

# A Strange Date on Sasanian Drachms of Kavad I\*

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The reign of Kavad the first is probably the most interesting in Sasanian history. The chaos caused by Mazdakism during his reign led to a restored, strong, monarchy under his son and successor. Kavad I had two reigns, 488 to 496 and 499 to 531 AD. He succeeded Valkash (484-488) but was soon deposed by his brother Zamasp (496-499). Three years in exile Kavad recovered his throne and was eventually succeeded by his son, one of the most remarkable Sasanian kings, Khusro I (531-579). Kavad had numerous coin types<sup>1</sup>. The one that interests us here is his first type. It was used during his first reign, showing no date, and was then used during the first two years of his second reign, being known for years 11 and 12. A new type was introduced in year 13.

Dates on Sasanian coins were first introduced during the reign of Kavad's father, Peroz I (457-84). Drachms of Peroz's second type are known dated from year 2 to year 7. Most of these drachms are scarce<sup>2</sup>, in comparison to the undated coins of the same type, perhaps indicating that these were struck for special use, perhaps for distribution during special events such as New Year. Normal coins without dates may have been struck at the same time<sup>3</sup>. After year 7, Peroz stopped the production of dated coins and probably started to strike his third type soon after<sup>4</sup>. Kavad's coins from his first reign are not dated. Zamasp resumed the production of dated coins and all his coins bear a date (year 1 to 3). After Kavad's restoration, all Sasanian drachms<sup>5</sup> were dated, until the end of the empire. Kavad was the first king to issue drachms with dates showing

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, R. Göbl, "*Sasanian Numismatics*", Braunschweig, 1971, table X.

<sup>2</sup> Dated coins from year 6 and 7 are more common than earlier ones.

<sup>3</sup> Coins of type 3 are much more numerous than coins of type 2. This suggests that coins of type 2 may have not been struck much later than year 7. There is thus a good chance that both dated and undated drachms were being struck each year with the type ending around year 7.

<sup>4</sup> The crown of the third type features wings (of victory) not found on earlier types.

<sup>5</sup> Some coins of Kavad's first type may have been struck without a date just after his restoration (see discussion later).



double digit numerals and this could explain the variations in the way dates on his coins were written.



Fig. 1

The first type of Kavād (Fig. 1) can be described as follows:

**Obv:** facing bust, head right wearing a crown with a crescent at the front, two merlons, one in the centre, one at the back, surmounted by a globe in a crescent. Ribbons to the left, under the globe and crescent. Five/six-rays star behind the head. A ribbon rises from each shoulder, a crescent on each shoulder and one or two dots/circles on each shoulder. In front of the bust Kavād's name (sometimes shortened to first three letters) written upwards. Necklace made of single row of pearls and single pearl on the breast. Earring formed of three pearls.

**Rev:** Fire altar between by two crowned attendants each raising one hand towards the altar. Five/six-rays star to left and crescent to right, of the flames. Mint abbreviation to the right of the right attendant, Kavād's name or date to the left of the left attendant.



Fig. 2

Two varieties of the first type exist differentiated by the number of lines forming the base of the crown. One has two lines (Fig. 2, with a smaller bust and double row of dots for the

beard), the other has three lines (Fig. 1, with a larger bust and a single row of dots for the beard)<sup>6</sup>.

Kavad's dated coins of his first type show the date to the left of the left attendant, in place of the king's name. This arrangement became standard until the end of the empire. Year 11 and 12 are known for this type, written the following way: 11 𐭪𐭫𐭬𐭭 (y'cdh); 12 𐭪𐭫𐭬𐭭𐭮 (dw'cdh).



Fig. 3

A feature of these early dated coins is the presence of large pearls under the crown<sup>7</sup>. These are not found on the coins of other reigns but are common at this time for Kavadeh. This suggests that similar coins without dates should also be attributed to the very early part of Kavadeh's second reign, probably the early part of year 11 (Fig. 3). Only rarely can coins of year 11 be found without these pearls (Fig. 4). The presence of the pearls is a clear reference to Anahita and could probably be linked with the Mazdakite movement.



Fig. 4

<sup>6</sup> As is the case for Valkash's coinage, these two varieties were probably produced conjointly from the start of the reign. These varieties have been described by M.I. Mochiri, "Etude de Numismatique Iranienne sous les sassanides et arabe-Sassanides", tome II, Téhéran, 1983 (see for instance comments on fig.555)

<sup>7</sup> Large pearls or annulets also form the hair ball behind the head and appear on the bust (features found in the following years as well). A single pearl can also be found at the front of the diadem on Zamasp's crown. See for instance coin A1 and A9 in Nikolaus Schindel, "Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum", vol 3/2, Wien, 2004.

All dated coins of the first type have a similar, generally fine, style with two lines at the base of the crown, indicating that the production of the three line variety had probably stopped some time before Kavad's restoration in 499 AD.

The coins we would like to discuss in this article all have a similar distinctive style more like the coins of the first reign than the second; that is they have a crown with a two-line diadem and no pearls below it, but with a clearly written date.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

Examples from four different mints, all located in Fars province, are so far known to me: ST (Fig. 5, Stakhr), ŠY (Fig. 6, Shiraz), BYŠ (Fig. 7, Bishapur), ART (Fig. 8, Ardashir-khwarrah)<sup>8</sup>.



Fig. 6

What links these coins is the unusual way the date is written: **𐭮𐭲𐭮𐭲** (Fig. 6 date). This way of writing the date has already been noted by Mochiri (1983, p. 14) and Schindel<sup>9</sup>. It is not found on any later Sasanian coins. Mochiri reads it as twelve, without any explanation. Schindel reads it as 11, as a combination of 'ywy (always used when "one" is not part of a double digit number) with *dh* (dah, 10).

This last explanation can be justified by the fact that such dates are also known for the same reign for the 20s and 30s with numerals 1 and 2, sometimes before, sometimes after the tens figure, as found on the following coins:

<sup>8</sup> Schindel, 2004, vol 3/1, p. 181.

<sup>9</sup> Schindel, 2004, vol 3/1, p. 96 (coin A10).



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

1. Fig. 9: ST/21 with clear date *wyst 'ywky*
2. Fig. 10: undetermined mintmark on the left/22 on the right with date written TLYN (dot) *(w)yst*. A non-regular issue but a very clear date using a type corresponding to it.
- 3 Fig. 11: AY/31 wit date *'yw(ky) syh*<sup>10</sup>; not a clear date but difficult to read it differently.



Fig. 11

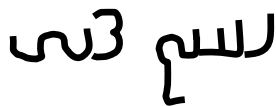


Fig. 12

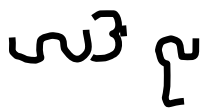
However, there are several problems with Schindel's reading. There is a ligature from the top of the K. This is very unusual as K's are normally never linked in any other letter. The K is here written like a large "n" rather than the typical "3" shape of the K with its final diagonal back stroke at the bottom. The K is written lower than the other letters with its top lying at the level of the base line. The final "y" of *'ywky* is missing which is strange for such a carefully written date.

Is there another explanation? First, let us consider the possible dates. Besides 11 and 12, year 13 (*sycdh*) would be possible from a numismatic point of view as Kavād's second type started in year 13. Year 10 can be excluded as the date ends with *dh*. Year 10 is not, in any case, historically possible unless we take this coinage to be evidence of an earlier, unknown, attempt by Kavād to regain his throne. Let us carefully study the date on the coins:

<sup>10</sup> Also discussed by Schindel, 2004, p. 96 (coin 86).



The first letter is clearly a “y” as it is a well curved, isolated, stroke. This immediately suggests one reading: 11. It invalidates both Mochiri’s reading of *dw’cdh* (12) and Schindel’s reading of *’ywkydh* (11) as both these words start with the wrong letter. The second letter could be an “a” (two vertical strokes), which is still compatible with 11. We are then left with a vertical stroke linked with the underscored “K”.



If we take this group and raise it up so that it lies on the base line, rather than low down as it is on the coin, we immediately see it is an archaic “c”, which I will call it c1, rather than the later c2 (looking like our “c”) generally found on coins of this period. The rest of the date can be read easily as *dh* (10) even though the way the “h” is written is not standard for this issue. The correct reading now becomes clear: *yac<sub>1</sub>dh* for eleven. The only problem is the level at which c1 is placed and the fact that it is joined to the preceding letters. The last point could be a consequence of the first, with a juxtaposition, not a true linkage between the two parts because of the lower position of the c1.

This early form of the c, c1, is regularly found from the beginning of the empire until the reign of Hormazd II (303-309). It occurs in the obverse legend which includes the words “MNW *ctry*”. After Hormazd II this legend is not found on any coins until the reign of Yazdgird I (399-420). It can then occasionally be found and is still written in the early way (c1) (Fig. 12, last letter of the internal line of legend on the right, near the crown)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> From the Claude Roelandt collection.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

The letter c can also occur in mintmarks composed of *gnc* + mint<sup>12</sup> which are only found for Yazdgird I and Kavad I. *gnc* is written with a c1 under the former king, when it is associated with *lyw* (Fig. 13) and with a c2 under the latter king when it is associated with *kl*<sup>13</sup> (Fig. 14). On this evidence the change from c1 to c2 on coins seems to have occurred after the reign of Yazdgird I and before year 34 of Kavad I.



Fig. 15



Fig. 17

Let us now look at the coinage of Peroz. On his first type the king's name, *pylwc*, is nearly always written with a c1 (Fig. 15). On his second type it is usually written with a c2 (Fig. 17) though very rarely a c1 is used on the early dated coins (Fig. 16).

<sup>12</sup> *gnc* (*ganj*) means "the treasury" see François Gurnet, "Deux notes à propos du monnayage de Xusro II", RBN 140, 1994, p.36-37

<sup>13</sup> The first date known for this mint is year 34.





Fig. 16

From a numismatic point of view, it is thus clear that the change from c1 to c2 must have occurred at the end of the fifth century<sup>14</sup>.



Fig. 17

A last coin of interest is a drachm of Valkash where the king's name is not written with a final "sh" as expected, but with a c1 (Fig. 17)<sup>15</sup>. This shows that c1 was still in use after Peroz's reign and that the confusion was not only orthographic, limited to the letter "c", but had also spread to letters with a similar sound. The reading of this curious date on Kavad's coinage proposed here seems less problematic than Schindel's explanation. Does it have any numismatic or historic implications? During this period coin production was mostly centralised<sup>16</sup> and it is strange to find such an unusual coinage being produced even though it was on a relatively small geographical scale, being known only for Fars. Its rarity points to a limited production time. These coins do not feature the pearls under the crown. This is very unusual, as one would generally expect to see them on coins of the second reign. Last, the style is very different from the one to be expected at that time.

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<sup>14</sup> C1 seems to have been used on bullae much later, see for instance bulla III/22 which clearly dates from Khusro I's time in Rika Gyselen, "*Sasanian seals and sealings in the A. Saedi collection*", *Acta Iranica* 44, Leuven, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> From the Internet.

<sup>16</sup> Nikolaus Schindel, "*Sasanian Mint Abbreviations: The Evidence of Style*", *NC*, 165, 2005, pp. 287-299.

These facts may argue in favour of a very early issue in the second reign. We could imagine that this coinage was the first issued by Kavad as he re-conquered his empire, travelling through Fars to reach Iraq. Alternatively they could have been struck by early followers. We have no historical data to back this up and the suggestion is based on limited numismatic data. More coins need to be gathered and studied in order to reach any degree of certainty. This issue shows that die production was centralised at a provincial level, at least for a brief period and in exceptional circumstances. This is unlikely to have been the case for Kavad's coinage in general. As we have shown, exceptional dates are found on other coins of Kavad but they are rare and each unusual date seems to be struck from one reverse die only. The coinage of a whole province was not involved as seems to be the case with the issue discussed here.

In conclusion, there are strong arguments for reading this date as 11 with an archaic c1. Attributing these coins to the early phase of Kavad's *reconquista* could make sense, although this is still pure conjecture.