

<i>ACTA CLASSICA UNIV. SCIENT. DEBRECEN.</i>	<i>L.</i>	<i>2014.</i>	<i>pp. 179–183.</i>
--	-----------	--------------	---------------------

## SASANIAN SEALS IN HUNGARIAN COLLECTIONS

BY TAMÁS GESZTELYI

*Abstract:* There are relatively few Sasanian seals in the Hungarian archaeological collections, and there is only one that was found in Hungary. Their review has been made timely by the appearance of a few pieces in the art trade. One of their characteristic motifs is the resting ram, but resting griffin and a winged sphinx also appear as motifs.

*Keywords:* Sasanian seals, resting ram, Pehlevi inscription, resting griffin, winged sphinx Avar cemetery Szarvas.

There is a seal of a peculiar shape in the recently acquired seal collection of The National Archives of Hungary, which, on the basis of its shape and representation, can be attributed to the Sasanian Empire.<sup>1</sup> This little-known culture was born around 226 A.D., the time of the rebirth of the once powerful Achaemenid Persian Empire, and remained the most powerful empire of the Near and Middle East until 642, when it was overthrown and its territory occupied by Arab tribes.

Sasanian seals belong to Neo-Persian glyptics.<sup>2</sup> They kept Achaemenid, Graeco-Persian and Parthian traditions while at the same time they were also greatly influenced by the gem use widespread in the neighbouring Roman Empire. Following local traditions, seals were for the most part in the shape of hemispheres, spherical sections, and flat spheres, which were pierced in their sides so that they could be suspended on a cord. Through Roman influence ring stones appeared, too. Their engraving techniques are characterised by the simplified shapes of the Roman Empire's mass production: body modelling with rounded drills, detailing with short rounded wheel grooves in the concave spherical surfaces.

The themes of the representations show a wide variety: royal portraits, hunts, animals, plants, composite creatures and symbols, often surrounded by Pahlavi inscriptions. Their chronology is difficult to establish at present. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Most important catalogues related to the theme: Bivar 1969; Frye 1971; Göbl 1973; Gignoux 1978; Gignoux 1982; Gignoux 1987; Gyselen 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Zazoff 1983, 363-373.

best quality works are usually attributed to the heyday of their art, the fourth and fifth centuries. The production and use of seals was continuous, mainly among the kings and their civil servants, as proven by the clay *bullae* which have been unearthed in their hundreds. These are impressions of gems that were used to seal and render documents official. The documents were placed in the archives of churches and when the churches burnt down, only the impressions remained of the documents, becoming valuable documents for researchers this time. But seals were also used in everyday life for closing and sealing off storage jars.

While the Romans mounted the seals (gems) into rings and wore them on their fingers or put them in small boxes, the Sasanian seals, even if they were made into the shape of rings, were pierced just enough to be suspended on a cord and worn, in all probability, around the neck as pendants. Recently acquired by The National Archives of Hungary, it is a colourless, translucent (rock crystal) seal, with four disc-shaped reliefs on its dome (its ring-shaped outer surface) standing out on both sides (Pictures 1 and 2).<sup>3</sup> Its oval surface portrays a ram sitting on the ground with forceful, crescent-shaped horns and pronounced eyes. The modelling of its body reveals the use of a smaller and a larger rounded drill while the parallel pattern of the body surface shows the signs of the smaller wheel which produced narrow grooves. In front of the ram there is a three-pronged flower or sapling, with lines of grooves above it. The lower edge of the figure is missing because part of the stone is chipped off.

Animal figures, including the resting ram, were favoured themes of Sasanian stamp seals. The only Sasanian stamp seal unearthed in the territory of Hungary has the same theme (Pictures 3 and 4).<sup>4</sup> This seal was made of carneol, a yellowish brown, translucent stone, and is of particularly fine execution: on the dome of the flattened spherical section bands run which meet in edge as high as the midline, where the narrowing bands end in a volute that rises out of the surface. The execution of the ram portrayed on this seal is visibly simpler than on the previous one: its body parts are not divided as clearly, and the engravings of varying width are more blurred. The crescent-shaped horns are pronounced here, too, but the figure became incomplete due to the chipping of the surface edge. The forepart of the ram shows the biggest chipped piece. There is no plant near it, but the hatchings that go round the

---

<sup>3</sup> Inv. no.: V 30-7, Balázs Károly's seal collection; size: 1,6 x 1,4 x 0,7; picture surface: 0,8 x 1,2; hole: 0,4 cm. Origin: Antique market in Amman.

<sup>4</sup> Szarvas, Tessedik Sámuel Múzeum; Inv. no. 88.33.2; size: 1,5 x 1,8 x 0,9; picture surface: 0,9 x 1,2; hole: 0,5 cm. Most recent publication: Gesztelyi 2010a, 112; Gesztelyi 2010b, 62.

ring turn into easily discernible letters, whose transliteration was performed by János Harmatta as follows: *abastán ó yazdán* = trust (is) in the gods.<sup>5</sup>

The peculiarity of the latter piece is that it was unearthed from a woman's grave of an Avar cemetery near Szarvas, as part of a necklace.<sup>6</sup> The Avars, on their way from Central Asia, could easily come into contact with the Sasanian Empire and it must have been during these encounters that they acquired the seal, which they later used as a jewel.<sup>7</sup> No Sasanian gems found their way into the Carpathian Basin during Roman times, this was the first one that must have reached this territory around the 8th century A.D. During the Middle Ages, however, probably as a result of the trade with Levant, the pilgrimages, and the crusades gems reached Europe, including Hungary, in greater numbers. This assumption was borne out by gem seals on the Medieval charters, three of which date from the period between the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 16th century and are of Sasanian origin.<sup>8</sup> However, these pieces reached Europe in greater numbers only through the Eastern art trade that was shaping from the 19th century on, making up considerable collections in some museums (see note 1.). This is not the case in Hungary, both the Hungarian National Museum<sup>9</sup> and the Museum of Fine Arts only hold a few pieces.

The motif of the seated ram appears on the Sasanian ring stone of the Antique Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, too (Picture 5).<sup>10</sup> All we know about its origin is that formerly it was in the collection of the Museum of Applied Art. The very roughly executed granite portrays two seated rams. One is in the foreground, the other is behind it, but its body cannot be seen, only its head rising in the middle, looking in the opposite direction from the other one in the foreground. Rams sitting or standing opposite each other or sitting back to back are often found on other portrayals as well<sup>11</sup>, but rams sitting crosswise are not.

Another ring stone of the Hungarian National Museum shows the motif of another well-liked animal, the stag walking (Picture 6).<sup>12</sup> The animal, usually portrayed with highly stylised horns, is depicted here in standing (walking)

---

<sup>5</sup> Harmatta 2003, 305-309.

<sup>6</sup> Juhász 2004, 56, 85; 103-105 (Harmatta).

<sup>7</sup> Gesztelyi 2010b, 51, 62.

<sup>8</sup> Gesztelyi, Rácz 2006, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Gesztelyi 2000, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Inv. no. 55.252; size: 0,9 x 1,2 x 0,4. Front is strongly convex, back is flat.

<sup>11</sup> Vollenweider 1967, Nr. 108; Gignoux 1982, 30.101; Gignoux 1987, 30.108.

<sup>12</sup> Inv. no. 55.24.61; size: 1 x 0,35; round, dark blue – dark grey nicolo; unknown origin.

Published: Gesztelyi 2000, Nr. 289.

position on some rings, or lying on the ground on others. A Sasanian ring stone of the Hungarian National Museum depicts a griffin lying on the ground (Picture 7).<sup>13</sup> It is also rather simply executed: the animals' body was made with a rounded drill while a finer wheel was used to produce the limbs and the stylised mane and the wing.

A carnelian ring stone portraying a winged sphinx has recently surfaced in the art trade and found its way into a private collection in Budapest (Picture 8).<sup>14</sup> In front of the seated sphinx with a long tail reaching up high there is an eight-pointed star, whose vertical stem is longer than the others, and there is a small cross line in the lower part. Below the ground line there are crossing lines to show the ground. The work is of medium execution.<sup>15</sup>

### Bibliography

- Bivar 1969 = Bivar, A. D. H.: *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum. Stamp Seals: II. The Sasanian Dynasty*. London.
- Frye 1971 = Frye, R. N.: *Sasanian Seals in the Collection of Mohsen Foroughi*. Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum III. London.
- Gesztelyi 2000 = Gesztelyi, T.: *Antike Gemmen im Ungarischen Nationalmuseum*. Catalogi Musei Nationalis Hungarici. Series Archaeologica III. Budapest.
- 2010a = Gesztelyi, T.: Antike Gemmen aus der Awarenzeit. *Pallas*, Revue d'Études Antiques. Glyptique romaine. 83, 99–116.
- 2010b = Gesztelyi T.: Antik gemmák az avar korból (Ancient gems from the Avar age). *Arrabona* 48/2, 49–66.
- Gesztelyi, Rác 2006 = Gesztelyi T., Rác Gy.: *Antik gemmapecsétek a középkori Magyarországon. Antike Gemmensiegel im mittelalterlichen Ungarn*. Debrecen.
- Gignoux 1978 = Gignoux, P.: *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles sassanides de la Bibliothèque Nationale et du Musée du Louvre II*. Paris.
- 1982 = Gignoux, P.: *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles sassanides des coll. diverses*. Paris.
- 1987 = Gignoux, P.: *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles sassanides des coll. diverses*. Paris.
- Göbl 1973 = Göbl, R.: *Der sasanidische Siegelkanon*. Braunschweig.
- Gyselen 1993 = Gyselen, R.: *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles sassanides de la Bibliothèque Nationale et du Musée du Louvre. I. Collection générale*. Paris.
- Harmatta 2003 = Harmatta J.: Egy sásánida gemma a Szarvas-68 avar temetőből (A Sasanian gem from the Avar cemetery of Szarvas-68). *Antik Tanulmányok (Studia Antiqua)* 47, 305–309.

<sup>13</sup> Inv. no. 55.24.78; size: 1,05 x 1,2 x 0,6, yellowish red carnel; front is strongly convex, back is flat. Unknown origin. Published: Gesztelyi 2000, Nr. 288.

<sup>14</sup> Size: 1,5 x 2 x 0,4; mounted into modern silver rings whose size is: 2,6 x 2,3.

<sup>15</sup> Cf.: Bivar 1969, EH 1–8.

Juhász 2004 = Juhász, I.: *Das awarenzeitliche Gräberfeld in Szarvas–Grexá-Téglagyár, FO*  
68. Monumenta Avarorum Archaeologica 7. Budapest.  
Vollenweider 1967 = Vollenweider, M.-L.: *Catalogue raisonné des sceux cylindres et intailles*  
I. Musée d'Art et d'Histoire. Genève.  
Zazoff 1983 = Zazoff, P.: *Die antiken Gemmen*. Handbuch der Archäologie. München.

#### **Pictures**

1. Resting ram. MNL OL V 30-7. (Photo: Czikkelyné Nagy Erika)
2. The seal from the side. (Photo: Czikkelyné Nagy Erika)
3. Resting ram. Szarvas, Tessedik Sámuel Múzeum. (Photo: Czikkelyné Nagy Erika)
4. The seal from the side. (Photo: Czikkelyné Nagy Erika)
5. Resting rams. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Antik Gyűjtemény. (Photo: Mátyus László)
6. Walking ram. Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum. (Photo: Kardos Judit)
7. Sitting griffin. Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum. (Photo: Kardos Judit)
8. Sitting sphinx with wings. Private collection. (Photo: Czikkelyné Nagy Erika)

(ISSN 0418 – 453X)