



PEARL I. PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

PEARL (*dorr*, *lo'lo'* [both large pearls], *marjān* [small pearls]).

i. PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

In modern Persia the term *morvārid* is generally used to designate the “oriental pearl” (see Gershevitch). Such pearls are hard, shiny grains, rarely larger than a seed, that grow in the shells of many species of shellfish, especially the pearl oyster. In antiquity these oysters were found in the Persian Gulf and also in flowing and fresh waters.

As pearls can be produced only under favorable circumstances and over long periods of time, it is difficult to obtain a precise understanding of their use in ancient Persia. The oldest find of pearls in Persia comes from Tepe Giyan (Giān) in Luristan (Lorestān), from levels dated to the mid-second millennium BCE (Herzfeld, p. 144). Among the Achaemenids (700-330 BCE) pearls were more highly valued than gold and precious stones; there are several textual references from this period to pearls used as ornaments for the neck, arms, and legs (Rawlinson, p. 325; Ammianus Marcellinus, 23.6.84). They have been found on neckbands and armbands at Susa and Pasargadae (see, e.g., de Morgan, pl. V/6; Stronach, pl. 159c; Musche, 1992, pls. CVI-CVII).

From the Arsacid period (ca. 250 BCE-226 CE) pearls have been preserved in jewelry (see, e.g., Colledge, pl. 11b; Musche, pl. XVII/13.3). In the first century BCE, the traveler [Isidorus of Charax](#) attested to pearl fishing in the Persian Gulf (Schoff, p. 20). The many hoards of pearls reported by Pliny the Elder



(38.6) as among the booty from eastern campaigns are evidence of the lavish use of pearls in the eastern lands, including Persia. In the Sasanian period (224-650 BCE), pearls were worn as body ornaments and set into crowns, royal robes, and decorative objects (see, e.g., Fukai and Horiuchi, pls. III ff.; Musche, 1988, pp. 198, 289, 311-12, 330). One pearl worn in the right ear of the great Sasanian king Pērūz (Firuz, r. 459-84) was particularly famed for its size and beauty (Procopius, 1.4).

Pearls continued to enjoy great popularity in the succeeding periods and were frequently cited in literature as symbols and synonyms for beauty, purity, and perfection.

For the image of the pearl in Gnostic allegory, see [Hymn of the Pearl](#).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

M.A.R. Colledge, *The Parthians*, London, 1967.

S. Fukai and K. Horiuchi, *Taq-i-Bustan*, 2nd ed., II, Tokyo, 1972.

I. Gershevitch, "Margarites the Pearl," *Études irano-aryennes offertes à Gilbert Lazard*, *Studia Iranica* 7, Paris, 1989, pp. 113-36.

E. Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East*, New York, 1941.

J. de Morgan, *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse*, VIII, Paris, 1905.

B. Musche, *Vorderasiatischer Schmuck von den Anfängen zur Zeit der Arsakiden und Sasaniden*, Leiden, 1988.

G. Rawlinson, *The Five Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*, III, London, 1879.

W. H. Schoff, ed., *Parthian Stations by Isidore of Charax; An Account of the Overland Trade Route Between the Levant and India in the First Century B.C.*, Chicago, 1976.

D. Stronach, *Pasargadae*, Oxford, 1978.



PEARL ii.