Neither Just nor Kingly:
Defensive responses in Sasanian Historiography

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I, Matthew O'Farrell, certify that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

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ببین، خیاط هم در کوزه افتاده است

Abstract

The Sasanian historical tradition, the so-called *Khwadāy-nāmag* or *"Book of Lords"* forms the basis of Islamic historiography of the Sasanian era as well as Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāmeh*, Iran's national epic. No primary work of this tradition is extant and it is retrievable only by its redactions in much later works. Examination of these has led to a characterization of the lost original texts as a sixth century formulation of a "national" history based on a royal chronicle with ancient religious and mythic beliefs codified into a fictional deep history servicing the needs of the Sasanian dynasty.

The second hand, retrospective and mythic character of the tradition however, has made historians understandably wary of engaging with it as a source for the Sasanian period. This is particularly true of the early Sasanians whose short, formulaic reigns are both unhelpful and suggestive of an enormous loss (or suppression) of historical information between the dynasty's foundation and the compilation of the parent texts of the tradition. This amnesia does, however, highlight the modular and episodic structure of the tradition. Importantly, it also raises questions as to the reasons for their presence.

In light of the changing views of the nature of the Sasanian state, particular episodes attached to this early period deserve a more intensive reading. A comparison between contradictory internal traditions regarding particular events as well as their record in the empire's other literatures, suggests the development of a Sasanian historiography took place in a competitive and defensive context. Its compilers, intent on preserving a constructed elite identity, answered aristocratic and religious critiques directly; incorporating their features and using the poorly remembered past as a convenient canvas on which to reshape them.

Contents

Abbreviations

Acta Archelai =	Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai*. Ed. Beeson. C.H. Die Griechen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Drei Jahrhunderte, J.C. Leipzig: Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1906.
Bal'ami =	Bal'ami, *Tārikh-i-Bal'ami*. Vol II. Ed. Gonabadi. M.P. Tehran: Kitābforushi Zavār, 1974-5.
Biruni =	Biruni, The *Chronology of Ancient Nations*. Trans & ed. Sachau. C.E. London: W.H. Allen and Co., 1879.
Fārsnāmeh =	Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeh,* Ed. Le Strange. G & Nicholson. R.A., E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Publications, New Series I. London: University of Cambridge Press, 1921.
Fihrist =	al-Nadim. *The Fihrist of al-Nadim, A Tenth Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, Vol.II, Trans & ed. Dodge. B. New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.
Hamza =	Hamza al-Isfahani., *Hamzae Isfahanensis, Annalium Libri X*, (Gottwald. J.M.E., Trans & Ed.) Leipzig: 1848. (Page numbers refer to the Latin translation)
Hymns =	Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns*, Trans & ed. McVey. K.E. The Classics of Western Spirituality, New York: Paulist Press, 1989.
KrN =	*Kārnāmeh Ardashir Bābakān*, Trans. & ed. Javadmaskur. M. Tehran: Donaye Kitāb, 2010/11.
LoT =	*The Letter of Tansar*. Trans. & ed. Boyce. M. Rome: Royal Institute of Translation and Publication of Iran, Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, UNESCO, 1968.
Man Hom =	*Manichäische Homilien*, Trans & ed. Polotsky. H.J. Manichäische Handschriften der Sammlung A Chester Beatty, Band 1. Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1934.
MMTKI =	*Mitteliranische manichäische Texte kirchengeschichtlichen Inhalts*, Trans & ed. Sundermann. W. Schriften zur Geschichte und Kultur des alten Orients, Berliner Turfantexte XI. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1981.
Muruj =	Mas'udi. *Les Praries D'or.* Vol.II, Trans & ed. De Maynard. C.B. & De Courteille. P. Paris: Société Asiatique, 1863.
NPi =	*The Sasanian Inscription of Paikuli, Part 3.1, Restored text and translation*. Trans & ed Skjaervø. P.O. Wiesbaden: Dr Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1983.
PG 111 =	Ibn Batriq/Eutychius, *Contextia Gemmarum sive Eutychii Patriarchae Alexandrini Annales*, 2 vols. Trans. & ed. J. Selden. J. & Pococke. E. Oxford: 1658-59; tr. repr. in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*, Vol. 111. Ed. Migne. J.P. Paris: 1857-66, cols. 889-1232.

Prose Ref =   Ephrem the Syrian, *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion and Bardaisan*, *Vol.I*. Trans & ed. Mitchell. C.W. London: Williams and Norgate, 1912.

PsBk =   *A Manichean Psalm-Book, Part II*. Trans & ed. Allberry. C.R.C. Manichean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection. Vol II. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1938.

ShN =   Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeh*, Vol. VI *or* VIII. Ed. Khaleghi-Motlagh. D. & Omidsalar. M. New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2005.

ŠKZ =   Huyse. P. *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka'ba-I Zardušt (ŠKZ) Band 1*. Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicum prt III. Vol.I. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1999.

Tabari =   Tabari. *History of the Prophets and Kings*, Vol V, *The Sāssānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids and Yemen*. Trans. & ed. Bosworth. C.E. Bibliotecha Persica, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999.

Tanbih =   Mas'udi. *Le Livre de L'Avertissement.* Trans & Ed. De Vaux. B.C. Paris: Société Asiatique, 1868.

Tha'alibi =   Tha'alibi. *Historie des Rois des Pers*. Trans. & ed. Zotenberg. H. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1900.

Ya'qubi =   Ya'qubi. *Historiae*. Ed. Houtsma. M. Th. Leiden: Brill, 1883.

I. Introduction

The late Richard Frye once wrote "for the Persians solid history begins with the Sasanians".[1] Indeed, after a sputtering start via Pseudo-Callisthenes' *Alexander Romance*, Iranian history proper begins with the rebellion of the house of Sasan against the Arsakid dynasty in the early third century.[2] This rebellion is noteworthy, not only as the first "real" event in Iranian history, but also as the harbinger of a new basis for imperial rule. While the Arsakids seem to have presented themselves largely according to Achaemenid or Hellenistic imperial patterns, on entering the imperial estate the first Sasanian, Ardashir I, immediately adopted public styles based on the quasi-religious epic cycles of the east.[3]

Central to this was the sudden, seemingly unprecedented, political use of an old mythic term, *Erān*, a usage that legitimated Sasanian rule and provided it a constructed historical context.[4] In time this posture, and its wholly legendary deep history, would become part of a Middle Persian written tradition: the *Khwadāy-nāmag,* or "Book of Lords". Consisting of *vitae* of royal individuals of the Sasanian dynasty and probably their legendary forebears. No primary text of this tradition is extant, however these works form the basis of the narrative passed to us via Arabic and Modern Persian works of the Islamic period.

Compiled centuries after Ardashir and under changed conditions, the *Khwadāy-nāmag* told a story adapted to the needs of the Sasanian imperial order, a continuation of Ardashir's positioning in literary form strongly associated with the legendary. Scholars are therefore left with an acute problem: Iran gives us a record of its own Late Antiquity, yet it is a retrospective and highly engineered one in which very little can be considered "historical" in the normal sense of the word. As Frye goes on to say, Iran's emergence from the mythic past brings with it new problems, but no abjuration of myth itself.[5]

This study is therefore less interested in the Sasanian historical tradition as history and more with what it says about the psychological and political context of its creation. It begins with work that has, over the last three decades, chipped away at the *a priori* assumption of religious homogeneity and royal absolutism that defined scholarly and popular views of the

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[1] Frye (1963), p.235.
[2] Nöldeke (1979), pp.20-1 & 68-70.
[3] The interface between these cycles and Zoroastrian belief is unclear. Gnoli saw these as woven into the religious tradition during the writing of the *Yašts*, Gnoli (1989), pp.35-6. Boyce stressed that this did not mean the death of secular heroic poetry and believed court performance to have been a far more important vector in the transmission of the Keyanid cycle, Boyce (1954) & (1957), *passim.*
[4] Gnoli (1989), pp.136-7.
[5] Frye (1963), pp.235-6.

Sasanian state from the late nineteenth century to the mid twentieth. It is a study of the reception and use of the past in the past. All comment on the Sasanian historical tradition is necessarily speculative due to the nature of extant sources, however I contend that we can in places get an "excellent idea of its content".[6] Using narrative and structural commonalities in surviving sources it is possible to isolate "original" episodes and examine them as discrete units. Particular episodes, when compared to texts related and unrelated to the Sasanian tradition, show both discrepancies and commonalities that mark an awareness of a broader context. Despite the significant loss of material from Sasanian Iran, the "official history" itself unwittingly preserves references to its competitors.

The focus of this study is the presentation of two episodes from the very early Sasanian period in the third century. While material dealing with this era is particularly poorly regarded as history, it is illustrative of a heterogeneous, selective, and above all *defensive* historical method. Although the "patriotic" nature of the tradition is well known this study will argue that the handling of these episodes supports ideas of a distinct hardening in Sasanian ideology, and, moreover, that the actions of previous kings were sometimes irreconcilable with the later vision of an "Iranian" identity as defined by the dynasty's own formulation of history.

The *Khwadāy-nāmag* was no assured production of unchallenged royal power. From its wreckage emerge not just incongruous artifacts but a sense of the artifice, and anxiety, of its entire underlying concept. Before the former can be examined one must survey the latter, the strange weld of the factual and the fantastic that grounded and shaped Sasanian ideology and historiography.

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[6] Boyce (1968), pp.58-9.

II. Historical Context

The Sasanian mythic-historic tradition rests on two interwoven bases: the third century adoption of a new political ideology, that of *Erān* about which much is unclear; and a sixth century compilation of historical traditions whose parameters seem to have been a development of the claims made at the dawn of the empire. *Erān* was at both points a tool of Sasanian political and cultural policy, and a means of building a consensus within the realm based on appeals to a shared mythic identity.

1. The introduction of "Erān" in the third century

The terms *Erānšahr* and *Erān* appear in the earliest inscriptional and numismatic evidence of the Sasanian dynasty. In a thorough investigation of the topic, Gnoli saw these terms as deriving from a very old toponym turned *ethnikon* that linked its bearers to specific religious and legendary cycles.[1] Members of the Pars-based Achaemenid dynasty used a similar word, but only as a "family" name, never as a political term.[2] Explaining how these terms came to be used by Ardashir almost six centuries later is problematic, and touches on questions of historical memory and cultural continuity inside Pars during the Seleucid and Parthian periods, a subject that has generated a literature of its own but remains obscure.[3]

How the early Sasanians viewed their past is, due to the lateness of source material, a subject of intense debate. It is clear that some kind of connection was made between the monuments of the Achaemenid past and the royal estate inside Pars. Archaeological evidence shows a distinct linkage between Sasanian and Achaemenid architectural and visual styles and a continuous reuse of Achaemenid sites and materials throughout the Hellenistic and Parthian periods.[4] Likewise Sasanian inscriptions show parallels to Achaemenid ones indicating some transmission of royal styles.[5] Despite these, scholarship leans towards the hypothesis that no specific memory of the Achaemenids survived beyond a confused knowledge of a glorious past. While Sasanian genealogies connect to Dara, a figure who probably is a badly remembered Achaemenid, how much of the significance of this figure comes by way of

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[1] Gnoli (1989), pp.57, 71 *ff*, 118-20 & 125-8.
[2] *Ibid*.
[3] Important discussions regarding the extent of Hellenistic influence in Pars, the memory of the Achaemenids and the meaning of the symbolism used by its rulers can be found in: Eddy (1961), p.65 *ff*, Yarshater (1971), p.523 *ff*, Gnoli (1989), pp.119-28, Boyce (1991), p.51 *ff.* & 108 *ff*, Panaino (2002) Wieshöfer (2007b) & Daryaee (2008).
[4] Canepa (2010), p.566 *ff.*
[5] Skjaevro (1985), *passim*.

Pseudo-Callisthenes' *Alexander Romance* is unclear.[6] The sudden political significance of the term *Erān* might indicate that an embryonic version of the originally east-Iranian myth of the Kayanids, a superhuman dynasty and rulers of a united and Iran, so prominent in later texts, was held; the evidence is, however, thin and retrospective.[7]

What third century Sasanians believed to be the specific connection between *Erān*, and the ruins of Pars, or whether Kayanid myths were a part of primitive Sasanian ideology cannot, therefore, be precisely known. More important to this study is Gnoli's placement of Sasanian mythologising in the context of a development of "national cultures" in the third century and his observation that the Sasanians' new ideology linked them to the cultural and religious positions carried by this term; by adopting it they shaped the development of their descendants' "past".[8]

2. A third century "Nationalism"?

As trenchant as Gnoli's observations were, his phrasing was perhaps unfortunate. It is questionable as to whether an organic "national consciousness" is the best way to understand early Sasanian posturing or its interaction with the cultures of the old Parthian state.[9] Sasanian "nationalism" has a political, rather than spontaneous air; Ardashir began to use *Erān* only after his acquisition of empire, and he propagated it outside of Pars.[10] Additionally the term was used to indicate an area broader than the dynasty's homeland.[11] Clearly more precise characterisation of the intent of Sasanian styles is required.

It has been posited that self-aware cultural identities or *ethnē*, could form the base of a "national" consciousness in antiquity, based on either "lateral" (aristocratic) or "vertical"

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[6] Alexander was a key plank of the Sasanian restorative claim. In the historical works he instigated the rule of the petty kings as a way of keeping Iran weak, but somewhat paradoxically is also, due to the source material, a *somewhat* positive figure of legend, Nöldeke (1979), pp.29-30. In the *religious* tradition he is a demonic figure who persecuted Zoroastrianism and destroyed its books, see Kotwal (2011), and also Gnoli (1989), p.124 n.27. A summary of theories as to why, alongside a novel solution, can be found at Shayegan (2011), pp.297-307. Another theory sees the "Bahman" of Sasanian genealogies as Artaxerxes II, see Arjomand (1998), *passim*.

[7] See Shayegan (2011), pp.23-9.

[8] Gnoli sees the emergence of *Erānšahr* as a sort of "decolonization" from post Hellenic aristocratic universalism, part of a process occurring across western Eurasia, and he rejects any "invention of tradition" except in the "ideological aspects of Sasanian propaganda" Gnoli (1989), pp.139-40 & 158-64. Happily, it is largely Sasanian propaganda with which we are concerned.

[9] Nationalism, besides, tends to be seen as a modern phenomenon, unviable without modern cultural apparatus, for an overview, see Calhoun (1997). The first three chapters of Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities* describe the author's concept of pre-national "imperial" cultures as very diverse yet united by transnational institutionalization of "prestige" languages, see Anderson (1991), p.9 *ff*.

[10] Ardashir's coinage as king of Pars does not use this term and his later coinage was minted in Hamedan and Ctesiphon with a final phase in Seistan and Marv, well outside of Pars, see Alram (2008), pp.17-21.

[11] Christensen (1944), pp.92-94. For Ardashir I's development of this region as a base of operations see Huff (2008) *passim*. For a discussion of early Sasanian monuments and a map see Canepa (2010), p.566 & 570 *ff*. On the extent of *Erān*, indicated by third century inscriptions, see Gignoux (1971).

(demotic) cultural impulses.[12] Smith characterised the Sasanian dynasty as a revisionist lateral *ethnos*, an exporter of an aristocratic consciousness.[13] *Erān* in the third century can be seen as an attempt to justify Sasanian rule using an existing base of stories, customs and images. Smith's theory helps explain how a "national" myth arises from a group associated with one region.[14] It is also a useful heuristic for understanding the audience for early Sasanian postures: the Iranian-speaking elites of the new empire.[15]

By adopting *Erān* as a political slogan Ardashir positioned himself as central to a mythic complex shared by the Parthian-era aristocracy. We see here an aggressive cultural signal to the Parthian era elite, a rival aristocracy with one foot in the Indo-Iranian tradition and another in the long afternoon of Hellenism.[16] Such positioning was probably largely ineffective. Pourshariati has stressed the endurance of Parthian identity, tensions between *Pahlav* (Parthian) and *Pārsig* (Persian, meaning from *Pārs/Fārs*), and the reliance of the new

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[12] In Smith's view, such identities are not only viable, their existence is necessary for the emergence of a modern nation, see Smith (2004), pp.184-90 & 202-4.

[13] The spread of Avesitc legends inside Iran and the cultural perspective of the Parthians themselves is a problematic area. Boyce argued that the Achaemenids likely had little or no connection to Kayanid cycle which she saw as court poetry reflecting a heroic age, bought by the Parthians from the North East, going so far as to posit that the Sasanians had to collect these legends from the *Parthian* homelands, see Boyce (1954), pp.48-52 & (1955), pp.473-4. *Contra* Gnoli, who places the source of these Sasanian stories in the south-east, specifically Seistan, see Gnoli (1989), pp.134-8. The Arsakid dynasty's attachment to some kind of Mazdean religion is clear in their link to fire temples (Isidore of Charax *Parthian Stations* XI) and their supposed sponsorship of a redaction of Zoroastian texts under an unspecified Balash (*Dēnkard* IV.3 trans. in Shaked (1994), p.100). Additionally, though occasionally self-advertising as phillhellenes (Sellwood (1981), pp.282-91), a certain nativism might be detectable at Josephus, *JA*, XVIII.46-48; Tacitus, *Ann*, II.2-3 (somewhat contradicted at Plutarch, *Crassus*, XXXII.3 & 5, XXXIII.2 and Livy IX.18.6). Despite this they do not appear to have made any overtly *political* use of their religion, and their "Iranism", if they ever felt such a thing, might be understood as a purely internal cultural phenomenon. A possible analog for the Sasanian use of myth might be found in the suggestion of Frank that the supposed "Pan-German" legendary complex of the early middle ages was not, as has been widely believed, an entirely organic minstrel tradition, but largely an ethno-genesis consequent to the expansion of the Carolingan empire in which distantly related traditions became more strongly connected. The nexus she proposes between written and oral traditions, in light of the myriad uncertainties about the extent of Iranian literacy, makes this a problematic comparison however, see Frank (2014), pp.87-88.

[14] Smith (1986), pp.76-89.

[15] Religious interpretations of his messaging, stressing the importance of a "state church", strongly expressed at Christensen (1944), pp.141-2 & Boyce (1979), pp.101-3, less so at Gnoli (1989), pp.138-9 seem insufficient in the context of debate over the "orthodoxy" of the early Sasanians, let alone the rest of third century Central Asia. For the alternative view see Shaked (1994), pp.97-8 and Gignoux (1984), pp.74-5, (this theory partially rejected at Shaked (1990), p.263). Boyce disagreed with Shaked's conclusions, prompting an article length response, see Boyce (1996). While a defender of a long-lived Zoroastrian orthodoxy, Boyce admitted that the imposition of any orthodox doctrine can never have been fast, or total, as can be seen in the persistence of icons see Boyce (1975b), pp.107-9. The disputations and periodic royal sponsored recompilation of religious and philosophical literature recorded in Pahalvi works as occurring at various points in the Sasanian era in which, in her own words, Zoroastrian scholars were "…*more inclined to collect and conflate than exclude*" also argues for a persistent diversity in the religious landscape, see Boyce (1979), p.135 & Shaked (1994), pp.103-4. Kryenbroeck suggested that Hinduism's acceptance of variety within itself presents a useful parallel for third-fourth century "Zoroastrianism", see Kryenbroeck (2008), p.13. Theories of a broader "Iranian revival" in the later Arsakid period paving the way for a strongly "national" identity are attractive, though rather speculative given the lack of solid information for any aspect of Arsakid ideology. For the loss of Greek styles in Parthian coinage see Sellwood (1983), pp. 293-8, for the "regionalism" displayed in sub-Parthian styles see Sarkhosh Curtis (2007), pp.14-22.

[16] Gnoli believed that there was an "Iranism" present in this period *and* that the Parthian nobility's cosmopolitanism was somewhat at odds with the Sasanians' rural nativism. Gnoli (1989), pp.161-2. citing Bivar's speculation at Bivar (1983), p.97.

order on the magnates of the old.[17] Further, she posits pronounced religious difference between the two groups.[18] The argument is compelling, there is good reason to believe that the Sasanians were neither as uncompromising in their rise nor as successful in imposing their vision as they later portrayed.[19] Significantly, the imperial *Erānšahr* never managed to replace the specific *Pārs/Fārs* in Manichean works or those of the Islamic era; the Sasanians, it follows, were never able to erase the centrality of Pars to their identity.[20] Despite success in propagating *Erān* as a concept, in the eyes of others they remained Persians proper.

Traces of a powerful undercurrent of Parthian nostalgia persist even in our sources. Ferdowsi's version of the rebel Bahram Chobin's (Bahram VI r.590-1) response to Khosrau II (r.590-628) is worth quoting in full:

'To him said Bahram O bold man, it was justice that took the kingdom from you

When Ardashir was born of Babak's daughter, **was not command held by the Arsakids?**

Did he not kill Ardavan? Take his throne with force and blows?

Now five hundred years (!) have passed, the Sasanians' crown and rule has turned cold

Today the throne and diadem are ours, rule and victorious fortune are ours

So when we see your face your fortune, your army, crown and garment

I attack these Sasanian deeds, like a prodded lion turned savage!

I shall wipe your names from every book, end the rule of the Sasanians

Greatness befits the Arsakids, should the right-thinking man hear'[21]

Artistic license certainly, but the very inclusion of this appeal to an older, more legitimate monarchical line in such a late text, and one that deals with the entire Parthian period in less than thirty lines is telling, particularly as Sasanian propaganda tends to avoid treating the Arsakids as a legitimate dynasty at all.[22] It is also worth noting that Parthian antecedents remained politically useful into the Islamic era; the ninth century Samanid dynasty based in Bokhara claimed Bahram amongst their ancestors.[23] Ardashir's sudden use of *Erān* was probably designed to placate the aristocratic discontent generated by his *lack* of legitimacy.[24]

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[17] Pourshariati (2008), pp.37-47. Rubin, in a study of Shapur's inscription at Naqsh- Rostam suggests a very contingent relationship between the two groups, seeing Ardashir as buying the old houses off by "*showering on them the rewards of constant successful warfare*". See Rubin (2002), p.282. This has some support in the much later actions of Kavad (r.488-531) who Pseudo-Joshua reports declared war on the Romans as a way of providing loot to his allies after a purge of the aristocracy, see Ps Josh, XXIV [pp.15-6].
[18] *Ibid*, p.360 *ff.*
[19] *Ibid* pp.33-37 & *ff.*
[20] Gnoli (1989), pp.152-6.
[21] ShN VIII. pp.25-6, lines 306-14
[22] ShN VI. pp.138-9, lines 64-86
[23] See Bosworth (1973), pp.58-9.
[24] See chapter 1 below.

Again, what, precisely, besides a claim to supremacy, Ardashir understood by this word is unknown; the mythic and religious content attached to our sources derives from a much later era.

3. Construction of a written tradition

Ardashir's imperial posture, integrated with a wholly legendary deep history, formed the basis of a later written tradition, the so-called *Khwadāy-nāmag*.[25] With the primary texts of this tradition long lost, their contents, themes and concerns are carried to us by means of works conforming to or heavily influenced by another literary tradition entirely (that of Arabic literature of the classical period), or, in the case of Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāmeh*, a late and "nationalist" member of a Persian school whose likely genetic resemblance to these works has to be balanced by very serious and unsolvable questions concerning the poet's sources.[26]

To further complicate matters, though a production of central power we do not deal with the unfiltered reflection of one standardized ur-text. In the eleventh century Hamza al-Isfahani reported inconsistency between editions of what purported to be translations of the same work, a fact that, alongside the opaque transmission of this material into Arabic and New Persian, explains the many differences discernible in very similar sets of material.[27] We should perhaps speak of a tradition of closely related texts descending from divergent iterations and made or copied and augmented at different points; a feedback loop of collected traditions, made even more complex by their reinterpretation by authors of the Islamic period.

There is, therefore, an understandable tendency to distrust sources descending from this tradition and head directly for the contemporary evidence of inscriptions and numismatics.[28] As important as this inscriptional and numismatic evidence is, it too has very serious problems; though surviving large inscriptions are chronologically clustered in the third and early fourth centuries, as productions of royal power, or those close to royal power, they too are somewhat misleading as history. To further complicate matters, a streak of formalism has been seen in Sasanian inscriptions, formulae or patterns linking Sasanian inscriptions with

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[25] The key article in the study of this tradition is Yarshater's *Iranian National History* listed in the bibliography as Yarshater (1983)

[26] A summary of what is known about Ferdowsi can be found at Khaleghi-Motlagh (2012).

[27] Hamza states that he had access to eight translations (though he lists only seven), while an author he cites, a *mobed* no less, claimed to have twenty *Khwadāy-nāmags*, see Hamza, pp.6-7 & 16-17. While Hamza attributed the lack of consistency to translation, Shahbazi theorized three separate streams: the royal, the aristocratic and the priestly, which implies a multitude of versions were in circulation, see Shahbazi (1990), pp.215-18.

[28] Described at Pourshariati (2008), pp.10-12.

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Achaemenid ones.[29] This, by aligning inscriptional with a long-standing oral tradition, collapses any sense that these texts are less "literary" than later literary sources, whose own sources also drew heavily on oral traditions. A sense of the intractability of the problem can be seen in one scholar's examination of Narseh's inscription at Paikuli: Mori not only asserts that *nothing* in the later Perso-Arabic historical tradition can be trusted, but that the inscription itself weaves history through a loom of longstanding epic shapes.[30]

As Arabic historiography of the classical period generally followed stricter rules of source management and drew a harder line between myth and history, moderns are not the first to struggle with the somewhat unreal nature of Sasanian history.[31] Gibb's verdict that this genre was degraded by the introduction of fantastical material from Persia seems to match the discomfort of some Muslim writers who dismissed Persian literature as unserious or irrelevant.[32] The easy movement from "fact" to "legend" that so upset them is, as Yarshater emphasizes, symptomatic of a generally eclectic and collative historical method intending to instruct, entertain and edify.[33]

4. Ideological and political change between the third and sixth centuries.

Aside from possessing very porous borders, the tradition is highly retrospective, with most estimates placing its initial compilation in the middle of the sixth century, *probably* during the reign of Khosrau I.[34] Therefore, despite its presentation of the dynasty and its institutions as eternal and unchanging, the conditions of the historical tradition actually represent the ideals of a time far removed from the dynasty's foundation. Tracking specific changes in administrative or political mindset to this point would require much more data than is available but broadly Ardashir's successors seem to have been less successful than he in

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[29] See especially Skjaerø (1985) & (1998), *passim*. Building on this work, an interesting discussion of the likelihood of transmission of traditions inside Pars in the Hellenistic/Parthian era can be found in Shayegan (2012) especially chp. 6 p.109 *ff.* which, comparing Darius' Behistun inscription, Narseh's inscription at Paikuli and the deposition of Zahak in the *Šāhnāmeh* points out similarities between in all three and suggests that the language and images attached to rebellion and usurpation at least, remained stable across a very long period of time. The present author would like to add that one aspect of this tradition, the display of a rebel or prisoner on a donkey, is also attached to Valerian/Julian in the reign of Shapur II, see Tabari 845 [p.65] and possibly ShN VI p.324, lines 434-7.

[30] "*[M]erely historical folktales narrated on (sic) the tradition of the epical literature*" Mori (1995), p.182.

[31] Robinson (2003), *passim* esp chp 2, pp.19-38, "Courtly" historiography reemerges in the tenth and eleventh centuries, see Mesami (1999), pp.10-11, 15*ff* & Bosworth (1973), pp.53*ff.*

[32] Gibb (1962), 116-7, for the conflict between Persian and Islamic history in the eleventh century see Meisami (1993), p.266 *ff.*

[33] Yarshater (1983), p.366, pp.400-1 & Shahbazi (1990), pp.209-13.

[34] Yarshater (1983), pp.359-360. Hypothetical dates of the first composition for the *Khwadāy-nāmag* tend to cluster around the reign of Khosrau I (r 531-579), though this too is unclear. Certainly the tradition passed to us must include a very late, probably post-conquest, iteration. See Huyse (2008), pp.150-2, Shahbazi (1990), pp.213-215, *contra* Yarshater (1983), p.392.

containing the clergy and the nobility.[35] The priests in particular prospered under Sasanian rule and by the sixth and seventh centuries (at the latest) some sort of structured religious hierarchy had emerged.[36] This had authority over civil law within the Zoroastrian community, and may have been entrusted with more powerful roles in the empire's administration.[37] There are signs, however, that the growth of "state Zoroastrianism" is not merely indicative of the emergence of another power bloc within the empire, but of a sort of psychic triumph over the monarchy.

In the middle of the fifth century there is a notable change in the titles and names used by the dynasty. The ambiguously divine (and possibly Hellenistic) term *bag* (majesty or god) falls into disuse while the Avestic *kay* is used for the first time; likewise names more strongly attached to the religious-epic tradition begin to appear, changes for which various explanations have been offered.[38] We are thus returned to the problem of continuity and memory in Hellenistic Pars. Daryaee theorized that Sasanian historiography should be understood as a process in which the legendary historical traditions of a waxing "Zoroastrian church" merged with and then overwhelmed those held by the Sasanians themselves, who he believes were heirs to the traditions of Pars (including a garbled memory of the Achaemenids) as well as followers of general trends in royal ideology of the Parthian era.[39] This would appear to make an important aspect of Gnoli's argument somewhat problematic; it supposes a weaker initial attachment to the Avestic legends Gnoli sees as the organic basis of foundational Sasanian propaganda, and implies a more conscious and retrospective "invention of tradition" than Gnoli is prepared to admit. Daryaee does argue that Avestic traditions played a part in shaping early Sasanian self-image, but his theory of a Pars-based historical

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[35] As Pourshariati has pointed out, scholars sympathetic to the centralizing thesis tend to be somewhat contradictory around this point, so much so that the nobility can be stated to control succession or troop levies and yet also cowed by absolutist claims, see Christensen (1944), pp.109-10, Frye (1983), p.133, Pourshariati (2008), pp.52-3.

[36] Wiesehöfer (2007a), p.187.

[37] *Ibid*, pp.140-1 & Shaked (1990), pp.267-70. The internal affairs of other communities were, by the late Sasanian period, governed by their own clergy, see Moroney (1974), 116-19. Boyce noted that the magi are often the instigators of persecution of Christians in the Syriac *acta*, see Boyce (1979), p.119.

[38] Boyce believed this was a sop to the eastern half of the empire in the face of the Hepthalite threat, see Boyce (1979), p.127, whereas Choksy theorized that this terminology was halted because Sasanian claims were by that point widely accepted, see Choksy (1988), p.45. Pourshariati sees an undercutting of the claims of eastern Parthian dynasts, see Pourshariati (2008), pp.385-6. While Boyce's claim is plausible, it does not address the retirement of the possibly divine *bag* from the king's titles. Regarding Choksy, as indicated above, the present author does not accept that Sasanian claims were *ever* accepted completely and cannot agree with this conclusion. Pourshariati's view is compelling but seems to discount the possibility, implied by Daryaee, that the Sasanians were by this point *convinced* that they did in fact belong to an eternal dynasty of legendary kings.

[39] Daryaee (1995), pp.137-41, (2006), p.500 *ff*, (2008), pp.67-8 *contra* Yarshater who sees the traditions of the east as having overwhelmed those of Pars well before the Sasanians came to power, see Yarshater (1983), pp.388-91.

memory eclipsed over time has interesting implications.[40] If correct, the later tradition's treatment of religion in the early Sasanian period has to be viewed as *especially* artificial.[41]

Whether or not such an independent tradition existed, the priestly tradition, which identified *Erān* with followers of Zoroastrianism, became more central to the imperial claim in the late Sasanian period.[42] A clerical sensibility also permeated the court; a late book of manners describes the courtly education of a young man whose upbringing included the memorization of sections of Zoroastrian texts alongside training in writing and arms.[43] Even if this is a somewhat idealized vision, it is suggestive that the *parfit gentil knight* of the late Sasanian era was assumed familiar with religious literature of the most traditional kind.[44]

The development of relations between the crown and the aristocracy at this time is less clear. It has traditionally been assumed that Khosrau I took advantage of the chaos caused by losses to the Hepthalites and the Mazdakite revolt to issue reforms that reduced aristocratic power.[45] Hence the later Sasanian state tends to be viewed as more court-centered, staffed by an appointed nobility of "service" rather than descent, and, by implication, less interested in catering to the pretentions of the old noble houses.[46] Much is doubtful about the circumstances of the time, the long-term effectiveness of his policy, or even whether a chastening of the nobles was Khosrau's intent. It should be noted that literary sources do not seem to reflect such hostility; the monarch is generally at pains to show he will *guard* the rights of the nobles. This may be a propagandistic presentation of a system that was actually becoming more absolutist, but the longevity of the "consultative" ritual of the assembly of the realm in narratives derived from Sasanian traditions has an air of concession.[47] On the other hand, the tradition *is* rather court-focused; an idealized Khosrau I surrounded by courtiers and

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[40] *Cf.* Gnoli (1989), p.164 & Daryaee (1995), pp.134-41 & (2008), p.61 *ff*.

[41] This is a possibility that will be explored in depth in Chapter 2.

[42] Shaked (2008), pp.106-11.

[43] This text and its translation is listed in the bibliography as *Husraw ī Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē: Khosrow Fils de Kawād et un Page* [ed. Azanoush (2013)]. The boy combines the qualities of the priest (IX), the scribe (X) and the warrior (XI). Memorisation was, until late in the Sasanian period, the *preferred* means by which priests retained and transmitted scriptures, see Huyse (2008), pp.142-4 and Tafazzoli (2010/11), pp.67-9.

[44] Boyce believed the majority of literature at this time to have been secular poetry, but also notes a strong religious influence in particular genres, particularly wisdom literature, and a tendency for religious literature to transmit secular themes see Boyce (1969), p.33 and *ff*.

[45] Surveys tend to accept the general thesis that Khosrau's reign saw centralizing reform to greater or lesser extent, see Christensen (1944), p.363 *ff*, Frye (1983), pp.153-70, Wieshöfer (2007a), pp.189-91. Pourshariati believed much of Khosrau's image to be a creation of Christensen but does accept that he interfered with the finances of the dynasts in a "probably unprecedented" way, Pourshariati (2008), pp.83-5 & *ff*. Detailed studies of the traditions surrounding the reforms, including a less than flattering view of Khosrau himself are available in Rubin (1995). Mazdakism itself is a very badly recorded and poorly understood phenomenon, for which see Crone (1991), *passim*.

[46] Wiesehöfer (2007c), pp.69-71.

[47] This will be further developed in the Methodology below.

advised by *mobeds* is presumed as the model of Persian kingship.[48] We can perhaps say that the historical tradition presents an accommodation, in which the king agrees to defend ancient rights on the understanding that it is (theoretically) his prerogative to do so. Under the glittering Khosrau the illusion of complete royal supremacy with the noble houses united harmoniously under a crown justified by ethnic myth might even have seemed convincing.

5. Programmatic intent of the historical tradition

Sasanian "historical" writing created an imagined dynastic past with ethnic-national overtones and cannot be disentangled from myth, nor, as a serene mask for a precarious situation among the aristocracy, can it be seen apolitically. Ardashir's threat, or invitation to be Iranians together, was continuously extended; historical writing was a tool of dynastic politics and a method of defining and protecting preferred aristocratic identity. It is possible that written collections of historical traditions were one part of a program directed at the empire's elites, a parallel to the state-sponsored production of precious items for the aristocratic gift economy.[49] Later Sasanian kings pursued a program of legitimization via the distribution of precious, symbolic objects; Canepa has detailed these usages in Sasanian diplomacy with Rome, and Choksy has hypothesized a domestic distribution for such symbolism as well.[50] There is some literary evidence that such distribution may have included a "publishing" program.[51] In consequence, once differences in communications technologies are noted and compensated for, helpful parallels might be drawn between the *Khwadāy-nāmag* as it originally stood and the reconstruction of national traditions in the modern era.[52] As in these cases the mythic complex grounding Sasanian claims was mined and a codified past of *Erān* erected. In another parallel to modern cases, in particular that of post-independence Greece, the development of a mythic historiography accompanied a "rewriting"

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[48] Yarshater (1983), pp.402-3 & pp.406-8. For an example, see Shahbazi (1990), pp.211-13.

[49] "[A] fairly official historical book*"* Yarshater (1983), p.359 Harper (1992), pp.148-9.

[50] Canepa (2009), pp.154-66, Choksy (1989), p.47. A distribution of precious gifts loaded with royal symbolism would be very similar to the near contemporaneous Roman practice of *largitio*, see Leader-Newby (2004), pp.15 *ff.*

[51] Hamza described lavishly illustrated books portraying Sasanian kings, Hamza, p.35 & *f*, while Mas'udi claimed to have seen one of an old Persian family, *Tanbih* pp.150-1, These are very late attestations but Hamza's seated and armed kings have parallels in extant Sasanian imagery arguing that these works were indeed representative of an older, official, tradition.

[52] A summary of the concerns and methods of those reconstructing an ethnic past in the modern era can be found at Smith (1986), pp.177-81. Two relevant and famous case studies, that of the Scottish and Welsh revivals, can be found in Hobsbswam and Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition*, (Hobsbawm & Ranger (2009)) Notice the prominence of reconstructed (or forged) *literatures* in both cases.

of the landscape.[53] The names of holy fires attached to the mythic *Erān* were applied to western locations during the Sasanian era.[54]

By harnessing a wider mythic complex, the reimagining of the empire of the Sasanians as eternal *Erān* presented literate Iranian speakers with a "national" model, based on a culture they understood but defined in terms that presented the Sasanians and the sixth century form of their religious and political ideology as central to it. The Sasanian project was not alone, however, in pitching to Iranian elites. The empire contained not only a dangerous, and probably largely unconvinced nobility, but also other literatures. These sometimes preserved a past that one suspects late Sasanian compilers would have preferred to ignore, one that either cast doubt on the antecedents of the dynasty or attacked the nexus between monarchy and "Iranian" identity as expressed through dedication to "Zoroastrian" religious practice. In defence of their position, the compilers of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* sometimes had to correct the record by writing refutations into a "national" story. Such corrections, and the structural properties of the parent texts themselves are most visible in the earliest parts of the Sasanian story.

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[53] For the "Classicising" of Greek place names after independence, see Liakos (2008), pp.230-6.
[54] Though the Sasanians may not have started this process their ideology probably accelerated it, Gnoli (1989), pp.141-2, and Canepa (2013), p.69 *ff*.

III. Methodology

The method used in this thesis concentrates on literary structure and comparison. Based on extant descendant texts of the tradition whose inception is outlined above, it suggests a model of composition and posits that the accounts of the Sasanians in the *Khwāday-nāmag* were, like their descendent texts, modular and episodic: a chain of individual stories subject to selective political and editorial pressures. As the reigns of the third and fourth centuries were both outside of living memory and seemingly largely unrecorded at the time of compilation, the episodes they contain possess an importance to the compilers of the tradition that is belied by their brevity. Particular episodes show an engagement with other literary trends in the empire and suggest a reworking of material hostile to the foundational claims of the dynasty.

This study will examine two such episodes and argue that, when viewed in context, they appear to have been constructed for the purpose of inserting an episode acceptable to the fully developed Sasanian political narrative. The first chapter will be a comparison of the *Kārnāmeh Ardashir Bābakān,* a legendary (and neatly packaged) account of the life of Ardashir I, with the problematic report of Tabari who preserves detailed, very plausible material that should have been troubling to Sasanian claims. The second chapter deals with the episode of Mani's trial and execution via a comparison with an older Manichean tradition. It shall examine how the scene may have been developed with reference to hostile Manichean and Christian *topoi* that were problematic and offensive to the religious positions of the later dynasty.

1. Sources

This thesis considers historical works from the ninth to twelfth centuries written in Arabic or Persian, primarily Tabari's *History of the Prophets and Kings* (f.839-923)*,* the *History* of Tha'alibi (f.961-1038) and Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāmeh* (finished 1010), though other works are also used, such as the histories of Ya'qubi (d. c.905), Dinawari (d. c.894-903), the summary of Hamza al-Isfahani (d. before 970), Ibn Balkhi's *Fārsnāmeh* (written before 1116) and Bal'ami's translation of Tabari (c.963). In one case it uses a Middle Persian text represented by a single manuscript dating from the fourteenth century but representative of a much older tradition.[1] Inscriptional evidence seems to have been largely ignored by the compilers of the Sasanian tradition but does contain relevant information, particularly where it contradicts the literary accounts. The position of the *Šāhnāmeh* as a historical text, or even trustworthy

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[1] Cerreti (2012).

reflection of the literary tradition, is somewhat liminal, with some scholars mistrusting it completely.[2] Davidson, for example sees this work as largely based on an oral tradition, its references to written antecedents being appeals to authority and the "*Book of Kings*" a largely poetic construct.[3]

While Davidson's observation that Ferdowsi is a link in a living tradition and rejection of Nöldeke's assumption of a purely literate context are points well made, for the sections dealing with the early Sasanians, the strong influence of oral-formulaic methods seems unlikely. The narratives contained in these works regarding the third and fourth centuries, are *roughly* similar and indicate some unity of source material. In addition, the poorly sourced reigns in Ferdowsi's narrative of this period are equally poorly sourced in Tabari and Hamza.[4] Further, there are strong indications that Sasanian king lists at least were integrated into those of the fictional dynasties of the Iranian tradition via written accounts.[5] The counter arguments are convincing that, for the early Sasanian era at least, the *Šāhnāmeh* does in fact have some basis in text. In any case, there is certainly *no* text extant that can be described as an unadulterated redaction of a Sasanian source. The problem of change within a living tradition, highlighted by Davidson, is somewhat applicable to the histories as well, given their opaque transmission in the early Islamic period.[6]

2. Periodisation of content

There is a tendency in scholarship to view the Sasanian historical tradition as most useful from the fifth century onwards. Pourshariati for example, concludes that the accounts of the earliest Sasanians are too vague to be of any use to her largely prosopographical study.[7] Along with Shahbazi and Huyse she notes that an explosion of useful detail occurs closer to the time of Khosrou I, though it is not until Yazdegird I that she finds enough material to even begin an analysis![8] Howard-Johnson likewise states that the tradition says nothing about Sasanian society until, again, Khosrau I.[9]

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[2] For the arguments and a defence of Ferdowsi as a source, see Rubin (1995), p.234 *ff*.

[3] See chapter 2 of *Poet and Hero*, Davidson (1998), p.29 *ff*., *contra* Nöldeke (1979), pp.62-7.

[4] The reigns between Shapur I and Shapur II, for example, present little more than coronation speeches in all three sources. A telling exception being the universal presence of the trial of Mani, something discussed in Chapter 2.

[5] The poem's recent translator Davis is largely in agreement with Davidson, but he does think that Ferdowsi used written sources in the "historical" section of his work, Davis (1996), pp.48-9. It should be noted that regardless of the orality or otherwise of Ferdowsi's deep history, it is connected somehow to a written tradition as the presence of Pishdanians and Kayanids in the king-lists and chronologies of Hamza, Biruni and others indicates.

[6] Safa (2011), p.91, Robinson (2003), p.18, *f*.

[7] Pourshariati (2008), pp.58-9.

[8] *Ibid*. pp.59-60 cf Huyse (2008), p.151 & Shahbazi (1990), pp.213-215.

[9] Howard-Johnston (2008), pp.119-20.

This division is a useful one as it highlights a rupture in Sasanian recollection of their ancestors and forces an appraisal of the tools and intent of the compilers when dealing with events outside living memory at the time of composition. The limited literacy and long persistence of oral transmission in Sasanian society needs also to be considered.[10] Oral traditions not only reduce history to two points, the far distant past and the now, but also continuously and consciously appraise and discard material; moreover, the construction of the past tends to be idealizing and "useful" to the present.[11] Thus the third and fourth centuries are assumed to have been a fairly blank slate for sixth century editors who seem to have had very little written Persian material for this period except brief notices of regnal dates or cities built.

3. Evidence of a base in chronicle

While the presentation of the reigns of the early Sasanians in later literary sources is usually sparse, their form supports structural arguments supposing that some kind of chronicle, probably an "official" one, lies at their base. In an examination of the "Persian" material of the Byzantine writer Agathias, Cameron concluded that some of it was very likely to have originated in a Persian archive.[12] That much of this material was concerned with dates and that these harmonises relatively well with those in the Perso-Arabic tradition was one of the bases on which Huyse theorized that Agathias' ultimate source was some kind of bare record and the framework around which collected and edited stories were wrapped.[13]

If this is admitted, then the minimalist reigns of the late third and early fourth centuries, presented most fully by Tabari and Ferdowsi, start to tell us something interesting. The case in point is that attached to Narseh (r.293-302). This king, despite deposing his great nephew and leaving a quite large inscription by way of excuse, disappears almost entirely from the literary record.[14] What little is recorded (an accession speech in praise of wisdom and a promise to protect tradition followed by a coda giving the length of rule) was probably the compilers' starting point: a bare chronicle entry given as nothing else was remembered or

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[10] Huyse (2008), *passim*.
[11] Finnegan (1971), 198-9. On the cultural limitations of oral histories see Vansina (1961), pp.171-2.
[12] Cameron (1969/70), p.70.
[13] Huyse (2008), pp.149-52.
[14] Disappearances like this have caused Shahbazi to note that Sasanian historiography completely neglected royal inscriptions, see Shahbazi (2003). In another indication of the uninspiring nature of Narseh's reign to later singers and compilers, Hamza al-Isfahani, summarizing from a picture book of Sasanian kings, gives no information (not even a proverb!) besides what Narseh's portrait looked like, see Hamza, p. 37. Notable also is the habit of assuming Narseh to have been Bahram III's *son*!

deemed worthy of remembrance. This pattern is marked in the shorter early reigns but also present in more expansive ones and even in those of kings closer to the sixth century.[15]

Throne speeches represent a negotiation of the Sasanians' ideological absolutism and a Parthian inheritance of a consultative, or at least quasi-elective *ideal* of rule.[16] Narseh's inscription, which portrays the king submitting his qualifications to a council of the leading men in the state, shows that these may have had some resemblance to the actual coronation rites of Sasanian kings.[17] As Hamza's summary, with its mottoes and *memento mori* shows, royal biography must also have been influenced by wisdom literature; the throne speech was, like a royal epitaph, a suitable place for a *bon mot*.[18] In either case the throne speech stands as a readily identifiable convention within the Sasanian tradition, a literary formula expressing the ideal beginning to a king's reign.

4. Composition derived from structural features

Identification of a formulaic baseline, derived from archival sources and literary convention combined with a close reading of the fuller descendant texts of the Sasanian tradition suggests an editorial method that shows very close similarities with theories describing the construction of Medieval European literature. Best seen in those kings such as Shapur II or Bahram V who double as folk heroes, the arrangement of events inside reigns is episodic: a collection of discrete stories poorly transitioned with minimal logical or temporal relevance to each other. Such episodic structure may be expected from Tabari whose models are the *hadith* of Islamic jurisprudence, but Ferdowsi, Tha'alibi and others also display it.[19]

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[15] Nöldeke noticed this feature long ago, see Nöldeke (1979), p.24. It is quite prevalent to use only Tabari, the reigns of Yazdegird II (r. 439-57), (Tabari 871-2 [pp.106-9]) and Balash (r. 484-88), (Tabari 883 [pp.126-7]) possess this feature. It even appears at the coronation of Khosrau II's daughters Boran (r. 630-1) (Tabari 1064 [pp.403]) and Azarmidokht (r. 630) (Tabari 1065 [pp.406])!

[16] Wieshöfer (1969), pp.109-115.

[17] Narseh states that the coronation of Bahram III proceeded without the permission of the grandees while characterizing his own as one invited by them, NPi: 5, 16, 32, 73-90 [p.29, 33-4, 41-3 & 62-70] shows his "election" at their hands.

[18] That the throne-speech is influenced by *andarz* or wisdom literature was also the opinion of Boyce (1968), p.59. Hamza gives similar sounding epitaphs for Bahram IV, V and Khosrau I Hamza, pp.39-40 & 44.

[19] On the "legalistic" methods of Islamic historiography, exemplified by Tabari, see Robinson (2003), pp.96-7. On the supposed Modern Persian source for Ferdowsi see Nöldeke (1979), pp.62-7, & 98 & Khaleghi-Motlagh (2012). Consider the following transition, moving from victory over the Romans to the trial of Mani:
    "He built another city in Sham, named Piruzshapur
    At Ahvaz he built a third city, with a hospital and palace
    They called it the lair of his prisoners, his prisoners found rest and contentment there
    Fifty years of his rule passed, in which time he had no equal
    There came a loquacious man from China, there was no painter like him on the earth"
ShN: VI pp.333-4, lines 464-8.

Safa imagined the transmission of the *Khwāday-nāmag* as a process of collecting and compiling from many discrete sources.[20] Ryding outlines an analogous situation in the construction of Medieval Western European poetic cycles; here various unrelated stories about a single historical or fictitious character were collected and stitched together; in what he called an "accordion" structure, a frame narrative may in some cases give a beginning and end to a cycle, serving as fixed points between which unconnected, once independent episodes were slotted in.[21] In the parent texts of the Sasanian derived material the coronation speech and the reign length and sometimes list of cities seem to have served a similar function.[22] The analogy to Medieval legendary and historical narrative is all the more attractive as Persian historical literature is likely to have shared its general lack of interest in causality, openness to legendary material, wish to entertain or edify, and expandable nature.[23]

5. Orality and feedback

When searching for the roots of this episodic material, and sometimes the tradition in general, scholars refer to an "oral tradition" for which the *locus classicus* is Boyce's 1957 article on the Iranian minstrel tradition.[24] Indeed, the normative outlook and concentration of episodes around kings deemed inspiring or important strongly indicates a period of oral transmission for much of our material. Unfortunately the obscurity of such material forbids precise analysis. The lessons of Davidson's analysis of Ferdowsi are therefore more broadly applicable; we see here no one way movement from performance to text but rather stories most likely developed in a specific performative context, committed to text then remade over and over in text and performance alike.[25] Though one translation of the *Khwāday-nāmag*, that of Ibn Moqaffa (c.721-57), is likely to have been especially influential in defining and structuring the tradition into the Islamic period, Hamza's list of variants, differences within

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[20] Safa (2011), pp.85-6.
[21] Ryding (1971), pp.43-48 & 53-61.
[22] For Wisdom literature see Yarshater (1983), p.399, & Tafazzoli (2010/2011 B), p.180 *ff.*
[23] Compare Yarshater (1983), pp.366-370, 393-7 & 400-1 to Partner's chapter on the literary form of 12th century English histories for example, Partner (1977), pp.194-211. A telling methodological and psychological analogy may be found in contemporary Byzantine literature. At around the same time that the *Khwāday-nāmag* was founded, Byzantine chronographers developed a genre quite different to that of the classicizing historians. In their hands history became a string of sometimes trivial, stories with regurgitations of earlier texts forming the historical framework. The various iterations of these works devoured each other, growing successively larger and more derivative. This was a) due to the expectation that the compiler produce the same set of known stories over and over, and b) perversely, seen to guarantee the truth of the material through an appeal to the compiler's plagiarism. This last claim was, however disingenuous; comparisons between Byzantine chronicles shows that even mild editorial decisions expressed the editor's political or religious bias. As Scott has shown, even custom-built propaganda stories could be used, with suitable editing, by both sides of a single polemic. See Scott (2009) and (2010). This stew of creative banality may provide some indication of what the Sasanian tradition might have become had it not been cut short in the seventh century.
[24] Boyce (1957).
[25] Davidson (1998), pp.63-6.

our sources and the "movable" nature of a number of episodes indicates that this work did not completely immobilize it.[26]

While a reliance on legendary material within the Sasanian tradition is well known, some unfortunate choices of phrase (the use of "folk" or "popular") create a misleading impression of the likely character of the texts.[27] "Oral tradition" in any society is not a shapeless, uniform mass, but rather something with "genres" and "registers" of its own.[28] The transmission of any story is volatile, subject to feedback loops of expectation and highly dependent on desires of the audience at the point of reception.[29] With traditions regarding early Sasanian kings we deal with stories that in Finnegan's classification, are both *general historical knowledge* and presumably *oral literature*, that is, part of the audience's understanding of the actual past, mediated by a more formal story telling as indicated by the number of tropes involved.[30] As quasi-official or official compilation, the "oral tradition" used by the compilers at the earliest points of transmission to text was almost certainly that of an audience close to royal power, not only subject to two centuries of ideological reinterpretation, but able to change overnight.[31]

Nor are such traditions hermetic. Literacy of varying degrees can coexist with or even support oral performance, a possibility recognized, in the Iranian context, by Shayegan in his discussion of formulaic language in Iranian inscriptions and Davidson in her comparison with the modern *naqqāl*.[32] While Iranian literacy in the early Sasanian period seems to have been very constrained, the empire contained highly literate subject groups. Modern cases show that contact with textual traditions, even those in other languages, exerts a "feedback" effect in which the consistent, textual, stories of others are reprocessed according to the patterns of the host culture.[33] The South Pacific examples used by Finnegan to illustrate this process show a complimentary adaptation by previously alliterate societies to the traditions of a dominant

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[26] Whether direct translations or just recompilations with added material is impossible to tell, though some level of reinterpretation and rearrangement of the text in the post Sasanian era seems likely, see Safa (2011), pp.86-91 and the references contained within to the arguments of Rosen.

[27] Such as Yarshater (1983), p.360.

[28] Finnegan (1971), pp.195.

[29] *Ibid*, pp.200-1, "*Official traditions convey information of public importance, and for this very reason are controlled by social or political groups of people in authority*." Vansina (1961), p.84.

[30] In which "historical poetry" is rare, Finnegan (1971) pp.196-99.

[31] Vansina points out that the presence of an aristocracy, such as, in our case, the Parthian great houses, fosters the development of independent oral traditions, see Vansina (1961), pp.166-9 *cf* Shahbazi (1994), p.217.

[32] Mixture of the two is in fact quite normal and usually a question of emphasis rather than exclusion, see Finnegan (1988), pp.140-3. The possible transmission between oral literature and inscriptions, has been explored in Skjaervø (1985) & (1998) and developed by his student Shayegan who, in an indication of the hazy relationship between the written and the spoken in Iranian literature, sees Sasanian inscriptions as "transitional texts" derived in turn from an "oral" tradition popularized by a written one, see Shayegan (1999), pp. 23-8 Davidson (1994), pp.56-60.

[33] Finnegan uses the example of the Bible's impact on the traditions of the South Pacific, see Finnegan (1988), pp.117-20.

imperial power, however the Sasanian tradition *was* an imperial platform. It was not for the King of Kings to bend to the assertions of older literatures, but rather for his subjects, particularly those forming the cultural core of his state, to understand history correctly. Hence, the process was here reversed with the less literate imperial society imposing its own patterns over those of subject groups. At the same time, sub-imperial narratives could not be simply ignored.

6. Eclecticism and modularity

The reigns of the early Sasanians as recorded in the various facets of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* are less continuous, synthetic historical texts, as one would expect from a classicizing Roman historian of the same period, than highly heterogeneous collages of legends, late antique *topoi* and very partisan historical material conditioned by normative imperial assumptions and tied together by a collative method that rarely bothered to reconcile them. In some cases, the compilers, or later re-compilers, so badly lost the thread of events that they wrongly attributed or duplicated one king's deeds to the time of another.[34] Hence, due to its later handling, in turn permitted by the episodic structure of the original, Sasanian "history" of the early period has a somewhat modular form; events or episodes may sometimes be moved or repeated almost at will. Nor are tropes constrained by belonging to historical or non-historical times. This obviously leads to a great deal of repetition, particularly of romantic or epic commonplaces, but has interesting consequences for historiography as very different versions of the same event may survive.[35]

It would appear also that Sasanian literary culture was generally open to outside influence. Bilingualism was likely to have been common in the empire and Syriac texts sometimes show the influence of Sasanian culture, suggesting that Persophone elites could move in more than one cultural setting.[36] Shaked has noted that a search for foreign wisdom is a motif of this

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[34] The story of Valerian for example is most probably duplicated in the reigns of Shapur I and Shapur II, see Nöldeke (1973), p.65 n.2.

[35] The reigns of the two Shapurs and their dealings with a captive emperor for example, preserve both a light, possibly "archival" (capture, build and release) version and a dark (capture, reparations, maiming then release/imprisonment) version of Valerian's captivity. The modular nature of these stories and the propensity to confuse episodes within the tradition is evident in a comparison of the treatment of this event across the tradition; *cf* Tabari 826-7 [pp.106-9] & 844-5 [pp.63-5], ShN: VI pp. 247-9, lines 75-103, & 332-3, lines, 550-7 who duplicate the story, Mas'udi and Tha'alibi who collapse it into a single event in the reign of Shapur II, *Muruj*, pp.181-6, & Tha'alibi, pp.488-9 & 527-8.

[36] Walker (2006), p.121 *ff*. The participation of Iranian nobles in religious squabbles recorded by Christians and Manichees gives some indication of the openness of the Sasanian elite to foreign ideas and perhaps, a perceived need to keep them inside the tent. A Persian noble is the means by which Mani is introduced to the king, see Lieu (1985), pp.102-3. The protagonists of Syriac *acta* are often Zoroastrian apostates such as Mar Qadah, see *The Legend of Mar Qardagh*, III, [Walker (2006), p.20]. It is perhaps notable that two kings, Yazdegird I and

period, and that foreign material was said to have been admitted to have been integrated into the "scientific" or philosophical works of the faith at least once.[37] Likewise, the king as a protector of knowledge and sponsor of inquiry appears to have been something of a *topos*.[38]

While we have no specific reference to the compilation of written history there is no reason to assume that these processes were any less open. The constituent episodes of the early Sasanians are not limited to the Iranian tradition: a Syriac death of Julian in the reign of Shapur II for example, appears to have shaped the Sasanian portrayal of his war with Rome.[39] Indeed the late compilation and the minimalist written starting points of the Sasanian tradition may sometimes have forced its compilers to adapt material from the empire's other literatures.

In particular cases however, it was not lack of material that drove engagement with sub-imperial literatures but too much of the wrong sort. The two episodes of the early Sasanian period selected for analysis have left traces of an origin in aristocratic or religious controversy. These events are more or less universal in our sources and in both cases significant evidence of a rival narrative has been preserved; in the first case as remarkably prosaic material offered by Tabari, in the second as set pieces in Manichean and Syriac Christian religious literature.

Ormazd IV seen as over mighty and insufficiently zealous are tied to foreigners either by inclination (Yazdegird I) Tabari 848 [p.71], or descent Tabari 988 [p.295]. This possibility is developed further in Chapter 2.

[37] Shaked (1994), pp.100-1 & 105-6.

[38] There is of course the list of sacred compilations in the *Dēnkard* (translation in Shaked (1994), pp.99-103) but there are other indications. Biruni states that the (mythical) Pishdanian king Taumath is supposed to, in one Persian legend, have ordered scientific books buried to preserve them from the Deluge, while supervision of the calendar was, according to the same author, under the king's supervision Biruni p.28 & 54. In a more secular setting Khosrau I was famed enough for his learning that Agathias could sneer at it from Constantinople, Agathias, *Hist*, II.28.

[39] Nöldeke, in his commentary on Tabari, rejected this, believing this story to have effaced the actual Persian tradition later, see Nöldeke (1973), p.59 n.4 and Bosworth (1999), p.58 n.165. There is no doubt that the story is ultimately Christian: the narrative appears to follow a Syriac novel about Julian and one feature, and Jovian's refusal to lead a non-Christian people is also found in much older church histories, see Gollancz (1928), p.211, Socrates, *HE* III.22, Sozomen, *HE* VI.3 & Theodoret, *HE*. IV.1.4. Yet Tabari follows this *Julian Romance* fairly closely. Mas'udi also uses this material, though in his section devoted to Roman emperors, while offering, like Tabari, a separate, disguised Shah/captive Caesar in his section on Shapur II see *Muruj*, pp.181-6 & 323-4. Ferdowsi by contrast seems to blend these separate stories together. He appears to preserve something of the capitulation of Jovian and the ceding of Nisibis (he knows Julian and Jovian's names), but offers a militantly Zoroastrian, *stridently* anti-Christian reading that differs greatly from that presented by Tabari *et al,* ShN: VI, pp.325-33, lines 443-566. The identification of Rome with Christianity is total. The reader is, for example, extremely unlikely to find Julian rallying his soldiers holding a large cross in any other text. This would suggest a poetic rewrite, were it not for the fact that Hamza alludes to Shapur's entrance into Roman churches in his summary, see Hamza, p.38, suggesting that anti-Christian activities may have originally been part of Shapur II's *gestae,* perhaps in opposition to the overly fraternal relationship presented between Jovian and Shapur in the *Julian Romance*, see Gollancz (1928), pp.235-7. An earlier hymn against Julian by Ephrem the Syrian also attaches a suspicious respect towards Christianity to Shapur in, see *Hymns* [pp.240-2].

IV. Case Study I: The rise of Ardashir I

The foundational claim of Sasanian historiography is that the accession of Ardashir I was no revolution but a restorative event, the return of a legitimate line of kings broken by foreign interference in Iranian affairs. It is an indication of the tradition's marriage to the needs of the Sasanian dynasty that Ardashir is its first "historical" individual. As the point at which a completely legendary and legitimizing deep history was welded onto contemporary politics, Ardashir's life was a particularly important historical moment for later compilers. The dynasty's founder was his descendants' link to their mythologies of rule, his actions justified through his role as a *restitutor orbis*.

It is therefore significant that more than one version of events survives; more so that one of these, a probable compound of several sources, paints a less than flattering portrait. There are no less than three broad narratives extant that describe the accession of Ardashir extant. Despite the presence of shared features, these take dissimilar approaches to very basic details of Ardashir's family and rise.

The presence of such a difference suggests a movement of the official line over time *and* the persistence of hostile, or at least liminal, independent episodic traditions into the Islamic period. Both processes highlight the failure of Sasanian reconstruction to monopolise the historical narrative at what was its weakest point. A failure emphasized by the attention paid in one strand, to the figure of Ardavan V, the last Arsakid, and his loss of legitimacy. Preoccupation with transfer of divine right has the unintended consequence of contradicting a pillar of late Sasanian ideology, that the kings of the Arsakid period were no real kings at all. The memory of Ardavan reconfirms that Arsakid claims were a live issue throughout the Sasanian era. This implicates the surviving Parthian elite as the both the holders of this memory and the primary target of Sasanian propaganda. On the other hand, the treatment of Ardashir's own family, particularly his ancestor Sasan, reveals the dynasty's origins to have become a liability to the later form of its own ideology. The memory of Ardashir became, in consequence, the site of confrontation between two uncomfortably allied blocs.[1]

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[1] What follows owes much to his hypothesis of Shahbazi regarding competing strands within the tradition, particularly his theories of aristocratic variations, see Shahbazi (1990), pp.215-8.

1. Sources

Surviving Perso-Arabic narratives of the rise of Ardashir fall into three rough categories, though some overlap of particulars is to be expected in all three cases: a minimalist and "safe" account; a problematic "realistic" account offered by Tabari; and a legendary account based on a story known from its Middle Persian incarnation as the *Kārnāmag Ardašir Pābagān.*

A) The minimalist account

A minimalist version of Ardashir's rise can be found in the epitome of Hamza al-Isfahani, the *Annals* of Ibn Batriq and the *Fārsnāmeh*. Here Ardashir arises in or takes Istahkr and attacks the lesser kings around him. His motivation is, variously, Kayanid ancestry, or a religious impulse to unify and restore.[2] His methods are first letters calling for obedience then violent deposition. Ibn Balkhi and Hamza give a similar total of kings killed in this process.[3] All three accounts are light on detail offering little information about Ardashir's early life in Pars. The strongly restorative outlook of these texts and the general concordance with statements of Sasanian ideology expressed in late Sasanian documents like the *Letter of Tansar* or the *Testament of Ardashir* particularly in the emphasis given to religious unification by Hamza marks them as either official traditions or accounts highly sympathetic to official needs. Their brevity concerning Ardashir's context and their omission of Ardavan as a major figure is most interesting when the next text is considered.

B) The "realist" narrative

Tabari presents an extensive, if sometimes confused, explanation of the origins and rise of the Sasanian clan.[4] In contrast to the texts above, this author goes into some detail about Ardashir's background. Given the lack of any better literary material this "realist narrative" generally forms the basis of examinations of the life of Ardashir I.[5] As always, however, here we are bound by very limited sources and merely appearing more realistic is no guarantee of his version's accuracy or lack thereof. Further, given the occasional inconsistency it is likely

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[2] Ancestral claim is foremost in Ibn Balkhi, see *Fārsnāmeh* pp.19-20. Hamza, like the author of the Letter of Tansar emphasizes Ardashir's religious motivation. Hamza, p.32 Ibn Batriq, like Hamza, has Ardashir summoning kings to obedience using letters before he attacks them, *cf.* Hamza p.33 (Trns) & *PG* 111: 990.
[3] Hamza and Ibn Balkhi both characterize these kings as tyrants. Hamza gives the number as ninety, Hamza, p.33 (Trns), while Ibn Balkhi says eighty, *Fārsnāmeh,* p.60.
[4] Other accounts which descend from Tabari are Ibn al-Atir (12th-13th C) and the Nihayat al-Arab (13th-14th C). The relevant sections of these are translated and compared in Widengren (1971), pp.764-72.
[5] Hence, Christensen (1944), pp.84-90, Widengren (1971), *passim,* Wiesehöfer (1986).

that Tabari offers a synthesis of various sources. Tabari's detail makes a remarkable contrast with the above three texts while the mildness of his supernaturalism and the base picture he paints of Ardashir and his family are entirely at odds with the legendary tradition represented by the so-called *Kārnāmag*.

Tabari offers two genealogies for Ardashir and a brief summary of the Sasanian restorative claim before turning to a more detailed account of Ardashir's early life that undercuts it.[6] Tabari places Ardashir in a constrained and decidedly unromantic context. Ardashir's supposed relationship to the Kayanid Dara is mentioned, however the family, including the eponymous Sasan, belongs firmly to the lesser nobility of Pars.[7] Ardashir's father Pabak, here the son of Sasan, is a junior nobleman, a subordinate of the king of Istakhr.[8] Parts of this narrative seems to appear in Dinawari but are rather summary and include few of the details included by Tabari regarding Ardashir's upbringing or the internal development of his revolt.[9]

Tabari and other followers of this narrative appear to have been drawing on sources that ran contrary to the Sasanians' self-presentation as fated national saviors projected by dynasty. Yarshater believed that this story could not possibly represent an official version for this reason and indeed, these details are unlikely to be artifacts of Sasanian reconstruction.[10] While hardly a detailed exposé of the Sasanian clan, and probably glued together from various narratives, in aggregate this account contains an inconvenient amount of unflattering detail, despite token concessions to Ardashir's royal descent and divine election.[11]

In contrast to the minimalist texts, Tabari expands on Ardashir's climb to power in Pars and as the story proceeds unedifying details emerge. Ardashir's revolt appears to have begun as a mere local power grab in which the identity of the instigator is confused by a horoscope and theophanic dream. In what looks like a clumsy weld between sources, this episode of explanatory prophecy is followed by a contradictory "letter". After becoming king of Istakhr (at Ardashir's insistence we are assured), Pabak, evidently unaware of his son's destiny, writes to Ardavan to gain recognition for the clan's *fait accompli*.[12] In the same letter Pabak

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[6] Tabari 813-14 [pp.2-3]. Dinawari also leaves out this legend (for translation see Widengren (1971), pp.772-3).
[7] Tabari 814-15 [pp.3-6].
[8] Tabari 814 [p.5]. The exact origin or origins of Tabari's account are not specified but Tabari does mention the eighth-century writer Hisham ibn al-Kalbi as the source for the name of this king.
[9] Widengren (1971), pp.772-3.
[10] Yarshater (1983), pp.476-7, also Safa (2011), p.91. Frye, on the other hand, believed that this *was* the official version, see Frye (1964), pp.48-9.
[11] That is Ardashir's horoscope and dream of his right to rule, something discussed below, see Tabari 815 [p.7].
[12] The rebellion in all likelihood started with Pabak and not Ardashir. Certainly the sudden emergence of Shapur in Pabak's letter argues that Ardashir was likely not the driver of events in actuality, see Wiesehöfer (1986) & Bosworth (1999), p.8, n.24. The historicity of Sasan son of Pabak is attested by coins, and also Sasanian inscriptional, see below.

requests recognition of Shapur, Ardashir's *brother*, as his heir. On Pabak's death Ardashir disobeys Shapur who goes to war with his brother before conveniently dying under a falling building.[13] In what appears to be a separate tradition, the Parthian Ardavan, in this rendition a remote figure, makes his first appearance in the story in an angry letter complaining of the kings that the Sasanian clan have overthrown and murdered while making aspersions about the ancestry of the upstart. When Ardavan is overcome and killed in battle, Ardashir then declares himself king of kings.

Tabari presents an unusually full picture of the relationship between Pabak, Shapur and Ardashir, especially as the more strongly restorative takes on these events downgrade Pabak and erase Shapur. This was a later development as Shapur I acknowledged his eponymous uncle in his inscription.[14] Thus Shapur *became* inconvenient at some point between the fourth and sixth century. Our sources seem to reflect a concern with an orderly succession in the early days of the dynasty. While Sasanian family squabbles might be given in some detail if they fell within living memory (as in the case of Khosrau II's uncles), if Narseh is any indication, earlier examples of infighting were not recorded. The presence of the founder's inconvenient older brother in a history of the tenth century argues that this was not always because such anomalies were simply forgotten.

Ardavan's letter, with its accusations of social climbing and injustice, also argues that Tabari's sources were not, ultimately, official.[15] A counter narrative must have existed, one that escaped the pull of later Sasanian reconstruction. Given the disjuncture between Shapur's appearance in ŠKZ and his disappearance in later statements of the Sasanian program it might be argued that the realist narrative simply leaked into circulation before a unified ideology was formulated. Be this as it may, someone had reason to preserve and transmit this account in the face of a sanitizing officialdom. Some indication as to why might be seen by comparison to a third version of Sasanian origins.

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[13] Tabari 816 [p.8].

[14] ŠKZ §36 [p.49]. Shapur son of Pabak is *possibly* mentioned at NPi 65 [p.58] though the text is fragmentary in both languages and this may be Narseh's father Shapur I.

[15] Such a letter appears in Tha'alibi, an account otherwise more aligned with the *Kārnāmag,* Tha'alibi, pp.479-80. The letter is almost certainly as Huff states a "literary invention" (Huff (2008), p.38) within an ancient tradition of an exchange of letters as a literary device, (Skjaervø (1998), p.99). One has to ask however *who* invented this particular exchange.

C) The Kārnāmag

The claim that Ardashir, with his Kayanid descent, merely set things to rights after the despoliation of Alexander became so developed that the *rebel* Ardashir would become a *legitimizing* figure: later writers attribute to him both political treatises and the institution of an idealized pattern of Iranian society.[16] Such circular reasoning finds expression in the minimalist narratives but blooms feverishly in the so-called *Kārnāmag* of Ardashir son of Pabak. This is an highly legendary *res gestae* of the dynasty's founder not only known to later authors, but unlike so much other Middle Persian literature actually extant in a Middle Persian text derived from a single fourteenth century manuscript.[17] This narrative may date to very early in the Sasanian era, as the Armenian historian Moses Khorenatsi (sometimes, controversially, dated to the fifth century), mentions something very like it.[18]

In this version Pabak, the "governor and king" (*mrcpᵓn štr'dᵓr: marzbān šahryār*) of Pars, an appointee of the Parthian king Ardavan, dreams of Sasan, a shepherd in his employ.[19] When Pabak asks his astrologers they tell him that Sasan or a son of Sasan will rise to kingship. Sasan admits to his descent from Dara, the last of the kings deposed by Alexander.[20] Pabak marries his daughter to Sasan and then adopts, or at least raises, Ardashir, the result of that union.[21] After adventures and romances at the court of Ardavan, Ardashir defeats his erstwhile guardian in battle and realizes his destiny by becoming king over Iran. The influence of this legend is seen in the accounts of Ferdowsi, Tha'alibi, and ibn Balkhi who repeat the story of Sasan as a shepherd and/or subordinate to Pabak amongst other features.[22]

Theories on the origin of this narrative are varied. Shaki believed this story to have been composed by partisans or well-wishers of the dynasty, and Frye, though allowing an ultimate origin in courtly performance, believed it to be the "popular" version.[23] On the other hand, Cereti believed that dynastic imperatives drove its construction.[24] Indeed, though surviving as a separate work something like the *Kārnāmag* may have been the version used by the Sasanians in at least one of their own compilations. Agathias, who seems to have had some second-hand "official" information from Sasanian archives, calls Sasan a soldier and makes

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[16] Later authors note that (then extant) works of political advice, as well as the organization of church and state were attributed to Ardashir, or his minister Tansar. See for example, *Muruj* pp.152-9, and *Fārsnāmeh*, p.61.

[17] Mas'udi speaks of a *Kārnāmag* at Muruj, pp.162, Ceretti (2011).

[18] Thompson (1978), p.217. For the problem of dating this author see Garsoïan (2012).

[19] KrN I.3 & 9-11. [pp.43-5 (MP) & 175-6 (NP)], ShN: VI pp.140-1, lines 99-115.

[20] KrN I.14-6 [pp.46 (MP) & 176-67 (NP)], ShN: VI pp.141-2, lines 116-35.

[21] KrN I.20 [pp.47 (MP) & 177 (NP)], ShN: VI pp.141-2, line 134 *f*, Tha'alibi, p.474.

[22] Ibn Balkhi makes Sasan a prince living in reduced circumstances (*zāhed šodeh bud/zāhed gašt*) but does not detail his relationship to Pabak, *Fārsnāmeh,* pp.19-20 & 60, Tha'alibi pp.473-4.

[23] Shaki (1990), p.80, Frye (1964), pp.47-9.

[24] Ceretti (2011).

Ardashir the result of wife-lending by Pabak. This seems a (hostile) variation of both the *topos* of the hidden prince and the unusual "adoption" narrative present in most iterations of the *Kārnāmag*.[25] Further, this story's convenience for the dynasty is obvious both in the strength with which it integrates Ardashir into the deep history of eternal *Erān* and communicates his divine right.

This absolute insistence on the legitimacy of the house of Sasan is a telling counterpoint to the ambivalence of the realist narrative with which it must have co-existed. Moreover, a comparison of the emphases of both suggests an engagement between the two. Conditions existed for the preservation of critical approaches to the dynasty's foundation; there is good reason to think that Ardashir's actions presented such a serious problem for the dynasty's claim to legitimacy that they were still being defended centuries later. The realist narrative shows that the *Kārnāmag* dealt with some of the shakier pillars of Sasanian ideology and in doing so can have been no mere entertainment. In places it addresses several problematic points of the realist narrative directly and may have been an episode crafted to counteract them, its use in some later works indicating limited success. Further, it develops "loyalist" aspects of Tabari's narrative, perhaps indicating that the *Kārnāmag* represents a refinement of earlier, but inadequate themes of Sasanain propaganda.

2. Killing Ardavan

As the destroyers of a long-standing royal dynasty, establishing legitimacy was a particularly severe issue for the Sasanians. Despite depicting his usurpation of Ardavan as a literal parallel of Ahura Mazda's defeat of Ahriman, Ardashir had in fact committed a grievous sin against custom. Sasanian rulers were the inheritors of a tendency common in Indo-European and Near Eastern societies alike of holding kings to be a special class of person a tendency reflected in the Sasanians' own ideology.[26] However, royal blood was sacred in the Parthian period also; the story of Shapur I's birth to a hidden Arsakid princess in the *Kārnāmag* tradition admits as much. That the house of Sasan, even in the sixth century,

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[25] Agathias, *Hist*, II.27.2-3. There is most probably an element of truth to Agathias' claims to have had access to Persian material, though one tempered by the second-hand and summary nature of his material as well as his hostility to the Persians in general. See Cameron (1969/70), pp.69-70.

[26] Widengren (1959), *passim*. Choksy (1988) *passim*, Yarshater (1983), pp.400-5. Gnoli argued that exposure to Mesopotamian practices and the practice of empire altered Achaemenid, and thereby "Persian" kingship and that an important aspect of its development. A shift from divine charisma to a supreme king backed by a god cannot be understood in an Indo-European context, while to Benveniste even the word *šāh* is indicative of another system entirely. See Benveniste (1973), pp.313-17 & Gnoli (1989), pp.95-7. Be this as it may, one should consider that much of the "Mazdean" religious complex is very old, and even under the influence of Zoroastrianism, preserved a great many of its Indo-Iranian habits (see Boyce (1975a), p.147 *ff*. On the "pagan" origin of fire temples see (1975c), pp.455-6*)*. Given this persistence it would be strange to say the least if *no* aspect of later Persian kingship was ultimately derived from Indo-Iranian *mores*.

felt the need to advertise a spurious blood connection with their predecessors by means of a story that casts Ardashir's intent as the *extermination* of Arsakes' line is yet another indication of a widespread and long lasting distaste for their act of deposition.[27] As the various minimalist narratives show, an accession without Ardavan was technically possible, and, one suspects given the Sasanian tendency to label their predecessors petty kings, preferable. The question arises as to why Ardavan is a central figure in the most expansive of Sasanian origin myths.

Ardashir's unification was almost certainly remembered differently by the scions of the old nobility. Ardashir is supposed to have campaigned in the east *after* his victory over Ardavan and Moses Khorenatsi records that the Karen, a powerful Parthian clan with links to Armenia, initially rejected his demands.[28] In his campaigns against the "petty kings" Ardashir may have attacked family cult centers and stripped symbolic rights from their aristocratic holders. In a section of the *Letter of Tansar* argued by Boyce to date to an actual third century tradition, "Tansar" defends "Ardashir" from the charge that he extinguished royal fires, stating that these were an unlawful innovation.[29] In an argument for Ardashir's orthodoxy, the same author points to evidence that he smashed images of the royal dead in Armenia.[30] Such evidence is thin but plausible; the obverse types of Sasanian coins as well as ŠKZ do indicate a strong connection between the royal estate and ceremonial fires, one with a likely Parthian pedigree.[31] Additionally, at least one Parthian era mortuary complex with statues has been found.[32]

Even if these are later pious fictions and Ardashir did not attack the dynastic infrastructures of the old aristocracy, it is still likely that he upset many powerful people. Although it is clear that the Parthian elite largely transferred their loyalty to the house of Sasan, they may well have resented being forced to do so. Sasanian use of Iranian myth must have been particularly galling to Parthian families who also claimed descent from the heroes

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[27] Shapur I's birth to a princess of the Arsacid line is a staple story of the *Kārnāmag* tradition, see KnG IX – X [pp.85-97 (MP) & 201-7 (NP)], ShN VI pp.194-8, lines 15-75. Tabari uses a version of it despite it being internally inconsistent with his narrative (in which prince Shapur is present at his father's victory over Ardavan). Tabari 823 [p.23 *ff*].

[28] For Ardashir's eastern campaigns see Widengren (1971), p. 745 *ff*. Widengren believed that the Parthian dynasts had accepted Ardashir by this point, but the north-east was a Parthian stronghold (see Pourshariati (2008), pp.37-43) and the Karen (who went on to prosper under the Sasanians, see *ibid*, pp.112-18) may not have been the only Parthian family with initial reservations, see Thompson (1978), p.218.

[29] *LoT*, pp.16-7 & 47. The *Letter* is of course a very difficult source, being, at the very least, extensively re-edited after the time of Khosrau I then retranslated See Boyce's introduction, *ibid*, p.1 *ff*.

[30] Boyce (1979), p.107. The reference is to Moses Khorenatsi, see Thompson (1978), p.225.

[31] Göbl (1983), pp.327-8. For evidence of sacrificial rites centered on fires in the Parthian period see Strabo, XV.3.14. For the connection between these and royalty, see *Parthian Stations*, XI. For the likely antiquity and of such a connection see Boyce (1975c), p.455 & 457 & Panaino (2009), *passim*.

[32] Invernizzi (2007), pp.164-168 & *passim*.

of old.[33] Such families were likely to have cherished memories of the Parthian period and seen the Sasanians' as obscure usurpers of ancient traditions. In such an environment the tyrant slaying unifier of the minimalist versions was inadequate. Ardashir's actions had to be reshaped and justified within the context of his relationship to the man he deposed.

Although sometimes localized and regarded as merely the most powerful of the regional princelings, even the *Kārnāmag* admits that Ardavan was something more. Though the sources often state that Ardashir demanded he be called a *Šāhānšāh*, they clearly show Ardavan behaving as one. In both the realist and *Kārnāmag* traditions Ardavan has the power to appoint and command lesser kings; the Pabak of the *Kārnāmag* ruled at Ardavan's pleasure and feared his wrath. Tabari indicates that Ardavan was not only Pabak's overlord, he possessed rights over the foundation of cities and the power to confirm or deny appointments, both pointedly ignored by Pabak and Ardashir.[34] While we cannot know the veracity of these specific rights, the general system of a great king acting as overlord to lesser dynasts corresponds to what we understand of Parthian "feudal" traditions and reflects Sasanian practice wherein much of this Parthian system seems to have remained in place.[35]

Both the realist and the *Kārnāmag* narratives take place inside this hierarchy of overlord and vassal. The difference is that the realist narrative, with its ambiguous instigator, offers no real excuse for Sasanian actions. In fact Pabak's letter to Ardavan admits that Pabak/Ardashir had knowingly upset the order of things and now hoped to salvage a place *within the Parthian order*. It is therefore interesting that in the *Kārnāmag* Pabak is cast as a loyal, or at least careful, subject; despite knowing Ardashir's destiny he is at pains to obey his overlord and temper his son's dangerous enthusiasm.[36] There is no possibility that the rebellion could have taken place at his instigation as the plot hinges on Ardashir's escape from Ardavan's palace *after* his destiny is foretold. As if to make sure, the version reported by Ferdowsi has Pabak dead before this happens.[37]

It is telling, therefore, that Sasanian deference is overturned only by proof given to Ardavan himself that his reign was over. The transference of royal authority is literally written into the heavens and Ardashir made the agent of fate. So strong is the association with prophecy that even the hostile and summary version given by Agathias makes Pabak an

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[33] If Boyce is correct then the Sasanians appropriated the aristocracy's stories for their own use, see Boyce (1954), p.47 *ff.*
[34] Tabari 816 & 817 [p.8 & 11].
[35] Pourshariati (2008), p.37 *ff.*
[36] KrN I, 40-4 [p.179 (MP) & 51-2 (NP)], ShN p.147 lines 203-6.
[37] ShN VI pp.149, line 232.

astrologer.[38] Ardavan's interrogation of the astrologers, like Pabak's dreams, is an announcement, in which the interpretation of signs is left to specialist figures with access to "objective" knowledge.[39] Doubt is silenced both by the prestige of astrology and the movement of these omens away from the person of Ardashir, who has to be told of them.

In fact the story as told by the *Kārnāmag* is studded with additional supernatural communication; by the time the *Khwarenah* makes an appearance incarnated as an animal, it seems not at all out of place.[40] The reader has after all, been guided to this point by a string of exposition delivered by way of dreams, astrologers, and oddly well-informed bystanders announcing Ardashir's rule.

In contrast, the realist version turns the story's supernatural features inward. The astrologers report not to Ardavan but to Ardashir himself. It is Ardashir, not Pabak who dreams of his great destiny. In a moment somewhat akin to Constantine's vision of the cipher of Christ, Ardashir sees a messenger of God in his dreams.[41] This is a much weaker application of the legitimizing power of portents than appears in the *Kārnāmag* and one bound, since this vision is the trigger for Ardashir to begin attacking the kings round him, to the tradition of a local revolt in Pars. While relating such an episode superficially backs the new king, it also allows doubt as to his motives. Though astrology sanctions Ardashir's actions in both narratives, the *Kārnāmag* enlarges its role making it a core part of the narrative. The entire astrological element of the realist narrative on the other hand, has, like the ancestry that begins it, an air of hasty concession.

That the *Kārnāmag* represents a reactive, or at least developed, narrative targeted at aristocratic nostalgia is suggested also by its depiction of the relationship between Ardavan and Ardashir. In the realist narrative the young Ardashir is raised by a eunuch in the service of his father's overlord (who is Gočir, king of Istakhr, *not* Ardavan) before taking over his position.[42] The *Kārnāmag* instead moves a portion of Ardashir's upbringing to the court of Ardavan, a move that eases the construction of the imperial claim. As Frye has pointed out, here the *Kārnāmag* has parallels to the legend of the birth and life of Cyrus and may represent

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[38] Though interestingly also, "*a cobbler by profession and a person of no social consequence*" Agathias, *Hist*, II.27.1.
[39] Despite the prestige of astrology in the Sasanian period, the astrological scenes in the Middle Persian *Kārnāmag* are more likely to be literary artifacts than actual reports, see Panaino (1994).
[40] That is the "kingly glory" or "divine charisma" the symbol of the king's right to rule, see Gnoli (1999).
[41] Lact, *De Mortibus*, XLIV.5
[42] Tabari states that this position was as an *arqbed* which should mean something like "castellan", though may have been something more, Tabari 815 [p.6 & n.15]. Bal'ami has Ardashir inheriting the *malaki* of Darabgerd from the Eunuch, which may indicate Bal'ami understood this to be a sub-kingship, see Bal'ami p.876.

an adaptation of an old epic type.[43] The interlude at Ardavan's court provides a regal context in which the intrinsic excellence of the prince can be recognized through royal activities. However, unlike the case of Cyrus or Romulus and Remus, the Sasanian platform of Kayanid restoration and Parthian illegitimacy complicates the inevitable blood link, which has to be presented *post facto* in the linked episode of the Arsakid princess. Hence the entire episode becomes not one of familial reunion, but demonstration. In the *Kārnāmag* Ardashir's blood alone makes him more legitimate than the petty kings of his time, but this legitimacy is manifested in his inherent excellence. This is recognized by Ardavan, who called the boy to court himself, and then demonstrated during a hunt, that most symbolic of royal activities.[44]

Ardavan's angry defence of his own son in response to Ardashir's assertion of his rights during this hunt is emblematic. Unlike Cyrus, Ardashir is meant not as a long-lost prince but rather as a living portent of the end of the rule of the petty-kings. The Ardavan of the *Kārnāmag,* we suspect, believes Ardashir's claim to be true; not because of his horoscope but because he has recognized something kingly in the young man.[45] If enhanced astrology serves to move incriminating information away from Ardashir, then the court romance, by bringing him to the centre of Parthian rule, obviates the constrained geography and gross insubordination of the realist narrative while cutting Pabak and Shapur from the frame. There was one family member, however, who could not be removed so easily.

3. Hiding Sasan

Because the central theme of Sasanian propaganda was a restorative unification narrative, Sasan was a keystone of the story the dynasty wished to tell. This was, however, no settled proposition; Tabari's minor nobleman is no romantic shepherd-prince.[46] In fact the only reference to this legend in Tabari is highly ambiguous and may be read instead as an attack on the obscurity of the Sasanian line. Significant too is the way the *Kārnāmag* tradition distances Sasan and therefore Ardashir, from Pabak, by means of marriage and adoption. Again, it is probable that no such arrangement was known in the early Sasanian period; Shapur I calls Pabak his grandfather, while Tabari's sources recorded Sasan as Pabak's *father*.[47] The

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[43] Frye (1964), pp.47-8.

[44] KrN I.32-3. [pp.50 (MP) & 178 (NP)], ShN VI p.145 lines 176-81, Tha'alibi, p.475. For the significance of the hunt in Sasanian iconography, see, Canepa (2009), p.157 *f.* The Parthian nobles were, Tacitus tells us, disgusted that Vonones, their Roman-raised king, did not hunt, see Tac, *Ann*, II.2.

[45] Something his letter ordering Pabak to send the boy to him foreshadows, KrN, I.24-5 [pp.48-9 (MP) & 177-88 (NP)], ShN VI p.143 lines 145-150,Tha'alibi, p.475.

[46] Daryaee believes that several different Sasans were concocted during the Sasanian period before an image was settled. This would explain the mismatches in Tabari, Daryaee (2010), pp.241.

[47] ŠKZ §1 [Huyse (1999), p.22]. Of course Pabak would be Shapur I's grandfather even if the tale told in the *Kārnāmag* were true. But one would have to imagine a particularly compelling reason for mentioning one's

question arises as to why other accounts of the rise of the dynasty largely ignore the relationship between Sasan and Pabak or completely refigure it. The contrast again flags that Tabari's sources included unapproved versions of Sasanian history. It also suggests that the attention paid by the *Kārnāmag* tradition to the intricacies of Ardashir's parentage was an attempt to answer a dangerously general knowledge that the dynasty arose from no exalted stock.

The identity of Sasan and his relationship to Pabak and Ardashir is a matter of dispute.[48] The genealogies offered by the historians are, it need not be said, products of Sasanian propaganda. His rank is slightly easier to theorise. Sasan is listed in ŠKZ as *Khwadāy* but tellingly, not *šāh*.[49] Tabari is somewhat contradictory but likewise makes him less than royal. Given the difference in nomenclature, it is very unlikely that he was of equal rank with Pabak, who it should be remembered had, according to Tabari, *seized* his crown.[50] Sasan may have been a nobleman or local magnate, but he is highly unlikely, at least on the strength of the evidence we have, to have been a petty-king.[51] Implicit in Tabari's telling therefore is a violation of established hierarchy. It is hard to disagree with Yarshater's characterization of this Pabak as an "ambitious ingrate".[52]

Ardavan's angry response to Ardashir's presumption is an interesting feature in this regard. In a historiography intent on projecting a strict hierarchy this is a clear accusation of social climbing, so much worse because we lack all but the scantiest justification for Ardashir's actions in the first place. Ardashir is the "son of a Kurd" a later ethnic slur implying a bandit or rustic.[53] A version of the same taunt appears in Dinawari naming Sasan as a shepherd.[54] One might argue that these are just reflections of the *Kārnāmag* tradition of Sasan as a prince in disguise, but Tabari contradicts his own, and the *Kārnāmag's,* version of the birth of Shapur I by having prince Shapur kill Ardavan's secretary at the battle of Hormozdagan, seemingly as payback for the insult, making this reading problematic and suggesting the letter

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maternal but not *paternal* grandfather, particularly as Tabari's account indicates the existence of hostility towards Pabak.

[48] Shaki argues that the tradition carried by Tabari, that Sasan was Pabak's father is true. On the other hand no exact relationship is specified and it is very possible that he may simply have been a remote, or even mythical ancestor, as postulated by Frye, cf. Frye (1983), pp.117 & Shaki (1990), pp.84-5.

[49] That is as "lord" not "king", the title borne by Pabak and his son Shapur, see ŠKZ §36 [p.49].

[50] Something notably glossed over in the *Kārnāmag* tradition where Pabak is Ardavan's appointed king or governor of Pars before Sasan arrives. KrN I.3, [p.43 (MP) & 175 (NP)], Shn VI p.139 line 81, Tha'alibi, pp.473-4.

[51] *Ibid,* pp.244-5. This seems also to be the conclusion drawn by Tabari's translator Bal'ami who says of Sasan: *malek nabud valikan ān hameh deyeh hā va rustā rā mehtari va savari kardi.* (*He was not a king, but the chief and leader over a group of villages*). Inserted before Sasan's link with the fire temple at Istakhr, this is not an interpretation found in the source text, cf. Bal'ami p.875 & Tabari 814 [p.4].

[52] Yarshater (1983), p.476.

[53] Tabari 817 [p.11 & n.39.]

[54] Widengren (1971), p.772.

does not arise from there.[55] The exchange of letters may represent an earlier layer of Sasanian mythmaking, assuming it was originally attached to a Sasan-the-shepherd narrative, but it would seem strange in this case, that Tabari did not mention such a narrative and that Ardavan gets the better half of the argument.

Elsewhere "Tansar" is made to answer the criticism that the king of Tabaristan's mythical lineage was just as glorious as that of Ardashir indicating some tension in aristocratic circles regarding Sasanian use of the epic past.[56] There are other clues that Sasanian illegitimacy remained an issue. Bahram Chobin's speech to Khosrau II in the *Šāhnāmeh* has already been mentioned, but an aside in the *Dēnkard* defending Ardashir's worthiness for rule is another indication that the house of Sasan, and its priestly backers were on the defensive.[57] We might therefore imagine the traditions used by Tabari as parts of a wider, aristocratic critique, one with especial emphasis on the "lowly" origin of the dynasty's namesake and the misbehavior of his progeny. It is interesting to consider whether a rural origin in the "gentry" of Pars caused the old houses to attach to Sasan epithets as shepherd or bandit.[58] This critique played out against the backdrop of a struggle for the ownership of *Erān's* mythic past as it was being subsumed into a dynastic history.

Whereas the problem of Ardavan's memory had to be addressed by expanding his role, the *Kārnāmag* strips Sasan of detail before quickly cutting him out entirely. The process is one of mystification by which Sasan, probably an only posthumously famous local heavy of no great significance becomes the carrier of exalted blood. His usurping descendant Pabak, too well known to be discarded but too infamous to own, is made peripheral to the Sasanian claim. A safe distance was thus put between the legitimacy of one and the actions of the other.

4. Conclusions

The ghostly presence of baser versions of the Sasanian rise to power in Tabari suggests that the dynasty's development of a mythic self-presentation did not sweep all before it. Despite inscriptional evidence hinting that the earliest Sasanians were relatively untroubled by such information, their descendants' reconstruction could no longer brook complication. The minimal unification narratives emphasizing the pettiness of the petty kings disposed of by

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[55] Tabari, 819 [p.15].
[56] *LoT*, p.66.
[57] Adhami (2003), p.225 *ff*.
[58] As per Gnoli's characterization of the dynasty and its followers as rural and nativist, as opposed to a civic and internationalist Parthian order, see Gnoli (1989), pp.157-62.

the unifier Ardashir probably represent the first and most widespread attempts to present the dynasty's founding in their written tradition.

These stripped down accounts were inadequate. Memories of the Arsakid system obviously survived and the Sasanian attempt to downgrade their predecessors failed. Therefore the *Kārnāmag*, a tradition sympathetic to the dynasty but contradicting a tenet of their propaganda cannot, as Frye argued, be regarded as a "popular" tale.[59] Rather it appears to be an attempt to augment or even replace the minimalist narratives and quell inconvenient questions about rights and bloodlines by a whole-scale reimagining of the past as a neatly encapsulated historical romance.

A comparison of this tradition with the narratives contained in Tabari's synthesis reveals an emphasis on the figures of Ardavan and Sasan that makes little sense considering the perfunctory way each is dealt with elsewhere. That the one is subjected to demonstration while the other is the subject of a complicated adoption story suggests why. The empire's Parthian grandees had never really accepted either Ardashir's revolution or the mythology that developed from it. They had kept alive a warts and all account of the dynasty's early days that undercut the characterization of Ardashir as a fated unifier.[60]

The *Kārnāmag* tradition, as its presence in some redactions of the Sasanian narrative shows, was capable of entering "historical" narrative. Its handling of sensitive material argues that it was in fact intended to do so. The disappearance from the narrative of Shapur son of Pabak, and the reengineering of Pabak as king and foster-father in particular show a distinct movement in Sasanian constructions of a dynastic past. That a connection to either man does not seem to have bothered Shapur I suggests that the *Erān* of the early empire was a far more flexible concept than it would become. This is something that Shapur's own legacy would further demonstrate.

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[59] Frye (1964), pp.47-8.
[60] The presence of half-hearted echoes of Sasanian propaganda in Tabari, the astrology and the genealogy, should not trouble this appraisal. Leaving aside the likelihood of cross-contamination in the post-Sasanian era, the better-known legendary tradition around Constantine shows his partisans and enemies borrowing features from each other. There is no reason why the Sasanians' enemies should not have done the same. Fowden (1994), *passim*.

V. Case Study II: Mani's Trial

Whereas the first case study dealt with a persistent and fundamental ideological problem based on archaic but internal theories of legitimacy, this second highlights the problem of the defence of a reconstructed identity in the face of external critique. The presence of the trial and execution of the prophet Mani as a near ubiquitous episode in Perso-Arabic texts should be considered highly significant. Mani, a native of Mesopotamia, promulgated an adaptable and highly syncretic form of dualist Gnosticism in the late third century. He and his followers were enthusiastic missionaries, publishers and translators capable of assimilating almost any existing religious concepts into their own system, which spread rapidly as a result. Reviled by Roman and Sasanian authorities alike, Manichaeism nevertheless proved enduring. Manichean communities survived into the Islamic era. It is last heard of in South-East China where it might have survived into the early modern period.[1] In light of the control that the compilers of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* must have had over the inclusion of elements to build the dynasty's early past, an episode with the potential to draw attention to a dalliance utterly at odds with the dynasty's own propaganda has to be considered an important ideological statement.

The admission of Mani to the stock pieces of the Sasanian tradition was a reactionary process directed against rival religious narratives. Thanks to his followers' industrious production of religious texts, Mani's "conversion" of Shapur I and death at the hands of Bahram I were propagated widely with the latter taking on a ritual aspect in the festival of the *Bema*. Comparisons to Manichean and Christian material allows us to map how the trial of Mani was developed. Mani's relationships with Sasanian kings forms part of a broader literature of disputation and martyrdom current in the Sasanian era. The various iterations of this story illustrate the *Khwadāy-nāmag*'s engagement with this literature and indicate an attempt to control a story *and* a narrative form damaging to the idealized image of the empire.

I. Church-state relations

For a long time it was assumed that the Sasanian revolution contained a strongly religious impulse, bringing with it the institution of a "state church", and much about Mani was seen in the light of this assumption.[2] Mani's relationship with Shapur I has long being an irritant for

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[1] For an overview of this religion see Lieu (1985).

[2] Mani is supposed to have "…*prêchait sa nouvelle religion sous les premiers rois sassanides, en adaptant sa prédication aux idées zoroastriannes de son temps…*" or a presented a "*reformed Zoroastrianism.*" Christensen (1944), p.150 & Boyce (1979), pp.113. As Kryenbroek has stated, such explanations would make Shapur I "*remarkably ignorant of his own religion*" Kryenbroek (2008), p.11.

those, like Boyce and Christensen, who held to this view and believed in a powerful and early Sasanian "Zoroastrian" orthodoxy.[3] Frye, in an examination of the most contemporary long source for the very early Sasanian era, foreshadowed a later, more critical, turn in the scholarship in his simple observation of the lack of priests amongst the grandees of the kingdom.[4] More recent work tends to be more cautious and more sensitive to the weakness of "orthodox" Zoroastrian literature as a source for early Sasanian religious policy.

Shaked, pointing at the number of variations of Zoroastrian myth and cosmology present in later heresiographers, posits instead that a diverse and accepting Mazdean religious culture survived well into late Sasanian times, what is now recognized as Zorastrian "orthodoxy" he claims, was a product of the early Islamic period.[5] Gignoux made a of a similar case, arguing that the prelates of Pars probably only represented a local religious group, that "Zoroastrian" conceptions of kingship are largely an invention of the Islamic period, and that the Iranian tradition of linking the royal and religious estates masks a literal and figurative history of conflict.[6]

The use of the title *bag* (god or perhaps majesty) by the early members of the dynasty has led Daryaee to argue that early kings may have viewed themselves as divine in the Hellenistic sense.[7] Shaked, in noting this self-aggrandizement, used it as evidence for his theory that the

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[3] Rawlinson (1882), pp.53-60, Christensen (1944), p.141 *ff*. The strongest proponent of this view in more recent times has been Boyce, see, Boyce (1979), pp.101-2.

[4] Frye (1956), p.325.

[5] Shaked (1994), pp.97-8. Boyce strongly disagreed with Shaked's conclusions, prompting an article length response, see Boyce (1996). While a defender of a long-lived Zoroastrian orthodoxy, Boyce admits that the imposition of any orthodox doctrine can never have been fast, or total, as can be seen in the persistence of icons. See Boyce (1975b), pp.107-9. The disputations and periodic royal sponsored recompilation of religious and philosophical literature recorded in Pahalvi works as occurring at various points in the Sasanian era in which, in her own words, Zoroastrian scholars were "…*more inclined to collect and conflate than exclude*" also argues for a persistent diversity in the religious landscape, see Boyce (1979), p.135 & Shaked (994), pp.103-4. Kryenbroeck suggested that Hinduism's acceptance of variety within itself presents a useful parallel for third-fourth century Zoroastrianism/Mazdaeism, see Kryenbroeck (2008), p.13.

[6] Perhaps unhelpfully, he also offers a reconstructed, primal Indo-European mythology, in which the first king and the first priest are deadly rivals, see Gignoux (1984), pp.74-5. His theory that the close relationship of religion and monarchy is a literary standby developed in the Islamic era is rejected by Shaked at Shaked (1990), p.263. A summary of the orthodox idealisations of kingship with references can be found in Choksy (1988), pp.36-42. *Extreme* skepticism regarding an ancient "Zoroastrianism" can be found in Millar (1998), pp.523-5.

[7] Daryaee (2008), p.62.*ff*. Panaino and Soudavar argued against this idea, believing that the king was understood as a *reflection* of the gods. The argument is made from the symmetry of Sasanian investiture reliefs, which, they believe, show the king "mirrored" in a God. A linguistic argument is also made that the Middle Persian *kē čihr až yazdān*, the Greek version of which (used in Shapur I's inscription) reads ἐκ γένους θεῶν, ought to be understood to mean "whose *image* is of the Gods", "not *of the race* of the Gods" (*čihr* means both image and origin, semen or seed in Middle Persian), *cf*. ŠKZ, §1 [p.22] and see Panaino (2002), pp.278-281 & Soudavar (2003), p.41 *ff*. A supportive argument was made some time before by L'Orange who, though he addresses much later Sasanian symbolism in art, also saw the king taking on the shape of a god, L'Orange (1953), pp.42-3. If one accepts the meaning "image" for *čihr*, there is still the problem, as Daryaee points out, of the use of the title *bay/baγ*, "god" (rendered in the Greek version of ŠKZ as θεός) in the same inscription and early Sasanian coinage, which seems to indicate that a stronger sense of the king's divinity was intended. Panaino discusses *bay/baγ* in detail, admitting that it was likely a Hellenistic import but suggesting that it possessed a two-fold meaning, a divine quality applicable to both gods and kings (in their role as upholders of the proper order), but

Sasanians were not wedded to one religious tradition and presumed themselves above the prelates of their empire.[8] Such a theory seems overstated; as Boyce pointed out in her response, despite the development of official sectarian groups and the later presence of Jewish and Christian community heads at court, the kings of this dynasty were, from the beginning, strongly linked to magi and fire-temples.[9] It would be unwise however to discard Shaked's theories out of hand. Despite such clear advertisements of Mazdaeism, the structured religious hierarchy of the late Sasanian era almost certainly did not exist in the third century; any priests attached to the courts of Ardashir and his immediate successors were likely local figures, far more reliant on the new rulers than the rulers were on them.[10] It may be more accurate to say that a variety of religious options existed within the Mazdaen complex and that early kings in particular had considerable freedom of movement within it. This is certainly not the outlook of the historical tradition, which stresses the state's alliance with the "church".[11]

A more general overlap in the estates may have already existed; Widengren points to evidence of the Parthian king as sacrificer and religious initiate and states that in Iranian monarchies the king was classically seen *as* a priest.[12] The prominence of references to the goddess Anahita in early Sasanian inscriptions and the Sasanians' supposed connection to her shrine has long been noted and a priestly role for the family suggested.[13] Hence, the Iranian habit of viewing kingship as a sacred position, combined with the possible priestly origin of Ardashir's family, and his position as a conqueror whose prestige was high and followers numerous, suggests that he and his immediate successors saw themselves as above any religious organization, and that the priestly estate was not as integrated into Sasanian ideology as later texts would claim.[14]

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quite separate from the title *yazad* (which certainly indicates a god) which was at no point given to a human being, see Panaino (2002), pp.274-278 & 281-3.

[8] Shaked (1990), pp.270-1, (1994), p.110.

[9] Boyce (1996) p.17. For religious communities under the late Sasanians, see Moroney (1974), *passim*.

[10] Noted at Frye (1956), pp.324-6 and Daryaee (2008), p.67. Gignoux also made this observation regarding even the famously boastful Kartir see Gignoux (1984), pp.76-7.

[11] The connection of Ardashir to the imposition of Zoroastrianism was a feature of later Sasanian propaganda; Hamza and "Tansar" for example present him as the first of the "Magised" kings of the Persians, see *LoT*, p.37 and Hamza, p.32.

[12] Widengren (1959), pp.251-2 & 254, Boyce (1979), pp.57-60. Eddy notes that the Magi of the Achaemenid era appear to have had many of the same religious privileges as the monarch and suggested that this is an indication that they once held monarchical power themselves, see Eddy (1961), p.65, *ff*. Sasanian court protocol and the parallel development of the Sasanian *šāh* and the Roman emperor as remote, almost supernatural universal monarchs is explored in detail in Canepa (2009).

[13] Tabari 814, [p.65]. Chaumont (2011). This at least indicates that a quasi-priestly role was part of Sasanian propaganda.

[14] Thus Shaked (1994), pp.109-115 & Gnoli (1989), pp.170-4.

Between them, Shaked's theory of managerial absolutism in religious matters and Gnoli's belief that the "church" was an important but never *integral* part of the state's mythic identity, explain the presence of Mani at Shapur's court far better than those of a rigid and early orthodoxy. On the other hand, the retellings of Mani's *fate* show that a concerted effort was later made to represent the relationship between king and priests as completely harmonious, as indeed it is stated to be in much later "Sasanian" documents.[15]

2.Mani's trial – Manichean and Christian versions

Mani's position at Shapur's court has been characterized in different ways; he has, at various times, been seen as a sort of guru to the king, holding out hope of religious unification of his empire; a competitor to Kartir, himself a prophet; a "shaman" engaged in shamanistic contest with the magi; and as a mere doctor or magician.[16] Given a pattern of Manichean stories showing Mani and his followers as healers, Lieu's suspicion that Shapur and Ormazd had little interest in Mani's religion, seeing him as a technical specialist, seems much more plausible than any competing explanation.[17] Christian tradition appears to have picked up on this "medical" aspect early, developing it into a polemical tradition. The *Acts of Archelaus*, seemingly referenced by the church historian Socrates (d. c.439) have the prophet executed for his failure to heal the king's relative.[18] It seems likely that they drew this story from Manichean texts; a Middle Persian Manichean fragment has the king (probably Bahram I) accusing Mani of being a worthless doctor.[19] A possible ninth century Christian counter polemic cited by Biruni shows later Christians were aware of its Manichean origin.[20]

Manichees, unsurprisingly, attached a much greater importance to Mani's relationship to the king. The conversion of high-ranking people by Mani or his immediate disciples was a commonplace of their literature, and can be clearly seen in their surviving fragments, as well as in the reports of various later writers. Within this genre they had propagated a story in

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[15] The admonition that "Religion and Kingship are twins" is attributed to a document authored by Ardashir by Mas'udi, *Muruj,* p.162, and in the so-called "Will of Ardashir" transmitted by Ibn Miskawayh, (Relevant section translated in Dignas & Winter (2007), p.211), it is also repeated in the *Letter of Tansa*r, *LoT*, pp.33-4.

[16] Hinz (1971), pp.498-9, Russell (1990), pp.184-8, & Ort (1967), p.147.

[17] For example; Mani describes himself as a doctor in the Cologne Mani Codex, see Lieu & Gardener (2004), p.69. Mani defends his healing during his interrogation by Bahram, see Henning (1942), p.951-2 (*trans*). A Manichean missionary calls himself a "Doctor (*bzyšk*) from Babylon" in *MMTKI*: 109-11 (p.23), and Mani is imagined as a metaphorical physician in *PsBk* II. 241: 46, 1-4 *f.* Lieu (1985), p.59.

[18] *Cf. Acta Archelai.* XLVI [p.95] &, Socrates *HE*, I.22.

[19] Henning (1942), p.951 (*trans*), a Coptic homily mentions the king's grief for his sister, *Man Hom*, 46: 22-26. Biruni's *Chronography* also mention that one of the king's relatives had died at this time, Biruni, p.191. Lieu & Gardner link Bahram's anger to this presuming Mani had failed as a doctor, Lieu & Gardner (2004), p.82, n.95.

[20] Biruni, p.191, the Manichee mentioned as the author of a refutation of the Christians, "Yazdanbakht", may be the same man summoned to dispute by the caliph al-Ma'mum (813-833), see *Fihrist*, p.805. See also Ort (1967), p.178.

which Shapur was at least interested in Mani's message.[21] His position as a doctor or faith-healer is subsumed into a distinct inclination towards the miraculous as a tool of religious proof; the kings and princes of the Manichean fragments are not converted by rational proof or disputation, rather they are won over by the prophet's supernatural charisma or "magical" abilities. The former is demonstrated in a Turkic fragment from Turfan showing Mani lecturing an Ormazd (probably the then prince, later king Ormazd I) who is struck by the prophet's beauty while the latter can be seen in the various reports of miracles attached to Mani in his dealings with powerful figures.[22]

The Manichean construction of Mani at the Sasanian court, with its reliance on the supernatural to turn one man, parallels missionary methods used in the West. Manichees would not seek public disputation; though extremely well prepared to debate, at least in a Christian context, public disputation was usually a tool of the establishment *against* Manichees.[23] Instead, they preferred the posing of difficult questions to individuals in order to break their previous religious attachments. Though Mani is sometimes envisaged in front of a crowd of dignitaries, his interlocutor in royal conversion narratives is almost always the king.[24] These are admittedly fragmentary but it is striking that they obviate the magi completely. The king is converted or convinced privately or in the company of aristocrats, and the prophet's awed audience does not challenge him on doctrinal grounds. Indeed it is noteworthy that in a Sogdian fragment examined by Simms-Williams, Mani ducks the opportunity to debate, merely characterizing the priests as untrustworthy; the king on the other hand is a just man obviously ripe for proselytisation.[25]

Mani's death at the hands of Bahram, on the other hand, takes a rather different tone. Manichees staged the scene as on the model of the trial of Jesus with the magi taking the role

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[21] *Fihrist*, p.776, *PsBk II*. 241: 43, 7-12, & Lieu & Gardner (2004), pp.76-7.
[22] Shimin et al (1987), p.53 (trans, lines 36-40 of fragment). In *MMTKI*: 37-64 (p.21) Mani discusses theology while levitating in front of a king, while in *MMTKI*: 1596-1603 (p.103), Mihrshah, king of Mesene and brother of Shapur is given a foretaste of paradise. It is likely that Mani was targeting the most important people he could find. His success in winning them over, however, must have been exaggerated by his followers. Given that letters of protection and permission to preach are mentioned elsewhere, it seems probable that this targeting of the powerful was not so much proselytism as insurance; by securing the tolerance of the powerful Mani ensured he and his students could not fall afoul of local opposition within the Sasanian empire, for protection given by Shapur, see, Lieu & Gardner (2004), p.75, *MMTK:* 1651-8, *Fihrist*, p.776. The protection given by Ormazd is less well preserved, see *Man Hom*, 42: 15-30 (text fragmentary but Mani seems to preach after his meeting indicating success), both kings are mentioned in Mani's defence at *Man Hom*, 48: 7-13 and *PsBk*. II. 241: 5-10. Mani may have targeted the powerful to secure royal access, Al-Nadim tells us that Shapur's brother is the means by which Mani gains the king's ear, Fihrist, p.776, Simms-Williams (1990), p.285 (*trans*).
[23] Lim (1995), pp.93-4 & 103-4.
[24] As in *MMTKI*: 2120-43, in which it appears that several people (including a Bahram!) have gathered around the throne of Ormazd I. This fragment is very incomplete however.
[25] Simms-Williams (1990), p.285 (*trans*).

of the Jewish authorities.[26] The image transmitted is a rather pathetic one; the prophet produces no miracle and instead falls back on an appeal to the authority of the protection granted by Shapur and Ormazd.[27] There is a trace of disputation in some versions of Bahram's interrogation in Mani's rather unsafe assertion that he, not the king, had access to the truth.[28] Generally, though, his failure as a doctor has exposed him to denouncement by the magi. Notice however how power is distributed: the king may now be the dupe of "liars" or "slanderers", but he is still driving events.[29]

Manichees therefore constructed their prophet's interviews with the Sasanians in one of two stereotypical ways: either as that of guru and student, or, in the case of his execution, as an episode with a recognizable religious parallel. The first probably served as a haigiographic gloss on a prudent measure or mere employment; the second as a kind of passion play. In neither does the prophet have to make a serious defence of his assertions; in the first he lectures, in the second he is reduced to defending his actions. While Christians seem to have developed a polemic tradition based on the latter, historians of the Islamic era, with access to texts from Christians Manichees and Persians alike present a complex knot of interpretations of this episode. It has been argued that Mani's death did not, in contrast to the West, trigger a hostile Iranian literature, but this assertion should be doubted.[30] The Perso-Arabic stagings of Mani before the Shah suggest that a propagandistic reworking of older stories does indeed lie at their base.

3. Mani's trial – Perso-Arabic versions

The earliest extant universal historian in Arabic, Ya'qubi (d. c905), positions Mani twice in his narrative of the Persian kings. In the first instance he tells us that Shapur I listened to Mani for ten years before rejecting his message and forcing the prophet to take refuge in India.[31] In the second he tells us that Bahram I, considered an easy mark, was approached by Mani but rejected his message and had the prophet executed.[32] While this aligns roughly with the passion sequences found in Manichean texts it is extremely unlikely to have been based on a Manichean source. In both cases a magus plays a pivotal role in the king's refusal. Shapur, ultimately rejecting Mani's message, turns to a priest for a refutation of Mani's

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[26] The comparison is made at *PsBk II* 241: 15-23 (p.43).
[27] See note 22 above.
[28] Though this too might be an analogy to some version of the trial of Jesus *cf.* John 18:38.
[29] Hennings' Middle Persian fragment may imply that Bahram was supposed to be drunk. The king has just come from table and is leaning on the shoulders of two nobles, Henning (1942), p.951.
[30] Russell (1990), p.188.
[31] The episode of Mani can be found in Ya'qubi, pp.180-2. My thanks to William Bullock-Jenkins of the Australian National University who translated this section for me.
[32] ibid.

writings, while Bahram oversees a disputation in which an extremely old Iranian method of trial by ordeal, the pouring of molten metal onto the chest, is offered by the *mobad* as a final proof.[33] As in Manichean stories, Mani's body is displayed, but in contrast, a highly specific gibbeting is used – the stuffing of Mani's flayed skin with straw.[34] This specific form of display appears in the *Acta Archelai* and over and over in Islamic era texts, though oddly, al-Nadim gives a different version and Biruni's Christian disputant as well as the evidence of earlier Manichean works, show that Manichees differed in their accounts as well.[35] Importantly, Manichean versions *do* present a form of public display of Mani's corpse but generally not this one.

The disputation scene attached to Bahram is quite common and particular themes within it can be discerned. Hamza portrays him as putting the question to the learned and Tabari has Bahram inquiring into his beliefs.[36] Ibn Balkhi describes how Bahram freed Manichees in order to draw Mani to him; he treats him well then gathers the priests to dispute. Once bested a general purge of Mani's followers begins.[37] Mas'udi, who seems to have used a very similar source to Ya'qubi (recording Shapur's dalliance then rejection of Mani) also has Bahram pretend to Mani's religion in order to draw more Manichees into the trap, though he lacks the disputation.[38] Ferdowsi and Tha'alibi also stage the scene as a disputation. The poet, transposing the scene into the reign of Shapur II, seems to have Islamised his source: Mani, as per Muslim tradition, is a creator of images and the *mobad*'s attack focuses on his supposed faith in ephemera.[39] Tha'alibi on the other hand offers a questioning of Mani that engages with the beliefs of his sect.[40]

Despite the rarity of a disputation in front of Shapur it seems unlikely that Ya'qubi's twin disputations were his own invention. Shapur's connection with Mani appears to have been known, though it is usually not expanded. Tabari's mention of the prophet's emergence at this time and Ferdowsi's placement of the death of Mani in the reign of Shapur *the second*

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[33] Importantly this method is also mentioned in the context of a disputation *between* magi, see, Boyce (1979), pp.118-9.

[34] Ya'qubi, p.182. The body is displayed at the city gate of Jundishapur, a recurring element in this tradition.

[35] Al-Nadim has Mani's body bifurcated and hung above *two* city gates at Jundeshapur, *Fihrist*, p.794, Biruni states that Mani's body was flayed and stuffed with grass then displayed over the gate of that city, though shortly after this he mentions a Christian disputant who, claiming to use a Manichean source, has Mani's body thrown onto the street, Biruni, p.191.

[36] Hamza, p.36, Tabari 834 [p.45].

[37] Fārsnāmeh, pp.64-5.

[38] *Muruj*, p.167.

[39] ShN: VI pp.335-6, lines 580-90.

[40] Tha'alibi, pp.501-2. Tha'alibi also mentions the report of Maqdisi's *Book of the Creation and Histories*, but does not seem overly influenced by its very short account which only mentions a brief exchange between the king and the prophet. Like almost all Perso-Arabic accounts it does mention Mani's flaying and stuffing, see Huart (1903), p.162.

suggests that a disputation was once attached to a king named Shapur.[41] Despite being mentioned in Manichean texts, Ormazd has no real connection to Mani at all, (except for two, possibly defensive references).[42] It is therefore likely that Sasanian era histories contained *two* Mani-episodes; a rejection by Shapur I and an execution by Bahram I, both featuring magi. As in the case of Valerian, the opaque processes of compilation or secondary editing seem to have rearranged or collapsed two similar seeming stories into one.

Even where the scenes have been collapsed there is some hint of an overlay; Ferdowsi's Shapur II, like his eponymous forebear, wavers in the face of the prophet's rhetoric.[43] The key differences between the competing constructions are the role of the priests and the form of Mani's fall. Most importantly, the prominence of the priests in the Perso-Arabic histories argues that this version of the story is a late Sasanian product; in the fragments discussed above it is clear that Manichees cast the third century magi as mere accusers and, in all probability, assigned them only a middling rank at court. Muslim authors however almost universally give them a high position at court and often invoke the figure of a chief priest.[44] While the king's power to decide and approve *alone* is still stressed, the tone is entirely different; no mere accusers, the magi are the guardians of the king's conscience.

Additionally, the versions presented by Arabic and Persian authors of the ninth and tenth centuries have eliminated the framing elements of the story. With the medical narrative absent, Mani has no relationship to the king who executes him, and the story shifts to a less personal setting. While the king remains the target of Mani's efforts and the final judge in the matter, the affair is now a religious and institutional one in which the clergy become the king's loyal co-workers in upholding Mazdaeism. Paradoxically, Mani's enemies have granted him a grander position in his trial than his followers would; Mani is seen as an assertive threat to the state rather than a saintly victim or physician with dangerous ideas. Particularly interesting are Masu'di and Ibn Balkhi who report the whole affair of the disputation as a trap set by a king in league with the clergy.[45] The presence of a gamut of uncertainty in the executing king's religious attitudes across the tradition may be yet another

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[41] Tabari 830 [p.38], *contra* Ort, who believed that Ya'qubi had retrojected the disputation from the reign of Bahram I, Ort (1968), p.187.

[42] Ibn Balkhi states that Ormazd "…*showed great zeal in the eradication of heretics, but was unable to catch Mani…*" (…*va dar qam'ye zendiqān mobālaqat namud, amā māni rā bedast natavānest āvard...*) *Fārsnāmeh*, p.43. Biruni also claims that Ormazd killed Manichees, Biruni, p.191.

[43] ShN: VI p.565, line 574.

[44] According to a Manichean text, "Kerdel" the leader of the priestly conspiracy to do away with Mani, has to relay his accusations to two officials in order to get them repeated to the king, see *Man Hom*, 45: 15-18.

[45] Bahram pretended to Mani's religion to better destroy it, Muruj, p.167. Ibn Balkhi phrases the trial as a formality, a way of justifying an inevitable sentence; "*it is neither just nor kingly to kill a person without sufficient evidence*" …" (*dar adl va pādišāhi nist bi allzāme hajjeh kasi rā koštan*), *Fārsnāmeh*, p.64.

result of secondary editing, and various assimilations of Shapur I's uncertainty into the episode of the execution.

4. Christian disputations in Sasanian contexts

Since the interaction of religious figures with the royal person was a set piece for Christians as well, the various Syriac *acta* of Persian martyrs are instructive. Despite adulteration some are thought to contain quite early material.[46] The trials recorded in these, though evidently hagiographic and conventional, to a great extent collaborate the institutional assumptions of the Manichean passion fragments. Some of the longer ones feature an interrogation by the king himself. As in the Manichean passions, his position as inquisitor and judge is a given, the clergy are shown as having to trigger events by petition.[47] Another Syriac report that seems to show the clergy operating independently merely confirms this formulation, making a revealing comment about religious realities inside the Sasanian state in the process.[48]

In staging scenes of royal interrogation Christian texts share with Manichean ones the same appraisal of the apportionment of power in the state, one in which the king's decision was paramount, and the same model, Christ's trial before Pilate, with the priests playing Pharisees.[49] Characterization of the magi as actors who must convince king, as in the Manichean texts, is used to explain the persecutions suffered by the Christian community.[50] These characterisations of the king as absolute and the magus as a bigoted courtier were probably reasonably accurate appraisals of the actual relationship between throne and altar, from the point of view of the empire's religious minorities.[51] Such texts may preserve

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[46] For linguistic reasons, the translations of Hoffman and Braun, which present selected translations of *acta* rather than entire cycles, have been used. These give cases over several centuries and before different kings. The most famous cycle relates to Shapur II but cases before other kings, up to Khosrau I in the sixth century, have also been used. Where possible, the name of the king will be given. For the cycle under Shapur II and its antiquity, see Vööbus (2011).

[47] One account has Shapur II moved to action by the notification of Christian activity by the chief priest. In a more targeted sense, Mar Aba was denounced by a group of the clergy during the reign of Khosrau I. See Braun (1915). pp.83. & 198, 210-11.

[48] Pethion was supposed to have been the target of a conspiracy of magi, in the time of Yazdegird II, the reason given that he was too damaging to their religion and persuasive before the king to be allowed to survive, see Hoffman (1880), p.61 *f.* The use of a persuasive Christian before the pagan king is a *topos* that would be developed as communal reassurance in the Islamic period, Binggelli (2010), *passim*. While this later usage was defensive, it is possible that this was not always so.

[49] The two traditions may even have become tangled; in an account of the saint 'Aqballaha, he, unlike Mani, manages to heal Bahram I's daughter and secures promises in return from the king, Hoffman (1880), p.49.

[50] Most clearly stated by Manichees in *PsBk II*, 241: 43, 15-25. The magi are shown manipulating the king's favour, and indeed being rebuffed in the case of Mar Qadagh at Walker (2006), pp.53-4. Bahram V is convinced by his high-priest Mihrshapur (to whom in this retelling he owes his throne) to persecute the Christians, Hoffman (1880), pp.39-40.

[51] Members of religious minorities relied very much on the personal protection of the king, see Brock (1982), pp.5-6.

valuable evidence of the structure of the Sasanian state but they do so in an inflammatory way. The recurrent use of manipulation and occasionally slander to influence the king casts doubt on his zeal while showing the priests as manipulators of royal favour, making them mere influence peddlers at court. Indeed, as can be seen by a comparison to the *Acts of Candida*, their denouncements and bullying can reduce them to the functional equivalent of jealous harem ladies.[52] They are also incompetent; when called on to defend their premises they are completely unable and the martyr effortlessly disposes of his opponents' positions.[53]

Were such texts confined to their communities we would not expect to see Perso-Arabic texts present the death of Mani in this way, or indeed at all, however, this was not the case. Manichees and Christians both used Iranian languages, and it is likely that bi-lingualism was widespread among Iranian-speaking elites in Syriac speaking areas.[54] We might easily imagine a situation in the later Sasanian period in which two sets of antagonistic but, ironically, very similar anti-magian literatures, couched in the terms of trials before the throne, were easily available, or indeed, actively proffered, to the empire's Iranian nobility.

5. Conclusions

From the point of view of late Sasanian compilers, these stories would have been both unacceptable and worryingly influential. The ideal Sasanian monarch was a conservative ruler and late Sasanian ideology of rule was steeped in the mythology of a religiously defined ethnicity. Tales of worldly and influential Iranians, able to trade chapter and verse with their former co-religionists struck at the heart of a solidifying Sasanian myth, to say nothing of the rumors of the great Shapur consorting with a *zindiq*.[55] Manichean and Christian literatures offered an alternative view of the Sasanian past, in which the religious positions of the state were somewhat arbitrary, and the priests, like everyone else, stood in the shadow of the throne. An answer was called for, and so, probably lacking extensive records of their own, Sasanian editors remodeled weapons that had been used against them for centuries.

The oldest versions of Mani's interrogation were ignored in order to better characterise the struggle as a religious competition. In doing so our hypothetical Sasanian episode(s) came to resemble Christian literature in which both sides made active defences of religious positions.

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[52] Brock (1978), p.178.
[53] For example, Pusai under Shapur II mocks the *mobad*'s theology, an account of the interrogation of his daughter shows a priest made fun of by a young woman, see Braun (1915), pp.67-71 & 72-9.
[54] Brock (1982), p.18, For thematic crossover between Sasanian and Syriac Christian literature, see Walker (2006), p.121 *f*.
[55] That is a heretic, see note 58 below.

Several sources hint at a "Christian" pattern in the construction of the disputation with Mani. Tha'alibi and Ferdowsi give (different) "transcripts"; likewise, the *mobad*'s recourse to a supernatural proof (the offer of trial by ordeal) in Ya'qubi echoes the miracle as a staple of Christian disputations; a move aimed at bypassing theology, as is the silencing of one's opponents, by natural or supernatural means, seen in both Manichean passions and Ferdowsi.[56] This shift from court politics to disputative struggle cast the priests as both effective debaters and partners to the crown. Thus the attacks on the competence and character of the magi are answered and their importance emphasized.

It may be asked, if both sets of literature were concerning, why it was considered important to include an episode against Mani and not one addressing Christian claims. The answer probably lies in the different appraisals of the two communities. As a separate community within the state Sasanian Christians were controllable, and usually, as long as communal boundaries were respected, left alone. Persecutions of Christians were sometimes political but, significantly, often motivated by conversions of important people out of the Persian religion; something that undermined the group identity of the aristocracy from without.[57] Manichees on the other hand, as their appellation *zindiq*, attests, were seen as attacking the Persian religion from within.[58] Christians may embarrass but they could never claim the mantle of Zoroaster, hence it was unnecessary to answer them *directly*.

That the styling of the episode reflects the refashioning of a hostile genre is of course open to interpretation; less so is the ubiquitous presence of Mani's post-mortem display, a feature indicating actual *borrowing* from Christian traditions. While some Manichean sources mention a mutilation and a display of the prophet's body, flaying has a strongly Christian angle. Hegemonius reports that Mani's skin was, having been prepared in someway, displayed; Ephrem also states that Mani was skinned; Socrates, claiming a version of the *Acta*

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[56] Tha'alibi, pp.501-2. According to Gardner and Lieu's translation of the fragmentary end of the homily depicting the prophet's interview, the executing king seems to fall silent to some assertion of Mani's at *Man Hom*, 47: 26-30 cf. Gardner & Lieu (2004), p.83. Ferdowsi has Mani silenced by the argument of the *mobad*, see ShN: V.p.336, line. 594. Lim (1994), pp.81-2 & 85-6.

[57] While earlier persecutions seem to have been either political or triggered by the actions of Christians themselves, later ones appear driven by the need to keep Iranians within the fold of the state's preferred religion, see Barnes (1985) p.135 & Brock (1982), p.12. The case of Mar Girwargis under Khosrau I shows that the problem became, not the existence of Christians *per se* (the martyr is present at court to present the case of one Christian faction over another!) but the idea that a high ranking man could abandon Mazdaeism for it. It is in this way that Girgwas' rival Gabriel, the king's doctor and a monophysite, is able to denounce him, see Braun (1915), 259-60, for the background to this incident see Reinink (1999) *passim*. Apostasy is also the accusation leveled at or Mar Qadagh, see Walker (2006), p.55.

[58] *Zindiq* is derived from the Middle Persian term *zend* meaning translation or commentary of scripture. Mas'udi claims this was applied to those who followed a particular interpretation of the Avesta. *Muruj*, pp.167-8, see also Taffazoli (2010/11), p117. Lieu points out that Manichaeism was not, in actuality, based in Zoroastrian writings, however the Christian and Gnostic roots of Manichaeism are unlikely to have soothed the jealous priests of the Sasanian period, see Lieu (1985), pp.53-4.

Archelai as his source reports that the skin was stuffed with straw though he was not the first Western author to mention this method.[59] That honour belongs to Lactantius who famously assigned a very similar fate to the emperor Valerian around 316.[60] Lactantius may have heard a very early, though garbled version of an eastern anti-Manichean polemic, itself tendentiously based on a Manichean account of Mani's death. He is far less likely to have been the source of the story, given he wrote in Latin and that *De Mortibus* appears to have had little influence, even in the West.[61] Certainly, that versions of the same story reappear slightly later in two Christian texts, one Syriac and one strongly associated with the east, suggests that it originated there as a tool for attacking Manichees.[62]

The near ubiquity of this humiliation in much later Perso-Arabic works indicates a wholesale adoption of this story in their sources. The unlikely integration of a Christian polemical point into a very sympathetic portrayal of the magi argues for an origin in the Sasanian era itself. While details were highly susceptible to augmentation and even Islamisation, as a comparison of the "transcripts" of Ferdowsi and Tha'alibi shows, the "shape" of the scene remains fairly stable. A Persianised artifact compounded of hostile parts, the episode of Mani before the Shahs well illustrates the anxieties of late Sasanian historiography. Moreover, a study of this episode illustrates the constructed and reconstructive nature of the Sasanian past. In Mani we see the hardening of the empire's *official* identity colliding with an indigestible counter-narrative of compromise and autocracy unbound by religious scruple.

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[59] Cf. *Acta Archelai*. XLVI [p.95] Socrates *HE*, I.22. *Prose Ref*, p.XXXVI.

[60] Lactantius, *De Mort*. V.5. As far as the author is aware, no Syriac, Arabic or Persian source allots this fate to Valerian.

[61] Valerian's flaying had a very odd afterlife in the west; it appears in Lactantius and in a speech of Constantine's recorded by Eusebius (*Oratio*. XXIV) but is neglected entirely by "pagan" historians such as Zosimus (I.36) and the various authors, Christian or otherwise who follow the *Kaisergeschichte* tradition. It does not resurface until Agathias (*Hist*, IV.23-4) who indicates that it was carried by unnamed and evidently lost, historians. The story would eventually become detached from Valerian and reapplied in a vague way to other emperors, Numerian (Zonaras, XII.30 [Banchich (2009), p.63 & n.115]) or Julian (in that paragon of realism the *Legenda Aurea*, see Graesse (1965), p.145) whose deaths were linked with the east. While the similarities with Mani indicate that the story most probably travelled to Lactantius as a stray bit of Christian polemic, the idea that Persians flayed their enemies had a Herodotean flavor (Herod, V.25.) and seems to have tapped into a preconceived notion of oriental cruelty, thus becoming more broadly applicable.

[62] Ort believed reports of flaying to be drawn from non-Manichean sources, a position with which I concur, I however disagree with his appraisal of Ya'qubi's disputations for the reasons outlined above see Ort (1967), p.184.

VI. Conclusion

In the hands of the later Sasanians the recording of human affairs became a dynastic saga. The arrival of Ardashir and his family from obscurity terminates the pre-Sasanian past, consigning it almost completely to the fog of a mythologised time. The blending of these two periods into a legitimizing "national" narrative shows that the Sasanians clearly understood the potential of history to excuse the present. Following in the founder's footsteps, Ardashir's descendants sought to create and maintain a community of precedence within their realm, one sculpted out of the wider "Iranian" linguistic and cultural complex. A dynastically inclined historiography based on the mythology of these shared beliefs was a tool in maintaining this community. This was no easy task, in a diverse empire the boundaries between aristocratic, linguistic and religious groups were more porous than the partisans of the national narrative would have preferred. As a result the tone of this historiography is often surprisingly anxious rather than triumphal.

The presence of contradictory or potentially embarrassing incidents within this tradition reveals the past as a conflicted, competitive site. Put simply, late Sasanian compilers struggled with noncompliant memory. Independent critiques existed of Sasanian legitimacy and religious policy, and were distributed in empire's languages, Iranian and otherwise. Incidents complicating the official story proved remarkably enduring. They ensured that there were points in the dim past that could not be forgotten, despite, or in fact because of, their inconvenience to the late Sasanian legitimist narrative.

This multiplicity of narratives within the empire, and the official sensitivity to them suggested by a study of episodes from the dynasty's early period supports theories that posit a distinct change in Sasanian ideology over time. While the earliest Sasanians did justify themselves in terms of a pan-Iranian mythic identity, the specifics of their "nationalist" unification narrative look to have taken some time to harden. An examination of the elaboration of the *vita* of Ardashir shows that this process drew a response; that aristocratic reaction fueled a contest over the ownership of the legendary past. There existed a split within the favoured community the Sasanians were trying to build; a struggle over the memory of the past between a *parvenu* family and an incredulous aristocracy who were both their partners and their competitors.

The dynasty's increasing connection to a waxing religious institution on the other hand, created external threats to its reconstructive project. Not only did the orthodoxy of early kings

have to be emphasized, and possibly invented, but religious competitors had to be seen off. Mani in particular, whose followers were adept at shaping their message in order to market it, presented a real problem. The rewriting of Mani's trial as an inverse Christian *acta* meanwhile, suggests a familiarity with Christian propaganda. In doing so draws attention to fact that the Christian proselytizing was, like Mani himself, seen to have the potential to corrupt the *mores* of the empire's core ethnic group. Mani's near ubiquitous presence in later texts indicates a pressing need to anathematize him, almost certainly for the very same reasons.

In light of the turn away from traditional views of the empire as strongly centralizing and religiously orthodox from its inception, an examination of how the later dynasty handled its own past allows a new angle on this difficult narrative as a historical source. The corpse of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* tells us very little about the historicity of the third and fourth century events it describes, but as a psychological record of official concerns of the later Sasanian court it is invaluable. Such stories, when seen in context, betray evidence of a struggle over cultural identity and in doing so show the later empire as complex and dynamic. Importantly they show Sasanian ideology not only as a somewhat artificial construction but as a precarious one, imposed over a heterogeneous realm and not universally accepted. Though now only visible as shadows or reflections, consideration of the complicating narratives shaping Sasanian historiography serves as a reminder that Iranians, like their Roman contemporaries, were no monolithic, static mass but active participants in making their own past.

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