

Monkey Business

R. D. BARNETT

The British Museum, London

In December 1903, the British Museum, London, got as a gift from Sir Robert Hamilton Laing (1836-1913)—who had been Her Majesty's consul at Larnaka, Cyprus, in 1871-72, and had excavated at Idalion—a large collection of Cypriote antiquities. But one item (BM.98321) of the collection does not seem to belong at all, and no information has survived as to where Laing obtained it. It has been ignored for seventy years probably because no one could decide what it represents and to what period and region it belongs. It is a white limestone slab 21" x 20", carved in low relief with a curious scene, unfortunately much damaged (plate 1). It shows a man (now decapitated) wearing a tunic and trousers edged with a vertical piping along the seam, sitting turned to the right, on a well-bred camel, moving to the right. There can be seen at his knee the top of the Iranian rider's thigh boot.¹ From his trousers, the camel rider must be an Iranian, possibly a Palmyrene but certainly not an Arab.² From the position of the rider's torso it is clear that his head, now lost, was depicted full-face. His feet, too, are lost together with the camel's rump, tail and legs. The camel has a long and sinuous, almost swan-like neck, pointed ears and a long nose. But the strangest feature of the whole scene is the figure of a monkey, which sits facing the rider on the camel's withers. It is a prisoner, for round its neck is a collar attached by a chain to the spear shaft (upraised in the rider's left hand), which it joins just behind the blade. The rider's right hand is extended to the monkey, to steady it.

What does it mean and to what can it be compared? The nearest parallels in composition seem to be rough and rustic stelae, representing military mounted deities from Syria of the third and fourth centuries A. D. A small basalt stele, recently acquired by the British Museum,³ shows a long-haired figure facing frontally but also turned to the right, riding a horse and

1 This article, called *paramēridion* in Greek, is discussed by P. Bernard, "Une pièce d'armure perse sur un monument lycien," *Syria* 41 (1964), 195-212, and on its later form, see H. Seyrig, "Armes et costumes iraniens de Palmyre," *Syria* 18 (1937), 10-13.

2 For an Arab camel-rider in Syria, cf. von Oppenheim and Moortgat, *Der Tell Halaf III*, pl. 27; for South Arabian camel-riders, *CIS IV*, 3: pls. XLIV (698); XLV (705, 708); XLVI (718); XLVII (719, 720); and a seal (BM. 117716) in Wiseman and Barnett, *Fifty Masterpieces of Ancient Near Eastern Art* (London, 1969), 91, pl. 45.

3 BM. 135708, height 72 cms. See Christie's *Sale Catalogue (Egyptian and Near Eastern Antiquities)* April 11, 1972, 18, no. 44. From the region of Khanaser: R. Mouterde, *Mélanges de l'université St. Joseph* 11 (1926), 309-22.

holding spear and buckle (plate 2). A small limestone stele from Tell Halaf ⁴ shows a warrior also facing frontally, very schematically represented, riding a camel. The warrior's hair is up-raised *en brosse*. Cumont, in publishing this Tell Halaf slab, suggested that this is the Arab-Palmyrene camel-riding military god, Azizos, ⁵ one of the divine pair known to the Palmyrenes and Edessans as Arṣu and Azizu.

These twin deities were identified with the evening and morning star, and the Edessans, according to Julian the Apostate, ⁶ worshipped them as companions of the sun. So these two stelae might be used to explain our fragment as representing Azizu, the morning star, who was, according to Iamblichus, also identified with Ares as a military god, while the god Arṣu was identified with Mercury. ⁷ But a difficulty is that Azizos does not have anything to do with monkeys, as far as I know, nor do these *dromedarii* ⁸ (light armed camel-troops) whom he represents appear to have worn Iranian dress.

A closer parallel to the camel is a series of three Sassanian bowls of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. showing a camel-riding king. The finest of these is in the Museum of Wine at Mouton (Pauillac), belonging to Baron Philippe de Rothschild. ⁹ Two other bowls, less spectacular, are in the Hermitage (plate 3). All three show the famous hero of legend, Bahram Gur ¹¹ (421-438 A.D.) riding a camel of exactly the type of our limestone slab and shooting at a herd of gazelle—no easy feat. Two of his shots have landed so neatly and powerfully on the gazelle's head that its horns have been shorn off and lie beside it on the ground. Behind the rider sits nonchalantly no monkey, but Bahram's female companion, Azade. Bahram was famous as the hunter of the fleet wild ass, that is (more exactly), the onager, herds of which still exist in the desert of Southern Iran, and formerly existed in that of Syria. These bowls suggest that our slab could be even Sassanian in date, and probably is, and seems to have been part of a large frieze or hunting scene, since the camel's rump is missing. From where and how it can have wandered to Cyprus and, whether in antiquity or modern times, is anybody's

4 F. Cumont, "Un dieu syrien à dos de chameau," *Syria* 10 (1929). Bossert, *Altsyrien*, fig. 528. This stele was then in private possession in Aleppo. The present whereabouts of this interesting monument is unknown to me.

5 "The good and compassionate god," Palmyrene text apud H. Ingholt, *Studien over Palmyrensk Skulptur* (Copenhagen, 1928), 45, quoted by Cumont, *Syria* 10.

6 Julian, *Orat.* IV: 150f.

7 For a representation of the camel-rider god and his cult at Dura, see Rostovtzeff, Brown and Welles, *Dura-Europos: preliminary report, Seventh and Eighth Seasons* (1939), pl. XXXI. See also Ingholt, *Studien*, pl. VII, 2 for relief showing this god. On early Arab gods, see Seyrig, "Les dieux armés et les Arabes en Syrie," *Syria* 47 (1970).

8 See Cumont, *Un dieu syrien*, and Seyrig, loc. cit.

9 Illustrated in *Observer* (London), *Magazine Supplement*, 18 February 73, p. 27 [and plate 5, see post-script Ed.] For sculptures illustrating camel-riders from the Temple of Bel at Palmyra, see Seyrig, "Sculptures palmyréniennes antiques," *Syria* 22 (1941).

10 J. Orbeli and C. Trever, *Sasanidskii Metall* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1935), pls. 11 and 12.

11 See Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam* on Bahram: "They say, 'the lion and the lizard keep/the halls where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep/ and Bahram, that great hunter, the Wild Ass/ stamps o'er his head, and cannot break his sleep'." The first allusion is to Persepolis, in Iranian called *Takht-i-Jamshid*, 'The Throne of Jamshid'.

guess. But again, no monkey.

What about the monkey? Monkeys have a long and fairly respectable history in the ancient Near East. They were pets in Egypt and probably also in Mesopotamia from early times. An Egyptian stele in East Berlin of the Nineteenth Dynasty shows one attached by a lead round its waist to the chair of its master, a cavalry general named Ria and his wife Mi.¹² There are monkey amulets from archaic levels at Warka, and in the grave of Meskalam-shar at Ur was found a copper pin topped with a delightful gold figure of a monkey.¹³ On a large stone cylinder in the Metropolitan Museum from Gök-tepe near Rezaiyeh of Early Dynastic date is carved a fine scene showing the sun-god issuing from his temple at daybreak. Beside him are the bull-man attendants holding up the gate posts and behind one squats a monkey. So a monkey can keep celestial company and be associated with the sun.¹⁴ In Cilicia at Karatepe on a relief of the ninth century B.C.,¹⁵ a hideous figure derived from the Egyptian god Bes, whom I believe to represent here a Western form of the monster Humbaba,¹⁶ is flanked by two long-tailed monkeys. This, I think, just to give local color and to suggest that Mount Amanus where Humbaba lives is a kind of jungle. In Mesopotamian cylinder seals¹⁷ a tailed monkey of the type of Hanuman from India is frequently depicted, and one is seen brought by Phoenicians perhaps from Ophir, as a gift to King Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud in the ninth century B.C.¹⁸ But we needn't always look for deep symbolic meanings in their presence in ancient Mesopotamian art and life. Monkeys in fact, as said, could be just pets. For sheer fun, we have the delightful Sumerian monkey's letter to his mother¹⁹ in which he complains scornfully to his mother, 'Ludiludi' (a pure nonsense name), like any schoolboy at a boarding school, of the miserable food which is given at Ur. It was evidently given as a model for youth-

12 Egyptian Museum, East Berlin, DDR, Inv. 7278, from Memphis c. 1300 B.C.; limestone, height 97 cm., length 168 ex Passalacqua Collection. I owe this reference to the kindness of Mr. P. Clayton.

13 C. L. Woolley, *Ur Excavations* 2: 158, pl. 165: in general, see E. D. van Buren, *The Fauna of Ancient Mesopotamia as represented in Art, An. Or.* 18 (1939), 22-24.

14 C. Lehmann-Haupt, "Materialien zur älteren Geschichte Armeniens und Mesopotamiens," *AGWG NF* 9 (1907), 8-9, figs 3a-b.

15 E. Akurgal and M. Hirmer, *The Art of the Hittites* (London, 1962), pl. 147.

16 On representations in Phoenicia and Syria of the slaying of Humbaba, see H. Kantor, *JNES* 21 (1962), 112-17 and Mallowan, *Nimrud and Its Remains* 2: fig. 457.

17 See E. van Buren, *Fauna*.

18 E. Budge, *Assyrian Sculptures in the British Museum*, pl. XXVIII.

19 I am deeply indebted to my friend, Professor Aaron Shaffer, for introducing me to The Monkey Letter which he has kindly collated for me. It reads: " (1) To Ludiludi my mother (2) speak: (3) Thus says the monkey (4) Ur is the glorious city of Nanna (5) Eridu is the prosperous city of Enki (6) But as for me, I sit behind the door of the house of the master musician (7) and eat garbage (8) May I not die from it! (9) I taste not bread, I taste not beer (10) send me a messenger! (11) Most urgent!" (latest editions: F. A. Ali, *Sumerian Letters: Two Collections from the Old Babylonian Schools*, University of Pennsylvania Ph.D. Dissertation (Ann Arbor, 1964), 120; Van Dijk, *La Sagesse Suméro-Accadienne* (Leiden, 1953), 14; cf. also E. Gordon, "Animals as represented in the Sumerian Proverbs," *Drevniy Mir* [dedicated to B. Struve] (Moscow, 1962), 228; Falkenstein, *ZA* 49 (1950), 327. This text is appended to the end of a series of Sumerian state letters from Nippur.

ful scribes to copy by way of light relief from harder tasks.²⁰ Perhaps such ideas of animals acting like humans, which we find in Mesopotamian art, came to Sumer with the monkey from India, the classic home of the animal fable.²¹ A well-known terracotta plaque of the Old Babylonian period shows a remarkable scene in which a hunter shoots with an arrow at a monkey in a tree; a kneeling man behind the hunter seems to restrain him, while a boar approaches the tree. We can easily see in it a lost animal fable, with the moral that while one kills a friend, the real enemy is creeping up (plate 4).²² But in Iran, life grew evidently more and more earnest for the monkey and, at some date well before the eighth century B.C., he became translated to heaven. This is shown by the remarkable bronze bowl in the Foroughi Collection in Teheran, which gives us a star map of the heavens, unique in our surviving material from antiquity.²³ It is also remarkable in illustrating what appears to be a partly, indeed largely, non-Mesopotamian, presumably Iranian astronomical scheme. In the center of the bowl between two large stars and two constellations shaped as a pair of hunting boots is the starry figure of a hunter-god armed with spear standing on an ibex. He seems to represent the constellation Orion, the Babylonian Papsukkal, standing on SUHUR-MAŠ^{ha} or Caper. To his right is (apparently) the Plough and the Pleiades. To his left is a bull's head, made of stars, presumably the constellation Taurus; below it is a kind of starry *ankh* sign, possibly *Corona borealis* or *coma Berenices*, while above it is a tailed monkey surrounded by twelve stars, for whom I cannot find a name or parallel. This learned symbolism, which at least once more associates the monkey with the hunter though on the astral plane, may possibly be relevant to our slab. One could have judged better if our camel rider had kept his head. The hunter god of the Iranians is Mithras, and there is at Dura a fine Parthian fresco illustrating him shooting from the saddle at all manner of wild beasts.²⁴ But we can only safely say that we have here part of a Sassanian sculptured scene in which a god or a mortal,²⁵ perhaps endowed with divine overtones, is illustrated hunting with a captive pet monkey. It remains for me something of a monkey puzzle. Perhaps others can supply the answer.

Postscript:

Since completion of the above article, I have received from Madame Meniel, of the Museum of the Chateau Mouton Rothschild, by courtesy of the Baron and Baroness Philippe de Roths-

20 On the Sumerian scribal schooling, see C. J. Gadd, *Teachers and Students in the Oldest Schools*, Inaugural Lecture, 6 March 1956 (School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1956).

21 On animal fables, see A. Aarne and S. Thompson, *The Types of Folk Tale* (1961).

22 BM. 128891. S. Smith, *British Museum Quarterly* 11 (1936-37), pl. xxxiii d; R. Opificius, *Das altbabylonische Terrakottarelie* (Berlin, 1961), pl. 21, no 643.

23 R. D. Barnett, "Homme masqué ou Dieu-Ibex?" *Syria*, 43 (1966).

24 Dura Europos, *Seventh-Eighth Season: Preliminary Report*, pls. XIV-XV.

25 On the frontal face in Parthian and Sassanian art, see D. Schlumberger, "Descendants non-méditerranéens de l'art Grec," *Syria* 37 (1960), 290, n.3. He points out that Sassanian art uses a mixture of profile and frontal views (the latter for gods and kings in center of a composition), whereas Parthian art uses only frontal faces.

child, a photograph of their fine Sassanian bowl (plate 5), which I am most indebted to them for permission to reproduce. I add the detailed description of Madame Meniel:

GRANDE COUPE A VIN

Les Sassanides buvaient à même la coupe et ils la tendaient aux autres convives. Au centre du bol, Bahram V, grand chasseur, monté sur un chameau tire à l'arc la gazelle. Le roi porte l'habillement royal et la fameuse couronne sassanide avec laquelle il est toujours représenté. Au sommet de la couronne, un globe, le monde, est entouré des bras du croissant de la lune. La tête du chameau, recouverte d'une fine plaque d'or est petite et fine comme celle des chameaux de l'Iran. Son harnachement est complété d'un collier de perles de trois rangs, d'un mors, d'un montant en perles, et de pompons dorés. Sur le pourtour, quatre gazelles fuyant les flèches du roi. Les bois décapités d'une gazelle mâle flottent, seuls, dans l'air. Quelques collines fleuries, gravées près du bord. Le bol est ceint d'une bande en vermeil.

Diam. 22 cm.

Argent, vermeil et or. Sassanide.

Vème siècle après J.C. vers 430.

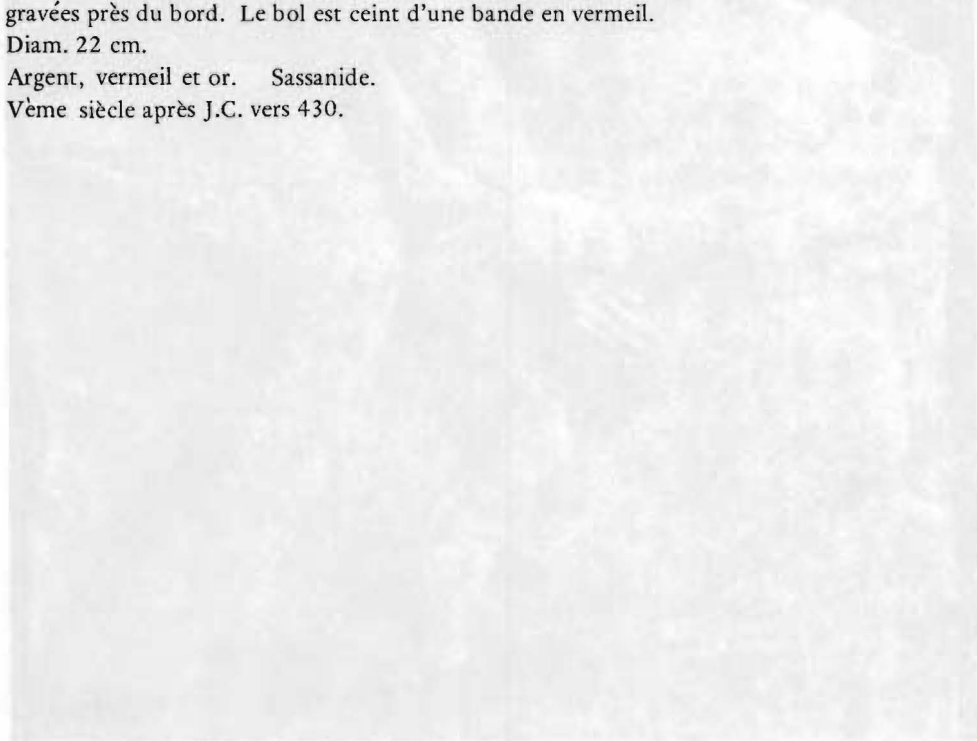




Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plate 5