

“Kāvusan’s Path” on The Iron Age Bowl of Luristan

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Introduction

The nature of the religion and rituals of the Bronze Age Luristan metalworkers has always been met with conflicting interpretations. Among these artifacts is a bronze bowl dating back to the 8th century BC, featuring eleven celestial depictions and seven Aramaic inscriptions arranged in a meaningful configuration. Most researchers attribute the production of Luristan bronzes to Indo-Aryan groups such as the Scythians, Kassites, Medes, and Cimmerians. However, despite the universal acknowledgment of this artifact's origin within the Luristan Iron Age culture, previous studies have failed to interpret the cryptic motifs and concepts on the bowl within the mythological and symbolic framework of Indo-Aryan beliefs. This research hypothesizes that analyzing the celestial depictions on this artifact can shed light on the existing ambiguities surrounding the religion of these people. Therefore, for the first time, the celestial motifs of sections two and six of this bowl are analyzed based on the narrative and mythological concepts of Indo-Aryan religions and in relation to other Luristan bronze motifs.

Research Method

This research is qualitative in nature and employs a descriptive-analytical approach. Data were gathered from library resources and museums. As a first step, the visual patterns of the celestial motifs in sections 2 and 6 were described. Since the pattern connecting the stars in section 2 of the bowl had been lost and this motif lacked a direct equivalent among modern constellations, it was necessary to reconstruct the overall celestial map at the time of the bowl's creation (800 BC) using the following methods: 1) Utilizing the Stellarium astronomy software; 2) Aligning the constellations around the bowl with the modern zodiac and cardinal axes of the sky in 800 BC; 3) Consulting visual sources containing ancient constellations. After identifying the astral identities of the motifs, several sources were used to interpret the cryptic meanings of the celestial motifs: 1) Consulting astronomical themes and narratives embedded in ancient Iranian texts; 2) Consulting textual sources containing technical specifications and imagery of ancient sky maps, such as the MUL.APIN; 3) Consulting the cosmology of Indo-Aryan religions.

Research Findings

The primary challenge of this research was identifying the celestial body represented by section two of the bowl (a monkey-like figure within an arch). Through visual comparison, aligning the bowl's constellations with the modern zodiac, and referencing representations on the Bali drinking vessel, section two was identified as Gemini. While other scholars interpret this monkey-like figure (section two) as the god Thoth, its proximity to a solar disc on the bowl suggests a solar

connection. Similar depictions of monkeys on other Luristan bronzes—brooches, spearheads, and seals—also relate to solar discs, lion heads, and solar motifs (a female figure surrounded by solar rays). This reinforces the association of the monkey constellation with solar themes.

Furthermore, significant similarities between sections two and six (the monkey and Pleiades constellations) indicate an axial relationship. Therefore, from the diverse and heterogeneous semantic interpretations of Gemini and the Pleiades in various cultural sources, themes connecting these constellations to the sun and moon were selected. In Iranian tradition, Gemini represents the head of *gōzihr* Dragon, the beginning of the zodiac and the Milky Way—a serpent causing eclipses by its movement and consumption of the sun and moon. Section six, the Pleiades, in Elam, signified the *Sibitti* and lunar eclipses. Thus, these constellations seem connected to solar and lunar eclipses.

Mesopotamian texts reveal that in Elam, eclipses symbolized a king's death and the decline of his reign. The "Kāvusan's Path," another name for the Milky Way in Pahlavi literature, reinforces this axis's connection to royal legitimacy. However, how is this axis represented on other Luristan bronzes? Ancient Iranian astronomical texts, like "The Kitāb al-Bulhān of Abu Mashar", depict animal constellations alongside these planetary deities in a visual representation like the master of animals. Conversely, a Luristan fibula shows a central human figure within a star, symmetrically holding two star-marked serpents. This imagery of a man holding two serpents symmetrically appears to represent the Hunter constellation and the axis between these two sections of the bowl.

Conclusion

According to research findings on the Luristan celestial bowl, sections two and six represent the constellations Gemini and Pleiades, respectively. Gemini symbolizes the head of *gōzihr* Dragon – the Milky Way serpent and lunar nodes. The Pleiades in section six are linked to the *Sibitti*, a constellation associated in Mesopotamian texts with Elam, the goddess *Narundi*, and lunar eclipses. Therefore, sections two and six of the bowl appear to represent solar and lunar eclipses.

In ancient Iran, kings with divine authority, like *Kayumars* and *Jamshid*, whose earthly power was bestowed by the gods, were likened to the sun. Thus, in the ancient world, eclipses signified divine disapproval of the king's rule. Following the prediction of these celestial events, or upon their occurrence, ceremonies for the replacement king were held to avert the resulting ill omen from affecting the king and the kingdom. Supporting this interpretation, the *Bundahishn* refers to the Milky Way as the "Kāvusan's Path." *Kaveh* was a king who, due to his arrogance and misguided ambition, sought dominion over the heavens in addition to the earth. He ascended to the heavens on four eagles, but his divine authority was subsequently removed. Therefore, solar and lunar eclipses were visualized as a serpent-dragon, through which the gods exerted their will in controlling the fate of kings and kingdoms.

Alternatively, the "Kāvusan's Path" represented the path of tyrannical kings who misused their divine authority for their own selfish ends and were thus cursed and punished by the gods. On certain brooches and seals from Luristan, *Giyan*, and *Susa* cultures, a goat-man controls two serpents flanking his body. In most instances, the serpents' bodies are adorned with star patterns. Therefore, this imagery seems to represent a combination of the human and goat constellations at the bowl's center, with *gōzihr* symbolizing the axis of sections two and six, representing the gods' power to alter destiny and punish tyrannical kings.

Keywords: Luristan Iron Age bowl, monkey constellation, Pleiades, *Gōzihr*, *Kāvusan's* path.