

# **Ranj-o-Ganj**

Papers in Honour of Professor Z. Zarshenas

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### Sasanian Kingship, Empire and Glory: Aspects of Iranian Imperium

Touraj Daryae\*

I would like to begin this essay by asking a simple question: that is whether ideological trappings of an Empire are simply a mode of rationalizing conquest?<sup>1</sup> I would contend that empires such as that of the Sasanians (224-651 CE) simply began their lives and ended it through the realization of an imperial ideology, through the imposition of the old Iranian world-view contained in their sacred text. Without this, there would be simply no reason for establishing an empire by Ardashīr I (224-240 CE), or its Afro-Asiatic over-expansion during the reign of Khusro II (590-628 CE) which caused its eventual collapse. In a sense, ideology was the driving force for the Sasanians and the *raison d'être* for what came to be called *Ērānšahr* or the "Empire of the Iranians." This vision of *Ērānšahr* or its truncated form *Ērān*, was an invention of the Sasanians which did not exist in the historical period with the preceding Arsacid or Achaemenid Empires. This invention or construct of an empire named *Ērānšahr* is manifest from the fact that neither before the Sasanians, nor after its collapse at the hands of the Muslims, did their neighbors call this

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<sup>1</sup> S. Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2002, p. 123.

territory as such and instead used the traditional designation of *Persia*, *Fars* or *Persis*. The idea of *Ērānšahr* came with all its religious and ideological trappings which necessitated the unification of the locations where once was associated with Iranian habitation. This complex construction of an imperial ideology, with the notion of kingship, religion and a territory was based on the Hellenistic, Mesopotamian and Iranian world-views, combined together with the local tradition of the Persian lords in the province of Fars. In honor of my colleague, Professor Zarshenas this construct of the empire of the Iranians will be analyzed here to provide a clearer view of the last pre-Islamic empire of the Near East and its impetus for its ideological power and control over Central Asia, Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia.

It is useful to look at the Near Eastern landscape before the Sasanians appeared on the Iranian Plateau. After the conquest of the Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, the region appears to have been ruled by loosely or less centrally organized empires. This includes the Seleucid and the Arsacid empires, along with the local kingdoms of Characene and Elamays, from the fourth Century BCE to the third century CE. In the third century CE the Persians from the province of Fars brought about the second Persian Empire known as the Sasanian Empire. In the new empire, the loose "feudal" order (*kadag-xwadāyān*) gave way to a mixture of local kings (*šāhān*) subordinate to the Sasanian king of kings, while many of the children and princes of the blood (*waspuhragān*) became provincial rulers. At the head of *Ērānšahr* stood the king of kings (*šāhān šāh*) who gave unity to a land mass which had been loosely held together and at times separated for the past five centuries.

By the fifth and the sixth centuries CE the system had been completely dominated by the Sasanian family, namely the sons of the king of kings who kept the empire together through a sophisticated bureaucracy, as evidenced by the sigillographic and numismatic evidence.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the Iranian Plateau, the Sasanian Empire, the self

<sup>1</sup> For the administration of the Sasanian Empire see R. Gyselen, *La Géographie Administrative de L'Empire Sassanide – Les Temoignages Sigillographiques*, ResOrientales I, Paris, 1989; and for the latest, see her *Sasanian Seals and Sealings in the A. Saeedi Collection* [Acta Iranica 44], Louvain 2007.

designated "Empire of the Iranians" (*Ērānšahr*), centered itself at Ctesiphon, in Mesopotamia. In a sense the "Heart of *Ērānšahr*," as the medieval Muslim geographers called it was Mesopotamia, a fact that served to demonstrate the influence of the old Near Eastern tradition on the newly found Sasanian Empire, which was cognizant of the history and heritage of the lands they had come to rule over.

This new empire, however, was maintained and controlled through the institution of kingship which was not static in the four centuries of its existence and based on internal constraints and requirements, continually attempted to redefine the role as the ruler, ranging from a divine king to a *cosmokrator*.<sup>1</sup> Among the most important ideas were the Zoroastrian notions of Iranian kingship, which served in the takeover of the land and the territorial battles, later added to by much innovation to fit the realities of the Late Ancient World. This Iranian king with his/her attributes was tied to the concept of *Ērānšahr*, where they could not survive without the other. Below we will first tackle the changing notion of kingship in *Ērānšahr* and what kept the Sasanians in power, and then will follow with the idea of *empire* as seen and projected by the Sasanians themselves.

#### Kingship, Glory and Ideology of *Ērānšahr*

The Sasanian Empire was held together by the king of kings (*šāhān šāh*) who in the third and the fourth centuries CE was considered to be from the "race of gods" and have a divine status. Ardashīr's coins<sup>2</sup> bear a standard formula which the succeeding kings in the third and the fourth centuries adopted to define themselves and the empire they were ruling over:

Transliteration: *mazdysn bgy ... MLK'n MLK' 'yl'n MNW ctry*  
*MN yzd'n*

Transcription: *mazdēsn bay ... šāhān šāh ērān kē čīhr az yazdān*

<sup>1</sup> For a good discussion of the position of the king see A. Panaino, "The King and the Gods in the Sasanian Royal Ideology," *Sources pour l'histoire et la géographie du monde iranien (224-710)*, ed. R. Gyselen, Res Orientales XVIII, Bure-sur Yvette, 2009, pp. 209-256.

<sup>2</sup> M. Alram, "The Beginning of Sasanian Coinage," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 13, 1999, pp. 67-76.

Translation: "Mazdaean Majesty, (name of the king), King of Kings of *Ērān* (Iranians), whose lineage (is) from the gods."<sup>1</sup>

According to this legend, Ardashīr I considered himself a worshiper of Mazda (Ohrmazd) "*mazdysn*" first and foremost.<sup>2</sup> This fact provides the religious significance of the Sasanian ruler and the type of kingship it represents. Secondly, he presented himself as having divine parentage: "*MNW ctry MN yzd'n*" "lineage from the gods." It is either possible that Ardashīr I had elevated the progenitor of dynasty, *Sāsān*, to divine status<sup>3</sup> and / or was proclaiming divine connection to

<sup>1</sup>For Sasanian coins see R. Göbl, *Sasanidische Numismatik*, Klinkhardt & Biermann, Braunschweig, 1968; M. Alam, *Iranische Personennamenbuch, Nomia Propria Iranica in Nummis*, vol. 4, ed. M. Mayrhofer and R. Schmitt, Vienna, 1986.

<sup>2</sup>A. Panaino has emphasized the human character of the Sasanian king and his lack of divine attributes, see "Astral Characters of Kingship in the Sasanian and Byzantine World," *La Persia e Bisanzio*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Roma, 2004, p. 558.

<sup>3</sup>In Shapur's inscription at Ka'be-ye Zardošt (ŠKZ 25/20/46), *Sāsān* is called: s's'n ZY MR'HY *sāsān ī xwadāy* "Sāsān the Lord." While the Middle Persian word *xwadāy* stands for "lord" in the political sense, there are instances where it also accompanies Ohrmazd, thus giving the word a spiritual sense. For *xwadāy* see M.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 that became important with Alexander under Egyptian influence may have influenced the Persians as well. See T. Daryaei, "Laghab-e Pahlavī-ye 'čīhr az yazdān' va Šāhanšāhī-ye Sāsānī," *Nāme-ye Farhangestān*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2000, pp. 28-32; *ibid.*, "Notes on Early Sasanian Titulature," *Journal of the Society for Ancient Numismatics*, vol. 21, 2002, pp. 41-44; There is much similarity between the Sasanians and the Seleucids since the latter 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; P.O. Skjærvø has made the observation earlier that these ideas were already current during the time of the kings of Persis, "The Joy of the Cup: A Pre-Sasanian Middle Persian Inscription on a Silver Bowl," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 11, 1997, pp.93-104. It must also be noted that while Ardashir 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 suggests the Sasanian belief in their own divinity.

the Zoroastrian pantheon of the *yazatas* (gods). The process of divinization was certainly part of the Hellenistic heritage of Iran. Alexander the Great and the Seleucids considered themselves as descendants of *θεός* "god," and more importantly *θεοπάτωρ* "of divine descent." The Arsacids made use of this idea as well,<sup>1</sup> which has close correspondences with the title of *MNW ctry MN yzd'n* of the early Sasanian tradition and that of Ardashīr and his sons and grandsons.<sup>2</sup> The artistic elements in early Sasanian period corroborate this suggestion. For example, in the early rock-reliefs, the image of Ohrmazd and Ardashir I are similar and in the same proportion, suggesting equal status where the two figures are mirror images of one another (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: Investiture of Ardashīr by Ohrmazd

<sup>1</sup>A. Gariboldi, "Royal Ideological Patterns Between Seleucid and Parthian Coins: The Case of *θεοπάτωρ*," *Commerce and Monetary Systems in the Ancient World: Means of Transmission and Cultural Interaction, Melammu Symposia V*, ed. R. Rollinger and Ch. Ulf with collaboration of K. Schengg, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004, p. 367.

<sup>2</sup>T. Daryaei, "Notes on Early Sasanian Titulature," *Journal of the Society for Ancient Numismatics*, vol. 21, 2002, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>A. Gariboldi, "Astral Symbolism on Iranian Coinage," *East and West*, vol. 54, 2004, p. 32.

Shapur I (240-270 CE) undertook conquests beyond Mesopotamia, which were recorded in his long inscription at the Ka'be-ye Zardosht in Fars. In this narrative, he provides us with the moral and ideological vision of the early Sasanian Empire. Shortly after Shapur's succession, the Roman Emperor Gordian III invaded Mesopotamia (243 CE) in order to retrieve what had been taken by Ardashir and his son after Alexander Severus' death. But Shapur tells us (according to ŠKZ) that he was able to kill Gordian at Misikhe in 244 CE, close to the Euphrates river, the place he later called *Pērōz-Shapur* (Victorious is Shapur).<sup>1</sup> Shapur I commemorated his victory in a rock-relief at Naqsh-e Rostam showing him subjugating two Roman emperors to his will which is the first long testament from the Sasanians themselves and demonstrates their imperial outlook.

Shapur states that Gordian and his army were destroyed, but more importantly that Caesar "lied," putting the matters in a Zoroastrian doctrinal context where the Romans represented the concept of Lie / Disorder, against the Iranians, representatives of Truth / Order.<sup>2</sup> This point brings us to the issue of religion and imperial ideology in the Sasanian Empire. The official religion of the Sasanian Empire was Zoroastrianism, or more exactly, Mazdaism. The king of kings on his inscriptions or coinage placed the word "Mazda-worshipper" (*mazdēsn*) first and foremost. Zoroastrianism of the late antiquity had developed a strong dualistic outlook, where on one side the creator of all that was good, including humanity, was Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda),

<sup>1</sup> Roman sources are divided as to the cause of death of Gordian. *Oracula Sibyllina* XIII, 13-20 predicts Gordian's downfall as a betrayal; Aurelius Victor, *liber de Caesaribus* 27, 7-8: 7 states that he was a victim of intrigues of his Praetorian Prefect, Marcus Philippus; Festus, *Breviarium* 22 mentions that Gordian was returning, victorious from his war against the Persians, when he was murdered by Philip. For all these sources see M.H. Dodgeon and S.N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, A Documentary History*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991, pp. 36-45. For details see Kettenhofen, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-37.

<sup>2</sup>The concept of lie (*druy*) 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. For a study of the Achaemenid precedence of this concept in royal ideology and its relation to religion, see Bruce Lincoln, *Religion, Empire, and Torture*, University of Chicago Press, 2007.

while Ahriman (Angra Mainiiu) was responsible for harm and destruction in the world. Naturally in this division and divided world-view, Shapur represented *Ohrmazd*, and the Roman Emperor was the *Ahriman* in the corporeal world.

By the fifth century CE, while the Empire operated under the aegis of *Ērānšahr* (which will be discussed in the next section), the notion of kingship had also gone through ideological changes. Yazdgerd II (438-457 CE) was the first king to use the new title of "Mazdaean Majesty Kay" (*mzdysn bgy kdy*). This meant that the Sasanian kings were not seen to be in the image of the gods anymore, as they had been early on, but were connected with the Avestan dynasty of the Kayānids.<sup>1</sup>

This meant that rather than looking to the Achaemenids as their ancestors (for all we know they might have seen the Achaemenid monuments as the work of the kings of Fars or the Kayānids), the Sasanians now connected themselves to the primordial and legendary Kayānid rulers of the *Avesta*.<sup>2</sup> This Kayānid dynasty included such legendary kings as Kay Khusro and Kay Kawād who were fighting outsiders and Turanian enemies. It is probably not an accident that at this time (fifth century CE) the Sasanians not only turned their focus to the East, where the supposed mythical Avestan enemies resided, but also adopted Kayānid throne names such as Kawād and Khusro and emulated them in their actions. We cannot say for certain if Yazdgerd II's relations with Khurasan or contact with Bactria / Balkh brought about this fascination with the Kayānids and the Kayānid identity, which was now to be adopted wholesale by the Sasanians. However, it is certain that there is a close interplay of Kayānid ideology with the Sasanian kingship. One may even suggest that at times the Sasanian kings were reenacting the Kayānid personalities and their feats in the *Avesta* in the world of late antiquity.

<sup>1</sup> Already with Yazdgerd I the title of *rāmšahr* which is another Kayānid title had been used, see T. Daryaee, "History, Epic, and Numismatics: On the Title of Yazdgerd I (Rāmšahr)," *Journal of the American Numismatic Society*, vol. 14, 2002 (2003), pp. 89-95.

<sup>2</sup>T. Daryaee, "National History or Keyānid History? The Nature of Sasanid Zoroastrian Historiography," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 28, nos. 3-4, 1995, pp. 129-141.

In the seventh century, Khusro II brought to fore a new vision of kingship for Sasanian Iran. In a sense he proclaimed a return to the dual heritage of the Persian Achaemenid past 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* “Glory”<sup>1</sup> is central to the ancient Iranian royal ideology as demonstrated in the *Avesta*, and is a prerequisite of rightful rule in the *Avesta*. In the Avestan Yašts one encounters the Kayānid kings battling the enemies of the Iranians and those who seek to gain sovereignty over the Iranian lands. To gain this rule every one of the rightful Kayānid rulers and those before them and the seekers of power make sacrifices to deities to be granted the *xwarrah*. The *xwarrah* is granted or is withheld from the Iranian rulers and the false non-Iranian evil characters based on the judgment of the gods. In Iranian art the *xwarrah* or glory was shown usually with a halo around the king’s head which also appeared in Sasanian art.<sup>2</sup> In later Persian literature and starting with Ferdowsi, the composer of the *Book of Kings* (*Shahnameh*) based on the Sasanian *Khodāy-nāmag* (*Book of Lords*), the concept was further elaborated and came to be used by the medieval Muslim dynasties on the Iranian Plateau and the Central Asia to legitimize their rule.

As in the *Avesta* and with the Kayānids, the Sasanian family claimed the royal “Glory” (*xwarrah*). The symbol at times appeared with the king as a ram or specific insignias associated with the family of Sāsān<sup>3</sup>. Of course *xwarrah* was bestowed by Ohrmazd and other deities such as Lady Anāhitā on the king of kings in the form of a diadem in the royal rock reliefs (Figure 2).

<sup>1</sup> A. Lubotsky, “Avestan *xvarənah*:- etymology and concept,” *Sprache und Kultur. Akten der X. Fachtagung der Indogermanischen Gesellschaft Innsbruck, 22.-28. September 1996*, edited by W. Meid, Innsbruck, 1998, pp. 479-488.

<sup>2</sup> For the latest study see A. Soudavar, *The Aura of the Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship*, Mazda Publishers, Costa Mesa, 2003; See also M.P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth. Art and Ritual of Kingship Between Rome and Sasanian Iran*, UC Press, 2009, pp. 193-195.

<sup>3</sup> On symbols of Glory see, T. Daryaei, “The *Xwarrah* and Sēnmurv: Zoroastrian Iconography on Seventh Century Copper Coinage,” *Schippmann-Gedenkschrift* (forthcoming 2013).



Figure 2: Diadem being given to Narseh by Lady Anāhitā?

Through fire-temples and instructions to the Zoroastrians of throughout the empire this idea was made current and accepted. For others the idea was understood, through the silver gilded dishes, demonstrating the awesome king in banquet, hunting or battle scenes. For those who were able to come to the court, such as foreign ambassadors, the immense crown suspended from a vault which mimicked the cosmos suggested the importance of the king of kings in the universe<sup>1</sup>. The image of Khusro on his coinage also placed the king with four stars and crescents on the four sides, suggesting that the king of kings of *Ērānšahr* was the king of the Four Corners of the World (Figure 3). Indeed in such royal imagery, the king of *Ērānšahr* was the center of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Canepa, pp. 221-222.



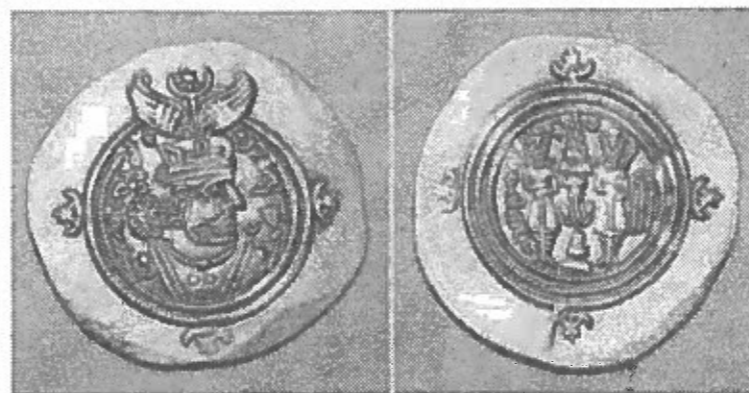


Figure 3: Khusro II Coinage

The sacredness of the king of kings and his importance for the well-being of the empire was paramount for the imperial ideology. Islamic sources mention that when an audience was given to see the king, he was usually hidden behind a veil, as he was not to be seen by all. He was like the sun and the moon, who held the same importance. Only during specific times in the year the king made a public appearance. For example, during the *Nowrūz* (New Year) and *Mehregān* (autumn) celebrations, gifts were exchanged and the king made speeches to the public. These biannual ceremonies were held so that the cosmic order and the order of the universe and the empire could be held through the appearance of the king of kings which ensured abundance, peace and the well-being of the empire. From the sixth century the well-being of the king of kings was so important that he did not participate in wars as his loss would have symbolically meant the loss of the glory and hence the well-being of *Ērānšahr*.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the murder of the king meant the death of the empire. This process had begun with the killing of Khusro II and continued with all the succeeding rulers. One feels that with the end of Khusro II, the imperial ideology of the Sasanian Empire had been shaken to its core, when the sanctity of the life of the king of kings meant very little.

<sup>1</sup> See the excellent article by M. Whitby, "The Persian king at war," *The Roman Byzantine Army in the East*, ed. E. Dabrowa, Cracow, 1994, pp. 227-263.

### Conclusion

We can conclude by stating that the Sasanian Empire came into being through the use of old Iranian religious tradition which was utilized by the Persians from the province of Fars. In this effort, the idea of kingship and empire was indebted to the Achaemenid, Hellenic and local Persian tradition, but the Avestan tradition was the major doctrinal manifesto for the creation of Sasanian kingship and empire. The Sasanian kings played out the Avestan lore of the *Yashts* in late antiquity, where they fought the enemies of *Ērānšahr* as epic figures. These kings of *Ērānšahr* were endowed with the *Xwarrah* or "Glory" which made them almost invincible. The wars with Romans, Hephtalites and then the Turks played out very much as it had been described in the Avestan tradition which now was historicized in the *Xwadāy-nāmag* (*Book of Lords*). The Sasanians were attempting to unify the world as it had been in the beginning with the mythological hero-kings of the past. That is why when Khusro I was given the title of *haft kišwar xwadāy* "Lord of the seven climes,"<sup>1</sup> this concept of the world harkened to the Avestan ideas as reflected in *Kayān Yašt* or *Zamyād Yašt* where the Kayānid kings had been known as those "who ruled over the seven climes of earth." Only in this way the world could come to an end, where all would be saved and once again tranquility would reign supreme under a single king who was the ruler over the seven climes.

This fact was an impetus for constant warfare and negotiations which dominated Sasanian history, something that the Romans did not really grasp. Sasanian king of kings, by ancestral rights claimed territories from the Romans and wanted to further their empire based on these very assumptions.<sup>2</sup> An interesting view of the world, lands and empires had been created in the late Sasanian period which saw

<sup>1</sup> D. Monchi-Zadeh, "Xusrov i Kavatan ut Rétak," G. Morgensrienne Momlmentum, Leiden, 1982, p. 63; S. Azarnouche, *Husraw i Kawādān ud rēdag-ē. Khosrow fils de Kawād et un page / texte pehlevi édité et traduit par Samra Azarnouche*, Paris : Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2013, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> For the latest theories on Sasanian memory in the third and fourth centuries, see M. Rahim Shayegan, *Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

*Ērānšahr* or the “Empire of the Iranians” as far flung as Africa and Arabia. The Sasanians briefly experienced this vision in the seventh century and then left it to the Muslims to accomplish this vision for a much longer time. The Umayyads and the Abbasids were only the realization of a Sasanian imperial dream which was in the making for four centuries. That was the Sasanian Empire.

### The Role of the Sogdians in the Spread of World Religions<sup>1</sup>

Richard Foltz\*

Throughout the first fifteen centuries of the Common Era and perhaps even earlier, the Central Asian region known as Sogdiana (Sughd) was connected to the trans-Asian network of overland trade routes referred to as the Silk Road. Sogdiana was situated near the intersection of the main East-West routes and the southern spurs leading into South Asia, and thus occupied a central position between the Mediterranean world, China and India. The Sogdians were therefore exposed to the full range of cultural interactions made possible by the Silk Road, and many of them—principally merchants and missionaries—were agents in these interactions.

It is no coincidence that throughout history ideas and technologies have spread along trade routes, and that merchants have been among their prime transmitters. One only has to think about it to realize that traveling businessmen do not simply convey, sell and acquire goods, and move on. They socialize, interact, and observe while they are on the road, and they take their impressions home with them.

The existence of trade routes and constant commercial activity linking diverse cultures from ancient times meant that religious ideas

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1. Adapted from Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Premodern Patterns of Globalization*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.