

Epic of Kārnamag and the Late Sasanian Period

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Introduction

Kārnamag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān, “The Book of the Deeds of Ardaxšīr son of Pābag,” is a Middle Persian epic text on the lineage, life and kingship of the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardaxšīr I.¹ Composed sometime between the mid sixth to early seventh century,² this epic text attempts to tell a story almost 300 to 400 years after its original time period. Consequently, it is essentially a mixture of history and fiction, full of mythical and legendary tales with no discernable historical accuracy.³ While the basic structure and the main focus of the epic is on the person and naturally the time period of Ardaxšīr I, all of its aspects are very much influenced by the ideals and customs of the time of its composition. As a result, the *Kārnamag* is more a description of the late Sasanians court and the picture it presents of the earlier kings, indeed what the future monarchs saw as the proper image for their ancestors, rather than any accurate historical projection.⁴

This paper will try to bring to light the similarities between ideals reflected in the *Kārnamag* and what was the dominant ideology at the time of its composition, as well as pointing out the differences that exist between what is presented in the epic and the time period and characters it is proposing to portray.

¹ Frantz Grenet (trans), *La geste d'Ardashir fils de Pābag, Kārnamag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān*. Editions A Die, 2003 (hereafter KAP).

² See section two below for a discussion of the dating of the *Kārnamag*'s composition.

³ The historical core of the story is surrounded by stories and legends; see Maria Macuch. “Pahlavi Literature”, in Ronald Emmerick and Maria Macuch (eds.) *The Literature of Pre Islamic Iran: Companion to a History of Persian Literature*. London: I.B Tauris, 2009 : 172

⁴ Josef Wiesehofer *Ancient Persia: from 550 BC to 650 AD*. Translated by Azizeh Azodi. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996: 220.



Time of composition

In trying to analyze and discuss the epic of *Kārnāmag*, one of the first and most important questions we face is that of when exactly the epic was composed. It is commonly accepted that while the *Kārnāmag* talks about the early Sasanian kings and how they began their rule over Iran, it was nonetheless written many generations later during the reigns of their descendants, the lasts of the Sasanian kings. The text is generally attributed to the late Sasanian period,⁵ sometime between the early sixth to the early seventh century, essentially during the reigns of Xusrō I, Anōšag-ruwān (531-79) to that of his grandson and namesake, Xusrō II, Abarwēz (591-628). There are certain elements in the story of the *Kārnāmag* which could be interpreted as signs that the epic text was composed at the time of Xusrō II.⁶ At the same time, we have other elements which would bring the time of composition to that of the other Xusrō, Anōšag-ruwān, or even his father Kawād I.⁷ Panaino also gives 4-28 September 578 as a possible date for one of the astrological passages that is mentioned in the *Kārnāmag*.⁸

We need to keep in mind that trying to confine the date of the composition to a year, a decade or even the reign of one monarch is almost impossible and is in fact quite unproductive. The ideology that is reflected in the *kārnāmag* is not one that was created in a short period rather one which was the result of a long process at work for over a century. This is the late Sasanian ideology, in sharp contrast with that of the early one, which is reflected in an epic written about those earlier kings. However, figuring out the approximate time of the composition of this epic text, despite initial problems, is a possible task and that can be achieved by pointing out solid facts as evidence.

When considering the *Kārnāmag* as part of a greater corpus of Middle Persian literature, it becomes clear that this work belong to the late Sasanian period, a time which appears to have

⁵ Ahmad Tafazoli. *Tarikh-e-Adabiyat-e-Iran pish az Islam*, Tehran: Sokhan, 1378: 260. Mary Boyce, "Middle Persian Literature: Visionary and Apocalyptic Texts," in *Handbuch der Orientalistik 4/1, Section 2, Literatur No. 1* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968): 31-66 [60].

⁶ These elements are 1) Parthian mother of Šābuhr I in *kārnāmag* and its possible connection with Parthian mother of Xusrō II as well as the rise of the Parthian clans during the time of Xusrō II and 2) the existence of the term "xwarrah" which was used only by Xusrō II, both of which will be discussed further below.

⁷ The importance of a centralized state and its relation to the reforms of Xusrō I which started by his father is discussed further below in the section four.

⁸ Antonio Panino, "The two Astrological Reports of the *Kārnāmag* ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān." *Die Sprache* 36 (1994) P. 189.

been a flourishing time as far as the literature was concerned.⁹ Literary works had been in construction for many years prior to the time of Xusrō I, nonetheless, it is undeniable that Xusrō I and his successor were responsible for greatly promoting literature.¹⁰ Even many of the earlier works that existed prior to the late Sasanian period and no doubt prepared the ground for the growth we witness in the sixth century _were themselves gathered, revised, and reedited during the reign of Xusrō I. A good example is the genre of wisdom literature known as *Andarz* which had probably existed in Iran since the time of the composition of the younger Avestan literature, but many of its stories were put together and compiled during the reign of Xusrō I.¹¹ Similar to the *Andarz* is another genre of the “Iranian national history” known as *Xwadāy Nāmag*, (Book of sovereigns) which existed and was already collected by the time of Wahrām V (420-38).¹² It was, however, during the time of Xusrō I that *Xwadāy Nāmag* was re-edited, with parts of it probably rewritten under Xusrō II and once again at a later date under Yazdgerd III (632-51) the last Sasanian monarch.¹³ It is interesting to note that similar to the *kārnāmag*, *xwadāy nāmag* is also written without any attempt at distinguishing historical facts from legends and myths,¹⁴ and also similar to the *kārnāmag*, the heroes of the distant past are fashioned to resemble more contemporary kings.¹⁵

The strongest evidence we have in attributing the *Kārnāmag* to the late Sasanian period is the text itself, what it says and how it says it. For one thing the linguistic evidence point to the fact that Middle Persian used in the *kārnāmag* must be a very late form of the language¹⁶ when already the evolution of it into New Persian is visible, putting the date of its composition no earlier than sixth century. It is of course possible that what we have available to us today is the revised version of an earlier text while the original is lost. However aside from the linguistic evidence, we also have other important elements, emerging from the nature of the story itself, that point to a time of composition from mid sixth to early seventh century. These in fact are the main concern of this paper and will be discussed in what follows.

⁹ Wiesehöfer, 1996: 219.

¹⁰ Wiesehöfer, 1996: 219.

¹¹ S. Shaked. “Andarz and Andarz Literature in Pre-Islamic Iran” *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 2004.

¹² Macuch, 2009: 177.

¹³ Ehsan Yarshater. “Iranian National History,; in E. Yarshater ed. *The Cambridge History of Iran, vol 3 (1): the Seleucid: arthian and Sasanian Periods*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1983: 359.

¹⁴ E. Yarshater, 1983: 366

¹⁵ E. Yarshater, 1983: 402. The Pishdadian and Kayanian period and kings resemble the Sasanian period and the Sasanian monarchs.

¹⁶ Tafazoli, 1378: 262

Centralization

The issue of centralization, its close relations to strength and greatness of the empire, is very present in the *kārnāmag*. From the very first page of the story, in fact the very first sentence, we learn that Iran, in the post Alexanderian period, had become a feudal society in which 240 petty rulers, *kadag-xwadāy* were ruling:

*Pas az marg ī Aleskandar ī Hrōmīg Ērānšahr dō sad ud čehel kadag-xwadāy būd*¹⁷

After the death of Alexander the Roman, (there were) two hundred and forty district rulers in the Empire of Iran.¹⁸

The last few sentences with which the epic of *kārnāmag* ends are also about centralization, but this time with a different tone, happily announcing that the empire of Iran is once again unified, as Hormizd (I) was able to put all of the Empire of Iran, *Ērānšahr*, under his rule and bring its different rulers into submission:

*“Hāmōyēn Ērānšahr abāz ō ē xwadāyīh tuwānist āwurdan.”*¹⁹

“(he was) able to bring all of the Empire of Iran again under control”

When focusing on the issue of centralization, we see that what is presented in the *Kārnāmag* is clearly under the influence of sixth century ideals of what a political system and ruler should be. While reading the *kārnāmag*, it is hard to miss the strong implication that a centralized country and an absolute monarchy are infinitely better than a feudalist one with many petty rulers, referred to as *kadag-xwadāy*. After fighting many wars, Ardaxšīr laments about failing to completely centralize the country and asks the astrologers whether his dream of unification will ever be realized:

*“Abar ān xīr abēr čēhišnīg ud handēšīdār būd, kū ma agar-im az abargar nē brēhēnīd estēd kū Ērānšahr pad ē-xwadāyīh bē šāyist winārdan?”*²⁰

About this matter (he) was worried and thoughtful, that if I do not establish this and leave the Empire of Iran to a worthy rule.

His grandson, Hormizd, who according to the *Kārnāmag*, actually does centralizes the empire, is not an ordinary king, rather one whose reign was prophesized by the fortunetellers of

¹⁷KAP, Grenet, 2003: 52

¹⁸ Unless otherwise states, all English translations of the Middle Persian quotations are by the present author.

¹⁹ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 116

²⁰ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 106-108.

India²¹ and also one whose destined role is so important that it cannot be stopped by anyone from being realized. Although Ardaxšīr does his best to make sure that this particular grandson is not even conceived in the first place,²² nonetheless Hormizd is born and realizes his destiny as prophesized. While much is said about king Hormizd before he is even born, the text of *kārnāmag* only devotes one paragraph to his actual reign, a paragraph solely concerned with his efforts at centralizing Iran. Also, the epic story ends with him in a manner as if everything that had happened before, including the deeds of his father and grandfather, was leading up to Hormizd's reign. Naturally what Hormizd does, in fact the only thing that he does as far as the story is concerned, must be of major importance.

In the *Shahnameh's* version of the story of Ardaxšīr, the pro-centralization tone is even stronger than it is in the *kārnāmag*. Not only is it mentioned that Iran has been a feudal, (*mulūk al-tawā'if*) state since the time of Alexander, but it is also mentioned that Rome, the ever present enemy of Iran, is happy about it;²³ obviously implying that only a centralized Iran can realize its full potentials and become a danger for its enemies while a feudal Iran is weak and unimportant.

Looking at the sources we have from the time of Ardaxšīr I and the beginning of the Sasanian dynasty, we see a very different image from what is implied and in some cases clearly said in the *kārnāmag*. We have no reason to believe that after defeating the Arsacids, Sasanians also ended their system of government and started a centralized one, at least not at the time of Ardaxšīr I and not even under the rule of his son Šābuhr I. In fact, it looks like Ardaxšīr I continued with the feudal system of the Arsacids.²⁴ More importantly, the extent of actual fragmentation of the Arsacid realm can be debated, since despite the claims of the *Kārnāmag*, the *Shahnameh* and even works of Muslim historians such as al-Tabari, the accusation in fact might be a way for the Sasanian propaganda machine to portray their founding father, Ardaxšīr I, as the unifier of Iran.²⁵ This way they could demonstrate the whole episode of Ardaxšīr's victory over Ardawān IV not as the struggle of a usurper who overcame and defeated the reigning king,

²¹ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 108

²² Ardaxšīr who does not want to have his blood line mixed with that of Mihrag orders the entire Mihrag family to be murdered. KAP, Grenet, 2003, p 108

²³ Ferdowsi, Abolghasem, *Shahnameh*. Ed Jul Mohl. Tehran: Sokhan, 1378 (1999): 1492

²⁴ R. N. Frye. *The Heritage of Persia*. Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2004: 239.

²⁵ 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, Elites Old and New*, Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2004: 241.

but as that of a noble prince attempting to unify a long lost empire which had greatly suffered in the hands of the evil Alexander and has been suffering since from a weak system of government.

It is true that the Sasanians, from beginning of their reign, did try to undermine the power of the nobility. The local rulers were replaced by the different sons of each reigning king who carried a title related to the area they were ruling over²⁶, and as the result, the power of the local rulers and nobility diminished with the rise of the Sasanian²⁷. Yet the immediate difference was very minor, if any at all, and the early Sasanian kings had a system of government and a military system that resembled that of the Arsacids.²⁸ More importantly, no matter how earnest the attempt of the early Sasanians in diminishing the power of the local rulers, the reality is that the Parthian noble houses such as Kārēn and Sūrēn, among others, continued to rule over their ancestral domain as late as the fifth century. These Parthian noble houses, while officially allied with the crown, nonetheless enjoyed a great deal of local independence.²⁹ A nobleman's rank could be bestowed upon him by the king as a royal favor, but in most cases was independent of him and more related to noble blood and descent. It was only in the late Sasanian period that the situation changed and royal favor became more important than family name and inherited nobility.³⁰

The real attempt, one that was temporarily successful, in diminishing the power of noble houses came with the reforms of Xusrō I³¹ which in fact started with his father Kawād I in sixth century.³² As a result of the reforms of Xusrō I, a new minor nobility, the land owning gentry called the *dehgāns*, emerged³³ and lessened the power of the large aristocratic houses. The *dehgāns* later became the military and economic backbone of the Sasanian state.³⁴ A new kind of army was also created as the result of these reforms which included four generals, *Spāhbeds*, each responsible for one quarter of the empire.³⁵ While evidence shows that the success with enforcing the empire inside a centralized frame was only temporary and the nobility eventually

²⁶ Šābuhr I names his sons with their title in his inscription, his crown prince is referred to as "the great king of Armenia," "*Wuzurg Armen Shah*." ŠKZ, 23/18/41

²⁷ Rubin, 2004: 244.

²⁸ Rubin, 2004: 246.

²⁹ Rubin, 2004: 245.

³⁰ Wisehofer, 1996: 172.

³¹ Rubin, 2004: 249.

³² Touraj Daryaee. *Sasanian Iran: Portrait of a Late Antique Empire*. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publisher. 2008: 70.

³³ A. Tafazzoli. *Sasanian Society*, Bibliotheca Persica Press: New York, 2000:41.

³⁴ Daryaee, 2008: 75.

³⁵ Rika Gyselen. *The four generals of the Sasanian empire: some sigillographic evidence*. Rome : Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2001.

regained their power with perhaps even more independence,³⁶ there are clear signs that at least an attempt did take place in sixth century. Consequently, the idea of an absolute monarchy as superior to a feudalist regime was projected in the epic work produced sometime between mid sixth to early seventh century.

Lineage

One of the most important, arguably the most important, themes in the *kārnāmag* is the theme of lineage and noble blood. From the very first page of the epic to almost the very last one, the issue of lineage is present and determining in how the story unfolds. Sāsān who is only a shepherd and normally should not be considered a proper husband for the daughter of a king, Pābag, is nonetheless given the honor after he reveals his true lineage and the fact that he is from the seed of Dārāyān and thus connected to ancient rulers of Iran.³⁷ Ardaxšīr's lineage and noble blood is repeatedly mentioned throughout the story and he is reminded of his noble background during the hardest part of his journey when he is being chased by the enemy.³⁸ Near the end of the story, Hormizd I is foretold to be the all powerful and unifying king who fulfills his grandfather's dream of centralizing the empire, almost solely because of his particular lineage as the descendant of both Ardaxšīr and Mihrag.³⁹ It is also fear of the very same lineage that results in one of the most brutal episodes of the *kārnāmag* when Ardaxšīr murders Mihrag's entire family.⁴⁰

As expected, this most important theme is in many ways a very confusing part of the story and a much talked over section as well. Not only the lineage provided for Ardaxšīr and his descendants differs radically from what is presented in historical sources such as inscriptions, but even the amount of attention that the issue of lineage receives in the *kārnāmag* is different from what we witness in early Sasanian testimonies.

It is hard to imagine a dynasty, anywhere in the world or in any time period, who do not care a great deal about their lineage and do not try to present themselves as members of an old and

³⁶ Rubin, 2004: 250. "By the time of the Arab conquest, local rulers, especially in the east and in the Caspian provinces, had become virtually independent."

³⁷ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 56-58

³⁸ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 68. Ardaxšīr is told that he is a "kay" and is son of Pābag and from the seed of Sāsān and thus should not fear anything. Obviously, his lineage alone is capable of protecting him.

³⁹ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 106-108.

⁴⁰ KAP, Grenet, 2003:108.



noble family. However the early Sasanian monarchs might just be that exception! None of the early Sasanian rulers go to any length in presenting their ancestry; almost all of them only mention their father and grandfather without going any farther back.⁴¹ Šābuhr I has a lengthy inscription in Ka'be-ye Zardošt in which he mentions in detail all the members of his court and family, yet the farthest he goes in mentioning his ancestry is the great grandmother, mother of Pābag named Dēnak.⁴² As far as the male ancestors are concerned, only his father, Ardaxšīr and grandfather, Pābag, are named. We do not see any name that goes further back than two generations with the exception of an obscure and unknown figure called lord Sāsān, *Sāsān xwaday*, who has been interpreted as father of Pābag by some scholars.⁴³

What we could conclude from all that these is that the Sasanian monarchs were either from a humble background, where no ancestor worth mentioning existed, or they did simply not care and did not realize the importance of mentioning their lineage. The second possibility becomes stronger when we look at the inscription of Šābuhr's son, Narsē I, in Paikuli. We can be certain that Narsē knew about his great grandfather, Pābag, yet he too, similar to his father, sees it sufficient to only mention his own father and grandfather and does not go any farther back than two generations.⁴⁴ Additionally, the behavior of the early Sasanian kings is in sharp contrast to those of ancient Persia rules such as Darius I, whose inscription in Behistun⁴⁵ names his ancestors as far back as possible in order to demonstrate his legitimacy as the king.

One might be able to interpret this silence on the issue of ancestry as a lack of interest on the part of the Sasanian monarchs in creating an earthly lineage for themselves and the desire instead to promote a grander and much more important lineage for their family. While no male ancestor prior to the grandfathers is ever mentioned by any of these kings, something far more interesting exists on their coins and inscriptions which is much more majestic and awe inspiring than any ancestry they had or could create for themselves. These early kings all refer to themselves as one who is from the lineage of the gods, *kē čīhr az yazdān*,⁴⁶ a clear claim of divinity which is once again very different from what we know of from the previous Iranian dynasties such as the Achaemenids. In any case, whether it was the goal of establishing a celestial lineage or lack of

⁴¹ Both Šābuhr I and his son Narsē I only mention their fathers and grandfathers in their inscriptions.

⁴² Michael Back. *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*, (Acta Iranica vol VIII), Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1978: 339.

⁴³ This issue will be further discussed below.

⁴⁴ Helmut Humbach and Prods O. Skjærvø *Paikuli Inscription*, Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reeichert Verlag, 1983. Section I, introduction (www.sasanika.com)

⁴⁵ Roland G. Kent. *Old Persian: Grammar, Text, Lexicon*, New Haven: American Oriental Society 1953: DB1:3-6.

⁴⁶ Daryae, 2008:17



any substantial earthly ones, or both, the way issue of lineage is being treated by the early Sasanian kings is in sharp contrast to how it is presented in the epic of *kārnāmag*.

Starting with the claim of lineage from the gods, we have the first major contradiction between the *kārnāmag* and the reality of the kings it is claiming to portray. Amid all the extraordinary and supernatural activities accomplished by Ardashīr in the *kārnāmag*, such as slaying a dragon, and in spite of all the honors being bestowed on him and his descendants as true and legitimate kings, nonetheless nowhere does a claim exist about celestial lineage. In the *Kārnāmag*, Ardashīr is a “*kay*” and thus is a member of the family of ancient legendary kings, the Kayanids through his descent from Dārāyān⁴⁷ and is being chased by the glory of the kingdom of his ancestors.⁴⁸ Yet nowhere in the story is the claim of descent from the race of gods, made by the historical Ardashīr I and his children repeatedly, reflected. Here we have another example of how the epic text is clearly reflecting the ideals of the late Sasanian period, the time when it was actually composed. The claim of descent from the gods, which was a never changing and standard motto for all of the early Sasanian kings, was however dropped completely in the fourth century.⁴⁹ It is never again seen in any of the coins until the very last days of the empire when Queen Bōrān claims, in some of her ceremonial coins, that she has restored the race of gods: *bōrān ī yazdān tōhm winārdār*, “Bōrān (who) restored the seed of the gods.”⁵⁰ By the time the *kārnāmag* is composed in late sixth/ early seventh century and before Queen Bōrān, the phrase “*kē čīhr az yazdān*” had not been used for more than two centuries and must have been a long forgotten phrase as far as the majority of the audience were concerned. In its place, a Kayanid ancestry had been adopted by the Sasanian monarchs, an ancestry that is perfectly reflected in the *kārnāmag*.

Kayanid ideology most certainly belongs only to the later Sasanian period, for absolutely no reference to it exists prior to fifth century and before the reign of Yazdgerd I (399-420) who gives himself a Kayanid title *rāmšahr*⁵¹. Prior to that there is no evidence of any Kayanid name or title for any member of the Sasanian dynasty and none of the legendary Kayanid kings are

⁴⁷ The legendary king who fought Alexander probably a reference to Darius III the last Achaemenid king but possibly a mixture of myth and historical reality, he will be discussed in more details latter in the paper.

⁴⁸ Xwarrah is chasing him in form of an eagle. KAP, Grenet, 2003: 70

⁴⁹ Daryae, 2008:53, Šābuhr II is one of the last kings that uses it.

⁵⁰ T. Daryae, “the Coinage of Queen Bōrān and its Significance in Sasanian Imperial Ideology,” *Bulletin of the Asian Institute*, vol. 13, 1999: 80.

⁵¹ T. Daryae, “History, epic, and numismatics: on the title of Yazdgerd I (Rāmšahr),” *The American Journal of Numismatic*, vol. 14, 2002 (2003): 91.

ever mentioned. Although the Avestan ideology seems to have been strong in the early days of the Sasanian rule,⁵² the legendary Avestan family of the Kayanids does not receive any form of attention. Things change in the fifth century and while in case of Yazdgird I it is only a title, soon we have Kayanid names, such as Kawād, Kāwūs, Zāmāsp and Xusrō, which were never before used by the Sasanians, becoming the norm for almost all kings and princes of the dynasty. More importantly the title *kay* is adapted by Yazdgird II and continues until Kawad I.⁵³ Once again what we see in the *kārnāmag* is in perfect harmony with what we know to be the ideals of the late Sasanian monarchy. Legendary Ardaxšīr of the *kārnāmag*, unlike his historical counterpart Ardaxšīr I, but similar to the later Sasanian monarchs, is called Ardaxšīr -ī-Kay⁵⁴, and is being chased by the majesty of the Kayanid sovereignty⁵⁵.

The fact that this chasing glory is referred to as the Kayanid sovereignty is not the only interesting and revealing elements about it. The glory is called *Xwarrah*,⁵⁶ a very interesting concept which can once again demonstrate to us how reflective of its time period the epic really is. Although we have images and even phrases from the early Sasanian times that have been interpreted as *Xwarrah*⁵⁷, we have no direct reference to it, outside of the text of the *kārnāmag*, until the time of Xusrō II who mentions it on his coins.⁵⁸ While the existence of this word is not enough for us to claim a more specific date of composition for the *kārnāmag* and attribute it to the time of Xusrō II, we can safely claim that the epic story must have been close enough in time to the period in which a coin with the word *Xwarrah* was minted.

Even more important than these references is the very clear and direct connection that Ardaxšīr has in the *kārnāmag* to the Kayanid dynasty via his biological father Sāsān. Sāsān, whose noble lineage and the blood of Dārāyān in his veins is the only reason why he even gets the chance to father Ardaxšīr, is one of the most confusing and unusual characters of the *kārnāmag* and one that is absent in historical references from the time of Ardaxšīr I.

⁵² As it will be discussed later, the titles that early Sasanians give themselves such as *Mazda worshipping* as well as the reference to the name of Ērān all show a clear tendency toward Avestan ideology.

⁵³ Rahim Shayegan “Approaches to the study of Sasanian history” in Siamak Adhami (ed) *Paitimāna*, Costa Mesa: Mazda Publisher, 2003: 370.

⁵⁴ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 68.

⁵⁵ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 70.

⁵⁶ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 70.

⁵⁷ It has also been suggested the word *afzun* on Kawād I’s coins is really meant to indicate *Xwarrah afzun* and *Xwarrah* is implied. Abolala Soudavar. *The Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian kingship*. Costa Mesa: Mazda publisher, 2003: 18

⁵⁸ T. Daryaei, “The Use of Religio-Political Propaganda on the Coinage of Xusrō II,” *The American Journal of Numismatic*, 1997: 44.

There are many contradictions between the story narrated in the *kārnāmag* and the historical reality, especially when it comes to lineage, yet nowhere are these contradictions as obvious and as radical as in the case of Sāsān and his connection to Ardashīr. The claims of the *kārnāmag* about the Arsacid mother of Šābuhr or maternal grandfather of Hormizd⁵⁹ are unsupported by historical data. However, one could always argue that the text of *kārnāmag* does not necessarily contradict the inscription of Šābuhr I or later inscription of his son in Paikuli, rather adds more information to them. In the case of Sāsān, however, the epic story does in fact clearly contradicts claims of Ardashīr I and his son Šābuhr I about their father and grandfather respectively.

All evidence we have from the time of Ardashīr I and his children designate Pābag to be the father of Ardashīr without any exception. The most famous of these historical sources is the lengthy inscription of Šābuhr I in Ka'be ye Zardošt (henceforth ŠKZ) in which once again Pābag is mentioned as father of Ardashīr and there is only one reference to a lord called Sāsān, *Sāsān xwaday*.⁶⁰ Here, no explanation is given of who this person could be, or whether he is a person or a deity, from which period he is, and what his possible connection to the Sasanians might be. As we move forward in time, nowhere else do we have any references to anybody else being designated as father of Ardashīr but Pābag, of course until the *Kārnāmag*.

In fact, the historical reality of Pābag being the real father of Ardashīr is so strong that it influences even the writers of the *kārnāmag* who have obviously chosen to deliberately change Ardashīr's ancestry. Although Sāsān is the father in the *kārnāmag*, he can only be described as the biological father, one whose only role is to impregnate the mother and transfer his Kayanid, noble seed. In practice, it is the grandfather, Pābag, who raises Ardashīr and gives him the patronymic by which he is known; note that even the epic story itself is entitled "the Book of the Deeds of Ardashīr son of *Pābag*."

Sāsān has a special position in the *kārnāmag* because of his descent from Dārāyān, and Pābag sees him in his dreams much glorified and treated like a king. In Pābag's dream, Sāsān is sitting on an adorned white elephant, an animal which has been interpreted as a symbol of sovereignty.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Lineage of both Šābuhr I and his son Hormizd I will be discussed later in the paper.

⁶⁰ ŠKZ 25/20/46

⁶¹ A. Tafazoli, "Elephant: A demonic creature and a symbol of sovereignty," in *Monumentum H.S. Nyberg (Acta Iranica Vol II)*, Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1975: 397.



“any Šab-ēw ēdōn dīd čiyon ka Sāsān pad pīl-ēw <ī>ārāstag ī spēd nišāst estād”⁶²

Another night (he) saw as such that Sasan was sitting on a white, adorned elephant

This is the reason why Pābag then decides to give his daughter in marriage to Sāsān. Despite his important role, Sāsān is not seen ever again in the story after the birth of his son. As noble as his lineage is, it looks as if his only role was to father the heir that Pābag is clearly lacking.⁶³ As the story progresses, Ardaxšīr grows up and becomes famous as a “cultured” youth, prompting the Arsacid king Ardawān IV to send a letter to Pābag and tell him to send his “son”, not grandson, to his court.⁶⁴ Later when Ardaxšīr runs into trouble with Ardawān and his sons, he writes a letter to Pābag, not Sāsān, and asks him for guidance. Sāsān has completely exited the story and is not ever again mentioned except in one passage when Ardaxšīr is being encouraged not to fear his enemy; even in this passage Sāsān is not referred to as Ardaxšīr’s father but rather as one of his ancestors.⁶⁵

“Ardaxšīr -ī- Kay ī Pābagān ī az tōhmag ī Sāsā,”

Ardaxšīr -ī- Kay son of Pābag who is from the seed of Sāsān.

This particular passage in the *kārnāmag* is very interesting and important not only because it shows the already fading position of Sāsān as the father of Ardaxšīr, but because it is very similar to another contemporary source, this time a non-Iranian, Byzantine, source written by Agathias in whose account Ardaxšīr is once again son of Pābag with Sāsān as his biological father and thus is called Ardaxšīr son of Pābag from the lineage of Sāsān.⁶⁶ Clearly the idea of Sāsān being the blood transmitter, the biological father, yet not the real acting parent to Ardaxšīr was a strong myth around the sixth century so much that is it presented in sources from both within and without the Sasanian borders.

Richard Frye mentions that the scholarship has only recently adopted the idea of Sāsān as the father of Pābag who was in turn the father of Ardaxšīr, and considers the discovery of Šābuhr I’s

⁶² KAP, Grenet, 2003: 56.

⁶³ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 54. It is mentioned early on in the story that Pābag did not have a noble child, probably meaning a male child. *farzand ī nambordar ne bud*: “Did not have a famous child”.

⁶⁴ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 58.

⁶⁵ KAP, Grenet, 2003 P 68.

⁶⁶ Agathias II, 27,1_5 (Dodgeon and Lieu p.9)

inscription to have been one of the major reasons behind this.⁶⁷ However, as mentioned earlier and as Frye himself points out, nowhere in this inscription is Sāsān designated as the father of Pābag. Coincidentally, as mentioned earlier, the mother of Pābag is mentioned by Šābuhr I yet we have no references to Sāsān being named as her husband or the man who had fathered her children.⁶⁸

One other argument regarding the character of Sāsān and his insertion into the ancestry of Ardaxšīr is centered around the possibility of Sāsān not being a person but rather a deity. If we decide to read the words “*xwadāy*” as god and not lord, then we have opened the door to a whole new possibility regarding the nature of Sāsān and his relationship with Ardaxšīr. The name Sāsān is strikingly similar to the name of a Semitic deity called *sesen* and for a while the possibility of Sāsān being a reference to this Semitic deity was strongly considered.⁶⁹ Knowing this information could help us draw some new hypothesis about the role of Sāsān in the *Kārnāmag*.

If we consider Sāsān to indeed have been a deity to whom the dynasty was devoted and from whom it claimed lineage, this could present a plausible explanation for the title “from lineage of gods” *kē čīhr az yazdān*,⁷⁰ that the earlier Sasanian kings used. As time passed, however, the desire of the later Sasanian monarchs to be less divine and more earthly becomes the reason behind Sāsān being lowered in rank from mythical ancestor/deity into an earthly father.

In the fourth century, the Sasanians stopped using the designation “from lineage of the gods” and instead became non-divine rulers. In fact, Šābuhr II (383-88) is one of the last kings who used the title “from lineage of the gods.”⁷¹ Given that the *Kārnāmag* was most certainly composed after the fourth century, we could argue that by the time it was composed the Sasanians had stopped connecting themselves to gods, and naturally this new identity was reflected in the *Kārnāmag*. While this could be a reasonable explanation, the possibility of Sāsān

⁶⁷ Frye, 2004: 236-237. Another reason behind this modern scholarly decision could be the history of Tabari, whose narrative is generally in harmony with the epic of *kārnāmag* yet has casted Sāsān as the grandfather and not the father of Ardaxšīr.

⁶⁸ Frye, 2004: 237.

⁶⁹ Daryaei, 2008: 8.

⁷⁰ Daryaei, 2008: 17.

⁷¹ Daryaei, 2008: 53.

being the same as deity Sesen is very unlikely according to Schwartz, who mentions among other things the different spelling of the name sesen, ssn, and Sasan ,s's'n.⁷²

One might ask why an attempt to secularize the ancestry, there is a need to alter the history so radically and change the name of a well-known forefather? Why couldn't the authors instead cast Sāsān as an earthly ancestor or perhaps the grandfather especially since the latter would agree with the common view about the Sasanian ancestry in the late Sasanian, early Islamic period?⁷³

To answer this question we best look at the other, already mentioned, function that Sāsān has in the story of Ardashīr, that of transmitter of ancient royal blood. Given the strong emphasis placed on the particular lineage of Sāsān, the alternative solution of casting him as the father of Pābag could have been problematic since then not only Ardashīr but Pābag too would have been the recipient of the blood of the ancestor of Sāsān, Dārāyān.

According to Kreyenbroek, Pābag could not be connected to Dārāyān, assuming that Dārāyān is in fact a reference to Darius III the last Achaemenid king, since the non-Achaemenid lineage of Pābag was well known.⁷⁴ This suggestion is problematic, however, since Darius III lived and ruled before the invasion of Alexander and even by the time that the real historical Ardashīr I took over in 224 AD, Darius was already a 500 years old figure and a very ambiguous one as well. In fact we do not even know how informed the Sasanians were about the Achaemenid dynasty.⁷⁵ By the time the Sasanians came to power and most importantly by the time that the *kārnāmag* is composed, the Achaemenid kings are quite archaic and ambiguous and their history is being convoluted by the history of the mythical kings of the Keyanid dynasty. It should not be difficult, in such a situation, to connect Pābag, the real father of Ardashīr I to these ancient rulers and thus avoiding the obvious revision of history that is presented in the

⁷² M. Schwartz, "Sesen: A Durable east Mediterranean God in Eastern Iran," *Proceeding of the Third European Conference of Iranian Studies held in Cambridge, 11th to 15th September 1995, part 1, Old and Middle Iranian studies*, ed. N Sims Williams, Wiesbaden, Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1998: 10.

⁷³ The fact that Tabari mentions Sāsān to be the father of Pābag and grandfather of Ardashīr shows the existence of a common and strong enough of a belief in such an ancestry in and around the time he is composing his work. Noldeke, 1999: 35.

⁷⁴ Kreyenbroek: hilip G. "How Pious was Šābuhr I?: Religion, Church and Propaganda Under the Early Sasanians" In *The idea of Iran, vol.3: The Sasanian Era*, Vesta Sarkhosh and Sarah Stewart (eds.) London: I.B.Tauris, 2008.

⁷⁵ For the question of whether or not the Sasanians had any memory of the Achaemenids see: T. Daryaee. "Keyanid History or National History?: The Nature of Sasanian Zoroastrian Historiography" In *Iranian Studies: the Journal of the Society for Iranian Studies*, vol.28, No 3&4, 1995:121-145.

Kārnāmag. No one indeed would have known enough about Darius III to dismiss such a connection as false and fabricated.

Kareyenbroek's suggestion would make sense, however, if we consider the possibility that Dārāyān is not a reference to an ancient pre-Alexanderian ruler, rather to a more recent local ruler of Persis. We know of the existence of the local rulers of Persis in the post-Alexandrian period and under the Seleucid and Arsacid overlordship.⁷⁶ We also know that the name Dārā appears in their inscriptions and coinage. The period of rule of one of them, called Dārā(yān) II, might have survived in the memory of the Persians of the Sasanian period as period of the rule of Dārā ī Dārāyān.⁷⁷ If the Dārāyān who is the ancestor of Sāsān is then a reference to this more recent ruler, who was in close proximity to the time of Pābag, then it is understandable why a connection to him could not be made through Pābag. First of all, this local ruler is much closer in time to both the real Ardaxšīr and legendary Ardaxšīr than Darius III of the Achaemenids. Additionally, according to al-Tabari, the family of these local rulers was called Bazrangi and they continued to rule in Persis until they were overthrown by family of Pābag and Ardaxšīr.⁷⁸ If this story, whether true or false, has survived until the time of Tabari, then it was easily known by the Sasanians as well and thus the legend that the family of Pābag defeated the family of Dārāyān was strong and well known, rendering it impossible for Pābag to be connected to them. That Pābag was not a member of Dārāyān's family was simply very clear and well established and would have been hard to ignore.

Apart from the way it is presented, the fact that a long, ancient lineage is created from Ardaxšīr is itself worth noticing, particularly in the context of the sixth century events which might have necessitated such ancestral claims. Around the time that the *kārnāmag* is being composed, Sasanian monarchy was going through a major phase of social, political, fiscal, and religious reform. Among these was the emergence of a Zoroastrian priest named Mazdak⁷⁹ who had managed to gain the favor of Kawād I and became close to him.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Wiesehöfer, "Fars under Seleucid and Parthian Rule," In *The Idea of Iran vol.2: the Age of the Parthians*, Vesta Sarkhosh and Sarah Stewart (eds.), London: I.B.Tauris, 2007: 37-47.

⁷⁷ P.O. SKjaervø, "The Joy of the Cup: A Pre Sasanian Middle Persian inscription on a Silver Bowl," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, vol. 11, 1997: 93-104.

⁷⁸ Nöldeke, 1999: 35-38.

⁷⁹ Other important effects of Mazdak religious reform shall be discussed later in the paper.

⁸⁰ Daryaei, 2008: 68.

Mazdak whose doctrine was to destroy social inequality and lessen the difference between the rich and poor⁸¹, is said to have believed and advertized a form of community sharing in which no one possessed anything but instead everyone shared all the resources.⁸² It has been claimed that “wives” were also among these “possessions” which were being shared, and for a while wife sharing was practiced by followers of Mazdak. In a number of accounts narrating the story of Mazdak, the issue of communal intercourse and the confusion it created regarding the issue of lineage is mentioned with much lamentation and it is said that because of this evil deed, lower class people had sex with noble women⁸³ or that fathers no longer knew their children and children did not know their fathers⁸⁴. It was suggested that the loss of lineage was the result of an evil doctrine that Mazdak propagated and Xusrō I proudly says that he managed to put an end to it by killing Mazdak and destroying his movement.

We cannot be certain about the accuracy of these accusations, since almost all that we know about Mazdak and his movement was written after his death and much influenced by the propaganda of the man who brutally murdered him and his followers, Xusrō I. What is important, however, is that these accusations - whether true or false - existed and were being propagated so strongly that they are projected in almost all post Sasanian sources we have.

Naturally in a situation when an evil religion has resulted in women being shared and children not knowing their real fathers, lineage becomes an important issue. It is easy to see that in this period, a real nobleman and most certainly a legitimate and ideal king is considered to be one who has an ancestry that goes long back without any ambiguity, unlike those who were unlucky enough to be caught in the middle of Mazdak’s heresy and thus do not know their true lineage. An epic story about the founder of the dynasty being produced under such circumstances naturally would focus greatly on lineage.

Another problematic ancestry we come across in the *kārnāmag*, although not as controversial and as confusing as the ancestry of Ardaxšīr himself, is the maternal lineage of Ardaxšīr’s son and successor Šābuhr I. The narrative of the *kārnāmag* is very important for again demonstrating how influenced the text is by the events contemporary to its composition. In the *Kārnāmag*,

⁸¹ Daryaei, 2008: 68

⁸² Patricia Crone, “Zoroastrian Communism” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Jul., 1994) :449

⁸³ Christensen, Arthur Emanuel. *Le regne du roi Kawadh I et le communisme Mazdakite*. (Persian translation by Ahamd Birashk: *Mazdak o Qobād*, Tehran: Tahoori, 1374 (1995): 42.

⁸⁴ Christensen, 1374: 47

Šābuhr is the product of a marriage between newly crowned king Ardaxšīr and the daughter of the defeated Arsacid king Ardawān (IV). In fact, we have no evidence that mother of Šābuhr I was a daughter of Ardawān IV or a member of the Arsacid dynasty or even Parthian in the first place. Her name is mentioned in her son's inscription as "Lady Mirdōd",⁸⁵ yet we know nothing else about her. It is entirely likely that Ardaxšīr had followed the tradition of the victor marrying or sleeping with the defeated kings' women, hence a marriage or at least a sexual relationship with a daughter or a niece of Ardawān might have happened. However what we know for certain is that the age of Šābuhr I does not allow him to be the product of any such union. Šābuhr I was a grown man who fought alongside his father against Ardawān/Artabanus IV, his supposed "grandfather."⁸⁶ What is even more important is that the early Sasanian propaganda does not seem to be even slightly interested in creating any connections between Sasanian family and the defeated Arsacids. While many new rulers try to connect themselves to the monarchs before them, a strong tradition in Iran until recent times⁸⁷, early Sasanian monarchs do not seem at all interested in being connected to the Arsacids. Their feelings about their defeated rivals are clear from the rock relief that Ardaxšīr I left in Persis, depicting him being legitimized as the rightful ruler of Iran. In his rock relief, while he is receiving the diadem of rulership from Ohrmazd, Ardawān IV is lying under the hoof of Ardaxšīr's horse and on the same level as Ahriman, the Zoroastrian evil spirit, who is under the hoof of Ohrmazd's horse.⁸⁸ The most obvious conclusion is that the blood of this cursed creature is not anything worth having for the future king of kings of Iran, Šābuhr I.

However, we do see Ardawān connected, through his daughter, to Ardaxšīr's son in the *Kārnāmag* and what is even more puzzling is the casual nature of the situation in which the daughter of Ardawān IV becomes the wife of Ardaxšīr. In Tabari's account, the marriage happens by an accident and Ardaxšīr is unaware of the girl's true lineage. When he learns about her identity, he tries to have her killed. In the *Kārnāmag*, however, there is no secrecy involved and, knowing who she is, Ardaxšīr nonetheless decides to make her his wife and the possible mother of the future monarch.

⁸⁵ ŠKZ, 26/21/50

⁸⁶ A. Christensen. *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Persian translation. by G. Rashid Yasemi, *Irān dar zamān-e Sasaniān*, Tehran: Negah, 1384: 100-101).

⁸⁷ This tradition survives until the Qajars who have a story about their founding father being the descendant of the last Safavid king.

⁸⁸ L. Vanden Berghe. *Archeologie de l'Iran ancien*. (Persian translation by Eisa Behnam, *Bāstānšenāsiye Irān*, Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1379 (200): 25.

Once again, the answer to this puzzling issue lies in the contemporary events of the Sasanian kingdom. The time period from Xusrō I's reign to the reign of his great grandson Kawād II, is the time of non-Persian and in some cases even non-Iranian wives and mothers for the Sasanian monarchs. It is very likely that all Sasanian monarchs had concubines and perhaps even lower rank wives from all over their kingdom and the neighboring countries. We even know of one case in the early fifth century when a "foreign" woman, although this time religiously *foreign*⁸⁹, gives birth to the future ruler, Wahrām V (420-38). However, in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, we have a sudden rise in the number of foreign queens and half Persian or even half Iranian monarchs. After Xusrō I, whose own mother was a non-Persian, or at least non-Sasanian if the legends are to be taken into consideration,⁹⁰ his son and successor Hormizd IV had a Turkic mother.⁹¹ Hormizd own son and successor Xusrō II had a Parthian mother⁹² and his son Shiroē, Kawād II, was the son of a Byzantine woman called Maria who was reportedly also the mother of later Sasanian queen, Bōrān.⁹³

The growing influence of the Parthian clans in the Sasanian Empire could perhaps be the other reason behind the creation of this obviously fake ancestry. In the late sixth century, when Xusrō II comes to power, a Parthian mother and a half Parthian king is not all that we hear about. Instead, this Parthian noble woman and later Sasanian queen had two very influential brothers who are in many ways responsible for their nephew, Xusrō II, ascending the throne in the first place. These maternal uncles, Bendōy and Bestām,⁹⁴ are not the only important Parthian figures of the time of Xusrō II, for it is another Parthian general, the legendary Wahrām Čōbīn, who challenged Xusrō II over the throne, forced him to run away, and even minted coins in his own name as the legitimate Šāhānšāh, Wahram VI.⁹⁵ This rise in power of the Parthians was most certainly not a sudden event that happened in a short period of time, rather one which had its roots in much earlier developments. Once again it is hard if not impossible to pinpoint the exact dates of these events but we could claim that in the late Sasanian period, the same period in

⁸⁹ Mother of Wahrām V was reportedly a Jewish woman named Šōšanduxt who was the daughter of Jewish exilarch. O. Klíma. "Bahrām V Gōr" *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Online, 2004 (www.iranica.com).

⁹⁰ Nöldeke, 1999:P 165-167

⁹¹ Daryae, 2008: 79.

⁹² She was the sister of the famous Bendōy and Bestām. J. H. Johnston "KOSROW II, the last great king of the Sasanian dynasty (590-628)" *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Online, 2004 (www.iranica.com). .

⁹³ Nöldeke, 1999: 305

⁹⁴ A. Shapur Shahbazi, "BESTĀM O BENDŌY" *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, 2004 (www.iranica.com)

⁹⁵ Daryae, 2008: 84



which the *Kārnāmag* was being composed, we witness a rise in power of the Parthians, a possible explanation for the Parthian ancestry provided for the early Sasanians of the epic.

Dragon fighting

One of the most interesting, and perhaps the most elaborate, episodes in the epic of the *Kārnāmag* is the part in which Ardaxšīr battles the dragon called *Kirm ī Haftōwād*, “the Haftōwād’s dragon.”

It is important to note that the myth of the hero slaying a dragon is common in the Indo-European tradition and Ardaxšīr is in fact fulfilling his journey in becoming the proper hero by going through this particular stage where he has to challenge a dragon.⁹⁶ Even in the Iranian epic literature, Ardaxšīr is not the only dragon slayer, for there are many others including the famous case of Dahāg (Shahnameh’s *Zahāk*) who is slain by Θraētaona (Frēdōn) in the *Avesta*.⁹⁷

As it was mentioned earlier, many of the events that take place in the *Kārnāmag* are not supported by historical evidence and some of them clearly contradict what we consider to have been the historical reality. However no episode in the epic is as impossible and as clearly fabricated as that of Haftōwād dragon, where we clearly leave the realm of history and enter the realm of myth. However, even in this legendary and most certainly fabricated episode we can still find the reflection of the contemporary events of the kingdom.

The dragon that Ardaxšīr slays is not just a dangerous beast to be tamed or destroyed, rather there is a clear religious aura associated with the dragon which makes the creature more dangerous morally than physically. In fact, physical destruction does not seem to be the problem since we do not hear of the dragon itself being a physical danger to anyone and there is no mention of the creature harming people or killing them for food; it is the idolatry that is the dangerous part. The importance of religion in this episode is very clear and it is mentioned from the very beginning that the beast is an object of idolatry and false religion. Ardaxšīr consults with Burzag and Burz-Adur before going to fight the dragon and they lament people’s corruption

⁹⁶ For more information about the Indo-European background of the story see: Calvert Watking, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Ardashir’s case as a dragon slayer, indeed in the tradition of Indo-European heroes, is discussed on page 302.

⁹⁷ Hans Reichelt, ed., *Avesta Reader: Texts, Notes, Glossary and Index*, (translated by Jalil Doostkhah, Tehran: Ghoghnoos, 1383: 157).

by the dragon's evil religion.⁹⁸ At the same time, they encourage him to keep his faith and believe that Ohrmazd will not let this situation go on just as the tyranny of Dahāg and Frāsyāg and Alexander did not continue, for they too had offended Ohrmazd.⁹⁹

Andōh ud tēmār ma dār, čē Ohrmazd ud Amahraspandān čārag [ī] ēn čīš –ē xwāhēnd, ud ēn petyārag ēdōn bē nē hilēnd , čē abāg stahmagīh ī Dahāg ud Frāsyāg ī Tūr ud Aleksandar ī Hrōmīg:as–iz yazadān pad-iš hunsand nē būd, u-šān pad warz ud dast ī xwēš ēdōn wany [ud] abaydāg kard čiyōn ān ī gehan ašnāg.

Do not upset and pity yourself for Ohrmazd and the Ameshaspands would have a solution and make the situation change and this evil will not continue, just as Dahāg and Frāsyāg of Tur and Alexander of Rome could not continue since gods were unhappy with them, despite all their greatness they became obscure as if the world had never known them.

We also see a lot of prayers being recited by both Ardaxšīr¹⁰⁰ and his hosts and when Ardaxšīr is finished with his task, he orders the citadel to be destroyed and establishes in its place, the holy fire of Wahrām.¹⁰¹

Clearly religion plays a central role and it is not surprising that the corrupt religion is being represented through a dragon, itself the symbol of lie, *druj*, in Iranian mythology.¹⁰² As a result of this episode, Ardaxšīr is no longer just a strong hero or a noble warrior, but rather a defender of the good faith who has a religious duty as important as his military and political one.

Obviously the Indo-European myth of hero slaying the dragon as well as the existence of the previous hero/kings such as Frēdōn all helped influence this episode of the *Kārnāmag* and so it is not hard to see why Ardaxšīr has to go through this step of the journey. Naturally it was interesting and beneficial for the late Sasanians to have their founding father presented not only as a great and ideal king but one who followed in the footsteps of older legendary ones such as Frēdōn. However, this episode with all its resemblances of the old mythological stories was nonetheless affected, like all the other sections of the *Kārnāmag*, by the contemporary events of the kingdom at the time of its composition.

As mentioned earlier, in the early sixth century, we have a famous social and religious revolt centered around a Zoroastrian priest named Mazdak. While the communal sharing of wealth and women was the most problematic part as far as the nobles and royals were concerned, the

⁹⁸ KAP, Grenet, 2003 p 86

⁹⁹ KAP, Grenet, 2003 p 88.

¹⁰⁰ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 88.

¹⁰¹ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 94.

¹⁰² Dj. Khaleghi-Motlagh, AŽDAHĀ: ii. In Persian Literature, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 2004. www.iranica.com

religious aspects of Mazdak's movements were not any less shocking and influential. Mazdak, who was by all accounts a heretic as far as the Zoroastrian clergy were concerned, managed to "convert" many people into his religion and even gained the favor of the king, Kawād I¹⁰³, who not only followed but reportedly even forced this religion on his subjects.¹⁰⁴ In addition to Kawād I himself being deposed for his Mazdakite tendencies¹⁰⁵ the same tendencies also stopped his eldest son Kāwūs from succeeding his father.¹⁰⁶ Instead, the younger, anti-Mazdak son who was supported by the powerful clergy ascended the throne as Xusrō I. Soon after, Xusrō I received the title of "immortal soul," after murdering Mazdak and his followers and ending their "heresy."¹⁰⁷

Thus the theme of right vs. wrong religion was very strong around the time of Xusrō I whose religious policies not only brought him his famous title, but also the very throne he occupied. What really happened with Mazdak and what were his true intended reforms are not very clear and not very important to our purpose either. What is important is that the propaganda was hard at work trying to make the king into a defender of the faith who brought down the evil religion of falsehood and restored the good religion. Naturally there was no better way to strengthen this position and the propaganda than by having the founding father, Ardaxšīr I, also go through the same experience¹⁰⁸.

It is well known that organized religion, mostly in form of the royal patronage of Zoroastrianism, had an important role throughout the entire Sasanian rule. In this context, the desire to cast the founding father in the role of the defender of the faith does not necessarily prove the existence of a late Sasanian influence. At the same time, by looking closely at the religious policies of the late and early Sasanian monarchs and comparing them to each other, we see very visible differences in their religious policies and beliefs.

¹⁰³ The date of Mazdak and the actual relationship between Mazdak and Kavad has been discussed in an influential article by P. Crone: "Kavad's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt," *Iran* XXIX, 1991: 21–42; see also H. Gaube: "Mazdak: Historical Reality or Invention?" *Studia Iranica* 11, 1982: 111–122 for a discussion of the existence of Mazdak and his revolt.

¹⁰⁴ Daryae, 2008:70.

¹⁰⁵ Daryae, 2008: 69. Kawād I is deposed and is replaced by his brother Zāmāsp but manages to gain back his throne with the help of the Hephthalites.

¹⁰⁶ Daryae, 2008: 73.

¹⁰⁷ Christensen, 1374: 56-57.

¹⁰⁸ For a discussion of the use of the image of Ardaxšīr as the ideal king, see Daryae, Touraj, "The ideal king in the Sasanian world Ardaxšīr I Pābagān or Xusrō Anōšag-ruwān?" in *Name-ye Irān-e Bāstān*, 3/1, Spring and Summer 2003:33-45.

The early Sasanians clearly did have a very strong religious ideology; they are each being invested by a god, usually Ohrmazd but also Anāhīd, as the king of kings. Starting with Ardashīr I and continuing all the way to Pērōz (459-84), all Sasanian monarchs refer to themselves as Mazda worshiping king of kings of Ērān, (Iran) and sometimes Anērān (non-Iran): *Mazdēsn bay* *Šāhān šāh ērān (ud anērān) kē čihhr az yazdan*, “Mazda-worshipping god (*name of the king*) the king of kings of Iran (and non-Iran), who [has] lineage from gods”. Not only does claim of being a Mazda worshiper on the coins shows the strength of their religious ideology, but also the use of the term Ērān demonstrates the deliberate promotion of the Avestan ideology.¹⁰⁹ Establishing fires in honor of the ancestors and children was additionally an important duty of these early kings, especially Šābuhr I who devotes a great deal of time in his inscription (ŠKZ) to details about the fires he found for the soul of his family members and himself. In fact, the religious organization of Zoroastrianism, as it was known during the latter part of the Sasanian rule, was just being formed in these earlier periods.. The *Avesta* was in the process of being canonized and Zoroastrian clerical hierarchy was being formed by leaders such as Kerdīr.¹¹⁰ Thus the religious situation of the kingdom and the rules regarding it were still very different from what we witness later under monarchs such as Xusrō I and his successors. Looking at the way they treated other religions is a very good way of measuring the level of religious diversity between the early and late Sasanian period. Mazdak is not the only heretic in the history of the Sasanian dynasty, and Kawād I is not the only monarch who shows favor to a heretic; we also have prophet Mānī in the third century who received the favor of Šābuhr I¹¹¹ and reportedly that of his son Hormozd as well.¹¹² In fact, the zealous Zoroastrian priest Kerdīr, the architect of the future Zoroastrian clerical establishment, is also receiving their favor at the same time.¹¹³ Although Mānī is eventually imprisoned by Wahrām II,¹¹⁴ and later executed, Šābuhr I is not

¹⁰⁹ T. Daryae. “kingship in Early Sasanian Iran” In *The idea of Iran Vol.3: The Sasanian Era*, eds. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart, London: I.B.Tauris , 2008: 62-64

¹¹⁰ Daryae, 2008: 28. for the activities of Kerdīr, see Ph. Gignoux. *Les quatre inscriptions du mage Kirdir: textes et concordances*, Cahiers de Studia Iranica, 9, Paris, 1991; his inscription in Naqsh-e Rajab is particularly enlightening about the extent of his administrative activities which most likely initiated the powerful system we know from the later Sasanian period: T. Daryae, “Katībe-ye Kerdīr dar Naqš-e Rajav,” (Kerdīr’s Inscription in Naqsh-e Rajab), *Nāme-ye Īrān-e Bāstān*, 1/1, Spring and Summer 1380 (2001):3-10, particularly lines 24-26.

¹¹¹ W. Hinz, *Mani and Kardēr*, Atti del convegno internazionale sul tema: La Persia nel Medioevo, Roma 1971: 485.

¹¹² W. Hinz, 1971: 487.

¹¹³ Kerdīr mentions in his inscription in Ka’be-ye Zardošt that he is given belt and cap (*kulāf ud kamar*) by Hormizd I. P. Gignoux, *Quatre Inscriptions du Mage Kirdīr*: 45.

¹¹⁴ W. Hinz, 1971: 491-492

criticized or damned, and neither is his son Hormizd I, the way Kawād I was blamed and deposed for his supposed patronage of Mazdak and his reforms. Neither do any of the kings who support Māni receive a derogatory title like the one Yazdgird I received for his kind treatment of religious minorities.¹¹⁵ Similarly, the king who treated Mānī harshly, Wahrām II, is also not immortalized and praised the same way that Xusrō I is praised for suppressing the Mazdakite movement.¹¹⁶ Obviously it was much more acceptable for the earlier Sasanian monarchs to favor other religions than it was for their successors. It could be argued that with exception of Wahrām II, all the early Sasanian monarchs were only moderately Zoroastrian.¹¹⁷ We do not know much about the religious policies of the real Ardaxšīr I, but the actions of his son and both grandsons, Hormizd I and Narsē, show a much less zealous attitude compare to what seemed to have existed in the late Sasanian era.

The hostile attitude of the late Sasanian political and clerical establishment towards Mazdakism and its “corrupting” effects can thus be seen in the text of the *Kārnāmag* and the symbolic battle of Ardaxšīr and the dragon (*kirm*) of Haftōwād. One of the very interesting parts of the story of Ardaxšīr slaying the dragon is how he does it not in a battlefield and through physical might, but instead with cunning. Although Ardaxšīr is supposedly there to kill the *druj*, “sprite of the lie” as his hosts encourage him to do, he does in fact achieve his goal through deceit, a lie, himself. He pretends to be a devotee of the dragon and asks to serve him and it is only after couple of days of serving him and gaining the trust of those around him that he gets the chance of slaying the dragon. Considering the grave crime associated with lie and falsehood in the Iranian culture,¹¹⁸ and the fact that Ardaxšīr is being presented as a very virtuous hero throughout the epic and as a devout Zoroastrian who establishes fires and recites prayers, this behavior looks extremely contradictory. Even before the episode concerning the dragon, the importance of being truthful is stressed upon in the epic text; when Ardaxšīr gets into an argument with one of Ardawān’s sons, he reminds the prince that lying is not compatible with honorable and princely behavior¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁵ Yazdgird I is called “*bezehkar*” meaning sinner, in the Sasanian sources. See a discussion of this title in A. Shapur Shahbazi, “The Horse that Killed Yazdagerd ‘the Sinner’,” in Siamak Adhami, ed., *Paitimāna*, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2003: 355–61.

¹¹⁶ Xusrō I is referred to as, Anōšag-ruwān, “immortal soul”: Daryae, 2008: 75; also see notes 120 and 121 below.

¹¹⁷ W. Hinz, 1971: 493.

¹¹⁸ The idea of lie vs. truth as a symbol of chaos vs. order is very evident in Darius I inscription in Behistun.

¹¹⁹ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 60. In this episode even more than being upset about the credit for his glory being stolen, he is angry over the lie that was told.

In the same vein, the story of Mazdak, as narrated by different historians and poets in pre and post-Islamic times, preserves varying details, some of which seem to suggest a similar behavior for Xusrō I. In all narratives, Mazdak and his followers meet their end not in a battlefield but in the least likely place of all, as guests in a banquet prepared for them by their murderer Xusrō I. The king in fact invites Mazdak to a feast and just the fact that the invitation is accepted shows that Mazdak trusted the king enough to attend the party. He is then caught by total surprise when faced with the real intention of the monarch and witnesses his followers murdered in a hideous way.¹²⁰

Looking at the story of Mazdak and the behavior of Xusrō I is also helpful in bringing to light the possible reason behind yet another surprising characteristic of Ardashīr in the *kārnāmag*, his ruthlessness. Telling lies and deceiving others is not the only anomaly in the otherwise perfect character of the ideal king, he is also exceptionally cruel and ruthless. While being brave and strong is appreciated and showing no weakness is applauded, the amount of cruelty that Ardashīr shows throughout the story is puzzling. He not only kills in the battles and shows no mercy to his enemies, but even defenseless women and children cannot escape his wrath from time to time. He orders the execution of his wife and insists upon it even after he learns that she is carrying his child.¹²¹ In another equally disturbing episode he orders the mass murder of the entire family of Mihrag, women and small children included, only because he has heard that his family and that of Mihrag might in future have one common descendant:

*Ardaxšēr, xešm ud kēn rāy, [ō] gyāg ī Mihrag šud, ud hamōyēn frazandān ī Mihrag framūd zadan [ud] ōzadan.*¹²²

Ardaxšīr, with anger and vendetta, went to the place of Mihrag, and ordered the beating and murder of all of Mihrag's offspring.

It is interesting that the late Sasanian counterpart of our hero, Xusrō I, also seemed to have taken part in what can be only described as mass murder of defenseless individuals. Xusrō I, who is known to history as “just”, received his famous title of “Immortal Soul” the day he murdered 80,000¹²³, in some narrative 100 thousand,¹²⁴ followers of Mazdak.

¹²⁰ He sees his followers being buried alive upside down with their heads on the ground and their feet in the air. Ferdowsi, Abolghasem, *Shahnameh*. Ed Jul Mohl. Tehran: Sokhan, 1378 (1999): 1781.

¹²¹ KAP, Grenet, 2003 p 100

¹²² KAP, Grenet, 2003 p. 108

¹²³ Christensen, 1374 p 49

¹²⁴ Christensen, 1374 p 56

Courtly culture

In the epic of *Kārnāmag*, being a proper prince is very clearly associated with knowing and engaging in certain activities both physical and mental. A prince needed to have “culture” (MP *frahang*), a label that one would achieve only after engaging in certain activities such as hunting, riding, playing polo, and also learning about literature, as well as gaining knowledge about certain board games such as chess and backgammon. Only one who has excelled in all of these activities could be considered a nobleman, and thus fit for ruling. These activities, plus few others are all part of the lifestyle that one needed to have in order to acquire “*frahang*.” The Middle Persian term *frahang* might best be described as the Iranian equivalent to Greek *paideia*¹²⁵ the course of acquiring a mixture of knowledge and physical training, a set of activities that would help create a lifestyle befitting a gentleman, a prince and a future ruler. It is mentioned from the early pages of the *Kārnāmag* that Ardaxšīr grew up and became a “cultured” youth and that he was the best in literary knowledge and horse riding.¹²⁶ It is because of his cultured personality and upbringing that the Arsacid king, Ardawān, wants him to come to his court and be a companion to his own sons. Clearly there is a kind of high culture that is associated with kings and princes and only people who have acquired it can enter this higher circle. As the story progresses, we see that Ardaxšīr becomes even more cultured when he learns chess and polo and other games, and it is mentioned that he was better than everyone else in all those arts. The importance of these activities for a man of high standing and noble birth is so grave that when Ardawān became angry at Ardaxšīr and wanted to punish him, he forbade him from ever again taking part in any of these activities and told him to instead spend his days serving in the stable.¹²⁷ It is worth noting that even the argument which resulted in Ardaxšīr’s fall from grace was itself over hunting and who is the better hunter. Our hero, clearly the best in everything, was challenged by the less worthy prince, Ardawān’s son, who wanted to take the glory of the former for himself. This once again shows how important it is for a nobleman to excel at certain arts and activities.

¹²⁵ T. Daryaee “Mind Body and Cosmos: Chess and Backgammon in Ancient Persia,” *Iranian Studies*, 35/4, 2002:283.

¹²⁶ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 58.

¹²⁷ KAP, Grenet, 2003:62.

Further in the story, we can see that Ardaxšīr is not the only prince that engages in these activities in the *Kārnāmag*; his son Šābuhr also goes hunting and is the strongest of all heroes.¹²⁸ The same is also true for his grandson, Hormizd, who is seen by his grandfather for the first time when he too is playing polo like a good cultured prince.¹²⁹ Clearly the element of *frahang* and its important place in the life of a proper prince is a running theme in all of the *Kārnāmag*; it is also another major element that shows how the epic of *Kārnāmag* reflects the ideals of the late Sasanian period when the text was composed for the first time.

Despite the likely presence of a courtly “high culture” in the Sasanian realm from an early period, not much is mentioned about it in any of the inscriptions left from the early Sasanian times, including the lengthy inscription of Šābuhr I in Ka’be-ye Zardošt. However, elements of this can be seen in another inscription of Šābuhr I in Hajji Abad where he talks about shooting an arrow in front of the princes and the nobles of his of his court. Clearly here he is not fighting an enemy, rather engaging in a competitive game where the king, either by real virtue or by status, comes out as the most accomplished member of the court, justifying the carving of an inscription to commemorate his achievement.¹³⁰

There are also some silver plates depicting the Sasanian monarchs hunting, mostly belonging to the two centuries in which we have an absence of rock reliefs, from the end of fourth to the end of sixth century.¹³¹ However, the earliest image of hunt on a silver plate belongs to the reign of Šābuhr II (309-79)¹³² and thus aside from the description of hunt by Šābuhr I, we have no other evidence of hunting or courtly games from the early Sasanian times, nor do we have any other form of evidence that would help us conclude what sort of courtly culture was being practiced in the early Sasanian period. We, of course, have rock reliefs belonging or at least depicting the early Sasanian kings including Ardaxšīr I himself, and in some of these other members of the family and court are also present. While these reliefs are very helpful in teaching us about the nature of religious beliefs, dress code and perhaps even some of the social manners relevant to the time of the historical Ardaxšīr I and Šābuhr I¹³³, there is nothing that could be

¹²⁸ He is the only one who can draw water from the well. KAP, Grenet, 2003 PP 110-112

¹²⁹ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 114

¹³⁰ D. N. MacKenzie, “Shapur’s Shooting,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978): 499-511. <http://www.humanities.uci.edu/sasanika/pdf/HajabadInscriptionShapurShooting.pdf>. He challenges anyone who is “strong of arm” to stand where he stood and shoot an arrow and see if they can hit the same target.

¹³¹ Harper:rudence. O. “Art in Iran V Sasanian Art” *encyclopedia Iranica*, online 2004

¹³² Harper: 2004 (www.iranica.com)

¹³³ Soudavar, 2003:156

considered a scene depicting courtly culture or kingly activity and certainly nothing that would resemble what we read about in the *Kārnāmag*. There are no scenes of hunting, polo, or any other game being played or any sort of art such as music or theater being performed. There are several rock reliefs in which an activity much similar to what we might call jousting is being performed and these reliefs are attributed to the early Sasanian kings. What we need to keep in mind, however, is that most of these rock reliefs are not depicting games being played between members of the same court, rather war being fought between enemies.¹³⁴ It is only in the seventh century rock relief of Xusrō II in Tāq-e-Bostān that we see scenes which can be labeled as those of hunting and pursuit of pleasure, what we can understand as courtly culture and similar to what is mentioned in the *kārnāmag* as such. This relief depicts playing of music, the king sitting on a boat, and lavish scenes of hunting.¹³⁵ Before these late Sasanian remains, we have few rock reliefs that would depict scenes similar to that of hunting. The most famous is probably the rock relief of Wahrām II in which he is protecting his queen and his son and is at the same time fighting two lions. While it is possible to view this rock relief as a scene of hunting, the situation is clearly different once we take a closer look. In fact, the lions are a possible danger and the king is bravely and dutifully slaying them and protecting the queen, crown prince and the kingdom. This is not a scene of hunting done for the pleasure of it, and thus cannot be considered a courtly activity or pass time: it is a real a battle in which the king is protecting his household and his kingdom.¹³⁶ The symbolic importance of the rock relief is further emphasized by James Russell's argument that the other man in the rock relief is priest Kerdīr and that the woman is Wahrām II's *daēnā*.¹³⁷ Regardless of which interpretation we tend to agree with, it is clear that the environment in Wahrām II rock relief is completely different from that of Xusrō II in Tāq-e-Bostān where a real hunting scene is being presented. Here, there is no enemy and there is no one being defended or protected; only scenes of hunting where a boar is shot by an arrow without it presenting any danger.

Moving away from physical activities befitting the royalty, there are also board games as well as certain kind of literary knowledge that are considered to be an important part of a nobleman's education. A very good example mentioned again in early pages of the *Kārnāmag* is

¹³⁴ L. Vanden Berghe, 1379(200): 53

¹³⁵ Vanden Berghe, 1379:p 103-105

¹³⁶ Vanden Berghe, 1379: 53

¹³⁷ James Russell, "Kartīr and Mānī" in *Papers in Honor of Professor Ehsan Yarshater*, Acta Iranica vol.XVI. 1990: 180-193

the game of chess in which Ardaxšīr was better than all others.¹³⁸ Here again we have a reference to a game which is not only never mentioned by any of the early Sasanian kings or depicted in their rock reliefs, but we can safely claim found its way to Sasanian court and realm only during the later Sasanian period.¹³⁹ First and foremost, all the Middle Persian texts that mention chess are written during or after the reign of Xusrō I and one of them, “The Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon” (*Wizārišn ī Čatrang ud Nihišn ī Nēw-Ardaxšīr*) even describes the way chess was brought from India to Iran.¹⁴⁰ Needless to say the *Wizārišn ī Čatrang*, similar to the *Kārnāmag*, is mixture of facts and fictions and the very elaborate and dramatic nature of the story regarding the game of chess and its introduction to court of Xusrō I is enough to make us wonder about its accuracy. However, the fact that the *Kārnāmag*, the very text that claims chess existed at the time of Ardaxšīr I, is itself the product of the late Sasanian period and also the undeniable evidence of the introduction of many scientific and cultural elements into the Sasanian realm during the reign of Xusrō I¹⁴¹, makes a strong case for claiming that chess in fact did come to Iran in sixth century.

The idea of culture in the *Kārnāmag* is clearly influenced by what was going on at time of its composition in the courts of kings such as Kawād I and his son, Xusrō I than what was taking place at the time of historical Ardaxšīr I and his children. While we can never determine exactly when these courtly games such as polo and chess found their way to the Sasanian court, it has been argued that courtly manners befitting the nobles became very important and were clearly expected of those connected to the king and the court, after the reforms of Xusrō I.¹⁴²

There is another late Middle Persian text, composed either during or after the time of Xusrō I, which is purely concerned with the issue of culture and learning in the royal court. Centered around a conversation between the Xusrō I and a young man, the *Husraw ī kawādān ud rēdag* (Xusrō, son of Kawād, and a Paige),¹⁴³ talks about culture and courtly manners and is almost synonymous in opinion with the *Kārnāmag* as to what is considered “*frahang*” and necessary

¹³⁸ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 60 Playing chess and polo and few other activities are being mentioned next to “other cultural activities” *abārīg frahang*, clearly stating that these games were part of proper *frahang* of a prince.

¹³⁹ Herzfeld, however, disagrees with this claim and believes that the game of chess is indeed from the time of Ardaxšīr. E. Herzfeld, *Zoroaster and His World*, Vol. II, Octagon Books, New York, 1974: 628.

¹⁴⁰ C.J. Brunner, “The Middle Persian Explanation of Chess and Invention of Backgammon,” *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 10 (1978), 43-51.

¹⁴¹ Wiesehofer, 1996: 217-221.

¹⁴² Wiesehöfer, 1996: 219

¹⁴³ D. Monchi-Zadeh, “Xusrōv I kavātān ut Rētak, Pahlavi Text, Transcription and Translation” In *Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne II*, Acta iranica vol VIII, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982: 47-91.

education for a nobleman. Here, the young man who was of noble descent but has lost his parents, presents himself to the king and demonstrates his noble upbringing by talking about his ability to play chess, backgammon, and polo, of having studied religious texts, learned riding and shooting with bow and arrow and other education befitting a nobleman. The details of his education, as well as his accurate and detailed answers to questions about food, dresses, games, and activities asked of him by the king clearly shows the primary importance of education in the world he lived in.

Astrologers and Fortunetellers

The presence of astrologers, dream interpreters, and fortunetellers is among the significant points present in the *Kārnāmag*. What is even more interesting is that these men of knowledge are designated with an “Indian” moniker towards the end of the *Kārnāmag*. It seems that courtly games such as chess were not all that was brought to Iran in the sixth century from India. There are indeed evidence of introduction of many scientific and cultural elements to the Sasanian realm during the reign of Xusrō I. Among these are works on Indian astronomy, also mentioned in the *Kārnāmag*.

More than likely, by the time that the *Kārnāmag* was composed, and perhaps even by the time the Sasanian dynasty came to power in 224, there already existed a long stretching history of astrology and astronomy in Iran. The connection between the Persians and the Babylonians makes it impossible for the Iranians to have been unaware of Mesopotamian astrology which was known even by the Greeks and the Indians who had learned about it and were utilizing it. There is also evidence of calendar reforms under the Achaemenids which clearly indicate familiarity with this field.¹⁴⁴

However, as far as the written native sources are concerned the propagation of the knowledge of astronomy is attributed to the second Sasanian monarch Šābuhr I who, according to the famous Middle Persian religious text Dēnkard, imported a variety of sciences, including astronomy, from India and “Rome” and brought them to his own empire.¹⁴⁵ What is really hard to miss is that this Middle Persian text is again anachronistically attributing the actions of a late Sasanian monarch, most probably Xusrō I, to an earlier king, Šābuhr I. It was indeed during the

¹⁴⁴ Antonion Panino, “Zodiac“ *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, 2004 (www.iranica.com).

¹⁴⁵ Dēnkart, Book IV; 19 (Sanjana 1911).

rule of Xusrō I and in the later Sasanian period that the interest in the eastern sciences and literature from India was at its height, resulting in translation of Indian literary, and probably scientific texts, including the *Pancha Tantra*, into Middle Persian.¹⁴⁶

What we could conclude from all these evidence is that while without any doubt a type of astrology existed and was perhaps even native to Iran long before sixth century, the description of a new and particularly Indian version of astronomy and perhaps fortunetelling found its way, among many other works of literature, to the Sasanian court during the reign of Xusrō I. This is in fact exactly how the text of *Kārnāmag* presents the issue.

In the *Kārnāmag* the idea of studying the stars and consulting the astrologers as well as the priests and fortunetellers, and asking them to foresee future events is presented as a rather old practice. In the early chapters, the Arsacid king consults the astrologers and makes his decisions based on what they have told him and the astrologers correctly predict the future fortune of Ardaxšīr.¹⁴⁷

kū har kē bandag mard kē az im rōz tā se rōz az xwadāy ī xwēš bē wirēzēd, ōwuzurgīh [ud] pādixšāyīh rasēd, abar ān ī xwēš xwadāy kāmag-hanjām ud pērōzgar bawēd.

Astrologers tell the king: “Anyone who leaves his master in the next three days will be great and victorious.

Later in the story, he again consults with his priests or religious authority, *Dastūr*, who tells him that once the glory of the Kayanids has reached Ardaxšīr, then he would most certainly be victorious and it would be pointless for Ardawān to tire himself and his soldiers and the horses for he would not be able to defeat Ardaxšīr.¹⁴⁸ However, near the end of the epic a particular version of magic and fortunetelling, one which was practiced in India, seems to had become important. When Ardaxšīr is worried about the future and is questioning whether or not Iran will ever be centralized, he particularly seeks out the advice of not just any “magician” or fortuneteller, but an Indian one and sends an envoy to India in order to ask the questions.¹⁴⁹

u-š mard-ē w az awestwārān ī xwēš ō pēš [ī] kēd ī Hindūgān frēstīd pad pursišn kardan ī ārāstan [ī] Ēranšahr pad ē xwadāyīh.

¹⁴⁶ For more information see: F. de Blois, *Borzōy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalilah wa Dimnah*, London: Routledge, 1990.

¹⁴⁷ KAP, Grenet, 2003:66.

¹⁴⁸ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 72

¹⁴⁹ KAP, Grenet, 2003: 108.

He sent one of his men to visit the Indian fortuneteller and ask him about making Iranshahr into a unified kingdom.

The idea of the prophesized and destined role of a king and hero who will realize his destiny, regardless of all the obstacles standing in his way, as well as the idea of godly and divine favor for the one who is the legitimate king, is yet another similarity between the *Kārnāmag* and what we witness in the late Sasanian period. In the *Kārnāmag*, the ascendance of Hormizd to the throne was prophesized, before his birth and even before his parents met for the first time, by the Indian fortunetellers, as was the future greatness of Ardaxšīr foretold by the astrologers in court of Ardawān. Both of these cases are very similar to what Tabari narrates about Xusrō II whose reign and its length were supposedly prophesized by the astrologers. Here, although Xusrō's fortune is weak when he is being chased by Wahrām Čōbīn, it is clear that he will be victorious for he is destined to rule for 38 years.¹⁵⁰ This episode of battle between Xusrō II and the Parthian general is very similar in tone to the episodes of struggle between the legendary Ardaxšīr in the *Kārnāmag* and the last Arsacid king Ardawān IV. Just as Ardaxšīr has with him the glory of the Kayanids, making him the rightful and legitimate king who carries the proper noble blood in his vein, Xusrō II is also aided by the supernatural and godly favors against Wahrām because he is the rightful Šāhān Šāh who is facing a usurper.¹⁵¹

Making an Ideal King

As mentioned earlier, the cultural upbringing of Ardaxšīr, his religious policy and the particular lineage provided for him all hint to the strong possibility of him being depicted in the manner that the late Sasanian monarchs saw fit for their ancestor. This is then a direct result of a famous sixth century monarch's desire to cast the founding father, Ardaxšīr I, as the ideal king most likely in an attempt to justify his own action and cast himself in the role of a worthy descendant.¹⁵² Xusrō I, the ideal patron of science and art in the later Islamic sources, is also the same monarch, according to Tabari, who is said to have been greatly interested in the person of

¹⁵⁰ Nöldeke, 1999: 308. Nöldeke comments that this shows that Wahrām had no chance of being the winner in this conflict since it was destined that Xusrō II would rule for that many years.

¹⁵¹ Nöldeke, 1999:308. According to Tabari when everyone believed that Wahrām has captured Xusrō II, the king was taken to the top of the hill by an unknown being. In *Shahnameh* however the mysterious being is mentioned to have been Soroosh. *Shahnameh*: 2142.

¹⁵² Daryae, "Ideal King": 34.

Ardaxšīr I and had specifically ordered the people to study and follow the behavior and mannerism of Ardaxšīr.¹⁵³

Xusrō I Anōšag-ruwān, who needed an ideal man from the past and from among the respected ancestors in order to justify his own actions and reforms¹⁵⁴ is our main candidate among the Sasanian monarchs for having ordered the composition of the *Kārnāmag* as well as the composition of another equally important account about the rule of Ardaxšīr I called the *letter of Tansar*.¹⁵⁵ *Letter of Tansar*, which is supposedly a correspondence between the chief Mowbad of Ardaxšīr I, Tansar, and the king of Tabarestan, is in fact another text talking about the greatness of the rule of Ardaxšīr and his undoubted position as the greatest and the best of kings. Although only available to us in Arabic and New Persian forms, and pretending to have been written by a mowbed in the third century, many elements of text such as its style show similarities with the text of *Kalīla wa Dimna*, suggesting a sixth century and later date of composition for this text.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, the geographical information in the text allows us to conclude that it was composed not only at the time of Xusrō I but particularly during the years 557 AD to 570 AD of his reign.¹⁵⁷ This text, thus, is another example of the importance of the character of Ardaxšīr for the later Sasanians and the great attempt in casting him in a particular light which served the needs of the late Sasanian monarchs.

Reverse Influences

After discussing how the contemporary events of the kingdom influenced the story of *Kārnāmag* and thus altered the history of the Sasanian dynasty, we might also want to look at how the *Kārnāmag* in turn influenced the contemporary attitudes of the kingdom. The epic of *Kārnāmag* as fictional and as contemporary influenced as it is, nonetheless had its root and basis on the events of the third century and centers around a real historical figure who was the founder of the Sasanian dynasty. In this way, the epic, aside from being the description of an ideal king and his kingdom, also served as the manual and handbook of how to raise and educate a potential “perfect” monarch. The result of this influence is very clear in late Sasanian times. Interest in

¹⁵³ Nöldeke, 1378:195

¹⁵⁴ Nöldeke, 1378:195 (footnote 1)

¹⁵⁵ Christensen, 1384: 76

¹⁵⁶ *Tansar's letter to Goshansp*, (*Nameyeh Tansar*), ed. Mojtaba Minovi. Tehran, 1354(1975): 14-19

¹⁵⁷ *Tansar's Letter to Goshansp*, 1354: 17-18.

the early Sasanian life style and ideology, apparent through examples such as names, coin legends and rock reliefs suddenly resurfaced. For the first time in 250 years, we have a prince named Ardaxšīr who eventually becomes Ardaxšīr III (628-29), the son and successor of Kawād II. The old legend about the lineage from gods returned under Queen Bōrān¹⁵⁸ and after centuries of absence we again have, under Xusrō II, a rock relief, portraying a scene of investiture in the style of early Sasanian kings.¹⁵⁹ Xusrō II who is said to have followed the style of the earlier Sasanian kings, also resurrected their title, “King of kings”, which has not been used by Sasanian monarchs for about two centuries.¹⁶⁰

We can then see that the popularity of the *Kārnāmag*, and probably a whole genre of legendary tales and histories about the Sasanian past, indeed started to influence the same period whose ideals were anachronistically reflected in these texts. If the world of *Kārnāmag* resembles the court life and political realities of the period of Xusrō I, the court of Xusrō II in turn seems to have aspired to replicate the world of which the *Kārnāmag* claimed to speak, the world of upright kings such as Ardaxšīr and Šābuhr.

Conclusion

The present work has looked at the epic of *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* and the ideals reflected in it. It has compared the *Kārnāmag* with both the late and the early Sasanian ideals in an attempt to show the mutual influences of the text and the time of its composition. The basic proposition of the thesis is that the *Kārnāmag*, as a sixth century epic text, served to reflect the contemporary attitudes on the character of the perfect monarch and his actions. In turn, it also managed to resurrect what was thought of this perfect king in the socio-political environment of the late Sasanian Empire.

By looking at the linguistic evidence, as well as the history of the evolution of literary works in ancient Iran, the present work attempts to determine an approximate time of composition for the epic text of *Kārnāmag*. The theme of centralization is one of the issues discussed and it was

¹⁵⁸ Daryae, 2008: 92

¹⁵⁹ A. Soudavar, 2003: p.163. Rock relief of Xusrō II in which he is receiving the diadem from a god, in his case two gods, similar to that of early Sasanian investiture scenes which were absent since the time of Wāhrām II, the only other scene of investiture we have in the period in between is that of Ardaxšīr II who is receiving the diadem not from a god but from his brother Šābuhr II.

¹⁶⁰ Daryae, 2008: 90



argued that the desire for a centralized empire, clearly presented in the epic, has its roots not in actual realities of the time of Ardaxšīr I but in the sixth century reforms of Xusrō I.

The section on lineage looked at the inserted character of Sāsān who was cast as the father of Ardaxšīr I in order to connect him to the ancient mythical rulers of Iran - the Kayanids. It was proposed that the late Sasanian interest in the mythical Kayanid dynasty is the reason behind creation of a new ancestry for Ardaxšīr I, unsupported by historical evidence. Furthermore, the lineage section has looked at the claims of Parthian ancestry of Šābuhr I in the *Kārnāmag* and brought examples of the contemporary events of the kingdom as possible reasons behind this clearly fabricated ancestry of the second Sasanian monarch.

The episode in which Ardaxšīr slays a dragon was analyzed in relation to the religious environment of the late Sasanian period and the revolt of Mazdak. The desire of the sixth century monarch Xusrō I who suppressed the Mazdakite movement in casting Ardaxšīr in the role of defender of the good religion was proposed as the possible reason behind the religious tone of the section.

The cultural activities mentioned in the *Kārnāmag* and their reflection of late Sasanian attitudes is the subject of the next section of the work. It was suggested that the criteria for the proper and educated prince in the *Kārnāmag* owes more to the courtly culture of the late Sasanian period than anything we know from the early Sasanian period. Other elements such as the existence of Indian fortunetellers, and our knowledge about the increasing Sasanian interest in Indian cultural elements, further show a late Sasanian influence.

Finally it was suggested that *Kārnāmag* was composed in order to present the image of the perfect monarch in the person of Ardashir. It is within this context that after the composition of the epic story, we see a renewed interest in the founding father of the Sasanian dynasty and his time period, an interest which resulted in the resurrection of some long forgotten traditions in the late Sasanian period, what we call a case of *reverse* influence.

In conclusion, while the text of the *Kārnāmag* continues to hold substantial historical information within the epic story it presents, it is clear that as a legend and a literary work, it aimed, and successfully achieved, to reflect the norms and expectations of its time of composition, the late Sasanian period of the sixth and seventh centuries CE.

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