



DIRHAM I. IN PRE-ISLAMIC IRAN

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The dirham retained a stable value of about 4 g throughout the entire pre-Islamic period. The tetradrachm, or stater (> Pahl. *stēr*), was equivalent to 4 drachmas and was already in circulation in the Achaemenid period at the time of Alexander's departure for Persia. The minting of "lion staters" continued in use in Babylon and Susa until the period of Antiochus I (ca. 324-261 B.C.E.). From that time on the Attic talent served as the weight standard for the Seleucid tradrachms (e.g., gold staters of Andragoras and the Bactrian kings).

Under the Arsacids circulation of money in northern Persia was similar to that in the rest of the Seleucid empire, but the drachma was preferred at Bactria (q.v.) and Hecatompylos, whereas at Ecbatana the tetradrachm still predominated. The standard weight in the 3rd century B.C.E. remained at about 4 g. On the obverse of the Seleucid coins the royal portrait head was represented, on the reverse Apollo seated on the omphalos and holding a bow. The oldest surviving Parthian coins come from a hoard found in the Atrak valley (west of Bojnūrd), including one tetradrachm and 1,500 drachmas, still based on Hellenistic models, recognizable in the *bāšlīg* diadem of the nomads, already known among satraps of the Achaemenid period, worn by an unbearded figure (Sellwood, p. 279). The archer remained the main reverse type throughout the Parthian period. The weight of the drachma varied



between 3.5 and 4.2 g. The use of the dynastic name Arsaces, rather than the personal names of the kings, in the inscriptions before the advent of the Sasanians in the 3rd century C.E. makes it difficult to clarify the sequence in which these coins were issued. Drachmas and silver obols (=one-sixth of a drachma, which later became the Persian *dāng*), as well as bronze coins, are attested from the reign of Mithridates I in the 2nd century B.C.E. The head is represented bearded (Sellwood, p. 281). Tetradrachms of more than 16 g, from the years 140-38 B.C.E., were struck only at Seleucia. Several mint names appear in abbreviated form beginning with the reign of Phraates III (73-57 B. C. E.). The drachmas of Orodes II (57-37 B.C.E.) are known in the thousands and must have been struck by the millions. The titulature, including the epithet philhellene, remained in use until the end of the Parthian period. The last Parthian drachmas issued at Susa and in Khorasan were those of Vardanes I struck in 42 C.E. Under Vologeses I (ca. 51-80; see [Balāš I](#)) the Greek language was abandoned on drachmas in favor of Parthian. By the beginning of the 3rd century the drachmas had evolved quite far from their Greek prototypes. At the same period tetradrachms and drachmas were being issued in Persis (present-day Fārs) with Aramaic inscriptions in the name of the *prataraka*. They weigh about 4 g, but the novel feature is the representation on the reverse of the fire temple with the winged figure of [Ahura Mazdā](#). Coinage in the Elymais continued to follow Seleucid prototypes (silver tetradrachms of Kamnaskires I, with inscriptions in Greek). After 45 C.E. the tetradrachms weighed 14 g. and the drachmas 3.5 g. In Characene, at Spasinu Charax, tetradrachms were issued with Greek inscriptions. (Sellwood, p. 310 ff.)

The basic coinage of the Sasanians (224-632 C.E.) was the silver drachma and, along with Arab-Sasanian dirhams, it constituted the main coinage of the Arab conquerors in Persia for for a long time. From the beginning to the end the Sasanian drachma weighed the same as its Parthian predecessor, about 4 g, attesting a remarkable financial stability. One important change was the introduction of the large, thin drachma, the first thin money in history (Göbl, 1968, p. 27). The thirty kings of the Sasanian dynasty were represented on the obverse of their drachmas with different and characteristic crowns, which facilitate establishment of a precise sequence of issues. The portrait of the king is not frontal, as on Parthian coins, but facing to the right. On the reverse is the fire altar, which may be flanked by two personages (both priests or perhaps the king and a priest) and also sometimes appears with a bust in the flames. Šāpūr II (309-79) must have increased production of coinage to finance his wars, as did Pērōz (459-84) during his conflict with the Hephthalites. A large



proportion of minted coinage was used to pay troops. Enormous quantities were thus struck under Kavād I (488-96, 498-531), Kōsrow I (531-79), and Kōsrow II (590-628), who were engaged in foreign wars. The tax reform of Kavād and Kōsrow I simul-taneously lightened the burden on the population and ensured higher returns for the treasury by making the poll tax (on men between twenty and fifty years old) more equitably assessed (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 366; Göbl, 1968, p. 26) The tetradrachm fell into disrepute in the time of Bahrām I (271-74), for it was made almost entirely of copper with only a tiny amount of silver. Half-drachmas appeared only at the beginning of the Sasanian period, obols and half-obols sporadically for gifts on the occasion of investitures or to be thrown to crowds. The inscriptions in Middle Persian included on the obverse the titles and name of the king and on the reverse, beginning with Bahrām IV, the mint and regnal year.

The Pahlavi *Vīdēvdād* and the late religious literature provide an idea of the purchasing power of the drachma: One sheep cost three *stērs* (*Vd.* 4.2); a cow 12, 14, or 30 *stērs*, depending on whether it was of inferior, medium, or superior quality (*Vd.* 7.41); and a man 125 *stērs*. According to *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān* (12.7-9), a slave was sold for 500 drachmas and a sheep for 10 (104.6), but a good piece of land was worth more than 500 drachmas (*Vd.* 4.2).

Sins had to be redeemed by fines that, depending on their gravity, were set between 1 drachma and 300 *stērs* (Kotwal, p. 115 table). A passage from the *Dēnkard* VI (Shaked, p. 179) includes the story of two poor priests who refused a gift of 2,000 *dirhams* that a *mowbedān mowbed*, moved by compassion, had sent to them; it must have represented a significant sum.

The drachma weight (Pahl. *dram-sang*) is mentioned on Sasanian vessels, where next to the name of the owner the weight of the object is sometimes given in drachmas or *stērs* (Smirnov, no. 61, pl. 33: 330 *dlmsng*).

See also [COINS AND COINAGE](#).



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