

The Sasanian King Khusrau II (AD 590/1-628) and Anāhitā

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Introduction

During the reign of the great king Khusrau II (Husrav, Xusrō) the Sasanian empire saw a massive expansion at the expense of the Byzantines. The Byzantine wars ultimately were a disaster for Khusrau II. It is during this long war that issues, both gold and silver drachms, were struck with the bust of the king on the obverse and what is generally believed to be the goddess Anāhitā on the reverse (Göbl III/4 and 4/5).¹ The present article explores these special coinage issues² in the context of Khusrau II's regular coinage,³

1. References to Göbl are to the tables in Göbl 1971, which are still the first port of call for the student of the series, Malek (1993a) provides details of varieties not noted in Göbl's publication.

2. From the outset it should be pointed out that there is scope for differing opinions as to the identity of the bust on coins. One alternative view is that the figure is of Ahura Mazdā and this view is not devoid of plausibility in view of the facts that the head is surrounded by a flame "halo" and that the usual reverse on Sasanian coins is of a fire altar. Gyselen (2000: 31) rejects the usual attribution to Anāhitā and states that it is more accurate to consider this bust as a male divinity with a strong relationship with the holy Zoroastrian fire. However, the bust would in fact appear to be of a female.

3. The concept of the use of coinage by Khusrau II as a form of religious political propaganda is not new: Daryaei 1997.

Zoroastrianism, challenged by Christianity and Manichaeism, sought to replace the foreign, one might say "Biblical," account of history by a religious version based on the tales in the sacred book of the *Avesta*. Why was this done in the middle of Sasanian rule? We may suggest that it was promulgated to counter the religious propaganda of Christian and Manichaean missionaries, and their views of the past. Why was this not done earlier? Because previously the "universal" religions had not been formed, and they did not present a threat to the position of Zoroastrianism in the Sasanian Empire. It was not only the religion which was threatened, but also the creation and foundation myths of the Iranian people, which demanded state action. It is not too much to suggest that ancient Iranian culture and civilization would be endangered by the myths of the Old Testament, as again later, in the time of Firdowsi. The promulgation of the Avestan-east Iranian version of the past was necessary both in the fourth and in the tenth centuries of the common era.

Therefore we should not insist that the Iranians did not know about the Achaemenids, but deliberate religious and government policy promoted the "national" history of Iran. In so doing the identity of Iran was preserved for posterity. The long history of Pharaonic Egypt was erased first by Christianity, followed by the Arab conquest, such that Egyptians did forget their history until archaeologists recovered it. The same happened to the Babylonians, Assyrians and other peoples of the Near East, and only in Iran was an ancient identity preserved. Firdowsi not only revived and made alive the Persian language, he really saved the self-identification of the Iranians. More than simply the Persians, also Armenians, Georgians and peoples of Central Asia adopted the Iranian version of the past, even though at times in conflict with the Old Testament myths of origin. Much more research is needed in this domain, but Firdowsi is revealed as much more than a great poet and teller of tales.

The pre-history of the Arabs, it seems, was connected to beliefs of the southern tribes in Yemen and the Hadhramaut, until the coming of Muhammad. He rejected this view of the past to make Islam a continuity of Judaism and Christianity. Thus, through first Christianity and then Islam the people of the Semitic speaking Near East lost their origins in a confluence of all in the Hebrew account of creation and history as found in the Old Testament. This was not such a great rupture, for the ancient Hebrews were part of the "Fertile Crescent" with similar peoples and beliefs. But what of the non-Semitic speaking peoples of the area? When the Armenians and Iranians converted to Christianity or to Islam, of course they accepted the creation myths of those faiths, but unlike the Semites, their traditions and practices were not so much replaced by new names and conditions, but rather they made attempts to harmonize the old and new, identifying figures and events in both traditions. To turn to Iran, the generalities above may be clarified with specific examples.

One of the enigmas of the pre-Islamic history of Iran is the loss of memory about the Achaemenids in later records and the adoption of a "mythical" history of eastern Iranian rulers instead. This lasted into Islamic times and culminated in the great work of Firdowsi, the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. Later writers sought to reconcile the prehistory of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* with the Bible, on the whole unsuccessfully. For example, Soleyman was identified with Jamšīd, but after a time Iranian "nationalism" exalted the ancient Iranian creator, founder and sustainer myths, as folklorists call them, while attention to the Qur'anic counterparts languished. The *Shāhnāmeḥ* view of Iranian ancient history at some time replaced actual history, which we know from both Herodotus and the Old Persian inscriptions. When and how did this happen?

Shapur Shahbazi has cogently explained that the early Sasanians were aware of the Achaemenids and their empire.² He attributed the change to the east-Iranian (*Shāhnāmeḥ*-Avestan) version of creation, and foundation of the first Iranian empire, to the influence of Zoroastrian priests in the 4th and 5th centuries.³ It appears to have been a deliberate policy, in which

2. A. Sh. Shahbazi, "Early Sasanians' Claim to Achaemenid Heritage," *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān* 1 (2001): 61-73.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 69.