



COURTS AND COURTIERS II. IN THE PARTHIAN AND SASANIAN PERIODS

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In the absence of records, a full picture of court life under the Parthians and Sasanians cannot be pieced together. The only available information is derived from a small number of inscriptions; from secondary contemporary sources in Greek, Latin, Armenian, and Syriac; and from later Arabo-Persian sources (Moḥammadī Malāyerī).

The court of the Arsacid kings of Armenia, about which more is known, may be taken as comparable in some respects, though not as typical, of all the courts in question, and the numerous Armenian titles of Parthian origin borne by court officials are useful indicators. About local courts in vassal principalities practically nothing is known. At the Armenian court the great nobles and dignitaries were allowed to be seated in the royal presence and were placed by rank, as described in one *gāh-nāmag* (book of ranks; cf. Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 62-63). They sat on cushions that were placed progressively higher as they came nearer to the royal cushion (*Généalogie*, pp. 32-39; Chaumont, p. 481).



In the Sasanian period feasts and banquets were occasions for discussing problems of imperial policy, as well as handing out gifts (e.g., silver bowls; Trever and Lukonin, p. 38; Tsotselia, pp. 18-19); no doubt the custom had come down from earlier times. On visits to the court noblemen wore a tiara (*kulāf*) and a jewel-studded [belt ii](#). as emblems of their rank (cf. KKZ l. 4). No one without a tiara was allowed to sit at the royal table or offer advice to the king.

The prime importance of the royal family at Iranian courts is always apparent. A number of customs sustained it. First, the rule of succession to the throne was strictly patrilineal; among the Parthians it generally passed from father to son and among the Sasanians sometimes from brother to brother (Lukonin, p. 688; see [crown prince](#)). The crises over the succession that arose in the 3rd century c.e. (Narseh's overthrow of Wahrām III), the 4th century (Ardašīr II's overthrow of Šāpūr III), and the 6th century (Wistahm's challenge of Ƙosrow II Parvēz) all demonstrate that this rule could not easily be circumvented. Second, deceased members of royal families became objects of organized worship, analogous to the Greek cult of dead heroes, with endowments for the soul of the departed (*pad ruwān*), as attested by the Nisa documents (Lukonin, p. 694) and by the naming of fire temples after their founders and benefactors (see, e.g., the inscription of Šāpūr I on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt at Naqš-e Rostam, ŠKZ; Maricq, *passim*). Finally, consanguineous marriage (*xwēdōdah*), which the Mazdean theologians deemed meritorious and the Sasanians actually practiced (see, e.g., the inscription of Kirdēr on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt, KKZ, l. 14; Back, p. 433), served not only to keep property within the family but also to maintain endogamy within the clan. Not all royal marriages were incestuous, however, as external alliances are also recorded (e.g., marriages with Christian women).

According to Strabo (11.9.3), the Parthian monarch was assisted by a council the members of which were drawn from two groups: his close relatives and the Magi and sages. This statement hardly corresponds to the known facts, however. Fortunately, there is more information about the Sasanian period. The inscriptions of Šāpūr I (ŠKZ) and Narseh I at Paikuli (NPi) contain lists of court personalities graded in order of rank (for SKZ, see Maricq, pp. 318-31; for NPi, see Humbach and Skjærvø, III/2, table pp. 40-43). The first rank included members of the royal family, including queens and other "ladies" (*bānūg*). The queen of queens (*bānbišnān bānbišn*; see [bānbišn](#)) was not the king's consort (Maricq, 1965, p. 76), for the latter held the title queen of the empire (*šahr bānbišn*). In the second rank were heads of the seven great families, though the



order of precedence among them varied over the centuries. Under the Arsacids the most honored, and indeed the only attested, great families were the Sūrēn and the Kārin. The other five known from Sasanian sources were the Spāhbed, Mihrān, Spandiyād, Warāz, and apparently the Andīgān (Undīgān). In the third and lowest rank were the other dignitaries and officials, though not all the courtiers are enumerated in ŠKZ and NPi. Only sixty-six members of Šāpūr I's court are mentioned in ŠKZ, whereas 165 were listed by the Armenian biographer of Saint Nerses, who was commissioned to prepare a *gāh-nāmag* fixing the positions of 400 cushions (*Généalogie*, pp. 32-39; cf. Chaumont, pp. 481-83).

In the *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* Sasanian princes and nobles were divided into four categories (ed. Īrānī, p. 84). The highest consisted of kings governing important regions, apparently comparable to the satraps of the Achaemenid period. Among the sons of Šāpūr, king of kings, were Narseh, who received in appanage “Sagestān, Tūrestān, and Sind down to the coast” and at a later date Armenia, with the title great king; Ohrmazd Ardašīr, who initially received Armenia; Šāpūr, who received Mēšān/Mesene; and Wahrām, who received Gīlān (cf. Maricq, p. 333). Evidently three levels of kingship were recognized: king of kings, great king (or kings), and kings of provinces or vassal states. The hierarchy of the senior clergy in the Sasanian period appears to have been graded on a similar model: *mowbedān mowbed*, great *mowbed*, and provincial *mowbeds* (Gignoux, 1993). In the second rank were *wispuhr(ān)* (*BRBYT'n*), princes related to the royal family or belonging to the royal clan. *Wuzurg(ān)*, “great” nobles, constituted the third rank (see *bozorgān*) and *āzādān* (see *āzād*), “free” nobles, the fourth (for the lists in NPi and the inscription of Šāpūr I at Hājīābād, see Humbach and Skjærvø, III/2, pp. 45-46). These terms can be traced back to the Achaemenid period, and the system may therefore already have been in existence under the Parthians.

Next to the Sasanian king of kings sat the *pasāgrīw* “second man after the king” (Man. Mid. Pers. *ps'gryw*, Sogd. *pš'γryw*, Syr. *pš'gryb* < **pasčā*– “after” + **grīvā* “self”; Benveniste, pp. 51-65). The exact nature of this office remains uncertain. It was probably held by the crown prince or heir apparent. His responsibilities may perhaps have been limited to administration of Mesopotamia. The title was taken over by the Manicheans (Benveniste, pp. 58-59). It seems likely that the *pasāgrīw* took the place of the *bidaxš* “second in command” of Parthian times, who was either the king's heir or his representative at different courts, that is, a viceroy.



All courtiers were subject to the orders of the majordomo, *darīgān sālār* (*dlyk'n srd'r*: ŠKZ, Mid. Pers. l. 33; Maricq, pp. 328-29; Back, p. 363; see also [darīgbed](#)). Also in attendance at court were counselors, *handarzbed* (*ḥndlcpty*; see [andarzbad](#)). The name of one “court counselor” (*BB' 'ndlcpty*), the eunuch Māhān, appears on a seal in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg (cf. Gignoux, 1991, pp. 17-21). Armenian sources confirm that a eunuch, *šābestān* (*š'pstn*), might hold high office, for instance, guard of the queens (i.e., the harem) and steward of the palace (*mardpet*), as in Armenia, or chief of the royal counselors, as at Byzantium. The *mardbed* also had charge of the treasure kept in the royal castles; his title may imply that he was an auditor (Livshits). The counselor of the queens, Middle Persian **bānūgān* (*b'nyk'n*), Parthian **bānbišnān* (*MLKTHn*) *handarzbed*, is mentioned in ŠKZ (Mid. Pers. l. 33, Parth. l. 27; Maricq, pp. 328-29; Back, p. 361); the counselor of the Magi, *magūn/mogān handarzbed* (*mgwny ḥndrcpty*), is mentioned on a seal found at Qaṣr-e Abū Naṣr near Shiraz (Frye, 1973, p. 61) and in Pahlavi literature (in *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān*; cf. Perikhanian). In addition, there were counselors in the provinces: One in Sagestān is mentioned in the inscription of Šāpūr II at Persepolis (ŠPs I, l. 6; Back, p. 493), and there are references in Armenian sources (Gignoux, 1985-88, p. 56).

Many important officials, like the *hazāruft/hazārbed* (see [chiliarch](#)) and the *wuzurg framadār*, were counted as members of the royal court. The same is true of the top-ranking clergy, for example, the high priest Kirdīr, who was promoted to the rank of *wuzurg* (KKZ, l. 8; Back, p. 408) in the 3rd century.

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