

SONDERDRUCK AUS:

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Drachenlandung

Ein Hildesheimer Drachen-Aquamanile
des 12. Jahrhunderts

Objekte und Eliten in Hildesheim

1130 bis 1250

Bd. 1

SCHNELL † STEINER



Umschlagabbildung: Dommuseum Hildesheim (Foto: Ansgar Hoffmann)

Erscheint zugleich als Band 382 der Patrimonia-Reihe.

Herausgegeben von der Kulturstiftung der Länder
in Verbindung mit dem Dommuseum Hildesheim

K U L T U R
S T I F T U N G · D E R
L Ä N D E R

Gedruckt mit freundlicher Unterstützung von

Julius Böhler
Kunsthandlung
seit 1880

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind
im Internet über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

1. Auflage 2017
© 2017 Verlag Schnell & Steiner GmbH, Leibnizstr. 13, D-93055 Regensburg
in Zusammenarbeit mit der Bernward Mediengesellschaft mbH, Hildesheim, 2017
Umschlaggestaltung: Anna Braungart, Tübingen
Satz: typegerecht, Berlin
Druck: M.P. Media-Print Informationstechnologie GmbH, Paderborn

ISBN 978-3-7954-3228-7

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On the Transcultural and Transreligious Dimension of the so-called ‘Sēnmurw’

The first visual traces of an enigmatic mythological creature, traditionally identified as ‘sēnmurw’,¹ are encountered in a royal context in the rock sculptures and reliefs at Tāq-i Bustān in southwestern Iran. These works date back to the Sasanian Empire, the dominant power in the Near East during the late antique period, which extended from Mesopotamia to the Caucasus, Central Asia and Northwestern India. This Iranian dynasty ruled from ca. 224 to 651, when it fell to the Muslim army and most of its territory was absorbed into the Islamic caliphate. The sculptural programme on the rock-cut complex, commissioned by successive Sasanian kings, revolves around the monumental arched recess (*iwan*) arranged in two levels. It is crowned by an impressively large relief in the spandrels of two beneficent winged female beings holding diadems, symbolising supernatural protection and surmounting two immense trees carved at ground level. The site of the reliefs must have been chosen for its strategic location close to the trade route, as well as for its great natural beauty, with sacred springs nearby that flow into a large pool at the base of a cliff.

The so-called ‘sēnmurw’ appears on reliefs that date to the closing decades of the Sasanian dynasty. Its ‘mise-en-scène’ could not have been more effectively chosen. Propagating the royal authority of the King of Kings and his glory, the creature is sculpted on the royal garments of the monarch, who is demonstrating his prowess in the hunt and, most probably, his skill as an equestrian warrior making war, thus signifying his lordship over the vast empire.

In the royal boar hunt represented to the left of the *iwan*, the haloed figure of the king is represented as a hunter armed with a bow. Both his dress and trousers are covered with ‘sēnmurws’ displayed prominently in a confronting attitude forming an all-over pattern of symmetrical pairs (Fig. 1). The fantastic creature is also depicted in the relief at ground level on the pantaloons of a horseman with shield and a raised spear, so heavily armoured that the coat of mail even covers much of his face. The garment of this heroic warrior is covered with large single ‘sēnmurws’ enclosed within non-tangent wreath-like roundels with rosettes in the interstices, repeated over the entire surface (Fig. 2).² The beast itself incorporates parts of other animals and mythical creatures, its basic form consisting of a winged animal protome that has a canine head with pricked up ears, quadruped legs and paws, and a large (pea-)cock’s tail.

The two figures representing the royal hunter and warrior probably portray Khusraw II Parvēz (r. 591–628), the king who endeavoured to annihilate the eastern Roman Empire and its capital, Constantinople. After his defeat by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641), he was deposed by a *putsch* in 628, which may account for the unfinished state of the hunting reliefs.

1 It has been over sixty years since Kamilla TREVER (reprinted 2005) identified this creature as ‘sēnmurw’. For recent discussions on the iconography of this creature, see CRISTOFERETTI / SCARCIA 2013, pp. 339–352; COMPARETI / CRISTOFERETTI 2012, pp. 239–250 and COMPARETI 2006, pp. 185–200.

2 See KAT. BRÜSSEL 1993, figs. 99 and 101 and 87 for the Tāq-i Bustān reliefs. Cf. the drawings of the *sēnmurw* figures by FUKAI 1984, figs. 60, 62; for a drawing of the armed equestrian rider, see FUKAI 1984, fig. 8.



Fig. 1: Rock reliefs. Iran, Kermanshah, *Ṭāq-i Bustān*, side wall of large niche, left side. Detail of King's garments, representing perhaps King Khosrau II Parvêz (r. 590–628).

The garments worn by the king are the only ones to be decorated with the motif, giving rise to the conjecture that the 'sēnmurw' might originally have been a symbol with royal associations. Underlining the king's charismatic majesty, legitimacy and divine sanction, the supernatural creature can be identified with the personification of the concept of *khvarənah* or 'heavenly fortune' and prosperity.³ Moreover, the late Sasanian period was a time of internal and external disruptions and wars. These disturbances led, as Prudence Harper has pointed out, to the 'realm of the supernatural' being accorded an increasing importance and potency because of its sought-after associative apotropaic and theurgic qualities.⁴ At the same time, this creature must have been designed to appeal to, and be meaningful for, the diverse multicultural population that lived within the Sasanian Empire, ruled over by a sovereign who was the titular head of both Mazdeist and Christian communities. The decision to emblazon on the royal attire a composite creature which assimilated diverse and, perhaps, deliberately ambiguous characteristics may be seen as the point at which the 'canonical' form of this Sasanian dragon began to be disseminated more broadly.

³ As is argued by, for instance, BELENITSKII / MARSHAK 1981, pp. 70–73; MARSHAK 2002A, p. 37. ⁴ HARPER 2006, pp. 22–23.



Fig. 2: Rock reliefs. Iran, Kermanshah, Tāq-i Bustān, side wall of large niche, lower level. Detail of King's trousers, representing perhaps King Khusrau II Parvēz (r. 590–628). Washington D.C., Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives.

From ancient times, the Indo-Iranians imagined the world to be peopled with fantastical creatures possessed of supernatural powers. Most of these are mentioned in what seem to be old parts of the *yasht* or hymns, which describe many myths of pre-Zoroastrian origin. One of these creatures was the ‘great saēna bird’,⁵ which is mentioned in Avestan texts and might provide an early prototype of the Sasanian ‘sēnmurw’. The *Rashn Yasht*,⁶ a collection of the surviving Avestan texts that record the most ancient scriptures of Zoroastrianism, speaks of the ancient cosmological motif of the ‘saēna Tree’, the perch of the mythical *saēna mərəgha*, as the saēna (Middle Persian *sēn murw* and Persian *sīmurgh*) is sometimes called.⁷ This tree, on which the saēna nests, grows in the middle of Lake Vārukasha⁸ and is called Vīspō. bish, The Tree of All Seeds or of All Healing, because it bears the seeds of all healing herbs.⁹

Unfortunately, there is no description of the physical appearance of the saēna. It is portrayed in a collection of Pahlavī writings compiled in the centuries after the fall of the Sasanian dynasty. In the Pahlavī Zoroastrian *Mēnōg ī Khrad*,¹⁰ a late Sasanian compilation, the ‘sēnmurw’ is depicted as nesting “on the tree without evil and of many seeds” (61.37–42) and scattering them in the rainy season to encourage future growth (Bundahishn XVI.4). It is by the beating of the bird’s wings when it takes flight that the seeds of this tree are dispersed and then carried by wind and rain all over the earth.¹¹ The Pahlavī books also relate that the tree in Lake Vārukasha is protected by the mythical Kar fish, which swims perpetually around it and whose task it is to ward off all harmful creatures, especially frogs that seek to gnaw at the roots of the life-giving tree.¹² According to the *Bundahishn*, or Book of Creation, a Zoroastrian Pahlavī commentary on an Avestan text,¹³ the perch of the saēna also plays a role in the final restoration of the world.

Typologically, this portrayal – familiar from Near Eastern-Mesopotamian iconography – belongs to the scheme of the tree of the world or tree of life, rooted in the primordial waters and with the

5 *Yasht* 14.41.

6 *Rashn Yasht* 12.17.

7 *Babrām Yasht* 15.41.

8 *Rashn Yasht* 12.17.

9 See LOMMEL 1927, p. 100; CHRISTENSEN 1941, pp. 66–67; BOYCE 1975, pp. 88–91, 137–138, 143; SCHMIDT 1980B

pp. 5–6; FAUTH 1987, pp. 123–124; JANDA 2010, pp. 320–321.

10 *Mēnōg ī Khrad* 62.37–39.

11 *Vizīdagihā ī Zad-Spram* (Selections of Zadspram) 8.3–4.

12 *Greater Bundahishn* 24A.

13 *Greater Bundahishn* 13.10.26; 18.1–5.

world-generating bird at its top.¹⁴ This explains the functional presentation of the *saēna-mərəgha*,¹⁵ which also acts as an intermediary in the investiture of Vərəthraghna, the Zoroastrian deity of victory. The avian creature is known to wrap *khvarənah* (understood as a magic force or power of luminous and fiery nature) around the dwelling of the worshipper,¹⁶ and “is like the big clouds full of water that beat the mountains”.¹⁷ As Hanns-Peter Schmidt points out, this might refer to the size of the vast bird that overshadows the mountains like the rain-clouds and, importantly, brings *khvarənah*, thus linking the bird with the arrival of the clouds and hence with rain.¹⁸

A striking parallel¹⁹ can be found in the ancient Indian Vedic myth recorded in the *ṚgVeda*²⁰ the sacred ritual potion (Vedic Sanskrit *sōma*, Avestan *haoma*) is associated with the mythical bird *śyena*, who takes it from the atmospheric *gandharvas* and brings it to the god Indra.²¹ The Avestan *fraša-*, meaning ‘conspicuous, spectacular, splendid, wondrous’,²² has been identified as an epithet of *haoma*²³ – the ritual potion. This associates it with the Old Iranian phrase **fraša- mryga-*, ‘spectacular bird, peacock’, that yielded the Parthian **frašamarg*, Pahlavī *fraš(e)murw*, which, interestingly, was replaced by New Persian *firišta-murgh*.²⁴ The denomination of this bird in Armenian by *siramarg*, a Parthian loan-word, probably goes back to **sēr(a)marg*, which has its attested parallel, *sēnmurw*, in Pahlavī (New Persian *sīmurgh*); both deriving from Old Iranian **saina-* (or *saira-*) *mryga-*, that is, perhaps, ‘colourful bird’. The affinity between raptors and the Avestan *mərəghō saēnō*, the bird *saēna*, and hence the ‘*sēnmurw*’²⁵ is suggested by the name of the etymologically identical Sanskrit *śyena* or *suparṇa* (Avestan *saēna*),²⁶ used in Judeo-Persian to translate the Hebrew *nāshār*, ‘eagle’.

The ‘*sēnmurw*’s’ association with the Avestan Vərəthraghna (New Persian *Bahrām*)²⁷ reveals not only its protective and victorious characteristics, but also its belligerent aspect.²⁸ In the hymn of praise to Vərəthraghna,²⁹ Zoroaster asks Ahura Mazda how to rid himself of a curse. The great god tells him to take a feather of the vulture and rub his body with it: “If a man holds a bone of that strong bird, or a feather of the strong bird, no one can smite or turn to flight that fortunate man. The feather of the bird brings him help; it brings unto him the homage of men, it maintains in him his glory”.³⁰

14 Cf. AMEISENOWA 1938/1939, p. 335.

15 SCHMIDT 1980B, p. 2.

16 Cf. GÖBL 1967, vol. 1, pp. 144, 168–169; *idem*, vol. 2, pp. 79–80, 116, 133, 156, 219, 224–225, 267; SCHMIDT 1980B, pp. 38, 52, 67.

17 *Yasht* 14.41. Literally meaning “smiting of resistance”: BOYCE 1975, p. 63.

18 SCHMIDT 1980A, p. 162.

19 BELENITSKII / MARSHAK, 1981, pp. 70–73; MARSHAK 2002A, p. 37; BAUSANI 1978, pp. 317–319.

20 *ṚgVeda* 4.26–27

21 *ṚgVeda* 1.93.6. The ascension to the sky is also found in the well-known Sumerian myth of “Etana, a shepherd, the one who to heaven ascended” to bring down the “plant of birth”. By enlisting the help of an eagle, the legendary king of Kish is taken up and transported through the seven heavens (translation by: E.A. Speiser and A.K. Grayson in: PRITCHARD 1969, pp. 114–118, 517; Etana tablet 2.4). The depictions can be found on seal designs of the Akkadian dynasty, dating between 2300 and 2200 BCE; see COLLON 1995, pp. 79–80, fig. 59f. A related iconography is found on the relief of the late second-millennium BCE gold cup

from Hasanlu Tepeh, near Naghadeh, northwest of Iran, although this example differs in the manner in which the figure (this time a woman) is carried into the spheres by an eagle. For discussion, see DİBA 1965, pp. 61–63, fig. 32.

22 Cf. JUNKER 1929, pp. 157–158, §15–16.

23 *Yasna* 10.14 and 10.

24 Cf. *idem*, 150, §13. FLATTERY / SCHWARTZ 1989, pp. 111–112, §172–175. Iranian evidence of the continued use of *haoma*, and perhaps other intoxicants, into historic times is also reflected in the use of wine birds which are associated with Zoroastrian tradition in medieval Islamic poetry. MELIKIAN-CHIRVANI 1995, p. 43.

25 BINDER 1964, p. 285.

26 Avestan *hu-parəna*, “well winged.” Cf. *Yasht* 13.70, where the Fravashis are “well-winged birds”; BARTHOLOMAE 1904, col. 1827. See SCHMIDT 1980B, p. 16. On the association with *garuḍa*, see SCHNEIDER 1971, pp. 31–33, 36.

27 *Bahrām Yasht* 15.41.

28 *Bahrām Yasht* 15.41.

29 *Bahrām Yasht* 14.34–36.

30 ZEND-AVESTA, p. 241.

Another story in which a bird plays an important role is the founding myth of the Achaemenid dynasty, according to which the child Achaemenes³¹ was said to have been raised by an eagle, as is reflected in the eagle emblem of Achaemenid and later Parthian and Sasanian rulers.³² A striking analogy to this topos is found in the national Iranian epic poem, Firdawsī’s *Shāh-nāma* (‘Book of Kings’), written at the end of the eleventh century, in which the *simurgh* is the special protector of the princely albino Zāl.³³ The prince’s white hair – taken to signify demonic blood³⁴ – so chagrined his father, Sām, that he took the baby out to a mountain top and exposed him to the elements. The *Shāh-nāma* depicts the Sīmurgh as a giant bird which descended, carried the boy away and reared the royal child with her own young in her nest in the Elburz Mountains. Zāl referred to the Sīmurgh’s wings as *farr*, a royal and divine attribute. Echoing the words of Ahura Mazdā, the Sīmurgh presented him with a feather saying: “[...] be always in the shadow of my fortune and grace”.³⁵

As with the wrapping of *khvarənah* or fortune around the house,³⁶ this gift indicates a special protection and the bestowal of blessings, benefits and curative properties. Later the Simurgh also helps Zāl’s son Rustam, the greatest hero of ancient Iran, to defeat the hero Isfandiyar.

In the Iranian world a bird of prey (*vārəghna*), such as an eagle or falcon, thus represents the blessing of the *khvarənah* which, according to the Avesta, is bestowed upon a sovereign or a hero by a god.³⁷ The god Bahrām also appears as wings, or as a bird of prey, in the crowns of the Sasanid kings. This bird iconography first occurs in the crown of King Bahrām II (r. 274–293), who also bears the name of the divinity. A similar image is adopted by Peroz (459–484, whose name means ‘victorious’) as well as by Khusrau Parvēz (r. 590–628, ‘ever victorious’).

The ‘sēnmurw’ is a strange creature. It is long-nosed, with three, or sometimes four, claws similar to those of a lion and the tail of a bird, in deference to the triple nature described in the Avesta and the *Bundahishn*, which combines elements of a quadruped, a bird and a musk animal. This hybrid animal has cosmological connotations. It is connected, on the one hand, with the heavens and, on the other, with the agricultural activity of spreading fertility by scattering the seeds of the cosmic tree. Its service to mankind is obviously auspicious and beneficent, which explains, as we will see, its frequent appearance in the culture of the late antique Sasanian dynasty.

Yet, despite its textual classification as a bird, this enigmatic creature is not, as one might expect, visually depicted with a bird’s beak. Instead it is rendered with the head of a snarling quadruped, with an elongated snout that curves upwards and rolls outwards to reveal a cavity rimed by a row of sharp teeth. The long open muzzle with enlarged nostrils, the slightly bulging tops of which are demarcated by small wrinkles, exhibits the lupine characteristic of the animal art steppe dragon. The tall upright ears are likewise similar to those of ancient lupine quadruped dragons, exemplified by a copper alloy figure of a winged dragon in standing position, surmounted by curved horns with truncated ends, found near Helmand River in the Sistan Basin, present-day Afghanistan.³⁸

31 AELIAN, *DE NATURA ANIMALIUM* 12.2; VON SPIEGEL 1873, p. 262.

32 XENOPHON, *INSTITUTIO CYRI* 7.1.4; XENOPHON, *ANABASIS* 1.10.12. See GÖBL 1960, pp. 36–38; MOKRI 1967, p. 24; VON GALL 1971, p. 232; ERDMANN 1951, p. 99.

33 LEVY 1967, p. 37; SCHMIDT 1980B, p. 16.

34 On Zāl’s white hair, see also KUEHN (forthcoming).

35 *Shāh-nāma* I, 226 lines 175, 181, Cited after SCHMIDT 2002.

36 *Yasht* 14.41.

37 *Yasht* 19.34–36. See LOMMEL 1927, p. 179; BENVENISTE / RENOU 1934, p. 34; MOKRI 1967, p. 23. Cf. GNOLI 1999. In the absence of rightful Iranian rule the *khvarənah* is said to escape to the depths of mythical Lake Vārukasha. SCHLERATH 1986A (art. *Ĥvarənah*) and SCHLERATH 1986B (art. *Vourukasha*).

38 London, The British Museum, inv. 123267. See CURTIS 2000, p. 83, fig. 99.



Fig. 3: Plate, Iranian world, seventh or eighth century. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Comparable images of the ‘sēnmurw’ appear in a broad range of Sasanian art, ranging from stamp seals³⁹ to glass,⁴⁰ silver⁴¹ and textiles.⁴² On a seventh- or eighth-century white bronze plate the creature’s outstretched clawed paws, placed one in front of the other in a posture of attack, are those of a beast of prey (Fig. 3).⁴³ The finely delineated wing feathers, which rise from the circular base, are curled towards the front. It is portrayed with the long, upturned wrinkled snout of a snarling serpent-dragon, the teeth bared to reveal a forked tongue, underlining the ophidian characteristics of the mythical creature. Its feet are in a crouching position, wings and compact plumage are turned upwards in the fashion of a peacock, the individual feathers finely delineated, accentuating its bird-like nature without, however, revealing the eyespots that are otherwise conspicuous in the plumage of male peacocks.⁴⁴

A sixth- or early seventh-century silver gilt ewer with a lid, discovered near the village of Pavlovka in the Kharkov region north of the Black Sea, is decorated with large medallions on either side containing ‘sēnmurws’.⁴⁵ The beasts’ snouts are blunt and canine-like. The tongues protrude, no teeth are visible, the wings are stiff, and the rigidly defined raised tails, which resemble that of a peacock, are partially displayed. The fur is conventionalised into a foliate pattern, the manes reduced to a series of small scallops, and the figures are quiescent (Fig. 4).⁴⁶

39 For instance on a seventh-century Iranian quartz crystal cabochon with a Pahlavī inscription below, inverted, *pzwn*. BIVAR 1969, EG 20, p. 81 and pl. 13.

40 Such as on a sixth- or seventh-century Iranian fragment of a translucent blue glass medallion, Corning, The Corning Museum of Glass, inv. 64.1.31.

41 KAT. PARIS 2006, cat. 46, 56, 71, 76 and 82.

42 KAT. PARIS 2006, cat. 129 and 130.

43 A closely comparable plate is preserved in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, inv. no. 60.141.

44 HARPER associates the frequency with which peacocks were depicted on Sasanian sealstones, with the popularity of the motif in late Roman and early Christian art, noting

that peacock feathers are also portrayed in the wings of archangels: HARPER 2006, pp. 73–74, fig. 41, 42.

45 KAT. BRÜSSEL 1993, p. 248 (entry by Boris MARSHAK); HARPER 1991, pp. 73–75.

46 Contemporary examples of the mythical animal are portrayed on several partially gilded silver vessels, such as on a boat-shaped silver dish, now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, inv. M.76.174.8; on a bowl, formerly in the collection of Prince Firdusi, Tehran, now in Mainz, Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, inv. O.41206; on a partially gilded silver flask found in a small barrow near the village of Pavlovka in the Kharkow region, Ukraine, formerly in the Collection of Prince V.N. Orlov, then in the



Fig. 4: Jug, Iranian world, sixth or early seventh century. St. Petersburg, Hermitage.

Representations of the fabulous beast are also found in the wall paintings of Afrasiyab (ancient Samarkand, capital of the Sogdian Empire), executed just after 658.⁴⁷ It is reproduced on the garments worn by the Sogdian ruler, Varkhuman, whose reign began in the 650s.⁴⁸ These feature Sasanian-style peacock-tailed ‘sēnmurws’ with open snouts, revealing their tongues, set into an overall pattern of curved rhomboids with small pearl medallions at the points of juncture. The figures in the Afrasiyab wall paintings are all portrayed in courtly costumes with patterns that are typically associated with the powerful Sasanian empire to the south-west. The prominent depictions of the supernatural animals indicate that – just as in the Sasanian context – they must have played a role of importance as mediators in designating royal power and kingship. Motifs such as the ‘sēnmurw’ were concomitantly presented as conspicuous carriers of wealth, power and prestige. Numismatic evidence shows that ‘sēnmurw’ iconography was very prominent in the Iranian borderlands. Several countermarks attributed to the Sogdians, with the image of a ‘sēnmurw’ on Sasanian or Sasanian-imitation coins, are accompanied by a short legend, *prn*, in Sogdian script, that is to say *farn* (glory, splendour, fortune) which had largely religious connotations.⁴⁹ In all Iranian dialects the form had an initial *f*-, except in Avestan and Pahlavī in which we find initial *kh*^v-: *kh^varənah*- and *kh^vwarrab*. The images of the fantastic creatures in these countermarks, which by their nature are very small, are often not very distinct.⁵⁰ But it is still possible to identify them as ‘sēnmurws’ even if we cannot always make out all the details.

In contrast to the rather stiff Sasanian-style pattern on the attire of the Sogdian ruler in the Afrasiyab wall paintings, the creature that adorns the interior of a partially gilded silver plate from Khurasan in the State Hermitage is worked in a new dynamism in a Sogdian-style (Fig. 5). Dated to the first half of the eighth century, it is rendered with great fluidity, its long feathers undulating outward and upward from the scaled body. The zoomorphic hybrid has acquired a beard, perhaps associated with that of a musk-deer. The body is imbricated, the neck edged with tufts of curling hair. The figure drives forward intently, in full flight. The wrinkled nose and forked tongue of some ‘sēnmurws’, as will be seen below, do not provide conclusive proof that the artist deliberately included reptilian elements in his representation. The hypothesis of an ophidian element in the make-up of the composite creature is, however, reinforced by the fact that on some ‘sēnmurws’ scales are incised or punched onto the neck, breast and rear, as is the case on this plate. We can see that the iconography of this creature was itself subject to mutations and local adaptations. The use of this motif on Sogdian works of art would, by that time, have been as familiar to the Sogdians as to the Sasanians themselves.

There is, moreover, abundant numismatic evidence for the ‘sēnmurw’ from the region of present-day Afghanistan, in particular on the seventh- or eighth-century coinage of the Hephthalites (Fig. 6), a confederation of both nomadic and settled people in Central Asia who expanded their domain westward in the fifth century. Just as in the Sogdian example, this version of the ‘sēnmurw’ is distinguished from the ‘standard’ Sasanian form by having a cock’s rather than a peacock’s tail.

Moscow Kremlin Armoury and now in St Petersburg, The Hermitage, inv. S-60; and on another bowl from the north-western Caucasus, Tersk region, preserved in St Petersburg, The Hermitage, inv. S-57.

47 MARSHAK 1994, pp. 5–20.

48 LIVŠIĆ 2006, pp. 66, 71, cited after AZARPAY 2014, p. 53. On Varkhuman’s robe, see AZARPAY 1981, fig. 51 and *idem* 2014, fig. 53.

49 NIKITIN / ROTH 1995, figs. 2–3 and pl. 49. For representations of sēnmurw-like creatures facing the king on seventh-century Zābulistān and Arachosian coins, see GÖBL 1967, vol. 1, p. 148 and *idem*, vol. 2, pl. 51 no. 216; NIKITIN 1984, p. 234.

50 KAGEYAMA 2003, no. 12.



Fig. 5: Plate, Sogdian tradition, East Iranian world, Khurasan, first half eighth century. St. Petersburg, Hermitage.



Fig. 6: Half Drachm (Copper), minting authority: Turk Shabis. Ruler: Pangul, end of seventh first half of eighth century, mint: Zabulistan or Kabulistan (?); Reverse: Tamga; Bactrian inscription »Tudun, Tarkhan of the Bactrians (?), the commander«, Rutbils of Zabulistan, 680–870.

The ‘sēnmurw’s’ head occurs as a crown-emblem in several issues;⁵¹ indeed, in one issue the whole animal appears on the top of the crown.⁵² The head and neck, or the complete animal, are used as countermarks on other examples.⁵³ In his study of Hephthalite coinage, Robert Göbl has shown that the creature is always struck next to the term *khwarrāh/khʿarānāh*, ‘royal glory’. A countermark of the mythical animal carrying a pearl necklace in its mouth not only associates it with royalty but also, importantly, marks the ‘sēnmurw’ as a symbol of investiture.⁵⁴

Iconographies characteristic of the pre-Islamic period were also familiar in the lands bordering on the empire, from Central Asia to the Mediterranean seacoast. Eastern prototypes of Sasanian or Sogdian origin, such as the ‘sēnmurw’, must have been in constant motion. They became increasingly apparent in works of art and architecture in the neighbouring regions where the motif of the supernatural creature was initially absorbed into the artistic vocabulary of the Umayyads, the first great Muslim dynasty to rule the empire of the Caliphate (661–750). Represented with open jaws revealing the projecting tongue and a peacock-tail, it is prominently displayed in courtly contexts. This version of the ‘sēnmurw’ makes an appearance in Jordan in the wall paintings that imitate wall hangings at the Umayyad fortified palace complexes at Khirbat al-Mafjar⁵⁵ and Qasr al-Hallabat,⁵⁶ and in the intricate relief carvings on the façade of Qasr al-Mschatta.⁵⁷ In Syria it was depicted at Qasr al-Khayr al-Gharbi⁵⁸ and in northern Iran

51 GÖBL 1967, vol. 1, nos. 208–10, 241–43, 246, 254–55, cf. the drawings in *idem*, vol. 4, pls. 6–7.

52 GÖBL 1967, vol. 1, no. 259.

53 GÖBL 1967, vol. 2, KM 102, 106, 107, 101, 106, 107, 101, 105, 3a–d, 11A–K, 1, 10, 141–43, and *idem*, vol. 4, pl. 10.

54 GÖBL 1967, vol. 1, p. 156, issue 255.1.

55 Sēnmurws are featured in interlaced roundels demarcated by heart chains in imitation of Sogdian or Sasanian fabrics; HAMILTON 1959, p. 153, figs. 118a, 253.

56 The creatures are rendered in non-tangent pearl studded roundels on the walls of the main room (no. 10) of the northern cluster. ARCE 2012, p. 39, fig. 8.



Fig. 7: Plate, Iranian world, probably seventh or early ninth century. London, The British Museum.

it appears in the well-known series of stucco plaque friezes from the two palaces at Chāl Tarkhān Ashkhabad, near Rayy, that are now divided between museums in London, Berlin, Chicago, Philadelphia, Stockholm and Tehran.⁵⁷ To these appearances must be added wall paintings in a Christian context which, following the Umayyad example, likewise reproduced textile patterns that prominently featured the 'sēnmurw', as for instance, in the ninth-century rock-cut church, known as Ağaç Altı kilise, in Cappadocia, located at the crossroads of the Byzantine, Arab and Transcaucasian worlds.⁶⁰

As was the case with these early examples, medieval Islamic renditions of the fabulous beast also drew on the iconographic and stylistic repertoire of the legendary Sasanian kings. Circulated, transferred and translated, it was employed in different contexts by successive dynasties and reappears in a variety of media, notably in metalwork. Its depiction on a plate in the British Museum reflects a still further stage in stylisation, with the protruding tongue rendered as foliage. On the imbricated tail is another foliate pattern and a ribbon fluttering from under the joints of the forelegs is also represented as a foliate spray, underscoring the bird's association with fertility (Fig. 7).

57 Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, inv. I. 6163. CRESWELL 1932, p. 404 with pl. 66; ENDERLEIN / MEINECKE 1992, fig. 20.

58 The creature is here set within a pearled rosette. SCHLUMBERGER 1939, p. 355, fig. 26.

59 Once again, set within a circle of pearls the sēnmurw is here characterised by a disproportionately large head which together with the paired forelegs projects from the rim; HARPER 1978, p. 118; ERDMANN 1940, p. 47; KAT.

PARIS 2006, p. 60, pl. 15; THOMPSON 1976, pl. XXIII.1 and pp. 29–31.

60 GRABAR 1970, p. 692, pl. 15, fig. 2. This tradition can still be observed in wall paintings with an all-over pattern of 'sēnmurws' in the Sasanian tradition in roundels at the early thirteenth-century church of Saint Gregory in Ani, the ancient Armenian capital and wealthy trading centre, near Kars in present-day Eastern Turkey. GRABAR 1970, p. 697, pl. 23, fig. 3.



Fig. 8: Ewer, Iraq or Iran, probably ninth century. London, The British Museum.



Fig. 9: Plate, Northeastern Iran, tenth century. Berlin, SMB, Museum für Islamische Kunst.

On a brass ewer, which perhaps dates to the ninth century, the fantastical creature is portrayed with, what is at first sight, an unusual feature: a pair of curling horns (Fig. 8). However this is stylistically consistent if one keeps in mind the copper alloy figure of a lupine quadruped dragon found near Helmand River in the Sistan Basin, which is crowned with similar horns.⁶¹ A two-pronged tongue projects from the beast's open jaws and a thick mane, starting a little above the snout, joins a ruff-like mane around the neck. Paired wings are attached to the shoulders and a peacock tail with heart-shaped feathers sweeps majestically up and round.

⁶¹ See p. 107 and n. 38 *supra*.



Fig. 10: Fragment of a base, Iranian world, probably ninth or tenth century. Corning, The Corning Museum of Glass.

An insight into the physiognomy of the ‘sēnmurw’ is provided by a tenth-century octagonal gilded silver plate, which shows the composite animal in three different poses (Fig. 9). In the centre we see the creature in the canonical position but with two raised wings and a third oriented downwards. This depiction is surrounded by four more stylised versions of the fabulous bird, each with a single folded wing and, unusually, with a bird head projecting downwards from the rear. Finally, along the rim of the plate, there are what appear to be ‘sēnmurws’ in flight, rendered with outstretched bodies and unfolded wings. Yet another iconographic feature of the ‘sēnmurw’ physiognomy is preserved on a piece of gold foil set into a translucent glass fragment from a base (Fig. 10). Here the lower part of the creature’s body is snakelike and coiled – a common device derived from late antique art which we will meet again in what follows. The coil, in turn, is topped by a feathery cock-like tail.

It is on silk textiles that the ‘sēnmurw’ seems to have been most frequently depicted. These textiles adorned both the bodies of the aristocracy and others who enjoyed privileged status and also, as has been shown, dressed palace spaces. The dynastic rule of the Sasanians from the third century to the mid-seventh century was a period of intense cultural interpenetration across Central Asia and beyond. Yet, in spite of the constant warfare between the Iranian and the Byzantine world, trade between the Far East and the West continued to flourish. Ancient Sasanian animal motifs such as the ‘sēnmurw’, which had become internationally popular by this time, were widely copied.⁶² And, by the eighth century the styles and motifs of the most highly valued silks show remarkable similarities, whether woven in Byzantium, Spain, Syria, Persia, Sogdiana, Xinjiang, China, or even Japan. The reason for the strong visual affinities between textiles of such diverse provenance is that iconographies and their patterns and pictorial compositions were borrowed from a common source, namely, Sasanian textiles and artefacts.⁶³

Drawing on a mutually understood visual vocabulary, these luxury objects carried motifs which must have been associated with social and political power. The likeness of the hybrid animal is present on arte-

⁶² For examples of silk textiles of both Byzantine and Islamic origin, see KAT. NEW YORK 1997, cat. 148 (sēnmurw), 149, 150, 269, 270 and 271 (sēnmurw, elephant, winged horse).

⁶³ Cf. JACOBY 2004, esp. pp. 212–213.



Fig. 11: Fragment of the shroud of St Helena, Oriental Mediterranean, Byzantine or Iranian world, eighth or ninth century. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

facts that moved around within the same cultures and which crossed political and cultural boundaries in a two-way movement. A variety of well-known historical accounts record the extravagant gifts exchanged between Byzantine emperors and Islamic rulers. Each of the key powers maintained political and religious links well beyond their sphere of influence. In areas that were within *both* Islamic and Byzantine orbits, the degree of cross-cultural interconnection was particularly notable. The circuits of cultural exchange extended from Spain, Sicily, Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia, Byzantium and the Caucasus into Western European pathways.

The ‘sēnmurw’ thus served as cross-cultural mediator. We find it rendered within a pearl roundel pattern on a silk fragment from the reliquary of a bishop at Verdun, which has been ascribed by some to Byzantium and by others to Iran, the dating varying widely from the seventh to the eleventh century.⁶⁴ Although no such patterned silks have been found in Iran, they first appeared as textile decoration at the rock reliefs at Ṭāq-i Bustān. The fragment is probably post-Sasanian and can be grouped with others showing a similar iconography and style, such as a blue-green fur-lined silk caftan covered with large representations of the ‘sēnmurw’ set within pearled roundel-frames. Excavated from a tribal grave at

⁶⁴ LUCIDI 1994, pp. 167 and 202, no. 31; JEROUSSALIMSKAJA 1993, pp. 114, 117–18.

Moshchevaya Balka, a northern Caucasian burial ground on the upper reaches of the Bolshaya Laba River, the 'sēnmurw' iconography on this magnificent garment must have provided a visual assertion of sovereignty in a tribal context.⁶⁵

There are a number of other examples of 'sēnmurws' appearing on textiles in a reliquary context. These include a fragment of the shroud of St Helena portraying 'sēnmurws' set within roundels of pearls that are very similar to those found at Moshchevaya Balka (Fig. 11).⁶⁶ An important mid-ninth-century monochrome example was probably commissioned by Hincmar of Reims for the relics of archbishop Remigius (d. 533) when the saint's relics were moved to the newly-built church in 852. For this purpose, red samite with this pattern, either from Iran or Byzantium, was fashioned into a cushion to support the head of the saint in its reliquary.⁶⁷ A large textile with 'sēnmurws', dating from the late eighth or early ninth century, again of patterned monochrome red silk, was used in the Carolingian period to make a whole chasuble currently housed in the Abbey of San Salvatore near Siena. The creature is set, yet again, within large contiguous pearl-bordered roundels. Even though the textile was venerated as a relic of Pope St Mark (which would date it to the first half of the fourth century), it in all probability actually dates, to the period of Pope John VIII (d. 882).⁶⁸ Together with winged horses and elephants, 'sēnmurws' in medallion-style are, also, featured on eleventh- or twelfth-century textile fragments found at the Monastery of Santa Maria de l'Estany in Catalonia in Spain.⁶⁹ Roughly contemporary are the fragments of the relic silk shroud of Saint Amandus of Worms (d. 659), which show four small equidistant 'sēnmurws' defining an *ouroboros*-roundel composed of two dragons enclosing a large double-headed eagle.⁷⁰

To this must be added miniature versions of the 'sēnmurw' that were emblazoned not only on coins but on more humble artefacts, such as on middle Byzantine (c. 843–1204) lead seals, which in the Byzantine world were used to validate objects, including letters, documents and containers of goods. The vast majority of seal impressions preserved today were made in lead. Even though these seals are modest

65 JEROUSSALIMSKAJA 1978, pp. 183–211, figs. 1, 6, 7, 11, 13, 15; KAT. BRÜSSEL 1993, cat. 127 and 128; KAT. PARIS 2006, cat. 129 and 130.

66 KAT. PARIS 2006, p. 180. Helena was laid to rest in 330 in Rome. While most of the empress's body remains there, a portion is now preserved in the Église Saint-Leu-Saint-Gilles in Paris. This transfer occurred because, according to tradition, in 840 a monk from Hautvillers in France returned from his pilgrimage to Rome with an exceptional relic. He claimed to have broken into Helena's tomb and stolen part of her body during his sojourn in Rome. Surprisingly, instead of requesting the return of the relic, the pope permitted it to stay in France since, according to tradition, the sacred remains themselves had not protested this thievery by miraculously bringing it to a halt (as other relics allegedly had). When the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicea determined in 787 AD that every altar should contain a relic, this practice became a vital aspect of Christian ritual.

67 See MUTHESIUS 1997, pp. 85, 90 n. 3; EFFROS 2002, p. 161. The donor that embroidered the textile with an inscription in gold and silk identified herself as Alpheidis, sister of Charles the Bald, who as lay abbess held the monastery of St Stephen in Reims. In the inscription, which frames two panels, Alpheidis requests the saint's prayers on her behalf in exchange for her gift. The second half of the inscription reads: "QVAE SVB HONORE NOVO PVLVILLVM

CONDIDIT IPSVM QVO SVSTENTETVR DVLCE SAQRVMQVE CAPVT REMIGII MERITIS ALPHEIDIS VBIQVE JVVETVR IPSIVSQVE PRECESHANC SVPER ASTRA FERANT". Unpublished file of the C1FM, Département 51, Basilique Saint-Rémi, Reims, cited after EFFROS 2002, p. 161 n. 91.

68 DOLCINI 1992, esp. pp. 5–8, 16–24, 40–49, as well as KAT. FLORENZ 1992, pp. 57–63, 82–83, 90–91, 98–103.

69 A large fragment with a pair of 'sēnmurws', winged horses and elephants within roundels is preserved in New York, Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, given by John Pierpont Morgan, from the Miguel y Badia Collection, inv. 1912-1-122; a smaller fragment featuring a single 'sēnmurw' is now in Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, inv. 634 Franchetti; and yet another small fragment, preserving only the lower part of a 'sēnmurw', is in Barcelona, Museu Tèxtil i d'Indumentaria de l'Ajuntament de Barcelona.

70 The rebuilding of the Benedictine abbey church of St Peter in Salzburg by Abbot Balderich (r. 1125–1147) after a devastating fire in 1127 must serve as *terminus ante quem* for the dating of the textiles. Fragments of the relic shroud of Saint Amandus are preserved in Riggisberg, Abegg Stiftung, inv. 1141; in The Cleveland Museum of Art, purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund; and in New York, Collection of Rina and Norman Indictor.



Fig. 12: Seal impression (obverse), Byzantium, tenth century. Birmingham, University of Birmingham, Barber Institute of Fine Arts.

devices, their owners were usually members of the elite: aristocrats, church officials or civil servants. One example shows the 'sēnmurw' with a peacock's tail (Fig. 12), another with a raised feathery tail.

At the same time, the likeness of the mythical beast was prominently displayed in the public architecture of Constantinople. One important example is a relief carving on a polygonal tower that forms part of the city wall, dated to the first half of the ninth century, and on a pair of monumental marble panels of the tenth century which must have been intended to serve as monumental apotropaions that, at the same time, conveyed a sense of wealth and prestige.⁷¹ Further afield, in a ruined church in Sivas in central Turkey which dates to the late Macedonian period, the pillars of the marble iconostasis were also carved with a frieze of 'sēnmurws'.⁷²

Our *Bilderwanderung* next leads us to central Italy, where fully-fledged 'sēnmurw' iconography attests to artistic contacts between the medieval Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. It thus comes as no surprise that we encounter the fabulous creature in a late eighth- or early ninth-century marble relief carving at the Abbey Church of Castel Sant'Elia in central Italy.⁷³ This depiction features a bilaterally symmetrical 'tree of life' with curling foliage alternately enclosing rows of birds and 'sēnmurws'. The latter are portrayed with raised wings and open jaws which reveal rows of teeth and projecting tongues. The imagery recurs in ninth-century Italian artistic vocabulary on the black and white mosaic pavement of the Monastery of Saints Ilario and Benedetto in Venice.⁷⁴

The cross-cultural distribution of the 'sēnmurw' motif was further ensured by its depiction on portable artefacts. It is found on objects of adornment, such as on a gold belt buckle, probably made in late

71 See GRABAR 1963, pp. 107–108 and pl. LVII. According to HARPER, the 'sēnmurw' developed its apotropaic aspect under Western influences: HARPER 2006, pp. 73–74.

72 FIRATLI 1969, p. 166, fig. 27. GRABAR 1970, p. 696 and pl. 22, fig. 1.

73 RASPI SERRA 1974, pl. CXXVI, fig. 206.

74 Now preserved in Venezia, Museo Civico Correr.



Fig. 13: Buckle, Byzantium, perhaps Constantinople, late seventh or eighth century. Cologne, Römisch-Germanisches Museum.

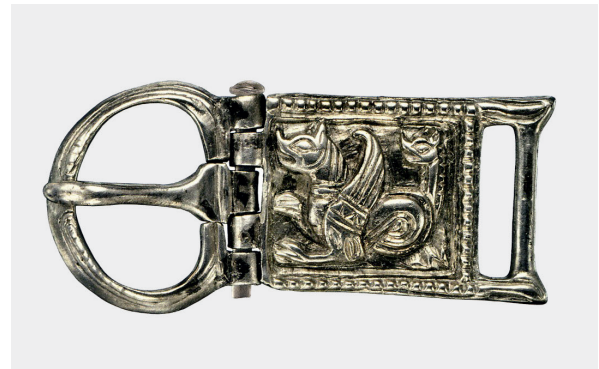


Fig. 14: Buckle, Asia Minor, late ninth or tenth century. Mainz, Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum.

seventh- or eighth-century Constantinople but found in Sardinia. The mythical creature is here portrayed with paired uplifted wings ending in curled tips and a prominent raised feathery tail (Fig. 13).⁷⁵ When personal in nature and worn on the body, objects with this motif must have been believed by many to provide the wearer with a prophylactic or apotropaic safeguard against a variety of real or imaginary dangers. At the same time the motif would have been displayed as a symbol of prestige. A silver buckle, probably dating to the late ninth or tenth century and thought to come from the Byzantine provinces of Asia Minor, portrays yet another type of ‘sēnmurw’ (Fig. 14). Instead of a peacock tail, or a feathery cock-like tail, or a spiralling tail with a bushy tip, this creature’s spiralling tail ends in a small ‘sēnmurw’-head, a device which became characteristic of Saljuq art.⁷⁶ Various stylised versions of the ‘sēnmurw’ were also portrayed on Byzantine ivory plaques. On one of these, re-used on a twelfth-century ivory casket now in the Cathedral Treasury in Würzburg, we find another instance of a ‘sēnmurw’-tailed ‘sēnmurw’ appear.⁷⁷

The depiction of a narrative scene known as the Ascent of Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE) is the subject of several Byzantine enamels, such as that found on the gold diadem from the Bulgarian Preslav Treasure, probably made in Constantinople in 927.⁷⁸ Two of the arched diadem plaques that flank the implied ascension and apotheosis feature confronted ‘sēnmurws’ with peacock tails. They belong to an imperial context as the plaques that formed the centre of the diadem were probably part of a diplomatic gift from the Byzantine emperor to the Bulgarian tsar.⁷⁹ The incorporation of ‘sēnmurws’, a rare feature in this otherwise common subject in Byzantine art,⁸⁰ clearly associates the creature with the highest form of glorification. Along with the Ascent of Alexander, the ‘sēnmurw’ was part of a stock imperial iconography which, as in the neighbouring countries, assimilated the creature into the visual language current in imperial circles.⁸¹

75 Fragments of the same textile are preserved in Paris, Musée de la Mode et du Textile, collections des Arts décoratifs, inv. no. 16 364.

76 For a discussion of the emergence of these “amphisbaena”, see, for instance, KUEHN 2011, figs. 36, 60, 100.

77 GOLDSCHMIDT / WEITZMANN 1930–1934, 58, fig. 107 a, pl. LXII a (cover).

78 Preslav, Arkheologicheski Muzei “Veliki Preslav,” inv. 3381/2. See KAT. MAGDEBURG 2001, vol. 2, pp. 488–489, cat. VI. 58b C and E; BOSSELMANN-RUICKBIE 2004, pp. 77–81.

79 BOSSELMANN-RUICKBIE 2004, pp. 77–81.

80 GLEIXNER 1966, pp. 96–99.

81 Cf. KAT. INNSBRUCK 1995, pp. 13–35.



Fig. 15: Plaques from the Cross of Theophanu, Byzantium, perhaps tenth century. Essen, Domschatz.

Moving from Veliki Preslav, the capital of the First Bulgarian Empire, to the Westphalian bishopric in Minden, we encounter the 'sēnmurw' on an enamelled gold disk, likewise worked in the tradition of the Byzantine enamels of the late ninth or mid-tenth century. This was inserted into the eleventh-century Petri shrine. The reliquary was gifted by the bishop of Minden in 1071 and is still housed in Minden Cathedral.⁸² The circular disk features a central semi-precious stone from which radiate four equidistant human figures alternating with addorsed pairs of 'sēnmurws'. Just as on the Preslav diadem plaques, the bird's apotropaic and protective properties, and its allusion to the fact that human beings are "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), must have been one of the reasons for its inclusion in this cruciform configuration. The 'sēnmurw' thus played a crucial role in making visible the restoration and apotheosis of the fragments of the saint, indicating his exalted status and his intercessory abilities. This is precisely why this Byzantine imagery was included in the main vertical face of the shrine, dominating its overall decoration. It shows the human figures rising into heaven with the help of the fabulous creature celebrating their glory and apotheosis. It is the 'sēnmurw's' close association with this form of glorification which explains the frequency with which we encounter it in the context of the medieval cult of relics.

The 'sēnmurw's' role as an animal of saintly apotheosis and the apotheosis of the dead – a characteristic it shares with the griffin or the eagle, as also demonstrated on the Preslav diadem plaques – must have been the reason that it featured twice on the enamel plaques that adorn the Cross of Theophanu in the Essen Cathedral Treasury. Gifted by Theophanu, abbess of Essen who reigned from 1039 to 1058, this Ottonian processional cross is among the most significant pieces of gold work from that period (Fig. 15).

⁸² Minden, Kath. Dompropsteigemeinde Minden (Domschatzkammer), inv. DS 65. See KAT. PADERBORN 1999, pp. 530–531, VIII.18 (detail).



Fig. 16: Illustration from the *Gerona Beatus*, f. 165v, tenth century. Girona, Museum of Girona Cathedral.

The ‘sēnmurw’ plaques are again most probably of Byzantine origin and likewise seem to have been ultimately derived from older pieces, which in this case were probably part of the possessions inherited by the Ezzonids from the Ottonian dynasty.⁸³ Paired ‘sēnmurws’ and griffins are shown on either end of the horizontal arm of the cross, which is topped by paired eagles. This placement once again underlines the close typological relationship between the three animals. The fact that they were specifically selected from an earlier Byzantine context for inclusion in these priceless pieces underlines the significance accorded to these winged animals in an eleventh-century German ecclesiastical context, as does their elevated position on this important cross, which bears two pieces of the true cross on red velvet, enclosed as relics.

During this time, the Fatimids, Byzantines, Normans and Umayyads flourished and competed in close proximity around the Mediterranean. It is in this context that the tenth-century illuminated manuscript known as the *Gerona Beatus* was created. This document reveals a degree of knowledge of Islamic iconographic traditions unmatched in other Spanish Commentaries. We find the ‘sēnmurw’ next to an example of the popular theme of an eagle pouncing on a gazelle with the legend ‘COREVS ET AQVILE / IN VENATIONE’ (Fig. 16). By this time both motifs belonged to a Mediterranean tradition that served Muslims and Christians alike. The representation of Coreus, as the ‘sēnmurw’ is named here, occurred early on in north-western Hispanic kingdoms, as can also be seen on the tapestry page in the Bible of 920 from León.⁸⁴

An important characteristic of the ‘sēnmurw’ is, moreover, its connection with water. As noted earlier, the Avestan saēna is linked with rain-clouds and rain. Through the perch on which it nests, it is intimately

⁸³ BEUCKERS 1993, p. 91 and n. 669, 94.

⁸⁴ Leonese Bible of 920, León, Colegiata de San Isidoro, Cod. 6, f. 3v; GÓMEZ-MORENO 1926, vol. 2, fig. 82.



Fig. 17: Relief carving, 915–921. Akht'amar island in Lake Van, Cathedral of the Holy Cross, southern façade.

associated with the mythical Lake Vārukasha. A ‘sēnmurw’-like sea-creature is found on the bas-relief carvings on the southern façade of the Armenian church of the Holy Cross on Akht'amar island in Lake Van, present-day Eastern Turkey, which was built in the second decade of the tenth century.⁸⁵ The church formed part of the palace complex of Gagik I, the Armenian king of Vaspurakan in Western Armenia, vassal of the Abbasid caliph. Biblical scenes in relief covered the building, which was directly linked to the palace by a gallery to the south. On the southern façade is a depiction of the story in the Book of Jonah that tells of the Hebrew prophet's flight from the city of Nineveh aboard a ship. When God caused a violent tempest at sea, the prophet was cast, at his own behest into the stormy waves to appease the divine wrath and save the lives of the sailors. Jonah did not drown because God sent a large aquatic creature or fish to save him, which in the Greek translation of the Bible is called a whale or *kētos*. The creature swallowed Jonah, carried him in its belly and vomited him up on dry land after three days and three nights.

The Armenian reliefs at Akht'amar feature two episodes. In the first, Jonah is lowered by the sailors into the maw of a dog-headed fish floating on its back. In the second, to the right, he is regurgitated out (Fig. 17). The ‘sēnmurw’-like creature is shown in upright position with pearl-studded curving wings enlivened by a palmette, a feature it shares with the ‘sēnmurw’ portrayed on the eighth- or ninth-century silk samite shroud of St Helena from the reliquary of the church of St Leu and St Gilles in Paris. Also worth noting are its forelegs, which are three-fingered, *sē angurāg*, in keeping with an epithet of the ‘sēnmurw’ in the *Bundahishn* (3.10). In this context the ‘sēnmurw’ is definitely a marine creature that can be interpreted as a symbol of salvation and deliverance.

Closely related imagery of a ‘sēnmurw’-like sea-creature swallowing or regurgitating Jonah is shown on a tenth-century bas-relief, possibly from the ambo of the Old Cathedral of Sorrento (Fig. 18). On an eleventh- or twelfth-century mosaic in the white marble ambo yet another depiction of the aquatic animal ingesting and then spitting out Jonah is preserved at the Duomo di Ravello, situated above the Amalfi coast in southern Italy (Fig. 19).⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Cf. GRABAR 1970, p. 697.

⁸⁶ See also the ambo at San Giovanni del Toro at Ravenna, founded in 1065. GABRIELI / SCERRATO 1979, fig. 424.



Fig. 18: Relief, possibly from the Ambo of the Old Cathedral of Sorrento, tenth century. Private Collection.

Underlining, once again, the importance of textiles as a medium for the circulation and exchange of a shared visual vocabulary, a closely related creature appears on a textile-inspired ornament page⁸⁷ in a richly illuminated manuscript, the so-called Luxeuil Gospels, commissioned by the abbot Gerhard II of Luxeuil between 1040 and 1051. It consists of a repetitive pattern of six rows of pearl-style medallions set against a light blue ground. These are filled with alternating rows of hybrid creatures and birds with spread wings. The mythical animals are not winged and have two front legs with the rear portion of their bodies ending in spiralling tails. Some decades later a magnificent long-necked ‘sēnmurw’-like creature appears in the medieval encyclopaedia, *Liber Floridus* (Book of Flowers), compiled between 1090 and 1120 by Lambert (d. 1121), canon of the cathedral of St Omer.⁸⁸

We encounter yet another version of our Sasanian dragon on a cubic capital atop a column erected in the nave of the Benedictine abbey church of St Michael in Hildesheim during the extensive restoration after 1150 (Fig. 20). The upper frieze features adorned ‘sēnmurw’-like creatures with pearled spiralling tails ending in three-pronged caudal fins, raised unfolded wings and open canine snouts that emit, or bite into, lush foliage. This depiction must have been endowed with a particular ‘symbolic dimension’, for about one hundred fifty years later it re-emerges in the same context and in the same city, its form having changed ever so slightly. Again it is represented in medallion-style on capitals, this time in the church of St Godehard (Fig. 21). The creature is portrayed with an imbricated body with a spiralling tail, a pair of uplifted feathery wings, the open canine snout revealing the tongue. Just like its close relative in St

87 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. nouv. acq. lat. 2196, fol. 19r.

88 Ghent, Centrale Bibliotheek van de Rijksuniversiteit,

Ms. 92. Associated pictorial materials are discussed in the contributions of Joanna OLCHAWA and Michael BRANDT in this volume.



Fig. 19: Ambo, eleventh to twelfth century. Ravello, Cathedral dedicated to San Pantaleone.



Fig. 20: Relief carving, capital, after 1150. Hildesheim, St. Michael's Church.



Fig. 21: Relief carving, capital, between 1133 and 1172. Hildesheim, St. Godehard.

Michael's, its three-fingered forelegs touch the rim of the medallion, following the iconographic canon established long ago at Ṭāq-i Bustān in the late Sasanian period.

It is perhaps in the form of the Hildesheim aquamanile that the 'sēnmurw' is called upon to perform the most triumphant of the roles in its long career. After centuries of serving a principally pictorial figure, in this piece the 'sēnmurw', once again, assumes the dignity of a 'social actor', an 'agent', and an 'active being'. We might say that it was perhaps not so much the form of this hybrid creature that changed over

time but its function and functionality, which are eloquently discussed in the other contributions to this volume.

As the above examples have demonstrated, the iconography of this supernatural creature remains remarkably consistent and resilient across cultures and eras. Yet, at the same time, its signification may be multi-layered, multivalent and adaptive. In its royal, apotropaic and exalting aspect, it passes easily between society, often retaining similar power, prestige and meaning even if situated in very different theologies and *Weltanschauungen*. Over more than seven centuries, and spanning civilisations from the greater Iranian world to twelfth-century Germany, this animal of fantasy has answered iconographic needs associated with themes ranging from the important, such as abundance, fertility, royalty, glory, good fortune, splendour and protection, to the most rarefied, such as ascent, salvation and delivery.

Abbildungsnachweis

Soweit der Redaktion bei den Bildrechten trotz gewissenhafter Recherche ein Versehen unterlaufen ist, bitten wir um Nachsicht und gegebenenfalls Benachrichtigung.

Claudia Höhl:

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Gerhard Lutz und Joanna Olchawa:

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Joanna Olchawa:

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Michael Brandt:

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Harald Wolter-von dem Knesebeck:

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