

Animal Figures of Sasanian Stucco in Tepe Hissar

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Abstract

One of the most important sites of sasanian period in Iran that stucco was found is Tepe Hissar in south east of Damghan. There was a sasanian palace with limited decoration and beautiful stucco in this Tepe which variety of motif fragments made it as so valuable studies that lead us to better understanding of the stucco art of this era. the noticeable part of stucco decorations contain animal figures that contain animals like: lion, deer, ram and boar. In this article, It have been attempted to clarify certain era, style and applications of figures by exact description and compare its fragments with the stucco of other sasanian sites. The final purpose is to clarify the aspects of sasanian stucco art and inventive ideas of this reliefs.

Keywords: Sasanian period, Tepe Hissar, Palace, Stucco , Animal figures

Introduction

Tepe Hissar is in three kilometers to south eastern of Damghan and southern border of Alborz mountains. Damghan at 360 kilometers east of Tehran is a city that located on the Old Road Route of Tehran- Khorasan (Negahban 1994, 393).

Archaeology investigation literature of Tepe Hissar goes back to 1928 A.D. this year in, "Roland De mequenem" did a rudimentary survey in Tepe Hissar. After him, "Ernest Herzfeld" did on excavation in Tepe Hissar in 1930. This excavations continued by Schmidt between 1931- 1933 under Boston university museum supervisory. Years later, from 1972 to 1976, archaeologists such as "Dyson", "Bulgarelli" and "Biscione", Italian researchers, do some excavations in Tepe Hissar. The most perfect excavation among them was done by Schmidt that lead to discovery of sasanian remains.

Three main prehistoric periods was recognized in Tepe Hissar which called I, II and III. The oldest one goes back 4200 B.C. in addition to prehistoric habitation remains, some historic and Islamic remains was found too (m'asoomi 2005, 539-540).

An interesting sasanian palace was found in this site that was built in fifth century A.D (few years before Qasr-i- shirin and after sarvistan) (Herrman 1995, 122). Although, Herzfeld believed that this construction belongs to the first sasanian phase which means in second half of third century A.D (Schmidt 1933, 455).

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The conspicuous feature of the building is the triple- aisled portico or Ivan, of which the circular piers, approximately 6 feet (1.8 meters) in diameter, are spaced some 8 feet apart in two rows, with a clear width of 6 meters in the central aisle and of 1.8 meters in the outer aisles.

A squar room, presumably domed, is preceded by an aisled ivan. While remains of mural paintings were found, the chief ornaments were stucco reliefs cast in moulds, including plaques, archivolts, and circular pier revetments (Kimball 1938, 579-580).

Archaeologists such as Schmidt (1933), Pope (1938) and Kroger (1982) mentioned the stuccoes of this site.

The most important principle in stucco investigations is exact extensive description of fragments, then they should be compared. These steps can be done after stucco classification based on factors such as subject, motif, application and even fragment dimensions. In this article, the classification is based on motif.

Description, comparison and a analysis of stucco fragments

Stucco animal figurines in Tepe Hissar include animals like lion, deer, hind, ram, boar. In this fragments, animal reliefs are presented alone or in combination with geometrical and floral motifs.

Stucco fragments with lion figure

Near the south eastern entrance of dome room from sasanian palace in Tepe Hissar, some fragments were found that include a lion left face, a big paw and two fragments of lion head and mane. Schmidt called them as gate guards (Schmidt 1933, 456). The first fragment with 3/4 of left face is a lion head that has a parallel row of incised grooves in forehead, head side and face bottom and show lion mane in these parts. The animal left ear is seen as an oval prominent mass in head bottom. The animal has long prominent muzzle and nose that a central end groove divided lion upper mouth in to two parts. The Lion mouth is opened, its three big sharp fangs is a sign of angry roaring lion and increased its dignity. From lion's eyes, just the left one is remained as a big almond- eye that has a deep incised as a pupil. There are two irregular continuous bands on the muzzle, nose, forehead, cheek and around the eyes of the lion. There is another band around the lion's mouth and muzzle that divides it from other parts of the lion face.

Another similar fragment of lion's face and head obtained that was eroded seriously and just a overall scheme remained from mane and its face parallel bands.

Another small incomplete fragment obtained from Tepe Hissar that has just a beautiful design of lion's mane that showed as some parallel bands with irregular direction.

Also a lion paw was seen that its foot tips and nails are vanished and in upper part of the paw – near ankle- a fragment is broken and has been isolated from the rest of the foot. The footnails divided with deep incised line. A series of parallel grooves beside the paw show this part hairs (fig.1). Some stucco fragments that are similar to Tepe Hissar samples, obtained from other sites such as Qal'eh-i Zohak (Ghandgar and others 2005, 212), Haji abad (Azarnoush 1994, 127-128), Kish (Pope 1938, 644) and Chal Tarkhan Eshqabad (Thompson 1967, pls 3-5).

Plaster lion heads from Qal'eh-i Zohak and Haji abad are very similar to each other, but they are distinct from Tepe Hissar samples, in terms of naturalistic figure style and have a better style condition (fig.2).

The similarity between these fragments with Tepe Hissar samples derived from the eyes with pupils got a hole in the center and from a prominent snout, can be seen well. Similar samples to Tepe Hissar lion fragments, were seen in Chal Tarkhan Eshqabad and Kish stuccoes.

As shown in figure 1, in a plaster lion head in Tepe Hissar, the ratios aren't very standard and lion face is shown as a cartoon figure.

In a plaster plaque of the Kish palace(no.1) a lion is shown that attack a cow, the lion shape is artificial and unacceptable(Pope 1938, 590). There isn't a standard ratios in the face and similar to the Tepe Hissar sample, the lion face is tough and primary (fig.3). the lion figure with the same characteristics is shown on a plaster plaque of Kish that in both samples large eyes, tough faces and the lion face components divided from each other by carved twin strips on top of snout and along the chin.

There is a close similarity between those fragment's foot paws with the lion's foot claw, in Tepe Hissar (fig.4).

There are partial plaster figurines in large scale from the main hall of the palace in Chal Tarkhan with lion's paw and mane figure(Thompson 1967, 36) that have stylistic similarities with Tepe Hissar samples. The mane showing way and similar scales of fragments show the same application.



Fig. 1 Tepe Hissar lion plaster head
(Schmidt 1933, 456)



Fig. 2 plaster fragment of Hajiabad
(Writers)



Fig. 3 A lion attacking a cow of Kish
(Watelin 1938, 590)



Fig. 4 lion plaster plaque of Kish
(Pope 1938, 644)

Stucco fragments with deer figure

The rectangular piece 41 cm length has a unique figure of a male deer (Pope 1938, PL176). The upper and lower parts of this piece has a smooth prominent strip that covers the figure as a marginal frame. within the frame, a big body deer is in the left of the scene. Toward the neck and rump it had a small curvature and bending downward. It's big round rump with trunk and abdomen coming forward show that it is a fat animal. No sign of body hair is seen only in the lower abdomen a row of parallel groove carved show it's hair. The artist deliberately created an appendicular under the animal abdomen to clear that it is a male deer, the artist tried to show the natural tendency of this art.

Animal stretched legs aren't parallel and distinct from other parts. The right hand bend obliquely to front at the animal's head level, While the left hand is bent back cursively behind the right one. The situation in legs is vice versa, it means the left foot is in front and the right foot is in behind. The situation of feet shows that animal is walking and moving.

The artist draw the left hand with a curve to show the continuous movement of the animal. As said, animals move in a way that hands and feet act completely in contrast. It means if the animal's left hand is in front, the left foot will be back and the right foot accordinated with the left hand is in front instead. Thus, the artist depicts animal movement to follow natural principles which is true about the size of the hands and legs. The legs, specially in hips, are moulding fatter than the hands. The animal big grooved hoofs on the lower margin is distinct from the ankles. In the rear legs, the curving strip is pulled from top to the back of the ankle and distinct by the linear foot curving.

Deer head and neck bent completely down and two very big horns with a series of antennas over the head are seen. This creature has a long elongated snout and face. The hole in the muzzle end, shows the nose cavity. This animal has a narrow sharp ear and a hollow circular prominent band with in the eye, show the pupil and iris.

A prominent line stretch from the top eye line to the nosed cavity and divide the upper face and muzzle from the animal's face sides. under the animal's mouth, three interconnected parallel bands with two screws around it self can be seen (fig.5).

According to Schmidt(Tepe Hissar digger) this spiral rings is like water. so he believes that the deer is drinking water (Schmidt 1933, 456). Followed by most researchers such as: Pope, Thompson and etc, believe this fragment is a deer which is drinking water. on the other hand, in some similar fragments, the spiral rings is known to be in connection with the water.

In general, the deer figure in ancient times, compared to other animal motifs such as ram or boar is more limited. The oldest sample that is similar to Tepe Hissar fragment, was seen a stone relief in Arsalan Tash belongs to the Assyrians period(fig.6). in this fragment, a deer is eating grass, a few trees are in front of a deer and two marginal strips at the top and bottom of the fragment –like the Tepe Hissar samples- can be seen(Schmidt 1937, 185).

Except the Tepe Hissar, the deer figure is not much seen in Sasanian era. Just similar samples can be seen in Chal Tarkhan and Kish stucco sites. A stucco fragment with deer figure is seen in Kish that had been standing with a plant branch in his mouth (Kroger 1982, PL.82). in a plaster fragment from Chal Tarkhan (fig.7) a rider on a deer can be seen that has all the characteristics of Tepe Hissar plaques(Thompson 1967, PL. 10).

Another fragment obtained from Tepe Hissar that is similar to female deer that has a series of minor differences with a previous fragment(fig.8). The differences include thinner trunk of female deer, having no horns on the head and a series of hair on the head. between the two ears a prominent stump with carved furrows is identified. The female deer movement is in contrast with previous fragment and it moves to the left in the scene.

Despite the similarities between Kish deer with Tepe Hissar one's, there is some differences between them. The stylistic differences in eyes, hair above the head, horns, feet, under the neck and body of the deer is clearly detectable. The similarity of Chal Tarkhan deer with Tepe Hissar one's is in it's circular shaped eyes, hair on the head, hands and horn form is detectable.

In Tepe Hissar deer, the furrow hooves and strips are detectable in the back of legs that repeated in animal design in Haji abad and Chal Tarkhan. Also in Tepe Hissar deer, the body hair under the abdomen is shown by a row of grooves, this method is repeated in animal motifs from Kish, Chal Tatkhan-Eshqabad and Kherbat almafjar.

Under animal's mouth, three parallel interconnected bands can be seen that nested as two screws. Schmidt (Tepe Hissar digger) thought these spiral rings refer to water and conclude that this is a deer which is drinking water. The following researchers introduced spiral shaped rings in this fragment and similar fragment as a symbol of water.

As ever seen, there is no animal that can drink water when it moves. It means all the animals must be stopped to drink water, while the don't have this restriction when they are eating grass and they can do this in any case.

So, spiral shaped rings, in contrast with Schmidt, Pope and other's comments is refer to the grass and weeds. Another clear reason is a gypsum plaque that attributed to Suse that two goats take up their front pair legs to the sides of a grape tree and between the goat's legs the same spiral shaped rings are repeated as a sign of grass.

The interesting and important point in these two fragments from Tepe Hissar is using the same plaster area and the animal motif on the field_that show a developed method in Sasanian stucco era. These animal motifs is used in Kish, Chal Tarkhan- Eshqabad and Susa too.



Fig. 5 Tepe Hissar plaster plaque with a male deer figure
(Pope 1938, pl.176)

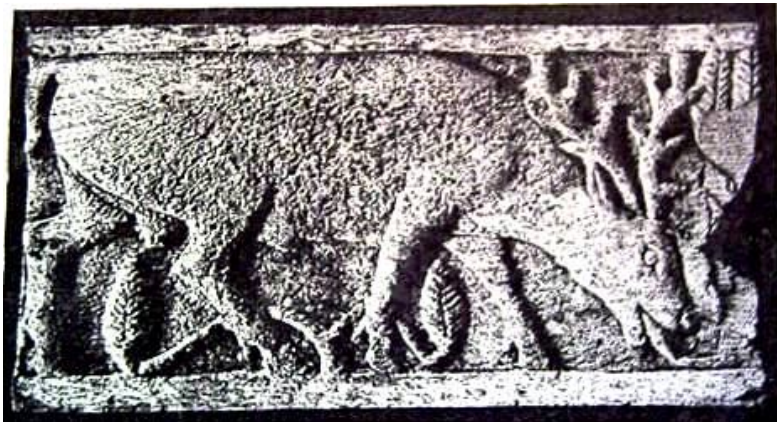


Fig. 6 Assyrian stone relief of Arsalan Tash
(Schmidt 1937, 185)



Fig. 7 plaster plaque with a human figure rides on a deer of Chal Tarkhan-Eshqabad(Thompson 1967, PL.X)



Fig. 8 Tepe Hissar plaster plaque with figure of a female deer (Pope 1938, pl.176)

A plaster fragment with a ram figure

From Sassanid palace in Tepe Hissar, a rectangular plaque with no margin has obtained that has a ram figure with two half palmette. The half palmette figure is located on the right side of the fragment as a small stem with two hanging leaves (Ayazi and Miri 2007, 26). Beside this figure, a four sepal half palmette is seen that rise up and its upper sepal tip is under the ram's mouth.

The most part of the fragment is occupied by the torso of a ram that is facing to the right stage and includes the hand, neck, thoracic and upper trunk. From the ram's body, just parts of the animal's trunk thoracic are figured as a mass of plaster with a smooth surface. The animal has a narrow elongated muzzle with a small curvature. Its mouth is shown by carving a relatively deep groove. A groove upper muzzle and near its eye continues to the nose that give an special prominence to upper muzzle part.

They used a hollow stump to show the nasal cavity and the eye is shown as an almond flat strip that separated by a furrow from its space. The interesting point is that unlike other Tepe Hissar fragments, there isn't any trace of eye pupil and just general plan of eye is figured.

The ram has a hollow elongated sharp ear that is carved in center and its tip is located on the horn. The ram's long beard under the chin and neck is detectable by a series of carved parallel vertical lines. Two long twisted hair under the beard is hanging from the neck as a prominent six-bar-end. A band laid on the ram's neck as a collar that include two narrow strips with a row of circular pearl beads in the center. A square shape is determined on the back end of the neck and thoracic that may be refer to the end of two hanging bands (fig.9).

Although the ram's head is shown as a silhouette, its horn view has a front view. The representation method of ram's head is seen in other Sassanid stucco sites such as Ctesiphon, Chal Tarkhan-Eshqabad and Kish(fig.10). The place of growing horns on the head, can be seen as a circular shape made by parallel formed tiny vertical furrows. The ram's big in harmonious horns bent around the head and twisted as a petition. Surface of large animal horns is filled with zigzag lines. This type of decorated horns and its shape are distinct from other Sassanid sites era.



Fig. 9 plaster plaque with a ram figure of Tepe Hissar
(Ayazi and Miri 2007, 26)



Fig. 10 plaster plaque with a ram figure of Kish
(Pope 1938, 639)

Stucco fragment with a wild boar figure

This fragment is a gypsum plaque with dimensions 40×38cm, on which a series of prominent reliefs created as the molding (Pope 1938, PL.177). Decorative margin as a four plant motifs of symmetric half- palmette filled the lateral space of the plaque. A pair of symmetric three sepal half- palmette leaves spread out around the space from every corner of the plaque. They connected by two curved strips. The sepal location method is exactly the same as the woman torso in square frame that explored from Tepe Hissar. This fragment is distinguished by three sepals, instead of four.

After this decorative margin, there is a frame with beads that include a row of hollow beads (24 beads). Inside the circular frame, a wild boar's head is seen in the right side with a crown like rough hair that is shown as are relatively deep parallel grooves in the top of the head (fig.11).

This type of coarse hair, standing at the top of the head, is seen in a wild boar's head in Kish. The eye is inside an angular hole as a prominent circular band. A small hole inside the band indicate the eye pupil. A narrow semi-circular strip above the eye is seen that indicate the upper eyelid. The animal ears can be seen as a mass of pyramidal shape head. The animal has a elongated pointy muzzle with an open mouth and two large teeth stuck out from the right side and this position is seen in the left side too.

The wild boar's dentine shaped teeth are n't similar in upper part in compare with lower part. The lower teeth slightly curved upward and attached near the mouth while the upper teeth crooked and twisted in a larger scale. Two folded strips can be seen upper mouth that created by dentine teeth.

Another sample similar to this fragment obtained from Tepe Hissar that is being held in ancient Iran museum now. In this fragment a half-palmette in plaque's angles can be seen as previous fragment that surrounded the lateral spaces. Subsequently, a circular smooth strip can be seen that form a circular frame in combination with another strip in the plaque to show a floral motif. The floral motif includes wavy stems of a grape tree that is waved completely regular. There are six clusters of grape in the internal space of these wavy stems and there are six clusters of grape and six grape leaves in the outer space of these wavy stems. The artist tried to show the surface of vein leaves.

After a decorative circular margin, a wild boar's head can be seen in plaque center. It's total characteristics is similar to previous fragment. The wild boar's muzzle is smaller and it's eyes are larger than those in previous fragment. The animal's ear with a carving in center, is in a better condition than the previous one(fig.12).

The boar is a symbol of power and one of the manifestations of Izad Bahram or Verethraghna that refers to the god of war and victory in Avesta (Porada 1965). In the an them that is dedicated to Bahram in the 14th Yasht, it is stated that Bahram or Verethraghna has ten embodiment and it's fifth embodiment shows a sharp teeth boar that is powerful, angry and killing(Hinnells 2005, 83). In Sassanid stucco era, a lot of boars can be seen in other sites such as Ctesiphon, Kish and Chal Tarkhan too.

Apart from Tepe Hissar, the only place that the boar head is figured within the plaque or medallion is Chal Tarkhan- Eshqabad that it's boar heads have many stylistic similarities with boar heads of Tepe Hissar(fig.13).

In a plaster plaque from Tepe Hissar, a type of coarse hair standing at the top of the head is seen in a separated boar head from Kish. The method that is used to create the animal's eye, is similar to a method that is used in animal motifs from Hajiabad. In Tepe Hissar sample the artist tried to show the hair of face and forehead by using a series of irregular small groove lines. The way of showing boar body hair, can be seen to some extent in Ctesiphon and Taq-e Bostan.



Fig. 11 plaster plaque with a boar figure from Tepe Hissar
(Pope 1938, 177)



Fig. 12 plaster plaque with a boar figure from Tepe Hissar
(Ayazi and Miri 2007, 26)

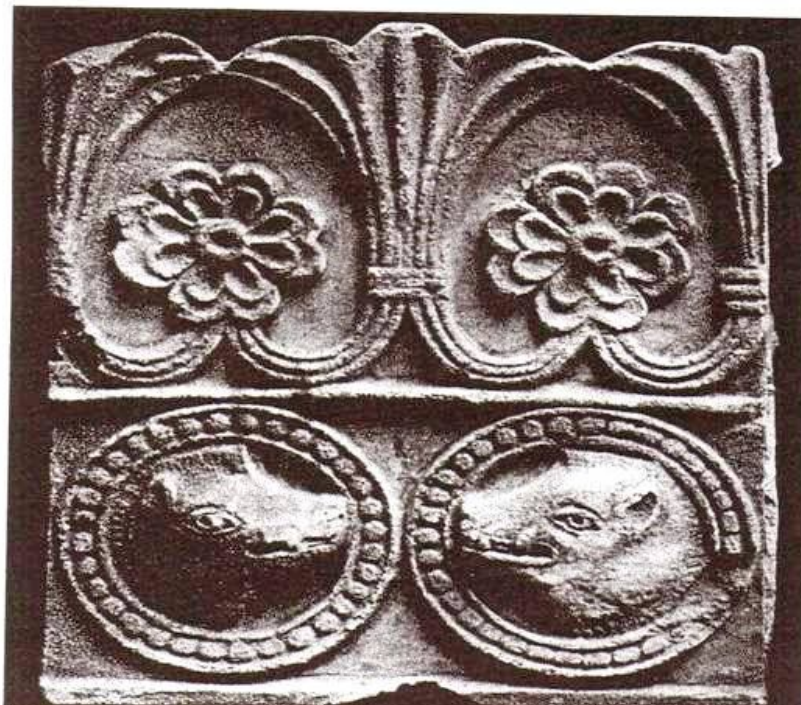


Fig. 13 plaster plaque with a boar figure from Chal Tarkhan- Eshqabad
(Thompson 1967, PL. IV)

Conclusion

Despite the low number of stuccoes obtained from Tepe Hissar, the motifs diversity and value of studies are obvious in this site. Among these stuccoes, the animal motifs are very important in accurate dating of Sassanian buildings and include motifs such as: lion, male and female deer, ram and boar. The animal figures explored from animal stuccoes of Tepe Hissar were belonged to those fashionable animal motifs and Sassanian artists were interested in those figures very much that have been seen in other artistic works of this era. It indicates the symbolic importance of these animal in religious and social beliefs of Sassanid era.

The lion defective fragments of Tepe Hissar are similar to those of Kish in terms of style and face. But they are distinct from lion samples of Qal'eh-i Zohak and Hajiabad and their naturalistic characteristics are lower. The lion mane and paw fragment of Tepe Hissar have the same shape and application of Chal Tarkhan- Eshqabad large scale fragments. In both samples these fragment were used as gate guard's and they are a reminiscent of Achaemenid stone statues in Persepolis.

Tepe Hissar deer plaques are refer to a deer that eating grass movingly. The main reasons are non- static posture of animal and it's similarity with a gypsum plaque of Susa. Among Sassanian stuccoes, the deer motifs is more restricted in compare with other animal motifs of this era. Except Tepe Hissar, the same fragment samples obtained from Kish and Chal Tarkhan- Eshqabad.

In a ram plaster fragment from Tepe Hissar, the head is shown silhouette but its horns have a facing view. The method of representation of ram head observed in stucco sites from Kish, Ctesiphon and Chal Tarkhan- Eshqabad too. The Tepe Hissar fragment style has less elegance than ram figure of other sites and it is more violent.

The interesting and important point in Tepe Hissar stucco is using of plaster area and figure an animal on this field.

There is a major differences between Tepe Hissar stucco style with other sites. There isn't any balance among fragment, the edges are very sharp and in some fragments such as lion head and ram faces have taken the case of cartoon.

Two ways of showing eyes in this fragments as a way of showing eye as a flat almond shaped strip and its samples can be seen as a ram motifs. The other way is showing eye a prominent circular band with a hollow in center and the artist showed the pupil and iris of the eye in this work.

In general, two major styles can be seen in Tepe Hissar fragments: one style follows naturalism and the artist try to perform all the details. Another style didn't respect naturalism and balance very much and figures have the cartoon shape.

In terms of style, the history of Tepe Hissar stuccoes go back to the fifth century A.D. Although the style of animal stuccoes from Tepe Hissar is unique, it has similarities in terms of style and time with Kish stuccoes. In terms of time, the animal figures of Tepe Hissar are built after Hajiabad stuccoes. They imitated animal stucco style of Hajiabad. The stucco style in Tepe Hissar has too much direct effect on Chal Tarkhan stuccoes, some of Tepe Hissar stucco characteristics are the same as those samples of Ctesiphon, Taq- Bostan reliefs and a plaster plaque attributed to Susa.

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