



From the Indo-Parthians to the Sasanians. Coins as Witness to History

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The present ensemble of pre-Islamic coins in the Herat National Museum principally consists of coins that were issued in the Eastern Iranian provinces of Arachosia and Sakastan between the 2nd and 3rd century CE. It may be assumed with some degree of probability that they derive from the local currency circulation in the environs of Herat, capital of the province of Areia, which adjoins Sakastan in the south.

These coins shed light on a time of political upheaval in the first half of the 2nd century CE, when the eastern Iranian borderland passed from the Parthians into the hands of the Kushan dynasty, which in turn was forced to yield to the Sasanians in the 3rd century.

The last Indo-Parthian king to mint coins in Sakastan and Arachosia was Pakores. Four of his Nike tetradrachms struck in Arachosia feature in the exhibition (cat. nos. C1–C4).¹ His immediate adversary was the Kushan king Soter Megas, who may perhaps be identified with Vima Takhto, son of Kujula Kadphises and grandson of Kanishka I. Vima Takhto's inscription at Dasht-e Nawur (located c. 60 km west of Ghazni) reveals that the Kushans had already advanced to the borders of Arachosia and Sakastan at that time.² In addition, many of Pakores' Nike tetradrachms display traces of overstriking, with some of the undertypes clearly assignable to Soter Megas.³

The Kushan dynasty itself is represented by two coins of Kanishka I which display marked

signs of circulation (cat. nos. C5–C6). They probably came from Bactria into the region south of the Hindu Kush. In this context mention should be made of the Buddhist temple complex at Tapa Sardar (near Ghazni), which was built during the rule of the Kushans. Among the coins found there in the course of the Italian excavations are a number struck by Kanishka I.⁴

It is a matter of debate as to when the Kushan Empire was conquered by the Persian Sasanians, who had seized power from the Parthians in Iran in 224. The Eastern Iranian border regions, however, must clearly already have been annexed under Ardashir I (224–240) and his son Shapur I (240–272). We know that Ardashir I had embarked on his great Eastern campaign, which took him first to Sakastan around 233 CE.⁵ After installing a king of his choice there and establishing a mint, he turned north, advancing via Herat and Abarshahr (Nishapur) at least as far as Merv.

In Sakastan, Ardashir I encountered a local prince who was presumably a descendant of the Indo-Parthian dynasty that had reigned there before. In his coinage, the latter continued the tradition of the Indo-Parthian Nike tetradrachms while adopting the fire altar introduced by Ardashir I as the new reverse image (cat. nos. C7–C8). The legend is written in Parthian script and gives his name, Farn-Sasan, as well as those of his forebears Adur-Sasan, Sanabares and Tiridates. Thus, clearly presenting himself as a member of the Parthian nobility, Farn-Sasan was subsequently removed from office by Ardashir.

The first Sasanian coins struck in Sakastan are the so-called 'throne-successor coins' which on the obverse show Ardashir I presumably together with the governor of Sakastan whom he had recently installed and who also bore the name of Ardashir.⁶

For reasons unknown to us today, most of these throne-successor issues were subsequently withdrawn from circulation by Ardashir's son, Shapur I, and overstruck.⁷ Two of these copper coins minted by Shapur I in Sakastan can also be seen in the exhibition (cat. nos. C9–C10).

Summing up, the coins presented here afford a fleeting glimpse of local coin circulation in the eastern Iranian borderlands and show how these territories passed from the hands of the Indo-Parthians to the Kushans and then to the Sasanians.

1 On the coinage and chronology of the Indo-Parthians see Alram 1999. On the archaeological evidence cf. also the coin finds from the excavations in Old Kandahar in Helms 1997, 95–99.

2 The inscription is dated Year 279 of an unknown era identified with the Yavana Era (Greek or Indo-Greek Era); see on this most recently Falk 2007 (2012), 135–136; Falk equates the beginning of the Yavana Era with the year 175/74 BCE.

3 Cf. Alram 1999, 43 n. 170.

4 Publication by M. Alram in prep.; on Tapa Sardar see Filigenzi 2009. The Kushan coins are strongly represented in the Kandahar Museum; see MacDowall/Ibrahim 1978.

5 For a detailed account see Alram 2007 with further literature.

6 SNS I, type VIII/3a. Alram 2007, Figs. 11–12. On the Sakastan mint under Sasanian rule see also Schindel 2011.

7 Alram 2007, Figs. 19–22.



Cat. No. C1

Cat. No. C2

Cat. No. C3

Cat. No. C4



Cat. No. C7

Cat. No. C8

0 1cm

Cat. No. C9

Cat. No. C10

Catalogue

Cat. Nos. C1–C4

C1: HNM V-03-a
 C2: HNM V-03-c
 C3: HNM V-05b / HNM V-03
 C4: HNM V-03x
 Tetradrachm (copper)
 Indo-Parthian king Pakores, first half 2nd century CE
 Obverse: bearded bust facing left with hair tuft, a double diadem, and necklace.
 Greek legend: *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΝ ΜΕΓΑΣ ΠΑΚΟΡΗΣ* – 'King of Kings, the Great Pakores' (mostly indecipherable).

Reverse: Nike standing right, holding wreath. Kharoshthi legend: *maharajasa rajadirajasa mahatasa Pakurasa* – 'King of Kings, the Great Pakores' (mostly indecipherable).
 Alram 1986, no. 1190. – Senior 2001, no. 269.

Cat. No. C5

HNM 10.05.13
 Tetradrachm (copper)
 Kushan king Kanishka I (127/28–150/51)?
 Obverse: Kanishka standing left, holding spear, making sacrifice on a small altar.
 Bactrian legend: *šao Kanēški* – 'King Kanishka' (mostly indecipherable).

Reverse: fire god Athsho standing left, holding wreath. Bactrian legend: *Athšo*.
 Göbl 1984, no. 772 (mint A).

Cat. No. C6

HNM V-08
 Tetradrachm (copper)
 Kushan king Kanishka I (127/28–150/51)?
 Obverse: *Kanishka* standing left, holding spear, making sacrifice on a small altar.
 Bactrian legend: *šao Kanēški* – 'King Kanishka' (mostly indecipherable).
 Reverse: moon god Mao standing left, holding wreath. Bactrian legend: *Mao*.
 Göbl 1984, no. 774 (mint A).

Cat. Nos. C7–C8

C7: HNM V-02-a / C8: HNM V-02-b
 Tetradrachm (copper)
 Sub-Sasanian king in Sakastan / Arachosia Farn-Sasan, first half of the 3rd century CE
 Obverse: bearded bust facing left with hair tuft, a diadem, and necklace.
 Parthian legend: *BRY BRY tyrdty BRY npy s'nby MLKYN MLKA* – 'grandson of Tirdat, great-grandson of Sanabar, King of Kings' (corrupted and mostly indecipherable).

Reverse: Fire altar. Parthian legend: *prnssn BRY 'twrssh* – 'Farn-Sasan, son of Adur-Sasan' (corrupted and mostly indecipherable).
 Nikitin 1994. – Senior 2001, no. 275.

Cat. Nos. C9–C10

C9: HNM V-05a / C10: HNM V-05xx
 Copper coin (AE/1)
 Sasanian king Shapur I (240–272)
 Obverse: bust of Shapur I facing right, wearing crenulated crown surmounted

by *korymbos* and diadem. Pahlavi legend: *mzdysn bgy šhpwhry MRKAN MRKA 'yr'n MNW ctry MN yzd'n* – 'The Mazda-worshipping divine Shapur, King of Kings of the Iranians, whose seed (image/brilliance) is from the gods' (corrupted and mostly indecipherable).
 Reverse: fire altar flanked by attendants. Pahlavi legend *NWRA ZY/šhpwhry* – 'Fire of Shapur' (corrupted and mostly indecipherable).
 SNS I, type IIa/1/1a (style Abis).

Cat. No. C5

Cat. No. C6



Addendum

Two modern forgeries were also identified in the collection (which could only be accessed on the basis of photographs). One is a drachma (base silver/copper?; cast) showing the bust of the Parthian king Gotarzes I (91/90–81/80), facing left; obverse: Arsaces, sitting right, holding a bow and a Greek legend: *ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΘΕΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ ΝΙΚΑΤΟΡΟΣ* (see Sellwood 1980, type 33.3 mint Rhagae). According to Assar 2006: Sinatruces (93/92–69/68).

The second is also a drachma (silver?; cast) combining an obverse showing the Sasanian king Ardashir I (224–240) with a reverse of king Shapur I (240–272); obverse: bust of Ardashir right, wearing covered crown cap surmounted by *korymbos* and diadem. Pahlavi legend: *mzdysn bgy 'rthstr MRKAN MRKA 'yr'n MNW ctry MN yzd'n* (mostly indecipherable and corrupted); reverse: a fire altar; to the left and right of the altar an attendant facing outwards and a Pahlavi legend: *NWRA ZY / šhpwhry* (indecipherable); obverse: SNS I, Ardashir I, type III?; reverse: SNS I, Shapur I, type 1?