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## Original Research Article

# A Comparative Study of Mitra's Sacrifice of the Bull with the Battle of Rostam and the White Demon Between the Paintings of Different Periods and Coffee House Paintings

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## Abstract

**Problem statement:** There is a similarity between images of the sacrificing of the sacred bull in Mitra's religion painted in the ancient era and the pictures of Rostam's battle with the white demon in the images of coffee houses in visual and pictorial characteristics that can be recognized by studying them. This similarity and formal connection is a suitable case for matching and checking the type of composition and the visual and image characteristics of these paintings. Considering that the image of the battle between Rostam and the white demon has some similarities with the scene of the sacrificing bull by Mitra-Mehr, both battles took place in the cave, and in general, the cave was sacred and had an important place in different religions.

**Research objective:** By achieving the type of relationships and effects in the elements used in the composition system, such as the type of sitting and standing of figures, guiding lines, and other visual elements, the comparison of works with a qualitative nature has been done.

**Research method:** The type of research is fundamental-theoretical and the research method is descriptive-analytical. Data including the author's archive were collected the library research method.

**Conclusion:** The coffee house painters have drawn (the scene of the killing of the white demon by Rostam) according to the previous patterns in the past painters' works. These effects are evident in the triangular composition system, the sitting position of the figures on the defeated creature (bull and white demon), and the presence of daggers in the hands of Mitra and Rostam. One of the common features of the paintings is the visual representation of the manpower of good and evil. Although the belief in the existence of light and darkness is rooted in the ancient beliefs of Iranians, it seems that the viewpoint of the painters and their attention to good and evil is taken from the Shahnameh.

**Keywords:** *Bull Sacrificing, Mitra, Battle of Rostam, White demon, Painting, Coffee house painting.*

## Introduction

The image of the battle between Rostam and the white demon, inspired by the narrative of the Shahnameh as the victory of good over evil, has similarities with the scene of Mitra's bull-killing. They have differences

because the sacred bull is sacrificed and life flows in plants and animals from its blood. Mitra is the sacrificer of the bull and the embodiment of the light of the sun and God, who is the symbol of all the good qualities and the god of covenants, the friend and helper of warriors; this great Aryan god went from

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Iran to the Roman Empire and preceded other Roman gods. Many temples were built for him and in all of them there is a prominent image of Mitra sacrificing a bull; But in Iran and Armenia, Mitra (Seal) has never been embodied in a human form but has been present in the literature, poetry, and popular culture of the people. A large number of images of Rostam's battle with the white demon have been depicted by Iranian painters in different periods. In these images, similar poses can be seen, which show Rostam in the form and posture of sitting on a demon. Like placing Rostam's knee on the white demon's chest, which symbolizes the victory of the warrior (good) over the demon (evil). This type of composition has been repeated in all images, including past paintings, lithographs, tile paintings, etc., to the paintings of a coffee house in the battle of Rostam with the white demon with this type of composition (the type of Rostam sitting on the enemy's chest). In all of them, Rostam and Mitra have a dagger in their hands, and the hat on the head of Mithras and Rostam is similar. This shows that artists and painters are influenced by a specific type of composition and imagery. So far, no research has been done to investigate the influence effects and the application of visual features and composition systems on the images of the sacrificing of the bull and the killing of the white demon in past paintings and coffee house paintings.

### Research Method

The nature of the research is qualitative and fundamental-theoretical. The data were studied using a descriptive-analytical method in a comparative approach. The method of identifying sources is the library research and using the author's archive. In this research, 3 images of Mitra while killing a bull and 8 images of Rostam's battle with the white demon were selected based on the similarities of the figures, body shapes, and types of battle. To answer the research question, the researcher attempted to match the selected images with one another.

### Research Background

In past research, many cases have been discussed about

the battle between Rostam and the white demon, and by mentioning a number of them, it is pointed out the course of its change and evolution (Hesami & Sheikhi, 2020). in the article "The Survey of Transformation of the Demon Illustration in Iranian Painting with Emphasis on Shahnameh Illustrations from the Ilkhanid Period to the End of the Qajar Period", to understand the historical course, examines the depiction of the demon in the Shahnameh and compares it with its role in literature in terms of form and visual (Nikouyi, 2019). wrote an article entitled "The Holy Cattle Slaughterer in the Persian Mithraism" on the difference between Mehr worship in Western Christianity and the Christianity of the Iranian Plateau (Armenia), with evidence of Mithraic symbols and signs in motifs and decorations (Javadi, 2015). in an article entitled "Pieta" in Christianity and Holy "Cattle Slaughtering" in Mithraism" believes that the picture of the Pieta was influenced by the scene of Mehr and the ritual Mehr has continued to live with the transformation in Christianity.

In this research, the topic of Rostam's battle with the white demon is compared with Mitra's bull-killing scene, considering the similarities in form-composition, space creation (cave), figures' postures, and details, which have not been investigated so far.

### Mithra (Mehr) and Mithraism

Mitra, the great Aryan god, the symbol of the light and brightness of the sun, the friend and helper of true warriors the defender of the homeland, and the god who keeps the long-standing covenants, has had a special place in the Iranian and Roman empires. The warrior Romans praised Mithras as the patron god of warriors and built many temples for him along with other gods. In all the Mithraic temples throughout the Roman Empire, the scene of the sacred bull slaughtering is present in the mihrabs; However, Mithras was not depicted as a human being in the territory of the Iranian empire, but the god Mehr appeared with symbols and signs.

### Introducing Mitra's Bull-killing

In the culture of Mithraism, tauroctony means killing and slaughtering a bull. Mithra worshipers used to

draw the bull sacrificing scene at the end of the cave, on the eastern side, and inside the mihrab. In this scene, bull-killer Mithra is depicted as a young hero wearing a broken conical helmet (Phrygian helmet), with a bust and a waving red cloak. He is triumphantly in a half-standing position, his finger in the bull's muzzle and the dagger in the bull's throat. Blood flows from the dagger, while wheat and plants grow from the bull's tail. A bunch of grain has appeared from the bull's tail and the dog is licking blood. The snake is also present next to the dog. A scorpion clings to the bull's testicle and Mithra's messenger crow is also present. Two young men wearing Phrygian hats and oriental clothes, one holding a torch facing upwards symbolizing the sunrise, and the other holding a torch facing downwards symbolizing the setting sun, are seen on the sides of the stage. Usually, there are signs of the birth of Mithra and signs of the planets and the zodiac around the sacrifice scene (Olansi, 2007, 57). Since the religion of Mithra is related to astronomy and astrology, the twelve symbols of the zodiac are depicted in many of the temples, and among them, Mithra is seen sacrificing a bull with a torch in his hand (Fig. 1).

The bull-killing scene in the cave is displayed in the form of colorful motifs of red, blue, azure, gold, black, and white. In the left and right corners, a symbol of the sun and the moon can be seen as two angels. the waving cape on Mithra's shoulders is red with a blue lining decorated with golden star motifs (Fig. 2).

Around the scene of the holy sacrifice, images of Mitra's birth can be seen like carrying a bull, throwing an arrow at a rock and flowing water, Mitra next to a sacred pine or cedar tree, etc. (Fig. 3).

Many researchers have theorized in the interpretation of this scene that, despite the existing differences, they all believe that Tavraktoni is a scene of salvation, which is a fact of concern and the belief of believers that salvation is achieved by the sacrifice and benefiting from the eternal blood and matching with God in eternity (ibid., 57).

### The Story of Rostam and the White Demon

Rostam's battle with the demon is a sign of the change



Fig. 1. Mitra killing the bull, bas-relief, London. Source: <https://b2n.ir/t90132>.

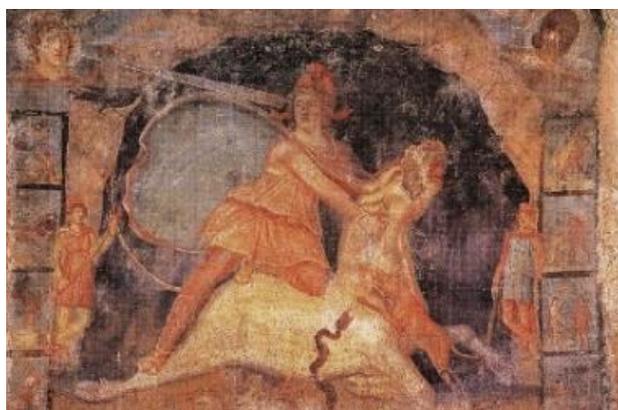


Fig. 2. Mithraic bull-killing scene. Plaster painting, Italy. Source: <https://b2n.ir/d20074>



Fig. 3. Slaughter of the Cow by Mithras, sculpture, Germany. Source: <https://b2n.ir/e01365>

in religion and the transformation of the Div from a god to a demon. "Da'wah" in ancient Persian means the same god and in French, "dieu" means God. With the emergence of a new religion, the gods of the previous religion were considered evil beings and were banished

in the name of demons. That's why Rostam fights with demons (Div-An) in Shahnameh and this is a sign of the change of religion and belief. In the Shahnameh, Ferdowsi versed a story called "The seventh Khan, Killing the White Demon (Div)", and in this work, Keykavous, accompanied by Guderz and Tus, marched to Mazandaran by chanting the voice of drum. When the Shah of Mazandaran was informed, he sent the white demon to fight them. The demon captured many of the Persian army. Then imprisoned and blinded Kiykavous and the rest. When Rostam was informed, he rode his horse and rushed to the rescue of Keykavous, found the white demon who was sleeping in a cave, threw him to the ground, split his side, and poured his liver's blood into the eyes of Keykavous and the captives, which restored their sight. Depicting the battle of Rostam and the white demon has a historical precedent in Iranian culture and civilization and can be seen in various arts, such as painting, tile carving, lithography, etc., in different periods up to the Qajar period (Table 1).

### The History of Coffee House Painting

Coffee house painting or Khiali-Negari (Fantasy-Drawing) is a branch of Qajar painting, which is a narrative with religious, epic, and lyrical themes taken from national and religious literature texts, painted in almost large sizes with paint and oil on canvas, and ordered by the coffee house, Hosseiniyeh, Zour-Khaneh, and Sagha-Khaneh owners. These masters were trained by traditional Qajar painters who worked in different fields such as painting on canvas, walls, behind glass, tile, and large screens with religious themes and stories of warriors. The coffee house painting has a very long history and goes back to the Sassanid period and Panjkent paintings. Coffee house painting falls into two main categories: national and religious. In the national part, from the time of the Mongols to the Safavid era, the narratives of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh were written and illustrated. With the establishment of the Safavid government and the recognition of the Shia religion as the official religion, during the era of Shah Ismail, Shah Abbas, and Shah Tahmasab, much attention was paid to the events of Islam, especially the event of Ashura.

This type of painting started its real life in the Zandiyeh and Qajar periods with Iranian-Islamic aesthetic features and visual styles, as well as dealing with national and religious issues. In the subsequent social developments, especially during the constitutional period and Pahlavi era, national and religious heroes received more attention from the people. Ferdowsi is a miracle worker who describes the wonders of superior human power most simply and expressively and makes the impossible possible. Hakim Ferdowsi's art is to verse the ancient Iranian legends and myths that have been common among people for thousands of years, in an excellent form. By creating a new descriptive style, the coffee house painter has been able to give Iranian color and flavor to the image of heroes and make them immortal. Hossein Qoullar Aghasi also refers to this topic in his speech: "It is not good to depict Rostam as a Hulk because then we paint him without his intellect and faith. Rostam is a hero because of his chivalry and correctness, not his strength and body". As it was said, coffee house painting in the national sector has a long history. In the religious section, the description of the old examples, which is the only reference to historical written sources, is explained in detail in the author's Ph.D. thesis. Based on the research problem, we will skip the examination of the religious group and only examine and study the national group. In the course of the work of Khiali-Negaran (Imaginary-Painters) who don't identify as "house coffee painters", I heard this many times from my father Hassan Ismailzadeh who said: "Everything that is depicted is from imagination." The Imaginary-Painters were particularly interested in some epic and religious subjects; because they saw the expression of chivalry and valor and all Iranian and Islamic values crystallized in it. One of those issues is the battle between Rostam and the White demon in the seventh Khan, which my father used to say: "In our opinion, Rostam has a young and eternal face, and signs of old age or his failure should not be shown. The viewer should see the hope of victory, invincibility, chivalry, bravery, fearlessness, sacrifice for national and moral values, and avoidance of darkness and filth in Rostam's posture and movement".

Table 1. The images of the battle between Rostam and the White Demon in paintings of different periods. Source: Author.

No	Painting	Specification
1		<p>The battle of Rostam and the white demon is displayed inside the cave. The position of the figures is in a triangular composition where Rostam is holding the demon's horn with his right hand and thrusting a dagger into the demon's chest with his left hand. Rostam wears a hat with a white leopard print and a curved white feather on top of it. Dressed in Babr-e Bayan is overcoming a sitting position on the demon's chest, and his right knee is placed on the demon's body, and his left leg is extended, which shows his attack to kill the white demon. Under Rostam's left leg, the severed leg of the demon, and on the right side, the demon's mace can be seen.</p>
2		<p>The battle between Rostam and the white demon inside the cave is depicted by the painter. The composition of Rostam and the white demon is triangular. Rostam is putting pressure on the demon's chest with his left hand and stabbing a dagger into the demon's stomach with his right hand. The left knee is placed on the body of the demon and the right leg is oblique, which shows the attack and domination of Rostam. The cut and bloody leg of the demon is drawn on the side of the demon and down. Rostam dressed in Babr-e Bayan and his red helmet can be a symbol of power and victory.</p>
3		<p>In this scene, Olad, the commander of Mazandaran, who had been captured by Rostam to show him the location of the white demon, is depicted outside the cave. who is standing next to a tree and watching the scene. The cave is surrounded by twisted rocks. Here, too, the battle of Rostam and the demon with a triangular combination is shown.</p>
4		<p>The battle between Rostam and the White Demon is in an arc-shaped frame on a seven-color tile with a triangular composition. Unlike the previous pictures, this battle was depicted in nature and outdoors among the grass and trees and under the blue sky with a bright background. On the left, behind Rostam Olad stands in human awe with a royal crown. Here, as in other scenes, Rostam's right leg is standing vertically on the figure of the demon, and his left leg is inclined and pulled back. Rostam is holding the demon's horn with his right hand raising his left hand and plunging the dagger into the demon's chest. The demon has a mace in his hand and is powerless, defeated by Rostam. In this scene, Rostam's dagger is depicted in pearlwork above the head of the warrior.</p>
5		<p>In this scene, the battle took place in the mountains and plains. In the continuation of the tradition of Iranian painting, figures can be seen behind the mountain. Rakhsh and Olad, are watching the battle scene.</p>
	<p>The battle of Rostam and the white demon from the Stone Print Shahnameh, illustrator: Mirza Ali Gholi Khouyi, 1851-1853, Tehran. Source: Marzolf, 2010.</p>	

Rest of table 1.

No	Painting	Specification
6	 <p>The white demon being killed by Rostam, Hasan Esmailzadeh, oil on canvas, 120x90, no date. Source: Author's.</p>	<p>The battle between Rostam and the white demon in the heart of the mountain and among the rocks is depicted in the style of Qajar painting. The background, which shows mountains, trees, and the sky, depicts European landscapes in the style of Qajar school painting. The bright colors on Rostam's dress and demon and horse saddle are derived from the tradition of Iranian painting.</p>
7	 <p>The white demon being killed by Rostam, Ghoullar Aghasi, oil on canvas, 1954. Source: Reza Abbasi Museum, 154.197.5. Source: Seif, 2012.</p>	<p>Rostam is sitting in a state of defeating the enemy, while the demon with a terrified face and tongue sticking out has become a defeated warrior. In the backstage, Rakhsh and Olad are watching.</p>
8	 <p>The Battle of Gisia-Banou and the Demon, Hasan Esmailzadeh, oil on canvas, 90x120, no date. Source: Author's.</p>	<p>The battle between Gisiabanou and the demon in the plain is written in heroic poems after the Shahnameh. The shape of the figures can be seen in the triangular composition in large dimensions. The female warrior holds the demon's horn with her right hand and plunges the dagger into the demon's chest with her left hand. Gysia is wearing a helmet with two horns and a red curved feather in the middle, dressed in Babr-e Bayan is defeating the white demon. The demon is lying on the ground with a terrified face and his mace can be seen on the side and in the center of the painting. Nature with green fields and trees, the sky, and a view of the castle in the manner of naturalistic is depicted in the background like European paintings.</p>

National themes in coffee house painting: 1. Epics of victory over filth (Battle of Rostam and demons). 2. Tragedies (The battle between Rostam and Esfandiar, Rostam and Sohrab). Most of the topics in the national section are taken from the poems of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh. The verses of the Shahnameh for paintings and drawings go back to the 6th and 7th centuries of the Hijri and have classified this book among the types of written literature. This means that if we put a specific image from Tahmasabi's Shahnameh or a work with the same title by a coffeehouse painter together, the source of inspiration for both works was specific verses from Ferdowsi's Shahnameh.

### A Comparative Study of Selected Works

In matching the scene of Mithra's sacred bull-killing and Rostam's battle with the white demon, there are

similarities in the form of the works, including the triangular composition in the Mithraic cave and the cave where the battle between Rostam and the demon took place. Some of the battle scenes between Rostam and the demon are depicted in nature and in the heart of mountains and plains, which also have a triangular composition. In the role of Mitra's sacrifice and Rostam's battle, the God of Mehr and athlete Rostam both have hats or head coverings. Mithras is always depicted with a Phrygian helmet. "Usually, in Greek and Roman iconography, the Phrygian hat is a sign of a Persian (Iranian) or Eastern Anatolian" (Olansi, 2007, 61). In some images of Rostam's battle with the White demon, Rostam is wearing a piebald helmet (such as the work of Qollar Aghasi and some painters). After killing the white demon, Rostam's helmet is displayed as a half-head of the demon. Some scenes of Mithra's bull-killing represent the main scene of

slaughtering at the mihrab at the end of the cave, and sometimes combined images with the holy sacrifice (Mithra's birth from a stone, a lotus flower, or a pine tree, Mithra's miracle and water fountain, the twelve signs of the zodiac, Mitra is depicted riding on horses and...)

We see the same approach in the scene of the battle between Rostam and the demon, where the main theme is in the center of the painting. The main subject is surrounded by figures such as the observer, Rakhsh (Rostam's horse), and the sky, mountains, and trees in the background (Fig. 4). The postures and movements of the figures are derived from previous patterns in Iranian painting; It has similarities with the Mithraic bull-killing. The face of warrior is in a three-faced pose while holding a dagger in his hand and sitting on the demon on his knee. Table 2 compares the composition system, the sitting position of the figure, and the position of the dagger in the character's hand in Mitra's bull-killing and Rostam and the white demon.

Based on the observations and analyses made in Table 2, there are common visual features in the scene of Mitra's bull-killing and the battle between Rostam and the white demon. The coffee house painter has effectively used the composition pattern and the shape and form of the figures from the works of his predecessors; Therefore, according to the characteristics of these works, in addition to the formal similarities in the meaning and content of the work, the elements of good and evil have been shown in the characterization. The theme of good and evil taken from the stories of the Shahnameh in Iranian painting corresponds to the character of Mitra as a symbol of all good and positive attributes.

## Conclusion

In the analysis of Rostam's battle with the white demon and the bull-killing of Mitra, citing the narratives of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh and the documents and evidence of the Mithraic religion, as well as the selected images from both scenes and the analysis of the selected images, it was found that the



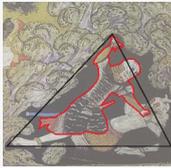
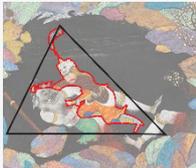
Fig. 4. Next to the bull sacrifice scene, Mithra rides his four horses' chariot to the sky. Source: <https://rasekhoon.net/article/show/1385393>

painting of a coffee house was taken from the specific pattern of the works of the predecessors. The formal similarities in these two works show that in both works, a triangular composition system is used and both events are in the cave. Although sometimes the battle of Rostam is depicted in the plain or the mountain range, the triangular frame is still visible. Rostam's sitting position and Mehr's standing posture show the victory of good over evil. Of course, according to many traditions, the bull is a symbol of the human soul, which is sacrificed so that a person can attain salvation, and that is why life flows in humans, animals, and plants from the blood of the bull.

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Table 2. Examining the composition of the state and form of the figures in the selected paintings. Source: Author.

Position of Mithra's hands and knees on the bull	Scared	
		
The position of Rostam's hands and knees on the chest of the white demon	The battle of Rostam with the white demon	
		
		
		
		
Different scenes of Rostam's battle with the demon		
		

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