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A Survey of Two Inscribed Sassanian Seals

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Abstract

Sassanian seals and sealings were among the objects; used at all levels of society and administrative organizations of the Sassanian era, and thus they play a significant role in our understanding of various historical aspects of this period. The motifs carved on Sassanian seals indicate the beliefs and thoughts of their owners, among which are abstract geometric motifs, introduced under the title of monograms. There are different ideas regarding the meanings of these motifs; they are generally identified as indescribable symbols; but some consider them to be modified forms of the Pahlavi letters, which mysteriously contain the concept of an inscription at their core and are introduced under the title of the monogram. Seals containing these motifs, as Nishan seals, are sometimes seen with an inscription. The use of Nishans on pre-Islamic Iranian seals is rather complicated, and it may not be easy to understand the owner's intention in using these motifs on their seals. In this article, an attempt is made to examine two seals kept in the Bu Ali Sina Museum in Hamedan. Through library studies and field research, the author attempts to read the inscriptions and find the relationship between the signs and the inscriptions around them while examining the seal designs.

Keywords: Seal, Sassanian, Sealing, Monogram, Inscription, Bu-Ali Sina Museum.

Introduction

Seals were widely used in various eras, especially in the Sassanian period, for sealing royal decrees and personal goods (Brunner 1978:9; Gyselen, 2007:8). The owners of Sasanian seals ranged from rulers, clerics, and other officials to people from various social groups and classes (Gorelick 1996:76). Sassanian seals were typically made of agate stones (Soleimani and Yamani), hematite and jade. Lapis lazuli, rock crystal and sometimes limestone were also used in making these seals (Gyselen, 1993:30; Bivar, 1969:35; Vandenberg, 2015: 224; Grishman, 2010: 241). Engravers used a special type of drill with a diamond head, made of copper to carve the stones, which could cut 1.5 to 13.4 mm deep. The use of diamonds in special sealing drills is attributed to the Sasanians for the first time (Gorelick & Gwinnett 1996: 76).

Two types of seals were used in this period: personal seals; and administrative seals, both of which were used instead of signatures. Many seals of this period contained motifs such as animal, birds, and human figures, which were sometimes accompanied by an inscription containing the name of a person, a geographical location, or a wish (Frye 1973: 47). According to the Pahlavi text of *Mātikān Hezār Dādestān*, the first administrative seals were made under Qabad I. For the first time, a seal was prepared for Mobad and Amargar in the time of Qabad I, and the referee's seal was also made for the first time by order of Khosrow I (Perkhanian 1997:214-215).

Seals of Nishan constitute a large group of Sassanian seals. The use of symbolic signs on these seals has abstract concepts that are difficult to understand. Emblems have been used for a long time by different ethnic groups from Sarmatians to Iranians as a means of identification. In ancient Iran, they usually included lines, circles, and other geometric shapes. This group of signs, called *Tamgha* in Turkish, are used more in some countries, such as Mongolia and Kazakhstan, than in other places. The monetary system of ancient Greece was one of the pioneers of the use of *Tamgha*, and the use of these signs on Greek coins had an impact on their use on Iranian coins and seals (Manassero, 2013:62; Gyselen, 2007:8). In Iran, the middle period was introduced with the word *Nishan*. Some believe that the use of the word *Nishan* for Iranian signs is a better option (Manassero, 2013: 60; Gignoux, 1972: 30).

Nishans were used as “identification marks of a person, family, status and rank” on the crowns and hats of high-ranking officials, silver dishes,

plaster plaques and seals (Gobel 1384: 137). Nishan seals or monograms are seals in which words or abbreviations are combined into a design or pattern. It is almost impossible to separate some monograms and specific designs from geometric patterns; (Frye, 1973: 54).

In the Parthian period, just one dynasty before the Sassanian period, eagle or crescent moon patterns can be seen on the helmets of the members of this dynasty in southern Iran; while the Parthian kings themselves used elements such as horns and stars or similar motifs. Later, Sassanian kings decorated their crowns with stars, crescents, orbs, and bird wings. These signs can also be seen in Sassanian reliefs, horse tools, dishes and plaster casts. The motifs of these seals are the Parthian emblems with more foliage. At the end of the Sassanian period, there was a tendency towards monographic elements which led to the use of abbreviations (Brunner, 1978: 123). Usually, at the top of the motifs, there were images of cow horns, ram horns, crescent moon, stars, rings and anchors. These signs probably had cosmological concepts and on the one hand, expressed the social status of people (Kamioka, 1976:207; Shepherd, 2013:344).

It is a bit difficult to distinguish whether the Nishans/emblems/monograms on the seals are family Nishans or a reflection of personal taste (Frye, 1973: 47). There is however, a difference of opinion in the interpretation of the concepts of these symbols.

One of the complications of reading glyphs is that the Pahlavi letters are written more or less in their original form and are often changed, on the other hand, sometimes the characters in the Pahlavi script represent several phonetic values. For example, the letters m and n are rarely seen in their true form and are generally seen as deformed. The letters y/z/r/w cannot be distinguished from each other. The letters b, g and n can also hard to differentiate. However, the reading of these characters will be possible. Other letters such as d, k, and h, appear completely in their true form. Some alphabetic signs, like t, p and č are very rare despite their wide use in proper names. This is likely due to their deliberate placement or absence, or they may have been displayed with non-alphabetic indices (Gyselen & Monsef, 2012, 156).

Pierre Jean de Menasce (1960: 311) presented a hypothesis, based on alphabetic signs that the letters of the alphabet in this type of sign correspond to the name of the owner of the seal in its inscription. To confirm this hypothesis, only the seals with inscriptions that have the names of their

owners can be selected for comparison. Philippe Gignoux (1972: 187) however believed that sometimes alphabetic signs refer to the first letters of a name and are considered a form of contraction for that name. He disagreed with the idea that some elements in these motifs, such as the crescent or the two hooks at the end of the horizontal bar, have any identity with letters. This opinion differs from that of other researchers.

Frye has briefly discussed the exact details of different types of painters in his book (1973: 53-57), and, reading the seals of the Qasr-I-Abu Nasr, several theories have been proposed regarding the Nishans and their identification, but none has been published. As Frye also emphasizes, there may or may not be a connection between the alphabetic signs and their accompanying inscription. To accurately identify alphabetic signs, it is necessary to have more solid documentation of inscribed seals (Gyselen, 2007:87-88).

The motifs of the Nishans usually consisted of symmetrical halves (Unvala, 1953:12); according to Soudavar (1384: 427), the combined role of the moon is a ring and a line is a sign of the two states of the moon; however Lokunin believes that these signs may have been special signs for fire temples, engraved on the seal of Mowbedan (Zoroastrian clerks). This opinion has been rejected today. These seals were also used by other people (Borisov & Lukonin, 1963:195; Gobel, 1384: 108; Pope, 1387: 997).

Gobel (1384:67) considers most of these seals to belong to the clergy class. These seals were used to seal administrative documents in fire temples. Most of the seals obtained from this type of seal belong to the fire temples of Takht-e- Soleiman and Qasr-i-Abu Nasr. Therefore, they are classified as administrative seals.

In the works of the great Iranologist Rika Gyselen, monograms are divided into two categories: 1) symmetrical and asymmetrical monograms and 2) letter monograms. Initially, the main factor for this division was a purely external criterion, i.e., their symmetric or asymmetric feature, in monograms consisting of a symmetric structure, the letters are engraved symmetrically concerning the middle vertical axis. In general, these types of monograms were known as fixed and symbolic combinations. According to what is depicted in different catalogues related to Sasanian seals, some of these structures are very common and others are rare or very rare. This is also true for monograms with asymmetrical combinations. Although, the degree of generality and rarity of the structures of these two types of monograms is not the same (Gyselen & Monsef, 2012:153-157).

Usually, the structure of monograms consists of two types of elements: linear elements, non-alphabetic motifs and alphabetic elements. One of the elements used in Sasanian seals is linear symbols, shown with small letters a, b, c (Fig.1).

The most non-alphabetic motifs used in Sasanian seals are the image of the heart, circle and crescent moon. Rika Gyselen has represented these elements by capital letters F, G, and H (Fig. 2).

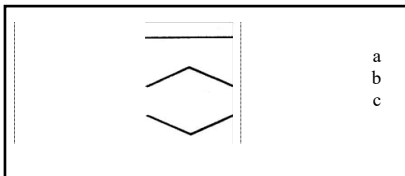
Most of the time, in cases where the structures consist of only linear elements, a crescent is printed on the crown of the monogram, and other non-alphabetic elements - i.e. circle and hearts- are used less frequently than the crescent moon in these structures. Sometimes, the motif of Nishan seals is derived from a combination of linear and non-alphabetic elements.

Background

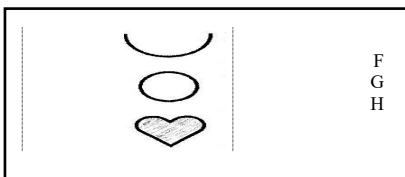
Sasanian seals were first seriously investigated at the end of the 18th century; when Silvestre de Sacy established the foundation for deciphering the Pahlavi script in 1793. Following this, linguists succeeded in reading the inscriptions of some Sasanian seals. Over the years, research has been conducted on different collections of Sassanian seals, including those of the Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, the British Museum, the Numismatic Society of America, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, some German museums (such as Braunschweig, Göttingen and Kassel, Hamburg, Hannover), Geneva, the National Library of France, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Royal Museum of Art and History; in Brussels, the Walters Art Gallery; in Baltimore, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; the National Museum in Amsterdam, and other collections in Leiden (Gyselen 2007: 2-5), among others. Sporadic investigations have also been conducted on Nishan seals, notably by two great scientists, Rika Gyselen and Philippe Gignoux; in the present era. Of the two seals discussed in this article, one has been briefly described in the author's previous article, while the information on the other two has not been published so far.

Hypothesis and research question: Non-alphabetic symbols such as the upper crescent, circle and heart can also be included in the readings of the scribes of these two seals, giving them an alphabetical value.

Are the scribes in these two Sasanian seals related to the inscriptions surrounding them? What is the alphabetical value of the images on these stamps?



▲ Fig. 1: Linear symbols (Gyselen & Monsef, 2012:153).



▲ Fig. 2: Non-alphabetic motifs (Gyselen & Monsef, 2012: 153).

Research Methodology: In the current research, information was collected through documentary method and based on library and field studies.

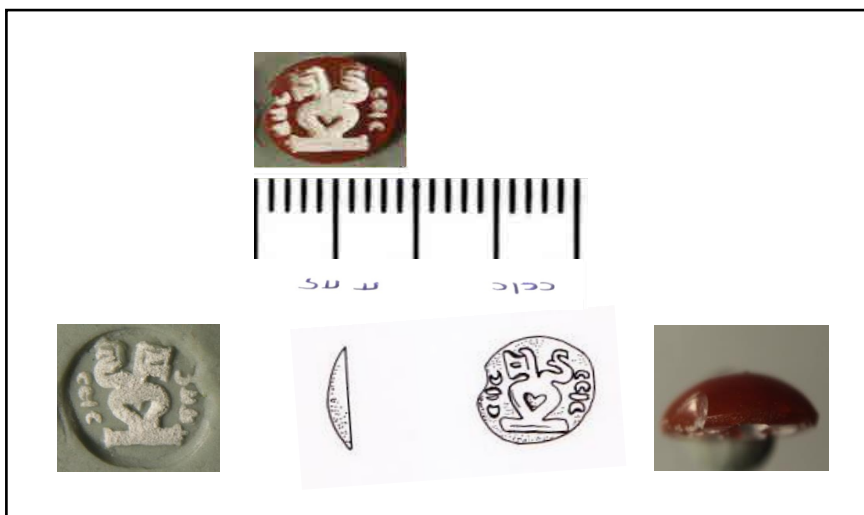
Seals of the Bu-Ali Sina Museum

The first seal of this collection with registration number 4586 (Fig. 3). The seal has a convex back with a diameter of 8 mm and a weight of 19 grams, and is made of brown agate, in which a threaded hole is embedded. The character of this seal with a structure consisting of a line, a crescent and a heart represents the character of an address seemingly decorated with letters of the alphabet. The final part of the symbol in this seal is a horizontal bar with a heart placed on it, which forms an almost symmetrical pattern. The heart pattern that leads to a pattern similar to the letter “a” for “a” on one side and another pattern similar to the letter “h” for “h” can be seen on the opposite side. Like the Nishans used in Sassanian seals, as mentioned earlier, this emblem has a special complexity. The motifs used in this Nishan cannot be easily interpreted. On the other hand, the crescent and the letter attached to it can be considered a hook. On both sides of this emblem, two inscriptions are engraved from 8 o’clock to 9:30 and from 2:30 to 4 o’clock; Among them, according to the author, the following readings are more likely:

Left inscription: (ht: Ahd? / Ahad?)

Right Inscription: (snd: Sind/ ktk: kadag)

Probably the inscription on the left refers to the name of the seal holder and the inscription on the right refers to the geographical area of application of the seal.



◀ Fig. 3: Seal and seal impression, seal design and inscription (Photo by Mohammad Naghi Seyedi Tabar, designer: Leila Khoshmo)

If we consider the role of the sign in this seal about the seal inscription, the reading Ahd/Ahad for the left inscription and the Sind reading for the right inscription seems more correct. In this sign, the heart shape, which can represent the letters p, t and č (Gyselen & Monsef, 2012: 155), here represents the letter “t” with phonetic value “d” and the two glyphs above it on the left side represent the letter “a” The phonetic value is “a” and the right side represents the letter “h” (Ibid). The horizontal bar below the heart is either devoid of alphabetic value or represents “n” in the word “snd: Sind”. In this case, the emblem in this seal can be interpreted for both inscriptions, in which case the heart pattern is like the inscription on the left, and the glyph above it on the left represents the letter “s” and the horizontal bar represents the letter “n”. This word could be “kadag” too which means: house.

The second seal with registration number 4587, has a diameter of 11 mm and a weight of 3.7 grams (Fig. 4). The seal has a flat back and is made of brown agate. This seal is considered unique in terms of the motifs carved on it, has two marks in the center of the seal, one on the right side and the other on the left side. The sign on the left in the main seal is a pictograph of the word Ādur, where the sign represents the letter “a” and beside it represents the letter “t” and the sign represents the letters “w” and “r”. It also can represent the word “ard” in surrounding inscription. The elements of the insignia on the right do not seem to have an alphabetic value. It consists of a horizontal bar, a base, and a U-shaped pattern with turned edges. Between these two emblems, and in the lower part of the seal, there is a crescent moon and an eight-pointed star on it. On the star, one of the most frequent motifs seen in Sasanian seals, uniformly positioned where the back of the hand is facing the side and the index finger and thumb are very close together. Another crescent moon is also engraved on the right emblem, but in a smaller size than the lower crescent. The seal inscription is from 3 o'clock to 1 o'clock, in the lateral line. A possible reading of the inscription:

'lt 'ni t' y pn'h y m't
Ard-Anāhīd ī panāh ī mādar

The possible translation of the inscription could be: “Anahita”, holy patron of mothers.

Conclusion

The Nishan motifs in Sasanian seals are undoubtedly related to their similar



▲ Fig. 4: Seal, seal impression, design and inscription of the seal (photo by: Mohammad Naghi Seyedi Tabar, designer: Leila Khoshmo).

motifs in the Parthian period, such as the crescent moon, and the horn, which was used with more branches in the later period. The two seals in this collection consist of an inscription and a seal, and the relationship between the motifs and inscriptions in seals is different. In the first seal, the sign of the seal has an alphabetic value and it is possible to match and harmonize it with both inscriptions, which has rarely been observed in the research of the sign motifs so far. The second seal is distinguished from other seals in terms of the motifs used and the inclusion of a frequent motif in Sasanian motifs, i.e., the hand, which has two motifs, one of which has an alphabetic value and the other has no alphabetic value. In this case, the noteworthy point is that the word introduced by the scribes has no phonetic or semantic connection with the words used in the inscription, and it represents a frequent word (=Adur) in Sasanian seals.

However, the motifs of the Nishans are often shrouded in ambiguity, and perhaps more collections with many Nishan seals are needed to carefully examine them and resolve these ambiguities. Sometimes in these seals, we come across words that have not been seen in any historical document before. On the other hand, the difficulties of the Pahlavi alphabet, where one character may have several phonetic values, can also cause more ambiguities in the reading of Sasanian seal inscriptions.

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بررسی دو مهر کتیبه‌دار ساسانی

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چکیده

مهرها و گل مهرهای ساسانی از جمله اشیائی بودند که در تمامی سطوح جامعه و سازمان‌های اداری عصر ساسانی کاربرد داشتند؛ از این رو نقش به‌سزایی در درک ما از جنبه‌های مختلف تاریخی این دوره دارند. در میان نقوش کنده‌کاری شده روی مهرهای ساسانی که حاکی از باورها و اعتقادات صاحبان آن‌ها دارد، نقوش هندسی انتزاعی دیده می‌شود که نسبت به سایرین از پیچیدگی بیشتری برخوردارند. درباره معانی این نقوش اختلاف نظر بسیار است. عموماً آن‌ها به‌عنوان نمادهای غیرقابل تعبیر شناسایی شده‌اند؛ با این وجود برخی این نمادها را صورت‌هایی تغییر یافته از خط پهلوی کتیبه‌ای می‌دانند که به‌گونه‌ای رمزآمیز مفهوم کتیبه‌ای را در دل خود جای داده است و تحت عنوان «مونوگرام» که از در این پژوهش «نگاره نویس» خوانده می‌شود، معرفی شده‌اند. مهرهای حاوی این نقوش که به مهرهای نشان معروف‌اند، گاهی همراه با کتیبه و گاهی تنها با نقش نگاره نویس یا نشان دیده شده‌اند. کاربرد نشان‌ها بر روی مهرهای ایران قبل از اسلام با کمی پیچیدگی همراه است و شاید به‌سادگی نتوان با یک نگاه به قصد حکاک این نشان‌ها بر روی مهرها پی‌برد. استفاده از این نشان‌ها در ایران باستان و در جامعه‌ای که همگان قادر به خواندن و نوشتن نبودند بسیار حائز اهمیت بود. نظام پولی یونان باستان به‌عنوان یکی از پیشگامان استفاده از تمغا و استفاده از این نشان‌ها بر سکه‌های یونانی بر کاربرد تمغا در سکه‌ها و مهرهای ایران بی‌تأثیر نبود؛ نظرات متفاوتی درباره این نشان‌ها و ارتباط آن‌ها با کتیبه مهر و یا نام صاحب مهر وجود دارد. این جستار به بررسی دو مهر نشان که در موزه بوعلی‌سینای همدان نگه‌داری می‌شوند، می‌پردازد. نگارنده بر پایه مطالعات کتابخانه‌ای و پژوهش میدانی خود سعی دارد ضمن بررسی نقوش مهر به خوانش کتیبه‌ها و ارتباط میان نشان‌ها و کتیبه‌های اطراف آن‌ها بپردازد.

کلیدواژگان: مهر، ساسانی، مونوگرام، موزه بوعلی‌سینا، نشان.

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