

## Sasanian Empire

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Ardashir I (r.224–241 CE) founded the Sasanian Empire after defeating the last Arsacid monarch, Artabanus/Ardawan IV (r.213–224 CE). Ardashir assumed the royal title of *shahan-shah*, “king of kings,” already in use by the Arsacids, and proceeded to bring a territory roughly equivalent to modern Iran and Iraq under his control (Daryaee 2009: 3–5). The Sasanian campaign to conquer *Eran*, “Iran,” had begun in 205/6 with Ardashir’s father, Pabag, rebelling against the local kings of Persis/Fars, the homeland of the Sasanians. Pabag’s father Sasan was supposedly priest of the goddess Anahid in the city of Istakhr, the capital of the province of Persis/Fars (Tabari 1999: I.814). The dynasty thus claimed religious legitimacy and authority from its foundation via the connection of an eponymous founder with an important sanctuary.

It appears that Pabag intended to make his eldest son, Shapur, the first Sasanian ruler (Tabari 1999: I.816), but that prince died under mysterious circumstances, leaving his brother Ardashir to complete the conquest of Persis/Fars and beyond. The emergence of this new power naturally alarmed the Arsacids, but they were unable to stop the Sasanian advances. Ardawan IV, and eventually his rival and temporary successor Vologasses/Walakhsh VI (d.229), soon fell victim to Ardashir. Conquests in the east, particularly the taking of the important town of Marv in north-eastern Khorasan, as well as the subjugation of the territory of the Indo-Parthians in Sistan, were the final achievements of Ardashir I.

After some conflict with the Roman Empire in Syria, Ardashir appointed his son Shapur I (r.241–270) as co-regent and eventually retired to his home province. During the reign of Shapur I, Sasanian conquests continued. At this time Armenia became the major point of contention between the Sasanians and the Romans, and it remained so until it was partitioned between the two empires in the fifth century. In his wars with the Roman Empire, Shapur famously defeated Gordianus III, captured Emperor Valerian, and forced Philip the Arab to a humiliating treaty, a set of events reflected in Shapur’s inscription at Ka’aba-i Zardosht in Fars, as well as in a major relief in the same vicinity and in his newly founded city of Bishapur. Militarily, the reign of Shapur marked the return of the military to form, after a relatively long slump in the 2nd and early 3rd centuries that had allowed Roman incursions into the Near East and Mesopotamia in the final Arsacid period (Gyselen 2001). In the field of religion we have evidence from the Manichaean religious writings that the prophet Mani first made his appearance during the reign of Shapur and managed to attract the king of king’s patronage, even composing a text, *Shabuhragan*, in Shapur’s name. The full extent of Manichaean teachings and missions, as well as their purge in Iran, came in the reigns of Shapur’s successors.

The next kings, Hormizd I (r.270–271) and Wahram I (r.271–274), had relatively short rules and very little is known about them. Wahram I’s eldest son, Wahram II (r.274–293), became king over Narseh, another son of Shapur I, probably with the backing of the Zoroastrian establishment and its powerful head, Kerdir. During his reign, Wahram II had to deal with hostile Romans and his own rebellious brother

Hormizd (Daryaee 2008: 34–35). It was also in the reign of Wahram II that the competition between Kerdir, representing the Zoroastrian priesthood, and Mani, the prophet of Manichaeism, reached its zenith, resulting in the capture and execution of Mani by Wahram II and persecution of Manichaeans in the Sasanian Empire. This resulted in the spread of Manichaeism both in Central Asia and in the Roman Empire.

Wahram III, known as the “king of the Sakas” – a title showing the dominance of the Sasanians over the Iranian-speaking peoples to the east – was brought to the throne through a conspiracy in the imperial administration. Narseh, the son of Shapur and at the time functioning as the king of Armenia, managed to depose him through a major campaign, which was detailed in the Paikuli inscription (Humbach and Skjærvø 1978: pt. 1).

The rule of Narseh (293–302) coincided with the initial popularization of Christianity in Armenia, and its eventual adoption as the state religion of that kingdom. A defeat at the hands of the Roman general Galerius resulted in the Treaty of Nisibis in 298, allowing Tiridates III back on the Armenian throne. This also brought Iberia (the historical kingdom of Georgia) into the Roman sphere of influence (Daryaee 2009: 13). Narseh’s death in 302 brought his son, Hormizd II, to the throne (Daryaee 2008: 43–44). The new king mainly presided over the conflict with Rome on the issue of Armenia, whose king Tiridates/Trdat III reputedly converted to Christianity in 301. A son of Hormizd called Adur-Narseh, who ruled only for a short while in 309, initially succeeded him. There are, however, no references to Adur-Narseh in the numismatic evidence or in the later Islamic sources, while Byzantine sources mention his existence only as the elder son of Hormizd II.

The circumstances of the birth and reign of Shapur II (r.309–379), the longest-reigning

Sasanian monarch, are quite legendary and include him being crowned while still in his mother’s womb and 40 days after the death of his father, Hormizd II (Anon. 1939: 34). When he came of age, he set about curbing Arab incursions in the south and punishing the perpetrators (Tabari 1999: 50–56), thus earning the epithet “Lord of Shoulders” (Arabic *Dhu-l-Aktaf*), evidently due to the form of punishment used against the protagonists. In the east, Shapur II was faced with a major invasion by the Huns (Chionites), who agreed to form an alliance only after fierce battles. This resulted in the termination of the rule of the Sasanian cadet branch, known as the Kushano-Sasanians, over Bactria and the establishment of autonomous Hunnic rule in Transoxiana and Bactria (Ammianus Marcellinus 17.5.1 in Blockley 1988; Nikitin 1999). In the west, Shapur had to face the Romans under Julian the Apostate in 363, although that campaign was soon abandoned following the assassination of Julian by his own troops. The resulting peace treaty with Jovian put the important border town of Nisibis under Sasanian control almost permanently, creating a long-lasting point of contention between the two empires (Blockley 1988). The long and relatively calm rule of Shapur helped bring stability to the Sasanian Empire, as well as establishing Sasanian control over the eastern provinces and the Persian Gulf region.

Ardashir II (r.379–383) succeeded his brother Shapur II, probably as the result of an agreement with the latter. The relief at Taq-i Bostan shows an exchange of diadems between the brothers, possibly as a reward for Ardashir’s bravery in the wars against Rome (Shahbazi 2005). Tabari associated Ardashir II with a great purge in the Sasanian nobility in order to control their increasing power, an act that resulted in Ardashir’s removal from the throne (Tabari 1999: I.846). The agreement between Shapur II

and Ardashir II probably guaranteed the succession of Shapur III (383–388), the son of Shapur II (Shahbazi 2005). The reign of Shapur III can be called the beginning of a temporary weakening in the Sasanian royal power, as reported by the chroniclers. The nobles of Shapur III were successful in removing him, as those of Ardashir II had been in that king's case, this time through a suspect death under the collapsing weight of Shapur's own tent (Tabari 1999: I.846). Wahram IV (r.388–399), another son of Shapur II, had a similarly short reign. His most significant action was to place his brother Wahrām-Shabühr (Armenian *Vramšāpuh*) on the Armenian throne. Like his brother Shapur III, Wahram IV also fell victim to the conspiracy of the court nobles and was removed in favor of his son (or perhaps brother?), Yazdgerd I (Klíma 1988).

The reign of Yazdgerd I (399–420) is the beginning of the restoration of the Sasanian monarchy. The king, occasionally called “the Sinful One” (Tabari 1999: I.847), was more strong-willed than his immediate predecessors. His less than complimentary title in the Islamic sources, presumably based on the Iranian ones, has been interpreted as a comment on his famous religious tolerance and accommodation of the Christians. Indeed, Christian sources from Rome (Procopius, *History* 1.2, 8) consider him a noble soul and even a second Cyrus (McDonough 2008). His strong-handed treatment of the Sasanian nobility and priesthood made him many enemies among his courtiers, although he seems to have survived their wrath, finally being killed by a kick from his horse (Shahbazi 2003). On his coins, he calls himself *Ram-Shahr*, “[bringer of] a calm realm,” which might indeed be a reflection of his rule as a whole.

Wahram V (r.420–438), son of Yazdgerd I, who was educated at the Lakhmid court at al-Hira, had to wrest his crown from a

usurper named Khosrow (Tabari 1999: I.861–862). Wahram's reign is highly romanticized in the classical Persian literature, particularly in a great compendium of interrelated stories called *Haft Peykar* by the poet Nezami (12th century), whose fanciful stories may draw on actual Sasanian-period romances. These stories include the coming of Indian minstrels known as *lur* (Gypsies?) and the pleasure the king took in drinking and hunting. Wahram is commonly known by the epithet *Gur/Gōr* (*Jur* in Arabic sources: Tabari 1999: I.854), meaning “onager,” presumably because of his love of hunting that animal. The story of his death is equally colorful, for it was said that while hunting in *Mah* (Media), Wahram fell into a swamp and disappeared (Daryae 2008: 60–61). Yazdgerd II (r.438–457) then succeeded his father.

Yazdgerd II, unlike his namesake and grandfather, does not appear to have been very tolerant toward Christianity, at least in Armenia. The tale of the great rebellion of Vardan Mamikonian and its suppression at the Battle of Avarayr by Mihr-Narse, Yazdgerd's vizier (attributed to Wahram V by al-Tabari: Tabari 1999: 104–105), is recorded in the work of Armenian historian Elishe (Elishe 1982: 178ff). It seems that for Yazdgerd and Mihr-Narse the control of Armenia meant a re-conversion of Armenians from Christianity to Zoroastrianism, making them part of a Zoroastrian *oecumene* designed to create a centralized Sasanian state. Persarmenia, the majority of the Armenian territory under the Sasanian rule, was from this point on managed directly by the Sasanian court through a *Marzpan* (margrave) and was effectively incorporated into the Sasanian realm (Blockley 1987). Yazdgerd II is the first Sasanian monarch to use the title of *Kay* (Pahlavi *kdy*) on his coins, a reference to the shifting Sasanian ideology and incorporation of a Kayanid political identity.

According to Tabari, the two sons of Yazdgerd II, Hormizd III (r.457–459) and Peroz (r.459–484), ruled consecutively, although the latter deposed the former in a power struggle (Tabari 1999: I.872). In the meantime, Iberia/Georgia gained independence and the eastern borders of the Sasanian Empire were laid open to attacks from the Hephthalites. According to Pseudo-Joshua, Peroz pacified Caucasian Albania and made an agreement with the Eastern Roman Empire to cooperate in defending the Caucasus from invaders. He was, however, captured by the Hephthalites in 469, and the Sasanians were forced to cede territory in the east and pay tribute to the invaders. While attempting to avenge his losses, Peroz was killed and his army destroyed in 484, and his rule is remembered as a low point for the Sasanian dynasty (Daryaee 2009: 25). Walakhsh (r.484–488), another brother of Peroz, followed him briefly. He was then deposed in favor of Kawad I (r.488–497, 499–531), the son of Peroz.

Kawad I was faced with the economic and political problems of a Sasanian Empire in flux. It seems that as part of the weakness of the previous rulers and/or their engagement in extra-territorial wars, the nobility and the Zoroastrian priests attained new levels of influence. In this atmosphere, Kawad instigated a series of extreme social measures aimed at curbing the power of the elite, and may at this point have been assisted by a radical cleric named Mazdak (for a different assessment, see Crone 1991). It is likely that Kawad I was using Mazdak's movement in an attempt to weaken the more orthodox factions of the government and the priestly establishment. The latter, in turn, removed and imprisoned the king and set up his brother Zamasp (r.497–499) in his place (Tabari 1999: I.887).

Kawad was able to escape, however, and later regained the Sasanian throne with

Hephthalite assistance (Litvinsky 1996: 140). His second reign, characterized by a prolonged war with the Eastern Roman Empire, mostly under Anastasius and Justin, was also marked by a series of reforms, this time implemented more carefully. Upon his death, his eldest son Kawus, supported by the Mazdakites, made a bid for the throne, but was defeated in favor of his younger brother Khosrow I Anusheerwan (r.531–579), who then had Mazdak and many of his followers killed.

Khosrow's reign was a high point in Sasanian history. He is remembered as a wise and just ruler in both Persian and Arabic histories (Tabari 1999: I.892–900). Kawad I and Khosrow I together reorganized the Sasanian Empire and made it one of the most powerful empires in the world of late antiquity. The reforms initiated by Kawad were continued and strengthened by Khosrow, and in fact are mostly credited to the latter (Rubin 1995). Khosrow is also known for continuing the war with the Eastern Roman Empire of Justinian I, the details of which can be found in the famous work of Procopius (Dignas and Winter 2007: 100–109). In the east, with the help of the Gok-Türk, Khosrow also managed to defeat the Hephthalite state in 572 and put an effective end to their activities.

It was under Khosrow's reign that the Sasanian imperial ideology and its legacy were perfected and established. This was done mostly through implementation of an Old Iranian worldview, as contained in the *Avesta*, applied to the concept of *Eranshahr* or the "Empire of the Iranians," centered in Mesopotamia – the Sasanian province of Susestān. This vision of *Eranshahr*, or its truncated form *Eran*, was an invention of the Sasanians, which did not exist in the preceding Arsacid or Achaemenid Empires. The new empire, however, was maintained and controlled through the institution of kingship, continually attempting to redefine its role as the ruler,

ranging from a divine king to a *cosmokrator* (Panaino 2009).

*Xwarrah*, “glory,” is central to the ancient Iranian royal ideology as demonstrated in the *Avesta*, and is a prerequisite of rightful rule there. *Xwarrah* is granted to or withheld from the Iranian rulers and the false non-Iranian evil characters according to the judgment of the gods. Of course, Ohrmazd and other deities such as Lady Anahita bestowed *xwarrah* on the king of kings in the form of a diadem in the royal rock reliefs.

All these ideals and ideologies were recorded and propagated, probably starting with the reign of Khosrow I, through the increasing interest of the Sasanian court and society in writing. Interest in literature and a need to record the past gave incentives in the 5th and 6th centuries for a movement in composing new pieces, as well as translations from other languages. It is often posited that the rule of Khosrow I saw the beginning of the compilation of the historical genre known as *Khuday-namag*, the “Book of the Lords,” which, in various texts, reflected the mythical and historical tales of the history of the kings. Alongside the *Khuday-namag* texts, other epics, romances, and pieces of devotional poetry were also composed, some of which, including *Ayadgar-i Zareran*, have reached us in original form, while others like *Vis o Ramin* are known through New Persian translations. At the same time, works such as *Madayan-i Hezar Dadestan*, the “Book of a Thousand Judgments,” a compilation of legal rulings and commentary, were composed and probably finalized in the 7th century (Macuch 1993). However, the largest body of Sasanian works of literature is the commentaries composed in Middle Persian on the *Avesta*, the Zoroastrian holy scripture. Written either in either the Pahlavi or the Avestan script, these texts (called Zand and Pazand respectively on the basis of the script) formed a large body of works that continued well into

the Islamic period and is essentially the vast majority of what we have in Middle Persian (Boyce 1968). The body of Middle Persian literature formed by the original compositions, as well as translations from Indic languages, formed a great body of texts that are better known through their Arabic translations of the 8th and 9th centuries and form a great part of medieval Near Eastern culture.

Hormizd IV (r.579–590), however, did not live up to the example set by his father and grandfather, and earned the enmity of the nobility and priesthood, who deposed him in favor of his own son, Khosrow II Aparvez (r.590–628) (Tabari 1999: I.991). The plot to remove Hormizd IV and to replace him with Khosrow II, however, ran into trouble when Wahram Chobin, the hero of the war with the Hephthalites, rose in rebellion, on the pretext of avenging Hormizd, against Khosrow and the conspirators (Tabari 1999: I.994–1000).

Forced to flee from the rebellious general Wahram, Khosrow went to the Eastern Roman Empire and sought the aid of Emperor Maurice (Tabari 1999: I.999). Wahram in turn declared himself emperor, as Wahram VI, marking the first time someone outside the Sasanian royal house had reached that position since the accession of Ardashir I. Emperor Maurice supplied mainly Armenian forces to Khosrow II, with whose help he managed to defeat Wahram and recapture his crown (Dignas and Winter 2007: 236–240). Khosrow then took revenge on those who had contributed to the murder of his father, although it is possible that he himself had a hand in that crime. A second rebellion by Wistahm, a maternal uncle of Khosrow and a conspirator in the removal of Hormizd, was soon put down, allowing the new king to establish his rule.

Starting in 602, Khosrow II undertook a series of campaigns against the Eastern Roman Empire and managed to make significant

territorial gains. The campaigns started on the pretext of avenging the murder of Maurice, Khosrow's ally, at the hand of Phocas (Dignas and Winter 2007: 240–241). These campaigns resulted in the fall of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, as well as significant portions of Anatolia, into the hands of the Sasanians (Dignas and Winter 2007: 115). The Sasanian general Shahrbaraz managed to lay siege to Constantinople itself, albeit unsuccessfully. These gains in many senses marked the height of Sasanian power and the culmination of the dynasty's efforts to consolidate power and initiate socioeconomic reforms. A successful counteroffensive by Heraclius, who by this time had managed to remove Phocas and reorganize the defenses of the Roman Empire, resulted in a quick reversal of fortunes in the mid-620s. By 628, not only were the territories in the Mediterranean realm restored to the Romans/Byzantines, but, with the help of elements in the Sasanian court, the Roman emperor had routed the Sasanian armies inside their own territories (Howard-Johnston 1999). Khosrow was removed in a palace coup, with his eldest son Shiroe installed as Kavad II (628) (Dignas and Winter 2007: 148–151). The very short reign of Kavad II was marked by internal chaos, as well as a major plague known by his name, the Plague of Shiroe, which had devastating demographic effects (Morony 2007).

The final phase of Sasanian rule was a period of factionalism and division within the empire. Ardashir III (r. September 628 to April 629), the son of Kavad II, was a child who was soon removed from the throne by one of the commanders of the war with Byzantium, Shahrbaraz. The courtiers in turn toppled him, installing Boran (r.628–630/1?), a daughter of Khosrow II (Emrani 2009). Her rule was a period of consolidation of imperial power and rebuilding the empire. She was probably brought to the throne because she was the only legitimate heir left,

as Kavad II had famously killed all of his brothers and male heirs. Another daughter of Khosrow II, Azarmigduxt (r.630–631?), replaced her sister. The army removed both from power, showing the increasing military control in the face of the shaken monarchy, the competing nobility, and the Zoroastrian priests. Claimants such as Khosrow III or IV are also speculated about, mainly from numismatic evidence, before finally, in 632, Yazdgerd III (r.632–651), grandson of Khosrow II, was installed on the throne.

Yazdgerd III's rule coincided with the conquest of the Sasanian Empire by the Muslims. Starting in 637, the Muslim armies managed to defeat the Sasanians in Qadisiyya, in southwestern Iraq, and soon in their capital at Ctesiphon. The last Sasanian king was forced to retreat to the east, demanding loyalty and support from local populations. Finally, a coalition of local Persian and Hephthalite governors of Bactria defeated his dwindling forces. Tradition has it that a miller who did not recognize the king of kings killed Yazdgerd III in 651 in Marv.

The sons of Yazdgerd III fled further east, asking the Chinese Emperor Gaozong to aid them in their battle against the Muslims. For a time, Sasanian descendants continued to be recognized by the Chinese as legitimate holder of the Persian throne-in-exile and governors of a "Persian Area Command" (*Bosi dudufu*) in Sistan. In the early 8th century, a Sasanian named Khosrow made a final, failed attempt to retake Iran from the Muslims, and this is the last time we hear of the family of Sasan (Compareti 2009). The world of ancient Persia had come to an end and a new chapter in the history of the nation had begun. The Muslim caliphs emulated the grandeur of the kings, their wisdom and opulence, and the name Khosrow, given as *Kisra*, became the general designation for a great ruler. The Sasanians also passed on the idea of *Eran*, "Iran," which was held as a form of idealized

territorial designation by dynasties from the Buyids to the Mongols, and utilized effectively in the premodern and modern periods in order to form the nation-state.

The Sasanian Empire was one of the major forces of the late antique world. Often represented as the “adversary” of the Roman Empire in the east, and thus on its “periphery,” the Sasanian Empire was in fact the center of a prolific sociocultural, political, and economic sphere that became widespread following its conquest by the Muslims. Political centralization, robust and expanding economy, socioreligious innovations and changes, and growing cultural activities made the Sasanians the blueprint for subsequent polities in the region. Often under-researched, many aspects of Sasanian culture and society are left unknown, and thin connections are made via shallow evidence for such influences. The emerging evidence and the development of more sophisticated studies of the period would no doubt show the centrality of the Sasanians in the late antique world, and assess their lasting legacy in the history of West and Central Asia up to modern times.

SEE ALSO: Armenia, Kingdom of (ancient); Byzantine Empire (all entries); Hephthalite Khanate; Hunnic Empire; Kushan Empire; Parthian Empire; Religion and empire; Roman Empire (all entries); Scythian Empire

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