

An Exceptional Gold Coin of Shapur I

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Recently we have had a chance to see a unique gold coin of Shapur I. Unfortunately the location of this coin today is unknown to us. At first sight, the coin looks like the usual issues of Shapur I (particularly the iconography in obverse), but exploration of some details in reverse give us cause to suppose that it was minted for a certain occasion.

Shapur I continued the regional policy of his predecessor, Artashir I, from the beginning of his reign. A series of victories against the Roman Empire opened the way to conquer Armenia, which was the main success of Sasanian Iran in the West. Shapur I represented his glorious victories against Roman Empire in rock sculpture and took a new title, king of kings Iran and non-Iran, as a result of his successful policy. Th. Noldeke has written: "In inscriptions Shapur I called himself king of kings of Iran and non-Iran and his father only king of kings of Iran. Thus we can conclude that Shapur I stretched far beyond the borders of his state, out of the country which called Iran at that time; it could refer to Armenia as well as to distant lands in East". Shapur I overthrew the ruling dynasty of Armenian Arsacids, and Sasanian crown princes began to bear the title Great King of Armenia during a 26-year period (261-287). Most probably, after the victories against Rome, Shapur I felt bolder on the throne of Iran than his father did. Nevertheless, Shapur I recorded the title king of kings Iran and non-Iran only in inscription on rock sculpture at Naksh-e Rostam, and he did not take the liberty of placing this title in the legends of coins.

Shapur's principal purpose in the East was conquest of Kushanian Empire. Shapur I insisted on the inscription of Naksh-e Rostam that the Kushanshah had submitted to Shapur: "accepted our authority and had to pay tribute to us". Nevertheless, we never meet with any record about Sasanian princes as Kushanshah in the inscriptions of Shapur I. It means that Kushanian Empire did not become the domain of Sasanian state. Frye has assumed: "Tabari was correct in reporting that the kings of the Kushans, of Turan and of Makran sent emissaries to Ardeshir to offer their submission". (Frye, 147)

Armenian sources also mention this historical fact. The Armenian king Khosro sent his delegates to the Kushanian court offering to consolidate the forces of both Arsacid families (Armenian and Kushanian) against the Sasanian king Shapur I. However, the Kushanians and other Parthian families refused this suggestion, because they had submitted to strengthening kingdom of Stahr. (Agatangelos, I-20)

As distinct from his previous ones, the coins of Shapur I are not distinguished by a variety of types. This phenomenon affirms once again that Shapur I did not much need to testify the legitimacy of his power as the founder of the dynasty of Artashir. Shapur I transferred the



image of Ahura Mazda from the rock sculptures to the reverse of coins, finally declaring Zoroastrianism as state religion.

Generally, Sasanian kings issued gold coins irregularly. The gold coins have the same iconography as silver issues. In this case, the obverse of the gold denar repeats the usual issues of Shapur I; a bust of the king facing right; wearing the corona muralis, consisted of a diadem with ribbons that lead away from the globe. The globe is covered with silk gauze decorated with triple dots. The pearl-hemmed earflaps depicted frontally cover the cheeks. His hair is curly and his beard tied up by small pair of ribbons. The circle legend is "Mazdah worshipper Shapur, king of kings of Iran descended from the Gods".



Coin of Shapur I at the History Museum of Armenia

Although the general composition of the reverse reminds one of the regular issues of Shapur I, some details of the coin are differing from ordinary pieces. The fire-altar is in the form of a high column with capital and base consisted of paving stones. In the center of the altar pillar, there is depicted a disk-crescent combination. This is the first case in which we meet with this mark on a column of the fire altar of Sasanian coins .

This sign could be considered the armorial symbol of the Sasanian dynasty inherited from kings of Perse. The Sasanian kings inherited not only the secular, but also the spiritual power of the high priests of the temple of the goddess Anahit in Stakhr. Thus, the most worshiped goddess of Persis became the patron deity of Sasanian dynasty. Anahit preserves the synthesis of three functions: fertility, military and patronage of dynasty.

The disk-crescent combination can be seen on kings' crowns of Perse (Napat, Autophradate III, Minučihhr II, Minučihhr III). This mark appears also on issues of Elimaide's kings (Kamnashkires-Orode, Fraate, Orode III). In this combination, known from earlier epochs, the disk (globe) symbolizes the planet Venus and the crescent is the attribute of the goddess of fertility.

In the Zoroastrian mythological imagination, the planets bear a harmful power, which is very dangerous for humans. Moreover, one of the functions of the seven main deities is to neutralize the bad influence of the planets. Each planet was called by name of the deity who keeps the Earth from that evil influence. In this system, Anahit appeared as the guard of planet Venus (Rak, 1998, 92). In the Hellenistic period, Anahit began to be identified with Artemis-Diana and Athena (Dandamaev, Lukonin, 1980, 2(3)). The moon was the main symbol of Artemis-Diana-Anahit, usually represented with crescent on head.

The Armenian scholar of mythology Ghevond Alishan writes: "Persians called the star Arusyak (planet Venus) by the name Nahit (Anahit) like other eastern nations. The worship of Anahit was widespread and appears like that of Artemis. In Persian iconography Anahit is depicted with a globe (disk) and crescent and a flower in her hand" (Alishan, 97). At the same time, Anahit had also the military function associated with Athena-Minerva.

The symbol of Anahit on the pillar indicating on goddess military function and the same time symbolizing her role as the patron deity of the Sasanian dynasty was probably related to the successful raid of Shapur I to the East.

The next interesting detail on the reverse is two figures along both sides of the fire altar. It is clearly visible; the two depicted figures are different persons. One of them has a curled beard and the other a pointed beard. The figures wear rich adornment, notably the chic pearl necklace.

R. Göbl argues that the figures on the reverse of Shapur's regular issues represent priests because they wear pinnacle crowns without globes and therefore do not represent the king himself (Göbl, 18). In this case, both of the attendants appear in corona muralis with globes, and can be interpreted as the portraits of different kings as well as the figures of king and deity. More likely it appears to us that the figures represent king and deity. One of the figures is probably Shapur I (perhaps the left one) and the other is Ahura Mazda.

The representation of a trident is typical for the coins of the Kushanshahs and appears as a symbol of their patron deity Shiva. The trident, as armorial symbol of Kushans, in the hand of Sasanian king, instead of staves, must signify the Shapur's superiority over the Kushanshahs. The representation of Ahura Mazda also carrying a trident had to mean that there was a preference for Zoroastrianism as the local religion of Kushans. On this occasion Shapur I used the principles of investiture scenes of rock-sculptures.

The weight of the coin (8.2 g) indicates that it refers to the Kushanian monetary system, because the standard weight of a Kushanian gold denar is heavier than the Sasanian. The weight of a Sasanian gold coin denar was, according with Roman aureus, about 7 g (Göbl, 28). We suppose that this type of coin could have been minted in Merv.

In our opinion, this gold coin is a special issue and reflects the policy of Shapur I in the East and his struggle against Kushanshahr. By issuing this gold coin Shapur I probably wanted to show that the Kushans' main symbol of power was now in his hands, and that he was the sovereign, while the rulers of the Eastern provinces were his vassals.

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