

Original Research Article

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بررسی مصداق‌های تجسمی برهمکنش‌های سیاسی و نظامی ساسانیان با رومیان

## **Examining Visual Representations of Political and Military Interactions between the Sassanids and the Romans**

### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** The political/military confrontation between the Sassanids and the Romans, in late ancient times, led to the formation of a kind of propaganda and deterrent art, which can be called «political art». This art served the ruling class of the war or peace parties, creating visual representations in the form of reliefs, coins, triumphal arches, and paintings. Most of these visual works of the Sassanid era and also the Roman Empire were created with the motivation of confrontation with the neighboring country, to show the weakness or promote such a situation. In this article, which was written to identify the importance of the image and the effect of image components on the audience of this type of visual art in the Sassanid period, the following question is addressed: «What are the visual representations of political/military interactions between Sassanids and Romans, the process of formation, and use of these representations»?

**Research Method:** This research is qualitative, and in terms of method, it includes citation studies and field surveys of the authors, which are presented using the method of historical descriptive analysis.

**Findings:** The studied works showed that their function was to increase the bargaining power in the correspondence and negotiations between the Sassanid Empire and the Roman Empire for propaganda and military deterrence. Using the image as one of the most basic activities during the Cold War between the Sassanids and the Romans has been considered, which sought to persuade the local audience along with legitimizing the Sassanids and justifying the costs of the battle for the Romans.

**Conclusion:** The use of visual representations to show off the power of the insider and the humiliation of the defeated enemy has a long history among the Sassanids and Romans, and its manifestations have been clearly seen in the research works.

### **Keywords**

Political Art, Sassanid Empire, Roman Empire, Visual Art Representation

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### **Introduction and Problem Definition**

The Sassanid period, as an era that is also called the late Ancient History, marked a period of ups and downs in the history of Iran and even the Middle East. Undoubtedly, a significant part of the period of this empire's rule was spent in conflict with international issues, including the confrontation with the policies of its Western counterpart, the Roman Empire. Numerous works of what is known today as Sassanid culture and art in the form of visual representations are the result of this engaging but mostly hostile confrontation with the Roman Empire. The dominant aspect of the political/military activities of the two Eastern and Western counterparts is presented as art, with instances such as reliefs, coins, paintings, and medals. This caused the policy of the two governments to be presented as «propaganda» as well as «deterrence» in the form of art, which we like to call «political art». It seems that the rulers of the two governments, to immortalize their victories and the humiliation of the enemy, created or ordered such works. The policy of mass migrations of the battle parties (at least with the Sassanid Empire), included the motivations for the formation and sometimes acceleration of the creation of the aforementioned visual representations to convince the domestic (to justify continuous campaigns and imposing heavy costs) and foreign audiences (accepting territorial sovereignty or officially recognizing it). Such behaviors have been the focus of the mentioned two governments during the rivalry between the Parthian Empire and the Roman Empire and probably, the visual manifestations of the Sassanid period and the corresponding Roman era were the continuation of this attitude towards domestic and foreign politics; however, in the Sassanid period and the parallel period of the Roman rule (with slight connivance to the rule of Augustus, where we see many visual manifestations), this type of attitude became more intense. Historical analysis with the help of visual representations can be considered as a model for today's political/military activities as one necessity for future research. Identifying the importance of the image and the effect of image components on the audience of such works in late Ancient History is the purpose of the present research. The current study seeks to answer these questions: «What are the visual representations of political/military interactions between Sassanids and Romans, the process of formation, and the extent of the use of these representations»?

### **Research Method**

The present research is qualitative and conducted using a mixed method (library studies and surveys). A part of the research data included library studies (1 Roman relief, 2 Roman coins, and 1 Roman medal along with 1 Sassanid wall painting and a piece of Sassanid jewel) and the other part included the authors' field investigations to observe the reliefs (7 Sassanid reliefs) and museum experiences of coins (3 Sassanid coins), presented using the method of historical description analysis.

### **Research Background**

The most important research that has been done in this direction is an article entitled «Deception of the Enemy, Images of the Parthians and the Orient in Rome» by «Schneider» (2013). In the article entitled «Symbol of Continuity? The tradition of the Persian wars in the Roman Empire» «Spawfort» (1994) has focused on the influence of ideology in the battles between the Greeks and the Persians in the battles of the Roman Empire. Such events during the time of the Roman emperors have been considered a continuation of the

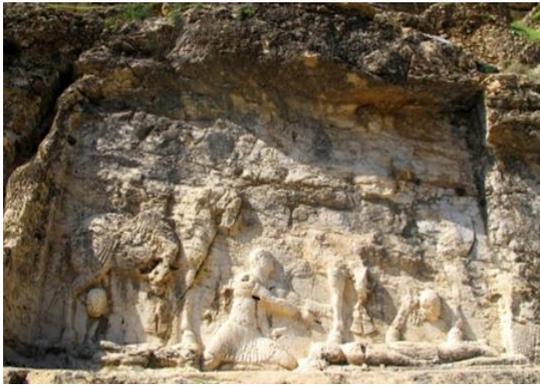
intellectual and political trends of the golden age of Greece. The book entitled «Rome and Iran» written by «Winter and Dignas» (2019) also examined the political and artistic influence of Iran during the Parthian and Sassanid eras with the Roman Empire and Republic. The thoughtful and relatively up-to-date book of «Canepa» (2017) entitled «Two Eyes of the Earth: The Art and Ritual of the Kingdom between Rome and Sassanid Iran» has somehow addressed the relationship between the Sassanids and the Romans. In the present research, while establishing and using the mentioned sources, an effort has been made to comprehensively and based on historical sequence, the works of art, including reliefs, coins, and paintings, which have depicted the political-military relationship between Iran and Rome during the period of Sassanid rule, analyzed. Some studies have studied Sassanid fabrics, and sometimes fabric motifs can be considered in the context of visual representations; among them is an article entitled "Islamic Tiraz or Sassanid Tiraz, Christian Clavos-Tablion" by "Fadaie Tehrani" (2023), which has made the authors hesitant about the chronology of these fabrics. In the current research, while following and using the mentioned sources, an attempt has been made to comprehensively examine and analyze works of art, including reliefs, coins, and paintings, which, in a way, show the political-military relationship between Iran and Rome in the period of the Sassanid rule, based on their chronology.

### **Sassanid and Roman Visual Representations**

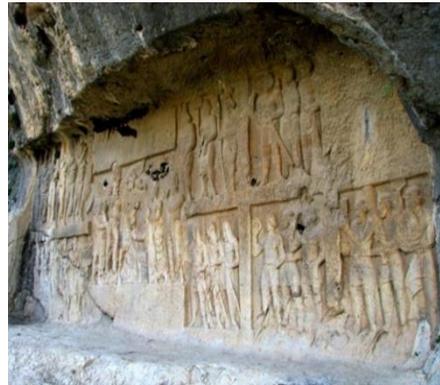
**1. Reliefs (Embossed motifs):** Reliefs are one of the most important visual works of the Sassanids. These motifs have various themes. According to the focal point of this research, the authors have investigated the reliefs that are related to the display of battle and political-military encounters between Iran and Rome (Byzantine). Among the thirty prominent reliefs of the Sassanid era, most of them are located in the current Fars province, and only eight of them depict the theme of the victory of the kings over the enemies, especially the Romans (Schippmann, 2017, 137-138). Shapur I had the most frequent relief in political/military events with the Romans. This king deliberately used Roman-style paintings to record his victories over the Romans. The models of these reliefs were probably paintings and mosaics of Roman palaces (Wiesehofer, 2010, 110).

**1-1. Bishapur relief 1:** This relief is located in Tang-e Chowgan in Bishapur, and both the Sassanid king and Ahura Mazda, on horseback, are seen in it (Fig 1). Two killed enemies can be seen under the feet of the horses, and the Roman emperor is kneeling in front of the Sassanid king as if begging. «Vandenberg» considered the subject of this motif the investiture of Shapur I by Ahura Mazda and the victory over Valerian, and the order of people from left to right is Ahura Mazda, the enemy, Valerian, Shapur I, and the enemy (Vandenberghe, 1969, 56). This work is an innovative and bi-lateral advertisement. In this relief, Shapur has killed two birds with one stone. By showing the ring of power, which means legitimacy from Ahura Mazda, he has reminded the victory of the enemy. The defeat of the Roman emperors also shows Shapur's political/military power. By creating this relief, Shapur could portray his religious and political power (Raygani, Veysi, Saadatmehr, & Raouf, 2022). In this motif, Shapur recalls two issues: one is his investiture by Ahura Mazda, which gives it spiritual legitimacy, and the other shows his victory and success over the Romans, which is a source of pride for him and his family. With this act, Shapur tried to show his great victory over the Roman Empire to his people and the captured Romans (or ambassadors). According to the Cube of Zoroaster inscription, Philip the Arab was

forced to pay tribute for the release of the Roman captives, and he kneeled in front of Shapur, his begging hands and face undermined the grandeur of the Romans and increased the glory of the Sassanid Empire (Vendaie, 2019, 270).



**Fig 1.** Bishapur relief 1, «The investiture of Shapur I and the defeat of the Roman emperors». Source: Authors.



**Fig 2.** Bishapur relief 2, «Shapur I's victory over the Roman emperors». Source: Authors.

**2-1. Bishapur relief 2:** A decisive battle occurred in Edessa, in which both the Roman officials and Valerian, the Roman Caesar, were captured by Shapur; he created the above-mentioned relief to depict his victory. This relief is located in Tang-e Chowgan and three scenes are depicted in it (Fig 2). In the center of the relief, Shapur is seen riding a horse and holding the hand of a Roman emperor with his right hand, another Roman is falling under his horse's feet, and the third Roman is kneeling in front of the king's horse in a begging manner. Above the king's head, the goddess of victory is flying and presenting the ring of power to Shapur (Mohammadifar & Amini, 2015, 209). Various opinions have been expressed about the attribution of Roman motifs in the mentioned relief, including Reiner, who considers its theme to be Shapur I's victory over Valerian (Reiner, 2006). Some consider the subject of this motif to be the battle between Shapur I and Uranius Antonius in 253 A.D. and the order of this motif is from left to right, Uranius Antonius, Shapur I, Gordianus III or Uranius Antonius or the symbol of the Roman enemy, Uranius Antonius (Overlaet, 2009). «MacDermot» also considers this arrangement from left to right to be Valerian, Shapur I, Gordianus III, and Philip the Arab (Macdermot, 1954). From the present research perspective, what is important concerning the visual representation of the political/military actions between Iran and Rome is the presence of several Roman emperors in the scene. In this relief, Shapur cleverly depicted all the heavenly and earthly factors that caused her victory over his enemies. In this motif, something that is very important in terms of political and religious propaganda and is understandable for the Romans is the divine presence of the Goddess, the Roman woman with ribbons that she brings to Shapur and is considered as propaganda. In this work, Shapur intends to warn the Romans that their gods have turned away from them and are supporting us (Shapur and Iranians) (Raygani et al., 2022).

**3-1. Bishapur relief 3:** This motif is also located in Tang-e Chowgan. In this relief, the scene of Shapur's victory over the Romans is fully depicted (Fig 3). On the right side,

Iranians are depicted in four rows, and on the left side, the defeated enemies are depicted in four rows. In the middle of the painting, Shapur I is depicted riding a horse, holding the

hand of a Roman, two other Romans are falling under his horse's feet, and another is kneeling in front of him. At the top of this image, a winged angel is seen holding the ring of power. An Iranian is standing in front of Shapur and presenting the ring of power to him. The image of Shapur who is riding a horse is in the middle of the motif, and the angel of victory gives him a representation of the Divine Glory (Farr-e Izadi) that has appeared in the form of a ribbon (Mousavijahi & Sarfaraz, 2017, 102). «Ghirshman» and «Hinz» considered the theme of this relief to be Shapur I's victory over the Romans (Hinz, 2006, 239), but «Overlaet» considers its subject to be Shapur's victory over Uranius Antonius in 254 A.D. (Overlaet, 2009). «MacDermot» considers its order from left to right, Valerian, Shapur I, Gordianus III, and Philip the Arab (Macdermot, 1954). This work, like Bishapur's relief, has two propaganda aspects, and Shapur has used it for political propaganda from a religious perspective. On the one hand, the Roman goddess brought the ring of power to Shapur, and with this image, she considered the Roman emperors to be incompetent. On the other hand, the person who presents the ring of power to Shapur, in fact, declares her allegiance and considers the power of the world worthy of the Sassanid king. The presence of Roman gods in the two Sassanid Shapur reliefs shows the arrival of Roman art in Iran, and this shows Shapur's political-religious propaganda to the Roman cultural society besides Iran (Raygani et al., 2022).



**Fig 3.** Bishapur relief 3, «Shapur I's victory over the Roman emperors». Source: Authors.



**Fig 4.** Darabgerd relief, «The victory of Shapur I over Gordianus III». Source: Authors.

**4-1. Darabgerd relief 1:** This relief is located ten kilometers from the south of Darab (Fig 4). In this relief, the Sassanid king is seen riding a horse. Iranians are carved behind him and Romans are in front of him. Three Roman rulers can be recognized in this motif. One was killed under the foot of the king's horse (Gordianus III), the other was begging (Philip the Arab), and the third one (Valerian) whom the Sassanid king placed his left hand on his head (Mohammadifar & Amini, 2015, 214). The act of laying hands on the head here has been discussed by numerous researchers. «Hinz» believes that it means friendship, but «Gobel» considers it as enmity and captivity. Also, in Roman examples, the evidence shows that the act of laying hands on the head is also considered as capturing and grabbing a person's hair (Von Gall, 1999, 164). Of course, it should be known that the king did not

grab the enemy's wrist but put his palm on the enemy's head and the enemy raised his hand as a sign of surrender. The important thing is that Shapur was the king from whom Philip the Arab requested peace and was ready to commit with the Sassanids, a commitment that Shapur never tired of boasting about (Winter & Dignas, 2019, 103). «Vandenberghe» calls its subject Shapur I's victory over Valerian (Vandenberghe, 1969, 48). «Herrmann» also considers its subject to be the victory of Ardashir I over the Romans in the last decade of Ardashir I's reign (Herrmann, 1979). In this motif, Shapur claims that the Romans gathered in Syria with sixty thousand troops. There is a theory stating that the long-ringed object in Shapur's hand is a tablet, which is the same contract imposed on Philip the Arab, and this is a contract concluded with two Roman Caesars; one is Philip the Arab, who has signed a contract with him and stretched out his hands on the relief. He went to Shapur with a request, and the other Caesars, whose names we do not know, are the ones who violated this contract (Von Gall, 1999, 166-167). In this relief, a person receives a position from Shapur, who is not Iranian according to his clothes. «Ghirshman» narrates that the person is «Mardias» who helped Shapur in the first battle between Shapur and Gordianus and caused his victory. Ghirshman believes that in this motif, he will give him the reign of the Antakya City (Ghirshman, 2000, 152-171). Shapur knew that an Iranian couldn't rule a city that had been Roman for a long time, so he handed it over to Mardias to repay Mardias's help and legitimize his kingdom in the hands of local men by bringing him to power in Antakya. He used Mardias as a military and political advisor.

**5-1. The relief of Naqsh-e Rostam 6:** The scene of Shapur I's victory over Valerian in this relief is very important both in terms of the sculptural style and from the point of view of political history (Fig 5). In the center of this work, the king is carved with great awe and according to the oriental art background, its size is bigger than the rest of the paintings. The king's body is carved in front view, and his head and legs are carved in side view. With his left hand, the king has a sword strapped to his belt, and with his right hand, he is holding the wrist of a Roman character standing in front of the king and to his right. In this relief, Valerian is not captured by Shapur, but kneels in front of him and requests forgiveness. Thus, we can conclude that from a historical point of view, this is Shapur's second victory against the Romans that happened in the Barbales area. According to this motif, the mentioned battle was stopped in 256 A.D. and peace was established between the parties (Mousavihaji & Sarfaraz, 2017, 95). All researchers who have worked on this motif agree that its subject is Shapur I's victory over the Romans. «Vandenberg» considers its order from left to right, Valerian, Cyriades, and Shapur I (Vandenberg, 1969, 26). «Canepa» also insists on this procedure regarding its arrangement, Philip the Arab, Valerian, and Shapur I (Canepa, 2017). «Erdeman» has written about these motifs that the reliefs of Naqsh-e Rostam, Bishapur, and Darabgerd, which reflect the victory over the Romans, were carved when Shapur had little time to win. Therefore, «the political event has become old and only its claim is left. This claim was not simply engraved on the heart of the mountain, but to ward off possible dangers» (Erdeman, 1943); that is, in addition to the fact that the above-mentioned motifs have immortalized the proud scene of a historical event, it also had a propaganda and a «deterrence» aspect.



**Fig 5.** The relief of Naqsh-e Rostam 6, «Surrender of the Roman emperors to Shapur I». Source: Authors.



**Fig 6.** The relief of Khan Takhti of Salmas and the presence of Armenian men. Source: Authors.

**6-1. Salmas (Khan Takhti) relief:** This relief is located 3 kilometers from Salmas, near the village of Khan Takhti (Fig 6). In this motif, both Ardashir I and Shapur I are riding on a horse and each of them presents the ring of power to the person who is standing. "Ghirshman" considers its subject to be the appointment of power to a person by Ardashir I and his son Shapur in 238 A.D. (Ghirshman, 2000, 140-141) and some consider it the victory of Ardashir I over Artavaz (Javadi & Avar Zamani, 2009, 64). «Hinz» also believes that the Armenian state leaders who receive positions from Shapur and Ardashir are depicted in this scene, and concerning its arrangement, from left to right, the Armenian state leader, Ardashir I, the Armenian state leader, Shapur I (Hinz, 1965). «Luschey» believes that the subject of this motif shows Ardashir I and Shapur I, who grant positions to two Armenian state leaders in 238 A.D., and the order is from left to right: Armenian state leader, Ardashir I, Armenian state leader, Shapur I (Luschey, 1987, 379). If we accept the dominant opinion of the researchers about the presence of Armenian men in this motif, the presence of Roman reign is implied here. We know well that the Sassanid rule was a legacy of the Parthian battles with the Romans over Armenia. This issue also led to the formation of various policies towards this land, from both sides, during over four hundred years of Sassanid rule. This relief can be the beginning of a kind of sense of possession of the Sassanids over Armenia from two aspects; first, it gives official status to a party ruler in Armenia. Second, it considers Armenia as its absolute property, which, while conducting a political act, has also tried to display it on the stone.

**7-1. The relief of Taq-e Bostan 1:** This relief is located in Taq-e Bostan region, Kermanshah (Fig 7), in which, the Sassanid king is supposedly receiving the crown from Ahuramazda. Under the feet of the king and possibly Ahura Mazda, there is a lying enemy (Mohammadifar & Amini, 2015, 236). «Girshman» states that the subject of this motif is the coronation of Ardashir II and its order from left to right is Izad Mehr, Ardashir II, Ahura Mazda, and the Roman enemy (Ghirshman, 1991, 190-91). «Azarnoush» considers the subject to be the investiture of Ardashir II, son of Shapur II of Ahura Mazda, and its arrangement from right to left is the Mehr, Ardashir son of Shapur II, Ahura Mazda, and finally Julian (Azarnoush, 1986). «Azarpey» states that the subject of this relief is Shapur II's investiture by Ahuramazda and his victory over Julian II, and the arrangement is from right to left of the Mehr, Shapur II, Ahuramazda, Julian (Azarpey, 1982). «Lukonin» believes that the subject of this motif is Ardashir II's investiture by Ahura Mazda. The victory of Ardashir II over the last king of Kushan in 380-382 A.D. and the order of the painting from right to left is Izad Mehr, Ardashir II, Ahura Mazda, and the king of Kushan

(Lukonin, 1993, 322-323). «Nicholson» stated this order from right to left: Izad Mehr, Shapur II, Ahura Mazda, Julian II (Nicholson, 1983). «Erdeman» considers the enemy who fell under the feet of Ardashir to be Julian the apostate (Erdeman, 1969, 138). In this relief, which was carved between 379 and 383 A.D., like his ancestors Ardashir and Shapur I, Ardashir II wanted to immortalize the body of Julian, which he won in the battle of 363 A.D., to show his power on this relief (Vendaie, 2019, 405). Erdeman's opinion regarding the relief of Shapur I in Naqsh-e Rostam can also be accepted about Ardashir's motif because it seems that this relief was created years after the possible battle took place, and it only had a propaganda and possibly a «deterrence» aspect.



**Fig 7.** The relief of Taq-e Bostan 1 and the presence of a defeated Roman.

Source: Authors.



**Fig 8.** The signet in the National Library of Paris, «Battle of Shapur and Valerian». Source: Winter & Dignas, 2019, 65.

**2. The signet in the National Library of Paris:** Besides the propagandistic representations of political-military interaction scenes between the Sassanid and the Roman Empire on rocks by the Sassanids, this has sometimes had a strong presence on movable samples, including signets (probably seals) and coins. An example of these cases can be seen on a signet that is kept today in the National Library of Paris. On this signet, the image of captured Valerian is shown (Fig 8). The face-to-face battle shows the victory of the Sassanid emperor. Valerian can be recognized by the sword he raised on the enemy, while his opponent, Shapur, did not raise a sword and instead held the Roman Caesar's left hand. Grabbing the wrist is a sign of captivity. Some researchers believe that this motif is actually an attempt to flatter Shapur, who instead of fighting with battle equipment, defeated the enemy with trickery (Winter & Dignas, 2019, 66). If this is really the case, the place of the manufacturer or at least the customer should be changed! Others believe that although the art of engraving belongs to the Romans, this signet is not in the composition as a battle of two horsemen, but in all its forms, it shows the art of the Sassanids. Horses with a big but short body and a wide neck represent Sassanid horses. The engraving of a Roman person on the left side of the signet has problems, while the Sassanid cups and reliefs show the victorious king on the right side. In Rome, many state signets differed from other Roman art in that the motif of a more important person was shown on the right side of the images. According to the condition of the images on this signet, the Sassanid rider is victorious in the battle; therefore, this Roman work was commissioned by Sassanid (Von Gall, 1999, 91-93). The authors of the present study believe that the method of confrontation in Sassanid royal iconography, with the claims of global supremacy of the Romans and their visual communication, is an issue that remains unresolved. Therefore, what is depicted in this

signet is still the confrontation between the Sassanids and the Romans, from the perspective of a Roman artist. In other words, the Sassanid client presented to the Roman artist (perhaps a captive or immigrant) the understanding of the victory of the Sassanid emperor over the Roman emperor as a person in a secondary position, and he carefully monitored all the steps. However, this signet shows the existence of all-round propaganda on works of art, both movable and immovable. As the Sassanid sought to immortalize their victories, the Romans also did not neglect this importance and developed the legacy of their ancestors against the Parthian Empire and immortalized some of their victories as triumphal arches, coins, and medals. In the following, representations of such cases have been discussed.

**3. Galerius Triumphal Arch:** Structures that have arched corridors and were built to commemorate victories or for individual memorials are referred to as Triumphal Arches. The founders of these buildings pursued two main goals: First, they considered the representation of local propaganda and tried to justify the battles and the resulting expenses for the Roman citizens. Second, it had propaganda against the similar activity of the Eastern counterpart for prisoners in the present and future, and on the other hand, it was considered as a stimulus for the army for future battles. In the following, one of the most important of these triumphal arches, Galerius triumphal arch, is discussed. Here, the relief of the lower part of Galerius' triumphal arch, which refers to the Sassanid and Roman battle, is presented (Fig 9). At the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., in the battles between Iran and Rome, the Sassanids used elephants (Daryaie, 2021, 83-86). Although Roman texts have provided a lot of information in this area, one most significant visual evidence is the Galerius Triumphal Arch. According to this visual evidence, which commemorates the battle between Galerius and Narseh, and ironically the Sassanids suffered a heavy defeat, the presence of elephants is noticeable in two parts of this building. The first part is depicted in the battle and elsewhere as part of the gifts that the Sassanids presented to the emperor (Canepa, 2009, 93-94). The victories of the Romans, the entry of captives, salutations, the end of the war, negotiations for peace, tributes, public scenes of victory, and final wars, are among the most important concepts inscribed in this triumphal arch, most of which have a propaganda representation. In this relief, the infantrymen are fighting and in the middle of the decorative margin, the Roman Caesar and the Iranian king are fighting face-to-face on horseback (Winter & Dignas, 2019, 69). The important events shown in this work are the defeat of the Sassanid army under the command of Narseh in Armenia and the victory of Galerius. At the end of this relief, the family of Narseh and Sassanid grandees are shown, who are accompanied by elephants and camels. In another scene, the image of the defeat of the Sassanids can be seen in the mountains of Armenia, and Iranian or Armenian soldiers can be seen in different ranks (Nicolle, 2016, 78-79). Like other similar buildings (Kleiner, 1984), this structure and the carved motifs on its main arch have a symbolic purpose for local and foreign propaganda, which was discussed before. If we compare the prominent scenes of Sassanid Shapur I motifs in this research with this scene, it reminds us of the confrontation between the parties in the form of the Cold War during peacetime, which had both a deterrent and propaganda aspect.



**Fig 9.** Details of the reliefs of triumphal arch. «Galerius and the defeat of the Sassanids». Source: <https://evar.com>.



**Fig 10.** Two-Dinar coin of Shapur I with a picture of the captivity of Philip the Arab. Source: [Aram, Lemarqund & Skjervo, 2007](#).

**4. Coins:** Coins were another means of propaganda for the political/military interactions between the Sassanid and Roman Empires. This economic object was one of the most widely used and, at the same time, the most frequent platforms that could allocate space for inserting advertising slogans and images with the largest number of audiences. In the following, these promotional features are discussed first on Sassanid coins and then on Roman coins.

**1-4. Coin of Shapur I:** One coin of Shapur, on which the titles of the Shah of Iran and Aneran are engraved, can be examined in this context (Fig 10). A Two-Dinar coin kept in a private collection and «Aram et al.» confirmed its authenticity ([Aram et al., 2007](#)). On the front of this coin, the half-body of Shapur I can be seen, and on the back, instead of the traditional image of the hearth in Sassanid coins, Shapur I is riding a horse and Philip the Arab, the Roman emperor, is approaching him respectfully. The inscription on this coin is the same as the title of Shapur, but the title «Emperor of Iran and Aneran» has been added to it.

**Front of the coin:** The great emperor Mazdayasna, Shapur, the king of Iran, and Aneran, who has the face of gods.

**Back of the coin:** This was when he enslaved Philip Caesar and the Romans.

The theme of this coin is taken from the prominent motifs of Shapur I. In these motifs, Shapur tried to record his victories and honors forever, and these five motifs, as well as coins and signets, are examples of them ([Aram, 2014, 29-30](#)). This coin could not be used in general and should be considered a kind of commemorative coin that was minted only to commemorate the position of Shapur and the event of his battle with the Romans. The point that challenges this assumption is the existence of the title of the emperor of Iran and Aneran. On the other hand, this coin is minted in gold, which raises doubts. Shapur only used this title on wall inscriptions (Naqsh-e Rostam, Cube of Zoroaster), and rarely did this title appear on coins. The gold material of the mentioned coin also formed new assumptions. «Raygani et al.» have shown that this was an initial attempt to use the mentioned title on other coins and the gold coin was not usually used locally ([Raygani et al., 2022](#)). Therefore, in a way, this coin can be considered among the visual propaganda activities of the Sassanid emperor in facing the local and foreign Roman citizens.

**2-4. Coin of Khosrow I:** Among the noteworthy cases in political representation as Sassanid coins, is the case that «Herman» raised about one coin of Khosrow I. He has written in this context: «... Khosrow finally found the power to cancel the contract of paying annual tribute to the Hephthalites, and around 557 A.D., he united with the Turks who had just entered Transoxiana and with their help, they completely crushed the power of the Hephthalites and divided their kingdom among themselves. The lands in the north of Seyhun became the share of the Turks, and the rule of most of Afghanistan was given to Khosrow. The exact extent of these new Eastern lands is not known, although Khosrow probably dominated the important Buddhist community in the Bamyān Valley. More importantly, the Iranians finally avenged their defeats against the Hephthalites and restored their dignity. Khosrow issued a coin with the ironic inscription "Iran was freed from fear» (Herrmann, 1994, 137). Unfortunately, we do not have the museum experience of such a coin, and other researchers are also silent in this regard; however, this has indicated the existence of such views on an economic and movable object, such as a coin between the two governments of the East and the West, which was also unprecedented in the Parthian era.

**3-4. Coin of Khosrow II (Khosrow Parviz):** Due to his conquests and victories, Khosrow II engraved phrases such as «Iranians have become fearless» (eran abebem kard) and «powerful Iranians» (eran abzonhened) on his coins (Fig 11) (Daryaie, 2013, 103). These coins somehow tell about Khosrow II's western conquests with the help of his famous commanders. These conquests, which extended to Jerusalem, forced Khosrow to propagate and also represent the glory of Sassanid power and his own person on coins. Therefore, the slogans mentioned at the beginning of the article are reminiscent of Shapur's representations of the reliefs and the Two-Dinar coin; however, the type of slogans was different. Khosrow I's slogan «Iran was freed from fear» seems to have been the focus of Khosrow II, and these slogans are a repetition of a kind of revenge strategy against the attack for the conquest of Ctesiphon by the Roman emperors. It seems that the underlying fear is still there. Because the slogan «Iranians have become fearless» indicates that Iranians had a hidden fear, after which they became fearless. A noteworthy point is that the reference of this text to the victory over Bahram Chobin cannot be correct, because these coins were minted in the Roman provinces after the relentless conquests of Khosrow II, and they cannot be considered for any purpose other than the induction of Iranian sovereignty left over from the Achaemenid period, even though he (Khosrow II) claimed ownership of those lands.



**Fig 11.** Gold coin of Khosrow II with political-propaganda slogans against Rome. Source: <https://antiksikkelelenu.mizmatik.com>.



**Fig 12.** Back of Severus Alexander coin. Source: Winter and Dignas, 2019, 57.

**4-4. Coin of Severus Alexander:** It seems that the coin minter focused on the propaganda aspect of this coin than its economic aspect, because on this coin, the Roman emperor claimed to have occupied the lands of the Middle Rivers, which, of course, is not confirmed by historical evidence. On this coin (Tughra), titles such as PM TRP XII COS III PP can be seen, which indicate the victory of the Roman Caesar, such as (Parthicus maxximus) or

(Persicus maximus) are not seen (Fig 12). What is on this coin is not the same as the evidence for Roman territorial sovereignty. The Severus Alexander coin is among the coins that Trajan, for example, ordered to mint to celebrate his victory in the East. The coins minted after the battle in the East with Tughras such as (Victoria Augusti, Lovi Propugnatori, Marit Propugnatori, and Pax Aeterna Augusti) show the end of the war with Iran and as a result the victory of the Romans. However, Ardashir or Roman Caesar cannot be considered the exact winner of this battle (Winter & Dignas, 2019, 58). Therefore, such propaganda interpretations are made by the parties, and the perception of it by contemporaries is still confusing.

**5-4. Coin of Philip the Arab:** In 244 A.D., Philip the Arab minted coins with the motifs engraved on them (Pax Fundata cum Parsis) indicating a firm and lasting peace with Iran (Fig 13). The Roman emperor concluded a peace with the Iranians in 244 A.D., which was a source of satisfaction for the Romans because of military and political reasons. The defeat that the Romans experienced from the Iranians in Misiche and the territorial divisions that were made between them was a great success for the Romans. Shapur's retreat from Armenia was very pleasant for Philip the Arab, and it is appropriate to mention the basic peace in the treaties (Winter & Dignas, 2019, 103). For this reason, Philip mints a coin the words of which (Pax Fundata cum Parsis) well illustrate this political position. The conflict, which later led to the formation of visual representations by the Sassanids on the coins, indicates these political-military interactions between the two governments of the East and the West.



**Fig 13.** The coin of Philip the Arab and the phrase «Permanent peace!»

Source: Winter & Dignas, 2019, 102.



**Fig 14.** Medal of Galerius and the monument of victory over Narseh. Source: Winter & Dignas,

2019, 67.

**6-4. Medal of Galerius:** The subject of this medal is the victory of Galerius over Narseh in 298 A.D. (Fig 14). The front of the coin shows a half-body of Caesar in victory, and the back shows Caesar on horseback charging at two defenseless people. This motif recalls the surprise attack on the Iranians in Satala. In the front part of it, a woman, a child, and a man can be recognized, raising their hands to Galerius in a pleading manner. These people can be recognized by their cone-shaped Phrygian-style hats. The purpose of minting this coin by Galerius refers to the capture of the family of Narseh, the Sassanid emperor. Narseh's begging state is reminiscent of Valerian's ignominy and his capture by Shapur I (Winter & Dignas, 2019, 68).

**5. Painting:** In the Sassanid period, painting on the wall, along with other decorative methods, was less common; however, samples of wall paintings of this period have also been obtained. The theme of these paintings was battle and hunting, which was confirmed by Ammianus Marcellinus (Ghirshman, 1991, 182). According to the writings of Hamwi and Buhtori, an Arab poet, there were paintings in Ctesiphon's palace (Ivan Madain) the subject of which was Anushirvan's battle with the Roman king (Hamwi, 2017, 295). Unfortunately, there are no traces of these paintings left, and their recovery is based solely on the texts of the first Islamic centuries; however, some of them, which were discovered in archaeological excavations, indicate the Sassanids' attempt to portray victory over the enemy; among them was the painting of the battle in Dura-Europos.

**1-5. Painting of battle in Dura-Europos (House of Fresque):** The mentioned painting was discovered in a house in Dura-Europos in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. (Fig 15). This wall painting was discovered in 1930 by «Alan Little». The mentioned painting is drawn in checkerboard form. In the center, a scene of battle can be seen. On the left side of the scene, riders who have lost their colors can be seen (Rostovtzeff, Bellinger & C. B. Welles, 1944, 57). A ball-like object hangs from under the body of the central horse, which is abundantly seen in Sassanid reliefs (De Waele, 2004). An unarmoured invading spear rider has taken down an opponent with a blow from his horse. Opponents are all falling head over heels, except for the first ones who are running away (Goldman & Little, 1980). «Rostovtzeff» believes that the group of characters in this work are gods who are watching this battle and the size of their image is indicative of this. According to Rostovtzeff's theories, the scene of the next battle, which is drawn with black lines, is interpreted as a battle between Romans and Iranians or local groups that support the Romans, because the people who fell from the horse are wearing short pants and have short swords and round shields indicating that they are Roman battle equipment (Rostovtzeff et al., 1944, 57). It seems that the invaders are not Iranian, although the hairstyle and puffy trousers and especially the galloping horses have a Sassanid style, the sleeved robes are only seen in Mesopotamia and Syria and not in Iran. According to the figures, on the upper left side, and in the second and third rows below, on the chest, a piece of clothing with vertical stripes can be seen, which was not popular in Iran during the Sassanid period and is related to the clothes of the Parthian period. With this description, it is possible to observe Parthian habits and customs in the Dura-Europos paintings that continued in the Sassanid period. The raiding horsemen in the Dura-Europos wall painting were probably an auxiliary military unit composed of natives in the service of the Sassanid Empire. These military units in the Mesopotamia region were made up of pro-Iranian Semites who received orders from the Iranian army «Shapur I». This painting is a little unusual and very much related to party art (Goldman & Little, 1980). The location and characteristics of this painting show the victory of the Sassanids over the Romans, and it was probably created after the capture of the city by the Iranians. It can be concluded that the drawing of horses' bodies and their galloping posture is Sassanid style, so this work should be classified among Sassanid works (Von Gall, 1999, 83-85).



**Fig 15.** Painting of a battle scene from Dura-Europos, House of Fresque. Source: Von Gall, 1999, 18.

**Discussion**

At the time of Mehrdad II, the Parthians could expand their territory to Armenia and Mesopotamia, and this started the relationship between the Parthians and the Romans. This encounter started during the time of Farhad III or IV, or during the time of Mehrdad II, which created a new order in West Asia. This encounter continued until the Sassanid period. Sassanid battles with Romans, as well as commercial and religious relations over more than four hundred years, led to the formation of a long-term relationship, the manifestations of which can be seen in the surviving works and historical texts. The political/military competition between the Eastern and Western governments and, as a result, the hostile or friendly relations between these two governments were shown in late ancient history. Among the most important reasons for the formation of this type of competitive art on the sides, it originates from internal pressures (public opinion and heavy costs of battle) and diaspora policies (to create dignity and develop a productive economy by captives). Both the Sassanid and the Roman emperors made enough use of «political art» to promote their military power and politics (including diplomacy and deterrence policy) (at least historical evidence has proven this). It seems that the artistic tools used for the mentioned propaganda for the parties of the battle/politics are almost the same, and depending on the time conditions or the frequency of visibility, diversity or changes have been achieved in them, in such a way that sometimes they used reliefs, coins, and paintings. To summarize the research data, Table 1 is provided to make a visual comparison.

**Table 1.** Archaeological artistic aspects of Iran and Rome. Source: Authors.

No.	Historical Period	Descriptions
1	Sassanids	The relief of Bishapur 1, the defeat of the Roman emperors
2	Sassanids	The relief of Bishapur 2, the victory of Shapur I over the Roman emperors
3	Sassanids	The relief of Bishapur 3, the general motif of Shapur I's victory over the Roman emperors
4	Sassanids	The relief of Darabgerd 1, the victory of Shapur I over Gordian III
5	Sassanids	The relief of Naqsh-e Rostam 6, the submission of the Roman emperors to Shapur I
6	Sassanids	The relief of Salmas, Ardeshir, Shapur I, and the Armenians!
7	Sassanids	The relief of Taq-e Bostan 1
8	Romans	The signet of Paris, Battle of Shapur and Valerian
9	Romans	Galerius Triumphal Arch
10	Sassanids	The coin of Shapur I
11	Sassanids	The coin of Khosrow I
12	Romans	The coin of Severus Alexander
13	Romans	The coin of Philip the Arab
14	Romans	The medal of Galerius
15	Sassanids	Dura-Europos, Painting of a battle scene

### **Conclusion**

From historical texts and archeological data, such as reliefs, figures, coins, and paintings, the description of the propaganda measures of the Sassanid and the Byzantine Empires against each other can be recovered. This process, whose propaganda and even deterrence aspects were more than the actions taken in the scenes of battle and diplomacy, began in the Parthian era and continued with changes in the Sassanid period. In the Sassanid era, the most obvious artistic and visual manifestations to depict the humiliation of the defeated enemy in various forms such as arresting, handcuffing, throwing under the horse's feet, the presence of Roman goddesses in the scenes, etc., were displayed on reliefs, coins, and paintings. Here, it should be remembered that the full use of the power of the image for greater impact was noticed by the Sassanids and the Romans so that they could get a better result from it over time, even though the subject of the presented image (as various visual arts) is not reality. Besides the legitimizing aspects, the Sassanids benefited the most from the creation and ordering of the mentioned works in propaganda. Although the territories captured by both sides of the battle were returned after a few years and the Euphrates were known as the main border of the two governments, persuasion of domestic addressees and foreign propaganda has been widespread. On the other hand, the philosophy of battle (victorious) in Sassanid culture led to the legitimacy of the emperor and the increase of his Divine Glory, which sought to convince the local audience. The Romans also dealt with this issue on the other side of the battle. Besides inserting slogans and images on coins and medallions, they tried to emboss prominent motifs as well as triumphal arches. The point is that the Sassanid emperor can hardly be seen under the horse of a Roman emperor in all artistic matters, including coins and reliefs; however, in the first half of Sassanid rule, more than 6 of these scenes have been seen. The philosophy of such measures should be examined in parallel both in the image (including reliefs, coins, and paintings) and the texts. Although the visual representations show the equality of two counterparts and attempts to weaken or humiliate the other party, the (Roman) historical texts severely criticized the Sassanids and the people of Iranshahr in general, due to their battle measures and their morals. Thus, a contradiction can be seen in the spirit of the writers of historical texts (who were usually non-ruling people) with the creators or, in other words, the orderers of visual manifestations (who were usually rulers). Accordingly, political and cultural relations and interactions between the East and West sides have been a continuous trend. Sometimes hostile and sometimes friendly, but its hostile aspects have been depicted more and the image in this context has shown itself more expressively than historical texts.

## Author Contributions

As the author of the master's thesis, Author 1 collected the samples based on their historical order. Author 2 analyzed the paintings and samples regarding the historical aspects of the Sassanids and the Romans eras. Author 3 summarized and contrasted the cases that may not have been carefully considered by Authors 1 and 2 in the current research. All authors cooperated in writing this manuscript; they discussed the results, reviewed, and approved the final draft of the manuscript.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article.

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**18**

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