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A SASANIAN HOARD FROM DUSHANBE

SUMMARY

The present paper analyses a hoard of Sasanian drachms which was found in 1950 in Dushanbe. So far, it is the unique treasure of Sasanian coins from Tajikistan. The hoard contains coins of Yazdgird I, Wahrām V and Yazdgird II. The author connects the presence of these coins in Central Asia to the payments that Yazdgird II had to make to the Kidarites around the middle of the 5th century to secure peace on the border. All the coins were countermarked by a local authority with an interesting “S” shaped *tamgha*.

Keywords : numismatics; coin hoards; Sasanid Iran; Tajikistan; Dushanbe.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article présente une analyse d'un trésor composé de drachmes sassanides, trouvé en 1950 à Douchanbé, qui constitue à ce jour l'unique trésor de monnaies sassanides provenant du Tadjikistan. Il est composé de monnaies de Yazdgird I^{er}, de Wahrām V et de Yazdgird II. L'auteur fait le lien entre la présence de ces monnaies en Asie centrale et les paiements que Yazdgird II a dû verser aux Kidarites vers le milieu du V^e siècle, pour garantir la paix frontalière. Toutes les monnaies portent une contremarque, apposée par une autorité locale, représentée par un *tamgha* en forme de « S » assez particulier.

Mots clés : numismatique ; trésors monétaires ; Iran sassanide ; Tadjikistan ; Douchanbé.

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I. PRESENTATION (Abduvali Šaripov)

The National Museum of the Republic of Tajikistan houses a hoard of Sasanian silver drachms which was found in 1950 in Dushanbe. This is highly significant for the study of Tajikistan's history in late antiquity. The coins were studied for the first time by N. N. Zabelina and the hoard

includes the following Sasanian kings: Yazdgird I, Wahrām V, Yazdgird II. On the obverse figures the king's bust with crown, on the reverse is depicted the fire altar of the Zoroastrian religion guarded by two attendants, with astral symbols; sometimes there is also the king's bust in flames. These coins are of good silver. On some coins there is an interesting countermark shaped like an "S". According to Zabelina¹ it was the mark of the local governor, and a similar sign is present on some Khwarezmian coins too.

II. CATALOGUE OF THE COINS AND HISTORICAL NOTES (Andrea Gariboldi)

In 1950 during the excavation of a canal in the north suburb of Dushanbe (then: Stalinabad), in the area of the old town, it was found a hoard of Sasanian drachms. The coins entered the National Museum of Tajikistan in December of the same year and were registered under the inventory number 1479.²

N. Zabelina soon published a short report about the hoard,³ indicating that there were 39 coins in total, including fragments. She identified the Sasanian kings as follows: 1 drachm of Yazdgird I (399-420), 28 drachms of Wahrām V (420-438), and 10 drachms of Yazdgird II (438-457). The Sasanian hoard of Dushanbe was listed also by Elena Davidovič in her book on ancient coin finds of Tajikistan.⁴

At present the hoard as it seems, is composed of 26 silver coins and 12 small coin fragments; the total weight of the fragments is about 12 g. Three

¹ Zabelina 1952, p. 80.

² I sincerely thank the Director of the National Museum of the Republic of Tajikistan, Abduvali Šaripov, who granted me the opportunity to study this important hoard of Sasanian coins, with the kind assistance of the Staff of the Museum together with the numismatist of the Academy of Sciences, the esteemed Davlatchodža Dovudi. The present research was conducted during summer 2009, as a part of the Italian mission of the University of Bologna in the Yaghnob Valley led by Professor Antonio Panaino. The support of the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente to our missions in Tajikistan has been fundamental. This paper was presented in Dushanbe at the International Conference *The Yaghnobis: Tradition and Actuality*, held on 9th June 2010 in the "Ahmad Donish" Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tajikistan. I would like to give a special thanks also to Nargis Chodžaeva (Dushanbe representative of the Institut Français d'Études sur l'Asie Centrale) for her kind logistic and scientific aid. I am in debt to Frantz Grenet (EPHE, Paris) and Rika Gyselen (CNRS, Paris) for reading the paper and for their suggestions. Of course, the responsibility is mine.

³ Zabelina 1952, pp. 79-80.

⁴ Davidovič 1979, p. 60; Masson 1971, p. 228; the hoard is quoted also by Malek 1993, p. 248, no. 55. All authors refer to the original publication by Zabelina 1952, who did not read either the coin legends or the mints. She just included in her article a poor drawing of the three main coin types (ibid. Table 3, p. 85), which has been recently reproduced also in Baratova, Schindel & Rtveladze 2012, p. 17.

drachms of Wahrām V are still joined together (no. 14 of this catalogue), forming a single block with thick concretions. Five drachms coming from the hoard are preserved in the Rudaki Museum of Penjikent. Moreover, one drachm of Xusraw II (no. 26) of the National Museum is not pertinent to the hoard, as it is a sporadic find from the area of Panj, but we take the occasion to publish it together with the hoard material.

Therefore, there seems to be a discrepancy between the old cataloguing and the present-day situation, as some coins seem to be missing, but it is not clear if Zabelina counted some of the coin fragments as single coins, and if so, how many of them. Labels bearing inventory numbers were pasted directly on the coins, and many of them are now lost. When Zabelina wrote her short note, Sasanian numismatics was at its early steps, since R. Göbl's work appeared about twenty years later.⁵ Furthermore, we should remember that in the last decade a pool of European scholars are making a large *Sylloge* of Sasanian coins (hereafter: *SNS*), based on coins preserved in the principal collections in Europe, such as Paris, Berlin and Vienna. Thus, the publication of numismatic material coming from other countries, especially Iran and Central Asia, is of great importance to enlarge our general knowledge about Sasanian coinage.⁶ In my opinion, this particular hoard from Dushanbe holds a great significance for the history of Tajikistan, because it is an unique original Sasanian treasure, as far as we know, which has been found in the modern territory of the Republic of Tajikistan.⁷

Of course many coins imitating the Sasanian prototypes come from Tajikistan, in particular the drachms of Pērōz (457-484) which were struck by the Hephthalites as local currency, between the 6th and 7th centuries, usually with Bactrian or Sogdian countermarks and legends. The findings of these coins are mostly concentrated in Khatlon region, in the southern

⁵ Göbl 1971.

⁶ See Baratova, Schindel & Rtveladze 2012; Gariboldi 2010. I am preparing, in collaboration with D. Dovudi, the *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum Tajikistan* that will include Sasanian coins and their imitations from Sogdiana, Tokharistān and Ustrushana.

⁷ Dovudi 2006, p. 103, writes that other 7 sporadic Sasanian drachms (4 Pērōz, 1 Kawād, 1 Xusraw I, 1 Xusraw II) have been found in the region of Khatlon: 4 drachms from the southern district of Panj and 3 drachms from the area of Kulob, precisely from the districts of Vose and Danghara. All these finds, coming from archaeological excavations, testify that Sasanian coins amply circulated in Tajikistan, but with different patterns according to each region. See Dovudi 2006, pp. 132-133, 137; Id. 1994, p. 247 (1 Xusraw I and 1 Xusraw II from the Panj district, burial ground of Bajtudašt) and p. 256 (1 drachm of Kawād from the central Vahdat district, former Ordžonikidze-abad). Jakubov & Dovudi 2012, p. 239, record 2 more coins of Pērōz from Zoli Zard, Farchor district.

part of Tajikistan.⁸ Pērōz had to give large tributes to the Hephthalites to ransom himself and his son Kawād, and it is said that he had to pay out thirty mule loads of silver.⁹ For this historical reason, it is common to find in Central Asia the coins of Pērōz and also imitative issues of his abundant coinage, which is widely spread from Iran to China.¹⁰

Thus, the Dushanbe hoard is remarkable because it precedes the period of Pērōz's wars against the Hephthalites. We may presume that it was stored up about the middle of the 5th century AD, when some nomadic tribes, such as Chionites, Kidarites or Hephthalites, moved westwards threatening the Sasanian empire.¹¹ Wahrām V collected a large army and marched against the "Turks". Near Merw he killed their ruler and put his brother Narseh as governor of Xorāsān, probably as Kushan *marzbān*. But Wahrām's victories in the East were not definitive: according to Armenian sources, such as Łazar and Elishe, Yazdgird II organized many other military campaigns against the growing power of the Huns, who by the end of the 5th century were able to include all the former Kushan realm. Elishe, for example, says that Yazdgird "marched immediately against the kingdom of the Huns (probably Kidarites), whom they call Kushans, but after fighting for two years he was unable to make any impression on them."¹² The confusion between the name "Huns" and "Kushans" is frequent in Armenian literature, but this passage offers a good evidence of the attempt by the Sasanians to restrain for a while their territorial expansion. The 5th century, we may say, represented a period of great political changes in Central Asia.

In concomitance with these Oriental wars also Sasanian royal ideology changed. In fact, Sasanian kings reinforced the aspect of their Kayānian descent. The long royal titles which were introduced on Sasanian coins by Ardašīr I, officially claiming that the king was *kē čīhr az yazdān*, "whose

⁸ Gariboldi 2011; Dovudi 2009, pp. 58-59, lists the following coin finds: more than 400 imitations of Pērōz from Čorgultepe, Vakhsh district; 1 countermarked drachm of Pērōz from the hoard of Sudžina, Penjikent district. See Dovudi 2009, p. 72; 4 imitations of Pērōz from different archaeological sites in the Vakhsh Valley, see Dovudi 2006, p. 105 and 147 fig. 2 (coin from ancient Kalai Kafirnigan); Smirnova 1963, pp. 56-57, nos. 5-6, from the old excavations of Penjikent.

⁹ Wright 1968, p. 8; Schindel 2006, pp. 681-682. Some Pahlavi documents from the Berkeley collection mention the "donkey load", *čhlw'lb xarwār*, for a delivery of wood. See Gignoux 2008, p. 136; Id. 2010, p. 150. The term *xarwār* is still a living word in Persian, meaning approximately 300 kg. Thus, the "mule loads" given by Pērōz to the Hephthalites were of course intended as unit of account. We should not imagine Pērōz climbing mountains in Central Asia, with a caravan of thirty mules.

¹⁰ Alram 2004, p. 177; Baratova 2002, published 44 drachms of Pērōz and 1 of Xusrav II from Kul'tepa (Uzbekistan); see Baratova, Schindel & Rtveladze 2012, p. 21.

¹¹ Sims-Williams 2008.

¹² Thomson 1982, p. 66. See also Schindel 2004, 3/1, p. 386; Id. 2006, pp. 677-682.

origin/image/splendour (is/comes) from the gods”,¹³ were shortened, and there appeared “new” titles, such as *rāmšahr*, “(who maintains) peace in (his) dominion”, a title first adopted by Yazdgird I, and which was later used only by Wahrām V and Yazdgird II.¹⁴ This latter ruler also used the epithet *kay*, “Lord” (*mazdēsn bay kay Yazdgird*, “Mazdean Lord King Yazdgird”), and sometimes on his coin reverses he put the word *nōg*, “new”, probably as king’s name. So Yazdgird II took as model the mythical Kay Wištasp, the primordial king that in *Dēnkard* (V 2. 8-11) embraced the true religion of Zoroaster and fought against the Chionites, the enemies of the “good religion”.¹⁵ The Sasanian political propaganda in this period focused on the Avestan dynasty of the Kayānians, exactly when the Persian kings were engaged with the affairs in the East.¹⁶

Yet the Sasanian empire, notwithstanding the military efforts of Wahrām V, did not really extend beyond the Oxus river (Amu Daryā), and the Persian base was the city of Merw, which was also an important Sasanian mint (ML/MLW), serving the region of Xorāsān. During the reign of Wahrām V, apparently Merw was lost, but few copper coins of Yazdgird II from the site of Merw probably indicate that Sasanian control was regained there. After the defeat of Pērōz by the Hephthalites in 484 “no Sasanian coins are known from Merw until the second reign of Kawād (499-531)”.¹⁷

This brief historical sketch indicates that the presence of the Sasanian hoard from Dushanbe, which is composed of coins minted during a quite limited period—between 399 and 457 (see above)—should probably be connected to the Sasanian activity in Sogdiana, aimed at maintaining peace in Central Asia. Priscus (*Exc. de Leg. Rom.* 12) informs us that Yazdgird II had refused to continue to pay the tribute to the Kidarite Huns for the control of the frontier, so the war exploded again and the Sasanians even demanded money from the Romans in order to sustain them against the Kidarites. Therefore, it seems likely that the Dushanbe hoard was part of a larger tribute or payment in money given by Yazdgird II to the Kidarites during 450’s, before the invasion of Tokharistān.¹⁸ The fact that the coins were locally countermarked, with the intent to give new legal validity to “foreign coins”, seems to support this hypothesis.

The provenance of all the drachms is from western Iran, and not from any eastern mint of the Sasanian empire, as one could think. It is possible

¹³ Panaino 2009.

¹⁴ Daryae 2002a.

¹⁵ Amouzgar & Tafazzoli 2000, pp. 28-29; Huyse 2006, pp. 185-186.

¹⁶ Daryae 2009, pp. 21-24.

¹⁷ Schindel 2005, p. 49.

¹⁸ Grenet 2002, pp. 208-209; Greatrex & Lieu 2002, pp. 56-57; Mazza 2004, pp. 72-73.

to identify the following mints: AT (Ādurbādagān), AW (Ohrmazd-Ardašīr in Xūzestān), AY (Ērān-xwarrah-Šābuhr in Xūzestān), BBA, LD (Ray in Media), and one DA (Dārābgird in Fārs) of Yazdgird II.¹⁹ If we exclude the mint mark of BBA that means *dar*, “the royal court”, which was an itinerant mint together with the king’s camp, the other cities involved are places very distant from the find spot. There is a prominence in the hoard of the AY mint, a royal city located near the ancient Susa, while the presence of three BBA marks reinforces the assumption that the treasure was formed, in origin, of military cash. Unfortunately, some coins are broken or illegible so it is not possible to ascertain the mint mark of all specimens which bear a mint, but my impression is that the hoard is quite uniform; also judging by stylistic criteria it forms a coherent group.

Table 1: Mints from the Dushanbe hoard.

<i>MINT</i>	<i>COINS</i>
AT	1
AW	2
AY	4
BBA	3
DA	1
LD	2

The majority of the coins belong to Wahrām V, who placed a large crescent between the crown cap and the *korymbos* (the large ball of head above the crown). Wahrām’s crown has two merlons, while the crown of Yazdgird II has three merlons below the crescent. Wahrām introduced an important innovation also on coin reverses: he placed the king’s bust in the flames, wearing the same type of crown as on the obverse, in front of the altar shaft, flanked by two attendants holding a long stick (*barsom*). Probably this iconography is related to the *Ādur-ī Gušnasp* or to a *Wahrām* Fire, the fire of warriors to which Wahrām V was particularly devoted.²⁰ The fire temple, in origin, was located somewhere in Media, but it is worth saying that the late Pahlavi text *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, “The cities of the domain of the Iranians”, mentions the presence of a *Wahrām* Fire also in Samarkand and Balkh.²¹ This Sasanian iconography is very important for the overall coinage of Central Asia, since it served as prototype for many “Hunnic” imitations and for the abundant coinage of the so called *Bukhar-*

¹⁹ See coin no. 21. DA is an unattested mint in *SNS* III for Yazdgird II.

²⁰ Schindel 2004, 3/1, pp. 89-90.

²¹ Daryaei 2002b, p. 13; Gyselen 2003, p. 133.

khudat kings, who minted silver coins with this Iranian pattern in Samarkand and Bukhara, until the 8th century, and even later.²²

The common obverse legend of the coins of Wahrām V, is: < mzdysn bgy wlhl'n MLKAn MLKA > – *mazdēsn bay* (on the left) *Wahrām šāhān šāh* (on the right, written anti-clockwise), “Mazdean Lord Wahrām King of Kings”; on the reverse, on the left of the altar, sometime it is legible the name of the Fire/King, <wlhl'n>. The mint mark may be placed either on the right of the altar or above it (no. 5).

Another important peculiarity of the Dushanbe hoard is that the coins present a countermark on the obverse with a *tamgha* shaped like an “S”, always struck in the margin outside the dotted rim.



Fig. A: Detail of coin no. 16, showing the “S” countermark (© Photo: A. Gariboldi).

I would like to stress that such type of countermark is otherwise unknown on Sasanian coins. Zabelina thought that this *tamgha* had been stamped by a local authority around the area of ancient Dushanbe, after the coins entered into Sogdiana.²³ A fitting comparison is given by some Khwarezmian silver coins (modern north-western Uzbekistan), where we can find a similar S-shaped symbol on coins of king Artramuš, dated to the 3rd century AD.²⁴ The “S” *tamgha* figures on some Sogdian copper coins, with the image of a horse, minted in Neseft (Southern Sogdiana, now southern Uzbekistan),²⁵ and rarely on Hephthalite drachms above the diadem ribbons of the bust of Pērōz.²⁶ It is worthy of note that the “S” sign

²² Zejmal' 1994, pp. 246-247; Fedorov 2003, pp. 18-21, with further references.

²³ Zabelina 1952, p. 80.

²⁴ Vajnberg 1977, pp. 39; 53; 106 (Type B1, III-IV), Pls. XVI-XVII; Fedorov 2006, p. 349. *Tamgha* Type no. 6.

²⁵ Smirnova 1963, pp. 127-128, no. 734-740; 1981, p. 343, no. 1450.

²⁶ Alam & Pfisterer 2010, p. 30.

is also present on copper coins of Wahrām V,²⁷ but here the “S” either is inverted or it stands on a base-line. Another relevant difference is that in the Dushanbe hoard the *tamgha* is stamped on the coins, while in the above cases it was engraved directly on the coin-die. A countermark with a similar but smaller “S” is occasionally present also on some *Bukhar-khudat* drachms, imitating Wahrām V’s coins.²⁸

Table 2: The Sasanian Hoard from Dushanbe.

No	King	Mint	Weight g	Diam. mm	Die axis	Inventory number	Catalogue acc. to SNS III	Comments
1	Yazdgird I (399-420)	–	3.9	29	3h	1479/3 NMT	Type: Ib1/1a var. 6 Legend: 1, 4	Broken S counter- mark
2	Wahrām V (420-438)	AT	4.14	27	3h	Penjikent Museum 1479/18	Ib2/2 Pseudo- legend	S
3	Wahrām V	AW	3.2	27	3h	NMT	Ib1/2 2a, 5	Broken S
4	Wahrām V	AW	4.22	27	3h	Penjikent Museum –	Ib1/2 Pseudo- legend	S
5	Wahrām V	AY	3.5	28	3h	1479/25 NMT	Ib1/1 1, 5	Broken
6	Wahrām V	AY	3.4	28	3h	1479/8 NMT	Ib1/2 2a, 5	Broken S
7	Wahrām V	AY	2.8	28	3h	1479/9 NMT	Ib1/2 2a, 5 R/• •	Broken S
8	Wahrām V	AY	4.13	28	3h	Penjikent Museum 1479/19	Ib1/2 2a, 5	S
9	Wahrām V	BBA	4.0	28	3h	11887 NMT	Ib1/2 2a, 5	S
10	Wahrām V	BBA	3.7	28	3h	NMT	Ib1/2 2a, 5	Broken
11	Wahrām V	BBA	4.32	28	3h	Penjikent Museum –	Ib1/2 2a, 2	S
12	Wahrām V	LD	3.3	28	3h	NMT	Ib1/2 3, 5	Broken

²⁷ Schindel 2004, 3/2, pp. 242-243; Pl. 67, no. 76; 84; A42.

²⁸ Dovutov & Zejmal’ 1985, p. 254, no. 635.

13	Wahrām V	LD	2.6	27	3h	1479/28 NMT	Ib/2 –	Broken S
14	Wahrām V	–	13.7	33	–	1479/2[?] NMT	Ib1/1 –	Block of 3 cracked drachms
15	Wahrām V	–	3.9	28	3h	1479/1 HMT	Ib2/2 2, 2. <i>wlhl'n</i>	Broken S
16	Wahrām V	–	3.3	27	3h	NMT	Ib2/1 –/1. <i>l's[ti]</i>	Broken S
17	Wahrām V	–	3.2	30	3h	NMT	Ib/1 –/1. <i>l'st</i>	Broken S
18	Wahrām V	–	3.1	27	3h	1479/2 NMT	Ib2/2 2, 2. <i>wlhl['n]</i>	Broken S
19	Wahrām V	–	2.9	28	3h	1479/20 NMT	Ib1/2 –	Broken S
20	Wahrām V	–	2.3	27	3h	1479/21 NMT	Ib1/2 –	Broken S
21	Yazdgird II (438-457)	DA	3.5	30	3h	1479/2 ? NMT	Ib1/2a 1, 1 ?	Broken
22	Yazdgird II	–	4.2	28	3h	NMT	Ib1/2b 1, 1 <i>nwky</i>	Broken in two parts S
23	Yazdgird II	[-]Y	3.7	28	3h	1479/39 NMT	Ib1/2a 1, 1	Broken
24	Yazdgird II	–	4.0	30	3h	Penjikent Museum 1479/32	Ib1/2b 1, 1 <i>nwky</i>	S
25	–	–	12.1	–	–	NMT	–	12 silver fragments (2 coins of Wahrām V at least)
26	Xusraw II (590/1- 628)	SK Year 23 <i>syewysy</i>	2.8	30	3h	11977 NMT	Göbl II/3	Broken. Not pertinent to the Hoard

All coins are preserved in the National Museum of Tajikistan in Dushanbe (Национальный Музей Таджикистана им. К. Бехзода), unless otherwise stated.

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(see also Table 2, above, for detailed reference)

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Fig. a: Detail of coin no. 16, showing the “S” countermark.

Fig. 1: Drachm of Yazdgird I (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 2: Drachm of Wahrām V (Rudaki Museum of Penjikent)

Fig. 3: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 4: Drachm of Wahrām V (Rudaki Museum of Penjikent)

Fig. 5: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 6: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 7: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 8: Drachm of Wahrām V (Rudaki Museum of Penjikent)

Fig. 9: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 10: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 11: Drachm of Wahrām V (Rudaki Museum of Penjikent)

Fig. 12: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 13: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 14: Block of three drachms of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 15: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 16: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 17: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 18: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 19: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 20: Drachm of Wahrām V (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 21: Drachm of Yazdgird II (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 22: Drachm of Yazdgird II (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 23: Drachm of Yazdgird II (National Museum of Tajikistan)

Fig. 24: Drachm of Yazdgird II (Rudaki Museum of Penjikent)

Fig. 26: Drachm of Xusraw II (National Museum of Tajikistan)



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