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The Political History of Ērānšahr (224-651 CE)¹

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The *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* provides us with Sasanian view of history before their rule.² Thus, the unification of the Iranian Plateau appears to have been a monumental task by Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān.³ The origins of the house of Sāsān as well as that of Ardaxšīr are a mystery. There are so many different stories in regard to the origins of Ardaxšīr and his family lineage that it makes one hesitant in accepting any version. One must be mindful that an upstart in order to gain legitimacy would naturally claim decadency from the ancients. Ardaxšīr is an excellent example of a ruler with an ambiguous lineage, as the array of titles and stories about his suggest.

Ardaxšīr claimed Sāsān as the patronymic of the dynasty. An ostraca found in the eastern Iranian world has the epigraphic form *ssn*. Scholars believed that this was to be identified with *Sāsān*.⁴ M. Schwartz has shown now that the deity mentioned on the ostraca has nothing to do with *Sāsān*, but represented *Sesen*, an old Semitic god which is

¹The basic outline of Sasanian history can be found in M. Morony, "Sāsānids," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1998; A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, Copenhagen, 1944; R.N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, München, 1983, pp. 281-340; *ibid.*, "The Political History of Iran Under the Sasanians," *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. E. Yarshater, Vol. 3(1), 1983, pp. 116-180; K. Schippmann, *Grundzüge der Geschichte des sasanidischen Reiches*, Darmstadt, 1990; J. Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia From 550 BC to 650 AD*, I.B. Tauris Publishers, London & New York, 1996, pp. 151-222; Z. Rubin, "The Sasanid Monarchy," *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 14, 2000, pp. 638-661; For the map of the Sasanian Empire see E. Kettenhofen, *Das Sāsānidenreich*, TAVO, Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1993.

²*Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, I.1, F. Grenet, *La Geste d'ardashir fils de pābag*, *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, editions A Die, 2003, p. 52.

³G. Widengren, "The Establishment of the Sasanian dynasty in the light of new evidence," *La Persia nel Medioevo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 1971, pp. 711-782; J. Wiesehöfer, "Ardašīr I," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, vol. II, 1987, pp. 371-376.

⁴V.A. Livshits, "New Parthian Documents from South Turkmenistan," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. 25, 1977, p. 176.

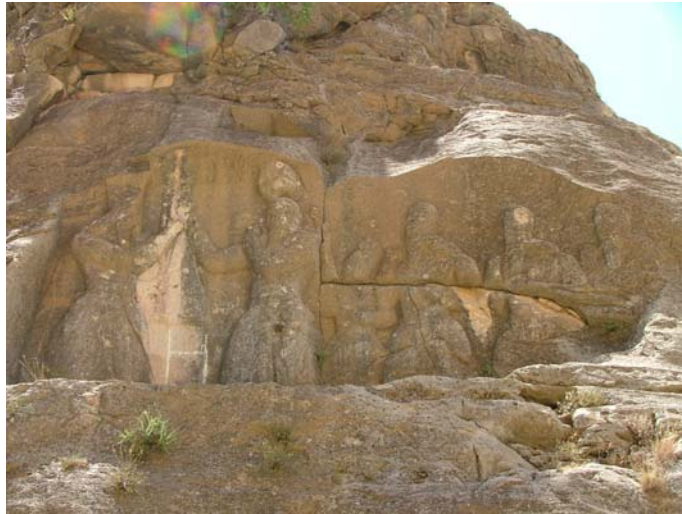
found in Ugaritic as early as the second millennium BCE.⁵ Be that as it may, in the first century CE, however, in Taxila we find coins with the name of *Sasa* which may be connected with *Sāsān* because the emblem on the coin matches those of coat-of-arms for Šābuhr I.⁶ As Ph. Gignoux has suggested, *Sāsān* may very well be a protective deity known in Asia, especially which was invoked against sorcery. This fact is shown by the existence of a seal which states: *sāsān ham sāsān ī bay ud sāsān pāsbān* “O Sāsān, the same Sāsān who is god and Sāsān the protector.”⁷ Furthermore it was claimed that Ardaxšīr was (KAP IV.19) *ardaxšīr ī kay ī pābagān ī az tōhmag ī sāsān nāf ī dārā šāh* “Ardaxšīr the Kayānid, the son of Pābag, from the race of Sāsān, from the family of King Dārāy.” When looking at this line one gets the sense that every possible connections to divinity, royalty and nobility is made by Ardaxšīr, which can only mean that he was none of them! The Kayānid dynasty in the *Avesta*, the little understood and probably known Sāsān, and the connection to Dārāy (probably Darius I and Dārāyān II) all suggest this falsification of a lineage.

The inscription of Ardaxšīr’s son, Šābuhr I does, however, mention that Pābag was the father of Ardaxšīr, but he was neither the only son, nor the eldest. Even here we see an ambitious man who is contemplating an empire from the fringes of the province of Persis. Later Persian and Arabic sources state that Ardaxšīr was the *argbed* (Castilian) of Dārābgird in eastern Persis when he began his campaign. Where we find the earliest physical evidence for Ardaxšīr, however, is at Ardaxšīr-xwarrah (Fērōz-ābād and also known as Gūr), on the southern fringes of the province of Persis. It is from Ardaxšīr-xwarrah, far away from Istaxr, the stronghold of the kings of Persis and yet farther away from the Arsacid king of kings, Ardawān that the Persian begun his campaign of conquest.

⁵ M. Schwartz, “Sasm, Sesen, St. Sisinnios, Sesengen Barpharangès, and ... ‘Semanglof,’” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 10, 1996, pp. 253-257; *ibid.*, “Sesen: a Durable East Mediterranean God in Iran,” *Proceedings of the Third European Conference of Iranian Studies held in Cambridge, 11th to 15th September 1995*, Part 1, Old and Middle Iranian Studies, ed. N. Sims-Williams, Wiesbaden, 1998, Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, pp. 9-13.

⁶R.N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, Munchen, 1983, p. 200.

⁷Ph. Gignoux, “Sāsān ou le dieu protecteur,” *Proceedings of the Third European Conference of Iranian Studies*, Part 1: Old and Middle Iranian Studies, ed. N. Sims-Williams, Wiesbaden, pp. 4; *ibid.*, *Man and Cosmos in Ancient Iran*, Roma, 2001, P. 72



Ardaxšīr-xwarrah

Ardaxšīr's campaign may be connected to his first rock-relief which shows him receiving the diadem of rulership from Ohrmazd in front of his small retinue. The year for this start may be 205-206 CE,⁸ when he had his first rock-relief as well. This time coincides with Arsacid king Walāxš's rule (192-207 CE) and wars with the Roman emperor Septimius Severus.⁹ By 211/212 CE Ardaxšīr had been able to subjugate the local petty rulers of the Province of Persis. We may assume that all this time Ardaxšīr-xwarrah served as the launching and hiding place for Ardaxšīr and the palace and the fort on the mountain was his stronghold. By this time he would have begun minting coins with the title of *bay šāh ardaxšīr* "(His) majesty king Ardaxšīr" to demonstrate his aspirations.¹⁰ Official Sasanian historiography states that Pābag dethroned the king of Istaxr, Gozīhr.¹¹ Then the question would be then why Ardaxšīr I would claim to be a king if his father Pābag had dethroned the local king at Istaxr? This issue may hint at tensions between Pābag and Ardaxšīr's aspirations for their family and who would be the eventual ruler of the province of Persis. It appears that Pābag had not chosen Ardaxšīr as the king, but the young man had himself aspired to the throne. The early coins of the Sasanians suggest that Pābag had designated his elder son, Šābuhr as the heir.

⁸R. Altheim-Stiehl, "Das früheste Datum der sasanidischen Geschichte, vermittelt durch die Zeitangabe der mittelpersisch-parthischen Inschrift aus Bišāpūr," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, vol. 11, 1978, p. 116.

⁹Wiesehöfer, "Ardašīr I.," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, p. 372.

¹⁰M. Alram, "The Beginning of Sasanian Coinage," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 13, 1999, p. p. 68; M. Alram & R. Gyselen, *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum Paris –Berlin Wien*, Band I, Wien, 2003, p. 93; for all the titles as reflected in the material culture as well as texts see Ph. Huyse, "Die sasanidische Königstitulatur: Eine Gegenüberstellung der Quellen," *Ērān ud Anērān. Studien zu den Beziehungen zwischen dem Sasanidenreich und der Mittelmeerwelt. Beiträge des Internationalen Colloquiums in Eutin*, 8.-9. Juni 2000, eds. J. Wiesehöfer and Ph. Huyse, München, 2006, pp. 181-202.

¹¹Agathias, *The Histories*, Book 2.27, p. 61. For Pābag and his relationship to Ardaxšīr see R.N. Frye, "Zoroastrian Incest," *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata*, eds. G. Gnoli and L. Lanciotti, Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, Roma, 1985, pp. 445-455; also M. Shaki, "Sasan ke bud?," *Iranshenasi*, vol. 2, no. 1, Spring 1990, pp. 78-80.



Coin of Šābuhr and Pābag

Obverse: *bgy šhpwhly MLK'* "(His) Majesty, king Šābuhr"

Reverse: *BRH bgy p'pky MLK'* "son of (His) Majesty, king Pābag."

In our sources Pābag is also said to have been the priest of the fire-temple of Anāhīd at the city of Istaxr and this must have been a stage for the rallying of the local Persian warriors who were devoted to the cult of this deity.¹² Pābag's priestly function can also be seen from a graffito at Persepolis.¹³ We may also accept that proximity of the graffiti of Pābag and the Achaemenid structure suggests that these monuments were important for the Sasanians and in effect they were attempting to be heirs to their builders.



Pābag at Persepolis

One should not rule out the idea that Pābag was the priest at the Anāhīd fire-temple at Istaxr and so his religious power may have given backing to Ardashīr's claim to rulership by being knowledgeable about Zoroastrian tradition.

Anāhīd is important, since she is an object of devotion in the Zoroastrian sacred text, the *Avesta*, (see Yašt V called *Ābān Yašt*), by heroes, warriors and kings. During the Achaemenid period, in the beginning of the fifth century BCE, Artaxerxes II, also

¹²For study on the cult of Anāhīd see M.L. Chaumont, "Le culte de la déesse Anāhītā (Anahit) dans la religion des monarques d'Iran et d'Arménie au Ier siècle de notre ère," *Journal Asiatique*, Vol. 253, 1965, pp. 168-171; and her "Le culte de Anāhītā à Stakhr et les premiers Sassanides," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, Vol. 153, 1958, pp. 154-175. Tabarī also gives further information, *The History of al-Tabarī*, translated by C.E. Bosworth, 1999, p. 4.

¹³E. Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East*, Hacker Art Books, New York, reprint 1988, p. 309; P. Callieri, "At the roots of the Sasanian royal imagery: the Persepolis graffiti," *Ērān ud Anērān: Studies Presented to Boris Il'ič Maršak on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, eds. M. Compareti, P. Raffetta, G. Scarcia, Venice, 2006, pp. 129-148.

worshipped Anāhīd (Anahita) along with Mihr (Mithra) and Ohrmazd (Ahurā Mazdā). Thus her cult must have been an old one in Persis and the temple may have been a location where the Persian tradition was kept alive. Her warlike character was the symbiosis of ancient Near Eastern (Ištar), Hellenic (Athena / Anaitis) and Iranian tradition which provided legitimating for kingship in the Sasanian period.¹⁴ Thus, Pāgab in our sources if provided the double priest-king identity which is a recurrent pattern in Iranian dynastic historiography.

Ardaxšīr appears not to have been satisfied with this arrangement and rebelled either against his father or after his father's death against his elder brother Šābuhr. Sasanian historiography tells us that before the two brothers met in battle, Šābuhr died accidentally. Had Ardaxšīr had his brother killed? We will never know for sure, but Ardaxšīr's ambition would have encouraged him to take such a step. By (211/212 CE?) he had become the king of Persis. It had taken him five years from his stronghold in Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah to take control of the province of Persis.

He now would begin a struggle with the Arsacid ruler, Ardawān IV. This time which may have lasted a decade would have been spent consolidating his power in Persis and the conquest of adjoining regions which would have alarmed Ardawān. It seems that other brothers of Ardaxšīr were also worrisome to him and he had to deal with them.¹⁵

Ardawān had sent armies to subjugate Ardaxšīr, but each time the young Persian had been victorious. The Arsacid king now had to take matters into his own hands and once and for all finish the work that his subject kings and generals could not accomplish. However, it was Ardaxšīr I was able to defeat Ardawān (Artabanus IV) at the plain of Hormozgān in 224 CE and established the Sasanian Empire.¹⁶ From then on Ardaxšīr took the title of *šāhān šāh* "King of Kings" and began the conquest of a territory which would be called *Ērānšahr* or simply *Ērān* / Iran.

But before this fateful battle between the last Arsacid king and the Ardaxšīr, much had happened which did not suggest a decline of the Arsacid dynasty. Ardawān had held his own fighting the emperor Caracalla and the Romans close to Nisibis in 217 CE. A treaty in 218 CE brought a monetary settlement and kept most of Mesopotamia in the hands of the Arsacids. The next two emperors, Elagabalus (218-222 CE) and Alexander Severus (222-235 CE) presented their own problems for the Roman Empire, which prevented them from making the Arsacids and then the Sasanians their sole priority. Thus, it is amazing that the Arsacid army which was able to confront the Romans, fell to Ardaxšīr and the Persian forces at the plain of Hormozgān.

¹⁴ A. Piras, "Mesopotamian Sacred Marriage and Pre-Islamic Iran," *Melammu Symposia IV*, eds. A. Panaino and A. Piras, Milano, 2004, p. 251.

¹⁵ Widengren, *op. cit.*, p. 725-726.

¹⁶ *Dio's Roman History*, Book LXXX.3, 1-2 mentions that Ardaxšīr was victorious in three battle against the Arsacids; Herodian Book VI.2, 6-7.



The battle of Hormozgān

Ardawān, however, had been challenged by another Arsacid Walāxš (Vologases VI) who minted coins in his own name until 221-222 CE, demonstrating the fact that the issue of an all powerful king of kings had not been settled in the Arsacid Empire.¹⁷ So it would have been possible that a local warrior and his family in the province of Persis would be able to rise and begin conquering the surrounding territories in a short time away from international and dynastic conflict. Ardawān appears to have had bigger problems than Ardaxšīr and could not turn his attention to a minor upstart in Persis at this time. When Ardawān did face Ardaxšīr in combat in 224 CE, the Persian warrior finished him off.

We should say more about Ardaxšīr, since he is an important personage in the development of the Sasanian history and imperial ideology. The material remains of his rule are especially rich in providing us with his world-view. In commemoration of his victory, he commissioned several rock-reliefs at Naqš-e Rajab, Naqš-e Rostam, and at Fērūzābād. At Naqš-e Rajab he is shown on his horse standing over the dead body of Ardawān. Ohrmazd faces him on a horse as well, which stands over the body of the evil spirit Ahreman, and is handing the symbol of sovereignty to Ardaxšīr I.¹⁸

¹⁷K. Schippmann, *Grunzüge der Sasanidische Reich*, 1986, p. 70.

¹⁸For Ardaxšīr's reliefs showing him at the battle of Hormozgan and other reliefs see W. Hinz, *Altiranische Funde und Forschungen*, Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin, 1969, pp. 127-134; G. Herrmann, *The Iranian Revival*, Elsevier, Phaidon, 1977, pp. 87-90.



Investiture Scene of Ardaxšir with Ohrmazd at Naqš-e Rostam

This relief suggests that Ardaxšir believed or wanted others to believe that he was appointed by Gods to rule over a territory which the inscription calls *Ērānšahr*. The name used for this territory which had precedence in the *Avesta*, and designated the mythical homeland of the Aryans was now transposed onto the region where the Sasanians were ruling.¹⁹ This idea was to be accepted by the Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian population of the empire and has lived on in the collective memory of Iranians in various stages and strata of the Iranian society till modern times.

This idea should not be mistaken for the Classical historian's testimonies, who believed that Ardaxšir was attempting to regain the Achaemenid Persian territory.²⁰ What is clear is that a notion of what *Ērānšahr* meant was present in the religious sphere, which may have given rise to political concepts of a set territory. This is gained from the third century inscription(s) of the Zoroastrian priest Kerdīr who tells us what was considered to be *Ērānšahr* and what was considered to be *an-ērān* or non-Iranian. Kerdīr tells us that he established many fires and priests in *Ērān* which according to him were the following provinces: Persis, Parthia, Babylonia, Mesene, Adiabene, Azerbaijan, Isfahan, Ray, Kerman, Sistan, and Gurgan, to Peshavar. According to him, Syria, Cilicia, Armenia, Georgia, Albania and Balasgan which were under Sasanian control were deemed as *an-Ērān*.²¹ This term is also used in an adjectival form, giving *Ērīh* "Iranianess," and an antonym, *an-Ērīh* along with all its cultural trappings.

Ardaxšir's coins²² also bear a standard formula which the succeeding kings in the third and the fourth centuries adopted: *mazdysn bgy ... MLK'n MLK' 'yl'n MNW ctry MN yzd'n* "Mazdaean Majesty, (name of the king), King of Kings of *Ērān*, whose lineage / image (is) from the gods."²³ According to this legend, Ardaxšir considered himself to

¹⁹G. Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran, an Essay on Its Origin*, Serie Orientale Roma LXII, Rome, 1989.

²⁰*Herodian*, Book VI.2.2-3.

²¹Ph. Gignoux, *Les Quatre inscriptions du mage Kirdīr*, textes et concordances, Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, Leuven, 1991, p. 71.

²²M. Alram, "The Beginning of Sasanian Coinage," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 13, 1999, pp. 67-76.

²³For Sasanian coins see R. Göbl, *Sasanidische Numismatik*, Klinkhardt & Biermann, Braunschweig, 1968; M. Alram, *Iranische Personennamenbuch, Nomia Propria Iranica in Nummis*, vol. 4, ed. M. Mayrhofer and R. Schmitt, Vienna, 1986.

worship Mazda (Ohrmazd) “*mazdysn*” first and above all.²⁴ Secondly, he saw himself as of divine descent “*MNW ctry MN yzd’n*.” This of course brings us to the question, from whom did he believe he was descended? Which “gods” were his forefathers?

Still with this difficulty and confusion, we can state that Ardaxšīr saw himself as the descendent of the gods “*yazdān*,” and the Sasanians may have elevated *Sāsān* to divine status.²⁵ It is altogether possible that this idea was part of the Hellenic past of Persia. Alexander and the Seleucids considered themselves being descendants of *θεός* “god;” and more importantly *θεοπάτωρ* “of divine descent,” which was by the Arsacids as well,²⁶ which matches the title of *MNW ctry MN yzd’n* of the early Sasanian inscriptions.²⁷ As A. Gariboldi has shown the artistic elements in early Sasanian period may also corroborate this suggestion, as the image of Ohrmazd and Ardaxšīr I are similar and proportionate at early rock-reliefs.²⁸

By 224 most of the Iranian plateau²⁹ and the Arab³⁰ side of the Persian Gulf had become part of Ardaxšīr’s empire.³¹ The take over of Armenia was unsuccessful and the Armenians were able to defeat and halt the Sasanian encroachment.³² The Armenian sources tell us of this defeat, but the Sasanian sources are silent. Even to the contrary a rock relief suggesting victory of the Sasanians over the Armenians at Salmās was carved. Ardaxšīr had to devise another way in which to take over Armenia and that was court intrigue and the killing of the Armenian king.

Ardaxšīr with his army invaded Syria and Cappadocia.³³ Thus, he came into open conflict with Rome and the emperor Alexander Severus (222-235 CE), a conflict which did not have a clear winner.³⁴ In a letter to Ardaxšīr, Alexander had made it clear that his invasion of the Roman Empire would not be as successful as his conquest of his other neighbors.³⁵ By 233 CE both sides were exhausted, and neither side appear to have

²⁴ A. Panaino has emphasized the human character of the Sasanian king and his lack of divine attributes, see “Astral Characters of Kingship in the Sasanian and Byzantine World,” *La Persia e Bisanzio*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 2004, p. 558.

²⁵In Šābuhr’s inscription at Ka’be-ye Zardošt (ŠKZ 25/20/46), *Sāsān* is called: *is s’s’n ZY MR’HY sāsān ī xwadāy* “*Sāsān* the Lord.

²⁶ A. Gariboldi, “Royal Ideological Patterns Between Seleucid and Parthian Coins: The Case of *θεοπάτωρ*,” *Commerce and Monetary Systems in the Ancient World: Means of Transmission and Cultural Interaction*, *Melammu Symposia V*, ed. R. Rollinger and Ch. Ulf with collaboration of K. Schengg, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004, p. 367.

²⁷ T. Daryaei, “Notes on Early Sasanian Titulature,” *Journal of the Society for Ancient Numismatics*, vol. 21, 2002, p. 42.

²⁸ A. Gariboldi, “Astral Symbolism on Iranian Coinage,” *East and West*, vol. 54, 2004, p. 32.

²⁹*Herodian*, Book VI 2, 2.

³⁰R.G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs, From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, pp. 27-28.

³¹G. Widengren, “The Establishment of the Sasanian dynasty in the light of new evidence,” *La Persia nel Medioevo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 1971, pp. 711-782; J. Wiesehöfer, “Ardašīr I,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, vol. II, 1987, pp. 371-376.

³² Armenia was of course independent of Rome and was able to defeat Ardaxšīr, Dio Cassius, *Dio’s Roman History*, Book LXXX, 3, 3.

³³ *Herodian*, Book VI, 2, 1; Zonares XII.15; Dignas & Winter, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

³⁴Dio Cassius, *Dio’s Roman History*, Book LXXX, 3, p. 483.

³⁵*Herodian*, Book VI, 2, 4. Eutropius makes Alexander Severus the victor over Ardaxšīr, Eutropius, *Breviarium*, Book VIII.23, translated with an introduction and commentary by H.W. Bird, Liverpool University Press, 1993. The same

won, but Alexander Severus remained in Antioch.³⁶ While Severus was alive, neither was Ardaxšīr able to defeat the Romans, nor the Romans the Persians. When Severus died in 235 CE, Mesopotamia, Dura, Carrhae, Nisbis and finally Hatra was attacked by the Sasanians.³⁷ Ardaxšīr then retired and spent the last years of his life in Persis while his son, Šābuhr I who had taken part in the 240 CE campaign continued his conquests and the expansion of the empire. Why Ardaxšīr had taken on these campaigns against the Romans? This was probably due to the fact that the stable borders between the two empires of Rome and Parthia had been Oshroene, Hatra, and Armenia, but Severus conquered Oshroene which brought the heartland of the Arsacid and later Sasanian dynasty in danger.³⁸

Šābuhr I

Ardaxšīr's son, Šābuhr I was co-regent with him in 240 CE. This is apparent from a coinage which portrays both men together that was probably ordered by Ardaxšīr to ensure a safe succession. This was because there were other sons of his who had been given governorship of other provinces, and they might have wanted to assume the throne, just as he had done in his youth. This system is characteristic of the Sasanians, under whom sons were sent to rule different provinces and when the ruler died, one of the heirs would assume the throne. In this manner, there was always a danger of dynastic squabbling, of which the Sasanians had their fair share. The method of succession was initially based on the choice of the preceding king, but later the nobility

may be said of the fourth century CE source the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Severus Alexadner 56.2 and 56.5-8; Dignas & Winter, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

³⁶ *Herodian*, Book VI,6,5-6.

³⁷For a detailed study of the Perso-Roman wars of the third century see, E. Kettenhofen, *Die römisch-persischen Kriege des 3. Jahrhunderts n. Chr. Nach der Inscript Šāpuhrs I. An der Ka'be-ye Zartošt (ŠKZ)*, Beihefte zum TAVO, Reihe B., Geisteswissenschaften, Nr. 55, Wiesbaden, 1982. In this campaign Šābuhr I, the son of Ardaxšīr was a main actor, p. 19, Winter and Dignas, *ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁸D.S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay (AD 180-395)*, Routledge, London and New York, 2004, p. 217.

and the Zoroastrian priests assumed the decision.³⁹ Šābuhr I did accompany his father in battle, which made him battle ready and in fact ensured his success in wars against Rome. In 243 CE, Gordian invaded Mesopotamia to retrieve what had been taken by Ardaxšīr and his son after Alexander Severus' death. But Šābuhr tells us (according to ŠKZ) that he was able to kill him at Misikhe in 244 CE, close to the Euphrates river which he later called Pērōz-Šābuhr (Victorious is Šābuhr).⁴⁰ It is now known that Gordian had died in Zaitha in northern Mesopotamia in 244 CE at a time when warfare between the two sides seemed unlikely.⁴¹ Thus, it is suggested by some that the Roman forces after the defeat murdered Gordian in retreat at Zaitha.⁴² According to Šābuhr I's Ka'be-ye Zardošt inscription Gordian had come with a force composed of "Goths and Germans" (ŠKZ Pa4/37 *gwt w grm'ny*), and they were defeated in a frontal battle. Philip the Arab was forced to sign a treaty which ceded much territory and a large sum of gold as war reparations, amounting to 500,000 denarii.⁴³ The territories which the Sasanians were able to take from the Romans were most of Mesopotamia and Armenia.⁴⁴ We should not lose the sight of the fact that the newly established Sasanian dynasty was facing a branch of the Arsacid family in Armenia and so it needed to flush out any such resistance to secure its northern flank while fighting the Romans. For this reason the great kingdom of Armenia was to have a turbulent history during the Sasanian period.

Šābuhr I commemorated his victory in a rock-relief at Naqsh-e Rostam showing him subjugating the two Roman emperors to his will. Šābuhr I has also left us a long biography of his deeds at Ka'be-ye Zardošt, in Persis which is the first long testament from the Sasanians themselves and demonstrates their outlook in an epic narrative. In his *res gestae* he provides information on his religious conviction, lineage, the areas that he ruled over, and also the fate of the Romans.

³⁹According to a later source, when the king died a council would choose the next king and the Chief Priest (Persian *mowbed ī mowbedan*) had to agree with the decision, M. Minovi, *Nāma-ye Tansar*, Tehran, 1352, p. 88; and for the English translation see M. Boyce, *The Letter of Tansar*, Rome, 1968, p. 62.

⁴⁰Roman sources are divided as to the cause of death of Gordian. *Oracula Sibyllina* XIII, 13-20 predicts Gordian's downfall as a betrayal; Aurelius Victor, *liber de Caesaribus* 27, 7-8: 7 states that he was a victim of intrigues of his Praetorian Prefect, Marcus Philippus; Festus, *Breviarium* 22 mentions that Gordian was returning, victorious from his war against the Persians when he was murdered by Philip. For all these sources see M.H. Dodgeon and S.N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, A Documentary History*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, pp. 36-45. For details see Kettenhofen, *op. cit.*, p. 31-37.

⁴¹Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

⁴²Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

⁴³ŠKZ 5/4/9.

⁴⁴Zonaras XII, 19; Evagrius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V, 7 which talks only about Armenia, see Dodgeon and Lieu, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.



Naqš-e Rostam: Šābuhr I, Valerian and Philip

He states that Gordian and his army were destroyed. Šābuhr I also tells us that Caesar lied, putting the matters in a Zoroastrian doctrinal context where the Romans represented the concept of Lie / Disorder, against the Persian representatives of Truth / Order.⁴⁵ The second campaign began in 252 CE against a Roman force of 60,000 at Barbalissus which ended in total defeat of the Romans, and if we are to believe the ŠKZ narrative, some 37 towns in Mesopotamia and Syria were taken.⁴⁶ The reason for this campaign by Šābuhr I is again explained by the phrase in the ŠKZ: *W kysr TWB MKDBW-t W 'L 'rnm-y w yns 'BD-t* "and Caesar again lied and did wrong to Armenia."⁴⁷ What was this lie? In effect although Philip had promised to allow Persian control over Armenia, he would not cede Armenia to the Sasanians and would only go back to the old treaty which was agreed between the Romans and the Arsacids from the time of Augustus where the Roman emperor crowned and the person be picked by the Arsacid king of kings.⁴⁸ Of course the Arsacid family would not agree with such a tradition, nor would have the Sasanian Persians who saw their nemesis to the north being crowned by the Romans.

In 260 CE Šābuhr I begun the third campaign and took eastern Mesopotamia and Syria⁴⁹ and the coast of eastern Mediterranean. At this battle the emperor Valerian along with senators and soldiers were captured and deported to the Sasanian territory.⁵⁰ Now Goths, Romans, Slavs and other people from the Near East were incorporated into the

⁴⁵The concept of lie (*druγ*) is antithetical to the ancient Persian ethics and the idea of order and righteousness (*aša*), see M. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism, Its Antiquity and Constant Vigour*, Columbia Lectures on Iranian Studies, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, California, 1992, pp. 56-57.

⁴⁶ŠKZ 12/9/11.

⁴⁷ŠKZ 6/4/10. For the campaign see Kettenhofen, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-46.

⁴⁸Potter, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

⁴⁹In regard to the idea that the Sasanians may have claimed Syria, that is the cities of Carrhae, Edessa and Nisibis by ancestral (Arsacid) rights see Z. Rubin, "The Roman Empire in the Res Gestae Divi Saporis," *Ancient Iran and the Mediterranean World*, ed. E. Dąbrowa, *Electrum 2*, Jagiellonian University Press, Kraków, 1998, pp. 183-185.

⁵⁰For the details (including maps) of the campaign and the cities taken by Šābuhr I see Kettenhofen, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-126; ŠKZ 15/11/24-25.

Persian empire. No other person could have claimed before that he was able to kill a Roman emperor, make one tributary, and capture and imprison the third. He was very much aware of his feat and did not hesitate to mention his heroism in his inscription. At a rock-relief in Persis, Valerian is shown kneeling before him and today at the city of Bēšābuhr, among the ruins of the city, a place is marked as *zندان-e valerian* "Valerian's prison." This victory by Šābuhr I did not escape the attention of Roman sources either, although the reason for Valerian's defeat, as many now wrote as Christians was his paganism and tormenting of Christians, while others gave a more sober view of the captured emperor.⁵¹



Bēšābuhr relief

Although the borders between Rome and Persia fluctuated between the Tigris and the Euphrates, depending on the military success on either side, this did not mean that travel was restricted. In fact people from both sides traveled from one side to another, engaged in trade, and intermarried. This openness and ease of movement from one side of the border to another made spies useful, and supplying information on the enemy was seen as a great betrayal by both sides.⁵² For now, Mesopotamia was in Persian hands, but Armenia needed to be dealt with as it has resisted Ardaxšīr and defeated his army.

Armenia would be the focal point between the Sasanians and the Romans and remained so until the end of the Sasanian period. The Armenian situation was much more complex and important for both sides, because of the strategic and economic interests, and Armenia served as a buffer between Persia and Rome. But also when a branch of the Parthian royal family remained in Armenia, this was enough for Šābuhr to put an end to it. He planned the assassination of king Xosrov and installed a king loyal to him by the name of Tirdates (Tirdād) who ruled from 252-262 CE. Armenia's importance in the eyes of the Persians is quite clear, since several of the heirs to the Sasanian throne would be the princes who were stationed in Armenia and were called

⁵¹ For example Lactantius, *de mortibus persecutorum* 5; Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, VII, 13, and especially Orosius, *adversus paganos*, see Dodgeon and Lieu, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-65.

⁵²For the issue of borders and frontiers between Rome and Persia see H. Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996, pp. 97-99.

wuzurg-Arman-šāh "The Great King of Armenia."⁵³ No other province of the Sasanian Empire had such an important title attached to it.

During Šābuhr's reign his religious outlook was also a matter of importance. The Zoroastrian "church" was being formed by Kerdīr, who was trying to establish a body of law, canonize the *Avesta*, create a common doctrine, unify the belief system, and establish a Zoroastrian religious hierarchy tied to the State. At the same time Manī emerged from Mesopotamia, professing a religion which by all accounts was universal. Manichaeic sources state that during the last years of Ardaxšīr's reign Manī had crossed the empire and had gone to India. During Šābuhr I's reign he had come back to the Sasanian Empire, appeared before the king and was honored, stayed with the king for sometime and was given permission to preach throughout the empire.⁵⁴

At this time it would be wrong to see Zoroastrianism as an exclusive religion, since Zoroastrianism was a religion that could be adopted by the conquered people. Šābuhr's tolerance of Manī, and at the same time his commitment to Ohrmazd and Zoroastrianism has caused problems for historians. But if Šābuhr saw the growing power and structure of the Zoroastrian priesthood, might he not have attempted to show them that the King of Kings was still the one who has the last say? Was it not the Sasanians who were the caretakers and priests of the Anāhīd fire-temple who were schooled in the rites and ceremonies? Sasanian concern with politics should not have diminished their religious authority, at least until the time of Wahrām I. Manī was able to propagate his religion during Šābuhr I's rule and that of his son. Still, Šābuhr I mention in his *res gestae* that many Wahrām fires were established and that lamb, wine, and bread were offered to the gods for the soul of the kings and queens of the family of Sāsān. All of these, to a Zoroastrian priest may have seemed "pagan," and the king's cult may have been that.

If one compares the retinue, the bureaucracy and the size of the court, between Ardaxšīr I and Šābuhr I, one begins to see that there was an increase in the administrative apparatus and the size of the court. This would be natural, since if an empire was to be centralized and to be functioning, it needed to have not only a king, but also governors (*šahrābs*), viceroys (*bidaxš*), a steward of royal property (*framādār*) a commander of the royal guard (*hazārbad*), scribes (*dibīrs*), treasurers (*ganzwars*), judges (*dādīwars*), and a market inspector (*wāzārbed*), along with the local kings (*šahrdārān*), princes of royal blood (*wāspuhragān*), grandees (*wuzurgān*), minor nobility (*āzādān*), and other officials as mentioned in the *res gestae*. The nobility (*wuzurgān*), whose loyalty to their clan was paramount, now submitted to the Sasanians.⁵⁵ Such families as Warāz, Sūren, Andēgān, Kāren, and others were given various honors and positions, such as being master of ceremonies or crown bestower. They also displayed their clan emblem

⁵³Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, Translation and Commentary by R.W. Thomson, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1976, p. 35.

⁵⁴ *The Kephalaia of the Teacher*, ed. I. Gardner, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1995, 15.28, p. 21.

⁵⁵For a list of the functionaries at the Sasanian court in the third century see R.N. Frye, "Notes on the early Sassanian State and Church," *Studi Orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida*, Rome, 1956, pp. 314-335.

or coat-of-arms on their caps (*kulāfs*) as is apparent on the rock-reliefs at Naqsh-ī Rajab and Naqsh-ī Rostam. We do not know which symbol belonged to which clan and what the symbols exactly meant, whether they were insignias or names of the clans made into designs.



Sasanian nobility

Wahrāms and Narsē

The next king, Hormizd I (271-272 CE), the youngest son of Šābuhr I came to the throne and ruled a short time,⁵⁶ but is associated with good rule and the building of the city of Rām-Hormizd in Xūzestān. The Ka'be-ye Zardošt inscription calls him the Great king of Armenia (*Wuzurg-Arman-šāh*). To be king of Armenia in the third century was a

⁵⁶Agathias IV, 24, 5.

position of privilege and usually signaled the fact that the person occupying this seat was the heir apparent to the Sasanian throne. Tabarī states that Hormizd I was fearless and showed extreme loyalty to. He had shown military talent, like his father during Šābuhr's campaign in the 250's which gave reasons for the king to appoint him as heir.⁵⁷ He was involved in the wars with the Romans in Syria, Cilicia and Cappadocia in his father's second campaign.⁵⁸ He then joined Šābhur I in the conquest of Antioch in the early 250s.⁵⁹ He was chosen over his elder brother Narseh, who in the Šābuhr Ka'be-ye Zardošt inscription was called king of Sīstān (*Sagān-šāh*), and Šābuhr king of Mesene (*Mēšān-šāh*).

Religiously, again it is not clear why Hormizd I allowed Manī to preach his message freely and also let Kerdīr continue his activity, giving him new ranks through the ceremonial cap and belt (*kulāf ud kamar*). In the Manichaean sources it is said that Hormizd I met Mānī,⁶⁰ was impressed by him and his message,⁶¹ and allowed him to travel freely to Mesopotamia. This may have been part of his campaign of dual containment, controlling both the religions which were attempting to dominate the region. Wahrām I (271-274 CE) also had a relatively short rule, but we have more information about him and his eventful career. He was the eldest son of Šābuhr I, but had been bypassed by Hormizd. He had been appointed as the king of Gēlān by his father. Initially, Kerdīr appears to have backed his succession and consequently the Zoroastrian priesthood and the person of Kerdīr benefited from his enthronement. In 274 CE it was at this time that Manī was sent from the east to present himself to Wahrām, and we have a Manichaean text which describes the harsh treatment of the prophet. He was scolded as not being a good doctor nor having any benefit, and Wahrām ordered his arrest and imprisonment of Mānī.

⁵⁷ M.-L. Chaumont, "Les grands rois sassanides d'Arménie (III^eme siècle ap. J.-C.)," *Iranica Antiqua*, vol. 8, 1968, p. 82.

⁵⁸ Kettenhofen, 1982, p. 68.

⁵⁹ M.R. Shayegan, "Hormozd I," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (online).

⁶⁰ N. Sims-Williams, "The Sogdian Fragment of Leningrad II: Mani at the Court of the Shahanshah," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 4, 1990, p. 283.

⁶¹ W. Sundermann, *Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, Berlin, 1981, p. 129; Sims-Williams, *ibid.*, pp. 281-288.



Kerdīr

Wahrām II came to the throne in 274 CE and may have needed Kerdīr's support in bypassing Narseh, who was now the Great King of Armenia, and it is in this period that Kerdīr begins his real ascent to power. Kerdīr also began the persecution of the non-Zoroastrians in the empire, such as the Jews, Christians, Manichaeans, Mandeans and Buddhists. During the rule of Wahrām II (274-293 CE) Kerdīr achieved higher rank and status, and it is during this period that the Sasanian kings lost much of their religious power and as caretakers of the Anāhīd fire temple to Kerdīr, making him the judge of the whole empire. This meant that from now on, the priests acted as judges throughout the empire and probably court cases were now based on Zoroastrian law except when members of other religious minorities had disputes with each other.⁶² Wahrām II is the first ruler to have a family portrait struck on his coins. On the *drahms* (silver coins) he is shown with his queen Šābuhrduxtag who was his cousin and his son, Wahrām III.⁶³ He also had several rock-reliefs carved as memorial with his family. This is an interesting feature of Wahrām II in that he was very much concerned to leave a portrait of his family⁶⁴ which incidentally gives us information about the court and the Persian concept of the royal banquet (*bazm*).⁶⁵

This included wine drinking, feasting, music and games being played before the king and the courtiers as evidenced not only from the rock reliefs, but also the silver dishes from the Sasanian period. While the term *bazm* means "feast," the Armenian sources give us its true use during the Sasanian period. (Armenian) *bazmoc'k'* "to recline,"

⁶²For the role of the priests in the Sasanian period see Sh. Shaked, "Administrative Functions of Priests in the Sasanian Period," *Proceedings of the First European Conference of Iranian Studies*, 1990, pp. 261-273.

⁶³J.K. Choksy, "A Sasanian Monarch, His Queen, Crown Prince and Deities: The Coinage of Wahrām II," *American Journal of Numismatics*, vol. I, 1989, pp. 117-137.

⁶⁴A.Sh. Shahbazi, "Studies in Sasanian Prosopography: III Barm-i Dilak: Symbolism of Offering Flowers," *The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Persia*, ed. V. Sarkhosh, et. al., I.B. Tauris, London, 1998, pp. 58-66.

⁶⁵The only detailed study of the concept of *bazm* and the idea of its significance is that by A.S. Melikian-Chirvani, "The Iranian *bazm* in Early Persian Sources," *Banquets d'Orient*, ed. R. Gyselen, Res Orientales IV, Bures-sur-Yvette, 1992, pp. 95-120.

meant a banqueting-couch which the nobility and the king used during feasting at the court. The courtiers would recline on cushions (*barj*), where the number of the cushions signified their importance in the court. Some of these banqueting couches had room for two people, referred to as *taxt* or *gāh* where one's proximity to the king of kings showed his/her honor and closeness to him.⁶⁶ Naturally, those whose *taxt* or *gāh* was further from the king, signified their lesser rank, and if moved further, was a sign of demotion and disgrace. These portraits may also have been a means of justifying Wahrām II's succession over Narseh who by now must have been quite dissatisfied from being bypassed several times, although he was the Great King of Armenia, a title reserved for the heir to the throne. Wahrām II's precarious situation is also clear because of the revolt of his brother, Hormizd in Sīstān in 283 CE. Although the chronology of the events is not clear, we are told that Hormizd was supported by the Sīstānīs, Gēlānīs and the Kušāns (Rufii)⁶⁷ in his campaign against Wahrām II.⁶⁸ This was not the only problem that Wahrām II had as we hear of religious strife as well, namely in the province of Xūzestān led by a certain mowbed who held power there for some time.⁶⁹



Wahrām II and Šābuhrduxtag

Plans had already been made by the Probus to invade the Sasanian territory, but he died and so Carus began the war and invaded Mesopotamia, laying siege to the capital Ctesiphon while Wahrām II was in the East, but he died in Mesopotamia in 283 CE.⁷⁰ Diocletian, who had to deal with the internal problems of Rome, made a treaty with Wahrām II which ensured the Perso-Roman borders. Now Wahrām II could deal with his brother, Hormizd, and Diocletian was able to focus his attention on the reforms in his empire, bringing order to an otherwise chaotic Roman realm. This treaty divided

⁶⁶N. Garsoian, *The Epic Histories: Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk'*, p. 515; for feasting under Šāpuhr II see Chapter IV.XVI, p. 146.

⁶⁷Either a mistake for Cusii, the Kushans, see Dodgeon and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

⁶⁸*Panegyrici Latini*, III/11, 17, 2, Dodgeon and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁶⁹*Die Chronik von Arbela*, 8,66, ed. P. Kawerau, Peeters, Louvan, 1985.

⁷⁰Most sources claim that while Carus was successful, he was struck by lightning. For example see Eutropis, *Breviarium*, IX, 18, 1.

Armenia among the two powers and left western Armenia in the hands of Tirdat (Tirdates IV) while Narseh ruled over greater Armenia. By 293 CE, when Wahrām II died, his rival Hormizd had been pacified in the east, but dynastic squabbling continued. Wahrām III who was known as King of the Sakas (*saḡān-šāh*),⁷¹ was brought to the throne by one faction, perhaps with the backing of Kerdīr, Adur-Farrobbāy, king of Mēšān, and Wahnām, son of Tartus. He was the son of Wahrām II, and Narseh who was now in Armenia and was not going to be bypassed again. He left for Mesopotamia and was met by a group of the nobility and men who had given their allegiance to Narseh. We do not know what happened to Wahrām III, but Wahnām was captured and executed and Narseh finally became king of kings.

Again Narseh has blessed us by leaving his personal attestation at Paikuli in northern Mesopotamia. It is a biography and a narrative justifying his succession to the throne, in which it is related that the nobility and courtiers asked him to take the throne when he was met by them.⁷² There are similarities between this inscription and others in the Near East, such as the Behistun inscription of Darius I and other pre-Achaemenid ones has given cause by some to believe that it is less reliable source. In fact, recently it has been claimed that the Paikuli inscription may be devoid of much historical information because it belongs to the genre of epic literature composed since time immemorial in the ancient Near East. One cannot accept this assumption certainly, and while it can be agreed that the story is told in an epic setting (formula), I do not know in how many ways a king could relate his story and his campaign. Relating a story or historical event in a specific form or formula should not necessarily deplete the story of its historical significance.⁷³ After all kings made war, defeated their enemies, and ruled over their kingdom. These issues in themselves are the genre that gives cause to a king to commission an inscription.

⁷¹Agathias also provides the same title for Wahrām III, IV, 24, 6-8.

⁷²P.O. Skjærvø and H. Humbach, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli*, Wiesbaden, 1983, p. 44 (Parthian: line 18).

⁷³S. Mori contends that the Paikuli inscription is basically relating the traditional Near Eastern story of how a king achieves supremacy with the aid of the gods in the epic form. He also believes that the early Islamic texts, such as al-Tabarī are of little use for the history of the Sasanian period, "The narrative structure of the Paikuli Inscription," *Oriens*, vol. 30-31, 1995, pp. 182-193. I wonder if then we should again rely solely on the Greco-Roman sources if our historical inscriptions and the Sasanian royal chronicle are of little use for understanding Sasanian history!



Narseh and Anāhitā

It should be said also that again a constant feature of the Persian civilization represents itself, as is evident in the Behistun inscription, and the Naqsh-ī Rostam inscription. In the Paikuli inscription we come across the notion that the enemy of the rightful king (Narseh, flower of Truth/Order), were followers of Lie (demon/Disorder).⁷⁴ This binary opposition which is a hallmark of Sasanian Zoroastrianism worked well for demonizing the king's enemies. Nāreseh's rock-relief at Naqsh-e Rostam is also important in that it shows him receiving the symbol of sovereignty from the deity, Anāhīd.⁷⁵ Leaving the religious implications aside, could this mean that politically Narseh was able to regain the control of the fire-temple of Anāhīd at Istaxr and was re-orienting his devotion to this deity at the cost of Kerdīr's power? Of course it is possible that devotion to Lady Anāhīd was never forsaken, but I think the mere representation of Narseh along with Anāhīd may hint at a religio-political shake up in the Sasanian empire. This perhaps reaffirmed the tradition of Narseh's father and grandfather, Šābuhr I and Ardaxšīr I, and his own as the original and legitimate rulers who began their campaign around the cult of this deity.

On the foreign front Narseh was far less successful. Narseh declared war on Rome in 296 CE because of Roman meddling in Armenia. Diocletian sent an army under Galerius, and while in the beginning the Persians held their own, in the second battle in Armenia at Satala the Sasanian army was routed and Narseh lost his wife and family and barely scaped capture.⁷⁶ In 298 he negotiated a peace treaty (Treaty of Nisbis) in which for his family's return and peace, he ceded parts of Mesopotamia, restoring Armenia to Tirdat, and the King of Iberia was now to be chosen by the Romans.⁷⁷ This Roman influence in Iberia (Georgia) was to be detrimental to Sasanian influence in the region, since in 330 CE the Georgian king and nobility adopted Christianity. Narseh's

⁷⁴Paikuli, Skjærvø, *op. cit.*, p. 44: line 18.

⁷⁵A.Sh. Shahbazi, "Narseh's Relief at Naqš-i Rostam," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, vol. 16, 1983, pp. 255-268.

⁷⁶Lactantius, *de mortibus persecutorum*, 9, 6-8 provides an insight into Galerius' invasion via Armenia and his capture of Narseh's belongings, Dodgeon and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁷⁷Petrus Patricius, *frag. 14, FGH IV*, p. 189, Dodgeon and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

rule announced a new balance of power among the Romans and the Persians. This weakness in imperial aspiration may be apparent from the omission of *an-Ērān* from his titles on some of the coin legends.

It can be said that in the third century CE the first two rulers of *Ērānšahr* established and organized a Persian Empire from the province of Persis. Persis in the third century appears to have had a centrality, not only because it is the first province that all of the early Sasanian rock reliefs mention, but also because it is the location where the family of Sāsān rose from. From the later sources we also learn that just like Constantine in the fourth century, Ardaxšīr I also attempted to establish a blueprint for the a religion, but a religion that he and his ancestors worshipped, what they called *mazdēsñ* or Mazda-worshipping-religion, *i.e.*, Zoroastrianism. This is the first word that appears on the coins and inscription of Ardaxšīr and Šābuhr, suggesting their deep devotion and proclamation for Ohrmazd. Ardaxšīr along with his wise priest, Tōsar sifted through the existing oral and written tradition kept throughout the empire and especially in Persis and began the canonization of the doctrines of what we call today Zoroastrianism. By the time of Šābuhr I the Romans had realized that a new power existed in the East which could defeat any Roman army and even kill its generals and hold captive its emperor. Šābuhr I's inscription also demonstrates the fact that the administrative apparatus of the Sasanian Empire had grown and became more sophisticated. This is to be expected if an organized and vibrant empire was to exist. Šābuhr I, however, also tried to use Manichaeism, a religion which seems to have attracted many from different regions in Asia and the Mediterranean world as an alternative to Zoroastrianism. While Zoroastrianism was the religion of his father and forefathers, Šābuhr I understood in order to have a universal empire, a universal religion which could cement loyalty to the king and state was much desired. To be the ruler of Iranians was one matter, but to rule over *an-ērān*, needed a more universal religion.

The growing number of Zoroastrian priests, however, would not allow this to happen and after Šābuhr's death, under king Wahrām I, Kerdīr and company made sure that Manī is stopped and later meets an early death and that the king of kings remain *mazdēsñ* and that the Zoroastrian religion spread at any cost to the empire. In a way Kerdīr is responsible for the preservation of the Zoroastrian tradition until its full development under latter Sasanians. Šābuhr I may have begun to imagine that the concept of *Ērānšahr* would not necessarily be tied to Zoroastrianism, although it had its origin in that tradition, and that any citizen, *i.e.*, *mard ī šahr* "male citizen" / *zan ī šahr* "female citizen," would be able to considered as *Ērānağān* "Iranians." This idea would take place in another century or so, but it was too early for it to take hold in a new empire. The Zoroastrian priests, not only made themselves an important part of the imperial government, but also would become evermore involved into the day to day workings of society. They also reduced the religious power of the king of kings, especially after Šābuhr I's "ungodly" meddling with Mānī. If Zoroastrianism was to survive, it needed to have a hierarchy, a religious tradition in the name of the *Avesta*,

and its traditions be zealously maintained. While the Wahrāms caved into these demands, Narseh struck back and attempted to make the family of Sāsān the ultimate decision maker. By the end of the third century CE equilibrium had been reached between the church and the state and none was able to really exist without the other or overtake the other.

Internationally, Rome now had to face a new and more centralized empire which had specific geo-political agendas and it did not fear coming into conflict with the Mediterranean empire. The presence of this Mediterranean empire, centered in Rome, in Syria and more importantly in Mesopotamia created the notion that it is certainly an imperialistic empire. As Mesopotamia served as the heartland of the empire with its capital Ctesiphon, and an agricultural center along with Xūzestān, Roman forts being only a short distance to the west made the Sasanian weary. This may be a prime reason for which early on Ardaxšīr and Šābuhr I waged war on the Roman holdings in those regions. We are not so clear on the Eastern campaigns of the Sasanians, but it is sure that they were able to establish a strong foothold there and secure their border against the Kušāns.

Šābuhr II and the Fourth Century

Hormizd II (303-309 CE) succeeded his father, but did not do much militarily, and even worse for the Sasanians, during his reign Armenia under king Tirdates IV adopted Christianity. He had tried to consolidate Persian-Armenian relations by marrying his daughter Hormizdduxtag to the Armenian prince Wahan Mamikonian,⁷⁸ and such an alliance must have affected the loyalties of some of the Armenian noble families. Consequently some of the Armenian feudal clans (*naxarars*) converted as well and supported Tirdat against those *naxarars* who were loyal to the Sasanians and more specifically those who honored the ancient Mazdean / Zoroastrian tradition of Armenia. It has usually been the case that Armenians have seen this momentous event as a break from the old “pagan” past, when the Armenian nation and identity was established through the medium of Christianity. But one can look at the event in another way as well, namely through the eyes of the Armenians who did not convert to the new religion. Those Armenians who chose to stay faithful to their ancient heritage went down into Armenian historiography as either villains or worshipping *Ormizd*, *Anāhit*, and *Vahagn* and Christian historians attempted to erase them from the Armenian historical memory, except a few as the evil-doers.⁷⁹

For many Armenian *naxarars* and especially those of the noble clans, their past history and religion must have meant something important and the adoption of new ways and religion (Christianity) must have not been accepted very easily. After all according to these Armenian nobles, it was King Tirdat who was the heretic who adopted a religion from the West, supplanting the Armenian Mazdeans who had been worshipping Ohrmazd since the sixth century BCE. James Russell has put an end to the modern Armenian notions of a pagan past vs. Christianity. According to Armenian historiography which is Christian and hostile to Zoroastrianism, Armenia was pagan, illiterate and disunited, but when in the early fourth century Christianity was adopted, there was a united vision and a united people or “nation.” Russell has shown that the Armenians from ancient times were a people who, although their culture was under Persian and Zoroastrian influence, had its own view of what Zoroastrianism meant and gave it an Armenian outlook.⁸⁰ So the few “evil” *naxarars* mentioned in the Armenian historical narratives that supported the Sasanians were those who in fact chose to keep their ancient Armenian tradition at the expense of the newcomers. The issue of the future of Armenia was not to be decided at this time and the adoption of Christianity further caused problems and divided Armenian society for some time to come. He also sent troops into Syria, deposing the Ghassanid king, as he was seen as a Roman ally.⁸¹

When Hormizd II died, his son Adūr-Nāreseh was chosen to rule, but he ruled only briefly and was deposed by the nobility and the priests. Then the infant son of Hormizd

⁷⁸ Buzandaran Patmut'iwkn', *The Epic Histories Attributed to P'awstos Buzand*, translated and Commentary by N.G. Garsoïan, Cambridge, 1989, Epic Histories IV.50,59.

⁷⁹ Armazd, Anahit, Vahagn which are Ohrmazd, Anāhīd, Wahrām which Tirdat initially had made proclamation to the Armenian people against the Persians. This fact demonstrates that the Armenians did not see these deities as specifically Iranian, Agathangelos, pp. 51-53. These deities are also equated with Zeus, Artemis, and Heracles.

⁸⁰ J.R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, Harvard Iranian Series, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987.

⁸¹ A.Sh. Shahbazi, “Hormozd II,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, (<http://www.iranica.com/newsite/>).

II, named Šābuhr II (309-379 CE) was put on the throne.⁸² In regard to this king we have the legend that the courtiers and the clergy placed the crown on the womb of his mother when she was pregnant. We may assume that during the early years of his reign, the court and the Zoroastrian priests ran the empire and the empire was secure and stable structurally and administratively to survive without a strong monarch. This scenario also signaled to the courtiers and the nobility that the empire could be managed without a powerful king which would benefit them. The Arabs in eastern Arabia raided the southwestern provinces of the Sasanian Empire, while Constantine and the other emperors battled for the soul of the Roman empire which made the Persians safe from the Western front. When Šābuhr II had come of age (325 CE), he took revenge on the Arabs and hence received the title “Shoulder Piercer” (Arabic *Dhū al-Aktāf*), referring to the punishment inflicted on the Arab tribes. As a result of his campaigns some of the Arabs were pushed into the heartland of Arabia and the Persian Gulf region remained in the hands of the Sasanian Empire. This was part of the overall strategy of the Sasanians to secure the Persian Gulf. Some Arab tribes were forcibly displaced and relocated into the Sasanian Empire. The Taghlīb tribe was settled in Darayn (a port in Bahrayn) and al-Khatt; the Abd al-Qays and Tamīm were settled in Hajar, and the tribe of Bakr b. Wa’īl was settled in Kermān and the Hanazīla in Ramila (vicinity of Ahwaz).⁸³ To keep the Arabs from mounting further attacks Šābuhr II constructed a defensive system which was called *war ī tāzīgān* “wall of the Arabs.”⁸⁴ This wall appears to have been close to the city of Hīra which came to be known as *Khandaq ī Shapur* (Ditch of Šābuhr).⁸⁵

It is again here that we hear of Arab forced immigration into the Sasanian empire by Šābuhr II, namely Bakr b. Wā’īl and Banū Hanzalah in Kermān and Xūzestān.⁸⁶ Thus the relation between the Arabs and Persians was just not on the frontiers, but also within the Sasanian empire.⁸⁷ Also for the first time we hear of the Chionites (*Xyōn*) tribes encroaching onto the empire from Central Asia, but Šābuhr II was able to contain them and make peace with them.⁸⁸ Šābuhr II placed his son, who now took the title of “King of Kušān” (*kušān-šāh*), on the throne in the east as is apparent from the coins and a few inscriptions in Kušān territory.

⁸² T. Daryae, “Šapur II,” Encyclopaedia Iranica, (<http://www.iranica.com/newsite/>).

⁸³ Meskewiyeh, 1369; 135.

⁸⁴ *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, 43, ed. T. Daryae, Costa Mesa, 2002.

⁸⁵ R.N. Frye, “The Sasanian System of Walls for Defense,” *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, ed. M. Rosen-Ayalon, Jerusalem, 1977 (reprinted) *Islamic Iran and Central Asia (7th-12th Centuries)*, Variorum Reprints, London, 1979, pp. 8-11; and H. Mahamedi, “Wall as a System of Frontier Defense during the Sasanid Period,” *Mēnōg ī Xrad: The Spirit of Wisdom, Essays in Memory of Ahmad Tafazzoli*, ed. T. Daryae and M. Omidsalar, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, 2004, pp. 156-158.

⁸⁶ Al-Tabarī, p. 56.

⁸⁷ R. Hoyland, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁸⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, Book XVII.5.1.



Šābuhr II (after Azarnoush)

On the western front with the conversion of the Armenia to Christianity and the Roman rulers' backing of Armenia caused Šābuhr II to begin a campaign against them. When Constantius came to the throne (337 CE), war began and in 338 CE Šābuhr II laid siege to Nisibis several times, and Amida and Sigara was captured in 359 CE.⁸⁹ The defensive system of fortresses and *limes* hindered Šābuhr's campaign in the region, but some forts such as Vitra fell to him.⁹⁰ The encroachment of the nomadic tribes in the Central Asia forced Šābuhr II to turn his attention to the East,⁹¹ and the war with Rome ended in stalemate by 356 CE. Around this time we first hear of the Hunnic tribes, who were probably the Kidarites (Chinese *Jiduolo*), encroaching onto the Sasanian empire and were also menacing the Gupta Empire (320-500 CE) in India. Šābuhr II, who had just returned from the Syrian front, was able to contain his eastern foes by making an alliance with their king, Grumbates, against the Romans. By such action, he foresaw an ally to attack against the Romans.⁹²

It is quite possible that Šābuhr II defeated his eastern foes and established Sasanian domination over the Kušāns.⁹³ This theory can be substantiated from the two Middle Persian inscriptions which mention that the eastern boundary of the Sasanian Empire under Šābuhr II included Sind, Sīstān, and Turān.⁹⁴ Also Ammianus Marcellinus lists the provinces of the Sasanian Empire in that period as Assyria, Susiana, Media, Persis, Parthia, Greater Carmania, Hyrcania, Margiana, the Bactriani, the Sogdiani, the Sacae, and Scythia at the foot of Imaus (Himalayas), and beyond the same mountain, Serica, Aria, the Paropanisadae, Drangiana, Arachosia, and Gedrosia.⁹⁵ Tabarī, additionally mentions that, among his city building projects, Šābuhr II established cities in Sind and

⁸⁹Festus 27.1-2; Dignas & Winter, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

⁹⁰Ammianus Marcellinus XX.7.9.

⁹¹*Die Chronik von Arbela* 1985, 85.

⁹²Ammianus Marcellinus XVII.5.1.

⁹³M. Azarnoush, *The Sasanian Manor House at Hājiābād, Iran*, Casa Editrice Le Lettere, Firenze, 1994, p. 14.

⁹⁴Šābuhr II's Persepolis inscription, Ps-I.3, M. Back, *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1978, pp. 490-492.

⁹⁵Ammianus Marcellinus, XXIII.6.14.

Sīstān,⁹⁶ which confirms his rule over that region. Finally, most of the gold coins minted by Šābuhr II are from eastern mints such as Marw where the Kušāns also minted gold coins. Also, a large amount of copper coins from the mints of Sakastān/Sīstān and Kabul exist.⁹⁷ This may mean that Šābuhr II was able to extract a large amount of gold and other precious metals from his defeated eastern enemies.

In 359 CE Šābuhr II, with the backing of king Grumbates, attacked Syria, laid siege to Amida, entered it after seventy three days,⁹⁸ and deported its population to Xūzestān. The city of Amida was sacked and its population deported as punishment because the son of the Kidirite king was killed. In 361 CE, the new Roman emperor, Julian counter-attacked and won against Šābuhr II with victories in 363 CE, and even laid siege to Ctesiphon. The capital, however, was not taken because of disorder and pillaging among the Roman forces.⁹⁹ In anticipation of Julian's victory against the Persians an inscription was placed in upper Jordan valley, with the premature title of BARORVM EXTINCTORI, probably because at his initial success in Antioch in March of 363.¹⁰⁰ We are told that among the Roman generals there was a Persian renegade by the name of Hormizd who commanded the cavalry. Julian had destroyed his own naval ships, so that his forces would not retreat,¹⁰¹ and Šābuhr II responded by adopting a scorched-earth policy in Mesopotamia which resulted in hunger among the Roman forces. In June of 363 Persian forces equipped with elephants defeated the Romans, and Julian was badly wounded in battle, probably by a "cavalry spearman," and died in his tent.¹⁰² Eutropius, who was an eyewitness to this campaign, affirms that Julian was killed by the hand of the enemy.¹⁰³

Jovian was elected emperor and had to make peace with Šābuhr II, which the Romans called *ignobili decreto* "shameful treaty,"¹⁰⁴ ceding eastern Mesopotamia, Armenia and the adjoining regions, fifteen fortresses as well as Nisibis.¹⁰⁵ Persian terms and conditions were conveyed by Surenas (Sūren) who agreed to have the mainly Christian population of Nisibis moved to Roman territory while the Persian standard was raised over the city.¹⁰⁶ Jovian left Mesopotamia and the Romans would not engage the Sasanians further as Emperor Valens had to deal with Germanic tribes in the Balkans.

⁹⁶Tabarī 1999, 65.

⁹⁷N. Schindel, *Sylloge Nummorum Sasanidarum, Shapur II.-Kawad I, 3/1 & 3/2*, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, 2004, 26.

⁹⁸Ammianus Marcellinus XVIII.9.

⁹⁹Libanius, *Selected Orations*, vol. I, translated by A.F. Norman, Cambridge University Press, London 1969 (reprint 2003). xviii.254-255.

¹⁰⁰G.W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978, pp. 123-124.

¹⁰¹Libanius xviii.263.

¹⁰²Ammianus Marcellinus XXV.3.6 : Libanius xviii.269-270.

¹⁰³Eutropius, *Breviarium* X.16.

¹⁰⁴Ammianus Marcellinus XXV.7.13.

¹⁰⁵Ammianus Marcellinus XXV.7.9.

¹⁰⁶For Šābuhr II's wars see Winter and Dignas, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-54; Chronicon Paschale 554.



Sasanian fresco from Hajjiābād (after Azarnoush)

On the Armenian front during the early years of Šābuhr II's life Armenia under king Tirdates IV (298-330) adopted Christianity (314 CE). Consequently some of the Armenian feudal clans (*naxarars*) converted as well and supported Tirdat IV against those *naxarars* who were loyal to the Sasanians, and more specifically, those who honored the ancient Zoroastrian tradition of Armenia, still worshipping *Ormizd*, *Anāhit*, and *Vahagn*. The precarious internal struggle and the wavering loyalties of the Persians by the *naxarars*, the king, and the clergy ushered in a turbulent period in Armenian history, and the sources for this period are confused. King Tiran, who had attempted to keep Armenia independent by playing both the Romans and the Persians, lost his life to Šābuhr II. He was replaced by his son, Aršak II (350-367 CE) who initially also tried to appease both the Romans and the Persians, but who finally joined Julian's expedition against the Sasanians.¹⁰⁷ As part of the peace treaty between Šābuhr II and Jovian, Armenia and Georgia were to come under Sasanian control and the Romans were not to get involved in Armenian affairs.¹⁰⁸ The Armenian king was captured by the Persians and imprisoned in the Castle of Oblivion, in Armenian (sources known as Fortress of Andmāš or Castle of Anyuš in Xūzestān), where he is said to have committed suicide while being visited by his eunuch Drastamat.¹⁰⁹ The cities of Artašat, Vałaršapat, Eruandašat, Zarehawan, Zarišat, Van and Naxčwan were taken and their populations deported, among whom there were many Jewish families.¹¹⁰ The pro-Persian *naxarars*, namely Vahan Mamikonean and Meružan Arcruni accompanied Shapur II and were rewarded for their help, and two Persians, Zik and Karēn with a large army were placed over Armenian affairs.¹¹¹ Georgia was also placed under Persian control where Shapur II installed Aspacures in eastern Georgia, but eventually the Roman emperor Valens succeeded in installing Sauromaces in western Georgia.¹¹²

Pap (367-374 CE), who was the son of the Armenian ruler Aršak who had fled to the Romans, was placed on the throne in 367 with Roman backing. The Armenians were

¹⁰⁷Ammianus Marcellinus xxiii.3.5 : xxiv.7.8.

¹⁰⁸Ammianus Marcellinus xxv.7.12.

¹⁰⁹Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk', Epic Histories V.vii.

¹¹⁰Epic Histories IV.lv.

¹¹¹Epic Histories IV.lviii.

¹¹²Ammianus Marcellinus xxvii.12.15.

able to withstand Šābuhr II's attack near Bagawan in 371 CE.¹¹³ Pap, however, was not popular with many of the *naxarars* or the Armenian church because of his pro-Arian policy, which caused him to be slandered by the Armenian sources as devoted to the *dews* "demons" due his mother's religious beliefs (Queen P'aranjem of Siwnik').¹¹⁴ Pap became a victim of internal divisions and fighting among *naxarars* and the *sparapet* Mušel Mamikonean and, was eventually killed at the instigation of Emperor Valens.¹¹⁵ Armenia, however, was divided between Šābuhr II and Valens in 377 CE and a state of relative peace reigned in the Caucasus.

Internally, the Zoroastrian priest named Adūrbād ī Mahrsapndān was to canonize the *Avesta* and the Zoroastrian tradition. As Richard Frye has stated, the semblance of the Ottoman *millet* system was first begun during this period, where the Christian bishop resided at Ctesiphon and, along with the Jewish *exilarch*, paid his poll tax in return for peace and security. By this time religious communities were being established and the foundation of a Late Antique society in Persia was being laid by the Zoroastrian priests, the Jewish rabbis, and the Christian clergy.¹¹⁶ We do not know how far Šābuhr II was able to cut the power of the *grandees* and the clergy, but since he was a strong ruler he was able to hold his own. The only hint which may suggest that the Zoroastrian clergy were able to impose themselves on the monarchy is that Šābuhr II is one of the last kings to call himself "whose lineage (is) from the Gods." It may be that finally the king of kings had become a secular ruler, whose religious authority had become minimal.

It is exactly at this juncture in history that the Sasanian monuments disappear in Persis and appear in the north, in Media. We may consider that the Zoroastrian priests in Persis had become too powerful and the king decided to shift their focus not only away from their traditional stronghold where they were from, but another place was a new image was to be presented. It is not clear what motivated this move by the king, or the adoption of the new titles. The artistic style is essentially different from those in Persis. Mithra's image becomes prominent, along with Ohrmazd. Ardaxšīr II and Šābuhr III are presented motionless and standing frontally, flanked by two small Middle Persian inscriptions, bearing the traditional formula which Ardaxšīr I had first adopted on his coins and inscriptions.¹¹⁷ They are not receiving a diadem from the gods, rather posing for a personal portrait. At Tāq-e Bustān, the monuments of Ardaxšīr II (379-383 CE) and his son, Šābuhr III (383-388 CE) are present. These kings along with Wahrām IV (388-399 CE)¹¹⁸ all met a violent end which suggests the growing power of

¹¹³Garsoïan 1997; 90-91.

¹¹⁴Epic Histories IV.xliv.

¹¹⁵Garsoïan 1997; 91.

¹¹⁶R.N. Frye, "Iran under the Sasanians," *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3(1), ed. E. Yarshater, Cambridge University Press, Massachusetts, 1983, p. 132.

¹¹⁷M. Back, *op. cit.*, pp. 490-491.

¹¹⁸ The building of Kermānšāh associated with Wahrām IV, Nöldeke, *op. cit.*, p. 102, ff. 2.

the nobility and the priests since the time of Šābuhr II.¹¹⁹ This growing power of the nobility is also reflected in the brief description of Ardaxšīr II's rule that is said to have killed a number of the great men and holders of authority in order to reduce their power.¹²⁰ Ardaxšīr III was the younger brother of Šābuhr II and was allowed to rule by making an oath that once Šābuhr II's son (Šābuhr III) reached the age of adulthood he would relinquish the throne. He commemorated his career with the relief at Tāq-e Bustān, flanked by Šābuhr II who is handing him the diadem of rulership. Behind Ardaxšīr II stand the deity Mithra, the god of oath. The relief corroborates Tabarī and Ferdowsī's report that Ardaxšīr II had taken an oath before Šābuhr II.

The figure laying beneath the feet of Ardaxšīr II has been identified as the Roman emperor Julian (the Apostate).¹²¹ The reason for which Ardaxšīr II chose to show him as the vanquisher of Julian may be that during the time of his invasion in 363 CE was that he was the king of Adiabene. This means that he took part in the war against Julian and may have been instrumental in the war.¹²²

During Wahram IV's reign, Armenia lost any semblance of independence, and the western part become part of the Roman empire and the east was put under the rule of the king of kings' brother, Wahrām Šābuhr (Armenian *Vramshapuh*) as king of Perse-Armenia in 394 CE. But Wahrām IV's greatest achievement was the stopping of the Huns who had entered Syria and northern Mesopotamia.¹²³

For the fourth century CE it can be said that Christianity was seen as a major threat to Zoroastrianism and a break from the ancient tradition by the Armenians. By adopting Christianity, Armenia and then Georgia began to become closer with the Eastern Roman Empire. This is because Constantine and his successors first allowed Christianity to thrive, and then it was tied to the institution of the emperor and the empire. The Roman Emperors saw themselves as the leaders of all Christians in the world, and hence the Christians in the Sasanian Empire had become suspect. A strong king such as Šābuhr II and a Zoroastrian priest like Adūrbād ī Mahrspandān reacted to the expansion of Christianity. This tactic was not to be fruitful, and in the fifth century CE another way was found to appease the situation. A strong and long-lived king like Šābuhr II brought security to the Sasanian Empire and secured its borders in the west and the south. In the east it appears that Šābuhr II had been able to control the encroachment of the various nomadic tribes from the East such as the Huns and Kidarites. Šābuhr II was able to create an alliance and a semblance of allegiance with the Huns and later the Kidarites. Šābuhr II's raids into the Arabian Peninsula and the coast was not only to punish the Arab tribes, but perhaps to secure the Persian Gulf region. The Sasanians could now call the Persian Gulf as their *mare nostrum*. The institution of

¹¹⁹ Tabarī has Ardaxšīr II killing many of the grandees and the nobility; Šābuhr III is killed by the same noble families (Arabic *ahl al-buyūtāt*), and Wahrām IV is killed by an unnamed group, Nöldeke, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-103 which were probably by the court and nobility or the army.

¹²⁰ Tabarī, pp. 68-69.

¹²¹ K. Erdmann, *Die Kunst Irans zur Zeit der Sasaniden*, Mainz, 1969, p. 138.

¹²² A.Sh. Shahbazi, "Ardašīr II," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater (<http://www.iranica.com/newsite/>).

¹²³ Nöldeke, *op. cit.*, p. 103, ff.1.

kingship, however, was to be redefined as the Zoroastrian ecclesiastical hierarchy strengthened. From now on the King of Kings was not known to be from the lineage of the gods (*yazdān*) anymore, but rather a secular ruler who continued to be a Mazda worshipper.

Yazdgerd the Prince of Peace and Fifth Century Iran

With the reign of Yazdgerd I (399-420 CE) we begin to get a new ideological outlook and treatment of the minorities in the empire. His coins add the slogan “who maintains peace in his dominion” (*rāmšahr*) while the Sasanian sources called him “sinner” (Arabic *al-Athīm*; Persian *bazehkar*). This is purely a priestly propaganda, because he not only killed some Zoroastrian priests who had looked down upon his good treatment of the religious minorities, but also treated the Jews and the Christians favorably.¹²⁴ In fact Christianity became a recognized religion, when the first synod of the “Nestorian Church” was convened in 410 CE, during the rule of Yazdgerd I.¹²⁵ Agathias calls Yazdgerd I a pro-Christian monarch, but more importantly a “friendly and peaceable,” ruler who never once made war on the Romans.¹²⁶ So his title would be fitting for the period, but we may even connect this to Kayānid ideology as well. In the Middle

¹²⁴For Maruthas’ mission to Persia and Yazdgerd’s killing of some Zoroastrian priests see Socrates Scholasticus, Chapter VIII.7.9.

¹²⁵Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l’empire perse*, pp. 87-109; Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. E. Yarshater, Vol. 3(2), 1983, pp. 940

¹²⁶Agathias Scholasticus, *The Histories*, Book IV.26.8. For the treatment of the Sasanians by Agathias see A. Cameron, “Agathias on the Sassanians,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 22-23, 1969-1970, pp. 126-127.

Persian epic, the *Ayādgar ī Zarērān* (The Testament of Zarēr) the last Kayanid ruler, Kay Wištāsp is given the title *rāmšahr* which appears in the *Dēnkard* as well.¹²⁷ This title suggests gravitation towards an Avestan / Kayānid ideology even before seeing such titles and terminology as *kay* “Kayānid” and *xwarrah* “Glory.” How much of this new ideological framework is due to the contacts with the East is difficult to say, but the evermore attention to the eastern boundaries of the empire must have impacted the view of the king.

By all accounts, the rule of Yazdgerd I was peaceful and with mutual respect with the Roman empire. In fact the emperor Arcadius (383-408 CE) asked the Persian ruler to become the guardian of his son Theodosius II¹²⁸ and this tradition would live on, sometimes the Romans and sometimes the Persians asking the other side for guardianship of the heirs to the throne of the respective empires. This action indicates that by the fifth century both empires saw each other as equals and worthy to have their heirs at the court of the other, or simply securing succession and being more fearful of internal opposition than each others forces. We should not forget before Yazdgerd I, the three kings who followed one another had met a violent death by the nobility and so Yazdgerd I had to react and that he did, but killing many of them, hence being called the “sinner” in the official Sasanian record. This title of Yazdgerd I may be as much for his tolerance of other religions and opening a new chapter in the history Christianity of Persia as establishing a balance of power between the institution of kingship and the noble families and the Zoroastrian priests.

In 414 CE, when Yazdgerd I died, his eldest son, Šābuhr left Armenia (Wahrām Šābuhr / Armenian *Vramshapuh*) to take the throne but he was murdered by the nobility who placed Xusrō on the throne who was not related directly to Yazdgerd I. This action suggests the nobility and priestly distaste for what Yazdgerd I had done and so his sons had the unfortunate situation of being in danger. Another son of Yazdgerd I, Wahrām who had been sent to the Arab court at al-Hira came with a force of mainly Arabs and forced Xusrō to abdicate in 421 CE. By all accounts Wahrām (421-438 CE) was a successful warrior; in 422 CE in the west a peace treaty was signed giving religious freedom to the Christians in the Sasanian Empire and to the Zoroastrians in the Roman Empire. This was in the face of persecution of Christians which seem to have begun at the end of Yazdgerd I's reign,¹²⁹ or more probably in the beginning of Wahrām's reign instigated by the Zoroastrian priests.¹³⁰ He defeated the Hephthalites, another tribe in the east, killing their king and stopping their encroachment on the eastern borders of the empire. While on his campaign it appears he had left his brother Narseh who was the youngest of his brothers in charge and when Wahrām returned, Narseh was

¹²⁷B. Gheiby, *Ayādgar ī Zarērān*, Pahlavi Literature Series, Nemudar Publication, Bielefeld, 1999, p. 21(64); for its occurrence in the *Dēnkard* (DkM, 600.12) see M. Shaki, “Observations on the *Ayādgar ī Zarērān*,” *Archiv Orientalni*, vol. 54, 1986, p. 265.

¹²⁸Procopius, I.ii.1-10.

¹²⁹Cyril of Scythopolis *Vit. Euthym* 10 (18.5-19.9) in G. Greatrex and S.N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, Part II (AD 363-630), Routledge, London and New York, 2002, p. 37.

¹³⁰Conf. Peroz (AMS IV.258-259); Socrates Scholasticus *HE* VII.18 (363.2-365.24), Greatrex and Lieu, pp. 38-39.

appointed at the ruler of Xwarāsān. We also here of the office of Wuzurg-framadār which was given to Mihr-Narseh.¹³¹ At this time Armenia's status also changed when the Armenian *naxarars* once again sought the aid of the Sasanians in the deposing of their king, Artāšes, the son of Vramshapuh. In 428 CE, Wahrām V removed him and placed a margrave (*marzbān*) in Armenia, ushering in what is known in Armenian history as the *marzpanate* period.



Wahrām and Āzadeh

There are many romantic accounts attributed to Wahrām V, such as the importation of Indian minstrels as entertainers (*lurs*), and his pleasure for drinking and especially hunting, receiving the epithet of *Gūr* "onogur." The composition of the first Persian poem is also attributed to him in early Persian compendiums which are a stretch of the imagination. But it was this imagination that he captured even by his mysterious death, where it is said that one day while hunting in Media (Māh) he fell into some marshes or a well and disappeared where his body was never found. He may also be remembered by the composers of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts as the one who brought about an age when there was peace and that evil and the demons went into hiding.¹³²

In the early years of the rule of Yazdgerd II (438-457 CE), the focus shifted to the east to battling what the sources call the Kušāns who were probably the Huns. He was stationed in Xwarāsān for some time until he was able to secure the eastern flank of the empire, and Bactria came under the control of the Sasanians. He then moved towards Armenia and Albania, as the defense of the Caucasus from the Huns moving westward was imperative, a campaign which also involved the Romans.¹³³ There were further problems in Armenia, probably at the instigation of Mihr-Narse (*Wuzurg-framadār* /

¹³¹Nöldeke, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

¹³²*Zand ī Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalypse*, edited and translated by C. Cereti, Istituto Italiano per il medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995, p. 152.

¹³³Priscus, frg. 41.1.1-3-27, Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

Armenian *Vzurk hramatar*), who issued an edict in which Zoroastrianism was re-imposed as the official religion in Armenia.¹³⁴ This edict provides us with an interesting glimpse of the Zurvanite tendency of Mihr-Narseh and the reasons why the Armenians should convert to Zoroastrianism.¹³⁵ This caused an uprising by some of the Armenian *naxarars* who had become Christian. We can tell that the Armenians were not united in this action and as a result at the battle of Avarair in 451 CE the Armenian forces, led by Vardan of the Mamikonian's family were annihilated, and many were deported to Persia.¹³⁶ This calamity was not to be forgotten by the Armenian (Christian) people and became a symbol of resistance and remembrance towards their Zoroastrian neighbors.

This anti-Christian measure did not only befall the Armenian Christians, since there are also Syriac martyrologies from this period which mention Christian and Jewish persecutions. Consequently Yazdgerd II is remembered well by the Zoroastrian priests and the Sasanian chronicle as someone who defeated his enemies (non-Zoroastrians) but who behaved with benevolence towards the Zoroastrians and the army. However, Yazdgerd II sent a *marzbān* of Armenian descent by the name of Aršakān/Aršagān and instructed to allow the Armenians to freely practice their religion and not to disturb them furthermore.¹³⁷ We can see this especial relationship with Armenia in the unique title of the "Commander of the army of the masters of the house of Armenia" (*gund ī kadag-xwadāyān-framādār ī armin*).¹³⁸ No other region had such an office.

In terms of imperial ideology, he is the first to use the new title of "Mazdaean Majesty Kay" (*mzdysn bgy kdy*). This means the Sasanian kings were not seen as in the image of the gods anymore, at least in the empire where these coins were circulated, but were connected with the Avestan dynasty of the Kayānids. However, we should remember that this trend had begun with Yazdgerd I and the title of *rāmšahr*, and that *kay* was the second manifestation of this Kayānid ideology.

It is especially interesting that this Avestan orientation takes place at the exact time when a Sasanian king is concerned again with the east and when the king resided in that region for several years. We cannot say that his stay in Xwarāsān or contact with Bactria would have brought about this fascination with the Kayānids, since we have the *rāmšahr* title appearing before. This Kayanid identity, which was now to be adopted wholesale by the Sasanians was to manifest itself in several titles which will be dealt

¹³⁴For the inscription of Mihr-Narseh see, Back, *op. cit.*, p. 498; L. Bier, "Notes on Mihr Narseh's Bridge near Firuzabad," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, Vol. 19, 1986, 263-268; for Mihr-Narseh's commitment to Zoroastrianism and service to fire-temples, namely those of Ardāwahišt and Abzōn-Ardaxšīr see *Madīgān ī Hazār Dādestān*, edited and translated by A. Perikhanian, *The Book of a Thousand Judgments*, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, 1997, A39.11-17; A40.3-5.

¹³⁵Elishē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, Translated and Commentary by Robert W. Thomson, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982, pp. 77-80. *The History of Łazar P'arpets'i* also covers these events, translated and commentary by Robert W. Thomson, Occasional Papers and Proceedings. Columbia University, Program in Armenian Studies, Georgia, 1991.

¹³⁶Elishē, pp. 178-179.

¹³⁷N. Garsoïan, "Frontier-Frontiers? Transcaucasia and Eastern Anatolia in the Pre-Islamic Period," *La Persia e bizanzio*, Roma, 2004, p. 347.

¹³⁸Gyselen, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 44.

with below. By a Kayanid ideology it is meant that rather than looking to the Achaemenids as their ancestors (for all we know they might have seen the Achaemenid monuments as the work of the kings of Persis), they connected themselves to the primordial kings, especially the Kayānid kings in the *Avesta*.¹³⁹

The two sons of Yazdgerd II, Hormizd III (457-459 CE) and Pērōz (459-484 CE) ruled consecutively, although the latter deposed the former in a power struggle. According to Tabarī, Hormizd III was the elder son and ruled of Sīstān. His younger brother, however, rose in rebellion against him and a dynastic squabble led to the rule of their mother, Queen Dēnag. Armenian sources here come to our aid in deciphering Tabarī's and other Sasanian based histories. Efiše states that the *dāyag* of Pērōz aided the young man by defeating the older son of Yazdgerd II and putting him to death.¹⁴⁰ During this confusion Albania gained independence and the eastern borders of the empire were laid open to Hephthalite attack.

When Pērōz came to the throne, he pacified Albania, but allowed the Armenians and the Albanians to practice Christianity and made an agreement with the eastern Roman Empire to cooperate in defending the Caucasus passes. The Sasanians met their match against the Hephthalites in Xwarāsān and in 469 CE. Pērōz and his harem and retinue were captured by Xwašnawāz. This calamity took place during the third major battle, while during the first two, his war was partly financed by the Romans.¹⁴¹ This was the low point of Sasanian rule, where they in fact became tributaries to the Hephthalites and ceded territory to them for returning the king and his entourage to Sasanian territory. The chief priest (*mowbed*), his son, Kawād, and his daughter were kept with the Hephthalites as insurance.¹⁴² The only reason that the Romans did not attack Persia at this time was because emperor Zenon was facing internal problems and could not turn his attention to the east.¹⁴³

We know there were religious persecutions, especially against the Jews at this time and drought and famine were rampant in the empire, but also revolt in Armenia in 482 CE,¹⁴⁴ but Pērōz took it upon himself to revenge his loss in the east. This time in 484 CE, his actions cost him his life, seven of his sons, and his entire army.¹⁴⁵ It is here that we hear of the famous legend of the "pearl earring" of Pērōz which was so precious that before dying he threw it to the ground so that no one would wear it.¹⁴⁶ The short rule of Walāxš (484-488 CE) was uneventful and since the empire was weak, the king kept peaceful relations with Armenia and the Hephthalites by giving tribute to the latter.

¹³⁹T. Daryaei, "National History or Keyanid History? The Nature of Sasanid Zoroastrian Historiography," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 28, nos. 3-4, 1995, pp. 129-141.

¹⁴⁰Efiše, p. 242; A.Sh. Shahbazi, "Hormizd III," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater (<http://www.iranica.com/newsite/>).

¹⁴¹*The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, Translated with note and introduction by F. Trombley and J.W. Watt, Liverpool University Press, 2000, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴²T. Daryaei, "Ardašir Mowbed-e Mowbedān: Yek Tashih dar Matn-e Bundahiš," *Iranshenasi*, 2001, pp. 145-146.

¹⁴³For the fifth century relations see Winter and Dignas, op. cit., pp. 54-57; *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite*, p. 9-10.

¹⁴⁴Lazar P'arpets'i, 136.

¹⁴⁵Sebeos reports that seven of Pērōz's sons were killed with him, Chapter 8.67, p. 5.

¹⁴⁶For Pērōz's campaign in the east see Procopius, *History of the Wars*, Book I.i-iv.

Walāxš appears to have been dominated by the noble families and it is interesting that we see the creeping influence of the Parthian noble families at this time. One such person is Zarmihr Soxrā of the Karen clan, who saved the rest of the Sasanian army after Pērōz's death, and the other Šābuhr of the Mehrān clan.¹⁴⁷ He was deposed by the nobility and the priests in 499 CE, when Kawād I (488-496, 499-531 CE) was brought to the throne.

The fifth century kings were generally weak and the nobility and the Zoroastrian priests were able to exert their influence at the cost of court. Some kings like Yazdgerd I did punish some the Zoroastrian priests and the nobility to reduce their power, but this only hampered their eventual take-over of the Sasanian state for a short time. This, however, did not mean that the empire was not centralized or ineffective. The bureaucratic apparatus, under the control of the priests, had reached such a level of sophistication that the death of a king would not bring the empire down which worked to the advantage of the priests and the nobility. This centralization is also apparent with the growing number of titles as they appear on administrative seals,¹⁴⁸ as well as the appearance of mint-marks on the coins. Economically, the empire was not faring well, because of the drought, famine and the incisive wars which had resulted in giving huge sums of tribute to the Hephthalite and there was no victory in the west to collect gold from the Romans.

¹⁴⁷ Nöldeke, *op. cit.*, p. 151, ff. 1.

¹⁴⁸For a detailed study of the administrative seals and the functionaries see R. Gyselen, *La géographie administrative de l'Empire sassanides*, Paris, 1989.

Kawād I and Xusrō I and Sixth Century

King Kawād I had to face economic and political problems which confronted the empire at the end of the fifth century. It is at this time that we have some information on Zoroastrian sectarianism in the Sasanian Empire. In the first period of Kawād's rule a Zoroastrian priest by the name of Mazdak was able to capture the attention of Kawād I, enabling both to make reforms which went beyond the accepted religious dogma and the established social order. Mazdak brought a social reform which caused much resentment during and especially after its success in the minds of the Zoroastrian priests. Sources tell us that Mazdak preached an egalitarian social system, one in which equality in sharing wealth, women and property was propagated. Byzantine sources state that it was Kawād who introduced Persians to "have communal intercourse with their women."¹⁴⁹ Mazdak's outlook had theological and cosmological dimensions, but it also had political and social ramifications as well.¹⁵⁰ One needs to see the Mazdakite movement in terms of its function as a political tool for Kawād. Kawād was able to use Mazdak's ideas to weaken the power of the nobility and the grandees, the large land owners and the priests who now were involved in every aspect of the state and were not always honest.¹⁵¹ Mazdak's teaching went against the social division which was enforced by the *Avesta*, or perhaps how the Zoroastrian priests had interpreted the *Avesta*. Now Mazdak had a new and perhaps novel interpretation of the Zoroastrian tradition. Kawād may have believed in his message or not, but he certainly used it to his advantage, in leveling the upper classes and making the king more appealing and accessible to the masses by adopting Mazdakite ideas. Imperial granaries were given away and land was redistributed among the peasants. In the Zoroastrian texts composed by the very priests who were against this reform, this period is seen as a time of chaos where women were shared by all, and no one knew one's lineage anymore.

The remaining dissatisfied nobility and the priests had Kawād arrested and imprisoned in the "Prison of Oblivion," in 496 CE and they brought his brother Zāmāsp to the throne for several years. Zāmāsp is noted for his gentleness and sense of justice which may be anti-Mazdakite propaganda,¹⁵² and he probably attempted to undue Kawād's reforms. Kawād, with the help of his sister was able to escape to the Hephthalites. He raised a force there and was able to come back to the throne in 499 CE, when Zāmāsp abdicated in his favor. This action also demonstrated the beleaguered situation of the empire, where in a time of chaos a small force was able to overrun the

¹⁴⁹Procopius, *History of the Wars*, Book I.v.1-2. Also Agathias, *The Histories*, "He was even reputed to have made a law that wives should be held in common," Book 4.7, p. 130.

¹⁵⁰H. Gaube in his essay has suggested that Mazdak was a fictional character, "Mazdak: Historical Reality or Invention?," *Studia Iranica*, vol. 11, 1982, pp. 111-122.

¹⁵¹P. Crone, "Kawād's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," *Iran*, vol. 29, 1992, p. 30. On an ostrakon found at Erk-kala from Turkmenia it is written: "He gave a doubtful oath, but a *mowbed* should not tell lies, and he died..." A.B. Nititin, "Middle Persian Ostraca from South Turkmenistan," *East and West*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1992, pp. 105-106.

¹⁵²Agathias, *The Histories*, Book 4.28, p. 131.

nobility-priest alliance. He forced the Mazdakite religion not only upon the population of the empire where many must have been happy, especially the lower classes, but also upon the clients of the Sasanians, such as the Arabs in Najd and Hijaz in the first quarter of the sixth century.¹⁵³ This means the developments in the Sasanian Empire effected the region as well.

Once the economic, political and social situation was under control, Kawād began to institute reforms that were fundamental to the empire in the sixth century and are usually credited to Xusrō I. The office of the “protector of the poor and judge” (*drīyōšān jādaggōw ud dādwar*) was created from the ranks of the *mowbeds* (chief priests) to help the poor and the downtrodden which was not only a reaction to the Mazdakite movement, but a general trend in Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and later Islam.¹⁵⁴ Administratively, four chanceries (*dēwāns*) were created for the empire which probably corresponded with the military division of the empire under the rule of four generals (*spāhbeds*).¹⁵⁵ Prior to this an *Ērān-spāhbed* led the army, but now it had become exceedingly difficult to be on several fronts at once. Now the four *spāhbeds* held sway over the quarters (*kust*) of the empire whose names and titles we have thanks to the work of R. Gyselen.¹⁵⁶

The quadripartition was a reaction to the incursions from the east by the Hephthalites, as well as the Roman frontier wars in the west, and the Arab raids into the empire from the south. This made it crucial that the empire be able to deal with problems on several fronts. Here we have a division of four quarters, much like the divisions in late Eastern Roman empire, where there was a *Praefectura praetorio per Orientem* “prefecture of the East;” *Praefectura praetorio per Illyricum* “prefecture of Greece and the Balkans;” *Praefectura praetorio Illyrici, Italiae et Africae* “prefecture of Italy and Latin Africa;” and *Praefectura praetorio Galliarum* “prefecture of Roman Britain and the Iberian Peninsula,”¹⁵⁷

The survey of agricultural lands and reorganization of the tax system was also begun during his rule as was the creation of new districts in the empire.¹⁵⁸ Religiously, Christian Nestorianism became the officially tolerated church in Persia and by the time of Xusrō I we are told that the leader of the Christians had the title of *Ērān Catholicos*.¹⁵⁹

Fortunately for the Sasanians, the Hephthalites were in demise and division by 515 CE. In the West, however, things were different and there was a protracted war beginning in 502 CE, ending a long period of piece. Procopius informs us that Kawād

¹⁵³M.J. Kister, “Al-Hīra, Some notes on its relations with Arabia,” *Arabica*, vol. xi, 1967, pp. 143-169.

¹⁵⁴M. Shaki, “An Appraisal of Encyclopaedia Iranica, Vols. II and III,” *Archiv Orientalni*, Vol. 59, p. 406; and a review of the evidence T. Daryae, “Modafe’ Darvīšān va Dāvar dar Zamān-e Sāsānīān,” *Tafazzoli Memorial Volume*, ed. A. Ashraf Sadeghi, Sokhan Publishers, Tehran, 2001, pp. 179-188.

¹⁵⁵F. Gurnet, “Deux notes à propos du monnayage de Xusrō II,” *Revue belge de Numismatique*, 140, 1994, p. 36-37.

¹⁵⁶*The Four Generals of the Sasanian Empire: Some Sigillographic Evidence*, Roma, 2001; for a catalogue of the seals see Gyselen, *op. cit.*, 2007, pp. 47-52.

¹⁵⁷G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, Rutgers University Press, Revised Edition, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1969, p. 97-98; J. F. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 35.

¹⁵⁸Z. Rubin, “The Reforms of Xusrō Anūshirwān,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, States, Resources and Armies*, vol. III, ed. A. Cameron, Princeton, 1995, pp. 227-296.

¹⁵⁹Sebeos, Chapter 9.70, p. 10.

owed money to the Hephthalites,¹⁶⁰ while another source suggests that the Persians were unhappy because the Romans had been unwilling to help in the defense against the Huns.¹⁶¹ Kawād successfully invaded Armenia and took Theodosiopolis and Martyropolis. Then from Armenia he moved westward and laid siege to Amida in Mesopotamia and was able to take it over.¹⁶² Kawād made further incursions westward, but was only partially successful in his predatory invasion in search of booty. The negotiations, however, paid off for the Persians and in 506 CE the war was concluded. In 524 the Iberian king Gourgenes sided with the Romans, because Kawād was trying to impose Zoroastrianism. This act threatened Persian control over that kingdom but the Persians were able to hold the area under firm control by 528 CE. Mesopotamia bore the brunt of further battles, beginning in 527 CE, and the Arab tribes and the Huns also became involved. Nu'man III, the ruler of Hira and his Arab army was entrusted with attacking the Roman possessions in Mesopotamia. By 529 CE there were negotiations which broke down and in 530 CE Kawād invaded Dara which coincided with Justinian's reign. His capable general Belisarius was sent to defend the Roman possession against the Persian general Mehrān.¹⁶³ There were further campaigns in Mesopotamian-Syrian border as well as in Armenia in 531 CE and Georgia and Lazica, but none of these wars had a clear winner.¹⁶⁴ Again some of the Arabs fought against on the side of the Persians, *i.e.* Mundir of Hira.

The Sasanian revival was taking place and its effect was that Georgia as well as parts of inner Arabia and Oman, was now controlled by the Persians.¹⁶⁵ Persians had already settled in Central Asia and traders had gone to India, China and as far away as Indonesia.¹⁶⁶ They were more interested in business and wanted to control the trade in spices and silk, motivated by economic gain, rather than as a state sponsored activity. When Kawād passed away in 531 CE the Mazdakites supported his eldest son by the name of Kāwūs (another Kayānid name along with his father). Here we have information that the court and the religious hierarchy decided in favor of Xusrō I, who was younger, but anti-Mazdakite. It appears that Kawād had also chosen Xusrō I to be his heir.¹⁶⁷ Kāwūs was ruling in the north, in Tabarestān and battled Xusrō I, but was ultimately defeated.¹⁶⁸

By this time Xusrō I had become instrumental in the murder of Mazdak and a large number of his followers who had felt secure enough to proclaim their allegiance to

¹⁶⁰Procopius, 1.7.1.

¹⁶¹Zachariah of Mytilene. *HE* VII.3 (22.15-22), Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁶²Theophanes A.M. 5996 (145.24-146.15), Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁶³Procopius, I.14.34-55, Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-91.

¹⁶⁴For these wars see G. Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at war: 502-532*, Leeds, 1998.

¹⁶⁵J.C. Wilkinson, "The Julanda of Oman," *The Journal of Oman Studies*, vol. I, 1975, pp. 98-99.

¹⁶⁶E.H. Schafer, "Iranian Merchants in T'ang Dynasty Tales," *University of California Publications in Semitic Philology*, vol. 11, 1951, pp. 403-422.

¹⁶⁷Procopius 1.21.20-22; Malalas, 18.68, p. 274.

¹⁶⁸For information on Kāwūs and his discontent with Xusrō's attempt to seize the throne see Z. Mara'shi, *Tārīkh-e Tabarestān va Rōyān va Māzandarān*, ed. B. Dorn, *Geschichte von Tabristan, Rujan und Masanderan*, St. Petersburg, 1850, reprint Gostareh Publishers, Tehran, 1363, pp. 201-206.

Mazdak openly. Although the *Šāhnāme* may be exaggerating the end of the Mazdakites, it has captured the mind of the Persians to this day in describing his end: “Kasrā (Xusrō) owned an estate with high walls. He ordered holes to be dug there and had the followers of Mazdak implanted, heads in the ground and feet upwards.”¹⁶⁹ He then is said to have told Mazdak to enter the garden of the estate to view the seeds that he had sown and had born fruit, and when the *mowbed* saw his followers in such a state he cried aloud and fell to the ground. He was then hung alive and killed by volleys of arrows. At the end of the story, Ferdowsī proclaims: “If you are wise, do not follow the path of Mazdak.”¹⁷⁰

Xusrō I (531-579 CE) represents the epitome of the philosopher-king in Sasanian and Near Eastern history. There is so much that has been attributed to him that it is quite difficult to discern fact from fiction. But certainly he was able to capture the imagination of the people of that region even after the fall of the Sasanians and the coming of Islam. Xusrō I’s reforms and changes to the empire were to become a blue-print for Kings and Caliphs and Sultans alike. But before undertaking major changes, he needed to secure his power on the throne. His power was contested by his brother Kāwūs whose stronghold was the north, in Mazandarān. Historical sources have it that the nobles who did not favor Mazdak and his followers sided with Xusrō I. But in effect Xusrō I followed his father’s vision of administrative and economic reforms and in order to do this the power of the great noble houses needed to be reduced. Once this had happened, it appears, that Xusrō I presented himself as the anti-Mazdakite candidate, aspiring to a time when there was stability and social order. While in reality Xusrō I was creating a new order after the defeat and the destruction of the old order.

When Xusrō I came to power as an anti-Mazdakite, he did not restore the power of the great noble houses and the large landed aristocracy, instead he favored the small landholding gentry known in the Middle Persian sources and the Perso-Arabic sources as *dehgāns/dehghāns*.¹⁷¹ The *dehgāns* would not only be the backbone of the Sasanian military, but more importantly the economic foundation of the state as tax collectors. They would also remain as the repository of the Persian culture and history in time to come, up to the eleventh century, when one of them in his poor economic state completed the *Šāhnāme* or the *Book of Kings*.

¹⁶⁹*Šāhnāme*, translated by R. Levy, p. 321.

¹⁷⁰*Šāhnāme*, p. 321.

¹⁷¹For the function of the *dehgāns* see A. Tafazzolī, *Sasanian Society*, Bibliotheca Persica Press, New York, 2000, pp. 38-58.



Xusrō I (National Museum of Iran)

To secure the borders of the Persian Empire, he built as a defensive a series of walls (*war*), in similar fashion to Hadrian's Wall of the Roman Empire and the Great Wall of China. The Persian walls, however, were built on the borders of the four sides of the empire. One was built in the northeast, along the Gurgān plain to defend against the Hephthalites, one in the northwest at the Caucasus passes along with a fortification at Darial (*qal'at Bāb al-Lān*),¹⁷² one in the southeast, and one in the southwest called the "wall of the Arabs" (*war ī tāzīgān*), in southwestern Persia.¹⁷³

Intellectually, there seems to have been an opening of relations and ideas with other people, especially India and Rome. Works on medicine, astronomy, mirrors for princes, fables and stories, and manuals for games such as chess were brought and translated from India.¹⁷⁴ From Rome, musical instruments, various scientific works, medical treatises, and philosophical texts were translated. Some philosophers came to the court of Xusrō I from Athens, especially after the closing down of the school of neo-Platonists by Justinian. Xusrō I's interest in philosophy is gained by noting that he was called "Plato's Philosopher King."¹⁷⁵ Tolerance of the Jewish and Christians was also a feature of Xusrō I's rule. The Catholikos or the head of the Christian church in the East was the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷²A. Alemany, "Sixth Century Alania: Between Byzantium, Sasanian Iran and the Turkic World," *Ērān ud Anērān: Studies Presented to Boris Il'ič Maršak on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, eds. M. Compareti, P. Raffetta, G. Scarcia, Venice, 2006, pp. 44-45.

¹⁷³R.N. Frye, "The Sasanian System of Walls for Defense," *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, Jerusalem, 1977, pp. 7-15.

¹⁷⁴T. Daryaei, "Mind, Body, and the Cosmos: The Game of Chess and Backgammon in Ancient Persia," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2001, pp. 218-312.

¹⁷⁵Agathias actually portrays Xusrō's encounter with the philosophers quite negatively, *The Histories*, Book 2.3. For a judicious and corrective view to Agathias see J.Th. Walker, "The Limits of Late Antiquity: Philosophy between Rome and Iran," *Ancient World*, vol. 33, 2002, pp. 45-69.

¹⁷⁶J.Th. Walker, *The Legacy of Mesopotamia in Late Antique Iraq: The Legend of Mar Qardagh the Assyrian*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2007, p. 92.

Xusrō I and the Roman Emperor, Justinian, however, represented the enlightened monarchs and memorable rulers of Late Antiquity. Their sense of being just (*ādel*), as Persian texts refer to Xusrō I, their campaign in the codification of laws, (probably begun in the time of Xusrō I and last compiled under Xusrō II, the *Madyān ī Hazār Dādestān*), and administrative and military reforms took place almost simultaneously in both empires. Scholars argue whether one king influenced the other, but rather than trying to see the process one way, one can view the relations as reciprocal, where each encouraged and perhaps wanted to outdo the other.

Xusrō I completed the administrative and military reforms of his father. This was the division of the empire into four regions, placing a general *spāhbed* in each quadrant. He also instituted a registry or *dīwān* for the military. He also drew on different tribal people such as the Daylamites to enforce the military which in time led a different military composition whose loyalty lay with the king. There were also tax reforms, where taxes were excised not only based on the amount of land, but based on the type of product or produce.

With these reforms Xusrō I was able to reinvigorate the Sasanian empire. The success of these reforms can be gleaned from his military successes. In the east in 557-558 CE, Xusrō I defeated the Hephthalites and between 572 to 577 CE, checked Turkic incursions into the Near East.¹⁷⁷ In the West Xusrō I concluded negotiations with Justinian which came to be known as The Eternal Peace in 532 CE, and it was favorable to the Persians. The Persians would receive gold to protect Caucasus pass, control over most of Armenia and Iberia and the Romans relinquished their bases in Mesopotamia.¹⁷⁸ In 540 CE, however, Xusrō I began a campaign in the West, being informed by the Gothic king Vitiges of Justinian's campaigning in North Africa and Italy, and Armenian pleas for help from the Persians.¹⁷⁹ Xusrō I began his campaign in Mesopotamia and Syria, where the city of Antioch was taken.¹⁸⁰ There was another campaign in 542 CE by Xusrō I, but a plague dissuaded the king from going further, but there was again warfare in 543 CE where the Romans were defeated in Armenia, and in 544 the Persians laid siege to Edessa, exacting a large amount of gold from its inhabitants. In 540 CE at the instigation of the Armenians and the Lazics Xusrō I again invaded Armenia to reduce Roman harassment in the region. This war proved to be a long one, beginning in 541 and lasting until 557 CE when a truce was agreed upon. Then Xusrō I took to the eastern borders of his empire, waging war on the Hephthalites and defeating them hence controlling the lands all the way to the Oxus.

¹⁷⁷On the Persian military tactics and capabilities see *Maurice's Strategikon*, Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy, Translated by G.T. Dennis, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1984, pp. 113-115. Also for the Iranian material see A. Tafazzolī, "Un chapitre du Dēnkard sur les guerriers," *Au carrefour des religions: Mélanges offerts à Philippe Gignoux*, Res Orientales VII, Peeters, Leuven, 1995, pp. 297-302. An old but useful treatment of Persian military tactics is by K. Inostrantsev, *Motal'ātī darbare-ye Sāsāniān*, BTNK, Tehran, 1348, pp.49-89.

¹⁷⁸Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97.

¹⁷⁹Procopius, II.2-3.

¹⁸⁰Malalas 18.87 (405.65-479.23-480.5), and other notices Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-107.

This truce lasted until 565 CE when Justinian passed away. When Justin became the new emperor he demanded the control over Suania.¹⁸¹ This became a cause for war and war proved disastrous for the Romans and by 573 CE the Persians had made substantial gains in the Caucuses, Mesopotamia and Syria. Dara was again taken by Xusrō I which was a blow to the already ill Justin.¹⁸² With the new emperor Tiberius there were negotiations over Mesopotamia but there was fighting in the Caucuses in 574-575 CE and then in Mesopotamia. This form of warfare continued during the reign of emperor Maurice and beyond till the seventh century.¹⁸³ Such cities as and Dara and Apamea were conquered and its population were taken to the Sasanian territory. The numbers were in hundreds of thousand, according to the Syriac Chronicle of 846, some 98,000 from Dara were taken and according to John of Ephesus, 292,000 from Apamea.¹⁸⁴ These deportations according to Morony were because of the labor shortage which had been caused by drought, famine, disease and warfare, and so the empire needed to be repopulated.¹⁸⁵

Xusrō I was able to gain a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula, all the way to Yemen. Because of his spectacular victories and achievements, Xusrō I minted such legends on his especial issue coinage as “Iranians has become fearless” (*ērān abē-bēm kard*), and “Iranians became strong” (*ērān abzōnhēnēd*).¹⁸⁶ This is the Sasanian empire at the apex of its glory and power, headed by a philosopher-king.

Xusrō's son, Hormizd IV (579-590 CE) came to the throne when his father was attempting to make lasting peace between Rome and Iran. He also had chosen Hormizd IV for the throne for similar reasons. Although the exact genealogy of Hormizd IV is not clear, it is for certain that on his mother side he was related to the Turks. Hormizd IV's mother was probably the daughter of the king of Xāzars.¹⁸⁷ If this is so, it means that Xusrō I wanted to also secure the Darband pass where the Xāzars ruled over and at times threatened the empire. In most sources he is noted for his arrogance, tyranny and he made many enemies at the court.¹⁸⁸ Sebeos tells us that Hormizd IV was responsible for the killing of many of the nobility, which must have made him much hated.¹⁸⁹ He continued his support of the landed gentry *dehgāns* who probably grew in strength at the cost of the nobility (*āzādān*) and dealt harshly with the Zoroastrian priests as well. These sources should not necessarily persuade us that Hormizd was an evil ruler. Rather, he was probably trying to reduce the power of the courtiers and the nobility and

¹⁸¹Theophanes (of Byzantium) 1 (FHG IV.270), Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-136.

¹⁸²Theophanes (Byzantium) 4 (FHG IV.271), Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹⁸³For the sixth century relations see Winter and Dignas, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-65.

¹⁸⁴M. Morony, “Population Transfers between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire,” *La Persia e bisanzio*, Roma, 2004, p. 175.

¹⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁸⁶These coins may be his and not that of Xusrō II if we are to accept *Bundahišn*'s account, bestowing these titles to Xusrō I.

¹⁸⁷ On Hormizd's maternal genealogy see A.Sh. Shahbazi, “Hormozd IV,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, (<http://www.iranica.com/newsite/>).

¹⁸⁸Theophylact Simocatta, Book iii.17.1

¹⁸⁹Sebeos, Chapter 10.73, p. 14.

as it is usual in the case of Sasanian historiography, such rulers are seen as harsh, brute and evil. This slander becomes clear when we read that he was unwilling to persecute the Christians, although the Zoroastrian priests had made a petition.¹⁹⁰

In his negotiations with the Roman Empire were less successful and cause a long and costly war. The Caesar Tiberius was willing to cede Armenia to the Sasanians and exchange outposts in Arzenere for Dārā.¹⁹¹ The Roman general Maurice invaded Iran all the way to Media,¹⁹² and another army laid siege to Ctesiphon and the Sasanian countered them in Mesopotamia and defeated the Romans in Armenia.¹⁹³ In 581 CE Maurice was forced to go back to Constantinople to take the throne, but his army kept on fighting and even then even when Hormizd IV suggested peace the Romans did not agree.¹⁹⁴

To make matters worse in 589 CE, the Hephthalites invaded Eastern Iran. They were met by the Sasanian general Wahrām Čōbīn, whose victory over them made the general famous within the empire. He was from the noble Arsacid family of Mihrān, which could trace its genealogy further back than the Sasanians could. When Wahrām Čōbīn had a minor defeat in Armenia against the Romans, Hormizd IV slandered him and made false accusations against him, which caused the general to rebel and move towards Ctesiphon.¹⁹⁵ With the help of the nobility, led by his brothers-in-law Wīstahm and Wīndōe, they deposed the king and brought his son, Xusrō II to power.¹⁹⁶

These events took place in 589-590 CE and it was quite important that it was the first time someone outside the family of Sāsān attempted to take over the empire, which probably was a shock to the Sasanian family. This may characterize the strength of the centralized system and the problems with Sasanian imperial propaganda, especially when a weak or hated king was on the throne. The institutions which were reformed and strengthened during the time of Kawād I and Xusrō I were so powerful and entrenched by this time that they functioned regardless of the political chaos. The same may be said of the local affairs, where the *dehgāns* became the important officials and local matters became more important as well as for the local population than the political affairs of the empire. One can suggest that when further damage was done to the Sasanian imperial propaganda in the seventh century and the Arab Muslim conquest, it did not really shake up the institutions and officials of the empire, in that the “system” continued to function under Muslim governors. This is evidenced by the adoption of the Persian administrative system and its employees by the Caliphate.

¹⁹⁰ Tabarī, pp. 297-298.

¹⁹¹ Theophylact Simocatta, Book iii.17.1-3.

¹⁹² Theophylact Simocatta, Book iii.17.4.

¹⁹³ Menander Protector, p. 217.

¹⁹⁴ For details of the events see Theophylact Simocatta, Book i.1.1-15.

¹⁹⁵ Theophylact Simocatta, Book iv.1.1.

¹⁹⁶ For details of the events see “Hormozd IV,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, (<http://www.iranica.com/newsite/>).

From Xusrō II to the Fall of the Sasanian Empire

Xusrō II at the time of his father's death was at Partaw, ruling over the realm or camp of Albania (*Šahr-Ālānyōzān*)¹⁹⁷ as king of Albania (*Alān-šāh*).¹⁹⁸ He was not able to withstand the forces of Wahrām Čōbīn¹⁹⁹ and did not feel safe within the empire, so he fled to the Eastern Roman empire in 590 CE, taking refuge in the city of Hierapolis and sought the aid of the emperor Maurice.²⁰⁰ The Roman emperor supplied Roman and mainly Armenian forces to Xusrō II, which enabled him to come back to the empire that same year and defeat Wahrām. The now renegade general took to the east and was eventually assassinated at the instigation of Xusrō by the Turks. We know that Wahrām considered himself a legitimate king, since he minted coins for two years (590-591 CE), in the first year in the southwest, primary in Iraq and Media and then in the second year in the northeast where he had fled. Regardless of his death, Wahrām captured the imagination of the people and songs and stories were composed about him that survived in Arabic and Persian.

¹⁹⁷ For the identification of this name on the papyri see D. Weber, "Ein bisher unbekannter Titel aus spätsassanidischer Zeit?," *Corolla Iranica. Paperes in honour of Prof. D.N. MacKenzie on the occasion of his 65th birthday*, Frankfurt, 1991, pp. 228-235.

¹⁹⁸ Alemany, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹⁹⁹ Theophylact Simocatta, Book iv.9-10.

²⁰⁰ Theophylact Simocatta, Book iv.12.8. For a different version of the content of the letter sent by Xusrō to Maurice see Sebeos, Chapter 11.76, pp. 18-19.



Xusrō II

When Xusrō II came to the throne he began to take revenge on those who had a hand in the murder of his father, although we are not sure if he himself was innocent of the crime. His uncle Wīstahm, who had been his supporter, was targeted and as a result he took to Media, minted coins in his own name and probably lived there until 600 CE.²⁰¹ So in the last decade of the sixth century, two people who were not deemed to be the legitimate rulers by the Sasanians minted coins. This is significant, since in 366 years, no one except the Sasanian king was allowed or was able to mint coins in his own name. It is with this damage to the Sasanian prestige and to the family of Sāsān that we may turn to Xusrō II's conquests.

Xusrō II consolidated his power around the Persian Gulf and sent envoys to Arabia, as far as Mecca to inquire about the situation. The last king of al-Hira, al-Nu'man III ibn al-Mundir was killed and the Lakhmid state put under other Persian loyalists in 602 CE. When the Roman emperor, Maurice was removed and Phokas came to the throne, Xusrō II used this event as a pretext for the conquest Syria and beyond. First Roman Armenia was captured by Xusrō II,²⁰² and in 604 CE with blazing speed, his two generals Šāhin and Šahrwarāz conquered Syria,²⁰³ Palestine in 614 CE, and then Egypt was taken in 619 CE, and the Persians even went as far as Libya,²⁰⁴ while Anatolia was conquered between 619-622 CE. We have vivid description by Antiochus Strategos of the conquest of the city of Jerusalem in 614 CE and the taking of the holy cross which resonated in Roman empire and the event was much lamented.²⁰⁵ We should remind

²⁰¹It is known that he has coins with the year 6, but Paruck states that he had also seen a year 10 coin which may be correct, since every time Xusrō II defeated his enemies, changes took place on his coins, see T. Daryaee, "Religio-Political Propaganda on the Coins of Xusrō II," *American Journal of Numismatics*, vol. 7, 1997, 141-154

²⁰²*Narratio de rebus Armeniae*, 109-13 (p. 41), Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 186-187.

²⁰³M. Morony, "Syria Under the Persians 610-629," *Proceedings of the Second Symposium on the History of Bilād al-Shām During the Early Islamic Period up to 40 A.H. / 640 A.D.*, ed. M.A. Bakhit, Amman, 1987, pp. 87-95.

²⁰⁴R. Altheim-Stiehl, "The Sasanians in Egypt - Some Evidence of Historical Interest," *Bulletin de la société d'archéologie Copte*, vol. 31, 1992, p. 87, 92; on the papyrological evidence see E. Venetis, "The Sassanid Occupation of Egypt (7th Cent. A.D) According to Some Pahlavi Papyri Abstracts," *Greco-Arabica*, vols. 9-10, 2004, pp. 403-412.

²⁰⁵Antiochus Strategos, in F.C. Conybeare, "Antiochus Strategos' Account of the Sack of Jerusalem in A.D. 614," in *English Historical Review*, vol. 25, 1910, pp. 502-517. Also see *Chronicon Paschale*, for the events of 614, p. 156.

ourselves that this is an early Christian view of things. The Jewish sources provide us with a more nuanced view of the events in Jerusalem. A Piyyutim or Jewish liturgical poem from the period suggests that the Jews initially saw the Sasanians as their savior. Indeed the Sasanians allowed the Jews not only to inhabit the city, but also to built an alter and retake the Jewish sacred space.²⁰⁶ But by 618 CE the balance of favor had tipped towards the Christians by the Sasanians.²⁰⁷ Xusrō II was not anti-Christian. In fact he had already presided over the election of a new patriarch of the Church of the East in 605 CE which was a sign of royal favor.²⁰⁸

The conquest of Jerusalem shocked the Eastern Roman empire which in 610 CE had made Heraclius its emperor.²⁰⁹ Heraclius was intent on leaving for North Africa, but it is said that his mind was changed by the clergy to remain and with the aid of church funds, he mounted a counterattack. From the Black Sea he entered Armenia and went into the heart of the Persian empire in 624 CE, sacking the sacred Adūr Farrōbāy temple at Ganzak²¹⁰ in retaliation for the taking of the “True Cross” by the Sasanians from Jerusalem. The first real crusade between the Christian world and the East had taken place and the Arab Muslims had not begun their conquest. Along with the retreating Persian army, the Persian nobility and those attached to the Persians also retreated from Syria and Iraq.²¹¹ In matter of years, Xusrō II went from a world conqueror, emulating the Achaemenid territorial integrity to a humiliated king who was unable to protect the sacred Zoroastrian fire-temples and his population. Xusrō II was removed in 628 CE by the nobility and the priests, and all the invaded territories were returned to the Romans by 630 CE.²¹² What was different in this campaign is that Xusrō II had gone beyond the norm and had made deep incursions in the heart of the Eastern Roman Empire, thus destabilizing what J. Howard-Johnston has said “destroying the long-established binary world order.”²¹³ This change would haunt both empires, destroying one and amputating major territories of the other.

²⁰⁶H. Sivan, “Palestine between Byzantium and Persia (CE 614-618),” *La Persia e bizanzio*, Roma, 2004, p. 90.

²⁰⁷*Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁰⁸Walker, 2007, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²⁰⁹For events in Byzantium see A.N. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, Vol. I, Amsterdam, 1968.

²¹⁰Theophanes A.M. 6114, 307.19-308.25; Movsēs Daskhuranst’i II.10 (130.3-132.5), Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-2003, and for other sources see N. Garsoïan, “Byzantium and the Sasanians,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. E. Yarshater, Vol. 3(1), Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 592.

²¹¹J.M. Fiey, “The Last Byzantine Campaign into Persia and Its Influence on the Attitude of the Local Populations Towards the Muslim Conquerors 7-16 H. / 628 A.D.,” *Proceedings of the Second Symposium on the History of Bilād al-Shām During the Early Islamic Period up to 40 A.H. / 640 A.D.*, ed. M.A. Bakhit, Amman, 1987, p. 97.

²¹²Some sources state that Xusrō II had fallen ill in Ctesiphon and was dying, Theophanes A.M. 6118 (325.10-327.16), Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

²¹³J. Howard-Johnston, “Pride and Fall: Xusrō II and His Regime, 626-628,” *La Persia e bizanzio*, Roma, 2004, p. 113.



Xusro II

In terms of imperial ideology we may say that while the early Sasanians considered themselves to be from the lineage of the Gods, they also used Persian Achaemenid titles, such as “King of Kings” on their coins and inscriptions. This heritage was set aside by the adoption of the Kayānid ideology from the fourth to the sixth century CE. However, Xusro II proclaimed a return to the dual heritage of the Achaemenid and Kayānid ideology by minting coins in his name with the title of “King of Kings” and also inscribing for the first time the slogan, “increased in glory” (*xwarrah abazūd*). *Xwarrah* is central to the ancient Persian royal ideology as demonstrated in the *Avesta*, and is a prerequisite for rulership in the Iranian world. In Persian art this glory shown usually with a halo around the kings head.²¹⁴

Xusro II was the warrior-king, similar to the kings of the early Sasanian period. His grotto at Taq-ī Bustan shows him in full body-armor, characteristic of the Sasanian heavy cavalry, and shows the deity Anāhīd, the lady of waters, above him. In many ways Xusro II represents the culmination of Sasanian absolutism and a return to the past glories for one last time. While the Ohrmazd was held to be supreme, at Taq-ī Bustan one also encounters two other deities, namely Mithra and Anāhīd. These are the triple deities that were worshiped by Artaxerxes II in the fifth century BCE, thus, there is a full return to devotion to these deities. The opulence of the court of Xusro II is clearly demonstrated by the Taq-ī Bustan rock-relief, where the king is shown on a boat, hunting, and musicians playing their harps, along with the retinue. Xusro II has gone down in Persian history as an opulent²¹⁵ king who brought ruin to the Persian empire. But perhaps his religious policy, specifically his interest in Christianity was a source of his condemnation by the Zoroastrian sources.²¹⁶ His favorite wife, Šērīn is well known in the epic and romance literature, and is also said to have propagated Christianity in

²¹⁴For the latest study see A. Soudavar, *The Aura of the Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship*, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, 2003.

²¹⁵There are allusions to his opulence in the a short Middle Persian text, *Māh Frawardīn Rōz ī Hordād*, passage 27, translated by S. Kiyā, where eighteen amazing things were beheld by Xusro.

²¹⁶According to Sebeos, Chapter 46.149, p. 115 after the capture of Jerusalem, Xusro assembled the Christian bishops in his court and presided over their disputation.

the empire,²¹⁷ along his other Christian wife Maryam who was an Eastern Roman princess.

After Xusrō II, Kawād II (Šērōe) came to the throne in 628 CE. He committed fratricide, killing almost every eligible or capable male heir from the Sasanian family. This again maybe due to the fact that his father Xusrō II had crowned a younger brother of his named Mardānšāh. This action would have a devastating effect on the future of the empire. He did not want to be associated with his father's memory, which is apparent from his coinage which reverted to the style of Xusrō I.²¹⁸ Kawād II, however in 629 CE made a peace treaty with Heraclius in which he returned all the lands that was held by the Romans,²¹⁹ and the Persian general Šahrwarāz met the emperor at Arabissus Tripotamus, where Euphrates became the permanent boundary between the Sasanian Persian and the Roman empires.²²⁰ Kawād II was himself assassinated like his brothers which demonstrates the beleaguered state of royal affairs at Ctesiphon.

In 630 CE, his young son, Ardaxšir III came to the throne and it was during his reign that for a third time that the Sasanian family was challenged by an outsider. This was the Sasanian general who had fought and led the armies of Xusrō II, Šahrwarāz, who soon entered the capital, Ctesiphon, and put an end to the young ruler and proclaimed himself the new king of kings. His actions may have been partly as a result of his respect for Xusrō II, since he punished and killed all those who had a hand in the murder of the fallen king. His peace with Heraclius in 629 CE and probably the latter's backing according to one Armenian source gave Šahrwarāz the impetus to conquer and take over the throne.²²¹ This again was a serious setback to the Sasanian imperial ideology. However, he was not able to secure his throne and in a matter of months he was killed.²²²

One of the daughters of Xusrō II, named Bōrān came to the throne in 630 CE and ruled for two years.²²³ Her rule was a period of consolidation of the imperial power and the rebuilding of the empire. She attempted to consolidate the empire and relieve the population of heavy taxes, as the Islamic sources report. Her notions of the past and respect for her father are also clear, since she reverted her coinage type to that of her father. She also minted gold coins which were ceremonial in nature and were not meant for wide circulation which, however, stated that she was the restorer of her lineage, *i.e.*, the race of gods which was emphasized in the early Sasanian period. The legend on her coin reads: "Bōrān, restorer of the race of Gods" (*bōrān ī yazdān tōhm winārdār*).²²⁴ Of

²¹⁷Sebeos, Chapter 13.85, p. 29.

²¹⁸For a treatment of Kawād II and his career see H.M. Malek, "The Coinage of the Sasanian King Kawād II (AD 628)," *The Numismatic Chronicle*, vol. 155, 1995, pp. 119-129.

²¹⁹*Chronicon anyonymum ad a.d. 1234 pertinens*, 100, Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

²²⁰*Chronicon* 724, 147.18-24, Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

²²¹Sebeos, Chapter 40.129, p. 88.

²²²*Chronicle of Seert* 93, PO 13.556, Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

²²³H.M. Malek & V. Sarkhos Curtis, "History and Coinage of the Sasanian Queen Bōrān (AD 629-631)," *The Numismatic Chronicle*, vol. 158, 1998, p. 113-129.

²²⁴T. Daryae, "The Coinage of Queen Bōrān and its Significance in Sasanian Imperial Ideology," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 13, 1999, pp. 77-83.

course something should be said of a woman assuming the throne in the Sasanian empire. She was probably brought to the throne, since she was the only legitimate heir along with her sister who could rule after Kawād II had murdered all of her brothers.²²⁵ She also attempted to keep good relations with the Romans and sent the *Catholicos* Mar Isho-Yab to Heraclius and so she had the opportunity to reorganize the empire.²²⁶

Bōrān was also deposed by another Sasanian general and here we see that the military generals are assuming power in the face of the shaken institution of kingship, the competing nobility and the Zoroastrian priests. Queen Azarmīduxt ruled for a brief period, and her coins have the bust of a man, probably a reuse of the older coins, not having enough time to mint new coins. Between 630 CE when Bōrān died to 632 CE when Yazdgerd III assumed the throne, there were a number of “contender-kings” who assumed the throne and were either removed or were challenged by other distant members of the family of Sāsān. This period may be called a period of factionalism and division within the empire. We have a list of kings who struck coins and others who are known only from the literary sources, but this era is confusing in terms of succession and a tentative sequence of rulers can be supplied. The list is as follows: Jošnasbandah, Azarmīduxt, Hormizd V, Xusrō III, Pērōz II, and Xusrō IV.²²⁷ The late Sasanian empire was beginning to resemble the Arsacid feudal system before the fall of the Arsacids. This system left the local officials and *dehqāns* as the most powerful elite, since the rulers and governors were not able to hold power.²²⁸ From the numismatic evidence it appears that Hormizd V, Xusrō III, Pērōz II and Xusrō IV ruled different areas of the empire simultaneously from the end of 631 CE to 637 CE, when Yazdgerd III had already been on the throne for some years.²²⁹ Hormizd V has been identified as Farrox-Hormizd, the General who may have had a hand in the death of Āzarmīduxt.²³⁰ He was a powerful king as he minted coins Xuzestān and Fārs.²³¹ Xusrō III appears to have been a child who was raised by one faction to kingship at the same time in the province of Kermān.²³²

Thus we can say that during this period, some power resided at the capital at Ctesiphon where the king was crowned, and in the provinces the deposed king moved from province to province, and the *dehqāns* who were probably the most numerous,

²²⁵For a detailed study queen Bōrān see H. Emrani, *The Political Life of Queen Bōrān: Her Rise to Power and Factors that Legitimized her Rule*, MA Thesis, California State University, Fullerton, 2005.

²²⁶For the seventh century relations see Winter and Dignas, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-71; *The Khuzistan Chronicle*, 29, Greatrex and Lieu, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

²²⁷For this period in Sasanian history see, T. Daryaee, *Fall of the Sasanian Empire and the end of Late Antiquity: Continuity and Change in the Province of Persis*, Ph.D. Thesis, UCLA, 1999.

²²⁸For the importance of the *dehqāns* in the late Sasanian and early Islamic period see, A. Tafazzolī, *Sasanian Society*, Ehsan Yarshater Distinguished Lecture Series, Bibliotheca Persica Press, New York, 2000, pp. 38-58.

²²⁹For a chronology of events and rulers see T. Daryaee, *Soghūt-e Sāsāniān (The Fall of Sasanians)*, Nashr-e Tarīkh-e Irān, 2004, pp. 59-79.

²³⁰M.I. Mochiri, *Études de numismatique Iranienne sous les Sassanides*, Tome I, Téhéran, 1972, pp. 13-16.

²³¹For the coinage and mints see R. Gyselen, *New Evidence for Sasanian Numismatics: The Collection of Ahmad Saeedi*, *Res Orientalis* XVI, Bures-sur-Yvette, 2004, p. 66.

²³²Mochiri, *op. cit.*, p. 17; Gyselen, *ibid.*, p. 66.

working with the local Zoroastrian priests, ruled the different regions of the empire. It is ominous that Yazdgerd III was crowned at the Anhāhīd fire-temple at Istakhr in 632 CE, the old center of power for the family of Sāsān. It may be that not only symbolically but also in relation to the region was still loyal to this family and he felt secure there. His rule, however, coincided with the Arab Muslim invasion of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Yazdgerd III was forced to move from province to province demanding loyalty, money and support. During this monarch's rule, Persia looked like the medieval Germanic system of rule, *i.e.*, a Wandering Kingship. Between 629 and 630 CE Arab Muslims were able to wrest Yemen and Bahrain from the Sasanians and convert its Iranian ruler and population to Islam. Those Arab and Iranians in Oman, Yemen and Bahrain who chose to remain Zoroastrian were allowed to do so by paying tribute. In 632 CE when the prophet Muhammad passed away the Zoroastrians in Oman rebelled and an Arab Muslim army was sent to pacify them.

In 633 CE the Arabs made important gains. They were able to defeat the Lakhmids, destroying the buffer between the Sasanians and the Arabs in the desert. This was not entirely due to Arab Muslim power, since Xusrō II had killed and deposed the powerful king of the Lakhmids when he had attempted to gain independence. In the same year the Arab Muslims entered southern Iraq. At the battle of D'āt al-Salasel in 633 CE the frontier forces under the leadership of Hormoz/ Hormizd. Although the Iranian general was able to receive reinforcement, he was again defeated by Khāled in Mēšān/Maysan. Khāled moved north further defeating Sasanian regiments. Finally Khāled reached Hira and was able to defeat the Sasanian *Marzbān*. Finally by January of 634 the Sawād had become part of the Arab Muslim dominion once Khāled defeated the joint Iranian and Arab force. The impact of Khāled's activity is that he was able to weaken and / or destroy most of Sasanian defense fortifications, leaving it defenseless before a stronger Arab Muslim army.

The Sasanians did not sit idly by and with reinforcement by the Euphrates defeated the Arab Muslims at the battle of the Bridge in 634 CE. Now another Persian general by the name of Mehrān ī Mehrwandād crossed the Euphrates and attacked the Arabs who were trying to gather their force in 635 CE. This campaign was disastrous as the Mehrān along many of his forces were killed and this left the Swād open to the Arab Muslims. From Kaskar/Kaşgar to Anbar was pillaged by the Arab Muslims. In 636 lower Iraq fell completely into the hands of the Arabs as they defeated the Sasanians at the battle Maḍār.

In June 637 CE after several months where the Arabs and Persians had faced each other, the major and disastrous battle of Qadisiyya took place. The Arabs were reinforced just in time from Syria and the Iranian general, Rustam ī Farroxxādān along with a large number of Iranians were killed in the battle. Some of the Sasanian forces now joined the Arab Muslims and switched sides afterwards, taking on the conquest of Sasanian Empire. The remaining Persian forces fought one more battle at Bābel, but were again defeated.

Although some sources state that Ctesiphon fell to the Arab Muslims where they entered it unopposed, with the nobility and the courtiers fleeing before them to the heart of Persia,²³³ this appears not to have been the case. For several months the city was sieged. Sa'd ibn Waqqās who was responsible for the victory at Qadisiya also broke into the city. With the riches at Ctesiphon in the hands of Arab Muslims, they could now finance any campaign to the ends of Ērānšahr.

In December 637 the Sasanian forces under the leadership of Rustam ī Farrozzādān's brother, Khorrazad (Xwarrah-zād?) fought again at the battle of Jalūlā. Those Persians who did not die in battle were slaughtered later and their women and children captured. Yazdgerd III who had fled Ctesiphon, now headed for Ray. The Arab forces left Ctesiphon and made Kūfa their center, allowing those Persians who agreed to pay tribute to return to the city. The fall of Iraq to the Arab Muslims had significant ramifications for the rest of the 640s and 650s. As Morony has pointed out, once Ctesiphon, the administrative center of the Sasanian fell, there was disorder throughout the empire. The heart of the empire was stopped and so the rest of the body was in shock.²³⁴ The Arabs right away, somewhat with the help of some Persians began to not only take over the chancery system of the Sasanians, they also created a regular paid army. They could finance wars from the riches they had accumulated in Iraq and specifically Ctesiphon. The Arab Muslims now not only enlisted Persians in their forces, but also acquired military equipment that was superior to before and matched those of the Sasanian army.²³⁵ The Sasanian troops which joined the Muslims were known as *marwālī* or *halīf* who became professional fighters for pay.²³⁶

Under the Caliph Umar's direction, Xūzestān fell in 642 CE and in the same year Media was taken at the battle of Nihāvand. The life of one of the generals of the Sasanians is well-known in these campaigns and that is Hormozān.²³⁷ He was the *Marzbān* of Xuzstān and in charge of the right wing of the Sasanian forces at the battle of Qadisiyya. Hormozān regrouped and fought again at the battle of Jalūlā. He again fought and escaped capture in the same region, while many of his forces were either killed or later beheaded by the Arab Muslim army. He finally surrendered in 642 CE and taken to Medina, but initially did not convert to Islam. He later married into the house of Ali ibn abu Talib and during the murder of the Caliph Umar he was accused and then killed by the Caliph's son, Ubayd-allāh. While in Medina he advised the Caliph Umar in making important fiscal and institutional changes.²³⁸

This laid the heart of Persia open to conquest without any major military resistance at once. Only the battle of Nihāvand is important which took place in 642 CE. Under the generalship of Mardānšāh who was the son of Hormozān a long battle took place

²³³Sebeos, Chapter 42.136, p. 98.

²³⁴ M. Morony, "Arab Muslim Conquest," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (<http://www.iranica.com/newsite/> online).

²³⁵ *Ibid.*,

²³⁶M. Zakeri, *Sāsānid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society. The Origins of 'Ayyārān and Futuwwa*, Wiesbaden, 1995, p. 113.

²³⁷ A.Sh. Shahbazi, "Hormozān," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (<http://www.iranica.com/newsite/> online).

²³⁸ Shahbazi, *ibid.*

which was fought for several days. Mardānšāh was killed and the Arab Muslims were victorious. In the 640s the Arab Muslims took over the heartland of the Iran, where Hamedān, Qazvin and Ray fell. Adūrbadagān also had similar fate. Each of these cities were given protection, their fire-temples undisturbed and not taken into slavery in return for huge sums of tribute (Rayy 500,000 and Ardebīl 100,000 Drahms/Dirhams). In the same time period another contingent of Arab forces captured Isfahan and Kāšān and established themselves at Qom. Another Arab force headed from Nēhāvand to Xūzestān and then Fārs. The Sasanian in Fārs put up a stiff resistance, notably by Pērōz in Xuzestān and the Ostāndār of Fārs. When the Caliph Umar died in 644 CE the cities revolted and it took until 650 CE for the Ērānšahr to be pacified again. While in the initial conquest, Iraq had been devastated and pillaged, the second conquest was brutal for the central Iran and Fārs. Yazdgerd III had been present in the difficult battle in Fārs where many of the Persian soldiers perished. He now only could go to the east, towards Kermān, then Sīstān and finally to Marw. In Kermān and Sīstān it appears that the *Marzbāns* did not support Yazdgerd's requests for reinforcement and money. The Kermanīs and Sīstānīs put up a heavy resistance, but were ultimately defeated. Yazdgerd III was faced with local officials who were unwilling to help him and he was defeated by a confederation of local officials, the margrave of Marv and the Hephthalite ruler of Bāghdīs. Tradition has it that he was killed in 651 CE in Marv by a miller who did not recognize that Yazdgerd was the King of Kings. With Yazdgerd III's death the Sasanian empire came to an end, but the memory and influence of Sasanian Iran loomed over the later caliphates and independent amirs, kings and Sultans for many centuries.