Another Installment on Sasanian Sphragistic Monograms*

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That the seals played an important role in the Iranian empires of antiquity cannot be overstated. Whether of official or personal nature, as parts of the material culture, they render a most important service in providing precious information on various aspects of the ancient lives. For the earlier periods such as the Achaemenids, as noted by John Boardman (2000, 153), "the seals come close to providing the universal iconographic medium that we need for study of common imagery"; in addition to acting as iconographic vehicles, the inscriptions found on the seals throughout Iranian history provide the students of the field with direct glimpses into the structure of the state, especially when the textual sources are either silent or fully absent. As is well known, the use of this "universal medium" survived beyond early antiquity and indeed the Sasanian monarchs seem to have deliberately revived the use of official seals in the daily activities of their own empire (AD 226–651).

In an attempt to contribute to this field of inquiry, the present author (forthcoming 2003) offered a few suggestions on deciphering two series of sigillary monograms dating from the Sasanian era; the attempt resulted in the possible decipherment of two series of monograms used by two classes of functionaries from the same era.¹ The first of the two series was identified as the "Āmārgar" series, denoting the seals of the "fiscal agent/tax collector", and the second one as the "Magi" (magw) series used by a particular class of Zoroastrian "priests". At the end of the same essay it was also promised that further attempts will be made at deciphering other examples of these unusually challenging primary sources; the following pages represent a partial fulfillment of that promise. More specifically, a hitherto unrecognized monogram, found among the remains from Qasr-i Abu Nasr (Frye 1973), will be the subject of our inquiry. However before delving into the main

¹ As always, I would like to thank Dr. Hanns-Peter Schmidt for reading an earlier version of this essay and his rādīb in allowing the use of his library; however, I alone am responsible for the content.

¹ It appears that P. Horn (1891, No. 1556) was the first scholar who successfully deciphered one of the Sasanian monograms: Nāzūk.
topic, a few words on another Sasanian relic which, as will shortly be seen, shares certain affinities with the monogram may prove beneficial.

A rather unique coin, a gold dinar of the Queen Burān (regnabat AD 629–630), was brought to our attention by R. Kuntz and the late W.B. Warden in 1983 which also bears legends written in Middle Iranian. M.I. Mochiri (1985), who has authored many valuable works on Sasanian numismatics, has offered a number of corrections in regard to these legends, one of which may not be quite acceptable to the students of Iranian languages. In fact, upon examining Mochiri's reading gohardār (sic. gōhrdār) “resplendissant” and comparing it with the actual legend, it immediately became clear that what is inscribed there cannot be read so, hence my suggested correction of the reading which is also used in T. Daryaee's article on the Queen Burān (2001). I believe it is an imperative to fully explain my reasoning for the corrected reading, and hence abandoning Mochiri's suggestion, mainly for the benefit of those readers who are not well acquainted with Middle Iranian orthography and the confusions which often arise due to the assigning of different values to the same letter (particularly in the cases of g/d/y and w/n/r). Now, in order to justify “gohardār”, one needs the following letters gw’ld’l (or more precisely, g/d/yw/n’l-d’l) which are not found on the coin (nota bene: the spelling of the suffix -dār [d’l] “possessor, holder” from dāstan “to possess, hold”). If we reproduce the legend, however, here is what we have: gw’ll’t’ll (g/d/yw/n’l’l) which, due to the presence of the letter tāw (t), cannot be read as gōhr-dār.

So, what is the alternative? The answer is found on the coin itself. The letter wāw, found at the initial position and understood by Mochiri as conjunctive (ud), should be taken as the initial letter of the word. Also, the other values of the “confusing” letters must be considered: the second letter, following the initial wāw, should be read yōd (not gīmel), while the third letter is to be read nūn (not wāw). What we finally have is a word spelled thus: wyn’ll’t’ll (winārdār), the nomen agentis of the verb win(n)ārdān “to order, restore, fix” (cf. e.g., winārdārān in Dēnkard 341/16); hence, the title chosen by the Queen in the waning years of the dynasty was “The Restorer <of the race of the gods>” (or perhaps more elegantly, “La Restauratrice <de la race des dieux>”).

Having hopefully satisfied the just demands of the purists among us, we return to our main topic: the monogram which will be examined is numbered D. 8 by Frye (1973) and the same designation will be followed here; it is characterized by having six letters as well as being beset by a peripheral inscription which will also be studied. We begin with the peripheral inscription for it will greatly facilitate our task of deciphering the central
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monogram. Professor Frye (1973, 60) has partially identified a few of the letters belonging to the inscription: "k'ny myx? (monogram also reads k'ny) name?", words which, admittedly, in their suggested combination and order are certainly unintelligible. I believe there were at least two obstacles which hindered Frye's progress in this case: i) the reading must begin with mem at ten o'clock, and not with käf at 4:00; and ii) the sixth letter at 2:00 which he read nūn, should be identified as rēš ("2"). Thus, if we start with mem (in D. 8a) and continue counter-clockwise, the sequence of the letters of the peripheral inscription is as follows: myxk'r y (mēx-kār), a term which will shortly be explained.

The monogram itself (D. 8b) shares three letters (mēm, alif and rēš) with the Āmāgar series (Adhami 2003): the crescent (☉) stands for the letter mēm. This apical position marks our starting point. On the right side, at 3:00, we have a combination of the two letters y and x; thus far, we have a repetition of the word myx already seen in the peripheral inscription. At 5:00, we have käf and at 8:00 we have alif, albeit in mirror image. At 7:00 we have another inverted letter, this time rēš. Again, we have a word which reads accordingly: myxk'r y (mēx-kār). The only spelling difference between the monogram and the peripheral inscription is in regard to the presence of the final-y in the latter which, as already noted by W. B. Henning (1958, 69), "schon im 3ten Jhdt., also zu Beginn der Zeit, in der das Mittelpersische wirklich fassbar wird, [...] zu einem rein orthographischen Ornament herabgesunken war."

Incidentally, D. 8 seems to be one example of the case where de Menasce's perspicacious suggestion (1960, 157), that the peripheral inscriptions "nous permettent d'identifier à coup sûr les lettres stylisées, puisque, sans doute, elles ne font que reproduire sous une forme le mot ou les mots dont le motif central contient les lettres", is fully
vindicated. Also, it should be noted that two other monograms, D. 268 and 423 (see Frye, 1973), are probably variants of the mëx-kâr monogram; the only major difference between D. 268 and D. 8, however, is found in the switching of the positions of the letters kâf and réš, i.e., in D. 268, kâf is located at 7:00 and réš at 5:00 which is exactly the reverse of their locations in D. 8.

Now to the meaning of the term mëx-kâr: in the Pahlavi language mëx (MacKenzie 1971), as is the case in Persian (mix), primarily signifies “peg, nail”; the second part of the word -kâr is a common suffix denoting “doer, agent” – and by extension, “job, work” – from kardan: “to do, to make”. Our first inclination might be to associate this individual (mëx-kâr) with some activity involved in carpentry. In fact, in Persian there exists a term mix-kâr which refers to two types of instruments used in woodworking (q.v. Mo’īn 1371; Wulff 1966, 98). However, a more expanded horizon and some familiarity with the history of minting in pre-Islamic Iran will lead us in a drastically different direction.

A secondary meaning of mix (q.v., Deh-khuda 1373; Mo’īn 1371) in Persian is “die”, i.e., a device used by minters in the production of hammered coins before the advent of the milling/minting machines. Related to this word are: Persian mix-kadeh (< *mëx-kadag) “mint” – which, in the course of Islamization of Iran, was supplanted by Ar.-Per. darrâb-xâneh; mix-pûl (< mëx + oβολογ) “coin”, before the currency of Ar. sikkâb “coin” in the Iranian-speaking world; and mix-sâz “minter” (lit., “die-maker”). Accordingly, I suggest that mëx-kâr (lit. “die maker/worker”) was the Pahlavi equivalent of “minter, moneyer” (perhaps even “the master of the mint”) which was, again, supplanted by Ar. darrâb and later by Ar.-Tur. darrâbbâši “master of the mint/head minter”.

To this author’s knowledge mëx-kâr and mëx-kadag are not attested in any text or inscription written in the Middle Iranian languages; this should not really surprise us as the extant texts, grosso modo, deal with the matters of the Faith and popular literature, thus not reflecting much about the organization of the state/court in any detailed manner. As for the Sasanian mint office and its organization, the late R. Göbl (1967, 31) had suggested that the office fell under the jurisdiction of the wâstaryošân salâr which he translated as “des Vorstehers der Finanzen”. Moreover, there exists a rather unique seal (Göbl 1973, Tafel 1) which depicts, inter alia, a minter holding a balance and a hammer. And the by-now famous passage found in Mânî’s Kephalai (Göbl 1967, 113–132; Idem 1983, 333; Album et al. 1993, 17), where he analagizes the creation of the Word with minting, sheds some light on the minting process, which putatively involved five individual craftsmen.
Thus, it is quite probable that a mex-kār oversaw the production of Buran’s exquisite dinar examined in the beginning of this essay.

Finally if the decipherment suggested here proves to be correct, we have so far identified three examples of the Sasanian monograms: ōmar, magw and mex-kār. After having studied the monograms for some time, the two preliminary conclusions which I have reached are as follows: the most important criterion which one must observe at all times when dealing with these monograms is consistency in ascribing the same value to the observed figure in the monogram; for example, a crescent ( Crescent ) must always represent the letter mem and only mem, i.e., one cannot, arbitrarily and unreasonably, decide that the crescent stands for lāmed in one group of monograms and pē in another. Secondly, notwithstanding the deciphering efforts by the late de Menasce and his “Xwsrwy” (1960:160) and Göbl’s “Pērūz Gošnasp” (1971, 111) – and indeed being rather uncertain of the correctness of their results – it appears that the Middle Iranian sigillary monograms (and only the monograms) dating from Sasanian era, more often than not, belong to the realm of the state functionaries of various ilk such as financial agents, priests, and minters and not to individuals, that is, they do not usually bear personal names.
Bibliography


DARYAEE, TURAJ: “The Coinage of Queen Boran and its Significance for Late Sasanian Imperial Ideology.” [Forthcoming, BAI, 2001].


Mirza Rafi'as Dastur ol-Moluk: A Prime Source on Administration, Society and Culture in Late Safavid Iran
By M. Ismail Marcinkowski, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok

The Significance of the Dastur ol-Moluk

Alfred between 1968 and 1969, the late Iranian scholar Professor Muhammad Taqi Daneespazhuh (d. 1997) published an edition of the Dastur ol-Moluk (henceforth DM), a Persian manual of late Safavid administrative practice, written during the second decade of the 18th century. Together with the Tazkirat ol-Moluk (henceforth TM), a closely related work which is similar in character and arrangement, the DM constitutes a vital source for our knowledge of the administrative structures and social conditions prevailing in Iran during that period. Both works contain also important information pertaining to the measures and weights prevailing at that time in Iran. DM and TM are in fact the only two surviving administrative manuals from the end of the Safavid period, whereas historiographical information is rather sparse. As shall be argued later, the TM should be considered as a mere derivate of the DM. It should be mentioned that it was

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1 For Daneespazhuh's edition of the DM see Muhammad Rafi'-e Ansarî [Mirza Rafi'a]: "Dastur ol-Moluk", henceforth DM (ed. Daneespazhuh).


3 See on this aspect Marcinkowski 2002b.

4 For an overview see Marcinkowski 2002f.

5 The present contribution contains also material from the introduction of Marcinkowski 2002a, henceforth DM (ed. Marcinkowski). References throughout the present contribution are to the pages of the Persian MS and correspond to my English translation of the DM. An earlier unpublished version won the First Prize (International Category) of the Iranian President's Award for the Best Research on Iranian Culture.