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SOME REMARKS
ON THE CAMEL ON SASANIAN SEALS

Abstract: *This article focuses on the analysis of the symbol of camel which can be observed on the seals dated back to the Sasanian period. The camel iconography was not only a simple decorative motive, but was strongly associated with the religious aspects. The author agreed with opinion that the camel can be associated with one of the god Verethragna incarnations.*

Keywords: *Sasanian seals; camel; Verethragna*

Sasanian glyptics, which are generally well studied, are known to have drawn on a rich repertoire of symbolic motifs, including human, fantastic creatures, plants and other elements, such as *tamgas* for instance (Debevoise 1934, 12-118; Bivar 1969; Shepherd 1983, 1055-1112; Göbl 1973; Göbl 1976; Frye 1973; Gineux 1978; Gyselen 1995). The representations obviously had to be of importance for the seal owner and had to carry symbolic meaning for those for whom the sealed documents were intended. Seals also served to individualize their owners and they may have acted as personal amulets with no administrative association, providing symbolic protection against evil spirits. Informative as symbols of the owners' official and administrative powers, seals were also carriers of ideological and mythological content, which in itself is inseparable from royal iconography and ideology. Thus, any analysis of the meaning and symbolism of seal representations has to delve into these aspects as well, and since royal ideology tends to draw on a rich iconography, such elements of royal propaganda are relatively easy to interpret.

It is not the case of seals bearing representations that apparently have no connection with royal propaganda and ideology. Understanding the ideological message hidden behind the iconography in these instances requires knowledge of local tradition, beliefs and sometimes religion to find a key to the interpretation.

One of the motifs appearing on Sasanian seals is a representation of camel and this paper focuses on the iconography of this animal (Bivar 1969, 83, Pl. 14; Göbl 1973, Taf. 18; Göbl 1976, Taf. 37; Frye 1973, D 155, D 221). Camel seals are few in Sasanian glyptic art, but even so they deserve consideration as a motif which while not common, must have had a deeper meaning and significance.

A closer look at the most common kinds of animals represented on different types of Sasanian seals should help with understanding the complexity of seal iconography. The lion, which is frequent in Sasanian glyptics (Göbl 1973, 43-44, Taf. 15; Frye 1973, 72-77, D 50, D 159, D 162, D 164, D 165, D 166, D 167, D 171, D 172, D 174, D 175, D 176, D 181, D 182, D 183; Bivar 1969, Pls. 9-11), is a strong symbol of dignity, nobility, might and power; it is also associated with royal majesty. Other creatures popular on seals of the period are birds of prey, especially eagles or falcons (Göbl 1973, Taf. 13; Frye 1973, D 41, D 45, D 51, D 56, D 58, D 60). Like the lion, these birds had strong associations with royal and heraldic symbolism. Bears, rams, canines, deer and horses are also found on Sasanian seals (Göbl 1973; Göbl 1976; Frye 1973; Gineux 1978). There are creatures apparently not as nice or elegant, like rats or mice (Göbl 1973, Taf. 14; Bivar 1969, Pl. 20) – quite unseemly in the esthetically minded Sasanian glyptics. These creatures were strongly associated with Gayamort symbolism, thus demonstrating close ties with Iranian mythology (Duchesne-Guillemin 1962, 37, 53-54; Göbl 1973, Taf. 1; Bivar 1969, Pls 5-6; Gyselen 1995). As for rams, ravens, deer, horses and boars, they could have been associated with the iconography of Verethragna (Duchesne-Guillemin 1962, 38, 175, 207, 382) who had several incarnations according to Avestan sources, all strongly associated with the warlike nature of the god (Duchesne-Guillemin 1962, 38, 175, 207, 382). The horse, however, could have been associated also with a *yazata* called Tishtria who, under the guise of a white horse, fought an evil demon represented as a mangy and ugly black stallion every year on the shores of the Vaurokaša Sea (Yarshater 1983, 345-346, 351-352). This symbolism was deeply grounded in Iranian mythology and tradition.

The cases of the horse and rat clearly show how difficult and delicate the interpretation of iconography can be.

Camels were obviously not unimportant to the Persians. In Iran, representations of camels appeared in the middle of the third millennium BC, on pottery from Tepe Sialk (Ghirsman 1938-39, Pl. XLXIX: A2; Zeuner 1963, 359; Bulleit 1990, 730-733) and on a bronze ax-head discovered in a grave at Korab in southeastern Iran (Maxwell-Hyslop 1955, 161; Zeuner 1955, 162-163; Lemberg-Karlovsky 1969, 163-168). One well-known example is a camel-like creature on a clay model from Turkmenistan (Masson and Sarianidi 1972, 109, Pl. 36). In all of these cases, however, it is a double-humped creature (*Camelus bactrianus*) that is shown. Other representations are known from Persepolis (Koch 2001, 32-33; Dutz and Matheson 2001, 46-63), but there they were part of a bigger composition with propagandist overtones, depicting representatives of different peoples making up the Achaemenid Empire. Since camels were commonly used or raised in several regions of ancient Persia, it was only natural that they appeared in a composition that took advantage of various characteristic features to represent different parts of the empire. The animal was associated with the Bactrians, Parthians, Aryans, Arachosians and Arabs, but only the last used dromedary camels (*Camelus dromedarius*). This particular species was obviously not very popular and was used apparently only by the Arabs from the western part of the Empire.

The only representation of camels in monumental art from the Sasanian period is a relief of Bahram II in Bishapur (Vanden Berghe 1984, 139-140, Pl. 28). The Persian king was shown on horseback receiving a delegation of Bedouins, who were depicted stereotypically with a train of camels.

The animal depicted on seals from the Sasanian period is the dromedary camel. Considering that the Bactrian camel was the more common and popular species in Persia, the iconography in this case cannot be accidental. It was necessary apparently to choose an uncommon, if not exotic, animal as a carrier of ideological symbolism. One example is a late Sasanian seal from the Ermitage collection (Gl. 407), depicting what appears to be a canonical representation of a camel walking to the left. (Fig. 1: 1) The seal belonged to a son of Datfarruch from Barzushtan and is dated to the 6th or beginning of 7th century AD (Lukonin and Iwanow 1996, cat. no. 60, Fig. 60). The animal depicted on it is carved schematically in shallow relief. The eye, which is drilled, is big. No harness or burden can be discerned.

Göbl (1973) published a few more similar seals in his monograph "Sasanidische Siegelkanon". Let us consider three examples of seals with

camel representations. The first, which comes from the E. T. Newell collection, shows a one-humped camel walking right (van der Osten 1934, Pl. 34-35). (Fig. 1: 9) The silhouette of the creature was modeled schematically but the head was better worked with a disproportionately big eye constituting a single major feature. The second example, from the Munich collection, is even more schematic, but with the camel also walking right (Göbl 1973, Taf. 18: 50b) (Fig. 1: 10). The third, from the British Museum, presents only a general shape recognizable as a camel (Bivar 1969, Pl. 14: EL 1.) (Fig. 1: 11). In all three cases, the camels have one front and one rear leg crossed. Several other very similar seals can be found in the British Museum collection, but in my opinion they do not contribute anything more to this discussion of camel iconography.

Excavations at Tacht-e Suleiman yielded three seals with representations of one-humped camels similar to the above (Göbl 1976). No. 306 has a schematically drawn camel walking to the left with raised tail and legs that are not crossed (Fig. 1: 6). On No. 307 the schematic outline of a camel is accompanied by a short illegible inscription (Fig. 1: 7). No. 308 also bore an image of a one-humped camel walking right, but nothing beyond the general shape is discernible on this severely damaged seal (Fig. 1: 8).

Seals with representations of camels from the excavations at Qasr-i Abu Nasr include one (Frye 1973, D 118), where a camel shown walking to the left has one foreleg and one rear leg crossed and a disproportionately big head (Fig. 1: 3). A raised tail makes the representation more dynamic. The image was accompanied by a short inscription. Another seal from the site followed the same pattern of a camel walking left (Frye 1973, D 155) (Fig. 1: 4), but with uncrossed legs, tail low and head worked in highly schematic fashion. The carving was generally quite careless. A fragmentary inscription was also discernible. Seal D221 also bore an image of a camel accompanied by a short inscription; in this case, however, the carving was good, depicting an animal with legs that were not crossed, a slightly raised hooked tail and well worked head with a characteristically big eye (Frye 1973, D 221) (Fig. 1: 2). Finally, there is an inscribed seal representing a one-humped animal with crossed legs, raised tail and a head featuring a big eye and pointed ears (Frye 1973, D 356).

The meaning behind the choice of camel iconography on such objects of the bureaucratic life as seals cannot be discussed without a consideration of the inscriptions that are found on some of these pieces. An analysis of the inscribed seals has demonstrated that many of them belonged

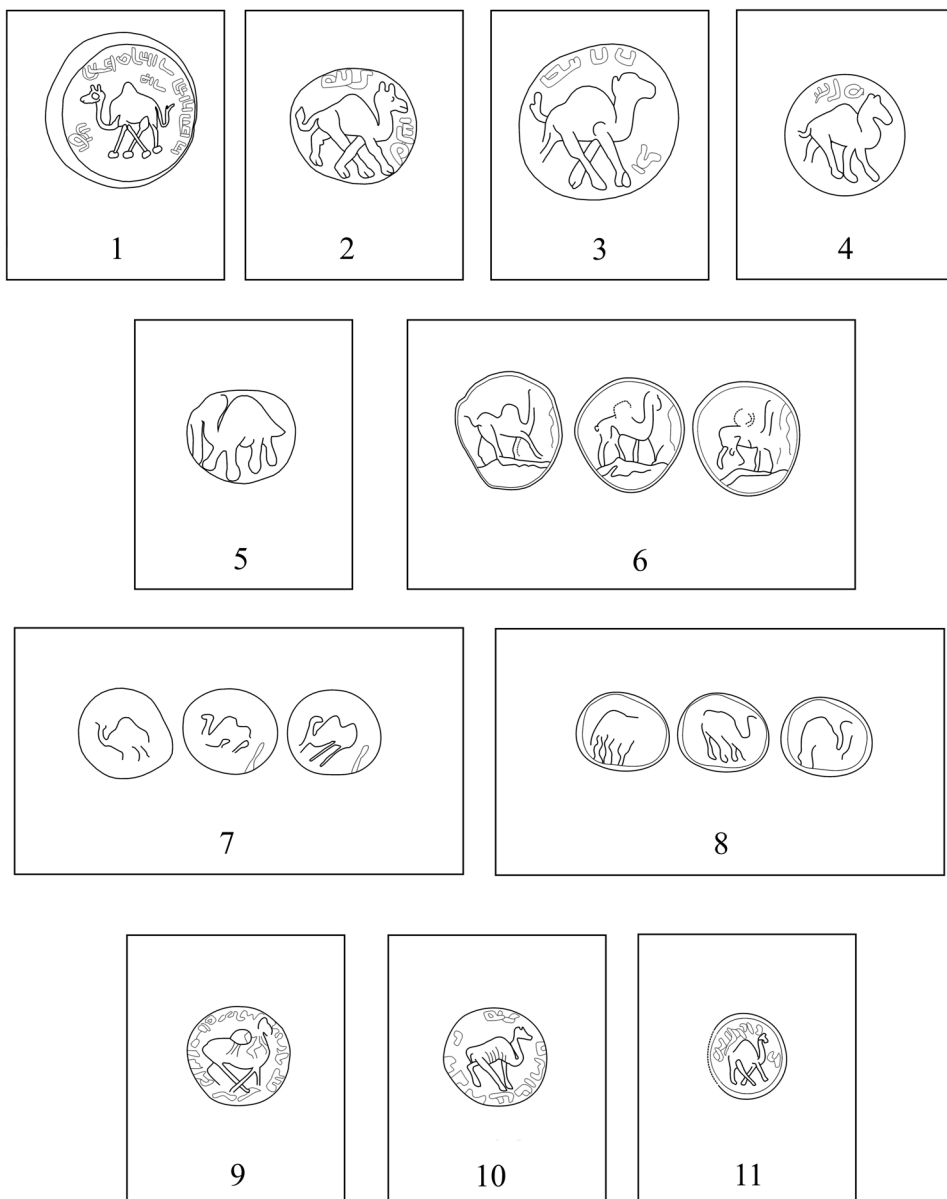


Fig. 1. Camels on Sasanian seals

- 1 - The Hermitage collection, reproduced from Lukonin and Iwanow 1996, cat. no. 60;
 2-5 - The seals from Qasr-i Abu Nasr, reproduced from Frye 1973, D 221, D 118, D 155,
 D 306;
 6-8 - The seal imprints from That-e Suleiman, reproduced from Göbl 1976, no 306-308;
 9 - A seal from the E. T. Newell collection, reproduced from Göbl 1973, Taf. 18: 50a;
 10 - A seal from the Munich collection, reproduced from Göbl 1973, Taf. 18: 50b;
 11 - A seal from the British Museum collection, reproduced from Göbl 1973, Taf. 18: 50c.

to Zoroastrian priests (Bivar 1969, Pl. 14: EL 1, El 2 Frye 1973, D 118, D 155, D 221). The association cannot be accidental in my opinion and it presumably reflects the symbolic importance of the camel as such. A closer reading of the Avesta draws attention to lines 11-13 in Yasht 14 dedicated to Verethragna, where the god's incarnation as a camel is described¹. The camel here is portrayed as a swift, long-haired beast of burden with sharp teeth, thick forelegs and large humps, quick-eyed, long-headed, bright, tall and strong. It had piercing sight and ventured far even in the dark of the night. Warlike and dynamic Verethragna was one of the most important deities in Mithra's train (Duchesne-Guillemin 1962, 37, 38, 175, 207, 382; Colpe 1983, 846); he represented invincible power fighting against evil spirits, traits that were naturally transferred to the camel as his incarnation. Moreover, all the powers that were attributed to a camel in Yasht 14 of the Avesta were also the god's. It is clear, therefore, that the camel on Sassanian seals carried the same symbolic import as an image of Verethragna. This carried the message that the seal owner was under the god's protection and that he acknowledged for himself all of the features associated with a camel including, indirectly, perseverance and determination.

In the case of Zoroastrian priests, the symbolism of the camel as a beast of burden can be associated with the Mazdaic concepts of bearing knowledge and spreading the light of faith. The same idea could be purported for seal owners who were royal officers and who desired to embody all that a Verethragna represented. Representative of the royal court in the provinces would have chosen the beast of burden as a symbol of their willingness to work hard and their readiness to sacrifice themselves in the name of the king. The camel symbolism on their seals thus accorded the owners, whether priests or royal officers, Verethragran features, conveying their honesty and other traits that made them deserving of Verethragna's assistance and protection. Indeed, the authority of this very important deity in the Iranian pantheon legitimized their actions.

The traits of persistence and determination, implied by the description in Yasht 14, consolidated camel symbolism as a beast of burden successfully completing the tasks assigned to it. Sharp-toothedness can also be associated symbolically with bravery, possibly emphasizing Verethragna's uncontrollable temperament, much like the camel's. Hence, the associations with the deity's most important aspect as a warrior god are clear and straightforward.

In verse 12 of Yasht 14, the camel as an incarnation of Verethragna, was described as showing greatest strength and fire when in rut. This emphasized

¹ *Zend Avesta*, part II *Yashts*, translated by J. Darmesteter, Oxford 1883.

the fertility and live-giving aspects, as well as temperament and strength.

Seeing in the dark also carried symbolic import on different levels. Firstly, there was battling against the evil spirits concealed in the dark, Ahriman in particular. Then there are associations with knowledge penetrating the darkness of ignorance. The connotations for royal officers and witnesses of these sealings are obvious: guarding against irregularity, dishonesty and injustice. Officers discharging the king's authority needed to be upright and righteous, as well as representing true Zoroastrian faith. The big camel eyes on several of the seals may be read as a symbol of this attribute.

Other adjectives strongly associated with the camel in Yasht 14 of the Avesta, such as thick forelegs and large humps, as well as sure-footedness, can also be associated with strength. Strong and tall in the same context refer hardly accidentally to the mighty nature of the camel/Verethragna. Finally, long-hairedness can also be associated with Verethragna's mighty nature, hair being commonly considered as a symbol of vitality and power. On a more pragmatic note, camel hair makes for excellent wool used in producing warm clothing, an aspect not to be overlooked in the conditions of the Persian climate. The violent character of the camel/Verethragna was described by two other adjectives: an animal that stamps forward and throws white foam. This could have indicated the fearless and uncurbed character of the deity, features that would have been of importance for the owner of a camel seal in the course of his bureaucratic career. Nobleness and a willingness to work for the people were also expected of members of the royal or Zoroastrian church bureaucratic apparatus. The Yasht also described the camel as bright, living in the abodes of men and well-kneed.

It is only natural that people with an understanding of symbolism in Persian religion would have had no difficulty in recognizing these features and in assuming that owners of camel seals evoked the god's protection and aspired to everything that Verethragna stood for.

Concluding, any discussion of the inherent symbolism of camel representations on seals should focus on religious and mythological aspects rather than the simple symbolism of a camel as a decorative and distinctive motif. Considering Verethragna's incarnation as a camel, the iconography found on seals takes on an intentional character stimulated by the accumulation of positive traits that would have shown seal owners in a favorable light. In the hands of royal bureaucrats, these seals became an excellent tool of what we would call today good public relations. Associating the camel as a decorative element with religious aspects that were clearly understood on all levels of both educated and uneducated society was an obvious reference

to Verethragna. Carriers of such seals would have thus drawn on this positive symbolism to present themselves as the most trustworthy members of either royal or church institutions. In other words, holding a camel seal ensured one's status as a member of a very exclusive group of the administration, a person of special confidence and one who could look to Verethragna for help and protection in critical situations. Moreover, assuming my thinking is correct; it would be interesting to observe how camel iconography changed over time. Very likely under the strong influence of the Avesta, the camel stopped being just a decorative element used as a means of identifying specific nations and ethnic groups in the Iranian and non-Iranian world of the Achaemenid period and became an expression of a symbolic association with Verethragna, one of the most expressive deities in Mithra's retinue.

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