

THE IMAGE OF SNAKE IN ELAM AND JIROFT SITES IN SOUTHWEST AND SOUTHEAST OF IRAN AND ITS COMPARISON WITH ZOROASTRIANISM

Abstract: Snake, the renowned slither, is a creature that has appeared in various shapes in myths across numerous cultures and nations. This creature comprises a great number of designs in Iran, as well. It seems that the image of the snake contains a special meaning, which has been used as a symbol and shares ties to people's beliefs and the religion. Thus, the researcher's attention has been turned to how the image of the snake has been used in the remaining artifacts from Elam and its neighboring regions, such as Jiroft, and its general differences to the Zoroastrian culture. In this paper, taking on a comparative descriptive approach, the repetition of the image of this creature in different designs is examined, a separate division is presented for each region (Elamite and Jiroft) and the mythological meanings and concepts related to each design are explained. In the end, the image of the snake in Zoroastrianism is briefly explained. The snake's image in Elam reveals more than anything, its connection with God, water, fertility, and the other world. In Jiroft, the image of interwoven snakes, coiled snakes, and even snakes fighting other animals are seen. Afterwards, with the influence of the Zoroastrian culture in Iran, this creature finds a new and completely different role to the point where it is introduced as a devilish creature.

Keywords: *The Snake, Iran, Elam, Jiroft, Zoroastrianism.*

Fahimeh Shakiba

Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies Tehran,
Iran
shakiba2065@gmail.com

DOI: 10.14795/j.v5i2.311

ISSN 2360 – 266X

ISSN–L 2360 – 266X

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the works that play an important role in identifying Iran's culture and civilization are bas-reliefs and inscriptions that give us valuable information on various aspects of the lives of the ancient people, and reflect their thoughts and beliefs. Studying these works can identify the course of cultural and religious developments. It may be claimed that the repetition of animal designs and the frequency of their use, reflect the beliefs of the people populating each land, because the artist by inscribing religious scenes, expresses the traditions and customs of people more than anything else. In this article, we have attempted to introduce and describe the snake related designs in the works of the civilizations of Elam and Jiroft. Their similarities and differences with each other, as well as, how the snake has been depicted in the Zoroastrian tradition is investigated, and its place in each culture is separately explained. Therefore, the following question will be answered: What is the difference in culture between the civilization of Elam, Jiroft (civilizations before the emergence of Zoroastrianism) and

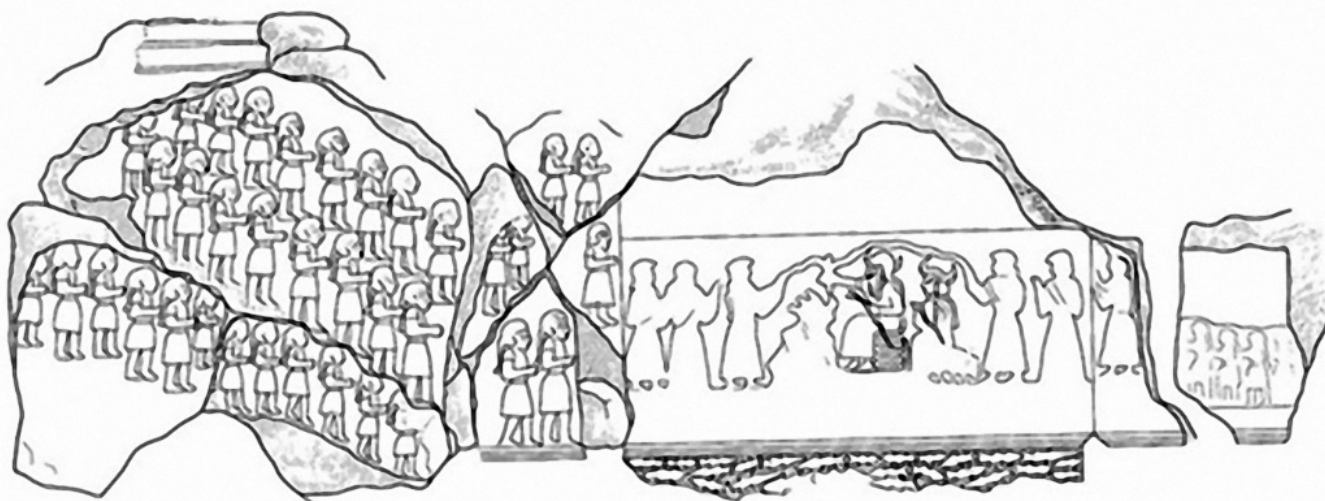


Fig. 1. The Kurangun rock relief (AMIET 1966, 386)

Zoroastrianism, regarding the attention that has been paid to the importance of the snake and its depiction? The research hypothesis is that the snake has played a different role and has carried distinctive concepts in the culture of Elam, Jiroft, and in the Zoroastrian culture. In this paper, by describing and reviewing the frequency with which this creature has appeared in different scenes, a separate division is dedicated to each region (Elam and Jiroft) and the mythological meanings and implications related to the role the snake plays in each region are explained. Finally, the appearance of the snake in Zoroastrianism designs is also analyzed.

Research Background

Researchers such as Monique De Beaucorps in *Les symboles vivants* (1989), J.C Cooper in *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* (2012), Mircea Eliade in *Traité d'histoire des religions* (1949), James Hall in *Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art* (2001) have mentioned in what the snake stands for during different eras of history. Katayun Mazdapour has studied the image of the snake in Iranian myths.

Walter Hintz in *The Lost World of Elam* (1977) and Pierre Amiet have specifically addressed the issue of Elam and introduced Elamite motifs, but they are less concerned with the image of this creature and its importance in the Elamite culture.

Most of the research on Jiroft has been done by Youssef Madjidzadeh, who has introduced the works of this ancient civilization, but has paid less attention to analyzing the role the snake plays in this culture.

Concerning the Zoroastrian tradition, we tried to retell the narrations of the religious texts of Avesta and Pahlavi in regards to the role of this creature. In general, there has not been a comprehensive study on the image of the snake in the reliefs of Elam (the beginning of the Elamite: 2800-3200 BC; the Ancient Elam: 2800-1500BC; the Middle Elam: 1500-1100 BC; the New Elam: 539-1000 BC) and Jiroft (the 4th millennium BC), and their differences with each other, and even with subsequent periods, in which

Zoroastrianism dominated Iran.

2. THE IMAGE OF THE SERPENT IN ELAM

2.1. The Coiled Serpent under the King's Throne

Kurangun rock relief belongs to the Middle Elamite period of the 15th to 11th centuries BC, which is located in today's Fars province. It shows a god sitting on a throne made of a coiled snake, holding the head of the snake. In his other hand, there's a jug or a cup from which water is flowing. There is a woman behind him. These deities are likely to be Inshushinak¹ and the goddess Napirish a human-like divine couple.²

De Miroschedji³ believes that the deity of snakes and flowing waters is the same major god and national deity of the Elamites of Inshushinak. In this relief, the snake refers to the deity's presence on the scene. The deity completely acts as a human holding a snake's neck. The tail of the snake, in the form of looped rings, forms a throne that the deity is sitting on. This god, whose worship became gradually obsolete, has quite a mysterious face, and probably symbolizes the dark forces of the underground, which are sometimes blessed and other times lead to destruction and tragedy.⁴

The image of the coiled snake under the king's throne comprises most of the snake related designs in Elam. Since the time of Untash-Gal⁵, in the 13th century BC, many statues on this subject have been found. Among them, there is the remaining parts of the figure of a deity sitting on a square throne, on which the deity once sat upon. The whole body of the deity is not present, and what now remains is only parts of the knee and legs. The sides and the posterior parts of the throne are decorated with the heads of horned

¹ In Middle Elamite period, he was the patron god of the city of Susa, and the Chogha Zanbil ziggurat was built to honor him in Khuzestan. In the writings of the 12th century BC, he is referred to as the Great God, the protector of the capital and the great patron. Inshushinak had the deepest influence on the Elamites.

² POTTS 2006, 285-287.

³ DE MIROSCHEDJI 1981, XVI, 25.

⁴ MADJIDZADEH 1991, 61-2.

⁵ Untash-Gal, one of the kings of Elam, who came to power in 1265 BC, built a new town called Untash and built the Ziggurat (Chogha zanbil) in it.

coiling serpents which are breathing fire from their mouths, and the fourth snake is lying on the ground in front of him.



Fig. 2 (AMIET 1966, 379)

This snake (Fig. 3) may have been one of the two snakes that the god held in front of his chest during a special ceremony.⁶



Fig. 3 (AMIET 1966, 381)

It seems that parts of the remaining statues which bear the mark of the snake belong to a deity whose distinguishing feature was the snake, and perhaps his worship was spread by the great kings to the heart of today's Fars. Hence, it will not be surprising that we observe numerous images of this deity being placed under the bases of buildings in order to protect them against the evil forces of the underworld.⁷

⁶ MADJIDZADEH 1991, 88-9.

⁷ MADJIDZADEH 1991, 61-2.

The coiled snake is the symbol of hidden power, dynamism and potentiality, be it the power of good or evil. The serpents and dragons are the guardians of the thresholds, temples, treasures, and secret knowledge and are considered lunar deities.⁸ Since the snake is naturally bound to the earth, it is considered a god belonging to the Underworld and an enemy to the sun-god. Like the scorpion, it can cause injury and death. Therefore, they were guardians of deities and kings. Snakes were also identified with the gods of healing.⁹ In Elam, from the time of the Sukkalmahhu about the 17th century BC onwards, we witness patterns (Fig. 4) showing a deity sitting on a coiled snake which possibly represents his involvement with underground water.¹⁰



Fig. 4 (AMIET 1966, 93)

2.2. The Snake with a Human Head

Many of the snake patterns found in Elam are different from other regions. One of them is the image of a serpent with the head of a human being, which exclusively belongs to the Elamites, and represents a kind of conflation done by the Iranians, because the Elamites not only depicted their gods as human beings or possessing human features, but also depicted them as mythical half-human and half-animal creatures.

In this picture (Fig. 5), the Elamite god is depicted as half-human half-snake. This evidently reveals the sacredness of the snake to the Elamites. An example of such a pattern is a design inscribed on a seal made of natural tar belonging to the period of Sukkalmahhus. At a religious scene, a worshiper

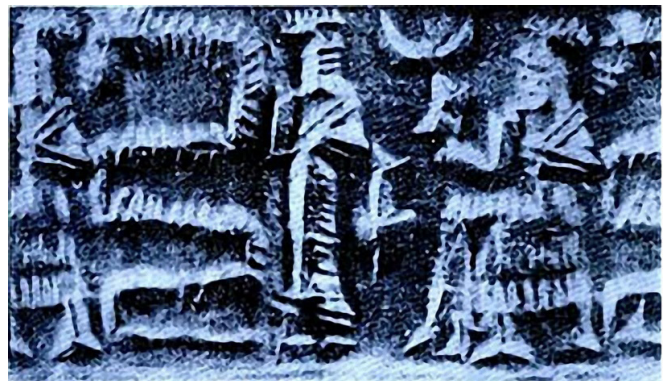


Fig. 5 (AMIET 1966, 69)

⁸ COOPER 2012, 239.

⁹ HALL 2001, 207-8.

¹⁰ AMIET 1966, 49.

stands in the presence of a god sitting on a throne. Behind the god a huge snake with the head of human is seen. Many of contemporary cylinder seals have the same impression.

The snake with a human head is a testimony to this creature being a deity, which is unknown in Mesopotamia. The Elamite artists depicting this god are more inclined to present it as a human being rather than an animal. Thus, sometimes the head and shoulders of this god are in human form and the lower body is in the shape of a coiling snake.¹¹

2.3. Snake-Water-Fertility

The Elamites' beliefs shares many aspects with the Mesopotamian traditions, but the Elamite religion essentially maintains its own individuality and special characteristics. Part of this individuality includes a kind of servitude and an unconventional respect for the eternal femininity and snake worshipping, which is rooted in magic. The serpent is the true motif of the Elamite civilization. Even many potteries of the third and fourth millennium BC are decorated with intricate designs of the snake.

2.3.1. The Snake's Ties to the Water: In many patterns, the image of this creature is not completely irrelevant to the water. The river is the holy spring of fertility and the cultivator of nature. The rivers gods are often female. In many Mesopotamian reliefs, we see the gods holding vessels from which the water flows. Believing that some rivers are sources of immortality is very common.¹² All over the world, the snake holds knowledge, grants youthfulness and owns the rivers of the Earth... it creates floods, controls human strength, dams the water, and sometimes brings rain.¹³

2.3.2. The Links between the Snake and the Female Deities: This immortal creature is the symbol of all the goddesses and great mothers. The connection of the moon and the snake is to the extent that it is sometimes identical to the moon and fertility is attributed to it. The phases of the moon have been important in development of the concepts related to time measurement. The moon takes on different shapes. The three phases of the moon: the new moon, the full, and the half-moon which waxes and wanes, occur and pass. But then the moon is resurrected and is restored to its original form. The three shapes of the moon serve as an allegory for the mythical expression of the three stages of a woman's life: the immature daughter, the birth giving young woman, and the old woman.¹⁴ The snake has a similar fate to the moon and is the symbol of the moon. It changes consecutively and repeats existence and nonexistence. The snake's shape regularly changes and it usually sheds its skin three or four times during a year. It becomes uncolored and formless, later the old skin becomes dull and then liquefies and becomes milky, then the old skin tears and with a twist the snake comes out of its old skin and lives with a slippery, polished and colorful one. According to Mircea Eliade,¹⁵ some believe that the moon incarnated as the snake, joins their girls and women in bed. The snake, the manifestation of the

sacredness of the moon, shares the same role with the moon. The Greeks and Romans believed that the moon coupled all women. It has been told that Olympias, Alexander the Great's mother, played with the snakes.

An example of the relationship between these concepts and the Elamite motifs can be found on the stele of Untash-Gal in Susa (Fig. 6). In this inscription, two huge snakes surround the inscription like a frame and they are likely to reach one another in the upper arch of the stele. In the top row, Untash-Gal is standing in front of Inshushinak in a position reminiscent of Mesopotamian reliefs, extending his hand to the god to receive the sign of the king (which is a scepter in the form of a serpent and a ring). We see two goddesses in another scene from the top of the monumental stone, whose skirts picture the mountains and the flow of six interconnected vases. The deities legs take the shape of two streams of water flowing from under their skirts on opposite sides. These streams actually show two water springs which stem from the slopes of the mountains.



Fig. 6 (AMIET 1966, 282)

Another example (Fig. 7) is a table with legs decorated with five goddesses. Each goddesses holds a vessel with two hands in front of her chest. Probably the water spilled out of the containers. Two snakes are seen on both sides of the table, which like the Kurangun rock relief, are the symbols of underground waters.¹⁶

According to Eliade,¹⁷ the snakes are guardians of springs, the fountain of youth, immortality, and holiness, as well as signs and symbols of life, fertility, heroism and

¹¹ HINTZ 1977, 48.

¹² HALL 2001, 207-8.

¹³ COOPER 2012, 329.

¹⁴ MAZDAPOUR 1992, 307.

¹⁵ ELIADE 1949, 17.

¹⁶ AMIET 1966, 62.

¹⁷ ELIADE 1949, 207.



Fig. 7 (AMIET 1966, 383)

treasures. Fertility and resurrection are among the codes attributed to the moon. The snake is the spirit and the essence of the moon. Perhaps this is the reason we see the image of the snake in the iconography and the rituals of the great gods of fertility.



Fig. 8 (MAZDAPOUR 1992, 327)

On a shell seal, a cylindrical seal dating back to 2300 BC obtained from Elam (Fig. 8), in addition to a woman holding a snake, we see a woman sitting on a throne with two snakes protruding from her shoulders. It is likely that the inscription of this snake holding lady, shows the goddess' victory over the ferocious force of the wild world of the beats, which is the symbol of the crude primeval nature. The serpent lady, the woman with the snakes protruding from her shoulders, can announce the presence of the goddess in the rituals celebrating the New Year and honoring those who have recently reached puberty, as well as her influence on the establishment of sexual relations and creation of a blessed union between the two sexes. It is from such relationship that existence begins.¹⁸

A shovel belonging to the 13th century which has been found at a temple located in north-east of Chogha Zanbil, carries an inscribed image of a snake on itself. Bearing in mind the fact that the moon influences the amount of rainfall and the fertility of the land, then the abundance of plants is

dependent on the moon. Therefore, some villagers plant the seeds as they see the crescent or the new moon and prune the trees and pick the fruits when the moon starts to wane. The snake has an unbreakable bond with the moon and monitors the formation and distribution of clouds in the sky and the rainfall ... Esfandiari, quoting from Lawrence,¹⁹ states the essential role of the snake in the agricultural civilizations in which life is dependent on the natural phenomenon. The description reads as follows: "If the snake dies, we will die. The dampness of the ground that causes the corn to grow depends on the life of the snake. From its scales, we extract gold and silver, the trees are rooted in the snake as the root of the hair is in our skin."

2.4. Snake - The Underworld

The snake images on the jurs and the lids of the dishes appear as the symbol of protection against the evil forces. Decorated snakes, as gatekeepers, coil around the doors and climb them up, they creep on the inscribed patterns of the kings on royal reliefs, twist around the gates, wrap themselves around the altar dishes, form the shafts of tools such as axes and staffs, and the handles of the royal Chovgan mallets, and build the thrones of the kings in vertically twisted figures.²⁰ The snake image in Mesopotamia symbolizes contrasting concepts such as life and death, profit and loss, wisdom and impulse, good and evil, sweetness and bitterness, and poison and antidote. It was a common motif in Mesopotamia in various periods, and even the manner in which it has been displayed in the Elamite tradition is somewhat influenced by this western neighbor. In the myths of Mesopotamia, the snake appears as the symbol of the beginning. Tiamat²¹ is a serpent or a dragon and symbolizes the living world. From her, Lahmu and Lahamu (a male and a female snake) were created as a couple. Additionally, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the serpent is the creature which steals the plant of immortality and this becomes the source of the snake's immortality and rebirth.²² Among the snake deities of Mesopotamia is Nirah, who was worshiped as the minister of Ishtar in the city of Der on the northern border between Mesopotamia and Elam. This god was worshiped from the earliest times until the Middle Babylon period in the E-Kur in the temple of Enlil, located in Nippur.²³ However, in Elam the snake was more important. Drawing snakes naturally in the form of motifs had been widespread from the prehistoric era onwards, but it is not easy to decide whether these patterns are of religious value. One of the most important mythical impressions of the snake in Elam is the idea of rebirth. The snake is great because it is resurrected, therefore, it belongs to the forces of the moon, and in this respect the snake grants fertility, knowledge, foresight, and even immortality. In countless mythos the ill-fated story of how the snake stole the eternal life, granted by God to the human beings, has been mentioned.²⁴ Among some civilizations including Elam, this animal was both revered and worshiped, and caused fear. The snake's molting

¹⁹ ESFANDIARI 2005, 90.

²⁰ HINTZ 1977, 47-48.

²¹ A primordial goddess.

²² TAWARATANI 2006, 17.

²³ BLACK/ GREEN 1992, 276-78.

²⁴ ELIADE 1949, 179.

¹⁸ MAZDAPOUR 1992, 334.

and its reappearance after shedding the worn old skin has caused it to be recognized as a reptile that is constantly reborn. Thus, it is said to be immortal. In many civilizations, particularly in Egypt, the snake is the creature of the dead, and as it lives a part of its life underground, it is also the guardian of the dead. Therefore, it is aware of the secrets of those who have passed away and is the embodiment of the spirits of the dead.²⁵



Fig. 9 (AMIET 1966, 39)

The relationship between the image of snake and the world of the Dead is seen in some Elamite potteries. For example, the cup which dates back to the middle of the 4th millennium BC, is decorated with the inscribed image of two snakes (Fig. 9). In this area, they buried the dead after their bodies had been decomposed. They laid the skull in a deep bowl and put the large and tall bones in tall bowls which resembled cups, and then they buried them with small boilers that were put beside. These sets of pottery were found in any grave.²⁶ On some other dishes, the image of the snake has been repeated as a motif which seems to protect and watch over the contents of the dishes. Almost always a jar made of clay is laid as a gift in the grave.

2.5.2. The Snake- Deity

In some designs we witness snakes coiling on the

²⁵ DE BEAUCORPS 1989, 47.

²⁶ AMIET 1966, 20-1.



Fig. 10 (AMIET 1966, 65)

heads of the gods (Fig. 10). One of the most interesting bronze sculptures from the time of the Sukkalmahhus, is the bronze statue of a god who is sitting on a chariot while a snake is coiling on his hat, Figure 10. This god is probably related to the Underworld and death, and the coiled snake



Fig. 11 (AMIET 1966, 382)

must be a sign of this connection.²⁷

Parts of a deity's head, from the royal capital of Susa, is an artifact belonging to the reign of Untash-Gal. The god's hair arrangement is comprised of two snakes crossing their heads on top of the deity's forehead. This head probably belongs to one of the Elamite deities, because despite its connection with the snake, reminds us of the snake coiling on the head of the god riding the chariot which belonged to the second millennium BC (Fig. 11). The snake lives underground, so it is linked to the Underworld and has access to absolute forces and magic that are in the possession of the dead. Because it has connections to the Underworld it is the enemy of the sun and all of the spiritual and solar forces, and is the representative of the dark forces of the human power.²⁸

2.6. Intertwined Snakes

A religious relief belonging to the Old Sumerian-Elamite period, about 2700 BC, has been found from the basement of the temple of the goddess Ninhursag in Susa, and shows two naked praying figures waiting for a goddess. The two figures were probably facing the goddess, so that the two intertwined snakes and dog are situated between them. There is cavity in the middle which may have been used for placing gifts (Fig. 12).



Fig. 12 (AMIET 1966, 173)

The Sumerian customs which were introduced to Elam, by Enmebaragesi, the king of Kish²⁹ does not only mean the dominance of the conqueror over the subdued, but also marks the beginning of a new era.³⁰ In the first place the two intertwined snakes serve as the symbol of the

²⁷ AMIET 1966, 20-1.

²⁸ COOPER 2012, 2000.

²⁹ Kish was one of the most important cities in Akkad during the Obaid period, which had a great civilization. The city became one of the most important cities of Babylonia after the establishment of the Babylonian government by uniting Sumer and Akkad.

³⁰ AMIET 1966, 35.

equilibrium of the opposites and show the two contrasting poles of life and death. This is the secret of health because the combination and coherence of the opposing physical and spiritual forces that neutralize each other, cause human liveliness and healing is nothing more than maintaining the balance and moderation.³¹ In Figure 12, two snakes are twisted around each other with open jaws and each one has its own tail in its mouth. The image of a snake eating its own tail, symbolizes a creature that swallows itself forever. There are many examples of the intertwined snakes in Jiroft, as well. However, different sources interpret the image of the intertwined snakes in two distinct ways: 1) the symbol of time and destiny as two great and limited forces; 2) the symbol of fertility and mating.

3. THE IMAGE OF THE SNAKE IN JIROFT:

Because the snake is a reptile, crawls on its abdomen, lacks hands and feet, avoids danger, and isolates itself from the others, it is a treacherous, frightening and immoral creature to people of different lands. In the popular culture of Jiroft, the snake symbolizes happiness and kingship, and it is believed that if one dreams of a snake they would be fortunate and happy.

The image of the snake in Jiroft shares a few similarities to its classification in Elam and generally includes the following categorization:

3.1. The Snake and the Eagle/Leopard

One of the motifs on the stone vessels of Jiroft, also seen in Sumerian art, is of two wild animals fighting each other. But, the specific form of this motif which particularly belongs to the new Uruk³² period, shows two beasts whose long tail or neck are twisted together. This motif is mainly seen on cylindrical seals. The encounter of these two creatures is one of the most commonly used designs in decorating the stone vessels of Jiroft.

The motif of eagles and angry fighting snakes in Jiroft (Fig. 13) immediately reminds us of the myth of Etana³³. The story of a shepherd king from the legendary Kish dynasty, who had no child and apparently had no choice other than ascending to the heaven to attain the plant of birth. The problem of ascending to the heaven was solved with the help of an eagle which had betrayed his snake friend and devoured the snake's children. The snake seeking revenge crawled inside the belly of a dead cow and waited in ambush. When the eagle descended to eat from the body of the cow, the snake poisoned him to death. Etana saved the eagle that was awaiting death in the pit, and the eagle in return took him on a spectacular but frightening journey to the heaven on its wings. In Mesopotamia the oldest display of this myth, is on the Akkadian cylindrical seal showing people flying on an eagle's wings in the sky.³⁴

The image of an eagle grasping a snake in its claws

³¹ ESFANDIARI 2005, 205.

³² Uruk was located 250 kilometers south of Baghdad on one of the oldest branches of the Euphrates in Iraq. In the Bible, it is called Arkh (Warka) which is the first major city of Sumer. This city is one of the largest habitats of the Sumerians and one of the most important religious centers of Mesopotamia.

³³ One of the most ancient kings of Kish whose name appears on the list of the Sumerian kings.

³⁴ MADJIDZADEH 2003, 7.

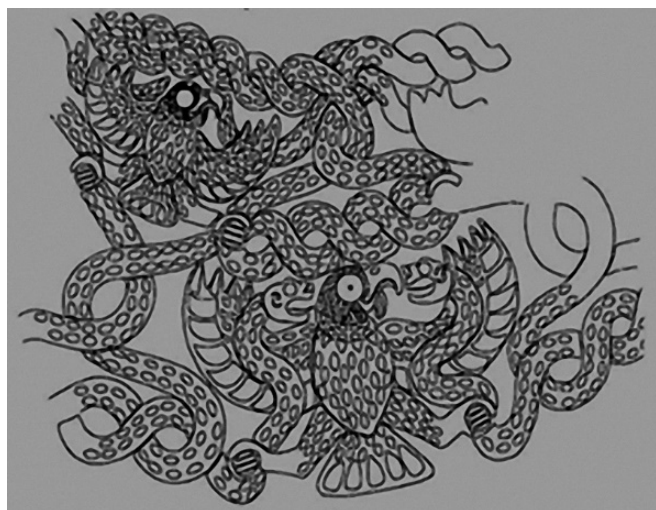


Fig. 13 (PERROT 2005, 139)

is almost a universal image. This image is the symbol of the struggle of the powers of Heaven and the forces of Hell and the contradiction between day and night, the heavens and the earth, and good and evil.³⁵ This picture probably reflects this myth that God descended to the Earth incarnated as a bird and overcame a snake. The bird is a symbol of a goddess like Venus.³⁶ Most likely, the conflict between a bird and a snake or the eagle and the snake more than anything else shows the victory of good over evil. De Beaucorps quoting from Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* writes that the snake is introduced as the most knowledgeable and cunning reptile and is paired with the eagle, the proudest bird. The book continues as follows: "I expect my pride to be always accompanying my knowledge." In another place the hermit, now living alone in a cave after a long journey, finds his animals: "I wish I was more cunning!" I wish I could naturally be sly like my snake!"³⁷

In fact, when the image of the snake and the eagle accompanies one another, the snake is the symbol of darkness that is linked to Underworld, and the eagle is the bird considered to be the Sun. Therefore, their presence together represents a cosmic unity and integrity, and in battle with each other, they represent antagonism and the conflicting forces of the Heaven and the Underworld, and shows the victory of good over evil, light over darkness, spiritual world over material world, and spiritual forces over the material forces.³⁸

On some vessels, the leopard is put against the snake, and elsewhere strongly grasping the snake in its claws (Fig. 14).

The leopard is the symbol of bravery and warfare. In ancient Greece, the leopard was sacred to Dionysus³⁹ and pulled his chariot. Egyptian priests also wore leopard skin when they buried their dead. Even the deceased person

³⁵ DE BEAUCORPS 1989, 58.

³⁶ MAZDAPOUR 1992 334.

³⁷ DE BEAUCORPS 1989, 59.

³⁸ COOPER 2012, 329.

³⁹ In Greek mythology, Dionysus is a Greek god. He is the greatest god of Modern Greek, where his worship was accompanied by a splendid ceremony which was a promise of liberation in some ways. The Romans knew this god more by the name of the Bacchus (Greek: Βάκχος) or Bakus (Latin: Bakchos).

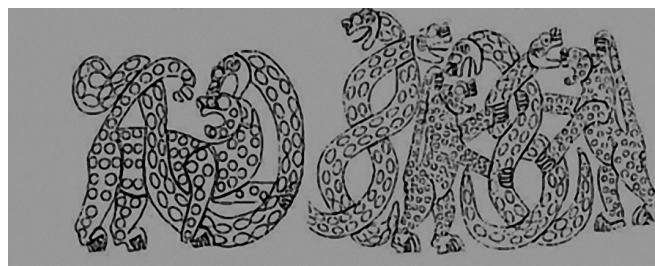


Fig. 14 (PERROT 2005, 139)

was shown wearing the skin of a leopard in order to remain immortal after death. The battle of the snake with the leopard reminds us of Mofdet, the Egyptian goddess, whom is called upon to the destroy snakes and scorpions. On some vessels, despite the fact that the leopard has the snake in its claws, the snake is slyly raising his head intending to bite the leopard on the head.

3.2. The Snake and the Human

On some dishes found in Jiroft, we see the image of a human being violently grasping the necks of two snakes and proving his superiority with absolute power. On another container, a man has taken refuge in the jar in fear of the snakes. Raising his head, he is faced with a snake (Figures 15 and 16).



Fig. 15 (PERROT 2005, 141)

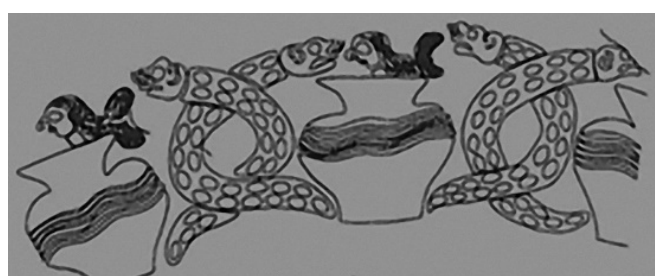


Fig. 16 (PERROT 2005, 151)

3-3- Intertwined snakes (figure 17)

Refer to 6-2 and figure 11.

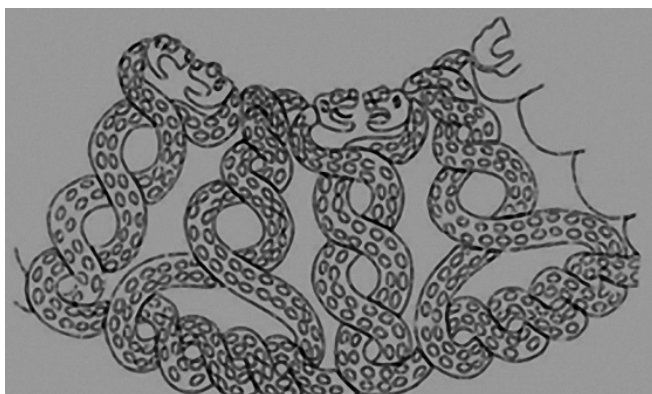


Fig. 17 (PERROT 2005, 139)

4. THE IMAGE OF THE SNAKE IN ZOROASTRIANISM

The image of animals, especially snakes, in the mythology of Iran and the ancient times has always been the center of attention. The ancient Persian books such as the Avesta, the sole survivor of the Avestan language, and various Middle Persian books, also refer to the image of the snake. Below is a brief description of the image of this creature in Zoroastrianism, the Avesta, and the Pahlavi texts.

At the end of the sixth millennium and at the beginning of the creation of the material world, the Devil, in the form of a snake, exits from a subterranean passage belonging to the Heaven, creeps to the surface of the ground, and abounds the earth with snakes and *vile animals or vermin*⁴⁰. Later, the Devil asks Zahhak to kiss his shoulders as a reward for what Zahhak had done for him. Due to this kiss, two snakes grow on Zahhak's shoulders, and Aži Dahāka the monster with three heads, three mouths and six eyes is born. The snakes on his shoulders feed on the brains of Iranian youth.

The other story belongs to the millennium of Oshidar⁴¹, in which a variety of wolves is gathered in one place and fuse into a single wolf. Behdinan⁴², fight with it and destroy it. In this way, the four-legged druz⁴³ is destroyed, but Jeh⁴⁴ exits from it in the form of a black cloud, and then enters the snake. During this time, some species of snakes worship the religion of Ahura Mazda. Then in the millennium of Oshidarmah⁴⁵ a large snake with the width of 833 steps and length of 1656 steps is created which is the druz of the snakes and represents all the vexatious reptiles. Behdinan fight this snake and during rituals set fire to this deava, the poison that exits from it scorches the land and the plants within a mile.⁴⁶ The myth of the imprisoned dragon

⁴⁰ Xrafstar is a vile animal or vermin. This name has been written in the Avesta as "xrafstra", in Pahlavi "xrafstar" and in the Persian culture and the literature of followers of Mazda "xarāstar". Al-Meidani in the book *Sami and al-Sāmi* has used "xastar"; AFIFI 1995, 500.

⁴¹ In Pahlavi, Ōšidar is the first savior in Zoroastrianism.

⁴² Members of the good faith, in Zoroastrianism.

⁴³ A lie-demon or a daeva.

⁴⁴ Jeh the whore (Avestan: Jahi).

⁴⁵ In Pahlavi, Ōšidar mäh is the second savior in Zoroastrianism.

⁴⁶ GHOLIZADEH 2008, 373-4.

defeated by Fereyduin in the millennium of Oshidarmah can be regarded as an obvious and striking example of how the Iranian and Aryan myths in Pahlavi texts are combined with the Zoroastrian legends.⁴⁷

4.1. The Snake in the Avesta

The snake is called (āži-) in the Avesta and (ahi-) in Sanskrit sometimes is accompanied by the adjectives (udarō. θraša-) meaning "moving on the stomach" and (xšvaēša-) meaning "crawling fast, quick, agile".⁴⁸

"Aži" means a great dragon or a snake with three heads, three mouths and six eyes. It has also been called Dahāg, Azdahag, Azhdaha dush (dragon-shouldered), Mar dush (snake-shouldered) or Bivar Asp. In the second part of the first fargard of Vendidad, Aži means the red snake in the land of Iran-Vej⁴⁹ and is considered to be created by Angra Mainyu or Ahriman. Aži Dahāka with three heads, three mouths and six eyes has been given a more mythological description than other daevas in the Avesta. Despite his devilish face, he prayed for the gods "Vayu" and "Anahid", and prayed to them to achieve his sinister goals, which were to dominate the land and empty the Earth of mankind, but none of these two gods fulfilled his evil desires. Although in the Avesta there is no mention of the fact that he was created as human and was a king, it is implied that he was of the human race and a powerful king. But a human cannot have three mouths, three heads and six eyes, so what is the cause of this abnormality? As in Shahnameh, the answer should be sought in the two snakes growing on his shoulders. Counting the heads of the snakes, this person had three heads, three mouths and six eyes. In fact, the two snakes are part of Azhi Dahaka's being, and all three form one single entity called Zahak or Azhi Dahak.⁵⁰

In fact, the snake in the Avesta is a dragon who wants to destroy the people and everything that is on the Earth, and sometimes represents the strongest lie-demon that Ahriman has created against the material world. His body is full of vile animals which will conquer the world, if he dies.

In the eighth stanza of *Hom Yasht*⁵¹ Zoroastra asks: Who smote Azhi Dahaka, three-jawed and triple-headed, six-eyed, with thousand perceptions, and of mighty strength, a lie-demon [druz] of the Daevas, evil for our settlements, and wicked, whom the evil spirit Angra Mainyu made as the most mighty Druz [against the corporeal world], and for the murder of (our) settlements, and to slay the (homes) of Asha! Or in the 11th stanza it has been mentioned: He who smote the horned dragon swallowing men, and swallowing horses, poisonous, and green of color over which, as thick as thumbs are, greenish poison flowed aside, on whose back once Keresaspa cooked his meat in iron caldron at the noonday meal; and the deadly, scorched, upstart, and springing off, dashed out the water as it boiled. Headlong fled affrighted manly-minded Keresaspa.

What is certain is that Azhi has not been spoken of in the Gathas, but the snake has been mentioned in various

⁴⁷ MAZDAPOUR 2008, 227.

⁴⁸ POURDAVOUD 1947, 197.

⁴⁹ The holy land of Zoroastrianism. It seems to have been considered as the original seat of the Iranian race.

⁵⁰ MEHRAFARIN/ TAVOUSI 2006, 121-3.

⁵¹ Hōm Yašt.

parts of the Old Avesta, including the Vendidad, the Yasna texts and Yashts. The snake in the Avesta has always been described as a devilish and evil creature, and the reward for killing and destroying it is reaching the world of truth. In general, the words Azhi Dahaka and Azhi have been used with mythical inclinations in some parts of the Avesta (in the Yasna and Yashts) and in some other parts (the Vendidad) they have been mentioned referring to the snake itself which is the serpent, the vile crawler, and the devilish creature.

4.2. The Snake in Pahlavi Texts

The word “snake” in Pahlavi and Persian is equal to the Sanskrit word “māra-” meaning “causing death and deadly” which is the equivalent of the word “mairiia-” meaning “malefactor and deleterious”.⁵²

The snake is one of the most threatening types of “xrafstarān”⁵³. According to the Bundahishn, “xrafstar” is all magic, and the snake is pure magic, but in the religion it is not recommended to kill the snake. Contrary to this, in the *Matikan-i Yosht Fryan* and the Pahlavi narratives, killing the snake is considered to be a great deed and its reward equals penance for one tanāpuhl⁵⁴. In his visit to Paradise, the pious Arda Viraf saw the spirits of those who killed “xrafstarān” in high position and beauty, and when he visits Hell, he sees the soul of man boiling in an iron cauldron while his right foot is outside of it. His companions tell him that every part of this man’s body had sinned except his right foot, with which he killed toads, ants, snakes and scorpion and other insidious animals or xrafstarān.⁵⁵

Mārghan meaning “snake-killer” is the name of a staff that was recommended for killing the insects. On the other hand, killing the snake in Zoroastrian creed is ill-omened and has dreadful, threatening and magical consequences. Additionally, it has been written in *Mār Nameh*⁵⁶ that seeing the snake on each day of the month contains a distinct meaning and falls under a different rule; sometimes it is sinister and occasionally is a blessing. Semi-mythological and superstitious beliefs also claim that sometimes a certain white snake is a blessing and brings about an unexpected benefit, and it is linked to the world of the unseen and mystery. This unofficial and surprising belief is so serious that there is even a holy feast hold in honor of the snake and a special sacred story called “The Story of the Snake”⁵⁷ is narrated sitting around a spread table cloth.⁵⁸

According to some foreign writers, Iranians were

⁵² POURDAVOUD 1947, 197-8.

⁵³ Vile animals or vermin considered to be devilish creations.

⁵⁴ tanāpuhl: is a certain degree of sin.

⁵⁵ AFIFI 1995, 501.

⁵⁶ It means “the book of the snake” Narrated by Darab Harmozyar, p. 2, p. 193

⁵⁷ The girl marries a snake, which is a mysterious, mythological, and godly existence. The jealous sisters burn the snake’s skin, which he takes off at night. The man / the snake turns to smoke and disappears. The woman embarks on a journey to find her husband. After a hard journey and passing its stages and based on the signs, she finds him near the water, but from then on she is only allowed to see him as a snake. The serpent commands to hold a feast and declares that henceforth, the woman and a tablecloth would be present in houses and himself will be only a snake on the walls to guard and bring blessings. The story of the snake remains hidden with precision and perseverance, and it is believed that if one reveals the secret, one of their loved ones will be lost; MAZDAPOUR 2004, 210.

⁵⁸ MAZDAPOUR 2004, 210.

making abundant attempts at killing xrafstarān. From Herodotus (from the 5th century AD) to Agathias (6th century AD), many had discussed this Persian creed, which lasted until the end of the Sassanid era and after that was carried on by the followers of Ahura Mazda. Herodotus writes with surprise that Magi kill all other animals except dogs and humans with their own hands. They take pride in killing reptiles, ant, snakes and birds. This was normal because they felt that by destroying such creatures, they reduce the forces of Angra Mainyu in number.⁵⁹

Analyzing the image of the snake in Pahlavi texts reveals that all of them call the snake (=Bēwarasp, garzag, Ažidahāk, Dahāk, kirm) an evil creature, born from the seed of evil and a druz which ruins the creation of good and if released it will harm the water, fire, and plant.

Of course, it is true that the snake appears more than any other animal in mythology and superstition all over the world, but when we evaluate the official Zoroastrian standpoint and the more informal and imaginative ideas about it in Iran, we are faced with two changes: first, that in written texts, official writings, and Zoroastrian works the snake is not very important and it appears more like a dragon, while its presence and name in the more recent unofficial texts is more widespread. Moreover, with this change, a slight change in quality can be seen in this classification. If we take the words of Bundahishn that regards the snake as the most evil xrafstar and, at the same time, prohibit its killing and also believe in the existence of the king of snakes with royal characteristics the beginning of such interpretation, then this change takes a more concrete and serious form⁶⁰

5. CONCLUSION

The image of the snake on the artifacts belonging to the 2nd millennium BC in Iran is seen abundantly and with great variety, but their main meaning is always controversial. The serpent in Elam more than anything is a representative of concepts like, the forces of the underworld, immortality, deathlessness, and fertility. This shows the importance of this reptile and is related to the rituals of this region. The image of the snake is accompanied by a kind of sanctity and respect, as well as horror.

But the image of the snake in Jiroft is different. In some of the designs, we witness the fight between the snake and the eagle, which represents a kind of contradiction and introduces concepts such as the victory of good over evil and light over darkness. Sometimes we witness this confrontation with the humans. On the other hand, the image of the interconnected and intertwined snakes constitutes most depictions of this animal in Jiroft and refers to concepts such as life and death, and time and fate.

What matters is that with the Persians and other nations rising to power after the civilizations of Elam and Jiroft, the image of the snake is not as frequent as before, because the expansion of the new powers the customs of the communities, especially the Achaemenid community, dominate various cities. The Zoroastrian creed spreads in other regions after the rapid expansion among the Persians. In Zoroastrianism, the snake is considered to be a xrafstar

⁵⁹ BOYCE 2002, 104.

⁶⁰ MAZDAPOUR 2004, 211.

and a devilish creature. As the penance for committing some sins is killing xrafstarān. For example, killing an otter, which is one of the good creatures, will be compensated for by killing 10,000 snakes, or the sin of being intimate with a woman on her menstrual cycle would be forgiven by killing one thousand snakes and two thousand other reptiles.

The position of this unimportant creation of Ahriman in Zoroastrian official beliefs and its comparison with other Iranian beliefs suggests that there is a contradiction and conflict between the two.

REFERENCES

- AFIFI 1995
Afifi, Rahim, *Iranian mythology and culture in Pahlavi writings* (Tehran: Toos Book Press).
- AMIET 1966
Amiet, Pierre, *Elam* (Archée, the University of California).
- BLACK/ GREEN 1992
Black, Jeremy A. and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary*, ed. Tessa Rickards, British Museum Press for the Trustees of the British Museum (the University of Michigan).
- BOYCE 2002
Boyce, Mary, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London and New York: Routledge).
- COOPER 2012
Cooper, J.C. *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* (Thames and Hudson Limited).
- DE BEAUCORPS 1989
De Beaucorps, Monique, *Les Symboles Vivants* (Nathan).
- DE MIROSCHEDJI 1981
De Miroschedji, P. La Dieu Elamite au Serpent et aux eaux jaillissantes, *Iranica Antiqua*, XVI, 1-25).
- ELIADE 1949
Eliade, Mircea, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Bibliothèque Scientifique Payot).
- ESFANDIARI 2005
Esfandiari, Saba. *Manifestation of Geometric Patterns in Traditional Iranian Art* (Mashhad: Nour-e Hekmat).
- GHOLIZADEH 2008
Gholizadeh, Khosrow, *Encyclopedia of Iranian Mythology Based on Pahlavi Texts*, (Tehran: Ketab-e Parseh).
- HALL 2001
Hall, James, *Illustrated Dictionary of Symbols in Eastern and Western Art* (Routledge).
- HINTZ 1977
Hintz, Walter, *The Lost World of Elam, the Reconstruction of a Lost Civilization* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, transl. by Jennifer Barnes).
- MADJIDZADEH 1991
Madjidzadeh, Youssef, *History and Civilization of Elam* (Tehran: Academic Publishing Center).
- MADJIDZADEH 2003
Madjidzadeh, Youssef, *Jiroft, the Oldest Civilization in the East*, (Ministry of culture and Islamic Guidance, Organization of Publishing and Publications in cooperation with the National Heritage Organization: Research Center).
- MAZDAPOUR 1992
Mazdapour, Katayun, The Fairy Tale in One Thousand and One Nights, Shahla Lahiji, Mehrangiz Kaar, *Understanding the Identity of the Iranian Woman in Pre-history and History* (Tehran: Roushangaran 290-353 ,).
- MAZDAPOUR 2004
Mazdapour, Katayun, *Fourteen Other Speech about the Myth*, (Tehran: Asatir Publication).
- MAZDAPOUR 2008
Mazdapour, Katayun, The Snake Magician and the Butterfly Beauty (People's Culture, 7th year, Issues 27 & 28).
- MEHRAFARIN/ TAVOUSHI 2006
Mehrafarin, Reza, Mohammad Tavousi, Paleontology of Zahak's Myth, *Magazine of Persian Language and Literature (Lyrical Research)*, (University of Sistan and Baluchestan, 4th Year, Issue 6).
- PERROT 2005
Perrot, J., Madjidzadeh, Y., L'Iconographie Des Vases Et Objets En Chlorite De Jiroft (Iran), (*Paleorient*, 31/2: 123-152).
- POTTS 2004
Potts, Daniel T. *The Archaeology of Elam: Formation and Transformation of an Ancient Iranian State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- POURDAVOUD 1947
Pourdavoud, Ebrahim, *Ancient Iranian culture*, (Tehran: Iran-shenasi).
- TAWARATANI 2006
Tawaratani, Nahoko, *Comparative Literature of Snakes and Pears, Everlasting Symbols in Persian and Japanese Literature*, (Tehran: Behjat Publication).