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## THE REPRESENTATION OF LEGITIMACY IN SASSANIAN COINS (KAVAD I AND ZAMASP ERAS)

### Abstract

In each era, social, cultural and political aspects, and their changes have a prominent role on the creation of the Governmental artworks that tries to act as a public media to show their power and legitimacy trends. This study wishes to survey the symbols of Sassanian coins and the role of this visual media from the power and legitimacy point of view during Kavād I (r. 488-531 AD) and Zamašp (r. 496-499 AD) eras, as a challenging period of the Sassanid dynasty. We try to show how Sassanid kings used artworks, especially coins, because of their spreads to transfer their legitimacy messages, thus they used it as the most principal media to show the power and its changes to publics. The result shows the changes during the first reign of Kavād I and after his deposing by cler-gies due to supporting the Mazdakites doctrine, raise of Zamašp to the throne and the second reign of Kavād I that they used various icons and symbols rooted in Zoroastrian beliefs to show their power and legitimacy according to condition changes. The emphasis of Kavād I on astrologic signs as the symbol of charisma and, in contrast, the representation of Zamašp, the successor of Kavād I after deposing, in the form of receiving diadem as a sign of his superiority and power, and the reuse of traditional symbols of legitimacy by Kavād I in the combination of diadem as the representation of his legitimacy after his second reign are some documents of visual changes of this challenging period.

**Key words:** Sassanids; legitimacy of power; coins; symbols

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## WIZERUNKOWA LEGITIMIZACJA WŁADZY NA MONETACH SASANIDÓW (ZA KAWADA I I ZAMASPA)

### Streszczenie

W każdej epoce zmienne czynniki społeczne, kulturowe i polityczne mają istotne znaczenie dla tworzenia dzieł sztuki, które w sferze publicznej mają się stać nośnikiem legitymizowania przez sprawujących rządy ich władzy politycznej. Celem niniejszego studium jest zbadanie symboli przedstawionych na monetach bitych przez władców z dynastii Sasanidów i ich roli jako medium wizualnego w legitymizowaniu władzy w trudnym dla Sasanidów okresie za panowania Kawada I (488-531) i Zamaspa (496-499). Chcemy pokazać, w jaki sposób obaj królowie sasanidzcy w przekazie społecznym wykorzystywali dzieła sztuki, przede wszystkim monety, jako podstawowe medium dla ugruntowania legitymizowanych zmian na tronie. W rezultacie podjętych badań ustalono, że wobec zmiany sytuacji w pierwszym okresie panowania Kawada I i po jego obaleniu przez kapłanów z powodu wspierania przez króla nauk Mazdaka, po osadzeniu na tronie Zamaspa i w czasie drugiego panowania Kawada I wykorzystywane były różne wizerunki i symbole, zakorzenione w zaratusztranzimie, po to by umocnić władców i legitymizować ich władzę, adekwatnie do zachodzących zmian. Podkreślenie przez Kawada I roli znaków astrologicznych jako symbolu charyzmy, z drugiej zaś strony przedstawienie wizerunku Zamaspa – następcy usuniętego z tronu Kawada – jako tego, który otrzymuje diadem na znak jego zwierzchności i władzy, jak też ponowne wykorzystanie przez Kawada I tradycyjnych symboli legitymizacji w powiązaniu z diademem wyobrażającym go jako prawowitego władcę w drugim okresie jego panowania – to niektóre ze świadectw dokumentujących przemiany wizerunkowe w okresie trudnych wyzwań.

Słowa kluczowe: dynastia Sasanidów; legitymizacja władzy; monety; symbole

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Alan Gowans (1971, p. 13), the renowned art historian, enumerates various functions for artworks, one of which is to convince "by using pictures and forms that are related to special ideas, art displays the fundamental beliefs or achievable ideals of the society [...] art intended to lead people towards new beliefs by the use of images."

"The Art of Persuasion" is one of the sections of the documentary *How Art Made the World*. This project completely talks about the role of art in political propaganda and the fact that leaders throughout history, from Neolithic Era in ancient Britain and ancient Rome till now, have used images to promote themselves and their messages. Also to persuade us to think what they want us to think, and to see things the way they do and even to deceive us. In fact, art was a tool of political promotion and leaders have used it for their authority and legitimacy. It is referred to the history of this matter in Iran in the royal art:

The walls of Persepolis were covered with awe-inspiring images. These stone reliefs were not just from one artistic style, but combined elements from all over the empire. The most spectacular reliefs of all were those decorating the staircase that leads to the great hall of Darius. Once a year, Darius invited ambassadors from every nation within his empire to join him

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there, and as they arrived, all the ambassadors passed up that staircase. The ambassadors' eyes would have been drawn to those figures the conquered peoples of the empire. All were shown in their national costumes, bringing tributes to the king. No scenes of war and retribution, they're happy to honor Darius. The ambassadors would have left there and travelled home with one message clearly etched in their mind that king Darius valued and respected them. And a new benevolent political era had dawned. But of course there were still millions of ordinary subjects across his empire who would never glimpse the vision of Persepolis. Once again Darius found his solution in art. He used the bowman image—meaning leadership, wisdom or having balance—as the symbol of his kingship in reliefs and his coins (Zelevansky & Wilson, 2005).

Since in the Sassanid era political mentality dominated all the positions and aspects of the society, any form of mentality from minstrelsy and architecture to association's formalities and etiquettes, playing chess and hunting-related ceremonies, etc. was organized according to that idea (Tabatabayi, 1382 AP,<sup>2</sup> p. 71). The most important happening in Sassanid period was making Zoroastrian the official religion of the State. In fact in this period the Zoroastrian religion plays an important political role and the government gets legitimacy through religion. The use of the title of "chehr az izadan [whose image is from the Gods]" by Sassanid kings in coins and reliefs is a clear indicator of the relationship between religion and government in Sassanid period.

There have been many artistic media in the Sassanid period such as vessels, reliefs, coins, etc. that displayed the royal propaganda. Some visual arts have been favored more by the governors because of being more comprehensive. Among them coins are very special. From the invention of coins at the end of 7th BC, they were not only used as a tool for trade but also as a tool to show the power of those who mint them (Alram, 1392 AP, p. 21). In fact the coins were the most prevalent media of Sassanid court due to their connection with power and legitimacy, and so the court controlled the mint house meticulously (Daryaei, 1387 AP, p. 31). Also, we have coins from all kings in different periods and that is another reason for the importance of them.<sup>3</sup> Each Sassanid king has a special crown on coins. Göbl (1382 AP, p. 63) says that art history has benefited the most from the Sassanid coins and these coins are the key for understanding the art through this period. These coins represent power and legitimacy of Sassanid kings.

The legitimacy crises are the best periods to identify how the kings' legitimacy and authority reflected in visual form. Royal propaganda or legitimacy demonstrates themselves in the best manner when rebels break the society rules, or better to say, when the royal ideology weakens or lacks authority. In this time, they tried to deny this condition or create an Image that can persuade people for their legitimacy, the Ideal and believable Scenes combined of formal representation and symbolic representation. As a result, new images appear or some changes occur in previous them to change people minds.

The coins minted for a king in a specific period had fixed basic elements which changed at the time of crisis or received additional sections. For instance, a king might minted several types of coins during his reign, but in crisis, the former fixed coins underwent evolution and were replaced with new ones. For example, in Khusro II's reign (590-628 AD), when the country was in war and challenges, coins changed for three times. These changes are directly connected with political and religious expectations of this king (Daryaei, 1387 AP, p. 31).

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviation AP (for Latin *Anno Persico*, "Persian Year") has been added in references to distinguish Persian and Christian calendars [editor's note].

<sup>3</sup> For example, only some Sassanid kings have reliefs or vessels, not all of them.

There are several articles,<sup>4</sup> books<sup>5</sup> and theses<sup>6</sup> that have studied Persian art and coins and their relationship with power and legitimacy. However, there is no specific research on coins' relationship with power and legitimacy during Kavād I and Zamašp eras, even though this period is known as a very challenging period of Sassanid dynasty. So in this research these coins will be studied.

## *KAVAD I, MAZDAK, AND ZAMASP*

In Kavād I's first reign we face with the appearance of Mazdak. Kavād I supported Mazdakites' doctrine. By Supporting Mazdak, Kavād I wanted to reduce the power of Zoroastrian clergies and the noble class (Christenson, 1385 AP, p. 249). But he was unsuccessful and was deposed by Zoroastrian clergies. After Kavād I, Zamašp, the brother of the king was raised to the throne (Tabari 1375, p. 640). Again Kavād I raised to the throne for the second time. So the coins will be studied in three periods:

1. The first reign of Kavād I (488-496 AD);
2. The reign of Zamašp (496-499 AD);
3. The second reign of Kavād I (499-531 AD).

Inscriptions of date on Sassanid coins were first introduced during the reign of Kavād's father, Peroz I (r. 457-484 AD), but lasted only for a short time (Göbl, 1382 AP, p. 134). Peroz I's coins were started on the second year of his reign and stopped on his seventh year because of a famine (Amini, 1389 AP, p. 273).

Kavād's coins from his first reign are not dated;<sup>7</sup> Zamašp resumed the production of dated coins and all his coins bear a date (from his first year to the third) and after Kavād's return to power, all Sassanid drachms were dated, until the end of the empire (Gurnet, 2011, p. 1).

## *THE CHANGES OF THE COINS:*

### *1. The changes of the coins in the first reign of Kavād I (488-496 AD)*

In one of his first coins, his crown is similar to the crown of his brother Valkash (r. 484-488 AD) and it seems it belongs to the first group of his coins. Then he chose his special crown, which we can see in almost all of his coins. His first reign's coins have one ring. In his first reign there are the following elements on his coins:

**Obv:** Fig. 1: One star behind his crown and two crescents on the top of his shoulders. These elements were added in Kavād's reign and are not present in previous reigns. Also

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Daryaei (1387 AP, 391 AP). He has studied Khusro II's and Bōrān's coins respectively in Sassanid period.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Soudavar (1383 AP). He has studied a comprehensive research about power and legitimacy in Persian art.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Afhami (1385 AP) on the Achaemenid period; Mobini (1391 AP) on the Achaemenid period; Afshar (1392 AP) on the Qajar period and Rahbar (1394 AP) regarding the Sassanid period.

<sup>7</sup> However minting the date of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> year can be seen in his first reign coins (see Amini, 1389 AP, pp. 274, 192).

the diadem under the king's shoulder has two symmetrical ribbons, similar to the third coin of Peroz I. The shape of the coins remained unchanged until Kavad I's first reign.



**Fig. 1:** Kavad I (obv: one star behind his crown and two crescents on each shoulder are added), National Museum of Iran, D.k. 269.

## 2. *The changes of the coins in the reign of Zamasp (496-499 AD)*

On the obverse side of the coin, star and crescents are eliminated and the diadem is not symmetrical anymore, and has only one ribbon. The most important element is an added figure who is offering a diadem to the king Zamasp. This pattern is seen in all of his coins (see Fig. 2 & 3). Offering a diadem is a popular pattern in Sassanid period and it goes back to the first reliefs of Ardashir I (r. 226-241 AD), the founder of Sassanid period, on Naqsh-e Rostam, Naqsh-e Rostam and Fīrūzābād. Ardashi I used this pattern to show his legitimacy, and other Sassanied kings followed his model. Göbl (1382, p. 66) suggests that this person is Ahura-Mazda, the great god of Zoroastrians. However there is no authentic document to support this claim. But since diadem was usually offered by Gods or Goddesses, we could say that this person is a deity.



**Fig. 2 & 3:** The coins of Zamasp, respectively, year 1 & 2 of his reign from top to bottom, National Museum of Iran, D.k.2107, D.K. 861

### 3. The changes of the coins in the second reign of Kavad I (499-531 AD)

**Obv:** one star and two crescents are added next to the bust and also there is a diadem under the shoulder, similar to the previous coins. Also in some coins there are two stars. The main change is adding three stars and crescents outside of the circle on the bottom left and write (south, west and east part). Another main change is adding a diadem to the crown with two symmetrical ribbons (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4:** Kavad I (499-531 AD), the second reign, year 16, National Museum of Iran, D.k. 567.

There is also a golden coin from the 25<sup>th</sup> year of his reign; on the obverse side, the king's bust is shown from the front angle and on the reverse side the king receives the circle of power though nobody offers it to the king.<sup>8</sup> It can be categorized as the monotypic coins of Sassanid period, because of using gold and also the unique shape of the king. These coins were minted for special events.

In the 33<sup>rd</sup> year of the reign of Kavad I, the second outside ring was added on the reverse part of the coins (Amini, 1389 AP, p. 274) (Fig. 5). Soudavar (1383 AP, p. 20) says that the word "Afzun (t)" (abundance) was added on some coins of Kavad I after the restoration of his reign against Hephthalite. However he does not mention clearly in which coins the addition of this word occurs. Also Göbl (1382 AP, p. 74) says that the word "Kai" (کای) [related to Kiāniān kings] was added to the name Kavad I, in the period of Yazdegerd II (r. 438-457 AD) and Peroz, but he does not mention any specific coin.



**Fig. 5:** Kavad I (499-531 AD), the 33<sup>rd</sup> year of Kavad's reign, National Museum of Iran, D.k. 567.

In other groups of Kavad I coins that are made of copper (the date is unclear), on the reverse side, the bust of successor, Khusro I (r. 531-579 AD), son of Kavad I, is depicted.

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<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately we could not find a good figure of this golden coin. For this picture see Amini (1389 AP, p. 94).

He is being entitled as “Shatr-dār” [meaning is not clear] in this coin (Amini, 1389 AP, p. 274). Also on the reverse, there is no diadem under the shoulder of Khusro and there is just one outside ring.

## THE MEANING OF SYMBOLS

### 1. *Star and Crescent*

It seems that star and crescent is the symbol of Zoroastrian Gods and Goddesses. The crescent (moon) is the symbol of the Goddess Anahita and the star (or the rays of sun) is the symbol of the God Mehr (Sarfaraż & Avarzamani, 1380 AP, p. 90). Also in Parthian period (247 BC–224 AD) (preceding the Sassanid) the star and crescent on the coins was the symbol of kingship (Sarfaraż & Avarzamani, 1380 AP, p. 41). So, these Zoroastrian religious elements are used to show the legitimacy of Sassanid kings.

### 2. *Diadem (symmetrical diadem)*

Diadem is the symbol of royalty and Farrah (Xvarnah). The notion of Farrah is a Zoroastrian concept, and corresponds to the concept of royal fortune. The relationship of Farrah (Xvarnah) and its political aspect can be seen in *Kārnāme Ardeshir Bābakān*. This is the only historical book written in Pahlavi language that has remained from the Sassanid period (Baqeri, 1378 AP, pp. 14–15). In this book, which is retelling the story of Ardashir I, the founder of Sassanid dynasty, we face with the war of Ardashir I and Ardavan V (r. 216–224 AD), the last king of Parthian dynasty. In the end, Ardashir I defeats Ardavan V because of the accompaniment of Farrah (Xvarnah) in the form of an animal (probably ram) (Baqeri, 1378 AP, pp. 34–35).

This is a legend but it can introduce the ideology of Sassanid period. Farrah (Xvarnah) demonstrated the legitimacy of the kings, and therefore Sassanid kings applied special symbols to represent it. Diadem is one of the symbols of Farrah (Xvarnah). In fact this symbol that appears on coins, reliefs, vessels, seals, fabrics and other artworks represents the victorious lawful king and his legitimacy. So Sassanid kings tried to represent themselves with this symbol. Diadem could be folded around the crown, hand, foot, shoulder, arc or other parts of the king's body or his possessions. We also know that the crowns of the kings represented the Farrah (Xvarnah) and kings changed their crowns in important events or dramatic defeats because they felt fear about their Farrah (Xvarnah) (Sarfaraż & Avarzamani, 1380 AP, p. 93). Also the crowns of kings were depicted from front angle while the bust of kings is mostly depicted from profile (Sarfaraż & Avarzamani, 1380 AP, p. 93). With the same logic, depicting of diadem from front angle shows more power than profile angle, and represents the king as a stronger figure.

### 3. *The scene of offering the diadem or the circle of power by Gods or Goddesses/ or receiving it by kings*

This scene specifically represents legitimacy. By depicting this scene, the king shows that his monarchy is explicitly legal and he is chosen by Gods or Goddesses. So, it is another symbol of legitimacy. Kings used this symbol especially when they were in danger,



or their kingship was not lawful. By using this symbol they aimed to claim legitimacy or emphasize it.

#### *4. Representing the successor*

By depicting the successor, the king introduced his successor and in this case, the king legitimized the successor's kingship. Also the king denied other successors. In fact Kavād I decided to choose his successor himself. He had three sons. Kavoos the elder son who had tended to Mazdakites doctrine and normally couldn't be a good candidate for kingship, the second son, Jam who was blinded and naturally could not become the successor though this rule could be changed, and the third son Khusro (Christenson, 1385 AP, pp. 255–256).

Kavād in one hand wanted to choose Khusro as his successor and in the other hand was so worried of the crisis after his death, so he suggested emperor Justin I (r. 518-527 AD) to adopt Khusro in order to solidify a lasting peace (Christenson, 1385 AP, p. 256). Also as Christenson (1385 AP, p. 259) has mentioned the reason for slaughtering the Mazdakites in 528-529 AD was their plan to appoint Kavoos as the king's successor. This story perfectly shows the reason of minting a coin with king Kavād on the obverse and the successor Khusro on the reverse side. In this way Kavād ended the crisis, legitimized Khusro's reign and declared him as his legal successor.

### *CONCLUSION*

In this research, the changes on the Sassanid coins during Kavād I and Zamasp were studied. The changes do not suggest any aesthetical or artistic reforms. Most changes were related to the historical challenges or crisis in the Sassanid court. At the time of crisis, Sassanid kings changed their coins and used new elements and symbols on them that referred to Zoroastrian beliefs such as Farrah (Xvarnah), or employed other religious symbols such as Star and Crescent, or depicted scenes in which a God or Goddess offered diadem or the circle of power to the king. The mentioned elements were used to legitimize the kingship.

On his first coin, Kavād I used his brother's crown. It was a tradition in Sassanid court that they used previous kings' crown. This way, he demonstrated his legitimacy through his bloodline. It is a dynastic legitimacy for Kavād I because he had a fight with his brother over the monarchy. By applying astrological elements such as star and crescent on the obverse side, Kavād I showed himself as glorious and charismatic, and also demonstrated that he was supported by Gods and Goddesses.

After the rise of Mazdak, Kavād I supported him and his group. In fact, he wanted to reduce the power of Zoroastrian clergies and nobles who were so powerful in the period of Kavād I and threatened the power of his kingship. But Kavād I was deposed by clergies and his brother Zamasp assumed the throne. Zamasp wanted to declare that his kingship is legitimate and lawful, so in his coin he depicted a person (perhaps a Zoroastrian God) offering him a diadem. He used this scene in all of his coins. So his kingship seemed to be a divine monarchy.

Kavād I could finally restore his kingship. At his second reign, his coins went back to their original form, with the addition of three stars and crescents outside the circle and an



open and symmetrical diadem to his crown on the obverse side. So his kingship had religious elements and he was represented as the legitimate and lawful king of Iran.

At the time of minting Kavad I's last copper coin, the historical document shows that there was a crisis in choosing a successor. By depicting Khusro I on the reverse side of his coin, Kavad I declared his son to be his legal successor and denied the other claimers of the throne.

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