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Like Father, Like Daughter: Late Sasanian Imperial Ideology & the Rise of Bōrān to Power

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The reign of Bōrān and, afterwards that of her sister Āzarmīgduxt, although short-lived, were historically significant. No other woman ascended the Sasanian throne, in her own rights, before or after them. The significance is even greater in view of the social and cultural limitations placed on women in Sasanian Iran, as discussed in the studies presented by scholars such as Jamsheed K. Choksy, Albert De Jong, and Mansour Shaki. This paper investigates the factors that legitimized the rise of these women to the throne through the examination of the ideas of Iranian kingship in general and Sasanian imperial ideology in particular.

Kingship in Iran was both political and religious; the former by the virtue of royal office and the latter as the protector of the divine law on earth. Many scholars have studied the concept of Iranian kinship, including Geo Widengren, Richard N. Frye, and more recently Choksy, Abolala Soudavar, Antonio Panaino, and Touraj Daryaee. The most important aspect of Iranian kingship debated by these scholars is the idea of sacral kingship as opposed to a divinized ruler. Choksy, for instance, suggests that Iranian kingship was sacral; he has reconstructed this concept from the accounts of Dēnkard or Acts of the Religion. He has elaborated on the doctrine of sacral kingship "as represented, legitimized, propagated, and preserved by the [Mazdean] religion." Frye, through the examination of "the place of the king in secular popular beliefs," and Soudavar, based on the study of visual symbolism of xwarrah or "Divine Glory" throughout Iranian history, have also suggested that Iranian kingship was sacral.

According to this idea, the king was legitimate because xwarrah, the divine glory of kingship, was bestowed upon him by a deity, and he could lose it by deviating from the divine

laws. The most important requirement for obtaining xwarrah was the lineage of the king; only descendents of the royal family could be considered legitimate holders of xwarrah. And, the nobles and priests loyally adhered to the requirement that the monarch always be a member of the ruling dynasty, in recognition of the belief that the gods had bestowed kingship only on descendents of the founder of the royal house. The king was sanctioned by the gods, but he was not divine.

As part of the same debate, Daryaee, in a recent article, has suggested that the ideology of kingship in Iran should not be viewed as a static and unchanging concept. He stresses that the ideology of sacral kingship applied to the Achaemenids, but that with the introduction of Hellenistic ideas during the Seleucid and Parthian periods, a shift towards the idea of a divinized king occurred. Following Daryaee's interpretation, it can be suggested that the ideology of kingship took different forms at different times during Sasanian rule as a reaction or a response to the political issues of the time. For instance, beginning with Ardaxšīr I, the early Sasanian ideology favored the concept of a divinized king, as apparent from the titles and slogans used by the kings. Ardaxšīr replaced the last Arsacids king whose ideology reflected a Hellenistic influence; so the newcomer had to accommodate the prevalent ideology to legitimize and justify his takeover. Ardaxšīr's political stand becomes apparent in the following formula on his coins and in his inscription:

> mzdysn bgy 'rthštr MLKAn MLKA 'yr'n MNW ctry MN yzd'n
> māzdēsn bay ardaxšahr šāhān šāh Ērān kē čihr az yazdān
> Mazdean Majesty Ardaxšir, king of kings of Iran, whose seed [is] from the gods

During the late second and the third centuries CE, however, the Mazdean religious hierarchy grew from its initial organization under Kerdīr, and began to challenge the divinized power of kingship. Kerdīr was able to centralize the church, create a religious hierarchy, and strengthen the position of Mazdean priests. In addition, under Wahrām II, the Zoroastrian clergy became so influential that for the first time a priest (Kerdīr) was appointed as the sole patron of the Anāhīd-Ardaxšīr fire at Istakhr – previously a hereditary position of the Sasanian

kings. It is also argued that Wahrām II (266-293 CE) and Wahrām III (293) assumed the throne due to the efforts and intrigues of Kerdīr. The nobles, however, deposed Wahrām III and placed Narseh on the throne; this was an instance of disagreement between the religious institution and the aristocracy, where the eventual victors were the nobles!

The eventual death of Manī and the defeat of Manichaeism as a rival to Mazdeanism in becoming the Sasanian state religion can be viewed as another manifestation of the increased power of Kerdīr and his influence on the King of Kings. Thus, by the end of the third century, priests played a significant role in political affairs of the state. Consequently, the idea of sacral kingship as opposed to a divinized king became more prominent as reflected by the changes of the legends on Sasanian coinage. By the time of Šābuhr II, in fourth century CE, the priests may have been powerful enough to cause the exclusion of such a formula as "whose origin is from the gods" from the Sasanian coinage.

With the elimination of the idea of the divine origins of the king, Sasanian monarchs had to rely on another legitimizing ideology. It was at this juncture that the idea of being related to the mythical Keyanid kings, presented as the rightful holders of xwarrah in the Avesta, became central to the justification of the hereditary kingship of the Sasanian dynasty. The reliance on the idea of being descendants of the Keyanids, first, created the required lineage as legitimate inheritors of the "Glory of Kingship," and then, limited any opposition by the religious institution. This compromise ensured their right to the throne, eliminated the claims of any contenders not from the Sasanian house, and curtailed any objections voiced by the Mazdean priesthood.

As another indication of the important position acquired by the priests, Shaked points to certain accounts in Shahname, which state that high priests were "sent as diplomatic emissaries to foreign rulers." He also argues that mowbads could even rule over cities. The involvement of the religious representative in administrative functions, and the authority of the priests increased over time and continued until the end of the Sasanian period as indicated by the accounts of Agathias in the sixth century:

> The magi are the objects of extreme awe and veneration, all public business being conducted at their discretion and in accordance with their prognostications, and no litigant or party to a private dispute fails to come under their jurisdiction. Indeed

> nothing receives the stamp of legality in the eyes of the Persians unless it is ratified by one of the Magi.

This suggestion is further corroborated by the sigillographic evidence presented by Rita Gyselen implying that priests performed specific functions within each provincial administration. One can also see the continuation of this trend as reflected in the extensive list of religious titles and people presented in Mādayān ī Hazār Dādestān. This rise of the political authority of the Mazdean institution not only limited the power of the king, but at the same time spread some of the burden of the preservation of kingship to the religious representatives and the nobles who had a vested interest in the continuation of the dynasty. In the case of Bōrān, these two groups were willing to disregard her gender to preserve sacral kingship and the powerful position of the Mazdean religion.

During the reign of Xusrō II (590-628 CE), the height of the power of the Sasanians was reached with the conquest of Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Libya. The end of his rule, however, marked the beginning of the decline of the dynasty. After the death of Xusrō II, his son Kawād II came to power. To secure his throne during this chaotic time, he killed all male descendents of the Sasanians, including his brothers. Not much later he died, leaving the empire to his young son Ardaxšir III. Within a few months, the young king was killed by an army general, Šahrwarāz, who claimed the throne. Šahrwarāz was not from the royal family and was unable to secure the support of the nobility. He was subsequently murdered, leaving a power vacuum in the empire.

When Bōrān became queen in 629 CE, she was the closest surviving direct descendent of Xusrō II and, in the absence of a male descendent, the person most legitimately qualified to ascend the throne.

Although, noblewomen had a special position in Sasanian society throughout their history, the conjunction of exceptional political issues and the reinterpretation of social norms permitted the rise to power of this princess. Wiesehöfer emphasizes that the "Iranian records of the third century (inscriptions, reliefs, coins), show that the female members of the royal family received an unusual amount of attention and respect." Examples of the strong presence of women in the official records of this period include the inscription of Šābuhr I at the Ka'b-ye Zardušt, the

reliefs (figure 11) and coins of Wahrām II; they all support the notion that noble women enjoyed a high level of authority in Sasanian court but not as the sole ruler. The parties involved, however, had to rely on certain resources, such as traditions, myths, symbols, and political ideology, to get beyond the gender roles defined for women. The legend of Hūmāy, a female ruler belonging to the Kayanid dynasty in Bundahišn, and the ever-present Anāhīd as the patron-saint of the dynasty could have also contributed to the justification of Bōrān and her sister's rise to power.

In order to be viewed as the legitimate ruler of the Sasanian realm, Bōrān had to be considered as the rightful holder of xwarrah. One way to accomplish this was through the revival of the early Sasanian political ideology of divinized king, and the specific invocation of her father's royal legacy by imitating the design of Xusrō II's crown and coins. Bōrān is the only Sasanian woman depicted wearing a crown on Sasanian coinage (figures 1, 2, 3 and 4.) The crowns of both Xusrō II and Bōrān display the symbol of Wahrām, the deity of offensive victory, spreading his wings. This reference points to Wahrām as the deity who had invested these two rulers. Xusrō II, similar to any powerful monarch, was expected to be victorious in campaigns against the enemies of his empire so being invested by Wahrām would have been acceptable. Bōrān, however, as a woman, could not potentially participate in any military expedition and consequently could not have been viewed as a victorious monarch. Therefore, the reference to Wahrām can be viewed as a symbolic gesture to reinforce her connection to her father. It is worth noting that the fact that Sasanian territories reached their largest expanse during the reign of Xusrō II could be viewed as the fulfillment of his destiny as prophesied by his investiture by the god of victory.

As for Bōrān's coins, their design and the legends further reinforced her claim to the throne by using specific symbols (figures 3 and 4). The obverse depicts the queen's bust turned to the right with a double row of pellets surrounding the royal portrait. The astral signs are represented in the margins of the coin. Her costume is decorated with a star and crescent and two diadem ties emerge from behind her shoulders. On the reverse, a Mazdean fire altar is depicted attended by two standing figures; the entire scene is surrounded by three rows of pellets with astral signs in the margins. The presence of the astral signs of the crescent,

representing the moon, and star on the crown and the coin of the Sasanian monarchs was yet another reminder of the divine sanction of the ruler.

Now, moving beyond symbols, the most important factor in Bōrān's claim to the throne was her lineage as the daughter of the most powerful Sasanian king. Until the end of the Sasanian dynasty, except for two occasions when Wahrām Čōbīn (590-591 CE) and Šahrwarāz ruled for short periods, the legitimate ruler was a descendent of Sāsān. The allegiance of the nobles and the religious leaders could rarely be won by a rebel who did not belong to the house of Sāsān. Tabarī relates the story of Šahrwarāz with details about his sickness and his murder in a way to emphasize the enormity of his sacrilege by sitting on the royal throne when he was not from the lineage of Sasan. It is important to note that no such objection was voiced against Bōrān because of her gender by Tabarī, Isfahanī or Sebēos. Except for Tha'alibī's mention that the prophet Mohammad considered her reign as a sign of decay, none of the sources reflect any controversy in her rise to the throne.

Another significant point to consider is Bōrān's personal depiction. According to Widengren, appearance played an important part in the legitimacy of the monarch, based on the Iranian ideology of kingship. He makes a special mention of the garments worn by the kings which were a combination of royal and priestly robes in special colors. In connection to this requirement, Hamzeh al-Isfahanī refers to the now lost suwar-i muluk-i bani-sasan, a book that depicted Sasanian rulers. According to al-Isfahanī, Bōrān was shown wearing the same type of clothing as the Sasanian kings, including a green tunic in a special pattern over sky-blue pants, a sky-blue crown, and sitting on the throne while holding a tabarzīn, or a battle-axe. The interesting points of this account start with the description of the tunic and pants combination that seems to be the standard clothing for the kings as depicted in the Sasanian rock reliefs (figure 9) or on objects of art (figure 10), and very different from the outfits of royal women who were always depicted in very long dresses that cover their legs and feet (figure 5 and 6). The colors are also of interest because sky-blue and green were used in the pictures of most Sasanian kings; red was the special royal color and this is absent from Bōrān's picture, but Xusrō I Anōšag-ruwān (531-579 CE) did not have this color as part of his garments either. Bōrān's colors are the same as Wahrām V Gūr (421-439 CE) and Yazdgird II (439-457 CE). It

should be noted that Āzarmīgduxt's colors were red, sky-blue and green. The use of red for Āzarmīgduxt demonstrates that the use of this royal color was not restricted to male rulers. So, Bōrān was not just a female member of the royal family but the monarch as shown by her attire and the legitimacy of her claim was further reinforced by the legends on her coins and the design of her crown.

Other important aspects of legitimate kingship included the relationships between the king, his subjects, and religion, meaning that the king had to protect the people of Ērānšahr and its religious laws. In the formulation of the requirements making the monarch worthy of xwarrah, there is no specific mention of gender. Panaino, however, underlines that the Iranian conception of the royalty was strictly a manly one, and that the king was the chief of the priests and the church, which did not have female clergy. It should be noted that although the religious institution excluded women as priests, the Mazdean doctrine as reflected in the Gāthās placed women at the same spiritual level as men. Reliance on such sentiments could potentially alleviate the restriction placed on Bōrān, a woman, to be the protector of the religious establishment. Panaino also points out that a queen in power, acting as a king, should have been under the sālarīh, i.e. guardianship, of a man. In answer to this concern, it is worth noting that this requirement applied to regular women, whereas Bōrān's lineage separated her from the rest and perhaps excused her from this restriction. More significantly, however, I would like to suggest that she was not viewed as the queen; she was in fact the king! Her gender was rendered irrelevant through the use of symbols. To further reinforce this idea, Āzarmīgduxt was presented with a beard on her coins (Figure 12) to emphasize the fact that the monarch was not a woman. Panaino views the rise of Bōrān to the throne as being an "absolute contradiction with respect to the Sasanian and Mazdean ideology of the power and the conception of the royalty" and consequently as a break with tradition. I would like to suggest that her rise to power should not be seen as a revolutionary step but as a required adjustment of existing parameters in the support of the central objective of preserving the Sasanian imperial ideology and the monarchy. This was a shift and an adjustment, not a revolution. The use of the proper kingly attire (as reported by al-Isfahanī), the use of the symbols on her crown (as investigated

by Malek and Curtis, Daryaee, Mochiri, Göbl and others), and the particular legend on her coinage (imitating her father's) were all to accommodate this shift.

In conclusion, the political turmoil after the reign of Kawād, and the challenges presented by the contender, Šahrwarāz, threatened the concept of hereditary monarchy so that drastic measures were required to preserve Sasanian kingship. In such dire conditions, nobles and priests, who were the pillars of the Sasanian institution of monarchy, reacted; they ensured the dynastic continuity, albeit for a short time, by promoting the accession of Bōrān, the daughter of Xusrō II and later her sister, Āzarmīgduxt, to the throne. The most important requirement for such an occurrence was the lineage of the person who had to preserve the function of the dynastic monarchy. Bōrān and Āzarmīgduxt were from the Sasanian royal bloodline and thus possessed the main prerequisite for the sacral kingship and xwarrah to be theirs. By disregarding the gender of these women, Sasanian aristocrats and the religious leaders preserved the idea of sacral kingship and the powerful position of the Mazdean institution.

Illustrations

Figure 1: Xusrō II's crown

Figure 2: Bōrān's Crown

Figure 3: Queen Boran's silver drahm, Muzeh Melli (Iran Bastan), Tehran.

Figure 4: Queen Bōrān's gold coin, private collection, courtesy of T. Daryaee

Figure 5: Sasanian noblewoman, palace of Bēšābuhr 3rd or 4th century CE

Figure 6: Investiture scene with Anāhīd

Figure 7: Female harpist from Bēšābuhr Mosaics, 3rd or 4th century CE

Figure 8: Nude dancing girl on the side of the boat shaped bowl

Figure 9: Investiture of Narseh, Naqsh-ī Rustam, late 3rd or early 4th century CE

Figure 10: Cup of Xusro I Anōšag-ruwān, 6th century CE

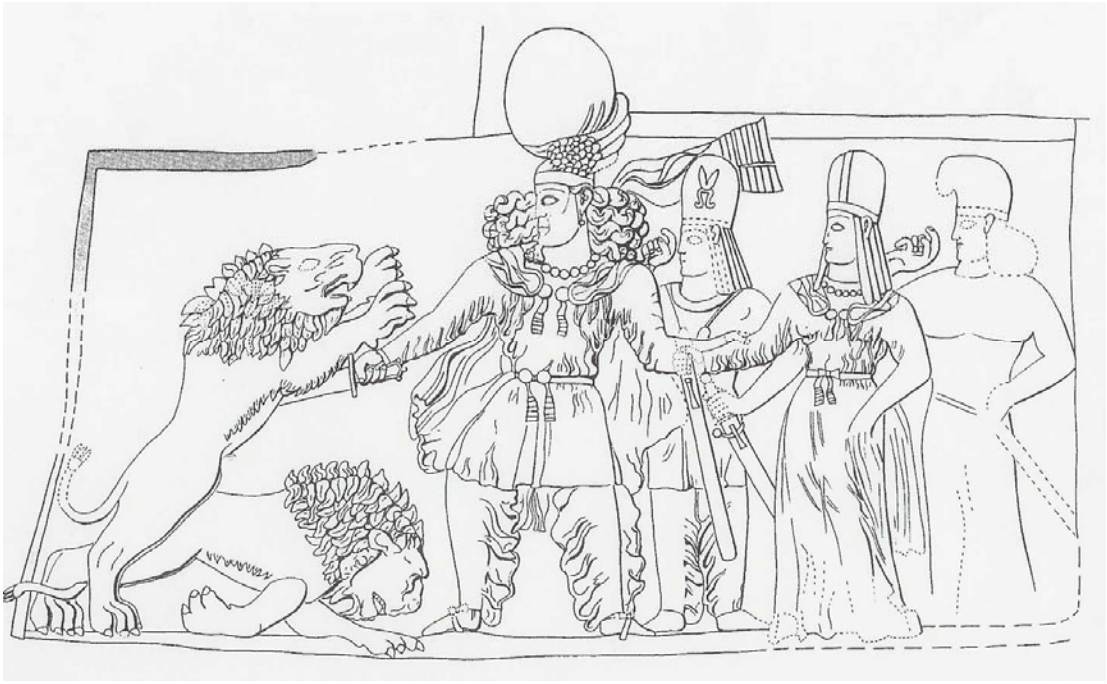

Figure 11: Wahrām II with his queen, late 3rd century CE, Sar Mašhad

Figure 12 – Āzarmigduxt, Mochiri Collection

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