

Mithraic symbols on a medallion of Buyid Iran?

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The object with which this note is concerned is not itself an antiquity, yet it preserves the record of a medallion otherwise unknown. It has the appearance of a cast taken in copper from an original existing in some other metal. This conclusion is suggested by the many pin-point bubbles visible in the enlarged photograph, and also by the smooth, soapy surface of the higher relief. One would guess that the original is actually in gold, for the softness of that metal would allow the higher points of the relief, especially the script, to be rubbed smooth in the manner seen. Moreover, it is known that a number of medallions of the relevant period, of generally similar dimensions, exist in gold. Casting from a worn gold original would greatly impair the sharpness of the script, which indeed in the present specimen has become so blurred as to be virtually illegible. None the less, the bolder features of the iconography are clear enough.

My record of the medallion I owe to Mr A. H. Morton of Tehran, who is its present owner. He has kindly allowed me to photograph it, and has authorized a publication. One might assume that such a cast had been made recently for sale to tourists. This conclusion is to some extent supported by the fact, reported by Mr Morton, that casts similar to that illustrated are known to have been offered for sale on other occasions. Mr Morton's medallion was acquired in 1971. In January 1972 he saw another in Mashhad; and during the summer or autumn of 1972 another in Tehran, in the same shop that the first had been purchased. Both had been, however, heavily scored with fresh scratches, and the second Tehran specimen had a large rectangular piece cut out of one side. Mr Morton's opinion was that all three had been cast from the same original, but he had no opportunity for side by side comparison. His recollection is that the other two also had suspension rings, but this point is not absolutely certain. In either case, the fact that the present example has such a loop suggests that it may once have been worn on clothing, perhaps by a tribeswoman. The same may be true of the others. If so, these casts could have been made some years ago, and the presumed original possibly no longer extant. It is, of course, a well known point in numismatics that a cast forgery, worthless in itself, may be of value if it records a lost original. Such is the justification of the present study, of what is on the face of it a very remarkable, but 'false', piece.

For an Islamic medal, the iconography is at first glance quite astonishing. The subjects represented are strongly reminiscent of the symbolism of Roman Mithraism. (See Pl. 1a, b.)

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| <p>Obv. 'Lion-headed personage', standing to l., head turned to front, with sickle wings and a tail (?). In the field, background of foliage. All within a circle.</p> <p>Margin. Double circle of Kufic script, unread.</p> | <p>Rev. Winged (?) lion, to l., with scorpion above, grasping tail of lion with claws, and attacking head of lion with its tail. Below, serpent. Foliage to left and right. All within circle.</p> <p>Margin. Circle of Kufic script, unread.</p> |
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Any distinction here between obverse and reverse is of course wholly arbitrary. There is no means of determining which face of the original was struck from the anvil, and which from the punch die. Nor, in conventionalized terms,¹ which face carried the *kalima* 'declaration of faith' (if indeed it was present), or which carried the mint-date formula.

To the present contributor it seems that the lion-headed figure is rendered in a style quite appropriate to the medieval period, as is the arabesque foliage which occupies the background. That so plausible a style could ever have been *fabricated* by a modern bazar craftsman, engraving freehand a pair of false dies, and rendering minute detail on a very small scale, is difficult to believe. It is no less improbable that such unexpected subjects should be *invented* in this context. For this reason the view is here taken that the casts were made from a medieval original. Yet it is not with any known Islamic theme, but with the lion-headed image known in Roman Mithraism, that the principal subject invites comparison.

In previous articles (1975b: 278), the writer has adhered to the view that this image was known to Mithraists by the Iranian name of Ahriman (Deus Areimanius), and that he is primarily to be understood as a deity of death. Such a deity, though arbitrary and powerful, is likely to have been seen by the Mithraists as ethically neutral, though susceptible to provocation or propitiation. The adverse ethical associations connected with the designation Ahriman 'the Evil Spirit' (a term probably adopted in late periods under Zoroastrian influence) are likely to have arisen only secondarily in the minds of the Mithraists, as a consequence of the universal human apprehension of death. It will rather have been amongst outsiders that the ethical view of the deity would have arisen. The religion of the Mithraists will have been calculated to overcome their fears of death and the hereafter, and the deity presiding there will have been regarded with tranquillity and resignation rather than abhorrence. Therefore, equally in the setting of a medieval medallion, we are entitled to regard the image purely as a symbol of death, and without connotations of an ethical or doctrinal nature. It is nevertheless surprising to encounter this seeming documentation of the continuity of Mithraic symbolism into later times.

With the figures on the reverse of the cast, scorpion, lion and serpent, we need deal only briefly. All three are prominent in the imagery of Roman Mithraism, and all three are susceptible of interpretation as symbolical of death. The iconographic arrangement of all three in a single composition is not typically Mithraic, but is readily intelligible in Mithraic terms. The grouping of the reverse is therefore less characteristic of a particular ideology than is the assumed figure of Ahriman. Such commonplace symbols could have been devised by any engraver, not necessarily a votary, or even an outsider cognisant of any esoteric religion. None the less, in association with the obverse, their message seems plain enough. It is once more strange to find them accompanied by inscriptions in Kufic script.

The present writer has made repeated efforts to decipher the inscriptions, but even when working from a four-times enlargement, has achieved no success. Their minute size, and blurred transmission in the cast present great difficulties. None the less, they have every appearance of being in correct Arabic. Here and there, the outlines of familiar letters are sufficiently distinguishable, but it is difficult to guess what formulae are to be expected on such an unprecedented piece, and the variety of script is anyway a particularly difficult one. We shall be comparing our piece shortly with other known medallions of the medieval period. The script may be likened to that of a silver piece, related to the medallions, which was published some years ago by Dr George C. Miles (1964: 283). This is the portrait coin of the Buyid prince Rukn al-Daula (338/949 to 366/976-7) issued from the mint of al-Muḥammadiya, (the official designation of Rayy) in the year 351/962. On this example also decipherment would have been extremely difficult but for the fact that conventional formulae are followed. In fact, the script of the Buyid coins of al-Muḥammadiya is highly characteristic, and that of our cast medallion has a very similar form. Since the medallion has come to light in Tehran, the modern successor to the ancient town of Rayy, such an attribution is to be expected. We may assume that its original was a product of the mint of al-Muḥammadiya, and that it is not far removed in date from the piece published by Miles.

It remains to consider what significance Mithraic iconography could have possessed at that time. It is the present writer's opinion that Roman Mithraism was in fact derived from an early Iranian cult (1975b: 286f.), and that traces of similar beliefs could therefore have lingered on in the Iranian borderlands. At least one authority has maintained that the religion of the Yazidī Kurds presented features similar to those of Roman Mithraism (Wahby, *c.* 1962), and if the above hypothesis is true that would not be incredible. For the survival of related symbolism as late as the medieval period supporting evidence seems to be lacking. Yet it must be recalled that in his remarkable article 'Zoroastrian survivals in Iranian folklore', the late Professor R. C. Zaehner (1965: 87) claimed to be in possession of evidence that traditions of a lion-like deity were still extant in the folklore of southern Luristan as recently as 1946 to 1949. It is true that Professor Zaehner's article aroused wide controversy. His informant, said to have been called Mirdrakvandi, never came forward to vouch for the story, and the promised second article on the material was never published. At the same time, friends of Professor Zaehner would be reluctant to conclude that the traditions to which he devoted so much effort were entirely spurious. The appearance of the medallion discussed here is proof, in the present writer's view, that knowledge of the iconography of the Lion-headed God indeed survived in the medieval period. This would not then be strange if knowledge of the figure continued to exist in esoteric circles in Iran as recently as 1949. Alternatively one could speculate that medallions of the present type, perhaps even this very one, might have been known to sectaries, and served to crystallize their traditional narrations.

It remains to consider what purpose the archetype of the Tehran bronze medal would have been intended to serve, and by what means it could have been issued. One could, it is true, speculate that medallions of this type may have been issued as badges of office for the hierarchy of some clandestine sect, ultimately descending from the original Mithraists, and passed down from hand to hand by holders of an office from the medieval period into recent times. Yet this does not explain how such an object could have been produced by

expert craftsmen, apparently commanding the resources of an official mint. Moreover, on general grounds, this seems far too romantic an explanation of what is probably quite a straightforward phenomenon. A far simpler explanation is suggested by an examination of the significant body of evidence existing in respect of figured medallions during the fourth/eleventh centuries.

In spite of the basic rule that the numismatic output of Islam, apart from a number of well-known exceptions such as the Arab-Byzantine and Arab-Sasanian coinage, consisted entirely of epigraphic subjects, evidence concerning a corpus of representational medallions has grown substantially during recent years. The late Dr John Walker described a medal bearing a representation of the Seljūq Sultan Ṭughril Beg holding a wine-cup (1958: 694, fig. 2), and connected it with the intended marriage alliance between the Sultan and the 'Abbasid caliph of his day. Such medals would naturally have been struck as presentation pieces for members of the court on these great dynastic occasions. Indeed, in Islam such so-called 'Bacchanalian' coins, which show the ruler drinking from a wine-cup, would only have been tolerable in the context of a court wedding. An earlier example of the same type is the well known medal of the Buyid Amīr 'Izz al-Daula (356/966–7 to 367/977–8) at Bagdad (Miles: 1964, 289, with bibliography in n. 15). This was issued from the mint of that city, officially entitled Madīnat al-Salām, in 365/975–6. It bears, in addition to mint and date, the names of the Amīr and of the 'Abbasid Caliph al-Ṭa'ī. On the obverse is seen the Amīr seated and drinking from a cup, and on the reverse a seated musician. Indeed it was in 365 (so it appears from Professor Busse's account)² that 'Izz al-Daula received in marriage a daughter of the Caliph. Once more there is no difficulty in understanding the 'Bacchanalian' medallion as commemorative of a royal marriage.

Of markedly different character are a pair of gold medallions bearing the names of 'Izz al-Daula and the preceding Caliph al-Muṭī', and issued at Madīnat al-Salām in 363/973–4. The types of one represent, on either face, a lion slaying a bull (Miles 1964: 288 with Pl. XLVI, 4 and 1975, Pl. 28.4); and on the other, an eagle killing a duck (Miles 1975: Pl. 29.1 – there published for the first time), and a vulture or goshawk devouring a hare. With regard to the first of these two subjects, the present writer has already argued, in the context of Achaemenid art and of Roman Mithraism, that the figures of Lion and Bull are normally symbolic of the moment of death (1975a: 105). He has also pointed out that knowledge of this meaning survived into Islamic art, and is attested in a mosaic at Khirbat al-Mafjar.³ The subjects on the second medallion, though different in detail, are generically similar, and may be understood as bearing the same meaning. When we consider that medals issued by the official mint are likely to have some reference to events of the court, and that A.H. 363 was the year of the death of the Caliph al-Muṭī', named on the piece, the conclusion emerges that the medal should have been issued to commemorate this event. That commemorative medals should have been presented on the occasion of a royal wedding, to guests or court retainers, is natural enough. At first glance it may seem less probable that such a practice would have been followed at a royal funeral. On the other hand, the Amīr 'Izz al-Daula would have needed to secure the goodwill of leading personages assembled to attend the funeral. Retainers would have looked for some donative in return for supporting the nomination of the successor, and a presentation of this kind seems not unlikely. The symbolism of lion and bull, combined with the critical date, and the names of the deceased Caliph, and surviving Amīr, express the purpose of the

medals in restrained yet explicit iconographic language. We must consider whether a similar explanation can account for the Tehran medal.

At the same time, consideration should be given to a description by al-Mas'ūdī (*Murūj al-Dhahab* VIII, 340–2) of celebrations for the festival of Mihrgān which were still taking place during the caliphate of the 'Abbasid al-Rāḍī (322/934 to 329/940). Commemorative medals were struck, and distributed to their friends by the leading personalities. A verse quoted concerning similar festivities during the reign of al-Ma'mūn (198/813 to 218/833) emphasizes the practice of *that* caliph, despite the prohibitions imposed by Islam, of drinking at the festival wine from an ancient Sasanian cup (*ka'sun khusrumānī*). In the light of this description, all the pictorial medallions, both festive and funereal, might be seen as presentation pieces issued on the occasion of the festival of Mihrgān. Those which illustrate the ruler drinking from a cup of wine might well attest a survival of this tradition during the festival, since there is authority even from Achaemenid times of wine-drinking by the king at the time of the Mithrakāna. Though this explanation goes beyond the association of the medallions with royal weddings suggested by Walker (and possibly therefore their association also with funerals), it does not really contradict it. For the worship of Mithra had many aspects; he was at once a deity of festivity, of death and of immortality. We could assume, therefore, that when, as at the time of royal weddings, the court was in festive mood, the medallions stressed the festive aspects of the occasion. On the other hand, during times of the royal obsequies and court mourning, if Mihrgān happened to take place in those circumstances, the funereal aspects of Mithraic iconography would be emphasized. This explanation, suggested by the passage in al-Mas'ūdī, further strengthens the association of our newly-reported piece with the Mithraic tradition, but much further research will be required before it can be decided for certain whether the simpler explanation based on the ideas of Walker is in fact correct, or whether it can be substantiated that medals of this kind had a close association with the occasion of Mihrgān.

In the case of the Tehran medal, the illegibility of the inscription offers a serious difficulty. Yet when we consider the iconography of the types, they signify, no less than the lion and bull, the presence of death; and like the latter, belong incidentally to the symbolism of Mithraism. The problem raised by the Tehran types is how knowledge of the image of Ahriman as God of Death could have reached the Buyid mint-officials of al-Muḥammadiya, and how they could have been permitted to reproduce such a figure in a Muslim society. On the one hand, it is clear that at any rate in court contexts, Buyid society did not rigidly enforce the supposed Islamic veto on the representation of animal forms. The prestige of the Sasanian artistic tradition was too great to permit its complete abandonment. At the same time, it is possible that in the tribal setting of the Buyid élite, a knowledge of Yazidī or Ahl-i Haq traditions was well established. It may even be the case that the iconography of Ahriman was better known to the medieval Zoroastrian tradition than we realize today, and that the lion-headed figure of our medallion derives from an illustration of some lost Sasanian manuscript, for the splendid illuminations of which there exists ample indirect evidence.

It is quite conceivable that the original of our medallion was issued at Rayy in 363/973–4 by Rukn al-Daula to commemorate the death of the Caliph al-Muti', and is thus a parallel for the similar issue at Bagdad. At any event, its subject matter suggests that it is likely to have been issued in commemoration of a funeral at about that date. A full and definitive

solution of the problem will have to await the final decipherment of the inscriptions. This will certainly be accelerated if other examples reported can be recorded, and above all if the presumed gold archetype of these medallions can ever be brought to light.

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Notes

- 1 Cf. Jere L. Bacharach and H. A. Awad, 1973: 183.
- 2 1975: 268 (apparently from Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl al-Ṣābi).
- 3 1974: 699 'the motif of the lion and the stag conveys as its essential meaning the moment of death. . . . The two sides of the mosaic would therefore represent the alternatives of life and death, and the room could be interpreted as a chamber of *siyāsa* judgement, in which the ruler, sitting *in camera*, exercised such powers.'

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Plate Ia Bronze cast from a medieval (Buyid) medallion, Tehran. Obverse. Approx. $2\frac{1}{2} \times$ enlargement. (Scale in millimetres)



Plate Ib Bronze cast from a medieval (Buyid) medallion, Tehran. Reverse. Approx. $2\frac{1}{2} \times$ enlargement. (Scale in millimetres)

