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BAHRAM GŌR AND ĀZĀDE
AN UNKNOWN SASANIAN GEM IN THE
COLLECTION OF CONSTANTINE
SCHMIDT-ČIĄŻYŃSKI

The tale of Bahram Gōr and Āzāde, belonging to the classical repertoire of Persian literature, had also been known even before the tradition was written down, and found a highly interesting reflection in late Sasanian art. An immensely absorbing instance of a miniature scene connected with the said tale is to be encountered on the surface of an unpublished gem from Cracow (Fig. 1).

Bahram V Gōr (Varahran V) from the Sasanid dynasty, ruling in the years 420–438 A.D., still as a prince was famous for his fondness of hunting and for unusual skill in archery. According to a classical passage by Firdousi in *Shah-nameh*, one day Bahram Gōr ordered a camel to be sad-

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dled and together with his Greek slave called Āzāde he set out for the chase. Āzāde sat down behind Bahram in a place lined with brocade, holding a lyre in her hand. When they encountered two pairs of gazelles, Bahram asked Āzāde which of the animals he is to shoot. His favourite answered that heroes do not go chasing gazelles, so he should transform by means of an arrow the female into a buck and an old buck into a female. Using an arrow with two heads Bahram homed it perfectly towards a buck, shooting off its two horns, so the old buck looked like a doe. He then hit a female’s head twice causing the two arrows protruding from its head to look like horns. Subsequently, Bahram Gör turned to another pair of gazelles. He shot a stone into the ear of one of them, so the animal started to claw the ear with its hindleg and then Bahram Gör nailed the animal’s leg to its head with an arrow. Seeing this and feeling compassion for the gazelle Āzāde burst into tears. Then Bahram Gör, indignant at her reaction to the spectacle she had induced him to produce, threw the girl off the saddle and had her trampled with the aid of the camel’s hoofs.

The scene on the object found at Cracow is rendered in deep engraved lines on the surface of a flat, octagonal gem made of green jasper of di-


* Cf. The Epic of the Kings, Shāh-nāma (translated by R. Levy), London 1967, pp. 299—300.

I am grateful to Dr. habil. Heidemarie Koch (Marburg) for her exact translation of the text by Firdousi (sent in a letter of October 28th, 1988), beginning from Āzāde’s answer to the question asked by Bahram, which gazelle he is to shoot: „Mein Prinz mit dem Herz eines Löwens, Kriegshelden jagen doch keine Gazellen! Verwandle durch deinen Pfeil die weibliche in einen Bock und lass dagegen den alten Bock weiblich werden! Treib dann dein Kamel zu einem scharfen Trab an, wenn die Gazellen deinen Pfeilen entfliehen wollen. Schiesst einen Kieselstein an das Ohr von einer, so dass sie den Kopf auf die Schulter legt. Der Kieselstein wird das Tier veranlassen, sein Ohr zu kratzen, und dafür wird es sein Hinterbein zur Schulter bringen. Dann hefte mit deinem Pfeil Kopf, Fuss und Rücken zusammen, wenn du willst, das ich dich den Vortrefflichsten der Welt nenne“. Bahram stieß daraufhin einen Schrei aus, nahm aus seinem Köcher einen Pfeil mit zwei Köpfen, womit er die beiden Hörner des Bockes fortorschoss, so dass sein Kopf, wie bei einer weiblichen Gazelle, kahl war, was das Mädchen mit Verwunderung erfüllte. Dann schoß er zwei Pfeile in den Kopf der weiblichen, an die Stellen, wo Hörner zu wachsen pflegen, und das Blut floss dem Tier auf die Brust. Dann wandte er sich dem zweiten Gazellenpaar zu, schoss der einen von ihnen einen Kieselstein ins Ohr, worauf das Tier sofort — zu seinem grossen Vergnügen — mit dem Hinterfuss das Ohr kratzte. Dann heftete er mit einem Pfeil Kopf, Ohr und Hinterfuss des Tieres zusammen. Āzādes Herz brannte vor Mitleid mit dem Tier, und Bahram fragte, warum sie denn so weinen. Darauf antwortete sie: „Das ist keine menschliche Tat, du bist kein Mann, sondern hast den Geist eines Dämons!“. Auf diese Antwort geriet Bahram so ausser sich, dass er das Mädchen vom Sattel stoss und unter den Hufen des Kamels zertrampelte, indem er ausrief: „Du törichte Leierspielerin, warum hast du mich dazu verführt? Wenn mein Schuss fehlgegangen wäre, hätte ich Schande auf meine Geburt gebracht!“.
Fig. 1. Bahram Gōr and Šāhīd. Sasanian gem from the collection of Constantine Schmidt-Ciążyński. National Museum in Cracow, Inv. No. MNK IV—ZI—133. Green jasper dimensions 13.3 × 11.6 × 2 mm. 6th—7th century. Phot. by Jacek Książek, Cracow
Fig. 2. Bahram Gor and Aza. Sasanian silver plate from the Hermitage collection, Leningrad
Diameter 28 cm. 6th/7th century. According to K. V. Trever, V. G. Lukonin, Sasanidskoe se-
tebro No. 14
mension 13.3×11.6×2 mm (Fig. 1) 4. We can see here the characters from the tale in question seated on the back of a camel facing right. In spite of the gem’s modest dimensions, a series of details have been rendered with great mastery, indicating without doubt its association with the story of Bahram Gór and Āzāde. Bahram Gór is seated in front, stringing his bow, and taking aim at a running animal. This is to be seen in the gem’s field on the right, opposite the camel and resembling rather a hare or a rabbit than a gazelle. Āzāde is located behind Bahram, turned to him with her back and holding a lyre (or arched harp?) in her hand.

At present, it is possible to quote only two analogous scenes on late Sasanian gems (6th—7th centuries) as parallels 5. One of them was kept in the collection of Dr. Phyllis Ackerman 6, another one in the Museum at Kassel 7. Both represent identical composition schema, though naturally differences are discernible in regard to the rendering and workmanship of details as well as stylistic and workshop differences. Within oval fields of both of these gems, a greater number of details have been located: in the case of a gem from the Ackerman collection there are three running animals opposite a camel and not one, as in the case of gems from Kassel and Cracow. Moreover at the bottom of the gems from the Ackerman collection and from Kassel viz. The field between the camel’s legs, a reclining or seated figure was engraved. Was this the scene where Āzāde was thrown from the camel? In the case of the Kassel gem, the employment of a globulo technique is a visible indication of Roman influence.

It should be also stressed that the scene under consideration here with the image of Bahram Gór and Āzāde, on the basis of the gem from Ackerman collection, has been taken into account among a widely meant canon of Sasanian seals, prepared by R. Göbl 8.

More details are legible in an analogous scene appearing on late Sasanian silver plates (end of the 6th — beginning of the 7th century). One such

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5 The third gem from the State Hermitage (Leningrad), unpublished, dated at early Islamic times, known to R. Ettinghausen only from oral information given to him by V. Lukonin (see Ettinghausen, op. cit., p. 28 and note 11).
object is housed among the Guennol Collection, two others in the Hermitage in Leningrad (Fig. 2). In comparison to the above described scenes on gems, there is a clear divergence in rendering Azâde: on the said plates she is always considerably smaller than her mate and faces the direction of the camel's movement, firmly holding the pommel, without a lyre. In the case of the Guennol plate she is handing over an arrow to Bahram Gér. On the other hand, on the gem's surface the figure of Azâde coincides in proportions with the royal hunter and probably for the sake of composition she is turned to him with her back, holding a lyre in front of her, whose triangular shape occupies the field before the heroine. On silver plates, two pairs of gazelles chased by Bahram Gér are carefully represented, whereas on the gems these creatures resemble more a hare and in two cases, e.g. Kassel and Cracow, only single animals are depicted.

The individual features mentioned here, which pertain to the scene's composition on a small surface of the gems make some regularity discernible on both hitherto known objects. Likewise, the Cracow object finds it niche within this group and regarding both its composition and workmanship it proves to be probably the best, unusually precise instance of such rendering, testifying to the high competence of late Sasanian glyptics.

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* P. O. Harper, The Royal Hunter, p. 48, No. 12; silver-gilt plate, allegedly from northwest Iran, 5th or 6th century, diameter 20.1 cm, weight 647 grams.