



## SASANIAN DYNASTY

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SASANIAN DYNASTY, the last Persian lineage of rulers to achieve hegemony over much of Western Asia before Islam, ruled 224 CE–650 CE.

Rise of the Sasanian empire. The overthrow of the Arsacid royal house in 224 CE and the establishment of the Sasanian dynasty was the outcome of the simultaneous decline of the Parthian state brought about by chronic civil strife, a devastating epidemic of smallpox, repeated wars with Roman forces (who sacked Ctesiphon in 165 and 198), and the gradual ascendancy of a Persian family with religious and political bases of support. The Arsacid empire was divided between two rival brothers: Vologeses VI (207-27), who ruled from Ctesiphon, and Ardavān (212-24), who held Media and Khuzistan (see [ARTABANUS IV](#)). The Roman emperor [Caracalla](#) encouraged discord between the two, and himself trapped and massacred Ardavān's supporters and sacked Arbela and many Armenian forts in 217. Although Ardavān regrouped and even defeated the Romans in the same year, his authority was seriously weakened (Bivar, 1983, pp. 92-97).

These troubles evoked political ambition in “Lord Sāsān”(Sāsān x<sup>w</sup>adāy), “a great warrior and hunter,” the custodian of the “Fire Temple of Anāhid” at Eṣṭaqr, who married a princess of the Bāzarangid family, the vassal dynasty of Fārs (Ṭabari, I, pp. 813-14). Their son Pāpak (see [BĀBAK](#)) consolidated his power with the help of his own sons, Šāpur and Ardašir. The three of them are represented on the wall of the Harem of Xerxes at [Persepolis](#)—evidence, it has



been suggested, of a claim to Achaemenid heritage (Calmeyer, 1976, pp. 65-67; figs. 3 and 4). The coins of Šāpur bear his image and that of his father, and its combined legend reads: bgy šhpwḥry MLK'BRH bgy p'pky MLK' "divine [= Majesty] Shapur the King, son of divine Pāpak the King" (Aram, 1986, p. 185, Pl. 22, nos. 653-56). Ardašir was more ambitious. After making himself the castellan (argbed) of Dārābgerd and enticing his father to kill the Bāzrangid king of Ešṭakr, he rose in open rebellion in the Seleucid year 523, i.e., 212 CE. Claiming that he was the inheritor of the ancient kings and destined to revive their glory and reunite all peoples of Persia, he began to conquer local rulers of Fārs (Ṭabari, I, pp. 813, 815-16; Widengren, 1971). His coins (Aram, 1999) show his father's image on the reverse but he himself is represented on the obverse and full-faced (a well-known sign of rebellion in Parthian numismatics), with the combined legend bgy'rthštr MLK' BRH bgy p'pky MLK' "divine [= Majesty] Ardašir, son of divine Pāpk the King" (see also Herzfeld, 1924, I, p. 37; Aram, 1986, Pl. 22, nos. 657-59; 1999, pp. 68 ff.). With the death of Pāpak Šāpur succeeded him in Ešṭakr but was accidentally killed at Persepolis. The mention of Shapur as a legitimate king for whom Shapur, son of Ardašir, endowed pious foundations (Huyse, 1999, I, p. 49) militates against the report in Ṭabari (I, p. 816) that Shapur was about to wage war on Ardasir for his refusal to recognize his authority.

Thereupon Ardašir reigned as the leader of the Sasanian house (Ṭabari, p. 816); and he went on to conquer, within 12 years, local dynasts of Fārs and neighboring regions (Mas'udi, Moruj II, p. 161; Widengren, 1971). Well acquainted with historical reality, he adopted the newer, more flexible chain armor of the Roman type, while the Parthians still used the older lamellar and scale armor (Bivar, 1972, pp. 275-76; see also [ARMY i.](#), [ARMOR](#)). On 30 Mehr (= 28 May) 224 Ardašir vanquished Ardavān at the battle of Hormzdagān (q.v.) and assumed the title "King of Kings of Iran." He commemorated the event in his victory relief carved at the approach to his early capital, Ardašir Kōrra (see [FIRUZĀBĀÚD](#)), as well as in three investiture reliefs showing him receiving the symbol of sovereignty from Ohrmazd (see [ARDAŠIR I ii.](#)). Afterwards, Ardašir captured Ctesiphon, annexed parts of Armenia and northwest Arabia, and reduced by force or political stratagem eastern Iran and the western provinces of the Kushan empire, an area which henceforth was ruled by Sasanian princes known as the "Kushano-Sasanian" kings (see [HORMOZD KUŠĀNŠĀH](#) and [INDIA iv.](#)). Then he returned to the western front and took some Roman border towns and besieged Hatra. This brought about the war with Rome



(Felix, 1985, pp. 32-42; Winter, 1988, pp. 45-79 with literature). Ardašir, pretending to be the heir of the Achaemenids (Dio Cassius 80.4.1; Herodian 6.2.1-2; see Shahbazi, 2002, with previous literature), laid claim to the eastern provinces of the Roman empire, fought with a good measure of success against Alexander Severus, and again invested Hatra, which fell in 240 (see [ARDAŠIR I](#)).

Ardašir symbolized his ideology on an imperial coinage (Lukonin, 1965, pp. 165-66; Alram, 1999), which he introduced in silver (Gk. drachma > NPers. derham), and gold (dinār), the latter in imitation of the Achaemenid practice (Göbl, p. 25; cf. p. 27). The obverse shows his bust, wearing a new type of crown, consisting of a diademed headgear surmounted by the korymbos, a fine, bejeweled fabric encasing the top hair in a glob-like fashion; it became the identifying feature of the Sasanian kings (on the symbolism of Sasanian crowns, see Herzfeld, 1938, pp. 91-158; Erdmann, 1951). The legend is also new (Klima, 1956; Sundermann, 1988): *mzdysn bgy 'rthštr MLK'n MLK'yr'n MNW ctry MN yzd'n* “Mazda-worshipping divine [=Majesty] Ardašir King of Kings of Iran whose seed is from gods.” Having re-united the Iranians (hence his traditional epithet, “the Unifier”; Maqdisi, III, p. 156), he adopted what appears to have been the old designation of their lands—*Ērānšahr* “Empire of the Iranians—” to serve as the official name of his country (Shahbazi, “The History of the Idea of Iran,” forthcoming; for a different interpretation, see Gnoli, 1989). His title, as elaborated by Shapur I (see below), became the standard designations of the Sasanian sovereigns. The reverse of his imperial coins shows a fire holder placed on a platform throne, which is itself supported by a stepped altar (both directly copied from the representations on the Achaemenid tombs, see Pfeiler, 1973), and the legend *NWR' ZY 'rthštr* “Fire of Ardašir” (Alram, 1986, p. 187). Ardašir abandoned the Seleucid and Arsacid practice of dating by dynastic eras and returned to the Achaemenid usage of counting by regnal years. The fire of each king was kindled on his accession (again an Achaemenid tradition, cf. Diodorus Siculus, 17.114, explained by Shahbazi, 1980, p. 132), and later Sasanian kings inscribed their regnal year on the coin reverse next to the fire. The legend conveyed “year X of the sacred fire of King Y” (Henning, 1957, p. 117, n. 2); “years of the sacred fire” meant “regnal years.”

Ardašir succeeded in creating a “Second Persian empire” which was recognized for over four centuries as one of the two great powers in Western



Asia and Europe (see [BYZANTINE-IRANIAN RELATIONS](#); see further Widengren, 1976; Howard-Johnston, 1991). It also “stood as a great shield in defense of the culture of Western Asia” against the constant onrush of Central Asian nomads (Ghirshman, 1954, p. 355). He left a lasting memory as a model king (see [ARDAŠIR I](#)), a city-builder (no fewer than eight were said to have been founded by him [Ṭabari, I, p. 820; Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 19-20]), an administrative reformer, and a consolidator of the Zoroastrian religion. He did not, however, elevate Zoroastrianism to be the state religion, as Sasanian-based sources claimed; and the clerical hierarchy was not yet fully organized (see Gignoux, 1984). He replaced vassal kings with his own sons and relatives, and he centralized the state revenue and authority by developing an efficient bureaucracy and by strengthening the military.

He continued the Arsacid tradition of entrusting high state positions to great noble families such as the Sūrēn, Mehrān, and Kāren (Henning, 1954, pp. 425-27; Maricq, 1958, p. 66; Lukonin, 1969, p. 38), to the extent that Sasanian Ērānšahr was described as “the empire of Persians and Parthians” (see MacKenzie, 1993, pp. 106, 108). Indeed, during the Sasanian period most of the Great Houses of Persia (see [HAFT](#)) were Parthian, more specifically Arsacid (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 127-28, 139-40, 438-39; Christensen, *Iran. Sass.*, pp.103-6). They intermarried with the Sasanian families and held the highest civil and military positions in the empire. A calendar reform is attributed to Ardašir, as is the introduction of the game of backgammon (Nard-Ardašir > nard, but see F. Rozenhal, “Nard,” *EI2 VII*, p. 963). A political testament (‘ahd) ascribed to him remained the most respected manual on statecraft well into the Islamic period (‘Abbās, 1967, pp. 33-45; see also [ANDARZ i.](#)). Late Sasanian storytellers shrouded the rise of the dynasty (Nöldeke, 1878; Gutschmid, 1880) and the career of its first kings in a series of legends (see [BĀBAK](#), [ŠĀPUR I](#)).

Wars with Rome. In his last years, Ardašir had made Šāpur, his eldest son, co-regent, and the latter participated in the capture of Hatra (Chaumont, 1974; Ghirshman, 1975). Then Ardašir retired, and Shapur succeeded him as the sole ruler (12 April 240) and reigned until May 270. He left several inscriptions, most notably one on the walls of the [Ka’ba-ye Zardošt](#) which is in Parthian, Middle Persian, and Greek (hereafter [ŠKZ](#); Huyse, 1999). Historically it is the most important inscriptional record next to that of Darius I at [Bisotun](#); it records his Roman wars (Honnigmann and Maricq, 1953; Maricq, 1958;



Kettenhoffen, 1982; Felix, 1985, pp. 43-89; Winter, 1988, pp. 80-123); and it provides a clear picture of the extent of his empire (cf. Gignoux, 1971; Chaumont, 1975) by naming its provinces, describing religious foundations, and mentioning relatives and senior officials who lived at the court of Pāpak, Ardašir, and Šāpur. He tells us that upon his accession, the emperor Gordianus (III) “marched on Assyria, against Ērānšahr and against us” but perished in battle, and his successor Philip “came to us for terms, and he became our tributary.” Afterwards Šāpur annexed most of Roman Armenia, appointed his own son, Hormozd-Ardašir “Great King of Armenia” (see Chaumont, 1968), and took and plundered many cities of Syria, Cilicia, and Cappadocia. Finally, in 260 he trapped and captured the emperor Valerian and his entire army of 70,000 (which included many senators, dignitaries, and officers) near Carrhae. All were deported, together with many of the inhabitants of the captured cities, and settled in royal domains (dstkrt) throughout Iran (see [DEPORTATION ii.](#)). A number of the deportees were Christian; no longer persecuted by pagan Roman authorities, they flourished (Labourt, 1904, pp. 18 ff.). For a long time they continued to speak and write in their native Greek or Syriac languages (Brock, 1982).

Because his empire now incorporated so many non-Iranians, Šāpur elaborated his titles to “King of kings of Ērān (Iran) and Anērān (non-Iran),” which henceforth became the customary title of Sasanian sovereigns. Šāpur also illustrated his triumphs in a number of rock-reliefs at Dārābgerd, Bišāpur, and Naqš-e Rostam, (see Hinz, 1969; see also [SASANIAN ROCK-RELIEFS](#)), in which the young Gordianus is represented as fallen, Philip as kneeling (entreating for peace), and Valerian as standing, with his wrist firmly grasped by the victor (a traditional gesture symbolizing capture; see MacDermot, 1959, p. 78). In his eleventh year Šāpur had to march to the eastern borders and quell a rebellion in Khorasan (Ṭabari, I, p. 826). According to ŠKZ, his empire included “Marv, Herāt and all of Aparšahr ... the Kushan Kingdom (Kūšānšahr) up to Peshawar and up to Kāšgar, Sogdiana and to the mountains of Tashkent” (Huyse 1999, I, pp. 23-24; for the empire and its provinces see Marquart, Ērānšahr; Chaumont, 1975; Brunner, 1983; Gyselen, 1989; Hewsen, 1992).

Šāpur I was known as a builder and a patron of knowledge. He constructed dams and bridges, forts and towns, and developed industries and trade. He had Greeks and Indian works on sciences and Greek scientific works translated into Middle Persian and even incorporated them into the Avesta



(Boyce, 1968, pp. 36-37 with literature). His tolerant religious policy encouraged [Mani](#), the founder of Manicheism, to preach freely; he even attempted to convert the Great king. Mani dedicated a compendium of his doctrine in Middle Persian translation to the king, calling it [Šāhbuhragān](#). Šāpur declined the offer of salvation, and kept to his Mazdean faith; but, like his father, he did not give it the status of the national religion.

Particularism and religious conflicts. Sasanian society was basically comprised of three classes (see [CLASS SYSTEM ii.](#)): the warriors, the commoners (“cultivators”), and the clergy (see Tafazzoli 2001). They were ideally symbolized by the three great fires of the empire, respectively: [Ādur Gošnasp](#) at Šiz in Azarbaijan, [Ādur Buzēn Mehr](#) at Rēvand, near Nišāpur, and [Ādur Farnbāg](#) at Kāriān in Fārs. The warrior class, usually called the aristocracy or nobility, had five ranks (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 437-55; Christensen, *Iran. Sass.*, pp. 98-140; Lukonin, 1983, pp. 698-712; for the highest offices see Khurshudian, 1998). Immediately below the “King of kings” were “kings (šahryārān),” who ruled provinces and had their own court and army. Next were “princes (wispuhrān “clan sons,” Ar. ahl al-boyutāt) or great noble houses. Most important of these were “the Seven” Magnates—the Varāz, Kāren, Surēn, Mehrān, Spandiāδ, Žik, and Nehābed. They had feudal rights and large estates scattered throughout the empire; they formed the backbone of the imperial organizations and provided the King of kings with advice and military and financial means. Third were the grandees (wuzurgān, Ar. al-‘ozemā), senior civil servants—the great secretaries (dabirān), viziers, and tax collectors. Fourth were the “householders” (katag x<sup>w</sup>atāyān), and fifth the “high born (āzādān), the lesser nobility consisting of the landed gentry (dīhgānān), military elite, particularly the knights (aswārān). (See [ASWĀR](#), [ASĀWERA](#), [ARMY i.](#), [DABIR](#), [DEHGĀN.](#))

The particularistic tendencies of the higher aristocracy had bedeviled the Arsacid empire, but Ardašir and Šāpur curbed them. These kings also refrained from creating a state church. Both policies were challenged throughout the Sasanian period; and only Šāpur II, Kavād I, and Ƙosrow I succeeded in exercising absolute power. During the reign of other kings, magnates re-asserted their influence through support of their own candidates for the throne or by deposing, even killing, autocratic kings. In the religious arena, the Mazdean society was threatened first with the spread of Manicheism. In response, the high priest Kirdēr (see [KERDĪR](#)) enlisted royal



support and began influencing state administration. Later, under Šāpur II, the danger of the Roman domination of Persia through Christianity necessitated the elevation of the Mazdean faith as the “national church” with a canonical organization and hierarchal priesthood capable of countering the Christian church of the Roman empire.

The successor of Šāpur, [Hormozd I](#), died after a short reign (May 270–June 271), and the throne passed, not to his son Hormozdak, but to his brother Bahrām Gēlānšah, evidently with the support of the Kirdēr. Bahrām I (June 271–September 274) was fond of fighting, hunting, and feasting (Henning, 1942, p. 951) but fonder of the Mazdean religion: he adopted a crown adorned with Mithra’s rays, and he showed himself on horseback receiving the diadem of royalty from a mounted Ahuramazda in a superbly carved investiture relief at [Bišāpur](#). If Kirdēr is to be believed, the king gave the priest a free hand in the consolidation of church authority and ended Mani’s career.

Originating from Babylon, Mani claimed the mission of combining and purifying Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. He asserted that “this revelation of mine of the two principles and my vital writings, my wisdom and my knowledge are much better than those of the earlier religion,” and “my creed is in ten things better than other, earlier religions,” including the universalistic nature, the undistorted writings, the ability to serve as “a door towards salvation” for unsuccessful believers of earlier faiths (M 5794, in Boyce, Reader, pp. 29-30; Wiesehöfer, pp. 206-7). These claims enraged the Mazdeans, and since he often described his own concepts in Zoroastrian terminology and even “translated” the names of his gods and angels to those of the Mazdean religion, he and his followers were labeled Zandīks “heretics,” meaning “those who put their own perverse interpretation upon holy texts” (Boyce, 1979 p. 112). His creed has been called “absolutely not suitable as the religion of a people. So spiritualized as it was, if adopted it could only lead to confusion, in contrast to the Mazdean faith with its love of life” (Nöldeke, p. 48, n.). Bahrām summoned him to the court, but Mani disobeyed (Polotsky, 1934, p. 46, ll. 12-16), and His statements that falsehood and evil acts would earn the “fire-worshippers” (meaning Mazdayasniāns) the fire [of hell] (Henning, 1951, p. 50, n. 1, Manichean frag. 28) and that Šāpur was known as an evildoer (Sundermann, 1987, p. 80) no doubt increased the Zoroastrian clergy’s animosity. Bahrām, therefore, sought Mani out and had him tried and executed at Gondēšāpur on 2 March 274 (Henning, 1942; 1957, pp. 119-21).



Mani's archenemy, the Zoroastrian high priest Kirdēr, is mainly known from his own words, written in his heyday, in four Middle Persian texts carved on rocks of Fārs (Hinz, 1971; Gignoux, 1991; MacKenzie, 1989). His assertions are lengthy: he was a hērbēd (attendant of a sacred fire)" under Ardašir; Šāpur I titled him Mōbed and Hērbēd, "in authority over the order of priests at court" and throughout the empire, and put him in charge of religious documents and endowment deeds; Hormozd I invested him with the rank of nobility and the title "chief priest" (mayupati > mōbed) of Ohrmazd); and Bahrām I retained him in "absolute authority," while Bahrām II increased his dignity and authority by elaborating his title to "Kirdēr, whose soul (god) Bahrām saved" (on this last title see Huyse, 2001, pp. 116-19) and appointing him "mōbed and dātbar (judge) of the whole empire" and the custodian of "the Fire Temple of Anāhīd the Lady" at Estakr—a position hitherto held by the Sasanians themselves. He claims that he destroyed many images and temples of false gods and replaced them with the sacred fire and fire temples, and converted many non-Zoroastrians to the Mazda-worshipping faith. He states that "Jews and Buddhists and Brahmans and Maktaks [= al-moġtasela "practitioners of ablutions," i.e., of baptisms] and Christians and Manicheans are being smitten in the land." This writer regards Kirdēr's statements as exaggerated. The fact that Zoroastrian scholars, who could very well read his inscriptions, totally ignored him means that his claims were not taken seriously. His own statement that he punished the priests who did not follow his line, but exalted those who did, implies that his actions were not considered as approved Mazdean policy. His rise was unusual and temporary, resulting from the social and political alliance against the danger posed by the success of Manicheism to Persian society and way of life. Narseh referred to him simply as "Kirdēr the Mōbed of Ohrmazd" (Skjærvø and Humbach, 1983, III/1, p. 42).

While Bahrām II was engaged in fighting the rebellion of his brother, [Hormozd Kūšānšāh](#), the Emperor Carus marched on Ctesiphon unopposed; but his troops retreated after he died suddenly and mysteriously, and Bahrām crushed the rebellion (Bivar, 1972; contra EIr. III, pp. 516-17). Under Bahrām II Sasanian art achieved mastery of form and a realistic style. He left at least seven rock-reliefs in Fārs, in most of which Kirdēr is present, showing the priest's importance at the court (see Hinz, 1969, pp. 189-228). He issued a vast number of coins of diverse types; some bear the images of his queen and heir next to his own, and one type even pictures and names "Šāhpuhrduxtak, Queen of queens" on the obverse, in a place usually reserved for a patron deity



(Lukonin, 1979, pp. 116-34 [English]; pls., pp. 155-73).

The events following the death of Bahrām II were related in Narseh's bilingual (Parth. and Mid. Pers.) inscription carved on the base of a memorial tower (now ruined) at Paikuli, in Iraq (see [HERZFELD iv.](#)), on the road to Qaṣr-e Širin. Though it contains numerous gaps, in historical significance it is surpassed only by Darius's Bisotun and Šāpur's KZ inscriptions (see Skjærvø, 1985). On the death of Bahrām II some of the Iranian nobility sided with his son Bahrām Sagānšāh (see [BAHRĀM III](#)), but a larger party pleaded with Narseh, Great king of Armenia, to regain "the Farra ([God-given] Glory)" and the realm and to restore the throne and honor of his ancestors and make Ērānšahr safe (Skjærvø and Humbach, 1983, III/1, pp. 34-35). Narseh moved "in the name of Ohrmazd and all the gods and Anāhīd the Lady" towards Ērānšahr (ibid., p. 35), and vanquished the "rebels." "The assembly then deliberated according to the correct procedure for royal succession instituted by Ardašir I and followed by his successors"; having judged him the most qualified candidate for the throne, it elected him King of kings (ibid., pp. 56-74). Since he considered Bahrām I a usurper, he appropriated his investiture relief by carving his own name over that of his brother. He further carved a rock-relief at Naqš-e Rostam, which depicted him either as receiving the diadem of royalty from Anāhīd or sharing it with his wife, Šāhpuhrduxtak (Shahbazi, 1983).

Narseh seems to have returned to the religious tolerance of Ardašir I and Šāpur I (Decret, 1979, p. 133; Duchesne-Guillemin, 1983, pp. 884-85). In war with Rome he first won a great victory over Galerius Caesar but was then routed by him. The peace treaty signed in 299 ceded five provinces across the Tigris (Arzanes, Carduene, Zabdicene, Moxoene, and Rehimene) to Rome, recognized the Tigris as the border of the two empires, gave the Persian territories up to the fort of Zintha to Armenia, and made Iberia a Roman protectorate (Petros Patriciaus, frags. 13-14, in Müller, 1885, pp. 181-84; see also Winter, pp. 152-231; Felix, pp. 110-30; Blockley, 1984). Narseh died soon after. His son [Hormozd II](#) (r. 302-307) was challenged domestically, as is evidenced by his "victory relief" at Naqš-e Rostam. He was slain in a remote place; and the nobility murdered his heir, imprisoned the second son, Hormozd, blinded the third, and "proclaimed a younger son [i.e., Šāpur] as King" (Suidas, s.v. "Marsuas," tr. with other sources in Dodgeon and Lieu, pt. 1, pp. 148-49). The stories about Šāpur's election while in mother's womb are unfounded (see Seeck, 1920, col. 2334).



The Age of Šāpur II (309-79). Early in his reign, Šāpur led a punitive expedition against the Arabs of the desert who had crossed over to Fārs and Khuzistan and devastated urban centers and ruined the countryside. He relentlessly pursued and harshly punished the Arabs, and built the Šāpur's ditch (Kandaq-e Šāpur), a defensive line south of [Hira](#) along the southern border of Mesopotamia. The Arabs called him *Ḍo'l-aktāf* (for Pers. *Hūbah-sonbā* "Piercer of Shoulder [blades]," see Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 235, n. 2). On the northeastern front, the [Chionites](#), a Hunnic people who by the early fourth century had mixed with north Iranian elements in Transoxiana and adopted the Kushan-Bactrian language, threatened Persia. Several times Šāpur had to interrupt his Roman campaigns and hurry to the east to remove the Hunnic threats. Soon the Kidarite Hunnic rulers replaced the Kushano-Sasanian prince governors (see [HUNNIC COINAGE](#)), but Šāpur subjugated some and forced others into a treaty of alliance. Between 372 and 375, Šāpur seems to have been campaigning again in the East against the "Kushans," i.e., the Chionites (Frye, 1984, p. 345).

More lasting and consequential were Šāpur's long wars with the Romans, which started when Constantine supported the refugee prince Hormozd (q.v.), promoted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire, and asserted guardianship of the Christians of all lands, including Armenia and Persia (Barnes), and refused the request to return the five provinces ceded by Narseh. Small- or full-scale campaigns were waged almost annually between 337 and 359, frequently in favor of the Persians, who captured the main Roman garrison towns of Amida and Sanjara in their last campaign. In 363, [Julian](#), generally acknowledged as the ablest Roman general since Trajan, led an expedition against Persia, with an army of 83,000 men, well-trained and equipped with the most sophisticated siege engines, and guided by Prince Hormozd. Marching down along the Euphrates, he besieged Ctesiphon and captured its southern sector, but a heavy Persian counterattack forced him to retreat northward (Ammianus Marcellinus, 23-24; other sources in Dodgeon and Lieu, pp. 231-74; detailed studies: Ridley; Wirth). He was killed in the thick of the battle, and his successor, [Jovian](#) (363-64), signed a "thirty-year peace treaty," which obliged the Romans to return the five provinces east of the Tigris ceded by Narseh, surrender Nisibis, Singara, and another fort in eastern Mesopotamia, and refrain from interfering in Armenia. Then Šāpur annexed the rest of Armenia as well as Albania. When emperor Valens (364-78) hatched several military and political plots in those provinces, limited local wars



continued until Šāpur died in 379. As George Rawlinson says, for twenty-seven years “he fought numerous pitched battles with the Romans, and was never once defeated ... By a combination of courage, perseverance, and promptness, he brought the entire contest to a favorable issue, and restored Persia, in AD 363, to a higher position than that from which she had descended two generations earlier” (pp. 239-40). According to Ammianus (18.6.14), Šāpur’s empire comprised eighteen major provinces “ruled by Bedaxšes (vitaxi), by kings, and by satraps.” They were: Assyria (Asōristān), Susiana (Khuzistan), Media (Māḍa/Māh), Persis (Pārs), Parthia (Parthav, Apar-šahr), Greater Carmania (Kermān), Hyrcania (Varkān/Gorgān and Dahestān), Margiana (Marv region), Bactria (Balḵ area), Sogdiana (Sogdian land), the Sacae (Sakastān/Sistān), Scythia at the foot of Imaus (an eastern Saka land, east of Afghanistan), Aria (Harēv/Herat), the Paropanisadae (Aparsēn, northeast Afghanistan), Drangiana (Zarang), Arachosia (Ruxaḍ, Roḵkaj, the Ghazni region), Gedrosia (Mokrān/Baluchistan), and two unidentified eastern regions of Serica and Beyond Imaus.

Šāpur deported the Roman captives into the inner region of his empire to use their skill and technical talents and develop industries (Mas’udi, Moruj II, p. 186; Ghirshman, Bīchāpour I, p. 13). Many were settled in Susa, which after its destruction as the result of a revolt was rebuilt and renamed Ērān Ḳorra Šāpur (Šāpur’s Aryan Glory). On the other hand he repopulated Nisibis with Persians, and it henceforth became the strongest Persian border post. The “founding” of several other towns were also attributed to him. During his reign Christianity posed a grave threat to the empire. It divided the Armenians into those favoring Romans as co-religionists and others holding to the Iranian heritage (cf. EIr. V, p. 525b); it also fostered sympathy with “the Christian emperor” of Rome against “the enemy of God,” Šāpur. Iranian authorities claimed that Christians demeaned his authority, mocked his religious beliefs, disobeyed his commands, refused to pay taxes or serve in the army, and even harbored Roman spies, destroyed fire temples, and instigated rebellion. In about 337, their leader Aphrahat (Farhād) hailed Constantine as the “instrument” of the “prosperity of the People of God” (Labourt, pp. 45-56; Christensen, Iran. Sass., pp. 249-50, 266-68; cf. Brock; Barnes; Decre) and hoped that he would conquer Šāpur the “wicked and proud man.” He even warned that, if the Persians won the war, that would be tantamount to God’s wrath (Demonstration 5.1.24 f.). Šāpur (and his successor) saw such claims as leading to political revolt in favor of the enemy of Persia. Hence, wars with Rome



normally brought parallel persecution of Christians (see [CHRISTIANITY i.](#)), reported with some exaggerations by Christian authors.

To counter this domestic threat, Šāpur convened religious councils headed by the Zoroastrian high priest Ādurbād son of [Mahrspand](#), which after many disputations “proved” the superiority of the Mazdean faith, whereupon the king issued a decree stating “Now that we have gained an insight into the religion in the worldly existence, we shall not tolerate anyone of false religion, and we shall be still more zealous” (Dēnkard 4.26-27: tr. Shaki, 1981, pp. 114-25). Thus the Zoroastrian Canon was consolidated, and the state finally enforced Zoroastrianism as the “national religion” with a canonical organization and clerical hierarchy which could rival the Christian church of the Roman empire. The development of the Dēn-dipirih “religious script” (the “Avestan alphabet”), “which “permitted the rendering of every vowel and consonant” as accurately as does “the modern international phonetic alphabet” (Boyce, 1979, p. 135) must have followed this canonization (cf. Bailey, 1943, pp. 177-94 and [AVESTAN LANGUAGE i.](#)). As Frye (1984, p. 315) remarks, “the ecclesiastical organization of the state church was not identical with the legal structure and the theory of the religious hierarchy was not always evident in reality.” The religious establishment executed the law, but secular input from the royal court and provincial administration prevented theocratic conditions. The Jews had their own court to deal with communal disputes (Neusner, III, pp. 29, 45, 273; IV, p. 131); and, similarly, Christian courts settled affairs of the Christians (Sachau, 1907, pp. 1-27; Morony, 1984, pp. 332-42). Incidentally, the view that in the Sasanian period Zurvanism was important or even prevailed as the state religion may have been founded on doubtful onomastic indications and free interpretation of confused non-Zoroastrian reports (Asmussen, 1983, p. 939; Frye, 1984, pp. 312-13). Duchesne-Guillemin (1983, pp. 898-99) has pointed out that the Dēnkard (ed. Madan, p. 829) condemns it: Those who believed that “Ohrmazd and Ahrīman were two brothers in one womb” were heretics deceived by the demon Ariš(k) “Envy.”

Ironically, the concept of the “twin brotherhood of the state and the faith” (Shaked, 1990, pp. 262-64.) restricted the absolutism of the sovereign with ethical and religious obligations (Dēnkard, tr.de Menasce, 1973, pp. 136-38; Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 261-62) and the expectation he would show “faith in the high-priest of the Good Religion,” because he is “the wisest among mankind.” If a king was inclined to ignore people’s hardships or was incapable



of preventing evil and was weak, then he was “manifestly unfit to administer justice of any kind,” and it behooved other “rulers to war with him for the sake of justice” (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 262). Another impact of the creation of the state religion was the changes in Iranians’ idea of the past (Shahbazi, 2001; see also [HISTORIOGRAPHY i.](#)). To the mōbeds the history of the past was the legends of the Pēšdādian and Kayānian kings as found in the Yašt and later Zoroastrian traditions. As legitimate Zoroastrian sovereigns, the Sasanians now claimed descent from Goštāsp (Ṭabari, I, p. 813), and the Avestan royal title Kay (< Kavī) started to appear on Sasanian coins in addition to the regular MLK’N MLK’ “šāhānšāh” (Shahbazi, 1991). The wispuhrān followed suit and alleged that they were descended from the legendary kings and heroes (Manučehr, Goštāsp, Esfandiār), and that their rank and rights had been established by Goštāsp (Ṭabari, I, p. 683). Šāpur II left an enormous quantity of coins, which testify to various stages of his life (cf. Göbl, pp. 46-47; pl. VI and pls. 6-7, nos. 88-120), as well as two magnificent silver plates representing him hunting boars and lions (Harper, 1981, pp. 61-63, 171, 179, 182, Pls. 15, 37), and a stucco bust from the site of a manor house at Ḥājiābād, some 60 km south-southwest of Dārābgerd (Azarnoush) There are four rock-reliefs, notably those at Ṭāq-e Bostān: one depicts him giving the diadem of royalty to his brother Ardašir II while Mithra the Judge supervises the covenant and Julian lies prostrate under the two kings’ feet (see Trumplemann; Sellheim; see also [ARDAŠIR II](#)); the other represents Šāpur with his son Šāpur III, both identified in Mid. Pers. texts, the last of the royal inscriptions known to date.

Social and military crises. The successors of Šāpur II tended to religious tolerance and peaceful relations with their neighbors, but their attempt to enforce royal absolutism was constantly challenged by the clergy, who detested kings tolerating Christianity or any other creed, and the higher nobility, who resisted any attempt to curb their particularism while viewing with contempt any king who showed mildness towards the enemies—domestic or foreign. Consequently, from 379 to about 530, the empire witnessed grave internal crises, which culminated in a social upheaval in which the Sasanian king Kavād sided with the mobs in order to reduce the power of the clergy and the nobles.

The nobles deposed [Ardašir II](#) (r. 379-83), known as the Benevolent (nikukār), when he turned against them (Ṭabari, I, pp. 845-46). They also murdered Šāpur III (383-88), a just and compassionate ruler much loved by the people (Ṭabari,



I, p. 846; Ya'qubi, I, p. 183), who stopped the persecution of the Christians (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 70-71, n. 4; Chaumont, 1974b), and concluded a peace treaty with the East Roman (Byzantine) empire, whereby Armenia was divided between the two states, making the larger part, or Persarmenia, a Persian Marzbanate (Adonitz, pp. 209-24; Blockley, 1987, pp. 222-34). His son Bahrām IV (388-99) was known for his pursuit of justice (Ya'qubi, I, p. 183; cf. Ṭabari, I, p. 847); although his forces defeated a Hunnic inroad into Mesopotamia and Syria (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 72, n. 1), he was shot to death when he tried to tame his commanders (Ṭabari, I, p. 847). It was only natural that his brother and successor, [Yazdegerd I](#) (r. 399-421), could not trust the nobility and resolutely prevented them from gaining undue influence and erode the royal authority. Highly intelligent and brilliantly educated, and “from the start” widely known for “the nobility of character” (Procopius 1.2, 8.4; cf. Ṭabari, I, p. 865; *Šāh-nāma* VII, p. 264), and a contemporary Christian testifies that he championed the cause of “the poor and the wretched” (cited in Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 75, n.). He granted religious freedom to all; the Christians began to establish a “Persian Church,” and the Jewish leader hailed him as a new Cyrus (see Neusner, V, pp. 9-13). He maintained friendly relations with Rome, even acting as the guardian of the child emperor Theodosius (Procopius 1.2.1-10; Agathias 4.25). His policy so enraged the clergy and aristocracy that they accused him of many evil deeds, called him the “Sinner, (Persian Bezegar), and killed him in a remote place and then presented the murder as a God-sent miracle (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 77 n. 1; Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 273) They further decided to deny his children the throne and slew his son and heir, Šāpur, but compromised with another son, Bahrām, a 20-year old youth, who threatened Ctesiphon with an Arab army provided by his foster father, the king of Ḥira. He was accepted as Šāhānšāh but was crowned by the mōbedān mōbed (the first recorded instance of such coronation) and had to recognize the nobility's claimed privileges. Consequently, he was left in peace and is pictured in the “national history” as a merciful king with exemplary generosity, a valiant defender of the faith and country, a heroic fighter, a peerless hunter, a poet, a lover of music and dance, a man of many women, and a paragon of splendor. From his time the [Ādur Gošnasp](#) temple in Šiz became the most important sanctuary of the empire and the symbol of its royal house. Also, the Avestan classification of the society into three classes, each headed by a chief, was revived, at least in theory; and his grand vizier, Mehr-Narseh, a Zoroastrian zealot, gave those chieftainships to his own three sons (see [ARTĒŠTĀRĀN SĀLĀR](#)). Christians' missionary zeal brought about persecution, causing a short



war with the Byzantines (422). The peace agreement obliged the Persians not to resume persecution or to press for the return of Christian fugitives, and the Byzantines to tolerate Zoroastrian religion in the Roman empire and pay a yearly payment to the Persians as assistance in guarding the Caucasian Pass (Nöldeke, p. 109, n.). More threatening was the penetration into the eastern provinces by the Chionites (often anachronistically called the Turks or confused with the Kushans or the **Hephthalites**). Bahrām defeated them and seized vast booty. The recently discovered stuccos at Daragaz (q.v., 100 km southeast of Ashkhabad) representing victorious Iranian warriors trampling on fallen enemies characterized by Central Asian features (Gignoux, 1998) seem to commemorate this victory.

Bahrām's successor was Yazdegerd II (439-57), an intelligent and well educated youth whose maxim was "Question, examine, see. Let us choose and hold that which is best" (Elishe, tr., p. 69). "He made a review of all doctrines" but stayed with his ancestral faith and greatly honored the Mazdean religion, priests, and shrines (ibid, tr., p. 66). He showed friendship toward the Christians until his twelfth year (Łazar, tr., p. 74); but when Christians attacked Mazdeans at home and in Armenia, he ordered Mehr-Narseh to reconvert Armenia, which he failed to do. During his reign, nomadic threats increased. He repulsed an invasion of the Causasus (Priscus, Frag. 47; tr. Blockley, pp. 353-55) and built or strengthened the Persian defenses in the region. He also defeated the Čuls (Šuls, Ar. Şul), the Hunnic tribes east of the Caspian Sea, north of Gorgān, and built a stronghold in their region, called Šahrestān-e Yazdegerd, in which he stayed from the fourth to eleventh year of his reign (450), when he marched against the "Kushans" (i.e., the Hunnic tribes). After several victories over them, he was forced in 454 to retreat (Elishe, tr., pp. 192-93 with p. 10, n. 1; Łazar, tr., p. 133; Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 288-89).

Yazdegerd's death inaugurated another period of royal and feudal rivalry. His oldest son, Hormozd III (457-59), was killed by Bahrām the Mehrān, who enthroned his foster son Pērōz (459-84). Pērōz put down a revolt in Albania (which was aided by invading Huns), stopped the invasions from the Caucasus (despite Romans refusal to pay the subsidy for the shared defense of the passes), and defeated the Kidarite Huns, who moved southeastwards and settled in Peshawar (Marquart, *Ērānšahr*, p. 58). But Pērōz faced a new and more formidable Hunnic people, the Hephthalites, who had taken Tokārestān, the upper Oxus, and northern Afghanistan. He waged war against them but



was defeated and captured. He bought his release with a heavy ransom and in 484 again attacked the Hephthalites, against the advice of his nobles and high priests. This time he and his entire army were annihilated; the Hephthalites captured Bost, Raḳwad (Arachosia), Zābolestān, Bādḡeys, Herat, and Pušanj (Marquart, *Ērānšahr*, pp. 37, 77), and they imposed a heavy annual tribute on Iran, which had additionally suffered from three (or seven) years of drought. According to the contemporary Armenian historian Łazar (tr., pp. 217-18), the nobility, led by Zarmehr the Suḳrā (a branch of the Mehrān) and Šāpur the Mehrān, blamed Pērōz for having “acted as a tyrant,” not willing to consult anyone; they murdered his son Zarēr, who claimed the throne, and elected Balāš, a brother of Pērōz, laying down the rules for him: “We have all willingly and readily chosen you, as a mild man concerned for the country’s welfare, in order to re-establish under you the prestige of the Aryan throne, and to promote the prosperity of the remaining portions of the Aryan kingdom and of the other lands that are subject to our rule.” They expected him “to reduce by soft words and friendship the nations who have rebelled,” recognize each person’s rank and worth, consult with the wise, and to reward every one according to his service. Balāš was clement, courteous, and fond of peace. He granted Christians freedom of worship. Iranian Christians had resisted the Roman version of dyophysite doctrine (as defined by the Council of Chalcedon in 451), adopting instead Nestorianism. The Nestorians emphasized the distinctness of the two natures in the person of Jesus Christ and stressed the completeness of his human nature. They also outlawed celibacy for priests, thereby appeasing the national faith, which anathemized celibacy. When the Romans closed down the Nestorian school at Edessa in 471, it was reopened and continued to flourish under the Persian authority in Nisibis. However, the empire was in deep trouble, and Balāš had no money to pay the troops, the Emperor Zeno having refused to pay the subsidies traditionally paid to support the guarding of the Caucasus passes (Joshua, 18). The nobility led by Zarmehr and Šāpur the Mehrān lost patience, deposed and blinded Balāš, and elected Kavād, a son of Pērōz, hoping that since the youth had been a hostage of the Hephthalites and had secured their friendship, he could decrease the pressure of the victorious enemy.

When Kavād ascended the throne in 488, troubles appeared everywhere. Wars and recent famines had devastated the land and emptied the treasury, yet a hefty annual tribute had to be paid to the Hephthalites; Armenia, Iberia, Arabs and some tribes of the Zagros regions were in revolt, and the Huns were



ravaging the northern regions, while the Romans continued to withhold the subsidy for guarding the Caucasus passes. The nobility had become too powerful and paid no heed to the royal authority, while the commoners had become poor and desperate. It was at this moment that the “Mazdakite revolution,” which preached the distribution of wealth and sharing of women (in the old Platonic ideology; see Altheim), became widespread and received regal support. Social anarchy ensued, nearly destroying the fabric of the Sasanian state. From Byzantine, Syriac, and Sasanian-based accounts, it appears that in the late third century a certain Zarēdošt, who may have borne the title \*Windag/bwyndak “Venerable,” Romanized into Boundos (Christensen 1925, pp. 96 ff.; Iran Sass., pp. 337-38), preached a Manichean interpretation of Zoroastrian faith and the Avesta called Drēst-dēn (on the form, see Christensen 1925, pp. 97-98). It persisted, at times openly and at times secretly, until the movement found fertile grounds for growth in the social and military difficulties during the reign of Pērōz. Eager to reform the whole society and ease the plight of his subjects and wishing to rid himself of the yoke of the nobility and Zoroastrian clergy, Kavād accepted (“re-established,” as Joshua specifies) this neo-Manichean creed. It came to be known as the “Mazdakite” heresy (see Christensen, 1925; Klima, 1957, 1977; Yarshater), after its leader Mazdak (q.v.), son of Bāmdād; however, the historicity or at least the principal role of Mazdak is seriously questioned (Gaube; Fulādpur and Rabi’i; on the alledged Mazdak-nāma see Tafazzoli, 1984). Extremism resulted in social upheaval, and the nobility and clergy deposed and imprisoned Kavād and enthroned his mild-mannered brother, Jāmāsp. Kavād escaped, returned with a Hephthalite army, and regained his throne.

Reforms of Kavād and Kōsrow I. Having seen the consequences of lawlessness and radical social practices, Kavād supported Zoroastrian orthodoxy, massacred the Mazdakite heretics, and subjugated the unruly nobility, a good many of whom had been killed, dispersed, or impoverished by the Mazdakite upheaval (Christensen, Iran Sass., pp. 357-58). He eliminated the highest-ranking official, the Artēštārānsālār, whose office was abolished (Procopius 1.11.31-38), demoted from the first to the third rank the Mōbedān Mōbed (chief of the clergy), replaced the Irān-spāhbed (the generalissimo of the empire) by four Spāhbeds, each responsible for a quarter (kust) of the empire (see SPĀHBED), and reduced the power of Wuzurg-framadār (approximately: “prime minister”) by the institution of the office of Astabed “Chief of the



household” (Stein, 1920; 1940, pp. 54ff.; Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 521 ff.). Kavād then initiated a new tax system based on a revision of land ownership and on payment in installments and according to a certain percentage of the assessed income. This reform was carried out in full by his successor, Kōsrow I Anōšīravān (“of the immortal soul”), and it severely broke the power bases of the higher nobility while promoting the lower aristocracy and bringing them closer to the crown (Frye, 1984, p. 324). Having thus restored royal absolutism, Kavād re-instituted the right of the king to choose his heir and restricted the role of the magnates and highest clergy in this case to the supervision of the exact execution of the king’s testament. Then Kavād quelled the rebellions of the Arabs and other tribes and waged a war against the Byzantines (502-506), the first military conflict between the two empires in sixty years. He invaded Armenia with an army that included Hephthalite warriors (Joshua 48); he took Theodosiopolis, Martyropolis, and Amida, while his Arab ally, No’mān III of Ḥira, raided and plundered Mesopotamia (Joshua, 51-52). After some skirmishes, he returned Amida for a ransom of 1,000 pounds of gold and signed a seven-year truce, which required him to attack and drive out the Hunnic tribes who had invaded Caucasus and plundered Persia’s northern territories (Procopius 1.8-9, 1.10.12; Marquart, *Ērānšahr*, pp. 63-64). Ten years later he had to subjugate the Sabir Huns who had invaded Armenia and Asia Minor (references in *ibid.*, p. 64). Meanwhile Kavād chose as his heir Kōsrow, in preference to Kāus Patišwāršāh (king of Ṭabarestān), who had sided with, and was supported by, the Mazdakites. To secure the succession, Kavād requested the Byzantine emperor Justin to act as Kōsrow’s guardian and adopted father. This act, he urged, “would bind together in kinship and in goodwill” the two royal houses, as well as “all our subjects,” thereby “bring us to a satiety of the blessings of peace” (Procopius, 1.11.7-9; see also Peiler). Justin proposed unacceptable terms, since he feared that a legal adoption might entitle Kōsrow to “the father’s inheritance,” resulting in the Persian king demanding the Roman empire. Feeling insulted, Kavād started a second war with the Romans (Procopius, 1.11.10 ff.; see also Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 355), which lasted from 527 till 531 and was mainly fought in Armenia, Iberia or Georgia, and Lazestān (Lazica). The two sides won and lost many a battle (described in detail by Procopius, and studied by Greatrex, 1998). In these campaigns Mōnḍer of Ḥira actively supported the Persians, and Ḥāreṭ of Kinda sided with the Romans. The participation of these clients brought the Arabs into the thick of the Irano-Byzantine wars and increased their political and military influence. Kavād died in 531; and his successor, Kōsrow, who faced internal dissent, signed the “Endless Peace” with Justinian. The Persians



relinquished their gains in Lazica, and the Byzantines did the same in Persarmenia and undertook to pay 11,000 pounds of gold for the defense of the Caucasus passes

Kavād does not appear to have troubled his Nestorian subjects; and his relationship with the Jews seems to have been friendly (Joshua the Stylite, 58; Neusner, V, pp. 105-7). He revived the function of the king as a “town builder” and “founded” Weh-az-Āmed-Kavād (“Kāvād’s better-than-Amida”) in Arrajān and Abaz-Kavād (Abar-Kavād), which lay between Baṣra and Wāseṭ (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 146, n. 2); he created a new settlement (kura) in Arrajān called Kavād-ḵorraḥ “Ḵavād’s Glory” (Ebn Balḵi, *Fārsnāma*, pp. 84, 115; Ṭa’ālebi, *Ḡorar*, p. 594; see further Gyselen, 1989, pp. 45-47, 71-72). Kavād also fortified Partav in Armenia and renamed it Pērōz-Kavād, and he built strong fortification walls in the Caucasus, which Ḵosrow I expanded and strengthened (see [DARBAND](#)).

After Kavād’s death, the eldest son, Kāus, claimed the throne; but the nobility abided by the testament of the late king (Procopius, 1.21.20-22; cf. Malalas, 18.68; tr., p. 274) and helped Ḵosrow to occupy the throne. Later many of them plotted to dethrone Ḵosrow, but he discovered the plot and slew “all the Persian notables” involved (Procopius, loc. cit) This event may have been related to the resurgence of the Mazdakite party and their subsequent slaughter, in which their leader, Mazdak, is said to have perished. Then Ḵosrow eased the social plight of those who had been ruined as the result of the Mazdakite excesses by providing them with work, estates, and legal security. He carried out the reforms his father had started (see [ḴOSROW I](#)) consolidated royal authority through direct taxation and extension of the central bureaucracy in every part of the empire, turning the feudal lords into officials of the central government who were loyal to him rather than to their hereditary families (cf. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 163, n. 1 and Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, p. 365). The army was retrained and better equipped, with the aswārān (“mounted nobility or knights”) patronized and promoted to the rank of royal retainers (see [ARMY i.](#)). or knights”) patronized and promoted to the rank of royal retainers (see [ARMY i.](#)). The tax reform was personally supervised by the king (Grignaschi, 1971, pp. 87-131; cf. Rubin, p. 99, n. 1), whose trusted officials worked with local judges in assessing, registering and exacting the dues. The “death tax” was abolished; and the poll-tax (gazit > jaziya), which was really a substitute for the service to the court



and church which the privileged class rendered, was limited to taxable men only; those too young or too old were exempt as being incapable of any type of service (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 242, n. 1, 246, n. 1; Kārnamag, pp. 13, 26-27). Cases could be appealed to the supervising judges, and all complaints could be directed to the royal chancellery (Kārnamag, pp. 17-18). The reform transformed a system which had been arbitrary, burdensome, and liable to every type of cheating into a regulated method of payment by installments (in three or four annual installments, either one-fourth each quarter or one-third every four months) in accordance with the standard yield. In most areas the lowest rate was by far the commonest (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 241, n. 2), and in poorer provinces payment in kind seems to have been permitted (*ibid.*, p. 242, n. 1).

Having consolidated his power, Kōsrow decided to put an end to the Hephthalite domination over the eastern provinces. By then the Turks, originally an Ural-Altai steppe people, had established a powerful empire stretching from Mongolia and the northern frontier of China to the Black Sea (Sinor). Under the Kāqān Ištāmi (called Snijabu in Ṭabari, I, p. 895 and Sizibul/Silzabul in Byzantine sources; Blockley, p. 262, n. 112 with reference), the Turkish empire had extended westward (Sinor, pp. 297-304) and come under heavy Sogdian influence (von Gabain). Kōsrow and Ištāmi made an alliance and destroyed the Hephthalite empire (Widengren, 1951; Grignaschi, 1971). Soon after, the Turks replaced the Hephthalites as the eastern enemies of the Iranians. In 569 or 570 Ištāmi/Sizibul, who had conquered the Avars and the remnants of the Caucasian “Huns” and thereby had come to control the Silk Road, attacked Persia with the encouragement of the Romans and pillaged some border areas (cf. Menander, tr., p. 147). Kōsrow contained the Turkish assault and concluded a treaty with them, but his marriage with the daughter of the Kāqān is chronologically impossible (see HORMOZD IV). He fortified the northeastern provinces against their further incursions. Sizibul died soon after, and his successor declined Byzantine’s offer of alliance against Persia and instead invaded the Bosphorus area.

Kōsrow’s wars with the Byzantines were long and consequential. Justinian’s border fortifications in Mesopotamia, Syria, and Armenia, his annexation of Armenia, and his attempts to entice the Lakhmid king’s of Ḥira to come to his side and the “Huns” to attack Persia, led to the first war in 540 (Procopius, 2.1 ff.; Bury, II, pp. 91-93; Güterbock, pp. 37-48). It lasted for five years; and



Ḳosrow personally invaded Syria and Lazica and took several cities including [Antiochia](#), which he plundered; he then deported its population to a section of his capital, al-Madā'en, which he named Weh-Antioch-Ḳosrow "Ḳosrow's Better Antiochia," commonly called Rumagān "Roman Town," Ar. al-Rumiya (on the privileges granted to its population, see Procopius, 2.1-13). In the meantime the Byzantines campaigned in Armenia and northern Mesopotamia. The truce was concluded for five years: Justinian paid 2,000 pounds of gold, and Ḳosrow released a large number of Roman captives but kept Lazica (Procopius, 2.26-28; Evagrius, 4. 8; Bury, II, pp. 107-13; Güterbock, pp. 48-54). However, in the fourth year of the truce, Justinian broke it by sending an army into Lazica, causing a new war, involving Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia, Lazica, and the participation of the Lakhmids and Ghassanids. The Persians were, on the whole, victorious; during the war, negotiations continued, and Justinian paid 400 pounds of gold annually. After another five-year truce, a peace treaty was signed in 562. This exemplary document of international relation is described in unusual detail by Menander Protector (tr., Blockley, pp. 71-75; studies in Bury, II, pp. 121-23; Güterbock, pp. 58-109). It obligated the Persians to prevent the Huns, Alans, or other barbarians from passing through Darband and the Dariel Pass and reaching Roman territories. It required the Romans not to cross the Persian borders with an army; declared diplomatic relations free and goods of ambassadors tax-exempt; regulated trade relations; and prohibited Arab allies of the two sides from attaching each other or their opponent's suzerains. It recommended settling disputes between the subjects of the two states by arbitration courts, and intercommunity disputes across the border by the ruling of frontier officials and, if necessary, by appeal to the General of the East or, as a final resort, to the sovereign of the offender.

Following the peace treaty, Ḳosrow defeated the Hephthalites and Khazars, stopped the threat of the Turks (Widengren, 1952; Grignaschi, 1980), and conquered Yemen, which allowed him to effectively control the sea routes and endanger Byzantine trade bases (Harmatta, 1974; 2000). Envious, and enticed by an offer of alliance from Sizibul Ḳāqān, the Byzantines stopped payment for the defense of Caucasian passes to Persia in 572; and a new war started. The Byzantines invaded Armenia; and Ḳosrow, despite advanced age and feebleness, took the field and captured Dārā (q.v.), while his forces raided Syria up to Antiochia, and forced the adversary to buy a truce for one year at the cost of 45,000 aurei. The truce was renewed for another three years at a cost of 30,000 gold aurei per annum and the promise not to interfere in



Persarmenia. The conflicts resumed in Armenia; and, when Kōsrow died of an illness in 579, his successor Hormozd IV had to counter renewed Roman offensive.

Kōsrow became known as Anōširavān (“of the immortal soul”). He “was praised and admired” by Persians and even some Romans, as “a lover of literature and profound student of philosophy,” who read (in translation) Greek philosophy and whose “mind was filled with the doctrines of Plato” (Agathias, 2.28). Nöldeke studied his achievements and character and concluded that he “was certainly one of the most efficient and best kings that the Iranians have ever had” (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 160-62, n. 3). Arab-Persian sources consider him the paragon of justice and title him “The Just (dādgar, Ar. ‘ādel).” He viewed justice as the “action most pleasing to God,” as the support of the cosmic order and the source of prosperity for the land and all who inhabited it. He maintained that equity and justice must apply both to the weak and to the mighty, to the poor and to the rich (*Kārnāmag*, pp. 26-27). Although Kōsrow had been educated in Zoroastrian religion and respected it (Mas’udi, *Moruj IV*, pp. 74, 76; *Dēnkart*, ed. Madan, p. 413; tr. M. Shaki, 1981, pp. 114-25), he followed a certain rationalism, which in a time dominated by religious fanaticism had its advantages (Nöldeke, loc. cit.; see also Morony, 1984, pp. 335, 337-39). [Paul the Persian](#) reflects Kōsrow’s mind when he says, in his dedicatory preface to Aristotle’s *Logic*, which he translated for the King, that philosophy is superior to faith; since in religious learning doubts always exist, while philosophy is the mental acceptance of explained ideas (*Gutas*). The introduction of Borzōē (q.v.) to the *Kalila wa Dimna* (Nöldeke, 1912) also makes the same point. Kōsrow himself states that “we examined the customs of our forebears,” but, concerned with the discovery of the truth, “we [also] studied the customs and conducts of the Romans and Indians” and accepted those among them which seemed reasonable and praiseworthy, not merely likeable. “We have not rejected anyone because they belonged to a different religion or people.” And having examined “the good customs and laws” of our ancestors as well as those of the foreigners, “we have not declined to adopt anything which was good nor to avoid anything which was bad. Affection for our forebears did not lead us to accept customs which were not good” (*Kārnāmag*, pp. 27-28). John of Ephesus, who even apologizes for eulogizing a Magian and an enemy, states that Kōsrow “was a prudent and wise man, and all his lifetime he assiduously devoted himself to the perusal of philosophical works ... He took pains to



collect the religious books of all creeds, and read and studied them, that he might learn which one were true and wise and which were foolish” (6.20). When the Academy at Athens was closed down by the Christian emperor, the pagan philosophers fearing persecution fled to Kōsrow and received warm and generous treatment; when they left him, he enthusiastically included a clause about their protection against the their Christian oppressors in his peace treaty with the inheritor of the Greco-Roman world, the Byzantine emperor (Agathias, 2.30-1). In general, he granted freedom of religion to the Jews (Neusner, V, pp. 111-12, 124-27), and to the Christians, even though Christian clergy was suspected of siding with the Byzantines (see Evagrius, 5.9).

Pahlavi literature flourished under Kōsrow (Boyce, 1968), as did translations from Syriac, Greek, and Indian sources on science, particularly medicine and astronomy. His interest in history led to the compilation of an official “national history,” the Xwadāy-nāmāg (see HISTORIOGRAPHY i.); and his court astronomers compiled the Royal Canon (Zij-e šahriārān), which henceforth served as the basic source for astronomers and chronographers in Sasanian Persian and the Muslim world (see EIr. II, pp. 859, 862 ff.). Kōsrow’s rationalism had created a society interested in foreign ideas and disputation. Indian and Manichean asceticism and Christian faith had spread, and Zoroastrianism had gone on the defensive (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 429-39). Borzōē, the “Chief Physician” of Persia, traveled to India in search of spiritual learning and returned with a copy of Pañcatantra, translated as Kalila and Dimna, which became the highest model of “wisdom literature” (see [ANDARZ](#)). Due to Borzōē and ascetics like him, Kōsrow’s age of progress and enlightenment assimilated pessimistic and wholly non-Iranian worldviews, which had a crushing effect on Iranians’ morale and strength just when they needed the power of self-preservation most (Christensen, *Iran Sass.*, pp. 415-40).

Decline and fall. As soon as Kōsrow left the scene, the higher nobility and the clergy attempted to regain their traditional power; but they were determinedly opposed by his successor, Hormozd IV (579-89). He was a highly educated yet haughty and suspicious king (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 264-65), who proclaimed that he was on the side of the common people and against any who would seek to deprive them of their rights and means (Dinavari, pp. 103-6). He infuriated the clergy by refusing their demand to



restrict the non-Zoroastrians of the realm (Ṭabari, I, pp. 990-91). Some said that he “surpassed his father in justice” (Bal’ami, ed. Bahār, p. 1071); others saw him as cruel and unjust. He killed or blinded his own brothers (John of Ephesus, 6.29), put to death a large number of higher priests and senior officials, and refused a peace offer by the Byzantine empire, thereby prolonging the war on the northern front. Arab tribes raided the western borderlands, while eastern nomads (called Hephthalites in Armenian sources, but Turks in Arab-Persian texts) invaded Khorasan and even occupied Herāt. The leading Iranian general, [Bahrām Čōbin](#), of the Arsacid family of Mehrān, defeated the Hephthalites and then crossed the Oxus and routed the Turks, while Persian forces contained other sources of trouble in the northwest and west. However, the king’s distrust and ingratitude drove Bahrām to rebel and march on Ctesiphon. Other magnates led by [Bestām and Bendōy](#), the king’s brothers-in-law and of Arsacid lineage, seized Hormozd and, with the approval of his son, Kosrow, first blinded and then murdered him (patricide was one of the charges that led to Kosrow’s execution, see below). Bahrām now captured Ctesiphon and proclaimed himself King of kings and restorer of the Arsacid dynasty (Ya’qubi, I, p. 192; Šāh-nāma, Moscow, IX, pp. 29-32; Shahbazi, 1990, pp. 222-23, 228). He was viewed by many as “King Bahrām the Glorious (Šāh Bahrām varjāvand)”, an expected Savior in Iranian traditions (Czeplédy, pp. 36-39). The royalists gathered around Kōsrow, who after suffering a defeat fled to the Byzantine territory and returned with a Roman army (eastern sources claim that Maurice even gave his daughter, Maria, to Kōsrow in marriage). Bestām and Bendōy gathered the loyalists around Kōsrow, and he regained the throne, proclaiming himself the true expected “Victorious King (Aparvēz á/Parwiz).” Defeated, Bahrām fled to the Turks and was murdered by an agent of Kōsrow. Envious of the power of Bestām and Bendōy, the king relied on a Roman guard and Armenian forces led by Sumbat Bagratuni. He soon murdered Bendōy, who publicly denounced the Sasanians as faithless upstart usurpers unworthy of service or loyalty (Dinavari, pp. 106-7), but Bestām rose in rebellion and carved a kingdom for himself in the territories west of Rey and even subjugated some Hephthalite princes. Sumbat put down his rebellion after six years, and the king had him executed. In about 600 Kōsrow imprudently overthrew the faithful vassal dynasty of the Lakhmids of Ḥira and thus removed the state which had acted as a barrier between rich Sasanian provinces and impoverished desert Arabs, who a generation later overran Sasanian territory with remarkable ease (see [ARAB CONQUEST OF IRAN](#)).



Kōsrow now enjoyed several years of peace (due to the goodwill of Maurice), increasingly turning to cruelty, luxury, and intellectual decadence. At first he supported Christians (his favorite wife Širin was a Christian from Khuzistan: Guidi Chronicle, tr. Nöldeke, p. 10), appointed them to the highest state offices, and offered precious gifts to Christian churches (Peeters; Higgins). He built magnificent palaces at [Ctesiphon](#), Dastagerd, Qaṣr-e Širin, and Tāq-e Bostān. In the last site, he had a grotto hewn in the Bisotun mountain in front of a park consisting of a large pool, garden, and a pavilion with columns surmounted by capitals with carved representations of the king, Anāhitā, and other divinities (Herzfeld 1920b, pp. 91 ff.). The grotto walls were ornamented with carved panels; one showed Kōsrow receiving the diadem of royalty from Ahuramazda while Anāhitā supervised the ceremony; another showed the king on his famous steed, Šabdiz; and a pair represented him hunting deer and boars, accompanied by mounted hunters, musicians, and pages (Herzfeld, 1920; 1929; 1938; see [SASANIAN ROCK-RELIEFS](#)).

The age of Kōsrow saw the zenith of splendor and corrupt rulership (Ferdowsi, Šāh-nāma IX, pp. 198-250; Christensen, Iran Sass., pp. 453-87). He combined autocracy with cruelty and ingratitude, love of luxury with avarice. He accumulated immense wealth (his seven treasures became legendary) by ruthlessly exacting heavy taxes from his subject and sending his forces on dangerous campaigns to collect booty. He kept thousands of women in his harem as wives, concubines, dancers, musicians, and singers, although he himself stayed to the last with Širin (their story became the stuff of legend). At Dastagerd he strolled or hunted in a park that contained thousands of wild and domestic animals; he sat on a fabled throne (Tak̄t-e Tāqdis) under a dome representing heaven and adorned with mechanically moving celestial spheres (Herzfeld, 1920b; Christensen, Iran Sass., pp. 466-68 with literature). When in 602 Maurice was murdered by the usurper Phocas, Kōsrow, allegedly to “avenge” his slain patron, sent his finely equipped and well-trained armies to wage an all-out war against the Byzantine east. These were led by the able generals Farroḳān surnamed “Razmyōzan” (“battle seeker”) and entitled “Šahrvarāz” (the “Boar [i.e., the hero] of the empire”) and Šāhēn Vahmanzādagān, one of the four Spāhbeds (Nöldeke, pp. 291-92, n. 2), and other notable commanders. Iranian troops swept through Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine ([Jerusalem](#) was captured in 614, and the “True Cross” was transferred to Ctesiphon [Flussin]), Cilicia, Armenia Minor, Cappadocia, and the rest of Asia Minor. By 616, they were camping at Chalcedon, opposite



Constantinople.

In 610, the Byzantine general Heraclius, of Armenian origin and probably of Arsacid descent (Shahid, pp. 310-11; Toumanoff, 1985, pp. 431-34), defeated and slew Phocas, ascended the throne, and repeatedly sought peace. Acceptance could have prevented all the calamities of the seventh century, leaving Persia at the zenith of power and height of prosperity. However, intoxicated by his victories, Kōsrow imprudently and haughtily refused; and the Persian advances continued. Heraclius was about to flee to Egypt when the news came that Alexandria had fallen. Desperate, the Emperor turned the war into a crusade for “saving Christianity,” and the church mobilized all its resources in his aid. He further reformed the army, replacing mercenaries with local recruits, who were now fighting for their land, family, and faith; and he placed the provinces he still controlled under military officials, thereby unifying the administrative and military commands. Aware that the Persians lacked a navy in the Black Sea, Heraclius sailed with an elite and mobile force to the neck of Armenia in 622, landed behind Persian lines, and devastated Armenia, northern Mesopotamia, and Ādurbādagān, killing many enemy troops and amassing much booty. The tactic proved successful, and he repeated it several times in the next few years, while Šahrvarāz and other Persians held Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Asia Minor. The two sides bled each other to the point of exhaustion (Gerland; Howard-Johnston, 1994; 1999). Heraclius also made alliance with the Khazars of the Caucasus and in 627 they descended on the northwestern Iranian provinces, overwhelming Persian forces without mercy. In the same year, Heraclius occupied and pillaged Šiz (the rich shrine of the Persian warrior class) and Dastagerd, where he wintered and continued to threaten Ctesiphon. There Kōsrow was forced to raise an army of cooks and slave boys, and yet he ordered his commanders to execute the troops who had been defeated on battlefields (for details and sources see [BYZANTINE-IRANIAN RELATIONS](#) and Greatrex-Lieu, pp. 198-228). A mutiny ensued, and the warrior aristocracy deposed Kōsrow and enthroned his son Šērōye (allegedly a grandson of Maurice), who assumed the throne name Kavād (II). Kōsrow was captured, tried, and found guilty of patricide, treason, inhumane behavior towards subjects especially soldiers and women, ingratitude toward the Romans, illegal orders, injustice, ruinous avarice, and mistreatment of his own children. He was executed, and Šērōye returned Persia’s gains in return for peace.



The country was disintegrating, and Šērōya's murder of his seventeen brothers, "all well-educated, valiant, and chivalrous men" (Ṭabari, I, p. 1060), deprived Persia of a future able monarch. The highest aristocracy gained full independence, each carving a state for himself within the empire; and the old animosity between the Parthians (led by Farroḵ Hormozd, the Spāhbed of the north), and the Persians led by Hormozān (q.v.), brother-in-law of Šērōye, flared up, further dividing the resources of the country (Ṭabari, I, pp. 2176, 2209). Dams and canals in Mesopotamia broke, turning cultivated areas into swamps. A plague devastated western provinces, killing Šērōya and half of the population (Mas'udi, Moruj II, p. 232; cf. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, p. 385, n. 4). His son and successor, Ardašir III (q.v.), was murdered by Šahrvarāz. The latter, having made a pact with Heraclius and evacuated all Roman territories (Mango), captured Ctesiphon with a small force, demonstrating to all the weakness of the empire. He also ascended the throne, further undermining the legitimacy of the Sasanian house. Nobles killed him after forty days, and two daughters of Ƙosrow reigned in succession. When Farroḵ Hormozd was assassinated in a palace plot, his son Rostam brought his forces to Ctesiphon, murdered the queen, and enthroned Yazdegerd (III), a grandson of Ƙosrow then merely eight years old (Ṭabari, I, p. 1067). Other nobles enthroned and deposed other candidates (ten in two years). The situation was so chaotic, the condition of the people so appalling, that "the Persians openly spoke of the immanent downfall of their empire, and saw its portents in natural calamities" (Balāḍori, p. 292; cf. *Tāriḵ-e Sistān*, p.81).

Such a wretched state enticed Persia's neighbors to take advantage of its situation. The Turks were marching through the eastern provinces at will, and only alliance with them saved local magnates in charge of those lands. The Khazars were ravaging the northwest provinces; Heraclius was interfering in Persia's internal affairs, and the Arabs, now inspired by a new faith and united by a call to arms and fully aware of the difficulties of the rich but disintegrating empire (Ṭabari, I, pp. 2187-88), were making inroads into Mesopotamia. Success made the Arabs rich and bold, and they defeated a major Persian army at Qādesiya (southwest of Ḥira), and subjugated local rulers until they captured Ctesiphon, where they found untold riches. Wave after wave of them swept through Iranian lands. Yazdegerd fled from one place to another, begging local lords to help save him and the empire; but the end had come, and no real, united front could be organized. The Arabs subjugated local lords by force or treaty and succeeded in destroying the



Persian empire by 650. Yazdegerd was betrayed by Māhōy Suri of Marv and murdered in a mill, in which he had been taking refuge.

With him ended the Sasanian dynasty, for the attempts of his son, Pērōz, and his descendants to regain power with the help of Chinese or Turkish troops proved futile. Although its last days were inglorious, the Sasanian state remained the ideal model of organization, splendor, and justice in Perso-Arab tradition; and its bureaucracy and royal ideology were imitated by successor states, especially the Abbasid, Ottoman, and Safavid empires. The memory of Yazdegerd III remained that of a martyred prince, and many a subsequent ruler or notable in Islamic Iran claimed descent from him. His coins (like that of Kōsrow II) were used—and continued to be minted, with some gradual alteration in legends—by Arab governors for several generations (Tyler-Smith). According to a Shi'ite tradition, one of his daughters married Imam Ḥosayn and begot 'Ali Zayn-al-'ābedin, the fourth Imam (Boyce, 1967). Thus, the Hosayni sayyeds claimed superiority over others by virtue of “nobility on both sides” (karim al-tarafayn: Ebn Balki, Fārsnāma, p. 4). Many Iranians, particularly Zoroastrians, took the accession of Yazdegerd (16 June 632), as the beginning of the Era of Yazdegerd; some, however dated from the year of his murder in 650 (Taqizadeh, pp. 917-22).

See also: [SASANIAN EMPIRE](#) and entries for the individual rulers.

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