

Entry

# Khosrow II (590–628 CE)

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**Definition:** Khosrow II (r. 590–628 CE) was the last great Sasanian king who took the throne with the help of the Romans and broke with dynastic religious preferences as he became married to a Christian empress. It was under his rule that the Sasanian Empire reached its greatest expansion. From the standpoint of iconographic studies, Khosrow II is among the most influential Persian kings. Although he was literally occupied by rebels and wars within the borders of the Sasanian territories and beyond, Khosrow managed to create a powerful image of himself that emphasized the legitimacy of his monarchy. Indeed, Khosrow Parviz (the Victorious) drew upon royal iconography as a propaganda tool on a wide range of materials such as rock and stucco reliefs, coins, seals, and metal plates. His image (created both visually and verbally) not only revived the traditional iconography of the Persian kings but also evolved it in a way that transcended his time and was passed on to the early Islamic Caliphates after him. Khosrow II imitated and manipulated the traditional royal iconography of his predecessors in order to display his legitimacy, piety, and valor.

**Keywords:** royal image; royal iconography; Sasanian Empire; Khosrow II; rock relief; coinage



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## 1. Introduction

The Sasanian dynasty, which ruled over the entire Iranian Plateau and beyond from 220 to 651 CE, was the last pre-Islamic empire of Iran (for the history of the Sasanian Empire, see [1,2]). Ardashir I (224–41 CE), the founder of the dynasty, named the kingdom after his grandfather Sasan, supposedly a priest of the goddess Anahid in the city of Istakhr, the capital of the province of Persis/Fars [3]. The dynasty thus claimed religious legitimacy and authority from its foundation via “[the connection of] an eponymous founder with an important sanctuary” [4] (p. 156). The Sasanians aimed to move the territories of the empire to that of the Achaemenids [4]. It was under Khosrow II (590–628 CE) that their empire reached its territorial zenith, thanks to a series of military campaigns that allowed the Sasanians to dominate the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt for over a decade in the early seventh century CE [5]. Hence, Khosrow II is the most important king of this golden era (498–622) of the Sasanian sovereignty.

Khosrow II took over the throne following a plot that deposed his father, Hormazd IV (579–90 CE). Soon after, however, the rebellious general Bahram Chobin forced the young Khosrow to flee to the Eastern Roman Empire, where he sought alliance and support [3] (pp. 191–199). Maurice, by then the Roman emperor, helped the young Khosrow to recapture the throne and defeat Bahram [4] (p. 160); [6] (pp. 236–240), [7] (p. 85); [8,9]. In order to consolidate power, Khosrow II managed to take control and prevent possible adversities, both inside and outside the borders of his political hegemony. As Khosrow wanted to clear any notoriety, he first eliminated those connected with the murder of his father. Later, when Maurice passed away, Khosrow started a series of campaigns in western territories, particularly in regions controlled by the Romans [4] (p. 161); [8,9]. Even though Khosrow's success in conquering Armenia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and

Anatolia granted him a good reputation and acceptance at first, the continuity and cruelty of his ambitious campaigns caused increasing hostility with the powerful western neighbor [2] (p. 33); [10,11]. For example, historians have recorded vivid descriptions of the hostile acts by Khosrow II during the conquest of Jerusalem (614 CE) that triggered revenge campaigns against Sasanian temples [2] (p. 33); [12,13] (p. 592). Thus, “in a matter of years, Khosrow II went from a world conqueror, emulating the Achaemenid territorial integrity to a humiliated king who was unable to protect the sacred Zoroastrian fire-temples and his subjects [2] (p. 33).” Eventually, the nobility and priests removed Khosrow II in 628 CE, and subsequently, all the conquered regions were returned to the Romans.

The Sasanian royal image was not just created through sovereign acts or written sources but rather depended, to a great extent, on a well-developed iconographic language promoted by rock reliefs, coins, and other visual products of material culture [14–17]. In the absence or scarcity of written sources, pictorial documents maintain a treasury for the understanding of the most important aspects of the royal image under the Sasanian rule [18]. From an iconographic point of view, Khosrow II is of significant interest to scholars: the abundance of archaeological evidence from his time, combined with the contrasting characters of his sovereignty (e.g., victory/defeat, treason/loyalty, piety/impiety, etc.) provide scholars with an unparalleled, first-hand source of information that sheds light on an important yet less-known period of the history of Iran. Considering the subjective nature of the portrayals and interpretations presented by Christian, Muslim, and Persian authors, Khosrow’s personality has remained relatively unknown to us [19]. The pictorial language, conceived by the king himself, is the proper medium that can shed light on this matter. Drawing upon the established iconographic language of his time, as well as manipulating some aspects of the iconographic language of his predecessors, Khosrow II managed to present a powerful and influential image of his monarchy. This entry summarizes the unique features of Khosrow II’s royal iconography, its function, and its possible audience. It, therefore, describes the iconographic and iconological characteristics of his royal image on rock reliefs and coins.

## 2. Taq-e-Bustan Rock Reliefs

Generally speaking, the depiction of a royal image aims to allude to the authority of the ruling king. The direct reuse of conventional royal icons or the use of their modified versions, as well as employing innovative symbols, are the methods by which this goal has been achieved in the history of Persian monarchies. Close analysis of the transformation of royal images under the Sasanians, particularly through iconographic studies of cases that vary in size and complexity, helps outline the basics and overall thinking of Sasanian royal iconography, including that of Khosrow II.

According to Vanden Berghe, the author of a comprehensive catalog of the rock reliefs of ancient Iran, the Sasanian kings commissioned 39 rock reliefs [20] (p. 1090). Most of these engravings are devoid of any inscription and are located in significant locations to depict crucial political events, such as royal investiture or military victories [20] (p. 1091), as well as religious tendencies or royal festivals, such as games and hunts. In ancient Iran, the use of pictorial reliefs, coupled with informative inscriptions, was the traditional way of illustrating royal images, as well as depicting the kings’ authority and legitimacy [21]. Therefore, by the time of the Sasanians, and Khosrow II, in particular, there existed an accepted iconographic language to propagate the political and religious ideas of the sovereign [22]. For instance, in rock reliefs, Sasanian artists depicted the kings only in four different positions: “standing, jousting, equestrian and enthroned” [23] (p. 308). Similarly, it is scholarly accepted today that almost every Sasanian king wore an individual crown and headgear [24]; (for various images of Sasanian crowns carved on rock reliefs, see [25]). The existence of these traditions allows scholars to study all Sasanian rock reliefs in a historical discourse that benefits from intertextual references.

Some of the most well-known rock reliefs of the Sasanian kings are located at Taq-e Bustan, near Kermanshah in western Iran. Here, the remaining reliefs include an investiture

scene carved on a large cliff (depicting Ardashir II, 4th CE) and two ayvans (recesses) carved out of rock that contains different scenes of the royal life [24]. Though it is clear that one of the ayvans depicts Shapur II and Shapur III in the 4th CE, the identity of the Sasanian king who ordered the cutting of the greater ayvan (the so-called Great Grotto) and the king(s) whose figures were depicted there, are the subject of debate. Nevertheless, there is a scholarly consensus that the great ayvan is associated with Khosrow II (for more information, see [24,26–30]; [31] (p. 361); [32,33]).

In order to create a visual synchronization between the two ayvans, the fashion of the older, smaller ayvan was adapted to the greater counterpart. Scholars believe that the ayvan was a stone version of a type of palatial decoration that was common in stucco by then [24,33]. It, therefore, represents a change in the choice of material used for royal iconography [34]. The great ayvan is decorated on all sides and contains four different scenes of Khosrow's opulence and his glamorous court (Figure 1). The most celebrated rock relief of the Sasanian dynasty represents the king in four scenes: 1. an investiture scene on top of the back wall, illustrating the king standing between Ahura Mazda (the god of Zoroastrianism) and Anahita (the goddess of waters); 2. an equestrian image on the lower part of the same wall, depicting the king as a warrior on an armored horse; 3. a deer hunt scene on the right sidewall; 4. a boar hunt scene on the left sidewall. The entire complex has been regarded as "a celebration of well-known themes from Assyrian times" [24]. As discussed above, the foundation of Khosrow's ayvan at Taq-e Bustan dates back to the end of the 6th century CE at a time when the Sasanian kingdom was at its apogee of military achievements [5] (p. 6468). Thus, one may regard the Great Grotto as a victory monument that depicts Khosrow in the traditional roles of an Iranshahr king: as a legitimate king that receives the ring of power from deities, as a victorious warrior on horseback, and as the head of the team at royal hunts.



**Figure 1.** Taq-e Bustan, The Great Grotto. Source: authors.



### 2.1. Investiture Relief

As it was usual in Sasanian reliefs to arrange the scene around a central axis [23] (p. 352), the sculpture of the king created a center for the Taq-e Bustan investiture relief, around which the Sasanian artist engraved the rest of the scene. The king is illustrated frontally in a standing position, whereas his right hand receives the ring of power from Ahura Mazda, and his left hand holds a sword. Anahita, the assumed divine patron of the Sasanian dynasty, stands on the right side. A power ring is in her right hand while she provides a blessing with her other hand that pours water on the ground from a jar (Figure 2). Following an established iconographic tradition, the king is illustrated larger than the two divine figures. His garment is fully decorated with pearls and water droplet patterns. Scholars have interpreted this particular treatment as a symbol of the greatness of Anahita in Sasanian beliefs [35]. As usual, none of the Zoroastrian gods and divinities (neither Ahura Mazda nor Anahita) carry any weapons [26] (p. 112). The contrasting juxtaposition of these weaponless divine figures and a king with his hand on a sword in the focal point of the scene conveys the legitimacy of Khosrow's sovereignty through the military and divinely bestowed powers. Khosrow's right to the throne is also emphasized in the engraving of his traditional crown, the use of which was granted only to the representatives of the Sasanian royal house [30] (p. 77).



**Figure 2.** The investiture scene, rock relief, end of the 6th century CE, Taq-e Bustan, The Great Grotto. Photographed by authors, the drawing is taken from: Flandin, E.; Coste, P. *Voyage en Perse*, Gide et J. Baudry, Paris, France, 1851.

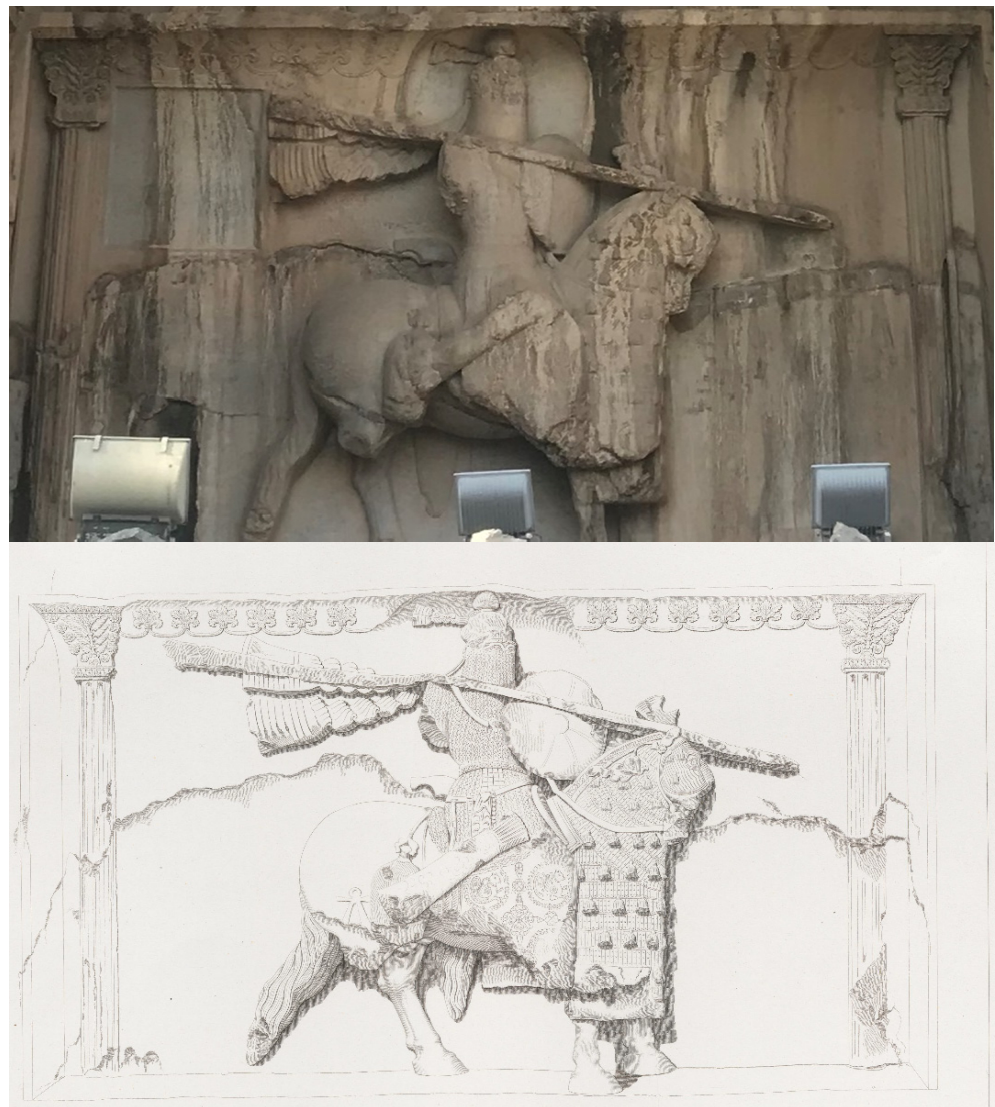
The imagery of the crown in Sasanian material culture is a signifier of the king's identity. Although a Sasanian king may have more than one crown, or he may change the crown in the course of his sovereignty—due to great achievement, the crown may be changed to display the increase in the *farr* (i.e., *xwarenah* in the old Persian language, literally meaning “glory”)—as a general rule, these crowns vary in detail. The crown illustrated in the investiture scene may resemble those forged on Sasanian coins from the time of Piruz, Khosrow II, Ardashir III, and Yazdgerd III [33] (p. 583). Nevertheless, archaeological evidence confirms Herzfeld's opinion [36] (pp. 83–100) that regarded Khosrow II as the king depicted on the great ayvan. The crown illustrated in the investiture scene consists of a headband ornamented with two rows of pearls on its lower part, above which there is a small knurled line with a small crescent in front. A hat with two wide wings on the sides shapes the main part of the crown, and a big crescent placed under corymbs fills the space between these wings [37] (illustrated in p. 59). All the elements of the crown (i.e., pearl band, wings, knurl, crescent, corymbs, and even the small ornaments scattered on the other parts) are believed to be of religious importance as they symbolize the Zoroastrian gods or beliefs, thereby showing the strong connection of the Sasanian king to supernatural powers [38] (p. 325).

The iconography of mythical gods in the shape of natural entities was an ancient tradition dating back to prehistoric Mesopotamia, which continued later in the Iranian Plateau [38] (p. 326). Abu Rayhan Biruni is amongst the earliest to note this in Sasanian imagery: in *Asar Al-Baghieh* (11th century CE), he emphasizes that the corymbs on the Sasanian crown feature the sun, the symbol of Mithra (i.e., an ancient goddess associated with the sun in Persian mythology) [39] (p. 43). Similarly, the mantle and accessories are worn by the king in the divine investiture relief, as well as all other ornaments of the ayvan, clearly refer to the Zoroastrian religion. Thus, they reflect the desire of Khosrow II to introduce his kingdom as a “celestial trust granted [to him] by gods” [38] (p. 327). Khosrow II's great emphasis on the divinely ordained power and celestial supports are also observable in the presence of a second ring of power in the investiture relief. Though the beribboned ring was a common symbol of the *farr* in Sasanian rock reliefs, which represented the legitimacy of the sovereignty supported by a god or goddess, the depiction of a second power ring in the investiture scene at Taq-e Bustan was unprecedented. To interpret this decision, one needs to analyze the significance of the *farr* in the context of the history of the Sasanians. Abolala Soudavar, an authority on the art of Persian courts, points out the particular characteristic of the *farr*, as the king's acts could cause an increase or decrease in the *farr* [40] (p. 51). Thus, on the one hand, the illustration of a second power ring could imply the king's urgent need for a double confirmation which, considering the events of the earliest years of Khosrow's rule, seems reasonable. For example, the king's tolerance towards Christians and specifically his relationship with Shirin—Khosrow's favorite wife, who was a Christian [2] (p. 34). coupled with the rumor of Khosrow's collaboration in the murder of his father [35] (p. 59) could have decreased the *farr*, prompting the priests to condemn the king. On the other hand, Khosrow's successful military campaigns that stretched the borders of his kingdom could have increased the *farr*, encouraging the king to illustrate multiple, beribboned power rings: “For his two-fold victories in the east and west, Khosrow was receiving two beribboned yārehs from Iranian deities, and two others from Nike and Fortuna” [40] (p. 50)—the last two names refer to the guardian angels of the Roman and Greeks, also depicted above the arch of the great ayvan (Figure 1).

The above remarks, once again, point out the contrasting character of Khosrow's rule amongst conquered nations, as well as the royal court circle, including the head priest of the Zoroastrian temples (*mowbed*), military generals, and aristocrats, which, all together, had the power to overthrow the king due to a reduction in his *farr*. This broadens the scope of the audience of the rock reliefs ordered by Khosrow II. It also explains the great attention paid to the engraving of details at Taq-e Bustan, making the Great Grotto the beholder of one of the most delicately carved reliefs of ancient Persia.

## 2.2. Equestrian Relief

Though partly damaged, the equestrian relief illustrates a fully armed warrior on horseback, with a shield and a lance in his hands, while a quiver is suspended on his right side. The horse is armored, and both the rider and the animal are shown in profile, facing the left sidewall (Figure 3). The sculpture is obviously more than an ordinary cavalry depiction: a nimbus is carved around the head (or helmet) of the horseman, and a globe (corymbos) crowns the upper part of his helmet, whereas flying ribbons are suspended from it. These icons all imply the grandeur of the man depicted here: the Sasanian king. The relief should have gained much attention during the Sasanian rule; even centuries after the fall of the Sasanians, it still symbolizes the glory of the royal court.



**Figure 3.** The armored warrior, rock relief, end of the 6th century CE, Taq-e Bustan, The Great Grotto. Photographed by authors, the drawing is taken from: Flandin, E.; Coste, P. *Voyage en Perse*, Gide et J. Baudry, Paris, France 1851.

Early Islamic historians, such as al-Hamawi (620 CE), Ibn-Faqih Hamedani (902 CE), and Ibn-Rosta (903 CE), all wrote descriptions of a great equestrian relief near Kermanshah that depicts the Sasanian king Khosrow Parviz on his favorite charger “Shabdiz” [35] (pp. 57–58). Modern scholars believe that the horseman in the equestrian scene and the king in the investiture setting display the same person [26] (p. 105); [30] (p. 76). This iconographically connects together the upper and lower illustrations. Indeed, visual presentation of different



stages of a hero's life or the events surrounding him was an old tradition in Persian visual culture; the Stele of Untash-Napirisha (circa 1300 BC) is an Elamite example of this old tradition. In this respect, the great ayvan and its many reliefs were meant to represent a "throne-Iwan" [26] (p. 106), depicting the different aspects of the king's power.

The equestrian relief, with its emphasis on a particular type of armor used by Sasanian cavalry, as well as the archery equipment, depicts the king as a victorious and invincible warrior. This sense of invincibility can be conveyed not only by the depiction of the strong, athletic bodies of Khosrow II and his horse Shabdiz but also in the artist's reference to the power ring, nimbus, globe, and flying ribbons which all symbolize the *farr*. Thus, it can be assumed that the great ayvan was constructed to depict the increase in *farr* as a result of Khosrow's victorious campaigns in the west and the east [40] (pp. 47–48).

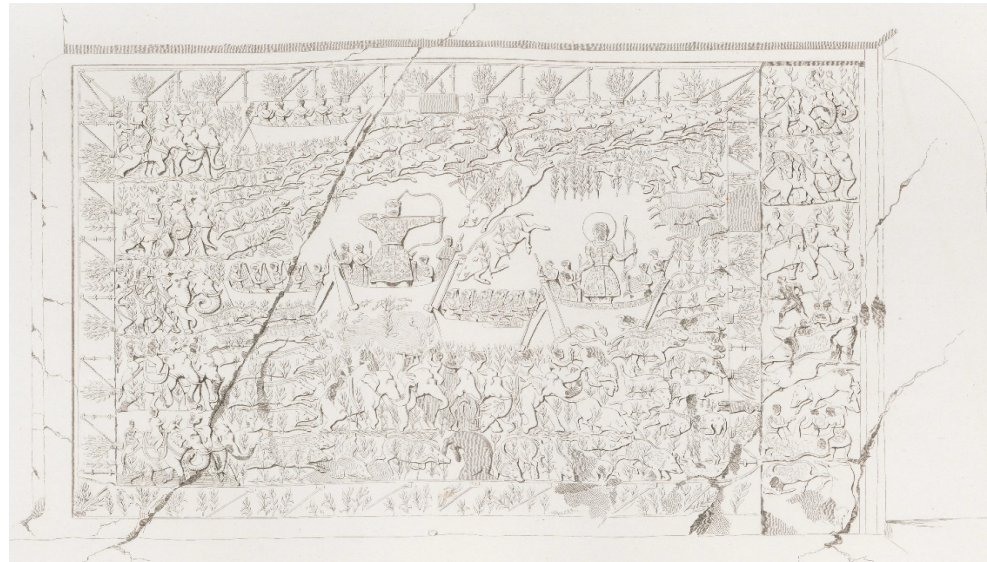
The iconographic details of the relief have attracted much scholarly attention. The flying ribbons are interpreted as a symbol of the king's "divine splendor" to "indicate the covenant of the king" [39] (pp. 44–45). While the depiction of a power ring for identifying the Sasanian king was a long tradition in Sasanian iconography, the illustration of a circular nimbus (not a radiating halo similar to those depicted in other engravings at Taq-e Bostan) around the head of the king was not a common practice in Sasanian rock reliefs before the time of Khosrow. At Taq-e Bostan, Khosrow II is shown twice with a nimbus around his head: once in the equestrian relief and again in the royal hunt scene. This halo around the king's head refers to the *farr* that, according to Sasanian visual culture, can be represented as a light radiating from the king's head or body [41] (p. 184). Examples of this particular type of imagery are also observable in royal hunt scenes carved on Sasanian-inspired plates dating back to the late Sasanian era or the early Islamic period [41] (pp. 183–184).

In contrast to the investiture relief, which was firmly attached to the conventional iconographic language of Persian court culture, some sculpted details in the equestrian scene were not common at the time, making scholars consider the possible inspirations from the local traditions of western and eastern frontiers of the Sasanian territories. Apart from shedding light on the evolution of the Sasanian military industry, the armor and other warfare of the horseman and his charger [42,43] are also regarded as supporting material for identifying the roots of new iconographic details [32]. In this respect, the "lamellar armor" and a new type of warrior that first appeared at Taq-e Bostan have Central Asian origins, which started to penetrate the western frontiers of Iran by means of trade fairs or wars, not before the end of the 6th century [43] (p. 173); [32] (pp. 394–396). On the other hand, the phoenix-like creature depicted as an ornament on the warrior's garment indicates eastern influences. Arguably, this "first occurrence of the flying creature on a monument which can certainly be considered pre-Islamic Persian" symbolizes the *farr* [30] (p. 78). Historians of the early Islamic period, such as Masudi and Biruni, point out that one of Khosrow's seals that was embellished with a flying creature called "*Khurasan khurra*", literally meaning the glory of Khorasan [30] (p. 78). This motif was also employed as a reoccurring pattern on the garments of the king in royal hunt reliefs [30,33].

To illustrate the authority and power of the ruling king, ancient officials portrayed the king in juxtaposition with the dead body of his enemies. Various examples of this artistic tradition are observable in archaeological remains in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Iranian Plateau from the Bronze Age onward. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of the use of this iconographic sign under the Khosrow II rule. In view of some scholars, the invincibility of Khosrow II made the depiction of dead enemies in his royal rock reliefs purposeless [24]. This separation from older traditions dating back to antiquity is noticeable. Indeed, instead of copying only after his predecessors or using age-old Persian traditions, Khosrow II, the conqueror of the east and west, also drew upon a new iconographic language (i.e., the equestrian relief) to emphasize his increased *farr* [44] (p. 3), as well as his invincibility. This was a wise decision as Khosrow Parviz's use of a universal language eventually displayed him as the king of the kings of four geographical dimensions in the eyes of audiences from Iran and beyond (for more information on Khosrow II's military strategies and achievements, see [45] (pp. 228–244).

### 2.3. Boar Hunt Reliefs

The technical style of this relief (Figure 4) is different from the investiture and equestrian reliefs, in contrast to the deep carving of figures on the central wall, which provides the illusion of rounded sculptures, the boar hunt relief was carved very shallow. In the view of the authors, both the position and technical style of this relief signifies its subordination to the main theme carved on the central wall.



**Figure 4.** The boar hunt relief, rock relief, end of the 6th century CE, Taq-e Bustan, The Great Grotto. Source: Flandin, E.; Coste, P. *Voyage en Perse*, Gide et J. Baudry, Paris, France 1851, modified by authors.

The relief is an elaborate and illustrious display of wild boar hunting on boats. The main scene is framed in such a way that it recalls a fenced hunting ground. The narrative nature of the carving is noteworthy: reading from left to right (facing the relief), the main scene depicts the king two times. The first time with a stretched bow targeting a boar, and the second time, at a smaller size with a bow in his hand and nimbate. In both scenes, the king's garments resemble one another and are decorated with patterns of the flying creature mentioned above [46] (pp. 106–108). The musicians and servants accompanying the king on the boat are clearly depicted to be smaller than their majesty. The relief is meticulous and rich in detail: elephant riders direct a herd of boars in a particular direction where the king targets them between the bushes. The presence of female musicians playing on boats, together with the illustration of fish and birds swimming freely in the water, is in sharp contrast with the turmoil of the king's battle with animals. On the right part of the relief out of the enclosed main scene, elephant riders and ordinary people are depicted with the dead body of boars on the ground or on elephants, creating the final episode of a royal story.

Hunting was a royal sport in ancient Persia. Thus, the depiction of the king while hunting, combating, or slaying mythical animals was of iconographic importance. Remarkable examples of this pictorial tradition are observable in the remains of the Achaemenid dynasty at Persepolis. Provided the fact that the Sasanians were familiar with this ancient site, their reference to a similar pictorial tradition can be regarded as a means to connect themselves with the glorious past of Persia. It is believed that Persian kings, especially in the Sasanian era, used enclosed parks (called paradise) [30] (p. 75) for hunting animals. The most celebrated among them was the hunting ground of Khosrow II at Taq-e Bustan [47] (p. 39). In this regard, it is logical to read the relief as the representation of the majestic paradise of Khosrow II, an example of the prosperity of his kingdom. The first impression of the boar hunt relief, in comparison with the investiture and equestrian reliefs,



and as a complementary part of the whole great ayvan project, is the wealth of Khosrow's court and the welfare of common people under his rule, which characterizes a righteous government. In fact, all the details of the relief, including the depiction of numerous big mammals, water, and plants, convey the fertility of the soil and the richness of Persia under Khosrow II rule. The depiction of common people in the last episode, where they are using the results of a royal hunt, is also noteworthy. As shown in the rock relief, ordinary people were not allowed to enter the hunting ground [30] (p. 75), yet they could benefit from the result of the hunt. This scene, therefore, displays the Sasanian king as the representative and protector of the third class of the society (i.e., agriculturists and herdsmen) [46] (p. 107). Moreover, provided the phoenix pattern depicted on the garment of the king, the whole scene may represent the festival of *Farvardingan* (i.e., a religious ritual at the beginning of spring to celebrate the fertility of the earth) [46] (p. 110). Phoenix was a symbol of the *farr* and was associated with the coming of rain clouds and the fertility of the soil (for a summary of ancient Persian literature on the phoenix, see [46] (pp. 106–110)). In ancient Persian beliefs, the fecundity of the earth and mankind was associated with the increased *farr*, while drought and famine were known to be the result of the decrease or loss of the *farr* (for an example of this belief, see [47]). When having these remarks in mind, the boar hunt relief displays the welfare state of the Sasanian kingdom under Khosrow II, thereby representing his legitimacy due to the prosperity he brought to Iran.

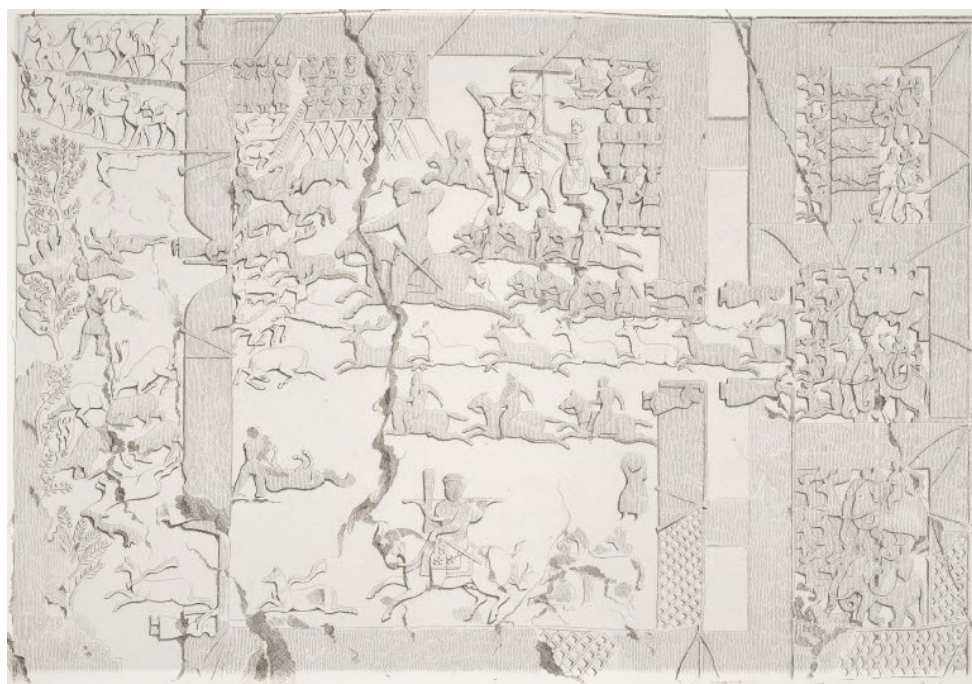
"The sole purpose of Sasanian kingly reliefs is to project the king's *farr* in the most eloquent way possible", Soudavar argues [40] (p. 31). In this respect, Soudavar proposes yet another interesting reading of the hunt reliefs in accordance with his theory of the "doubled *farr*" of Khosrow II. He regards the depiction of elephants as an allusion to India, while the roaming boars in extensive marshy lands imply the conquest of Egypt [40] (pp. 48–49). This pictorial expression of the vastness of Khosrow's territories points out the increase in his *farr* that is also observable in the nimbus around the king's head in the second episode of the relief [40] (pp. 48–49). The depiction of the nimbus may also be a sign of a successful hunt, as this type of imagery was employed in late Sasanian metal plates [41] (p. 183). Last but not least, the depiction of elephants, a non-native species in the heartland of the Sasanian Empire, is considerable. The elephant was a valuable animal for the Sasanian court: troops of elephants proved to be a real threat to the Roman army [48] (p. 92). The illustration of a great number of these large mammals in the service of Khosrow II could yet be another emphasis on his invincibility.

#### 2.4. Deer Hunt Relief

Considering the unfinished state of this relief, it was probably the last carving for the great ayvan project. The narrative style and artistic composition of this relief (Figure 5) are similar to the boar hunt one. The central hunt scene depicts the enclosed Khosrow's paradise, and the two marginal frames on the right and left demonstrate the before and after of the deer hunt. The animated story starts from the right marginal section (facing the relief), in which people, deer, and elephants are depicted in three enclosed areas. Scholars believe that the king is depicted three times in the central scene that should be read vertically downward. Hence, the first episode displays the king entering the scene with a man holding a parasol on his head while a crowd of people accompanies him. The second scene illustrates the king in the practice of archery (or hunting), and the last one shows the end of the hunt [30] (p. 73); [40] (p. 48). Moreover, on the left side, the relief depicts outside of the hunting ground, where folks carry the hunted deer on camels.

A historical survey of the Iranians' visual culture (both pre-Islamic and Islamic eras) demonstrates the shortcomings inherent in the downward reading of the central scene: the most important figures have always been shown above others. Such an order is not observable completely in this scene. On the other hand, as a result of a successful hunt, the increased *farr* should have been demonstrated by means of symbolizing the attachments to the king's body or garments or engraving him in an adorable position in the scene. Nevertheless, such details are not observable here. Thus, it is reasonable to propose another

interpretation of the relief that sheds light on the identity of the man depicted in the center of the relief.



**Figure 5.** Deer hunt relief, rock relief, end of the 6th century CE, Taq-e Bustan, The Great Grotto. Source: Flandin, E.; Coste, P. *Voyage en Perse*, Gide et J. Baudry, Paris, France 1851.

In Iranian visual culture, the king is always depicted in the center of an image. The presence of a heroic figure in a scene alters this artistic attitude: in such a case, the hero may appear at the center, whereas the king (depicted as usual at a larger size) observes the whole landscape from above [49] (pp. 168–169). The missing details of the unfinished deer hunt reliefs (such as the ornaments on garments and headgear) make it hard to precisely identify the three depicted figures. Yet, some noticeable visual evidence and historical accounts fortify the idea that the man at the focal point of the scene is a Sasanian hero. There is a scholarly consensus that the two hunt reliefs of the great ayvan depict different geographical climates: plants, water, and fish in the boar hunt relief are replaced by an empty background, and camels that resemble a desert in the deer hunt relief. Such contrasting scenery reminds us of the theory of “From India to Nile”. In the view of Soudavar, the deer hunt relief implies the “victory of Khosrow II’s general Smbat Bagratuni over the Central Asian Turks, circa 616” [40] (pp. 48–49). Historical accounts also support the idea that the artistic treatment of the deer hunt relief, which resembles an inhospitable region, may refer to the conquest of the northeastern borders of the Sasanian Empire. According to Sebeos history, Khosrow II was so satisfied with the military achievements of his general in Central Asia that he “summoned him to court with great honor and pomp” with an elephant that carried the general’s son [40] (p. 49). Provided the fact that Khosrow did not personally participate in those campaigns, it can be assumed that the horseman in the center of the scene is the Sasanian general, whereas the king himself is depicted on top with attendants and musicians and supervising the heroic acts of his general.

In short, the deer hunt relief should be read in accordance with the boar hunt relief on the opposite wall and two other reliefs on the central wall. In this respect, both hunt scenes illustrate the prosperity of Khosrow’s court, as well as representing him as the protector of the common people [46]. Moreover, both hunt reliefs imply the extension of the Sasanian territory under Khosrow II; the left relief (boar hunt) refers to the victories on the western frontier, and the right one (deer relief) refers to the achievements in the eastern regions (For analyses relating to the sculpted reliefs and iconography, also see [50]. In order to acquire a

fuller understanding of Sasanian art, it is advisable to study the Sasanian production of silver plates, which demonstrate iconographic similarities to the rock reliefs. On this topic, see [51]).

### 3. The Image of Khosrow II on Coins

In the Sasanian era, coinage was not just meant to facilitate commerce but was also a means to achieve propagandist aims. Coins, along with rock reliefs are of special value in the iconographic study of Sasanian royal image [18] (p. 108); [24,44] (p. 41); [52] (p. 41). The centralized Sasanian state had adopted a “well defined” convention of iconographic language for coinage that was comprehensible for the mostly illiterate population [22] (pp. 417–418). Generally speaking, Sasanian coins contain a portrait of the king along with his name and title on the obverse and a fire altar with or without two attendants on the reverse side. By the end of the 5th century, mint marks, including the name of the mint and the regnal year of the king, also appeared on the reverse [20] (p. 1093). Scholars have recognized three conventions in depicting the king on Sasanian coins: 1. in contrast with the “full face or left looking” image of the Parthian kings (i.e., the dynasty ruling Persia (247 BC to 224 AD) before the Sasanians), Sasanian kings were portrayed looking rightward; 2. in order to facilitate the identification of the portrayed king, each ruler was shown with a special crown or headgear; 3. the designation of predetermined criteria for illustrating every detail, particularly the position of the king’s image on the obverse and reverse sides, that eased the understanding of the king’s message [22] (pp. 418–421). While these artistic and political traditions displayed the desire of each king to be recognized as a legitimate ruler similar to his predecessors, the individualistic features of each coin served to build a more comprehensible image of the ruling king.

At least 31 different kings or rulers issued coins during the Sasanian era [53] (p. 816); (For an in-depth study and iconographic comparison of the coins under study, see [54]). Amongst them, Khosrow II was the most prolific one: he centralized the production of coins, and the forged metals transmitted the propagandist aims of his sovereignty all over the Sasanian Empire [55] (p. 132). A vast amount of precious metals were minted during the reign of Khosrow II to finance his ambitious military adventures, such as the long wars with the Roman Empire [2] (p. 145); [20] (p. 1093); [56] (p. 167). According to Göbl’s classification, nine coin types belonging to the reign of Khosrow II can be distinguished [33] (p. 585). Apart from the ceremonial coins, as well as the minor changes that appeared in detail (such as the pellets appearing in the reverse margin of coins), three main groups of coins can be categorized from his time [52] (p. 42); [57] (p. 465).

Generally speaking, changes in the Sasanian coinage reflect important events such as political or military achievements in a symbolic manner [2] (p. 161, note 166); [53] (p. 829). The complicated historical context in which Khosrow’s coins appeared helps researchers to understand their iconographic language more completely. The initial years of Khosrow’s reign were occupied with rebels and conspiracies, which led to his loss and subsequent recapture of power. In the last decades of the 6th century, Bahram Chubin (a general in the service of Khosrow’s father) and Bastam (his maternal uncle) struck coins in their names, [56] (p. 167); [53] (p. 816); [57] (p. 461). This was obvious damage to Khosrow’s prestige: from the beginning of the Sasanian Empire until then, only a Sasanian king was allowed to mint coins under his own name [2] (p. 33); [58] (p. 811). Khosrow II seems to have felt the necessity of compensating for this loss, as he sought a particular propagandist symbolism in his official media [44] (p. 18). It is important to note that Khosrow II’s coinage established a particular iconographic model also employed by his successors, in particular by early Islamic rulers. This shows the spread of the Sasanian iconography after the fall of the dynasty [5] (p. 7); [44] (p. 24); [53] (p. 837).

At an early stage, Khosrow’s coinage followed the principles established by his ancestors; in the first coin type for the first regnal year (Figure 6), Khosrow II is depicted on the obverse with a crown resembling that of his father with a crescent on its top. The word *abzun* (increase) can be seen to the left of the crown, and the king’s name is forged on the



right side. On the outer margin, there is a crescent with a star at 3, 6, and 9 h [57] (p. 461). One may consider this particular arrangement observable on Khosrow's coins as an implication of four geographical directions, showing the king as the "king of four corners of the world", which refers to an "old Mesopotamian idea" [2] (p. 41). On the reverse, a fire altar is depicted in the center with one attendant on either side and a crescent and a star above the altar. On the outer margin, crescents are shown in four directions. In early Sasanian coinage (i.e., coins from the first decades of the Sasanian rule), some circles are observable around the central part of the coin (on both obverse and reverse sides). This particular treatment was out of fashion by the time Khosrow II came into power. In other words, Khosrow's predecessors favored a coinage style in which a single rim on each side of the coin was forged [53] (p. 830). Khosrow revived the age-old tradition of Sasanian coinage. In particular, two circles appear on the obverse and three on the reverse side of the coins forged by Khosrow II. Khosrow's reuse of multiple circles is of importance as both Bahram and Bastam (i.e., his rivals) only used a single rim on their coins. Generally speaking, rings, solar discs, sun bursts, and pearl roundels all symbolize the *farr*, and their appearance on coins refers to an increase in the *farr*. Thus, the emergence of multiple rings on Khosrow's coins is the "equivalent of the legend *farreh-afzun*" [44] (p. 18), meant to display the increase in the king's legitimate power or divine glory to his populace in the most recognizable way.



**Figure 6.** Khosrow II's coin-type I, impression on silver, 590, Tehran, National Museum of Iran.

Khosrow's regaining of power was marked by a change in his crown depicted on the coins belonging to the second regnal year (Figure 7). Two wings were added to the crown while a crescent and a star were added between them. This imagery continued to symbolize Khosrow's crown until the end of his rule. The legend on the left side of the crown gave place to the *farreh afzun* (i.e., may regal splendor increase, or he has increased the regal splendor [56] (p. 461)). Furthermore, stars were added to the crescent of the outer margin on the reverse. Touraj Daryaee, the renowned Iranologist and historian of the Sasanian dynasty, suggests that the wings on Khosrow's crown, which appeared from the second year of his sovereignty onwards, symbolize *Wahram* (i.e., a deity related to victory in ancient Persian beliefs), "whose avatars is the falcon". Since *Wahram's farr* was more than anyone else's, by using his symbol, Khosrow declares his victory over the rebellious general Bahram and displays himself as the most eligible person deserving the throne [52] (pp. 50–53).

The third group of coins dating back to the eleventh and twelfth years onwards reflects minor changes. Here, the headgear of the attendants on the reverse was changed from a bonnet to a crown; this particular type of iconography became the prevalent model from year 12 to year 39 (i.e., the last year of Khosrow's rule). Although the iconography of Sasanian coins on the obverse symbolized the victories of the ruling king and his increased glory [59] (p. 68), depictions on the reverse convey religious meanings (also, see [21], in particular chapters 6, 7, and 8). The fire altar, which is the main part of the reverse side of Sasanian coins, eloquently refers to Zoroastrianism [44] (p. 45). Soudavar reads the two crowned figures on either side of the fire altar as the king on the left and a deity on the

right [22] (p. 420). The whole scene, thus, depicts the king following the Zoroastrian rituals while the deity accepts his deeds. Therefore, the adding of a crescent to the crowns of these figures displays the increase in the *Aryan farr* (i.e., Iranian glory).



**Figure 7.** Khosrow II's coin-type II, impression on silver, 591, Tehran, National Museum of Iran.

#### 4. Conclusions

Khosrow II's eventful reign is reflected in his royal iconography, even though not directly. Khosrow II utilized different types of media to issue his ideal image of the Sasanian king. Coins and rock reliefs served to act as the most important tools for his propagandist aims. Khosrow not only drew upon the well-established iconographic language of the Sasanian dynasty but also sought clarity by putting emphasis on particular features (e.g., power rings, nimbus, etc.). Indeed, Khosrow II revived historical symbols rooted in the ancient Persian and Mesopotamian beliefs that had defined an ideal legitimate king. This explains why on the rock reliefs at Taq-e Bostan, Khosrow II is engraved as the legitimate divine king, receiving not one but two rings of power from the most respectful Zoroastrian deities. The illustration of Khosrow II as a victorious warrior and a good hunter who brought prosperity to his kingdom also served the same purpose. All the details of Khosrow's rock reliefs, such as the nimbus and the symbolic ornaments of his garments, showcase the increase in his divine splendor (i.e., the most important factor in determining a king's right to the throne). Khosrow's rock reliefs were located on a site not accessible by ordinary people; thus, they were not the main beholders of his magnificent propagandist project at Taq-e Bostan. In fact, the audience of these reliefs were the religious and military nobles who had the authority to depose the king. As with other Sasanian rulers, the coins minted by Khosrow II depict the image of the king in association with a number of religious symbols, thereby demonstrating the connection of the royal court with divine powers. Khosrow II's coins spread his image in a diverse society living in vast geography. In conclusion, it can be summarized that Khosrow's personality and kingship are well reflected in his iconographic and propagandist projects. In spite of these grand efforts, Khosrow II could not eventually satisfy the priests and military nobles (i.e., the Sasanian first social class) of his legitimacy to the crown during the final years of this sovereignty. He was then deposed and assassinated due to his defeats by Heraclius, the Roman Emperor. Nevertheless, his image remained the standard for Persian kingship throughout the centuries.

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