



# IMMINENT DEATH

The authenticity of a Persian “killing drachm” appears to be well-supported by scholars and numismatic experts.

**T**he intricately rendered image on an ancient silver coin freezes the moment before death, with a Persian only an instant away from killing a Greek soldier. The issue is both startling and puzzling—was it produced by a Persian subject of a Greek king, does it proclaim a revolution, or does it symbolize something else altogether? Figure 1 presents such a coin, a *drachm* minted by Oborzos (or “Oborzus”), the *frataraka* of Persis (a satrap north of the Persian Gulf). According to numismatist and author Brian Kritt, “frataraka” has been translated as “fire-kindler” or “keeper of the fire.” More prosaically, it designates a regional official who derives his power from a king, in this case a Seleukid king, a Greek.

Because of the coin’s rarity and uncharacteristic iconography,



◀ **FIGURE 1:** *Oborzos silver drachm struck in Persepolis in the mid-3rd century B.C. The violent image on the reverse is a subject of debate.*

Actual Size: 15.8mm

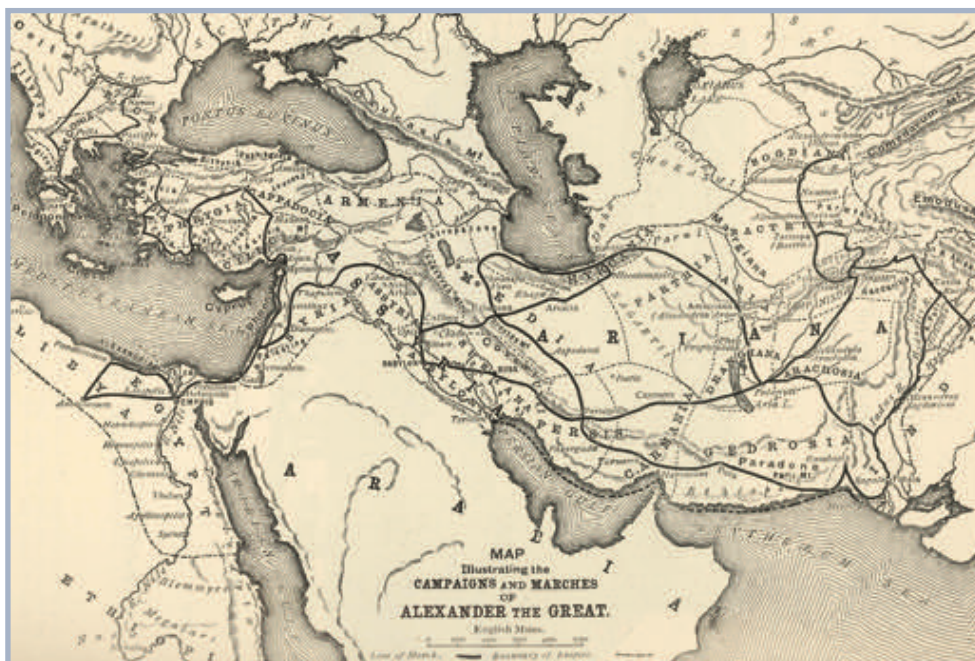
scholars have debated its authenticity, imagery, inscription and historical significance, starting with A.D.H. Bivar’s presentation on the subject at the 10th International Congress of Numismatics in London in September 1986. The example shown here is one of two currently known.

After Alexander’s death in 323 B.C., his generals negotiated and fought with each other over parts of his conquered territory. By 300 B.C., one of the generals, Seleukos, loosely controlled the largest area—the land south of the Hellespont, north of Syria, and east to Baktria. Oborzos struck his coins in Persepolis in central Persis.

### Authenticity

The coin’s jarring break from traditional numismatic iconography led Michael Alram to write an article in *Litterae Numismaticae Vindobonenses* (1987) in response to Bivar’s presentation, questioning the authenticity of the Oborzos drachm, which was unique at the time. As a *frataraka*, Oborzos normally depicted a figure in satrapal garb, standing by a Zoroastrian fire altar, on the reverse of his coins (Figure 2).

Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion of the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire (550-330 B.C.), and Alram describes the Seleukid subjects in Persis as tradition-



PHOTOS: JOHN NEBEL (COINS) & GREEK COINS AND THEIR PARENT CITIES, 1902 (MAP)



PHOTOS: JOHN NEBEL



▲ **FIGURE 2:** *Oborzos silver tetradrachm struck in Persepolis in the first half of the 3rd century B.C.*

Actual Size: 30.3mm

mindful Iranians, unlikely to depart dramatically from the old ways. This was contrary to Bivar, who thought the coin's iconography harkened back to the pre-Zoroastrian Mithraic concept of the *tauroctony* (that is, the Indo-Iranian god Mithra's slaying of the cosmic bull, which set in motion the cycle of death and re-creation). To Bivar's way of thinking, this motif was not extraordinary; it was as reasonable

as an image of a fire altar. He restated his opinions in *The Personalities of Mithra in Archeology and Literature*, using examples of Mithraic art to support his position.

Figure 3, for example, is an ancient Roman depiction of the *tauroctony*, a scene similar to that on the coin. Mithra leans on the bull's leg, just as the drachm's



▲ **FIGURE 3:** *The tauroctony, depicted here on an ancient Roman bas-relief panel, is similar to the image appearing on the Oborzos drachm.*

Persian presses on the soldier's leg. In each case, the victim is facing away, his head held back by his attacker, who wields a short sword. Bivar translated the Aramaic legend *whwbrz* on the left as "Oborzos" and *krny* on the right as "Commander in Chief." Bivar also noted that below are the

Aramaic words *dnr zy*, which could represent *dinatu* ("contract of") in Akkadian. Bivar wrote, "Surely the 'contract' of Oborzus was the Mithraic oath of secrecy." Alram disagrees with Bivar's reading, as do scholars M. Rahim Shayegan and David Engels, but the latter two also disagree with one another.

The appearance of the second example of the drachm struck with a

different obverse die provided support for its authenticity, and several authors, among them Dietrich Klose, Wilhelm Müseler, Bradley R. Nelson, Shayegan and Engels, consider it to be genuine. Writes Engels, "Since a second drachm with the same iconography has been found, the coin is now held to be genuine." Viewing

the specimen in hand offers a distinct advantage over studying a photograph of it. (Alram based his opinion on the latter.) The coin subsequently was examined by Numismatic Guaranty Corporation (NGC) experts David Vagi and Barry Murphy, who determined it to be authentic.

### Imagery

Although Oborzos' early coinage apparently employed an obverse die of his predecessor, Artaxares I, the portraits depicted thereon generally are accepted as images of Oborzos himself. His cap (a *bashlyk*, or *kyrbasia* in Greek) appears to be made of a flexible material, perhaps felt, and is tied with a diadem, which Engels indicates is the "Achaemenid custom of singling out the king's syngeneses by conceding to them the right of wearing a diadem." The diadem thus recognizes both Seleukos' power and the Achaemenid tradition. The prominent hoop earrings could be a reference to the archers who are shown wearing them on a frieze at the palace of the Persian Great King Darius (Figure 4). (Continuing the Achaemenid tradition, the *frataraka* also could be guards who tended the sacred fire.)

The drachm's reverse shows a figure dressed as the Persian Great King, wearing a quiver of arrows and killing a Greek soldier. The bas-relief sculpture in Figure 5 shows the Great King in his court dress; similar to the depiction on the coin, although not as elegantly rendered, are his hair, beard,

▼ **FIGURE 4:** *Like the king on the drachm, the archers on this Persian frieze carry quivers of arrows and wear hoop earrings.*

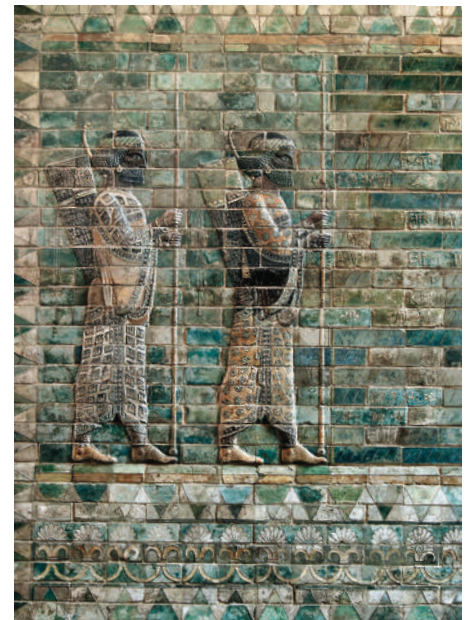


PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/JEBULON (LOUVRE MUSEUM, EXCAVATED BY MARCEL DIEULAFOY, 1885-86)



▲ **FIGURE 5:** *The rendering of the Great King in this bas-relief sculpture is reminiscent of the images on the Oborzos drachm.*

crown, separate jacket and lower garment. Dissimilar is the reverse image showing the king's garment hiked up on his left leg, suggestive of the short dress of the Mede (a citizen of the Iranian area known as Media) shown in the court sculpture, harkening back to pre-Achaemenid times.

Similarities also exist between the Oborzos coin and a Seleukos I *tetradrachm* shown in Figure 6, specifically with regard to the soldier's armor on the former and the trophy displaying Greek armor on the latter—an example of Greeks killing Greeks. Overall, the grim scene on the Oborzos drachm closely resembles (but with reversed roles) the carving on a Limyra tomb (Figure 7), also illustrated by Alam.

### **Inscription**

Deciphering the legends on the drachm are a challenge. Polyainos, the 2nd-century Macedonian author, refers to Ὀβόρζος (“Oborzos”) killing 3,000 Greek settlers, from which it was concluded, but not with certainty, that Oborzos was the Greek name for *whwbrz*. The latter has been variously transliterated as the Persian *Vahuberz* (George Francis Hill), *Vahbarz* or *Wahbarz* (Shayegan).

The title *krny* is more difficult. Writes Engels, “The word, which does not exist in Aramaic, is usually thought of as referring to the Persian office of *κάρανος*, a hapax attested



▲ **FIGURE 6:** *Silver tetradrachm of Seleukos I, struck in Susa in 305-295 B.C.*

Actual Size: 26.2mm

only on Xenophon.” Engels goes on to quote Xenophon: “I send down Kyros as *karanos* of those whose mustering-place is *Kastalos*,” which implies the

title is something like “commander.” Almost inscrutable is *dnr zy*, translated by Shayegan as “was/may be victorious.” Thus, the entire inscription could be construed as “Wahbarz was/shall be victorious, (he) who (is) the commander”—substantially different from Bivar’s Mithraic allusion. Engels thinks that *dnr zy* should be read as *dnt zy* (Persian rather than Aramaic), which might be understood as “victorious over Susiana.”

Hill described the possible cause of this confusion: “The inscriptions are all in Aramaic, degenerating into Pehlvi. [M. Edmund] Drouin is of the opinion that the debased and frequently illegible script, occurring on coins of which the art is still good, indicates that the coins are the work of Greek artists who did not understand the language.”

### **Historical Significance**

Oborzos lived in a dark age. “Apart from short literary and epigraphic information and archaeological remains, the pre-Sasanian coins of Fars (Persis) are our most important source of knowledge,” wrote Josef Wiesehöfer in “Frataraka Rule in Early Seleukid Persis: A New Appraisal.” He goes on to say that only about a dozen Latin and Greek literary works referred to Persis between 280 and 140 B.C., as the “Iranians themselves were relying on an oral ‘historical’ tradition.”

Wiesehöfer’s view is that the Persid Dynasts began their rule at the start of the 2nd century B.C., commencing with Oborzos and his predecessor Artaxares I. He also states that the significance of the Oborzos drachm is that it commemorated a successful rebellion against Seleukid rule; Shayegan agrees and dates the rebellion between 193 and 189 B.C. Both think the coin commemorates the killing of 3,000 Greeks, as told by Polyainos.

However, numismatic evidence contradicts this hypothesis. A coin hoard that was discovered in 1986 contained four Seleukos I trophy tetradrachms, three trophy drachms, coins of Artaxares I and one coin of Oborzos. No newer Seleukid coins were represented



PHOTO: HISTOLIA.DE/RALF ROCHOW



in the hoard, which prompted Brian Kritt to date the hoard to the early 3rd century B.C.

That said, Klose and Museler have documented a significant piece of numismatic information: an Oborzos tetradrachm with the Greek monogram ΠITYMA, an enlarged photograph of which appears on p. 30 of their 2008 reference *Statthalter Rebellen Konige*. The monogram leads Engels to believe (with slight reservation) that the tetradrachm likely was struck by a Greek mint. Based on the monogram and his translation of the legend on the Oborzos drachm, Engels seems to imply that both the Seleukids and the Persids might have been better off as allies against external enemies rather than enemies of one another.

In Engels' opinion, Oborzos was confirmed as frataraka by Seleukos' half-Iranian son Antiochos I, and "then at some moment promoted karanos of a larger Eastern Iranian territory as shown by the control monogram associated with a mint in Drangiane or Western Arachosia." The Oborzos drachm perhaps commemorates a mid-3rd-century victory in Susania, where the Persids fought as Seleukid allies "during Ptolemy's III invasion of Babylonia in 245 during the Third Syrian War."

**Conclusion**

The authenticity of Oborzos' "killing drachm" appears to be well-supported

◀ **FIGURE 7:** The grim scene on the Oborzos drachm closely resembles this carving on a Limyra tomb.

by scholars and by NGC experts who had the opportunity to examine it. The scholarly opinion is that the drachm casts a ray of light on a dark period of history, but the argument continues as to whether the Seleukids and Persids were allies or enemies (even though the coin initially appears to indicate the latter).

The two being allies is certainly an appealing thought, strengthened by Seleukos' extraordinary abilities and the probability that the coin's dies were cut by a Greek engraver. Author and scholar J.D. Grainger notes that when Seleukos died, he essentially controlled the same empire that the last great Persian king did in about 350 B.C., that is, the full Achaemenid empire (with the exception of Thrace and Egypt). The able Seleukos likely would have built an empire that integrated the Persids as allies.

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