

A Study of the Imagery and Place of Women in the Sasanian Period: Sigillographic Evidence.



Sasanika
Archaeology 14
2013

Mohadese Malekān

Masters Candidate, College of Art and Architecture, Bu-Ali Sina University Hamedan, Iran

Yaghōb Mohammadifar*

Associate Professor, College of Art and Architecture, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamedan, Iran

Translator by: Greg Watson

Editor: Milād Vandāee

Abstract

An important source for the history of certain periods is the seals and sealings that date from them. This applies especially to the Sasanian period of Iranian history, from which only a relatively slight corpus of epigraphic material has survived. A certain proportion of the thousands of seals we have from this period are associated with women. Studying these seals may offer researchers interesting insights into the place of women in Sasanian society. Of course, the practice of representing images of women on seals has long antecedents, and on Sasanian seals, the only evidence that enables us to identify the owner of a seal as a woman, with any degree of certainty, is the existence of a female name in the accompanying inscription. The majority of seals bearing an image of a woman also have an inscription in the Pahlavi script where the name is a compound that includes the suffix *dukht*, meaning 'lady' or 'daughter'. The image of a woman accompanied by a female name on a seal suggests that woman's individual autonomy, right to property ownership, and possibly, sometimes, some sort of official administrative position or post held by that woman. Evidence indicates that during the Sasanian period, prominent, official roles existed for royal woman at the very least. Inscriptions on Sasanian seals are in the Pahlavi script, representing the Middle Persian language prevailing in the Empire at the time. Names of individuals, place-names, administrative titles and short religious invocations constitute the vast majority of inscriptions on these seals. These inscriptions are aesthetically of little significance, but are historically, linguistically and culturally important. The aim of this research is to study the images and inscriptions on seals identified as belonging to, or associated with women, and compare and contrast them with other related Sasanian works of art, in the hope that this may offer us further insights into the roles and position of women in immediate pre-Islamic Iran.

Key Words: Images of Women, Sasanians, Sasanian seal, inscription, Sasanian art

* yamohamadi@yahoo.com



Introduction

A seal is a badge of authority, power, ownership and a sign of its owner's commitment and ability to enact their obligations, stipulated in contracts to which it is affixed. In the *Mādiyānhazārdādsetān* ('One Thousand Legal Judgments'), a seal is described which bore the legend, *Mūhr ī pad kār framān dāšt* ('Possessing the Authority to Act') (Frye, 1989: 2). Sasanian seals composed of an image and inscription are valuable documents for researchers. The imagery found on Sasanian seals is highly diverse, and a large range of human figural elements may be represented, including portraits and profiles of men and women, mounted figures, Keyumars¹, human hands and groups of several figures. Other motifs include faunal designs (camels, ibex, stags, rams, wolves, elephants, horses, bulls, goats, bears, wild boars, rabbits, scorpions, rodents among others); mythological beings (winged horses such as Pegasus, griffins, the Lamassu²); vegetal and foliate elements (pomegranate, grapes, palmettes, tulips); monograms (personal ciphers); and celestial bodies such as crescent moons and stars; and finally, Mazdean fireplaces (Frye, 1973: p. 67; Bivar, 1969: 10-24; Azarpay, 1997:25).

The Seal and the Significance of Seal Engraving in the Sasanian Period

The Sasanians were the last pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty in West Asia (c. 224-651 CE). The dynasty may have sought, in some way, to portray itself as the direct inheritors of the culture, economy, and administrative systems of the Archaemenid period (c.550-330 BCE), as it understood them. The domain of the Sasanians was large and is considered a golden age in the historical memory of the Iranian peoples. The main conduit for much of the Empire's most lucrative trade was the Silk Road which connected east with west by land through Central Asia, and by sea from the Persian Gulf to India and southern China. Numerous artifacts survive from the Sasanian period, among which seals and sealings constitute a very important segment (Azarpay, 1997:25).

Using seals appears to have been considered so important in this period that the craft of seal-making experienced significant development and was controlled by a centralized Imperial bureaucratic authority. In the course of the period, the Near Eastern tradition of making and inscribing stone seals saw much continuity. One Greek traveler wrote about the use of seals in the Sasanian domains: "Every Persian always has a seal about their person" (Gorelick and Gwinnett, 1996:80). Reports of this sort show that the Sasanians were a people much taken with the imprimatur of seals, and consequently it seems that there was very little to which a seal could not be affixed (Schippmann, 1383/2004:167). In the sixth century CE, the Sasanian government developed a sophisticated multi-level administrative system, which included at least seven central ministries, each of which administered parallel provincial administrative branches.

1. The Judiciary
2. The Theocratic Administration
3. The Finance Ministry
4. The Crown Holdings Agency

¹ The Zoroastrian 'Adam'.

² Human headed bulls or lions, which were symbolic protective deities in Iranian and Mesopotamian pre-Islamic cultures.

5. The Imperial Chancellery
6. The Ministry of 'Records, Seals and Sealings'
7. The Army Ministry (Morony, 2008:4-5)

The sixth administrative body listed attests to the importance of seal-making in the Sasanian period.

The Image of Woman in Different Historical Periods

At the time of Sasanian rule, Iranian women appear to have enjoyed a relatively respected position in society. Among the thousands of seals which have survived from the Sasanian period, a proportion relate to women. Their study gives us interesting new insights into the place of women in this pre-Islamic Iranian world. The female image on seals has a long history, although literary sources only have very limited, though tantalizing, things to say about the activities of both royal and ordinary women before the arrival of Islam (Dādvar and Ardakāni, 1387/2008:173). In the Elamite and Partho-Elamite (Elamais) periods, women appear to have played important roles in both domestic life, and public and commercial life. In this period, seals depicted women at work in domestic and industrial settings, such as spinning thread, constructing pottery jugs, and churning butter (*Figure 1.*). We also see seals depicting various groups of women in the process of enacting rituals of some sort; and seals have been obtained that may suggest the roles of women of the higher social classes (Bayāni, 1363/1984:34-38).



Figure 1. Impression of a seal from Chogha Mish c. 3300 BCE. Image of women carrying out domestic activities.

The most important primary source relating to women during the Achaemenid period is the archive of tablets from Persepolis. These tablets record the titles of royal women and also refer to their economic activities. We also have information about working women from the Achaemenid period. Some of the secondary sources, including Greek and Roman, not to mention some sacred texts, mention Achaemenid women. The title *dukšiš* was applied to a group of senior royal Achaemenid women such as the Queen-mother, the queen and daughters (princesses) of the sovereign. This title was borrowed from the royal nomenclature of the Assyrians and Babylonians (Brosius, 2010:3). The Persepolis tablets have revealed that women during the ruling of Darius the Great occupied high positions, to an extent arguably unique among the nations of the ancient New East (Koch, 1386/2007:278).

Representations of women in the Achaemenid period, by contrast with earlier periods, in which they were depicted in poses suggesting participation in social and religious activities, began to be shown as a sort of a symbol of a deity – a holy women – or in conjunction with the title 'queen' (Dādvar and Ardakāni, 1387/2008:174). Achaemenid

women enjoyed a degree of autonomy and could possess their own private property (Brosius, 2010:3). We can divide them into two groups – professional women and noble/royal women. Images of some have been found on seals (*Figure 2*), on the Daskyleion stelai, kept in Istanbul’s Archaeology Museum, and the Pazyryk carpet (Daryāee, 1386/2007: 54-56).

The female image is rather scarcer in Achaemenid art than it is in the art of other periods. We have no examples in either monumental or administrative art. In fact, the only corpus of images available comes from small objects including seals, decorative ivories and silver works, which have predominantly turned up in areas of the old western and north-western satrapies such as Babylon, Palestine, Egypt, Asia Minor and Armenia. A small number have also been found in eastern regions including north-west India, but very few have been found around the putative centre of the Empire on the southern Iranian Plateau (Lerner, 2005:153).

Among common images of women found in Achaemenid seals is the scene of a woman seated on a chair, holding a flower or both a flower and a bird in her hand. These images do not appear to suggest the women had an official role in the Achaemenid administration. Rather, these women appear to be portrayed alone, in a private setting with no suggestion of them enacting public ceremonies (Ibid:155). On Achaemenid seals, silver ware and reliefs, women do not wear tiaras or crowns; rather, they wear a train with long ribbons and a round or cylindrical hat sometimes securing a large veil (*Figure 2*). Lerner believes that the woman depicted in these scenes is a female deity such as Anahita (Lerner, 2005:161).



*Figure 2. Modern impression of cylinder seal AO22359, Louvre, Paris.
(Lerner, 2005: 155, Fig 1402)*

Images of Women on Sasanian Seals

In the Sasanian period, a representational tradition evolved that was an amalgam of styles and practices from the preceding two periods (Elamite and Achaemenid), to portray women and their social identity. On Sasanian seals, the only way to attribute a particular seal to woman with confidence is if it bears a specifically female name. The majority of

seals with the image of a woman are accompanied by an inscription. However, in a number of these cases, it is difficult to determine if the name is female or not. In many other cases however, we are able to say without doubt that the owner was a woman because the name incorporates the suffix *dukht*. Sometimes, the image on some seals with the feminine suffix *dukht*, does not appear to be associated with traditionally 'feminine' things. This shows that, like men, women were able to employ a great range of iconographic themes on their seals (Amirzādeh, 1379/2000:252). Some woman's names also end in 'ag' (اگ), such as *Dinag* (lit. 'of Din' (religion), and *Ābrudag* ('of the rose') (Hejāzi, 1385, 2006:252).

A Sasanian seal bearing the image of a woman is highly suggestive of the identity of the owner of that seal. Seals with such images evidently belonged to important women of considerable authority and power (Brunner, 1979:43). A woman could be a sovereign in her own house, a lord of a manor, or involved in commercial activity. Even in cases where the woman was divorced or widowed, she had control over her own assets. It goes without saying that women in these positions of authority would be in need of a personal or family seal. This seal was used for enacting legal and commercial agreements, among other things. Sigillographic evidence clearly suggests that women in the Sasanian period were able to be independently economically active, possess their own private property and possibly even occupy official administrative posts and positions (Gignoux and Gyselen, 1989: 894-6).

With the advent of the Zoroastrian religion, the position and social roles of woman were codified to a certain degree. Women had the right to involve themselves in many social settings just like men, and could sometimes assume responsibilities as heads of families. Their character could be impugned and their testimony was acceptable in court and contrary to some other religions, they enjoyed the right to an equal share in inheritance (Nazari, 1382/2003:30).

Iconographic and thematic studies of the seals with the images of women engraved onto them, can be divided into four general categories: 1. seals bearing the image of a noblewoman or queen; 2. Seals bearing the graven image of the female deity *Ānāhitā*; 3. Seals with the image of a sovereign standing beside a princess (perhaps signifying a wedding ceremony), and seals bearing the image of a woman (either a princess or the deity *Ānāhitā*) with a child.

Seals with the Image of a Princess/Queen

Evidence suggests that during the Sasanian era, prominent and clear roles existed for women. According to Iranian texts from the third century CE (rock inscriptions, reliefs and coins), female members of the royal family were held in high respect and esteem, so much so that their names appeared on the royal list inscribed into the *Ka'abe-ye Zartoshti* (Zoroastrian Ka'abe) at the Naghsh-e Rostam in Fars. The list records the different names and titles of respect accorded to members of the Sasanian family at that time of the king Shapur I (Wiesehöfer, 1386/2007:219). The text of this inscription reads:

Khwarāzim Shah Shāhbānu; Āzar Nāhid Shāh Bānuwān Shāhbānu [Bāmbishnān Bambishn]; Dinag Shāhbānu; Bahrām Gilānshāh; Shāpur Meyshān Shāh; Hormoz

Ardārshir Shāh Bozorg Armenia; Narse Sagān Shāh; Shāpur Dokht, Sagān Shāh Banu; Chashmag Banu; Piruz Shāhzādeh; Morud Banu, Mādar-e Shāpur Shāhān Shāh; Narse Shāhzādeh; Rudokht Shāhdokht Dokhtar-e Anushak; and Rāzdokht Shāh Bānu-ye Istakhriyād, Dokhtar-e Khwarizm; Hormozd va Hormozdag, Pesar-e Shāh-e Armenia, Owdābakht and Bahrām, Shāpur, Piruz, Pesarān-e Meyshān Shāh, Shāhpur Dokht, Dokhtar-e Meyshān Shāh etc...(Akbarzādeh and Tāvusi, 1385/2006:46).

Sasanian rulers established holy fires for women of the court. In the art of the Sasanian period, ordinary women (engaged in domestic activities) were not depicted. However, every representation of a woman was considered sacred to the deity Ānāhitā. The title *Shahbānu-ye Shahbanuwān* (Queen of Queens), mentioned on the Zoroastrian Ka'abe inscription, refers to the sister, wife, daughter, and mother of the sovereign (Brosius, 2010:12). The first time images of the royal family were included on coins, alongside the head of the King, was during the reign of Bahrām II. On coins of this king (*Figure 3.*), the inscription “*Shāpur Dokhtak, Shahbānu-ye Shahbānuwān*” [‘Dokhtak, wife of Shapur, Queen of Queens’] was struck along with her head. The appearance of Shāpur Dokhtak is much better known than those of other royal Sasanian women, thanks to these coins, stone reliefs, and a silver loving cup (جام نقره ای سرگوشي) (Nasrāllahzādeh, 1384/2005:155).

The image of two people standing on both sides of a fire place was depicted on the reverse of Sasanian coins since the reign of Shapur I (241-272 CE). One of these temple attendants may represent a god and the other the king. An example of one of drachms of Bahram II is depicted below, which shows an image of the king and a woman on the front (Schindel, 2005:1 and Alam and Gyselen, 2003:26).



Figure 3. Coin of Bahram II showing the king's head alongside that of his wife Dokhtak
<http://home.eckerd.edu/~oberhot/sasanian.htm>

The presence of women on prestige art such as the Sasanian rock reliefs, was a new type of representation of women, a tradition begun by Ardashir I, founder of the dynasty, with

his relief at Naghsh-e Rajab (c. 240 CE). On the right side of this stone relief, a prominent woman of the court is depicted, posed with other nobles and prominent Sasanians (Brosius, 2010:12). This lady has long braids of hair hanging down her back and a hat on top of her head. The composition has her facing away from the previous scene, with her right hand raised in a gesture of respect. This figure, on account of her age, must be the Queen of Queens, ‘Dinag’, mother of Ardashir I (Javādi and Āwarzamāni, 1388/2009:40). At the end of the Sasanian period, Buran Dokht³ became the only woman of the Sasanian dynasty to have her image struck on coins as reigning monarch (*Figure 4*). Her crown is similar to that of her father, Khosrow II Parviz, and shows the divine symbol of royal victory, *verethragna* (Emrani, 2009:7).



Figure 4. Coin of Queen Buran Dokht. Source <http://www.grifterrec.com/coins/sasania>.

Some writers record her reign as being of sixteen months duration, and others, eighteen months. Sebius, an Armenian monk, wrote that it was two years long (Chaumont, 1989:2).

Āzar Ānāhid was another of the most important women recorded on the Zoroastrian Ka’abe list. In the list of names of the family of Shāpur I, her name appears immediately following the king’s and his sons’ names. She was titled ‘Queen of Queens’ (Nasrāllahzadeh, 1384/2005:37). In the Sasanian period, the Queen was clearly considered to be an earthly symbol of the deity Ānāhitā. It is very common to find the image of a woman in profile on seals, who appears, based on her clothing and *accoutrements*, to be Ānāhitā. There is a high probability that these profiles may also be the portraits of queens. The bust of a queen was represented crowned, adorned with various jewels, with hair dressed and braided, with necklaces, and earrings, in exactly the same manner as the kings themselves were portrayed (Dādvar and Ardakāni, 1387/2008: 178).

A prominent early Sasanian woman was Queen Dinag. As mentioned, the Zoroastrian Ka’abe records the members of the noble family of Sasan Papakan and his wife, Dinag (Dinag remained alive through the reign of her son, Ardashir), whose name appears in one of the most honored positions on the list. (Lukonin, 1384/2005:49). Her seal is one of

³ *Bōrān duxt*

the most beautiful of the period (*Figure 5 ,Seal*), and depicts her bust in stunning profile, which projects not only her beauty, but her authority and an evidently strong will. The feature of this seal that makes it significant is the attractiveness of the rendering of the queen's face and braided hair, which demanded the hand a craftsman of exceptional skill (<http://www.ichodoc.ir>). A Sasanian Pahlavi inscription runs around the rim of the seal, recording her name and status, "Dinag, Queen of Queens"⁴ (Pope and Ackerman, 1387/2008:983). The eyes of the queen are well-proportioned, she has curved half-moon eyebrows with a prominent, determined chin. Her thick locks are braided, spilling down the sides of her cheeks, shoulders and back. Queen Dinag wears a spherical cap-crown, with a portion of her hair gathered into a sort of ball, with the very top of this feature tied with a ribbon. Her crown has a rim decorated with jewels. Long earrings hang from her ear-lobes, and she also wears a necklace (<http://www.ichodoc.ir>).



Figure 5. Queen Dinag, Queen of Queens. Made of lilac garnet. Hermitage Museum
<http://www.irandokht.com/editorial/print.php?area=pro§ionID=11&editorialID=3147>

Seals Bearing the Image of the Queen and King Together (Wedding Ceremony or Banqueting Scene)

A number of seals depict a man and woman together - an ancient motif on Iranian seals (Ghirshman, 1350/1971:241). The motif of a man and women is also found on some Sasanian coins (the coins of Bahrām II). It appears that these sorts of paired figures are meant to suggest a family relationship, or a more particular moment in time – a marriage. In Greece, Byzantine gold wedding rings have been found depicting the image of a couple, with a cross between them, accompanied by the name of the couple and/or a sentence invoking luck and good fortune. Bust of couples facing each other are found dating to the end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth CE; while from the sixth and seventh centuries, full-faced busts are found (Lerner, 1977:6). In *Figure (Seal) number 6* a woman and man, facing each other, can be seen relaxing on a sleeping

⁴ Dēnag bāmbišnān bāmbišin

platform, surrounded by the distinctive cushions of the Sasanian period. A hoop is held between them. An interesting point about this seal is its inscription, which gives both the name of the man – Mehrshāhag – and the name of the woman – Ānāg Dokht – along with the word *Izadān* (the gods), (Bivar, 1969:25).


6		<p>Image of a woman and man sitting on a platform, facing each other. A hoop or diadem is held between them.</p>	<p>The Pahlavi inscription reads: <i>mtrš'xky 'nkdwxy yzd'n.</i> <i>Mihr-šahāg Anag-duxt yazdān.</i> [Mehrshāhag, Ānāg Dokht, the gods]</p>	<p>Agate of an oval form. Dimensions: 16x14 mm. Fourth Century CE, British Museum. (Bivar, 1969, CF2)</p>
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Figure 6. Sasanian Seal, Design: woman and man beside each other. Wedding ceremony.

The scene of a seated woman and man facing each other, holding a ring between them is also found on some Sasanian silver vessels (Figure 7.). Harper believed this was also indicative of a wedding (Harper, 1981:74). The image is comparable to that on seal number 6 (Figure 6).



Figure 7. Sasanian Silver Bowl of the seventh century. Wedding ceremony.
 (<http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/zoomObject.cfm?ObjectId=22661>)

This group of seals also offers us insights into royal banquets (Figure 8). Banquets in this sense mean festivities and revelry. Armenian sources provide us with an account of them in the Sasanian period. The Armenian word *bazmoc'k* means lounging or recumbent, and evokes the posture required of someone using the type of sleeping platform illustrated in the previous images. These platforms were present in court parties and festivities and it was the practice of the nobles and king to recline on them (Daryāee, 1384, p. 27).


8		<p>Image of a recumbent man on a platform with a woman bringing him a bowl and flask. A star shines above and below, to the left, sits a container of fruit, and on the right there is the head of a gazelle.</p>	<p>Pahlavi inscription reads: <i>'pst'n 'l yzd'n</i> <i>Abestān ō yazdān.</i> [Relies on the Gods]</p>	<p>Agate, oval shaped. Dimensions: 22x24 mm. Fourth Century CE, British Museum, (Bivar, 1969: CF1)</p>
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Figure 8.Sasanian Seal

Members of the court reclined on small cushions, the number of which indicated their position and status at court (Daryāee, 1384:27). This scene has been recorded on a number of other Sasanian silver vessels (*Figure 9*). Of all the Sasanian Kings, Bahram II most liked to have his family depicted on works of art and coins. In *Figure 9*, a king is depicted sitting on a platform, with a lady facing him, wearing pleated clothing and ribbons down their backs. The type of clothing worn by the woman is also taken from forms commonly associated with representations of the goddess Ānāhitā.



Figure 9. Sasanian Silver Vessel, Walters Art Museum, Royal Banquet (Emrani, 2009: p. 12)

The posture of the sitters was a common convention throughout the Iranian cultural world. Herzfeld noted this phenomenon and gathered numerous examples, mainly from silver vessels. The oldest of his examples is in fact the rock relief located in the Sorug Gorge (*Figure 10*.) (Ghirshman, 1378/1999:141). On the northern side of this stone, a scene depicting the bestowal of offices can be seen. An Elamaisan prince (or possibly a Parthian prince) reclines on a splendid platform, and shows his ring of kingship (divine glory) to two men on the left. The legs of the platform are carved birds (Mohammadifar, 1387/2008:218).

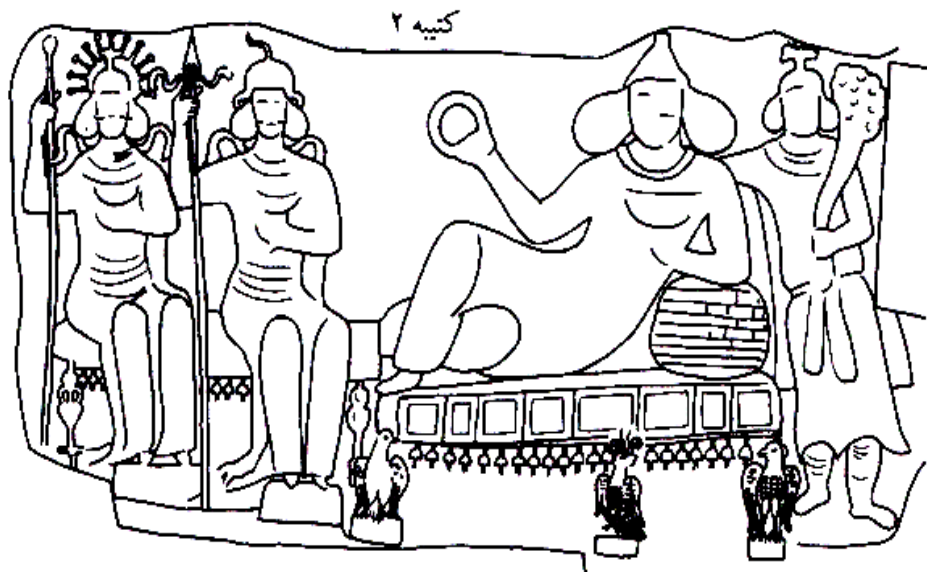


Figure 10. Stone relief from the Sorug Gorge II (Mohammadifar, 1387/2008:218).

Seals Bearing the Image of the Goddess Anahita

The Goddess Ānāhitā was one of the most popular deities in pre-Islamic Iran. This female deity was held in great reverence and had a very prominent position in the religious doctrines of pre-Islamic Iran. The tradition of her veneration is very ancient and probably extends further back than the age of Zoroaster himself (Āmuzegār, 1387/2008:22). The name of this goddess, in the form 'Ānāhitā' appears for the first time in the inscriptions of Artaxerxes II (404-359 BCE) of the Achaemenid Dynasty. The king requested the support of Ahura Mazda, Mithra, and the goddess Ānāhitā.

...My great-grandfather Darius built this palace. Then, in the time of my grandfather, Artaxerxes [the First], it was burned by fire. With the help of Ahura Mazda, Ānāhitā and Mithra, I built this village. Ānāhitā and Mithra give me resilience and harm not that which I have built. (Farah-Vashi, 1387/2008:171).

Many fire-temples were built for the veneration of Ānāhitā. Among them were Takht-e Suleiman (the Throne of Solomon), Kangāvar, Rey (Bibi Sharbānu) and Namba'i (Ibid: pp. 187-191).⁵ Early on, the Sasanian Dynasty decreed that the Zoroastrian faith would be the state religion. However, Ānāhitā, as a water goddess, played a very significant role in the popular beliefs of the people. A woman standing or sitting, facing toward the right, became the emblem of the goddess Ānāhitā. It is possible that the survival of this popular Avestan deity is due to the special significance Ānāhitā had in the religious doctrines of the Sasanian dynasty. She is described clearly in the *Āban Yasht* of the Avesta (Yasht 126-129-5). The earliest reverential representation of the goddess is found on the coins of Hormozd I (c. 273 CE) (Brunner, 1979:42). Her appearance is described in the *Āban Yasht*:

Atop the divine head of Ānāhitā sits a crown adorned with a hundred stars; the golden crown was made with eight corners circling its middle, with bejeweled

⁵ The only fire temple of Anahita that remains standing.

ribbons around. A loop projects from the beautifully-made crown (*Āban Yasht*, verse 128).

Surviving Sasanian rock reliefs emphasize the high respect in which Ānāhitā was held. In the Naghsh-e-Rustam (*Figure 11*), near Persepolis, the Sasanian king Narse (293-302 CE), receives the hoop of power from Ānāhitā (Vanden Berghe, 1959; Ghirshman, 1962; Lukonin, 1962; Herman, 1977). Narse was possibly the brother of Bahrām I and uncle of Bahrām II, who, upon his ascension, stripped the Empire's *eminence noir*, the high priest Kartir, of his power. Narse is depicted in the middle of the scene at Naghsh-e Rustam, receiving the 'divine glory' [فر ایزدی], which conferred the right and ability to rule, from Ānāhitā. The goddess' clothing is highly pleated and ruffled, and her crown is similar to the description offered in the Avesta's *Mehr Yasht*.

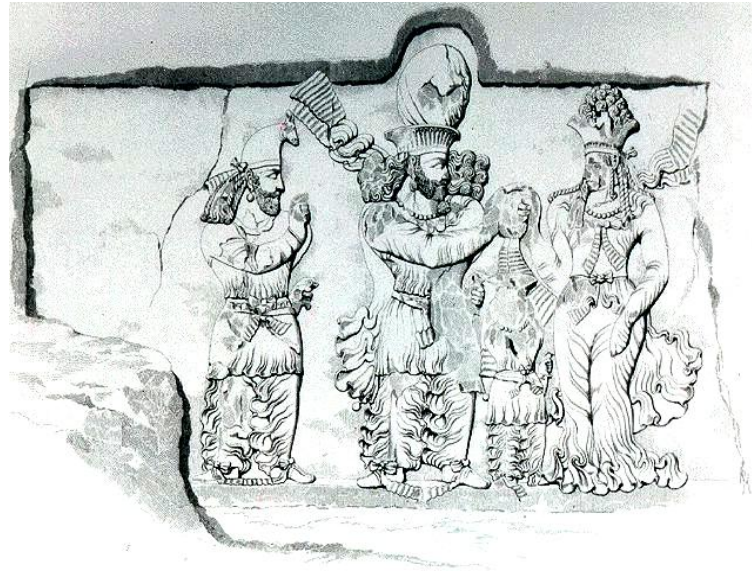


Figure 11. The coronation of Narse by Ānāhitā, Naghsh-e Rustam (Tampson, 2008:352)

The Tagh-e Bostān at Kermānshāh, was the last major stone relief commissioned by the Sasanians. It shows Khosrow II Parviz (c. 590-628 CE) receiving and conferring offices. In this relief, Ānāhitā is depicted symbolically pouring the waters of the world from a small jug until the final days (Herzfeld, 1920a:82-103; Erdmann, 1937b:169-1970; Tanabe, 1982:90-92). The spilling of water from this pitcher is symbolic of the precipitation of the sky's waters, which causes the fecundity, blessing and greening of the land and gives the king his power and resilience (Javādi and Āwrazamāni, 1388/2009: 46). Khosrow II (Parviz) was the last great king of the Sasanians and is shown here receiving the 'divine glory' from Ahura Mazda. At the same time, Ānāhitā also stands on the other side of Khosrow Parviz prepared to confer the 'divine glory' upon him. This image suggests some equality of status between Ānāhitā and Ahura Mazda, at least in the late Sasanian period (*Figure 12*).



Figure 12. Khosrow II Parviz receiving the symbol of kingship from Ahura Mazda and Ānahitā (Javādi and Āwrazamāni, 1388/2009:48).

On a number of seals, Ānahitā is shown with long, pleated clothing, symbolic of infinite waves of water (Seal number 13), with her hand raised and a water lily stem in her right hand. She holds her left hand behind her clothing (Dādvar and Ardakāni, 1387/2008: 178). The ring/hoop with wavy ribbons held by the woman in Figure 13, her clothes, and the direction of her posture is comparable to that shown in the work recording the coronation of Narse at the Naqsh-e Rostam, and also the representations of women in Sasanian silver vessels.

13		<p>Image of a standing woman facing right, hoop in right hand which has wavy ribbons hanging from it. She has long, braided hair, one strand of which is depicted falling down her back, with another falling forward over her shoulder.</p>	<p>The Pahlavi inscription around the upper left third of the rim reads: <i>'plwtky Ābrodag</i> [a feminine proper name]</p>	<p>Agate, oval form. Dimensions: 18.7x22.7x15.5 mm. Brussels Museum of Art and History (Gignoux and Gyselen, 1987: MCB 10.1)</p>
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Figure 13. Sasanian Seal, showing the image of Ānahitā with the ring of kingship.

Another group of seals depicts the image of a lone standing woman, or in a few cases, beneath a dome (Figure 14), and/or with a flower in hand, a sign associated with the deity Ānahitā. Some scholars believe that this dome or arch represents the fire-temple building (Bivar, 1969:26).


14		<p>The image of a standing woman (who might be the Goddess Ānahitā) beneath a dome, facing right. In her right hand is a flower and in her left, an unidentified object.</p>	<p>The Pahlavi inscription reads: <i>Pylw dwxty</i> <i>mtrss[n]’ (g/z) d</i> <i>Pērōz-duxt mihrsāsān.</i> “Peroz Dokht, kindness of Sasan”</p>	<p>Jade or jasper, ring seal. Dimensions: 11x17 mm. Fourth Century CE. British Museum, (Bivar, 1969: CB1)</p>
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Figure 14. Sasanian Seal Ānahitā underneath an arch or dome

The flower that Ānahitā holds (*Image 14*), in most cases appears to be a water lily, although in other cases it may be a tulip or an Iris lily. These later examples, like floral details in plasterwork from the Sasanian period, are considered by some to be simply aesthetic details rather than intentional religious symbolism. However, it is possible that they were also employed as particular symbols of some sort or other. Often, on seals associated with both men and women, the floral detail is a tulip, which may be accompanied by an inscription which includes particular words such as ‘*abzōn,*’ (meaning ‘increasing blessings’), which is clearly connected to the Zoroastrian religion. In the Middle Persian book, the *Bundahishn*, the tulip is the symbolic flower of god, *Ashtād* (meaning righteous, upstanding). In the *Shāhnāneh*, Ferdowsi mentions the tulip in a number of places as symbolic of holiness and virtue, fortitude and patience (Brunner, 1979:4). In certain other sources, the tulip is the Persian symbol of perfect love (Cooper, 1379/2000:322). It is also worth recalling that the tulip is one of Iran’s most beautiful native flowers (Pope, 1384:68).

The flower that the goddess Ānahitā holds is one of her symbols. A study of the inscriptions on these seals (*Figure 14 and 15*) reveals that the owner of these types of seal are also woman, and it may be concluded that the goddess was considered the divine protector of women. Names such as Armiduxt, Pērōz-duxt, Hērbed-duxt have been found on seals, and the female image must have been assigned a special significance. (Gnoli,1993:1).

15		<p>Image of a standing woman in profile, facing right, with a tulip in her right hand and her left hand held behind her clothes. Her dress hangs to her ankles and her waist is pinched in with a belt.</p>	<p>The Pahlavi inscription reads: <i>WIC ʾndwht ZY</i> <i>bwlspsy.</i> [Warāzān Dokht, Daughter of Burasp]</p>	<p>Quartz, oval form. Dimensions: 18x21 mm. Fourth Century CE. Moore Collection</p>
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Figure 15. Sasanian Seal, Ānahitā with flower in hand.

Some of the representations of women holding flowers on Sasanian seals are comparable with the pictures of women found on the mosaics of Bishāpur (*Figure 16.*) This type of mosaic work is not an indigenous Iranian artistic technique and was created under the influence of the artistic traditions of the Roman Empire. Therefore, the possibility exists that other images of women during the Sasanian period were also influenced by Roman conventions, especially when considering that depicting women in works of art was not common in the older Iranian iconographic repertoire, and at least initially, may have been considered to be breaking certain taboos (Āyyat-Ellahi, 1380/2001:160).



Figure 16. Image of a woman in the Mosaics of Bishāpur. (Emrāni, 2009: p. 12)

Image of Ānahitā Accompanied by Child

Many images have been found showing Ānahitā with a child alongside. In some cases the goddess is standing cradling the child. In a highly elaborate example held in the British Museum (*Figure 17*) a female figure who may be Ānahitā is sitting on a bench, with her legs stretched out, leaning on several distinctively Sasanian cushions. The child being embraced has a ring/hoop in his hand onto which three water lily buds have been fastened (Brunner, 1979:4).


17		<p>Image of a seated woman on a platform/throne, facing left, hugging a child, with a hoop or diadem in its hand.</p>	<p>Pahlavi inscription reads: <i>xwṗndy 'pst'n 'lyzd'n.</i></p> <p><i>Hu-pand abestān ō yazdān.</i></p> <p>[Hupand, Trusts in the Gods]</p>	<p>Agate, oval form. Dimensions: 19x16mm Fourth Century CE. British Museum. (Bivar, 1969: CD1)</p>
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Figure 17. Sasanian Seal

Pahlavi Inscriptions on Seals, with Women's Names

An interesting feature of Sasanian seals is the inscriptions that often accompany them. In contrast to contemporary Greek and Roman seals, which are usually found without inscriptions, Sasanian seal are of excellent quality and their Pahlavi (Middle Persian) inscriptions render them important epigraphic sources for the period. This is the same script and language used in Sasanian trade documents and recorded on bas-reliefs from the third to seventh centuries CE (Azarpay, 1992:21). Other inscriptions found on Sasanian seals are in Parthian Pahlavi, Sogdian, Armenian and Syraic. The Syraic language was the liturgical language of the Nestorian Christians of Mesopotamia. It was a common language in the regions of present-day Iraq at the time of Sasanian rule over the area. The second most common language used on royal Sasanian seal inscriptions was Parthian Pahlavi, and was dominant in the northern regions of Iran (Bivar, 1969:13).

Sasanian seals were read thus: “If the seal impression is considered to be the face of a clock, rim inscriptions are to be read counter-clockwise. If other words or phrases are present towards the center of the seal impression, they are to be read from right to left,” (Mohammad-Panāh, 1386/2007:183).

During the Sasanian period, the naming of a new-born baby was extremely important and conducted by the father of the family. After thanking god, conducting certain religious rites, and giving alms to the poor⁶, a suitable religious name was chosen for the child. Nearly all the names recorded on bas-reliefs and seals are those of members of the upper classes, and have religious meanings or concepts behind them (Christensen, 1388:235). The study of Sasanian seal inscriptions has revealed that the majority include the personal names of individuals. These invariably refer to the owner of the seal and/or their administrative title. No cases have been found where the name or signature of the maker of the seal is mentioned. In some cases the portrait of the owner, along with their name appears (Bivar, 1969:18). Studying these seals acquaints us with a comprehensive word list of Sasanian-period personal names (Pope and Ackerman, 1387:1000). A number of these are female names, such as *Figure 18*– “Sasan Dokht”, and *Figure 19* – “Herbed Dokht, loyal”. All of these seals include the suffix “Dokht” in the compound name. Sometimes the iconography of seals which include this suffix, involves elements not exclusively of a traditional female character, and even suggests the participation of the owner in domains perhaps more traditionally considered the preserve of men. This indicates Sasanian women of the upper levels of society were able to employ iconography of the same type as Sasanian men, if they were inclined or if appropriate (Amirzādeh, 1379/2000:77).


18		Bust in profile of a woman facing right.	Pahlavi Inscription around the rim: <i>s's'n dwhty</i> <i>Sāsān-duxt</i> [Daughter of Sasan]	Agate, Dimensions: 16.6x15.2mm. Private collection, Paris. (Gignoux and Gyselen, 1982:20.1)
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Figure 18. Sasanian Seal, Image of a woman with the name Sāsān Dokht.

⁶ Greater alms were given in the case that a son was born, than if a daughter was born.


19		<p>Standing woman form in profile, facing right, holding a flower in her right hand. Has long braided hair, a long dress and shoes.</p>	<p>Pahlavi Inscription around rim reads:</p> <p><i>hlyptdwhtyhwmtly</i></p> <p><i>Hērbed-duxt humihr</i></p> <p>[Daughter of the Priest [a 'Herbed'], be loyal]</p>	<p>Dimensions: 17.7x24x20.3mm.</p> <p>Private collection, Paris.</p> <p>(Gignoux and Gyselen, 1982 : 10.1)</p>
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Figure 19. Sasanian Seal, Image of a woman with the female name or title 'Herbed Dokht'.

A number of the inscriptions on Sasanian seals have been found to be phrases offering religious advice, exhortation or a brief prayer. The most common of these is *abestān ō yazdān*, meaning, 'Trusts in the Gods'.⁷ This sentence is directly translatable into Arabic as المتوكل على الله (Jaddi, 1387/2008:68). The phrase was probably considered a sort of protective charm or spell that was intended to protect the owner from evil and destructive forces. Prayer and invocatory formulas like this have also been noted in the inscriptions of Assyrian sovereigns (Torrey, 1932:24). The phrase indicates that the topics etched into some precious stones were not simply referencing prosaic matters. Rather, many had magical or sacral meanings, that it was hoped would confer the favor or support of the gods on the owners of these seals.

Other words found on Sasanian seals include *abzōn* (increasing blessing) and *farrokhīh* (good luck, auspicious)⁸ (Akbarzādeh, 1385/2006:77). Woman, like men used such phrases on their seals (Figure 20). Thus, although seals were used in the transaction of administrative, commercial and other forms of every-day business, and were an occupational and personal identity reference for individual ownership and autonomy, they could also manifest the spiritual beliefs of the seal's owner. In reality, in addition to their use in the material realm, these seals were employed as a spiritual device or amulet to protect the person and their assets against destructive forces and unforeseen events. So, having a seal may have given the owner a sense of confidence and peace-of-mind (Āwrazamāni, 1375:107).


20		<p>Image of a woman facing right, with a flower in her right hand. Her hair is long and braided into a single strand. She wears a long dress which covers her feet. Something like a cross symbol is also present on the seal.</p>	<p>Pahlavi Inscription:</p> <p><i>'pst'n 'l yzd'n,</i> <i>mtrbwcyt.</i></p> <p><i>abestān ō yazdān</i> <i>Mihr-bōzid.</i></p> <p>[Relies on the Gods, Mehr Buzid]</p>	<p>Agate, oval form.</p> <p>Dimensions: 27.3x32x24.3mm</p> <p>Ancient History Museum of Iran, Tehran.</p> <p>(Gignoux and Gyselen, 1987: IBT 10.1)</p>
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Figure 20. Sasanian Seal, Woman Motif.

⁷ This type of phrase or prayer appears on a great many Sasanian seals.

⁸ This word is found on a great many seals, seal impressions, coins, and metal vessels from the Sasanian period.

Conclusion

Sigillographic evidence is one of the more important textual sources for the history and culture of ancient Iran. This applies especially to the Sasanian period. Representations of women are recorded on seals, bas-relief monuments, silver vessels and coins. Images of women appear to have been an important motif in the court art of the Sasanians. Ladies of the court possessed seals themselves, which was an indication of their individual autonomy and right to hold private property. A seal enabled a woman to engage in trade and official matters. Images of women inscribed on Sasanian seals are among the most significant archaeological artifacts from this period, and offer important information about the social roles played by women, their religious beliefs and their position in society. They are doubly significant because, as an iconographic motif, representations of women are not very common in Iranian art generally. Seals that are associated with women are usually accompanied by an inscription incorporating the suffix *dokht*. The image of a woman accompanied by a female name is highly suggestive of their independence, legal right to own property and engage in business on their own account, and possibly, their ability to hold official positions.

This research makes clear that the position of a woman in Sasanian society probably depended more on her social class than it did her gender. Women of the ruling class, such as the queen and mother of the sovereign, were much freer to participate in decision-making and other activities, and it is mostly the seals of women such as these that have turned up in archaeological contexts. They include women such as Shahbanu Dinag, mother of Ardashir I. The fact that the faces of these women were etched into seals has, to some degree, immortalized them.

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