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The bullae of the *spahbedan*. Iconographic remarks¹

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The bullae of *spahbedan*, that is commanders of Iranian armies in 6th century AD, are known for preserved impressions from the Saedi and Bakarar collections.² The pieces constitute a general group closely related iconographically. Curiously, they have not yet been considered from a formal or structural standpoint. Their historical value was already appreciated but they have not been treated with the same attention towards their images.³ That might result from the very nature of sigillography which is never solely artistic or textual and artistic expression is here not obligatory, might be replaced by an abstract symbol, and is always clearly subdued to a message. Also the pattern cannot be easily compared with any other known from Sasanian seals and bullae and in fact from entire Sasanian art.⁴ Although the images were employed in the studies of arms and armour, even in possible allegoric aspect of armours in Sasanian art, the composition itself was never researched as if the detailed aspects blurred an overall view.⁵

Although all *spahbedan* bullae follow a similar composition pattern, essentially, some important variances in composition occur and are consistent with major differences in depicted equipment. This allows for a decisive definition of five groups of images. It must be borne in mind that the state of preservation of the objects can have a profound influence on their perception. Patterns impressed in clay may not have retained all details they had had initially and could have gotten worn down, but the stamps themselves also wore out, which is why part of the impressions are lacking clarity nevertheless despite disparity in detail they follow compositional principles of one of defined groups.

I. Composition – introductory remarks.

All *spahbedan* bullae represent the same composition type. Most of the round field is occupied by an armoured rider, mounting an armoured horse, turned to the right, surrounded by Pahlavi text. The body of the rider clearly establishes a vertical axis, his shoulders are shown *en face*, while the head is turned to the side. In the right hand, he holds a spear at the mid-section of the shaft, which indicates a diagonal axis of the field. At the left side of the rider's leg, a long quiver is attached. The horse's barrel accentuates a horizontal axis. This effect is emphasised by the straight cut-off of the barding, which reaches just below the mount's abdomen, leaving its legs uncovered. This visually lowers the horizontal axis. The animal is shown with one of its forelimbs flexed and lifted. The tail is depicted as tied up in a specific way, resembling leaves of a clover or a swallow tail. The heads of all horses are decorated with a bun on top. The horse is always decorated with two large almond-shaped tassels, one placed below the neck and the other behind the saddle.

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² GYSELEN (2001a), (2001b), (2007) 248-270, (2008a); DARYAEE, SAFDARI (2009), (2010); KHURSHUDIAN (2015) 345-349.

³ DARYAEE, SAFDARI (2009), (2010); GYSELEN (2001a), (2001b), (2007) 35-62, (2008a); KHURSHUDIAN (2015) 212-218, 345-349.

⁴ The review of the common motifs in Sasanian sigillography can be found at: BRUNNER (1978) 49-130, (1980); GYSELEN (1997) xxxiii-iii, (2007) 74-77, (2008b), LERNER, SIMS-WILLIAMS (2011) 65-178; RITTER (2010) 76-214, (2017).

⁵ SKUPNIEWICZ (2007), (2014), (2015).

II. Groups of bullae – composition and iconography

Five groups of images of regional commanders may be distinguished in the sigillographic material: three of them are clearly constituted and are well-defined, the other two contain the derivative examples, associated with the first or second groups, though differing from them in details. These unclassified objects in general seem closest to group I, and while the differences can be explained with the quality of impression, degree of wear of the stamp, or the state of preservation, I found the differences clear enough to class them as a separate group. Differences may be observed in the composition and the depicted equipment of riders.

II.1. Group I (PL. I)

Bullae: (1) Wahrām ī Nāmxw/Husraw *spahbed kust ī nēmrōz*, (2) Wistaxm ī Hazārbed/Husraw *spahbed kust ī xwarārān*, (3) Čīhr-Burzēn/Husraw *spahbed kust ī xwarārān*.⁶

The rider is snugly fit in the circular seal. His head touches the border of the format, and in two cases hooves also do. The text is placed in semi-circular verses, reflecting the shape of the seal, running behind and in front of the horse, in the case of the Wahrām ī Nāmxw seal (1), one verse was placed under the hooves. The heads of the riders are large compared to their shoulders. Torsos are shown markedly from the front.

The helmets of all three riders from group I are drawn with a clear semicircular line suggesting a construction element, and finished off with protruding comma-shaped elements (either on top of the helmet - Wahrām ī Nāmxw, or sloping towards the face - Wistaxm ī Hazārbed (2)) or an almost circular shape (Čīhr-Burzēn 3). At the bottom of the helmet, a crown, consisting of U-shaped rhythmically displaced elements appears. The back of the head, the neck, torso and arms, up to the elbows and the hip and thigh, is covered by a pattern of dense U-shaped incisions. On the seal of Čīhr-Burzēn, this pattern is also covering the forearms, while in the case of Wahrām ī Wistaxm, this part of the body is covered by transverse, rhythmic lines. The knees and shins of the riders are also covered in a dense pattern of horizontal lines included into a prominent contour of the rider's lower leg drawn with thick lines. Behind the calves, quivers are shown, as vertical elongated rectangles, covered with a pattern of X shapes. The feet of Čīhr-Burzēn and Wistaxm were shown extended downwards, in a Sasanian-specific, "ballerina" pose. Short spears with prominent heads on their ends have horizontal elements in the form of a cylinder or block.

Abnormally small heads of horses are depicted in a defined chamfron and with the curb bits with hanging shank bits, with reins attached horizontally. Behind the ears and manes buns the tops of heads, the neck protection begins, shown as a rhythm of slightly bent lines, covered partly by a small, almond-shaped tassel departing diagonally from around the jaw joint of the animal. The large tassels in depictions of group I are shown diagonally, which is emphasised by the axis established by the spear. Behind the front edge of the horse armour, on the horses' chests, there are three vertically placed X-shaped elements, while the area behind them up to the rider's leg, is covered partly by the front tassel and rows of lines. The croup of the horse is covered by the lines bent towards the back, starting at the edge of the tassel. Below the tassel there are streaks similar to those on the animal's chest. On the Wahrām's seal, rhythmic lines on the croup of the horse have also been covered with a dense rhythm of transverse streaks. The knot in which the tails of mounts are tied has been represented in detail.

II.2. Group II (PL. II)

Bullae: (1) Sēd-hōš ī Mihrān/Husraw *spahbed kust ī ādurbādagān*, (2) Pirag ī Šahrwarāz - Mihrān /Husraw *spahbed kust ī nēmrōz*, (3) Pirag ī Šahrwarāz/Husraw *spahbed kust ī nēmrōz*⁷

The rider placed inside the circle, surrounded in three quarters by verses of the legend on the seal. On the only place under the hooves of the horse, the inscription is absent. The body of the rider is lowered in relation to the horse's back and unnaturally shortened to fit the text above his head. The figure of the warrior has been thrust below the back of the mount, which emphasises the conventionality of the depiction,

⁶ GYSELEN (2001a) 36, seal 1a, 37, seal 2a, 42, seal 3a, 42, (2007) 248-251, III/1, III/2, III/4, 262-265, III/16, III/17, III/18, III/19, 268-271, III/22, III/23, III/24, 276 – 277, III/31.

⁷ GYSELEN (2001) 39, seal 2c, 44, seal 4a, (2007) 272-274, III/27, III/28, 260-261, III/13, III/14.

prioritising the symbolic function over mimesis. The shoulders are narrow, perhaps shown in a three quarter view rather than frontally.

Heads of riders are shown in semicircular helmets with crowns, while the head covering of Pirag on both bullae is flattened, and substantial crowns protrude significantly from the outline of the helmet, creating a turban or tiara-like effect. Sēd-hōš was depicted in a more ovally shaped helmet with a crown that has clear triangular halo pieces. Hoods covered in shallow, rhythmic, vertical grooves. On the visible right shoulder, the grooves change direction to diagonal and cover the chest of the figure. The upper arm, down to the elbow, is covered by dense transverse lines, forearms seem flat, though this could be caused by wear. Similarly it is not possible to tell how thigh covers of the figures are depicted. The calves cover the rhythms of diagonal streaks. The front edge of the shin was marked by a separate line. The horsemen exhibit "ballerina feet". Behind the legs, quivers are shown in shape of vertical elongated rectangles with an unidentifiable pattern. Spearheads are substantial with transverse elements, held more vertically than group I.

The short horse head is decorated with a bun on top, and on the Sēd-hōša's seal the cheek, noseband and a long shank bit can be distinguished. The head is cut off from the neck with a curved line. A line stretches from the mouth that cuts through the neck, suggesting a double rein. On the Pirag's bullae, the head is quite undefined, perhaps covered by a mask or forehead covering. The upper part of the necks of the horses is covered by vertical segments, below, the front sections of the horses are shown covered by a uniform pattern of rhythmic rows of shallow holes. The contour of the front and bottom of the horse armour is very clear, marked by a double line at the front. The upper part of the horses' necks is covered in rhythmic segments, which due to poor preservation on the Pirag's bullae, resemble the manes of a griffin. The part over the croup is cut off with a line curving towards the bottom, covered in a scaly pattern. Part of the croup behind the rear tassel is densely chequered. The knots on tails are shown simplified compared to the form of two round objects, which, however, could result from the state of preservation.

II.3. Grup III (PL. III)

Bullae: (1) Wēh-Šābuhr Ī Aspbed/Husraw *spahbed kust ī nēmrōz*, (2) Gōr-gōn ī Mihrān/Husraw *spahbed kust ī ādurbādagān*⁸

Riders placed similarly to bullae of group II, figures also shown sitting below the line of the back of the mounts, as in the previous group. Horses with elongated barrels are shown, which makes the riders proportionally smallest in relation to them, in comparison to the other bullae discussed here.

The heads of the warriors are disproportionately large, directed slightly upwards. Arms and torsos are significantly diminished. Helmets are hemispherical, without preserved crowns. Nor did the pattern covering the torsos and legs of the riders survive, aside from several transverse streaks on Wēh-Šābuhr's arm. Feet are shown in the same ballerina position as before. Quivers are poorly preserved, while on the Gōr-gōn seal, the quiver seems decorated with a rhythm of inverted Vs. Spears are shown held similarly to group II, which is to say more vertically, but spearheads are not shown, covered by lines of text.

Heads of horses decorated with buns; marked elements of the bridle, including accentuated nosebands. Heads cut off from the neck like other groups. The armour, aside from transverse segments on the upper neck, is covered by a pattern of small circles. Curved lines at the bottom of the neck of the horse and its upper buttocks are seen, whereupon the like cuts off a fragment similarly to group II. On Wēh-Šābuhr's seal, a line stretches from the shank bits to the central part of the neck of the horse, which could be interpreted as reins. The tails are simplified, similarly to depictions of group II.

The element in the shape of a horseshoe is placed over the buttock of Wēh-Šābuhr's horse and under Gōr-gōn's hooves.

II.4. Group IV (PL. IV)

Bullae: (1) Wistaxm ī Hazārbed/Ohrmezd//Farrox *spahbed kust ī xwarbarān*, (2) Dād-Burz-Mihr Ī Aspbed/Ohrmezd *spahbed kust ī xwarāsān*.⁹

⁸ GYSELEN (2001) 40-41, seal 2d1, 2d2, 45, seal 4b, (2007) 252-254, III/5, III/6, III/7.

⁹ GYSELEN (2001) 36, seal 1b, 43, seal 3b, (2007) 260-261, III/13, III/14.

The bullae of group IV have characteristics known from groups I and II, though have major equipment differences. The layout of the text repeats the placement of the legends from group II, similarly the proportions of the figures reflect those from group II, but the riders are not lowered as much in relation to the horses' backs, resulting in a composition associated to group I. Their equipment is also more similar to group I. On their heads they have helmets crowned with a comma-shaped element, slightly more elliptical than helmets from group I. In the case of Wistaxm's seal, the helmet is decorated with a crown made out of U-shaped elements (or crescents). The horse armour is consistent with group I, aside from the lack of X-shaped elements in the front, which, on Wistaxm's seal, have been replaced with diagonal lines falling towards the front, on the seal of Dād-Burz-Mihr in turn there were columns of short streaks.

II.5. Group V (PL. V)

Seal: (1) Wahrām ī Nāmxw/Ohrmezd *spahbed kust ī nēmrōz*.¹⁰

The seal essentially repeats the pattern ascribed to group I, but the head of the figure is bigger even than those of group I, similarly the horse's head is larger. The helmet does not have a crown or decoration. The spearhead is triangular and does not have a bar. Double reins are clearly visible as opposed to group I. The armour of Wahrām's mount do not have the X-shaped elements on the horses' chests. In their place is a dense rhythm of horizontal lines, uninterrupted save for the almond shaped tassel.

III. Patterns of depicting lances in Sasanian and Byzantine iconography, and the ways of showing *spahbedan* (PL. VI, VII, VIII, IX, X)

An important element of the model of depiction represented by all *spahbedan* bullae is the diagonally held spear with a short shaft and large head. This contradicts the patterns of depicting riders using shafted weapons in Sasanian iconography. Several schematics are allowed, in which horsemen are shown with lances: held with both hands alongside horse's neck or a "*cataphract*" hold, if to accept Mielczarek's simplified division, and/or "*clibanarii*" grip with the shaft running across horse's neck, a strike downwards with a lance held with one hand, a two-handed strike downwards diagonally, or occasionally, a thrust to the back. Sometimes, the lances are held single-handed alongside mount's neck, which shows a shaft held in the right hand at waist level. In all cases, the lance reflects realities described in literary sources, where heavy Parthian and Sasanian cavalry, using long lances, *kontoī*, sharing this type of arms with Sarmatian cavalry and heavy Seleucid and Roman cavalry formations.

In depictions showing the hunters hurling javelins PL. X, the shafts are much shorter than those shown on the bullae of the *spahbedan*. Spears of similar length are now used by figures fighting animals on foot, both royal and princely and of lower social castes. It must be noted, however, that depictions of riders using similar weapons are absent.

Another important fact is that aside from one exception of Bišāpūr IV, Bahrām II's relief, Sasanian kings in triumphal reliefs do not carry arms in their hands. Naturally their left hands are shown resting on the sword-hilts but the arms usually are not important enough to encumber royal hands.

Seeking sources of the discussed iconographic pattern, one must go beyond the constraints of Sasanian aesthetics. A similar pattern can be found on a Parthian relief from Hung and Kamalwand,¹¹ where the spear does not establish a diagonal line of the depiction as strongly as in the case of the bullae discussed here however is held obliquely and in front of the rider an over-sized standing figure is shown. More importantly, this arrangement of the rider, with a spear wielded diagonally, is shown on scenes of imperial *adventus* or *profectio* represented by coin of Septimius Severus from Laodicea commemorating his Parthian expedition, medalion of Constantius of London and on depictions on a medalion of Justinian and missorium showing of Constantius II from Kertch and later Byzantine iconography of holy warriors (PL. XI),¹² but also on

¹⁰ GYSELEN (2001) 38, seal 2b, (2007) 266-267, seal III/20, III/21.

¹¹ KAWAMI (1987); MATHIESEN (1992).

¹² Where it gives way to other visual forms showing shafts of weapons stabbed into a target under the horse's hooves or held freely with the rider's arm.

depiction of armoured riders on an ivory casket that is presently in Troyes, showing mounted emperors in antiquity-stylised garments, clearly imitating the model of imperial *adventus* or *profectio*. The coin of Septimius Severus, the medallions of Constantius and Justinian's medallion show the main personages in armour, constituting a potential pattern for future depictions of saints.¹³ What attracts attention is the fact that except for Septimius' *profectio*¹⁴ and the depictions from Troyes casket all mounted figures, holding the spears in oblique manner, have a standing personage in front as if vertical accent was required to stabilize composition or additionally mark the visual importance of the main rider on top of application of commonly recognized symbolism. In all cases the spears are held in the way which seem rather presenting the weapons than actually using them. It seems important that Byzantine depictions, and those of late antiquity, showing riders armed with lances show them in three essential configurations:

1. Striking a target under the hooves (with shafts shown across the torso of the figure and vertically behind it),
2. Holding the shafts vertically or directing the head diagonally backwards behind the torso, with this formula encompassing both spears and *labraria*,
3. Diagonally as in the discussed formula: this indicates that these formulae had been an integral part of east-Roman visual language. Their permeation into the art of Iran does not seem odd, though it must be noted that a spear held diagonally, accentuating the diagonal axis, makes the composition more dynamic, making it a more important image accent. The use of such a pattern aims, surely, to emphasise the semantics of worn arms, which becomes an important attribute of the figure. It must be accentuated here that in Byzantine art, this pattern was mainly used to show emperors, and therefore fit perfectly into the iconography of great leaders of the Persian empire.¹⁵

Depicting riders in Iranian equipment distances the depictions from Western originals, retaining the majestic importance inherent in the pattern discussed here. It must be remarked that neither the late Roman depictions, nor the relief from Hung and Kamalwand, portray riders themselves, as there are other figures or attributes.¹⁶ The process of excluding attacking warriors from any narrative, showing only the act of attack, fully dynamic, is known in late Parthian and Sasanian art.¹⁷ In the case of the rider from the aivan in Tāq-e Bostān, it is hard to say whether a warrior was shown attacking, or majestically brandishing his military might with the latter being more likely.¹⁸ The stylisation portraying armed riders without a target is related to the model binding in Sasanian toreutics, whereupon the target of the attack is marginalised, most frequently in the right margin of the picture field.¹⁹

Therefore, despite a short shaft making the weapon seemingly unrealistic, its visual function was emphasised, making it a sort of insignium, which is not contradictory with the Iranian understanding of spears and lances. It must be stressed that in dynamic scenes, where it was the aim of the creators to underline

¹³ An interesting repetition of this pattern is a ring depicting the arrival of Jesus to Jerusalem, dated at the 4-th century. *Age of Spirituality*, 525.

¹⁴ KROLCZYK (2016) 76-77, il. 12

¹⁵ It might be noted here that pre-Achaemenid or Achaemenid stone slab from Sardis depicts three riders on walking horses and each of them is holding obliquely a thick spear. The time gap between relief from Sardis and the spahbedan bullae seems too long to believe in any direct influence, also the shafts of the spears from Sardis are depicted behind the personages so are not exposed in an almost insignial manner. Parallel influence from both Roman sources and ancient Iranian relics cannot be excluded. It cannot be ruled out that the appearance of this formula in later art (Sogdian, Ilkhanid examples and its appearance in iconography of medieval Europe) should be connected to reflecting the real way of carrying lances by heavy armoured riders rather than a continuation of an older motif. It must also be noted that the shafts of the weapons shown have been depicted realistically, which follows from the lack of limitation of its size due to the circular form of the medallion, patera or seal. Nor can it be ruled out that the consistency of this style with the practical reality was decisive in its survival. Similarly, Ilkhanid images could have been inspired by Sasanian counterparts, established in the tradition of late antiquity. It is also noteworthy that standards were an important semantic element, eclipsing the meaning of the spear itself.

¹⁶ KAWAMI (1987); MATHIESEN (1992).

¹⁷ GROTOWSKI (2011); SKUPNIEWICZ (2009) 49-65; SKUPNIEWICZ (2015) 251-284.

¹⁸ VON GALL (1990), (1997) 174-197, (1998) 109-110; MODE (2006) 393-414; MOVASSAT (2005); SKUPNIEWICZ (2006b) 19-33, (2015B) 180-211.

¹⁹ SKUPNIEWICZ (2009) 49-65.

the bravery of the main figure, the shafts were sometimes omitted in some examples so as not to obstruct important elements of the depiction. The bullae stress the short weapons of the warriors through clearly showing the shafts and substantial heads. Importantly, among many connotations, the spear had a function of constituting borders, reflecting that of the *spahbedan* themselves. It cannot be ruled out that the bullae portray, quite realistically, the spears that were the actual insignium, known from late Parthian and eastern Iranian representations. Perhaps they were a relic of bulky spears-, „spontoons” of the Hellenistic officers as it was proposed by Sekunda or Roman *hasta summa imperii*.²⁰ Because the warriors are shown fully armoured, visual stylisation is to be suspected, especially taking into account the unrealistic character of proportions in Sasanian aesthetics.

IV. The helmets and the armour from the *spahbedan* bullae in the context of the visual language of Sasanian art

Due to the type of armour portrayals, *spahbedan* bullae should be classified in the late-Sasanian group of "realistic" depictions of body protection, different to early Sasanian royal warriors in cuirasses, referring to traditional representations of Roman emperors, as *statua loricateda*.²¹ An echo of this tradition could be the depiction on the capital in Ṭāq-e Bostān, probably religious in character.²² It seems that the early tendency to show warriors from the highest castes of society in cuirasses lost its communicative clarity at least in Iran, it must be noted though that the medallion of Constantius I and that of Justinian show them in muscle cuirasses, referring to earlier iconography. Also the muscle cuirasses were still present in iconography of military saints in Byzantium. Interestingly, the riders from the lid of the 11th century Byzantine Troyes casket, despite being depicted in an ancient style, have been depicted in what appears a type of scale armour, while Constantius on the patera from Kerch was depicted without armour on.²³

The small size and rather worn state of the *spahbedan* bullae does not allow certainty in identification of the armours. The clearest element in all groups is the hemispherical helmet. In groups II and III this seems to be a plain headgear made of single piece of metal while in other groups the helmet seems to consist of two halves joined by a low ridge and a horizontal band running (covered by the crown of U-shaped protrusions) around its body. The single-piece helmets are attested in late Sasanian and early Islamic context. The headgear in group II is heavily worn which might allow speculations toward the shape of the helmets however plain bodies without the ridge seem most likely. The hemispherical ridge helmets (groups I, IV, V) do not have any direct analogy among preserved late Sasanian helmets, however their construction clearly originates from the Sasanian headgear found in Dura Europos and can be attested by the contemporary finds from territories West of Iran. The main difference is a shape which in Dura Europos helmet follows *kulahu/kolaf* pattern while *spahbedan* helmets are hemispherical. All helmets have the protective coifs attached however clear drawing of the eyes and the profiles allows to believe that they did not cover the face as was the case with the armoured rider at Ṭāq-e Bostān and relate the headgear on the discussed impressions to the capitals from Bisotun (now in Ṭāq-e Bostān) and Kermanshah with the stark difference in helmet's body construction.²⁴

The torsos of the riders in group I, IV and V are covered with the U-shaped patterns which might suggest either scale or lamellar armour however carefully carved interior of the U's might suggest the chain-mail. Sasanian iconography was carefully depicting the rings of the mail, this can be observed in Firūzābād frieze, Capitals from Kermanshah and Bisotun or on the sculpture of the rider in large avian in Ṭāq-e Bostān which stands in stark contrast with Roman practice of conventional treatment of chainmail, either painted on sculpted surface or marked by the drilled holes. Iranian aesthetics required wire rings to be carefully

²⁰ ALFÖLDI (1959) 1-27; SEKUNDA (2001) 13-41; similarly insignal function played lances on the coins of Indo-Saka kings see FRÖLICH (2005) 59-78.

²¹ SKUPNIEWICZ (2006b) 19-33, (2015) 251-284.

²² COMPARETI (2006) 163-200, (2016) 71-83; DOWNEY (2006) 321-356; JÄGER (2006) 19-42; KANTOROWICZ (1961) 368-393; SKUPNIEWICZ (2006b) 19-33, (2007) 9-28, (2015) 251-284.

²³ BRECKENRIDGE (1979) 45-46; GRABAR (1936); MAGUIRE (1996) 204-206; WALKER (2012).

²⁴ AHMED (2015) 135-156; ALLAN (1986); COMPARETI (2006) 163-200; DIMITREV (2008); FAROKH (2005); VON GALL (1990); GLAD (2009),(2012); JAMES (2004); NEGIN (2015) 31-46.

sculpted in stone therefore what might appear a pattern of scales with central rib could equally be rings of mail. The cover of the torsos of the riders depicted in groups II and III cannot be clearly identified.

The visible parts of the limbs of all the riders are covered with dense rhythm of parallel incisions which suggests laminated limb defences, a feature well attested among the depictions of Iranian heavy cavalry of late antiquity. Usually such devices were attached to cuirasses however the details from 6th century East Roman wooden sculpture, with depiction of the besieged city, from Berlin prove that they were employed also with the chain mail. What attracts attention among the depictions on the *spahbedan* bullae is that the laminated parts seem to cover only forearms and shins thereby suggesting that either the laminated sleeves or leggings were covered by external layer of mail or scales, or there were only laminated greaves and *bazubands*. This would not be surprising in light of later Central Asian iconography.

The barding depicted on the *spahbedan* bullae has been discussed in separate work. In groups I, IV, V it seems consist of a caparison closing at the mount's chest, reinforced with lamellae, with separate crupper and neck protections and a chamfron. The state of preservation of the bullae of group II and III allows to see in them the forms of multi-piece lamellar or mail armours. The pattern of roundels covering horses' body in Group III could be interpreted as decoration of round mirrors or conventional representation of rings of mail.²⁵

V. The quivers at the *spahbedan* bullae.

All quivers depicted on the discussed impressions belong to the same type of long tube, already present in early Sasanian in the battle scenes but also are important part of the royal kit in the triumphal scenes. They are depicted on vast majority of mounted "hunting" scenes despite the weapon wielded by the main personage. In late Sasanian period the hour-glass quivers start being depicted (Ṭāq-e Bostān mailed rider, Merv vase) which should be associated with the battlefield realities however Islamic and later Central Asian toretics keeps depicting the older type in pieces imitating Sasanian style.

VI. Conclusions

Based on the above short analysis, the following conclusions may be proposed:

- Iconographic bullae imitate imperial Roman representations, or Hellenic-derived Parthian images, carefully avoiding the entry into the label of royal imaging. This results from the need to avoid even a symbolic violation of royal prerogatives, while simultaneously emphasise the importance of the office. Imitating Roman emperors, a "second eye of the world" in the Iranian ideology, worthy opponents of Iran's kings, though still inferior, was an acceptable practice. Realistic, Persian equipment shows an Iranian character of the posts.
- The seals were most likely made centrally. Perhaps they were handed over together with other insignia of the office. The fact that the bullae of the same types reflect commanders of different parts of the empire, coming from different houses, shows this. Manufacturing in local or family workshops must therefore be excluded.
- The dominant model is group I, all embossments refer to the "honorific name" Xusrō. It seems that this is a primary and essential model. Groups II and III also have references to Xusrō. It seems, though, that they are derivative emissions. Their lesser quantity could mean that they apply only to officials appointed during Anōšīrvān's reign. Groups IV and V bear the "honorific names" of Hormozd. It seems, therefore, that this explains their derivative character relative to Xusrō's emission, perhaps their smaller quantity shows a disappearance of an office or its diminishing role. Perhaps during Hormozd's reign another iconographic formula was developed and favoured which resulted in the creation of magnificent portrayal of the armoured rider on the relief in Ṭāq-e Bostān. The lack of crown on the helmet of Wahrām ī Nāmwxw, however, could indicate an ever decreasing role of the office during Hormozd's reign. One cannot exclude the possibility that calling to Xusrō's name in groups II and III might had resulted from their later production date and Xusrō II was referred by them.

²⁵ SKUPNIEWICZ (2014), (2015) 251-284.

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Summary

The bullae of the *spahbedan*. Iconographic remarks

The seals of Sasanian highest military officials, the *spahbedan* which contain depiction of armoured rider create consistent iconographic group. It is possible however to distinguish five sub-groups within it, which in turn might serve as supplementary argument for their chronology or might suggest differentiation of the role of the office in time. The iconography of the *spahbedan* is related to 3-5th century, Roman models of imperial *adventus* which seems adequate for high ranking officers who needed iconographic layout emphasizing power however not entering royal prerogative. Iconography of the sovereigns of the neighboring power suited that goal well.

Stylization of the arms and armour depicted on the *spahbedan* seals and small size of the objects do not allow firm identification of the types however it is clear that the more realistic tendency in depicting armament, typical for Late Sasanian period and contrasting with stylized and symbolic functions of earlier official art, prevailed.

Keywords: bullae, Sasanian art, spahbed, sigillography

PLATES



PL. I



PL. II



PL. III



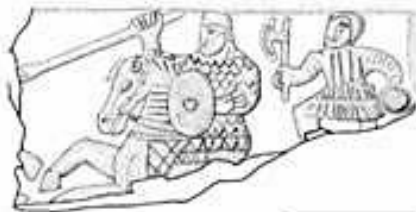
PL. IV



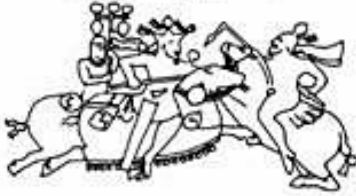
PL. V



PL. VI



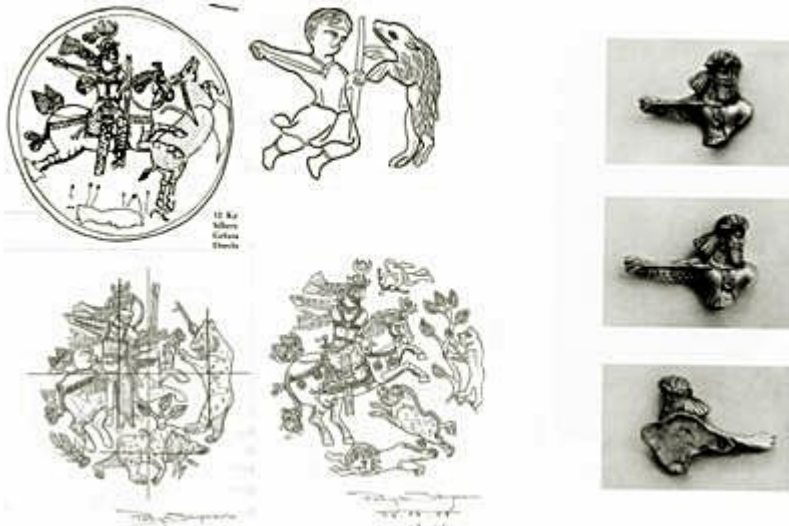
PL. VII



PL. VIII



PL. IX



PL. X



PL. XI