The Senmurv

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The world of fantasy is well illustrated in the art of the ancient Near East. Birds with animal heads, animals with scorpion bodies, centaurs, sphinxes, and serpent-dragons are represented more frequently than natural fauna. For the most part these imaginative creatures remain unnamed, unmentioned in the literature that remains to us from the early periods, and the material evidence clearly shows that their significance changed over the millenniums. They may appear first as the attributes of one god and then centuries later as the companions of another; in some cases they cease to be beneficent forces and become the evil antagonists of gods or heroes.

In the rich heritage of monstrous beings that fell to the Sasanians when, at the beginning of the third century A.D., they became the masters of the Near Eastern kingdoms, there is little evidence of one demon who was to become a favorite during the three hundred years of Sasanian domination. A very ornate example of this creature, the senmurv, appears on a bronze plate (Figure 2) purchased last year by the Metropolitan Museum. The head is doglike, with open mouth displaying a forked tongue and a row of pointed teeth. The forelegs and paws are canine or feline, with sharp claws. The animal forepart then comes to an abrupt halt and the back half of the creature is a bird. Wings come from the shoulders and long slender feathers rise above the head. Finally a rich tail of double plumes curves out behind.

In the Avesta, the great book of the Zoroastrian religion that flourished in Iran from the Achaemenian through the Sasanian periods, from the fifth century B.C. to the seventh century A.D., there are a few references to a great bird, the saena, who was probably the senmurv. But our only real description of the creature comes from a collection of Pahlavi writings concerned with Zoroastrian mythology and compiled in the centuries after the fall of the Sasanian empire. The senmurv is said to be of three natures, and his actions are described thus: "The tree of all germs was produced, from which all species of plants continuously grow. And the senmurv has his resting place upon it; when he wanders forth from within it he scatters the dry seed into the water and it is rained back to the earth with the rain." His service to mankind as the distributor of the seeds of plants is obviously a beneficent one, and this explains his frequent appearance in Sasanian art, in metal, stucco, stone, textiles—in all mediums except seals. The small stone stamp seals carved during the Sasanian period are varied in subject matter and show a number of composite creatures, but almost never the senmurv. This is hard to understand, since there is no question of either his popularity or his importance. In a seventh century rock relief at Taq-i-Bostan in western Iran he is carved on the garment worn by the king, and many fine textiles of the Sasanian period which were worn by nobles or used as hangings in the royal court are decorated with medallions each enclosing a senmurv.

Some modern authors have translated the word senmurv literally as dog-bird, a meaning that certainly fits the form of the creature as represented in art. Although the Zoroastrian religion that gave him his meaning came relatively late to the ancient Near East, the artistic tradition of monster representation had existed there for thousands of years, and certain features or details of the senmurv link him to these earlier times. Two demons in particular, although their final forms are different, are related to him.
The first is the lion-griffin, part lion and part bird. In some of the earliest illustrations this creature carries weather-gods on his back. A seal (see Figure 3) of the Akkadian period, 2340-2180 B.C., is decorated with two such lion-griffins, bird-tailed, footed, and winged, their roaring leonine heads lowered and surmounted by figures wearing the horned crowns that are always the mark of divinity. On an Assyrian relief of the first millennium B.C. the lion-griffin becomes the victim rather than the cohort of an attacking weather-god. In later centuries he appeared most often as the antagonist of heroes, gods, or simply other fantastic animals. On a Babylonian seal (see Figure 4) of the late eighth or early seventh century B.C. an archer strides forward in full attack on a fleeing lion-griffin. Here the creature’s tall upright ear is represented as a bull’s ear, not a lion’s; this feature and the mane, wing, and clawed forepaw are all points of similarity between the lion-griffin and the senmurv.

The significance of the lion-griffin in the ancient East is obscure, but at least in his malevolent character he differs essentially from the senmurv. It has been suggested that he is the symbol of Nergal, god of the underworld, or perhaps one of the lion-and-bird conglomerates that inhabited his domain. Another possibility is that he is one of the monsters that Tiamat, mother of the gods in the Mesopotamian Epic of Creation, created to destroy her noisy and troublesome offspring.

She has set up the Viper, the Dragon and the Sphinx,
The Great Lion, the Mad Dog and the Scorpion Man,
Mighty lion-demons, the Dragon-Fly, the Centaur,
Bearing weapons that spare not, fearless in battle.

Under the leadership of the god Marduk, in the late Babylonian version of this myth, Tiamat and all her demons were destroyed. On the whole, it is probably wise to see in the lion-griffin merely one of the many evil forces that were believed to exist in the world and to be the constant antagonists of god or man. Since ancient literature gives few clues to his identity and since the representations clearly show him in a number of different roles, no one interpretation suffices for him.

The relation between this lion-and-bird conglomerate and the Sasanian dog-and-bird combination is, at least as far as the foreparts are concerned, reasonably close, and in translations of the Pahlavi texts the senmurv is sometimes called a griffin-bird. But the senmurv has certain minor features that the ancient representations of the lion-griffin did not. The most obvious of these is the series of parallel wrinkles or ridges along the horizontal upper surface of the nose. In the ancient Near East lions are characteristically represented with wrinkled noses, but the lines curve back from the tip horizontally or obliquely and then pass under or over the eye (see Figure 5). This tradition continued into the Sasanian period. The lines follow for the most part the contours of the nostrils; rarely do they go back evenly along the bridge of the nose. On the nose of the senmurv, on the other hand, the wrinkles appear as a series of short vertical lines running back along the bridge of the nose.

Such a nose is no more characteristic of the dog in Near Eastern art than it is of the lion, for it does not appear upon a stone fragment of a
Sasanian relief from the Museum’s excavations at Kasr-i-abu Nasr that shows a dog attacking a fleeing goat.

A nose like that of the senmurv is, however, frequently and continuously illustrated in the art of the ancient Near East as an attribute of the serpent-dragon. In the Akkadian period this monster was the attribute of the god Ningizzida, who guarded the entrance to the other world and was endowed with healing powers. Ningizzida later achieved greater prominence as the guardian of Gudea, ruler of Lagash, a city in southern Mesopotamia that for a period of fifty or sixty years was of major importance. In following centuries serpent-dragons continued to appear on a variety of monuments, but they were no longer connected with Ningizzida. On boundary stones set up by the Kassite kings of Babylonia in the second millennium B.C. they appear with other symbols of gods who were invoked to protect the agreement. In the first millennium the serpent-dragon was carved in a
The lion-griffin and the serpent-dragon are similar in many ways to the senmurv, but the feathered ending of the latter, the purely bird-like termination of his body, is not to be found in any of the animal conglomerates known from the heart of the ancient Near East, Iraq, or Iran.

Probably the first true prototypes of the senmurv came from the art of the nomads who spread westward across the Russian steppes in the beginning of the first millennium B.C. and infiltrated the lands on the northern borders of these ancient civilizations. The Scythians appeared in the seventh century B.C. around the shores of the Black Sea and in the Caucasus between the Black and Caspian Seas. Their art was rich in fantastic animal-bird combinations, often including forms that were taken over from the Near East and elaborated by the native artists. Imagination, fantasy, and a distinct taste for the decorative are all characteristics of the style they developed while they were in touch with the cultures of the Near East. It is here that the closest parallels to the senmurv appear from the fifth century B.C. onward. The variety characteristic of both the animal and bird parts in these early examples disappears by the time of the Sasanian empire and the form becomes relatively standardized.

The typical senmurv is clearly divided, having a canine forepart and feathered hindquarters. The forked tongue and wrinkled nose of the Museum’s senmurv are characteristic, though many examples have shorter, squarer noses. The tall upright ears, similar to those of the older Babylonian lion-griffin, are customary. The mane, which in the Museum’s example runs down the back of the neck in a row of curls, is in other cases shown as an upright ridge. Most senmurvs have a leonine ruff encircling the back of the jaw, and a decoration of scales or half palmettes on the neck; both these features are missing from the Museum’s plate. The forelegs complete the animal part of the body. One foreleg of the Museum’s senmurv has a fringe of hair running along it; perhaps it was by accident that the artist omitted it on the other leg.

The senmurv’s wing is composed of short pointed feathers for the lower section and longer waving tendrils forming the outer section; usually the latter turn forward toward the neck rather than back toward the tail. The two types of

great relief at Maltai in northern Iraq, bearing the god Assur on his back. On the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, built by Nebuchadnezzar and embellished with green, blue, yellow, orange, and white glazed bricks, the mushrushšu, as this dragon came to be called, alternated with bulls on the faces of the towers (see Figure 6). The scaled or wrinkled nose and the forked tongue are characteristic of the head, and in addition there is a curled tip at the end of the nose.

The ridged nose and forked tongue of the senmurv are not conclusive proof that the artist deliberately included reptilian elements in his representation, but the suggestion is reinforced by the fact that on some senmurvs scales are actually incised or punched onto the neck and hindquarters. In my opinion this means that the creature was thought to be part reptile as well as part animal and part bird.

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Fig. 3. Lion-griffins carrying weather-gods. Impression of a cylinder seal. Akkadian, 2340-2180 B.C. M.M.A. no. X.304.30
feathers are divided by a border decorated with any of various motifs. By far the commonest form of tail feather for a senmurv is that of a peacock. The rounded lobe rises behind the bird and is decorated either with separate feathers or with purely decorative designs such as the half palmette or curling vine. On the Museum’s plate the shape of the tail seems to be unique. The broad plumes rise in pairs curving to the right and to the left. At the end is a single pointed feather. These are the feathers of an ostrich rather than a peacock.

The roundel in the center of a plate (Figure 1) in the Hermitage museum in Leningrad—

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 5. Lion’s head. Gold appliqué. Achaemenian, v-IV century B.C. Height 1 3/8 inches**

Gift of Khalil Rabenou, 56.154.1

which has, incidentally, the finest collection of Sasanian metalwork in the world—shows a senmurv enclosed in a simple rope border similar to that surrounding the Metropolitan’s senmurv. The Leningrad senmurv, although executed in a quite different style, has many similar details. The tail and predominantly backward-curling feathers of the wing, though slenderer and hence more delicate than ours, are nonetheless closely related. The tail of the Leningrad senmurv again is not that of a peacock. The long feathers are oval and undulate outward and upward from the scaled body.

The Leningrad senmurv is generally dated to the end of the Sasanian period or to the beginning of the Islamic period on purely stylistic grounds. The half palmettes which border the underside of the neck are signs of this late date. Such essentially unrealistic details become more common in late Sasanian or post-Sasanian works. The tongue, tail, or the various joints turn into floral designs, and the artist is more concerned with producing an elaborate decorative scheme than with retaining any realism or even naturalism in the animal or plant forms. A tightness in the representations, an exaggeration of the different features of the body increases the sense of unreality in these later works.

The relative naturalism of the Museum’s senmurv makes it certainly a piece of Sasanian rather than post-Sasanian art and possibly from the middle rather than the end of this period. The fact that nearly all Sasanian metal vessels in existence come from clandestine digging or were purchased on the open market means that none of them can be exactly or even approximately dated on archaeological evidence. The only vessels to which dates can be given with some certainty are those with royal personages, whose crowns changed from reign to reign and thus serve to identify them. But such vessels rarely include mythological animals and are therefore not of much use for our comparison. Other Sasanian monuments, such as the immense rock reliefs in northern and southern Iran, illustrate official and historical scenes. In the one of the seventh century A.D. at Taq-i-Bostan mentioned earlier, the king wears an elaborate garment covered with floral designs and senmurvs. These belong to the conventional late Sasanian type with peacock tail and palmettes along the neck. The shape of the head, the enlarged nostril, and ridged nose are all fairly similar to the Museum’s senmurv, but the forked tongue is lacking and the back of the jaw is encircled by the familiar ruff which has been omitted on the Museum’s plate. The creatures with their paws outstretched before them appear to be in flight, while the Museum’s senmurv seems stationary.

The Metropolitan’s plate, which was cast and then chased, is said to come from Mazanderan, a province northwest of Teheran and bordering on the southwestern edge of the Caspian Sea. This was a wealthy and prosperous area during the Sasanian period, and recent excavations in these regions by the Japanese as well as numer-
ous clandestine diggings have produced a quantity of Sasanian pottery, metalwork, and glass. Although the dish is bronze, a common enough material for plates or bowls, the nature of the alloy is unusual in that it has a high tin content (twenty-two to twenty-five per cent) and some iron. Both account for the fine golden sheen of the metal and its extreme brittleness. This uncommon technical feature is found in a few other metal bowls, some perhaps earlier in date, which also reputedly come from northwestern Iran. It is perfectly possible, therefore, that the Museum's plate was actually made in the province of Mazanderan where workshops producing metal vessels had been active for a long time before the Sasanian period.

After the Arab conquest in the seventh century A.D. the senmurv changed its nature. The Zoroastrian religion was gradually overwhelmed by the new Arab Mohammedanism, and much of the older lore and mythology was lost, replaced, or blended together. The Shah Namah, or Book of Kings, written by the Iranian poet Firdausi in the eleventh century A.D., includes history and legend from the earliest times through the Sasanian period. In this epic there is a bird, the simurgh, who cared for the abandoned son of the king Sam (see Figure 7). When the king returned after years spent searching for the child, the great bird, having given his adopted offspring a feather which he was to burn if he ever needed the simurgh,

Bore him with stately motion to the clouds,
And swooping down conveyed him to his sire.

In this tale nothing remains of the tree of good seeds or of the senmurv's travels to scatter those seeds around the world. His benevolence to man is remembered in his care of the child—but the creature represented by the Sasanians, the dogbird with features of the ancient lion-griffin and serpent-dragon, has disappeared forever.
NOTES


Fig. 7. The simurgh returning the king’s son. Detail of an illustration for the Shah Namah by Firdausi. Persian, XVII century A.D. Gift of Alexander Smith Cochran, 13.228.17