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## Original Research Article

# Factors Strengthening and Threatening the Security Functions of the Achaemenid Coins (559-330 BC)

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## Abstract

Coins are illustrative and credible sources of ancient times whose study can shed light on the darker parts of history. Coins had security, commercial, and media role in the past. The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors that enhance and threaten the security functions of the Achaemenids period coins (559-330 BC) using a historical research method and a descriptive-analytical writing approach, library sources, and museum archives and documents. Trade and trading tools have always been one of the most important components of a society's social life. The present study attempts to investigate this aspect of socio-economic history by proposing the hypothesis the political and economic factors can affect the Achaemenid coin security functions. The findings indicated that the Achaemenid coins have to be reinforced by Darius's efforts to pay attention to economic (royal road), administrative (Divine Road), and political management practices (Satrapies). The threatening effects of the Achaemenid coins must also be found in the political, social, and economic mismanagement of Darius's successors, such as the policy of gold coinage in the Peloponnesian Wars, the recruitment of mercenary soldiers, corruption of the court, the rise of the Satraps, and the increase in interest rates and taxes.

**Keywords:** *Coins; Achaemenids; Reinforcement; Threats; Security Functions.*

## Introduction

Minting the coins had many religious, economic, and political functions and had

always been influenced by reinforcing or threatening factors. Coins have long been a symbol of ethnicity, sovereignty,

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independence, and freedom. Another advantage of minting the coins for people was that coins were a sign of the progress of civilization and paying attention to culture, that is, the people minting coins were certainly more advanced and civilized than others. Coins were minted in more beautiful and artistic forms as the state of affairs became more regular and governments became richer. Coin's history and its functions in Iran date back to the Achaemenid period. Darius the Great (522-486 BC) was the first one who minted coins in Iran. He minted both gold and silver coins, which came to be known as the Daric which was a high-purity gold piece of 8.41 grams, and Siglos or Shekel with 5.6 grams of silver. The front of the coin had the image of the king of the Achaemenid Empire armed with a bow and arrow and on the back of the coin, there were some depressions. Coins of Darius III showed the archer holding a dagger. Coinage is minted during the Achaemenid Persian imperial period as needed, but when the war broke out, satraps and local rulers received the lion's share of the accumulated Persian royal treasury to mint the coins. The main question addressed in this paper is: what were the security function of coins of the Achaemenid Persian period and its strengthening and threatening factors?

### **The Significance of the study**

The significance of this study refers to examining the coins, especially their security function, with a different approach to find new innovative points.

### **Research background**

The pre-Islamic coins received attention from many historians and researchers of Iran. For example, Gershevitch was among those who attributed the minting of the coins in Iran to Cyrus Achaemenid King (Gershevitch, 2006) and also Babelon who was the curator of the coins in Paris Museum, Pope in the book titled "A Survey of Persian Art", and Iranian researchers including Dadvar & Makvandi (2012),

Feizi, Montashari & Mohammadi Loron (2017), Avarzamani (2001) and Malekzadeh Bayani (2009) have focused on Iranian coins and have written a book titled "The History of coins". However, none of the above-mentioned studies and other research conducted in this regard have investigated the security functions of Achaemenid-era coins.

### **Methodology**

This study is conducted using a library research method and the data were collected by referring to the museum's documents, books, existing literature, inscriptions, and coins from the Achaemenid Empire.

### **Achaemenid-era coins**

Coins not only were a valuable trading instrument but also had played a political, security function. The kings promoted a harmonious and one-sided belief system in the society by placing their image as well as the images of religious, ritual, and political symbols on the coins. Achaemenid-era coins were characterized by the fact that only one side was minted. The front face of the coins showed a figure of the king, standing upright and holding a bow in one hand and an arrow, dagger, or spear in the other hand. The back of the coins showed a bezel in irregular rectangular shape resulting from a tool minting the coin. The Achaemenid Empire mostly minted gold and silver coins. Achaemenid gold coins of daric (8.42 grams) and double daric (16.65 grams) were minted (Gershevitch, 2006). During the Achaemenid Empire, royal coins, satrapies, or provinces were minted with the king's image in the conquered lands. Darius I commonly known as Darius the Great introduced an identical currency for the Achaemenid Empire after 517 B.C. This currency was chosen based on the Achaemenid monetary system and consisted of a new thick gold coin that had a standard weight of 8.4 g. Only the Royal Mint could mint the gold. The grade of this gold was 3%, and this standard was considered as the basis for the prevalence of gold





coins in world trade for several centuries (Babelon, 2009). The most common medium of exchange was a silver coin weighing 5.6 grams equal to 1.20 gold coins in value. During the Achaemenid Empire, the ratio of gold and silver with equal weights was 1:131.3. Precious metals that belonged to the treasury were minted and converted into coins only with the discretion from the emperor (Grantovskiĭ, 2010); (Table 1).

### Reinforcing factors affecting the security function of Achaemenid-era coins

The Achaemenid Empire ruled over West Asia and prevented the rulers of this region from power, which

led to an unprecedented concentration of power. It was considered one of the most important factors contributing to economic growth. Besides, Darius's economic policy and his efforts to build the road to facilitate rapid communication, introduce new scales of weights and measures, spread the coins and an identical currency in the imperial diameter, and control the government over economic affairs had exerted unprecedented effects on business. According to Ghirshman (1933), the growth of world trade led to achieving higher living standards in Achaemenid Iran, and a standard of living in Babylon was considerably higher than that in Greece (Ghirshman, 1993). Olmstead believed that rarely among the

Table 1. The types of coins of the Achaemenid Empire. Source: Rezaei bagh bidi, 2012, 5 &6; Babelon, 2009, 8-26 .

No	The features of the Achaemenid coins	The images of the coin
1	Torso of bearded archer wearing the crenelated crown and sleeved chiton. This archer holds the bow in his left hand and two arrows in his right hand. This image is found on only some Siglos.	
2	The archer who had no pointed beard is depicted on coins.	
3	Unlike the previous two images, the lower part of the sleeved chiton is not folded over the left knee but extends as a half-circle from the left knee to the right foot ankle.	
4	Archer is in full-length view with the appearance similar to the type 1 Archer coin, holding quiver over his back, a bow in his left hand and a dagger in his right hand, and is in a kneeling or running position.	

ancient monarchs do we find rulers like Darius “who so thoroughly understood that the prosperity of the nation must rest on a sound economic foundation”. He also introduced a new weight, the “Karsha”, in the shape of a pyramidion for the standardization of weights and measures (Olmstead, 2014). According to some historians, Darius I ordered the minting of darics in the middle of the first month of winter in 504 BC Egypt, and India used the gold coins or darics and the difficulties in trade between the various ethnic groups and regions of Iran were resolved. The darics were minted by the king himself, but not the silver coins. Darius’ satrapies were allowed to mint the required silver coins. Daric coins were very popular in all adjacent countries, especially Greece in a way that foreign banks eagerly accepted Achaemenid coins and conducted an important part of their banking transactions using them. The new gold coins were called the Daric and the silver coins were called the Sigloi. The Darics and Sigloi were trade coins. Darics weighed 8.42 grams and Sigloi weighed 10.75 grams. The grade of the gold coins or darics was very high which contained only 3% of the alloy. The high purity of gold darics led to their popularity and made Achaemenid gold coins which were always valid. At the end of the Achaemenid Empire, double darics were also minted. The quality of gold coins remained the same throughout the Achaemenid period. Darics and Sigloi carried the images of Persian archers. These images changed during the two centuries of Achaemenids’ monarchy. Since the date of the minting of Achaemenid coins is unknown, images displaying on the coins during the rule of each king are determined based on other pieces of evidence. Achaemenid coins, except for exceptional cases, have an image on one side only, and, usually, square depressions and unevenness are seen in their back (Bayani, 2002). Other reinforcing factors contributing to the security function of Achaemenid-era coins refer to its effective relationship with measures such as establishing post offices and post

roads, establishing the organization of the eyes and ears of the king, minting coins by Great Satraps, adopting Darius I’s policy of religious tolerance, bow and arrows and imperial crown exhibited on the coins, using the unit of weight and currency in trade, permitting the internal independence of the satraps, paying the attention to water roads, providing political and economic security and most importantly building the imperial roads. To maintain a connection between the various imperial cities and the capital cities, Darius I built a network of roads that remained stable for a long time and was used primarily for administrative purposes and made trade easier. These roads provided access to safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transport. Throughout these roads, which branched off from Shush, the administrative capital of the country, trade and the expansion of cultural ties and the exchange of ideas perform under the shadow of the imperial flag (Frye, 2014, 17). According to Frye, two salt deserts, the Kavīr and Lūt deserts, which separated the east from west, led to an increase in the number of immigrants heading toward India or Mesopotamia. However, a trade route was built near Ctesiphon passing from Kermanshah, Hamadan, and Tehran to Herat. Then, one road ahead the northeast connected to Marv, Bukhara, and Samarkand. Another road crossed from the south to Sistan and the east to Kandahar and the mountains to the Indus plain. Other roads going through Tehran or Hamedan were bordered to the north by Azerbaijan and Armenia and Caspian and Black seas or to the south by Isfahan and Fars. However, the main historical road was the Great Khorasan Road that later came to be known as the Silk Road, crossing central Iran from east to west (ibid., 18).

### **The continuation of bow and arrows exhibited on Achaemenid coins as a symbol of the whole empire**

The image of the royal crown on the coins was considered a symbol of power, legitimacy, and socio-

political security was. The front of Achaemenid coins bear the image of the king and the back of the coins, in general, there is no special image. Only irregular rectangular depressions, which may represent a particular image, display on the back of the coins. The Darics, Double darics, and Shekel and some silver coins minted by satraps and subordinates, generally displayed the image of a Persian archer or the image of a king fighting a lion or riding on his horse. Also, some types of coins exhibited images similar to different Achaemenid kings from the time of Darius I to Darius III.

According to Charles Lenorman (1949), the heads of the people displaying on these coins (darics) are divided into two distinct types: a straight nose that is exhibited on the coins and must belong to the image of Xerxes or Darius I (Babelon, 2009); (Fig. 1).

### Threatening factors affecting the security function of Achaemenid-era coins

The Achaemenid Empire came to power and gained

power from the Persian people, but as monarchy established, the source of their power was the vast estates that existed throughout the Achaemenid Empire. With the decay of the Achaemenid Empire, chief of police headquarters became virtually independent, especially after, contrary to the main rule, it became customary to appoint them as the generals of their city. Alexander who defeated Darius III in 330 BC and also continued the basic customs and traditions of the Achaemenids (Lambton, 1960). All the kings of the Persian Achaemenid Empire did not follow the wise method of Cyrus and Darius, rather they were immersed in wealth, bliss, corruption, greed, and selfishness. The minting of coins in the time of Darius marked the beginning of a stable government with peace, security, and prosperity, but soon the profiteers threatened the power and security of the Achaemenid Empire by raising interest rates at banks. The emergence of a private banking system is one of the interesting economical phenomena during the Achaemenid period. According to Olmstead

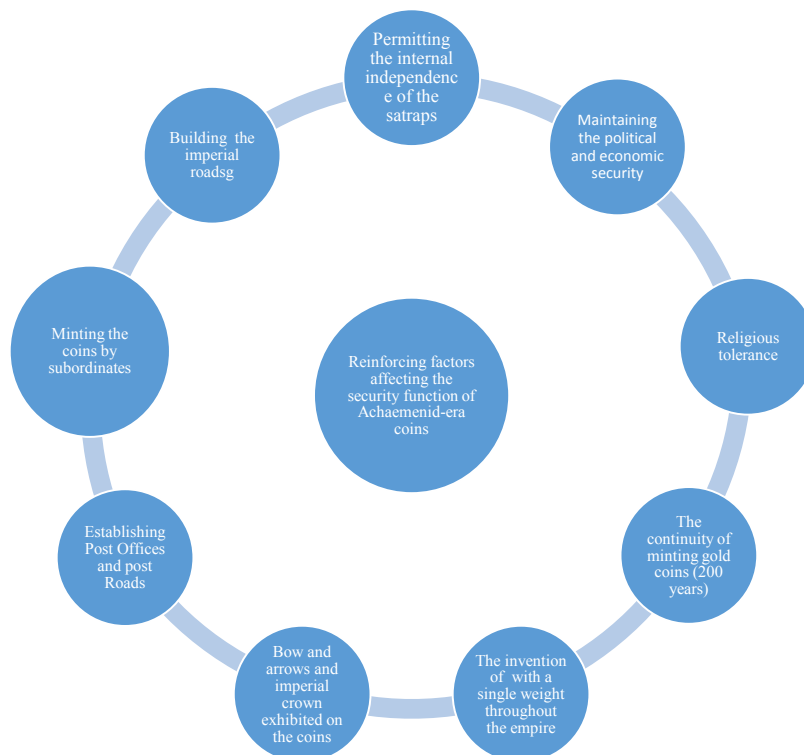


Fig. 1. Reinforcing factors affecting the security function of Achaemenid-era coins. Source: authors.

(2014), temples as major economic units offered the loans. Agricultural loans were interest-free, but they stipulated that if the loan did not repay, a 25-percent interest would be added to the loan. The rate of interest on non-agricultural loans was 20 percent. If the borrower was not a reliable person or if he did not repay on time, a heavy penalty would be added to the loan. Regarding unreliable persons, the lender usually took a house, a piece of land, or a slave as a pawn. In these cases, there was no rent for the pawn and no interest in the money. If the borrower failed to repay the loan, the lender would have taken the pawn. Other loans demanded both pawn and interest and stipulated that everything in the city and outside the city belonging to him was considered as a pawn (Sami, 1964, 2, 78). Other threatening factors contributing to the security function of Achaemenid coins with high-interest rates on bank loans include the king's courtiers accepting bribes, increasing tax rates in the subordinate nations, forgetting the religion and ideology of Cyrus II, known as "Cyrus the Great", excessive indulgence and lazy military commanders, weakness of organization of the king's eye and ear and the subordinate nations' successive revolt. From Darius the Great time onwards, the Achaemenid kings only were thought of collecting taxes and accumulating gold and silver bars in their treasures (ibid., 79). While the cost of food, clothing, housing, and other necessities of life had been rising since the end of Darius's reign and the income and wages of the active classes of the society were still constant, and thus for the majority of people the purchasing power was decreasing day by day. Undoubtedly, if the Achaemenid kings had used the large sums of money that they had forcibly taken from the Middle Eastern nations as taxation to develop and aid the active classes of society, the taxpayers would not have been forced to receive the bank loans with a forty-percent interest rate. The continuation of this economic policy led to the revolts or rebellions of Babylon, Egypt, and other Middle Eastern countries

and paved the way for the victory of Alexander's policy. Darius III at the Battle of Gogmel said that let this greedy nation (Macedonians and Greek), which has long been thirsty for my treasures, immersed to the neck in gold (ibid., 80). If Darius III and the kings before him had followed the benevolent policy of Cyrus instead of collecting gold bars and oppressing the subordinate nations, Alexander would not have thought of invading Iran. The king and his courtiers were extravagant. As can be seen in the cuneiform inscriptions, the Achaemenid Empire from the time of Darius onwards, handed over different parts of the country to contractors such as Ajibi and Sons and Morasho and Sons, and others to provide their comfort and convenience and collect taxes. These contractors would collect taxes and deliver them to the royal treasury. Also, they not only received tax from the people but also ruthlessly plundered the people. Cuneiform inscriptions of the fifth century showed that one of the Iranian officers complained about the actions of these tax collectors, leading to his conviction, but Morasho and Sons paid large bribes to the Iranian officers and did not convict (Petrushevsky et al., 1974). Olmstead thought that because they collected heavy taxes and received silver and gold as tax coins, many landlords who could not pay the ransom were forced to give their property as a pawn to wicked lenders to provide silver and gold coins. According to Olmstead, the continuation of this oppressive policy by the king and rulers of the Achaemenid Empire caused inflation and rising prices for people (Olmstead, 2014); (Fig. 2).

### **The policy of the allotment of the gold darics and the Peloponnesian War**

Following Themistocles' death and the expulsion of Simon from the country, the relationship between Sparta and Athens gradually became colder. Athens emerged as the supreme naval power at the time of Pericles 461 BC. There were several causes for the Peloponnesian War: after the Delian league,



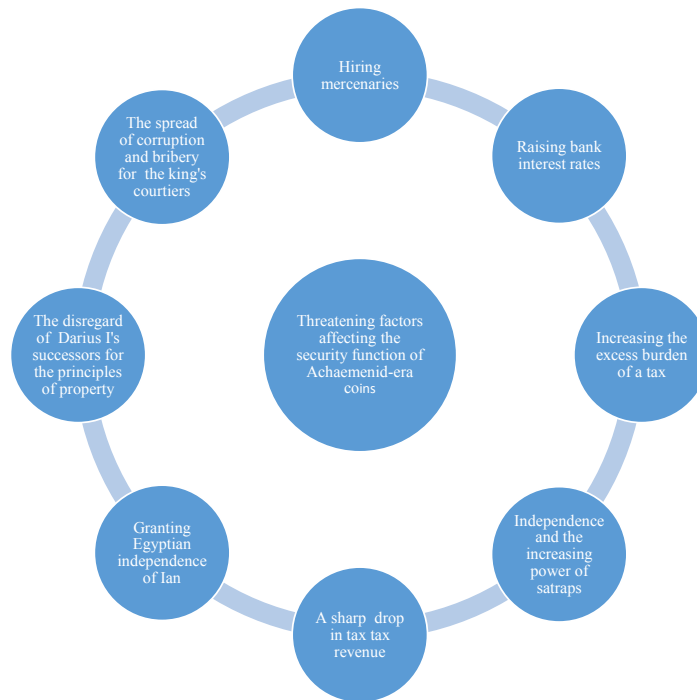


Fig. 2. Threatening factors affecting the security function of Achaemenid-era coins. Source: Khodadadian, 2007; Hinz, 2010; Koch, 2007.

the Athenian government built long walls and large buildings there and emerged as the naval power. It didn't take long until this Athenian power disturbs its neighbors such as Thebes and Carthage, and as Sparta was hostile to the Athenian power and the walls built on it, the Thebes and Carthage naturally followed Sparta and made a pact with it to prevent the growth of Athenian power. Thus the Peloponnesian War began in 431 BC between Athens and Sparta until Sparta finally assigned the administration of the war to Lysander as the Spartan commander. Lysander defeated the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War leading to the fall of Athens. Most of the cities and islands of Athens were conquered by the Spartans. The treasury of Athens was empty, and Athenian aristocrats wanted to go peace and the alliance with the Spartans. In 404 BC, Athenians accepted the Spartans' offer of peace, destroyed its fences, renounced all its possessions, left the democratic government, and agreed to transport Spartan forces to the Acropolis. This defeat led to Athenian surrender. As a result, the Peloponnesian War was ended; however, Athens

could withstand for a long time against the forces of the Greek governments that enjoyed the help of Persian coins (Pirnia, 2009, 1211; Sami, 2010, 208). During the Peloponnesian War, mercenary forces made up the bulk of Iranian armies. Mercenaries fight for money and often joined the military service by forces. The presence of mercenaries weakened and degraded the army. Successive revolts or rebellions of subordinated nations, military defeats, and police uprisings with the help of Greek mercenaries caused Ardashir I to fundamentally reconsider his policy toward Greece. He realized that divided Greece would pose no threat to the Persian government. Thus, paying bribes to discredit Greek political leaders was on Ardeshir's agenda. Ardashir selected the policy of the Achaemenid Empire (446 to 646 BC) based on 'divide and rule', by inciting Sparta against Athens and vice versa using the greedy strategy (Sami, 2010). Using the policy of "influence of Iran's gold on the Athenian rulers", Ardashir I tried to attract them towards the Persians, and built a creepy atmosphere of fear of Iran over all of

Greece and inform that a new army of Persians led by Xerxes's son will not come to Greece. Iran was pouring its gold towards Greece so that each side that was weakened, Iran tended to the other side and helped to continue these wars and the Achaemenids could maintain their interests in the region, without war and bloodshed. There was no need for a sword for Ardashir anymore because the gold and his golden promises prevented the Greeks from sedition in the western borders of the country even before the Peace of Kallias and the Peloponnesian War, and the Greeks were tempted by gold. The method used by Ardeshir was a new strategy that had not been employed in the diplomatic relations of the countries theretofore, or if it was effective, it was not known (Pirnia, 2009; Sami, 2010). Ardashir I died in December 424 BC. On February 13, 423 BC, the son of Ardashir I, proclaimed himself as the king of Persia under the name of Darius II. Greece's internal strife provided an opportunity for the king to use Iranian gold as a decisive weapon in Greece and weaken both Athens and Sparta by increasing their conflict. During that time, when the Peloponnesian War began, Sparta sought to use Darius I's gold coins to destroy its powerful rival, Athens. Transporting Iranian gold coins instead of Iranian soldiers to the border and enticing both sides of the war made things difficult for the Greeks and easy for the Iranians. Without war occurring between Iran and Greece, Persian gold was used to seduce Athens against Sparta. The war was continued soliciting or offering bribes. Sparta lost its privilege based on the diplomatic style of the Persian emperor but received a large amount of gold. The king became responsible for the international banking system. Tissaphern and Farnabaz, two Persian politicians, used a separate policy to weaken Greece, which achieved a common goal. Finally, the Spartans concluded a treaty with Tissaphern in 414 BC which specified the following articles: ( 1) All the cities and lands that were previously placed under the control of Persians came under the control of the king

of Persia, ( 2) It was decided that the Achaemenid's king and the Spartans would join their forces to prevent the Athenians from collecting taxes in these areas, (3) they outlined a set of mutually agreed with rules of war with Athens, (4) Any city or region that rebelled against the king was considered an enemy of Sparta, and( 5) The king, in turn, considered the rebels against the Lasdemons as his enemies. The Persians took the financial supporting responsibility of the Spartan. The articles of this treaty were not very pleasant to Sparta (Pirnia, 2009); (Table 2).

### Conclusion

Throughout history, coins not only played a major role in facilitating trade and exchange of goods but also considered as security and propaganda tools for the kings. During the Achaemenid period, the most important coins minted had played a security function, namely "Royal Gold Coins" and "Satrapy Coins". During the Achaemenid Persian Empire, the number of satraps and their political position witnessed frequent changes. However, in many cases, these changes can be seen in the study of coins and inscriptions. The policy of the allotment of the gold coins, in addition to the separation of Egypt from Iran and a rise in the prices of basic goods, was considered as one of the most important factors threatening the security functions of Achaemenid coins.

From the time of Ardashir I and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, the Iranian government pursued a policy of 'divide and rule' by displaying its gold coins and using this new diplomatic strategy. The king of Iran not only intervened in the internal affairs of Greece but also prevented the Greeks from invading the borders of the countries under his control. However, this policy continued until the time of Darius II, who also played the role of international banker through his policies and created conflict between Athens and Sparta. According to historical sources, these wars not only began with the support of the Iranian government but also ended by the order of



Table 2. Consequences of the allotment policy of the gold coins of the Achaemenid during the Peloponnesian War. Source: authors.

No	Positive consequences	Negative consequences
1	Creating peace for the subordinating nations in the region of Asia Minor	Neglecting the training administrative and financial affairs in the region of Asia Minor
2	The conflict between the government and Greek cities	An alliance of government with Greek cities at the time of Alexander's invasion of Iran and the ineffectiveness of the policy of the allotment of the gold coins
3	Control of the subordinating nations by the kings, including Ardashir I, Darius II, Ardashir II, and Ardashir III by hiring mercenaries	the revolts or rebellions of nations and the weakness of the Achaemenids as a result of the policy of hiring mercenaries
4	The expansion of trade in the Achaemenid Empire	The expansion of trade in the Achaemenid Empire
5	The effectiveness of the policy of gold coins in political tactics	The ineffectiveness of the policy of the allotment of the gold coins at the time of Darius III and the fall of the Achaemenids
6	Organizing tax collection	Inability to collect taxes due to the revolt of the subordinate nations, especially Egypt

the Iranian government and the policy of the allotment of Persian coins. In conclusion, Persian coins were sharper than the swords of military soldiers. In other words, minting the coins was effective in providing internal security, but caused insecurity between rival and hostile governments.

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