

Sasanian Coins

Dr Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, Firuz Madon Curator of Parthian and Sasanian Coins at the Department of Coins and Medals in the British Museum, has been involved in the re-organisation and cataloguing of the Sasanian coins of the National Museum of Iran since 1999. Together with the fine collection of Sasanian coins at the British Museum, Dr Curtis has access to 7000 coins altogether, which she intends to put on a database, similar to other coin databases sponsored by the British Academy such as the *Sylloge of Greek Coins*. Dr Curtis is particularly interested in the iconography of the coins and their religious symbolism as a primary source for the art of the Sasanian period and the history of Zoroastrianism.

Vesta Curtis is also the Secretary of the British Institute of Persian Studies and the Joint Editor of the Journal IRAN.

Coins of the Sasanian kings of Iran provide a wealth of information about the art, religion and economy of the period AD 224–652. Their importance is illustrated by the fact that for about a century after the conquest of the Sasanian empire by Arab forces, the Sasanian silver drachm continued with the iconography of the king's portrait on the obverse and the fire altar on the reverse, and as such was adapted to become the Islamic dirham. In addition to their monetary value and their importance for financial transactions, these coins were also intended to promote religious and political propaganda. From

to the ancient Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism. He and his successors describe themselves on the obverse of their coins as *Mazda yasna*, a worshipper of Ormazd or Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, and on the reverse a fire altar appears as the symbol of Zoroastrianism. This holy fire is named after the king, which relates directly to textual evidence and known tradition that at the coronation of each king a new fire was lit and named after him. The Middle Persian legends on the early Sasanian coins give the personal name of the king and describe him as 'king of kings of Iran and non-Iran', thus indicating that the Sasanians were in control of non-Iranian lands both to the west and the east of the empire.

The message on all these coins is clear: the Sasanian king worships Ormazd and as his representative on earth he protects the rightful faith. State and religion are inseparable, with Zoroastrianism being the official religion of Iran. Indeed, the art of the Sasanian period in general can only be understood within a Zoroastrian context. For example, winged Sasanian crowns as seen on coins of Bahram II and Bahram IV, Piruz and Khusrow II are not merely decoration, but have to be interpreted as symbols of Verethragna or Bahram, the god of Victory. The twigs on the crown of Narseh symbolise this king's devotion to his patron deity, Anahita. Also important is the diadem which was a symbol of kingship. This was a band with long floating ends tied around the head. It also decorated waistbands, the shoes of the king, and frequently appeared on its own behind the head of the king and on either side of the fire altar on the reverse of coins. Sometimes it is possible to see on the reverse of early Sasanian coins that the diadem is being offered by a god or goddess, who stands to the right of a fire altar, to the king on the left of the altar.

In the third and the fourth century we begin to find on the reverse of some Sasanian coins letters in Middle Persian or Pahlavi which stand for abbreviated mint centres of the empire. But it is not until the end of the fifth century that mint



Figure 1. Coins of Ardashir I (AD 224–241) in the National Museum of Iran showing the king on the obverse. In one case he appears with his son and co-regent, Shapur I (241–272). The reverse depicts a combination of a royal throne and Zoroastrian fire altar. The legends are in Middle Persian/Pahlavi. Photographs courtesy of the National Museum of Iran.

the beginning of Sasanian rule in AD 224, religious symbolism played an important role in the iconography of this period. The Sasanians, who named themselves after their legendary ancestor Sasan, were keen to stress the importance of their religion as soon as they came to power. The first Sasanian ruler, Ardashir I, a local king of Fars (Persis) and a high priest at the temple of Anahita, the goddess of fertility and all waters, at Istakhr near Persepolis, immediately declared his devotion

signatures become a standard feature of all Sasanian coins, when they are placed on the reverse to the right of the fire altar. At the same time we also find on the reverse to the left of the fire altar near the edge of the coin, the regnal year of the king. The main denomination of Sasanian coins is the silver drachm, which weighs about 4 g, but there are also gold dinars, minted on special occasions, and copper and lead small change coins.

In 1994 the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum embarked on a project of recording Sasanian coins in major museums. The aim of this undertaking was to create and make available for research purposes a photographic archive of Sasanian coins in major collections, including that of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg and the British Museum. It soon became apparent that it would be important for such a research project to include the significant and hitherto little-known collection in the National Museum of Iran, which consists of some 4000 coins, many of which come from excavations conducted in Iran. All denominations, particularly silver drachms, are represented, but the bulk of the collection is made up of late Sasanian coins from the reign of Khusrow I (AD 531–79) onwards.

After some lengthy negotiations with the relevant authorities in Tehran and London, work on the Tehran collection began in 1999. This was to be the first joint international project between three organisations: the National Museum of Iran (the Muzeh Melli), the British Institute of Persian Studies and the British Museum. The actual work was done by Mrs Elahé Askari, the Head of the Coin Department of the National Museum and myself, and the results will be jointly published by the three organisations involved, both in English and Persian.

During the first season I had to familiarise myself with the very extensive collection in Tehran and draw up a plan for future programming. Generous grants from the British Academy to the British Institute of Persian Studies had enabled me to purchase electronic scales, black and white films, and special glossy paper to take to Tehran. By April 2000, some 600 coins had been removed from their plastic sheets, weighed, measured, photographed and placed in wooden trays, with detailed information being recorded on cards. By April 2001 this number had grown to about 1500 coins. Two sets of photographs remain in Tehran and two sets are brought to London. At the same time, coins in need of conservation are being treated on the spot.

Rather than wait until the preparation is completed and then publish all 4000 coins together, it has been decided that the collection should be published in at least two parts. The first will comprise about 600 early to mid-Sasanian coins from Ardashir I – Kavad I (early third to early sixth century AD). These coins are all recorded and photographed and are ready to be entered in a database together with the British Museum's Sasanian collection, which has about 3000 coins. Preparations for this publication will be completed in 2002/3. The volume will be typeset in London and printed in Tehran.

This joint project would not have materialised without the support of several organisations, including the British Academy. In addition, staff of the National Museum of Iran and its Director, Mr Mohammad-Reza Karegar, have provided every possible help and support. We are indebted to him and to other Iranian colleagues including Mrs Elahé Askari, Mr Ali Akbar Safi, the museum photographer, Miss Mahnaz Gorji, the Head of Conservation, and Mrs Zahra Jafar Mohammadi of the Central Treasury. Furthermore, our thanks also go to the Director of the Iranian National Heritage Organisation, Mr Mohammad Beheshti, and the Director of Research, Mr Jalil Golshan, for continuous help and support.



Figure 2. Silver drachm of the Sasanian king Piruz (AD 457–484) in the National Museum of Iran. The king wears a winged crown, the symbol of victory. The reverse shows a fire altar and two attendants. The mint signature appears in Middle Persian/Pahlavi on the far right and the regnal year on the far left. Photographs courtesy of the National Museum of Iran.



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