



The Coinage Reforms (600–603) of Khusru II
and the Revolt of Vistāhm

SUSAN TYLER-SMITH

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FOREWORD

THE HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

STEFAN HEIDEMANN

The project began its life with a telephone call while I was sitting in my office at the Institute for Languages and Culture of the Middle East at Jena University in late November or early December 2000. Klaus Weber, an independent scholar of Byzantine coins and weights in Ebersberg in the vicinity of Munich, who had been referred to me, wanted to inform me that an elderly gentleman he was caring for, Hans Niedermayer (1927–2007), owned a group of several hundred Sāsānian coins, perhaps a hoard, acquired in the early 1970s in Munich. Mr Weber was concerned that Mr Niedermayer might part with the collection soon, and an important piece of numismatic evidence would get lost without being noticed. The size of the parcel, the time and location of its acquisition, and the brief description made me instantly interested, and a few days later, on 15 December, I visited Klaus Weber in Ebersberg. We drove through a beautiful winter landscape up to Prien at Lake Chiemsee. On our way, Mr Weber told me more about the life of Mr Niedermayer and about his collections.

In Prien we were warmly welcomed. Mr Niedermayer gave us a tour through his spacious home and his art collection, which was as magnificent as it was eclectic. Among the treasures, in a secured room in the basement, a bowl of about 600 Sāsānian coins rested on a shelf. I inspected it briefly; my initial hunch seemed to be correct, I was convinced that its entire contents, except for a few distinct early and late intruders, constituted a late Sāsānian coin hoard or parcel, the majority consisting of coins of Khusru II (590–628) and some going back at least to Kavād I (488–96, 499–531). The closing date was obvious, being represented by multiple examples that dated either to regnal year 12 or 13. Whether the reading of the latter date was more likely the year 11 or 13 was at that time disputed due to the ambiguous Pahlavi rendering of the date on most of these coins. However, there were no coins in this part of the hoard that were minted after that date or bearing the abbreviation *'pd*. A large portion of the hoard originated from the mints of BYSh (Bīshāpur) and ST (Iṣṭakhr). Die duplicates for the final years were apparent. Mr Niedermayer related that he had bought the group in Munich, as a hoard, in the early 1970s. He even phoned the dealer during our visit, but unfortunately the man could give us no further information, except that he had sold in turn to Mr Niedermayer the complete parcel he himself had received. Since his acquisition Mr Niedermayer had not done anything with parcel except to present some random coins to friends as gifts.

I realized already at that point that I might have in front of me the largest surviving portion of the famous 'Shiraz' hoard, which had as its closing date either year 12 or 13, with BYSh and ST as the most common mints in some parcels. I remembered from the literature that parcels of this hoard had turned up in the coin market in Munich. Some of the dealers had listed the content of their share in a memo in their sales catalogues to advertise their 'fresh' merchandise. Ilisch in such a brief article in 1978 in a German fixed price list attempted an overview and scholarly appraisal about the known parcels at this time. The hoard was soon dispersed in the market. A comprehensive study seemed no longer to be possible.

Robert Göbl wrote his seminal study on Sāsānian numismatics in 1968, and created a boom for collecting Sāsānian coins. The large 'Shiraz' hoard was soon siphoned into the international coin market. Its known size of in 1978 was about 1000 coins (later estimations were up to 37,000 coins) and its importance became legendary, even to the degree that later groups of coins were said to come from the 'Shiraz' hoard, although the composition of the group differed a good deal.¹

¹ Sears (2002).

Since the early recordings of parcels of the so-called ‘Shiraz’ hoard in the early 1970s, Sāsānian numismatics have evolved tremendously up to 2000, through the pioneering works of Rika Gyselen,² Malek Iradj Mochiri³ and Stuart Sears,⁴ to name only a few. For example, some mint abbreviations were seen in the early seventies as distinct from each other, such as KL and DL, while consensus has it now as being a single mint (KL) in slightly different renderings. Other mint abbreviations were regarded as variations of the same lettering, such as BBA and BHL, AW and AY, GD and LD, or ML and MY. This distorted the lists of contents, which we had for the ‘Shiraz’ hoard, and could not be checked anymore.

Here, with Mr Niedermayer’s collection, was the opportunity to revisit the legendary ‘Shiraz’ hoard, which already held an important place in the literature, despite its insufficient documentation. On that Saturday, I explained to him the history of what was known of the ‘Shiraz’ hoard and what could potentially be learned from the study of this parcel. He had preserved an important untouched piece of historical evidence by acquiring it, and keeping it almost intact. Mr Niedermayer, who liked his art collection to be appreciated and studied by scholars, enthusiastically agreed to lend the group of 580 coins to the Oriental Coin Cabinet at Jena University. In 2001 and 2002, we did the first identification and documentation at the University. In 2002, Mr Niedermayer asked me for some of the coins which he had promised for an exhibition at his local bank, the Sparkasse in Prien, and which would be returned to Jena afterwards. I prepared 25 coins and a leaflet for that exhibition. Unfortunately, the coins never came back.

In order to organize the study of the coins, I asked several colleagues if they might be interested in the opportunity to study the ‘Shiraz’ parcel. I myself was working on a different research project and it required my full attention. I was delighted that Susan Tyler-Smith agreed to come over with her husband Marcus Phillips to Jena to study the hoard in 2003. The Royal Numismatic Society (Lowick Fund) and the U.K. Numismatic Trust had generously made small grants available for travel and black and white photography. In early May 2007, Susan and Marcus returned to Jena to corroborate their die studies with the original coins still on loan at the University. In 2008, technical progress required that the coins be photographed again, this time digitally.

The late Mark Blackburn, Keeper of the Coins at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, invited me for a month in 2008 as a Robinson Visiting Fellow to the museum.⁵ This gave us plenty of opportunity to discuss the hoard and its historical implications, fuelled by numerous answers, provided by Susan’s diligent study, to many of the pending questions in Sāsānian numismatics and the political history of Khusru II – far beyond a publication of just another hoard. The study of the ‘Shiraz’ hoard looked as though it was the key. Susan’s observation of minute details discovered more types and varieties than those that were known to Göbl. Arranging them in a plausible sequence, she was able to demonstrate how the coins of the usurper Vistāhm (595–600/1) (there were no coins of Vistāhm among the coins of the parcel) tie into the sequence of coin production for Khusru II, and above all to solve the dispute about the beginning and stages of Khusru’s coinage reform. She was able to describe the reform process to its full extent, which creates the basis for constructive speculation about its possible purpose and meaning.

While the spotlight of the OMJ parcel of the ‘Shiraz’ hoard was crucial in formulating such hypotheses, the questions were much larger and needed more evidence. It was decided to broaden the base of the study by including more material and hoards, to answer sufficiently the questions about monetary policies and Sāsānian history. Despite the delay of publication that this decision would cause, the scholarly gain seemed to be worthwhile.

² Especially Gyselen (1979b), (1981), (1983), (1989a), (1989c), and (1990); Gyselen and Kalus (1983).

³ Mochiri (1983), (1996).

⁴ Sears (1997).

⁵ 6 September to 5 October 2008.

Hans Niedermayer passed away on 25 December 2007. The now 555 coins were returned to the rightful heir on 9 June 2009.⁶

In the following years, the manuscript grew and improved steadily. Two new parcels of different hoards with the closing year 12, and another with the supposed closing year 17 surfaced. These additions were recorded in a joint effort by Susan Tyler-Smith with the support of Jena and Hamburg Universities. They added substantially to the evidence presented and confirmed and refined the hypotheses formed from study of the initial 'Shiraz' hoard.⁷

Without the initial worried call in 2000 by Klaus Weber, who felt that something important would be lost if the coins were sold, this entire research would never have been undertaken. Unfortunately, Hans Niedermayer cannot see the results of his spontaneous and generous loan to the Oriental Coin Cabinet at Jena University. I could not have asked anyone more competent than Susan Tyler-Smith to address the questions that came up with the 'Shiraz' hoard. I fondly remember discussing with her all the issues arising from it. We sometimes found ourselves in productive disagreement, which benefited the study by sharpening both of our arguments toward finding better-argued solutions. Norbert Nebes, Professor of Islamic Studies and Semitic Languages, and director of the Oriental Coin Cabinet, supported the project from the beginning. Uwe Kessler and Toni Ullrich at Jena University, and Matthias Naue at Hamburg University, my assistants over the years, helped to photograph all the coins of the OMJ parcel of the 'Shiraz' hoard in 2008, the coins of the 'Berlin year 17' parcel in 2009, and at last in Hamburg the second 'Berlin year 12' parcel of 2016. And finally, I would like to thank the Royal Numismatic Society for accepting the manuscript for publication in its Special Publications series.

Hamburg, February 2017

⁶ The coins were sold soon after. Their present whereabouts are unknown.

⁷ The 'Berlin' parcel of a year 12 hoard turned up in May 2007 and was recorded by Tyler-Smith and partially photographed by Uwe Kessler, see Tyler-Smith (2009). Another 'Berlin' parcel of a year 17 hoard could be recorded in Jena in April 2009, and were photographed by Toni Ullrich. A further parcel of a different year 12 hoard was recorded in Berlin by Susan Tyler-Smith and Marcus Phillips as late as between 8 and 13 August 2016, and images taken by Matthias Naue at Universität Hamburg.