

A matter of timing: the modern history of a ‘Sasanian’ silver plate from Rasyh

Andrea Luigi Corsi

1. Introduction

Among the most peculiar representations depicted on ‘Sasanian’ silverware is the scene illustrating what is interpreted as the chariot of the Moon God Mah, the apotheosis of Chosroe, or Chosroe’s mechanical clock (henceforth the ‘lunar chariot’).¹ In fact, outside the numerous attestations of royal hunting scenes, this iconographic theme is found, with stylistic differences and slight iconographic variations, on six silver plates likely made in the Eastern Iranian world and dating to the late or post-Sasanian periods (7th–9th centuries). The occurrence of this scene on such a consistent group of silver plates, along with the puzzling diverging solutions adopted, constitute an interesting art historical case that stimulated considerable interest among scholars.²

¹ The scene, which appears on these plates with slight variations, consists in a central, wheeled structure organised on two registers. On the upper part a large crescent moon supports an enthroned male figure with lunar attributes, usually identified as the Moon God Mah (for an updated study on the iconography of the God Mah, see Michael Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic Iranian World, Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity* 4, Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2014, 98–101). The crescent rests on an arched structure framing a standing figure, generally holding a bow and arrows. The chariot is carried by two pairs of flying zebus. Two erotes occupy the upper sections of the plates, holding the reins harnessing the zebus, as well as a sort of lash. The identification of the scene as a depiction of the chariot of the Moon God Mah was first advanced by Orbeli: see Joseph Orbeli, ‘Sāsānian and Early Islamic Metalwork’ in A.U. Pope and Ph. Ackerman, eds, *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, London, New York: Oxford University Press 1938–39, Vol. I, 736, while the identification of the depiction as the apotheosis of Chosroe is proposed by L’Orange: Hans Peter L’Orange, *Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World*, Institutet for Sammenlignende Kulturforskning, Serie A: Forelesninger XIII. Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1953, 41–43. For the interpretation of the scene as a mechanical clock device, see Ernst Herzfeld, ‘Der Thron des Khosrō. Quellenkritische und ikonographische Studien über Grenzgebiete der Kunstgeschichte des Morgen und Abendlandes (Fortsetzung)’, in *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 41, 1920, 140, 146. Herzfeld’s hypothesis is supported by Boris I. Marshak, *Silberschätze des Orients*, Leipzig: VEB E.A. Seemann Verlag, 1986, 292, n. 195.

² For a recent synthesis on the various interpretations of the scene, see Maria V. Fontana, ‘The Moon Chariot on a Late 10th or Early 11th-Century Slip-Painted Dish’, *Parthica* 24, 2022, fn. 19.

With these premises, and especially because of the recent publication, in 2020 and 2022, of two previously unknown specimens owned by private collectors, this paper was intended to encompass the acquisition histories of each plate. In fact, considering the relevance of previous studies dealing with this iconographic theme and its possible meanings, the initial aim of this paper was to re-examine the circumstances of discovery and to reconstruct the modern vicissitudes associated to these plates, in relation to the different phases of connoisseurship and reception of this class of art objects from the Persianate world. The decision to shift the attention to one plate in particular, i.e., what I will refer to as the ‘Rashy plate’, came about in the process after it began to emerge that its authenticity was highly questionable.

Doubts about the authenticity of several ‘Sasanian’ silver vessels are admittedly legitimate in a consistent number of cases. A reminder, or sometimes warning, frequently attached to this class of luxury objects is the poor provenance information available to scholars. ‘Sasanian’ silver vessels are indeed virtually absent in the archaeological record, and when available they do not display the artistic quality of the luxurious items of the ‘central Sasanian’ production.³ This aspect, besides preventing us from establishing reliable chronological sequences and identifying stylistic changes and developments,⁴ should, and in fact frequently does, alert scholars to the possible non-authenticity of unprovenanced objects.

The scarcity of ‘Sasanian’ silverware in the archaeological record is nonetheless an expectable consequence of the intrinsic value of silver, but especially of the long-lasting use of luxury objects, that frequently goes beyond the chronological, geographical, and socio-cultural context in which they were produced. The circulation of ‘Sasanian’ silverware during the Late Antique and Medieval periods, and thus the possible changes in ownership and use, is a peculiar historical phenomenon. The majority of reliably genuine specimens should indeed be listed in the impressive number of fortuitous discoveries of hoards of ancient precious metal vessels made in the regions west of the Ural Mountain range and in

³ For the definition of ‘central Sasanian’ silver vessels, see Prudence O. Harper and Pieter Meyers, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period. Volume One: Royal Imagery*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981, 127–129. It should be considered, for example, that of the four silver objects listed by Harper in 2000 as coming from controlled excavations in Iran, none is decorated: see P.O. Harper, ‘Sasanian Silver Vessels: The Formation and Study of Early Museum Collections’ in John Curtis, ed, *Mesopotamia and Iran in the Parthian and Sasanian Periods: Rejection and Revival c. 238 BC - AD 642*, London: BMP, 2000, 47–48. The decorated boat-shaped silver bowls discovered in 1997 during maintenance works in the Quri Qaleh cave in Kermanshah (see Sajjad Alibaigi, Alireza M. Bisotuni, Fereshteh Rahimi, Shokouh Khosravi and Hossein Alibaigi, ‘The Late Sasanian Treasury of Qouri Qaleh Cave: Votive Offerings for a Mithra Temple in Kermanshah, Western Iran’, *Iran* 55: 2, 2017, 227–252), based on Harper’s studies on these vessels shape (Harper, ‘Boat-shaped bowls of the Sasanian period’, *Iranica Antiqua* 23, 1988, 331–345), are likely to be of the same category of objects commissioned by local aristocrats in the late or post-Sasanian period. Despite not being part of the ‘central Sasanian’ production, the plate decorated with a hunt scene excavated at the end of the 1990s in Mes-Aynak, Afghanistan, is worthy of mention due to its assured provenance (Patrik Skupniewicz, ‘Scene of Fighting Tigers on a Sasanian Plate from Mes ‘Aynak. Notes On The Composition’, *Acta Archaeologica Lodziensia*, 66:2, 65–84).

⁴ Harper, ‘Sasanian Silver’, 47.

the Caucasus, thus across Russia and Georgia, in the mid-18th to early 20th centuries, as the result of early Medieval trade.⁵

As Harper recently emphasised, from around 1950 various factors facilitated the introduction of forged, or at least suspicious ‘Sasanian’ silverware, into the art market.⁶ This approximate date can be taken as the watershed between the discoveries made earlier, especially on Russian soil, which although lacking adequate archaeological documentation remain the best recorded and most reliable, and those made later in almost unknown circumstances. This phenomenon can be taken as one of the manifestations of the 20th century ‘forgery culture’, as postulated by Oscar W. Muscarella.⁷ Harper’s statement is not without previous concerns, such as those expressed by Maurice Dimand (1892–1986)⁸ and Oleg Grabar (1929–2011),⁹ but at that time the tools to distinguish between forged and authentic ‘Sasanian’ plates were not adequately developed.

Timing, in fact, has been a central component in the scholarly research on this class of objects, and so it will be in the analysis of the Rasy plate and its history. This article will indeed confront this object with the historical and scholarly context in which it surfaced, trying to reconstruct the dynamics that facilitated its introduction in both the art market and the scholarly debate.

However, before entering this analysis, it is worth providing some information on another silver plate, i.e. the Klimova plate, as it will be functional for understanding how the fabrication of the Rasy plate might have been conceived.

⁵ Heterogeneous hoards containing Sasanian, Byzantine, Sogdian, and Khoresmian silver vessels, were found fortuitously and carefully recorded. Rough drawings depicting crowned figures and symbols, scratched on the surface of many of these vessels, in the 9th or 10th centuries, attest the reuse of these objects in shamanistic rituals. Similarly, holes were made on several plates in order to hang them. Luxury objects of various provenances were allegedly traded via Central Asia in exchange of furs. See, on this topic, Maria Mundell-Mango, ‘The Archaeological Context of Finds of Silver in and Beyond the Eastern Empire’, in Nemat Cambi and Emilio Marin, *Acta XIII Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae*, Split - Poreč (25.9. - 1.10.1994), Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, Vol. 1, 222–224; V.P. Darkevich, *Khudozhestvennyi metall Vostoka VIII–XIII vv. Proizvedeniya vostochnoi tsvetiki na territorii evropeiskoi chasti SSSR i Zauralya*, Moscow, 1976, 167–188; Richard N. Frye, ‘Byzantine and Sasanian Trade Relations with Northeastern Russia’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 26, 1972, 263–269; Thomas S. Noonan, ‘The Fur Road and the Silk Road: The Relations between Central Asia and Northern Russia,’ in Csanád Bálint, ed, *Kontakte zwischen Iran, Byzanz und der Steppe im 6 und 7. Jh.*, *Varia archaeologica Hungarica* 9, Budapest, 2000, 285–301; Florin Curta, *The Long Sixth Century in Eastern Europe*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021, 232–243.

⁶ Harper, ‘Sasanian Silver’, 55.

⁷ Oscar W. Muscarella, *The Lie Became Great: The Forgery of Ancient Near Eastern Cultures*, Studies in the Art and Archaeology of Antiquity, Vol. I, Groningen: STYX Publications, 2000, 1–22.

⁸ Maurice Dimand, ‘A Group of Sasanian Silver Bowls’, in Richard Ettinghausen, ed, *Aus der Welt der Islamischen Kunst (Festschrift für Ernst Kühnel)*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 11–14.

⁹ Oleg Grabar, *Sasanian Silver: Late Antique and Early Mediaeval Arts of Luxury from Iran: August-September 1967*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1967, 26–28.

The other four plates of the series are briefly discussed in the appendix at the end of this paper.

1.1 The Klimova plate

The Klimova plate (fig. 1), kept in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg since 1908, and still the most famous example of the 'lunar chariot' series, was recovered on Soviet soil. As with the vast majority of finds from occurred in the same territorial setting, accurate information was collected about the circumstances of the discovery, thereby supplying a 'non-archaeological', albeit trustworthy provenance. Records show that on the 8th and 16th of June 1907 two hoards had been recovered on a terrace near the villages of Klimova and Bol'shaia Serva in the Solikamskii County of the Perm Governorate, west of the Ural Mountain range.¹⁰



Figure 1 The Klimova Plate. Silver gilt plate, State Hermitage Museum, acc. no. S-43. After Fontana, 'The Moon Chariot'.

Measuring 21,6 cm in diameter, with a weight of 985 grams, the plate was hammered into shape from a single sheet of silver and its design made by carving out the background, thereby leaving the figures in low relief. The background was then heavily gilded as well as some of the design elements. A very low ring foot (1,4

¹⁰ The plate of the 'chariot series' belonged to the first hoard, discovered by Kseniia Fedorovna Klimova, which included a silver bucket and other plates, for a total of five objects. The hoard was then transferred, after the payment of 400 rubles, to the Archaeological Commission in the month of August 1907 (Kamila Trever and V. G. Lukonin. *Sasanidskoe srebro: sobranie Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha: khudozhestvenniia kul'tura Irana III-VIII vekov*, Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1987, 125; Darkevich, *Khudozhestvennyi metall Vostoka*, 23). In 1908 the plate finally entered the Imperial Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, later renamed State Hermitage Museum, where is still on display in room 391 of the Winter Palace.

cm high) supports the plate. This object triggered considerable interest for its unusual decorative theme, which offered an unprecedented scene compared to the more frequent attestations of royal hunting depictions. Despite its non-archaeological provenance, which nevertheless unites all the plates of this series, its early discovery and the fact that it is the first documented depiction of the 'lunar chariot' scene made the Klimova plate a 'fossil guide' for interpreting the comparable plates which appeared later on the art market, thereby entering museums and private collections.¹¹

2. The Rashy Plate



Figure 2 The Rashy plate. After Dürr, 'Une nouvelle carafe'.

Among the plates of the lunar chariot series, one in particular is by far the most puzzling (fig. 2). This was included by Nicolas Dürr, curator of the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva, in his publication of a silver gilt jug acquired by the museum

¹¹ The plate from Klimova should date to the 7th or 8th century, while its place of manufacture remains debated. Harper proposes an origin in the east of Iran, recognizing the impossibility of assigning it to a specific cultural context (Harper, *Silver Vessels*, 119). Nicolas Dürr proposes an origin in Tabaristan (N. Dürr, 'Une nouvelle carafe sassanide', *Genava: revue d'histoire de l'art et d'archéologie*, 15, 1967, 28, fn. 12), while Marshak suggests an Iranian origin: Boris I. Marshak, *Istoriya Vostochnoy Toreotiki III–XIII Vv. I Problemy Kul'turnoy Preyemstvennosti* (History of Oriental Toreutics of the 3rd-13th Centuries and Problems of Cultural Continuity), Academy of Culture's Research, St. Petersburg, 2017, 305.

in 1966.¹² Unfortunately, the information provided for the silver plate is extremely limited, and its current location is unknown. According to Dürr, the plate was discovered in the 1960s in the village of Rasy, in the Gilan region.

2.1 Iconographic aspects: between inconsistencies, attempted improvements and a suspicious timing

Before dealing with the problems related to this alleged provenance, it is worth considering the specifics of the Rasy plate. In general, the scene depicted is in line with those found on the other plates of the series, but several aspects appear unusual.¹³ First, only in this case the scene does not occupy the entire plate, but is constrained within a central disk, which appears brighter than the outer circular area in the photograph published by Dürr. I will return to this feature later, when discussing its manufacturing technique.

As for the stylistic and iconographic aspects of this plate, the figures are distinctively elongated, clearly less full-bodied than those on the Klimova plate. On the other hand, the solution adopted for the arrangement of the scene in the Rasy plate is virtually identical to that found on the Klimova plate, except for the enthroned figure. The wingless zebus share identical poses and perspective solutions;¹⁴ the chariot structure is identically conceived on both plates, including the details used to depict the draught poles connecting zebus and wheels. The winged erotes share exactly the same pose and gestures, with the same arm holding the whip turned back behind the head, while the figure within the arch is identical in his posture and attributes as well as similar in dress. All these close similarities acquire a greater meaning if we consider the large variety of solutions adopted for the other four plates. In other words, based on their matching elements, the Klimova and Rasy plates appear to constitute a coherent subgroup of the 'lunar chariot' series.

There is, however, a substantial difference between them, namely the depiction of the enthroned figures. While it is difficult to appreciate details from the photograph published by Dürr, the figure represented on the Rasy plate can be clearly associated with the stereotyped representation of enthroned Sasanian kings with standardised crowns. The fluttering ribbons appearing from behind his shoulders visually replace the crescent that emerges from behind the Moon God on the Klimova plate.¹⁵ Another peculiarity is represented by the banqueting couch resting on winged horses, since none of the other plates of the 'lunar chariot' series shows theriomorphic supports for the throne. Directly comparable solutions can be observed on the gold, rock-crystal and glass bowl in the Bibliothèque nationale de

¹² Dürr, 'Nouvelle carafe', 28, fig. 3.

¹³ For an overview of the other plates of the series, see the appendix below.

¹⁴ See in particular, the same position of the zebus heads, with those on the foreground looking outwards and those on the background facing the chariot, as well as the solution used for the overlapping tails, identical to that on the Klimova plate.

¹⁵ The crescent on the back of the upper character is absent only on the Boston plate, but this absence should be contextualised in the stylistic oddities already pointed out for that dish.

France, and especially on the plate from Strelka.¹⁶ In fact, the enthronement on the Strelka plate could have been the model from which the maker of the Rasy plate took inspiration. This variation appears unusual when considering that the pose of the king on the Rasy plate remains faithful to the solution adopted for the Klimova plate, ignoring the fact that this kind of posture is inconsistent with Sasanian or Late-Sasanian enthronement scenes showing theriomorphic throne supports.¹⁷ The feeling is that the Rasy plate was inspired by the Klimova plate, from which it copied postures and gestures of each depicted subject, while the replacement of the lunar god Mah with the stereotypical depiction of the enthroned king from the Strelka plate seems a deliberate attempt to lend a royal character to the representation, which at the same time reveals a misunderstanding of the Sasanian manner of seating.¹⁸

Considering when the Rasy plate was published, the matching elements with the Klimova plate ultimately make sense. Timing is in fact central: in 1967, when Dürr published the Rasy plate, the Klimova plate was the only widely known specimen of the 'lunar chariot' series,¹⁹ hinting the similarities observed may not be a coincidence, and that the Klimova plate might indeed have served as model for the Rasy plate. The latter's doubtful authenticity is confirmed by other aspects.

2.2 Unsuspected misinterpretations: The Rasy plate and the double shell technique between 1935 and 1977

As is widely recognised, the technique used to fabricate 'Sasanian' silver plates is frequently pivotal in distinguishing genuine pieces from modern forgeries. Although it is impossible to determine the metalworking techniques used to make the Rasy plate, close observation of comparable metalwork may offer clues about how the plate was made. The unusual organization of the plate, consisting in a central medallion encasing the 'lunar chariot' scene surrounded by a large, plain space, can be seen on a consistent number of plates decorated with single animals or fantastic creatures, but also on a restricted number of specimens with royal hunt depictions. This kind of arrangement is common to virtually all the accepted 'Sasanian' forgeries as it usually implies the use of the double-shell technique,

¹⁶ Hubertus von Gall, 'Entwicklung des Thrones in Iran', *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran, Neue Folge*, 4 (1971), 214–215; Prudence O. Harper, 'Thrones and Enthronement Scenes in Sasanian Art', *Iran* 17, 1979, 53–64.

¹⁷ Harper Meyers *Silver Vessels*, 117.

¹⁸ The attempt seems to be successful, as Dürr interpreted the Rasy plate as the original version of an established Sasanian dynastic iconography, correctly depicting the enthroned Chosroe, while the Klimova plate would be a later distorted reinterpretation of the scene (Dürr, 'Une nouvelle carafe', fn. 12).

¹⁹ The other plates, listed in the appendix, were published later than the Rasy plate. The only exception is the plate kept at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, published for the first time in 1962 (Richard N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, fig. 85). However, assuming that the Rasy plate could indeed be a modern forgery it is not possible to give an exact date for its production, as the year 1967 only constitute a *terminus ante quem*. On the other hand, images and descriptions of the Klimova plate were widely available, especially after its inclusion in the Survey of Persian Art.

which is still regarded as the principal factor for identifying ‘Sasanian’ counterfeit vessels.²⁰

Leaving aside plates decorated with single figures, those with central discs decorated with royal hunting scenes are not numerous. The most famous is the large silver plate (36 cm in diameter) allegedly found at Rashy, bought by the Louvre Museum in 1969 and later exposed as forgery (fig. 3).²¹ The same happened with another example, from an unknown private collection, published in 1972 by Dorothy Shepherd (1916–1992).²² Another blatant forgery characterised by this kind of arrangement is a plate formerly owned by the Chrysler Museum of Art in Virginia.²³ We may add to this group a plate, allegedly found in Kerman, owned by the collector and dealer Mohsen Foroughi (1907–1983), which appeared in the long series of exhibitions organised across Europe and America in the 1960s, with its

²⁰ Typical ‘Sasanian’ vessels are generally shaped by hammering a single sheet of metal, while the decoration is made by carving the background, leaving the figures in slight relief, or by crimping previously fabricated elements – worked with a cast or repoussé technique – to the body of the vessel, creating a higher relief. Details were then added by chasing with different kind of tools. The double shell technique consists in the fabrication of two vessels which are joined at the edge by soldering or riveting the rim of the external vessel onto the internal one. The decoration, in this case, is usually accomplished by repoussé and chasing, with the negative design on the back hidden by the addition of the outer shell. Meyers’s demonstration that this technique was alien to Sasanian silversmiths (Pieter Meyers, ‘The Application of X-Ray Radiography in the Study of Archaeological Objects’, in Giles F. Carter, ed, *Archaeological Chemistry–II, Advances in Chemistry Series 171*, American Chemical Society, Washington DC, 1978, 79–96), was accepted and followed in later studies, until present. See, for example: Harper and Meyers, *Silver Vessels*, 147–148; Ann C. Gunter and Paul Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art*, Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1992, 231–236, 253; Robert Cohon, *Discovery and Deceit: Archaeology and the Forger’s Craft*, Kansas City: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1996, 10–15; Muscarella, *The Lie*, 203–204; Aimone, *Wyvern Collection*, 146, n. 36; Spink, *Brasses, Bronze and Silver*, 19.

²¹ This is clearly stated on the Museum website:

<https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010360768>. Accessed 19 Sept. 2022. The plate, purchased from a dealer named Cohen and currently on a long-term loan to the Musée du Cheval in the Château de Saumur, was published in Pierre Amiet, ‘Orfèvre Sassanide au Musée du Louvre’, *Syria*, 1970, 47: 1/2, 1970, 51–64. It was reportedly found at ‘Rashy’, and fabricated with the double-shell technique and the raised decoration was made by repoussé. Like other similar examples is distinctively large (36 cm in diameter,). The name Cohen may correspond to the Nourollah Cohen who sold, just three years before, in 1966, a silver head and a silver gilt bust of ‘Sasanian’ features to the Freer Sackler Gallery, both recognised as forgeries (Gunter and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*, 233-239, n. 46–47), as well as another dubious plate to the Cincinnati Museum (see Oleg Grabar, *Sasanian Silver*, cat. n. 14).

²² Dorothy G. Shepherd, ‘Some Problems of Sassanian Silver’, in *The Memorial Volume of the Vth International Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology: Tehran - Isfahan - Shiraz (11th-18th April 1968)*, Téhéran 1972, 351, fig. 40.

²³ Muscarella, *The Lie*, 204, pl. 529. Closer observation reveals that the plate is a copy of acc. no. 34.33 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with clear iconographic oddities, such as the shape of the king’s head and the style of the mountainous landscape.

impressive dimensions (51 cm in diameter) and especially its absurd weight of 6900 g.²⁴



Figure 3 Forged 'Sasanian' plate from the collection of the Musée du Louvre, acc. no. AO 22994. After Amiet, 'Orfèvre sassanide'.

²⁴ The plate first appeared in the exhibition held at the Petit Palais in Paris, from October 1961 to January 1962 (see Roman Ghirshman, *Sept mille ans d'art en Iran, Petit Palais, Octobre 1961-Janvier 1962*, Paris, 1962, cat. N. 771), for which Mohsen Foroughi was also co-organiser. The plate was then included in following exhibitions in Europe, such as those in Essen in 1962, Milan in 1963, before being circulated by the Smithsonian Institution in eight USA locations between 1964 and 1965 (Smithsonian Institution, *7000 Years of Art in Iran: Circulated by the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, 1964*). It is interesting to read that 12 objects belonging to the Foroughi Collection had been withdrawn from the exhibition due to their doubtful authenticity. The plate was obviously not among these dubious pieces, as there was no awareness about the technical problems related to the double-shell technique yet. Back in Europe, the plate took part in the exhibition at the Musée Rath in Geneva, again under the auspices of R. Ghirshman and M. Foroughi (*Musée Rath, Trésors de l'ancien Iran: Musée Rath, Genève, 8 juin - 25 septembre 1966*, Genève: ATAR, 1966, cat. n. 726). It is difficult to locate the whereabouts of this artefact after the Iranian revolution. Since it is not included among the objects donated to the Louvre Museum between 1957 and 1977 by Foroughi (Pierre Amiet and Philippe Gignoux, 'Mohsen Foroughi (1907–1984)', *Studia Iranica* 15: 2, 1986, 245–248), it may be kept in the National Museum in Tehran as the Foroughi collection was confiscated after the revolution (see Richard N. Frye, 'Forūgī, Moḥsen ii. Art Collection', in *Encyclopædia Iranica* Vol. X, Fasc. 2, pp. 115–116).

Based on the arrangement shared with these plates, there is a high possibility that also the plate from Rashy was made using the same technique, namely a double-shell technique, and should therefore be included in this group of modern forgeries also on technical grounds.

Again, the timing was pivotal in facilitating the introduction of these objects into the dynamics of the art market. The first explicit claim that the double-shell technique was not used by Sasanian silversmiths, thus indicative of modern forgeries, was made by Pieter Meyers (b. 1941) during the Sixth Symposium on Archaeological Chemistry in 1977.²⁵ Meyers's claim finally rectified the inclusion of this type of manufacture in the repertoire of Sasanian silversmiths made by Joseph Orbeli (1887–1961) and Kamilla V. Trever (1892–1974) in 1935,²⁶ and especially by Orbeli in the *Survey of Persian Art*.²⁷ Therefore, for more than forty years this technique had been regarded as a marker of authenticity for Sasanian silver plates, causing confusion among scholars, but also among modern forgers.²⁸ The problem is amplified by the large success that these artefacts started to achieve from the 1930s in western museums and private collections. The 1930s can be indeed regarded as the golden decade for the historiography of Persian art in Europe and America. The renowned exhibitions (Philadelphia, 1926; London, 1931; Leningrad, 1935), as well as the publication of the *Survey of Persian Art* in 1938–1939, raised new awareness also on Sasanian metalwork.²⁹ This trend continued, and possibly increased in intensity after the 1939–45 war, culminating in another series of important exhibitions circulating in Europe and America in the 1960s.³⁰ It was during these forty years, with the sole interruption of the 1939–45 war, that an increasing number of allegedly Sasanian silverwares, later revealed as forgeries, started to circulate in response to the growing demand of the art market. The impressive amount of Sasanian silver finds occurred in uncontrolled excavations in Iran, especially in Mazandaran and Gilan, caused surprise, but also scepticism among scholars, moreover if one considers the few objects recovered in Iran before 1930 in

²⁵ Meyers, 'X-Ray Radiography', 84–90. Considering the importance of technical analyses for the identification of modern forgeries, the fact that the first studies devoted to this topic appeared consistently later than the first publications of silverware is itself clearly central. William T. Chase's pioneering article published in 1968 can be regarded as the first detailed technical analysis of Sasanian silverware which, as he foresaw, would have been a potentially useful approach towards a differentiation between genuine Sasanian pieces, later copies and modern forgeries (William T. Chase, 'The Technical Examination of Two Sasanian Silver Plates', *Ars Orientalis* 7, 1968, 75–93).

²⁶ Joseph Orbeli and Kamilla V. Trever, *Sasanidskii metall: khudozhestvennyye predmety iz zolota, serebra i bronzy*, Moscow and Leningrad, 1935.

²⁷ Orbeli, 'Sāsānian and Early Islamic Metalwork', 750–751. Orbeli's arguments are largely followed by Shepherd, 'Some Problems'.

²⁸ Meyers, 'X-Ray Radiography', 87; Cohon, *Discovery and Deceit*, 14–15.

²⁹ The Hermitage collection of 'Sasanian' silverware was indeed exhibited at the London exhibition in 1931 thanks to Pope's friendship with Orbeli (Yuka Kadoi, 'A Historiographical Inquiry into the Falsification of Persian Art, in Olga Yastrebova, ed, *Proceedings of the Eighth European Conference of Iranian Studies, Volume II Studies on Iran and the Persianate World after Islam*, Saint Petersburg: The State Hermitage Publishers, 2020, 123).

³⁰ See fn. 32.

opposition to the surprisingly rich discoveries made earlier on Russian soil.³¹ The concern about the potential presence of modern forgeries among these newly found artefacts in Iran was openly expressed by Oleg Grabar, and in fact a considerable number of forgeries was included in the 1967 Michigan exhibition he curated due to the lack of adequate tools for distinguishing between authentic and forged silverwares before 1977.³² Timing, again, was fundamental, as forgers and associated dealers³³ took advantage, albeit unconsciously, of this knowledge gap, proving to be aware of the desiderata.³⁴ It must be said, however, that this unconsciousness came as a blessing in disguise: the forgers' employment of the double shell technique, clearly the most convenient and easy to handle among those listed by Orbeli, happened to be a double-edged sword, as it is now the main tool available to scholars in order to distinguish forgeries from authentic works, thanks to Meyers's technical studies.

2.3 *Patterns of provenance fabrications*

The dubious iconography and the possible use of the double-shell technique for the Rashy plate are accompanied by its suspicious provenance. Dürr reports that the plate was found near the village of Rashy, in Gilan, during digging activities conducted for commercial purposes by private enterprises, which seemingly unearthed a large number of silver and gold objects from Parthian and Sasanian burial contexts.³⁵ Amiet, in turn, speaks frankly of clandestine looting in the Rashy necropolis, rather than 'commercial' activities.³⁶

Two recognised forgeries, which appeared on the art market practically at the same time when the Rashy plate was published, were labelled as coming from Rashy/Rashy in Gilan. The abovementioned plate bought by the Louvre in 1969 is the most interesting due to the previously discussed visual similarities shared with the Rashy plate depicting the 'lunar chariot' scene. Another possible modern forgery allegedly found at Rashy is a silver rhyton acquired by the Seattle Art Museum in 1968,³⁷ for which Oscar W. Muscarella (1931-2022) proposed the identical rhyton found in Kul Olba as the direct model from which it was copied.³⁸

³¹ Dürr, 'Une nouvelle carafe', 25–26.

³² Grabar, *Sasanian Silver*, 26–28. For a list of forgeries in the Michigan exhibition, see Muscarella, *The Lie*, 203; Judith A. Lerner, 'Arthur Upham Pope and the Sasanians' in Yuka Kadoi, ed, *Arthur Upham Pope and a New Survey of Persian Art*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016, fn. 145, 150. The problems associated with post-WWII finds is highlighted also by Harper (Harper, 'Sasanian Silver', 55).

³³ Cohon, *Discovery and Deceit*, 11, on the possible collaboration between dealers and craftsmen in producing counterfeit plates.

³⁴ See for instance, the perfectly timed sale of a silver bust to the Freer Gallery of Art, which appeared on the market immediately after The Met acquired its famous silver head of a king, acc. n. 65.126 (Gunter and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*, 237).

³⁵ Dürr, 'Une nouvelle carafe', 27–28; C.L. Goff et al., 'Survey of Excavations in Iran during 1965-66', *Iran* 5, 1967, 141.

³⁶ Amiet, 'Orfèvre Sassanide', 51.

³⁷ Seattle Art Museum, 'Annual Report of the Seattle Art Museum: Sixty-Third Year, 1968', *Seattle Art Museum Libraries: Digital Collections*, 58. Accessed September 16, 2022, <https://samlibraries.omeka.net/items/show/41>.

³⁸ Muscarella, *The Lie*, 52.

In this scenario, the context of discovery of the Rashy plate here discussed can be taken as the third element raising doubts about its authenticity. According to Muscarella, the provenance 'Rashy' is in fact a forged provenance.³⁹ Seen from a broader regional perspective, the situation is more articulated and might have involved a systematic practice of introducing forgeries into the art market, likely aside genuine pieces, on a wider scale.

It should be underlined that, as sometimes wrongly assessed, the toponym 'Rashy' does not coincide with the city of Rasht. The small village of Rashy is situated approximately 50 km to the south of Rasht, closer to the city of Rudbar on the Safid Rud. More significantly, Rashy lies in close vicinity to the ancient sites of Marlik Tepe and Amlash, as well as Daylaman. The site of Marlik is particularly interesting since it has been scientifically excavated since 1961 by Ezat O. Negahban but, already before this controlled activities, Marlik and other sites in the Gilan region were interested by plunder operations and private commercial diggings that brought to light artefacts that ended up on the art market.⁴⁰ According to Amiet, the 1961 exhibition '7000 Ans d' Art Iranienne', and implicitly the entire series of subsequent exhibitions, saw the success of Gilan as a new province in the field of Iranian art, although illegally excavated objects from the same region were already circulating before this date.⁴¹ The increasing collectors' demand for the peculiar objects of the so-called Marlik and Amlash cultures raised the price and stimulated the introduction of new objects, including a number of forgeries or modern pastiches.⁴²

On a smaller scale, the situation with the artifacts from 'Rashy' may have been similarly contrived. The event that possibly contributed to the affirmation of this toponym as a reliable label of authentication, in other words a suitable forged provenance, was the discovery, in the early 1960s, of a famous set of five silver gilt jugs, contended by several major museums between 1963 and 1966.⁴³ At the same

³⁹ Muscarella, *The Lie*, 52.

⁴⁰ Pierre Amiet, 'Antiquités Iraniennes récemment acquises par le Musée du Louvre', *Syria*, 45: 3/4, 1968, 250.

⁴¹ Amiet 'Antiquités Iraniennes', 249–250 in particular.

⁴² The existence of counterfeit items with forged provenances 'Marlik' or 'Amlash' was already known to Amiet (Amiet 'Antiquités Iraniennes', 249). See also Muscarella, *The Lie*, 31–42; U. Löw, 'Kunsthandel und Fälschungsproblematik', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologen-Verbandes* 24: 1, 1993, 36–44.

⁴³ According to Dürr, 'Une nouvelle carafe', 29, the discovery was not part of the aforementioned commercial activities, but rather a fortuitous find made by a local farmer some years before the discovery of the plate here discussed. Dürr reported that the Geneva Museum was able to secure the last vessel remaining available, while another one was acquired by a private collection. As for the last three objects, one was purchased in 1965 by the Louvre, acc. no. MAO 426 (see Amiet, 'Orfèvre Sassanide', 51, 58, where he refers to the village of Reshy/Rashy). The vessel sold by Khalil Rabenou to the Walters Art Gallery in 1963 (acc. n. 57.1923) should be the fourth of this series, although it is reported as from Daylaman (<https://art.thewalters.org/detail/8037/bottle-2/> accessed 20 Sept. 2022). The fifth, according to Dürr, should be located in the Cleveland Museum of Art, and probably corresponds to acc. no. 1962.294. However, neither Shepherd nor the museum website give information about the provenance of this bottle (see Shepherd, 'Sasanian Art in Cleveland',

time, indeed, besides the Louvre plate and the Seattle Art Museum rhyton previously discussed, other dubious specimens increased the record of objects reportedly found in this area, such as the questionable silver vessels sold to museums or acquired by collectors after being supposedly found in unclear circumstances in the areas of Rudbar⁴⁴ and Daylaman.⁴⁵

That this approach in fabricating forged provenances constituted a recurrent pattern can be somewhat verified in another, earlier affair. Two Sasanian silver objects (a plate and a bottle) entered the British Museum collection in 1897.⁴⁶ As reported by Ormonde M. Dalton (1866–1945), the artifacts were allegedly found together in a copper vase in Mazandaran in 1893.⁴⁷ Such an early find, made even before the publication of Smirnoff's 1909 catalogue of the Russian finds, leaves little doubt as to the genuineness of both the objects and their circumstances of discovery, as they would be situated at a time when there was inadequate knowledge of, and therefore little demand for these artefacts to justify a modern production. It may not be a coincidence, then, that a treasure of (at least) nine objects was found in similar conditions, namely inside a chest in Mazandaran, some decades later, when the enthusiasm for these objects was at its apex.⁴⁸ According to Lerner, at least six of

The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art, Apr. 1964, Vol. 51: 4, 83–92), only indicating that it was donated to the museum in 1962 by Katharine Holden Thayer (1898–1985).

⁴⁴ Two are in the Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis in Brussels (Ernie Haerneck, avec note complémentaire de G. Genin, 'Trois récipients inédits de style sasanide', *Iranica antiqua* 16, 1981, 161–172). The first, allegedly from Rahmatabad, Gilan and acquired by the museum in 1963 (acc. N. IR.1194), was fabricated with the double-shell technique. The authors, who appear sensitive to the problem of fakes, claim that double-shell plates were not unusual in 7th-century Sasanian silverware production (Haerneck, 'Trois récipients', 170–171), attributing this statement to Chase's article (Chase, 'The Technical Examination'), even though no such claim was made by Chase. It is therefore clear that both authors were not aware of the recently published essay by Meyers (Meyers, 'X-Ray Radiography') and his claims about the double-shell technique. The second plate, made with a copper and silver alloy and allegedly found in Rustamabad, Gilan, was acquired by the same Brussels museum in 1964 (acc. N. IR.1254). It is formed by two parts consisting of a disk soldered to a hammered plate. Genin, in his complementary note, proposed that the piece is a modern assemblage of two ancient objects (Haerneck, 'Trois récipients', 171) but there is no proof to confirm the authenticity of the two parts.

⁴⁵ A dubious piece from Daylaman, part of the Collection Jean-Paul Barbier was offered at an auction at the Hotel Drouot in 1970 (Collection Jean Paul Barbier Genève, *Argenterie de la Perse Antique Achemenide, Sassanide et Post-Sassanide, Vente aux enchères publiques, Paris Hôtel Drouot*, Lausanne 1970, 14, cat. n. 8A) after taking part in the 1966 Geneva exhibition (Musée Rath, *Trésors*, n. 727). The plate is comparable in style, and seemingly in technique, to acc. N. F1958.7 in the Freer Sackler Gallery, which is an acknowledged modern forgery (Gunter and Jett, *Ancient Iranian Metalwork*, 230–232).

⁴⁶ The plate (acc. N. 1963,1210.3) and the bottle (acc. N. 124094) are both bequests of Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826–1897), Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities and Ethnography at the British Museum.

⁴⁷ Ormonde M. Dalton, *The Treasure of the Oxus with other Objects from Ancient Persia and India*, London: Oxford University Press, 1905, 125–127.

⁴⁸ The discovery was enthusiastically advertised by A.U. Pope some years later: see Arthur U. Pope, 'The First Photographs of a Group of Outstanding Sasanian Silvers', in *The Illustrated London News*, Feb. 11 1950, 206–207.

these nine objects are modern forgeries,⁴⁹ likely made between 1930 and 1947.⁵⁰ The critical point of this story is the direct involvement of eminent figures in the field of Persian art history, such as Arthur Upham Pope (1881–1969) and Roman Ghirshman (1895–1979), in the promotion of these pieces. The latter, for instance, wrote an article spending enthusiastic words on one of these plates that was sold in 1947 to the Nelson-Atkins Museum and later exposed as forgery.⁵¹ While Ghirshman’s consciousness in promoting a problematic artefact is difficult to prove, he apparently was not personally involved in its sale. Ghirshman’s article was indeed published slightly after the plate was acquired by the Nelson-Atkins Museum.⁵² However, an episode about this plate may be illustrative of the provenance-associated issues of those years. According to Ghirshman, the plate was acquired in Baku by the dealer (Paul Mallon?) who later sold it to the Nelson-Atkins Museum.⁵³ He thereby places the discovery of the plate in the Caucasus region based on the vicinity of the city of Baku. This act is not meaningless, as it constitutes an attempt to associate this find to the rich (and mostly genuine) discoveries made in unsuspected times on Georgian and Russian soil, thus trying to provide a sort of legitimization to the plate. Ghirshman’s attempt is however discredited by Pope,⁵⁴ who associates the plate to the ‘Mazandaran hoard’, proving how easy it was to manage and manipulate information about the provenance of dubious artefacts.⁵⁵ The case of Pope’s article, or better advertisement, appeared on the *Illustrated London News* in 1950 reveals, on the other hand, his involvement in the circulation of these fakes, even though we must give him the benefit of doubt about his

⁴⁹ Lerner, ‘Arthur Upham Pope’, 215. One of them is the plate sold by the French dealer Paul Mellon to the Nelson Atkins Museum in 1947 (acc. n. 47-47), exposed as a forgery in 1996 by Robert Cohon, at that time Curator of the Ancient Art Department in the same museum (see Cohon, *Discovery and Deceit*, 8–12). Clearly made by the same forger are the plates illustrated in Pope, ‘The First Photographs’, figs. 1–2. Another possible forgery is the plate owned by the dealer Fahim J. Kouchakji (1886–1976) depicting a royal hunt seemingly representing the Sasanian king Kavadh (Pope, ‘The First Photographs’, fig. 5). This piece was displayed at the Persian Art exhibition held in Rome in 1956 (see Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, *Mostra d’Arte Iranica, Roma, Palazzo Brancaccio Giugno-Agosto 1956*, Milano, 177, cat. n. 254), but I was not able to track its location after that date. According to Pope, one of the plates from this Mazandaran hoard was brought to the Tehran National Museum. The plate, weighing 1.206 g and depicting a winged horse set in a central medallion, displayed at the Geneva exhibition ‘Tresors d’Orient’ could be another example of this forger’s work based on its similarities with the Nelson-Atkins plate (see Musée Rath, *Trésors*, 127, cat. n. 728).

⁵⁰ The Nelson Atkins Museum reports a date of production between 1930 and 1950, but their plate was acquired in 1947. According to Cohon, many of these modern forgeries were fabricated before the 1939–45 war (Cohon, *Discovery and Deceit*, 11). As regards the acquisition of Persian art objects by the Nelson-Atkins Museum before the 1939–45 war, and A. U. Pope’s involvement, see Kimberly Masteller, ‘Arthur Upham Pope and Collecting Persian Art for Kansas City’, in Yuka Kadoi, ed, *Arthur Upham Pope and a New Survey of Persian Art*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016, 267–290.

⁵¹ Roman Ghirshman, ‘Notes Iraniennes I. Un plat en argent doré’, *Artibus Asiae* 10: 2, 1947; Cohon, *Discovery and Deceit*, 8–12.

⁵² Cohon, ‘Discovery and Deceit’, 9.

⁵³ Ghirshman, ‘Notes Iraniennes I’, 98.

⁵⁴ Pope, ‘The First Photographs’, 206.

⁵⁵ On this specific case of forged provenance, see Muscarella, *The Lie*, 204.

awareness about the Mazandaran hoard pieces authenticity.⁵⁶ Two of the six illustrated objects were indeed sold by Pope to the director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Edward Jackson Holmes (1873-1950) in 1949 (one of them clearly made by the same 'artist' that fabricated the Nelson Atkin forgery),⁵⁷ while the other three were still owned by renowned art dealers, among them Pope's friend and associate, Khalil Rabenou (1905-1961).⁵⁸

3. Final Remarks: The Rasy Plate After 1966

Returning to the Rasy plate, the similar circumstances of its discovery might have led to a similar fate. After Dürr's publication, the plate disappeared from scholarly publications, and it is only cited in a few works as one of the various examples of the depiction of the 'lunar chariot'. It is significant that it was not part of the exhibition 'Trésors de l'Ancien Iran' held at the Musée Rath in Geneva 1966, which included a consistent number of silver objects allegedly found at Rasy at the same time as the 'lunar chariot' plate. The possible location of this plate in Geneva is indicated in several later publications, but these references could be based on the association of this plate with Dürr and his acquisition of the silver gilt jug in 1966.⁵⁹ The latter was in fact probably purchased shortly before the exhibition, as it was included as one of the highlights of 'Sasanian' toreutics.⁶⁰ Objects from Rasy were popular in the 1960s among Swiss dealers, such as Elie Borowski (1913-2003, based in Basel),⁶¹ and collectors, like Marguerite Ansari (Geneva)⁶², thus before and after the Geneva exhibition. Also the Frankfurt-based art dealer Saeed Motamed purchased silver objects presumably found in Rasy,⁶³ while the collection of 'Sasanian' silvers owned by Jean-Paul Barbier (1930-2016) was largely composed of objects allegedly recovered in Daylaman, Gilan.⁶⁴ The plate could have entered one

⁵⁶ On Pope and the problem of falsification of Persian art, involving more famous art works such as the Alp Arslan salver and the illustrated copy of the *Andarz-nāmah*, see Kadoi, 'A Historiographical Inquiry'.

⁵⁷ Pope, 'The First Photographs', fig. 2. The plate (acc. N. 56.582) was acquired by E.J. Holmes in 1949 and donated to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts by his wife in 1958.

⁵⁸ Lerner, 'Arthur Upham Pope', 183–192, 215. The plate owned by Khalil Rabenou (Pope 'The First Photographs', fig. 1) is one of the forgeries mentioned by Lerner. Rabenou was associated with other forgeries, or pieces enhanced in modern times, interestingly labelled as well as 'from Mazandaran'. An example is the bronze plate acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (acc. n. 60.141) in 1960 (Prudence O. Harper, 'The Senmurv', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 20: 3, 1961, 95–97), that was later revealed to be an ancient plate decorated in modern times to raise its price:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/325078>, accessed 18 Aug. 2022.

⁵⁹ Harper and Meyers, *Silver Vessels*, 117, fn. 88; Aimone, *Wyvern Collection*, 229. It is nonetheless sure that the plate was not acquired, as it was the case with the silver gilt jug, by the Geneva museum (personal communication, Gabriella Lini, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, 23 Sept. 2022, confirmed by the former curator of the museum, Marielle Martiniani-Reber, personal communication, 28 Nov 2022).

⁶⁰ Musée Rath, *Tresors*, 126, cat. n. 715, pl. VI.

⁶¹ Musée Rath, *Tresors*, 131, cat. n. 775.

⁶² Musée Rath, *Tresors*, 131, cat. n. 773.

⁶³ Information on Saeed Motamed are available on the British Museum website:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG62628> accessed 30.01.2023.

⁶⁴ Jean Paul Barbier Genève, *Argenterie*, 5.

of these private collections,⁶⁵ but the search for its current location did not give positive results. The possibility that it never reached Switzerland and remained in Iran, given its absence in the Geneva exhibition, should also be considered.

There is anyway a high probability that this plate will resurface, as often happens for both authentic and dubious pieces. Illustrative, in this sense, is the notorious case of the plate allegedly found in Ardabil in 1915. Owned by the Feuarent Frères, it was published in 1926 by Louis Delaporte as a Sasanian plate depicting Bahram Gur hunting lions.⁶⁶ After its appearance in the *Survey of Persian Art*,⁶⁷ the plate vanished like the Rashy plate here discussed. As later pointed out by Harper, the Ardabil plate is clearly not Sasanian, but rather a deliberate forgery or an archaicising object imitating Sasanian style.⁶⁸ It resurfaced (and ended unsold) at an auction in 2007, with a revised date of the 7th-8th century based on a questionable stylistic analysis accompanied with the 'authentication' from Delaporte's 1926 article, therefore ignoring Harper's claim.⁶⁹ It is hoped that the Rashy plate will resurface, thereby allowing us to verify what has been argued in this contribution, and to establish its place, whether in the production of authentic luxurious 'Sasanian' silverware, or in the mid-20th century 'forgery culture'.⁷⁰

Appendix follows ...

⁶⁵ Records of these private collections are archived in the Media Center for Art History of the Columbia University (https://learn.columbia.edu/offsite-photo-collection?search_api_fulltext=Rashy) but the Rashy plate is not included (personal communication, Gabriel Rodriguez, Digital Curator, Media Center for Art History, Columbia University, 18 Aug. 2022).

⁶⁶ Louis Delaporte, 'Une Coupe sassanide de Bahram Gour', *Arethuse* 3, 1926, 143–148.

⁶⁷ Orbeli, 'Sāsānian and Early Islamic Metalwork', 730.

⁶⁸ Harper, 'Sasanian Silver', 54–55.

⁶⁹ Boisgirard & Associés, *Arts d'Orient*, 36–37, n. 70. The plate's entry was written by Annie Kevorkian, granddaughter of the renowned art dealer Hagop Kevorkian,

⁷⁰ For a definition of this concept, see Muscarella, *The Lie*, 1–22.

APPENDIX

This section presents brief descriptions of the other four plates belonging to the 'Chariot series', accompanied by information on their provenance, acquisition, and current location.

4.1 The Wyvern Collection Plate



Figure 4 Silver plate, partly gilded. Wyvern Collection, London. After Aimone *The Wyvern Collection*.
Photo Matt Pia; © The Wyvern Collection – UK.

The Wyvern Collection plate constitute an exception in this list, since it was actually found before the Klimova plate, but different circumstances kept it outside the scholarly discourse for more than a century. The plate was indeed only recently published by Marco Aimone in the third volume dedicated to the Wyvern Collection, London.⁷¹ Measuring 24,7 cm in diameter and weighting 783 g, the plate

⁷¹ Marco Aimone, *The Wyvern Collection: Byzantine and Sasanian Silver Enamels and Works of Art*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2020, 227–229, n. 61. The plate should be likely assigned to the same cultural environment that produced, in the 9th or 10th century according to Marshak, the plate found in 1909 at Anikovskaia, in the Perm governorate (Marshak, *Silberschätze*, 320–324, n. 209–211), and therefore its similar and possibly earlier model found at Nildin in 1985 (Gemuev, 'Another Silver Dish from the North Ob Region', *Proceedings of the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, series on history, philology, and philosophy*, 3: 1, 1988, 39–48). To these plates, it may be also added the plate found at Malaya Ob (see Arkady V. Baulo, 'Silver Plate from the Malaya Ob', *Archaeology, Ethnology &*

was made with the same technique employed for the Klimova plate, with gilding covering the carved background and specific relief elements.

According to the ownership record, the object was acquired in Russia by a Russian-Greek family in the end of the 19th century and passed on, by descent, to a related Greek family of the Ottoman Empire that moved to London for business in 1906.⁷² Since then, the plate has not left England. It was acquired in 2017 from the dealer, John Eskenazi (b. 1949), by the owner of the Wyvern Collection.

What this second plate reveals is both interesting and alarming. That the plate was acquired in Russia at such an early date suggests that it belongs to the large group of occasional discoveries on Russian soil, likely found in circumstances similar to those of the Klimova plate.⁷³ The first publication of this object, which appeared more than one hundred years after its finding, indicates that despite the large number of accurately documented and ‘controlled’ discoveries in the Ural region, a certain number might have escaped the control of the Archaeological Commission and entered the art market. Considering the great number of silver objects that flowed into the collection of the Imperial Hermitage Museum and other Russian museums, the number of ‘disappeared’ objects, owned by collectors and not yet published, might be quite relevant.⁷⁴

4.2 *The Khalili Collection Plate*

This plate of the ‘lunar chariot’ series is owned by another London collector, Nasser David Khalili (b. 1945), and was published in 2022.⁷⁵ The plate measures 18,5 cm in diameter and is made from a single sheet of silver, hammered to shape, with a low ring foot soldered at the base. Unlike the other plates of this series, the decoration is

Anthropology of Eurasia, 1: 4, 2000, 143–153). Similarities include the type of headgear worn by the ruler on the Wyvern and Malaya Ob plates, as well as the hairstyle and the eyes without an iris. The helmet of the figure below the arched structure corresponds to those depicted on the Nildino and Anikovskaia plates. Another comparison for the depiction of the hairstyle, crown, and eyes depiction can be found on a plate of unknown provenance depicting a royal banqueting scene attributed to post-Sasanian Sogdiana (Marschak, *Silberschätze*, 48–50, nos. 30, 32).

⁷² Aimone, *Wyvern Collection*, 227. Additional information on the provenance and ownership history of this plate were kindly shared by Marco Aimone.

⁷³ A small hole on the upper part of the object, and the seemingly intentional engravings made in relatively bare areas further confirms this provenance, as it associates it with several other examples found in the Urals reworked in the 9th or 10th century, or possibly later, for ritualistic purposes (see fn. 5).

⁷⁴ While this is not the case with the Wyvern Collection plate, silver objects might have been part of the Hermitage sales to the Antikvariat that took place in the interwar period (Yuka Kadoi, ‘The Study of Persian Art on the Eve of the 1939–45 war: The Third Congress of Iranian Art and Archaeology in 1935’, in Iván Szántó and Yuka Kadoi, eds, *The Reshaping of Persian Art: Art Histories of Islamic Iran and Beyond*, Pilicsaba: The Avicenna Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, 2019, 120–121).

⁷⁵ Michael Spink, *Brasses, Bronze and Silver of the Islamic Lands*, The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art XI, London: The Nour Foundation, 2022, 42, n. 6.

in repoussé, which has left the design negative on the back of the plate.⁷⁶ Its subject remains largely faithful to those of the other plates, but several elements significantly diverge.⁷⁷

4.3 *The Boston Plate*

The silver gilt plate kept in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (acc. 57.587) is, from an iconographic point of view, possibly the strangest of the 'lunar chariot' series. Almost nothing is known about its provenance, and the odd features, such as the enthroned figure, do not help in locating the cultural context in which it was manufactured. Moreover, the plate displays several iconographic inconsistencies, suggesting that its maker may not have been fully aware of the significance of the scene.⁷⁸ According to the available information, the plate entered the Boston museum collection in 1957,⁷⁹ and was acquired from the New York art dealer, A. Khan Rahimi.⁸⁰ Considering the timing in which it was introduced in the art market and the highly unusual features of its decoration, suspect can be raised also about this object.

4.4 *The Surena Plate*

The Surena plate is representative of the world of auction houses. The object, a silver gilt plate measuring 23 cm in diameter, set on a low ring base and apparently decorated by repoussé like the dish from the Khalili collection, was (and possibly still is) owned by the Surena Collection in London since the late 1970s or early 1980s.

⁷⁶ The repoussé technique employed for the decoration is quite unusual for this kind of objects and was taken, together with the stylization of the figures represented, as indicator for its provenance outside central Iran (possibly Afghanistan or Central Asia), and its 7th century date (Spink, *Brasses, Bronze and Silver*, 42). It should be noted that the same technique is frequently attested on boat-shaped vessels, such as those recovered in the Quri Qaleh Cave (Alibaigi et al., 'The Late Sasanian Treasury of Qouri Qaleh Cave', 238–249).

⁷⁷ See, for instance, the bottle held by the enthroned figure replacing the sword attested on the other five dishes, the unidentified object held by the figure standing below the crescent, and the presence of seemingly only two zebus.

⁷⁸ Besides the unusual outfit of the personages, the inconsistencies include the objects held by the enthroned figure as both the spear in his right hand and the sceptre with a globular finial are not attested in other representations, as well as the absence of solar attributes in connection to the upper figure, which are present on each plate of the series besides this one. Another element suggesting the misunderstanding of the representation is the odd solution adopted for depicting the chariot structure: there is indeed no connection between the chariot and the wheels, and in fact the latter seem decorative elements tied to the zebus rather than a functional part of the structure. Also the unidentified creature on the right is inconsistent with the scene depicted on the other plates.

⁷⁹ Kojiro Tomita, 'Department of Asiatic Art', *Annual Report for the Year 1957 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)*, 82, 1957, 21.

⁸⁰ <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/155888/plate?ctx=0352a622-6378-4188-a8d1-b714283447bd&idx=2> The files associated to A. Khan Rahimi contain: 'c/o Hassan Khan Monif' (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, personal communication, Victoria Reed, Monica S. Sadler Senior Curator for Provenance, Sep. 1, 2022). Monif was himself an art dealer operating in New York (Marylin Jenkins-Madina, 'Collecting the 'Orient' at the Met: Early Tastemakers in America', *Ars Orientalis* 30, 2000, 73) and Chicago (Yuka Kadoi, 'The Rise of Persian Art Connoisseurship: Arthur Upham Pope and Early Twentieth-Century Chicago' in *Arthur Upham Pope and a New Survey of Persian Art*, Leiden – Boston: Brill 2016, 239–240).

Information on previous owners or its provenance is not available at the present state, but it is not surprising due to the history of the collection.⁸¹ The object was offered on sale in 2007 by Boisgirard & Associates at the Hotel Drouot in Paris⁸² and then in 2012 by Bonhams in London, with an estimated price between £120,000 and £150,000, but apparently went unsold both times. Given the available information, however, it cannot be excluded that the plate was finally sold after 2012, but it was not possible to verify this.



Figure 5 The Surena Plate. Silver, partially gilded. Bonhams, London, 25 Apr 2012.

<https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/19961/lot/177/>

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⁸¹ Provenance problems are associated to the Surena Collection (see Neil Brodie and Palmyre Manivet, 'Cylinder Seal Sales at Sotheby's and Christie's (1985–2013)', *Journal of Art Crime*, 17, 2017, 5, 8).

⁸² Boisgirard & Associés, *Arts d'Orient, Vendredi 1^{er} juin 2007, Paris – Hôtel Drouot*, Paris, 2007, 28–29, n. 63. According to the sale catalogue, the plate should be attributed to Central Asia and dated to the 7th or 8th century.

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Andrea Luigi Corsi obtained his PhD in Islamic Archaeology from Sapienza University in Rome in 2021. For his doctoral research he dealt with the production of early Islamic stuccowork (c. 8th-9th centuries) in Mesopotamia and the Iranian world, a topic on which he has published a series of articles. He has also expanded his research interests on matters of artifacts provenance, acquisitions, and museum display.

andrealuigi.corsi@gmail.com



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