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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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Some Remarks on the Inscription and Attribution of a Transitional Arab-Sāsānian

Dirham from Merv

Kiarash Gholami¹ and Amin Amin²

The purpose of this paper is to review the reading of the Pahlavi inscription on a previously unique dirham of the Arab-Sasanian period from the year 78 AH in Merv, and to attempt to attribute it properly. In the following analyses, we shall first re-examine the extant literary and numismatic evidence to verify the identity of the issuer(s) of this and similar coins. We shall then study both the die sequence of contemporary dirhams and similar legends that appear on bronze pashizes from the same time period, aiming to uncover other characteristic features of this special dirham type.

The first example of these extremely rare outputs came to light in 2015 (Amini & Dashkov 2015: 61-62). As shown in Fig. 1. A, the obverse of these dirhams depicts the usual imitated bust of the Sāsānian king facing right, surrounded by a four-line Pahlavi inscription. The well-known Pahlavi invocation behind the bust simply reads as *GDH 'pzw't* that is *xwarrah abzūd* «Glory increased», whereas the two lines in front of the bust are somewhat more complicated. As briefly cited above, the only reading of this legend on the

1- The responsibility for the reconstruction and interpretation of the inscription on the second spacemen as well as the preparation of the English text of this paper lies with Kiarash Gholami, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada; k2gholam@uwaterloo.ca

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issue depicts the typical bust of a Sasanian king and bears the Pahlavi legends *GDH 'pzwt'* i.e., *xwarrah abzūd* «Glory increased» and *plhwyh – pylwcyh* i.e., *farroxīh – pērōzīh* «Benediction - victory», behind and in front of the bust, respectively (Curiel & Gyselen 1984a: no 79-80). There is also an Arabic legend in the second quarter of the margin that was read and translated as *nasar allāh al-haqq* / نصر الله الحق «(May) God give the victory to the Truth». However, it must be noted that the Arabic word نصر lacks all its diacritics that determine its pronunciation and consequently its meaning. As correctly pointed out by Curiel and Gyselen, and because of its position in the sentence, the first Kufic word should be read *nasar^a* / نَصْر (as the simple past conjugation verb «helped»), whereas the incorrect reading as *nasr* / نَصْر might also present the Arabic noun «victory». Therefore, the correct translation of the whole sentence must be «God helped the Truth(ful people)» or equivalently «(May) God help the Truth(ful people)».

The reverse of the other issue (so-called *Mihrāb* and *'anaza dirham*⁷) also includes the Arabic invocation نصر الله⁸ inside an upside-down U-shaped structure that most probably illustrates a triumphal arch (Fig. 3. B). Similarly, due to the lack of the diacritics on the Arabic word نصر, one might read it in two different ways as just mentioned above. Treadwell has suggested to read the whole expression as the two separate words *nasr* / نَصْر «victory» and *allāh* / الله «God» (Treadwell 2009: 372). On the contrary, the authors believe that the legend must be read as *nasar^a allāh* «(May) God help» similar to the sentence appears on the first example that discussed above. These slogans appear on these two specimens are very similar to that of the middle-Persian legend «(may) God be the faithful men's helper» on the dirham under consideration here.

The next challenge is to reliably attribute these special dirhams to a certain ruler, since their obverses bear no personal names. This necessarily calls for a thorough revision of the contemporary events in the literary sources. We are told that in the year 74 AH, the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān appointed Umayyah b. 'Abdallāh b. Khālid governor of Khurāsān after dismissing the previous governor, Bukayr b. Wishāh (Tabari: Vol. XXII, 7) (A'tham al-Kūfī: VI, 288-90) (Balādhuri: Fūtūh, 416).⁹

Umayyah then entered into a friendly relationship with Bukayr and offered him the governorship of Tuxāristān. Spending a great sum of money, Bukayr made the necessary arrangements for his departure. However, Bahir b. Warqā who was a prisoner of Bukayr before the arrival of Umayyah in Khurāsān, slandered Bukayr warning Umayyah that with this appointment, the latter will get the chance to revolt in Tuxāristān. Heeding Bahir's warning, Umayyah changed his mind and left Bukayr under the burden of his campaign debts. Thereupon, Bukayr's creditors had him arrested and imprisoned. Nevertheless, Bukayr somehow paid off his debts and left the prison with a hatred of Umayyah. Soon afterwards, the latter made preparations for a campaign in Bukhārā, to be followed by a march against Musā b. 'Abdallāh b. Khāzim in al-Tirmidh (Tabari: Vol. XXII, 166). He took Bukayr with himself and marched east, leaving his very young son, Ziyād, as his deputy in Merv. However, after crossing the Oxus with his troops on boats, Umayyah changed his mind and instructed Bukayr to sail back and help his son, Ziyād, in his

7- For further information see G. Miles 1952: 156-171, and Treadwell 2009: 357-381

8- Album et al, 28 :2002 .read this inscription as نصره الله .i.e. *naṣṣarahu allāh*) » May (God grant him victory .« However, there is obviously no ه letter after the Arabic word نصر inside the arch.

9- Ibn Khayyāt has recorded this event in year 73 AH. For further information see Ibn Khayyāt, Tārīkh, 297 (year 73 [1692-693]) and Bosworth 1968: 49.

affairs, while he himself headed for Bukhara. Obeying this order, Bukayr took a number of his trusted men and crossed back over the Oxus. However, one of his attendants, ‘Attab al-Liqwah suggested to him to burn the boats and return to Merv where he may throw off his allegiance to Umayyah and exploit that city’s revenues for a while. Bukayr did so and returned to Merv, seizing and imprisoning Ziyād. He also succeeded in turning the citizens of Merw against Umayyah by inviting them to repudiate their allegiance to him (Tabari, Vol. 22, 166-168) (Balādhuri, Fūtūh, 416) (Ya’qubi, Tārīkh, Vol. II, 324). Receiving this disturbing news, Umayyah left his campaigns against the Bukhārans incomplete and headed back to Merv upon agreeing a temporary truce with the Bukhārans for a small payment. Nevertheless, it took Umayyah some time to have his boats ready to cross back the Oxus and march toward Merv. Ibn A’tham briefly reports that the siege of Merv by Umayyah’s troops lasted four months (al-Kūfi, Fūtūh, Vol. VI, 290). Tabari adds that after several battles between the two sides, Umayyah accepted the truce offered by Bukayr and promised to pay him 400,000 dirhams and the governorship of any districts of Khurāsān he wished to have.¹⁰

Umayyah then wrote to Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik explaining the affairs concerning Bukayr and his pardoning him. The caliph responded by selecting an expeditionary force to send to Umayyah in Khurāsān (Tabari, Vol. 22, 165-176). Later, Umayyah took Bukayr and his concubine al-‘Arimah and imprisoned them. He then arrested al-Ahnaf b. ‘Abdallāh, from the al-‘Anbāri clan of the Tamim, saying, “You are one of those who counseled Bukayr to rebel”. Thereafter, Umayyah attempted to remove Bukayr with the assistance of Bahir. In the meantime, a friend of Bukayr tried to convince Bahir and Umayyah to remain faithful to the pledge they had made to Bukayr. Nevertheless, Bahir ignored this request and murdered Bukayr (Tabari, Vol. 22, 165-176).¹¹ It is reported that upon receiving the news of Umayyah’s poor performance in dealing with Bukayr, the Caliph ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwān removed Umayyah in the next year (78 AH). He then chose as the new governor of Khurāsān al-Muhallab, an experienced *amir* who had distinguished himself during his campaigns against the Kharijites in Kirmān and Fārs. Having arrived in the province in the year 79 AH, al-Muhallab took charge of the affairs of Khurāsān.

Reviewing the numismatic evidence from Khurāsān and Merv in the period 77-79 AH, we encounter the isolated dirhams of *BBA* (Court mint); this is illustrated in Fig. 1. C. The obverse of these outputs depicts the typical bust of the Sasanian king being introduced as ‘*wm’y’ Y ‘ptwl’n* «Umayyah b. ‘Abdallāh» as the governor of Khurāsān, whereas the reverse bears the Hijri date 77 (*hpt hpt’t*) and the mint name as *BBA*. A comparison between the obverse dies of these outputs with those of the above discussed dirhams from مَرَو (Merv) dated ۷۸ (78 AH) (Fig. 1. A-B) reveals some undeniable similarities. This strongly suggests that they (obv. dies) were prepared by a single engraver. As some notable engraving characteristics of this craftsman, he has designed a comparatively wide tiara, large eye socket, and iconographically unique tresses for the Sasanian king’s bust on his obverse dies.

10- Tabari also narrates a secondary account as “Some people say that Bukayr did not go out on campaign with Umayyah, but rather that when Umayyah went out on campaign, he left Bukayr as his deputy over Merw. Then Bukayr rebelled, and Umayyah returned and fought him, then made a truce with him and entered Merw. Umayyah kept faith with Bukayr and treated him with the same honor and complaisance as formerly.”

11- Tabari has recorded the murderer of Bukayr by *Bahir* as the latest important event of year 77 AH in his accounts. However, as will be demonstrated hereafter, the under discussion transitional dirhams of Merv suggest that he might have still been alive until early 78 AH. For further information see Tabari, Vol. 22, 175.

Additionally, both types are struck on small flans (26 mm - 29 mm) and unusually light (2.2 gm - 2.6 gm), very similar to the Umayyad reform-style dirhams. On the other hand, the appearance of different mint places on these two types in conjunction with the Hijri dates imply that the engraver was active in the court of Umayyad and most probably accompanied him on his 77 AH campaigns. However, later in 77 AH or even in 78 AH, this die-engraver relocated to Merv whereupon he prepared the dies of the anonymous dirhams bearing the two unusual slogans « (may) God be the faithful men's helper » and « blessing from the god » (بركة من الله) (Fig. 2. B) which are recorded on no other Arab-Sasanian dirhams. The appearance on the only two known examples of this type of these two general expressions suggests that the issuer of this brief coinage was not eager to record on them his personal name. It is possible that the issuer jointly ruled with one or more colleagues and so this prevented a single name from exclusively appearing on these coins. Now, considering the above discussed literary sources and the numismatic evidence, we believe that the extremely rare anonymous dirhams of Merv were most probably struck by Bukayr b. Wishah and his friend and counsellor, 'Attab al-Liqwah, who had advised him to burn Umayyah's boats on the banks of the Oxus. According to Tabari, Bukayr and 'Attab were unsure of the allegiance of the citizens of Merv to Umayyah [Tabari, Vol. 22, 167]. Accordingly, in order to tempt the population to change their allegiance, 'Attab suggested to Bukayr to announce to the non-Muslim citizen of Merv that they will be exempt from paying taxes upon their conversion to Islam. This plot ultimately worked and around fifty thousand people pledged allegiance to Bukayr and 'Attab [Tabari, Vol. 22, 167]. Considering this key point, it would now seem logical that Bukayr and 'Attab omitted their personal names on their joint dirham so that it could be circulated in Merv, since the population of this city had remained faithful to Umayyah until they repudiated their allegiance to him.

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Fig. 1.

- A) Drawing and images of the first known spacemen of transitional. Arab-Sasanian dirham (Merv, Year 78 AH) from the authors' collection (2.2 gm, 26 mm)
- B) Drawing and images of the second example of transitional Arab-Sasanian dirham (Merv, Year 78 AH) from H. Khalaj's collection. (2.6 gm, 29 mm)
- C) Dirham of Umayyah b. 'Abdallah (BBA, Year 77 AH) with the marginal Pahlavi inscription y'nbwt' i.e. yānbūd « Gyānbūd? », (2.57 gm, 29 mm) Heritage Auctions, Inc., September 2013, Lot. 23489.

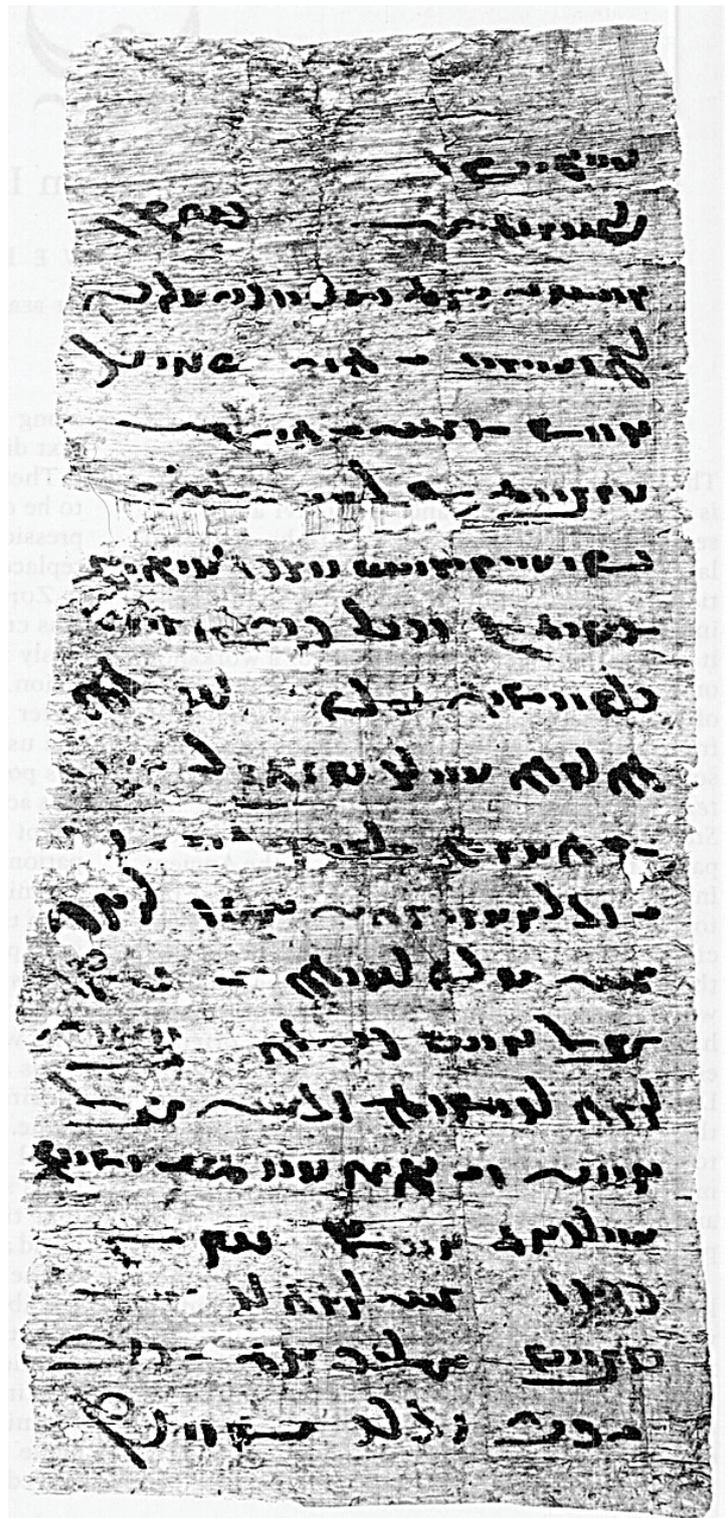


Fig. 2. Early-Islamic Pahlavi Papyrus of Egypt (Courtesy of the British Library Board).

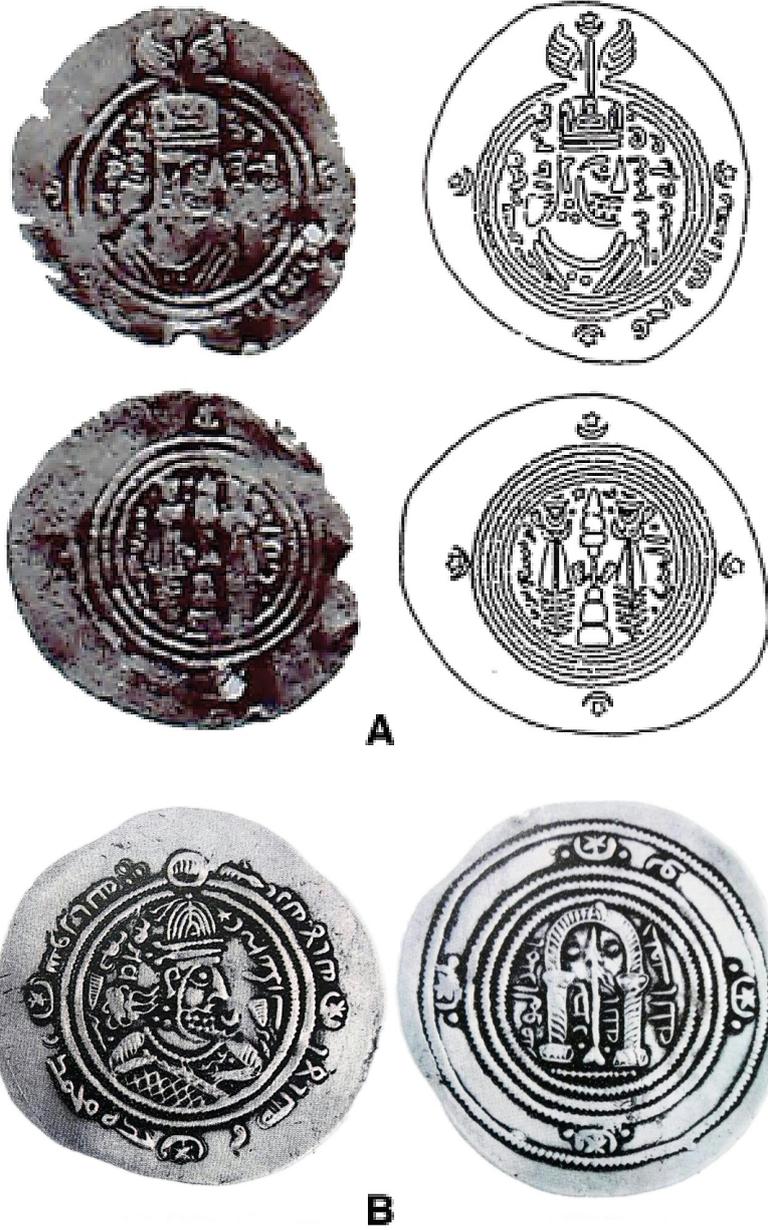


Fig. 3.

A) Photo and drawing of G-48 pashiz (Veh Az Amid Kavād, year 82 AH) from Gyselen 2000: plate 8, type 48.

B) So-called " *Mihrāb* and ' *Anaza* " dirham by the Arabic inscription نصر الله inside the arch (Courtesy of the Bānk-ē Sepah Museum; Foroughian 2000/2001: 18)

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