



Reading the Inscription of Four Sassanid Seals

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Abstract: From 224 to 651 A.D., the Sasanian dynasty created one of the most powerful empires in the pre-Islamic Middle East. The dynasty ruled from the Euphrates to the Indus, holding a position of supremacy for more than four centuries and exerting a direct influence from Egypt to China via the Silk Road and maritime trade routes.

Seals and seals impressions are the most abundant class of cultural artifacts surviving from the Sassanian era. They are commonly found from West to Central Asia and even beyond, from Europe to Southeast Asia. The importance of their study is from two aspects, on one hand, they are as historical documents and on the other hand, they are valuable works of art and a way to understand the culture and civilization.

This study conducted in a descriptive-analytical method using written sources, tries to read four samples of the Sassanian's seals of the National Museum of ancient Iran, which are part of the confiscated items collection. The purpose of this research is to read inscriptions and examine the roles of these seals.

Keywords: *Sassanian, Seal, Inscription, Pahlavi, Middle Persian.*

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Introduction

Seals are one of the important documents for the study of culture, history, language evolution, and art of every period. The use of seals expanded progressively and became more formalized with the growth of the Sasanian bureaucracy and economy (Brunner 1978: 9). Bullae appear in many shapes and often the backsides preserve imprints of leather, slightly grained parchment, or other organic material. Almost 70% of the Sasanian stamp seals have a hemispherical and ellipsoid shape, while the remaining 30% consist of flattened, convex, and concave ring-stones, comparable to the contemporary Roman types (Gyselen 1993: 30). The seal cutter carved the depiction as a negative relief into the surface. They all perforated horizontally and when stamped on a soft and prepared material, like clay or wax, the seal left its impression as a positive relief on the surface.

The financial potential of the buyer and holder of a seal influenced the quality of style and design. Similar images appear on seals of all known shapes and materials during the Sasanian period, but stylistic differences are significant. Seals with roughly cut images were predominantly owned by seal-users with poor purchasing power, while highly elaborate cut seals were reserved for affluent groups of buyers (Gyselen 1993: 60). In general, we can roughly identify three social groups of users or owners of a seal: first, the king and the highest nobility, who belong to the group that is best known by written sources; secondly, the functionaries and officials, a group that is attested by their seal impressions on clay bullae; and finally, the broad and mostly anonymous spectrum of clerks, priests, lower functionaries, merchants, and private persons (Ritter 2017: 284)

The imagery of seals always depends on their political, social, and religious environment. The images people chose for their seals demonstrate what they imagined and believed in (Gyselen 2007: 8). Furthermore, images appearing on seals were never limited to a purely decorative meaning, as they give some insight into the foundations of a culture (Boehm 2007: 27). What people do with images and the way of displaying their perceived world in images leads us directly to their distinct way of thinking (Belting 2009: 23). The inscriptions on the seals are mostly names, official titles, simple religious formulae, names of places. These four seals belong to the National Museum of Iran which was not read before and all of them are pictured with man faces, this heterogeneous group forms the mass of the Sasanian seals. The description of each seal, according to its image and impression, is followed by a brief discussion of its iconography and style. Measurements are in millimetres, length times width times height.

Inscriptions

Fig 1: Ring stone seal, with the depiction of a male bust looking left, with a bearded face, modeled into four, clearly distinguishing shoulders and breast. Hair is tied with a fillet and represented as straight. The drapery falls in horizontal folds from the shoulders, which are interrupted by the vertical fold over the chest. According to Brunner this rather schematized manner of portraiture of the drapery and hair are common in the early fifth century (Brunner 1978: 53). The inscription is started with a six-pointed star and followed by a crescent, which are popular shapes on many of the seals of this period and are known as symbols related to the worship of Mithra (Mihir) and Anahitā. The inscription is on top of the



Fig. 1

seal, written in Middle Persian (Pahlavi), and was cut from 11:00 to 2:00, clockwise, it's written as "l^sty" and read as "rāst" which means "truth".

Fig. 2: The personal stamp seal used as pendant, seems to belong to a high-ranking person; the bust is modelled into four lobes, looking left; he is a bearded male, who wears a pearl necklace. The ear is ornamented with a single bead earring. A few lines at the shoulders show a drapery with horizontal folds at the shoulders and vertical ones falling over the chest. The top hair is arranged in tight curls, each represented by a simple drill hole, and the back hair is tied with a ribbon, wound in 4 parallel locks. It seems that the arrangement of hair, modeling of the bust, the layered representation of the long beard, and fairly naturalistic style are usual and notable features of the early Sasanian period in the third and fourth centuries (Bruner 1978: 53-54). The inscription was cut from 9:00 to 3:00 clockwise and it's written as "dstwr ZY pčlwmy" which is read as "dastōr ī pahlōm".



Fig. 2

Fig. 3: A male bust worn a sort of crown, with a small corymbose, and the hair is gathered in the back. It's a rare way of depicting the face. The edge of the seal is damaged, however, the inscription, in which the words of it are written in an unusual manner, is cut into two parts, first, followed by a four-pointed sun star, from 9:00 to 11:00 clockwise, it's written "Algpt" and read as "argbēd"; another word is written after a five-pointed star and between two four-pointed stars which are known as Christian symbols, seems to be a decorative space filler, or, on top of the head of a noble it's likely to be an abbreviation, maybe taken to indicate the seal of a minor official, perhaps indicate his honorific name with the letters "ḥw" which is the beginning of the word "Xusraw". Although, compared with a similar seal in Metropolitan Museum, there is another possibility that all the inscription is an imitation means, the writing is neither a correct inscription nor the freer forms of pseudo-writing, but an attempt at a plausible imitation (Bruner 1978: 60-149).

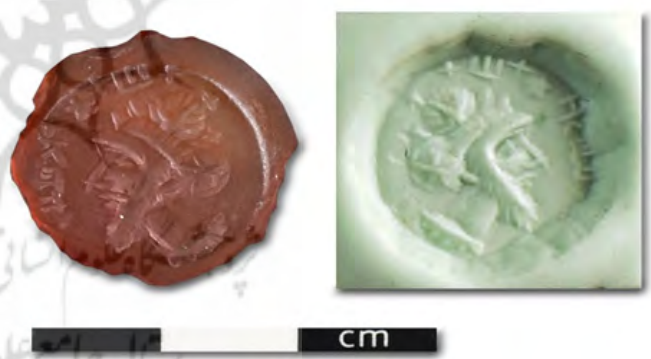


Fig. 3

Fig. 4: Bust of a man, bearded, with straight hair, above the head is a four-pointed sun star which is sometimes interpreted as a Christian cross. Seals engraved with Christian motifs are not unusual for the Sasanian-



Fig. 4

an period when numerous communities of Monophysites and Nestorians existed under Persian rule (Lerner 2009: 184). The inscription is cut on 9:00 clockwise, it's written "br yšw" and read as "bar išō"; the word "bar" usually used before the name of a Christian person.

Table 1: Charecteristics of Four Sassanid Seals

	Writing	Reading	material	Dimension
Fig. 1	l'sty	Rāst	Carnelian (red)	4*12*12
Fig. 2	dstwr ZY phlwm	Dastōr ī pahlom	Carnelian (red)	10*8*12
Fig. 3	ḥw algpt	Xu (sraw) argbēd	Carnelian (red)	5*20*20
Fig. 4	Br yšw	Bar išō	Carnelian (orange)	2*8*12

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