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COMPOSITIONS OF ZOROASTRIAN FIRE ALTARS OF SASANIAN IRAN (based on Coin Images)

Since the early years of the Sasanian Empire, the effigy of each Sasanian king was placed on the obverse of the coins, and on the reverse side there was an atashdan altar, depicting where a sacred fire burned. Its image demonstrated the importance of Zoroastrianism as a state religion. A commitment to preserving a certain number of altar components – there were seven altogether – speaks of the sacred purpose of the object and the existence of the canons that were followed during its construction. The article analyzes compositions of atashdans mainly according to the images known from publications of Sasanian coins and copies of coins of the Sasanian mint. The author notes the gradual schematization of atashdan iconography from monumentality to decorativeness, linking this phenomenon with a weakening of the role of the Zoroastrian religion in the life of the state and society.

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, atashdan altar, Sasanian coins, composition, pedestal base, trunk, chapter, religious symbols.

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SINCE ancient times monetary symbols contain reliable information about the state to which they belong. They depict images of deities and kings, state emblems, writing patterns, symbols of religions, and even details of architectural structures and their facades. It is known that the main ceremony of the Zoroastrian religion involved the use of sacred fire, which was divided into different types. The hierarchy of fire temples consisted of three main fires, which however, were different in category: The first level is “Shah Atash Varahram (Bahram)” meaning “Victorious Fire King”; the second level is “Atash Aduran (Adaran)” or “Fire of Fires,” the third one is “Atash Dadgah” meaning “Legally Set Fire.” The sacred fire was kindled on special *atashdan* altars whose three types were wall, portable and static. The *atashdan* was an important symbol of the Zoroastrian religion, therefore, its image was given special attention in ancient times.

The *atashdan* was depicted on the walls of temples and tombs in the pre-Achaemenid period. One particular example is the Kyzkapkan tomb (7th – 6th centuries BC) in Media over the door of the entrance portal is a relief image of two men dressed in Median clothes and standing on the sides of the fire altar (Borodin 1970: 294, Fig. 5). Here the *atashdan* consists of a short thick trunk, placed on three wide,

high-stepped slabs or platforms. The trunk is crowned with three finials, relatively low, which are equal with the width of the slabs. Images of *atashdan* are extant in wall paintings, on the walls of ossuaries, on coins minted in Central Asia, as well as on coins from Sasanian Iran. On the obverse of the coins of each Sasanian king was his portrait, and on the reverse side was an altar, on the raised flat platform, where the sacred fire burned.

According to information based on reports by Ammianus Marcellinus, Sebeos and other ancient authors, each king had his own fire, kindled at the beginning of his reign. This fire was maintained in a portable altar, such as those depicted on coins (Frye 1962). It is possible, however, that the “king of lights” was simply called the fire of the ruling king (Anklesaria 1908: 127–128).

A brief overview of the details of the architectural structures and *atashdan* altars of the Zoroastrian religion depicted on the coins of Central Asia has already been undertaken (Azimov 1997). This publication gives an analysis of a small number of coins from the Sasanian era to the twentieth century. The geography of the considered monetary symbols covers the territories of Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, etc. Here we will discuss the composition of the *atashdans* mainly based on the images known from publications of the

Sasanian coins and imitation coins of the Sasanian mint.

The images of the king and the altar on a coin indicate the sovereign's adherence to the Zoroastrian religion in Sasanian Iran. Gradually, the cult of Ahuramazda became the single official religion of the state. The role of religion in the state structure was reflected in the famous poem by Ferdowsi called the *Shahnameh*, which contains the following maxims: "The throne is the support of the altar, and the altar is the support of the throne;" "Religion and royal authority are like body and soul, the world is behind them both;" "Every time a throne is left without a sovereign, its wisdom and religion lose its value."

The *atashdan* symbolized cosmogonic ideas about the earthly and heavenly worlds. Apparently, it symbolized the images of a star and a crescent placed on both sides of the fire altars with a flame as depicted on one of the coins found on Karatepa in Uzbekistan (Pidayev, Baratova 2006: 175). *Atashdans* compositionally resembled an architectural column order. At the bottom was a base pedestal, consisting of two or more flat steps, expanding downwards. The trunk often ended with four flat steps and expanded upwards according to their arrangement. All the altars consisted of the same parts: a base pedestal, the trunk, and the chapter. In most *atashdan* images, the trunk is tied in the middle with a ribbon or banner. In some of them, the ribbon extends down both sides of the trunk or their ends are directed upwards. On both sides of the altar there are always images of the deity, king and attendants.

There are significant differences in the design of the *atashdans*. We will only analyze the altar compositions, without commenting on other images or attributes, in particular any inscriptions, the ribbons of the trunk, or human figures on both sides of the *atashdan*, etc. The designs of the *atashdans* will be considered in accordance with the sequence of periods from the reigns of the Sassanid kings of Iran.

There are two noteworthy coins of Ardashir I (Dashkov 2008: 52-53). On one of them, the chapter of the *atashdan* includes four flat steps with a large extension on the sides. The third step plane (tread), which is especially high with an impressive extension, increases the weightiness of the altar's composition. The altar depicted on the other coin shows the third step plane also enhancing the lightness and airiness of the composition with a large arched ledge. In the compositions of both altars, the artisans emphasized the third tread of the step not only by increasing its size, but also utilizing ornamental decoration on the contours of the passageway borders with a chain of convex points.

On all ten known coins from the period of Ardashir I's reign (Lukonin 1969: Tab. 11), the third

step of the chapter of the altars is characterized by an excessively large arched extension on the sides. In one image, the trunk of the altar is shown to have vertical, convex stripes resembling fluting on Roman columns. The altar depicted on the coin of Shapur I, consists of six flat slabs and a trunk. The trunk is round and proportional to the horizontal parts of the altar. The continued expansion of the width of the steps of the chapters to the sides is halted by the placement of the fourth narrow slab on which the sacred fire burns.

The height of the fire altar, as depicted on the reverse side of a drachma of Hormizd I, is close to human stature. The proportional combination of thin, flat platform steps is broken by the excessive width and height of the trunk. All this reduces the compositional stability of the base of the altar. In the image of the altar of Varakhran I, the width of the step is not very distinguishable from the central stem-trunk. Here, the steps of the base are shown by line bars applied on the edges of the trunk body, therefore the *atashdan* acquires a pillar-like composition. The previous composition is repeated on one drachma of Varakhran II. In it, the contours of the lower steps are marked by a line of convex borders.

Many types of coins were minted during the reign of Varakhran II. It is no coincidence that one scholar notes that "this is an unprecedented case in all Sasanian numismatics when about twenty different types of coins with different images are minted in a short period of only 17 years" (Lukonin 1979: 5). On the *atashdan*, depicted on the coin of King Narse, the trunk is of excessive width and height. The width of one of the upper steps keeps the altar composition balanced. Other steps are separated from each other and from the trunk by horizontal lines.

On the altar from the coin of Varakhran III, the chapter is characterized by the gradual expansion of steps along the sides. The trunk is massive. The lower step of the base gives a balance to the whole composition of the altar. As in the altar of Varakhran I, the edges of the steps of the upper part are marked by the contour of the convex border. Compositions of most altars starting from Shapur I are characterized by a wide pylon-shaped trunk. Even on a coin imitating the drachmas of Varakhran V found in Sogd (KIDU 1991: 33), there is a depiction of an *atashdan* with a trunk made in the form of a solid, large "melon-shape," widely dispersed in the later wooden columns found in the Surkhadarya region.

It is possible that the vertical lines which resemble flutes, were made in order to ease the composition of the *atashdan* trunk depicted on the coin of Varakhran IV. On a Sogdian coin imitating the drachma of Varakhran IV, the fluted trunk has a smooth narrowing in the middle (Dashkov 2008: 300). On the Sasanian-Kushan coin No. 191 from the Dilbergin ex-

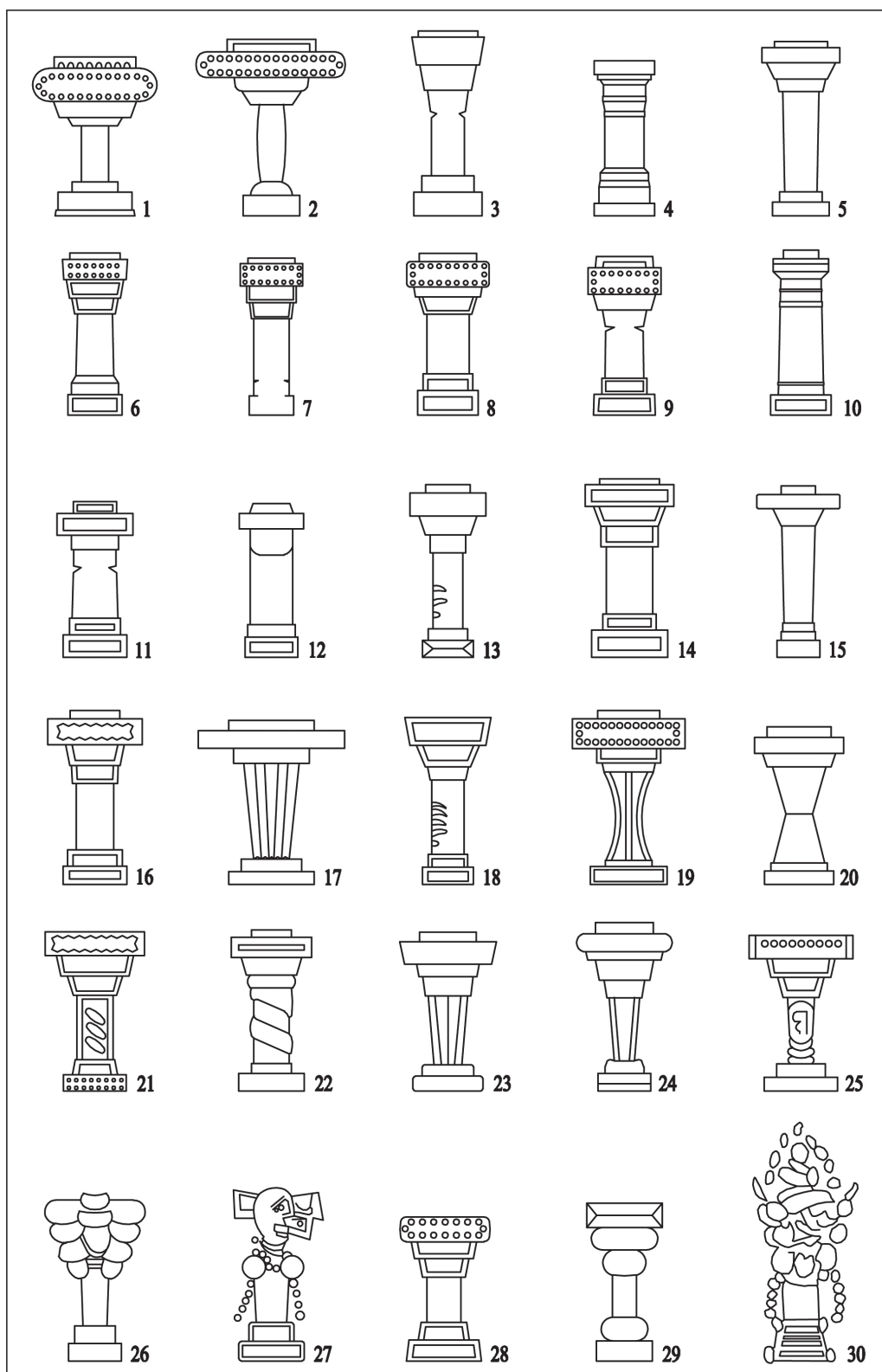
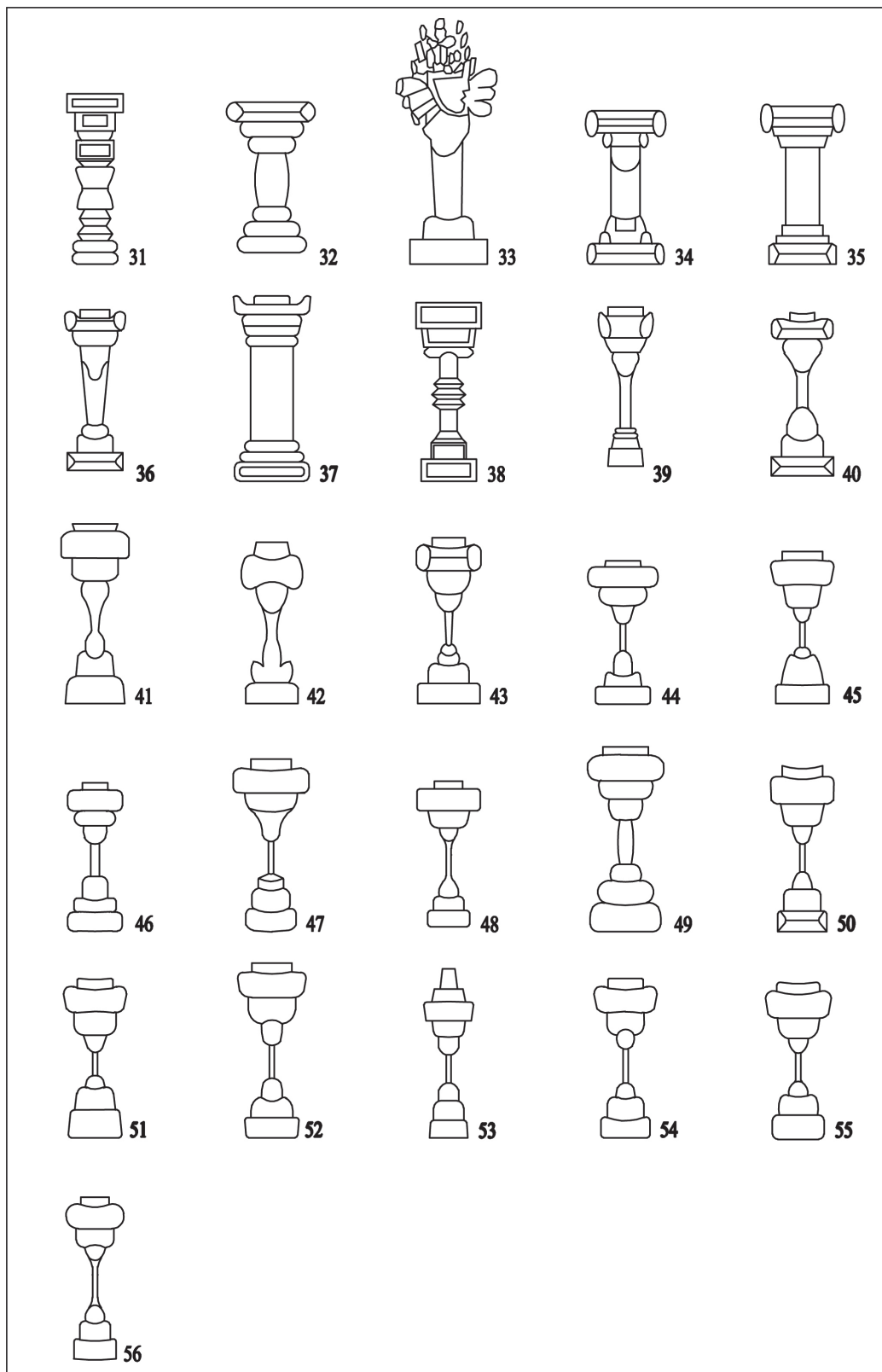


Fig. 1. Schematic representation (drawing) of the main types of atashdanz on the coins of the kings of the Sasanian Iran: 1-2. Ardashir I (227 - between 241 and 243); 3-4. Shapur I (243-273); 5. Hormizd I (273); 6. Varakhran I (273-276); 7-9. Varakhran II (276-292); 10. Varakhran III (292); 11-13. Narse (293-302); 14-15. Hormizd I (302-309); 16-18. Shapur II (309-379); 19-20. Ardashir II (379-383); 21-22. Shapur III (383-388); 23-24. Varakhran IV (388-399); 25. Yazdegerd I (399-421); 26-27. Varakhran V (421-438 / 439); 28-29. Yazdegerd II (439-457); 30. Hormizd III (457-459);



31–32. Peroz (459–483 / 484); 33. Valkash (484–488); 34–36. Kavad I (488–496 and 499–531);
 37. Jamasp (496–498 / 499); 38–40. Khosrow I (531–579); 41. Hormizd IV (579–590);
 42–43. Varakhran VI (590–591); 44–45. Khosrow II (590 / 591–628); 46. Wistachmus (591–596);
 47. Hormizd V (? -?); 48. Kavad II Shiroe (628); 49. Ardashir III (628–630); 50. Buran VI (630–631);
 51. Khosrow III (ca 630); 52. Hormizd VI (629–632); 53. Azarmidukht (631–632); 54. Khosrow V, or Farrukhzad-
 Khosrow (632); 55. Yazdegerd III (632 / 633–651 / 652); 56. Arab-Sasanian.



Fig. 2. Samples of coins of Sasanian Iran with the image of *atashdands*

cavation, the fluted trunk of the *atashdan* is extended downwards (Vainberg, Kruglikova 1984: 131, 140).

The image of the *atashdan* related to the period of reign of Yazdegerd I has a peculiar interpretational element—a spiral carving in the lower part of the trunk. The Sogdian (?) copy from the 5th-6th centuries of the drachma of Varakhran V (Dashkov 2008: 300) has an extant helical spiral reproducing the upper part of the *atashdan*'s trunk. The lower section of the image is worn. S.B. Dashkov expressed doubt, indicated by a question mark, concerning whether the coin belonged to the Sogdian copy. This doubt, however, is dispelled by the fact that the trunk of the column, covered from top to bottom with helical braiding, is particularly characteristic of Sogd. For example, in the Biyanaiman ossuaries (Kastalsky 1909), there is a spiral-shaped curve ascending upwards which winds in the middle of the trunk and is perhaps one of the variations of the *morpech* ("the curve of the snake" or a spiral) motif that was very popular in Central Asian architecture and in the ornamental art. The trunk of the paired columns of the Limarov pitcher continues the same bundle motif; the direct parallel to it is given by the columns of the dwarf gallery of the Samanid mausoleum (Pugachenkova 1950: 32). There is a depiction of an arbor or pavilion on a ceramic, glazed vessel dating to the 8th century from Afrasiab. The arches there are based on these same paired bundle-shaped columns with small chapiters in the form of curls (Rempel 1961: 81-82). The column trunk with a spiral rendering is also found in Timurid architecture.

In the recent past, traditions spanning a millennium were still alive in the mountain valley of the Upper Zeravshan. The artisan undoubtedly saw and esteemed the patterns of the past in Rarz and Urmitan (Voronina 1977: 48-49). Ancient traditions have also survived in other mountainous regions of Central Asia. One such example is of the column with a bundle-like rendering of the trunk in the mountain village of Iskodar (Voronina 1977: Fig. 38); in the Upper Zeravshan villages of Zerobod, Zosun (Nazilov 1999: 183); in the Surkhandarya villages of Dehai Surkh, Dehai Bodom (Nazilov 1999: 174), and in the Kashkadarya mountain village of Hazrati Bashir (Pugachenkova 1965: 86).

On the coin of Hormizd I, the *atashdan*'s trunk is separated from above and below by one step with a significant ledge. The altar on the coin of Ardashir II is characterized by the fact that one of the upper flat slabs (the third) is quite wide and has a large extension on the sides, making the composition of the altar impressive and grandiose. Here, as on the altar depicted on the coin of Shapur II, the trunk of the altar has a smooth narrowing at the middle. This, to some extent, reduces the massiveness of flat steps.

On another coin of Ardashir II, the steps of the altar are narrow, with a small extension, possibly rounded. In the general composition of the altar, there is a prevailing trunk, which consists of two truncated cones connected in narrow sections. On another coin of Shapur II, the fire altar has a flattened shape due to the large offsets of flat steps. As in the image of the altar on the coin of Ardashir I there is an inclusion of vertical rollers in the trunk body which resemble flutes.

On a coin of Shapur III, most of the composition of the *atashdan* is occupied by high, flat steps. There are long and short diagonal lines made on the body of the short trunk. The combination of the thickness and width of the flat steps with the trunk imparts integrity, volume and elegance to the altar's depiction.

On the coins of Varakhran V, an image of the head of the deity appears to replace the upper steps of the altar. A similar *atashdan* with the head of a deity is found in the imitations of drachmas of Varakhran V discovered in Sogd and dated to the 5th – early 6th centuries (KIDU 1991: 33). On the altar, depicted on a coin from the period of Valkash's reign (484–488), in place of the flat steps of the chapter, there is an image of the deity's head. Such heads in the flame of the altar appear in the early 4th century during the reign of Hormizd II (Lukonin 1969: 155).

On Peroz's coins, the depictions of most altars have a classic form. It is characterized by a smooth, round trunk at the top and below it is marked by three roll-shaped steps. On coin No. 642, found in the Pyanj district, the image of the trunk consists of ellipsoidal and spherical shapes mounted on top of each other. On the altar from the coin of the early 8th century found on Ajina-tepa and which is a copy of the drachma of Peroz with the Sogdian legend in the embossment (DT 1985: 255, No. 647), the entire composition of the trunk includes rectangular, conical, cup-shaped planes with sharp and rounded bottom corners and superimposed on each other. The trunk here is not solid. The *atashdan* on this coin resembles the trunk of a wooden column of the early part of the first millennium from East Turkestan (Xinjiang, China) in the area of the Lobnor Lake.

On one coin of Khosrow I Anushirvan, the altar trunk consists of two round truncated cones connected in narrow sections by means of a rod. This coin of Khosrow I has the image of an *atashdan* of a similar composition as that found in Chaganian (KIDU 1991: 10). On a drachma which belongs to the period of reign of the same king, the middle of a narrow trunk contains three flat, pointed, roller-shaped forms. If in the first image it appears that the constructive function of the trunk of the *atashdan* is now lost and the decorative function of the trunk has increased, then in the second image the composition of

the altar is minimized due to the linear edging. Beginning from the reign of Hormizd IV, the outline of the trunk in the images of the altars significantly narrows and turns into a thin, solid rod. This can also be seen on the coins of Hormizd IV, Varahran VI, Khosrow II Parviz, Vistakhm, Hormizd V, Kavad II Shiroye, Farrukhzad-Khosrow and Yazdegerd III, whose reign covers the period of 579–651 (*Dashkov* 2008: 295–299). At the same time, the height of the flat slabs of the bases and chapters increases, which results in weakening the structural stability of the composition and intensifies the altar's decorative effect.

On the image of one coin from Tokharistan (*Zemal*, *Lukonin* 1972: Table XXVII, 1), imitating the coins of the Sasanian Iran, the cone-shaped trunk of the altar takes the form of a pointed, stepped pyramid mounted on a base consisting of two planes with beveled ends. At the same time, the placement of a three-stage chapter with a large extension of the upper step on the pointed trunk would have reduced structural stability.

Two coins during the reign of Narse (*Lukonin* 1969: 155) depict columns installed on both sides of the *atashdan*. The round pedestal and chapter are visible on the columns. The spherical forms on the pedestal resemble *kuzagi* – tear-shaped bases found

on Central Asian columns. The drawing of these coins reflects the interior of a fire temple. The relief drawing on an ossuary, found in the Sogdian Mulla Kurgan, shows the interior of a three-nave structure. An *atashdan* of the same design appears etched on the floor of the central nave between the two columns. The drawing of the *atashdan* is identical to that on the coins from Sasanian Iran. It is also known that the plan of a temple with two columns located on the sides of the *atashdan* was excavated in Bishapur (*Lukonin* 1969: 155).

According to researchers, statues were once erected on the columns of similar temples, one having a statue definitely identified as Shapur I, as indicated by the inscription on the column. On the other column was perhaps a statue of Ahuramazda (*Ghirshman* 1936; *Lukonin* 1969: 155). This evidence provides reason to believe that the massive *atashdans* of Sasanian Iran were located in the center of the room of the temple. In large halls the *atashdan* was placed between the columns that supported the ceiling girders which could number two, four or more. It is assumed that between the columns above the *atashdan*, holes were arranged in the ceiling to provide lighting and allow the smoke to exit the temple from the altar's fire.

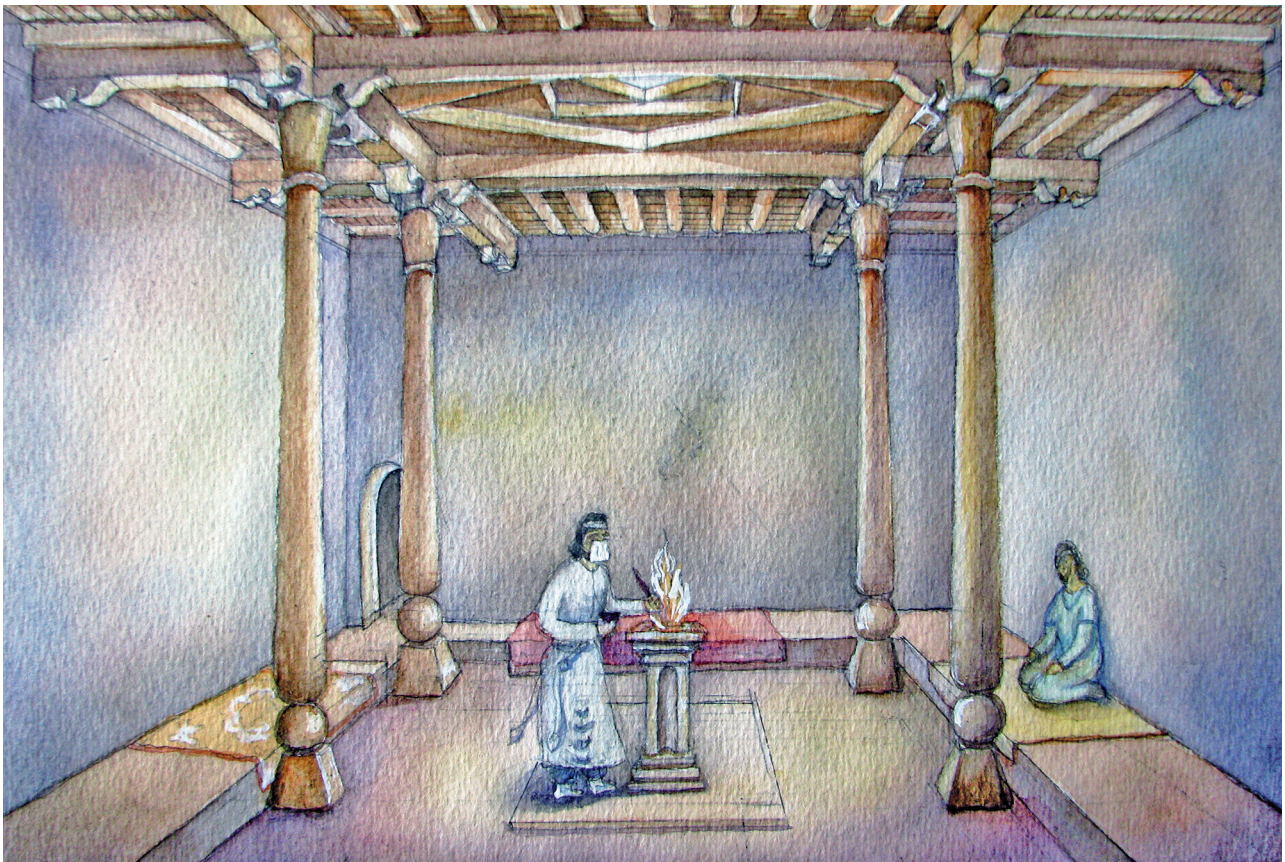


Fig. 3. Interior of the Zoroastrian sanctuary. Upper Zeravshan, Tajikistan. Reconstruction by D. Nazilov

It is estimated that the *atashdans* as depicted on the coins of Central Asia had an actual height of between 50 cm to 2 m (Azimov 1997: 24-25). That said, Pugachenkova's comments should be taken into account: "Based on the images on some "Sasanian-like" coins circulating around Sogd, there was a known shape of local fire altars, possessing a stepped base and top, which differed from Iranian altars based upon the nature of their low-set or squat proportions" (Pugachenkova 1950: 49).

The images of *atashdans* on coins from Chach (modern Tashkent) between the 3rd to 8th centuries (Shagalov, Kuznetsov 2006: 89, 309) possess two types of designs. The first displays the *atashdan* as squat with a short trunk and the chapter and the pedestal consist of one flat slab. On the second coin type, the *atashdan* differs only in height and diameter of the trunk. The depiction of an altar with a pyramidal-shaped flame was found on a bronze brazier vessel in the Chorsu-Goziyon area 4 km south of Khujand. It would have been knee-high for people standing on both sides of the altar (Litvinsky, Tursunov 1971: Fig. 1).

Several coins with the fire altar image on the reverse were found in Paykend. The front on one of the coins depicts a double-humped, or Bactrian camel, facing to the right encircled by a rim of dots. On its reverse is this same type of circular rim enclosing a two-stage fire altar. The tongues of flame are vertical, shooting upward. On the front side of another coin, a similar camel image was found whose reverse side, though less clear, contained a linear rim enclosing a two-stage fire altar. It has a wide base and upper section, and the flame, in this case, is triangular.

Among the coins from the Bukharan oasis, two coins were found with the image of the ruler within a dotted rim with a three-quarters profile. On the reverse in the center of another dotted rim, there is a fire altar with tongues of flame above it. To the left of the altar there is a three-lettered Sogdian inscription (Torgoyev, Mirzaakhmedov, Kulish 2014: 101-102).

On the coin images of Sasanian Iran, the height of the *atashdan* is usually either higher than the figures of priests or attendants occupying both sides of the altar, or at eye-level. At such a height, caring for the fire would have required additional stepped platforms which is not reflected in coin images of *atashdans*. Only on a single coin of the Peroz period (5th century), found at the ancient settlement of Kultepa (medieval Sabat in Northern Ustrushana) – which is located along a large trade route leading from Sogd to Khujand, Ferghana and further on to China – an image of a high *atashdan*, depicts the ministers of the temple standing on wooden supports on both sides perhaps pour oil into the fire. One of them appears to be standing on a chair or stool with three legs while

the other one has a stand which resembles a throne (Buryakov, Gritsina 2006: 158).

It appears obvious that two aspects were considered when depicting the images on Iranian coins. First, would be the task of exalting the status of the state religion, since the *atashdan* is the main symbol of Zoroastrianism. Second, in terms of the design concept, the element occupying the center of the coin's circle should have united and subordinated the entire composition by its dominance.

As we see, the presence of the *atashdan* accompanied by a priestly figure, probably the mobed, and also a deity either Ahuramazda, Mitra, or Anahita are located on both sides of the altar, which is characteristic for all Sasanian coins during the same reign of the various shahs, along with the other main components. However, the shapes of the trunks, chapters and bases are different not only in composition, but also in ornamentation.

This raises the question as to the reason for this diversity. V.G. Lukonin came to the conclusion that the images on the both sides of the coins were replete with religious symbolism. It is possible to suppose that the change in a number of components that make up the obverse and reverse images was dictated by the state and did not depend on the traditions of mints or on stamp engravers. He also included in his analysis the form of the *atashdan* (Lukonin 1969: 156-157). If this hypothesis is correct, then it can be assumed that each king sought to maintain his legitimacy even through the process of coin minting. The *atashdan* as a symbol of the Zoroastrian religion was apparently an important tool of visual propaganda. In other words, such parameters as the height and thickness of the support trunk, the large arched extension of the flat steps of the chapter and base, were not random choices. But how does one explain the images of the *atashdans* in which a powerful, high trunk is replaced by a thin, and sometimes a short rod? The archaeological work in the Termez region revealed an interesting numismatic collection, consisting of various imitations from the reign of Peroz. They differ in the nature of the images, iconography, metal composition, and integrity. Researchers note that "in the course of time, there was a process of distortion of the images and inscriptions, which in the final phase lead to the replacement of Peroz's image on the obverse with a local ruler and a strong systematic reduction of the iconography on the obverse" (Pidayev, Baratova 2006: 173).

The political, trade, and economic situation in the country influenced the quality of coins more than the chronological diversity, the deterioration of the quality of metal, and other factors. The growing discontent of different strata within the society—which included part of the Iranian nobility, peasants, artisans and

others—led to rebellion and revolt against the central power. The economic and political weakening of the Sasanian empire also resulted in the intensification of the struggle against Iranian rule by the subjected peoples from the conquered countries.

It is noteworthy that the basis of the Sasanian coins found on the site of Kultepa mentioned above is composed of items minted in the different cities of Iran (Baratova 2002: 52). It is possible that the lack of a centralized mint could have led to depicting only various parts and forms of the *atashdan*, as well as to a deterioration in the quality of the coins. This is confirmed by the comparison of the images on two coins from Peroz's reign. On one, the *atashdan* consists of several rounded geometric shapes, and on the other is a traditional, classical shape as indicated by the proportionality of the parts.

Baybayev's assessment should be considered: "It is possible that the gradual deterioration of the carving and the systematic reduction of the subjects on the Sasanian carved stones, as well as some other monuments, are caused by other factors. One of them, undoubtedly, is the multiple repetition of subjects, which naturally leads to systematization in art" (Baybayev 1971: 55). Similarly, a repetition in the coinage results in a deterioration in the pattern of the matrix. O.I. Smirnova correctly states that "a significant number of copies in the manufacturing process are found in which the matrices or the stamps of the coins shifted by 3-5 mm and even up to half a coin's planchet. This testifies to the inexperience, and in some cases simply negligence of not only the artisans, but also the minters" (Smirnova 1981: 44).

If Lukonin's idea is taken into account that the execution of all the components of a coin was dictated by the state, then the above mentioned deterioration in quality can be explained. It is possible that the influence of Zoroastrianism decreased from the reign of Peroz. Scholars report that by the end of Sasanian rule, the Zoroastrian temples had to fight for their existence as the state it was so closely connected with fell into decay. This was due not only because of internal causes that weakened the religion, but also the external forces that also attacked it. Manichaeism, received new adherents which was never completely suppressed by the mobeds, especially in Central Asia. The spread of Christianity was even more impressive (Frye 1962). Perhaps, this was the reason why the image of the *atashdan* lost its former symbolic meaning and remained at the discretion of coin manufacturers, who began rendering of this feature based on their own creative abilities and considerations, thus enhancing the decorative design?

As already noted, the beginning of the thinning of the trunks of *atashdans* in coin images dates back to the reign of Khosrow I. According to John of Ephe-

sus, this ruler collected books of all religions, read them, and reflected on which of them were true and wise. "After he read and reviewed everything, he praised the books of Christians most of all and said, "These are the truest and wisest among all religions." (Pigulevskaya 1964: 308; Dashkov 2009: 140). The decorative image of the *atashdan* on coins continued on during in the following periods of the reign of the Sasanian kings. Obviously, in the time of the last Sasanians, the stylization of this previously significant attribute had already become a tradition.

A silver dirham minted in Mahal Basra (Nehavend) in 658 serves as an example of an imitation of the Sasanian coins at the dawn of Islam. Khosrow II Parviz with his peculiar winged crown is depicted on the obverse. The processing is coarse in comparison with the coins minted by the king himself, but in the lower right corner there is a depiction of the *basmala*, which symbolizes the victory of Islam. On the reverse side there is a fire altar with two clergy (Brend 1991: 37). This indicates that the coins minted outside Iran, as well as at the time of the change of religions, were worse in quality of their minting. The proportions of the *atashdan* on this dirham are noticeably elongated with the base and horizontal shelves excessively high in relation to its width. The same discrepancy between the proportions of the parts of the *atashdan* continued to be on the Arab-Sasanian coins of 661–680. Thus, although the images of the altars on the coins of the last Sasanians conveyed a purely decorative image, they nevertheless indicated the existence of temple *atashdans* at that time, as well as the above-mentioned relief image on the wall of the ossuary from Mulla Kurgan. The images of portable *atashdans* of a similar design are also found in the wall paintings of Panjakent. Like on the *atashdans* of Sasanian Iran they have a chapter, a stepped pedestal, a ribbon with ornamental notches, convex rollers, and other details.

Studying the main types of images of altars reproduced on coins testifies to their evolutionary development that begins with monumentality and moves toward a more decorative tradition. The image of the altars on coins of an early period has a representative, solemn view. The trunks at that time are wide and high, as if made of fired brick or stone. The combination of the trunk and stepped flat slabs is quite proportional.

The altars on coins of the latter period are light and conventional. Their trunk is short and narrow. The flat slabs of the pedestal and chapter more resemble cuboid stone blocks, which are absolutely incompatible in proportion with their thin, smart trunk rods. Here, the structural stability of the real altar is simply violated, and its image becomes completely questionable.



Fig. 4. Relief image of the facade of the Zoroastrian sanctuary, combined with the interior, on the wall of the ossuary from Mulla Kurgan. Source: /sogdians.si.edu/mulla-kurgan-ossuary/

The *atashdan* on the reverse of the coins from Sasanian Iran reflected the importance of Zoroastrianism as a state religion. Adherence to the principle of preserving a certain number of altar components, which amounts to seven, speaks of the sacred purpose of the object and the existence of the canons that were followed during its construction.

The symbolic image of the altar on the reverse side of the coins generally reproduces the real composition of the main and widespread form of the altar that existed at that time. The wall paintings of Panjakent, the relief image above the door of the tomb of Kyzkapkan and other artifacts testify to the existence of a real *atashdan* of this type.

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It is possible that the altar trunk symbolized the support and power of the religion on the state level. Perhaps the change of the trunk's image from a massive, pylon-like composition to a significantly thin rod or portraying the trunk body in a number of geometric figures, in short, form of stylization, provides evidence of the admissibility of an independent creative approach by the engraving artisans during the reign of specific Sasanian kings.

Probably, such innovations were the result of economic decline, as well as the onrush of other religions – Manichaeism, Christianity, and then Islam, which led to the weakening of Zoroastrianism and, therefore, to the purely decorative meaning behind the image of *atashdan*. The form varieties stylization of its parts could also have been affected by the production of coins from the same ruler in different cities of Iran. This form of *atashdan* began to be repeated and subsequently turned into a tradition and into a certain style.

The increase in the size of the *atashdan* with all its elements compared to its other elements occurred mainly due to considerations of the layout of the altar in the center of the coin. Thus, the central element should serve as a dominant feature, uniting the rest of the image into a single composition. It is also possible that increasing the scale of the altar emphasized the role of the dominant religion on a national scale.

There are coins with the image of the *atashdan* in which the upper rim ends with an excessively large arched extension. This can be seen on the coin images from the times of Ardashir I and Shapur I. Such a significant extension of the upper steps can hardly be called a chapter – it is rather symbolic of the heavens or the cosmos. In this case, the trunk, while maintaining the semantic significance of the support of the official religion, acquires an additional function as *arbor mundi*, or the “Tree of the World” as described in the Avesta (Yasht 12, 17) as the most important tree, the progenitor of all plants. Nevertheless, the idea of the sacrificial altar pillar as one of the forms of the axis of the world connecting earth and sky was widespread in Sasanian Iran, and the *atashdan*, in turn, could serve as a clear illustration of the idea of a tripartite structure of the universe.

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