

# THE LAST RULING WOMAN OF ĒRĀNŠAHR: QUEEN ĀZARMĪGDUXT

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We have good information on noble women of the Sasanian dynasty from the third and the fourth century CE.<sup>1</sup> Then again we also find information on royal women in the late sixth and the early seventh centuries CE. 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 some detail in the historical sources. Queen Bōrān has been given more attention,<sup>2</sup> mainly because there is more information on her, and far less is known of Queen Azarmīgduxt and of her life and career.<sup>3</sup>

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1. A. Sh. Shahbazi lists some twenty ladies of the court, "Studies in Sasanian Prosopography III. Barm-i Dilak: Symbolism of Offering Flowers," *The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Persia: New Light on the Parthian and Sasanian Empires*, ed. V. Sarkhosh Curtis, R. Hillenbrand, J.M. Rogers, I.B. Tauris, 1998, p. 58. The best article reviewing royal 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," *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. G.R.F. Hambly, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1999, pp. 29-54.

2. M.-L. Chaumont, "Bōrān," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. II, 1987, p. 366; H.M. Malek, and V. Sarkhosh Curtis, "History of the Coinage of the Sasanian Queen Bōrān (AD 629-631)," *The Numismatic Chronicle*, vol. 158, pp. 113-129; T. Daryaee, "The Coinage of Queen Boran and Its Significance for Late Sasanian Imperial Ideology," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 13, 1999, pp. 77-82; also H. Emrani, *The Political life of Queen Bōrān: Her rise to power and factors that legitimized her rule (Iran)*, MA Thesis, California State University-Fullerton, 2005, and most recently A. Panaino, "Women and Kingship: Some Remarks about the Enthronization of Queen Bōrān and her sister \*Āzarmīguxt," *Ērān und Anērān: Studien zu den Beziehungen zwischen dem Sasanidenreich und der Mittelmeerwelt*, eds. J. Wiesehöfer and Ph. Huyse, München, 2006, pp. 221-240.

3. Only Ph. Gignoux, "Āzarmīgduxt," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. 3, 1987, p. 190; and Panaino discuss the career of this queen, *ibid.*, 234-236.

The studies by M. Macuch<sup>4</sup> and J.K. Choksy,<sup>5</sup> legal rights, rites, and position have given us a better understanding on women's about women in late antique Iran. Based on these studies one can 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 hindrance and dynastic connections makes the study of these noble women interesting. J. Rose<sup>6</sup> and A. Panaino<sup>7</sup> have also provided us with fresh interpretive studies on Sasanian royal women which help us in regard to queens Bōrān and Āzarmīgduxt. Although queen Āzarmīgduxt is an interesting female ruler in the late antique world, no article has been written about her beside the encyclopedic entry by Ph. Gignoux<sup>8</sup> deals specifically with her life and reign. The following essay in memory of A. Sh. Shahbazi discusses the importance of the last Sasanian female ruler, 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 wal-muluk* and Masudi in his *Tanbīh wa-al-ishrāf* provide the more probable period of six months.<sup>9</sup> 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 the royal ideology of 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.<sup>10</sup> 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

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4. M. Macuch, *Rechtskasuistik und Gerichtspraxis zu Beginn des siebenten Jahrhunderts in Iran: Die Rechtssammlung des Farrohmard i Wahrāmān*, Wiesbaden, 1993.

5. J.K. Choksy, *Evil, Good and Gender: Facets of the Feminine in Zoroastrian Religious History*, New York, 2002.

6. J. Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-54.

7. A. Panaino, *op. cit.*

8. Gignoux, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

9. *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. Payandeh, Tehran, p. 96.

10. For 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.

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.<sup>11</sup>

There is unanimity in the Perso-Arabic sources about her end. Tradition has it that Farrokh Hormoz who was the Spāhbend or General of the Northeast<sup>12</sup> 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 having her killed.<sup>13</sup> On the surface, 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 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 the rule of Āzarmīgduxt, 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.<sup>15</sup> The obverse and the reverse of the coin is indeed exactly a copy of the coinage of her father, Khusro Parwēz. On

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

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

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

14. P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*, New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2008.

15. For the identification of WHYC for “Weh-az-Amid-Kawad” 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.



Courtesy of Sasanian Empire website ([http://www.griffterrec.com/coins/sas\\_buran\\_1.html](http://www.griffterrec.com/coins/sas_buran_1.html))

the obverse (Fig. 1) 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.<sup>16</sup> On the reverse (Fig. 2) 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 *'clmykdwht'* (*āzarmīgduxt*) which was first identified by Malek Iraj Mochiri.<sup>17</sup> More recently a new mint-mark for *Āzarmīgduxt* has been discovered by R. Gyselen, namely that of ŠY (*Šērāz*).<sup>18</sup>

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*.<sup>19</sup> 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? Is it possible 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

16. For the use of Avestan deities on the coinage see T. Daryae, “The Use of Religio-Political of Xusro II,” *Journal of the American Numismatic Society*, Vol. 7, 1997, pp. 41-54.

17. M.I. Mochiri, *Études de numismatique Iranienne sous les Sassanides*, Tome I, Téhéran, 1972.

18. R. Gyselen, *New Evidence for Sasanian Numismatics: The Collection of Ahmad Saeedi*, *Res Orientales XVI*, Leuven, 2004, pp. 132-133.

19. Mochiri, *op. cit.*

than a woman appears on these coins is that this is really the image of Farrox-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 unsatisfactory 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.<sup>20</sup> The reason for such an innovation, i.e., the placing of her father's image, 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 her father, Khusro Parwez.

A gold coin of queen Bōrān suggests an attempt at restoration, return, or re-establishment of the legitimacy of Khusro Parwēz and the house of Sāsān. Queen Bōrān placed the legend on her gold coin: "Bōrān, restorer of the lineage of the gods," referring to her father, Khusro Parwēz.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> Palestine was conquered in 614 CE and then Egypt was taken in 619 CE, and the Iranians even went as far as Libya,<sup>23</sup> 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*). 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

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20. H. Emrani, "Like Father, Like Daughter: Late Sasanian Imperial Ideology and the Rise of Bōrān to Power", *The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies*, Nos. 13-14 (2007-8): 3-18.

21. T. Daryaei, "The Coinage of Queen Bōrān and its Significance in Sasanian Imperial Ideology," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 13, 1999, pp. 79-80.

22. M. 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.

23. R. Altheim-Stiehl, "The Sasanians in Egypt - Some Evidence of Historical Interest," *Bulletin de la société d'archéologie Copte*, vol. 31, 1992, p. 87, 92; on the papyrological evidence see E. Venetis, "The Sassanid Occupation of Egypt (7th Cent. A.D) According to Some Pahlavi Papyri Abstracts," *Greco-Arabica*, vols. 9-10, 2004, pp. 403-412.

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 651 CE. 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 for long. 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.<sup>24</sup>

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-Manṣur* 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.<sup>25</sup> 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 (i.e., Rustam) may be instructive here. 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 and a coup from within destroyed the legitimacy of the imperial ideology of the house of Sāsān. Now only a distant relative of the house of Sāsān, Yazdgerd III 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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24. T. Daryaee, “Yazdgerd III's Last Year: Coinage and History of Sīstān at the end of Late Antiquity,” *Iranistik*, nos. 9-10, 2007, pp. 6-7.

25. Ph. Gignoux, *Noms propres sassanides en Moyen-Perse épigraphique*, no. 167, cf. no. 1660