HISTORIA I ŚWIAT, no 14 (2025)
ISSN 2299-2464
e-ISSN 2956-6436

Daryoosh AKBARZADEH * (ICAR, Tehran, Iran)

From the Greek Goddess Isis Holding a Flower to Sasanian Dancers with Blossoms in Hand

https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2025.14.04

Abstract: *The cultural ties between Iran and the Hellenic world are ancient and well-documented. However, this article focuses on the influence of a particular aspect of Roman art on a distinct form of Sasanian performance. The author refers to this combination as a ritual performance. This dance style retains the overall structure of Sasanian art but is significantly influenced by Roman art. There are many important gilded silver vessels housed in well-known museums that depict dancers who share strikingly similar features. They have been found across a wide geographic range, from northern Iran – such as Mazandaran – through Central Asia and into Eurasia. These semi-nude dancers, with prominently displayed chests, typically hold a long-stemmed flower in one hand. In the other, they may be seen holding a bird, a sugarcane, or even the hand of a child. For the background of such a style, carrying a flower branch in one hand and another instrument in the other, it is quite possible to refer to Hellenistic art. The sculpture of the Greek Goddess Isis was one of the most important statuettes and, of course, the best known in Iran, Mesopotamia and Central Asia*.

Key words: Sasanian Silver Works, Performance, Hellenism, Isis the Goddess

Introduction

The cultural connections between Iran and the Hellenic world date back to ancient times. Numerous scholarly works have been published on this subject over the past century. Tangible Greco-Roman legacies – including hoards, collections, statues, and other archaeological data and texts – have been studied extensively.[1] However, the similarities between Roman sculptural styles and Sasanian dance, and the potential influence of the former on the latter, have not been addressed in earlier scholarship. The available materials play a significant role in defining the boundaries of dance scenes depicted in Sasanian art, whether explicitly or implicitly.

In royal Sasanian art, musicians and dancers are consistently depicted as fully clothed. The performers shown in Taq-e Bostan, particularly in the scene

* Corresponding Author. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6961-2476. d.akbarzadeh@richt.ir; Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism.

[1] E.g. Skupniewicz & Maksymiuk, 2019 (with literature).

of Khosrow II at Kermanshah, support this observation.[2] In contrast, the performers portrayed in the Bishapur mosaics[3] are dressed in a completely different manner. The dancers' clothing – especially their long shawls – plays a crucial role in accentuating a single breast, with the creators clearly emphasizing its enlargement. These paintings, discovered in a royal palace in Bishapur and dating to the reign of Shapur I, likely belong to a non-Iranian artistic tradition. It is well known that after defeating three Roman emperors, Shapur I captured numerous soldiers, among whom were artists, musicians, and scientists. The performers depicted in the Bishapur mosaics typically reflect Roman artistic styles.[4] Recently, the author has interpreted the prominently displayed single breast of the Sasanian dancers as a Hellenistic influence. This form of semi-nudity also reflects the impact of Roman art within the Sasanian court. Zoroastrianism strongly opposed any form of nudity, as demonstrated by the fully clothed performers at Taq-e Bostan. Beyond the Bishapur mosaics, an agate seal housed at the Iran-e Bastan Museum (renamed the National Museum of Iran after 1979) also reveals the influence of Hellenic performance art on Sasanian aesthetics. The attire of Sasanian dancers referenced above is strikingly similar to that seen in Roman sculpture.[5]

However, the subject of this article is not the official (royal) Sasanian performance tradition. Instead, the paper focuses on the influence of a particular Roman artistic feature on a non-royal form of dance. The author describes this style as a ritual performance. This form of dance preserved the general structure of Sasanian art but was strongly shaped by Roman artistic influences.

In the following section, the author will discuss several works related to this performance that do not belong to official royal Sasanian art, in order to better support this claim. The geographical origins and dating of these pieces are highly uncertain; therefore, the author will not explore that aspect in detail and will instead place greater emphasis on the influence of Roman sculptural style on this particular ritual dance.

There are many important gilded silver vessels housed in major museums, including the Iran-e Bastan Museum, the MET, the Louvre, the Cleveland Museum, and the St. Petersburg Museum. These works all depict dancers who exhibit remarkable similarities. They have been discovered across a vast region – from northern Iran (such as Mazandaran) through Central Asia and into Eurasia.[6] Because the manufacturing techniques, material composition, and overall design of the performances reflect Sasanian methods and style, these vessels are generally recognized as Sasanian artifacts.

[2] Fukai & Horiuchi, 1972: LVIII.
[3] Sarfaraz, Chaychi Amirkhiz & Saeedi, 2014: 35.
[4] Ghirshman, 1971: 11-15.
[5] Razmjou, 2015.
[6] Marshak, 2017: 613, 632, 644.

The main questions posed by this article are as follows: Is the style of these dancers genuinely Sasanian? Could it be that Hellenistic art also influenced the type of dance portrayed on these renowned vessels? And if so, which specific elements of Hellenistic art might have shaped the dance style depicted on these artifacts?

Description

In the following image, depicted on a vase housed at the Iran-e Bastan Museum [Fig. 1], two dancers are shown. One of them holds a long-stemmed floral branch in her right hand and a candy cane or a similarly shaped object in her left. The other dancer also holds a long flower branch angled downward, along with a separate container, likely intended for sweets. Birds such as cranes and falcons appear on either side of the dancers. One of the four dancers depicted on a vase in the Louvre Museum [Fig. 2] is shown holding a long floral branch in her right hand and a bird – likely a falcon – in her left. This scene is also depicted on an ewer currently housed at the MET [Fig. 3]. Similar examples can clearly be found by browsing the websites of major museums such as the Smithsonian, St. Petersburg Museum, and several others.

Fig. 1. A dancer with a long-stemmed floral branch. The Iran-e Bastan Museum, inv. 500 [Photo after Akbarzadeh, 2022: 49, fig. 6].

Fig. 2. A Dancer with a falcon (in the left hand). The Louvre Museum, inv. MAO426 [Public Domain: https://www.photo.rmn.fr/archive/08-529951-2C6NU0THGYH3.html].

Fig. 3. This figure bears the same artistic features of the previous two pictures. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 67.10a, b [Public Domain: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/325865].

All of the dancers depicted on these vessels feature prominent breasts, either fully exposed or semi-nude (with one breast uncovered). They wear thick, folded garments on their lower bodies, resembling a lace-like dress over the bust. Their dance posture is evident from the rotational positioning of their bodies and legs, with one leg extended forward and the other placed behind. They are shown wearing headbands or braided headgear, with hair styled into branch-like plaits draped over one/both shoulders. They possess narrow noses, arched eyebrows, rounded mouths, and small chins. Another common characteristic is their open-arm posture – one hand holding a long-stemmed flower, the other carrying a container of sweets, a small musical instrument, or a water pitcher. This open-arm gesture accentuates the chest (cf. Cleveland Museum dancer [Fig. 4]). In addition to the thin tunic or lace garment, their lower clothing consists of two fabric ends, held like shawls in both hands. The ends of these shawls curve downward, resembling a flower – a motif that also appears independently in other artworks, such as the Bishapur mosaics. The dancers are portrayed as graceful and enchanting.

Fig. 4. Anahita Vessel. The Cleveland Museum of Art, inv. 1962.294 [source: https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1962.294]

Grape branches and leaves are arranged in arch-shaped decorations, separating the dancers on the dishes from one another. Additionally, the figures of various special birds and even animals such as dogs appear alongside these dancers. These works follow the same general design structure as well-known Sasanian vessels, often featuring the distinctive "pearl" motif as decoration. Many of them also contain fine needle-like inscriptions in the Pahlavi language, typically indicating the owner's name and the vessel's weight.

Discussion

In previous scholarship, these dancers have been described as being associated with the goddess Anahita or as inspired by Dionysian themes.[7] Some researchers have even interpreted these scenes as representing intertwined erotic motifs.[8] However, the dancers' attire, hairstyles, decorative elements, and – most importantly – the objects they hold in their hands are clearly inconsistent with typical Dionysian iconography or the traditional representations and narratives of goddess Anahita.[9]

[7] Seipel, 2001: 289-290.
[8] Gholami, 2016: 39-42.
[9] Dustkhah, 1992: 297-324.

Falcons (including the phoenix), cranes, dogs, and similar creatures have been interpreted as elements of the spiritual world and ritual practice in northeastern Sasanian art.[10] The Persian Simurgh, a mythical bird often associated with falcons, symbolizes divine joy and perfection. It appears as a savior figure in Persian literature (e.g., the *Shahnama* (I), particularly in the tale of Rustam).[11] Dogs also held an important role in the afterlife beliefs of ancient Iran.[12] In contrast to southern Sasanian art, these avian motifs are richly represented in artistic legacies stretching from Khorasan to China, such as in the murals and artifacts found in Sogdian tombs.

If the claim that these creatures are connected to the afterlife does not sufficiently establish a link between the dancers and the spiritual realm, then perhaps the figures on the ewers from the Smithsonian Museum may offer further support: 1/ A performer with a halo above her hair, holding a bird (possibly a falcon) in her left hand (inv. S1987.117); 2/ A dancer with a halo and castanets held in both hands (inv. F1966.1).

These two previously mentioned works are strikingly similar in detail – aside from the presence of a halo of light – to the earlier-described vessels. This similarity further reinforces the symbolic importance of the birds and their potential association with the spiritual realm. It suggests a sense of sanctity rather than eroticism. Nevertheless, the key question remains: Could this style of dance, characterized by flower-bearing performers, have originated from a prototype absent in traditional Sasanian art? This is a subject that has not yet been thoroughly explored. The author proposes that its origins may be traced to Roman artistic influence.

The East became increasingly familiar with Isis, the Greek goddess, following the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. Her figurine has been among the most widely recognized artifacts in Iran since at least the Seleucid period. One such example was discovered in Nahavand [Fig. 5].

[10] Lerner, 2013: 135.
[11] Davis, 2007: 104-105.
[12] Omidsalar *et al*., 1995.

Fig. 5. Bronze Statue of Isis. Iran-e Bastan Museum, inv. 437. After *Catalog of Glory of Iran (Exhibition)*, 2010: 39.

The bronze figurine depicts the goddess with a damaged right eye, a long, narrow nose, a rounded chin, arched eyebrows, graceful eyes, a small breast, and a relatively thick woven headband. This headband is visible at the base of her neck on both sides, resembling two branch-like extensions with rounded ends or pearl-like beads, similar to a stigma.

On her head, she wears a woven kerchief or a two-layered head covering, relatively large in size, concealing her short hair. Above her forehead is a distinctive mark with a four-branched design, resembling four petals, which is confidently interpreted as the crown of Isis.[13] The figurine is clothed in a long tunic that fully covers her legs, concealing her toes. Over the tunic, she wears a large, wide shawl (resembling rolled decoration), folded across her abdomen and falling to her knees. This shawl is secured beneath a thin belt that crosses over her left arm, extends from her back, and hangs freely on the right side, resting atop her right breast in a folded shape with a rounded end.

It remains unclear whether the artistic element near her elbow – depicted on the shawl – is a form of decorative knot or a floral motif. Given the open-handed

[13] Seipel, 2001: 248.

posture, this belt – and possibly the knot – may have functioned to secure the shawl in place. The figurine's modest yet prominent Hellenic breast is clearly visible; her right breast is covered, while her left is left bare.

The object in her left hand has been previously described as a fruit bowl, a claim that is certainly questionable.[14] The object in question features a relatively thick and elongated stem, a distinctive hand rest, and two (or possibly three) protrusions at the top, which appear to be damaged. It is most likely a grape branch, a motif also seen in the hand of the Isis-Fortuna statue found in Pompeii. Her right leg is positioned forward, with the left leg stepped back, creating a graceful curve at the waist that enhances her captivating posture.

If we compare the long-stemmed flower (or branch) in Isis's hand, her headgear, body posture, and partially exposed chest with those of the dancers described above, striking similarities become evident. This resemblance does not imply that the creators of these artworks worshipped the goddess; rather, it suggests that they were inspired by her iconic gesture of carrying a flower stem and her distinctive bodily stance.

The facial features of Isis – including her forehead band, elongated nose, eyebrows, lips, mouth, and chin – are clearly echoed in the faces of the dancers depicted in works from the Iran-e Bastan Museum, the MET, the Louvre, and other collections. The author believes that certain indigenous artistic elements and cultural beliefs occasionally replaced imported features such as grape branches or water pitchers. Notably, Sasanian sugarcane appears to have substituted some of these Roman motifs. However, the presence of children or infants, a Roman element, was preserved in certain instances (see the Smithsonian Museum, inv. F1966.1). This distinctive fusion of Sasanian and Roman aesthetics would not have been possible without modeling practices – a technique that had no precedent in southern Sasanian art.

Additionally, this artistic combination should not be interpreted as erotic art. The author suggests that the gesture of Isis was merged with specific Sasanian artistic features, giving rise to a new hybrid style known as ritual dance. This development likely took place outside the political boundaries of the Sasanian Empire, in regions where both Sasanian and Roman artistic and religious traditions were present.

It should be noted that the goddess Isis, along with other Roman deities, was known to Iranians[15] for centuries prior to the Sasanian era. However, these deities became particularly popular in the Khorasan region around the time of the Sasanian period. Despite this familiarity, our knowledge of the specific names or classifications of the dances depicted in Sasanian artworks remains limited.

[14] Seipel, 2001: 279.
[15] Invernizzi, 1995: 25.

Conclusion

The Greeks practiced a wide variety of dances since antiquity, including military dances, flower dances, the Endymatia, and the Gymnopaidia, among others.[16] They were also considered masters of expressive, wordless dance. Unlike in the East, nudity and semi-nudity were commonly accepted features of Hellenic dance. Many of these dance forms had religious origins.

Therefore, prior to the introduction of Hellenistic art into the East, particularly during the Parthian period,[17] there is no known reference to nude dancers holding flowers in the official art of Iran or Central Asia. However, this phenomenon becomes more understandable through the material evidence from the Sasanian period. The author believes that Roman performance aesthetics manifested in Sasanian dance in two distinct ways.

The first is the influence of Roman visual art, as seen in the Bishapur mosaics. The second influence stems from Roman religious art, which appears in a specific form of ritual dance – characterized not by theology, but by the visual elements of religious sculptures, such as exposed breasts or stylized bodily postures involving a flower-bearing hand.

Based on these Sasanian scenes depicted on the vessels, most of the dancers are portrayed with light musical instruments, engaged in flirtatious or expressive gestures, and frequently holding a (sacred) flower branch. Exposed breasts are also a recurring element in these depictions. In classical antiquity, the crotalum (castanets) was a well-known percussion instrument commonly used in Hellenic performance traditions.[18]

In ancient Iranian religious beliefs, particularly in Zoroastrianism, certain sacred plants and their associated rituals are recorded in the Avesta (the sacred Zoroastrian text). These rituals have roots in Central Asian traditions. However, it is difficult to conclusively identify the flowers held by the dancers as the sacred Hum plant.

In contrast to Hellenistic art, women in ancient Iran did not participate in religious or ritual ceremonies, at least not in any officially recognized capacity.

It is evident that this type of nude or semi-nude dance, as depicted on the vessels, was opposed by official Sasanian religious doctrine. Some of the dancers are shown with a halo of light above their heads, holding objects such as a pitcher of water, a child or infant, or a light musical instrument. These elements are also characteristic of Hellenistic performance art – the statue of Isis being a prime example.

These dancers may have been intended to convey happiness and fortune, as they are often depicted holding a flower branch. Much like the grapevine in Hellenistic iconography, this floral element can be interpreted as a symbol of fertility and

[16] Raftis, 1987: 25, 254, 255; see also Fitton, 1973: 254.
[17] Keall, 1967: 99-121.
[18] Catalunya & Poletti, 2012: 142.

prosperity. Notably, these flowers do not represent power or royalty, as no king or ruler is ever shown in the presence of these dancers – a point further supported by existing inscriptions.

Additionally, the sugarcanes depicted in Figs. 1 and 3 may also be interpreted as symbols of happiness, based on their placement in the dancers' hands. Although official Sasanian art does not include motifs such as dancers holding flowers, pitchers, children, or birds, the author suggests that this artistic style may have been influenced by traditions from the Northeastern regions.

While accurately dating this group of artifacts is challenging, they most likely belong to the late Sasanian period, rather than to a post-Sasanian context. Technical analyses, such as XRF testing,[19] indicate that their composition is both precise and balanced, comparable to that of 6th-century CE coins (e.g., Khosrow II drachms). Moreover, Islamic doctrine strongly opposed such silver or gold objects, especially those depicting nude female figures. The presence of delicate and finely executed needlepoint inscriptions further supports their classification as late Sasanian artifacts. Notably, Zoroastrianism was also critical of such artistic expressions.

The northeast and Eurasia regions represent one of the most significant examples of cultural and artistic fusion between Sasanian, Roman, Indian, and Buddhist traditions. This combination was a significant reason that during the reigns of Kaniska and Huvishka, Kushan Empire, Sasanian and Roman artistic elements became deeply intertwined. Zoroastrian deities such as Nana and Mihr (Mitra), along with the Roman sun god Helios, were frequently depicted on coins.[20] The peacock motif found in some of these artifacts – such as the Chilak bowl in the Samarkand Museum – may reflect Indian artistic influence.

The author also draws attention to vessels produced in similar style and technique, featuring dancers and iconography from Eurasian regions, such as Perm. These pieces may serve as additional evidence supporting the validity and spread of this artistic style – characterized by nude dancers, halos, birds, sugarcane, and flower branches – beyond the traditional borders of the Sasanian Empire.[21]

The author believes that the depiction of these *sacred dancers* was influenced by Roman artistic traditions. The image of dancers holding a long flower stalk bears a clear resemblance to the flower branch held by Isis, and this parallel cannot be overlooked. The portrayal of nudity and semi-nudity, which was opposed by Zoroastrian doctrine, appears to have occurred outside the religious borders of the Sasanian Empire – with Central Asia being the most plausible origin. Southern Sasanian art, due to the Zoroastrianism, was soulless. Zoroastrian manuscripts in Pahlavi, as well as inscriptions and bas-reliefs of Sasanian kings lack artistic details.

[19] Akbarzadeh & Khedir, 2023: 209.
[20] Jongeward, Cribb & Donovan, 2015: 135.
[21] Marshak, 2017: 632, 643, 644, 646.

Clearly, there are no religious signs in a magnificent scene such as Taq-e Bostan. Fragments of the nude musicians of Taq-e Kisra from the MET[22] can also be interpreted as a work outside of the Zoroastrian specific mainland. Furthermore, Roman art has provided an attractive detailed artistic portrait of the Bishapur Mosaics.

Therefore, if these silverworks with such motifs were not produced in Khorasan, parts of present-day Afghanistan, or even Central Asia, they certainly belong to a time and regions where Zoroastrianism was fading.

It is likely that the fusion of Roman nudity and floral iconography with Sasanian artistic motifs began during the reign of Shapur I and reached its peak in the 6th century CE. The author suggests that artifacts discovered in northern Iran (Mazandaran) were originally brought from other regions. The vase, currently housed at the Iran-e Bastan Museum, was sent to the Museum by Queen Farah from the Golestan Palace before 1979. This work was a confiscated artifact. The Kelardasht hoard (Sasanian silver works) in Mazandaran was also purchased from a collector as reported by Ali Sami.[23] The same situation applies to silverworks in other above-mentioned museums; Most of them were purchased but their historical sites remained unknown.

Bibliography

Akbarzadeh D. (2022). Sasanian Silver Bowl at the National Museum of Iran, Indian Gypsies and Persian Gulf. *Parseh Journal of Archaeological Studies*, 6(19), 44–57. https://doi.org/10.30699/PJAS.6.19.95

Akbarzadeh, D., Khedir, S. (2023). Dating of Three Sasanian Bowls from the National Museum of Iran: An X-Ray Fluorescence and Spectroscopic. *Journal of Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization*, 27, 201–220. https://doi.org/10.12797/SAAC.27.2023.27.10

Catalog of Glory of Iran (Exhibition). (2010). Tehran: National Museum of Iran.

Catalunya, D., Poletti, P. (2012). Late Medieval Strung Keyboard Instruments: New Reflections and Attempts at Reconstruction. *Journal of Alamire Foundation*, 4(1), 141–155. https://doi.org/10.1484/J.JAF.1.102611

Davis, D. (transl.) (2007). *Ferdowsī, Shahnameh: the Persian book of kings*. New York: Penguin Books.

Dustkhah, J. (1992). *Avestā: Kohan-tarin Sorudhā va Matnhā-ye Irāni* [*Avesta: The Ancient Iranian Hymns and Texts*]. Tehran: Morvarid. (in Persian)

Fitton, J. W. (1973). Greek Dance. *The Classical Quarterly*, 23(2), 254–274. http://www.jstor.org/stable/638179

Fukai, Sh., Horiuchi, K. (1972). *Taq-i Bustan*. Tokyo: Institute of Oriental culture.

[22] See inv. 32.150.25 [https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322652].
[23] Sami, 1970: 90.

Jongeward, D. Cribb, J., Donovan, P. (2015). *Kushan, Kushano-Sasanian, and Kidarite Coins: A Catalogue of Coins from the American Numismatic Society*. New York: The American Numismatic Society.
Ghirshman, R. (1971). *Fouilles de Châpour. Bîchâpour*, vol. 1. Paris: Geuthner.
Gholami, S. (ed.) (2016). *Dance in Iran: Past and Present*. Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert Verlag.
Keall, E.J. (1967). Qal'eh-i Yazdigird: A Sasanian Palace Stronghold in Persian Kurdistan. *Iran*, 5, 99–121. https://doi.org/10.2307/4299591
Invernizzi, A. (1995). The Jupiter Statuette from Veh-Ardashir and the Iconographical Repertoire of 3rd Century Mesopotamia. *Iranica Antiqua*, 30, 23–53. https://doi.org/10.2143/IA.30.0.519283
Lerner, J. (2013). Yidu Stone: A Sino-Sogdian Tomb? Sogdians, Their Precursors, Contemporaries and Heirs. In P. Lurje, A.I. Torgoev (Eds.), *Sogdians, their precursors, contemporaries and heirs. Based on proceedings conference "Sogdians at home and abroad" held in memory of Boris Il'ich Marshak (1933-2006)* (pp. 129–146). St Petersburg: The State Hermitage Publishers.
Marshak, B.I. (2017). *History of Oriental Toreutics of the 3rd- 13rd Centuries and Problems of Cultural Continuity*. St. Petersburg: Academy of Culture's Research.
Omidsalar, M., Omidsalar, T., Boyce, M., Digard, J. (1995). Dog. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 7(5), 461–470.
Raftis, A. (1987). *The World of Greek Dance*. Athens: Finedawn.
Razmjou, S. (Ed.) (2015). *A statue for peace: the Penelope sculptures from Persepolis to Rome, Catalogue of the exhibition*. Tehran: National Museum of Iran.
Sami, A. (1970). Mosighi dar doreh Sasani [Music in Sasanian Period]. *Journal of Hunar and Mardom*, 2, 90–95. (in Persian)
Sarfaraz, A.A., Chaychi Amirkhiz, A. Saeedi, M.R. (2014). *Shehar bastani Bishapor* [*Old Bishapur City*]. Tehran: Samt. (in Persian)
Seipel, W. (Ed.) (2001). *7000 Jahre persische Kunst : Meisterwerke aus dem Iranischen Nationalmuseum in Teheran: eine Ausstellung des Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien und des Iranischen Nationalmuseums in Teheran*. Bonn : Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.
Skupniewicz, P., Maksymiuk, K. (2019). Gordāfarid, Penthesilea and Athena: the identification of a Greek motif in Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma* and its possible association with Hellenistic art in the East. *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 34(2), 123–143. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2019.1663651

Acknowledgments
The author is thankful to the Iran-e Bastan Museum (National Museum of Iran) for permission to use the photos. Also, he appreciates Virginie Fabre (from the Louvre Museum) for her kind assistance. Sincerely appreciation is extended to the MET (Image Licensing Dep.), with special thanks to Laura.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

To cite this article: Akbarzadeh, D. (2025). From the Greek Goddess Isis Holding a Flower to Sasanian Dancers with Blossoms in Hand. *Historia i Świat*, 14, 67–78. https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2025.14.04