Introduction
Achaemenids and Sasanians

Until recent times, modern scholarship had been firmly divided into two distinct camps over the issue of historical continuity between the Achaemenids and the Sasanians, with one camp regarding the Achaemenid reception as instrumental in the formation of the political ideology of the early Sasanians, and the very stimulus of their incursions into Roman territory, and the other dismissing Achaemenid echoes as an interpretatio romana.¹

Due to the complexity of arguments favoring or rejecting such a continuity, we shall limit our discussion to those arguments that, in our opinion, best characterize the conflicting positions of scholarship.

The main tenets of the fraction of scholarship, which supports the idea of a conscious continuity of Achaemenid traditions into Sasanian times, may be summed up as follows²:

1) significant literary parallels between Achaemenid and Sasanian inscriptions,³ analogies in institutions,⁴ and continuity in art⁵ support the thesis that Sasanian kings, such as Ardaxšīr, Šābuhr I, and Šābuhr II, may have considered themselves heirs to their Achaemenid forebears;

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¹ For a most important and recent survey of the Problemstellung, see Kettenhoffen, “Bilanz.”
⁵ Vanden Bergh and Schippmann, Reliefs rupestres d’Elymaïde, 112–118; for a more skeptical view, see Roaf, “Persepolitan Echoes,” 1–7; see also Dignas and Winter, Rome and Persia, 61–62.
Introduction

(2) religious minorities, notably, the Sasanian Jewish community, by virtue of the continuity of their literary and religious traditions ought to have known about the Achaemenid forebears, and may have been able to transmit this knowledge to other communities, as well as to the Sasanian elite;

(3) contemporaneous Roman sources—Cassius Dio and Herodian for the reign of Ardashir I and Šābuhr I, and Ammianus Marcellinus for that of Šābuhr II—report of Sasanian claims to former Achaemenid territores, while in conflict with Rome;

(4) the historicity of Sasanian revendications may be substantiated mainly by the term āhēnag/hasēnag attested in Šābuhr I’s inscription on the Kažbe-ye Zardōšt, as well as in the inscription of king Narseh at Paikuli, which is deemed to have alluded to the Achaemenids;

(5) the endeavor of Arsacid sovereigns who, prior to the Sasanians, also sought to legitimize their expansionism into Roman territories by referring to the Achaemenids, as reported by Tacitus for the reign of Ardawān (Artabanos) II, may have reflected an “Achaemenid program” as part of an Arsacid political ideology, which may have been presumably inherited by the Sasanians.

In contrast the fraction of scholarship that rejects Achaemenid reminiscences as the source of early Sasanian expansionism presents the following arguments:

(1) there are no unambiguous references to the Achaemenids in Sasanian epigraphy;

(2) the Middle Persian Zoroastrian literature and the Iranian epic tradition as reflected in Islamic chronicles and Ferdousi’s Šāhnāme have not preserved the memory of an actual Achaemenid history.

Achaemenids and Sasanians

(3) the presence of Persian kings in the Bible is not a reliable measure for gauging the familiarity of Sasanian Jewry with their Achaemenid predecessors; far more revealing in this respect is the later Rabbinic exegetical tradition, such as the Babylonian Talmud, which, interestingly, seems to indicate that knowledge of the Achaemenid past had frittered away amidst the sages of Babylon, in this, following the general Sasanian trend;⁷

(4) consequently, one may conclude that Roman sources, such as Cassius Dio, Herodian, and Ammianus Marcellinus, which ascribed an Achaemenid revival to the early Sasanians, represented in reality either the Roman interpretation of Sasanian political activities, or the Roman amplification of some vague memories of the Sasanians from their past. Moreover, the mere fact that Romans did have knowledge of the Iranian past and used it to label the expansionism of the new Persian power, is not a sufficient gauge for assuming that the Persians possessed the same knowledge of the past, or were inspired by it.

Most recently, however, a new tendency may be observed that identifies the ahēnag/hasēnag, not with the Achaemenids, but with the epic forebears of the Iranians, the Kayānids.

Intriguingly, as we shall elaborate in more detail below,⁸ both (former) proponents⁹ and opponents¹⁰ of the view that the Sasanians may have possessed some historical memory of the Achaemenids seem now increasingly in agreement in identifying the ahēnag/hasēnag with the Kayānids. Indeed, the opposition between radically different positions has become in time less marked, and if opposition there still is, it relates to the path of demonstration, rather than the conclusions, which are remarkably close.

In the following, we shall discuss some of the problems associated with the notion of historical continuity between the Achaemenids and the Sasanians.

In the first chapter, we shall investigate the semantic Umfeld of the terms ahēnag/hasēnag in Sasanian inscriptions and their equivalents in other Iranian epigraphic corpora, in order to determine whether the termini ahēnag/hasēnag could have referred either to historical dynasties of the past, or alternatively to the Kayānids.

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⁷ See the recent study of Mokhtarian, “Rabbinic Depictions of Cyrus,” 112–139.
⁸ See below, 21–29.
Introduction

In the second chapter, we shall look into the main tenets of our classical sources—Cassius Dio, Herodian, and Ammianus Marcellinus—reporting on early Sasanian claims to Achaemenid territories, and explore whether they may contain any historical veracity.

In the third chapter, we shall examine the alleged “Achaemenid program” of the Arsacids, and whether it, if substantiated, may have affected the political ideology of the early Sasanians.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, we shall discuss how the reception of the classical age and the impact of the Alexander imitation in Rome would cause the identification of the eastern neighbor with the Achaemenids both in Roman propaganda and, beginning with Šābuhr II, in Sasanian political ideology.
CHAPTER I

Sasanian Epigraphy

The early Sasanian political ideology and agenda are known from various contem- 
porary sources: on the Sasanian side we have the trilingual inscription of Šabuhr I 
on the Kaʿbe-ye Zardosht in Persis (ŠKZ),¹ (see figures 1 and 2) also known as 
the Res Gestae Divi Saporis,² and on the Roman side, the narratives of Roman 
historians, such as Cassius Dio, Herodian, and Ammianus Marcellinus. In the present 
chapter, I shall first investigate the ideological rationale behind Sasanian territorial 
claims, subsequently, I will seek to determine the extent of those revendications 
by comparing our sources.

According to Šābuhr’s inscription, the king’s campaigns against Rome were 
triggered by a Roman offensive against Sasanian territory. The actions of Šābuhr 
are accordingly depicted as defensive reactions to the Roman aggressors, who are 
qualified as liars: Kayšar bid druxt (drōžād) ʾō Armin winās kerd “the Caesar lied again 
(and) did wrong to Armenia.” The emergence of deceit or lie (Old Persian drauga-; 
Middle Iranian drōj/drō) announces the rule of evil, which it is the king’s duty to 
uproot.³ Thus, by accusing the Caesar of deceit, Šabuhr associates him with evil and so 
provides an ideological rationale for the “defensive” character of his campaigns, 
as the following passages illustrate:

¹ On the ŠKZ, see now Huyse, Dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs; also Back, Sasanidische Staatsinschriften.
Still valuable, Sprengling, Third Century Iran; Maricq, “Res Gestae,” 37–101. For a recent survey of 
the Sasanian epigraphic material, see Huyse, “Sāsānidische Inschriften und Felsreliefs,” 109–123. In 
the following, I will exclusively cite the Parthian (Pth.) version of the ŠKZ, as it is better preserved 
than the Middle Persian version.
³ DB IV.33–40; DB is cited after the edition of Schmitt, The Bisitun Inscriptions.
Sasanian Epigraphy

Figure 1 The Edifice of Ka’abe-ye Zardoit at Naqš-e Rostam in Persis.
Figure 1 (cont.)
Sasanian Epigraphy

Figure 1 (cont.)
Figure 1 (cont.)
Sasanian Epigraphy

Figure 2 Detail of the Parthian version of Šābuhr I’s *res gestae* on the *Kaʿbe-ye Zar došt*.