



MEHR-NARSEH

MEHR-NARSEH, the grand vizier (Mid. Pers. *wuzurg framādār*) during the reigns of the Sasanian kings Yazdgerd I (r. 399-421 CE), Bahrām V (r. 421-39; see [BAHRĀM v](#)), Yazdgerd II (r. 439-57; Frye, p. 146), and Pērōz (r. 459-84; see [FĪRŪZ](#)).

Mehr-Narseh was born in the fourth century CE in the village (*qarya*) of Abrovān in the rural district (*rostāq*) of Dašt-e Bārin in the administrative division (*korra*) of [Ardašīr-*korra*](#), in southwestern Fars (Ṭabari, I, p. 870, tr., p. 105). He appears to have had noble ancestry, similar to that of [Ardašīr I](#), the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, going back to the Kayanian (q.v.) king Vištāspa (see [GOŠTASP](#)), with the notable difference that the Arsacid king (Kay Ašak) is also mentioned as part of his lineage (Ṭabari, I, p. 869; tr., p. 104). In the Arabic sources, his father is called Borāza, and he who may well have owned the territory where Mehr-Narseh was born and his descendants lived. Mehr-Narseh was able to achieve the rank of grand vizier (see [FRAMADĀR](#)), the highest rank in the administrative hierarchy of the Sasanian empire in the fifth century. In a Middle Persian text on a banquet speech at the royal court (*Sūr ī saxwan*), the order and placement of the *wuzurg framādār* is only below the king of kings (*šāhān šāh*) and the princes of the blood (*pūs ī wāspuhr ī šāhān*), while generals (*spāhbeds*), judge of the empire (*šahr dādwarān*; see [DĀDWAR](#)), chief councilor priest (*mowān handarzbed*), [chiliarch](#) (*hazārbed*), and the performer of the *drōn* ceremony (*drōn-yaz*) are all below him (Daryaee, pp. 66-67). While [Bahrām V Gōr](#) was at war in the east, Mehr-Narseh was left in charge of the empire as the *wuzurg framādār*. However, he was not



the first person to hold this office. Previous holders of the title, including an *Abarsām*, mentioned to have been the *wuzurg framādār* of Ardašīr I (Ṭabari, I, p. 816; tr., p. 9), which appears to be anachronistic (Khurshudian, 1998, p. 89), but more likely a Husraw Yazdgerd, during the reign of Yazdgerd I (r. 399-421) mentioned in the synod of 410 (Syriac *hrmdr' rb'*) (Chabot, p. 260; Frye, p. 319), are known to have existed. The office of *framādār* itself appears as early as the 3rd century in the inscriptions of Šāpur I at Ka'ba-ye Zardošt and Naqš-e Rostam in Fars.

Mehr-Narseh had three sons (Ṭabari, I, p. 870; tr., p. 105), named Zurwāndād, who became the “grand hērbēd” (Mid. Pers. *hērbēdān hērbēd*) the leader of the clergy; Kārdār, who became the “chief of warriors” (Mid. Pers. *artēštārān sālār*, the second class of the Sasanian society; and Māhgušnasp, who became the “chief of the cattle breeders” (Mid. Pers. *wāstaryōšān sālār*), the third class of the Sasanian society. This may suggest that Mehr-Narseh attempted to reorganize and bring order to the Sasanian caste system by appointing each of his sons at the head of each of them (Zaehner, p. 125; Perikhanian, in *Madiyān*, p. 633).

Mehr-Narseh's religious life. The name of Mehr Narseh's first son, Zurwāndād, is important in that it points out the possible prominence of Zurvanite tendencies in Iran of the fifth century CE. Robert Zaehner has suggested that, in the fifth century, Zurvanism was in ascendancy, especially during the rule of Yazdgerd II (Zaehner, p. 47). Mehr-Narseh's Zurvanite belief is further corroborated by the evidence from the Armenian sources, where he is said to have imposed Zoroastrianism (Armenian *awrēnk 'deni mazdezn*), but instead, in his proclamation to the Armenians, he provides a clear Zurvanite doctrine (Ehšē, p. 78). Furthermore, Ṭabari (I, pp. 870-71; tr., p. 105) informs us that, as part of his beneficent policies, Mehr-Narseh laid out three gardens and planted 12,000 trees in each one of them (see below). It is noteworthy that the number 12,000 is associated with the Zurvanite doctrine, as the allotted time from the creation of the cosmos till its end (Wikander, p. 177). During the reign of Pērōz, when Zurvanism seems to have been shunned, Mehr-Narseh was accused of having committed a sin, but it did not dislodge him from his office (see below). There is also the mention of a Zurwāndād/Zarwāndād as a great sinner along with Mazdak in the Pahlavi *Vendidād* (IV.49), which may be a reference to Mehr-Narseh's son. In the *Vendidād*, Zurwāndād is mentioned as having had authority, but he was sinful and destructive and disputed the creator of the corporeal world, that is, Ohrmazd (*ēd-iz kē ō mardōm druwand ī*



sāstār kamāl zadār pahikārēd [čiyōn zarvāndād uš pahikār abāg astwandād]; Jamasp, p. 134).

In the Sasanian law book, the *Mādiyān ī hazār dādestān* (*MHD*), Mehr-Narseh is accused of having committed a sin, but the nature of the offense is not specified. As a result of this sin, he became a servant in fire temples: *ōy bay wahrām šāhān šāh yazdgirdān mihr-narseh ī wuzurg-framādār pad bandagīh ō ātaxš ī ardwaḥišt ud ātaxš ī abzōn-ardaxšīr dād* “His Majesty, Bahrām, the king of kings, the son of Yazdgerd, sent Mehr-Narseh, the chief minister, in servitude to the fire of Ardawahišt and the fire of Abzōn-Ardaxšīr.” (*MHD* A39.11-13). He, along with his wife, stayed there for several years during the reign of King Bahrām V, until the ascension of King Yazdgerd II. Mehr-Narseh was then taken to the *ōstān* (royal domain) for several more years as a further punishment for his offense (Perikhanian, pp. 641-42). Mansour Shaki, however, suggests that what happened was that, during the rule of Yazdgerd II, Mehr-Narseh was divested of his ecclesiastical benefice, but kept his office (Shaki, p. 99)—a suggestion corroborated by the historical information. But then again, during the reign of King Pērōz and under the direction of Mardbūd, the chief priest (*mowbedān mowbed*) of the time, and other authorities, he was sent to another fire temple named Ohrmizd-Pērōz (*MHD* A39.14-17; Perikhanian, pp. 641-42).

According to the *Mādiyān ī hazār dādistān* (A40.3-4), Mehr-Narseh and his wife then served in the fire temple as the “Servant of Ādurwaxš” (*Ādurwaxš bandag*), that is, watching over the fire in the fire temple along with his wife, children, and slave (Perikhanian, in *MHD*, p. 329; idem, 1983, p. 641). Thus, one should take Mehr-Narseh’s service not in the sense of common servitude (*bandagīh*), but one with full rights and authority (see [BARDA AND BARDA-DĀRI](#)). Mehr-Narseh also carried the title of *hazārbandag* “owner of a thousand slaves,” but his servitude (*bandagīh*) to these fire temples had a religious tone, serving to cleanse him of the offense for which both he and his family were held accountable (Perikhanian, p. 635).

Aswuzurg framādār. Two matters stand out in Mehr-Narseh’s career as the *wuzurg framādār*: his domestic policies and negotiations on behalf of the Sasanian empire with the Roman empire; and his policy towards Armenia and the Christians in that kingdom.

Mehr-Narseh is lauded for his sagacity and is credited as a trusted appointee and regent during the reign of Bahrām V (Ṭabari, I, pp. 866-67; tr., p. 100). He



is perhaps one of the earliest trusted officials who took over the function of the viceroy when the king was campaigning on the fringes of the Sasanian empire. He was probably appointed by Yazdgerd I after a period of tolerance of the Christians. When the Christians defiled a Zoroastrian fire temple, persecution of Christians broke out in the empire and this event may have coincided with Mehr-Narseh's appointment (Gyselen, p. 11). His wisdom, perfect manners, and education were at odds with Yazdgerd I's contempt for the nobles and the great men (*al-ašrāf wa'l-oḡamā*), shedding of blood, and tyrannical manner (Ṭabari, I, pp. 848-49; tr., pp. 72-73). Additionally, Mehr-Narseh may have been active during the reign of Bahrām V in the negotiations with the Romans which resulted in the peace treaty of 422 that ended the persecution of Christians in the Sasanian empire and of Zoroastrians in the Roman empire (Dignas and Winter, pp. 136-38; Greatrex and Lieu, pp. 42-43). In the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsi, there appears to be a confusion between Bahrām's brother and Mehr-Narseh, as their names are the same, but many of the functions attributed to Bahrām's brother, the eventual ruler of Khorasan, belong in the domain of the grand vizier's responsibility (Ferdowsi, pp. 524-94).

We do not encounter the name of Mehr-Narseh in the Roman sources, with the exception of Socrates Scholasticus (VII.18), where a "Narses" is mentioned, but he has a more militaristic function beside the informant-counselor of the Persian king (Greatrex and Lieu, p. 39). The function of Mehr-Narseh described here is in line with Ṭabari's depiction of the *wuzurg framādār* leading armies and men to face the Romans (Ṭabari, I/2, p. 868; tr., V, p. 103). In the Roman sources, Sasanian plans (Narseh?) against Ardaburius, the supreme military commander (*magister militum praesentalis*) who had invaded Persian territories, are discussed (Greatrex, p. 2). According to the Sasanian-based sources, during Yazdgerd II's reign Mehr-Narseh was sent for negotiations after the commencement of the rekindled war, because the Romans had refused to pay their annual subsidy for the protection of the Darband Pass. It appears that because of the new Hephthalite pressures from the east, which preoccupied the Sasanian kings in the fifth century CE, Mehr-Narseh was left in charge of the empire, as Yazdgerd II made his residence in Khorasan for some years (Frye, p. 146).

Roman influence and the issue of Christianity further brought the Sasanians and the Armenians into conflict. Two contemporary Armenian sources, Eliše and P'arpets'i, are concerned with these events and name Mehr-Narseh as the main agitator of the persecution. They refer to him, beside by his usual title

(*vzurk hramatar*), as a *hazarapet* in Armenian (see [HAZĀRBED](#)), which is commonly equated with his main title of *wuzurg framādār* (Chaumont, pp. 147-57). For the description of Mehr-Narseh's policy towards Armenia, we are left mainly with Armenian sources, which present a negative image of him. He is called an "embittered old man" (*tsern darnats'eal*), a "snake" (*vishap*), and "sinister" (*dzakhoł*). The reason was the fact that the Armenian ruler (*hazarapet*) was directly replaced by Mehr-Narseh himself, who took this title and was able to take control of Armenia with the assistance of the chief priest (*mowbedān mowbed*) and the Suanian prince Varazdan. Secondly, "Zurvanite" Zoroastrianism, which the Armenian texts call "perverse religion" (*dzakhołaki*), was subsequently imposed upon Armenia in 439 (Russell, p. 136). The Armenians, led by the *Sparapet* Vardan Mamikonean, rebelled against these measures, leading to the battle of Avarayr on 2 June 451, during which many Armenians lost their lives—an event that has been remembered ever since and is commemorated by the Armenian people (Garsoïan, in *MHD*, pp. 98-99).

Only Abu 'Ali Bal'ami provides a story for the end of Mehr-Narseh's life. While Ṭabari stops mentioning Mehr-Narseh abruptly with the story of him being sent to negotiate with the Romans on behalf of King Pērōz (Ṭabari, I, p. 872; tr., p. 108), Bal'ami mistakenly—quite contrary to Ṭabari—states that during the reign of Bahrām V, Mehr-Narseh had gotten old and wanted to retire, attend to religious matters, and to think about the afterlife. Bahrām ordered that Mehr-Narseh return to his own abode, to Ardašīr-*korra*, and to live out his life in his homeland (Bal'ami, I, p. 654). This story may either have taken place during the reign of Pērōz or is used to provide an exit of Mehr-Narseh from the narrative; it might also reflect his demotion because of the sin attributed to him.

Two bullae from Mehr-Narseh's seal survive, providing us with an image and title of the *wuzurg framādār* (Gyselen, p. 12). He is portrayed with the cap (*kulāf*) with insignia and ribbon (*wandag*) typical of the Sasanian nobility and the ranking officials of the empire (Figure 1). The legend on his seal reads: *mtrnrs[hy] ZY LB' plmt'r* "Mehr-Narseh, the Grand Minister."

Mehr Narseh's building policy. According to Ṭabari (I, pp. 870-71; tr., p. 105), Mehr-Narseh erected four fire temples close to his birthplace. He also built three large gardens, one holding 12,000 date palms, another 12,000 olive trees, and the third, 12,000 cypress trees, which were in good condition and still controlled by his descendants in the post-Sasanian period. He founded four



villages, with a fire temple in each of them for the sake of his own soul and those of his three sons, named Farāz-marā-āwar-koḍāyā, Zarvāndādān, Kārdādān, and Māgošnabān. Furthermore, at Dašt-e Barin he had buildings erected and built another fire temple for himself called Mehr Narsiān (Ṭabari, I, p. 870; tr., p. 105; Vanden Berghe, pp. 187-91; Moṣṭafawi, pp. 112-14). This fire temple may be the one mentioned by Eṣṭakri, who in the tenth century says that the people call it Bārin and that on its edifice there was an inscription mentioning that 30,000 dirham was spent for it (Eṣṭakri, p. 118; tr., p. 105; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 189).

The bridge and inscription. Mehr-Narseh built a bridge across the Tang(-e) Āb River in Fars. It is located next to the rock relief depicting Ardašir I's investiture, at five km from Qal'a-ye Doḵtar on the main road leading north to Gōr, the present-day [Firuzābād](#) (see [BRIDGES](#), Plate XXII; Moṣṭafawi, pp. 99-100). Its purpose was to connect the two roads leading to Gōr, and it is the best dated example of Sasanian masonry from the fifth century (Bier, p. 263). Next to the bridge is an important inscription by Mehr-Narseh. Besides the third-century Zoroastrian priest, Kirdēr (see [KARTĪR](#)) and the fourth century Šāpur Sagān-šah and Seluk, Mehr-Narseh is the only other dignitary of the Sasanian period to have left an inscription. The inscription is instructive of Mehr Narseh's religiosity and meritorious activity, which is also corroborated by Ṭabari and other Arab and Persian historians (Elišē, pp. 77-78; Ṭabari, I/2, p. 870; tr., V, p. 105). The content of the inscription is as follows: "This bridge was built by the order of Mehr Narseh, the *wuzurgframādār*, for the benefit of his soul, at his own expense. Whoever has come on this road, let him give a blessing to Mehr Narseh and his sons for that he thus bridged this crossing. And while God give help, wrong and deceit there shall be none therein" (Henning, 1954, p. 101; idem, 1977, p. 434; Back, p. 498).

This building and cultivation activity of Mehr-Narseh is instructive of pious work and foundations (see [CHARITABLE FOUNDATION](#)) for the sake of one's own soul (*pad ruwān xwēš*) and for his family (Boyce, pp. 282-83).



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