



KĀRIN

KĀRIN, one of the seven great families of the Parthian and Sasanian periods (OIr. **kar-ina-*; cf. OPers. *kāra-* m., people, [army](#); Parth. *krny*; MPers. *k'lny*; Armen. *karen*; Gk. *karanos*; Lat. *carenes*; Ar. *qāren*). The name is attested as early as the Achaemenid period (Bivar, 1961, p. 123, n. 5; Tavernier, p. 386) and given to various mythical and historical figures of Iranian history (Justi, pp. 156-58).

In the legendary sections of the *Šāh-nāma* of [Ferdowsi](#), figures of Kārin descent, such as [Gēv](#), [Gōdarz](#), [Bīžan](#) and Rahām, appear in the ranks of the commanders of the army of [Kay Kosrow](#). These, however, also happen to be historical figures of Parthian ancestry, whose saga was incorporated into the legendary sections of the *Šāh-nāma* during the Sasanian period (Nöldeke, 1896; Shahbazi, 1990, p. 211). From [Pērōz](#)'s reign (r. 459-84) onwards, the Kārins traced their genealogy to the Kayānid king, Manučehr (Ṭabari, tr., V, p. 117).

The origins of the Kārins' rise to power during the [Arsacid](#) period remain obscure, but given the agnatic structure of the pre-modern Iranian society (Perikhanian, 1983, pp. 627-81), it is most likely that their power continued through the late antique period of Iranian history and especially in the northeastern regions of Iran into the eleventh century (Madelung, p. 178). According to [Movsēs Xorenac'i](#), one of the three sons of the Arsacid king, Phraates IV (r. ca. 37-2 BCE), was called Kārin (tr. Thomson, p. 166). This Kārin became the progenitor and chief agnate of the Parthian house bearing his name. While the historicity of this myth, and the information pertaining to the Kārin and other members of the Parthian dynastic family that Movsēs



Xorenac'i provides, might be debatable (Christensen, 1944, p. 104, n. 1.), it must be noted that given the long history of the Parthians in Armenia from the first to the mid-fifth century and thereafter, it can be assumed that Xorenac'i must have been thoroughly acquainted with traditions circulating amongst various Parthian dynasts of Armenia (Toumanoff, 1963; Lang, 1983, pp. 517-18; Garsoïan, 1985a). In fact, the powerful noble family of the **Kamsarakan** in Armenia traced their genealogy to the Iranian Kārin Pahlav family of the Arsacid period, and specifically to one Pērōzmat (only attested by Movsēs Xorenac'i, p. 219). The Armenian Kārins, the Kamsarakan, remained a powerful dynastic family in the region, directly involved in the history of the Byzantines and the Sasanians, and in Armenian political sphere up to the 14th century, carrying the surname of Pahlavuni, in commemoration of their origins. They lent their name to important localities, so that ancient Theodosiopolis was named Kārin, before the name was changed to Erzurum in later centuries. The Qārin mountain range in the Caspian region and the Qārin mountain of the **Čahār Lang** of the **Baktiārī** regions in ancient Media in western Iran (Dehḡodā, vol. 23, pp. 20-1) likewise testify both to the power of this dynastic Parthian family in western Iran as well as to the territorial delimitation of their power, the lands of the Parthava/Pahlav (Bivar, 1983, pp. 24-7; Gyselen, 1989, p. 73).

The Parthian Kārins were a significant part of the political and cultural scene of Iran during the Sasanian and late antique period of Iranian history. Parthian lineage was, in fact, of crucial importance during the Sasanian period, so much so that the Pahlav/Pārsīg dichotomous ethno-communal associations were one of the primary gauges of identity. While confirming the power of the Kārins during the early Sasanian period, inscriptional evidence of this period contradict Movsēs Xorenac'i's subsequent account concerning the Kārins. According to him (p. 218), whereas the Aspahapet (the Spāhbadān) and the Sūrēn Pahlav dynastic families lent their support to the rising **Ardašīr**, the Kārins remained staunch supporters of their "brother and kin," Ardavān (**Artabanus IV**), the last Arsacid king, and as a result, all members of the Kārin family were decimated in their struggle against Ardašīr I, except Perozamat of the Kamsarakan in Armenia. Contrary to Xorenac'i's claim, the Kārins do appear high in the list of the nobility of Iran in the inscriptions of the first Sasanian kings in the **Ka'ba-ye Zardošt** (ŠKZ). In the list of magnates in the trilingual inscription of **Šāpur I** (r. 241-272; ŠKZ), after the enumeration of the kings (*štrd'ly*), and the nobility close to the King (*BR BYT'*), the Kārins appear among the ranks of the grandees and magnates (*wclg'n*, Pers. *bozorgān*) of

Ardašīr. As they appear side by side of other *Parthian* families, such as the Wārāz and the Sūrēn (Lukonin, 1983, p. 703; Huyse, 1999, I, p. 55), moreover, there is little doubt that these Kārins are in fact the *Parthian* Kārin family (Lukonin, 1983, p. 704).

Like other Parthian dynastic families of the realm, the Kārins were incorporated into the administrative system of the early Sasanian rulers and their extensive domains were incorporated into the Sasanian realm as a semi-independent kingdom (Lukonin, 1983, p. 705). Their uninterrupted power during the early Sasanian period continues to be reflected in the primary sources of the third century. In the inscriptions of Šāpūr I at Naqš-e Rājab, the Kārins are mentioned in the ranks of the nobility, appearing along with other Parthian dynastic families, after the king, the princes of the realm, the queen, and the commander of king's guard (Lukonin, tr. 1986, pp. 108-9).

The paucity of the sources prevents us from obtaining further information on the Kārins during the fourth century, but the Arsacid traditions continued to be a forceful current in Sasanian administrative and political structures (Christensen, 1944, p. 235). In the fifth century, from the rise of the Sasanian king Pērōz (r. 459–84) onwards, when the *Xwadāy-nāmag* (see [Historiography ii. Pre-Islamic Period](#)) tradition itself only begins to acquire flesh, the Kārins' power becomes reflected in our sources. A critical examination of the *Xwadāy-nāmag* tradition pertaining to the rule of Pērōz (r. 488-96; 498-531), Walāxš/Balāš (r. 484-488), and parts of the rule of Kawād I (r. 488-531), makes it amply clear that the Kārins had a direct and central role to play in the editing, rewriting, and composing of parts of the *Xwadāy-nāmag* pertaining to this period of Sasanian history. In fact, the history of the Sasanians during this period, and the factors that instigated the Mazdakite uprising, can only be fully understood through the saga of the Parthian house of the Kārins. The *Xwadāy-nāmag* tradition is explicit that throughout this period, the Kārinid Sokrā (Sūfarā), for all practical purposes, ruled the empire (Nöldeke, pp. 130-211; Ṭabari, tr., V, pp. 120–121). Sokrā, also called Zarmehr (Christensen, 1944, p. 294), was one of the two major generals, the other being Šāpur of Ray of the house of Mehrān. Together these Parthian dynasts managed the country after Pērōz's death (484) until Balāš became king.

The power of the dynastic families, including the Kārins, had two important bases: First, the great wealth that accrued to them through their dynastic domains, and secondly, by virtue of this, the manpower that they could muster in times of war, the armies that they provided to the Sasanian kings, in



cavalry, infantry, and most probably also mercenaries and slaves. Pending further research, one can cautiously claim that a large part of the expenses of the Sasanians' warfare, during their numerous wars in the east and the west, was underwritten by the manpower that the Parthian dynastic families contributed (see Pourshariati, 2008, pp. 84-92). The Kārins must have been one of the wealthiest Parthian agnatic families. Ferdowsi highlights a number of times how the Kārinid Sokrā was in control of the treasury of Iran. In the initial phase of Kawād's kingship, all the regions under the presumed authority of the king, as well as all the elite of his realm, paid their taxes (*bāj*) to the Kārinid Sokrā. Recognizing this, the grandees mocked the king: "you have naught but name in kingship" (Ferdowsi, VII, p. 47).

Balāš's accession (r. 484-88) to the Sasanian throne, however, had also marked the start of an all-out dynastic rivalry, not amongst various Sasanian claimants to the throne, but between the two powerful Parthian families of the Kārins and the Mehrāns. Thus, the next Sasanian king, Kawād, resorted to the power of the Mehrāns in order to finally wrest his kingdom from the suffocating grip of the Kārins. So proverbial the rivalry of the two houses had become, that an expression began to circulate: "Sokrā's wind has died away, and a wind belonging to Mehrān has now started to blow" (Ṭabari, tr., V, p. 132). Most likely, it was the Parthian hold on the Sasanian throne and especially the total power exerted by the Kārins on the royal family that largely instigated Kawād's Mazdakite phase. It probably even precipitated Kawād and Kosrow I's (r. 531-79) reforms in the wake of it.

After their loss of power, the Kārins were sent into exile to Ṭabaristān and Zābolistān, regions ostensibly far from the center and proximity to the king. It is from this point onwards, therefore, that, in addition to what seems to have been their traditional fiefdom in the Nihāvand region (Christensen, 1944, pp. 105-6), the Kārins are also closely associated with the northeastern regions of Iran (Khorasan, Ṭabaristān, and partly also Zābolistān). The exile, however, was far from signaling the end of the Kārins. For after the accession of Kosrow I to power, our sources inform us that the king regretted the treatment that had been meted out to the Kārins by his father, Kawād, and reintegrated them into his administration. He gave them the rank of *spāhbed* of the *kust ī xwarāsān* or the "Quarter of the East".

Kosrow I inaugurated a series of reforms to curb the power of the Parthian dynastic families (see [Kosrow I ii. Reforms](#)). Recent studies, however, have seriously questioned the efficacies of these reforms in achieving their

intended aims, as the power of the Parthians continued unabated through the rest of the Sasanian history, and was in fact partially responsible for the fall of the dynasty (Rubin, 1995, pp. 227-297).

Sigillographic evidence confirms that the Kārins continued to be deeply integrated into the Sasanian administrative apparatus, as the *spāhbeds* who were in charge of the administration, taxation, and protection of the four quarters of the Sasanian realm. We can thus establish that the *spāhbeds* of Khorasan during the rule of **Ķosrow I**, were in fact the Kārīnids Čīhr-Burzēn (Gyselen, 2001, Seal 1a, p. 35), who appears in the *Šāh-nāme* as Simāh-e Borzēn (Ferdowsi, VII, p. 475), and Dādmehr (or Dād-Burz-Mīhr or Burz-Mīhr; Gyselen, 2001, Seal 1b, p. 36), who was put in charge of war and peace, taxation, and administration of the region (Dinavari, tr., pp. 102-3) and continued to hold this same office during the reign of **Hormozd IV**. Dādmehr makes a point of identifying himself as the Parthian *asped* (*asped ī pahlaw*) of the Sasanian administration (Gyselen, 2004).

As *spāhbeds* of the *kust ī xwarāsān*, which included the Pahlav provinces of Kōmīš and Gorgān, the Kārins aided the Sasanians during the revolt of **Bahrām VI Čōbīn**. Had it not been for the stance that the Kārins made against this popular Parthian Mehrānid rebel, there is no telling what would have awaited the Sasanian king **Ķosrow II Parviz** (r. 590-628), who himself owed his throne to the Parthian Spāhbadān family, specifically to **Bestām and Bendōy**. Not much can be recuperated from the history of the Kārins in the aftermath of the Spāhbadān's rebellion and the post-**Bagratids** period of the history of Khorasan (Pourshariati, 2008, pp. 133-36). If the crucial part that the Kārins played in the course of the Arab conquest of Iran and subsequent centuries is any indication, they are certain to have remained strong in spite of their substantive absence from the confused and confusing literary sources of this tumultuous period of Sasanian history.

Under the umbrella faction of the Pahlav, the Kārins participated in the war efforts of the Sasanians in the course of the early Arab conquest of Mesopotamia (628-32 CE). During the later Arab conquest of Iran, in the seventh century, they seem to have lost a substantial part of their original domains in **Nehāvand**, when a figure of uncertain background, Dinār, took advantage of the Kārins' preoccupation elsewhere, and usurping their possessions, made peace with the Arab armies. This Dinār was probably a person from lesser nobility and possibly Jewish, as the name seems to have been prevalent among the rather substantial Jewish population of Iran. Unlike



other Parthian families, such as the powerful Spāhbadān family, who chose to cooperate closely with the Arab armies in return for keeping control of their domains, the Kārins continued to put up a stiff resistance against the encroaching Arab armies.

During the conquest of Khorasan, the Kārins, under the leadership of one [Aswār](#), thus fought sternly not only against the encroaching Arab armies of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Āmir, but also against the Parthian Kanāragān and Spāhbadān families (Pourshariati, 2008, pp. 273-76). There is no doubt that parts of “Inner Khorasan” (Pourshariati, 1995) had remained under the control of the Kārins throughout this period. In the course of the conquest of Khorasan, however, the Kārins ultimately lost their control of the Khorāsānid part of their territory and were forced to retreat to Ṭabarestān. One of their members, the Kārinid Balāš, was responsible for the murder of Bāv or Farroḳzād, the scion of the Spāhbadān family and the brother of [Rostam b. Farroḳ-Hormozd](#), the Sasanian commander at the battle of [Qādesiya](#).

In the process of the Arab conquest and the [Bāvandīd](#)’s assumption of power in the region, as well as the rise of Āl-e Jāmāsp to power, the Kārins had lost much of their power. For a period of close to a century afterwards, until the revolt of Māzyār b. Qāren (839), the rule of this important Parthian dynastic family in Ṭabarestān and Khorasan was subject to that of the Spāhbadān/Bāvandīd family. The events that transpired at the inception of the Abbasid caliphate, and the incursions that these made into the hitherto closed quarters of the north and the east, however, provided the Kārins with an occasion to reassert their control.

The Kārins came to play an important part in the history of the Caspian regions, Ṭabarestān and [Gilān](#) in the aftermath of the Abbasid revolution. The popular rebel of the early Abbasid period, the Zoroastrian Sonbād, whose rebellion (754-55) was supposedly launched to avenge the murder of [Abu Moslem](#) in 755 by the Abbasid caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754-75), was most likely also a Kārin (Pourshariati, 2008, pp. 428-33).

Even more consequential in the long history of the Kārinid struggle against the central powers of the caliphs, was the aforementioned revolt of the Kārinid/Qārenid Māzyār, who, in coalition with [Bābak](#) in [Azarbaijan](#), was on the verge of exhausting the material and manpower resources of the caliphate. He was defeated by a Central Asian commander, the general [Afšīn](#), and a mercenary army assembled by the caliph al-Mo‘taṣem, in 837. As a result, the



Abbasid caliphs were finally able to take at least partial control over the northern regions of Iran and the “Khorasan Highway.”

The mark that the Kārins left on posterity is evident in the popular and courtly traditions that developed around this Parthian family in subsequent times. The sections of the *Šāh-nāma* about them reflect only part of their contribution to the Iranian national history. Their cultural ethos, it seems, was even more long lasting. As Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh, following Justi, underlines, one of the most emblematic and paradigmatic viziers of the Sasanian period, *Bozorgmehr-e Boktagān*, who became the model of the good vizier into the medieval period and in Islamdom, was probably the aforementioned Sasanian Dād-Burz-Mihr, who was of Parthian ancestry. The Kārins’ mark might also be seen in the Parthian romance of *Vis o Ramin* and in the *Adventures of Hamza* (*Ḥamza-Nāma*), but this is a question that needs further investigation.

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