



ARSACIDS III. ARSACID COINAGE

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iii. Arsacid Coinage

Under this heading are treated coins which were minted in Iran under the Arsacids and which superseded Seleucid currency in the territories successively taken from the Seleucids. In essentials such as denominations, iconography, and script, they are markedly Hellenistic, but in varying degrees they also show Iranian features. They form a substantial complex of royal issues consisting of different denominations from mints in different places (see [Plate VIII](#) and [PLATE IX](#))

The start of Arsacid minting. This may be placed soon after the middle of the 3rd century BCE, when the internecine conflict between Seleucus II and his brother Antiochus Hierax opened the way for the eruption of the nomadic Parnians into the satrapy of Parthava (after which they became known as Parthians). The subsequent establishment of the Parthian empire took place in two main stages: under Mithradates I (ca. 171-139/38 BCE) and under Mithradates II (ca. 124/23-88/87 BCE), when the territorial expansion was completed and the need for provision of adequate circulation media became acute. Arsacid minting ceased when the Sasanians seized power in CE 224. Thereafter the typology was entirely different, but not all the denominations



were changed; the Attic drachm was retained.

Metals, denominations, mints. The principal metal used was silver; there was no gold coinage. Copper was minted to meet local market needs for petty cash, and in some periods the output of copper coins was substantial.

In contrast with the Seleucid model, the leading denomination is the drachm, minted mainly at Ecbatana. Tetradrachms are not so abundant; as a rule they were minted solely at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and in increasing volume from the reign of Phraates IV onward. Silver denominations lower than the drachm are rare, the most current being the obol mainly minted for festive occasions. The drachms are of the Attic standard (ca. 4 grams); in fineness and weight they remain virtually unchanged for four centuries, adulteration of the silver content being found only in drachms from a few mints in the northeastern frontier provinces. The tetradrachms however, soon show considerable debasement in both assay and weight. In copper the values range from the *octachalkon* (worth 8 *chalkoi*) to the *chalkos*. *Chalkoi*, being the lowest denomination, are the most abundant.

Coin production, when required, was normally done in the well-established mints at Seleucia-Ctesiphon and Ecbatana; others are working at Rhagai, Mithradatkart-Nisa, Susa, and elsewhere. Each mint's issues are usually marked with the mint's monogram, though in some cases no satisfactory identification has yet been found. The tetradrachms bear monograms of mint officials on the Seleucid model. Coins specially minted for war purposes were specially signed with the name of the province most concerned, e. g. *Areía* (Herat), *Margiánē* (Marv), *Traxiánē* in the reigns of Phraates II and Sinatruces (according to Mørkholm); sometimes they were also produced in moving mints (expressed by terms such as *katastráteia*).

Regular annual minting does not appear to have been practiced. The tetradrachms however are marked with the year of the Seleucid era and the month according to the Macedonian calendar. Dates are seldom found on the drachms, but sometimes occur also on copper coins of the later period.

Typology. The designs appear in Hellenistic manner, but various traces of Iranian tradition can be seen in the details.

The obverse always shows the head of the king wearing either the Hellenistic diadem or an Iranian royal tiara, in some instances with details of obviously



nomadic origin (e. g. a string of deer on the crest of the crown of Phraates II). The first Arsacid kings still wear the leather cap of the steppe warrior. The king's head usually faces left, and always so from Mithradates II onward; but in coins of Mithradates I from mints in the west of the empire, rightward direction on the Seleucid model is retained. Frontal depiction is very rare, but there are no given reasons for imputing any political significance to this fact. The royal attire appears to be an elaborate form of armor, the neckband (*torques*) with griffin carvings on the ends being a conspicuous feature.

The reverses of the drachms bear the stereotyped figure of the dynasty's founder, Arsaces I, enthroned to the right, copied from the seated Apollo on the reverses of Seleucid coins—at first like Apollo sitting on the *omphalos* (Mithradates I), later like Zeus on the throne (Mithradates II onward). The tetradrachms show the enthroned king holding a bow or a Nike (as *nikēphóros*), others a scene such as praise given by Tyche (several variants); rare types show the king mounted, probably in connection with his investiture.

The reverses of the copper coins (in contrast with the silver coins) bear a rich and varied range of designs which scarcely will be found elsewhere and of which some plainly refer to investiture, e.g. an eagle with a wreath, a ram, or the wreath of investiture alone. Also represented are deities, particularly Artemis-Nanaia, Nike, and the bust of Tyche, horses, stags, and elephants, bow in case, and in some instances a city wall.

Legends, names, epithets. The legends are usually on the reverse and always in Greek. From the reign of Vologases I (ca. 51-ca. 76 or CE 80), additional legends in Parthian script appear exclusively on drachms first sporadically, and later on more frequently. They are limited to the king's name and title, and when on the obverse are always abbreviated.

The Greek legends, almost invariably in the genitive case, are set in a square, and always include the dynastic name Arsaces in addition to the royal title Great King (*basiléōs megálou*) or, from Mithradates II onward, more often King of the Kings (*basiléōs basiléōn*) and to epithets which gradually become more numerous. The epithets are at first manifestly political assertions, but later become stereotyped strings of words losing their immediate political sense (e.g. *basiléōs basiléōn Arsákou euergetou dikaíou epiphanoûs philéllēnos*). The king's personal name is only mentioned in exceptional circumstances such as struggles for the throne when rival kings held power in different areas (e.g.



epikalouménou Mithradátou on coins of Mithradates III; *kekalouménos Gōtérzēs* on coins of Gotarzes II). After Vologases I, however, the king's personal name appears regularly on the tetradrachms. On the drachms the Greek legends become increasingly corrupt from about Orodes II onward, first in the mints of the northeastern frontier provinces.

On account of the fact that several kings bear the same name (homonymy) and the tendency to standardization of royal epithets, attribution of some coins to a certain reign must still remain in question in some cases.

Imperial coinage, local currency, and circulation. In addition to the imperial currency, copper coins for local use were struck in the city of Seleucia on the Tigris, which held a special minting franchise in Arsacid times. Although these coins can be classed as autonomous on a narrow definition, they are always coordinated with the imperial issues. Under Phraates IV, Susa enjoyed the same privilege in 31/30-27/26 BCE.

The indigenous dynasties which governed Elymais, Characene, and Persis also exercised the right of coinage and largely displaced the Arsacid currency from their domains. Their mints were at Susa and Seleucia on the Hedyphon in Elymais, at Spasinou Charax in Characene, and at Staxr (Eṣṭakr) near Persepolis in Persis. These so-called “sub-Parthian” dynasties had begun to mint coins well before the Parthian conquest (in Persis as early as the beginning of the 2nd century BCE); they continued to do so until the Sasanian conquest.

In Elymais and Characene, only copper was minted from the first half of the 1st century CE onward (mainly drachms in Elymais and tetradrachms in Characene). On the other hand, the local coinage of Persis is consistently pure silver (drachms and fractions thereof); in respect of design and script it prefigures the Sasanian coinage. Elsewhere the typology is initially Hellenistic, as in coins of Characene which often portray Heracles in the Greco-Bactrian style, but Parthian elements emerge in the later period, particularly in coins of Elymais. In contrast, the coins of Persis, the stronghold of Achaemenid tradition, are always purely Iranian in type. The legends are predominantly in Greek, but are in Parthian on the coins of Elymais from the middle of the 1st century CE onwards. On the coins of Characene legends in Aramaic only appear at the end of series, whereas on the coins of Persis the legends are at first in correct Aramaic and later in the Middle Persian script as used under the Sasanians.



In eastern Iran, in Sacastene, the Pahlavas, a local dynasty of Parthian origin and perhaps of the Sūrēn family began to overstamp coins with the name Otannes at the end of the 1st century BCE, and later to produce imitations of Arsacid drachms.

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