

# The Seal of a Eunuch in the Sasanian Court

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With a Note on the Legend

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure to dedicate this article to David Bivar, whose 1969 catalogue of the Sasanian seals in the British Museum remains a model for the study of Sasanian glyptics<sup>1</sup> and has been an inspiration for this particular student of Sasanian art.

The seal presented here is known from its impression on a beige clay bulla measuring 3.34 cm x 2.77 cm x 1.44 cm at its thickest; the seal itself, as measured from its impression, is approximately 2.65 cm x 2.2 cm. (Figs. 1a and b).<sup>2</sup> The seal belongs to a group of Sasanian intaglios that depict portrait busts of various officials and are known from the actual stones as well as from impressions. From the impression, we can see that, like the other portrait seals, this was an oval stone, set in a metallic mount and, given its small size, probably a finger ring. Attached to the mount at the 12 o'clock position was a globular knob which served to anchor the seal to the clay when the impression was being made and which has left a deep circular indentation at the top of the bulla.<sup>3</sup>

The reverse of the bulla is marked by a concavity that cuts across it and is roughly at a right angle to the vertical orientation of the seal impression on its face; a single string hole runs into the bulla immediately above and below the concave channel near the center of the back surface (Fig. 1b). These features show that the bulla was used to seal a document that was rolled and tied together in the middle by a string; the clay lump was then placed against the document and impressed with the seal in its ring.<sup>4</sup>

## DESCRIPTION (Fig. 1a)

The seal shows a beardless male bust facing to the right in the impression. The bust is presumably that of the seal owner, who is identified in the inscription that frames his head as *Bōxtšābuhr* (see below). *Bōxtšābuhr* wears a forward-projecting *kolāb* edged with a band of pearls or beads along its upper surface and another at its base, at the brow line. On the surface of the *kolāb* is emblazoned a symbol, most likely a personal “device,” that consists of two bird-like forms, facing in opposite directions and joined by a vertical shaft. Below his *kolāb*, *Bōxtšābuhr*'s hair is arranged in two-tiers of twisted locks, the uppermost ending at earlobe level and the lower at his shoulder, while a short lock of hair curls in front of his ear, a feature that is absent

from most male portrait seals because the beard hair, indicated by a different curl pattern, normally covers this area.<sup>5</sup> As an earring, *Bōxtšābuhr* wears a large pearl or bead suspended from a smaller horizontal ovoid element, and around his neck is a simple torque. He wears a cloak, secured by two circular clasps linked by six short chains, unless this series of horizontal lines represent the folds of the garment underneath.

The inscription follows the upper contour of the stone; it runs to either side of *Bōxtšābuhr*'s bust, apparently ending on the right in the impression at the projection of his *kolāb*, and continues at the rear of the hat at 11 o'clock. The uppermost portions of the inscription are illegible due to the way in which the seal was impressed into the clay, but also because of subsequent damage to the bulla.

## DISCUSSION

The bulla belongs to a group of seals and bullae that depict the “portraits” of Sasanian officials. Typically, these images are characterized by an exquisitely carved bust of the dignitary wearing a *kolāb* emblazoned with an insignia, a pearl drop earring and a torque or necklaces; the accompanying legend contains his name and title, sometimes also a toponym, patronym, and an additional title.<sup>6</sup> The surviving seals are mostly cabochons carved from carnelian, oval in shape with convex engraved faces and flat backs. Based on the consistency of shape and material of these actual seals, we may assume that *Bōxtšābuhr*'s seal was also a carnelian cabochon.<sup>7</sup>

Certain stylistic as well as paleographic features (see below) allow us to date the bulla to the third century CE, with several details suggesting the second to third quarter of the century. For one, *Bōxtšābuhr*'s *kolāb* is of the so-called “Parthian” type, so named because it is found on dignitaries' seals that have Parthian inscriptions<sup>8</sup> and is distinguished from the domed *kolāb* worn by other officials by the forward projection of its peak.<sup>9</sup> Further, the insignias on the Parthian *kolābs* tend to be composed of elements (some resembling letters) in an asymmetrical arrangement, while most of the insignias on the domed *kolābs* are completely symmetric. Although *Bōxtšābuhr*'s emblem is more symmetrical than most of the devices on other Parthian *kolābs*, it is of a less compact design than those on the domed *kolābs*,<sup>10</sup> and both his jewelry, specifically his simple necklace, and his garment, with its double

clasp, are of the type worn by dignitaries wearing the Parthian *kolāb*. All these features, therefore, point to an early date for the seal. Sasanian officials also appear in such dress on early metalwork<sup>11</sup> and rock reliefs.<sup>12</sup>

The closest parallel to Bōxtšābuhr's seal is the modern seal impression published some years ago by our honoree (Fig. 2).<sup>13</sup> Depicting the portrait of a supervisory judge (*pad-dādwar*) named Xīmarōz, the profile bust not only shares the type of clothing, hat, and jewelry with Bōxtšābuhr, but also the style of carving and intensity of expression, in particular the large staring eye set just below the strong oblique line of the eyebrow. On the basis of its style, Bihar dated the seal to the third–fourth centuries, although, as noted, Bōxtšābuhr's seal can be more precisely dated within the third century. The striking difference between the two seal images is, of course, Xīmarōz's full, richly curled beard while Bōxtšābuhr's lacks a beard. Indeed, his softly swelling cheek and chin and generally epicene appearance has been masterfully captured by the seal-carver. His appearance is not a sign of youth, however, but, as shown by his title, *arzbēd*, the characteristic feature of a eunuch.

#### BEARDLESSNESS IN AN EARLY SASANIAN CONTEXT

Numerous beardless portraits of Sasanian males survive on stone seals and sculpture. Most of these follow Sasanian hairdressing and sartorial conventions, but some are atypical in having short tightly curled coiffures and wearing a distinctly non-Sasanian draped upper garment or cloak. Such portraits resemble portrait types on Roman coins and seals and were probably made for residents of Mesopotamia or Syria in the western part of the Sasanian Empire or even perhaps for those from captured Roman areas who had been deported to Iran.<sup>14</sup>

The titles associated with these men are not only the expected “supervisor of the women's quarters,” *šābestān*, or, as with Bōxtšābuhr, “master of the women's quarters,” *harzbed* (see below), but also that of *magus*.<sup>15</sup>

The following third-century representations of beardless men are those most pertinent to the depiction of Bōxtšābuhr, the earliest being the court official who appears in four of Ardashir I's (224–240) reliefs: the victor in the third pair of combatants in the Firuzabad joust relief and the fly-whisk bearer in that king's investiture reliefs at Firuzabad, Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rajab. In the Firuzabad and Naqsh-e Rajab investitures, he appears in the Parthian *kolāb*, as previously noted, while in the joust and the Naqsh-e Rostam investiture, he wears the domed *kolāb*.<sup>16</sup> In the triumphal relief at Darabgerd, which belongs to Ardashir I or his son Shapur I (240–272), of the eighteen Persians who stand behind the king, four of the eight who wear the Parthian *kolāb* are beardless. It is clear that they and their companions are meant to be specific individuals: those in the front, all bearded and wearing the domed *kolāb* with neck guard, are apparently of greater impor-

tance in the Sasanian court than those in the other rows.<sup>17</sup>

Unequivocally dated to Shapur I's reign is the fire altar found at Nasrabad in Fars, dedicated to that monarch by Abnūn, “the palace table-decker” or “master of ceremonies in the harem” (*pad šabistān āyēnīg*, see below), to commemorate the king's victory over the Romans in 243 or 244.<sup>18</sup> Carved on four sides, two opposing surfaces show “Ardashir, King of Kings” and “Shapur, King of Kings”; while the other two sides depict Abnūn on one and on the other the double portrait of Aspēz and Wahnām, their respective titles, “minister of the Court” (*darbed*) and *fīamadār*. Unfortunately, the portrait of Abnūn, who we might expect to be beardless, is badly eroded, although his face, in fact, seems to be free of hair (Fig. 3).<sup>19</sup> The *darbed* Aspēz, however, is clearly beardless, his smooth face contrasting with that of Wahnām, whom he overlaps as both men face to the right to offer a ring to Ardashir I, who is depicted on the adjacent side, immediately to the right of the pair (Fig. 4). It is difficult to make out Abnūn's headgear, but Aspēz clearly wears a domed *kolāb*.

This is the style of hat worn by other beardless personages of the period, already cited in other works, among them the following: the man in the domed *kolāb* with neck guard who, on Warahrām (Warahrān) II's relief at Naqsh-e Rostam, stands with a group of courtiers to the left of the king and is the only one to raise his right hand in a respectful gesture,<sup>20</sup> and, most notably, the priest and organizer of Zoroastrian orthodoxy, Kerdīr, whose beardless portrait, in the same type of *kolāb* and with the same gesture, appears to the left of Ardashir I in his investiture relief at Naqsh-e Rajab (Fig. 5). Indeed, it is tempting to identify the beardless man on Warahrām II's relief as Kerdīr, who served four kings, from Shapur I to Warahrām II, and also appears among the dignitaries in King Narseh's (293–303) inscription of 293 CE at Paikuli; the man's gesture and gaze is directed towards the standing Warahrām II and seems to be met by the king who has turned his head to the left as if to acknowledge his homage.<sup>21</sup>

Hat style may also have been linked to an individual's specific rank, rather than being a matter of personal taste. Thus, it is possible that the Parthian *kolāb* worn by Ardashir I's fly-whisk bearer on the Firuzabad and Naqsh-e Rajab investitures and the domed *kolāb* worn by him on the Firuzabad joust and Naqsh-e Rostam investiture indicate a change in status. In any case, the Parthian *kolāb* seems to have gone out of fashion by the fourth century.

One other seal of this period is relevant to that of Bōxtšābuhr, namely, an inscribed rock crystal cabochon in Geneva carved with the bust of a man, bareheaded, and with shoulder-length curls.<sup>22</sup> He does not wear a hat, but resembles Bōxtšābuhr in clothing, jewelry, and hairstyle, down to his cheek curl, as well as in the full rounded form of his cheek and neck; the carving is less sensitive, however, and in some areas more cursory. Interestingly, this eunuch does not include a title on his seal, only the legend, which Robert Göbl read as *rthštr r'st* “Ardashir (is) just.”

## CONCLUSION

From this discussion, it is evident that eunuchs were an institution in the Sasanian state and its hierarchy. In writing about eunuchs in the ancient Assyrian bureaucracy, A. K. Grayson wonders how “a phenomenon which was so important in so many major civilizations has been virtually taboo in modern scholarship with the result that there are very few serious studies of the subject.”<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, several scholars have explored the institution of eunuchs in ancient civilizations (Babylonian, Assyrian, Urartian, Hittite, classical Greek and Hellenistic, Achaemenid, Parthian) and, especially, those contemporaneous with the Sasanians (later Roman, Byzantine, and Chinese). Relatively little is known about the institution in Sasanian Iran, however, beyond the fact that eunuchs, in addition to holding the expected inner sanctum court or royal household positions, like Bōxtšābuhr, also rose to the offices of priests, administrators, and military men, as attested by the titles known from commemorative inscriptions and glyptics.<sup>24</sup> We know nothing about the families from which they came or how they were chosen for this life role, nor how such mutilation of the male body was reconciled with Zoroastrian ideals of promoting procreation. Let us therefore hope that this brief look at a eunuch’s seal, in honor of a scholar who has been in the forefront of Iranian studies, will spur further investigation into what, by analogy with earlier, contemporary, and later (medieval Islam and Ottoman Turkey) cultures, must have been an important institution in Sasanian Iran.

## THE LEGEND

The legend originally ran from the left to the right shoulder of the bust, but the upper part (more than one-third) is now illegible. The legible part of the legend has *bwhtš(hp)[whr ... ..] x x x x n'lcpt*, that is, *bōxtšābuhr [...]-ān arzbed* “Bōxtšābuhr (Bokht-shapur) [...] *arzbed* of [...]” There are traces of letters before the second part of the preserved inscription, behind the *kolāb*, and also, conceivably, above the front of the *kolāb*. When I first read the inscription, I thought I saw *gwlk'n'lcpt* “*arzbed* of Gurgān,” but the traces do not seem to support it.

The letters have standard forms, but it should be noted that the *c*, with its round curves, is not found on the coins of Ardashir I and Shapur I recently published. The simplified “rectangle open to the right” form found on some coins, however, must be based on the form seen on our seal and must therefore have been common already in the first half of the third century.<sup>25</sup> We can also compare the forms of *b*, as *c* is often identical with *b* plus a “foot;” an *b* looking like our *c* is found, for instance, on several of the seals discussed by Gyselen.<sup>26</sup>

The form of the name, *bōxt* plus royal name, recalls Kerdir’s honorific title *bōxt-ruwān-warahrān*, which I have interpreted as “he whose soul was saved by Warahrān,” where the name Warahrān obviously refers to the king, but also, in my opinion,

to the king assuming the role of the prince who, together with the queen assuming the role of the *dēn*, guides “Kerdir’s likeness” across the bridge in the relief at Sar Mashhad.<sup>27</sup>

The term *arzbed* was discovered by Ahmad Tafazzoli in a Syriac text on Persian martyrs, as well as in the *Book of Kings*, and convincingly explained as the title of the supervisor of the harem.<sup>28</sup> Tafazzoli proposed the word might be derived from Old Iranian \**har-čī-* “woman.” This is possible, but leaves out of consideration Avestan *hārišī-* “female,” which can also be derived from \**hāri-čī-* or, conceivably, \**hari-čī-*; the latter form would and the former probably could give Middle Persian *harč*, later *harz*.<sup>29</sup> The title would thus mean “master (i.e., person in charge) of the women(s) quarters.”

In Shapur I’s trilingual (Middle Persian, Parthian, Greek) inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam (third century CE), the title of the person supervising the women’s quarters is *šābestān* (MPers. *špst’n*, Parthian *špystn*)<sup>30</sup> and corresponds to ΕΥΝΟΥΧΟΥ in the Greek version, that is “eunuch.”<sup>31</sup> Etymologically, the term obviously refers to the person in charge of the *šābestān* “the nightly (sleeping) quarters (of the women).” The latter word is found in the Abnūn inscription (see above), where Abnūn presents himself as *pad šābestān āyēnīg*, literally, “the one who makes (guests) enter the (women’s) sleeping quarters.”<sup>32</sup> The Middle Persian term *āyēnīg* is also found in Shapur’s inscription, where it corresponds to Parthian *niwēd-bed* and Greek ΔΕΙΠΝΟΚΑΗΤΟΡΟC, the person who announces the dinner.<sup>33</sup>

In Avestan, terms for persons in charge of a place are derived from the words denoting the place by means of the suffix *-i*, for instance, *aspō.stān-i-*, sb. in charge of or owner of the *aspō.stāna-* “stable” (see *Videvdad* 15.23-39). In Old Persian, these derivatives were probably integrated into the productive type of derivation by means of suffix *-i* and lengthening of the first vowel seen, for instance, in Old Persian *bāgayādi-*, month named after the \**baga-yāda-*, “sacrifice to the god(s)” and Avestan *māzdaiiasni-* “belonging to a *mazda-iiasna*.” The term *šābestān* corresponding to *šābestān* should probably be explained in this way, as well.

It should be pointed out, however, that no elements of these words by themselves refer to the person’s lack of (functioning) genitals, which is the common implication of English *eunuch*. They are titles describing his function at the court. The Greek word, too, originally meant “the holder [supervisor] of the beds (εὐνή).” Thus, of the two definitions of “eunuch” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (online), “A castrated person of the male sex; also, such a person employed as a harem attendant, or in Oriental courts and under the Roman emperors, charged with important affairs of state,” only the second definition corresponds to the actual use of the Middle Persian terms.<sup>34</sup> It can therefore be misleading simply to translate the Persian terms as “eunuch” without explanation, as is commonly done.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A. D. H. Bivar, *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum: Stamp Seals II: The Sassanian Dynasty* (London: The British Museum, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> The bulla was given to the author several years ago, after having been in a Midwest private collection since the late 1970s.

<sup>3</sup> The globular knob set beside the bezel holds the clay so that the seal will not slip and allows pressure to be applied across the clay's surface to yield a clear impression; it also serves to orient the seal: intaglios with portrait busts are always set into the mount with the top of the bust closest to the knob (i.e., the 12 o'clock position). See Judith A. Lerner and P. Oktor Skjærvø, "Some Uses of Clay Bullae in Sasanian Iran," in *Sceaux d'Orient et leur emploi* (Res Orientales X), ed. Rika Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'Étude de la Civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1997), 73 and n. 13.

<sup>4</sup> See Dietrich Huff, "Technological Observations on Clay Bullae from Takht-e Suleiman," *Mesopotamia* 21 (1987), 367-90; Lerner and Skjærvø, "Some Uses of Clay Bullae," 67-78.

<sup>5</sup> One exception is the seal impression of Ardfarrox, which shows the curl above the beard (Lerner and Skjærvø, "Some Uses of Clay Bullae," 69, figs. 3 and 5).

<sup>6</sup> Most have been brought together in Rika Gyselen, *La Géographie administrative de l'Empire sassanide. Les témoignages sigillographiques* (Res Orientales I) (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'Étude de la Civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1989), 149-66: "Annexe II: La glyptique des hauts fonctionnaires et dignitaires de l'empire sassanide." Two others (three bullae) are the subject of Lerner and Skjærvø, "Some Uses of Clay Bullae." Yet another has been published by A. D. H. Bivar, "Glyptica Iranica: A Sasanian Himerus," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* n.s. 4 (1990), 196-98. None of the bullae in this group bears the impression of an administrative seal and most have only the impression of the dignitary's seal.

<sup>7</sup> An exception is the amethyst cabochon in the Hermitage: A. Ja. Borisov and V. G. Lukonin, *Sasanidski gemmy* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, 1963), no. 1 = Vladimir G. Lukonin, *Persia II*, trans. James Hogarth (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1967), ills. 67 and 102.

<sup>8</sup> Gyselen, *La Géographie administrative*, 152 and n. 11; Borisov and Lukonin, *Sasanidski gemmy* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, 1963), 15, fig. 2. For such Parthian-inscribed seals: Bivar, *Catalogue*, AA 1, and the amethyst seal cited in note 7.

<sup>9</sup> For other seals and bullae of dignitaries wearing the Parthian *kolāh*, see Gyselen, *La Géographie administrative*, pl. I.

<sup>10</sup> A chart comparing these and other features discussed further on is in Gyselen, *La Géographie administrative*, "Index iconographique," 164-65. An exception to the asymmetrical insignia that appear on the Parthian *kolāh* is the bud-like emblem on the hat worn by the fly-whisk bearer on Ardashir I's investiture relief at Naqsh-e Rājab (see reference in note 12, below).

<sup>11</sup> A plate from Mtskheta, Georgia (Prudence O. Harper and Pieter Meyers, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period. Volume One: Royal Imagery* [New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 1981], pl. 1): the inscription on the plate identifies the owner as Pābag, with the *bitaxš*, a title of the Iranian authority in Armenia or Georgia; he also mentioned in King Narseh's inscription of 293 CE at Paikuli. Harper (37) dates this plate to 260-270 CE. See also Prudence O. Harper, "Sasanian Medallion Bowls with Human Busts," *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy and History. Studies in Honor of George C. Miles*, ed. Dickran K. Kouymjian (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1974), 62-63, 68-71. Pābag wears the Parthian *kolāh*, but his raised arm obscures the closure of his upper garment.

<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Parthian *kolāh* worn by the following: the fly-whisk bearer behind Ardashir in his investiture scenes at Firuzabad and at Naqsh-e Rājab (in the former, the carving is too cursory and worn to judge clothing details, and, in the latter, his raised arm obscures the closure of his upper garment);

the uppermost person standing behind the mounted Shapur I at the same site (the person's upper garment obscured by the men standing in front of him, although all of them—albeit wearing the rounded *kolāh*—wear cloaks that are secured in front by two clasps); and the eight individuals among the serried ranks of Persians who stand behind the triumphant Sasanian king on the early third-century relief at Darabgird (their upper garments also obscured by figures in front of them) (Georgina Herrmann, "The Dārābgird Relief—Ardashir or Shāhpūr?" *Iran* 7 [1969], 67 and pl. II [Ardashir's investiture, Firuzabad]; 68, fig. 3 and pl. III [Ardashir's investiture, Naqsh-e Rājab]; 79, fig. 9 and pl. VIII [Shapur]; 84, fig. 10 and pl. XVII; Herrmann's identification of the Parthian *kolāh* as the "Phrygian" hat would link this distinctive headgear to the ancient Iranian world).

The cloak secured by a cord or chain linking two circular clasps is worn by some of the courtiers on Warahrām II's (276-293) relief at Naqsh-e Rostam (Roman Ghirshman, *Persian Art. The Parthian and Sasanian Dynasties*, 249 B.C.—A.D. 651, trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons [New York: Golden Press, 1962], 169-70, fig. 212). This type of cloak, including that worn by Bōxtšābuhr, seems to be made of a soft draping material; this is in contrast to an outer garment of stiffer fabric similarly secured and also characteristic of the first centuries of Sasanian rule, but which seems to derive from the much earlier Median and Achaemenid periods (see Elsie H. Peck, "Clothing IV. In the Sasanian Period," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 5 (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1992), 745).

<sup>13</sup> Bivar, "Glyptica Iranica," 196-98 and fig. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Examples include the seal of a scribe, Bivar, *Catalogue*, 44, pl. 1, AA5 (this seal shows the same treatment of eye and eyebrow as Bōxtšābuhr and Ximarōz); Christopher J. Brunner, *Sasanian Stamp Seals in The Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978), 54-55, no. 34; Paul Horn and Georg Steindorff, *Sassanidische Siegelsteine* (Berlin: W. Spemann, 1891), pl I: 1039 (with Pahlavi inscription), 1041 (with Pahlavi inscription) and 1048. Two known seals may well be of Roman manufacture, their Pahlavi inscriptions added later: Rika Gyselen, *Catalogue des sceaux, camées et bulles. I. Collection générale* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1993), 99 and pl. XIV: 20.D.50; and Philippe Gignoux, "Miscellanea Sasanidica," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, n.s. 4 (1990), 233-34 and fig. 1. A seal in Leyden depicts a beardless male bust with short curly hair, though what is shown of the upper garment is more in the Sasanian style like that of Bōxtšābuhr (Rika Gyselen, *L'art sigillaire sassanide dans les collections de Leyde* [Collections of the National Museum of Antiquities at Leiden (C.N.M.K.) X] [Leiden: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, 1997], KPK 20.15: 6 and pl. II).

<sup>15</sup> Rika Gyselen, "Les Sceaux des mages de l'Iran sassanide," *Au Carrefour des religions: Mélanges offerts à Philippe Gignoux* (Res Orientales VII), ed. Rika Gyselen (Bures-sur-Yvette: Groupe pour l'Étude de la Civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1995), 121-50, specifically the seals, 137, figs. 8f and l (this last is a Greco-Roman-looking frontal bust); 139, fig. 10b (a sealing from Qasr-e Abu Nasr near Shiraz, showing two overlapping beardless busts; such double images occur on other seals of *magi*, but the busts are bearded [139, figs. 10c-d], while the two beardless portraits on a seal that also belonged to a priest seem to be those of women [139, fig. 10a and discussion on 138-9]).

<sup>16</sup> Herrmann, "The Dārābgird Relief," 74, fig. 7 and pl. IB (Firuzabad joust), 70, fig. 4 and pl. IV (Naqsh-e Rostam investiture); see note 10, above, for the other references. In all four depictions, the "bud" insignia marks this person's hat, regardless of its style; on the Firuzabad joust, it also decorates his horse's saddlecloth.

<sup>17</sup> Herrmann proposes that those in the back three rows represent subject nations and those in the front the king's sons or high-ranking members of his court (87). However, the minimal differentiation among those in the back rows, except for the presence or absence of beards and the wearing of the Parthian *kolāh*, suggests instead that specific officials of the court are being portrayed, among whom four are eunuchs.

<sup>18</sup> Mahmud Tavoosi with notes by R. N. Frye, "An Inscribed Capital Dat-

ing from the Time of Shapur I,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, n.s. 3 (1989), 25-29; Philippe Gignoux, “D’Abnūn à Māhān. Etude de deux inscriptions sassanides,” *Studia Iranica* 20 (1991), 9-17; Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “L’inscription d’Abnūn et l’imparfait en moyen-perse,” *Studia Iranica* 21 (1992), 153-60.

<sup>19</sup> The chalcedony cabochon in the State Hermitage Museum, which depicts a bearded bust encircled by a lengthy inscription that identifies the seal owner, Māhān, as a eunuch, is most surely a reworking of a fourth-century portrait seal to which the inscription was added later, perhaps copied from another seal; indeed, the domical *kolāh* has an unusual flattened form, as if the stone had been cut down at the top, perhaps to remove the original inscription, and the current inscription then carved around the vertical edge of the resulting circular stone (Borisov and Lukonin, *Sasanidskie gemmy*, no. 46 = Lukonin, *Persia II*, ill. 100; and Gignoux, “D’Abnūn à Māhān,” 17-22). Gignoux and, especially, Gyselen have also expressed their doubts about the pairing of image and inscription (*La Géographie administrative*, 162: x2).

<sup>20</sup> Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 169, fig. 212.

<sup>21</sup> The beardless Kerdīr also appears directly behind the lion-slaying Warahrām II on that king’s relief at Sar Mashhad (Ghirshman, *Persian Art*, 173, fig. 215).

<sup>22</sup> Marie-Louise Vollenweider, *Catalogue raisonné des sceaux cylindres et intailles*, 1 (Geneva: Musée d’art et d’histoire, 1967), No. 99: 85-6 and pl. 43: 1 and 6. Three other beardless heads are known to me, though of a later date and all showing the bust in full-face view: Philippe Gignoux and Rika Gyselen, *Sceaux Sasanides de diverses collections privées* (Leuven: Peeters, 1982), pl. XII, 20.73; 20. 74 (= Gyselen, “Les sceaux des mages,” 137, fig. 8f); 20.76.

<sup>23</sup> A. K. Grayson, “Eunuchs in Power. Their Role in the Assyrian Bureaucracy,” *Vom Alten Orient zum Alten Testament: Festschrift für Wolfram Freiherrn von Soden zum 85. Geburtstag am 19. Juni 1993*, ed. Manfred Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Verlag Butzon & Bercker and Neukirchener Verlag, 1995), 97.

<sup>24</sup> See Ahmad Tafazzoli, “An Unrecognized Sasanian Title,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* n.s. 4 (1990), 301-5; A. Kolesnikov, “Eunuchs....ii. The Sasanian

Period,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 9 (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1998), 65-66. For a military eunuch, see Rika Gyselen, *The Four Generals of the Sasanian Empire: Some Sigillographic Evidence* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 2001), 27 and 37-38 (seals 2a and b: Warahrām, General of the South); on Ardashir I’s eunuch trouncing the Parthian enemy at Firuzabad, see above.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Alram and Rika Gyselen, *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum Paris Berlin Wien*, vol. 1, *Ardashir I. – Shapur I.* (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Kl., Denkschriften 317) (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2003), see “Paleography,” 65.

<sup>26</sup> Gyselen, *The Four Generals*.

<sup>27</sup> Review of Philippe Gignoux, *Les quatre inscriptions du Mage Kirdīr: Textes et concordances* (Collection des sources pour l’histoire de l’Asie centrale pré-islamique, sér. II, vol. I = *Studia Iranica*, cahier 9) (Paris: Union Académique internationale. Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes, 1991), in *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 5/6 (1993), cols. 696-98.

<sup>28</sup> Tafazzoli, “An Unrecognized Sasanian Title.”

<sup>29</sup> Shortening of long vowels before more than one consonants is found also elsewhere, for instance, in *balx* < Old Persian *bāxδī-*.

<sup>30</sup> In the glossaries of Philip Huyse, *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka’ba-i Zardušt (ŠKZ)* (Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum. Part III. Pahlavi Inscriptions 1, Texts) (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1999), 135, the Parthian form is erroneously cited as *špstyn*.

<sup>31</sup> André Maricq, “Res Gestae Divi Saporis,” *Syria* 35 (1958), 330-31; reprinted in *Classica et Orientalia* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1965), 72-73.

<sup>32</sup> Tavoosi and Frye, “An Inscribed Capital,” 29, 31; on the form of the title (*pad* ...), see Skjærvø, “L’inscription d’Abnūn,” 154.

<sup>33</sup> Maricq (1958), 324-25 = (1965), 66-67.

<sup>34</sup> It is true that *arz-bed* could in principle contain the word for “scrotum, testicles,” Avestan *ərəzi-* (although, in Middle Persian, the letter *c* usually corresponds to an older *c* rather than *z*), but the eunuch was hardly “master of testicles.”



Fig. 1. Bulla with the impression of Bōxtšābuhr's seal. Clay, 3.34 cm x 2.77 cm; thickness ca. 1.44 cm.  
 Fig. 1a. Obverse. Photograph by Rudolf H. Mayr.  
 Fig. 1b. Reverse. Photograph by Rudolf H. Mayr.



Fig. 2. Seal of Ximarōz, modern impression. From Bivar, "Glyptica Iranica," 197, fig. 5, with kind permission of the *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*.

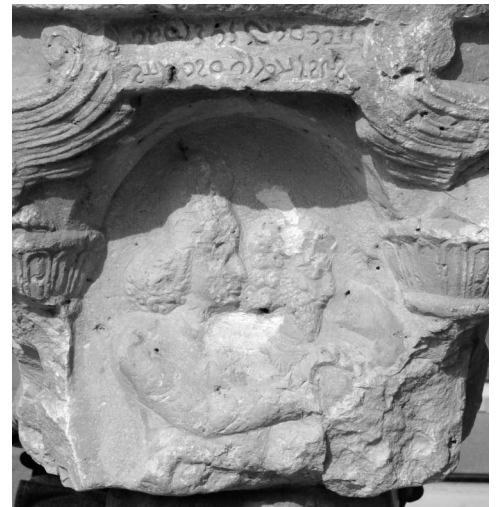


Fig. 4. Face B of the Nasrabad fire altar showing Aspēz and Wahnām. Author's photograph.



Fig. 3. Face D of the Nasrabad fire altar showing Abnūn. Author's photograph.



Fig. 5. Relief of Kerdīr, Naqsh-e Rajab. Author's photograph.