

*Touraj Daryaee*  
University of California, Irvine

## WAHRĀM ČŌBĪN THE REBEL GENERAL AND THE MILITARIZATION OF THE SASANIAN EMPIRE

### SUMMARY

The following essay discusses the importance of the rebellious general, Wahrām Čōbīn who in the late sixth century CE challenged the Sasanian throne. Contrary to what has been suggested, Wahrām appears not to be important because of his place in Middle Persian and Persian literature as a hero and a savior, but as this paper attempts to show, was the earliest manifestation of the militarization of the Sasanian Empire in the late sixth century which eventually lead to its decline in the seventh century CE.

In August 589 CE Wahrām Čōbīn was defeated against the Romans in the Albania and in matter of months staged a mutiny which has captured the imagination of the surviving sources on late antique history of the Near East. We are told he was belittled by the Sasanian king of kings, Hormizd IV as a result of his defeat, furthered by jealousy of the king and / or his advisors. The mockery could have also simply been the result of Wahrām not sending the proper amount of booty from the eastern campaign against the Turks. Wahrām consequently took the unprecedented step in taking the road to Ctesiphon to meet the Sasanian king who had belittled him. According to D. Frenndo, on February 6<sup>th</sup> 590 CE, just before arriving to the capital, the Sasanian nobility blinded and deposed Hormizd, and then placed his son, Khusro II on the throne.<sup>1</sup> As our most important source, Sebēos, which J. Howard-Johnston

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<sup>1</sup> Frenndo, D. (2010). Emending a Name: Theophylact Simocatta's Version of the Correspondence between Khusrau II and Bahram Chobin. *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 20 (2010), p. 13.

has called the work the 'History of Khosrov,'<sup>2</sup> states that Wahrām was rapidly arriving, 'like the swoop of an eagle (*khoyanal artsui*),' and so the young Khusro Parwēz (not a *parwēz* by any means yet), was taken away from the capital by his uncles, Wistahm and Vindōe.<sup>3</sup>

The Sasanian general, Wahrām Čōbīn boasted to be from the Mehrān family, and may have used his lineage as a means of legitimacy in claiming some sort of case against the king. Theophylactus Simocatta, however, suggests that Wahrām was attempting to undo the unlawful usurpation of Khusro II,<sup>4</sup> but we know that Wahrām appears to have wanted to assume the Kayānid crown for himself.<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Khusro it is reported that Wahrām had said: 'come to us and you will at once become a regional commander of the Persian state.'<sup>6</sup> Khusro II was not about to give away his crown to Wahrām and so with a large force left the capital to face his opponent by the Nahrawān canal, east of Ctesiphon.<sup>7</sup> Wahrām was able to defeat the forces of Khusro and the newly enthroned king took refuge at Hierapolis in Byzantium.<sup>8</sup> Wahrām not only crowned himself, but also minted coins in several provinces in the first year of his rule, thus attempting to legitimize himself as a sovereign.<sup>9</sup> But by 591 CE Wahrām had been defeated and had fled to the east and was eventually killed by the Turks.

Wahrām's adventure is believed to have made him much remembered, especially in Persian epic and romance literature which may be a sign of impact on his contemporaries. K. Czeglédy suggested, for the latter generations saw him even as a savior and hero.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Wahrām's image appears to be larger than life and certainly more colorful and important (in terms of the amount of pages dedicated to him) than many Sasanian king of kings. There is much

<sup>2</sup> Howard-Johnston, J. (2010). *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford), pp. 70–71.

<sup>3</sup> Sebēos (1999). *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*. Translated, with notes, by R.W. Thomson, Historical commentary by James Howard-Johnston. Assistance from Tim Greenwood. Part I. Translation and Notes (Liverpool), Chapter X, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Frendo, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> One can make such an assumption also based on al-Tabarī (1999). *The History of al-Tabarī. The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids, and Yemen*. Translated by C.E. Bosworth (Albany), p. 309, and striking coins after the defeat of Khusro II.

<sup>6</sup> Theophylactus Simocatta (1986). *The History of Theophylactus Simocatta. An English Translation with Introduction* (Oxford), IV.7.11.

<sup>7</sup> Theophylactus Simocatta, IV.9.3, p. 115ff.

<sup>8</sup> Theophylactus Simocatta, IV.10.9.

<sup>9</sup> Christensen, A. (1944). *L'Iran sous les sassanides*, (Copenhagen), p. 439.

<sup>10</sup> Czeglédy, K. (1958). Wahrām Čōbīn and the Persian Apocalyptic Literature. *Acta Orient. Hung* 8/1 (1958), pp. 33–35.

that Czeglédy attributes to Wahrām in terms of his influence in the romance, epic and apocalyptic literature of the Persianate world. This view has been the standard outlook in regard to Wahrām and his place in Middle Persian and Persian literature for more than half a century.

But the more important question is that why Wahrām rose up and assumed the Sasanian crown? Was it his lineage and an attempt by the 'Arsacids' to take revenge for the events of three centuries before? Was his humiliation the cause? Here I intend to answer why Wahrām took such an unprecedented act, but also to measure how much legitimacy Wahrām really had during his battle against Khusro II, and his short rule over *Ērānšahr*. Literary sources sometimes mislead one in that the author in late antiquity or in later times builds on the legend of a famous person, such as Wahrām Čōbīn. This popularity and fame then masks the person's real power and reach at the time that he was living. I think reading the historical sources also suggest not so clear of a superiority and popularity of the Wahrām. One can also counter-balance the literary sources, through the numismatic evidence, demonstrating the base of power for our rebel general. In fact the numismatic evidence can present a detailed description of the territories that both Wahrām Čōbīn and Khusro II controlled and their movements in the years 590–591 CE.

Of course the minting of coinage was a sign of power and the mints which minted in the name of the ruler suggested the popularity and legitimacy of the person in question. Let us see what the numismatic evidence tells us about the power base of Wahrām and Khusro II. As mentioned, Khusro II, as a young man in a chaotic situation was not able to match the military strength of Wahrām Čōbīn, so he had fled to Byzantium while waiting for assistance from Maurice.<sup>11</sup> His crowning and stay in Ctesiphon could not have been very long, since Wahrām was approaching with rapid speed. Still, it is important and interesting that many cities minted coins for the first year in his name and also curiously at some of the same mints as Wahrām Čōbīn. These were DA or Dārābgird, DL or Kermān, GD or Gay, MY or Mēšān, NY or Nīhāvand, ST or Staxr, YZ or Yazd, AW or Hormizd-Ardaxšīr, WYHC or Weh-az-Amid-Kawād, AT or Ādūrbādagān, AY or Ērān-Xwarrāh-Šābūhr, BYŠ or Bīšābhūr, AHM or Hamadān, GW or Qum, APL or Abršahr, ALM or Armenia, BN or Gwāšīr, and LYW or Rēw Ardaxšīr in Xūzestān. Chart II provides us with the areas or cities in which Khusro II minted coins during his first year of his reign and acknowledged his short ascension.

<sup>11</sup> Theophylactus, IV.12.8.

Several mints appear to have struck coins for both Wahrām and Khusro II for their first year (590 CE). These were AYLAN, AW or Hormizd-Ardaxšīr, AY or Ērān-Xwarrah-Šābuhr, MY or Mēšān, NY or Nihāvand, and WYHC or Weh-az-Amid-Kawād. The only explanation for this anomaly is that these mint sites either fell out of the control of Khusro II and into the hands of Wahrām Čōbīn in the first year or vice-versa. We see that the region of Xūzestān and directly to the north seems to have been where this anomaly occurs, and this was Wahrām Čōbīn's area of control. It is quite logical that when Khusro II was crowned, coins were minted at these sites in the beginning of the regnal year, and when Wahrām Čōbīn took control, coins were struck at these sites in his name immediately:

By 591 CE, Khusro II had received the backing of Maurice while residing in Constantina, one of the main military bases in Mesopotamia under Roman control. Without battle the Armenians had come to support him, no doubt because of the emperor's decision, although other reasons may be suggested. The Nisibis garrison and Martyropolis had surrendered to Khusro's side. The battle took place near Lake Urumia and in a day Wahrām was defeated and much of his camp and army was captured and he fled to the east to the Turkic held territory.<sup>12</sup> There are four mints for year two which struck coins in the name of Wahrām Čōbīn; which are APL or Abaršahr, BBA or the imperial mint (mobile mint), ML or Marv, and RD or Ray.

While only four mints struck in the name of Wahrām, almost all the mints struck coins in the name of Khusro for year 591 CE. This scheme demonstrates that while Wahrām Čōbīn is suggested to have been an important general, political loyalty in the provinces to him was weak at best. The numismatic evidence shows that Wahrām Čōbīn was only able to mint coins at the court and its vicinity, primarily in Xūzestān in the first year of his rule. Xūzestān seems to have been the power base of Wahrām Čōbīn and that was the area where both monarchs minted coins for the same year. Wahrām Čōbīn, however, was never able to present himself as legitimate in all parts of the empire. Clearly, he never controlled Fārs, the center of the Sasanian dynasty, nor Kermān which was beyond his reach. I do not think that more new finds would change the scheme of things radically.

Although Khusro II had fled the empire, many of the mints, especially in Fārs and Kermān always minted coins in his name and upheld his legitimacy. Only the cities in which Wahrām Čōbīn had taken control recognized him as the ruler, and they were few. One may question why Khusro II would have left

<sup>12</sup> Sebeos, vol. II, p. 173.

the empire if his rule was upheld by the majority of the districts. By going to Byzantium, he would have been certain that Wahrām VI would not be able to pursue him and the military might of Wahrām would not allow him to seek any refuge on the Iranian Plateau or further eastward.

Once Khusro II had come back to the Sasanian Empire, he was able to drive Wahrām Čōbīn to the northeast and Wahrām VI was able to mint coins in the northeast for the second year. As mentioned, he then fled to the Turks and was later assassinated at the instigation of Khusro II.<sup>13</sup> This fact, I believe also demonstrates the relative importance of the dynastic name of Sāsān and the part it played in the struggle between the two men. The coins struck by Wahrām Čōbīn were not different from the other Sasanian coins and the crown and the coins as a whole stayed the same. There were no other types of coinage, except the Sasanians ones to suggest legitimacy to the population of the empire. In the eye of the court and perhaps the people, Sasanians were the only legitimate heirs to the throne. Although Khusro II was in Byzantium, the mints struck coins in his name. No matter where Khusro II was, the Sasanians were the sovereigns of *Ērānšahr*.

As Frendo has noted, in Theophylactus Simocatta, both Wahrām and Khusro furnish a long list of titles and honorifics, both reminding each other of their lineage. But while Wahrām was trying to be slanderous, Khusro was attempting to remind him that the Sasanian dynasty began with the aid of the Parthian nobility which had made a common cause with them that is to remind Wahrām of the actual ties of dependency and interdependence which bind the existing nobility to their present sovereign, to quote Frendo.<sup>14</sup> The same trend is seen in the great Persian epic, where many pages are dedicated to the speeches and letters of the two men.

But it is clear that Wahrām was never as powerful as it appears to be imagined. Prior to the major battle which caused his total defeat, he appealed to the most likely group that would turn to his side, i.e., the Mušeł Mamikonean, the Sparapet of the Armenian forces. Having promised independence and power to him and the Armenians and reminding them of how the Sasanian had dealt with Armenia, it should have made it easy to switch sides. Sebēos mentions that the Armenians did not answer the first letter of Wahrām, because they feared that even acknowledging it, that it would bring disunity (*anmiabanut' iwn*),<sup>15</sup> but in response to the second letter by Wahrām, Mušeł

<sup>13</sup> Christensen, p. 440.

<sup>14</sup> Frendo, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Sebēos, vol. I, p. 21.

Mamikonian responded by saying that 'Kingship is from God, and he gave it to whom he wished.'<sup>16</sup> This exchange, I believe is significant in that even the Armenians acknowledged Sasanian royal family's *Xwarrah* or 'Glory' and their right to kingship (*t'agaworut'iwn*). If this is the case, one should not be surprised that in *Ērānšāhr* most mints and perhaps the local elite had sided with Khusro II, as only the family of Sāsān was seen as legitimate rulers. Thus, there is some accord between the historical texts and the material culture in terms of the general character and career of Wahrām, who had won a battle against the Turks, then lost to the Romans, usurped the throne, and then lost to the combination of the Roman, Armenian and Persian forces, then fleeing to the East, when he was killed by the Turks. This career is certainly interesting and many stories could be concocted about, but it is certainly not an impressive *vitae* by any means.

But we are reminded of Wahrām Čōbīn's importance in the literary tradition of Iran. We can begin by examining the supposed appearance of Wahrām Čōbīn in Middle Persian literature, which has been associated with the apocalyptic period, as a savior. Czeglédy almost fifty years ago presented such scheme and this idea along with his thought on the subject has become an important pivot to base the assumption of Wahrām's extraordinary importance. This tradition now, I believe has safely been put aside as C. Cereti has demonstrated that the Wahrām I Warzāwand and Wahrām Kay which are important apocalyptic figures and were associated with our rebellious general do not have any association with Wahrām Čōbīn. In fact they are better associated with Wahrām Gōr, the son of Yazdgerd I and as Cereti has clearly shown, Wahrām, the son of Yazdgerd III who plays the main part in the Middle Persian apocalyptic tradition and served on the part of Sasanian political oracle.<sup>17</sup> Thus Wahrām Gōr's feat was the skeletal makeup of the heroic Wahrām Gōr, and Wahrām, the son of Yazdgerd III who had gone to the East to seek help from the Chinese emperor to restore the Sasanian Empire in the face of the Arab Muslim conquest which created the apocalyptic Wahrām.

Again, one is left with Wahrām Čōbīn, a rebel general, who claimed power, but none came to his side and accepted such claim except with brute military force. In fact if one looks through Persian literature, Khusro II receives more attention than Wahrām Čōbīn, not only in the *Šāhnāme* and other epic texts, but has the day when it comes to romance literature as well. One only has to

<sup>16</sup> Sebēos, vol. I, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Cereti, C (1996). Again on Wahrām I warzāwand. *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo* (1996), p. 638.

mention Nezami's *Khusro o Shirin*, the love story of the very same Khusro II with Shirin, the Armenian lady, whose kin (Mušet Mamikonian) stood at the side of Khusro and his forces before fate deciding the battle close to Lake Urumia. Again, if any Wahrām is to match Khusro in Persian literature, is Wahrām Gōr, who is immortalized in the *Haft Peykar* of Nizami.

Let us conclude by asking the question that I posed at the beginning of the essay. Why did Wahrām rise up and assume the crown? Was it his lineage and an attempt by the Arsacids to take revenge, or was his humiliation the cause? I would like to answer this by pointing out an important and much neglected source, albeit late, but the first of the early Persian historical texts. One of the different and diverging sources of the early Islamic period, no doubt drawing on a *Xwadāy-nāmag* tradition is the *Zayn al-Akhbār* of Gardīzī. I believe this source has at times unique and important information, even though it was penned in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Khurāsān. It is of note that unlike other sources, Gardīzī suggests that the mutiny of Wahrām Čōbīn was begun first by his army and not himself. Gardīzī reports at the time when Wahrām received the mocking letter from the Sasanian king, Hormizd IV, after his defeat in Albania:

'and when this letter came to Wahrām, he shared it with army leaders. All of them became angry ... suddenly they became rebellious and turned from Hormizd...'<sup>18</sup>

I believe Wahrām Čōbīn's mutiny is really symptomatic of a more important phenomena in the history of late antique Iran and that is the militarization of the Sasanian Empire in the sixth and seventh centuries CE. The boasting of lineage by Wahrām is really secondary and a pretext for the empowerment of the generals and military men as a result of Khusro I's military reforms. With the breaking of the back of the nobility and the destruction of their power, and with the professionalization of the military as is reported in the historical and even the literary sources such as the *Šāhnāme*<sup>19</sup> the stage was set for a new force to fill the vacuum and that was the military men who became army commanders and in a sense king makers. This scenario, that is military control of the state, very much resembles the third century Roman world of the Barrack's Emperors.

<sup>18</sup> Gardīzī (2005). *Zayn al-Akhbār* (Tehran), p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> For example see Bābak who was set in charge of ordering the Sasanian cavalry, Ferdowsi, A. (2007). *The Shahnameh (Book of Kings)*, ed. Dj. Khaleghi-Motlagh and A. Khatibi, vol. 7, (New York), p. 102–103; and Tabari, pp. 262–263.

Wahrām was only the first of a series of the generals of the Sasanian Empire who attempted to wrest control of *Ērānšahr* from the king of kings. After Wahrām came Šahrwarāz, Khosro's great general in 629 CE, followed by Farrokh Hormizd during the reign of Queen Bōrān, and Rustam Farrokhzādān during the reign of Āzarmīgduxt,<sup>20</sup> and finally Farrokhzād, the brother of Rustam who accompanied Yazdgerd III as the general of his forces against the Arabs. As a last note, it should be mentioned that even at the last moment of war against the Arabs, the generals, namely Pērōzān which Tabarī states was the leader of the Persians (*ahl al-fors*) supported the Sasanian family and joined Yazdgerd III, who were at odds with another group named Pahlavs (*al-fahlwaj*) who supported the general Rustam Farrokh Hormizd. The generals had been in conflict after the battle of the bridge and this division, in a sense had split the Sasanian forces. Thus, Wahrām Čōbīn was the beginning of an important change in the power structure of the Sasanian Empire, one in which I believe led to the downfall of the Sasanians.

## APPENDIX

### The Coins of Wahrām Čōbīn and Khusro II

#### Wahrām Čōbīn

- APL  
Year 2 Mochiri fig. 12, p. 46  
AW  
Year 1 Mochiri fig. 5, p. 44  
AY  
Year 1 Mochiri fig. 4, p. 44  
AYLAN  
Year 1 Mochiri fig. 2, p. 44  
BBA  
Year 2 Mochiri fig 13, p. 46  
GD  
Year 1 Münz Zentrum 27, 3–5 Nov. 1976  
ML  
Year 2 Mochiri fig. 14, p. 46

<sup>20</sup> Shahbazi, A. (1389). *Tārikh-e Sasāntān* (Tehran), p. 671, note 1286.

- MY  
Year 1 Paruck, 1976, p. 160  
NY  
Year 1 Mochiri fig 7, p. 44  
RD  
Year 1  
Year 2 Mochiri fig. 11, p. 46  
VH  
Year 1 Sellwood, p. 199  
WHYC  
Year 1 al-'Ush No. 150, pl. VII, p. 310

#### Mint Chart of Wahrām Čōbīn

	APL	AW	AY	AYLAN	BBA	GD	ML	MY	NY	RD	WH	WHYC
Y. 1	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*			
Y. 2		*					*		*			

#### Khusro II

- AHM  
Year 1 Paruck, 1976, p. 132  
ALM  
Year 1 Paruck, 1976, p. 138  
APL  
Year 1 Paruck, 1976, p. 137  
AT  
Year 1 Mochiri 1 fig. 1310, p. 375  
AW  
Year 1 ANS Collection 1940.209.634  
AY  
Year 1 Paruck, 1976, 143  
AYLAN  
Year 1 Paruck, 1976, p. 134  
BN  
Year 1 Paruck, 1976, p. 147  
BYŠ  
Year 1 Paruck 1976, p. 146  
DA  
Year 1 ANS Collection 1940.209.718  
DL  
Year 1 ANS Collection 1940.209.760  
GD  
Year 1 ANS Collection 1940.209.776

GW  
 Year 1 ANS Collection 1940.209.805  
 LYW  
 Year 1 Paruck, 1976, p. 175  
 MY  
 Year 1 ANS Collection 1940.209.814  
 NY  
 Year 1 ANS Collection 1940.209.872  
 ST  
 Year 1 ANS Collection 1920.999.250  
 WHYC  
 Year 1 Mochiri fig: 332, p. 131  
 Year 2 Tsotesliia & ANS Collection 1940.209.925  
 YZ  
 Year 1 ANS Collection 1940.209.1096

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*Leonardo Gregoratti*  
 Durham University

## A TALE OF TWO GREAT KINGS: ARTABANUS AND VOLOGAESES

### SUMMARY

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD the rise of Artabanus II to the throne of Parthia marks the first substantial attempt to reaffirm the power of the ruling dynasty after decades of crisis. This monarch tried to build up a reformed government system capable of reassigning to the Great King some of his traditional prerogatives through the alliance with political entities alternative to the nobility. The agreement with the Jewish communities proved to be the most effective while the parallel efforts made with the Greek communities resulted at the end in a failure. The new dynasty which came to the throne with Vologaeses I followed the path traced by Artabanus, improving his strategy. Purpose of this paper is to show how much the consolidation of the Arsacid monarchy achieved by Vologaeses owed to the political solutions spotted by Artabanus some years before.

Starting from the publication in 1938 of Debevoise's book *Political History of Parthia*<sup>1</sup> the Parthian empire gradually began to emerge from the shadows of history to become a better defined political subject whose role and historical importance were no less worth studying than those of the more famous oriental empires which preceded it, like the Achaemenid one, or followed like the Sasanid kingdom.

Of course Debevoise's work presented some indisputable limits. Among these the almost exclusive use of Roman sources, both Greek and Latin. In 53 BC in northern Mesopotamia the Roman legions led by the triumvir Crassus suffered a disastrous defeat.<sup>2</sup> From that time on until the early decades of

<sup>1</sup> Debevoise 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Timpe 1962 and the recent Traina 2010.