AN ACHAEMENIAN BRONZE HEAD

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The art of casting in bronze was developed to a state of high proficiency in western Asia in the third millennium B.C., but examples of large-size bronze sculpture made in antiquity in Mesopotamia or Persia are few indeed in this present age. Only fragments of statues still exist, incomplete reminders that life-size bronzes were once comparatively numerous. Anyone who has been to the Iraq Museum in Baghdad will recall the extraordinarily lifelike head of a man with his long hair elaborately coiled and dressed, discovered in Nineveh by R. Campbell Thompson. In the Louvre, and thus more commonly known, there is a life-size statue, unfortunately with the head missing, the figure of a woman, Napir-Azu, the wife of Untash-Huban, king of Elam about 1250 B.C. A magnificent cast head of a man, not of bronze but of copper, is one of the outstanding works of art in the ancient Near Eastern collection in this Museum.

The Metropolitan Museum has recently acquired another cast sculpture of major importance, a bronze head, not of a human being but of an ibex, made when the Achaemenian kings ruled Persia in an empire that lasted for over two hundred years, from about 535 to 330 B.C.

Literary references to bronze-casting in Persia of that time are lamentably lacking. Among the Persepolis Treasury tablets translated by Cameron, which yield much interesting information, we find no direct references to bronze-casting—there are merely two tablets concerning the wages of “copperers(?)” (Ku-pir-ri-ia-i). Further excavation may fill this lacuna. However, in order to see how important was the casting in bronze of objects other than tools and weapons, let us look at the Assyrian records, where things of value are carefully specified in regard to the palaces built by kings and in the lists of booty captured from enemies. We read, for example, in Luckenbill’s translation of the records of Sargon, king of Assyria (721–705), these words put into the king’s mouth: “Following the prompting of my heart, I fashioned a work of bronze and cunningly wrought it. Over great posts and crossbars of wood, twelve fierce lion-colossi... At the command of the god, I built a form of clay and poured bronze into it, as in making half shekel pieces, and finished the construction.” These records tell us that large bronzes made in neighboring countries were destroyed by the Assyrians—a fate which, when they were conquered, undoubtedly befell their own statues. Sargon boasts that he took away from Musasir, a city in the kingdom of Urartu (Armenia), to the northwest of present-day Iran, “four statues of bronze, the colossi which guard his gates, whose four bases, as well as their shrines, were of cast bronze; one statue of Argishiti, king of Urartu, whose right hand was held in the attitude of blessing, together with its shrine weighing 60 talents of bronze [nearly 4,000 pounds]; one statue of Ursa [a king of Urartu] with two horsemen and his charioteer cast in bronze.” Many of these bronze statues were broken and melted down to be made into new shapes for new masters just as has happened in recent wars. Others perished by gradual disintegration over the centuries and so disappeared just as completely. Because it is chance and not aesthetic judgment that has preserved the large ancient Near Eastern bronzes now in existence we feel an especial pleasure when one of them still has the power and the beauty to enthrall us.

The ibex head is such a piece. It is a superb specimen of the bronze-caster’s art of the late sixth or early fifth century B.C. The head was cast by the lost-wax process in five separate parts: the horns, the ears, and the main mass of the head, including the beard. As can easily be seen in the illustrations there has been a little corrosion while it was buried in the earth. A number of holes in the horns, mostly in the grooves where the metal is very thin, are due to this. In addition, there are signs that, when the castings were new, they were not altogether with-
Bronze head of an ibex. Achaemenian, about 500 B.C. Although it is stylized the sculptor has expressed the essential character of the animal. Height about 14 inches. The tips of the horns are missing. Fletcher Fund, 1956
Details showing defects in the casting. Above: a hole formed when the molten metal ran into fissures in the core. Below: an oval patch on the chin, filled in by the casters with metal of a somewhat different color.

out blemish. One of the holes (see left), which has a convex edge at the top, was in the horn when freshly cast. It was caused by the molten metal running into two fissures in the core instead of completing this particular ring of the horn. The bronze that should have filled the hole piled up in two little pinnacles on the inside and is still there. Apart from the small blowholes, such as can be seen on the upper edge of the ear in the same illustration, there are signs of another defect, which the casters decided to hide. This is on the chin and is visible immediately below the lip in the lower photograph as a dark irregular oval with a lighter ring around it. The metal used as fill is of a different color and is more grayish in appearance than the original bronze.

But these little accidents in no way diminish the extraordinary ability of the metalworkers who made this head. They fully showed their powers by the way they joined these five castings together. Instead of taking the easy way out, by soldering, they set the ears and the horns into the head by fusion welding. This method requires great skill, and unless the metal-caster possesses this to a high degree the chances of the whole thing being spoilt are very great indeed. The essential definition of fusion welding, as Herbert Maryon says, is “melting the adjacent edges” and “running molten metal of the same kind into the intermediate space.” In this method the use of solder is thus excluded. Maryon tells how this method of joining bronze was employed also by the Greeks, with some failures, as in the Chatsworth head of the fifth century B.C., in which their efforts to join separately cast locks of hair were not completely successful. The ibex head has withstood the test of time and remains intact with no signs of weakness at any of the joins.

It is probable that before the pieces were fastened together a new core was inserted into the head and the ears and horns then set into place. A mold was built around the parts to be joined, and after sufficient heat had been applied the molten bronze was run in. This was a perilous process, but it succeeded, though some signs of the intense heat that had to be applied in order to fuse the molten metal properly can be
Front and back views of the ibex head. The ears are not set at the same angle, a feature that adds to the lifelike appearance of the animal. The clean modeling of the curls on the neck can be contrasted with those on the forehead, which have suffered in the process of affixing the horns to the head (see detail, p. 76).
seen in the distortion of the curls around the base of the horn and near the ears, where they have lost the precision of the original casting. What they were like before they were affected by this heat and reworked can be seen by looking at the curls on the back of the neck. The join of the ears is to a certain extent disguised by a projecting ring at the base of each, which has been tooled with a simple chevron pattern after welding. There are also visible results of the heat just above this decoration on the ears and also on the first ring of the horns. It takes the form of pitting and roughness of surface where the scale was taken off. Chasing was not confined to the chevron pattern at the base of the ears; it also appears on the beard and can be most clearly seen on the left side of the photograph on page 74, at the edge of the beard. It softens the transition from a highly patterned surface to a plain one.

Variety of surface is mostly achieved not by change of technique but by change or absence of pattern, various conventions being used. The line of the jaw of bulls in Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian art was very commonly emphasized by a “ruff” of short, parallel corkscrew curls. This convention was not restricted to any one medium and occurs on ivory, carved stone, and glazed brick. Ibexes also were sometimes embellished with this peculiar ruff, though the natural male ibex, like the bull, has no such mass of hair in this place. It was a decorative exaggeration. In this ibex head, however, the corkscrew curls have been turned into petal-like forms, each pair being separated by a fine ray. Clearly one convention has suggested another, still further removed from reality. These petals form the forward surface of a ridge, triangular in section. The rear surface is treated in another way, the decoration consisting of small herring-bones with central spines molded in relief. These form an interesting contrast both to the petal-like ornament and to the smooth polished surfaces contiguous to them. There is no attempt to represent the short hair on the cheek, neck, or ears—a convention employed in Egyptian and Greek art and still practiced today.

The hair on the back of the head and neck is highly decorative and is arranged in rows of parallel locks, each curling up at the end, those
on one side of the medial line curling to the left and those on the other curling to the right. This particular way of delineating curls is one that goes back to early Sumerian times. There is, however, a variation to be seen on the forehead, where the locks are elevated vertically so that the curl is at the upper end. This is a peculiarity of Achaemenian as distinguished from Assyrian or Babylonian art, most commonly to be seen in human heads. There is every reason to believe that it is related to a contemporary fashion in men's hairdressing. Artists seem to have been fascinated by this style, using it also for animals. The eyebrows are heavily emphasized and are of the typical pattern of the period. Other features of the head are treated in a monumental way. The cutting of the eyelids gives the feeling that they were sculptured in stone despite the fact that they were originally modeled in wax. As a result of the boldness of division between one plane and another and one type of surface and another there is no feeling of tentativeness, and, conventional though it may be, the ibex head gives a sense of a live being charged with power.

One wonders for what purpose the head was made. That it was not the head of a complete animal is certain because there is a distinct contraction in the neck just where it would widen were it attached to a body. It will be noticed that there are four circular holes at the base of the neck, and if the inside of the head is examined there are the rusted remains of iron attached to the area between the horns. It would seem, then, that the head was supported by an iron rod which probably formed the core of a wooden or stone plug into which four rivets were fastened to make the whole thing secure. Unfortunately we have no indication what the head was attached to. The design, however, strongly suggests that it was placed well above eye level, and this is borne out by the care that was taken to plug the defect in the chin, mentioned above. There is nothing contemporary to guide us, for not only is no Persian palace sufficiently well preserved to help us in this matter but there are no pictorial records either.

The ibex was symbolic in Mesopotamia of Ea, the god of sweet water, the god of wisdom, and
the patron of artists and artisans. But as symbol of this god, the forepart of the ibex was usually combined with the body of a fish. The ibex is mentioned as representing Ea by Gudea in an inscription concerned with the building of the temple of Ningirsu. In Barton’s translation we read: “Its inner sanctuary he constructed like the Abyss in a pure place. Its guard house (†), like the holy ibex of the Abyss, he made brilliant like the new moon standing in the heavens.” In later times the ibex was popular in Persian art as well as Assyrian, between which there was often a very close relationship. Ibexes standing on their hind legs with their bodies crossing each other appear on Assyrian cylinder seals of the eighth and seventh centuries, on a gold sheath of the same period found in Zawiyeh, and on an Achaemenian conical stamp seal. An example of the first is in the British Museum; the two last are in the Metropolitan Museum. In the ivories from Zawiyeh it is the ibex and not the ram that stands on either side of the “tree of life.” Here a religious significance is certainly present, but it is less certain in the frequent use of the head and forepart of the ibex as an isolated decorative feature, very common in the art of Persia, of ancient Elam, then of Luristan, and later of the Achaemenian empire. The ibex head can hardly be explained as a direct religious symbol in relation to the Mazdean religion of Persia. It is probably better to consider it as decoration; though it is always possible that animal heads such as this were intended to suggest other thoughts than purely aesthetic ones. When animals are used in a decorative way there is nothing to prevent people from regarding them as religious symbols or reading other qualities and purposes into them. They themselves cannot affirm or deny the attributions with which man may endow them.

The ibex itself, a strong and agile creature at home in the mountains of Persia, was and is today the difficult quarry of skilled hunters. That the head of such an animal should have figured in the decoration of Achaemenian palaces seems very natural. We are most fortunate that this ibex head has been preserved to our day. It reminds us that the Persians were capable of great technical and artistic skill, for no matter how it was used or what it may have suggested in the past, it is without question a technical triumph and a masterpiece.

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