HISTORY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Is cross always Christian? A study on iconography of Sasanian seals

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Abstract: The article analyses the semiotics of religious symbols appearing on selected Sasanian seals. The core of the research are the seals on which a cross and a scorpion are depicted together. The authors tackle the two research hypotheses concerning the interpretation of the iconography of these seals. The first (by Rika Gyselen) is the identification of the seals as Christian seals. The second (by Abolala Soudavar) attributes the seals to Mithraism. Drawing on available visual and written sources, the authors' study examines the symbolism of the scorpion and of the cross in the religious doctrines of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Mithraism. The authors conclude that since the crosses are depicted in the company of scorpions, the content cannot be neither Christian nor Zoroastrian. The current authors suggest that the seals with scorpions and crosses must belong to Iranian Mithraism; however, their argumentation is based on the grounds radically different from those proposed by Soudavar.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Within the wide research of the interpretation of religious symbols, there dominates an opinion that the cross, in iconography, is a symbol of Christianity. This is specifically clear in the case of historical research on the religions of pre-Islamic Iran. Historians coming from the “Western” cultural background tend to interpret archaeological monuments containing the cross as monuments unquestionably linked to the Christian creed. However, the symbol of the cross in the Middle Eastern iconography is not always a symbol of Christianity, it could be related to far older cultures and non-Christian religions. Thus, the symbol cannot be treated as exclusively Christian.
1. Introduction
In 2006, an article by Rika Gyselen “Les témoignages sigillographiques sur la présence chrétienne dans l'Empire Sassanide” was published. In the article, Gyselen promotes an idea of culturally significant presence of Christians in the Sasanid Empire, based on sigillographic sources. In her publication, Gyselen attributes the seals on which a cross appears, among other iconographic elements, to the followers of Christianity, seeing in them a mark of cultural presence of Christians in the Iranian environment.

Can all the seals published by Gyselen be unequivocally identified as Christian? The authors of the present paper tackle the idea, which stems from the vision of the culture of the territories of modern Iraq in late antiquity as non-pluralistic, basically stretched in Christiano-Zoroastrian dualism. Identification of the seals as belonging neither to Christian nor Zoroastrian systems of beliefs is but a small aspect of a larger picture of late antiquity in Western Asia that should be viewed as a far more complex cultural and political system than a mere dichotomy. The picture of relative cultural diversity, escaping dominant ideologies, emerges from the analysis of the seals containing depictions of scorpions and crosses. Neither do the symbols seem to be examples of mere eclecticism in the type of early mediaeval, newly christianised lands, where pagan and Christian symbols overlapped because of unrefined theological awareness of the wearers. It is proposed here that the images on the seals can be explained on the foundation of Mithraic

Figure 1. The seal from Cabinet des Médailles (drawing by Eleonora Skupniewicz).
religion, an Iranian faith different from Zoroastrianism. The idea was already outlined by Soudavar; however, the present authors supplement it with new considerations and, at the same time, offer a different interpretation with regard to several of his arguments.

The analytical method selected for the research, directly deriving from Panoffsky’s tripartite approach to work of art, might seem somehow conservative, perhaps structurally related to psychoanalytical approach to dreams or automatisms, where the clear definition of the shape/material/narrative constitutes the starting point, and then it is followed by examination of associations (internal and free in psychoanalysis, and based on research of common visual language of the time in iconological method) and finalized by internalized conclusions or iconological analysis. This, even simplified, model cannot be fully applied to late antique popular art, as the semantic content is lacking direct textual explanations and requires comparisons with forms semantically better embedded. Instead, a closer and more reliable source of comparison is found. The semiotic search of meaning must include a syntactic part, i.e. positioning of the elements within the pictorial field which directly influences the semantics and, in fact, is in itself a semantic element. The lack of direct semantic explanation is replaced by the analysis of analogies.
1.1. Rika Gyselen’s interpretation

Among the artefacts discussed by Gyselen there are three specifically intriguing seals with representations of scorpions and crosses (Gyselen, 2006, no. 58, pp. 54–5, no. 97, 62–3, no. 62, 56–7).

The first one was registered in Gyselen’s catalogue under number 58 [Figure 1] and comes from the collection of the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris. It depicts two scorpions (one small and one large), holding each other with pincers. They are located alongside the vertical axis of the oval field of the seal. To the left of the scorpions, on the horizontal axis, a simple Greek cross was placed. On the other side of the scorpions, there is a short pahlavi inscription that reads d'nyly. Gyselen classifies the seal as Christian on the basis of the inscription, which Shaked (1977, p. 22) identified as the name “Daniel”. Gyselen ignores the opinion of Shaked, who stated that: “The Christian affiliation of the owner of the seal is indicated in this case by the presence of a cross”. Gyselen’s view is followed by Gignoux (1980, p. 310), based on Shaked’s (1977, p. 23) remark that the occurrence of biblical names on Sasanian seals in Pahlavi script may suggest that the owner of the seal was a Christian because perhaps “Jews tended to use the Hebrew script”. What is surprising is the inconsistency of Gyselen (2006, p. 27), who in the same article includes the name Daniel among names used by both Christians and Jews: “noms sont communs aux juifs et chrétiens”. That is, naturally, if the reading indeed refers to Judeo-Christian name.

The Agate stamp-seal from the British Museum [Figure 2] with two scorpions and two crosses separated by an inscription is also identified by Gyselen (2006, no. 97, pp. 62–3) as Christian. The central Pahlavi inscription was interpreted by Shaked (1977, pp. 22, note 28) as zpkry, and by Gignoux (1976, p. 145) as zpkr‘, while by Bivar (1969, KB 2, pl. 24) as zmkw‘. Gyselen (2006, pp. 28, 36) states that in this case it could have possibly been an Iranian name Zabgar. According to her, the owner of the seal was a Christian too.
The third example to which the authors wish to refer, and which Gyselen (2006, no. 62, pp. 56–7) has identified as Christian, is the seal from the Mohsen Foroughi’s collection [Figure 3]. The seal repeats the motif of two scorpions with crosses but this time the scorpions are flanking a hand with the forefinger and the thumb joined and with what appears a diadem around the wrist. The seal contains no inscription; thus, Gyselen (2006, p. 31) states that the owner of the seal remains anonymous.

Gyselen classifies all the seals mentioned above as Christian ones on the basis of the “Greek cross” that appears on them. With regard to the scorpion, she merely states that, although this animal was considered harmful by the followers of Mazdaism, it, nevertheless, is a frequent motif on Sasanian seals, allegedly, a classical symbol of fertility. Gyselen (2006, pp. 36–8) also states that although many Sasanian seal motifs contain an apotropaic significance, it is impossible to consider them “magical”. An interpretation of combinations of crosses with the old Iranian elements in decoration of pottery in Sasanian Iraq as a kind of transcultural and transreligious eclecticism, the idea resembling Gyselen’s view, was also advocated by Simpson (2013).

1.2. Abolala Soudavar’s interpretation
Another interpretation of the seal from the Mohsen Foroughi’s collection was proposed by Abolala Soudavar (Soudavar, 2017, p. 79). He believes that the “two scorpions complement a well-known Sasanian emblem representing ten thousand farr/khvarrah: A hand with two stretched fingers (symbol of 10,000) surrounded by a flying ribbon or dastər (symbol of farr). Through association, all of these symbols are auspicious, and project an abundance of farr for its owner.”

In Soudavar’s opinion (2017, p. 82–4), the Sasanian motif of the scorpion derives from proto-Elamite Jiroft culture where, he believes, the scorpion was to symbolise the Spring, being an animal hibernating throughout the Winter and awaking in the Spring. Furthermore, Soudavar associates the appearance of scorpions in the Iranian iconography with ethnographic material, where a ceremony of kuseh-gardi is recorded, which was to wake scorpions and snakes to evoke clouds and rain associated with them.

Thus, according to Soudavar (2017, p. 80) the four-armed cross is an ancient symbol of the Sun that Iranians called chalipd, apparently related to Mithra.

2. Discussion
The interpretation of the meaning of late Pre-Islamic Iranian seals combining crosses and images of scorpions cannot provide a clear and unambiguous answer as to the nature of associations of the images with particular fragments of certain scripts. It requires drawing attention to possible explanations and assessment of their plausibility rather than certainty. At the current stage of research, the results of such studies must remain hypothetical rather than definite. It is, however, noteworthy that such considerations are important in the construction of the structure of relationships between visual and spoken modes of communication in Sasanian Iran. Moreover, such reflections would provide assessment of the role of the Christians in Sasanian Iran and clues to understanding Christian attitudes towards scorpions in late antiquity, followed by the inquiries of the possible semantic function of the scorpion and the cross in the Sasanian imagery.

2.1. Christian church in pre-Islamic Iran
The problem of Christian presence in Pre-Islamic Iran is indisputable and has been researched many times in scholarly works, e.g., Asmussen (1983), Walker (2006). The beginnings of the evangelisation of Iran took place as early as the first century A.D. (Ch. & Jullien, 2004), while the increase in the number of Christians in the Sasanian Empire was the result of the deportation of the inhabitants of Antioch by Shahanshah Šābuhr I (r. 242–272) during his victorious wars with Rome (Jullien, 2006; Mosig-Walburg, 2010). A specific situation with regard to Christians took place in northern Mesopotamia. organisationally, this area was subordinate to the Patriarchate of Antioch, but language differences (in the eastern part Syriac was spoken above all—a western dialect of Aramaic) naturally prevented the unity of the Christian church. The bishop of Ctesiphon...
Papa was recognised as a Catholicos in 315, which made him equal with the patriarch of Antioch (Wigram, 2004, pp. 44–56).

The planned, systematic action of the Persian court against the Iranian Christians resulted from the actions of Emperor Constantine (306–337), who considered himself the “protector” of the Persian Christians (Barnes, 1985, p. 131–2; Frendo, 2001). A period of persecution was initiated by political rather than religious reasons (Brock, 1982). During the persecution, which lasted 40 years, some 35,000 Christians suffered martyrdom (Wiessner, 1967). A turning point for the development of the Christian church in Iran was the reign of Yazdgerd I (r. 399–421) (McDonough, 2008). The king allowed the council to be organised in 410. At the council the Persian Catholicos Ishaq united the dioceses of the East, until then remaining under the direct authority of the patriarch of Antioch, into a separate ecclesiastical province under his authority. In 424, the Persian bishops recognised Catholicos Dadisho’ as patriarch, thus rejecting any sovereignty of Roman Antioch (Abramowski, 2011). After the Councils of Ephesus (in 431) and Chalcedon (in 451), many supporters of the “Nestorian” doctrine fled the Roman Empire to Iran (Wessel, 2006, pp. 138–80). Although there were persecutions of Christians in Iran, the decisive factor was not the religious intolerance of the kings, but political actions. Such a situation can be observed, repeatedly, with regard to rebellious Armenia (McDonough, 2006). In 484 King Pērōz (459–484), under the influence of Barsaumā, imposed the Nestorian creed on all Christians in Iran at the synod of Beth Lapat (Gondēşāpūr). This led to the persecution of other Christian creeds in the Persian state (Gero, 1981). In 518, Emperor Justin I (518–527) dismissed Severus as bishop of Antioch, leading to another schism among Christians. The followers of Severus’ doctrine formed the Miaphysite church, some of whom fled to Iran to escape persecution by the emperor (Andrade, 2009).

The challenge facing the Catolikos in Iran was to maintain the doctrinal unity of the church. In addition to the Miaphysites, whole swathes of Christians flowed into Iran as a result of deportations, e.g., the people of Amida in 502 (Jullien, 2006, p. 114), or Antioch in 540 (Maksymiuk, 2018d). By order of Husraw I Anōšag-rūwān (r. 531–579), a synod of the Christian church in Iran was called in 544, which, among other things, prohibited Christians from entering into xwēdōdah, the so-called incest marriages (Maksymiuk, 2019). The participation of Christians in the unsuccessful attempt of Anōš Azād (son of Husraw, who was excluded from the succession because of his adoption of Christianity) to take power in 551 was an interesting event. Catholicos threatened them with excommunication and personally went to the rebellious province of Bēt Huzayē (Jackson Bonner, 2016).

The Christians in the 6–7th century enjoyed religious freedom. Additionally, a clause in the peace treaty of 562 guaranteed the King’s consent to build Christian churches, celebration of public services and burying the dead according to the Christian rite (Herman, 2010, pp. 30–40). The only exclusion was a ban on missionary action to convert followers of Mazdaism to Christianity.

This brief history of Christianity in Sasanian Iran illustrates that the group gained relative importance in the kingdom, remaining, however, the minority, somehow analogically to Jews although without the ethnic notion.

2.2. Scorpion in Christian imagery: Tertullian’s Scorpice
Tertullian of Carthage wrote the polemical treatise Scorpice (Antidote for the Scorpion’s Sting) during the period of persecution of the Christians in the Roman Empire (Birley, 1992). In this work, a Christian writer of the turn of 2nd and 3rd centuries argues against the view of some Gnostics (Valentinians) who believed that martyrdom should not be condoned. The Valentinians proposed formulas that allowed Christians to offer sacrifices to the Roman state gods and thus preserve their lives (Barnes, 1969; Romero Pose, 2002). According to Tertullian, such practices were a violation of the first of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”. To Tertullian, such actions of the Gnostics were comparable to a fatal bite of a scorpion. In his treatise, he juxtaposes the description of the scorpion-animal and the scorpion-heretic, and offers
the antidote that can save from these two dangerous creatures. Tertullian describes the scorpion as a hideous and vicious animal:

The earth brings forth, as if by suppuration, great evil from the diminutive scorpion. The poisons are as many as are the kinds of it, the disasters as many as are also the species of it, the pains as many as are also the colours of it.... And yet to smite with the tail – which tail will be whatever is prolonged from the hindmost part of the body, and scourges – is the one movement which they all use when making an assault. Wherefore that succession of knots in the scorpion, which in the inside is a thin poisoned veinlet, rising up with a bow-like bound, draws tight a barbed sting at the end, after the manner of an engine for shooting missiles. From which circumstance they also call after the scorpion, the warlike implement which, by its being drawn back, gives an impetus to the arrows. The point in their case is also a duct of extreme minuteness, to inflict the wound; and where it penetrates, it pours out poison (Tertullian, 2018, Scorpionace, 1).

According to Tertullian, both scorpions and the heretics compared to them are the symbol of evil and sin. The juxtaposition of the heretics with scorpions shows the extremely negative attitude of Christians towards scorpions, believed to be one of the most abominable animals. Therefore, we maintain that it would have been highly incongruous to combine the symbol of the scorpion with the Christian cross.

Tertullian’s interpretation represents general Christian understanding of the scorpion as a symbol of enemies (The Holy Bible, Prophecy of Ezechiel, 2.6), cruelty (The Holy Bible, Second Book of Paralipomenon, 10.14), demonic power of destruction and pain (The Holy Bible, The Apocalypse of St. John the Apostle, 9.3–5), and vicious, lethal power in contrast to the benevolence of Divine Love (The Holy Bible, The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ, According to St. Luke, 11.12). One of the miraculous powers given to the Apostles was authority over scorpions which must be interpreted directly as a mystical force of removing these dangerous creatures but also as a symbolic value of vanquishing falsehood (The Holy Bible, The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ, According to St. Luke, 10.19). In later Christian thought the scorpion stood for the treacherous power of heresy (following the track initiated by Tertullian), the demon and Satan. The scorpion was compared with Judas and associated with some anti-Semitic traits, being a symbol of Jewish “treachery”. Christian perception of the scorpion was clearly a result of the Old Testament tradition but also the heritage of classical perception where scorpions are perceived as malicious creatures only waiting to attack humans and as representing unexpected danger and fear at best (Aelian, 1959, 6.20 and 6.23).

2.3. Scorpion in Sasanian imagery

The motif of the scorpion is quite popular in Sasanian sigillography with four dozens of examples just in the collection of Leiden Museum van Oudheden (Gyselen, 1997, 61–3, Planche XXIII-XXIV) and the British Museum (e.g., Museum number 119,601). Naturally, the popularity of the motif cannot be explained neither on Zoroastrian nor on Christian grounds where the scorpion was treated as an abominable animal khraﬅar, work of Ahriman and representation of deceitful and treacherous Valetinian heresy, respectively. In their study of Zoroastrian attitudes towards animals, Foltz and Saadi-nejad (2008) mention scorpions only in the context of Ahrimanic domain as creatures to be killed by pious believers, leaving no place to any other interpretation. This study only emphasises what an unsuitable symbol the scorpion would have been for a Zoroastrian. Perceiving it as a representation of the archaic symbol of fertility rooted even in Jiroft, non-Indo-European culture, results in the following two methodological issues:

(1) Interpretation of prehistoric objects is hypothetical, based on educated guesses rather than actual sources. It is possible to assume that in Jiroft culture scorpions and snakes symbolised the fertile power of water, or fertility in general, but, in fact, it is impossible to determine the nature of the relationship between the waters and chthonic, venomous animals, whose lethality is a crucially important feature. Thus, these animals could equally well stand for the guards of the life force related to humidity, holding it imprisoned through winter and the entire ritual of waking them up
might just distract them in order to allow the life force to escape. Uncertain nature of such interpretations leaves space for educated confabulations as actual related beliefs are unknown.

(2) Even if the function of the scorpion as a fertility symbol in the prehistoric imagery was assumed for sake of further course of thought, it is impossible to determine the way of its transition to the world of late antiquity. It is true that the beliefs are characterised by certain conservatism but they also change with time, especially in times of rapid political and ethnic changes as well as intensified cultural exchange which happened several times in Iran from protohistoric times until the Sasanians.

In the light of the above, instead of using a semantic “skeleton key” of over-generalised alleged archaic meaning of “fertility”, it seems sound to refer the symbols to the then current cultural environment. The closest in this case seem the depictions of scorpions in the Roman Mithraic cult. It is difficult to assess the relations between the Roman Mithraism and its Iranian origin (Beck, 2006; Chalupa, 2008, 2010, 2016); however, leaving aside the disputes regarding the amount of the preserved Iranian content in the Roman cult, the current Authors believe that with all its deficiencies the Roman form of Mithraic religion is the source of ultimate importance in the reconstruction of the elements of the original Iranian version, thus taking mildly Cummonian stance. Despite the efforts of the scholars like Bivar (1998, 2005), Pourshariati (2013) and Soudavar (2017), the reconstruction of the original Iranian Mithraic cult leaves gaps, which is inevitable, concerning the indirect nature of the sources. In the light of their work and recently discovered Mithraic temples in Iran, the very existence of Iranian prototype of Roman Mithraism seems undeniable; however, the question of the way of transition and further mutual dependency of both versions remains open. It seems that Roman Mithraism derived from Anatolian, possibly Commagenian form of the Iranian cult in the first century AD (Greut, 2006). Also, following the ideas of Soudavar and Pourshariati, the current Authors believe that Iranian Mithraism was a “mysteries” cult, a society, rather than any form of institutional religion. Thus, it was not based on dogmas but rather on myths, stories and personal religious experience. The existence of grades in Roman Mithraism does not automatically prove existence of hierarchic clergy as the grades might refer to initiation levels. However, the presence of Mithraic temples in Iran and the Roman Empire implies that there must have been people involved in their upkeep. Nevertheless, the Authors agree with Foltz’s (2013, p. 162) statement that “Iranian Mithraism may in fact deserve to be considered a religion in its own right”.

The reference to the almost simultaneously existing iconography of the Western version of Mithraic cult seems more justified than associations with references chronologically distant and basically out of context. This does not fully abolish the idea of the relation of the scorpion to previous cultures, as the later symbolism must have derived from its predecessors.

In the scenes of tauroctony, the scorpion is always shown below the sacrificial bull, usually holding its genitals with the pincers. Unlike the dog and the snake, the scorpion does not seem to be related to the dramatic complex focused around the wound on the bull's neck. This distances the scorpion from the sacrificial function; however, it cannot be semantically neutral. Its apparent remoteness from the main action allows to perceive scorpion as a structural rather than an active element of the drama, an element situating the action rather than participating in it. Thus, if the figure of the bull in at least one of its semantic layers would be assumed to represent zodiacal Taurus, then Scorpion would be directly on the opposite side, thus establishing the vertical axis of the drama, possibly an astrological equivalent of Mithraic Axis Mundi. Such an interpretation was recently offered by Maksymiuk and Skupniewicz (Karamian et al., 2020) who agreed with Insler's (Insler, 1978) identification of the bull as Taurus and, consequently, with identification of the scorpion in astrological terms. What has remained unexpressed is the observation that this axis coincides with all-European festivals of first of May and first of November shared in Celtic, Germanic and Slavic lore. Naturally, this does not imply Mithraic connections with North European nations, but rather the shared, possibly already Indo-European, origin.
It is possible that the stellar focus of Roman Mithraism was not similarly important in its original version and the astral symbolism overlapped or was otherwise connected with the purely religious one. As evidenced convincingly by Sick (2004), the acquisition of solar qualities by Mithra was a process associated with overlapping responsibilities of Sun, perception, truth and agreements/contracts. Koim (2009) has identified one of the most common symbols of Sasanian iconography; a diademed ring deriving from diadems in Hellenistic and Parthian Art with Mithraic contents, this way proving popularity of the cult, which shared large overlapping areas with Mazdaism. This omnipresence of Mithraic traits in Iranian Pre-Islamic culture, even though limited to its margins only, allows supposition that the astral symbolism so much emphasised in Roman Mithraism might not be its original feature. The very fact that the Mithraic temples were underground constructions, or that even caves were adopted for that purpose, proves its strong chthonic aspect. The juxtaposition of the bull and the scorpion as the poles of the cosmic axis might not necessarily refer only to astrological perspective. In fact, the scorpion’s power to kill much larger creatures and its chthonic connotation (clearly visible in regard with kuseh ceremonies mentioned earlier) approximate semantically scorpions and snakes. In Greek-Egyptian Mithras Liturgy an initiate, on his/her way to Mithra, must face seven bull-headed male gods and seven asp-headed female deities which seems to reflect the earlier described juxtaposition of the bull, representing direct physical, material power and the scorpion, apparently symbolising chthonic power to kill and harm animals far exceeding its size. In Mithras Liturgy, the function of the scorpion is taken over by the asp; nevertheless, one may observe similarly paired, polarised powers. The gender differentiation of male, bull-headed deities and female asp-headed ones, might point to sexual tension related to fertility, symbolically associated by means of the connection of the scorpion and bull’s testicles.

In several Sasanian seals the snake is juxtaposed with the deer. This pair can also be interpreted as a reference to Mithraic myth, where the snake took over the function of the scorpion as a part of mechanism described above, while the bull was replaced by the deer. Semantic transfer of the deer and the bull is fully justified as the words describing male deer and male bovine are closely related in Iranian languages, though the habit of using a word “bull” in reference to large male herbivores is also common in European languages.

The scorpion may, therefore, function as a foundation and the lower Autumn pole of the cosmic drama but also as a guardian or guarantor of lethal power, which in Mithraic context was especially important. The god himself governs contracts, agreements, promises and oaths, and therefore truth, one of the crucial ideas of Sasanian royal ideology. As observed by Grenet (Boyce & Grenet, 1991, pp. 486–7) and Foltz (2013, p. 167), Mithra was paired with Asû in Kushan Empire which relates him to cosmic order and its moral foundations. Just as the scorpion might be interpreted as the guardian of waters or life in its underground part of the cosmic trip, it could also be perceived as the guardian of Truth able to kill the followers of druţ who break the oaths and thus challenge Mithra.

2.4. Cross in Mithraic cult

The “Greek cross” with the arms terminating with goat or ram-headed finials is known from the Sasanian seal from the collection of Biliotheque Nationale (Museum number 1972.131.7.49) which clearly denies any Christian affiliation (Ritter, 2010, p. 296, Tafel XIX; Gyselen, 1993, p. 30). The motif of four goats’ or rams’ heads forming a cross or swastika appears on three seals from Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden (Museum number B1982/5.990; B1982/5.143; B1982/5.1147; Gyselen, 1997, p. 67, Planche XXV), while x-shaped cross with the arms ending with birds’ heads is attested by another seal from the same museum (Museum number B1982/5.751; Gyselen, 1997, p. 67, Planche XXV). Another seals from the same collection include the monograms consisting of “Greek crosses” with the arms terminating in crescents and eight points or dots running around, four of them being embraced by the horns of the crescents (Museum number 1982/5.1028; 1982/5.528; 1982/5.779; Gyselen, 1997, p. 85, Planche XXXII). The cross also accompanies the figure of a winged horse or bull on the seal from the collection of Mohsen Foroughi (Ritter, 2010, p. 273, Tafel XIV). What is important, the cross is not straight
by slightly oblique. There are numerous examples of eight-rayed stars difficult to distinguish from crosses but the fantastic and actual animals, as well as symbols are often accompanied by six rayed stars and crescents. These examples clearly mark relative independence of the cross symbol from the Christian creed and allow understanding it differently than the tool of execution of Jesus Christ. In fact, semantically, the Christian cross also exceeds this simple interpretation.

Mithraic association of the cross was proposed by Foltz (2013, p. 185) as a mark of crossing ecliptic and celestial equator. Soudavar believes that the Mithraic cross is a purely solar symbol. Recently Maksymiuk and Skupniewicz (Karamian et al., 2020) proposed, in their analysis of the cross carved over a Parthian tomb in Māhūr, yet another explanation. As Taurus and Scorpio create the vertical axis of the mystic drama of tauroctony, the horizontal line would spread between Leo and Aquarius. In Roman Mithraism the lion is identified with Cautes and not Mithra. This identification of Cautes with the lion might further refer to Mithraic iconography where Cautes and Cauropates flank the central scene (Driven, 2016, pp. 22–4). The Lion is the fourth of the seven grades of Mithraic initiation and therefore it marks the middle of the vertical ladder of the grades (Adrych, 2020). Cautes represents Leo and marks the south, holding his torch up, while in this case Cauropates would reside in Aquarius representing the north and holding the torch down. This would allow to simplify the tauroctony to the sign of cross. Even though the solstices and equinoxes would create a regular cross if marked on the circular calendar, they belong to the zodiac signs flanking the Leo-Aquarius line, the theoretical horizontal line of the Mithraic cross. The cross is also a clear mark of centrality. Crossing lines are the most natural designation of the centre. This is the aspect emphasised several times by Julian Apostate in his Hymn to Helios. Julian himself states that he reveals only what principles of the mysteries allowed him, but clearly he does not refer to any of the Western mystery cults, as the only, so strongly related to Sun, were the Mithraic ones (Julian, 1913, Oration IV).

3. Conclusion
The assimilation mentioned by Rika Gyselen (2006, p. 18: “La présence des chrétiens dans l’empire sassanide et leur assimilation culturelle sont aussi perceptibles dans les sceaux”) must be seen in two ways: (1) as social assimilation of Christians in Iranian culture and creation of the group of Iranian Christians, well interwoven in the “social textile” of the time which is represented by introduction of Christian motifs into a traditionally Iranian genre of sigillography, but also (2) as adoption of earlier Iranian motifs within Christian imagery. The latter approach may raise doubts as to the genuinely Christian nature of some of the objects considered Christian by Gyselen. If Christian visual language adopted earlier Iranian elements, it is also clear that the same elements did not cease to exist in their original context. The amount of “Christian” seals in Sasanian Iran might raise a question of whether Christianity did not threaten popularity of native Iranian religions, or maybe the habit of expressing the creed through sigillography was not exclusively related to Christianity.

The interpretation of the seals containing crosses and scorpions, proposed by Gyselen is incongruous with the negative perception of the scorpion in the Christian thought. The very existence and a relatively strong position of the Christians in Sasanian Iran and their assimilation into the fabric of the local society confirmed by historical sources may constitute a compelling argument against identification of seals including both scorpions and crosses as Christian. It seems unlikely that with such widespread knowledge of the Christian doctrine, such an incompatible combination would have been ignored by the contemporaneous people. Neither can the cross be interpreted as some general solar symbol related to Mithra on the ground of Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism because the creed imposed on the believers a strong duty to destroy them. Thus, the most plausible explanation which refers to the existing and confirmed cult would be associating the seals with Iranian Mithraism.

Given the strong presence of Christian and Zoroastrian creeds, the idea of mixed identities or blurred lines between the faiths should be treated with utmost cautiousness. The high level of
theological dispute in Sasanian Iran, supporting the view of dogmatic awareness of the faithful, does not sustain the picture of the semi-“pagan” culture with blurred lines. It needs to be reminded that the Christian proselytism was forbidden even at the peak of power of this religion. Hence, it seems legitimate to assume that the then existing religious communities must have been well aware of their religious identities and, therefore, it seems that such reckless application of the religious iconographies must have been unthinkable to the people of that time. It is worth noting that the clearly Christian themes are unmistakably identifiable through references to Biblical scenes or to Western Christian iconography; thus, neither Gyselen’s not Simpson’s views can be found fully convincing.

The scholars rooted in the Christian culture tend to interpret the cross as Christian whenever they see it. Their misinterpretation results from strong acculturation of the symbol and a lack of understanding of a cultural environment that is foreign to them. It is difficult to perceive it as a part of the wide post-colonial heritage but it rather results from the great importance of the symbol in the cultural background of the scholars. It was pointed out by Maksymiuk (2018b) that the language and the rituals used by one side do not have to be interpreted by the other as was intended. Iranian history cannot be studied exclusively through European lenses. The Euro-centric tendency to interpret the motif of the cross from a Christian perspective cannot be sustained after one conducts a thorough study of the local cultures.

Soudavar was the first scholar to observe that the symbol of the cross does not necessarily refer to Christianity in the Sasanian context. He convincingly concludes that the scorpions on the seals must be auspicious symbols; therefore, they cannot belong to the Zoroastrian imagery, where the animal is one of the khrafstar creatures, created by Ahriman, which any pious believer is obliged to kill.

Soudavar’s observation that the crosses referred to the Iranian Mithraic cult seems very plausible to us. However, it requires additional argumentation and re-interpretation as far as the function of the symbol is concerned. Namely, as Mithra’s function of the Sun-god was relatively new, the Mithraic cosmological myth must have exceeded that function by far (Cantera, 2017). One might risk a statement that the Sun became one of Mithra’s epiphanies but definitely not the only one, which is illustrated by rich iconography of Roman Mithraism and the writings of Julian Apostate. Also, in Soudavar’s study the motifs of the Mithraic crosses and the scorpions are presented separately, which distances his research from the seals discussed in the current work.

Soudavar’s interpretation ignores the fact that if the scorpion was to represent Spring, through its appearance after Winter hibernation, it cannot have been used? for Winter and Spring accordingly (2017, p. 84–5). Moreover, the hypothesis does not explain how proto-Elamite beliefs could have been transferred to Iranian rites and further, there is no proposal as to how to bridge Jiroft and the Sasanians, and as to how to explain the transition from the Sasanians to modern times. The popularity of the snake and the scorpion in imagery of multitude of ancient cultures undermines such strict conclusions. Also, the participants of kuseh ceremonies were? well protected against bites of the venomous “auspicious” animals, bringers of the joyful Spring. In fact, it seems, that the known folkloristic ritual was used to explain some elements of the Sasanian iconography and this conclusion was projected onto Jiroft without much regard for chronology. In Soudavar’s opinion the secrecy of the Mithraic societies and their occult nature, with Mithraic priesthood being “labelled as khrafstar-ish” by the Zoroastrians (2017, p. 277), was, surprisingly, not prosecuted, in contrast with Manichaens or Mazdakites.

The apparent connection between Spring and the scorpion and, consequently, the semantic relation of the snake and the scorpion which wake from hibernation in the Spring advocated by Soudavar ignores two important factors: (1) cosmic associations, emphasised in the Roman version of Mithraism, possibly reflected in the story of three magi following the star which guided them to the baby Jesus, which would suggest that the iconographic scorpion in Mithraic context must refer rather to the constellation of Scorpio or late Autumn zodiac sign reflecting it; (2) identification of
the snake and scorpion? Scorpio or the scorpion is not confirmed by the iconography of the Roman Mithraism, where the scorpion is always shown below the bull in the tauroctony scenes, while the snake is either associated with it or with the dog turned towards the stream of blood running from the wound on the bull’s throat. It seems that the scorpion performs there a function exceeding “generally chthonic” role of a venomous animal. To some extent, exchangeability of the snake and the scorpion could be traced back in Mithras Liturgy in the moment when an initiate meets seven bull-headed gods and seven asp-headed goddesses. This gender diversification might, to some extent reflect the scorpion’s function in tauroctony scenes, where it is associated with the bull’s genitals.

Pizzimenti (2019) convincingly argues that the scorpion’s association with fertility refers in fact to Autumn fieldworks which were performed in the astrological sign of Scorpio. This further undermines Soudavar’s view of perceiving the symbolism of fertility linked to scorpions on the basis of a direct observation of their swarming in Spring.

According to Soudavar (2017, p. 80) the four-armed cross is an ancient symbol of the Sun. It is impossible to disagree with this view, as the cross is a solar symbol common among numerous cultures. Its solar function is undeniable; however, there are two issues with such an interpretation: (1) Mithra was identified as a Sun-god at a relatively late stage, most likely in the Parthian period, which might explain the absence of the crosses in Roman Mithraic iconography where Mithras is not definitely identified as Sun, because both Sun and Moon appear independently in tauroctonies; what is more, Mithra never became solely a Sun-god but rather acquired a solar aspect, not unlike Apollo in Greece; but then (2) the cross could be a part of Mithraic symbolism in more than just the solar aspect.

Summarizing the above considerations, it should be noted that although the cross appears in the Sasanian sigillography in non-Christian contexts, it cannot be linked with the dominant religion of the era—Zoroastrianism. When the crosses are depicted in the company of scorpions, the content cannot be neither Christian (where these creatures represent treason and heresy) nor Zoroastrian (because this religion urged to kill scorpions as they were believed to belong to the evil god—Ahriman). The Authors suggest that the seals with scorpions and crosses must belong to Iranian Mithraism. They support their view by the sources related to Roman Mithraism and propose understanding of the cross as a celestial figure, symbolically related to the decorations of the Mithraea. The scorpions are, in this view, a foundation of the cosmic structure but they may also appear as the guarantors of the contracts, which relates them directly to Mithra—the Lord of Contracts/Oaths.

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