

Some Aspects of Feudalism in Ancient Iran

When we come to late antiquity there exists a large body of excellent studies on kinship terminology, close-kin or incestuous marriage (Pahlavi *xwēdōdah/xwēdōdad*), the great aristocratic families, and social organization by a distinguished group of scholars including Arthur Christensen,¹ Touraj Daryaei,² Paul Frandsen,³ Saghi Gazerani,⁴ Bodil Hjerrild,⁵ Heinrich Hübschmann,⁶ Maria Macuch,⁷ Katarzyna Maksymiuk,⁸ Anahit Perikhanian,⁹ Parvaneh Pourshariati,¹⁰ Darab Dastur Peshotan Sanjana,¹¹ Prods Oktor Skjærvø,¹² Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina,¹³ Edward William West,¹⁴ and Józef Wolski.¹⁵ Rather than reviewing material already fully explicated by these scholars, I have chosen to revisit a topic that has been connected with the Achaemenids, Arsacids, and, particularly, the Sasanians since the nineteenth century—namely, the concept of feudalism in ancient Iran.

1. Christensen 1936, 311–30.
2. Daryaei 2013.
3. Frandsen 2009.
4. Gazerani 2016.
5. Hjerrild 2003, 2006.
6. Hübschmann 1889.
7. Macuch 1991, 2007, 2010, 2014, 2017.
8. Maksymiuk 2015.
9. Perikhanian 1983.
10. Pourshariati 2008, 2017.
11. Sanjana 1888.
12. Skjærvø 2013.
13. Vevaina 2018.
14. West 1882.
15. Wolski 1967, 1989.

FEUDAL TRAITS IN ANCIENT IRAN

Few specialists in medieval European feudalism have probably spent a great deal of time considering the historical debates about feudalism in pre-Islamic Iran. Yet this is a topic of considerable scholarly antiquity in Iranian studies. Nineteenth-century scholars, for example, who relied principally on the data provided by Herodotus and Xenophon, did not hesitate to deem the Achaemenid socio-economic system feudal. When the Belgian universal historian François Laurent wrote in 1861 that nothing characterized the Persian monarchy so much as its dependent satrapies, he went on to assert that this was feudalism minus the hierarchical principle of organization that defined feudal régimes in Europe.¹⁶ Similarly, in 1882, the French Semitist and historian of religion Ernest Renan claimed that the entire Persian Empire was one vast feudality.¹⁷

One of the first scholars to offer a broader sketch of what he understood by Iranian feudalism was the Danish Iranologist Arthur Christensen (fig. 12). In 1907, he argued that the origins of feudalism in Persia were to be found in the seven “clans privilégiés,” one of which was the Achaemenids.¹⁸ Below these, in rank, were a series of vassals,¹⁹ some of whom had been given land as hereditary fiefs by the great king, although their relationship to the satraps was unclear. Nevertheless, Christensen believed that feudalism remained undeveloped in the Achaemenid era, in part because the Achaemenid kings had a standing army—relieving them of the necessity of relying on levies raised by their vassals—as well as a centralized system of administration.²⁰

In the Achaemenid case, much depends on the interpretation of OP *bandaka* in the Bisotun inscription. König considered the *bandaka* to be literally the “bound,” in the sense that they were bound to the throne of Darius through vassalage.²¹ *Bandaka* was translated as “servicemen or vassals” and “bound ones” by Geo

16. Laurent 1861, 485. Cf. Held 1863, 334n280.

17. Renan 1882, 4.

18. Christensen 1907, 6. Already in 1879, however, Nöldeke (1879, 437) had stressed that the notion of seven clans or “houses” was simply a convention, albeit one attested in the Arsacid and Sasanian periods as well. Cf. Xenophon’s account of the trial of Orontas “before the seven ‘best’ Persians of Cyrus’s [the Younger] entourage.” See the discussion in Tuplin 2010, 51–52, 59n5. Marquart (1895, 635) noted that, according to Tabari, Kai Wištāsp installed seven hereditary feudal lords, making each one the ruler of a province. The number seven here is suspect, at best. For a discussion of groups of seven “witches, other demons and monsters, gods,” in Sumerian and Akkadian literature and religion, see Konstantopoulos (2015, 15). One is also reminded here of the seven journeys across seven mountains in the Sumerian poem *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (Vanstiphout 1983, 40–41) or the seven “brother warriors” in *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* (Civil 2003). Obviously, the number seven in these cases has a strong folkloric flavor.

19. Christensen 1907, 6–7. Cf. Christensen 1936, 14.

20. Christensen 1907, 7.

21. König 1938, 57n4.



FIGURE 12. Arthur Christensen (*left foreground*) and Henri Massé at the Ferdowsi millennial celebration in 1934. Photograph by the British poet and dramatist John Drinkwater. © 2020 The Nelson Collection of Qajar Photography; used with permission of John Ferreira.



FIGURE 13. Jacques de Morgan (1857–1924). Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

Widengren;²² “subordinate/vassal” by Iris Colditz;²³ and “bondsmen” by Wilhelm Eilers.²⁴ As Ernst Badian noted, “OP *bandaka*, one ‘bound’ to a superior, especially the King . . . is the term that Darius I uses throughout the Bisutun inscription to designate his senior army officers, most strikingly even a member of the ‘six families’ that had assisted in his *coup d’état* and hence held the highest position in the Persian aristocracy.”²⁵ Widengren emphasized that, when looking at comparable Neo-Babylonian terms, the simple translation “servant” or “slave” would be incorrect because it failed to indicate the semantic field of the term with its connotations of a military subordinate. This view is echoed by Wouter Henkelman, who stressed that “in Bisotūn [Elamite] *libar-uri* (sg., equivalent of OPers *mantetā bandaka*) is used for Darius’ generals and seems to denote ‘my follower,’ ‘my vassal’ rather than ‘my servant.’”²⁶ Darius also called Dādarši, satrap of Bactria, and Vivāna, satrap of Arachosia, *manā bandaka*.²⁷

For Jacques de Morgan (fig. 13), “the great vassals or companions of the supreme chief” in the Achaemenid Empire consisted of a class of nobility to which

22. Widengren 1969, 13–14.

23. Colditz 2000, 110.

24. Eilers 1988.

25. Badian 2000, 250.

26. Henkelman 2003, 105.

27. Schmitt 1991, 63 [DB III 13] and 65 [DB III 56].

the younger branches of the royal family and the principal chiefs of tribes which had taken part in the conquest belonged. The seigniors themselves in their provincial governments surrounded themselves with their principal subordinates, descendants of those who had served under their ancestors at the time of the invasion. After the conquest each of the chief vassals was granted or received a territory proportionate to the importance of his tribe, and the same was done for each of the clans, then for the families. Thus a kind of complete hierarchy was established from the owner of a village or a group of tents up to the supreme master.²⁸

This was a characterization that, while flatly contradicting Laurent's perception of a lack of hierarchy, seems to owe just a bit too much inspiration to land tenure in late Qajar Iran as witnessed firsthand by Morgan.²⁹

In a similar vein, the German ancient historian Hermann Bengtson wrote that if one wished to identify the essence of the Persian Empire, it was as a kind of feudal state, even though it changed through time. The feudal-vassal system, organized down to the smallest unit, he suggested, served mainly to guarantee military service. The sovereignty of certain families, from which the highest ranking bureaucrats were drawn, was also typical of Achaemenid feudalism, he wrote. Individual satrapies often remained in the hands of the same family for multiple generations,³⁰ giving rise in some cases to satrapal revolts since the satraps assumed the role of great feudal lords.³¹ For Ernst Herzfeld, however, the origin of feudalism in Iran, a millennium before it appeared in Europe, according to his chronology, lay in the notion that Ahura Mazda distributed to rich and poor alike their share of land and wealth. In this sense, then, Darius was the feudal "Liege Lord," comparable to the much later "shadow of God."³²

The provision of a fixed number of days of mounted military service in return for a fief or *feudum* has often been cited as a foundational principle of vassalage.³³ The granting of land in return for service was not, of course, an invention of the European Middle Ages. The same phenomenon is attested in the ancient Near East in many different settings—for example, in Mesopotamia³⁴ and Egypt.³⁵ Geo Widengren noted in 1956 that the provision of a fixed number of cavalymen, archers, and chariot drivers in return for land could be found in the second millennium BC

28. De Morgan 1914: 580.

29. Christensen (1934) noted, in his review of Hüsing 1933 on feudalism, that analogies to more recent Persian and Turkish social systems, separated by thousands of years from the Achaemenid example, were unreliable.

30. Cf. König 1924 and 1926b on the Persian noble families. Examples of "dynastically occupied satrapies" included Phrygia, where the Pharnakids ruled; Caria, under the Hecatomnids; and Cappadocia, where the family of Anaphas was in power. See Klinkott 2005, 47.

31. Bengtson 1937, 115.

32. Herzfeld 1938a, 153.

33. See, e.g., Prestwich 2003, 301; Reynolds 2017, 5.

34. For one relatively recent discussion, see Brinkman 2006.

35. See, e.g., Winckler 1901b, 47, 79, 117, 160; Koschaker 1935b, 18–19; Bengtson 1937, 115–16; Brundage 1956; Widengren 1969, 8–12; Lafont 1998; and Jansen-Winkel 1999.

at Nuzi.³⁶ In fact, Codex Hammurabi §27 stipulated that so-called *ilku*-land—that is, land for service—that had been assigned to a soldier or, interestingly, a fisherman, who had subsequently been taken captive, could be reassigned to someone else, but if the original holder of that land returned, it would be restored to him, along with his service obligation.³⁷ In her exhaustive review of feudalism in the ancient Near East, Sophie Démare-Lafont cited only the Babylonian evidence when dealing with the Achaemenid period, where, indeed, numerous attestations of land-for-service or its alternative, silver-for-service, are attested.³⁸ Widengren, however, also noted that, judging by the testimony of Xenophon, the character of these fiefs seems to have changed by the late Achaemenid period and become instruments of financial speculation in the hands of craftsmen and workers who no longer supplied manpower for the military.³⁹ Apart from the fact that Xenophon's testimony cannot always be taken at face value,⁴⁰ the evidence cited by Widengren was, again, almost exclusively from the Achaemenid satrapy of Babylonia. More recent studies of Achaemenid feudalism have stressed the importance of vassalage and the pledge of loyalty or homage through *proskynesis* rather than fiefs,⁴¹ but Christopher Tuplin, to name just one scholar, has criticized the notion that Achaemenid feudalism emerged in the same way as it did in early medieval Europe, concluding that infantry were generally more important in the Achaemenid military than cavalry and that the Achaemenid socioeconomic context was “radically different” from that of Europe over a millennium later.⁴²

In fact, since the early nineteenth century, many scholars have expressed the view that the most compelling evidence of feudal relations in ancient Iran dates not to the Achaemenid but to the Arsacid and Sasanian periods. The renowned professor of Semitic languages at the Collège de France Étienne-Marc Quatremère (1782–1857), for example, considered the petty kings of Armenia, Media, Elymais, Adiabene, Bactria, and Gordyene all vassals of the Arsacid king who were obliged to march when he required them and to accompany him into battle, fighting beneath the Arsacid banner, even if, in some cases, their own power surpassed that of their sovereign.⁴³ Similarly, in the posthumously published fragments of his

36. Widengren 1956, 108.

37. Roth 1995, 86; Badamchi 2019, 150.

38. Lafont 1998, 620–28. On feudal aspects of Achaemenid Babylonia, see also Cardascia 1983; Stolper 1985, 25n96, 27–28, 54, 59, 69, 105, 150.

39. Widengren 1956, 109. The literature on these fiefs is extensive. As van der Spek (1985, 255), paraphrasing Dandamaev, wrote, “the fief system declined because the fiefs, in the course of time, were divided by inheritance, so that they became too small to support a soldier. . . . It seems that the obligation to serve in the army could be bought off with silver.” Cf. Dandamaev 1992, 16.

40. See, e.g., the discussion of the tendentious nature of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, which was written, in the opinion of Christesen (2006), to argue for military reform in Sparta, not as a biography of Cyrus the Great.

41. See, e.g., Petit 2004. Cf. also Petit (1990, 248–51) for a discussion of feudality and vassalage.

42. Tuplin 2010, 58.

43. Quatremère 1840, 341.

history of the Arsacids, Jean-Antoine Saint-Martin (1791–1832) reminded readers that, according to Strabo, Iran was governed by vassal kings of the Arsacid great king and that one such vassal within the Arsacid feudal structure in the early third century was none other than Ardašīr, founder of the Sasanian empire.⁴⁴ As Iris Colditz observed, although Widengren emphasized the comparability of Iranian and European social institutions, and consequently posited a developed form of feudalism in Iran, this applied only to the Arsacid period. Hans Heinrich Schaeder, however, proposed that not until the Sasanian period did a fully feudal society emerge.⁴⁵ In his 1943 study of Sasanian art, Kurt Erdmann suggested that forms of “kighthood” were developed in Iran long before they were in the West, which, he believed, owed much to Eastern influences later transmitted to Europe by returning crusaders.⁴⁶ Even so, Touraj Daryaee has expressed some reserve, noting that, while “the characteristics of land tenure or ‘feudal’ makeup in the Near East and in particular in Iran have similarities with European feudalism . . . there are major differences as well.”⁴⁷ But rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water, Josef Wiesehöfer has suggested that “although former studies on Sasanian ‘feudalism’ very often drew unjustified and wrong parallels between Sasanian Iran and the medieval European monarchies the theoretical parameters of studies on late medieval and early modern courts proved to be quite useful for cutting a swathe through the source material on the Sasanian court and on power and ‘state-building’ in Sasanian Iran.”⁴⁸

MARKERS OF NOBILITY

One feature of feudal society implied by the system of vassalage is the existence of a class composed of families whose wealth and land, as well as loyalty to a sovereign or his/her heirs, persisted through time—in other words, a form of hereditary nobility. Arthur Christensen conceived of ancient Iranian society, in the Avestan tradition, as reflected in the Gāthās, as four-tiered, consisting of the house (*nmana-*), village (*vis-*), tribe (*zantu-*) and province (*dahyu-*). In his opinion, during the Achaemenid period, the king occupied the position of chief of the land, while the positions formerly held by tribal chiefs were now the domain of satraps. Below them came the clan chiefs (*visbadh*) and heads of families or households (*mānbadh*),⁴⁹ which were identified eponymously, as Antoine Meillet emphasized, by their heads’ names.⁵⁰ In the Arsacid and Sasanian periods,

44. Saint-Martin 1850, 50–51, 174.

45. Colditz 2000, 111n18.

46. Erdmann 1969, 73.

47. Daryaee 2010, 401–2. Toponyms containing *diz-*, however, point to the existence of castles or fortifications (e.g., *diz-pul*, mod. Dizfūl). Cf. Hübschmann 1897, 19.

48. Wiesehöfer 2010, 143.

49. Christensen 1936, 13, 15.

50. Meillet 1925, 23.

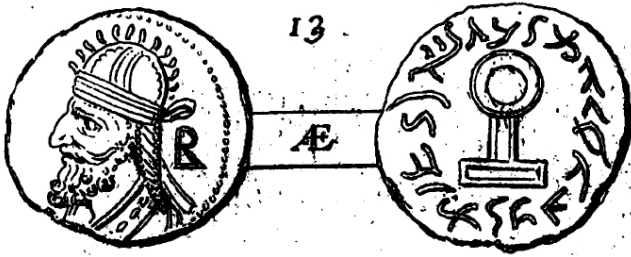


FIGURE 14. A drachm of Vologases III (after Pellérin 1767, Pl. 1.13).

however, we encounter both these magnates, and the names of great families, like the Suren, Karin, and Mehran, that dominated Iranian society for centuries.⁵¹

In discussing the significance of kinship ties in medieval Europe, which he believed had been over-estimated, David Herlihy found that the vast majority of charters recording land transactions from the eighth century onward rarely reflected “the permission or agreement of kinsmen”; moreover, “whatever the strength of family sentiment or the moral weight of the obligation to demand vengeance, the extended kinship group had little visible importance as an economic administrator, at least in regard to the management of land.” In fact, family names were rare until the late tenth century and remained so for the next few centuries. “Apart from the high aristocracy, there seems little consciousness of membership in an identifiable kinship group, and little memory of a common ancestry.”⁵² In Sasanian Iran, however, we are certainly justified in considering families like Suren, Karin, and Mehran exceptional, powerful kinship units, evidence of which Herlihy only saw much later in Europe.

In Western scholarship, examples of signs used by Parthian and Sasanian noble houses have been known since the earliest drawings of Arsacid and Sasanian coins and reliefs began appearing in publications by Enlightenment scholars,⁵³ even if these often went unremarked upon. Examples include those published in the *Supplement* to Joseph Pellerin’s *Recueils des médailles*, from 1767 (fig. 14), and Carsten Niebuhr’s report on his 1765 visit to Fars, published in 1778, in which drawings of the Nāqš-e Rostām I and VI rock reliefs⁵⁴ show such devices on the headgear of two of the attendants (fig. 15).

By the early nineteenth century, greater attention was being paid to these devices. In the 1822 account of his travels, Sir Robert Ker Porter commented on the very same heraldic devices on the rock reliefs at Nāqš-e Rostām that Niebuhr

51. These have been discussed extensively in the Iranological literature. For the names Suren and Karin, see, e.g., Schmitt (1983); and Pourshariati (2017). The Mehran family boasted the famous general Warahrān Čobin; see, e.g., Maksymiuk (2015, 191; and Syvānne and Maksymiuk (2018, 28, 30).

52. Herlihy 1970, 67–68.

53. See, e.g., Pellerin 1767; Niebuhr 1778.

54. These are modern numberings and follow those used in Vanden Berghe 1983.

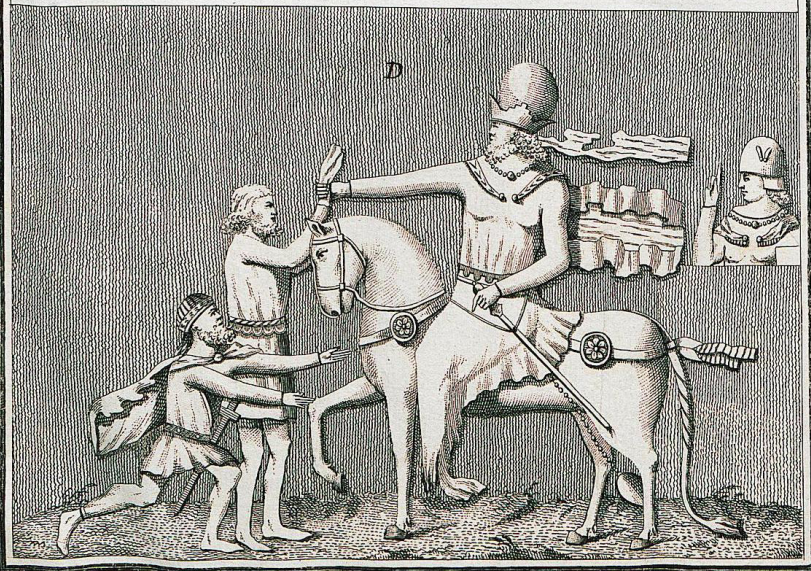
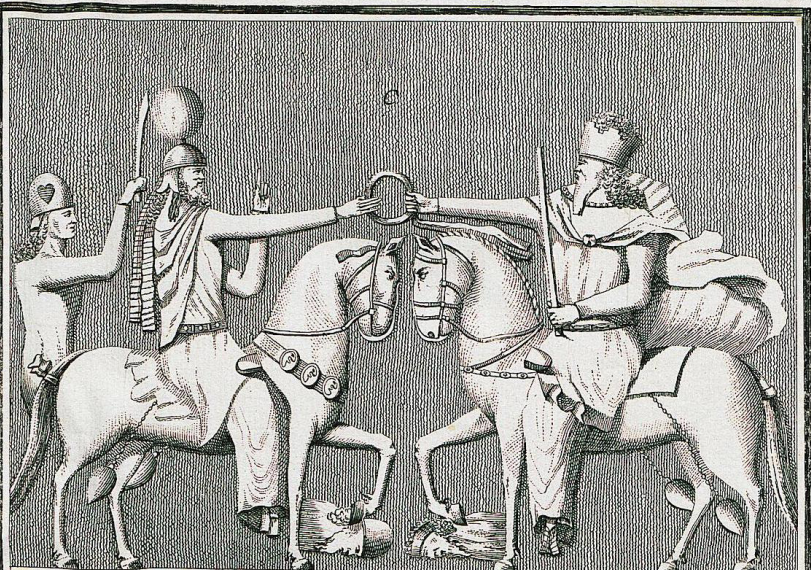


Abbildung der Figuren zu Nakschi Rostam .

FIGURE 15. Carsten Niebuhr's illustrations of Naqš-e Rostām I (upper) and VI (lower) (after Niebuhr 1778, 2: table 33).



FIGURE 16. Naqš-e Rostām I, by Sir Robert Ker Porter (after Ker Porter 1821, 1: between 548 and 549).

had illustrated half a century earlier. Naqš-e Rostām I (fig. 16), depicting the investiture of Ardašir, includes “a beardless youth, wearing a high round-topped cap, on which is some distinguishing mark,” which, Ker Porter thought, seemed “to place him in the same rank with the figure half covered with the scroll in the bas-relief of Shapoor.” On Naqš-e Rostām VI (fig. 17), showing Šābuhr I’s triumph, the bust of Kerdīr appears wearing “a round-topped cap . . . with a sort of badge on its side, like part of a flower.” Finally, on Nāqš-e Rostām II (fig. 18), which shows Warahrān II with members of his family and other dignitaries, the headgear worn includes some with “a crescent, with a small circle over it,” or “the crescent only,” or “again a mark on it not unlike that on the fanning attendant” depicted on another relief there.⁵⁵ Generally, Ker Porter suggested, “the different flat marks”⁵⁶ seen on the headgear of these reliefs “are likely to have been badges of the respective rank or function of the wearer.”⁵⁷

55. Ker Porter 1821, 541, 551, 559.

56. By this he meant they were carved in low relief.

57. Ker Porter 1821, 561.



FIGURE 17. Naqš-e Rostām VI, by Sir Robert Ker Porter (after Ker Porter 1821, 1: between 540 and 541).

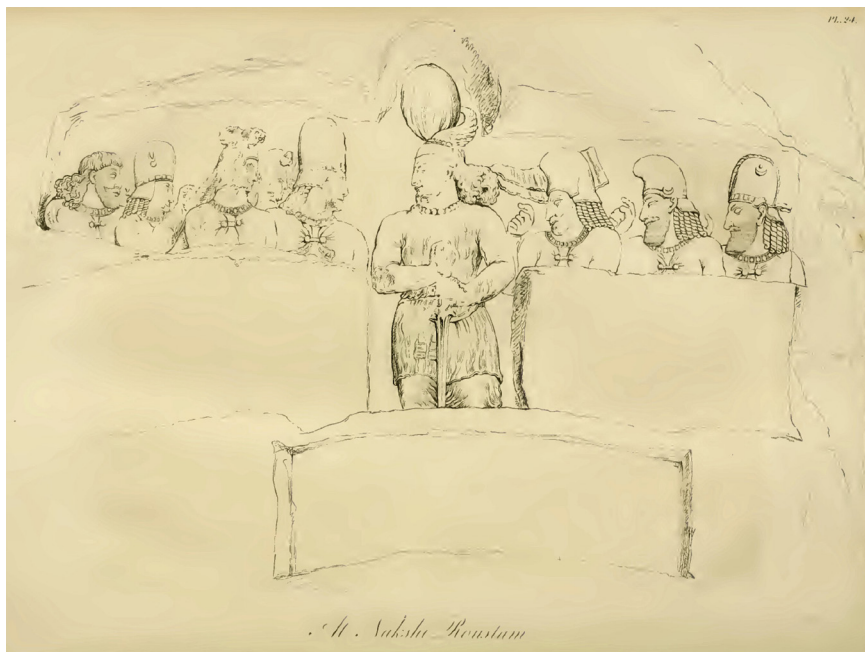


FIGURE 18. Naqš-e Rostām II, by Sir Robert Ker Porter (after Ker Porter 1821, 1: between 556 and 557).

These marks quickly found their way into studies such as Adalbert de Beaumont's 1853 monograph on the origins of European heraldry.⁵⁸ Even if Richard N. Frye's comparison between pre-Islamic camel brands and European coats of arms seems somewhat stretched,⁵⁹ it is undeniable that the use of signs to mark property and to identify families, lineages, clans, dynasties, and high-ranking individuals is historically widespread in both space and time.⁶⁰ There exists a great variety of what have been called variously "heraldic devices,"⁶¹ "*tamgas*,"⁶² "emblems,"⁶³ or, to use their ancient, Middle Persian name, "*nīšān*,"⁶⁴ and it has often been argued that these were the equivalent of later European familial *Wappenzeichen*,⁶⁵ "wappenartigen Zeichen,"⁶⁶ or *blasons*.⁶⁷ Here, following Robert Göbl, I will refer to these as *tamgas*, a word signifying "seal" in Old Turkic and "printing plate" in Mongolian.⁶⁸ It has been suggested, though, that these are secondary meanings, the primary being "a property-mark"⁶⁹ used by a family or clan on livestock, where it appears as

58. Beaumont 1853, 51–53, 109–10.

59. Frye 1987, 17. He was, of course, not the first to draw attention to camel brands. See, e.g., Genep 1902; and Artin Pacha 1902, 182–220, 235, 239–40, 242, with a bibliography.

60. The literature on this subject is voluminous. See, e.g., Beaumont 1853; Homeyer 1870; Andree 1889, 74–85; Artin Pacha 1902; Meyermann 1904; and Genep 1905.

61. Bivar 1959; Bivar 1970, 399.

62. Nickel 1973; Göbl 1976, 83; Yatsenko 2010a, 2010b; Manassero 2013.

63. Bromberg 1990, 1; Shokoohy 1994.

64. Göbl 1976, 83.

65. Erdmann 1969, 55, 73; Göbl 1976, 83.

66. Herzfeld 1926, 254.

67. Ghirshman 1946, 11. Cf. Ghirshman 1956, 73–74.

68. Erdal 1991, 378. For a possible Alanic etymology, see Manassero (2013, 60). Discussing the Kalmucks, Pallas (1776, 65) noted the use of a signet ring with the personal *tamga* in signing an oath. On the Mongols, Pallas (1776, 189) noted that the Khan signified his approbation of the decisions of his council with his signature or the impression of his seal (*tamga*) in red or black ink.

69. Laufer 1917, 117. Doerfer (2011) noted that "the *tamgā* 'mark of ownership' originally identified the communal property of a kinship group or tribe. It occurred chiefly as a cattle brand but also on such objects as vases; it was also scratched on stones bearing inscriptions. It contrasted with the *toğrā* (Middle Turkish *tuğrağ*), an individual's symbol (later often represented by a device of reign, valid for the respective ruler). After the Turks acquired a chancellery practice, *tamgā* came to mean 'the stamping of a document as the ruler's property,' hence 'originating from the ruler,' hence 'seal.'" Discussing the Kirghiz-Kaisak, Jochelson (1928, 129–30) noted:

The subclan crest or *tamga* may be regarded as its symbol. The crest is used as a property mark and is branded on the left side of the animal, i.e., the side from which the rider mounts, or cut on various belongings, as well as on the graves of deceased members of the clan. The *tamga*, represented by geometric designs, may correspond to a totem. Some of the Kirghiz of the Middle Horde have *tamgas* representing a "bird's rib" (*urdaś bii*), a comb (*tarak*), and a forked stick (*salak*). The antiquity of these symbols can be judged from the fact that they may be seen on the old Nestorian monuments and on the monument to Khan Kul-Jegi in the valley of the Orkhon, on which the inscriptions are in old Turkic characters, dating from 732 A.D.

Göbl (1971, 100) isolated symbols and *tamgas* as one iconographic category on Sasanian stamp seals. These he described as that which one often called "heraldic devices," and marks of authority.

a brand, and on other objects.⁷⁰ Such signs appear as status markers⁷¹ on, for example, the headgear of certain individuals depicted on the Sasanian reliefs described above, only when and if a particular family, lineage, or clan assumed a leading role socially and politically.⁷² Thus, this was a further development from the original function and meaning of the *tamga*.⁷³ In 1971, Göbl argued that despite the fact that the term *tamga* was only attested long after the Sasanian period, it was nevertheless the best descriptor available for those heraldic devices that already appeared on the helmets and headgear of early Sasanian elites and that, like heraldic coats of arms, served as unique, unambiguous identifiers of individuals.⁷⁴

The literature on *tamgas* has a long history. In Rašid al-Dīn's history of the Oghuz, we find a reference to the fact that Oghuz told his son Kün-Ĥān that each of the twenty-four sections of the Oghuz should have its individual sign and *tamga* in order that their rank, function, and title might be recognized and so as to avoid internal strife.⁷⁵ Similarly, according to the so-called political and military institutes of Temur, the world conqueror gave a dozen of his elite troops each a distinctive mark or *tamga*.⁷⁶ In 1928, Ernst Herzfeld suggested that *tamgas* were abstractions—abbreviated and simplified versions of originally figural depictions derived from the property ownership marks of previously nomadic peoples—that had evolved into clan or lineage markers, variants of which might be used by individuals or families. In this sense, he believed, they truly did mirror European heraldic devices. Whereas distinctive crowns or headgear were used to identify kings and gods, *tamgas* ("blasons") were used to identify persons.⁷⁷ *Tamgas* have also been interpreted as abbreviated titles or designations of rank.⁷⁸

TAMGAS ON SASANIAN RELIEFS

Already visible on the drawings of the Nāqš-e Rostām reliefs published by Niebuhr and Ker Porter in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the entire corpus of *tamgas* depicted on Sasanian rock reliefs was collected more than fifty years

70. As Göbl (1967, 203) noted, a *tamga* was a personal property mark, belonging to a family or clan. It was, first and foremost, a brand used to distinguish the horses, cattle, and sheep of one household from another.

71. Jänichen 1956.

72. As Gennep (1905, 106) noted, the transformation of a property mark into an armorial one only occurred where there was a social differentiation between nobles and commoners—for example, among the Kirgiz.

73. Göbl 1967, 204.

74. Göbl 1971, 109–10.

75. Jahn 1969, 45. Cf. Anonymous 1860, 112; and Nickel 1973, fig. 14.

76. Davy 1781, 309; Langlès 1787, 151; Csiky 2006, 462.

77. Herzfeld 1928, 130. Cf. Steindorff in Horn and Steindorff 1891, 1.

78. Yatsenko 2010a, 113.



FIGURE 19. Firūzābād I, by Eugène Flandin, 1851–54. Etching by Auguste Alexandre Guillaumot. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-8f8c-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

ago by Erich F. Schmidt.⁷⁹ Those seen on Ardašir I's battle relief at Firūzābād, where three pairs of combatants appear, have attracted particular attention (fig. 19).⁸⁰ The lead combatant is Ardašir, shown unhorsing the last Arsacid king, Ardavān or Artabanus. Herzfeld was particularly struck by the *tamga* covering Ardašir's horse,⁸¹ which Roman Ghirshman thought represented the ring and ribbons, or crown and diadem, given by Ahuramazdā to the king in investiture scenes.⁸²

The crown and diadem⁸³ shown in investiture scenes are not confined to the reliefs of Ardašir, however, as those commemorating the investitures of Narseh, Šābuhr II, and Xosrow II clearly show. For Richard N. Frye, the *tamga*'s placement on the horse ridden by Xosrow II in the great grotto at Tāq-e Bostān IV (fig. 20) was also telling. As he noted, "Since a *tamgha* was used by Turks and Mongols in branding horses, it is perhaps not inappropriate that the first of the Sasanian signs [first by virtue of its use by Ardašir, founder of the Sasanian empire] is also found on the flank of a horse on a Sasanian relief at Taq-i Bostān."⁸⁴ In fact, in 1938, Herzfeld had suggested that the presence of Ardašir's "Diadem-Zeichen" on the horse identified since the time of Hamd-Allah Mostawfi (c. 1281–1344) as Shabdīz, "black as night,"⁸⁵ Xosrow's famous steed, could imply that Ardašir, the founder of the Sasanian Empire, had also established a royal stud, from which Xosrow's horse

79. See Schmidt 1970, table 5.

80. Hinz 1969, 115. For excellent illustrations and discussion of the entire relief program, see also Gall 1990.

81. Herzfeld 1926, 254.

82. Ghirshman 1946, 9.

83. Kaim 2009, 405.

84. Frye 1963, 176.

85. Mostawfi called Taq-e Bostan the "Stall of Shabdīz." See the discussion in d'Anville (1761, 162); and Silvestre de Sacy (1793, 235–36). Cf. Potts 2018b, 587; Potts 2022c, 251; Thomas 1873a, 84; Jackson 1920, 12.

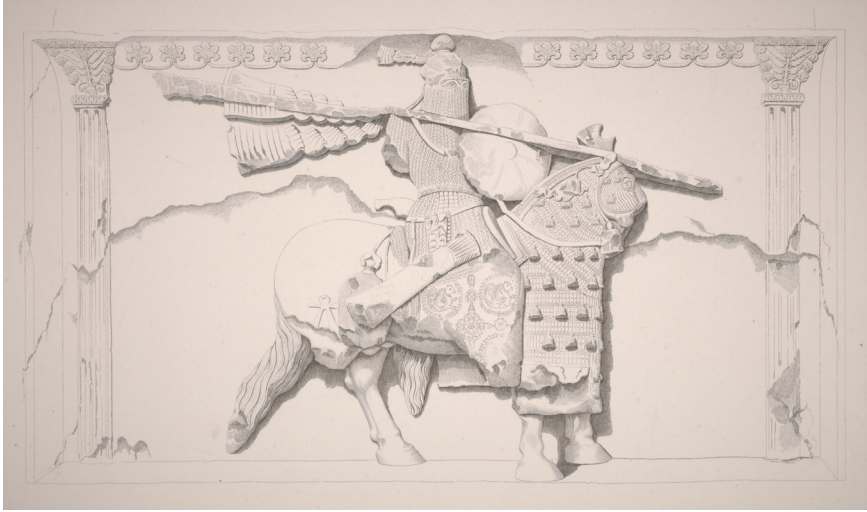


FIGURE 20. Tāq-e Bostān IV, by Eugène Flandin, 1851–54. Etching by Auguste Alexandre Guillaumot. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-8f61-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

FIGURE 21.
Vologases IV Æ
tetrachalkon from
Edessa. BMC 96,
Sellwood 84.134.
Used with permis-
sion of wildwinds
.com, ex cngcoins
.com, Auction 88,
Sept. 2011.



came several centuries later, bearing what had originally been Ardašīr's brand.⁸⁶ If this device was, in fact, derived from the crown and diadem used in investiture ceremonies, then its appearance at Firūzabād may reflect Ardašīr's desire to underscore his legitimacy when appearing in battle, even though he was the challenger and not, at that point, the legitimate king.

Roman Ghirshman, who called the device on Ardavān's horse "the emblem of the Parthian king, a ring placed upon a support," also noted that it was attested on the coinage of the Arsacid kings Vologases III⁸⁷ and IV (fig. 21), as Herzfeld had

86. Herzfeld (1938b, 108) suggested that Ardašīr's *tamga* became almost a family sign, used by his son Šābuhr I, alongside his own; both were used by his grandson Narseh, as if he wanted to declare his legitimate right to the throne, and later by Warahrān (III) and Šābuhr II. Then, after a long gap, it reappeared on Xosrow's mount.

87. Ghirshman 1946, 8–9n3, referring to Morgan, *Numismatique orientale*, p. 168, fig. 180C.

already observed.⁸⁸ It is also emblazoned on Ardavān's headgear at Nāqš-e Rostām. In a slim monograph heavily criticized by Robert Göbl for its superficiality, the German archivist Hans Jänichen noted that the same device appeared on the coinage of Phraates IV and Vologases I, as well as Vologases III,⁸⁹ and it has been chosen by Fabrizio Sinisi as the logo for the *Sylloge Nummorum Parthicorum*.⁹⁰

A straightforward interpretation of these co-occurrences would suggest a familial relationship between all of these rulers, including Ardavān, but this would be incorrect since we know, for example, that Phraates IV belonged to the Sinatruclid line—that is, the descendants of Sinatruces who came to power around 78 BC and were probably descendants of Mithradates I. The “House of Vologases I or Vologasids,” however, represented a rival line, descended from Artabanus II and his brother Vonones, which perhaps originated with Mithradates II.⁹¹ Given the animosity between these two extended families, one would not expect them to have shared the same *tamga*. As for the episodic, discontinuous appearance of the *tamga* on Arsacid coinage, Sinisi has suggested, following the late David Sellwood, that this reflected political expediency. These scholars have argued that the decision to illustrate the *tamga* on coinage was “associated with phases of political unrest, when Vologases allegedly decided to distinguish his issues from the coins struck by the rebels challenging his authority.”⁹²

Turning again to the Firūzabād relief: Ardašīr's son, the crown prince Šābuhr, is shown riding a horse covered with a different *tamga* than that of his father, one that adorns his quiver as well. Herzfeld referred to Šābuhr's *tamga* as the Arsacid *ankh*-sign embellished with a crescent moon,⁹³ while Ghirshman called it a crescent mounted on a ring support.⁹⁴ In his 1963 review of Göbl's publication of the Sasanian coins in the royal numismatic collection in The Hague, Frye discussed the *tamgas* of both Ardašīr and Šābuhr: “Inasmuch as the *tamgha* of Ardavān . . . is similar to that of Šāpūr, minus the crescent on the circle, we may suggest that the sign of Šāpūr is that of a noble Arsacid family, close to that of Ardavān, from whom Šāpūr's mother came.”⁹⁵ Frye is alluding here to the different traditions surrounding the filiation of Ardašīr's wife, identified variously as Ardavān's daughter (by Tabāri), a cousin (according to the anonymous *Nihayat ul-'arab*), or as the daughter of an unnamed Arsacid nobleman (thus Dinawāri).⁹⁶ In 1985 Frye's hypothesis was repeated by David Sellwood, Philip Whitting, and Richard Williams, who saw

88. Herzfeld 1938b, abb. 4.

89. Jänichen 1956, pl. 26. This had already been observed by Herzfeld 1938b, 108.

90. Fabrizio Sinisi (pers. comm.) confirms that the *tamga* on coins attributed by David Sellwood to Vologases IV appears on coins reassigned to Vologases III in Sinisi (2012, 63n251).

91. See the discussion of these familial/dynastic lineages in Olbrycht (2016).

92. Sinisi 2012, 63.

93. Herzfeld 1938b, 108.

94. Ghirshman 1946, 10n2. Thomas (1873b, 32) called this “the sun and moon in conjunction”; Hinz (1969, 119) considered it a ring on a T-shaped support surmounted by a crescent moon; and Bivar (1970, 399) referred to it as the “cap-device.”

95. Frye (1963, 176) is following a suggestion first made in Herzfeld (1938b, 108).

96. See Pourshariati (2008, 45–46) for a discussion of these sources.

two possible explanations for the origin of Šābuhr's *tamga*, which they unhesitatingly called a "dynastic symbol." The first was that it was derived from Ardavān's *tamga*, as Frye had suggested more than two decades earlier. The second was that it had "Gondopharean precedents,"⁹⁷ a notion that goes back at least to Herzfeld's 1938 paper on Tāq-e Bostān⁹⁸ and that both Saghi Gazerani and Marek Olbrycht have recently revived, suggesting that the *tamga* on Šābuhr's horse and quiver is the same as that used as a "dynastic mintmark on Gondopharid coinage"—that is, the issues of the eastern Indo-Parthian state that ruled in Arachosia, Drangiana, and Sakastan during the last century BC and first century AD.⁹⁹ Related to this hypothesis, Olbrycht has further speculated that Farn-Sāsān, the last king of the Gondopharid dynasty, was actually Ardašīr's father. Although he did not make the connection explicitly, Olbrycht implied that the Gondopharid *tamga* and that found on Šābuhr's horse and quiver are testimony to this familial tie. Gazerani, in contrast, following Herzfeld, suggested that the "Gondopharid symbol," as she calls it, was "a symbol of the house of Suren,"¹⁰⁰ the members of which were considered instrumental in bringing Ardašīr to power, according to Olbrycht.

There is a problem with this hypothesis, however, which Herzfeld, Gazerani, and Olbrycht all appear to have glossed over. Simply stated, the Gondopharid *tamga* and the *tamga* of Šābuhr I are not graphically identical. The open circle in the middle of the Gondopharid device is topped not by the crescent seen on Šābuhr's horse and quiver but by two diagonal lines, either meant to be read as individual lines or as a V atop an open circle. Particularly given the lunar associations of crescents, whether in combination with other elements, as seen here, or on their own, and their potential religious significance, I would be very reluctant to ignore the graphic differences between these two signs.¹⁰¹

Finally, we come to the third Sasanian nobleman depicted at Firūzabād who wears headgear decorated with a floral symbol, a *tamga* that appears on his horse as well. Ghirshman suggested this figure was the page,¹⁰² who is also shown holding a fly whisk behind Ardašīr at Nāqš-e Rostām.¹⁰³

A TAMGA ON THE HEADGEAR OF WARAHRĀN IV

Besides appearing on Sasanian reliefs, *tamgas* are visible on a large number of Sasanian seals and coins, where they are often referred to as "Beizeichen" (symbols).¹⁰⁴

97. Sellwood, Whitting, and Williams 1985, 34.

98. Herzfeld (1938b, 108) called it the sign of the dynasty of Sūrēn Gundopharr of Sakastān.

99. Olbrycht 2016, 24. For the use of this *tamga* by the Gondopharids, called "the Gondopharid sign," see also Shenkar (2017, 176).

100. Gazerani 2016, 22.

101. For a very different interpretation of this device, see Soudavar (2009, 427–28).

102. Herzfeld (1926, 254) called him the *Knappe*, or squire, of Ardašīr.

103. Ghirshman 1946, 11. Sarre and Herzfeld (1910, 69) wrote that the sign on the headgear was probably an indicator of rank.

104. See, e.g., Alam and Gyselen (2003); and Schindel (2004).

One particularly fine object, a large convex bezel made of amethyst, shows the bust of a Sasanian nobleman wearing a *kolāh*, the typical royal headgear,¹⁰⁵ with a *tamga* on it. The accompanying Pahlavi inscription identifies the individual as the prince “Warahrān [IV, r. 388–99] Kirmānšāh [‘king,’ i.e., governor, of Kerman], son of Šābuhr [III] the Mazdaean, King of Kings of Ērān and An-Ērān, who is of the race of gods.”¹⁰⁶ The seal has been known since the eighteenth century and offers an important window on the origins and development of scholarship in this field, as well as the history of collecting and connoisseurship and the repurposing of ancient objects in modern times.

The story begins in 1761, when the German gem engraver Johann Lorenz Natter (1705–63), from Biberach in Swabia,¹⁰⁷ catalogued the gems and seals in the collection of the 4th Duke of Devonshire.¹⁰⁸ The Devonshire collection, kept to this day at Chatsworth (Derbyshire, UK), was begun by the 4th Duke’s grandfather William, 2nd Duke of Devonshire, who succeeded to the title in 1707 and amassed a large coin collection. Both the 3rd and 4th dukes added to the collection. In a catalogue dating to 1908, the then Chatsworth librarian and later assistant director of the British School at Rome, Eugénie Sellers Strong (1860–1943), speculated that “the 4th Duke had relied on [Baron Philipp von] Stosch for many of his acquisitions, and Stosch was certainly familiar with the collection, for some of his opinions were quoted by Natter” in his unpublished catalogue of 1761.¹⁰⁹ Baron Philipp von Stosch (1691–1757), who spent much of his life in Florence and Rome,¹¹⁰ amassed what was almost certainly the largest collection of engraved gems and

105. For a discussion of this headgear, see Gyselen (1989, 152).

106. Ouseley 1801, 17–18. This was immediately confirmed by Silvestre de Sacy (1801, 358). Cf. Gyselen 1989, 160, no. Z2 and pl. 2.z2. On the basis of the “exquisite naturalism of the portrayal and the appearance of the eye and beard,” Harper (1974, 69; cf. Harper 1978, 142) suggested that this seal depicts Warahrān I, not Warahrān IV. Responding to this, Bivar (1985, 34) wrote that if this was correct, then Warahrān I “too, prior to his imperial accession, will have held charge of Kirmān province as Kirmānshāh,” but this is unlikely. As Shahrāzi (2016) stressed, Warahrān I, son of Šābuhr I, was Gēlānshāh—that is, king/governor—of Gilan near the Caspian Sea, according to the Ka’ba-ye Zardošt inscription. Warahrān IV, the son of Šābuhr III, however, was Kirmānshāh. See Klīma 2016. Herzfeld (1924, 1:77–79 and fig. 35; also Herzfeld 1924, 2: fig. 140) discussed the seal briefly, noting its resemblance to another amethyst seal of Warahrān I in St. Petersburg, which differed only in the more rounded form of the *kolāh*. The inscription on the St. Petersburg exemplar reads “Warahrān, the great šāh.” See Zakharov 1933, 270.

107. For his career, see Dalton (1915, xlix, with refs). Among his other clients were Catherine the Great, Christian VI of Denmark, and William IV of Orange. According to Mariette (1750, 144), Natter went from Rome to England and then to Iran, attracted by “Thomas-Kouli-Kan”—that is, Nader Shah. This was contradicted by Natter himself, who wrote, “From Italy I came to England; and went from hence with Mr. Mark Tuscher to Denmark, Sweden and Petersburg. But never was at the Court of Thomas Kouli-Kan, where Mr. Mariette has left me to seek my Fortune.” See Natter 1754, xxx.

108. Scarisbrick (1986, 252n27) cited Natter’s *Catalogue des pierres gravées de la fameuse collection de Monseigneur le Duc de Devonshire*, of 1761, p. 32, no. 27, where it was called a “very singular engraving.” The manuscript of Natter’s catalogue is held at Chatsworth.

109. Scarisbrick 1986, 241.

110. For the history of his collection, see, for example, Hansson (2014) and Pietrzak (2018).



FIGURE 22. The Warahrân IV gem cast
(after Tassie and Raspe 1791, 2: no. 673).



FIGURE 23. The Warahrân IV gem cast.
Collection of the author; photo by the
author.

impressions—3,444 originals and glass-paste copies and more than twenty-eight thousand impressions—in the world at that time.¹¹¹ After von Stosch's death, no less an important figure in the history of archaeology than Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–68) catalogued his collection. But von Stosch's adopted nephew and heir, Heinrich Wilhelm Muzell-Stosch (1723–82), who inherited his uncle's estate,

111. Hansson 2014, 21.

was not interested in keeping or expanding the collection and was instead eager to convert the collection into cash.¹¹² Accordingly, in 1766, he sold the vast majority of von Stosch's engraved gems to Frederick II of Prussia,¹¹³ while most of the twenty-eight-thousand-plus gem impressions or casts were acquired by James Tassie (1735–99) in Edinburgh. The *catalogue raisonnée* of this collection, which Tassie published in 1791, together with Rudolf Erich Raspe, author of *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, includes an engraving of a sulfur cast of the Warahrān IV seal (fig. 22) and gives its provenience as the von Stosch collection.¹¹⁴ Recently, a cast of this very same gem (fig. 23) was offered for sale.¹¹⁵

As for the seal itself, its provenience prior to entering the Devonshire collection is unknown. On the one hand, it may be that the original Sasanian gem was acquired by the 4th Duke of Devonshire from von Stosch's estate after his death in 1757 but before 1761, when Natter catalogued it at Chatsworth,¹¹⁶ and in this way the gem was not among the roughly three and a half thousand gems that went to Frederick II of Prussia. On the other hand, we know that, so great was von Stosch's eagerness "to have, if not originals, at least a copy of each known ancient gem,"¹¹⁷ that he may only have owned the impression, later acquired by Tassie, and never possessed the gem itself, in which case it must have entered the Devonshire collection from another, unknown source. Where the Warahrān seal may have originated prior to its arrival in Europe is unclear, although in discussing Parthian and Sasanian seals circulating in the late eighteenth century, Tassie and Raspe observed that they "come generally from Bassora."¹¹⁸

In any case, the engraving of the gem published by Tassie and Raspe in 1791 attracted the notice of Sir William Ouseley (1767–1842), and a decade later he addressed himself to "the Pahlavi inscription on a very curious sulphur described in Mr. Tassie's Catalogue of Gems, (No. 673,) as belonging to the Collection of

112. As Hansson (2014, 25) noted, "Muzell-Stosch, who wanted to travel in the Orient and elsewhere, immediately started negotiating the sale of everything with potential buyers."

113. Hansson 2014, 29. The Persian seals in the catalogue do not include the Warahrān seal. See Winckelmann 1760, 28–32; and Schlichtegroll 1798. Hansson (2014, 26n86) claimed that "the Christian and Persian gems went to the Cavaliere Francesco Vittori," but this is based on a misreading of Justi (1871, 24), who wrote only that the collection of Christian gems was sold after the baron's death, without making any reference to the Persian material.

114. Tassie and Raspe 1791, 1:66, no. 673. As Raspe wrote, "*Sulphur of Stosch* implies an impression taken from and preserved in that numerous collection of Sulphurs which the late Baron *Stosch* formed, and which, *post varios casus*, at last has found its way into Mr. *Tassie's* cabinet." See Tassie and Raspe 1791, 1:lxiv.

115. It is unclear whence this cast derives. A complete set of the casts is held in the Victoria & Albert Museum. The photograph of the Warahrān IV seal, made by the Beazley Archive in Oxford, is unfortunately partially in shadow.

116. Talbot 1861, 301–2.

117. Pietrzak 2018, 122.

118. Tassie and Raspe 1791, 1:67. This, of course, was only their point of sale, not their place of origin.

Baron Stosch.”¹¹⁹ Ouseley, however, said nothing about the device shown clearly on Warahrān’s headgear, nor did Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), the eminent French Semitist and Persian scholar, in his review of Ouseley’s work, which appeared in the same year.¹²⁰ In 1815, the Tassie impression and Ouseley’s publication of it were again discussed by Silvestre de Sacy. This time he noted that Warahrān’s headgear bore a symbolic device or monogram, but he made no attempt to explain it.¹²¹ Meanwhile, as Natter’s catalogue of the Devonshire collection from 1761 was unpublished, unlike the cast of the seal in the Tassie collection, the existence of the gem itself was presumably known only to the duke and whomever he may have shown it to.

This all changed in 1856, however, when the 6th Duke of Devonshire, a bachelor, had it set, along with eighty-seven other ancient gems, by the London jeweler C. F. Hancock in what has become known as the Chatsworth or Devonshire “parure.” This elaborate set of jewelry was made to be worn by Countess Granville, the wife of the duke’s nephew Earl Granville, at the coronation of Czar Alexander II in Moscow on 7 September 1856, which they attended as representatives of Queen Victoria. The set of seven pieces, incorporating eighty-eight ancient gems, consisted of a comb, bandeau, stomacher, necklace, diadem, coronet, and bracelet. A contemporary description of it lists “a very fine Oriental Amethyst Intaglio” as the seventh stone in Hancock’s comb. Five smaller gems were set in a row above three larger ones, the central one being the Warahrān IV seal.¹²² As a writer in the *Manchester Guardian* noted on 28 February 1857, “the comb has an elegant form in outline; its chief gem placed in the centre is a large, pure and lustrous oriental amethyst, on which is carved the head of the Persian King of the ancient Sassanian dynasty with the high cap of sovereign, and at the side is an inscription in this oldest known form of Persian. This gem is undoubtedly antique, the line of kings deriving their dynastic name from Sassan, the grandfather of Artaxerxes”¹²³ (i.e., Ardašīr).

Within a decade, Edward Thomas referred to the gem as “the Duke of Devonshire’s well-known amethyst,”¹²⁴ and it quickly entered the literature as “the highly-prized amethyst belonging to the Duke of Devonshire,”¹²⁵ “the great Devonshire amethyst,”¹²⁶ “the celebrated Devonshire Amethyst,”¹²⁷ and a “magnificent amethyst

119. Ouseley 1801, 17.

120. Silvestre de Sacy 1801, 358.

121. Silvestre de Sacy (1815, 214) noted that the headgear was adorned with a symbol or monogram that he was at a loss to explicate.

122. Hancock 1857, 5. Cf. Scarisbrick 1986, 247.

123. Anonymous 1857.

124. Thomas 1866, 241 and pl. 8 for an engraving of the seal.

125. Thomas 1868a, 349.

126. King 1872, 1:62.

127. Thomas 1873, 10.



FIGURE 24. The Warahrân IV gem (after Thomas 1868a, 350).

intaglio.”¹²⁸ Nevertheless, when discussing the Devonshire gem, Thomas lamented that he had “vainly sought to obtain a thoroughly satisfactory representation” and was consequently forced to publish a “woodcut,” which “gives a very artistic rendering of the general details.”¹²⁹ This was later superseded by a more accurate engraving by a Mr. Williams, with the initials “AMW” beneath it (fig. 24).¹³⁰ This can only have been Alfred Mayhew Williams (baptized 1832),¹³¹ one of the sons of Samuel Williams (1788–1854), the noted “Engraver on Wood.”¹³²

The very fact that Warahrân’s seal is made of amethyst is significant. Prior to the discovery of extensive amethyst mines in Brazil, the stone was extremely rare,¹³³ and most of the amethyst consumed in the Roman world derived from mines in the Eastern Desert of Egypt.¹³⁴ Given its purple color, amethyst was a “favourite stone for ruler portraits,” like the fine intaglio of Gallienus in the British Museum.¹³⁵ It is also interesting that “a dramatic revival of gem engraving, including the use of large amethysts and sapphires of fine style,” occurred in the fourth century during the reign of Constantine.¹³⁶ It has been suggested that in the Sasanian world, seals like the Devonshire amethyst, in the form of “large convex bezels,” were typical of senior officials and “may have been a royal prerogative.”¹³⁷ Given the political situation, it is unlikely that amethyst in late fourth-century Iran, when Warahrân IV

128. Westropp 1874, 88–89.

129. Thomas 1868a, 350.

130. Thomas 1873, 10; originally published in Thomas 1868b, 350.

131. Williams and his four siblings were all baptized in 1832. His date of death is unknown. See Brake and Demoor 2009, 678.

132. Anonymous 1854; Lewer 1917; Avery-Quash 2004.

133. Lüle 2011, 1.

134. Meredith 1957; Shaw and Jameson 1993; Harrell et al. 2006; Hirt 2010, 110.

135. Zwierlein-Diehl 2011, 154 and pl. 28.

136. Spier 2011, 193.

137. Gyselen 2007, 19 and note 77.

reigned, was sourced in Egypt. Either India or Sri Lanka, where sources also exist, is a more likely origin.¹³⁸

In discussing the *tamga* on Warahrān IV's headgear in 1868, Thomas mistook the "highly-prized amethyst belonging to the Duke of Devonshire" and the cast, published by Tassie and Raspe in 1791, for two different seals, noting that on the Tassie cast the "Parthian helmet is adorned with the self-same device as is seen on the more valuable gem,"¹³⁹ but he made no attempt to identify or characterize it. A decade later, Andreas David Mordtmann (1811–79) characterized the device on Warahrān IV's headgear as a Zoroastrian symbol.¹⁴⁰

It is tempting to suggest that the device is composed of Middle Persian letters in Warahrān IV's name, perhaps combined with an epithet, but this remains to be worked out. More complex monograms, which differ from the *tamgas* found on Sasanian rock reliefs, are combinations of letters, often in mirror image, upside down, or at an angle, and can actually be read, as Göbl,¹⁴¹ Menasce,¹⁴² Adhami,¹⁴³ and, more recently, Gyselen and Monsef¹⁴⁴ have shown. More than sixty years ago, Hans Jänichen documented seventy-five different monograms on Sasanian stamp seals,¹⁴⁵ and this number would certainly be greater today. These, as Richard N. Frye pointed out, "were usually representations of names, although the principle that all Sasanian monograms on seals represent the name or legend on the rim of the seals is in *many* cases demonstrably false."¹⁴⁶ In fact, in his 1798 treatise on monograms, Johann Christoph Gatterer noted that monograms, whether on coins, flags, walls or tapestries, seals or documents, could be *nominalia*, *titularia*, or *verbalia* (names, titles, or words) or a mixture thereof.¹⁴⁷ Sasanian monograms may not represent just one such category.

138. For the Indian and Sri Lankan sources, see, e.g., Gourley and Johnson 2016, 29–31.

139. Thomas 1868b, 111.

140. Mordtmann 1876, 199. Gyselen (1989, 165) made no attempt to interpret the *tamga* and simply referred to it as a symmetrically composed monogram.

141. Göbl 1967; 1976, 85–87 and pl. 48.

142. Menasce 1959. Yatsenko (2010a, 123) maintains, however, that "it is very difficult to interpret them as monograms containing name letters (as it was traditionally thought not long ago), for it is practically impossible to find within them any letters from the Pahlavi alphabet. But they are easily 'divided' into two or three elements, each of them being in most cases identical to the signs of other Iranian peoples. . . . I can suggest that in this case they are compound signs made up of the symbol of the father's clan together with the symbols of the families of the mother and the father." It is possible that the so-called anthropomorphic (?) motifs incised on some of the ceramics from Achaemenid Dahan-e Goleman are *tamgas*. See Zehbari, Afarin, and Haji 2015, 226 and esp. fig. 22.47–53.

143. Adhami 2012.

144. Gyselen and Monsef 2012. Very different interpretations have sometimes been suggested, resulting in polemics. See, e.g., Soudavar (2014, 373–74) vs. Gyselen and Monsef (2012).

145. Jänichen 1956, pl. 23.

146. Frye 1970, 266.

147. Gatterer 1798, 119.

MEANINGS AND SIGNIFIERS

Scholars have viewed the significance of monograms and *tamgas* in very different ways over the years. Whereas monograms have often been seen, implicitly or explicitly, as ciphers for personal names and titles, even a cursory survey of the literature on monograms in the non-Iranian world shows that multiple interpretations are often possible,¹⁴⁸ and monograms may be intentionally ambiguous.¹⁴⁹ *Tamgas*, however, often appear to be nonreferential abstractions, one notable exception being the *tamga* on the headgear of the priest (*mobed*) Kerdir, which resembles a pair of scissors or shears.¹⁵⁰ In theory, either device, whether *tamga* or a monogram, could have functioned like heraldic devices of medieval Europe, particularly those seen on the horses of Ardavān, Ardašīr, Šābuhr, and the page at Firūzabād. It is striking, though, that the nearly three dozen surviving Sasanian rock reliefs were commissioned by just nine of the thirty-one rulers attested between 224 and 651—namely, Ardašīr I, his son Šābuhr I, and great-grandson Warahrān II, Narseh, Ōhrmazd II, Šābuhr II, Ardašīr II, Šābuhr III, and Xosrow II. Furthermore, of those nine rulers who left rock reliefs, only two were depicted with a *tamga* on their headgear or other equipment: Ardašīr I and Šābuhr I. The

148. To cite just one example, nearly a dozen different explanations, all inconclusive, have been advanced to decipher the so-called TP (tau-rho) monogram on Herod the Great's year 3 coinage. See Jacobson 2014, table 1.

149. As in the case of Lady Mary Wroth's (1587?-1651?) "many-sided monogram," the letters of which "give us the first and last initials of four successive generations of Sidneys, beginning with Wroth's great-grandfather and ending with herself: William Sidney (WS), Henry Sidney (HS), Robert Sidney (RS), and Mary Sidney Wroth (MSW). These additional secondary significations would not have eluded Wroth, nor would the fact that the letters can also spell 'Philip,' reflecting her literary uncle. . . . These interpretations are possible readings rather than necessary or primary ones." See Braganza 2022, 144.

150. For his much-discussed *tamga*, in the form of scissors or shears, see Eilers (1974 and 1976) and Skjærvø (2011/2012), where a host of possibilities are entertained, none of them ultimately satisfying. Mackenzie, on the one hand, suggested that Kerdir's *tamga* might have been a pair of shears or scissors because these symbolized "his family's trade." See Mackenzie 1999, 257. Skjærvø, on the other hand, suggested that, if Kerdir was a eunuch, as has sometimes been inferred from his beardlessness (e.g., Hinz 1969, 228; Lerner and Skjærvø 2006, 116; Skjærvø 2007), then "the shears could have been a badge of honor," although castration by scissors, as opposed to a razor, knife, or red-hot metal rod (Wilson and Roehrborn 1999, 4324), appears highly improbable. Certainly, Kerdir's *tamga* does not resemble Roman castration clamps (for which see, e.g., Francis 1926, figs. 1-7). Grenet (2011, 127), however, argued persuasively that eunuchs could not be Zoroastrian priests, citing *Yašt* 5.92-93 and 17.53, which require "physical integrity," and suggested instead that being clean-shaven was a precaution against polluting the sacred fire by having one's beard catch on fire, a real danger since the recitation of prayers by the priest was performed very close to the flames. This sort of precaution recalls the amusing story of the British officer Henry Lindsay (Bethune), charged with training 'Abbas Mirza's artillery, who could not convince his trainees that it was safer to be clean-shaven than bearded when working with explosives. "One day, however, the chance explosion of a powder-horn in the hands of a gunner carried off the better part of the holder's beard, and Lindsay availed himself of the circumstance to gain his end." See Goldsmid 1880, 159.

other figures who bear *tamgas* are unidentified Sasanian elites or dignitaries associated with Ardašīr I, Šābuhr I, and Warahrān II, as well as the last Arsacid king Ardavān IV or V, the priest (*mōbed*) Kerdīr, and an unidentified opponent of Ōhrmazd II. None of the Sasanian magnates or officials depicted alongside Šābuhr I at Dārāb, however, has a *tamga* on his headgear. So, in brief, the selectivity we see in the distribution of *tamgas* on Sasanian reliefs would not suggest that these played the same role as the heraldic insignia of European knights did, and their significance for the characterization of Sasanian society as feudal is thus in need of qualification. Their episodic and, indeed, inconsistent use in Iranian late antiquity raises many questions. If they are deemed markers of feudalism, then many more societies of the first millennia BC and AD will have to be considered candidates for that designation as well. However important even the selective use of *tamgas* on the Iranian plateau may have been, it is an undeniable fact that on the steppes, from Inner Asia to Hungary, *tamgas* were more widespread in space and time than they ever were in Iran during the Arsacid and Sasanian periods.