



KUSHANSHAHS II. KUSHANO- SASANIAN COINAGE

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ii. Kushano-Sasanian Coinage

General overview. The name Kušāno-Sasanian is applied to coin issues in gold, silver, and bronze struck by rulers bearing Sasanian dynastic names who call themselves Kušānšāhs (𐭠𐭣𐭠𐭮𐭠𐭮𐭠𐭮𐭠𐭮𐭠, i.e., Kings of the Kušān). It is generally assumed that they were viceroys installed by the Sasanian Kings of Kings to govern the areas that formerly belonged to the [Kušān](#) empire and which had come under Sasanian domination.

Many basic questions, such as absolute chronology or, even partially, the relative sequence of rulers, are still disputed, and the two main exponents of research during the last decades, Robert Göbl, who published a comprehensive and systematic reconstruction of the system of Kušāno-Sasanian coinage, and Joe Cribb, tend to disagree on most of these topics. Thus, no scholarly consensus does yet exist. It therefore goes without saying that the present contribution largely mirrors the writer's opinion, who, mainly on the basis of studying Sasanian coinage, arrived in several cases at conclusions different from those of both Göbl and Cribb.

A large number of different names (all but one of which were also used by Sasanian kings) and crown types are attested on Kušāno-Sasanian coins, in



varying combinations. In [Table 1](#), I use the numbering system introduced by Göbl (1984, with some modifications in Göbl, 1993).

Leaving aside uncertain cases, we are confronted with seven different names (Ardašīr, Kavād, Mēzē, Hormozd, Pērōz, Šāpūr, and Bahrām), and with 14 different crowns. It is clear that not each and every one of the 22 combinations listed in [Table 1](#) represents a single, distinct Kušānšāh, but too drastic attempts to reduce the number also do not do justice to the material. There are, in my opinion, two very important observations. The first is that image and name do not necessarily have to represent the same person; the second is that there are different monetary areas—basically Marv, [Balkh](#), and [Gandhara](#)—where different monetary patterns, but also different arrangements of the rulers, can be observed.

The absolute dating of the Kušāno-Sasanian coin series, which is pivotal for the question of Year One of the Kušān King Kaniška I, is hotly debated (Alram and Klimburg-Salter, 1999; Cribb, 2007), and no consensus has been reached so far. What is clear is that the Kušāno-Sasanian coinage cannot have begun earlier than the foundation of the Sasanian dynasty by [Ardašīr I](#) (r. 224-40), and that it stretched until the reign of [Šāpūr II](#) (r. 309-79), since issues undoubtedly citing this king occur within the Kušāno-Sasanian coin series. As regards the actual beginning date, it ranges from 233 for Ardašīr 1 (Cribb) to the 350s for Pērōz 1 and Hormozd 1 (Göbl). The present writer, basing his opinion largely on stylistic and typological comparisons between Sasanian and Kušāno-Sasanian coins, advocates a middle position. Similarities between these two series are most frequent and most relevant in the time of [Narseh](#) (r. 293-303) and [Hormozd II](#) (r. 303-09) and in the early reign of Šāpūr II (Schindel, 2005; nowadays I prefer a slightly later date in the reign of Šāpūr II). This does not apply to the “early group” of copper coins of Ardašīr 1 and 2, or to Ardašīr (Cribb) or Šāpūr (Göbl). They seem to be earlier and might date to the 280s, but in any case after Šāpūr I (r. 240-72). The “main group” starts with Pērōz 5 and Hormozd 1. Their coins show clear links to the coins of Narseh and Hormozd II.

The most important single argument is derived from three gold [dinars](#) from the Marv mint struck by Hormozd II Šāhānšāh, Hormozd 1 Kušānšāh, and Šāpūr II. They all show the same style, and with all probability their dies were produced by the same die cutter. While the Hormozd II dinar fully follows the rules of Sasanian imperial typology, the Kušāno-Sasanian coins feature several unusual features, such as the treatment of the diadem ribbons on the obverse



or the base line on the reverse. While the base line is common on Kušāno-Sasanian coins, it never occurs on Sasanian imperial issues save for the Marv Šāpūr II dinar, which therefore has to be dated after the Hormozd 1 coin. The chronological limits for the Marv Hormozd 1 dinars thus are the issues of Hormozd II Šāhānšāh (*terminus post quem*), and the early dinar of Šāpūr II (*terminus ante quem*). This Kušāno-Sasanian issue thus can be dated after 303 and before ca. the 320s at latest (Schindel, 2005).

The chronological limits for the Marv Hormozd 1 dinars thus are the issues of Hormozd II Šāhānšāh (*terminus post quem*) and the early dinar of Šāpūr II (*terminus ante quem*). This Kušāno-Sasanian issue thus can be dated after 303 and before ca. the 320/330s at latest; new evidence for the pivotal coins of Šāpūr II in this sequence advocates an actual date near to the later limit of the date span. As regards the earliest layer of “main group” coinage, in Marv always Hormozd is named and depicted. On the rare [Herat drachms](#), Pērōz 5 is attested (alongside a piece of Hormozd 1), as well as the earliest Gandhara bronzes. In Balkh, the earliest coins cite Pērōz, but show a standing figure in Kušān dress, wearing the typical, triangular, later Kušān crown. The next issue retains the name Pērōz, but shows the lion-head crown of Hormozd 1; thereafter, this Kušānšāh’s name and image are depicted.

One possible explanation could be that at the beginning, the Sasanian line of approach, if we are thinking in terms of a military invasion, was two-pronged (north and south of the [Hindu Kush](#)), with the two main bases of Marv and Herat. The southern division under Pērōz at first seems to have been the principal one, which would explain why his name was put on the coins in the Kušān capital, Balkh. Later on, however, the northern king Hormozd 1 became the supreme ruler in the Kušāno-Sasanian territories, and this fact might be expressed by his title “King of Kings of the Kušān,” which thus poses no challenge to the Sasanian King of Kings (who is labeled, it has to be remembered, “King of Kings of the Iranians and the non-Iranians”). Rather, it emphasizes his superior position over the local “satraps” like Kavād or Mēzē. In Marv, Kušāno-Sasanian coinage ends with Bahrām 4, while the mint remains active for the Sasanian Kings of Kings from Šāpūr II, with some stylistic and denominational break, to the middle of the 5th century (Schindel, 2004). In Gandhara, the last crown to be attested is that of Pērōz 4. Thereafter the area apparently came under the direct rule of Šāpūr II, whose obverses, in any case, still show features typical of his earlier reign (i.e., ca. before the late 320s). In Balkh, the coins of Bahrām 6 show a steady decline in style and purity



(Blet-Lemarquand, 2006); they are followed by issues attributed to the [Kidarites](#) (Cribb, 2010). As scyphate dinars showing the Sasanian King of Kings [Pērōz](#) (r. 457-484), which follow the same typological and denominational patterns, prove, this series continued at least until the 2nd half of the 5th century. It is an amazing observation that in far-away Gandhara, direct Sasanian control was established, to which can be added the setting up of the Sasanian imperial main mint in the [Kabul](#) area late in the reign of Šāpūr II (Schindel, 2004), while in Bactria, first the Kušānšāhs and later rulers of “[Hunnic](#)” stock retained power.

It goes without saying that it is difficult to present a definite answer to the many problems that affect our understanding of Kušāno-Sasanian coinage. One possible reconstruction of the chronological sequence of issues might look as shown in [Table 2](#). It should be noted that the dates—which in most cases are based on stylistic and typological observations—are often a little bit vague and may vary by some years. Rulers whose names are written in the same line are thought to have ruled at the same time. As regards absolute chronology, let me emphasize once again that the dinars of Hormozd 1 Kušānšāh must have been struck after Hormozd II Šāhānšāh came to power and are most closely linked to issues featuring the second reverse type of Šāpūr II in chronological order. This means that no coins from the “main group” could have been possibly struck before ca. 300; in all probability, the start date is about a quarter of a century later. The duration of the “main group” in Marv is highly unlikely to have exceeded ca. 30 years because of the stylistic and typological similarity within this series. The coinage in the name of Bahrām 6 and “Kidara” certainly lasted for several decades.

Denominations. According to the different monetary areas, the denominations vary greatly. The Marv dinars follow Sasanian models, as do the Marv and Herat drachms; for an in-depth study of their metrology, the coins are much too rare. The small bronzes struck by Marv craftsmen first have a peak slightly above 2.00 grams. Since neither the metrological basis of contemporary Sasanian nor that of Kušān copper coins is well enough known, it is difficult to relate the data to these two series. The issues of the rulers bearing the name Bahrām show a marked decline in weight (as well as in craftsmanship), but, due to their scarcity, so far they are not well enough studied to draw reliable conclusions. In Balkh, the dinars follow later Kušān models as regards their scyphate form, their weights, and also the decreasing gold purity. Cribb’s idea that all coins in the names of Vasudeva II and Kanishka II which have a



scyphate form are already Kušāno-Sasanian imitations, and not official Kušān issues, fails to convince, since also the “early group” coins (Ardašīr 1 and 2) are clearly marked as something different from the Kušān series, and since there is nothing Sasanian in these coins. The decline in gold purity gets dramatic for Bahrām 6 and the Kidarite issues. The accompanying coppers of Pērōz 2 and 3 have a weight peak above 2.50 grams, and—as one might expect—are different from the Marv issues. The Gandhara bronzes start at more than 4.00 grams, but show declining weights. Besides light Šāpūr II coins struck on irregular flans, however, also much heavier and technically superior pieces in this king’s name occur which need a special explanation; Cribb has postulated a monetary reform under Šāpūr II, which is a quite convincing idea.

Basic typology. Kušāno-Sasanian coins display a vast array of different influences. Apart from typological elements taken over from imperial Sasanian and Late Kušān (i.e., Vasudeva I and later) coins, they also display a remarkable degree of independence. Special importance has to be attributed to the crowns. In Marv, Hormozd 1 is always depicted with the bundle of hair at the top of his head (*korymbos*), which invariably takes a form different than that of the Kings of Kings. In the beginning, it is depicted in the form of an artichoke, later on, of a pomegranate, which becomes the most common form afterwards. Hormozd 1’s crown featuring a lion’s head is closely connected to that of Hormozd II, which shows an eagle. The parallels to the eagle cap worn by Šāpūr I on some rare early drachms (Alram and Gyselen, 2003) and also to the lioness cap on the rock relief of [Naqš-e Rostam](#), are much less close. The arcaded crowns of Pērōz 5 and of the Bahrāms have parallels with the crown of Narseh, the closest link being that between Pērōz 4’s bull’s horns above the crown cap and the floral elements in Narseh’s earlier crown. The deer’s horns in the crown of the rare Bahrām 7 coins have been traced by Göbl to nomadic influences from the Eurasian steppe.

The “early group” coins are especially innovative, and thus isolated also in this respect: the frontally seated deity on the reverses of Ardašīr 1 has no real model in Kušān, let alone in the Sasanian coinage. While the investiture scene on the coins of Ardašīr 2 can be traced back to Sasanian models, the lack of the fire altar as well as the fact that no diadem ribbon is handed over, but with all probability a Kušān crown of the type that had been worn until the first half of the reign of [Huvishka](#) (Schindel, 2009), proves that we are not dealing merely with a takeover from Sasanian models. The seated god of the copper coins struck by a ruler called Ardašīr (Cribb) or Šāpūr (Göbl) also is unique, and thus



fits well with Ardašīr 1 and 2. These two rulers, however, employ as obverse image the Sasanian-style bust to the right, while the uncertain king uses a standing figure in Kušān fashion. This implies that they were struck in a mint other than Marv.

In Marv, the obverses also invariably feature a bust to the right (left-facing busts appear to result from die cutters' mistakes), and thus follow Sasanian models. The earliest copper reverse features Oesho with the bull, thus basically a Kušān image, but with Iranian hairstyle and clothes. The investiture scenes on the drachms and the copper coins are a pictorial innovation. The fire altar over which the Kušānšāh is sacrificing is not connected to the Sasanian one, but is also depicted in a different fashion than that of the Kušān obverses. A minor, but very important observation concerns the base line, which is first shown on some of the Oesho coins and becomes canonical thereafter; as we already have seen, it is typical of Kušāno-Sasanian coins. The investiture scene on the dinars follows Sasanian models. Hormozd's latest copper type showing a bust holding a diadem and a lance or scepter on a fire altar—which was to become canonical after him—is another Kušāno-Sasanian innovation; this type later is taken over on Sasanian imperial bronzes of Šāpūr II, also at the mint of Marv (Loginov and Nikitin 1993).

The Balkh coins follow Kušān models as regards basic typology: standing king sacrificing over an altar on the obverse, Oesho and bull on the reverse. However, the images are strongly iranized. While retaining the Kušān chain mail, the king is shown with a breastplate and with the individual Sasanian crown as well as the prominent diadem ribbons so typical of Sasanian art. On the reverses, Oesho is depicted in Iranian style with trousers and the two bundles of hairs on the neck. A unique dinar of Hormozd 2 shows an investiture scene, in which the Kušānšāh is sacrificing in front of a seated [Anahita](#), that is closely related to the Marv and Herat drachm reverses.

In Gandhara the coins bear [Bactrian](#) legends, but the typology by and large is Sasanian rather than Kušān. The obverses invariably show right-facing busts in Sasanian style. The reverses feature two typological variants. The first shows a fire altar without attendants, but also without the typical mushroom-shaped supporting elements typical for the reverses of Ardašīr I. The other variant depicts a fronting bust above the altar table that has to be linked to the single reverse type of Hormozd II Šāhānšāh. Which way the influences work is still an open question; what seems to be certain is that Göbl's idea that the Gandhara coin types cannot have been struck earlier than reverse type SNS 2



of Šāpūr II cannot be upheld any longer. It has to be emphasized that already the earliest issues—those of Pērōz 5—feature the bust on the altar table and thus strongly advocate a close chronological relation with the reign of Hormozd II. The meaning of the symbols or tamgas on the altar shaft remains obscure.

Legends. Two different languages and alphabets are used on Kušāno-Sasanian coins. All Marv and Herat coins feature legends exclusively in Pahlavi, which comes as no surprise, considering that Marv had been an imperial Sasanian mint since Ardašīr I. Not only as regards the language, also as regards the elements used in the legends, these issues closely follow the Sasanian model. From Hormozd I to [Bahrām IV](#), the canonical Sasanian coin legend in its ideal form reads *mazdēs n bay* [king’s name] *sāhān šāh Ērān ud Anērān kē čīhr az yazdān* (“the Mazda-worshipping ‘divine’ [name], King of Kings of the Iranians and Non-Iranians whose seed is from the gods”). The first two elements are also encountered on Kušāno-Sasanian coins; after the personal name, the ideogram *LBA* (for *wuzurg* “great”) is inserted, followed by *kušān šāh*, it thus reads “the Mazda-worshipping ‘divine’ [name], Great King of the Kušān.” On the dinars of Hormozd 1, the phrase *kušān šāhān šāh* is found. As was noted above, this appears to be no challenge of the Sasanian King of Kings, but intended to show Hormozd’s superior status over the “satraps” like Kavād or Mēzē, whose names can be found on the Gandharan coppers. On most of the Marv bronzes, because of the small flans only the personal name and the title *šāh*, sometimes accompanied by the word *kušān*, occur. The reverse legends are often quite complex, and are clearly different from Sasanian imperial ones. The quality of the legends is very high throughout, and superior to many imperial Sasanian issues.

The Balkh scyphate dinars as well as the accompanying bronzes bear Bactrian inscriptions which are close translations of the Pahlavi version. They read [name] OOZOPKO KOṔONO ṔOYO, “[name], Great King of the Kušān”; from Bahrām 1 onwards, the legend is preceded by the word BOṔO, the translation of Middle Persian *bay* “divine.” On the reverses, the name of the deity depicted (OHṔO “Oesho” on Kušān coins) is replaced by an ambiguous phrase, which translates as “the exalted god.”

In Gandhara, only personal names devoid of any titlature occur in front of the bust. With the exception of a group of coins bearing the name of Šāpūr II in Pahlavi, it is always written in Bactrian. Two names can be read with absolute certainty, namely, that of the King of Kings Šāpūr II and that of Kavād



(KOBOD), who is otherwise unknown in the series and might represent a local satrap of Gandhara. Another name is more problematic. It reads Mēzē according to Cribb, but his interpretation has not been accepted by Göbl. In the present writer's opinion, Cribb's reading can be verified with the help of well-struck examples; the meaning of the name, however, remains obscure. Apart from the earliest issues of Pērōz 5, no reverse legends are attested.

Mints. While Kušān coins never bear mint indications at all, some Sasanian mints from Šāpūr I onwards, especially in the east of the Sasanian empire, put their names in abbreviated or full form on the coins they produce. As regards the Kušāno-Sasanian issues, we are in the lucky situation that several types are signed. The dinars of Hormozd 1 Kušānšāh bear the full mint name MLWY "Marv" on the reverse above the fire altar, as does one of the rare drachms of this ruler. The vast majority of small copper coins with Pahlavi legends from Hormozd 1 to Bahrām 4 do not bear a mint signature, but because of stylistic reasons—note especially the rendering of the altar ribbons on the reverses—there can be scarcely any doubt that they were also produced at Marv (Schindel, 2005) for circulation in the Kušāno-Sasanian territories. In the isolated "early group," many coins of Ardašīr 1 bear what seems to be the Pahlavi letters M and L in front of the bust; they thus also seem to belong to the mint of Marv. A unique drachm of Hormozd 1 bears the mint name HLYDY "Herat," to which also unsigned silver coins of Pērōz 5 can be attributed. In the series inscribed in Bactrian, some of the scyphate dinars from Hormozd 1 to Bahrām 4 bear the mint signature BOXAO in ligature.

For stylistic as well as general reasons, it is very probable that the entire group (both signed as well unsigned) of Kušāno-Sasanian scyphate dinars belongs to this mint, located in the former capital of the Kušān empire. Göbl's attribution of the unsigned group to Kabul seems very unlikely, since it would not allot a single Kušān or Kušāno-Sasanian mint to Bactria itself. Also copper coins of the Kušānšāhs Pērōz 2 and Pērōz 3 belong there. While these three mints can be located with a high degree of certainty, the remaining one can only approximately be attributed to the Gandhara region. It does not seem likely that more than these four mints (of which Herat was ephemeral) struck Kušāno-Sasanian coins, the only possible exception being the bronzes in the name of either Ardašīr or Šāpūr, which typologically do not fit into the Marv series.

Plate I. Coins of Kušāno-Sasanian rulers.



(London: Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Münzkabinett. Aman ur Rahman collection: Islamabad and Dubai.)

- a. [Hormozd II](#). Dinar. Marv. SNS 2, type Ia/3h. London.
- b. [Hormozd 1](#). Dinar. Marv. Göbl, 1984, type 1026. London.
- c. [Šāpūr II](#). Dinar. SNS 3, type Id/1c. Berlin.
- d. [Ardašīr 1](#). AE. Marv. Göbl, 1984, type 1028. (Aman ur Rahman collection)
- e. [Ardašīr 2](#). AE. Marv. Göbl, 1984, type 1029. (Aman ur Rahman collection)
- f. [Hormozd 1](#). Drachm. Marv. Cp. Göbl 1984, type 1031 (but mint Marv). London.
- g. [Hormozd 1](#). AE. Marv. Göbl, 1984, type 1047. (Aman ur Rahman collection)
- h. [Pērōz 4](#). AE. Marv. Göbl, 1984, type 1084. (Aman ur Rahman collection)
- i. [Bahrām 4](#). AE. Marv. Göbl, 1984, type 1097. (Private collection)
- j. [Pērōz 5](#). Drachm. Herat. Göbl, 1984, type 1030. London.
- k. [Pērōz 2](#). Dinar. Balkh. Göbl, 1984, type 702. (Aman ur Rahman collection)
- l. [Hormozd 1](#). Dinar. Balkh. Göbl, 1984, type 743ff (marks). (Aman ur Rahman collection)
- m. [Kidara](#). Dinar. Balkh. Göbl, 1984, type 739. (Aman ur Rahman collection)
- n. [Pērōz 5](#). AE. Gandhara. Göbl, 1984, type 1118. London.
- o. [Mēzē](#). AE. Gandhara. Göbl, 1984, type 1125. (Aman ur Rahman collection)
- p. [Šāpūr II](#). AE. Gandhara. Göbl, 1984, type 1121. (Aman ur Rahman collection)

































































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