

Khosrow II (590–628 CE)

Subjects: Art

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Khosrow II (r. 590–628 CE) was the last great Sasanian king who took the throne with the help of the Romans and broke with dynastic religious preferences as he became married to a Christian empress. It was under his rule that the Sasanian Empire reached its greatest expansion. From the standpoint of iconographic studies, Khosrow II is among the most influential Persian kings. Although he was literally occupied by rebels and wars within the borders of the Sasanian territories and beyond, Khosrow managed to create a powerful image of himself that emphasized the legitimacy of his monarchy. Indeed, Khosrow Parviz (the Victorious) drew upon royal iconography as a propaganda tool on a wide range of materials such as rock and stucco reliefs, coins, seals, and metal plates. His image (created both visually and verbally) not only revived the traditional iconography of the Persian kings but also evolved it in a way that transcended his time and was passed on to the early Islamic Caliphates after him. Khosrow II imitated and manipulated the traditional royal iconography of his predecessors in order to display his legitimacy, piety, and valor.

Keywords: royal image ; royal iconography ; Sasanian Empire ; Khosrow II ; rock relief ; coinage

The Sasanian dynasty, which ruled over the entire Iranian Plateau and beyond from 220 to 651 CE, was the last pre-Islamic empire of Iran (for the history of the Sasanian Empire, see ^{[1][2]}). Ardashir I (224–41 CE), the founder of the dynasty, named the kingdom after his grandfather Sasan, supposedly a priest of the goddess Anahid in the city of Istakhr, the capital of the province of Persis/Fars ^[3]. The dynasty thus claimed religious legitimacy and authority from its foundation via “[the connection of] an eponymous founder with an important sanctuary” ^[4] (p. 156). The Sasanians aimed to move the territories of the empire to that of the Achaemenids ^[4]. It was under Khosrow II (590–628 CE) that their empire reached its territorial zenith, thanks to a series of military campaigns that allowed the Sasanians to dominate the eastern Mediterranean and Egypt for over a decade in the early seventh century CE ^[5]. Hence, Khosrow II is the most important king of this golden era (498–622) of the Sasanian sovereignty.

Khosrow II took over the throne following a plot that deposed his father, Hormazd IV (579–90 CE). Soon after, however, the rebellious general Bahram Chobin forced the young Khosrow to flee to the Eastern Roman Empire, where he sought alliance and support ^[3] (pp. 191–199). Maurice, by then the Roman emperor, helped the young Khosrow to recapture the throne and defeat Bahram ^[4] (p. 160); ^[6] (pp. 236–240), ^[7] (p. 85); ^{[8][9]}. In order to consolidate power, Khosrow II managed to take control and prevent possible adversities, both inside and outside the borders of his political hegemony. As Khosrow wanted to clear any notoriety, he first eliminated those connected with the murder of his father. Later, when Maurice passed away, Khosrow started a series of campaigns in western territories, particularly in regions controlled by the Romans ^[4] (p. 161); ^{[8][9]}. Even though Khosrow's success in conquering Armenia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Anatolia granted him a good reputation and acceptance at first, the continuity and cruelty of his ambitious campaigns caused increasing hostility with the powerful western neighbor ^[2] (p. 33); ^{[10][11]}. For example, historians have recorded vivid descriptions of the hostile acts by Khosrow II during the conquest of Jerusalem (614 CE) that triggered revenge campaigns against Sasanian temples ^[2] (p. 33); ^{[12][13]} (p. 592). Thus, “in a matter of years, Khosrow II went from a world conqueror, emulating the Achaemenid territorial integrity to a humiliated king who was unable to protect the sacred Zoroastrian fire-temples and his subjects ^[2] (p. 33).” Eventually, the nobility and priests removed Khosrow II in 628 CE, and subsequently, all the conquered regions were returned to the Romans.

The Sasanian royal image was not just created through sovereign acts or written sources but rather depended, to a great extent, on a well-developed iconographic language promoted by rock reliefs, coins, and other visual products of material culture ^{[14][15][16][17]}. In the absence or scarcity of written sources, pictorial documents maintain a treasury for the understanding of the most important aspects of the royal image under the Sasanian rule ^[18]. From an iconographic point of view, Khosrow II is of significant interest to scholars: the abundance of archaeological evidence from his time, combined with the contrasting characters of his sovereignty (e.g., victory/defeat, treason/loyalty, piety/impiety, etc.) provide scholars with an unparalleled, first-hand source of information that sheds light on an important yet less-known period of the history of Iran. Considering the subjective nature of the portrayals and interpretations presented by Christian, Muslim, and Persian authors, Khosrow's personality has remained relatively unknown to us ^[19]. The pictorial language,

conceived by the king himself, is the proper medium that can shed light on this matter. Drawing upon the established iconographic language of his time, as well as manipulating some aspects of the iconographic language of his predecessors, Khosrow II managed to present a powerful and influential image of his monarchy. This entry summarizes the unique features of Khosrow II's royal iconography, its function, and its possible audience. It, therefore, describes the iconographic and iconological characteristics of his royal image on rock reliefs and coins.

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