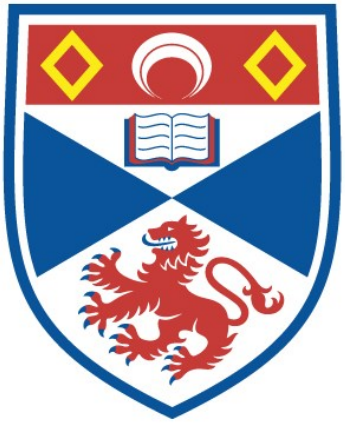
STATE AND ARISTOCRACY IN THE SASANIAN EMPIRE

David John Bagot

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



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State and Aristocracy in the Sasanian Empire

David John Bagot

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Abstract

This thesis aims to consider the competing visions of Sasanian Iran advanced by Arthur Christensen in *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (1944) and Parvaneh Pourshariati in *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire* (2008), discuss the relevant evidence in relation to their arguments, and to suggest our own theory of how the Sasanian Empire operated.

Christensen argued for the strength of the Sasanian monarchy and the subservience of the aristocracy to the kings, whilst Pourshariati's thesis stressed Sasanian royal weakness and the relative power of the aristocracy. These theses are incompatible, offering fundamentally different conceptions of the natures of the Sasanian monarchy and aristocracy, and how they interacted with each other. Firstly, this thesis critiques the models established by Christensen and Pourshariati, especially their failure to acknowledge evidence at variance with their thesis, and their lack of discussion concerning how the aristocracy perceived their relationship with the monarchy. We then turn to our own discussion of the evidence relating to the Sasanian monarchy and royal power, and the cultural outlook of the aristocracy, with reference to the above theories, so as to understand how strong the Sasanian monarchy was, the nature of royal power, and how the aristocracy perceived their relationship with the crown.

We argue for a conception of Sasanian Iran somewhere between the theories of Christensen and Pourshariati. There is very little evidence that the Sasanian kings ruled through a state enjoying significant institutional power; indeed Sasanian power seems very limited in the periphery of the Empire. However, the inherent respect for the monarchy held by the aristocracy, and the ties of mutual dependence which existed between kings and aristocrats, allowed for Sasanian rule to in general be highly effective.

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I, David John Bagot, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me or principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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Though writing a PhD thesis can feel like a very solitary affair at times, in reality a whole group of people and institutions support the process, offering their assistance, either financial, practical, or emotional, or a combination thereof.

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The University of St Andrews is a very special place, and it is with some sadness that my studies there are coming to an end, after having been a student there since 2005. The School of Mediaeval History, and all the staff and research students who work there, have been a great support over the years. Above all, this thesis would quite simply have been impossible without the assistance of my excellent supervisor, Dr Tim Greenwood, whose wisdom, advice, and saint-like patience, has made me a much deeper thinker, a more rigorous researcher, and a better academic writer. For this he has my deepest thanks.

On a more personal note, my wife, Margaux Whiskin, has supported this thesis throughout, offering her practical support and continual emotional guidance throughout the sometimes tortuous PhD process. Finally, this thesis could not have been done without the unstinting support of my parents, Janet and Les Bagot, to whom this thesis is dedicated. Not only have they helped fund my studies for far longer than what might be considered normal, their engagement with my work, and continual assistance in a wide range of areas, has made this thesis possible. Most of all, I have their lifelong commitment to furthering the education of their children to thank for me being in a position to submit a PhD thesis now. From numberless holidays spent visiting museums and castles, to inculcating a love of reading and learning, and to their unwavering belief in the intrinsic value of education, I have my parents to thank.

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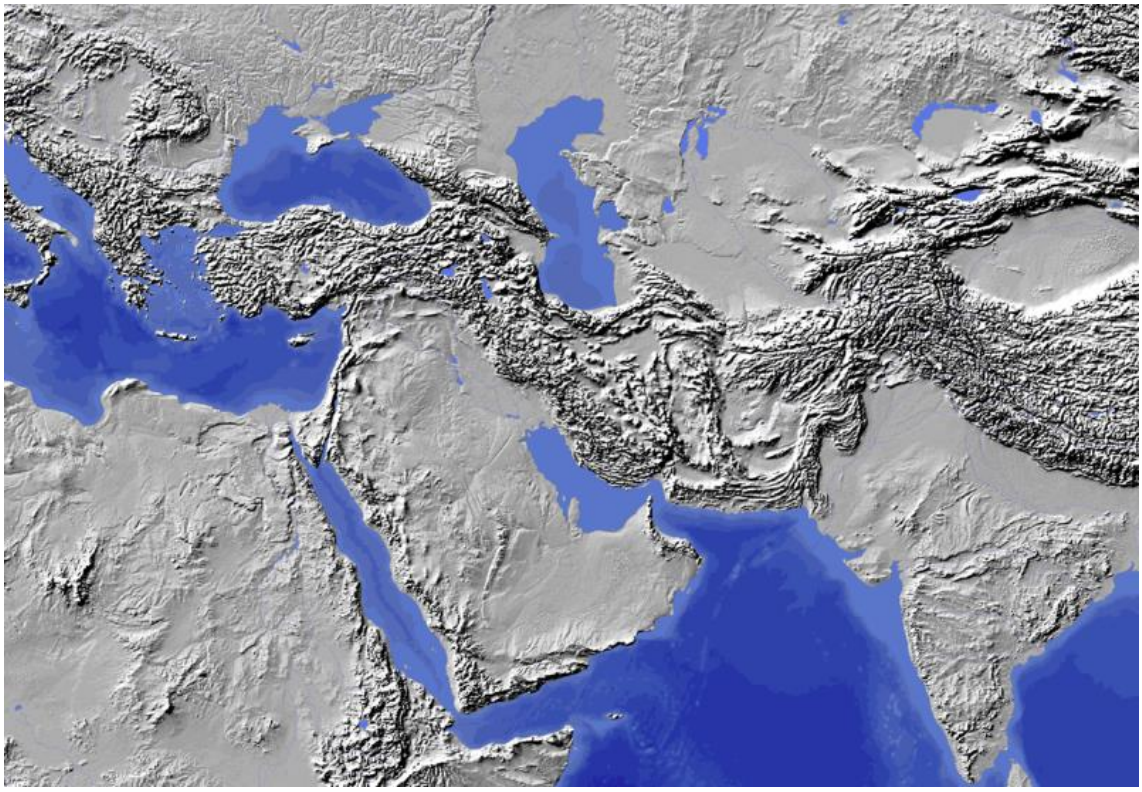
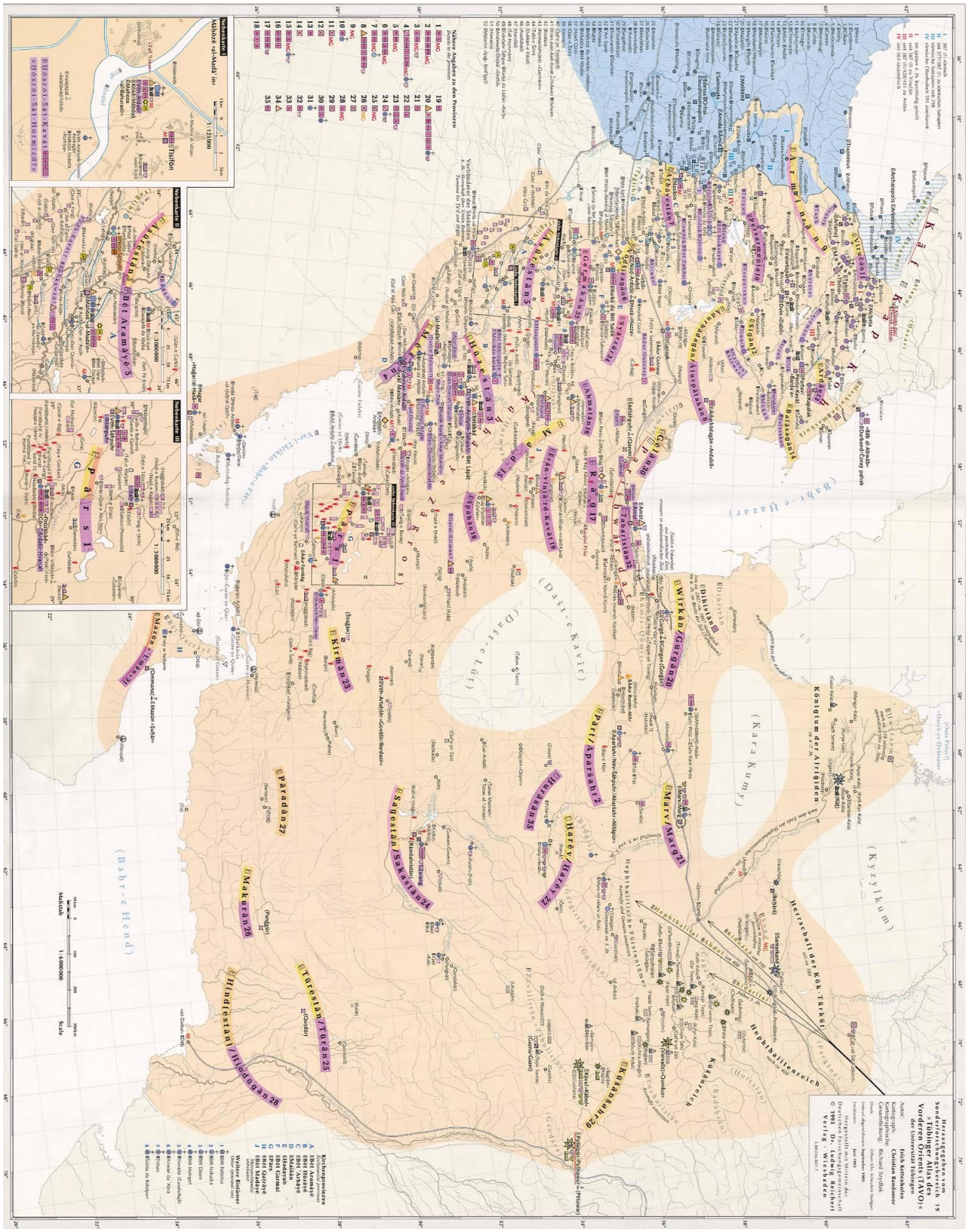
Map of the Sasanian Empire, *c.* 600. Taken from cais-soas.com



Relief map of Sasanian Iran and surrounding area. Taken from Wikimedia.org



Detailed map of the Sasanian Empire, taken from mappery.com

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Transliteration conventions

Ordinarily, we shall transcribe Persian names in accordance with their spelling in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, and Armenian names in accordance with the transliteration practices used by Robert Thomson (2006). Alternative spellings based on different languages (eg. the Greek 'Cabades' for 'Kawād') shall be avoided. An exception is made for Armenian names, where the Armenian form is preferred. When there is a near universally applied English spelling without diacritical marks, these shall be preferred to an alternative (e.g. 'Iran' rather than 'Irān').

In direct quotations, book titles, and the like, the transliterations used by the quoted author are used, regardless of how this differs from our normal transliteration practice.

A note on referencing primary sources

For primary sources, references will follow the book-chapter-paragraph/sentence system (or just book and chapter when a paragraph or sentence reference is unavailable) as much as possible. For some sources, most particularly for translated Armenian texts, we use this system, despite many references in secondary literature referring to page numbers in critical editions. This is partly because it is closer to the method that used for most Roman histories, but also because it reflects the organisational structure given by the original author rather than the vagaries of page breaks in the critical editions of the text.

For some works, most significantly the *History* of Ṭabarī and the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsī, with chapter numbers being unavailable, we reference relative to the page/verse numbers given in the margins of the translation used.

Abbreviations Used in the Text

The abbreviations we use are based around what seems logical to us, rather than a standardised system. Hopefully they are sufficiently self-explanatory. The full references to these works are provided in the bibliography.

Ag – The *History* of Agathias

AM – The *History* of Ammianus Marcellinus

BD (1 and 2) – The Bactrian Documents (as organised by Sims-Williams into Volumes 1 and 2)

BP – The *Buzandaran Patmutiwnkʿ/The Epic Histories*

CD – Cassius Dio

FD – The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsī.

Her – The *History* of Herodian

LB – *The Book of a Thousand Judgements*, also known as *The Law Book*

ŁP – The *History* of Łazar Pʿarpecʿi

LoT – The *Letter of Tansar*

MK – The *History* of Moses Khorenacʿi

PJS – The *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite

Proc – The *History of the Wars* of Procopius

Seb – The *History* of Sebēos

HA – The *Historia Augustae*

Ṭab – The *History* of Ṭabarī.

Introduction

The Issue: Introductory Remarks

Anyone approaching the study of Sasanian Iran cannot fail to be struck by the absolute positions held in much of scholarly literatre. Broadly, the Sasanian Empire is conceived either as a confederacy of semi-independent principalities, or as a highly centralised autocracy, the aristocracy either jealously protective of hereditary prerogatives, or largely compliant in the centralising royal project, and the borders of the empire defended either by a 'feudal' host, or a state-financed standing army. Discussions of these and related issues seem stuck in a binary mode, where, broadly, features of the Sasanian state are either *one* or the *other*, and not some kind of blending of the two.[1]

This rigidity is not a feature of most modern scholarship on late mediaeval European history, where it is commonly accepted that effective governmental structures could, indeed generally did, co-exist with regional particularism, and military forces were commonly a blend of permanently retained, temporarily contracted and traditionally levied men. In this context, the apparently singular character of models employed in much Sasanian scholarship seems an oversimplification, ripe for re-evaluation. The general failure to set the Sasanian evidence in comparative perspective, at least in any systematic way, is unfortunate. Arguably, this has contributed to conclusions which might appear logical in isolation but seem increasingly unreliable when assessed comparatively. Implicit comparisons may have been made (indeed, we all have some fixed point or other around which everything else is articulated – *everything* is in some sense related to *something*), but no sustained attempt to evaluate the Sasanian

[1] A recent example of this binary approach is found in the conclusion of Sauer *et al,* 2013; Eberhard W. Sauer, Hamid Omrani Rekavandi, Tony J Wilkinson and Jebrael Nokandeh, *Persia's Imperial Power in Late Antiquity: The Great Gorgān Wall and Frontier Landscapes of Sasanian Iran* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 616-619. We are unaware of any suggestion that the Sasanian army was in any sense a 'hybrid', involving a variety of different forms of remuneration and natures of service.

evidence explicitly against external examples seems to have been undertaken. We shall argue that when compared to better documented pre-modern societies, some major interpretations of the Sasanian evidence look increasingly problematic.

If we were to examine the issue of the balance of power within the Sasanian Empire, effectively equating to the balance of power between the king and the aristocracy, we find two dominant theories, advanced by Christensen and Pourshariati, which are effectively polar opposites. Although it would be wrong to say that all other scholars follow one of these theories uncritically, Christensen's work remains the classic foundation of much subsequent scholarship, whilst Pourshariati's recent survey is the most vigorous rejection of Christensen's core thesis.

Arthur Christensen argued, in *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, that the Sasanian Empire was defined by strong political centralisation, and with Zoroastrianism as the state religion. He saw the Sasanian monarchy as all-powerful and authoritarian, supported by an advanced bureaucracy, and, latterly, a standing army.[2] Though this view has not been universally accepted, Christensen's work is still the pre-eminent single-volume account of Sasanian Iran, and remains highly influential.

Parvaneh Pourshariati's polemical work, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire* comprises a thorough rebuttal of Christensen's thesis. Pourshariati offered a radically different analysis of the Sasanian Empire, strongly attacking the paradigm laid out by Christensen, instead arguing for a decentralised, confederate political structure based upon a long-standing

[2] Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides: 2nd edition* (Copenhagen, 1944), see ch. 2, esp. p. 96.

alliance between the Persian Sasanian house and various Parthian magnate families, and stressing the weakness of individual kings *vis-à-vis* these magnates.[3]

Clearly, these positions are incompatible. Both arguments have their merits and both are deeply flawed. Both Christensen and Pourshariati focussed excessively on what they saw as defining the Sasanian state, and either ignored inconvenient evidence to the contrary, or read it counterintuitively so as to fit their thesis.

The differences between these theses centre upon their conception of the relationship between the monarchy and the aristocracy. Did the aristocracy have the 'whip hand', able to dominate the king, as Pourshariati suggests was the case for the greater part of Sasanian history? Or should we envisage a relatively weak nobility 'of the robe' which was subservient to the crown, in accordance with Christensen's thesis? We would suggest that the attitude of the aristocracy towards the monarchy is a possible aid in resolving this. In ancient and mediaeval polities surely as much as in modern ones, the effectiveness of government is to a large extent based around the level of cooperation the state enjoys from the powerful elements of the population (which might, in some cases, include the greater mass of the population). Regardless of the coercive powers a state might employ, it will struggle to govern effectively if there is a significant amount of non-compliance. Therefore, the cultural outlook of the Sasanian aristocracy becomes very significant – were they generally cooperative or antagonistic towards a centralising royal project?

Unfortunately, neither Christensen nor Pourshariati addressed the attitude of the aristocracy towards the monarchy, or the interplay between them. This dissertation sets out to correct this, aiming to assess the feasibility of each stance. Understanding the Sasanian

[3] Parvaneh Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (New York, 2008), see ch. 1.2, esp. pp. 47f.

monarchy, how it related to the aristocracy and the outlook of the aristocracy towards the monarchy, are the core aims of this thesis.

Competing Theses

It is our contention that both Christensen and Pourshariati misused their sources in furtherance of their argument, and both advance contentions which from a comparative point of view seem unlikely.

Christensen's thesis, as we have already mentioned, argues for the strong centralisation of Iran under the Sasanian dynasty. He saw the Sasanian dynasty as markedly different to the preceding Arsacid regime, seemingly imagining Iran under the Sasanians as similar to a modern (or early-modern) nation state:

> "Les éléments hellénistes furent en partie rejetés de l'organisme iranien, en partie absorbés et transformés, et, au moment où ŠHēr prend les rênes du gouvernement, le monde iranien commence à se presenter comme une unité nationale dont le caractère marqué se révèle de plus en plus dans tous les domaines de la vie intellectuelle et sociale."[4]

Christensen's overarching theme is one of centralisation and governmental authority. The range of sources he brings to bear is formidable, intimidating the reader away from querying the strength of Christensen's theory, and pushing one into uncritical acceptance of the analysis offered. In fact the book is now dated, with much of the source criticism and analysis outmoded. Despite this, it still remains *the* single volume account of Sasanian history.

[4] Christensen, *L'Iran*, p. 97. "The Hellenistic elements were partly rejected from the Iranian organism, and partly absorbed and transformed, and at the moment when Ardašīr took the reins of government, the Iranian world began to present itself with a national unity, whose marked character revealed itself more and more in all areas of intellectual and social life." Christensen does not offer any evidence in support of this statement.

In his notable work *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* Touraj Daryaee describes *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* as one of the two classic accounts of Sasanian history (the other being Schippmann's *Grundzüge der Geschichte des sasanidschen Reiches*). Tellingly, Daryaee conceived of his volume as an English language alternative to Christensen, not a replacement of it.[5] Even Pourshariati, Christensen's arch-critic, described the book as "[t]he last *magnum opus* on Sasanian history."[6] Despite its age, it still remains the most influential single volume account of Sasanian history.

The work addresses most features of the history of the Sasanian world, covering political and military history, as well as cultural matters, though the focus is largely upon the monarchy. The critical section is Chapter Two, which sets out Christensen's basic conception of Sasanian Iran. Though he acknowledges evolution over time, and some substantial changes under the later Sasanians (especially under Ḵosrow I),[7] the essential character of the Sasanian state, defined by strong centralisation and a state religion, is in his view a constant of Sasanian history.

However, Christensen's writing displays serious flaws of logic and source criticism. Sometimes source material is forced to conform with his overarching argument. One senses that Christensen was sympathetic to the Sasanians, employing his evidence to buttress his thesis that the Sasanian state was highly advanced and centralised and so consonant with many of the ideals of government circulating in later nineteenth and early twentieth century

[5] Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*, (New York, 2009), p. xv; see too Touraj Daryaee, 'The Collapse of the Sasanian Power in Fārs/Persis', in *Nāme-ye Iran-e Bāstān, The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies, Vol. 2, No. 1* (2002), pp. 5-6: "The most important work on Sasanian history was written by A. Christensen, who brought together all the sources available in the first half of the twentieth century." David Morgan, 'Sasanian Iran and the Early Arab Conquests', in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 54* (2011), pp. 529-531 for a favourable review of Daryaee's work.

[6] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, p. 7.

[7] See Ch. 8; Christensen saw the reign of Ḵosrow as the most centralised and the most glorious of the Sasanian epoch, see esp. pp. 363, 438f.

Europe. In his popular work on the later Roman Empire, Adrian Goldsworthy argued that most pioneering historians of the later Roman Empire were guilty of accentuating the positives, in order to valorise their decision to study something relatively obscure, justifying their research upon a polity historically belittled when compared to the Empire of Augustus, Vespasian or Trajan.[8] We believe something similar pertains to Christensen's narrative, whereby there was an underlying desire – whether conscious or not – to show that the Sasanian Empire was 'modern', or at least not 'mediaeval', and as worthy of study as the Roman Empire.

Christensen's argument for centralisation and standardisation was not infrequently based upon the misinterpretation of sources. By way of illustration, Christensen suggested that when the Sasanian army was about to attack, they signalled this with a flame-coloured flag.[9] However, the source Christensen cites for this, Ammianus Marcellinus, states that in *one* siege in 360 *one* Persian assault on the city of Singara was signalled by a flag of this nature.[10] Ammianus does not mention this flame-coloured flag again, nor indeed does any other source concerning Sasanian armies and military operations. Christensen converted an incidental remark by a Roman historian, describing a one-off event, into proof that the Sasanian army had a standardised means of signalling an attack.

Christensen seemingly ignored sources which contradicted his narrative of a strong Sasanian state. For instance, when discussing the Sasanian army, he does not mention the explicit statement by the Roman historian Herodian that the third-century Sasanian army was a temporary formation, with no standardised payment system, and was disbanded at the end of a campaign.[11] Christensen might have argued that Herodian was somehow an unreliable

[8] Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Fall of the West: The Death of the Roman Superpower* (London, 2009), see ch. 1, esp. pp. 19f.
[9] Christensen, *L'Iran*, p. 211.
[10] AM, XX.6.3
[11] Her, VI.5.3-4, VI.6.4.

source, but to ignore his statements, relevant as they were, does suggest that Christensen was guilty of his theory driving his use of evidence. Certainly, there is little evidence of conscious source criticism. Though Christensen used his second chapter to list his sources, and to mention a few points about them, he did not explicitly try and rank their usefulness, explain how he planned to use them, or discuss any particular problems associated with them. This, no doubt, was in part due to the time in which he worked; most early twentieth century (and older) histories would today be considered exceedingly light on source analysis. Moreover, Christensen's background as a philologist and folklorist, rather than a historian, may have played its part.[12] This lack of source criticism does serve to make deconstructing his narrative more difficult, and given the aforementioned problem with ignoring some prominent sources which contradicted his main contention, does induce suspicion about Christensen's methods in using the sources he cited.

Some other criticisms should be ascribed to the era in which Christensen's thesis was developed. He could not be an independent specialist of everything, and it is not to his discredit that in many cases he appears to have accepted the consensus of his day. For example, Christensen apparently believed that 'feudalism', or anything indicative of 'mediaeval-ness', correlated with weak states. This was in line with traditional continental European conceptions of feudalism, which saw it as incompatible with strong governments.[13] This doubtless fed into his views of the Sasanian state – though he did see feudal elements in Sasanian Iran, he perceives this as a throwback to the Arsacids and aberrant to the centralising Sasanian project. If we continue our thread concerning the Sasanian army, the consensus nineteenth- and early twentieth-century view was that 'feudal' or 'mediaeval' armies were

[12] Jes P. Asmussen, 'Christensen, Arthur Emmanuel', in *Encyclopaedia Irania (Online Edition),* <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/christensen-arthur-emanuel-b> [14 January, 2014].
[13] Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994), ch. 1.2, esp. p. 9. Reynolds points out that due to a different historiographical tradition, English scholarship generally conceives of feudalism in strong government terms.

hopelessly inefficient and chaotic. Sir Charles Oman's classic account of mediaeval military history is indicative of a consensus which saw mediaeval armies as incoherent, disparate and muddled entities, and any successes they achieved bordering on the miraculous. For instance, when describing the First Crusade, a military operation of remarkable success, Oman argued "[t]he first crusading armies displayed all the faults of the feudal host in their highest development. They were led by no single chief of a rank sufficient to command the obedience of him companions…If a medieval king found it a hard matter to rule his own feudal levies, and could never count on unquestioning obedience from his barons, what sort of discipline or subordination could be expected from a host drawn together from all the ends of Europe? It is perhaps more astonishing that the Crusades accomplished anything..."[14]

This is a view which has become increasingly problematic the better understood mediaeval military systems (and governments in general) have become. As an illustrative comparison, in the early stages of the Hundred Years War, Philippe VI of France could assemble his 'feudal' army (from sending out the summonses to concentration in the theatre of operations) in under two months,[15] a feat the French standing army of 1870 struggled to manage, despite the assistance of railways, telegraph, and purportedly modern military order and discipline.[16] Just because something is deemed to be more 'advanced' does not necessarily mean it works better. However, the appreciation of what bureaucracy-light mediaeval governments could achieve was not something widely appreciated in the early twentieth century, and if Christensen saw the Sasanian state as orderly, and in some sense modern (or at least not markedly less orderly or modern than the Roman Empire), he was doing no more

[14] Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages: Volume One: 378-1278* (London, 1924), pp. 233-234.
[15] Jonathan Sumption, *Trial by Battle: The Hundred Years War I* (London, 1989), p. 272.
[16] Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge, 2005), see ch. 3, esp. pp. 73-83; Richard Holmes, *The Road to Sedan: The French Army 1866-70* (London, 1984), pp. 172-178.

than distancing his vision from the prevailing view of mediaeval states whose performance was deemed to be so much less impressive.

However, the feasibility of Christensen's arguments is debatable. The two principal questions which arose on engaging with his work were: how did the Sasanians radically alter the political culture which Christensen considered had so characterised the Arsacid period; and how could Sasanian rulers impose themselves so effectively on the upland and peripheral regions of their realm? One of the characteristics of late mediaeval European history is the conflict of interests between kings and magnates, and the limited ability of central governments to influence provincial life. The balance of power between the king and the nobility was flexible, with central control oscillating wildly, being dependent upon the authority and quality of the king. A common theme in late mediaeval European history is the constant struggle (whether violent or not) between regions and centres for ascendency. In this context, Christensen's assertion that the Sasanians permanently changed the political culture of Arsacid Iran, with apparently little difficulty or opposition, seems fanciful. If it was a struggle for mediaeval English kings to keep a firm grip on their northern shires when they ruled a small and relatively homogenous polity, how could a Sasanian king in Mesopotamia automatically enjoy firm control over magnates resident in Sistān?

Christensen seems to have envisaged Sasanian Iran as a fundamentally early-modern state, by which point conflicts between the centre and provinces had, in Western Europe, been definitively decided in the favour of the former. However, if we see mediaeval states as defined by less bureaucracy, more consensual monarchy, and weaker state structures, and early-modern states as potentially possessing absolute monarchs, standing armies, and more advanced bureaucracies, this thesis will show that Christensen's vision of Sasanian Iran as definitively in the latter category as unrealistic. One could argue the Sasanian kings could have

been 'absolutist' in their heartlands, but even if this was the case, their ability to coerce provincial lords, who seem to have had private military forces, and who often resided in rugged mountainous regions, is highly debatable. Without strong evidence for a programme of coercion (almost inevitably involving armed conflict) between the centre and the periphery, it seems preferable to argue that provincial lords were self-interested collaborators in a centrally directed policy, participating through choice rather than coercion. In short, the cornerstone of Christensen's argument fails this feasibility study.

We acknowledge the formidable scholarship Christensen brought to his study, and the impressive range of sources he integrated into it, but the more one interacts with the work, the less intellectually satisfying Christensen's theory seems, the more problematic his interpretations of some sources, and the more aware one is of the age of Christensen's thesis. Despite this, though one can challenge individual elements of his work, the core of the argument, that the Sasanian state was strong, remains compelling, and we can understand why it has lasted. Perhaps the longevity of Christensen's influence should not surprise us, given the relative marginality of late antique Near- and Middle-Eastern studies in Western academia. For instance, Adontz's work *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, originally published in 1908, is still the dominant work on late antique Armenia, and has yet to be superseded.[17] Ultimately, despite its reputation, Christensen's thesis becomes less persuasive when we try to consider how feasible his vision would have been in practice.

Pourshariati's thesis, on a first reading, offers a welcome reappraisal of Sasanian history. When we consider that late mediaeval English rulers had to work hard to rule effectively in their northern and western shires, and French kings had to deal with the *de facto* independent duchies of Burgundy and Brittany, the logic of Pourshariati's argument of a

[17] Nicholas Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian: The Political Conditions Based on the Naxarar System*, tr. Nina Garsoïan (Lisbon, 1970); see Garsoïan's preface to her translation, esp. pp. xv-xvi.

primus-inter-pares king, hemmed in by strong regional interests, was immediately compelling. However, like Christensen's thesis, the argument becomes weaker the more one engages with it.

Pourshariati argued Christensen accepted Sasanian royal propaganda in using the *Khwadāy-nāmag* tradition uncritically, without analysing it for what it was.[18] Pourshariati postulates that the great Parthian noble families, which were so strong in the Arsacid period, did not lose nearly all their power in the Sasanian era, in contravention of Christensen's thesis, and the effective 'zone of control' of the Sasanian kings was focussed upon Mesopotamia and Fārs, becoming increasingly weak in the north and east.[19]

In general there is much to commend Pourshariati's thesis. As we have seen, Christensen's use of sources was problematic. The archaeological evidence cited to support Pourshariati's argument for the geographic focus of the Sasanian monarchy in the rich lowlands of Mesopotamia seems solid.[20] Her argument that there was a continuing Arsacid or Parthian flavouring to Sasanian history seems well founded.[21] Certainly, Pourshariati's thesis coheres better with the apparent reach of the monarchy in the provinces and the cultural outlook of the aristocracy, which we will assess in Chapters 2 and 3.

However, Pourshariati's own source analysis is not beyond reproach. Her work is a polemic, and, not unlike Christensen, she interprets evidence in line with her overarching thesis, even when the evidence logically points in another direction. Pourshariati underappreciates the frequent effectiveness of Sasanian power. While doubtlessly correct in stressing the irregularity of strong royal projections from the heartlands, the Sasanian state

[18] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall,* p. 10. See too pp. 33-37 where she discusses the nature of Sasanian influence upon this tradition.
[19] *Ibid*, her core thesis is set out in Ch. 2.
[20] *Ibid*, pp. 39-40.
[21] *Ibid*, pp.37-47.

was able to undertake massive infrastructure and building projects (most significantly for us, the Gorgān Wall defensive system), proving beyond all doubt the potential power of the government. The recently published Bactrian documents demonstrate that even though the Sasanian state might not have been very strong in the east, it was certainly present.[22] Although in many cases aristocrats dominated kings, they also very often cooperated with them. Pourshariati failed to acknowledge the evidence contrary to her argument, and, not unlike Christensen, generated a monolithic, unitary thesis, lacking nuance and variation over space and time.

It goes beyond the scope of the present work to offer a complete deconstruction of the arguments of Christensen and Pourshariati, and how they relate to each other in every particular case. Indeed, given the different foci of the books this would not be desirable or worth-while; Christensen's narrative is fairly evenly spread across the Sasanian period, but stops in 628, whilst Pourshariati's skims through most of Sasanian history swiftly, and focusses on the last century of Sasanian rule, especially on events *after* 628.

One example should suffice in illustrating the problems inherent in their approaches. The reign of Šāpur II can be used to support both theses, attesting to both the potential strength and weakness of the Sasanian monarchy relative to the aristocracy. According to later traditions, Šāpur II was purported to have being crowned in the womb, an attractive story which probably covered-up an aristocratic reaction against the apparent heirs of Hormozd II.

[22] See *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan. I: Legal and Economic Documents*, tr. Nicholas Sims-Williams (Oxford, 2001); *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan. II: Letters and Buddhist Texts*, tr. Nicholas Sims-Williams, (London, 2007). For instance, we see references to the levying of a 'Hepthalite Tax' (BD1, I, Ii, J, etc), a reference to a "royal road" as a boundary (BD1, J), and references to fines being paid to the treasury (BD1, Q). For further analysis, see Nicholas Sims-Williams, 'The Sasanians in the East: A Bactrian archive from northern Afghanistan', in Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (eds.), *The Sasanian Era: The Idea of Iran: Volume III* (London, 2008); Khodadad Rezakhani, 'Balkh and the Sasanians. The Economy and Society of Northern Afghanistan as Reflected in the Bactrian Economic Documents', in *Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies: Proceedings of the 6th European Conference of Iranian Studies, held in Vienna, 18-22 September, 2007*, eds. Maria Macuch, Dieter Weber and Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst (Wiesbaden, 2010).

According to Roman sources, Šāpur II had elder brothers (or half-brothers) who proved unable to keep the throne.[23] The reasons why an aristocracy jealous of their own prerogatives and power would prefer an infant over a fully-grown prince as king are obvious. The ability of the nobility to remove from the succession one or more princes (who may, or may not, have been mentally unstable – it is impossible to say whether Prince Adarnarses was really a sadistic psychopath unfit for office, or whether this was merely an invented pretext justifying his removal) clearly shows that the aristocracy could replace one heir for another more to their liking.

However, after Šāpur II achieved his majority, and certainly by the 350s and 360s (for which we have unusually precise sources, largely thanks to the narrative of Ammianus), we see a king thoroughly in control of his domains, with notable aristocrats apparently serving him loyally. Šāpur was able to prosecute wars in the farthest extremities of his realm, whilst simultaneously keeping a close control over his Mesopotamian heartlands.[24] Though the infant Šāpur may have been the puppet for self-interested magnates, the adult Šāpur clearly was not, and seems to have controlled the empire firmly. Simply, the reign of Šāpur II can be deployed in support of both extremes of Christensen's and Pourshariati's theses.

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[23] Adarnarses seems to have been the crown prince, but was passed over for the throne, apparently for his cruelty; see John of Antioch (*FHG* IV, p. 605) and Zonaras (XIII.5.19-24) in Michael H. Dodgeon, and Samuel N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: A.D. 226-363: A Documentary History* (London, 1991), p. 144 (6.1.2). Later, one of Šāpur's brothers, Hormozd, went over to the Romans (see Dodgeon and Lieu 6.2.3 for several sources on this). The versions of Agathias (written in the later 6th century from Persian sources) and Ṭabarī show a later version, where Šāpur is the legitimately appointed heir, and crowned in the womb. All the politicking is removed; Ag. IV.24.2-5; Ṭab. 836). Šāpur's brother Hormozd fought with the Romans during the invasion of 363; he went over to the Romans in 323 (Zos. ii.27; the account of this is in one of Ammianus' lost books); in 357 he was in Rome (AM. XVI.10.16). In 363, he accompanied Julian on his invasion of Persia, commanding cavalry (*ibid*, XXIV.1.2) and acted as a translator (*ibid*, XXIV.1.8). When the Romans besieged Pirisabora, the garrison demanded to address Hormozd, as he was a countryman of royal rank, but the garrison abused him on sight, calling him a traitor and deserter (*ibid*, XXIV.2.11).

[24] See AM XV.13.4, XVI.9.1 for general comments on Šāpur's campaigns in the east. There is no implication that he suffered any loss of control in the Sasanian west because of this. In the east Šāpur seems to have enlisted 'Grumbates', king of the 'Chionites' to fight for him against the Romans; *ibid,* XVIII.6.32, XIX.1.7.

Christensen says little about Šāpur II's accession and early reign, which is treated briefly, but he sees Šāpur's majority as the reassertion of strong monarchy over the descent towards the "l'anarchie féodale" which he believed characterised the misadministration of the Arsacid era.[25] The circumstances of his accession were glossed over, and the reign of Šāpur becomes another illustration of the strength of the Sasanian state, seemingly ignoring the fact that by his very accession it was clear that normal patterns of royal succession could seemingly be overturned through the self-interested actions of some elements within the nobility.

For Pourshariati, we see the same reign, largely evidenced from the same sources, used to make precisely the opposite point. She rightly stresses the power of the aristocracy in Šāpur's accession, but seems to badly misrepresent the role of the magnates during the wars of the 350s and 360s.[26] She identifies the crucial role of representatives of the house of Sūren and Mihrān in Šāpur's wars in the West, but she interprets this as meaning the king was weak relative to them. However, our literary sources give no indication *at all* of this, but rather that these magnates were subordinate to the king, and were following his orders, with the Armenian historian pseudo-Pʿawstos explicitly stating that Sūren did what he did under orders from Šāpur.[27] There is no indication that Sūren was anything other than a subordinate commander to the king. In our view, one could argue from Ammianus' narrative that Sūren and the other magnates had independent military forces, but one could not argue that they were stronger than the king's, or that they were employed in anything other than service to the wider Sasanian war effort. The mere existence of powerful magnates with private military resources does not seem to have suggested Šāpur's weakness, and certainly not indicative of the near puppet status accorded to him by Pourshariati.

[25] Christensen, *L'Iran*, pp. 234-235.
[26] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 56-57.
[27] See esp. *BP* IV.xxxiii, xxxvi, V.xxxviii; AM XXIV.2.4, 3.1, 4.7, 6.12, all of which concern Sūren, and XXV.1.11 concerns one 'Merena' (Mihrān).

The example of Šāpur II is a helpful illustration of how both historians have interpreted evidence excessively rigidly in furtherance of their thesis. A rigidly applied strong-state model struggles to explain how the aristocracy could evict the chosen successor if there was substantial institutional strength to the monarchy at this point. On the other hand, the logical extreme of Pourshariati's thesis does not address how Šāpur moved from being a puppet boy-king to a very strong and effective ruler during his majority. Instead we need a more sophisticated model where the institutional strength of the monarchy might have been limited, but an energetic and skilful ruler could more than make up any shortfall, and rule with great authority.

Neither Christensen nor Pourshariati seemed to consider the significance of personal factors, focussing excessively on structures, without considering how the reign of especially weak or strong kings might have altered the balance of power within the Empire. A 'strong' king does not necessarily gain his strength through bureaucracy or institutions, but can be strong through his personal authority, by the respect and fear in which he is held, and by his intelligent political actions. If one focuses one's attentions upon the personal qualities of the king, especially if one views this alongside the wider cultural outlook of the elite, one can begin to understand how the Sasanian monarchy seems to have shifted between periods of apparently extraordinary power to extreme fragility, sometimes, as illustrated by Šāpur II, within the same reign.

A simple critique of the weaknesses of Christensen's and Pourshariati's work does not significantly advance the scholarly field. In order to explain how the Sasanian state might have operated, this dissertation will explore personal and cultural factors, which could provide a means to understanding the strength and nature of the Sasanian monarchy. Not only is this a facet largely overlooked by Christensen and Pourshariati, it also allows for the shifts in

Sasanian royal control. In essence, personalities and personnel change (and can be changed) more easily than structures. Though this is not to deny the importance of structures and institutions, for these broadly define the limits of what is possible, we would contend that human factors are vital considerations. This thesis will attempt to add this dimension.

The Howard-Johnston Question

Setting the Christensen/Pourshariati debate to one side, we also need to consider the arguments made by James Howard-Johnston in his significant essay, "The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: A Comparison". This study asked the question of how the Sasanian Empire could be a serious threat to the Roman Empire for over four centuries, despite relative material weakness.[28] Whilst we disagree with some of his conclusions, Howard-Johnston's question and method provides another useful angle to the discussion at hand.

Howard-Johnston's contention, that the Sasanian monarchy was able to extract a substantially greater proportion of wealth from the populace than the Roman government could, enabling it to meet Roman armies on an equal footing, seems broadly in agreement with Christensen's thesis. Howard-Johnston reached his conclusion not so much through an in-depth analysis of the sources (because there hardly are any), but through the application of logic and rational argument (as he perceived it) to the problem. Despite the lack of hard evidence underpinning his argument, it is possible to appreciate its attractiveness. However, whilst in isolation Howard-Johnston's argument appears plausible, we do not see it as the only solution to the question, and the way he reached his conclusion is not above criticism. In general, we would suggest that Howard-Johnston's overall conclusion is correct, but his reasoning is often suspect.

[28] James Howard-Johnston, 'The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: A Comparison', in Averil Cameron (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: III: States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton, 1995), p. 165.

There are methodological flaws, Howard-Johnston seemingly interpreting evidence (or the absence of evidence) in furtherance of his thesis of strong centralisation. For instance, Howard-Johnston proposes that Rome's upland Balkan provinces were thoroughly Romanised and became prime military recruiting grounds through the long-term use of fortifications and other coercive measures. He then argues that the complete absence of evidence for such a programme of works in the upland Sasanian regions as evidence for their thorough integration into the Sasanian project, making a programme of coercive integration unnecessary. In his view the military parity showed that the Sasanian uplands *must* have provided resources freely to the centre.[29] However, the absolutes of geography (upland regions can inevitably better defy central authority than lowland regions), suggests a more plausible argument would be that central governments have limited control over upland regions, unless there is compelling evidence otherwise. As shall be discussed in Chapter 2, though the Sasanian government certainly intruded into the Iranian East, the level of hard power the Sasanians enjoyed there seems limited. There is however no evidence of habitual hostility between the lowland and upland regions of the Sasanian Empire, and magnate families with substantial eastern interests, such as the houses of Sūren and Mihrān, were often involved in empire-wide affairs at the highest level. The conflict between Ḵosrow II and his uncle Bestām in the 590s (whereby Bestām effectively took over the northern and eastern parts of the Empire, and fought off attempts by the centre to reassert control for six years, until he was murdered, *not* militarily defeated) strongly suggests that the centre could not impose itself on the upland regions when the upland regions were in active opposition.[30] Bestām's success in resisting Ḵosrow II strongly

[29] *Ibid*, pp. 184-185.

[30] See A. Shapur Shahbazi**, '**Besṭām o Bendōy' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bestam-o-bendoy-maternal-uncles-of-kosrow-ii-parvez-and-leading-statesmen-and-soldiers-under-hormozd-iv-and-kosrow-p> [17 June, 2013] for an overview of Besṭām's career. See too: Seb. 22-26, 27; FD, 1979-1983. Theophylact does not mention the conflict between Ḵosrow and Besṭām directly, but does refer to Ḵosrow's fears at being murdered by his own people, and his murder of Bendōy. TS V.11.9, V.15.1.

suggests that right until the end of the Empire, control over the upland regions depended more upon the willing cooperation of local locals than the might of the king. Therefore, we would suggest that Howard-Johnston was not so much wrong in his assertion that there was no conflict between upland and lowland regions, but wrongly focussed. There was cooperation between the regions and the centre because provincial lords willingly cooperated with the king and voluntarily contributed to affairs of the Empire as a whole, *not* because the central state could enforce compliance. This shift in focus suggests the importance of looking for reasons why provincial magnates chose to cooperate.

Similarly, though individual elements of Howard-Johnston's thesis are open to criticism, its broad contentions remain reasonable. One certainly could argue that the Roman Empire of the mid-third century onwards was less powerful than the Roman Empire of the first and second centuries which the Arsacids contended with, thereby explaining the relative success against the Romans of the early Sasanians *vis-à-vis* the Arsacids. Military parity does not *necessarily* imply resource parity – some ways of making war are substantially more efficient than others. A good general might overcome substantial resource imbalances. Howard-Johnston's claim that the victories of Šāpur I showed the Sasanians enjoyed resource parity with the Romans is open to question,[31] as one could equally argue that Šāpur was simply a better general than the Roman commanders opposing him.[32] Similarly, the Diocletianic re-conquests of the later third-century can in part be explained by better Roman commanders as much as by resource imbalance. Howard-Johnston does not seem to have considered the

[31] Howard-Johnston, 'The Two Great Powers', p. 161.

[32] The quality of Šāpur I compared to the Roman generals of his day might be suggested by the relative success Severus Alexander (the last Roman ruler before the 'Third Century Crisis' engulfed the Roman world) enjoyed against the Sasanians. How successful Severus Alexander was in his Sasanian wars is debatable, as the major sources (Herodian, Cassius Dio and the *Historia Augusta*) are all complex sources. It appears that Severus Alexander suffered some defeats (possibly major defeats) in the east, but he halted Persian attacks for the rest of his reign, and he could claim the title *Parthicus Maximus* or *Persicus Maximus*, which would have been absurd if his campaigns had been true failures. See Pat Southern, *The Roman Empire from Severus to Constantine* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 60-62.

quality of generals or statesmen at all. Military matters are conceived of almost entirely in terms of the balance of resources. Certainly, tactical genius cannot make up for an overwhelming resource imbalance, but to suggest an absolute link between military stalemate and resource parity, without any reference to how human decisions can influence affairs, is problematic. However, it is also likely that over the long centuries of coexistence the fluctuations in the competence of generals and statesmen on both sides probably balanced out, and any arguments based around military 'efficiency' cannot be easily answered. Howard-Johnston's assertion might be flawed in detail by ignoring the human component, but over the *longue durée* one can accept the broad thrust that military parity more-or-less equated to resource parity.

We would suggest the greatest weakness in his approach lies in the assumption that the only way to finance military forces is through a central bureaucracy paying for everything. A cursory glance at other pre-modern states shows that while states might control substantial military forces, they did not necessarily assume the whole financial burden for them. Mediaeval European rulers were able to harness (with varying degrees of success) the natural bellicosity of their aristocracies, aristocracies who channelled a large proportion of their landed wealth into military related expenditure, and then fought for the king on terms of employment which made little financial sense, but with a view to affirming their status in the 'community of the realm', to earn political capital or governmental support in their local affairs, and through fulfilling an ethos of service to the king.[33] Howard-Johnston does acknowledge the importance of cultural factors, mentioning that the aristocracy could not have been habitually antagonistic towards the central government, and the importance of the ideology of government.[34] However, he did not develop the implications of these statements,

[33] This is discussed at greater length in Part 2 of our Conclusion.
[34] Howard-Johnston, 'The Two Great Powers', pp. 221-5.

and offers a model heavily in favour of the strength of the Sasanian monarchy, rather than the cooperation of the nobility.

Howard-Johnston's thesis is important because it highlights one of the few absolutes of Sasanian history – the military parity with the Romans – and tries to account for it. Regardless of the solutions proposed, the question is vital. Performance in war remains one of the very few fixed points around which we can articulate our discussion. For our purposes, we shall call this the Howard-Johnston question. Howard-Johnston proposes the most logical solution – the competing governments enjoyed approximate resource parity. However, we would contend that his understanding of how this parity was achieved is problematic.

Pourshariati's hypothesis, which sees a relatively small role for effective central government in Sasanian Iran does not address the Howard-Johnston question. Christensen's thesis does, but it does not fit the evidence for large tracts of Sasanian history. As we have discussed, Howard-Johnston, an apparent supporter of Christensen's line of argument, offers his own interpretation, but that too is unsatisfying. Any model has to account for an approximately similar military resource base between the Sasanian and Roman Empires, and for what must have been a generally cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship between the centre and the regions.

Theoretical and Methodological Underpinnings

We would suggest three key weaknesses in the prevailing scholarship on Sasanian Iran: an excessive focus on the king rather than the subject when assessing state power, an over-concentration on institutions and structures rather than human factors, and a lack of a comparative framework to assess the Sasanian situation. Neither Christensen nor Pourshariati reflected on the cultural predisposition of the Late Antique Iranian aristocracy. As a result, a potentially vital avenue of investigation into the question has been missed. As rehearsed

above, the ability of the state to govern and to extract resources from the population is as much dependent upon the willingness of subjects to cooperate in being governed, as it is upon the coercive powers the state might deploy to enforce compliance. Regardless of the bureaucratic or coercive powers a government might have, it will struggle to govern if people systematically refuse to cooperate.

The Sasanian Empire is poorly served with source material. The extant works are insufficient by themselves to provide a full description of the Sasanian state and how it interacted with the aristocracy. The sources at our disposal give only scattered details concerning the nature of Sasanian government, or occasional pointers on the outlook of the nobility. They certainly do not allow us to create a precise model of how the state was organised, nor how it developed over time, leaving plenty of scope for interpretations articulated around relatively few fixed points. We have little indication of the representativeness of the sources we have, and as we necessarily have to draw heavily on individual sources due to their rarity, this makes any conclusions prone to unreliability.

We would suggest the selective use of a comparative methodology can help us interpret more reliably the sources at our disposal, and so avoiding some of the shortcomings in the theories mentioned above. We acknowledge that adopting this analytical framework is controversial, but we believe a comparative analysis will help to resolve some aspects of the Christensen-Pourshariati debate. We suggest that our interpretations can become more reliable by comparing them with what is known of comparable societies for which we have fuller sources.

Some of the merits of a comparison based approach have been eloquently summed up by Chris Wickham in his pamphlet *Problems in doing Comparative History*:

> "The key point is that comparison is essential. I don't think you can properly do history without it…There are, I think, two main reasons why comparison is so necessary. The first is cultural solipsism: if you don't compare, you end up believing that one type of historical development is normal, normative, and that every other is a deviation. People who don't compare almost always study their own country, and their focus on it creates a Europe – a world – of islands, with no relationship to each other…Worse, these insularities in nearly every case match up with national teleologies, the study in each country of the historical reasons why We are special, better than – or at least different from – the Others…We as historians, neutral analysts of the past, we hope, should be studying those reasons, so as to explain why *other* people developed them, not reproducing them ourselves.
>
> "The second reason for the necessity of comparison could be called quasi-Popperian: comparison is the closest that historians can get to testing, attempting to falsify, their own explanations."[35]

Wickham gives us two positive reasons for doing comparative history – so as to avoid national insularities, and to better test one's theories – both clearly desirable aims. This adds to the aforementioned issues in how best to interpret potentially unrepresentative sources. As so much of our Sasanian evidence lacks substantial historical context, interpretations can easily lead to unreliable conclusions, despite these conclusions appearing quite logical in isolation.

Given the potential range of useful comparisons which might be made, we have limited ourselves to the selective use of comparisons where they will prove most valuable. This

[35] Chris Wickham, *Problems in doing Comparative History* (Southampton, 2005), pp. 2-3.

is primarily a decision borne from considerations of space, and the reasoning for these ad-hoc comparisons will be made as required.

The greater part of our comparative analysis focusses upon the later mediaeval West, and shall be made in Part 2 of our Conclusion. We would suggest (a point fully articulated in our conclusion), that the late mediaeval West is an illustrative point of comparison, sharing many features of Sasanian Iran. Late Mediaeval Europe offers a better documented and researched example of the development of more powerful state structures, and their growth into more peripheral areas of kingdoms, as well as illustrating the significance of *de jure* hierarchies, even when far removed from the *de facto* balance of power. We recognise that this requires some comparisons of thought processes rather than institutions or structures, which is inherently more problematic. That is why we intend to couch this discussion much more in terms of probability and possibility, using comparisons to suggest how things *could* have been done, rather than how they necessarily *were* done. We will explore how in many cases official power structures were maintained despite their variance with the balance of power on the ground. This is significant in the context of our thesis, because we would suggest that social and ideological ties were essential in sustaining a more-or-less unified Sasanian Empire, which otherwise lacked a government with the coercive means to enforce such continuity. We believe that, given the grain of the evidence available, it is reasonable to suggest a situation where a polity endured despite the central authority lacking the hard power to enforce its survival, an interpretation supported when we make comparisons with the later mediaeval West.

Methodological summary

This thesis aims to reconcile the theories of Christensen and Pourshariati, and to better understand the internal power dynamics of the Sasanian state. In order to do this, we

will focus not only on the monarchy itself, but also on the aristocracy and how they related to the crown. This is in part because how the monarchy was perceived was largely overlooked by Christensen and Pourshariati, but also because understanding the cultural outlook of the aristocracy towards the monarchy suggest how cooperative the greater part of the aristocracy may have been for the Sasanian kings, and hence the level of control achieved by the state.

Firstly, we shall consider the major primary sources. Then, our second chapter will study the Sasanian monarchy, focussing upon the ability of the monarchy to act outside of core areas, the ideological underpinning of monarchy, and the army. Our third chapter will concern the cultural outlook of the Sasanian aristocracy, with especial regard to their conceptions of service to the monarchy. When relevant, we will make use of selective comparative analysis to better interpret the evidence to hand.

In our conclusion, we will bring together the most important arguments from Chapters 2 and 3, and make a comparative analysis with late mediaeval Western Europe, especially with England and France, so as to interpret our evidence more reliably, and to provide a broader framework of reference for our contentions regarding Sasanian Iran. The West European monarchies in the late mediaeval period (c. 1300-1530) are especially pertinent, given our interest in state centralisation, royal-aristocratic power balances, and the nature of armies. The mediaeval monarchies of England and France underwent similar changes to those under discussion for Sasanian Iran. Furthermore, the late mediaeval Holy Roman Empire offers a different point of comparison. It was often headed by an exceptionally weak emperor, unable to assert himself in any meaningful way, and yet the institution was still respected due to the prestige and antiquity of his office.[36] The late mediaeval west is therefore especially helpful in

[36] As an introduction, see Tom Scott, 'Germany and the Empire', in Christopher Allmand (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History: VII: c. 1415-c1500* (Cambridge, 1998), see esp. pp. 343-347 for an overview of the emperor's unique and exalted position coupled with the political weakness of his office.

having a more-or-less ‘ideal type’ confederate empire to study alongside the stronger monarchies of France and England.

In late mediaeval Europe, one sees relatively advanced states coming into conflict with entrenched regional interests. Comparisons with earlier periods of European history are less pertinent because states generally did not enjoy the level of bureaucratic penetration the Sasanian state undoubtedly had, and later comparisons are less useful too, because by the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries regional lords had become clearly subservient to royal authority. We would suggest that the grain of the evidence for Sasanian Iran fits most convincingly with the late mediaeval western situation, whereby there was what one might call a hybrid state, which enjoyed real power in some areas, but had what might be described as ‘influence’ in others; where armies were effective instruments of the state’s will, but were largely raised to fight a given campaign and disbanded afterwards, and where standing armies were an addition to, rather than a replacement of, more traditionally levied forces.

However, before we undertake our analysis of Sasanian Iran, we must first assess some of the most important sources available. As our thesis largely concerns social history, literary sources necessarily provide the overwhelming body of our evidence, though of course it shall be supplemented with archaeological evidence where relevant.

Chapter 1 – Source Analysis

Introduction

The majority of the literary sources can be grouped into one of three main bodies: literary sources from the Roman world, sources from the Armenian (or, more broadly, Caucasian) literary traditions, and those written in Persian and Arabic after the Arab Conquest, frequently drawing upon the *Khwadāy-nāmag* traditions, the lost Sasanian royal history which most likely began to be compiled in the fifth century. In this section we shall consider each corpus of material *in general*, before offering a more detailed analysis of some of the prominent works from that corpus. There are other literary sources which do not fit into one of these three broad categories. These mostly originate from within in the Sasanian world, and include *The Book of a Thousand Judgements*, *The Letter of Tansar* and the Bactrian documents. These sources will be treated in a 'miscellaneous' section, along with sub-literary sources, such as coins and seals, at the end of this chapter.

The questions outlined above, concerning the Sasanian state and how the aristocracy related to it, demand different sources, or different things from the same source. To understand how the Sasanian monarchy operated, how it presented itself and was perceived, and how effectively it was able to project into provincial life, we need either relatively restrained literary sources, or sub-literary sources, which allow us to piece together the reach and nature of Sasanian government. To understand the culture of the aristocracy we need more qualitative material. The historical truth of such material is often not significant. Myths might have little, if any, grounding in historical events, but can be extremely informative about the ethos of their audience.

1.1 - Roman literary sources

Of all the bodies of literary evidence available, the Roman material is the most accessible for Western audiences, and enjoys the most extensive scholarly criticism in European languages. This has contributed to what we perceive as the excessive use of Roman material. Christensen used Roman historians extensively in his narrative, with certain sections heavily reliant on Roman authors, especially for the reigns of Šāpur II (dominated by the account of Ammianus Marcellinus) and, to a lesser degree, Ḵosrow I (where Procopius' history is especially significant). Pourshariati focusses on later Sasanian history, where other sources are often available, making Roman material relatively less useful. Nevertheless, this body of material holds some importance for the earlier stages of her narrative, though she downplays the significance of Roman literature to her thesis.[37]

The strengths and weaknesses of the Roman *corpus* are subtle, so it is not simply a case of writing off the Roman testimony because it viewed the Persians as 'barbarians' (which was only occasionally the case), nor of highly prioritising the relative historicity of Roman histories compared to the other literary sources available. The use of Roman narratives is complex, and requires greater caution than other bodies of evidence, justifying greater scrutiny of them, even when non-Roman sources might be more significant to this study.

Placing some weight on Roman histories is not entirely misplaced. Roman writers were generally more contemporaneous to the events they described than the other literary sources, with all the benefits that entails. Also, Roman historians, generally, present factually plausible (if not necessarily accurate) and chronologically sound accounts which are largely grounded in the mundane world of conflict and warfare. This gives a concomitant, if occasional, interest in

[37] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, p. 13, "[b]esides Armenian sources, selective use has also been made of other foreign sources, especially Greek and Syrian sources…"

such things as logistics and political manoeuvring, and a lower likelihood of ascribing events to the involvement of supernatural phenomena. Given that many of the other literary sources are decidedly 'epic' in character, and often written long after the events they describe, after decades, even centuries, of oral transmission, the mundaneness and contemporaneity of much of the Roman material are very important strengths. Also, we have a plurality of voices from the Roman world at certain periods, meaning we can better analyse what we do have. So whilst Ammianus might be the principal source for Julian's invasion of Mesopotamia in 363, Zosimus, Libanius and others also offer insights, allowing a more satisfying reading of the principal narrative.[38] Alone amongst all the available bodies of literary evidence, the Roman sources offer us more-or-less coherent chronologies. Though far from perfect, Roman historians writing about military matters often give credible accounts of numbers, troop movements, and tactics from which one might fairly infer characteristics of the states involved. This is especially useful considering the nature of our more epic Armenian and post-Conquest Arabic and Persian sources, with their tendency to focus upon the heroic qualities of leaders.

However, despite these significant strengths, Roman histories can only hold a supporting role in this thesis. Inevitably, Roman historians largely focussed on the Roman world, and were seldom, if ever, interested in Persians or Persian affairs for their own sake. Clearly, Persians might be involved in Roman affairs in a significant way (generally as battlefield antagonists), but their inclusion was generally restricted to how they impacted upon Romans and Roman interests. There is little interest in Persians in themselves, and in some important cases (especially for Ammianus Marcellinus) the representation of Persians sometimes becomes little more than a means to present the learning of the author, conforming to established preconceptions more than reality. Indeed, the Roman historians

[38] For an example of trying to reconcile competing accounts, see: Walter R. Chalmers, 'Eunapius, Ammianus Marcellinus and Zosimus on Julian's Persian Expedition', in *The Classical Quarterly Review, New Series, Vol. 10, No. 2* (Cambridge, 1960).

holding greatest significance for us, Ammianus Marcellinus and Procopius, seemingly subordinated their representation of the Persians to their wider political message, as we shall discuss. This seriously undermines the credibility of these historians when discussing Persian affairs.

There was a long tradition of Greek and Roman writers presenting foreign cultures in terms of their own societies, rather than trying to explain foreign concepts to their audience.[39] In some instances this gives rise to a false impression of similarity. For instance, Ammianus described Persian cavalry as *turmae* – that is, organised into *turma* – the term used to describe a cavalry squadron in the Roman army.[40] Persian infantry, probably best described as a mob of conscripted peasants, are described as fighting in *manipuli*,[41] a word more typically applied to formations of disciplined Roman legionaries. Arguably, this gives a misleading impression of Sasanian armies, by using terms with a clear Roman administrative meaning (and all the concomitant implications thereof) to describe a Persian formation which probably had a very different administrative and social underpinning. This only acts as an example, and we cannot be sure how consciously different authors did this, but, given the peripheral nature of Persia and Persians to Roman sources, we should proceed with caution.

We would suggest that in general, the best use of the Roman literary tradition is to help fashion a framework to facilitate the use of other bodies of evidence. The Roman histories offer uniquely detailed narratives of isolated episodes, often providing a wealth of useful asides and digressions. Chronology is a particular strength, meaning we can with reasonable

[39] Famous examples of this are the descriptions of the Carthaginian constitution in the writings of Aristotle and Polybius, which they saw as an amalgam of monarchy, democracy and oligarchy, the three ideal types of government in the Hellenistic world; Aristotle, *The Politics*, tr. T. A. Sinclair, (London, 2000), II.xi; Polybius, *History*, tr. Frank W. Walbank, published as *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, (London, 1979), VI.51.
[40] AM, XIX.2.2-3, XXIV.6.8
[41] E.g. *ibid* XXIV.6.8.

certainty state, for instance, that a campaign was fought in a given year, what its major events were, and whether the Persian king was present. Also, the Roman works cover most of the Sasanian period, with the exception of the fifth century, meaning that we generally have contemporary or near-contemporary Roman material available. However flawed, it supplies a breadth which is missing from other bodies of literary evidence.

This is especially valuable when set alongside the other bodies of evidence which are generally patchier in their coverage. In general, the post-Conquest Arabic and Persian material is dominated by the heavily mythologised reigns of Ardašīr I and Bahrām V, and the reigns from Ḵosrow I onwards, whilst the Armenian tradition is rich for the mid-to-later fourth century, the mid fifth century, and the last sixty years or so of the Sasanian period, but offers only the sketchiest details for other periods, notably the sixth century. It is a matter of frustration that very little comparative analysis can be done between Roman and Armenian sources for the sixth century, at which point Christensen argued that Sasanian centralisation reached its apogee.[42]

Roman material is best used in a supporting role, offering a framework to better interpret other material and offering us relatively sound chronologies. Coming from outside the Iranian world is a major hindrance for writing cultural history, and the Roman writers were seldom interested in the Persians as such, often manipulating their representation of Persians to advance a political point. This is why we will relegate Roman histories to a supporting role.

1.1.1 – Ammianus Marcellinus

The history of Ammianus Marcellinus has generally been treated as a source of the first order for Sasanian affairs, almost certainly the most useful of the available Roman

[42] Christensen, *L'Iran*, see ch. VII, esp. pp. 363-364.

sources.[43] His work has been described as "by far the fullest, most precise and most reliable narrative source" for fourth-century Roman history,[44] and has unique strengths for Sasanian studies through his personal involvement in two campaigns against the Persians in 359-360 and 363, the latter of which penetrated up to the walls of Ctesiphon. His first-hand contact with the Sasanian Empire is unique amongst the significant Roman historians. He also provides an extended description of fourth-century Iran (XXIII.6). Given his status and his influence on Christensen's account of fourth-century Iran, we consider it pertinent to discuss Ammianus' narrative at some length. The lack of a major work explaining his representation of the Persians further justifies this study.

Ammianus is generally a well-regarded historian, though perhaps less so in recent years.[45] As a military historian his reputation remains sound.[46] However, it is our view that the underlying biases and motives of Ammianus' narrative renders it a problematic source which should be approached cautiously.

Ammianus was a conservative pagan author – though to what extent his political and religious views altered his narrative is debated.[47] Ammianus' work certainly *appears* fairly

[43] Christensen sees Ammianus as a source of "haute importance au sujet de l'Iran", and makes very extensive use of him, especially for military matters, p. 75, and chapters II and V.
[44] Timothy D. Barnes, *Ammianus Marcellinus and the Representation of Historical Reality*, (Ithaca, 1998), p. 2.
[45] See esp. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1776-1778), Ch. XXVI, p. 65 of Vol. 3 of the Everyman 1993 edition, for a very favourable 'classic' view. See too. T. G. Elliott, *Ammianus Marcellinus and Fourth Century History* (Toronto, 1983), pp. 3-13 for a good overview of works on Ammianus written in English, French, Latin, German and Italian from the seventeenth to later twentieth centuries.
[46] John Lazenby, 'Roman Military Historians', in Richard Holmes (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford, 2001), p. 783; N. J. E. Austin, *Ammianus on Warfare: An Investigation into Ammianus' Military Knowledge* (Brussels, 1979), pp. 7, 20-21; Henry T. Rowell, *Ammianus Marcellinus, Soldier-Historian of the Late Roman Empire* (Cincinnati, 1964), pp. 6, 52-53.
[47] Elliott is an especially forceful critic of Ammianus, seeing his work as conservative Pagan propaganda, seeking to subtly bend his audience to his line of thinking. Elliott, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, see esp. pp. 7, 12, 54, 132-133, 213-215. Kelly largely agrees with Elliott's contention that Ammianus was a subtle and able propagandist; Gavin Kelly, *Ammianus Marcellinus: The Allusive Historian* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 5. Blockley agrees with Elliott's anti-Constantius reading of Ammianus' account of the campaign of 359. See R. C. Blockley, 'Ammianus Marcellinus on the Persian Invasion of A.D. 359', in *Phoenix, Vol. 42, No. 3*

balanced. However, the more one engages with it, the more one realises that 'good' characters are never Christian, and 'bad' characters are never pagan. As Ammianus does not bluntly confront his audience with strong statements articulating his views, it becomes easy to accept his characterisations without question.

Elliott is correct to point out that propaganda is only truly effective when it is not obviously such, and works with subtlety.[48] It is worth mentioning that such a reading of Ammianus' history fits remarkably well with the tenor of Chomsky's work *Necessary Illusions*, which though dealing with The United States in the twentieth century, illustrates well how selective reporting and the pretence of balance can produce extremely successful propaganda.[49] We strongly believe Ammianus' work should be seen as a means for advancing his political and religious beliefs. As Warrington persuasively argued,[50] Ammianus made highly improbable statements in furtherance of these. We should therefore read everything he has to say in the light of his overarching political, social and religious prejudices.

For instance, Ammianus seemingly misled his audience in support of Julian. Regarding Persian affairs, he failed to include Šāpur II's two peace initiatives rebuffed by Julian in 362-3 mentioned by Libanius, the contemporary sophist and orator from Antioch, who stated (in a

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(1988), pp. 245, 250-251. Warrington makes us aware of how (in books now lost, but surviving in the eleventh century work of Cedrenus) Ammianus ascribed the outbreak of war between Constantine and Šāpur II in 330 to fanciful causes which show the Roman emperor in the blackest light; B. H. Warmington, 'Ammianus Marcellinus and the Lies of Metrodorus', in *The Classical Quarterly Review, New Series, Vol. 31, No. 2* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 464, 468; see Cedrenus, *Chronicle,* i, pp. 516, 12-517, 15, tr. Michael H. Dodgeon, in Dodgeon and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: A.D. 226-363*, p. 153. However, Seager, Thomson and Camus have in different ways articulated a more positive view of the historical merits of Ammianus' narrative. See Robin Seager, *Ammianus Marcellinus: Seven Studies in His Language and Thought* (Columbia, 1986), pp. 131-133; E. A. Thompson, *The Historical Work of Ammianus Marcellinus* (Cambridge, 1947), pp. 121-124, 131-133; Pierre-Marie Camus, *Ammien Marcellin: Témoin des Courants Culturels et Religieux a la fin du IV^e Siècle* (Paris, 1967), pp. 106f, 113-114, 256f. We should note in particular Seager's argument that Ammianus in particular was interested in the threat 'barbarism' played to the Roman way of life – this certainly should be of interest in assessing his representation of the Persians.

[48] Elliott, *Ammianus Marcellinus*, p. 12.

[49] Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (London, 1989), *passim.*

[50] Warrington, 'Ammianus Marcellinus and the Lies of Metrodorus', n. 8.

speech made in January 363, just before the invasion), that the Persians had sent an embassy to negotiate a settlement,[51] accounts of which are also recorded in Socrates' *Ecclesiastical History*.[52] This episode offers clear evidence of Ammianus warping his narrative in furtherance of his aim, but it is only detectable because of other sources on this same issue, indicating that we must be careful using Ammianus' narrative when we do not have external corroboration.

Furthermore, Ammianus perhaps warped his representation of Šāpur II for the furtherance of his political aims. Ammianus' representation of Šāpur as a barbarian king whose courage, piety and respect for the aristocracy far outstripped that of Christian Roman rulers might have owed more to his political and religious beliefs than reality.[53] However, most of the actions Ammianus ascribed to Šāpur are plausible. They are usually not obvious fabrications. Interpreting his representation of the Persian king is therefore difficult.

Ammianus' lengthy description of the Persian Empire immediately before Julian's invasion in 363 (XXIII.6) was largely drawn from outdated literary sources, rather than his own experiences.[54] His main source seems to have been Ptolemy's *Geography*, then over two centuries old, supplemented with Strabo (writing in the Augustan period) and Pliny the Elder (working in the later first century AD) extensively.[55] This reliance on dated literary sources caused him to make egregious errors, stating that the Arsacids were still ruling Iran, for

[51] Libanius, Oration XII.19, 76, see too Oration XVIII.164, tr. A. F. Norman, published alongside other orations as *Selected Works I: The Julianic Orations* (Cambridge (Mass.), 1969).
[52] Socrates, *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus*, tr. The Rev. A. C. Zenos, III.19, III.21 (pp. 169-170), http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202.html [25 March, 2013].
[53] AM. XVIII.5.6 which refers to the Persian king taking advice from his nobles; regarding piety, Šāpur made sacrifices before his invasion of 359 (XVIII.7.1) and according to Ammianus, Šāpur refrained from attacking the Romans in 361 "*dum moveri permitterunt sacra*" – "until the *sacra* (divine/ holy) [force/power] would permet a move." Šāpur's personal courage is demonstrated by leading from the front during the siege of Amida; XIX.7.8.
[54] J. den Boeft, J. W. Drijvers, D. den Hengst and H. C. Teitler, *Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellins XXIII* (Groningen, 1998), p. 129-131.
[55] *Ibid*, pp. 130-131.

instance.[56] He may not have even read these works in full, instead relying on popularising facsimiles and glosses.[57] Sabbah has suggested that Ammianus' scientific, geographic and ethnographic digressions (of which XXIII.6 is the longest) were a means to demonstrate his learning and all-round reliability as a source,[58] which seems likely given Ammianus' status as a propagandist.

Ammianus seemingly constructed his narrative with his audience's expectations in mind; his descriptions of Persian heavy cavalry are nearly identical to those in Heliodorus' third century novel *Ethiopica*.[59] Ammianus' descriptions were not wholly fictitious. There is widespread pictorial evidence that some Persian cavalry were equipped as he recorded, though probably only a small minority,[60] but he implies that the *clibinarius* archetype was the norm, in apparent accordance with popular perceptions. Ammianus was seemingly guilty of perpetuating popular perceptions of the Persians, regardless of their accuracy, and preferring well-regarded, if dated, literary sources to his own experiences, significantly reducing the value of the unique strength of his account – his personal experience of the Persian Empire. Ammianus apparently preferred to have been perceived as a scholarly author, this seemingly conferring greater status than that of being a reliable eyewitness, who would challenge the popular, but erroneous, perceptions of his audience.

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[56] AM, XXIII.6.5-6.

[57] Charles W. Fornara., 'Studies in Ammianus Marcellinus: II: Ammianus' Knowledge and Use of Greek and Latin Literature', in *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte, Vol. 41. No. 4* (1992).p. 421.

[58] Guy Sabbah, *La Méthode d'Ammien Marcellin: Recherches sur la Construction du Discours Historique sur les Res Gestae* (Paris, 1978), pp. 525-528.

[59] AM XIX.7.4, XXIV.6.8, XXV.1.1, 12-13; Heliodorus, *An Ethiopian Romance*, tr. Moses Hadas (Philadelphia, 1957), pp. 229-231.

[60] See esp. J. C. Coulston, 'Roman, Parthian and Sassanid Tactical Developments', in Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (eds.), *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East: Part I* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 60-61, 66-68; David Nicolle, *Sassanian Armies: The Iranian Empire early 3rd to mid-7th centuries A.D.* (Stockport, 1996), p. 20; Simon James, 'Evidence from Dura Europos for the Origins of Late Roman Helmets' in *Syria, T. 63, Fasc. 1/2,* (1986), p. 15.

However, Ammianus remains the most useful Roman historian for this thesis. The second most prominent Roman narrative, that of Procopius, has similar problems of political bias, but contains less personal observation and involvement. If one strips away the more fanciful detail, and reads Ammianus' history critically and sceptically (a process greatly aided by the relative wealth of other contemporaneous extant Roman writers), there remains much of interest. His campaign accounts (especially that of 363) are much longer and more detailed than Procopius' eyewitness account of the Dara campaign of 530. Though Ammianus may have misrepresented the Persians, and in some cases clearly fabricated material,[61] much of his acount is plausible. Though the representation of Šāpur II in the campaign of 359 was probably used to impugn the military reputation and conduct of Constantius, the core narrative is probably sound. For instance, there is no reason to doubt that Šāpur II led from the front at the siege of Amida. If Ammianus wanted to be an effective propagandist, the narrative he supplied had to be believable. He could not invent events which thousands of Romans had witnessed, such as the personal leadership of the Persian king in a major campaign. As a final point, Ammianus does not seem to have held any particular animus against the Persians. He saw them as them inferior to the Romans, but did not consider them barbarians (as he did the Huns or Germans),[62] a strength shared by relatively few Roman authors.

Therefore, Ammianus shares the weaknesses of the wider Roman corpus of cultural distance and potential misunderstanding. However, Ammianus' testimony remains useful, if used with care. For example, his description of the siege of Amida is highly believable, especially when read alongside other sources, such as the archaeological evidence from the

[61] For example, Ammianus' account of watching in detail the Persian invasion of 359 from a mountain top around 70 miles away, including such details as Šāpur's II (very un-Zoroastrian, and rather Roman-pagan) sacrificial rite before crossing into Roman territory. The passage should be treated as largely fictitious; AM XVIII.7.1.

[62] Jan Willem Drijvers, 'A Roman Image of the "Barbarian" Sasanians', in Ralph W. Mathiesen and Danuta Shanzar (eds.), *Romans, Barbarians and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction ad the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity* (Farnham, 2011), p. 70.

third-century Sasanian siege of Dura Europos.[63] Ammianus' principal strength is found in the retention and preservation of many incidental comments from which highly pertinent extrapolations can be made, especially regarding the Sasanian military system, and thus the Sasanian aristocracy. Despite the problems, we would still maintain Ammianus is the most useful Roman historian for our purposes.

1.1.2 – Procopius

After Ammianus' history, Procopius' *History of the Wars* is the second most prominent Roman source. Like Ammianus, he was an eyewitness (albeit in a civilian role) to some of the campaigns against the Persians which he describes. At face value, many of his observations appear to be extremely significant.

Procopius' *Wars,* however, displays the same main weakness as Ammianus' *Res Gestae*, namely the use of the narrative as a means of conveying a political message. Cameron detects a sustained (if veiled) critique of Justinian throughout *Wars*, but argues that Procopius, ultimately, tried to write *Wars* as a Thucydidean history.[64] *The Secret History*, which arguably conveys Procopius' real views, existed as an expression of discontent which would not have been appropriate to express in a classicising history.[65] Cameron argues that we should not anticipate political bias within the *Wars*. Procopius hated Justinian, but he tried to write his most significant work in the manner of classical Greek history, where such invective was inappropriate.

[63] See AM XVIII.9-XIX.8, see for comparison Simon James, *Excavations at Dura-Europos 1928-1937: Final Report VII: The Arms and Armour and other Military Equipment* (Oxford, 2004), esp. pp. 30-39.
[64] Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London, 1985), pp. 8, 12, 140.
[65] *Ibid*, *passim*, esp. pp. 45-46, 265-266.

However, Kaldellis' argument, that *Wars* was the 'face' of Procopius' political views, and should not be separated from the opinions expressed in *The Secret History*,[66] seems substantially more credible. This is made more likely as it seems that Books I-VII of *Wars* was written simultaneously or near-simultaneously with *The Secret History* in 550-551;[67] thus the author wrote both works holding the same estimation of Justinian. Though most of Kaldellis' thesis does not concern us directly, many features have a direct impact upon how Procopius portrayed the Persians, most notably in his representation of Ḵosrow as a royal tyrant. We are fully convinced that Procopius used Ḵosrow I to illustrate how bad a tyrannical, cruel and avaricious monarch really was, leaving his audience to apply this to their judgements of Justinian. As Procopius' treatment of the Persians was heavily focussed upon the person of their king, we should use Procopius' reporting on the Persians with caution, for it might convey more about how Procopius saw Justinian than what he knew about Ḵosrow.

Generally, we believe that Procopius ought to be treated similarly to Ammianus: an eyewitness to some events, but as a writer who prioritised his domestic political message above accurate and rigorous reporting. We would generally consider his work as less useful than that of Ammianus due to the lesser extent of his personal involvement on the Persian frontier.

However, Procopius' narrative possesses one major strength over Ammianus' work. As we saw above, Ammianus seemingly gave an artificial sense of his own learning and scholarship, preferring venerable (if esteemed) accounts to his own experiences or more up-

[66] Anthony Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2004), *passim,* esp. p. 49. We acknowledge, thanks to Fahey's helpful review, how Kaldellis' Straussian philosophical position might well have influenced his thesis. We do not think Kaldellis' argument loses any weight because of this; see William Edmund Fahey, 'Review of Anthony Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea*', in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2005.10.11 <http://brynmawr.edu/2005/2005-10-11.html> [accessed 21 October, 2009], esp. pp. 2-3.
[67] Geoffrey Greatrex, 'The Dates of Procopius' Works', in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 18* (1994), pp. 113-114.

to-date learning, leading him to make some egregious errors. This is not a weakness of Procopius' work. Procopius used material from within the Iranian world, acknowledging his use of "the History of the Armenians".[68] His description of the meeting of the Armenian king Aršak and the Sasanian king 'Pacurius' (Šāpur II) is remarkably similar to that of the meeting between Šāpur II and Aršak as described by pseudo-Pʿawstos Buzand.[69] It is unclear how much Armenian material Procopius used, or from where it was obtained, but his use of at least some material from within the Iranian world improves the validity of some of his comments on Persian affairs. Furthermore, as this material was not esteemed in the same way as the great geographers and ethnographers of antiquity, we should perhaps surmise that Procopius used this material to improve the factual basis of his study, rather than to burnish his reputation as a learned individual.

Therefore, Procopius' *Wars* is a useful support to our work, but, like the work of Ammianus, we have to appreciate the potential political impositions which diminish the value of Procopius' narrative. His most interesting observations often concern Persian domestic affairs, where he seems to have had un-historic reasons for showing the undesirability of absolute royal power. Though we suggested above in relation to Ammianus, the representation of the behaviour of Persian kings to comment on Roman affairs does not mean the event itself did not happen, Procopius' interest in Persian domestic affairs should make us more wary. Ammianus could not just invent the personal command of a Persian king in war, because tens of thousands of other Romans would have seen it. The chance that Procopius invented stories of Ḵosrow I killing individual Persian aristocrats seems much greater. Therefore, given the aforementioned problems, we feel it would be prudent to use Procopius's account only in a supporting role.

[68] Proc. I.v.9.
[69] *Ibid*, I.v.16-29; for comparison see *BP* III.liv.

1.1.3 – Agathias

As a historian, Agathias is generally less regarded than Procopius, but he has an unusually prominent place in Sasanian studies thanks to his lengthy description of Persian religion, and the apparent inclusion (via translations made by a friend working in the Roman diplomatic service) of Persian chronicles, allegedly consisting of a later sixth-century version of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* tradition, which is otherwise only known through the works of post-Conquest Arabic and Persian histories.[70] Howard-Johnston considered Agathias "[t]he only Roman historian to have made a serious attempt to understand the Sasanian world."[71] If we accept that Agathias accurately recorded genuine Sasanian histories, this is not only extremely useful in itself, but it is also helpful for assessing the post-Conquest historians who used later versions of this narrative.[72] The sources used by Agathias are closer in time to Sasanian originals than those recorded by Arab and Persian historians of the ninth-century or later, though there is scepticism over whether Agathias was a faithful recorder of Persian historical traditions.[73]

How reliable is Agathias' assertion that he used Persian chronicles? The potential use of such material is the unique strength of Agathias' narrative. If he genuinely reflected a sixth-century version of the *Khwadāy-nāmag*, his account predates any potential editing of the text in the last Sasanian century, the versions which the post-Conquest historians used. The implications of a genuine sixth-century version of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* are substantial. For

[70] McDonough sees Agathias as "traditionally" the most important Roman source on the Sasanians because of this; Scott McDonough, 'Were the Sasanians Barbarians? Roman Writers on the "Empire of the Persians"', in Ralph W. Mathiesen and Danuta Shanzar (eds.), *Romans, Barbarians and the Transformation of the Roman World: Cultural Interaction and the Creation of Identity in Late Antiquity* (Farnham, 2011), p. 55.
[71] Howard-Johnston, 'The Two Great Powers', p. 177.
[72] Christensen, following Noldeke, dated the final version of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* tradition (as recorded by post-Conquest historians) to the reign of Yazdegerd III; Christensen, *L'Iran*, p. 59.
[73] See Averil Cameron, 'Agathias on the Sasanians', in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Vol. 23/24* (1969/1970), pp. 113ff.

instance, Agathias makes no mention of the Mazdakite revolt, an apparently defining event of the early career of Ḵosrow I, and a major feature of the post-Conquest historians, which should perhaps make us question how significant (or even real) this event was.[74]

However, there is substantial doubt whether Agathias actually had access to a Persian royal chronicle. Greenwood is correct to point out that the characterisation of some Persian kings, especially his highly positive appraisal of Yazdegerd I, is wholly at variance with their representation in later accounts drawn from the *Khwadāy-nāmag* tradition. Greenwood's contention that "Agathias had access to an incomplete, hostile summary of Sasanian dynastic history, reflecting Christian and Roman sympathies" seems likely.[75]

However, Agathias' source was not wholly detached from Sasanian royal history. Agathias states the Arsacid period lasted only 270 years, a dramatic reduction of the actual length of the dynasty, and showing he used a source which recorded the propagandistic dating system advanced by the Sasanians, rather than Roman authors who presumably knew the full length of the Arsacid period.[76] Some of the stories Agathias relates, such as the account of the accession of Šāpur II (involving the soothsayers and the crowning in the womb), can only have come from within the Persian world.[77] There are Roman accounts attesting Šāpur's elder brothers (or half-brothers) who lost the throne in 309-10, showing that in the Roman world a different (and probably more accurate) version of the accession of Šāpur II was circulating. [78] As Agathias records this incident in accordance with Persian tradition and at variance with

[74] Crone offers a helpful overview of the literature of Mazdakism; Patricia Crone, 'Kavad's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt', in *Iran, Vol.* 29 (1991), see esp. pp. 21-23. For an extremely suspicious view, heavily based upon the absence of Mazdak from Agathias, see H. Gaube, 'Mazdak: Historical Reality or Invention', in *Studia Iranica XI* (1982). See too Cameron, 'Agathias on the Sasanians', pp. 155-6; Cameron does not equate the absence of Mazdak from Agathias as evidence of his non-existence.
[75] Tim Greenwood, 'Sasanian Echoes and Apocalyptic Expectations: A Re-Evaluation of the Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos', in Alice Rio (ed.), *Law, Custom and Justice in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Proceedings of the 2008 Byzantine Colloquium* (London, 2011), p. 332.
[76] Ag. I.26; discussed in Cameron, 'Agathias on the Sasanians', p. 105.
[77] *Ibid*, II.25.
[78] See Dodgeon and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier: 226-363,* 6.1.2. 6.2.3, pp. 144, 147-150.

Roman accounts, we can only surmise that he genuinely made use of accounts originating from inside the Iranian world. However, given the differences in tone between Agathias' account and those of the post-Conquest historians, this does not necessarily mean it was an early version of the *Khwadāy-nāmag*.

How then can we account for this change in the representation of some Sasanian kings between Agathias's history and the accounts of the post-Conquest historians? We would suggest two possible, and not mutually exclusive, scenarios. Either Agathias, his friend Sergius who reportedly acquired the text, or another Roman altogether, edited, poorly translated, or otherwise corrupted a genuine Persian text to fit with popular Roman perceptions and prejudices. This scenario would account for some of the changes – Yazdegerd I's apparent sympathy for Christianity would have boosted his reputation amongst the Romans, whilst damaging it amongst many Persians. Alternatively, the text might have come from a source within the Sasanian Empire which was more hostile to the ruling dynasty, such as a Christian community, which we might expect to have more contact with Roman diplomats. Such a community would have been susceptible to accepting Persian royal accounts of the past, especially if they lacked independent records of these events, though they had reasons to put their own interpretation on them. It is impossible to ascertain for certain why Agathias' characterisation of some Persian kings is so at variance with the post-Conquest accounts, but either of the scenarios outlined here makes confident use of Agathias' narrative more difficult.

There are however other issues regarding the usefulness of Agathias' history which can be more confidently answered. Perhaps counterintuitively, it is helpful that Agathias was not well read (and did not pretend to be well read) in the classics of Latin and Greek literature. His work is free of allusions to notable classical authors, probably increasing the usefulness of his account on the Sasanians. He seems to have based his account more on the contemporary

information he gathered (of whatever provenance) than classical texts centuries out of date.[79] However, unlike Ammianus and Procopius, he had no personal contact with Persia at all, his work being wholly constructed from secondary material.[80] Agathias also seems deeply anti-Persian,[81] which might have compromised the reliability of some of his comments, especially regarding Zoroastrianism and Persian culture, which seems unremittingly and exaggeratedly negative.

Agathias' *History* is a difficult source to use. His cultural commentaries, for instance on the boorishness of Persian court life, might be potentially fascinating contemporary insights especially pertinent to our question, but they are at least as likely to reflect the prejudices of the author or his sources. Certainly, Agathias' account lacks the immediacy of the personal experiences of Ammianus and Procopius. However, the straightforwardness of the account is helpful; there is not the artifice of other writers, and artifice is much harder to filter than simple prejudice. Although the transmission of Sasanian royal history into Agathias' *History* must be more convoluted than commonly assumed, it does at least offer an approximation of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* from before the fall of the Sasanian Empire.

1.2 – Armenian literary sources

We see the Armenian historians as providing generally the most important body of literary evidence. The reasons are various. The primary reason is the cultural affinity between Armenia and Iran in our period, especially regarding aristocratic culture.[82] The Armenian

[79] Averil Cameron, 'Herodotus and Thucydides in Agathias', in *Byzantinische Zeitschrift 57, Issue 1* (1964), pp. 33ff. See too Cameron, 'Agathias on the Sasanians', pp. 75, 91, 99.
[80] McDonough, 'Were the Sasanians Barbarians?', p. 57.
[81] *Ibid*, pp. 59-60; Drijvers, 'Roman Image', pp. 74-75.
[82] Nina Garsoïan, 'The Two Voices of Armenian Medieval Historiography: The Iranian Index', in Studia Iranica XXV/I (1996), pp. 7-9, 10, 12-13, 18; Nina Garsoïan, 'Prolegomena to a Study of the Iranian Elements in Arsacid Armenia', in Handes Amsorya, *Zeitshcrift für armenische Philologie XC* (Vienna, 1976), pp. 6-7, 24-30, 37, 40, 45-46; Nina Garsoïan, 'Reality and Myth in Armenian History', in *The East and the Meaning of History, Studi Orientali XIII, Università di Roma "La Sapienza"* (Rome, 1994), pp. 118-

historians closely reflected elite culture in their work, sharing "the general social ethos of the leaders of the landed aristocracy…Their virtues were "noble" ones…heavily slanted towards personal valour in combat, loyalty in personal relationships, generosity in giving largesse..."[83] Given the close proximity between Iranian and Armenian elite cultures (which we shall discuss shortly), Armenian sources are extremely informative about Sasanian elite society. Furthermore, as most of Armenia lay inside the Sasanian Empire, Armenian authors usually had a much greater proximity to the internal workings of the Sasanian state. Armenian authors describing events before the removal of the Armenian kings can offer invaluable insights into noble-royal relations which, given the cultural affinity between Armenia and Iran, can reasonably be treated as applicable to the Sasanian Empire proper (with some caveats, discussed below). Armenian authors describing events after the removal of the Armenian kings allows us to analyse the relationship between the central government and provincial lords in the Empire.

Whether Armenia should be included in the Iranian world is extremely significant. Nina Garsoïan, after extensively discussing the relevant evidence, ultimately concluded that Armenia offers a good window on Iran, but that by the end of the Sasanian period Iran had become more centralised and bureaucratic than Armenia, and had moved away from Armenia's more primitive tribal organisation. Essentially, she saw Armenia as too de-centralised, too 'Parthian', to be highly indicative of late Sasanian Iran (though by implication

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122; Nina G. Garsoïan, 'L'Art Iranien comme témoin de l'armament Arménien sous les Arsacides' in *Atti del V Simposio Internazionale di Arte Armena* (Venice, 1991), pp. 387, 395; Nina Garsoïan, 'Armenia in the Fourth Century: An Attempt to re-Define the concepts of <<Armenia>> and <<Loyalty>>' in Nina Garsoïan, *Armenia Between Byzantium and the Sasanians* (*REArm*, n.s. VIII (1971), p. 342. Tim Greenwood, 'Sasanian Reflections in Armenian Sources', in e-Sasanika 3, 2008, < http://www.sasanika.org/wp-content/uploads/e-sasanika3-Greenwood.pdf>, [6 May, 2014], pp. 2f; James R. Russell, 'Some Iranian Images of Kingship in the Armenian Artaxiad Epic', in James R. Russell, *Armenian and Iranian Studies: Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, 9* (Cambridge (Mass.), 2004), pp. 157-158, 169-171; James R. Russell, 'The *Šāh-nāme* in Armenian Oral Epic' in James R. Russell, *Armenian and Iranian Studies: Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies, 9 (*Cambridge (Mass.), 2004), pp. 1069-1070.

[83] Robert W. Thomson, 'Introduction', in Łazar Parpecʿi, *The History of Łazar Parpecʿi*, tr. Robert W. Thomson (Atlanta, 1991), p. 2.

therefore, highly indicative for early Sasanian Iran).[84] However, Garsoïan saw Sasanian Iran in accordance with Christensen's view of a highly centralised later Sasanian Empire, a characterisation which might be outdated. We believe it to be inappropriate to downplay similarities between Iran and Armenia based upon a potentially outdated conception of the Sasanian state.

In discussing the applicability of Armenian evidence to Sasanian Iran, we should consider the specific focus of our study. Armenia was Christian from the early fourth century. Despite a greater degree of syncretism than is commonly recognised, and that the significance of the church in wider cultural life should not be exaggerated,[85] Armenia's Christianity was a point of divergence between the Armenians and the largely Zoroastrian Persians. However, for areas of particular interest to us, aristocracy and monarchy, Armenia was a full member of the Iranian world.[86]

The fundamental 'Iranian-ness' of Armenian elite culture can be demonstrated by a number of cultural and linguistic crossovers. Stories about Rostam, the preeminent hero of Iranian myth, circulated in Armenia.[87] Armenian kings were said to possess պարք (*parkʿ),* the royal 'glory', considered identical to Iranian *farr*. The Iranian term *āzādān*, 'freeman', the lowest rank of the nobility, and also meaning a mounted warrior, is cognate with, and conceptually identical to, the Armenian ազատ (*azat*). Armenian authors implicitly placed Armenia within the Iranian cultural world. This, we should add, comes through strongly *despite* both the Christian clerical background of the major authors, who had an ingrained distrust,

[84] Garsoïan, 'Prolegomena', pp. 45-46; Garsoian, 'The Two Voices', pp. 7, 45-46.
[85] Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 166.
[86] See too G. Dédéyan, 'Le cavalier arménien', in Jean-Pierre Mahé and Robert W. Thomson, *From Byzantium to Iran: Armenian Studies in Honour on Nina G. Garsoïan* (Atlanta, 1997), pp. 201-202.
[87] MK II.8; Russell, 'The *Šāh-nāme* in Armenian Oral Epic', pp. 1065-1066.

even hatred of Sasanian Zoroastrianism, and the anti-Persian political views of most authors.[88] As Garsoïan recognised, "[d]espite this all too evident …[anti-Zoroastrian/Iranian bias by the Armenian historians], pre-Islamic Armenian society remained profoundly Iranian in character".[89] This can only heighten our appreciation of the significance of the cultural overlap between the two peoples.

In Armenian literature, the words used for aristocratic and military ranks and titles are identical for both Iranian and Armenian lords – terms such as նախարար (*naχarar*, prince or noble), իշխան (*išχan*, ruler or prince; higher in status than a նախարար) or զօրավար (*zōravar*, general, commander) are used for both Armenian and Persian aristocrats.[90] Roman nobles generally hold transliterations of Greek or Latin titles, such as ստրատելատ (*stratelat*, an Armenian transliteration of the Greek *stratēlatēs,* general), or կոմս (*koms*, a transliteration of the Latin *comes*, companion, and later, count).[91] Persian and Armenian military forces are generally termed զօրք (*zōrkʿ*, army, host, forces), or գունդ (*gund*, troop, or band; a smaller formation than a զօրք). Roman armies are often entitled լեգէոն (*legēon*, transliterating the Latin *legio*; legion).[92] It seems clear therefore that Armenian writers consciously conceived of their aristocracy and military organisation as sufficiently similar to the Iranian to use the same words for both. The fact that Roman equivalents were often described with transliterations of Greek or Latin terms not only strongly suggests that these were perceived as sufficiently different to warrant their own term, but also that the Armenian authors consciously placed the Iranian and the Armenian on the same level. There is no reason to suggest why Armenian

[88] Garsoïan, 'Armenia in the Fourth Century'; see p. 342 for a description of how the Armenian writers were churchmen, foisting their own ideals on their representations of the situation, and ignoring many of the facts on the ground, including among other things the heavily Persianate flavour of society.
[89] Nina Garsoïan, 'The two voices', p. 7.
[90] eg. MD, 2.1 refers to " the *naxarars* of Persia…the *naxarars* of Armenia"
[91] See, for example, *BP* V.i.
[92] *Ibid* V.v.

authors could not have transliterated Persian terms as well as Greek and Latin ones, if they saw the Iranian example as sufficiently different to warrant it.

The personal contacts between some Armenian and Iranian aristocrats were deep and meaningful. Foster-parenting across the border seems to have been common rather than exceptional.[93] This shows that Persian and Armenian aristocrats considered each other fit foster parents for their children, demonstrating their cultural proximity, and that the religious differences between Armenia and Iran did not significantly impact upon personal relations. Armenian writers claimed the family of the Katʿołikos of Armenia was related to the Sūren, one of the great magnate families of Sasanian Iran.[94] As the Sūren were from Sistān, in the Iranian east, their close blood relations in Armenia, in the Iranian far west, indicates not only the empire spanning marriage links of the high aristocracy, but also strongly implies that we should see the Armenian aristocracy as culturally similar to Iranian aristocrats from across the Empire, and not just those near the frontier. Even if we do not accept the truth of these familial links, for which we only have Armenian records, they show that familial ties with major Persian families augmented the reputation of major Armenian houses, further suggesting the two aristocracies operated in the same cultural world.

We are convinced that especially regarding issues of monarchy, aristocracy and warfare, the Armenian evidence offers the best avenue of investigation, and one to date relatively unexplored. The cultural proximity of the aristocracies of Iran proper and Armenia is sufficiently close that, in our view, one can apply Armenian social norms into the wider Sasanian context. This is especially attractive given the close degree of 'fit' suggested between the aristocratic worlds articulated in the literature of Ferdowsī (discussed below) and the

[93] See e.g. ŁP III.60, 62.
[94] *Ibid,* I.14, MK II.xxvii-xxviii, lxxi-lxxii, lxiv, xci.

histories of the Armenian authors. Therefore, the Armenian historical tradition shall be our preeminent body of evidence.

1.2.1 – *The Epic Histories* of pseudo-Pʿawstos Buzand

We see *The Epic Histories* as the most important source for the cultural strand of our narrative, as it is quite simply the most "faithful representation of an Iranian society" available to us.[95]

The Epic Histories is based upon oral tales circulating in Armenia from the fourth century onwards, and compiled *circa* 470.[96] It draws together three major oral traditions: a history of the Armenian Church and eminent churchmen (focussing on the Katʿołikos), and what have been described as the Mamikonean *geste* and Aršakuni *geste*: epic stories focussing upon the leading members of these families.[97] The author was probably a churchman, and not very knowledgeable about other literature.[98] This might mean he reproduced more faithfully the tales he heard, as he would be less likely to be influenced by other literary norms or models.

Though written up to 150 years after some of the events it describes, the text is still relatively early compared to many other sources (such as the work of Moses Khorenatsʿi, or the post-Conquest writers), and is the earliest significant non-Roman literary source for us. The oral and epic nature of the text certainly reduces its value for recreating a historical narrative – there is not a single date in the text, and there are confusions of fact presumably stemming

[95] Garsoïan, 'Armenian Medieval Historiography', p. 7. Garsoïan sees the society described in *The Epic Histories* as closer to that of Arsacid, rather than Sasanian, Iran. However, as was mentioned above, this seems largely based on the Christensen consensus, which is now very much in doubt.
[96] Nina Garsoïan, 'Introduction', in *The Epic Histories*, tr. and int. Nina Garsoian (Cambridge (Mass.), 1989), pp. 11, 22, 30f; for Armenian minstrel culture (and an implicit parallel to the Iranian) see Mary Boyce, 'The Parthian Gōsān and Iranian Minstrel Tradition', in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Vol. 89, Issue 1-2* (1957), esp. pp. 10, 13-15.
[97] *Ibid*, p. 32.
[98] *Ibid*, p. 30.

from its oral provenance. For instance, the reign of Šāpur II (309-379) was recorded as extending until the end of the narrative in the 380s, either due to the extreme length of Šāpur's reign making it dominate the later memory of the fourth century, or by confusion with Šāpur III (383-388). Some tales either border on the fanciful, or are exaggerated to the point of incredibility, such as the Armenian heroes defeating 23 successive Persian armies, with a combined strength of over 22,000,000 men.[99] However, despite its manifest flaws for sober political history, as a source for social history *The Epic Histories* is invaluable.

By being drawn mostly from the oral tales circulating in Armenia, the work captures better than any other source the ethos of the audience, being infused with the culture of the military aristocracy. It offers the best window we have upon the dynamics of noble-royal relations, and the nature of royal power in Armenia, issues which are of vital interest to us. Through a close reading of *The Epic Histories* we obtain a clear impression of how the Armenian aristocracy conceived of the nature and the limits of royal power, and their own responsibilities towards the king.

The author was undoubtedly pro-Mamikonean, and regularly stressed the heroic qualities of this princely house. Mamikoneans are the undisputed heroes of the piece. However, the author generally does not obliterate the nefarious deeds of members of this house. Vasak Mamikonean appears quite villainous - he was implicated in the murder of Vardan Mamikonean, was an apostate, and an ally of the Persians against the Armenian kingdom.[100] The generally heroic Mušeł Mamikonean is accused of "deceitfully" murdering the *Hayr-Mardpet* (albeit on the orders of King Pap).[101] After the death of Mušeł, his family carry

[99] *BP*, IV.xxvi-xliii, IV.xlv-xlix.
[100] See eg. *Ibid*, IV.xviii, IV.xx
[101] *Ibid*, V.iii.

out apparently Zoroastrian funerary practises, of which the author disapproved.[102] It is significant that the anonymous author nevertheless included these less than desirable acts, showing that he did not entirely fabricate or obfuscate to augment the stature of the Mamikonean house. Many, if not all, of these undesirable acts by Mamikoneans could have been downplayed, or omitted entirely. That the author kept them indicates he was a more-or-less faithful reporter of the tales he knew. Though we might question the truth of the stories as they are written, it seems likely that the author recorded these stories as they were reported.

Equally significantly, we would suggest that the acts committed by Mamikoneans which met with the author's disapproval, in the context of a generally pro-Mamikonean stance of the text, shows the boundaries of acceptable aristocratic behaviour. Though the clerical author might have been more horrified by apostasy or syncretism than his lay contemporaries, we should treat his condemnations of fratricide and cold-blooded murder (even when the victim was considered villainous himself, and the crime was committed on royal orders) as genuinely beyond the limits of acceptable behaviour, and indefensible. As the author is willing to condemn certain acts by Mamikoneans, we would suggest that anything else done by a Mamikonean was either good, or at least defensible, behaviour in the eyes of the author, and hence, presumably, his audience. Though one might expect the author to give his Mamikonean characters the benefit of the doubt over some of their actions (most significantly their rifts with the Aršakuni kings at the end of Book III and the start of Book IV, and their dethronement of King Varazdat at the end of Book V), the author was unlikely to hold up as virtuous behaviour acts which his audience considered reprehensible. Given that the author did criticise some behaviour by the Mamikoneans, we would argue that *everything* else done by a

[102] *Ibid*, V.xxxvi.

Mamikonean should be seen as either good, or at least acceptable, behaviour in the eyes of the Armenian elite, and so, by extension, the Iranian elite also.

We appreciate that the political situation described in *the Epic Histories* is not a perfect match to the Sasanian Empire proper, or to Armenia after the downfall of the Armenian monarchy. The situation described in *The Epic Histories* is one where there is a local king as a 'middle tier' between the local aristocracy and Sasanian monarchy, a situation seldom applicable to other areas in the Empire. There were a number of sub-kings early in the Sasanian period, Šāpur I listing the non-Sasanian kings of Abrênakh, Margiana, Carmania, and the king of the Sakas as all being within the Sasanian realm.[103] These intermediate kings, seemingly similar in status to the Armenian kings, seem to have become less and less common as the Sasanian period progressed. However, the work of later Armenian writers indicates that social mores remained more-or-less the same regardless of the presence of the Armenian king. We would contend therefore, especially when we have other sources to bolster it, that *The Epic Histories* is the preeminent literary source for social history, and can be used to provide valuable inferences throughout the Sasanian Empire.

1.2.2 – Łazar Parpecʿi

The late-fifth century *History of the Armenians* by Łazar Parpecʿi is also valuable, and nearly as useful a source for social history as *The Epic Histories*. It concerns Armenian history of mid-to-later fifth century, especially the abolition of the Armenian monarchy, the great Armenian rebellion against Persian rule in the 450s, and its aftermath. Like *The Epic Histories*, Łazar's *History* is highly indicative of elite culture and ethos, informing us of "what the Armenians expected of each other and of their lords, the shahs of Iran."[104] Though Łazar's

[103] André Maricq, 'Res Gestae Divi Saporis', in *Syria, T. 35, Fasc. 3/4* (1958), p. 322 (clause 55).
[104] Thomson, 'Introduction', p. 3.

History is more removed from the world of the military elite than *The Epic Histories*, it still offers an informative window into Armenian (and hence Iranian) elite society of the fifth century.

Like *The Epic Histories*, Łazar's *History* is a pro-Mamikonean account. Łazar grew up in the Mamikonean household, and records that he wrote his history on the urging of Vahan Mamikonean, *sparapet* of Armenia.[105] However, rather like the pro-Mamikonean bias of *The Epic Histories*, this explicit bias is not a significant problem due to it being easily accounted for, and, as we rehearsed above, allowing us to better understand the limits of acceptable aristocratic behaviour.

Łazar utilised *The Epic Histories*, the *Histories* of Agatʿangełos (seeing his work as a continuation of these two), and also Koriwn's biography of Maštocʿ, supplemented with oral testimonies, and his personal knowledge, to inform his account, Łazar informing us about some of the literary sources he used.[106] Łazar uses his own introduction to distance himself from the style of *The Epic Histories*, mistakenly associating the work with Byzantium, and considering the author unlearned.[107] Łazar's conscious rejection of the style of pseudo-Pʿawstos is the principal reason for preferring *The Epic Histories* to Łazar's *History*. *The Epic Histories* appears as a more-or-less faithful record of Armenian oral tales, Łazar's history is subject to the influences of the author's scholarly and religious background, and hence is a less useful source for understanding Armenian and Iranian social norms.

However, in some respects Łazar's *History* is more useful than that of pseudo-Pʿawstos. As most of the events described in Łazar's work post-date the abolition of the Armenian monarchy, sub-kings do not feature in the narrative, rendering it substantially closer

[105] ŁP, Int. 4.
[106] Thomson, 'Introduction', pp. 2, 20; ŁP. Int. 2-3.
[107] ŁP, Int. 3.

to the political organisation of Sasanian Iran than that described in *the Epic Histories. Also*, Łazar records more episodes concerning the direct interaction between Armenians and Iranians, most notably the events surrounding the abolition of the Armenian monarchy, and the final reconciliation between the Armenians and the Sasanians. Episodes involving direct contact are rarer in *The Epic Histories*, and though it is clear that Łazar invented the speeches he attributed to his protagonists, these speeches had to conform to social norms and expectations.

Therefore, the *History* of Łazar Parpecʿi is a most useful addition to *The Epic Histories*. It offers further evidence for the social situation outlined by pseudo- Pʿawstos, as well as some very useful supplements, such as information on negotiations between Persians and Armenians. It's status as our second most important literary source is more through the extraordinary usefulness of *The Epic Histories* than any weakness of Łazar's *History.*

1.2.3 – The *History* attributed to Sebēos

Firstly, before discussing this work, we should address the question of authorship. The manuscript of the *History* was in the nineteenth century attributed to one Bishop Sebēos, a seventh century bishop of the Bagratuni family who was recorded as the author of a history entitled *The History of Heraclius*. However, the manuscript we have "is not the History of Heraclius by Sebēos."[108] Despite this, given the widespread association between the name of Sebēos and this *History,* to avoid potential confusion, in this thesis we will refer to 'Sebēos' *History*', and Sebēos as the author, even though we realise that the authorship of the work is unknown. However, the name of the author is not significant. Sebēos was a bishop, and

[108] Greenwood, 'Sasanian Echoes', p. 326; James Howard-Johnston, 'Introduction', in *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos: Part I. Translation and Notes*, tr. R. W. Thomson (Liverpool, 1999), pp. xxxiii-xxxviii.

though the author of this history was not Sebēos, the author certainly was a cleric.[109] Though Sebēos was associated with the Bagratuni family, the author of this text clearly sympathised with Smbat Bagratuni, and hence shared the pro-Bagratuni stance Bishop Sebēos would presumably have had.[110] Though perhaps more satisfying to give a definite name to the author of this text, the inability to do so is not relevant, given that evidence from within the text can be used to fairly accurately place the author both socially and culturally, enabling us to assess his work.

Sebēos' *History*, written in the later seventh century, runs from 572 until 655. It offers significant coverage of Sasanian affairs in this period, most importantly for us, a detailed account of events in the Sasanian Empire during the 590s. The 590s saw two unprecedented threats to the Sasanian monarchy: the rebellion of Bahrām Čōbīn against Hormozd IV, and the six year conflict between Ḵosrow II, Hormozd's son and heir, and Ḵosrow's estranged maternal uncle, Besṭām. Though we have a number of other sources offering information on the rebellion and downfall of Bahrām Čōbīn from the Roman world and from post-Conquest historians, Sebēos offers his own, relatively full, account, as well as offering a unique record of the struggle between Ḵosrow II and Besṭām. The events of the 590s offer us an impression of how the Sasanian monarchy dealt with crisis, and the limits of royal power, and Sebēos' history is by some distance the best source available for understanding them.

Though various documentary sources were used, the author apparently incorporated a strand of Sasanian royal history as a source, perhaps reflecting the *Khwadāy-nāmag* traditions (the *Khwadāy-nāmag* being discussed below).[111] This is something Seboes recognised, opening a section with a greater focus on Sasanian affairs under the title "Chronological Book: Royal

[109] James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010), p. 73.
[110] Seb. 24-25, 27-29.
[111] Greenwood, 'Sasanian Echoes', p. 334; Howard-Johnston, 'Introduction', pp. lxv-lxx.

History."[112] However, like Agathias, Sebēos does not appear as a simple conduit for Persian historical traditions. His account of the conflict between Bahrām Čōbīn and Ḵosrow II is much more Armeno-centric than those offered by the post-Conquest historians, where the Armenian contribution is neglected.[113] He offers his own interpretation, with Armenians taking a more prominent role than in other accounts. Also, Sebēos' account furthers our analysis of the post-Conquest versions of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* which we shall address below. Early in the account, Sebēos seems especially interested in the Mamikonean family, who dominate his record of the war of 590-591. However, in the 590s his focus shifts to Smbat Bagratuni, and the heroic treatment of him suggests Sebēos made use of a favourable biography of Smbat.[114] However, unlike the other Armenian historians we will use, Sebēos seems to have had an interest in Armenia as a whole, and did not focus upon one princely family.[115] Though Mušeł Mamikonean and Smbat Bagratuni are prominent in the text, Sebēos does not seem to have used his account to especially burnish these individuals or their dynasties, which is a welcome feature when compared to the other Armenian sources available.

Like the Armenian historians we have addressed hitherto, Sebēos enjoys the general benefits of the Armenian corpus, i.e. the cultural affinity between Iran and Armenia. Like pseudo-Pʿawstos and Łazar, Sebēos offers us valuable accounts of interaction between Armenian princes and Sasanian kings, in addition to much information unavailable elsewhere. As such, his narrative is a valuable supplementary source in this thesis.

1.2.4 – Moses Khorenacʿi

[112] Seb. 9.
[113] *Ibid*, 11-12; Ṭab. 999-1001; FD. 1925-1946.
[114] Howard-Johnston, 'Introduction', p. lxvii.
[115] Howard-Johnston, 'Witnesses', p. 79.

Moses Khorenacʿi is a highly ambiguous author. Probably writing in the eighth century, the author claimed to be active in the mid-fifth century.[116] The principal value of Moses' text does not lie in the historical sections of his narrative. He mostly covers material treated with more detail and immediacy by earlier historians (pseudo-Pʿawstos for the fourth century, Łazar for the fifth). Moses' historical accounts are heavily compromised by his pro-Bagratuni sympathies, the Bagratunis being the dominant Armenian house of the early mediaeval period. This led him to crudely write out the Mamikonean house (the preeminent Armenian house of our period) from much of the narrative, inserting instead ancestors of his Bagratuni patrons. His pro-Bagratuni sympathies are more disruptive than pseudo-Pʿawstos' pro-Mamikonean sympathies. Pseudo-Pʿawstos did not wholly whitewash the Mamikoneans, and we have no indication that he re-wrote history to suit his patrons. Moses records some useful historical traditions unavailable elsewhere (especially stories surrounding the accession of the Sasanians and the rule of Ardašīr I). His principal contribution to this study is his unique record of Armenian mythology, or references to the circulation of Iranian mythis in Armenia through his reference to Rostam.[117] He was not sympathetic to these myths, and he belittled them in his text.[118] However, the fact that he recorded them does indicate their cultural significance even at the late date at which Moses wrote, and as he seems to have recorded them in part to illustrate his ability as an antiquarian,[119] it is likely that he did record them faithfully.

As we shall discuss more fully below when we turn to Ferdowsī, mythology can be an extremely valuable way of constructing the ethos of a people. Just as Rostam reveals how Persian nobles saw their idealised selves or ideal noble-royal relations, so too can Moses'

[116] For a detailed discussion concerning the date of Moses' work, see Thomson's introduction to his re-translated version of the text; Robert Thomson, 'Introduction', in Moses Khorenatsi, *History of the Armenians: Revised Edition*, tr. Robert W. Thomson (Ann Arbor, 2006), see esp. pp 55-57.
[117] MK, II.8.
[118] E.g. *ibid,* II.8; see Garsoïan, 'The Two Voices', pp. 10-14.
[119] Garsoïan, 'The Two Voices', p. 14.

accounts of epic heroes such as Aram, or the evil giant Barsham, inform our understanding of how Armenian (and so, by extension, Iranian) nobles perceived themselves and their place in society. Therefore we suggest exploiting Moses' account primarily as another tool for better understanding aristocratic ethos, rather similarly to how we will use the mythic parts of Ferdowsī's account outlined below.

1.3 – Arabic and New Persian literary sources following the *Khwadāy-nāmag* traditions

The post-Conquest traditions, especially the account of Ṭabarī, have generally been treated as the most significant bodies of evidence for the Sasanians, especially for the later Sasanian period.[120] Both Christensen and Pourshariati used a post-Conquest author as their preeminent source, Ṭabarī for Christensen, Ferdowsī for Pourshariati. However we believe that their reliance on the post-Conquest literature is misplaced.

Much of the value traditionally attributed to the post-Conquest writers lies in their preservation of something of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* traditions, the semi-official history of Sasanian Iran.[121] However, "[d]espite all the efforts invested in the investigation of the *Khudāynāmah* [sic.], the contour of this enigmatic text remains vague."[122] The *Khwadāy-nāmag* is no longer extant, but it was a common source for several post-Conquest histories and works of epic literature, and was seemingly begun in the fifth century, perhaps under Bahrām V, being updated until shortly after the fall of Yazdegerd III.[123] It has been considered

[120] G. Widengren, 'Sources for Parthian and Sasanian History', in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran 3 (2): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1279-1280.
[121] By way of introduction, see Ehsan Yarshatar, 'Iranian National History', in Yarshater, Ehsan (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran: Volume 3 (I): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 359f; see pp. 370-383 for a summary of the contents of the *Khwaday Namag* from post-Conquest sources.
[122] Mohsen Zakeri, 'Al-Ṭabarī on Sasanian History: A Study in Sources', in Hugh Kennedy (ed.), *Al-Ṭabarī: A Medieval Muslim Historian and his Work: Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 15* (Princeton, 2008), p. 40.
[123] M. Macuch, 'Pahlavi Literature', in *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran: Companion Volume I to A History of Persian Literature*, Ronald E. Emmerick and Maria Macuch (eds.) (London, 2009), p. 177.

an official history of Iran, though this characterisation does conceal some complexity, with probably several parallel versions, the number of which is unknown.[124] The extent to which the 'royal' narrative dominated the others is unknowable; Omidsalar made the pertinent observation that the "bellicose nobility," who were themselves literate and interested in epic tales, were unlikely to wholly cede ownership of Iranian history to the monarchy.[125] However, the different versions cannot have been too dissimilar. Shahbazi has broadly characterised 'royal', 'priestly' and 'heroic' versions, each with slightly different foci, the last of which explored the non-royal heroes of Iran's mythic past to a much greater extent than the royal or priestly versions. Broadly however, their historical narratives were in agreement.[126]

As far as can be ascertained, the dominant strand of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* was composed under the aegis of several later Sasanian kings from a mixture of archival texts, oral testimony, and the 'Ctesian method', whereby older stories and lacunae were elaborated with more modern embellishments or compositions.[127] Despite the different versions, the dominant narrative was seemingly centrally composed under royal instruction, and "[t]he implicit court sanction of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* and similar works made them instruments of the political ideology of a well-ordered, autocratic monarchy. Absolute obedience to the king was impressed upon the reader at every turn."[128] As such, though we have reflections of other versions, and Agathias and Sebēos both reflect the *Khwadāy-nāmag* to some extent, we should generally see it as a problematic, and potentially misleading, source for discussing royal-aristocratic relations. It seems likely that the version of Sasanian history recorded by writers working from the *Khwadāy-nāmag* would be naturally more consonant with

[124] Greenwood, 'Sasanian Echoes', p. 330.
[125] Mahmoud Omidsalar, *Politics and Poetics of Iran's National Epic, The Shahnameh* (New York, 2011), pp. 38-39.
[126] A. S. Shahbazi, 'On the Xwadāy-Nāmag', in *Iranica Varia. Papers in Honour of Professor Ehsan Yarshater* (Leiden, 1990), pp. 215-218.
[127] *Ibid.* pp. 208-215
[128] Yarshatar, 'Iranian National History', p. 397.

Christensen's reading of the Sasanian Empire, stressing the authority of the king, and the effectiveness of royal government.

In general, therefore, we believe that for the administrative and institutional strand of our study, the post-Conquest material, even the well regarded history of Ṭabarī, is less helpful than has hitherto been supposed. Given the royal provenance of the dominant *Khwadāy-nāmag* traditions, the representation of the Sasanian government cannot be seen as disinterested. Robinson has commented that early Muslim histories generally focus upon elites, especially urban elites, and that cities were generally the centres of governmental power, whilst in the regions, government was less invasive,[129] which perhaps heightened the royalist narrative which inhabited the *Khwadāy-nāmag* traditions. Given that these sources are often the only literary evidence available for certain facets of Sasanian Iran, especially regarding domestic matters, evaluating and interpreting them is difficult.

However, for the cultural dimension of our study, works such as the *Shahnameh,* and, to a lesser extent, advice literature such as the *Qābūs Nāma*, provide a useful pool of evidence. The post-Conquest Iranian aristocracy greatly resembled that of the Sasanian period, fighting as similarly equipped heavy cavalry, and being entertained by the same epic tales.[130] We would contend that one may infer a good deal about the cultural outlook of the Sasanian aristocracy from the impression given from the post-Conquest epic material. The circumstances of the circulation of the oral tales which fed into Ferdowsī's *Shahnameh* were similar to those surrounding the Iranian minstrel and epic story telling traditions which had existed in the Sasanian era, and previously.[131]

[129] Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 124-125, 128-129.
[130] A. Shapur Shahbazi, *Ferdowsi: A Critical Biography* (Costa Mesa, 1991), pp. 20-21. 33-34.
[131] Boyce, 'The Parthian Gōsān', pp. 12-14.

1.3.1 – The *History* of Ṭabarī

The late ninth-century *History* of Ṭabarī is especially prominent in secondary accounts of Sasanian Iran, Rubin commenting that "al-Ṭabarī was the most important source of consecutive, detailed, narrative history of the Sasanian period."[132] Ṭabarī has dominated earlier perceptions of Sasanian Iran, to the point that "[t]he danger is that historians have relied too much upon Ṭabarī and neglected other sources."[133] The extent to which his work has informed our perceptions of Sasanian Iran, prompted Howard-Johnston to comment:

> "It comes therefore as a surprise to anyone with some knowledge of the historiographical debate now preoccupying Islamicists…that the Sasanian material in al-Ṭabarī has been handled so uncritically. It is taken for granted that all or almost all of the apparently sober historical material can be trusted…"[134]

One factor in Ṭabarī's prominence is surely because without Ṭabarī, a huge swathe of Sasanian history would become a *terra incognita*. He is often the sole source for many Sasanian affairs, especially domestic ones.[135] However, when we can assess Ṭabarī's narrative against other sources, its reliability can be questioned. Rubin compared Ṭabarī's account with material remains pertaining to the early Sasanians,[136] and with post-Conquest literary sources not drawn from the *Khwadāy-nāmag* tradition to assess the reforms of Ḵosrow I,[137]

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[132] Zeev Rubin, 'Al-Ṭabarī and the Age of the Sasanians', in Hugh Kennedy (ed.), *Al-Ṭabarī: A Medieval Muslim Historian and his Work: Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, 15*, (Princeton, 2008), p. 41.
[133] Widengren, 'Sources', p. 1280.
[134] Howard-Johnston, 'The Two Great Powers', p. 170.
[135] C. E. Bosworth, 'Translator's Forward', in Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume V: The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids and Yemen*, tr. C. E. Bosworth (New York, 1999), pp. xviii-xx; Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, p. 137.
[136] Rubin, "Al-Ṭabarī and the Age of the Sasanians', pp. 56-57.
[137] See Zeev Rubin, 'The Reforms of Khusro Anūshirwān', in Averil Cameron (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: III: States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton, 1995), esp. pp. 234-239, and afterwards.

demonstrating that we should not necessarily prefer the narrative of Ṭabarī when other sources are available.

We take a sceptical approach to Ṭabarī's account. The question of potential contemporary political bias (with the Sasanians being seen through the prism of the Abbasid situation) is difficult to address. Though the Abbasid caliphate was generally Persianising, with a far greater appreciation of Persian culture than the more 'Arab' caliphates preceding it,[138] there is little indication if, or how, this influenced Ṭabarī's narrative, by, for instance, explicitly using Sasanian exemplars to illustrate good governance. There is no suggestion that Ṭabarī wrote his history in the furtherance of any given political agenda, as he was an independent author, not beholden to anyone for patronage.[139] Though he was himself a Persian and circulated in a generally Persianising cultural milieu, Ṭabarī, unlike Ferdowsī, does not seem especially attached to Persian culture and history. He does record something of Iranian mythology. He mentions Gayōmard, according to the Avesta the first human, though Ṭabarī equated this figure with 'Gomer', a grandson of Noah, belittling Persian claims of equating Gayōmard with Adam.[140] Davis has interpreted Ṭabarī's inclusion of Iranian mythic figures as an indication of a desire to fuse Iranian mythology with Koranic mythology.[141] This argument seems plausible given Ṭabarī's background in religious scholarship, and implies that his work is problematic, at least in its reflection of social history, for communicating cultural mores from the Zoroastrian Sasanian period. In regard to political history, Ṭabarī's overarching Islamic structure is less likely to have coloured his narrative.

[138] Ehsan Yarshater, 'The Persian Presence in the Islamic World', in Richard G. Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh (eds.), *The Persian Presence in the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 6-7, 12-13; pp. 54ff; Richard N. Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia: The Arabs in the East* (London ,1975), Ch. 6.
[139] Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: Second Edition* (Harlow, 2004), p. 359.
[140] Ṭab. esp. I.17; see too I.147-148, 154, 199.
[141] Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition: The Case of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh* (Washington, D.C., 1992), p. 14.

We will treat Ṭabarī's narrative broadly similarly to the Roman authors aforementioned: with scepticism, but not necessarily disbelief – though the representation of an event might well be altered for one reason or another, it does not mean the event did not happen as presented, or is devoid of significance for this study. Ṭabarī's history probably reflects the late Sasanian government's idealised view of events; we need to account for this, but we do not need to discount the history because of this. We should be aware that Ṭabarī probably broadly reflects Sasanian history as articulated under Yazdegerd III, which might differ from earlier renditions preserved through Agathias or Sebēos.

However, a unique strength of Ṭabarī is his recording of the fall of the Sasanian Empire to the Arabs in the middle decades of the seventh century. Here we see the late Sasanian Empire in crisis and collapse. We would suggest that the resistance and downfall of the Sasanians and the response of the Persian elite to the Arab Conquest is highly illustrative. Although the post-Conquest accounts naturally reflect the conquerors' view of the struggle, the record can be used as useful evidence for how local dynasts related to the king, and how effectively the king and non-royal leaders could organise defences. Though Ṭabarī's account offers an impression of an empire in crisis and collapse, and hence perhaps an unreliable indication of the Sasanian Empire under normal circumstances, it is useful.

For understanding the institutions of the Sasanian state (especially the late Sasanian state) Ṭabarī provides by far the most important literary account, but one which is generally unverifiable. This caveat has not been sufficiently recognised. However, when we turn to cultural perceptions, Ṭabarī's account becomes scarcely more useful than that of Roman historians – that is, as a narrative around which we might articulate interpretations. Unlike Ferdowsī , Ṭabarī was no champion of Persian culture; though a Persian himself, Ṭabarī cannot

be seen as a reliable conduit of pre-Islamic Persian ethos. For cultural history, there are markedly better sources.

1.3.2 – The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsī

The *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsī is Pourshariati's preeminent literary source. She believes that Ferdowsī not only used the *Khwaday Namag* tradition, but that he offered an interpretation of Sasanian history which coheres better with the sigillographic evidence and the relevant Armenian accounts.[142] Ferdowsī apparently saw himself as *primarily* writing history,[143] and we accept Pourshariati's assertion that *The Shahnameh* being in verse does not lessen its historical merit. Versification was common for Persian literature in this period, with even medical texts being versified.[144] As such we should not assume that versification necessarily meant losing historical validity. However, Davis has demonstrated that Ferdowsī added significantly to his sources. He was not merely a compiler of myths and historical traditions, but a creative poet working from such material, Davis suggesting that *The Shahnameh* "is more like grand opera than history."[145] Despite the faith placed in Ferdowsī's work by Pourshariati, we do not share her view on its historicity. The problem of the poetic accretions in the text is compounded by Ferdowsī offering little historical information unavailable elsewhere, having a very similar historical account to that articulated in prose by Ṭabarī.

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[142] Pourshariti, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 14-16. We do not dispute the essentially historical nature of Ferdowsī's historical section, and agree that being a poetic work does not make it any less valuable as a source. However, we would question Pourshariati's preference of Ferdowsī over other historical works (most notably Ṭabarī). We believe his key advantage is that he seems to record Persian ethos far better than Ṭabarī.

[143] J. S. Meisami, 'The Past in the Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia', in *Poetics Today, Vol. 14, No.2, Cultural Processes in Muslim and Arab Societies: Medieval and Early Modern Periods* (1993), p. 253; see too Meisani's n. 14.

[144] Omidsalar, *Poetics and Politics*, p. 72.

[145] Dick Davis, *Epic and Sedition,* pp. 9-13.

Ferdowsī's sources are various. The similarity of Ferdowsī's historical sections to Ṭabarī's account shows that they shared the *étatiste Khwadāy-nāmag* as a source. However, Ferdowsī substantially bolstered this with orally transmitted tales. Yamamoto has demonstrated that these had a significant influence upon Ferdowsī's narrative style, as it often conformed to models of oral performance.[146] Ferdowsī might have made use of an older version of the *Shahnameh*, that of Abu Mansur, as a source, but this is uncertain, and there is no indication he depended upon it.[147] Ferdowsī seems to have used various traditions, of unknowable provenance, to supplement his narrative in the historical section of *The Shahnameh*. This is demonstrated by the many minor inconsistencies in Ferdowsī's historical narrative, regarding the details or actions of individuals, which Davis has plausibly suggested as showing that Ferdowsī was working from multiple slightly different traditions, and feeling obliged to maintain these internal contradictions.[148] However, we know few details of Ferdowsī's sources, save that they were various, and that they included oral and written tales. Pourshariati has argued that Ferdowsī made use of literary sources written both in Persian and Parthian.[149] This, coupled with Ferdowsī being an eastern Iranian, suggests that at least some of the sources Ferdowsī drew upon reflected a provincial perspective on myth and history, perhaps better reflecting cultural perceptions in the provinces than from the centre. However the extent to which this was the case must remain an unprovable hypothesis.

Ferdowsī was a consciously Persian poet. Though writing over three centuries after the Conquest, Ferdowsī's life seems almost identical to that of a Sasanian nobleman; he came from the *dehqān* (gentry) class, the lifestyle of which is assumed to have been similar to that of

[146] Kumiko Yamamato, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry* (Leiden, 2003), pp. xxi-xxiii, 8-10, ch. 4.
[147] *Ibid*, pp. 3-6.
[148] Dick Davis, 'The Aesthetics of the Historical Sections of the *Shahnama*', in Charles Melville (ed.), *Shahnama Studies I* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 120-123.
[149] Parvaneh Pourshariati, 'The Parthians and the Production of the Canonical Shāhnāmas', in Henning Börm and Josef Wiesehöfer, *Commutatio et contention: Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East: In Memory of Zeev Rubin* (Düsseldorf, 2010), pp. 382-386.

Sasanian antecedents.[150] He arguably faithfully recreated the tenor of his oral and pre-Conquest literary sources, and he seems relatively sympathetic to Zoroastrianism, which doubtless lessens the likelihood he wilfully misrepresented or otherwise corrupted Zoroastrian-coloured material, as seems to have been the case in Ṭabarī's account. The key advantage Ferdowsī's account brings to our analysis is the reasonably close approximation of the viewpoint and ethos of a late antique Iranian aristocrat.

Ferdowsī's historicity is a secondary concern for us, as the principal interest of his work relates to the cultural strand of our investigation, where conveying ethos is more important than conveying fact. The epic and mythological tales preserved in Ferdowsī's poem are of greater value than the more prosaic historical narrative (this extends to the mythologised figures of the historical section, especially Bahrām V and Bahrām Čōbīn), as these are valuable conduits for understanding Iranian aristocratic ethos and culture. Rostam is a vital figure. Tales about Rostam circulated during the Sasanian era, and certainly far predated it.[151] As we have seen, tales about Rostam also circulated in Armenia.[152] We would argue that the representation of heroes gives an indication about social ideals and cultural mores; the epic heroes, of whom Rostam is by far the most important, represent exaggerated ideals of masculinity for the society which formed them, reflecting the values of their audience.

Therefore, Ferdowsī's *Shahnameh* is a valuable source for the cultural outlook of the Iranian aristocracy through late antiquity and into the mediaeval period, complimenting the Armenian material we will also use. This strength of cultural affinity is shared by some of the post-Conquest advice literature, most notably the *Qābūs Nāma* of Kai Kā'ūs, prince of Gurgān, which was written shortly after Ferdowsī was active. Though sources of this nature can only

[150] Shahbazi, *Ferdowsi: A Critical Biography*, pp. 20-21. 33-34
[151] Dick Davis, Rustam-i Dastan, in *Iranian Studies, Vol. 32, No. 2, The Uses of Guile: Literary and Historical Moments* (1999), pp. 231-233.
[152] MK II.8 (p. 139).

supplement our understanding of cultural ethos, like Ferdowsī's work, they convey something of pre-Conquest aristocratic culture.

1.4 - Sources from within the Sasanian world (including inscriptions)

A variety of documentary sources from within the Sasanian world survive, the most significant of which are: *The Letter of Tansar* (probably a late Sasanian work of political philosophy); *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* (a legal treatise dating to the 620s); the Bactrian documents (a variety of documents from modern-day Afghanistan running from the mid-Sasanian period onwards); and the public inscriptions, such as the Paikuli inscription and the great inscription of Šāpur I.

1.4.1 – The Letter of Tansar

The Letter of Tansar purports to be an early third-century text, allegedly being a letter between one Tansar, a leading priest at the court of Ardašīr I to Gušnasp, an independent king, extolling the benefits of submitting to the new Sasanian *shahanshah*. However, the text has many sections which can only be attributed to the late Sasanian period, or later, such as references to the Turks.[153] The text as we have it comes from a seventeenth century manuscript of a thirteenth-century Persian translation by Ibn Isfandiyar, made from the eighth-century Arabic translation of the lost original by Ibn al-Muqaffa (al-Muqaffa's translation is largely lost, though a few isolated fragments survive). The text was edited by an unknown hand in the post-Conquest period, with additions of a clearly Islamic nature.[154] The chain of transmission, which has certainly added some accretions, and potentially others which we cannot detect, makes using this source to inform our opinions of Sasanian Iran problematic.

[153] *The Letter of Tansar*, tr. Mary Boyce (Rome, 1968), pp. 33, 63-64.
[154] See Boyce's introduction to her translation for an in-depth over-view of this text; Mary Boyce, 'Introduction', in *The Letter of Tansar*, tr. Mary Boyce (Rome, 1968). See too the brief overview of Macuch, 'Pahlavi Literature', pp. 181-182.

If we could accept the *Letter* as a genuine work of the reign of Ardašīr I (224-240), it would clearly be a source of supreme importance. Boyce's introduction to her translation remains the fullest English language discussion concerning the dating of this text,[155] though we cannot share her belief in its authenticity. Boyce believed that the work has a third-century core,[156] though acknowledging a sixth-century composition is generally considered more likely.[157] We believe the only reason to ascribe a third-century date to the work is assertion by its purported author, with plenty of features clearly indicating a sixth-century date (or later). Boyce's arguments for a third-century composition seem weak.

We accept that the *Letter* has a sixth-century core, but given that the text has gone through two translations (Middle Persian to Arabic and then Arabic into New Persian), and there are Islamic tinges, such as, "…in the time of Noah (upon whom be peace!)…the sons of Adam (upon whom be peace!)…till God (glorious is his name!)…",[158] and there might be other, less obvious, accretions which have accumulated on the text, we will approach the *Letter* with a degree of scepticism.

Leaving the potential post-Sasanian alterations to one side, even if the text were a reliable copy of a genuine sixth-century document, using the text would not be straightforward. It certainly reflects an idealised royalist view on government and society. This is valuable in advancing the discussion, especially as other bodies of evidence (such as some elements of Ferdowsī's writing and the Armenian sources) better reflect an aristocratic and provincial view. However, given the avowedly royalist character of the text (articulating the

[155] Boyce, 'Introduction', see esp. pp. 11f.
[156] *Ibid*, pp. 16-18, 21-22.
[157] *Ibid*, p. 15. Widengren was firmly of the opinion that the text was a sixth century composition; Widengren, 'Sources', p. 1272.
[158] *LoT* p. 45; See too "…the sayings of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali (upon whom be peace"…"; p. 58. This Islamic reference is particularly significant, as the inclusion of Ali possibly indicates the whole anecdote in which it is included (running from pp. 53-60) was a later addition. See too the reference to the Qur'ān, p. 39.

arguments of a courtly priest for why a provincial ruler should submit to central royal authority), it seem imprudent to apply universally the social message of the text to all areas of *Iranshahr*. The complex process of transmission from original composition to surviving version makes us wary of placing weight on the source without corroborating evidence. *The Letter of Tansar* may be a significant source, but one more complex and difficult to use than is perhaps commonly acknowledged.

1.4.2 – *The Book of a Thousand Judgements*

The Book of a Thousand Judgements has been described as the preeminent source of Sasanian social history.[159] Unfortunately the applications of the text to understanding the Sasanian state have not been appreciated fully. It is a collection of legal cases intended as a practical guide for practising lawyers, a genre apparently relatively common in Sasanian Iran.[160] The text originated from Gōr, modern Fīrūzābād, in Fārs, the home territory of the Sasanian dynasty, and dates from the 620s. The source is fragmentary. What survives mostly concerns family and inheritance law, and we have no indication as to the original length, organisation or complete contents of the work, making arguments based around the representativeness of the surviving legal cases impossible.

The principal strength of the source is that it offers a genuine impression of late Sasanian institutions and social conditions, at least for the province from which it originated. The *Book* is made up of legal examples for the use of active lawyers, and so reflected real-world judicial practice. Therefore, its record should be treated with a high degree of respect. Although we should recognise the possibility of a gap between judicial ideal and social reality,

[159] Anahit Perikhanian, 'Iranian Society and Law', in Ehsen Yahrshater, *The Cambridge History of Iran 3:2 – The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Oxford, 1983), esp. p. 628.
[160] See Anahit Perikhanian, 'Introduction', in Farraxvmart ī Vahrāmān, *The Book of a Thousand Judgements (A Sasanian Law Book)*, tr. (from Pahlavi into Russian) Anahit Perikhanian, tr. (from Russian into English) by Nina Garsoïan (Costa Mesa, 1997), see esp. pp. 12-13.

this source is surely more representative of late Sasanian social realities than anything else we have. The extant sections, largely concerning family and property law and inheritance, are relatively useful for understanding aristocratic society.

The source shows some royal involvement in the legal areas covered in the work, but references are rare.[161] There are references to six kings (Bahrām V, Yazdegerd II, Pērōz, Kawād I, Ḵosrow I and Ḵosrow II), but only two attributions of new laws to a king (1,2 concerns Bahrām V making statements over the ownership of the children of slaves, and 93, 4-9 mentions Bahrām V and Ḵosrow I introduced official seals for officers – the finance officer and for judges respectively). The other references employ the king only as a dating device, with no indication the king was responsible for the case presented, or the clarification it contained. This shows that kings could introduce legal reforms, and that reference to their reigns was the principal dating system used. However, beyond this, it is difficult to interpret the role of the kings in this text. Given that it consists primarily of cases for legal instruction, it might be that the name of a king responsible for a legal ordinance was considered irrelevant, or it could be that royal involvement was minimal in the extant laws. The lack of other sources offering context for the Sasanian legal system, coupled with the fragmentary nature of this text, makes it impossible to confidently interpret the role of the king in Sasanian legal practice.

It is difficult to ascertain how relevant *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* is to the empire as a whole, or to the earlier Sasanian Empire. The book originates from Fārs, the heartland of the Sasanian dynasty. Alongside Mesopotamia, this is a region where one would expect the central government to be powerful. We cannot state what the nature of law was in the more peripheral regions, or how applicable the legal system outlined in *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* might have been there. The earliest datable individuals in the text are

[161] *LB*, 1,2, 78, 2-11, 93, 4-9, 100, 7-11, A37, 1-15, A38, 6-12, 11-17.

from the fifth century, the first named ruler being Bahrām V (421-39).[162] It seems unlikely that the whole work was created *ex nihilo* in the middle Sasanian period, but we have no evidence for how the cases presented within *The Law Book* pertained to earlier periods. The lack of historical context makes interpreting this text difficult.

Ultimately, *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* offers an enlightening and reliable indication about the late Sasanian aristocracy within the Sasanian heartlands. However, it would be cavalier to uncritically apply the impression offered by this source across the empire as a whole, given that the area from which the text originates was probably more closely governed than was typical. The more generalised impression of aristocratic culture coheres very well with that supplied in other bodies of evidence. Armenian literature also reflects at length on the pronounced importance of noble inheritance, for instance. For a more general assessment of social norms it is invaluable, and largely consonant with other literary sources.

1.4.3 – The Bactrian documents

More than 150 Bactrian documents have been edited and translated by Sims-Williams since their discovery from the early 1990s onwards. Even so, it is our contention that their full significance has yet to be realised.[163] They consist of legal and economic documents, personal letters, and religious texts, and run from the fourth century until after the fall of the Empire. Their geographic origin is quite compact, it being suggested they derived from the archives of

[162] *Ibid*, 1.2; A39, 11.

[163] For a general description, see Khodādād Rezākhāni, 'The Bactrian Collection: an Important Source for Sasanian Economic History', in e-Sasanika 13 (2008), < http://www.sasanika.org/wp-content/uploads/e-sasanika-13-Rezakhani.pdf> [29 January, 2014]. See too Rezākhāni, 'Balkh and the Sasanians', *passim*, this article only begins to scratch the surface of what these documents might tell us.

the ruler of Rob, but as much of Bactria (and beyond) is occasionally mentioned, they arguably hold relevance for much of the Sasanian East. [164]

These texts are invaluable for us. They are practical documents which must surely reflect day-to-life in the region from which they originated, and as such probably the best source available for understanding Sasanian provincial life. Some of the documents involve interaction with the state, meaning we can see how provincials interacted with it. The personal letters are also useful for understanding social attitudes. Although we cannot say how representative these texts are, they offer significant insights into life in the Sasanian east, hence they will be a major source for this thesis.

1.4.4 – Inscriptions

We have a number of surviving inscriptions, several from early Sasanian kings, and also a few from other leading personages, such as the Kirdīr inscriptions, and the brief fifth-century inscription of Mehr Narseh.[165]

Firstly, let us treat the royal inscriptions of which we have seven: two from the reign of Ardašīr I (c.224-c.240), four from Šāpur I (c. 240-270), and one from the reign of Narseh (293-302), the most significant being the lengthy inscrption of Šāpur I at Naqš-e Rostam (usually abbreviated to ŠKZ, and also known as the *Res Gestae Divi Saporis*),[166] dating to 260-262, and

[164] Rezākhāni, 'The Bactrian Collection', p. 4; Nicholas Sims-Williams, "Four Bactrian Economic Documents", in *Bulletin of the Asia Institute, XI* (1997), pp. 3-15.

[165] Philip Huyse, 'Inscriptional Literature in Old and Middle Iranian Languages', in Ronald E. Emmerick & Maria Macuch (eds.), *A History of Persian Literature: Volume XVII: The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran* (London & New York, 2009), see pp. 91-92 for an overview of the surviving royal inscriptions and pp. 98-99 for an overview of the Kerdīr inscriptions. On pp. 100-102 other inscriptions, relatively short and lesser known, are enumerated.

[166] For a full translation and notes, see Maricq, 'Res Gestae', pp. 295-360. See too W. B. Henning, 'The Great Inscription of Šāpūr I', in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, Vol. 9, No. 4* (1939).

the late third-century Paikuli inscription of Narseh, which records his struggle to assume the throne.

These sources are secure in date and provenance. Furthermore, the names of princes, nobles and officials listed in some inscriptions should be accepted as accurate; there is no reason to suppose they were fabricated. As such, these inscriptions give a precise glimpse of social conditions at the time of manufacture.

The royal inscriptions, as would be expected, provide a royalist view of the Sasanian Empire, which is useful for understanding how the crown wished to be seen, but they are limited to the first century of Sasanian rule (and six of the seven to the first two rulers). They are also confined geographically, with six of the seven located in Fārs. The seventh, the Paikuli inscription, is in northern Mesopotamia. This narrowness, both in terms of date and location, of these inscriptions makes us cautious about projecting the impression they give onto the wider Empire, or later Sasanian history. Whatever message these inscriptions carried, there is no evidence they were projected widely, or even beyond areas of longstanding Sasanian strength. We have no way of knowing how many royal inscriptions have been lost or remain unfound, and this makes it hard to determine how representative the extant rock-cut inscriptions may be. There could have been any number of painted or woven royal pronouncements which have been lost, making interpreting the surviving inscriptions more difficult. However, so long as we appreciate their context, the royal inscriptions offer a useful source for assessing the early Sasanian monarchy.

For this study, the ŠKZ and the Paikuli inscription are the most important. The ŠKZ is clear government propaganda, articulating an image of Šāpur I as a war leader and patron. It also lists members of Šāpur's court, giving an impression of its composition. The Paikuli inscription is more complex to use, in part because it is damaged, but in many ways the

content of it is more interesting. In describing the struggle for the throne between Narseh and his nephew Bahrām III, it lists Narseh's supporters, the alleged crimes of Bahrām III and his chief partisan Wahnām son of Tatrus, and the flow of the campaign. This inscription can therefore be used to illustrate models of good and bad government in the early Sasanian period. It also records the powerbrokers in Sasanian Iran in the later third century.

The most significant non-royal inscriptions are Kirdīr's four inscriptions of the later third century, and the single short inscription of Mehr Narseh, dating to the mid fifth century. These are especially significant as they are genuine testimonies from the Sasanian aristocracy, depicting these individuals as they wanted to be seen without authors or historians acting as intermediaries.

The Kirdīr inscriptions record his achievements in royal service, and were erected at Naqš-e Rajab, Naqš-e Rostam, Sar-e Mašhad and on the Kaʿba-ye Zardošt, all in Fārs. These sites all have royal associations, being alongside the investiture relief of Ardašir I, the triumphal relief of Šāpur I, alongside Šāpur's trilingual inscription (the ŠKZ), and on the Kaʿba facing the rock reliefs of Naqš-e Rostam.[167] There are some textual and content differences between the four inscriptions, and there are disagreements over their precise dating and order.[168] However, these issues are not especially significant for us. For our purposes the key features are that they all have a late third-century date, they are textually similar (and hence clearly closely related with a common authorship), and all are sited in places of great significance for the Sasanian dynasty.

[167] Prods Oktor Skjærvø, 'Kartir', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica: Online Edition*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kartir> [9 April, 2014]; Philippe Gignoux, *Les Quatre Inscriptions du Mage Kirdīr: Textes et Concordances*, (Paris, 1991); see too Philippe Gignoux, 'Etude des variants textuelles des inscriptions de Kirdīr, Genèse et datation', in *Le Muséon 86* (1973), pp. 193-216.
[168] The debates are summarised in Skjærvø, 'Kartir'.

The Kirdīr inscriptions are important for the discussion of religious institutions and thought in the Sasanian Empire, but for us their principal value lies in illustrating how an individual largely defined by his association with the monarchy presented himself. Through royal service, Kirdīr rose from relative obscurity to (by his own testimony) a major figure in the Sasanian Empire, with substantial power in his areas of competence. His inscriptions allow us to see how an individual who was intimately involved in government, and owed his status to royal service, presented the monarchy, and his relationship with it. It is a unique source for understanding aristocratic-royal relationships from the aristocratic point of view, and as such is extremely valuable.

The fifth-century inscription of Mehr Narseh upon a bridge he built may be very short, but does offer us another angle on aristocratic identity, and as such is useful. As discussed later, this inscription offers a markedly different impression of royal service to that articulated in the Kirdīr inscriptions, which is in itself useful.

All these inscriptions obtain further significance for this thesis through their precise dating and attribution. Though we have to be careful when using the inscriptions to project beyond the areas to which they directly pertain, they do give us a good indication as to how the individual responsible for the inscription wanted to be presented, and some offer a representation of society which must have appeared credible to contemporaries.

1.4.5 – Coins and Seals

Both coins and seals have relevance for assessing the Sasanian state. From Bahrām V's reign, coins always included mint marks, though the coins of earlier kings, such as Bahrām I and Šāpur II, occasionally did so too.[169] This means that from the mid-Sasanian period, and

[169] Robert Göbl, 'Sasanian Coins', in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran 3:1 – The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 331-332.

often beforehand, most coins can be securely associated with a mint. The ability to mint a coin in any given place demonstrates significant control by the government, as well as revealing the need of the government to pay people in that area. As such, mint marks can be used to indicate relatively secure control on a given city by the government. Absence of a recorded mint does not necessarily mean absence of control, but one would suggest that one can make broad assertions on patterns of minting, especially when set alongside the impression given by other sources. Coins were standardised by the Sasanian government, with negligible regional variation, strongly indicating centralised control.[170] As coins would have been the principal way the king's image could be communicated to the vast majority of subjects, it is useful for ascertaining Sasanian royal imagery, and for comparing this with the more narrowly projected images made by the monumental reliefs or other pictorial sources.

Although there are a wide variety of seals dating to the Sasanian period, by far the most significant for us are the *Spahbadh bullae*, studied by Gyselen.[171] These seals all date to the sixth and seventh centuries, during the alleged high-point of Sasanian centralisation. These seals, despite being limited to eight surviving examples, have a great impact on our understanding of the higher command of Sasanian armies, which is highly significant, given our concern with military matters. Most importantly, in some cases, the family of the holder is given, allowing us to develop arguments concerning how much the king could control the highest military offices.

Due to the nature of this thesis, and our focus on cultural factors, the material evidence of coins and seals can only be a supporting body of evidence, acting as further

[170] Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, 'Royal and Religious Symbols on Early Sasanian Coins', in Derek Kennet and Paul Luft (eds.), *Current Research in Sasanian Archaeology, Art and History: Proceedings of a Conference held at Durham University, November 3rd and 4th, 2001: BAR International Series, 1810* (Oxford, 2008), p. 99; Nikolaus Schindel, 'Sasanian Coinage', in D.T. Potts, *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* (Oxford, 2013), p. 817; Göbl, 'Sasanian Coins', p. 332.

[171] See Rika Gyselen, *The Four Generals of the Sasanian Empire: Some Sigillographic Evidence* (Rome, 2001).

corroboration of, or occasionally against, trends we have already ascertained through more descriptive sources. They are however useful, as they are generally securely dated, offering relatively definite points of reference facilitating the interpretion of other sources.

Chapter 2 – The Sasanian Monarchy

This chapter aims to assess the Sasanian monarchy and state, within the context of the Christensen-Pourshariati dispute.

2.1 – An overview of the Resources Available to the Sasanian Monarchy, and their Centres of Control

Although we cannot define precisely, or even approximately, the resources available to the Sasanian monarchy, some contentions may be advanced. If we can demonstrate that the Sasanian monarchy enjoyed substantial control in any given region, it becomes more likely that it could extract significant resources and could also dominate the local aristocracy. Demonstrating royal control over much or all of the Empire inclines one towards Christensen's view. Conversely, a lack of evidence for royal control inclines one towards Pourshariati's thesis.

Some of the evidence specifically relating to the presence of the monarchy in the provinces will be discussed in Section 2.3 below. Here we will try to ascertain where the monarchy was strongest and what we might extrapolate from this. All conclusions can only be seen as provisional, as the lack of evidence means we cannot make claims beyond reasonable doubt. Regarding the issue of royal control in any given region, the best available markers are offered by urban foundations, royal inscriptions, and the minting of coins. These seem heavily clustered in certain areas and rarer, if not absent entirely, in other areas.

Pourshariati's observation that the recorded Sasanian urban foundations appear to be heavily concentrated in Fārs and Mesopotamia seems to be correct.[172] The ability to found (or

[172] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 38-39. See too Zeev Rubin, 'Nobility, Monarchy and Legitimation under the Later Sasanians', in John Haldon and Lawrence I. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: VI: Elites Old and New in the Islamic Near East* (Princeton, 2004), p. 242; and Zeev Rubin, 'The Sasanid Monarchy', in Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History: Volume XIV: Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors AD 425-600* (Cambridge,

re-name) cities indicates control of some kind, and there is little evidence of the Sasanian monarchy doing this regularly outside of these core areas.

We must interpret urban developments with care. Firstly, we are largely dependent upon literary traditions for associating kings with specific urban sites, traditions which might prove false. For instance, though most literary accounts accredit Ardašīr I with the foundation of Fīrūzābād, archaeological and architectural evidence proves the city predated Ardašīr's reign.[173] Also, it is impossible to tell how directly the king was involved in these projects apart from perhaps lending his name to them. The ability to lend his name indubitably shows his prestige, and control of some kind, but it does not inform us of how in practice these projects were undertaken. Some new foundations were "probably partly political, but also…pragmatic, " such as the city of Veh- Ardašīr, established by Ardašīr I.[174] This was built next to the existing city of Seleucia which Simpson suggests had become too congested, and also perhaps struggling to recover from the damage done to it by the Romans in the late Arsacid period.[175] This example suggests the king made political capital from an urban development that needed to be made, and which perhaps might have happened without his involvement. Simpson suggests the possibility that some 'urban foundations' should be more accurately seen as re-

2000), p.652. Though the Marxist-Leninist interpretations are both forced and dated, Pigulevskaja's work still has some relevance for the distribution of cities and their foundations; Nina Pigulevskaja, *Les Villes de l'État Iranien aux Époques Parthe et Sassanide: Contribution à l'histoire sociale de la Basse Antiquité* (Paris, 1963), *passim*. For a list of toponyms incorporating the name of a king, see Rika Gyselen, *La géographie administrative de l'Empire Sassanide: Les témoignages sigillographiques* (Paris, 1989), pp. 16-19.

[173] Dietrich Huff, 'Fīrūzābād' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/firuzabad>, [13 May, 2014].

[174] St John Simpson, 'Mesopotamia in the Sasanian Period: Settlement Patterns, Arts and Crafts', in J. Curtis (ed.), *Mesopotamia and Iran in the Parthian and Sasanian Periods: Rejection and Revival c. 238 BC-AD 642* (London, 2000), p. 61.

[175] Robert McC. Adams, *Land Behind Baghdad: A History of Settlement on the Diyala Plains* (Chicago, 1965), p. 70.

namings.[176] For instance, Ḵosrow I's city of Veh Antioch Ḵosrow has been associated with the pre-existing city of el-Bustan, suggesting this act of 'foundation' should be seen as a triumphal re-naming of a city, rather than founding a new one.[177] We should not interpret Sasanian urban 'foundations' as necessarily indicating an all-powerful state which could create the conditions necessary for major population centres, but as a mix of deliberate policy and opportunism.

However, regardless of the details concerning any given city, the frequent use of the king's name for the city suggests that such foundations were used as a means of asserting and augmenting his authority and prestige, though we cannot assume that renaming of cities was universally accepted; the aforementioned city of Veh- Ardašīr was also known as New Seleucia, taking the name from the Macedonian city it replaced.[178] Although we must allow for unrecorded Sasanian urban foundations, as well as those few which were outside the central region (such as the significant city of Dasht Qal'eh in the Gorgān Plain,), the concentration of these foundations indicates a regime with a geographically limited reach. As much of Iran is relatively mountainous, and so not suited to urbanism, assessing royal control only via urban development is flawed, as a lack of cities could be more indicative of sparse local agricultural resources than a lack of local political power. It is impossible to determine where the Sasanian family held extensive estates, the possession of which potentially offering as much local control as royal cities did. However, the impression given by the location of most Sasanian foundations, which indicates varying local power enjoyed by the crown, coheres with other sources which suggest that Sasanian authority was regionally varied.

[176] St John Simpson, 'From Tekrit to the Jaghjagh: Sasanian Sites, Settlement Patterns and Material Culture in Northern Mesopotamia', in Karin Bartl and Stefan R. Hauser (eds.), *Continuity and Change in Northern Mesopotamia from the Hellenistic to the Early Islamic Periods,* (Berlin, 1996), p. 89.
[177] Simpson, 'Mesopotamia in the Sasanian period', p. 61.
[178] *Ibid*, pp. 61, 69.

When considering the reception of urban developments, we have some indication from Armenia that they were strongly disliked by the aristocracy. *The Epic Histories* records Aršak II's foundation of the city of Aršakawan, the treatment of which being unremittingly negative.[179] The city was recorded as occupied by murderers, liars, thieves, and other rogues, until God killed all the inhabitants with a plague. Cities and their inhabitants were presented as an abomination, their foundation reflecting poorly on the king responsible. The Armenian aristocracy was largely rural in outlook and lifestyle,[180] but the contemporary Iranian aristocracy appear also to have been largely rural also, with no evidence of elite dwellings in excavated cities.[181] As aristocrats themselves were seemingly not typically urbanites, and from Armenia we have evidence of strong anti-city views amongst the elite, it seems likely that founding cities hardly endeared kings to the nobility, and hence was not without risk of political and social unrest. It certainly adds another reason as to why royal foundations seem highly concentrated in certain areas – it might have been politically impossible, or excessively dangerous, for cities to be founded in areas where the king did not already enjoy firm control.

The most prominent expressions of royal propaganda, the royal reliefs and inscriptions are (with the exception of the Paikuli inscription) concentrated in areas which enjoyed deep historic ties with the Sasanian house. There probably was a conscious echoing of Achaemenid grandeur in the choice of locations for some Sasanian sites in Fārs,[182] but this does not explain the distribution of Sasanian sites in Fārs and Mesopotamia, and their absence elsewhere. Though the Sasanians obviously had an interest in associations with earlier dynasties, the prominence of such monuments in Mesopotamia, which have no obvious link to the

[179] *BP*, IV.xii-xiii.
[180] Garsoïan, 'The early-mediaeval Armenian city', *passim*.
[181] Hugh Kennedy, 'Great Estates and elite lifestyles in the Fertile Crescent from Byzantium and Sasanian Iran to Islam', in Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung (eds.), *Court Cultures in the Muslim World: Seventh to nineteenth centuries* (London, 2011) pp. 54-58.
[182] See Matthew P. Canepa, 'Technologies of Memory in Early Sasanian Iran: Achaemenid Sites and Sasanian Identity', in *American Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 114, No. 4* (2010).

Achaemenids or any other earlier dynasty, shows that the potential historical link was only one factor among many, and that a lack of foundations should, in some sense, suggest a lack of control. The distribution of these reliefs coheres with the distribution of urban foundations discussed above.

The conclusions drawn from minting patterns can only be provisional, as mint marks were only universally used from c. 390. As we cannot be sure of the volumes of coins issued by any one mint at any one time, it is difficult to give a firm assertion of their relative significance. However, it seems clear that most minting was carried out in either Mesopotamia or Fārs,[183] this even being the case for kings with significant interests in Eastern Iran. Under Yazdegerd II and Pērōz, two kings who spent much of their reigns fighting enemies on their northern frontiers, the most active mints were in Khuzestan, Media and Āsōristān.[184]

Most mint marks were associated with a city rather than a province or region, which does suggest that Sasanian administration was largely city-focussed, which reinforces the above point concerning Sasanian urban foundations and regional control. The Gorgān mint (one of the very few mints associated with a region rather than a city) seems to have been very active in the fifth century, when the Wall was being built and three successive kings were regularly based in the area, but the mint appears to have dramatically declined in output after this.[185] This might suggest that minting outside of core areas was not carried out as part of 'normal' procedure, but could be done to meet specific needs. Some Sasanians minted extensively in Eastern Iran, such as Šāpur II using what has been interpreted as mobile war

[183] Nikolaus Schindel, 'Sasanian Coinage', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sasanian-coinage> [12 November,2013]. See esp. Table 2 regarding mint marks.
[184] Rika Gyselen, 'New Evidence for Sasanian Numismatics: The Collection of Ahmad Saeedi, in Rika Gyselen (ed.), *Contributions à l'histoire et la géographie de l'empire sassanide: Res Orientales. Vol. XVI* (Bures-sur-Yvette, 2004), pp. 60-61.
[185] Sauer *et al*, *Persia's Imperial Frontier*, p. 598.

mints.[186] However, the output of these Eastern mints under Šāpur II appears to have been disproportionately comprised of gold coins or silver *drahms* of an unusual design.[187] Gold coins were not issued for standard circulation, being primarily for display and prestige purposes.[188] This could be interpreted to mean that the easten coin issues might reflect different governmental concerns, more to do with establishing connections with, and securing the loyalty of, local elites to whom the coins would have been distributed, and further suggests that issuing coins outside of core areas was not normal government practice, but to meet a specific need of the king. Certainly, it is clear that minting coins was a royal monopoly and that the standardisation of coin portraits show that this image was centrally controlled.[189] Non-Sasanians who minted coins (such as Besṭām in the 590s) did so as rebels against the Sasanians, and in part as a declaration of their own sovereignty. Therefore, whilst minting patterns give a mixed impression of Sasanian strength, we should certainly see the controlled nature of coinage as evidence of some kind of central oversight and a recognition that only kings minted coins, even in places far removed from areas of apparent royal strength.

Extensive royal involvement outside of Mesopotamia and Fārs seems rare, with the major exception of the Gorgān wall. However, the evidence of minting patterns (as well as literary accounts of campaigns outside of the Mesopotamian theatre) shows that some kings could operate effectively in more peripheral areas. It *could* be done, even if it was not *commonly* done.

The Sasanians apparently invested heavily in developing their agricultural resources in Mesopotamia, with a series of projects which greatly increased the population and

[186] Göbl, 'Sasanian Coins', p. 331.
[187] Gyselen, 'New Evidence for Sasanian Numismatics', p. 52.
[188] *Ibid, p. 67,* Göbl, 'Sasanian Coins', p. 329.
[189] Schindel, 'Sasanian Coinage', p. 817.

productivity of the region.[190] Under the Sasanians, it has been suggested that urban centres grew significantly, necessitating a substantial growth of the canal system upon which the required agriculture depended. Around 8,000 square kilometres in the Diyālā/Ctesiphon area were under cultivation, around double the natural limit without artificial irrigation.[191] However, the amount of archaeological work undertaken is limited, and accurate assessments are presently lacking.[192]

Regardless of the size of the canal network, we cannot determine the extent to which local lords or population were involved in programmes of agricultural expansion. Howard-Johnston asserts that the irrigation schemes were "undoubtedly state sponsored".[193] Adams sees the increase of the canal network as the result of massive state planning in the sixth century.[194] However, we believe the level of state involvement cannot be proved, nor is it possible to determine with any precision how state programmes interacted with developments undertaken by private interests, for which we have very strong evidence. The *Law Book* devotes chapter XXXIV to "the co-partnership of two (persons) and concerning canals and plots of land…belonging to two persons."[195] The lack of context make these legal references difficult to interpret beyond showing that at least some investment in agricultural infrastructure was undertaken privately. It seems likely that the largest canal projects involved the government to some degree, but clearly private individuals built canals, so we cannot assume that the major works were solely governmental affairs.

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[190] See for an overview, Howard-Johnson, 'The Great Powers', pp. 198-204.
[191] Adams, *Land Behind Baghdad*, pp. 73-77.
[192] Michael G. Morony, 'Land Use and Settlement Patterns in Late Sasanian and Early Islamic Iraq', in G.R.D. King and Averil Cameron (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: II: Land Use and Settlement Patterns* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 221-223.
[193] Howard-Johnston, 'The Great Powers', p. 199.
[194] Robert McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities: Surveys of Ancient Settlement and Land Use on the Central Floodplain of the Euphrates* (Chicago and London, 1981), pp. 200-208.
[195] *LB*, 85.7-86.15.

It is possible that Šāpur II's use of the canal system in 363, whereby areas were flooded to control Roman movements, meant the canals around Ctesiphon were primarily under royal control.[196] If there were a substantial 'private' stake in these canals, one might expect them to have been used less decisively, as using them in the manner described would have entailed the destruction of much farmland, thus presumably engendering resistance to damaging these assets to defend the Sasanian capital. In earlier accounts of Roman wars in Mesopotamia (specifically the campaigns resulting in the fall of Ctesiphon commanded by Trajan, Septimius Severus and Severus Alexander in the second and third centuries), there is no record of the canal system being used in such a way.[197] This might be due to the relatively full accounts of Julian's campaign compared to these earlier campaigns, which are covered briefly in Cassius Dio's *History* and the *Historia Augusta.* It could also reflect the natures of the individual kings: Šāpur II might have had a more ruthless approach to defending his capital than earlier rulers. However, it is certainly possible that by the 360s the canal system had been expanded, and was under firmer royal control than in the past.

The focus upon Mesopotamia and Fārs is further borne out by these regions apparently being the normal places of residence of the Sasanians themselves. Numerous palaces were sited in these regions, with apparently the first Sasanian palace built by Ardašīr I at Fīrūzābād, and Šāpur I building palaces at Bišāpur and Ctesiphon.[198] As far as we are aware, there is no evidence for royal residences outside of these regions. Despite the problems of

[196] AM, XXIV.2.7 (a description of the canal system), 3.10-12 (Ammianus explicitly mentions of how the land had been very fertile before the dykes were smashed).

[197] CD, LXVIII 17.1-18.2, 26.1-33.3; *HA Severus*, XVI.1-3; *HA Severus Alexander*, 54.7-57.1. We also have a reference to an attempt to inundate Carus' invading army in the 280s by diverting a canal into the hollow where his army was resting near Ctesiphon, but this proved unsuccessful; Zonaras, XII, 30; see Dodgeon and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier AD 226-363*, p. 116; Rose Mary Sheldon, *Rome's Wars with Parthia: Blood in the Sand* (Edgware, 2010), pp. 133-141, 165-171.

[198] Lionel Bier, 'Sasanian Palaces in Perspective', in *Archaeology, Vol. 35, No. 1* (1982), pp. 31-36; Dorothy Shepherd, 'Sasanian Art', in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran 3 (2): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1058-1063; E. J. Keall, 'Ayvān-e Kesrā', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ayvan-e-kesra-palace-of-kosrow-at-ctesiphon>, [22 January, 2014].

attributing palatial buildings to the Sasanians, a process heavily dependent upon uncertain literary traditions,[199] it is clear that Mesopotamia was where the kings ordinarily resided, and was the centre of their regimes. Ctesiphon was the undisputed capital of the Empire from very early on, and where most Sasanian kings were crowned.[200] Though an imperfect measure, royal succession disputes were recorded as always focussing upon Mesopotamia, and Ctesiphon in particular, such as the accessions of Bahrām V and Kawād I.[201] Though the evidence is limited, making arguments from silence necessarily tentative, we have no evidence for regular or sustained royal habitation in the Sasanian east or north, with the royal presence there only recorded in a military context. The king could go there to meet a particular need or obligation, but it was not habitual.

Strength in Mesopotamia did not necessarily entail weakness elsewhere, but we would suggest that in the Sasanian era, it did. The apparent focus of investment on Mesopotamia could imply the irregularity of income from other regions; Kennedy has argued that the irregularity with which the Umayyad Caliphs could extract resources from their own periphery spurred on their heavy investment in the infrastructure of Mesopotamia, initiating substantial land reclamation schemes.[202] We might see something similar in the Sasanian focus on Mesopotamia. Certainly, developing 'core' resources is especially attractive in the context of irregular non-core income, though in itself it cannot be used as evidence for it.

Another means of assessing the resources of the Sasanian monarchy is to consider the size of the armies it could raise and command. For major western campaigns, we have

[199] Bier, 'Sasanian Palaces', pp. 29. 36
[200] Matthew P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2009), pp. 13-15. R. N. Frye, 'The Political History of Iran Under the Sasanians', in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran 3:1 – The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods,* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 120-121.
[201] For Bahrām V, Ṭab. 858-859; for Kawād, Ṭab. 884-885, Proc. I.vi.17.
[202] Hugh Kennedy, 'The Financing of the Military in the Early Islamic State', in Averil Cameron (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: III: States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton, 1995), p. 372.

attestations of huge armies, according to Roman estimates. Ammianus claimed that the Persian army besieging Amida in 359 AD numbered 100,000, and Procopius stated that the Persian army at Dara numbered 40,000 cavalry and infantry, being reinforced by a further 10,000 on the second day of the battle.[203] However, even if we accept these figures as accurate, which they may not be, these assertions of scale do not reveal how typical armies of this size were, how difficult they were to assemble, the political manoeuvring undertaken to muster them, and upon whom the weight of the financial burden of these armies fell. Roman armies in Late Antiquity certainly fell far short of this total in normal circumstances, with armies of 10-20,000 men being more typical, with armies of up to 60,000 only being assembled for major campaigns.[204] This suggests that if we accept the larger figures for Persian armies attested by Ammianus or Procopius, they should be seen as unusually high, perhaps in part because both examples concern campaigns which focussed upon sieges where amassing manpower (more for digging and other manual activities than for actual fighting) was especially important.

We accept some Roman claims regarding troop numbers, meaning that Sasanian kings could command enormous armies in some circumstances. There is, however, little indication as to how they did this, or the administrative systems underpinning it. The potential scale of some Sasanian armies does not allow us to make assertions regarding the strength of the Sasanian state, or the bureaucratic sophistication which supported it.

It is very difficult to ascertain what forces kings controlled personally. It is likely that the king had a greater personal military following than any single magnate did. In Armenian literature, only kings are said to possess a bodyguard force called *pʿuštipankʿ*. When we

[203] AM. XIX.6.11; Proc. I.xiii.23, xiv.1.
[204] Hugh Elton, 'Military Forces', in Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees and Michael Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare: Volume II: Rome from the late Republic to the late Empire* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 285-286.

consider kings in times of weakness, they seem to have commanded meagre military resources. When recording Ḵosrow II's conflict with Bahrām Čōbīn, Theophylact described Ḵosrow as having only "one thousand of his personal guards."[205] In the 590s, Ḵosrow II was unable to militarily defeat his estranged uncle Besṭām (despite Ḵosrow's seemingly secure rule in the wealthier lowlands of the Empire), and relied upon the military support of the Armenian prince Smbat Bagratuni to contain Besṭām and to enforce Sasanian rule in the north and east after Besṭām's murder.[206] This suggests that the resources reliably controlled by the king were insufficient to overcome entrenched regional opposition.

These examples of Ḵosrow II are perhaps not indicative of normal conditions. However, alongside the examples of stronger, militarily successful kings, they suggest that the ability to raise large armies and make war effectively was as much dependent upon the king's political and personal skills as on the resources he personally commanded. This is supported by the fate of Hormozd IV in 590, who seems to have alienated the aristocracy and was unable to organise a credible defence against Bahrām Čōbīn, despite the latter only controlling the troops of one frontier. We also have the mid-fourth century example of the Armenian king Tiran, who lost all support of the nobility, and accompanied only by a small contingent of domestics and retainers, was easily kidnapped by a modest Persian force.[207] It seems that for a king to command substantial forces he had to enjoy significant political support. Therefore trying to ascertain the resource base of the Sasanian crown through the number of troops a monarch could command in certain circumstances is potentially misleading. Sasanian armies surely represented very large concentrations of wealth, but it would be wrong to assume this wealth was under solely royal control.

[205] TS, V.5.5-6.
[206] Seb., 22, 24-29
[207] *BP*, III.xx.

Returning to issues of political control, we should consider the importance of Mesopotamia to Sasanian finances. From the close analysis of post-Conquest historians, Morony has tentatively suggested that under Ḵosrow II in 607 the entirety of Sasanian royal income was 600,000,000 *drahms*, a little over one third of which was provided by all the revenues drawn from the Sawad region of central Mesopotamia, which comprised Ctesiphon and the major settlements of the middle Tigris and Euphrates. For Morony, this "underscores the economic importance of this region to the Sasanian state."[208] If we accept this approximate figure, it could only have been achieved by the Sasanians enjoying an extraordinary degree of control in this region, and is probably best explained by much, perhaps most, of the land belonging to the king personally, and any local aristocrats surely acquiescent and compliant.

Such a hypothesis is further illustrated by the clustering of royal palaces and of mints in Mesopotamia, and an apparently high level of attachment to the ruling dynasty there. As we have mentioned, Ḵosrow II struggled to re-impose his control over the north and east of the Empire in the 590s, but Mesopotamia and Fārs seem to have willingly returned to the Sasanian fold. This is despite the problems associated with the early years of Ḵosrow II's rule, such as submission to the Romans and territorial concessions in the west,[209] which would have been destabilising factors, and weighed most heavily in Mesopotamia itself. One may suggest that in one half of the Empire, centred on lowland Mesopotamia and Fārs and the cities there, the king enjoyed direct power, but that in the upland and eastern regions, control was dependent upon negotiation and cooperation with the local elites. This asymmetry of the Empire has important implications for the Christensen-Pourshariati debate, offering succour to both theories. The existence of large areas of weak central control certainly inclines one towards

[208] Michael Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, 1984), p. 120.
[209] TS, IV.14.8; Seb., 11, 14; see too Ṭabarī who records that Ḵosrow II relinquished Persia's claim to tribute from the Romans (Ṭab. 999), and that Ḵosrow distributed 20,000,000 *dihrams* amongst the Roman troops, which could be interpreted as tribute in disguise (Ṭab. 1000).

Pourshariati's thesis, whilst the apparent strength of the monarchy in other areas seems more in line with Christensen.

We know little about the Sasanian taxation system, and what we do have is dominated by Ṭabarī's account of the taxation reform of Ḵosrow I.[210] Ṭabarī states that before Ḵosrow's reform, tax was levied as a proportion of the produce (between a third or a sixth), as well as a poll tax. This was changed, after a thorough audit, to levying fixed charges depending upon what was grown on the land.

Other than Ṭabarī, we have some Talmudic evidence for Sasanian taxation before the alleged reforms of Ḵosrow I. The Talmudic evidence, weighted towards the fourth century, conveys little detail; Goodblatt's principal contention from the Talmudic evidence was that it "does not enable us to determine the absolute rate of the poll tax. It does suggest that the rate was burdensome".[211] Even this modest conclusion might be over-optimistic. Goodblatt's argument that the tax was burdensome was based around his interpretation of anecdotes, and that people were enslaved for non-payment.[212] However, not knowing how commonly people could not pay the tax (and so were enslaved) makes it impossible to suggest the tax rate. Even small sums of money can be extremely burdensome to the already impoverished. Given the paucity of the literary evidence, we find it unreasonable to argue for how the Sasanian taxation system operated, or how extractive it was, on the basis of Talmudic evidence.

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[210] Ṭab. 960-962. See too V. G Lukonin., 'Political, Social and Administrative Institutions: Taxes and Trade', in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran: Volume 3 (II): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 745-746. See too Rubin, 'The Reforms of Khusro Anūshirwān' who addresses the sources issues, and assesses literary sources other than Ṭabarī. Also, Zeev Rubin, 'Kosrow I ii. Reforms' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kosrow-i-ii-reforms>, [14 November, 2013].

[211] See David M. Goodblatt, 'The Poll Tax in Sasanian Babylonia: The Talmudic Evidence', in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol. 22, No. 3*, (1979), p. 247

[212] *Ibid*, pp. 244-247.

The extent of the taxation system across the Sasanian Empire, either pre- or post-Ḵosrow I, has not previously been considered, it seemingly being assumed that the tax system described by Ṭabarī applied equally to all areas. However, there is no evidence for this, and given the asymmetry of royal power within the Empire, without evidence for a universal tax system we would not argue for one. Armenia was taxed to some extent, with a census and a governor with fiscal responsibility.[213] However, the term most often used for financial impositions, հարկ (*hark*) is perhaps better translated as 'tribute' than 'tax', which implies a different kind of state intrusion. Also, the Armenian evidence gives an impression of how tax was assessed; Ełišē reports that levying taxes on "mountains, plains [դաշտ, *dašt*, also meaning 'fallow ground' or 'heath'] and forests" was seen as a cause of rebellion, strongly implying that land of this nature was ordinarily exempt, in Armenia at least.[214] We cannot say whether this applied to the rest of the Empire, but if it were the case that only prime arable land was taxed, as Ełišē's text seems to suggest, it must have significantly impacted on state finances.

There was taxation in the more peripheral areas of the Empire, but taxes were often in kind, seem very low when compared to the rates outlined in Ṭabarī's account (either before or after the alleged tax reform), and surviving references to negotiation suggests a system vulnerable to localised abuse and favouritism. For instance, from the Bactrian Documents we hear that the donkey part of a tax paid in donkeys and cows was to be rescinded, as the payee had given some wine instead; elsewhere we see a discussion over whether a tax should be paid in sheep or coins, as well as the discussion of an issue over assessment.[215] Both of these

[213] Nina Garsoïan, 'Armenian Sources on Sasanian Administration', in Rika Gyselen (ed.), *Res Orientales XVIII: Sources pour l'histoire et la géographie du monde iranien (224-710)* (Bures-sur-Yvette, 2009), pp. 95-97 and *passim*.
[214] Ełišē, *History of Vardan and the Armenian War*, tr. Roberts W. Thomson (Cambridge (Mass.), 1982), 22-23.
[215] BD2, je, jh.

texts date to after 473, so might refer to the situation post-reform. Document jh refers to an 'old' and a 'new' tax, which might suggest an implementation of the tax reform, but could equally refer to the payment from the previous tax cycle. Though not directly related to taxation, the recorded treatment of royal officials is surely instructive. One document records a lord petitioning the satrap to release someone from captivity on account of their personal friendship, and another involves a lord telling the satrap to stop bothering his servants.[216] Though not involving tax issues, these documents suggest it was acceptable to negotiate with local administrators to obtain a preferential outcome, regardless of the legality of what the administrator had demanded, and as such suggest that levying tax in out-of-the-way regions was difficult in practice. In short, as there is no evidence for a uniform Empire-wide taxation system at any point, given the regional variance of manifestations of Sasanian royal power, it would be mistaken to assume there was one.

Even in Mesopotamia, there is a strong indication that tax collection substantially relied upon local landlords rather than state officials, the prominence of the *dehqān* class continuing after the reforms of Ḵosrow I and even under the post-Conquest Arab regime to some extent.[217] This is not to deny the existence of a substantial body of royal bureaucrats, but they do not seem to have been sufficiently numerous or influential, even in Mesopotamia, to obviate the need of for aristocrats to be involved in facets of administration. Given that our sources on Sasanian taxation are highly inadequate, we would suggest the only conclusions we can make are that *even in areas of royal strength* the nobility retained a substantial role in the administration of tax, and in areas of relative royal weakness we have recorded examples of

[216] *Ibid*, xn, xr.
[217] Goodblatt, 'Poll Tax', p. 248. Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest*, pp. 115-116; Michael Morony, 'The Effects of the Muslim Conquest on the Persian Population of Iraq', in, *Iran, Vol. 14* (1976), pp. 56, 59. Michael Morony. 'Continuity and Change in the Administrative Geography of Late Sasanian and Early Islamic al-'Irāq', in *Iran, Vol.* 20 (1982), p. 6. 'Abd al-Ḥusain Zarrīnkūb, 'The Arab Conquest of Iran and its Aftermath', in R. N. Frye (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran: Volume 4: The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 43-45.

negotiation over tax (as well as other issues regarding local administration) which can only have limited the extent to which the crown could raise revenues there.

It is difficult to ascertain how the right to levy taxation was perceived, but we have some indication that the aristocracy had an antipathy to paying taxes, beyond the expected dislike of them. Moses Khorenatsʿi tells the Armenian myth of the defeat of the giant Barsham by Aram:

"…Aram…marched with the same force to Assyria…He found there a certain Barsham of the race of the giants, ruining the land with forty thousand armed infantry and five thousand cavalry. He was crushing the whole region by the severity of his taxes and turning it into desert. Aram opposed him in battle, and chased him through Kordukʿ to the Assyrian plain, slaughtering many of his men; and Barsham, encountering his [Aram's] lancers, was killed."[218]

Barsham is not treated as a force of physical destruction, he does not burn or pillage like one might expect an evil giant to do, but rather he is an extortionate taxman. For Moses' audience amongst the Armenian nobility (and so, arguably, the Iranian nobility as well), the manifestation of evil government was not the wrath of a destructive warlord, but the actions and impositions of an efficient bureaucrat. If there was a strong antipathy to taxation, the ability for the central government to effectively levy taxes would surely have been diminished.

The Sasanians did have revenues other than taxes. Though we have no indication of their extent, the crown doubtless controlled vast estates from which they could derive substantial profits (either through rents or direct usage). We have references to the Sasanian crown controlling gold mines in Armenia. Łazar informs us that Vahan Mamikonean and one

[218] MK, 1.14.

Vriv, a royal administrator, had shared responsibility for a mine under Pērōz,[219] and Procopius refers to a mine which Kawād had granted to an Armenian named Symeon.[220] There existed the office of *zarrbed* (literally 'head of the mines', perhaps best rendered as 'mine inspector'), showing that there was an administrative framework for administering the mines.[221] These seem to suggest that the king had legal ownership of the mines, but leased them to locals under the auspices of a centrally appointed administrator.

As both literary references to royal mines come from Armenia, and that the administrative districts listed on the *zarrbed bullae* are all within the South Caucasus, we cannot assume a similar arrangement pertained to the rest of the Empire, though there seems no intrinsic reason why it could not, and it would help explain why Sasanian coinage consistently had a high bullion content. Also, both literary sources refer to disputes over the revenue of the mines. Łazar states that Vriv had reported Vahan to King Pērōz for interfering in his administrative duties, and of misappropriating funds in readiness for going over to the Romans or the Huns. Procopius recorded that Symeon took advantage of the war between the Romans and the Persians to keep the profits of the mine for himself. This suggests that the ability of the king to derive direct benefit from his mines was conditional, and that even though there was an administrative framework, the king's ability to significantly profit from it would have fluctuated.

Plunder and tribute from successful warfare could also be highly remunerative. For example Ḵosrow I was paid substantial tribute by the Romans to make peace in 532, and when hostilities resumed in 540, plundered the large and wealthy city of Antioch, and was bought off

[219] ŁP, III.65.
[220] Proc, I.xv.27-29.
[221] Rika Gyselen, *Sasanian Seals and Sealings in the A. Saeedi Collection* (Leuven, 2007), pp. 240-241, seals I/165 and I/166.

from attacking Edessa with 2 *centenaria* of gold.[222] However, we do not know how expensive it was to assemble and use the military forces needed to extract such money, and it does not take into account the damage to Sasanian possessions, which could be substantial; though ultimately defeated, Julian's invasion of Mesopotamia in 363 must have been extremely destructive, with cities sacked and land deliberately flooded to stop the Roman advance.[223] Indeed, such was the destruction that Julian's army unleashed on Sasanian Mesopotamia, Ammianus saw not destroying a palace as a notable event.[224]

Comparisons with better documented conflicts makes us question whether the Sasanians made any profit on wars with the Romans on a long-term basis, though not denying the possibility that individual campaigns might make handsome returns. War was extremely expensive for the Roman government. Certainly, we have literary accounts stressing the booty gained through successful warfare, with some commentators believing (or implying) that some wars were fought primarily to appropriate plunder, such as Septimius Severus' Persian campaign.[225] However, the extent to which these levels of plunder could be maintained would have been limited. It has been suggested that Trajan's relatively successful Mesopotamian war quickly became ruinously expensive, spending the treasure he had accumulated from conquering Dacia, perhaps the preeminent source of gold in Europe.[226]

If we take a late-mediaeval European example, for which we have precise figures, the notion that warfare was profitable on the longer term is fanciful. The single most financially profitable campaign the English fought during the Hundred Years War was in 1356, which resulted in the capture of the French king Jean II and many other nobles at the battle of

[222] Proc, I.xxii, II.ix.14-17, xii.34.
[223] AM, XXIV.1.12, 14-16, 2.3-4, 22, 3.3, 10-11, 14, 4.1, 10, 25-27, 5.2.
[224] *Ibid*, XXIV.5.1.
[225] Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford, 1990), p. 380-2; CD, LXXVI.9.4; *HA*, *Severus*, XVI.5
[226] Sheldon, *Romes Wars in Parthia*, p. 217.

Poitiers, with demanded ransoms totalling around £500,000 sterling (though much went unpaid).[227] This was in addition to the preceding year having seen an exceptionally profitable long distance raid into French territory, with over 500 settlements pillaged.[228] The sum gained from the capture of Jean II was vast, and was in real terms probably the biggest windfall any mediaeval European government received. Ransoming a rival king was a near unique occurrence, and Poitiers was truly exceptional in the value of the prisoners taken.[229]

However, these huge sums were significantly less than the cost of maintaining the war. The battle of Poitiers was fought in the nineteenth year of the War, which, in relatively quiet years, cost the English government on average £118,000 a year, and considerably more in more active years.[230] As the war had cost well over £2,000,000 by 1356, one campaign turning a profit of £250,00-300,000 cannot have convinced the English government that the War was financially profitable.

In addition, the financial losses caused by economic dislocation are unknowable, but presumably significant. Though individuals in England certainly made their fortunes through warfare, neither the nation as a whole, nor the royal exchequer, profited from it financially. Given that Sasanian Iran often had to suffer invasions, which was seldom a concern for mediaeval English kings, the cost-benefit analysis of waging war must have appeared even less agreeable. Therefore, we cannot see the Sasanian monarchy as being able to treat warfare as a regular revenue stream. It is true that for long periods the Romans were technically tributary

[227] Jonathan Sumption, *The Hunded Years War: II: Trial by Fire* (London, 1999), pp. 447, 497-500, 572; Christopher Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 18.
[228] David Green, *The Battle of Poitiers 1356* (Stroud, 2002), pp. 33-35.
[229] Chris Given-Wilson and Françoise Bériac, 'Edward III's Prisoners of War: The Battle of Poitiers and Its Context', in *The English Historical Review, Vol. 116, No. 468* (2001), pp. 804-806.
[230] Michael Prestwich, 'The Enterprise of War', in Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (eds.), *A Social History of Engand, 1200-1500* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 84; see too Michael Prestwich, *The Three Edwards: War and State in England, 1272-1377* (London, 1980), p. 223.

to the Sasanians,[231] but the profits of this would have balanced with the necessity of higher military spending to ensure payment. We would suggest that the benefits to the Sasanian crown of this arrangement were more political than financial, allowing the king to demonstrate his martial ability (the importance of which is discussed below in Chapter 2.4), as well as harnessing the natural bellicosity of the aristocracy for objectives beneficial to royal interests.

Tolls and indirect taxes were also probably significant revenue streams, especially given the insistence of both Roman and Sasanian governments to limiting cross-frontier trade to a small number of relatively easily controlled points which would greatly facilitate the gathering of indirect taxes.[232] For the Romans, these were highly remunerative, and there is no reason why they were less so for the Persians.[233] However, these sources of revenue cannot have overshadowed the income from exploiting the agricultural wealth of the empire, whether through rent payments or taxation.

Certainly, the Sasanian monarchy levied taxes of some kind outside of their core territories, and the areas which were taxed might have expanded over time. Tabarī records that after the conquest of Yemen, Ḵosrow I made the client ruler there send back taxes.[234] However, in general, we have no indication that the Sasanian crown was able to regularly levy taxes in distant regions. It is impossible to hypothesise the level of resources controlled by the monarchy, given the scarcity of the source material. However, we can confidently state that there is no evidence for a deeply extractive state apparatus, and at least in some quarters there appears to have been a substantial cultural aversion to taxation. Ultimately, we find

[231] Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, p. 124, see too n. 12, p. 124.
[232] Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest,* pp. 115-117; See *The Codex Justinianus*, IV.63.4, in Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part II: AD 363-630* (Abingdon, 2002*,* pp. 33-34. See too Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 200-209.
[233] R. C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius*, (Leeds, 1992), p. 148.
[234] Ṭab, 949-950.

scant support for Christensen's thesis, and some limited agreement with Pourshariati's, when considering the resources available to the Sasanian state.

2.2 – The Ideological Framework of Monarchy

The Sasanian kings seem to have placed themselves on a quasi-divine level, asserting a royal link to the gods, or the sun, moon or stars.[235] This has been interpreted as meaning "the king referred to himself as a god…the subjects were to consider their ruler not only as some kind of overlord, but as a king with divine qualities."[236] If the Sasanian king was perceived as somehow divine, this would doubtless have greatly augmented royal prestige and authority. However, we feel that not enough weight has been placed on the issue of reception, and how non-royals perceived the image projected by the kings.

On royal inscriptions, the kings apply the word *bey*/*bgy* to themselves, which has been interpreted as marking themselves as divine.[237] The word is borrowed from the form of address used for the gods.[238] The early Sasanian investiture reliefs, most famously that of Ardašīr I at Naqš-i Rustam, show the king being given the insignia of kingship by Ahura Mazda, suggest the two were equal, with both figures the same size, and with a special link between them.[239] Indeed, the late-Sasanian relief of Ḵosrow II at Taq-i Bustan might imply the king was superior to the gods Anahita and Ahura Mazda. He is placed in the centre of the scene and is

[235] See esp. Maricq, *Res Gestae*, p 304. See too Paikuli, L1. For a further example, see too AM XVII.5.3. Sebēos records a letter from the usurper king Bahrām Čōbīn to the Mamikoneans, claiming a similar lineage; Seb. 11 (77-78). For an overview of this issue, see Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, esp. ch. 6.
[236] Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD*, tr. Azizeh Azodi (London, 2001), pp. 165-166.
[237] Touraj Daryaee, 'Kingship in Early Sasanian Iran', in Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (eds.), *The Sasanian Era: The Idea of Iran: Volume 3* (London, 2008), p. 62.
[238] Shaul Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran* (London, 1994), p. 113.
[239] Dietrich Huff, 'Formation and Ideology of the Sasanian State in the Context of Archaeological Evidence', in Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (eds.), *The Sasanian Era: The Idea of Iran: Volume III* (London, 2008), p. 39.

the marginally larger figure (Fig. 1-2).[240] As we noted earlier the reliefs and inscriptions are concentrated in the western regions of the Sasanian Empire, generally in areas with longstanding attachment to the Sasanian dynasty. The audience who saw the conception of royal authority expressed in these sources was presumably very limited.

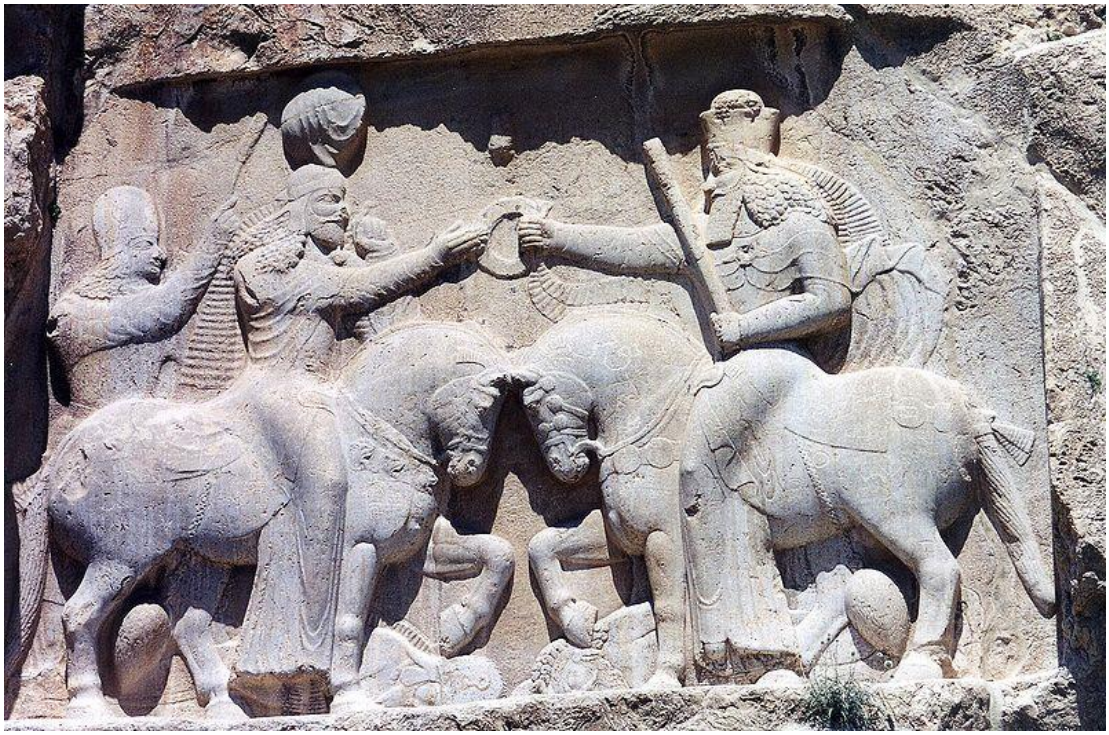

Fig. 1 – The Investiture of Ardašīr I (left), showing Ardašīr being given the insignia of kingship by Ahura Mazda, at Naqš-i Rustam. Image from Wikimedia Commons

[240] *Ibid*, pp. 39-40.

Fig. 2 – Ḵosrow II (centre) receiving the insignia of kingship from Ahura Mazda (right) and Anahita (left), Taq-i Bustan. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

Coinage was a more accessible and portable vehicle for projecting royal imagery. Sasanian coinage was probably primarily intended to communicate with the aristocracy, because silver coins would seldom have been handled by common people.[241] The crowns on royal coin portraits used throughout the Sasanian era have elements derived from the crowns associated with different gods.[242] Though each king had a slightly different crown (and some kings changing their crowns during their reign), each design possessed religious significance. The coin legends also linked the Sasanians to the divine, with Ardašīr I instituting the legend "the divine Mazdayasnian King of Kings Ardašīr, (king) of (the) Iranians, whose seed is from the

[241] Curtis, 'Royal and Religious Symbols', p. 141.
[242] Robert Göbl, *Sasanian Numismatics* (Braunschweig, 1971), p. 7; Göbl, 'Sasanian Coins', p. 330; Andrea Gariboldi, 'Astral Symbology on Iranian Coinage', in *East and West, Vol. 54, No. 1/4* (2004), pp. 31-32; Curtis, 'Royal and Religious Symbols', pp. 138-141.

gods," a formula which stayed constant until the reign of Šāpur II.[243] Throughout the Sasanian period, the coinage showed a Zoroastrian fire temple on the reverse, further linking the king with religious forces.[244] Given that Sasanian coinage remained stylistically similar for the duration of the dynasty, it is clear that the Sasanians maintained this link with religious forces throughout their rule, suggesting it was valuable to them. Indeed, such was the apparent power of Sasanian coinage that the coins issued by the 'usurper kings', most particularly by Bahrām Čōbīn and Besṭām, follow the Sasanian style, further suggesting the potential power of it.

However, we should consider how the association between the king and religious forces may have been perceived. The aforementioned reliefs and coins originated from royal channels, showing the king as he wanted to be seen, and in the case of the reliefs and inscriptions, presumably for a very narrow audience. There is a huge gap between what should be seen as royal propaganda, and the widespread acceptance of the government's point of view. To have any effect, propagandistic statements need some kind of resonance with the populace, so claiming the king was "l'adorateur de Mazda, le dieu Shapur…de la race des dieux, fils…du dieu Ardachir" does at least show that asserting royal divinity was not perceived as absurd. The divine association on coins for the entirety of the Sasanian period shows that the government considered it useful. However, this only goes some way to understanding how the monarchy was perceived.

If we assess literary sources surviving from the Sasanian period which were not produced by the crown, or with a lesser royal link, there is little indication of belief in the divinity of the monarch. Despite being an inherently problematic argument from silence, the

[243] Michael Alram, 'Early Sasanian Coinage', in Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (eds.), *The Sasanian Era: The Idea of Iran: Volume III* (London, 2008), pp. 20-29.
[244] Schindel, 'Sasanian Coinage', pp. 834-835.

nature of some relevant sources makes their silence potentially very indicative. The inscriptions of Kirdīr, the chief priest of several early Sasanians, and someone who owed his status and authority entirely to royal service, does not describe the kings he served as quasi-divine, or enjoying any particular link with the gods, even though his inscriptions were made alongside those of Šāpur I which claimed that very thing.[245] He offered loyal service to the lords, and was "un bon serviteur bien disposé (envers) les dieux et Ardašir roi des rois et Šabuhr rois des rois…", and he worked "pour [king] Ohrmazd et les dieux".[246] He served the kings *and* the gods, but there was no sense *at all* that the line between them was blurred. Kirdīr's inscriptions have many opportunities for asserting Sasanian quasi-divinity, and yet they do not. This is despite his proximity to the court and personal dependence upon the kings, including Šāpur I who asserted his own divinity in his inscriptions at the same sites as Kirdīr had his. Given the fact that Kirdīr arguably represents early Sasanian religious orthodoxy, the lack of apparent belief in divine kingship is telling.

The Letter of Tansar does not describe the king to whom the addressee is supposed to submit as holding any especial link with the gods either. As already discussed, since the surviving document is a defective translation of the Sasanian original, conclusions must be tentative. However, as the alleged purpose of the document was to promote submission to the king, one might expect the author to stress the unique link with Ahura Mazda enjoyed by the king, if such a belief was widespread. Though the relevant sources are few, limiting the strength of these arguments from silence, it is noteworthy that their conception of the royal dignity falls far short of quasi-divinity, and that the only extant sources we have which ascribe divinity to the Sasanian kings originate from official channels.

[245] Philip Huyse, 'Inscriptional Literature in Old and Middle Iranian Languages', in Ronald E, Emmerick and Maria Macuch, *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran: Companion Volume I to A History of Persian Literature* (London, 2009), pp. 98-99.
[246] Gignoux, *Les Quatre Inscriptions*, pp. 37, 66.

Though not the same as suggesting quasi-divinity, we have various post-Conquest sources which purport to inform us about Sasanian court protocols, such as the famous anecdotes concerning the king being concealed behind a veil or curtain until ready, or wearing an over-sized crown so large that it needed to be suspended from the ceiling, devices of ostentation and display which exalted the king far above even the mightiest subjects.[247] However, the evidence for these tales largely comes from much later post-Conquest historians.[248] These writers were active in a time when historical fictions about the Sasanians were commonly used to justify or explain current practices, with prominent figures of the Sasanian period (such as Ḵosrow I and his vizier Bozorgmehr) being used as examples of good governance and sources of *bon mots*, or alternatively used as a model of pomp and grandeur to contrast with Muslim simplicity.[249]

When we compare this with the impression of Sasanian court ritual offered by Armenian historians, writing either under Sasanian rule or at least within living memory of it, we see a rather mundane courtly life, with Armenian princes meeting Sasanian kings relatively straightforwardly, and not sharing the image of overwhelming royal pageantry and display offered by post-Conquest writers.[250] Of these references, perhaps the most telling is Łazar's description of the meeting between the Sasanian king Balash and the Armenian princes.[251] This is clearly a formal appointment, but there is no reference at all to unusually elaborate court

[247] Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, pp. 139-143.
[248] *Ibid*, p. 140, ns. 103-106; A. Shalem, 'The Fall of al-Mada'in: Some Literary References Concerning Sasanian Spoils of War in Medieval Islamic Treasuries', in *Iran 32* (1994), pp. 77-81.
[249] Shalem, 'The Fall of al-Mada'in', pp. 77, 81; Djalal Khaleghi Motlagh, 'Bozorgmehr-e Boḵtagān', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition),* < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bozorgmehr-e-boktagan>, [18 May, 2014]; Hanna Mikhail, *Politics and Revelation: Māwardī and After* (Edinburgh, 1995), pp, 30-32; Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam: An Introduction to the Study of Islamic Political Theory: The Jurists* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 43-45, 58, 64, 71, 117.
[250] *BP*, IV.xvi, on Šāpur II hosting Aršak of Armenia and Vasak Mamikonean at Ctesiphon; ŁP, 1.14-15, 3.95; concerning the meeting between Bahrām V and the Armenian princes on the deposition of Artashēs of Armenia, and the meeting between the Armenians and King Balash; Seb, 12, on the meeting between Ḵosrow II and Mušeł Mamikonean.
[251] ŁP, 3.95.

ceremonial. We might also consider the late Sasanian text *King Husrav and his Boy*, concerning an exchange between Ḵosrow I and a noble boy recently arrived at court.[252] Once again, there is little indication of the extremely pronounced status attributed to the Sasanian king in the other sources we have seen. We would not necessarily deny the image given by the post-Conquest writers. It seems possible that on special occasions the full weight of royal pageantry and display would have been used, but we feel it would be misleading to suggest that this was representative of how the Sasanian king interacted with those around him, especially given that the Armenian accounts suggest a much more accessible king without the extremes of court protocol and display accredited to him by later writers. Though not directly concerning how the 'divinity' of the Sasanian king was received, the Armenian accounts of relations between kings and nobles, suggesting a mundane and accessible monarchy, makes one suspicious as to how deeply Sasanian claims of quasi-divinity penetrated.

Though we have few relevant sources, we would suggest there was a degree of disconnect between the image of monarchy presented by the king and his government, and how this was perceived. The most indicative sources are the inscriptions of Kirdīr. Given that Šāpur I asserted his divine connections, and his own chief priest did not, despite their inscriptions being next to each other, we should question how widespread belief in the king's claims was. This is further supported by the relatively mundane treatment of the Sasanian king which we see in the Armenian histories. The king might well have been a figure of immense respect, but the contemporary Armenian accounts do suggest a more prosaic, worldly, kingship than that suggested by some post-Conquest writers, perhaps inclining us to see these as, at least partly, later inventions.

[252] *The Pahlavi Text "King Husrav and His Boy": Translated with its Transcription, Translation and Copious Notes*, tr. Jamshedji Maneckji Unvala (Paris, 1921).

Let us now turn to the concept of *farr*, the numinous glory traditionally associated with the legitimate king in Iranian tradition.[253] References are plentiful in *The Shahnameh*, where it might be translated as 'glory' or 'grace'. Perhaps understandably, this source has dominated later scholarship on *farr*,[254] though the question of whether it accurately reflected belief in the Sasanian period has not been addressed.

In Armenia, the cognate concept of *pʿarkʿ* existed. However, *pʿarkʿ* was not perceived as the uniquely royal force as the *farr* described in *The Shahnameh.*[255] References to *pʿarkʿ* are numerous in *The Epic Histories*, with many in a Christian religious context, as well as in a royal, more 'Iranian', context.[256] However, very significantly, the non-royal Manuel Mamikonean also has the word applied to him.[257] The fact that the author of *The Epic Histories* attributed *pʿarkʿ* to non-royals shows that it was not perceived as a uniquely royal quality by the author, and presumably also by his audience.

The Christianisation of *pʿarkʿ in The Epic Histories* indicates that the concept was culturally significant enough to be 'converted' too.[258] Unlike the *Shahnameh*, which features supernatural phenomena until the later stages (such as the manifestation of Sorush during the conflict between Bahrām Čōbīn and Ḵosrow II), *The Epic Histories*, heroic though it is, is largely

[253] By way of introduction, see Gherardo Gnoli, 'Farr(ah)', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*; <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/farrah> [23 October, 2013].

[254] See for example, Homa Katouzian, 'Arbitrary Rule: A Comparative Theory of State, Politics and Society in Iran', in *The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 24, No. 1* (1997), pp. 59-60. Ehsan Yarshatar, 'Iranian Common Beliefs and World View', in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran: Volume 3 (I): The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 345-346; Yarshatar bases his discussion largely upon the *Shahnameh*.

[255] See Garsoïan, 'The Two Voices', pp. 8-11 for a discussion of *pʿarkʿ* in an Armenian context.

[256] *BP*, III.xiv, IV.xvi, xx, xxiv for *pʿarkʿ* in a royal context; *BP*, III.v, IV.iv-v xiii, V.iv, xxviii, xxx for *pʿarkʿ* is used in a Christian religious context.

[257] *Ibid*, V.xxxviii.

[258] Nina Garsoïan, 'Technical Terms', in *The Epic Histories*, tr. Nina Garsoïan (Cambridge (Mass.), 1989), p. 552. Garsoïan argues that the author of *The Epic Histories* uses the term in a more 'Iranian' than a Christian sense. We would suggest the line is rather more blurred than she argues, but certainly the term has not been fully 'Christianised' as in the more explicitly religious works she cites (e.g. in hagiographies).

mundane. Supernatural manifestations are minimal, and the Christian author occasionally made the point of stating that non-Christian supernatural phenomena did not occur. For example, the author reports that the family of the recently killed Mušeł Mamikonean vainly expected the *Aṙlezkʿ* (winged dog-like creatures whose licking would revive otherwise mortally wounded heroes) to appear and save their kinsman, and he misrepresented what should be properly seen as the family's syncretism regarding burial rites (whereby they allowed the body to decompose before burial, in accordance with Zoroastrian practice).[259] Despite rejecting other non-Christian cultural practices and belief, the author apparently believed in *pʿaṙkʿ*. Given his likely desire to downplay non-Christian elements still present in Armenia, we could see this as evidence of the significance of the belief in *pʿaṙkʿ* - other pre-Christian beliefs and practices could be ignored or misrepresented. *Pʿaṙkʿ* remained. It was clearly important. Given the similitary between Iranian and Armenian cultures in this period, we should consider the possibility that the inclusive conception of *pʿaṙkʿ* in *The Epic Histories* may have existed in Sasanian Iran. It seems most likely that an Armenian writing about *pʿaṙkʿ* meant the same thing as a Persian writing about *farr*. Despite the number of references to *pʿaṙkʿ* in *The Epic Histories* being small, they show it was not uniquely royal, and perhaps that we ought not see *farr* as a uniquely royal force in the Sasanian period either.

The source traditionally used to understand *farr* in Sasanian Iran is *The Shahnameh*, despite the considerable gap between this work and the Sasanian era. The more 'historical' literary sources, drawing from similar source material, such as the history of Ṭabarī, do not feature *farr*. Neither does the work of Agathias. Therefore, the principal sources we have for *farr* in the Sasanian period, often seen as a vital part of Iranian kingship, largely comprise a fifth-century Armenian text, which presents a concept of *farr*/*pʿaṙkʿ* which differs from the

[259] *BP*, V.xxxvi. See too J. Russell, 'Arlez' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition),* < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/arlez-term-for-a-supernatural-creature-in-armenian>, [23 October, 2013].

standard view, and the very late *Shahnameh*. This indicates it is in fact very difficult to determine what exactly *farr* meant in a Sasanian context.

For the Sasanian period there are arguments for accepting the more inclusive impression of *farr*/*pʿarǩʿ* as expressed in *The Epic Histories*, rather than the standard view. The writer of *The Epic Histories* did not use any sources associated with the Sasanian crown, and as far as we can tell genuinely reflects oral tales circulating in Armenia. *The Epic Histories* shows that *farr*/*pʿarǩʿ* had meaning for contemporaries, proving that it was not perceived as a figment of royal propagandists, with little cultural significance. However, the conception of *farr*/*pʿarǩʿ* articulated in *The Epic Histories* is not unique to the king, and conflicts with the impression in the much later Shahnameh where it was presented as uniquely royal. A similar blurring between the aristocratic and the royal occurs in *The Epic Histories* with the Armenian adjective *kʿaǰ* (valour), normally associated with kings, is also held by especially heroic noblemen.[260] It is perhaps significant that in the extremely ancient Yashts, gods, kings and heroes can all possess *farr*.[261] The ability for heroes in the oldest Iranian tales to hold *farr* seems in accord with the representation of *pʿarǩʿ* in *The Epic Histories*, perhaps suggesting that the more exclusive definition we see in the post-Sasanian material was a later development to how this particular supernatural force was perceived in our period.

Given the paucity of relevant sources, it would be rash to make a strong judgement. However, we would suggest that it is at least arguable that *farr* being seen as uniquely royal was potentially a very late Sasanian or post-Conquest development. Certainly, the *only* source written in the Sasanian period to make use of these terms clearly attributed these qualities to exceptional nobles as well as kings.

[260] See Garsoïan, 'Technical Terms', pp. 534-535
[261] Yarshatar, 'Iranian National History',, p. 414.

On a related note, both *The Epic Histories* and Ferdowsī's *Shahnameh* strongly suggest that for a king to maintain *farr* depended upon his ethical behaviour. The continuing presence of it, and the good fortune brought by it, was in some sense dependent upon the king remaining virtuous and honourable. The great king Jamshid was said to lose his *farr* when he became too arrogant.[262] Before he was overthrown, the *farr* of Ardavān IV was said to leave him, manifesting as a white ram and transferring to Ardašīr, the first of the Sasanian kings, explicitly because the last Arsacid ruler had become tyrannical.[263] Similarly, when Ḵosrow II became corrupt and tyrannical, he lost his *farr*, and he lost his throne.[264] We do not accept Katouzian's argument that kings lost *farr* when they were deposed, and that *farr* naturally adhered to the throne, legitimising the king without regard for the ethics of the individual (i.e. one lost *farr* because one lost the throne – there were no 'laws' which the king might break).[265] In *The Epic Histories*, King Tiran is explicitly told that he will lose his *pʿarkʿ*, and then his throne, if he killed the holy man Daniel.[266] There is a clear sense of cause and effect. Though there seems a belief that *farr/pʿarkʿ* adhered to the legitimate king, it was also presented as being dependent upon his virtue for it to remain. This poses the question of whether a wicked king, therefore losing *farr/pʿarkʿ*, might become, or be considered, illegitimate. As we shall discuss more in Chapter 3.4, there does seem to have been a theoretical framework for the overthrow of tyrannical kings. We tentatively suggest that the belief in *farr/pʿarkʿ,* though generally a support to royal authority, could also become a liability, as there does seem to have been the belief that a particularly wicked king could become illegitimate, and fit to be overthrown, by its loss.

[262] FD, 27-28.
[263] *Ibid*, 1373.
[264] *Ibid*, 2020.
[265] Katouzian, 'Arbitrary Rule', pp. 59-60.
[266] *BP*, III.xiv.

Holding *farr* was still essential to being seen as a legitimate ruler. In Ferdowsī's account, Bahrām Čōbīn was clearly stated to not have *farr*,[267] thus proving his illigitmacy, though we should not discount the possibility that more pro-Čōbīn or Mihrānid histories *might* have applied *farr* to Bahrām Čōbīn in the way we see the Mamikoneans treated in *The Epic Histories.* The only lay non-royal associated with *pʿarǩʿ* in *The Epic Histories*, Manuel Mamikonean, deposed and drove into exile King Varazdat, ruling Armenia through the queen and her sons.[268] The author clearly approved of Manuel's actions, and though he fought King Varazdat, Varazdat appears as a tyrannical king, with Manuel's actions presented as an 'ideal type' of royal deposition. Manuel was virtuous. This is one of the major points to take from *The Epic Histories*' conception of *farr*/*pʿarǩʿ*: it was a force which adhered only to extraordinary individuals, but also only to virtuous ones. Whether we accept the impression given by *The Epic Histories* of a more widely available *farr* or the more narrowly defined *farr* of *The Shahnameh*, there appears to be consensus that maintaining it was dependent upon the virtue of the person to which it applied, and therefore suggesting a belief that not only lineage, but virtue also, was essential to being a king.

Where then does this discussion over the supernatural underpinnings of Sasanian monarchy leave us? The divine associations put forward by the monarchy must have had some credence to have been maintained, and the belief in *farr* certainly marked the king as special. Though there may have been less than total acceptance of some of the quasi-divine claims put forward by the monarchy, there appears to have been genuine belief in *farr*.

We would suggest, from admittedly sparse evidence, that some provincial lords might have ascribed *farr* to themselves *and* to the king. It must be stressed that *The Epic Histories* is

[267] FD, 1775-7, see too 1854-5 when Gordiyeh upbraids her brother Bahrām on the iniquity of his desite to be king.
[268] See *BP*, V.xxxvii-xxxviii.

not at all favourable to the Aršakunis, yet every Aršakuni king was attributed with *pʿarkʿ*. This seemingly suggests that the concept of *farr* was sufficiently powerful that local lords with the means to do so would try and attach something inherently royal to themselves. This makes assessing the role of *farr* in the context of our discussion somewhat difficult. We would tentatively contend that seeing it as uniquely royal in the Sasanian period is problematic, but the co-opting of *farr* by more local lords was only meaningful in the context of respect and reverence of the monarchy and the acceptance that kings had a particular form of 'glory' which only the most exalted provincial lords might hope to hold themselves.

In later Armenian texts, which presented a much more Christian conception of Armenia and Iran, monarchy was still presented as being an office of a different nature to others. When Łazar described the authority wielded by one of his Mamikonean heroes, he claimed "everyone willingly and in awe obeyed his commands as those of a king who might have been established by God over the land."[269] Sebēos has the Armenian lord Mušeł refuse to support the usurper Bahrām Čōbīn in part because he believed kingship came from God,[270] implying that other forms of lordship did not.

If we turn to perceptions of the monarchy in purely mundane contexts, one can identify a large degree of majesty surrounding the royal office, though events often suggest that many approached the monarchy in a practical way. Once again, our sources are dominated by *The Epic Histories* and *The Shahnameh*, with a few other (admittedly very telling) references from other works. We must preface our discussion by stressing that all conclusions are tentative.

[269] ŁP, III.82
[270] Seb,11.

The Epic Histories certainly shows the king to be higher status than anyone else (as we would expect), and a person it was inherently honourable to serve. Mamikonean lords loyally served kings the author clearly viewed as unfit for office, a state of affairs which was presented as reflecting well upon, and so enhancing the status of, the Mamikonean house. We find a similar situation in *The Shahnameh* in the relationship between Rostam and the Kayanid monarchs, where the mighty hero loyally serves unfit rulers. However, we also find the limits of the desirability of royal service, and the specialness of kings; Rostam is surly towards Kay Kavus, and insults him to his face, and it is the king, not the hero, who ultimately backs down.[271] These issues are discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.3, when we consider the service mentality of the Sasanian aristocracy.

Elsewhere we get a sense of a largely practical relationship with the monarchy. Łazar presents the Caucasian lords at Ctesiphon as scheming together to mislead King Yazdegerd so that they could leave, despite their leader, the heroic Vardan Mamikonean, twice publicly affirming his loyalty and desire to serve the Sasanian crown.[272] When Łazar described the disputed succession after the death of Pērōz, the Persian lords are presented as having mundane reasons in preferring Balash as the next king, because he was seen as gentle, and Pērōz as tyrannical, a point presented as being expressed to the new king's face by the Persian lords.[273] Similarly, Sebēos presents the Armenian lord Mušeł Mamikonean as publicly stating his service to the king, whilst refusing to enter into the royal presence if he could not take his sword and retainers – a very public demonstration that Mušeł did not trust the king.[274] Relations with the king are presented by these authors in practical terms. Though there was a

[271] FD, 466-467.
[272] ŁP, II.25-28.
[273] *Ibid*, III.87-88.
[274] Seb, 12.

publicly expressed service mentality (addressed in Chapter 3.3), this apparently did not conflict with scheming to deceive the king, or refusing to enter his presence unarmed.

We do find several statements prohibiting the killing of kings, and thus indicating his special status. Procopius, when discussing the temporary deposition of Kawād I, stressed the unwillingness of the Persian nobles to kill Kawād, despite practical reasons for doing so, because they were "unwilling to put to death a man of royal blood."[275] Such a sentiment is echoed in Ferdowsī's account of the conflict between Rostam and Esfandiyar, in which Rostam slays the king's son. Despite the poet's clear sympathy with Rostam, and the impossible position in which the unjust king Gushtasp had put him, the killing of the prince was said to have blotted out all the good deeds Rostam had performed on behalf of the Iranian monarchy, and helped bring about the destruction of Rostam's house.[276] Rostam's fate, despite his 'crime' consisting of killing an unjust prince carrying out the demands of a tyrannical king, suggests a belief that slaying a king (or another high-ranking royal) was considered such a serious offence that even the most exalted of heroes, even with compelling justification, could not commit such an act and survive.

However, the author of *The Epic Histories* seems to condemn slaying one's social superior, rather than the king as such. Manuel Mamikonean dethroned king Varazdat and chased him from the kingdom at the point of a lance, but is recorded as stopping his sons from killing the king, telling them to "not become lord slayers".[277] This incident was not a prohibition against shedding royal blood, but a prohibition against shedding the blood of one's social superior (which the king always was), hence representing a wider social conservatism and the ideal of well-defined social hierarchies which we shall address in Chapter 3.2. This suggests

[275] Proc, I.v.3-7.
[276] FD, 1717-1718, 1748-1755.
[277] *BP* V.xxxvii; մի լինիք տիրասպանուք

kingship was the highest social rank, but not of a different nature to other forms of lordship. There does not appear any prohibition about killing a foreign king – i.e. a king who was not your lord. *The Epic Histories* records the Mamikoneans defeating and killed one Sanēsan, king of the Mazkʿutʿkʿ, a kinsman of the Armenian king Xosrov.[278] Though Xosrov grieved for Sanēsan's death, there is no indication that the author thought killing the king of the Mazkʿutʿkʿ was wrong, and presents the destruction of his army as praiseworthy. Taken with the aforementioned example of Manuel and Varazdat, it does seem that for the author of *The Epic Histories* killing one's own lord, rather than kings in general, was seen as taboo, though as we do not find within *The Epic Histories* an incident of killing one's lord who was not one's king we cannot conclude this matter. All we might do is suggest that the taboo of regicide was perhaps more complex than it might appear.

The Epic Histories and *The Shahnameh* both share a strong belief in the importance of inheritance. This is something we will return to at length later (Chapter 3.2), but in specific relation to the king, it is clear that in the epic world of these texts, no nobleman, no matter how valorous or worthy, could seek the throne for himself. In *The Epic Histories*, Manuel Mamikonean might well have chased the king from the country at the point of a lance, but he did not assume the throne himself. Rather the queen and her sons were in (nominal) control.[279] Manuel almost certainly ruled the realm through military force and used the royal family remaining in Armenia as his puppets. However, it is significant that this pro-Mamikonean source stressed that Manuel did not take the throne and respected the royals under his control. This suggests that for Łazar, the monarchy was above the highest 'normal' lordships, and royal status could not be seized, even by the most exalted and virtuous nobles.

[278] *Ibid,* III.vii.
[279] *Ibid*, V.xxxvii-xviii

Similarly, in *The Shahnameh*, Rostam states that the warriors wanted him to be king, but he would not break with custom and accede to their wishes.[280] Zeev Rubin has persuasively argued that had Bahrām Čōbīn stopped at dethroning Hormizd IV (who was clearly tyrannical) in favour of his son, and not seized the throne for himself, it would have been theoretically acceptable behaviour.[281] In the literary sources therefore, it seems clear that there existed a gap between the monarchy and other forms of lordship which simply could not be crossed, though we would suggest that this gap existed as much through a belief in the ideal of social stability as any specific quality of kingship.

We even see this with the Sasanians themselves to some extent. The stories concerning the mother of Šāpur I, who according to the literary traditions was a daughter of Ardavān IV, the last Arsacid king,[282] suggests a later need for legitimation by linking the two dynasties by marriage, and making the throne in a sense quasi-inherited. This link was fictive. Ardašīr I may have married daughters of Ardavān IV, but it is impossible Šāpur I was the offspring of any such union, as his birth predated Ardašīr's defeat of Ardavān by at least fifteen to twenty years. The reliefs illustrating Sasanian victory over the Arsacids show prince Šāpur (as he then was) as an active combatant, and his successful campaigns against the Romans in the 240s suggests a mature and battle-hardened general at the height of his powers, rather than a teenager if his alleged Arsacid descent were true. The Arsacid link with Šāpur I is fanciful, but reflects a desire, even at the highest level, for the legitimacy only inheritance and marriage ties could bring.

However, the belief in the legitimacy of dynasticism was not absolute. Very occasionally, royal dynasties changed at the point of a sword. The Sasanians took the throne

[280] FD, 467.
[281] Rubin, 'Nobility, Monarchy and Legitimation'; *passim*, esp. p. 263.
[282] Ṭab, 823-826; FD 1392-1397.

though violence, and this, ultimately, must have been accepted by the majority of the aristocracy, as the successes of Ardašīr I and Šāpur I against the Romans strongly suggests. It is perhaps telling that the third-century representations of the Sasanian conflict with the Arsacids, as expressed through the monumental reliefs, present a direct clash between Ardašīr and Ardavān, and the Sasanians triumphing through martial skill – i.e. might makes right (Fig. 3). The marriage link between the royal houses was probably invented much later, with the tale of Šāpur's Arsacid mother not appearing in Agathias' account, perhaps suggesting a very late Sasanian invention of this marriage link.[283] We would tentatively suggest it was invented after 591, as a direct counter to Bahrām Čōbīn's propaganda linking himself to the Arsacids.

Fig. 3 – Ardašīr I unhorsing Ardavān IV in the victory relief at Fīrūzābād; taken from allempires.com.

[283] Ag. IV.23-24.

Indeed, the events on the ground in the war between Bahrām Čōbīn and Ḵosrow II in 590-1 suggest substantial support for the usurper. As we mentioned earlier, Ḵosrow is recorded as only personally commanding 1,000 soldiers,[284] and though at the decisive battle in 591 Ḵosrow had the larger army (allegedly having 60,000 men to Bahrām's 40,000), Ḵosrow's had relatively few Persians fighting for him, perhaps only 8,000 (the rest being made up of 12,000 Armenians and 40,000 Romans) – whilst Bahrām seems to have had no significant external support.[285] Ḵosrow perhaps had five times as many Persians (and other natives of the Empire) fighting against him as for him. Though we cannot discount the possibility that Bahrām conscripted soldiers who would by preference have fought for Ḵosrow or remained disengaged, it still seems that he must have had significant public support to amass what in any context was an extremely large Late Antique Iranian host. An army of 40,000 men was surely beyond the private resources of the Mihrān house, suggesting Bahrām was able to effectively gather support to him beyond that which was automatically his through his Mihrān heritage and possessions. It was an army of comparable scale to those amassed by strong Sasanian kings for major campaigns against the Romans. It certainly does not appear from the balance of forces that Bahrām was a desperately unpopular king clinging to power in the face of a mass movement clamouring for the return of the 'legitimate' royal house.

The rarity of recorded challenges to the Sasanian house in our surviving literature, all of which occur in the 590s and 620s, does attest the power of Sasanian legitimacy. This is reinforced by the short reigns of the queens Bōrān and Āzarmīgdukht, whose accessions were

[284] TS, V.5.5-6 (p. 138).

[285] See A. Shapur Shahbazi, 'Bahrām VI Čōbīn', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Online Edition); http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bahram-the-name-of-six-sasanian-kings#pt7 [15 March, 2012]. The author gives an itemised breakdown of Ḵosrow's army, drawing from the accounts of The Chronicle of Seert, Dinawari and Sebēos.

determined by their lineage.[286] However, we cannot escape the clear evidence of events; the usurper Sasanians in the third century took the throne by force, yet quickly gathered substantial support. Bahrām Čōbīn only lost his throne through Roman intervention, not a popular movement within the Iranian world for the return of the 'legitimate' royal dynasty. Thus whilst there was a strong belief in the unique status of the royal dynasty, this belief did not always survive contact with traumatic events.

Therefore, what should we say about the ideological underpinnings of the Sasanian monarchy? Previously, there has been much interest in understanding how the Sasanian dynasty conceived of its relationship with the divine.[287] However, the question of reception has seldom been addressed. There is a clear disconnect between royal assertions of divinity and the aristocratic reception, and between the representation of kings in perhaps mythologised post-Conquest sources and those created during (or within living memory of) the Sasanian period. The different uses of *farr*/*pʿarǩʿ* in *The Epic Histories* and *The Shahnameh* makes us reticent to see this particular supernatural force as uniquely royal during the period in question. *Farr* apparently was seen as uniquely royal when Ferdowsī was active, but this is not an argument for it always being seen as such, especially given that our only source dating to the Sasanian period conceives of *farr* (or, rather, *pʿarǩʿ*) as being attached to especially prominent nobles as well as kings.

Returning to the Christensen/Pourshariati debate, what we can ascertain of the ideological underpinnings of the Sasanian monarchy seems to cohere better with Pourshariati's thesis, but with some major caveats. The acceptance of royal assertions of divinity was more nuanced when one focusses more upon sources made under non-royal

[286] Touraj Daryaee, 'The Coinage of Queen Bōrān and Its Significance for Late Sāsānian Imperial Ideology', in *Bulletin of the Asia Institute: New Series/Vol 13* (Bloomfield Hills, 1999), pp. 77, 80-81.
[287] See Daryaee, 'Kingship in Early Sasanian Iran', pp. 60f, Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, pp. 165-171; Yarshater, 'Iranian Common Beliefs', pp. 345f.

auspices, and it is certainly arguable that one staple of Iranian monarchy, *farr*, was not seen as uniquely royal in our period. This clearly has an impact upon the nature of royal authority, by making it more mundane, and therefore, one would expect, easier to resist. There does seem to have been genuine attachment to the principle of hereditary rule (which we will return to in Chapter 3.2), which probably made Sasanian rule more secure, but also made governing at will rather harder because if nobles were attached to Sasanian rule by hereditary right, they were probably even more attached to their own hereditary lands, prerogatives and privileges.

However, we should not understate royal authority. In *The Epic Histories* the Mamikoneans commit horrific acts of violence against domestic enemies on the orders of the king.[288] The positive light in which this is cast is surely indicative that disobeying the king was a serious offence indeed. The relationship between the Mamikonean and Aršakuni houses was far from straightforward. On the one hand, the text shows the honour of obeying royal commands no matter what they were, and in other sections shows the honour in resisting a tyrannical king. Aristocratic-royal relations were complex and should not be oversimplified. Though we might downplay belief in royal divinity, we should not limit the scope of royal authority. The king might not have been perceived as quasi-divine, but nonetheless he was a figure of immense respect and authority.

2.3 – The Reach and Influence of the Monarchy into the Provinces

This section seeks to assess how extensively, regularly and effectively the monarchy was able to intrude into provincial life. All the sources we have suffer drawbacks. We have some literary accounts which concern events on the periphery of the Sasanian world, but these do not concern themselves with day-to-day occurances, focussing on one major event (or series of events) without wider context. Most of our literary sources are weighted towards

[288] *BP*, V.viii-xx

the western Sasanian Empire, where the greatest royal strength lay. References to the Sasanian east are rare and fleeting, with the only sustained and relatively deep coverage concerning the disturbances of the 590s. The 590s are especially informative however, as they come towards the end of the Sasanian period, *after* the alleged centralisations of Ḵosrow I. This allows us to make generalised assertions regarding the maximum extent of centralisation in the Sasanian empire before Ḵosrow I (regardless of the nature of Ḵosrow I's alleged reforms, nobody has yet argued that the Empire became less centralised over time). Generally, however, the extant literary sources convey little about the Sasanian east, and allow only tentative contentions to be advanced.

Other evidence does give a greater, if scattered, breadth of coverage. The Bactrian documents offer occasional evidence for much of Sasanian history, giving us some sort of insight into provincial life in the Sasanian east at irregular, and random, intervals. Though there has been relatively little archaeological work carried out with a specifically Sasanian perspective, there has recently been extensive work on the Gorgān Wall. Sigilographic evidence can be of some use, especially the *spahbadh bullae*, the seals of office of the late Sasanian generals.

The literary sources concerning the reach of the Sasanian state into the eastern provinces can be divided into those concerning the period before 590, and those concerning the 590s. All the pre-590 sources may be grouped together because although they have markedly different provenances and dates, they all offer a similar impression of the Sasanian east. They show that energetic kings could and did marshal the forces necessary to campaign there, and either win substantial successes, or ensure that defeat was an empire-wide catastrophe. The post-590 sources are mostly concerned with the war between Bahrām Čōbīn and Ḵosrow II, and then the struggle between Ḵosrow and his maternal uncle Besṭām.

Unusually, we have a range of sources offering information on these closely related events, and as such they form a discrete body of sources in their own right.

If we turn to the earlier sources, Ammianus' account of the wars of the 350s shows Šāpur II successfully fighting the "Chionites" in the Sasanian east, and after having defeated them, enlisting them as auxiliaries in his Roman campaign of 359.[289] Procopius' account of Pērōz's ill-fated Hepthalite campaigns includes several fanciful details, but when we strip the information down to its basics, we see a strong king able to organise substantial military support, and campaign far away from his centres of power.[290] Indeed, we see the scale of Pērōz's defeat as evidencing his success as a king prior to this – he had gathered such resources that their destruction was catastrophic. Though the provenance is markedly different, we have epic tales concerning the Turkish wars of Bahrām V, which shows the king defeating the Turks through the strategic application of high quality forces.[291] Offering a different angle, the author of *The Epic Histories* recounts the exploits of an Armenian contingent fighting for the Persians against the Kushans in the 370s,[292] showing us that the Sasanians could move military resources around the Empire to meet specific needs. In some of these examples, we have material evidence to further illustrate the energetic eastern policies of some of these kings, such as the output of Šāpur II's war mints in Afghanistan,[293] and the fifth century Gorgān Wall project associated with Bahrām V and/or Pērōz.[294] Though individually these scattered sources tell us little, collectively they indicate that regardless of any limitations of the administrative framework, energetic Sasanian kings could pursue active policies outside their centres of power.

[289] AM, XV.13.4, XVI.9.2, XVII.5.1, XVIII.6.22-XVIII.7.1, XIX.1.7-8.
[290] Proc, I.iii-iv. Fanciful details include such stories as the tale of Pērōz's pearl earring; see Kaldellis, *Tyranny, History, and Philosophy*, Ch. 2, for a convincing interpretation of these stories.
[291] Ṭab, 863-866; FD 1542-1545.
[292] *BP*, V.xxxvii.
[293] Gobl, 'Sasanian Coins', p. 331.
[294] Sauer *et al*, *Persia's Imperial Frontier*, discussed below.

However, if we turn to the disturbances of the 590s, we see a Sasanian monarchy which appeared very weak, firstly falling to an eastern rebellion, and then proving unable to overcome serious resistance in the eastern and northern provinces. These events have been substantially (if variously) treated by Roman, Armenian and post-Conquest Arabic and Persian writers, who each offer their own interpretation of events. Trying to reconcile the competing accounts goes beyond what we hope to achieve here, but all the accounts of the 590s suggest royal powerlessness in the face of provincial opposition. Using eastern forces, Bahrām Čōbīn took the throne, and after Ḵosrow II was reinstated through foreign intervention, his rule was only asserted in the east after a six-year war with Ḵosrow's maternal uncle Besṭām, which was concluded through Besṭām's murder, rather than military defeat.[295] It is significant that the most sustained opposition to the Sasanian dynasty occurred *after* the alleged centralising reforms of Ḵosrow I, and the supposed high-point of Sasanian royal power, strongly suggesting that earlier Sasanian kings would also have struggled to overcome serious regional opposition if it had occurred.

How then do the eastern campaigns of Šāpur II, Bahrām V and Pērōz, showing an active royal policy in the east, fit the impression our literary sources give us of the 590s, where we see one king overthrown by eastern forces, and his son unable to overcome active eastern opposition? We would suggest that the institutions underpinning Sasanian rule in the periphery of the Empire were at no stage strong enough to compensate for a weak or unpopular king, but that Šāpur II, Bahrām V *et al* could pursue an active eastern policy because they were astute politicians and good leaders, and, vitally, could harness effectively the natural service instincts of the aristocracy (which we shall discuss in Chapter 3.3), and not because they wielded substantial administrative power in the more distant regions. Though the relevant literary sources are scanty, they make clear that a successful king could marshal

[295] Ṭab, 993-100; FD, 1979-1987; Seb, 22-28; TS, IV.1-V.15.

substantial resources and carry out active warfare, whilst an unsuccessful or unpopular king could not enforce his rule against active opposition.

The Bactrian documents prove a state presence of some kind in the Sasanian east. There are several references to cash fines paid to the "royal treasury",[296] and there are references to two governors, Keraw Ormuzdan in 417/8 and Meyam, king of Kedag, who described himself as "the governor of the famous (and) prosperous king of kings Peroz", this latter reference indicating that nominally at least, such an appointee drew his authority in some sense from the king. The exalted tone in which the governor described the king may be indicative of Pērōz having an active involvement in eastern affairs, and thus of greater local significance.[297] One document of manumission was ratified and sealed at "the court of the governor", perhaps indicating a central record of such documents, or some kind of official involvement.[298] There is also a reference made to a dispute being referred to a "royal tribunal" if other solutions could not be made.[299] The existence of a royal tribunal as an ultimate arbiter is significant, as it proves that the king was seen as the judicial authority in the region, and as such was perceived to enjoy overlordship, even if he did not necessarily have the power to back up decisions with force.

The concept of a royal tribunal, and the implication of contact with the king, is supported by some literary accounts, with several references to nobles directly petitioning the king. The right for individuals of sufficient status to enjoy direct access to the king was seemingly assumed. Łazar describes Armenian nobles petitioning the Sasanian king over who should be the Armenian king and katʿołikos in the early fifth century.[300] Later, he records the

[296] BD1, docs. A, C J (fines of 20 dinars, A and C date to the 4th century, J to the early 6th), Doc. L (fine of 40 dinars, c. 600)
[297] BD2, docs. dd, de, ea.
[298] BD1, doc. F.
[299] *Ibid*, doc. J.
[300] ŁP. I.9, 12-15.

aforementioned dispute between Vahan Mamikonean and Vriv, the king's mine inspector; in this case Vahan personally met King Pērōz, and demonstrated his innocence.[301] Sebēos records Sahak, a member of the house of Siwnik, petitioning Ḵosrow II against his nephew Stepʿanos, concerning their dispute over ownership of the Siwni principality. Sahak demonstrated his support from the bishop of Siwni and the members of the family, as well as reminding the king that the soldiers Stepʿanos had sent to Isfahan had rebelled; this resulted in Stepʿanos being executed, and (presumably) Sahak taking over the principality.[302] These examples not only confirm the king's status as overlord, and that the nobility expected to have access to him, but also that we should not see provincial lords as always resisting royal interference, but potentially inviting it when it was useful. Though we have relatively few references to invitations by lords for the king to settle their affairs (whether fairly or not), the few surviving cases prove that the king was recognised as legal overlord.

Returning to the Bactrian Documents, it is noteworthy that amongst the personal letters both references to kings are to Šāpur II.[303] Šāpur had campaigned in the area in the 370s, against the Kushans in a campaign centred on the city of Balkh.[304] Both these documents feature an individual with a personal link with the king, the former concerning an apparently trivial matter over the delivery of shirts from Balkh, the second refers to the capture of Bamyan (probably in the context of the aforementioned conflict over Balkh), and argues for one lord to offer another lord hospitality partly because the guest and his family have been in royal service. Given the highly fragmentary nature of the Bactrian documents, one cannot assume these references to Šāpur II are representative. However, it is certainly noteworthy

[301] *Ibid,* III.65.
[302] Seb, 23. This incident comes out of sequence in Sebēos' narrative; Step'anos (along with other Armenian princes) dispatched troops to Ḵosrow II in Seb. 21, and they mutinied in Seb. 25.
[303] BD 2, docs. cd, cg . Also dating to the reign of Šāpur II, document bd refers to one Šāpur, but the document is badly damaged, and there is no indication that this Šāpur is the king. Document cl refers to one "Wesh-mard the inhabitant of Zwin, the servant of the queen". There are around 30 published Bactrian documents dating to the reign of Šāpur II.
[304] *BP*, V.xxxvii

that in a period when the king was actively involved in an area, contact with him apparently became something locally significant, and which people referred to in their correspondence, even some years later. The lack of other references to personal contact with kings in these documents might suggest that when a king was less involved in these peripheral regions, he quickly lost local significance.

The Bactrian documents confirm that though it seems the Sasanian state was *relatively* weak in the East, it was certainly present. The aforementioned references to Šāpur II shows that a royal connection carried some weight locally, though the correlation between references to kings and the involvement of that king in local affairs could suggest (and we would not put it stronger than this) that a king had to make himself relevant to local life for him to be viewed as significant there. Though the impression given of the Sasanian state in the Bactrian documents is complex, the texts prove it existed in Bactria and had at least some local meaning.

There are also similarities between the legal documents preserved amongst the Bactrian documents and some of the cases in *The Book of a Thousand Judgements*. Matters relating to marriage law show similarity of legal language and underlying legal norms.[305] Similarly, documents concerning surety for land deals amongst the Bactrian Documents are not dissimilar to laws concerning surety in property deals in *The Book of a Thousand Judgements*.[306] It is difficult to fully interpret what this means for our understanding of the Sasanian state. As well as being of different natures, the sources are too fragmentary to confirm whether laws were the same, rather than just similar, and it is impossible to suggest whether the similarity was due to the central government harmonising laws to some extent, or merely reflecting similar cultural norms. There was clearly some commonality of legal practice

[305] BD1, doc. A; *LB*. XXX.
[306] BD1, docs. J, L, Nn; *LB* ch. XLV

between Fārs and Bactria, which is in itself noteworthy, but firm conclusions on its meaning for the Sasanian state cannot be made.

The dating of the Bactrian documents holds some significance. 'Year 1' corresponds to c. 222, the approximate date of Ardašīr I's accession, and hence the dating reference is in relation to the Sasanian dynasty.[307] All of the dated administrative and legal documents, which by their nature imply an interaction with the state, use this dating system. However, amongst the personal letters, the only documents using this dating system originate from governors.[308] One might postulate whether the Sasanian dating system had percolated into local society. As an interesting comparison, the calendar reform by the French revolutionary government illustrates how changes in dating, and the use and non-use of it by the populace, can be intensely political.[309] Though the non-use of royal dating outside of government circles is hardly conclusive evidence, it could indicate that there was not an enthusiastic monarchism which would have been evidenced by the wider use of the Sasanian dynasty as a chronological reference point.

Otherwise, the central government does not seem to have intruded significantly into local life. The aforementioned cash fines (in documents BD1, A, C J; BD2, dd and de of 20 *drahms* for the aggrieved party and 20 for the state, and in L and ea of 40 *drahms* for each) are extremely low compared to another reference to fines amongst these documents which was overseen by the local magnate, the *khars* of Rob (a document discussed more below).[310] The discrepancy in fines *might* suggest the royal representatives in Bactria could not enforce levels of payment for offences to the same degree as in more closely governed provinces. The

[307] Sims-Williams, 'The Sasanians in the East', pp. 88-89.
[308] BD2, dd, de (dating to 417/8), ea (dating to 465/6).
[309] See eg. Matthew Shaw, *Time and the French Revolution: The Republican Calendar, 1789-Year XIV* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 46-58, 90-102, 145-148
[310] BD1, N.

witnesses listed for marriage or property contracts are never given an administrative or official title which might have been conferred by the central government, whilst sometimes a connection with the local *khars* of Rob is mentioned (for instance BD1, N is witnessed by the *khars*' steward, among other people).[311] The apparent prominence of what appears to have been local men without obvious contacts with the central government, combined with the relatively prominent role of men associated with local lords, must suggest that servants of the Sasanian monarchy were relatively scarce.

The documents also point towards the limited nature of central control in Bactria. A large number of our letters concern local disputes being resolved through violence, and without any recourse to a higher authority. BD1, O records a contract of reconciliation between formerly violent parties, one of whom had outlawed the other (an act apparently done without reference to any representative of the central government), and promising to pay fines to the "treasury of Gozgan" (not the royal treasury) if they broke the agreement. In BD2, ca we hear of a man being ordered to call out his horsemen to attend his lord's business; ce tells of hostages being taken as surety; cl records a dispute over stolen horses, and the aggrieved party threatening to deal with the perpetrators "without mercy" should his demands not be met, and in BD2, xp, we read of two lords, Purlang-zin and another lord, promising to not damage each other's cities through mutual consent, without reference to a higher authority acting as arbiter (i.e. it seems a mutual decision to stop fighting, rather than the government intervening), and also seemingly suggesting these cities were *de facto* personal possessions – the cities are unnamed, but are referred to as "the city of Purlang-zin" and "your [lord]ship's city." Though the number of surviving documents is small, making conclusions necessarily tentative, we consider it significant that many of these letters give the impression of a region where the government did not have a monopoly on armed force, and

[311] *Ibid*, A, C, I, Ii, J, L, N, Nn.

where local lords apparently settled their differences (through either violence or negotiation) without reference to any central authority.

Also, on the rare occasions we have definite references to royal employees, their royal service seems *in addition to* their local pedigree – for example, Meyam, "king of the people of Kedag, the governor of the famous (and) prosperous king of kings Peroz…"[312] There is perhaps a sense that the local lords dominated the local administration regardless of who was the nominal overlord. Under the late fifth-century Hepthalite administration, another king of Kedag, Kilman, was the governor.[313] The impression that local administration depended on local land holding is also supported by the *spahbadh* seals, as we shall discuss shortly.

The Bactrian documents give the impression that much of the taxation in the region was paid in kind, not money.[314] The significance of payments in kind has various facets. Firstly, it may suggest a limit on the amount of coinage in circulation. There clearly were some coins in circulation, but as coins came from the government, and entered circulation through government spending, having fewer coins available in a region implies a smaller government presence. Secondly, it would have been impractical to move payments in kind around the empire on a large scale; moving coins to meet needs elsewhere was much easier than moving animals or crops. This suggests that a larger proportion of the tax revenue stayed in the region in which it was levied, and so likely going towards paying for the local royal officers and their attendants, who, as we have seen, were likely to be local men.

This, probably, had a twofold effect. It doubtless made the local elite more loyal to the state, as the state gave them the legitimacy to levy taxes and fines from which they could supplement their income. However, it also probably helped inculcate a localised mentality

[312] BD2, ea.
[313] *Ibid*, ja.
[314] BD1, H, I (money and sheep); BD2, cr (concerning grain owed to the governor), je (taxes explicitly paid in kind), jh (taxes paid in sheep and coin).

among the elite, as their wealth (either landed wealth or income from royal service) was probably largely drawn from local sources. We would tentatively suggest therefore, that the evidence of the taxation data amongst the Bactrian documents, extremely limited as it is, suggests on the one-hand the desirability of being in royal service, but also implies a localised mentality which was not conducive to centralised control. There was no incentive for the local lords to encourage a wider royal bureaucracy which could facilitate the imposition of appointments from outside, hence lessening the need for local administrators to have a local landed base. Similarly, thinking beyond the local would have been disincentivised, as it was the local situation which allowed a lord to gain office and influence. A localised mentality amongst regional powers is surely a strong brake on centralising tendencies of the government.

Document BD1, N is especially significant. It dates to c. 629, in the aftermath of the fall of Ḵosrow II, and a period of extreme frailty for the central government. It records a peace contract between minor lords, whereby one lord promises to not damage the property of another, under the threat of paying 1000 *dinars* to the *khars* of Rob (the local magnate), and 1000 dinars to the aggrieved party.

The size of the fine is huge when compared to the relatively minor fines intended for the royal exchequer discussed earlier. These documents and BD1, N share a similar framework, whereby payments were levied on people breaking the agreement. The difference in the level of the fine might be due to the fact that large-scale property damage (one might call it private warfare) was presumably considered a worse crime than irregularities in property transfers. However, one could also argue that the local lord was better able to wring money out of local miscreants than royal representatives were. What is extremely telling is that at a time when the central government was profoundly weak (the near anarchy after the deposition of Ḵosrow II), a local magnate seems to have quickly asserted himself as the person to uphold law and

order, and to have done so without any reference whatsoever to the central government. This document suggests that as soon as there was not a strong king, regional lords could and did take over the running of local affairs, implying that whatever governmental structures the monarchy might have had in Bactria (or any other distant region), they were fragile.

This document also implies the *khars* of Rob was not powerful merely through the local force he controlled, but also through his ability to take over what had hitherto been state functions. This text suggests that written law and negotiated settlements were sufficiently important in the Sasanian east to be brokered even when there was not a central state to support them – the *khars* of Rob's actions indicate the importance of these 'state' functions (i.e. as a recorder and arbiter of disputes) to local people, and as such perhaps indicative of the downreach of the state into Bactria prior to 629. Though we should still see this text as evidence of the speed which functions ordinarily carried out by central government might be taken over by local lords, it also implies, to an extent, the significance these functions held for locals, and the legitimising power they could have for authority figures. Or, more simply, local lords could run their own affairs when the central government was otherwise engaged, but to do so they had to behave in a similar way to the organs of the central government.

The Bactrian documents suggest a region where there was a light-touch royal administration. There was indubitably a royal presence in the area, and there were some royal officers, though these seem to be local men, rather than the king introducing his own people from elsewhere. Some nobles had contact with the king, and this seems to have been useful in pursuing local agendas. We do see a largely localised society, and with many trends running counter to the notion of a strong centralised state – private armies, non-judicial means of resolving disputes, and lords who quickly asserted themselves as soon as the central government was weak. All in all, the Bactrian documents suggest that the intrusion of the

Sasanian state into their eastern provinces was prone to being subverted by local forces, through assertive lords and extra-judicial means of dispute resolution. However, this existed alongside what appears a strong attachment to some of the benefits of central government, such as recording property deals. The fact that the *khars* of Rob in BD1, N seems to have demonstrated control through assuming the roles of the central government suggests that though the central state was dependent upon local conditions to operate, it did offer the local population things they wanted.

The nature of the response of local Iranian lords to the Arabs in the seventh century coheres with the situation of regional assertiveness suggested by BD1, N, with them often negotiating settlements, showing that they not only held local authority, but also sufficient military resources to be in a position to negotiate, whilst other Persian lords won some significant (if relatively short lived) military successes in eastern Iran.[315] This suggests that the structures needed to run *de facto* independent states existed alongside those of central government in Sasanian Iran, and could spring into action when the situation allowed or demanded it. The tenacity of Iranian non-royal resistance to the Arabs, which in eastern Iran continued for some decades after the death of Yazdegerd III, surely indicates that, should the need have arisen, similar resistance could have been organised against the armies of Sasanian kings too.

This was not simply a case of desperate times calling for desperate measures. In the Roman Empire, resistance to Arabs largely ceased without the Roman government to organise it, with the conquest of Egypt being an extreme example of this. Kennedy commented that in Roman Egypt "defence was in the hands of the governor and his army. Most of the population

[315] See Daryaee, 'The Collapse of the Sasanian Power', *passim*; Michael G. Morony, 'Conquerors and Conquered' in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society,* G.H.A. Juynboll (ed.) (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1982), pp. 74-77, 86-87; Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests: How the Spread of Islam Changed the World We Live In* (London, 2007), ch. 5, esp. pp.193-198.

had neither arms nor military training. There were no semi-independent lords with significant private military followings who could continue resistance on a local basis.There is a clear contrast here with Iran, where local lords and princes preserved their local cultures and a measure of independence long after the Sasanian government had been defeated."[316] In the Roman Empire, maintaining one's own military forces was illegal, and though it was done to some extent,[317] we should not see these illicitly maintained forces, whose primary function seems to have been to intimidate peasants, as significant military assets in time of war. Similarly, the Roman West, which fell to Germanic conquest in the fifth century, depended for defence upon Imperial armies, or hiring barbarians to fight other barbarians, rather than a militarised aristocracy. As such it is not surprising that the most effective resistance to Germanic invaders was carried out in the least Romanised parts of the Empire – Brittany, the Basque country, and western Britain.[318] Though perhaps an over-simplification, in general in the Roman world it was not possible to effectively resist invasion without the Roman state, as the Roman state had successfully monopolised all facets of defence.

In contrast, the nature of Iranian negotiation and resistance to the Arabs strongly suggests that the Sasanian state had not demilitarised the eastern regions, nor removed structures of local government from the local lords. If they had done, surely the Arab conquest of Iran would have more closely resembled the Arab and Germanic conquests in the Roman Empire. The nature of Iranian resistance to the Arabs in the mid-seventh century indicates that the Sasanian state had not assumed sufficient facets of government to make regional lords unnecessary in local affairs, corroborating the situation suggested by BD1, N. It appears that underneath the superstructure of the Sasanian state there were strong noble families who

[316] Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests*, pp. 166-167; see too pp. 143 (for the relatively easy Sasanian conquest 20 years earlier), pp. 158-166.
[317] Peter Sarris, *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2006), ch. 9, esp. pp. 162-176.
[318] Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 40-41, 48-49.

retained the ability, if not always enjoying the opportunity, to take affairs into their own hands. This could only have been detrimental to the power exercised by the central government.

The late Sasanian *spahbadh bullae* give a similar impression as the Bactrian documents to Sasanian weakness in the East. Though we only have eight known *spahbadhs*, their *bullae* are highly significant to our immediate question, because they precisely concern the relationship between the monarchy and the high aristocracy in the context of warfare.[319] The *bullae* pertain to the military system after the reforms of Ḵosrow I, whereby, apparently, a unified command was divided into four regional commands. The seals prove that a quadripartite military command structure did exist in the late Sasanian period, stating their bearer was "general of the east" (or equivalent). These are the eight known *spahbadhs* (all spellings following the transcription offered by Gyselen). We include images of only two seals, Fig. 4-5, because all the *spahbadh bullae* are of a noticeably similar design with only very minor stylistic details between them.

East:

Čihr-Burzēn

Dād-Burz-Mihr

South:

Wahrām son of Ādurmāh (who had also acquired the name 'Husraw'); also appears on the seals published by Daryaee and Safdari

[319] See esp. Gyselen, *The Four Generals*; See too Touraj Daryaee and Keyvan Safdari, 'Spāhbed Bullae: The Barakat Collection', in *e-Sasanika 7* (2010), <http://www.sasanika.org/wp-content/uploads/e-sasanika7-Safdari-Daryaee.pdf> [6 November, 2013]. See too Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 94f for her interpretation of these seals.

Wēh-Šābuhr

Pirag Mihran “the boar of the empire” (possibly the general and short-lived king Šahrvaraz)

West:

Wistaxm; also appears on the seals published by Daryaee and Safdari

North:

Gōr-gōn Mihran

Sēd-hōš Mihran

Fig. 4 – The seal of Wahrām son of Ādurmāh (who had also acquired the name ‘Husraw’), *spahbadh* of the east (south-east in Daryaee and Safdari). Image taken from Daryaee and Safdari, ‘Spāhbed Bullae: The Barakat Collection’.

Fig. 5 – Seal of Wistaxm, *spahbadh* of the west (south-west in Daryaee and Safdari). Image taken from Daryaee and Safdari, 'Spāhbed Bullae: The Barakat Collection'

Daryaee and Safdari also published one northern *spahbadh bulla*, which is badly damaged, but the crown-like helmet decoration on the mounted figure is clearly similar to that of the northern *spahbadh* Sēd-hōš Mihran on the seal published by Gyselen.

Though the number of seals is small (and as the known seals emerged from the antiquities market, the context of their discovery is unknown), the total number of *spahbadhs* must have been relatively small too. The office was instituted late in the Sasanian Empire, and there were apparently only four holders at any one time. It is possible that holders were in office for some time, conceivably for life. The surviving seals may be more representative than they first appear.

Firstly, as has already been mentioned, all the *spahbadh* seals have strikingly similar iconography. There is apparently nothing to distinguish the appearances of the mounted figures upon these seals, save seemingly trivial details, such as a slightly different style in rendering the armour. This shows that there was a standardised, presumably centrally controlled, design for all *spahbadh* seals, and that their bearers did not use them as a vehicle for projecting an image of personal or familial power and identity. All of the seals in a good state of repair bear the honorary title "well-omened (is) Husraw/Ormezd" (some of the Daryaee/Safdari seals are poorly preserved, but the remains of this refrain apparently appears on seal LO/1076).[320] This inscription has been interpreted by Gyselen as a reference to the then king, and is the sole means of dating the seals, making those referring to 'Husraw' impossible to place as they might refer to either Ḵosrow I or II.[321]

All of the *spahbadhs* were from the highest nobility, bearing the title *wuzurg*, or grandee, which was the rank just below that of royal princes.[322] Gyselen postulates whether the *spahbadh* was elevated to the status of *wuzurg* with his office, or held the rank beforehand, but we would suggest it more likely that the rank of *wuzurg* was held before. Three of the eight *spahbadh* bullae were held by members of the Mihrān house, one of the greatest houses of the Sasanian Empire, and hence *wuzurg* by birth. It seems more likely that the other men were born to the same rank, rather than some were and some were not. Also, the Persian literary tradition treated the elevation of Smbat Bagratuni by Ḵosrow II to very high rank and military command very unfavourably (discussed more below).[323] Elevating relatively modest nobles to high office was seemingly divisive and so probably done infrequently.

[320] Daryaee and Safdari, 'Spāhbed Bullae", see this seal reproduced on p. 12.
[321] Gyselen, *The Four Generals*, pp. 18-20.
[322] Rika Gyselen, 'Spābed', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition),* <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/spahbed> [6 November, 2013].
[323] FD, 1986-1987.

Pourshariati suggested that both of the eastern *spahbadhs* were from the Kārin family, and the western *spahbadh* Wistaxm was Besṭām, the Ispahbudhan uncle of Ḵosrow II.[324] This is possible, though certainly conjectural. What is for us more significant, and less conjectural, is the noteworthy degree of familial continuity amongst the eight identified *spahbadhs*. Both the northern *spahbadhs* are from the Mihrān house (as is one of the southern *spahbadhs* also), and the two eastern *spahbadhs* are probably related to each other, given the similarity of their names. As the seals of the southern *spahbadh* Wahrām refers to his father Ādurmāh on all of the various issues of his seal, it seems possible that this Ādurmāh had some significance in relation to the office of *spahbadh*, perhaps a former *spahbadh* himself (or the pre-reform equivalent).

It seems likely that the association with the Mihrān house and northern military command was well established, long predating the *spahbadh bullae*. There is one "Aštât Mihrân <de Ray>" attested in Šāpur I's ŠKZ inscription.[325] This is especially significant when considering the *spahbadh bullae*, as *aštât* (or *aspbed*, closely related to the Armenian term *aspet*) was a high-ranking military title.[326] In the late fifth century, we hear of one Šāpur Mihrān of Ray, who alone possessed the military forces needed to defeat Sukhra of the Kārin house, the over-mighty subject who had helped install Kavad, but latterly dominated the king.[327] One might suggest (and it can only be a suggestion, given the substantial lacunae in our sources) that for most of the Sasanian period a Mihrān dominated military command in north-eastern Iran. Probably the most famous Mihrān, Bahrām Čōbīn, launched his rebellion from

[324] Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, table 6.3, p. 470.
[325] Maricq, 'Res Gestae', p. 330.
[326] M. L. Chaumond, 'Asped', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/aspbed-older-asppat-from-oir> [15 December, 2013]; see too C. Toumanoff, 'Aspet', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/aspet-armenian-title-in-contemporary-greek-documents-also-aspetes-hereditary-in-the-bagratuni-bagratid-family>, [15 December, 2013].
[327] FD, 1604-1607.

the north. Bahrām was described by Sebēos as the իշխան (*ishkan*, prince, sovereign, ruler, commander) of the Sasanian east.[328] Indeed, a Mihrān of Ray organised resistance to the Arabs in the 640s, showing that even the defeat of Bahrām Čōbīn did not permanently weaken this family in their ancestral lands.[329]

The apparently hereditary nature is further suggested by Procopius' observation of the Dara campaign that "one general held command over them all [the whole army], a Persian, whose title was "mirranes" (for thus the Persians designate the office), Perozes by name". [330] For a relatively well informed historian of Procopius' calibre, personally close to members of the Roman military high command, to mistake the family name Mihrān for a high military office is extremely telling. It strongly suggests that as far as the Romans could see, military command and members of certain families were so closely related that they were indistinguishable, further suggesting the *de facto* heritability of at least some military offices.

How should we interpret the *spahbadh* seals regarding the reach of the Sasanian monarchy? We would suggest that in the case of the northern region (which was especially large and militarily sensitive, given the long frontier), the king was unable or unwilling to impose office holders from outside, and that the office of *spahbadh* was the *de facto* inheritable possession of the Mihrān family. The only non-Mihrān we can identify holding high military command in the north was Smbat Bagratuni under Ḵosrow II, before command seemingly reverted to Mihrān control by the time of the Arab Conquests. The focus of the three Mihrān seals on their own dynasty, and the paternal references of Bahrām's southern *spahbadh* seals might suggest a mentality of inheritance. The *spahbadh* seals reveal a

[328] Seb, 10. The word իշխան can be variously translated, but it certainly denotes a very exalted status, and strongly implies some independence from central government. Sebēos perhaps Armenianised his subject, but the word he chose to use does imply that Bahrām Čōbīn enjoyed not only military, but civil, authority in the regions under his control.
[329] Ṭab, 2654-2655.
[330] Proc, Wars I.xiii.16.

monarchy unable or unwilling to radically alter provincial office holding, and a *de facto* heritability of even some of the most important offices. As this was the case in the later Sasanian Empire, this was presumably the case beforehand too.

Unfortunately, only one western *spahbadh* seal survives. As the Sasanian monarchy was western-focussed, we would assume that the Sasanian dynasty itself could control appointments there to a much greater extent, but we cannot show this through the *spahbadh* bullae. We might comment that there is no obvious link between the three men who held the southern command, unlike for the northern and eastern commands. This should make us wary of taking a universalistic approach. Though the seals seem to suggest a degree of family continuum in the north and east, they do not for the south. The uniform appearance of the seals implies governmental involvement in their design, and perhaps manufacture, suggesting that, at least nominally, there was governmental oversight. If nothing else, the appearance of the seals suggests that the government did not allow their bearers to use them to articulate a personal image as a commander. This factor should not blind us to what appears to be clear evidence for an association between some families and this office, but it should remind us that our interpretations require some nuancing.

The recent excavations on the Gorgān Wall offer another vital insight.[331] The Gorgān Wall ran for 200km, included over 30 forts, being considerably longer than any of the fixed defensive systems of the Roman Empire. The wall was built far beyond the centre of royal power, further north and east than Ray, which served as the *de facto* capital of Besṭām and the centre of opposition to Ḵosrow II in the 590s.[332] The walls were probably built in the fifth century, the earliest possible date for construction starting was the 420s, and the very latest

[331] See Sauer *et al*, *Persia's Imperial Power* for the writing up of this work.
[332] Frye, 'Political History', pp. 163, 166; Besṭām minted coins there, Göbl, 'Sasanian Coins', p. 338, plate 28/3; see too FD, 1986-8; Seb. 22

date for completion being the 540s. Sauer has proposed that building work was largely finished by the death of Pērōz in 484, but further chronological precision is impossible. As Sauer *et al* have correctly stated, a fifth-century date corresponds with three successive rulers (Bahrām V, Yazdegerd II and Pērōz) being engaged in active warfare against enemies on their northern frontier. The walls seem to have remained in use and garrisoned (though without any indication of garrisoning levels) until the first half of the seventh century, despite the disturbances of the 590s. [333]

The impression given by this vast building work seemingly contradicts what we have discussed previously, concerning limited royal control over military offices (including over the *spahbadh* in whose area of command the Wall was located), and a marginal royal presence in Bactria. Although Bactria is distant from the Gorgān Wall, they are both far from areas of undoubted royal strength. Given that the date of the building work closely coincides with an intensive period of royal involvement in warfare on their northern/eastern frontiers, and the huge scale of the project, it is difficult to ascribe the Gorgān Wall to anything other than a royally directed project. How then can we fit the impression the wall gives, of a project directed by a strong central authority with considerable resources, with the irregular nature of Sasanian royal authority observed elsewhere?

Firstly, there is an important difference between a king having substantial authority, and the state structure under him having great bureaucratic power. If we consider fortifications in a comparative context, states less or no more sophisticated have built very substantial fortification systems. As a particularly illustrative example, we have Offa's Dyke, built in the later eighth century by Offa, King of Mercia.[334] It is a vast construction, running

[333] Sauer *et al*, *Persia's Imperial Power*. p. 1, 594-5, 598. 600-1.
[334] See Paolo Squatriti, 'Digging Ditches in Early Medieval Europe', in *Past and Present,No. 176* (2002); David H. Hill, 'The Construction of Offa's Dyke', *The Antiquaries Joural, Volume 65*, (1985); Frank Noble,

over 100km (around half the length of the Gorgān Wall), with a ditch averaging 20 metres wide, up to four metres deep, and a rampart up to six metres high, and probably also included forts.[335] However, the Mercian state which constructed it was, compared to Sasanian Iran, tiny, poor, and seemingly rudimentary.[336] Though Offa was clearly an immensely strong ruler, the state which underpinned his rule was not, as in part evidenced by the collapse of Mercian power under his less formidable heirs – the Mercian hegemony was based upon the personal qualities of the king, not the institutional power he wielded. Offa's ability to construct this defenstive work cannot in any way imply the Mercian state was all powerful in all places, or had significant institutional strength. As such, we should not use the Gorgān Wall to necessarily evidence the strength of Sasanian state power, merely the personal power and authority of the kings responsible

Secondly, the fertility of the Gorgān Plain, and the density of its population are considerable factors. The region was wealthy, and the local city of Dasht Qal'eh has been conservatively estimated to have housed 100,000 people.[337] Though not as rich as Mesopotamia, the Gorgān Plain was one of the wealthier regions of the Empire, and though the city might have been founded by royal *fiat* at some point in the fifth century, the local agricultural resources needed to sustain it could not be. It is impossible to postulate what proportion of the resources required to build the Gorgān Wall were provided locally or transported there from other provinces, but certainly the richness of the locality would have been a facilitating factor.

Offa's Dyke Reviewed: BAR British Series, 114, ed. M. Gelling (1983); Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*, London, 1990), p. 117.

[335] For the forts see C.R. Musson and C.J. Spurgeon, 'Cwrt Llechrhyd, Llandwedd: an unusual moated site in Central Powys', in *Medieval Archaeology, 32* (1988), pp. 104, 107-108.

[336] For a brief introduction to the Mercian state (about which very little is known), see Cyril Hart, 'The Kingdom of Mercia', in *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977), esp. pp. 56-59, and D.M. Metcalf, 'Monetary Affairs in Mercia in the time of Æthelbald', in *Mercian Studies* (Leicester, 1977).

[337] See Sauer *et al*, *Persia's Imperial Power*, pp. 38-40, 382-404.

The continuous occupation of the Wall until c. 630 might suggest that after it was built the simpler tasks of maintenance and peace-time garrisoning could (and probably were) undertaken largely with local resources. There is no evidence that the Wall was abandoned or left to fall into disrepair in the 590s, even though the area was not under the control of the king, though this cannot be used to prove the local sustainability of the Wall, as offering detailed dating of the Wall's occupation is impossible. However, the role (or, rather, apparent inactivity) in the 590s of whatever forces the Gorgān Wall possessed suggests that however they were organised or financed, they did not have any particular loyalty to the Sasanians. Certainly, one cannot envisage Besṭām's regime successfully lasting for six years with the active hostility of a major pro-Sasanian force situated so close behind him.

We have little indication as to how high command on the Wall was organised, though we suspect it was on a *de facto* hereditary basis depending upon local notables for command. According to Sebēos, Ḵosrow II sent Smbat Bagratuni, the Armenian prince who appears as his chief partisan in the 590s, to the region in the early- or mid-590s, and Smbat was appointed '*marzpan* of Vrkan', i.e. of Gorgān, and Ḵosrow "made him prince over all that region," Smbat holding the office of *marzpan* until 606/7.[338] The situation was highly untypical, and it is likely that Ḵosrow used the temporary eclipse of Mihrān fortunes to impose his own man in the area. Smbat's appointment cannot be seen as indicative of how commands on the Gorgān Wall were allotted, in particular as Smbat could not have taken up his office for some years. In the 590s Besṭām was ruling his own kingdom based around Ray, being joined "in the land of the Parthians" by mutinous Armenian troops from Isfahan, suggesting rebel territory extended a long way from Ray.[339] Given that Gorgān was separated from the provinces controlled by the Sasanians by a large expanse of rebel territory, it seems unlikely that Smbat was initially able

[338] Seb, 24, 27.
[339] *Ibid*, 23.

to exercise his command in the province in question. This is the only record of military commands being conferred, and we might see Smbat's appointment as a rare imposition of a royal appointee into a region where military command had hitherto probably been effectively a Mihrān family preserve.

We would suggest that the Gorgān Wall should not be used by itself to indicate the *institutional* strength of the Sasanian state, but rather the personal strength and authority of one or more fifth-century kings. The long-term occupation of the Wall doubtless drew some support from the wider Sasanian Empire, but this is not incompatible with the garrisoning and maintenance of it being a largely local affair. Given the obvious desire of the residents of the Gorgān Plain to keep themselves as well defended as possible, they surely would have been extremely willing participants in maintaining the defences. Royal support presumably played a part; the approximately similar timing of the abandonment of the Wall and the collapse of the Empire suggests the former was somewhat dependent upon the latter, but this does not mean maintaining the Wall was wholly dependent upon assistance from the central government.

We do not therefore see the Gorgān Wall as conclusive proof of the strength or centralisation of the Sasanian state. Certainly, in isolation the natural interpretation of the Wall, rather like the answer posited by Howard-Johnston to his own question which we discussed in our introduction, inclines one to see a highly extractive, centralised state behind it. However, this is not the only explanation for it, and should not influence our interpretation of other evidence, which generally inclines us in the opposite direction. Therefore, we would argue that the Gorgān Wall *must* demonstrate the strength of individual kings, but cannot alone demonstrate a strong empire-wide state, or the ability for the king to interfere meaningfully into every province at once.

Ultimately, it is difficult to ascertain the ability of the Sasanian monarchy to impose itself in provincial life. We have an ambivalent set of sources at our disposal. The Gorgān Wall implies a strong king, but the Bactrian documents reveal a more localised world with local lords solving problems directly, without reference to higher authority, and quickly grasping any breakdown in central authority to assert local power. The *spahbadh bullae* suggest a mixed view of appointments – in the north (especially) and the east (probably) the office seems to have effectively been hereditary. In the south however, there was no obvious link between the appointees, probably suggesting a greater degree of royal control over appointments. Therefore, we would tentatively suggest that the ability of the king to intrude into provincial life depended upon the king, and when he was unable or unwilling to assert himself in the regions beyond his immediate control, local forces quickly filled the vacuum.

For answering our question, we would suggest that the evidence, such as it is, for the reach of the Sasanian state offers a middle view. Certainly some kings had immense power and reach, but this seems more likely due to their personal qualities (and the natural sympathy towards the monarchy by the aristocracy, which we shall discuss below in Chapter 3), rather than any institutional strength. As the 590s amply illustrate, the Sasanian king was unable to enforce compliance against active opposition, which can only be seen as a rebuttal of Christensen's thesis – a king who can only be 'autocratic' if the nobles choose to cooperate with him cannot truly be considered an autocrat.

2.4 – The King at War and Leisure: The Person of the King

Sasanian kingship appears highly militarised, and in literary and pictoral sources the king is presented as a great huntsman and horseman. Sasanian kings who took little or no military activity are exceedingly rare. We would suggest that though the king did not necessarily need to command armies personally, not to do so was a dangerous choice to make.

The nature of our sources requires us to rely upon anecdotes and coincidences found in literary works, but they unanimously suggest that an independent military reputation was essential to effective kingship. Projecting an image of a physically vigorous king in art and literature played upon similar themes as that of the the king as a great warrior. Successful command in war, as well as projecting an image of near superhuman physical quality, seems an integral element to being a successful king, helping overcome some of the aforementioned structural weaknesses of the monarchy.

The monumental reliefs of the early Sasanian period publicly and strongly express the image of the royal warrior. The Fīrūzābād frieze (Fig. 3) showing Ardašīr I overcoming Ardavān IV focuses upon Ardašīr's vigour as a warrior. Similarly, the victory reliefs of Šāpur I (Fig. 6) revel in his martial glories, stressing the physical subjection of the Romans under him. His inscription at Hājīābād concerns the public demonstration of his skill as a bowman.[340] Though of course there were other forms of royal propaganda, the image of the royal warrior in the early Sasanian period was a dominant one, and seems to be in itself a legitimising force.

[340] Hājīābād Inscription, translated by D. N. MacKenzie, 'Shapur's Shooting', in *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 41* (1978), p. 501. See too, Philippe Gignoux, 'Hajiabad i. Inscriptions', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hajiabad-i-inscriptions> [20 November, 2013].

Fig. 6 – The triumph of Šāpur I over three Roman emperors, Bišāpur. Gordian is captured, held by the hand by Šāpur, Philip kneels in supplication, whilst Valerian lies dead under the hooves of Šāpur's horse. Image taken from iranicaonline.org.

The unique physical qualities of the ruler, which apparently qualified him to rule, were stressed in literary accounts. The representation of the recognition of Šāpur as the heir of Ardašīr I in post-Conquest literary accounts is highly illustrative. As we have previously mentioned, Šāpur was in reality an adult combatant when Ardašīr seized the throne, and probably over forty when he became king – the literary account is pure fabrication. Our literary sources inform us that in the latter stages of the reign of Ardašīr I, the king feared what would happen after his death, not knowing he had a son by the daughter of the last Arsacid king. However, Ardašīr's vizier told the king that he indeed did have a son, Šāpur, then aged seven,

and it was proved to all that Šāpur was the king's son by the prince's extraordinary skill at polo.[341] Simply, the legitimacy of the prince was proven by him being physically superior to all the other noble boys at court.

Similarly, the literary accounts of the disputed accession of Bahrām V state that Bahrām was allowed to become king because he could slay lions in heroic fashion, which Ḵosrow, his rival for the throne, and the preferred candidate of the courtly aristocracy, was unwilling or unable to do.[342] It is significant that the account of Bahrām's accession did not dwell upon the most likely cause of his accession, his support from Arab rulers and the forces they commanded, or even upon arguments of legitimacy, which were in Bahrām's favour, as he was the eldest surviving son of Yazdegerd I after the murder of his elder brother, prince Šāpur.[343] Ḵosrow was not presented as a tyrant, with a worse claim, or as somehow unfit for office. As written, the decisive factor was Bahrām's skill at arms. This is highly significant for understanding what was seen as essential to kingship. This story only has meaning if there was a belief that it was vital that the king was a strong warrior.

We also possess an interesting story recorded by Moses Khorenatsʿi, concerning events immediately preceding the accession of Bahrām V. Moses records that Prince Šāpur, son of Yazdegerd I, had ruled Armenia for four years before the death of his father. Moses records three anecdotes of Šāpur's reign: that he was shown as an ineffective and timid huntsman on two separate occasions; he was a poor polo player who played upon rank to cover for his weaknesses; and thirdly that he took offence at the way one Khosrov Gardmanatsʿi behaved towards a lyre-girl at a banquet, ordering his arrest, but not daring to

[341] Ṭab, 823-825; FD 1393-1397.
[342] Ṭab, 861-3.
[343] MK, III.56.

apprehend him.[344] These anecdotes feed into an image of a prince who was petulant, physically weak, and, ultimately, unfit to be king. Moses records Šāpur's time in Armenia as one spent "reigning in ignominy", though the only acts associated with his reign are those enumerated, and immediately preceded his murder, and the succession crisis which resulted in the accession of Bahrām V. From the tenor of Moses' account, for a prince or a king to be anything other than a superlative huntsman or sportsman was to mark him out as a figure of ridicule, implicitly delegitimising him. This further indicates the importance for the kings to articulate an impression of being an extraordinary huntsman, which shall concern us shortly.

The underlying assumptions suggested by Moses' narrative is further emphasised by the references we have to princes with any physical deformity or handicap being disbarred from the throne. Procopius records that Ḵosrow I succeeded his father Kawād, despite being the third son, because the eldest, Kavus, was disliked by his father, and Zames, the middle brother, could not become king on account of having lost an eye, and that it was unlawful for a man with any deformity to inherit the Persian throne; this was despite Zames' popularity and various virtues.[345] Similarly, after Ḵosrow suppressed the rebellion of his son Anushzad, he had his face mutilated around the eyes so that the disfigurement would permanently disbar his son from the throne, and therefore prevent him rebelling again.[346] After his deposition, Hormozd IV was blinded, therefore disbarring him from the throne (he was murdered later, it is unclear on whose orders).[347] These are all late-Sasanian references, and the prominence of Roman sources is perhaps problematic, in that they may not have accurately represented the laws of Sasanian royal succession. However, we believe that given the focus we have discussed hitherto on the importance of the physical qualities of the king, and how this seemingly

[344] *Ibid*, III.55.
[345] Proc, I.xi.2-5, II.ix.12
[346] *Ibid*, VIII.x.20-22.
[347] Ṭab, 993; FD. 1865; TS, IV.6.4-5; Seb, 10 (Sebēos records that Hormozd was murdered immediately after the blinding, the others state that it was later).

conferred legitimacy, it seems likely that obviously disabled or disfigured princes could not become the Sasanian *shahanshah*.

The link between hunting and royal power was expressed visually throughout the Sasanian period, especially on silverware (Fig. 7). The silver bowls seem to have been centrally created by a royal workshop, with analysis of the metal showing they came from one ore source over a very long period.[348] The design was distinctively Sasanian, not at all like those produced by other peoples or governments who bordered the Sasanian Empire, and as such marked these works as uniquely a product of royal craftsmen.[349] Clearly, Sasanian silverware was highly desirable, and presumably was distributed as gifts by the kings.[350] If we interpret these silver bowls primarily as gifts, which seems a logical reason for their manufacture, their main function would have been to disseminate an image of a king of extraordinary prowess. Silver bowls showing hunting scenes do seem to have been an effective means of distributing idealised images of kingship, as stylistically very similar examples were also made by the Kushano-Sasanian rulers in the Sasanian far-east, during periods of their semi-independence in the later third and early fourth centuries, Harper interpreting this as "a statement of independence."[351] This further suggests the value of these artworks in demonstrating royal strength, and implicit fitness to rule. These pieces articulate what was perceived as a forceful impression of royal power, and one which coheres very well with the accounts hitherto discussed concerning the relationship beteen the display of physical prowess and the fitness to rule.

[348] Prudence O. Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity: Monuments and Artifacts of the Sasanian Near East, 3rd to 7th Century A.D.,* (New York, 2006), pp. 120-121; Prudence O. Harper and Boris Marshak, 'La vaisselle en argent', in Françoise Demange (ed.), *Les Perses sassanides: Fastes d'un empire oublié (224-642),* (Paris, 2006), p. 70.
[349] Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, pp. 129-130.
[350] Harper, 'Sasanian Silver', pp. 1117-1118, see too n. 6.
[351] Harper, *In Search of a Cultural Identity*, p. 123.

Fig. 7 – Dish showing Šāpur II hunting, housed in the Sackler Gallery. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

When we turn from hunting to military performance, we find that Sasanian kings frequently played key roles on the field of battle. Narseh was wounded fighting against the Romans in the 290s, suggesting he was leading from the front.[352] According to Ammianus' account, Šāpur II took personal command of assaults of Amida,[353] and he is recorded as

[352] Zonaras, XII, 31 in Dodgeon and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier: 226-363*, p. 131.

[353] AM, XIX.7.8. Ammianus claims that it was not customary for the Persian king to fight personally, and this was the first time Šāpur had done so. The first claim is simply wrong, and the second hardly credible – Šāpur was aged 50 when he besieged Amida, and one can scarcely believe this was the first time he had entered combat, given the large number of wars he had already fought against Arabs, Romans and enemies on his eastern and northern frontiers.

commanding many armies in *The Epic Histories*.[354] Bahrām V seems to have won a glorious reputation fighting the Turks,[355] and Pērōz was famously killed fighting the Hepthalites.[356] Until shortly before their deaths, both Kawād and Ḵosrow I actively campaigned against the Romans.[357] Early in his reign Ḵosrow II seems to have done the best he could to garner a personal military reputation, leading with some élan the limited forces under his personal command against Bahrām Čōbīn,[358] and taking personal command of the symbolically significant re-conquest of Dara in 604.[359] The fact that many Persian kings fought and commanded armies in person ought not to surprise us. However, we see good correlation between effective leadership in war and being a strong king who ruled securely.

Hormozd IV seems to have lacked a military reputation. Unlike his father Ḵosrow I, who campaigned into old age, Hormozd seems to have conducted his campaigns at a distance. This does not seem to have been a necessary factor in his dethronement (our sources ascribe that to his cruelty toward the aristocracy, and his poor treatment of Bahrām Čōbīn),[360] but his lack of military reputation probably made Hormozd much more vulnerable to aristocratic revolt than he might otherwise have been. Similarly, though Ḵosrow II early in his reign seemingly endeavoured to gain for himself a personal military reputation, by the time of his deposition he had not personally commanded an army in over twenty years. Though not wishing to oversimplify the complex series of events which led up to the depositon of Ḵosrow

[354] *BP*, IV.xxi-ii, lviii, V.ii, iv-v.
[355] Ṭab. 863-865.
[356] Proc. I.iv.
[357] For Kawād, see Proc, I.vii-viii, x.12, for Ḵosrow I, see Proc, II.v-vii, xvii, xx-xxi, xxvi, xxviii; VIII.vii, xii.
[358] TS, V.5.5-6.
[359] Seb, 107. See too the sources in Greatrex and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: Part II: AD 363-630,* pp. 184-186 (see Theophanes, 6096).
[360] FD, 1844-1845; Ferdowsī's account labours the insults Hormozd made to Iran's greatest paladin. See too Ṭab. 992-995; Seb. 10; Sebēos' and Ṭabarī's accounts are briefer than that of Ferdowsī, Ṭabarī showing Bahrām as loyal, and rebelling through fear for his own safety, and Sebēos presents Hormozd as disrespecting Bahrām, greedily seeking to seize all spoils of war, which Bahrām had shared between the king and his own soldiers. Ṭabarī, in fact, states that Bahrām sent much booty to the king. All three seem to place the fault of Bahrām's rebellion on Hormozd's actions.

II, one factor has to be that Ḵosrow could no longer command the loyalty of his generals, and could not, or would not, take the field against the Romans.[361]

In *The Epic Histories* we see the vulnerability of kings lacking an independent military reputation. The Mamikonean heroes fought on behalf of the Aršakuni kings, who seldom seem to have fought themselves. Every one of the Aršakuni kings in *The Epic Histories* was murdered or deposed, suggesting the inherent danger of a king lacking a substantial personal military following. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fall of king Tiran. Tiran was abandoned by the nobles and their contingents, leaving the king with a motley body of various domestics, enabling the Persians to capture him without difficulty.[362] Although the nature of the sources make it impossible to ascertain how closely this fits with the Sasanian examples discussed previously, it offers further anecdotal evidence of the vulnerability of non-military kings in our period.

We find a parallel with mediaeval European politics. In fourteenth century France, the king could not force everybody to comply with his demands: he might inflict retribution for non-compliance, but he might not.[363] The king's reputation as a 'winner' (usually, but not necessarily, defined through battlefield successes) was helpful in making more recalcitrant subordinates see the potential costs of non-compliance as worse than the known costs of obedience. When one compares the Sasanian situation with other pre-modern monarchies, one can appreciate why the stronger kings, such as Šāpur II, Kawād and Ḵosrow I, actively campaigned until their deaths. As we saw earlier, the references to Šāpur II in the Bactrian documents suggest that when a king involved himself in local affairs, locals responded well to him, and wanted to be associated with him. Although the fragmentary nature of these

[361] Seb, 39; Ṭab. 1004-1005, 1044-1058; FD, 2016-2027.
[362] *BP*, III.xx
[363] Sumption, *Trial by Battle,* pp. 26-27.

documents makes one cautious of strong conclusions, the lack of references to kings not involved in local affairs perhaps suggests that when a king did not have a local significance, locals lost interest in him and his capacity to rule suffered accordingly. Though we cannot determine how formidable the rebellion truly was, Ḵosrow I seemingly defeated the revolt of Anushzad with ease.[364] By contrast, Hormozd IV lost control of events as soon Bahrām Čōbīn rebelled. A king who won wars, and could involve himself in local affairs, would be much more successful than one who did not. The relative weakness of the Sasanian state made the impression people held of the king personally much more significant than in monarchies where the state apparatus was more developed.

In the context of our wider question, this excursus on the physical qualities and military abilities of the king inclines us away from a Christensenian reading. It suggests a monarchy lacking institutional strength, and heavily dependent upon the king having a strong warlike image (as well as other personal and physical qualities) to compensate for this. The clear importance of showing the king as a great huntsman and military leader suggests that, to some extent, effective government depended upon the perceived physical qualities of the king. This coheres with the impression of a monarchy more dependent upon personal factors than institutional ones, as has been articulated earlier.

However, we should not see the importance of the king's physical qualities or military acumen as wholly inclining us towards Pourshariati's interpretation of Sasanian history. Šāpur II and Ḵosrow I were clearly strong rulers, who seems to have been able to rule effectively, in part, no doubt, through their successful military leadership. Though the importance of physical qualities (however manifested) must to some extent suggest the weakness of the Sasanian state, it should not be taken to mean that all Sasanian kings were limited by it.

[364] Proc, VIII.x.17-22.

2.5 – The Organisation of the Sasanian Army

The principal aim of this section is to determine whether the Sasanian army was an impermanent organisation made up of traditionally raised contingents (a 'feudal levy', for want of a better phrase), a standing army, or some form of hybrid of the two. This will involve consideration of how the Sasanian army evolved over time. As we shall discuss, we view the Sasanian aristocracy as primarily a military aristocracy, providing the greater part of the fighting power of the Empire. Therefore, changes in military organisation hold great significance to the relationship between the aristocracy and the monarchy. If we see the Sasanian kings after Ḵosrow I employing a 'standing army', that would necessitate a much closer and regularised relationship between crown and nobility, or the evolution of a completely new form of military organisation.

The nature of Sasanian military structures is highly pertinent to the Christensen-Pourshariati debate. If the king held the monopoly (or near monopoly) of armed force within the Empire, it is naturally consonant with Christensen's thesis, as the king could dominate any internal opposition. If the king lacked substantial military resources, it is consonant with Pourshariati's thesis, requiring a weakening in the king's position relative to the aristocracy. If the aristocracy were capable of militarily resisting the king, royal power would naturally become more conditional, consensual and negotiated. A standing army would be remunerated directly by the state, and so presumably more loyal to the king, rather than a more immediate lord. An army indicating a weaker state would have elements of the 'feudal levy' archetype – less permanent structures, more payments in kind, and, most significantly, with soldiers having a primary loyalty to their immediate lord, who may or may not have been the king.[365]

[365] This argument was developed some time ago by Stanislav Andreski, *Military Organization and Society*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968); see esp. Chs. 7 and 10. For the particular example of Iran, see

Therefore, the Sasanian military system takes on an important role in our discussion, informing a wide range of issues relevant to understanding the relationship between the king and the nobility.

Much of the scholarship on the organisation of Sasanian army is distinctly unhelpful. Christensen, as we might expect, dwelled heavily on what he saw as the organisational strength of the Sasanian army, but, as we shall explore, the way he used some sources was highly problematic. He suggested that the army developed some "cadres fixes" from the earliest time, and offered a description of the army, largely drawn from the testimony of Ammianus Marcellinus and the Denkard, and that there was a standardisation of battle tactics and organisation.[366] Christensen suggested that under Ḵosrow I the cavalry were retained as a standing force, warlike peoples were moved around the Empire to provide troops in different places (such as the recently subjugated highlanders of Kermān), four regional military commands were established, and there was an expansion of fortifications, most notably at Darbend (the Gorgān Wall not being known when Christensen was active).[367]

There has been little scholarly focus on the Sasanian army since Christensen, and the popular publications which focus upon it add little, if any, research to the field, taking an uncritical approach to both their primary and secondary sources.[368] We have no serious academic account of the Sasanian army. Generally, historians who briefly address the Sasanian army have a tendency, perhaps unsurprisingly, towards accepting the consensus established

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pp. 43-46. His work has been described as "important but neglected"; Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, (New York, 1984); p. 49.

[366] Christensen, *L'Iran*, see esp. pp. 130-132, 206-218.

[367] *Ibid*, 368-374.

[368] See Peter Wilcox, *Rome's Enemies (3): Parthians & Sassanid Persians* (Oxford, 1986); Nicolle, *Sassanian Armies*; Kaveh Farrokh, *Sasanian Elite Cavalry AD 224-642* (Oxford, 2005); Kaveh Farrokh, *Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia at War* (Oxford, 2007).

by Christensen,[369] despite, as we shall explore, Christensen's analysis of the Sasanian army being deeply problematic.

Before the reign of Ḵosrow I, there seems to be an assumption that the Sasanian army was an impermanent 'feudal' host, made up of contingents directly dependent upon their own lords, bolstered by allied forces from peripheral areas of the Empire and beyond the frontiers. Unfortunately, the evidence is very thin. The only explicit reference is in the work of the third-century Roman historian Herodian, whose comments we will discuss shortly. Given the alleged significance of the 'reforms' of Ḵosrow I, we feel we should consider them first, and then move on to a wider discussion of how the Sasanian army was organised.

The issue of whether the Sasanian army moved from a 'feudal' levy to a standing army under the aegis of Ḵosrow I is a vital one. Christensen saw this alleged development as a crucial element in the shift towards a more centralised and 'modern' Sasanian Empire.[370] The crux of Christensen's vision has received wide acceptance. Though there are some relatively sceptical voices on the issue,[371] there has not been an attempt to deny the existence of some kind of serious military reform under Ḵosrow I. However, we contend that the 'standing army' as envisaged by Christensen to be unsubstantiated, and based around a highly problematic interpretation of the primary source material. We believe that the late Sasanian Empire was not significantly less dependent upon the part-time aristocratic cavalryman than the earlier Empire.

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[369] E.g. Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, pp. 197-199; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, pp. 45-46, Rubin, 'The Sasanid Monarchy', p. 526, See, for example, R. N. Frye, 'The Political History of Iran Under the Sasanians', p. 143.

[370] Christensen, *L'Iran*, pp. 367-371.

[371] Rubin, 'The Reforms of Khusro Anūshirwān', pp. 279-296; see too Touraj Daryaee, 'When the End is Near: Barbarized Armies and Barracks Kings of Late Antique Iran', in *Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies: Proceedings of the 6th European Conference of Iranian Studies, held in Vienna, 18-22 September 2007*, in Maria Macuch, Dieter Weber and Desmond Durkin-Mesiterernst (eds.) (Wiesbaden, 2010), esp. pp. 49-50. Daryaee does not discuss the military reform as such, but his discussion on barbarised armies (following the arguments of Rubin in 'The Reforms of Khusro Anūshirwān') does suggest that the late Sasanian army was far from the Christensian model.

Christensen's evidence for the creation of a standing army was in our view unacceptably thin and forced to fit his overarching thesis. Some of his evidence is solid, though the interpretations are flawed. The quadripartite division of command under Ḵosrow I is confirmed by the *spahbadh bullae*, though, we believe this was more likely a regularisation of the *status quo*, entailing re-naming pre-existing offices, rather than an innovation as such. The fortifications at Darbend (especially when placed alongside the rather more substantial walls at Gorgān which came to light more recently) cannot be ignored.[372] These indubitably relied upon some permanently maintained troops, and demonstrate substantial royal power, as we previously discussed (with specific reference to the Gorgān Wall, but the interpretation still stands), there are more nuances concerning the interpretation of Sasanian fixed fortifications than has been assumed. Christensen's arguments for military reform, including the key argument for the establishment of a standing army, are dependent upon passages from Ṭabarī.

Given their importance to Christensen's analysis, it is worth quoting Ṭabarī's relevant statements:

"He [Ḵosrow I] strengthened the fighting quality of the soldiers with weapons and mounts."[373]

"He made enquiries about the cavalrymen of the army, and those lacking in resources he brought up to standard by allocating to them horses and equipment, and earmarked for them adequate financial allowances."[374]

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[372] See Erich Kettenhofen, Darband (1) , in *Encycopaedia Iranica (Online Edition),* < *http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/darband-i-ancient-city>,* [18 February, 2014]; Wolfram Kleiss, 'Fortifications', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition),* < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/fortifications- >, [18 February, 2014]; R. N. Frye, "The Sasanian System of Walls for Defense," in M. Rosen-Ayalon, ed.,*Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet* (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 11-12, and H. Mahamdedi, 'Wall as a System of Frontier Defense' in Touraj Daryaee and M Omidsalar (eds.), *The Spirit of Wisdom. Essays in Memory of Ahmad Tafazzoli* (Costa Mesa, 2004).

[373] Ṭab, 894

"Kisrā had appointed over the department of the warriors a man from the secretarial class who was outstanding for his noble birth, martial values [etc]…Bābak…Bābak's herald now proclaimed throughout those troops present in Kisrā's army camp that the cavalrymen were to present themselves before him for inspection on their mounts and with their weapons, and the infantrymen with their requisite weapons…The equipment that a cavalryman of the army had to take along with him comprised of horse mail, soldier's mailed coat, breastplate, leg armour plates, sword, lance, shield, mace…"[375]

These extracts show the king being responsible for outfitting the troops, and making sure they had sufficient means to support themselves. It also describes some form of military parade or review (presumably to check that the men were present, and suitably equipped and disciplined). However, this description falls far short of initiating what one might reasonably consider a standing army.

This description of the king ensuring the cavalry had sufficient means to support themselves surely indicates that Ḵosrow *restored* people who were socially *āzādān* to their 'proper' status (i.e. to their status before the Mazdakite disturbance, the description of which immediately preceded the review in Ṭabarī's narrative), rather than instituting anything new. As such, this passage presumably should be read as Ḵosrow reaffirming the social order, rather than an innovation.

The royal review of troops appears as something of a literary topos. King Pap of Armenia conducted a troop review before doing battle with Šāpur II (in this case, Mušel Mamikonean organised the troops and saw to it they were properly equipped).[376] There are two recorded reviews early in Sebēos' history, one where Ḵosrow II reviewed the Roman

[374] *Ibid,* 897-8.
[375] *Ibid*, 963-4.
[376] *BP*, V.i

troops who were going to fight for him against Bahrām Čōbīn, and the second showing Mušeł Mamikonean reviewing his troops after the battle against Bahrām had been won.[377] Ḵosrow reviewing the Roman troops clearly appears as a way of marking his titular leadership of the allied army, and given his limited role in command during the expedition, held no significance beyond that. The review from *The Epic Histories* again reflects the nominal authority of King Pap. These cases might suggest that reviewing troops was a kingly act, which affirmed nominal superiority. However, in these cases, the king, whether Pap or Ḵosrow II, was actually a relatively insignificant figure in proceedings, and the military reviews they conducted cannot be used to attest any especial royal control over the army.

Sebēos also records a meeting in 652 between the Roman emperor Constans and the Armenian princes, which included Constans reviewing the contingents of the Armenian princes who met with him.[378] Sebēos records that after the emperor had met the princes, there was a process of negotiation with the Armenians firstly demonstrating the treachery of the lord of the Ṙshtunikʿ, and then persuading Constans not to overwinter his army in Armenia. Though Sebēos' account refers to mustering and reviewing in a Roman context, it is still illustrative for how the practice may have been carried out in the Sasanian Empire. We see once again the recognition of the over-lordship of the sovereign and his right to draw upon their manpower, but also the occasion was an opportunity for the Armenian princes to negotiate with the emperor, to inform him of rebellion, and to press him to change policy in their interest. Though this example concerns a muster and review in a Roman context, it seems reasonable to assume that this model was equally applicable to Sasanians Iran. It suggests that this process involved the nobles exerting leverage on the government, as well as demonstrating and

[377] Seb, 11-12.
[378] *Ibid*, 48.

reaffirming the government's right to make use of the military resources controlled by the elite.

The king reviewing the troops is also a common theme in *The Shahnameh*. The episodes presented by Ṭabarī have particular resonance with Ferdowsī's presentation of the early stages of Kay Ḵosrow's reign, where the king travelled through the realm, righted various wrongs, numbered and rewarded the paladins of Iran, and reviewed his troops.[379] It is significant that before his accession, Kay Ḵosrow defeated rebellious generals who had tried to claim the throne. Though not the same as Ḵosrow's defeat of the Mazdakites, this shares the theme of defending the social order against those seeking to overturn it. There are clear parallels between the military reviews of Ḵosrow I in the account of Ṭabarī and of Kay Ḵosrow in *The Shahnameh*, and, we would contend, parallels which are unlikely to be coincidental.

We cannot say how close sixth-century stories of the mythic Kay Ḵosrow were to those recorded by Ferdowsī, but there are clear parallels between the tales recorded in the *Shahnameh* and the description of Ḵosrow I in Ṭabarī's account.[380] There are some significant differences. Ṭabarī stated that the king pretended to be a soldier and was reviewed like the others; this seems to be a literary touch, which makes one even more dubious as to the historicity of Ṭabarī's account. However, one can appreciate how Ḵosrow I might well have wanted to evoke the stories of his mythological namesake in the literary history of his reign. We cannot say there was a direct parallel between the literary representation of the military reviews of Kay Ḵosrow and Ḵosrow I, given the nearly 500-year gap between the reign of Ḵosrow I and when Ferdowsī recorded the myth. Certainly however, the military review was a

[379] FD, 766-791., esp. 768-770, 775-6, 784f.

[380] It seems that in a substantially similar form, these legends existed in Arsacid times (at which point they were passed to Armenia, where we can read forms of Rostam's stories in Moses Khorenatsʿi). Most likely, these myths began to be recorded from the later fifth century; see Yarshatar, 'Iranian National History', pp. 390-3

not uncommon literary *topos*, and therefore should not be seen as particularly significant in assessing Ḵosrow I's reign.

Indeed, as we have seen, we have a parallel from *The Epic Histories* showing Mušel Mamikonean making sure the warriors were well equipped, with King Pap then reviewing the men.[381] There is no indication that there was a standing army in fourth-century Armenia, and certainly no one has used this section of *The Epic Histories* to argue that fourth-century Armenia moved towards a standing army. Yet the literary evidence is broadly similar to that which has traditionally been used for such an institution in Iran under Ḵosrow I. For a lord (any lord, whether the king or a magnate) to be involved in making sure his followers were well equipped for war should not surprise us, and certainly should not be used to prove the institution of a regularised standing army.[382]

We contend that the notion that the Sasanian army radically altered under Ḵosrow I is unsubstantiated, not even mentioned in the literary sources which allegedly evidence it. Certainly the *spahbadh bullae* prove there was a quadripartite military organisation,[383] though we cannot say whether such a division was created at the same time as the inception of the *spahbadh* bullae, or predated it, with the *spahbadhs* only gaining an official seal under Ḵosrow I.

In the north, and quite possibly elsewhere too, the new *spahbadh* system arguably confirmed existing realities within a new, regularised, framework; as we mentioned in Chapter 2.3, high military command in the north seems to have been a *de facto* heritable office of the Mihrān house, which seems to have effectively monopolised military command in the north-eastern regions of the Empire. It is possible that dividing military command into four regional

[381] *BP*, V.i.
[382] We also have a reference to Vahan Mamikonean equipping Armenian cavalry for Persian service; see ŁP, III.94.
[383] Gyselen, *The Four Generals*, *passim*.

commands was revolutionary, but we would suggest it was more likely a formalisation of the *status quo ante:* presumably someone took command of the border defences before Ḵosrow I's reform, whether he had an officially acknowledged title or not. In *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* we have a reference to the official seals of the *magupats* and the finance officer which were instituted by Kawād I and Ḵosrow I respectively: the reference is to the institution of an official seal, *not* the office itself.[384] It is at least arguable that something similar pertained to the *spahbadhs* under Ḵosrow I – that he instituted official seals, and perhaps a greater degree of administrative formality, to an already established institution. After Ḵosrow I *spahbadhs officially* had royally sanctioned titles, which might have conveyed more prestige, and possibly wages, and, significantly, formally tied them into a wider network of royal patronage. These are not insignificant factors, but they fall far short of a major change in the military structure of Sasanian Iran.

The best evidence for increased governmental involvement in the military system in the late Sasanian period comes from elsewhere in *The Book of a Thousand Judgements*. This records a law stating that equipment conveyed for the outfitting of a horseman should be returned to the treasury on his death,[385] and also includes three references to a *List of Horsemen*, which seems to have included the details of men liable for military service, though who exactly was on the *List*, and the geographical extent of the area covered by it, is unknown.[386] This shows that the central government took some role in equipping the cavalry (at least in Fārs), and that there was a regularised system of some sort relating to recruitment. It is impossible to know when these edicts were implemented, the text offering no indication whether these were ancient laws or relatively recent innovations.

[384] *LB*, 93, 4-9.
[385] *Ibid,* 77, 6-9.
[386] *Ibid*, A16, 11-14, 14-17, A19, 2-6.

Curiously, all three references to the *List of Horsemen* concern people trying to remove their names from it. Whatever else we might read into this, it certainly seems possible to avoid being on the *List* even when the government thought one should be. It shows that at least some people liable for service were of sufficient status to enjoy legal representation and to be able to avoid duties demanded by the government. As these are isolated clauses without wider context, we should not extrapolate too far from them. Even rare occurrences require some sort of legal framework, and we should not use these cases to suggest a widespread dislike of military service, which given the cultural outlook of the aristocracy (discussed in Chapter 3) seems unlikely. However, it suggests that even at the very end of the Sasanian Empire, in the home province of the ruling dynasty, there clearly was negotiation and non-compliance regarding military service.

We must also consider the remarks of Theophylact Simocatta, who stated that one reason why Hormozd IV was so unpopular was because he cut military pay by a tenth.[387] The obvious meaning of this is there was a salaried army to endure a pay cut. However, we do not think that this is the correct interpretation. Assuming the statement is a true reporting of events, we have no indication how many people lost pay. It could have referred to a small household force, rather than the principal fighting force of the Empire. Such a situation would better fit the lack of evidence for the widespread use of permanently salaried troops.

However, we think it more likely that Theophylact either misunderstood the Sasanian army or misrepresented it for the ease of understanding of his Roman audience. Theophylact and his audience lived in an empire which had used long service salaried soldiers as its principal fighting force for many centuries. Rather than explain the Persian situation, we would suggest the possibility that Theophylact presented Hormozd's actions in a manner closer to the

[387] TS, 3.16.13.

Roman public's understanding of how an army was financed. In the alternative, the payments to which Theophylact referred could have been in the form of subsides paid to local magnates holding important regional commands, who used the money to help pay for troops in their sectors. This was a mode of financing used for later mediaeval English march wardenships, which might serve as a useful parallel.[388] We believe this is the most likely scenario. Not only does this cohere well with the impression of Sasanian military command in the north and east, with regional command apparently going together with local landholding, but also helps explain the rebellion of Bahrām Čōbīn. Though our literary sources present the heroic Mihrān as the victim of undeserved royal invective, it seems more likely that the real cause of the rebellion was a reduction in Bahrām's government subsidy, rather than the more dramatic reason given, that he had been egregiously insulted by the king. This seems so inept on Hormozd's part that we must query its authenticity. Although Theophylact seemingly suggests a salaried army, we think it most likely that Theophylact misreported the Sasanian situation by describing it more in line with Roman practice, giving the impression that the Sasanian army was closer in structure to the Roman army than was in fact the case.

Therefore, we strongly contend that we should not think of the Sasanian army in terms of pre- and post-Ḵosrow I. There must have been some evolution over time, though it is difficult to credit Ḵosrow I with any dramatic revolution in how the army operated. For instance, there must have been some changes in the fifth century, especially regarding the Gorgān Wall, which would have needed at least some kind of permanent garrison. But thinking in terms of pre- and post- Ḵosrow I is, we would suggest, unhelpful.

[388] R.L. Storey, 'The Wardens of the Marches of England towards Scotland, 1377-1489', *The English Historical Review, Vol. 72, No. 285* (1957), *passim*; Cynthia J. Neville, *Violence, Custom and Law: The Anglo-Scottish Border Lands in the Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 1998), *passim*, esp. pp. 69-70 for some of the specific needs of border defence in the later middle ages, pp. 186-195 for a comparison of the Scottish, Welsh and Irish marches; further discussed below in Conclusion 2.2.

How then should we proceed in discussing the organisation of the Sasanian army? There are very few sources directly relating to this. One explicit reference to how the Sasanian army was recruited comes from Herodian, writing in the first half of the third century, and describing the armies of Ardašīr I. Herodian stated that the early Sasanian armies were temporary entities raised for each campaign, and disbanded at the end of it, from contingents mustered by the nobles; the men went unpaid, subsisting through pillage.[389] This appears very close to an 'ideal type' feudal host. If we accept Herodian's testimony, and there seems no reason why we should not, this at least gives us a relatively good idea of the essential characteristics of early Sasanian armies from which we can attempt to plot further developments. It is certainly arguable that Herodian simplified the situation, by giving the general characteristic of Ardašīr's army, and so we should not necessarily see the early Sasanian army as being entirely made up of feudal levies. However, we are happy to accept that to a greater extent it was.

In the very late Sasanian period, we have the account of Movsēs Dasxuranci, which records the mustering of an army in Ałuankʿ, in the eastern Caucasus, "at the common meeting-place", before they marched south to join the Persian army which was defeated at Qādisiya in 637.[390] This reads very much like the mustering of a 'host' type army – there was a common meeting ground where all the different commanders and their contingents assembled, and then they marched off together. This account implies a similar military system as that described by Herodian for the early Sasanian period. Though the situation in the mid-630s was hardly typical, it still shows that whatever evolutions might have occurred regarding the Sasanian military systems, it did not lose the ability to swiftly and efficiently raise 'host' type armies from individual contingents. If the Sasanian army had moved to a fully standing

[389] Her, VI.5.3-4, VI.6.5.
[390] MD, 2.18.

army, the ability to raise substantial bodies of men by this method would have been lessened, if not lost entirely.

Ultimately, we are unable to definitively state how the Sasanian army was organised at any point. There are however several slight indicators. Even from the reign of Šāpur II, there is evidence of mobile war-mints.[391] This shows that from the fourth century at the earliest at least some soldiers were paid in coin, rather than through grants of land or through service obligations, though in mediaeval Europe, it is worth noting that soldiers being paid in coins did not mean that they fought in standing armies.[392] Even in the late Sasanian period, many soldiers do not seem to have been paid with coins. Under Ḵosrow I, the Sasanians conquered (or re-conquered) much of southern and eastern Arabia, which necessarily required substantial military forces. The extreme scarcity of Sasanian coins in Arabia, with those appearing mostly being found in post-Conquest hoards, makes it difficult to see how there could have been significant numbers of Sasanian soldiers paid in coin there,[393] though this might reflect the nature of the local economy as much as the way the Sasanians remunerated their soldiers. Though we would suggest the Gorgān Wall probably had a smaller peace time garrison than has been assumed, the Wall only makes sense in the context of at least some permanently garrisoned troops. We do have several attestations, throughout the Sasanian period, of allied contingents, generally taking the form of light cavalry, fighting alongside the Persians.[394]

[391] Göbl, 'Sasanian Coins', p. 331.

[392] See for example, Maurice Keen, 'The Changing Scene: Guns, Gunpowder and Permanent Armies', in Maurice Keen (ed.), *Medieval Warfare: A History* (Oxford, 1999).

[393] Derek Kennet, 'Sasanian Coins from 'Umān and Baḥrain, in Derek Kennet and Paul Luft (eds.), *Current Research in Sasanian Archaeology, Art and History: Proceedings of a Conference held at Durham University, November 3rd and 4th, 2001: BAR International Series, 1810* (Oxford, 2008), p. 59; for an alternative view, see D. T. Potts and J. Cribb, 'Sasanian and Arab-Sasanian coins from Eastern Arabia, in *Iranica Antiqua, 30* (1995), pp. 136-137. One realises that *some* of the late Sasanian coins in Arabia might have been used to pay soldiers, the extreme rareness of them suggests that this could not have been a systematic means of renumeration, inclining one towards Kennet's view.

[394] For example, Grumbates king of the Chionites, a people from somewhere beyond the Sasanian north-eastern frontier, was defeated by Šāpur II and fought with him against the Romans in 359, AM, XVI.9.4, XVIII.6.22; the Arab king Alamoundaras fought for the Persians in the sixth century; Proc, I.xvii,I,

Ultimately, however, for any logical explanation of how the Sasanian army operated, we are forced to return to the primacy of the military aristocracy, the *āzādān.*

Whilst the evidence is fragmentary, we are confronted again and again with the military focus of the elite, and the relative marginality of the peasantry. This is a truism repeated by Roman historians, and strongly implied by our Armenian and post-Conquest literary sources, where infantry forces are seldom mentioned, and always in unusual contexts, never being perceived as the main fighting force of the Empire. We cannot deny that allied contingents were sometimes vitally important, and in some campaigns centred around sieges (the sieges of Amida, as described by Ammianus and pseudo-Joshua Stylites, being notable examples), the Persian armies seem greatly inflated with infantry forces (true infantry forces, as opposed to cavalry fighting on foot), whose labour would be needed for prosecuting the siege.[395]

However, the principal burden of military service must have fallen upon the *āzādān* class. This is especially so given what we have said regarding Ḵosrow's alleged reform – the principal aim of which seems to have been ensuring those born to the cavalry stayed as such. It was about maintaining (albeit perhaps in a more regularised way) the military dominance of a particular stratum of society. Such an argument is supported by the aforementioned '*List of*

I.xvii.40ff, etc. The use of allies from outside the Empire might have increased over time, especially in the later Sasanian period. See Daryaee, 'Barbarized Armies', *passim.*

[395] Ammianus' description of Sasanian troops attacking the city seemingly suggests that cavalry fighting on foot were the dominant force, along with archers (who may or may not have been dismounted cavalry too); XIX.1.2, 2.2-3, 6, 5.5. However, the infantry seem primarily involved with purely menial matters; see esp. XIX.6.6 "Duo tamen aggeres celsi Persarum peditum manu" – "two high mounds [of earth] were made by Persian infantry" – the Persian infantry were primarily there to dig earthworks. See too AM, XIX.6.4. At one juncture, we see infantry and cavalry assaulting the city together, the latter presumably fighting on foot; AM, XIX.7.4. Though pseudo-Joshua does not describe the composition of the Persian army at Amida, the impressive range of earth-works the besiegers constructed strongly suggests a large body of non-nobles accompanied the army; PJS, 50-53. Procopius states the Persians intended to capture Dara in 530, and in this context the presence of large numbers of low quality infantry (which increased the size of the Persian army without significantly increasing the fighting power of it) seems likely; Proc, I.xiii.12-13, 23-24, xiv.1, 25.

Horsemen' attested in *The Book of a Thousand Judgements*.[396] These cases show that at least around the city of Gōr (and so, most likely, in other relatively closely governed areas of the Empire) that there was a system for identifying men for military service. These were surely noblemen – they were fighting as cavalry, references to descendants on the *List* suggests a largely hereditary system, and they were apparently people of sufficient standing to enjoy substantial legal rights.

Also, the law concerning returning equipment to the treasury seems to suggest that these grants of equipment were supplementary to a landed income – the grants were not intended as a 'salary'. This reading is supported by one element of Ḵosrow's tax reform which was that nobles and warriors were exempt (we would suggest that probably this merely re-confirmed an existing exemption).[397] The most logical meaning of this was that the nobility were expected to use their landed wealth to pay for horses, weapons, and other expenses. Rubin has suggested we should see the later Sasanian army as one heavily dependent upon enfeoffment – that is, holding land in return for military service.[398] This is supported by the aforementioned references in *The Law Book* whereby it seems men on *The Military List* owed service in return for land, the land grants for which would in practice quickly become held by hereditary right.[399]

The widespread use of enfeoffment in the late Sasanian period seems likely, but begs the question of how Sasanian armies were organised and financed before Ḵosrow I. We would suggest that probably they did so in exactly the same way, by holding land from the king or an intermediary in return for service. Other than making the system more regularised, we think it unlikely Ḵosrow I substantially changed the terms of remuneration or service. Given the

[396] *LB*, A16, 11-14, 14-17, A19, 2-6.
[397] Ṭab, 962.
[398] Rubin, 'Reforms of Khusro Anūshirwān', pp. 283-7, 294-295, esp. p. 294.
[399] Perikhanian, 'Iranian Society', p. 660.

evidence from *The Epic Histories* of an Armenian *sparapet* making sure his troops were well equipped, we should not treat grants of equipment as indicative of anything other than an authority figure wanting soldiers under him to be as effective as possible. By itself it does not indicate anything else. Also, the status of the men on *The List of Horsemen* as landholders must make us question how 'full time' these cavalrymen could have been. If they were primarily sustained by landed assets which in most cases would have been far-removed from any likely warzone (let us remember that the *Law Book* pertains most directly to Fārs, far removed from any frontier), it seems at least arguable that they would have spent a large proportion of their time on their estates. This therefore begs the unanswerable question of how much time these men spent on royal service, and must suggest that these men fought as a 'nobleman's militia' in impermanent armies, in accordance with the 'feudal host' archetype.

Though there is some evidence for a greater degree of regularisation and bureaucratisation of later Sasanian armies compared to earlier ones, there is no evidence that the later Sasanian army employed a standing army as its principal fighting force. This does not mean that the Sasanian Empire had no permanently maintained troops. For the Gorgān Wall to have had any strategic sense, there must have been some soldiers permanently stationed on it, though these could have been limited in number. In better documented European transitions from feudal hosts to standing armies, it is clear that it was not a case of simply changing one army type for the other by royal decree, but a drawn out process, with many false starts, and for a period of many decades, hybrid systems were used, where standing troops formed one part of an army alongside traditionally raised forces, urban militias, allied forces and mercenaries.[400]

[400] By way of introduction, see Keen, 'The Changing Scene', *passim*; Christopher Allmand, 'War', in Christopher Allmand (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History: VII: c. 1415-c1500* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 162-166.

Significantly, regardless of how the army was organised, there appears very little to differentiate the authority of strong kings before Ḵosrow I (most particularly Ardašīr I, Šāpur I and Šāpur II) who probably commanded armies mostly raised through traditional means, from the authority of Ḵosrow I, who may not have had a 'standing' army, but probably did command an army with a greater bureaucratic underpinning, even though it was still probably primarily a 'landed' army – i.e. an army largely sustained through private land ownership rather than wages paid by the state. There is no neat correlation for Sasanian kings seemingly getting more powerful and the aristocracy less so as time went on.

Crucially, the late Sasanian state did not appear to enjoy consistent loyalty from its generals. The late Sasanian Empire seemingly suffered more than the early empire from ambitious commanders with armies loyal to the general if he came into conflict with the king, as the conflicts of the 590s and late 620s amply illustrate.

Leaving the issue of military organisation to one side, it is certain that whatever might have changed in the later Sasanian army, the dependence upon the aristocracy, fighting as cavalry, remained. There is no evidence whatsoever that the later Sasanian army tried to broaden the base of the fighting classes by, for instance, raising dependable infantry forces. The literary descriptions of Ḵosrow I's 'military reform' are entirely based around cavalry. The little evidence we have of a more bureaucratic military structure, as illustrated by the examples drawn from *The Book of a Thousand Judgements*, is solely focussed on cavalry. There were infantry forces, but there is no evidence they evolved beyond the unskilled peasants which inhabit the battle scenes of Ammianus or Procopius, and whose general absence from Armenian and Iranian literary sources is mute testimony to their social and military marginality.

Finally, we should briefly consider military forces controlled by nobles but not used as instruments of royal policy. The existence of substantial military forces of this nature would be a substantial barrier to any centralising policy. Generally, when we might identify substantial 'magnate' forces, such as those of Sūren during the campaign of 363, they operate within the framework of a centrally directed war effort. However, as we saw from the Bactrian documents, the Sasanian east seems a violent place where military power was anything but a royal monopoly, with local lords clearly using private forces to dominate their local rivals.[401] Certainly, though the aforementioned Sūren seems to have used his private military force in the context of a wider royal policy, Sūkhrā, of the Kārin house apparently used his to garner a very advantageous position for himself in the later fifth century. He is presented as having defeated the Hepthalites (responsible for the killing of Pērōz and the destruction of his army) alone, with his own resources, and without any leadership offered from outside.[402]

It is highly significant that in the late Empire, kings often turned to nobles or people from the fringes of the Empire to defeat internal opponents, presumably indicating an inability to do so themselves. The most prominent cases concern Kawād's use of Šāpur of the Mihrān family to defeat Sūkhrā of the Kārin house, and in the 590s Ḵosrow II requiring Roman assistance to put down an Armenian rebellion, and then bringing in the Armenian prince Smbat Bagratuni to contain the rebellion of his maternal uncle Besṭām.[403] These examples strongly suggest that relatively weak kings (as both Kawād and Ḵosrow II were early in their reigns) could not necessarily command the military support needed to confront serious internal opposition, or to overcome their strongest subjects.

[401] See esp. BD2, ca, ce, cl and xp. See p. 124 above

[402] FD, 1596-1602; Pseudo-Joshua records that Balash (the successor to Pērōz) was despised by the soldiers and replaced by Kawād by them. He does not name the ringleaders, but it is in broad accord with the account of Ferdowsī, if more violent; PJS, 18-19.

[403] Ṭab, 884-885; FD 1603-1607; Seb. 16, 23-25.

In Armenia, the major lords controlled substantial military assets, with raiding apparently endemic in the South Caucasus, though this was suppressed when rulers were strong enough to do so. For instance the private war between the Orduni and Manawazean house was met by the crushing Aršakuni and Mamikonean response.[404] One of the most illustrative accounts of a raid comes from Movsēs Dasxurancʿi's history, which records a raid by J̌uanšhēr and his brother against a Persian general who had set himself up as ruler in a part of Albania.[405] Dasxurancʿi describes a small dawn raid – J̌uanšhēr's force concealed themselves in an ox-stall in a wood before the attack. The speed and ease with which J̌uanšhēr and followers carried out the attack, and the matter-of-fact way in which the author narrated it, suggests the normality of such behaviour. Also, the small size of J̌uanšhēr's raid, presumably undertaken with only a handful of men, perhaps indicates why we do not hear of such raids more frequently. This raid was significant because it featured the prince of Caucasian Albania (and the principal hero of Dascurancʿi's narrative), and the victim was a notable lord, but given the scale of the attack, it seems likely that if had featured less prominent personages, it would have gone unrecorded. The involvement of such prominent people in these small raids in the Caucasus does suggest how important they were, and how prominent a feature of life they might have been.

However, these were relatively isolated and peripheral areas. *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* gives the impression of an orderly and not particularly violent society. Certainly, both the Bactrian documents and *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* are fragmentary sources and as such might be unrepresentative. However, the picture they paint, of an orderly centre and an irregularly governed and relatively turbulent periphery is compelling, and seems extremely plausible.

[404] *BP*, III.iv.
[405] MD, 2.19

As it stands therefore, we would suggest the military system of the Sasanian Empire appears substantially more in accord with Pourshariati's thesis than Christensen's. There is no evidence the king had the monopoly on military power in all areas of the Empire, and strong arguments to the contrary. There is no substantial evidence that royal control increased over the military aristocracy. Indeed, the last decades of the Sasanian period were more turbulent, and more prone to military revolt, than had been the case hitherto. The events of the 590s prove that a king could not defeat entrenched and active regional opposition, and that his rule over much of the empire was to a large extent dependent upon the good will of more locally based lords. There is little reason to see a widespread use of permanently salaried troops in the later Sasanian period, and substantial evidence that the military reliance on the landed military aristocracy continued.

2.6 – Conclusion

On balance, the evidence we have assembled inclines one towards Pourshariati's reading of Sasanian history. It seems that the Sasanian monarchy had a relatively weak presence in large areas of the Empire, and the king certainly did not enjoy a monopoly on military force. Certainly, the monarchy was an institution of immense respect (which we will further discuss in Chapter 3), but it seems to have lacked the ability to impose itself forcefully against serious regional opposition, as the 590s amply illustrate.

Individual Sasanian kings could accomplish substantial infrastructure projects, of which the Gorgān Wall is the most dramatic example. Given its scale, it is impossible to argue anything else. However, we would maintain that the authority of the monarchy was dependent upon the person of the king, not on institutional factors. The Bactrian documents seem to originate from a more turbulent region, where problems were not uncommonly solved through violence and the king was generally a distant figure, apparently only becoming

locally significant when he campaigned in the region. Armenia too appears a particularly disorderly area of the Empire, as evidenced by the frequent rebellions and the killing of royal officers.[406] We would contend that if the monarchy had significant institutional strength (such as through well-established bureaucracies, and the imposition of local officers solely loyal to, and dependent upon, the state) across the whole empire, royal authority would have appeared more meaningful in the area pertaining to the Bactrian documents, the large scale break-down of royal authority in the 590s would have been less likely, and there would probably be less of a hereditary element to some of the important regional offices. It seems that the monarchy and the apparatus it controlled did not have the strength to assign effective appointees in regions where the appointee lacked a powerbase. Though there are substantial lacunae in our knowledge, the association between Mihrāns and military command in the north-east in the third, late fifth, sixth and mid-seventh centuries (the only occasions where we can comment on such matters) could be taken to suggest that this was the default manner by which military commands were organised. This of course is not the same as saying it was always like this – an assertive king might have been able to alter the normal order and appoint his own man – but as far as we can tell, military command in northern Iran appears normally a Mihrān prerogative. The apparently localised nature of many of the appointees we might identify suggests a state unable to consistently bridge the shortfall in authority external appointments brought.

We see the nature of the Sasanian monarchy as closer to that as envisaged by Pourshariati, but with major caveats. From an institutional point of view, Pourshariati's argument has much to commend it, rightly acknowledging the geographical constraints of

[406] *BP*, V.xxxviii; ŁP, II.32 (which describes the destruction of fire temples and the killing of Zoroastrian priests by the Armenian rebels; the following chapters describe the rebellion proper); Seb, 8 on the rebellion of Vardan in 572, and the killing of the *marzpan* Sūren; Seb, 16, on a group of Armenian lords who robbed Ḵosrow II's 'auditor of Vaspurakan'.

strong royal control, and the military weakness of the king against serious opposition. However, her thesis does not allow for the real authority some kings indubitably wielded – it seems unlikely that a Sasanian monarchy of the Pourshariati model might have been responsible for the Gorgān Wall, for instance. We would argue therefore that we need to look for the ways some kings could enforce their wills despite apparently lacking a strong state apparatus to underpin their authority. It is with this in our minds that we turn to the Sasanian aristocracy.

Chapter 3 – The Sasanian Aristocracy

This chapter offers a study of the Sasanian aristocracy with reference to our question: whether the Sasanian Empire was closer in form to the paradigms established by Christensen or Pourshariati. To further this, we intend to establish how the elite perceived their relationship with the monarchy, especially in regard to military service.

We intend to explore the extent to which the Sasanian aristocracy was amenable to centralised control. The impressions given by the Armenian and eastern Iranian literary sources, and the Bactrian Documents, despite their widely divergent dates and locations of composition, together offer a credible impression of a pan-Iranian aristocratic culture.

However, we must stress that the majority of the relevant sources offer us a provincial view of aristocratic-royal relations. We have no source directly reflecting aristocratic culture from the centres of Sasanian power in Mesopotamia and Fārs, only from the fringes of the Iranian world where the monarchy was relatively weak. This does not necessarily diminish the reality of the situation expressed through our provincial sources. In some cases the authors utilised material which was centrally produced, such as Sebēos' use of 'the history of Xosrov' and Ferdowsī's use of the *Khwadāy-nāmag* traditions, so they should not be treated as purely provincial documents.[407] However, we acknowledge the possibility that the culture of defensiveness over hereditary status, and reciprocity in dealings with the king, might have been more pronounced in the less closely governed regions of the Sasanian Empire than in those where the king was generally stronger.

[407] See Chapter 1.3 for a discussion of these issues.

3.1 – An overview of the Sasanian aristocracy: social class and function

We will begin by trying to get a sense of social stratification in the Sasanian Empire, and definitions of aristocracy used within it. The problematic nature of sources traditionally used to assess social stratification in the Iranian world, such as the inscription of Šāpur I at Hajiabad, the *Letter of Tansar*, and religious texts, has not been fully recognised.[408] From Armenia, we can make use of *The Throne Book* (the *Gahnamak*) and *The Military List*, which despite being complex sources, offer another angle on this issue. Perikhanian considers *The Law Book* the preeminent source for discussing Sasanian society, a view we share, but understanding social history as a whole is different to understanding social stratification. *The Law Book*, very useful source though it is, only offers limited information into social stratification.

Šāpur's inscription at Hajiabad was obviously created at the behest of the king, and *The Letter of Tansar* was written by somebody wishing to assert the need for a more centralised form of government. Both therefore reflect social stratification as conceived by the king or central government. This does not invalidate their representation of social conditions, but we should not assume that these sources accurately reflected the realities of social organisation found elsewhere in the Empire.

The religious literature we might draw upon has also been heavily used, but is even more problematic. Though there were centuries of oral tradition behind the writing of the *Avesta*, it seems to have been codified and written in the later Sasanian period, allegedly under the aegis of Ḵosrow I, according to a ninth-century tradition.[409] The surviving Avestan

[408] Perikhanian, 'Iranian Society and Law', pp. 627-631 discusses the most relevant sources in her estimation, focussing especially upon religious texts and *The Law Book*. Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, pp. 171f uses inscriptions in the first instance, but also addresses Roman literary texts and the sources used by Perikhanian.
[409] Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Abingdon, 1979), p. 135.

literature derives from late manuscripts (the earliest dating to 1288),[410] and the extent of the post-Sasanian revision or corruption of these texts is unknown. It is impossible to say how, if at all, the dramatic decline in Zoroastrianism's status and power in the post-Sasanian period influenced the impression of society given in the texts.

The *Avesta* and *The Letter of Tansar* offer a similar approach to stratification based upon function. The *Avesta* conceived of a tripartite social order, consisting of priests, warriors and cultivators, though the archaic language (warriors conceived of as 'charioteers', for example) should lead us to suppose the conception of society in the work was very ancient.[411] *The Letter of Tansar* offers different visions of social stratification. When it explicitly describes social estates, it offers a quadripartite division with the king at their head: priests, warriors, bureaucrats and cultivators.[412] Elsewhere the author offers the division of nobles, warriors and commoners.[413] We should probably see 'warriors' as a subset of 'nobles' rather than a separate class – the warriors were said to sacrifice "their own lives and possessions and followers", implying that they had substantial assets. Elsewhere, the text suggests a partition between the "noble" and "base" people as the most important distinction, claiming "there is no wickedness or calamity, no unrest or plague in the world which corrupts so much as the ascending of the base to the station of the noble."[414] We believe that the author's horror strongly suggests that the major division in the minds of contemporaries was that between the noble and common people, and subdivisions within the nobility (into warriors, priests, and perhaps bureaucrats) represented different social functions rather than discrete orders within a single noble class.

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[410] J. Kellens, 'Avesta: The Holy Book of the Zoroastrians', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (online Edition),* <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/avesta-holy-book> [19 November, 2013].
[411] Perikhanian, 'Iranian Society and Law', p. 632.
[412] *LoT*, p. 38.
[413] *Ibid*, pp. 48-49.
[414] *Ibid*, p. 27.

We are inclined to downplay the idea of 'bureaucrats' as a separate stratum, and see the elevation of the people involved in governing to the status of the Avestan classes of warrior and priest as reflecting the likely provenance of the text, from the heartlands of the Empire. The centres of the Empire were, as we have seen, relatively closely governed, and hence presumably had more bureaucrats than was typical. However, the number of bureaucrats was seemingly not very high even in Mesopotamia; as we have seen, Morony argued that in Mesopotamia the Sasanian state depended upon the aristocracy for some bureaucratic functions.[415] Given the lack of other references to 'bureaucrats' as a class, we would suggest that the view expressed by the author of *The Letter*, that bureaucrats formed a distinct stratum in Sasanian society, to not be widely held.

Though the tripartite or quadripartite division may have been an orderly ideal, the 'real' division seems to have been between nobility and the commoners, between which there was an unbridgeable chasm. We have very little information regarding the careers of individual nobles, but where we can trace the careers of individuals within the same family it is clear they were not purely 'priestly' and 'warrior' families. This is best illustrated by Mehr Narseh and his sons. Mehr Narseh himself was *wuzurg framādār*, or supreme vizier, under Bahrām V, whilst his three most exalted sons were chief *hērbadh* (the highest ranking priest in the Empire), *artēštārān sālār,* the 'chief of warriors' (a senior military office) and *wāstaryōšān sālār*, 'chief of cattle breeders', presumably a major civil administrative post.[416] There does not seem to have been a problem for members of the same family to rise to the highest levels in the priestly, administrative and military hierarchies. This strongly indicates that we should not see the priestly, administrative and military estates as being self-contained groups, but rather a single ruling class who could become involved in military, administrative and priestly affairs,

[415] See n. 217, p. 90, above.
[416] Ṭab, 869-870; see too Touraj Daryaee, 'Mehr-Narseh' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mehr-narseh>, [10 December, 2013].

suggesting that the tripartite/quadripartite division was more a literary ideal than a representation of reality.

Similarly, we obtain no sense of division by social function in the inscription of Šāpur I at Hajiabad. This inscription differentiates by birth, not by function – there are no references to classes of priests or warriors within it. The Hajiabad inscription praises Šāpur I's skill as an archer, as performed before the nobles of the kingdom. These are ranked thusly: *šahryārān*, *wispuhrān*, *wuzurgān*, and *āzādān*. These have been translated respectively as 'kings' (usually seen as meaning client and allied kings, such as the king of Armenia); princes (usually seen in the secondary literature as meaning Sasanians outside the direct line of succession, but this is not clear from the original); grandees/magnates (the heads of the great houses; the houses of Surēn, Mihrān, Kārin etc. are traditionally seen as from this class); and *āzādān*, which MacKenzie translates as 'nobles'.[417] The failure to mention any non-noble class suggests that these people were seen as irrelevant, in that the king had no interest in impressing them, and further suggests the noble/commoner division as the most important for contemporaries.

Though some of our sources see social stratification in terms of the *function* the person performed in a society (i.e. warrior, priest, peasant), stratification in terms of birth and status appears more significant. The most important division seems to be between 'nobles' and 'commoners', or perhaps between the 'free' and the 'un-free'. Though we might subdivide the nobility, either into warriors, priests and bureaucrats, or into lesser nobility, magnates and princes, what unified them as a group was that they were not commoners, from whom, as *The Letter of Tansar* asserts, there was perceived to be an unbridgeable gap. Within the nobility, mobility was possible, and something the upwardly mobile celebrated. Kirdīr seems to have started off as a relatively minor priest (a 'noble' occupation; Kirdīr's birth status was probably

[417] MacKenzie, 'Shapur's Shooting', p. 501. MacKenzie offers a full translation of this inscription.

that of a relatively minor *āzādān*), but through royal service he was elevated greatly in status.[418] However, we are unaware of any 'commoner' being raised up in such a way, though of course the lack of source material makes it impossible to state definitely that it never occurred.

The eleventh-century *Qābūs Nāma* complements our understanding of the Sasanian aristocracy, confirming the military quality of the elite. Though very late, the text came from the same cultural mileu as the *Shahnemeh*. It is consciously an Iranian text, with the wise words of Buzurjmihr, the much mythologised vizier of Ḵosrow I (though the author seems confused as to whether he served Ḵosrow I or II), and Sasanian rulers, being sources of *bon mots* and notable examples in the text. Islam barely features in the work. The author of the piece, Kai Kā'ūs, was prince of Gorgān, and so perhaps more representative of the Sasanian *wuzurg* (grandee) class than the more numerous *āzādān*. Though this makes him a more pertinent source for understanding the higher nobility, it seems that there was much in common between the different strata of the nobility. As such, the *Qābūs Nāma* offers another angle to understand the Sasanian nobility.

The text reads as a genuine piece of advice from a father to a son, cautioning against playing too much polo because of the risk of injury, for instance.[419] The text is free of the class-chauvinism and warrior machismo of some texts, and is measured in tone. Despite this, Kai Kā'ūs puts military training at the centre of a boy's upbringing – first of all he must learn horsemanship, and how to handle and maintain weapons, after which he could be taught to swim.[420] It should be noted that though the text envisages the young prince fighting personally, the many passages dealing with wider issues of command (such as paying troops),

[418] Gignoux, *Les Quatre Inscriptions*, pp. 66-68 (1-5).
[419] Kai Kā'ūs Ibn Iskandar, Prince of Gurgān, *A Mirror For Princes: The Qābūs Nāma*, tr. Reuben Levy (London, 1951), xix.
[420] *Ibid*, xxvii.

and the status of the author as the Prince of Gorgān, rather than a more typical noble, should incline us to believe that the author saw his son's primary battlefield duty as a commander, rather than a fighter. The *Qābūs Nāma* further evidences the military nature of the elite, and the centrality of military ethos to the aristocracy, even by members of the higher aristocracy who saw their role more as commanders than fighters.

The *Qābūs Nāma* has significance for understanding the equestrianism of the *azadan.* It praises horses, lists a series of especially famous horses and their qualities, and describes horses as "the best of all animals because its maintenance is required both by husbandry and knightly duty. It is proverbial that you must keep horses and garments in good condition if you wish these to maintain you in good condition."[421] Such a statement shows that horses were as essential to marking status as clothing was. In the *Shahnameh*, Rostam's mount Rakhsh appears as a major character – he was more than a means of transport. We also see sentiments that it was not fitting for a Persian noble to fight on foot, and that becoming horseless was an acceptable (if not necessarily honourable) reason to leave the battlefield.[422] We would not like to overstate this, as there is archaeological and some Roman literary evidence for nobles fighting on foot when conditions demanded,[423] but it is clear that the Sasanian aristocracy was an equestrian aristocracy, and horses were exceptionally highly prized.[424] Concepts of nobility, freedom, and being a mounted warrior were extremely closely linked – *āzādān* means 'freeman', but also conveys a sense of nobility, and strongly implied a

[421] *Ibid*, xxv, xxxv.
[422] E.g. FD, 813-818, where Tus and Giv retreat from a fight with Forud after their horses are shot from under them.
[423] The dead Persian in the Dura Europos siege mine was presumably a horseman, as he wore a mail coat cut to facilitate horse riding; James, *Excavations at Dura-Europos*, p. 116. See too AM, XIX.2.2-3, 7.4. In these cases, Ammianus describes Persian cavalry (the Persian troops are organised into *turmae* – cavalry squadrons – and as *cataphracti* respectively in these extracts), but as the context concerns assaults on the walls of Amida, these horsemen were doubtless fighting on foot.
[424] As too in Armenia, Dédéyan, 'le cavalier arménien', pp. 202-208.

horseman too.[425] We have the same situation in Armenian, where an *azat* is both the most commonly attested form of mounted warrior available to the lords, as well as being the lowest rank of the nobility.[426]

In Armenia, there also appears a huge gulf between those deemed *āzādān* (Armenian *azat*) and those who were not, which was clearly recognised by contemporaries. Łazar presents maintaining the division between the nobles and the commoners as one of the major conditions for the Armenian princes to submit to Sasanian royal authority, with Vahan Mamikonean stating "…you treat no man imperiously…that you choose between the valuable and the worthless, discriminate between the well-born and the lowly, cleave to the good and honourable…" as his second condition for submitting to Persian rule (the first being freedom of worship, and the third ensuring the Armenian princes enjoyed access to the Persian king).[427] This has important implications for the nature of the Sasanian state as a whole, which we shall return to shortly.

Though our Armenian texts often focus upon warfare, highlighting the warrior elite, the history of churchmen is a significant feature too. It is clear that though the social function of warriors and churchmen was very different, they were of the same social class. Members of the same extended family apparently pursued extremely diverse occupations, the family of Grigor the Illuminator, whose members held the hereditary office of *katʿołikos*, were allegedly related to the Persian house of Surēn, the Surēn obviously having no role in the hierarchy of Armenian Christianity.[428] Similarly, one the relatively rarely attested high-ranking civil officers, the *hayr mardpet*, was from the same *azat* background, enjoying the elite pastime of hunting,

[425] M. L. Chaumond, 'Āzād (Iranian Nobility), in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition),* <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/azad-older-azat#pt2> [20 November, 2013].
[426] C. Toumanoff, 'Āzād (Iranian Nobility): ii Armenian Azat', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition),* <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/azad-older-azat#pt2> [20 November, 2013]
[427] ŁP, III.89.
[428] *Ibid*, I.14.

and commanding cavalry forces.[429] Adontz has argued that the strength and vitality of the Armenian Church was largely down to its ability to adapt itself to the conventions and norms important to the Armenian nobility.[430] We might be inclined to go further: that the Armenian Church was bound by the social norms of Armenian nobility from the very beginning. As we shall presently discuss in more detail with reference to inheritance, the Armenian Church in our period was clearly organised on the same lines as any other aristocratic hierarchy – with status transmitted by inheritance. The fact that we are dealing with priestly ranks, rather than military or any other form of stratification is not significant – *all* types of aristocrats, whether clerical or lay, had shared rights, norms and expectations which divided them from the rest of the population, and which were ideally transmitted through inheritance. For instance the sons of *katʿołikos* Yusik were manifestly unfit to enter the priesthood, wanting to be warriors instead, but they were forcibly ordained.[431] Regardless of their wishes or competence, they *had* to be priests.

This has similarities with Manuel Mamikonean's deposition of King Varazdat for giving the office of *sparapet* to his tutor Bat.[432] Bat was not considered the 'real' *sparapet*, despite the king's orders. Though the situations are different, what is clear is that the noble society, both clerical and lay, followed the same rules of inheritance (i.e. that one could not circumvent them either through personal inclination or through royal fiat).

The *Gahnamak* and *The Military List* inform our understanding of social stratification in Armenia. Both texts are recorded in defective single manuscripts with many copyist errors, making some names unrecognisable.[433] Adontz dated the *Gahnamak* to the mid-seventh-

[429] *BP* IV.xiv, the *hayr-mardpet* is killed when hunting; ŁP II.34-35, where the *mardpet*, an office by now associated with the Arkrunikʿ house, are said to command cavalry "anxious to exhibit valour in war."
[430] Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 166.
[431] *BP*, III.xiii, xv
[432] *Ibid*, V.xxxvii.
[433] Adontz, *Armenia in the Age of Justinian*, p. 195.

century at the earliest (with a similar version being recorded by Moses Khorenatsʿi in the eighth century); *The Military List* was dated by Adontz to even later.[434] These sources are broadly similar; though conferring different information, the names largely agree, and are similar to the lists of nobles recorded by Łazar,[435] leading Adontz to argue that these texts broadly reflected the situation of the mid-Sasanian period.[436] Indeed, in his estimation, the content was more-or-less accurate until the catastrophic defeat to the Arabs at Naxijawan in 702, which saw many Armenian noble houses destroyed.[437] Whether we accept Adontz's argument for a radical change in *naχarar* society in the early eighth century or not, any radical change which would invalidate these documents post-dates the Sasanian era. For us, the similarity to the names presented in Łazar's fifth-century account should make us relatively confident to accept the names put forward by the *Gahnamak* and *The Military List*. The transmission of these texts is unknown, but this is not a problem unique to them. Though they reflect Armenia rather than Iran itself, the high level of cultural affinity between Armenia and Iran diminishes this problem.

The *Gahnamak* ranked nobles by their *gah* (throne, or rank, which had a practical consideration regarding seating arrangements at royal banquets), *The Military List* ranked the nobles by the number of horsemen they commanded, with Adontz suggesting that the ability to command 300 "knights" the *de facto* prerequisite to being considered a 'proper' *naχarar* (grandee, or magnate).[438] The numbers recorded in the list are fictional; the Mamikoneans are said to command only 1000 men (a number far below their historical status would suggest), and are not ranked highly even within the nobles commanding a force of this size, whilst the Siwnik and Kadmēaci houses are said to command forces far larger than anyone else (19,400

[434] *Ibid*, p. 232.
[435] ŁP, II. 39, 42.
[436] Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, p. 228.
[437] *Ibid*, pp. 183, 228.
[438] *Ibid*, p. 210.

and 13,200, the next highest being 4,500).[439] The Kadmēaci are a fictional family, being the purported descendants of Cadmos, one of the companions of Hayk, one of greatest heroes of Armenian mythology,[440] whilst the inflated number of cavalry associated with the house of Siwnik most likely reflects a Siwni origin for the text. Though we can discount the numbers, the social implications which underpin the *Military List* remain significant. If we accept that this document has a Siwni origin, which is likely but unprovable, the presentation of the Siwni military resources indicates that there was a perception that rank could be linked to military power (and so resources), and exaggerating one's own military following was a means of augmenting one's own status.

The concept of ranking nobility in relation to the king given by the *Gahnamak* fits with that given by the various office holders enumerated by Šāpur I in his inscription at Naqš-i Rustam, which seems to have ranked the courtly nobility, though the underlying schema is unclear.[441] The manner of ranking in such works as the *Gahnamak* suggests a society where rank was precisely delineated – not just broadly classified. However, these texts offer different means of ranking – the *Gahnamak* indicates rank was linked to familial status, which *The Military List* seemingly ascribes rank to the control of military resources. There is no way of knowing which schema was more generally subscribed to, perhaps indicating that we should not be too eager to seek one unitary method by which the Sasanians perceived rank.

Some myths recorded by Moses Khorenatsʿi seem to suggest the idealisation of absolutely stable social status and family property. He recalled how the great houses had the borders of their principalities established in ancient antiquity, and so their inheritances were

[439] *Ibid*, pp. 193-195.
[440] MK, I.10-12.
[441] Maricq, 'Res Gestae', pp. 320-330.

fixed.[442] These tales recorded by Moses should not be treated as true, doubtless being warped by the political desires of contemporaries, as evidenced by Moses largely writing out the Mamikoneans from his history, including from the establishment of the ancient principalities. However, what these tales indicate is how Armenian (and so arguably Iranian) aristocrats perceived their lands – they were seen as ancestral possessions, the borders of which were established in mythic times, and so in some sense beyond the authority of any temporal power. Of course these inheritances did change over time (Moses himself records examples of families rising and falling in status), but the mentality underpinning the myths seems one which believed deeply in the inherent stability of inheritance, and any fluctuation in status an aberration.

The idealisation of the ossification of status could only have been a hindrance to the king's freedom to disburse patronage, potentially lessening one of his major powers, or at least making it more politically difficult to wield. In *The Epic Histories*, the author offers a description of the aftermath of the reconciliation between King Aršak and the Mamikonean house, whereby we see the 'ideal' of social order and royal rule – every noble was ordered according to his (hereditary) rank, and the king distributed offices to the worthy nobles (in practice usually meaning the confirmation of hereditary titles).[443] Similarly, Łazar states one of the conditions for the negotiated Armenian submission to the Sasanians in the later fifth century was a promise to maintain social stratifications, and the settlement in general appears as a return to the *status quo ante*.[444] These reconfirmations of the social order have parallels in *The Shahnameh*, where the high-points of Kavus' reign show him ruling wisely, and giving titles and offices to the lords, especially if they already seem to have had that status (so Rostam was

[442] MK I.12.
[443] *BP*, IV.ii.
[444] ŁP, III.89, 92.

made, or more likely confirmed, "paladin of paladins", for instance).[445] These sections from Armenian histories and *The Shahnameh* suggest that the best thing a king could do was rule with magisterial inactivity, confirming aristocrats with their ancestral rights and privileges, and changing nothing. Not giving nobles their traditional status was seen as a grave insult,[446] and potentially very dangerous to the king (an issue discussed below in Chapter 3.4), whilst restoring noble houses to their traditional status seems to have been celebrated.[447]

Rank was not completely ossified in practice, but we have very little evidence of social mobility. Kirdīr attests that Hormozd I raised his rank because of service to the crown and the gods.[448] Moses Khorenatsʿi i records that Ardašīr I raised the Mamikoneans to the fifth rank of the Armenian nobility, and restored the Kamsarakan and Amatuni families to the nobility, but to a lower rank than hitherto.[449] However, in the wider context of his narrative, Moses' statement could be seen as supporting the notion of social ossification as an ideal. Though not denying the reality of kings having the power to raise the status of individuals, we would suggest in the context of Moses' anti-Mamikonean bias and the idealisation of stability of status within the aristocracy, it is likely that Moses introduced this raising of the Mamikoneans by royal decree in the third century, in the time of recorded history, and only a little over two centuries before his purported – though not actual – time of writing, to *diminish* the status of the Mamikoneans in the eyes of his audience. Moses did not include the Mamikoneans among his list of ancient princely houses, implying that the Mamikoneans were rather *parvenu* compared to the princely houses of the Bznuni, Orduni, *et al*, despite these houses appearing less significant than the Mamikoneans in most literary histories. Given that Moses clearly sought to diminish the Mamikoneans with his text, and could easily have said nothing at all

[445] FD, 376-378, 408-409.
[446] e.g. *BP*, IV.liv.
[447] e.g. MK III.51.
[448] Gignoux, *Les Quatre Inscriptions*, p. 68.
[449] MK, III.51

about their origins (they appear in his narrative extremely sparingly considering their historical significance), it certainly seems likely that the author saw status raised through royal decree as in some sense shameful when compared to status gained through inheritance since time immemorial.

This interpretation is supported by the treatment of one of the very few other recorded instances of social mobility within the Sasanian world, the elevation of Smbat Bagratuni by Ḵosrow II to the *de facto* ruler of much of the Sasanian north-east. This was an unusual example of swift social advancement, an atypical act which is surely indicative of Ḵosrow II's unpopularity amongst the Iranian elite in the 590s, and his urgent need for military support. Sebēos treated this very positively, and he seemingly used pro-Bagratuni sources.[450] However, Ferdowsī, who had no reason to favour Smbat, presents Ḵosrow's appointment as an almost comical punishment for the population of north-eastern Iran, with Smbat being described as an ugly, red-haired, buck-toothed hunchback, selected for his stupidity, cruelty and immorality.[451] Though Ferdowsī's account is highly fictionalised (indeed, Ferdowsī does not actually name Ḵosrow's appointee, and the rebellion of Besṭām is omitted entirely, though from the context it cannot refer to anything other than Smbat's appointment), it is highly informative regarding the opinion of Ferdowsī's audience upon appointments of this nature. The elevation of Smbat is one of the very few attested examples of social mobility in Sasanian history, and the treatment of it in Iranian tradition, where the appointment is viewed with a mixture of horror, contempt and humour, and certainly not to the credit of Ḵosrow, is probably indicative of wider opinions on society. Though Sebēos presents a more historically plausible scenario, Ferdowsī gives us some idea as to the reception amongst the Iranian elite. Social elevation is treated as an aberration, and something rather shameful for a king to do. Given

[450] Seb, 24-25, 27-28; Howard-Johnston, 'Introduction', pp. lxvii-lxviii.
[451] FD, 1986-1987.

the treatment of this episode, this example also indicates the potential political dangers in a king exercising patronage to elevate relatively minor lords well above their birth status.

Indeed, evidence from *The Epic Histories* might suggest that upholding the social order and the hereditary principle was *more* important than royal service, discussed below. At one juncture, the *bdeašχs* Bakur, the prince of Ałjnikʿ, went over to the Persians, transferring his principality to Persian, rather than Armenian, over-lordship – officially splitting from one's lord like this appears as a serious offence. This action was punished by a coalition of nobles, who killed Bakur, his brothers and all but one of his sons, and chased out his Persian allies. However, Bakur's last son, Kesha, escaped, finding shelter with Vačē Mamikonean, who had played no part in the punitive action. Kesha, at a later date, went on to inherit his ancestral possessions.[452] The positive treatment of the Mamikonean involvement in this episode suggests that apparently going against the king in order to safeguard the inheritance of innocent heirs was intrinsically meritorious.

There are echoes of this in the example of the Persian great house of Kārin, which seems to have suffered greatly in the early Sasanian period through their attachment to the Parthian Arsacids. Moses Khorenatsʿi records that the Kārin family, unable to unify with other anti-Sasasnian forces, was mostly destroyed by Ardašīr, with only one boy escaping to shelter with relatives amongst the Kushans.[453] Yet the Kārin presence amongst the magnates and dignitaries on the ŠKZ and the Paikuli Inscription shows the family was quickly rehabilitated.[454] By the later Sasanian period the house of Kārin was one of the dominant forces in Sasanian politics,[455] perhaps best illustrated by a representative of this family, Sūkhrā, being largely responsible for defeating the Hepthalites in the aftermath of Pērōz's death, apparently without

[452] *BP*, III.ix.
[453] MK, II.72-73.
[454] Maricq, 'Res Gestae', L. 57 (p. 322); Paikuli, 2.17 (p. 22).
[455] See Pourshariaiti, *Decline and Fall*, ch. 2.4-2.5 for an overview of the Karins in late Sasanian affairs.

support from the central government.[456] Similarly, by the time of the Arab Conquest, the Mihrāns seem to have become powerful in Ray once again, despite the fall of Bahrām Čōbīn fifty years earlier.[457] It seems that regardless of the 'crimes' a magnate might commit, it did not impede the rehabilitation of their heirs, or their right to inherit ancestral lands. This inclines us to see a wider belief in the permanence of rank, with kings apparently seeing it as beneficial to restore disgraced families, rather than to use their confiscated estates to elevate new families of supporters. The literary sources we have at our disposal certainly suggest that the act of restoring the status of nobles, even if their ancestors had acted against the king, was far more praiseworthy than elevating new families, and that, in some sense, the great families were too important to be allowed to fail or be destroyed.

Given the idealisation of stability of status amongst the elite, one can only see a system with a closely defined concept of rank as a hindrance to royal action, making substantive changes in the social order more politically difficult. As we shall discuss below, there seems to have been a belief that denying a lord his hereditary status was a legitimate reason for rebellion, making decisive royal action over appointments potentially dangerous. The ideal of kingship as expressed in the *Shahnameh* is one of confirming status and ruling wisely (which often meant changing nothing, or a return to the *status quo ante*), one which largely accords with what we see in Armenian literature, suggests that a pronounced belief in the hereditary principle, and strong displeasure at altering it, was widely diffused.

The Sasanian nobility was a stratified organism, where status (in theory at least) could be more-or-less precisely defined, as we see by concepts of *gah* and the Armenian texts pertaining to this. Though in reality, the ranking of nobility must have been less exact than the

[456] Ṭab. 873.
[457] *Ibid*, 2654-2655. Pourshariati believes that general Shahrvarāz, who briefly usurped the throne in 629, was a Mihrān. This is possible, but we see Pourshariati's arguments as less than conclusive. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 159, 181-182.

ideal suggested, the notion of a precisely ordered nobility surely made aristocrats inherently defensive over their status.

We have few clearly attested examples of kings raising and lowering the status of families or individuals in the extant sources, and these are often in unusual circumstances, and one which as far as we can see was controversial and probably entailed political risks. Kirdīr, who seems to have moved from the modest nobility to a major figure, was as far as we can tell a unique example of relatively high social climbing through service to Šāpur I through to Bahrām II. Through service to Ḵosrow II, Smbat Bagratuni was elevated from the status of a relatively minor Armenian lord to effectively ruling a large part of the Sasanian Empire.[458] Given that we have only two well documented cases of relatively pronounced social mobility, it is very difficult to assess how representative the cases of Kirdīr and Smbat Bagratuni were, though the recorded reception to the elevation of Smbat does suggest that such cases of social advancement were sufficiently rare to remain shocking. We are however relatively confident in arguing that the Sasanian aristocracy's martial qualities and apparent idealisation of stability of status can only have been problematic from the point of view of a central government wanting to rule independently. It certainly offers more support to Pourshariati's thesis than Christensen's.

3.2 – The hereditary principle

Heredity appears to have been extraordinarily significant for the Late Antique Iranian aristocracy, with strong evidence for the desirability of inheritance, and the safeguarding of assets and status within the family. We have already touched upon issues relating to the hereditary principle in Chapter 3.1, concerning *gah* and the impression which comes through strongly from the Armenian material regarding the origins of some noble domains. Issues

[458] See Seb, 24-25, 27-28, FD, 1986-1987.

relating to the hereditary principle will also be discussed below in relation to rebellions. Certainly, the significance of heredity is treated more meaningfully in our sources than issues relating to service to the king.

Heritable offices and heritable landed assets are not the same thing, but both are based on a fundamentally similar mentality. The heritability of assets, through the nature of inheritance law, seems to be a given. The official status of heritable offices is more complex, though there is some evidence for the latter, both in Iran proper and more pronouncedly in Armenia.

Armenian histories, especially *The Epic Histories* and the work of Moses Khorenatsʿi, contribute substantially to our understanding. The most pertinent Armenian material to this issue has already been discussed in 3.1, or will be discussed in more depth in 3.4 below, so to avoid repetition, we will treat the Armenian material here more briefly than perhaps it deserves. Moses Khorenatsʿi, as we saw above, stated that the borders of the most prestigious Armenian principalities were set in ancient antiquity.[459] These fictitious origin myths reflect a mentality which idealised the ossification of status.

The Epic Histories contains much of relevance regarding heredity. The most extreme example is the story concerning the transmission of the office of katʿołikos to the manifestly unfit sons of Yusik, Pap and Atʿanginēs, involving the forced ordination of these violent and sexually profligate youths.[460] The author seems to put the blame for this on the youths in question, viewing ordination at sword-point a sensible way of attempting to solve the problem, the personal qualities and opinions of the heirs of Yusik apparently being irrelevant. Despite the obvious unsuitability of Pap and Atʿanginēs, after they had been (in the author's

[459] MK, I.12.
[460] *BP*, III.xiii, xv

opinion) struck down by God, the son of Atʿanginēs still became the next katʿołikos.[461] These episodes illustrate the lengths the Armenian nobility (and so, arguably, the Iranian too) went in upholding the hereditary principle.

The transmission of the office of *sparapet*, the hereditary possession of the Mamikonean house, a term cognate with the Iranian *spahbadh*, was similarly transmitted by hereditary succession without apparent regard for the titular *sparapet*'s fitness to carry out the duties of office. After the death of Vačʿē Mamikonean, his young son Artawazd was made *sparapet* as he was the last male of that house. As he was too young to perform the duties of the office, these were undertaken by other princes who were related to the Mamikoneans by marriage.[462] It is significant that Artawazd was legally the *sparapet* from what appears near infancy, rather than being elevated to the office on the attainment of his majority. The thought of having a non-Mamikonean as the titular *sparapet,* even if temporarily, does not seem to have been considered. It is also significant that this office passed to young Artawazd without any reference to the king; King Xosrov was present at Artawazd's investiture, and was involved in making sure the people actually charged with carrying out the duties of the office raised the boy properly, but he does not appear as choosing who the titular *sparapet* would be. Certainly, the king bestowing a hereditary rank was desirable – this was a significant part of the Aršakuni-Mamikonean reconciliation, for instance.[463] However, it is clear that the Mamikoneans were deemed to hold the office of *sparapet* regardless of whether the king bestowed it on them or not.[464] It is possibile that this is a literary dimension to the anonymous author's representation of these events, but even if this were the case, the account is predicated on a deep belief in the importance of inheritance above practical considerations.

[461] *BP*, III.xix
[462] *Ibid*, III.xi.
[463] *Ibid*, IV.ii.
[464] See too *Ibid* V.i, where Mušel Mamikonean just "became" *sparapet* after the death of the predecessor Vasak.

Indeed, during the conflict between King Varazdat and Manuel Mamikonean (discussed at greater length in 3.4), we see two important facets of Armenian conceptions of the hereditary principle.[465] Firstly, denying an aristocrat his hereditary rights was perceived as a legitimate reason for deposing the king. Secondly, it is clear that the author believed that the Mamikoneans were the 'real' *sparapets* regardless of what the king might have ordered – Manuel Mamikonean came back from fighting the Kushans and made himself *sparapet* – it was seen as naturally part of the Mamikonean patrimony, an office "his ancestors had naturally wielded from the very beginning".[466] Clearly, the author believed the king lacked the authority to choose his own *sparapet*, seemingly suggesting the hereditary principle outweighed royal wishes, with status existing wholly independently of the royal will. Sebēos records Sasanian kings bestowing ranks which would have been held by hereditary right anyway. Kawād I granted Vahan Mamikonean the office of *marzban* of Armenia and his familial principality, and later Kawād II made Varaztirotsʿ, the son of Smbat Bagratuni, *tanuter* (the head of his house), *marzban*, and granted him authority over "all his ancestral possessions."[467] Kawād II seemingly wanted to honour Varaztirotsʿ, and as such we should see this as illustrating the desirability of the king confirming offices and titles, as well as affirming nominal Sasanian overlordship. However, we get no sense that royal confirmation was necessary to hold the land, and as we shall discuss in Chapter 3.4, interfering with the hereditary principle, certainly in Armenia, was politically dangerous.

It is certainly possible Armenian practice was more independent of central control than was typical for Iran proper. However, as has been established, a common aristocratic culture was shared between Iran and Armenia, and if this extreme cultural attachment to heredity applied to the Armenian elite, it is difficult to see it being absent in Iran proper. Also,

[465] *Ibid*, V.xxxvii
[466] *Ibid*, V.xxxvii.
[467] Seb, 8, 40.

we should consider what was discussed in Chapter 2.3, concerning the late Sasanian *spahbadh* bullae, and what appears a *de facto* hereditary approach to military command in the Sasanian north (and perhaps east) until the end of the Empire. Though perhaps less extreme, the Sasanian experience in some areas of the Empire might not have been dissimilar.

Turning to sources from within the Iranian world proper, *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* further evidences the significance of heredity, showing that the legal framework was heavily weighted towards providing heirs, and so for keeping assets within families. Incestuous marriages and the widescale acceptance of adoption would have made a man dying intestate an extremely rare occurance.[468]

The concept of the *stūr* (someone, either a woman or a man, who was entrusted with providing an heir for a dead man, or for a man who knew he could not produce an heir himself) and *stūrīh* (stūr-ship, that is, the status of being a *stūr*) are commonplace in the text, with over 100 references to them.[469] We also have references to *čakar*-marriage, whereby a widow would remarry, but any offspring would be legally considered the heirs of her dead husband.[470] The offspring of *čakar*-marriage in *The Law Book* were considered full heirs in the absence of 'natural' heirs, and they were legally considered brothers, sons, *etc*.[471] What should impress us is the obvious legal and social significance of *stūrīh* and *čakar*-marriages, which

[468] Maria Macuch, 'Inheritance i. Sasanian Period', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/inheritance-i>, [10 April, 2014]; Maria Macuch, 'Incestuous Marriage in the Context of Sasanian Family Law', in Maria Macuch, Dieter Weber and Desmond Durkin-Mesiterernst (eds.), *Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies: Proceedings of the 6th European Conference of Iranian Studies, held in Vienna, 18-22 September 2007*, (Wiesbaden, 2010), pp. 136-137, 141.

[469] See Garsoïan, *The Book of a Thousand Judgements,* pp. 387-8 for references. See *LB*, 41, 2 – 50, 17 (pp. 111-133) for the most concentrated collection of legal cases concerning *stūr*ship. See too Mansour Shaki, 'Family Law: i. In Zoroastrianism', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica: Online Edition*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/family-law#i>, [12 December, 2013]; and Mansour Shaki, 'Čakar' in *Encyclopaedia Iranica (Online Edition)*, < http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cakar-a-middle-persian-legal-term-denoting-a-widow-who-at-the-death-of-her-authorized-padixsayiha-q>, [12 December, 2013]. See too LoT, pp. 46-47.

[470] Macuch, 'Incestuous Marriage', pp. 142-143.

[471] *LB*, 28, 5-9.

existed purely to keep assets within a family, and the implicit support this must have had from the state to be legally codified in such a way. The text gives the impression that if even if one had an heir one still had to have a *stūr*; men with a value of over 60 *satērs* had to have a nominated *stūr*, even if he had legitimate sons.[472] *The Law Book* also mandated that if a man had a doubtful claim to something, a provisional *stūr* was to be appointed until clarification was possible.[473] Furthermore, if the best candidate for a *stūr* was not found at their usual residence, they were to be found, presumably indicating that if one tried to evade being a *stūr,* there was a system in place to stop one evading one's duties.[474]

The significance of *stūr*ship and *čakar*-marriages in *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* is that it proves not only did society value heredity to a pronounced degree, but such a social predilection was incorporated into legal practice, demonstrating state recognition. The wider implication of this was that it would have added to the ossification of the social order, and weakened the powers of patronage of the state. In mediaeval European monarchies, manipulating ward-ships and inheritance (especially complicated inheritances involving minors) was a major means for the king to exert power over the aristocracy, dispense patronage, and, especially, as a means of gaining revenue.[475] One would suggest that a system which helped to ensure inheritance gave the government one less means of control, and can only have reduced the power of the government, as it minimised the lands which might revert

[472] Macuch, 'Incestuous Marriage', p. 144; *LB* 81, 11-17.
[473] *LB*, A14, 7-9.
[474] *Ibid*, a31, 3-5.
[475] See eg. Scott L. Waugh, 'The Fiscal Uses of Royal Wardships in the Reign of Edward I', in *Thirteenth Century England: I: Proceedings of the Newcastle Upon Tyne Conference, 1985*, P.R. Coss and S.D. Lloyd (eds.) (Woodbridge 1985), see for example p. 57; proceeds from holding wardships brought in profits of nearly £900 a year in the later 13th century, a quite significant sum. At this time, the entire government expenditure (in a time of frequent warfare) was averaging under £40,000 a year, and running the royal household cost around £12,000, see D.A. Carpenter, 'The Plantagenet Kings', in David Abulafia (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History: Volume V c. 1198-c. 1300* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 348. See too Scott L. Waugh, *The Lordship of England: Royal Wardships and Marriages in English Society and Politics, 1217-1327*, (Princeton, 1988), pp. 207-231; see too ch. 6 for the political costs of egregious manipulation of wardships.

to the control of a superior lord, such as the king. Certainly, the Sasanian crown seems to have exploited complicated inheritances when the opportunity arose; Łazar records that King Balāš refused a demand that the heir to the Arcruni inheritance be allowed to take up his ancestral lands until "the men of that family may be able to show some worthy service to us", showing that when the king had the chance to use a complex inheritance to his benefit he would do so.[476] However, the legal framework as expressed in *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* presumably greatly reduced the likelihood of such situations arising.

The Book of a Thousand Judgements also includes provisions which state that a man's offices (his "dignities") were not to be inherited.[477] By its very nature, a law forbidding the inheritance of offices reveals that this practice occurred, though there is no indication as to how common this was – it could equally have been a habitual or a freak occurrence. Does this suggest that hereditary office holding was deemed undesirable? Or did it mean that in practice the government wanted to be involved in confirming hereditary appointments, merely stopping people treating offices solely as a personal possession without reference to higher authority? The lack of historical context makes it impossible to say what this law meant in practice. It certainly suggests that some people treated offices as heritable property, but it is difficult to say more than that. We would suggest, given what we saw regarding the seemingly heritable status of certain *spahbadhs*, and the frequent confusion by Roman historians between Persian names and titles discussed previously,[478] that to an extent there was an element of *de facto* heritability to offices, and this law shows that the government perceived it as a problem. It is noteworthy that the late date and the origin of the *Law Book* from a relatively closely governed part of the Empire (Fārs being the home province of the Sasanians) should perhaps incline us to expect to see more implicit state interference than might have

[476] ŁP, III.96.
[477] *LB*, 42, 14-15.
[478] See p. 127.

been the case in more peripheral areas. In itself, this law does not tell us much, but in the context of the deep-seated attachment to heredity, we could see it as evidence of a lack of control over office holding by the government, and an indication of some *de facto* heritability of office, even in relatively centralised areas.

Though the range of sources upon which we might draw is limited, they seem to paint a compelling picture. The political situation in Armenia was not an exact parallel with that of Iran, and we would not suggest that all (or even many) major offices in the Sasanian Empire proper were the fiercely guarded hereditary possessions of aristocratic houses, as the offices of katʿołikos and *sparapet* were in Armenia. However, given the similarity between elite culture in Armenia and Iran, we see no reason why the strong attachment to the hereditary principle was absent in Iran, given the clear importance of it in Armenia. The aforementioned law in *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* banning the hereditary transfer of offices suggests that there were attempts by the nobility to make office holding as hereditary as possible. Most forcefully of all, *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* strongly shows the obsession, and obsession is not too strong a word, for keeping assets within families, with what might appear extreme lengths apparently being taken to ensure heirs were provided. Clearly, the attachment to heredity was immense.

For our wider question, this can only be seen as supportive of Pourshariati's thesis. Though we are not denying the ability of some Sasanian kings to control some appointments, we can identify plenty of cultural opposition to the government exercising this power, and know of no voice championing the merits of the royal involvement in appointments or inheritance, though given the paucity of our sources any arguments from silence are necessarily cautious. We would argue that the Sasanian elite seem to have been inordinately protective of their inherited prerogatives, and there is no surviving indication they were

amenable to the levels of royal control needed for the king to exercise complete authority over appointments, though there might well have been localised variation in patterns of appointments, and the stronger and more astute kings probably had more effective control than weaker ones.

In general, the idealisation of social stability does not cohere with a Christensenian reading of Sasanian Iran, as the strong attachment to heredity must have made the exercise of royal patronage politically more difficult than it otherwise might have been. However, the idealisation of social ossification also safeguarded the king's position, and one can appreciate how a wise king could take advantage of the deep respect for inherited status held by the elite.

3.3 – Royal Service and Consultation

In general, the Sasanian aristocracy seem to have had a deeply ingrained service mentality. Though the desire for rewards (however they might be realised) must have been signifciant, the importance of serving kings in the relevant literary sources indicate that royal service was perceived as intrinsically honourable and desirable. However, running parallel to this service mentality was a belief that the king should consult with the aristocracy, and take into account their demands at significant junctures. Indeed, under certain circumstances, it seems to have been acceptable to withdraw one's service entirely, and perhaps even turn against the king.

In *The Epic Histories* we see some of the fullest expressions of the intrinsic desirability of service to one's lawful lord, perhaps best illustrated by this extract:-

"The valiant general, the *sparapet* of Armenia…faithfully and through just labour exhausted himself, and laboured on account of the kingdom of Armenia. Day and night he was diligent. He endeavoured and suffered much through command in the war, and he did not

permit at all, not one handful, of earth to be taken away from the borders of the land of Armenia. To live and die for the country, for [his] valorous name, for native lords, and for inhabitants of the country, for the Christian faith, for people faithful to God and baptised in Christ, for [the] church, and for consecrated vessels, for chapels of the martyrs of Christ, for [the] covenant of God, for sisters and brothers, for relations of the family, for good friends; constantly Mušeł the general was in valour of the battle [fighting valorously in battle], rendering [sacrificing] himself instead of the land. And he preserved his life for death, he laboured every day of his life, for his native Aršakuni lords."[479]

Here we see the clear articulation of the ideology of service to one's lord (though service to one's own family was also very important), and makes clear that such service was perceived as intrinsically honourable. Following the atrocities Mušeł committed to bring rebel or separatist regions under royal authority, it certainly seems that disobedience to one's lord was a most serious offence, if the punishments meted out by Mušeł were considered reasonable punishment for them (as the author seems to believe was the case).[480] It has to be stressed that the then monarch, Pap, is presented as a poor king, with very little, if anything, to commend him in the eyes of the author.

The desire to serve one's lord, and to honour his good name, was portrayed as something which ideally trumped all good sense and caution. In another, probably apocryphal, tale, the author of *The Epic Histories* records that when King Aršak of Armenia and Vasak Mamikonean were at the court of Šāpur II, Vasak overheard the Persian king's ախոռապետ (aχoŕapet, head of the stables) insulting Aršak, offering a bale of hay for the "king of the

[479] *BP*, V.xx
[480] *Ibid*, V.viii-xix.

Armenian goats" to sit upon. Vasak, preferring death to hearing his lord insulted, decapitated Šāpur's chief of the stables in rage. On hearing about the incident, Šāpur praised the loyalty of Vasak, and rewarded him for the great love he showed his lord.[481] This tale illustrates an ideal of service to one's lord, and how one should defend his good name, no matter what the potential personal cost.

However, the anonymous author also apparently believed that there was a point at which it was acceptable to withdraw one's service. After a long period of prolonged warfare between Armenia and Iran, King Aršak was forced to come to terms with Šāpur II because his nobility refused to fight for him any more – they had simply had enough.[482] Though St. Nersēs is portrayed as trying to dissuade the nobles from their course of action, the author does not condemn their actions. As a cleric, one might assume the author's sympathies lay with St. Nersēs' argument, but he does not suggest that the nobles' actions were cowardly or dishonourable, and he certainly takes for granted their right to withdraw their support. After having already done much loyal service for the king, the author apparently viewed it as permissable (though perhaps not good) for the Armenian lords to withdraw their service, and force Aršak to change policy against his wishes and interests. Though the contexts are very different, this case is not dissimilar from Rostam's response of going on an unrestrained bout of drinking when summoned to fight for Kay Kavus (which we discuss below), sharing as it does the theme of not doing service (or offering service on one's own terms) when one had already done substantial service in the past. This strongly suggests that there was a point, which must have fluctuated greatly in practice, when it was considered acceptable to withdraw one's service from the king.

[481] *Ibid*, IV.xvi.
[482] *Ibid*, IV.li-lii.

Łazar's history offers a similar impression to that provided by *The Epic Histories*. The hero of Łazar's history, Vardan Mamikonean, publicly proclaims his loyalty and service to Yazdegerd II, a king recorded as attempting to re-impose Zoroastrianism on Armenia – something which the cleric Łazar abhorred.[483] This only serves to accentuate the inherent desirability of royal service – in both *The Epic Histories* and the history of Łazar, the authors used service to kings they considered irredeemably corrupt or immoral as a way of burnishing the reputation of their heroes. Royal service seems to have been perceived as conferring glory on the servant, regardless of the personal qualities of the king.

We also see the sentiment of the acceptable limits of service expressed towards the end of Łazar's history, where he presents in idealised terms the reconciliation between the Armenian princes, headed by Vahan Mamikonian, and King Balash. Łazar puts into Vahan's mouth a recognition of Sasanian authority and superiority "you are our natural lords, we are your natural subjects", but also adds the caveat "do not make our duties/obligations excessive."[484] It is significant that in this account of idealised royal-magnate reconciliation, Łazar saw fit to stress not only the recognition of hierarchy, but also the condition of reasonable demands. Similarly, Sebēos records Mušeł Mamikonean, in his meeting with Ḵosrow II after the victory over Bahrām Čōbīn, described himself as "raised by my ancestors and forefathers as a companion [սննդակից, brought up together, friend, fellow] to kings," and as such someone defined from birth as intimately involved in royal service, yet he will not obey Ḵosrow's command to disarm in the royal presence, strongly implying that Mušeł distrusted the king. Disobeying this particular royal command was presented as natural and reasonable.[485] The recognition (and desirability) of service went hand in hand with the

[483] ŁP, II.26, 28.
[484] *Ibid*, III.92.
[485] Seb, 12.

assumption that the king would not abuse his position, and that the noble retained well defined rights.

We might also use the depiction of Rostam in *The Shahnameh* as a model. Though a fictional character, Rostam's behaviour and motives in *The Shahnameh* must have resonated with the poem's audience. Rostam's life is dominated by royal service. Whenever the king calls on him, he offers his services. There is no justification for this – serving the king, even an unfit king, is presented as the natural behaviour of an aristocrat of Rostam's status. Rostam was generally rewarded for his efforts – he does not obey commands merely through duty, but the poem strongly suggests that material advancement was not his primary motive.

However, sometimes Rostam's service was grudging, and offered with insults and tardiness. In one episode, when ordered to defend Iran against a dangerous Turanian invasion, Rostam wilfully ignored Kavus' summons for four days, delaying an increasingly frantic royal messenger, because he wanted to enjoy himself and was too drunk or too hung-over to do anything.[486] When Rostam finally made it to court, he ignored Kavus' rebuke for his lateness, telling the king to his face that he was an unfit ruler. Though the two were later reconciled, it was the king who backed down.[487] Rostam is something of an anarchic character, and as an epic hero operated outside the normal limits of acceptable behaviour.[488] However, his brazen flaunting of the royal will suggests that the audience of *The Shahanameh* saw entertainment in disrespecting the king, and as such, indicates the limits of the desirability of royal service. However, it must be stressed that Rostam's drunken tardiness only arose after much dutiful service had been done for Kay Kavus. One would suggest that the ideal expressed through *The*

[486] FD, 460-465.
[487] *Ibid*, 466-472.
[488] Davis, 'Rustam-i Dastan', p. 231.

Shahnameh is one of reciprocity: ideally, nobles would give kings a good level of service, and would in return receive honourable rewards and not have their service instincts abused.

The only non-royal inscriptions from the Sasanian period, those of Kirdīr and Mehr Narseh, offer a highly illustrative expression of the views of their patrons, suggesting their publicly stated position relative to the king.

The sentiment of the inherent honour of service is echoed in the inscriptions of Kirdīr. Kirdīr had served Šāpur I, Hormozd I and Bahrām I and II, and opened his inscription with the statement that he was a "good servant to the gods and the lords".[489] Kirdīr wanted to show himself in the best possible light with his own inscription, and so we ought not to be surprised he dwelled upon his service to various kings rather than the material rewards he most likely accrued, but his focus on his royal service further indicates the perceived honour of it. Kirdīr was an undoubted 'winner' of royal service, being raised through it (on the evidence of his own inscription) from relative obscurity to a highly exalted position. Despite these caveats, Kirdīr's texts fit with the ethos of service as expressed elsewhere.

However, the much shorter fifth century inscription of Mehr Narseh, inscribed on the bridge he built near Fīrūzābād, offers a somewhat different impression. Given the brevity of the inscription, it is worth quoting in full:

"This bridge was built by the order of Mehr Narseh, the *wuzurgframādār*, for the benefit of his soul, at his own expense. Whoever has come on this road, let him give a blessing to Mehr Narseh and his sons for that he thus bridged this crossing. And while God give help, wrong and deceit there shall be none therein"[490]

[489] Gignoux, 'Les Quatre Inscriptions', pp. 36-37 (lines 1-2).
[490] Translation from Walter B. Henning, 'The Inscription of Firuzabad', *Asia Major* N.S. 4/1, (1954b) (1954), pp. 98-102. See too Daryaee, 'Mehr-Narseh'.

This text does not mention the king primarily demonstrating Mehr Narseh's own wealth, piety, and the vitality of his own dynasty. The nearest it comes to mentioning royal service is stating Mehr Narseh held the office of *wuzurgframādār*, which in this context serves mainly to augment Mehr Narseh's own standing. This runs counter to the impression offered by Łazar, who presents Mehr Narseh as a highly influential royal counsellor,[491] and suggests that though outsiders perceived a particular Persian notable as closely intertwined with royal service, he himself might perceive his relationship with the crown rather differently.

Given the rarity of non-royal inscriptions, it would be imprudent to extrapolate too much from them. However, it is perhaps telling that the two we have suggest different conceptions of the relationship of their dedicator and the king. Kirdīr and Mehr Narseh were both heavily involved in royal service, each holding some of the most exalted offices of state. However, Mehr Narseh was not of relatively humble origins, but a representative of the Sūren great house, and as such did not owe most of his wealth or status to the kings he served. The inscription of Mehr Narseh might suggest that service to the king was perceived as less significant by the already powerful. The short inscription has nothing to say of the king, only the wealth, status and piety of Mehr Narseh, and the continuation of his own dynasty. If Mehr Narseh had wanted to stress his connection to the kings he served, he could easily have done so – adding another line to this inscription stating this would not have been difficult. The failure of Mehr Narseh to explicitly mention royal service perhaps indicates that by his own estimation, his status was not significantly related to the kings he served, however important this royal service may have been.

Though there was a sense that royal service was intrinsically desirable and honourable, this was tied to the belief that service had limits. As we have already seen, when Rostam

[491] See esp. ŁP, II.20-21.

thought the king was asking too much of him, he attended on the king after a delay spent in personal gratification; the Armenian lords forced Aršak to agree terms when they thought they had fought long enough. There is no sense that these examples of behaviour, which could in a negative light be treated as gross insubordination or mutiny, were viewed as immoral or in any sense 'illegal' by our authors.

Some of the epic literature gives the impression that there was no honour to be gained by serving immoral kings. Even the most glorious of kings were abandoned by their followers when they became corrupt or tyrannical. Ferdowsī wrote that the great king Jamshid, arguably the greatest of the mythic kings of *The Shahnameh* was abandoned by the lords when he turned from the path of righteousness, Ferdowsī stating that "[n]one who desired renown stayed in his presence".[492] Such a statement implies that it was seen as immoral to support a corrupt king, and the only honourable recourse was to leave his service. This must be set alongside the aforementioned instances from Armenian literature whereby virtuous nobles served kings who were (in the author's opinion) deeply immoral individuals. Context and personal factors must have been significant in determining the desirability and limits of royal service. We would not suggest that there was a unitary values system which applied to everyone.

Alongside the apparent belief in the desirability of royal service was a concomitant belief in the responsibilities the king owed to his nobles. In *The Shahnameh,* perhaps the best illustration comes late in Kai Ḵosrow's reign. The old king became melancholic, and refused to see the nobles of the court. This so perturbed the latter that they summoned Zal and Rostam, the most prominent of the lords, to try and persuade the *shah* to return to normal courtly proceedings, arguing that the king must be taking advice from Iblīs to behave in the way he

[492] FD, 27.

did. When Zal confronted Ḵosrow concerning his wilful isolation from the nobles, he argued that the king's behaviour was the way of Ahriman, and would lead to Ḵosrow losing his crown and his royal majesty.[493] Though Ḵosrow and Zal were ultimately reconciled, and Ferdowsī does not question the king's right to isolate himself, Ḵosrow's decision to do so was intensely problematic, and Zal's well-intended words show that non-engagement with the nobles was seen as intensely wrong. Ferdowsī's treatment of Ḵosrow's withdrawal from court suggests a view that a king had obligations to the nobility, and that the good order of the kingdom depended upon their cooperation.

This interpretation might be supported by Roman references to Persian kings conferring with the nobility,[494] or that a king could only accede to the throne through the consent of the nobles.[495] It is possible that the Roman writers exaggerated the formal power of the Persian noble assemblies, if they existed in a meaningful way at all; we would interpret these 'noble assemblies' as reflecting an ideal of consultation and consent, though without formal constitutional power. However, it does seem likely that, even if only nominally, consultation and assent were important features of the political process.

We have some indication that aristocratic assent conferred legitimacy upon a king when his claim to the throne might be less than clear, suggesting something of a symbiotic relationship, whereby the king could gain legitimacy through his association with the nobility. The Paikuli Inscription records Narseh's route to the throne in the late third century. This inscription could be seen as the articulation of a justification for the deposition of the legitimate king – as the eldest son of Bahrām II, Bahrām III should be seen as the legitimate ruler. As Narseh could not prosecute his rebellion on the claim of being the 'true' king, he had

[493] *Ibid*, 1405-1423
[494] AM, XVIII.5.6
[495] Proc, I.xxi.20.

to justify it somehow, so we might interpret the inscription as a justification for rebellion and deposition.

As the inscription is the only source offering insight into these events, from the context it is impossible to tell whether Narseh was the instigator of the plot, or the figurehead of a coterie of aristocratic rebels against Bahrām's government. The text presents Narseh as being in control of events, but not actively desirous of his nephew's throne, though we cannot be sure whether this was the case or not.[496] However, for our purposes, it is not overly significant, as the cultural implications of the inscription are equally applicable in either case. The justifications for Narseh's rebellion and accession are only meaningful if they held significance for the powerful strata of society, regardless of whether Narseh or his powerful partisans were the driving force behind his takeover.

Repeatedly, the inscription asserts the role of the collective will of the magnates in Narseh's taking of the throne. Bahrām III and his chief partisan Wahnām are presented as ruling without having consulted Narseh or the higher aristocracy, with this lack of consultation de-legitimising the new king.[497] Then Wahnām made pronouncements that he would kill the princes and seize their possessions, in response to which the princes invited Narseh to become king instead.[498] During the rebellion, Narseh enjoyed the consensual support of the majority of aristocrats, and offered Wahnām and Bahrām the opportunity to stop the fighting.[499] The focus of the inscription is on the evil counsel Wahnām gave to Bahrām III, whose alleged policies

[496] We think it more likely Narseh actively conspired to take the throne from Bahrām. It seems intrinsically more likely that many nobles would have been comfortable with Bahrām, given that he must have been very much younger than Narseh, and as such offering a greater potential for seigniorial autonomy than the much more mature and experienced Narseh might allow.
[497] Paikuli, lines 4-5.
[498] *Ibid*, lines 4-18, see too 63-90,
[499] *Ibid*, lines 16-18, 22-31,

appear as the spur of the rebellion; certainly the punishments meted out by Narseh fall upon Wahnām; the fate of Bahrām III is unrecorded.[500]

As the text should be treated as self-justification for removing the legitimate king from office, this inscription is highly illustrative for understanding the potential ethical, social and political justifications for rebellions and depositions. The accusation that Wahnām did not seek wider assent for Bahrām's accession, Narseh's frequent labouring of the widespread support he enjoyed from the princes and magnates, and the alleged aristocratic consensus that Narseh was the best person to be king, all indicate that the nobility had a legitimate role in issues of royal succession.

It suggests that there was an ideal of the king enjoying wider assent from the elite, and that in some sense such support was desirable, perhaps even necessary, for him to be king.[501] Indeed, the inscription seems to suggest that aristocratic assent itself was perceived as a legitimising force. The repeated record of lists of nobles supporting Narseh's actions, that he acted on their entreaties, and that they unanimously decided he was the best person to rule, as well as Wahnām being recorded as not having consulted anyone for his elevation of Bahrām, all points towards the perceived significance of the engagement of the 'community of the realm'.

Given the shortage of other sources treating the details of Sasanian successions, it would be unwise to extrapolate too far from the impression given by this inscription. However, as this inscription was in some sense a political and social justification for a coup, the presented role of the nobility in effectively selecting the king cannot be ignored. It shows that in the early Sasanian period at least, there was an ideal of aristocratic consent and perhaps

[500] *Ibid*, lines 60-62.
[501] *Ibid*, lines 10-18, 63-95. Note esp. 83-90 where the magnates assert that Narseh was the best person to be king.

even quasi-election (or staged election), which was sufficiently strong to justify replacing a legitimate king lacking aristocratic assent for one enjoying greater aristocratic support. Indeed, the inscription seems to suggest that an assembly of the aristocracy was competent to pronounce on questions of royal legitimacy. Though this inscription should be seen as self-justification for those involved in the coup against Bahrām III, if the consent of the nobility was considered irrelevant to matters of succession, surely the Paikuli inscription would not have dwelled upon it. The Paikuli inscription offers good evidence that in the early Sasanian period the will of the nobility was perceived by itself to bring legitimacy to kings, and feeds into the sense of a reciprocal relationship between kings and the nobility.

The detailed description of the accession of Bahrām V in the fifth century is also especially illustrative. The accession of Bahrām V has already been discussed in Chapter 2.4 above, focussing upon the legitimating power of his heroic qualities; here we will focus on the role of the nobility. The accession scene is treated at length by Ṭabarī and Ferdowsī, both offering an unusually large amount of detail on the role of the aristocracy.

Bahrām's father, Yazdegerd I, is presented in these traditions as cruel and tyrannical, and because of this the nobility did not want his son to inherit. Little judgement was passed on their decision, perhaps indicating a belief they were acting within their rights. Moses Khorenatsʿi recorded that Šāpur, Yazdegerd's eldest son, then ruling in Armenia, hastened to Ctesiphon and was promptly murdered by the courtly nobility.[502] This is not mentioned by Ṭabarī or Ferdowsī. The reason for the omission is unknowable, but failing to mention or reflect upon the murder of the heir apparent does make the representation of the courtly nobility and their arguments much more sympathetic than might have been the case.

[502] MK, III.56

Ṭabarī presents the courtly nobility, in conjunction with the people, as choosing Ḵosrow, a member of an ancillary line of the Sasanian house, to be king. When Bahrām arrived at Ctesiphon, with substantial support from Mundhir, king of the Lakhmid Arabs, he recognised the grievances held by the nobles. He denounced the behaviour of his father, and promised to put right all the wrongs Yazdegerd had done within a year, or abdicate. The nobles replied that Ḵosrow had been a fair ruler, but they would make Bahrām king if he could snatch the royal regalia from under two lions, a feat he managed manfully.[503] Ferdowsī's account is less conciliatory to the nobles, but largely agrees with Ṭabarī.[504] The differences are more of tone than of substance.

At no point do our authors present the actions of the courtly nobility as immoral or in any way illegal. Certainly, Bahrām was presented as the legitimate king, but the grievances of the nobles were seen as reasonable. When we turn to rebellions below, there are some indications that it was seen to have been acceptable to remove a tyrannical king and replace him with another member of the same house. Ferdowsī's neglect in mentioning Ḵosrow's Sasanian ancestry is an important factor in his less sympathetic treatment of these events. Though perhaps an idealised account, Bahrām was presented as respectfully considering the complaints of the nobility and responding to them fairly, indicating that the nobles' complaints were considered reasonable. Both authors, Ṭabarī more so than Ferdowsī, seem to predicate their accounts on the assumption that it was reasonable to influence successions away from direct descendants when the last king was considered a tyrant, or in some other way unfit.

We suspect that as Bahrām was supported by substantial forces, the threat of violence prompted a negotiated settlement under rather more duress than our sources suggest. However, regardless of the reality of the events surrounding Bahrām's accession, the cultural

[503] Ṭab, 859-863.
[504] FD, 1480-1487.

assumptions underpinning the representation of the events are significant. It is telling that histories largely composed from sources produced under the aegis of the Sasanian government presented the nobles as holding legitimate grievances, which Bahrām V sensitively addressed. Ṭabarī's account in particular strongly implies that negotiation, compromise and aristocratic assent were all considerations in Sasanian accessions. It would have been easy to present the actions of the courtly nobility as immoral, as they were standing in the way of the inheritance of the legitimate heir, as Bahrām was apparently Yazdegerd's eldest living son. The generally positive representation of the part played by the aristocracy in this episode further suggests an ideal of compromise and consultation between the king and nobility.

Therefore, the ideological framework of royal service held by the aristocracy was a nuanced one, and to an extent depended upon reciprocal behaviour from the king. There appears a natural predilection to serve the king. However, this service was tied to the expectation of reciprocal rewards (whether they be material, or to be consulted on important affairs of state), and the apparent belief that service could be delayed, or withdrawn entirely, if the king's demands became unreasonable. Though admittedly a tiny sample of sources, the different uses of royal service in the inscriptions of Kirdīr and Mehr Narseh suggest a nobleman's approach to the king and royal service somewhat depended upon his status. Without royal service, Kirdīr would have been an anonymous priest of modest rank, whilst Mehr Narseh would have been a slightly less powerful magnate, perhaps suggesting that magnates did not identify themselves through their royal service as such, as they had the means to sustain an exalted status without royal patronage.

What we can ascertain concerning the ideology of service amongst the Sasanian elite offers support to both the theses of Christensen and Pourshariati, but in different ways. Certainly, an aristocracy which saw royal service as intrinsically honourable, and to some

extent status being defined through one's association with the king, would be more in line with Christensen's thesis. Moreover, an aristocracy who saw it as their duty to serve the king would be more amenable to centralised control. Conversely, the desire for reward (however realised), the apparent belief in reciprocity in royal-aristocratic relations, and the limits of acceptable demands of service, feed into a model of nobles suspicious of royal control and protective of their prerogatives, a model which coheres with Pourshariati's thesis. We would suggest that this ambivalent situation supports the picture we have been painting thus far, whereby human agency seems to be the most important factor in the 'real' level of power of the Sasanian kings.

Royal service seems at some points to have been perceived as natural and honourable, and at others something which could legitimately be refused if the king was being unreasonable. The exact nature of 'reasonable' demands was not defined, and no doubt depended upon the competence of the king doing the demanding, and his ability to offer inducements. The approach to royal service offers some succour to both the theories of Christensen and Pourshariati. We would postulate that stronger kings could harness the natural service instincts of the aristocracy, and through successes be able to offer greater rewards without being perceived as abusing their good will. A less able king, on the other hand, would quickly exhaust the goodwill the nobility naturally felt towards him, making him less able to reward them, and inclining his aristocracy towards asserting their apparent right to withdraw their support from a king making unreasonable demands. Therefore, in common with issues hitherto discussed, we would see the conceptions of service apparently held by the Sasanian elite incline us towards seeing the power of the Sasanian monarchy as heavily dependent upon personal factors, with the king being as powerful as his talents and circumstances allowed him to be.

3.4 – Rebellion and Resistance

Alongside the belief in the desirability of royal service (with a concomitant belief in royal obligation), there seems to have been a recognition of how to legitimately resist kings in certain circumstances. Some of the cases discussed below were not full-blown rebellions, but they all represent examples of serious breakdown in royal-aristocratic relations. They attest to a general understanding that it was legitimate to offer proportional resistance to kings who were behaving immorally.

In *The Epic Histories* the Mamikoneans are generally defined through their service to the legitimate kings. Nevertheless, there are several recorded break-downs in Mamikonean-Aršakuni relations. Given the Mamikoneans are generally portrayed as loyal servants of the kings, these ruptures become especially illustrative. We have argued that all Mamikonean actions in *The Epic Histories* not explicitly condemned should be seen as acceptable, or at least defensible, behaviour. Though indubitably pro-Mamikonean, the author could not contravene the culture or expectations of his audience, with which the representation of Mamikonean behaviour had to generally accord. The failure of the author to condemn significant examples of Mamikonean resistance and revolt, when he condemned other acts committed by Mamikoneans, such as murder under royal orders, apostasy and fratricide,[505] suggests that these rebellions were seen as acceptable acts by the author, and so most likely on the part of his audience also. He could hardly present actions neutrally or favourably when his audience saw them as reprehensible.

On two occasions, the Mamikoneans intervened to stop the king killing innocents. For the first and more significant of these, Mamikonean resistance effectively took the form of informal secession from the realm. King Tiran, with the encouragement of his wicked advisor,

[505] See eg.*BP*, IV.xviii, xx, V.iii. xxxvi.

the *hayr-mardpet*, cruelly persecuted the houses of Ṙštuni and Arcruni, and was on the point of killing the last heirs of these families, when Artawazd and Vasak Mamikonean rescued the boys at sword-point from King Tiran's presence, taking them under their protection. The Mamikoneans abandoned their territories in Taron, and retreated to their mountainous stronghold of Tayk', where they seem to have effectively seceded from Armenia, only returning to wider involvement in Armenia after a reconciliation with Tiran's successor Aršak.[506] In a similar later example, King Aršak irrationally turned against the nobles (without the malign *hayr-mardpet* taking a portion of the blame for the crime); similarly, Vasak Mamikonean hid the last of the Spandarat family in his territory, later enabling the heir to inherit his ancestral lands.[507] These events are shown positively by the author, despite the Mamikoneans clearly disobeying the commands of the legitimate king. Indeed, in the first case, the forcible rescue of the boys might be seen as coming very close to insurrection.

Why were these events viewed in a positive light? It was not a simple case of horror on the part of the author at violence towards innocents. Mušeł Mamikonean inflicted horrific violence on rebellious regions on the orders of King Pap, including the mass crucifixion of the population of Virk', actions which the author views as highly positive.[508] Neither was it a case of pro-Mamikonean bias in the text – as we have already discussed, other crimes committed by Mamikoneans were criticised and the author could not go beyond the culture of his audience, presenting as positive things they perceived as abhorrent. We believe it is especially

[506] *Ibid*, III.xviii, IV.ii. The description of the reconciliation is as follows: "At that time, King Aršak searched for the family of the generals, for the tribe of the valiant Mamikoneans, especially because they were his tutors and foster-fathers. Then he went and found them in a fortress in their (own) country of Tayk, and he returned them [to the realm of Armenia] by appeasing them, because they had split and separated away, and [from] every deed of the Armenians, in the time of the madness of Tiran. And the King placed Vardan, the priest's brother [and the eldest] as the patriarch of his clan, and Vasak, the middle brother and his [Aršak's] tutor as *sparapet*, giving [to him] command of the army and affairs of war, and likewise he established the younger brother as a leader of the army."

[507] *Ibid*, IV.xix.

[508] *Ibid*, V.vii-xix. It is significant that the author strongly disliked Pap, especially because of his sexual preferences (IV.xliv). Nevertheless, he is portrayed as the legitimate king who it was honourable to serve.

significant that the Mamikonean secession is portrayed as withdrawal from the affairs of state, and so *technically* not impugning the dignity or status of the Aršakuni kings (even though in practice it probably did), whilst the revolts put down by Mušeł Mamikonean are portrayed in terms of formal secession from the authority of the king (whether in reality they were or not is irrelevant). We would suggest the key to 'legitimate' resistance was to not *officially* repudiate the king, and so not formally raise oneself above one's own status through one's actions. *De jure* secession would do this, by effectively making oneself a king in one's own land. Though the king might have no power locally, he was still the nominal overlord. Also, as we have seen, the belief in the importance of inheritance adds to the righteousness of these examples of Mamikonean resistance. In rescuing these heirs and allowing them to inherit their estates, the Mamikoneans also acted as the upholders of the social order, which was intrinsically meritorious.

One of the most articulate descriptions of apparently legitimate violent rebellion (in the eyes of the author describing it) is that of Manuel Mamikonean against King Varazdat in the later fourth century. We have discussed this incident previously in Chapter 2.2, but it also has great importance to the issue of rebellion, so given its significance it is worth repeating the key events. Manuel had been fighting for the Persian king against the Kushans, but when he returned to Armenia, he found the king had given his ancestral office of *sparapet* to a courtier called Bat. Manuel gathered his forces and dethroned the king, chasing him into exile in the Roman Empire. It is important to stress that Manuel is reported to have stopped his sons from killing Varazdat, ordering them not to become "lord slayers".[509] After the fighting was done, Manuel took control over Armenia, but he ruled through the queen and the sons of Varazdat – officially Manuel did not rule himself, and respected the status of the royal family.[510] This

[509] *Ibid*, V.xxxvii.
[510] *Ibid*, V.xxxvii-xxxviii.

returns us to the desirability of service to the king. Manuel, regardless of the reality of the situation, is presented as the loyal servant of the queen and her sons. Being proximate to them and being their (nominal) servant is presented as conveying substantial honour upon Manuel.

The reality of what happened matters less than the mentality underpinning the description of the events. In reality the episode was probably a cynical and self-interested (and likely Persian-backed) regime change in Armenia, and quite probably Manuel would have been unconcerned by Varazdat's death. After Varazdat's deposition, one would be surprised if Manuel did not manipulate the surviving Aršakunis for his own ends. However, as presented in *The Epic Histories*, this episode reflects a model for the legitimate removal of a wicked king, reflecting well on the behaviour of the Mamikoneans.

The key to 'legitimate' rebellion as expressed through *The Epic Histories* seems to be respecting the social order. As we have already discussed, heredity was exceptionally important. One ideal of kingship expressed in this text, as represented by the actions of Aršak early in his reign, and echoed by the behaviour of the Kayanid kings towards the aristocracy in the *Shahnameh*, is one of re-confirming hereditary titles, offices and lands. The ideal was of an unchanging social order where the best thing a king could do was change nothing. In executing a rebellion, one should not overturn the social order by slaying one's superior. Afterwards, one had to put members of the legitimate royal family on the throne. This might well be a charade (clearly Manuel held Armenia through forcibly controlling the remaining Aršakunis), but maintaining the pretence mattered a great deal. The king had to contravene heredity to warrant removal. Despite the huge range of crimes committed by Aršakuni royalty in *The Epic Histories* (ranging from the murder of prominent churchmen and honourable nobles, to sexual habits of which the clerical author sharply disapproved), interfering with the social order and the hereditary principle was the offence which was presented as a legitimate reason to depose

the king. After removing the wicked king, the virtuous noble then returned to the norm of dutiful service to his lawful superiors, in accordance with the ideal of royal service which was, as we have seen, significant.

Łazar Parpecʿi's history, focusing as it does on the Armenian revolt against the Sasanians in the mid-fifth century has several highly pertinent references to revolt, offering a slightly different angle to *The Epic Histories*. One advantage of Łazar's testimony is that the political situation of mid-fifth century Armenia was closer to the Sasanian norm than the fourth century as described in *The Epic Histories*. As the Aršakuni kings had since been removed (a process described earlier in Łazar's work), the relationship between the Armenian princes and the Sasanian kings was closer to magnate-royal relations elsewhere in the Sasanian world; there was no intermediate layer of lordship between them.

Łazar treats the great rebellion as one largely inspired by religion, i.e. opposition to the Sasanian attempt to re-impose Zoroastrianism on Armenia. Despite a cause which one would expect to draw great sympathy from a clerical writer, Łazar suggests that the Armenian princes were unwilling rebels and tried to avert insurrection for as long as possible. Firstly, after swearing amongst themselves never to accept Zoroastrianism, the Armenian lords agreed to be summoned to the Persian court, because if they did not go, it would be considered rebellious.[511] Łazar then puts a speech into the mouth of Vardan Mamikonean, the leader of the Armenian princes, where he asserts his loyalty to King Yazdegerd, that he recognised Sasanian authority over him and Armenia, and that he would wear himself out in his service, but he would not abandon Christianity (though Łazar states all the Caucasian princes feigned conversion to be able to go home), and before leaving Vardan once again affirming his desire

[511] ŁP, II.25.

to do good service for his legitimate lords. [512] Vardan and the other Armenian princes rebelled anyway, though Łazar presents Vardan as being pressured into revolt by Vahan of the Amatunikʿ, only rebelling when others had done so, and avoiding conflict would imperil the others.[513] Łazar does seem to overstress the loyalty and reluctance to rebel of the main protagonist in the insurrection.

As in *The Epic Histories*, the Mamikoneans are the heroes of the piece, and as such represent the ideal as Łazar perceived it. Łazar certainly saw the rebellion as justified. However, his labouring of Vardan's vocal loyalty and reluctance to rebel, and Vardan's assertion of Yazdegerd's legal overlordship, strongly suggests that the author believed rebellion was an option of last resort, and not intrinsically honourable, even when (according to Łazar) it was in defence of Christianity. In many ways, Łazar's presentation of revolt agrees with the impression given by *The Epic Histories* and the *Shahnameh*. Rebellion for a good cause seems justified *in extremis.* Even when prosecuting a legitimate rebellion, overturning the existing social structures was not acceptable.

Given Łazar's status as a churchman, one might expect him to present a rebellion which was in his view in defence of Christianity as unquestionably positive. That Łazar felt the need to stress Vardan's history of service and loyalty, and unwillingness to rebel, does suggest that rebellion, even 'justified' rebellion, was a serious matter, and where one had to behave impeccably beforehand for it to be justifiable. Though Łazar's testimony does agree, in general, with what we have seen hitherto, with the need for a just cause, proportionality, and respect of social hierarchy, it does confirm that it was difficult to present a rebellion as legitimate, helping us to understand why rebellions appear only rarely in our sources.

[512] *Ibid*, II.26, 28.
[513] *Ibid*, II.31-32.

Finally, Łazar offers perhaps the clearest articulation of a justification of revolt. This is expressed by Nixor, the Persian diplomat charged with negotiating the reconciliation between the Caucasian princes and the Sasanians. Nixor claims that Pērōz's behaviour had provoked revolt, in part because he had not treated his loyal servants well, and because he had lost the power of the Empire through military defeat, adding that "[n]one of the Aryans can blame you for such thoughts and actions, neither the present lord of the Aryans, nor the courtly nobility…For every subject seeing his [Pērōz's] limitless severity, planned every day to carry out [some act of rebellion]; but unable to face death he would desist."[514] We need to read this in conjunction with Łazar's labouring of Vardan's loyalty to the Sasanians, and the suggestion that justifying disloyalty was extremely difficult. Łazar's attribution of a presumably fictional speech to a distinguished Persian magnate asserting that the Armenians did nothing wrong was surely to the credit of the Mamikoneans, and a foil to potential detractors who might have accused them of treachery or rebellion. However, in the same vein as for *The Epic Histories* earlier, Łazar could not go beyond the beliefs of his audience. He could not invent justifications for rebellion if his audience believed it to be unjustifiable; all he could do was articulate persuasively sentiments they must have already held.

The literary accounts of the rebellion of Bahrām Čōbīn against Hormozd IV have also been interpreted as indicating the potential acceptability of rebellion. Bahrām Čōbīn, Hormozd IV's greatest general, briefly supplanted the Sasanians in 590-1, until defeated by Ḵosrow II and his Roman allies. Bahrām himself posthumously became something of a 'chivalric' hero, and the subject of a cycle of secular romances, which can, to a fair degree, be pieced together from the surviving source material.[515]

[514] *Ibid*, III.91.
[515] See Rubin, 'Nobility, Monarchy and Legitimation', pp. 235-237; see too notes 1-6.

Rubin saw the *Bahrām Čōbīn Romance* as articulation of an aristocratic belief in the legitimacy of rebellion and resistance to the king if he behaved tyrannically, though it was utterly wrong to overstep the boundary, and crown oneself king. Rubin interpreted Ṭabarī, Ferdowsī, and the other sources he drew upon, as showing a belief that Bahrām's rebellion was justified, and would have been fully legitimate if he had stopped at removing Hormozd IV in favour of his son.[516] We share his interpretation, and it coheres well with the Armenian evidence. Rubin differentiates the concept of royal authority which is articulated in the *Romance*, where there seems to be substantial sympathy with the notion of resistance to the crown (within the above mentioned constraint), with early-modern concepts of royal absolutism, where in theory one has to submit to a tyrannical ruler, and if one conscientiously objected to his demands, one's only option is to willingly submit to his just punishment.[517] The moral world of the *Romance* is a long way away from this. Both Ferdowsī and Ṭabarī are sympathetic to Bahrām Čōbīn's situation, but there is unanimity that his decision to assume the throne himself marked the contravention of accepted norms.[518] Simply removing a tyrannical king such as Hormozd IV appears an acceptable course of action, and (possibly) even praiseworthy, given the stress they place upon the insults made by the king to his greatest general.

Significantly, our sources accuse Hormozd IV of similar crimes to those committed by Varazdat, such as stripping nobles of their ranks and offices.[519] Procopius seems to suggest that Ḵosrow I's love of "innovation" (which, possibly, included interfering with noble hereditary

[516] *Ibid*, *passim*, but esp. pp. 263f for the conclusions.
[517] *Ibid*, pp. 263-264.
[518] FD, see 1844-9,1851-1857; Ṭab, 992-994, 996-1001. It might be worth mentioning that Sēbeos does not explicitly criticise Bahrām's decision to seize the throne though his account is relatively brief; Seb, 10-11.
[519] Ṭab, 990.

rights) was a direct cause in the rebellion centred on Prince Zames,[520] though given Kaldellis' reading of Procopius' account (one we generally agree with), we are aware that Procopius' representation of the event might have owed more to his disapproval of Justinian's government than the real events in the Sasanian Empire.

The representation of Bahrām Čōbīn before his decision to supplant the Sasanian house is strikingly similar to that of Manuel Mamikonean in *The Epic Histories*, and seems to reflect a similar moral framework. Removing a tyrannical king was *in extremis* a prudent course of action, but it was the worst kind of presumption to take the crown for oneself. Given that the Armenian source material gives a very similar impression to the Iranian, and the provenances of the sources were wildly different, we would suggest that this ideology of legitimately removing a tyrannical king was relatively well diffused in Sasanian Iran.

Though the illustrative cases are few in number, their similarity of outlook suggests an accepted framework for legitimate rebellion and resistance to central authority: the king had to be tyrannical, one should use a proportionate amount of force to remove him, and one should not *in any circumstances* use the opportunity to elevate oneself to the status of a king, but elevate another member of the royal house instead.

However, we must stress that events could overcome moral objections. Clearly, the Sasanians were able to supplant the Arsacids, and after a period of warfare, Ardašīr I and Šāpur I seemingly ruled securely, their successes presumably convinced enough people they should be supported over the Arsacids. There is no indication that after the fighting was over, the nobility were implacably hostile to the new dynasty, seeing them as illegitimate upstarts.

[520] Proc, I.xxiii.1-6

The Arsacid dynasty had suffered a series of defeats to the Romans in the decades preceding the fall of the dynasty, quite probably reducing its legitimacy.[521] In the campaign of 217, Caracalla was recorded as destroying Arsacid royal tombs, and scattering the bones.[522] This may have significantly damaged the prestige of the Arsacids; *The Epic Histories* records Šāpur II deliberately destroying the mausolea of the Armenian Arsacids, and taking the bones into captivity.[523] The text seems to suggest that the bones enjoyed some form of supernatural royal power, and taking the bones away was especially harmful to Armenian royal prestige. Certainly, it is presented as a deliberate and potent act of desecration. It is very possible that the long series of defeats to the Romans in the second and third century delegitimised the Arsacid dynasty, and the destruction of the royal mausolea less than a decade before the coming of the Sasanians might well have been significant in this. Certainly in the Armenian tradition, it appears as a particularly devastating blow to the prestige of the ruling dynasty.

Turning to the much later rebellion of Bahrām Čōbīn, what we know of Bahrām's revolt against the Sasanians in 590-1 suggests substantial sympathy with the usurper. At the decisive battle in 591 Ḵosrow had the larger army (recorded as 60,000 to Bahrām's 40,000),[524] but Ḵosrow's army included relatively few Persians, perhaps only 8,000 (the rest being made up of 12,000 Armenians and 40,000 Romans), whilst Bahrām had no recorded external support.[525] Ḵosrow potentially had five times as many Persians fighting against him than for him. Bahrām may have conscripted people who would rather have fought for Ḵosrow II, or absented themselves from the conflict, but Bahrām Čōbīn is recorded as having gained much

[521] Sheldon, *Rome's Wars in Parthia*, ch. 9.
[522] CD, LXXIX.1.2.
[523] *BP*, IV.xxiv.
[524] TS, 5.9.4.
[525] See Shahbazi, 'Bahrām VI Čōbīn'; he gives an itemised breakdown of Ḵosrow's army, drawing from the accounts of The Chronicle of Seert, Dinawari and Sēbeos.

support from the unpopularity of Hormozd IV.[526] 40,000 men was a large army in a Sasanian context, though as we do not know how much of this army was made up from peasants of dubious military worth, the power of this army, or the amount of support amongst the nobility it represented, is impossible to determine. Certainly, there is no indication that Bahrām Čōbīn was a desperately unpopular king clinging to power in the face of a mass movement clamouring for the return of the 'legitimate' Sasanians. We still believe that it was broadly seen as wrong for someone outside the reigning dynasty to make themselves king, but clearly many people would accept a change of dynasty in the right circumstances. There was an ideological framework which idealised legitimacy and hereditary succession. However, there also was flexibility depending upon circumstances, as the very successful early Sasanians illustrate.

To complement the notion of legitimate resistance, we should consider 'illegitimate' resistance and revolt. From a merely practical point of view, resistance, however defined, seems to have been eminently possible in many cases. Moses Khorenatsʿi records the example of the Vananatsʿi family, who rebelled against (or seceded from) Armenian royal rule in the later fourth century, and withdrew to the mountains and forests of Taykʿ, where they maintained a precarious independence, until, after enraging both kings of Armenia, they were chased to the Syrian border, where they sustained themselves through pillage.[527] Khorenatsʿi states that the Vananatsʿi "disturbed the land and kept it in turmoil", and he presents their activities as no better than banditry, beneath the dignity of a *naχarar* house with any desire for honour or grandeur. The actions of the Vananatsʿi show that in upland regions noble houses of even quite modest resources could defy central authority, certainly if the king was relatively weak, if they were unconcerned about the wider social consequences of their actions.

[526] TS, 5.5.2.
[527] MK, III.44, pp. 301-302.

In Armenia, and so probably in the upland regions of the Sasanian north and east, on a practical level it would have been relatively easy for separatist minded lords to defy central authority if they wanted to. The number of recorded instances is very low, but given the scarcity of our source material, this cannot be used to make any conclusion regarding the incidence of such events. We would suggest that a major reason for what appears to be the general willingness of aristocrats to cooperate with central authority may be expressed in the account of the Mamikonean secession discussed above.[528] The Mamikoneans could defy central authority in Tayk῾ – the king could not force them back into the fold. However, in order for the Mamikoneans to secede, they had to abandon their less defensible lands, and withdraw from affairs of 'national' significance. This was surely an unsatisfactory state of affairs for a great house with ambitions beyond the precariously independent rule over a few isolated valleys. What cooperation with the king could offer them, in exchange for submission to him, was more land and political prestige than that which they could hold by force. We have many references to the involvement of members of east-Iranian great houses (most notably the houses of Surēn and Mihrān) in Empire-wide affairs (such as commanding in wars against the Romans). Though it is impossible to recreate the landholding patterns of the Sasanian aristocracy, we would hypothesise that these great lords acquired assets in the Sasanian west through their involvement in affairs of state there, so one can appreciate how submission to the king could allow more fulfilling and remunerative careers and acquisitions to be realised. *The Book of a Thousand Judgements* permits lords to make written testimonies bearing their seal, or to appoint representatives to speak on their behalf.[529] By enabling long-distance testimony to be offered, the Sasanian state seems to have supported a legal framework amenable to absenteeism and the acquisition of more dispersed interests.

[528] *BP*, III.xviii, IV.ii.
[529] *LB*, 93, 11-94,

This is an important point when considering how the Sasanian Empire could hold together as a more-or-less coherent entity. In many cases, nobles could defy central authority if ruling a small isolated area was the limit of their ambitions. However, this was incompatible with controlling larger estates (especially estates in lowland areas which would have generally been the wealthiest), and wider political participation, and the additional status and wealth which would come from that. Sasanian kings had to offer sufficient offices, security and other incentives for nobles to desire more scattered estates and to want to be involved in Empire-wide affairs. If they could not offer inducements for wider political engagement, one can easily imagine weaker kings struggling to prevent many nobles from effectively seceding from their authority.

We would suggest there was a belief in a reasonably coherent set of circumstances under which nobles could legitimately resist royal actions. These centred upon the rebel being wronged by the king, and ideally having already done much good service for him. The king should be 'tyrannical', or otherwise unfit to rule, perhaps through showing contempt for heredity, which seems to have been seen as especially iniquitous. The number of recorded aristocratic revolts against the king is very small, and though there probably were more which have gone unrecorded in extant sources, and many 'revolts' were manifested through manipulating royal succession disputes, we do not expect the number of revolts to have been large. The testimony of Łazar is especially telling. Despite being a cleric, he believed he had to labour the moral uprightness of the Armenians rebelling, even though the rebellion he described purported to be in defence of Christianity. Rebelling legitimately was very difficult.

Though having a mental framework for 'legitimate' rebellion might offer a justification for removing kings or resisting their actions, we doubt this made rebellion significantly more likely. The belief in the legitimacy of some rebellions made the great majority of rebellions

illegitimate by default. Full-blown rebellions were exceptional events. We have discussed three in some detail, two of which were in Armenia. Though there are fleeting references to others, it seems unlikely that full-blooded rebellions were at all common. Certainly, the apparent acceptability of rebellions in certain circumstances is not in accord with absolutist concepts of monarchy, but it does not seem to have made Sasanian government significantly less stable. The king certainly laboured under unofficial limitations, such as the strong attachment to heredity among the elite, but beyond that, the respect held for his office contributed to a situation where open resistance to the king was generally difficult to justify.

3.5 – Conclusion

In this chapter we have endeavoured to explore certain facets of the Sasanian aristocracy with reference to the wider Christensen-Pourshariati debate. Our findings do not offer complete agreement with either theory, though on balance it should incline us towards Pourshariati's position.

There appears a strong correlation between many facets of the cultural outlook of the elite, the military system employed by the Sasanian Empire, and Pourshariati's model. The aristocracy strongly idealised heredity, which could serve only as a brake on decisive royal policy, greatly exacerbating the political risks of the king conveying patronage. Coupled with the apparent belief in the inalienability of status, land, and titles, there was seemingly a belief in a framework for the legitimate removal of the king. In the admittedly rare accounts which offer some detail of rebellions, the removal of 'tyrannical' kings is never presented negatively. Bahrām Čōbīn is seen in an extremely sympathetic light, until he went too far and seized the throne. It seems that removing a tyrannical king was perceived, at least by the audiences of the epic tales, as meritorious. The aristocracy seemed to have championed defending their prerogatives, held a mental framework for how to dethrone kings, and also possessed the

means to do so, through their undisputed status as the decisive military force within the Sasanian Empire. All of this is very much in accord with Pourshariati's model.

From a structural point of view, there seems little to support Christensen's argument; as we saw in Chapter 2, the coercive powers of the monarchy were limited. However, the lack of support for Christensen's model returns us to the Howard-Johnston question, the undoubted successes of many Sasanian kings in warfare, and the fact that serious rebellions seem to have been very rare events indeed.

We believe the keys to this issue are the ideology of service, and also the hereditary principle. Serving the king was a vital part of an honourable aristocratic existence. It is important to stress that though there seems to have been an acceptable point to withdraw your service from the king, this was only after having done substantial service for him. There doubtless were political wranglings over what was a 'reasonable' amount of service, a process where stronger, more successful kings would have had an advantage, and weaker kings would have been severely hampered. Also, we must stress that a 'withdrawal of service' was not as serious an act as open rebellion, which was a much harder act to justify. However, despite the caveats, the basic belief in the desirability of royal service could easily have been a strong factor in holding the Empire together, and for the king to govern relatively effectively. The belief in heredity had two implications. It doubtless made aristocrats more defensive of their own status, and more likely to resent assertive royal activity. But this belief in heredity safeguarded the status of the king, and further valorised service to him.

Therefore, once again we would suggest a 'middle way', which stresses the role of human factors over institutional ones, as being the best way to proceed. It is difficult to argue that the monarchy was institutionally very strong outside of core areas. It seems a king could not force compliance if there was substantial organised opposition to him. However, what he

did have in his favour was the natural predilection of the aristocracy to respect his rank and to want to serve him, because doing so not only brought rewards, but also confirmed their own status within the realm. This is why we see such powerful aristocrats willingly serving the kings; our texts are heavily populated with various Sūrens, Mihrāns, or other magnates, involved in affairs of state. The key is suggested by *The Epic Histories* treatment of the reconciliation between the Aršakuni and Mamikonean houses early in Book IV. The Mamikoneans returned to serve the kings, and in return they gained honour and the ability to hold more lands. The relationship between nobles and kings was a symbiotic one, where the mutual benefits made serious ruptures relatively rare. The king could offer nobles greater landholding and honour in the eyes of their peers than they could enjoy through non-engagement with affairs of state. The nobles could offer the king service. Undoubtedly, there must have been plenty of self-interest too. However, we would suggest that the reason the Empire held together and generally operated effectively was not because the king was in a position to force people to cooperate (he clearly could not if opposition was organised), but because it was in everyone's interest to collaborate in the wider affairs of the realm.

Conclusion

Part 1 – A summary of Chapters 2-3, and introduction to the conclusion

As we have seen hitherto, the evidence pertaining to Sasanian Iran does not fully accord with either the theories of Christensen or Pourshariati.

Occasionally, Sasanian royal power seems prodigious, perhaps best illustrated by the Gorgān Wall project, demonstrating the ability of some Sasanian monarchs to achieve impressive feats of engineering, and thus being able to assemble the huge resources required for them. A number of Sasanian kings, such as Šāpur II, and the fifth-century kings responsible for the Gorgān Wall, actively campaigned on their northern and eastern frontiers, showing that though the weight of Sasanian power lay in Mesopotamia and Fārs, kings could project power and authority far from them.

However, the institutional strength and coercive powers of the monarchy appear limited. Besṭām's rebellion of c. 594-600 suggests kings could not overcome active and entrenched regional opposition. Furthermore, as far as we can tell from admittedly scanty evidence, military command in the north-east was apparently hereditary (at least on a *de facto* basis), with attempts by the central government to impose outside appointments having no lasting impact in provincial life, as illustrated by the return of the Mihrān family to power in north-eastern Iran after the temporary hiatus brought about by the rebellion of Bahrām Čōbīn and the appointment of Smbat Bagratuni. In broad terms, it seems that though kings often possessed considerable power and authority, their ability to act contrary to the interests of powerful vested interests, and, if necessary, to militarily enforce their rule, was limited.

However, there is no indication of habitual hostility between the centre and the provinces in the Sasanian Empire. There was a service ethos amongst the elite, it being

perceived as intrinsically honourable to serve one's king. Though there was apparently a belief in the legitimacy of rebellion against 'tyrannical' kings, the conditions required for a rebellion to be perceived as 'legitimate' were highly prescriptive, with recorded aristocratic rebellions exceedingly rare. The aristocracy of Sasanian Iran had a pronounced belief in heredity, which though doubtless making it more politically difficult for a king to exercise patronage over appointments, safeguarded the king's position as the unquestioned authority within the Empire.

Therefore, Sasanian Iran was to an extent defined by a king with real authority in some areas, and merely influence in others, and an aristocracy which had a deeply engrained sense of the desirability of royal service, whilst being fervently attached to the hereditary principle. Being mindful of these potentially contradictory factors, we undertake our comparative analysis.

Part 2 – Why make comparisons with the late mediaeval West?

As has already been suggested, we believe a good point of comparison to further our understanding of Sasanian Iran would be later mediaeval Western Europe. Not all aspects of which are helpful parallels for the situation of Sasanian Iran, but broadly, the political and social situations were sufficiently similar for comparisons to be useful. The reasons for preferring comparisons to late mediaeval Western Europe, rather than perhaps more obvious parallels (specifically the Roman Empire or the Caliphates) are various, but hinges upon the different military and political systems pertaining in these different empires.

The Roman state was apparently a much stronger and intrusive entity than the Sasanian, with a firm grip over appointments to offices, and an extractive tax apparatus, taking

at least 25% of gross yields, and perhaps 50% of the surplus.[530] As we have seen, some important military offices in the Sasanian world were effectively hereditary, and though we lack detail concerning the Sasanian taxation system, it seem incredible to suggest it was as extractive as that employed by the Romans, in part because the dominant expense of the Roman exchequer was the standing army,[531] something which the Sasanians did not have, thus obviating the need of a widespread and extractive tax apparatus.

Though in many ways the early Caliphates used or adapted some Sasanian bureaucratic practices, their state structure had marked differences. This was in many ways through the role of Islam, whereby a relatively small group, defined by language and religion, ruled over a subject population. Within the Muslim group, there was a relatively large degree of social mobility.[532] This contrasts with the Sasanian Empire, whereby status was seemingly defined primarily through heredity.

Furthermore, both in the Roman and Arab Empires, the relatively high rate of dynastic change stops us getting a sense of there being 'one' legitimate royal dynasty. This contrasts with the Sasanians, and the Arsacids before them, who both enjoyed over four centuries of uninterrupted rule. As dynastic legitimacy appears significant in Sasanian Iran, the dynastic instability in the Roman and Islamic polities is certainly a hindrance for understanding how monarchies and elites interacted.

The Roman army was unquestionably dominated by long-service, salaried professional troops. Though there were changes in how the army fought and was organised, the late Roman army remained a professional standing army, deriving most of its fighting power from

[530] A.H.M. Jones., *The Later Roman Empire 284-602* (Oxford, 1964) chs. XI-XIII; Chris Wickham, *Land and Power: Studies in Italian and European Social History* (London, 1994), pp. 13-14, 27.
[531] Ramsay MacMullan, 'The Roman Emperors' Army Costs', in *Latomus, T. 43, Fast. 3* (1984), p. 571.
[532] Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, ch. 7, esp. p. 200.

the wider free population rather than the aristocracy.[533] As has been discussed, we have no evidence for large standing armies in the Sasanian world, and their primary fighting power was drawn from the aristocracy, not the population as a whole. Therefore, the different nature of the Roman state and army makes it only occasionally a useful source for comparisons.

The post-Conquest Arab states maintained armies largely financed through provincially administered taxation. As a consequence of this, the army "directly depended on the state for its subsistence," with individual soldiers not enjoying landed wealth to sustain them, as mediaeval European, and most likely Sasanian, elites did.[534] Moreover, Arab armies contained significant contingents of infantry, perhaps predominantly being infantry forces (in battlefield potency as well as in numbers). This, too, contrasts with Sasanian practice.

In mediaeval Europe, however, we find a similar military and political system to that which apparently existed in Sasanian Iran, with a landed, equestrian military aristocracy being the dominant military force in a similar way to Sasanian Iran, and an apparently similar approach to dynastic legitimacy, with changes of dynasty exceedingly rare. Indeed, the vast majority of European royal dynastic changes could be seen as changes between different branches of the same family.

The Sasanian Empire was a relatively sophisticated polity, with written laws, and widespread record keeping, as evidenced by the use of written contracts even in the furthest extremities of the Empire, and with at least some troops being paid in coin from the fourth century at the latest. Though Sasanian armies were apparently not permanently maintained,

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[533] By way of introduction, see Pat Southern and Karen Ramsey Dixon, *The Late Roman* Army (London, 1996), ch. 2; Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, ch. xvii.

[534] Hugh Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (London, 2001), p. 59, see esp. ch. 3. See too Fred Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 222-223; Fred Donner, 'The Formation of the Islamic State', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 106, No. 2,* (1986), pp. 283-296; J.F. Haldon and H. Kennedy, ''The Arab-Byzantine Frontier in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries: Military Organisation and Society in the Borderlands', in Michael Bonner (ed.), *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times* (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 108-116.

they were the battlefield equal of Roman armies. The sophistication of Sasanian Iran inclines us away from comparisons with the early mediaeval West, and towards later mediaeval Europe where systems of government and military organisation were more advanced.

The most useful points of comparison are: the reach and influence of states; military systems; and the cultural factors which bound the monarchy and aristocracy together, despite seemingly divergent interests at some junctures. In each case, the late mediaeval example coheres with the grain of the evidence for Sasanian Iran, and can offer us a means of better integrating what evidence we do have into a model of how the Sasanian Empire might have operated. For reasons of space this discussion must necessarily be brief and selective, nonetheless we believe it still is valuable.

Conclusion 2.1 – Comparative Analysis

A fitting introduction to this section can be made by quoting A. J. Pollard's description of late mediaeval English government:

> "It is apparent, however, that while the kingdom of England possessed highly centralised institutions, a sophisticated system of royal government and a uniform legal system, all of which were perhaps the envy of fellow monarchs, the actual power of the Crown was nevertheless severely limited. The reasons are not hard to find. Communications were slow; it took five days for an urgent letter from Westminster to reach York [a little over 200 miles] and another five for a reply to arrive. The holders of feudal liberties, especially in the parts more distant from Westminster...jealously guarded their administrative independence. The coercive power of the state was feeble. It lacked a standing army, except for three small border garrisons in Berwick, Carlisle and Calais; in time of emergency it relied on calling out a militia…It had

> no police force; it had no full-time, paid civil service in the provinces. The state barely existed. Government was therefore a delicately balanced two-way process, resting on the in-grained obedience, willing consent, and co-operation of the king's subjects. The king's will could only be mediated through them…At the same time all those that served the Crown…sought to use royal influence for their own profit and advantage. Rule rested on a partnership between Crown and subject, each needing the other."[535]

There are clear parallels between Sasanian Iran and Pollard's vision of later mediaeval England. The lack of coercive power enjoyed by the state and the cultural predisposition of the aristocracy to cooperate with the king are features common to Sasanian Iran. A similar state of affairs existed in France.[536] Lacking the power to enforce royal rule, effective government ultimately depended upon whether the king was perceived as a 'winner', and so could persuade provincial decision makers that the likely cost of noncompliance were rather worse than the certain costs of obedience. We believe that a similar state of affairs pertained to Sasanian Iran, whereby government depended upon the personal abilities of the king at least as much as, if not more than, the institutions of government.

Broadly, the effectiveness of late mediaeval government rested upon the competence of the person who wore the crown. The clearest illustration of this comes from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, where we can contrast the reigns of Charles V of France with that of his son Charles VI, and similarly those of Henry V and Henry VI of England.[537] Henry V and Charles V ran effective governments which extracted substantial

[535] A. J. Pollard, *Late Medieval England 1399-1509* (Harlow, 2000), pp. 243-244. See too J.R. Lander, *Conflict and Stability in Fifteenth-Century England* (London, 1977), ch. 7.
[536] Sumption, *Trial by Battle*, p. 27.
[537] Françoise Autrand, *Charles V le Sage* (Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée, 1995), Françoise Autrand, *Charles VI La folie du roi* (Condé-sur-l'Escaut, 1986), Christopher Allmand, *Henry V* (London, 1992), esp. chs. 18-19, Bertram Wolfe, *Henry VI* (London, 1981), *passim*; for a synopsis and synthesis of the reigns, especially

revenues, successfully prosecuted wars, and maintained the peace within their kingdoms. Henry VI and Charles VI were both unfit kings, whose reigns saw the collapse of governmental authority within their kingdoms, destabilising declines in revenue, the overbearing influence of powerful magnates, and the inability to effectively prosecute wars. "The state of this period had not yet become cold and inhuman. The affective bond between king and subjects was what constituted the national monarchy."[538] Effective government depended upon the quality of the king in a very real way.

Though under weak kings, government did carry on to some extent, its effectiveness in the provinces atrophied dramatically, whilst more-or-less continuing in areas of closer royal control. This is perhaps best illustrated by England under Henry VI, where northern and south-western England became increasingly violent, with aristocratic rivalries settled more through force than royal mediation and engagement.[539] However, Sussex, much closer to the centre of English royal power, saw little aristocratic violence.[540] Under Charles VI of France, there was perhaps an even more dramatic collapse in royal authority, with civil war between the dukes of Burgundy and Orleans for control of the king, and catastrophic defeats to the English.[541] We struggle to separate these calamities from the incompetence of the kings reigning at that time.

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regarding England's declining fortunes under Henry VI, his pliability to various aristocrats and the breakdown of governmental power in northern England, see Edward Powell, 'Lancastrian England', Christopher Allmand (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History: Volume VII c. 1415-1500* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 458-476.

[538] Françoise Autrand, 'France under Charles V and Charles VI', in Michael Jones (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History: Volume VI c. 1300-c. 1415* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 423.

[539] Hannes Kleineke, 'Why the West Was Wild: Law and Disorder in Fifteenth-Century Cornwall and Devon', in Linda Clark (ed.), *The Fifteenth Century III: Authority and Subversion* (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 75-80; Peter Booth, 'Men Behaving Badly? The West March Towards Scotland and the Percy-Neville Feud', in Linda Clark (ed.), *The Fifteenth Century III: Authority and Subversion* (Woodbridge, 2003), *passim*; Alexander Rose, *Kings in the North: The House of Percy in British History* (London, 2002), ch. 15.

[540] Nigel Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Knightly Families in Sussex, 1280-1400* (Oxford, 1986), p. 73.

[541] Richard Vaughan, *John the Fearless: The Growth of Burgundian Power* (London 1973/2002), ch. 4; Autrand, 'Charles V and Charles VI', *passim.*

However, significant violence was an aberration which effective government quickly suppressed, as illustrated by Charles V of France's rule after resolving the outstanding issues of the catastrophic reign of his father, Jean II.[542] Though the military elite doubtless used periods of weak government to advance their own position, and surely resented royal intrusion into their local affairs, there is little sense they actively sought to destabilise central government. Stronger kings, who enjoyed military successes and were politically astute, ruled securely and did not generally have to endure affronts to their authority.

Indeed, though the aristocracy seems to have had a localised focus, this was not necessarily something which kings opposed. Though we might see strong regional lordships as antipathetic to effective central government, there is little indication that contemporaries shared this view. "There is no reason to suppose that the fourteenth-century kings of England regarded the establishment of peers in their 'countries' as anything but entirely natural, and indeed advantageous for the monarchy."[543] For an aristocrat to achieve extensive control over a given region, it depended upon him effectively engaging with royal authority. The most effective local lords were those who were the most integrated into royal government, as illustrated by the local power and influence the Duke of Suffolk was able to accrue through his role in the government of Henry VI, managing to at least temporarily overcome the traditional East Anglian dominance of the Dukes of Norfolk.[544] Certainly, under weak governments, powerful regional lordships were potentially deleterious to royal authority, but in principle, there was not necessarily a contradiction between effective royal control and strong regional

[542] Autrand, *Charles V*, chs. xxiv, xxviii.
[543] Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1987), p. 166, see too. pp. 160-179. See too Helen Castor, *The King, the Crown and the Duchy of Lancaster: public authority and private power, 1399-1461* (Oxford, 2000), p. 100.
[544] Peter Coss, 'An age of deference' in Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (eds.), *A Social History of Medieval England, 1200-1500* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 53-56; Helen Castor 'The Duchy of Lancaster and the Rule of East Anglia, 1399-1440: A Prologue to the Paston Letters', in Rowena E. Archer (ed.), *Crown, Government and People in the Fifteenth Century* (Stroud, 1995), pp. 53-54.

lordships, and in peripheral areas of the kingdom, there were indeed definite benefits for border defence, as we shall discuss shortly.

Political units and hierarchies were generally surprisingly strong, even when these were at variance with the *de facto* balance of power on the ground. The classic illustration comes before our period of special interest, but the Angevin 'Empire' still illustrates the point. The English king ruled more of France than the French king, yet (in France) legally remained the French king's vassal; ultimately the legal reason for the loss of English lands in France was a failure of John of England to acknowledge his feudal obligations to Philippe II of France.[545] This serves as a strong illustration of, even at the very highest level, formal power structures being maintained, despite seemingly impugning the dignity and status of the more powerful lord, and the potential danger this legal subordination posed.

To take another later mediaeval example, we might consider The Holy Roman Empire in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. This was a large political unit, seemingly kept together through the willing association of great princes, and without any coercion on the part of the central government. It had been a "fragmented" empire since the mid-thirteenth century, with power (from the mid-fourteenth century) formally shared between the emperor and the elector-princes; the system of government "institutionalised the weakness of the emperor and his government who was not remotely endowed with the institutions which he needed to make himself obeyed."[546] However, despite the weaknesses of the emperor, and his inability

[545] Robert Bartlett, *England Under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075-1223* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 17-18, 22, 26-28.
[546] Albert Rigaudière, 'The Theory and Practice of Government in Western Europe in the Fourteenth Century', in Michael Jones (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History: Volume VI c. 1300-c. 1415* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 21-23.

to enforce any kind of effective 'imperial' rule, he remained a figure of immense respect, whose titular superiority was acknowledged within the Empire.[547]

Despite the lack of coercive powers enjoyed by mediaeval states, formal secession from a realm was exceedingly rare, at least under 'chivalric' leaders (there were several 'popular' secessionist movements, of varying levels of longevity, the Swiss Confederation being the most famous example). Formally splitting one's own territory away from the formal sovereignty of one's king was simply not done, even when it might have been eminently practicable. A number of Breton and Burgundian dukes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries minted coins and prosecuted independent foreign policies, aspects of independent statehood far more pronounced than we can detect for any Sasanian nobleman, yet never renounced their legal inferiority to the French crown, even when there was a state of active war between them.

'Secession' might be undertaken within the established frameworks of hierarchy, as illustrated by Charles of Burgundy's attempt in the 1470s to be made king of a reconstituted kingdom of Burgundy or Lotharingia (i.e. he was to be king of a previously existing, now lapsed, kingdom, not a new political entity, at least in theory), the title being conferred by the Holy Roman Emperor, a ruler considerably weaker and poorer than Charles, but with much greater legal authority.[548] The attempt came to nothing, but illustrates the power titles and hierarchies held over contemporaries.

We might also consider the Percy-Mortimer-Glendower rebellion of 1405-8 as another illustration of how breaking up established political units was perceived. In 1408, Henry Percy, the earl of Northumberland, was the ringleader of a plot to divide England and Wales between

[547] Tom Scott, 'Germany and the Empire', pp. 344-347.
[548] Richard Vaughan, *Charles the Bold: The Last Valois Duke of Burgundy* (London 1973/2002), pp. 139-155,

himself, Edmund Mortimer, and Owen Glendower, who would respectively gain northern England, southern England, and Wales and the Marches, disposing of the ruling dynasty entirely. The rebellion, despite being headed by a number of prominent and powerful nobles, was a complete failure, and the pathetic nature of its defeat testimony to just how fanciful the rebels' aims were perceived to be.[549]

For all the weaknesses of late mediaeval monarchies, outright aristocratic rebellions were rare. Most occurred under the leadership of a disaffected prince. If we were to consider the English examples of the Lancastrian revolution of 1399, or the series of conflicts commonly known as the Wars of the Roses, the leading protagonists were all Plantagenets, every one being a direct descendent of Edward III. In England, the only significant 'aristocratic' revolts, those of the Percies under Henry IV, are illustrative by their extreme rareness. Though kings were dethroned with some regularity (amongst the English kings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, only Edward I and Henry V both gained and vacated the throne through constitutional means), there was never any credible attempt by nobles to usurp the royal dignity, or in any other way to formally subvert the established power structures. Rather, nobles wanted to associate with the king, perhaps in a self-serving way, but the desire to serve and be associated with the king was very real.

We would not suggest that an identical political culture underpinned the relationships between aristocrats and kings in later mediaeval Europe and Sasanian Iran. However, we do believe that they were sufficiently similar to make comparisons useful. As we have discussed, the Armenian literature seems to suggest that splitting one's own territory away from one's lords unilaterally (i.e. secession) was shameful behaviour, and though possible, the political

[549] Rose, *Kings in the North*, pp. 433.-440.

and cultural isolation it brought was beneath the dignity of an ambitious magnate house.[550] From both Armenian and Persian literature, taboos against making oneself a king appear extremely strong. Respecting the nominal social order was immensely important. Furthermore, the desire to serve the king was significant.

As this excursus has demonstrated, states could remain in being even when there were little or no means to actually enforce their survival, to a large extent because the nobility broadly accepted their existence and the power structures which underpinned them. The political authority enjoyed by late-mediaeval European rulers, even those who appear much weaker than the average Sasanian *shahanshah* (such as the Holy Roman Emperor by the fifteenth century), were able to achieve substantial objectives, provided they were able to carry their nobility with them.

Let us turn to military matters. We will not suggest there was any great similarity in battlefield tactics between Sasanian and late mediaeval European armies. There was not. Sasanian armies, as far as is evidenced, were dominated by cavalry throughout the period in question, with horseback archery having an important role, and infantry never developing into an effective battlefield force. Conversely, infantry forces, certainly by the mid-fourteenth century, had become significant on European battlefields, and horseback archery had long since vanished. Rather, this section explores the organisational underpinnings of armies. Though in the political sphere, we have focussed more upon later fourteenth and fifteenth century examples, for military comparisons, we feel later thirteenth and early fourteenth century comparisons are more apt, given that at this time heavy cavalry remained the dominant battlefield force.

[550] See pp. 213-214, 230 above.

The 'feudal' armies of the later-thirteenth or fourteenth centuries could be highly effective forces. Armies could be assembled in two months, including sending out the summons and assembly in the theatre of operations.[551] Given that major Roman invasions took months to plan, requiring moving units and supplies often long distances,[552] if the Sasanians had even a limited intelligence network, there seems no intrinsic reason why they would lack the time to muster sufficient defensive forces.

Mediaeval armies could enjoy a considerable degree of internal cohesion. The building blocks of such hosts were the retinues of the individual lords, often substantially drawn from the magnate's household, of which the king's was generally the largest.[553] The Armenian writers suggest a similar form of organisation for Armenian and Sasanian armies, with one level of organisation being by banners (դրօշ, *drōš*, from the Parthian *drafš*),[554] presumably indicating the banners of individual commanders. Though perhaps not highly disciplined or structured, impermanent mediaeval armies, organised into contingents based around extended families and households, could carry out relatively complex manoeuvres, and allowing commanders to use their tactical acumen, rather than just relying on superior numbers or the individual valour of their men.

By the thirteenth century military pay had become relatively common for the knights of Western Europe, though the wages offered seem closer to 'expenses' than a remunerative wage. In fourteenth-century England, an income of £40 a year was considered the minimum to sustain the costs of knighthood,[555] whilst wages for a knight in English royal service stood at 2

[551] Sumption, *Trial by Battle*, p. 272.
[552] See eg. Ammianus' description of the Roman preparation for the invasion of Persia in 362-3, which was well underway in the October before the invasion, AM, XXII.12, XXIII.2. The Persians obviously knew an invasion was planned, because they sent a pre-emptive peace envoy; Libanius, *Oration* XII.19.
[553] John France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades* (London, 1999), pp. 135-136.
[554] See Garsoïan, 'Technical Terms', p. 522; see *BP* III.vii, IV.ii-iii, xx, V.i, xliii.
[555] Sumption, *Trial by Battle,* p. 51.

shillings a day.[556] Even if paid 365 days a year (which would almost never happen, as wages were only paid when on campaign) the total sum came to only £36, 10s, meaning that noble warriors needed a landed income, even if regularly employed on royal service. Indeed, in the thirteenth, and well into the fourteenth, centuries, many knights considered receiving pay as beneath their dignity, taking pride in outfitting contingents to fight for the king at their own expense.[557] There was significant prestige to be gained by fighting under a 'glorious' king, despite the costs involved. In the 1330s dozens of knights from north-western Europe fought for Edward III in Scotland – "[t]hese men cannot have been drawn by booty or high pay, unless they were much deceived. The magnet was Edward's personal reputation and reputation of his court and army."[558] For a military aristocracy fighting for a glorious king was inherently desirable, even if there was no realistic chance of receiving much, if any, financial reward. An effective king could harness the natural bellicosity and service instincts of the aristocracy, and gain the services skilled soldiers whilst only paying a small fraction of the costs needed to outfit such an expensively equipped warrior.

For understanding some of the Sasanian regional commands, there is value in considering the military affairs of the Anglo-Scottish border in the later middle ages. From the late thirteenth century extended kinship groups, known as 'surnames', formed bodies of cavalry for self-defence and raiding, the larger 'surnames' being able to muster some hundreds of men at short notice.[559] These bodies of cavalry existed due to the instability of the region in which they operated, and in many ways their existence outside of any governmental framework must have been a hindrance to royal policy in the borders. It must be stressed that the numbers of troops paid by the English crown in the borders were ordinarily greatly

[556] Allmand, *The Hundred Years War,* p. 64.
[557] Michael Prestwich, 'The Enterprise of War', p. 80.
[558] Sumption, *Trial by Battle*, p. 182.
[559] Steven G. Ellis, 'The English State and its Frontiers in the British Isles', in Daniel Power and Naomi Standen (eds.), *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands 700-1700* (London, 1999), p. 165.

outnumbered by the irregular forces maintained by the locals; in the early fifteenth century, the king's garrison of Carlisle numbered under 100 men.[560] However, these irregular forces were, ultimately, loyal to the central government, with considerable numbers fighting for the king in France, even when war with Scotland was imminent, such as in 1513.[561]

Secondly, the importance of localised landholding and effective military command cannot be overstated, perhaps best illustrated by the rehabilitation of the Percy family under Henry V. The father and grandfather of the Percy rehabilitated by Henry V had both been killed in rebellions against Henry IV, yet Henry V felt compelled to bring the surviving Percy heir back from exile, and charge him with defending the border. Percy's extensive northern lands gave him the means and incentive to resist the Scots, despite limited government assistance. Percy commanded great loyalty from the northern populace, the case illustrating that defence depended upon strong local lordship.[562] This has apparent parallels with what appears the rehabilitation of the Mihrān family not long after the death of Smbat Bagratuni, whereby the formally disgraced Mihrān family appear to have regained their regional prominence, presumably with royal acquiescence.[563] Though the king could impose his own man for a time, effective border defence ultimately depended upon well-established local lords, with developed patronage networks, and a real incentive to defend the locality with which they were entrusted.

As our brief description of military systems suggests, an army simply being impermanent did not stop it being an effective tool of governmental policy. Armies could be raised quickly and efficiently, and their foundation upon aristocratic extended families and

[560] Henry Summerson, *Medieval Carlisle: The City and the Border from the Late Eleventh to the Mid Sixteenth Century – Volume 2* (Kendal, 1993), p. 407.
[561] Niall Barr, *Flodden* (Stroud, 2001), p. 73.
[562] Edward Miller, *War in the North: The Anglo-Scottish Wars of the Middle Ages* (Hull, 1960), p. 16; Ellis, 'The English State and its Frontiers', p. 163; Neville, *Violence, Custom and Law*, p. 108
[563] Ṭab, 2654-2655.

households gave forces a valuable coherence. Our examples of salient points regarding border defence in England might suggest something of how regional commands in the Sasanian Empire were organised, and suggest why, in fact, a *de facto* Mihrān monopoly on military command in the north east might well have been mutually beneficial for both the Sasanians and the Mihrāns, rather than an indication of Sasanian weakness.

To conclude this section, our brief excursus into later mediaeval Europe has suggested is that even without highly advanced bureaucracies, effective government was possible, thanks to the desire of nobles to be associated with the king, and the rewards (both material and social) he could offer the nobility. However, above all, we need to stress that, ultimately, effective government depended upon cooperation between the king and the nobility, and with kings recognising the legitimate interests of their subordinates. This could well be mutually beneficial; as we have seen, nobles wanted regional autonomy and authority, but in order to achieve this, they needed to be integrated into courtly life. Offering regional military commands to the magnates of the region might have in some way reflected royal weakness (in that the king could not impose his own man who would be equally effective), but it was a system which was mutually beneficial for both king and magnate, and there is no reason to suppose kings felt 'forced' into semi-hereditary regional commands. Though not necessarily a perfect point of comparison in all areas, the late mediaeval West has much in common with Sasanian Iran, and can offer us a model which can help us understand how the Sasanian Empire could not only exist for so long, but could be a highly effective political unit.

A Proposed Solution to the Christensen-Pourshariati debate

As has been rehearsed before, both Christensen and Pourshariati exaggerate what they see as the defining feature of Sasanian Iran, overemphasising the strengths or weaknesses of the Empire in accordance with their theses, without acknowledging the

numerous indications to the contrary. Also, we have to consider the question posed by Howard-Johnston, and offer a realistic suggestion as to how the materially weaker Sasanian Empire could contend with the Roman Empire for so long. Therefore, we need a model for understanding Sasanian Iran which allows for a strong army to be assembled, but without a strong state to underpin it.

As suggested by our brief overview of late mediaeval Western Europe, the personal qualities of a king could overcome the weakness of the state apparatus which underpinned his rule. States and dynasties endured, despite occasional royal weakness, largely through cultural or ideological factors: kings lacking coercive powers ruled through their widespread acceptance by, and support from, the elite. Secession, or similar separatist movements, just did not happen. Even though armies were impermanent and dependent upon intermediate lords between the king and the soldiers, they could be assembled relatively quickly, and were normally effective implements of state power. In these armies, the aristocracy would fight on terms of service which did not normally offer significant financial reparation, but in part through an ethos of service, and in part through a desire for royal patronage. Such a system allowed kings to assemble armies without having to meet thir full economic cost. Strong regional lordships were not, ordinarily, overly problematic for the kings, in part because the desire to build up such lordships engendered positive engagement with the monarchy, but also because, in exposed frontier regions such strong local lordships could offer more capable systems of defence than anything the government might offer alone.

Though the Sasanian king was unable to enforce his will on large parts of the Empire against regional opposition, the aristocracies of these regions actively chose to engage themselves in royal government. As has been rehearsed hitherto, in such figures as diverse as Rostam and the Armenian heroes of the fourth to the seventh centuries, we can detect a real

desire to serve the king, certainly in part for material rewards, but also because there seems to have been a well-developed service mentality amongst the elite, and a desire for the prestige which serving the king brought. This helps us answer the Howard-Johnston question. The late antique Iranian aristocracy was a military aristocracy, apparently channelling a large proportion of their landed wealth into military expenditure (such as weapons, horses, and armour), and then, we would suggest, fighting for the king on terms which made little financial sense, but rather to fulfil traditional service obligations, to gain patronage from their superiors, and to affirm their status in society.

Therefore, our proposed solution to the Christensen-Poushariati debate turns upon the culture of the nobility. Though the ability of the Sasanian kings to enforce their rule was seemingly limited, they could generally depend upon the culture of service and deference which imbued the elite. This culture could be turned against royal interests, either through rebellion or withdrawal from the affairs of state (though never formal secession), but this was exceptional. In general nobles wanted to engage with the king and associate with him. As such, kings who were generally wise and militarily successful could harness the natural inclinations of the elite, and be able to rule effectively. Of course, weaker or less astute kings, lacking the coercive powers to enforce compliance, would struggle to rule effectively, and potentially faced deposition. However, this was atypical, and, under normal circumstances, both king and aristocracy had a mutual interest in cooperating in government, respecting each others legitimate interests. Therefore, we would suggest that our conception of the Sasanian government is somewhere between the opposing poles of Christensen and Pourshariati: a strong Sasanian monarchy, but one which was strong, not through force or institutions, but through the willing cooperation of the nobility.

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