

LIONS AND KINGS:
The Transformation of Lions as an Index of Power in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Lions and Kings: The Diachronic Transformation of Lions as an Index of Power in the Middle East

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This thesis will analyze secondary sources about the usage of lions in the Middle East from around 3000 BCE to the present day. Images and examples will be analyzed along two semiotic dimensions-discourse and genre. Discourse refers to motifs and context, and genre refers to material aspects of the work. History, discourse, and genre will be used to make connections across time in order to present a unified theory on the transformation of lion use throughout time.

Beginning in the Ancient Near East, the important functions, discourses, and motifs become illuminated. Lions are used for good, bad, and protective functions, and found in genres from seals to literature, and wall reliefs. Then, Cyrus the Great starts the Achaemenid Empire, and the Persians begin to dominate the Middle East. Discourses like the lion and the bull and lion hunt continued to be used across genres which came to include textiles, carpets, and more. In the Seventh Century CE, Islam sweeps across the Middle East, and the lion takes on new meaning associated with Ali ibn abi Talib. Though the lion was most likely always consciously incorporated into new empires, in the Modern Era its power is harnessed for nationalism and nationbuilding.

To Matt, my favorite Leo.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For thousands of years the lion has been associated with power in the Middle East. From the first emperor to the most recent despots, people with power have utilized lions in art, literature, names, ritual, and more. The transformation of the lion's use over time parallels developments in social systems of power, mainly political and religious systems, as well as technological developments related to art. Secondary sources about the lions use in the Middle East span from prehistory to the modern era. This paper works to bring these various sources together in a comprehensive theory of lion transformation. Before delving into historical content, there are a few concepts, limits, and dimensions of analysis that need to be introduced. The first is that lions' association with power is most likely motivated by their predatory ability. This causal relationship between inherent traits of lions and their use by powerful groups can be understood through semiotics, which labels such a motivated symbolism as an index.

After an introduction of the inevitability of the lion as an index of power, there will be a discussion of the limits of this study-geographically, temporally, and otherwise. In addition to historical context, the dimensions of analysis for this study are discourse-or in what contexts the lion appears- and genre-on what materials does the lion appear, which will be elaborated on after the discussion of extent. The present chapter will conclude with a brief summary of each of the upcoming chapters, which deal chronologically with the transformation of lion usage.

Semiotic Background

The Asiatic lion as an animal was present across the Middle East before it entered any literary or artistic lexicon. Lions are still used there today despite their extinction in the area.

Communication developed as a way to organize and transfer information about the world to others, through signs. A sign is something that connects two planes of meaning, in this case one physical-the actual animal of a lion and one philosophical - the concept of power.

Communication in the early days of writing was primarily visual, since few people were literate. The visual texts that include lions are complex, and generally part of an iconographic code that began as a simple way to indicate what early humans perceived. Perceived meaning is not constant over time. Understanding of the world changes over time because peoples' frame of reference evolves.

Another useful conceptualization of communication is Italian semiotician Umberto Eco's idea of meaning and reference as contracts with the item being communicated. This can be useful when considering the lion's use in protective functions. Though Eco defines refer narrowly as designation (utterances that mention something specific), shying away from a broad definition, it is unlikely that people from the Ancient Near East were referring to a specific lion or to all the lions, but perhaps to lions that might threaten them. Since today people have different cultural baggage and maybe have never had a friend or relative attacked by a lion, our understanding of this reference might be slightly different. If, as Eco says, "referring is an action that speakers perform on the basis of negotiation,"¹ it is not difficult to imagine ancient humans negotiating, referring to, and contracting with wild animals out of their control such as the lion, or the snake, in order to protect themselves.

There are several places to look when discussing the use of images in social systems like government or religion. One of those is social semiotics, which was developed rather recently as

¹ Eco, Umberto. *Kant and the Platypus*. Pg 295

a way of looking at symbols and how they fit into social systems. Theo van Leeuwen outlines some dimensions for semiotic analysis throughout his book “Introduction to Social Semiotics.” Though not every dimension is useful, the framework is essential to the social semiotic mindset. It is from this book that I draw the characteristics at which I look at in this study. The first is genre, easily defined as *what* is the lion depicted on. Then there is discourse which is what is being said about the lion and its connection to power by historians. Style comes next, referring to how the lion is depicted and how it is used as index of power. In other words, style indicates how visual language figures as a means of government. The final dimension is modality, or what level of truth is represented in these depictions. Modality is based in the interpretation of the people who the art was meant for². Thus, in historical cases is irrelevant, since in many cases the art is incredibly different now than it was at the time of creation, as well as because at the time of certain wall reliefs and inscriptions the average person most likely could not read what it said, while today access to translated inscriptions is readily accessible.

Though there are not a lot of dimensions in which this study is limited, there is one broad category that encompasses the time periods and leaders that will be dealt with throughout this study. To cover every single person or group that ruled over the Middle East beginning in prehistory would be impossible. For that reason, this paper is concerned with empires, dynasties—rulers whose domain was both large geographically—and which lasted at minimum around one hundred years. So, though lions may appear in the court arts of a shorter or less central empires (such as the Timurids, Mamluks, or Mongols), these are not covered in depth. It must be said that in the modern period, with the advent of the imperially imposed nation-state,

² Leeuwen, Theo van. 2005. *Introducing social semiotics*. London: Routledge.

such limitations are neither possible nor beneficial, since states do not encompass the whole area, nor do rulers lead for anywhere close to one hundred years. Nonetheless, Chapter Five will present several explanations of lion usage from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In addition to focusing on some of the most extensive and impactful empires and their historical context, this paper has two other dimensions of analysis that contribute to overall understanding of the transformations that usage of the lion undergoes over time. These dimensions are discourse and genre, in reference to the aspects of socio-semiotic analysis mentioned earlier. Discourse refers to the context in which a lion is used. Broadly, this can refer to motifs like the lion hunt, as well as to the use of an actual lion in rituals. In the second chapter, overarching categories of discourse will be introduced. These broad categories are useful because they generally remain constant, though the specifics of them change according to period. For example, within the category of lions in conquering prey, in the Ancient Near East the lion and a deer or ibex is common, and it remains used in the Islamic empires, though another similar discourse at that time is the lion and the hare.

The other dimension of analysis is genre, which refers simply to the material characteristics of what the lion is depicted on. Though many discourses remain constant over time, for example the lion hunt, the genre on which this discourse is presented on evolves as technology evolves. To continue with the lion hunt example, the lion hunt was first shown on wall reliefs and seals carved from stones. As art evolved, so too did depictions of the lion hunt. Under any number of Islamic caliphs, the lion hunt is common in paintings and literature, as well as on tapestries. As with discourse, there are many examples of genre consistencies over time, and many examples of changes. Another example of this is the transformation from cylinder seals to seals made out of harder and thus more exclusive rocks, to beads and jewelry with the

same function, and postage stamps are the most recent tangentially related item. Lions are also used consistently in public spectacles.

Much of the lion's longevity as a symbol is due to convenience, which is surely the reason for the continued systematization of the lion as index of power in the empires immediately following the Neo-Assyrian. A big part of symbol use is efficient communication. Since the Neo-Assyrian Empire was very large, and most of its subjects could not read, it was important to incorporate simple, emotionally affective symbols, such as the lion, the snake, the bull, and others. The reason for the existence of these symbols lies in structural selectivity, meaning they were chosen merely because they were around that area.

Method of Development

The discourse surrounding lion imagery in the history of the Middle East is centered around the Ancient Near East, with a few attempts to connect it to the Achaemenid Empire and later empire such as the Byzantine and Islamic. Based on mostly secondary sources, this study will improve upon the pre-existing feeble attempts by drawing together more comprehensively the uses of lions throughout time. By connecting the dots, and discussing in passing what historical work has come before, the changes in lion imagery and genre will become clear. Such changes can be measured in many ways, from how the way the in which the lion is shown is portrayed to the changes in materials and technique used to produce these works of art.

Since the goal is to trace the transformation of the image throughout time, the second chapter will cover the lion in the Ancient Near East. By briefly covering its usage before standardization and focusing on the Neo-Assyrian empire, this chapter will look at two angles of lion representation, first explaining iconographic discourse (what is the lion pictured in/with) and

genre (what is the lion pictured on). These will compromise the framework for comparison for the rest of the work. By putting the common motifs in context, this chapter will act as an introduction to those motifs, which will continue to occur throughout history. Many scholars have categorized these motifs into a variety of types. For the purposes of this study the categories have been restructured into two main groups: (1) instances where the lion is portraying good power, and (2) instances where the lion is exuding bad or evil power. Within the good and bad categories are smaller subcategories that will further illuminate the common contexts of the lion. These categories are important because changes in genre attributed to technological developments over time still fall into these broad functional types of discourse.

Since the lion was present in works since prehistory, chapter two will briefly summarize the early incidences of the lion while focusing on its occurrence and usage in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, when the iconography of kingship and power was systematic and explicit, and undeniably included the lion. Alongside the Neo-Assyrian focus, there will be a discussion of the genre of the things the lion appears on in this section. Throughout this period, the lion appeared in a number of different genres, from traditional wall reliefs and cylinder seals to satirical literature and omens. The various material and social connotations of each genre will be discussed in as much detail as possible. As with the common discourses, the genres of this period are important in future empires as well.

The following chapter deals with three culturally Persian empires, the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanian. While the Achaemenid Empire could technically fall into the Ancient Near East, since it falls before 0 CE, it seemed logical to discuss it along with the other Persian empires that succeeded it prior to Islam. Beginning with the Achaemenid, the discussion of each empire will consist of the general categories established in the first chapter. Many motifs

previously discussed in the second chapter reappear consistently in the cultures of these three empires, including the lion and the bull, the lion in combat with a powerful being, the lion as protective power, and more.

In the years spanning these empires many things changed, especially in terms of international trade. The Silk Road was founded under the Arsacid Empire, and even before that there was evidence of trade and cultural exchange during the Achaemenid Empire. New genres also became prominent under these Persian empires. Silver plates and dishes became more intricate, eventually production was royally controlled under the Sasanians. Achaemenid emperors started minting coins, and this continued throughout this period. Increased interconnectedness also allowed elaborate textiles to become sought-after social symbols of power. Other traditional genres continue to be used, including seals, wall reliefs, and many others. This chapter brings the study to around 300 CE.

The fourth chapter will deal with the post-classical period of history, around 500-1300 CE, looking at lion use in the Islamic Caliphates, as well as under the Seljuk Turks. This era sees the development of many sects of Islam, the most relevant being Shi'a, whose followers are faithful to Ali ibn abi Talib, the first follower of Islam, and the lion of god. Because some sects of Islam ban portraying living things, the lion was found in less artwork, however it was still used in many other apotropaic (protective) contexts. Court art evolves slightly in this period, moving away from wall reliefs towards painting, literature, calligraphy, and other paper based arts. Textile and metal arts remained popular for courts of this period.

Moving into the modern period and the fifth chapter, in the 16th century there is a conscious effort by Safavid shahs to insert the lion of god, Ali, into paintings of the mi'raj. These

shahs also reappropriate the hunt, and are shown hunting lions and other wild animals on paintings and intricate metal dishes. Personal names still use words for lion, a phenomenon discussed deeply by at least one scholar of Islamic history. A discussion of this phenomenon leads the reader through the Ottoman Empire to the present day, as current Syrian dictator Bashar Al-Assad's family name 'al-assad' means lion.

A common discourse in the modern era is the appropriation of historical images for use in nation-building. A common phenomenon, this occurs in Iran under the Qajars, in Iraq under various rulers but most notably Saddam Hussein, and in Ottoman Turkey. Lion discourses and usages remain consistent once more, the lion is represented in the hunt, or apotropaically. The genres on which the lion appears vary, now postage stamps exist, and real lions are used to incite fear and cooperation. The Qajars use a lion in their state seal, appearing on all official documents and the flag. More contemporarily, ISIS, in an interesting and scary subversion, draws upon the power of history by destroying it, also presumably to cause fear.

Chapter 2: Ancient Near East

This chapter will discuss the lion in the Ancient Near East. It will be divided into two sections. The first section will deal with the lion in the Ancient Near East prior to Neo-Assyria. While simultaneously providing historical context, this section will briefly introduce the discourses (or motifs) commonly found in the early days of human systems, as well as common materials and their connection to power. In the second section, a brief historical context for Neo-Assyria will be provided, along with examples emphasizing the importance of this era.

Historical Background

As the fourth millennium comes to an end and the third millennium begins, the tribes and villages that existed in the Middle East began to organize into city states. From the historical documents of this period it would seem that the temple played a huge role in society, however much of the evidence is economic. Nonetheless, priests were important figures in these cities. One of the cities developing an early administrative system was Uruk-the supposed home of the goddess Inanna, where her temple employed many in its craft workshops and was a seemingly large player in the economy. Temples had large statues of lions protecting the doors even before this period. Inanna/ Istar is known as “the lion of heaven ³,” and her temple at Uruk was referred to as a “lion, laying on its paws.⁴” With this first instance of organization, comes the first instance of the lion hunt. The earliest confirmed portrayal of a “priest-king” combatting a lion is in 3000 BCE⁵.

³ Chikiko Watanabe, *Animal symbolism in Mesopotamia: a contextual approach*, (Wien, Institut für Orientalistik der Universität Wien, 2002) 91

⁴ Brent A. Strawn, *What is stronger than a lion?: leonine image and metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East*. (Fribourg, Academic Press, 2005) 217

⁵ Strawn, *What is stronger than a lion?* 134



Figure 1. Warka stele Baghdad Museum ca.3000BCE

Lion images are first seen in some of the earliest seals. Seals are “artifacts carved with imagery rendered in the negative so that, when pressed into a malleable surface of damp clay, they produce positive designs⁶.” The earliest seals consisted of soft minerals and were stamp seals, which had a flat surface that was carved with imagery, and could be considered the earliest form of writing. In Uruk, stamp seals evolved into cylinder seals, which remain popular in this area for thousands of years. Many reasons have been posited for the popularity of cylinder seals: they are faster to cover a whole surface with, they hold more content. At least one historian suggests “that the major value and purpose of the larger size was to be able to adequately present the dramatic, visual image and implicit ideological message.⁷” Seals were a status symbol,

⁶ Root, M. Cool. *This fertile land: signs & symbols in the early arts of Iran and Iraq*. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Kelsey Museum of Archeology, 2005.) 10

⁷ Gorelick, Leonard, and A. John Gwinnett. "The Ancient near Eastern Cylinder Seal as Social Emblem and Status Symbol." (*Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 49, no. 1 45-56,1990.) 49

owned by important men and women. Society became more urban in the Uruk periods, and seals were worn on a string like beads, visible status emblems.

In 2900 BCE hereditary kingship developed. The kings were endowed with divine power, after all, king lists were recorded, and showed that kingship came down from heaven. Within this mythology, the gods even had their own king. In this period writing develops, though literacy remains low, and writing is still mainly utilitarian. This period containing the advent of kingship is known as the Early Dynastic Period (2900-2334 BCE). During this period, lion statues of all sizes, and anthropomorphic aspects drawn from lions began to be used to protect religious spaces. At al-'Ubaid, the temple of Ninhursag was “flanked by bitumen lions,” as was the temple of Enki at Eridu⁸. Representation of a lion attacking prey began in the Early Dynastic period on



Figure 2: Yellow sandstone vase; Uruk; early 3rd millennium



Figure 3: Cylinder seal ft. lion and prey, Early Dynastic pd. Mari

⁸ Strawn, *What is stronger than a lion?* 218

cylinder seals, vases, vessels, bowls, plaques, and reliefs, and the examples are numerous⁹ (see fig 2-3)¹⁰. A sandstone vase from Uruk features a high relief carving of a lion at its spot and a lion attacking a bull (Fig. 2)¹¹.

The tradition of giving personal names derived from the various words for lions, or totemism, also started in the Early Dynastic Period, like *Lugal-pirig* or “the king is a lion” and *Sarru-laba*-the king is a lion.¹² Strawn argues that totemism is part of sympathetic magic, which uses objects resembling the thing it wishes to influence. Another prong of the magic aspect is found in royal weaponry that bears characteristics of fierce animals like the lion. An example of this is the war mace of Mesilim from Uruk, which features a lion head¹³.

⁹ Ibid., 135

¹⁰ Cylinder seal battle Louvre AO18359.jpg from Wikimedia Commons:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cylinder_seal_battle_Louvre_AO18359.jpg. Retrieved 30 March 2017. .

¹¹ Ritual Vase: Decorated with animals in high and low relief from Uruk. From ArtStor:
http://library.artstor.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000136083. Retrieved April 25, 2017.

¹² Watanabe *Animal symbolism in Mesopotamia*, 45

¹³ Mace head of Mesilim Louvre AO2349 From:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mace_head_of_Mesilim_Louvre_AO2349.jpg. Accessed March 30, 2017.



Figure 4: Mace head of Mesilim

In 2334, Sargon began to conquer neighboring kingdoms, creating the Akkadian Dynasty, the first empire of many that would control this area. Sargon used religion to legitimize his leadership, linking kingship and priesthood officially. By the Akkadian period man was manipulating iron, gold, and silver, which meant better weapons, and better dishes. Lions began to be used apotropaically—or protectively—in front of palaces by this time. Totemism tapers off, as the use of animals in metaphor for royalty decreased, to be replaced with personal names likening the lion to gods.

The last years of the third millennium (2193-2004 BCE) are the Ur III period, which was marked by many building projects, as well as an increased sophistication of administration. Rather than empires, however, kingdoms in this period reverted to local rule. There were attempts to standardize month names, taxes, and laws, which were rebuffed by local leaders. Kings of this era claimed to exert control a region vaster than that of the Akkadians. Šulgi was a notable king of this period who pursued lions in myths and songs. In Ur III, seals are used for

both coinage and identification, and possession of seals made from hard stones correlated to wealth.¹⁴ Following this were the Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian period. In the Old Babylonian period, the kingdoms were organized into larger states led by one king who had a number of vassal kings beneath him. These kingdoms used administrative strategies developed in the Ur III period. Literacy became more common. The Old Assyrian period brought the advent of increased trade from the Fertile Crescent to Anatolia and beyond. This international trade caused an increase in Mesopotamian art featuring mythological hybrids (in German: *mischwesen*)—animals made by mixing the bodies of things from fantastical creatures to humans. Trade encounters turned to diplomatic encounters in the Late Bronze Age (1595-1155 BCE), where war was characteristic, but so was marrying for diplomacy, and so were peace treaties. After this comes a brief period where there was little of note culturally or politically, and that brings us to the Neo-Assyrian period (1100-612 BCE).¹⁵

¹⁴ Gorelick and Gwinnet “The Ancient Near Eastern Cylinder Seal” 49

¹⁵ Podany, Amanda H., *The Ancient Near East: A Very Short Introduction* (2013; online edn, Very Short Introductions online, Dec. 2013),

Discourse and Genre

To better understand the changes that lion usage undergoes, it is important to recognize the overarching discourses in which the lion was present, and their associated genres. Broadly, the discourses in which the lion is found can be divided into overarching categories that are designated as good, evil, or both. These categories are derived from Strawn (2005), but modified slightly. They could be considered natural or moral categories. The concept of the lion as evil is perhaps the most common, it is the first context in which the lion appears, and the number of

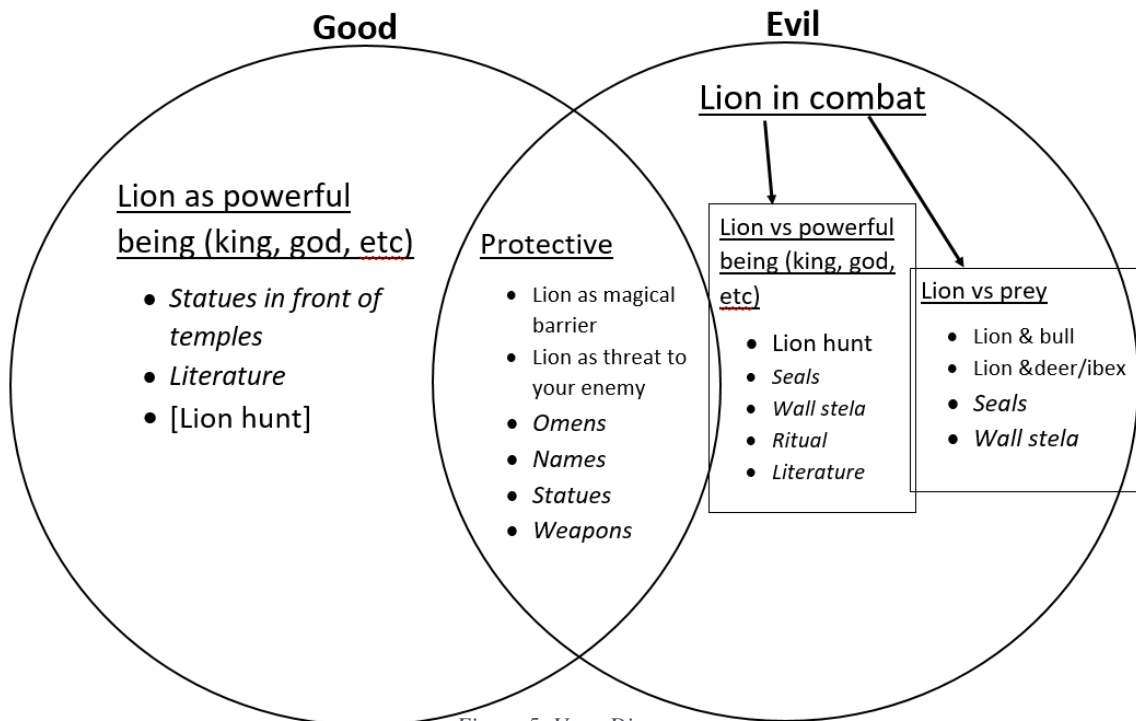


Figure 5: Venn Diagram

artifacts that show a lion in combat with another being or conquering a lesser animal are innumerable. Lions used apotropaically (for protection) involve harming anyone who is a threat, which is evil power, but they also have aspects of good power. Lions are also depicted as or compared to a powerful entity implies the lion's power is good.

The first facet of the lion's associations with positive power come when it is equated to a powerful entity, whether it be a god or a king. This relationship was based on characteristics of the lion-its loud roar evokes thunder, and its predatory power evokes war. Powerful gods like Ninurta/Ningirsu are associated with the lion, called a "great lion"¹⁶, as is the sun god Šamaš, Inanna/Ištar is also known as "the lion of heaven"¹⁷. Gilgamesh was shown wearing a lion pelt, as are many other powerful people¹⁸. Other instances of comparing kings to lions have been mentioned in the discussion of totemism. Comparing the leader of a society to a powerful wild animal took many forms. Sometimes this likening was simple, merely stating that the king is a lion. Other times it was more complex, using words like "fierce" or "virile" traditionally used to describe lions to describe the king as well. Although this phenomenon does draw upon the predatory power of the lion to invoke fear, it also draws upon the sexual prowess lions purportedly had.

Occupying a liminal middle ground between good and evil are objects whose function is protection. From colossal statues to seals to other talismans, the lion commonly appeared apotropaically. There were statues outside of temples to absorb evil and protect the sacred space beginning in third millennium. Initially carved from rock, then eventually molded in bitumen and cast in copper, these colossal statues could measure up to 4.4 meters. Generally, these apotropaic colossal statues were in full relief, or three dimensional. Occasionally the head would be two dimensional. Prior to the Neo-Assyrian period some colossi had five legs, so that when looked at from different angles they would appear to have four.

¹⁶ Watanabe, *Animal symbolism in Mesopotamia* 90

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91

¹⁸ Strawn, *What is stronger than a lion?* 178

Closely linked to the lion's apotropaic power are its powers in other magical contexts. There are also a few daggers that have lions or lion parts on them. The destructive features of a mace head correspond to properties of the lion that are represented by its image on the mace-head¹⁹. Though weapons in this style here placed squarely in the category of instances where the lion is marked as equal to a powerful entity, they could also be placed in the second category of combat, since the lions on these weapons faced powerful enemies either in myths or on the battlefield. There are swords and daggers with lions on their hilts, and a bronze lance tip with a lion on it²⁰. Axe heads also incorporated the lion, the blade was often depicted as coming out of the lion's mouth.²¹ Better control of metals also increased the intricacy of offering dishes, and anthropomorphic lion dishes with some divine relevance are found crafted from stone and metals. These vessels, including rhytons, were supposedly used by elite worshippers.

Lions are often shown as fearsome, in combat with or conquering other animals. The predatory abilities of the lion were undoubtedly obvious to early humans. For this reason, the earliest produced lion images portray it as evil. Many scholars have attempted to correlate the presentation of the lion to the wild, or the destructive power of nature²². Both this, and the option that these artists were simply putting down what they saw in the world are possible. Since the lion could be associated with bad or evil power, logically it became associated with demons. Demons appearing as lions, or even creatural demons with lion body parts were threats to powerful gods like Marduk. Ugallu, a storm demon with the body of a man and the head of a lion, is a featured enemy in the epic of Marduk—a Mesopotamian sun god²³. Records of omens

¹⁹ Watanabe, *Animal Symbolism in Mesopotamia* 43

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Strawn, *What is stronger than a lion?* 186

²² Collins, *History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*. 270

²³ Strawn, *What is stronger than a lion?* 148

indicate that the lion was dangerous wherever encountered, from the face of a baby to the dangerous wilds outside city walls. One Mesopotamian omen series titled *Summa Izbu* contains around 140 omens related to lions, including “[i]f a woman gives birth, and (the child) has a lion’s head – there will be a harsh king in the land.”²⁴

Lions are shown conquering ibexes, and in an important and exceptional category, in combat with a bull. The reason for this exception is the power the bull has in the mythology of the Ancient Near East. These two powerful animals become linked in iconography very early on. The lion is linked or labeled as the sun god Šamaš, while the bull is linked to the moon god. Lion and bull seals with stars included allude to the constellations of Taurus and Leo. This motif is also separated from the lion as predatory because it appears prominently in the iconography of the Achaemenid Empire.

The conquering lion is simply a threat, while lion combat, like a ruler hunting a lion shows the king’s power through comparison. A libation ritual followed the lion hunt, indicating its sacred aspects. Some have posited that the hunt was sacrificial in nature, indicating that perhaps the lion was a sacrifice to the gods. The first lion hunt stele is from the late Uruk period²⁵. A natural outcome of battle between the lion and powerful entities was the capture of live lions to act in ritual or merely to show the king or god’s power over the unpredictability of nature. Strawn outlines two groups, one of images in which the royalty encounters and fights lions, and another of images where the royal figure hunts and kills them. Images of tame lions

²⁴ Leichty in Ulanowski, “The Metaphor of the Lion in Mesopotamian and Greek Civilization”, 276

²⁵ Watanabe, *Animal symbolism in Mesopotamia*. 42

indicate that the first monarchs to conquer them may have been during the Neo-Assyrian Empire. There is some controversy as to when rulers first domesticated lions²⁶.

There are a few more things to consider before moving forward in time. The main materials of the art and culture of the Ancient Near East are clay, stone, and metal. Within the first category are wall reliefs, colossi, literature, and seals. A wall relief is carved in stone and usually found on walls of palaces or temples. Many genres peak in intricacy, sophistication, and become part of a larger system in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The genres included in the metal category include weapons and dishes. Many, if not all, of the motifs introduced earlier in this chapter are represented on at least one, but usually most of these genres.

Urbanization brings specialization, and seals become easier to make. Cylinder seals made of cheap, easy to find soft or medium hardness stones like steatite, marble, and alabaster became commonplace, while the elite of the Neo-Assyrian period laid stamp seals in rings. While the scenes depicted on any seal were most likely part of an oral history or socialization system of which historians of the present day can have no knowledge of, the seals of the Neo-Assyrian era are referential to the royal reliefs, and were most likely part of a large corpus of works containing similar themes. In this period seals containing lions either showed the lion solo or as part of the lion hunt.

When material and discursive developments are looked at in addition to historical background, it becomes evident that the development and transformation of the use of the lion in the Ancient Near East paralleled development in societal institutions and systems. The upcoming

²⁶ Strawn, *What is stronger than a lion?* 157

section will show that under the Neo-Assyrian kings the lion's use in these contexts reached new artistic pinnacles.

Neo-Assyria

Considering the common motifs or ideological discourse surrounding the lion in the Ancient Near East, as well as investigating the material contexts of such representations should allow the reader to understand why the case study of the Neo-Assyrian Empire is relevant. The Neo-Assyrian Empire was more than four times larger than any previous empire or organization of kingdoms. Because it followed a period of war and a brief dark age, it was a cultural resurgence of sorts for the Middle East. In a departure from the traditional idea of the king as a shepherd, the Neo-Assyrian kings wished to be perceived as fearsome conquerors. This is evident in the flourishing art, philosophy, and the bureaucracy of imperialist first millennium Assyria. One of the kings of this period, Assurbanipal, is one of the first to start collecting a variety of literary documents in what modern day historians call the first library.

Glorification of the royal and ritualistic hunt of the lion reached new heights under the Neo-Assyrian emperors. In Nineveh, there are the first major wall reliefs dedicated to the lion hunt. Though the lion hunt was first represented on a stela in the third millennium, such reliefs achieved artistic peaks under the Neo-Assyrians. These reliefs were painted, and their splendor was more magnificent than known today. Animals and humans in the lion hunt stela at Nineveh are depicted with impressive realism, complete with muscle detail. This "vivid realism" has been attributed to the brutally effective imperial institutions of the Neo-Assyrians, who brought in people against their will from all parts of the empire to be trained as craftsmen²⁷. These reliefs

²⁷ Collins, *History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*. 145

mark the first major monumental reliefs devoted to the lion hunt. Initially the hunt is merely religious, but as rulers began to claim divine ordinance to rule it becomes more of a grey space.

Royal seals depicting the lion hunt reference these elaborate wall reliefs.



Figure 6: Wall relief, lion hunt, Assurbanipal's Palace, Nineveh

Rather than being a snapshot of a single scene, the wall reliefs at Nineveh tell a story. Due to this narrative aspect, there is another dimension of analysis necessary, though it may not have been accessible to all. The text accompanying these reliefs is similar to many royal inscriptions, and tells of the great deeds of the king. The multi-modality of the stories kings told of themselves is interesting to consider in a society where not everyone could read, but everyone knew of the splendor of the palaces. Some historians say that this increase in narrative aspects

corresponded to a decrease in abstraction of concepts²⁸. Supposedly the lion is literally a lion, rather than a signifier for chaos, wildness, or anything else threatening. Others say that the lion could be a metaphor for an enemy. The lion's appearance in the intricate Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs was most likely influenced by previous uses both with abstract, literal, and even metaphorical meaning.



Figure 7: Wall relief, lion hunt, Assurbanipal's Palace, Nineveh

The *mischwesen* transformed into an apotropaic role by the Neo-Assyrian Empire, a role lions had been used for millennia prior. Size of the colossi did not peak in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, however the diversity of images did. Many protective statues were *mischwesen*, including the lion-headed man. To have a lion in front of a temple was exceptional, and so the lions flanking the entrance to Ishtar's temple at this time must be noted. Though the king and his

²⁸ Ibid., 149

powers took center stage in a lot of ways, religion was still important, and the lion was still widely used in it.

Lions were found on objects other than the ones listed here, however the ones given treatment in this chapter were most closely linked to power, whether it be divine or royal or both. The Neo-Assyrian Empire is a fine example to illustrate all the motifs and genres discussed. There are many reasons to focus on the Neo-Assyrian Empire, including simply that prior to Persian dominance in the area the most well-preserved artifacts are from the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The four palaces at Nineveh are incredible examples of royal propaganda and storytelling. Discourse surrounding these palaces, as well as the iconography utilized by these kings is nearly ubiquitous. The dominance of the lion hunt in this era will be carried through for hundreds of years, thus it will be pertinent in upcoming chapters as well.

Chapter 3: Persia

The Neo-Assyrian Empire was finally weakened by widespread civil wars, and the area was then ruled for a short 75 years by the Neo-Babylonian Empire, whose leadership focused on rebuilding. In 539 BCE, the Achaemenid Empire begins when the area is conquered by Cyrus the Great. Some scholars consider the Achaemenid Empire part of the “Ancient Near East,” however, for the purposes of this study, it seemed logical to group the Persian empires together. Although there are differences between the iconographies of the Neo-Assyrian rulers and the Achaemenid rulers, many similarities remain. The lion hunt motif carries through, and the lion and the bull comes to even higher prominence. In terms of materials and genres, seals continue their evolution, wall reliefs are still used in royal contexts, but there are new developments in materials for a variety of reasons, chiefly among them a diversification in metalwork.

The Achaemenid Empire and the subsequent Persian Empires act as a bridge between the cultures of Ancient Near East and the Islamic Empires. Many of the discursive contexts carry over from the ANE into the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanid Empires, and then into the various empires that ruled the Middle East after the spread and dominance of Islam. In this way, this chapter acts as a pivot point between ancient history and the middle ages. Despite the dearth of secondary sources specifically about the lion in this period, the history and lion examples from these Persian empires will show the ways in which continuity was cultivated over time. Many discourses (motifs) introduced in Chapter 2 are reused by some or all of the Persian empires mentioned. The Achaemenids choose the lion and the bull, while later Arsacid and Sasanid leaders latch onto the lion hunt. Genres such as wall reliefs and cylinder continued to be used, though each underwent a series of small change under each empire.

Achaemenid Empire

The Achaemenid Empire was the first Persian Empire, and its dominance began in the fifth century BCE and continued until the third. Though some historians place this period squarely within the realm of Ancient Near Eastern history, for the purposes of this study it will be paired up with other culturally Persian empires. Known for the impressive art and architecture at Persepolis, the Achaemenid Empire was by design a beacon of tolerance²⁹. To say something is a beacon of tolerance assumes that there are perceived different ethnic groups at that time, which is impossible to know for sure presently. However, since some places and ethnicities seem to be referred to by name in Achaemenid sources, it would seem that this assumption is true.

In the fifth century BCE, Cyrus II the Great of Fars/Parsa began a successful campaign that would eventually lead to the beginning of the first Persian empire, the Achaemenid Empire. Starting with Media, a kingdom to the west of Fars, in 20 years Cyrus II conquered the area known as the modern Middle East. Upon his success, Cyrus II founded the royal capital at Pasargadae. By the time Darius completed the construction at Pasargadae following several local rebellions, this city had become the ceremonial center of Achaemenid kingship. Darius' real masterpiece was Persepolis, whose legend endures until the present.

²⁹ Brosius, *The Persians: an introduction*. 9

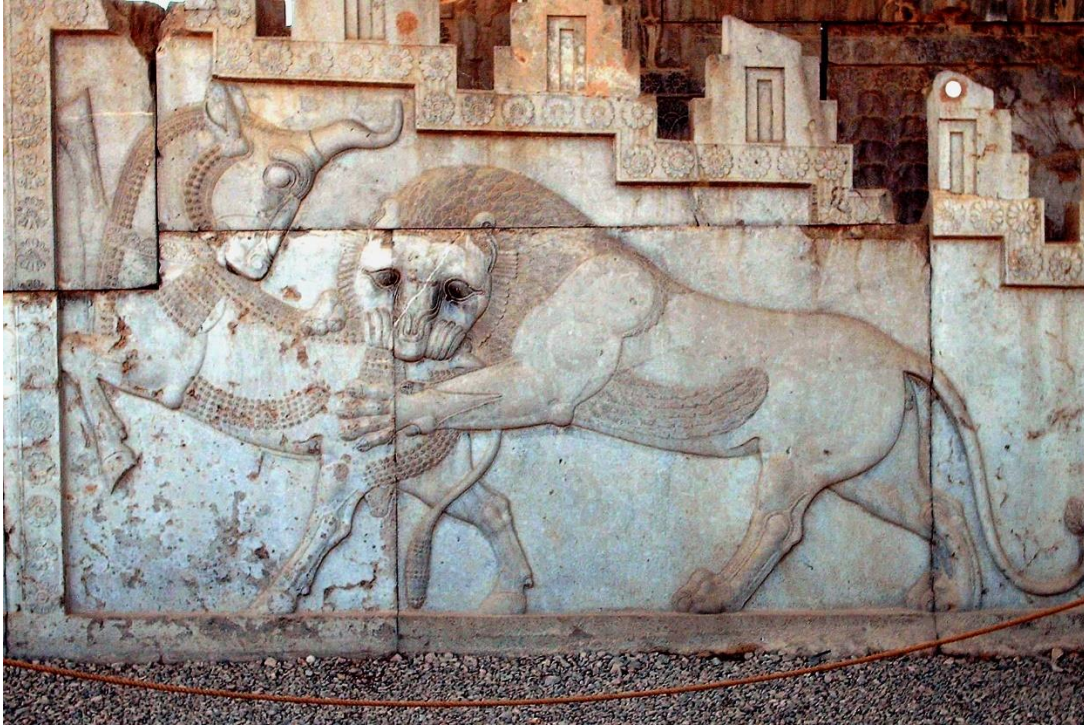


Figure 8: Lion and bull relief at Persepolis

The lion is ubiquitous at the Achaemenid capital of Persepolis. Margaret Cool Root claims that the ubiquity of the lion in Persepolis was a conscious effort by the Achaemenids to incorporate traditionally Mesopotamian ideals surrounding the lion's indication of power³⁰. Thus, the lion continued to be used as an index of power, and as power shifts southeast, the relevance of Elam and Persepolis is unquestionable. Elam was a rich province located on the Arab gulf. The lioness of Elam is an unmissable snarling lioness located in the Apadana reliefs of Persepolis. This lioness also suggests the effect of Elam on the traditions of the Achaemenid court. Rarely is a lioness portrayed, even though the lioness does the hunting, which points to the importance of masculinity as part of the metaphor. The lioness of Elam, conversely, is depicted as furious since her cubs have been taken from her and are being brought by following

³⁰ Collins, *History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*. 202

attendants. The Apadana reliefs depict many diplomatic gifts brought to Persepolis, and the Lioness of Elam is the only one that is emotive.



Figure 9: The Lioness of Elam from the Apadana staircase, Persepolis³¹

Root also discusses the various lion and bull reliefs. These as well carry symbolic meanings related to the constellations Leo and Taurus, as well as symbolizing domination³². Bulls are also revered in Zoroastrianism-the dominant religion practiced in Achaemenid court. The image of a lion attacking a bull is rare prior to the Achaemenid Empire, usually the

³¹ Persepolis_Apadana_Eastern_Stairway_Triangle.jpg. From Wikimedia Commons: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/74/Persepolis_Apadana_Eastern_Stairway_Triangle.jpg. Retrieved 30 March 2017.

³² Root in Collins, B. Jean. *A history of the animal world in the ancient Near East*. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

conquering lion (as Ettinghausen calls it) is usually seen attacking a deer³³. In fact, the lion is seen attacking ibexes in seals and reliefs of this period. The lion and bull image was not limited to royalty, since it appears on seals, but presumably seals marked a social class as well. The Elam effect, if you will, is important. Though Neo-Assyrian symbols and their meanings were consciously chosen to be used by the Achaemenid rulers, this is not the sole reason for their continued existence throughout this empire.

Another prevalent example of the lion in combat with a powerful being is the typical lion hunt motif. The straight-armed King of Kings can be seen prevailing over the lion in reliefs at Persepolis. Another common instance of this motif features an archer, both human and part human, triumphing over a lion on seals and reliefs. The complex at Pasargadae also has many examples of the lion and the “straight-armed hero” as well as a warrior fighting a lion demon. In the oral tradition of the *Shahnameh*- a chronicle of kings, eventually written down, a trope merges heroic elders with lions.

Lions also appear apotropaically, striding confidently on borders of buildings, textiles and more, protecting those within and implying a threat to those who might be a danger. Large statues of lions are also erected to guard palaces and temples, as in times past. Jewelry remained a popular way to protect oneself, and naturally lions are found on pins, amulets, wearable seals, and other baubles.

Achaemenid rulers are the first in this area to begin minting coins, on which lion imagery was quite popular. Lions in combat with other animals frequently occur, as do simple lion heads.

³³ Root in Collins, B. Jean. *A history of the animal world in the ancient Near East*. Leiden: Brill, 2002.

This iconography is similar to the Achaemenid hegemonic iconography found in seals and influenced by local styles. The set of images included in the set of “Achaemenid hegemonic iconography” includes lions and even bulls, though rarely are they presented together.

Seals made of glass and fine minerals have been found in abundance at administrative headquarters such as Sardis. The location and materials indicate that seals remained a status symbol, especially as there was innovation in the types and settings of seals. Seals continued to be set in fine metals. There are different types of seals found that date back to the Achaemenid empire. One of those types, ‘modeled’ seals, is based directly on seals from Babylon and Neo-Assyria, while others are unique to the Achaemenids.



*Figure 10: Cylinder Seal with Heroes Surrounded by Hunters and Animals*³⁴

³⁴ Walters Art Museum. Cylinder Seal with Heroes Surrounded by Hunters and Animals. From Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iranian_-

Wall reliefs during this empire are impressive in scale and style, like their predecessors. The iconographic system is much larger, since imperial conquering of surrounding lands allowed the kings access to a much larger artistic and iconographic base from which to draw. Reliefs from the time of the Achaemenids are highly detailed and well-polished.

Arsacid Empire

After the Achaemenid Empire, the Seleucid Empire, an offshoot of Alexander the Great's Macedonian Empire, rose to power in this area. As with most Hellenistic empires and cultures, the lion was present there- found in many reliefs of Herakles conquering a lion, or the cloak of Roger II. For the purposes of this paper, the following empire, the Arsacid, presents a more useful context to consider since it was also ethnically Persian, like the Achaemenids. The unfortunate thing about the Arsacid or Parthian period is that little art remains from it that is in good condition, or of good provenance, but that does not diminish its importance. After highlighting the important historical developments of this period, this section will then delve into the familiar contexts in which historians of this period have encountered the lion. Finally, there will be a brief discussion of the genres on which the lion was present, and how techniques in this period varied from those past.

Unlike Cyrus II's short campaign that began the Achaemenid Empire, the consolidation and beginning of the Arsacid Empire took about 100 years, culminating in the last fifty years of

[Cylinder Seal with Heroes Surrounded by Hunters and Animals - Walters 42445 - Profile Impression.jpg](#). Retrieved April 3, 2017.

the third century BCE³⁵. Other than a brief period where a religious minority leader tried to impose his cult on the whole empire, the Arsacid generally resembled the Achaemenid Empire in many ways. Kings and royal friends followed Zoroastrianism (but not the entire empire), and the artistic traditions remained relatively constant. Since the Arsacid Empire was preceded by a Hellenistic empire, the effects of this cultural exchange can be seen in the art of the time.

In fact, many external influences may have been at play in the art of the Parthian period, since it was during this time that the legendary Silk Road trading route developed. Evidence of cultural exchange dates to the Achaemenid Empire-pieces of Achaemenid provenance have been found in tombs in Central and East Asia. The lines of cultural thought exchange are difficult to trace, it is nearly impossible to know in which direction the arrows of influence point, and at what time. This same idea operates in the successive Sasanian Empire.

Given the small sample size, almost the only prevalent motif in the time of the Sasanians was the lion hunt. Historiographically, however, some interesting forces are at play due to this empire's closeness in time to Hellenistic empire and culture. After mentioning the relevant lion hunt scenes, the discourse around lion hunts of the Parthian/Arsacid period will be investigated. Then, like before, this section will explore the common genres of this era, including wall stelae and seals. Finally, distinguishing features of the genres and motifs of the Parthian period will be identified for effective comparison both forward and backwards in time.

At Tang-e-Sarvak (near modern Kermanshah) there is a classic example of a powerful being in combat with a lion. The powerful person is standing frontally, holding the lion stiff-

³⁵ Brosius *The Persians: an introduction*. 81

armed on his right as it reaches towards him with its front legs³⁶. Such an image was familiar from Achaemenid times, and also appears on Arsacid seals, including one found at Nisa. A final example is a statue of Hercules strangling a lion as part of one of his tasks, found at the Masjid Suleiman. It is likely that the tradition of a powerful man or ‘hero’ conquering a lion in the art of this area led to the popularity of this specific Labor out of all of Hercules’ trials and to its widespread portrayal³⁷.

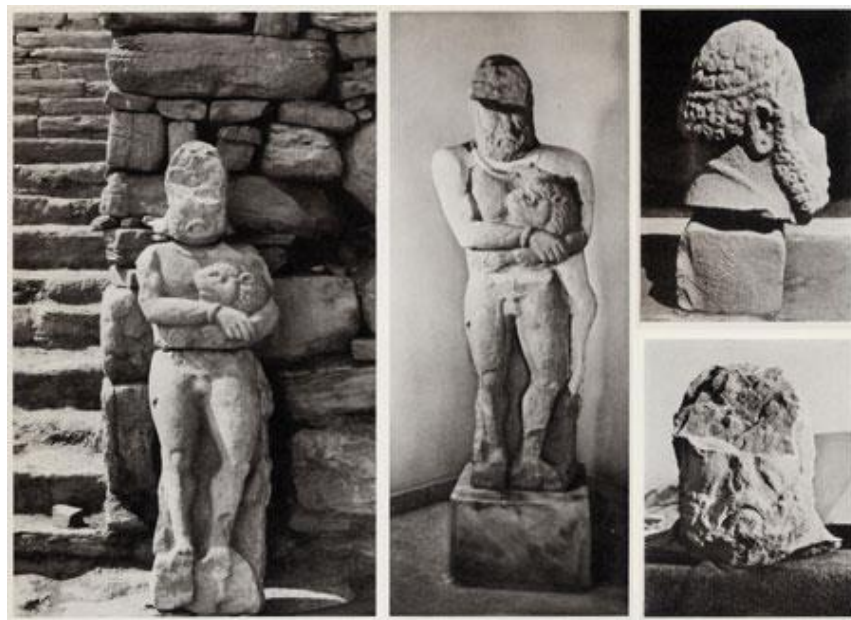


Figure 11: Herakles strangling a lion, from Masjid Suleiman

The lion hunt motif is often referred to in different terms by various historians of the Arsacid Empire³⁸. They tend to use more Hellenistic terms in reference to the lion hunt because it closely followed the Seleucid Empire. Similar to the conceptualization of the conquering lion or the king of the jungle, many historians of the Parthians term these lion hunt scenes as an

³⁶ Kawami *Monumental Art of the Parthian Period in Iran*. 146

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 113

³⁸ Kawami *Monumental Art of the Parthian Period in Iran.*, Curtis, Vesta Sarkhosh. *The Art And Archaeology of Ancient Persia: New Light On the Parthian And Sasanian Empires.*

unnamed “hero” conquering a lion. Obviously, there is some merit to this, since it can be hard to know with certainty who the person in such a lion hunt scene represents. It is possible to know with certainty when an image depicts Hercules/Herakles, because he is “the only habitually nude figure in ancient Iranian art.³⁹” That said, there are numerous depictions of Hercules in the Parthian period, often depicted strangling a lion.

Wall reliefs in this period are ‘less expert’ than those that come before and after. The reliefs at Tang-e-Sarvak are clumsily large and rounded, with little detail and smooth surfaces. Shapes in these reliefs are defined by shadows, in an inflated style that may have originated in Kushan or northern Afghanistan. Reliefs in this style are also found at Masjid Suleiman and Bard-e Nsheandeh⁴⁰. Sculptures from the Parthian period bear a definite Greek influence, both in subject matter and in style (see: the Herakles statue). Generally, the wall reliefs and sculptures of this period are not polished, nor do they show great care for detail.

Sasanid Empire

Unfortunately, the historical record does not provide clear answers regarding continuity. It is unclear what kings were thinking or doing as they incorporated iconographies of past empires while also attempting to distinguish their period of rule. Ardashir I, the first emperor of the Sasanians, traced his lineage back to Arsaces, first leader of the Arsacids. In this way, the Sasanians merely continued what cultural practices they inherited from the Parthians. Generally, this is true, in fact many things remain the same. However, several important changes occurred in the Sasanian Empire. No Zoroastrian rituals are represented in any royal art. Zoroastrianism

³⁹ Kawami *Monumental Art of the Parthian Period in Iran*. 111

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 113

was still the main cult of the royalty, however it was being challenged by Christianity, Manichaeism, and other religions.



Figure 12: C4th Sasanian Silver plate depicting King Shapur II hunting lions⁴¹

The lion hunt remained important among emperors of the Sasanians, and wall stelae of this traditional ritual are carved next to their predecessors in the same locations. Under the Sasanians the lion hunt comes to have two lions (or tigers, in some cases). After first mentioning occurrences of the lion hunt, an exception to the lion hunt norm will be discussed. In this occurrence, an emperor protects his family from lions, encompassing both the motifs of the lion as a threat and the lion in combat with a powerful being. Finally, this section will deal with the genres present under the Sasanians, and what changes they underwent. Wall relief techniques

⁴¹ Feltham, Heleanor. "Lions, Silks, and Silver" Figure 1.

resembled those of the Achaemenids, and by the final half of the empire, kings controlled silver craftsmanship and refineries.

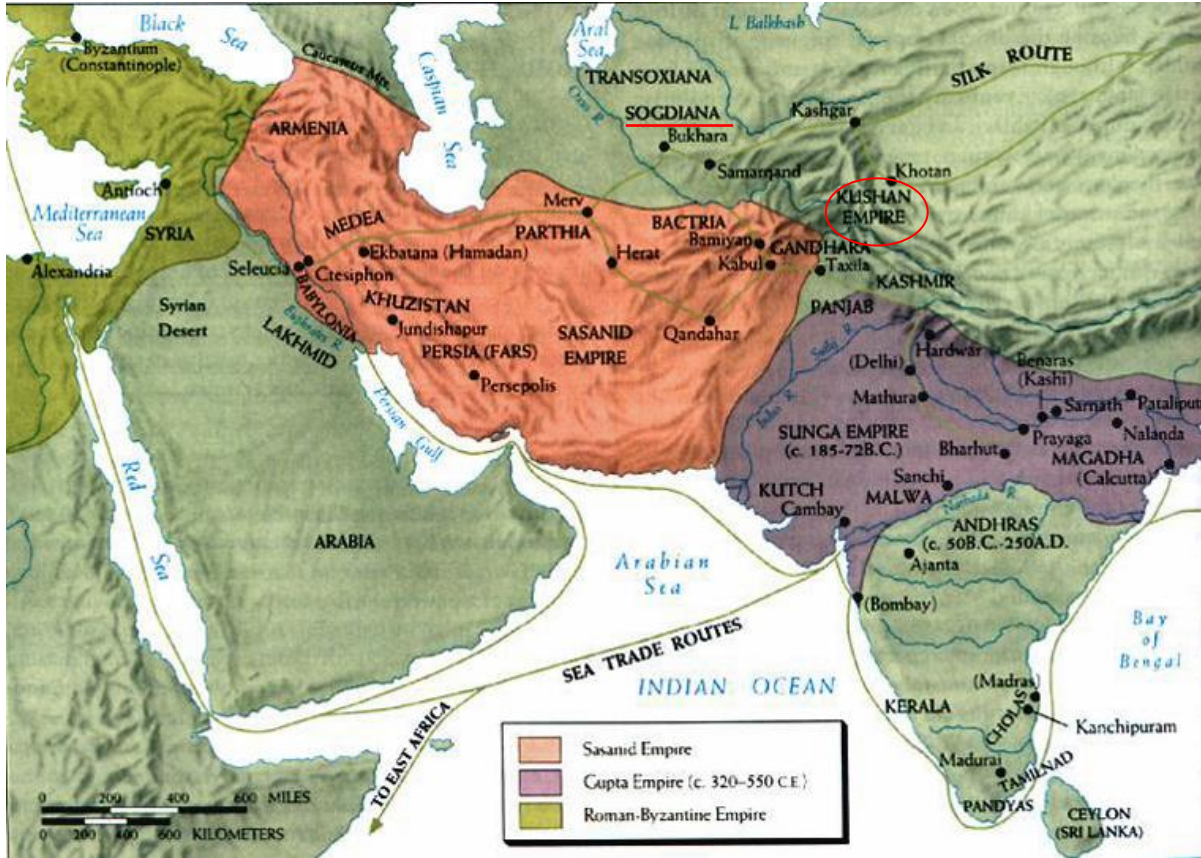


Figure 13: Map-Sasanian Empire and surrounding areas⁴²

In keeping with tradition or continuity, the motif of the king or powerful being confronting a lion in a lion hunt remains important in the empires of Sasanian kings, who may have continued to hunt physical lions. Though typically shown with a powerful being (usually a prince or king) and one lion, in the outer territories of the empire in the third and fourth century a new lion hunt scene emerges, separately from the royally controlled workshops in the empire’s capitals in Ctesiphon, Bishapur and others. Tanabe traces the phenomenon of a lion hunt on horseback with two male lions to independent or non-royal workshops in the Kushano-Sasanian

⁴² “091 Sassanid, Byzantine and Gupta 320 - 550 Empires Map” from Iran Politics Club. <http://www.iranpoliticsclub.net/maps/maps05/index.htm>

territory (northern Afghanistan or the Merv oasis).⁴³ The “hero” that appears on the earliest lion hunt plates with two lions is not identifiable as a King of Kings or emperor and is most likely a prince based on how he is dressed.

In a slight subversion of a classic theme, Bahram II is shown hunting two lions and defending his family from that threat on a wall relief at Sar Meshhad. This combines both the lion hunt motif and the lion as a threat motif. Historical accounts indicate that the Sasanian kingship existed between two lions, and any prince who wanted to ascend to the throne had to fight the two lions. It is this idea that enables the possibility that this scene of Bahram II is his divine investiture scene, which is possible because a traditional investiture scene depicting Ohrmazd giving the King of Kings a ring signifying his power⁴⁴.

Lions also continue to appear apotropaically in the Sasanian Empire, sometimes combined with the ‘tree of life’ image, especially on textiles. Many royal coins have two lions seated in front of the king and throne, protecting both. This motif also exists in furniture, including on thrones, which could be made with lion legs for example. Like in earlier periods, emperors used names that meant lion, like Ardashir (*shir* is lion in Persian). The Sasanians also continued using composite animals that included lion parts apotropaically, like the *lamashtu* or, more well known, the *senmurv* (also known as a simurgh or griffin) an animal with lion claws, a peacock tail, and a dog’s head. The *senmurv* is seen on things from silver plates to silks to amulets.

⁴³ Tanabe in Curtis *The Art And Archaeology of Ancient Persia*. 96

⁴⁴ Tanabe in Curtis *The Art And Archaeology of Ancient Persia*. 99.

Wall reliefs in the Sasanian period return to techniques of the Achaemenids, which were in fact more sophisticated in style than those of the Parthian period. Sasanian emperors erected wall reliefs next to pre-existing Achaemenid and Arsacid reliefs, and presumably aspects of those reliefs influenced the Sasanians.⁴⁵ In this era polishing the rock reliefs is again a popular practice briefly, then discarded because it looks better on smaller reliefs like those at Persepolis⁴⁶. Unlike Assyrian reliefs, the setting of which was made explicit, Sasanian reliefs have no identifiable natural characteristics or “topographical setting.”

Moving to metalwork, many different genres fall into this category, including coins, amulets, and silver dishes. Under Sasanian rule the silver workshops were controlled by the King, who chose the subjects of the works as well, which explains the prominence of the lion hunt. The shapes of these silver dishes vary, and have no similarities to the shapes of silver dishes from prior periods. However, technique-wise the craftsmen of the Sasanian time were not starting from nothing, since the dishes were beaten like those past rather than molded. These dishes were important court and diplomatic symbols, traded and looted for thousands of years.

Lions remained on silks and silver long past the Sasanian Empire. The Silk Road, great highway of cultural exchange, facilitated many such trades of silver and silk. Silk was also closely linked to kingship during the Sasanian empire since its rarity and provenance from far east Asia made it a luxury good. Similarly to silver, the government controlled the silk trade. As diplomatic gifts, silks that originated in Iran have been found in China, Siberia, and other far off

⁴⁵ For an example-the relief of Bahram V is located next to a relief and inscription by Darius.

⁴⁶ Harper, *In search of a Cultural Identity*. 10

places. Even as the Islamic empire took over the silk road, the trade did not falter, and the styles did not change.



Figure 14: C8th textile of Sasanian Persian or Sogdian origin with lion hunt⁴⁷

As the final Persian empire before the advent of Islam, the traditions and culture of the Sasanians is the most well-known of all three of these empires for almost two thousand years. Their practices are reintroduced by the Qajar Shahs during Iranian nation-building, including wall reliefs and symbolism. Eventually the Achaemenid Empire reaches a similar level of infamy because of Persepolis, but its culture is not incorporated as consciously (or not incorporated by

⁴⁷ Feltham, Heleanor. "Lions, Silks, and Silver" Figure 3.

name) into nation-building as the Sasanian culture, however as this chapter proved, the Sasanian culture owes a lot of its existence to the Achaemenids.

The Shahnameh, a twist on the king list of the ANE, becomes essentially a genre of art in and of itself as literacy spread and miniature painting gained popularity. Discourses such as the lion and the tree of life which developed in this time remain used in Islamic art. In other arenas of discourse such as the lion hunt, these Persian Empires are important merely to show continuity, as well as slight variance.

Chapter 4: The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages in the Fertile Crescent was a formative period of Islamic hegemony. As Islam spread, evolved, and divided, across the Middle East, lions continued to be used by those in power despite intermittent bans on figural representation. Though in many ways these uses were newer iterations of previous discourses and materials, throughout the Middle Ages there were developments in both dimensions. Painting and calligraphy reached new pinnacles of importance and skill, culminating in the creation of beautiful, richly illustrated manuscripts. Lions appear in all three of those genres. Much of this is religiously motivated, as Ali ibn abi Talib, the Prophet Muhammad's first follower, became known as the lion of god, or *asad allah*.

As the Persians had done before them, the leaders of the various caliphates and empires in this period had to simultaneously declare themselves as distinct from previous rulers while incorporating existing traditions. The distinct aspects were mentioned before, but there are many genres and discourses surrounding the lion that remained constant throughout the transition from the Sasanids to the Caliphs. Lion hunting was still portrayed, and lions were still used in apotropaic ways in art and architecture. To understand the continuities and changes lion imagery underwent in this period, this chapter will first look at the historical context, followed by material aspects, and then discursive motifs.

History

The instability caused by the prophet Muhammad's death in 632 CE led the Hijaz based Arab tribes to begin raiding surrounding tribes and empires. The people across the gulf, who were under the rule of the Sasanid and Byzantine Empires, had accumulated many grievances against their rulers, and were receptive to the opportunity to improve their situation. By the end

of the 600s, Muslim armies had successfully conquered the Arabian Peninsula, Anatolia, and the Fertile Crescent.

In those early years of the Umayyad Caliphate, power was unstable and shifted constantly. Some sects believe Ali should have inherited the caliphate after Muhammad died, but Muhammad's son in law ascended to the caliphate and controversy ensued. Finally, by 692, after more civil war, 'Abd al-Malik came to power, and "administrative measures were taken to tighten the caliph's control over his subjects, to prevent future challenges to his authority."⁴⁸ From Spain to Pakistan 'Abd al-Malik and his successors imposed a consciously Arab and Islamic identity through decentralized imperial institutions, language, and religion.

The Umayyad hold over the caliphate was tenuous, and in 750 a Shiite revolt from the east challenged their power, and the Abbasid caliphate took over. At this point, the seat of power shifted from Damascus to Baghdad. Naturally, there were some challenges to administering such a large empire. The farthest provinces, in places like Morocco, Afghanistan, Spain, and more splintered off, led by other families who generally cooperated with the Abbasids. Notable break-offs include the Ghaznavids in India and the Fatimids in Egypt. In the 800s political power changed hands often, while the Abbasids retained the figural title of Caliph. Despite this instability, culture in the Middle East experienced what some call a 'golden age'. Literacy was spreading, and calligraphy and painting were flourishing under the patronage of wealthy caliphs.

The Buyids briefly ruled over Iraq and Iran, but the next group to dominate the Middle East was the Seljuq Turks, who, like most Turkish groups that ruled in this area, incorporated

⁴⁸ Silverstein, Adam J., 'The Story' in *Islamic History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2010; online edn, Very Short Introductions online, Sept. 2013), <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1093/actrade/9780199545728.003.0001>, accessed 16 Feb. 2017.

Persian culture into their empires. At times, tolerant of Shi'a and at other times at odds with it, the Seljuqs were a formerly shamanistic people from the steppes of Central Asia who had been converted to Sunnism. The Great Seljuq empire ruled over much of what is now Iran, Iraq, and some of Syria and Anatolia.

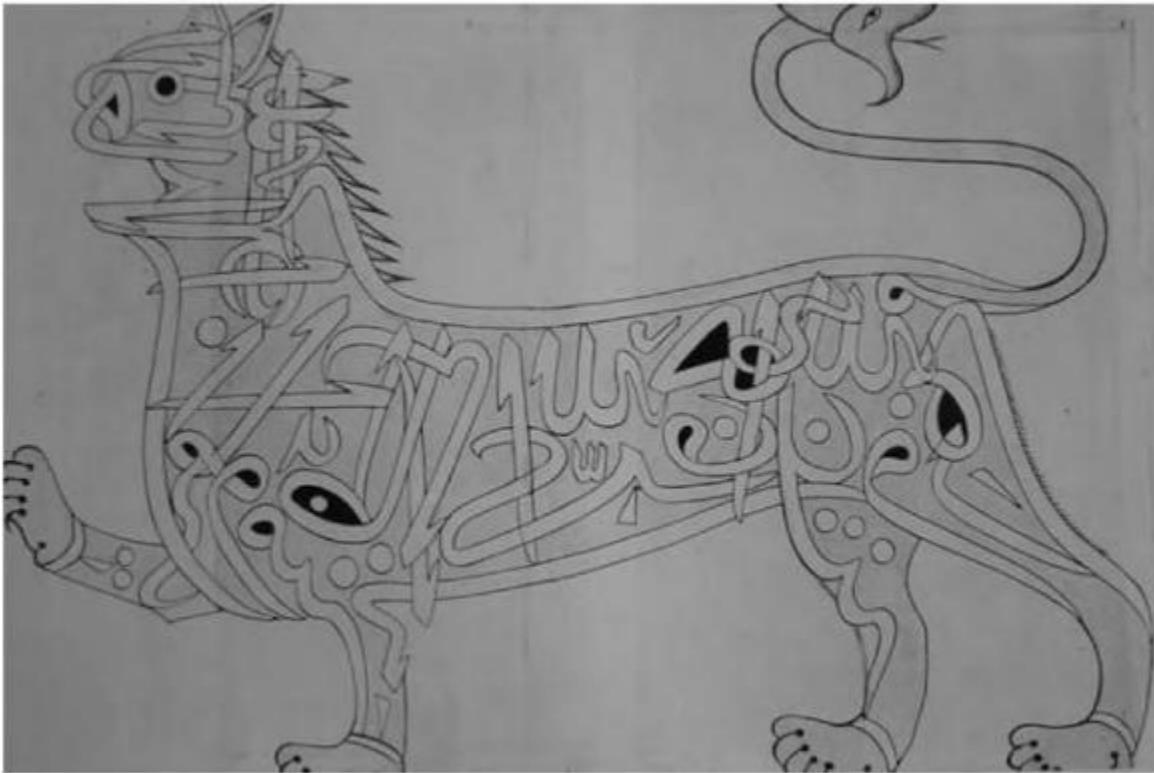


Figure 15: Calligraphic composition in the form of a lion. 1458. Anatolia⁴⁹

Since Ali was central to Shiism, the lion appears in folios of the Qur'an and other artistic contexts—such as calligraphy—throughout this period. These transformations in genre will be discussed extensively in the upcoming section. Specifically, books and painting combined in beautiful ways, and many other genres remained constant from the Sasanids through to times beyond the scope of this chapter. Seals, tapestries, carpets, dishes, and sculptures all featured lions in typical discursive contexts and new ones. After covering the material transformations of

⁴⁹ Khosronejad, Pedram. *The Art And Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography And Religious Devotion In Shi'i Islam*. 2012. Figure 41.

the Middle Ages, this chapter will conclude with the consistent and changing discourses surrounding the lion in this period.

Materials/Genres

Under the patronage of many caliphs, *waqfs* or endowments supporting schools and education blossomed, which led to an increase in literacy across the Middle East. In turn, this increase in literacy led to a great expansion of literary arts. From poetry, to short fables, to scientific and historical documents, more was being written down at this point than probably any point prior. Naturally, the lion is present in nearly all of these genres. It appears as a subject in scientific books like *Kitab Na't al-Hayawan* where the lion is both described and visually and in terms of its usefulness⁵⁰.

An anthropomorphized lion is a key character in Arabic folios of a set of stories called *Kalila wa Dimna*, which originated as a set of fables in India, and were then translated into Pahlavi and subsequently into Syriac and then Arabic. The translator of these fables claims them as political advice, but they were most likely for simple enjoyment and moral lessons. Several tales from this set include lions in them, for example, “The Lion and the Ox,” which contains within it ‘The story of the lion and the hare,’ and several others, since the use of a story within a story was quite common. Naturally, the lion represents a king, and the lion and the ox end up fighting. Eventually the lion kills the ox.

⁵⁰ Contadini, A. (2012). *A world of beasts: a thirteenth-century illustrated Arabic book on animals (the Kitāb Na't al-Hayawān) in the Ibn Bakhṭīshū' tradition*. Leiden: Brill.

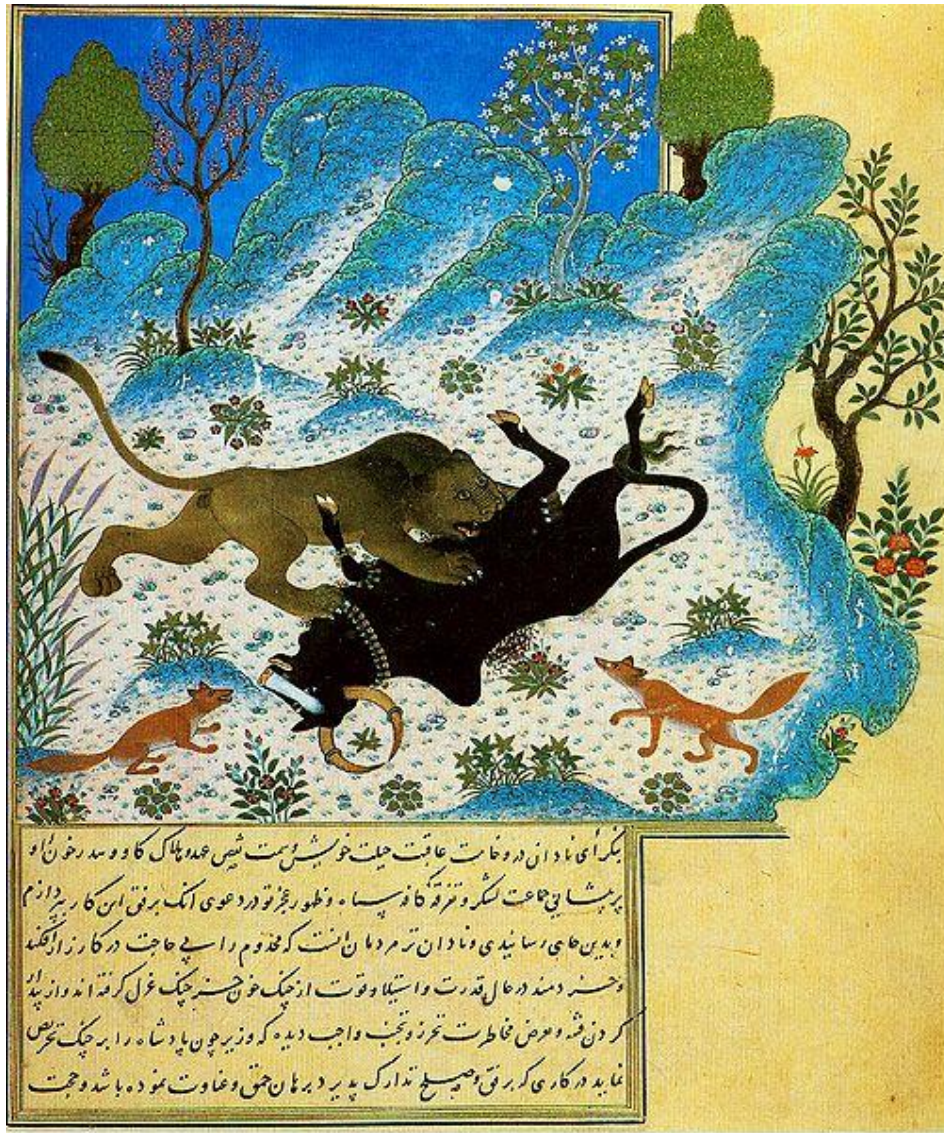


Figure 16: Page from Kalila wa Dimna ca.1430⁵¹

Another example of literature, taken directly from the Sasanid culture, is the Shahnameh, the story of how Bahram V came into his position. This too is a collection of stories that feature the lion hunt and lions in general very heavily. The many manuscripts of this collection of stories usually contain paintings of Bahram V winning his battle against the two lions that protect the throne of the Sasanid Empire, and taking power.

⁵¹ Kalila wa Dimna 001.jpg. From Wikimedia Commons.

Though painting takes on a number of forms in this period, the most immediately relevant type is miniature painting, which populated manuscripts and folios of books with beautiful depictions of whatever action was taking place. The most commonly decorated, and most ornately decorated books were copies of the Holy Qur'an. These folios are populated with intricate paintings, and some even have gold leaf.

In a slight modification to wall reliefs, mosaic art becomes widely utilized in this period. An example well covered by scholars is the apse mosaic at Khirbat al-Mafjar. This mosaic depicts a lion attacking a deer, and a tree of life. This image could either be a typical conquering lion or a representation of something more sensual and erotic, since it was found in a bath house. Another variation on a well-worn category: lustreware, a type of pottery that looks like metalwork, becomes quite popular and easy to produce. Since it mimics metalwork, the iconography is naturally quite similar. In addition to these new material developments, many materials used in the past continue to be used in this period. These include stone, metal, textiles, wood, ceramics, and more.



Figure 17: Apsa Mosaic at Khirbat al-Mafjar⁵²

⁵² Arabischer_Mosaizist_um_735_001.jpg from Wikimedia Commons.

Discourses

As with the genres, many discourses developed earlier in time continue to be used under the various Islamic leaders. There are also a few notable developments that take place, specifically within the sect of Shi'a Islam and its offshoots. Followers of these groups rallied behind Ali ibn-abi-talib, the first follower of Islam, known as *assad-allah* or the lion of god. The implications of this devotion stretch into the present day, but are profound throughout the Islamic Empires.

The motifs with which the reader should already be familiar that continue to be used in this period are mostly variations of the conquering lion. Items with lions and an apotropaic function are also prevalent. As mentioned previously, a mosaic of lion conquering a deer can be found at Khirbat al-Mafjar, as can stone lions on the walls for protection. However, "the most widely represented use of the lion as an image of power is the theme of the lion-bull combat."⁵³ At the mosque at Diyarbakir, the lion and bull is used on towers and gates. There are also monumental sculptures of the lion-bull combat. Again, it could be argued that this usage has astrological aspects, or merely symbolizes regal power. This motif is found on a wide variety of objects, both luxury goods and everyday items.

⁵³ Adey, *A study of the iconography of the lion*. 171



Figure 18: Detail of lion and bull from the mosque at Diyarbakir⁵⁴

In terms of protective function, the lion remains commonly found in items meant to keep something or someone safe. From small wooden talismans to thrones guarded by lions, apotropaic items with lions on them are found on a broad variety of items. Lions protecting important things can also be seen in paintings, like one in an illustrated manuscript portraying a king guarded by two lions lying in front of him. The Qajars in Iran would later appropriate this motif in their nationbuilding. Lion statues are also found guarding tombs. Totemism was still common. Many people at all levels of power were named with one of the many Arabic or Persian or Turkish names for lion (*assad/haydar*, *shir*, *arслан* respectively). Lions are closely linked to courage, and many powerful people are likened to lions. For example, in the *Shahnameh*, heroes, soldiers, and more are described as ‘lion brave,’ ‘lion strong,’ ‘bold as angry lions,’ and ‘Lions of the Shah.’⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Great Mosque. ARTStor: 1988.

<http://library.artstor.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/library/ExternalIV.jsp?objectId=%2BCtfeTkiICgoKjNUej5wRXEoV3Ep&fs=true>

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 175

Lions and other composite animals containing lion parts continue to appear on textiles, often in conjunction with the tree of life. Some of these textiles may be funeral shrouds, others are typical carpets and such. Nonetheless, these items function protectively. Pieces in which the lion is shown as part of the zodiac may also function similarly. Many apotropaic pieces across genres and discourses had short inscriptions wishing for good luck and God's blessing.

Though not every item portraying a lion was related to royalty, many were. The lion is personified as the king of the beasts, like in *Kalila wa Dimna*. In the *Shahnameh*, royal heroes repeatedly prove themselves by fighting lions. This conscious appropriation of common history and culture (i.e. the *Shahnameh* and Bahram Gur's Sasanid story of legitimacy) is a precursor to modern rulers' much more obvious and well researched usages of the past. The king and his lion hunt are still ubiquitous. Kings are shown on foot with clubs winning this fight, bare handed, or with a spear. As shown in the *Shahnameh*, the lion hunt is still a ritual attribute of kingship. The lion hunt appears on textiles, ivories, metalwork and ceramic dishes, and most likely many other materials.

Until this point, this section has reiterated common motifs that re-occur in this period. However, as Islam left its mark across the region, so too did it affect lion discourse. Ali ibn-abi-talib, the first follower of the Prophet Muhammad and Islam, revered imam, a saintlike figure in the eyes of many Shi'a Muslims, became known as the lion of god, *haydar* (which means lion) and *assad-allah* (literally lion of god). Items which had religious significance and portrayed lions often had an inscription to Ali, who is almost always referred to as Prince Lion or the Lion of God. From Anatolia to the Persian Gulf, nomadic Shiite orders like the Bektashi and Bakhtiari place Imam Ali at the center of their worship. Lions manifest in many different and important

contexts within these sects, most notably appearing on graves.⁵⁶ The phenomenon of *assad allah* and its prevalence in art is an extension of powerful leaders being associated with the lion.

The advent of Islam in the Middle East saw some transformations and tweaks in terms of genre and discourse. Perhaps the largest of these evolutions was that of painting, which then expanded into literature, and the two combined to form beautifully illustrated manuscripts and folios of many different types of books. The lion appears in these illustrations in scientific books to the Holy Qur'an. The other main development of this period was the association of Ali ibn-abi-talib with the lion. Ali is called the lion of god, and his followers represent him as a lion across genres. The implications of this name and relationship stretch into the present day.

In the modern era, many discourses remain constant and develop further. In whatever ways discourses from past empires were appropriated by new to this time cannot be known, nor can their goals in doing so. This mechanism shifts as we approach the present day. Technology, knowledge of history, and more all improve. The concept of the nation-state wreaks havoc across the so-called "east." What this means is that beginning with the Ottomans, leaders are consciously using historical evidence, motifs, methods, and more to create a sense of unity and nationality. Conscious appropriation is the main shift in the modern era, and it is followed, unfortunately, with conscious destruction of cultural rallying points.

⁵⁶ Khosronejad, Pedram. *The Art And Material Culture of Iranian Shi'ism: Iconography And Religious Devotion In Shi'i Islam*. 2012. 111.

Chapter 5: The Modern Era

This chapter deals with the Early Modern and Modern Eras (1500-2017), which is characterized by conscious use of lion imagery within the appropriation of history towards national sentiments. As we approach the present day, Islam is still the dominant religion in the Middle East, and the cultures and traditions of this area remain heavily influenced by the formative Islamic period discussed in the previous chapter. After the fall of the Seljuq Empire in 1194, the area is ruled by assorted Mongol and Turkic tribes until two new empires came to prevail in the 1500s. The Safavid Empire ruled over what is now Iran, and some of its surrounding areas until the 1700s. The Ottoman Empire controlled the rest and eventually much of the Middle East until World War I.

The late 19th century brought new concepts like nationalism and statehood to revolutionary thinkers now more interconnected to the rest of the world than ever before. The Middle East was no exception, especially when faced with the new orientalist imperialist powers that acquired the pieces of the fallen Ottoman Empire in 1918. Even before the fall of the so-called “sick man of Europe” the great western European powers had divided up the different vilayets of the Ottoman Empire in the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement. At this point, what was once a braided rope or tapestry of a story frays into individual threads of the histories of each state. Finally, after World War II, these territories gained some semblance of independence. Some were monarchies, others experimented with democracy; experiments which it is today evident failed almost completely.

Since all the imperial systems at play come crashing down at various points in this period, the prior qualifier for investigation—extent of empire—is no longer valid. This chapter

will go over instances of usage of the lion, while covering history in more detail as appropriate. With the spread of nationalist ideologies, the lion and the sun become an important symbol in several Persia-based kingdoms/empires, including the Safavid, and under the Qajars. In Iraq, under British Occupation and under Saddam Hussein, the lion plays an important role among many historical symbols and practices that Hussein revives. Lions had a variety of roles in Ottoman art, and they continued to appear in art and public spectacle. In Syria, the ruling family has been named Al-Assad (lion) since the mid-20th century. In perhaps the most jarring example of lion usage, the terrorist group ISIS has destroyed many priceless artefacts, including the Lion of Al-Lat. *Asad Allah* remains relevant among Sunnis to this day, where a man dressed as a lion cries over martyrs in an *Ashura* ritual commemorating the Battle of Qom.

Occupation by European powers greatly increased interest in and study of the Middle East, which then contributed to leaders' conscious choice to use this shared history to unite their populations. Due to the proximity in time to the present day, historical records of most of the 20th century are incredibly detailed, and so is this chapter. (perhaps unnecessarily) The major pattern of this period is this conscious use of historical symbols for nation-building, which is undergoing a subversion as terrorism warps

Anatolia

Nationbuilding is a central concept in this chapter, given the importance of national movements worldwide at the turn of the 20th century, and in the Middle East especially. Distinct from state-building, which is when a third party, external actor comes in to develop state institutions in the wake of destruction, nationbuilding refers to conscious use of shared characteristics, whether historical ancestry, culture, language, etc. to facilitate the creation of an imagined community-the nation-state. The Ottomans started such a movement, Turkification,

when faced with the Eastern European nationalist movements eating away at their borders. From its earliest appearance, the ugly side of nationbuilding becomes clear when the Turks, in a quest for supposed national purity and “Turkishness” perpetuate the Armenian Genocide. Later attempts to create imagined communities in places like Iraq, where loyalties to tribe, religion, and family, trump those to the many times failed state, more lives were lost in sectarian civil wars in Iraq, Lebanon, and more.

After the decline of the Seljuk Turks, many smaller Turkish states emerged, but by the mid-15th century, the Ottoman Turks had absorbed all the other states. Turkish expansion peaked in the 16th century, when the empire’s boundaries broadened to include North Africa and Eastern Europe. A series of treaties limited the Ottomans’ economic freedom, while wars at its outer borders led to territory loss. Faced with increasing rebellion and nationalist tendencies in Eastern Europe, the administration attempted reforms, including the creation of a parliament, but these were short lived. In the early 20th century, the Ottomans faced more territory loss, internal revolution at the hands of the Young Turks, and following their losses in WWI, the complete destruction of the empire, leaving only Anatolia-what is today Turkey.

Like the Turks who preceded them, the Ottomans incorporated lions into many aspects of their culture. During the Ottoman Empire, there are extensive records internally and from visitors of the Sultans’ menageries, mainly found in capital cities like Istanbul and Cairo. These *arslanhane* (literally-lion house) had many different exotic animals and other curiosities, which visitors could see for a small fee⁵⁷. The provenance of these animals is unclear, but some may have arrived as diplomatic gifts from surrounding empires. These lions were used in parades,

⁵⁷ In one case these “lions” were in fact fakes, merely a stuffed pelt.

most likely to evoke fear. The use of an actual lion is not exceptional, it may have happened in the lion hunt ritual as early as 1500 BCE. Nonetheless, the use of the lion to incite fear and emphasize subjugation relies upon its power as an apex predator. The Sultans also had lion flags that caught wind and inflated.

Ottoman Sultans too, were invested in painting during this time. The genre of Ottoman miniature painting emerges in the early days of the Empire, and is funded by Sultans for four centuries. Artists working at the behest of Sultans beginning with Mehmet II produced standalone pieces and miniatures that were featured in books and manuscripts. These artists were heavily influenced by (and in some cases, brought from) Safavid Persian and Timurid courts. Lions appeared in art of all three, often in illustrations of works of literature like the *Shahnameh*.⁵⁸



Figure 19: Khusrau fights a lion-from the *Khamsa of Nizami*⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Fırat, Özden, Begüm. *International Library of Visual Culture : Encounters with the Ottoman Miniature : Contemporary Readings of an Imperial Art (1)*. London, GB: I.B.Tauris, 2015.

⁵⁹ Khusrau Subduing a Lion. From The Minneapolis Institute of Art: <https://collections.artsimia.org/art/1198>. Accessed April 25, 2017.

Persia/Iran

One of the main adversaries and eventual allies of the Ottoman Empire was the Shi'a Safavid Empire, which developed in Persia in the face of Sunni exclusivism in the Ottoman Empire. When the Ottoman Empire banned Shi'a Islam in 1501, the Safavids, a Sufi order with allegiance to Ali, declared independence and banned all religions other than Shi'ism. The Safavids created great cultural centers in eastern Persia, including and especially their capital in Isfahan. The importance of Ali in this empire means that lions are prevalent in their art and culture, and this is evident from the rule of the very first Shah—Ismail I.

Shah Ismail I and his court decided to force their mostly Sunni subjects to Shi'ism. Sunni ulama or religious authorities were either killed or left. Then, the Shah brought in Shi'a scholars to form a new religious elite. Another aspect of this nationbuilding was cultural enrichment through funding the creation of new shrines and religious schools⁶⁰. One part of this was Shah Ismail's efforts to add the Ali, the lion of god, to court paintings of the mi'raj (the Prophet Muhammad's journey to heaven). The characteristics of this addition to the iconography are important, since under Shah Ismail the Lion of Ali is seen giving a ring seal to Muhammad.

⁶⁰ BBC. "BBC - Religions - Islam: Safavid Empire (1501-1722)."



Figure 20: The Lion of Ali in the Mi'raj⁶¹

Under the Safavids, evidence suggests that there was a centralized artists' workshop which produced a distinct iconography that was then applied to carpets, textiles, manuscripts, and book bindings. Lions appear on all of these things. The flag of the Safavid empire also contains a lion and a sun, a symbol of zodiacal origins (sun in the house of Leo) and used in this area since ancient times. The Qajars and Pahlavis continue to use this symbol until the mid-20th century. Though the Safavid empire began as a Shi'a empire and its leaders wished to be connected first to the 12 imams, the other great Shah of this empire, Shah Abbas I, incorporated

⁶¹ Meraj ii from: http://www.iranicaonline.org/uploads/files/Meraj_ii/meraj_ii_fig_3.jpg

many Persian traditions into society. Persian language was used by the administration, and the Shahnameh was the most important literary and historical text. Shah Abbas encouraged celebration of the Zoroastrian new year, Nowruz.⁶²

The Safavids begin to use history and the lion in their attempts to bring their subjects together. This set the stage for later nationalist sentiments in the area that would become Iran. In the 17th century the Ottomans were focused on territory losses elsewhere (mainly Eastern Europe), and thus the Safavids' military power declined. Subsequent Shahs were corrupt, decadent, and complacent. In the intervening years, different warlords and warring tribes fought over and briefly ruled Iran. Beginning in the late 18th century, the Qajar dynasty, a Turkic speaking tribal confederation, began to conquer Iran bit by bit until they founded their dynasty in 1796. The decentralized empire lasted for more than a century after that.

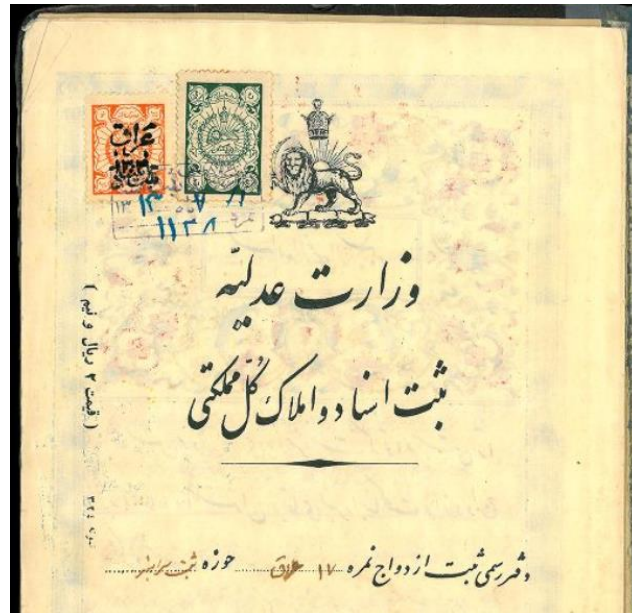


Figure 21: Qajar Seal, on wedding permit, 1934⁶³

⁶² Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*. 92

⁶³ Marriage contract of Khvurshid Khanum Sari and Haj 'Ali Quli Khan Ashtari al-Nakha'i, undated. Ali Sari Collection. Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran Digital Archive. Middle Eastern Division, Widener Library, Harvard Library.

In the wake of colonialism, the lion and the sun remained important in modern Persia. In 1836 Shah Muhammad formally adopted the lion and the sun as the official emblem of the Iranian state. The sun initially acquired more feminine traits, while the lion acquired more masculine traits, until the 20th century, when the sun lost many of its feminine traits. At the turn of the 20th century, a constitutional revolution shook Iran after increased European meddling due to oil (among other factors). In 1921, Reza Shah came to power in a coup, and shortly thereafter established the Pahlavi dynasty, which would last until the Islamic Revolution of 1979 that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power. After this revolution, the symbol of the lion and the sun was abandoned.⁶⁴

Iraq

The territory that is now the state of Iraq was once hotly contested and switched hands between the Ottomans and Safavids many times until it, like many other previously Ottoman territories, fell into British control in the early years of the 20th century. When the British were designing postage stamps for Mandatory Iraq they stuck to their standard “colonial picturesque” style, while also reflecting their desire to construct an identity for this artificially constructed area. These early stamps included palm trees, camels, and ancient reliefs from Assyria and Babylon.

In 1932, Iraq gains independence, and four decades of unrest followed. The British installed a Sunni monarchy, oblivious to the many other religious groups present in this area. At the end of the 1950s, a coup inspired by the Egyptian Free Officers coup created a short-lived republic. During this republic, Iraq is launched essentially into a civil war between government

⁶⁴ Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. 2005. 63-96

forces and Kurdish forces. The Baathist party took over shortly before this war ended, and that opened the door for Saddam Hussein to force the president's resignation in 1979 and take a stranglehold over Iraq.

Under Saddam Hussein, the lion, and, more broadly, ancient history, took center stage as a tool for unification and/or nationalism. Though his stamps were generally an iconographic departure from the 'colonial picturesque,' the Lion of Babylon makes an appearance in 1941, and lions played a huge role in other parts of Iraqi society⁶⁵. For example, *Ashbal Saddam* (Saddam's lion cubs) was a military youth group created by Hussein in 1998, analogous to Hitler Youth, where boys 12-17 trained for combat⁶⁶. The lion is representative of courage and masculine, violent power. Hussein also developed a new tank, which he named *assad babel*, the Lion of Babylon.



Figure 22: Iraqi stamps featuring a lion⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Reid, Donald Malcolm. "The Postage Stamp: A Window on Saddam Hussein's Iraq." *Middle East Journal* 47, no. 1 (1993): 77-89.

⁶⁶ Jacinto, Leela. "Iraqi Kids Learn to Fight for Saddam." ABC News. ABC News Network, 22 Jan. 2003.

⁶⁷ From catstamps.org

Lions seemed to be more the obsession of Hussein's craziest son, Udai (Uday, Odai) Hussein. Udai was responsible for brutal public beheadings, and private executions at his whim. He was notoriously violent and unhinged, and would take automatic weapons to parties. Udai owned four lions, and according to his head executioners, he would feed people to these lions. Udai also oversaw the Iraqi National Football Team with his signature brutal hand, purportedly torturing members of the team called *Asood al-rafideen*—the Lions of Mesopotamia. Lions remain important in present day Iraq and Iran, especially with Shi'ites, who incorporated the Lion of Ali into their Ashura ritual, where a man dressed as a lion representing Ali mourns the victims of the battle of Qom.

Terrorism



The screenshot shows the top portion of a Guardian news article. The header is dark blue with the Guardian logo in white. Navigation links include 'sign in', 'become a supporter', 'subscribe', and 'search'. Below the header is a horizontal menu with categories like 'US', 'politics', 'world', 'opinion', 'sports', 'soccer', 'tech', 'arts', 'lifestyle', 'fashion', 'business', 'travel', and 'environment'. A secondary menu lists geographical regions: 'home', 'world', 'middle east', 'africa', 'australia', 'cities', 'development', 'UK', 'europe', 'americas', and 'asia'. The main article title is 'Islamic State' followed by 'Isis militants destroy 2,000-year-old statue of lion at Palmyra'. A sub-headline reads: 'Syrian antiquities director says destruction of Lion of Al-lāt statue dating from 1st century BC at Palmyra museum is serious crime against world heritage site'.

This discussion of the modern period of Middle East history is incomplete without mention of the various terrorist groups that have affected the region, with a focus on those that incorporate lions into their actions. The first, and most presently relevant is the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant. Whether one prefers to call them ISIS, ISIL, or DAESH, they have worked hard to destroy priceless historical artifacts, including the Lion of Al-Lat, a lion statue from the first millennium BCE that was outside a museum in Palmyra. In destroying a symbol that has so long been associated with power, ISIS is claiming to be more powerful, exempt from the

colonialist construct of nationalism. This move functions similarly to the lion hunt motif—kings were claiming to be more powerful than this ultimate natural predator.

Other terrorist groups use the lion in their recruitment materials. Lions imply bravery, heroism, and honor. They can also imply future martyrdom. The lion's association with Ali is a part of this. Literal lions can be used in these digital images, as well as metaphorical lions, sometimes simultaneously. They are often used about Osama bin Laden, since *osama* is another word for lion in Arabic, but the lion has even been used by Eastern European jihadist groups.⁶⁸



Figure 23: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "the lion of Mesopotamia"⁶³

⁶⁸ Combatting Terrorism Center. "The Islamic Imagery Project: Visual Motifs in Jihadi Internet Propaganda." 29-32.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

It is hard to argue when conscious use of previous historical material began. Emperors and Caliphs from the Achaemenid and Umayyad eras most likely chose to both incorporate past practices and add their own individual aspects. The modern era is different not because this conscious use changes, but because its goal does. We are in the age of the nation-state, the age of nationalism, and history, and the lion itself, were used as part of a toolkit by leaders looking to create an imagined national community where there may not have been one before. When earnestly driven by shared history, this can work, but when tainted by imperialism it often fails. In recent years, this appropriation has distorted into destruction of artifacts-supposed national rallying points used by ISIS to remind us that nations and nationalism are arbitrary.

For the time being, this is the end to the story of the transformation of lion usage over time in the Middle East. It is impossible to predict what material innovations or discursive evolutions will come next, but it is possible to look back at five thousand years of history and trace some very broad patterns of development relative to the lion as an index of power. That is the huge mission undertaken by this thesis, and the mission which it has completed, however inconsistently over each period.

Beginning in the Ancient Near East, the important functions, discourses, and motifs become illuminated. Lions are used for good, bad, and protective functions, and found in genres from seals to literature, and wall reliefs. The specific discursive contexts introduced in this period remain relevant until the present day. The trend of leaders, heroes, or gods, compared to or designated as lions begins in this period, and continues to the current *Al-Assad* administration in Syria. Then, Cyrus the Great starts the Achaemenid Empire, and the Persians begin to dominate the Middle East. Discourses like the lion and the bull and lion hunt continued to be used across genres which came to include textiles, carpets, and more.

In the Seventh Century CE, Islam sweeps across the Middle East, and the lion takes on new meaning associated with Ali ibn abi Talib. Literacy becomes far more common than it had ever been before, and the lion is present in all types of written material. Calligraphy and the art of bookmaking flourished during this time, and beautiful folios featuring lions can be found across literary genres. The lion hunt is still ubiquitous across genres that carried over from the pre-Islamic Persian empires, like tapestries, metalwork, etc.

Though the lion was most likely always consciously incorporated into new empires, in the Modern Era its power is harnessed for nationalism and nationbuilding. This phenomenon begins with the Safavids in Iran, where the lion and sun appear on state documents into the 20th century under the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasty. The lion retains its relevance in Iraq, where occupying British forces appropriate ancient Mesopotamian history as a tool to stir nationalism. Saddam Hussein and his son Uday also embrace this shared history, and especially lions, which are featured in many official names for teams, tanks, and more. Shi'a groups still venerate Ali ibn abi Talib in their rituals, representing him as a lion mourning victims in a common Ashura ritual. Terror groups such as ISIS use lions for recruitment, and destroy them in attempts to erase common ground and shared traits.

By analyzing historical context, discourse (motifs and context) and genre (materials), it is evident that the lion's use changed as society, governance, and art developed and transformed. The longevity of its use as an index of power has far reaching implications for art history. Predatory power has been used across the globe to indicate power, and the use of the lion in the Middle East is no exception. For thousands of years, through comparison, combat, and public spectacle, powerful groups in the Middle East tapped into the power of the lion for their own advancement.

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