AN IDENTIFICATION OF THE CHAIN-ARMOURED EQUESTRIAN IMAGE AT THE LARGER GROTTO, TAQ-I BUSTAN

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As for the Larger Grotto at Taq-i Bustan near Kermanshah in North-Western Iran, it is well known that more than thirty years ago there had continued between E. Herzfeld and K. Erdmann a hot controversy as regards the identification of the Sasanian king represented on the rock-cut reliefs thereof.\(^{(1)}\)

After their controversy, many scholars have continued to adopt either of the views of these two German scholars without adding new interpretations, except some two of whom analysed costumes and thongs (Riemenzungen) represented in the royal boar hunting scene and the rest either by comparing Taq-i Bustan complex including capitals with Byzantine Art or reassessing literary evidences.\(^{(2)}\) And nowadays, E. Herzfeld's view seems to be held by most of scholars, though in the present author's view, not fully convincing.

As is clearly shown by this still completely unsolved problem of the identification of the king who must have ordered to hew out that larger grotto with bas-reliefs and haut-reliefs, scholarly attention seems to have concentrated upon the identification of the king and the date of the grotto, disregarding or unnoticing another important problem still awaiting the keen-sighted investigations.

However, in 1971, Hubertus von Gall published a quite brilliant paper\(^{(3)}\) in which he clarified the importance of the equestrian image for the first time. Almost before and after his paper appeared, most of the scholars regarded the chain-armoured equestrian image at the lower back-side of the Larger Grotto (pl. II-a) is the same person with the king standing between Anâhitâ and Ahura Mazda in the upper investiture scene. In other words, they regarded the equestrian image as representing another theme than the king's investiture, but according to H. von Gall's new interpretation, this equestrian image is intimately connected with the upper investiture scene from the iconographical and compositional view-points. He concluded on the basis of the shape of
the Grotto imitated after "Zeltiwan oder Iwanartige Baldachin" of the Sasanian king, and also of his interpretation that both investitur scene (upper) and the seemingly independant equestrian image (below) constitute together a "Thron-Iwan" similar in function to the famous Takht-i Taqdis (Cosmic Throne) reported by al-Tabari, al-Tha'aliibi and by Byzantine chroniquers.(4)

And in order to corroborate his new interpretation, he regards two columns beside the equestrian image, as possessing the same role and significance as the zoormorphic legs of the "Kline" represented at the rock-cut investiture scene of an Elymaidan prince at Tang-i Sarwak.(5) In the latter investiture scene of the late Parthian period, there are represented three female deities two of whom are sitting on stool and chair, but the rest standing. These three goddesses investing the prince seem to correspond to two Zoroastrian gods in the upper story and the equestrian image at the back-side of the Larger Grotto, if we admit the equestrian image was a god or celestial being except a living Sasanian king.

According to H. von Gall's interpretation, the equestrian image corresponds exactly with one standing female deity holding Cornucopia at Tang-i Sarwak, whom he regards as Tyche-Xvarnah, and finally identifies her with Iranian Daemon "Fravaši". On the other hand, the brand-mark (′ ) on the right-side of the horse and the same marks also on the saddle-girth of the horse, were already interpreted as the sign of Fravaši by J. M. Unvala and R. Göbl. Following this interpretation, he had concluded that the equestrian image in question is regarded as abstract Fravaši (not of the king's own) who is witnessing the investiture ceremony represented in the upper lunette. This daring, but quite convincing view was soon accepted by J. Kellens with more detailed literary evidences.(7)

The author of this paper also agrees with the view of H. von Gall in most of lines, but cannot accept all his interpretation. Therefore in this short paper we should like to present a slightly different iconographical interpretation of the equestrian image and also our own iconological investigation of the rock-cut relief complex of the interior of the Larger Grotto. Our arguments start from our recent discovery(8) of a decorative motif hitherto unnoticed but clearly remaining at the top of the half-broken large tassel hanging on the right-side of the armour-clad horse (pl. II-b).

As far as a pair of the large Sasanian tassels are concerned, their top consists of a ring through which the tassel is suspended by something like a string
or chain as is clearly shown by the equestrian warrior image of Bahram I (273–276) at Naqsh-i Rustam.

However, on the large tassel of this armour-clad horse is not represented such a ring. And the uppermost part of the hairy materials composing the ordinary Sassanian tassels is decorated or covered with acanthus leaves, calyx or merlons, but there is no such decoration at this large tassel of the equestrian lancer of Taq-i Bustan. Instead of those ordinary motifs, the top of the large tassel hanging on the right-side of the armoured horse is composed of a sphere on which are sculptured three human (divine) heads horizontally (pl. I). Consequently, the connecting part between this spherical top and hairy body of the large tassel is shaped like a human neck and its lowermost part is decorated with neck-band on which pearls are represented continuously. This upper portion of the large tassel is too much damaged to be noticed by other researchers visiting the site, but according to the present author’s scrupulous investigation done in 1978 at the spot, there remain clearly the profile contours of two heads of both sides. On these profiled faces there is not represented beard, whisker nor moustashe at all, and their faces look like female. As for the central face represented perfectly frontally, it is so much damaged that we can notice only the lower part around chin and head-gear resembling Athena Promakos’ helmet. Its face is also clean-shaven and seems to be female.

We think that the identification of this unique motif might contribute to the solution of the iconography of the chain-armoured equestrian warrior of the Larger Crotto at Taq-i Bustan, therefore, in the following we try to show several probable identifications, though hypothetical, of this tricephalic image.

As the most general interpretation, this tricephalic image might be regarded as an apotropaic decoration already noticed by tri- or bicephalic images (gods?) on vessels of Elam and Hittite. Furthermore, we know that Greek and Roman vessels are often decorated with human-shaped heads for apotropaic or prophylactic purposes. In this connection, some Roman glasses and green-glazed vessels decorated with human-headed low-relief might have played an intermediate role for transmitting this apotropaic idea into the Partho-Sasanian cultural sphere, as is indicated by lots of earthenware discovered at Khotan (7–8th centuries) and by a ewer from Ak-Tepe in Tadjikistan (4th century). Therefore, we might regard this tricephalic motif as an apotropaic decoration for protecting the Sasanian royal tassel from demons, enemies and those created by Ahriman.
Secondly, we should take into consideration an enemy’s cut head hanging form martingal of the horse of a hunter represented on a Post-Sasanian silver plate housed at Hermitage. Among the Eurasian equestrian nomads there is said to have been a custom to decorate their horse-trappings with enemy’s cut head(s). We know that there are few “Sasanian” silver phalerae decorated with a human head which might have a apotropaic significance. The above-mentioned silver plate was probably made in Khorasan modelled after 4th century Sasanian silver plate. On the other hand, we can notice some Central Asian and North-Iranian costumes in the rock-cut reliefs at Taq-i Bustan, it is quite probable that our tricephalic image might have the same function as the Eurasian enemy’s cut-head on the silver plate, to emphasize equestrian warrior’s distinguished valour and strength. In this connection, we should remember that on the Sasanian equestrian investiture scenes produced during third century, a vanquished enemy’s corpse is lying trampled under the feet of the royal horse on which Sasanian king is being invested by Ahura Mazda on horse-back. Therefore it might be probable that such a lying corpse of fallen enemy of Sasanian king became to be represented by that tricephalic image which means three enemies’ cut heads, in 7th century. More concretely speaking, this tricephalic image symbolizes three enemies who contested the Sasanian Shahan-Shah’s Throne with the king or opposed him who is represented in the upper investiture scene, such as Khosraw II (591–628) who fought with three foes (Bahram Chovin, Byzantine emperors Phocas and Heraclius). Or, if we follow H. von Gall’s interpretation, this armour-clad equestrian warrior might be taken as Fravashi of Shahpur I (241–272) who fought with three Roman emperors (Gordianus, Phillipus Arab and Valerianus) and made depict his “triple victory” on several rock-cut reliefs in Fars.

Next we should investigate this tricephalic image from the Zoroastiran view-points. First of all we should compare this tricephalic image with that represented on the reverse of bronze coins issued by a Parthian king, Phraates IV (37–2 B.C.). According to E. Herzfeld, the tricephalic image on those coins is actually of four faces and means four-faced Zurvan. As for this identification, J. Duchesne-Guillemin, G. Widerngren and R. C. Zaehner also admit four elements or characteristics of Zurvan, therefore our tricephalic image might represent three faces of tetracephalic image of four-folded Zurvan as was indicated by E. Herzfeld.
On the other hand, our tricephalic image might be regarded as that of the Zoroastrian saviour "Saošyant". According to R. Pettazoni, (18) Saošyant is looking over the world with the aid of six eyes, and his six eyes are distributed among his three faces or heads. R. Pettazoni argues that this tricephalic representation of Saošyant which he considers to symbolize the omniscience of the god, was created under the Indian influence such like Hindu and Buddhist Trimurtis. Furthermore, this tricephalic representation seems to have existed even in a Early Islamic bronze vessel on which Sun god is represented with four eyes, three mouths and noses within one circular head. If Saošyant with six eyes was represented in Late Sasanian period just like Sun god on that bronze vessel, our tricephalic image with four eyes, three noses and mouths might be regarded as representing the ominiscient Saošyant who was considered to raise the dead king in the last judgement and to resurrect him in the Paradise.

Thirdly we should compare our tricephalic motif with the malicious dragon Azi-Dahákā created by Ahriman, which according to Abân Yast (IX) and Bahrâm Yast (XIV), is "three-mouthed, three-headed and six-eyed" (The Zend-Avesta, pt. II, trans. by J. Darmesteter, The Sacred Books of the East, vol. XXIII, p. 61). This tricephalic monster is said to have been killed by Thráetoana, Frédon and Verethragna, and the myth of dragon-slayer (Vṛtra-han) is also reflected in Kārnāmak-i Artakhshir-Papakān. According to this literature, Ardashir I (224–241) fought with a dragon Haštán-bóxt (=Azi-Dahákā) and killed that monster. (19)

And on Ardashir I’s equestrian investiture scene at Naqsh-i Rustam the human corpse trampled under the feet of the horse of Ahura Mazda, has a head crowned by snakes, possibly symbolizing Ahriman and Azi Dahákā. Therefore it is quite probable that the Indo-Iranian Dragon Slayer's myth was absorbed into the Sasanian royal ideology (20) and consequently, our tricephalic image represents anthropomorphically that tricephalic dragon such as Azi Dahákā, Haštán-bóxt. In this connection, our observation that all three faces of our tricephalic head are of female, seems to be quite important for this identification. According to L. A. Campbell, (21) the Zoroastrians seem to have made tricephalic female head connected with dragon-slayer. He cites Firmicus Maternus' description of the dragon-slayer myth adopted into Mithraic mysteries as follows;

... They (Persians) even fashion the female with a triform face and bind her about with monstrous serpents ....
If this was the case, we can understand why our tricephalic motif is composed of female faces such as Athena, Artemis and Tyche which might have been made by a Byzantine sculptor. And as for probable Byzantine influence, our tricephalic image recalls threefold Hecate who, as a chthonic goddess, might have been used as a model for representing anthropomorphically the Iranian chthonic satan “Ahriman” which was assimilated to the Semitic chthonian Hadad with three-headed Cerberos in Syro-Mesopotamia.

Fourthly, we might equate our tricephalic motif with the tricephalic image painted at the fresco discovered by A. Stein at Kuh-i Khwāja in Seistan. According to Ph. Eckermann, this painted tricephalic image represents Sun god and three faces mean the sunrise, high-noon and sunset. Therefore, if this Sun god was equated with Mithra, our Tricephalic image might symbolize the omniscient Mithra who is said to be watching over the world with a thousand eyes. However, Mithra seems to have been in the Sasanian Royal iconography with two-eyed head crowed with radiate nimbus just like the Mithra represented in the rock-cut investiture scene of Ardashir II (379–383) at Taq-i Bustan, this interpretation might not be probable. And we know that there are represented tricephalic images on the reverse of the Kushan coins, the tricephalic statue (Siva=Heraceles?) from Shaozma-kala in Northern Afghanistan, the three-headed Veshparkar in Sogdian fresco-paintings and Buddhist and Hindu Trimurtis from India and Central Asia, but we might disregard the influence from these Eastern precedents or the likes, because our tricephalic motif seems to be composed of female heads of the Western or Classical plastic tradition.

In the above-tried arguments, we treated this tricephalic image quite independently from other motifs of the equestrian warrior. In the following we will try to identify it by correlating it with other motifs of the equestrian warrior and of the rock-cut reliefs of the Larger Grotto.

First of all we should pay attention to the fact that our equestrian warrior is well armed like clibanarius with long spear, circular shield and bow and arrows in addition to chain-armour. In this connection, in Bahram Yast Verethragna is described as follows;

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(The Zend-Avesta, pt. II, trans. by J. Darmesteter, SBE, vol. XXIII, pp. 231 ff.) And furthermore, there are known a few Sasanian stamp-seals on which is represented a radiate cavalier with lance fighting with multi-headed serpent (dragon, Hydra). According to K. B. Trever, this cavalier is Verethragna (St. George) fighting with Azi-Daháka. (27)

And furthermore, the Kushan OPΘΛΑΓΝΗΚ=Verethragna was according to R. Renou and E. Benveniste, "coiffé d’un casque que surmonte un ciseau (le vâragna), appuyé de la main gauche sur une lance, tenant de la main droite la poignée d’une épée suspendue à ceinture (Vētra et Vṛthragna, 1934, p. 81).

According to these description and documents, Verethragna best-armed of all the heavenly gods might be well reflected in our equestrian warrior.

On the other hand, we can find out the following descriptions as regards Fravasis in Fravardin Yast (The Zend-Avesta, pt. II, p. 189, 191):

We worship the good, strong, beneficient Fravashis of the faithful, who form many battalions, girded with weapons, lifting up spears, and full of sheen; who in fearful battles come rushing along where the gallant heroes go and assail the Dānus. We worship the good, strong, beneficient Fravashis of the faithful; with helms of brass, with armour of brass; who struggle in the fights for victory in garments of light, arraying the battles and bringing them forwards, to kill thousands of Daēvas.

As for the latter description, F. Wolff translates as follows (Avesta die heiligen Bücher der Parsen, Strassburg, 1910, p. 236);

Die guten gewaltigen Fravasays der Asagläubigen verehran wir, die mit metallenen Helmen, mit metallenen Angriffswaffen, mit metallenen Schilden in lichtumstrahlten Schlachten kämpfen, die die gezückten Dolche führen, um tausend Daēvas zu erschlagen.

J. Kellens adds the following description from Bundahishn (op. cit., p. 134);

Et la frauasi des guerriers, des justes, vaillant cavalier, la lance en main, (se trouve) autour de cette fortification exactement comme l’apparence de la chevelure autour de la tête, à la manière de ceux qui protègent la fortification (Bd. VI A3, ed. Anklesaria 60, I. 15 sq.).

These images described in Fravardin Yast and Bundahishn also resemble our nimbate equestrian warrior with spear and shield, and the brand-marks as the Fravaṣī’s symbol and nimbus seem to support the interpretation proposed by H. von Gall. And furthermore, the nimbus of the equestrian warrior
seems to be intimately connected with “garments of light, lichtumstrahlten Schlachten” to the effect that the nimbus might have been employed in Sasanian royal iconography only to distinguish the dead or celestial being from the living king, and not for indicating the divine god like the Buddha or deified king in the Kushan royal iconography.

However, there might be another meanings for the nimbus, we should like to examine the significances of the round nimbus in the Sasanian royal iconography.

First of all we should pay our attention to the princely images represented in the interior of the Larger Grotto. It is perfectly clear that no nimbus is attached to the king in the investiture scene, the bigger hunter shooting an arrow in the boar-hunting scene (pl. II-c), and that who is represented three-times in the deer-hunting scene. On the contrary, we perceive a disk-like nimbus around the head of the smaller princely hunter (pl. II-d) in the boar-hunting scene. And also the equestrian warrior is embellished with circular nimbus which is hewn out clearly and deeply around his head (pl. II-a).

As for two princely hunters in the boar-hunting scene, the bigger shooting one is unanimously regarded as identical with the king in the upper investiture scene, but the smaller nimbate one preparing first shot or second after first shot is regarded by some scholars either as Mithra hunting or the deified king identical with the bigger shooting king after he killed boars. In the present author’s view, the smaller princely hunter might be different from the left bigger king, and should be a celestial being, for the former wears a robe the design of which is slightly different from that of the left king’s and does not carry a sword like the left king, in addition to the difference of the sizes. In regard to the sword, Zoroastrian gods such as Ahura Mazda, Mithra and Anahita do not carry any weapon at all. Therefore, we should not regard the nimbate hunter and also equestrian warrior as Zoroastrian god like Mithra. As for the idea of identifying the nimbate hunter as deified king after having killed boars, we should reject it on the following basis.

In this regard, we take into consideration some nimbate royal hunters represented on “Sasanian” silver plates. According to R. Göbl, B. Marshak and P. O. Harper, some of the hunter-kings thereof might be interpreted as ancestors of the Sasanian kings who ordered those plates for their ancestors’ commemoration. As far as the royal hunters and banqueters on the “Sasanian” silver-ware are concerned, most of them are not nimbate, radiate nor haloed,
and those nimbate or radiate are comparatively rare or Post-Sasanian. If we compare those royal hunters and banqueters with the Sasanian kings’ portraits on coins and bas-reliefs, we can conclude that those nimbate royal images on the “Sasanian” silverware are not likely to be living Sasanian kings, for in the royal Sasanian iconography no living and reigning king is nimbate at all. Therefore, we might accept that the nimbate royal images on the “Sasanian” silverware are likely to be heroized kings after death resurrected in the Zoroastrian Paradise. Consequently we cannot follow such a hypothesis that the nimbate royal hunter in the boar-hunting scene is a deified king after hunting, for if Sasanian kings had been considered to be deified after hunt, all the royal hunters on the “Sasanian” silverware must have been nimbate quite contrary to the fact. Furthermore, as for identifying him with Mithra, we know that Mithra is always radiate not nimbate as is clearly shown on the Ardashir II’s investiture scene at Taq-i Bustan.

From the above-developed arguments, we might regard our equestrian warrior and the nimbate royal hunter as similar to the ancestral kings on the “Sasanian” silverware, that is to say, not the living and visible kings but invisible celestial beings.

According to Zoroastrianism, every righteous man’s indestructible, spiritual element (Daemôn) existing before his terrestrial birth and also surviving after death, is called Fravasi. The celestial, nimbate royal hunters represented on “Sasanian” silverware are, concretely speaking, Sasanian kings’ Fravāsīs who are said to exist in the presence of Ahura Mazda and in the “asar rōsīnih (endless light)” and to descend from the heaven to the earth on Fravardīgan, the day of the dead in the month of Farvardin.

Following our arguments and that of H. von Gall’s, we might regard our nimbate royal hunter and equestrian warrior as Sasanian royal Fravāsīs. Although we cannot well identify the former with the Fravāši of the invested king in the lunette, but as the latter we might regard him as that of the invested king, quite contrary to H. von Gall who regards him as an abstract Fravāši. Our interpretation depends upon our iconological investigation of the rock-cut relief complex of the interior of the larger grotto.

The interior sculptural complex is composed of the investiture scene, equestrian warrior and a pair of royal hunting-scenes. In the investiture scene the king in ceremonial garb is represented with Ahura Mazda and Anāhītā. The Sasanian king of kings as descendant of Gods, friend of stars and brother
of Sun and Moon, had the most intimate connections with Zoroastrian Gods and organized sacrifices at fire temple as head of the priests. And this investiture recalling his enthronement liturgy or ceremony allegedly carried out at Anâhitâ or fire temple at Istakhr or Shîz (Takht-i Suleimân), symbolizes his first function as the head of sacerdotal class. As for the equestrian warrior, it is clear that this image represents the Sasanian king's second function as the head of military class in addition to the universal king (cosmocrator). As for the hunting scenes, we can regard them as expressing symbolically the Sasanian king's third function as the protector of the cultivators (herdsmen) for boars and deers are their enemies which damage crops. The royal boar-hunt might be that of Farvardigân (Naurûz) in spring because a Fravaši participates in the ceremonial hunt, while the royal deer-hunt, probably that carried out at Mithragân in autumn.

In other words, the entire composition of the interior reflects as a whole, perfectly the three-functional ideology of the Sasanian kingship which is clearly preserved in the Ardhashir I’s legend (Kârnâmak-i Ardakhshir-Papakân). Therefore, we might take that the equestrian warrior is well related to the image of the reigning king in the upper investiture scene. On the other hand, the Iranian king’s association with the second class is said to have been manifested mythically by the conqueror of Dragon. Therefore, our tricephalic image should be regarded as nothing but the three headed Azi-Dahâka, and the equestrian warrior is assimilated partly into the Dragon-Slayer like Verethragna, Feridôn etc.

In final conclusion, the equestrian warrior is the king’s Fravaši, mixed with the image of the mythical great heroes and God, and not living and reigning king himself who ordered to make this sculptural complex. And if the equestrian warrior is witnessing and supporting the upper investiture as his tutelary divinity, as was indicated by H. von Gall, it might be because the later Sasanian king’s military power was assumed not to exist actually in his terrestrial body but in his celestial Fravaši who is eternally undestructible and rushes to the battle-field for helping his terrestrial counter-part, e.g. reigning king in the lunette.
Notes


(8) The Tokyo University Iran-Iraq Archaeological Expedition under the directorship of Dr. Shinji Fukai made photogrammetric surveys at this site in 1976 and 1978, and the author of this paper participated in both.


(27) K. В. Тревер, “Отражение в Искусстве Дуалистической Концепции Зороастрзма”, *Труды Отдела Истории Культуры и Искусства Востока*, vol. I (1939), p. 249, pl. XI. cf. contra. H. von Gall regards this cavalier as something like the Thracian Heron or its Iranian non-avestic counterpart, and rejects its identification with Verethragna, on the basis that all the arms (spear, sword and Vahagan helmet) carried by the Kushan Verethragna are lacking in this cavalier.

However, in this paper we prefer K. B. Trever's identification relying upon his fighting with multi-headed serpent (= Azi Dahāka) and his lance, for these two aspects seem to correspond with those of our equestrian warrior.

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cf. A. D. H. Bivar, Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum, Stamp Seals II: The Sassanian Dynasty, London, 1969, p. 61, pl. 7–8, 4. He describes “Nimbate rider to the right attacks hydra”.


(29) The exact and accurate drawings of the costumes are in preparation by the Tokyo University Iran-Iraq Archaeological Expedition.


(32) D. G. Shepherd, “Banquet and Hunt in Mediaeval Islamic Iconography”, Gatherings in honor of Dorothy E. Miner, The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, 1974, pp. 79–92. She regards all the “Sasanian” royal hunters in silverware as heroized kings after death in the Paradise, but in our view, only those nimbate should be regarded as heroized kings.


(38) R. I. Ringbom, Graltempel und Paradies, Beziehungen zwischen Iran und Europa im Mittelalter, 1951, Stockholm, p. 302; Ein Sinnbild der Sieben-Karswarweltern finden wir dagegen im Schildzeichen Khorsraus II wiener, so, wie das Relief der Grossen Grotto in Taq-i Bustan es wieder gibt. Though her reasoning based upon the wrong sketch done by Sir R. Ker Porter is untenable, but her conclusion to regard this equestrian warrior as cosmocrator is, in our opinion, acceptable.


(43) The three-headed or tricephalic image might have been regarded as appropriate for demons, but not for gods, by the orthodox Zorastrians. Cf. H. Humbach, op. cit., p. 405; Als Got ist dagegen ein dreigesichtiges order dreiköpfiges Wesen (Azi Dakâka) für den orthodoxen Zoroastrier unvorstellbar.

(44) According to G. Widengren, op. cit (1965), p. 348, note 2, “on nous dit que c’est précisément Xosrau I qui fit une loi interdisant aux rois de se rendre sur les champs de bataille”, the sasanian kings in 6–7th centuries might have not participated themselves in cavalry-battles. According to A. Christensen (L’Empire des Sassanides, Copenhagen, 1907, p. 63), “dans les grandes batailles, qui étaient dirigées par le roi même, un trône d’une grandeur considérable était élevé, pour celui-ci, au centre de l’armée”. Therefore, the armour-clad equestrian warrior, though the appearance of which is the exact copy of the Sasanian cavalier (cf. A. Christensen, L’Iran sous des Sassanides, Copenhagen, 1944, p. 368) rather than king, might not have been regarded as the actual Sasanian king by Sasanian priests, nobles, and military men.
Pl. I Detail of the large tassel
Pl. II-a General view of the innermost wall

Pl. II-b Part of the equestrian warrior

Pl. II-c King shooting on boat

Pl. II-d Nimhate royal hunter on boat