
Nikolaus Schindel

Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum. The Schaaf Collection.

With contributions by Michael Alram, Rika Gyselen and Robert Schaaf

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The new *Sylloge* catalogue is an addition to a scholarly series and marks an important step forward in mapping Sasanian monetary history and its numismatic documents. It builds on the already published volumes of the *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum* of the collections in Paris, Vienna, and Berlin, in this review referred to as «the core collections» of the *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum* publication project, having now advanced to the reign of Kavādh. While *Sylloge* catalogues are sometimes rather static, almost freezing the authoritative knowledge, this *Sylloge* series dynamically explores also regional collections in Usbekistan and in the Israel Museum, collections which have different archaeological backgrounds and historical geneses, and which each highlights the progress achieved in studying the new collections, revising and correcting old opinions and presenting new ones.

The new *Sylloge* is dedicated to an important private collection, assembled by Robert Schaaf. Publishing private collections including archaeological material is an issue of current debate on ethical treatment of archaeological artefacts. The authors avoid this topic. Coins as serial mass-produced objects with a continent wide circulation are different from other singular, often unique archaeological artefacts. Coins are produced in thousands or millions. Assembling them into a meaningful collection might be compared with organizing serial objects such as books or, better, printed political and administrative pamphlets, into a special library created for research purposes. Books and documents «talk» to each other. The publication of outstanding «libraries» is part of the preservation of heritage. The importance of this «special collection» lies in the selective criteria of its «librarian» Robert Schaaf. «Diversity in rarity» could have been his guiding principle covering the entire Sasanian period, judging by the wealth of different groups of rare pieces in the collection. The strength of this collection lies in its being complementary to the systematic general collections at the core of the project.

The present volume has a similar structure to the other volumes of the core series. It starts with «General Remarks and Commentary». Schindel provides an overview on the collection, and discusses the new information for each ruler. The second part of the book is the catalogue itself. A typology is given, legends and additional elements are explained, followed by a brief description of each coin in the sequence of the rulers. Each coin is illustrated on the opposite page.

723 coins are meticulously listed. The point of gravity lies in the early period, from Ardashīr to Walkāsh. The collection is strong in gold coins (17), fractions, such as obols (sixth of a drachm) (34) and half-drachms (10), and copper- (87) and lead coins (7). The late period from Pērōz to Yazdgard III is only represented by a selection, overemphasising «rare» rulers (such as Vistahm 4; the enigmatic Hormizd V [ca. 590s] 1; Kavādh II 4; Khusrō III 1) and empresses (Buran 7, Azarmidukht 2), while the forty or so mints of Khusrō I's prolific 48-year reign are barely represented – by just 24 coins, and Khusrō II's 37-year long second reign with a mere 47 coins.

In the first part Schindel presents the scholarly progress achieved by the study of this collection (pp. 9–46), particularly in three areas: gold denominations, fractions, and coins with left facing portraits. He discusses in detail the history of the system of Sasanian gold coins and he refines our knowledge of their weight system (pp. 12–15). The statement «It goes without saying that ... gold and silver stood in a fixed relationship» (p. 13) would have deserved some more explanation since such a fixed relationship is not always the case in monetary history¹.

The large amount of fractions in the collection is fascinating (pp. 15–17). Schindel identifies them as festive issues for ceremonial occasions in the core province of Fārs. The spread of occasional small Late Roman silver coins for public distribution at certain state occasions serve here as a model. These Roman coins were of a much smaller and unusual denomination (p. 17). However, while this is a possibility (albeit without supporting literary evidence), more caution might have been appropriate; we do not know enough about Sasanian rituals to reascertain the nature of rulership in public, whether – apart from public worship of the gods – these also involved occasional public distributions of money. With the idea of «diversity in rarity», Schaaf also brought together a significant number of coins with left facing portraits (pp. 17–18). Surprisingly Schindel does not discuss the illustrated coin of Khusrō I (no. 578), which he qualifies in the catalogue as a mere «imitation».

At this point, a discussion on the rich collection of copper coins would have been welcome. General comments on them are scattered in the considerations on Walkash (p. 41), and here and there under the different rulers. The discussion of lead coins in the monetary system, would also have merited more attention².

¹ Pre-modern monetary systems involving gold and silver coins suffer from the fluctuating market rates between the two metals, despite occasional attempts to maintain a fixed ratio. For example in the sources we find always different ratios between the early Islamic *dīnār* and *dirham*, although they had a carefully maintained standard weight. The Ottoman gold pound of the 19th century had a fixed relationship to the piaster in fine silver, following the western European bimetallic currencies. However, we know that the Gold pound was traded within the Ottoman Empire at different rates in the provinces.

² The Schaaf Sylloge was published concurrently with an article by Schindel on lead coins, including the new material of the Schaaf collection; N. SCHINDEL, Sasanidische Bleimünzen, in: W. SZAIVERT – N. SCHINDEL – M. BECKERS – K. VONDROVEC (eds), TOYTO APECH TH XWPA. Festschrift für Wolfgang Hahn zum 70. Geburtstag, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte 16 (Vienna 2015), pp. 303–330. This publication appeared only months later. There is no reference to it in the Sylloge, although it exploits the Schaaf collection.

Copper and lead coins rarely show up on the antiquities market and are scarce today – a reason for Schaaf to have collected them intensely. A hoard in the Tel Aviv Museum suggests that copper coins had existed in significant quantities, although it is uncertain whether their production was limited to specific cities. From the reviewer's experience with archaeological coin finds in Afghanistan it may be added that tiny late Sasanian copper coins, due to their (supposed) almost pure copper, and lead coins were mineralising completely in certain environments in Greater Iran. This happened much faster than with late Roman copper coins, which are stabilized by a small amount of silver content.

Schindel continues the «General Remarks» with a discussion, ruler by ruler, highlighting the exceptional coins, contextualizing them within Sasanian numismatics and history, and noting the progress they allow to make. He assumes that the interested readers, as well as specialists, are familiar with the debates on the «Viennese School's» numbering system of «types». In many cases it would have been helpful to have included a sentence or two to assist the reader, or briefly to introduce the relevance of a matter he is discussing (e.g. on p. 27).

The reigns of Ardashīr³ to Hormizd II are treated by Michael Alram and Rika Gyselen, the original authors for the coins of these rulers in the Sylloge's core series (pp. 18–25). The report on the series from Shāpūr II to Kavādh is again the work of Schindel. Numerous amendments and additions are proposed to the system of types, developed by Göbl's Vienna school. The reviewer's ever underlying question for the Sylloge series in general – why the description of the Sasanian monetary system should be so closely based on Göbl's ideas about late Roman issue systems – remains: In the description of the coins, the «types» are sometimes of great monetary and historical significance, but sometimes they are not, and are mere variants. Does the very rare one-mint-only «type» known from very few specimens really qualify as separate type, justifying a bulging, complicated numbering system? Would it not much more appropriate for Sasanian numismatics to separate the regular significant types which are struck in the entire empire from the rare exceptional types used only in one mint or known by very few coins, instead of implying a much wider significance of these types, blurring the otherwise extremely regular and uniform sequence of issues?

Schindel also questions and tests «style» as a means of mint attribution. Given the shortage of hard evidence (e.g. mint abbreviations), stylistic criteria as an approach for mint attribution are applied to the the project's core volumes, – a legitimate attempt of course. Based on the fresh material of the Schaaf collection, Schindel challenges some results of this method (e.g. in the case of Shāpūr II). Style is obviously a much more fluid and debatable concept with more material coming to light (see pp. 26–27).

The discussion of a dirham of Yazdgard I (r. 399–420) (no. 404) is a great addition to our knowledge of Sāsānian history. The coin shows on the reverse the portrait of Yazdgard's son Shāpūr as king of Armenia, adorned with a crown featuring two ram's horns. Very carefully Schindel discusses the authenticity of

³ 48 coins of Ardashīr are mentioned on p. 19, but the overview on p. 9 lists 51.

the issue, albeit being sidetracked by other modern «concoctions»⁴, accepting the authenticity of the coin and comparing it to two similar coins featuring crowns with ram's horns (pp. 33–38). This particular coin highlights the dynastic policy of Yazdgerd I, obviously grooming his son Shāpūr as successor and not Varhrān V (r. 420–438), who actually followed him on the throne. Schindel's many extensive erudite discussions of other possible and actual fakes, is followed by just a brief paragraph (p. 38) on the historical significance of the issues; a fuller discussion here would have been welcome.

The discussion of the central-die production and minting system established in Fārs by Yazdgerd I is an important addition to the earlier discussion (pp. 32–33) by Schindel on this ruler, but the four mints mentioned: DA/DA-LAPK (no. 378, suggested Royan), GW/GW-DMY (no. 379; suggested Juwaym), LW/LWDY (no. 380), and Š/Š (nos. 381–382) are not referred to in the list of mints on page 11⁵. (The slash means that the abbreviations are distributed on the obverse and reverse.). Only the specialised reader will find out that multiple errors occurred in the list of mints, and that these mints are erroneously mentioned under the abbreviation DA⁶. The province of Fārs presumably had a central die engraving office at the mint of Darābgerd, sending out dies to the districts, probably to Juwaym, possibly to Royan, and to Shīrāz. The discussion in the Sylloge is only comprehensible by readers who are very familiar with the specialised literature mentioned in the footnotes. Some general introductory paragraphs would have helped a wider audience interested in Sasanian economics and administration to become acquainted with the topic.

The century between the long reigns of Khusrō I and Yazdgerd III is summarized on just three pages in an extremely cursory fashion. This contrasts significantly with the extensive treatment of the preceding rulers. Schindel is currently authoring the sections on these rulers in the Sylloge project's core series on Khusrō I to Yazdgerd III. For obvious reasons he may have thought it is premature to say anything about that work in this volume, not even describing numismatic highlights of the Schaaf collection or the new scholarship resulting from it. This uneven treatment of series gives this Sylloge a rather unbalanced structure.

The catalogue starts with a typology section referring in principle to the project's core series, adding the legends of each coin type, pp. 47 to 103 (56 pages; 20% of the book). Although it appears at first glance as service to the user, this part is arguably unnecessary, because the underlying concept of the book is to read it parallel to the Sylloges' core series, where this typology has its place. It would have been more user friendly to limit the typology section to the amendments and additions which the Schaaf collection offers for the typology, to document the progress. At present that comparison is left to the reader.

⁴ Schindel dismisses the two coins of «Hormizd III» already in an already published article in a major journal: N. SCHINDEL, The farewell to the coins of Ohrmazd III, *Studia Iranica* 42, 2013, pp. 121–131.

⁵ For the discussion of the minting system see N. SCHINDEL, Eine Partie von Drachmen des Sasanidenkönigs Yazdgerd I. (399–420), *Res Orientales* XIX, 2010, pp. 291–304.

⁶ In the list of mints on p. 11 a number of errors occurred such as «DA for SYLAC», «DA for LWDY», «DAL for LYW» and «KAL» for Karzi is also missing in the list on p. 11.

The actual catalogue, which is the heart of the book, covers pages 104 to 253 (150 pages). It is meticulously done in the Vienna fashion.

The group of later Sasanian coins which are summarized in the «General Remarks» includes some important additions especially from the eastern part of the Sasanian empire. Numismatics is one of the most important sources for the reconstruction of Central Asian history in the period from the Kushan to the Islamic Empire. Since these later Sasanian coins are rather treated somewhat summarily, the reviewer allows himself to make some selective comments below.

Khusrō I, no. 565 mentions BST for Khusrō I's 14th regnal year. The mint is known (in the form of BŠT, or BYST) for the Kavād's 39th and 40th year. The city of Bust in Helmand (today better known as Lashkar-i Bazar) has been suggested for the abbreviation and, if correct, it would hint at the renewed extension of the Sasanian empire under Kavād continued after Khusrō I.

As for the coinage of Hormizd IV, the imitations are the most exciting feature. Although there may be stylistic reasons for labeling no. 597 (APL, year 12) as an imitation, it is questionable whether or not the coin is merely the product of some unfortunate die engraving. No. 598 (BHL=Balkh, immobilized year «11») is an imitation in the technical sense, but a well known regular issue of the Western Turks with a «frozen» immobilized date after the end of Sasanian influence in Tokharistan, struck probably during the lifetime of Khusrō II⁷. As Schindel correctly highlights on p. 44, the mint HLM, year 8 (no. 599) – tentatively attributed by Mochiri as Kholm east of Balkh – might belong to the eastern campaigns of Bahrām Čōbīn under Hormizd IV. Why it is listed here under the label «imitation» is not explained. No. 601 with the mint of N' LNY, year 7, also deserves more attention, which Schindel promises for his forthcoming volume in the core series. Nos. 602–604 with the denomination *zuze* (drachm) instead of the mint abbreviation are a well known Georgian imitations, but not noted as such in the brief description.

Again among the coins of Khusrō II, the imitations deserve attention. One coin (no. 668) belongs to a rather large group of usually underweight coins (between 3.75g and 3.95g) with the mint abbreviation «BBA» (court mint) executed in the old style (years 2 to 11) (Göbl type II/2) but invariably showing the regnal years 21 or less frequently 25. Among this group, apparently all engraved by the same hand, a large number of dies were used. A brief browsing through the available photo files at Universität Hamburg and the literature at hand revealed 13 obverse dies and 12 reverse dies among 16 coins of this style from BBA year 21. The *šādē* from *yāz-u wīst'* (year 21) is often bent quite backwards appearing almost like a loop of the Pahlavi *pē* as in *haft-u wīst'* (year 27), but a comparison reveals that the date should be read as 21 and not as 27 (the *tāw* would also be missing in Schindel's reading). When and where this apparently large group of coins were minted is unknown. It was apparently a large issue somewhere and not just a random imitation.

⁷ D. SCHNÄDELBACH, A group of countermarked imitative drachms of Hormizd IV, Oriental Numismatic Society Newsletter 169, Autumn 2001, pp. 3–4.

For Ardashīr III, it would be interesting to know why no. 686 from the mint of Sakastan (SK) is dismissed as a modern forgery without further commentary. The knowledgeable reader might suspect that might be because of the slightly awkward rendering, but SK is not known for its fine style; or because the mint abbreviation SK is not yet known for Ardashīr. However such issues should be discussed in the commentary.

For Hormizd VI, the Schaaf collection adds a number of new mints compared to Mochiri's seminal work from 1983, such as AY 2, LD 2, MY 2, WYH 2, and a mule with a reverse of Khusrō II, year 35.

For Azarmidukht, the reengraving of the queen's name and the date on an original pair of dies engraved originally for Khusrō II from ShY (possibly Shīraz) (no. 702) and WYHC is remarkable (no. 703)⁸. Schindel suggests in the catalogue entry that the recutting meant that «this queen did not exercise full control over the minting», but it is not apparent to the reviewer what this means since she actually minted coins there, efficiently recycling old dies.

For Yazdgard III, the coin no. 708, from the Kirmānī mint BN is to be read as year 12 (Schindel reads year 16). Dieter Weber, in an article published at about the same time as the present Sylloge, points to this curious rendering of Pahlavi «12» as *dw'nzdh*, a form only used in Kirmānī mints of Yazdgard in NAL, BN and GLM⁹. No. 712 from the Kirmānī mint GLM (Garm-Kirmān) also shows the same paleographical peculiarity of the year 12, and should not be read as year 33. Schindel does not mention that in this case an old die was re-used by engraving the name Yazdgard over the name of Khusrō II, re-using again an old die¹⁰. Why Schindel appears not to have used the current state-of-the-art studies of Tyler-Smith on the coins of Yazdgard III¹¹, of Malek and Curtis on Buran¹², and Malek's studies on Kavādh II¹³, remains unexplained. Did he not want to engage with these issues, and intend to treat these later in one of the upcoming sylloges of the core series?

The reviewer would finally like to comment briefly on description techniques. The identification of well-known countermarks should perhaps have been mentioned (for example nos. 598, 711), as also should the re-cutting of dies (nos. 703 and 712), and details of the use of graffiti (invisible on the published photos; but clearly visible on a website where the Schaaf's collection was for a long time on display)¹⁴ would have been welcome, as would be details of the dipinti (ink

⁸ The reviewer has examined this coin.

⁹ S. HEIDEMANN – J. RIEDERER – D. WEBER, A hoard from the time of Yazdgard III in Kirmān, Iran 52, 2014, pp. 79–123, here p. 87 about the palaeographic aspects. The coin from the Schaaf collection is mentioned on p. 85 fn 36, and p. 114 with the dies O-n.

¹⁰ Idem, p. 87 fn. 52 and p. 99 fn. 99.

¹¹ S. TYLER-SMITH, Coinage in the name of Yazdgard III (AD 632–651) and the Arab conquest in Iran, Numismatic Chronicle 160, 2000, pp. 135–70, pls. 13–29.

¹² H. M. MALEK – S. V. CURTIS, History and coinage of the Sasanian queen Būrān, Numismatic Chronicle 158, 1998, pp. 113–129, pls. 33–37.

¹³ H. M. MALEK, The Coinage of the Sasanian King Kavād II (AD 628), Numismatic Chronicle 155, 1995, pp. 120–130; ID., New coins from the reign of Kavād II (AD 628), Numismatic Chronicle 174, 2014, pp. 257–260.

¹⁴ The website was owned by Thomas Mallon MacCorgay. It was taken offline after he passed away in January 2014.

inscriptions on coins; such as on no. 661); and of deliberate erasures (as of the neck hair and name on Vistāhm's coin no. 622¹⁵; and of BBA on no. 668).

Sometimes the tone of the book changes from a scholarly vernacular to a colloquial «I»- and «me»-author, who has his own personal opinion about the use of intoxicating beverages by depicted priestly attendants (p. 27 «leaning against the dotted border as if they were drunk»).

The book appears to the reviewer with its uneven treatment of rulers and issues, the arcane style of scholarly discourse, almost like a report for the initiated about an extraordinary private collection in preparation for the future volumes of the Sylloge's core project, with addenda and corrigenda of the already published volumes, rather than a study about particular scholarly gains and merits of the collection and its «librarian» Robert Schaaf.

The collection of Robert Schaaf is rightly called in the foreword by Michael Alram and Rika Gyselen «one of the most important collections of Sasanian coins in private hands.» While Schindel's treatment might be legitimate, it leads to some general thoughts on how to publish such an important collection today.

Most of the coins were available for study for a long time on the now defunct website by Thomas Mallon-McCorgray¹⁶. The idea of a Sylloge is to have a brief description and an illustration, but the printed book with an analytical discussion remains still imperative, emphasizing the scholarly achievement of a specialized collection. A sustainable web-based database including the material of the Schaaf collection would be welcomed but such efforts will be always secondary to the printed form, because a database dissolves the focused scholarly collection into raw material for further research. This catalogue represents a huge step forward, and the value of the material Robert Schaaf brought together can hardly be overestimated. The volume is written by one of the best specialists in Sasanian numismatics, but further work would have transformed the report into a book of greater use and value.

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¹⁵ Schindel does not mention this erasure in the Sylloge, but treats it in N. SCHINDEL, Ein Beispiel für damnatio memoriae auf einer Münze des sasanidischen Usurpators Wistahm, Geldgeschichtliche Nachrichten 254, 2011, pp. 103–104

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that, a collector in Iran grabbed these images and illustrated his own publication with them, without reference to the source. These book lives for many illustrations from the website: Amīnī, Amīn, Ākhirīn-i shāhān-i sāsānī, Numismatic of the Latest Sasanian Kings, Tehrān: Pāzīneh 1392 (2013); Amīnī, Amīn, Tārīkh u sikkeh dar pāyān imparātūrī sāsānī, History and Coin at the End of Sasanian Empire, Tehran: 1387 (2008).

