

Numismatics Book Review

Sasanian Coins: A Sylloge of the Sasanian Coins in the National Museum of Iran (Muzeh Melli Iran), Tehran, by Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, M. Elahé Askari, Elizabeth J. Pendleton with Richard Hodges, Ali-Akbar Safi.

Vol. 1, Ardashir I–Hormizd IV, Special Publication (Royal Numismatic Society [GB]) 47, London: Royal Numismatic Society in assoc. with the British Institute of Persian Studies, 2010, 216 pp (unpaginated), illus., ISSN 0080 4487; ISBN 0 901405 44 2.

Vol. 2, Khusrau II–Yazdgard III, Special Publication (Royal Numismatic Society [GB]) 49, London: Royal Numismatic Society in assoc. with the British Institute of Persian Studies, 2012, 511 pp (unpaginated), illus., ISSN 0080 4487; ISBN 0 901405 64 7.

A team from the British Museum and the National Museum of Iran under the supervision of Vesta Curtis, Curator of Islamic and Iranian Coins in The British Museum, authored a two-volume catalogue on the holdings of Sasanian coins of the National Museum of Iran in an unprecedented effort of scholarly co-operation. Both volumes are a welcome adjunct to the ongoing series of sylloge catalogues published under the supervision of Rika Gyselen, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), in Paris, and Michael Alram, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, in Vienna.

Both projects adopted the sylloge format for their catalogues, being a method of preparing coins for scholarly research. This format was initiated by the British Academy in 1931 for Greek numismatics as an alternative approach to a corpus embracing all known coins of a specific type. While for vast areas within numismatics a corpus is still an unobtainable goal, a sylloge allows the material to be presented in such a way that, on the one hand, the holding institution is credited for its collection and its scholarly achievements (here the National Museum of Iran) and, on the other hand, the material is geographically and historically organised according to mints and is accessible for almost any kind of historical or numismatic research, most importantly for a future die corpus. Typically, the page on the right side illustrates the coins while, on the left, a minimal but sufficient description of the corresponding coins is given. The description can be reduced to the essentials because the image carries the information. Preface and general introduction are kept to a minimum in the 'Greek' model. While this might be sufficient for Greek numismatics, which looks back on almost 500 years of scholarship, in Islamic and in the wider field of Oriental numismatics the treatment of a particular series is pioneering, is often groundbreaking and goes far beyond previous scholarship, calling for a more expansive approach. Thus, suitably enhanced sylloges of comprehensive collections can be a welcome substitute for monographs or corpora.

Obviously, this goal was not envisioned by the British Academy in 1931; however, the sylloge series of Islamic coins by Tübingen, Oxford and Jena universities embraced this approach with extensive, yet often still far too brief, introductions. This was also the intent when the CNRS and the Austrian Academy launched the *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum*: it was to map the field of Sasanian numismatics by pooling the Sasanian holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the Staatliches Münzkabinett zu Berlin into one single virtual collection. This enterprise saw its first volume published in 2003 and already reached, in its systematic part, the second reign of Kavad I (488–531 CE). For every ruler, the French–Austrian project provides a historical and numismatic introduction, discusses the mints, the types, and their chronological sequences, all in the particular style of the so-called Vienna school of numismatics

founded by Robert Göbl (1919–1997). This systematic treatment demonstrates the strength and the limits of the Viennese approach, yet boldly faces the challenges of Sasanian numismatics, especially when it comes to the complicated Central Asian border lands.

The sylloge under review here has more modest goals, making material accessible which would otherwise be hidden behind a wall of bureaucracy. The introduction to the first volume of little more than two pages and the second of one page relate the history of the project. The project originated in the British Museum as an internal research tool of a curator, who initiated a photographic archive of the Sasanian coins in the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. This international collaborative effort further headed by Vesta Curtis was welcomed by the National Museum of Iran and was published by the Royal Numismatic Society in association with the British Institute of Persian Studies.

The first volume spreads the description 1,476 coins over 102 plates and corresponding text pages, commencing not with Ardashir I but with pre-Sasanian regional rulers Shapur and Papak (200–210 CE) and extending to Hormizd IV (579–590 CE). The second volume, covering the remaining sixty years of the empire between Khusrau II (591–628 CE) and Yazdgard III (632–651 CE), comprises 2,948 coins spread over 352 plates and corresponding descriptive pages. In total 4,424 coins are detailed.

Despite these impressive numbers, in confronting such a huge amount of hitherto unpublished coins the reader is struck by questions which immediately come to mind. What is the history of this collection? Is it a representative collection covering all parts of Sasanian numismatics? Have large hoards or parcels entered the collection? Within the description of each item 'Acq.' hints at the acquisition history of the individual coin. As a random example, take no. 2071: 'Acq. 30/07/1328. Kahmar Khurasan'. The coins have obviously quite varied origins. The enigmatic notes of provenance are evidently not meant for the reader and are nowhere explained. They seem to be more a sort of internal registry note, published only incidentally. Other sylloge projects explain the genesis of the collection and its general character and list the information on provenance at the end of the volume, which might serve later as the basis for tracing different groups, such as acquired collections, hoards or parcels. The only statement on that matter we find in the introduction—that confiscated material is deliberately left out.

In a sylloge the description of an individual item should be as brief as possible, to steer the reader to the essentials and let the image do the talking. The description of the coins here establishes a new, unfortunately less user-friendly way. The coins are listed under each ruler according to their mints, at least in the later period. Every change in type is acknowledged by a full new description of every element of the coins. That means for the two main types of coins for Khusrau II the same description is repeated for more than thirty mints, creating a lot of redundant text. Every coin is then described in its individual technical details, such as die axis, weight, mint abbreviation and year. This is followed again by a minute description including the transliteration of the standard legends, partly overlapping with and repeating the general boilerplate and compounding a redundancy, even for a single coin. Finally, the acquisition history is provided but it is almost useless for the scholar interested in the composition of hoards or even in the history of the collection. The description of each coin ends with a citation, mostly the type number established by Robert Göbl (*Sasanidische Numismatik*, Braunschweig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1968). This adds text but no information, because the type information found in Göbl belongs to the general description of the type, which is already given extensively with each change of type within one mint. One wonders why the authors did not incorporate the references of the existing corpus studies on the coins of Kavadh II, Buran and Yazdgard III into the catalogue, although the British–Iranian team included these works in their bibliography. The inventory number of the National Museum follows, with a note whether a similar coin can be found in the British Museum. Here, too, a list at the end of the volume would be more suitable for comparison of the two collections and for future research.

The reader gets the impression that a computer-generated numismatic database with its necessarily concomitant redundancy has been printed as a scholarly book, with little editing and almost no translation from one medium (database) to the other (book). The standardisation of the coin designs across mints is one of the hallmarks of the late Sasanian period, yet the cataloguers treat every coin as an individual piece of die engraving. In the pre-computer age any author would have looked for ways to avoid tiring redundancy in penmanship, but here the reader has the burden of finding the interesting bits of information hidden amidst a plethora of repetitive detail.

Illustrations are the core of every sylloge. They are an outstanding achievement. The setter has to be congratulated for meticulous work balancing the black and white, the contrast and the grey shades to bring out the optimum of material delivered, which can be most charitably described as uneven. However, the plates also reveal the challenge in Sasanian and Islamic numismatics alike, that coins with such minute scripts and details, badly struck for the most part, can hardly be illustrated at their actual size to be genuinely useful to their fullest extent. Facilitating systematic die comparison—this was the original idea for the creation of the sylloge format—is hardly possible with the actual size image of the coins. Greek and Roman coins, given their thicker flans and simpler inscriptions, are usually much clearer and better struck than Islamic and Sasanian coins. This difficulty is generally acknowledged and only a digital database presents a feasible remedy for the future.

Until the period of Bahram V (420–438 CE), Sasanian coins did not have a regular system of mint marks. While the Austrian–French project, in attributing coins to specific mints, follows the original intent of the sylloge of attributing coins to specific mints, the British–Persian project dismisses this approach and thus misses an opportunity to challenge or confirm the results of their continental colleagues. The coins of the first rulers are just listed according to their types. The team also did not attempt to narrow down the region of origin, not even in the case of imitations. This is especially idiosyncratic in the case of the coins of Bahram V from Marw (nos 211–214), which have a clear mint mark and are listed under imitation without any explanation as to why. They are regarded correctly by Nikolaus Schindel of the French–Austrian team as regular issues. Strange is the cataloguing of coins of Khusrau II under the mint abbreviation AS (nos 1756–1758). None of the mint marks on the accompanying images is unambiguous and they might be read differently. Overwhelmingly, the evidence shows the mint mark AS ends in the twenty-second regnal year of Khusrau I, and it is believed that the mint was continued or transferred to WYHC. Dipinti, ink inscriptions on the coins, are not noted (for example, see nos 1614, 2342, 2352, 3936, 4007). Coins on which dates are illegible, due to poor striking or corrosion, are merely listed at the end of each mint entry, although it is possible to narrow a date down to a certain range of years through observation of stylistic changes. For example, no. 2219 (BBA) must have been struck before the late twenties of Khusrau's reign before the adoption of the very stately specific style of the mint BBA. The mint signature DAL, encountered during the reign of Bahram IV, seems to have been resurrected for Khusrau II. It is most likely a misreading of DA (no. 2517 seems to be a die flaw; the mint mark of no. 2518 is too abraded). The mint DL/KL—there are uncertainties in the reading—is divided between two separate entries. The reviewer reads them all as KL because the lower end of the D is short instead of having a long tail to the right, as we see it in the mint abbreviation DA at that time. Coin no. 3082 (probably with remnants of dipinto) is quite interesting; it provides a clearly legible abbreviation WAH or NAH (year 26). Whether it is a die cutter's mistake for WYH or an abbreviation in its own right should be left undecided.

While the provenances of the collection and the criteria of its formation are not transparent, some observations on its structure can be made. In the second volume, there is usually a section of coins with illegible dates, and at the end of every reign those coins without a discernible mint abbreviation are listed. While listing of such coins has necessarily to be part of an internal inventory, its inclusion in a sylloge is questionable, especially if the coin is in such bad condition that it cannot even be part of a die study. The entries lose their value for scientific research. One hundred and eighty-one coins of Khusrau II without discernible mint-mark are listed with long

redundant descriptions, even including a description of the shape of a surviving fragment, which is visible on the image on the opposite page. Further, there is an appendix with sixty-eight coins (nos 4345–4412) called 'Uncertain Silver Coins', the function of which is not well explained, consisting mainly of coins of Khusrau II, but in an even more deplorable state. The section of imitations is interesting but data on the regional provenance would have been welcome. It is striking that the collection has very few rarer items. There is a purchased gold coin of Khusrau II (no. 1477). There are only three drachms of Yazdgard II's twenty-year reign (nos 216–218), no coin of Vistahm or even the relatively common Bahram VI. Among the 2,744 coins of Khusrau II are just five with his first crown (year 1–2) (nos 1814, 2267, 2268, 3668, 3890), no coin of Azarmidukht, Khusrau V (bearded portrait; its occurrence may be explained as mules, but from a number of mints) and Yazdgard III is represented with just three coins from the common mint of SK. The whole collection of the National Museum of Iran belies the impression of a carefully selected museum collection, as one would expect in one of the most well-resourced countries in the Middle East. It appears more as an agglomeration of groups of coins brought together by chance. More than half of all the coins are from the reign of Khusrau II. Neither the arrangement nor the description of the coins attempts to incorporate the latest scholarly achievements. The two books give the impression of a computerised database, with images, that was transferred to paper as a back-up, without much thought as to what a printed book can achieve and what a research-oriented sylloge should be for the advancement of scholarship.

Despite this critical view, the authors can be congratulated for having achieved a great collaborative effort and co-operation between museums of different academic cultures, rarely seen in our time. It is an important testimony to the value of the exchange of knowledge and experience, which cannot be praised enough. The lasting fruit of this sylloge remains the abundant wealth of material which is presented in illustrations, which will make the book an invaluable resource for any future research in Sasanian numismatics, especially for the period of Khusrau II. The first volume announces the project's second step—the online database, which, judging by the layout and the design of the present volume, looks promising.

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