lot can be said about religious notions in the late Roman Empire, but further to the east the picture is quite different. Until today even sketching the religious evolution within the Arsacid and the Sāsānian World remains problematic. A substantial amount of the most central Zoroastrian texts are incomplete and what we do find preserved is often mirrored through redaction after the Islamic conquest. About other central textual sources the only thing we know for a fact is that they existed. The situation with other cults not belonging to the Zoroastrian state church is even worse. Of course, this is also true when it comes to the interpretation of related archaeological material. Many of the themes we find depicted on toreutics, seals or stucco are hard to explain, while other representations are strongly reminiscent of cults known from the Roman World but somehow oddly adapted. In this contribution I will try to examine one of these cults — the worship of Dionysus.

Since information about the Dionysian Cult in the east is quite scarce, it might prove useful to pay attention to a differentiation emphasized by Martha Carter. She stressed the difference between the term ‘Dionysian’, written with capital-D as related to the god, and ‘dionysian’ seen as a general mode to express a relation to wine or ecstatic behaviour, not necessarily connected to the cult of the god.¹ For both terms we find comparable visual vocabulary, like scenes of vintage with *erots* or various animals between vine branches etc. In the specific case of the Late Roman beholder there likely was a connection between both perceptions, but the further east we go with an analysis the more difficult is to say what the actual content was. In Gandhāra and

¹ Carter (2015: 356).
Mathura, for example, we have several examples strongly resembling scenes of the thiasos — the followers of Dionysus — but somewhat oddly adapted in respect to Greco/Roman iconography. This makes it hard to judge whether what we have here is a representation of the same cult as in the Roman World, or some different expression, partly using the same vocabulary, but with no direct related meaning. Most probably it is the latter. But let us turn our attention to the Sāsānian World. Here we can at the very least present several works certainly made in Sāsānian workshops, but carried out with the vocabulary best known from Hellenistic and Roman art.

The aim of this contribution is to argue for the persistence of a Late Dionysian cult within the Sāsānian Realm and its perception as mirrored in archaeological finds from the Roman World and Eastern Hellenistic models. To show how interwoven and at the same time different such relations most probably were, I will discuss a vase in the Freer Gallery of Art from the Dionysian circle. Therefore I will try to develop a sketch of its artistic and historical background and combine this with a possible perspective that a Sāsānian beholder could have had. This will be first of all an attempt to reconstruct a content for which we have almost no sources, in order to argue for the persistence of a Dionysian Cult, about which we have no information except some archaeological finds.

We know a couple of Sāsānian toreutics with unclear connections to the cult of Dionysus since it is very hard to judge whether they represent the results of a proper Dionysian aspiration or merely echo general ideas of wine and Roman taste. A connection to Late Roman/Early Byzantine works is obvious but its contextualization is still problematic. One of the latest elements in this row is a silver vase in the Freer Gallery of Art (Fig. 1) said to be from the 6/7th century.

The imagery on the vase is composed of three scenes, divided by pillar-like palm trees, each set on top of a stylized mountain landscape.

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2) Carter (1968) connected all expressions of dionysiac aspects in Kušan art with the worship of Yakṣas and other related beings.

3) Ettinghausen (1967: 29–41); Atil (1971: no. 50); Ettinghausen (1972: 3–4); Augé, Linant de Bellefonds (1986: 522 no. 90); Gunter, Jett (1992: 188–190 no.34); Carter (2015: 221, 373–4 fig. 2.24, 3.18–9). For dating cf. a 6th century ceramic vase from Umm az-Zaʿātir (Iraq): Upton (1932, 194 fig. 11), its shape is similar to the Freer Vase, and some stucco ornaments from the same spot repeating the crest of the man playing with the child, the execution of the birds’ wings sitting on the ‘palm tree’ and the crest on the neck of the vase: cf.: Kröger (1982: figs. 24, 28g, 35a-b), for dating: Kröger (1982: 231–232, 260–261).
The trunks or pillars themselves are twisted, endowed with round bases, and on top of each in the acanthus-like leaves there is seated a bird, oriented towards the left side. The movement in the scenes is directed towards the right. The central episode represents a naked person, always described as Dionysus, wearing just a cloak lined with a wavy pattern. The pubic region is emphasized by small punches, but with no actual indication of genitals. The person’s face is in three-quarter profile, his cap-like haircut is divided in a curly lower part and an upper part with chased waves. He wears a diadem or a crest featuring a round element with two small loops, comparable with a knot. In his raised right hand he holds the *thyrsos* with the middle and ring finger — the little and index finger are extended. The left hand holds a short leash with a panther, trying to climb up the ‘palm tree’ to catch one of the birds sitting on its top who observes him, frightened. In the second scene to his right side, there is a woman, depicted in profile. In her right hand she also holds a leash with a panther, but this time it drinks from a wine jar. Her left hand holds two stems or an instrument. She is clad in a long-sleeved robe reaching her ankles and an over-garment which only covers her left shoulder. The upper garment is adorned with a doted pattern. Around her head there is a thin band tied with fluttering ribbons in the back part, at the front a knot-like element is added, similar to the one in the headgear of Dionysus. Two long braids cascade down her neck, while a shorter one covers her ear. The last scene is set on the left from Dionysos. A bowing man is depicted playing with a child. He is dressed in a loose scarf and a V-shaped collar but no other indications of clothing. It is therefore not easy to determine whether he is naked or not — most likely he is depicted like Dionysus with no indication of the sex. On his head he is wearing a crest made of heart-shaped leaves.

Richard Ettinghausen emphasized that it is possible to ascribe all of these scenes to Roman prototypes. However a more detailed comparison gives us some reasons to doubt this view. Only the representation of Dionysus itself might be linked to some late Roman and early Byzantine works — but even here its ascription is not totally convincing. It is even harder to find direct precursors for the woman attributed as being a *maenad* and the man playing with the child. Neither do they mirror the widely used blueprints

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4) Ettinghausen (1972: 3–4).

5) Compare a Byzantine knife handle in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection (5th century) and a figure in the Walter Art Gallery (3rd century): Ettinghausen (1972: 3 figs. 2–3).

6) It is remarkable that the ‘maenad’ and ‘Dionysus’ wear almost the same headgear,
of *neoattic* models, used in Roman art, nor is it possible to sketch any closer connection to later aspirations of the Dionysian entourage. We may identify them as members of the *thiasos* only from general comparisons. As a result Martha Carter concludes that the Freer vase is part “of a ‘dionysian’ folklore that persisted in Sasanian Iran […]”.

However, the positions of Ettinghausen and Carter imply that there has never been an independent cult of Dionysus within the Sāsānian World and simultaneously that any presence of Dionysian elements can only be explained through copies of Western sources and, as a last consequence, that all odd adaptations from this sphere were caused by misunderstandings on the part of the craftsman or interpreted in a new sense. Confronted with the lack of Sāsānian sources it is hard to judge whether such an assumption is acceptable or not — but most probably it is easier to justify this position from the historical perception of the research itself and not on the basis of archaeological sources.

It should not come as a surprise that the first scholars who dealt with Western connections to the East and resulting adaptations of religious aspirations had classical education. Their research was driven by the common wish to recognize the beloved Greek culture brought to the East with Alexander the Great, and so was their corresponding knowledge. Until today, compared to the richness of material from the West, our understanding of Central Asia and Iran before the Islam is scant. This sometimes leads to extreme interpretations, supported by the whole classical knowledge celebrated between 19th until the first half of the 20th century. For example, Kurt Weitzmann saw on a Bactrian bowl the satyr play ‘Syleus’, written by Euripides in the 5th century B.C.,

but a closer examination reveals that not a single scene is really comparable to any of the different versions of Euripides — parts of it are even philological reconstructions of the barely preserved play. However, the same we can observe on a series of three Iranian silver plates with Dionysus and Ariadne sitting on a chariot, which we will discuss later. This feature is atypical for Roman representations but we may be able to explain it via the apotheosis of Ariadne through the wedding with Dionysus. In this course Ariadne takes part of the divineness of Dionysos, here possibly expressed with the help of the similar headgear. So the ‘maenad’ would be Ariadne. The depiction of the man playing with the child was convincingly explained by Martha Carter (2015: 221) as a scene from the childhood of the god.

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7 Carter (2015: 374).

8 Weitzmann (1943: 303-307). The bowl is today in the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg cf. Staviskij (1960). It can be most probably dated in the 5th/6th century.
Weitzmann’s conclusion was that the craftsman misunderstood his own motive.⁹ In defense of Weitzmann one can mention the lack of typologies and comparable material, problems of dating etc. Nevertheless, the tendency to compensate missing sources with positions which are hard to prove instead of admitting our lack of knowledge is problematic.

For further analysis it is important to arrange one’s material connected to dionysian expressions, to provide a rough sketch of its development. A couple of Roman toreutics found in the Iranian World and neighbouring regions prove that the Western material was accessible to local craftsman.¹⁰ But this alone provides no hint to the question how far its original meaning was understandable for the local recipient. We have reason to believe that since the 3rd century B.C. Dionysus gained a high ranking position in several Hellenistic courts as conqueror of the East, well-fitting to the self-image of the Seleucids and Bactrian Greeks.¹¹ It should also come as no surprise that the philhellnic Arsacids kept a close connection to classical plays with Dionysiac content, as Plutarch reports. After a disastrous failed campaign of Crassus against the Parthians in 53 B.C., his head was brought to Artavasdes of Armenia, a subject of the Arsacid king Orodes II. The decapitated head was at once used as requisite in the play Bacchae of Euripides.¹² Even if we consider this episode as a macabre elaboration, it is remarkable how self-evident the idea of the Parthians consuming a classical drama of the Dionysiac circle appeared to Plutarch. In the same sense we can argue for one of the famous rhyta from Nisa, ca. 2nd - 1st century B.C.¹³ The theiasos is definitely depicted, in a distinct style best known from other rhyta from Nisa, but also strongly resembling the ‘stiff’ appearance of later Sāsānian representations.¹⁴ The mosaics found

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⁹) For a more elaborate argumentation and a proposed interpretation in context of a Zoroastrian funeral ritual see: Schulz (forthcoming).

¹⁰) E.g. a Roman silver plate found in Beitan, province of Gansu, China, with Dionysos riding on a lion and with a Sogdian and a Bactrian inscription. Dating between 2nd and 3rd century: Baratte (1996); A Roman silver handle said to be from Iran with the Indian Triumph of Dionysos, roughly 2nd century, Alexander (1955–56); A Roman 3rd century silver dish with Dionysiac scenes and 2 Gupta-period Brahmi inscriptions in the Al-Sabah Collection: Carter (2015: 259–261 Cat. 72).

¹¹) For the position of Dionysos in relation to Alexander the Great in Middle and late Hellenistic dynastic legitimation see Bohm (1989: 125 fn. 111).

¹²) Plutarch, Crassus, 33.

¹³) Staviskij (1979: tab.65, 66).

¹⁴) For the influence of this style even in Late Antiquity cf. a 5/6th century ewer from
in the iwan of the so-called palace of Šapur I, in Bīšapūr\(^{15}\) provide a different perspective. The palace’s inner court was framed with mosaics most probably made by Roman craftsman, and so their appearance strongly recalls Antioch mosaics from the same period.\(^{16}\) This point is remarkable, because it proves the lively influx of Roman material and secondly it shows, that the early Sāsānian court adored Dionysiac themes, which would not have happened, if the idea of Dionysos’ worship had been meaningless in their imagination. However, even if the Bīšapūr findings serve as evidence to the persistence of the Dionysos Cult during the beginning of the Sāsānid Dynasty, they do so for the middle of the 3\(^{rd}\) century, while the Freer Vase is attributed to the 6\(^{th}\)/7\(^{th}\) century, we still have to bridge at least 300 more years.

For this purpose we might consult a series of 3 silver plates. The first, maybe from the 3\(^{rd}\) century, is in the British Museum, said to be from the treasure of the Mīrs of Badakšān.\(^{17}\) The next two are later, probably dating to the 5/6\(^{th}\) century One was purchased on the art market, now in the Freer Gallery\(^{18}\) and the last exemplar was found 1953 not far from the train station of Alkino, Southern Ural, preserved in the Historical Museum Moscow (Fig. 4).\(^{19}\) All three plates represent the same scene but with two distinct variations. A rather stylized cart is drawn to the left by two dressed persons while respectively two winged erots, or one on the Badakšān plate are depicted at the wheel. There is a prominent half-naked person sitting on the chariot with a bowl in his right hand — filled with berries on the Freer and the Alkino plate. The second person is depicted much smaller, sitting on the rear of the cart. There is an erot with an ewer standing at its outer left edge, who holds the end of a lash of a whip held by the second flying erot. The right side of the composition is closed by a grape-wine and a naked dancing man with a small Guyuan (Ningxia, China) in a typical Roman/Sāsānian shape but with a scene depicted in a distinct Late Eastern Hellenistic mode. The naked hero on the left is realized in the manner alike to the Dionysos of the Freer-Vase: Harper (1993: 104 fig. 88). Marshak and Anazawa argued that the ewer originated from Bactria. For the present of comparable realization in Western Iran cf. some late Parthian Dionysiac stuccos from Qal’eh-i Yazdigird: Keall et al. (1980: figs. 8–12).

\(^{15}\) Ghirshman (1956: pl. A, ix-xiv, plan iv).

\(^{16}\) Cf. the Antioch mosaic in room 2 of the House of the Triumph of Dionysos: Levi (1947: pl. 16b). For this argumentation: Demange (2006).

\(^{17}\) Dalton (1964: 49–51 Pl. 27).

\(^{18}\) Gunter, Jett (1992: 121–127).

\(^{19}\) Smirnov (1957).
tail, wearing a lion skin on his arm and a kind of a club on his shoulder. The whole composition is set on a baseline. The baseline separates a space featuring a lion, who is about to drink from a krater on the Badakšan plate, and from a bulging jar on the Alkino and the Freer-plate. On the Freer-plate he is surrounded by musicians and on the Badakšan plate by plants, while on the Alkino plate both motives are combined.

Already Dalton compared the Badakšan plate with a cameo from the former collection of Lorenzo di Medici in Florence, but he overemphasized the idea that he had discovered the original pattern of the plate and, moreover, he misunderstood some of its elements leading him to the conclusion that it “imperfectly reproduces the Triumph of Dionysos”. Some of these mistakes were later on quoted to argue in the same vein for all three plates. For example, it was doubted that the craftsmen still understood that they were depicting a chariot since it was not obvious how it was pulled, or that the ‘Heracles’ has a small tail, and that Dionysos and Ariadne have almost the same appearance etc. Finally, an orthodox Dionysiac content was refuted. However, a comparable Roman glass cameo in London already features a chariot with Dionysos and Ariadne in a similar shape with no indications of fastening to the car (Fig. 5), and the ‘Heracles’ strongly resembles a common neoattic type of a tailed dancing faun carrying a thyrsos and a panther skin, which originated in classical models of the 4th century B.C. very common in Roman representations of the thyasos. The only late addition is the separated scene with the lion drinking from a wine jar. However this element is also frequently found in Late Roman/Early Byzantine dionysiac representations. Continuing this line of argument we can explain almost the whole composition based on Hellenistic material, with some later additions, which makes it hard to trace the origins of its prototype. It is equally possible that the prototype might have originated from early Roman or from com-

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20) Dalton (1964: 50).
21) E.g. Marshak (1986: 254); Boardman (2014: 46–49); Carter (2015: 38–39, 358–359).
22) After Hauser (1889) Typ 20 cf. Fuchs (1959: 106–7 Taf. 23b).
23) Cf. a mosaic from Sheikh Zouede (Sinai), most probably mid 4th / mid 5th century: Ovadiah et al. (1991: 189–190); alike 2 mosaics from Ptolemais (Libya) very unlikely dated to the late 1st century Because of its similarity with mosaics from Syria, a dating in the 5/6th century is preferable: Kraeling (1962: 261); in Wadi Ayoun Mousa (Syria), ca. 5th century: Balty (1984: pl. 27.2). Accepting the date of the Badakshan-plate in the 3rd century or even in the 4th century (Carter 2015, 38–39) would mean that we find here the earliest Dionysiac scene of two felinae drinking from a vine vessel.
mon Hellenistic sources — maybe Arsacid or Bactrian. Notwithstanding, it can be said with certainty that the content of all three plates is actually Dionysiac.

From that perspective it would be reasonable to find similar connections between the Freer Vase and contemporary western Dionysiac representations. The situation, however, is more complicated — we cannot precisely identify a single Roman scene used as a common blueprint. It is only possible to explain certain elements with help of Dionysiac narratives and some general comparisons with Roman material. If we want to keep our hypothesis that the Freer Vase is Dionysiac we need a more developed argumentation.

The only figure compared by Entinghausen with earlier or contemporary western material is the androgynous man with the panther. His body is turned to the side while the examples of Entinghausen and their neoattic forerunners are all oriented towards the viewer. This observation seems to be banal but consulting a sāsānian silver plate in the Metropolitan Museum of Art dating from the approximately same period, we might identify a much closer model. Here we see two men, also naked, arranged in a heraldic composition together with two winged horses. Many details of their appearance are very similar to the Freer Dionysos. In place of a panther they hold winged horses in the same position and similarly a spear looking exactly like the thyrsos of the Freer Dionysos, even the index finger being extended likewise. Additionally all figures wear the paludamentum, the Roman military cloak, nearly absent in Hellenistic and Roman representations of Dionysos. Two of the rare exceptions are a 5/6th century ivory pyxis in the Metropolitan Museum and a second one in Vienna (Fig. 3b), showing Dionysos in the battle against the Indians. In Sāsānian art it is worn only by Roman emperors.

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24) The model of the lying Dionysos on the Badakshan plate is also known from a Bactrian terracota found in Karabag, Kashkadariya region, Uzbekistan, dated 2nd /1st century B.C.: cf. Abdullaev, Radzhabov (2000) and a Heracles in Bisutun dated 148 B.C. cf.: Luschey (1974: Abb. 15); For the developing of the motive in the West cf. Scharmer (1971).

25) Ettinghausen (1972: fig. 2, 3); after neoattic models: cf. Fuchs (1959: 108–109 pl. 22, 23).

26) Harper (1965); Ettinghausen (1972: 11–16); Ghirshman (1974); Marshak (1986: 253); Harper (2006: 99).

27) Another example is a 4th century ivory handle in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, quoted by Ettinghausen (1972: fig. 2).

28) Volbach (1976: Taf. 101).
during their submission before the King of Kings,\textsuperscript{29} but it is not part of a usual Sāsānian dress. In connection with the two \textit{pyxides} we might interpret the \textit{paludamentum} on the Freer Vase hence as an allusion to Dionysos as a commander and conqueror of India.\textsuperscript{30}

If we try to connect the idea of a ‘Roman’ element in connection with Sāsānian toreutics we have to translate its meaning in terms of its beholder. The \textit{pahlavi} equivalent for \textit{Roman} is \textit{hrōmāyān}, but this term was also taken as synonymous for Byzantines as well as for the Greeks of the time of Alexander the Great. In later consequents, even Alexander was titled ‘Alexander the Roman’. Coming back to the Alkino plate we can add a further observation, giving a hint for the same interpretation. There is a symbol depicted at the hip of Dionysos, recalling the shape of a Maltese cross, framed by a crest.\textsuperscript{31} It is unlikely that its meaning is Christian in a classical sense, but it is also unlikely that a recipient of the 5/6\textsuperscript{th} century made no connection to the widespread Christian communities, since exactly this type of a cross was the most typical version of the eastern cross between the 5\textsuperscript{th} and 7\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{32}

Concerning the history of Christian persecutions within the Sāsānian Realm, we might propose that the Sāsānid State too did not always differentiate between them and the actual Romans — though the local Christians were seen as \textit{hrōmāyān}.\textsuperscript{33} If we suggest that the cult of Dionysos was still connected to its \textit{hrōmāyān} roots, or rather to Roman believers from the same period we

\textsuperscript{29} For a recent compilation see Shavarebi (2015).

\textsuperscript{30} The \textit{Indian Campaign} is the most popular story of Dionysos conquering the world inebriated in order to prove the advantages of wine. Later the story became an allegory for the deeds of Alexander the Great, and Alexander himself was copied by plenty of Hellenistic rulers cf.: Bohm (1989), and later on, by the Roman elites and even emperors cf: Kühnen (2005). The theme stayed even under Christian domination popular as shown by the appearance of a new version of the life of Dionysos written by Nonnus of Panopolitanus, \textit{Dionysiaka}, in the 5\textsuperscript{th} Century one of the most extensive works of the whole antiquity, featuring the Indian Campaign as its culmination.

\textsuperscript{31} See Marshak (1986: pl. 175).

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. diverse liturgical silver vessels from the Hama Treasure (Syria, late 6\textsuperscript{th}, early 7\textsuperscript{th} century): Mango (1986: figs. 4.3, 5.3, 6.3, 7.3, 7.2, 9.2, 10.2, 20.1, etc.); for Christian Sāsānian seals and bullae with the same type of cross see: Spier (2007: Cat.No. 781, 937).

\textsuperscript{33} It has to be emphasized that many Christians on both sides of the Roman Sāsānian border spoke either Syrian or Armenian. A differentiation between both groups is literally just a political one. So we should consider most conflicts between them and the Sāsānian State not primary as religious but as political. Christian communities were mostly a well-integrated part of the state. cf.: Gyselen (2006).
easily can translate the most common Christian symbol, the cross, as cipher for hrōmāyān.\textsuperscript{34)} This is even more plausible if we take into account that Dionysiac representations were still present in the Byzantine World until the 7\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{35)}

The Metropolitan plate is certainly not Dionysiac, but its reading could easily breathe the same hrōmāyān connotation\textsuperscript{36)}. In the same moment its similarities with the Freer Plate seems to give sufficient reasons to believe that both figures share a common Hellenistic model, alien to Roman representations. It is perhaps possible to identify one of these models on a pair of clasps, excavated in Tillya Tepe (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{37)} We find a heavily armed Hellenistic warrior, elaborately pictured wearing a muscle cuirass, a shield and a lance in a stance similar to the one described previously, but dated to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} quarter of the 1\textsuperscript{st} century\textsuperscript{38)}. His hair is long and curly and he wears an Hellenistic helmet with animal ears and horns. Michael Pfrommer saw therein an allusion to Dionysos, suitable for a Bactrian king, and concluded that the model of the clasps originates in the Hellenistic art of the Bactrian court, but was slightly barbarized since the ‘king’ has long hair.\textsuperscript{39)} Pfrommer might be wrong — the juvenile Dionysos also often is depicted with long curly hair. Moreover, he too wears the military cloak in the same fashion as the one we have seen on the Freer Vase. We might thus as well identify him as Dionysos the conquerer of India. His cloak is likewise lined with a wavy pattern. This detail is absent in Roman representations, but most probably it indicates that the cloak is made of a tiger pelt, which could be understood as a hint to the omnipresent Dionysian cats. Cats are also featured within the clasps frame. Here we see two winged lions depicted in Sarmatian Animal Style,\textsuperscript{40)} demonstrating yet

\textsuperscript{34)} Boris Marshak (1980: 21 and 1986: 254) interpret the cross on the Alkino-plate in the same way.
\textsuperscript{35)} Cf. a silver plate with a dancing menad and a sylen in the State Hermitage, St. Petersburg, certainly made under rule of Herakleios (613–629/30) in Constantinople: Effenberger et al. (1978: 166 pl. 88).
\textsuperscript{36)} Alike Marshak (1986: 253).
\textsuperscript{37)} Sarianidi (1985: 240, Pl. 81–84).
\textsuperscript{38)} Also cf. the attitude of Oēšo on Kušān coins: Göbl (1984: pl. 1–3). He represents an intermediate stage between the Tillya Tepe clasps and the Freer Vase. The indicated movement to the side is present alike on the Tillya Tepe clasps but the index-finger of the hand holding the spear is stretched like on the Freer Vase.
\textsuperscript{39)} Pfrommer (1996: 108–112).
\textsuperscript{40)} First discussed by Rostovtzeff (1929: 41–61).
again its independence from the Western representations of Dionysos. The same is also true for a second Dionysiac pair of clasps from Tillya Tepe, showing Dionysos riding with Ariadne on a fairy cat, accompanied by drunken Sylenus.\textsuperscript{41) When we accept, that the eastern Hellenism developed its own formal language for the cult of Dionysos\textsuperscript{42}) and, as we have seen, the worship of Dionysos lasted until Parthian and Sāsānian rule, different traditions referring to the same cult should not come as a surprise. Coming back to the 1\textsuperscript{st} pair of clasps from Tillya Tepe we find another remarkable detail. Dionysos is framed by pillar-like plants, each of them featuring a bird seated on its crown\textsuperscript{43). This representation is very kin to the ‘palm trees’ of the Freer Vase, but none of the authors, who came across this detail for the vase in scrutiny, were able to propose an interpretation. Nonetheless, it is remarkable to find the same feature depicted on the much later \textit{pyxis} in Vienna raised before, also together with the \textit{Indian Campaign} (Fig. 3a). Dionysos is enthroned together with Ariadne, framed by pillars with birds on its crown. The same element appears on three 5/6\textsuperscript{th} century ivory \textit{diptycha} with no connection to Dionysos\textsuperscript{44) and, again in a certainly Dionysiac context, we find birds inbetween the spandrels of arcades of 3\textsuperscript{rd}/4\textsuperscript{th} century sarcophagi.\textsuperscript{45) Returning to the Iranian World we also come across arcades provided with birds approximately dated in the same period.\textsuperscript{46) If

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41) Sarianidi (1985: 258, Taf. 77–79.)}
\item \textsuperscript{42) So Sarianidi (1985: 56–57).}
\item \textsuperscript{43) Michael Pfrommer (1996, 111) thought the birds on the Tillya Tepe clasps were eagles and counted them as a link to Zeus, the father of Dionysos. It is also remarkable that the birds are adorned with fluttering ribbons, they are the oldest examples showing this element, known to the author. It might be possible to trace a connection to later representations, also connected to the dynastic iconography of Central Asia, but this idea needs more argumentation.
\item \textsuperscript{44) Volbach (1976 No. 36, 43, 51–52).
\item \textsuperscript{45) Kranz (1999: Cat.No. 105) in Via Portico d’Ottavia Casa dei Vallati in Rome (250–70 A.C.) and in the Vatican (290–310 A.C.) Kranz (1999: Cat.No. 128).
\item \textsuperscript{46) E.g. on a Buddhist Chapel at Tapa Shotor (Afghanistan) roughly after late 4\textsuperscript{th} century: Kuwayama (1987: 172–173); an altar in Surkh Kotal dated according a Sāsānian coin alike: Schlumberger et al. (1983: Pl. 69.235, 131–132, 146–147), on a Sāsānian silver vase in the State Hermitage, St. Petersburg: Marshak 1986: pl. 187; or on the celebrated Bīmarān Reliquary. In this context it would be reasonable to request the Reliquary’s date in the 1\textsuperscript{st} century A.C. because of its strong connections to Roman pyxides of the 4–6\textsuperscript{th} century, and its composition in arcades resembling a typical Late Antique means of organizing a composition, typical for Central Asia, Iran and the Roman west, also
\end{itemize}
we do not consider it as a solely decorative element it might be possible to propose a general interpretation of the birds in the sense of a *parapetasma*, in western Roman iconography, or the Nimbus, as a means of underlining the most central figures. Anyway its meaning is certainly not an exclusively Dionysiac one. Since we have no idea about the original significance of the birds in Eastern Hellenistic vocabulary, a general interpretation will not be made here.

The connection drawn here between the Tillya Tepe clasps, the Roman examples and the Freer Vase can help us to retrace the continuation of Eastern Hellenistic models in Central Asia bridging at least six centuries. At the same time we also have to keep in mind the assumed context of a late Sāsānian beholder. As argued, the Dionysos Cult was still alive within the Sāsānian Realm continuing older traditions, best captured with the help of the Tillya Tepe clasps, but in the same moment the repertoire of the Freer Vase is also in many details quite differed to the Tillya Tepe scene. There was obviously an interest in expressing the contemporary understanding of iconography related to the needs of the cult, likewise mirrored in Roman representations, which makes it hard to explain any element as solely decorative.

I would like therefore to propose a more speculative interpretation for the Freer Vase. From the Roman context we know another mythical bird significant for the state propaganda and depicted sitting on altars or trees — the phoenix. From the 1st century onward it became a very popular symbol of eternity and renewal, and as such it was used in the cult of the Emperor, as well as in private or Christian contexts, always with a slightly modified connotation. In the state cult the Phoenix was seen as an allusion to the everlasting renewal of the empire and the Emperor, while within Christian iconography it expressed the resurrection of Christ and the coming Kingdom of God.\(^{47}\) Especially here the Bird appears, sitting on a palm tree.\(^{48}\) In the *Poem of the Phoenix* (de ave phoenice), written by Lactantius in early 4th century,\(^{49}\) the phoenix lives in a happy land in the outer most East on top

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\(^{47}\) Schindler, Witte (2016).

\(^{48}\) The palm tree is a usual representation of the heavenly Paradise. For references and depictions cf.: van den Broek (1972: 183 Tabs. 24–30).

\(^{49}\) Richter (1993: 64–5). Lactantius (250–320) was one of the most important apologetics transmitting classical narratives into Christian vocabulary.
of the highest mountain, where it sits on a huge tree. In other versions it is
directly expressed that the Phoenix lives in India. In such a context we easily
can interpret it as an allusion to India or to the East in general. The same
assumption might be true for the ivory *pyxis* in Vienna and some other Late
Roman / Early Byzantine pieces.\(^{50}\)

Especially the *pyxis’* dated to the 5/6\(^{th}\) century (Fig. 3), with the rare
Dionysos wearing a military cloak, and the representation of the *Indian
Campaign* in combination with the birds featured on pillars, clearly provides
a connection with the Freer Vase. Therefore, it is very likely that in both cases
Dionysos is represented, as the conquerer of India featuring the phoenix as
a hint to the ambition of Dionysos — India. With that we can even explain the
mountain landscape under the ‘palm trees’ of the Freer Vase as the mountain
mentioned by Lactanitius.\(^{51}\) This idea is also supported by the genre-like
scene of the panther, who is about to climb one of the trees to eat the phoenix.
There are many similar scenes in the *thiasos*. We consistently find representa-
tions of drunken, foolish followers often cruel in their demeanour — a solely
decorative element would not be a part in this narrative.

From this perspective it would be reasonable to explain the scene as a typi-
cal Late Antique Dionysiac aspiration, very close to Roman expressions from
the same period — and indeed it is, but similarly we have to employ in our
analysis the perspective of the contemporary beholder and its art historical
context. As demonstrated, we can trace two different traditions expressing
the same cult. The one under scrutiny represents an Eastern Hellenistic tradi-
tion, maybe partly influential for Late Roman expressions since we can trace
certain Late Dionysiac elements first in the East, like the panther drinking
from a wine jar, also figured on the Freer Vase,\(^ {52}\) or the birds siting on pillars

\(^{50}\) Cf. the Phoenix Mosaic in Daphne. The phoenix is sitting on top of a crag, framed
by rams borrowed from Sāsānian sources: Lassus (1938). It might be easily interpreted
as an allusion to the East. Also cf. a mosaic in the apsis of a Villa in Piazza Armerina,
Sicily. Depicted is a phoenix siting at the side of a personification which was seen as
being *India*: Settis (1975: 950–951).

\(^{51}\) van den Broek (1972: 314–319) argued that the home of the Phoenix, as described
by Lactantius, is largely inspired by the imagination of Christian paradise, additionally
he stressed comparable conceptions in the Iranian cosmology of the *Bundahišn*. This
would provide an interesting link to a common means of Sāsānian compositions to set
scenes in stylized mountain landscapes. It might be possible to see therein a hint for
supernatural environment.

\(^{52}\) Cf. fn. 23.
or trees first found on the 1st century clasps from Tillya Tepe featuring the victorious Dionysos in India. It is even harder to encounter the perspective of the Sāsānian recipient from that period. We tried to explain the bird as an Roman allusion to India. The phoenix was a very widespread motive in the Late Roman World, and as such it was also known to the Sāsānian beholder. This is proven by Christian seals, owned by Sāsānian subjects depicting the phoenix on an altar.\(^{53}\) Therefore the interpretation of the phoenix as an allusion to the East, would be most probably an adaptation from Roman sources but based on a much older Eastern Hellenistic pattern that we do not completely understand in its original content. It might be interesting to ‘translate’ the phoenix in the same way as we did before in case of the cross on the hip of the Dionysos on the Alkino plate in Moscow (Fig.4), as a symbol for everything hrōmāyān, connecting the cult with its Hellenistic roots and its Early Byzantine present but this idea is highly speculative. Even if our interpretation is wrong both traditions, the Roman and the one represented through the Freer Vase, were most probably not independent of each other, and so it is very likely that in Late Antiquity a Dionysiac cult continued in the Sāsānian Realm.

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\(^{53}\) Cf. a seal in Copenhagen: Spier (2007: Cat.No. 937), and 3 seals combined with fishes. The bird on the altar is wrongly interpreted as dove, in the British Museum and an private collection in Iran Spier (2007: Cat No. 869 and 870), Bivar (1969: HF14).
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Fig. 1. Dionysiac vase 6th – 7th c. A.D., height 17.9 cm, max. diameter 10.5–11.0 cm, weight 488 g, silver and gilt, Washington, Freer Gallery of Art, inv.no. 65.20.

Fig. 2. Clasps from Tillya Tepe, Grave III, 2nd quarter 1st c. A.D., gold, height 9.0 cm, length 6.3 cm, Kabul, National Museum of Afghanistan inv.no. 04.40.245.
Fig. 3. Pyxis with the Indian Campaign of Dionysos, 5th c. A.D. ivory, height 8.3 cm, diameter 10.8 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv.no Antikensammlung, X 41.

Fig. 4. Dionysiac silver plate, 5th – 6th c. A.D., silver and gilt, found close to the station of Alkino (South East of Ural), height 4.0 cm, diameter 21.0 cm, State Historical Museum Moscow, inv.no. 84845.
Fig. 5. Roman cameo made of blue transparent glass paste, 1st – 2nd c. A.D., length 4.8 cm, height 4.2 cm London, British Museum inv. no. 1923.0401.1106.