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Nation and Empire Building the Iranian Way The Case of the Sasanian Empire in the 3rd Century

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Nation and Empire Building

The modern concepts of nation, nationalism and state are actually quite problematic and open to many interpretations none of which has achieved a universally accepted status. The problems associated with these have already been studied quite adequately by Eric Hobsbawm¹. It is therefore unnecessary to attempt to invent the wheel again. The fact that even such nations that have supposedly been built on nationalistic principles (e.g. France, Germany, Italy, Finland, Sweden, Estonia, Iran, India, China) do not actually follow those in practice proves this to be the case – all nations include linguistic or religious minorities or peoples of other ethnic origins not to mention nations that have not been built on the basis of nationalistic principles at all like e.g. the USA, Canada, Australia, most of the states in sub-Saharan Africa, Indonesia, Belgium, Monaco, and Vatican. It is also quite clear that the nations have always been built from the top down, but in such a manner that it answers the hopes, needs, wishes and interests of those whose opinions matter – the latter vary from one time and place to another. In some cases this means only the upper classes or those with military power while in other cases this also includes the common people. The typical unifying factors among those are commonly shared language, history, culture, shared experiences and religion or ideology all of which have been used to rally the upper classes and/or people behind the forces that attempt to unite the so-called nation under their leadership. In most cases this process involves also the purposeful falsification of history and facts for propaganda purposes. The following analysis proves that all of the above markers existed also in the past.

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¹ HOBBSAWN 1992.

The Emergence of Ardašīr the Priestly Warrior from Fārs

At the beginning of the third century, when Ardašīr I succeeded as prince of Fārs, Iran was experiencing one of its most tumultuous periods in its long history. The ruling Arsacid dynasty came from the Iranian speaking tribe of Parthians, but they were not considered as Iranians proper in Fārs. When the ruling Arsacid dynasty then suffered a series of humiliating defeats in their wars against the Romans, they did not only lose the support of the Iranians proper but eventually also the support of the seven Parthian noble families. The final nail in their coffin was the civil war between Walagaš and Ardavān.

The genealogy of Ardašīr, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, is obscured by the many different versions in existence. According to one version, he was the son of Pābag, king of Xīr, and grandson of Sāsān, a great warrior, and the head priest of the Anāhid Fire Temple of Eṣṭaqr, and related by marriage to the Bāzarangi family. According to another version, Ardašīr's father was actually Sāsān who had married to Pābag's daughter, but that Ardašīr became Pābag's son through adoption. This version claims that Dārā (Darius III) was one of Sāsān's ancestors making Ardašīr legitimate successor of the Achaemenids. In fact, the Roman and later Middle Persian and Persian texts prove that the Sasanians claimed Achaemenid ancestry, but they did not stop at this but also claimed that the mythical Kayanids were their ancestors². Still another version given by Agathias claims that Pābag had placed his own wife into Sāsān's bed so that they would produce offspring. It is possible that the family of Sāsān originally came from the east and had Sacae-tribal ancestry and was therefore probably related to the house of the Sūrēns. On the basis of Ardavān's supposed letter, Sāsān's ancestors may also have included Kurds.³ What is certain, however, is that from the very beginning the Sasanians claimed Achaemenid ancestry and identified themselves strongly with the Iranian past and with its Zoroastrian religion and also used religion and Achaemenid history successfully as a weapon against the foreign Arsacid rulers.⁴

The sources (e.g. Ferdowsī, Ṭabarī, Mīrkhwānd, *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*; Baḷ'amī) for the early career of Ardašīr are equally poor and give several different versions. However, what appears certain is that Ardašīr Pābagan's official father Pābag served as the Guardian of the Fire in Fārs, which enabled him to use its

² DARYAEE 2008: 66-67.

³ DARYAEE (2010: 6) notes the possible eastern origins of the house of Sāsān. POURSHARIATI (2008: 155-156) has speculated that by the late sixth century at least part of the Sūrēn family had become so enmeshed with the Persian House that they had adopted the title *Pārsīg*. On the basis of this, it is possible to speculate that the Sūrēns and Pābag had formed an alliance in which the Sacae-Parthian-Persian-Kurd origin of Ardašīr (a mix of Sūrēns and Pābagians/ Bāzarangi) was suppressed beneath the legendary accounts. In short, the idea of mixing the ancestral records was probably to hide the truth – i.e. that Ardašīr was not really a purebred Iranian from Persis/Fars, which he pretended to be.

⁴ Ṭabarī 813-815; Agathias, 2.27.1-5; KREYENBROEK 2008: 8-9; HUFF 2008: 31-54.

priests as his own secret operatives. We also know that Bāzarangi, the King of Persis and relative of Ardašīr, appointed Ardašīr as a military governor of Dārābgerd in eastern Fārs and that Ardašīr enlarged his territories through raiding and killing as a result of which he gathered around him a group of loyal friends, followers and trusted soldiers. It was then that Ardašīr convinced his father Pābag to assassinate Bāzarangi⁵. After the assassination, Pābag demanded that Ardavān would appoint his eldest son Šāpur as ruler of Persis. Ardavān refused. The Sasanians were now considered rebels, but there was not much that Ardavān could do about it because by this time (c. 213) he appears to have revolted against Walagaš. After this followed a power struggle within the Sasanian family from which Ardašīr emerged as the victor. The ongoing Parthian civil war made it possible for Ardašīr to secure the core areas with further conquests.⁶

It was after this that Ardašīr set about immediately to reorganize his realm. At the heart of his project was the systemization of the Zoroastrian beliefs and traditions to serve his own goals. This was certainly necessary because the extant sources suggest that Ardašīr faced a series of plots at the very beginning of his reign, but the loyalty of the clergy and the core followers enabled Ardašīr to crush all of these.⁷

The information provided by the *Nāma-ye Tansar*, *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* and Agathias gives us a very good picture of how Ardašīr created what can justifiably be called a theocracy under his rule and that it was this that ultimately secured his position.⁸ The *Nāma-ye Tansar* claims to respond to the critique of Ardašīr's policies presented by Gushnasp Jushnasp in the immediate aftermath of the death of Ardavān. Gushnasp accused that Ardašīr: 1) had made religious innovations; 2) had extinguished the royal fires of the other kings; 3) had forsaken the traditions⁹; 4) had made innovations in law; 5) was cruel; 6) prevented social mobility; 7) had forbid intermarriage between common people and nobles; 8) had

⁵ DARYAEE (2010, 3) dates the overthrow of Gōzīhr Bāzarangi to the years 205-206 before the revolt of Ardavān against Walagaš, but I would date it to a later period.

⁶ Ferdowsī, 529-553; Mīrkhwānd, 274-276; Ṭabarī 813-817; *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*; Balami, 66-71; HUFF 2008: 32-35.; SHAHBAZI 2002.

⁷ Ṭabarī 816-817; Mīrkhwānd, 276; DARYAEE 2010: 70-71; HUFF 2008: 35-54; For the Sasanian religious doctrines and practices in general, see DARYAEE 2010: 69-97.

⁸ The following discussion is my summary of the contents of Agathias (II 26.2-5.), *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* and the *Nāma-ye Tansar*, but in such a manner that I present the case through the contents of the Letter (its contents are in agreement with the former). POURSHARIATI (2008: 321-395) and most of the secondary sources she sites argue that the kingship and religion did not form the twin basis of Ardashir's rule as claimed in the *Testament of Ardashir* on the grounds that the religious doctrine underwent constant changes and because there existed many other religions within the empire. This sort of analysis does not take into account the fact that all religions are in a constant state of change and that there will always be religious minorities in all territories regardless of what measures the state uses to suppress those. In short, I agree with those historians who accept this duality as presented by the extant sources.

⁹ DARYAEE (2008) notes that it is possible that Ardašīr did not necessarily recognize which were innovations or borrowings in his idea of kingship.

forbid lavish spending¹⁰; 9) had forbid exaction of money from the wealthy and merchants (this secured Ardašīr the support of both); 10) used spies and informers; 11) and had not appointed a successor.

According to the *Nāma-ye Tansar*, the above was not Ardašīr's fault, but the fault of Alexander the Great who had destroyed religious books and had introduced new customs which had resulted in chaos and violence. It was because of this that Ardašīr was forced to resort to the use of violence and had to introduce innovations so that he could correct the situation. In other words, Ardašīr sought to achieve the restoration of the ancient Persian culture and religion that had existed before the death of the Achaemenid Darius III by falsifying both to suit his own political needs. According to both the *Nāma-ye Tansar* and *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*, Ardašīr saw the alliance between the Zoroastrian religion and his house to be the foundation stone of the whole empire. It is also quite obvious that Ardašīr's underlying motives for the things mentioned above were: a) to gain the support of the nobles (clergy, military, and scribes) and merchant class¹¹; b) to obtain money and services from the common people for the upkeep of the empire and its upper classes. All this was excused on the grounds that the Zoroastrian religion supposedly required this. All those who were opposed to this were crushed by the secret services and armed forces¹².

In sum, Ardašīr's reincarnated ancient Iranian nation in Persis was based on a theocracy ruled by him and by his family in which the history and religion were modified to suit his purposes. The nobles and merchants provided the necessary support for this, and their support was secured through their privileged position and their indoctrination into the Zoroastrian faith. The Zoroastrian clergy and the security apparatus (informers, spies and soldiers) were used to exercise tight control over the entire population, including the nobles and merchants.

Ardavān Reacts and the Battle of Hormzdagān on April 28, 224

In about 223, after having defeated Walagaš, Ardavān finally reacted to the news of the revolt by insulting Ardašīr as a Kurd and then by dispatching two armies against the upstart. Ardašīr did not wait for their arrival. He stated to his followers that it had been the God who had made him king and had helped him defeat

¹⁰ The lavish spending and luxuries were forbidden on the grounds that the public show of wealth was only allowed according to the rank the person held in the society.

¹¹ Note the similarities in policy between modern and ancient Iran. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the modern Iran is similarly built upon the support of the clergy, Revolutionary Guard, military, and the merchants of the "bazaar".

¹² For a fuller analysis of the intelligence gathering and internal security, see SYVÄNNE 2016: (the writing of which was generously supported by the ASMEA Research Grant). See also for example: *Sīāsat-nāma*, 66-67; BOSWORTH 1988.

his enemies and that the God would grant him victory¹³. After this, he marched against the enemy with the result that one of the enemy commanders deserted to his side. This was a sign of the times. In the course of the civil war Ardavān had punished many of the leading families for their support of Walagaš and they were now ready to pay in kind. It was thanks to this that Ardašīr was able to defeat both of the armies sent by Ardavān with ease¹⁴.

Ardašīr challenged Ardavān to fight him in a place chosen by him. Ardavān's position was so precarious that he was forced to accept the challenge. The council of Parthian nobles had demanded nothing less than that Ardavān would hand over his power to Ardašīr. Ardašīr won the battle and was proclaimed the *šāhanšāh* (king of kings) on the battlefield¹⁵.

Ardašīr I consolidates his position

The sources give conflicting information of how Ardašīr exploited his victory over Ardavān, but all of these seem to agree that Ardašīr ordered all magnates, petty kings and satraps to submit under his rule. Most appear to have answered in the affirmative, but the locations of Ardašīr's subsequent campaigns prove that he was still forced to campaign against several important Parthian magnates. However, having defeated these, he always exploited his military victory with a show of clemency and restored back to them their traditional privileges and lands, and it was this that ultimately secured their loyalty. In other words, Ardašīr used a big stick and carrot approach. These sources also confirm that he secured first the western territories with a military campaign. The only area that he was unable to conquer was Armenia, because it was defended by its king Xusrō the Great. Xusrō was even able to take control of Ctesiphon, the capital of Parthia, but he lost it to Ardašīr by 227. Of particular note is that fact that in the course of these operations Ardašīr formed an alliance with the Kings of Adiabene and Kirkuk and king Baba of the Aramaic speaking "Iraqis". This gives some credence to Ardavān's insulting name Ardašīr "the Kurd". He was indeed supported by the kings of "Kurdistan"¹⁶.

The reaction of the local populations to the change of ruler was mixed. Some of the Christian Arabs belonging to the Qudaah tribes disliked the prospect of being subjects of Ardašīr and fled and joined the Qudaah tribes who were already in Roman Syria. They preferred to be subjects of the Roman Empire at a time when the Christians

¹³ For the Sasanian concept of kingship, see DARYAEE 2008: 60-70.

¹⁴ Ṭabarī 818; Ferdowsī, 536-542.

¹⁵ Ṭabarī 818-9; Mīrkhwānd, 276-277. Ferdowsī, 536-542; *Nāma-ye Tansar*, 4-6; Mas'ūdī, 142; Agathangelos, 11-14; HUFF 2008: 38.

¹⁶ Ṭabarī 819; Baḷ'amī, 71-75; Mīrkhwānd, 277-278; *The Chronicle of Arbela*, 8; Ferdowsī, 542-554; *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*, 5; Agathangelos, 19-23; Moses of Khorensats'i, II 67-73.

were not yet persecuted¹⁷. This, however, is not the whole picture because Ardašīr followed a policy of religious tolerance to make it easier to conquer new territories¹⁸. In the following years (c.226-227) Ardašīr subdued the eastern territories and conquered al-Baḥrayn in about ca. 228. Consequently, it took until 228 for Ardašīr to secure the areas that had previously recognized Parthian rulers. This gave him access to the entire trade network and to most of the manpower of these areas, both of which were needed in the forthcoming wars. The only thorn in his flesh was Armenia with its Arsacid ruler Xusrō the Great¹⁹.

We are now in a position to summarize what tools Ardašīr used in the securing of Iran and most of the territories of Parthian Empire:

- 1) In about 211-213 he obtained a loyal core of supporters consisting of: a) the soldiers who had fought with him; b) the Zoroastrian clergy loyal to his family; c) the Persians of Persis loyal to his family and whose support he could rely upon against the foreign Parthians; d) the merchants of Persis that gave him access to a fleet of ships.
- 2) In about 213-223/4 he exploited the civil war between Walagaš and Ardavān so that he was able to secure a base of operations in a situation in which Ardavān had proven himself unable to protect even the holy sites of the Zoroastrian faith.
- 3) In about 224-228 he exploited the dissatisfaction of the Parthian/Persian nobility, merchants, clergy and populace against Ardavān's policies and his persecution of the Parthian magnates loyal to Walagaš. After Ardašīr had subdued all resistance, he secured the support of the seven major Parthian families by giving them back their privileges that Ardavān had abolished. These privileges were based on the laws of the Achaemenid ruler Darius I who had been the first to grant all of the major offices of the empire to the seven families that had supported him²⁰. During this stage of his campaign Ardašīr's goal was the securing of all those domains that were or had been ruled by the families that had Arsacid blood in their veins or had recognized their suzerainty, but this was clearly not the limit of his territorial ambitions. His next targets of attack were the territories previously held by the Achaemenids.
- 4) It was during this same time period that Ardašīr secured the conquered territory with a well-organized intelligence gathering apparatus, which consisted either of the members of the Zoroastrian clergy or of persons thoroughly indoctrinated by them, but he did not stop at this. Ardašīr indoctrinated the entire populace with

¹⁷ In fact Severus Alexander and his mother were both interested in the Christian faith.

¹⁸ *Chronicle of Arbela*, 8, Ṭabarī 821-822, 833-834.

¹⁹ Ṭabarī 819-820; *Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*, 6; Mīrkhwānd, 278; BOSWORTH in Ṭabarī (p. 16, n. 61) notes that the name of the king of Bahrain Sanatruq is Parthian suggesting the likelihood that he was a vassal of the Arsacids. I do not agree with FRYE (1983: 121-124) that Gilan and the coast of the Caspian Sea (Gurgan/Hyrcania) did not submit to Ardašīr, because the name Gilan King appears for the first time in the reign of Šāpur who installed his son, the later king Bahrām I, as its ruler. Ṭabarī clearly implies that the areas that he mentioned were conquered and Movsēs Khorenats is quite specific that all of the Parthian clans except the Kāriṅs supported Ardašīr, which means that the ruling family of Gurgan/Hyrcania supported them too.

²⁰ E.g. Theophylact, III 18. 9.

religious propaganda and falsified national myths/history which were later codified as the official history of the Sasanian realm²¹.

The spreading of Ardašīr's version of Zoroastrian faith meant the introduction of strict social control in which the society was divided into four (or five?) major castes (clergy, warriors, bureaucrats, and the common people) in which everything was controlled by the magi. The fact that the high priest Kerdīr used only Middle Persian in his inscriptions, the language of Persis, is highly suggestive that Ardašīr's Zoroastrianism was the version practiced in Persis²². This is also highly suggestive of the importance of the Iranian nationalism in the initial stage of Ardašīr's rise to power. Ardašīr also appears to have divided his subjects along the 'racial' lines into Iranians and non-Iranians, which is proven by the concepts *Ērān* and *Anērān*.

Ardašīr I the "Achaemenid"

Invasion of Roman Territory in 229-330

Ardašīr followed up his successes by invading the Roman territories in ca. 229/330. According to the Roman sources, Ardašīr proclaimed to be the legitimate successor of the Achaemenids and the legal owner of their lands.²³ Despite not yet having defeated the Armenians, the timing of the attack was opportune because the Roman army in the East was in the middle of a mutiny. Of note is also the fact that there were Zoroastrian communities within the Roman territory in Syria, Asia Minor and Cappadocia and that the Persians were probably in contact with these²⁴. It is therefore not surprising that Ardašīr managed to gain the upper hand and pillage Mesopotamia and Cappadocia and threaten Syria, but he was still forced to

²¹ Even if there is no firm evidence for this in the sources, it is more than likely that in the initial stages of the nation building the official history of Iran did not yet bypass the Parthians and most of the Achaemenid history in the way we find it in Ferdowsī's *Šhāh-nāma*. The reasons for this conclusion are: 1) The Parthian Arsacids were still in power; 2) The Roman sources state quite clearly that Ardašīr used in his propaganda Achaemenid history. The change in the writing of official history must therefore have taken place when it became apparent to the Sasanians that they could not use Achaemenid history to their own advantage. The likeliest date for this change in propaganda is the reign of Yazdgerd I (399-420) who was the first to adopt the title Kai, which connected the Sasanian kings to the mythical Kayanids. The apparent reason for the change was that Yazdgerd maintained peace with the Romans and therefore did not have any need for the use of the Achaemenid propaganda. The use of the Kai in the title mentioned by POURSHARIATI (2008: 335). For details of these later events, see SYVÄNNE 2015b (written with the generous support of the ASMEA Research Grant).

²² The use of the language of Persis in POURSHARIATI 2008: 333.

²³ For Ardašīr's Achaemenid rhetoric, see EDWELL 2008: 156-160; SHAHBAZI 2001. Contrary to what Edwell states, I do not think that the revocation of the Achaemenid past would have been meant to serve only as rhetorical propaganda by Ardašīr. The fact that Ardašīr was unable to attain the goals that he publicly set on himself is not evidence that he did not have those goals.

²⁴ EDWELL (2008: 159) after Kerdīr's inscription. I would suggest that these communities also provided intelligence reports for the Persians.

evacuate the Roman territory in 230. Consequently, it is probable that the Achaemenid and Zoroastrian propaganda did have a positive impact, but it was not decisive because there were not enough Zoroastrians in the Roman territories to make the difference in a situation in which the Persian army failed to defeat the Romans decisively²⁵. The lack of popular uprisings proves that the Achaemenid propaganda had just as little attraction for the peoples of Roman east as the Ottoman propaganda of today's Turkey has among the Arabs of Middle East. These peoples did not yearn to become subject nations of a Persian/Zoroastrian theocracy when they had been under the much more benign Roman rule for well over two centuries.

Roman Counter-Strike in 231-232

The Roman response was to prepare a massive invasion of Iran, but the poor planning and coordination of three separate armies enabled Ardašīr to engage each of those separately. This time, in imitation of the Achaemenids, Ardašīr fielded a military force, which included scythed war chariots and elephants. The war ended in a stalemate, but the poor performance of the scythed war chariots led to their abandonment. It was impossible to reintroduce successfully outdated pieces of military hardware and tactics solely on the basis that these harked back to the good old times of the Achaemenid past²⁶.

The Final Years of the Founding Father

The Roman and Iranian empires remained at peace until ca. 239-240 when the Persians appear to have invaded Roman territory once more and this time they were able to take Nisibis, Singara and Hatra before the end of 240. In about 240 Ardašīr appointed his son Šāpur as *šāhanšāh* so that he was free to devote his last moments on earth for the preparation of his eventual death which came in about 241/2. The war was continued under Šāpur I in 240-241/2²⁷.

Šāpur I of the Hosts (240/242-271)

The Beginning of Šāpur I's Rule in 241/2-248

The first thing Šāpur I needed to do after the death of his father was to secure the support of the “great men” of the empire. With the exception of Pērōz of Kārin in

²⁵ Sources collected in DODGEON, LIEU 1991: 17-33.

²⁶ Sources collected in DODGEON, LIEU 1991: 26-28; SYVÄNNE 2017: 311-324.

²⁷ Sources collected in DODGEON, LIEU 1991: 32-35 with notes 354-355. See also MAKSYMUK 2015: 29-31; FRYE 1983: 124-125. GHIRSMAN (1978: 191) has suggested that the Sasanians managed to defeat the Armenians after a war that lasted ten years, but this seems to be an overstatement of the facts because Xusrō was still fighting against Persia during the reigns Philip, Decius, Gallus and Valerian.

the east, the other great men offered their loyalty. The disloyalty of Pērōz is not surprising in light of the fact that the Kārins had previously sided with Ardavān and then with Xusrō the Great. It is quite probable that in this case the Romans, who now invaded Persia under the nominal leadership of Gordian III, and the Armenians and Kārins all cooperated. As long as the Romans were led by the praetorian prefect Timesitheus in 242-243, they were successful, but when the young Gordian assumed the leadership in 244, the Roman campaign ended in utter defeat. When Gordian died in uncertain circumstances, he was succeeded by Philip the Arab who negotiated a peace settlement with Šāpur. This gave Šāpur the chance to crush Pērōz, but Philip did not abide by his agreement and continued to support the Armenians. On top of this, Šāpur was unable to defeat Pērōz militarily, but he was still able to bring the war to a successful conclusion thanks to the poisoning of Pērōz by a Persian special operative. The Persians exploited the situation by adding new territories into their domains in the east.²⁸

Šāpur I's Wars and Manichaeism from 249 until ca. 271/2

After having pacified the east, Šāpur I appears to have decided to punish the Romans for their breach of peace terms. Šāpur inflicted a series of crushing defeats on the Romans from 249 until roughly 256, which are recorded in Šāpur I's inscription known as the ŠKZ. The Roman counter attack under Valerian halted the yearly invasions temporarily, but in about 259/260 Šāpur defeated and captured Valerian alive. It was also during the 250s that Šāpur was able to assassinate Xusrō the Great and add Armenia, Albania, and Iberia into the Persian Empire. The *Historia Augusta* suggests that the Armenians and Bactrians once again changed sides after the capture of Valerian in about 260, which proves again the strong resistance of the Armenians, Kārins and Kushans against the Sasanians. Šāpur naturally made them all pay dearly for their disloyalty. The Roman counter attack led by Ballista and the Palmyran Odaenathus, however, turned the tables in 260 so that Odaenathus was eventually able to advance twice against Ctesiphon before his murder in 267²⁹.

The fact that Mani was accompanying Šāpur on his military campaigns in the west suggests that Šāpur used Mani's universal religious message as a weapon to weaken the enemy resistance. The best proof of this is the Roman accusation that the Manicheans were pro-Persian fifth-columnists. Of particular note is also the fact that Šāpur appears to have respected the sanctity of religious temples and shrines during his campaigns. The respect that he showed to the local religions in conjunction with the universality of Mani's teachings was obviously meant to make it easier for the

²⁸ Ṭabarī 826; Movsēs Khorenats'i, II 72, 2.87; *Chronicle of Arbela* 9; Zonaras, 12.19; DODGEON, LIEU 1991: 354-359.

²⁹ Movsēs Khorenats'i, II 72-3, 2.76; Zonaras, XII 21-22; *Historia Augusta*, vita Val. 2. 1-4.; ŠKZ; DODGEON, LIEU 1991: 50-110; Ṭabarī 826-27. MAKSYMIUK (2015: 29-45) provides a good summary of these Romano-Persian wars.

locals to join the religious community led by Mani and ultimately by the *šāhanšāh* in person. However, at the same time as this happened, Šāpur gave the high priest Kerdīr two missions: 1) to protect the Zoroastrians in the lands conquered by the Persians; 2) to unite the local Zoroastrian churches into the Persian organization so that they would be placed under the Persian clergy³⁰. In short, it is quite probable that one of Šāpur I's intentions was to use Mani's message of universal religion as a unifying force for the peoples of Iran and non-Iran, because the Persis version of the Zoroastrian faith had failed to do the trick in the west and apparently also in the east because Mani made several missionary trips to this region too. It is therefore also quite probable that Šāpur did not see any conflict between the teachings of Mani and the Zoroastrian religion.

The fact that Odaenathus faced only "satraps" during his invasion of Persian lands in about 266-267 suggests that Šāpur faced troubles in the east just like his successor Hormozd. On the basis of this it is clear that whatever measures had been taken by Šāpur and Mani to pacify the region that these had failed and probably contributed to the problem because Mani fell out of favor. In short, it appears probable that the very last years of Šāpur's rule were spent in the east.

Šāpur's Successors (271/2-293) and the Rise of Kerdīr

Šāpur was succeeded by his son Hormozd I the Bold (ca. 270/271-272/3), who conducted a successful campaign against the Hephthalites or Sogdians. Very little is known of Hormozd's reign besides this, except that he may have held both Mani and Zoroastrians in equal honor. Some historians even claim that he was a follower of Mani, and that he restored Mani back in favor after his temporary fall from favor during the last years of Šāpur's rule, but this interpretation has not been universally accepted because Hormozd promoted Kerdīr's standing to such an extent that he was in the position to decide who would succeed Hormozd. Furthermore, Dīnavarī even claims that Mani was killed by Hormozd³¹.

We are on a more certain ground with Hormozd I's successor Bahrām I (272/3-275/6) and under his successor Bahrām II (275/6-293). Under Bahrām II Kerdīr's position became so powerful that his picture was included on Bahrām's reliefs. On top of this Bahrām II even handed over to Kerdīr the lordship of the fire of Anāhid-Ardašīr at Eštākr and of Lady Anahit, which had previously been the sole right of the Sasanians. Unsurprisingly, Kerdīr had Mani executed and his followers persecuted. He also launched a full-scale persecution of all religions whose doctrines

³⁰ Sources for Šāpur's wars collected in DODGEON, LIEU 1991: 50-110 with notes; The references to Mani and Kerdīr in DODGEON, LIEU 1991: 65 and 135. For Mani's life, see SUNDERMANN 2009. For the Persian religions in general, see esp. DARYAEE 2010: 69-97; POURSHARIATI 2008: 321-395.

³¹ Dīnavarī; For Mani, see SUNDERMANN 2009; POURSHARIATI 2008: 331.

differed from his version of the Persis Zoroastrianism. His Persis version of Zoroastrianism was now the only orthodox religion³².

In my opinion, the strong position of Kerdīr and the weakening of Mani's standing resulted also from the military situation. The Persian rulers were waging wars in the east from ca. 272 until 282 while the Romans were threatening them from the west. It was thanks to this that Trdat the Great managed to gain a permanent foothold in his native Armenia in about 277³³. Therefore, my ultimately improvable educated guess is that the legitimate Sasanian rulers (Bahrām I-II) wanted to secure the full support of the military contingents drawn from Persis and the Zoroastrian Church by giving Kerdīr their full backing while their enemies in the east sought support from the Manicheans.

Ardašīr's Vision of Iran Re-asserts itself in 293

The change to the situation came under Narseh (293-302) who did not accept the nomination of Bahrām III as Bahrām II's successor. We are lucky to possess the *Pāikūlī Inscription* set up by Narseh I, because it describes the principal events of his rise to power. At the time Bahrām II died his son Bahrām III was in Sakastan and Narseh in Armenia. Bahrām III succeeded on the throne as his father had wished, but this was done without consulting the princes, grandees, nobles, Persians, and Parthians. This move angered all of the above. What is notable about this list is the omission of the clergy, which implies that the clergy backed Bahrām III, while Narseh's supporters consisted mainly of the feudal nobility. The notables who accepted Narseh as ruler asked him to move from Armenia to *Ērānšahr* (Land of Iran)³⁴ and to take the crown. Narseh was backed up by his personal retinue and by the Army of Armenia, the Army of Gilan, and by the forces of the noble houses of Sūrēn, Wārāz, and Andēgān, while Bahrām III's forces consisted of the Army of Sakastan and of the Army of Mesene and of the forces of the Kārins and of the Prince Pērōz. In other words, it was a struggle in which, with the exception of the Kārins, the previous enemies of Ardašīr I supported his grandson Narseh against the forces of Persis which were now reinforced with the forces of Sakastan, Kārins, Mesene and Pērōz.³⁵

Narseh adopted a twofold policy to undermine Bahrām's position. Firstly, he adopted the policy of clemency towards all those who would desert Bahrām. Secondly, he claimed to rule in the name of Ohrmazd, of all the gods and of the Lady Anāhid, and he also reclaimed the title of the Chief of the Eštaqr temple away from the

³² *Chronicle of Arbela* 10. For another interpretation, see POURSHARIATI 2008: 327-395.

³³ For the eastern troubles, see DODGEON, LIEU 1991: 71-122; SYVÄNNE 2015a: 169-179.

³⁴ In this case the wording meant Asorestan/Mesopotamia with its capital at Ctesiphon.

³⁵ The presence of the Sūrēns among the supporters of Narseh mean probably the Sūrēn Pahlav rather than the Sūrēn Pārsīg, because the former appears to have lost their lands in Sakastan/Sistān which was now under Bahrām.

clergy. This brought results. The Mesopotamian towns which hated the bigoted theocracy created by Kerdīr and most of the nobles deserted to Narseh's side.³⁶ The fact that the Sasanians were the traditional priests of Anāhid worked to their advantage in Persis. In fact, the deserters included even Kerdīr who must have realized that it was in his own interest to change sides before he would also fall – he seems to have realized that the military forces of Narseh were just too powerful to resist. Bahrām tried to restore unity among his followers with a series of religious ceremonies, but to no avail. His soldiers deserted and Bahrām was captured. This proves that the heritage of the founder of the Sasanian Empire Ardašīr proved stronger than the power of the clergy, but at the same time this also proves that the power of the king of kings always rested on the duality of his control of military forces and religion, but in such a way that it was ultimately the military force which was decisive³⁷.

The Iranian Nation and Empire Building in the 3rd century

In sum, the initial building blocks of Ardašīr for his nation were the Iranian nationalism and religion in Fārs, the loyal military following he had secured for himself, and the civil war among the Parthians. He used this to great advantage so that he was able to build a secure base while the Parthian rulers were fighting against each other after which he exploited the divisions among the Parthian nobility to overthrow the Parthians. The subduing of the Parthian nobility was secured with a combination of military action, clemency and religious control. The reinterpretation of the Zoroastrian faith and the Achaemenid past to serve the politico-religious goals of Ardašīr formed a part of the process. When Ardašīr attempted to use the Achaemenid and Zoroastrian inheritance in the lands outside *Ērānšahr*, this was not effective enough in a situation in which the military forces failed to achieve their goals.

Ardašīr's son Šāpur I changed the strategy and attempted to unite the non-Iranians and Iranians under Manichaeism, but when this resulted in further problems in the east, the Persis version of Zoroastrianism reasserted itself towards the end of his reign with the result that Šāpur I's immediate successors were entirely reliant on Kerdīr's support. These rulers and Kerdīr, however, overplayed their hand with the result that the original vision of Ardašīr, the duality of kingship and religion, reasserted itself. Under Narseh the monarchy and the armed forces were once again back in power. Ardašīr's idea may have been to secure his position with this duality in which the military forces under the nobility and the magi were constantly competing with each other, but in practice this did not work when the nobles and magi found a common ground. And we do not have to wait long for this to happen for it was

³⁶ POURSHARIATI 2008: 333.

³⁷ NPi.

already in 309/310 when this happened and the magnates and magi murdered Hormozd II (302/3-309/310) and installed his unborn son Šāpur II on the throne³⁸. The subsequent history of the Sasanian realm was therefore a constant struggle for power between the ruler, magnates and the magi.

One of the outcomes of the rise of the purist form of Zoroastrianism under the Sasanians was the Roman counter reaction in the bigoted form of pagan worship under Decius, Valerian and Diocletian and then in the rise of the similarly bigoted form of Christianity in the fourth century. The unity of purpose provided by the Zoroastrianism required similar unity of purpose from the neighbors. A clear parallel development has taken place quite recently in the Islamic world after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. **The rise of the Shiites in Iran and the occupation of Afghanistan by the atheist Soviet Union opened up the gates for the rise of the Sunni fanaticism.** There is always a counter reaction to the rise of some ideology or religion.

Any Lessons for Modernity?

The above account suggests that whenever one wants to build a nation, the circumstances for it have to be right. In other words, there has to be a crisis which has undermined the position of the previous rulers. Furthermore, one needs to find some ideological or religious basis for it, which includes the creation of falsified myths which are then exploited in a military campaign to unite the core followers. It also suggests a need to possess strong armed forces and loyal intelligence services to control the newly conquered areas. It also proves that the religion/ideology that is used to unite the core areas will probably not be as useful in the annexation of new territories in a situation in which the military lacks the means to conquer the territories in question.

The above analysis has also shown that the strengthening of the position of the clergy and religion can be a two-edged sword. In the initial stages it can unite the people behind the leader, but after the demise of the founding father and his immediate successor there clearly existed a danger that the clergy could actually overtake the power that belonged to the ruler. It also implies that modern liberal democracy would be far too weak as a form of government to resist a nationwide well-organized and all-powerful clergy such as existed in the Sasanian Empire, because even its rulers with their powerful personal armies faced trouble when the clergy was able to undermine the loyalty of the rest of the armed forces serving under the nobles. The obvious conclusion that one can draw from this is that if one wants to build a new nation in a place where the religion already wields significant influence over the population, the person needs to undermine its position with a new religion or

³⁸ SYVÄNNE 2015a: 239; SYVÄNNE 2018.

ideology that is then used to unite the armed forces behind the founding father. To take a modern example, the Arab Socialist movements managed to suppress the power wielded by the clerics temporarily when the socialist movement was on the rise. However, after socialism/communism had lost its lure and the Soviet Union had collapsed in 1991, most of these socialist governments have proven to be too weak to resist the religious fanatics especially when these receive support from foreign powers. Nowadays, the secular Arab governments can survive only with foreign help, which is not that surprising because a secular government cannot co-exist with a religion that requires blind obedience from its followers. In order to survive the secular government has to use force – quite often brute military force – against the religious fanatics, but when such a government uses force it is forced to violate human rights. It is the military vs. the clergy just like it was in ancient Iran. Had anyone bothered to study the Sasanian example at nation building, this would have been quite obvious to everyone. The study and analysis of ancient matters is still relevant and when the results of such studies are taken into account properly it would be possible to avoid the making of such quite serious mistakes that have been committed by the western powers in the Middle East in the course of the past 30 years.

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Summary

Nation and Empire Building the Iranian Way The Case of the Sasanian Empire in the 3rd Century

The article concentrates its attention on the practical aspects of the nation and empire building so that it: 1) Analyzes what methods, means and myths the founder Ardašīr I and his immediate successors used in the building of the Iranian nation and then the empire; 2) Provides an analysis of the importance of history and religion in the making of national myths so that the article analyzes how the Iranian leadership rewrote the past together with its religion for the purpose of uniting under their flag all those who spoke the Iranian dialects and/or practiced ancient Iranian religions, 3) Investigates what methods the Sasanians used to control the subjects; 4) Shows how the original set of falsified historical myths and the core set of religious beliefs were altered to meet the changing reality. 5) Asks whether the above provides any lessons for modernity.

Keywords: Iran, Persia, Sasanians, Parthians, Zoroastrianism, Religion, Rome, Nationalism, Nation-building, Military