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978-0-521-76641-8 - Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia

M. Rahim Shayegan

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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 Ardashīr, Šābuhr I, and Šābuhr II, may have considered themselves heirs to their Achaemenid forebears;

¹ For a most important and recent survey of the *Problemstellung*, see Kettenhoffen, “Bilanz.”

² *Among Iranists*, see Wiesehöfer, “Anfänge sassanidischer Westpolitik,” 444; “Iranische Ansprüche,”; “Ardašīr I,” 373; “Zum Nachleben,” 389–393; *Dunkle Jahrhunderte*, 15–22; “Zeugnisse,” 430–432; and “Gebete”; see also Gnoli, “L’inscription de Šābuhr” 57–63; and “Il pericolo persiano,” 411: “Ardashir reclamò i suoi diritti, quale erede degli Achemenidi, sui territori che erano già appartenuti all’impero persiano prima di Alessandro.” Also Calmeyer, “Zur Genese,” 142–143; Daryaei, “National History,” more recently, Shahbazi, “Early Sasanians’ Claim,” 61–73, especially 69. *Among classicists*, see Enßlin, “Senate and the Army,” 68–72; Calderini, *Severi*, 120; Rémondon, *Crise de l’empire*, 98; Angeli Bertinelli, *Roma e l’Oriente*, 108; also Winter, *Friedensverträge*, 18–44; more nuanced, Panitschek, “Achaemenidennachfolge”; more recently, Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 24–36; Winter and Dignas, *Rom und das Perserreich*, 75–77, and *idem*, *Rome and Persia*, 61–62. Worthy of mention is also the recent article of Shahīd, “Sasanid-Byzantine Conflict,” 223–244, especially 238–243; and the recent study by Canepa, *Two Eyes*, 46–52.

³ See Skjærvø, “Parallels,” 593–603; and Huyse, “Zu Parallelen,” 177–184.

⁴ See Frye, “Achaemenid Echoes,” 247–252; and Wolski, “Achéménides et Arsacides,” 63–89.

⁵ Vanden Berghe and Schippmann, *Reliefs rupestres d’Elmāide*, 112–118; for a more skeptical view, see Roaf, “Persepolitan Echoes,” 1–7; see also Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 61–62.

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- (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 Ardashīr I and Šābuhr I, and Ammianus Marcellinus for that of Šābuhr II—report of Sasanian claims to former Achaemenid territories, while in conflict with Rome;
- (4) the historicity of Sasanian revendications may be substantiated mainly by the term *ahēnag/hasēnag* attested in Šābuhr I's inscription on the *Ka' be-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 arguments⁶:

- (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*;

⁶ See mainly Kettenhoffen, "interpretatio romana," 177–190; "Überlegungen," 99–108; Potter, "Alexander Severus and Ardashir," 147–157 = "Appendix III," 370–380; Strobel, *Das Imperium Romanum*, 287: "[d]arüber hinaus haben wir die immer wiederkehrende These aufzugeben, daß die ersten Sasaniden seit der endgültigen Etablierung der Dynastie 226/7 n. Chr. in Ktesiphon einen grundsätzlichen, ideologisch begründeten Anspruch auf die östlichen Gebieten des Imperium Romanum, soweit sie zum altpersischen Reich gehört hatten, konkret vertreten sowie mit entsprechenden großangelegten Eroberungs- bzw. Feldzugsplänen verfolgt hätten und dies die persische Außenpolitik für Rom zu einer ständigen Bedrohung mit weitreichenden Zielen gemacht hätte." Also Roaf, "Persepolitan Echoes," 1–7; Rubin, "Roman Empire," 178–185; and "Sasanid Monarchy," 646–647. For the application of the precepts of oral literature, as expressed by Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, to historiographical practices in Ancient Iran, see Schoeler, "Die Lücke," 375: "[w]ir können also füglich von einer Lücke in der einheimischen Tradition Irans sprechen, einer Lücke, in die die Geschichte der Meder, Achämeniden, und Seleukiden so gut wie ganz und weitgehend auch die der Parther fällt." Lately, although not always abreast of recent trends in scholarship, Frendo, "Sasanian Offensive," 25–36, especially, 29, 32–33; most recently, Mosig-Walburg, *Römer und Perser*, 12–113, 19–21, 62, and 326.

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- (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.

⁷ See the recent study of Mokhtarian, "Rabbinic Depictions of Cyrus," 112–139.

⁸ See below, 21–29.

⁹ See Wiesehöfer, "Gebete," 113, 116–117; "Rüm," 113–114; *Iranien, Grecs et Romains*, 141–142; see also Daryaei, "Memory and History," 11–14; "Construction of Past," 500–503; "Sasanians and Ancestors," 389–393.

¹⁰ See most prominently Kettenhoffen, "Bilanz," 63; and Huyse, "Revendication," 302–303.

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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.

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CHAPTER I

Sasanian Epigraphy

The early Sasanian political ideology and agenda are known from various contemporary sources: on the Sasanian side we have the trilingual inscription of Šābuhr I on the *Kāʿabe-ye Zardošt* 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: *Kaysar bid druxt (drōžād) ō Armin winās kerd* "the Caesar lied again (and) did wrong to Armenia." The emergence of *deceit* or *lie* (Old Persian *drauga-*; Middle Iranian *drōγ/drō*) announces the rule of *evil*, which it is the king's duty to uproot.³ Thus, by accusing the Caesar of deceit, Šābuhr 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, *Sassanidische 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.

² Rostovtzeff, "Res Gestae," 17–60.

³ DB IV.33–40; DB is cited after the edition of Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscriptions*.

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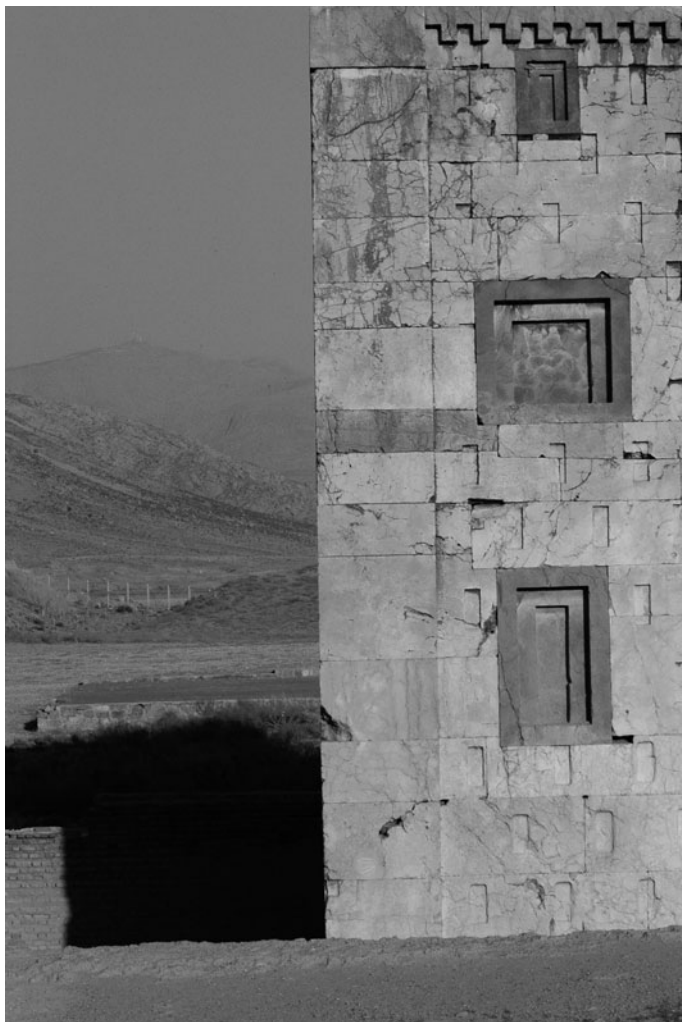


Figure 1 The Edifice of *Ka'abe-ye Zardošt* at *Naqš-e Rostam* in Persis.

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Figure 1 (*cont.*)

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Figure 1 (*cont.*)

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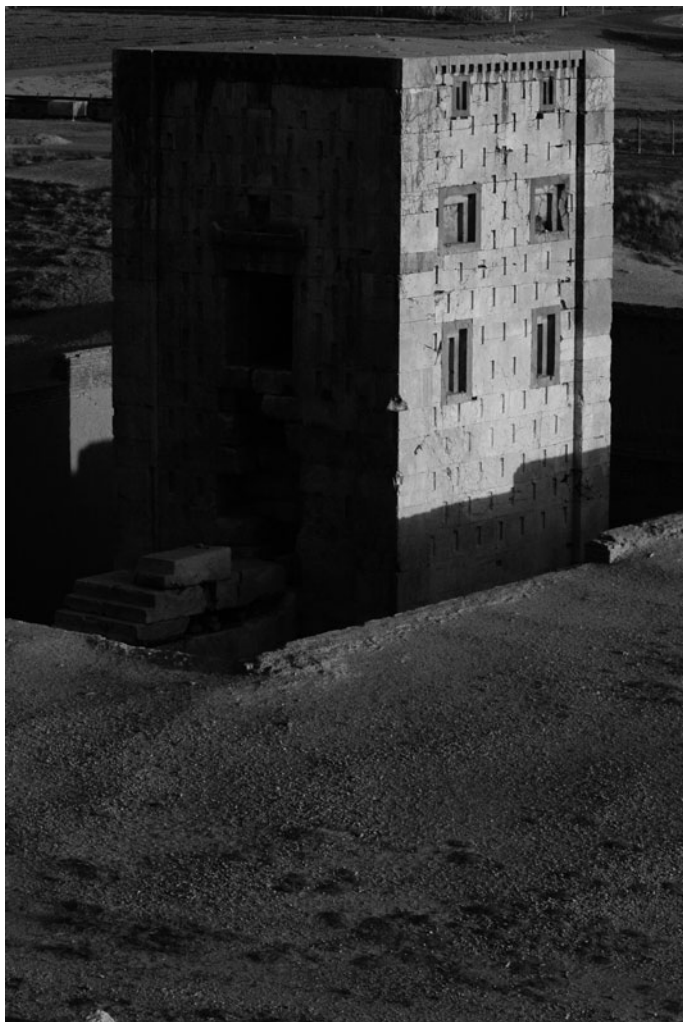


Figure 1 (*cont.*)



Figure 2 Detail of the Parthian version of Šābuhr I's *res gestae* on the *Kā'abe-ye Zardošt*.