

The Last Ruling Woman of Ērānšahr: Queen Āzarmīgduxt

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Abstract: Queen Āzarmīgduxt was the last queen from the Sasanid dynasty who ruled Ērānšahr during the 7th century CE. In this paper we intend to review her life and her decision to revive the memory of her father Khusro the Second (Parwez). One of Āzarmīgduxt's actions was to mint coins with the image of her father, but her own name. In this paper, we propose a new theory about Āzarmīgduxt's decision to do so. The paper concludes with an analysis of the reasons behind Āzarmīgduxt's assassination by a group of Arsacid nobility Spāhbed Farrox-Hormizd and his son, Rustam ī Farroxzādān.

Keywords: Sasanian Empire, Sasanian numismatics, Queen Āzarmīgduxt, Khusro Parwez, Farrox-Hormizd, Rustam ī Farroxzādān, female rulers of Iran.

Introduction

We have a large amount of reliable information on noble women of the Sasanian dynasty from the third and the fourth century CE. Then again we also find information on royal women in the late sixth and the early seventh century CE.¹ The difference between the two periods is clear. While the early ladies are the mothers and wives of kings and kings to be, members of the latter group are rulers themselves and at times the products of unions between Iranian and Roman nobility, or Zoroastrian and Christian couples. Among the latter group of noble ladies, Queen Bōrān and Queen Azarmīgduxt stand out in Sasanian history. This is due to the fact that they not only ruled, but that coins were struck in their names and they were discussed in the historical material. Queen Bōrān has been given more attention (Chaumont 1987: 366; Malek and Sarkhosh Curtis 1998: 113-129; Daryae 1999; Emrani 2005; Panaino 2006), mainly because there is more information on her, and far less is known of Queen Azarmīgduxt, and of her life and career.²

Due to the work of M. Macuch (1993), and

J.K. Choksy (2002), we are beginning to have a better idea of the legal rights, and rites, of women in late antique Iran. These sources suggest that, while the institution of Zoroastrianism, like most other religious traditions, restricted women's function in many facets of life, in reality women may have acted very differently. With our queens, the further dichotomy of legal

1. A. Sh. Shahbazi lists some twenty ladies of the court, "Studies in Sasanian Prosopography III. Barm-i Dilak: Symbolism of Offering Flowers." In Sarkhosh Curtis, V., Hillenbrand, R. & Rogers, J.M. (Eds.), *The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Persia: New Light on the Parthian and Sasanian Empires*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1998, p. 58. The best article reviewing women in Sasanian Iran with discussion on early and later Sasanian queens is by J. Rose, "Three Queens, Two Wives, and A Goddess: Roles and Images of Women in Sasanian Iran," In Hambly, G. R. F. (Ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, pp. 29-54.

2. Only Ph. Gignoux, "Āzarmīgduxt," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. 3, 1987, p. 190; and Panaino discussed the career of this queen, *ibid.*, 221-239.

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hindrance and dynastic connections makes the study of these noble women interesting. J. Rose and A. Panaino have also provided us with fresh interpretive studies on Sasanian royal women (Rose 1999 and Panaino 2006). No articles as of yet beside the short encyclopedic entry of Ph. Gignoux deals specifically with queen Āzarmīgduxt (Gignoux 1987). The following essay in memory of A. Sh. Shahbazi discusses the importance of the last Sasanian female ruler Āzarmīgduxt, whose reign in many ways signaled the end of dynastic power and legitimacy in late antique Iran.

The last woman from the house of Sāsān to sit on the throne of Ērānšahr or the Kingdom of the Iranians was Queen Āzarmīgduxt, the daughter of Khusro Parwēz and the sister of queen Bōrān. She ruled for only a short while, between 631 and 632 CE. Sources vary on the length of her rule, from four months to sixteen months, but Tabarī in his *Tarīkh rasul w al-muluk* and Masudi in his *Tanbīh wa-al-ishrāf* provide the more probable period of six months.³ Information on her rule is meager for the very reason that she ruled for such a short time, but the timing of her rule and her fate is very important for our understanding of the disintegration of royal ideology for the house of Sāsān, and for the decline and fall of the Sasanian Empire to the Muslims some twenty years after her rule.

After the murder of Queen Bōrān in 631 there were no other sons or daughters of Khusro Parwez left, because of the fratricide of Kawād II (Shirōye). Kawād II (628 CE), who had come to power after his father's long and tumultuous reign, had felt that his position was so precarious that there was a need to kill all his brothers (See Malek 1995). Thus, by the death of Queen Bōrān, Queen Āzarmīgduxt was the last legitimate surviving progeny of Khusro Parwēz. The textual sources are unanimous about her strength and resolve to continue her sister's work in reviving the Sasanian Empire.

Her resolve is mentioned by Bal'amī where it is stated that she brought justice and did not choose a minister so that only Āzarmīgduxt herself would rule and make decisions.⁴

There is unanimity in the Perso-Arabic sources about her end. Tradition has it that Farrokh Hormoz who was the Spābhend or General of the Northeast⁵ asked for her hand in marriage. Queen Āzarmīgduxt replies in this way to the general's request:

“Marriage to a queen is not permissible. I realize full well that your intention in what you are proposing is to satisfy your own (sexual) needs and lust with me...” (Tabarī, p. 406).

The queen plotted successfully to have the general killed in her palace at Ctesiphon for his indiscretion. This action caused Rustam ī Farrokhzadān, the son of Farrokh Hormoz to take revenge, blinding her and then have her killed.⁶ On the face of it the story suggests the lustful approach of a “womanizing” general, seeking the hand of the beautiful queen of Ērānšahr. However, I believe there is a deeper meaning to this story. Thanks to the work of P. Pourshariati we have a better understanding of the inner politics of the Sasanian Empire and the rivalry between the houses of Sāsān and Mehrān, i.e., the Arsacids (Pourshariati 2008). According to Pourshariati the fall and demise of the Sasanians was not entirely due to the long war with the Eastern Roman Empire, nor to the Muslim invasion, but rather the weakening of loyalty within the empire and the rivalry between

3. *The History of al-Tabarī: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids, and Yemen*, translated by C.E. Bosworth, New York, 1999, P. 407; *Kitāb al-tanbīh wa-al-ishrāf*, translated by A.-B. Pāyandeh, Tehran, p. 96.

4. *Tārīkh-nāme-ye Tabarī: A 963 AD Persian Translation attributed to Bal'amī*, ed. M. Roshan, vol. 2, Soroush Press, 2004, 848.

5. Text states Khurāsān which is the kust of northeast.

6. Tabarī, pp. 407-408; Bal'amī, p. 849; Ibn Balkhī, p. 110.

the two ancient noble houses of Iran. If we are to accept this supposition, which I do, then the textual innuendo about the “lustful” approach to the Sasanian queen by the Arsacid general could be translated into the “ambitions” of the Arsacid family against the ruling house of Sāsān. One may suggest that after this murder the center of power for the empire may have shifted to the northeast, the place where Yazdgerd III, the last Sasanian king of kings, finally fled to seek help.

Let us look at the numismatic evidence for her rule, as it reveals to us important clues in regard to her views of rulership and the Sasanian royal house. We have several specimens of Queen Āzarmīgduxt’s coinage which are all from the western part of the province of Persis / Fārs, from the mint of WHYC “Weh-az-Amid-Kawād,” with the year one.⁷ The obverse and the reverse of the coin is indeed exactly a copy of the coinage of her father, Khusro Parwēz. On the obverse there is the bust of the bearded king Khusro with the legend on the fourth quadrant, xwarrah abzūd “Increase in Glory” and the winged crown symbolizing Wahrām, the deity of offensive victory.⁸ On the reverse there is the typical late Sasanian fire-altar with two attendants. On the right there is the mint-mark WHYC, for kust or district of the province of Fārs. On the left of the fire altar there is the date 1, her regnal year. On the obverse the legend on the right reads ’clmykdwh’t (āzarmīgduxt) which was first identified by Malek Iraj Mochiri (1972). More recently a new mint-mark for Āzarmīgduxt has been discovered by R. Gyselen, namely that of ŠY (Šērāz), (Gyselen 2004).

Before we tackle the question of the image on the obverse of Queen Āzarmīgduxt’s coinage it is instructive to look at the coinage of her rival, Farrokh Hormoz. Another rare group of coins belongs to an Ohrmazd / Hormozd who has been identified as Ohrmazd V. Again, M.I. Mochiri has identified the person as Farrokh

Hormoz, the general who put an end to the rule of Queen Āzarmīgduxt (Mochiri 1972). The problem with this identification is that we have coinage also for year 2. The question is, if he was killed by Queen Āzarmīgduxt in 631/2, how could he have minted coinage for two years? It may be that the Spāhbed Farrokh Hormoz may have already considered himself a king before coming to the queen to ask her hand in marriage.

Now we can turn to the issue of the bust of Āzarmīgduxt’s father as it appears on her coinage. Mochiri’s explanation for the reason why the bust of a man rather than a woman appears on these coins is that this is really the image of Farrokh-Hormoz, the Spāhbed, but this seems unlikely. The other possibility is that since Queen Āzarmīgduxt ruled for a very short time, she did not have time to mint coins with her image. This I believe is also unsatisfying as she was able to mint her name on the coin and so the image could also have been replaced. I believe as H. Emrani has suggested that the portrayal of Khusro Parwēz’s image on the coin was purposeful. Therefore reason such an innovation, that is the placing of her father’s image by the queen, was that by the time of her rule the gender of the ruler was not so important in comparison to the relation to the royal house of Sāsān and most importantly to Khusro Parwez, the last real and legitimate king of kings of Ērānšahr the restoration of whose image was first attempted by her sister, Queen Bōrān.

A gold coin of queen Bōrān suggests this attempt at the restoration, return, or re-establishment of the legitimacy of Khusro Parwēz and the house

7. For the identification of WYHC for “Weh-az-Amid-Kawād” see R. Gyselen, *La géographie administrative de l’empire sassanide, les témoignages siglloraphiques*, Paris: Centre National pour la Recherche Scientifique et de l’Associaton pour l’Avancement des Etudes Iraniennes, 1989, p. 62.

8. For the use of Avestan deities on the coinage see T. Dary-ae, ANS

of Sāsān. Queen Bōrān has placed the legend on her gold coin, “Bōrān, restorer of the lineage of the gods,” referring to her father, Khusro Parwēz (Daryaee 1999). But at the time when Queen Āzarmīgduxt had come to power, a legend may have not have been sufficient, and the image of the great king Khusro was needed. Thus, not Āzarmīgduxt’s image, but that of her father was struck on the coin to give legitimacy to her and to remind the magnates and the nobility as well as the people of a time of glory in Ērānšahr.

In the early seventh century Khusro Parwēz had been able to conquer a large part of the Near East. In 604 CE with blazing speed, his two generals, Šāhīn and Šahrwarāz, conquered Syria (Morony 1987). Palestine was conquered in 614 CE and then Egypt was taken in 619 CE, and the Iranians even went as far as Libya (Altheim-Stiehl 1992, on the papyrological evidence see Venetis 2004), while Anatolia was conquered between 619-622 CE. Because of his spectacular victories and achievements, Khusro II minted such legends on his special issue coinage as, “Iranians have become fearless” (ērān abē-bēm kard), and “Iranians became strong” (ērān abzōnhēnēd).⁹ This is the Sasanian Empire at the apex of its glory and power, headed by a heroic king. However, the emperor Heraclius was able to outmaneuver the Persian king and invade the Sasanian Empire, thus defeating Khusro Parwez.

While Khusro Parwez’s son, Kawād II tried to erase the memory of her father, Khusro’s daughters revived their father’s memory in a time of trouble for the house of Sāsān as it was being challenged from without and within. We find a similar trend for the end of the Sasanian period with Yazdgerd III’s coinage in Sīstān for 651CE. There is a curious series of coins from the mint of Sīstān in large numbers from this province, a place which Yazdgerd III did not stay at very much. I have tried to solve this puzzle by suggesting that it was really the two

sons of Yazdgerd III, Pērōz and Wahrām who minted these coins. The reason for which they minted these coins with the image and name of their father was that there were two sons who were co-rulers, and more importantly, that king Yazdgerd III was the last legitimate image for the house of Sāsān before it crumbled before the onslaught of the Muslims (Daryaee 2007).

In the very same way Queen Āzarmīgduxt, by striking the image of her father Khusro Parwēz, was attempting to evoke a period of stability and the period of glory in Sasanian history, namely the reign of her father. Again, a piece of textual evidence supports the importance of her father for Queen Āzarmīgduxt’s rule. Tabarī states that when she came to the throne she stated that:

“Our way of conduct will be that of our father Khusro, the victorious one, and if anyone rebels against us, we will shed his blood” (Tabari, 1999, p. 406).

Here Khusro the Victorious (Arabic al-Mansōur is based on Middle Persian Abarwēz, Persian Parwēz). In closing, I will point out that the etymology of her name is itself suggestive of the would-be queen’s mission from the time of her birth. The name Āzarmīgduxt renders “daughter of the honored, respected one,” i.e., of her father Khusro Parwēz. Still, it seems that the damage to the imperial ideology of the house of Sāsān had been done by the Spāhbed Farrox-Hormizd and his son, Rustam ī Farroxzādān. This was a deliberate and purposeful attempt by the house of the Arsacids who at the very moment of weakness of the Sasanians launched this attack and murdered the last Sasanian queen. The name of the Spāhbed may be instructive here, that is, Rustam. Rustam appears to be associated with the Eastern and more specific Arsacid realm of epic and tradition. Thus, a foreign invasion brought the obliteration of Sasanian empire, a coup from within destroyed the legitimacy of the

9. These coins may be his and not those of Khusro II if we are to accept the Bundahišn’s account, bestowing these titles to Khusro I.

imperial ideology of the house of Sāsān. Now only a distant relative of the house of Sāsān, Yazdgerd II made a last ditch effort to bring glory and order the falling empire. By then it was too late, the Muslims appeared on the scene and the world was about to take a major turn.

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