

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EARLY AND LATE SASSANIAN COINAGE

Stephanus Vollgraaff

E-mail: svollgraaff@gmail.com

(Received 11/10/2015: Accepted 06/05/2016)

ABSTRACT

Sassanian coinage is one the best sources for information on the individual kings from this Persian dynasty. This is because the coins are primary sources that are unaltered. The way in which the Sassanian coins changed is not a topic that has been dealt with extensively.¹ A stylistic analysis and comparison of the coins from the different Sassanian ages will be done. In this study the coins from the Sassanian rulers of the early period (224–302 C.E.) and the late period (628–652 C.E.) will be analysed for stylistic characteristics that differentiated them from other Sassanian coins. Trends that were common to coins from each period will be identified as well so that the continuity and breaks in coin design from each period can be illustrated and compared. The factors behind some rulers following the standards set by predecessors and others reinventing it will be exposed by the study.

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on Sassanian coinage from the early period (224 C.E. to 302 C.E.) and the late period (628 C.E. to 652 C.E.). Each ruler's coinage will be analysed in turn and the changes noted in comparison with preceding rulers. The late Sassanian period and early Sassanian period differed greatly in political, social and religious outlook. In the late period, for example, the Zoroastrian priests had codified their religion and had gained considerable political influence in comparison to their position in the early period. The early Sassanian period was also a period in which the empire was a new political force whereas in the later era of the middle seventh century C.E. the empire was fractious and recovering from a defeat by the Byzantines. The aim is to expose how political realities are reflected in the coinage from each period. Coins were not just economic items in the Sassanian Empire but also items that are replete with propagandistic symbolism that glorifies the monarch for whom they were created

¹ This study is a more in-depth version of what was discussed and touched upon in my Master's degree thesis.

(Afram 2010:17). On Sassanian money, for example, the Sassanian kings claimed that they were mediators between the gods and humans (Daryaee 2010:67). The imagery on the currency also served to identify the monarch who ordered their construction (Afram 2010:17). Sassanian coinage, like Greek and Roman coinage, was as a result an item that had more than one use and the study of these items could be useful to understanding Sassanian propaganda. The propagandistic message was an important component of ancient coinage, as can be seen from the example of the Roman Medallion of Galerius (Fig. 1), in which he is celebrating a victory over the Sassanians at the Battle of Satala in 298 C.E.

COINS AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

The Sassanian Empire as a state was founded by Ardashir I (224 C.E. to 240/242 C.E.) when he displaced the Arsacid king, Artabanus IV. Ardashir I wanted to reinforce the perception that he was the rightful king, not the Parthians (Canepa 2010:573). On the reverse of Ardashir I's coinage, enthroned fire altars are regularly depicted (Canepa 2010:579; see Fig. 2). The depiction of the enthroned fire altar elements was furthermore taken from Achaemenid portrayals at Naqsh-e Rostam and Persepolis (Canepa 2010:579). On a specific coin (Fig. 2) the fire altar is shown as being supported by an Achaemenid-inspired, lion-legged throne (Canepa 2010:579). Ardashir I wanted to link his rule with that of the Achaemenids by using the same imagery. Academics are mostly in agreement that the Sassanians had at best an imperfect knowledge of the Achaemenids (Canepa 2010:563). The Sassanians thought of the Achaemenids as the last members of the legendary Kayanid dynasty and that these Kayanids were their ancestors (Canepa 2010:564). Ardashir I thus used Achaemenid style imagery (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) to reinforce the impression that this was the second beginning of Kayanid rule under the alleged descendants of the legendary dynasty.

The circumstances of the late Sassanian period (there was political instability and military defeats in 628 C.E. against the Byzantine Empire and in 651 C.E. against the

Arabs) had the effect that Sassanian monarchs focussed on coinage — instead of rock reliefs — as an art form. It was easier to mint coinage than produce almost any other sort of traditional propaganda (rock reliefs, silverware) and as a result almost all of the historically verifiable monarchs minted coinage (Schindel 2013:816). With many of the reigns of the Sassanian monarchs short and disputed in the late Sassanian period it made coinage well suited because a large amount of coins could be produced in a relatively short space of time. The coinage could also be widely circulated and it could even reach outside the borders of the Sassanian Empire. The political context was changed with Wahram Chubin (590–591 C.E.), the first ever non-Sassanian monarch to mint his own coinage (Daryaee 2009:33). The political legitimacy of the Sassanian monarchy being challenged was to be a characteristic of the late Sassanian monarchy.

ROLES PLAYED BY MINTS

Mint signatures were very rare in the initial phase of the Sassanian period and as a result the coins are arranged in groups according to style (Alram 1999:67). Ardashir I had reorganised the coinage so that it depicted him as a pious Zoroastrian king not only to his subjects but also to his enemies. The Sassanians were confronted by the Roman currency system in the East. The tetradrachms, denarii and aurei that were issued from the Roman mints in Antioch played a significant role in trade and monetary circulation of the ancient Near East (Alram 1999:67). During the reign of the Roman emperor Caracalla there was a decrease in the quality and weight of the coinage and a new type of Roman coinage was introduced, the antoninianus (with a value of two denarii). These changes led to inflation that contributed to a total collapse of the Roman monetary system in the second half of the third century C.E. The collapse of the Roman monetary system created a situation for the Sassanians to exploit with their own coinage in the East. The different Sassanian denominations were drachms (of Attic weight), half-drachms, obols, half-obols, tetradrachms and commemorative gold coins (Chegini 1996:49). The quality of Sassanian coinage was maintained for the most part, which made it appealing to traders. Mints had freedom to

introduce stylistic variations in their coinage (Aram 1999:69). Mint B (Fig. 5) and C coins (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7) are examples of currency from early in Ardashir I's imperial reign (Aram 1999:69). On mint B coins, for instance, Ardashir I is always shown with flat ribbons whereas on mint C coins the ends of the diadem is ribbed (Aram 1999:69). On mint B coins there is also a star on Ardashir I's chest which does not appear on mint C (Aram 1999:69).

Wahram II's use of unusual designs continued on the reverse of his coinage. Wahram II was the first Sassanian monarch to utilise the design of the diadem ribbon bound around the altar shaft (Schindel 2013:834). The design became canonical from late in Narseh's reign onwards. The importance which Wahram II attached to coin production is evidenced by the fact that the monarch founded new mints in his reign. The new mint signature "Ray" appeared for the first time in the reign of Wahram II (Aram 2010:26). An unconventional investiture is portrayed on the reverse of some of Wahram II's coins (Fig. 8) which depicts the goddess Anahita on the right of an altar extending her hand holding a diadem to the king on the left. Wahram II sanctioned the creation of the unusual reverse design in order to claim that his rule was directly sanctioned by the gods. The continuation of the minting of coins can be observed in the fact that the same mints functioning under Shapur I were also operational in Wahram II's reign and well into Narseh's reign. Wahram II instituted a number of changes, namely regarding the figures represented on the obverse and reverse, but stylistically there was continuity because many of the same mints of his predecessors still produced his coins (Aram 2010:26).

The fact that there are extant coins of Khosrow III (between 629 C.E. and 632 C.E.) shows that he had enough power to control a mint (Schindel 2013:816). He probably usurped control of a province and ruled this rogue province, possibly when Shahrbaraz was the monarch. There were 25 mints that were in operation in the late Sassanian period and these centres would have been important for any would-be monarch. As Khosrow III is shown as being beardless this could point to the monarch's youth. The motive for portraying the youth of the Sassanian king may have been done to elicit sympathy from the populace. Cases of usurpers who struck coins

but do not feature in historical sources do exist. An example of such a case was Ōhrmazd who controlled the Ctesiphon mint for a short while in the 590's C.E. The usurper failed to gain general acceptance though and historical sources did not deem him important enough to mention. The situation is similar to that of many of the Sassanian monarchs after 628 C.E. as many of these monarchs (like Khosrow III) had very short reigns and although they did mint coins very little is known of them from historical sources such as *The history of al-Ṭabari*, *Ta'rīkh* and *Kāmil* (Bosworth 1999:407 n. 1005). The fact that many leaders (whose power was unsure at best) chose first to gain control of a mint and manufacture coins with portraits of themselves illustrates the importance attached to mints and coins (Schindel 2013:816).

The numismatic evidence shows that Khosrow III had at least a long enough reign to mint coinage with a portrait of him on it. The Arab historian al-Ṭabari emphasises the transient nature of Khosrow III's rule by describing it as lasting "forty days" though this may be an exaggeration (Bosworth 1999:407). The coinage gives a clue to the true length of Khosrow III's reign as it describes the reign as being two to three years long (Schindel 2013:815). The monarch's control may have only been over an eastern section of the Sassanian Empire. Farrukzādh Khusraw (631 C.E.–637 C.E.) was another Sassanian monarch about whom little is known. His candidacy was based on the fact that he was Khosrow II's son, a monarch whose memory was much respected within the Sassanian Empire. After six months of his reign there was a coup against him and no extant coins exist of this monarch (Bosworth 1999:409 n. 1013).

The Sassanian monarch Hormizd VI (or Hormizd V depending on the numbering) seemed to have ruled simultaneously with Azarmigduxt in 630–631 C.E. (Pourshariati 2008:205). Coins of Hormizd VI were minted in Stakhr in Fars and Nihāvand in Media. The two aforementioned places were controlled by Farrukh Hurmuz, the Prince of Medes. The numismatic evidence as a result points to Farrukh Hurmuz and Hormizd VI being one and the same. This figure was furthermore the jilted lover of Azarmigduxt and was ultimately killed by her when he sought more power (Pourshariati 2008:206). Hormizd VI's coins depict the monarch in a manner that was standard for contemporary Sassanian monarchs, with the winged crown alluding to the

Iranian god of victory, Verethragna. There is a difference in quality though between Hormizd VI's coins and most other late Sassanian coins (Schindel 2013:830). Hormizd VI's coins were seemingly more roughly minted than many of the other Sassanian coins and the mint's shape is more irregular. Hormizd VI may have wanted to get as many of his own coins into circulation quickly and it could have been the reason behind the drop in quality —the lettering and images not being as legible as previous coinage (Fig. 17).

PERSONAL IMAGES

The Parthian practice of depicting the monarch on coinage was that of either depicting him looking left or facing forward (Soudavar 2009:418).² Ardashir I followed the Parthian practice in his first series of coins (Fig. 9) but later instituted the Sassanian convention of the right-facing portrait. Ardashir I instituted the new rule to allow illiterate onlookers to easily distinguish Parthian coins from Sassanian coins. The Sassanian dynasty almost wholly followed the right-facing convention until the very end of the empire. With the advent of the Sassanian Empire there was a clear effort to standardise iconography for clarity and ease of recognition (Soudavar 2009:418). Mortals and deities were allocated fixed positions on coins, for example, on the reverse of Sassanian coinage a fire altar is regularly represented flanked by two figures. The figure on the left was usually the king and the figure on the right was usually the deity and this was done to avoid confusion and to emphasise the importance of the deity. This image on the reverse of most Sassanian coinage was an image that originated in the *fratarakā* coinage, which originated in Persis when the province was briefly independent in the second century B.C.E. before it became part of the Parthian empire (Schindel 2013:834). The originator of the Sassanian dynasty in 205–206 C.E., Pabag the father of Ardashir I, was also reportedly a priest at the fire temple of Anahita in the city of Istakhr in the province of Persis (Daryaei 2009:3).

Ardashir I added the politically loaded word *Ērān* to his coinage, expressing an

² Parthian coinage was largely influenced by Roman and Greek stylistic conventions.

ideology of Ardashir that the empire was the “realm of the Iranians” (Afram 2010:19). The word *Ērān* differentiated the Sassanian Empire ideologically from the Arsacids and helped to create a new identity for the Sassanian dynasty and state (Afram 2010:19). The type of coinage minted by Ardashir I remained largely unchanged for centuries which indicates how powerful a symbol the type of coinage became for the Sassanian Empire (Afram 2010:19). In Ardashir I’s coinage portrait he is portrayed with cheek protection (Fig. 2) that highlights the martial nature of his rule and military success (Schindel 2013:832). Ardashir I’s successor, Shapur I, was a military success and portrayed himself with a cheek guard but not all of the Sassanian monarchs were depicted with a cheek guard on their helmets (Schindel 2013:832). It was most probably at the discretion of the monarchy or mints if the kings were to be depicted with items like cheek guards. The first Sassanian monarch didn’t only attempt to erase almost all Parthian symbols but he also appropriated some symbols. This is evidenced by a series of coins commemorating Ardashir I’s ascension where he is depicted wearing a Parthian tiara (Chegini 1996:41). Symbolically the depiction of the Sassanian king in such a manner insinuates that the new king took over the Parthian political power. The image of the Sassanian king taking ownership of the Parthian tiara would have had a particular impact on the former Parthian subjects who would have lived under Parthian rule for nearly five centuries (Canepa 2010:563).

The efficacy of Ardashir I’s pictorial coinage programme is attested by the fact that Shapur I made few visible changes (Afram 2010:21). Shapur I did initiate the tradition of portraying each monarch with their own unique crown on their coinage. The crown was important to Sassanian royal ideology because the headpiece signified the ruler’s *xwarrah* (divine aura) (Afram 2010:21). Shapur I’s silver coinage was of a high quality with the average silver content of 94% making Shapur I’s drachms one of the highest in Sassanian history (Afram 2010:22). To compare the silver content of the drachms — a Roman emperor’s antoniniani of about the same weight as the drachms had a silver content of 45% (Afram 2010:21). The Sassanian monarch controlled major trade routes and had an adequate supply of silver to maintain the high silver content (Bacharach & Gordus 1972:283). As silver coins were utilised outside of the

Sassanian Empire's borders it would have negatively affected the reputation and economic prestige of the state if debasement of the specific currency was to occur. Shapur I's reign was also one of military success and prosperity and as such the Sassanian Empire could afford to have a silver drachm of 94% silver content. The aim of having a silver currency with such purity could have been to project an impression of wealth and to instil confidence in the monetary system.

Wahram II (276 C.E.–293 C.E.) was a monarch who made extensive use of the propagandistic potential of coinage. No other Sassanian king has as many obverse and reverse types on his coinage as Wahram II (Aram 2010:25). The special designs reflect Wahram II's intimate involvement with domestic and dynastic issues and a need to legitimise his rule because of these issues (Aram 2010:25). Wahram II wanted to communicate different messages to the populace and as a result different types were designed to communicate the desired messages. One type of coinage (Fig. 10) largely follows the formula of early Sassanian coinage. On the obverse of this type of coin Wahram II is depicted alone wearing a Hellenistic plain ribbon diadem. The second type of coinage (Fig. 11) signifies a radical break with previous Sassanian coinage as the Sassanian king isn't represented alone on the obverse but together with his queen and they are facing a youth. The youth, who is unbearded and wears a high tiara, is normally identified as a Sassanian crown prince (Aram 2010:25). The coin is in essence a family miniature that shows the present ruler of the Sassanian Empire with his queen and the future ruler of the empire, the crown prince. In order to earn him support and give him legitimacy, the crown prince is depicted on the coinage with his father and his mother.

The third type of coinage of Wahram II (Fig. 8) shows the Sassanian ruler and his queen, Shapurdukhtag, facing an unbearded individual who has a diadem in hand (Aram 2010:26). The identity of the third, unbearded person in this type of coinage is not clear; some scholars are of the opinion that the individual represents Anahita or Verethragna while others think that it is the crown prince who is represented again. The fourth type of coinage (Fig. 12) shows Wahram II with only his queen. The representation of the queen on the coinage stemmed from the importance of certain

women in the Sassanian Empire. Their importance stemmed from their noble birth and their marriage to important male figures (Wiesehöfer 2001:175). Important Sassanian women were commemorated with fires to ensure that their fame and legacy endured after death (Wiesehöfer 2001:174). Wahram II wanted to derive some legitimacy from depicting himself with his queen, who would have been a well-known individual in her own right. A further implication of the Sassanian king depicting himself with his queen was that he would appear virile and successful. This type of coinage could also unwittingly have evoked more empathy from the Sassanian female populace for Wahram II's reign. Visible sole female ruling figures in the ancient world were few and far between. On the second, third and fourth type of coinage Wahram II is depicted with a winged diadem. The wings on the diadem allude to Verethragna, Iranian god of victory (Schindel 2013:829). Wahram II was the first Sassanian monarch to depict himself with the wings of Verethragna on his crown. The wings would be a popular motif with the succeeding monarchs Wahram IV, Peroz, Khosrow II, Ardashir II, Khosrow III, Hormizd IV, Azarmigduxt and Yazdgerd III having coin portraits with it present (Schindel 2013:829). The wings of victory were popular because martial prowess was important to political legitimacy in the Sassanian monarchical system. The propaganda on the coin at least gave the impression to observers of a militarily successful monarch.

Of Wahram III there are no coins extant as his reign lasted only four months. The group of nobility that supported Narseh was larger than that of Wahram III and as such Narseh was able to usurp the incumbent monarch (Daryaee 1998:439). On Sassanian numismatic portraits the monarchs' hair is usually depicted being arranged in two globular bundles but on Ardashir I's, Wahram I's and Narseh's (292 C.E.–302 C.E.) coins the monarchs' hair is arranged in the form of pearl rows (Schindel 2013:833). The basic typology of Sassanian coins was quite uniform though elements like the depiction of hair could be subject to changes and development depending on the preferences of the Sassanian monarch. During Narseh's reign such an important development occurred for the first time in Sassanian coinage. For the first time in Sassanian history one monarch was depicted with two different coins in two different

stages of his reign (Alram 2010:27). The first type of Narseh's coins was a type from early in his reign (Fig. 10) and depicted the monarch with a "the crown with loops and branches" (Alram 2010:28). The second type of coin (Fig. 13) was minted at the end of Narseh's reign and the crown on this type only has loops.

Designs on the coinage of many kings of the late Sassanian period generally do not exhibit experimentation and rather follow a set type. The general design of Sassanian coinage remained unchanged with the obverse depicting the bust of the ruler and on the reverse the religious symbol (Schindel 2013:829). Late Sassanian monarchs tended to choose designs that referred to previous monarchs and used established symbols of kingship. One such monarch was Kavad II whose coinage (Fig. 15) reverted to the style of the widely revered Sassanian king Khosrow I (Daryae 2009:35). Each monarch had a unique take on the well-established tropes of Sassanian coinage. The *korymbos*, the hair bundle above the monarch's head, was, for example, depicted in different ways (Fig. 10) which is just one indication of how coin portraits were constantly evolving in minor ways. Kavad II used a crown with wings that is reminiscent of the crown that is depicted on Khosrow I's coinage (Fig. 14) (Schindel 2013:822). The style of the beard Kavad II is depicted with on his coinage is also identical to that of Khosrow I. A design that remained prevalent throughout every era was the reverse design of the fire altar flanked by two attendants. The fact that Pabag, the father of Ardashir I, was also reportedly a priest at the fire temple of Istakhr made the depiction of the fire altar scene all the more poignant (Schindel 2013:834). The Sassanians furthermore understood the importance of religion in gaining legitimacy and this knowledge gave rise to the uniform reverse design.

The individual who succeeded Kavad II in 628 C.E. was Ardashir III (628 C.E.–629 C.E.) who was seven years old at the time of his coronation. Ardashir III is clearly depicted as a child on his coinage (Fig. 14) and there is no attempt made to hide his youth (Pourshariati 2008:178). During Ardashir III's reign there was no time to carve elaborate rock reliefs and images of the new king had to be created and circulated as soon as possible. In the second year of Ardashir III's reign the coinage changed and began to resemble the style of Khosrow II, Ardashir III's grandfather. Whereas Kavad

II harboured hatred towards his father (Khosrow II), and rather chose to imitate Khosrow I, the child king seemingly had no resentment towards Khosrow II. Ardashir III in actual fact chose to imitate his grandfather, Khosrow II, in his style of coinage (Daryae 1998:437). Coinage could betray the political sympathies of the respective monarch's regime in the subtle manner that has been demonstrated. There are no extant coins of Ardashir III's successor Shahrbaraz (629 C.E.) which would have made it more difficult for the monarch to gain legitimacy. Shahrbaraz was furthermore not of the Sassanian family.

The numismatic portrait of Buran is the only definite one found of a Sassanian queen thus far (Chegini 1996:49). Creating a link between Buran's regime and that of Khosrow II was of such importance that the Sassanian female ruler was depicted with the same crown as her father (Emrani 2009:7). Although Buran was the first female Sassanian leader it only required a slight adjustment of existing parameters in ideology and propaganda. The priests and nobility had a central objective: to preserve the Sassanian monarchy and thus preserve their privileged position in Sassanian society. Buran's rule was preceded by the rule of a non-Sassanian, the general Shahrbaraz. The ceremonial gold coins of Buran reflect the fact that the preceding monarch was a non-Sassanian (Daryae 2009:35). The legend on the coin states, for example: "Buran, restorer of the race of Gods" (Daryae 2009:36). The legend on the coin resembles early Sassanian propaganda which emphasised that the Sassanian lineage was supposedly a race descended from the gods. By reusing the early Sassanian propaganda Buran wanted to remind all users of the coinage of the long history of the Sassanian dynasty which she was a part of.

There exists no numismatic evidence of the Sassanian ruler following Buran, Jushnas Dih (631 C.E.). There is extant coinage of Azarmigduxt (631 C.E.) though, the second female Sassanian ruler. In Azarmigduxt's reign, as was the case with her sister, Buran, there was an effort to create the impression of a strong link with Khosrow II through the design of her coinage (Schindel 2013:816). The manner in which Azarmigduxt tried to cultivate this perceived link was different from Buran. On Azarmigduxt's coinage (Fig. 14) her portrait shows her with a beard and in this way

she wanted to make her gender irrelevant (Emrani 2009:7).³ Azarmigduxt attempted likewise to reinforce the idea that she was not a queen but a king. The bearded portrait of Azarmigduxt was furthermore modelled on the portrait of Khosrow II thereby solidifying association between the two rulers in the public consciousness. Azarmigduxt may have been of the opinion that the reason why her sister's reign was cut short was because she focused too much on her feminine nature. Wings were depicted on Azarmigduxt's crown that were associated with Verethragna because the falcon was sacred to the god of victory (Schindel 2013:829). Buran downplayed the military aspect of kingship and focused on the religious and divine aspect of kingship. Azarmigduxt in contrast referred to the army in her speeches and depicted herself with a crown that had martial symbols on it.

Yazdgird III (632 C.E.–651 C.E.) was one of the Sassanian monarchs whose image is attested on coins. The portrait of one of Yazdgird III's coins (Fig. 17) shows the monarch wearing a necklace with three large pendants on his breast (Schindel 2013:831). The three large pendants might have signified the affluence of the Sassanian dynasty and by extension Yazdgird III. Yazdgird III was depicted in this manner in order to perpetuate the perception that the Sassanian monarch ruled over a prosperous empire and that he wielded immense political power. Yazdgird III was ultimately to be the last Sassanian monarch and the fortunes of the family had been flagging for years by the time Yazdgird III came to the throne. Yazdgird III's coinage did not deviate from the traditional Sassanian design that had been instituted by previous Sassanian monarchs. Yazdgird III was depicted, for example, with the iconography of the winged crown and a sickle above that many past Sassanian monarchs had been depicted with (Schindel 2013:829). One legacy of the late Sassanian coinage was the crescent moon and star symbol which first appeared in Hormizd IV's reign. The crescent moon could have symbolized the promise of a new reign. The moon in Sassanian iconography was furthermore seen as the purveyor of

³ There were female rulers before Azarmigduxt that took on masculine aspects in their propaganda and art. The ancient Egyptian female pharaoh Cleopatra VII (reign circa 51–30 B.C.E.) had herself displayed with distinctive masculine features on her coinage, namely deep-set eyes and a firm chin.

farr: glory (Soudavar 2009:426 n. 27). The star was considered to be the companion to the Aryan *xvarnah*: the Iranian people's glory (Soudavar 2009:428). The crescent moon and star symbol in the margins was then extensively used in late Sassanian coinage. The symbol was later adopted by Muslim Arabs who conquered the Sassanian Empire (Curtis 2011).

MILITARY AND POLITICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Not only did Ardashir I want to connect his rule to the Achaemenids, he also wanted to make his coinage visibly distinct from that of the Parthians in order to undermine the legitimacy of the dynasty he replaced. The Parthians, for example, never minted gold coins but Ardashir I started a tradition of manufacturing gold coins that was followed by all other Sassanian monarchs except Jamasp, Hormizd IV and most of Khosrow II's successors (Schindel 2013:826). The gold coinage served primarily as donative coinage that the Sassanian king gave to Iranian elites at festivals (Schindel 2013:827). The coins were as a result intended to impress upon the elites the importance of the Sassanian dynasty. Ardashir I's earliest known dinar weighed 8.47 grams which makes it the heaviest known Sassanian dinar (Schindel 2013:827). To give one context for the weight of Ardashir I's dinar, the contemporary Roman aureus of Alexander Severus weighed 6.50 grams (Schindel 2013:827). Ardashir I ordered such a heavy gold dinar to be minted at the inception of his rule so that he could instil confidence in all concerned that the Sassanian dynasty could ensure the prosperity of the empire. On the first gold coin of Ardashir I the title is only "King of the Iranians" and with subsequent monarchs the title evolved into "King of Kings of the Iranians" (Alram 2010:18). Although Ardashir I set the precedent in many areas the fact was that Sassanian ideology was still forming as evidenced by the changing legends on the coinage.

Wahram I (273 C.E.–276 C.E.) looked to the past for designs to place on his own coins. On his coinage (Fig. 2) the Sassanian monarch is shown wearing cheek protection, a feature that is similar to what is depicted on Ardashir I's and Shapur I's

coinage (Schindel 2013:832). Wahram I may have wanted to link his reign with that of the militarily successful monarchs, Ardashir I and Shapur I, by depicting himself with the same type of cheek protection. The cheek armour emphasises the martial aspect of Wahram I and the ambition of the monarch to equal the achievements of his forerunners. Wahram I's coinage design largely follows the precedent set by previous Sassanian monarchs with the reverse design of the altar flanked by anonymous attendants making a return. The royal diadem was the most important emblem on Sassanian coinage. Wahram I's portrait shows him being depicted with a Hellenistic plain ribbon diadem. The Hellenistic plain ribbon diadem was a common headpiece for early Sassanian portraiture. Wahram I may not have wanted to take any risks in the imagery of his coinage because of the short reign of his predecessor. Wahram I rather wanted to capitalise on how familiar the imagery of Ardashir I and Shapur I was to lend legitimacy to his regime.

During her reign Buran initiated a program of minting silver coins for circulation and repairing masonry bridges. The program of minting of the silver coins was an effort to repair the economy but also to have the effect of proliferating images of the ruler in the Sassanian Empire. On almost all of the Sassanian rulers after Wahram IV (388–399 C.E.) the mural elements on the coins referred to the main Zoroastrian deity, Ahura Mazda (Schindel 2013:829). The mural elements on Buran's coinage do not refer to Ahura Mazda though but to the Sassanian monarch's divine elements. The crescent on the crown of the monarch, so popular from Yazdgerd I's reign onwards, was wholly absent from Buran's crown. By choosing not to include the crescent on her coinage Buran made a subtle shift from her contemporaries. Buran was also the sole Sassanian monarch after Khosrow II to mint gold coinage (Schindel 2013:826). For some of Khosrow II's successors extant coins haven't been found. The evidence as a result suggests that Buran was the only late Sassanian monarch to put such a great emphasis on coin production. Special coins were minted during Buran's reign which depicted the monarch on both sides. The propaganda on the coins indicates that Buran sought to make her own image distinctive and widespread throughout her empire.

The coinage of Khosrow III shows the same winged crown on the portrait as on

Azarmigduxt's and Khosrow II's coinage (Schindel 2013:829). The winged crown with its connection to military victory was popular with the late Sassanian kings because of the defeat suffered at the hands of the Byzantines. The message that the kings wanted to impart was that this king's reign would be one of victory and not defeat. The mural elements of Khosrow III's coinage refer to Ahura Mazda, the main Zoroastrian deity. Khosrow III aimed to gain the favour of the Zoroastrian priesthood with his overt show of faithfulness on his coinage. Khosrow III's coinage largely follows the stylistic precedent set by previous Sassanian kings except with regards to the portrait. On Khosrow III's portrait he is depicted without a beard and the only other males to be depicted without beards were Ardashir III and Yazdgird III. The reason behind Ardashir III being depicted without a beard was that he was a child when he ascended the throne and Yazdgird III was quite young (Schindel 2013:831). The reason behind Khosrow III being depicted without a beard is uncertain though.⁴

MILITARY EVENTS

Shapur I (240/242 C.E.–272 C.E.) continued to strike gold coins, as his father (Ardashir I) had done (Alram 2010:22). Shapur I made a change to the normal gold coin stylistic formula on one of his coins by replacing the normal reverse picture of an altar. Instead of the picture of an altar (Fig. 18), Shapur I is shown mounted with the Roman emperor Philip the Arab (reign 244–249 C.E.) standing before him. The gold coin made a break with the customary design formula because the coin in question was commemorative of Shapur I's victories over the Romans and Philip suing for peace in 244 C.E. The gold coin tied in with the victory theme of Shapur I's rock reliefs at Bishapur I-III, Naqsh-e Rostam and Darab. Shapur I wanted to craft an image of a perennially victorious monarch and he was confident enough in his own legitimacy that he allowed local kings of Marv to mint their own bronze coins (Alram 2010:24). Shapur I consciously chose to allow the Marv kings only to mint bronze

⁴ The brief reigns of Ardashir III and Khosrow III were a product of the fratricides perpetrated by Kavad II which saw the death of many other more eligible Sassanian candidates who could have succeeded Kavad II.

coins because the silver and gold coins were reserved for the Sassanian kings to use to increase their legitimacy. The silver and gold Sassanian coins also signified their power and wealth.

The evolution of the bust and symbols on the reverse of Narseh makes it possible to date the two types of coinage. For example, on type 1 coinage the folds of the tunic are depicted as triangular strokes whereas on type 2 the folds are depicted as vertical strokes (Alram 2010:28). The second indicator of chronology was on the reverse where the ribbon wrapped around the altar only became canonical late in Narseh's reign. Narseh in the second half of his reign (297 C.E.) suffered a military defeat in the Battle of Erzerum at the hands of the Roman emperor, Galerius. The defeat may have been a contributing factor towards the reduction of size that occurred in Narseh's type 2 coinage. The defeat had a profound effect on Narseh's propaganda overall as it became more modest faced with the defeat against the Sassanian Empire's western arch-rival.

RELIGION

Working with a limited amount of space to represent deities and ideological concepts resulted in caricaturised signs being used on coinage. The Iranian deity Apam-Napāt (Lord of the night) could, for instance, be represented by a stylized *ankh* sign (Soudavar 2009:427). Symbols representing deities (like the *ankh*) were placed on the coinage so as to indicate the king's *farr*/glory (Soudavar 2009:427). On one coin of Shapur I (Fig. 19) the king is represented with an eagle-headed conical hat with the specific two-legged *ankh* sign on the hat. On the reverse of some of Shapur I's coinage a fire altar is shown flanked by a pair of king-gods that are mirror images of each other (Soudavar 2009:449). Shapur I had his image put on the reverse of his coinage so as to visually represent the slogan *cīhr az yazatān* (monarch's origin/seed was of the gods) to strengthen his legitimacy. By having the imagery used on his coinage Shapur I let the reader focus on the purported link between the Sassanian monarch and the gods. Shapur I did not claim to be a god himself by being related to a god, god kings being a

foreign notion in the Iranian kingship ideology (Soudavar 2009:422 n. 12). The more likely explanation would have been that the word *chir* could be translated as “image” and that the meaning that Shapur I (or his administration) wanted to impart to any onlooker was that Shapur resembled a god both physically and in his actions (Soudavar 2012:30).

During Hormizd I’s short reign (272 C.E.–273 C.E.) there occurred changes to the iconography on Sassanian coinage. It was during the reign of Hormizd I that the Iranian deities Mithra and Anahita were represented on coinage for the first time (Nikitin 1996:67). On the reverse of one type of coinage (Fig. 20) the Sassanian king is standing left of an altar with his right hand raised (gesture of respect) towards Mithra on the opposite side (Alram 2010:24). Mithra is depicted with a radiant crown and dressed in royal regalia and offering the diadem of sovereignty to Hormizd I (Nikitin 1996:67). The message thus conveyed would be clear to any Sassanian subject looking at the coinage: Hormizd I’s rule was divinely sanctioned. The second type (Fig. 2) of coinage has a reverse image which shows Hormizd I holding a barsom bundle (pieces of wood used in Zoroastrian rituals) and standing on the right side of the altar while the goddess Anahita stands on the right also holding a barsom bundle (Alram 2010:24). Anahita is shown dressed as the queen of queens, which insinuates that the goddess was in effect the consort of Hormizd I (Nikitin 1996:67). In the space of one year Hormizd I had already minted two types of coinage showing reverence for two different deities which illustrates the importance attached to the message that coinage could convey. The Sassanians had been ruling for close to fifty years by the time of Hormizd I’s ascent to the throne and this could have given him the confidence to initiate changes to the iconography of the reverse of the coinage. Hormizd I’s changes made to the design of the coinage had a definite religious bent to it. Hormizd I also wanted to garner favour with the Zoroastrians by choosing to support the influential Zoroastrian priest Kirdir. The shift in the religious attitude of the Sassanian monarch is reflected by the fact that Hormizd I chose to replace Mithra and Anahita with Ahura Mazda on some of his coinage (Pourshariati 2008:331).

Religious and propagandistic identities could be spread throughout the Sassanian

Empire through the propagation of coinage (Emrani 2009:4).⁵ For example, Buran (630 C.E.–631 C.E.) tried to gain legitimacy through her coinage. On her coinage Buran referred to the mythical female Kayanid ruler, Hūmāy, and the goddess Anahita (Emrani 2009:5). By referring to female figures that were revered in the Sassanian society Buran hoped to gain some of the legitimacy that the important figures had. Buran tried to strengthen the link between her rule and that of her father's (Khosrow II) similar to what Ardashir III had tried to do. On the coinage of both Buran (Fig. 14) and Khosrow II (Fig. 14) the spreading of wing that was the symbol of the martial deity, Verethragna, is present. Buran would not have been able to participate personally in military campaigns and as a result the sign of Verethragna was only included for symbolism and to link her rule with Khosrow II. Buran's use of specific symbols and inscriptions was used to strengthen her claim to the throne in a turbulent period. On the obverse of Buran's coinage she is shown with her costume decorated with a star and crescent sign (Emrani 2009:4). On the reverse of the coinage the fire altar scene was also surrounded by three astral signs. The prevalent astral signs were on the coins so as to create the impression that the regime had divine sanction.

The political events dictated to a large degree how the Sassanian monarchs focused on manufacturing coinage. Because of the political instability of the succession crisis period (628–632 C.E.), Sassanian monarchs focused on issuing coinage, public letters and making their genealogy known because it required the least investment of currency and time before it had an effect. As has been noted, many of the coinage portraits from the late Sassanian period depict the king with a winged crown. The spreading of the wings that can be observed on Sassanian coins supported thematically the astronomical elements such as the crescent moon, star and the sun (Compareti 2010:201). The spreading wings not only alluded to Verethragna, as previously mentioned, but could also have signified glory (Compareti 2010:201).

⁵ Using coinage in this manner wasn't unique to the Sassanians though. Note Figure 1 and how Galerius used coinage to commemorate his victory over the Sassanians in 298 C.E. What can be observed on Figure 20 is Severus Alexander being crowned by the deity Victoria (233 C.E.) with the personified river gods Euphrates and Tigris at his feet. Severus Alexander's claim of ownership over the two rivers was fiction but it was an attempt to frame the emperor as victorious and powerful in this depiction (Dignas & Winter 2007:76).

Symbols like the spreading of wings and fluttering ribbons were intimately linked with the religion of pre-Islamic Iran. Evidence for the spreading of the wings being associated with Verethragna though is Khosrow II's (590 C.E., 591–628 C.E.) victory over the rebel Wahram Chubin and the Sassanian king celebrating his victory with the wings on his second coin type. Khosrow II may have initiated a propagandistic programme that claimed divine protection from the god (Verethragna) who shared a name with the defeated usurper. The wings were not a symbol that was only reserved for coinage though. Several seals and sealings have a pair of wings below the bust. The spreading wings may furthermore have had positive connotations like protection and succour that is provided by someone powerful, depending on the context. It also features on early Sassanian metalwork and stucco decoration (Compareti 2010:2008).

CONCLUSION

The differences between early Sassanian coinage and late Sassanian coinage have been identified. One clear difference is that, however the Sassanian kings denied it, early Sassanian coinage was more influenced by Parthian symbolism than the late Sassanian coinage. One example of the Parthian influence is Ardashir I's coins depicting himself with a Parthian tiara (Canepa 2010:563). The early Sassanian period was still a transitional period where former Parthian supporters had to be convinced that the Sassanians had the political power. This was done by depicting the Sassanian monarchs with the Parthian influenced symbols of power. In the early Sassanian period the monarchs also looked more earnestly to the Achaemenids for inspiration as evidenced by the Achaemenid-inspired throne on the reverse of Ardashir I's coinage. In the early period Hellenistic elements like the plain ribbon diadem were much more prevalent also, to appeal to the considerable Greek minority within the Sassanian Empire (for example in Seleucia). In the early Sassanian period there was a lot more experimentation with the composition of the coinage as there hadn't been a standardised coin design instituted yet. The gods being represented on the coinage were also dissimilar in the two time periods. In the early Sassanian period it seems that

Apam-Napāt, Mithra and Anahita were the more popular deities to allude to on coinage. In the late Sassanian period the Zoroastrian religion became more standardised, with Verethragna and Ahura Mazda being alluded to with symbolism like the spreaded wings (Verethragna) and mural elements (Ahura Mazda). The Late Sassanian period saw the first instances of non-bearded portraits of Sassanian monarchs with Ardashir III, Khosrow III and Yazdgird being depicted in such a manner on at least one of their coinage. The non-bearded portraits were a symptom of the fratricides (628–632 C.E.) in the Sassanian family where the young males were some of the few legitimate candidates that survived (*The History of al-Ṭabari*, 1061). The political realities of the early Sassanian period and the late Sassanian period dictated to a large degree what designs would be best and the Sassanian monarchy generally acted accordingly. Sassanian coinage design remained broadly similar throughout the Sassanian period. Comparing Roman coins from the reign of Severus Alexander (222–235 C.E.) (Fig. 21), contemporary with Ardashir I, with those of Heraclius (610–641 C.E.) (Fig. 22), roughly contemporary with the last Sassanian king, one sees significant differences in all the aspects of the coins (Schindel 2013:829). In comparing an early Sassanian drachm with a late Sassanian drachm though stylistic and topological variations are exposed but there is a greater similarity than when comparing Roman coins of these different periods. The relative similarity of the coinage largely came about because of the continuity of the Sassanian dynasty in respect to political and religious concepts over its nearly four and a half centuries of existence.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1 A bronze medallion of Galerius from 298 C.E. (Canepa 2009:99 Fig. 18)



FIGS. 1, 2, 3. Ardashir I.



FIG. 4. Shapur I.

FIG. 5. Hormizd I.

FIG. 6. Bahram I.

Fig. 2 Coinage from Ardashir I to Wahram I (Chegini 1996:50 Fig. 1–6)



Fig. 3 Reverse of silver drachm of Ardashir I with Achaemenid traits (Canepa 2010:579 Fig. 17)

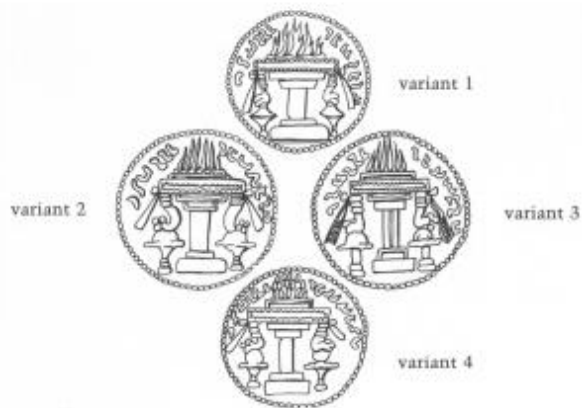


Fig. 4 Different reverse altar flame portrait variations of Ardashir I (Alram 1999:73 Fig. 24)



Fig. 5 Ardashir I's drachm (from initial phase of his imperial reign) of "mint B" from Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris (Aram 1999:72 Fig. 17)



Fig. 6 Ardashir I's drachm (from initial phase of his imperial reign) of "mint C" from Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris (Aram 1999:72 Fig. 18)



Fig. 7 Ardashir I's tetradrachm (from initial phase of his imperial reign) of "mint C" from Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Aram 1999:73 Fig. 19)



Fig. 8 Silver drachm of Wahram II depicted him and his queen with an unbearded figure who has a diadem in hand from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Afram 2010:26 fig22)



Fig. 9 Early coin of Ardashir I showing the Parthian trait of monarch facing left in private collection (Soudavar 2009:456 Fig. 3)



FIGS. 7, 8. Bahram II.

FIG. 9. Narseh.



FIG. 10. Narseh.

FIG. 11. Hormizd II.

FIG. 12. Shapur II
(gold dinar).

Fig. 10 Coinage from Wahram II to Shapur II (Chegini 1996:51 Fig. 7–12)



Fig. 11 Silver drachm of Wahram II with his queen facing a youth who wears a high tiara, from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Alram 2010:25 Fig. 20)



Fig. 12 Silver drachm of Wahram II depicted together with his queen, from the British Museum (Alram 2010:26 Fig. 21)



Fig. 13 A silver drachm of Narseh. Second type of Narseh with a crown of loops, from the British Museum (Alram 2010:27 Fig. 26).



FIG. 31. Kavad II.

FIGS. 32, 33. Ardashir III.



FIG. 34. Khusrau III.

FIG. 35. Queen Boran.

FIG. 36. Queen Azarmidukht.

Fig. 14 Coinage from Kavad II to Azarmiduxt (Chegini 1996:55 Fig. 31–36)



FIG. 19. Peroz.



FIG. 20. Valash.



FIG. 21. Kavad I.



FIG. 22. Jamasp.



FIG. 23. Khusrau I.



FIG. 24. Hormizd IV.



Fig. 15 Coinage from Peroz to Hormizd IV (Chegini 1996:53 Fig. 19–24)



FIG. 25. Bahram VI.

FIG. 26. Vistahm.

FIG. 27. Hormizd V.



FIGS. 28, 29, 30. Khusrau II.

Fig. 16 Coinage from Wahram VI to Khosrow II (Chegini 1996:54 Fig. 25–30)



FIG. 37. Hormizd VI.

FIG. 38. Khusrau IV.



FIGS. 39, 40, 41. Yazdgird III.

Fig. 17 Coinage from Hormizd VI/Hormizd V to Yazdgird III (Chegini 1996:56 Fig.37–41)



Fig. 18 Gold double dinar of Shapur I with the Roman emperor Philip and Shapur I represented on the reverse (Alram 2010:23 Fig. 15)



Fig. 19 Coin of Shapur I showing the monarch with a conical hat that has the symbol of Apam-Napāt on the side (Soudavar 2009:459 Fig. 28)



Fig. 20 Silver drachm of Hormizd I currently in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Aram 2010:24 Fig. 17)



Fig. 21 Reverse of Severus Alexander bronze medallion from 233 C.E., from Cabinet de France (Dignas & Winter 2007:76 Fig. 5)



Fig. 22 Ceremonial Siliqua of Emperor Heraclius, from Ex Hunt Collection (Markowitz n.d.:16)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alram, M 1999. The Beginning of the Sasanian coinage, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 13:67–76.
- _____ 2010. Early Sasanian coinage, in Curtis & Stewart 2010:17–29.
- Bacharach, J L & Gordus, A A 1972. The purity of Sasanian silver coins: an introduction, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92/2:280–283.
- Bosworth, C E (trans.) 1999. *The history of al-Ṭabari Volume V: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Canepa, M 2009. *The two eyes of the earth: art and ritual kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran*. Berkeley and Los Angeles (USA): University of California Press.
- Canepa, M 2010. Technologies of memory in early Sasanian Iran: Achaemenid sites and Sasanian identity, *American Journal of Archaeology* 114/4:563–596.
- Chegini, N N 1996. Political history, economy, and society, in Litvinsky, Guang-Da & Shabani Samghabadi 1996:40–57.
- Compareti, M 2010. The spread wings motif on Armenian steles: its meaning and parallels in Sasanian art, *Iran & The Caucasus* 14:201–232.
- Curtis, V S 2011. Kingship and religion: the coins of Sasanian Iran, Part 4. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzCW31S7jBo> [Accessed 2015/02/18].
- Curtis, V S & Stewart, S (eds) 2010. *The Sasanian era*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Daryaei, T 1998. Sāsānian Persia (224–651 A.D.), *The Journal of Society for Iranian Studies* 31/3/4:431–461.
- _____ 2009. *Sasanian Persia: the rise and fall of an empire*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- _____ 2010. Kingship in early Sasanian Iran, in Curtis, & Stewart 2010:60–68.
- Dignas, B & Winter, E 2007. *Rome and Persia in late antiquity: neighbours and rivals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Emrani, H 2009. Like father, like daughter: late Sasanian imperial ideology & the rise of Bōrān

to power, *e-Sasanika* 5:1–16.

Litvinsky, B A, Guang-Da, Z & Shabani Samghabadi, R (eds) 1996. *History of civilisations of Central Asia – the crossroads of civilisation: A.D. 250–750*. Paris: UNESCO.

Markowitz, M n.d. Late Roman and Byzantine silver coinage, c.330–1200. Available: http://www.academia.edu/3455580/Late_Roman_and_Byzantine_Silver_Coinage_c._330-1200 [Accessed: 2015/10/02].

Nikitin, A V 1996. Custom, arts and crafts, in Litvinsky, Guang-Da & Shabani Samghabadi 1996:59–77.

Potts, D T (ed.) 2013. *The Oxford handbook of ancient Iran*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Pourshariati, P 2008. *Decline and fall of the Sasanian Empire: the Sasanian-Parthian confederacy and the Arab conquest of Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Schindel, N 2013. Sasanian coinage, in Potts 2013:814–840.

Soudavar, A 2009. The vocabulary and syntax of iconography in Sasanian Iran, *Iranica Antiqua* 44:417–460.

_____ 2012. Looking through the two eyes of the earth: a reassessment of Sassanian rock reliefs, *Iranian Studies* 45/1:29–58.

Wiesehöfer, J 2001. *Ancient Persia*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers.