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Author(s): Esmail Yaghmaei

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An Insight into Achaemenid Golden Bowl

Esmail Yaghmaei¹

Abstract

The current study tries to discuss a Golden Bowl with four-headed lion which is kept at the Mostazafan Foundation's Cultural Institution of Museum. In addition to minor cracks and fractures at several places on the body, the cylindrical rim of the bowl has also been slightly altered and deviated from its original form, making it difficult to distinguish the lower part of it and the base. As can be seen, its bottom design is adorned with five circles, with one being a water lily with twelve petals. In this article, the author studies this bowl and based on iconography, argues that this was related to the Achaemenid period.

Keywords: Achaemenid; Golden Bowl; Four-headed Lion; Cultural Institution of Museum.

¹ ICAR, Tehran, Iran.  Yaghmaei@yahoo.com

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Introduction

Many researchers, have been studying about Achaemenid period. Some study has been about the metal objects of this period. Golden and bronze objects have also been discussed (see Nazari, & Sharbaf, 2023). The golden bowl, under the study, is a short-bodied cylinder with a height of 5.77 to 76 millimeters, decorated with an outer design featuring four angry male lions. In addition to minor cracks and fractures at several places on the body, its rim has also been slightly altered and deviated from its original form, making it difficult to distinguish the lower part of the body, including its base. The outer surface is adorned with five circles, with one being a water lily with twelve petals, surrounded by diagonal lines forming an oblique hatching pattern.

The lion figures on the outer surface of the vessel are uniform in size. Their bodies are semi-protruding while faces in different directions. In addition to depicting muscles in the hands, legs, hips, and tail, the artist also paid attention to the wings under the necks of the lions. The tip of the tail is much noticeable.

All three sections of the extended feathers on the left wing of the lion are clearly visible while its right wing, which can be seen partially, is behind the lion. The faces are fierce and angry, especially this feature is most evident when we look at the mouths. The artist has skillfully created and portrayed them with open mouths and four sharp teeth. In addition, the wrinkles on the muzzle, wide-open eyes, and the underneath further enhance the fierceness and ferocity of the lion. The empty spaces on the background of this cylindrical vessel are simple, although the two boundaries above and below are adorned with half-petal lily designs and two slightly curved lines.

Structure

Most of the vessels or golden Rhyton, with such prominent or semi-prominent roles, are made in the “ost-wax casting” or “waste wax process”, and therefore this vessel is no exception to this structural framework. It seems that the artist(s) first created the body and its base from natural wax or bitumen without embellishing the lions’ faces. Then, they covered the whole part with soft plaster. Once the plaster hardened well, it was put in the oven, and after the wax or bitumen melted away, a hardened plaster mold was obtained. Then, they poured molten gold into this mold to fill all the empty spaces. After molding, they broke the surface of the plaster and obtained the golden vessel with only the bold lines of its design clearly visible, and the finer lines not so prominent. Then, the artist worked on engraving the details onto the surface of the raw structure.

The lion’s face was also made and worked on in the same way. After creating and working on the faces and completing their engraving, they cut a part of the flat surface of the vessel that had no design using scissors and affixed the lion’s face to its body using a soldering iron.

With this method, the lion’s face will be hollow, and that is why this vessel has a relatively low weight (131.9 grams). Another point needs to be mentioned here is that the soldering artist had to twist the lion’s tail around its necks to hide the solder joints as best as he could. However, the effort to cover up this soldering work is not particularly successful and is more or less noticeable.

The author believes that a vessel like this, alive and vibrant, was not made by just one artist but several skilled artists worked on it. Its artistic nature tends to believe that such a vessel was not for ordinary people but was used by royals.



Fig. 1. Golden Bowl with Four-headed Lion (Mostazafan Foundation's Cultural Institution of Museum)



Fig. 2. The Bottom of the Golden Bowl (Mostazafan Foundation's Cultural Institution of Museum)



Fig. 3. Golden Bowl from Kelardasht (National Museum of Iran)

Bowl's Features Body

The edge of the cup to its border is 2.2 millimeters. It is adorned with half-petal patterns of the lotus, which have a semi-circular upward-facing 3.5 millimeters wide. The plain raised border at the bottom of the design is 2.2 millimeters wide. The distance between the upper and lower plain ribbons, both of which are raised, is 58.5 millimeters. The distance between the two heads of the lion is 4 millimeters. The lower plain ribbon (border) is 2 millimeters wide. The lower ribbon, which may have been attached to the bottom, has a pattern of the upper semi-circular section of the lotus and is 6.5 to 7 millimeters wide. The thickness of the edge is 1.1 millimeters while the lion's head at the edge is 13.5 to 14.2 millimeters.

Bottom

The thickness of the three circles inside each other, from the outermost to the innermost, is 1.2 millimeters each. The diameter of the lotus with 17 petals on the bottom is 35 millimeters. The size of each petal is 14 millimeters. The diameter of the small circle inside the lotus is 8 millimeters.

Comparison and Chronology

The image of Kelardasht Cup comes to the mind of every archaeologist upon the first observation because of its striking resemblance to the raised lion faces. The vessel was discovered during the construction of Reza Shah Pahlavi's pool in a cemetery dating back to the first millennium BC, along with a golden dagger, plain golden vessels, and several other utensils made of clay.



Fig. 4. Plaque with Horned Lion-griffins, Achaemenid (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The height of this cup is 5 inches, which is equivalent to 12.5 centimeters. The elongated bodies of the Kelardasht Cup's raised lion faces, with their weak muscles, and sleepy and lethargic facial expressions, are indicative of the artist's insignificant and feeble attempts. It is believed that these three slender lions, held together by pegs, were crafted by a local artist.

Louis Vanden Berghe dates the Kelardasht Cup to sometime between 1000

and 800 BC and believes that "... All of these objects belonged to one cemetery and they are all contemporaneous and can be dated between 1000 and 800 BC ... The recent motifs on the cup bear an extraordinary resemblance to the art of the Hittite, and three lions in the style of Hittite art are depicted on three sides of it ..." (Vanden Berg, 1966: 6).

He also believes that all the findings, especially the red-brown baked clay vessels, are equivalent to those found at



Fig. 5. Golden Rhyton from Hamedan (National Museum of Iran)

Cemetery B of Tepe Sialk in Kashan. It is unclear how all the findings can be equivalent to Cemetery B in Tepe Sialk if they bear an “extraordinary resemblance” to the Hittite art?

Robert Dyson dates the Kelardasht Cup from 1200 to 1100 BC and regards it as belonging to one of the peoples inhabiting the Alborz Mountains region up to the Zanzan area (Dyson, 1960). Most likely, the Kelardasht Cup, which nei-

ther bears evidence of the Hittite art nor does it reflect the conscious artistic expression of the Marlik or Kalouraz peoples, was made and decorated by a local artist around the Kelardasht region and was placed in the cemetery of a nomadic people for their afterlife. The swastika symbol on the body of these feeble lions signifies the devotion to the Mithraism, making Vanden Berghe’s dating (800 BC) more acceptable. It should be noted that

Porada suggests the first millennium BC for the Kelardasht culture (Porada, 1960).

The structural and artistic features of the vessel under study, with fierce lion faces on it, do not make its dating as difficult as that of the Kelardasht Cup. However, a similar vessel to it has not yet been discovered.

The fierce open-mouth faces of male lions, with protruding tongues and sharp teeth, can be compared with other findings of the Achaemenid period which are kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, such as the golden Rhyton with the head and hands of a wingless lion from 2500 years ago, measuring 17.1 centimeters in height (Davoudi, 2003: 24), the gold-plated dress adorned with a lion's head from 2600 to 2500 years ago (Davoudi, 2003: 26), and the gold pendant with two lion heads from 2600 to 2500 years ago (Davoudi, 2003: 26).

In all these three examples, the lions are fierce, roaring with open mouths,

sharp teeth, and protruding tongues. The golden Rhyton with the three-part wings has a structure closer to that of this vessel. This Rhyton, which measures 22.3 centimeters in height and was obtained from Hamedan, dates back to the Achaemenid period (National Museum of Iran, Catalog: 42). Besides this valuable Rhyton, there is a golden dagger with its grip decorated with two fierce lion heads with sharp teeth and protruding tongues. It was also found in Hamedan and belongs to the Achaemenid period. In the Mostazafan Foundation's Cultural Institution of Museums, there is also a gold bracelet with two roaring lion heads facing each other (Yaghmaei and Amirghiasvand, 1999: Cover Page), which also dates back to the Achaemenid period.

Considering the aforementioned findings, we can attribute the golden bowl to the Achaemenid period (possibly to the era of Darius the Great?).

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