

## Comparative Study of the Form and Shapes of Sassanid and Parthian Rhytons

Fatemeh Maleksabet<sup>a\*</sup>, Mehrnoosh Sakenyandehkordi<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Sewing and Clothing Design, Faculty of Hazrat Roghayeh Branch, Technical and Vocational University (TVU), Yazd, Iran*

<sup>b</sup>*Department of Design and Clothing, Research Institute of Traditional & Modern Structures (RITMS), Yazd, Iran*

Received 30 June 2021; revised 15 July 2021; accepted 08 August 2021

---

### Abstract

There are two major Hellenic and Oriental tendencies in party art. In addition, the gradual transformation of Greek thought under the influence of the East can be discerned. Sassanid art is a sign of ethnic effort and taste, whose culture and art follow the Achaemenid and Parthian art. This art embodies the principles of Iranian aesthetics, which inherits the arts of early Asia. Making Rhyton is one of the most interesting and valuable examples of Iranian art and expresses the creative spirit and inherent genius of Iranians. Rhytons are animal drinking vessels, some with one mouth and some with two or more openings for liquids to enter and leave, used for drinking liquids at banquets, court ceremonies, and ceremonies. Drinking from such cups has symbolically meant the transfer of living vital force to man. By examining the achievements of the ancient Iranians, the possibility of recognizing and understanding their mental concepts as well as the type of social and cultural life of the societies of that time becomes clear to us. Based on this, it was decided to study the unique form, role and composition of a small number of Rhytons of the Parthian and Sassanid periods. The early Parthian rites were influenced by Greek and Hellenic culture, but gradually the national tendencies of the Iranian tribes emerged in them, while the early Sassanid rites were influenced by the Achaemenids, but the influence of Parthian and Roman art can't be denied.

**Keywords:** Rhyton; Sassanid; Parthian; Form; Shape

---

---

\* Corresponding author. Tel: +98-9134519634.

E-mail address: [maleksabet.f2888@gmail.com](mailto:maleksabet.f2888@gmail.com).

## 1. Introduction

Rython is usually a container in which the lower and lower part is engraved with the role of a human or animal (real or imaginary) and the standing and upper part is a horn-shaped container. These dishes were used in religious ceremonies, court ceremonies, gatherings and parties. (Mohammadpanah, 2010). In Greek culture, a Rython is a container whose upper part is attached to the cup (vertically or horizontally) and the lower part to the animal's head or torso or torso. In the dictionary of Fors Asadi, we read of Rython, "a vessel made of gold or silver or mud, in the form of animals, especially in the form of milk, to drink wine" (Sarfaraz, 2008). According to the above opinions, it can be said that Rhytons are containers in the form of various animals and of different objects, some of which have an opening and in others two or more openings that were used for drinking. The shapes of some Rhytons are natural and some are abstract.

## 2. Application of Rhyton

The prevailing theory as to why animals in the form of containers are used to drink liquids and wine is that drinking in animal horns has been common since prehistoric times, and since then it has been believed by people in different eras that fluid passes through. An animal-shaped container, the force of that animal is transmitted to humans. This belief is actually associated with many sacrificial rites. In many of these rituals, the sacrificial blood flows to the earth and gives its reproductive power to the earth and through it to other living beings, including humans. In many ceremonies, wine passes through a container, the cup of which is sometimes in the shape of an animal horn and the outlet of which is in the shape of the head of animals such as bulls, lions, tigers, horses, deer, rams, antelopes, and humpback cows. Symbolic has meant the transfer of living vital force to man.

Another idea of the Achaemenid kings was that, for example, matters of a religious nature, such as the transfer of royal power from God or the lord of kindness to the king, are done by the holy drink that a lord of kindness gives to the king in a blessed rite. For example, the power transfer assembly is shown on a Rhyton that Ahuramazda gives power to the king (Gershman, 2011).

## 3. History of Rhyton

Pottery Rhyton in Iran date back to the fourth millennium BC, i.e. six thousand years ago. In the Old Testament, it was customary for a feast to be held after the hunt, where wine was drunk inside the horns. Prehistoric pottery cups are made like horns (Sami, 1964).

The art of Rhytoning with pottery, following natural examples, developed in the first millennium BC. Examples of this type of Rhyton have been discovered from Kelardasht, Mazandaran, Azerbaijan, Marlik, Silk, Qeytariyeh, Hasanlu and Amlash in the form of animals such as deer, rams, cows and sheep. Also found in silk teapots that imitated the beak of a bird, which belongs to the first millennium BC. Rhyton related to the Median and Manichaeon periods have been discovered from Ziviyeh grave and from Hasanlu region, New Elam and Azerbaijan in the form of gazelle, cow and horse head (Kambakhshfard, 2010). The art of Rhytoning, both in prehistoric and historical times, was not an imported art, but an Iranian initiative that has continued since the fourth millennium BC. During the Median period, due to the fact that they had a special interest in this type of dish, they enjoyed a lot of development and progress, and during the Achaemenid period, they reached their highest level in every way (Sarfaraz, 2008). Achaemenid Rhytons are taken from

material, Urartian and Scythian examples, but Achaemenid artists are more inspired by material examples (Sarfaraz, 2008).

In the old city of Nisa, the first Parthian capital, a few kilometers from the new city of Ashgabat, works of art from the 2nd-3rd century BC have been found on the south side of the palace. Among them are pottery and glass objects, small Hellenistic sculptures made of marble or gold and about forty horns that have survived looting (Gershman, 2011). Enamel Rhytons with sculptural ornaments and pottery jugs from the Parthian period. One of these cups found in Damavand belongs to the second century BC and is similar to the ivory cups found in Nessa (Gershman, 2011).

During the Sassanid dynasty, horn-shaped cups ending in animals were common, and most Rhytons were made entirely in the shape of animals.

Rhytons found in Asia Minor and in Greece, Mesopotamia and the land of the Scythians were most likely inspired by Iranian Rhytons (Sarfaraz, 2008).

Tubular pottery, some of which ends in an animal's head, has been obtained from different areas, all of which are comparable in appearance, known in archeology as Raytheon, which has been continuously evolving. And changes have been made. The simplest type of these Rhytons is the shape of a container that starts with a long tip and sometimes ends with a bird's head instead of a tip, which means that the long beak of such Rhytons represents the neck and the container itself, like a chicken with an elongated body. And sometimes this body becomes rounder and its drain becomes a mountain goat or deer head with turned horns. In fact, in this type of container, the neck and mouth of the container are made in the shape of the neck and head of the animal. Gradually, such vessels change in shape and their body takes the shape of a horn or funnel, and the lower part ends at the head of an animal or a sleeping animal. After the Medes, the best type of these Rhytons, especially of gold and silver, can be seen in the Achaemenid period (Sarfaraz, 2008).

According to Kambakhsh Fard, the author of the book *Pottery and Pottery in Iran*, among all the pottery made in the shape of animal or human limbs, it is called "Rhyton", meaning the cup and cup cut from the animal's horn, if these ritual vessels should be referred to as jugs. The Iranians never drank directly from jugs, pitcher and jugs, but poured the liquid inside the pitcher into a measure or cup (Rhyton) and drank. It may be common among Westerners to grab the handle of the jug directly and pour the liquid into it, and it is only in this case that the name Rhyton refers to a jug with a handle and a tube decorated with the body of an animal or a human being. From the beginning of the first millennium BC, the Iranians made cups, cup, cups and cups from pottery in the form of severed heads and horns of animals, which can be called Rhytons, such as Rhytons of Zivieh, Damavand, Nessa, etc. But pottery made in animal or human limbs and obtained in abundance in Marlik and Amlash (first millennium BC) and Garmi of Azerbaijan (Parthian period), have a use as a jar, pitcher and jug and in the category of allegorical dishes and they are considered ritual. Their ritual use cannot be precisely determined because they mysteriously express inner meanings. These containers are generally hollow and made in the shape of an animal. These potteries are formed with two to three negative molds. The potters of this region, with their complete knowledge of the domestic animals of their environment, have shown special skills and mastery in shaping the limbs of these animals. Most of these pottery animals have three appendages instead of legs, and so the potters have considered the symbolic shape by shaping the head, horns, neck, snout and body of the animals and have ignored some organs and joints, however, the sign A few can also determine the group, genus and type of animal well (Kambakhshfard, 2010).

## 4. Material of Rhyton

Rhytons are generally made of pottery, ceramics, metals (gold, silver, bronze, iron), glass and ivory. Occasionally, the exterior of cups and wine glasses was decorated to create a two-tone state, instead of using the gold-plating technique by attaching gold leaf to silver. Most of the remaining Rhytons are made of silver, although bronze, gold and pottery types have also been discovered (Mohammadpanah, 2010). In terms of Rhyton-making style and works of art, these courses have a very important place among ritual, luxury and industrial works (Sarfaraz, 2008).

### 4.1. Parthian Rhytons

The art of Rhyton making, which has a long history in Iran, continued during the Parthian period. Rhytons are made of various materials and are made of different metals and non-metals (Sarfaraz, 2008).

In some Rhytons of this period, a narrow tubular fluid came out of the animal's chest and extended to its legs (Gunter, 2004).

The horned cups found in the royal palace of Nissa, the first Parthian capital, are similar to those of the Achaemenid period. These Rhytons date back to the first two centuries of Parthian rule. The Parthians were popular, but they restrained themselves in eating. In addition, many broken potteries have been found, dating back to the first century BC, around the mounds. Perhaps it was common at that time to have earthenware pieces on wine jars with not only the amount and date of the wine (inscriptions in the Aramaic alphabet) but also their mustaches. This was also mentioned on the jars of vinegar and raisins. Wherever you grow dates, they make date wine (College, 2001).

Rhytons discovered in Nissa are generally made by connecting three or more different pieces. Their length is between 30 to 60 cm. They reach a diameter of 17 cm and their capacity is about one and a half liters. The Rhytons are horn-shaped and curved near their base. The other end of them ends in a statue. It is as if the sculptures came out of the leaves that grow on the trunks of the Rhytons. There are one or two holes at the bottom of the Rhytons to drain the liquid. These holes and the heavy weight of the dishes indicate that Rhytons were not used every day but were used for vows or special occasions. At the upper end of the Rhytons is a wide decorative border with embossed patterns. These motifs and images represent complex subjects, and the throats of the Rhytons are adorned with images of prominent heads, with intermittent bells or small glass eyes. In the designs of Rhytons, sometimes silver, sometimes gold brass, or gold itself was used (Mohammadifar, 2008).

In terms of beauty and art, Nissa Rhytons are unique in their kind in the world of fine arts. These Rhytons were made in the second century BC. Judging by the style and set of designs, they show that a basic pattern has been followed in their construction, but they all belong to a single art school whose artists have perfect and excellent skills in ivory engraving. The subjects created in the decorative fringe designs of the Rhytons are very diverse; but they can all be categorized into certain groups. In the first category, the images of the gods, and most of all, the image of the 12 Lords of Olympus; in two places, Apollo, the goddess of art (banana), is depicted on one of the Rhytons, the goddess of art with Hephaestus, and on the other, the role of Artemis among the nymphs. This shows that the Parthian kings were familiar with Euripides dramas. Topics related to Dionysus such as: taking animals to places of sacrifice, offering wine to the gods, performing religious ceremonies and dancing in the sanctuary of temples have an important place in these images. Although the subject of the images is taken from the Greeks, their creation has Asian and artistic features. In the neck of the dishes, the prominent heads are very beautifully made in the

style of a drum. The pictures at the bottom of the dishes reflect the Asian style. Most of these mythical images are: human-animal-like creatures, images of strange creatures with wings and horns, and “Iranian” winged lions that bear no resemblance to earlier examples. There are also motifs on a cow with a human head that also has wings. In classical art, the image of a wing on a horse with a human head is not seen. Images and motifs of Nessa Rhytons have unique features; therefore, it can be said that as a result of Nessa excavation, the Parthian-Hellenistic school of sculpture was discovered (Mason, 2005).

#### 4.2. Sassanid Rhytons

The tradition of using Rhyton, which is a dish in all Iranian meanings, is preserved in the Sassanid period with the same stability that it had in the currents of the previous period and the beginning of the arrival of Iranians (Gershman, 2011).

During this period, Rhytons are mostly vessels that were made entirely of metal or ceramic in the form of animals (Gunter, 2004). The design of cups consisting of horn-shaped cups and animal heads has been common in Iran for a long time during the Sassanid dynasty, and the heads of animals such as horses with mouths, etc. have been added to these shapes. The method of drinking from the dishes, which became common at this time as in the Parthian period, was to make a hole or holes in the middle or bottom of the cup from which the liquor would come out and open the mouth under or in front of it. In Sassanid times, they drank alcohol in the body of vessels, usually from the mouth or body of an animal in which it was embedded, such as some wine glasses or small muskets that are common in Spain today (Kalikan, 2008).

Animals made by Sassanid artists are closer to Scythian art than animals made by Achaemenid or Parthian (Gershman, 2011).

### 5. Form and Shape of Parthian Rhytons

Fig 1, is a cup that is attached to the anterior part of the milky trunk and is elongated and horn-shaped. The leaves of the grapevine, in the form of emerald ivy, surround the mouth of the horn. One of these yellow leaves has continued in the direction of the lower part of the horn. The front part, which looks like a lion, is made separately. The back of the lion, the legs, and the tail extend upward on the trunk of the horn.

The edges, claws, facial hair, tongue, eyebrows, and pupils are all gilded. Small twisting designs can be seen at the end of the eyebrows and on the ears. The mane continues to twist to the center of the forehead, and a tube protrudes from the animal's chest. The decoration and appearance of this Rhyton due to the extension of the animal's body inwards into the trumpet, is reminiscent of a connection between this object and the Achaemenid and Greek specimens, during the 5th-5th centuries BC. Artichoke leaves are found on the underside of the horn. Similar plant designs can be seen on Rhytons discovered in the city of Nessa.

The dish consists of two main parts; Trumpet and anterior part. The junction of these two parts does not have any cover tape. The container is made of a thin sheet of silver and in order to balance and stabilize the container, milk legs have been added separately to the Rhyton. The thickness of the metal appears to be the same everywhere, except for the edge of the dish, which is slightly thicker at the top and protruding outwards. The effect of any seam is not seen in the horn or anterior part. It is clear from the embossed details of the dish that a combination of three embossing techniques, embossing from the inside, and carving has been used. However, its surface probably needed more work to form this Rhyton. Gilding with its great radiance on small parts of the carved

areas, on the grape leaves, which is the main design, near the edge of the dish and adorns the underside of the horn, as well as on the edges, beard, the tongue, eyebrows, pupils and claws are visible. The angular edges of the gold leaf can be clearly seen in most places.

This gold-plated Raytheon dates from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD and is housed in the Sackler Museum. Its height is 25.6 cm, length is 27.3 cm, width is 17.3 cm and its approximate weight is 502 grams (Fig 1 a, b) (Gunter, 2004).



**Fig 1 (a, b)** Trumpet Shape, Silver and Gold Plated, Arthur Sackler Exhibition (Gunter, 2004, 45)

Fig 2: A narrow, elongated vessel with a sloping horn that has an outward-facing edge and a horn-shaped section attached to a separate interior section, which includes the head, chest, and legs of an animal resembling a lynx (fur). A circular cover is located at the junction of the anterior part and the horn part. The front legs of the animal are made separately and then added to the animal's body. A gutter-like tube protrudes from the animal's chest and extends between its legs. The edge of the horn, which is turned outwards, is gold-plated. An inscription can be seen on the outside of the edge of the container. The animal's mouth is open and its tongue is sticking out. A tuft of hair protrudes from both ears of this animal. A torsional pattern can be seen on the shoulders and chest above the gutter. A collar-like band surrounds the neck. A Parthian inscription can be seen on the edge of the trumpet, only part of which remains intact, apparently indicating the name of the owner of the vessel and its weight.

Rhyton's anterior part, with its cat-like shape, is similar to Hellenistic and Roman art; and this dish has been introduced as a ritual dish, which is definitely related to Dionysian religious rites. The animal's pointed ears are a symbol of the Near East to the West; and this is one of the special features of this dish.

This Rhyton consists of three main parts connected together; the horn, the anterior part, and the annular covering at the junction of the two parts. However, the anterior part is made up of several components. The horn building is integrated and seamless. In the trumpet section, there are veins that indicate the construction of this section by hammering. The edge of the pan is raised and, in addition, the structure of the pan is slowly cooled and worked on after heating; No trace of casting can be seen in this section. Your anterior part is empty and has a very thin wall compared to the trumpet. Of course, your legs are full and seemingly cast. They are elaborately attached to the

anterior part with the help of a port (or connecting agent). The legs are narrower at the junction, and are embedded inside the ligament, and the base of the legs rest on the anterior part.

The details of the dish are created with the help of carving technique. A series of small oval holes, reminiscent of fur, have been created on the surface of the anterior part. The inscription on the edge of the dish is formed using a series of small circular holes. There is gilding on the surface of the back edge of the dish and on the whole anterior part. This Rhyton has a special leaf gilding structure.

This gold-plated Rhyton dates from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD and is housed in the Sackler Museum. Its height is 23.5 cm, length is 28.5 cm, width is 12.3 cm and its approximate weight is 698 grams (Fig 2 a, b, c) (Gunter, 2004).



**Fig 2 (a, b, c)** Trumpet Shape Rhyton, Silver and Gold, Arthur Sackler Exhibition (Gunter, 2004, 46 & 133 & 135)

## 6. Form and Shape of Sassanid Rhytons

The container in Figure.3 is made by connecting a short, small horn to the anterior part of the Ghazal. A short, ruined tubular drain drained from the gazelle's mouth. The eyeballs that are now empty may have been gems in the past. The lower part of the horn is grooved or Dalber, and in the upper part of the trumpet, there are two rows of animals approaching a central tree. These animals include a sitting goat, a lion, cattle, a goat; In addition, there is a tree with a wavy trunk, whose leaves are seen in the shape of three trunks. The skins of the animals are depicted with a series of hatched lines all over, and the images are decorated with the gold-plated dot gilding method.

At the top of this arranged area, a twisted band surrounds the trumpet; between this strip and the edge of the dish, a row of circular plates can be seen. The edge of the horn, which is added separately, is tubed and thickened outwards. The twisted bands around the horns and behind the head, the nose, the two grooves on the underside of the horn, and the embossed parts of the animals' bodies on the horn are gold-plated. The unusual shape and decoration of this dish is the main stimulus of its historical charm and cultural birthplace.

Ms. Harper has provided a more detailed report on this Raytheon. He dates this Rhyton to the beginning of the Sassanid period, and probably to the beginning of the fourth century, and believes that the construction of this object was influenced by non-Iranian patterns, and that Balkhi artists probably played an important role in this. The species and style of the tree depicted on the Raytheon cosmetic border with a wavy trunk and ornate branches represent a form of foliage found on silverware made in Balkh or India. He writes: In addition, the decomposition of the composition

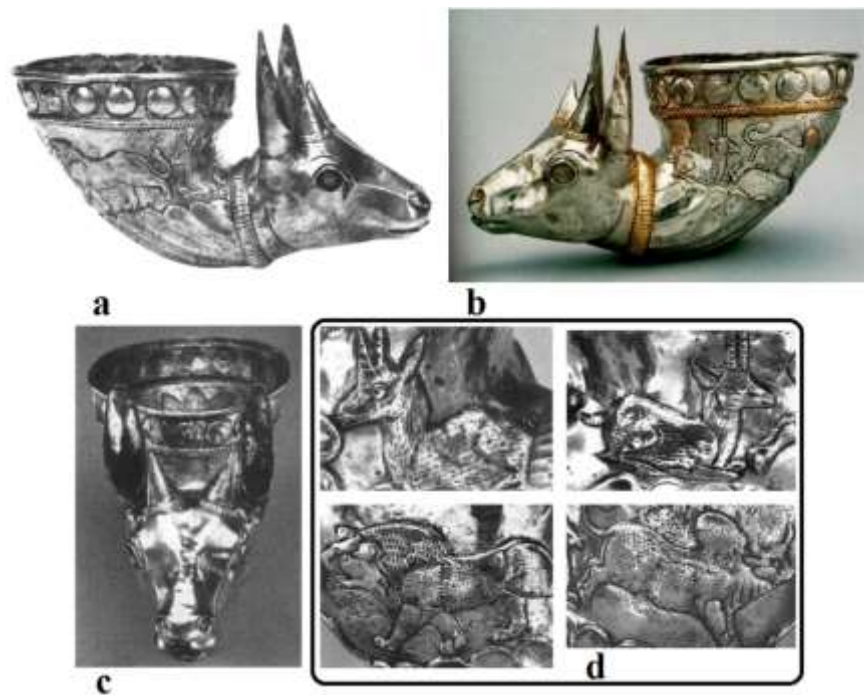


of the silver metal of this vessel also indicates the beginning of the Sassanid period. The technical and stylistic features used in this Rhyton, such as the use of spot gilding and the all-embroidered design, which represents the skin of animals, are among the features of silverware of the early Sassanid period.

This Rhyton is made with a combination of two different types of embossing technique, these two types are: embossing from the inside, and embossing from the outside.

The horn and the front part are made of a piece of metal. Gazelle ears are formed separately and inserted into the cavities of the anterior part. The edge of the dish is also considered as an added piece. At the same time, there are signs of using the tool on the inner surface and indicate some actions on the inner part. The existing design on the trumpet is created by creating holes on the outer surface. The skins of the animals are finely depicted, using only two types of holes, which mean crescent and oval holes, and a gilded amalgam with great radiance on various details such as the nose and the short horns of the gazelle in the anterior part, the trumpet divider strip and the anterior part, and the details of the embossed design on the trumpet (lion head, cow hump, central leaf of the tree, twisted strip below the edge, and two grooves on the underside of the trumpet) are seen. Becomes.

This gold-plated Raytheon dates back to the 4th century AD and is housed in the Sackler Museum. Its height is 15.5 cm, length is 25.4 cm, width is 1/14 cm and the diameter of the mouth is 14 cm and its approximate weight is 599 grams (Fig 3 a, b, c, d) (Gunter, 2004).



**Fig 3 (a, b, c, d (part of the image)).** Rhyton Trumpet Shape, Silver and Goldsmith, 4th Century AD, Arthur Sackler Exhibition (Gunter, 2004, 293-296)

## 7. Conclusion

The history of Rhyton art dates back to the fourth millennium BC and continued until before Islam, the Sassanids. Rhytons are vessels that are either entirely in the shape of an animal or in the



lower part of which the carving of an animal or a human is engraved and the upper part of which is in the shape of a horn or trumpet. These cups were used in religious ceremonies, court ceremonies and parties, and it was believed that by drinking the liquid, the cup transmits animal power to humans. Rhytons are in the form of various animals such as horned and legendary animals, lions, goats, deer, horses, cows, etc. These utensils are made of pottery, metal, ivory, glass, etc. with complete skill and mastery. It was common for courtiers and aristocrats to use gold and silver Rhytons, and for ordinary people to use pottery Rhytons. According to the classification of the type of Rhytons and according to the pictures and descriptions given, the features and characteristics of this ancient masterpiece have been revealed to some extent.

An examination of works from Parthian civilization and art reveals that the Parthians gradually abolished the influence of Greek culture and art during their reign, and revived the features of Achaemenid art. In the first century AD, Parthian art with its specific and national nature was revealed. Parthian art is rooted in Oriental art, not borrowed from Greece. Spiritual designs and interest in many details and details in the decoration originate from this eastern source. The Parthians took only what they liked from Greek art.

Parthian Rhytons are excellently written and polished. By examining these works, we can understand the different and influential artistic styles that were due to the vastness of the Parthian realm. According to the research, it has been found that the Rhytons of the first Parthian period are Eastern, but the decoration on them is from the Achaemenid period and the mythological scenes around them are Greek.

Sassanid art, which may seem separate from its predecessor, is essentially composed of ancient Persian and Oriental elements. Sassanid art explored the Achaemenid traditions that resulted from these elements, followed and perpetuated non-Hellenistic Parthian artwork, and paved the way for art that flourished in the Roman states. Construction. This art embodies the principles of Iranian aesthetics, which is the inheritor of the arts of Asia Minor, and has a force that can leave its mark on the arts of neighboring nations.

Some Sassanid Rhytons have been influenced by non-Iranian patterns. Spotted gilding and an all-embroidered design representing animal skins are among the characteristics of early Sassanid silver.

In general, the shape and decoration of the Rhytons of the Parthian and Sassanid periods are very close to each other, so it is very difficult to accurately distinguish the ancient metal and pottery works of these two periods. One common feature of the Rhytons of these two periods is the orifice or orifices that are embedded in the front of the animal's body from which the liquor jumps out. They stopped their mouths to drink alcohol. The difference between Sassanid Rhytons and Parthians is that the use of amalgam for gilding, as a prominent method, was common in the Sassanid period, but by studying the works of the Parthian period, no case of using mercury for gilding has been observed.

Based on the collection of Persian literary-historical sources, it is clear that the continuation of the ancient Iranian Rhyton, which is in the form of a complete animal, as well as the Rhytons that end in the anterior part of the animal, has entered the Islamic period.

## References

- Gershaman, R. (2011). *Iranian art during the Median and Achaemenid eras*. Third edition, Scientific and Cultural Publishing Company, Tehran.
- Gunter, C., & Paul, J. (2004). *Metalworking in Iran during the Achaemenid, Parthian, Sassanid eras*. Ganjineh Honar Publication, Tehran.

- Kalikan, W. (2008). *Materials and Persians*. Samir Publication, Tehran.
- Kambakhshfard, S. (2010). *Pottery and Pottery in Iran*. Fourth Edition, Phoenix Publication, Tehran.
- Malcolm, C. (2001). *Parthians*. Hirmand Publication, Tehran.
- Mason, M. Y., & Galina Anatolyona, P. (2005). *Parthian Rhyton of Nessa (Interpretation of Rhyton Patterns)*. Bazetab Andisheh Publication, Volume II, Tehran.
- Mohammadpanah, B. (2010). *The Forgotten Empire*. Sabzan Publication, Tehran.
- Mohammadifar, Y. (2008). *Archeology and Parthian Art*. Samt Publication, Tehran.
- Sami, A. (1964). *Achaemenid Civilization*. Shiraz Mousavi Printing House, Volume II, Shiraz.
- Sarfaraz, A. A., & Firoozmandi, B. (2008). *Archeology and Art of the Median, Achaemenid, Parthian, Sassanid Historical Periods*. Fourth Edition, Marlik Publication, Tehran.