

The Political History of Ērān in the Sasanian Period:

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The Sasanika Project:
Late Antique Near East Project

Ardaxšīr I was able to defeat Ardawān (Artabanus IV) at the plain of Hormozgān in 224 CE and established the Sasanian Empire. From then on Ardaxšīr took the title of *šāhān šāh* “King of Kings” and began the conquest of a territory which he called *Ērān*.¹ But before this fateful battle between the last Parthian king and the institutor of the Sasanian dynasty, much had happened internally and externally in order for this new dynasty to come to power. To the west, the Roman Empire was going through one of its worst centuries, an anxious period, when its future seemed unsure. Roman armies whose allegiance lay with their generals, brought chaos to the empire and one “Barrack Emperor” followed another, with some ruling for a very short time. During Caracalla’s rule the empire was ruled by religious fanatics and imbued with civil strife. Ardawān had defeated the Romans and with a treaty in 218 CE was able to add most of Mesopotamia to his territory and a monetary settlement to his advantage. 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 Parthians and then the Sasanians their priority.

While Ardawān was able to repel the Romans, internally he had been challenged by 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

¹The basic outline of Sasanian history is based on al-Tabarī, *Ta’rīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, Leiden, 1879-1901. The English translation with copious notation is by C.E. Bosworth, *The History of al-Tabarī, Vol. V, The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids, and Yemen*, State University of New York Press, 1999; Secondary sources, 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. For the map of the Sasanian Empire see E. Kettenhofen, *Das Sāsānidenreich*, TAVO, Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1993.

in the Parthian empire.² So it would not seem amazing that a local warrior and his family in the province of Persis was able to rise and begin conquering the surrounding territories in a short time. Ardawān had greater problems and could not turn his attention to a minor upstart in Persis at this time.

The Sasanian campaign in controlling the province of Persis had begun from 205-206 CE, when the father of Ardaxšīr I, Pābag³ had dethroned the local ruler of Istakhr by the name of Gozīhr. According to the sources, Pābag was a priest of the fire-temple of Anāhīd at the city of Istakhr and this must have been a stage for the rallying of the local Persian warriors who were devoted to the cult of this deity.⁴ 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 worshipped Anāhīd (Anahita) along with Mīhr (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.

Pābag had envisaged his eldest son, Šābuhr, as his heir because coins representing both Šābuhr and his father are found, but Šābuhr died under mysterious circumstances. On these coins the obverse has the legend *bgy šhpwhly MLK*’ “(His) Majesty, king Šābuhr” and the reverse *BRH bgy p’pky MLK*’ “son of (His) Majesty, king Pābag.”⁵ Ardaxšīr and his followers seem to be the culprits who would gain the most out of this “accidental death,” but that cannot be proved for certain. If the graffiti at Persepolis is an accurate portrayal of Pābag and his son Šābuhr, one can make several assumptions. One

²K. Schippmann, *Grunzüge der Sasanidische Reich*, 1986, p. 70.

³Agathias, *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.

⁴For study on the cult of Anāhīd see M.L. Chaumont, “Le culte de la déesse An~hit~ (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 An~hit~ 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.

⁵V.G. Lukonin, *Tamddun-e Irān-e Sāsānī*, Translated from Russian into Persian by I. Rid~, Scientific & Cultural Publication Company, Tehran, 1987, pp. 268-269

is that the Sasanians were becoming or had become a family that held both temporal and religious power in Persis. Secondly, the cult of fire, which is very much an idea connected with Zoroastrianism, was alive before Ardaxšīr came to power.⁶ Thirdly, the proximity of the graffiti of Pābag and Šābuhr to the Achaemenid structures suggests that these monuments were important for the Sasanians. We may assume that after the death of Šābuhr, Ardaxšīr became the next heir and began to complete the conquest of Persis and beyond. By this time Ardawān had become alarmed, but neither the force sent, nor the army under his direct command were able to defeat Ardaxšīr. Walāxš, the Parthian challenger to Ardawān in Iraq, outlived the Parthian king, but he was the next victim of Ardaxšīr in 229 CE. By this time most of the Iranian plateau⁷ and the Arab⁸ side of the Persian Gulf had become part of his empire.⁹ In his invasion of Armenia, Syria and Cappadocia, he came into conflict with Rome and the emperor Alexander Severus which was not always successful.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ While Severus was alive, neither was Ardaxšīr able to defeat the Romans, nor the Romans to defeat the Persians.¹² Once, however, the Roman Emperor died in 235 CE, Mesopotamia, Dura, Carrhae, Nisbis and finally Hatra fell to the Sasanians by 240 CE. Ardaxšīr then retired and spent the last years of his life in Persis while his son, Šābuhr I, continued his conquests and the expansion of the empire.

We should say more about Ardaxšīr, since he is an important personage in the development of the Sasanian outlook and imperial ideology. The material remains of his

⁶E. Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East*, Hacker Art Books, New York, reprint 1988, p. 309.

⁷*Herodian*, Book VI.2.2.

⁸R.G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs, From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, pp. 27-28.

⁹G. Widengren, "The Establishment of the Sasanian dynasty in the light of new evidence," *La Persia nel Medioevo*, Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 1971, pp. 711-782; J. Wiesehöfer, "Ardašīr I," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, vol. II, 1987, pp. 371-376.

¹⁰Dio Cassius, *Dio's Roman History*, Book LXXX.3, p. 483.

¹¹*Herodian*, Book VI.2.4.

¹²The wars between Ardaxšīr and Alexander are described in *Herodian*, Book VI. and VI.5.

rule are especially rich in providing us with this world-view. In commemoration of his victory, he commissioned several rock-reliefs at Naqsh-ī Rajab, Naqsh-ī Rostam, and at Firūzābād. At Naqsh-ī Rajab he is shown on his horse standing over the dead body of Ardaw~n. 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.¹³ This relief demonstrates that Ardaxšīr believed or wanted others to believe that he was appointed by Gods to rule over a territory which the inscription calls *Ērān*. 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.¹⁴ 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 Persians in various stages and strata of the Iranian society till modern times when it was propagated through Iranian nationalism.¹⁵ This idea should not be mistaken for the Classical historian's testimonies, who believed that Ardaxšīr was attempting to regain the Achaemenid Persian territory.¹⁶ What is clear is that a notion of what *Ērān* 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 *Ērān* 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*.¹⁷ This term is also used in an adjectival form, giving *Ērīh* "Iranianess," and an

¹³For 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.

¹⁴G. Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran, an Essay on Its Origin*, Serie Orientale Roma LXII, Rome, 1989.

¹⁵See the "Symposium: Iranian Cultural Identity," published in *Iranian Studies*, vol. 26, nos. 1-2, 1993, pp. 139-168.

¹⁶*Herodian*, Book VI.2.2-3.

¹⁷Ph. Gignoux, *Les Quatre inscriptions du mage Kirdīr*, textes et concordances, Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, Leuven, 1991, p. 71.

antonym, *an-Ērīh* which may be equivalent to the ancient Greek concept of *barbaroi* along with all its cultural trappings.

Ardaxšīr's coins 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 yzad'n* "Mazdaean Majesty, (name of the king), King of Kings of *Ērān*, whose lineage (is) from the gods."¹⁸ According to this legend, Ardaxšīr considered himself to worship Mazda (Ohrmazd) first and above all. Secondly, he saw himself as of divine descent. This of course brings us to the question, from whom did he believe he was descended? Which "gods" were his forefathers? The eponym of the dynasty, i.e., *Sāsān* is clearly important to this question. It was thought that the epigraphic form *ssn* which appeared on ostraca and other documents designated *Sāsān* as a Zoroastrian deity, although he was not mentioned in the *Avesta* or the Old Persian material.¹⁹ Recently, Martin Schwartz has suggested that the deity mentioned on the ostraca has nothing to do with *Sāsān*, but represented *Sesen*, an old Semitic god which is found in Ugaraitic as early as the second millennium BCE.²⁰ 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 Š~buhr I.²¹ The Persian epic, the *Šahname* of Ferdowsī also mentions an eastern connection with *Sāsān* which leads us to the fact that this family may have come from the east. Still with this difficulty and confusion, we can state that Ardaxšīr saw himself as the descendent of the gods "yazd~n," and the Sasanians may have elevated *Sāsān* to divine status.²²

¹⁸For the coins see R. Göbl, *Sasanidische Numismatik*, Klinkhardt & Biermann, Braunschweig, 1968, tabelle xv. M. Alram, *Iranische Personennamenbuch, Nomia Propria Iranica in Nummis*, vol. 4,

¹⁹V.A. Livshits, "New Parthian Documents from South Turkemenistan," *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. 25, 1977, p 176.

²⁰M. Schwartz, "Sasm, Sesen, St. Sisinnios, Sesengen Barpharangs, 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.

²¹R.N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, Munchen, 1983, p. 200.

²²In Šābuhr's inscription at Ka'be-ye Zardošt (ŠKZ 25/20/46), *Sāsān* is called: is s's'n ZY MR'HY *sāsān ī xwad~y* "Sāsān the Lord." While the Middle Persian text *xwadāy* stands for Lord in the political sense,

Ardaxšīr's son, Šābuhr I was co-regent with him until 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 and the Zoroastrian priests assumed the decision.²³ 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, but Šābuhr was able to kill him at Misikhe, close to the Euphrates river which he later called Pērōz-Šābuhr (Victorious is Šābuhr). According to Šābuhr I's inscription, 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.

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 a literary narrative. In his *res gestae* he provides information on his religious conviction, lineage, the areas that

there are instances where it also accompanies Ohrmazd, thus giving the word a spiritual sense. For *xwadāy* see R. Shayegan, "The Evolution of the Concept of *Xwadāy* 'God'," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, Vol. 51, Nos. 1-2, 1998, pp. 31-54. The tradition of deification of the ruler/king which became important with Alexander under Egyptian influence may have influenced the Persians as well. See T. Daryaei, "Laghab-e Pahlavī-ye 'īhr az yazd-n' va Šāhanšāhī-ye Sāsānī," *Nāme-ye Farhangestān*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2000, pp. 28-32; There is much similarity between the Sasanians and the Seleucids since the latter dynasts represented themselves to their subjects as descended from a god (*theos*) and more importantly god-made manifest (*epiphanes*), F.E. Peters, *The Harvest of Hellenism, A History of the Near East from Alexander the Great to the Triumph of Christianity*, Barnes and Noble, New York, 1970 (reprint 1996), p. 232; Also it must be noted that while Ardaxšīr and other early Sasanians called themselves *bay* "god" or "lord," written in the ideographic form &lh, in such Middle Persian texts as the *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*, Ohrmazd also bears this title as *ohrmazd bay*. This also suggests the Sasanian belief in their own divinity.

²³According 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.

he ruled over, and also the fate of the Romans. He states that Gordian and his army, which included many from the Germanic tribes, were destroyed. Šābuhr I tells us that Caesar lied, which is similar to Darius' statement in his Behistun inscription, where he says he was follower of truth and enemy of lie and that his enemies lied as well.²⁴ In 260 CE he also took eastern Mesopotamia and Syria²⁵ and the emperor Valerian along with senators and soldiers was captured and deported to the Sasanian territory. Now Goths, Romans, Slavs and other people from the Near East were incorporated into the 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.²⁶ 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." 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.²⁷

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 to both sides, because of strategic and economic interests, and Armenia served as a buffer between Persia and Rome. But also when a branch of the

²⁴The concept of lie (*dru()*) 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.

²⁵In 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.

²⁶For 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.

²⁷For 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.

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 *wuzurg-Arman-š~h* "The Great King of Armenia."²⁸

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. 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? Were 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 mentions 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

²⁸Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, Translation and Commentary by R.W. Thomson, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1976, p. 35.

royal guard (*hazāōbad*), scribes (*dibīrs*), treasurers (*ganzwars*), judges (*dādwards*), and a market inspector (*w~z~rbed*), 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.²⁹ 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 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. The most recent theory is that rather than being symbols, they represent letters belonging to the Middle Iranian language.

The next king, Hormizd I (270-271 CE) ruled a short time and we know very little of him. He was chosen over his brother Narseh, who now became the king of Armenia, as heir apparent. 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 and titles. 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 short rule, but we have more information about him. He was the eldest son of Šābuhr I, but had been bypassed by Hormizd. Initially, Kerdīr appears to have backed his succession and consequently the Zoroastrian priesthood and the person of Kerdīr benefited from his enthronement. Wahrām II may have needed Kerdīr's support in bypassing Narseh, who was the 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. 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 other benefit. Consequently he was

²⁹For 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.

imprisoned and put to death in 276 CE during the rule of Wahrām II and with the blessing and to the relief of Kerdīr.

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.³⁰ More will be said of these developments in the chapter on religion. 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 and his son, Wahrām III.³¹ He also had several rock-reliefs carved for memory with his family. This is an interesting feature of Wahrām II: he was very much concerned to leave a portrait of his family³² which incidentally gives us information about the court and the Persian concept of the royal banquet (*bazm*).³³ 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,” which 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

³⁰For 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.

³¹J.K. Choksy, “A Sasanian Monarch, His Queen, Crown Prince and Dieties: The Coinage of Wahram II,” *American Journal of Numismatics*, vol I, 1989, pp. 117-137.

³²A.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.

³³The 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.

his/her honor and closeness to him.³⁴ 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 287 CE. Rome invaded the Sasanian territory as well under the emperor Carus who died on the way to battle in 283 CE and 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 Empire. This treaty divided Armenia among the two powers and left western Armenia in the hands of Tirdat (Tirdates IV) while Narseh ruled the greater Armenian part. 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 (*sagān-šāh*), was brought to the throne by one faction, perhaps with the backing of Kerdīr and a Wahnām, son of Tartus as well. Narseh who was now in Armenia and was not going to be bypassed again, left for Iraq and was met by a group of the nobility and men who gave their allegiance to him.

Again Narseh has blessed us by leaving his personal biography at Paikuli in Iraq. 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 met them.³⁵ 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 which now have been taken to be less reliable than initially thought. 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.

³⁴N. Garsoian, *The Epic Histories: Buzandaran Patmut#wnk#*, p. 515; for feasting under Šāpuhr II see Chapter IV.XVI, p. 146.

³⁵P.O. Skjærvø and H. Humbach, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli*, Wiesbaden, 1983, p. 44 (Parthian: line 18).

One cannot accept this assumption completely and while it can be agreed that the story is told in an epic setting (formula), I do not know 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.³⁶ After all kings made war, defeated their enemies, and ruled over their kingdom.

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-e Rostam inscription. In the Paikuli inscription we come across the notion that the enemy of the rightful king (Narseh) were followers of the Lie (demon).³⁷ Narseh's rock-relief at Naqsh-e Rostam is also important in that it shows him receiving the symbol of sovereignty from the deity, Anāhīd.³⁸ Leaving the religious implications aside, could this mean that politically Narseh was able to regain the control of the fire-temple of Anāhīd at Istakhr 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 less successful. While initially he was able to crush the Roman forces under Galerius, in a second battle he lost his entire harem and had to negotiate their return by ceding parts of Mesopotamia, restoring Armenia to Tirdat and the King of Iberia was now chosen by the Romans. As has been suggested, Narseh's rule announced a new balance of power among the Romans and the Persians. This

³⁶S. 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," *Orient*, 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!

³⁷Skjærvø, *op. cit.*, p. 44: line 18.

³⁸A.Sh. Shahbazi, "Narse's Relief at Naqš-i Rostam," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, vol. 16, 1983, pp. 255-268.

weakness in imperial aspiration may be apparent from the omission of *an-Ērān* from his titles on some of the coin legends.

Hormizd II (302-309 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. 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.³⁹

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

³⁹Armazd, Anahīt, 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.

own view of what Zoroastrianism meant and gave it an Armenian outlook.⁴⁰ So the few “evil” *naxarars* mentioned in the Armenian historical narratives who 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.

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 II, named Šābuhr II (309-379 CE) was put on the throne. 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 Caesars battled for the soul of the Roman Empire which made the Persians safe from the Western front. When Šābuhr II had come of age, 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. It is again here that we hear of Arab forced immigration into the Sasanian Empire by Šābuhr II, namely Bakr b. Wā’il and Banū Hanzalah in Kermān and Xūzestān.⁴¹ Thus the relation between the Arabs and Persians was just not on the frontiers, but also within the Sasanian Empire.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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

⁴⁰J.R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia*, Harvard Iranian Series, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987.

⁴¹Al-Tabarī, p. 56.

⁴²R. Hoyland, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁴³Ammianus Marcellinus, Book XVII.5.1.

from the coins and a few inscriptions in Kušān territory. By 359 CE, Šābuhr II reached Amida and its population was deported to Xūzestān⁴⁴ and the emperor Julian countered against him with victories in 363 CE.⁴⁵ We are told that among the Roman generals there was a Persian renegade by the name of Hormizd who commanded the cavalry, thus spies and defectors were an important tool for a successful invasion. Julian had destroyed his navy, so that his forces would not retreat and Šābuhr II had adopted a scorched-earth policy in Mesopotamia which had resulted in hunger among the Roman forces. In June of 363 Persian forces equipped with elephants defeated the Romans, and Julian was killed in battle⁴⁶ probably by a *kontophoros* “cavalry spearmen.” Jovian was elected as emperor and had to make peace, which was called “shameful,”⁴⁷ ceding territory in Mesopotamia and Syria to the Persians. Roman sources lament the fact that now the enemy hoisted Persian standards over the city of Nisibis.⁴⁸ The Emperor Valens had to deal with the Germanic tribes in the Balkans and so the Sasanians got the chance to invade Armenia. The Christians of the Sasanian Empire were also persecuted and the city of Susa, which was the hotbed of Christian activity, was razed by the elephants of the Sasanian army.

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.⁴⁹ We do not know how far Šābuhr II was able

⁴⁴Ammianus Marcellinus, Book XVIII.9. Also see E. Kettenhofen, “Deportations. ii. In the Parthian and Sasanian Periods,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. VII, p. 299.

⁴⁵Ammianus Marcellinus, Book XXIV.1-6 details Julian’s campaign against the Sasanians.

⁴⁶Ammianus Marcellinus, Book XXV.3.

⁴⁷Ammianus Marcellinus, Book XXV.7.

⁴⁸For Julian’s campaign into Persia and the sources, see G.W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978, pp. 115-118.

⁴⁹R.N. Frye, “Iran under the Sasanians,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3(1), ed. E. Yarshater, Cambridge University Press, Massachusetts, 1983, p. 132.

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 a new place where 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.⁵⁰ They are not receiving a diadem from the gods, nor victorious over any enemies, rather posing for a personal portrait. At Taq-i Bustan, the monuments of Ardaxšīr II (379-383 CE) and his son, Šābuhr III (383-388 CE) are present. These kings along with Wahram IV (388-399 CE) all met a violent end which suggests the growing power of the nobility and the priests since the time of Šābuhr II. This growing power of the nobility is also reflected in the brief description of Ardaxšīr II’s rule who is said to have killed a number of the great men and holders of authority in order to reduce their power.⁵¹ During Wahrām IV’s reign, Armenia lost any semblance of independence, and the western part became 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.

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

⁵⁰M. Back, *op. cit.*, pp. 490-491.

⁵¹Tabarī, pp. 68-69.

“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.⁵² 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.⁵³ Agathias calls Yazdgerd I a pro-Christian monarch, but more importantly a “friendly and peaceable,” ruler who never once made war on the Romans.⁵⁴ So his title would be fitting for the period, but we may even connect this to Kayānid ideology as well. In the Middle Persian epic, the *Ayādgār ī Zarērān* (The Testament of Zarēr) the last Kayanid ruler, Kay Wištāsp is given the title *rāmšahr* which appears in the *Dēnkard* as well.⁵⁵ This title suggests a gravitation towards an Avestan / Kayānid ideology even before seeing such titles and terminology as *kay* “Kayānid” and *xwarrah* “Glory.”

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 II⁵⁶ 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. In 420 CE, when Yazdgerd I died, his eldest son, Šābuhr left Armenia 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. Another son of Yazdgerd I, Wahrām

⁵²For Maruthas’ mission to Persia and Yazdgerd’s killing of some Zoroastrian priests see Socrates Scholasticus, Chapter VIII.7.9.

⁵³Labourt, *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

⁵⁴Agathias Scholasticus, *The Histories*, Book IV.26.8. For the treatment of the Sasanians by Agathias see A. Cameron, “Agathias on the Sassanians,” *Dumberton Oaks Papers*, vol. 22-23, 1969-1970, pp. 126-127.

⁵⁵B. Gheiby, *Ayādgār 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 *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*,” *Archiv Orientalni*, vol. 54, 1986, p. 265.

⁵⁶Procopius, I.ii.1-10.

V who had been sent to the Arab court at al-Hira came with a force of mainly Arabs and forced Xusrō to abdicate in 420 CE. By all accounts Wahrām V (420-438 CE) was a successful warrior; he defeated the Hephthalites in the east, and 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. 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, Artašes, 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.

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 is 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 he fell into some marshes and disappeared. He is also 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.⁵⁷ 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 Khurāsān 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 and at the instigation of his prime-minister (*Wuzurg-framādār* / Armenian *Vzurk hramatar*), Mihr-Narseh issued an edict in which Zoroastrianism was re-imposed as the official religion in Armenia.⁵⁸ This edict provides us with an interesting glimpse of the Zurvanite tendency of Mihr-Narseh and the reasons

⁵⁷*Zand ī Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalypse*, edited and translated by C. Cereti, Istituto Italiano per il medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995, p. 152.

⁵⁸For 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 Ard-wahišt and Abzōn-Ardaxšīr see *Madigān 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.

why the Armenians should convert to Zoroastrianism.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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 behaved with benevolence towards the Zoroastrians and the army. 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 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 had begun with Yazdgerd I and the title of *rāmšāh*, 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 with the east and resided in that region for several years. We cannot say that his stay in Khurāsān 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 with below. By a Kayanid ideology it is meant that rather than looking at the Achaemenids as their ancestors (for all we know they might have seen the Achaemenid monuments as the work of the gods), they connected themselves to the primordial kings, especially the Kayānid kings in the *Avesta*.⁶¹

⁵⁹Elisha, *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 Lazar 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.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

⁶¹T. Daryae, "National History or Keyanid History ? The Nature of Sasanid Zoroastrian Historiography," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 28, nos. 3-4, 1995, pp. 129-141.

The two sons of Yazdgerd II, Hormizd II (457-459 CE) and Pērōz (459-484 CE) ruled consecutively, although the latter deposed the former in a power struggle. Pērōz fled to the east to Khurāsān and with an army probably consisting of Kidarites or Hephthalites regained the throne. Meantime, while Hormizd II may have crowned himself, we hear that their mother, Dēnag was governing the capital or parts of the capital. 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 Khurāsān and in 469 CE Pērōz and his harem and retinue were captured by Khwašnawāz. This calamity took place during the third major battle, while during the first two, his war was partly financed by the Romans.⁶² 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 Huns as insurance.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

We know there were religious persecutions, especially against the Jews at this time and drought and famine were rampant in the empire, 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ The short rule of Walāxš (484-488 CE) was uneventful and

⁶²*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.

⁶³T. Daryaei, “Ardašīr Mowbed-e Mowbedān: Yek Tashih dar Matn-e Bundahiš,” *Iranshenasi*, 2001(forthcoming).

⁶⁴*The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite*, p. 9-10.

⁶⁵Sebeos reports that seven of Pērōz’s sons were killed with him, Chapter 8.67, p. 5.

⁶⁶For Pērōz’s campaign in the east see Procopius, *History of the Wars*, Book I.i-iv.

since the empire was weak, the king kept peaceful relations with Armenia and the Hephthalites by giving tribute to the latter. 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 conduct their activity at the cost of court. Some kings like Yazdgerd I did kill Zoroastrian priests and nobility to reduce their power, but this only hampered their 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,⁶⁷ as well as the appearance of mint-marks on the coins. Economically, the empire was not faring well either 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.

Thus 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. A Zoroastrian priest by the name of Mazdak was able to capture the attention of the Kawād I, to make reforms which went beyond the accepted religious dogma. This was also a social reform which caused much resentment during and especially after the event in the minds of the Zoroastrian priests. Sources tell us that Mazdak preached an egalitarian social system, one in which equality in wealth, women and property was propagated. Some sources state that it was Kawād who introduced Persians to “have communal intercourse with their women.”⁶⁸ This religious outlook had theological and cosmological dimensions which will be discussed in some detail in the chapter under religion, but goes to show that he was not a fictional

⁶⁷For a detailed study of the administrative seals and the functionaries see R. Gyselen, *La géographie administrative de l'Empire sassanides*, Paris, 1989.

⁶⁸Procopius, *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.

character.⁶⁹ Here, however, 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.⁷⁰ 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 religion. 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. He is noted for his gentleness and sense of justice which may be anti-Mazdakite propaganda,⁷¹ 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 nobility-priest alliance. In the early sixth century Kawād campaigned against the Romans which was predatory in nature and in his search for money and he was successful. He forced the Mazdakite religion not only upon the population of the empire where many must have

⁶⁹H. Gaube in his essay has made such a claim, "Mazdak: Historical Reality or Invention?," *Studia Iranica*, vol. 11, 1982, pp. 111-122.

⁷⁰P. Crone, "Kavād'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.

⁷¹Agathias, *The Histories*, Book 4.28, p. 131.

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.⁷²

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 were 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.⁷³ 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*).⁷⁴ Prior to this an *Ērān-spāhbed* led the army, but now it had become exceedingly difficult to be on several fronts at once. 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.⁷⁵

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*.⁷⁶ Luckily for the Sasanians, the Hephthalites were in demise and division by 515 CE. The Sasanian revival was taking place and its effect was that Georgia as well as parts of inner Arabia and Oman, were now controlled by the Persians.⁷⁷ Persians had already settled in Central Asia and traders had gone to India, China and as

⁷²M.J. Kister, “Al-Hīra, Some notes on its relations with Arabia,” *Arabica*, vol. xi, 1967, pp. 143-169.

⁷³M. 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 Zam~n-e Sāsānīān,” *Tafazzoli Memorial Volume*, ed. A. Ashraf Sadeghi, Sokhan Publishers, Tehran, 2001, pp. 179-188.

⁷⁴F. Gurnet, “Deux notes à propos du monnayage de Xusrō II,” *Revue belge de Numismatique*, 140, 1994, p. 36-37.

⁷⁵Z. Rubin, “The Reforms of Khusrō Anūshirwān,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, States, Resources and Armies*, vol. III, ed. A. Cameron, Princeton, 1995, pp. 227-296.

⁷⁶Sebeos, Chapter 9.70, p. 10.

⁷⁷J.C. Wilkinson, “The Julanda of Oman,” *The Journal of Oman Studies*, vol. I, 1975, pp. 98-99.

far away as Indonesia.⁷⁸ 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. The Mazdakites supported one of the sons of Kawād I, by the name of Kāwūs who was the eldest and was the heir (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. Kāwūs was ruling in the north, in Tabarestān and battled Xusrō I, but was ultimately defeated.⁷⁹ 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 proclaimed their allegiance to 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 the 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.”⁸⁰ 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.”⁸¹

Xusrō I (531-579 CE) represents the epitome of the philosopher-king in Sasanian history, and much has been attributed to him which is quite difficult to substantiate. He, however, surely put an end to Kāwūs and the nobles who did not favor him and, destroyed the stronghold of Mazdakites in the empire. But he continued his father’s administrative and economic reforms and the imperialistic activities. He built as a defensive mechanism, walls (*war*) on the four sides of the empire. One was built in the northeast, along the Gurgan plain, one at the Caucasus passes, one in the west and

⁷⁸E.H. Schafer, “Iranian Merchants in T’ang Dynasty Tales,” *University of California Publications in Semitic Philology*, vol. 11, 1951, pp. 403-422.

⁷⁹For information on Kāwūs and his discontent with Xusrō’s attempt to seize the throne see Z. Mara’sī, *Tārīkh-ē 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.

⁸⁰*Šāhnāme*, translated by R. Levy, p. 321.

⁸¹*Šāhnāme*, p. 321.

another, called the “wall of the Arabs” (*war ī tāzīgān*), in southwestern Persia.⁸² Although the quadripartition of the empire was attributed to Xusrō I, it appears that this division had already taken place or had begun by Kawād I. While Xusrō I came to power as an anti-Mazdakite, he did not restore the power of the great nobility and the large landed aristocracy, instead favoring the small landholding gentry (*dehgāns*).⁸³ The *dehgāns* would be the backbone of the Sasanian military and 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 state completed the *Šāhnāme*.

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 from India.⁸⁴ From Rome, musical instruments, various scientific works, medical treatises, and philosophical texts were brought. Some philosophers came to the court of Xusrō from Athens, especially after the closing down of the school of neo-Platonists by Justinian. Xusrō’s interest in philosophy is gained by noting that he was called “Plato’s Philosopher King.”⁸⁵ The cultural development in the Sasanian Empire will be dealt with in a separate chapter. Xusrō I and the Roman Emperor, Justinian 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 the *Corpus iuris civilis* for Justinian), and administrative and military reforms took place simultaneously. Scholars argue whether one king influenced the other, but rather than

⁸²R.N. Frye, “The Sasanian System of Walls for Defense,” *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, Jerusalem, 1977, pp. 7-15.

⁸³For the function of the *dehgāns* see A. Tafazzolī, *Sasanian Society*, Bibliotheca Persica Press, New York, 2000, pp. 38-58.

⁸⁴T. Daryaeae, “Mind, Body, and the Cosmos: The Game of Chess and Backgammon in Ancient Persia,” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2001, pp. 218-312.

⁸⁵Agathias actually portrays Xusrō’s encounter with the philosophers quite negatively, *The Histories*, Book 2.3.

trying to see the process one way, one can view the relations as reciprocal, where each encouraged and perhaps wanted to outdo the other.

Militarily the Sasanian Empire was able to exact a large sum of gold from the Romans, control Armenia, plunder Syria and deport its local population to Persia.⁸⁶ In the east, Xusrō defeated the Hephthalites in 557-558 CE and the Turks from 572 to 577 CE, checking their incursions into the Near East.⁸⁷ Because of his spectacular victories and achievements, Xusrō I minted such legends on his special issue coinage as “Ērān has become fearless (*ērān abē-bēm kard*), and “Ērān became strong” (*ērān abzōnhēnēd*). This is the Sasanian Empire at its apex of glory and power, headed by a philosopher-king as the literary and historical texts would have us believe.

Xusrō’s son, Hormizd IV (579-590 CE), did not match his father’s grandeur, nor his political outlook. He is noted for his arrogance, tyranny and he made many enemies of the court.⁸⁸ Sebeos tells us that Hormizd IV was responsible for the killing of many of the nobility, which must have made him hated.⁸⁹ He continued his support of the landed gentry who probably grew in strength at the cost of the nobility (*āzādān*) and dealt harshly with the Zoroastrian priests as well. In the east, the Hephthalites were met by the Sasanian general Wahrām Čōbin, whose victory over them made him quite famous within the empire. He was from the noble Arsacid family of Mihrān, which could trace its genealogy further than the Sasanians could and so he must have been a proud man. When he was unsuccessful in the western campaigns, Hormizd IV slandered him and made false accusations against him, which caused the general to move towards Ctesiphon.⁹⁰ With the help of the nobility, led by Wīstahm and Wīndōe, they deposed the king and brought his

⁸⁶For the favorable treaty with Romans see Menander Protector, Fragment 6,1.

⁸⁷On 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 darbāre-ye Sāsānīān*, BTNK, Tehran, 1348, pp.49-89.

⁸⁸Theophylact Simocatta, Book iii.17.1

⁸⁹Sebeos, Chapter 10.73, p. 14.

⁹⁰Theophylact Simocatta, Book iv.1.1.

son, Xusrō II to power. 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 Sasanians. 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.

Xusrō II was not able to withstand the forces of Wahrām⁹¹ 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.⁹² The Roman emperor supplied Roman and mainly Armenian forces to Xusrō, 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.

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

⁹¹Theophylact Simocatta, Book iv.9-10.

⁹²Theophylact 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.

he took to Media, minted coins in his own name and probably lived there until 600 CE.⁹³ 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 Maurice was removed and Phokas came to the throne, Xusrō II used this event as a pretext for the conquest Syria and beyond. In 604 CE with blazing speed, his two generals Šāhin and Šahrwarāz conquered of Syria,⁹⁴ Palestine, Anatolia, Egypt and even went as far as Libya.⁹⁵ We have vivid description by Antiochus Strategos of the conquest of the city of Jerusalem and the taking of the holy cross which resonated in Roman Empire and the event was much lamented.⁹⁶ This shocked the Byzantine Empire which by 610 CE had made Heraclius its emperor.⁹⁷ 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, sacking the sacred Adūr Farrōbāy

⁹³It 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. Daryae, "Religio-Political Propaganda on the Coins of Xusrō II," *American Journal of Numismatics*, vol. 7, 1997, 141-154

⁹⁴M. 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.

⁹⁵R. Altheim-Stiehl, "The Sasanians in Egypt - Some Evidence of Historical Interest," *Bulletin de la société d'archéologie Copte*, vol. 31, 1992, p. 87, 92.

⁹⁶Antiochus 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.

⁹⁷For events in Byzantium see A.N. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, Vol. I, Amsterdam, 1968.

temple at Ganzak⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ 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.

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, Xusrō 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.

Xusrō II was the warrior-king, similar to the kings of the early Sasanian period. His grotto at Taq-i Bustan shows him in full body-armor, characteristic of the Sasanian heavy cavalry, and shows Anāhīd, the lady of waters, above him. In many ways Xusrō II represents the culmination of Sasanian absolutism and a return to the past glories for one last time. While Ohrmazd was held to be supreme, at Taq-i 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 Xusrō II is clearly demonstrated by

⁹⁸For 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.

⁹⁹J.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.

the Taq-i Bustan rock-relief, where the king is shown on a boat, hunting, and musicians playing their harps, along with the retinue. Xusrō II has gone down in Persian history as an opulent¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹ His favorite wife, Šērīn is well known in the epic and romance literature, and is also said to have propagated Christianity in the empire.¹⁰²

After Xusrō II, Kawād II came to the throne in 628 CE, he committed fratricide, killing almost every eligible or capable male heir from the Sasanian family. 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.¹⁰³ In 630 CE, his young son, Ardaxšīr III came to the throne and it was during his reign that for a third time the Sasanian family was challenged by an outsider, i.e., the Sasanian general who had fought and led the armies of Xusrō II, Šahrwarāz, soon entered the capital, Cetsiphon, and put an end to the young ruler and proclaimed himself king of kings. His actions may have been partly 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 him the impetus to conquer and take over the throne.¹⁰⁴ 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 was killed.

One of the daughters of Xusrō II, named Bōrān came to the throne in 630 CE and ruled for two years.¹⁰⁵ Her rule was a period of consolidation of the imperial power and

¹⁰⁰There are illusions 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 Xusrō.

¹⁰¹According to Sebeos, Chapter 46.149, p. 115 after the capture of Jerusalem, Xusrō assembled the Christian bishops in his court and presided over their disputation.

¹⁰²Sebeos, Chapter 13.85, p. 29.

¹⁰³For 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.

¹⁰⁴Sebeos, Chapter 40.129, p. 88.

¹⁰⁵H.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.

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*).¹⁰⁶ Of 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. 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 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, a result of 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 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. The late Sasanian Empire was beginning to resemble the Parthian feudal system before the fall of the Parthians. This system left the local officials and *dehqāns* as the most powerful elite, since the rulers and governors were not able to hold power.¹⁰⁷ 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.

¹⁰⁶T. Daryaei, “The Coinage of Queen Bōrān and its Significance in Sasanian Imperial Ideology,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 13, 1999, pp. 77-83.

¹⁰⁷For 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.

Thus we can say that during this period, some power resided at the capital at Cetusphon where the king was crowned, and in the provinces the deposed king moved from province to province, and the *dehgāns* who were probably the most numerous, 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. From 633 CE the Arabs were able to enter Iraq but were defeated at the battle of the Bridge in 634 CE. In 636 CE at the battle of Qadisiyya the Sasanians under the leadership of Rustam were defeated and the capital fell to the Arab Muslims who they entered it unopposed, with the nobility and the courtiers fleeing before them to the heart of Persia.¹⁰⁸ Under Umar's direction, Khūzistān fell in 642 CE and in the same year Media was taken at the battle of Nīhāvand. This laid the heart of Persia open to conquest without any major resistance. We should remember that during the reforms of Kawād I and Xusrō I the army was divided into four groups, each placed at the borders. When one army was defeated, the heart of the empire laid open. The Arab Muslim victory was successful for a series of reasons. In addition to the internal problems, the heavy Sasanian cavalry was no match for the Arab light cavalry which was much more maneuverable. The Islamic texts usually report the number of the Persian soldiers to have been in the hundreds or tens of thousands and several times larger than the Arab armies. This is pure fiction and it is boastful literature which aims to aggrandize Arab Muslim achievement, which may be compared to the Greek accounts of the Greco-Persian wars. The Sasanian army would not have been able to muster such a large force against the Arabs, since many had been killed or were not present because of the long wars with the Roman Empire and the internal strife. Yazdgerd III fled to Persis,

¹⁰⁸Sebeos, Chapter 42.136, p. 98.

but the Arabs were able to conquer that region by 650 CE and he was forced to flee to the east. There he was faced with local officials who were unwilling to help him and he was defeated by a confederation of local officials, the margrave of Merv and the Hephthalite ruler of Bāghdīs. Tradition has it that he was killed in 651 CE in Merv by a miller who did not recognize that he was the King of Kings.

The sons of Yazdgerd III fled to the east asking the T'ang emperor, Gaozong to aid them in their battle against the Arab Muslims. Pērōz, the elder son of Yazdgerd III established a kingdom called the "Persian Area Command" (*Bosi dudufu*) at Sīstān, stationed at Zarang from 658-663 CE. He was recognized as the legitimate king of Persia by the Chinese,¹⁰⁹ but by 674-675 CE we hear that he went to the Chinese capital, probably because of further Arab Muslim victories.¹¹⁰ He died in around 679 CE and his son Narseh was placed on the throne of Persia in exile. Pērōz has been remembered by a stone statue of his which is still in existence at the entrance of the mausoleum of Gaozong with the inscription: "Pērōz, King of Persia, Grand General of the Right Courageous Guard and Commander-in-chief of Persia."¹¹¹ There the family of Sāsān kept their royal status, became military generals, and had temples built at Tun-huang (sha-chou), Wu-wei (Liang-chou), Ch'ang-an (founded in 631 CE) and at Loyang and lived along with the other Persians who had been there for commercial activity or had fled as a result of the Arab Muslim victories.¹¹² The other son of Yazdgerd III, Wahrām (Aluohan in Chinese sources) attempted to recapture the lost territories from the Arab Muslims. Although he was ultimately unsuccessful, the Middle Persian texts especially a small Middle Persian poem called *Abar Madan ī Wahrām ī Warz~wand* (On the Coming of the Miraculous

¹⁰⁹J. Harmatta, "The middle Persian-Chinese Bilingual Inscription from Hsian and the Chinese-Sāsānian Relations," *La Persia nel Medioevo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 1971, p. 374.

¹¹⁰A. Forte, "On the Identity of Aluohan (616-710) A Persian Aristocrat at the Chinese Court," *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 1996, p. 190.

¹¹¹C. Guocan, "Tang Qianling shirenxiang ji qi xianming de yanjiu," *Wenwu jikan*, Vol. 2, 1980, p. 198b8; Forte, *ibid.*, p. 191.

¹¹²The classical work on Chinese-Persian relations in this period is that of B. Laufer, *Sino-Iranica: Chinese Contributions to the History of Civilization in Ancient Iran, with Special Reference to the History of Cultivated Plants and Products*, Field Museum of Natural History, Publication 201, Anthropological Series, vol. 15, no. 3, Chicago, 1919; also see E.H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand, A Study of T'ang Exotics*, University of California Press, 1963, pp. 10-25; For a more general treatment see J. Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 282-287.

Wahrām) may have a kernel of truth in regard to his campaigns. He died in 710 CE.¹¹³ Wahrām's son, Xusrō (Juluo in Chinese sources) who with the aid of the Turks invaded Persia, was not able to defeat the Arabs either and this is the last time we hear of someone from the family of Sāsān trying to capture the throne of Persia.¹¹⁴ The Arab Muslims conquerors met stiff resistance in parts of the empire from some of the *dehgāns* and the Zoroastrian priests as well, while others agreed to pay a poll-tax and remain in charge of their territory and submit to the Arab governors. Part of the Sasanian military also joined the Arab forces and as a result they kept their status and continued the conquest of the region and Central Asia. The conquest brought Asia closer together and now Arabs, Persians, Indians and the Chinese met each other on the Silk Road. After Wahrām's death the Persians had to wait only forty years to topple the Arab rulers at Damascus, and by the ninth century, they would establish their own independent dynasties in Persia. Even then the Muslims rulers, be it Persian, Arab, or Turkish remembered the Sasanians and claimed to be the descendants of Sāsān in one way or another.¹¹⁵ The family of Sāsān was never forgotten.

¹¹³C. G. Cereti, "Again on Wahrām ī Warz-wand," *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 1996, pp. 629-639.

¹¹⁴Harmatta, *ibid.*, p. 375; Forte, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-194.

¹¹⁵C.E. Bosworth, "The Heritage of Rulership in Early Islamic Iran and the Search for Dynastic Connections with the Past," *Iranian Studies*, vol. xi, 1978, pp. 7-34.

