

The votive plaques in the Oxus and Mir Zakah treasures: what they tell about the cults

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a comparison between the votive plaques which were part of the Oxus and Mir Zakah treasures, both dating for the main to the Achaemenid period. In a first section the questions of provenance and authenticity are discussed. Arguments adduced against the authenticity of some plaques are dismissed in the light of comparative material, some of which was recently discovered in safe contexts. A second section addresses the religious significance of these offerings. The Oxus treasure collection is consistent with known characteristics of the god Wakhsh (Oxus), e.g. its association with the horse and its possible assimilation to Tishtrya. The Mir Zakah collection is more associated with farming and it also comprises a significant proportion of medical *ex-votos* (or propitiatory offerings), completely absent from the Oxus treasure. Such a repertoire could suggest that this part of the Mir Zakah treasure originally belonged to a temple of Anāhitā.

KEYWORDS

Achaemenid; Anāhitā; Bactria; forgeries; medicine; Mir Zakah; Takht-i Sangin; votive plaques; Zoroastrianism.

We have only few means to access the religious beliefs and practices of non-elite people in ancient Central Asia. Funerary archaeology gives us quite a precise idea of ritual practices and their frequent conformity to the prescriptions of the *Vidēvdāt*, the ‘exorcism’ book of the Avesta, but the eschatological beliefs are documented only by a dozen or so figured Sogdian ossuaries, extremely interesting but which probably were not intended for the common folk.¹

The very abundant series of terracotta figurines offers better perspectives. They often depict donors bringing flowers or offerings, or seated goddesses. The production of anthropomorphic terracottas had almost ceased in Central Asia between the late Bronze Age and the Hellenistic period. Even then, at Ai Khanoum, the main site, this material is neither particularly abundant nor imaginative. The last studies, in particular by Jangar Ilyasov, Tigran Mkrtichev, Kazim Abdullaev, and Nigora Dvurechenskaya,² tend to indicate that a diversified production started only in the post-Hellenistic period, initially with some influence from Parthian art. In Sogdiana this material remained quite stereotyped until the 6th century, after which it gave way to some individualized depictions of deities.³

Fortunately, for the Achaemenid and, to some extent, the Hellenistic period, we have a remarkable and focused documentation with multiple *ex-votos* or rather propitiatory offerings, drawn or incised on gold leaves. They come from two sources: the Oxus Treasure found in

1 The up-to-date collection of the evidence is in SHENKAR 2014, see figs. 34, 52–53, 112, 133, 169–181, and pl. 6.

2 ILYASOV – MKRTICHEV 1991/1992; ABDULLAEV 2003; ABDULLAEV 2004; DVURECHENSKAYA 2016.

3 MESHKERIS 1989; KIDD 2007. See also the very informative entries in ZEYMAI ed. 1985, especially no. 486–509 by Boris Marshak.

1877 near the Afghan border in present Tajikistan, now in the British Museum,⁴ and the Mir Zakah Treasure found in 1992 in the mountains to the southeast of Kabul, now in the Miho Museum in Japan.⁵ The Oxus series comprises 51 plaques, the Mir Zakah series more than three hundred. Similar plaques were found in the temple of Takht-e Soleiman (the Ādur Gushnasp, one of the three major Fire temples of the Sasanian empire), but they are only a few.⁶ In both the Oxus and Mir Zakah treasures the golden plaques were only part of the votive offerings, and by far not the richest one, but they lend themselves better to a study of religious attitudes because of their very special character: uniform by the function, but individual by the choice of images expressing specific intentions. In both cases these finds were associated with coin hoards which do not match chronologically with them and had most probably been accumulated separately. Both series of plaques are entirely accessible in published catalogues, and both have been submitted to detailed and sometimes polemical studies. In January 2006 I had direct access to the Miho collection thanks to the help of the curator Professor Inagaki.⁷

These two series cannot be treated as reliable source material without further ado. Several questions have to be addressed, and in fact have been addressed.

QUESTIONS OF PROVENANCE AND AUTHENTICITY

The first question is the provenance. Contemporary information consistently associates the Oxus Treasure with a fortified site named Takht-i Qobad/Takht-i Kuwad, just on the northern bank of the Amu Darya. In 1976, one century after its discovery, excavations at Takht-i Sangin, five kilometres upstream, began to bring to light a monumental temple from the Hellenistic and Kushan periods, with dedicatory inscriptions all mentioning the god Oxus, in Bactrian Wakhshu; the place is in fact mentioned by Ptolemy under the name Oxeiana.⁸ The excavator Igor Pichikyan then proposed to recognize Takht-i Sangin as the real place of discovery of the Oxus Treasure.⁹ A major objection is the time discrepancy between the composition of this treasure, entirely Achaemenid except perhaps for one or two objects and the coins (probably hoarded separately), and the foundation of the Takht-i Sangin temple in the early Seleucid period. I shall not dwell on this point as I consider it was convincingly solved by Evgenii Zeymal,¹⁰ then by Paul Bernard:¹¹ they demonstrated that the Oxus Treasure came from a destroyed or still undiscovered Achaemenid predecessor of the Takht-i Sangin temple, and was concealed at Takht-i Qobad at the time of Alexander's invasion or in a subsequent period of troubles.

4 DALTON 1964; ZEYMAL 1979; CURTIS – SEARIGHT 2003.

5 *Miho Museum* 2002.

6 HUFF 2011, 86–88 with fig. 4a–c.

7 Photographs from the Miho Museum exhibition catalogue are reproduced with permission from Pr. Inagaki. From here onwards I substantially revise and update the second half of an article published in Italian some years ago (GRENET 2010).

8 The most elaborate excavations report is LIVINSKIJ – PIČIKJAN 2002. The identification with Oxeiana was first proposed in GRENET – RAPIN 1998, 85.

9 He expressed this idea in many publications, see especially PITSCHIKJAN 1992.

10 ZEYMAL 1979, 10–15.

11 BERNARD 1994.

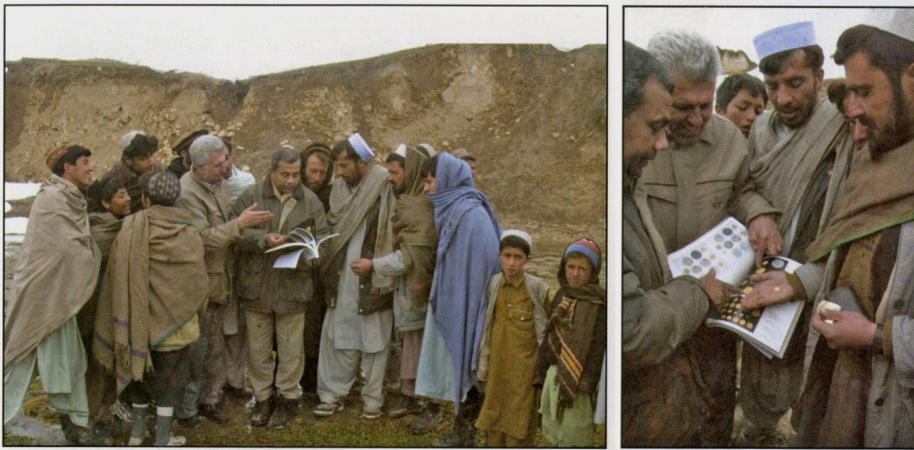


Fig. 1: Osmund Bopearachchi and members of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology at Mir Zakah, 2 March 2005, checking the Miho catalogue with local people's recollections. © Osmund Bopearachchi.

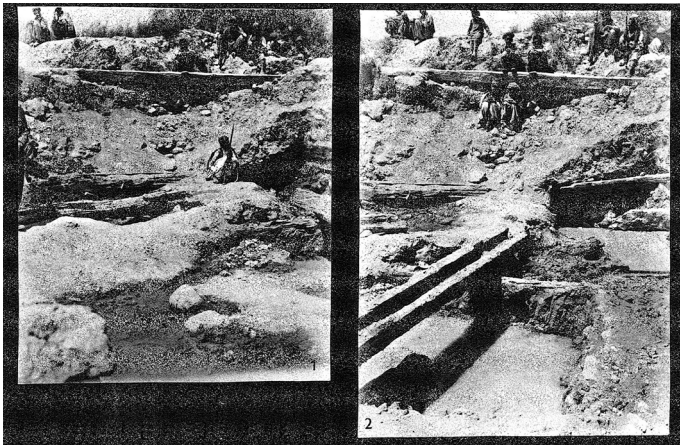


Fig. 2: The only scientific excavations at Mir Zakah, 1948: basins lined with wooden logs; right, wooden drain. CURIEL - SCHLUMBERGER 1953, pl. VII: 1-2.

Like the Oxus Treasure, the Mir Zakah treasure does not come from controlled excavations, but, contrary to what is sometimes stated, precise information was recovered on the spot in the following years by members of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology, at great risk to themselves (**Fig. 1**).¹² The golden plaques were part of a huge hoard which also comprised four tons of coins and many prestigious objects in precious metal. It appears that it was all put in bags and thrown simultaneously into basins dug around a spring and lined with wooden logs, which had been already evidenced in 1948 during a limited rescue excavation (**Fig. 2**).¹³ The coin series stops with the Kushan king Vasudeva I whose reign ended in about 230 AD, after which the Kushans lost Bactria to the Sasanians and, after some time, retreated to the east of the Khyber Pass.¹⁴ A plausible scenario is that these treasures were part of the holding of the Kushan state and were evacuated at the time of the Sasanian invasion or other concomitant

12 BOPEARACHCHI - FLANDRIN 2005. See below for more detail.

13 CURIEL - SCHLUMBERGER 1953.

14 BOPEARACHCHI - FLANDRIN 2005, 158, 245.

troubles. The closure of the two rooms containing the Begram treasure (more probably part of a palace treasury than a merchant's cache) might be related to this stampede. The fact that the largest hoard of Kushan gold coins ever discovered, at Debre Damo in Ethiopia, near the mouth of the Red Sea, also ends with issues of Vasudeva is perhaps not just a coincidence but could also be in relation to the disruption of the Kushan Empire, rather than with trade.¹⁵ As for the cargo to Peshawar, for some unknown reason it was diverted to a side valley, where the load was hastily hidden by people who certainly intended to recover it but were never able to come back. These State holdings were obviously the product of a long and heterogeneous accumulation, including a far older stock of temple offerings; in fact, very few plaques from Mir Zakah indicate the Hellenistic period, especially two with Athena (**Pl. 2/1**), and none belongs clearly to the Kushan period; the Buddhist repertoire is totally absent.¹⁶

Another issue is authenticity. In 2003 Oscar White Muscarella took an extreme position.¹⁷ According to him both series of plaques were, at least largely, the product of modern forgers working one century apart from each other: 'not one single gold plaque can be readily accepted as an ancient artefact.' As far as the Oxus Treasure is concerned, this contention was refuted with sound arguments by John Curtis.¹⁸ The Mir Zakah Treasure presents a more complex situation, for forgers working in the late twentieth century could benefit from the well spread knowledge of Achaemenid art. In an article published in the *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan* in 2011, Dietrich Huff took a middle position, proposing to eliminate several objects including the most beautiful ones, one from the Oxus Treasure and five from Mir Zakah, all showing worshippers with mouth-covers (*padām*) and the bundle of ritual twigs (*barsom*) (**Pl. 2/2**).¹⁹ I must admit that I am not convinced by his arguments, very carefully presented as they are:

- 1) The Oxus Treasure plaque is supposed to be mistaken in its depiction of the suspension of the *akinakes* (Scythian and Persian dagger), the lower belt being too thin. But if we compare the recently discovered image of Srōsh at Akchakhan-kala in Chorasmia, this belt looks hardly thicker (**Pl. 2/3**).²⁰
- 2) The *bashlyk* as reproduced on the Mir Zakah plaques is supposedly copied from published coins of the Frataraka rulers of Persis and misunderstood. In fact, it is almost identical on a genuine coin from the Oxus Treasure, issued in Bactria as shown by the legend *Wakhshu* on the reverse (**Pl. 2/4**).²¹
- 3) Huff's main objection to the genuineness of these images is the double string attaching the *padām*, which he considers inspired by modern medical masks. A double string, however, appears on the figure of a priest in a 6th-century Sogdian funerary relief from China (**Fig. 3**).²²

15 MORDINI 1960. Trade is not the most likely explanation for Roman gold flew towards the Kushan Empire and not vice versa. A diplomatic gift carried to the king of Axum and diverted on the way is also a possibility, see BERZINA 1984.

16 Same conclusions in BOPEARACHCHI – FLANDRIN 2005, 166.

17 MUSCARELLA 2003.

18 CURTIS 2004.

19 HUFF 2011, 88–100.

20 BETTS *et al.* 2016, 133–134, fig. 18, pl. 7.

21 ZEYMAL 1979, no. 0454; ALRAM 1986, no. 383. All that can be read of the obverse legend is *w.gw* (The second and fifth letters can be either d, k, or r), certainly not *whšwwr* (Wakhshuwar, Greek Oxyartes), contrary to n° 382 which bears no portrait of a local ruler.

22 Couch in the Miho Museum: WERTMANN 2015, 305, fig. 86, left.

For my part I do not see any decisive reason to eliminate these objects. Concerning specifically Mir Zakah, it is necessary to return to some facts linked with the discovery. As mentioned above, in 1993, when the pillage was still going on, members of the Afghan Institute of Archaeology managed to inspect the place; among them was Nader Rasooli, a trained archaeologist who later on became director of the Institute. Ten years later, after the Miho Museum exhibition catalogue had appeared, he recognized in it about twenty objects or series of objects he had seen, including most of those illustrated in the present article.²³ Even taking into account some possible confusion, Muscarella's opinion cannot be reasonably maintained in view of this testimony.



Fig. 3: Sogdian funerary couch in Miho Museum. Lamentation scene, detail of priest. WERTMANN 2015, fig. 86 left.

Certainly, I cannot exclude that some plaques of childish execution are modern forgeries,²⁴ though I am not even sure of that (some plaques in the Persepolis Museum do not look better). Bad taste, inaccuracy in the reproduction of *realia*, awkward copying of good specimens by less talented hands, all phenomena considered as betraying modern forgeries, could just as well occur in temple workshops where craftsmen with various training worked side by side. Considering the huge mass of objects found at Mir Zakah and simultaneously poured on the antique market, one wonders why the dealers would have wasted money to commission forgeries whose contribution to the gross price was utterly negligible.²⁵

23 **Pl. 2/2:** *Miho Museum* 2002, no. 65a-d (priests?, tentatively dismissed by D. Huff), **Pl. 2/5:** *Miho Museum* 2002, no. 70c-d (plaques with twisted tongues), **Pl. 2/6:** *Miho Museum* 2002, no. 86 (ploughing) and *Miho Museum* 2002, no. 87a-l (domestic animals).

24 See especially *Miho Museum* 2002, n° 71-72 (indeed not included among the objects recognized by N. Rasooli). I owe to Henri-Paul Francfort the important remark that several objects from Ai Khanoum would have been rejected as fakes if they had not been found in controlled excavations.

25 The find was never dispersed in various shops: as a whole (including the coins and the heavy precious objects) it was transported to Peshawar by Mangal tribesmen under the control of the brigand Jan Baz; there the London art dealer Nigel Markham arranged air transportation to London, and

THE REPERTOIRES AND THEIR POSSIBLE RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATION

Having tried in my own way to clear the field, I can now come to real issues of religious history. Judging from the diversity of their repertoire, especially at Mir Zakah, and in both places major differences in quality and consequently in price, it is clear that these plaques were purchased individually by pilgrims, either as ready-made or executed on the spot. In the shape they came down to us, quite often folded or crumpled, they had probably been recycled as raw material, except for the best specimens. How were they used before? Some had been nailed to a support; others had long tongues cut in the same metal (**Pl. 2/5**). In his contribution to the Miho Museum exhibition catalogue, Anthony Green has supposed that such tongues were wrapped around a parcel which constituted the real offering.²⁶ Paul Bernard proposed an alternative idea: the tongues could have been used to suspend the plaques to tree branches, like the ribbons and pieces of cloth which in a modest way continue such offerings in modern Zoroastrian and Islamic sacred places.²⁷ I took the photo reproduced here (**Fig. 4**) in 2002 in a shrine built around a spring at Shaartuz, not far from Takht-i Sangin, and which somehow perpetuates the devotion to Waters which had been the main function of the ancient temple. Perhaps in this context one should compare the mention by Herodotus (VII, 31) of Xerxes suspending 'golden ornaments' to a plane tree in Lydia.



Fig. 4: Ribbons attached to trees in a sanctuary near Takht-i Sangin. Photo by the author.

subsequently to the free trade zone in Basel where it was 'legalized' and acquired by Noriyoshi Horiuchi, another art dealer, on behalf of the Miho Museum. All this went on quickly: there is no doubt that the objects (except for the coins) were in the Miho Museum in 1997 at the latest, when Igor Pichikyan published the first study of the hoard which (misinformed about the real provenance) he assumed to come from the same source as the Oxus Treasure, an opinion which has never gained much approval (PICHIKYAN 1997). Pichikyan's study did not include the votive plaques but he mentions there were several hundreds. For all this see BOPEARACHCHI – FLANDRIN 2005, 126–149, a scrupulous inquiry based on multiple interviews. This history excludes any substantial addition of modern forgeries.

26 GREEN 2002, 225. Approved by HUFF 2011, 99–100. Indeed, these tongues are another indication that the pieces are genuine: they were not copied from the plaques of the Oxus Treasure where, on rare specimens, they are much shorter; why would forgers have invented them, wasting gold and work?

27 Personal communication.

Both series of plaques contain a majority of images of worshippers, including a few women. Those who carry *barsoms* are not necessarily priests, for there is textual evidence that still in the Sasanian period *barsoms* were also used by the laity when uttering prayers or thanksgiving.²⁸ Those wearing a *padām*, however, are likely to be priests, for the *padām* is associated with the recitation of the Avestan prayers in front of the sacred fire, a duty of priests, and there is no record of their use by others except by servants in the presence of their master.²⁹ One worshipper with *padām* in the Oxus Treasure carries an *akinakes* (Pl. 2/3), which does not necessarily preclude his function as a priest.³⁰



Fig. 5: Oxus Treasure, votive plaque with horse, ZEYMAI 1979, no. 99.

If we move now onto other categories of the repertoire, some significant differences can be noticed between both sites. In the Oxus Treasure the only subject depicted except for worshippers are individual figures of animals: one camel and three unsaddled horses (Fig. 5), to which one can add two figures of horses cut around. It is plausible that they were substitutes for sacrificed animals. At Mir Zakah the majority of animals depicted are bulls or zebus. There are also camels, horses, donkeys, sheep, and goats. Some compositions are evocative of farming, like a scene of ploughing and transportation of the harvest in a cart, which suggests a wish for agricultural abundance (Pl. 2/6).

Another difference is the mass presence at Mir Zakah of miniature images of weapons, mainly *akinakes* and bows (Pl. 2/7), and their total absence from the Oxus Treasure. There is also an image of a lancer charging (Pl. 2/8). The Takht-i Sangin votive deposits, however, include a huge quantity of real weapons, mainly arrows.³¹

28 BOYCE – KOTWAL 1971, 298–302.

29 Information kindly supplied by Almut Hintze.

30 Still recently in India weapons were kept in some fire temples and carried in processions (information Almut Hintze). In Sogdian painting some characters dressed in white and supposed to be priests carry a dagger or a sword at their belt: GRENET – AZARNOUCHE 2007, 168–169 with figs. 12–13.

31 LITVINSKY 2001.

The main contrast concerns images of body parts, totally absent in the Oxus Treasure but relatively frequent at Mir Zakah where they represent 8% of the total. They include eyes, arms, legs, hands, and feet (Pl. 2/9). Clearly these offerings reflect requests for cures. A Persian Zoroastrian text, the *Saddar Bundahishn*, actually mentions the offering of a 'golden eye' to the Ādur Gushnasp temple in order to recover eyesight.³² Scratched figures of babies might express requests for fertility (Pl. 2/10), but contrary to what is found in Greco-Roman curative sanctuaries no object alludes to sexual functions, in contrast to the repertoire of Sasanian magical seals which include some images of intercourse and uteri.³³ The only figures showing genitalia are clearly of Indian inspiration (Pl. 2/11). Does the absence reflect the extremely reserved attitude of ancient Iranians towards nudity and bodily functions, which surprised Greek writers so much?³⁴

While remaining cautious in the religious interpretations, one can venture some explanation for the contrasts between the repertoires at both sites.

Several peculiarities of the Oxus Treasure are consistent with what we know of the cult to the river-god Oxus. Horses were in general sacrificed to rivers, and in the case of the god Oxus there are, moreover, indications of an assimilation to Tishtrya, originally the rain god, who comes from the waters every New Year in the shape of a white horse fighting the black horse which embodies the demon of drought (*Avesta*, *Yasht* VIII, 20–23). A Chinese account from the time of the Arab conquest contains an echo of this myth, associated with the description of a temple which is most probably Takht-i Sangin or what subsisted of it at that time.³⁵ An assimilation of Oxus and Tishtrya is also possibly reflected by a personal name in the Aramaic archive of Balkh: *Wakhsu-abra-dāta*-, 'given by the cloud of Oxus'.³⁶ More accretions are suspected in the Hellenistic period, such as the Lydian river-god Marsyas (depicted by a votive statuette) and his rival Apollo, which could explain the presence in the material from that time of many arrows and musical instruments, especially flutes of pure Greek manufacture,³⁷ but they are not relevant for the Achaemenid period documented by the Oxus Treasure.

One function of river deities, however, was probably not assumed by the god Oxus: I have in mind the healing function. The river Weh Dāytī (today the Daryā-i Panj) which joins the Oxus (today the Wakhs) just opposite Takht-i Sangin is considered in the *Bundahishn* (XIa, 8) as infested with noxious creatures (*xrafstar*).³⁸ Perhaps this mention concerns mainly silurids, large sludge fish unfit for consumption and which can attack domestic animals drinking in the river. Fish were apparently not caught or at least not consumed at Takht-i Sangin, according to the collection of bone remains found in the excavations.³⁹ A deep staircase dug in the temple courtyard, cleaned by the archaeologists to a depth of twelve meters without reaching the bottom, had no other purpose than giving access to the water table (Fig. 17);⁴⁰ it shows that the river water, though flowing at a very short distance, was not considered suitable for the cult and possibly not even for drinking, no more than it is today. I would suggest that the total absence of medicine in the functions reflected by the offerings in the Oxus Treasure could reflect this situation.

32 Transl. DHABHAR 1932, 536.

33 GYSELEN 1995, 50–51 with figs. 50–56.

34 Dio Chrysostomus, *Oration* 13.24: being naked in public is one the worst thing to do for Persians; Procopius, *De bello Persico* I, 7.18: it is not allowed for women to be seen naked by men.

35 DRÈGE – GRENET 1987; BERNARD 2015, 59–61, 68.

36 NAVEH – SHAKED 2004, 59, 211; TAVERNIER 2017, 118, prefers to read *Wakhsu-abda-dāta*-'given by the wonderful Oxus', an alternative already considered by NAVEH – SHAKED 2012.

37 BERNARD 1987; BERNARD 2015, 55–58.

38 CERETI 2004, 32–33.

39 Angelina Drujinina, personal communication.

40 DRUJININA – LINDSTRÖM 2013; BERNARD 2015.



Fig. 6: Takht-i Sangin, staircase. DRUJININA - LINDSTRÖM 2013, fig. 3.

As for the Mir Zakah material, the combined allusions to war, agricultural abundance, and medical cure could hint at a temple of Anāhitā, for these are the three main benefits her worshippers expected from her. The wish for good health is expressed by the worshipper Tusa in the *Ābān Yasht* (*Yasht* V, 53), and is consistent with her function as protectress of running water, as all pure waters are considered as healing. The bull which according to Plutarch (*Lucullus*, 24.6–7) was sacrificed to Anāhitā, and still was in the Zoroastrian shrine of Pir-e Bānu Pārs until the 19th century,⁴¹ is well represented among animal images at Mir Zakah. A lady holding a vase and wearing an indented crown (**Pl. 2/12**) could be Anāhitā, or perhaps rather a queen emulating Anāhitā, for in the *Ābān Yasht* (128) the goddess is described with a crown with ‘eight towers’ (*ašta.kaožda*).⁴² The history of the formation of the hoard as we can try to reconstruct it does not, unfortunately, give any clues to the place where this Achaemenid and Hellenistic temple could have stood. Balkh, one of the seven cities mentioned by Berossos (*apud* Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* V, 65.3) as having received a temple of Anāhitā under Artaxerxes II, is just a possibility.

It does not seem proper to push the analysis further, and possibly I have tried to make these modest objects tell more than they could. I hope, however, to have shed some light on the expectations of these anonymous pilgrims, otherwise utterly lost to history.

41 BOYCE 1977, 248–255.

42 PANAINO 2000, 38 note 16. This proposal has not gained wide acceptance, most translators preferring to understand ‘eight parts’ or ‘eight rays’. It is, however, etymologically attractive (*kaoždaka* -> Middle Persian *kōšk* = pavilion, palace, kiosk). The towered crown could be a heritage of Ishtar. On the famous Achaemenian seal from Gorgippia showing a dignitary praying in front of Anāhitā depicted as Ishtar on her lion, the goddess has a crown with four indentations, presumably eight ‘towers’ in profile view (SHENKAR 2014, fig. 18). On the Mir Zakah plaque five indentations are visible.

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