



## A Suggestion on Two Sasanian-Late Islamic Coins in the Tabriz – Orumiyeh Museums

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### ABSTRACT

The significance of Sasanian coins extends beyond their historical era and into the post-Sasanian and subsequent periods. This study focuses on an intriguingly overstruck coin of Hormizd IV, a Sasanian monarch, in the Tabriz Museum and a similar coin in the Orumiyeh Museum. The overstriking process introduced counterstamps with well-known Islamic holy phrases: *quwwa* (قوه), *barakah* (بركه), *Allāh* (الله), which translates as "power," "blessing," and "God." This implies the phrase "power and blessings are from God".

The Islamic legends appear on Tabriz Museum's coin as: at 4 *lā* (لا), 2 *hukm* (حكم), 12 *illā* (الا), 10 *Allāh* (الله), 8 *rabbī* (ربى), and 6 *Allāh* (الله). This translates to "There is no judgment except God, my Lord is God". The discovery of a similar coin in the Orumiyeh Museum has raised intriguing questions. Did the individuals responsible for the restriking possess a collection of Hormizd IV coins, and did they apply the aforementioned restriking to these pieces?

In this article, I argue that the genesis of these transformations or, in other words, inspiration can be traced back to the Īlkhānī era. While such a design can be discerned from the Salḍjūkid period, the indelible imprint of the Īlkhānī period has profoundly influenced the Azerbaijan region.

### INTRODUCTION

Sasanian coins were extremely important not only in their own time but also for the post-Sasanian period and beyond. Local national governments in the north (Tabaristan) and south (Būyids) followed the Sasanian coinage system. Arab rulers also followed the same method for a long time (cf. Bates 1978, 18). However, they gradually replaced their names with the names of the Sasanian kings, added Islamic words in the margins, removed the fire altar, and finally, Islamic coins, in their true sense, found an important place in history.

The present article focuses on the study of two rare and unique coins, one each from the collections of the Tabriz Museum (hereafter referred to as TM) and the Orumiyeh Museum (hereafter referred to as OM)<sup>1</sup>. Intriguingly these coins have not been featured in any published academic literature. The coins in question have not been subjected to any form of study or analysis, a fact that adds to their enigmatic appeal. Of particular note is the coin from the OM, which was not officially registered due to an unidentified strike, a circumstance that left the curator in a quandary. The existence of other coins of this particular type, either in the museums of the two Azerbaijani coins or in other Iranian museums, remains a mystery. This is largely due to the lack of a comprehensive, reliable, and easily accessible database within the Ministry of Cultural Heritage.

## METHOD

This study employs a quantitative and textual research methodology. The author conducted a comparative analysis of two coins from two different museums, with a special focus on Sasanian and especially overstruck drachmas, the so-called Arab-Sasanian coins. In addition, coins from the Islamic period that share similar design elements, such as legends, fonts, and size, were integral to this research. In addition to numismatic analysis, the study includes textual research related to the political and social events of the time. To ensure the integrity of the coins and to detect any damage, additions, or losses, the study employed chemical testing and technical photography on a selected coin.

## MATERIALS

The Sasanian drachma with the registry number 4740 and kept in the TM has undergone a rather crude overstriking on its obverse side.

Despite this, the coin's original symbols, such as the star and crescent, have not been completely obliterated. The king's name (legends) remains visible on the same side. The reverse of the coin, however, remains untouched and fully visible. The alteration, shown in Figure 1, includes the Arabic words *quwwa* (قوه), *baraka* (بركه), and *Allāh* (الله), which translate as "power," "blessing," and "God," respectively. This suggests the phrase "power and blessings are from God". Furthermore, the legends at 4 *lā* (لا), *hukm* (حكم), *illā* (إلا), *Allāh* (الله), *rabbī* (ربى), 6 *Allāh* (الله) can be interpreted as "there is no judgment except God, my Lord is God".



Fig. 1 (no. 4740). AR. Drachm. 3.98. 3mm. 3h. LY 12. MY.

A similar change is observed on the OM coin (Fig. 2), albeit with minor variations likely due to inconsistent strike control. The legends on this coin are as follows: 6 *lā* (لا), 4 *hukm* (حكم), 2 *illā* (إلا), *Allāh* (الله), *rabbī* (ربى), 8 *Allāh* (الله). Interestingly, the "die" was professionally overstruck on both coins.

However, an anomaly was observed in the TM coin, where the counter-stamp extended to the left edge. This peculiar occurrence resulted in the preservation of some partial legends bearing the name of the Sasanian king. The Islamic terms, especially the sacred terms "Allāh" and "RBY", enjoyed immense popularity among the Muslim population. The Arab-Sasanian coins, the so-called RBY with the legend of Allah, are frequently reported (Gaubert 1973: tab. 4) already.

Undoubtedly, on the obverse, the visibility of the diadem is obscured, but the legends are visible on the right side.

Although the clarity of the striking, on the obverse is evident, the regnal year (legends, on reverse) remains clearly visible.

Unlike the quality of TM's work, the OM coin's counterstamp exudes an air of professionalism,

coupled with an artistic flair and design appeal that surpasses the previous one. Despite the disparity between the two coins, the same die can be seen in both works.

The numismatics data provides us with the necessary tools to confidently attribute the Object (OM) to Hormizd IV. The upper portion of the diadem, as seen on the obverse, is a significant indicator. Further, the presence of a fire altar, attendants, a crescent and star, and the unique font of the legends all contribute to this attribution. The ring, visible on the reverse, further substantiates this assertion.



Fig. 2 (no. 13013). AR. Drachm. 4.14g. 33mm. 3h. LY 4. ART (AHM?).

The obverse of the coin shows a partial view of a diadem, specifically its upper part, which is visible at 10.

The reverse of the coin, however, shows an insignificant striking effect. This is likely due to an unprofessional cleaning attempt that, while not damaging the overall integrity of the coin, has slightly compromised it.

Initially, my perceptions of the TM coin were quite varied and complex. It seemed that the coin had been deliberately tampered with, possibly for someone's personal agenda. The amateurish nature of the alterations led me to speculate that the perpetrator might be a radical individual, possibly a zealous Muslim. Interestingly, the alterations were made on the obverse of both coins.

The two scenarios presented could possibly suggest that an individual, without precise information, may have decided to make changes to the coins. I also entertained the notion that it could be a mere coincidence. These preliminary hypotheses piqued my curiosity and led me to conclude that the alterations could have been made in modern times for a variety of reasons.

However, a more meticulous examination and a series of pivotal inquiries have cast a shadow of doubt over the aforementioned propositions. For instance, in this contemporary era, we are equipped with a plethora of sophisticated tools that can facilitate a more efficient execution of tasks for striking coins.

Moreover, if we were to entertain the hypothesis that the TM coin holds some validity (as an unplanned and random work), it is promptly dismissed by the existence of the OM coin. An intriguing question that arises is why no striking was levied on the reverse side of the coin, where the fire-altar is depicted - a symbol synonymous with Zoroastrianism and the pre-Islamic periods. This leads us to consider the religious aspect as a less convincing alternative, specifically on the possibility of a reactionary stance taken by a zealous individual or group against Zoroastrianism and the pre-Islamic period.

In an effort to conduct a more nuanced analysis of the TM coin, I asked the museum to send the coin to the laboratory of the Research Institute (RICHT) for a series of technical examinations. As of 2020, there was still no trace of the elusive OM coin. So, my colleagues

and I used a variety of techniques, including XRF, XRD, and microphotography, to examine the TM. My primary goal was to ensure that no foreign metal had been incorporated into the coin and that its composition was consistent with other known Sasanian coins. After our comprehensive study, we concluded that an unskilled, negative stroke had marked portions of the coin, resulting in the formation of a hexagram inscribed with Islamic words (legends).

It is plausible to infer that the choice of the obverse was deliberate. The side of the coin showing the king's profile was probably considered more effective for their Islamic propaganda. This could indicate a nuanced understanding of the distinction between the obverse and reverse of the coin. Consequently, they replaced the Islamic terms (legends) with the king's profile.

## DISCUSSION

The Sasanian drachma of TM (registry no. 4740) was generously donated to the museum by Mr. Farshid Khojasteh-far, a renowned numismatist. In a separate incident, the OM coin (No. 13013) was recently intercepted from a smuggler in the Bāzargān border region who intended to transport it to Turkey and possibly on to Europe. The paucity of academic reports on Arab-Sasanian coins of such similarity is remarkable. Moreover, the author doubts that the Arab-Sasanian term can correctly describe these two coins. Arab-Sasanian coins follow a specific structure, such as the use of Arabic words (legends) in the margin and changes on the reverse of the coin. The destruction and alteration of the image of the (Sasanian) king was not part of the structure of this series of coins.

Despite their Sasanian numismatic characteristics, these coins (TM, OM) bear Islamic legends that are recognized from the early Islamic period to the late Qajar period (Quchani 2004; Hosseini 2014, 25).

The Islamic beliefs of Quwwah and Baraka, along with the terms Allāh and RBY (Bates and Shaddel 2023, 27-36), are frequently found inscribed on doorways, individual inscriptions on artifacts, and Islamic coins (Album et al. 1992, online). Interestingly, these inscriptions often appear with or without a hexagram. However, this raises a critical question: if these coins cannot be definitively attributed to a specific historical period, could it be possible that the coins of a specific historical period served as a template for them? This question warrants further study and scholarly discourse. The study of these two coins not only contributes to our understanding of a specific type of Arab-Sasanian coins but also provides valuable insights into the cultural and religious interactions of these periods.

The author conducted a comparative analysis between these two objects with the coins of the Early Islamic coins, including those from the Khawāridj legacy, to possibly determine a specific

dating, but it was not fruitful. Consequently, the author shifted his focus to coins with similar characteristics within the same geographical region. This decision was prompted primarily by the discovery of coins in the Azarbaijan region that exhibited strikingly similar designs or dies. The author postulates that the indigenous population may have been the primary catalyst for such a change in past or pre-modern Iran.

Should this hypothesis hold true, it suggests that while the origins of such counter-stamps and Islamic legends can be traced back to the pre-Ilkhāni era, specifically the Saldjūkid period, their zenith of evolution and refinement could be attributed to this particular epoch in Azerbaijan. 3

Tabriz, a city steeped in history, experienced significant growth and development during the Saldjūkid era. This period marked a time of prosperity and expansion, not just for Tabriz but for the entire region. The city's fortunes were further enhanced during the reign of the Īlkhānī, reaching unprecedented heights of prosperity. The rich tapestry of Persian texts provides a detailed account of this period, narrating the extensive reconstruction efforts undertaken by Ghazan-khan. Among the cities that were rebuilt and revitalized under his rule was Ūjan, which emerged as a testament to the architectural prowess and urban planning of the era. The prosperity of Azerbaijan, the region in which Tabriz is located, is a recurring theme in the annals of Iranian history.

A significant number of similar Īlkhānī and Saldjūkid coins have been discovered in the historical landscape of Azerbaijan, as previously reported. This discovery essentially serves as a validation of the TM coin (Torabi-Tabatabaee, 1968:22). The existence of these Saldjūkid - Īlkhānī coins suggests a possible connection between the two, the TM-OM coins and the two historical periods in the two Azerbaijani provinces of Iran.

The author postulates that these two coins could be classified as "imitations" of the Īlkhānī style, although the Saldjūkid era is also a possibility. The author further suggests that this replication probably occurred after the Īlkhānī era, a belief he maintains. Interestingly, the die of the Īlkhānī coins was struck with a level of professionalism and harmony consistent with the TM coin. However, this does not significantly distinguish it from the OM coin. This raises an intriguing question: is it possible that the minting of the TM coin preceded that of the OM coin, and that the minters learned from their initial mistakes and did not repeat them in the subsequent minting process?

The unprofessional conduct can be seen clearly on the TM coin. It is substantiated by the use of X-ray (Fig. 3) photography. The images reveal a subtle defacement of the king's face, presumably achieved by a deliberate act of abrasion. Subsequently, the coin appears to have been subjected to a forceful, though poorly regulated, impact. This probably occurred when the coin was placed on a rigid object, such as an anvil.

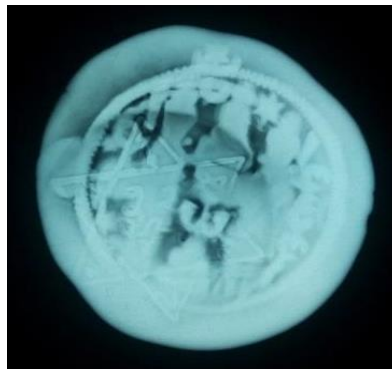


Fig. 3. X-ray photographic photo

Nevertheless, through the lens of a Leica M8 microscope (Fig. 4), the unprofessional actions become glaringly evident. The crescent and the star, symbols of significance, remain visible on the obverse, while the other traces, those of Sasanian origin, have vanished. Despite the impact of a stroke on the left margin, the regnal year, denoted as "dw'c-dh" (12), remains distinctly visible.



Fig.4. Microscopical photo

In this context, the integrity of the Sasanian coin metals was meticulously preserved, a fact that was confirmed by the XRF analysis (Chart 1). At the same time, the results of this analysis can be juxtaposed with previously published research (Akbarzadeh 2024, 22) for a comprehensive understanding.

Calibration Mode: General Metal Analysis									
Sample %	Obv.					Rev.			
	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	P1	P2	P3	P4
Si	0.679	0.719	0.680	0.711	0.643	0.716	0.774	0.743	0.826
P	0.058	0.057	0.051	0.049	0.040	0.052	0.065	0.043	0.061
Ti	0.060	0.048	0.061	0.065	0.048	0.068	0.058	0.061	0.064
V	0.103	0.093	0.098	0.096	0.093	0.091	0.084	0.088	0.092
Cr	0.573	0.563	0.573	0.570	0.601	0.632	0.635	0.641	0.642
Fe	0.091	0.092	0.082	0.044	0.121	0.052	0.059	0.056	0.054
Cu	3.98	3.97	4.06	4.04	4.02	3.60	3.51	3.52	3.28
Ag	92.10	92.08	92.08	92.05	92.09	92.51	92.57	92.46	92.63
Sn	0.106	0.163	0.106	0.103	0.106	0.201	0.203	0.203	0.255
Au	0.573	0.549	0.547	0.581	0.577	0.560	0.550	0.579	0.549
Pb	1.52	1.52	1.57	1.55	1.54	1.40	1.35	1.48	1.34
Bi	0.025	0.026	0.031	0.034	0.031	0.035	0.033	0.020	0.026

Chart. 1. XRF result

However, the overstriking of the Orumiyeh coin was done with the utmost professionalism.

Determining whether a collection of Sasanian coins or a hoard of Hormazd IV coins was first struck in Azerbaijan, or it was struck elsewhere before being transported to its current location is a complex task.

This striking, which differs from all known overstruck Islamic coins, can be explained by alternative means (cf. Moshiri, 2010: 79). The striking similarity between these coins and those of the Saldjūkid, particularly the Īlkhanī coins found in the Azerbaijan region, could indicate the knowledge of the person(s) responsible for this charge.

## CONCLUSION

The enigmatic Sasanian to late Islamic coins in the TM (no. 4740) and OM (no. 13013) represent a unique artifact in the field of numismatic studies (for the absence of the background, see Bates 1986, online; Malek 2019, 572). Shrouded in mystery, these coins pose a significant challenge to researchers due to the lack of comprehensive information on similar hoards and collections in Iranian museums. Most of the collections remain unpublished, which further exacerbates the difficulty of obtaining reliable data. The reliability of information provided by museum curators is also questionable, adding another layer of complexity to the research process. Interestingly, an abundance of Islamic coins with hexagram designs and Islamic inscriptions have been documented. However, no reports of this particular type of coin have surfaced from the TM-OM museums.

The task of preparing an initial design and producing a die to mint a mere two Sasanian coins presents a formidable challenge. Could these coins be considered remnants of a failed initiative from a bygone era? It is plausible that there was an intention to overstrike a collection of Sasanian coins, but an insurmountable inability thwarted the effort.

However, it is crucial not to overlook the uniformity and professionalism displayed in overstriking the OM coin. The overstriking is centrally located, covers the entire ring, preserves the lettering of the legends, and does not damage the reverse of the coin. These factors suggest a controlled and deliberate process, and caution should be taken against dismissing this as mere private amusement. The form and Islamic terms predominantly visible on these coins are reminiscent of those seen in Iran prior to the Safavid period (Moshiri 2010:30).

The claim that a comparable Īlkhānī artifact inspired the TM-OM coins is neither overly ambitious nor convoluted. This proposition underscores the need to recognize the numismatic features of the Īlkhānī era as a significant influence on the design of these coins. However, the author does not support the view that these two coins were struck during the Īlkhānī period. Nevertheless, the artistic inspiration of this period cannot be overlooked. Coins of the Īlkhānī period are often reported to be in the hands of people and smugglers (locals) in Azerbaijan. Besides, the interest of the locals in this historical period cannot be ignored. Pan-Turkic feelings have probably had an effect on this matter. In fact, those who made this striking could not have done so without having a sample(s). Interestingly, these two coins do not reflect any real Shiite legacy. The numismatic style of the Īlkhānī period, characterized by its unique artistic elements, could have significantly influenced the design of the TM-OM coins. However, this influence does not necessarily mean the coins were struck in the same period. The author is skeptical about this idea and instead emphasizes the possibility of artistic inspiration from the Īlkhānī era. It is plausible that the minting of these coins took place in pre-modern Iran, where the coiners corrected their mistake on the Tabriz coin through the Orumiyeh artifact.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nestled in the historic heart of Tabriz city, the Museum of Azerbaijan stands as a testament to the rich cultural heritage of East Azerbaijan. The museum, a brainchild of M. Reza Shah (Father of Iran), was established in April 1958 and officially opened its doors to the public in 1962. The architectural design of the museum was entrusted to A. Godard, a renowned French architect who also designed the National Museum of Iran (Sarami et al. 1993, 12-14). The Museum of Azerbaijan is a treasure trove of vibrant artifacts spanning from the prehistoric era to the Qajar periods. It houses an impressive collection of 7600 coins, with over 2500 coins hailing from Pre-Islamic periods such as the Achaemenid, Parthians, Elymais, Hellenic, and Sasanian eras. The remaining coins are from the Islamic Periods, including a notable collection of approximately 300 Sasanian, Arab-Sasanian, and Tabaristan coins. In addition to the Museum of Azerbaijan, the Orumiyeh (Rezaee) Museum also contributes significantly to the preservation of the region's history. Established by order of Queen Farah in 1966 and inaugurated in 1967, the Orumiyeh Museum boasts a collection of over 6000 coins. Among these, 400 coins are from the Sasanian, Arab-Sasanian, and Gopad-shah periods, further enriching the understanding of the region's historical narrative.

<sup>2</sup> Quwwa ilā be-Allāh (3-6h) or Lā-ilā- ...MMH Rasūl-al-Alāh reported already (on the margin of Hormizd IV; cf. Hossein Rastagar 2016, 265).

<sup>3</sup> As the laboratory staff began their technical examination of the Tabriz coin, a serendipitous event occurred. A small cache of Islamic coins, freshly unearthed from the Ūjān site, arrived for simultaneous analysis. These coins, discovered by the esteemed archaeologist Dr. R. Valayati (2019:108) of the University of Tehran, were found in the eastern region of Azerbaijan in 2019. Valayati's archaeological team uncovered these coins both on the surface and through meticulous excavation at the fortress site. All the coins were attributed to the Īlkhānī period, specifically the 7-8 hijra. Interestingly, I noticed striking similarities between the Tabriz coin and one from the newly arrived hoard. The site of Ūjān, nestled in the foothills of Mount Sahand, is located five kilometers south of the city of Bostan-abad in eastern Azerbaijan. Bostan-abad itself is 45 kilometers east of Tabriz. Upon closer examination of the bronze coin of Ūjān, a hexagram from the reign of Abu Saeed Bahdur-khān (716-736/1305-1335), several names and terms were discernible.



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## مداخلة حول عملتين ساسانيتين – إسلاميتين متأخرتين محفوظتين في متحف تبريز و أورومية

### الملخص

تمتد أهمية العملات الساسانية إلى ما بعد عصرها التاريخي، لتشمل الفترات اللاحقة للعهد الساساني وما بعده. وتركز هذه الدراسة على عملة مثيرة للاهتمام تعود إلى الملك الساساني هرمز الرابع، والتي تم إعادة سكها ومحفوظة في متحف تبريز، بالإضافة إلى عملة مشابهة محفوظة في متحف أورومية. تضمنت عملية إعادة السك هذه ختمًا على شكل نجمة سداسية الرؤوس يحوي مركزها عبارات إسلامية ذات دلالة دينية معروفة، وهي: "قوة"، و "بركة"، و "الله"، في إشارة إلى عبارة "القوة والبركة من عند الله". تظهر النقوش الإسلامية على عملة متحف تبريز كما يلي: ٤ "لا"، ٢ "حكم"، ١٢ "إلا"، ١٠ "الله"، ٨ "ربي"، و ٦ "الله"؛ حيث تشير الأرقام المذكورة إلى موقع الكتابة داخل دائرة الساعة، وتجتمع الكلمات المفردة لتكون عبارة: "لا حكم إلا الله، ربي الله". ويثير اكتشاف عملة مشابهة في متحف أورومية أسئلة مهمة لفهمها مضمونها ودلالته. فهل كان الأفراد المسؤولون عن إعادة السك يمتلكون مجموعة من عملات هرمز الرابع، وهل قاموا بتطبيق عملية إعادة السك المذكورة على هذه القطع؟

وتبحث هذه الدراسة في تأويل أصل هذه التحولات، أو بعبارة أخرى، الدوافع وراءها، والتي تذهب بتاريخها إلى العصر الإيلخاني. فبينما يمكن تمييز مثل هذا التصميم منذ زمن السلاجقة، إلا أن ثمة تأثير واضح للعصر الإيلخاني قد ترك بصمة عميقة على منطقة أذربيجان.

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### بيانات المقال

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تم استلام النسخة المنقحة في ١ يناير

٢٠٢٤

تم قبول البحث في ٢٥ يناير ٢٠٢٥

متاح على الإنترنت في ٦ فبراير

٢٠٢٥

### الكلمات الدالة

ساسانيون؛

هرمز الرابع؛

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