

Origins of the modern Zarathushti 'Phèto' worn on the Subcontinent

By Sam Kerr

The word '*turban*' is a corrupted adoption, loosely used in English to refer to several varieties of head gear in the form of cloth head-wraps. The word was derived from the Persian word '*dulband*'. In the Islamic tradition it is composed of a length of cloth usually wound around an inner sturdy 'hat' of varying shapes as a head wear. The word '*dastār*' in Persian, meaning a head-wrap has been adopted by the Sikh community, a more respectful Punjabi word for a Sikh 'turban'. The Sikh '*turban*' is in fact a modified copy of the Crowns of our Sassanian Emperors with the *twisted length of the hair of the scalp tied into a knot (Gujarati word: Amboorō / Greek: Orymbos)*. The Orymbos of the Crowns was covered by silken cloth decorated with pearls and gemstones. The Orymbos could be worn only by the Ruler and the Prince chosen as heir. The Sikhs use a square piece of ordinary cloth and cover it up with a flap end of the ritualistically elaborate making of their head-dress. In Hindi, a turban is called a '*pagri*'. Unlike in the Middle East (and perhaps later in some African) tradition the pagri cloth in India is not wound around an inner hat. Among western societies the 'turban' is worn mainly by migrant Sikh men and, sometimes, by western women in a flight of fancy as a tight fitting fashionable head wear

Such head wraps that men wear in Asian and African cultures have different names and are worn in different ways depending on the region and custom. In India the size, colour, mode of wear slowly evolved into distinctive separate characteristics to become a sign of the wearer's status in society. A rich colourful turban is still particularly put on by the bridegroom during the marriage ceremony much in the same way as our Zarathushti bridegroom wears the '*Phato*' (or the unique Zarathushti 'Pāgri') during the marriage ceremony.

The purpose of this article is to try and trace the evolution over the centuries from the Iranian '*dastār*' and the Sassanian Crowns to the modern Zarathushti '*phato*' worn on the Subcontinent.

History reveals that the 'diadem', which had been first worn by the Achaemenian Persian Emperors, has been acknowledged to be 'of eastern origin'. The Greeks called it '*diadema*'. It was a fillet or band of linen or silk, plain or richly embroidered, and was worn tied round the brow of the forehead. It was later adopted by the Greeks and the Romans. (See **figure 1- Diodotus I c.246-250 BCE**, satrap of Bactria during the Seleucid era after Alexander).



Figure 1

The Greek and Roman heads of State were satisfied with their head band 'Diadem' as a sign of prestige and authority. Centuries later it was adopted by the Byzantine Emperor **Constantine I (307-337 CE)** and, then, was adopted by all subsequent rulers of the later Roman Empire (as depicted in their coins). This cloth band on the brow was the precursor to the crown of the emerging European Royalty after the fall of the Roman Empire. A close look will reveal the European Crowns were replicas and modifications of the Sassanian Crowns.

It is important to remember the distinction, for, although diadem and crown are now used as synonymous terms, the two were originally quite distinct. The confusion between them has, perhaps, come about from the fact that the modern crown seems to be rather an evolution from the diadem than the lineal descendant of the older crowns. The linen or silk diadem was eventually exchanged for a flexible band of gold - the lamina, which was worn in its place round the forehead. The further development of the crown from this was readily effected by the addition of an upper row of ornament – the super-structure. Thus, the much later introduced medieval European royal and the crowns of England after the fall of the Roman Empire were merely modified diadems and copies of the crowns of the Sassanian rulers (224-641 AD).

The decay and ultimate fall of the Roman Empire had started when Romulus Augustus was deposed as the Western Roman Emperor in 476 AD while still young. Rome had begun to decay and fall to foreign powers with the death of Justinian I, the last Roman Emperor who tried to reconquer the west, in 565 AD. The subsequent spread of Islam after the fall of the Sassanian Empire in 641 AD - the final battle of Nihavand was the last nail). The Roman colonies in Europe now free of the fetters earnestly commenced their self rule and slowly developed their own Monarchies a thousand years after our Sassanian Renaissance in 224 CE. The European monarchies borrowed much that was enviable from the Sassanian rulers – the structure of their Courts, their court etiquette, manners, customs, and Royal dress and, of course the make-up of the Crowns. In England it was after many minor conquests and interludes with the invading Vikings that Athelstan conquered Northumbria in 927 CE and adopted the title *Rex Anglorum*. Starting with Henry II as late as 1154 CE, the title became *Rex Angliae* (King of England) a thousand years after the Sassanian resurgence. Monarchies in the rest of Europe followed suit. By this time, groups of the followers of Zarathushtra after the loss of Iran to the Arabs in the Battle of Nihavand 641 CE, had well and truly established settlements in Gujarat, India as refugees.

The origins of the modern 'Pheto'.

To understand the origins of the '*Pheto*' more closely let us delve further on the Sassanian Crowns. I have taken the outline of the description of the Emperors Crowns from my *The Sassanian Dynasty - Historical Perspective* www.Avesta.org. In the outline of the History of the Dynasty I have used mainly a Silver Dirham (Greek: Drachma) to represent the image of those rulers known to have minted coins during their rule. Here I am presenting only the bust of the Rulers on the obverse side of the coins to describe the crowns.

Studying the Head dress of rulers on the Sassanian coins:

The bust of the ruler: The face of the ruler **always** looks to the right (in contrast, all the Parthian Coins show the King **always** facing left). The face looking forwards is seen only in some Gold Coins. Each Royal Crown made of gold represented the Khwarena of the ruler and, thus, **was unique to each ruler**. The Crowns were commonly **dedicated to the Yazatas Verethragna, Mithra or Anahita**. The previous crown had to be replaced by a new crown if there was any interruption or major occurrence during the rule. This happened during a new phase in the rule or if the ruler was deposed and regained the throne or after a glorious victory in battle against the Romans, since the crown traditionally represented power, legitimacy, victory, triumph, honour and glory.

The golden 'Tiara' - a thin rim or broad 'lamina': The Tiara or Diadem of gold was of variable thickness. The thin rimmed Tiara of Ardeshir I (224-240 CE) shows the huge **Orymbos** covered over and supported by a bejewelled silken cloth – called the '**Cap**' by numismatists (See **figure 2 Ardeshir I**). It was either a thin ring, single or double rimmed, adorned with single or double layers of pearls or gemstones or a thicker lamina decorated with arched designs and studded with gemstones.



Figure 2

The lamina was very thick in the case of **Shahpur III (383-388 CE - See figure 3)**. An exact replica of it was adopted centuries later in a Royal Crown in England. The Tiara is open at the back to fit the Head. The open end is suitably tied at the back with ribbon or held by a clip adorned with gemstones.



Figure 3

Extensions to the lamina: These were in the form of '*Turrets*'. The number of Turrets varied between one in front to three (with two on sides) or four (another at the back). *Arcaded designs, Wings* (Verethragna), *Eagle Head / Boar Head* (Verethragna) (See [figure 4](#) - busts of *Varahran II & wife Esme 276-293 CE*), *Rays* (Mithra)



Figure 4

(See [figure 5](#) bust of *Varahram I 272-276 CE*).



Figure 5

Narseh's crown (CE 293-303) has a Tiara showing *Palm fronds* of gold as the Lamina with *Palm Leaves* in the place of Turrets. Note the Priest on the right side of the Fire Altar wears a Mithra Crown but does not have an Orymbos of hair (*See figure 6*).



Figure 6

Yazdegard I (CE 399-420) has a large **Crescent** attached to the front of the Lamina. This was continued in all later crowns of the Dynasty (*See figure 7*).



Figure 7

The (Parsi) Ambooro/Sassanian Orymbos in the Head-dress: The hair style and makeup of the head-dress were unique, too. No one but the King could possibly sport an Orymbos of hair. Also permitted was the Prince, after the Council of Nobles and the Mobeds had officially and ceremoniously installed him as heir to the throne. However,



Figure 8

the Mobeds could wear the Mithra Crown but still not sport an Orymbos of hair. (*See Figure 8. The Reverse side of coin* - On the right is the priest tending the Fire & wearing a Crown of Mithra bearing the Sun's rays. On the left is the King Hormazd I 271-272 CE, crown showing the Orymbos of hair).

Nearly 1500 years later the Sikhs, a breakaway martial group from among the Hindus of the Punjab, adopted the Sassanian Head-dress using stiff starched cloth in the place of the gold lamina and other portions of the crown. Again, the eldest son of volunteering Punjabi families was ceremoniously invested with this unique head-dress covered by a turban. He was installed as a Sikh to uphold and defend the cause of Hinduism, while opposing and countering the spread of Islam after the Moghul conquest during Aurangzeb's cruel regime.

For the Sassanian crown the top part of the long uncut hair from the vertex of the scalp was twisted like a rope, which was then wrapped into a large round (Greek word: '*Orymbos*' (Gujarati: '*Amboorō*'), which was tied at its waist with a ribbon. The Orymbos and the rest of the top hair was *covered over by a silk cloth or felt, richly embroidered with gold and silver thread and studded with pearls and gemstones*. The loose ends were tied again at the back by a ribbon in the form of fillets (like the '*Māthubānu*' of the Zarathushti women on the Subcontinent or the '*Lachak*' of the Iranian Women).

Western writers called this silk, stiff felt or *Pâpière Mâché* head-dress *the 'Cap'* and erroneously divided the Crowns into 'capped' and 'not capped'. When the Lamina was thick the 'Cap' was, naturally not visible and the western writers erroneously deemed the Crown as 'not capped'. It is interesting to note the later Sassanians did have a *firm Cap* (made of firm felt like cloth and probably even made of *Pâpière Mâché* looking like the Zarathushti '*Phêto*') above the Tiara, as in the Crowns of *Qobad I (CE 489-497)*, *Khusru I (the Great Anouservan E Adil CE 531-579)* and *Qobad II (CE Feb-Sept 628)*. (*See figure 9*). A close look at the 'cap' in the crowns of these 3 Emperors clearly resembles the make-up and shape/size of the modern '*Phato*'.



Figure 9

The lowest portion of the *Papyri Mache superstructure of the 'Phato'* was once surrounded/ wrapped around by a length of cloth in different manners [*See figure 10 - the 'Phato' of the great pioneer industrialist, Jamshetji Nasarwanji Tata (1839-1904)*].

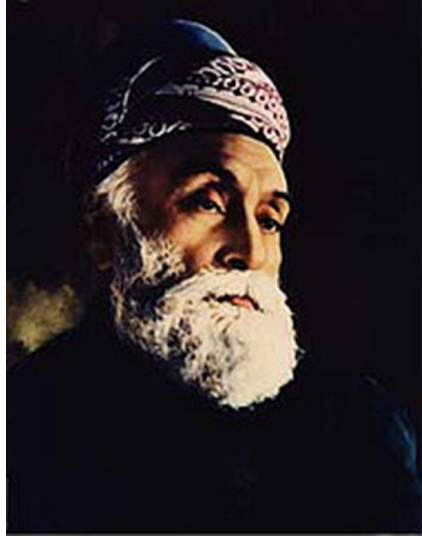


Figure 10

Figure 11 shows an elderly Iranian wearing a similar head dress. The photo shows a distinct old-fashioned turbaned 'phato' as in Jamshetji Tata's painting perhaps done in the late 1800s. It shows a slight shift towards the modern appearance of the 'phato'.

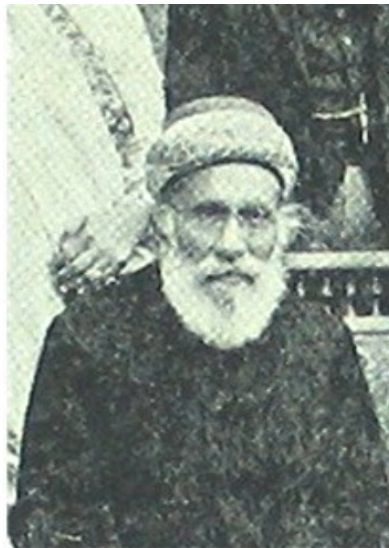


Figure 11

Figure 12 It seems that the young Kadmi gentleman in 1870 around the same time as Jamshetji Tata's painting is still proudly wearing an old-fashioned turban. This could be consistent with the Kadmi's of the Subcontinent (as with their denominational compatriots in Iran to follow the old ways inherited through the Sassanian times perhaps to try and emphasise their solidarity in the face of the terrible persecution they had to undergo in Iran and the obvious discrimination and discountenance on the Subcontinent (as we Kadmis have been scorned by our own co-religionists in India and overseas).



A Parsi gentleman in Kadmi Parsi head-dress.
(Photo. about 1870 A. D.)
-Evolution of the Parsi costume and head-dress.-

Figure 12

It is of importance to let readers be aware that the Qadimis (Kadmis) of Iran particularly in the region of Yazd still practice their old time-honoured ways of Sassanian times, including following the old Sassanian Calendar prior to the introduction of the Julian Calendar in 1079 CE. **The acceptance of the Julian Calendar in Iran (as the ‘New Calendar’) occurred as late as 1079 CE during the reign of Sultan Jalâl al-Din Malekshah Saljûq (1079-1092 CE).** It is therefore called the Jalâli Calendar having the insertion of an auspicious day (Ruz e Vahizak) on February 29 during each Leap Year. (See ‘The day of NouRouz during Sassanian times’. www.ancientiran.com)

The modern ‘Phəto’

The modern ‘phəto’ took its present appearance sometimes during the early part of the 1900s.

Made from stiff long lasting *Pâpière Mâché*, which was covered over by thin felt it was cleverly devised for convenience and ease of wear. The replacement of the old cumbersome wrapping of a length of cloth by a fixed lace of embroidered cloth (like that of the border of a sari) wrapped around and glued like a mini-turban all round the circumference about one and a half inches of the bottom edge of the *Pâpière Mâché structure* it became a readymade Turban-like head dress for daily use. Clearly, it was more a convenient and ingenious adaptation ready to be placed on to the top of the head to save time and effort. Further each ‘Phəto’ came with a metal mould (Gujarati: Laas) on to which it is fitted when not worn, so that the *Pâpière Mâché* structure does not shrink exposed to the environmental heat and humidity of the Subcontinent.

Figure 13 is an amazing early 1900s photo of an Iranian wearing a ‘phəto’ like head-dress.



Figure 13

A final note:

The ‘superstructure’ of some Sassanian crowns: There is valid suspicion that at least some of the kings may have used a firm cap to mask the sparseness of hair on the vertex of the baldness of their head, in the absence of an Orymbos of hair. They introduced a superstructure above the Lamina, on which they exhibited a clump of artificial hair (*see figure 14 of Zamasp 497-499 CE*). This may well have been the beginning later of the wearing of the ‘*Wig or Toupé*’ by the Court Nobles of the Royal Dynasties of Europe.



Figure 14

Later, the wig was widely carried through to judges and lawyers in Courts of Law. It is interesting to note that the English and European Royal Crowns, which had superstructures, were commonly worn by queens, princes and princesses in spite of their well endowed head of hair rather than the Kings who, nevertheless camouflaged their scalp area with a covering of red or purple silken cloth above the Tiara/lamina portion of their crown..

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