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Righteousness is Good

A New Interpretation of the Seal from Yarim Tepe in the Daregaz Plain, Khorasan, Iran

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Abstract

This paper discusses a Sasanian sealstone discovered in 2014 at the archaeological site of Yarim Tepe in Khorasan, northeastern Iran. Although a surface find, the fact that this sealstone is provenanced is significant because this sets it apart from thousands of unprovenanced Sasanian sealstones which, coming from the antiquities market, are held in museums and private collections around the globe. The seal shows a bust in profile and an inscription that arcs above the bust from shoulder to shoulder. Through a stylistic analysis, we date the seal to the 3rd–4th century CE. The article offers a new reading and interpretation of the inscription and argues that the image shows a conventional portrait rather than a specific individual.

Keywords

seal – gemstone – Sasanian – Yarim Tepe – Daregaz – Pahlavi inscription – magical and therapeutic properties

1 Introduction: The Archaeological Context

Situated at the geographical midpoint between the headwaters of the Atrak and Kashafud rivers in the south, and the fertile foothills that border the Kara Kum desert in northern Turkmenistan, the Daregaz Plain or ‘valley of the tamarisks’ in Razavi Khorasan is renowned for its relative fertility, prosperity, and substantial population. The plain has been occupied from, at least, the early fifth millennium B.C. until the present day (Kohl/Heskel 1980: 163).

Archaeological investigations in the Daregaz Plain have been ongoing since 1924, notably with the pioneering survey in this region by Henri Frankfort (1924: 83–84, pl. VII. 2). Nevertheless, Sasanian archaeology in this region has remained largely marginalized for several decades. It was not until 1994 that the Daregaz Plain witnessed its first substantive archaeological excavation at the Sasanian site of Bandian by a team of experts of the Iranian Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization under the direction of Mehdi Rahbar (1998; 2007; 2010). This team uncovered an extraordinary complex, comprising a fire temple, which is currently interpreted as a place for the veneration of a *dādgāh* fire and for performing the funeral rites of the noble family that owned the estate (Callieri 2014: 98, 124; idem 2022: 41, 50), a tower of silence for exposing the corpse of Zoroastrians to vultures, and a royal residence. The fire temple and the tower of silence date back to the reign of Bahram V (r. 420–438), and the royal residence is from the time of Khosrow I (r. 531–579) (Rahbar 2007: 466). The Middle Persian inscriptions incised on the stuccos of the columned hall of the funerary edifice describe the place as *dastgird*, an aristocratic family estate (Bašāš-Kanzaq 1997: 34; Gignoux 1998: 253; Callieri 2014: 54).

The existence of this *dastgird* and the abundance of Sasanian settlements (Kohl/Heskel 1980: 163, Table 1) within the Daregaz Plain point towards a region characterized by substantial population density, economic vitality, and considerable political importance during the Sasanian period. Geographically located between the Caspian Sea and Merv, Daregaz served as a pivotal borderland between Sasanian Iran and the Huns. The district was of strategic importance, acting as a crucial gateway that connected the northeastern frontier of the Sasanian Empire to the expanse of Central Asia.

Among numerous archaeological sites in the Daregaz Plain, Yarim Tepe stands out as the largest and most noteworthy. Located on the right bank of the Dorungar River, some 1.5 km north of the present day-day town of Daregaz (Fig. 1), the site (Fig. 2) covers an area of ca. 8 hectares and rises more than 35 m above the surrounding terrain with archaeological deposits extending 3 m beneath the level of the plain, with the total archaeological deposits of ca. 40 m (Kohl/Heskel 1980: 163–165).

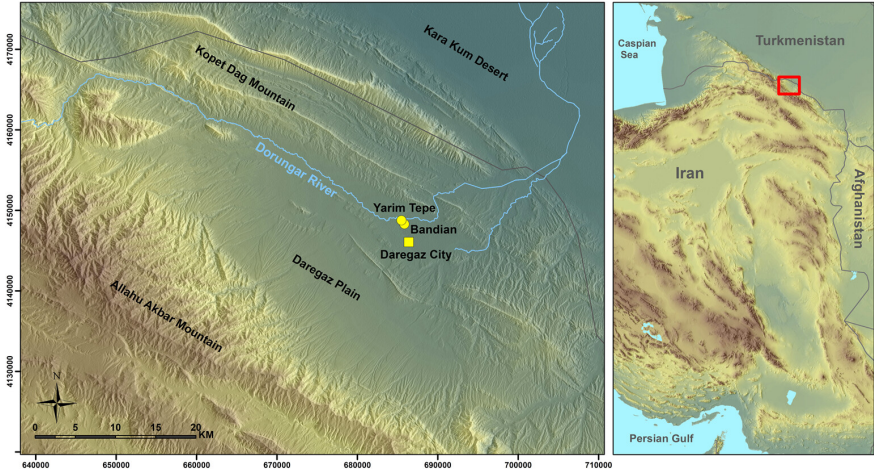


FIGURE 1 Geographical location of Yarim Tepe in northeastern Iran
DRAWING BY Z. VALIZADEH



FIGURE 2 Overall view of Yarim Tepe
PHOTO BY M. LABBAF-KHANIKI

Surface materials collected from Yarim Tepe suggest occupation throughout the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages, and again during the Achaemenid and Parthian periods. The discovery of the sealstone under discussion here, along with diagnostic ceramics scattered across the site, provide strong indications that the site was occupied during the Sasanian period, too, although the exact nature and extent of this occupation remain obscure due to the lack of archaeological excavations and the absence of visible architectural remains on the surface. Considering the impressive height of the mound and its strategic position on the plain, it is tempting to speculate that a Sasanian fortress may have once stood atop the mound, serving as a protective bastion to oversee not only the surrounding area but also the vital caravan route leading to and from Central Asia.

The sealstone was discovered in 2014 by Fatemeh Vatanpur, a student of archaeology at Nishapur University, during a brief educational visit to the site under the guidance of Professor Omran Garazhian, who later published an article in Persian that was partially devoted to a discussion of this sealstone (Garazhian 2019: 266–267). Currently, the sealstone is housed in the archives of the Mashhad Museum in Razavi Khorasan province. The significance of this sealstone lies in the fact that it is provenanced. Currently, approximately 10,000 Sasanian seals are known and published (Ritter 2017: 277), but with only a few exceptions (Ritter 2010: 26–28), most of the Sasanian sealstones in public and private collections come from uncontrolled and undocumented excavations, with no indication of where and when they were discovered. Being of unknown provenance, such seals are of limited value, because information on the nature and significance of the sites from which they were recovered is lacking.

What follows offers a comprehensive description of the seal with a careful analysis of the stylistic characteristics of the portrait bust engraved on it and a new reading and interpretation of the inscription that arcs above the bust from shoulder to shoulder. Finally, we propose a timeframe for the production of the seal. We are hoping that this article will not only enhance our understanding of this specific sealstone but also contribute to the broader context of Sasanian glyptic art, emphasizing the importance of provenance in the study of Sasanian seals.

2 The Sealstone

The description and discussion below of the sealstone is based on the images in Garazhian 2019 and on a plaster cast of the sealstone, of which Omran Garazhian kindly provided images. It has so far not been possible for us to



0 0.5 1cm

FIGURE 3
The carnelian sealstone
found at Yarim Tepe
AFTER GARAZHIAN 2019:
FIG. 3



FIGURE 4
Plaster cast of the seal found at
Yarim Tepe
PHOTO BY O. GARAZHIAN



0 0.5 1cm

FIGURE 5
Drawing of the seal found at
Yarim Tepe
AFTER GARAZHIAN 2019:
FIG. 4

examine the original object, and the images included in the present article are reproduced from the published article with the kind permission of Garazhian. Unfortunately, the quality of the published photograph of the seal (Fig. 3) and its impression (Fig. 4) fail to adequately capture all its details. Moreover, the line drawing (Fig. 5) is inaccurate, leading to misinterpretation of detail. Nevertheless, each of the images grants insights into specific aspects of the seal's design. The sealstone is oval in shape with a flat engraved face and a convex back. Measuring 12.82 × 11.12 × 3.44 mm, its back is slightly smaller at 10.06 × 8.66 mm. Its shape and dimensions suggest that it was most likely set into the bezel of a ring and worn as a finger ring, although it is difficult to determine in what type of ring it was mounted. It is also possible, however, that the seal was mounted as a pendant, suspended around the neck, the wrist, or affixed to some piece of jewellery such as a fibula, button, or stud (Lerner/Skjærvø 1997: 71; Gyselen 2007: 26).

The seal is crafted from reddish-brown carnelian, a semi-precious stone, popularly used for Sasanian seals. The outer band, which contains the inscription, is lighter because it is thinner. The central part that contains the bust seems to be darker due to the stone being thicker and thus less translucent. The seal cutter meticulously carved the image in *intaglio* (sunken relief) onto the surface of the gem. When this *intaglio* was pressed onto a soft, small blob of clay (Latin, sing. *bulla*) or some other mouldable substance such as wax, bitumen or lead, a positive relief or impression was the result.

The portrait bust on the seal is that of a male, his head shown in left profile and his shoulders and chest frontal. This view is a distinguishing characteristic of Sasanian glyptics and coins. While the profile view is easier to depict, it lacks

the visual impact compared to a full or three-quarter view portrait, as it does not fully exhibit the vitality of the subject's face in its entirety. His facial features are detailed, with a long prominent eyebrow sloping towards the top of the prominent nose, a large fully opened eye with a rounded pupil and prominent lids; visible earlobe; elongated nose, and full lips. His thin moustache is long with slightly upturned tip, while his spade-shaped beard is indicated by a series of sparse oblique lines; a line frames the curved contour of the face. His hair is rendered by obliquely dense lines ending in a row of curls around the head. His drop-earring is made of two large round pearls or beads suspended one above the other from his earlobe. At his neck he wears what appears as a string of oval beads or pearls. His garment appears to be round-collared cloak with a prominent neckline. The drapery is conventionally shown as six rows of deep parallel folds, running obliquely from the shoulders, and continuing vertically on the chest.

The seal is carved so that its impression is in moderate relief, although parts are more deeply engraved towards the lower brown layer of the stone. It is carefully engraved with many fine lines and well-finished broader areas. The style and the treatment of the facial features of the bust leans towards naturalism even though the characteristics of the image on the seal are those of the conventional portrait that does not represent a specific individual, i.e., the bearer of the seal or the sovereign. Rather, it is the depiction of a generalized human male image. Such male images are extensively represented on Sasanian seals (Bivar 1968: pl. XII, nos. 1–10). Garazhian (2019: 267) describes the individual on this seal as an official of considerable social and political standing within the hierarchical structure of the Sasanian government. However, it is a personal seal, belonging to a private individual who was not necessarily but could have also been a state official. The lack of a typical attribute of the royal Sasanian iconography including insignia, fluttering ribbons or *kōlāh/kōlāf* (headdress) indicate that he was not related to the royal household or, in fact, held any high office.

The arrangement of the hair, modeling of the bust, and naturalistic style observed here are also found on three chalcedony seals held in the British Museum (Bivar 1969: 47, nos. 119727, 120173, 119735, pl. 2. AC 2, 3, 4). Furthermore, the treatment of face, hairstyle, the drapery, the two-beaded earring, and the necklace resemble, to great extent, a seal in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Gignoux 1978: pl. XVIII. 6.35). There are more seals in this museum that share similarities in iconography and style with the seal from Yarim Tepe (Gignoux/Gyselen 1982: 70–71, pl. IX, no. 20.30; Gyselen 1993: pl. 13. no. 20. D.27). Furthermore, the style of this bust recalls the portrait on a ring stone in a private collection (Gignoux/Gyselen 1989: pl. III. bottom left). However, none of these seals is dated.

The seal can be dated to the 3rd to 4th century on the basis of its stylistic comparison with datable seals. This seal closely resembles the British Museum's garnet seal, inscribed *mšlp šPYL* or *mšy šPYR* (Bivar 1969: 45, no. 119739, pl. 1. AA 9) in its technique, iconography, and stylistic treatment, which are also characteristic of various published Sasanian seals of the 3rd to 4th century.

3 The Inscription

The seal has one line of a Middle Persian inscription in lapidary script running along the margin and framing the impressive image of the bust from shoulder to shoulder (ca. 4 to ca. 8 o'clock). The careful execution of the inscription and general coherence of the composition suggest that the inscription and image are contemporaneous.

According to Garazhian (2019: 267, fn. 1), the inscription on the seal was read by Cyrus Nasrollahzadeh (Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, Tehran) as “Rāst-Shāpur”, suggesting that it was the name of the seal's owner. However, he only provides his reading in a rendering in the New Persian script as *راست شاپور* [*rāst šāpūr*], in which Nasrollahzadeh sees a personal name. The Persian article includes no transliteration of the characters. Personal compound names with *rāst*, including the name Rāst-Shāpur, are also attested in other Middle Persian inscriptions (Gignoux 1986: 152; 2003: 57). In particular, the composite name Rāst-Shābuhr, in its full spelling, is attested on a 4th-century ring stone featuring the image of a reclining bull (Metropolitan Museum of Art MMA 81.6.277. Osten 1931: 238, fig. 85; Brunner 1978: 79, fig. 24). Gignoux (1986: 11/2, 152) translates the name as “droit Šābuhr” (“true Šābuhr”) or “Juste (est) Šābuhr” (2003: 57), but Gyselen (1996: 245–247, 252) contends that a literal translation may not be appropriate, as the term *rāst* could potentially allude to the name of a “minor deity”. However, the reading proposed by Nasrollahzadeh fatally falls short of matching the characters visible on the sealstone. It also encounters the problem that the standard spelling of the name in both inscriptional and Book Pahlavi is <šhpwhry> /šābuhr/. Nasrollahzadeh's reading requires to be revised.

The inscription consists of 10 characters which in the reading proposed here constitute two words. The first word, which Nasrollahzadeh read as *rāst*, can be confidently read as <l'styh> /rāstīh/. The second word comprises three characters: *shūn*, *pē*, and *lāmed*. We propose to read <špl> and interpret the word as representing the Aramaic heterogram *šPYL* /weh/ ‘good’; here spelt defectively by omission of the *yōd*. Hence, the following is our proposed reading of the inscription on the seal:

⟨l'styh šP[y]L⟩
 /rāstīh weh/
 'righteousness (is) good'

An explanation for the defective spelling could be that there is little space left for four characters at the end of the inscription. It seems that the seal engraver misjudged the available space for all the letters that had to fit into the space on the gemstone. The fact that the six letters of the first word ⟨l'styh⟩ are engraved with generous spaces between them and that they are followed by a rather cramped arrangement of the subsequent letters, supports the view that the engraver encountered challenges in managing the available space. Presumably the engraver omitted the *yōd* of ⟨šPYL⟩ in order to fit in the text. Such omissions of one or even several characters in a word to accommodate the intended text are not uncommon on Sasanian seals. For instance, the letter *pē* of the word *šPYL* is omitted to accommodate a line of inscription on a carnelian seal held in the A. Saeedi collection (Gyselen 2007: 122, no. 70. 14). Conversely, on a *bullā* in the A. Saeedi collection (Gyselen 2007: 112, no. 33. 1), this word is written with two *yōds* as ⟨šPYYL⟩.

The combination of the two words, *l'styh šPYL*, is quite rare and attested elsewhere only on a seal housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Gignoux (1976: 49) transliterates and translates the words as follows:

⟨MND^cM MN l'styhy šPYR^cL yzdty⟩
 'Ce (qui vient) de la droiture, (est) bon pour la divinité'

Since the expression *rāstīh weh* 'righteousness (is) good' also occurs as a phrase on the Yarim Tepe seal according to the reading proposed here, it is preferable to understand the sentence /tis az rāstīh weh ō yazad/ as 'What (comes) from good righteousness (is) for the deity'. Moreover, the formula *rāstīh weh* aligns well with *rāstīh pahlom* and *rāstīh parsām* 'best righteousness' or 'righteousness (is) best', phrases which appear on several seals and *bullae* (Bivar 1969: 110, no. 120298, pl. 15. MG 3; Göbl 1976: 47, no. 273; Gignoux 1978: 59, no. 6.64–67). In the inverted word order, the two adjectives *weh* 'good' and *rāst* 'right' ⟨šPYL l'sty⟩ are attested on a seal which Gignoux and Kalus (1982: 130) transliterate and translate as follows:

⟨šPYL l'st[y] 'yK krpky krt[y]⟩
 /weh rāst kū kirbag kard/ (our transcription)
 '(Il est) bon et droit que les bonnes actions (soient) faites'

Each of the words *rāstih* and *weh* appear on numerous Sasanian seals and *bullae*, individually or more frequently in conjunction with an adjective or other ethical concept (Bivar 1969: 85, no. 119863, pl. 15. EM 14; Gignoux 1978: 61. no. 6.82; Gignoux/Gyselen 1978: 28. no. 10.2, pl. 1, no. 10.2). Among the more frequent combinations is the expression <YWM ŠPYL> /rōz weh/, which is often accompanied by images such as devices, plants, and male and female portrait busts (see Bivar 1969: 48, nos. 119716 and 119732, pl. 15. AC 12–13; Gignoux 1978: 60–61, nos. 6.76–81; Gignoux/Gyselen 1978: 28. nos. 20.03–04, pl. 11, nos. 20.03–04). Gignoux translates the expression /rōz weh/ as ‘Fortuné’, but subsequently he and Gyselen (1989: 879, pl. 1. no. 6) interpret it as “Meilleure que le jour” (“Better than the day”). The words *rōz weh*, engraved around the female bust on a sealstone in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, led these scholars to propose that *rōz weh* could be a female name. However, this argument may not be fully conclusive for two reasons: Firstly, to our knowledge, no personal name spelt with an Aramaic heterogram is so far attested on Sasanian seals and *bullae*. Secondly, *rōz weh* is also found in conjunction with images of male portraits on several seals and *bullae*. One example is the *bullā* impressed with a seal showing a conventional male bust, unearthed from the archives of the ritual edifice at Bandian. Bašāš-Kanzaq (1997: 34, 35, fig. 2) suggests that the inscription may be that of a personal name, /rōz weh/ ‘Ruzbeh’, and proposes that Ruzbeh was the miller, as described in Ferdowsi’s *Shah-nameh*, whose daughter became a queen at Bahram v’s court. This proposition is based merely on the assumption that the Bandian complex dates back to the time of Bahram v. Although the complex was built in the 5th century, its association with Bahram v is uncertain. Furthermore, the image on the *bullā* does not evoke a specific individual but rather seems to be a conventional portrait. As previously stated, this evocative phrase also occurs on non-figurative sealings. It is plausible that *rōz weh* simply means ‘good day’.

Although the exhortation *rāst* or *rāstih* (‘Truth’ or ‘Righteousness’) is also found on several Sasanian Christians seals (Shaked 1977: 20; Gyselen 2006: 48, 60, 65, nos. 29, 83, 105a–106), the expression *rāstih weh* ‘good righteousness’ or ‘righteousness (is) good’ is absent. Since this expression recalls the Avestan phrase *ašəm vohū*, a Zoroastrian affiliation of the owner of the seal seems likely. Notably, *ašəm vohū* constitutes the first two words of the Zoroastrian prayer *ašəm vohū vahištəm astī* ‘righteousness is the highest good’. In the Pahlavi version of the Avesta, however, this verse is rendered as *ahlāyih ābādih ī pahlom ast* ‘righteousness is the foremost prosperity’, and also elsewhere in the Middle Persian translation of the Avesta, forms of the noun *aša-* are usually rendered as *ahlāyih*. And yet, translations with *rāstih* are also attested

(e.g. in Yasna 49.1, 45.8, 46.17, 48.3, where *rāstīh* is glossed as *dēn ī Ohrmazd* ‘the religion of Ohrmazd’). Since *ašəm* in the famous Zoroastrian prayer is usually rendered in Pahlavi as *ahlāyih* and *vohū* as *pahlom*, it is unlikely that the phrase on the Yarim Tepe sealstone specifically alludes to the Zoroastrian prayer. However considering the central role which affirming *rāstīh* ‘righteousness’ plays in the Zoroastrian religion, a Zoroastrian connection is plausible, if not likely.

4 Excursus: Magical and Therapeutic Properties Associated with Sealstones

While the primary use of this inscribed seal would have been to secure property, assign responsibility or authenticate or witness documents and packages by leaving the imprint of the individual who is identified by the seal’s impression, textual sources indicate that seals were believed to possess magical and therapeutic properties and thus also served as an amulet for the wearer. Two Middle Iranian lapidary traditions, one in Middle Persian and one in Sogdian, and a third tradition attested in a Turkish text have survived describing the magical powers of gemstones (Weber 2003: 235–237). As Rossi (2006: 478) notes, the texts indicate that gemstones were thought to have an ‘activation power’ which is released when they are rubbed and polished and thus reflect light in a way peculiar to a particular stone. Thus, the *Pahlavī Rivāyat* accompanying the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (Ch. 64; Williams 1990: 11/111–113, 265–268; de Menasce 1942–1945) enumerates the significance and magical properties of green, black, yellow, red, dark blue, and ‘sky-coloured’ (*asmān gōn*) gemstones, both unpolished and polished. These stones are referred to as *muhrag* ‘gemstone’. The properties of the red sealstone, the colour of the sealstone discussed here, are described in the following four passages:

PRDd 64.11 < mwhlk’ Y swḥl MNW d’lyt’ KR’ k’l Y pr’c ‘ḤDWN-yt’ plc’mynyt’ BR’ L’ zwt’ SGYTWN-yt’ >
/muhrag ī suxr kē dārēd harw kār ī frāz gīrēd frazāmēnēd bē nē zūd rawēd/
‘The one who keeps a red gemstone will complete every work he undertakes,¹ but it will not proceed quickly’.

Note 1 on PRDd 64.11: In PRDd 64.11 and 15, the ambiguous heterographic spelling 𐭠𐭣𐭠𐭣𐭠 can be read as ‘BYDWN-yt’ /kunēd/ or as ‘ḤDWN-yt’ /girēd/. De Menasce (1942–1945: 182) and Williams (1990: 1/230–231) prefer the former, while, in an unpublished transcription of the text, Skjærvø transcribes it as

girēd. Considering that the combination of *frāz* and *griftan* is attested also elsewhere (MacKenzie 1971: 33; Nyberg 1974: 83), the reading *girēd* appears preferable.

PRDd 64.15 <mwhlk' Y swḥl MNW-š s'dsn' spyt' MNW d'lyt' KR' k'l y pr'c
'ḤDWN-yt' zwt' tyc' SGYTWN-yt'>
/muhrag ī suxr kē-š sāyišn spēd kē dārēd harw kār ī frāz girēd zūd tez
rawēd/
'He who keeps a red gemstone which has a white polish, every work which
he undertakes will proceed quickly and swiftly'.

PRDd 64.24 <mwhlk' Y swḥl MNW d'lyt' KR' gyw'k' 'p'dsnyk' YḤWWN-yt
'p'lytl PWN hncmn' mdy'n Y hmym'l'n'>
/muhrag ī suxr kē dārēd harw gyāg abāyišnīg bawēd abērtar pad hanja-
man mayān ī hamēmālān/
'The one who keeps a red gemstone is respected in every place, especially
in an assembly in the midst of opponents.'²

Note 2 on PRDd 64.24. While the word *hamēmāl* denotes an 'opponent' in a variety of contexts (e.g., in PRDd 64.10 an 'opponent' in battle), PRDd 64.24 could apply to a legal context. Macuch (2003: 172–177; 2009: 181f.) has shown that *hamēmāl* is also a general term for an opponent in a law case. Both litigating parties, the 'plaintiff' (*pēšēmāl*) and the 'defendant' (*pasēmāl*), are described as *hamēmāl*. In the process of witnessing and sealing, the owner would use his seal to testify or certify statements or judgements.

PRDd 64.29a <MNW swḥl d'lyt' 'D yng³ blyhynšn pr'c YḤMTWN-yt' 'DYN'-š
MND'M-C L' tlwnyt'>
/kē suxr dārēd tā ḵang brēhēnišn frāz rasēd ēg-iš tis-iz nē tarw(ē)nēd/
'The one who keeps a red (gemstone) until the (final) battle of creation
takes place, then nothing will overcome him'.

Note 3 on PRDd 64.29a. Williams (1990: I/232–233) emends the transmitted reading to TWB /did/ 'again' and translates /did brēhēnišn/ as 'recreation', interpreting it as a reference to the perfection of the world (*frašegird*) at the end of time (Williams 1990: II/267, n. 10). Instead of emending the text, in the text transcribed above, the transmitted form 𐭩𐭮 is interpreted as <yng> /ḵang/ 'battle, fight', implying that a reference is made here to the battle that precedes *frašegird*. One has to assume that an ezafe has been omitted between *ḵang* and *brēhēnišn*.

The Sogdian text P₃, as edited by Azarnouche and Grenet (2010), describes the magical properties of nine stones, which are referred to by the ordinary Sogdian word for ‘stone’ <snk> /sang/. In this text, the red stone is said to have a negative, even pernicious influence (Grenet/Azarnouche 2010: 43; Rossi 2006).

Bal’ami, a Persian historian of the 10th century, informs us that the Sasanians wore seals as amulets upon armlets. In the story about the discovery of the body of the Sasanian king Peroz by the Hephthalite ruler Khoshravaz, Bal’ami narrates that Khoshravaz took Peroz up from the trench and had him buried. While doing so, Khoshravaz took off Peroz’s seal, which Bal’ami describes as the ‘amulet of the treasure writing’ (گنج نامه) [ta’wīḏ-i ān ganj-nāma] from his arm and took possession of it (Bal’ami, ed. Bahar 1974/1353: 11/961).

According to Ṭabarī (1999: 397–398), the great Persian historian (late 9th–early 10th century), gemstones served as a type of shield. Ṭabarī relates that although Mihr Hurmuz, the murderer of King Khosrow II Aparvez (r. 590–628), struck his axe in multiple blows to the sinews of the king’s neck in an attempt to kill him, a gem in the form of an amulet protected the king from the fatal strokes. Only after removing the amulet from the king’s upper arm was the murderer able to take the king’s life, and he did so with a single blow.

5 Conclusion

The known provenance, a rarity among Sasanian sealstones, sets the sealstone from Yarim Tepe in Khorasan apart from thousands of unprovenanced seals stored in museums and private collections around the globe. This sealstone provides valuable insights into Sasanian glyptic art. The stylistic analysis of the portrait bust proposed here suggests that the sealstone was manufactured in the 3rd to 4th century A.D. We have also suggested that this is the seal of a middle-class man, showing a standardized portrait accompanied by an inscription of general positive content. The seal provides a glimpse into the day-to-day activities of ordinary people in Sasanian Iran.

Our investigation challenges the previous reading of the seal’s inscription as *rāst šāpūr* and instead propose the new reading *rāstih weh* signifying the exhortation that ‘righteousness (is) good’. This aligns with other Sasanian seals featuring similar *andarz*-type statements. The inscription’s analysis also sheds light on the challenges faced by engravers in managing limited space on a sealstone, offering insights into the craftsmanship of Sasanian glyptic artisans. It has been argued that the engraver deliberately omitted a letter in the last word and wrote <šPL> instead of <šPYL>, due to a miscalculation of the space avail-

able. This indicates that the image was engraved first, and the inscription afterwards. Possibly two different craftsmen performed these tasks.

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