

THE ORDER OF NARSEH'S COIN PORTRAITS by Alan.S. DeShazo

In table V of his Sasanian Numismatics, Dr. Göbl has the obverses of Narseh divided under 1st crown and 2nd crown. There are good reasons to consider that the chronological order of the crowns is the opposite of that given by Göbl. Since details of the bust and hair arrangement need to be taken into account and to avoid confusion with Göbl's terms, it is proposed here to describe the obverses under 1st and 2nd portrait. The 1st portrait coins have two major divisions. The portrait, which may be designated 1a, is like Göbl pl.5,76 where the hair is in straight plaited strands, which are gathered in a single, undivided bunch. Portrait 1b is like Göbl pl.5, 75 where the hair is divided into two bunches. The difference is not just an expression of artistic license. So far, all of the obverses with portrait 1a seen are paired with the reverses on which the fire altar does not have ribbons, and all of those with portrait 1b are paired with those on which the altar has the ribbons. Portrait 1a seems to start earlier than 1b, but it is not clear whether the issues are successive or parallel. Either way, the distinction is deliberate.

Portrait 2 has the hair in a ball at the back of the neck. This change in hairstyle is probably significant, but I do not know just what is indicated. The change in the hair from strands to a ball also occurs in the Kushano-Sasanian series. This phenomenon may have clues for chronology and other problems in both series. Since the crown is essentially unique to each ruler and provides few if any links with his predecessor or successor, it is necessary to look elsewhere for indicators of chronology. Nearly all of the obverses of portrait 1 coins depict Narseh as having a collar to his garment, which is represented by a row of round pellets between two curved lines (fig.1). This collar is seen first on coins and sculpture of Ardashir I and is the most common neck ornamentation of coin portraits down through Narseh portrait 1. This collar does persist on individual dies until the early part of the reign of Shapur II but becomes very rare with Narseh portrait 2. The collar is replaced beginning with the 2nd portrait by a necklace of fairly large beads (fig.2). This necklace did appear on the portrait sculpture of Shapur I as well as on the altar attendants on his coins but was slow to come to the coin obverses. Coins with Narseh's portrait 2 are the earliest clearly observed, so far. This large beaded necklace becomes the standard from this point to nearly the end of the dynasty.

There is another feature of the portraits, which is very telling. Narseh portrait 1 depicts the ruler's garment as being tight and form fitting. The shoulder area is smooth except for lines representing small folds in the material, which radiate from the area of the armpit (fig.3). This is usual for all of Narseh's predecessors going back to Shapur I.

Narseh portrait 2 coins usually depict the ruler's garment as if it was textured rather than smooth and with the shoulders showing 'flame-shaped' folds or applications (Sellwood, Whitting & Williams plate 24) and fig. 4 below. This feature does not appear on coins with portrait 1 but is common on those of Hormizd II and the early ones of Shapur II.

It seems clear that it is the portrait 2 coins that lead into the issues of Hormizd II and not those with portrait 1.



