even be the hide of the ram covering the ears of the human head. Below the knots there are well presented lions' heads and above them were possibly three bovine heads with short crescent horns. On the top of the mace head there may originally have been one more animal head, which it is now missing.³⁷ The fourth example is our mace from the Ashmolean museum constructed with three ram's head. The image of a ram can be easily connected to Iranian animism (but also to the art of Gandhāra). The connection between the ram and the royal *farr* in Sasanian Iran clearly point a special role of the so-called

³⁵ MUSCARELLA (1988) 294.

³⁶ LERNER (1996) 18.

³⁷ OVERLAET (1998) 254.

“ram crowns” which deserve more attention in the future study. As mentioned by B. Overlaet, such crowns may form part of the Kushano-Sasanian tradition, in which they appeared in two forms: one consisting of a full ram's head on the top of the wearer, or simply the horns alone of this animal.³⁸ The crown in the form of a full ram's head can be seen in two maces mentioned above, and importantly can be found in Ammianus Marcellinus's report as a headdress or helmet possibly³⁹ worn by Shapur II during a siege of Amida in 359⁴⁰. The rams' horns on their own can be observed on Kushano-Sasanian, and Sasanian coins⁴¹ as for example the coins of Wahrām.⁴² We can see a similar style on certain items of Sasanian silver; for example on the well known silver plate kept in Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg (inv. no. S-24.) which has a hunting scene on the front and a Sogdian inscription on the reverse in Samarqand script, and possibly showing a Kushanshah on a silver plate.⁴³ Similar horns can also be found on the Sasanian seals showing women. For example on a seal from the National Library of France published in 2006 by R. Gyselen in her “L'art sigillaire: camées, sceaux et bulles” (cat. nr. 156)⁴⁴ which shows a noble woman, and also on the Sasanian seal from K. Tanabe's book describing the Hirayama Collection loaned and exhibited at the British Museum from 1st April to 31st of May of 1993.⁴⁵ An even more interesting form of the ram-decorated head cover comes from a Bactrian seal from the Aman ur Rahman Collection, Islamabad/Dubai, published in 2009 by J. A. Lerner.⁴⁶ The seal itself shows an unbearded individual with three full rams' heads on the top of his head.⁴⁷ The full ram's head recalls the description of Ammianus Marcellinus and the mace head mentioned above described by B. Overlaet. However, the fact that the multiple heads are shown on the individual's headdress makes this seal a unique piece of Eastern Iranian art. What is even more interesting is that this visualization is in the form of a beardless individual without any sexually identifying features. So it could be argued that the face is that of a youth, a clean-shaven man, a woman, or a eunuch. Furthermore, it was made in the same style as the two maces with full rams' heads identified above as bearing women's heads. It seems that we can observe here a similar visual tradition which could, in

³⁸ OVERLAET (1988) 263.

³⁹ For the problems with identification of the king under Amida see for example: GHIRSHMAN (1955) 5 - 19; BIVAR (1979) 327 - 328.

⁴⁰ Amm. Marc. XIX. 1. 3. ROLFE (1935) 470:

Insidens autem equo. ante alios celsior, ipse praeibat agminibus cuactis, aureum capitis arientini figmentum, interstinctum lapillis, pro diademate gestans, multiplici vertice dignitatum, et gentium diversarum comitatu sublimis.

⁴¹ GÖBL (1993) taf. 32, taf. 36, taf. 38; TANABE (1989) fig. 4; TANABE (1993) 32, pl. 95-97; OVERLAET (1998) 263; DMITRIEV (2012) 146, ris. 2.

⁴² GÖBL (1993) taf. 32, k2 a.

⁴³ LIVSHITZ, LUKONIN (1964) 170 - 172, MARSHAK (1986) pl. 7, TREVER, LUKONIN (1987) pl. 147; TANABE (1993) 32, pl. 72; LUKONIN, IVANOV (1999) 116, pl. 52; DMITRIEV (2012) ris. 1, p. 145, and others

⁴⁴ GYSELEN (2006); COMPARETI (2010) 98, fig. 5.

⁴⁵ TANABE (1993) 33, pl. 74.

⁴⁶ LERNER (2009) 215 - 226; LERNER (2010) pl. II.8.

⁴⁷ LERNER (2009) fig.1.

the current author's opinion, suggest that both maces mentioned are Indo-Iranian,⁴⁸ from post-Kushan territory. This is because of their close similarity with the seal mentioned above, and might possibly be dated to the same period, namely the 4th-5th century.⁴⁹ The current author suggests that these types of anthropomorphic maces should be called the Bactrian type, as they come from the Kushanshahr territory. A female crown is also shown on a silver plate from the Walter Art Gallery, showing a banquet scene, and is identified as provincial Sasanian art from the 6th-7th century.⁵⁰ There is also a known depiction of a woman wearing a ram's horn head decoration from Uzbekistan, near Termez, that was discovered on the Fayaz-Tepe painted murals.⁵¹ This monastery was founded in the Kushan period (1st-3rd century), but the paintings could date to the later period.⁵² However, this piece is quite different from the other horn headgear as the horns might be placed on the sides of the head, not strictly on the top of the head as seen on other Iranian artefacts containing this kind of imaginary. What should also be mentioned as an interesting line of future studies on Eastern-Iranian headdresses of this type, is the fact that such crowns were commonly used by Central Asian Kidarites.⁵³

Scholars have mostly focused on the connection of such Kushano-Sasanian horns with the Hellenistic post-Alexander tradition, where coins often showed Alexander the Great with additional rams horns,⁵⁴ and also connecting such horns with Zeus-Amon.⁵⁵

In the present author's opinion, we cannot of course disregard western influences. Nevertheless, we also cannot simply point to such influence, as M. Compareti did in his article on horned figures in late Bactrian painting. In reality, we are facing much longer and wider tradition of using ram symbolism in Asia. It becomes even more complicated if we look at the nomadic Altai tribes where additional ram horns on headgear starts at least as early as the Pazyryk period⁵⁶ and survived in different forms until at least the Mongol period. In fact we are here facing a bigger Asian tradition of using animal horn formulae

⁴⁸ Connection between maces from Kushan and Kushano-Sasanian art of Eastern Iran and later traditions of Greater Iran were shown in A. L. Kubik work: *About one group of Iranian maces in the context of the new find from Sivas, Turkey: an analysis from the Sasanian to the Safavid Period*, Pskov, 2014. Some of the maces described in this paper show a connection to Bactrian and Gandhāran art. The term Eastern-Iranian or following Kushano-Sasanian aesthetic tradition will be used here as a synonym of bigger term Indo-Iranian to place those maces much more in some "regional tradition" or provenance then to give them strict datation of period in history of art.

⁴⁹ LERNER (2009) 216.

⁵⁰ HARPER (2000) pl. 26; COMPARETI (2010) fig. 6.

⁵¹ Mural from the south-western wall of the central court: a female donor with a ram's horn headdress. Taškent, Muzej istorii narodov Uzbekistana see: TANABE, MAEDA (1999) fig. 156; COMPARETI (2010) 97; LO MUZIO (2012a) fig. 7, pl. 6, 194, 207; (2014) fig. 3.13, 129.

⁵² COMPARETI (2010) 97; LO MUZIO (2012b) 319 - 327; (2014) 130.

⁵³ COMPARETI (2010) 97; LO MUZIO (2012a) 199 - 201.

⁵⁴ COMPARETI (2010), DMITRIEV (2012); DMITRIEV (2013).

⁵⁵ DMITRIEV (2013) 67.

⁵⁶ YATSENKO (2006) 83 - 101.

which, in the current author's opinion, was widespread throughout Asia and was possibly suited and modified to local traditions and beliefs. This needs future detailed study.

As was mentioned above, we can in fact connect such late Sasanian or - in the author's opinion - Indo-Iranian maces, or the maces following the Kushano-Sasanian aesthetic tradition, with a strictly ceremonial or even liturgical function.⁵⁷ We cannot exclude the possibility that in Iran the ram, as part of a mace, could refer to the Victory God Verethragna or could be shown as the bearer of *xvarnah* – the royal glory, guarded by Verethragna⁵⁸ as, perhaps, could other animals shown in Sasanian art. But as was mentioned above and suggested by Kubik,⁵⁹ the maces of this type share many elements with eastern art and possibly entered Sasanian Iran during the late Sasanian period from the



Plate 6. Four-Armed Goddess with a ram's head in her hand. North India, from the MMA collection, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Perry J. Lewis, 1984.

Available online: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/38252>

⁵⁷ The current paper only discusses anthropomorphic and zoomorphic maces. It is important to note that there were a variety of mace forms in Arsacid and Sasanian Iran, for example, the mace head found at Dura Europos [JAMES (2004) 189]. The mace as a weapon of war is also mentioned by Tabari [see: BIVAR (1972) 275 - 276, 291; BOSWORTH (1999) 262 - 263].

⁵⁸ LERNER (2009) 219 ; SIMPSON (2013) 104.

⁵⁹ KUBIK (2014) 161 - 163.

Sasanian Empire's eastern provinces or neighbors.⁶⁰ Some interesting elements are present in Gandhāran art, for example, the appearance of ram's heads in the hands of deities. As an example we can show here a Goddess sculpture from MMA (acc. nr. 1984.488), which was acquired as a gift of Mr. and Mrs. Perry J. Lewis in 1984 (pl. 6). This piece has been interpreted by S. Kossak as a four-armed Durgā Śāradā.⁶¹ Controversies concerning the meaning of rams' head in Gandhāran art were well presented by A. Di Castro in his article,⁶² but are outside the remit of the present study. However, the connection between the part of the animal and the use of the animal symbolism on maces was not investigated further by Di Castro. A similar pattern of influence from bird symbolism to bird-headed maces or scepters can clearly be seen on Kushan coins, where the motif of a bird held on an outstretched open hand exists in the same formulae as the bird on Kushan maces or scepters.⁶³ It is likely that the two motifs are related, and that the animal held in the hand may have formed the precedent for the same animal forming the head of a mace or scepter. Interestingly, the motif of animal symbols held in the hand or on mace heads existed mainly on Kushan coins, in the most north-western area of Indic influence, but was absent in central and southern India.⁶⁴



Plate 7. From the left: A cast of a coin showing the God Yamsho standing to right with a bird sitting on his outstretched arm, The British Museum, London, coin of Kushan king Huvishka published by Meenakshi Singh in JNSI Vol. LXVII, after R. Bracey.⁶⁵

The second interesting features of the Ashmolean mace are the so-called “double pearl necklace”⁶⁶ and “three dots” decorative pattern. The “three dots” motif, or “cintamani”

⁶⁰ KUBIK (2014) 168.

⁶¹ KOSSAK (1994) 33.

⁶² DI CASTRO (2015).

⁶³ BRACEY (2009); KUBIK (2015).

⁶⁴ DI CASTRO (2015) 288.

⁶⁵ BRACEY (2009) 39 - 40.

⁶⁶ Pearl necklaces survived on the animal maces till the Ghaznavid period and can be observed on the mace from The Furusiyya Art Foundation published by MOHAMED (2008) 239, see also: KUBIK (2014) 178 - 179, fig. 2.

is a common motif that was ubiquitous in Sasanian Iran and had been seen as early as the Arsacid period. In the Sasanian and post-Sasanian periods, this motif most commonly appeared on textiles and clothing (as seen on Sasanian and post-Sasanian metalwork, and on a find from Xinjiang), but could also be seen as a decorative motif on metalwork, on certain seals, and on coins.⁶⁷ It was also used on banners and decorative covers for armor (as seen on the 8th - 10th century plates from Semirechye) and on the handles of implements (such as a knife handle from Qasr-e-Abu Nasr, 5th - 7th Century).⁶⁸ The exact meaning and origin of this motif is debated. Soudavar has linked it to the Chamrosh bird and the star Tishtrya.⁶⁹ This reference backs up the idea of such a mace having religious or ceremonial importance although it must be noted that arms and armor and textiles in a secular setting were also often adorned with such a motif. The motif has been linked to a Buddhist tradition where the dots are thought to represent three pearls or jewels of the Buddha.⁷⁰ This variety of “cintamani” is often accompanied by a “wave” or “tiger stripe” pattern (the identification of a “wave” pattern links back to Apam Napat, the Iranian water deity, in Soudavar’s opinion).⁷¹ However it must be noted that the association of the triple dot motif with the tiger stripe motif in close juxtaposition was rare during the Sasanian period when they were more commonly used as separate motifs. Much later, this “cintamani” or “three dots” motif returned and became extremely popular during the Timurid and Ottoman periods.⁷² Interestingly, the link between the triple dot motif and a motif consisting of three animals has been brought to light.⁷³ Hence it is possible that the three heads of the mace may also be linked with this feature.

The double pearl necklace is another common motif that was very frequently seen on textiles depicting animals. Pearl roundel textiles often show animals either wearing a double pearl necklace, or holding one in their mouths (as for example by the Ducks in ‘Sasanian’ Pearl Roundels, on wall paintings from Kucha, Xinjiang, Kyzil, Cave 60 in the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg). These are linked to investiture rings as seen on Sasanian art, and were a symbol of the royal *farr*. This motif was also common in the post-Sasanian period in Central and Inner Asia, but did not become as widespread either geographically or chronologically as the triple dots motif.

The shaft of the Ashmolean Museum mace can be regarded as ‘typical’. The polygonal bulb on the handle section does not seem to be a significant feature in close association with other finds of zoomorphic maces, because similar forms of decoration

⁶⁷ SIMPSON (2013) 104.

⁶⁸ WHITCOMB (1985) 171.

⁶⁹ SOUDAVAR (2014) 47 - 48.

⁷⁰ Named also wish-fulfilling jewel, possibly adopted from the art of Central Asia see: ARNOLD-DÖBEN (1978) 58 - 60.

⁷¹ SOUDAVAR (2014) 48.

⁷² SOUDAVAR (2014) 50 - 52.

⁷³ For example with three hares motif see: J. Lees “Three hares and cintamani: two well-travelled motifs”, 2013, available online: <http://www.green-man-of-cercles.org/articles/cintamani.pdf>

survived at least until the 14th century.⁷⁴ A much more interesting part of the handle seems to be the right human hand which ends the mace where it serves as a pommel. What is clearly visible is that it is holding a hemispheric object, identified as a ball by P. O. Harper and associated with the Roman or Byzantine tradition.⁷⁵ However, it should be noted that in her work Harper did not explore the motif of a ball or a sphere held in the hand familiar from Indian art.⁷⁶ Further study may help to link many other symbolic aspects of the maces



Plate 8. From the left: Sasanian silver plate, the king Yazdgerd I killing a stag, MMA, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1970, available online: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/326007> , Penjikent mural, hunting scene from the museum on the site of Old Penjikent, Tajikistan, 2007, Photograph courtesy of Jack Farrell.

under consideration to an Indo-Iranian tradition as well as to Central Asian and Western traditions. The hand motif could be seen on other Sasanian or late Sasanian tools and is not a feature unique to maces. In Sasanian art, shafts ending with fists are known from a certain silver-gilded plate now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art which shows Yazdagird I killing a deer (pl. 8).⁷⁷ It also appears on Kushan luxury items⁷⁸ which were initially and incorrectly understood by A. L. Kubik⁷⁹ as bone maces or scepters. A similar motif appears as the pommel of a dagger of a hunter from Panjikent, dated to the 7th — early 8th centuries (pl. 8). These hands existed in many different forms: right and left clenched hands holding a hemispheric object, sometimes with an extended index finger (pl. 5); as open hands; and as

⁷⁴ KUBIK (2014) 169.

⁷⁵ HARPER (1985) 253 - 254.

⁷⁶ For example: in the hand of India Goddess Durga (see for example: Goddess Durga Slaying the Buffalo Demon (Mahishasuramardini), Kushan period, 2nd century, The Art Institute Chicago, USA, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence R. Philips (inv. no. 1985.1108)) or in the hand of Siva-Mahesvara (see for example: painting of Siva-Mahesvara from Dandan-Uiliq, 6th century, British Museum, London, England) and also in the hand of Mesopotamian Goddess Nana.

⁷⁷ GRABAR (1967) 98; HARPER, MAYERS (1981) 64; SKUPNIEWICZ (2009) 51.

⁷⁸ PUGACHENKOVA, RTVELADZE (1978) 61,111; STANČO (2005) 54 - 64 ; ABDULAEV, STANČO (2011) 140; STANČO (2013) 19 - 40.

⁷⁹ KUBIK (2014) 163, 169.

fists. In the current author's opinion, such hand endings need also further study in relation to the hand gestures which had a prominent place in Sasanian⁸⁰ and Buddhist traditions. The “pearl bracelet” of the hand from the Ashmolean mace corresponds to the upper ending of the hand from a so called “Indian mace” (pl. 5), a mace from MMA collection, gift of Parviz H. Rabenou, 1966 (pl. 4) and a mace from Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran, mentioned above. This gives us the opportunity to group those maces together for the more precise dating of the objects. Two of them can be dated to the late or the end of the Sasanian period. The so called “Indian mace” is dated by the Department of Asian Art of MMA to the 7th century. The mace from MMA collection with three Heracleian knots ending with a bull's head (pl. 4), because of a clear simplification of the form of the hand⁸¹ and connection with late-Sasanian seals as for example those mentioned above dated to the 5th-7th century, can be also dated to the late-Sasanian or post-Sasanian period. We need to state here that the symbol of the hand with the orb or the ball cannot be found in post-Sasanian iconography. It is quite possible that this motif was abandoned or disregarded in early Islamic period. Therefore we can state that those four maces date from the similar late-Sasanian period. However, a major difference between the hand seen here, and the hands on other Indo-Iranian maces, is the hole that may have been intended for a thong or strap to hang the mace by, or it may have held a pair of floating ribbons. Such ribbons are seen in late Sasanian iconography flowing from sword hilts or pommels and from the upper *siyah* of bows (and in several places on clothing as well). Many maces have unique features that, while fitting an overall Iranian theme, all differ slightly in aesthetic terms. This may suggest differences in local traditions or perhaps changes in art style over time.⁸²

Conclusion

The mace was an essential weapon in Greater Iran, while anthropomorphic and zoomorphic maces and scepters also had an important symbolic and liturgical role. The mace from the Ashmolean Museum has not been fully studied so far and it is an important example in the study of Sasanian and post-Sasanian iconography. Although several tricephalic maces are known (including an example with three human heads, and an example with three ox heads), this is the first example with three ram's heads. The three rams' heads are likely to have been connected with Central Asia or Eastern Iran and the motif is well known from Kushano-Sasanian and Kidarite seals, coinage, and artwork. The ram itself is also strongly associated with the *farr* in Sasanian symbolism. The Ashmolean mace has two other important symbolic features – the triple dot motif, common in Sasanian Iran on textiles and metalwork, and the pearl necklace motif, a common symbol for the royal *farr*. Overall, the mace itself highlights several important new ideas and motifs regarding animal symbolism in Asia which, while briefly touched upon the present study, require further research to fully explore their significance. Such motifs include the widespread

⁸⁰ FRYE (1972) 102.

⁸¹ Such simplifications are well known from late Sasanian and post-Sasanian periods in Iranian art.

⁸² The possibility of travelling artists cannot be excluded, as such individuals may have travelled into a region carrying art forms from a different region but which were nevertheless suited to local traditions. Every new mace that is brought to light can help shed further light on these interesting concepts.

visualization of rams heads and rams horns throughout Asia (including in hairstyles); the Herakles knot; the use of the hand pommel and hand gestures in Asia; and the use of the pearl necklace and triple dots and its connotations in Central Asian visual language. Interestingly a full exploration of these complex concepts would be an important topic for future study.

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Summary

The present study brings to light a new Sasanian mace in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England, acquired in 1971 from the Bomford Collection. The bronze mace head is in the shape of three ram heads, has an iron shaft, and a bronze pommel in the shape of a hand holding a ball. The mace incorporates several important decorative motifs – the ram heads which can be linked to the royal *farr* and to Central Asian visual language; the pearl necklace which is another symbol of the royal *farr*, and the triple dot motif which may have links to the star Tishtriya, to Apam Napat, or to Buddhist symbolism. In addition to these elements there is the hand motif, whose meaning is still unknown but might be linked to Asian symbolic hand gestures. The mace or scepter was an important element of royalty and of religion in Iran and Central Asia and the example in the Ashmolean museum is an important addition in the study of Iranian visual language and royal image in the specific context of Indo-Iranian mutual influence.

In the present authors' opinion, the present mace is likely to date, based on relations with other objects, from the 5th - 7th Centuries and is likely to originate from Eastern-Iran or is rooted in Eastern-Iranian artistic tradition.

Keywords: Sasanian Warfare, Military History, Sasanian Beliefs, Central Asian Beliefs, Late Antiquity, Maces, Sceptres