

Muhammet YÜCEL* (Muş Alparslan University, Turkey)

Religion, Conflict and Continuity in the Early Sasanian Period

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Abstract: *This article investigates the relationship between historical/religious memory and the perception of power in the early Sasanian period, and analyses how dynastic reflexes are formulated by religion/tradition in the new system within the context of Ardashir, Kerdir and Mani. It asserts that we can discover the relationship between the Sasanian elites and religion if we understand the factors that mobilised and remodelled their historical memories. Based on these factors, it proposes that the natural relationship established by the Sasanian dynasty during the state-building phase was fuelled by historical/traditional factors rather than by conscious political factors. Thus, the inherent links between the representatives of power and the religious tradition in the reign of Ardashir, founder of the Sasanian state, have been consciously politicised since the reign of Shapur I.*

Key words: Sasanians; Ardashir I; Shapur I; Kerdir; Mani; religion; pre-islamic Iran

Introduction

Identifying Ardashir I (224-240 AD) and his immediate ancestors with fire temples, Sasanian sources did not intend to reconstruct the Sasanian history nor engage in religious propaganda. This generates the question of what the aim was. The initial was to emphasise the fact that Ardashir I was a truly religious man. This is not unexpected, as Ardashir I was shaped by the religious environment where he was raised in. There are significant contemporary studies that address this issue directly or indirectly, which will be referred to throughout the texts when necessary rather than being summarised here one by one. However, we will start with a general critical discussion of the primary sources that provide information about the period of Ardashir I and the building phase of the Sasanian state.

Most of the information provided by Greek and Roman sources contain military incidents and related details.¹ Although the information given in some of these sources is important, they are not sufficient to reconstruct the philosophy behind the foundation of the Sasanian state. Moreover, it would not be wrong to make

* ORCID iD 0000-0002-1936-0327. m.yucel@alparslan.edu.tr

¹ For the rise of Sasanians in the eyes of Western Sources, see GARIBOLDI, 2016: 47-52.

a similar assertion for Armenian and Syriac sources. Apart from these, the Sasanian's sources (mostly religious) give us much more detail, especially about the religious inclinations of the dynasty. The inscriptions and coins belonging to early Sasanian period also provide important details. Manichaean sources are of importance too, as they help us understand early Sasanian's reflexes to religions other than Zoroastrianism. Besides, some medieval Arabic and Persian sources draw special attention to the religious environment of the Sasanian realm, with reference to Zoroastrian ties to the state religion.

What almost all these sources have in common is the emphasis that Ardashir I was a successful commander or a worthy king. The main sources that provide information about the building phase of the Sasanian state are full of repetitive and sometimes quite exaggerated information about how Ardashir I created the state out of nothing and how many battles he won.² They also contain a lot of information especially about the periods and performances of the kings like Ardashir I, who was idealised, and some of this information is devoid of reality.³ These sources deliberately attempt to manipulate how the idealised kings were religious. We even come across consciously reconstructed historical information in some texts such as *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, which is full of exaggeration.⁴ *Letter of Tansar* is very important for this point because it is also directly related to Ardashir I period although it is not a contemporary source.⁵ Both sources have two important points; first they remove the uncertainty about the origin of the Sasanian dynasty, and they also turn the dynasty into a divine figure by attributing them a religious mission. In this respect, both sources contain crucial information that will help us understand the early period of the Sasanians. We should also include the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsi here.⁶ Some Muslim writers such as Ṭabarī,⁷ Dīnawarī,⁸ al-Mas'ūdī⁹ and al-Bīrūnī¹⁰ follow the plot of *Khwadāy-nāmag* roughly in parallel with Ferdowsi.¹¹ Muslim Historians sources, such as those cited here, are generally compatible with the Middle Persian sources written during the last or the post-Sasanian periods. One needs to be cautious about the fact that these sources, probably influenced by Islamic doctrine, emphasise that religion and political power are supported by each other. There are obvious differences between the Sasanians in reality, and the Sasanians that are imagined or described as a historical fiction by Islamic and post-Sasanian Middle Persian sources.

² WIDENGREN, 1971: 711-782.

³ DARYAEE, 1382/2003: 33-45.

⁴ For the translation of and comments on *Kārnāmag* see GRENET, 2003.

⁵ BOYCE, 1968.

⁶ Ferdowsi (2016).

⁷ Ṭabarī (1999).

⁸ JACKSON-BONNER, 2015.

⁹ al-Mas'ūdī (2004).

¹⁰ al-Bīrūnī (1879).

¹¹ See HÄMEEN-ANTTILA, 2018.

These sources, having an anachronistic perspective, tend to consider the Sasanian state authority as religious-oriented.¹²

Roman sources do not include much information about Sasanians except for their wars with Rome; at least it is difficult to find any information about the subject of this study. Even the information provided in these sources often does not allow us to fully understand the military capacity of the Sasanians. However, we need to distinguish Agathias from these sources, as he somehow succeeded to get into the Sasanian archive and touched on a few important points about the interrelation of religion and the state.¹³ Despite the conflicting information, some classical Armenian sources such as *History of the Armenians* by Moses Khorenats'i¹⁴ and *History of the Armenians* by Agathangelos,¹⁵ also provide information about the foundation of the Sasanian state.¹⁶ Islamic sources written by Ṭabarī, al-Mas'ūdī and Dīnawarī give us more detailed information than the Roman sources. All the sources, in sum, may describe Sasanian kings as good/bad commander, fair/cruel king, religious/heretic or pagan ruler, etc., but they do not explain how these kings turn into such a commander/king/ruler.

It is well-known that there was a natural bond between power and religion during the building phase of the Sasanian state. This article does not discuss the role of religion or traditional beliefs in the establishment of the state, which is a popular and widely studied topic. Rather, it deals with the image of the Sasanian kings, particularly Ardashir I (224-240 AD), and how these kings' religious and philosophical ideas are reflected by the society of *Ērānšahr*. It does this by looking at the political role of a famous Zoroastrian priest of the third century, Kerdir, who was known to have great influence with the monarchy, and probably also on society. Since his influence was at its height during a crucial period for the Sasanian state, he paved the way for a mutually supportive relationship between the monarchs and his priesthood. Kerdir's conflicts with his contemporary Mani (216-274), a fellow priest and the prophet of Manichaeism, sheds further light on the nature of his religious influence. First, however, it is necessary to discuss the structures of the Sasanian state during the reign of Ardashir I, as well as the dynasty's historical background and contemporary influences.

The rise of the Sasanian dynasty in Istakhr is known to have influenced Zoroastrian rituals and sparked a new worldview first in *Ērānšahr* proper and, subsequently, in its hinterland. Contrary to the Parthians, who never adopted a particular political approach to Zoroastrianism, the basic practices of the Sasanian dynasty developed in accordance with their Zoroastrian beliefs, rooting their political,

¹² REZAKHANI, 2015: 63-65.

¹³ Agathias (1975); Also see CAMERON, 1969/70: 67-183.

¹⁴ Moses Khorenats'i (1980²).

¹⁵ Agathangelos (1976).

¹⁶ TRAINA, 2018: 107-119.

cultural and historical principles in their Iranian background. This worldview drove the Sasanian dynasty's struggle against their Parthians predecessors, which the Sasanians seem to have defined as their 'holiest' struggle. Identifying themselves with their ancient ancestors, the Sasanian dynasty maintained their Iranian identity by transforming it to present an impression of historical continuity.

This identity was strengthened by the followers of Zoroastrianism in the Anahita Temple, as one might expect for a dynasty associated with a sacred temple. After all one of the Sasanian's critiques of the Parthians was that they had abandoned that 'sacredness' (national and religious) while in power.¹⁷ The Sasanian elites likely remembered the Parthians with disgust, claiming that under their reign religion was thrown out of focus and Persians were separated into factions.¹⁸ In *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, Ardashir's association with the sacredness of the temple is made clear by, a reference to 'ram' (*xwarrah*), a divine gift akin to prophetic revelation which could not be rejected by the recipient; in this context it demonstrates a claim that Ardashir was awarded the kingship by a divine power and embodied the divine will on the royal throne.¹⁹ His opponents, therefore, are shown as defeated by an invisible religious triumph rather than being intimidated with a political success.

The application of this archaic worldview to the throne led to new developments in the history of Zoroastrianism. The marginalised and alienated – so to speak – god Ahura Mazda was portrayed with new characteristics and was given a 'symbol of kingship', which he was claimed to bestow upon to the Sasanian dynasty alone.²⁰ The dynasty would thus deftly take advantage of their organic relation with Zoroastrianism against the Parthians, thereby achieving significant political success. Led by Ardashir I, the Sasanian dynasty depicted this relationship allegorically, not literally – or at least they wished their subjects to think it was mere allegory. Thus, Ardashir revitalised traditional Iranian legends tradition and came to represent the continuity of the kingship.²¹ It was the naive, local, 'god-devoted' dynasty under their control that posed a danger to the Parthians.

This religious heritage that Ardashir adopted from his culture's archaic history and the way he used it played a decisive role in his relationship with his subjects. The claim that religion and the state were inseparable gave Ardashir I influence over a dynamic mass of people, and his attempts to unify religious and political power made him a new force in *Ērān*. Agathias slurs over the origin of Ardashir while he tells us about the extraordinary commanding ability of Ardashir as well as his charisma.

¹⁷ YARSHATER, 1971: 517.

¹⁸ GARIBOLDI, 2016: 49.

¹⁹ *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, IV.10-24; For a similar discussion, see DARYAEE, 2008: 66-67.

²⁰ The coin and relief patterns that appeared with the reign of Ardashir were imitated later. On both coins and reliefs, a god (generally Ahura Mazda) is depicted while extending a diadem (symbol of kingship) to the king.

²¹ GARIBOLDI, 2016: 51-52.

He describes the process that Ardashir I became the leader and gained success against Parthians, based on the aforementioned dynamism as follows:

“A certain Persian called Ardashir, a man of humble and obscure origins but of great daring and resourcefulness and a born revolutionary, launched an attack with a band of conspirators and killed the king Artabanus. Assuming the diadem of the kings of Persia he put an end to hegemony of Parthia and restored the empire of the Persians.”²²

Did Ardashir I consciously want to build his monarchy on a religious foundation or did the revitalised tradition influence the development of a religion-based state system? What messages did he present with inscriptions and reliefs depicting his special relationship to Ahura Mazdā? What does the Sasanian claim that kings were the descendants of gods tell us about their power? In light of these questions, the current study aims to discuss continuity and change in the state system during the reigns of the first Sasanian kings as well as the religious disputes during this period.

The next section of this paper will describe how Ardashir I was influenced by the traditional history of the lands where he was born, how he presented himself, and most importantly, how he saw his subjects in his newly-built state system. The following section will discuss how the state system founded by Ardashir I, which embodied the natural bonds between the state and religion, affected the kings, the state institutions and the social life, as well as how the system shaped the state policies towards new religions in the early Sasanian period – specifically, how this system can be seen in the conflict between Kerdīr and Mani. The paper concludes that the bond between the kingdom and its religion was considered necessary for the continuity of royal legitimacy.

The King and His Subjects

Ardashir I, the driving force behind the rise of the Sasanian dynasty, considered himself a pious man and sought religious advice from the priests around him, as can be seen in *Letter of Tansar*.²³ These priests could thus intervene in politics in accordance with the will of the king. Their intervention was not considered to be ‘impertinence’ against the king – on the contrary, it was considered to be a ‘divine intervention’ by people who were close to god. Al-Mas’ūdī narrates this interplay between religious and governmental affairs by having Ardashir say,

²² Agathias (1975) II 26.2.

²³ See BOYCE, 1968.

“Son! Religion and kingship are brothers. The owner of the throne cannot do without them as the religion is the base of the kingship, and kingship is the guard of religion. The realm is condemned to decline without a base and to perish without a guard”.²⁴

Similarly, in the *Letter of Tansar*, who was the palace priest during the reign of Ardashir I, it is said that religion and kingship were born from the same womb, and had the same characters.²⁵ Ferdowsi also described the relation of the Sasanian dynasty to Zoroastrianism in a lyric way, with metaphors similar to those used in the *Letter of Tansar*.²⁶ After the collapse of the Sasanian state, the writers who maintained both the religious and ideal political tradition of the Old Iran like *Dēnkard* also make similar mention of this relation in their works. It has been always said that *Ērānšahr* was integrated with religion, and even it was sometimes not true in Iranian history, it was what these authors desires to be true. For instance,

“They held this too: Everything has a sea. The [sea of the] Iranian quality of the king of kings is perfection; the sea of religion is the sacred word; the sea of brightness is the sun.”²⁷

In addition to his political objectives, Ardashir I also aimed to please god/s and draw his subjects ‘closer to god’ as much as possible. A system in which the king and god could replace each other was imposed with strong emphasis. This was due to the alliance between throne and altar in the period.²⁸ Societies neighbouring each other worshipped the same idea, even if they did not share the same religion. While Mani ceaselessly continued his preaching activities that he started in Mesopotamia, the incubation period of Christianity was about to finish. Even though a soft discourse was the shared doctrine of these religions, there occurred deviations in the existential objectives of both religion and reign when they came together under one roof.

In later centuries, the Sasanians were accepted as the legitimate inheritors of the throne. How did they achieve this? Tabarī depicts Ardashir as the legitimate heir of the kingdom due to his lineage.²⁹ In addition, in *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pāpagān*, a text written in the Pahlavi language and which speaks of the early periods

²⁴ al-Mas’ūdī (2004): 142.

²⁵ BOYCE, 1968: 33-34.

²⁶ DARYAEE, 1378/1999: 292.

²⁷ *Dēnkard*, VI 259 (especially see p. 275).

²⁸ GNOLI, 1989: 165.

²⁹ Tabarī (1999): 814.

of Sasanian dynasty, it is stated that the person called Sasan³⁰ is directly linked to Darius (Dara) III, the last Persian Emperor.³¹ In addition, some western sources like Herodianus and Cassius Dio include discussions of the Sasanian dynasty's descent from the Persian-Achaemenid kings, stating that they thus shared their ancestors' political objectives.³² This suggests that some debates on the legitimacy of reign took place in Iran at the time.³³ However, it is not clear whether Ardashir laid claim to the land of Persian Empire or developed a 'political programme' to this end.³⁴

It is apparent from sources that the Sasanian dynasty was concerned with establishing the legitimacy of their claim to power.³⁵ This is revealed through the Sasanian kings' constant references to their lineage and sacred religion in their inscriptions (in ANRm-a, ŠKZ etc.). However, in official inscriptions this was not in the form of an explicit reference to the Achaemenids. It is also important to note that although the Roman sources claim that Sasanian kings had political and ideological concerns about Western politics, this does not mean that such concerns had a direct influence on the domestic affairs of the Sasanian state and as far as can be said from sources, Sasanians did not use their Achaemenid heritage or border claims to make demands on the Romans.³⁶ In fact, when we look at the Sasanian's borderland

³⁰ We have contradictory information about Sasan's identity. In ŠKZ, Shapur calls his father, Ardashir, *king of kings* but only calls Pabak, father of Ardashir, a king. In this inscription, Sasan is mentioned as a king, but is not associated with Ardashir. Please see. ŠKZ (1999) § 25. In Ṭabarī's *Annals* (964), on the other hand, Sasan is said to be the father of Pabag and grandfather of Ardashir. The *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* (I 20 and II 1) relates that Sasan descended from the Persian Emperor Dara III and an ancestor of Ardashir – specifically, according to *Kārnāmag*, Pabag was the maternal grandfather of Ardashir. However, *Bundahishn* (XXI 30), a religious text written in medieval Persian, says that Ardashir's father was Pabag, and his mother was the daughter of Sasan. In Agathangelos' *History* (I 18), Ardashir is named as the son of Sasan. Sources from the east of Iran provide another perspective. One source confirms the presence of a god named *ssn*, whose cult had origins in the east. Livshits tries to argue that this is the same as *Sasan* (LIVSHITS, 1977: 176). DARYAEE (2009: 6) rejects this association, and SCHWARTZ (1996: 253-257 and 1998: 9-13) claims that the form *ssn* is not a reference to *sasan*, but a reference to the name *sesen*, which represents a Semitic god. He argues that the name Sasan comes from ancient Persian word **čačan* "guarding god" (In Avesta language, *θraθra* 'guarding'). Another source offers the word *sasa*, which has also been argued to be related to the name Sasan (FRYE, 1983: 200; DARYAEE, 2010: 242). It is sometimes argued that Sasan who gave his name to the dynasty was more likely a god, than a human. For example, DARYAEE (2009: 6) arguing from coins and other evidence, suggests that Sasan is identified with a god. Even though there is no clear-cut information about of Sasan's origins, however, it is the opinion of this author that the claim that he was a man from Ardashir's ancestry. For more information, see SHAKI, 1369/1990; FRYE (2000: 17-20) argues that Sasan is of eastern origin and that he is the maternal grandfather. Based on the idea that Sasan has his origin in Sakastan and protects the Fire Temple in Pars, Olbrycht states that he has a religious-cultic connection in his past. However, it is also claimed that Sasan's ancestors were in some way connected to one of the Parth clans. (For more details on Sasan's family roots and his real identity, see the following in-depth study: see OLBRYCHT 2016: 23-34.

³¹ *Kārnāmag*, I 6-7.

³² Herodian 6. 2.

³³ For a detailed discussion see SHAHBAZI, 1380/2001: 61-73; YARSHATER, 1971: 517-533.

³⁴ SCHIPPMANN, 1990: 18.

³⁵ As a matter of fact, this understanding was not limited to its own era, but it survived long after the collapse of the Sasanian state, for instance see *Dēnkard*, VI 173.

³⁶ RUBIN, 2008: 137-140.

policies, we can see that they carried out policies in line with the reality of their era rather than the glories of a past empire. One can easily see that even their claims to an Achaemenid heritage and borders had no correspondence to reality because the Persians were not, in fact, equivalent to former Persians nor did the borders of the former Persian state have meaning during the Sasanian period. Mythological connections can work in domestic affairs and keep people attentive to royal authority, but these ideological attitudes are not substituted for a realistic state policy.

Although they did not use these claims abroad, written records of the late Sasanian period (which usually shared similar sources) focus on their supposed Achaemenid origins. It is a fact that the dynasty developed these politically and religiously radical discourses for their own audience, which would be politically strengthened by the narrative of continuity. The unity brought by this narrative was useful during the time when the number of Sasanian subjects was growing while the state itself was shrinking, confining itself to the boundaries of *Ērānšahr*.

If the book *Kārnāmag* can be regarded as a reliable source, we can say that there were at least over 240 vassal kingdoms (*Kadag-xwodāy*) under the rule of Parthian Empire. The book goes on to emphasise that, among those kingdoms, the Sasanian dynasty was the most eligible family to rule in Iran, portraying its legitimacy in terms of its lineage.³⁷ Roman writers, on the other hand, were ignorant of political transformations in Iran, and from far away the change in dynasties appeared like a simple takeover.³⁸ Parthians and Romans alike struggled to understand the radical transformation, not limited to politics, taking place in Iran as an established order with ‘national’ nuances³⁹ was emerging. However, this idea of ‘national’ should not be considered in its modern meaning. It cannot be linked to a single cause, nor can it be totally ignored as an interpretive approach.

Considering that the Ardashir family oversaw the Anahita Fire Temple in Istakhr, it can be understood that under Parthian reign the importance of Zoroastrian rituals and worshipping-praying ceremonies prevailed among the Iranian public. Accordingly, there could be a connection between the fact that the region was densely populated by followers of Zoroastrianism and the rise of a political movement from that same region.⁴⁰ Both the Zoroastrian religious traditions that the Iranians had maintained since the reign of Achaemenid and Ardashir’s ability to ‘stir’ the followers of this faith based on its religious teachings⁴¹ can be interpreted as the result of a desire to bring religion into the forefront in Iranian society, and it should be kept in mind that this apparent desire is directly related to the acceptance of the provisions set forth

³⁷ There are also some arguments that the Sasanian dynasty, through their claims about the identity of Sasan, attempted to leave their true origins behind and build a more legitimate past. See OLBRYCHT, 2016: 30-31.

³⁸ For a similar opinion see GARIBOLDI, 2016: 47.

³⁹ CHRISTENSEN, 1368/1989: 148-149.

⁴⁰ BOYCE, 1979: 103.

⁴¹ BOYCE, 1979: 101-102.

in the holy book *Avesta*. Under the influence of Hellenism, there was a range of diverse religions in Iran during the reign of Parthians and this diversity prevented Zoroastrianism to spread up. Zoroastrianism, forgotten and made ordinary during the reigns of Seleucids and the Parthians after the Persian Empire's defeat by Alexander the Great, became the of religion of state⁴² with Ardashir I's rise to power, which was manifestation of a massive 'discharge', to put it in Canetti's words.⁴³ The followers of Zoroastrianism, who received no support – either official or unofficial – from pre-Sasanian reigns in Iran, were people who were dynamic in their intellectual world but were passive towards the world outside themselves. Thus, this mass of people who were *discharged* with Ardashir got jobs in the higher positions of the state. However, they maintained a singular world perspective and thus confined the state to a self-enclosed system.⁴⁴

Another factor was the indifferent attitudes of Iranian Parthians to Zoroastrianism.⁴⁵ In fact, the Parthian King Balash I gave an order to bring different religions and traditions together, with the result that the legends of Nabu-na'id were mixed in Eastern Iranian traditions.⁴⁶ This must have led to the exclusion of Zoroastrianism, whose followers constituted the principal religious group in Iran. This mass of excluded people became visible during the reign of Ardashir I. Although he used the religion as a means to establish his legitimacy, that does not necessarily mean that he himself initiated a religious movement. Perhaps it is true that Ardashir used religious values in accordance with his political interests. However, his principal objective was to establish a privilege that had its roots in his lineage, which he implied originated from gods. It is apparent that Ardashir's rise to power had origins in a search for a historical religion and lineage.⁴⁷ Ardashir probably started to transform his own society (we can also include the followers of other religions in Eran) by bringing Zoroastrianism into the forefront based on such a perspective.⁴⁸ The result was a system in which, Ardashir, who took his authority both religiously and politically from Ahura Mazdā, ruled the corporeal world while Ahura Mazdā ruled the material and spiritual world. During the first two centuries of the dynasty, Sasanian kings wielded the connection with Ahura Mazdā proclaimed by Ardashir.⁴⁹ This was a political attitude rather than a religious one; indeed, one can interpret this as the kings considering themselves beyond time and space, much like a god.

⁴² YARSHATER, 1983: 386.

⁴³ CANETTI, 1984: 17-18.

⁴⁴ The Zoroastrians considered their religion as 'good religion' while defined non-Zoroastrianism as 'bad religion'. This definition didn't have negative connotations, but it was mostly used to identify non-Zoroasters. For a discussion on this issue, see MOKHTARIAN, 2015: 99-115.

⁴⁵ TAFAZZOLĪ, 1378/1999: 297.

⁴⁶ YARSHATER, 1983: 447.

⁴⁷ See DARYAEE and REZAKHANI, 2017: 156.

⁴⁸ WIESEHÖFER, 1986: 371-375.

⁴⁹ CHOKSY, 1988: 37-38.

In Naqš-e Rostam, where the rock tombs of Achaemenid kings were found, Ardashir had a relief carved depicting his victory and rise to power. This emphasised his power and the connections on which he built his claim to the kingship. The relief also showed the king's 'spiritual' relation with Ahura Mazdā, allegorically representing a harmony the king and the god. This relief of Ardashir, combining the 'worldly' and 'otherworldly' victories, is a surviving witness to his efforts to legitimise his understanding of himself and his sovereignty. Common in the early Sasanian period, these reliefs match the themes of written texts. The relief in Naqš-e Rostam is known as the 'the relief of assignment' (ANRm-a) of Ardashir, who was said to have been given the ring of sovereignty by Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazdā). In this relief, we see both Ardashir, on the left, and Ohrmazd, on the right, crushing enemies under their horses' legs. For those who could not witness Ardashir's war against Ardawan, the Parthian king, this relief shows how a reign that had turned away from Zoroastrianism was overthrown by the hand of the god: Ohrmazd defeats Ahriman, a kind of 'evil spirit', and Ardashir defeats a demonised King Ardawan.⁵⁰ Later, when the mortal and visible body of the sovereign is at rest, his *political body* is displayed with godlike pageantry, and the blessing of god (*xwarrah*, 'ram') becomes visible in the body of the king.⁵¹ Thus, the ideal power of the king seems to be at one with the god.⁵² It is as if all human frailties in the body of the king are swept away, and his divine 'personage'⁵³ is displayed. Now the *Persona Publica* of the king was before the eyes of people. Before becoming the king, Ardashir's mystic relation to Ahura Mazdā in the temple of Anahita was only visible to himself, if not to a limited group of people. However, with this relief, Ardashir identifies himself with the god, making his claim visible. Thus, portrayed as freed of his human frailties, Ardashir would be fixed in the memories of his followers with unchanged appearance. The religious aspect of this relief helps us understand its political meaning, in which a political and theological reality is displayed as a coherent whole. Making the king equal to the god⁵⁴ gives visibility to the god while bestowing immortality to the king.

⁵⁰ WIESEHÖFER, 1382/2003: 229-230; HERRMANN, 2000: 39.

⁵¹ Sasanian kings used certain divinity – referring expressions. For a detail discussion on this issue see PANAINO, 2009: 209-257.

⁵² GARIBOLDI, 2004: 32.

⁵³ i.e. *ad Similitudinem regis*, KANTOROWICZ, 1957: 420.

⁵⁴ SKJÆRVØ, 2013: 557.



Fig. 1. Investiture relief of Ardashir I (after ALRAM, 2015: fig. 4).

Ancient sources relate that Ardashir used the title *šāhān-šāh*, “king of kings”.⁵⁵ This title reflects a political reality. However, numismatic evidence can tell us more about the title and demonstrates his understanding of the connection between the king and his subjects.⁵⁶ His coins, especially those minted after the defeat of his opponents, include the following title on the coins:

*mzdysn bgy 'rthstr MRKAn MRKA 'yr 'n MNW ctry MN yzd'n; mazdēs̄n bay
Ardashīr šāhān šāh Ērān kē čīhr az yazdān*

“Ardashir, Persian king of kings, descendant of Madaperest gods”.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ al-Masʿūdī (2004): 141.

⁵⁶ PATTERSON, 2017: 186.

⁵⁷ *SNS-I*, 22-23; ALRAM, 2008: 17-18; DARYAEE, 2010: 250-252. For more information and contrasting analysis on the subject, see GÖBL, 1971: 7 and 42; ALRAM, 2007: 227-242; SHAYEGAN, 2003: 369-371; SELLWOOD, WHITTING and WILLIAMS, 1985: 17-18.



Fig. 2 (a-b). Silver Drachm of Ardashir I, Mardin Museum (Turkey), Inv. No: 18209; (after YÜCEL, 2018: Levha 1, no: 2).

The fire altar on the reverse of the coin clearly depicts Ardashir as a humble protector of the temple of Anahita. However, this humble position of the king is more complex than it may seem. While the king's temple prayers and rituals were not made visible when the king first came to power, now they are made visible and tangible. These images made him a cult figure of the Sasanian reign in later periods. Similarly, in the inscription engraved next to the aforementioned relief, there exist the following statements manifesting political propaganda just like the coins:

*Ptkly znH mzdysn bgy 'rthštr mlk'n mlk' 'yr'n mn' ctry mn yzt'n brH bgy p'pky mlk' ptkly znH 'whwrmzdy .y.*⁵⁸

“This is the figure of the Mazda-worshipping god, Ardaxsir king of kings of Iran who is from the lineage of deities, the son of the god, king Pabag. This is the figure of the god Ohrmazd.”⁵⁹

After introducing himself as the loyal subject of god and the legitimate sovereign of Iran region, the king did not forget to draw particular attention to the figure representing god. This figure created an image where god and the king

⁵⁸ ŠKZ (1978): 281-282.

⁵⁹ DARYAAE, 1999: 27-28.

became coequal, which is contrary to ascension to the presence of god, i.e. *me'raj*.⁶⁰ While supporting the Pauline doctrine in which Messiah is said to be the image of god, and the coequality of Father and Son, Athanasius interprets this doctrine as follows, making analogy to the image of the emperor which he called 'idea' and 'form': "I and the Emperor are one, I am him, and he is me".⁶¹ That was what Ardashir clearly declared to his subjects and enemies. On the other hand, while the king meant to show the esoteric relationship between himself and the god to his subjects and successors, he made god a 'worldly' figure just like himself. The political objectives of the king brought the god to earth and made him coequal with a mortal body. In other words, while Ardashir carried himself beyond history and time, he materialised the god as a subject of history.

This religious portrayal of Ardashir I and his policies was naturally adopted by his successors. With the rapid rise of the third-century priest Kerdir, politics and religion were yet more closely joined to one another. This led to the emergence of new problems in politics and society, as well as a reorientation of the state's functions. In the next section, we will elaborate on how the state system and religious rhetoric of the ruling power are integrated into each other within the context of Kerdir and Mani conflict.

Kerdir and Mani

Above, this article explored the Sasanian dynasty's attempts to unify political power and religion and to build a cultural and political identity on that religion. As a man of religious authority who saw the reigns of six Sasanian sovereigns, it was the third-century priest Kerdir who was the real agent in the state's monopolisation of religion. Kerdir was awarded a religious rank at an early age during the reign of Ardashir I, but important information about his role is found in Naqš-e Rostam, at Ka'be-ye Zartošt (ŠKZ), the *Res gestae* of King Shapur (240-270).⁶² In addition to Shapur's achievements, ŠKZ contains important information about high state officials and their titles. According to this text, Kerdir, also mentioned in lists of high state officials from the reign of Ardashir, held the religious title *ēhrbed*.⁶³ He has an exceptional position in the history of Sasanians because he is the only exception to the rule that nobody, but the king of kings could order the engraving of an official inscription engraved. There are four epitaphs in the name of Kerdir, found in Sar Mašhad, Naqš-e Rostam, Ka'be-ye Zartošt

⁶⁰ For a similar discussion see GARIBOLDI, 2004: 32.

⁶¹ KANTOROWICZ, 1957: 440.

⁶² ŠKZ (1999) § 49.

⁶³ TAFAZZOLĪ (1378/1999: 298) has argued that it is unclear whether or not Kerdir was given this rank by Ardashir. I believe the title given to Kerdir in ŠKZ is actually a title given to him during the reign of Shapur I.

and Naqš-e Rajab. The epitaph in Naqš-e Rajab includes a relief of Kerdir on the left of the epitaph.

Of the four, the epitaph in Naqš-e Rajab⁶⁴ has been identified as original.⁶⁵ Ardashir's charisma and religious sensitivity led to the foundation of the Sasanian dynasty on a religious base. Kerdir systematised this religious tradition that was inherited from Ardashir's reign.⁶⁶ Kerdir's contributions to the Sasanian views of church and state a longstanding influence in the region. As noted above, in *Letter of Tansar*, Tansar,⁶⁷ says that "Religion and state are born from the same womb; one cannot stand still without the other."⁶⁸ This expression of the Sasanian worldview became so famous that it was be quoted by historians of the Islamic period. Indeed, in his *Muqaddimah*, Ibn-Khaldun occasionally emphasises the necessity of keeping religion and state together, showing that the worldview that started with Sasanians continued during the Islamic period.⁶⁹ Similarly, there are number of remarks regarding the interdependence of religion and state during the Sasanian period in the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsi, a master of Persian literature.⁷⁰ While we cannot argue that the foundation and development of the Sasanian empire was driven only by religious motivations, and we cannot interpret the politics of this period based only on religious motivations, it should be noted that from time to time priests gained enough power to dismiss kings and assign new rulers. Because of their religious and political positions in the empire, powerful clergy could maintain their own agenda that was not compatible with that of the kings.⁷¹ However, their religious service resulted from the king and his state. In fact, we can say that despite any attempts at independence from the clergy, there was a total union between the kingdom and religion.⁷²

Sasanians were not oblivious to the policies of the Roman Empire to their West. Therefore, they could not develop all their policies from their religion alone. Nevertheless, in domestic affairs priests like Kerdir could sometimes radically affect the policies of the state. For example, Yazdgerd I (399-420) was declared a sinner by Zoroastrian priests because he was tolerant of Christians as well as followers of other religions. Especially in the early period of the Sasanian state, until the end of the reign of Shapur II, political policies were created that were completely in line with religious provisions, and new formula were developed without abolishing those

⁶⁴ See GIGNOUX, 1991, for the translation of Kerdir's inscriptions and a detailed and technical analysis.

⁶⁵ TAFAZZOLĪ, 1378/1999: 298-299.

⁶⁶ See PANAINO, 2016: 53-60.

⁶⁷ Some have said that Tansar and Kerdir are the same person. However, TAFAZZOLĪ (1378/1999: 33-34) claims that this is not possible.

⁶⁸ BOYCE, 1968: 33-34.

⁶⁹ Esp. See. Ibn Khaldun (2007) I: III, IV-V-VI.

⁷⁰ Ferdowsi (2016): 662-684; also see DARYAEE, 1378/1999: 292.

⁷¹ PATTERSON, 2017: 187.

⁷² CHOKSY, 1988: 39.

provisions. It has been claimed that the early Sasanians tried to establish a new interconnection between the religion and of state authority.⁷³

Sasanians, as the above suggests, also had non-Zoroastrian subjects. So, granted that Zoroastrianism was such a focal point in government, how did Sasanians treat other peoples under their rule? This depended on where those people lived. While Sasanians developed policies in strict compliance with Zoroastrianism in the region called *Ērānšahr*, they were more politically focused in those regions which fell outside *Ērānšahr*. In other words, the Sasanians defined *Ērānšahr* with political, cultural and religious arguments and gathered Iranians under the rule of a new dynasty, granting them legal privileges.⁷⁴ After achieving significant success against Romans, Shapur I revised the policies and political ideology of the Sasanians.⁷⁵ They started using the term *anērān* (non-Iranian) for regions which were under the rule of Sasanians but had a non-Zoroastrian population.⁷⁶ In fact, the classification such as good religion and bad religion can also be considered as the determinant of the ideological as well as geographical boundaries between *Erān ud anērān* (Iranians and non-Iranians).⁷⁷ Thereby the drawbacks for non-Zoroastrian groups under Sasanian rule were eliminated. However, in domestic policies within *Ērānšahr*, the Sasanian state would test the limits of its power against religious minorities, which it perceived as a threat, with the emergence of Mani.

Mani, who was born in Mesopotamia on 8 *Nīsān* (14 April) 216,⁷⁸ declared his prophecy in approximately 240, when Shapur I took over the Sasanian throne.⁷⁹ During Ardashir I's reign, Mani travelled to India in order to spread his teachings, returning to Iran after the king's death.⁸⁰ It should be noted that Mani had a remarkable number of supporters in Sasanian country at that time.⁸¹ As soon as he returned to Iran, Mani came into the presence of Shapur I and dedicated *Šābuhragān*.⁸² Mani had written this booklet in the Pahlavi language so as to explain his teaching to the king,

⁷³ SHAKED, 1994: 35.

⁷⁴ GNOLI, 1989: 137-138.

⁷⁵ SHAYEGAN, 2013: 806.

⁷⁶ For a detailed discussion see YÜCEL (2018: 55-95). Furthermore, it was possible to treat non-Zoroastrian groups differently. In a sense, the foundations of Ottoman Empire's the economic and political arrangement for non-Muslim groups were laid in the regions which fell outside the sacred land of Zoroastrianism but under the reign of the Sasanian dynasty. See FRYE, 1983: 132; It is also known that this expression is used on Shapur I's coins see ALRAM *et. al.*, 2007: 11-40, and YÜCEL, 2017: 334-341.

⁷⁷ For a similar discussion see PAYNE, 2016: 29.

⁷⁸ TARDIEU, 2008: 1-2.

⁷⁹ It is claimed that Ardashir I, father of Shapur, handed over the throne to Shapur while he was alive. That would mean that Shapur was coronated in 239/240 a.d., before Ardashir I died. However, TAQIZADEH (1943: 41) suggests 242/243. Mani gives detailed information on the coronation of Shapur in his Codex. SUNDERMANN (1990: 295-299) comparing this codex to other sources, took the years 240/41 as the date of both Shapur's coronation and the beginning of Mani's activities.

⁸⁰ For Mani's travel to India and the existence of Manichaeism in the region see SUNDERMANN, 1986: 11-19; CHRISTENSEN, 1368/1989: 263; LIEU, 1999: 6.

⁸¹ IBRAHIM, 1994: 60.

⁸² For the translation of *Šābuhragān* see MacKENZIE, 1979: 500-534 and MacKENZIE, 1980: 238-310.

likely in an attempt to gain a powerful monarch's support for spreading his teachings).⁸³ Shapur considered Mani's teachings as 'the revision of Zoroastrianism',⁸⁴ However, Mani's doctrines stipulated that Zoroastrianism was imperfect.⁸⁵ Moreover, Mani claimed that the religions preceding his (*dyn 'y pyšyng'n; dīn ī Pēšēngān*) were corrupt,⁸⁶ that he was called to fix their corruption, and that he was the last prophet.⁸⁷ In addition, Mani and his followers rejected the rituals of Zoroastrian priests and claimed that they were not the rightful representatives of Zoroastrian teachings.⁸⁸ Perhaps, the Sasanians' main concern was not only religion but it could be political.⁸⁹

He did not choose Mani's teachings over Zoroastrianism, but Shapur did not prevent Mani from spreading his religious teachings,⁹⁰ although Manichaeism did not enjoy prestige in the Sasanian palace.⁹¹ Mani was well aware of the strict religious attitudes of Zoroastrian priests but he did not hesitate to gain their hatred in order to win favor in the king's eyes and spread his teachings.⁹² Their opinions are reflected in later texts, as almost all sources from the early Islamic period describe Mani as a *zandīq* i.e. 'heretic'.⁹³ Mani caused uneasiness not only among the members of Zoroastrianism, but also among Christian religious leaders, who also discredited Mani due to his Persian origins.⁹⁴ Manichaeans were considered as a group of people who had to be expelled from Iranian territory. For instance, Kerdir tried to introduce Manichaeans as religious deviants who were disrupting the political order.⁹⁵

⁸³ en-Nedim (2017): 843) says that Mani wrote seven books in total, one of them being written in the Pahlavi language (*Šābuhragān*), and six of them being written in Syriac. See also HUTTER, 1993: 3-4.

⁸⁴ BOYCE, 1979: 113.

⁸⁵ BOYCE, 1979: 112.

⁸⁶ HUTTER, 1993: 2-3.

⁸⁷ Manichaean sources accept Mani's prophecy. However, early Islamic works call Mani a 'heretic', as mentioned above, rather than a prophet. The most important discussion of this term would be al-Bīrūnī's, given that al-Bīrūnī read the books written by Mani himself along with other Manichaean works. In this regard, al-Bīrūnī and en-Nedim took Manichaeism the most seriously and wrote the most systematic treatments of in Islamic literature. For Mani's claim to prophecy, see al-Bīrūnī (1879): 189-190; For Mani's claim to prophecy and teachings see CHRISTENSEN, 1368/1989: 265 ff.

⁸⁸ LIEU, 1999: 10.

⁸⁹ BIVAR, 1983: 97.

⁹⁰ WIDENGREN, 1983: 969.

⁹¹ KREYENBROEK, 2008: 11.

⁹² When Shapur began his excursions against Rome, Manichaean missionaries were operating on the boundaries of two empires. Mani himself wrote that at that time he had made a trip to Adiabene, a boundary between Sasanian and Roman Empires. Mani probably made it to Upper Mesopotamia with Shapur's army. In the *Cologne Mani Codex*, it is written that Mani visited Edessa, a claim based on some quotes from the manuscripts of Mani (LIEU, 1999: 38); Also, for Mani's teachings, see, HUTTER 1993: 3.

⁹³ Chronicles such as Ṭabarī, al-Mas'ūdī, and Ebn al-Balkhī mention Mani as a *zandīq*, and accuse him of serving the devil. In Kerdir's inscriptions, this word appears as *zndyky*. Al-Mas'ūdī says that the word was originally a technical term used for the interpretation of Avesta, but that in the Islamic period the word came to be used to describe ideas that were not in compliance with Islam. For more information, see GARDNER, 2015: 192-193; BEDUHN and MIRECKI, 2007: 3.

⁹⁴ PEDERSEN, 2004: 169.

⁹⁵ PAYNE, 2016: 34.

Kerdir, a prestigious official with significant religious influence in Sasanian palace, must have started his counterpropaganda against Mani during the reign of Shapur, when Mani first started his religious activities.⁹⁶ However, either Kerdir was not able to oppose the king's religious policies or his ideology was still in formation at this time. As a result, Zoroastrian clerics must have been frustrated with Mani's winning favor in Shapur's eyes and Shapur's tolerance of Mani's efforts to spread his teachings. The fact that Manichaeans were subject to oppression and tyranny after the reign of Shapur offers further support to the assumption that Shapur's tolerance afforded them some protection.

Shapur appointed Kerdir as the head of all Fire Temples in *Ērānšahr*. Kerdir summarises the favour he won in Sasanian kings' eyes and his career as follows:

“And after Shapur, King of Kings, went to the place of the gods and his son Hormizd, King of Kings, established himself in the kingdom, Hormizd, king of kings, gave me cap and belt and made my position and honour higher, and at court and from province to province, place to place throughout the empire made me likewise in (the matter of) the rites of the gods more absolute and authoritative, and named me ‘Kirdir the Mobed of Ohrmezd’ in the name of god Ohrmezd. Then also at that time from province to province, place to place, the rites of the gods were much increased, and many Vahram fires were established and many Magians (mowmard) were (made) content and prosperous, and many charters (relating to) fires and Mages (mowun) were sealed.”⁹⁷

That must have been an excellent position and an opportunity that enabled Kerdir to spread his ideas and views throughout the government. His primary goal was to institutionalise the religion that he was leading within the Sasanian state.⁹⁸ Although Kerdir was under the rule of the king and the dynasty, his religious authority brought him in power in domestic affairs and gave him the opportunity to pursue his own agenda.⁹⁹ Kerdir did not hesitate to avail himself of this opportunity, even during the reign of Shapur I. Even he attempted to put his idea of religion into practice throughout the *Ērānšahr*.¹⁰⁰ Taking all other priests under his control, Kerdir took strict precautions against the spread of Manichaeism during Mani's last years in the world. For instance, before Mani could visit a certain place in Sasanian country, Kerdir,

⁹⁶ KREYENBROEK, 2008: 12.

⁹⁷ Cited in LIEU, 1999: 6-7; See also KSM/KNRm/KKZ (1978): 387-397.

⁹⁸ PAYNE, 2016: 24.

⁹⁹ PANAINO, 2016: 53.

¹⁰⁰ CHAUMONT, 1973: 680-681.

without fail, would send priests there to prevent Mani from teaching or resort to other miscellaneous methods to prevent Mani's activities.¹⁰¹

Shapur's special efforts to support Zoroastrianism could not save him from criticism as he had let Mani and his fellows spread their teachings. Due to this, in late period sources he was accused of detracting from Zoroastrianism.¹⁰² However, although Shapur had allowed Manicheans to spread their teachings, he was known to have been bound to the fundamental provisions of Zoroastrianism and lived his life as a loyal member of that religion. There is no evidence to Shapur's supposed apostasy from Zoroastrianism except for a few weak claims. It is just that Mani, with the confidence of privilege bestowed to him by the king, must have conveyed his teachings to people in the palace, including nobles.¹⁰³

Numismatic data also supports the idea that Shapur was loyal to his faith. Although he used the same phrases as his father, Shapur made a major change in the imagery on his coins: on the reverse, he depicted a fire altar with two figures on either side guarding the holy fire.¹⁰⁴ The claim that one of or both of those figures represent the king¹⁰⁵ clearly supports Shapur's loyalty to Zoroastrianism. However, in the *Kephalaia Codex*, Mani's description of Shapur suggests that the king considered Mani to be a revered religious man and scholar and took him under his protection:

“King Shapur took care of me [well]. He wrote letters on my behalf to [all] the princes (ἐὐγενής) saying: ‘Take care of him and assist him well so that no one may stumble and sin against him’. [Still], the testimonies are in your midst that King Shapur took care of me well, and (so are) the [letters] which he wrote on my behalf to every [land] [to the] princes that [they] might take care of me.”¹⁰⁶

Late period sources were mistaken in questioning Shapur's loyalty to his religion. However, we can see that Shapur's religious sensitivity was not reflected in the state's fundamental political structures. The king had just followed a balanced policy among his subjects. Thus, Shapur I struck an alliance of convenience with the Zoroastrian clerics and managed to keep Manichaeans indirectly within this policy.¹⁰⁷ Debates on this issue even gave rise to claims that Shapur I had a secular worldview.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ GARDNER, 2015: 200-201.

¹⁰² al-Mas'ūdī (2004): 143.

¹⁰³ DILLEY, 2015: 39-40.

¹⁰⁴ ALRAM, 2008: 21.

¹⁰⁵ ALRAM, 2008: 21; GÖBL, 1971:18.

¹⁰⁶ DILLEY, 2015: 40.

¹⁰⁷ RUBIN, 2008: 144.

¹⁰⁸ DARYAEE, 2009: 20.

Following death of Shapur, his son Hormizd (270-271) became king, but died about a year later. Hormizd did not object to Mani's teachings either; in fact, he might have showed respect to them and supported them in carrying out their operations.¹⁰⁹ After his brief reign, his brother Wahram I (271-274) replaced him as his successor. Wahram, under the influence of Kerdir, summoned Mani to the palace and had him arrested. Twenty-six days later, towards the end of King Wahram's reign, on the 4th of *Adar* (March) 274,¹¹⁰ Mani died – or was murdered – in the prison where he was held.¹¹¹ Al-Birūnī attributes these fatal words to King Wahram:

“This man has come forward calling people to destroy the world. It will be necessary to begin by destroying him, before anything of his plans should be realised.”¹¹²

According to Ṭabarī, Wahram stated that Mani's teachings were equal to “obeying the devil”.¹¹³

Before being imprisoned by the order of the king, Mani had travelled around the country and tried to spread his doctrines among Zoroastrian subjects. He had also incurred the wrath of Zoroastrian priests, in part due to Kerdir's efforts. In fact, there is a considerable amount of information on his last operations before being arrested.¹¹⁴ It should also be noted that Kerdir had an important position during Wahram's reign and made attempts, on behalf of the king, to undo the harm done to Zoroastrianism through the protection Mani received during Shapur's reign. Since that Kerdir was able to manipulate Wahram easily, he was undoubtedly behind Mani's arrest. Ṭabarī states that Wahram “did not abandon the ways of his ancestors”,

¹⁰⁹ *Fārs-nāma* (1962): 30.

¹¹⁰ Mani's date of death of Mani is controversial. Some researchers (IBRAHIM 2004: 61) claim that Mani died in 277, while Frye (1983: 303) asserts that it was at the beginning of 276. Given the relationship between Zoroastrian priests and kings, it is sometimes thought that Mani might have died at the very beginning of Wahram's the reign. However, there is no evidence for this, and Wahram's kingdom had been established for some time before Mani came into his presence. Therefore, Gardner's suggestion of 4 *Adar* (March) 274 should not be ignored. Daryaee, on the other hand, assumes Wahram I established his kingship between years 271-274; since many researchers set the date of Mani's death in Wahram's last year, disagreements about the years of his reign can explain some differences in the dates given for Mani's death. Kerdir's positive attitude towards, and power over Wahram, may suggest that Mani's death falls closer to the date that the king claimed throne. Kerdir, who was disturbed and annoyed by the activities of Mani, had no reason to wait once he had an opportunity to act. With the support of the king, Kerdir must have accelerated the execution. However, the dialogue between Mani and Wahram might have been delayed. For more detailed information and discussion, see GARDNER 2015: 204-205.

¹¹¹ al-Mas'ūdī (2004): 144; Ṭabarī (1999): 834; al-Bīrūnī (1879): 191. Ṭabarī and al-Bīrūnī recount almost the same story about Mani's death, in which Mani was flayed and his body stuffed with hay and hung on the gate of the city of Gundē Shapur to set an example. It is said that this gate was named as ‘the Gate of Mani’. For more information on how the Sasanian king perceived Mani during this time and about Mani's last days see HINZ, 1971: 485-492.

¹¹² al-Bīrūnī (1879): 191.

¹¹³ Ṭabarī (1999): 834; al-Bīrūnī (1879): 191.

¹¹⁴ See GARDNER 2015: 159-205 (especially p. 199 ff.).

showing Wahram's determination to guard and maintain the religious foundations of the Sasanian state, i.e. his tendency towards religion.¹¹⁵ Taking Sasanian kings' loyalty to tradition into account, we can conclude that, as loyal devotees of the religion, they would not hesitate to retaliate against any danger to the position or provisions of Zoroastrianism. For instance, certain persecutions were aimed at the elite Christian population, whose activities had greater economic and political consequences for the Sasanians. Apparently, the kings pursued a policy of supporting the Zoroastrian clergy in return for religious support of their legitimacy as well as for salvation of the empire; persecutions that were undertaken against other religious groups were consistent with the agenda of the Zoroastrian clergy. The relationship between king and clergy was founded on mutual interests.¹¹⁶

Mani and his supporters, by starting a new religious movement in Sasanian country, were exposed to significant oppression during a period when a strict loyalty to Zoroastrianism was becoming more prevalent. The murder of Mani was a bitter herald of hard times for his supporters, and it is understood that following his death those who had adopted his teachings had to bear the reign's wrath and very severe persecution.¹¹⁷ However, it can be said that this oppression was not maintained systematically throughout Kerdīr's priesthood, and it was not only Manichaeans.¹¹⁸ Christians, Mandeans and Jews also shared this treatment.¹¹⁹ Moreover, it seems the conflict between Kerdīr and Mani began due to religious matters¹²⁰ and then it turned into a religio-political rivalry. The fact that Kerdīr executed the followers of other religions was due to his political concerns rather than religious ideas. Besides, the term 'bad religion' used to define non-Zoroastrians mostly referred to a different religious group. Although this definition is not compatible with the cosmological struggle in Zoroastrianism, it must denote a hierarchical structure rather than something evil.¹²¹

Wahram's reign was a short three years, and he was replaced by Wahram II, a young king, who ruthlessly persecuted members of other religions in the same way. Kerdīr reached the height of his power at this time, and this is probably the period in which he had his inscriptions engraved. Kerdīr harbored a particular esteem for Wahram II, and described him as a "merciful, fair and philanthropic" king in his epitaph, *Ka'be-ye Zartošt*.¹²² Under Kerdīr's influence, the king himself declared Kerdīr to be the spiritual leader of the whole country. Kerdīr, in return, continued to

¹¹⁵ Ṭabarī (1999): 834.

¹¹⁶ For a detailed discussion, see PATTERSON, 2017: 187-193.

¹¹⁷ Ṭabarī (1999): 987; *Fārs-nāma* (1962): 30.

¹¹⁸ PANAINO, 2016: 54-55.

¹¹⁹ KREYENBROEK, 2008: 13; DARYAEE, 2009: 11; for a detailed discussion see PAYNE, 2016: 38-48.

¹²⁰ PIRAS, 2018: 39-40.

¹²¹ PAYNE, 2016: 25 and 30-38; also see REZAKHANI, 2015: 55-70 and MOKHTARIAN, 2015: 99-115 for a thorough discussion on the 'good religion' and 'bad religion' as well as what they refer to.

¹²² TAFAZZOLĪ, 1378/1999: 302.

praise, highlight and confirm the religious and political victories of the king in the inscriptions engraved on his behalf.¹²³ At this point, Zoroastrianism took full control of the state and kingship. While Daryaei justly asserts that religion is not totally monopolised by the state, in the early Sasanian period the state had been monopolised by religion.¹²⁴ The reason why Mani was considered as a threat while Kerdīr was not is that he was out of the king's control.¹²⁵

In his inscriptions, Kerdīr repeatedly implied that there was a special connection between the god and himself, with the apparent goal of making people think that not only he, but also all subjects, would benefit from his doings. In his inscription at *Ka'be-ye Zartošt*, Kerdīr introduces himself as “And I, Kartīr, the magus-chief”¹²⁶ – which is rather a pompous introduction – and states that he is grateful (*spāsī*) to gods for their blessings, probably in terms of his position and contributions to religion, indicating that it was his political career he wished to emphasise rather than his religious position.¹²⁷ In his inscription Naqš-e Rajab, he starts by extending his loyalty to the god/s and asking for the virtue to distinguish *truthfulness* from *evil* (“*ardāyīh ud druwandīh*”) from gods. Again, in this inscription, he includes a list of the titles he was given from the reign of Shapur I to Wahram II.¹²⁸ Kerdīr's services did not end with the death of Wahram II, who was succeeded by his son Wahram III. Wahram III's brief sovereignty lasted approximately 3 months, as since Narseh denied Wahram III's kingship made efforts to overthrow him with the title of *wuzurg šāh Arminān*, coming to the capital Ctesiphon from Armenia to take the throne. During this turmoil, the priests supported Narseh. Wahram III was dethroned, and Narseh established himself as the king (AD. 293-302/3). Kerdīr was one of his supporters. In Narseh's inscription from Pāikūlī, in Kurdistan, Kerdīr is named as Mowbed of Ohrmezd.¹²⁹ In practice, therefore, Kerdīr was close to the only person in charge of the state's religious policy the foundation of Sasanian State to the beginning of fourth century.

Conclusions

Sasanian Kings of the early period attached great importance to the unity of religion and state from the beginning of Ardashir I's reign. In particular, the special connection of the Sasanian dynasty, to the fire altar almost demanded that the family to produce religious policies as they built their state. The influence of this connection lasted for many years. In fact, in the seventh century, the reign of Ardashir was used

¹²³ On this issue see HINZ, 1971: 493-499.

¹²⁴ DARYAEI, 1378/1999: 292.

¹²⁵ GNOLI, 1989: 171.

¹²⁶ SPRENGLING, 1940: 203.

¹²⁷ For a review of Kerdīr's career and his inscriptions, see SKJÆRVØ, 2013: 558.

¹²⁸ DARYAEI, 1380/2001: 6-7 (KNRb § 1-10 and 27-30); Also see GRENET, 1990: 87-93.

¹²⁹ For Pāikūlī inscription, see HUMBACH and SKJÆRVØ, 1983: §15.

as an example of the ideal state. Finding room to spread in the areas controlled by Sasanian monarchs, religions such as Christianity and Manichaeism forced Zoroastrian priests (and sometimes kings) to take strict precautions against their religion and evangelism. Priests, who sought to protect their own followers, on the one hand, and kings, serving as the guards of Zoroastrianism, on the other, placed the real politics of the Sasanian state on religious bases with absolute faith. Echoes of this policy are seen in later centuries.

At first, the emphasis on the unity of religion and state, which seems to have emerged alongside practical and even tolerant religious policies, was soon remodelled with political goals. This attitude worked for both the *šāhānšāh* and the clergy, and also became a way of consolidating their position. Therefore, the bond between the kingdom and its religion was considered necessary for the continuity of royal legitimacy. The kings emphasised their personal piety in accordance with the religious history of society and used it as a political basis for the continuity of the royal legitimacy. It should be noted, however, that philosophical analysis of transcendental beliefs in this period may sometimes hinder our understanding of the kings' real political attitudes and perspectives.

From the reign of Ardashir I, the kings adopted the title 'king of kings' and claimed to be *čīhr az yazdan* (descended from the lineage of gods). From a socio-political point of view, this indicates a strong relationship between faithful Zoroastrian subjects and the palace. Thus, Ardashir's claim was more about his deeply esoteric view of the world and the manifestation of the god than a conscious political reflection. Therefore, although Sasanian state enjoyed remarkable military achievements against, for example, Rome to the West and Central Asia in the East, they failed to draw the local people of the places they had conquered to the state religion. The role of Zoroastrianism in the state was not seen in such cases, as if the state were unable to come to good terms with conquered peoples, it was also unable to maintain its military power over their land.

Manichaeism, however, emerged in a later period in which strict Zoroastrian faith had come to the forefront. This made it inevitable that the followers of Mani would be subject to severe persecutions. The State wished to maintain its protected power over an area where the teachings of Mani could never be allowed to reach. Therefore, Mani and Manichaeans were subject to the wrath of both kings and priests in Iran. Despite the lack of sources for popular views of Manichaeans, considering the harsh attitudes of both kings and priests towards Manichaeans, it is reasonable to conclude that the general population was unfriendly to Mani and his followers as well. It is clear from the example of Kerdir that priests did not wish to lose their connection with the god/s or their power with the monarchy. Moreover, the kings, who acted as the guards of the priests as well as of the religion, wished to maintain their privileged positions before gods. In the Sasanian empire, both kings and priests left their visible identities and took on a representation of the divine. This partnership

of the kings, said to be descended from the gods or reflections thereof, and Kerdir, who experienced a spiritual *ascension*, gave rise to a sociological cycle founded on religion in Iran. Although Kerdir himself was forgotten in the following years, the activities he carried out in the name of religion and politics remained vivid in the collective memory, as did his approach to Manichaeism, such that the death of Mani and the persecution his followers endured acquired the power of legends in the later Manichaean sources.

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