

Special exhibit

Gold coins of the Sassanians

From 224 AD to 651 AD the Sassanians, who followed the Parthians, ruled a large empire whose centre was in the area of present-day Iran. Over time, this state was able to project so much power that it became the most important counterweight to the Roman empire. It was not until the invasion by the Arabs that the Sassanian empire fell in the seventh century.

The coins produced by this culture are a key source of historical knowledge about the Sassanian state. They provide information about the rulers and religion, about the economy and the administrative structure.

Large quantities of silver coins still exist whereas gold coins were struck only sparingly and are therefore something quite special. This is because gold coins were considered to be prestige objects which were designed to enhance the standing of the emperor and not intended for circulation. The gold coins struck by Shapur II were more numerous than those of other rulers as he needed large quantities of them to finance his military operations. The gold coins minted by this major empire of antiquity are the subject of intense debate among numismatists; many questions still remain unresolved. It is still not known, for example, whether and, if so, how Sassanian gold coins were modelled on contemporary Roman coins in terms of their weight. The basic unit was the Sassanian dinar, with fractional denominations of $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{6}$ of a dinar; multiples of the dinar were quite rare.



Ardashir I.

Bahram II.

Shapur II.

Yazdgard II.

With a very few exceptions dating from the later period of Sassanian minting, the images struck on gold and silver coins were identical. The obverse always featured the great king, the “king of kings”, with his specially designed “personal” crown.

Even if one cannot read the Persian inscription on a coin, the portrait can almost always be identified by the crown. Rulers whose reigns were interrupted, for whatever reasons, always received a newly designed crown upon regaining power. The reverse normally shows a fire altar either by itself or flanked by two attendants, one of whom is sometimes the great king himself.



The fire altar was the central cult object in Zarathustrianism, or Zoroastrianism, the national religion in ancient Persia. Whenever a new ruler took power, the regal fire was lit on the fire altar. The accompanying inscription initially gave the name of the fire, eg “Fire of Ardashir”, and the reign of the great king was then counted from the date the fire was lit. This information was later replaced by the designation of the mint and the year of the reign.

The reverse of the coins with a differing image displayed either the ruler resting on a sword or, in this case, a portrait of the Persian goddess Anahita.



Recommended reading

Robert Göbl, *Sasanidische Numismatik*. Braunschweig 1968 (engl. *Sasanian Numismatics*, 1971).

Michael Alram, *Nomina propria Iranica in nummis. Materialgrundlagen zu den iranischen Personennamen auf antiken Münzen*. Vienna 1986.

Michael Alram/Rika Gyselen, *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum*, Paris – Berlin – Vienna. Volume I: Ardashir I. – Shapur I. Vienna 2003.