

THE DEITIES ON THE KUSHANO-SASANIAN COINS

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Abstract: This article deals with Kushano-Sasanian coins, aiming to interpret the images of deities used on their reverses. The topic has occasionally been discussed in numismatic studies on the Kushano-Sasanian series, and some images have also been examined in archaeological literature on Central Asia. Yet Kushano-Sasanian religious imagery has never really been the subject of specific treatment. In fact, such series provide extremely interesting evidence of the religious imagery of the Sasanian period, due to the conventions which governed typological selection, since these allowed a more varied iconographic repertoire in comparison with what we can see on the imperial issues. Contrary to previous hypotheses of the phenomenon of syncretism produced by the supposed Bactrian religious specificity, the analysis results in a picture showing a fully Zoroastrian imagery, which absorbed iconographic features of Sasanian and Kushan derivation against the background of the presence of the new Sasanian power.

Key words: Kushano-Sasanians, Kushanshahs, Sasanians, numismatics, religious iconography, Iranian deities, Zoroastrian imagery.

The coin series struck by the governors of the former Kushan lands conquered by the Sasanians in the third century represent an extremely interesting phenomenon from several points of view. Their most prominent characteristic is the mixture of Sasanian and Kushan features, which provides researchers with material for various kinds of enquiries – from numismatics to history, to iconographic studies and the history of religions – that have so far only been explored in part.

Due amongst other things to the objective difficulties in the historical reconstruction and to the priority given to the analysis of the coin sequence and the resulting issue of attributing the series to specific rulers, Kushano-Sasanian coinage has been the subject of various studies that have always been of a strictly numismatic nature.¹ These have mainly dealt with relative as well as absolute chronology – the latter in the framework of the

¹ Herzfeld 1930; Bivar 1956; 1979; Brunner 1974; Carter 1985; Cribb 1990; Schindel 2005.

debate on the eras used in Central Asia² – and have only cursorily tackled other aspects. Among the latter, a topic of some interest is the religious imagery displayed by such series, namely the depictions of deities on coins of various denominations. The importance of this documentation lies in the fact that, contrary to standard Sasanian practice, the reverses of Kushano-Sasanian coins regularly display anthropomorphic depictions of gods, sometimes associated with the standard device of the fire altar of Sasanian derivation, sometimes together with the kings or even merely on their own. While largely due to the legacy of the Kushan coin tradition maintained by Kushano-Sasanian series,³ this translates into an unparalleled possibility for the study of Sasanian period religious imagery, which is notoriously less common on coins of the main dynasty.

Within the framework of a wider ranging work on Kushano-Sasanian coin finds to be published by Nikolaus Schindel,⁴ the typology of the Kushano-Sasanian copper series – which is especially rich in iconographic variety – is currently under investigation by the present author, the aim being a detailed treatment carried out applying a systematic approach. The results achieved so far have produced material for further elaboration, part of which is presented here, with account also taken, where necessary, of the gold and silver series.

According to the general reconstruction of the sequence of rulers determined by Schindel,⁵ the Kushano-Sasanian coinage begins with the series of Ardashir 2 and Ardashir 1,⁶ which constitute a group of their own to be dated around the 290s. They issued only copper series, all with striking reverse types showing two of the main yazatas of the Zoroastrian pantheon, Anahita and Mithra.⁷ A hiatus of several years was followed by the main group of Kushano-Sasanian issues, beginning with the Peroz series.⁸ The production assumed a more regular character, with copper series accompanying gold denominations, occasionally joined by silver drachms in the very early stages. The main mints were Balkh, where most of the series in gold were struck, and Kabul, both mints also accounting for the coining of copper series. Only occasionally were they joined by Merv and Herat.⁹

Indeed, this pattern of mint distribution is mirrored in the employment of specific types, at least as a general norm. Balkh is accordingly characterised by a reverse type that portrays a male god with trident standing in front of a bull, known also on coppers but mainly dominating the gold coinage. The standard typology of the copper reverses presents two variants of the basic type of the altar of Sasanian derivation with a human

² Above all thanks to the *Zeitschranke* defined by Robert Göbl, see 1984; 1993, 77–86; 1999. Cribb (1990, 176–177) also used the absolute chronology of the Kushanshahs to date the era of Kanishka. See also Schindel 2005.

³ Cf. Brunner 1974, 145.

⁴ Whom I would like to take the opportunity to thank here. All the attributions as well as the chronological reconstruction here follow Schindel, forthcoming.

⁵ Forthcoming, already proposed in Schindel 2005; 2012; 2014.

⁶ Here the custom of numbering the Kushano-Sasanian rulers with Arabic numbers is followed (cf. Göbl 1984, 80; 1993, 44). Types are referred to according to Göbl 1984, abbreviated as MK.

⁷ In Merv and Balkh respectively.

⁸ A single ruler with this name, whose series were previously conventionally ascribed to Peroz 1, 2, and 5.

⁹ All mints are attested by direct reference on some of the series, with the exception of Kabul, whose identification is a convention introduced by Göbl 1984 for a mint certainly located south of the Hindukush.

bust emerging from flames: apart from other differences, in Balkh the figure is normally seen in left profile, while in Kabul the bust is shown full on.

Beside these common types, there are also unique images, mainly belonging to the category of the so-called investiture scenes involving the ruler and a deity. Altogether these types bear depictions of no less than three different gods, in various figurative compositions.

The first such image is also the earliest Kushano-Sasanian reverse type, since it occurs on the coppers of Ardashir 2 struck in Merv (Fig. 1b).¹⁰ The ruler, immediately recognisable on the left thanks to his diademed crown,¹¹ is being presented with a diademed tiara by a standing goddess. She holds a globe-topped staff in her left hand, and is clad in a long robe reaching to her ankles, the shoulders covered by a cloak. While her body is depicted frontally, the diademed head is fully turned to the left in order to look towards the king, showing in profile the three-pronged rendering of the goddess' headgear, which must be identified as a mural crown. A Middle-Persian inscription surrounds the image, perhaps also mentioning the name of the deity,¹² but it has not yet been deciphered.



Fig. 1

¹⁰ MK 1029.

¹¹ Shaped like a bird, as used by Ardashir on his obverses.

¹² The inscription is long enough to include a reference to both the ruler and the deity, as is generally the case with similar types.

The same deity appears to be depicted on the reverses of copper series again struck in Merv by the following Kushanshah, Ardashir 1 (Fig. 1d).¹³ This time the goddess is portrayed frontally, seated on a high-backed throne with railings on the side and surmounted by a circular canopy, which suggests a temple setting.¹⁴ The deity holds the same staff in the left hand, and with the right offers a ribbed diadem. She wears earrings and bracelets on her wrists, and displays the long robe reaching to her ankles, its heavy folds emphasised on the lower legs. While no cloak is visible, the three-pronged headgear appears to be the same displayed by the goddess on the coppers of Ardashir 2, this time seen from the front and on a larger scale, which allowed the engraver to better reproduce the crenellated battlements composing the main elements of the mural crown.¹⁵ Here too a Middle-Persian inscription is visible around the image, even if the part engraved in the right-hand field has not been deciphered. In the left-most part, running roughly from 11 o'clock to 7 o'clock in an anti-clockwise direction, the words *'n 'hyt MR'T'*, "Lady Anahita," are legible, providing a clear key to an identification that, given the role of Anahita as a Sasanian royal deity, would already have been possible on an iconographic basis alone.

A second enthroned deity (Fig. 1f),¹⁶ this time a male one, is used on coppers struck by Ardashir 1 in Balkh.¹⁷ The figure is seen in an almost frontal view, slightly turned three-quarters to the right, sitting on a throne very similar to that of the seated Anahita used in Merv, with high back and side railings, although no arched frame is visible above. In his left hand the god holds the hilt of his sword, held vertically between his legs, which are clad in the pleated trousers typical of Sasanian iconography. The right hand is stretched forward to offer a conspicuous diadem, whose ties show the ribbed treatment ubiquitous in Sasanian imagery and that was also to be seen in the two previously described types depicting Anahita. The god has a moustache and a beard, while his hair is gathered on the sides in two spherical bunches, also common in images from Sasanian Iran. Finally, the diademed head is framed by a large rayed halo, the deity's main iconographic mark, which identifies the god as Mithra. In addition, an explicit legend in Bactrian can be read around the figure, *BOFO MIYPO*, "God Mithra."

The resumption of the Kushano-Sasanian coinage under Peroz after a break of several years¹⁸ brings a different pattern. Alongside a single issue of silver drachms struck in Herat,¹⁹ gold is introduced with dinars minted in Balkh,²⁰ accompanied by an isolated series from an unidentified mint located south of the Hindukush.²¹ Copper series appear to be produced in both Balkh and Kabul.

¹³ MK 1028.

¹⁴ Cf. Göbl 1984, 40, followed by Cribb 1990, 159, 186. Also Carter 1985, 225, 230.

¹⁵ Needless to say, the crown appears three-pronged or with just three battlements due to the perspective of the image, but the full complement was of four battlements, one each on front and rear and the two lateral ones.

¹⁶ MK 1114.

¹⁷ The very same type is employed on a unique gold dinar of Ardashir published by Cribb 1990, 186, no. 14. The authenticity of this coin has been questioned, see Göbl 1993, 47; Schindel, forthcoming.

¹⁸ Peroz 1 = 2 = 3 = 5, see Schindel, forthcoming.

¹⁹ MK 1030. See Schindel, forthcoming.

²⁰ MK 702, 703–706.

²¹ MK 555.

All denominations bear interesting types on their reverses. The dinars introduce the type that was to dominate gold production throughout the Kushano-Sasanian series, namely the standing god with bull (Fig. 2). The full-size deity is depicted in frontal view, with a bull seen in left profile standing behind him. The god holds a trident in his left hand and offers a diadem with his right. He has a full beard and long hair, with the hair on top of his head being depicted as dishevelled, while a circular halo is visible around the head. The clothing consists of a belted long-sleeved tunic reaching to above the knees, and baggy trousers pleated on the sides. The image is surrounded by a Bactrian inscription reading OOPZOANΔO IAZAΔO, corresponding to the Middle Persian *bwrz 'wndy yzdty* legible on other Kushano-Sasanian series and variously translated as “exalted god” or “the god who acts in the high regions.”²² In the last version the appellative has been regarded as recalling Avestan, “(the one) who acts in the superior region” borne by the god of the atmosphere Vayu, i.e., *Vaiiuš Uparō.kairiō*, “the Wind who acts in the high region.” Accordingly, the legend has been interpreted as a reference – more or less direct – to the deity depicted, and in particular to its Kushan forebear, the Bactrian Vayu, Wesh, explicitly named on Kushan coins as Oesho.²³ Indeed the main iconographic mark of the Kushano-Sasanian deity, the trident, perfectly matches the imagery of Oesho, as do the bull and the dishevelled hair. Yet there are differences, since no multiple heads or arms are associated with the Kushano-Sasanian type, and other features of the Kushan Oesho are also missing, such as the Indian style clothing,²⁴ the secondary attributes and the erect linga.



Fig. 2a-b



Fig. 3a-b

²² Bivar 1956, 16; 1979a, 746; Humbach 1975, 408; Tanabe 1991/1992, 59.

²³ Tanabe 1991/1992, 61–62; Grenet 1994, 43; cf. also Cribb 1997, 29–30.

²⁴ Cf. Bivar 1956, 15.

In addition to such standard series, a further gold issue from another mint is attributed to Peroz, of which only one specimen is known,²⁵ and which shows the combination of a rather peculiar rendering of the ruler's image on the obverse with a unique reverse type. The latter depicts an enthroned Ardokhsho-type goddess of Kushan style (Fig. 3b), closely imitating the images of the enthroned goddess of the late Kushan series. The deity is portrayed frontally, with a circular halo around her head and her main iconographic attribute, the cornucopia, held in the left hand. The only significant difference to the Kushan model is that with her right hand the deity offers not a diadem, but a diademed mitre similar to those worn by late Kushan kings.

Another rather unusual type is used by Peroz on the reverses of silver drachms struck in Herat (Fig. 4b),²⁶ reproducing one of the so-called investiture scenes. The king, recognisable by all his standard paraphernalia, is visible on the left, as seen in the type with Anahita on coppers of Ardashir 2. He is pouring offerings on a small fire burner with his right hand and addressing a figure in front of him with the gesture of the bent left forefinger well known in Sasanian imagery. The figure on the right appears to be a male deity, despite the long robe reaching to the ankles,²⁷ and sits in a three-quarter view on a high-backed throne with side railings similar to those of Anahita and Mithra already seen on coppers of the first two Kushanshahs. In his left hand the god holds a spear, and offers a diadem to the king with his right. The god is short haired,²⁸ and in all likelihood fully bearded, as evidenced by comparing the image of these coins with other depictions of the same figure. The head, in full left profile, is surrounded by a halo of flames, and comparable types also show a crescent-shaped element on the forehead, apparently supported by a sort of triangular shaped feature probably held by a ribbon around the head. It is not clear if the dots on top of the head render a close cropped hairstyle or a tight-fitting tiara-like headgear.²⁹ In addition to mentioning the ruler by his name and titles, the Middle Persian legend surrounding the image refers to the god, calling him *bwrz 'wndy yzdty*, *burzāwand yazad*, the equivalent of the Bactrian OOPZOANΔO IAZAΔO that accompanies the standing god with bull.

²⁵ MK 555.

²⁶ MK 1030.

²⁷ The engraving of the muscular masses of the chest may suggest that the deity is bare-chested, but this might not be the case, as can be inferred by comparing the image with that of the standing god with bull, or even with the royal portraits, where figures wearing tunics still display a rather emphasised chest musculature. A confirmation that it is a sleeved dress that is worn might indeed come from the silver drachms struck in Merv by Ohrmazd I (MK 1031). A very well-preserved specimen kept in the BM and illustrated in Cribb 1990, no. 59 shows a circular border at the neck of the deity as well as similarly engraved lines at the wrists. These might be interpreted as a necklace and bracelets respectively, but it seems more likely that they could represent the border of the neck and the sleeve edges of a dress covering the whole body of the deity.

²⁸ The ear is visible, and neither long hair nor hair bunches are engraved.

²⁹ Cribb 1990, 187, no. 24 described "a crescent adorned tiara type crown," and Tyler-Smith 1997, 7 "a domed headdress."



Fig. 4a–d

The copper series bear two basic types showing different sources of inspiration. The first is the same standing god with bull of the gold dinars, regularly used in Balkh and only shortly, at the very beginning,³⁰ in Kabul. The second (Fig. 5b), employed only in Kabul, very closely recalls the standard reverse type of Sasanian imperial series, namely the altar on which the dynastic fire burns. Similarly to the issues of the founder of the dynasty Ardashir I,³¹ the altar is decorated with feline throne legs, as well as diadem ribbons on its sides. Instead of the flames, a human bust emerges from the altar, as can be seen in the reverse types of Sasanian imperial coinage from the series of Ohrmazd II.³² The bust is depicted in frontal view, breast and shoulders just above the altar upper slab and arms not visible. It is not clear if the bust is bareheaded or if some kind of headgear is worn,³³ but at any rate the long hair falls behind the head. Indeed the image closely recalls the frontal busts typical of Sasanian art that can be seen at Paikuli or Hajiabad. A Bactrian inscription frames the type, read as BAḠO BOPZANO by J. Cribb³⁴ and accordingly connected to the “exalted god” of the drachms.

³⁰ Schindel, forthcoming.

³¹ The throne legs were first used in Type 2 and the ribbons in Type 3a, i.e. from the pre-imperial phase throughout the whole coinage of Ardashir, see Alram/Gyselen 2003, 117–132. The feline throne legs reappear in Sasanian imperial coinage only with Type 2a of Shapur II (used on gold issues alongside the silver series), see Schindel 2004 (I), 215–217; 2004 (II), 14, 22.

³² Throughout all his series, see Alram/Gyselen 2012, 362–365, 380–393. In fact, the busts in the Kushano-Sasanian types appear larger, almost completely hiding the flames.

³³ On some specimens (cf. for example, Cribb 1985, no. 4.82, here Fig. 5b) the top of the head shows some lines departing from the centre, perhaps in order to depict hair. Cribb (1990, 188, no. 132) described the bust with “flaming hair,” which supported his connection to the deity with flaming halo and the epithet “exalted god.”

³⁴ In Cribb 1985, 309, 319.

A less common type,³⁵ also minted in Kabul, shows the same frontal view with a different bust, this time female, since the Bactrian legend has been read as BAΓA NANA (Fig. 6b).³⁶ The deity appears bareheaded, the hair closely framing the face and a conspicuous crescent decorating the forehead. A large circular halo is visible behind the bust.



Fig. 5a–b



Fig. 6a–b

The basic typological choices of Peroz were largely inherited by his successors, starting with Ohrmazd I, with some variations. The standing god with bull was to remain standard on gold series minted in Balkh,³⁷ making his last appearance on copper, struck in the same mint, under Ohrmazd I himself. Ohrmazd was also to copy the Herat drachms of Peroz with the investiture scene (Fig. 4d),³⁸ coining drachms with the same reverse type even in Merv (Fig. 7b),³⁹ and exporting it on coppers minted in Balkh.⁴⁰

In this phase of systematisation under the second ruler of the main group, unique types can still occasionally be found, like the reverse image of Ohrmazd's gold dinars from Merv (Fig. 8b). Two standing male figures face each other on either side of a burning fire on a ribboned altar of Sasanian derivation. Indeed, the basic scheme of the type clearly owes much to Sasanian imperial issues as developed under the king of kings Ohrmazd I.⁴¹ On the left, the Kushanshah, portrayed in a stance closely resembling that of the ruler in the “investiture scenes” already described, is recognised by his diademed and lion-headed crown. The bearded figure on the right is identified as a deity by the combination of the diadem he offers to the king and the rayed halo surrounding his

³⁵ MK 1117.

³⁶ Apparently written retrograde, see Cribb 1985, 311, 319–320; 1990, 188, no. 31, followed by Tanabe (1991/1992, 60).

³⁷ Only shifting to a slight three-quarters to left view, instead of the fully frontal depiction used on the coins of Peroz. This is especially visible in the rendering of the head. Furthermore, unlike the right leg, the left one shows the lateral pleating of the trousers only on the inner side, meaning that the leg was not supposed to be depicted as seen from the front. From Ohrmazd onwards as a general norm the head of the god acquires Sasanian-style hair bunches in lieu of the long hair rendered as a fringe.

³⁸ MK 1031.

³⁹ Cribb 1990, no. 59.

⁴⁰ MK 1042–1048.

⁴¹ Cf. Schindel 2012, 69. While the type of the fire with two attendants was introduced by Shapur I, its elaboration into an “investiture scene” is due to Ohrmazd I, cf. his reverse Types 2a–b, Alam/Gyselen 2012, 117–119, 128–130.

head, clearly identifying the god as Mithra even if no mention of him is included in the legend.⁴²



Fig. 7a-b



Fig. 8a-b



Fig. 9a-d

The typology of the copper series is also subject to a degree of change due to the demise of the standing god with bull under Ohrmazd 1. Alongside the “investiture scene,” modelled after the type used on the drachms, a new variant of the altar with human bust is introduced, destined to become canonical in the Kushano-Sasanian copper series from Balkh. The male human figure is portrayed as a bust seen from the front with the head

⁴² Cf. Bivar 1979a, 745–746; Tanabe 1991/92, 60. The god’s left hand rests on the hilt of his sword, which is well in evidence exactly as in the type with the enthroned Bago Miuro of Ardashir 1.

looking left (Fig. 9b), emerging from the altar at the waist. Both arms are fully visible, allowing the figure to show specific identifying features, such as the spear held in the left hand and a ribboned diadem in the right. In addition, flames are visible around the figure's head, and there is a crescent on the forehead, clearly connecting the image to the "exalted god" of the "investiture scenes" on the drachms of Peroz and Ohrmazd 1 from Herat and Merv. Indeed, the Middle Persian legend appears to read as *bwrz 'wndy yzdty* (Fig. 9d).

This type is used by Ohrmazd 1 on coppers struck in Balkh as well as in Kabul, but under the following kings a sort of division between the two mints can be observed: the fully facing bust employed in Kabul and that with the head seen in profile view in Balkh.

The last innovations are due to Ohrmazd 2. A unique type reproducing an "investiture scene" appears on a gold dinar from Balkh (Fig. 10b),⁴³ alongside the standard series with the standing god with bull. Since the deity is sitting on a throne, the basic scheme closely recalls analogous types with enthroned deities on the coins of Peroz and Ohrmazd 1. The king is depicted standing on the right in the same posture, pouring offerings on a small altar with his right hand while raising his left. On the right, a diademed goddess is sitting on a throne with side railings as already seen in similar types, offering a diadem to the king with her right hand. All around the image there is a Middle Persian inscription, identifying the deity as "Anahita the Lady." Yet there are several peculiarities. The first is the small altar upon which the king is pouring offers, since it has the shape of a bird, with smoke rising from it. Such unusual rendering of the fire burner is indeed strictly paralleled by the analogous bird-shaped burner, complete with rising smoke, upon which the king pours offerings recently detected on the obverses of some coppers of Ardashir I Kushanshah.⁴⁴ Even more striking, nonetheless, is the fact that the deity wears a completely different crown from the mural one displayed by Anahita elsewhere. The headgear is low, flat and slightly flared towards the top, with a patterned decoration on the side, resembling in the design of its base element similar royal crowns commonly employed by the Kushanshahs on their obverses from Peroz onwards. These in turn reproduce the motif of "arcades" inaugurated on the imperial issues by Narseh.⁴⁵ In addition, the goddess holds a bow with her left hand, a unique occurrence for Anahita, even if in accordance with the warrior traits which were also part of the complex religious physiognomy of this deity.⁴⁶

⁴³ Cribb 1990, 184, no. 5, where the only known specimen was first published: Göbl 1993, Pl. 11, no. 746A.

⁴⁴ Schindel 2014.

⁴⁵ His first crown, see Type I of Narseh in Alram/Gyselen 2012, 295–300. Cf. also Schindel 2012, 71.

⁴⁶ Owned also by Nana, portrayed in an Artemidean version – with bow – in a type employed by Huvishka, see Göbl 1984, Pl. 167, Nana 2.



Fig. 10a–b

A different type employs the same iconographic variant of the goddess on coppers of Ohrmazd 2 minted in Balkh (Fig. 11b), where it alternates with the god with flaming halo and spear.⁴⁷ Like the latter, the deity, once again directly mentioned as “Anahita the Lady” in Middle Persian, is depicted emerging from an altar at the waist, her bust portrayed frontally and the diademed head in left profile. Also identical are the arms, with a spear held in the left hand, and the ribbed diadem offered with the right. The crown is the same flat-topped one with patterned side decoration visible on the gold dinar from Balkh.



Fig. 11a–b

As shown by this survey, a significant group of divinities can be seen on the reverses of the Kushano-Sasanian series. Some of them have clear antecedents, some not; some are directly mentioned by their name, others in a more indirect way.

Among the former, Mithra is clearly recognisable thanks to his iconographic physiognomy alone, characterised by the conspicuous rayed halo around his head. The god is depicted in two types, one from Merv and one from Balkh, the former instance closely recalling standard Sasanian imagery as known from the so-called “investiture scenes” of the rock reliefs, despite the fact that Mithra appears there only much later and only in a single occurrence at Taq-e Bostan. In fact, similar images already appear on Sasanian imperial coins under Ohrmazd I,⁴⁸ and of the two figures accompanying the king at the reverse of his coins, one is marked by a radiate crown and accordingly easily identifiable as Mithra.⁴⁹ While the identification of these figures is related to the general interpreta-

⁴⁷ Cf. Tyler-Smith 1997.

⁴⁸ Alram/Gyselen 2012, 128–130.

⁴⁹ Despite the doubts, cf. the discussion of the possible hypotheses in Alram/Gyselen 2012, 143–144. Indeed, the god with radiate halo at Taq-e Bostan is identified (as Mithra) on a mere iconographic basis, so

tion of such images, the typological kinship with the Kushano-Sasanian type is objective and could provide further evidence to be included in the wider discussion.⁵⁰

More unusual is the enthroned Mithra from Balkh. In Bactria the imagery of Mithra has a tradition going back at least to Kushan times, when the god was frequently employed on the reverses of the coins of Kanishka and Huvishka. Yet the visual rendering of the Kushan Mithra clearly owes much to the original iconography of Helios-Apollo, as made explicit even by the Greek version of the god's name, Helios, used before the passage to Bactrian for Kushan coin legends. Indeed, even if his costume is modified according to local taste, the Kushan Mithra is always depicted as a youthful, beardless figure. The only exception so far known is represented by the appearance of the deity, immediately recognisable thanks to the rayed halo, on the so-called "Kanishka reliquary" from Shāh-jī-kī-dherī, where the god is portrayed as bearded and wearing a pointed cap.⁵¹ At any rate, no enthroned images of the Kushan Mithra are known. In fact, even Western Iranian imagery has kept a record of a double tradition in the iconography of this very popular deity, since the image of the Sasanian official, dynastic Mithra at Taq-e Bostan, i.e. a fully bearded figure, is contrasted with the documentation provided by glyptics. On a few Sasanian period seals where Mithra is depicted,⁵² he is regularly portrayed beardless according to the Helios imagery of Greek derivation,⁵³ and the only connection with the bearded version of the god's image is the rayed halo, in fact Mithra's primary iconographic mark. This double tradition indeed seems to be attested also in the East in earlier times. While the type of Helios on his chariot appears on coins of the Graeco-Bactrian Plato,⁵⁴ providing us with a direct antecedent in the area for the later image of the Sun-god, as can be seen for example at Bamiyan as well as in Sogdiana,⁵⁵ a very interesting iconographic case is presented by an unusual obverse type employed on coins of the Indo-Greek kings Amyntas and Hermaeus. On some of

it is not clear from a methodological point of view why a similar figure on coins should raise doubts over its identity.

⁵⁰ In fact, the possible contribution of Kushano-Sasanian evidence to the debate on more general Sasanian issues is too often neglected: with the explicit mention of his name, the Kushano-Sasanian Bago Miuro provides an indisputable comparison for Mithra with sword in a Sasanian context (cf. Alam/Gyselen 2012, 143), for example.

⁵¹ Thus providing two features elsewhere unknown for the Kushan Mithra. For a recent treatment of the reliquary, strangely enough regularly ignored in the literature dealing with the iconography of Mithra (with the only exception of Callieri 1990, 92), see Errington 2002, where the casket is dated to the period of Huvishka.

⁵² See Callieri 1990 for a survey of the occurrences known at the time, then Grenet 2001; cf. also Gubaev/Loginov/Nikitin 1996, 58, no. 1.3. Some of these seals explicitly mention Mithra in the inscription accompanying the image.

⁵³ Grenet 2001, 37, note 3, interpreted the facing Mithra on several seal impressions from Ak Depe (all from the same seal, see Gubaev/Loginov/Nikitin 1996, 58, no. 1.3) as bearded, but in no case is the face of the god clearly impressed. On the basis of the comparison with the other depictions of the facing Mithra on seals (particularly Gignoux 1978, 62, 6.84, Pl. XXII, illustrated in Callieri 1990, 87, Fig. 7), the somewhat bulging lower face of the impressions from Ak Depe, which could appear as a beard on the worn surface, could also be explained as a stylistic trait without requiring the presence of a beard.

⁵⁴ Boppearachchi 1991, 220–221, Platon s. 1–3 (Pl. 24, 1–C). A fourth issue by the same king (s. 4, Pl. 24, D) depicts Helios standing with no chariot, holding a sceptre in his left hand (and apparently making a gesture of blessing with his right).

⁵⁵ Grenet 2001, 38–44.

their copper series, the obverse depicts a bearded bust facing right, wearing a pointed cap and showing rays emanating from the head.⁵⁶ On one of the two series issued by Amyntas, a spear-shaped sceptre is also visible resting on the figure's shoulder. The combination of attributes, namely rays and pointed beret, indeed leaves few doubts that this is a depiction of Mithra, even if the background for the use of his image on the coins of two late Indo-Greek kings remains rather obscure. The same set of attributes appears to be employed by another reverse image commonly used by Hermaeus and on some of his posthumous imitations: an enthroned deity, holding a staff in one hand and making a gesture of blessing with the other.⁵⁷ While in terms of posture and clothing the figure is clearly inspired by the imagery of Zeus, who appeared in that very same type on coins of various Indo-Greek kings,⁵⁸ the transformation of the laurel wreath of Zeus in rays and the bashlyk apparently visible on top of the head seem to speak in favour of the possibility that this is Mithra.⁵⁹ This has indeed led to postulate the iconographic assimilation of Zeus to Mithra,⁶⁰ a peculiarly eastern Iranian synthesis of the two gods in lieu of the expectable equation of Zeus with Ahura Mazda, attested in the West of the Iranian world up to Commagene. Such a particular development would allegedly be due to the status of Mithra in the East and his role there of supreme deity similar to that of Ahura Mazda in western Iran. The acquisition of Jovian features connected to sovereignty by the figure of the Indo-Greek series with rays and bashlyk should be seen in this light, as further hinted at by the staff held by the deity both in the bust version and in its rendering as an enthroned figure. Indeed, it is exactly this enthroned version of the Zeus-Mithra that would provide the only attestation so far known of an enthroned Mithra before the Kushano-Sasanian type of Ardashir I.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Bopearachchi 1991, 303–304, Amyntas, s. 14–15 (Pl. 47, K–L), and 329–330, Hermaios s. 9 (Pl. 54, 16–F).

⁵⁷ Bopearachchi 1991, 326–329, Hermaios s. 1–5, 7–8 (Pl. 52–54). See also pp. 330–334, s. 10–13, Pl. 54–56, for the imitation series, commonly attributed to the Yuezhi expanding south of the Hindukush from c. 70 BC onwards: bashlyk and rays seem to disappear with s. 14 at the latest (cf. Bopearachchi 1991, 122, 334).

⁵⁸ The most famous instance being the type depicted on the reverse of the double decadrachms of Amyntas (Bopearachchi 1991, 299, Amyntas s. 1, Pl. 46, A–B). See Bopearachchi 1991, 380 for an index of the occurrences of the variants of this basic type on coins of several Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kings.

⁵⁹ Coins of Heliocles I have been adduced as further evidence (Grenet 1991, 149), due to the pointed dots appearing around the head of the god on coins of this king which depict a standing Zeus with thunderbolt and sceptre on the reverse (see Bopearachchi 1991, Pl. 24–26). In fact, the vast majority of the coins of Heliocles I seem to show no discernible feature around the head of the deity. The case is different with Heliocles II (Bopearachchi 1991, Pl. 42, series 1–6), but here one should take into account the possibility that it is the laurel wreath of Zeus that is depicted: if the more or less elongated dots around the head of Zeus must always be interpreted as rays, then we have “Zeus-Mithra” even on coins of Archebios, for example (Bopearachchi 1991, Pl. 50–52). Yet his series provide us with a different possibility, since some coppers depict the profile bust of Zeus (series 13), and clearly no rays are visible. Unless we postulate a rather unlikely Herakles-Mithra, the standing Herakles of Zoilus I (Bopearachchi 1991, Pl. 34) in fact shows that the laurel wreath around the head could be depicted in the same way as the “rays” on coins of Heliocles II. A good comparison is finally provided by some coppers of Philoxenus (Bopearachchi 1991, Pl. 44, series 12), where real rays, depicted as long strokes rather than more or less elongated dots, are visible around the head of a Helios-like deity.

⁶⁰ First by Newell 1938, then followed by all other studies.

⁶¹ Cf. Bivar 1956, 22.

The discussion on such possible antecedents is important due to the scholarly hypotheses on the background to the typological and iconographic choices of the Kushano-Sasanian series, which are mostly based on the notion of some continuity with previous periods. Accordingly, the Kushano-Sasanian enthroned Mithra has been seen as involved in a wider process of syncretism that, through the concept of Zeus-Mithra, brought together Mithra and the “exalted god.”⁶² The latter’s differing iconographic renderings, i.e. the Oesho-style standing god with bull and the deity with flaming head, would connect the shivaite element of Oesho and that deriving from Mithra, since the flames would indeed represent the rayed halo of the sun-god in an updated rendering of the Jovian Mithra.⁶³ Needless to say, the aim of such a synthesis by the Kushano-Sasanians would have been the strengthening of their legitimacy. However, the different explanations put forward by scholars highlight the difficulties of such interpretations, as well as their importance due to the possible impact on general reconstructions. Within the basic framework of a struggle between the Sasanian main imperial house and the Kushano-Sasanians, Martha L. Carter has proposed that the latter could have promoted the retrieval of older formulas to obtain the support of a group of local population of Saka stock.⁶⁴ From a different point of departure, Frantz Grenet has instead merely stressed the appeal to Indian as well as Iranian subjects in the then Sasanian eastern regions, where the Kushanshahs had to cope with Iranian beliefs “non conforme au zoroastrisme codifié.”⁶⁵

We are here faced with an interesting case of method in iconographic analysis, since the concept of iconographic assimilation, i.e. the borrowing by an eastern god of the iconographic physiognomy of a western deity, seems to a certain extent to overlap with that of religious syncretism. While this may appear as a mere terminological issue, in fact the two notions should be kept clearly separated,⁶⁶ and the possibility that Mithra could be given visual rendering thanks to the image of Zeus in no way translates into the existence of a Zeus-Mithra. If we accept the reconstruction of the process from its first Graeco-Bactrian or Indo-Greek stages – and if we dispense here with the problematic aspects⁶⁷ – we should merely speak of Mithra,⁶⁸ precisely as, for example, we do not speak of a Kushan Helios-Mithra, but only of the Iranian god. Indeed the analysis of the Kushan coinage, which provides the most conspicuous documentation in this regard, eloquently shows that the deities’ Greek names were just translations of the *names* of gods that had always been conceived and felt to be local: Mioro was Mithra even when labelled Helios.⁶⁹ An analogous occurrence – and a rather significant one in the context

⁶² Bivar 1979a, 747; Carter 1985, 238; Grenet 1991, 149; cf. also Grenet 2001, 43.

⁶³ Bivar 1979a, 746; Grenet 2001, 43–44, along the same basic lines as Carter 1981, 96–98.

⁶⁴ Carter 1985, 229, synthesising the arguments already put forward in Carter 1981.

⁶⁵ Grenet 1991, 150; 2001, 44.

⁶⁶ Cf. the remarks in a similar context in Callieri 2007, 78.

⁶⁷ Cf. in this regard Martínez-Sève 2010, 206, where the presence of the Zeus-like statue in the main temple of Ai Khanum is explained in connection to the cult of the Oxus.

⁶⁸ As indeed did Grenet in the title of his seminal article of 1991. Cf. also MacDowall 1979, 562.

⁶⁹ Cf. Göbl 1960. The case of Mao is even more illuminating: the Zoroastrian god Mah is given anthropomorphic rendering by re-elaborating the figure of Helios used for Mithra, thanks to the substitution of the rayed halo with a large crescent behind the shoulders. The in fact male figure is then provided with the female name of Salene in the series of Kanishka inscribed in Greek only because the Greek moon deity is female. As

of this discussion – is provided by the name of Zeus in the Greek caption of the image of Ahura Mazda on the relief of Ardashir at Naqsh-e Rostam.⁷⁰

In fact, even qualifying Mithra's aspects of sovereignty as Jovian is more a scholarly construct than anything else, a tool that we may use to define specific features but that can possibly reveal itself also to be misleading: the sceptre held by the Zeus-like figure of the Indo-Greek coins is often well in evidence even in the Helios-inspired Kushan Mithra, for example.⁷¹ Yet the assessment of these traits is crucial as they are at the basis of the interpretation of the iconographic evidence of the Kushano-Sasanian period, with quite important implications: besides the hypothesised synthesis of the *burzāwand yazad* with the Jovian Mithra, i.e. the enthroned and bearded Bago Miuro, this eastern bearded Mithra, having allegedly survived in Bactria thanks to cult images from the Greek period, would have provided the model of the bearded image of the god as seen at Taq-e Bostan.⁷²

This is why all such considerations must be set in a broader analysis, i.e. an examination of the typology of the Kushano-Sasanian coin system as a whole rather than of mere single images. Indeed, the picture is made complex by the presence of several different levels. On the one hand deities are depicted with more than a single iconographic identity, like Anahita with her two sets of headgear; then, a coexistence can be seen between Iranian deities of western and eastern derivation, like Anahita and Nana, due to the two legacies – Sasanian and Kushan – which were used for the Kushano-Sasanian repertoire. All this is accompanied by the inconsistent pattern of the legends, which sometimes mention the gods by their name, sometimes only by appellatives.

The point of departure is that the impact of Sasanian imagery may be clearly detected.⁷³ This is evident in the adoption of Sasanian types like that of the reverse altar, for example, as well as in the royal effigies on the obverses, whose crowns were conceived on the pattern of the imperial ones, despite the presence of peculiar features of local origin. This Sasanian influence is visible even in the images of the reverse deities. The very presence of Anahita is in itself quite telling, since she is a religious figure of specifically Persian derivation. Apart from the unusual version seen in the series of Ohrmazd 2, the image on the coins of Ardashir 2 is perfectly in line with her iconography from Sasanian Iran known from rock reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam and Darabgird,⁷⁴ the mural crown providing a very clear link. In fact, the Ardashir 2 type is the earliest instance in which an

a matter of fact, there was no iconographic confusion, but just a “free translation,” so to say, of the *name* of the deity, based – as was normally the case – on a merely functional equivalence.

⁷⁰ Back 1978, 282. This – fortunately – has never translated in theories on a Zeus-Ahura Mazda in Sasanian Fars. Needless to say, the differences in how problems are approached in dealing with the same issues against an imperial Sasanian as opposed to a “provincial” Sasanian background show well, albeit indirectly, how conditioning scholarly prejudices can be.

⁷¹ Göbl 1984, Pl. 116–117, types Miuro 2, 4–6, 8–10.

⁷² Grenet 2001, 36–37.

⁷³ Cf. Schindel 2005.

⁷⁴ Cf. Shenkar 2013, where the female figure of the relief of Narseh at Naqsh-e Rostam is re-examined in the framework of a discussion on Anahita and identified as a depiction of the goddess.

explicit and indisputable connection is made between the name of Anahita and the image distinguished by the mural crown.⁷⁵

With regard to male deities, leaving aside the god with flaming halo, the figures are consistently dressed according to typical Sasanian canons, i.e., with sleeved tunic and trousers, as noted by all authors. This is most striking in the case of the standing god with bull, who is markedly “sasanised” in comparison with his previous iconography of Indian inspiration. Among the new iconographic features displayed by this figure there is also the beard, completely unknown in images of the Kushan Oesho. This is indeed a crucial detail, to be associated with conventions for the rendering of the hair typical of Sasanian iconography, like the hair bunches commonly seen in the images of this god from Ohrmazd 1 onwards.⁷⁶ If we are to follow the hypothesis that the Sasanian official Mithra of Taq-e Bostan inherited his beard from eastern images of the god like the Kushano-Sasanian enthroned Bago Miuro, then an eastern source must also be found for the beard of the standing god with bull. Yet, contrary to the case of Mithra, the visual documentation available across the various media for the Shiva-inspired image of this god clearly excludes a bearded image at any period. Therefore, if we accept that the god with flaming halo actually represents (a Jovian version of) Mithra, the only possibility is that the competition for supreme god between Mithra and the Shiva/Wesh identified with the figure of the god with bull⁷⁷ – which would in a way be synthesised by the use of the appellative *burzāwand yazad* for both – could produce a transfer of iconographic details between the figures of the two deities.

Such a scenario already appears unlikely without tackling specific issues, as even its premises are debatable, based as they are on a number of gods, Mithra as well as Vayu, disputing the role of supreme god with Ahura Mazda in a context, i.e. Bactrian religion, that was in fact still Zoroastrian. It definitely becomes too contradictory when individual features are analysed: while they are both bearded, no common *distinctive* iconographic attribute can be found between the images of the enthroned Mithra and that of the god with bull, exactly in the same way as no iconographic link exists between the latter and the god with flaming halo, despite the fact that they share the appellative of “exalted god.”

The proposal of an even deeper osmosis producing a real wider syncretism that involved all these figures, i.e. Shiva/Vayu in their “oeshoite” rendering as well as Mithra in an updating of his alleged Zeus-Mithra forebear,⁷⁸ is likewise, if not more, difficult to accept. Leaving aside the too extreme iconographic oscillation, it would be even harder to account for the inconsistencies just mentioned. For example, the standing god with bull linked to the god with flaming head by the appellative does not display any solar character at all.⁷⁹ His plain circular halo cannot be considered relevant, since the original background of this image, Kushan iconography, clearly shows that it had no solar con-

⁷⁵ With a definitive impact on the debate about the identification of this figure, cf. above note 50 and the discussion in Alam/Gyselen 2012, 141–143.

⁷⁶ Cf. above, note 37. In fact even the fringe hairstyle previously displayed by the god’s image is of clear Sasanian derivation.

⁷⁷ Cf. Grenet 2001, 43.

⁷⁸ Carter 1985, 238.

⁷⁹ Rather the contrary, if one takes due account of the poseidonic features of his iconography.

nection whatsoever, as plain halos were commonly used for several Kushan deities.⁸⁰ Indeed, the Kushano-Sasanian Nana on the coppers of Peroz exhibits exactly this kind of plain halo (cf. Fig. 6b).

In fact, we would have a syncretistic religious phenomenon visually translated by excessively disparate features such as the moon crescent and the radiate halo, or the bull of Oesho, an animal elsewhere associated with Mah in Sasanian imagery,⁸¹ somehow connected to the solar god instead of his horses.

Finally, a specific analysis is necessary for the halo around the head of the figure that for the time being we can define only as “exalted god,” since we do not know its real name. This halo is actually not made of rays, like the radiate nimbus of Mithra, but of flames, an element of crucial importance for all our discussion. Once again the Kushan series provide fitting comparisons to properly assess the character of the iconographic devices under discussion: while Mioro customarily displays a nimbus of rays and never of flames, the figure of Atsho, for example, has flames emerging from his shoulders, not rays; this clearly implies that the craftsmen who engraved such images had a clear understanding of the difference and of the differing meanings these iconographic marks were supposed to transmit.

This means that there are no real links even between the god with flaming halo and Mithra, despite the sharing of attributes like the throne, which in fact must be understood as a secondary iconographic attribute for both figures. Indeed, the two deities are perfectly recognisable thanks to their primary marks – flaming halo and radiate nimbus respectively – in those Kushano-Sasanian series where they both appear without throne. In addition, the throne is used in the analogous function of accessory device even in the type of Ardashir 2 depicting Anahita.

What, then, is the sense in the use of the appellative *burzāwand yazad*, and how should one deal with the possible problems created by its shared use by the god with standing bull and the one with flaming halo? The answer was already available at least a couple of decades ago, when Katsumi Tanabe explicitly wrote that this appellative “does not represent the name of a particular god. It is an epithet of Zoroastrian deities.”⁸² Here a very straight and consequential approach is necessary, as we cannot simply state a concept without really taking due consideration of all its implications: once we properly understand that the appellative was not tied to a specific deity and could refer to completely different gods, it becomes clear that its use was not meant to hint at some kind of overlapping of discrete religious physiognomies. While the use of legends on the reverses of Kushano-Sasanian coins is surely less direct in this regard when compared to Kushan series, in fact there is no reason to imagine the Kushano-Sasanian minting authorities making a deliberate choice to produce an ambiguous picture of their religious policy as transmitted by coin imagery.

Therefore, there is no need to imagine any link, either explicit or alluded to, between the standing god with bull and the god with flaming halo, and between this and Mithra. In

⁸⁰ As well as for the royal images.

⁸¹ As shown by the image of the chariot of Mah drawn by bulls on a seal in the Staatliche Münzsammlung in Munich (Göbl 1973, Pl. 6, no. 7d) and on one of the silver plates from Klimova (Vanden Berghe 1993, 212–213, no. 66), regardless of its post-Sasanian dating.

⁸² Tanabe 1991/1992, 59.

fact this leaves room for a more harmonious reconstruction that does not require imagining more or less complex syncretism phenomena. While the figure with rayed halo is the only one to effectively depict Mithra, in the two types of the enthroned Bago Miuro and of the investing deity beside the fire altar on the gold coins of Ohrmazd I from Merv, the standing god with bull can be comfortably identified in straightforward accordance with its iconography as an updated version, i.e. sasanised, of the Bactrian Wesh, the Zoroastrian Vayu.

Apart from these two yazatas, only the figure with flaming halo still needs to be identified. The inherent difficulties have been repeatedly stressed,⁸³ since the iconography of this deity does not have real parallels, in contrast to the other instances. A feature that in fact clearly sets it apart from other figures is the clothing, since the outfit comprising tunic and trousers is replaced by a robe reaching to the ankles as normally associated with female deities. Indeed, combined with the rendering of the chest and the sceptre-spear, this is probably what led Göbl to identify the figure as Anahita.⁸⁴ Yet traces of a beard are visible on better-preserved specimens. Moreover, the rendering of the chest is actually that of a male figure, the muscular masses enhanced exactly as visible in the depictions of the king, or that of the standing Wesh with bull (Fig. 12).



a. "Exalted god"



b. Wesh with bull



c. King

Fig. 12

In fact, these parallels also show that the treatment of the chest musculature is not meant to depict a bare-chested figure. Actually the deity wears a long-sleeved robe, whose circular edge is indeed visible at the base of the neck.⁸⁵ The main identifying features are nonetheless the spear and the flaming halo, perhaps accompanied by the diminutive moon crescent visible on the forehead.

Once the identifications with Anahita or with a figure synthesising aspects of Vayu and Mithra in order to render the Jovian Mithra have been discarded, we might proceed by exclusion. A first possibility that immediately comes to mind is Ahura Mazda, which

⁸³ Bivar 1956, 16; Tanabe 1991/1992, 61; Cribb 1997, 187.

⁸⁴ Göbl 1984, 46, and Pl. 172 (under reverse type Investiture 1).

⁸⁵ Consequently negating another alleged trait of continuity between the figure of the Indo-Greek Mithra, bare-chested as for its Jovian model, and that of the Kushano-Sasanian deity.

was indeed proposed by Christopher J. Brunner.⁸⁶ To a certain extent this hypothesis appears strengthened by the peculiarity of the image, and the spear could well refer to the sphere of sovereignty embodied by Ahura Mazda, as noted by Tanabe for the type of Ooromozdo already seen on Kushan coins.⁸⁷ Yet Tanabe himself rejected Brunner's proposal, aptly commenting on the impossibility of reconciling the Kushano-Sasanian deity with the imagery of Ahura Mazda that we know from Sasanian Iran: Sasanian reliefs regularly depict Ahura Mazda holding the barsom and not a spear, and the flaming halo is completely unknown. Tanabe's arguments may be further expanded if we take due account of the wider context, i.e., that of a clear Sasanian influence on Kushano-Sasanian imagery even in religious iconography. In the Sasanian rock reliefs, the image of Ahura Mazda is clearly modelled on that of the king, betraying no element of other, i.e. earlier, iconographic models. This does not imply that we can exclude the existence of previous images of the god, of course. Yet a clear approach by the new dynasty to visual communication can be seen, which is translated into a rendering of the god immediately recognisable as manifestly local, with no concessions to the imagery of Greek origin shared by western and eastern Iran, which in Kushan Bactria, for example, produced an image of Ooromozdo of clear Graeco-Roman derivation. A constitutive element of the Sasanian approach to religious imagery, which indeed sheds light on how the gods' images were conceived, is that of the role of distinctive headgear, clearly indebted conceptually to the Sasanian royal crowns system. That is why deities connected to the sphere of royalty, like Ahura Mazda or Anahita, normally wear mural crowns. When all this is given due consideration, it appears extremely unlikely that the Sasanian governors of Kushanshahr could depict on their coins an Ahura Mazda that has nothing in common with the image of the god seen on the visual monuments of the main dynasty in western Iran, not even for the single most important identifying feature represented by the crown.

Once Ahura Mazda is also excluded, it seems that hardly any connection can be made between the god with flaming halo and most of the deities depicted in Sasanian official art. Yet Sasanian coinage offers a fine comparison, since a series of Khusraw II bears on the reverse the frontal bust of a deity surrounded by a halo of flames.⁸⁸ The bust is beardless, and accordingly has long been identified as Anahita.⁸⁹ Rika Gyselen has already rejected this interpretation, instead putting forward the hypothesis that the bust could depict either Adur or Xwarrah, rightly stressing the identifying character of the iconographic attribute represented by the flames surrounding the head of the deity.⁹⁰ The context of the use of the image could favour the identification as Xwarrah, perhaps partly overlapping with a personification of Adur. A similar interpretation could indeed be proposed for the Kushano-Sasanian image. The presence of Xwarrah on the series of a new dynasty is very understandable, and is well paired with the frequent depictions on

⁸⁶ Brunner 1974, 148.

⁸⁷ Tanabe 1991/1992, 61.

⁸⁸ Göbl 1971, Pl. XII, Xusrō II reverse type 4 and 5. See Gyselen 2000 for a specific study of the series (where similar images on Sasanian seals are also listed). Mosig-Walburg 2009, 192–193, opted for a depiction of Adur as an explicit reference to the “good Religion.”

⁸⁹ Since Göbl 1971, 20.

⁹⁰ Gyselen 2000, 302–308.

Kushano-Sasanian coins of fire altars with feline legs.⁹¹ These are clearly modelled on the similar reverse types of Ardashir I, and must be understood in similar terms, namely as referring to the establishment of royal fires,⁹² in this instance hinting at the creation of the Kushano-Sasanian dynasty by the main imperial house of Iran. In fact, despite the peculiarity of the iconography of the god with flaming head, both Xwarrah and Adur have a Kushan antecedent, and in both instances the fire is often well in evidence in their anthropomorphic rendering. Occasionally the Kushan Pharro also shows a staff similar to a spear in lieu of the caduceus,⁹³ not to mention that he is depicted enthroned on rare coppers of Kanishka.⁹⁴ On the other hand it is true that the god with flaming head is quite distant from these hypothetical Kushan antecedents, unlike – for example – the Kushano-Sasanian Wesh, which is only a sasanised version of the Kushan Oesho.

It seems that the iconographic physiognomy of the god with flaming halo has a sort of experimental character, at the same time being distinctly less Sasanian-looking than the other two male deities and completely new in the local iconographic tradition of Bactria, at least for what is known so far.⁹⁵ Similarly peculiar is the presence on Kushano-Sasanian coins of Bactrian deities already known from Kushan coinage, which, unlike Mithra and Wesh, have no direct counterpart – or, it is perhaps better to say, cannot be straightforwardly assimilated – in Persian Zoroastrianism, like Nana and the isolated occurrence of the Ardokhsho-like goddess. The appearance of Nana is especially remarkable, since her royal function in Bactrian Zoroastrianism is exactly the same as that of Anahita in western Iran, essentially providing the Kushano-Sasanian “monetary pantheon” with a functional duplicate of the Persian goddess. This can only be the result of a planned choice: with the depiction of Nana the Kushanshahs appear to have aimed to integrate the Kushan royal goddess into their visual propaganda, and the direct mention of the goddess’ name cannot be more explicit. Yet this is set – unsurprisingly – in a clearly Sasanian context, as Nana is emerging from a Sasanian-inspired fire altar.

Indeed, what must be properly addressed is the nature of the Sasanian contribution to the imagery displayed by the Kushano-Sasanian coins, for, significant as the inheritance from the local tradition might have been, the influence of the new Persian conquerors was greater than was generally supposed. Indeed what is visible on coins is a strong impact of Sasanian iconography, and the fact that the local tradition was not wiped out but integrated does not make such impact lighter. Religious iconography was sasanised like royal imagery, and in the same way as Kushan tiaras and mitres were substituted by Sasanian-style crowns with princely *korymboi* on the obverses, so were the reverse im-

⁹¹ All in connection with the types with facing bust minted in Kabul: MK 1115–1119 and 1123 (for Peroz), MK 1122, 1124 (Kavad), MK 1125 (Peroz 4).

⁹² Cf. Schindel 2004, 217 with reference to the employment of this type by Shapur II (his Type 2a).

⁹³ Göbl 1984, Pl. 171, Pharro 4–5, 7, 9, 11. Other types (Pharro 1–2, 6, 12) depict the deity with a scepter with a spherical ending.

⁹⁴ Göbl 1993, 125, no. 163 (Pl. 43).

⁹⁵ In fact this deity is marked by some of the attributes borne on Kushan coins by Manaobago, i.e. Vohu Manah: the throne as well as the lunar connotations, symbolised by the crescent behind the shoulders of Manaobago and on the forehead of the Kushano-Sasanian god. Yet there seem to be too many differences, especially when the role of single features is addressed, since no connection with fire is detectable in the images of Manaobago. Moreover, the throne does not appear to have been a primary mark of the god with flaming halo.

ages of deities, which were thoroughly re-clothed in Sasanian outfits. Even the hairstyle was sasanised, and long braid-looking fringes as well as hair bunches were introduced. It is this process which led to bearded gods, for Wesh as well as for Mithra: the enthroned Bago Miuro is not bearded in continuity with the Indo-Greek bearded Mithra, but as a result of the contribution of Sasanian iconographic canons to Kushano-Sasanian imagery. Connected to this, the idea that the bearded Mithra of Taq-e Bostan might be dependent on the bearded Bago Miuro must definitely be discarded: the Kushano-Sasanian Mithra is bearded like the Ahura Mazda of Ardashir I at Naqsh-e Rostam or Firuzabad. Against this background it is easy to explain the presence of all those typically Sasanian features, from ribbed diadems and pleated trousers to so-called investiture scenes.⁹⁶

This degree of influence of Sasanian imagery on Kushano-Sasanian series can be explained only with the presence in Sasanian Kushanshahr of craftsmen in close contact with western Iran. They probably worked together with local personnel, but Kushano-Sasanian typology, on both obverse and reverse, owes too much to Sasanian concepts to be conceivable without a direct western Iranian contribution. While a shared artistic vocabulary between western and eastern Iran surely existed,⁹⁷ Kushano-Sasanian imagery seems to attest to something more circumstantial: in order to renew the repertoire of the local coin tradition to the extent shown by the Kushano-Sasanian series, pattern books must have been brought from Sasanian Iran by personnel with the mastery necessary for adapting standard Sasanian imagery to include, or to merge with, Kushan features. Indeed, this might find possible parallels in other media, as the Sasanian rock relief of Rag-i Bibi would suggest: while the style of the relief seems to imply a local sculptural craftsmanship distinct from artistic centres of western Iran,⁹⁸ its imagery shows Sasanian features not only in the subject and iconography of major features, but also in details like the pleating of the king's trousers.⁹⁹ While in theory coins could be copied from coins, this is obviously not the case with rock reliefs, and it requires the import of models from Sasanian Iran that could reach Bactria only with specialised personnel who knew how to use them. The rather unlikely alternative would be to imagine that Bactrian craftsmen all of a sudden, and above all completely on their own, became aware of the semantics of Sasanian imagery, from general features to details, from composition to iconography. Therefore we must assume that at least part of the personnel – probably those in charge of the direction of the works – came directly from Sasanian Iran,¹⁰⁰ coordinating the work of local sculptors who gave the relief its distinctly Bactrian stylistic rendering.

Indeed, this is the most plausible scenario even with regard to coin engravers or mint masters, and Merv is of course a most likely place to depart from, especially when the role of its mint for both imperial Sasanian and Kushano-Sasanian series is taken into ac-

⁹⁶ In their explicit formulation. The same subject is hinted at on Kushan coins, but in a more indirect way, as king and deity appear on the two faces of the coin (due to the conventions of the previous coin tradition of Greek derivation). Only a single Kushan reverse type, employed by Huvishka on rare coppers, reproduces the full image of the king paying homage to a deity, see Göbl 1984, Pl. 167, Nana 5.

⁹⁷ Cf. Cribb 1990, 162–163.

⁹⁸ Grenet/Lee/Martinez/Ory 2007, 249; Callieri forthcoming, dealing with centres of artistic production in Sasanian Iran.

⁹⁹ Grenet/Lee/Martinez/Ory 2007, 257.

¹⁰⁰ All the more so if the high chronology proposed by Grenet/Lee/Martinez/Ory 2007 (the late years of Shapur I) is accepted.

count.¹⁰¹ In Balkh itself, imperial series were minted under Wahram I,¹⁰² and Herat also struck both imperial and Kushano-Sasanian series, even if the production of imperial issues is certain only from Shapur II onwards.¹⁰³ The close connection of the Kushanshah mints with Sasanian Iran is further strengthened by the possible cases of motifs moving from East to West, like the upper ribbons of the korymbos inaugurated by the Kushanshah Ohrmazd I and the reverse base line appearing in imperial series with coins of Shapuhr II from Merv.¹⁰⁴

Even within the framework of the activity of Kushano-Sasanian mint workshops, the merging of Sasanian and Kushan features may be better explained by the joint work of Sasanian and local craftsmen, at least in the early stages. The most telling instances are exactly those provided by religious iconography, since phenomena like the sasanidisation of Wesh require the knowledge of the values transmitted by his image both from the point of view of its original environment and from that connected to its re-elaborated version seen on Kushano-Sasanian coins. One must only remember that the deity normally associated with a bull in western Iranian imagery is Mah, not Wesh, in order to appreciate the degree of conceptual elaboration behind the images. The same is true for Nana, taken directly from Kushan imagery to be connected with a Sasanian style fire altar.

In fact, this seems to draw a picture of the interaction between the new Sasanian power and the local context based on notions of close integration, rather than independence or hostility.¹⁰⁵ This appears to be the only possible background in order to imagine the Kushano-Sasanian mints set in a network connecting them to centres of production in western Iran.¹⁰⁶ Needless to say, this does not imply that there could not be local innovations or that the interaction with the Iranian West must be rigidly understood as always of the strictest nature at every moment of Kushano-Sasanian history. Yet a reconstruction based on a sort of dialectic within the Sasanian sphere of power in the East between the imperial house and the Kushanshahs does not appear to be supported by the study of the semantics of the Kushano-Sasanian imagery used on coins. There were original choices, but within formulas essentially consistent with Sasanian visual culture, without fractures. As a matter of fact, on coins the Kushanshahs appear for what they were, i.e. governors of the former Kushan lands on behalf of the Sasanian kings of kings, not independent rulers.

From the point of view of the religious background of the imagery used and the possible inferences on the religious policy lying behind it, a flexible approach seems to be apparent. Once faced in their East with a previous imperial tradition, the Sasanians aimed at presenting themselves as the new masters in an immediately recognisable way.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Schindel 2012, 72.

¹⁰² Nikitin 1999; cf. Alram/Gyselen 2012, 47.

¹⁰³ A group of drachms could have been struck in Herat by Narseh: Alram/Gyselen 2012, 326–327, 351; Schindel 2012, 72.

¹⁰⁴ Schindel 2012, 69–70. Cribb 1990, 166 attributed to Kushano-Sasanian models the adoption of the facing view for the bust on altar designs on coins of the king of kings Hormizd II.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. for example Grenet/Lee/Martinez/Ory 2007, 259–260, fn. 16, stating that “Hormizd I Kushanshah temporarily seized Merv...” and that the Kushanshahs were a semi-independent dynasty.

¹⁰⁶ But this is valid in the same terms for other media, as shown by the case of rock sculpture.

Yet this did not imply a rejection, but rather what appears as the elaboration of a message essentially based on the claim to the inheritance of that legacy. The definition of Kushan was expressly kept as part of the titulature. The deities that played a prominent role in Kushan visual propaganda make their appearance, of special significance among them the royal deities, which are depicted in an explicit way, as shown by the type of Nana on altar or even by that of Ardokhsho employed by Peroz. They do not play the main role, yet they are there, included among the gods who legitimate Sasanian rule in the formerly Kushan lands.

Of course this could happen on the basis of a common religious background, i.e. Zoroastrianism, and these gods were largely common to western and eastern Iran. It is therefore no surprise that the Bactrian Wesh became the standard reverse deity for Kushano-Sasanian gold series. This leaves no room for an unorthodox variant of Zoroastrianism. While adapted to the context, the message of Kushano-Sasanian coin legends and imagery was perfectly summarised in the appellative of *mazdēsn* that the Kushanshahs imported from Sasanian titulature.

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