

## PLATE DECORATED WITH AN INCISED HORSE

Persia, 6th-7th century A.D

Silver

Diameter: 21.5 cm

Reference: 28294



This vessel, outstanding for its solidity and weight, was hammered from a cast silver bar. According to a quite unusual process for the Sassanid silversmiths, the decoration here is simply incised and has no engraved, embossed or gold element.

The plate is circular and shallow; the base has no foot and does not provide good balance. The rim is rounded, with no real lip.

As often in Sassanid art, the representation is highly stylized. This example is characterized by great simplicity (one may even wonder whether it is entirely finished) and by a wide use of the compass and of the ruler, which enabled the toreutic artist to trace the lines more quickly, while maintaining a remarkable formal accuracy.

The inner surface of the vessel, which has no subdivisions, no ground line, no landscape and no vegetal elements, is simply decorated with a horse that walks towards the right in a proud and solemn manner. Its strong and thick-set proportions are typical of contemporary Sassanid art. The harness is richly detailed (bridle, bit, saddle, the disk-like phalerae, the decorative ribbons on the tail, head and neck).

The use of the horse as a unique decorative motif is very rare in the Sassanid world and is only attested in glyptics and on one other silver cup, slightly different in type (provided with a disk-shaped foot and with ribs on the outside). In the Zoroastrian tradition, the horse belonged to the family of beneficent herbivores. Given its major role in Epic poetry, the animal was closely associated with royalty, as evidenced in this example by the presence of the fluttering ribbons adorning its neck and tail.

The Sassanids ruled Iran from 224 A.D. (end of the domination of the Parthian kings) until the Arab invasion of 651 A.D. This period was a golden age for Iran, in terms of art, politics and religion. The Sassanid

Empire extended throughout the Near East, as it is still referred to today (Iran, Iraq, Armenia, southern Caucasus, southern Central Asia, western Afghanistan, part of Pakistan, eastern regions of Turkey, Syrian territories, part of the Arabian Peninsula). Historians consider this period as one of the most important in the history of Iran; in many ways, it represents the highest level of ancient Persian civilization, just before the Muslim conquest and the consequent adoption of the doctrine of Muhammad. The cultural influence of the Sassanids spread far beyond the borders of their empire, reaching Western Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Far East, and played a role not only in the emerging Islamic culture and civilization but also in Byzantine, Asian and European art of the early Middle Ages.

### CONDITION

Complete and in excellent condition. Superficial wear and traces of dents. Oxidations and greenish patina on the outside.

### PROVENANCE

Sotheby's London, November 14, 1966, Lot 29; Swiss private collection.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

GUNTER A.C. and JETT P., *Ancient Iranian Metalwork in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art*, Washington, 1992, pp. 139-141, no. 20.

*Les Perses sassanides: Fastes d'un empire oublié (224-642)*, Paris, 2006, pp. 69 ff.