

FROM ZOROASTRIAN TO ISLAMIC IRAN:
A NOTE ON THE CHRISTIAN INTERMEZZO

Touraj Daryaee - University of California, Irvine

This essay discusses several Iranian copper coins with Christian symbols and slogans in the context of the transition period from Sasanian to Islamic Iran in the 7th century CE. It is suggested that these coins demonstrate the power of the local Christian community in the province of Pārs and their ability to mint these coins which were circulated in the local economy. It appears that the Christians were able to mint coins, either with the invasion of the Roman Emperor, Heraclius in the late 620s, or during the period of Arab Muslim conquest. While the first possibility would suggest the capability of the Christians to mint coins in a time of chaos in Ērānšahr, the latter choice suggests the working of the local Christian community with the conquerors in the province of Pārs.

Keywords: Pārs; copper coinage; Išō; čalī(p); Heraclius

1. INTRODUCTION

The Muslim conquests in the 7th century CE is one of the most decisive and important events in Eurasian, Near Eastern and Iranian history. It was once thought that with the Muslim victories and the death of Yazdgerd III, the last Sasanian King of Kings in 651 CE, *Ērānšahr* (The Empire of the Iranians) came directly into the possession of the Arab overlords. This idea of a sudden collapse and the way in which the Muslim armies conquered Iran and the Near East was mainly read via the *futuḥ* (conquest) literature, composed centuries after the events they purport to describe. These texts provided a narrative of what should have happened according to the taste and world-view of these later authors.¹ These narratives of conquest were accepted due to a perceived lack of alternative sources from the 7th century CE, as well as the staying power of the traditional narrative. Nowadays, through detailed work on historiography of late antiquity² and non-Islamic sources,³ and such finds as the new Pahlavi documents,⁴ our understanding of the events is much more nuanced.⁵

Certainly, the conquest of all the provinces of *Ērānšahr* did not occur in the same way or had the same effects in each region.⁶ Of course, we are less informed about some of the Provinces/*Šahrestāns*, such as Sīstān⁷ versus Pārs,⁸ but we know that the aftermath of the conquest in these two provinces was also different, even in terms of Muslims settling. While most of the conquerors stationed themselves in such garrison towns as Kufa and Basra, the question that comes to mind is how were they able to control the many villages and cities on the Iranian Plateau? Taking the province of Pārs as diagnostic, I would like to

¹ Sizgorich 2004, 13.

² Pourshariati 2017.

³ For Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian perspectives see Hoyland 1998.

⁴ Gignoux 2004, 37-48.

⁵ On the tropes of *futuḥ* literature, see Noth 1994.

⁶ Morony 1982; 1987; Choksy 1997; see now Donner 2005; Hoyland 2014.

⁷ Bosworth 1968.

⁸ Daryaee 2002.

make some observations and suggestions as to the way in which the collapsing Sasanian world changed in the 7th century CE, not through a direct change of authority from the Sasanians to the Muslims, but rather through a much more complex picture that included intermediaries and local functionaries.

The main data source of this study is the lesser used copper coinage from the 7th and early 8th centuries CE, minted in the many cities of Pārs. These coins have been studied and catalogued by a number of scholars, most importantly R. Curiel and especially R. Gyselen.⁹ However, the next step is to contextualize these coins and place them in a historical context, so that they can be used in understanding this important juncture in the history of the region in the absence of other sources, especially for the period between 627/628 CE and 700 CE.

Based on the historical and archeological data the province of Pārs is thought to have been the stronghold of Zoroastrianism. There are some 40 Chahar-Tāghīs which are thought to have been fire-temples in the province of Pārs alone.¹⁰ Textual sources also attest to the number and importance of fire-temples in the province. But different sets of sources provide us with an alternative view and realities in regard to the religious life and makeup in the province of Pārs. Based on the epigraphical evidence, we now know that somewhere between forty, and sixty bishoprics existed in the province of Pārs,¹¹ and Syriac literature provides a rich description of Christian life in this province. These Christians were part of the Church of the East, but from the 6th century onward new deportees from Mesopotamia, Syria and Cappadocia were brought to Pārs.¹² These were Christians who had entered from the time of Kawād I, Khosrow I and Khosrow II.¹³ While the numbers of deportees described by ancient sources are no doubt typographical and exaggerated, they still suggest that the deportations were relatively large.¹⁴ Based on the sylligographic evidence also (style, legends), it appears that the Christians from the Church of the East had assimilated in the Sasanian Empire well,¹⁵ many of whom were likely multi-lingual (Persian and Syriac). We are unfortunately less informed of the Hellenized Roman Christians.

Todd Godwin in his book, *Persian Christians at the Chinese Court, The Xi'an Stele and the Early Medieval Church of the East*, has recently drawn a new picture of what we may call "Persian Christianity." According to him, if the appearance of Persian Christians in the early 8th century China is predicated on a strong Persian Christianity in sixth and seventh centuries in *Ērānšāhar*. That is, when in the Tang Chinese records, "The Persian Religion" (*Bosi jiao*) is mentioned, as Antonio Forte has shown, it is a reference to Christianity, indicating a strong correlation between Christianity and Iran at the Tang court.¹⁶ Those who had come with this religion were member of the Sasanian royal family and elites, whose

⁹ Curiel - Gyselen 1980; 1984a; 1984b.

¹⁰ For these, see the classical study by Schippmann 1971; Huff 1975; 1990; "Ātašdaeh va čāhārtāghīha-ye Fārs, Foundation for the Study of Fārs," (Fire-temples and Chahar-Tāghīs of Fārs), http://ffs.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1084:1395-02-23-08-42-33&catid=13:tourist-attractions&Itemid=7.

¹¹ Payne 2015, 10.

¹² Gyselen 2006b, 6.

¹³ Jullien 2006, 113.

¹⁴ Jullien 2006, 115. See also Kettenhofen 2011.

¹⁵ Gyselen 2006a, 18.

¹⁶ Godwin 2018, 15.

names have been identified by Carlo Cereti in his important work on Alouhn/Wahrām in both the Chinese and Pahlavi text, *Abar Madan ī Wahrām ī Warzāwand* (On the Coming of the Miraculous Wahrām), the son of Yazdgerd III.¹⁷

What I would like to add to this discussion is in regard to the dating and the relation of Christianity to the province of Pārs vis-à-vis some of the copper coinage that exists for the seventh and early 8th centuries CE. What might these coins tell us about the situation on the ground in the 7th century and early 8th century CE? This essay purviews five copper coinage which have been identified as Christian copper, and some new readings for the legends will be proposed. Having these interesting legends at hand, one can make some suggestions as to their meaning and significance for the late Sasanian - early Islamic period in the province of Pārs.

2. CHRISTIAN COPPER COINS¹⁸

The first copper coin (Copper Coin I) is a Byzantine type with the Heraclius style.¹⁹ Gyselen's coin does not reveal the third line of the legend on the obverse, but this new copy supplied by Gholami gives us the possibility to read the following (fig. 1):

'twrgwšnsp
y'nbwt' SRM
cly(p)

Ādur-Gušnasp /
**Giyān/Gehān-bed drōd /*
**čalī(p)*
“Ādur-Gušnasp
Salutations to Chief of the World
Cross”

While before we were not sure about the legend on the third line, with this new coin my suggestion is to read the last line as *čalīp* or *čalīpā*, Sogdian *clyb*, which derives from Aramaic. Furthermore, I take *Gehān-bed*, not as a proper name, but rather a slogan which may be tied to Christian propaganda.

Copper Coin II (fig. 2) is Gyselen type 81 with a four step Byzantine cross, although with some differences.²⁰ Based on Gignoux's reading, Gyselen suggests: *pn'hyzd... / panāh-yazd...* is provided.²¹ My reading of the legend is as follows:

¹⁷ Cereti 1996. For the latest translation of the text, see Daryaei 2012.

¹⁸ I thank K. Gholami for supplying these coins.

¹⁹ Gyselen 2000, 168-169.

²⁰ Gyselen 2000, 67.

²¹ Gyselen 2000, 173.

MRWḤY

PWN ʔyš ʔwst ʔn*xwadāy**pad Iš abēstān*

“Lord

Refuge in Jesus”

I believe the first word is clearly written with two strokes, giving us the heterogram PWN, while the second word should be read as Jesus. Admittedly, the word in Middle Persian should be written as ʔyšw, as it is written in the Manichaean book of Living Gospel (ms. M 17 verso, i ll. 4-6):

ʔn m ʔny ʔrystg ʔg ʔyšw ʔry ʔm ʔn“I am Mani, the apostle of Jesus Aryāmān”²²

Furthermore, the use of *xwadāy* also appears as an appellation for Jesus in Parthian (*xwd ʔy ʔyšw mšyh[ʔ]*), though here too Jesus is spelled with two y’s (*ʔyšw*).²³

Coin III (fig. 3) is type 90 according to Gyselen’s catalogue where on the obverse there is the legend *lwb ʔk* / *rawāg* or “current,” which is found on early Islamic coinage. The legend on the reverse is a bit more complex. According to Gignoux, the reading of the legend is: *ʔskwʔws* from Greek *επισκοπος* as “bishop.”²⁴ I would like to provide another reading which is as follows:

*lwb ʔk**PWN lʔst(y)**rawāg**pad rāst(y) ...*

“in Circulation

in Truth”

Coins IV and V (figs. 4-5) are Byzantine type coinage without legend, but with a number of crosses, with Heraclius type obverse and various crosses on the reverse. These coins are of much better specimen than what has been presented so far. On the obverse of the coins V, we see an artificial attempt providing a Pahlavi-legend, along with the four-

²² Middle Persian ms. M 17 verso, i ll. 4-6; cf. Müller 1904, 26; Cirillo - Concolino Mancini - Roselli 1985, 66:4-5; all reference from Sundermann 1991.

²³ Henning 1947, 50:1-2.

²⁴ Gyselen 2000, 177.

step cross. However, what the coin attempts to portray on the obverse is the sovereignty of the Byzantine Empire against that of the Sasanians. Certainly, the Christians would not have been allowed under normal circumstances to mint such a coin in the Sasanian Empire.

3. DATING

We can provide two suggestions for the dating of these coins: 1) Heraclius' conquest and its aftermath (627-628 CE); 2) Muslim Conquest and its aftermath (651 CE). Both were periods of political disarray. It is clear that by 628 CE, the Sasanian Empire was in chaos and could have given the chance to the Christian community, namely the deportees and their decadents to celebrate the victory of Heraclius by 624 CE. After all, the Sasanians would not have allowed the Christian community to mint copper coins with the image of the Byzantine Emperor, with the legend reads *pad īs abēstān* / "refuge in Christ". Hence the minting of Byzantine imitation copper coinage may be an important suggestion as to the loyalties and aspirations of some of the population of Pārs vis-à-vis the Byzantine and Sasanian monarchy. Heraclius, after 614 CE had used such religious propaganda and the Christian population in the Sasanian Empire were certainly affected by it.²⁵

Alternatively, these coins may have been minted following the Arab conquests, which may have brought at least temporary to the Christian community.²⁶ During this precarious time, Christians may have been allowed to take it upon themselves as one of the religious communities of *Ērānšahr* to mint coins, especially such low value coins that were mostly for local use. Evidence for such cooperation between the Muslims and the Christians may come from another series of copper coinage which has joint Iranian/Zoroastrian and Muslim themes. It appears that the early Muslim rulers were much more flexible in the encounter with the Iranians of various religious persuasion and often cooperated with the local elites. These coins, which show Zoroastrian cooperation with Muslims, are difficult to interpret, but are mainly from the province of Pārs, where such figures as Manšūr, who may have acted as the *'āmil* "governor" or "subordinate governor" of al-Hajjāj b. Yūsuf, support this idea of cooperation.²⁷ In a similar vein, a local potentate named Farrozzād minted copper coins during the time of al-Muḥallab b. Abī Sufra (82-82/703-703 CE) as the governor of Pārs. On his coins we find the image of the fabulous Iranian bird, Sēnmurw/Simorgh, which has specific affinities with the Iranian world, but lack overtly Zoroastrian connotations.²⁸ Clearly, then, the early conquerors were less discriminate about coin iconography, and may have therefore tolerated local Christian iconographic expressions. This may have lasted through the periods known as *fiṭnas* or civil wars, until Muslim rule had become much firmer, perhaps following the reforms of Abd al-Malik,

²⁵ Howard-Johnston 1999, 39.

²⁶ As Michael Morony has suggested, many Christians, wearied by the incessant wars of the 7th century and exhausted by punitive taxation, welcomed the Arab conquerors. He states that «Christianity, along with other minority faiths such as Manicheism, enjoyed a brief period of expansion in the early centuries of Islam, only to suffer diminution later on through conversion and attrition in times of strife, after which the faith survived only precariously in Iranian lands». Morony 1984, 384-385; see also Russell 2012.

²⁷ Daryaei 2015a, 75.

²⁸ Daryaei 2015b, 65.

where the language of the *Dīwān* was changed from Pahlavi to Arabic.²⁹ These copper coins were of course minted for local consumption and did not circulate very far, but many of them such as Khuzistān provide the closest set of copper coins with similar themes.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, we find interesting Christian material culture from the late Sasanian - early Islamic world, far more complex than what existed before for the seventh century, between the time of Heraclius' campaign and that of the first century of Hijra. I would like to suggest that between the time when the Sasanian Empire was in power, till the fall of Khusro II and the coming of Hajjāb b. Yusuf and his reforms, the Christians were able to create a world for themselves which I call the "Christian Intermezzo". This Christian intermezzo, to use V. Minorsky's terminology³⁰ for the Iranian ascendancy between the decline of the Abbasids and the coming of the Turkic tribes, can be used in a lesser form for the situation in the province of Pārs in the 7th century CE. It appears that when the Sasanian central government was shaken due to the defeat of Khusrow II at the hands of Heraclius and the events which ensued between 627/628 CE and 631, but also with the Arab Muslim victories in Mesopotamia,³¹ Khūzīstān³² and Pārs³³ and the rest of the Iranian Plateau. The power of the Christian community should be emphasized, as they were able ability to mint coins in *Ērānšahr*, either during the late Sasanian or early Islamic period. In the greater scheme of discussion of the transition period from Zoroastrian to Islamic Iran, then we can add a caveat, and that is the Christian intermezzo.

REFERENCES

- BOSWORTH, C.
1968 *Sīstān under the Arabs: from the Islamic conquest to the rise of the Šaffārids (30-250/651-864)*, Rome 1968.
- CERETI, C.
1996 Again on Wahram ī Warzāwand: AA.Vv., *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo* (Atti dei Convegni Lincei 127), Rome 1996, 629-639.
- CHOKSY, J.K.
1997 *Conflict and Cooperation, Zoroastrian Subalterns and Muslim Elites in Medieval Iranian Society*, New York 1997.
- CIRILLO, A. - CONCOLINO MANCINI, A. - ROSELLI, A.
1985 *Codex Manichaicus Coloniensis. Concordanze*, Cosenza 1985.
- CURIEL, R. - GYSELEN, R.
1980 Une Collection de monnaies de cuivre sasanides tardives et arabo-sasanides I: *Studia Iranica* 9/2 (1980), pp. 163-184.

²⁹ On his actions in Iraq and in general, see Grierson 1960, 244.

³⁰ Minorsky 1953.

³¹ Morony 1981.

³² Jalalipour 2015.

³³ Daryaee 2002, 3-18.

- 1984a Monnaies byzantino-sasanides à la croix sur degrés: *Studia Iranica* 13/1 (1984), pp. 41-48.
- 1984b Une collection de monnaies de cuivre sasanides tardives et arabo-sasanides: *Studia Iranica* 13/2 (1984), pp. 163-184.
- DARYAEE, T.
2002 The collapse of the Sasanian power in Fārs/Persis: *Nāme-ye Iran-e Bāstān* 2 (2002), pp. 3-18.
- 2012 On the coming of Zoroastrian Messiah: a Middle Persian poem on history and apocalypticism in Early Medieval Islamic Iran: W. AHMADI (ed.), *Converging zones: Persian literary tradition and the writing of history. Studies in honor of Amin Banani*, Costa Mesa 2012, pp. 5-14.
- 2015a Persian lords and the Umayyads: cooperation and coexistence in a turbulent time: F. DONNER (ed.), *Christians and others in the Umayyad State*, Chicago 2015, pp. 73-82.
- 2015b The Xwarrah and Senmurv: Zoroastrian iconography on seventh century copper coinage: SH. FARRIDNEJAD (ed.), *Faszination Iran. Gedenkschrift for Klaus Schippmann*, Wiesbaden 2015, pp. 39-50.
- DONNER, F.
2005 The Islamic conquests: Y. CHOUËIRI (ed.), *Companion to the history of the Middle East*, Malden 2005, pp. 28-51.
- GIGNOUX, PH.
2004 Aspects de la vie administrative et sociale en Iran du 7ème siècle: *Res Orientales XVI* (2004), pp. 37-48.
- GODWIN, T.
2018 *Persian Christians at the Chinese court: the X'an stele and the early Medieval church of the east*, London 2018.
- GRIERSON, PH.
1960 The monetary reforms of 'Abd al-Malik: their metrological basis and their financial repercussions: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 3 (1960), pp. 241-264.
- GYSELEN, R.
2000 *Arab-Sasanian copper coinage* (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften 284), Vienna 2000.
- 2006a Les témoignages sigillographiques sur la présence chrétienne dans l'empire sassanide: R. GYSELEN (ed.), *Chrétiens en terre d'Iran: implantation et acculturation*, Paris 2006, pp. 17-78.
- 2006b Avant-propos: R. GYSELEN (ed.), *Chrétiens en terre d'Iran: implantation et acculturation*, Paris 2006, pp. 5-7.
- HENNING, W.
1947 Two Manichaean magical texts, with an excursus on the Parthian ending -ēndēh: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 12 (1947), pp. 39-66.
- HOWARD-JOHNSTON, J.
1999 Herlaeus' Persian campaigns and the revival of the east Roman Empire, 622-630: *War in History* 6 (1999), pp. 1-44.
- HOYLAND, R.
1998 *Seeing Islam as others saw it: a survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings on Early Islam* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam), Princeton 1998.
- 2014 *In god's path*, Oxford 2014.

- HUFF, D.
1975 "Sasanian" Čahār Tāqs in Fārs: *Proceedings of the 3rd Annual Symposium on Archaeological Research in Iran, Tehran 23rd 10.-1st 11, 1974*, Tehran 1975, pp. 243-254.
- 1990 ČAHĀRTĀQ: E. YARSHATER (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cahartaq#pt1>.
- JALALIPOUR, S.
2015 A study of the Sasanian province of Khūzistān at the time of Muslim conquest in the seventh century: *E-Sasanika* (2015), <https://www.sasanika.org/wp-content/uploads/GradPaper-JalalipourStudyofSasanianKhuzestan.pdf>.
- JULLIEN, C.
2006 La minorité chrétienne "grecque" en terre d'Iran à l'époque sassanide: R. GYSELEN (ed.), *Chrétiens en terre d'Iran: implantation et acculturation*, Paris 2006, pp. 105-142.
- KETTENHOFEN, E.
2011 Deportations: E. YARSHATER (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/deportations#pt2>.
- MINORSKY, V.
1953 *The Iranian Intermezzo: Studies in Caucasian History*, London, 1953.
- MORONY, M.
1981 *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest*, Princeton University Press, 1981.
1982 Conquerors and the conquered: a reassessment: G. JUYNBOL (ed.), *Studies on the first century of Islamic society*, Carbondale 1982, pp. 73-88.
1984 *Iraq after the Muslim conquest*, Princeton 1984
1987 Arab conquest of Iran: E. YARSHATER (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, London 1987, pp. 203-201.
- MÜLLER, F.
1904 *Handschriften-Reste in Estrangelo-Schrift aus Turfan, Chinesisch-Turkistan II*, Berlin 1904.
- NOTH, A.
1994 *The early Arabic historical tradition: a source-critical study*, Princeton 1994.
- PAYNE, R.
2015 *A state of mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian political culture in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley - Los Angeles 2015.
- POURSHARIATI, P.
2017 *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*, London 2012.
- RUSSELL, J.
2012 CHRISTIANITY i. In Pre-Islamic Persia: Literary Sources: E. YARSHATER (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/christianity-i>.
- SCHIPPMANN, K.
1971 *Die iranischen Feuerheiligtümer, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten*, Berlin - New York 1971.
- SUNDERMANN, W.
1991 Christianity v. Christ in Manicheism: E. YARSHATER (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/christianity-v>.
- SIZGORICH, T.
2004 Narrative and community in Islamic Late Antiquity: *Past & Present* 185 (2004), pp. 9-42.

ONLINE SOURCE

“Ātašdaeh va čāhārtāghīha-ye Fārs, Foundation for the Study of Fārs,” (Fire-temples and Chahar Tāghīs of Fārs), http://ffs.ir/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1084:1395-02-23-08-42-33&catid=13:tourist-attractions&Itemid=7.



Fig. 1 - Copper coin I.



Fig. 2 - Copper coin II.



Fig. 3 - Copper coin III.



Fig. 4 - Copper coin IV.



Fig. 5 - Copper coin V.