



KAWĀD I I. REIGN

The reign of Kawād I, lasting from 488 to 531, with an interruption of some three years, is a turning point in Sasanian history. When the king ascended the throne, power and prestige of the Sasanian King of Kings had reached its nadir; when Kawād died 43 years later, he was able to pass on to his son [Kosrow I](#) (r. 531-79) a stable and powerful monarchy which could match the military resources of the Byzantine empire. Major administrative changes were initiated by Kawād. Taking into account the various challenges and problems he mastered, the king undoubtedly was one of the most forceful and successful personalities on the Sasanian throne, a genius in his own right, even if of a somewhat Machiavellian type.

A major focus of the history of Kawād's reign is the [Mazdakites](#), a historiographical problem which cannot be discussed here in detail (see [Chroné, Yarshater](#); see also [IRAN ix. RELIGIONS IN IRAN \(1\) Pre-Islamic \(1.1\) Overview](#); and [SASANIAN DYNASTY](#)).

The sources for Kawād's rule are diverse, as is usual for Sasanian history. Among the original products of the Sasanian state we have a large number of coins, which provide us with information on administrative, and also in some cases historical, topics. Some pieces of silverware and gemstones might depict Kawād, but since [Kosrow I](#) and [Ohrmazd IV](#) (579-90) wear basically the same crown, the identification is not as easy as it is in the case of the 4th- and 5th-century rulers. As regards the Oriental historiographical tradition—represented especially by [Moḥammad b. Jarir Ṭabari](#)—we can observe, on the one hand, a focus on the Mazdakite movement and, on the



other hand, a rather negative portrait of Kawād as a weak ruler whom his son easily outshines. This is clearly due to an element of propaganda employed by Ƙosrow I after his ascent to the throne.

In the Western (Greco-Roman) tradition, the most important and substantial author is Procopius of Caesarea (all references below are to his *De Bello Persico*); he is generally friendly towards Kawād, at the expense of Ƙosrow I. Another important contemporary is an author in Syriac, Joshua Stylites, whose perception of Kawād certainly is much less benign. Many scattered notes can be found in various other authors, which sometimes add important pieces of information but also are marked by much confusion. It has to be emphasized that, for example, in Ʀabari and Procopius, contradictions can be observed even within their own respective narratives. Trying to forge together the different traditions into one single narrative is therefore next to impossible. I have tried to show how uncertain are the dating and interpretation of many of the basic events in Kawād's reign, while stating which version seems more plausible to me.

FIRST REIGN (488-96)

It is certain that Kawād was a son of Pērōz (r. 457-84). Two conflicting views exist on his age when he ascended the throne. According to John Malalas (p. 471/18.68), he died at the age of 82; Ferdowsi (*Šāh-nāma* VII, p. 82, vv. 368-69) says that he was then 80 years old. Procopius (1.4.2), to the contrary, states that Kawād was too young to participate in Pērōz's disastrous campaign of 484; the Greek word he uses actually refers to an age of around 14 to 16 years. This would be perfectly in accord with a notice in Dinavari (p. 66) that Kawād ascended the throne at the age of 15. Most coins of his first reign show him with only short whiskers and without a moustache. This is a unique depiction, since the usual convention is to show Sasanian Kings of Kings heavily bearded. The only other exceptions are the boy kings [Ardašīr III](#) and Ƙosrow III as well as the crown princes of Wahrām II (see [BAHRĀM ii](#)), so the numismatic evidence lends great plausibility to the assumption that Kawād was rather young when he ascended the throne. In the early coinage of his second reign, he is already shown with the usual moustache, so that a certain development in age can be observed in the coinage. Kawād thus probably was born in 473. The fact that Walāxš, rather than Kawād, became king after Pērōz's death also might be an indication that the fallen ruler's son was considered to be too young to effectively rule the realm, especially in a time of crisis, even if the example of Šāpūr II (r. 309–79)—allegedly designated by his father as



successor to the throne when still in his mother's womb (Ṭabari, I/2, p. 836; tr., V, p. 49)—proves that there was no binding law against child kings.

Walāxš, however, was dethroned in 488, and Kawād ascended the throne in his stead. According to Ṭabari (I/2, pp. 877-78; tr., V, pp. 116-17), Dinavari (p. 61: Šuḡar), and Ferdowsi (*Šāh-nāma* VII, pp. 44-47: Sufrāy), the main character during the reign of Walāxš had been Suḡrā, of the Karin family (for the great families, see [COURTS AND COURTIERS ii](#)). According to Meskawayh (I, p. 89: Suḡrā, as in Ṭabari), he was Kawād's maternal uncle. He is also credited by Ferdowsi (VII, pp. 45-47) with dethroning Walāxš, while according to Joshua Stylites (sec. 19), it was the Zoroastrian clergy who were responsible for Walāxš's removal due to his violation of Zoroastrian practices; his lack of ready cash is said at the same time to have lost him the respect of the army.

The larger-than-life image of Suḡrā—he is said to have avenged Pērōz by successfully fighting against the [Hephthalites](#) and to have regained the fallen king's treasure as well as his captured daughter (Ṭabari, I/2, p. 880; tr., V, p. 120)—certainly inspires some doubts. Still, it seems unlikely that his important position in the Sasanian state during the reign of Walāxš and the early years of Kawād is totally unhistorical. It seems likely that at a moment when most power in the realm had been shifted from the king to this great nobleman, the power struggle between individual grandees and their families drastically intensified. A certain Šāpūr of Ray, from the Mehrān family, managed to break Suḡrā's power and have him executed. According to Ferdowsi (VII, pp. 53-60), this happened in the course of a civil war; other variants—like those of Ṭabari (I/2, p. 885; tr., V, pp. 131-32), Dinavari (p. 66), and Meskawayh (I, pp. 89-90)—have Šāpūr of Ray following a plan made with Kawād and simply dragging Suḡrā from the king's side to prison for execution. The dating of the episode is problematic because of the conflict between Ṭabari's late dating ("the greater part of his days had gone by," I/2, p. 885.5-6; tr., V, pp. 133) and the other sources. Ferdowsi dates the slaying of Suḡrā in Kawād's seventh regnal year (at age 23, having begun ruling at age 16; VII, p. 53, vv. 23-27). Dinavari (p. 66) states that Suḡrā served as tutor to the young Kawād during his first five regnal years; this would imply that Suḡrā's removal took place in 493. Ṭabari's narrative, stressing Kawād's restiveness in subordination in Suḡrā, fits with this date (as does Ya'qubi's briefer account, I, p. 185). As argued above, it seems very likely that Kawād was in fact quite young upon his ascension, which makes Dinavari's version appear plausible. The idea that Kawād, having grown up, wanted to do away with his tutor is perfectly logical.



As Dinavari relates, Kawād, a king but in an inferior position as pupil, was looked down on by other people. According to one tradition in Bal'ami, one of the reasons for replacing Kawād with his brother Zamāsp (see [JĀMĀSP](#)) in 496 was that he had killed Suḵrā.

The main argument in favor of dating the execution of Suḵrā in Kawād's first reign, however, is the following: Ṭabari (I/2, p. 886; tr., V, pp. 132-34), Dinavari (pp. 66-67), Bal'ami (pp. 967-69), Procopius (1.5.1), and Joshua Stylites (sec. 23) are unanimous in stating that the main reason for dethroning Kawād was his connection with the Mazdakites (see also Agathias, pp. 267-68; tr., p. 129). It is impossible, I believe, to imagine that Kawād could have acted in such a fashion when the all-powerful Suḵrā was still active and practically controlling the king. Since these reports, taken seriously, would require some time to have passed from the beginning of Kawād's involvement with the Mazdakites until his actual dethronement, the date 493 indicated by Dinavari as the end of Suḵrā's tutorship makes perfect sense. In addition, by this date Kawād would have been about 20 years of age and thus certainly in a position to rule the empire in his own right.

Little is known of the external political history of the Sasanian empire during Kawād's first reign. With all probability, the Sasanians still had to pay tribute to the Hephthalites. In 491, Kawād sent an embassy to the Byzantine emperor Anastasius I (r. 491-518) to ask for money—similar to Pērōz's request for a subvention to Leo I (r. 457-74; see [FIRUZ](#); J. Styl., secs. 8-10). The rationale for Byzantine payments to Persia in order to defray mutually beneficial defense costs is argued in a later letter (529 CE, to Justinian), which is attributed to Kawād in the chronicle of John Malalas (p. 449/18.44). The king's present request, like his later ones, was to no avail (J. Styl., secs. 19-21), whether or not due to dispute over continued Persian occupation of the city of [Nisibis](#) (for the historical background, see [JOVIAN](#)). The historicity of an Armenian uprising in Persarmenia at approximately the same time is doubtful (J. Styl., sec. 21). Meanwhile Arab tribes freely plundered Persian territory (J. Styl., sec. 22). All told, the impression is that the Sasanian empire was rather weak politically during this period; to this we probably have to add that it suffered from the lack of money (see J. Styl., sec. 19; J. Mal., p. 449/18.44; see also [ECONOMY iv](#)).

Because of all the problems concerning the Mazdakites, it is impossible to say which developments took place during Kawād's first reign, and which only after his return to power. In any case, already in his first regnal period a serious involvement of the king in what is generally labeled the Mazdakite



movement must have taken place; as noted above, this involvement was the reason for his deposition. This proves, on the one hand, that the nobility—or at least its anti-Mazdakite parts—were still powerful enough to remove a king. But it also proves that Kawād had had the opportunity and the freedom to maneuver to inaugurate a policy which threatened the vital interests of his adversaries, a feat that would have been impossible to imagine if he still had been merely a puppet under the grandee's control. At an assembly of the Persian nobles, it was agreed—against the advice of those who wanted to have him executed—that Kawād should be imprisoned. He managed to flee from his prison, however, and found shelter at the Hephthalite court (Proc., 1.6.1-10; J. Styl., sec. 24; Agathias, p. 268; tr., pp. 129, 131).

SECOND REIGN (498-531)

Kawād persuaded the Hephthalite king to support him in regaining the Iranian throne, after having received the king's daughter (who was his own niece, according to J. Styl., sec. 24) as bride. For chronology, the only reliable evidence at our disposal is the coinage of Zamāsp: regnal years 1 to 3 are known; thereafter Kawād's resumed coinage starts with his regnal year 11 (498/9). It seems that not much fighting took place (Ṭabari, I/2, p. 887; tr., V, p. 136; Dinavari, pp. 66-67; Meskawayh, I, pp. 90-91; Agathias, p. 269; tr., p. 131). Zamāsp's life was spared, even if he was probably blinded (Proc., 1.6.17), and his most important aide among the nobility, Gušnaspdād (Gk. Gousanastādēs), who had argued for Kawād's death, was executed (Proc., 1.5.4-6, 1.6.18).

Two members of the Iranian nobility are mentioned most prominently in the Arabic and Persian sources in the context of Kawād's flight and successful return. The first is Zarmehr, son of Suḵrā; he is said in Ṭabari (I/2, p. 886; tr., V, pp. 133-34) to have accompanied Kawād during his flight; later he took a firm stand against the Mazdakites, who then managed to have him executed on Kawād's order. Some scholars have claimed that Suḵrā and Zarmehr are not father and son, but rather the same person, but this is very unlikely; it is much more probable that Suḵrā had been killed in Kawād's first reign (see above), which makes it impossible that he assisted Kawād in his flight. Furthermore, while the death of Suḵrā is explained in the context of the hostility and machinations of Šāpūr of Ray, the motivation of Zarmehr's execution is altogether different. That Zarmehr should have loyally served his father's murderer cannot be used as an argument against the clear statements of our sources (see discussion, Bosworth, p. 134, n. 344), since parallels for such loyalty are found throughout history.



The second important helper of Kawād is Siyāwuš (Gk. Seósēs in Procopius). Although instrumental in freeing Kawād from his prison, he was later brought to trial at a nobles' court at the instigation of Mahbod (Gk. Mebódēs), a military commander or else palace official (judging by his title *magister* in Procopius, 1.11.25). The episode can be dated by the evidence in Procopius (1.11.24) to the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justin I (r. 518-27), apparently rather early in this period. Siyāwuš was accused of deliberately mishandling peace negotiations with Byzantine representatives and thus sabotaging the proposal for adoption of the prince Ƙosrow by the emperor (see below), to which charge were added the veneration of new deities and violation of Persian customs—for instance, by having his deceased wife interred; he was sentenced to death (Proc., 1.7.31-36). Thus, it seems quite likely that he was a sympathizer of the Mazdakites; despite their friendship, Kawād did nothing to save his life, apparently with the intention of curbing Siyāwuš's power as overall military commander (*arteštārān-sālār*), which was resented by his judges as well (Proc., 1.11.32-33). Siyāwuš had achieved the position during the first reign, and it was discontinued after his death (Proc., 1.6.19). Mahbod was to be instrumental in the transfer of power to Ƙosrow I upon Kawād's death, but he himself later fell victim to court intrigue (Proc., 1.21.20-22, 1.23.25-29).

The history of the Mazdakites is too complex to be dealt with here in detail; suffice it to say that it seems certain that they were pivotal for the success of Kawād against the nobility. However, the situation cannot have been as simple as a pro-Mazdakite population confronted with a unified, anti-Mazdakite nobility; we have already seen that Siyāwuš, a member of the high nobility, apparently had Mazdakite leanings. What the Mazdakite movement was all about, and to what extent Kawād sincerely believed in it—or rather used it in a Machiavellian way to enlarge his own power—is impossible to find out, due especially to the partisan nature of most of our sources.

Apart from his political and military successes, which brought about a strengthening of the role of the king and repaired the weakness of the Sasanian dynasty manifest after 484, Kawād also successfully worked to change the administration of his realm. Different views on the implications of this reform exist; what seems certain is that a cadastral survey was begun late in his reign (Tabari, I/2, p. 960-61; tr., V, pp. 255-56) and was still incomplete at his death. Based on it, Ƙosrow I would levy taxes to be paid in three annual installments in money, not in kind—both for the land tax (*ƙarāj*; see [FISCAL SYSTEM ii](#)) and for poll tax (see [JEZYA](#)). Apparently the majority of



administrative seals date only after this reform, so that the administrative practices in Sasanian Iran also must have been heavily affected.

In the military and provincial organization, too, significant changes can be observed in the sixth century. A body of cavalry troops (see [ASĀWERA](#); Mid. Pers *aswār*) directly under the king's command which received fixed wages seems to have been established from among the gentry (see Altheim and Stiehl, pp. 62-63; cf., among Ṭabari's references to the *asāwera*, the 300 'oḏamā' "grandees" in the cavalry force under the king's commander assigned to resist the Arab advance into Persia after the battle of [Jalula](#), Ṭabari, I/5, p. 2062.2; tr., XIII, p. 142). The high rank and military leadership of the cavalry commander may be exemplified under Kawād by the "Aspebedes" (Proc., 1.11.5, 9.24, 21.4, etc.), unless this 'name' represents, instead, the overall military leader (*spahbed*; on the term "cavalry commander," see [ASPBED](#), [ASPET](#), and [ASTABED](#)).

Moreover, the structure of command was changed. Four local military commands (*spahbeds* of the four quarters) were established, which are attested in the sigillographic material (Gyselen, 2001, see p. 33); a bulla of one of the commanders also gives him the title "cavalry commander of the empire" (*šahr-asped*, Gyselen, 2001, pp. 26-27, 45). Abolition of the office of *arteštārān-sālār* or *Erān-spahbed* that was held by Siyāwuš around 520 gives us some general chronological indication about the terminus post quem for the creation of the four regional *spahbeds*. Ṭabari (I/2, p. 894; tr., V, 149-50) attributes these changes to the reign of [Kosrow I](#) (pt. ii).

Approximately at the same time, more specifically in regnal year 33 (520/1), we first encounter some unusual mint signatures, such as GNCKL or DYWAN, which one might link to Kawād's administrative reforms. Since these two types of evidence—Procopius's report about the show trial of Siyāwuš and the numismatic evidence—support each other in a quite remarkable way, one further conclusion seems possible. Since Siyāwuš was with all probability sentenced to death for his pro-Mazdakite sentiments, by around 520 Kawād must have withdrawn officially his support from the Mazdakites. Therefore, a connection between the administrative reform and the king's earlier pro-Mazdakite leanings seems highly unlikely.

Kawād was one of the kings to whom several city foundations are credited, such as Ērān-āsān-kar-Kawād in Media, Weh-Kawād and Ērān-win(n)ārd-Kawād in Fārs (Gyselen, 2002), Weh-az-Amid Kawād in Fārs (Gyselen, 1989),



and *Kawād-xwarrah (Ṭabari, I/2, p. 885; tr., V, p. 130) in Fārs.

Kawād's own religious leanings certainly are a complex matter, given the context of the Mazdakite controversy. His relationship with Christians is somewhat obscure. In Christian Iberia, where the Sasanians had sought to propagate Mazda-worship in the past (see [GEORGIA ii](#)), he presented himself as a champion of orthodox Zoroastrianism (Proc., 1.2.5; see Schindel, p. 489). But in Persarmenia, Kawād is said to have compromised with his Christian subjects in the area of religious observance immediately after his return to the throne (J. Styl., sec. 24), and he seems to have continued the conciliatory policy of Walāxš (see [ARMENIA ii](#), secs. 6a-6b). In Mesopotamia and Persia, the reign seems free of persecution (see [MARTYRS, CHRISTIAN](#), reviewing the list of martyrs presented in Hoffmann), although the punishment of Christians in Persia is briefly mentioned for ca. 512/13 (Theophanes, p. 160; tr., p. 241). Kawād may have taken a pragmatic attitude comparable to that of Pērōz, who had close rapport with the cooperative Nestorian bishop [Baršauma](#) of Nisibis, or that of Zamāsp, the “peaceful and kind” (*Synodicon Orientale*, tr., p. 311 [year 497], as was Walāxš, p. 299 [year 486]; cf. Agathias on both, pp. 268, 269; tr., pp. 129, 131). Zamāsp supported the catholicos [Bābay](#) on marriage of the clergy; and their example and teaching in family matters would have stood in opposition to the tenets of Mazdakism (*Synodicon*, tr., p. 312; Labourt, pp. 154-55). Kawād continued this support (*Chronique de Séert*, sec. 15/VII, p. 37), and Christians are attested at his court in high positions.

According to the chroniclers (J. Mal., p. 444/18.32; Theo., pp. 168-70; tr., pp. 259-61), Kawād proscribed “Manicheism” (generally understood to mean Mazdakism) and turned over confiscated churches to the Christians. This followed a council called by the king in 528/9 in order to entrap the sect's leadership. A Christian bishop named Bozanes (Theo., p. 170.13) was present at the council, but possibly as court physician rather than in any ecclesiastical capacity. (For the chronological question—attribution of this event to Kawād or [Ḳosrow](#)—see [Chroné](#), pp. 30-31.)

Around 520, Kawād tried to safeguard the right of ascent to the throne for his favorite, [Ḳosrow I](#), by having the emperor Justin I adopt him. Justin, after initial favorable reaction to the proposal, was dissuaded by his counselor, Proclus, who raised the fear that [Ḳosrow](#) might later lay claim to the Byzantine empire as his own heritage, and this initiative finally came to nothing (detailed account in Proc., 1.11.1-30). Kawād's use of this strategy for purposes of internal politics remains interesting, especially in light of the plot against



Ḳosrow some time after his accession (Proc., 1.23.1-6). The adoption proposal and its failure, which was attributed to Siyāwuš (see his parlay with the Byzantines, Proc., 1.11.26-30), led to the general's downfall (see above) and apparently poisoned the attitude of Ḳosrow I towards the Byzantines (Proc., 1.11.30). In the end, as noted above, the transfer of power to Ḳosrow was successfully carried out; the reasons why Kawād preferred his youngest son as successor remain obscure.

WARS

After decades of peace between Sasanian Iran and Byzantium, war broke out in 502. Kawād again, as in the first reign, asked the emperor Anastasius I for money so the king could pay what he owed the Hephthalites, but Anastasius refused to help him. Kawād answered with a lightning attack against the frontier city of Theodosiopolis and the adjoining Roman parts of Armenia, then descended on [Amida](#) on the upper Tigris river, one of the main fortresses of the Byzantine frontier (J. Styl., sec. 48; Proc., 1.7.1-3). He captured it after a lengthy siege in early 503 (Proc., 1.7.4-32). The same year saw an unsuccessful siege of [Edessa](#) begun by Nu'mān II, the Lakhmid king of [Ḥira](#), and continued by Kawād after the death of his ally (J. Styl., secs. 52, 58-63). In 504 and 505 the Byzantine army was able to gain further military successes (e.g., J. Styl., secs. 64-66, 69, 75), and Amida was restored to the Byzantines upon payment of an indemnity (Proc., 1.9.4, 1.9.20; J. Styl., sec. 81). From 503 on, Kawād's war efforts were troubled by unrest in the east of his realm (see below), so in 506 a peace for the duration of seven years was concluded (Proc., 1.9.24; J. Styl., sec. 98). Even if this first Roman war did not end with a clear winner, the capture of Amida was the most conspicuous success gained by a Sasanian army since 359, when the same city had been taken by Šāpūr II.

A second war was launched against Rome in 528, early in the sole reign of the emperor [Justinian I](#) (r. 527-65), allegedly because the Byzantines had decided against supporting Ḳosrow I as heir to Kawād I. According to John Malalas (p. 441/18.26), military operations began first in Lazica—which had been the focus of Kawād's dispute with the emperor Justin that went back to the year 522, regarding claimed intrusion on Persian sovereignty; invasion of Mesopotamia followed (J. Mal., pp. 414/17.9, 427/18.4, 441/18.26; see also [ABḲĀZ](#), [COLCHIS](#)). After a severe defeat of the Byzantines at the border (Proc., 1.13.6-7), there occurred in 530 one of the greatest open-field battles between a Byzantine and a Sasanian army at the frontier city of [Dara](#) (Gk. Anastasiopolis), which ended with a great Roman victory (Proc., 1.14); it failed,



however, to bring about an end to the fighting. Kawād again mustered an army in 531, which won a costly victory over the Byzantines near the major emporium of Callinicum in Syria, but no cities were captured (Proc., 1.18). Later that year a siege was in progress at Martyropolis, east of Amida, when Kawād became sick and died (Proc., 1.21.19-20; J. Mal., p. 471/18.68). This event led to an immediate truce and to subsequent negotiation of a comprehensive peace treaty between his successor [Kosrow I](#) and Justinian (Proc., 1.21.20-27; 1.22).

Of Kawād's eastern wars, we know next to nothing; Procopius (1.8.19) relates that Kawād, after the fighting in 503 (see above), had to withdraw in order to confront an invasion of "hostile Huns" (*Oúnnōn polemíōn*)—one more episode in an ongoing "long war" to secure the northern frontiers of the empire. (See [HUNS](#) for the problematic identities indicated by this term.) Again, coinage is our main source for at least some conjectures. After the catastrophe of Pērōz in 484, all Khorasan was lost to the Sasanian empire; no coins from mints in this region (Abaršahr, Herat, Marw) are attested until the 20s of Kawād's reign: the earliest specimen is a Marw drachm from regnal year 24 (512/3). This chronology seems to imply that the Sasanians managed to regain Khorasan, and one wonders whether there is any explanation for this other than that Kawād had been successfully waging war against the Hephthalites, his former allies.

In the northwest of the empire, Lazica, Iberia, and Armenia would continue, after Kawād as during his reign (e.g., the campaigns of 513 and 515: Schindel, p. 489, note 2170), to figure in the Sasanian/Byzantine wars of the sixth century. On the southeast frontier, a close relationship continued with the Lakhmids of [Hira](#), counterposed to Justinian's Arab allies, the Ghassanids. The conquest of Yemen by the Abyssinians (see [ETHIOPIA](#)) in 525 carried the potential for a new threat in the south from Byzantine allies (hoped for by Justinian; see Procopius, 1.19-20); this event would eventually, during [Kosrow I](#)'s reign, lead to a Sasanian presence as far as the Gulf of Aden (see [ABNĀ'](#)).



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