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## **Palm Branch in the Parthian Coins of Iran, Case Study: Coins of Phraates II**

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**Abstract:** Coins are engraved metals like books full of historical, cultural, religious, and mythological information. They are also like written documents that can be analyzed through their motifs through symbolism, and they are the most important guide for researchers in recognizing and familiarizing themselves with religious beliefs in different historical periods. Therefore, studying the images and symbols on them opens a window to ancient periods for researchers. Due to its long reign, the Parthian is one of ancient Iran's most important critical periods. They minted many coins with various motifs. One of the symbols used is the pattern of a palm branch, which from the time of Phraates II can be seen as the reverse of the drama and tetradrachm coins of the Seleucid Mint. This study has investigated the symbol of palm branch in coins of Phraates II in the Seleucid Mint to realize political goals. These coins are kept in Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran (Iran) and were purchased through private collectors. In this study, 250 Parthian coins were examined, among which 60 coins had palm motifs. The palm branch is considered a mythological plant common between Mesopotamia, and Greek. Parthian king, the branch palms were used as symbols for victory, under the cultural influence of the Seleucid and Mesopotamia.

**Keywords:** *Coins, Palm, Parthian, Mesopotamia, Phraates II.*

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## ***Introduction***

Iconography is used to interpret signs on both a denotive and connotative level. Iconography is typically used in analyzing works from the past and offers another way of analyzing images found in artwork or visual culture. Therefore iconography is the study of signs. Signs or Symbols are representations that have meanings beyond what they literally represent and are everywhere. Iconography offers a way to break an image into its constituent parts- its signs, trace how they relate to each other, and other systems of meaning in which the image itself is the focus and the most important site of meaning. The signs in an image are analyzed into two parts, the signified and signifier. The signified is the concept or thing the representation stands for. The signifier is the representation. Signs can have a denotative or literal meaning and connotative meanings in addition to their literal meaning. Signs exist in relationship to other signs. Signs also connect to wider systems of meaning that are conventionalized meanings shared by particular groups or cultures. Because signs can often be polysemic or have multiple meanings, unpacking them fully can be very complex. It is accepted, however, that within specific groups/ cultures, and particular times, there are often preferred or dominant readings of signs that are interpreted in ways intended to retain the institutional/political/ ideological order imprinted on them for that time (Rose, 2012: 105-133). One of the symbolic images in ancient world art is the palm. The palm had a vital role in human life; some of the myths have formed around plants and gradually enjoyed high strength. This mythos belief could be traced through symbols in the art of ancient nations. Symbolism is a tool of old knowledge and the most fundamental means for explaining conceptions. Symbolism has been placed during the times and centuries and in the thoughts and dreams of different races. Symbol motivates thought and leads human to spread thought without speech. Symbol operates in art on different levels and according to beliefs and social customs, which induces artist. In another level, some thoughts are related to worship. In this way, the artist gives a symbolic image by giving substance and identification to existents whose form is unknown. These symbols are mostly formed in one cause and are transferred to another nation, and during this transferring, they are evolved and partly caused by a little change in nature. Investigation of this transfer trend and changes can give us worthy information about art and politics. The pervasive presence of plant figures in ancient art can be traced to the ancient belief of plant consecration and the people considerable respect for nature. In all eras, flowers and decorative figures were drawn on objects and buildings. In Iran, from the time of Phraates II (138-127 B.C.), the palm motif can be seen on the reverse of drachma coins and Tetraderakhma. The palm branch is in Nike's hand. The purpose of this study is to use other nation's religious symbols in coins according to the policies of the kings. A case study is the use of palm branches in the drachma and tetradrachma coins of Farhad II. Importance of the research is The Historiography and the policies of Parthian kings are less well-understood than those of Seleucid and Ptolemaic kings or the emperors of Rome. Therefore, this research is important to show the connection between the symbols used in the coins and with Politics of Parthian kings.

## ***Literature Review***

The use of plant motifs with geometric shapes in Iran has a long history. In ancient Iran (the Achaemenid and the Sassanid era), plant motifs were used in the decoration of buildings, and were consequently conveyed to other civilizations in Iran and other countries. With regard to the ongoing studies on Iranian architecture and its adornments, it is clear that experts such as Arthur André Godard (1998), Hillenbrand (1995), and others only refer to the general description of the progress of this art in different periods. Today, many researchers have studied the



role of Plants in the Sassanid period and have studied them from the point of view of symbolism, but the plant motifs in the Parthian period have been less studied. The role of the palm in Parthian tetradrachma coins has not been investigated so far. In this article has investigated the historical factors in the formation of the palm motif in the Parthian tetradrachma coins.

**Research Methods**

This research has been done in a descriptive-analytical method with an iconographic approach, collecting information and data from library and museum studies. Two hundred and fifty coins in the repository of the Reza Abbasi Museum were examined and studied. Among them, one hundred thirty coins had plant drawings, and sixty coins had palm motifs. Due to the limitations of museums in photography and providing photographs to the authors, twenty coins were selected for the study. The Sellwood catalog of Parthian coins has been used for library studies and to identify the Parthian kings. Thus, at first, the plant motifs used in Parthian coins were identified; then, by collecting information from library research, and relying on the symbolic approach, palm drawings in Greek and Mesopotamia were studied.

**Discussion**

The Parthians were one of the dynasties of ancient Iran that ruled for about 500 years (247 B.C.-224 AD and expanded their territory from the time of Mithradates I (132-164 B.C.). In 141 B.C., he entered Mesopotamia and inherited the Seleucid mint (Bivar, 1983: 34), and they minted Tetradrachma coins. By examining the coins from this period, a palm branch can be seen in reverse tetradrachm coins, Phraates II (14.1 S), Mitradates II (24.3.S), Orodes II (46.2 S), Phraates IV (51.5 S), Tirdates (55.7 S), Phraataces (S.56.1) Vonones I (S.60.2). Artabanus II (61.2- 62.8, 63.4 S), Vardanes I (64.7), Vologases I (S.70.10), which are divided into two types: The first type: the palm branch is in the behind the tetradrachm in the hands of the goddess Nika and Tokkeh (Fig. 1). The first time, the palm branch in Nikah's hand is seen on the reverse drachma coins of Phraates II, which is a Seleucid mint (Sellwood, 1980). The second type: The palm branch is seen on reverse tetradrachm coins in the back of the epigraph. This type can be seen only in the tetradrachm coins of Mithradates II and Orodes I (Fig. 2).

Considering that the palm branch was observed for the first time in the drachma and tetradrachma coins of Phraates II, This research is about the relationship between the palm branch and the policies of Farhad II after the victory and conquest of Mesopotamia.



Fig. 1: Tetradrachm coin of Phraates II with palm pattern in Seleucia mint, Reza Abbasi Museum, Iran



Fig. 2: Tetradrachm coin of Mitradates II with palm pattern in Seleucia mint, Reza Abbasi Museum, Iran

### ***Seleucid Mint***

Seleucia city was situated some forty miles to the north-east of Babylon and fifteen miles to the south of modern Baghdad, near the spot where the "Royal Canal" (Nahr Malcha) of Nebuchadrezzar and earlier kings joins the Tigris River which Seleucus I founded. The exact date of the founding of Seleucia is unknown. Research results show which the city was founded in 306 B.C. Therefore, the new and rapidly growing city replaced Babylon as the administrative center, and it may be taken as certain that an important mint was at once opened here (Newell, 1938: 8-10). Considering that the palm branch has been observed in the coins of the Seleucia mint, in this section, we will first discuss the coins minted by the Greeks in this mint, between 300 and 217 B.C.; tetradrachma, drachma, and copper coins were minted in the Seleucid mint. The characters on the back of the coins have been chosen based on the victories and political status of the kings. Topics include: tetradrachms seen in Zeus' right hand of a tiny winged victory, facing to the right and offering the god a wreath which the allusion is obviously to the successes which Seleucid kings had gained in the eastern portions of his empire. The wreath (Olive ring) in Nike Hand may refer to Seleucid's recovery of the easternmost Persian provinces (Newell, 1938). The reverse of some coins presents us with a warlike figure of Athena standing in a chariot drawn by four great, horned elephants, emblematic of royal magnificence and might (Fig. 3).

The palm branch is not seen in the coins of this period. Surveys showed that The pattern of the palm branch can be seen on the coins of Demetrius I which they were minted in the Seleucid mint in 160 B.C. (Fig. 4). For a better understanding, we have a review of political events and historical in Mesopotamia between 300- 165 B.C.



Fig. 3: Drakhma (296-281 B.C.), Reverse: Atena in elephant quadriga right, brandishing spear and shield Mint Seleucia, (Numismatic.org, part 1, 132)



Fig. 4: Tetradrachm coin of Demetrus I with palm pattern in Seleucia mint.

The most important political events of this period are:

1- The war between Antiochus I and Ptolemy II (280-252 B.C.), which continued with the death of Antiochus I in 261, followed by her successor Antiochus II. In 252 B.C., Antiochus II married Ptolemy's daughter (Bernice), and there was peace between them until Seleucus II.

2- The War between Ptolemy III and Seleucus II, in 245 B.C., Ptolemy conquered Mesopotamia and Syria. In 241, peace was concluded between Ptolemy III and Seleucus II (Bivar, 1983: 1188-121). Also, during this period, there was a conflict between the Seleucids and the Romans. In 188 B.C, a peace treaty was conducted between the Roman Republic and Antiochus III called The Treaty of Apamea. Rome taking prominent Seleucid family members hostage was one of the terms of the Treaty of Apamea that had ended the Roman-Seleucid War. Demetrius I unitle 164 B.C. held as a hostage in Rome. With the help of the Greek historian Polybius, Demetrius escaped from confinement and made his way to the Seleucid capital Antioch. He successfully gained the support of the local aristocracy and was welcomed back on the Syrian throne around 162 B.C. He entered Babylon in 160 B.C. and defeated the rebellious Median satrap Timarchus. the Babylonians called him Soter (Spek, 1998: 167-175). In this year, the Demetrius I coins in the Seleucid mint have palm motifs. A role that was sacred to the Romans and Mesopotamians. Demetrius was killed in a battle in 150-151 B.C. By this time, the Parthians had also been able to advance in Iran's regions and won. Mitradares I in the year 141 B.C., he was able to enter Mesopotamia and inherited the Seleucid mint. He used the image of Herakles on the reverse of the tetradrachm coins (Fig. 11). On the other hand, Demetrius II was married to Cleopatra (Ptolemy VI Philometor's daughter) in 145 B.C., with the death of Ptolemy in late 145 B.C. He took over the government (Josephus, 13, 120). He decided to reclaim the lost territory. In 140 B.C., Mithradates I left Mesopotamia for the east to contain an invasion by the Saka (Shipman 1986: 525). The Seleucid ruler Demetrius II used this opportunity; he was at first successful in his efforts to reconquer Babylonia. However, the Seleucids were eventually defeated, and Demetrius was captured by Parthian forces in 138 B.C. (Bivar 1983: 34). On the death of Mithradates I in 132, Phraates succeeded his father. This period, we are facing rebellion in different regions. Antiochus VII (138-129) decided to reconquer the eastern satrapies. In 130, he defeated the Parthians thrice and expelled them from Babylonia, pushing them back across the Zagros Mountains, following them into Media and wintering in Ecbatana (Dąbrowa 2018: 76; Shayegan 2011: 128). After his victories, Antiochus demanded not only the release of Demetrius but also the return of all lost lands and the renewal of tribute fees. Phraates II, offended by the reply, broke off the negotiations and prepared for battle (Nabel 2017: 32). Phraates II attacked the Seleucid army in during the spring of 129 B.C., and the local population supported him. Antiochus was defeated and died, ending Seleucid rule east of the Euphrates (Bing & Sievers 1986: 125-135). He allowed Antiochus a royal funeral. In Antiochus' company had been several relatives, the children of Demetrius II Nicator, the Seleucid king who had in 141-139 lost the eastern satrapies to Mithradates and had been held captive for some time. Phraates took the children captive, and he married Princess Laodice, giving him a claim to the Seleucid throne (Assar, 2000: 1-25). Thus, after conquering Mesopotamia, also, Phraates II used a palm branch in Nike's hand, which is a sign of victory. To better understand the concepts of the palm, we will discuss the place of the palm in mythology, the role of the palm in the Achaemenid, Mesopotamia and Greek art.

### ***Palm Iconography in Achaemenid Period***

A review of the artworks of the Achaemenid period shows Palm tree Achaemenid period is important, and the palm tree is the symbol of kingship on Achaemenid cylinder seals, usually shown standing beside the actual ruler (Roaf-Zgoll 2001: 285-287). All these seals show the scene



of the victory of the king (a crowned man) over the lion. A different example shows two Persian-crowned men praying in front of an altar. The text of this seal, which was found in Takht Jamshid, repeats the name of Darius in three languages (Bjorn, 2002: 180)(Fig. 5).

The most famous cylinder seal of Darius was found in Egypt which meaning is (Bonfiglio, 2012: 515): The king is hunting and riding in a chariot, and palm trees can be seen on both sides (Fig 6). In Iran, associating the palm with particular deities is a more difficult. Ghirshman believes that the presence of the tree has nothing to do with other parts, and it is only for the visualization of the scenery (Ghirshman, 1962: 269). Therefore, the presence of palm trees in the Achaemenid artifact is derived from the art of Egypt and Mesopotamia (New Assyrian). Probably, Darius tried to add the palm tree to the official symbols of his kingdom and insist on his power in the area, and its presence in Achaemenid art' can be a sign of fertility thinking in West Asian art (Ettinghausen and Yarshater, 1999: 100-101).

### ***Iconography Palm in Mesopotamia and Greek***

Sacred palm is seen in the Mesopotamia artifact from three thousand years B.C., depicted in the interior decoration of temples, on city gates, royal vestments, and seal cylinders. Palm date in the Akkadian period is more common among naturalistic scenes than amid other periods (Collon, 1987: 36-37). The first representations of sacred gardens can be identified with scenes of date harvests (Fig. 7) in ritual contexts on cylinder seals of the Akkadian period (Bomher, 1965: 125, 191).

The date palm in Mesopotamia has profoundly complex implications. They seem to indicate a cultivate. At some point, the setting of certain ceremonies may be an expression of wealth, richness, control and assurance, as well as enchanted control. Also, they could be an expression of abundance, fertility, power, protection, and magical power. The Early Dynastic period, a god called "Lord of the date palm tree" (dLugal-ġišimmar) was afterward identified with Nergal, the master of the underworld (Volk 2003–2005: 290). Still, no delineations of this god are as of now known. In the Assyrian era, date palms were complex devout images as well; the date palms are held by Mythical creatures on the shaped reliefs of the façade (Fig. 8) (Harper, 1992: 141–144). These Symbols were expected to inspire the sacrosanct gardens that encompassed the temples (Dalley, 2013: 67).

Also, there's a near association between the date palm and Assyrian Sacrosanct Tree (Roaf-Zgoli, 2001). It can be said by examining the reliefs: Date palms in this era could refer to specific persons and, as the "King of the Trees" embodied the king's person (Fig. 9). In this period, some trees are stylized, which seems to be a connection between the naturalistic and stylized rep-



Fig. 5: Cylinder seal of Darius Achaemenid (Bjorn, 2002: PFS0011)



Fig. 6: Cylinder seal of Darius Achaemenid, British Museum

representations. Date palm conceivably alludes to the plant's mysterious powers (Ibid, 285-287). Therefore, It can be said that based on the examination of reliefs and cylindrical seals, there were three basic types of gardens in Mesopotamia: the productive garden, the royal garden, and the sacred garden (garden of the gods)(Margueron, 1992: 56-61). The rich Babylonian libraries have been discussing palm cultivation and symbolism, and in the Hellenistic period, they were reedited (Popenoe, 1924: 313-325). In Mesopotamian art is used the palm tree.

Between the years 485-100 B.C. of date-palm images in Greek, eastern Mediterranean-Phoenician, and Carthaginian issued realism (Rivera et al., 2018: 1-5) (Fig. 10). They believed that at the sanctuary at Delos, there was enshrined the sacred palm Protogonos Phoenix, odinos agalma dais along-lived mythological palm tree beneath which Leto gave birth to Apollo and Artemis (Michel, 2013). The offering of palm leaves reflects a Roman custom, still in use in modern (Kaper, 1997: 167). Probably for this reason, in the Seleucid period, the material about palm cultivation was revised again. The palm branch is expressed as a symbol of eternity and triumph and sometimes shows the date palm with the bird, the Phoenix, which is associated with the sun. On the back of the coins of Demetrius II, palm branches and bird are used (Fig. 11).



Fig. 7: Date harvet, cylinder seal of Akkadian era, British Museum



Fig. 9: Goddess Ishtar, Neo-Assyrian with Lion and Palm Tree, British Museum

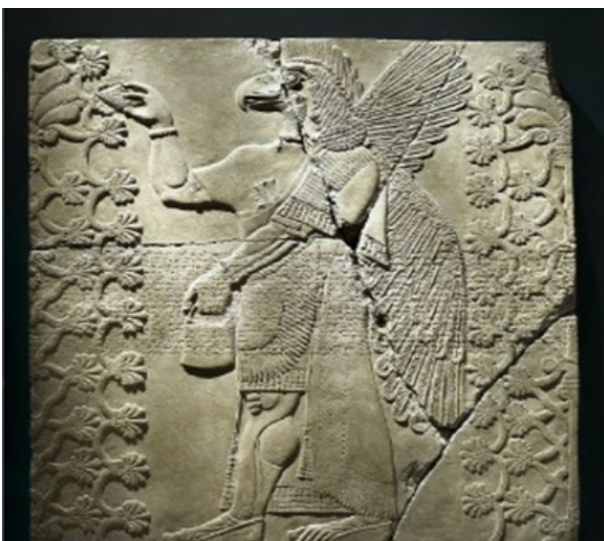


Fig. 8: The Assyrian stylized scared tree, Brooklyn Museum



Fig. 10: Siculo-Punic silver tetradrachm with Palm tree reverse (ANS 1944.100.79692)



Fig. 11: Coin of Demetrius II with Palm branch and Phoenix

## **Conclusion**

Myths have formed a very most important part of the beliefs and routine life of ancient people which are a significant role in the formation of symbols, and by examining them, one can understand the meaning of the symbols. Thus, the pictures displayed in the form of symbols in works of art have led to the transmission of the message through the image that by examining symbolic images, one can understand the ideology that governs societies. Most kings have used symbols for political purposes; for more than two thousand years, the palm has been extremely popular in both Eastern and Western cultures. In Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greek iconography, this fruitful and useful plant has been a symbol of harmony and fertility. In Iran, except for the southern regions, the palm has not been used in art and according to the weather conditions, the palm is an imported art which, according to the political goals in the Achaemenid period, it is seen in cylindrical seals in the shape of a tree under the influence of Assyrian and Egyptian art. By examining the tetradrachma coins of Parthia, we see the role of palm branches in goddesses' hands, the reverse of coins of Farhad II which were minted in the Seleucid mint. Examining political events shows after conquering Mesopotamia, Phraates II used a palm branch in Nike's hand, which is a sign of victory also this symbol be used for political purposes and respect.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that they agreed to participate in the present paper and there is no competing interests.

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