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The Sasanian Empire in the Fifth Century: The Case of Yazdegerd I and Bahrām V

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DEDICATION

To
the two heroes of my life, my parents, Iran Motamedi and Mohammad Jafar Malekzadeh. Thank
you for lighting my torch, paving my path, and holding my hand as I treaded this earth. It would
have been a treacherously scary journey without you.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Sasanian Empire in the Fifth Century: The Case of Yazdegerd I and Bahrām V

By

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Despite his literary popularity, the Sasanian King Bahrām V (r. 421- 438 CE) is a neglected figure in the Historical study of Iran. His life and reign have so far been a mystery waiting to be analyzed and reconstructed. This dissertation provides a resolution to the unanswered questions pertaining to Bahrām’s life, reign, and literary depiction by closely analyzing of Perso-Arabic texts in light of Greco-Roman, Armenian, and Syriac narratives. In order to provide a reconstructed history of Bahrām’s life and reign, it is also essential to study and highlight the various ways in which the Sasanian administration, under the leadership of Yazdegerd I, adopted a more centralized and diplomatic foreign policy in the face of the Hunnic invasions. I conclude that several forces, namely victory over the Huns, contextualized within the Kayānid ideology and promoted by the peace of the fifth century, allowed for the literary transformation of Bahrām from a royal figure into the great hero of late antique Iran.

INTRODUCTION

Some characters, whether historical, fictive, or both, embody the dynamic nature of humanity as they cross literal and figurative thresholds and borders in their journey through life and beyond. In this process, they defy certain boundaries or create new ones. Such limits may, at times, not be readily discernable. Yet the act of crossing from one world into another defines the meaning of life, not only for the protagonist but also for the storyteller and the audience. A fine example of a character continually crossing the boundaries between epic and history can be found in The Republic of Azerbaijan. Walking through Azneft Square, in Baku, one does not expect to come across a bronze statue of a fifth-century Iranian King, frozen in the moment, as he is about to slay a dragon. It is even more surprising that in his new setting, this King is stripped of his royal attire and more or less personifies a freedom fighter such as Kāveh the Blacksmith, rather than a royal figure. The dragon slayer of Baku is no other but Bahrām Gur, the fifteenth King of Kings of the Sasanians Empire, and one of the subjects of this study.

The project of this dissertation began with the aim to produce a critical analysis of Perso-Arabic accounts concerning Bahrām's life and reign. I was hoping that such study would shed light on the grand mystery surrounding Bahrām's depiction in epic narratives and the question of why and how, out of all Sasanian kings, it is he, perhaps, who crossed the boundaries of history and epic the most, transitioning from king to hero, a process that immortalized him in the limitless world of Eurasian storytelling and epic tales. The initial stages of this project proved to be slow and fruitless. The grand puzzle of Bahrām's life as a royal-hero was missing a crucial piece; one that was nowhere within the sources and scholarship concerning his life and reign but rested in the history of his father Yazdegerd's Kingship. Desperate to find answers, I expanded my focus and

looked back in time. The context in which Bahrām's character operated had been formed much earlier and was primarily impacted by the sociocultural and political changes that took place during the reign of his father Yazdegerd, "the Sinner." After all, the hand that life deals us is as important as how we choose to play it. Thus, I also embarked on deconstructing the history of Yazdegerd's reign, mainly his foreign policies and matters involving inner-aristocratic feuds of the time. The reconstruction of the history of this era brought all the seemingly contradictory details and unexplainable subtleties of Bahrām's life into focus and harmony. In the end, stepping back and viewing Yazdegerd and Bahrām's reign from a non-traditional standpoint, more than anything reveals the challenges, difficulties, and trials Sasanian kings faced as mortal men, vulnerable, scared, tired, and free of royal glamour. Such an outlook is also essential in composing an account that distances itself from usual binaries of good or bad, tyrannical or just, weak or powerful and moving towards a narrative that views kingship as a maze, laden with difficult decisions and numerous obstacles. It also brings to light the Sasanians' meticulous and at times innovative strategies that were utilized to ensure peace, prosperity, and longevity for the royal house and the empire.

At the dawn of the fifth century, the Sasanian administration had embarked on implementing a new political policy. The empire was now more interested in upholding a centralized outlook, one who placed diplomacy and peace before war and conquest. With the accession of Yazdegerd I as the King of Kings of Iran, this new political outlook gained life and was executed through tactical gestures of goodwill towards Rome, with whom the Sasanians now shared a common enemy, the Huns. It is the urgency brought about by this new invader that led the Sasanians down the path of increased diplomacy. For the first time, the Near East witnessed two superpowers coming to each other's aid. After inflicting great destruction upon Roman

provinces in 395 CE, the Huns were driven away by Persian forces only to return after two decades.¹ Yazdegerd, although still not the king, is likely to have had a significant role in thwarting the Hunnic invasion, the memory of which may have haunted him in later years. He now focused on transforming such sporadic acts of political kindness into the new reality.² As king, he first ordered assistance to be given to the emancipated Roman soldiers so that they could safely head home. He then vowed to Emperor Arcadius, who was on his deathbed, to protect the Roman State and its young Emperor, Theodosius II. Having negotiated a peace treaty with Rome and set in place new trade routes and cooperative defense measures against future Hunnic raids, Yazdegerd focused on solving the “Christian issue of Iran.” By doing so, he would not only bring further order to the empire but also demonstrate his goodwill to Rome. Inner-religious tension manifested itself in the form of mistrust towards the followers of Christ. This led to accusations of treason and disloyalty, cases of vandalism against Zoroastrian sacred space, and attempts to convert Zoroastrians. The hostility of Christian hagiographers against their Zoroastrian sovereign, in addition to the legal punishments that said crimes would conjure, had given Rome the excuse to meddle in Persian affairs and add fuel to the fire of tensions. Wisely, Yazdegerd’s next project was to resolve the issue through “the promotion of religious uniformity...and intervening in matters of religious dispute...”³ Uniformity was attained by legalizing Christianity, sanctioning regularly held synods, and granting the Catholicos a high position at court. This was done in hopes of

¹ Shapur Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian* (Tehran: Markaz Našr Danešgāhi, 2014), 420.

² There are also previous cases where those who had a significant role in securing military victory during war were given high status. If they were of royal blood, it would have increased their chances of being chosen as crown prince. Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 369. For example, Shapur II’s dedication to his brother Ardashir, and accepting him as heir over his son, was mainly due to the latter’s role in the victory over Julian. *Ibid.*, 410-12.

³ Robert Hoyland, “Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1057.

decreasing civil strife, increasing Christian loyalty to the crown, and extending a message of peace to Rome.

Peace with Rome, at the time, meant that the empire could focus its resources on the Hunnic threat. Moreover, it is plausible that the threats must have instigated a sense of insecurity within Iranians and subsequently led to a decrease in the Sasanians claim to sovereignty. The tales of horror that Hunnic raids of the previous century had spread through the Near East was reminiscent of Iranian epic tales that narrated the evil deeds of the Turānians and the final victory of the Kayānids in ridding the material world of the evil Afrāsiāb. The popularity and the religious nature of the epic tradition sparked the use of Kayānid ideals as a new legitimation discourse, one that refashioned the Sasanians as protectors of *Ērānšahr* and the ultimate torchbearers of peace in the model of their ancestors the Kayānids. Yazdegerd and Bahrām possessed the political acumen and experience, intertwined with an iron will, to put their policy of internal and external peace in motion. It is not surprising that such drastic changes in administrative outlook would face considerable opposition from the warlords of the empire, orthodox religious figures, and those whose dishonesty and corruption had made them targets. Neither son nor father was an easy force to reckon with. Thus, as peace within and without the empire was so dearly sought, aggression found a new center, and that was the inner aristocratic spheres of the realm.

Meanwhile, Yazdegerd's son, Bahrām, was born in 399/400 CE, to Šīšīnduxt, the daughter of the Jewish Exilarch. To be protected from danger, Bahrām was sent away to Hirā with Nu'mān son of Mundhir, a Sasanian vassal and the leader of the Lakhmid Arabs. With the support of Nu'mān and away from the lurking perils of Ctesiphon, Bahrām grew into what sources describe as a chivalrous youth, who exemplified every characteristic a Persian Prince was expected to possess. As a child, Bahrām is depicted as witty, intelligent, and far ahead of his teachers in arts,

sciences, literature, and most specifically archery and Equestrianism. About two decades later, past events such as continued Hunnic threats, relations with Rome, inner-aristocratic feuds and Bahrām's ties to Hirā all come together to impact Bahrām's destiny and subsequently breathe new life into the history of the House of Sāsān.

420 CE proved to be a challenging year for Bahrām, who was now a twenty-year-old prince. In a brief period, he lost his father, his brother was treacherously murdered, and he was denied his right to the throne. Destined for glory, as Perso-Arabic sources put it, he headed towards Ctesiphon to claim his right to the throne, with the support of a large army of Lakhmid warriors. Yazdegerd's trust in Nu'mān had not been misplaced, for with his help Bahrām succeeded in gaining kingship, albeit under a probationary one-year period condition. He did not, however, receive the crown on a golden tray. The same factions and individuals who had tainted his father's name in Sasanian hagiography wished to make sure that Bahrām was out of the way before the year was over. Major violent outbreaks in the east, tension with Rome, and further inner-aristocratic struggles characterized the beginning of his rule. Bahrām, on the other hand, upheld his father's commitment to the "Peace Project" by insisting on reinforcing a peace treaty despite Rome's aggressions. He held a new Christian council under his patronage, and, most importantly, subdued the Huns. It was precisely and his grand victory against the Huns in addition to the way he handled his enemies at court that solidified his reign and immortalized his name in history and epic. Bahrām ended up transitioning from king to hero, one that encompassed the diversity of the empire, with all its beauties and flaws, and also served as a reminiscent of the ancient struggles and values of the Iranians.

One can say that overall, the House of Sāsān was fraught with tension in the first half of the fifth century. Despite facing much hostility, conspiracy, and scheming, Yazdegerd and Bahrām

proved to be cunning sagacious political tacticians who managed to rule willfully. A difference in time, place and method of dealing with conflict led to father and son to receive starkly dissimilar depictions in Perso-Arabic sources. While Yazdegerd became a late antique model of Zahhāk, Bahrām began to resemble epic Iranian heroes such as Fereidun and Kay Khosrow. The primary drive behind such different treatments was the shift in the scale of power brought about by Bahrām’s victory over the Huns. Such triumph gained further prominence in the context of the newly promoted Kayānid ideology. Serving as the symbolic and literary embodiments of Kay Khosrow not only immortalized Bahrām as a hero, but also silenced the voices of his enemies once and for all. Although tales concerning Yazdegerd and Bahrām’s life and reign are heavily intertwined with epic-dramatic elements, one must acknowledge the limitations of “fact” and the contributions of “fiction,” while sifting through such accounts.

Historiography

Let us now take a brief look at the scholarly depiction of our two protagonists. It must be pointed out that the state of Sasanian historiography has been negligent of the significant political challenges and social changes that were implemented during the reign of Yazdegerd and his son Bahrām. This played a significant role in my decision to focus my research on the dynamics of the early fifth century and Yazdegerd and Bahrām’s reign. Almost half a century of rule, with all its unique historical dynamics, has been boiled down to a paragraph or two in monographs that can be characterized as more or less survey literature, such as Christensen’s *L’Iran sous les Sassanides* or Frye’s *The History of Ancient Iran*. On a brighter note, a few scholarly articles that focus on a

specific aspect Bahrām or Yazdegerd’s life, reign, or literary projection, such as Aidenlou’s “*Qeibat Bahrām Gur*,” have significantly contributed to the field.

Moreover, there are concerning issues in the treatment of this period and Sasanian history in general that must be brought to light. First, the binary tension between good and evil, as seen in the literary treatment of Yazdegerd and Bahrām, has unfortunately led to their mistreatment in modern scholarship as both are projected as “weak rulers.”⁴ Scholarship on the life and reign of Yazdegerd and Bahrām has been less glorious than their role in sources. The details of the Peace Project and the removal of emphasis from war and conquest have led scholars to characterize the successors of Shapur II as weak rulers, or better say, cowards. While Yazdegerd is depicted as a victim of Zoroastrian magi, Bahrām is characterized as a puppet, who succumbed to the magi’s will in his thirst for the crown. Such a view is most probably the result of two problematic outlooks. First, aggression, in its ancient context receives a somewhat romanticized treatment. Moreover, the association of thrill and glory with war and conquest played a major role in such views. This has led some scholars to gloss over the gruesome bloodshed, painful displacement, and the agony of widowed wives and orphaned children, and the trickling sound of cities burning to ashes. It is exactly this type of outlook that leads to periods, such as the reign of Shapur II, to be labeled as the height of the empire.⁵ Another reason for Yazdegerd and Bahrām’s mistreatment in Western scholarship lies in the persistence of orientalist ideas of the tyrannical east and ecclesial hyperbolic

⁴ For example, Christensen describes the post-Shapur II era as one hundred and twenty-five years of weak kings and aristocratic tension. Christensen also labels Bahrām V and his son Yazdegerd II as weak rulers and argues that the only reason Bahrām is praised in Perso-Arabic literature is because he left the affairs of the empire in the hands of Zoroastrian priests. Arthur Christensen, *L’Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1944), 356-60.

⁵ For such views, see George Rawlinson, *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy or the Geography, History, and Antiquities of the Sassanians or New Persian Empire* (London: Longmans, Green, & CO. 1876), 378

depictions of sadistic and manipulative Zoroastrian priests.⁶ As a result, we face misjudgment of a complex political system, in which executives, some with religious authority and some without, collaborated with the king in securing the safety and well-being of the empire and its citizens. For example, when speaking of the Christian integration in the fifth century, some historians either praise Yazdegird as being the sole instigator of the plan, disregarding the Sasanian administration and its intricacies. Others, using a Christian-centric approach, go as far as repeating the words of ecclesiastic hagiographies and emphasize that the bishop Marutha was the main force behind this deal and Yazdegerd and the Sasanians were merely impacted by the holy grace of the bishop.⁷

Such misconceptions add further urgency to the need for a new study that sheds unpolitical light on the life and reign of Yazdegerd and Bahrām. Despite the shortcomings, it is precisely such grounds that render the early fifth-century Sasanian history as worthy of further scholarly attention. Furthermore, the study of Bahrām and Yazdegerd’s life and reign would not be possible without foundation cast by valuable studies conducted on the history of the Sasanian World.

George Rawlinson’s monograph, *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy*, albeit dated and somehow less used, contains interesting suggestions for questions regarding the period of

⁶ See Pierre Briant, “The Theme of ‘Persian Decadence’ in Eighteenth-Century European Historiography: Remarks on the Genesis of a Myth,” in *The World of Achaemenid Persia: History, Art, and Society in Iran and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Curtis and St John Simpson (New York: I.B. Tauris: 2010), 3-16.

⁷ Frye portrays the changes made to the Christian status as merely the result of the hard work of roman/Christian ecclesial leaders. He states that Yazdegerd’s pro-Christian policies were “his reported friendship for Marutha the bishop of Maypherqat” and “that the lot of the Christians improved as a result of Marutha’s influence.” While in reality Marutha was a tool in implementing the rules that were advantageous to Christians, as part of the peace project. Such a view systematically removes the graces and good will of the king and places it on the church, subscribing to the belief that Sasanian kings were inherently hostile to minorities. See Richard N. Frye, “The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, vol. 3.1, 1983, 143-144.

Bahrām's rule.⁸ Rawlinson draws the most extended account of Bahrām's reign: one complete chapter. His fascination with Bahrām is apparent in the fact that even when discussing Yazdegerd, he makes an incursion into the life of Bahrām, showing that the two monarchs were not only tied by blood but need to be studied together. Rawlinson's work is not free of contradictory statements, however. For example, he states that neither courtiers, nor subjects, were happy to have Bahrām as king, but then sums up his reign suggesting that he was a generous and benevolent king.⁹

Arthur Christensen revolutionizes the field by dedicating his monograph, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, to the study of the Sasanians. Christensen sheds light on the curious position of Bahrām within Sasanian hagiography by categorizing him, along with the founder of the empire Ardashir Bābakān, as two of the most beloved characters in this period.¹⁰ He falls into the trap discussed earlier; merely deducing that Bahrām's popularity is a result of his giving in to his father's enemies, an argument that many scholars such as Richard Frye and Scott McDonough reiterate in their respective work.¹¹ Although Christensen does not dedicate the in-depth

⁸ For example, while discussing the reign of Yazdegerd I (399 – 420 A.D.), Rawlinson argues that Yazdegerd's coins reveal that Bahrām was in fact not the first choice for the throne. Early minted coins have Yazdegerd's name and the name of "Ardeshir." Rawlinson assumes that Ardashir must have been a son of Yazdegerd and his designated heir. Only later coins mint the names of Yazdegerd and Bahrām. Rawlinson guesses that Ardashir either died or offended his father, which ultimately led to Bahrām's appointment as heir. Although Rawlinson does not develop this hypothesis further, it is worth noting, especially about Bahrām's relationship with his father, the incidents which followed Yazdegerd's death, the subject of Bahrām's kingship and his relationship with the courtly elite. See Rawlinson, *The Seventh Great Oriental*, 278.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 393-403.

¹⁰ Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1944), 537.

¹¹ See Scott McDonough, "A Question of Faith? Persecution and Political Centralization in the Sasanian Empire of Yazdegerd II (438-457 CE)," in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, ed. Harold A. Drake (Aldershot: Ashgate 2006), 77.

examination that Yazdegerd and Bahrām deserve, he does lay the groundwork for future studies by presenting the two protagonists as they appear in Perso-Arabic studies.¹²

Richard Frye's contributions to Iranian and Sasanians Studies cannot be overstated. Bahrām and Yazdegerd however, were never the focal point of his attention. Nonetheless, in his chapter, "The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians," Frye identifies the understudied nature of the early fifth century Sasanians history, yet like Christensen fails to exhibit any reconstructive analysis of sources about Yazdegerd and Bahrām's era.¹³ Moreover, his monograph, *The History of Ancient Iran*, although a great addition to the compendium of Iranian historiography, fails to do justice to Bahrām and Yazdegerd's history.¹⁴

Touraj Daryaee breathes fresh air into the field of Sasanians Studies with the publication of his monograph, *Sasanian Persia, The Rise and Fall of an Empire*. This study sheds new light on many understudied aspects of Sasanian history. He breaks ties with the discourse of Bahrām's bow to the elite in his greed for kingship and recognizes Bahrām's success as the King and as the protector of Ērānšahr. Especially relevant to my work are two articles, "History, Epic, and Numismatics: on the Title of Yazdegerd I (Rāmšahr)" and "National History or Kayānid History? The Nature of Sassanid Zoroastrian Historiography."¹⁵ In the former, Daryaee, recognizes the initiation of the Peace Project under Yazdegerd and brilliantly ties this to its Kayānid background, on which he further elaborates in the latter article. Daryaee's two articles are the foundation and

¹² Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 374-382.

¹³ Frye, "The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians."

¹⁴ Richard N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*. Munchen: Beck, 1984.

¹⁵ Touraj Daryaee, "Keyanid History or National History? The Nature of Sāsānian Zoroastrian Historiography," *The Journal of the Society for Iranian Studies* 28, no. 3-4 (1995): 129-141.; Touraj Daryaee, "History, Epic, and Numismatics: on the Title of Yazdegerd I (Rāmšahr)," *American Journal of Numismatics* 14 (2002): 89-5.

backbone of the first and second chapters of this dissertation and served as the two primary drives behind the main arguments of this study.

Furthermore, Shapur Shahbazi's commentary on Tabari's history of the Sasanians, published under the title, *Tārikh Sasanian*, offers a constructive perspective as one attempts to understand the implications and possible interpretations of the Tabari's report on the life and reign of Bahrām and Yazdegerd.¹⁶ Moreover, Geoffrey Greatrex does a great job analyzing accounts of the Sasanians' conflict with Rome in 421 CE in his article, "The Two Fifth-Century Wars between Rome and Persia," where he delves deep into sources, providing a comprehensive analysis. Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winters' monograph, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbors and Rivals*, also sheds light on the Roman-Sasanian relations, including the 421 CE confrontations. Although they successfully present the nuances of the relations between the two empires rather than focusing on antagonism as its main characteristic, one cannot disregard the number of times the term "aggression" shows up next to the term "Sasanian."¹⁷

The early fifth century and the Sasanians in general receive a very fair and non-polemical treatment in Richard Payne's groundbreaking monograph, *A State of Mixture*. Yazdegerd's attempts to regulate Christian activity and reduce inner-religious tension has deeply examined as Payne draws upon Perso-Arabic, Middle Persian and Greco-Roman sources and brings to light the nuanced relationship between the Sasanian administration and its Christian subjects.¹⁸

¹⁶ Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*.

¹⁷ Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter. *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Richard E. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

The endurance and development of Bahrām's character in Iranian literate and epic have also attracted the attention of scholars of Persian Literature. For example, Mohammad Jafar Mahjub in his 1989 study, *Gur Bahrām Gur, Sowgoli Shāhnāmeḥ*, sheds light on Bahrām's prominent position in the Shāhnāmeḥ of Ferdowsi.¹⁹ Moreover, Sajjad Aidenlou, in his 2016 article "*Qeibat Bahrām Gur*," brilliantly analyzes stories associated with Bahrām's death and reveals how such stories are intended to further exonerate the hero-king by placing him into a position of messiah and savior.²⁰

This brief review of the literature reveals that, despite the shortcomings and the contributions, the life and reign of Bahrām and Yazdegerd could benefit from one wholesome and in-depth study that would fill in some of the blanks and shed light on more gaps to be analyzed by future historians. This dissertation intends to do so. It is organized subsequently.

Chapter one, "*Killing the Enemy with Kindness*," establishes that, by the dawn of the fifth century, the Sasanian administration shifted its policies away from conquest and towards peace and diplomacy, both internal and external. A cross-examination of Perso-Arabic and Greco-Roman sources reveals the nuanced ways in which Iran attempted to gradually change the nature of its relationship with Rome, the minorities of the empire, and its Iranian citizens. This chapter studies the political atmosphere that resulted in a policy of peace and the repercussions that such a policy had for the empire and its ruling class. This chapter argues that ultimately, Yazdegerd heralded a new age of peace, at the expense of his eternal damnation in Persian hagiography and epic literature.

¹⁹ Mohamad Jafar Mahjub, *Gur Bahrām Gur, Sowgoli Shāhnāmeḥ Ferdowsi* (Tehran: Kānun Pažuheš va Amuzeš, 1989).

²⁰ Sajjad Aidenlou, "Qeibat Bahrām Gur," *Boustān Adab* 2 (2016): 27-60.

Chapter two, “*But Who Prays for Satan...He Being Among Sinners the Supremest?*” demonstrates that Yazdegerd’s vilified image in Perso-Arabic historiography and his Saint-like depiction in ecclesial and Greco-Roman sources are merely two sides of the same coin. This chapter emphasizes and demonstrates that, unlike the assertion of previous studies, Yazdegerd’s tainted image was not merely the result of his decision to legalize Christianity but was affected by the amalgamation of many forces and policies coming into clash with each other, at the wrong time and in the wrong place. The animosity existing between the King and the Persian aristocrats initially stemmed from the murder of his father and brother, namely Shapur III and Bahrām IV, and was intensified by Yazdegerd’s anti-corruptive measures and diplomatic decisions in securing peace, including, but not limited to, the legalization of Christianity. The King’s ruling philosophy is best described by the Shakespearean saying “nothing emboldens sin as much as mercy.”²¹

Chapter three, “*Some are Born Great,*” looks back at 399/400 CE and the birth of Bahrām. While the two previous chapters focus on Ctesiphon as the center of activity, Chapter three moves a few miles south to Hirā, where Bahrām grew into a young man. Beneath the thick mist of myth, hyperbole, and romanticism that characterize most of the Perso-Arabic accounts concerning Bahrām’s life, lay the nuanced methods with which the Iranian storytelling tradition chisels its heroes into being. This chapter concentrates on stories of Bahrām’s birth and childhood until his coronation. It sheds light on the dreadful events that arose after the death of Yazdegerd, as well as on Bahrām’s struggle against forces similar to those his father faced and the different trajectory he took to resolve them.

²¹ William Shakespeare, *The Life of Timon of Athens*, ed. John Jowett (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), 244.

Chapter four, “*Unhappy is the Land that Needs a Hero,*” analyses a new phase of Bahrām’s life: his role as King of Kings of the Sasanian Empire. This chapter traces the unique ways Perso-Arabic sources and the Iranian oral and written epic tradition, as the nuts and bolts of a conscious hero-building project; immortalize Bahrām into a Kayānid hero and a messiah. Beyond the glitter and the gold crust of epic poetry and legendary feats of heroism lies the bitter core of historical truth. In Bahrām’s case, the struggle to maintain peace within and beyond the empire provided safety and security for the citizens of *Ērānšahr*. He subdued, in his own unique way, those who had opposed the changes brought along during the early fifth century. Bahrām’s success becomes tenfold when placed in the context of the religio-epic animosity between Iran and Turān. This in turn transforms Bahrām into the living representation of Kay Khosro, who is viewed as the Kayānid royal hero and the deathless saint who brought Afrāsiāb to his knees, and avenged many generations of innocent Iranian bloodshed at his hands. The story of Bahrām’s life, from birth to death, was forever immortalized as it was woven with elements of heroism and glory. Ultimately, I argue that it is the cultural framework of epic heroic tales that exalts Bahrām as the hero of late antiquity and transfers his stories of trial and valor beyond the borders of *Ērānšahr*, glorifying his fame for centuries to come.

A Guide to Pronunciation

Following is a guide to diacritic marks used in transliterating Middle Persian, terms. For the transliteration of Arabic and Persian Terms excluding modern personal names and trademarks, the IJMES Transliteration system which can be retrieved online at <https://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/docs/TransChart.pdf>

Ā **B**other, **F**ox, **C**ot

Č **C**hine, Nature, **C**hurch

Ē seen in Middle Persian terms; a long /e/ sound in **B**ed, **M**elt, **R**ed.

Ī **B**each, **T**eeth, **C**lean

Š **S**hower, **S**how, **S**hine

Ō seen in Middle Persian terms; a long /o/ sound in **D**oor, **f**or, **p**ort.

Ū **S**chool, **B**oots, **S**hoot

X Similar to the German sound in **I**ch or **B**uch.

Ž **V**ision, **A**zure, **P**leasure

CHAPTER 1: “KILLING THE ENEMY WITH KINDNESS”

The dawn of the fifth Century coincided with the beginning of Yazdegerd I's rule (399-420 CE) and summoned a different chapter in the foreign policies of the Sasanian Empire, one that was void of the major armed conflict that characterized the Roman-Sasanian relationship in previous centuries.²² In this chapter, I analyze accounts which make mention of Roman-Persian relations during Yazdegerd and study the diplomatic and culturally savvy measures through which the Sasanians extended the olive branch to their neighboring empire. In the aftermath of the Hunnic invasion of 395 CE, both realms had witnessed the atrocities committed by their new mutual enemy, the Huns, and would have realized that joining forces may be their only option.²³ It is

²² We witness many occasions in which Rome disrupted the peace, which resulted in increased tensions between the two powers. Tensions reached a peak in the first year of Bahrām's rule, when Rome broke peace by interfering in Sasanian internal affairs, thus refusing to return to Iran, the Christians who had fled the empire. For a description of this era of peace, see John Bagnell Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian: (AD 395 to AD 565)*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 96. In regard to Yazdegerd striving to maintain good relations with Rome, see Omert J. Schrier, "Syriac Evidence for the Roman-Persian War of 421-422," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 33, no. 1 (1992): 77; Roger C. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct From Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1992), 51. The move towards peace may have, indeed, been part of Iran's movement away from conquest and move towards centralization. See Christian J. Robin, "Arabia and Ethiopia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 247-334.

²³ Ibn Balkhi, in his narrative on Bahrām's reign, states that Iranians feared no other like they feared the Turks. Here, the term Turk is referring to Huns and similar tribes invading from Central Asia. See Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, ed. Guy Le Strange and Raynold Nicholson (Tehran: Asātir, 2005), 67. For the Hunnic invasion of the Near East in the fourth century, see Blockley *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius*, 46. For the Hunnic invasion of 395 CE, see Geoffrey Greatrex and Marina Greatrex, "The Hunnic Invasion of the East of 395 and the Fortress of Ziatha," *Byzantion* 69, no. 1 (1999): 65-75; Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns; Studies in their History and Culture*, ed. Max Knight (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 50-59; Alan D. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium AD 363 to 565: The Transformation of Ancient Rome* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 111. See, Kazuo Enoki, "The Origin of the White Huns or Hephthalites." *East and West* 6, no. 3 (1955): 231-37.

more than likely that Yazdegird and Arcadius participated in defense of the empire and must have had a fresh memory of its horrors. Their experience, in turn, must have influenced their foreign policies and resulted in “an easing of tension between West and East.”²⁴ Since their survival no longer depended on competition but rested on mutual collaboration, at least for the time being, Yazdegerd’s administration must have viewed the Peace Project as a wise political decision in the face of Hunnic threats on the eastern borders.²⁵

This chapter also sheds light on forces and events that periodically threatened the permanency of this hard-earned peace by juxtaposing Perso-Arabic grievances of Yazdegerd with Greco-Roman praise of him. Examples of such expressions are found in symbolically potent acts, such as the liberation of Roman soldiers from Hunnic captivity, the protection of Theodosius II and the integration of Christianity into the empire as a legalized faith.²⁶ Issues concerning Christians were not isolated from the immediate dangers faced by Persia. The Hunnic threat, looming at the eastern fringes of the empire, added further urgency to the problem. Domestic enemies, disloyalty, reduced number of allies due to apostasy and socio-religious disputes were to be avoided if Persia wished to outlast both eastern and western threats. As Richard Payne argues, the wisest plan for the empire was “to reorganize its networks to

²⁴ Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 35.

²⁵ Rubin suggests that, while both empires had realized the gravity of the threat from the east, “it was the Persian monarchs who were mainly interested in maintaining peace.” See Zeev Rubin, “Diplomacy and war in the relations between Byzantium and the Sasanids in the fifth century AD,” in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East: Proceedings of a Colloquium Held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1986), 685.

²⁶ For Arcadius and Yazdegerd’s relationship, see Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy: Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius*, 46-59. On the Sasanians relations with Rome during Yazdegerd, see Schrier, “Syriac Evidence for the Roman-Persian War of 421-422,” 75-77.

maximize its fiscal and material resources.”²⁷ The Sasanians did so by incorporating the Christian population into the sociopolitical structure of the empire and providing them with the means to convert hostility into loyalty.²⁸ Through this process, ecclesial leaders began to take on a new role as loyal agents of the empire. Also, the empire’s centralized focus on and inclination towards domestic and foreign peace became apparent in the Sasanian administration’s new legitimization discourse, which used Iranian epic themes, specifically, The Sasanians’ claim to Kayānid heritage.

On the other hand, the fifth century was, by no means the height of Roman power, as the empire struggled with extensive domestic and foreign threats.²⁹ Rome’s fragile political and military position during the reign of Arcadius rendered it as a perfect target for war since it would have brought Persia much political and financial strength through treaties that could have been advantageous.³⁰ Despite having a great chance to score a victory over their oldest and most worthy

²⁷ Richard E. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 13.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Procopius describes Arcadius as politically weak and says that he “had not shown himself as sagacious in other matters.” See Procopius, *History of the Wars*, vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library, trans. Henry Bronson Dewing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 10-11. Agathias goes as far as criticizing Arcadius, arguing that the decision was an unwise one and that it would have had catastrophic consequences if it had not been for the Persian king’s righteousness and rectitude. See Agathias, *The Histories*, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 2.A, trans. Joseph Frendo (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975), 129. For a description of Arcadius as an emperor, see Catherine Ware, *Claudian and the Roman Epic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 75, 78, 80; Sara Phang, et al., *Conflict in Ancient Greece and Rome: The Definitive Political, Social, and Military Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2016), 707; William L. Burdick, *The Principles of Roman Law and their Relation to Modern Law* (New Jersey: The Lawbook Exchange, 2004), 148. On Rome during Arcadius, see Alan Cameron and Jacqueline Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

³⁰ Shapur Shahbazi argues that Yazdegerd’s avoidance of conflict and his insistence on disallowing a disruption of the peace with Rome was seen by courtiers as a disservice to Iran, since they foresaw a great victory which would result in beneficial treaties. Shahbazi uses examples, such as Shapur II’s became victorious over Julian in 363 CE. After this victory, a truce was composed, and Romans agreed to succeed all provinces they had conquered during Narseh with all the infrastructure and wealth

opponent, the Sasanians embark on the path of cooperation and diplomacy with Rome.³¹ Greco-Roman authors also speak of the peaceful aspirations of Yazdegird and describe the Persian King as,

...τε ων χαί ειρηναιος, είτε οὔτω συμβάν³²

...[Yazdegird] was consistently peaceful and conciliatory.³³

Such attempt to convert the enemy into an ally, or at least silence any threats from them, was most likely made despite the disapproval of Iranian military commanders and warlords. Their grievance is voiced in Perso-Arabic sources, and it is likely that what is labeled as acts that “emboldened foreigners,” could have in fact been diplomatic measures taken to pave the way towards peace with Rome. Tha‘ālebi writes,

Thus, he empowered foreigners (non-Iranians), humbled men of authority, and... shed the blood of many and put on grand shows in his attempt to disgrace and belittle Iranians.³⁴

within the cities plus more. See Shapur Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian* (Tehran: Markaz Našr Danešgāhi, 2014), 427-8.

³¹ See William A. Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church: Or, the Church of the Sassanid Persian Empire, 100-640 AD* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1910), 85.

³² Agathias, *Historiarum*, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae* 3, ed. Barthold Niebuhr (Bonn: Weber, 1828), 130. For an analysis of Agathias’ account of the Sasanians, see Averil Cameron, “Agathias on the Sassanians,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 23 (1969): 67-183.

³³ Agathias, *The Histories* 4.26.8, 129.

³⁴ Abu Mansur Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, trans. Mahmood Hedayat (Tehran: Asātir, 2005), 256-7:

بیگانگان را متوحش و زورمندان را ذلیل ... خونها ریخت و در امحاء آثار عدل و تخفیف ایرانیان شعبده‌ها برانگیخت.

Thus, we can see why military commanders, such as Bestām, would be named amongst Yazdegerd's enemies and those who bypassed Bahrām in his claim to the throne.³⁵ For example, Perso-Arabic sources do not provide us with examples of policies that led to bitter animosity between military warlords and Yazdegerd, but we find possible examples elsewhere.

Furthermore, in line with peaceful gestures towards Rome is the rescuing of Roman soldiers from Hunnic captivity, providing them safe passage and assistance back to Rome which happened early on in Yazdegerd's reign. The Syriac text known as *Liber Calipharum*, or *The Book of Caliphs*, describes the emancipation of the Roman troops as follows:

In this same year, the cursed Huns entered the territories of the Romans They took many prisoners, then withdrew to go back to their territories. ... They killed many and took many prisoners. When the Huns heard that the Persians were moving against them, they decided to flee. The Persians pursued them and killed many of them. They took from them all the booty they had robbed and freed 18,000 [Roman] prisoners. They brought [the freed Romans] to their cities of Selok et Kaucaba, which they called Ardeshir and Ctesiphon. There they remained for many years. The King of Persia gave them rations of food: bread and wine. Of these 18,000 only a few remained... The Persians allowed them to go back to their home country. Then when Yezdegerd, King of Persia was ruling, he sent 1330 more of these prisoners to their home country. About 800 prisoners remained in Persia. The others died because of plague, dysentery, and the abuses they suffered at the hands of the abominable Huns. All these things the prisoners told us. The Christians and the ascetics spoke as well, and the younger priests reported about the good things the prisoners said that [the Persians] had done for them. For those actions, [the Christians] thanked the good and benevolent Yazdegird, Christian, and blessed among the kings. May his memory be blessed, and may his end be more splendid than his beginning. He who in all his days has done beautiful things for the needy and the miserable.³⁶

³⁵ See Chapter One.

³⁶ Translation based off *Chronica Minora*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, ed. Ignazio Guidi (Leuven: Peeters, 1903), 106-7:

At first glance, the decision to assist Roman captives appears unprecedented, as either side would have requested a large sum of money to free the prisoners. But when placed in the context of Christian ideals of piety, such an act would serve as a very strategic decision as it would send a bold political message of goodwill to Rome, since bishops and priests commonly presented themselves as agents freeing captives of war. In addition, such deeds were viewed as the height of “Christian philanthropy” which emphasizes the Sasanians’ deep level of awareness of and familiarity with the symbolic language of Christian piety and virtue.³⁷ Subsequently, this

*Et hoc ipso anno, venit populus maledictus Hunnorum in regiones Romanorum usque; captivos piurimos abduxerunt. Et regressi sunt ut revererent in regionem suam; ...sitos devastarunt, occideruntque et captivos abduxerunt piurimos. Cum autem audiissent Hunni Persas in se progredi fugere statuerunt, et eos persecuti sunt Persae et ex eis turmam unam occiderunt, sumpseruntque *ab eis omnem praedam quam praedati erant, et liberaverunt ab eis homines captivos qui erant numero decem et octo milia, et hos adduxerunt in suas urbes Selok et Kaucaba, quae dicuntur Hardasir et Ctesiphon, ubi fuerunt multos annos; adscripsit eis annonas rex Persarum: panem, vinum, siceram oleumque. Ex his 18 000 non manserunt nisi pauci.[...] milliarium unum primum; et dimiserunt eos Persae ut redirent in patriam suam. Cum autem regnaret Yezdegerd, rex Persarum, rursus remisit ex his captivis in patriam eorum 1330; remanserunt autem in Perside circiter 800 captivi, reliqui omnes mortui sunt lue dysenteriae prae vexatione et angustia quas ab Hunnis execrandis passi erant. Haec omnia captivi nobis narrarunt. Christiani quoque et ascetae narrarunt; et iuniores clerici ipsi rettulerunt de benefactis quae captivi sibi facta dixerunt et de eorum gratia erga regem bonum et clementem Yezdegerd, christianum et benedictum inter reges. Sit eius memoria in benedictionem et eius finis praeclarior sit eius initio; qui omnibus diebus suis pulchra fecit erga egenos et miseros.*

Special thanks to Dr. Leonardo Gregoratti of Durham University, Classics and Ancient History Department, for his translation of the passage. For a similar translation, see Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N.C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 363-628* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 31-32. For a description of *The Book of Caliphs*, see Sebastian, P. Brock, “Syriac Historical Writing: A Survey of the Main Sources,” *Journal of the Iraq Academy* 5, (1980): 9.

³⁷ Samuel N.C. Lieu, “Captives, Refugees and Exiles: A Study of Cross-frontier Civilian Movements and Contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian,” in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East: Proceedings of a Colloquium Held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986*, vol. 2, ed. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1986), 488. Lieu uses an example found in the Acts of Archelai attributed to Hegemonius from the early fourth century, which renders freeing captives as the most virtuous of all deeds. The report tells the story of Archelaus bishop of Carrhae, who sought the help of Marcellus of Charchar in providing the ransom money for 7700 captives in plight. The two men raised the requested payment and delivered it to the Roman garrison. Also, for more examples of bishops and ascetics acting as protectors of the weak and the downtrodden, see *Ibid.*, 490. For other similar cases, see Procopius, *History of the Wars* 2.6.1, 23.

political move not only laid the foundation for peace negotiations with Rome, but could have also had a positive effect on the mindset of Christian leaders in Persia, whose cooperation was integral to the upcoming Christian legalization process.³⁸

To the disappointment of Iranian warlord and those who saw the growth of the empire embedded in conquest, Yazdegerd's administration went on to make another grand decision towards peace.³⁹ In 408 CE, while on his deathbed, Emperor Arcadius sent word to Yazdegerd requesting that the latter act as the guardian of the crown prince Theodosius II until he reaches the proper age of kingship.⁴⁰ Procopius reports that,

³⁸ See Chapter Three.

³⁹ Scholars are divided on the subject of Yazdegerd acting as the protector of Theodosius' kingship. Wigram, Bury, Greatrex and Bardill consider the guardianship credible. Blockley, who also finds the story to be factual, suggest that it was "an extension of diplomatic *fraternitas* into executive force via legacy." Others, such as Frye and Christensen, refute it as either doubtful or nothing beyond an insignificant gesture of respect. See Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church*, 85-86; Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 212; Jonathan Bardill and Geoffrey Greatrex, "Antiochus the *Praepositus*: A Persian Eunuch at the Court of Theodosius the II," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50, (1996): 174; George Rawlinson, *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy or the Geography, History, and Antiquities of the Sassanians or New Persian Empire* (London: Longmans, Green, & CO. 1876), 388; Richard Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* (Munchen: Beck, 1984), 319; Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1944), 368; Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy*, 197 ft. 36. For a complete analysis of the sources on the subject, see Bardill and Greatrex, "Antiochus the *Praepositus*," 171-80.

⁴⁰ Bardill and Greatrex suggest that the arrangement was in fact made while Theodosius was an infant. Despite the lack of consensus on the matter, the analysis of sources renders the reports to be more than likely factual. Greatrex and Lieu suggest that the scarcity of sources on the arrangement from the time of Arcadius comes from the fact that the existent narratives were censored and removed, after the war of 420 CE. It would be plausible to suggest that, not only were writers few at the time, but most found the decision to be unwise from a Christian standpoint. Also, we can speculate whether the omission of Yazdegerd's role could have "fueled Rome's anti-pagan sentiments." Just as Rome systematically removed pagan sites of worship, the removal of the name of Yazdegerd as a 'pagan' ruler would not be surprising. Furthermore, Roman hagiographers would not have wanted to advertise the late emperor's decision, as it would have advertised an atmosphere of distrust and discord at court. Finally, the suggested idea of the censorship of the story gains further credibility when viewed in light of Pulcheria's hostile position towards non-Christians and Sasanians. A report by Agathias supports this suggestion. He writes that "This story has been handed down from generation to generation and preserved on the lips of men and is still repeated at present by both the upper classes and the common people." See Bardill and Greatrex, "Antiochus the *Praepositus*"; Agathias, *Historiarum* 4.26.4, 264; Agathias, *The Histories*, 129. For the possible censorship of the guardianship story, see Greatrex & Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier*

ἔς ταύτην Ἀρκάδιος τὴν ἀμηχανίαν ἐμπεπτοκῶς, καίπερ οὐ
γεγονῶς εἰς τὰ ἄλλα ἀγρίνους, βουλευέται βουλὴν ἣτις οἱ τὸν τε
παῖδα καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν διασώσασθαι εὐπετῶς ἴσχυσεν-, ...διάδοχον
μὲν τῆς ἡγεμονίας ἀνεῖπε τὸν παῖδα, ἐπίτροπον δὲ αὐτῷ
κατεστήσατο Ἰσδιγέρδην τὸν Περσῶν βασιλέα, ᾧ δὴ πολλὰ ἐν ταῖς
διαθήκαις ἐπέσκηψε Θεοδοσίῳ τὴν βασιλείαν σθένει τε καὶ προνοίᾳ
πάσῃ ζυνδιασώσασθαι.”⁴¹

When Arcadius was confronted with his difficult situation, though he had not shown himself sagacious in other matters, he devised a plan which was destined to preserve without trouble both his child and his throne.... For drawing up the writings of his will, he designated the child as his successor to the throne, but appointed as guardian over him Isdigerdes, the Persian King, enjoining upon him earnestly in his will to preserve the empire, for Theodosius by all his power and foresight.⁴²

Interestingly, the story of the guardianship is also mentioned by Hamzeh

Esfahani.⁴³ He reports that,

and the Persian Wars, 32; On anti-pagan sentiments and the war on “heresies” in Rome, see Geoffrey Herman, “The Last Years of Yazdegird I and the Christians,” in *Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians: Religious Dynamics in a Sasanian Context*, ed. Geoffrey Herman (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2014), 89-90; Giusto Traina, *428 AD: An Ordinary Year at the End of the Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 13, 35.

⁴¹ Procopius, *History of the Wars* 1.2.6-7, 10. Also, see Agathias, *Historiarum* 4.26.3, 264; Agathias, *Histories*, 129; Bardill and Greatrex, “Antiochus the *Praepositus*,” 176; Cameron and Long, *Barbarians and Politics at the Court of Arcadius*, 218-223.

⁴² Procopius, *History of the Wars* 1.2.6-7, 11. Sources suggest that one of the major factors that lead to such an arrangement was the political environment of Constantinople. Furthermore, Theophanes’ report on the events of the year 407/8 CE suggests Arcadius’ distrust of the Roman court. He writes that “...Arkadios, perceiving that his son, the young Theodosius, was still very young and unprotected and fearing that someone would plot against him, proclaimed him emperor and in his will appointed the Persian emperor Isdigerdes his guardian.” Bardill and Greatrex also describe Yazdegerd as a “more reliable guardian” compared to Arcadius’ brother Honorius. See Bardill and Greatrex “Antiochus the *Praepositus*,” 173; Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, vol. 1, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, ed. John Classen (Bonn: Weber, 1939), 125; Theophanes Confessor, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor Byzantine and Near Eastern History AD 284-813*, trans. Cyril Mango and Roger Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 124 Ft. 2. For Procopius’ report on Arcadius’s concerns and his lack of trust in the courtiers of Byzantium, see Procopius, *History of the Wars* 1.2.1-5, 9-11.

⁴³ Mojmal al-Tavārikh is the only other author that uses Hamzeh’s report of the tutelage. He writes that “Yazdegird sent Shervin Parnian, ...to Rome to maintain kingship there ..., until the child had

The other Yazdegerd, whose name was left out [by authors] was nobler than his son Yazdegird, the sinner. He was the lord of Shervin of Dashtbey...he was a great politician, compassionate, and sympathetic. About His fame for honoring his word, it has been reported that one of the kings of Rome, on his deathbed, bestowed [the guardianship] of his young son to Yazdegird and requested that send someone to Rome to take care of his affairs until he reaches manhood. Yazdegird sent Shervin Parnian the head of the Dashtbey region to Rome to be in charge.⁴⁴

Having received the request, the Sasanians had two choices: to take advantage of Rome's weak position and make an incursion into their territory, or to accept the request and act by diplomacy and trust.⁴⁵ It is probable that before the final decision, military commanders had taken up arms and were ready to make the best of such impeccable timing, since Sozoman reports that, in 408 CE, the drums of war started to beat once again, but were silenced with yet another truce.⁴⁶ Evidence of threats of war can also be found in the reports on how Yazdegerd

grown and [Shervin] returned kingship to him.” Moreover, the author of *Mojmal* has difficulty reconciling the two extremely conflicting reports on the character of Yazdegerd: one evil and one honorable. So, he concludes by suggesting that there must have been another Sasanian king by the name of Yazdegerd that historians have left out. Regarding the guardianship, he writes that “Yazdegird the father of Bahrām Gur, who is known by the epithet sinner, had a father who was also called Yazdegird. Unlike his son (referring to Yazdegerd I), he was a great man, diplomatic, wise and fair. It is said that his integrity and credibility was so highly regarded that, during his kingship, a Roman emperor requested in his will that Yazdegird ensure his son's kingship.” See *Mojmal al-Tavārikh va al-Qesas*, ed. Mohammad Taqi Bahar (Tehran: Bina, 1939), 86.

⁴⁴ Hamzeh Esfahani, *Tārikh Payāambarān va Šāhān*, trans. Jafar Shoar (Tehran: Bonyād Farhang Iran, 1967), 14-15:

یزدگرد دیگر که نامش را از قلم انداخته اند بزرگوارتر از پسرش یزدگرد بزه کار بود و وی سرور شروین دشتبی...سیاستمدار و مهربان و با عاطفه بود. درباره وفا به عهد او گفته اند: یکی از پادشاهان روم به هنگام فرار سیدن مرگش فرزند کوچک خود را به یزدگرد سپرد و از وی خواست که جانشینی برای او به بلاد روم بفرستد تا عهده دار کارهای پسر باشد تا آنگاه که به سن مردی برسد. یزدگرد شروین پرنیان رئیس ولایت دشتبی را به روم فرستاد و فرمانروایی آنجا را بدو سپرد.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Greatrex, “The Two Fifth-Century Wars between Rome and Persia.” *Florilegium* 12 (1993): 1-14.

⁴⁶ Sozomen, “The Ecclesial History of Zozomen, Comprising a History of the Church from A.D. 324 to A.D. 440,” in *History of the Church*, trans. Edward Walford (London: Bohn, 1855), 410.

reacted to Arcadius' request. Yazdegerd accepted the guardianship of Theodosius and informed the Romans of his decision, while reminding them of his powerful stance in case they diverged from the treaty. Procopius writes that,

Ἰσδιγέρδης δὲ ὁ Περσῶν βασιλεύς, ἐπεὶ τὸ γράμμα τοῦτο ἀπενεχθὲν εἶδεν, ὧν καὶ πρότερον ἐπὶ τρόπου μεγαλοφροσύνη διαβόητος ἐς τὰ μάλιστα, ἀρετὴν ἐπεδείξατο θαύματός τε πολλοῦ καὶ λόγου ἀξίαν. τὰς γὰρ Ἀρκαδίου ἐντολὰς ἐν ἀλογίᾳ οὐδεμιᾷ ποιησάμενος εἰρήνην τε ἀφθόνῳ χρώμενος διαγέγονεν ἐς Ῥωμαίους τὸν πάντα χρόνον καὶ Θεοδοσίῳ τὴν ἀρχὴν διεσώσατο. αὐτίκα γοῦν πρὸς Ῥωμαίων τὴν βουλὴν γράμματα ἔγραψεν, ἐπίτροπός τε οὐκ ἀπαρνούμενος Θεοδοσίῳ βασιλέως εἶναι καὶ πόλεμον ἐπανατεινόμενος, ἣν τις αὐτῷ ἐς ἐπιβουλήν ἐγχειροίη καθίστασθαι.⁴⁷

Isdigerdes the Persian King, when he saw this writing which was duly delivered to him, being even before a sovereign whose nobility of character had won for him the greatest renown, did then display a virtue at once amazing and remarkable. For loyally observing the behests of Arcadius, he adopted and continued without interruption a policy of profound peace with the Romans, and thus preserved the empire for Theodosius. Indeed, he straightway dispatched a letter to the Romans senate, not declining the office of the guardian of the emperor Theodosius and threatening war against any who should attempt to enter into a conspiracy against him.⁴⁸

It is likely that this was the beginning of closer cooperation and exchanges between the two courts. Theophanous adds further to the details of the arrangement, and says that,

Ἰσδεγέρδης δε ὁ τῶν Περ- σων βασιλεύς τὴν Ἀρκαδίου διαθήκην δεξάμενος, εἰρήνην ἀφθόνῳ πρὸς Ῥωμαίους χρησάμενος, Θεοδοσίῳ τὴν βασιλείαν διεσώσατο, καὶ Ἀντίοχόν τινα θαύμαστόν τε καὶ λογιώτατον το ἐπίτροπόν τε καὶ παιδαγωγὸν ἀποστείλας γράφει τὴ συγκλήτῳ Ῥωμαίων τάδε Ἀρκαδίου κοιμηθέντος καμὲ κουράτορα το παιδός καταστήσαντος, τὸν ἀναπληροῦντα τὸν τόπον τὸν ἐμὸν ἀπέστειλα μὴ τις οὖν ἐπιβουλήν το παιδός ἐπιχειρήσῃ, ἵνα

⁴⁷ Procopius, *History of the Wars* 1.2.8-10, 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11. Also, see Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 125; Theophanes, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, 123-124.

μη πόλεμον άσπονδον κατά Ρωμαίων ανακινήση. ο δε Αντίοχος
ελθών ήν συν τώ βασιλεί υπό δε του αυτου θείου... και ήν ειρήνη
αναμεταξύ Ρωμαίων και Περσών.⁴⁹

Isdigerdes, the Persian emperor, after accepting Arkadios' will, behaved most pacifically towards the Romans and preserved the empire for Theodosius. After dispatching Antiochus, a most remarkable and highly educated advisor and instructor, he wrote to the Roman senate as follows: 'Since Arkadios has died and has appointed me as his child's guardian, I have sent the man who will take my place. Let no one attempt a plot against the child so that I may not stir up an implacable war against the Romans.' After Aniochus had come, he stayed at the emperor's side... moreover; there was peace between the roman and the Persians...⁵⁰

In a report by Chilas of Ptolemais, we find further evidence that suggest that Persian officials in Constantinople, during the reign of Yazdegerd and his guardianship over Theodosius held high and respected position.⁵¹ In a letter to his brother Chilas, he mentions Antiochus at the Byzantine court "during the early years of Theodosius... recently in the service of a Persian."

The bishop writes that,

Αντιοχον ηγου μη τωω απο Γρατιανου, το ιεροω ανθρωπιον,
το βελτιστον μεν τους τροπους, ειδεχθεστατον δε την οφιν. 'Αλλ'
ετερος εστιν ο νεανισχος ο προχοιλος, ο Ναρση τς Περση
παρουναστεοθσας. Τουτον εξ εχεινου μεχρι νυν η τυχη μεγαν ποιει.
Τουτον ουτως εχωωτων, ειχος εστι χορωνης ενιαθτοθς αρζαι παρ
ημιν τον διχαιοτατον αρχοντα, τοθ μεν οντα συγγενη, τοθ δε οιχειον
γενομενον.⁵²

⁴⁹ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 125.

⁵⁰ Theophanes, *The Chronicle*, 123-124. Shahbazi suggests that Antiochus and Shervin may, in fact, represent the same character. Moreover, Antiochus is not mentioned by Procopius or Agathias. Theophanes is the first to speak of his position as the representative of Yazdegerd in Constantinople. See Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 413; Bardill and Greatrex, "Antiochus the *Praepositus*," 173.

⁵¹ On the letter and the character of Chilas, see Denys Roques, *Études sur la Correspondance de Synésios de Cyrène* (Bruxelles: Latomus, 1989), 246-247.

⁵² Synesius of Cyrene, *The Letters of Synesius of Cyrene*, trans. Augustine Fitzgerald (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 205-6.

When I speak of Antiochus, do not confound him with Gratian's favorite, the sacred little man, honorable in character, but very ugly. The man I am talking about is young, has a paunch, was in great esteem with Narses the Persian and even after Narses. Since then his fortune has only gone on increasing. Under these circumstances, it is probable that he will be in command among us as long as is a raven's life, this most righteous general, the near relation of the one and the intimate of the other.⁵³

Sources convey ample evidence that reveal an unprecedented level of cultural exchange and political cooperation aimed at maintaining a state of peace between the empires.⁵⁴ The Sasanian's diligence in upholding peace is even conveyed in reports that go as far as viewing order at Constantinople as the result of Yazdegerd's honor and efforts. For example, Agathias ends his report on Theodosius's guardianship by writing that,

ει δε μηδεν οτιουν εμι τς βρεφει ημαρτηται, αλλα μεμενηχεν η τουτου βασιλεια βεβαιοτατα προς του χηδεμονος φυλαττομενη, και ταυτα ετι υπο μαζω τιθηουμενου, εχεινον αν μαλλον επαινετεον της εγνωμοσυνης, η 'Αρχαδιον τοθ εγχειρηματος.⁵⁵

If the infant came to no harm and if thanks to the care and protection of his guardian, his throne was never in jeopardy...then one ought to rather praise the honesty of Yazdegird than the action of Arcadius...⁵⁶

⁵³ Retrieved at <http://www.livius.org/sources/content/synesius/synesius-letter-110>. For a slightly different translation and suggestions on the identity of the 'Narseh' mentioned in the letter, see Bardill and Greatrex, "Antiochus the *Praepositus*," 174-176.

⁵⁴ The way Ferdowsi treats the issue with Rome is also reminiscent of the Sasanian struggle for peace at the time. Ferdowsi presents the Cesar, who, as we know, is Theodosius II, in very positive light. Ferdowsi later quotes Bahrām as he is having a conversation with the Roman envoy and says that he apologized for delaying the negotiations, for he was preoccupied in the east with the Khāqān. See Abolqāsem Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, ed. Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh (California: Mazda and Bonyād Mirās Iran, 1997), 543-546.

⁵⁵ Agathias, *Historiarum* 4.26.7, 265.

⁵⁶ Agathias, *The Histories*, 129.

Peace also translated into a better economy and a larger revenue for citizens of both empires. Yazdegerd used this new development in his relationship with Rome to negotiate new trade routes and hubs which would be beneficial to the economy of the empire.⁵⁷

From there on, Yazdegerd's administration took further steps in solving the issue of the Christians of Persia which mainly consisted of "conversion activity and espionage."⁵⁸ now let us take a very quick look at what the "Christian problem" encompassed before delving back into

⁵⁷ Frye makes the suggestion that the eastern invasions had blocked trade routes. Thus, it was essential to negotiate new trade routes in the West. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, 70. Dignas and Winters argue that the limitation on trade routes also secured their shared borders aligned with centralization policies. Dignas and Winters *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 205. The 408/9 CE trade agreement assigned three frontier cities; Nisbis, Kallinkos, and Artaxata as hubs where merchants from both empires were permitted to engage in trade. Furthermore, de Bruijn and Dudley, in their study of a hoard of counterfeit solidi and drachms of Yazdegerd excavated in the south of Oetra, suggest that the hoard dates to around 410 CE and was most probably forged in Iran. See de Bruijn, Erik, and Dennine Dudley, "The Humeima Hoard: Byzantine and Sasanian Coins and Jewelry from Southern Jordan," *American Journal of Archaeology* (1995): 697. Also, see Greatrex and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, 34. Shahbazi suggests that the 408/9 CE agreement was, in fact initiated because Yazdegerd had demanded that Iranian merchants be permitted to take western routes, thus increasing the flow of wealth and merchandise into the empire. Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 425 ft 404. He further argues that helping the Roman captives whom the Persians had freed was planned to serve as a gift. He also writes that the agreement to cooperate in guarding the gate of Darband or the caucuses was due to Yazdegerd's lenient and non-threatening measures and policies. *Ibid.*, 427. Such an agreement tends to be the rational solution to a shared concern posed by a mutual enemy. Frye dates the cooperation in protecting the Darband passage to the time of Bahrām and includes it in the 421 peace negotiations. See Frye, 145. For details of the newly assigned trade hubs, see *Codex Justinianus* 4.63.4.1: *Imperatores Honorius, Theodosius*: <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/justinian/codex4.shtml>, Translation: CJ.4.63.4.1 https://droitromain.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/Anglica/CJ4_Scott.htm, Translation: CJ.4.63.4.1

⁵⁸ Evangelos Venetis, "The Zoroastrian Priests and the Foreign Affairs of Sasanian Iran and the Later Roman Empire," *Nāmeḥ Irān Bāstān* 3, no.1 (2003): 64. The decision to incorporate Christianity into the Empire may have begun in the late fourth century. Shahbazi suggests that, since neither Shapur III nor Bahrām IV exhibited animosity towards Christians, one can suppose that the option of integrating Christianity into the Sasanian administration and "buying" their loyalty had already been proposed. As McDonough states, integrating the Christians was perceived as the best viable resolution to a growing population that was deemed as a political and religious threat. As Venetis argues, accusations, such as "conversion activity and espionage on behalf of the Christians," were the primary causes of tensions between the members of the two faiths. See Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 418; McDonough, "The Legs of the Throne," 303; Venetis, "The Zoroastrian Priests and the Foreign Affairs of Sasanian Iran and the Later Roman Empire," 64.

Yazdegerd's solution for it. By the mid-fourth century, the empire witnessed an increase in the number of Christians, which then led to new socio-political concerns.

On one hand, Christians were accused of treason and acting against the empire by harboring loyalty to Rome acting as informants and spies. Examples of Christians being suspected of such acts date back to the reign of Shapur II.⁵⁹ Ecclesial authors quote the King expressing his frustration by saying that "They [the Christians] dwell in our land and share the sentiments of Caesar our enemy."⁶⁰ Another report describes the disloyalty of a Christian known as Simon in the following terms: "There is no secret which Simon does not write to Caesar to reveal."⁶¹

On the other hand, the nature of Christian theology and the role of Christ as the only Lord and Savior undermined the Iranian tradition of hierarchy and the authority of the King, leading to defiance in the face of power and disrupted social order.⁶² This, in turn, led to significant social disorder and crimes, such as vandalism against sacred infrastructure.⁶³ Christian martyrologies, such as the acts of 'Abda, describe accusation against people involved in such crimes as follows:

⁵⁹ Shapur II most likely viewed such behavior as intended to undermine his rule and jeopardize peace in his domain. He is quoted voicing concern about Christian disobedience and their conspiring against Sasanian authority. See *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Bedjan (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1890), 278; Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1 (New York: Orbis, 1998). For Christians accused of delegitimizing Persian sovereignty and harboring loyalty to Rome, see Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 41-42.

⁶⁰ *The Lesser Eastern Churches*, ed. Adrian Fortescue (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1913), 45.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 45-6.

⁶² See Geoffrey Herman, ed., *Persian Martyr Acts under King Yazdgird I* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016) for examples of clashes between Yazdegerd and Christian subjects as reported by Syriac martyrologies.

⁶³ David M. Gwynn, "Episcopal Leadership," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 881. For the status of the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, see William, F. Macomber, "The Authority of the Catholicos, Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon," *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 181 (1968): 179-200. For Dādīšo's role as Catholicos, see Jerome Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'Empire Perse sous le Dynastie Sassanide, 224-632* (Paris :

These Nazoreans who are called bishops, priests, and deacons and Monks in the provinces of your Kingdom, transgress your commandment and despise your Kingdom and insult your gods and deride fire and water. They cast down the foundations of our fire temples of worship, and in no small way do they despise our laws.⁶⁴

Violence against Zoroastrian temples turned into a big problem since unlike Roman pagan temples, Sasanian temples had the support of a mighty empire behind them, and such acts would have a hefty price, both legally and socially. Christian destruction of Zoroastrian sacred structures also leads to social chaos in the form of clashes between Christian and non-Christian citizens.⁶⁵ For example, according to *The Acts of Abgar*, a fifth-century monk, a priest from Rey by the name of Narsai (Narseh) had reportedly removed the furniture from a fire temple, which had once been a church, and extinguished the fire.⁶⁶ Local folk and community members, undoubtedly Zoroastrians, attacked Narseh for his act of sacrilege. He had stirred such great fury

Lecoffre, 1904), 120. On Dādīšo, see Erica Hunter, “Dādīšo,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. VI, fasc. 5, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1993), 556-557; Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 48.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Herman, ed., *Persian Martyr Acts under King Yazdgird I* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2016), 54.

⁶⁵ Jewish-Christian relations were also fraught with tension. This could have initiated further social confusion. Inner-religious tension is evident from a report found in *The Chronicle of Arbela*. This ecclesial source displaces the blame for the administration’s disapproval with Christian behavior on members of other faiths, such as Judaism, and reports “And they [the Jews and the Manicheans] explained to them [the magi] that the Christians were all of them spies of the Romans. Moreover, that nothing happens in the king’s land that they do not write to their brothers who live there.” While the bias of the report is apparent, it does shed light on two social groups, Persian and Jewish with deep roots in Mesopotamia. Thus, a sense of territoriality, agreeing on the non-trustable nature of the “newcomers,” the captives as Payne mentions, and the “landless.” For the dating of anti-Jesus arguments in the Babylonian Talmud, its correspondence with the reign of Shapur II and the initial increase in Christian displacements and conversions, see Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in Talmud* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 8; Josef Wiesehofer, *Ancient Persia* (New York: IB Tauris, 2001), 202. For the idea of Christians as “the landless,” see Walker, “From Nisibis to Xi’an: The Church of the East in Late Antique Eurasia.” For Christians referring to themselves as captives, see Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 33.

⁶⁶ See Herman ed., *Persian Martyr Acts under King Yazdgird I*, 3-27.

within the community that law enforcement had to intervene to “protect” him from the mob. Narseh was taken to Seleucia to see a judge named Adurboze and is asked to clarify the incident. The court decided that it would free Narseh and rule him as “not guilty” of the crime of “killing the fire” if he agreed to rekindle the fire in the temple. Such a decision was probably designed to calm the public fury and brought peace and order to the community. The problems did not end here. The most significant concern of all was that the proselytizer nature of Christianity and the encouragement of conversion and apostasy, a very sensitive topic when it targeted members of Persian noble houses.⁶⁷ Thus, we can say that in the context of the Iranians and Zoroastrian culture and tradition, the crimes that the Christians were accused of had tainted them as enemies of the people, the faith, and the empire.

By 409 CE Yazdegerd’s administration had fully embarked on legalizing the Christian church of Persia and integrating ecclesial leaders into the Sasanian government.⁶⁸ In doing so,

⁶⁷ Elite families were considered the backbone of the empire and apostasy had political and financial repercussions for the apostate, the ruling class, the empire, and also for Zoroastrianism as a faith. Christianity could be tolerated, but apostasy had to be stopped. The evil nature of apostasy in the Zoroastrian theological point of view can be seen from the fact that the apostate, *Gojastag Abāliš*, becomes immortalized as a symbol of evil and is equal in his wickedness to Alexander. Thus, apostates are not seen as mere people who choose a new faith, but just like Alexander, they are responsible for the destruction of the religion and cannot be allowed to exist. The comparison of *Abāliš* to Alexander is also interesting since we see Zoroastrian literature attaching the “western” connections of Alexander, and the destruction he brought, to the “western” connections of Christianity. Both “evil” rose from the west, and thus are seen as equal in their destructive force. The metaphor of Alexander also makes sense in the theme of treason and espionage. Followers of Christianity are seen as sympathetic to the cause of the western enemy. See *Nāmeḥ Tansar*, ed. Mojtaba Minovi (Tehran: Khārazmī, 1975), 62. For an English translation of the passage, see *The Letter of Tansar*, ed. and trans. Mary Boyce (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1968), 42. For the impact of apostasy on the empire’s military strength, especially in dealing with the Hunnic invasions, see Payne, *A State Of Mixture*, 46. On the intolerable nature of apostasy and the other-worldly punishment accorded to it after death, see *Ardāvīrāf-Nameh*, trans. Qolam-Reza Yasemi (Tehran: University of Tehran, 1932), 176-7, 180. Also, on apostasy as a *margarzān* crime, one deserving of the death penalty, see West, *The Book of the Mainyo-i-Khard*, 164. For technical terms concerning apostasy, see Albert de Jong, “Armenian and Georgian Zoroastrianism,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Yuhan S. Vevaina (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 119.

⁶⁸ The Christian population of the Sasanian empire began to rise in the third and fourth centuries. It is speculated that the Roman-Persian campaigns led to an influx of Christian war-captives and

Yazdegerd would not only remove an internal threat to order but also hoped to increase the political amicability that had been in progress between Iran and Rome. Yazdegerd's administration made the best of the situation by involving the Roman Emperor and high ranking members of the Roman Church, such as Marutha of Maypherqat. In doing so, they not only intended to facilitate negotiations with the Church of Persia, but they also sought to further demonstrate their political goodwill and neutralize the effect of negative Christian propaganda, which may have stood in the way of further peace between the two powers.

Yet, this would prove to be a very challenging task, for the Sasanians faced opposition from both orthodox Zoroastrians and Christians alike. First, such a bold decision must not have been an easy pill to swallow for the fundamentalist members of the court. In fact, the analytical reading of Perso-Arabic accounts of Yazdegerd's sins and crimes, places the Mobadān Mobad on top of the list of Yazdegerd's opponents.⁶⁹ After all, Middle Persian texts are very clear about the fact that one of the main "sins" that can lead to one's loss of Farr and glory is "assisting other religions."⁷⁰ For example, the *Chronicle of Séert* reports on the bad blood between the king and the priestly factions,

displaced populations, who were settled in Khuzestan and Mesopotamia. Furthermore, social assimilation and intermarriage led to apostasy amongst non-Christian spouses, who induced Christian upbringing in their children. See Payne, *A State of Mixture*; Joel Walker, "From Nisibis to Xi'an: The Church of the East in Late Antique Eurasia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 994-1052.

⁶⁹ See Chapter two for further details. For Agathias' description of the authority and influence of the magi, see Agathias, *Historiarum* 2.26.5, 123; Agathias, *The Histories* 2.26.5, 61.

⁷⁰ Jamsheed K. Choksy, "Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 2 (1988): 39. For the concept of *Farr* or glory in the Iranian context, see Gherardo Gnoli, "Farrah," in *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, 1999.

The Magi began to hate Yazdegerd because he maltreated them on his accession, reduced the power of the leaders and was favorable to Christians, allowing them to build churches. They made fun of him and cursed him in their fire temples.⁷¹

Whether animosity between Yazdegerd and the magi was initiated by the plan to integrate Christian or had been instigated by previous issues is difficult to ascertain. As we will see in Chapter two, Yazdegerd is accused of a general disdain for Zoroastrian priests. For example, his sins included lack of regard for men of faith and disrespect for “knowledge,” meaning religious knowledge. Non-Orthodox courtiers may have also been suspicious of the success of this project.

Yet, it can be assumed that the plan was embraced by the majority. The success of this plan is, to some extent, conveyed by Agathias, who conveys Roman sentiment regarding Yazdegerd and writes,

ἐπί τούτοις Ἰσδιγέρδης ὁ Σαβώρου τὴν Περσικὴν ἡγεμονίαν παραλαμβάνει, ὁ πολὺς παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις χαί περιλάλητος.⁷²

...Yazdgerd, the son of Shapur, [was] a man whose memory has remained something of a legend among the Romans.⁷³

This move influenced the rhetoric of ecclesial authors. For example, *The Chronicle of Seert* claims that Yazdegerd’s decision to organize Persian Christians was the result of a letter

⁷¹ *The Chronicle of Séert*, 67. For the original Arabic text, see *Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, 105.

⁷² Agathias, *Historiarum* 4.26.3, 264.

⁷³ Agathias, *The Histories*, 129.

sent from Emperor Arcadius, in which he appealed to the King's sense of reason and morality to avoid the harsh treatment of Christians.⁷⁴ Following is the details of the alleged letter,

ان الله عز و جل لم يعطنا الملك لنؤثر صلاح انفسنا. واثما رد البينا الرعية
لندبرها بالاستواء و نقمع الظالم و نكافى المحسن باستحقاقه... و ليس من العدل و الحق ما
يجرى على على النصارى فى مملكتك من الظلم و النهب و القتل. و ان كان اكثر ذلك
يجرى على غير علمك و اثما يفعله اصحابك رغبة فيما ياخذونه من مالهم. و فى ذلك
مع اجتلاب سخط الله بغض الناس لك. لانهم اذا وقفوا على ما تلحق امثالهم انكروه و
استعظموه. و لو صرف هاؤلاء القوم اهتمامهم الى قصد الاعداء و اصلاح المملكة كان
اعود عليهم.⁷⁵

If God has placed royal power in our hands, it is not so that we can secure our own personal well-being but so that we can govern with justice, chastise the oppressor and reward benefactors according to their merit...It is therefore not right the Christians of your empire be so maltreated, robbed and killed. If it is true that this happens most of the time without your knowledge, it is no less true that your people do this always with the aim of pressuring them and taking what belongs to them. Know that this makes God angry with you and people hateful of you. In fact, when men come to know what happens to their fellows, they disapprove and find it monstrous. Those people would find it more profitable to pursue the enemy and introduce reform into the empire...⁷⁶

This was achieved through regularly convened synods sanctioned by the King of Kings of Persia himself. The aim was to provide leadership for the Church and assign detailed rules

⁷⁴ Marutha's role at the synod of Isaac and his alleged presence at the Persian court shows that the two administrations were in communication in coming up with the best way possible in their approach towards the Christians. Also, correspondences between the two emperors were customary. Yet the content of the letter is questionable. Its goals are to present the Roman emperor as the instigator of anything good that may come out of the process. For dorms of communication in late antiquity, see Gillett, Andrew, "Communication in Late Antiquity: Use and Reuse," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 816, 823.

⁷⁵ *Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, 92.

⁷⁶ Translation based on Ibid.

and regulations for all Christians to follow.⁷⁷ Through this development, the Catholicos became officials at the Persian court and responsible for maintaining peace and order within the Christian community. The process of assimilating the church into Sasanian administration aimed to resolve the issue of authority and loyalty by employing ecclesial leaders, who, in turn, were in charge of guaranteeing the cooperation of the bishops, instead of appealing to the average Christian.⁷⁸ In return for their loyalty to the empire and the king, which was displayed by securing organization and preventing acts of espionage and defiance of authority, higher church leaders were allowed to climb the socioeconomic ladder.⁷⁹ The assimilation and integration of Christianity into Sasanian politics was not just beneficial for the empire, but had a direct and immediate effect on the lives of higher level Christian leaders.⁸⁰ As David Gwynn states, Christian integration mainly

⁷⁷ “The general tone of Sasanian–Christian relations evolved into one of (occasionally grudging) tolerance and socio-political integration of Christian minority communities.” McDonough, “The Legs of the Throne,” 304. It must be noted that this “grudging tolerance” found relevance amongst both Christians and Zoroastrians and was in no way a one-sided deal. Payne also argues against the use of the term intolerant when refereeing to the religious policies of Zoroastrian priests since they “were not inclined to the simplistic binary thinking, and inveterate antipathy toward religious others that the label intolerant often applied to them evokes.” Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 25.

⁷⁸ Zoroastrian citizens were mainly in communication with courtly officials through the magi. Jewish communities were represented at court by the Exilarch. Sasanian Christians, unlike other religious sects, were neither organized, nor represented at the Persian court before the fifth century. On the highest point of Christian influence and status, evident in examples such as that of Khosro II’s funding of the construction of St Sergius Monastery, see Greatrex and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, 173- 176; Elizabeth, K. Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius Between Rome and Iran* (California: University of California Press, 1999), 137-141. For the Story of Babwai, see *The Lesser Eastern Churches*, 46.

⁷⁹ This reminds me of the Achaemenid policy of “buying out” their enemies, especially in their affairs with the Greek *Polei*. Here, we see how Sasanians, just like their Persian predecessors the Achaemenids, used the gift of power and prestige to incorporate the most hostile forces and movements into the empire.

⁸⁰ It must be pointed out that the expectation for bishops and ecclesial leaders to act as agents of the Sasanian administration had existed even earlier than their official integration into Sasanian politics. Yet it was never realized and often met with hostile resistance. Gwynn argues that the 410 synod and its aftermath was a turning point, yet it was not new in the Iranian context, where religious coexistence was a social reality. For example, we see that Shapur II expects the priest of Simon (Bar-Sabba’e, bishop of Seleucia Ctesiphon) to collect taxes on his behalf, yet he is faced with the priest’s refusal to do so. Simon

had an impact on bishopric wealth.⁸¹ Payne also argues that the spread of churches across the Sasanian Empire and church-court connection reveals the success of both secular and religious leaders in using their religious institution for “transmitting their source of economic and political capital across generations,” which would have only been possible under the patronage of Iranian nobles and royals.⁸² In a world where the rise in socioeconomic status was based firmly on socially constructed notions, noble blood and genealogy, the Christians – descendants of captives or deported populations –, who desired to integrate high society, did not have the option of capitalizing upon their noble heritage as Zoroastrian Iranians did.⁸³ The bishops, in turn, would be scrutinized and questioned as any other government officials in charge of maintaining peace and order within their community on behalf of the empire.⁸⁴ For instance, when questioning the group of Christians guilty of vandalism, Yazdegird first holds ‘Abda the bishop, who has political authority, responsible, for he had allowed men of lower ranks to commit such acts. Yazdegird then goes on to stress the sanctity of the temples not from a theological point of view

writes back to the King of Kings, saying that he is “no tax collector but a shepherd of the Lord’s flock.” Thus, the process of integration did not start with Yazdegird, nor did it end with him. See Gwynn, “Episcopal Leadership,” 881.

⁸¹ Ibid., 882.

⁸² Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 11.

⁸³ For how Christians used linguistic methods in dealing with the issue of *Ērānšahr* being the land of the Iranians, and their status as non-Iranians, see Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 66- 67. On the concept of captivity in the Syriac Christian, see Ibid., 66-68, 187.

⁸⁴ The rise of a new class of elite courtiers could have in turn caused further rivalry since the Iranian elite, who had enjoyed a full monopoly over sensitive political positions for more than three centuries, must have found Christian promotion as a bitter pill to swallow. On the church as a branch of government and church officials thus expected the smear loyalty of Persian aristocrats, see Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 47. For the role and responsibility of the Catholicos, see Walker, “From Nisibis to Xi’an: The Church of the East in Late Antique Eurasia.” Gwynn argues that the king’s relationship with Christian ecclesial leaders did not turn into one of imperial domination but functioned as a two-way relationship, similar to Constantine and the bishops. Gwynn, “Episcopal Leadership,” 881-2.

but an ancestral stance, thus delving into a shared space that he believes all citizens of his empire, regardless of faith would honor. He reproaches 'Abda saying that,

As you are the head of these people and their leader, why do you allow them to despise our kingship, transgress our command and conduct themselves in their stubbornness, and you cast down and uproot our houses of worship and bases of the house of fire that we have received from our forefathers to be honored?⁸⁵

The first official synod was held in February 410 CE with the goal to organize and unify the church of Persia.⁸⁶ This was the first Christian synod held with the support of the king of Kings of Iran.⁸⁷ The proceedings were carefully recorded and the content of the opening section of the council further reveals that the message of the council targeted both Romans and Persian Christians. The council recognized the authority of the Sasanian king and acknowledged the role

⁸⁵ Herman ed., *Persian Martyr Acts under King Yazdgird I*, 56.

⁸⁶ *The synod is known as the Council of Mar Isaac*, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon from 399-410 CE. To express the importance of the synod, ecclesial authors have compared it to the Edict of Milan and Yazdegird is praised as Constantine. More than anything, the council of 410 CE helped to spread Christianity within the empire. The agreement permitted Christians to worship openly throughout the empire and allowed bishops to travel freely in their districts, while accepting the authority of the Catholicos and not assisting in the conversion of Zoroastrians to Christianity. For more information on the synod, see Baby Varghese, "East Syrian Liturgy during the Sasanid Period," in *Inkulturation des Christentums im Sasanidenreich*, ed. Arafa Mustafa, Jürgen Tubach, and Sophia Vashalomidze (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 2007), 269-280; Valentin Vesa, "Church-Imperial Power Relationship in the Persian Empire of the 5th Century: The Role of Politics in the Reception of the First Ecumenical Council," *Altarul Reîntregirii* 2 (2013): 261-276. On Mar Isaac, see Sebastian Brock, "Isaac," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. XIII, fasc. 6, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2006), 610-611. On the significance of the synod in spreading Christianity in Persia, see Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 14-17; Scott McDonough, "A Second Constantine?: The Sasanian King Yazdgard in Christian History and Historiography," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no. 1 (2008): 127-128. For the Edict of Milan, see Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church*, 32, 56, 89.

⁸⁷ The council was held at the cathedral in Veh-Ardešir, on the western banks of the Tigris, across from the royal palace of Ctesiphon, an urban capital nearly twice the size of ancient Rome, thus probably holding two million people. See Walker, "From Nisibis to Xi'an: The Church of the East in Late Antique Eurasia."

of the Roan fathers in bringing the council together.⁸⁸ The patronage of the King of Kings and bishopric cooperation continued to be the binding agent of all following councils of the fifth century. It began with praise and prayer for Yazdegerd and finalized with the synod by adopting the creed of Nicaea.⁸⁹ The proceeding read,

And in the month of Kanun on the holy feast of the Epiphany (6 January 410), they [the bishops of Persia] came to the capital city [Seleucia-Ctesiphon], capital of all the cities of the Orient. The King of Kings, victorious and illustrious, heard of their arrival; he commanded our honorable Father, Mar Isaac, bishop of Seleucia- Ctesiphon, Catholikos and Archbishop of all the East, and his brother the Bishop Mar Maruta, to bring them all together in the great church, prescribing that the letter sent by the bishops of the West be read out in their presence, and that they hear and observe all that was written therein.⁹⁰

Conclusively, it can be said that the socio-religious context of Iran allowed for the Christian legalization to become a reality and gain success in the *longue durée*.⁹¹ The fifth-

⁸⁸ The synods began with including Roman ecclesial influence, yet in the long run, the goal was to eliminate, or at least reduce, Christian loyalty to Rome by separating the Church of Persia from Rome. By 424 CE, the synod had claimed the independence of the Church of Persia. See Venetis, “The Zoroastrian Priests and the Foreign Affairs of Sasanian Iran and the Later Roman Empire,” 67.

⁸⁹ For further information on the synod, see Jes P. Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanid Periods*, vol. 3.2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 940. On the influence of Zoroastrianism on Nestorian philosophy, see Jes P. Asmussen, “Das Christentum in Iran und sein Verhältnis zur Zoroastrismus,” *Studia Theologica* 16 (1962): 10.

⁹⁰ Alan V. Williams, “Zoroastrians and Christians in Sasanian Iran,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78, no.3, (1996): 37. For the original Syriac version of the passage, see Jean Baptiste Chabot ed., *Synodicon Orientale ou Recueil de Synodes Nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 257.

⁹¹ For the socio-religious factors that allowed church-court integration to become a reality, such as the diverse historical background of Persia, see Payne, *A State of Mixture*. Also, for the role of the inclusive nature of Zoroastrian dualism and polytheistic elements of the faith religiously allowed a space for intermingling, see Jaclyn Maxwell, “Paganism and Christianization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott F. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 449-875. For the religiously flexible atmosphere of Iran in contrast to the harsh and intolerant measures, Rome in eradicating pagan

century synods did not entirely remove the problems, yet they were a start for the gradual erasure of the concerns, while providing a space that allowed both faiths to not only exist side by side, but to develop simultaneously.⁹² Like most other groundbreaking movements, the integration and legalization of Christians initially faced much opposition from culturally and religiously conservative standpoints.⁹³ Eventually, it gained the support of most courtiers. Otherwise, it would have been halted soon after the King's passing, and we see that by the sixth century Christians are at the height of their socio-political influence in Iran.⁹⁴ Allowing Christians to

and heretical sects See Ibid. Also, for examples of Christian suppression of non-Christian practices and rituals, see Ibid., 849. For what Payne describes as “the repression of unbelievers in a zero-sum contest for the truth.” See Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 1. The oppression, harassment, and at times persecution of Roman Zoroastrians become an issue of political debate and negotiation during the early fifth century. See Walker, “From Nisibis to Xi’an,” 995. On the ideological and cosmological elements of Zoroastrianism that allowed the integration of followers of other faiths to integrate the imperial project, see Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 31. For the role of the “soft Zoroastrianism” of most Iranians in integrating “non-fanatic” Christians, see Walker, “From Nisibis to Xi’an.” For the role of Zoroastrian leaders providing new religious interpretations that allow the social and daily interactions of different faiths, see Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 32-3; Yakof Elman, “Marriage and Marital Property in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law,” in *Rabbinic Law in its Roman and Near Eastern Context*, ed. Cathrine Heszer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 227-76.

⁹² See Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 8-10.

⁹³ Opposition came from both Christian and Zoroastrian factions. Orthodox Christians viewed cooperation with a non-Christian king as sinful; hence they continued to resist political assimilation by disobeying the authority of the legally sanctioned power of the Persian Church fathers and engaging in criminal activity. Maxwell argues that, while the orthodoxy of Persian priests, Christian leaders and some of their fanatic followers sporadically translated into violence, the central portions of the community were neither strict zealots nor fanatical believers. He adds that, for Sasanian leaders, the issue was not one of who holds more truth, but one of how to integrate a new, growing, and prone to unfaithfulness group of people into a diverse and inclusive social and political system. See Maxwell, “Paganism and Christianization,” 845-890.

⁹⁴ Success in integrating the Christian Church and legalizing it did not mean the complete elimination of threats and problems. For example, Babwai bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was accused of referring to Pēroz as “an impious sovereign” in correspondence to the Roman emperor Zeno. In another instance from the sixth century, we hear that the bishop of the Sasanian province of Nisibis jeopardized Khosrow's plans to attack the Roman city Circesium. For the English translation, see Evagrius Scholasticus, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, trans. Michael Whitby (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 266-267. For further examples, see Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 140.

have more constructive and decisive roles in the success of the empire, turned them into more docile citizens. Thus, the inclusion of Christians as administrators not only “bought” their loyalty, but also guaranteed that “their hearts and hands” were used in assisting the empire, not “seeking evil or mischief.”⁹⁵ Moreover, Yazdegerd won high praise in Greco-Roman and Christian reports, which signifies that the strategies were successful in promoting peace and understanding between the two powers, both culturally and politically, and further enhancing the Peace Project. Eventually, we see staunch Christian author Socrates speak of Yazdegerd in the following manner,

“Isdigerdes King of the Persians, who had in no way molested
the Christians in his dominions...”⁹⁶

The integration and legalization of Christianity had an even more beneficial advantage for the Sasanian Empire. In less than a century, we see that ecclesial authors, in their attempts to further integrate into the Iranian society, developed a new genealogy for the house of Sāsān as descendants of the Achaemenids and the magi/king who visited baby Jesus.⁹⁷ Christians were not alone in the search for new and dynamic discourses concerning identity and legitimacy. The fifth century also witnessed attempts from the Sasanian administration to “renovate” their claim

⁹⁵ *The Letter of Tansar*, 41 ft 5.

⁹⁶ Socrates Scholasticus, *Socrates' Ecclesiastical History*, 296.

⁹⁷ Scott F. Johnson, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 21. Also, see *The Book of the Cave of Treasures: A History of the Patriarchs and the Kings, their Successors, from the Creation to the Crucifixion of Christ*, trans. Wallis Budge (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1927). On the idea of the Achaemenid as descendants of the Kayānids, see Choksy, “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran,” 36. On Sasanian claims to Achaemenid lineage, see Shapur Shahbazi, “Early Sasanians: Claim to Achaemenid Heritage,” *Nameh Iran Bastan* 1, no.1 (2001): 61-73. Moreover, descent as a constructed tool has the power to legitimize or delegitimize. Claiming ties to ancient and noble ancestry provides the hero with a stable setting that mentally prepares the audience for greatness to follow. For the concept of *Čehr* as lineage in ancient Iran, see Bruce Lincoln, “Čehr,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. V, fasc. 2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1990), 118-119.

to sovereignty in a new context of peace and centralization. The close association and interdependence of church and state meant that legitimacy could be found in Zoroastrian concepts.⁹⁸ The interplay of religious and non-religious ideals within Iranian epic narratives and tales then led to emphasizing descent from the Legendary Avestan kings of Iran; the Kayānids. Such a revival allowed the Sasanian to capitalize on the Kayānids' claim to upholding peace and security in their battles against eastern invasions.

The need for constructing a new legitimizing ideology through the revival of mythological connections and concepts is believed to have been influenced by domestic and foreign crisis.⁹⁹ On the one hand, the use of Kayānid legends became instrumental in forming a new conception of the “past” shared by the Iranian people; thus, enhancing domestic unity and peace.¹⁰⁰ On the other hand, the legends also provided a sense of hope in the face of the horrors that Huns brought along.¹⁰¹ Increased prevalence of Kayānid ideals and legends can be found both at an imperial and a local level in the fifth century, which points to the administration's reliance on the popularity of such legends domestically.¹⁰² Yazdegerd stressed this new

⁹⁸ For the “intimate connections between the social hierarchy of the Sasanian empire and orthodox Zoroastrian doctrine,” see Choksy, “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran,” 40.

⁹⁹ On the role of Hunnic raids causing “institutional and ideological crisis,” and thus initiating the use of Kayānid lineage, see Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 45.

¹⁰⁰ For Kayānid history, see Arthur Christensen, *Les Kayanids* (Copenhagen: Fred Host & Sons, 1931). For Sasanian use of Kayānid connections, see Touraj Daryaee, “The Construction of the Past in Late Antique Persia,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 55, no.4, (2006): 493-503; Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

¹⁰¹ Bivar dates the beginning of Hunnic troubles to 350 CE. See Adrian D.H. Bivar, “The History of Eastern Iran,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanid Periods*, vol. 3.1, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 211.

¹⁰² Shahbazi suggests that, from the time of Shapur II, we see an increase in the prevalence of Avestan names in Iran, especially those connected to the Kayānid period. Frye adds that the rise in Kayānid names and connection is influenced by the increased link to the east in this period, see Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 415; Shapur Shahbazi, “On the *Xwadāy-nāmag*,” *Iranica Varia: Papers in Honor of*

institutional ideology not only through implementing new policies and strategies but also through carefully chosen epithets.¹⁰³ For example, according to numismatics, one of Yazdegerd's main titles was *Rāmšahr*, meaning “who maintains peace in (his) dominion.”¹⁰⁴ Such a title provides a direct link to the Kayānids since it was first claimed by the Kayānid king Kay-Wištāsp as *Rāmšahr Kay Wištāsp Šāh or Rām Wištāspān*.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, he was famed for his battles against the *xiyōnān* who represent the Huns in the context of Iranian/Avestan epic legends.¹⁰⁶ Kay-Wištāsp's son, Esfandiār, an immortal warrior comparable to Achilles, put an end to the invasion by defeating Arjāsp, the King of the Xyōns, just as Bahrām, son of Yazdegerd, defeated

Professor Ehsan Yarshater, Acta Iranica 30 (1990): 214; Richard N. Frye, “The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians,” in The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanid Periods, vol. 3.1, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 120.

¹⁰³ Most scholars suggest that Yazdegerd was the first Sasanian king to initiate the use of the Kayānid ideology. Shahbazi traces the Kayānid ideology as a primordial discourse to the reign of Shapur II, and argues that he used the title *Kay* on some of his coins. See Richard Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, 320; Touraj Daryaee, “Keyanid History or National History? The Nature of Sāsānian Zoroastrian Historiography,” *The Journal of the Society for Iranian Studies* 28, no. 3-4 (1995): 136; Shahbazi, “On the *Xwadāy-nāmag*”, 214-226, ft. 53. For Shapur numismatics, Shahbazi cites Michael Mitchiner, *Oriental Coins and their Values: The Ancient and Classical World* (London: Hawkins, 1978), 159: no. 890f., 166: no. 980 ff. Mitchiner's reading of the coins is problematic, however.

¹⁰⁴ The numismatic legend reads “*Yazdegird Rāmšahr*.” See Robert Gobl, *Sasanian Numismatics* (Braunschweig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1971), Table IX. For the translation of the legend, see Touraj Daryaee, “History, Epic, and Numismatics: on the Title of Yazdegerd I (Rāmšahr),” *American Journal of Numismatics* 14 (2002): 91. For other suggested translations, see Nikolaus Schindel, “Sasanian Coinage,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, 2005; Robert Gobl, “Sasanian Coins,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanid Periods*, vol. 3.1, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 330.

¹⁰⁵ See Daryaee, “History, Epic, and Numismatics” 93-94. Kay-Wištāsp is also hailed as *Rāmšahr Kay Wištāsp Šāh* in the middle Persian text, *Ayādegār i Zarērān*. Also, Mojmāl al-Tavārikh has recorded the title as *Rām Wištāspān*. See *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 83. For Kay-Wištāsp's title in *Ayādegār*, see Saied Oryan, *Motun Pahlavi* (Tehran: Nilufar, 1992), 201. For a Persian translation of *Ayādegār*, see *Yādegār Zarirān*, trans. Zhaleh Amuzegar (Tehran: Mo'in, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ For an etymology and suggested meanings of the term *xiyōnān* or Chionites and possible connection to the Huns, see Wolfgang Felix, “Chionites,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. V, fasc. 5, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1991), 485-487; Frye, “The political history of Iran under the Sasanians,” 120; Bivar, “The History of Eastern Iran,” 211.

the Hunnic Khāqān.¹⁰⁷ Symbolic motifs from the period also suggest the spread of Kayānid references as the royal ideology.¹⁰⁸ Motifs such as the crescent moon are versatile in the sense that they not only provide symbolic connections to legendary Iranian past, but also connect the house of Sāsān to eastern religion-cultural trends, thus providing a meaningful context for a shared history in the east.¹⁰⁹ By placing Sasanian kings in the context of primordial and epic

¹⁰⁷ It is quite fascinating that, just as Yazdegerd is labeled as the “sinful,” his epic counterpart Wištāsp goes through a similar transformation from the *Avestā* to the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. In the *Avestā* he, along with his victorious son Esfandiār, is a just ruler and the protector of the faith. In the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, he is projected as a hypocrite and a ruler thirsty for power and, ultimately, responsible for the tragic death of the brave and younger Esfandiār, albeit at the hands of Rostam. On the portrayal of Esfandiār in the *Avestā* and the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, see Ehsan Yarshater, “Esfandiār,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. VIII, fasc. 6, ed. by Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1998), 584-592. For the hero’s immortality, see Mahmood Omidshah, “Rāz Ruyintany Esfandiār,” *Iran-nameh* 1, no.2, (1983): 254-81. On the comparison of Esfandiār to Achilles, see Jehangir, C. Coyajee, *Studies in Shāhnāmeḥ* (Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala, 1939).

¹⁰⁸ Despite the general suggestion that Yazdegerd was the first to introduce the crescent on his crown, we see that this motif appeared first on the crown of Shapur II. Hamzeh Esfahani describes Shapur II’s crown in the following manner: “His crown resembled the heavens, surrounded by two layers of gold, with a golden crescent in the middle.” The Metropolitan Museum also holds a Sasanian bust, believed to be that of Shapur, where the crown closely resembles the description of Hamzeh, who depicts a gold crescent at the front and center of the crown. See Hamzeh Esfahani, *Tārikh Payāambarān va Šāhān*, 50. For an image of the bust, see <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/325717>. For the crescent motif on the crown of Yazdegerd I and Bahrām V, see Kurt Erdmann, “Die Entwicklung der Sasanidischen Krone,” *Ars Islamica* 15-16 (1951): 102-3; Gobl, *Sasanian Numismatics*, 321-327. For the crescent of Yazdegerd’s crown used as a guideline to analyze similar motifs on Iranian Hunnic coins, see Gobl, *Sasanian Numismatics*, 48. For coinage of Bahrām and the unique position of the crescent on his crown, see *Ibid.*, 49. On Shapur II as the initiator of Astral symbols on coinage, see Schindel, “Sasanian Coinage.” For Jewish-Sasanian seals bearing the crescent motif, see Daniel M. Friedenberg, *Sasanian Jewry, and its Culture: A Lexicon of Jewish and Related Seals* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2009), 39, 47, 51-52. For the moon motif as a prominent motif in rituals held for deceased ancestors, see Mary Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), 116. Boyce’s argument strengthens the relationship between the moon motif and Kayānids as Sasanian ancestors. For the religious, symbolic and ideological significance of the moon motif in the Iranian context, see Mehrangiz Samadi, *Mah dar Iran* (Tehran: Enteshārāt Elmi va Farhangi, 1988), 17-27.

¹⁰⁹ For the depiction of the moon motif on Kushān coinage and its relation to Mithra, see Franz Grenet, “Mithra: Iconography in Iran and Central Asia,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, online edition, 2006. For the crescent motif in Sogdian iconography as a symbol of the goddess Nana, see Jenny Rose, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (New York: IB Tauris, 2011), 145. On the cult of Nana in Panjikant and Sogdiana, see Boris Marshak, “Panjikant,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, 2002; Franz Grenet and Boris Marshak, “Le Mythe de Nana dans l’art de Sogdiane,” *Arts Asiatiques* 53 (1998): 5-18. On the Kushān empire and Sasanian influence in the region, see Bivar, “The History of Eastern Iran,” 198-208. On the use of the crescent motif in Hunnic coins in the mid-fifth century, see Michael Alram, “Hunnic Coinage,” in

mythological battles against evil, the Sasanians succeeded in reviving their socio-cultural place as the protectors of Ērānšahr and the Zoroastrian faith. Conclusively, we see that the title *Rāmšahr* stood as a bold testimony to Sasanian political aspirations and a conscious move towards securing peace. The Kayānid ideology and its propagation throughout the empire, sought to provide the dynasty with a renewed level of legitimation, advertise the administration's peace policy and avert eastern threats by allowing diplomatic negotiations through a shared heritage. On an international level, the empire sought to reduce tension with Rome through deliberate expressions of goodwill. Yazdegerd's political legacy created a new space characterized by a more centralized policy that used the legalization of Christianity and the Kayānid ideology as its primary tenant. Maintaining order also meant containing the Hunnic threat and reducing chances of failure maintaining a centralized policy that emphasized peaceful relations with Rome. The combination of such systems, inner-aristocratic blood feuds and the unique cultural atmosphere of fifth-century Iran created a setting in which Yazdegerd was transformed into the model of sovereign cruelty, while his son Bahrām was mythologized as a hero, one that ushered hope and victory just as Kay Khosrow did. The use of the Kayānid ideology continued to be central to the administration's domestic polemic during Bahrām's reign. As a result, we find Bahrām's character shaped after the most revered of all Kayānid kings, Kay Khosrow.

Encyclopedia Iranica, vol. XII, Fasc. 6, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2004), 570-573. For examples of the crescent motif on Kushān coins and its connection to *Māh*, see John M. Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 79-84, 92, 108-109.

CHAPTER 2:
**“BUT WHO PRAYS FOR SATAN...HE, BEING AMONG SINNERS THE
SUPREMEST?”¹¹⁰**

In 399 CE, Yazdegerd I succeeded Bahrām IV as the King of Kings of Persia.¹¹¹ As we saw in the preceding chapter, the concerns of the fifth century, namely the Hunnic crisis, had necessitated a radical change in political and military policy. A more centralized political outlook – achieved through domestic and foreign peace, and order – meant that the Sasanians were able to focus their resources on eastern defense. The court’s internal affairs, however, were nowhere close to peaceful and orderly. The inner-aristocratic feud caused by rivalry, personal animosity and political disagreement had led to a power struggle that not only resulted in Yazdegerd’s depiction as a villain but could have ultimately brought his line of kingship to an end. Despite being the son of Shapur III and the grandson of one of the mightiest kings of the Sasanian empire, Shapur II, Yazdegerd is regarded as one of the most despised characters in Perso-Arabic narratives. He is defamed as the most notorious son of the House of Sāsān, a bloodthirsty lunatic, who ushered dark and terrifying times.¹¹² Despite such horrible accusations, we see that

¹¹⁰ Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011), 34.

¹¹¹ Rawlinson and Shahbazi suggest that Yazdegerd was the son of Bahrām IV and the grandson of Shapur II. Frye makes no final remarks and states that he was either the son or brother Bahrām, who himself was either the son of Shapur II or Shapur III. See Rawlinson, *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy*, 385; Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 421-22; Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, 318.

¹¹² Yazdegerd’s precise genealogy is a matter of debate, yet it is most likely that he was the son of Shapur III. The primary root of the confusion is, in fact, al-Tabari’s misled assumption that Bahrām IV must have been Yazdegerd’s father since sons inherited their father’s throne. Bal’ami repeats this erroneous genealogical account and says, that some believe, that Yazdegerd was not the son of Bahrām but the son of Shapur. He, however, adds incorrectly that Bahrām and Shapur were brothers. Authors such as Dinavari are helpful in solving the mystery of Yazdegerd’s genealogy. Dinavari and the Armenian author Elishe, amongst others, refer to him as Yazdegerd, son of Shapur, son of Shapur. Nehāyat adds that

Yazdegerd receives unmatched praise in Greco-Roman sources.¹¹³ Moreover, the empire seemed to have fared well during his rule, managing amicable relations with foreign leaders, increased revenue through implementing trade agreements and, most importantly, steps taken to decrease rivalry and tension between Christians and non-Christians of the empire.¹¹⁴ Considering the lack of consistency in sources regarding Yazdegerd and his rule, in this chapter, I will focus on

he was the grandson of Shapur II, known as Dhu Al-aktāf. Also, the 20-year gap that separates Yazdegerd's coronation from Shapur II's death renders it improbable for Yazdegerd to be the son of Shapur II, confirming that Yazdegerd was the son of Shapur III and the grandson of Shapur II. See Mohammad ibn Jarir Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari: The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, vol. 5, trans. Clifford E. Bosworth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 70; Abu Ali Mohammad Bal'ami, *Tarikh-nāmah Tabarī*, ed. Moḥammad Rowshan (Tehran: Soroush, 1999), 633. For other sources that introduce Yazdegerd as the son of Bahrām IV, see Hamzeh Esfahani, *Tārikh Payāambarān va Šāhān*, 16; Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 74. For sources which name Yazdegerd as the "son of Shapur," see *Šahrestānīhā*, 14; Agathias, *The Histories* 4.26.3, 129; Ali ibn al-Hossein Mas'udi, *Moruj al-Dhahab va Ma'āden al-Jowhar*, trans. Abolqasem Payandeh (Tehran: Enteshārāt Elmi va Farhangī, 2003), 255; Lazar P'arpec'i, *The History of Lazar P'arpec'i*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 52; *Ibn Meskavayh, Tajāreb al-Omam fī Akhbār Moluk al-'Arab va al-'Ajam, vol. 1*, trans. Ali-Naqi Monzavi (Tehran: Toos, 1995), 140. For the original Arabic text, see *Ibn Meskavayh, Tajāreb al-Omam fī Akhbār Moluk al-'Arab va al-'Ajam, ed. Abolqasem Emami, 6 vols. (Tehran: Soroush, 1987)*. For sources that correctly identify Yazdegerd as the son of Shapur III, see Abu Hanifeh Dinavari, *Al-Akhbār al-Tevāl*, trans. Mahmood Mahdavi Damqani (Tehran: Nashr Ney, 2004), 78. For its original Arabic text, see Abu Hanifeh Dinavari, *Al-Akhbār al-Tevāl*, ed. Abdulmon'em Shial (Qom: Manšurāt Al-Razi, 1989); Robert W. Thomson, tr. *Elišhē: History of Vardan and the Armenian War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 97; *Nehāyat al-Erab fī Akhbār al-Fors va al-Arab*, ed. Mohamad Taqi Daneshpazhuh (Tehran: Anjoman Āsār va Mafākher, 1996), 252. On *Nehāyat al-Erab*, see Khatibi, Abolfazl, "Negāhi be Ketāb Nihāyat al-Erab fī Akhbār al-Furs va-l-'Arab va Tarjomeh Fārsi Qadim Ān" *Nameh Farhangestan* 8 (1996):140-149.

¹¹³ For example, Agathias describes him as "...Yazdegerd, the son of Shapur, [was] a man whose memory has remained something of a legend among the Romans." *ἐπί τούτοις Ἰσδιγέρδης ὁ Σαβώρου τὴν Περσικὴν ἡγεμονίαν παραλαμβάνει, ὁ πολὺς παρά Ρωμαίοις καὶ περιλάλητος* See Agathias, *Historiarum* 4.26.3, 264. For the English translation of the passage, see Agathias, *The Histories* 4.26.3, 264. For Yazdegerd's praise in non-Sasanian sources, see Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 423.

¹¹⁴ While we have no information on the trade hubs in Persia designated for Roman merchants, we do know that one of Diocletian's terms of agreement for peace in 298 CE was that all exchanges between Rome and Persia be restricted to Nisibis, limiting the flow and movement of population for surveillance purposes. Sasanian administration was also concerned with the Christians of the frontier regions, such as Veh-Ardeshir, Hira and the Mesopotamia rather than those of central and eastern Iran. This points to the reality of the conceived threat of Christians acting as agents of Rome and the importance of the periphery as locations of spy-related commotion and intelligence activities. See, Lieu, "Captives, Refugees and Exiles: A Study of Cross-frontier Civilian Movements and Contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian."

reconstructing a less polemical account of the life and government of Yazdegerd, as I develop an account of the socio-political atmosphere of the Sasanian Empire at the dawn of the fifth century. Furthermore, I demonstrate the intricacies and nuances of the Sasanian political administration and argue that Yazdegerd was, in fact, a man of integrity and honor, whose domestic and foreign policies placed him in opposition with certain holders of power within the Sasanian system.¹¹⁵ I also situate the historical narratives of this period within the framework of Iranian epic, since proper contextualization of reports increase our understanding of how late antique Iranians made sense of their world. The story of Yazdegerd's vilification, when placed in the context of Avestan epic tale, further reveals why he was fashioned after the most wicked of all rulers of Ērānšahr: Zahhāk, and received the eternal literary damnation that such portrayal would guarantee.

In the last year of the fourth century, Yazdegerd I, a middle-aged descendant of the House of Sāsān, with extensive political and military experience, was crowned as the King of Kings of Iran.¹¹⁶ His alleged crimes and not his acclaimed qualifications are the source of his fame in Perso-Arabic history. Yazdegerd is known by the epithet *bezehgar*, meaning "The Sinner," since sources

¹¹⁵ Most studies on the period view Zoroastrian priests as responsible for the vilification of Yazdegerd who, in opposition to their wishes, legalized Christianity in the Sasanian Empire for example. Frye writes that Yazdegerd's poor reputation was due to his persecution of priests and pro-Christian policies. See Frye, "The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians," 143.

¹¹⁶ Rawlinson argues that numismatic evidence shows that Yazdegird was already a middle-aged man by the time he became king of Persia. Thus, he most probably served as a provincial governor. I suggest that he possibly had a prominent role in defeating the Hunnic attack on Byzantium and Persia, in the late fourth century. Ardeshir II also secured himself the throne by showing valor in war. See Rawlinson, *The Seventh Great Oriental Monarchy*, 390; Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 415-419. On the title "King of Kings of Ērān and Anērān," see Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 144; Phillip Gignoux, "Aneran," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. I, fasc. 1, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd.) 1985, 30-31.

claim that he was notorious for a level of ‘harshness’ that Iranian had not experienced before.¹¹⁷ He is suspect of arrogance, lack of mercy, bloodshed, skepticism, contempt towards the Faith, and, above all, high regard for non-Iranians.¹¹⁸ History has proven, now and again, that things are not always as they seem. First, accounts start off by describing him as a man of intellect and extensive political knowledge, yet inclined towards malice.¹¹⁹ For instance, Bal‘ami writes,

مردی با علم و تمیز بود و بخرد، و تجریت بسیار [داشت]. چون ملک بدو
رسید از آن همه بگشت و ستم و بیدادی کرد.¹²⁰

He was a learned man with a great sense of discernment.
[He was] wise and had extensive experience. He turned from all
that after becoming king and exerted cruelty and injustice.¹²¹

Moreover, despite the claim that Yazdegerd’s tyranny was directed towards the “people” and the “peasants,” it can be deduced from Perso-Arabic accounts that his alleged cruelty mainly targeted high ranking nobles.¹²² For example, Shabankarei specifies that Yazdegerd’s “harshness” was not directed towards all citizens, and focused on the Persian elite and nobility. He writes that,

¹¹⁷ At times sources use the Arabic translation of *bezehgar*, which is *al-athim*. Yazdegerd is also known by the epithet *dabr*. See Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*. On the term *bezeh* in Middle Persian, see Henrik Samuel Nyberg, *A Manual of Pahlavi*, vol. 2 (Gottingen: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974), 46.

¹¹⁸ For a comprehensive account of Yazdegerd’s vilified image in Perso-Arabic sources see, Shahram Jalilian, “Afsāneh Marg Yazdgerd Bezehgar,” *Tahqiqāt Tārikh Ejtemā‘y* 5, no. 2 (2015): 13-32.

¹¹⁹ It is possible that references to Yazdegerd’s wisdom, intelligence and high political experience were transmitted through non-hostile editions of the *Xodāynāmag*.

¹²⁰ Bal‘ami, *Tarikhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 633; Also, see Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 70.

¹²¹ Translation based off Bal‘ami, *Tarikhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 633.

¹²² Gardizi also writes that his oppression is aimed primarily at members of his “own royal house.” Abi Saied Gardizi, *Zein al-Akhhār*, ed. Abdolhai Habibi (Tehran: Donyāye Ketāb, 1984), 74.

مردی با عقل و علم بود، اما ظالم بود. بر بزرگان فارس استخفاف کردی و
سیاستی عظیم داشتی.¹²³

He was a man of knowledge and intelligence, yet cruel. He brought much humiliation upon the elite of Persia and had grand political genius.¹²⁴

Furthermore, the author of *Mojmal al-Tavārikh* confirms that Yazdegerd won the title “Sinner” because of the humiliation and shame that he imposed on Iranian “elite and courtiers.” He writes that,

علامتهای زشت بر اندام مهتران کردن، تا همه ستوه شدند از وی و ازین
سبب او را بزمگر خوانند.¹²⁵

The grantees, tired of all the humiliation he had subjected them to, began to call him The Sinner.¹²⁶

The profound and extensive political influence and monopoly of the Iranian nobility and the Zoroastrian leaders is a known fact. Disagreements, conspiracies and coups against members of the royal house were also not unheard of either. The animosity between Yazdegerd and his opponents was of a peculiar nature since the King was despised, yet ruled somewhat authoritatively, for more than two decades. It is plausible that, even at the time of his enthronement, Yazdegerd was already seen as a threat by certain influential members of the

¹²³ Mohammad ibn Ali Šabānkārei, *Majma‘ al-Ansāb*, ed. Mir-Hashem Mohaddes, vol.1 (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 2002), 230.

¹²⁴ Translation based off Šabānkārei, *Majma‘ al-Ansāb*, 230.

¹²⁵ *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 69.

¹²⁶ Translation based on *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 69.

court. For example, Tha'ālebi provides an exciting depiction of the grim and, undoubtedly, awkward atmosphere of Yazdegerd's coronation. He writes that,

As they crowned him, they stood in front of him [in respect], just as it was the tradition of his forefathers, and despite their reluctance and fear, they began to speak in his praise. Yazdegird gazed upon them with passively and refused to respond [in gratitude] and signaling with a [wave] of his hands and a [nod] of his head, bestowed his grim silence upon them.¹²⁷

As Tha'ālebi reports, Yazdegerd was crowned amidst cheers of health and prosperity as was the custom. Yet, not all looked forward to his reign since they were 'consumed with fear and anxiety.' Moreover, Yazdegerd seems to have been aware of the unspoken tensions and silent whispers, since he responded to the empty words of praise and congratulatory homilies by merely staring at the crowd and signaling them to leave. It is evident that tensions increased sometime after he had assumed kingship, since sources praise the King's knowledge and experience in a few reports. Moreover, the real cause of such hostility and tension is still a mystery. On one hand, Bal'ami alludes to 'the breaking of a promise' and writes that,

یزدجرد اول ملکی به رفیق کرد. چون شما شرط بشکستید او نیز عهد با شما
بشکست.¹²⁸

Yazdegird initially ruled with leniency and mercy. You went back on your oaths to him, and so, in turn, he also broke off his promises to you.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 256:

همینکه تاج بر سر او نهادند و در برابرش ایستادند در عین کراهت و خوف همچنانکه در مورد اجداد او معمول بود زبان بدعای او گشودند. یزدجرد با بی‌قیدی تمام در آنان نگرینسته از جواب خودداری و با حرکت سرودست اشاره‌ای بآنان کرده درروی خمش را بخورد آنان داد...

¹²⁸ Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 651. In response to accusations of tyranny against his father, Bahrām reminds his foes that Yazdegird "changed" because they "betrayed him" and broke their promise. For a commentary on the passage, see Shahbazi, *Tārīkh Sasanian*, 423-424.

¹²⁹ Translation based on Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 651.

In fact, analysis of sins attributed to Yazdegerd reveals “distrust” at its core. For example, his opponents are described as victims of suspicion, discredit, and lack of recognition. On the other hand, we know that Yazdegerd may have begun his rule with vengeful feelings towards certain courtiers, since there is likelihood that two of his predecessors and next of kin, Shapur III and Bahrām IV, were assassinated by the Sasanian elite.¹³⁰ The *Chronicle of Séert* supports this suggestion and writes that,

...و قصد من قتل اخاه و غلظ على روساء مملكته و وضع منهم. فعاتبه بعض من يأنس به على فعله. و قال له البناء لا يقوم الا على اساس. و اذ لم يكن اساس فكيف يقوم بناء. و قد عاملت في اول امرك روساء مملكتك بمعاملة قبيحة اوصلت عليهم و الى قلوبهم مكان السرور حزناً. فاي شئ يكون آخر امرك معهم. فقال لهم. انتم قتلتهم الملكين و استحققتهم منى ما افعل بكم. و ان استقامت طريقكم احسنت اليكم. فرهبه رعيته و استقامت له الامور.¹³¹

He [Yazdegird] then looked for his brother’s killer. He was unyielding with the princes in his kingdom and tried to humiliate them. Some of his friends advised him against this: ‘The building cannot stand without foundation. You have maltreated the princes

¹³⁰ For further reference to the murder of the Persian monarch, see the poem “Against Eutropius” in Claudius Claudianus, *Claudian*, vol.1, trans. Maurice Platnauer (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 220-21. Since Claudius is not a historian, his poem about the developments of the Sasanian Empire, in 399 CE, is poetic in tone. Yet it is important as it reveals the rumors that were spreading through the Roman Empire, at the dawn of the fifth century. Claudian informs us that Romans believed in the infrequency of regicide in Persia, at least compared to Rome, and argues that such infrequency is mainly because the punishment for it was too grand to make it worthwhile. His passage also fits well into the custom of sending embassies to report new developments in kingship to the neighboring land, as Lee writes in his article. The reference he makes to “our faithful ally Sapor” most probably refers to Shapur III and can be used as evidence to the earlier stance of the “Peace project,” which will be the focus of the next chapter. On Cameron and his authorship see, Averil Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Greatrex and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier*, 255 ft 2. The *Chronicle of Séert* also mentions the possible murder of Shapur III and Bahrām IV, writing that, “At the time of Theodosius, Bahrām son of Shapur, surnamed Farmānšāh, ascended the throne of Persia. He resolved to avenge his father... The subjects of his empire quickly felt the yoke that he placed upon them. They plotted his death. One day, he went out with a servant walking on the hill adjoining the land of Daskart. He was followed by soldiers and realized their intention. As he was strong, he asked his servant for an arrow to shoot at them. But the soldiers managed to wait for him and kill him on this hill. He was on the throne for ten years and eighteen days.” See *The Chronicle of Séert*, 52-3.

¹³¹ *Histoire Nestorienne Inédite (Chronique de Séert)*, 316.

in your kingdom and thus made them bitter rather than joyful. What do you hope to achieve?’ The King replied: ‘You have killed two Kings, so you deserve this treatment. If you follow the right path, I will be more considerate.’ His subjects were suitably fearful of him, and his authority derivation.¹³²

Thus it is worth considering that Yazdegerd may have viewed certain members of nobility as murderers who got away. What seems to have further enraged Iranian nobles, who had, and would for centuries, hold a monopoly over power, was to witness Yazdegerd’s stance towards non-Iranians, specifically foreign envoys or, as they put it, “unworthy persons.”¹³³ Tabari specifies that all his trust and respect was placed on foreign emissaries and envoys rather than Iranian nobles.¹³⁴ He writes that,

Only delegations of envoys comig to him from the rulers of the various nations, could speak with him on these things and similar topics.¹³⁵

Tha‘ālebi describes Yazdegerd’s politically amicable relations with outsiders as a mistake, since it “emboldened foreigners.” He writes,

Thus, he empowered foreigners (non-Iranians), humbled men of authority, and impoverished the poor, shed the blood of many and put on grand shows in his attempt to disgrace and belittle Iranians.¹³⁶

¹³² *The Chronicle of Séert*, 58.

¹³³ For similar criticism, see *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 252. The letter of Tansar also elaborates on the consequences of conferring titles upon undeserving people, see *Nāmeḥ Tansar*, 71.

¹³⁴ Even when reporting Bahrām’s short and not very pleasant visit to Ctesiphon, Tabari explains that it was only through the interference of the Roman envoy that Bahrām succeeded in attaining permission to return to Hirā. For Tabari’s treatment of the Sasanians, see Zeev Rubin, “Al-Ṭabari and the Age of the Sasanians.” In *Al-Ṭabarī: A Medieval Muslim Historian and his Work*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2008): 60.

¹³⁵ Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 71.

¹³⁶ Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 256-7:

One example of the King's close bonds with non-Iranian/Zoroastrian groups was Yazdegerd's marital ties and his amicable relations with the rabbinic circle of Babylon.¹³⁷ According to Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr, Šīšīnduxt was the daughter of the Jewish Exilarch, the wife of Yazdegerd and the mother of Bahrām.¹³⁸

چنانکه بیگانگان را متوحش و زورمندان را ذلیل و ضعفا را بیپا کرده خونها ریخت و در امحاء آثار عدل و تخفیف ایرانیان شعبده‌ها برانگیخت.

¹³⁷ If the alliance between the House of Sāsān and the House of the *Resh Galute* was made by Yazdegerd's father, Shapur III (r.383-388 CE), Šīšīnduxt could be the daughter of Nathan II (370-400 CE). On the other hand, if the union took place after Yazdegerd's coronation in 399 CE, Šīšīnduxt was most probably the daughter of Kahana I, (400-415 CE). The latter hypothesis would make Narseh and Bahrām the half-brothers of Shapur, the son of Yazdegird, since we know that Shapur was old enough to assume the role of king of Armenia by 414 CE. For a genealogy of the Babylonian Exilarch, see Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia: Later Sasanian Times*, part V (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 45. For a history of the Babylonian Exilarch, see Moshe Beer, *The Babylonian Exilarchate in the Arsacid and Sassanian Periods* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1970.) It must be pointed out that some scholars do not view references to Sasanian kings found in the Babylonian Talmud to be non-factual. For example, Mokhtarian argues the Sasanian royals mentioned in the Talmud might be allegorical or symbolic. He adds that the figure of the Sasanian kings and other symbols of Persian imperial authority were used by rabbis as a didactic mirror to assert their prestige over these "others," negotiating boundaries of self-identity through a "us-them" dialectic. See Jason Mokhtarian, "Empire and Authority in Sasanian Babylonia: The Rabbis and King Shapur in Dialogue," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012): 148-80. On the relations between Yazdegird and the Jewish population of the Empire, see Geo Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sassanian Empire," *Iranica Antiqua* 1 (1961): 140-42.

¹³⁸ The passage also reveals the queen's considerable wealth, influence and as a result, her indulgence in charity, such as dedicating wealth to pious foundations. She is also acknowledged as the founder of the cities of Šuš and Šūštar in Khuzestan. Elite individuals or families would underwrite the construction of religious sites or infrastructure from their wealth for the benefit of the society. The king, on the other hand, was expected to contribute to the welfare of the people and the empire by funding the construction of new towns and cities. In a society where political power and prestige was directly tied to such public display of piety, why would a Middle Persian text assign such role to a non-Zoroastrian, non-Iranian female persona, unless evidence of her marital ties to the royal house and her pious deeds were ample and evident? See Mary Boyce, "The Pious Foundations of the Zoroastrians," in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 31, no. 2 (1968): 270-289; Anahit Perikhanian, "Iranian Society and Law," in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanid Periods*, vol. 3.2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 627-80; John R. Hinnells, "The Flowering of Zoroastrian Benevolence: Parsi Charities in the 19th and 20th Centuries," *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce, Acta Iranica* 25, ed. Harold W. Bailey et al. (1985): 261-326. For the city of Šuš in the Sasanian period, see Gerd Gropp, "Susa: The Sasanian Period." in *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, 2005. On Susa during the Achaemenid period, see Pierre Briant, 'Susa and Elam in the Achaemenid

*šahrestān [ī] šūs ud šūstar šīšīnduxt zan ī yazdgird ī šābuhrān
kard čiyōn duxt ī rēš-galūdag jahūdagān šāh mād-iz ī wahrām ī gōr
būd.*¹³⁹

The city of Susa and Šūštar were built by Šīšīnduxt, the wife of Yazdgird, the son of Šābuhr, since she was the daughter of Reš Galut, the King of the Jews, and also was the mother of Wahrām Gōr.¹⁴⁰

Empire’, in: J. Perrot (ed.), *The Palace of Darius at Susa. The Great Royal Residence of Achaemenid Persian*, London (2013): 3-35.

¹³⁹ *Šahrestānīhā*, 15.

¹⁴⁰ *Šahrestānīhā*, 20. The religious background of Šīšīnduxt’s family, as well as the fact that she is only identified in one extant Middle Persian source, has led scholars to be doubtful of the factuality of the report. Frye, for example, dismisses the report as a mere “folk tale,” while Neusner writes that, “this again may be the product of Jewish historiography and propaganda, but one cannot deny the historicity of the contacts between the Sasanians and the Jews.” Christensen mentions the alliance but does not provide any interpretation. McDonough, on the other hand, sees the marital alliance as likely considering the general friendly relationship between the Jewish elite and the Persian royalty. Indeed, marriages between members of the Sasanian family and non-Zoroastrian nobles were not uncommon during the time of Yazdegerd. For example, Hormozd-duxt, the daughter of Hormozd II, was given in marriage to the Armenian Vahan Mamikonian. The rabbinic legal tradition also deems interfaith marriages as possible. In light of evidence from Aramaic incantation bowls, Shaked argues that the “mixture of blood between Semites and Iranians” did, indeed, occur. Thus, it is safe to say that Šīšīnduxt’s transition and integration into the Sasanian royal sphere would have been possible. Overall, if we consider Yazdegerd’s diplomatic policies and his plans to maintain domestic and foreign peace, the alliance between the House of the Exilarch and the House of Sāsān, appears to be more than mere folktale. Such a pact would have had the potential to provide the House of the Exilarch with a certain level of access to influence and wealth, which would have been labeled as a break from tradition, potentially causing inner-courtly rivalry. See Shapur Shahbazi, “Hormozd II,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. XII, fasc. 5, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2004), 464-465; Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran*, 319; Jacob Neusner, “Jews in Iran,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanid Periods*, vol. 3.2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 915; McDonough, “The Legs of the Throne:”, 304; Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud, Reading the Bavli in its Sasanian Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 40; Shaul Shaked, “Religion in the Late Sasanian Period; Eran, Aneran, and other Religious Designations,” in *The Sasanian Era: The Idea of Iran*, vol. 3, ed. Vesta Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: IB Taurus, 2008), 103-117; Elman, “Marriage and Marital Property”; Elman, ““He in His Cloak and She in Her Cloak.”” Are the double quotation marks normal? For a genealogy of the Babylonian Exilarch, see Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia: Later Sasanian Times*, 45. Neusner identifies the Exilarch at the time of Yazdegerd as Nathan II. See, *Ibid.*, 97. Daryaee suggests that Šīšīnduxt may have been the daughter of Mar Kahana I (400-415 CE.). See *Šahrestānīhā*, 51-52 ft. 9.

As the wife of the King of Kings and the queen mother, she would have received the title *bānbišnān bānbišn*, or queen regent, the highest title a female could hold in the empire.¹⁴¹ This, in turn, would have caused an uproar amongst elite families, who were eager to marry off their daughters to the king and rise in status and wealth.¹⁴²

Another example of Yazdegerd's bonds with non-Iranians is his ties to the Lakhmids of Hirā. As if taking a queen from a non-Iranian family was not enough, Yazdegerd proceeds to assign Nu'mān of the House of Lakhm, an Arab pagan, as the foster father of his son Bahrām and conferred the highest title of the empire upon.¹⁴³ Such measures would have been interpreted

¹⁴¹ On the position of *bānbišnān bānbišn*, see William Sundermann, "Bānbišn," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. III, fasc. 7, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1988), 678-679.

¹⁴² The queen is also accounted as responsible for the relocation of a group of Jews to the city of Gay. It is difficult to ascertain where the Jews were being relocated from, or what caused Šišīnduxt to "plead" *xwāhišn* for royal permission to initiate the transportation. It is also difficult to determine the identity of the Jews who were being relocated. It is possible that they were either Babylonian Jews, or immigrant Jews from Israel, Armenia, or Arabia. Šahrestānīhā states that, "*šahrestān ī gay gizistag *aleksandar ī flīpus kard. mānīšn ī jahūdān ānōh būd. pad xwadāyīh [ī] Yazdegerd ī sābuhrān nīd az xwāhišn ī šišīnduxt u-š zan būd.*" "The city of Gay was built by the accursed Alexander, the son of Philip. The dwelling of the Jews was there. During the reign of Yazdgird, the son of Šābuhr, (the Jews) were led there by the request of Šišīnduxt, who was his wife." Moreover, Macuch suggests that it is probable that the tradition of "charitable foundations" developed into the idea of Waqf in the post-Islamic era. Also, Mojmal al-Tavārikh reports that Yazdegird was so wicked that he contributed nothing to charity and constructed no towns during his kingship. Such a claim is probably baseless and serves to further portray the king as impious. Such a claim stands in contrast with Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr according to which Yazdegird is the founder of Hamedan, a city in northwestern Iran. See Maria Macuch, "Pious Foundations in Byzantine and Sasanian Law," in *La Persia e Bisanzio: Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, Roma: 14-18 Ottobre 2002, ed. Antonio Carile (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2004), 181-96.; Šahrestānīhā, 16- 20; *Mojmal Al-Tavārikh*, 96. Shahbazi also alludes to the close connections and states that the rabbinic tradition of Babylon and their Exilarch "hailed him [Yazdegird] a new Cyrus. Shapur Shahbazi, "The Horse that killed Yazdegerd," in *Paitimana: Essays in Iranian, Indo-European, and Indian Studies in Honor of Hans-Peter Schmidt* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2003), 355-361. Shahbazi bases his opinion on the Talmudic passage; b. Zev 19a. The passage shows the amicable interaction between Yazdegerd and the rabbinic figures. Yet it would be exaggerated to interpret it as hailing Yazdegerd as a second Cyrus.

¹⁴³ While the practice of fosterage was customary in Sasanian Persia, entrusting education to non-Zoroastrians was theologically frowned upon and seen as a great sin, synonymous with murdering the child. Interreligious guardianships did take place, see Elman, "Marriage and Marital Property in Rabbinic and Sasanian Law," 27. Furthermore, Lakhmids' religious background also rendered them an unwise choice. Lakhmids are believed to have remained faithful to pagan Arab faith for the majority of their rule.

as not only the “empowerment” of non-Mazdean/non-Iranians, but also as the humiliation and belittlement of the noble houses.

Yazdegerd’s relationship with foreign emissaries was also troubling to the Iranians who saw nothing but shame and disregard.¹⁴⁴ For example, Socrates Scholasticus reports that,

*Χρεια δη ουν και τοτε ηγαγεν, ωστε Μαρουθαν τω
Μεσοπαταμιας επισκοπον, ου μικρον εμπροσθεν μνημην
πεποιημεθα, πεμφθηναι παρα του βασιλεως Ἀρωμαιον προς τον
βασιλεια Περσων. Ὁ δε Βασιλεως τον Περσων Πολην
εθλαβειαω παρα τω ανδρι εθρηκως, δια τιμης ηγεν αθτω, και ως
οντως θεοφιλει προσειχεν. Τουτο γινομενον θπεκνιζε τοθς μαγοθς,
οι πολθ παρα τω Περσων Βασιλει Ισχύουσιν.¹⁴⁵*

Necessity brought it about at that time that the Roman emperor thought proper to send Maruthas bishop of Mesopotamia, who has been before mentioned, on a mission to the king of the Persians. The King, discovering great piety in the man, treated him with great honor and gave heed to him as one who was indeed beloved of God. This excited the jealousy of the magi, whose influence is considerable over the Persian monarch...¹⁴⁶

Another issue is that Hirā was home to a large Christian community, despite its leader’s adherence to the pagan faith, see Clifford E. Bosworth, “Iran and the Arabs before Islam,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran: The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sassanid Periods*, vol. 3.1, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 598-99. Fosterage was used to create networks and happened to a great extent in the Iranian world. Foster fathers were in charge of the education and upbringing of the child. For examples of Christians of Hirā sending their sons to Persian household to be educated in the Persian language and culture, see Isabel Toral-Niehoff, “Late Antique Iran and the Arabs: The Case of al-Hira,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 6, no.1-2 (2013b):120-122. For the ancient history of the Arabs, see Jan Retso, *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013). For the titles given to Al-Mundhir, see *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 253; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 83.

¹⁴⁴ This is evident from his relationship with some Christian bishops, and Roman envoys such as Marutha of Maypherqat who served as mediators and representatives of the church of the West. See, Liebeschuetz, John Hugo Wolfgang G., *Barbarians and Bishops: Army, Church, and State in the Age of Arcadius and Chrysostom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

¹⁴⁵ Socrates Scholasticus, *Socrates’ Ecclesiastical History* 7.8, 288.

¹⁴⁶ Socrates Scholasticus, “Socrates: Church History from A.D. 304-439,” 156-7.

In another example, Perso-Arabic sources claim that after Bahrām’s first visit to Ctesiphon, it was the Roman ambassador who persuaded Yazdegerd to allow Bahrām to return back to Hirā.¹⁴⁷ To emphasize that foreign envoys held considerable influence over Yazdegerd, sources report that Tinuš, who was “Cesar’s brother,” was at the Sasanian court on a mission to beg “for peace and to extinguish the flames of war.” Through Tinuš’s request and intervention, Bahrām was granted permission to leave.¹⁴⁸ Bal‘ami writes,

قیصر ملک روم [برادر] را سوی یزدجرد فرستاد با هدیه‌های بسیار تا صلح کند. یزدجرد او را گرامی کرد. چون باز خواست گشتن، بهرام او را درخواست تا از پدرش یزدجرد دستوری خواهد تا بهرام نزد منذر باز شود که وی اندر آن زمین خوی کرده است و ایدر دلش تنگ همی شود. یزدجرد او را دستوری داد.¹⁴⁹

Cesar the King of Rome sent his brother along with many gifts to Yazdegerd to seek peace. When he was about to depart, Bahrām requested that he [Cesar’s brother] ask Yazdegerd for permission so that Bahrām could return to Mundhir [Nu‘mān] since he was accustomed to that land and missed it as it was his home. Yazdegerd granted his wish.

Such portrayals would not only vilify Yazdegerd but also be useful in bypassing Bahrām in the line of kingship. They exhibit Yazdegerd’s wickedness and his ties to “foreigners” while also portraying Bahrām as “unsuitable” for kingship, since he was unfamiliar with Persian customs and never stayed long enough to hold a political appointment before this. Yazdegerd’s enemies would have certainly capitalized upon such arguments.

¹⁴⁷ Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 255. Also, see Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 641.

¹⁴⁸ Arcadius dies in 408 CE. So, if Tabari is talking about a peace treaty and potential war, this should be after the death of Arcadius.

¹⁴⁹ Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 641-642.

In addition, the feeling of humiliation and belittlement, partially caused by the introduction of non-Iranian voices into Yazdegerd's circle of trust, seems to have been only part of the problem, as Yazdegerd was also accused of bloodshed. Sources specify that Yazdegerd was guilty of the grand punishments he assigned to small errors.¹⁵⁰ Dinavari writes that,

[He] was quick-tempered, fierce and merciless. He refused to reward people for reliable services and would not forgive the slightest transgressions. No one dared have a word with him, since he was temperamental and had a straightforward personality and a quick temper.¹⁵¹

We can assume that, accustomed to power and influence, elite officials were, to some extent, beyond the law, which came to an abrupt end during the reign of Yazdegerd. The accusations are voiced in general terms and Perso-Arabic sources provide no specific episode or example. Fortunately for us, however, the gap is filled with stories found in Western sources that speak of the tensions at the Sasanian court. An episode narrated in ecclesial history may serve as an illuminating example of such a case, where a crime is committed and no mercy is shown.¹⁵²

Socrates Scholasticus narrates that somewhat amusing story and writes that,

¹⁵⁰ Interestingly, Yazdegerd is quoted making the following remarks regarding crime and punishment, "The wisest of kings are those who do not haste to punish while angry but rush to commend good deeds while in power." See Qiāseddin ibn Homāmodin Khāndmir, *Ma'āser al-Muluk*, ed. Mirhashem Mohaddes (Tehran: Rasā, 1993), 42. Also, see Bal'ami, *Tarikh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 633; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 140; Serājeddin Jowzjāni, *Tabaqāt Nāseri*, ed. Abdolhay Habibi, vol. 1 (Tehran: Donyā-ye Ketāb, 1984), 159; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 71.

¹⁵¹ Dinavari, *Al-Akhhār al-Tevāl*, 78:

...بدخو و تند و بدون گذشت بود، کسی را در قبال خدمت پسندیده پاداش نمی‌داد از خطا هر چه کوچک هم بود گذشت نمی‌کرد و بر گناهان کوچک همان گونه عقوبت می‌کرد که بر گناهان بزرگ و چون تندخو و درشت‌گفتار بود هیچکس را یارای گفتار با او نبود

¹⁵² This story may be a segment of the author's imagination, especially if we consider the hostility of church authors towards Zoroastrian priests. It is worth considering, since it does display three layers of Yazdegerd's accusations: his high regard for foreign individuals, humiliation and punishment brought upon Iranian elite, and Yazdegerd's lack of tolerance and mercy in the face of transgressions.

...και επειδή οι Περσαι το πυρ σεβουσιν, ειώθει δε ό βασιλεύς εν οικω τινι το διηγεκόσ καιόμενον πυρ προσκυνειν, υπό γην κατακρύψαντες ανθρωπον, καθ' όν ειώθει καιρόν ο βασιλεύς εύχεσθαι, παρεσκεύασαν αναφθέγγεσθαι, 'εξω βαλλεσθαι δειν τον βασιλέα, ησεβηκεναι γαρ, ότι τον των Χριστιανών ιερέα νομίζει θεοφιλή.' ... Μαρουθας δε αληθως θεοφιλής ανθρωπος ευχαις προσέκειτο, δι ων ευρίσκει τον παρά των μάγων γενόμενον δόλον. Τω ουν βασιλεϊ, 'Μη παίζου,' εφη, 'βασιλεϋ άλλ' είσελθων, οτε της φωνής ακούσεις, όρύζας. τον δόλον εύρησεις ου γαρ το πυρ φθεγγεται, αλλά ανθρώπων κατασκευή τούτο ποιει'. Πείθεται τω Μαρουθα δ Περσων βασιλεύς, και αύθις είσηει είς τον οικίσκον, οπού ήν τό άσβεστου πυρ. Έπει δε αυθις ακούει της αυτής φωνής, όρύττεσθαι τον τόπον εκελευσε και ο προπεμπων την νομισθεισαν θεου φωνην εξηλεγχετο. Πίεριοργης ουν γενόμενος ο βασιλεύς το των μάγων γένος άπεδεκάτωσε.¹⁵³

As the Persians worship fire, and the King was accustomed to pay his adorations in a certain edifice to the fire which was kept perpetually burning, they concealed a man underneath the sacred hearth, ordering him to make this exclamation at the time of day when the King was accustomed to performing his devotion! 'The King should be thrust out because he is guilty of impiety, in imagining a Christian priest to be loved by the Deity.' ...However, Maruthas being truly a God-loving man, by the earnestness of his prayers, detected the imposition of the magi. Going to the King, therefore, he addressed him thus: 'Be not deluded, O King,' said he, 'but when you again enter that edifice and hear the same voice, explore the ground below, and you will discover the fraud. For it is not the fire that speaks, but human contrivance does this.' The King received the suggestion of Maruthas and went as usual to the little house where the ever-burning fire was. When he again heard the same voice, he ordered the hearth to be dug up; after that, the impostor who uttered the supposed words of the Deity, was

Furthermore, the killing and discipline of the magi is not a new topic. We are not sure whether the Sasanian oral tradition or that of the Romans included the Achaemenid 'Moq-Koši' or the Killing of the Magi. However, Yazdegerd's dealing with the magi is a reminder Darius and his dealing with Gautama. While the magi held more power and influence in the Sasanian era compared to the Achaemenid Empire, the role of the king as the anchor of the order could not be disputed. Order must be maintained even if it requires the use of violence against religious figures that have walked the path of evil. The main difference during Yazdegerd's time, unlike that of Darius, the magi the magi and their allies at court have a more significant role in composing the history of the House of Sāsān and that of the empire.

¹⁵³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Socrates' Ecclesiastical History* 7.8, 289; Socrates further adds that the magi did not give up and conceived a new plan, which was once again exposed and punished.

discovered. Becoming indignant at the deception thus attempted the King commanded that the tribe of the magi should be decimated.¹⁵⁴

Perso-Arabic sources rationalize that such disciplinary measure were a result of Yazdegerd's insanity and obviously make no mention of possible corruption and dishonesty.¹⁵⁵ For example, Tha'ālebi writes that,

Even his closest friends could not intervene on behalf of another or seek forgiveness for an innocent victim. If one dared take a step to benefit the situation of an imprisoned or miserable folk, he [Yazdegird] would address them saying: "what have you received in return for doing this? How much was the bribe that persuaded you?" In doing so, he removed the conditions for any intervention which ultimately increased his cruelty and tyranny.¹⁵⁶

The *Chronicle of Séert* narrates a story that, if factual, could be seen as further evidence of honoring non-Iranians, as well as what could be referred to as Yazdegerd's anti-corruption measures. According to the *Chronicle*,

On the death of Isaac, Marutha of Maiferqat chose in his place, with the agreement of the fathers and Yazdegerd, Ahai, the disciple of Mar 'Abda. ... As Catholicos, he enjoyed the support of Yazdegerd, who later sent him to Persia because of the pearls being transported on ships from India and China that Nahruz his nephew, the governor of Persia, claimed had been stolen by pirates, so that Ahai could ascertain the truth of these allegations and report on them. When he arrived in Persia, the Catholicos wanted to know where those martyred by Shapur were buried. He made a written account of the martyrs in these areas and told Yazdegerd what he

¹⁵⁴ Socrates Scholasticus, "Socrates: Church History from A.D. 304-439", 157.

¹⁵⁵ Also, see Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 633; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 71.

¹⁵⁶ Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 257:

نزدیکترین دوستانش قادر نبودند که بِنفع کسی مداخله یا مظلومی را شفاعت کنند و اگر کسی جرأت میکرد و بمنظور اجر
اخروی قدمی بِنفع بیچاره یا محبوسی برمیداشت باو میگفت: برای انجام این امر چه تعارف گرفته‌ای؟ در مقابل چه مبلغی راضی باین
کار شده‌ای؟ و همین مقدمات و ساطت را ممنوع ساخته بود و متدرجا شر و ضررش فزونتر میشد.

had seen. He was trusted by the King and had considerable authority with him.¹⁵⁷

Based on the report, Yazdegerd had been doubtful about the credibility of the claim that pirates had robbed a shipment of jewelry and pearls on its way to Persia. There is no doubt that the House of Sāsān and other Persians must have found it outrageous that the King appointed a non-Persian, non-Zoroastrian, to investigate the claims of his cousin and a member of the House of Sāsān. Moreover, the possible opponents were also amongst the highest holders of power within the empire. While political parties and affiliations were in perpetual change, it is possible to identify a few of Yazdegerd's most prominent opponents by cross-analyzing Perso-Arabic reports of the period.¹⁵⁸ The first name that we encounter is Bestām, the head of the military unit

¹⁵⁷ *The Chronicle of Séert*, 61.

¹⁵⁸ Scholars suggest that these hostile narratives were exclusively written and distributed by Zoroastrian priests, whose role in the composition and transmission of Sasanian hagiographical accounts, as well as their influence on court scribes and *dabīrs* is well known. By selecting the Zoroastrian priests as the opposing party, it is easy to see that the legalization of Christianity and the admission of Christian leaders into the Sasanian administration would become the accepted view. For example, Daryaei states that the characterization of Yazdegerd as “sinner” can be traced to the religious freedom he granted to Iranian Christians. Christian integration could not have been the only reason for political tension at the Sasanian court. First, because it would have been halted after the death of Yazdegerd. Not only it was not halted, but it continued to grow and expand. Using the praise voiced about Yazdegerd in Roman and Christian sources, scholars have stuck to noncritical and abstract characterizations of the king and, as an extension, the whole political system of the Sasanian Empire, using terms such as “good”, “benevolent”, or “weak.” For example, Christensen describes Perso-Arabic accounts on Yazdegerd as being biased. Yet he fails to dismantle the “prosecution theory” developed in Greco-Christian sources and ecclesial history. This, in turn, results in an almost word for word repetition of the views expressed in such sources. He conclusively describes Yazdegerd as “probably” a good ruler with a tendency to do good deeds, yet “forced to commit great sins and cruel acts.” We know that the negative account of Yazdegerd's kingship was not the only narrative circulating about him, but it was the most prominent one. This may signify that different versions of the *Khodaynāme* were produced at the Sasanian court. Because the magi's functioned as representatives of the king and links between the public and the court, it was ultimately their version of the Sasanian hagiography that gained widespread popularity. Thus, even in the oral and popular tradition, except for one exception, there is no trace of an unbiased, let alone positive, account of Yazdegerd. We can also see *Khodaynāme* as a form of communication with the public and not only a mythical and historical hagiography. See Venetis, “The Zoroastrian Priests and the Foreign Affairs of Sasanian Iran and the Later Roman Empire,” 50; Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, 22; Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 368.

of Mesopotamia, whose animosity was embedded in the fact that he led those united to bypass Bahrām, son of Yazdegerd.¹⁵⁹ Bestām's allies were all high ranking officials. Dinavari reports that,

The Iranian elite, because of Yazdegerd's mistreatment and his divergence into the wrong path. Made a vow to disallow any of his sons to be chosen as King. Amongst them was Bestām the general commander of the army of Mesopotamia, who had the status of Chiliarch, Yazd-Gušnasb, the general of Khuzestan, Pīrak of the Mehrān family, Gudarz the minister/secretary of the army, Gušnasb-? Minister of taxation/secretary of finance, Panāh-Xosrow the minister of charity, and other noblemen...¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ We do not hear of Bestām after Bahrām gains kingship. It is probable that he was replaced by Bahrām's brother, Narseh. Ferdowsi also reports that, as soon as he became king, Bahrām assigned his brother Narseh as the grand General of the Army. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, 422. For the etymology of the name Bestām, see Ferdinand Justi, *Iranisches Namenbuch* (Marburg: N.G. Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1895), 67. For the character of Bestām in history, see Wilhelm Eilers, "Bestām," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. IV. fasc. 2, edited by Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1989), 175.

¹⁶⁰ Dinavari, *Al-Akhbār al-Tevāl*, 83:

بزرگان ایران بعلت بدرفتاری یزدگرد و روش ناپسندیده‌اش پیمان بستند که هیچیک از پسران او را به پادشاهی انتخاب نکنند، از جمله ایشان بسطام سپهبد عراق بود که پایه و مرتبه او را "هزارافت" می‌گفتند و یزدجشنس فانوسفان زوایی و فیرک ملقب به مهران و گودرز دبیر لشکر و جشنسازدز بیش دبیر خراج و فنا خسرو دبیر صدقات کشور و کسانی دیگر از مردان شریف و بزرگزاده.

David MacKenzie translates *spāhbed* as general or commander, See David N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 75. Moreover, the term *hazrāft* is most probably a form of *hazārūft* or *hazārbed*, meaning chiliarch. According to Lazar, Mehr-Narseh held this position during the reign of Yazdegerd II. According to Dekhoda Jeshnas is the Arabized form of the name Gušnasb. Ali Akbar Dekhoda, *Loqat-nāme* Dekhodā, vol. 5, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 1999), 7759. Dekhoda also suggests that *Pādūsban* supervised and oversaw the position of the *Marzbāns* in the Sasanian period. Dekhoda, *Loqat-nāme* Dekhodā, vol. 4, 5337. He further identifies Zowāb as a region located in the province of Kohkiluyeh. Dekhoda, *Loqat-nāme* Dekhodā, vol 9, 12995. According to Dekhoda, Fanā-Khosro is the Arabized form of Panāh-Xosrow. Dekhoda, *Loqat-nāme* Dekhodā, vol. 10, 17221. Also see Justi, *Iranisches Namenbuch*, 240. For the etymology of the name Yazd-Gušnasb, see *Ibid.*, 149. For the etymology of Pīrak, see *Ibid.*, 252. Here, Justi correctly translates Mehrān as the lineage of Pīrak and not his epithet. Lazar, *The History of Lazar P'arpec'i*, 65. For the etymology of the term *hazārbed* and the status of the holders of such title in the Sasanian era, see Rahim Shayegan, "Hazārbed," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. XII, fasc. 1, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2003), 93-95. For the role and official position of Sasanian Dabīr, see Ahmad Tafazzoli, "Dabīr," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. VI, fasc. 5, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1993), 534-539.

Another prominent opponent may have been the Mobadān Mobad, or the high priest of the court as he was the most outspoken about Yazdegerd's sins when Bahrām, son of Yazdegerd, sieged Ctesiphon and demanded kingship to be returned to him.¹⁶¹ Moreover, Bal'ami writes that Yazdegerd had little respect for "men of knowledge," meaning the Zoroastrian priests. Bal'ami writes that,

بیر اهل علم استخفاف کردی و بر سپاه و رعیت خواری کردی¹⁶²

He belittled the men of knowledge and shamed the army and the peasant.¹⁶³

We further hear that Yazdegerd "disregarded men of knowledge."¹⁶⁴ He reports that court astronomers had suggested that it would be advantageous for the King to go on a pilgrimage to a sacred spring located in Tus, Khorasan. Mocking their words, Yazdegerd took an oath to never step in that area, which resulted in being accused of heresy and rebelling against the will of God.¹⁶⁵

Thus, it is not difficult to see how Yazdegerd, slowly but surely, set himself against his kin. Failing to pay back "the favor" while the King lived, we see that his opponents exacted vengeance post-mortem by assuring his literary damnation as the most wicked son of the House of Sāsān and depriving his sons of their right to rule. Interestingly, by framing Yazdegerd policies and disciplinary measures in religious terms, authors of his letters of damnations

¹⁶¹ See Chapter Three.

¹⁶² Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 643; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 70.

¹⁶³ Translation based on Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 643.

¹⁶⁴ *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 85.

¹⁶⁵ *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 86.

succeeded in transforming him from a shrewd politician into a monster in the context of Iranian epic narratives. For example, we see that Yazdegerd corresponds with the general description of a “bad king,” as presented by Dādestān i Mēnōg i Xrad,

*dušpādixšā ān bawēd kē dād ud ēwēn ī rāst ud frārōn
wišōbēd ud stahm ud appar ud adādestānīh andar kār dārēd ud xīr
ī mēnōg wišōbēd ud kār ud kirbag pad abandīh dārēd ud kirbakkar
mardōm az kirbag kardan abāz dārēd ud padīš wizend kardār
bawēd uš hāmōyēn handāzišn ō tan ī xwēš ud ārāyišn ī xīr ī gētīg
ud hangadīh burzišn ī wattarān ud zanišn The āwēnišn ī wehān ud
abesīhēnišn ī driyōšān. dušpādixšā ī pad ān ēwēnag hamtāg ī
ahrēman ud dēwān guft ēstēd.*¹⁶⁶

And evil-power belongs to he who disrupts justice, tradition, and the path of righteousness. And he whose deeds involve injustice, theft, and brutality. [And he who] abolishes all that belongs to the Spirit and belittles pious deeds and harms pious souls and prevents them from undertaking virtuous deeds. The center of his focus in his own corporal body, promoting and respecting wicked souls and bringing harm and reproach upon the good. An evil sovereign of such kind is as wicked as Ahriman and the demons.¹⁶⁷

The “Bad Ruler” not only suffers consequences during his life, but also faces eternal damnation. Regarding the fate of the “Bad Ruler” in his afterlife, Ardāvirāf-nāmeḥ writes that,

*um dīd ruwān ī mardē kēš andarwāy dāšt uš pañjāh dēw
pad mār ī šēbāg pēš ud pas hamē zanēnd um pursīd kū ēn tan cē
wināh kard kē ruwān ōwōn pādīfrāh barēd gōwēd Srōš-ahlaw ud
Adur- yazad kū ēn ruwān ī ōy druwand mard kē-š pad gētīg duš-*

¹⁶⁶ *Mēnōg i Xrad*, (15.7-39), book MX, data entry by D.N. MacKenzie, <http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/miran/mpers/mx/mx.htm>

¹⁶⁷ Translation based on: *Mēnōg i Xrad* 15.27-39. For a Persian translation of the passage, see *Minuyeh Kherad*, (14. 27-38), 30. For West’s translation, see West, *The Book of the Mainyo-i-Khard*, 148-149.

*pādixšāyīh kard ud pad mardōmān an-āmurz ud zadār [būd] ud
zaxm ud pādīfrāh an-ēwēnīhā kard.* ¹⁶⁸

I saw the soul of a man who was held upside down as fifty demons flogged him from both sides using vipers. I asked what sin had his corporal body committed for his soul to deserve such penance. The Pious Sroš and, the Āzar, the god, said that this is the soul of that man of the who followed the evil faith, who ruled wickedly on earth, was merciless towards the people, shed blood, and bestowed ruthless punishments [upon the people.] ¹⁶⁹

A close look at accusations against Yazdegerd reveals that they tend to serve as a reminder of Zakhāk's sins. The Huns represent the Turānians, arch enemies of the Kayānids and the Iranian people in the Avestā, ¹⁷⁰ while Yazdegerd takes on the symbolism in the characteristic of Aži-dahāka, the primordial snake or, as later depicted, Zakhāk, the tyrant whose downfall at the hands of Fereidun signaled the freedom of the Iranians from oppression. ¹⁷¹ Despite Yazdegerd's Iranian identity, he is transformed into a non-Iranian by association with and harboring sympathy towards "Anēran." Qazvini writes that "he was the opposite of all Persian kings, who are famed for their justice, integrity, generosity, and bounteousness."¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Fereyduṅ Vahman, ed. *Ardā Virāz Nāmag* (London: Curzon Press, 1986), 129.

¹⁶⁹ For the Persian translation of the passage, see *Ardāvīrāf-nameh*, trans. Qolam-Reza Yasemi (Tehran: University of Tehran, 1932), 243. For a variant English translation, see *The Book of Ardāvīrāf*, trans. Dastur Hoshang Jamaspji Asa (Bombay: Government Central Book Depot, 1972), 173.

¹⁷⁰ For example, in the Avestā, Afrāsiāb is said to be from the land of Turān, located in the east and central Asia. In medieval texts, he receives the epithet "Turk," which is the same term used to discuss and refer to the Huns in Perso-Arabic literature. For example, see Ibn Balkhī, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 44. Also, on Afrāsiāb being characterized as "Turk," see *Nāmeḥ Tansar*, 91.

¹⁷¹ See Ahmad Tafazzoli, "Ferēdūn," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. IX, fasc. 5, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1999), 531-533; Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Aždahā in Old and Middle Iranian," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. III, Fasc. 2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1987), 191-205.

¹⁷² Šarafeddin Qazvini, *Al-Ma'jam fi Athār Moluk al-'Ajam*, ed. Ahmad Fotuhinasab (Tehran: Anjoman Āsār va Mafākher, 2004), 282.

Yazdegerd's depiction as anti-Iranian brings him closer to Zakhāk, whose Arab lineage is fundamental to his tale of mischief. Similar to Yazdegerd, Zakhāk is depicted as incredibly intelligent and educated, but wicked.¹⁷³

By 420 CE, the hopes and prayers of Yazdegerd's opponents would become a reality with his passing.¹⁷⁴ The most plausible explanation for Yazdegerd's death is that he passed of an illness; one that had plagued him for many years. Greco-Roman and Syriac texts mention in several cases that Yazdegerd suffered from chronic headaches and nosebleeds.¹⁷⁵ Armenian authors add further detail to this and report that Shapur, having received news of his father's deteriorating health, abandoned his political position in Armenia and rode towards Ctesiphon. For example, Khorenats'i writes that,

After reigning in ignominy over Armenia for four years, Shapuh received word of his father's illness. He departed in haste, ordering his deputy the general to arrest the Armenian magnates and bring them to Persia. On Shapuh's arrival at Ctesiphon his father Yazkert died ... and on that same day [shapuh] was also

¹⁷³ For Zakhāk, Afrāsiāb, and Alexander mentioned in one setting to conjure a same sense of tyranny and foreign dominance over Iranians, see Frantz Grenet (ed.) *La geste d'Ardashir fils de Pâbag* (France: A Die: 2003), 88. For a Persian translation of the text, see *Kārnāmag i Ardešīr i Pābagān*, ed. and trans. Bahrām Farahvashi (Tehran: Tehran University Press, 2003), 71. Also see Carlo Cereti, "Karnamag-i-Ardasir," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. XV, fasc. 6, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2011), 585-588.

¹⁷⁴ Sources do not agree on the length of his rule, which ranges from 18 to 23 years, depending on the report. The scholarly consensus is that he died in 420, after ruling over Persia for 21 years.

¹⁷⁵ The reported nosebleeds could be symptoms of a significant underlying health issue such as a brain tumor, or chronic migraines. Mojmal al-Tavārikh is the only Perso-Arabic source to make mention of the king's nosebleeds. The author adds that to heal headaches, the magi advised him to bathe in the sacred waters of Češmeh Sabz, which eventually turns out to be his death place. See *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 35. From a symbolic level, Mojmal's sources reinforce the idea that Yazdegerd's illness was caused by his malice, which only death can end. A similar argument is made in the *Chronicle of Séert*, saying that Yazdegerd headaches resumed as soon as he allowed the Christian trials, implying that his ailment was a direct result of his deeds. The primary goal of the tale of Yazdegerd's fictive death and its context of divine prophecy was to serve as a final chapter in the story of his vilification, and simultaneously assign moral legitimacy to his opponents. After all, if Yazdegerd's enemies are wrong, why would God answer their prayers?

killed by the treachery of the courtiers...thus our land remained in anarchy for three years.¹⁷⁶

Syriac ecclesial reports corroborate his illness, stating that, close to his death, he fell extremely ill and “suffered more and more from the headache of which he died.”¹⁷⁷ The report of Yazdegerd’s illness is also supported by Procopius who writes that,

*Ἐπεὶ δὲ Θεοδοσίος μὲν ἀνὴρ τε ἐγγόνει καὶ ἡλικίας πόρρω ἀφῖκτο, Ἰσδιγέρδης δὲ νοσήσας ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἠφάνιστο.*¹⁷⁸

When Theodosius had grown to manhood and was in the prime of life, and Isdigerdes had been taken from the world by disease.¹⁷⁹

Since Perso-Arabic sources do not always compose their narratives for purely historical purposes, and most often wish to transmit a life lesson to their audience, is not surprising that the story of Yazdegerd’s death is not only far from royal and honorable, but also interwoven with mytho-religious motifs and meaningful symbols, which are doctored to suit the Zoroastrian worldview: evil is eventually defeated by that *Yazatas*, who will ensure that justice is served. Hence, such a story provides a well-crafted and robust conclusion to the narrative on the “evil rule” of Yazdegerd, which was ended by “God,” who seems to have been on the side of Yazdegerd’s enemies.

¹⁷⁶ Moses Khorenats’i, *History of the Armenians*, trans. Robert Thomson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 326. Also, see Lazar, *The History of Lazar P’arpec’i*, 307. Lazar also states that Yazdegerd was in bed with illness. Moreover, considering the hostility of Armenian authors towards Iranian nobility and the royal house, if there had been any rumors or news of the king’s assassination, they would have been the first to mention them.

¹⁷⁷ *The Chronicle of Séert*, 67; *Ibid.*, 58-9.

¹⁷⁸ Procopius, *History of the Wars* 1.2.11, 10.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

According to Perso-Arabic sources, “the people,” helpless and out of resources in the face of Yazdegerd’s atrocities, had no other option but to implore God to rid them of his malice. Their prayers were heard and Yazdegerd was struck dead by an “angel,” who appeared in the form of a [winged] horse and jolted the King in the chest before disappearing [into a body of water.]¹⁸⁰ The final act of the story of Yazdegerd’s vilification concludes with the King laying lifeless on the ground as his enemies look on, grateful for ‘the miracle’ that released them from his grip.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ There are two alleged settings in which the story takes place: Khorasan and Gorgan. A third suggestion can be Ctesiphon, as some sources say that the horse that took Yazdegerd’s life appeared outside his palace. For example, Nehāyat states that Yazdegerd saw the horse from his castle chamber before his death. See *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 25. For an analysis of the story of Yazdegerd’s death, see Jalilian, “Afsāneh Marg Yazdgerd Bezehgar,” 22-29.

¹⁸¹ While fatal accidents involving horses is not unheard of, it is evident that the story of the horse that killed Yazdegerd is not factual. The fictional nature of such story, in addition to Yazdegerd’s vilification in Perso-Arabic sources and the possible murder of two of his predecessors, has led many scholars to theorize that he was a victim of a court assassination. For example, Frye states that he died mysteriously in the east, probably murdered by the nobles. Christensen and Shahbazi also adhere to the murder theory. Phillip Wood uses hostile narratives about the king to conclude that he was murdered. He writes that “Though our sources are late, they indicate that Yazdegerd’s murderers used Zoroastrian ideas to legitimate their actions, and criticized his attempts to broaden his pool of advisors.” Despite such arguments, there is no indication of a murder plot in the “late” sources to which Wood refers, not even in the *Chronicle of Séert*, which is the main focus of his monograph. The influence of the elite and the clergy has always been a reality of the Sasanian court since the reign of Shapur I. For example, we know of the possible role of Kartir, the high priest in overrunning Narseh, and, subsequently, the role of the elite in securing him the throne. Thus, the influence of noble families and magi was never threatening enough to end in several serial murders of the royal family. Yazdegerd’s vilified image in Perso-Arabic history does not serve as strong evidence for murder but may prove the opposite. If assassinating Yazdegerd had been an easy task, it would have been accomplished much earlier and not after two decades of absolute rule, when he was already old and ill. Also, if we accept that his predecessors, Shapur III and Bahrām IV, were assassinated, we must also note that their murders happened not long after coronation and history is pretty much silent about their rule. Furthermore, if we argue that a fictive, mythologized death is a sign of a murder cover, then Bahrām’s death, which is much more romanticized, would also fall under the assassination category. Thus, the hypothesis of Yazdegerd’s murder is merely speculative. It is not corroborated by any source. Shahbazi says that the story of Yazdegerd’s death is undoubtedly fictive. See Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 430 ft 408. For the manifestation of *farr* as a “theological miracle,” Gignoux suggests that punishments should be viewed in the category of miracles. This further explains why Yazdegerd’s death should be seen as a punishment for his crimes in the context of his vilification. See Philip Wood, *The Chronicle of Séert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 38; Christensen, *L’Iran sous les Sassanides*, 202; Frye, “The political history of Iran under the Sasanians,” 157; Philippe Gignoux, “Miracles: in Ancient Iranian Tradition,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, 2015.

Such a tale not only served to legitimize the claims of Yazdegerd's opponents but also functioned as a warning to those who wished to walk a similar path, thus fulfilling the literary requirement of all Iranian tales to serve as lessons and be instructive. The religious and ideological meaning of the story of Yazdegerd's death becomes transparent in the context of Zoroastrian belief system and motifs. The horse is associated with Zoroastrian deities, believed to take the corporeal shape of a horse and answer the prayers of Yazdegerd's enemies by not only taking his life but also his taking his *Farr* and glory. They thus safe keep the royal *Farr* it until the next glorified king is ready to receive it.¹⁸² Thus the story of the "horse that killed Yazdegerd" in a Zoroastrian context, is more about karmic vengeance and the loss of *Farr* that merely a historical record of a King's death. It is the concept of the loss of *Farr* and glory that further explains that the story of Yazdegerd and the horse is more about the loss of *Farr* and less about the manner of the King's death. Especially when we consider that according to the Denkart, one major sin that can lead to the Iranian king's loss of *Farr* is "assisting another

¹⁸² Shahbazi suggests that the horse symbolizes the Zoroastrian god of justice and agreement, Mithra, and the divinity known as Apam Napāt, who at times works in association with Mithra in securing order. He adds that the horse's emergence from water and disappearance into water also connects it to Apam Napāt, who protects the *Farr* underwater, in the Vourukaša Sea, after it leaves Yimā and before it is released to Fereidun. The role of Mithra, as Shahbazi explains, is also of interest. His collaboration with Apam Napāt in safeguarding the *Farr*, in addition to his responsibility of punishing those who break promises, fits into the narrative that Yazdegerd broke his promise to some of the elite houses. Moreover, Mithra is often symbolized as a winged horse. For the horse motif in the Iranian context, see Fridrik Thordarson, "Asb," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. II, fasc. 7, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1987), 724-737; Shahbazi, "The Horse that killed Yazdegerd," 355-361. On the death of Yimā, see Jalal Matini, "Pāyān Zendegāniy Jamšid va Sargozašt khānadānaš," *Yādnāmeḥ Yaqmā* (1991): 355-64. On Yimā and the *Farr*, see Wolfgang Lentz, "Yima and Khwarenah in the Avestan Gathas," in *A Locust's Leg: Studies in Honour of S. H. Taqizadeh*, eds. Walter B. Henning and Ehsan Yarshater (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co 1962), 131-34. For Apam Napāt, see Mary Boyce, "Apam Napāt," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. II, Fasc. 2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1986), 148-150.

religion.”¹⁸³ Imbedded in accusations of honoring “non-Iranians” is the attempt to legalize and integrate Christianity into the empire, which was finalized under Yazdegerd.¹⁸⁴

Birth and death, the first and final acts of a theatrical play, especially one involving a villain or a hero, if well-orchestrated, can help guarantee the success of the play as a whole. Perso-Arabic narratives are no exception to that rule. His end is the climax of a story that serves to instruct and warn. The death of Yazd through divine retribution, as a response to the prayers of his “victims,” brings the case of the villain of the fifth century to a complete end, making sure that the author’s voice is heard loud and clear.

To understand the primary drive for recording such hostile reports on Yazdegerd and how it would be viewed as revenge against him, one must place his accounts in the religio-cultural context of fifth-century Iran. As mentioned earlier, Yazdegerd’s epithet is translated not as “criminal” but as a “sinner,” signifying the religious nature of his accusations. In dealing with a seemingly undefeatable, unstoppable force like Yazdegerd, opposing factions had two options. They could either wipe his name entirely off history and condemn him to oblivion, a fate similar to that of Kartir the grand priest of the early Sasanian period, or, alternatively, they had the

¹⁸³ See Choksy, “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran,” 39. In Rome, such attempts in addition to Yazdegerd’s diplomatic cordial relations with Arcadius and Roman envoys was advertised as the king’s secret conversion to Christianity advertised by authors such as Procopius. Similarly, after Khosro II’s son, Anušzād, staged a coup against his father using Christian elite of Khuzestan, we see rumors circulate regarding his conversion. See, Payne, *A State of Mixture*, endnote 146. As Payne suggests, such rumors were also tools of vilification for a Zoroastrian audience, as well as a legitimation tool for Christians, further revealing the interfaith competition in the empire. We see similar rumors circulating about Yazdegerd. For example, Socrates Scholasticus writes that, “Nay, he almost embraced the Christian faith himself... But the death of Isdigerdes prevented his making an open profession of Christianity.” See Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 11; Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 42 Endnote 146; Socrates Scholasticus, *Socrates’ Ecclesiastical History* 7.8, 287-8.

¹⁸⁴ See Chapter Three.

option to taint his name and label him as the most sinister of his bloodline.¹⁸⁵ They chose to do the latter. As the Babylonian Talmud states, "...The name of the wicked shall rot."¹⁸⁶ This is especially valid in the Iranian cultural context, where the worst fate for the soul of the deceased is to die with a disgraced name.¹⁸⁷ The importance of a good name in the Persian culture is further indicated by the extensive works of poetry concerned with the topic of "good name," its

¹⁸⁵ See Touraj Daryaei and Soodabeh Malekzadeh, "Why was Kartir Forgotten?" *Iran Nameh* 30, no. 2 (2015): 280-287.

¹⁸⁶ *Babylonian Talmud: Original Text, Edited, Corrected, Formulated, and Translated into English*, vol. V, ed. Michael Levi Rodkinson (Boston: New Talmud Publishing Society, 1916), 53. For commentary on the passage, see *Ibid.*, 55-56.

¹⁸⁷ One way to ensure the permanence of a reputable name and post-mortem blessings was to establish charitable foundations, very popular amongst Iranians of wealth and noble status during the Sasanian period, and continuing under the *waqf* system, after the introduction of Islam in Iran. According to this scheme, one third of a deceased man's wealth was designated to be spent on charitable foundations, such as the construction of infrastructures – bridges, dams, and water wells – or religious centers, such as fire temples. A particularly relevant example is the charitable donations of Mehr Narseh, the Wuzurg Framadār or Great Commander of three generations in the House of Yazdegerd. This emphasis on reputation and legacy also explains why Yazdegerd is depicted as sonless. The death of his sons would be interpreted as punishment for his sins. The importance of securing a good name for oneself before and after death, and having male heirs, can also be seen in the Sasanian institution of marriage and what is known as the "proxy marriage." In the case of a man dying without a male heir, the extended female family members of the deceased, such as the wife, daughter or other female kin, are legally and religiously expected to enter into a marriage solely intended to procure a son for the deceased patriarch. Chapter twenty-six of the Middle Persian text, *Mādayān ī Hazār Dādestān* deals with the specific topic of laws concerning the dedicated concept of *pad ruwān dāstan*, 'things for the soul'. The chapter elaborates on the concept of leaving earthly possessions as an endowment so that the blessings of the pious deed would benefit the soul of the deceased. *Mādayān ī Hazār Dādestān* (24:17, 25:1) states that, "*ka xwāstag ruwān ī xwēš aniz kas rāy paydāg kunēd ēgiz ān xwāstag pad paywand ī oy mard rawēd kē pad ān ēwēnag dāstan rāy paydāg kunēd.*" See Farroxmard ī Bahrāmān, *The Book of a Thousand Judgements (A Sasanian Law-Book)*, trans. and ed. Anahit Perikhanian and Nina Garsoian (Costa Mesa: Mazda; New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1997), 76. For the English translation of the passage, see *Ibid.*, 77. For rules concerning endowments for the soul, see *Ibid.*, 80, 84, 88, 101, 123, 176, 194, 286. For a study of the Zoroastrian concept of post-mortem, post-mortem rituals, and pious endowments, see Boyce "The Pious Foundations of the Zoroastrians," Macuch, "Pious Foundations in Byzantine and Sasanian Law" 2004. For a brief introduction to the bridge donated by Mehr Narseh, see Walter B. Henning, "The Inscription of Firuzabad," *W. B. Henning Selected Papers II, Acta Iranica* 15 (1977): 434. For sealigraphic evidence of Mehr Narseh and his title Wuzurg Framadar, see Rika Gyselen, *Great-Commander and Court Counsellor in the Sasanian Empire (224-651): The Sigillographic Evidence* (Rome: Instituto, Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2008), 10-18.

importance and the value it holds.¹⁸⁸ Thus, we see here, why and how Yazdegerd's enemies at court used written and oral hagiographies as a tool for vengeance. Also, they strived to complete their revenge by murdering his son Shapur and trying, albeit in vain, to exclude his other son Bahrām from Kingship. What better revenge than removing the *nām-bordār*, male recipients, of the deceased name and title and the *nām e nīk*, an honest name, of the deceased villain?

In the case of Yazdegerd, he tends to be one man's sinner and another man's saint. We know well that historical characters are grey. The black and white extremes to which we assign our heroes and villains only serve political purposes. This dichotomy essentially helps in reconstructing a less polemical account of Yazdegerd and a more realistic image of the atmosphere of the Sasanian court in the early fifth century. It is not surprising that Zoroastrian priests, their benefactors and allies kept a close eye on the content of Sasanian chronicles and hagiographies.¹⁸⁹ This led scholars to suggest that Yazdegerd's tainted image in history is precisely the work of Zoroastrian clergy because of their disapproval of Yazdegerd's kindness towards the Christians of the empire. A close study of sources shows that his subsequent literary damnation had three possible reasons. First, an atmosphere of distrust initiated by the possible murder of the two previous monarchs and second, Yazdegerd's cultivation of new loyalties with non-Iranians. And third, his disciplinary measures in the face of bribery and inner-familial corruption.

¹⁸⁸ See Abolfazl Beihaqi, *Tārikh-e Beihaqi*, ed. Khalil Khatib Rahbar (Tehran: Mahtāb, 1995), 239, 337; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 7, 288; *Ibid.*, vol. 6, 137; Fakhreddin As'ad Gorgani, *Veis va Rāmin*, eds. Magali Todua, Alexander Gwakharia, and Kamal Eini (Tehran: Bonyad Farhang Iran, 1970), 533; Abu Mohammad Sa'di Shirazi, *Golestān Sa'di*, ed. Gholam Hossein Yusefi (Tehran: Kharazmi, 2015), 504.

¹⁸⁹ Duschen Guillman argues that the Zoroastrian clergymen were not seen as agents of the empire but "partners" in kingship and that Yazdegerd's era and the decrease of their partnership was only a short interval in their cooperation (rearrange this sentence too). See Duschen Guillman, 1983.

One can only imagine that for the citizens of the Sasanian empire the years 420-422 CE must have been quite enthralling as they watched in suspense change unfolding on the domestic and inter-imperial levels. The death of Yazdegerd was the first link in the chain of events that ensued over the next few years, as court intrigue and rivalry, and foreign invasion, threatened the longevity of the empire and its citizens. On a large scale, the survival of the empire was ensured mainly by the intricacies of its political administration, its active military and the religio-ideological bonds between the ruling class and the citizens. Nonetheless, the period between the passing of a king and the accession of his successor is usually sensitive, especially when the identity of the successor is left open to debate. As a result, Yazdegerd's passing created a void that would only be filled with the succession of a leader as capable and as politically savvy as him.

CHAPTER 3: “SOME ARE BORN GREAT”

After Yazdegerd’s passing, and despite much intrigue, conspiracy and political tension, his son Bahrām V (420-438 CE), known as Bahrām Gur, succeeds to “crown himself” as the King of Kings of Iran.¹⁹⁰ Flash forward to the end of his reign, we see that the ultimate crown he wears is that of the royal-hero of late antique Iran and a deathless messiah.¹⁹¹ Considering the animosity and resistance that Yazdegerd faced from certain aristocratic factions, Bahrām’s path to kingship was not necessarily smooth, nor was it a given. In this chapter, I examine the trajectory of Bahrām’s life from birth to coronation, as reported by Perso-Arabic sources, which prove to be an entanglement of fact, epic-heroic motifs and polemical fiction.¹⁹² Similar to Yazdegerd’s vilified narratives, Bahrām’s heroicized accounts reveal a core of fact which, in light of the empire’s socio-political atmosphere and Iranian ideals, point to the internal struggle for power and the role of foreign intervention in bringing about change within the Sasanian empire. Ultimately, we see that Bahrām’s life and his literary portrayal was deeply affected by

¹⁹⁰ For a summary of Bahrām’s life and reign, see Otakar Klima, “Bahrām V,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. III, fasc.5, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1988), 514-522; Daryaee *Sasanian Persia*.

¹⁹¹ See Chapter Four

¹⁹² While other kings only receive a short paragraph concerning the quality of their kingship, Bahrām is unique in the sense that Perso-Arabic sources narrate his life from birth to death. This speaks to Bahrām’s role as a royal hero, since such a comprehensive treatment is reserved for mytho-historical characters such as Rostam. Nikui et al. argue that Bahrām, like all mythical heroes, has a *haft khan*, (translation of the word), which is essential in building his heroic character and explains the report of the full account of his life. See Nikui, et al., “Baznegari Revāyat Tarikhiy Yazdegerd Aval va Bahrām Panjom bā Ta’kid bar Tahlil Enteqādi Goftemān,” *Adab Pazhuhi* 31 (2015): 30. On Rostam’s birth, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 1, 265-270. On his affairs with Kay Kavus and his seven trials, see *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 4-54. For the tragedy of Rostam and Sohrāb, see *Ibid.*, 137-198. For his death at the hands of his half-brother Shaqād, see *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 441-473.

the empire's struggles in maintaining the facade of continuity and tradition, despite the deafening blares of the sirens of change and the coming of a new age.

The politically constructed discourse of Bahrām's 'divine destiny' starts with the account of his birth, in 399/400 CE. ¹⁹³ Tabari reports that,

His birth took place in Hormozd day in the month of
Farwardin at the seventh hour of the day. ¹⁹⁴

Claiming *Nowruz*, the Persian New Year, as Bahrām's birthdate adds further dimensions to the religious and cosmological significance of his character. In the Zoroastrian context, such an auspicious day is metaphorically associated with the victory of good over evil, conjures hopes of change, and promises the rise of a hero through whom good fortune and abundance will overflow. ¹⁹⁵ Further sanctity is associated with Bahrām through stories of prophecies and predictions. ¹⁹⁶ For example, Tha'ālebi adds that it was clear that his birth would beckon bountiful blessings upon the empire. He writes,

¹⁹³ Also, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, 363; *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 252. According to Gharib, *Ruz e Hormozd* also refers to every Thursday of the week. See Badri Gharib, "Hafta," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. XI, fasc. 5, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2009), 530. Hosseini reports that Bahrām was born around the time that Yazdegerd moved to Ctesiphon, which would have been 399 CE. *Nehāyat* writes that Bahrām was born in the second year of Yazdegerd, which would be 400 CE. Bal'ami and Mas'udi also report that he was twenty years old when crowned as king which places his date of birth around 400 CE. Traina also suggests that Bahrām was the same age as Theodosius II, who was born in 401 CE. See Mohammad Mirak ibn Masoud Hosseini, *Riaz al-Ferdows Khani*, eds. Iraj Afshar and Fereshteh Sarrafan (Tehran: Bonyād Moqafāt Doctor Mahmood Afshar, 2006), 104; *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 253; Bal'ami, *Tārīkh-nāme* *Tabari*, 647; Mas'udi, *Moruj al-Dhahab*, 256; Traina, *428 AD: An Ordinary Year*, 118. Also, see Shahbazi *Tārīkh Sasanian*, 416; Hashem Razi, *Gāhšomāri va Jašnāye Irān Bastān* (Tehran: Foruhar, 1979), 81-85.

¹⁹⁴ Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 82

¹⁹⁵ From a Zoroastrian standpoint, *Nowruz* is a reminder of the final victory of Ohrmazd over Ahriman, the destructive spirit, and the triumph of light over darkness. See Mary Boyce, "Nowruz in the Pre-Islamic Period," in *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*, 2009.

¹⁹⁶ Examples of visions and oracles that promise the removal of evil and the rise of a hero or a messiah are abundant in the Indo-European epic narrative. For a summarized discussion and examples,

The astrologers were hopeful about the infant's future and saw him as a source of blessing and capable of grand deeds.¹⁹⁷

To foresee the future of his newborn, Yazdegerd sent for his court astrologers, who predicted greatness and sovereignty over “the seven realms” in the newborn's fate.¹⁹⁸ Tabari writes that,

At the instant of Bahrām's birth, his father Yazdajird summoned all the astrologers who were at his court and ordered them to cast his horoscope and to explain it in such a clear way that what was going to happen to him in the whole of his life would be indicated... Then they informed Yazdajird that God would make Bahrām the heir of his father's royal power....¹⁹⁹

Soon after, Yazdegerd arranged for his newborn to be moved away from the royal capital, and brought up amongst non-Iranians.²⁰⁰ After requesting candidates from all neighboring

see Hossein Ziai, “Dreams and Dream Interpretation,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. VII, fasc. 5, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1995), 549-551.

¹⁹⁷ Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 257:

منجمين در مورد نوزاد و آتیه او پاسخ مساعد داده او را منشأ خیر و قادر بانجام هر عملی معرفی نمودند.

¹⁹⁸ The fact that his rule was emphasized as “the will of God,” adds further inviolability to Bahrām's destiny as it unfolds. Meisami suggests that a hero's birth is almost always shrouded in metaphysical elements such as dreams and prophecies. See Julie Scott Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 135; Authors? *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 252; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 363-364. Seeking predicting about the future of a newborn or an upcoming event was customary in ancient Iran, see Mahmoud Omidsalar, “Divination,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. VII, fasc. 4, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1995), 440-443. For astrology and astronomy in late antique Iran, see Christopher J. Brunner, “Astronomy and astrology in the Sasanian period,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. II, Fasc. 8, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1987), 858-871.

¹⁹⁹ Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 82.

²⁰⁰ On the nuanced relationship between the Lakhmids and the Sasanians, see Isabel Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Hīra* (Leiden: Brill, 2013a), 120; Michael, J. Kister, “Al-Hirā, some notes on its relations with Arabia,” *Arabica* 15 (1968): 144-9; Bosworth, “Iran and the Arabs before Islam,” 593-612; Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989). For

nations and considerable assessment and speculation, Yazdegerd assigned Nu‘mān I, the leader of the Lakhmid Arabs of Hirā as Bahrām’s guardian.²⁰¹ Tabari reports that,

Yazdajird had it in mind that he should commit the child for suckling and rearing to one of the Arabs, Romans, or other non-Persians who were at his court. It now seemed best to Yazdajird to choose the Arabs for rearing and bringing him up. Hence he summoned al-Mundhir b. al-Nu‘mān and he committed to his charge the upbringing of Bahrām’sand he ordered him to take Bahrām to the lands of the Arabs.²⁰²

Yazdegerd is then said to have bestowed great honors, ranks and wealth upon Nu‘mān.²⁰³

Sources then seek to find the rationale behind the decision to send Bahrām away and find it difficult to agree on the reason. The majority of reports suggest that it was out of concerns for the

Lakhmid connections to Yemen, see Glen W. Bowersock, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity* (New Hampshire: The University Press of New England, 2012), 34. For the history and timeline of the Lakhmids, see Irfan Shahid, “Lakhmids,” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. V (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 633. For the history of Hirā, see David Talbot Rice, “Hirā,” *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society* 19, no.2 (1932): 254-268. For the ethno-religious composition of Hirā, see Isabel Toral-Niehoff, “Late Antique Iran and the Arabs: The Case of al-Hirā,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 6, no.1-2 (2013b):115-16. For the location and geography of Hirā, see *Ibid*, 117-118.

²⁰¹ Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 365-6. This may in fact be an example of what Perso-Arabic sources refer to as the crime of honoring foreigners, when speaking of Yazdegerd. Studies show that Nu‘mān I who was a contemporary of Yazdegerd I and Bahrām’s guardian. Nu‘mān is correctly identified in sources, such as Gardizi *Zein al-Akḥbār* 74; Qazvini, *Al-Ma‘jam fi Athār Moluk al-‘Ajam*, 285; Bal‘ami, *Tarīkhnāmeḥ Tabari* 635. For sources that incorrectly identify him as Mundhir, see *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 252; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 141; Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 257; Dinavari, *Al-Akḥbār al-Tevāl*, 78; *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 68; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 366; Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 74. The confusion had already started by the time Bal‘ami was composing his narrative. See Bal‘ami, *Tarīkhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 635. For Perso-Arabic narratives on the Lakhmids, see Dinavari, *Al-Akḥbār al-Tevāl*, 79-83.

²⁰² Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 82.

²⁰³ On the Lakhmids’ high rank and respect from this point on, see Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 82; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 141. On titles and wealth conferred upon Nu‘mān ibn Mundhir by Yazdegerd and Bahrām, see *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 95; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 367; Dinavari, *Al-Akḥbār al-Tevāl*, 84; Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 78; *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 252.

health and well-being of his son and Hirā's dry and clean climate.²⁰⁴ For example, Tha'ālebi writes that,

The astrologers also suggested that Yazdegerd raise him [Bahrām] in a location where the climate would suit the infant. Mundhir [Nu'mān] took the child to Hirā where in comparison it had better land for agriculture, more pleasant weather, and much fresher water.²⁰⁵

Other reports rationalize the move in the context of Yazdegerd's malice and write that the King either murdered all his other sons or was deprived by God from the pleasure of having children.²⁰⁶ They add that Bahrām's glory softened Yazdegerd's dark and evil heart, which is why the child was spared.²⁰⁷ For example, Zein al-Akhbār writes that,

²⁰⁴ Christensen assumes that the relocation to Hirā was a form of exile caused by irreconcilable differences between him and Yazdegerd, yet we have ample evidence suggesting that such a view is incorrect. See Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 373. Also, see Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 635; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 75; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 141. In late antiquity, relocation for health benefits was a common cause of migration, yet in this instance it may have only been a cover for other more critical reasons behind the move.

²⁰⁵ Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 257:

{منجّمين} ضمنا یزد گرد را بتربیت او در خارج و انتخاب محلی که هوا و اقلیمش بطفل سازگار باشد توصیه کردند... منذر (نعمان) طفل را گرفته بمقرّ خود حیره برد که خاکش در عراق سالمتر و هوایش مطبوعتر و آیش گواراتر از سایر نقاط است.

²⁰⁶ Other reports indicate that the infants never made it to adulthood, which they view as Yazdegerd's atonement for his sins. Others again go as far as to suggest that Yazdegerd murdered all his sons in infancy. Such narratives transform Bahrām into a Moses-like character, who, by the will of the gods, escaped murder at the hands of the evil Pharaoh. Ibn Meskavayh is one of the few historians who does not present Bahrām as the only son of Yazdegerd. He even alludes to several male heirs, when speaking of the developments in succession after Yazdegerd's death. See Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 142. On Yazdegerd's son's death in infancy, see Qazvini, *Al-Ma'jam fi Athār Moluk al-'Ajam*, 28. Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 635. On Yazdegerd murdering his sons, see Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 635; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 75; Gardizi, *Zein al-Akhbār*, 74.

²⁰⁷ See Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 635. Ferdowsi, whose account is invested in the goodwill of the Zoroastrian clergy, presents a scenario in which the priests and the magi persuade Yazdegerd to place Bahrām in a foster-family, secretly conspiring to remove the child from Yazdegerd's influence, lest he grows to imitate his father's manners and policies. Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 365.

و یزدجرد را همان فرزند بود، و از بدخویی خویش، بران فرزند بترسید که
روزی او را بدخویی تباہ کند.²⁰⁸

Yazdegerd only had that one child, and He (he?) sent the child away, fearing that his temper and rage would harm him [Bahrām].²⁰⁹

Moreover, Tabari insinuates that the primary goal was to distance Bahrām from the ethno-cultural reach of “Persian influence.” He writes,

[Astrologers told Yazdegerd] that he would be suckled in a land not inhabited by the Persians, and that it was advisable that he should be brought up outside his own land.²¹⁰

The overall story of Bahrām being an only child is fictional, which makes the suggested rationales behind the move to be questionable.²¹¹ Considering the overall evidence regarding

²⁰⁸ Gardizi, *Zein al-Akhhbār*, 74.

²⁰⁹ Translation based on Gardizi, *Zein al-Akhhbār*, 74.

²¹⁰ Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 82.

²¹¹ The fact of the matter is that Bahrām had two other male siblings of whom we know, namely Shapur and Narseh. Our information on Narseh and his status are slim, primarily due to the prevalence of his name in the Sasanians era. While Shapur’s identity is only attested in Armenian sources such as Xorenats’i, Narseh is identified as Bahrām’s brother in Perso-Arabic sources. Furthermore, Šahrestānīhā refers to a character known as Narsēh ī yahūdagān. Daryaei translates *yahūdagān* as “son of a Jewess,” which may indicate that he is Bahrām’s brother since both characters were born to Jewish mothers. Also, there is no evidence that Narseh claimed kingship after the murder of his brother Shapur or during Bahrām’s rule. In fact, Perso-Arabic narratives on Bahrām’s kingship are very tentative regarding their peaceful cooperation. Most importantly, Ferdowsi confirms that Narseh was the younger brother of Bahrām and his most trusted ally. Christensen suggested that Narseh was a child when Yazdegerd died and that the Prime Minister Mehr-Narseh is the character to which Perso-Arabic sources refer as Narseh. Christensen’s argument is unsubstantial since Mehr Narseh could not have been appointed as Governor of Khorasan nor would he have been qualified to replace Bahrām on the throne during his absence. Moreover, his position as *wuzurg framadār* only starts during the kingship of Bahrām and not that of Yazdegerd. Frye also makes a suggestion that stands in sheer contrast to relevant reports and is uncorroborated by the chronological evidence, suggesting that Shapur ruled for a short period after his father before being murdered. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol 6, 422; Christensen, *L’Iran sous les Sassanides*, 172; Frye, “The political history of Iran under the Sasanians,” 346; *Šahrestānīhā*, 37. For

Yazdegerd's lack of trust in his political associates and the fate of his predecessors, the relocation was most likely not the result of Yazdegerd's unflinching faith in oracles or knowledge of his inner demons, but because of his anxiety over possible threats against the Bahrām's life.²¹²

Thus, Nu'mān moved Bahrām to Hirā, where he resided at the palace known as Xwarnaq.²¹³ Eventually, Nu'mān transcended his role as a guardian and their relationship most likely resembled that of father and son. According to Mojmal al-Tavārikh,

بهرام گور بزرگتر از همه نعمان بن المنذر را داشت که پرورانیده او بود.²¹⁴

Bahrām Gur honored Nu'mān who had raised him [from infancy], above all other men.²¹⁵

Narratives then indulge in emphasizing Bahrām's excellent education and upbringing and depict him as intellectually superior, prudent and enthusiastic in attaining knowledge and

Bahrām as the first or the second of the three brothers, see Nikui et al., "Baznegari Revāyat Tarikhiy Yazdegerd Aval va Bahrām Panjom," 19.

²¹² See Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 432, ft. 416.

²¹³ According to Ibn Balkhi, Bahrām was two years old when taken to Hirā. Mohammad Mirak Hoseini mistakenly states that Mundhir took Bahrām to "Janzeh which today is called Ganjeh [in Azerbaijan]." It is easy to see how an old and worn out manuscript could have been misread, since when written in Arabic script Hirā حیره and Janzeh جنزه look the same especially if the dots are wiped away rendering it difficult to read. Regarding its size, Bal'ami reports that it was larger than two hundred *rash*. One *rash* is the standard distance from fingers to elbow, which is about 40 cm. Thus, two hundred *rash* would be approximately 80 meters. Such measurement will only make sense if it refers to the height of a building. Furthermore, the highest point of Tāq e Kasrā is thirty-seven meters. So, presumably, either Xwarnaq was more spectacular than the Sasanian palace of Ctesiphon or Bal'ami's description is a mere exaggeration. Bal'ami adds that the construction of the palace took five years to complete based on some accounts, while based on others, twenty years. See Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 74; Hoseini, *Riaz al-Ferdows Khāni*, 104; Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 636. For stories associated with Xwarnaq, see Ibid., 636-640; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 75; Ahmad ibn Yahyā Balādhuri, *Fotuh al-Boldān*, trans. Mohammad Tavakol (Tehran: Noqreh, 1958), 352. On the chronology of Xwarnaq, see Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 373. For the fate of Xwarnaq during the post-Sasanian era, see Alois Musil, *The Middle Euphrates: A Topographical Itinerary* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1927).

²¹⁴ *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 95.

²¹⁵ Translation based on *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 95.

perfection. Although, the basics of his instruction follows Sasanian standards, every detail is arranged to distinguish him as the possessor of a God-given drive for excellence and automatically setting him on the path to greatness within the framework of epic heroic literature. For example, sources emphasize that when only five years old, Bahrām proactively requested to be instructed in “writing, archery, and knowledge of law.”²¹⁶ Nu‘mān shows reluctance in granting his wish arguing that he is still too young.²¹⁷ Bahrām’s response is in turn meant to illustrate his wit, aptitude, nobility, royal preeminence and divine nature. He says,

I may be young, but I possess a mature mind. You, on the other hand, are mature in age but have the mindset of a child. Do you not know that what is sought early will be found promptly and what is pursued tardily will be obtained when it is too late...I am a prince, and with God’s will I shall become King, and kings must seek knowledge and wisdom; the backbone of glorious of kingship...so make haste in supplying me with the instructors I have demanded.²¹⁸

Although Bahrām mastered all sciences and arts of his time, the focus is on his physical prowess.²¹⁹ Tha‘ālebi directly connects Bahrām’s fame and popularity to his physical feats and hunting skill and writes that,

Even before puberty, he had become a legend, as a result of his skill in archery, equestrian and wielding weapons.²²⁰

²¹⁶ Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 83; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 141; *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 252; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 368-9. The Middle Persian text, *Husraw i Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē*, lists essential skills in which Sasanian youth were trained. See, Samra Azarnouche, (ed.) *Husraw i Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē, Khosrow Fils de Kawad et un Page* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2013).

²¹⁷ Also, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, 370.

²¹⁸ Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 83-84.

²¹⁹ Those chosen by the gods to lead, save a nation, or to become historically immortal, often display signs of distinction before puberty. Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 12. Also, see Dinavari, *Al-Akhbār al-Tevāl*, 79.

²²⁰ Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 258:

The theme of a child prodigy frequently surfaces in reports on Bahrām’s upbringing. Such emphasis is an integral part of the epic-heroic storytelling framework, as it hints to the child’s predestined fate as a hero. For example, the infant Rostam displayed signs of heroic distinction when he slayed an elephant with one single blow of his grandfather’s cudgel.²²¹ However, superior strength alone does not guarantee the protagonists’ growth into a hero. In the Iranian context, exceptional excellence in equestrianism and hunt are also essential elements that establish the hero on the path to fulfilling his fate. As a result, it is not surprising that Bahrām is praised for acquiring distinction as a hunter-warrior, a characterization that automatically produces a sense of expectation of upcoming feats of courage and heroism.²²²

The archetypal hunter-warrior is incomplete without his steed, which is why the next critical step is to narrate Bahrām’s a quest to find the perfect ride.²²³ Sources provide a lengthy report on the topic and conclude that after extensive search Nu‘mān gifts the fastest Arabian horse to his foster-son Bahrām.²²⁴ The significance of this moment is specifically apparent in

و قیل از آنکه بحدّ بلوغ رسد در اسب سواری و تیراندازی و استعمال اسلحه بطوری راه کمال بیمود که استعدادش ضرب المثل شد.

²²¹ Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 1, 275.

²²² Shahbazi also considers this process as an essential aspect of the creation of the Iranian hero. Using examples of legends, such as Siāvaš and Rostam, he argues that the hero and his horse eventually become one. Shahbazi, *Tāriḫ Sasanian*, 434-5.

²²³ Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 85. Also, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 370-2. Tabari, Bal‘ami, Nehāyat, and Ferdowsi mention the color of the horse. Tabari calls it *sorkh-mooy*, “red-haired.” Ferdowsi reports that Bahrām chose two horses: one *ašqar*, meaning a sorrel one with red coat and mane, and a *komeit*, meaning a sorrel with a red coat and black mane. The name of the horse is only reported by Ferdowsi. In a report similar in tone and purpose to Bahrām’s request for instructors, he narrates the details of how Bahrām found his hunting partner. See Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 85; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 371; Bal‘ami, *Tāriḫnāmeḥ Tabari*, 640; *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 254.

²²⁴ Shahbazi states that it was a common practice in Iran to race horses to determine their worth, which is what Bahrām requested Nu‘mān to do. See Shahbazi, *Tāriḫ Sasanian*, 434. For the story of how

epic narratives such as the *Shāhnāmeḥ*. For example, according to Ferdowsi, Bahrām named his horse Shabdiz. This instantly links Bahrām to the Kayānid chain of kings and heroes since Shabdiz was the name of horses owned by the Kayānid Kings Lohrāsp and Wištāsp. It was also the epithet of Rostam’s horse and Khosro II’s famous ride.²²⁵ After acquiring a horse, Bahrām fulfills his first legendary hunting feat, where he pins together an onager and a lion with a single shot of his arrow. Sources indulge in emphasizing that his incredible strength and precision left his hunting companions in awe and bewilderment. Bal’ami describes the scene and reports that,

پس يك روز بهرام گور با سپاه عرب و با منذر به صيد شده بود، از دور گوری دید بدان بیابان اندر همی دوید. بهرام آهنگ او کرد، و منذر با همه سپاه از پس وی بشدند. و بهرام کمان به زه داشت، تیری بدو بر نهاد. چون اندر گور رسید، شیرى دید خویشتن بر پشت گور افکنده و گردن گور را به دندان گرفته ... بهرام تیر گشاده کرد و بزود بر پشت شیر اندر شد و به شکم شیر بیرون آمد و به پشت گور شد و به شکم بیرون شد و به زمین اندر نشست تا نیمه و ساعتی نیک همی لرزید، و گور و شیر هر دو بیفتادند و بمردند، و منذر با آن خلق متحیر بماندن.²²⁶

Once, Bahrām, Mundhir [Nu‘mān], and the Arab army were out hunting when Bahrām spotted an onager speeding through the meadow. He galloped after the pray, Mundhir [Nu‘mān] and the army following him. When Bahrām reached the onager, he had shot with an arrow he saw a lion feasting upon his pray... He then shot another arrow so mightily it pierced the lion’s back, exited through the onager’s abdomen and penetrated the earth halfway through trembling for a while. The lion and the onager laid there lifeless as Mundhir [Nu‘mān], and the others watched in disbelief.²²⁷

Bahrām acquired his horse, see Bal’ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 640-641; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 83; Tha’ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha’ālebi*, 259.

²²⁵ Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 5, 413.

²²⁶ Bal’ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 641.

²²⁷ Translation based off Bal’ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 641.

Nu‘mān then ordered the quest to be immortalized as a grand painting on the walls of Xwarnaq.²²⁸ The importance of such display of valor is evident in reports that speak of the endured popularity of Bahrām’s hunting episodes. For example, Tārikh Mobārak Qāzāni mentions Bahrām’s second favorite hunting feat and states that,

و... حکایت بهرام گور که بحیلت پای آهوئی با گوش او بهم بتیر زده ... و از هزار و پانصد سال باز بر دیوارها و کتبهها نقش می‌کنند.²²⁹

And the story of Bahrām Gur who cunningly pierced the feet of a gazelle to its ears...and after fifteen hundred years, people still decorate walls of their houses and pages of books with painting and illustrations of Bahrām’s hunting feats.²³⁰

The strict factuality of these famed hunting spectacles is far less critical compared to their cultural impact. Success in the hunt was the mirror image of victory in war. It was regarded as a metaphorical symbol of qualities such as ambition and good fortune.²³¹ As a result, it is the

²²⁸ See Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 86; Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 259; Bal‘ami, *Tārīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 641; Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 143. Rostam also engages in an onager hunt on his way to Samangān. Ferdowsi describes his strength as he balances, on the one hand, a tree trunk to which he has impaled an onager. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 4, 472-73.

²²⁹ Khājeḥ Rashid-al-din Fazl-allāh, *Tārīkh Mobārak Qāzāni*, ed. Karl Jahn (Hertford: Stephan Austin, 1954), 131. It must be noted that it was an architectural and artistic trend for the walls of Sasanian homes and palaces to be decorated with illustrations depicting scenes of heroic deeds and acts of courage, similar to the Greco-Roman mosaics. See Shahbazi, *Tārīkh Sasanian*, 418; Massoud Azarnoush, *The Sasanian Manor House at Hajiabad, Iran* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994).

²³⁰ Translation based on Khājeḥ Rashid-al-din Fazl-allāh, *Tārīkh Mobārak Qāzāni*, 131.

²³¹ William L. Hanaway, “The Concept of the Hunt in Persian Literature,” *Boston Museum Bulletin* 69 (1971): 25. Hanaway further adds that post-hunt and post-war celebrations were very similar in the sense that they involved feats, music, storytelling, and poetry. The reason for such equal treatment, he suggests, is the shared concept of danger, violence, and death. On the connection between hunt and war, see *Ibid.*, 26; Shapur Shahbazi, “Hunting in Iran,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. XII, fasc. 6, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2004), 577-580.

religio-symbolic connotation of the hunt and specific game in the Zoroastrian context is key to untangling the enigmatic meaning of Bahrām's epithet, Gur.²³²

It has long been assumed, by both Perso-Arabic sources and modern scholars, that this epithet was associated with Bahrām's indulgence in hunting onagers, since the term *gur* can either mean onager or grave in Persian. For example, Tha'ālebi argues that it was not pursuing onagers, but his one heroic hunting feat, where he pinned the onager and the lion together, that won him the epithet Gur.²³³ Majma' al-Ansāb summarizes the different suggestions and writes that,

بعضی گویند او را بهرام جور گفتند از بهر آنکه در شهر جور از فارس
مقام داشت، و بعضی گویند از برای آنکه شکار گور بسیار کردی، چنانکه يك روز
شیری در شکارگاه بیدید که گوری را گرفته بود، بهرام تیری بینداخت و به پشت شیر
زد و به شکم گور بیرون کرد. و گویند که سیصد گله گور را حلقه‌ای زرین در گوش
کرد و رها کرد. و بعضی گویند او را از بهر آن بهرام گور گویند که چون مرگش
رسید، از پی گوری می‌تاخت و دست اسبش در چاهی فروشد و به چاه افتاد و
بمرد.²³⁴

Some say he was called Bahrām Gur because he had a position in the city of Gur and some say it was because he hunted onagers (Gur) frequently, they say he pierced the ears of Three hundred herds of onagers with golden earrings. Others say that his name was because of his type of death and falling in a well/grave (Gur).²³⁵

²³² In the Iranian understanding of divination, the flight patterns of birds, such as falcons, and the behavior of sacred animals, such as horses, boars, and onagers, was believed to convey significant meaning and was observed. Individual animals were also viewed as incarnations of mighty Zoroastrian gods and divine elements.

²³³ Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 260.

²³⁴ Šabānkārei, *Majma' al-Ansāb*, 240. For example, Mas'udi, states that the king's extraordinary skill and passion for the hunt won him the title. See Mas'udi, *Moruj al-Dhahab*, 255.

²³⁵ Translation based on Šabānkārei, *Majma' al-Ansāb*, 240.

If we shift our focus from hunting to the symbolic meaning of onagers in the Zoroastrian belief system, we may be able to see a more viable reason for such an odd epithet.²³⁶ For example, the Middle Persian text, *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* narrates the story of how Kayānid glory descended upon Ardashir in the form of an onager,

*ēdōn gōwēnd kū xwarrah ī kayān pad gōr *kirb be būd andar
pēš ī ardaxšīr ēstād ud andak *hamē raft tā ardaxšīr az ān gyāg ī
dušwīdarag az dast ī dušmanān abē-wizendihā bērōn ānīd ud frāz ō
deh-ēw ī mānd xwānēnd āwurd.*²³⁷

It is said that the Kayānid glory [*farr*] in the form of an onager [*gur*] stood there in front of Ardashir and slowly moved away until he had secured Ardashir away from that difficult passage and his enemies and from harm and lead him to a village which they called Mānd.²³⁸

The passage explains how Ardashir was washed ashore by the sea, after a battle with the last Parthian King. In that instant, The Kayānid Glory descended upon him in the form of an onager and saved his life by directing him away from danger. According to another episode of the *Kārnāmag*, Ardashir participated in an onager-hunt and competed with the heir to the Parthian throne, Ardavān's son.²³⁹ Ardashir's victory may beckon the interpretation that it is he

²³⁶ Christensen argues that Bahrām's personality was restless like that of an onager, while Shahbazi states that the title either signifies that Bahrām was meeting his death in a ditch or that he was of a patient temperament like the onager. See Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 376; Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 432. For studies suggesting that the epithet Gur refers to Bahrām's indulgence in hunting the onager, see Frye, "The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians," 144-5; Daryaei, *Sasanian Persia*, 116. For other suggestions see, Akhavan Zanjani, Jalil, "Azirāš Khānand Bahrām Gur," *Kelk* 54 (1994): 34-39.

²³⁷ *Kārnāmag* 12.4 as entered by D.N. Mackenzie retrieved at: <http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/miran/mpers/kap/kapt.htm>. Also see Grenet (ed.) *La geste d'Ardashir fils de Pābag*, 86. Grenet reads the term *gur* differently as *dur* in his transliteration.

²³⁸ Translation based on *Kārnāmag* 12.4 as entered by D.N. Mackenzie: <http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/miran/mpers/kap/kapt.htm>.

²³⁹ See Grenet (ed.) *La geste d'Ardashir fils de Pābag*, 60-62. For the symbolic meaning of onagers in Iranian epic see, Gignoux, "Miracles: in Ancient Iranian Tradition."

who will eventually receive the Kayānid glory and not his rival. This can specifically be translated as one of the instances the Kayānid and royal *Farr* and glory descends upon the future ‘chosen one.’ The encounter between Ardashir and the onager also fits into the category of western miracles.²⁴⁰ While reports have already established that Bahrām was born with heavenly glory, he must receive and maintain the royal Kayānid glory to assume the position of king over Iranian lands.²⁴¹ If we view the epithet Gur as a symbolic motif of Kayānid glory, we can see that such an epithet not only reinforces the idea of Bahrām as the possessor of Kayānid glory but also conjures the idea that Bahrām is as *Farrahmand* as the founder of the empire.²⁴² This juxtaposes Bahrām further in the context of the Kayānid ideology, as a link in the chain of Iranian primordial heroes. In such light, we can see that the story of the onager-hunt holds a far larger significance than a tale of bravery and agility and should be viewed as a form of augury and prophecy in the eyes of its Iranian audience.

Moreover, it is very likely that Yazdegerd may have never selected Bahrām as heir to the throne.²⁴³ Sources emphasize his distance from the center of the political action and agree that

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Choksy, “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran,” 37.

²⁴² Antonio Panaino also agreed with the hypothesis during a conversation on 04/23/17.

²⁴³ According to Perso-Arabic sources, Bahrām had visited his father in Ctesiphon when he was approximately fifteen. Yet sources claim that the stay was less than pleasant for the prince and he decided to return to Hirā, after one year. In sources, his age ranged between twelve and fifteen years-old. Fifteen would be a more educated guess, since it is the age when the Mazdean youth would be initiated into the religion. His move to Ctesiphon may have been dictated by his father and religious commitment. See Bal’ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 641; Ibn Meskawayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 142; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 85.

Bahrām was never appointed political office or chosen as heir to the throne.²⁴⁴ First, Bahrām remained in Hirā, even after receiving the news of Yazdegerd’s death.²⁴⁵ Nehāyat writes that,

فهلك يزديجرد، بهرام بالحيرة، عند المنذر.²⁴⁶

When Yazdegerd died Bahrām Gur was in Hirā with Mundhir [Nu‘mān].²⁴⁷

Upon hearing of Yazdegerd’s illness, it is Yazdegerd’s eldest son Shapur, who rushed to Ctesiphon to claim the throne, where he was subsequently killed at court.²⁴⁸ Meanwhile, It was only after Bahrām was bypassed from kingship by Yazdegerd’s enemies and a distant member of the house of Sāsān was proclaimed king that we see him enter the political arena and swiftly climb the ladder of fame.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ See Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 86. The only source claiming that Bahrām was heir is Qazvini, who suggests that, “while still alive, Yazdegerd had designated Bahrām Gur, who was his son, as his heir apparent.” Qazvini may mainly be making such assumption about Bahrām’s succession. See Qazvini, *Al-Ma’jam fi Athār Moluk al-‘Ajam*, 42.

²⁴⁵ Sources situate Bahrām’s encounter with the onager before Yazdegerd’s death. If we accept *gur* as the reincarnation of Bahrām’s Kayānid glory, the chronological order of events makes more sense in the context of Bahrām’s fame.

²⁴⁶ *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 256. On receiving news of Yazdegerd’s death, see Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 142. Also, see Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 86; Bal’ami, *Tarikh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 642.

²⁴⁷ Translation based on *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 256.

²⁴⁸ According to Armenian sources, Shapur replaced the deceased Sasanian client king of Armenia, Vṛām-Shāpuh in 414 CE. It was common practice for the eldest son to rule as Wuzurg Arman Shah. It is also probable that his assassination, after Yazdegerd’s death, was induced by his claim to the throne. Unlike Bahrām, Shapur rushed towards Ctesiphon upon hearing of Yazdegerd’s illness, which makes his status as heir more apparent. It is only after Shapur’s demise that Bahrām assumed the position of the candidate for kingship. See Khorenats’i, *History of the Armenians*, 324; Lazar, *The History of Lazar P’arpec’i*, 55. On Shapur as the “King of Armenia since 416,” see Shahbazi, “The Horse that killed Yazdegerd,” 370.

²⁴⁹ Bal’ami, *Tarikh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 642.

As to why Bahrām was denied his birthright, sources mention grievances against Yazdegerd, Bahrām’s lack of political experience and his “Arabian ways” were listed as the reasons why he was bypassed.²⁵⁰ Yet, it is clear that revenge against Yazdegerd was the main drive. For example, Bal‘ami writes that,

ما از جور یزدجرد برستیم و ز بلای بدخویی او، و تا کنون از بدخویی او
بستوه بودیم، و او را پسری است به عرب اندر بزرگ شده و خوی عرب گرفته، و اگر
بباید ما او را ملک نکنیم که خوی او بتر بود از پدر و با ما بتر از ان کند.²⁵¹

We are free of Yazdegerd now, and we have had enough of his harshness. He has a son in Arabia, who has taken on Arab traits. if he comes here, we shall not make him king since he his moods and character will be worse than his father and will treat us even harsher.²⁵²

While Hirā provided Bahrām with a safe upbringing, we see that, after two decades, it was used and polemicized as an excuse to deny him the right to the throne. After the death of Yazdegerd, his rivals and enemies argued that being away from the center of politics and having inherited the “characteristics of Arabs” automatically made him unsuitable for sovereignty over the Iranians. And yet, while Bahrām’s Arab upbringing was used as an excuse to bypass him, we see that it was precisely his ties to the Arabs and their support that secured his rightful position as

²⁵⁰ See Ibn Meskawayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 142. A system of fosterage was prevalent during Sasanian times, yet the custom was for Persians youth to be educated by Mazdean figures of authority or influential Zoroastrian families. We can see why being brought up amongst non-Zoroastrians or *jud-den* discredited Bahrām’s position as a potential supporter of the faith.

²⁵¹ Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 642.

²⁵² Translation based on Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 642.

King.²⁵³ Bahrām addressed the Lakhmids and convinced them to assist him in standing against the Persian nobility.²⁵⁴ Nu‘mān responded by reassuring him not to have any fear and said that,

You all well remember how my father, despite his strict methods and his disciplinary methods against the Persians, he treated you Arabs with kindness and generosity. My father has passed now, and the Persians have chosen another for kingship.²⁵⁵

Interestingly, Bahrām did not request aid from the Arabs based on his relationship with them but reminded them of their debt to Yazdegerd, which adds further light to why Yazdegerd had sent Bahrām away and chose the Lakhmids as his son’s guardians.²⁵⁶ Mundhir swore

²⁵³ The Lakhmids played a decisive role, as envoys of the prince as well as his military support, in Bahrām’s dealing with the members of the elite responsible for bypassing him. It was Nu‘mān who informed the young prince of his father’s passing and the subsequent turn of events. While sources present Nu‘mān as delivering the distressing news, it is likely that Bahrām was informed of the developments by his father’s allies, since the Persians were caught off guard upon receiving news of the advancement of Arab military forces. This may allude to a void in the Sasanian intelligence system operating within the Lakhmid sphere, which further reveals why Hirā and the Lakhmid protection was the best choice Yazdegerd could have made to protect Bahrām from potential danger. A similar attempt to counter an act of usurpation took place before the kingship of Narseh I. Paikuli inscription, Passage 23-31, provides a “non-romanticized” version of what such negotiation would have been like in the Sasanian period. On royal usurpations and the Paikuli inscription, see Rahim Shayegan, *Aspects of History and Epic in Ancient Iran from Gaumāta to Wahnām*, Hellenic Studies 52 (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2012). For the Paikuli inscription, see Richard N. Frye, “Remarks on the Paikuli and Sar Mašhad Inscriptions,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 20 (1957): 702-8; Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Herzfeld and the Paikuli Inscription,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. XII, fasc. 3, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2003), 298-300.

²⁵⁴ See Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 632.

²⁵⁵ Translation based on Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 143:

نیکی‌ها و نواخت‌هایی را که پدرم با همه بدخویی و سخت‌گیری خود با پارسیان، با شما تازیان کرده است، نیک می‌شناسید.
پدرم مرده است و پارسیان کسی جز من را به پادشاهی برداشته‌اند.

²⁵⁶ See Dinavari, *Al-Akḥbār al-Tevāl*, 83. Bahrām then tops that with further promises, which to me have political and financial implications that we see in later accounts. Dinavari’s report depicts Nu‘mān as the provoker of Bahrām’s claim for kingship, telling him to rise in revolt and ask for what is his right.

allegiance to Bahrām and took a vow not to rest until his kingship was secured. Bal‘ami writes that,

و منذر با همه سپاه بر وی سلام کردند به ملک و گفتند: ملک عجم و عرب
ترا است و ما همه فرمانبرداریم و جانهای ما فدای تست. و منذر بپذیرفت که من
نیارمم تا ملک به تو باز ندهم و ترا بر تخت ملک نشانم و تاج ملک بر سر تو نهم.²⁵⁷

And Mundhir [Nu‘mān] and all the military saluted him as King of Kings and said: ‘You are the sovereign of all Arab and Persian lands; we are at your command, and ready to give our life for you. Moreover, Mundhir [Nu‘mān] vowed that, ‘I shall not rest until he has restored Kingship to you and has placed you on the throne and crowned you as King.’²⁵⁸

Thus, Nu‘mān’s son, Mundhir, along with thirty thousand Arab warriors, marched towards Ctesiphon, while Bahrām and Nu‘mān remained in Hirā.²⁵⁹ Mundhir encampment outside Ctesiphon was meant to serve as a message, since he was ordered to only engage with Persian military forces if they initiated battle. He must refrain from shedding blood but was permitted to take hostages, which were most probably intended for negotiation purposes.²⁶⁰ The Iranians, perplexed as to why Nu‘mān’s army was staged outside their gates, send Javāni, who had been a *dabīr* or secretary of Yazdegerd, as an envoy to Nu‘mān to warn him about the consequences of such transgressions.²⁶¹ Interestingly, Javāni is not instructed to address Bahrām, which indicates that the Persians most probably did not suspect Bahrām to be the instigator of the

²⁵⁷ Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 632; also, see Ibn Balkhi, *Fārs-nāmeḥ*, 75

²⁵⁸ Translation based on Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 632.

²⁵⁹ See *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 643.

²⁶⁰ Ibn Meskawayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 143.

²⁶¹ Ibid. Regarding the spelling/transliteration of the name of the messenger sent to inquire why the Lakhmids were camped outside Ctesiphon, Nehāyat refers to him as Jawān-bih. Tabari identifies him as Jowanūy, which could be a dialectal version of Jawān-veh. See Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 86; *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 257.

new turn of events. At this point in the narrative, Nu‘mān transferred agency to Bahrām, saying that his son was camped outside Ctesiphon under Bahrām’s orders and that he has no other choice but to do as he was told.²⁶² At this point, sources shift back to interweaving their historical narrative with Bahrām’s development as a hero. Instead of focusing on the eminence of a military confrontation and civil war, they make reference to Bahrām’s beauty and charisma emanating from his *Farr*.²⁶³ For example, Ibn Meskavayh writes that,

Upon arriving at the presence of Bahrām, he was left speechless and confounded at the sight of [Bahrām’s] majestic appearances and divine looks. Bahrām was kind to him and gave him much hope.²⁶⁴

The envoy returned and conveyed Bahrām’s message to the Persian court. It is most likely that, at this point, the negotiations came to a standstill since Bahrām’s next move was to march towards Ctesiphon along with Nu‘mān and an additional troop of thirty thousand warriors.²⁶⁵ Although evidence indicating a military confrontation between the two forces are

²⁶² Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 144.

²⁶³ Sources frequently emphasize Bahrām’s charm, good looks and etiquette. See Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 22. In the Indo-European context, an individual’s appearance was the product of his noble lineage but, most importantly, a sign of his spiritual stance. Correlations between a perfect appearance and an ideal soul are manifest not only in Persian literature but also in European literature about Iran. See Joel Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 13-20.

²⁶⁴ Translation based on Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 143:

جوانوی همین که به پیشگاه بهرام رسید از دیدن بهرام و شکوهی که در چهره داشت خیره ماند. بهرام با وی به مهربانی سخن گفت و امید و نوید داد.

Bal’ami, on the other hand, uses this scene to voice Bahrām’s grievance over being denied his birthright. See Bal’ami, *Tarikhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 644.

²⁶⁵ Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 144.

slim, the possibility cannot be ruled out, mainly since Ibn Balkhi reports that the army lead by the son of Nu‘mān “raided and pillaged” until they reached Ctesiphon.²⁶⁶

Further negotiations ensued between the Sasanian court and Bahrām, who entered the scene seated on a golden throne, with Nu‘mān, standing at his right side, indicating that the Lakhmids did not view Khosro as the legitimate King of Persia.²⁶⁷ Curiously, even at this point, the Sasanian administration continued to disregard Bahrām as an authoritative figure.²⁶⁸ This reinforced the idea that the only reason why Bahrām had any say at all was because of the military force of his Lakhmid allies, which was in fact what his brother Shapur, lacked and why he failed.

Once again, courtiers spoke of Yazdegerd’s tyranny and admitted that it was their primary reason for delegitimizing Bahrām.²⁶⁹ Bahrām was tactical in his response and sympathized with them, promising to compensate them for their hardship. Ibn Meskavayh quotes Bahrām saying that,

I do not deny [the cruelty and wrong deeds] of which you have accused my father. I never approved of his behavior, and never walked his path. I have always prayed to God that he may bestow kingship upon me, so that I can make right all the wrongs that Yazdegerd has done...If I become King and one year passes that I do not fulfill power promise, I will willfully resign from the throne.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 75. Although uncorroborated by other narratives, the form of attack matches well Arab nomadic warfare practices.

²⁶⁷ Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 143; 144; Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 644. Sources add that Mundhir son of Nu‘mān, see Ibn Ibid., 76; *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 258.

²⁶⁸ Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 88. Also, see Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 144.

²⁶⁹ Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 644.

²⁷⁰ Translation based off: Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 145:

در باره یزدگرد در هیچ يك از سخنانی که گفته‌اید، دروغ نزده‌اید، که از آغاز بر من نیز آشکار بوده است. من خود از شیوه او بیزار و از رفتار او روی گردان بوده‌ام. همواره از خدا خواسته‌ام که پادشاهی را به من دهد تا تنباهی‌هایی که او به بار آورده، راست

At this point of the narrative, we catch a glimpse of Bahrām's political savvy and his use of diplomacy as means of avoiding military conflict and reaching his goal with the least amount of aggression possible. Political figures, including those in the Sasanian administration, were far too familiar with empty promises and Bahrām's savvy proved to be ineffective.

Following the second round of failed negotiations, Bahrām resorted to less talk and more action. He suggested that, since the right to kingship was based on birth and valor, the two contestants, Khosro the Usurper and Bahrām, should engage in a trial. The crown was to be set between two untamed lions and the contestant must retrieve it without being harmed. He suggested that the crown should belong to whoever walks out alive.²⁷¹

The courtiers accepted his offer hoping that the young prince would be a victim of his lunacy. In reality, Bahrām posed a political and military threat to Sasanian power, and his gladiatorial proposal may have eventually eliminated him as a threat. Ibn Meskavayh reports the concerns of Bahrām opponents, who argued that,

If we refrain from handing kingship to Bahrām, there is the great chance that he and his allies may subdue us; since there is an enormous Arab force gathered here. Let us accept his deal. Therefore, if he is slain by the lions, we would not only be free of guilt in his demise but also escape any harm that he could bring upon us.²⁷²

آرم و رخنه‌هایی که پدید آورده است، ببندم. اگر از پادشاهی من سالی بگذرد و این چیزها که بر شمرده‌ام، به جای نیاوردم، هم به خواست خود از پادشاهی کناره گیرم.

Also, see Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 644.

²⁷¹ See *Mojmal al-Tavārikh*, 128.

²⁷² Translation based on Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 145:

اگر پادشاهی را به کسی جز بهرام دهیم، بیم آن رود که ما پارسیان به دست او و همداستانان وی نابود گردیم که از تازیان سپاهی گران گرد کرده است. از این گذشته، بهرام چیزی را پیش کشیده که تاکنون کسی مان بدان نخوانده است، که این خود از دل استواری است که از دلیری و بی باکی خویش دارد. اگر هم چنان نبود که درباره خویش گفته است، باز رای آن است که پادشاهی را هم به وی بسپریم. از وی سخن بشنویم و فرمان بریم، تا اگر فرو ماند و در برابر شیر از پای درآید، ما بی‌گناه باشیم و از بدی و تباهی وی بیاساییم.

So, they gathered the next day and prepared an arena for Bahrām's theatrical suicide mission to take place. The military General of Mesopotamia brings out two hungry lions as Bahrām and Khosro and set the crown between them. Bal'ami writes that,

بفرمودند تا دو شیر گرسنه بیاورد با مردم نآموخته، و زنجیر به گردن اندر
کردند و تاج بر زمین بنهادند، و يك شیر از این سوی تاج کردند و یکی از آن سوی
تاج، و بسطام زنجیر دراز بیفگند.²⁷³

They ordered two hungry undomesticated lions to be brought forth. The lions chained to a long rope were set on either side of the crown before Bestām set them free.²⁷⁴

Bahrām offered Khosro the chance to go first. Yet fearful for his life and confident that no man will make it out of that arena unscathed, Khosro says,

نخست تو فراز شو که دعوی ملک تو همی کنی و از دست من تو همی خواهی
سندن.²⁷⁵

You go first since you are the one claiming kingship and wish to take what is already mine.²⁷⁶

As he is heading into the arena, Mobadān Mobad, hoping to clear his name and that of his allies from yet another murder accusation, warns Bahrām and says that,

از خدای بترس و از بهر ملک خویشتن را هلاک مکن، و از آن گناه که خدای
ترا بدین جای آورد عقوبت آن مر خدای را توبه کن که این از عقوبت گناه است که
ترا این حرص بر ملک بدین جای آورد که خویشتن را همی هلاک کنی. اگر این شیران
ترا هلاک کنند ما از خون تو بیزاریم.²⁷⁷

²⁷³ Bal'ami, *Tarikhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 645. Also, see *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 1996, 259.

²⁷⁴ Translation based on Bal'ami, *Tarikhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 645.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., Also, see Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 77; *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 260.

²⁷⁶ Translation based on Bal'ami, *Tarikhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 645.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

Fear God and don't kill yourself for the sake of kingship. Repent of the sin that brought you here for it is your sins that have manifested as this greed for kingship you have, and which will eventually destroy you. If these lions slaughter you, your death is not on us since we have no desire to shed your blood.²⁷⁸

Bahrām sarcastically said, “Of course, you have no desire to shed my blood,” picked up his mace and headed towards the arena as the lions were released into the scene.²⁷⁹ Bal‘ami described the scene and writes that,

یکی شیر آهنگ وی کرد. بهرام از زمین برجست و بر پشت او نشست و گوشهای او بگرفت و آن سنگ بر سر او همی زد، آن دیگر شیر آهنگ وی کرد. چون فراز آمد، بهرام به يك دست گوش این شیر را که بر نشسته بود نگاه همی داشت و ران بیفشرد تا شیر به زیر وی اندر بمرده، و به دیگر دست گوشهای دیگر شیر بگرفت و سر آن شیر بر سر این شیر همی زد تا سر هر دو شیر خرد گشت و مغز از سرشان بدوید²⁸⁰

One of the lions paced towards him. In a blink of an eye, Bahrām bounced on top of the ferocious animal squeezing its torso with his legs. Using his mace, he then smashed its head in as the second lion approached. Bahrām grabbed the beast by its ears and knocked its head against that of the dead lion until its brain had spilled all over the arena.²⁸¹

Having swiftly slaughtered the two beasts, Bahrām walked towards the crown, picked it off the ground, and crowned himself as he dragged the lifeless body of the lions and hurled it at the feet of his opponents. The Persian aristocrats watched in “awe, fear, and dismay very much like the way they saluted his father, Yazdegerd, during his coronation.”²⁸² Bal‘ami writes that,

²⁷⁸ Translation based on Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 646.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 646-7.

²⁸¹ Translation based on Ibid.

²⁸² *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 260. Bivar suggests that rock relief of Sar-Mashhad, which depicts Bahrām II slaying of lions, was the inspiration for this story. See Adrian D.H. Bivar, “Cavalry Equipment and Tactics on the Euphrates Frontier,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 26 (1972): 280.

تاج از زمین برداشت و به سر خویش بر نهاد و آن هر دو شیر را پیش تخت
اندر بینداخت، و مردمان از مردی وی عجب بماندند.²⁸³

He picked up the crown and placed it on his head. He then dragged the two lions and tossed them in front of his throne as the audience watched in bewilderment.²⁸⁴

Bahrām was hailed as King simply because Khosro avoided having to go through the lion-trial. He submitted to Bahrām, expressing his servitude as follows,

Long live Bahrām, who is now the King of the seven realms by the will of God and to whom we are all obedient servants.²⁸⁵

The factuality of Bahrām’s gladiatorial show of valor cannot be corroborated, yet there are several possible interpretations.²⁸⁶ The lion-wrestling completion may, in fact, be a form of *var*, or religious trial, where a contestant proves his sincerity by undergoing a life-threatening situation. It could also allude to either a method of a duel or an epic-heroic appropriation of a

²⁸³ Bal’ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 646.

²⁸⁴ Translation based on Bal’ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 646.

²⁸⁵ Translation based on Ibn Meskawayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 146:

زنده باد بهرام، که همه پیرامونیان سخن از وی بشنوند و فرمان او برند. بزدان، پادشاهی هفت کشور را از آن بهرام کرده است.

Also, see Bal’ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 647; *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 261.

²⁸⁶ Shahbazi argues that the lion scene is essential in Bahrām’s initiation as a “royal hero” since acts of valor were the essence of Iranian kingship. He uses the example of Shapur II who aside from his strategic genius, and impeccable political acumen, we see that Shapur II is praised for his lack of fear in the face of death. In one episode, Ammianus narrates a scene during the siege of Bezabde that serves as a non-mythological parable for Bahrām’s lion killing performance, where Bahrām proceeded to personally check out the city’s defenses despite being showered with arrows and ballista missiles. Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 418, Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*. Vol. 2, ed. John C. Rolfe. The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1940), 43.

one-on-one battle between Bahrām and his opponents.²⁸⁷ Whatever the reality behind lion-trial story may be, it signifies the moment when Bahrām crosses the threshold and moves from one side of the binary of power to another. From this point on, Bahrām’s actions are not merely theatrical displays of valor or idyllic acts of gallantry. They directly influence the fate of the empire, its people and more so his own, as he moves closer to fulfilling his destiny as the newest link in the chain of Kayānid heroes. The story’s motifs directly tie Bahrām to Kayānid and other epic heroes and legends.²⁸⁸ For example, in his battle against the Lions, and also in his pictorial depiction reported by Hamzeh, he holds a weapon known as ‘*Gurz-e Gav-star*’ which is a bull-head mace.²⁸⁹ *Gurz Gav-sar* is attested as the weapon used by Mithra, the Zoroastrian divinity of Oath and Light, Fereidun, and also Kay Khosrow.²⁹⁰

Even at this point, his opponents did not fully surrender which is why rather than the Mobadān Mobad pronouncing him King, following the custom Bahrām crowned himself.²⁹¹ The two factions agreed on a year of probationary kingship. If Bahrām’s proved himself worthy, just

²⁸⁷ Dinavari, *Al-Akhhbār al-Tevāl*, 83. Bal’ami, *Tarīkhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 645.

²⁸⁸ On the depiction of Bahrām alongside many themes that are instantaneous reminders of the most famous mythical heroes of Iran, see Nikui et al. “Baznegari Revāyat Tarikhiy Yazdegerd Aval va Bahrām Panjom.”

²⁸⁹ Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 140.

²⁹⁰ Nikui et al. “Baznegari Revāyat Tarikhiy Yazdegerd Aval va Bahrām Panjom,” 32. On Fereidun and Bahrām’s medieval portrayal as emblems of the cosmic monarchy, see Marianna Shreve Simpson, “Narrative Allusion and Metaphor in the Decoration of Medieval Islamic Objects,” *Studies in the History of Art* 16 (1985): 131-149.

²⁹¹ See Bal’ami, *Tarīkhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 646. It was customary for the Mobadān Mobad to place the crown on the king’s head. According to the letter of Tansar, the ruling king would provide three letters, one for the Mobadān Mobad, one for the *Dabirān Mahišt* and one for the *Erān Espāhbed*. After the king had passed, they would vote on the matter. This shows that the religious, executive and military heads of the empire made the final decision regardless of whom the king had appointed as heir. See *Nāmeḥ Tansar*, 87-89. For an English translation, see *The Letter of Tansar*, 61.

and merciful, he would remain in power, if not he would resign from his position without holding any other accountable. Although not directly acknowledged in sources, there is ample evidence of tension between Bahrām and his father’s opponents.²⁹² Ibn Balkhi reports that Bahrām’s opponents were forced to plead to Nu‘mān and ask him to intervene on their behalf and ask for Bahrām’s forgiveness.²⁹³

In reality, despite the suspense, drama and excitement that the scene offers, the truth was a grim one for the Sasanians. Civil strife would have been catastrophic, and would promote attacks from all corners of the empire. The manner in which the nobility even accepted to engage with Bahrām in the first place, hoping to ultimately remove him at his own expense, alludes to the fact that military conflict between Bahrām’s forces and Bestām’s army was a real possibility and one the administration was avoiding at all costs. The Sasanian courtiers were not a united front either, which rendered the possible conflict even more hazardous to the empire. For example, Ibn Balkhi reports that Bahrām suggested the lion scene to satisfy the courtiers, “half of whom were in favor of Bahrām.”²⁹⁴ Even in the case of Bahrām’s defeat, it was possible that the

²⁹² Mashkoor suggests that the Iranians have lost the battle to the siege of Bahrām and the Lakhmids, hence why they allowed negotiations to take place. He adds that the story of the lion-wrestling ordeal may be a Kayānid metaphor that represented the battle between the two forces. See Mohammad Javad Mashkoor, *Tārikh Siāsi Sāsānian*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Donyā-ye Ketāb 2010). For the potential symbolic meaning of the lions, see James R. Russell, “Magic Mountains, Milky Seas, Dragon Slayers, and Other Zoroastrian Archetypes,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 22 (2008): 60-61.

²⁹³ Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 78. Also see Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 93; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 148; Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 266.

²⁹⁴ Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 146. According to Ibn Balkhi, Bahrām’s opponents argued that they were bound to Khosrow, for the promise of kingship made to him could not be severed. The report also reveals that Sasanian accession laws withstood, regardless of Yazdegerd’s tyranny and the Arab influence in Bahrām’s upbringing, since now the last card they played was the theological owe they had to Khosro and their vow. This, in turn, explains why negotiations went from being conducted between Bahrām and the Persian administration, to being a contest of valor between Khosro and Bahrām. See Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāmeḥ*, 77.

Sasanians would lose their Lakhmid allies, whose political compliance and military cooperation was essential to the well-being of the empire. Tha'ālebi adds that Bahrām's success in gaining back the right to rule made no one as happy as the Arabs.²⁹⁵ And for the right reasons, since it was the help of Nu'mān, along with his son Mundhir that secured the succession of Yazdegerd's blood. At this point, the story of the two guardianships comes to a karmic end. Just as Yazdegerd had secured the Theodosian bloodline, Nu'mān secured Yazdegerd's, and Bahrām paid forward the favor by appointing Mundhir son of Nu'mān as the King in Hirā, after his father's demise.²⁹⁶

Conclusively, we see that Bahrām's evolutionary growth into an epic hero begins with narratives of his birth and eventually comes to a full circle with the mythological tale of death or, better say, disappearance. It is essential to see that the fictional or non-factual details of the story of Bahrām's princehood and his struggle to gain back his right to kingship are purposeful insertions. Elements within the literary tradition of Iranian epic-heroic narratives intertwined with the polemics of inner-aristocratic animosity and rivalry ultimately lead to the composition of a tale filled with contradiction, literary devices, and symbolic meaning. Even details that appear as sheer fabrication, such as Bahrām being an only child, when analyzed, reveal ample

²⁹⁵ Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 264.

²⁹⁶ Bal'ami reports that, after seven days of traditional feasting and political meetings, Mundhir returned to Hirā with even more political authority as Bahrām gifted him with power over all Arab lands. See Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 610. Fisher suggests that the Lakhmids were more in favor of Bahrām becoming the future king of Iran because they viewed Bahrām as an anti-Mazdean candidate. If Bahrām ascended the throne, they would be saved the trouble of having to take measures against their Christian population. While Fisher's argument is interesting, it is not supported by any evidence. Sources shed light on a political alliance between the Lakhmids and Yazdegerd, one that was strengthened by the fosterage system and Bahrām being tied equally to the house of Sāsān and the house of Nu'mān. Such a bond was most likely further strengthened by the Arab value of tribal loyalty. According to Majma' al-Ansāb, when accusations against Yazdegerd were voiced, Nu'mān entered the debate and addressed Bahrām's opponents "with utmost aggression." See Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 67; Šabānkārei, *Majma' al-Ansāb*, 238.

religio-cultural meaning. For example, portraying Yazdegerd as incapable of conceiving healthy sons emasculates him and provides a literary context which gains further sense when juxtaposed with rumors of Bahrām's hyper-sexuality. Such binary opposition is supported by additional reports claiming that the king refrained from alcoholic drinks, while his son Bahrām was described as the most Dionysian character in Iranian epic literature.²⁹⁷ Despite the historical veracity in Yazdegerd and Bahrām's stories, both are ultimately subjected to a storytelling tradition that positions its characters within archetypes of good and evil, or "us versus others," thus ensuring their literary survival and immortality in the winds of time.

Such contrasted depictions function as bricks in the literary structure of Iranian epic narratives. For example, in order for Bahrām to transition into a hero, he must be portrayed as a hunter-warrior, hence his depiction as mentally and physically superior, with meticulous training and upbringing. This is mainly owed to the significance of hunting, a royal sport deeply embedded in the cultural values of the Iranian world.²⁹⁸ Mastery of horsemanship and combat skills are requirements for a hunter, the sport *par excellence* of Iranian royalty and an extension of Indo-European heroic values.²⁹⁹ Epic heroes-to-be must gain victory in hunting adventures and challenges; as they act out the symbolic pursuit and defeat of their enemies on hunting

²⁹⁷ See Jāhez, *Tāj*, 65 for Bahrām's over indulgence in wine. For Yazdegerd's avoidance of wine and music, see Mohammad ibn Khāvand Shah, *Tārikh Rozat al-Safā*, vol. 1, ed. Jamshid Kianfar (Tehran: Khayyam, 1338), 757.

²⁹⁸ See Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*; Phillip Gignoux, "La Chasse dans l'Iran Sasanide," in *Orientalia Romana, Essays and Lectures*, vol. V, ed. Gerardo Gnoli (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1983), 101-118; Hanaway, "The Concept of the Hunt in Persian Literature"; Ilya Gershevitch, "Etymological Notes on Persian Mih, Naxčir, Bēgāne, and Bīmār," in *Dr. J. M. Unvala Memorial Volume*, ed. Jamshedji Unvala (Bombay: K.M. Jamasp Asa, 1964), 89-94.

²⁹⁹ See Choksy, "Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran"; Hanaway, "The Concept of the Hunt in Persian Literature"; Kinga Ilona Márkus-Takeshita, "From Iranian Myth to Folk Narrative: The Legend of the Dragon-Slayer and the Spinning Maiden in the Persian Book of the Kings," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, no. 2, (2001): 203-214.

grounds.³⁰⁰ We eventually see that, as a hunter-warrior, Bahrām not only defeats the Hunnic invaders but “hunts down” their leader.³⁰¹

Moreover, we must be cautious not equate Bahrām’s coronation as the end of hostilities. Yazdegerd’s enemies lost to Bahrām, though without bloodshed. So as soon as the drums of war started to beat, it was seen as an opportunity to blame Bahrām and his ways of life. This was not the first time the world had seen a hedonistic ruler. How this lifestyle was used to create an argument that would serve as an excuse to depose him in case need be, was essential. It sheds light on the constant struggles of the sons of the house of Sāsān who had to juggle internal and external pressure.

We see that the fate of the Lakhmids was, indeed, intertwined with their Persian overlords: their political authority reaching an end with the Arab invasion of the Sasanian empire. The city itself had a similar fate. Hirā, with all its acclaimed beauty and prosperity, did not survive much after the fall of the Persians and, with them, the Lakhmids. As Balādhuri reports, it was still in residence by colonial Arabs in the 9th century.³⁰² However, by the mid-tenth century, it had become the “abode of owls.”³⁰³

³⁰⁰ Hanaway, “The Concept of the Hunt in Persian Literature,” 22.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 25.

³⁰² Balādhuri, *Fotuh al-Boldān*, 207.

³⁰³ Mas‘udi, *Moruj al-Dhahab*, 465.

CHAPTER 4:

“UNHAPPY IS THE LAND THAT NEEDS A HERO”³⁰⁴

As Bahrām proceeds to assume the position of King of Kings on the 26th of June 420 CE, we see that his transformation into an epic hero gains momentum.³⁰⁵ The analysis of reports on his kingship reveals how the socio-political atmosphere of the fifth century necessitated the rise of a hero.³⁰⁶ As we saw in the previous chapter, the beginning of Bahrām’s rule was characterized by domestic disarray and a state of political limbo caused by Yazdegerd’s death and the inner-aristocratic dispute over the throne. Furthermore, things were aggravated by foreign invasion, most importantly by the Huns. Sources reveal two points of focus: Bahrām’s victory over the Huns in addition to his acts of heroism, charity and justice. These emphatic layers are bound together by cause and effect. Success in thwarting the “Hunnic threat” stabilized Bahrām’s position as King and guaranteed his transformation into a benevolent and messianic Kayānid hero.

While, scholars suggest that Bahrām won his positive image in Perso-Arabic history by bowing to the commands of his rivals at court, this chapter argues that it was his victory over the

³⁰⁴ Brecht Bertolt, *Life of Galileo*, trans. John Willet (London: Methuen, 1980), 254.

³⁰⁵ According to Ferdowsi, Bahrām became king in the “month of *Khordād*, the day of *Ard*.” See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, 560. For Bahrām’s enthronement in 420 CE, see Fry, “The political history of Iran,” 144; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*.

³⁰⁶ Renard points to the broad aspect of heroic themes and the fact that they reinforce a sense of unity amongst people through feelings of pride in constructed past achievements. Renard, John, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 12.

Huns that secured him great literary praise. For example, Christensen claims that Bahrām had no say in governing and let the elite do as they wished, at face value and as a fact.³⁰⁷ Moreover, Bahrām ends up being described in scholarship as a “great hunter who loved pleasure and music more than the affairs of the state, which he left to his minister.”³⁰⁸ Such simplistic suggestions dim the political acumen and diplomatic measures of Bahrām as a historical figure. They reduce a historical character to an exoticized one, devoid of cultural agency, and disregard the socio-cultural elements and events that made Bahrām’s heroification a necessity. Furthermore, such arguments revive the Orientalist imaginary of dimly lit harems, burning incense, belly dancers and sluggish rulers, whose political status was not owed to their merit but to a tyrannical monarchy based on blood ties.³⁰⁹

It is yet surprising that merely victory in war would bear such significant results for a king. Especially since exerting military and political sagacity, protecting Iran from its enemies and achieving victory on behalf of the faith and the people was the “responsibility” of every Sasanian king. So, one must ask, why was Bahrām’s victory treated differently? The answer to his heroification lies deep in the heart of the perceived animosity and struggle between the Iranians and the Turānians. Looking back at the reign of Yazdegerd, we see that the Hunnic threats had already placed their invasion in the mytho-religious context of enmity between the lands of Turān and Iran and had given motion and drive to a new legitimating royal ideology. Ultimately, the early fifth century Hunnic defeat in the context of a revived Kayānid ideology

³⁰⁷ See Christensen, *L’Iran sous les Sassanides*, 360; Scott J. McDonough, “A Question of Faith? Persecution and Political Centralization in the Sasanian Empire of Yazdegerd II (438-457 CE),” in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, ed. Harold A. Drake (Aldershot, UK, 2006), 69-85.

³⁰⁸ Gignoux, “La Chasse dans l’Iran Sasanide,” 133-134.

³⁰⁹ Edward Said. *Orientalism: Western representations of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

recalled Kay Khosro's struggle against Afrāsiāb and modeled Bahrām's literary character after his Kayānid counterpart. This juxtaposition of characters ultimately transformed Bahrām from a prince whose throne had been usurped, his sibling assassinated and his father's name tarnished, into a hero – and eventually a messiah – as he became a model of royal *javānmardi*, “justice” and “benevolence”.

A king without power is no king, let alone a hero, and Bahrām's power was achieved through the defeat of enemies, both internal and external. According to Perso-Arabic sources, following seven days of celebration, Bahrām officially started his one-year probationary kingship.³¹⁰ Despite reports concerning lively feasts and merry-making, the real picture may have been a grim one especially considering the manner in which he wrestled back the throne.³¹¹ Sources also reveal that the initial tension and distrust between Bahrām and individual members of the court, continues to raise to surface all through his kingship, especially before his defeat of the Huns.³¹²

The air of uncertainty was not limited to the court. One can imagine that the death of Yazdegerd, the murder of his son Shapur, and Bahrām's siege of Ctesiphon must have left the whole empire in disarray and insecurity. Moreover, sources report the Huns' attack on Iran's

³¹⁰ See Chapter Three for the probationary condition of Bahrām's initial year.

³¹¹ Choksy suggests that a king's loss of *Farrah* resulted in the ensuing of great calamity and strife in the land. Such a view fits well with the claim of ecclesial sources, such as the *Chronicle of Séert*, that after his death, Iran was in great crisis, creating a ripe setting for Yazdegerd's 'sins' to crystallize as truth in the Iranian mindset. Thus, Yazdegerd's enemies were able to blame the further political chaos on the dead king. See Choksy, “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran,” 38; *The Chronicle of Séert*, 45.

³¹² See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 420. Interestingly, the negative rumors against Bahrām come to an end right after the report of his victory.

northeastern borders shortly after Bahrām's enthronement.³¹³ The lack of unity and transparency is explicitly evident in reports that suggest that Bahrām and his allies kept the rest of the nobles uninformed of their plan to crush the Hun's invasion. Sources open with a scene in which foreign threat is blamed on the inefficiency of the King. According to Ferdowsi,

پس آگاهی آمد به هند و به روم.... به ترک و به چین و به آبادبوم
 که بهرام را دل به بازیست و بس.... کسی را به گیتی ندارد به کس
 چو خاقان چین این سخن ها شنید.... ز چین ، ختن لشکری برگزید³¹⁴

Thus, news reached India, Rome, Turān, China and all nations that Bahrām has no preoccupation but attending to leisurely activities and pays no concern to the wellbeing of his empire. After the Khāqān had heard such news, he assembled an army from the east [and headed towards Iran]³¹⁵

Such a narrative intends disqualify Bahrām and prepare the audience for what they hoped would be his expulsion from the position of King.³¹⁶ On the other hand, Bahrām's rivals are depicted as more anxious for the well-being of the empire. Iranian nobles, enraged by the King's alleged laidback attitude and lack of pro-activeness, reproached their sovereign. Bal'ami writes that,

³¹³ Bal'ami places the Hunnic attack at around 427 CE. See *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 75; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 94; Ibn Meskawayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 148; Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 266; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 523-33; Bal'ami, *Tarīkhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 647-8.

³¹⁴ Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 523. Since Bahrām's first year of kingship, as reported by Perso-Arabic sources, was probationary, such rumors would ease the way to remove him from power.

³¹⁵ Translation based on Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 523.

³¹⁶ See *Nehāyat al-Erab*, 75; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 93; Ibn Meskawayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 148; Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 266; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 523-33; Bal'ami, *Tarīkhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 647-8.

پس مهتران و موبدان موبد پیش بهرام اندر شدند و او را ملامت کردند و گفتند: تو به لهو مشغول شدی و صید همی کنی تا مملکت به باد دادی و تباه شد، و ملک ترک آمد و اطراف بگرفت و کشتن و غارت کرد و فسادهای بسیار.³¹⁷

Thus, the grandees along with the *Mobadān Mobad* met with him and reprimanded him saying that; ‘You are so preoccupied with leisure and pleasure and spend all your time hunting to the point that you have led the nation to destruction. The King of the Turks has arrived, occupying the borderlands. He is killing and pillaging and causing great harm.’³¹⁸

At this point the tone of the narratives closely resembles that of Yazdegerd’s accounts. It is very important to keep in mind that the subtle defaming tone connotes that despite Bahrām’s position as king, the “the ball of power” is still in the anti-Yazdegerdian faction of the court. Furthermore, Bahrām intentionally added further fuel to the fire by disregarding their grievances, and maintaining his relaxed attitude in the wake of a crisis. He responded to their distress call in a relatively passive manner, advising them to calm down and saying that,

خدای رحیم است و مرا به دست دشمن نسپارد، و ایشان را اجابت نکرد
چنانکه ایشان خواستند.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Bal’ami, *Tarikh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 647-8. Also, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 523-4.

³¹⁸ Translation based on Bal’ami, *Tarikh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 647-8.

³¹⁹ Bal’ami, *Tarikh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 648. Also, see Tha’ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha’ālebi*, 266; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 95; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 524. For a slightly different account of the victory see Abu Osmān Jāhez, *Tāj*, trans. Mohammad Ali Khalili (Tehran: Ibn Sinā, 1964), 233-236. Jāhez’s report involved more elements of disguise as he advised on the use of deception as a less aggressive weapon of war. His account is an amalgamation of the story of the Hunnic defeat and Bahrām’s adventures in India. Moreover, the reason why it is essential to consider instructive treatise and the genre of mirror (is this a literary genre? If yes, put in between quotation marks or italicize) for prince such as Taj, is that it allows us to get a glimpse of court protocol, administration customs and regulations during the Sasanians period. Jahez writes that “we [probably referring to the Abbasids] have learned the rules and laws of governing a land (country) and setting hierarchies from the elite and the laymen, and politics and ways of dealing with the public from the kings of Iran as they have been the pioneers of all this.” *Ibid.*, 67

God is Kind and will not surrender me to the enemy. Thus he [Bahrām] did not grant them their wish the way they had hoped he would.³²⁰

At this point in the story, Ferdowsi makes sure to inform his audience in advance that the King had a secret plan and that his lackadaisical conduct was nothing but a show.³²¹

Bahrām's next move was then to place his brother Narseh on the throne, and announce that he will be heading north to the province of Azerbaijan and Armenia to hunt, taking along only a few of his trusted allies. The intention was to persuade his opponents that he was fleeing the capital out of fear so that they would take matters into their own hands. Luckily for Bahrām, his opponents took the bait and planned what can be labeled as a political coup.³²² Bal'ami writes that,

چون از نزدیک وی بیرون آمدند، گفتند: این مرد را عقل نیست، یا از دشمن
بترسید بدین غافلی و با وی حرب نخواهد کردن و پیش وی نیارد رفتن... مردمان
گفتند: وی از ملک ترک بگریخت و پادشاهی به دشمن دست باز داشت. تدبیر آن
کردند که سوی خاقان رسول فرستند و هدیه و ساو و باج بپذیرند تا وی باز گردد و
اندر پادشاهی ایشان هیچ فساد نکند.³²³

As soon as they left his presence, they said; 'This man is either insane or fears the enemy and will refrain from battle.'... [Then] they said: 'He has fled having to face the King of the Turks and has submitted the kingdom to the enemy.' So they decided to send an envoy to the Khāqān and accept to pay gifts and tribute so that he returns [to his land] and avoids the further destruction of their kingdom.³²⁴

³²⁰ Translation based on Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 648.

³²¹ Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 524.

³²² See Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 248; Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 266; Jāhez, *Tāj*, 234.

³²³ Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 648-9.

³²⁴ Translation based on Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 648-9.

So, arguing that Bahrām is a coward and has fled the country, the courtiers wrote to the leader of the Huns, or as Perso-Arabic sources refer to him, the Khāqān, and agreed to pay him tribute if he halts his invasion.³²⁵ The Khāqān agreed and commanded the raiding and pillaging to stop while the Huns awaited further communication from Ctesiphon.³²⁶

Meanwhile, Bahrām and his allies moved north and headed towards Khorasan using the thick forests of northern Iran as a shield against surveillance, while his spies kept him informed of what had transpired between Ctesiphon and the Hunnic headquarters. Having reached the enemy campground, the Iranian cavalry stayed in ambush and took advantage of the element of surprise raiding the Hunnic camp at nightfall.³²⁷ By dawn, the Khāqān was beheaded, his wife was taken prisoner, and the rest of his men either killed or chased beyond the Oxus.³²⁸

The outcomes of the victory were not limited to securing the borders. Bahrām used his success to also battle the propaganda warfare against him. By winning the war, he had already proven himself militarily sagacious, which, once and for all, ends the claim that he was a coward who rarely left the side of his female companions.³²⁹ Moreover, as mentioned in the previous

³²⁵ See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 524.

³²⁶ See *Ibid.*, 528-529.

³²⁷ For a description of the route that Bahrām took in reaching the Khāqān's camp, see Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 266; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 148-9; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 96; Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 649; Dinavari, *Al-Akḥbār al-Tevāl*, 84; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 530-1. The details of Bahrām's ambush and surprise attack closely resemble a hunting scene. It depicts the Huns as preys, which reinforces his role as a hunter. Interestingly, this context distances Bahrām from the concept of *Druq*, or "lie," while maintaining his position as an able strategist since he had said that he was going hunting, but never mentioned what or whom he intended to hunt!

³²⁸ See Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 649-50; Dinavari, *Al-Akḥbār al-Tevāl*, 85; Qazvini, *Al-Ma'jam fi Athār Moluk al-'Ajam*, 292; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 98; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 149; Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 266; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 531.

³²⁹ For accusations concerning the excessive company of women, drinking and feasting, see Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 147; Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 647; Dinavari, *Al-Akḥbār al-Tevāl*,

chapter, his opponents had attempted to discredit him by arguing that as a result of his upbringing amongst Arabs he lacked deep Iranian/Zoroastrian sense of identity. By sending the Khāqān's gem-laden crown and his enslaved wife as gifts to the fire temple of Azar-Gošnasp Bahrām publicly paraded his faith and neutralized the rumors.³³⁰ Turning our attention to the post-war development, we see that, as Bahrām victoriously headed towards the capital, the news of his victory was nothing short of terrifying for his opponents who had committed treason by conspiring against Bahrām.³³¹ According to Ferdowsi, fearing for their lives, they implored Bahrām's brother, Narseh, to write to the King and ask for forgiveness on their behalf. Ferdowsi writes that,

دل نامداران ز تویر شاه... همی بود پیچان ز بهر گناه
 که اندیشه ی کژ و فرمان دیو... ببرد دل از راه گیهان خدیو³³²

The nobles were filled with fear of the King and felt great anxiety over the sin they had committed. For wrongful thoughts and the orders of the devil had led their hearts away from the path of the creator.³³³

Meanwhile, the post-victory events unfold, and we see an outstanding change in the inner-dynamics of Sasanian court. Upon his return, Bahrām addressed the court in the following manner,

84; Qazvini, *Al-Ma'jam fi Athār Moluk al-'Ajam*, 291; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 93; Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 265. For accusations of excessive drinking and the role of the Luri's in *Andarz* literature, see Jāhez *Tāj*, 66-70.

³³⁰ Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 538.

³³¹ Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 267. Ferdowsi describes a scene in which people welcome Bahrām back from India. It can be assumed that Ctesiphon celebrated every return of the king with similar fanfare. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 595.

³³² Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 535.

³³³ Translation based on Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 535.

بدانید و آگاه باشید و چنان میندازید که من به لهر و صید مشغولم، به تدبیر مملکت اندرم و نه غافلیم، و لیکن من این ملک نه به نیروی شما گرفتم و تدبیر شما، من این همه به نیروی خویش گرفتم، و مرا از شما نه نیرو باید و نه تدبیر بکار است. و هر گاه که من غایب شوم به تدبیری از مملکت، شما گوئید او به بازی مشغول است یا بگریخت و ملک دست باز داشت. و شنیدم که چون من به آذربایگان شدم شما گفتید که وی از دشمن بگریخت، و همی خواستید که رسول فرستید به خاقان و او را ساو و باج دهید، و من شما را همی آزرم دارم تا شما بر طاعت‌اید، نیز هر گاه از شما بی‌ادبی آید عقوبت بیشتر کنم از آنکه یزدجرد کرد. و یزدجرد اول ملکی به رفق کرد. چون شما شرط بشکستید او نیز عهد با شما بشکست. و اگر من نیز غایب شوم و شما بی‌ادبی کنید یا رای چنین افکند من شما را عقوبت کنم چون پدرم.³³⁴

I wish you to know and beware that while you may believe that I am negligent and constantly busy with pleasure and hunt, I am dealing with matters of the nation. (Keep in mind) that I took kingship not with your support and planning, but with my strength. I neither need your power and support, nor your wisdom and strategy. Every time I am away dealing with an issue (of the country) you start saying he has fled, or he is just fooling around.... (I warn you,) as long as you are obedient I shall respect you, but if you become disrespectful and unruly I will reign terror on you far worse that Yazdegird ever did. Remember how Yazdegerd was a kind and lenient King at first. You were unfaithful to the agreements. Thus he broke away from them too.³³⁵

During his speech, Bahrām reminded his subjects of his authority and status, identified the crimes of his enemies, yet exerted power not by purging and punishing but by showing mercy. By doing so, he maintains his political authority, while taking steps to resolve political tensions and implementing order and unity, which fits perfectly into the broader goals of the Peace Project. The gist of Bahrām’s speech denotes a shift in the Sasanian power dynamic, as well as in his literary portrayal. From here on, we see that not only criticism against him ended

³³⁴ Bal’ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 650. Also, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 539-41.

³³⁵ Translation based on Bal’ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 650.

but he also continued to rule as King of Kings, which implies that the probationary status of his rule had turned into a permanent one.

One aspect of the war, namely the use of deceit and guile in facing the enemy, is largely emphasized in Perso-Arabic accounts. Embedded within the Zoroastrian aim to preserve, lengthen and promote life and longevity, Andarz Literature emphasizes the importance of avoiding bloodshed and trying to win a war using trickery and guile. For example, Jāhez advises his readers to use Bahrām as a model of wisdom and military strategy. He writes that,

It is for this reason that has said that the most successful and wisest kings are those who use war as their last option, for the price of all things is paid with money and possessions, but the price of war is the lives of warriors and people....thus the only time a king should engage in war, is after using deceit and trickery but failing.³³⁶

Furthermore, the plot of the victory, stripped of dramatic embellishment, also provides a glimpse into the use of human intelligence networks, as they spread the fake news of the Bahrām's escape, in addition to infiltrating both the Sasanian court and the Hun's camp.³³⁷ The letter of Tansar makes the following argument on the necessity of surveillance of subjects,

³³⁶ Translation based off Jāhez, *Tāj*, 232-3:

دیگر از اخلاق پادشاهان این است که در جنگ نیرنگ باید به کار برد. و برای این بوده است که گفته اند پادشاه کامروا و دوراندیش آن باشد که جنگ را آخرین نیرنگ قرار دهد، چون هزینه هر چیز از دارایی و نقدینه است ولی هزینه جنگ جان های سپاهی و مردم است. پس اگر در نیرنگ ها عاقبت شایسته ای باشد از خوشبختی و کامروایی پادشاه است... اما اگر نیرنگ و فسون به کار نرود و سودی نبخشد آنگاه نوبت جنگ فرا رسد. هیچ پادشاهی آن نیرنگ و فریب که پادشاهان ایران به کار می برند نداشته است.

Jāhez then makes the advice further applicable to the post-Islamic mindset of rulers and quotes the prophet Muhammed saying that, “war is nothing but deceit and trickery.”

³³⁷ For studies concerning the role of intelligence networks in Rome and Persia in antiquity, see Philip Freeman and David Kennedy, eds. *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East: Proceedings of a Colloquium Held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986*, 2 vols. (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1986); Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium*, 106-118. For merchants and pilgrims as agents of penetration into foreign territory and espionage, see Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium*, 491-2. For the story

اما دیگری که نیشتی 'شهنشاه منهیان و جواسیس برگماشت بر اهل ممالک،
مردم جمله از این هراسان اند، و متحیر شدند! ... شهنشاه در وصیتی که فرمود، این
باب به استقصا نوشته اند که 'جهالت پادشاه و بی خبر بودن از احوال مردم دری است
از فساد'.³³⁸

In addition, concerning you writing that 'the King of Kings has placed spies to surveille the citizens causing surprise and fear amongst everyone.' ... [I must say that] The King of Kings has briefly commented on this matter in his will and [said that]: 'The king's ignorance and his lack of information on the conditions of the people is a door to evil.'³³⁹

The significance of victory against the Huns reveals further layers of meaning in the cultural context of the Iranian world. On a practical level, the Huns posed a significant danger to the safety and security of the empire and its citizens.³⁴⁰ Thus, overcoming such a threat automatically increased Bahrām's popularity amongst the public.³⁴¹ In turn, it disarmed

of a Roman veteran who was captured in the siege of Anantha and ended up remaining in Persia as an informant, integrating into the society, see Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* xxiv.1.10, 78. For the story of a Gallic deserter of the Roman army who had been in the service of the Persians as a spy for years and acted as a scout for the Persian reconnaissance unit, see *Ibid.*, xviii.6.16, 52. For the report on the Persian traitor, Pusaesus, see Lieu, "Captives, Refugees and Exiles," 490; Ammianus Marcellinus xxiv.1.7, 75. For evidence of Sasanian intelligence networks and tools from the Umayyad era, see Adam J. Silverstein, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). Ferdowsi refers to spies and informers as "kārāgahān". See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme* vol. 6, 422, 529-30. Syvanne suggests that merchant spy activity was controlled by the governors of the frontiers regions, who then reported to the *Iran-Spahbed*. She adds that Sasanians not only guarded wells against Roman intelligence network, but also were masters of infiltration, since their information of enemy movements and activities seem to have been extensive. Ilkka Syvanne, *Military History of Late Rome* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2015), 128. Also see, Rose Mary Sheldon, *Intelligence Activities in Ancient Rome: Trust in the Gods but Verify* (London: Routledge, 2005).

³³⁸ *Nameh Tansar*, 71.

³³⁹ Translation based on *Nameh Tansar*, 71. For an alternative English translation, see *The Letter of Tansar*, 49-51.

³⁴⁰ Ibn Balkhi says that Iranians feared no one as much as the Turks. Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāme*, 38. Dignas and Winters describe the Huns as the most dangerous enemy of Persia in the 5th century. See Dignas and Winters, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, 98.

³⁴¹ Aidenlou adds that extra-ordinary physical power and the possession of an indestructible armor are the two most critical aspects of a heroic storytelling framework. He uses the example of the travelogues of Naser Khosro and Abumoslemnameh, in which Bahrām possesses such features. Naser

Bahrām's opponents at court, since their accusations of being careless, weak and unfit to rule was now vain.³⁴²

Iran's western borders were not completely secure either. Greco-Roman sources report that Iran and Rome engaged in a military confrontation sometime in 420 CE, which is the first year of Bahrām's rule.³⁴³ Perso-Arabic sources, on the other hand, either make no mention of any conflict or briefly mention a peace treaty signed after the Hunnic victory.³⁴⁴ The sequence in which the two armed conflicts occurred is difficult to ascertain, yet not impossible. A cross-

Khosro states that, "we left that location on the 1st of Moharram and took the mountains towards Esfahan. On our way, we reached a narrow valley called *Shamshir Borid*, 'sword cut.'" The locals believed that the mountain was sliced with a swift blow of Bahrām Gur's sword which serves as a less mythologized form of immortality seen in Esfandiār. Exaggerated acts of valor and strength are an instant reminder of the adventures and feats of the Iranian national epic hero, Rostam. In addition, Abumoslem is said to have had an indestructible armor that his grandmother had discovered and had belonged to Bahrām. See Aidenlou, "Qeibat Bahrām Gur," 30; Abu Taher Tartusi, *Abumoslem-nāmeḥ*, vol.1, ed. Hossein Esmaili (Tehran: Mo'in, 2001), 287; Naser Khosro Qobadiani, *Safar-nāmeḥ Naser Khosro*, ed. Mohsen khadem (Tehran: Qoqnus, 2003), 139. For a comparison of Rostam and Bahrām, see Meisami, p. 70.

³⁴² As stated in Chapter 5, Bahrām was initially bypassed for unreasonable reasons, such as resembling his father or being unfamiliar with Persian ethics due to growing up amongst Arabs. Perso-Arabic sources describe the young king as a lover of women, wine and hunt. It was the nature of accusations that he faced after becoming king that mainly defamed his character. Such attributes would potentially be accepted in the context of epic-heroic tales. A pleasure-loving, lackadaisical king threatens the security, prosperity and advancement of the empire, and will be seen as unfit to rule.

³⁴³ For an analysis of the 420 CE war, see Greatrex and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*. Also, for Bahrām's brief presence in a battle scene as reported by John Malalas, see Josef Wiesehöfer, "From Achaemenid Imperial Order to Sasanian Diplomacy: War, Peace, and Reconciliation in Pre-Islamic Iran," in *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 130.

³⁴⁴ It must be noted that the difference in treatment does not signify a lack of importance of Roman affairs but rather reveals how Iran capitalized upon the humiliating defeat of the Huns to reinforce the Kayānid ideology and, in turn, revitalize the legitimacy of the House of Sāsān as the protectors of Iranian lands. Ghaemi also suggests that the war with the Huns should have been viewed as a revived moment of the primordial battle between Ohrmazd and Ahriman. Choksy indicates that the relations between Zoroastrianism and sovereignty allowed the Iranian king to reenact such primordial conflicts, since he was seen as Ohrmazd's representative. See Farzad Ghaemi, "Tahlil Dāstān Kay Khosro dar Shāhnāmeḥ bar Asās Raveš Naqd Osturei," in *Fasl-nāmeḥ Pažuhešhay Adabi* 27 (1389): 79; Choksy, "Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran," 32.

reading of sources suggests that issues with the Huns and the Romans possibly started at the same time, in the first year of Bahrām's reign. Ferdowsi's report is most helpful in reaching a more precise timeline of events. He specifies that the Romans took advantage of Iran's occupation in the east and launched an attack on Persian soil right after news of the Hunnic invasion had reached them.³⁴⁵ Ferdowsi writes that,

ز چین ، ختن لشکری برگزید	جو خاقان چین این سخن ها شنید
کسی را نیامد ز بهرام یاد	درم داد و سر سوی ایران نهاد
همه کشور روم لشکر گرفت	وزان روی قیصر سپه برگرفت
ز چین و ختن لشکر آمد پدید ³⁴⁶	که قیصر سپه کرد و اندیشه کرد

When the Khāqān heard such news, he assembled an army from the east. He paid them and headed towards Iran without the least worry about Bahrām. On the other hand, the Cesar also prepared his army, summoning them from all over Rome... Thus as an army arrived from the east, Cesar also prepared for an attack.³⁴⁷

Ferdowsi further reports that while Bahrām was busy fighting a war in the east, the Romans had sent an envoy to Iran to negotiate peace. He also states that the negotiations had begun a year before the end of the Hunnic war. On his return from war, the King inquired about whether a deal had been reached with Rome or not. Ferdowsi writes,

برفت و بیاورد چندی ردان	بفرمود تا موبد موبدان
رسولش همی دیر یابد جواز	بدو گفت شد کار قیصر دراز
که دارد روان از خرد پشت راست ³⁴⁸	چه مردست، اندر خرد تا کجاست؟

He ordered the Mobadān Mobad to summon a few of the nobles. He asked them why the deal with the Roman affair has

³⁴⁵ See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, 523.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Translation based on Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, 523.

³⁴⁸ See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, 546.

taken so long and that Cesar's envoy was not given permission promptly. We wish to see how wise he is since wisdom is the key to a healthy soul.³⁴⁹

Ferdowsi's report alludes to the positive state of negotiations between Bahrām and the Romans. During the negotiations, Bahrām even specified that the "delay in talks" was due to preoccupation with the Huns and praised the Cesar for not displaying the insanity of the Khāqān!³⁵⁰ Ferdowsi writes that,

کنون مردمی کرد و فرزانیگی چو خاقان نیامد به دیوانگی
ورا پیش خوانیم هنگام بار سخن تا چه گوید که آید به کار³⁵¹
بدو گفت کیدر بماندی تو دیر ز دیدار این کرز ما گشته سیر
مرا رزم خاقان ز تو باز داشت به گیتی مرا همچو انباز داشت³⁵²

[The Cesar] has shown great humanity and wisdom since he did not act in lunacy the way the Khāqān did. Summon the envoy during meeting hours to see if he has anything useful to say.
³⁵³

[Bahrām acknowledged] that you [the envoy] have been waiting [for this meeting] for a long time and [I am sure] you have seen enough of our empire. My battle with the Khāqān prevented me from attending to you.³⁵⁴

³⁴⁹ Translation based on Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 546.

³⁵⁰ See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 544-552.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 545.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 546.

³⁵³ Translation based on Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 545.

³⁵⁴ Translation based on Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 546.

What adds further weight to the possibility that the Iranians were involved in war on both fronts, somewhat simultaneously, is that, according to Greco-Roman sources, Bahrām joined his troops in the west in defense of Nisibis only towards the end of the conflict in 422 CE.³⁵⁵

Turning attention from foreign issues to domestic, one can imagine that the post-Yazdegerd political chaos and the following two years of military conflict must have made life difficult for Iranians. So after securing relative stability at court and dealing with foreign threats, Bahrām focuses on the empire’s economy and the Iranian people. According to Perso-Arabic sources, Bahrām sent letters to all provinces announcing them of three years of tax cut, arguing that the financial gain from the Hunnic victory was enough to keep the royal treasury full.³⁵⁶ Such reports of acts of charity and generosity add a new layer to his heroic character, one that sets him as a model of royal goodwill and benevolence to the poor without entirely transforming into an ascetic or a religious figure.³⁵⁷ For example, Dinavari writes that,

³⁵⁵ See Greatrex and Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars*, 37.

³⁵⁶ Ibn Meskawayh claims that the Persians are still in possession of that letter. Moreover, Mohammad Mirak ibn Mas‘ud Hosseini reports that Bahrām abolished tax for the Iranians for an additional seven years after his trip to India. On Bahrām’s acts of charity and tax removals, see Qazvini, *Al-Ma‘jam fi Athār Moluk al-‘Ajam*, 293; Bal‘ami, *Tarikh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 651; Dinavari, *Al-Akhbār al-Tevāl*, 85; Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 267; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 98; Ibn Meskawayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 149; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 537-8 and 650-611; Hosseini, *Riaz al-Ferdows Khāni*, 104.

³⁵⁷ Aidenlou reinforces this view by arguing that *javanmardi*, which includes bravery, justice, and populism, is a trait shared by all Iranian heroes within the storytelling framework. In *Tārikh Negārestān* Bahrām is labeled as *javānmard*, while also reprimanded for excessive charity. When confronted with wasting the treasury, he claims that the only way he can gain the people’s love was through bestowing wealth and kindness.” This is supposed to be a double-sided lesson and serve as a mirror for princes on the importance of charity and maintaining balance in all affairs. See Sajjad Aidenlou, “Qeibat Bahrām Gur,” *Boustān Adab* 2 (2016): 27-60, 14; Qazi Ahmad ibn Mohammad Qaffari Kashani, *Tārikh Negarestan*, ed. Morteza Modarres Gilani (Tehran: Hafez, 1962), 229. For the concept of *javanmardi* and the role of *Ayyārs*, see Hanaway “The Concept of the Hunt,” 55. For Bahrām’s part in Persian literature, see Hasan Zolfaghari, “Yek Dāstān, Čahār Revāyat,” *Faslnāmeḥ Pažuhešhay Adabi* 14, (2006): 31-53. For towns constructed through Bahrām’s donations see, *Šahrestānīhā* 18-20. For gifts given for the construction of religious temples in Iran, see Hasan ibn Mohammad Qomi, *Tārikh Qom*, trans. Hasan ibn Ali Qomi, ed. Mohammad-Reza Ansari Qomi (Qom: Ketābkhāneh Bozorg Āyatollah al-Ozmā Mar‘aši Najafi, 2006).

And so he [Bahrām] became the proverbial model of chivalry and welfare.³⁵⁸

Gardizi also welds the two main distinguishing features of Bahrām's character, namely his chivalry and his charitability, and presents them as the two sides of the same coin.³⁵⁹ He narrates a story that tells how Iranians recovered a treasure that had belonged to the Kayānid king Kay Kavus.³⁶⁰ When informed of the discovery, Bahrām ordered it to be distributed amongst the needy arguing that he is capable enough to not need the inheritance of his ancestors.³⁶¹ Gardizi quotes Bahrām saying that,

گنجی که کیکاوس نهد، ما برنداریم. زیرا که ما را ننگ باشد، نهاده دیگران
برداشتن، ما را خزانه به تیغ و تیر و بازوی قوی، مال از دشمنان باید گرفت، و
ولایت آبادان باید داشت نه به خواسته مردگان. پس بفرمود تا آن زر و جواهر بر
درویشان بخشیدند.³⁶²

Qomi states that while Bahrām was on his way to Armenia, he reached the Saveh where he found a fire temple and the city of Qom and its surrounding villages. See Qomi, *Tārikh Qom*, 44.

³⁵⁸ Translation based off Dinavari, *Al-Akhbār al-Tevāl*, 75:

و بدین جهت ضرب المثل جوانمردی و آسایش خاطر شد.

³⁵⁹ Ferdowsi also illustrates Bahrām as a mortal who does not fear death. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 577.

³⁶⁰ Meisami adds that heirlooms discovered by heroes are, in fact, emblems that in some cases disappear into the underground and are recovered by a worthy hero. See Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 141.

³⁶¹ Ferdowsi reports a similar story but says that the wealth belonged to Jamshid. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 457-462.

³⁶² Gardizi, *Zein al-Akhbār*, 77. One could argue that, while public donation was an integral aspect of the Sasanian society, such projection of the king could also be viewed as a Zoroastrian hagiographical strategy to counteract Christian claims to charity and support for the poor and needy. The Christian integration and the mutual support that the church and the state promised to give one another now allowed the king of Persia to take on a role that brought the Sasanian king closer in ideology to his Christian subjects and the Christians of Rome. This can be compared with the displays of charitability by Pulcheria and also Mehr Narseh. For Pulcheria's political role see, Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 83.

We shall not be making use of a treasure that Kay Kavus accumulated, for it is a dishonor for us to feed upon the possessions of others. We fill our treasury with the power of our sword and arrow and our strength and virility. Wealth should be taken from enemies, and the empire should prosper not with the wealth of the deceased and what they have left behind. So he ordered the gold and the gems to be distributed amongst the poor and the needy.³⁶³

Perso-Arabic sources then moved on to report the details of Bahrām’s “foreign” adventures to destinations such as India and Sudan.³⁶⁴ Some sources emphasize the political and military nature of Bahrām’s presence in India before indulging in the epic-heroic aspects of it.³⁶⁵ According to Ferdowsi, Bahrām was briefed on a potential military threat from India.³⁶⁶ Despite

³⁶³ Translation based off Gardizi, *Zein al-Akhhār*, 77.

³⁶⁴ Evidence of Sasanian activity in Ethiopia in the fifth century is almost nonexistent. While India and Iran have enjoyed a long history of cultural and political exchange, Ethiopia as a destination for a fifth-century king or his political reach is surprising. Theoretically, Bahrām’s main tie to Ethiopia was through his connection to the Lakhmids. Moreover, their origins in Yemen (this sentence is incomplete). So Bahrām’s tale may be the only evidence, albeit slim, of the initial stages of Sasanian exploration of Southern Arabia and Ethiopia. While we know that in following centuries, the Sasanians extended their influence into Yemen and Ethiopia, there is no evidence placing them in that region in the fifth century. Thus, it is also more viable that later activities were automatically attributed to Bahrām in the oral tradition. Although the story of Bahrām’s presence in Ethiopia has been neglected due to a lack of supporting material, his adventures in India has received much attention. For Sasanian influence and presence in southwestern Arabia and Yemen, see Bowersock, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity*. For details of the political makeup of the kingdom of Hemyar during the early fifth century, see Robin, “Arabia and Ethiopia,” 267.

³⁶⁵ Ibn Balkhi reports that Bahrām headed towards Yemen and Sudan after sending his brother Narseh to Rome, possibly as an envoy. The report on Bahrām’s presence in Sudan is short and primarily involves battle. See Ibn Balkhi, *Fārsnāme*, 82; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 150; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 100; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, 559-565.

³⁶⁶ An example similar to the gist of Bahrām’s trip to India can be found in the fourth century. In 363 CE when Julian was preparing to march against Iran, though he intended to keep the imminent attack a secret, news had spread amongst the people and had reached Ctesiphon, since late, in 362 CE, a delegation arrived in Antioch from the Persian court, requesting to negotiate to avoid aggressive measures. Although in this case Julian sent back a sarcastic message and insisted on war, we can see Iran’s strategies in preventing violence. See Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium*, 456-7. Another similar incident happened in 540 CE when Justinian heard the news that there was a possibility that Khosro II

an easing of tensions at court, Ferdowsi's report points to an ongoing air of distrust. Once again, Bahrām kept some officials in the dark regarding the political nature of his trip to India.³⁶⁷

Ferdowsi voices Bahrām's thoughts and writes that,

چنین گفت کین کار من در نهان بسازم نگویم به کس در جهان
شوم پیش او چون فرستندگان نگویم به ایران و آزادگان³⁶⁸

He thought to himself that I should take care of this secretly and not let anyone know of my plans. I shall present myself to the Indian King under the disguise of a messenger without informing the Iranians and the nobles.³⁶⁹

Thus, he set off towards India in disguise.³⁷⁰ Acting within the epic-heroic framework, Bahrām displayed bravery and involved scenarios that further emphasize his immense glory and

may be preparing for war, he sent wealth to Khosro with a letter pleading not to engage in violence, see *Ibid.*, 457.

³⁶⁷ According to Ferdowsi, Bahrām entered India pretending to be an envoy sent from Bahrām with a letter warning the King of India that an attack on Iranian soil would be a grave mistake. It is here that we see Bahrām as a skilled negotiator. Some sources say that he presented himself under the pretense of being a nobleman who had served the Persian King and was now on the run. Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 559-565. The King of India is identified with different names in various sources. For example, Mas'udi calls him Šabarmāh, while Tabari prefers Khoshdel, and Tha'ālebi and Ferdowsi refer to him as Šangol. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 558; Mas'udi, *Moruj al-Dhahab*, 113.

³⁶⁸ Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 559.

³⁶⁹ Translation based on Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 559.

³⁷⁰ Shahbazi argues that the motif of a king traveling to far lands in disguise to infiltrate enemy headquarters is a foundational concept in historical mythology and Bahrām is not unique in embodying such themes. For example, in narrating the story of Shapur II, Tabari writes that the King infiltrated the Roman armies' campground under disguise in order "to see with his own eyes how the Cesar behaved during feasts." Shahbazi adds that the transitory nature of heroic tales and historical mythology is evident in tales attributed to Bahrām. As a hero, his popularity made him the protagonist of heroic legends possibly carried out by other characters. Shahbazi suggests that stories of Bahrām's connection to India and the pact made between the Sasanian government and its eastern neighbor took place during the reign of Shapur II. Meisami argues that in heroic tales, "journey...becomes a metaphor for the larger picture of the hero's life." See Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 149; Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 416. For the use of disguise in heroic tales, see Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 145. For Sasanian influence in Sind, from Shapur II to Bahrām Gur, see Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 409.

Farr.³⁷¹ Sources depict him shining victoriously in different trials such as wrestling contest, defense of India in war, slaying evil creatures, or *xrafstars*, such as wolves, elephants, and dragons.³⁷² On how he slayed the rogue elephant that had been terrorizing the townsmen, Bal'ami writes that,

تیر به کمان بر نهاد و بانگ بر پیل زد. پیل آهنگ وی کرد. بهرام تیری بزدهش
به میان دو چشم اندر و ... به دو دست خرطوم پیل بگرفت و در کشید تا به روی اندر
افتاد، و بهرام شمشیر بر گردنش همی زد تا سرش از تن جدا شد و سرش با خرطوم
برگرفت و بر گردن نهاد و از آن مرغزار بیرون آمد... و خلق اندران عجب بماندند
و همی نگرستند.³⁷³

[He] placed an arrow in his bow and hailed the beast. As the elephant-headed towards him, Bahrām shot an arrow piercing the beast between its eyes... He then grabbed its trunk with both hands and pulled it to the ground and chopped its head off with a blow of his sword. He then picked up the head by the trunk and tossed it over his shoulder and walked off the meadow and as he walked away, people watched in awe and surprise.³⁷⁴

After two years, and having accomplished his mission of collecting information on the Indians and transforming them into allies, Bahrām revealed his true identity to the King of India

³⁷¹ This is similar in tone and message to the episode where Jovani, the Persian envoy, met Bahrām and was astounded by the young prince's splendor, charisma, and elegance. Moreover, according to Tha'ālebi, the King of India presented himself to Bahrām as a father figure, which serves as a reminder of the image of Bahrām as an orphan and a fatherless boy in exile, under the protection of a neighboring king. Ferdowsi also emphasizes Bahrām's glory and *Farr* as evident in his looks. During the story of Bahrām and the farmer woman, Ferdowsi writes that the woman recognized Bahrām by his *Farr*-given beauty. To emphasize Bahrām's glory, Ferdowsi says that the *Kayānid Farr* was evident in his looks. See Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 268; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 470.

³⁷² Ferdowsi describes Bahrām engaging in a game of polo. Bal'ami also says the enemy was a Chinese ruler. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 567; Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 654; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 100; Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 268. For the significance of *xrafstars* in the Zoroastrian ideology, see Mahnaz Moazami, "Evil Animals in the Zoroastrian Religion." *History of Religions* 44, no.4 (2005): 300-317; Hans P. Schmidt, "Ancient Iranian Animal Classification." *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 5, no. 6 (1980): 209-44.

³⁷³ Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 653.

³⁷⁴ Translation based on Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 653.

and returned to Iran. The King of India offered him the lands of Sind and Makrān as a tax paying affixation to Iran, as well as his daughter's hand in marriage.³⁷⁵ Interestingly, the core of the story of Bahrām's adventures closely resembles the victory over the Huns.³⁷⁶ Bahrām used guile, wit and heroism to win over the Indians and returned, bearing security and wealth for his people. Moreover, in both stories, he returned with a female "gift." First, we see the Khāqān's wife, who became a servant of the Azar-Gošnasp and then the Indian princess, who wedded Bahrām.

In a similar fashion to previous episodes, the core of this tale of romance and adventure may hold a kernel of historical truth.³⁷⁷ Based on the Sind coin collection, we know that Iran's involvement in the region began with Shapur II and ended with Piruz, whose defeat by the Huns brought the Sasanian presence to an end.³⁷⁸ Thus, it is possible that during Bahrām's rule the

³⁷⁵ Bal'ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 653-4; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 102; Ibn Meskawayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 150; Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 269. Hanaway argues that "women invariably function as links to the outside world, to the lands and peoples beyond those of the principal heroes. Whereas the heroes tend to relate to the outside in the capacity of conqueror...heroes nearly always marry or pair up with women from national, ethnic, or even religious communities other than their own...thanks to the heroines, unification does not always happen through conquest." See Hanaway, "The Concept of the Hunt in Persian Literature," 36; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 581-2.

³⁷⁶ These further points to the importance of the Hunnic defeat and its popularity in storytelling circles, since it affected the plot of other tales.

³⁷⁷ Iran and India have always had extensive cultural and economic relations in antiquity. In this context, focus on India from a more military perspective is preferred, since India could have been a gateway for further Hunnic attacked. Having lost the Kushān link, one could see why the Sasanians shifting their attention towards the Southeast.

³⁷⁸ Nikolas Schindel, "The Coinage of Paradan and Sind in the Context of Kushān and Kushāno-Sasanian Numismatics," in *The Parthian and Early Sasanian Empires: Adaptation and Expansion*, eds. Vesta Curtis, et al. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016). Schindel suggests that these coins can help prove that "Sind was not a Sasanian province...but was rather a region where Persian rule was exercised more indirectly." Respectively, we see Perso-Arabic reports saying that Bahrām refused to annex the lands of Sind and Makrān to his empire and merely asked for tribute and taxation to be sent to Ctesiphon. Schindel adds that Bahrām has the highest number of coins and is also the last Sasanian king on the coins to hold the title *Sri*. See Schindel, "The Coinage of Paradan and Sind in the Context of Kushān and Kushāno-Sasanian Numismatics," 127. For Hunnic coins following an Iranian model, see *Ibid.*, 128. For Bahrām's coins in the Sind region see Schindel, "The Coinage of Paradan and Sind," 126-130. On the style, metrology, weight, and localization of the series, see *Ibid.*, 128-129; Gobl, *Sasanian Numismatics*, 66.

political relations of the Sasanian administration with India also involved military assistance. Such cooperation may have been romanticized by epic and folkloric narratives and transformed into what we know today as Bahrām's adventures in India. Political history could have later converted into a tale of love and adventure as it spread through the ages.

Further examination of the reports on Bahrām reveals an increase in storytelling elements, as he transforms from a historical character into an epic-heroic one who, at times, takes on the role of what is commonly described in the literature as a trickster.³⁷⁹ A trickster is mainly “characterized as sexually over-active, irresponsible, and amoral.”³⁸⁰ He is also a hero in the sense that his one goal is to perform “heroic acts on behalf of men.”³⁸¹ It is precisely these two seemingly contrastive aspects of the trickster's character that help reconcile and rationalize the contradictory details of Perso-Arabic reports concerning Bahrām. He is a royal hero, a model of perfection; yet he is tainted with accusations concerning wine, women, and pleasure. A trickster also brings about change, while defying rules, crossing boundaries and exceeding expectations: “a smart character, which manipulates and deceives the audience, sometimes for a good cause,

³⁷⁹ Bahrām seems to be the hybrid of a hero and an anti-hero (trickster). Hanaway writes that, “like the wily Odysseus, the street-wise picaresque hero lives not by deeds of physical prowess but by his dazzling eloquence and quick wit.” See Hanaway, “The Concept of the Hunt in Persian Literature,” 51. On the trickster character, see Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, “‘A Tolerated Margin of Mess’: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11, no. 3 (1975): 160. A more rational explanation of such motifs is that, while intelligence systems the infiltration of enemy quarters is not surprising, it is not the king himself who is in charge of such missions despite receiving the honors for it in history and myth (this sentence is hard to understand. Try to break it up). The fact that spies and undercover agents were referred to as “the eyes of the king” suggests an idea of the king being present himself to witness the events. Thus, the king and his spies become one, in a sense, allowing for the oral storytelling tradition to place the king as the protagonist and the spy to increase the dramatic element of the tales.

³⁸⁰ David A. Leeming and Jake Page, *God: Myths of the Male Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 24.

³⁸¹ Robert D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (University of California Press, 1989), 15.

and sometimes with mischievous intentions.”³⁸² This is precisely what Bahrām does the moment he leaves Hirā. Bahrām is a transformer who ushers new age, the post-Yazdegerdian age, and the symbolic dawn that came after a long cold night.³⁸³ In a sense, Bahrām’s trickster-like behavior symbolizes his transformation into an adult and serves as his character seal: shaped after Iranian heroes, yet unique and faithful to what Bahrām as a historical character may have been like.³⁸⁴

As Bahrām fulfills his different roles as a royal-hero, narratives begin to bring his tale to an end. It is believed that Bahrām passed away in the year 438 CE, leaving the empire to his son Yazdegerd II.³⁸⁵ The tale of Bahrām’s death as reported in Perso-Arabic sources is laden with symbolism that completes his link to the Kayānid pantheon of royal heroes and emphasizes his glory and *Farr*. Similar to his father Yazdegerd, how Bahrām met his end will, for the most part, remain a mystery.³⁸⁶ There are two different reports: one claims that he died peacefully in bed,

³⁸² Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 7.

³⁸³ Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa*, 15.

³⁸⁴ I believe that Bahrām’s character portrays a sense of freedom and flexibility that we do not see in other epic heroes such as Esfandiār or Rostam. Meisami also adds that “it appears that the freest is the picaresque type, for he is by nature protean and almost by definition free of ordinary societal constraint.” See Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 139.

³⁸⁵ According to modern scholarship, Bahrām ruled for eighteen years, dying two years short of his fortieth birthday. Perso-Arabic reports have a different view on the matter. Bal’ami, Hamzeh Esfahani, Dinavari, Ibn Meskavayh, Tha’ālebi, Ibn Balkhi, Mas’udi and Tabari agree on twenty-three years as the length of his rule, while Gardizi and Ferdowsi state that his rule lasted sixty-three years. However, Tabari does mention that he has heard another report stating that Bahrām only ruled for eighteen years, ten months and twenty days. Agathias says he ruled for twenty years, while Khorenats’i reports twenty-one years. See Bal’ami, *Tarikh-nāmah Tabari*, 655; Dinavari, *Al-Akhbār al-Tevāl*, 86; Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, 106; Tha’ālebi, *Shāhnāmah Tha’ālebi*, 272; Mas’udi, *Moruj al-Dhahab*, 256; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 151; Gardizi, *Zein al-Akhbār*, 78; Hamzeh Esfahani, *Tārikh Payāambarān va Šāhān*, 11; Agathias, *The Histories* 4.27.2 148; Khorenats’i, *History of the Armenians*, 346. For all reports see, *Mohammad Jafar Mahjub, Gur Bahrām Gur, Sowgoliye Shāhnāmah Ferdowsi (Tehran: Kānun Pažuheš va Amuzeš, 1989); Aidenlou, “Qeibat Bahrām Gur.”*

³⁸⁶ Local folktales assign different regions as his death place, all of which are most probably fictitious. For example, one popular legend designates the town of Dehbid in the province of Fars, while another prefers the village of Surmaq which is also located in the region of Fars. See Qahramān-Mirzā

while the other suggests that he died or, better say, disappeared while chasing prey.³⁸⁷ Both versions of the story correspond with Bahrām’s role as a “royal hero.” While one emphasizes a “royal” death, the other focuses on his status as a “hero” and assigns him a death “in action.” For example, according to Ferdowsi, the son of Yazdegerd, having completed his responsibility towards his nation and his family, went to rest in his gilded royal chambers and passed away peacefully in his sleep.³⁸⁸ Ferdowsi writes that,

بیامد به نزد پدر یزدگرد چو دیدش کف اندر دهانش فسرد
 ورا دید پژمرده رنگ رخان به دیبای زربفت برداده جان³⁸⁹

As Yazdegerd entered his father’s chambers and set eyes on his pale and withered complexion, he went was taken aback with fear and grief as [the King] had passed away in his gilded silk bedding.³⁹⁰

Ferdowsi regards Bahrām as an accomplished politician and the protector of Ērānšahr, so it is only natural to assign to his story an ending worthy of the *šāhanšāh*.³⁹¹ In the *Shāhnāme*, all of Bahrām’s heroic deeds and marvelous adventures had one result: peace and prosperity for Iran and Iranians, which is, after all, the first and foremost objective of any “royal” figure. It is

Einosaltaneh, *Ruznāme* *Khāterāt Einosaltaneh*, ed. Mas‘ud Salur and Iraj Afshar (Tehran: Asātir, 1995); *Do Safar-nameh az Jonub Iran*, ed. Seyed Ali Al-e-Davud (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1999). For other folk ideas concerning the location of Bahrām’s death see, Mohammad Mirzai, “Bahrām Gur va Gur e Bahrām dar Eqlid,” *Hafez* 53 (1387): 16-18.

³⁸⁷ For a summary of the seven different accounts of Bahrām’s death, see Aidenlou, “Qeibat Bahrām Gur,” 29. The minute difference in detail in the reports by no means affects the hidden symbolism of his death motif, which, interestingly, is a close reminder of the location of Rostam’s death.

³⁸⁸ Mirak ibn Mas‘ud also claims that many believe that Bahrām died of natural causes. Hosseini, *Riāz al-Ferdows*, 109. Aidenlou makes a similar suggestion. Aidenlou, “Qeibat Bahrām Gur,” 17.

³⁸⁹ Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, 614.

³⁹⁰ Translation based on Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*, vol. 6, 614.

³⁹¹ Mahjub calls Bahrām, “the apple of Ferdowsi’s eye.” See Mahjub *Gur Bahrām Gur*, 3.

also not surprising that Ferdowsi ends his tale of Bahrām by reminding the audience that, despite the fearsome nature of death, one can leave behind the most valuable treasure: a good name. By doing so, he artistically brings attention back to where it had all began: the vilification of Yazdegerd.³⁹²

According to other reports, Bahrām, the forever hunter-warrior, while out hunting on horseback and in pursuit of prey, stumbled down a ditch and died.³⁹³ Despite many searches, his body was never recovered, provoking the idea that the most beloved king of Ērānšahr may have “disappeared” into the depth of the earth.³⁹⁴ Since the theme of disappearance holds mystical meaning in the Iranian worldview, his physical merging into a body of rock provides a context for his last and ultimate stage of heroification, which transforms him into a messiah. Three factors may have had the most influence on how this story came to be. First, as the most famed hunter, it is only natural for Bahrām to face grave dangers and one cannot rule out the possibility

³⁹² Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 614-15.

³⁹³ Bal‘ami says he was chasing a gazelle and fell into a well. Dinavari and Ibn Meskawayh state that he was after an onager when got trapped in a swamp, named Dāy Marj. Tabari and Tha‘ālebi make a similar report but say he fell in a well. According to Nezami, Amir Khosro and Abdi Beig Shirazi, he rode into a cave, see Bal‘ami, *Tarīkh-nāmeḥ Tabari*, 655; Dinavari, *Al-Akḥbār al-Tevāl*, 86; Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 272; Ibn Meskawayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 151. Nezami, *Nezameddin. Khamseh (Tehran: Hermes, 2009)*, 733. Amir Khosro Dehlavi, *Khamseh*, ed. Amir-ahmad Ashrafi (Tehran: Shaqayeq, 1983), 692-5; Abdi Beig Shirazi, *Haft Akhtar*, ed. Abolfazl Rahimoff (Moscow: Edāreh Enteshārāt Dāneš, 1995), 235-6. For a symbolic analysis of Haft Peykar and the mystical meaning of the cave motif, see Mohammad Jafar Yahaghi and Samira Bamshaki, “Tahlil Namād Qār dar Haft Peykar Nezāmi,” *Matnšenāsi Adab Farsi* 1, no.4 (2009): 43-58. For a general symbolic analysis of Haft Peykar, see Georg Krotkoff, “Colour and Number in the Haft Paykar,” in *Logos Islamikos, Studia Islamica in Honorem Georgii Michaelis Wickens*, eds. Dionisius A. Agius and Roger M. Savory (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1984), 97-118. Shahbazi suggests that falling in a well is merely a literary pun and a product of Bahrām’s epithet, Gur, which can also mean ‘grave.’ Accepting the story of his death as a literary pun is as simplistic an interpretation as saying that his epithet means “grave.” The symbolism behind his disappearance into the earth fits well into the theme of his grand glory and allows for much more literary interpretation. See Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 418. Also see, Hanaway, William, L. “Bahrām V Gōr in Persian Legend and Literature.” *Encyclopedia Iranica Online*. 1988.

³⁹⁴ Aidenlou also rightly terms his article on the death of Bahrām as “Bahrām’s Absence” emphasizing the mystical and religious significance of *Qeibat* in the Iranian mindset.

that he may have in fact lost his life in a hunting accident. Moreover, Bahrām’s success is emphatically owed to his God-given glory or *Farr*. Thus, one can see how epic narratives would have merged his glorious corporeal body with one of the most *Farrahand* cosmic creations, which is earth.³⁹⁵ Regarding the glory of mountains and rocks, the middle Persian text, *Šāyest Nēšāyest* states that,

*yāzdah kē ō ān ī buland gar šawēd tā-š xwarrah ī gar ud
kōf āfrīn kunēd ud ayyārīh dahēnd.*³⁹⁶

Eleven, (by him) who goes (to) to a lofty mountain, so that
the *glory* of mountain and hill blesses and befriends him.³⁹⁷

In a sense, Bahrām enters the earth “alive,” as sources report that his body was never recovered, implying that his death was never verified. Entering the earth alive ensures that he was not *nasumand* or contaminated and was not committing sacrilege by contaminating the earth.³⁹⁸ The third influential factor is that the Kayānid royal-hero, Kay Khosro, also “disappears” into a rocky surface, only returning during resurrection day.³⁹⁹ This version of the story of Bahrām’s end is not a coincidental literary pun as some scholars suggest but a genius conclusion to a cycle in which the House of Sāsān relives the glory of the past by presenting

³⁹⁵ For the significance of mountains and caves in the Iranian literary tradition, as well as in post Sasanians mystic ideology, see Aidenlou, “Qeibat Bahrām Gur.”

³⁹⁶ Firoze M.P. Kotwal, (ed.) *The Supplementary Texts to the Šāyest Nē-Šāyest* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1969), 79. For its Persian translation, see *Šāyest Nēšāyest*, translit. and trans. Katayoun Mazdapour (Tehran: Mo‘asseseh Motāle‘āt va Tahqiqāt Farhangi, 1990), 239.

³⁹⁷ Kotwal, *The Supplementary Texts to the Šāyest Nē-Šāyest* (19.12), 79.

³⁹⁸ See Mahnaz Moazami, “Nasu,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, ed. Ehsan yarshater 2016, online edition.

³⁹⁹ Aidenlou argues that folk traditions gifted their favorite hero with deathlessness and immortality in the sense of messianic prophets. He left this corporal earth only to return on Armageddon. Aidenlou, “Qeibat Bahrām Gur,” 28.

Bahrām as the reincarnation or the doppelganger of Kay Khosro.⁴⁰⁰ It is not only in death that Bahrām resembles Kay Khosro but also in life and deed.⁴⁰¹ First, both heroes were born to non-Iranian mothers: Kay Khosro’s mother was Farangis, a Turanian princess, and Bahrām was born to the daughter of the *Resh Galut*.⁴⁰² Furthermore, both grew up away from home: Kay Khosro was entrusted to the care of a shepherd and Bahrām was sent away with Mundhir.⁴⁰³ At birth, both heroes were endowed with a powerful *farr*, which was physically evident in their mental and physical superiority during childhood and manifest in their heavenly looks as they grow into young men.⁴⁰⁴ As the King of Iran, the greatest of Kay Khosro’s deeds, was eradicating the world of the evil of Afrāsiāb.⁴⁰⁵ As a result, the most outstanding moment that binds Bahrām to Kay Khosro was when he killed the Turkic Khāqān.⁴⁰⁶ More surprisingly; Kay Khosro kills

⁴⁰⁰ For a summary of Kay Khosro’s legend, see Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Kayanian vii,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica Online*, 2013.

⁴⁰¹ For the idea of Bahrām’s disappearance influenced by Islamic mysticism, see Aidenlou, “Qeibat Bahrām Gur,” 40. For an analysis of Kay Khosro’s legend and its mystical interpretation, see Ghaemi, “Tahlil Dāstān Kaykhorow.”

⁴⁰² On Kay Khosro’s maternal heritage, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 2, 364 ff.

⁴⁰³ On Kay Khosro’s upbringing by a shepherd see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 2, 368.

⁴⁰⁴ The birth of both heroes is prophesized, just as Bahrām’s future was seen by astronomers; the birth of Kay Khosro was prophesized in a dream by Pirān-e Viṣeh. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 2, 364-5. Just as Bahrām’s beauty shocked Jovani and the King of India, we see that Pirān-e Viṣeh was astonished by the grace of Kay Khosro. See Ghaemi, “Tahlil Dāstān Kaykhorow,” 30-31; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 2, 366. On Kay Khosro showing signs of grandiosity as a child, see *Ibid.*, vol. 2 369.

⁴⁰⁵ West, *The Book of the Mainyo-i-Khard*, 159. For its Persian translation, see *Minuy Kherad*, 45. On how Kay Khosro captured and killed Afrāsiāb, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 4, 322.

⁴⁰⁶ In this instance, Bahrām is also connected to Fereidun, since Bahrām’s weapon of choice was a mace, the same weapon used by Kay Khosro to kill Afrāsiāb, and Fereidun before him to kill Aži Dahāka. On Kay Khosro and Fereidun’s weapon, see Skjærvø “Kayanian vii.” Ferdowsi distinctly describes Bahrām’s weapon as the Kayānid Mace. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 8. It is worth considering that if, according to some Perso-Arabic sources, Yazdegerd died in the east; he may have been killed in a battle against the Huns. The possibly fictitious horse story may have been a cover for his honorable death in action, rather than a cover for his murder. If Yazdegerd were indeed killed at the hands of the Huns, Bahrām’s projection as Kay Khosro would gain further weight, since Kay Khosro kills

Afrāsiāb on the same calendar day as Bahrām’s birth, which is the “day of Khordad, Month of Farvardin.”⁴⁰⁷ The two heroes not only used a similar weapon but also pray at the same temple, Azar Gošnasp, before they finally captured their enemy.⁴⁰⁸ Epic traditions also portray both characters as dragon slayers, which is the quintessential deed of an Indo-European hero.⁴⁰⁹ More importantly, Ferdowsi praises the charity, kindness and the blessings of both heroes in a similar fashion.⁴¹⁰ Also, since Kay Khosro is reported to have ruled sixty years, it is certain that sources such as *Shāhnāmeḥ*, which assigns a sixty-three-year rule to Bahrām, are placing him in the format of Kay Khosro’s kingship.⁴¹¹ In the end, having secured the Iranian borders and avenged his father’s murder, Kay Khosro retreated from kingship and disappeared into the mountains, his body never to be recovered.⁴¹² The motif of “disappearance” then leads to being viewed as an immortal and a messiah. According to Middle Persian sources, Kay Khosro would return on

Afrāsiāb in revenge for the murder of his father, Siāvaš. On Kay Khosro taking an oath to revenge the horrors Afrāsiāb had brought upon the Iranians and the death of his father, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 3, 10. For the story of Kay-Khosro killing Afrāsiāb, Skjærvø, “Kayanian vii.”

⁴⁰⁷ See Chapter Three.

⁴⁰⁸ See Skjærvø, “Kayanian vii”; Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 4, 311-12.

⁴⁰⁹ See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 468-470. For depictions of Zoroastrian heroes and deities engaging in dragon slaying, see hunter-warrior king characters can be found in literature as early as the Avestā and Iranian epic such as Verethragna, Garšāsp, Rostam, Esfandiār, see Hannaway, “The Concept of the Hunt in Persian Literature”, 22; Russel “Magic Mountains, Milky Seas, Dragon Slayers, and Other Zoroastrian Archetypes”, 60-61. For Verethragna, see Parivash Jamzadeh, “Bahrām (Vərəθraγna).” In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. III, fasc. 5, edited by Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1988), 510-514.

⁴¹⁰ See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6 and vol. 3.

⁴¹¹ For the length of Kay Khosro’s sovereignty, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 3, 3; *Ibid.*, vol. 4, 327. For Ferdowsi’s report on Bahrām’s length of rule, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 613.

⁴¹² See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 4 367-8. On Kay Khosro’s disappearance, see Aidenlou, “Qeibat Bahrām Gur.”

resurrection day to assist the Zoroastrian grand messiah, Sošyāns.⁴¹³ The reason why Sasanian hagiography fashion Bahrām after Kay Khosro and not other Kayānid kings/heros can also be traced back to the horrors of the Hunnic invasion.⁴¹⁴ Bahrām is hailed as the remover of evil and the harbinger of peace in *Zand i Wahman Yasn*, where it is stated that,

*guft-iš Ohrmazd kū, spitāmān zarduxšt, ēn ān ī ō pēš
gōwam. draxt-ēw bun ī tō dīd, ān gētīg ast ī man Ohrmazd dād ud
ān haft azg ī tō dīd, ān haft āwām ast ī rasēd.*⁴¹⁵

Ohrmazd said ‘O *Spitāmān Zarduxšt*, this is what I foretell. The trunk of the tree that you saw, that is the material world that I, *Ohrmazd*, have created. Moreover, those seven branches that you saw, those are the seven epochs that will come.⁴¹⁶

*ud ān ī arzīzēn xwadāyīh ī wahrām [ī] gōr šāh, [ka] *kē
mēnōg ī rāmišn wēnābdāg kunēd, ud ahreman abāg jādūgān abāz
ō tār ud tōm ī dušox dwārēnd.*⁴¹⁷

The one of lead is the reign of King *Wahrām Gōr*, who will render visible the spirit of peace, and *Ahriman* together with

⁴¹³ West, *The Book of the Mainyo-i-Khard*, 159; for its Persian translation, see *Minuyeh Kherad*, 45. For Sošyāns applauding Kay Khosro on killing Afrāsiāb, see Allan Williams, ed. *The Pahlavi Revāyat Acompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg*. Part 1, Copenhagen: The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences Letters, 1990, 179-181. Aidenlou also touches upon the similarity of name between Bahrām Varjāvand, a Zoroastrian apocalyptic character, and Bahrām Gur. Nonetheless, it is not sharing of names that associate Bahrām to such elements. After all, several other Sasanian kings share the name Bahrām, but only one becomes an epic hero. The common denominator between the Sasanian Peace Project, the change in dynamics with Rome and the need for a messianic hero is the Hunnic attack and the terror it spread throughout the Iranian world. Aidenlou, “Qeibat Bahrām Gur,” 17. Bahrām’s tales and trials are formed in response to “structural chaos,” which is resolved within a “new space” created through myth. Nikui et al., “Baznegari Revāyat Tarikhy Yazdegerd Aval va Bahrām Panjom,” 33.

⁴¹⁴ Kay Khosro is not only a royal hero, but sacrifices made to his *fravashi* leads to strength, victory, healing and health. One wonders whether the revival of the Kayānid ideology was limited to sophistic propaganda or if it was relived and reinstated within the history of the fifth century. See Skjærvø, “Kayanian vii.”

⁴¹⁵ *Zand i Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalypse*, ed. Carlo G. Cereti (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995), 3.20-22, 135.

⁴¹⁶ *Zand i Wahman Yasn* 3.20-22, 151.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.27, 135.

the sorcerers will crawl back to the darkness and obscurity of hell.⁴¹⁸

Just as Superman or Captain America do not perform the same socio-cultural functions, Avestan heroes played out different roles. The early fifth century did not need a martyr like Siāvaš, or one like Rostam who, despite his qualifications, did not possess royal blood. They needed a savior and a royal hero to usher an age of victory and vengeance against one specific group, the Turānians, or as known in Perso-Arabic reports, the Turks. That is the socio-cultural function that Kay Khosro had fulfilled.⁴¹⁹ Thus, while Bahrām's image may bring to mind many Iranians heroes, such as Esfandiār, Rostam, Fereidun and Ardešir-e Bābakān, time and place dictated the rise of a new Kay Khosro.

The extensive similarities between the character of Bahrām and Kay Khosro bring us to the central question of this chapter which is why and how Bahrām's role transformed from the bypassed son of a despised king into the most popular royal hero of Iranian epic. The primary factor that contributed to Bahrām's transformation into a hero is "context." The atmosphere of the empire after the death of Yazdegerd provided the right context since it was one of chaos and crisis due to both domestic and foreign threats. The Hunnic attack, in addition to courtly rivalries, provided enough confusion to ensure the rise of a hero who would lift the national spirit and also reinforce the legitimacy of the House of Sāsān.⁴²⁰ The Kayānid ideology and the

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 3.27, 152.

⁴¹⁹ Ghaemi suggests that Kay Khosro's rise was essential in the gloomy atmosphere after the assassination of Siāvaš. We can argue that the same void could have been felt after Yazdegerd's death, despite his hostile depiction. Moreover, from Yazdegerd's supporters, Bahrām did what Kay Khosro had done, return and take back what was his and revenge his father, in his way of course. See Ghaemi, "Tahlil Dāstān Kaykhosrow," 19.

⁴²⁰ Especially in light of the atrocities they committed in the 395 CE attack of eastern Rome.

Sasanian Peace Project further ripened this context, since it gave the Hunnic attack further urgency and religious meaning. The instrument that implemented Bahrām’s popularity within this context was his victory over the Huns. Bahrām’s win over the Huns was central to his reputation and had specific socio-political outcomes. The apparent result was that he had fulfilled his duty as the King of Iran by removing foreign threats and increasing the economic prosperity of the empire. These combined elements established his position as “King of Kings.” It filled the hearts of the citizens of the empire with a sense of security and safety and increased the empire’s standing in the region and its domestic legitimacy. Also, one must consider the economic factors that potentially led to public satisfaction with his rule. If we accept that Bahrām did, in fact, increase the empire’s revenue through increased foreign tributary income and decreased local taxation, we can argue that his positive portrayal was also owed to famous oral legends and stories. As Tha‘ālebi reports, Iranians had not mourned for the passing of any king the way they did for Bahrām.⁴²¹ Moreover, his victory increased his popularity amongst the people and largely subdued the hopes of the Persian elite, who had placed their bet on Bahrām’s defeat and subsequent removal from power.⁴²² On the other hand, the mytho-religious context of the Hunnic invasion solidified his role as a Kayānid hero and a protector of the faith.⁴²³ The House of Sāsān

⁴²¹ Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 272. Also, see Mas‘udi, *Moruj al-Dhahab*, 256.

⁴²² Bal‘ami and Ibn Meskavayh argue that the relative peace that followed was the result of the news of Bahrām’s victory over the Huns dissuading neighboring people from any possible attack on Iran. Bal‘ami, *Tarikhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 656; Ibn Meskavayh, *Tajāreb al-Omam*, 152.

⁴²³ For the Turānians led by Afrāsiāb as the archenemy of Iranians in the *Avestā*, see Ehsan Yarshater, “Afrāsiāb,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. I, Fasc. 6, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd. 1984,) 570-576; Ferdowsi refers explicitly to the lands that Bahrām captured as he defeated the Huns and made them pay tribute as “Turān.” See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 6, 533. Ferdowsi, further on, refers to the same invading group as *Hoyunān*. Ibid., 535. Moreover, Ferdowsi refers to the lands of Turan as “Torkestān,” while Bal‘ami refers to the Hunnic leader as “Khāqān e Torkestān.” This further shows that the Huns, with whom fifth century Iran was engaged, were viewed as reminiscent of the Turānians. See Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāmeḥ*, vol. 4, 307; Bal‘ami, *Tarikhnāmeḥ Tabari*, 103. For constructed connections between the Turānians headed by Afrāsiāb, as projected in the *Avestā* and epic narratives, and

claimed descent from the Kayānid kings.⁴²⁴ This intensified the Sasanian kings' role as the reincarnated hero of the Avestan lore. The epic nature of the Kayānid tales of courage and victory transitioned Bahrām's success into the storytelling framework which, in turn, romanticized his deeds, intensified his role as a hero and guaranteed its popularity, furthering his immortality in the Iranian national epic.⁴²⁵ Perso-Arabic sources suggest that the romantic aspects of tales attributed to Bahrām, which describe him as a charitable King, a lover of women and wine, and an avid hunter, served as the fundamentals of his popularity as an epic hero.⁴²⁶ One must be careful in not confusing cause, tool and momentum. Thus, it can be argued that Bahrām's qualities as a hero were not the cause of his heroification, nor were they its tools. His romanticized heroic image was merely storytelling techniques which fit the epic genre.⁴²⁷ Persian

Central Asian/Turkic tribes, see Yarshater, "Afrāsiāb"; Bivar, Adrian D.H. "Hephthalites," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. XII, Fasc. 2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2003), 198-201; Felix, "Chionites."

⁴²⁴ Choksy adds that such a connection was also seen from a lineage point of view and not just ideological contexts. Aside from sacral kingship belonging to specific families in the *Avesta*, Choksy states that Sasanians thought that the Achaemenids were descendants of the Kayānids, thus making Kayānid references in later Sasanian eras not surprising. Choksy, "Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran," 36.

⁴²⁵ Ghaemi also suggests that the war with the Huns should have been viewed as a relived moment of the primordial battle between Ohrmazd and Ahriman. Choksy also adds that the relations between Zoroastrianism and absolute sovereignty allowed Iranian kings to relive such primordial wars, since he was seen as Ohrmazd's representative. See Ghaemi, "Tahlil Dāstān Kaykhosrow," 18; Choksy, "Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran," 36.

⁴²⁶ This has led to modern scholarship making similar claims. There is no substantial evidence corroborating that Bahrām owed his success to bowing down to his rivals and was a weak pushover. As Hanaway states "heroes win admiration precisely because they are of human stuff, not because they laugh in the face of death, to the degree that modern authors consider the classical heroic mode as a flight from life into an imaginary world, they now ascribe the heroic as an immersion in life as it is, with all its suffering and disappointments." Hanaway, "The Concept of the Hunt in Persian Literature," 63.

⁴²⁷ For example, Yazdegerd II was even more so in line with hardliner factions, yet it is Bahrām who was chosen as the hero of the late antique epic tradition of Iran. When reading Perso-Arabic sources against the grain, we understand that there was much tension at court despite Bahrām's positive portrayal and his diplomatic measures in coming to a compromise with the elite and holders of power.

literature overflows with prose and poetry reminding men and women of the temporary nature of life, the unfaithfulness of the world, and that the best things in life are the shortest lived.

Bahrām's death is also placed in such a context. All the instruction in the world does not help sooth away the grief of loss, the greatest of which was the untimely passing of their sovereign, protector, and hero, Bahrām, son of Yazdegerd. For he was the embodiment of youthful defiance, memorable hunting scenes and secret acts of charity.⁴²⁸ As Tha'ālebi reports,

The level of distress and grief that people experienced [upon hearing the news of Bahrām's passing] that one would say that such mourning had not been seen in the passing of any of his ancestors. They mourned not only for his death but also for the loss of such a sovereign as they sighed upon the good days [of his reign], his great deeds, and his charity.⁴²⁹

The feeling of loss that is reflected in sources concerning Bahrām's death is the last essential stone in Bahrām's heroification. Just as tears are shed in the passing of Rostam, Esfandiār, Sohrāb and Siāvaš, Bahrām's death is viewed as the loss of a son, one that belonged to the whole Iranian world.

⁴²⁸ The way in which Bahrām's death and his mother's mourning are described creates a setting that is very close in tone and motif to the death of a youngster, especially a martyred one, such as the biblical Joseph. Meisami writes that, "among those heroes whose stories developed into a more or less coherent biography, some seem to manage a kind of perpetual youth, perhaps because of the audience to whom they most appealed never clamored for heroes with realistic life cycles." Meisami, *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*, 221.

⁴²⁹ Translation based on Tha'ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha'ālebi*, 272:

خلق چنان آشفته و مغموم شدند که گوئی نظیر آن حالت را در سوک هیچیک از اسلاف او حس نکرده بودند هم غم مرگش داشتند و هم از دست دادن چنین سلطانی را و شدیداً بر دوران خوش و عملیات برجسته و رعیت دوستیش افسوس همیخوردند.

Mojmal al-Tavāriḥ, also writes that people believe that Bahrām's era was the most pleasant of all times. *Mojmal al-Tavāriḥ*, 95.

Ultimately, we see that the answer to why and how Bahrām, amongst all Sasanian kings, became the new link to the Kayānid chain of Iranian heroes is found in the events of the fifth century and the rhetoric of the Sasanian administration. The various executive measures of the Peace Project had lowered the relative risk percentage of attacks from Rome and inner-religious civil strife. Almost twenty-five years after the horrors of 395 CE, the Huns were still a looming threat. Without a real victory and the decimation of the enemy, the Kayānid ideology was merely a lullaby. The void in kingship after Yazdegerd's death converted this lullaby into drums of war, fearful citizens and pillaged towns. Eventually, Bahrām's "personal" victory over the Huns, his tactics in dealing with courtly enemies, and his commitment to the Peace Project, allow for the epic tales of Kayānid valor to take on a theatrical reality. Bahrām plays a central role in creating an atmosphere of balance, which brings two extremes into harmony. He exerts the military power and genius of his great paternal grandfather Shapur II, while staying committed to enhancing his father Yazdegerd's hopes for long-term peace. Bahrām is presented as the Kay Khosro of a new age, who vanquishes Afrāsiāb in the fifth century. Thus, the key to Bahrām's literary transformation and heroification lies in the Hunnic war, its outcome, and how the Sasanians dealt with citizen trauma, fear and possible whispers of distrust in their overlords by glorifying ancient heroes and creating ones of their own.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

"به پایان آمد این دفتر حکایت همچنان باقی"

Who were Yazdegerd and his son Bahrām? Merely two names scattered around dusty pages of history, mighty heroes and villains whose tales brought families together on cold dark winter nights, or mortal men with struggles and aspirations as grand as that of any other human who has walked this earth? The answer to such questions varies, depending on who the respondent may be and through whose looking glass we are to view the protagonists of this study. The fascinating aspect of studying the life, or better say, the literary projection of such characters is that, despite their position at the highest point of the pyramid of power, their historical representation was to some extent shaped from below. Literature and folklore, as the vehicle that transmits these characters beyond time and place, while used to exert power can also be tools that resist it, for it is continuously restyled by their primary consumers: “the people.” After all, the pen has been and will always be mightier than the sword. It is through the medium of oral and written tales and stories that we can hear echoes of the voices of the common men and women, those whose world was shaped by the words and deeds of people such as Yazdegerd and Bahrām.

Bahrām and Yazdegerd are immortalized not by being of ‘the seed of the gods’ or *čīhr az yazdān* but by becoming literary protagonists and models through whom the Iranian people

voiced their views, ideals and needs, during more than a millennium of being subjugated by foreign rule.⁴³⁰ It cannot be difficult to imagine that through stories associated with such characters Iranians hoped to instruct and educate their non-Iranian overlords.⁴³¹ Epic tales thus were most probably powerful cultural tools with which the gradual Iranization and integration of foreign invaders, especially the Turko-Mongols became possible. This is apparent in the fact that, from an analytical standpoint, almost every story involving our protagonists has been tweaked to fit into *Andarz* literature: a type of literature intended to provide future rulers with a model of just kingship, sovereign mercy, and royal benevolence.⁴³² Moreover, Bahrām's popularity and fame as a messianic hero made such tales not only more entertaining but also increased chances of being more useful as an instructive tool, for every world conqueror envisions himself immortalized the way Bahrām was. For example, through his victories, Bahrām becomes an example of the ideal military strategist.⁴³³ For example, *Siāsatnāme*h which "is addressed to uneducated ex-nomad Turk [Mahmud of Qazneh], who would hardly have been impressed or pleased if many of the stories had been concerned with names unfamiliar to him," uses Bahrām as a literary pawn for Persian ministers and educators who wish to teach their

⁴³⁰ For an alternative translation of *čīhr az yazdān*, see Bruce Lincoln, "Cehr," 1990.

⁴³¹ For *Andarz* literature, see Shaul Shaked, "Andarz and Andarz Literature in Pre-Islamic Iran." In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. II, fasc. 1, ed. by Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1985), 11-22.

⁴³² For an analysis of literature such as *Siāsatnāme*h and *Taj*, see Simpson, "Narrative Allusion and Metaphor." Payne defines *andarz* literature and writes that, "...mythical historiography and *andarz*, 'political guidance,' ...provided the court with a potent discourse for discussing and debating the nature of just political power, as well as media through which to communicate imperial claims." See, Payne, *A State of Mixture*, 9.

⁴³³ *Shāhnāme*h contains the highest number of tales in which Bahrām is the protagonist. These tales are intended to convey a moral lesson, mainly one on the topic of royal justice, generosity, and attendance to the needs of the weak and the needy. For examples, see Ferdowsi, *Shāhnāme*h vol. 6, 424-436; *Ibid.*, 452-457.

overlords the basics of Iranian ethics, morality and government.⁴³⁴ In another example, Khajeh Nezam al-Molk uses the story of Yazdegerd's death to warn the Turkic rulers of tyranny and cruelty.⁴³⁵ Furthermore, *Tārīkh Mobārak Qāzāni* reports that Bahrām's fame was to the extent that, for centuries, rulers of the Iranian world attempted to reenact Bahrām's legendary Gazelle hunt during their hunting feats.⁴³⁶ So, we can assume that it was hoped that Bahrām's alleged acts of justice and charity would also be emulated. We also see that Jāhez uses Bahrām's visit to Ctesiphon and Yazdegerd's alleged coldness towards him as a pawn to elaborate on the way a prince should address his father, the king. He emphasizes that, regardless of being the son of the king, princes are subjects of the king and shall behave accordingly. He writes that

They shall not enter upon the king without asking for permission. It is also important for the king's guards to be even stricter with the princes than with other courtiers so that their royal status does not lead him to overstep boundaries.⁴³⁷

Jāhez tells the tale of how Yazdegerd found Bahrām wandering in the king's royal chambers without having permission to enter. He asked the young prince whether the guard had permitted him to enter and Bahrām's response was positive. Having heard that, Yazdegerd orders Bahrām to punish the guard with thirty slashes before firing him. A few days later, Bahrām, once again, was about to wander into the royal chambers when the newly appointed guard pushed Bahrām away with a painful blow to the chest and says, "If I ever see you around here again, I

⁴³⁴ Nizām al-Molk, *The Book of Government, Or, Rules for Kings: The Siyar Al-Muluk or Siyasat-nama of Nizam Al-Mulk*, trans. Hubert Darke (London: Routledge 1960), xvi.

⁴³⁵ For examples of such appropriation and anecdotes, see Nizām al-Molk, *Seir al-Moluk (Siāsatnāme)*, ed. Hubert Darke (Tehran: Bongāh Tarjomeh va Našr Ketāb, 1968), 57-59.

⁴³⁶ Rashid-al-din Fazlollah, *Tārīkh Mobārak Qāzāni*, 133.

⁴³⁷ Translation based on Jāhez, *Tāj*, 181.

will have you slashed 60 times...!” Yazdegerd heard of the incidents and rewarded the guard with many gifts.⁴³⁸ Eventually, Bahrām’s fame and, in Yazdegerd’s case, his infamy, reached such a height during the medieval period that authors of *andarz* literature attributed instructive anecdotes to them.⁴³⁹

Even more fascinating is that the memory of Bahrām, as a model of the epitome king, was also used as a tool of integration and assimilation. Colonization is never a smooth and easy process. Resistance towards foreign cultural, religious and political elements is only a natural reaction of those who have been conquered. We see that the popularity and diversity in background of characters such as Bahrām yield them as the perfect tool for reducing resistance and envisioning a shared past. For example, according to Qazvini astrologers emphasized that, to grow into a brave warrior, Bahrām must dwell with the Arabs.⁴⁴⁰ Qazvini merely was writing from a post-Islamic mindset which exalted the culture of the conquerors and presented them as ‘positive forces,’ functioning even during the “good old days.” Thus, Bahrām as a royal hero and a role model for post-Islamic monarchs becomes immortal not only through his heroic acts, but also by fitting into a multicultural structure. For example, Dinavari writes that,

When he reached the age of education; his father sent him Iranians instructors and Mundhir assigned him Arab ones thus he was fully educated in both the Iranian and Arab literature and reached perfection in archery and equestrian arts. He was intelligent, fine-looking, and good-natured.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ See Darke’s introduction in Nizām al-Molk, *The Book of Government, Or, Rules for Kings*, xvi.

⁴⁴⁰ See Qazvini, *al-Ma’jam fi Athār Moluk al-’Ajam*, 44.

⁴⁴¹ Translation based on Dinavari, *Al-Akhbār al-Tevāl*, 79:

چون به سن تربیت رسید پدرش برای او آموزگارانی از ایرانیان فرستاد و منذر هم برای او آموزگارانی از عرب گماشت و او در هر دو ادب ایرانی و عربی کامل شد و تربیت پسندیده یافت و در ادب و سوار کاری و تیراندازی به حد کمال رسید و خردمند و عاقل و زیبا و پسندیده سیرت شد.

The idea of diversity associated with Bahrām grows out of his connections to Hirā itself a multicultural entity and space. Bahrām’s knowledge of Arabian customs, culture and language rendered him a suitable choice in Perso-Arabic sources, as a model for presenting the Iranian population with a legitimizing example of pre-conquest Arab-Iranian relations.⁴⁴² For example, he is depicted as a famous polyglot and a composer of Arabic poetry.⁴⁴³ Tha‘ālebi projects the ideals of his era into the history of the fifth century and writes that,

What made him [Bahrām] stand out amongst other kings
was his vast knowledge and his familiarity with different
languages.⁴⁴⁴

Bahrām’s fame was at its height even in the Abbasid era. It is then not surprising that Jāhez, who is writing for an Abbasid audience, manipulates parts of the history of Bahrām’s birth to kingship and places his Arab sovereigns in the limelight.⁴⁴⁵ He writes that,

⁴⁴² Mas‘udi also reports that Bahrām conversed fluently in many of the languages of his time, was very fond of art, and composed poetry in both Persian and Arabic. Mas‘udi claims that he has had access to Bahrām’s books of poetry and the pleasure to read them (do you mean that he read the books himself and found them good?). He then adds that he does not have the time and luxury, unfortunately, to address them in his work. Mas‘udi, *Muruj al-Dhahab*, 464. Shahbazi states that legends of Bahrām’s fame as an Arab poet are most probably fictive, yet he does not elaborate on the cultural and political significance of such tales, whether historical or fictive. Shahbazi, *Tārikh Sasanian*, 432 ft 416.

⁴⁴³ For Perso-Arabic sources presenting Bahrām as the first to ever compose Persian poetry and talk of the popularity of his poems in Arabic, see Zabihollah Safa, *Tārikh Adabiāt dar Iran*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Ferdowsi, 1999), 169.

⁴⁴⁴ Translation based on Tha‘ālebi, *Shāhnāmeḥ Tha‘ālebi*, 260. To emphasize Bahrām as a polyglot and, in turn, render him as a symbol of multiculturalism, Tha‘ālebi lists Middle Persian, Dari, New Persian, Roman (Latin or Greek), Turkish, Zaboli, Aramaic, Hebrew, Hindu, Arabic, and Nabatean. Moreover, Tha‘ālebi uses Bahrām’s character to further emphasize the ‘positive’ aspects of knowing Arabic and indulging in the Arab culture. He goes as far as reporting a few lines of poetry attributed to Bahrām by Arab authors, as well as lines of poetry he composed during the Hun war. *Ibid.*, 260-2.

⁴⁴⁵ It is most probable that he intends to relate Sasanian and Arab history and create close cultural proximity and historical connection between Arabs and Persians. Meanwhile, Jāhez does not forget his primary task, which is to spread and advertise Persian kingly customs. Thus, while promoting knowledge of Arabic culture as one of Bahrām’s strengths, Jāhez makes sure to place it second in superiority to

His father made Nu‘mān responsible for (Bahrām’s upbringing) so that he would learn the ways and customs of the Arabs and become familiar with their history, wars, and language.⁴⁴⁶

Famous folktales reveal that, in the Abbasid era, hunters claimed that they had caught an onager with Bahrām’s name in Pahlavi script burnt onto his ear. They emphasized that the onager had once been captured by Bahrām, since they believed that onagers could live to be a thousand years old.⁴⁴⁷ Others report that local rulers viewed him with such respect and awe that they would try to emulate his hunting feats and even compete with his set standards in the hunt.⁴⁴⁸

As a royal-hero, Bahrām encompassed the ideals of two distinct worlds, or better-say a timeless malleable hybrid. His increased popularity in the post-Sasanian period is evident in the proliferation of artistic and literary representations.⁴⁴⁹ Such artistic trends reached their peak

Iranian customs and traditions. He writes that, when Bahrām inquired whether Mundhir would assist in sieging Ctesiphon, Nu‘mān replied, “How could I compete with the house of Sāsān? For they are kings and we are nothing but their servants.” Jāhez, *Taj*, 222-224.

⁴⁴⁶ Translation based on *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴⁴⁷ Iraj Afshar, ed., *Daftar Tārikh Majmu‘e Asnād va Manābe‘ Tārikhi*, vol 3 (Tehran: Bonyād Moqafāt Doctor Mahmud Afshar, 2001), 285.

⁴⁴⁸ See Šaraf al-din Ali Yazdi, *Zafarnāmeḥ*, vol. 1, ed. Saeid Mir-Mohammad-Sadegh and Abd al-Hossein Navai (Tehran: Markaz Asnād Majles Šoray Eslami, 2008), 781.

⁴⁴⁹ For illustrations of Bahrām’s adventures in the Mongol period and depictions of Bahrām wrestling in the presence of the King of India, slaying a dragon and attending to the needs of peasants, see *Persian Art before and after the Mongol Conquest: Exhibition April 9- May 17* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1959); Eric Schroeder, *Persian Miniatures in the Fogg Museum of Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942), 106 fig. 4, 110-114, 116 fig. 10, 130 fig. 8-9. For 15th-century miniature paintings of Bahrām, see Abol‘ala Soudavar, *The Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship*, ed. Hossein Ziai, Bibliotheca Iranica intellectual traditions series 10 (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2003), 12, Fig. 10. For Bahrām’s portrayal on medieval artifacts, see Simpson, “Narrative Allusion and Metaphor.” For Shāhnāmeḥ miniature paintings depicting Bahrām, see Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *A King’s Book of Kings: The Shah-nameh of Shah Tahmasp*, ed. S.C. Welch (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), 36, 39, 44, 46, 177.

between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.⁴⁵⁰ Illustrations depicting Bahrām’s adventures became so popular that they even changed the way other legendary hunting feats were illustrated. For example, in the 16th-century edition of the *Dārāb-nāmeḥ* made for King Akbar, Ardeshir Bābakān’s legendary onager hunt is depicted in the manner of Bahrām’s gazelle hunt, when he pierced the prey’s hooves to its ear.⁴⁵¹

Bahrām’s status as the ideal Iranian King and a savior hero reached such popularity that we find several instances where Iranian and mainly non-Iranian rulers of dynasties, such as the Mughals, Seljuqs, and Deylamites, claimed descent from Bahrām to increase their legitimacy to rule. For example, it is reported that the Buyids claimed to be descendants of Bahrām, thus borrowing his Kayānid and royal glory.⁴⁵² The constructed genealogy that traced local rulers’ heritage to Bahrām was usually too convoluted and lengthy to present an image of accuracy.⁴⁵³ Hamdollah Qazvini presents the following genealogy for the Buyids,

نسبش بویه بن فنا خسرو بن تمام بن کوهی بن شیرذیل بن شیرکنده بن شیر
ذیلبن شیرویه بن شستان شاه بن سیس فیروز بن شیرذیل بن سنباد بن بهرام گور.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵⁰ Simpson suggests that this period was characterized by an era of “artistic explosion” due to artistic innovations in Iran and Iraq during the Seljuqs. Simpson, “Narrative Illusion.” For Bahrām’s artwork as symbols of justice and sovereignty being only second to Fereidun in popularity and number, see *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁵¹ Adeela Qureshi, “Bahrām’s Feat of Hunting Dexterity as Illustrated in Firdausi’s *Shahnama*, Nizami’s *Haft Paikar*, and Amir Khusrau’s *Hasht Bihisht*,” in *Shahnama Studies II*, eds. Charles Melville and Gabrielle van den Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 182.

⁴⁵² Hamd-allah Mostowfi, *Tārikh Gozideh*, ed. Abd al-Hossein Navai (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1985), 409. To the long list of rulers claiming descent from Bahrām, Gardizi adds the Mikalis local rulers of Khorasan who ruled during the Buyid era. Gardizi, *Zein al-Akhhbār*, 361-2.

⁴⁵³ On the importance of such instances as evidence to the significance of possessing noble and Iranian lineage in power, see Safa, *Tārikh Adabiāt dar Iran*, vol. 1, 219.

⁴⁵⁴ Hamd-allah Mostowfi, *Tārikh Gozideh*, 410.

The Deylamites were also empathic on having Sasanian lineage, maintaining that they were direct descendants of Bahrām.⁴⁵⁵ They rationalized their northern origins by claiming that they fled Ctesiphon after the Arab invasion and took refuge in Gilan.⁴⁵⁶ Majma al-Ansāb writes that,

They [the Deylamaites] were of a brave and valiant people who claimed descent from Bahrām Gur. However, the truth is that they were of Arab origin and rose from Tabarestan and ruled the nation for a hundred and twenty years.⁴⁵⁷

Another small dynasty of Arab descent who claimed Sasanian heritage was the Šervān-Šāhān. In their attempts to integrate into the Iranian society and increase their legitimacy, they adopted Persian names and claimed ancestry from Bahrām.⁴⁵⁸ The fallacy of such claims was not difficult to detect, however. Many authors of the time made sure to comment on what they believed were fictitious origins.⁴⁵⁹ For example, Biruni reproaches such fictional descent stories and says,

بسا می‌شود که ... جمعی را وادار می‌کنند که دروغهایی بسازند و ممدوح خود
را به اصل شریفی نسبت دهند... چنانکه برای آل بویه ساخته‌اند.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁵ M.S. Khan, "A Manuscript of an Epitome of al-Šābī's Kitāb al-Tāġī," *Arabica* 12, fasc. 1 (1965): 37.

⁴⁵⁶ Qazi Ahmad Tatavi and Asef Khan Qazvini, *Tārīkh Alfī*, vol 3, ed. Gholam-reza Tabatabai Majd (Tehran: Elmi va Frahangi, 2003), 1760.

⁴⁵⁷ Šabānkārei, *Majma' al-Ansāb*, 89.

⁴⁵⁸ Clifford E. Bosworth, *The New Islamic Dynasties, A Chronological and Genealogical Manual* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 62.

⁴⁵⁹ See Khan, "A Manuscript of an Epitome," 38.

⁴⁶⁰ Abu Reihan Biruni, *Athār al-Bāqiyeh*, trans. Akbar Dana-seresht (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 2007), 61.

It did not prevent dynasties, and those with aspirations to rule, to reinvent themselves as the sons of Bahrām. The positive impact of such rumors is evident in the fact that rival houses would actively try to discredit such reports. For example, the Seljuqs tried to at struck back at their rivals the Deylamites, by spreading letters and statements that argued that the Sasanian genealogy Azad al-Dowleh is unauthentic.⁴⁶¹ Such instances extend even beyond the borders of Ērānšahr. For example, the founder of the Bahmani Dynasty, who ruled central India in the 14th century, also traced his lineage back to Bahrām.⁴⁶² Also, the governor of Qanuj, Amir Firuz Badakhshani, also claimed lineage from Bahrām.⁴⁶³

One can argue that emerging kings and dynasties of the medieval period were aware of their foreignness and status as illegitimate invaders. They were also familiar with the significance Iranians bestowed upon their royal past, conveyed to them through epic narratives and tales. This is evident in the fact that even the Sasanians, as we saw earlier, were aware of such tools and, hence, claimed lineage from the Achaemenids and the Kayānids. For post-Islamic rulers, such a claim must have been even more crucial. Without Iranian descent, they could, in no way, claim to possess the kingly *Farr*, which was the first qualification needed for ruling over Ērānšahr. Moreover, Bahrām's popularity as a charitable royal messiah increased their chances of gaining a populist stance amongst the masses. Furthermore, Bahrām's connections to central Asia, Arab tribes and India, explain why we see populations of Arab, Turko-Mongolian and Indian heritage specifically claim descent to him. No other Sasanian king can provide such point

⁴⁶¹ Mehrdad Shokoohy, "Sasanian Royal Emblems and their Reemergence in the Fourteenth-Century Deccan," *Muqarnas* 11 (1994): 68.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.* For more examples, see *Ibid.*, 65-6; Michael Fedorov, "New Data on the Appanage Rulers of Khuttalān and Wakhsh," *Iran* 44 (2006): 201.

of reference. As Simpson states, “At the heart of this phenomenon, epitomized by the Shu‘ubiyya movement that advocated the cultivation of Persian at the expense of Arabic, lay a belief in the glory and magnificence of the ancient Persian kings and in a concept of royal legitimacy whereby claimants to the throne must have been born of royalty or, like Fereidun, possessed *farr*, that is, royal majesty or splendor.”⁴⁶⁴ Moreover, who is more glorified with *farr*, glory and splendor than Bahrām?

Furthermore, these reports shed light on the fact that, by this time, Bahrām had emerged as the epitome of Iranian ideals and culture. He was not merely a past king, a legend, or a hero, he was the symbol of all that was Iranian. Such height of fame is owed to the intertwining of many elements, namely, the peace of the fifth century and its importance to the Iranian people, as well as the emergence of an ancient enemy, one whose threat was as old as the epic tales could be. Bahrām’s road to fame was paved not only by his father, but also by those he entrusted his son with, namely Nu‘mān son of Mundhir, without whose loyalty and support the line of kingship would have ended with Yazdegerd. However, above all, Bahrām as a literary hero, messiah and model of all that is Iranian is to some extent influenced and transmitted by the Iranian people, their use of storytelling traditions as a tool to voice their needs, hopes and ideals. Bahrām was shaped and molded in the hands of every citizen of Ērānšahr to resemble their ideal protector and sovereign. Hence why Bahrām can be ripped off his royal attire in the town of Baku and resemble a socialist freedom fighter, for he is the essence of justice, liberty and peace. In his flexibility, he can be shaped and reshaped to the liking of the people as he moves beyond the physical limits of time and space.

⁴⁶⁴ Simpson, “Narrative Allusion and Metaphor,” 141.

While this dissertation has attempted to shed light on the inner dynamics and changes that took place in the early fifth century Sasanian administration, and the way in which such changes in policy affected the life and the literary image of two royal figures, Yazdegerd and Bahrām, it is far from complete. The early fifth century and the era of Yazdegerd and Bahrām are still in need of further examination and study. The issue of the Christians of Iran and their integration has received much valuable attention in recent years, yet the popularity of the theme of ‘prosecution’ would enjoy more consideration and needs to be studied from a Mongol polemical standpoint. Moreover, the dynamics of how the Sasanians dealt with the Huns in this period must be studied and analyzed at a much deeper level, despite the scarcity of historical evidence. Also, criticism voiced in sources about Bahrām’s overindulgence in wine, women and pleasure is, in itself, a topic that must receive in-depth examination, as it sheds much light on the convoluted cultural changes that the Iranian society underwent as it transitioned from Late Antiquity to the medieval period. I hope that this study can serve as a foundation for further historical analysis focused on the early fifth century, as a period of peace, diplomacy and change.

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