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Contents

Notes

1. Touraj **Daryaee**: From Yima's Wara to Jamshid's Throne: Persepolis and the Impact of the Avestan Lore **01**
2. Kamyar **Abdi** : Elamo-Hittite I: An Elamite Goddess in Hittite Court **07**
3. Parsa **Daneshmand**: Neo-Assyrian Diplomatic Marriage and Divination: A Case Study **15**
4. Adam **Benkato**: The hypothetical life of an Middle Iranian participle **26**
5. Matthew P. **Canepa**: Methodological and Historiographical Notes on the 'Paradise' as an Iranian Royal Institution **39**
6. Khodadad **Rezakhani**: *Saansaan Piroosen*: Ammianus Marcellinus and the Kidarites **44**
7. Amir **Ahmadi**: Avestan *ciθra-* **51**

Reviews

1. Lloyd **Llewellyn-Jones**: Stoneman, Richard. 2015. *Xerxes: A Persian Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 288 p., £25.00, ISBN 978-0-300-18007-7. **57**

Review Article

1. Khodadad **Rezakhani**: Jongeward, David, Joe Cribb & Peter Donovan. 2014. *Kushan, Kushano-Sasanian, and Kidarite coins: a catalogue of coins from the American Numismatic Society*. New York: The American Numismatic Society. 322 pp., \$150, 978-0-89722-334-8. **61**

Special Issue

1. Firoze M. **Kotwal**: An Overview of the History and Development of the Parsi Priesthood in India up to the 19th Century **67**

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Saansaan Pirosoen: Ammianus Marcellinus and the Kidarites

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At the beginning of his account of the Sasanian siege of Amida in AD 359, Ammianus Marcellinus describes the entry of the King of Kings (presumably Shapur II) to the field as follows:

Insidens autem equo ante alios celsior ipse praeibat agminibus cunctis, aureum capituli arietini figmentum interstinctum lapillis pro diademate gestans, multiplici vertice dignitatum et gentium diversarum comitatu sublimis. (Amm. Marc. XIX.1.3)

The king himself, mounted upon a charger and overtopping the others, rode before the whole army, wearing in place of a diadem a golden image of a ram's head set with precious stones, distinguished too by a great retinue of men of the highest rank and of various nations. (Ammianus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1935: 471)

Clearly, the type of the headgear worn by the king seems to have been significant enough for Ammianus to make a special note of it. It also shows his familiarity with the usual type of headgear, a "diadem," which a Sasanian emperor was expected to wear. Of course, it is a well-established fact that Sasanian royal crowns were unique creations which designated each individual king of king and distinguished them from each other, particularly on their coins (Göbl 1971: 7). Furthermore, scholars recog-

nise that the normal headgear of Shapur II was a crenelated crown seen on his known coins (Schindel 2003: 212-216). As such, the occurrence of a golden ram's head as the headgear of the king of kings was indeed something remarkable and worthy of note for observers such as Ammianus.

Naturally, scholars have not ignored this remarkable description, justifying it in different ways. Numismatists have already made the connection between the crown described by Ammianus and the crown of Kushano-Sasnaian kings, most importantly that of Warahran 4 (Göbl 1967: 225-226). Bivar has doubted the identification of this king with Shapur II – indeed he is not named as such by Ammianus – suggesting that the person in question might be Wahram “II” (2) Kushanshah (Bivar 1979: 328). Another idea, considering the ram's head as a “war helmet,” a sign of the god *Vratharaghna* (Erdmann 1951: 87, note 4), which was exchanged with the diadem for war purposes, (Lerner 2009: 221, note 24) is indeed interesting and deserves further investigation. However, Ammianus does not in fact say that Shapur had *exchanged* his crown for the moment (as suggested by Lerner), rather that he was wearing the ram's head crown already, for (pro) a diadem. Specifically, the possible connection between the description of Ammianus and the coinage of the Kushano-Sasanians needs to be explored thoroughly enough in the contexts of its implications for political history.

Considering a notice several passages below the above passage, describing the successful conclusion of the siege and the ensuing celebrations, a new suggestion can be formed:

“Persis Saporem saansaan appellatibus et pirosen, quod rex regibus imperans et bellorum victor interpretatur.” (Amm. Marc. XIX.2.11)

“the Persians called Sapor “saansaan” and “pirosen,” which being interpreted is “king of kings” and “victor in wars.” (Ammianus, *Roman Antiquities*, 1935: 481)

Ammianus' impressive abilities in translating the original Middle Persian terms has in a sense precluded any other suggestion that can be made for either of the two terms rendered by him. Indeed, Saansaan appears to be a Latin rendition of MP Šāhanšāh (through Greek, hence the /š/ → /s/), “king of Kings” or “rex regibus” as Ammianus Marcellinus interprets. Similarly, *Pirosen* is most likely a rendition of MP *Pērōz* “victorious” or Latin “victor”, to which the gloss of “at wars” (*bellorum*) is perhaps added as an emphasis by Ammianus. The reason for Ammianus' knowledge of the meaning of these words is unknown, but it could be due to the presence of Hormizd, a brother of Shapur II (?) who had taken refuge with Constantine II, in the Roman army (Amm. Marc. XIV.1.8). However, just as Ammianus is most likely over-translating *Pērōz* as “victorious at war,” we might assume that he, or most likely his Greek speaking source, was going beyond the call of duty to translate the word at all. Below, we will consider the possibility that the *Saansaan Pirosen*, as mentioned by Ammianus Marcellinus, was not in fact the title of Shapur II (“Sapor”), but instead the name and title of Šāhanšāh *Pērōz*, a leader of the eastern tribes – the Chionites, the Gelani, and the Sagištani – mentioned by Ammianus Marcellinus as being involved in the siege and storming of Amida.¹

It is well-known that the onomastics of the Kushano-Sasanian rulers closely resembled those of

1- See Errington and Curtis 2007: 86-88 for a discussion of the use of the name/title of *Pērōz*, which would be contrary to my suggestion.

their Sasanian counterparts. In some cases, such as the name of *Peroz* (MP Pērōz “victorious”), it indeed appears in the Kushano-Sasanian line earlier than its appearance among the *imperial* Sasanian rulers. Based on the agreed order of the Kushano-Sasanian/Kushanshah rulers, the second and the fifth Kushanshah were called Peroz 1 and Peroz 2 (Bivar 1979; Jongeward and Cribb, 2015: 197). Despite whatever disagreements in chronology (c.f. Schindel 2012 and 2014), it is generally agreed that both of these kings lived before the reign of Sasanian Peroz (AD 459-484). On the basis of onomastics, there is then a possibility that the person hailed so by the troops was not Shapur II himself, but Peroz 2, the Kushano-Sasanian monarch, who had possibly become an ally of Shapur II in his siege of Amida. The conclusion would be to understand leaders such as Grumbates, the “king of the Chionitae” (Amm. Marc. XIX. 1.7) as vassals of this Kushanshah Peroz. On the other hand, the dating of Peroz 2 to before 330 (Jongeward and Cribb 2015: 197) would preclude such conclusion, at least based on a particular numismatic point of view.²

On the other hand, another series of coins featuring a king wearing a ram’s horn crown are now ascribed to one of the “pre-Kidarite” rulers of the Kidarite Huns (Jongeward and Cribb 2015: 232-235). This whole series was already ascribed to Wahram 4 (Göbl 1984: ser. 714-717). However, it seems that the name *Sa Piroysa* “King Peroz”, written in Brahmi on some of these coins, would now ascertain the presence of an authority of that name to the south of the Hindu-Kush (Vondrovec 2014: 29).³ Cribb now assigns all coins of this series, even those with the name Varahran appearing on them, to Peroz, based on the presence of the ram’s horn crown and the Kidarite *tamgha* (Jongeward and Cribb 2015: 232-233). In his precise study of Kidarite and Alkhan coins, Pfišterer also attributes the ram’s horn types to Peroz, even those without a legible legend (Pfišterer 2013: type 1B; Cribb 2010: type B1a). Additionally, on the point of similarity between crown types, he considers types 19 and 19A (Pfišterer 2013: 228-229) to also belong to Peroz, although these lack ram’s horn: on them the king instead is sporting a “flat cap” crown copied from that of Shapur III (AD 383-388). On the other hand, even if we take only those with the name of Peroz inscribed on them (Cribb 2010: type A1; Göbl 1967: type 5), the type 1B and type 4 coins of Peroz show him as wearing a ram’s horn crown instead of a crenelated or flat crown.

The dating of the “Kidarite” king Peroz to 345-350, as presented by Cribb, is perhaps an extreme example of the dating of the Kidarite rule to the fourth century, something that is commonly opposed by many historians (Grenet 2010; de la Vaissiere 2005). On the other hand, archaeological records and funerary rites do present evidence of fourth century occupation by the “Chionites” at least in Sogdiana (Grenet 2010: 270). As such, the early dating of Kidarites, possibly as the “first Chionite coin authority” (Pfišterer 2013: 23) seems at least within the range of possibility, although the order of the Kidarite authorities still seems hard to establish.

2- The early, perhaps too early, dating of the entire Kushano-Sasanian series by Cribb is, of course, not universally accepted and is criticized, among other by Nikolaus Schindel (Schindel 2012). Judging from a historian’s point of view and in relation to the larger historical context of the time, I would find this to be indeed too early to make sense as well. Here, I will refrain from presenting any particular opinion on the subject, in order to proceed purely on the available evidence.

3- See Errington and Curtis 2007: 86-87 for a use of Peroz “victorious” as a title. Cribb 2010: fig. 43 suggests that an earlier type 1B also bore the name Peroz, which is contested by Vondrovec 2014: 28. Pfišterer 2013: 208 seems to have reservations about Cribb’s reading as well, but nonetheless on the evidence of the crown, assigns type 1B to Peroz. It seems that now Cribb suggests that this Peroz should be considered the second Kidarite king (Jongeward and Cribb 2015).

By considering Ammianus reference to a King of Kings called Peroz, if we indeed interpret his Saansaan Pirozen as “the King of Kings Peroz,” we might be able to postulate the presence of a Kidarite king of that name in AD 359. Both the coin legends in Brahmi (*śri śa piro*), and possibly the Pahlavi one (m[lk’] pyrwc[y]) (Cribb 2010: B1a), and the ram’s horn crown connect the numismatic evidence to the narrative of Ammianus Marcellinus. The natural conclusion would then be the consideration of the presence of an authority named Peroz within the Sasanian realm around AD 359. This authority, both through the virtue of his association with the troops from East Iran present at the Siege of Amida and through the appearance of his name on early Kidarite coins, is then connected to the realm of East Iran. His suzerainty in the region extended to the various local populations in the region, including the already known Sagesāni (Amm. Marc. XIX.2.3), the population of the province of Sakištan, former Drangiana. We can speculate that the invasion of the Chionites, whose king Grumbates was also present at the siege (Amm. Marc. XIX. 1.7), which is associated with the same period (de la Vaissiere 2012: 122) had initially resulted in an alliance which put Peroz, perhaps only in pretence, as the authority over the new population as well. This would match the evidence of Ammianus who puts Grumbates and his Chionites under the authority of the King, but seemingly also in charge of the rest of the East Iranian forces during the actual storming of the walls of Amida (Amm. Marc. XIX.2.3). It is shortly after this period that the Kidarites, as part of the Chionite tribes, rise to prominence and start issuing coins, initially in the name of Peroz and indeed showing his portrait with full Sasanian style beard and the ram’s horn crown (Pfišterer 2013: types 1A, 1B, and 4). A further type, showing a flat cap crown, influenced by those of Shapur III but with a beardless portrait, a characteristic of the Kidarites (Pfišterer 2013: 12A, 19, and 19A), represent a second stage of coin issues. These bear legends such as Bactrian *pirozo šao* (King Peroz) and *košano šao* (the Kushan King) showing the continuation of the tradition of issuing coins under the name of Peroz, perhaps a Kushanshah indeed.⁴ However, we might all in all conclude that the presence of a Chionite/Kidarite authority in the latter half of the fourth century is now confirmed by both textual and numismatic evidence. Further research into the ethnic/dynastic identity of Peroz and his relation to the Sasanian, Kushano-Sasanian, or Kidarites would of course need to be undertaken.

⁴ This is perhaps in parallel to the continuing tradition of issuing coins under the name of Heraus by the early Kushan authorities; Cribb 1999.

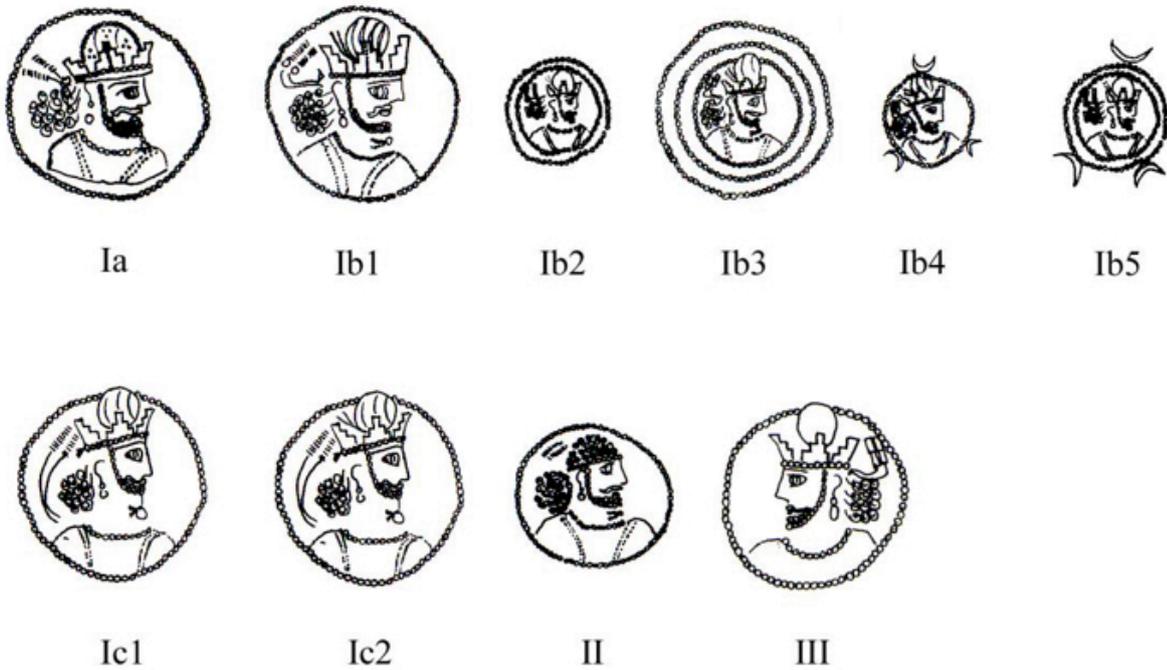


Image 1: Obverse types of Shapur II (after Schindel 2003: 212)



Image 2: Gold denar of Wahram (?) issued under the authority of "Kidarite Peroz" (Cribb 2010: 28)
CNG Triton XIX, Lot 2166

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