

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL SEALINGS FROM DVIN

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Dvin was one of the largest commercial, industrial, cultural and administrative centres of medieval Armenia. Founded in the 4th-5th centuries, Dvin became the centre of Marzpanian Armenia and was immediately drawn into the economic, political and cultural sphere of the epoch.

The numerous artifacts, architectural monuments and written sources found during the excavations testify to the great development from early medieval times in different handicrafts, trade and building in Dvin: The sealings (bullae) from Dvin are extremely interesting and permit to judge the economic, political and social life of Dvin.

The sealings (bullae), globular pieces of special clay with impressions of seals on them were used to stamp documents of various types or to seal different depositories or bales.

Forty-one such sealings have been found at Dvin on which were impressed up to 45 seals. On 37 of them we find impressions of Iranian Sasanian and other seals, which date from the 6th-7th centuries. Of utmost interest represent three sealings on which are found impressions of seals with Arabic inscriptions from the 9th century. Such sealings as far as it is known have been found for the first time.

Thousands of Sasanian sealings which were found by chance, or during excavations are kept in different museums of the world (the British Museum, Louvre, Hermitage, Teyheran Museum, and so on). The largest collections of sealings have been found in Iran, in Qasr-i Abu Nasr and Takht-i Suleiman, etc. In the Soviet union many sealings have been fo-

und in Central Asia (Samarkand, Teshik-Kala and Ak-Depe). In the Transcaucasus, the single specimens of Sasanian sealings are known to be from Urnisi and Mingechaur.

K. Ghafadarian was the first to pay particular attention to the collection of sealings from Dvin, and different suppositions were made by him which later were summarized in his article—*"The Remains of the State Archives in Dvin"*, (Historical and Philological Journal, № 2, 1974).

In studying the applied handicrafts of Armenia, Babken Arakelian has given interesting information about the seals of the Sasanian period. (*"The Reliefs of Armenia in the 4th-7th centuries"*, Yerevan, 1949).

The seal was a symbol of the power and judicial rights. The social status of the owner and his occupation in society may be determined by the seal. The historians of the Middle Ages—Lazar Pharpetsi, Stepanos Orbellian, Movses Kaghancatvatsi, Sebeos and others in their works point to that fact. In historic sources, seal-rings were represented as *"palace"*, *"common"*, and *"ordinary"* seals.

In the church hierarchy there were also *"ordinary"*, *"master"*, *"patriarchal"*, *"confirmation"* seal-rings.

There is much interesting information about seals and sealings in Persian and Arabian literary monuments, and in judicial documents (*"Sasanian Code of Law"*, *"Ishobokhtian Syrian Law Book"*, Al-Beladsori, Al-Masudi, Al-Jahsiyari, Omar-Kayam, and others).

In the study of sealings and seals, the question of chronology occupies a special place.

ce. But, in the specifications of the seals, especially those which are engraved on precious stones, they are kept for centuries and this makes difficult to define more exactly their chronology. While the sealings are found in certain layers of the earth and may be precisely dated.

The greater part of the sealings was found in Dvin citadel and belongs to the 6th—7th century. The remains of small rooms destroyed by a great fire to all appearances, by the first Arabian invasion in 640 AD, are seen. Here, besides the archaeological objects, remains of cotton, garlic, hemp, grain and oats were found.

In the central block of the city in the layers of the 9th century Arabic sealings with inscriptions were found.

To study the different questions of applied purpose of sealings an important part may play the detailed characteristics of their external features: the chronology, the shape of seals, determination of external signs of objects to be sealed, local and non-local characters of seals etc.

The clay sealings from Dvin have mainly round forms, with a diameter of 1,5—9,0 cm., sometimes square, triangular, of indeterminate form having a single impression, the form of which is conditioned by the character and external features of the object on which a seal is stamped. All the sealings have thin holes for fastening the threads.

The reverse of sealings in discussion have an even surface, on which have been impressed the external signs of object to be sealed. It may be noted that on certain samples is well seen the remains of cloth or leather.

The possibilities which offer us the materials and the analysis of external signs of the sealings from Dvin, make possible to divide the sealings from Dvin into three groups:

1. Sealings on which there are found remains of belts, rope and cloth. They were attached to bales, bags having commercial significance. This group includes sealings with many impressions and singular sealings with one or two impressions.

2. „Bullae“ which have a concave surface. This group includes bulls having only one or

two impressions. They were attached on documents rolled up.

3. Bulls of indefinite form having an even surface sealed and attached to documents by string. This group is represented by bulls having one to four impressions.

The majority of the sealings are of a brown colour, some of them are black and one is reddish. To all appearances the difference in colour depended on the documents and goods arrived from different places. The bulls with one seal may be attached by strings and kept in appropriate places. Of special interest are two sealings, which have signs (neshan) and are official seals. These bulls are flat of a darker colour and covered with an additional glitter mass, and that is why the images of seals here and there are badly preserved.

The impressions on sealings permit to determine the form of gems, which is very important to determine the chronology and to study the separate forms of the seals and sealings. In all, 41 sealings stamped with 179 seals have been found at Dvin. 139 of these are believed to date from the late Sasanian period, and 40 of them from the early Arabian period. The latter ones are impressed on three Arabian sealings.

Careful statistic study of seals, as to their forms and shapes gives us the following picture:

Sasanian sealings—40 of them are egg-shaped and protuberant; 38 are rectangular; 34 are round; 11 are egg-shaped and flat; 4 are square, and two of them are oblique-angled.

Arabian sealings—19 of them are egg-shaped and protuberant; 8 are egg-shaped and flat; 6 are oval, 5 rectangular, and two of these sealings are square.

The greater part of Sasanian and early Arabian seals are egg-shaped, rectangular and oval. The egg-shaped seals of the Arabian period form a greater part, which attest a more developed phase of using the protuberant gems on seal-rings.

On various sealings found during the excavations at Dvin, we meet the same seals. All those who have studied the sealings have correctly pointed out that this fact is of great importance to determine the date of sealings. P.

Harper, explained the repetition of the impressions on the same sealing by a bad reproduction of the image, when the first impression was made. V. Lukonin considers that those sealings on which are repeated the same impressions are bound up with trade, that a group of persons, who participated in the trade in this case, the handicraftsmen and the merchants, possessed a part of bags or bales, in material and quantity respects. If we study the reverses of the sealings of this type with the remains found on them, we may notice that there are the remains of the cloth or belts, which has nothing to do with the documents.

In the literature on Sasanian sealings there are diverse contrary opinions as to their use. R. Göbl studying the sealings found at Takhti Suleiman, expressed the opinion that they were hung on documents, that is, the sealings were used to seal documents of different significance, the majority of them were not of local origin. Göbl points out that the importance of the documents were conditioned by the number of persons, who participated in confirmation of documents.

R. N. Frye also and then P. O. Harper recognizing that the sealings were used to approve the documents, consider that the sealings were used in trades, that is, they were used to seal the goods which participated in transit international trade.

V. Lukonin, in his numerous investigations devoted to Sasanian glyptics and to the economic and social questions on Iran, considers those sealings, which are attached to the documents as juridical.

V. Lukonin confirms his theory chiefly by data from juridical sources in the first place from the Sasanian Code of Law; and Syrian Lawyer and widely uses the inscriptions and pictures found on the seals. V. Lukonin's point of view does not exclude the usage of sealings in trade. On the contrary, he is of the opinion that the large sealings were attached to commercial packages and after their realization the sealings were kept in archives as specific trading documents which guaranteed the inviolability of rights of shareholders.

K. Ghafarian in one of his recent articles, expounded his principal thesis on sealings

proving that they are connected with the documents of state „Divan“ of Dvin, contained in the „Girk Tghtoths“ which were attached by seals of important, secular persons and ecclesiastics of the country.

K. Ghafarian considers that the numerous finding of sealings in Dvin prove the fact that at Dvin a centre or archive was to have been where the correspondence was concentrated.

In this connection, it is worthy to note the evidence of Sebeos as to the transfer of the Sunik Divan from Dvin to Paltakaran. „Before this (revolt of 570—571 A.D.), Vahan, the owner of Sunik land revolted and separated from the Armenians, and begged the Persian king Khosrov to transfer the Sunik archives of Sunik land from Dvin to Paltakaran and placed the city within the boundaries of Atrapatakan (Shahrmar“).

The evidence of Sebeos allows us to assume that in central Divan of Dvin were kept different types of documents, and among these were obligations, promissory notes, the privileges for collecting and paying taxes.

The internal reforms of Khosrov, which were also related with taxation policy, included Armenia, especially during the second half of the 6th century. When after the revolt of Vardan Mamikonian (Karmir) the country was for a time under the domination of the Sasanians. Sebeos mentions officials who were occupied with taxation and nominated by Khosrov. They were called „Hamarakar“—a Pahlavi term which means „counter“, that is the head official of the state on expenditures and incomes. The historian notes that the Armenian army „took also the royal treasury collected from taxes of that country kept at the treasure's and house Hamarakar and then was started on a journey towards the fortified country of Gelum“.

The evidence of Sebeos of „Hamarakars“ becomes for certain when we address to suitable clause of Sasanian code of Law. In one of these clauses it says that „the Hamarakars are competent also in charge and collection of taxes“.

Most probably, Dvin was one of the centres of Armenia where collection of taxes was concentrated.

All these events and sources belong to one historic period chronologically connected with finding of sealing. We can assume that some of the sealings which were found in Dvin were directly connected with taxation.

Comparison of Sasanian sealings from Dvin with those of Qasr-i Abu Nasr and Takht-i Suleiman, reveals a number of features. First of all on the sealings from Dvin we rarely see inscriptions (on 20 from a total of 138).

On the sealings from Dvin, we do not see seals belonging to Persian high-ranking officials and ecclesiastics. In other words, those sealings did not belong to any state department persons or temple priest, who supervised the various domains of internal relations. Most of the impressions stamped on the sealings from Dvin belong to the category of personal seals.

This is determined in the first place by the pictures of plant and animal or by the lack of inscriptions, and also by the size of seals. But, we can distinguish five sealings from the total group of sealings on which official seals we have. Three of them have only inscriptions and are the seals of office. Two impressions are defective and the inscriptions are not completely preserved, but nevertheless they are very interesting. V. Lukonin suggested the preliminary lecture of the inscription on one of these sealings:

center: *'lmny*

edge: *['l] mny gwndy ZY ktk, ZY... (or ZY ktkhw [t'yh?]. that is)*

center: Armenia

edge: House of the Armenian army („gund“)
(evidently not the title *kadag* xwaday).

The defect on the inscription does not permit to decipher it completely.

Taking into consideration the precise date of this sealing (on the sealing there are three impressions also, and on one only there is an inscription which cannot be read because of its badly preservation), it will be useful probably the historic studies of Armenian sources. For the present we can only say that this seal was the seal of the central Sasanian office of Armenia, and that this office was linked to the military department (perhaps the office of the Sasanian Military Garrison?).

The other two seals have signs „neshan“ with inscriptions and undoubtedly belonged to the magians, that is, they were used to seal religious and judicial documents.

And the impressions we see on the sealings with the images of the cross belonged to ecclesiastics and in all probability they were official seals. In this connection it may be noted that on the sealings found in non-Christian regions, as we see in Central Asian and Persian collections, there is almost an absence of seals with the signs of the cross, while the seals with „neshan“, belonged to the magians, were impressed obligatory on large sealings.

This fact allows us to suppose that in Dvin the local ecclesiastics were official persons when different kinds of deeds had to be confirmed or, these sealings, which were of no doubt of foreign origin, were brought from the Christian regions of Syria or Iran.

To determine the significance of certain groups of sealings it is of utmost importance to study various questions of lower trade of handicrafts of Iran, paying special attention to the role of handicraft and trade associations.

The fact, that in Sasanian Iran, the handicraftsmen were grouped in different organizations, in so-called shops is confirmed by written sources. The different branches of the handicrafts were headed by foremen, by leading handicraftsmen. All the handicraft shops had their internal structure, and the members had certain obligations. They lived in certain quarters of the city, according to their handicrafts, and their work was under the strict surveillance of the state.

In trade the organizations were also engaged. Ishobokhti expounded in detail the statuses on such organizations. In the articles on the Sasanian Code of Law, there is much information about the commercial organizations and their internal orders. The organization „hambaylh“, by its character, differed from the community, but by its attitude towards property it approached to it. The share-holders were included in that organization, and they divided the incomes according to the volume of their investment.

This fact mentioned above is seen on trade

sealings, when on one seal many impressions are met.

This is connected with the ordinary trade, when the share-holder, in discussion, member of the organization, confirms by the number of impressions of his seal the number of shares which belong to him, and according to this after the selling of goods the income must be divided.

In this sense, the sealings reflect brightly the rights of the members of organizations and some questions as to their structure.

The long ideological struggle between Armenia and Iran to some extent, promoted the preservation of the independence of different fields of culture in Armenia,

Nevertheless, the influence of Iran is evident—it is noticeable particularly in the arts, and in the mode of life of the aristocracy. Sasanian administrative and economical influence on Armenia was very evident, because Armenia was in a dependent position.

Armenia was one of the centres of transit trade between the East and West. This fact is marked in the Code of Justinian, 408—409 A. D. As to the trade between Armenia and the Transcaucasus during the period of the Sasanians, we find numerous data. The commercial routes, are shown rather clear on the „Tabula Peutingeriana“.

Procopios, a historian of the 6th century writes that in Dvin there were many densely populated neighbouring villages which were inhabited by people arrived with trade purpose. The tradesmen brought with them goods from India, neighbouring Iberia, from all the countries which were under the domination of Persia and also from Roman country; it is here that they made trade with each other.

Anania Shirakatsi suggested a very interesting fact in regards to the commercial routes and strong points. Shirakatsi mentioned a commercial route which extended from Baktria, along the southern shores of the Caspian Sea to the Transcaucasus. It is very interesting to note that on that route are mentioned Gandzak (that is Takht-i Suleiman) and Dvin, the centres, where sealings for trade purposes were found.

Of great value for us is the evidence we

find in the „Girk Tghtoths“ („Book of Messages“), where is mentioned that the supporters of Nestor moved from Khuzistan (Khujastan), to Armenia and were occupied with trading. These events took place in the forties of the 6th century when the king of Persia was Khosrov I.

Numerous materials on the foreign trade of Armenia, particularly Dvin, were found during the excavations. Among the materials are glass vessels imported from Mesopotamia and Syria; and clay bottles on which the images of Saint Andrei whose origin is Asia Minor, and the well-known board of silver bowls from Nor-Bayazed; and the Sasanian and Byzantine coins etc.

The active trade done by the supporters of Nestor is testified by the sealings, found in Dvin and Qasr-i Abu Nasr, near Khuzistan. These direct links are expressed by the same impressions on the sealings which were found in Dvin and in Qasr-i Abu Nasr. There are four seals which are repeated. One of them an official seal belonged to an office, perhaps a commercial „association“ and had a fragment of an inscription. The other three are personal seals. These seals from Dvin we find only on the trade sealings on which are seen the remains and traces of wide belts and bags.

In Dvin we see them only in single specimens and also in Qasr-i Abu Nasr with the exception of one (D—363), which is impressed on five different sealings. A comparison of seals allows us to ascertain what sealings from Qasr-i Abu Nasr were used in commerce. A detailed analysis of the sealings from Dvin and materials from Takht-i Suleiman shows the resemblance between various impressions. It is interesting that some of them are repeated on the sealings from Dvin and Qasr-i Abu Nasr.

The repetition of seals on different monuments, however, does not allow us to make clear some questions of their origin and localisation. It may be supposed, that the big sealings stamped with many seals found in Dvin, had been prepared in Qasr-i Abu Nasr and vice-versa, and the bulls with one seal were used to seal personal letters or warrants and address to the trade middlemen of two cities. Probably in Dvin the Syrians had their trading communities, which up till and during the first

seven centuries of our era, were considered as advanced trade people of the Mediterranean Sea and the Near East.

The presence of Syrian merchants in Dvin is proved also by sealings. On one of the sealings (2197/313), which was used in commerce, two seals are stamped Syrian origin of which makes no doubt. One of the seals is made with the sign of the cross (No 2), with separate letters on it, which do not belong to the Pahlavi alphabet, but remind us of Syrian letters. The other one (No 9) is not a Sasanian seal. We see on it a palm-tree with an arrow-shaped sign. As to its form and image, the seal belongs to the Syrian group. Undoubtedly, in the foreign and home trade of Armenia, the Armenian merchants played a leading part though we have no direct evidence. But, the evidences we dispose in regards to the merchants show their privileged position and their role in the economy of the country. In all cases, there was a competition in commerce, and hence they had been obliged to form groups associations which in Dvin was under the surveillance of the town administrative bodies.

The fact of the presence of merchants in Armenia is confirmed by the sealings found in Dvin. The goods which were stamped with trade sealings with a great number of seals were used for the trade only by trade associations, but not by a single merchant. That becomes more intelligible when we follow attentively the impressions of the same seals on different sealings or the many impressions of a seal on one sealing.

The pictures which are met on the seals of sealings found in Dvin, independently of the place where they were found, is closely connected with similar Sasanian monuments. It is no mere chance that a part of the seals, belonged to all appearance to local high-ranking persons, and by their composition they are very similar to the composition of seals created in the Sasanian surroundings. It is very likely that the symbolics of these seals coincides with the symbolics of Sasanian seals.

The analysis of the pictures and the classification of seal themes of sealings from Dvin

are done on the basis of the works of P. Harper.

There are seven seals with the images of men and one of them—2197/314—has been impressed on a sealing three times. The man standing in the centre is holding on the right an animal whose elongated body is very clearly underlined. The image of the horseman on the sealing with one seal is very interesting and dynamic. The horseman is holding a sword (or spear) in his hand and has a triangular hat on his head. At the bottom of the seal, immediately below the horse, a stylized chamois is represented.

On the sealings from Dvin numerous images of animals are met. There are images of lion, chamois, wolf, sheep, wild boar, bear, deer and mouse.

These impressions with the images of lions are met in our collection three times. Two of them are in the artifacts of the 6th—7th centuries, and one of them sealing of the 9th century. One of impressions probably from functional point of view belongs to another group of sealings. On it is represented a sitting lion with a dense mane, with its head on its front paws. In totemic worship, the wolf and the dog have their particular place. It is no mere chance that, this worship going back to antiquity penetrated into Christian reality and was expressed in the decorative and applied art. On the sealings from Dvin these images are met four times.

On the sealings from Dvin, we often see the impressions on which sheep, chamois and deer are represented. The general style of the images is smaller than the identic samples from Qasr-i Abu Nasr. They are all personal seals and have no inscriptions.

We meet seals with the image of wild boar, bear and mouse. On one of the seals a full-faced bear is represented with an astral sign which is rarely seen on Sasanian seals.

There are four impressions which represent a scorpion, on two of them the scorpion is represented with a bird, on one with the moon, and on the other it is alone.

The majority of the images on impressions of sealings from Dvin represents birds chiefly pigeon, stork, pheasant, eagle-griffon, peacock,

swan, and duck etc. They are represented alone and with other animals (snakes, scorpions and deer). On ten impressions, the birds are represented with heavenly bodies, particularly with the half-moon. This group of birds was widely used in the late Sasanian glyptics. From the point of view of the representation technique, there is some resemblance between the sealings from Dvin, Qasr-i Abu Nasr and Takht-i Suleiman, which prove that they were made in the same place.

These themes on sealings are closely linked with the worship and particularly they clearly appear in the religious texts of Zoroastrianism. This group of birds is connected mainly with the heavenly worship symbolizing the idea of immortality of soul. With the idea of fertility is connected the image of the stork and of the bird of paradise-the peacock.

In contrast to the sealings from Qasr-i Abu Nasr, there are very few seals with the images of plants in Dvin among them (there are seven in all) it may be mentioned the seal of Syrian origin on which a palm tree is represented, seals with images of leaves like vines, and stylized trees, are seen. On the early Sasanian seals the images of plants are seldom seen.

At the beginning, the plant motif in the early medieval art of Armenia was very rare but stylized as it may be seen on the Achts mausoleum, on the basilica in Kasakh, and on a number of other monuments. In the 6th and 7th centuries, the plant motif was widely used and began to appear in more realistic form. That is especially seen in the temple at Zvartnots which, as is known formed a whole epoch in the history of Armenian architecture and ornamentation.

Though the seals of this group are no numerous, nevertheless, we divide them into two parts. The first type of seals on which are represented Gopatshah and the winged horse, evidently is of Sasanian origin. The seal with the image of Gopatschah is seen on one seal of the 9th century from Dvin:

The seals of the second type were made in Christian surroundings. Two of them have images of Cupid, with a branch in his hand, and the other a pair of Cupids. On Sasanian seals, such images are very rare. As to their

themes, they are very similar to the late Roman seals.

Among the sealings from Dvin, seals with Christian and Zoroastrian symbols occupy a peculiar place. The cross which is seen on the seals cannot be considered only as a sample ornament.

The basic symbol of a strange faith (in this case the cross) could not have been used on the seals as an empty decoration. We suppose that it is a certain sign which proves that the owner of the seal was of Christian faith.

Sometimes, we meet seals made in Zoroastrian surroundings and later passed into the hands of Christians and which carved supplementary on them the sign of the cross.

The seals with the images of the cross of the sealings from Dvin are met seven times. The seals with various signs of the cross on one sealing is met only one time. One of these seals with a sign of the cross is dated from the 9th century. One of the seals with the image of a cross has a short, probably a Syrian inscription. This seal of foreign origin belonged to a Christian, but non-Armenian, or to a representative of a local Syrian community. Nevertheless, we can assume that some of the seals with the images of the cross which were used for stamping impressions on the sealings were made in the workshops of Dvin.

Sasanian seals with crosses are little known. They are met rarely in the Transcaucasus, and in the collection of the State Hermitage we know for the present only one sample which is dated to the 4th—5th centuries.

The investigators have expressed many opinions as to the significance of the neshan which appear on the seals.

The desire to unravel the secret of the neshan is understandable because those signs in a great number were represented on the seals, on coins, on ceramic, and silver vessels. But, till now, there is not a final decision of that question.

On the sealings from Dvin we see neshan (signs) three times. Two of them are on individual seals, and one of them has an impression made on a sealing with four seals. As a rule, all the seals with neshan have inscriptions.

On sealings with many seals, impressions with neshan have not been seen.

In the Dvin collection there are three monograms, one of which has 45 seals on one sealing. It is very likely that the letters of names of the owner of those seals are well stylized.

It is of utmost interest the artifact found in Armenia, a fragment of a ceramic vessel found during the excavations made in Algevan village (Ararat region) in 1973 (under the leadership of the academician B. B. Plotrovski), on which was stamped neshan very similar by its form to neshan met on the seals. This fragment was found in the upper layer and is definitely dated to the 5th—7th centuries. The fragment of the ceramic vessel with the

Impression of the neshan allows us to suppose the existence in that region of an institute connected with the Sasanian worship. In 1975, in that same place, was found a head of a sheep done in white sandstone. Considering the peculiarities of the working of that artifact, we think that it is a capital. Two-headed capitals during the Achaemenian period were widely in use in the Transcaucasus and in Iran as well. In the later periods, especially in the Sasanian era, the presence of that kind of capital is unknown to us. The head of a sheep from Algevan confirms the fact that here we have to do with a building, of worship, the remains of which have not been preserved, it seems to be destroyed during the first years of the adoption of Christianity.