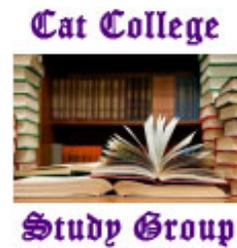




Cat College - Session 400 - History 402: Persian Lion, Royal Symbol of Power



Statue of Anahita (Courtesy of Sacred Source)

"In the Bronze Age mythology, which is the basic mythology of antiquity, the lion is associated with the solar image. The moon dies into the sun every month and is born from it again. So the sun is the mother of the moon.

The animal that is associated with the sun primarily is the lion, whose wonderful solar face and his roar scatters the animals of the grazing plain as the rising sun scatters the stars of night. The lion is the great image of the power of consciousness and energy.”

— "Sukhavati: Place of Bliss

A Mythic Journey with Joseph Campbell

The Persian, or Asiatic, lion (*Panthera leo persica*) was the symbol of royalty, power and courage of Persian kings for millennia. It is now so rare, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List considers it “endangered.” This majestic animal once reigned over vast territory encompassing North Africa, Greece and the Mediterranean and Southwest Asia. It now lives in the wild only in the protected Gir teakwood forest in the Gujar state of western India, in an area of 1,169.79 square miles (1882.6 km). The 2010 count measured a total population of 411 mature animals. Tragically, the Persian lion has been extinct in Iran (Persia) since the early 20th century.

The history of the Persian lion began 10,000 years ago when it genetically separated from the African lion; the Persian lion grew smaller and less aggressive. The male Persian lion has a smaller mane around the top of its head leaving his ears more exposed. It weighs 330 to 550 pounds and the females weigh 264 to 396 pounds. Persian lions live in smaller prides than the Africans, and the male watches the cubs while the female hunts. The African and Persian lion can interbreed.

Lion as Symbol

The lion motif, with its varied symbolism, has been prominent in European, Near Eastern and Middle Eastern art, architecture, carvings, coins, literature and national emblems since ancient Sumeria 3,000 BCE, possibly earlier. Archaeologists continue to discover ancient relics. The National Archaeological Museum in Athens, Greece, has a gold lion head rhyton, a ritual cup from which to drink or pour libations, dating to 16th century BCE Mycenae.



A lion carving on Xerxes staircase at Persepolis

The area of Mycenae has been inhabited since Neolithic times (approximately 4,000 BCE) with the Mycenaean civilization living there from 1700 to 100 BCE.

Early man worshipped Mother Goddess, and her first likenesses have been found in the Iranian Plateau dating back approximately 10,000 years. The ancient Iranian goddess Anahita — known as the water goddess, war goddess, patroness of women and fertility goddess — is depicted with a lion as her symbol. A statue of her and her lion are present at all water sources, and until recently all public baths and reservoirs used faucets shaped as a lion head made from gold or carved in stone. The original Iranian flag depicted Anahita standing on a lion's back in the sun. Later Anahita was removed; the sun and lion remained, and eventually a sword was added. The "Lion and Sun" motif endured many dynasties and governmental changes for thousands of years until it the 1979 revolution. The lion symbol is still seen in many countries including Syria and India.

In the ancient city of Ecbatana, now Hamadân in modern Iran, temples were dedicated to Anahita. When Alexander the Great conquered the Achaemenid empire he destroyed the shrine because his friend



The Persian flag changed into this Iranian version in 1886.

Hephaestion died in Ecbatana (324 BCE). The lion of Ecbatana, Hephaestion's tomb monument, still stands and is a symbol of fertility touched by visitors today.

The Iranian Achaemenid dynasty in the 5th century BCE and the 17th century Safavid dynasty used chair-like thrones, three of which are in Tehran. The Naderi Throne has an unknown history but "nader" means rare or unique in the Persian language. The throne, comprised of 12 sections, has verse written on it, a total of 26,733 jewels including four large spinel gemstones on the backrest, the largest weighing 65 carats. It also has four emeralds, the largest is 225 carats and the largest ruby is 35 carats. Designs on the throne include a peacock tail on the backrest, ducks, leaves and tree branches. On the front panel of the foot rest is depicted a majestic resting lion.

The world famous and much beloved Persian (Iranian) poet Hakim Abol Qasem Ferdowsi Touci (935-1020) took 30 years to write his epic poem, Shahnameh, or the Epic of Kings, Hero Tales of Ancient Persia. Ferdowsi often used the lion in his epic and the lion symbol was bestowed on the great Persian hero, Rostam.

Often used as the symbol of power, courage and royalty by ancient dynasties it is a modern day tragedy that the noble lion, the Persian lion, is on the brink of extinction

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