



CORONATION

CORONATION (Pers. *tāj-godārī*) in ancient Iran, the ceremonial act of investing a ruler with a crown, is mainly known from a few references by Western classical and Armenian authors, statements by Ferdowsī and other early Islamic writers, and iconographic implications of monuments (e.g., rock reliefs) and artifacts (especially coins and vessels). Only a sketchy picture can thus be attempted.

From the Median period onward the Iranian sovereign's official title was "king of kings," as many of his provinces were ruled by appointed or hereditary "kings" (for Near Eastern precedents, see Kienast). He alone was permitted to wear a gold crown and ascend a golden throne; subordinate kings were restricted to silver headdresses and seats. The ceremony of coronation transformed him ideologically into a "new" person: sacred, possessed of magical powers, and capable of dispensing justice and prosperity (for details, see Widengren, 1959). This "rebirth" was symbolized in two ways. First, the ruler assumed a "new" name (a so-called "throne name"; Schmitt; *Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VIII, p. 51, IX, p. 247), and, second, he kindled a "royal fire," which was extinguished, along with other fires of the realm, only at his death. The extinguished fire was replaced after three days by the fire of the successor king (Shahbazi, pp. 131-34, with references; Diodorus 17.114: "sacred fire"). The Achaemenid king of kings evidently crowned himself (for details, see Ritter, pp. 18-30). His familiarity with Babylonian and Egyptian coronation rites (cf. Oppenheim, pp. 554-59; Atkinson) permits the conclusion that his accession to the throne was celebrated with equal solemnity and festivity, but



particulars are lacking. According to an account reported by Plutarch (*Artaxerxes* 3; cf. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, p. 209), Artaxerxes II (405-359 b.c.e.), following his accession, journeyed to Pasargadae to undergo a mystic rite (Gk. *teletē*) of initiation conducted by the Persian priests. “Here there is a sanctuary of a warlike goddess whom one might conjecture to be Athena [generally taken to refer to *Anāhitā*]. Into this sanctuary the candidate for initiation must pass, and after laying aside his own proper robe, must put on that which Cyrus the Elder used to wear before he became king; then he must eat of a cake of figs, chew some turpentine-wood, and drink a cup of sour milk.” This drink is usually identified with *haoma* juice but was more likely *dūg*, an essential component of a simple Persian meal to this day.

The Parthian king of kings was elected from the Arsacid clan by two councils; of his kinsmen and of the wise men and Magi (Poseidonius apud Strabo, 11.9.3; cf. Lukonin, pp. 689, 707ff.). The kinsmen included members of six Arsacid families, which constituted the leading nobility of the land. The most influential member was the one belonging to the Sūrēn family, who was entitled by heredity to place the crown on the head of the king (Plutarch, *Crassus* 21; Garsoïan, cols. 180-81, 197-98 n. 28, 210-11; Faustus, tr. Garsoïan, pp. 409-10, 563); under the Sasanians this charge was given to the *argbed*, evidently a member of the Sasanian royal house (Theophylact Simocatta 3.18.3; cf. Christensen, *Iran. Sass.*, p. 107; for a different view, see *argbed*). That the Arsacid king of kings also followed the tradition of kindling a royal fire at his accession is likely (cf. Isodore of Charax, *Parthian Stations* 11; see *arsacids v*). The Sasanians certainly did (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 162; Shahbazi, p. 132 n. 60). Both dynasties depicted the coronation rite on coins and rock reliefs as the conferring of the royal diadem by Ahura Mazdā or another divinity (Ghirshman, 1962, pls. 65, 67, 152, 167, 168, 211, 233, 235; idem, 1970).

Until the middle of the 5th century c.e. the Sasanian king of kings crowned himself. Ardašīr (224-40), for example, appointed his son Šāpūr as his heir and “with his own hand placed his personal crown upon Šāpūr’s head.” When Šāpūr (ca. 240-70) ascended the throne “he crowned himself [anew]” (Baḷ’amī, ed. Bahār, pp. 884, 886). An assembly of notables (described by Narseh [293-302] as “landholders, princes, grandees, nobles, house lords . . . who were the greatest and the best”; Humbach and Skjærvø III/1, p. 56) observed and participated in the ceremony, as no doubt did many priests. From Bahrām V (420-38) onward, a chief priest (*mōbadān mōbad*) appears to have fulfilled the functions of placing the crown on the king of kings’ head and thus sanctifying



the coronation rite (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 96; cf. Baḷ'amī, ed. Bahār, pp. 936-37; *Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VII, pp. 300-01; cf. *Nāma-ye Tansar*, pp. 87-89; see below). In the Byzantine empire beginning in 491 similar functions were fulfilled by the patriarch of Constantinople (Woolley, pp. 11ff.), and it has been suggested that the model was Sasanian practice (Bury, p. 11). From descriptions of court ceremonial in the *Šāh-nāma* and other early Islamic texts (for examples, see Grignaschi), verified by Armenian sources (Garsoïan, cols. 180-83, 196 n. 21, 209 n. 43, 214 n. 46, 219-20 n. 58, 222 n. 62, 230 n. 74; Faustus, tr. Garsoïan, pp. 107-08, 146-47; Moses of Khorene, tr. Thomson, pp. 136-39, 187-88, 315-18; and the Rank List [*Gāh-nāmak*] originally from the Ctesiphon archive, Adontz, text, pp. 67*-68*, tr. pp. 191-93) and iconographic features (L'Orange, pp. 18-28, 37-50, 65-87; Azarpay; Harper, pp. 99-122, with literature), the following picture of the ideal Sasanian (and probably also Parthian) coronation rite may be reconstructed.

The ceremony was held on the first Nowrūz following the accession of the king (Schaeder, p. 350; Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 180, with references); this tradition was said to have been established by Jamšēd (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] I, pp. 41-42). Occasionally, however, Mehrgān seems to have been the chosen time (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] I, p. 81: “established by Frēdōn,” V, p. 481: revived by Lohrāsp; cf. Bīrūnī, *Āṭār*, tr. Sachau, p. 211). A great assembly of notables of the “social estates” (warriors, priests, artisans, and, in the later Sasanian period, state officials) gathered in the throne hall and took seats (*gāhs*) preassigned according to social standing. The chief of the priestly class (*mōbadān mōbad*) and three other notables, including the chief secretary, sat next to the royal throne (*pēšgāh*, lit. “foremost seat”), other notables 10 cubits farther away (see [courts and courtiers ii](#)). The regalia and royal attributes were entrusted to the *mōbadān mōbad* (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 96; Baḷ'amī, ed. Bahār, p. 936; *Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VII, pp. 217-19, 286, VIII, p. 50; and passim). Then the new king came toward the throne, so magnificently attired that the glitter of his bejeweled costume awed the guests (cf. the description of Hormozd IV by a Byzantine eyewitness; Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 398, 400). Certain leading magnates then rose, mentioned the happy or unhappy events of the previous reign, and asked the new ruler to justify his claim to the throne and to outline his plan for the future (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] V, pp. 406-07, VII, pp. 295-98, esp. IX, pp. 56-60; Baḷ'amī, ed. Bahār, pp. 936-37). The sovereign responded with a recital of the qualifications—noble descent (*nežād*), innate worth (*gōhar*), wisdom (*kerad*), and justice (*dād*)—that made him worthy of the God-given fortune (*farr*) necessary for the legitimate king of



kings. He pledged to act responsibly and piously “in accordance with royal tradition”; to defend the Zoroastrian faith and Iranian people; and to dispense justice for lords and commoners (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] I, pp. 33, 36, 39-42, 79, 109, 135-37, II, pp. 6, 43, 56-60, IV, pp. 10ff., V, pp. 406, 416-18, VI, pp. 8-9, 67, 343, 354, VII, pp. 155-56, 195, 200-02, 207-08, 210-11, 213, 214, 216-17, 257, 259-60, 263, 264, 303-05, VIII, pp. 6, 53-56, 423, IX, pp. 2, 12, 137, 254-55, 293 305, 307, 312). In return he demanded the oath of allegiance (*paymān/’ahd/bay’at*) from the assembly (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow], esp. IX, pp. 61-62). Ferdowsī described the actual crowning only once (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VII, p. 300): “Thus was the tradition of just kings; at the accession of a new noble king, the *mōbadān mōbad* approached him, together with three of the wisest men (representing the “social estates”; cf. the rock relief at Naqš-e Bahrām depicting Bahrām II enthroned flanked by four dignitaries, including the chief magus, Kartīr/Kerdīr, and a silver dish from Strelk, probably depicting Kōsrow II [591-628] enthroned among four magnates, Harper, pp. 100-02, 110-11 and pl. 19). The *mōbadān mōbad* enthroned the king, blessed the crown, placed it upon his head while invoking the name of earlier kings, and kissed him (lit. “pressed both cheeks on his breast”) with joy. Thereupon the sovereign bestowed on suppliants all gifts presented to him.” The assembly then acclaimed the new ruler: “Long live the king of kings. Your exalted majesty is the worthy sign of noble kings, deserving royalty and possessing the *farr*. God has chosen thee, and we are all thy bondsmen (*banda*)!” They showered jewels over him and invoked blessing (*āfarīn*) upon his crown. The new king thanked the assembly and signaled for the festivities to begin; they normally lasted three days.

After the coronation ceremonies letters were dispatched to other rulers and magnates, informing them of the news, conveying the king’s good will, and demanding their oaths of allegiance (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VII, pp. 306, 309, IX, pp. 62, 136ff.). Whatever taxes were outstanding were remitted, and many officials, commanders, and priests (and their fire temples) were favored with royal gifts (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 124). Certain Sasanian kings of kings followed their coronations with pilgrimages to the fire temple of *Ādur Gušnasp*, a practice that anticipated the pilgrimages by Shi’ite Muslim rulers to Karbalā’ and Mašhad.

See also [crown i, ii](#); [courts and courtiers i, ii](#).



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- N. Adontz, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian*, ed. and tr. N. Garsoïan, Lisbon, 1970.
- K. M. T. Atkinson, "The Legitimacy of Cambyses and Darius as Kings of Egypt," *JAOS* 76, 1956, pp. 166-77.
- G. Azarpay, "Crowns and Some Royal Insignia in Early Iran," *Iranica Antiqua* 9, 1972, pp. 108-15.
- J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire I*, 2nd ed., New York, 1958.
- N. Garsoïan, "Prolegomena to a Study of the Iranian Elements in Arsacid Armenia," *Handēs Amsorya* 90, 1976, cols. 177-234.
- R. Ghirshman, *Persian Art. The Parthian and Sasanian Dynasties, 249 B.C.-A.D. 651*, New York, 1962.
- Idem, "Une coupe sasanide à "scène d'investiture"," in M. Boyce and I. Gershevitch, eds., *W. B. Henning Memorial Volume*, London, 1970, pp. 175-79.
- R. Göbl, "Die sasanidische Krone," *Alte und moderne Kunst* 7, 1962, pp. 2-5.
- M. Grignaschi, "Quelques spécimens de la littérature sassanide conservés dans les bibliothèques d'Istanbul," *JA* 254, 1966, pp. 11-42.
- P. O. Harper, *Silver Vessels of the Sasanian Period I. Royal Imagery*, New York, 1981.
- H. Humbach and P. O. Skjærvø, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli*, 3 vols., Wiesbaden, 1978-83.
- B. Kienast, "Zur Herkunft der achämenidischen Königstitulatur," in *Die islamische Welt zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit. Festschrift für Hans Robert Roemer zum 65. Geburtstag*, Beirut, 1979, pp. 351-64.
- H. P. L'Orange, *Studies on the Iconography of Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World*, Oslo, 1953.



V. G. Lukonin, "Political, Social and Administrative Institutions, Taxes and Trade," in *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/2, pp. 681-746.

Nāma-ye Tansar, ed. M. Mīnovī, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1354 Š./1976.

L. Oppenheim, "The Babylonian Evidence of Achaemenid Rule in Mesopotamia," in *Camb. Hist. Iran* II, pp. 529-87.

H. W. Ritter, *Diadem und Königsherrschaft. Untersuchungen zu Zeremonien und Rechtsgrundlagen des Herrschaftsantritts bei den Persern, bei Alexander dem Grossen and im Hellenismus*, Wiesbaden, 1965.

H. H. Schaeder, review of C. Schmidt and H. J. Polotsky, "Ein Mani-Fund aus Ägypten," *Gnomon* 9, 1933, pp. 337-62.

R. Schmitt, "Achaemenid Throne-Names," *AIUON* 42, 1982, pp. 83-95.

A. Sh. Shahbazi, "An Achaemenid Symbol II. Farnah (God-given Fortune Symbolized)," *AMI* 13, 1980, pp. 119-47.

L. Vanden Berghe, "Les scènes d'investiture sur les reliefs rupestres de l'Iran ancien," in *Orientalia Iosephi Tucci Memoriae Dicata* II, Rome, 1987, pp. 1611-21.

G. Widengren, "The Sacral Kingship in Iran," *Numen* 4, supp., 1959, pp. 242-57.

Idem, *Die Religionen Irans*, Stuttgart, 1966.

R. M. Woolley, *Coronation Rite*, Cambridge, 1915.