SASANIAN ROYAL EMBLEMS AND THEIR REEMERGENCE IN THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY DECCAN

In the fourteenth century in the Deccan in Central India, a well-known Sultanate dynasty was established whose sultans called themselves Bahmani. They claimed to be descended from the Sasanians, and in their buildings they decorated the crowns of the arches with a device which varies in its details, but has as its main components two open wings surmounted by a crescent and sometimes a disk that closely resembles the emblems on the crowns of the Sasanian emperors. At a period when there is little evidence that the Sasanian royal emblems were still known to the Persian-speaking world, it is difficult to see how the Bahmani sultans could have been aware of them. Yet the close resemblance between the Bahmani motifs and those on the Sasanian crowns should not be dismissed as merely coincidental. So far scholars have offered no explanation for the origin of the motif or its probable connection with the Bahmani's claim of noble origin.

To what extent the Bahmani claim had any validity is not certain. The founder of the dynasty, which lasted for nearly two centuries, was Zafar Khan Hasan Gangu, a Persian adventurer at the Delhi court. Muhammad b. Tughluq made him governor of Gulbarga, from where he led a successful rebellion against the sultan in 1347-48. Zafar Khan claimed to be a descendant of Bahman the son of Isfandiar, through his lineage with Bahram Gur. In the works of the early Muslim historians, who used the Khudây nânâma and other Sasanian sources, Bahman appears as a real historical character, while his legendary life is celebrated in Firdawsi's Shahnâmâ, which in the fourteenth century was regarded as the standard history of pre-Islamic Iran. According to A. D. H. Bivar, the legends of Bahman may indeed have some historical basis, and may allude to the post-Alexandrian power struggle in northern Iran between Eumenes (wâhuûnî), the former secretary of Alexander, and Antigonus, Alexander's successor.

In the court of Delhi in the fourteenth century Zafar Khan was not the only personage who claimed a noble origin. Ibn Battuta records that at the time of Muhammad b. Tughluq the governor of Qanuj was Amir Firuz Badakhshani, who traced his genealogy back to Bahram Gur. Malik Karay, another personage at the court, also claimed descent from Bahram Gur. A third was Amir Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad b. Abd al-Qahir, a descendant of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustansar. In fact Delhi was full of Arab and Persian fortune hunters who had heard of the gold of India and left their homelands to seek wealth and power at the sultan's court. Muhammad b. Tughluq, whose brutality matched his generosity, welcomed them and often gave them more than they deserved, but he frowned upon any one who ever wished to leave his court. Some who tried to escape in secret paid the price with their lives. Many others, such as Zafar Khan, stayed and were raised to positions of power. The earliest Bahmani buildings are in Gulbarga, which was made the capital of the sultanate until 1424 when the ninth sultan, Ahmad Shah Wali (1422-36), moved his capital to his newly reconstructed town of Bidar. The early examples of the winged motif are therefore to be found on the arches of the buildings of Gulbarga, particularly in the few original structures inside the fort and on the tombs attributed to the first sultans, situated to the west of the town. A good example of the device is on the exterior of the entrance arches of a square tomb chamber distinguished by its segmented melon-shaped dome. The emblem (fig. 1) consists of two winged forms with foliated decoration on the wings, spreading upwards and outwards and cradling the crescent moon, within which is a disk carved in the form of a

Fig. 1. Motif on the entrance arch of an anonymous tomb chamber with a segmented dome in Gulbarga.
rosette. A similar motif also appears in the interior of the tomb of Firuz Shah Bahmani,12 in Haft Gunbad, the necropolis of the later sultans, situated to the east of the town.

While the general form of the motif always remains the same, the details vary in different buildings and sometimes among the motifs on a single building. For example, in the tomb of Firuz Shah Bahmani (fig. 2) the motifs on the interior over all the arches, including those of the squinches, differ slightly from each other, and some have the word Allah in the center. On the exterior the motifs (figs. 3 and 4) are quite different and are simplified. They appear over the niches and windows on two levels, and although each motif varies slightly from the others, they all fall into two general categories: those with the wings stretched outwards, and those with the wings pointing upwards. In both forms the surface of the wings is plain and the outline foliated. The disk is absent, but the crescent is designed so that its center is in the form of a circle. In another building, an anonymous and little-known tomb chamber (figs. 5 and 6) south of the fort and now in the middle of the built-up area of Gulparga, the crescent is more pronounced, and its center is circular, again bearing the word Allah carved in relief (fig. 7). The word suggests that there was a religious symbolism behind the motif, as was indeed the case with the Sasanian emblems. The tomb seems to date from the early decades of the Bahmani period, and probably belongs to one of the first Bahmani sultans. The winged form on this tomb chamber is more compact, and the

Fig. 2. Tomb of Firuz Shah Bahmani. General view.

Fig. 3. Tomb of Firuz Shah Bahmani. One of the motifs on the exterior of the arches.