

THE WINGED FIGURE

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The winged figure has become so popular among Iranians, particularly Zartoshtis, and Parsis that it has virtually become a symbol of "Zoroastrianism" and the "Ancient Iranian Glory." Its gold and silver pendants adorn male and female chests. The usual name given to it is **fravahr** or **farohar** (Avesta *fravashi* or *fravarti*), a term which originally meant "Choice of Religion," religious conviction, belief, faith but later came to be interpreted as the "Guardian Spirit."

The figure appears first on the Achaemenian bas-reliefs. But we know that it is an "achaemenianization" of a much older and quite evolved Near East figure of the sun disk. The earliest form is the Egyptian eagle, symbolizing god Osiris. We have then its Assyrian and Babylonian forms in which the eagle's head is replaced by a human torso. Yet it continues to represent the Sun god.

Since the Achaemenian figure protectively hovers above royal personage and in spite of the fact that the Achaemenian bas-relief does not specify who the winged figure is, many scholars, mostly Western, in the past believed it to be a representing or communicating motif for Ahura Mazda. Some still do. But there are some who argue that since Zoroastrian scriptures, tradition, and practice as well as historical evidence prove that God did not have an icon representation, the figure should signify something else.

Whatever the significance, as soon as the Achaemenian art was well introduced in Zoroastrian circles of India, imitation of certain motives, particularly the winged figure, became very popular and showed up on institutional architecture. Then came two well-written articles by Dr. J.M. Unvala (1925 and 1930) which strengthened an earlier idea that the figure stood for fravahr, the Guardian Spirit. It suited the public taste and since then this popular motive has become a common sight on Zoroastrian institutions and publications as well as tie-pins, brooches, pendants, and other ornaments. It is slowly becoming a decorative, though not very religious motive just, as the Cross is, in certain liberal circles.

The figure has several interpretations by some fanciful persons during last 35 years. The ring, the rows of feathers in the wings and the tail, the circle in the middle, and the two claws have each their occult meanings. These have been given so assuredly as if the interpretation was recorded by the Achaemenians on their bas-reliefs, or given in the Zoroastrian scriptures. And that is what some simple folks have been given to believe.

No one has ever given it a thought why the figure disappears after the Achaemenians. Except a few transformed figures on a number of Parthian coins, there is no trace of it on the Parthian and Sassanian art on stone, in metal and on cloth. Winged lions, horses and monsters abound on all the three. So do the twin wings of eagle as mere decoration. Sassanian kings are shown as sitting on throne, riding horse, fighting enemy and hunting in wild. But the Achaemenian winged figure or a substitute is not seen hovering above their heads.

It was Dr. Eruch J.S. Taraporewala, noted for his scholarly translation and commentary of the Gathas, who wrote that it represents khvarenah, the Royal Iranian Glory (1928). Miss Parivash Jamzadeh, then a student of the California University, Berkeley, joined in with much better arguments that it represents the Royal Glory of the Achaemenians ("The Winged Ring with Human Bust in Achaemenid Art as a Dynastic Symbol," *Iranica Antiqua*, vol. XVII, 1982, pp 91). Earlier, we have Dr. A. Shapur Shahbazi, famous Iranian archeologist and scholar (*An Achaemenid Symbol 1: A Farewell to 'Fravhr'* and *Ahuramazda* (1974), and *An Achaemenid Symbol II: Farnah [God Given Fortune] Symbolized*, 1980). Now Prof Mary Boyce, the well-known Zoroastrianologist (*A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol III, Leiden, 1991), and others agree with the idea that it represents khvarenah.

It may be added that the earliest clue is supplied by the Avesta, which says that the Kavaya Khvarenah, the legendary Kayanian Glory "flies" in form of an eagle from a falling king or hero to a rising king or hero. (Yasht 19.35-38) The eagle, with its soaring flights, supplied the Iranians with a soaring fantasy just it did and does to others, including the Americans.

Let us add to this the frequent references in Persian literature, folklore, and bedside stories that speak of the farr-e homay, the Glory of the Auspicious Bird shown in miniature paintings as a long-tailed aquiline bird. It hovers over the heads of kings and to-be kings.

The final point: While *Khvarenah* is neuter, *Fravashi* or *Fravarti* in Avesta and Old Persian is **feminine in gender**. The winged figure is, no doubt, masculine. A neuter object, especially when belonging to a male, would obviously be represented in masculine. **Did the Achaemenians made the blunder in portraying a beautiful lady as a bearded man, or modern interpretation of it is erring?**

It is, therefore, very safe to consider the Achaemenian winged figure as the **Royal Glory** (Persian *farr*, Old Persian *farna*, Middle Persian *khvareh*, and Avestan *khvarenah*) and not *fravahr* or *farohar*, the so-called guardian spirit.

Let us call it the Farr, the Royal Glory and join Ferdowsi, the master epic poet of Persian and recite:

Homâye sepehri be-gostard parr
Hami bar sarash dâst sâneh ze farr.
The celestial "hoday" spread its wings
Casting the shadow of Glory over his (king's) head.
(The Shahnameh)

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