



ARAB-SASANIAN COINS

ARAB-SASANIAN COINS. Arab-Sasanian is a term applied to several different coinages of early Islamic Iran which were issued under Arab authority using the design and inscriptions of the preceding Sasanian coinage. Most Arab-Sasanian coins ([Plate II](#)) are silver, known by their contemporaries as *drahms* (Mid. Pers.) or *derhams* (Ar.), both terms derived from Gk. *drakhma*. These coins usually have a portrait of a Sasanian emperor with an honorific inscription and various ornaments. To the right of the portrait is a ruler's or governor's name written in Pahlavi script. On the reverse there is a Zoroastrian fire altar with attendants on either side. At the far left is the year of issue expressed in words, and at the right is the place of minting. In all these features, the Arab-Sasanian coinages are similar to Sasanian silver drahms. The major difference between the two series is the presence of some additional Arabic inscription on most coins issued under Muslim authority, but some coins with no Arabic can still be attributed to the Islamic period. The Arab-Sasanian coinages are not imitations, since they were surely designed and manufactured by the same people as the late Sasanian issues, illustrating the continuity of administration and economic life in the early years of Muslim rule in Iran.

1. *The coinage of Iran in the first decades of Arab rule, A.D. 636-704.*

Silver drahms. As the Arabs conquered the cities of Iran, they evidently allowed the mints to go on as before. There are a small number of coins indistinguishable from the drahms of the last emperor, Yazdegerd III, dated



during his reign but after the Arab capture of the cities of issue. It was only when Yazdegerd died (A.D. 651) that some mark of Arab authority was added to the coinage (Plate II, 1; Marv, 651-52). Most early drahms have only a short Arabic religious inscription in the margin (such as *besm Allāh*, “in the name of God”), with the name of Yazdegerd or his predecessor Kōsrow II, but a few have the name of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Āmer, conqueror and governor of southern and eastern Iran. The most common name in the first two decades of Arab rule is Kōsrow II. This Sasanian emperor had died only a few years before the Arab conquest began, after reigning thirty-eight years, so his coins must have been by far the most common in circulation when the Arabs came.

Starting with the reunification of the former Sasanian empire under a single governor in 670-75, the name of an Arab official, written in Pahlavi, replaced that of Kōsrow II on the coinage. These names include caliphs, viceroys of the East, and governors of provinces and districts; it is not easy to discern what principle determined the choice of name. Also in this period, there is a wide variety of different Arabic religious inscriptions in the margin often associated with a particular governor (Plate II, 2; governor al-Ḥakam, 675-76).

In the years 692-99, the transitional issues of Damascus which led to the development of new Islamic coins had some parallels in the east. One such issue of 75/695 shows an Arab, perhaps the caliph, with hands upraised in prayer and two attendants at either side, replacing the Zoroastrian fire altar (Plate II, 3; Baṣra, 694-95). Other drahms of the same era have the entire Muslim *ṣahāda* engraved on the margins (Plate II, 4; Bīšāpūr, 695-96). Some coins of the late period have the governor’s name written in Arabic instead of Pahlavi.

In the year 79/698-99 new Islamic dirhams bearing nothing but religious inscriptions in Arabic were introduced at Damascus and at nearly thirty mints throughout the east. Sasanian-type drahms continued at only a few mints, notably in Fārs where they were issued for a time along with the new dirhams. The last date for a regular Arab-Sasanian drahm is 85/704-05.

Fārs province was the most productive region for Arab-Sasanian drahms, and in general the southern and eastern provinces under Baṣra were more productive than northern Iraq and Jebāl under Kūfa. The mint of issue is indicated on the coins by an abbreviation, which often stands for the province of which a city was capital or for an unfamiliar pre-Islamic form of the city name. Identified mint cities include Baṣra (BJRA), Susa (AYR, AYRAN), Bīšāpūr



(BYS), Dārābgerd (DA), Eṣṭakr (ST), Arrājan (WYHJ), Gūr (ART), Yazd (YZ), Zaranj (SK), Marw (MR, MRW), Herat (HRA), Nišāpūr (ARP), Hamadān (AHM), Ray (RD), Nehāvand (NH, NYH, NY), Isfahan (GD), and several mints in Kermān province. There are still a few mint abbreviations for which no good identification has been proposed, but these represent a small proportion of the body of surviving coins. The deciphering of these abbreviations on Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian coins has been a difficult and often controversial process, which still goes on.

Little is known for certain about the weight standards of these coins, except that the system was very complicated—or rather, chaotic. There is great variation in the diameter and weight of surviving Arab-Sasanian drahms (from under 2 grams to more than 4 grams), even among specimens which are otherwise identical. The largest drahms, however, weigh between 3.90 and 4.10 grams, which may be regarded as the range of the full standard weight, regarded in Iran as the *metqāl*—miskal—(and not to be confused with the *metqāl* of the Syrian dinars of ‘Abd-al-Malek, about 4.25 grams). The weight of the *metqāl* seems to have varied somewhat from place to place; there is no evidence of rigorous central regulation. The fineness of these coins also remains unstudied, but the limited data available suggests that nearly all were better than 90 percent silver and most around 95 percent.

Issues with Arabic, Bactrian, and Pahlavi inscriptions. These drahms are similar to the preceding group, but are distinguished by the presence of inscriptions in the Bactrian (or “Hephthalite”) language as well as in Arabic and Pahlavi. The coins are mostly dated 66-69/685-89, but there is an issue with Bactrian inscriptions, a unique depiction of an armored warrior, and the date 84/703-04 (Plate II, 5; Jūzjān, 703-04). This coin has the Arabic word *be-jūzjān*, “in Jazjan,” and in its Bactrian inscription the word *gozogono* which may well be the equivalent of the Arabic place name. This Bactrian word seems also to occur on many of the other pieces with Bactrian inscriptions, leading to the attribution of the whole series to that district of eastern Khorasan; but their origin is still unclear: were they struck under Arab authority for trade with the Hephthalites, or by the Hephthalites for tribute to the Arabs, or for some other reason?

Counterstamps (official small secondary stamps applied to coins found in circulation to revalidate them) with Bactrian inscriptions are common on ordinary Arab-Sasanian drahms from Khorasan and eastern Iran, as are counterstamps with animals, human representations, and abstract symbols.



Most of these were no doubt applied by the eastern neighbors of the Arabs to revalidate for local circulation coins that had crossed the frontier (Gaube, pp. 109-18). There are also Arabic and Pahlavi counterstamps on Arab-Sasanian coins, indicating revalidations within the Arab sphere.

Muslim copper coins with Sasanian images and inscriptions. In the 7th and early 8th centuries, most parts of Iran also had small copper coins for everyday purchases, although these seem today to be much scarcer than the better-known silver coins. The chronology and geographical distribution of these coppers is still incompletely known. This was a much more irregular coinage than the silver, varying not only from mint to mint but even from one issue to the next at the same mint. It seems likely that an issue of copper was made whenever a locality found itself short of small change.

Some copper issues have the same design as the silver coins, but on others there is a wide variety of images, including variant portraits, standing or praying figures, horses (both with wings and without; Plate II, 6; uncertain attribution), rams, and human-headed bulls. Some images are influenced by Byzantine motifs, surely copied from the parallel Arab-Byzantine issues of Syria (Plate II, 7; uncertain attribution). The quality of engraving ranges from very fine to barbarous. A few coppers have nothing but inscriptions in Pahlavi or in Pahlavi and Arabic. At the same period (from about A.D. 700 onward) coppers with Arabic inscriptions were issued. Only a small minority of these coppers have a mint name, date, or identifiable governor's name. The bulk of those identifiable geographically are from Fārs or Kūzestān. The earliest date observed so far, if correctly read, corresponds to A.D. 671 and the latest to 742.

2. *Transitional Sasanian style silver issues of Syria.* Official Arab coinage began in Syria about 692, including gold, silver and copper coins. These went through a rapid evolution in design, culminating in the invention of purely Islamic coins with Arabic inscriptions only. The gold and copper transitional coins were derived from Byzantine designs, but the silver coins were Arab-Sasanian. There were three silver issues. The first, dated 72-74 H., was like the contemporary Arab-Sasanian silver coinage of Iran, except that Kōsrow's name was used; the mint and date were written in Arabic; and the obverse had the complete Muslim *šahāda*, the first time this was used on coins (Plate II, 8). The second issue had a similar obverse, but with the date 75 H. in Arabic in place of Kōsrow's name. The reverse was new, with a portrayal of the caliph himself girt with his sword, and his titles in Arabic; this image was used also on gold and copper coins (Plate II, 9). The third issue, undated, had on the



reverse the Prophet's spear within an arched *mehrāb*, and on the obverse a new portrait which may be that of the caliph adapted to the conventions of Sasanian imperial portraiture (Plate II, 10). Islamic silver dirhams replaced Arab-Sasanian coins in Syria in 79/699.

3. *Barbarous issues of Sīstān and the Kabul region in the eighth century.*

Among the Arab-Sasanian drahms with the mint abbreviation SK for Sakastān (Sīstān) are many with various anomalies or barbarous style which do not seem to belong to the regular official series of 651-99 (Plate II, 11; in name of Jabīr). These have come to be regarded as imitations of the 7th-century series, struck in the 8th or even early 9th century either by the eastern neighbors of the Arabs or by the Arab conquerors of modern Afghanistan. The process of separating imitations from official issues is still under way, and the geographical origin and chronology of the imitations is uncertain.

4. *Issues of the 'Abbasid governors of Ṭabarestān.*

When the Arabs conquered Iran, one small pocket of resistance held out in the mountains of Ṭabarestān (Māzandarān) in the northeast, led by a governor of the province, a Sasanian prince. In the early 8th century, these princes began issuing coins like those of the Sasanians but with half the weight. They placed their own names on the coins in place of the former emperors' names, and on the reverse used the mint name TPWRST'N, Ṭabarestān, with dates based on an era beginning with the death of the last emperor, Yazdegerd III, in 651 (year 1 of this era overlaps A.D. 652-53). The earliest known date on these coins is 60 (A.D. 711-12). This was only a few years after the Arabs replaced Arab-Sasanian issues with the new, reformed Arabic type, and may have been a response to an increasing scarcity of coins of the Sasanian type.

When the province was finally brought under Arab rule about 141/758, the local mint continued for a few years to issue drahms with the name of the last Espahbad, but in PYE 116 (A.D. 767-68) his name was replaced by the name of the 'Abbasid provincial governor written in Pahlavi. A few years later, the names began to be written in Arabic (Plate II, 12; governor Sa'īd, 777-78). Some fifteen different governors are known, as well as an anonymous group. The latest date is 143 PYE (A.D. 794-95). During the period of issue of the Ṭabarestān drahms, purely Arabic dirhams and coppers were also struck at the Ṭabarestān mint in some years. The authentic Arab-Sasanian coinage of



Ṭabarestān is only in silver. They are sometimes called half drahms, but for the people that used them they were drahms with a weight standard half that of the original Sasanian issues.

The major problem posed by the Ṭabarestān drahms is the existence of issues with different governors' names over the same or overlapping timespans. It has been proposed that the mint name TPWRST'N was used by more than one mint, perhaps at Āmol and Sārī; or possibly the anachronisms are only result of careless reuse of old dies in the mint.

5. *Issues of Bukhara in the 'Abbasid period.*

Bukhara was conquered in the early 8th century, but was slow to begin issuing coins of the Muslim type that had already been introduced elsewhere. Instead, there is a series of coins with images indirectly derived from Sasanian types, evolved from intermediate non-Muslim Bukharan imitations of the 7th and early 8th centuries. The first identifiably Muslim coins have Sogdian inscriptions including the title of the local ruler (who survived under the supervision of the Arab governors), and Arabic inscriptions naming the caliphs al-Mahdī (A.D. 775-85; Plate II, 13), Mūsā al-Hādī (785-86), and Hārūn al-Rašīd (786-809), as well as two or three other individuals who can not be identified. The representations of the imperial portrait and the fire altar are highly barbarized. It seems likely that these coins came to an end at the time of the introduction of Arabic Islamic dirhams in 193/809.

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illustrates not only the coins in the British Museum but also at least one example of every other variety known to Walker. Although this has not been replaced, many new varieties have been discovered since then and Walker's identifications and interpretations are no longer reliable. H. Gaube, *Arabosasanidische Numismatik* (Handbücher der mittelasiatischen Numismatik II), Braunschweig, 1973 is more authoritative but does not attempt a detailed listing of all known issues; it has a full bibliography. The major subsequent work is by Malek Iradj Mochiri, *Étude de numismatique iranienne sous les Sassanides et Arabe-Sassanides II*, rev. ed., Paris, 1983.

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