



SASANIAN COINAGE

SASANIAN COINAGE. The coinage of the Sasanian empire (ca. 224-651 CE) is not only the most important primary source for its monetary and economic history, but is also of greatest importance for history and art history. Only through the evidence of the royal portraits on the coins, does it become possible to identify depictions of kings on other media of Sasanian art such as silverware or rock and stucco reliefs. So far, there are coins known for 32 rulers, who are listed in [Table 1](#). The attribution of coins to the reign of Bahrām III, as well as the equation of some of the short-lived rulers after Kōsrow II with persons known from historical sources, is still under debate. The reigns of Kavād I (Kawād I) and Kōsrow II are separated into two periods by the usurpation of Jāmāsp and Bahrām VI, respectively.

All Sasanian coins are hand struck. The obverse, or lower die, bearing the portrait of the king, was fixed in an anvil, while the reverse, or upper die, was held in the craftsman's hand. A typical technical feature of Sasanian silver coins is the thinness of their flans, which makes them very broad, but often, especially in the 6th century, leads to technical problems such as the "dead spot," which means that parts of the die image remain obscure since the flans are too thin (Plate I.k [see [coin images](#), below]).

Striking coins was always a royal prerogative, and during the entire Sasanian history the typology employed is the same over the entire empire, proving that the mints always were under control of the royal central authorities. Until the 5th century, the coin dies were mostly produced locally in the respective mint, but from the mid-5th century onwards they were almost always centrally



manufactured, and then sent to the various mints, whereby the coins are homogenous not only when it comes to typology, but also when it comes to style. As in the Roman empire, the coin production was done according to accurate and well-organized plans. This system of the Sasanian coinage can be reconstructed, to some extent, from the surviving numismatic material, which, however, only represents a tiny portion of the entire Sasanian monetary output.

The *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum* (SNS) will offer a numismatic overview over the reign of each single Sasanian king, and hopefully also will fill the gap in general literature on Sasanian coins (published so far: Alram and Gyselen, 2003; Schindel, 2004), while so far the only scientifically sound work which gave an overview on the entire Sasanian series was that of Göbl (1971, a then updated compilation of idem, 1954 and 1962). Detailed studies on the coinage of single kings exist so far for the following rulers: Ardašir I (q.v.) and Šāpūr I (Alram and Gyselen, 2003), Šāpūr II to Kavād I (Schindel 2004), Šāpūr II (Göbl, 1984), Pērōz (Szaivert, 1987), Kavād II (Malek, 1995), Bōrān (q.v.) (Malek and Curtis, 1998), and Yazdgerd III (Tyler-Smith, 2000). Mochiri's book from 1977 offers a great number of photos, but is of varying value. Most recent contributions are articles and notes scattered in various journals of numismatics and Iranian studies; until 1993, the highly useful, although not absolutely complete, bibliographic survey by Malek (1993) can be consulted; for the following period, the relevant chapters in the volumes of International Numismatic Commission, *ASurvey of Numismatic Research* (for 1990-95: Berlin, 1997; for 1996-2001: Madrid, 2003). The tedious topic of modern forgeries of Sasanian coins has been discussed by Göbl (e.g., 1971, pl. 16; for a discussion of modern forgeries of Kōsrow II dinars, see Gurnet, 1994).

Denominations. Ardašir I, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, inherited from his Parthian predecessors a monetary system which was dominated by the silver drachm, struck at a weight of ca. 3.7 g. Apart from this leading denomination, billon tetradrachms were struck in Seleucia, while tiny bronze coins were used as small change. Ardašir reorganized this system (Alram and Gyselen, 2003): He raised the drachm weight during his reign to ca. 4.2 g, and he issued regularly fractions of the drachm, namely the hemidrachm, or half drachm, and the obol, equalling one-sixth of a drachm. These two fractional silver denominations most probably were a heritage from the monetary system of Ardašir's home province Fārs. Billon tetradrachms, derived from Parthian models, were also issued. As for the copper coinage, Ardašir



introduced a large coin of ca. 16 g, which has been called “unit” by Göbl (1971), of considerably higher weight and size than the Parthian bronze coins struck for the previous 100 years. Without any real importance for monetary circulation, but of high propagandistic value, was the introduction of a gold coinage, unknown to the entire Parthian monetary system. These dinars weigh about 7.2 to 7.4 g; since they are heavier than the contemporary Roman standard gold coins, or *aurei*, but lighter than the Kushan gold pieces, it is not clear from where their denominational standard was derived. The very rare double-dinars, however, were most likely based on Roman models. With the small numbers of gold coins, and their often special typology (Plate I.a), one can safely assume that the Sasanian gold coinage was used for ceremonial purposes, as a kind of honorary gifts to the grandees of the empire, and was not intended to meet the demands of monetary circulation.

This delicate system did not survive the first century of the Sasanian dynasty. The last hemidrachms are known for Hormozd II, while the one-sixth drachms, at latest from the reign of Šāpūr II onwards, were used for ceremonial purposes and not for everyday circulation, as can be seen from their often deviating typology, and the small number of existing specimens (Plate I.c). The issue of billon tetradrachms was discontinued after the reign of Bahrām II. During the reign of Šāpūr II, the weight of the gold coins was reduced to some 4.2g, thus resembling the Roman solidus of 4.5 g, but apparently being based on Iranian weight standards. Gold coins of the older, heavier weight standard continued to be issued, however. Under Pērōz, the weight of the drachm was slightly reduced, while at the same time the weight control was improved, and the coin output was heavily increased (Schindel, 2004). One-sixth drachms are last known for the second reign of Kavād I, while gold coins continued to be issued, albeit in small numbers, until the end of the dynasty; the last specimen known so far was issued by Queen Bōrān. Large copper coins were not issued in quantities after Šāpūr I, save for eastern mints of Šāpūr II. The weight standards, and various denominational values, of Sasanian petty coinage remain obscure, as long as no large number of specimens is available for statistic analysis. While most public and private collections consist mostly of silver drachms, excavations have brought to light far larger numbers of copper than of silver coins (see Curiel, 1979 for Masjed-e Solaymān; Loginov and Nikitin, 1993 for the Marv excavations, where the ratio silver-copper is approximately 1:100). Bronze coins are nowadays known for almost all Sasanian rulers except some of the short-lived successors of Kōsrow II. Thus, the overall picture of the Sasanian monetary system as monometallic,



being based only on the drachm, has to be changed in favor of a bimetallic system with regular and common copper issues for everyday transactions and drachms, which certainly were used for taxes as well as for state expenditure, especially for the army.

Basic typology. The coin obverse always shows the bust of the Sasanian King of Kings. On issues of Ardašir I, Bahrām II, and Jāmāsp, a smaller bust to the right of the king is depicted, on coins of Bahrām II also a jugate bust of his queen. In the case of Ardašir I, the bust may represent a local ruler (Alram and Gyselen, 2003). Under Bahrām II, sometimes a crown prince, sometimes the goddess Anāhid is depicted, while under Zamasp, the small bust to the right most likely represents the god Ahuramazdā. Normally, the head of the king is shown turned to the right. Intentionally left-facing portraits occur only on copper issues of Hormozd II and Šāpūr II from Sakastān. Frontal busts are mostly attested on gold issues, namely of Bahrām IV, Pērōz, Balāš, Kavād I/second reign (Plate I.a), Kōsrow I, Kōsrow II/2nd reign, and Bōrān, as well as on drachms of Kōsrow II/2nd reign. In general, the ruler is almost always depicted with his individual crown, which normally consists of a diadem, above which various theophoric elements such as mural elements or wings can be shown, the crown cap and the *korymbos*, i.e., a bundle of hair covered with a piece of cloth (Erdmann, 1951). While in the period from Ardašir I to Kavād I each ruler normally has an individual crown typical for him, in the later Sasanian period the crown forms become rather standardized. It has been assumed that the deities alluded to in the crown represent the investiture gods of the respective rulers (Göbl, 1971).

The reverse typology is more complex than that of the obverse side. On most drachms, a Zoroastrian fire altar is depicted which might represent the individual king's fire, but this basic picture is subject to considerable changes. Under Ardašir I, the altar alone is depicted (Plate I.f). The same type is used, mainly for ceremonial issues, from Šāpūr II to Yazdgerd I (Plate I.e). From the reign of Šāpūr I onwards, two standing figures are depicted flanking the altar (Plate I.d). In the 3rd century, one crown of these 'attendants' almost invariably is that of the King of Kings depicted on the obverse, while the other one is a deity's. Some drachms of Bahrām II, for example, depict the investiture of the king by Anāhid (Pl. I.g), but it has to be stated that, in some cases, the correct identification of the deity depicted is difficult to ascertain, e.g., in the case of Hormozd I. From the reign of Šāpūr II onwards, both figures invariably bear the royal crown (Plate I.b, h-k), thus representing the king



performing religious duties at the Zoroastrian altar. The double depiction of the king on both sides of the altar may be explained simply by the rules of symmetry of the coin image (cf. Alram and Gyselen, 2003). While the attendants are shown turned away from the altar on most issues from Šāpūr I to Bahrām II (Plate I.d), from the reign of Narseh onwards they face the altar (Plate I.h-j). Beginning with Kōsrow I, the reverse figures are shown frontally (Plate I.b, k). As long as the attendants are shown turning away from the altar, they tend to hold objects which appear to mean long scepters (Plate I.d). When facing the altar, they hold a *barsom* bundle (Plate I.h-i), while from Kōsrow I onwards, they lean on a sword (Plate I.b, k). On almost all drachms from Pērōz until the death of Kavād I, the attendants raise their respective right hand towards the altar in a gesture of adoration (Plate I.j). The treatment of the altar itself also varies during the various reigns, especially when it comes to the depiction of the altar flames. The most noteworthy additions to the altar itself are a bust with curled hair above the upper altar plate on issues from Hormozd II to Yazdgerd I (Plate I.h) and the royal bust on the upper elements of the altar under Bahrām V and Balāš (Plate I.i). A last point is the position of the ribbons which are depicted on the altar shaft from Bahrām II onwards: they are shown hanging down until the death of Kavād I, while from Kōsrow I onwards they are represented in an upright position.

While almost all drachms except some rare Kōsrow II issues depict one of the variants mentioned above, on gold, fractional silver, and copper coins variations of these main types (Plate I.e) or totally different representations can be found. These can be explained by the ceremonial character in the case of gold (Plate I.a) and fractional silver coins (Plate I.c), and by the more local nature of the issues in the case of copper coins—e.g., the typologically mostly independent reverse types in 5th-century Marv (Loginov and Nikitin, 1993). Among the representations different from the main drachm typology are standing figures of the respective ruler on dinars of Kavād I (Plate I.a), Kōsrow I, Kōsrow II, and Bōrān; still unidentified busts on copper coins of Kavād I and dinars as well as drachms of Kōsrow II, the coins of the latter king showing a frontal bust in flames (see Gyselen, 2000); a diadem ribbon (Plate I.c); a cock's head on one-sixth drachms of Bahrām IV (Schindel, 2004); and a cross with diadem ribbons under Yazdgerd I (Loginov and Nikitin, 1993).

An original and typical feature of Sasanian coins is the use of multiple rims, as well as astral symbols outside the rim. After its occurrence on some rare copper issues of Šāpūr II, a double rim on the reverse is used in the coinage of



Kavād I from his 33rd to his 43rd year. Kōsrow II and most rulers after Ardašir III employ a double rim on the obverse and a triple rim on the reverse (Plate I.b). Astral symbols, namely a star and a crescent at 3h, 6h and 9h, are first used on drachms under Kavād I, and remain canonical until the end of the Arab-Sasanian series, the only exception being the coins of Kōsrow I and Bahrām VI, which show only the crescent without a star (Plate I.k). Astral symbols had been employed already on copper issues of Šāpūr II, albeit in a slightly different position.

Legends. Only a short overview concentrating on the most common forms can be given here (for another short overview, see Alram, 1986; for Ardašir I and Šāpūr I, cf. the contribution of Skjærvø in Alram and Gyselen, 2003). All Sasanian coin legends are written in Pahlavi scripts. They normally cite the name of the ruling king as well as his official titles. Ardašir I is called *mazdēsn bay Ardaširšāhān šāh Ērān kē čīhr az yazdān* “the Mazda-worshipping, divine Ardašir, King of Kings of the Iranians, whose descent is from the gods” (Plate I.f). Hormozd I adds the phrase “and of the Non-Iranians;” the legends thus read *mazdēsn bay Hormozdšāhān šāh Ērān ud Anērān kē čīhr az yazdān*. This form remains in use until the 5th century (Plate I.g-h). Yazdgerd I adds the title *rāmšahr* “joy of the empire” before his name. Under Yazdegerd II, the mythic royal title *kay* “king” is placed before the royal name, while the titulature *šāhān šāh Ērān kē čīhr az yazdān* is mostly dropped (Plate I.j). Kavād, during his first reign and the first 15 years of his second reign, as well as Jāmāsp only place their name without any titles on the coins. From regnal year 16 of Kavād I, the phrase *abzōn* “may he increase” is added (Plate I.k). This form—royal name and *abzōn*—remains in use until the beginning of the second reign of Kōsrow I, who adds the ideogram *GDH* for *xwarrah* “royal splendor” together with the word *abzōt*, thus “Kōsrow, his royal splendor has increased” (Plate I.b). Except for Kavād II and Ardašir III, this rendering of the obverse legend is employed until the end of the Arab-Sasanian coin series. Both obverse and reverse legends are often missing on silver fractions (Plate I.c) and copper issues (Plate I.e). On drachms of Kōsrow II, the word *abd*, literally “wonderful” is added outside the rim, but its exact meaning has not yet been established beyond doubt.

The reverse legends normally mention the ruler’s name and an expression for *ādur* “fire;” for the latter, from Ardašir I to Ardašir II the ideogram NWRA is written (Plate I.d, f-h), from Šāpūr III onwards the phonetic spelling. These two phrases are normally placed at 3h and 9h. During the first half of the 5th



century, occasionally, other words and ideograms occur. Since from the second half of the reign of Bahrām V onwards the mint signature almost always is placed at 3h, the legends get shorter (Plate I.i), and, after the permanent introduction of the use of regnal years on the reverses under Jāmāsp, the reverse inscription only contain administrative data (Plate I.b, k). Exceptions from this rule can be observed on rare special type issues in gold, silver and copper (Plate I.a).

Mints. An indication of the place of minting in abbreviated form is a common feature of many ancient coin series, e.g., the Parthian coinage or the Roman issues from the mid-third century onwards. In Sasanian Iran, the name of the mint place was first added on gold coins of Šāpūr I from Marv (Alram and Gyselen, 2003, pl. 35, A51). The names of other, mostly eastern, cities were occasionally placed on Sasanian coins until the reign of Ardašir II. The majority of drachms until ca. 390 CE, however, bear no mint indication and can be localized only through stylistic comparisons with later, signed issues. It was only under Bahrām IV that the empire-wide use of mint abbreviations was introduced, typically consisting of two or three letters. At the same time, the number of different mints strongly increases, reaching as many as 40 during the 6th and 7th centuries. During the reigns of Bahrām IV, Yazdgerd I and Yazdgerd II, some unsigned drachms were issued, but apart from those, all other Sasanian drachms bear mint signatures, as do many gold and copper issues. These mint signatures can stand for cities, provinces or regions of the Sasanian realm (for the Sasanian administrative geography, see Gyselen, 1989 and 2002). They remain in use until the end of the Arab-Sasanian coin series. The signatures are of the greatest importance for the reconstruction of the basic structures of the Sasanian monetary system, as well as for the economic history of the Sasanian empire.

The two main questions regarding them are the correct reading of the signatures on the coins and the localization of the mint places. As for the reading, generally there is nowadays a consensus on how the most common signatures have to be read (Schindel, 2004). As for the localization, various methods have been employed. Among the most important, and most often used, is the comparison of the abbreviations on the coins with the late Sasanian administrative bullae (first employed by Herzfeld, 1938; see also Gyselen, 1979 and 1983). It has to be stated, however, that the localization of Sasanian mint signatures is primarily a numismatic problem, and thus the sigillographic evidence can be used only after a sound analysis of the



numismatic material. One of the most important methods is the observation of style, which is very helpful for the first half of the 5th century, as long as the dies are not produced centrally for the entire Sasanian realm (Schindel, 2004). The observation as to which signature was used under which ruler is of importance, too (first employed by Szaivert, 1975; cf. Schindel, 2004). The evidence of excavation coins is not to be underestimated, while the value of coin hoards varies from case to case (see for an overview Malek, 1993). Examples of mint signatures attested on drachms, from WYHC, AW, AS and AM, are shown on Plate I.b, i, j, k respectively.

So far, no modern, comprehensive in-depth study of all known Sasanian mint signatures exists, although most of the important ones are dealt with in some detail by Schindel (2004). It is hoped that a full treatment will be achieved once the SNS series is finalized. There are various compilations of the most important mint signatures, each of the respective authors adding individual considerations (cf. Göbl, 1954 and 1973/74; Bivar, 1963; Szaivert, 1975; Simon, 1976; Gyselen, 1983; Malek, 1993; Schindel, 2004). The studies of Walker (1941), Gaube (1973), and Album and Goodwin (2002) focus on the Arab-Sasanian coin series, but are important for Sasanian numismatics, too. Articles and notes on individual signatures can be found in the bibliographies of the studies cited above and are not included in the short list of references given at the end of this article. Detailed treatments of many various signatures can be found in Mochiri (1977), which, however, has to be used with caution (cf. Tyler-Smith, 1983). A monographic treatment of the mint place Ray, covering Sasanian as well as Islamic issues, has been published by Miles (1938).

The list in [Table 2](#) tries to give an overview of the most common Sasanian mint signatures and their localizations. Abbreviations which are found only on Arab-Sasanian coins are not included. For the sake of easy use, I have arranged the signatures by the Latin alphabet, and not by Sasanian administrative entities. Also mainly to keep the list short, I have listed only one single localization for each signature, as well as only one writing variant (the most recent overview over both topics can be found in Schindel, 2004). The “Note” column indicates the degree of probability for each localization.

Comments on specific signatures. AS: It is not certain whether AS refers directly to the region Āsōristān or to Aspānvar, a part of the city complex of Ctesiphon. In every case, the mint can be located in the Sasanian capital with certainty due to stylistic analysis as well as general considerations; apart from AS, no other mint signature can be attributed to the administrative center of the



Sasanian empire during the 5th century. See also the note on WH below.

AYL: Under Bahrām IV and Yazdgerd I, style analysis makes it certain that AYL is just a longer variant of AY, referring, however, to the same minting place. From the 2nd reign of Kavād I onwards, AYL might also refer to another place such as Ērān-āsān-kerd-Kavād or Ērān-vin(n)ārd-Kavād. The localization of this signature during its second period of use thus is uncertain.

AYLAN: As in the case of AYL, it is uncertain whether this signature is a longer variant of Ērān-xwarrah-Šāpūr, whether it refers to another place beginning with “Ērān-,” or whether it means the Sasanian court (Mochiri, 1977). The meaning of the signature may also have changed during its use.

GW: Under Yazdgerd I, two mints issued coins with the abbreviation GW: On the one hand, Gowaym, on the other hand, Gorgān. After the reign of Yazdgerd I, GW always means Gorgān, as is shown by style, as well as by a drachm of Bahrām V with the longer variant GWL.

HL: Under Bahrām IV and Yazdgerd I, this signature does not refer to Herat, but to an unknown location, probably in Fārs. The equation of HL with Herat from Pērōz onwards, however, is beyond doubt.

NAL: Due to the ambiguity of the Pahlavi script, a reading as WAL is possible, too.

WH: The common equation with Vēh-Ardašīr, a portion of the city complex of Ctesiphon, is not correct, because, as long as the dies are not produced centrally for the entire empire, WH always shares the stylistic criteria of the Khuzestani mints AW and AY, whereas it is totally different from the style of AS. Thus, the equation with Vēh-Antiok-Šāpūr can be considered to be certain on numismatics grounds.

WYHC: Also in this case, two different mints employed the same signature. Rare coins of Kavād I, known so far only from regnal year 17, as well as the Arab-Sasanian coins belong to the Fārs mint Vēh-āz-Āmīd-Kavād. The bulk of WYHC issues, however, have to be attributed to Vēh-āz-Antiok-Ḳosrow, a part of Ctesiphon, since the common signature AS is replaced by WYHC in the 23rd regnal year of Ḳosrow I (Mochiri, 1977), and since WYHC is the only mint for some of the short-lived rulers after Ḳosrow II known to have reigned in Ctesiphon.



Coin images.

[Plate I entire](#), [Plate I.a](#), [Plate I.b](#), [Plate I.c](#), [Plate I.d](#), [Plate I.e](#), [Plate I.f](#), [Plate I.g](#), [Plate I.h](#), [Plate I.i](#), [Plate I.j](#), [Plate I.k](#)

Plate I coin descriptions. (RY = regnal year.)

a. Kavād I/2nd reign, AU Dinar, type SNS II/2, no mint, RY 25. State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; Schindel, 2004, no. 300.

b. Kosrow II/2nd reign, AR Drachm, type SN II/3, mint WYHC, RY 38. Numismatic Central Card File, Institute for Numismatics and Monetary History, University of Vienna.

c. Šāpūr III, AR One-sixth drachm, type SNS Ib1/3, mint VII (ART). Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Münzkabinett; Schindel, 2004, no. 29.

d. Šāpūr I, BI Tetradrachm, type SNS IIc/1a. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Münzkabinett; Alram and Gyselen, 2003, no. 76.

e. Bahrām IV, AE, type SNS Ia1/1b, no mint. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris; Schindel, 2004, no. 73.

f. Ardašīr I, AR-Drachm, type SNS IIIa(4a)/3a(2b); mint/group C (“Ctesiphon”). Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Münzkabinett; Alram and Gyselen, 2003, no. 125.

g. Bahrām II, AR Drachm, type SN XI/3. Numismatic Central Card File, Institute for Numismatics and Monetary History, University of Vienna.

h. Šāpūr II, AR Drachm, type Ib1/3a, mint I (“Ctesiphon”). Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris; Schindel, 2004, no. 106.

i. Bahrām V, AR Drachm, type SNS Ib2/2, mint AW. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris; Schindel, 2004, no. 20.

j. Pērōz, AR Drachm, type SNS IIb/1c, mint AS. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des Médailles, Paris; Schindel, 2004, no. 40.

k. Kosrow

l. AR Drachm, type SN II/2, mint AM, RY 17. Numismatic Central Card File,



Institute for Numismatics and Monetary History, University of Vienna.

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