

## SASSANIAN MOTIFS ON PAINTED POTTERY FROM NORTH-WEST INDIA

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*The cultural contacts between India and Persia in the prehistoric and later ages have left many marks on the relics of India, on images, coins and mural paintings. In the following paper, Professor Piggott deals with the Persian influence on painted Indian pottery of the post-Christian period. The number of specimens on which he has found this influence is not considerable, but the fact that it has been detected even on a few is of importance to Indian archaeology.*

THE vigorous prehistoric painted pottery traditions of western India, originating on the eastern fringe of the Iranian early metal age cultures probably at least by the fourth millennium B.C., have had a remarkable survival value as a peasant craft which continues to such a degree that not only do painted wares continue to be made in the remote villages, but even in the comparatively sophisticated bazars of the Frontier towns one may still buy pots which, once reduced to sherds, would offer the archaeologist an unpleasantly difficult task in dating. Much painted pottery collected by Aurel Stein and others from Baluchistan and adjacent regions of western India, while it falls outside the known prehistoric groups and may sometimes be associated with, e.g., iron objects implying a relatively late date, can still only be vaguely classed as 'post-prehistoric' in the lack of distinctive stylistic criteria or its occurrence in a scientific excavation, but it is the purpose of these notes to draw attention to certain pottery from the Quetta region painted with designs derived from those popular on Persian textiles of the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.

The best preserved specimen (pl. VIII) is unfortunately the least adequately documented. In Lahore Museum is a group of three painted pottery vessels, two decorated with roughly executed curvilinear and spiral designs, but the third and largest having a more ambitious scheme of ornament which falls within the scope of the present discussion. This vessel is globular with a short everted neck, with four loop-handles joining the rim to the upper part of the body, which is painted with a broad zone of plain plum-red colour. Below this, and above the maximum girth of the pot, is a band consisting of a row of open discs with the spandrels between them hatched, the whole painted in purple-red on a buff-white background. This background is continued over the main area of the vessel below this 'pearled' band, which is occupied by four large roundels of similar design and colour, each with a border made up of discs with hatched intervals similar to the upper band. Within these pearled roundels is in each instance a very crudely drawn design recognizable on analogy as the 'senmurv' or hippocamp, which, within such a roundel, forms a characteristic feature of Sassanian ornament, known best from textiles. Despite the poor quality of the painting, the derivation of the motif is obvious.

Unfortunately the provenance of this and the two smaller vessels is not recorded in the Museum, but apart from the intrinsic probability of a north-west Indian origin there is some evidence for the probable find-spot of at least the large vessel with which we are concerned. In reporting on the finds from his trial-excavations on the early historic site at Mastung, thirty miles south of Quetta, Hargreaves describes a sherd (his no. 31) 'having a buff ground decorated with circles in black and chocolate, floral forms and the head of a bird(?)' which he compares with a vase, then in Lahore Museum, which came from Baleli near Quetta.<sup>1</sup> The Mastung sherd is not illustrated by Hargreaves, nor can it now be found

<sup>1</sup> H. Hargreaves, 'Excavations in Baluchistan 1925', *Mem. Arch. Surv. Ind.*, no. 35 (1929), p. 5.



unsafe owing to the decay of Roman power in the west and the waning Chinese influence in the east after the Han dynasty had come to an end at the beginning of the third century, with the result that the route lay open to the attacks of nomads and brigands. But with the establishment of the strong T'ang dynasty in the opening years of the seventh century control was once again obtained over the route, and Persian products could be traded eastwards, ultimately, as we have seen, sufficiently far to inspire Chinese craftsmen in the eighth century.

Sassanian contacts with India had been established at least as early as Chosroes I (531-579), to whom is attributed the introduction of chess from India into Persia and who certainly received tribute from Indian princes, and it seems likely that the stoppage of land-trade east of the Oxus in the fourth and fifth centuries turned the attention of Sassanian merchants not only to the sea-ways, but also to the caravan-route turning south-eastwards from near Merv through Alexandropolis (Kandahār) to India—a route by which Rome had been trading with China through Indian middle-men in the first century A.D.<sup>1</sup> Quetta, at the head of the Bolan Pass giving access to the Indian plains, is on the site of an inevitable trading centre to which the route continuing eastwards from Kandahār would lead, and where the famous Sassanian textiles brought as part of the merchants' stock-in-trade would serve to introduce novel motifs to the local pot-painters.

<sup>1</sup> Huzayyin, *op. cit.*, p. 108 with references.