

Oriental Numismatic Society
Occasional Paper No 14

March 1980

Early Sassanian Coinage and its Background.

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The origins of all the pre-Mohammedan dynasties of Iran are shrouded beneath a veil of legend, but certain facets seem to recur with suspicious regularity. The Achaemenids had their Cyrus and Darius; the first while of royal parentage, spent his youth as a shepherd to escape the attentions of his grandfather, who, as a result of prophecy, feared he would lose his throne to Cyrus; the second was the leader of a group of seven conspirators who dispossessed a usurper. Arsaces, the eponymous founder of the Parthian ruling house, came from nomadic stock and, according to one Greek source, was also assisted in his uprising by six friends.

The more prosaic interpretation of a series of similar facts is that Sasan was a petty prince in Fars, Papak being his son, while Ardashir, the conqueror of the Parthians, was his grandson. On the other hand, Ardashir's "Book of Deeds" tells us that Sasan, a descendant of the Achaemenids, served as a shepherd to King Papak, but that, as a result of a dream, the latter gave Sasan his daughter, who subsequently bore Ardashir. Other evidence confirms that the great families who probably stemmed from Darius' colleagues in rebellion, continued through the Parthian into the Sassanian age. With all these examples in mind, we need not be surprised to find links of many types between the coins of Ardashir and those of his imperial predecessors.

There had, of course, been a mint at Persepolis, the heart of the province of Fars, from the time of the Seleucids, although the latter seem to have been more concerned with control of the trade route running through their Hellenised cities, such as Ecbatana, Rhagae and Magesiana, all in northern Iran, to central Asia and the Punjab. In consequence, as soon as the Greeks encountered secessionist movements in Bactria and Parthia, c. 250 B.C., they also relaxed their grip on territories further to the south. The local kinglets in Elymais and Persis (Fars) began striking autonomous issues. In weight standard, fabric and engraving techniques, these owed much to Greek prototypes. Thus, the coins struck included tetradrachms, drachms and fractions, based on the Attic standard of about 4 grammes to the drachm of silver. The flans were relatively thick and the designs were in high relief.

However, the designs themselves were by no means Greek. The obverse bust depicted the ruler in a satrapal bashlyk, a species of nomadic felt bonnet with earflaps and chin-strap, the latter drawn up to cover the mouth. We have here an evident allusion to the monarch's position as chief priest; when officiating before the fire altar, the prime focus in Zoroastrian rites, care had to be taken not to defile the flame with human breath. The commonest reverse design shows us the priest-king, hand raised in adoration, standing before the fire-altar; the inscription, containing the royal name, is given in a local derivative of Aramaic. Such issues continued to be struck even after nominal suzerainty had passed to the Parthians, c. 140 B.C. Naturally, a number of features characteristic of Arsacid numismatic iconography were incorporated in the coinage of Persis. Chief amongst these was the adoption of the tiara first seen on the drachms of Mithradates II, c. 100 B.C. and recurring as the head gear of many later monarchs. Towards

the final decades, a few Parthian mintings portray the prince with an exotic, bouffant hair style; this also was taken up by the Persian princes. An elaborate coiffure would obviously debar the wearer from any active, and therefore degrading, participation in normal life. Even ritual functions required delegation to the Magi, who were probably an hereditary tribe of mobads, or priests.

As it happens there are relatively few natural sources of silver in the territory of Persis; accordingly, many of the blanks for the local coinage were obtained by beating flat imported currency to obliterate the designs. In such a way there arose in Persis a tradition of thin flan, large diameter issues in comparatively low relief. In this there was a very considerable difference from Arsacid practice, where the tetradrachms, struck in Seleucia were quite dumpy and of a diameter too small to take the full impression of the dies; even drachms emanating from mints on the Iranian plateau, had a reasonably thick module.

This, then, was the position at the advent of Ardashir. Certain items of evidence imply that his grandfather was not merely a ruler but was also high priest of the fire temple at Stakhr, but no names on the coins of Persis can be equated with Sasan. Other references indicate that Papak, Ardashir's father, was at some pains to advance his elder son, Shapur, as his successor in the eyes of the Arsacid Great King, at this time Artabanus (or Ardavan). However, Shapur perished in a convenient accident and so Ardashir advanced his own claims, only to have them rejected. As a result, Ardashir embarked on the subjugation of neighbouring small kingdoms, all of which were in some sense feudatory to the Parthians. Naturally, this led to a conflict with Artabanus, whose armies were defeated in three battles and who himself

succumbed in the final one. The accepted date for Artashir's victory is April, 224. A new and enterprising power now controlled Iran.

Standard types

Varieties



1



2



3



4

Vologases VI

Artabanus IV

Vologases VI

Artabanus IV

How does the contemporary coinage fit in with this sequence of events? Parthian tetradrachms struck in the name of Vologases (VI) bear dates, in the Seleucid era, running continuously from A.D. 207 to 221, with an isolated final issue in 227; as for the drachms, these are undated, but there are two major issues, one in the name of Vologases and one in that of his brother, Artabanus IV, the Ardavan referred to previously. Their names are written in Parthian script (abbreviated on the obverse, in full on the reverse) although the remainder of the legend purports to be in Greek. The issues of Artabanus were formerly attributed to an Artavasdes, presumed to be his son, but the reading of the Parthian to make this possible is philologically unlikely. In addition, the forked beard to be seen on the drachm portraits is also to be found on a rock relief which specifically names Artabanus. Accordingly Artavasdes must be expunged from the king-list.

The characteristic side decoration on the latest Arsacid tiaras appears to be a series of oblique strokes ~ interpreting these according to the usual conventions relating two dimensionally details existing in three dimensions, they may be feathers protruding at right angles to the side of the tiara. However, this ornament is supplemented or replaced on a few rare issues. Comparing figures 1 and 3, we note the addition of a crescent behind

the "feathers" (on some examples the crescent has been subsequently scraped off - alterations of coins in response to political changes occurs often enough in the Parthian series). With figures 2 and 4, the "feathers" are superseded by a star, probably formed by embroidering pearls on the side of the tiara. While the Parthian letters are omitted on the obverses of both figures 3 and 4, the corresponding reverses are quite standard, so that the attributions, respectively to Vologases and Artabanus, are secure. Finally, we may note the occurrence of a "mule" of the standard types, obverse Vologases, reverse Artabanus.



5



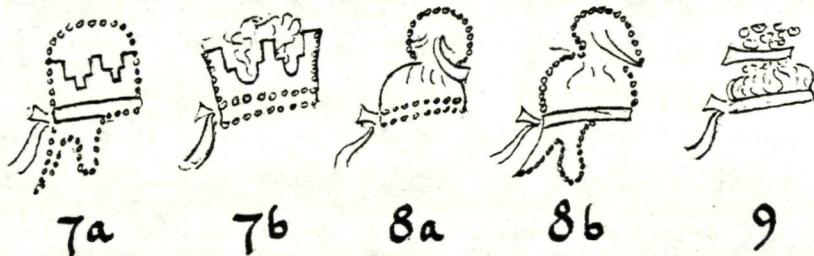
6

The significance of the varieties just described becomes clear when the earliest coinages of Artashir are studied. Figure 5 gives the obverse and reverse of a drachm presumed to have been struck before the fateful battle against Artaban. The frontality of the royal portrait, a prime feature of Parthian art and here employed most tellingly, imposes the convention already met with - in other words, although the ridge of the tiara runs from back to front (as we know from the Hatra statues), here it is turned through 90° so that we may see its most important element, a crescent. The reverse inscription indicates that the bust represents Papak, Artashir's father; its tiara also has a crescent, although in its true position, on the side. The crescent was, in fact, a Persian regal symbol and presumably Vologases introduced it on his own drachms in an attempt to emphasise his overlordship of the territories of the rebellious Artashir.

Figure 6 shows the obverse and reverse of Artashir's first substantive type when he had become, as its legend claims, King of Kings of Iran. The profile bust, facing right, in pointed contrast to the habitually left profile portraits of the Arsacids, wears a tiara with a star on its side, exactly identical with the tiara initially designed for Mithradates II, the great Parthian ruler, in about 100 B.C. After this reign, there seems to have been a hiatus in the direct line of Arsacid succession, with collateral branches taking over. Hence it seems probable that, with his adoption of the old tiara, Artashir claimed to represent himself as a true descendant of the first Arsaces after centuries of usurpation. When, with his final issue, Artabanus also donned this tiara, we may clearly regard it as a counter claim to legitimacy. So we have both the brothers involved in numismatic attempts to refute the pretensions of the rebel in Persis.

The reverse of the Artashir type under discussion restores the Zoroastrian fire altar, while the inscription specifies that it is the King's fire. Zoroastrianism has been described as an imperfect monotheism and the worship of Ahura Mazda did not prevent other gods such as Anahita and Mithra receiving their need of respect ~ they appear on coins of later princes. However, although the sacred books were assembled during the Parthian period, Artashir certainly continued to regard Zoroastrianism as the state religion with overwhelming emphasis on Ahura Mazda only. Jews and Christians, who had lived in comparative liberty under the tolerant Arsacids, now suffered increasing civil disability. The famous rock-relief at Naqsh-e Rostam, with Artashir receiving the diadem emblem of royalty from Ahura Mazda, testifies to the monarch's devotion. Below the feet of the horse, on which Artashir is mounted, lies the trampled figure of the defeated Parthian, identified by his tiara, on the side of which is yet another

symbol Q ; this frequently occurs on earlier Arsacid coins as an adjunct, though not as the main element of tiara decoration. On other rock reliefs, the king is accompanied by an entourage many of whom wear tiaras of the same general type, but decorated on the side with symbols such as Z (a triskelos), H , etc. Now in Lukonin's work on earlier Sassanid culture, he mentions that the Hermitage collection possesses tiara type drachms of Ardashir for which the star ornament has been replaced by H (a diadem), Z (triskelos) as well as an eagle (which had been known elsewhere). Later in his reign Ardashir extended his conquests in eastern Iran and, in fact, many of the sub-kings formerly owing fealty to the Arsacids, submitted to him voluntarily. We may therefore suppose that these very rare coins represent stages in Ardashir's subjugation of the east and that the former princes were permitted to resume their positions afterwards.



Returning to the Naqsh i Rostam relief, it will be noticed that Ardashir is depicted with a new hair style, with some collected in a silk sac above and the rest arranged in elaborate pendent curls. The god, on the other hand, wears a battlemented crown which originally appeared on the coins of another Artaxerxes (Ardashir) reigning in Persis c. 50 B.C. The same crown is employed for a rare striking for Ardashir himself. Finally, there are also one or two coins where, both sac and crown are dispensed with altogether. The three varieties just described are given above, figures 7, 8 and 9.

The coins so far discussed have all been drachms; although the chief denomination, it was by no means the only one. During the first two centuries of the Parthian empire, up to about 50 B.C., drachms had been supplemented by hemidrachms (or triobols), diobols and obols. The same fractions were now struck by the new dynasty. Göbl has wittily compared the outer spaces on the flans on the larger silver to a bed of Procrustes within whose confines the inscription had to be fitted; of course, the effect was of constant abbreviation or even omission. This fault applies more forcibly to the engravers' attempts with the small ones. In any case, "the polyphony of the script makes the deciphering difficult and sometimes impossible" - Herzfeld.

Gold from the Arsacid period was probably never struck and no genuine example is now known. It is therefore an innovation to meet with dinars, minted according to the weight standard of Roman aurei, in the tiara type issue of Artabashir; a few small, one-sixth dinars are known as well. It is likely that all these gold coins were minted mainly for prestige purposes. At the other end of the scale, base metal was employed too, though apparently not in great quantity; the reason was the continued circulation of vast numbers of Arsacid bronzes. Coming on to the market still are hoards of such issues, often including types from the whole Parthian period as well as one or two early Sassanian pieces. The relationship between silver and bronze is not certain, but of the latter there seem to have been two denominations, the unit and its sixth part, perhaps the coin called *shashir*, in documents. This constant division into six is characteristic of Iranian custom and a special word denoting this, the *dang*, persists to the present day. Under Artabashir and a few of his successors, were struck tetradrachms, resembling in fabric the debased Parthian issues; the Artabashir examples carry on the obverse not merely his own portrait, but also, in smaller dimensions, that of his son Shapur.

Tetradrachms were almost certainly

produced in Seleucia. What of the other mints of Ardashir? The second major Parthian mint was Ecbatana, although, earlier, cities such as Rhagae, Nisa and Margiane had also been responsible for copious issues. In the east, Areia (Herat) had probably by this time become subject to the Indo-Parthian princes of the dynasty of Gondophares. According to the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, writing in the next century, the Sassanian empire included Assyria, Susiana, Persis, Parthia, Greater Carmania, Hyrcania, Margiane, the country of the Bactrians, Sogdiana and Saka, Scythia, Serica, Aria, the country of the Paropamisadae, Arachosia, Gedrosia by the Indus mouth, but not Kabul and the Punjab; in other words, modern Iraq, Iran and parts of Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. As far as we can tell Ardashir, ("King of Kings of Iran") acquired the majority of this territory, although his son Shapur ("King of Kings of Iran and non-Iran") contributed some of the outlying areas, many of which were controlled through local satraps. Ardashir might, therefore, have employed almost any of the former Arsacid workshops. Unfortunately, at this period no mint signatures appear on the dies and, at best, we can allocate coins to general areas only on grounds of style, a subjective and, so, unsatisfactory criterion. It is believed that the presence of pellets in the reverse field is associated with possible mint attributions, but further investigation is required.

The most remarkable feature of Sassanian issues after Ardashir is the sequence of crowns, each specific to one ruler. Indeed, royal portraits on rock-sculptures, silver platters, etc. may be identified from the numismatic analogies. These crowns, substantial enough to begin with, eventually became so heavy that when the king sat in audience, they had to be suspended just above his head by a slender chain. Göbl has also shown that the silk sacs were also varied in colour, that of Ardashir being green, while Shapur's was red. The latter

also introduced on his reverses, either side of the fire altar, a pair of attendants. During his and the following reigns these may be, variously, the king himself, the crown-prince, the chief priest, the god Mithra or the goddess Anahita; usually they bear a sceptre or a sword, in a few cases the royal diadem and, on one occasion the figure stands with a raised arm, finger crooked in the gesture of respect. This increased emphasis on the participation of the royal family in religious functions went hand-in-hand with further bureaucratisation of society as a whole. A reflection of such tightening control is the invariable presence on later coinages of both mint-name and the regnal year. In the matter of metal and weight standard we find that gold is brought into line with the Roman solidus, with its fractions; the base metals are supplemented by a few striking in lead; silver, on the other hand, maintains both its purity (except for drachms made from melted down Roman antoniniani) and its weight at about 4 grammes to the drachm!

In spite of these developments, we can say that the pattern of the whole of Sassanian coinage was set by its first prince, Ardashir. He, in turn, is seen to have been indebted to his predecessors in Parthia and Persis, both in matters of numismatic iconography and technology. In fact, impressive as is Ardashir's achievement, it has firm roots in the Iranian past.

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