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SASANIAN SILVER COINS FROM ATBATAN NECROPOLIS NEAR DEMIRCHI (SHAMAKHI DISTRICT, AZERBAIJAN)

Rustam N. Huseynov, Akif A. Guliyev

Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, AZ1143, H. Javid Avenue 115, Baku, Azerbaijan

Corresponding Authors: Huseynov, R.N.: rustam.huseynov@arxeologiya.az

ORCID:
Huseynov, R.N.: 0009-0006-5120-5753
Guliyev, A.A.: 0009-0009-8966-3110

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Abstract
This article presents a small group of Sasanian silver drachms discovered during archaeological excavations at Atbatan necropolis near the village of Demirchi in the Shamakhi region of Azerbaijan. The coins were recovered from burial contexts in association with human skeletal remains and accompanying grave goods, providing important archaeological evidence for the circulation of late Sasanian silver coinage in the Shirvan area. The study focuses on the typological and chronological attribution of the coins based on iconography, mint signatures, regnal dates, and Pahlavi legends preserved on the specimens. The Demirchi finds contribute to the growing corpus of Sasanian numismatic material discovered in Azerbaijan and provide new data on Sasanian influence, trade networks, and population contacts in the Shirvan region during Late Antiquity – Early Middle Ages.

Keywords: *Sassanian coins, Demirchi, Azerbaijan, Numismatics, Silver drachms*

INTRODUCTION

Sasanian silver coinage is among the most informative categories of archaeological evidence for reconstructing political, economic, and cultural interactions between the South Caucasus and the Sasanian Empire (Badiyi, 2004, pp. 195-167). Owing to the stability of the Sasanian monetary system and the wide circulation of silver drachms throughout the empire, coin finds provide important evidence for regional exchange, administrative integration, and the chronological assessment of archaeological contexts (Marussi et al., 2024, p. 381). Numerous Sasanian coins have been recorded throughout present-day Azerbaijan, including isolated finds, hoards, settlements, and funerary contexts, reflecting the incorporation of Caucasian Albania and adjacent regions into the sphere of Sasanian political and economic influence (Fabian, 2019, p. 33).

During the Late Antique period, Caucasian Albania occupied a strategically important position along the northern frontier of the Sasanian Empire. It played a significant role in the political and military organisation of the Eastern Caucasus (Khalifa-zade, 2023, 111–121). Archaeological evidence demonstrates the extensive penetration of Sasanian cultural traditions, administrative institutions, and material culture into the region, particularly in Shirvan and adjacent territories (Jalilov et al., 2013, pp. 42-46). Sasanian coin finds, therefore, represent an important source for investigating patterns of monetary circulation and regional interaction in the South Caucasus (Karlsson, 2015, pp.136-80).

The discovery of Sasanian silver coins at the Atbatan necropolis near Demirchi contributes new evidence to the growing corpus of Sasanian numismatic material recovered in Azerbaijan. Unlike stray finds or hoards lacking precise archaeological provenance, the Demirchi coins were recovered during controlled excavations from funerary contexts, providing a secure basis for chronological attribution and archaeological interpretation

(Fabian, 2019, p. 35). This brief communication presents these findings and their preliminary typological and chronological assessment.

The Atbatan necropolis is located approximately 3 km from the village of Demirchi in the Shamakhi district of Azerbaijan (Fig. 1, 40.8372° N, 48.5612° E). Although the modern village itself, according to written records, was formed much later, the archaeological sites around it testifies to a much earlier settlement of this mountainous region (Abbasova, 2024, p. 99). The Demirchi necropolis is located on the Shamakhi–Lahij road, approximately 35 km north-west of Shamakhi, at an elevation of about 1,800 m above sea level. The site covers more than 3 hectares. Initial archaeological investigations were conducted in February-March 2016 under the direction of Akif Guliyev and Idris Aliyev. During this research, a Late Antique-Early Medieval necropolis was found, and stone box graves were discovered at the site called Gegeli near Demirchi village in the Shamakhi district of Azerbaijan.

Fig. 1. Location of Demirchi village in the Shamakhi District of Azerbaijan.

The Atbatan necropolis forms part of the broader archaeological complex of Demirchi in the Shamakhi District of Azerbaijan. During the 2025 field season, archaeological investigations were conducted at the necropolis by the Shamakhi–Aghsu Archaeological Expedition of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology under the direction of Akif Guliyev.

Earlier archaeological discoveries in the Demirchi area were made during the construction of the Demirchi–Lahij road, when a series of Early Medieval burials were identified on the Gegeli plateau. Subsequent excavations carried out by researchers of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology revealed more than ten stone cist graves as well as architectural remains associated with settlement activity. The excavations yielded a diverse assemblage of archaeological materials, including ceramic vessels, iron weapons and tools, bronze objects, and various types of beads, indicating intensive occupation of the area during the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods (ANAS, 2018).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study is based on sixteen Sasanian silver drachms recovered during archaeological excavations of the Atbatan necropolis near the village of Demirchi. All specimens originate from controlled funerary contexts and are currently preserved as part of the excavation assemblage. The coins were documented through digital photography and examined using standard numismatic methods. Identification and

attribution were carried out based on typological and epigraphic analyses, including examinations of royal portraits, crown types, mint signatures, regnal years, and Pahlavi legends preserved on the obverse and reverse. The state of preservation, wear patterns, corrosion traces, and visible damage were recorded for each specimen, and basic metrological parameters were measured whenever possible.

The archaeological context of the finds was taken into account following recent approaches in contextual numismatics, which emphasise the importance of analysing coins within their depositional and cultural setting rather than solely as chronological indicators (Fabian, 2019, pp. 47–50; Krmnicek, 2023, pp. 1–4). Chronological attribution was established through the interpretation of mint marks, regnal years, and comparative typological analysis (Erdmann, 1951, pp. 90-94). No metallographic or compositional analyses were undertaken; therefore, the interpretation is based primarily on archaeological, typological, and epigraphic evidence (Göbl, 1960, pp. 65-98).

The transliterations of the coin inscriptions are based on the system proposed by MacKenzie (1971), with reference to the palaeographic conventions described by Nyberg (1974) (MacKenzie, 1971, pp. 11–16; Nyberg, 1974, pp. 1–9).

RESULTS

During the 2025 season, the Shamakhi-Agsu archaeological expedition excavated 16 stone cist tombs in the Atbatan necropolis (Fig. 2: 1, 2).

The silver coins were found in tombs 12 and 13. Tomb number 12 was located 1 meter below the ground surface. The tomb was constructed in a semicircle from six rows of stones. The upper part of the chamber was closed with two slabs. A semi-bent human skeleton was discovered inside the chamber, facing west and in a south-north direction. Silver coins, drachmas belonging to the Sasanian ruler Khosrow II Parviz (590-628), bronze bracelets, rings, bronze and silver round pendants, agate, black opal and glue beads, bronze hairpins and two clay vessels were found on the skeleton's forehead (Fig 2, 3, 4, 5).

Fig. 2. Excavations at the Atbatan necropolis near Demirchi village (Shamakhi District, Azerbaijan): 1–2 — general view of the excavation area and stone cist graves; 3–5 — excavated burials with associated archaeological materials.

Tomb number 13 was discovered 2.5 m west of tomb number 12. It was located 1 m below the ground. The grave was built in the shape of a semi-quadrant of 6 rows of stones. The upper part of the chamber was closed with two slabs. Inside the chamber, a half-bent human skeleton was found facing west, in the south-north direction. Archaeological evidence suggests the existence of small fortified settlements and rural communities associated with both Albanian tradition and the Sasanian military-administrative system.

Akif Guliyev provided all photos.

Description of the coins

All found coins belong to the Sassanian Empire, silver drachma standard type (Fig. 3).

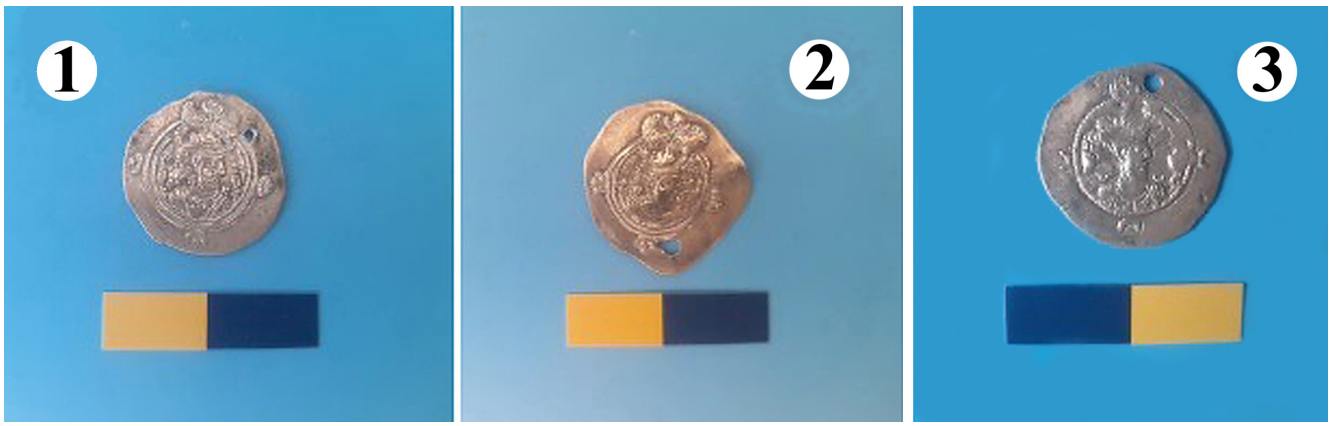

Fig. 3. The dimensions of the Sasanian silver drachms.

Coin 1. Belongs to the Sasanian ruler Khosrow II Parviz (590-628), the second type of crown (Fig. 4).
The weight of the coin: 4.1 gr.
Diameter: 29-30 mm.
The legends in Pahlavi are well preserved (Fig. 4: 1, 2):

The obverse side, right of the portrait (Fig. 4: 1):

hwslwb‘ [Xusrō]
Khosrow [II Parviz]

The reverse side (Fig. 4: 2):

DA [Darabgird mint]

XVI [16th year of reign]

Fig. 4. Sasanian silver drachm of Khosrow II Parviz (590–628 AD) from Burial No. 12, Atbatan necropolis: 1 — obverse; 2 — reverse.

Coin 2. Belongs to the Sasanian ruler Khosrow II Parviz (590-628), the second type of crown (Fig. 5).
The weight of the coin: 3.9 gr,
Diameter: 30 mm.
The legends in Pahlavi are partly preserved (Fig. 5:1, 2):

The obverse side, right of the portrait (Fig. 5: 1):

hwslwb‘ [Xusrō]
Khosrow [II Parviz]

The reverse side (Fig. 5: 2):

ShY [Shiraz mint]
Date is erased

Fig. 5. Sasanian silver drachm of Khosrow II Parviz (590–628 AD) from Burial No. 12, Atbatan necropolis: 1 — obverse; 2 — reverse.

Coin 3. Belongs to the Sasanian ruler Khosrow I Anushirvan (531-579), strongly erased, but can be identified by the portrait (Fig. 6; Göbl, 1971).
The weight of the coin: 4,2 gr,
Diameter: 30-32 mm.
The legends in Pahlavi are partly preserved (Fig. 6:1, 2):

The obverse side (Fig. 6: 1):

Name is erased
The reverse side (Fig. 6: 2):

ShY [Shiraz mint]
Date is erased

Fig. 6. Sasanian silver drachm of Khosrow I Anushirvan (531-579) from Burial No. 13, Atbatan necropolis: 1 — obverse; 2 — reverse.

CONCLUSION

The silver drachms recovered from the Atbatan necropolis near Demirchi constitute an important addition to the corpus of Sasanian coin finds from Azerbaijan. The assemblage includes issues of Khosrow I Anushirvan and Khosrow II Parviz and contains coins struck at the mints of Darabgird and Shiraz.

The presence of coins originating from southern Iranian mints demonstrates the circulation of Sasanian silver coinage in the Shirvan region during the Late Antique and Early Medieval periods. The recovery of the coins from controlled funerary contexts provides valuable archaeological evidence for the chronology of the necropolis. It contributes to our understanding of cultural and economic connections between the eastern Caucasus and the Sasanian world.

Although the assemblage is small, it confirms the integration of the Shirvan area into Sasanian monetary circulation. It highlights the significance of numismatic evidence for the study of regional interactions in the South Caucasus.

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