

Abstract

Some reflections on a common motif in ancient Greece and ancient Iran

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From the beginning of the Iron Age Greece was self-sufficient in its economy as well as in its art. During the eighth century BC this changed, and Greece was directly and indirectly influenced by the Oriental world. These influences were probably not as pronounced in vase painting as they were in metalwork and ivory carving. Nevertheless, common motifs can be seen in Greek and Near Eastern painted pottery. I will discuss one complicated case: Two birds of prey with their victim between them.

This motif is well-known in the ancient Near East and frequently occurs in different regions of the area (Susa, Astarabad, Marlik, Scythia, Anatolia etc.) from the Late Bronze to the end of the Iron Age. During the "Orientalizing period" this motif finds its way into the Greek domain and becomes a favorite theme in artistic representations. For example, the motif is depicted on a bronze shield from the Idaean cave in Crete, on the lid of an early black-figure krater from Vari near Athens, and on other specimens which are all inspired by Oriental art.

After a rather long interval, the motif reappeared in Near Eastern territory during the Achaemenid period, possibly under the influence of Greek art. Many seals in Greco-Persian style from western satrapies of the Persia Empire bear the motif with small iconographical variations.

This image seems to be viewed by the people of the ancient Near East as a presage of good fortune in battle and as bringing luck to warriors. Since it is obvious that a motif may assume a new meaning when adopted into a new context, it is interesting to compare the meaning of the motif in Greek art and Achaemenid usage. Did "Orientalizing Greeks" see Western Asiatic representations, and did they interpret them, in the same way they were viewed by the people of the Near East? Or are we facing here the rendering of an omen, the history of which goes back beyond the time at which it found pictorial expression? Did the Achaemenids reproduce the image as a known, traditional eastern theme or as a borrowed Greek motif? In this presentation an attempt will be made to answer these questions.