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## ARDAXŠĪR AND THE SASANIANS' RISE TO POWER\*

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Who was Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān, how did he come to power and what was the origin of his family which came to be known as Sāsān? These are questions that cannot be given definitive answers at the moment. There are avenues of inquiry, however, which allows to shed some light on the mysterious background of this upstart in the province of Persis / Fārs in the third century CE. We always should be weary of late Sasanian – Early Islamic sources reflecting on the early Sasanian period. But if these sources vary in their judgments on the third century CE, especially in regard to Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān and the house of Sāsān, then we might conclude that there were varied constructions of the history, story, and myth of origins and personage of the founder of the Sasanian dynasty.

G. Widengren long ago presented a detailed version of the rise to power of Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān and the Sasanians in the third century CE.<sup>1</sup> His study was based mainly on the Arabic and non-native Sasanian sources, especially taking into consideration the *Nihayat al-'arab* which gave some alternative narratives to that of Tabarī. In this article I intend to do the same by particularly taking into consideration three Persian sources which, however late, do provide interesting information on Ardaxšīr. The first is the medieval Persian translation of *Tajarib*

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<sup>1</sup> Widengren 1971, 711–782.

*al-Umam fi akhbar mulūk al-‘arab wa al-‘ajam*,<sup>2</sup> second, *Zainu’l-Akhbār*,<sup>3</sup> and more importantly the recent edition of *Tārīkh-e Bal‘amī*<sup>4</sup> which provide important observations not found in al-Tabarī and other texts. These sources juxtaposed by the iconographic and the numismatic evidence which have been the subject of an excellent study by M. Alram and R. Gyselen can provide us with a new look at Ardaxšīr’s rise.

R.N. Frye made the important observation that, in Iranian history, we are usually faced with sources that tend to fit facts into a preexisting pattern. Thus, in the sources on Sasanian history, Ardaxšīr is given an epic treatment which may not be close to “actual” history.<sup>5</sup> Recently J. Wiesehöfer has given a much more sober image of Ardaxšīr and his career by counterbalancing the Classical sources with the Syriac, Armenian and Perso-Arabic sources.<sup>6</sup> This has been followed by M. Alram’s reconstruction based on the numismatic evidence.<sup>7</sup> I tend to agree with Frye’s observation and would like to emphasize that the Perso-Arabic sources must be read and used with the utmost care for the early history of the Sasanian Empire through the time of Khusro I in the sixth century CE. The same must be said for the Middle Persian texts, such as the *Kār-nāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* (The Vitae of Ardaxšīr, the Son of Pābag).<sup>8</sup> This is not so much due to the lack of the quality and importance of these works, rather it is because during the time of Khusro I much of Iranian history was constructed by the court and the clergy to fit the world-view of the late Sasanian world. Thus, an ideal image of the past was created to fit the aspirations of Khusro I, and Ardaxšīr was given treatment in this light by the Sasanian authors.<sup>9</sup>

Naturally, the Perso-Arabic historians relied on these late Sasanian sources so they could not have done any better than to relate a ready made image and narrative on the history of Ardaxšīr and the early Sasanians. Still, we can see certain disagreements among the sources for this period which can help us decipher the mysteries of the house of Sāsān. On the other hand, the corroborative evidence of the Middle Persian and Perso-Arabic sources can also provide us with some clues into the historiography of Ardaxšīr. I am inclined to believe that while there was a single *Book of Kings* (*Xwadāy-nāmag*) in the Sasanian pe-

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<sup>2</sup> *Tajārīb al-Umam fi akhbar mulūk al-‘arab wa al-‘ajam* 1994. I should like to thank Mrs. F. Jahanpour for her kindness in providing this hard-to-find text in Mashad.

<sup>3</sup> Abū Sa‘īd ‘Abdul Ḥayy b. al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Mahmūd Gardīzī, *Zainu’l-Akhbār* 2005.

<sup>4</sup> *Tārīkh-nāme-ye Tabarī: A 963 AD Persian Translation attributed to Bal‘amī* 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Frye 1975, 237.

<sup>6</sup> Wiesehöfer 1987, 371–376.

<sup>7</sup> Alram 1999, 67–76; and more recently and in more detail his 2003, 21–31.

<sup>8</sup> Grenet 2003.

<sup>9</sup> For how Ardaxšīr’s memory may have been manipulated by Xusrō I, see Daryaei 2003, 33–45.

riod,<sup>10</sup> by the early Islamic period there were variety of the historical tradition of ancient Iran (*Siyar al-mulūks*).<sup>11</sup> This means that alternative traditions and stories about the Sasanians and the history of the past was put to writing by authors with varied contents and lengths.

In this essay I will look at the evidence for the early history of Ardaxšīr in the province of Persis / Pārs / Fārs in the third century CE and his usurpation of the throne at Istakhr, and the province of Persis / Fars. That is, I will situate Ardaxšīr and his relations with the kings of Persis who ruled over Istakhr and the Arsacids; his father Pābag who rose from Khīr, and the brother of Ardaxšīr, Šābuhr and Sāsān, the protogenitor of the dynasty. Thus, I hope to strip down the epic and ideal view of Ardaxšīr, as much as one can with late sources, and give a more sober picture of Ardaxšīr, however epic-like his feats may have been in the early third century CE. The central problem of this task is that our sources are either late (Perso-Arabic), or foreign and hostile (Greek and Armenian), or concerned with external religious matters (Syriac) which tend to be helpful mainly for chronology. Material culture, specifically coinage along with the rock reliefs are of the utmost importance to this investigation, and it is these sources that need to be juxtaposed with the literary documents to achieve a more balanced view of the origins of the Sasanians.

## The Rulers of Istakhr

After Alexander the Great's death, the province that Ardaxšīr I eventually came to control was in the hands of a series of rulers who had their seat at Istakhr. Their coinage bears such names as Baydād, Ardaxšahr / Ardaxšīr I, Wāhbarz, Wādfradād I, and Wādfradād II.<sup>12</sup> Wiesehöfer has shed much light on this dark period of Persian history and has given us a perspective on the relations between these kings and their Seleucid and, eventually, Arsacid overlords.

These early rulers in Persis minted coins with the legend *prtrk' zy 'lhy' / fratarakā ī bayān*. As later Persis coinage has rulers who call themselves MLKA / *šāh* we may assume that the Fratarakā were not independent rulers and were probably subordinate to the Seleucids.<sup>13</sup> The meaning of this legend has been subject to several important studies by Wiesehöfer,<sup>14</sup> Skjærvø,<sup>15</sup> and Panaino.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Shahbazi 1990, 208–229.

<sup>11</sup> Rozen 2004, 50–52.

<sup>12</sup> For the list of kings see Wiesehöfer 1994, 114.

<sup>13</sup> Most recently see Wiesehöfer 2007, 37–49.

<sup>14</sup> Wiesehöfer 1994, 105–110.

<sup>15</sup> Skjærvø 1994, 93–104.

<sup>16</sup> Panaino 2002, 265–288.

Panaino takes the legend to mean “the governor (for the sake/for the account=in the name) of the Gods,” referring to the gods, namely Ahuramazdā, Mithra and Anāhitā, who were upheld by the Achaemenids.<sup>17</sup> Skjærvø, with whom Panaino agrees in principle, takes the legend to mean “the one (set) ahead (of others) of = by the god.”<sup>18</sup> For now let us take the legend to mean “Fratarakā of the Gods.” These Fratarakās were protectors of the *bayān* “Gods,” but these *bayān* I believe were not Ahuramazdā, Mithra and Anāhitā as Panaino believes, but the Achaemenid kings themselves. Callieri, in an important article on the iconography of the coinage of the Fratarakās, has made the very important observation that the paraphernalia, namely the banner, the funerary monuments and the gesture of the person standing before it all, emphasize a tie with the Achaemenid kings. D. Potts also takes this line of reasoning, but believes that the Fratarakās may have been ignorant of the original function of the funerary monuments of Ka’ba and Zendan, but they still had an ideological significance for them.<sup>19</sup> I believe, as Callieri has rightly pointed out, that the *bayān* are none other than the Achaemenid kings who after their demise were deified by the Seleucids.<sup>20</sup> This may be the reason for which we may read the title *bay* on the coinage of Ardaxšīr and the early Sasanians as “divine,” in its Hellenistic sense.<sup>21</sup>



Wahbarz

On the coins of the Persis lord Wahbarz, for example, we find the legend *whwbrz prtrk' zy 'lhy' br prs* “Wahbarz, Fratarakā of the Gods, son of a Persian.” This is important because the early Sasanian legend *MNW ctry MN yzd'n / kē čīhr az yazdān* “from the race of gods” is reminiscent of the Fratarakā’s title. Thus, the Sasanians combined both the Fratarakā and Persis kings’s traditions

<sup>17</sup> Panaino 2002, 283.

<sup>18</sup> Skjærvø 1994, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Potts 2007, 270–271.

<sup>20</sup> Callieri 1998, 35–36.

<sup>21</sup> Daryae 2008, 68.

into one. This is significant since it suggests that the Persians were influenced by Seleucid propaganda and were not so reactionary in regard to Hellenism.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the *Fratarakā* supported the Seleucids, even when the Arsacids stepped onto the Iranian Plateau to take their place.<sup>23</sup> When the Arsacids took control, they also continued the Seleucid tradition and adopted the existing titles, namely θεοπάτωρ, i.e., “of divine descent.”<sup>24</sup> Even the title later used by the Sasanians, *xwadāy* “lord,” may have been a calque from Greek ἀυτοκράτωρ.<sup>25</sup>

The later kings of Persis had the title of *MLKA* / *šāh* “king.” One of these rulers by the name of Dārāyān II made substantial changes, not only in linguistic matters, but also to the iconographic and the religious traditions.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, it appears that the Sasanian historical memory placed this ruler in the formulaic period of *Dārāy ī Dārāyān*, that is, the time between the two Dariuses. These kings of Persis included Dārāyān I, followed by Wādfradād, Dārāyān II, Ardaxšahr / Ardaxšīr, Wahuxšahr, Wādfradād, Manūčīhr, Ardaxšahr / Ardaxšīr, Manūčīhr,<sup>27</sup> and Nāmbad. These kings all in all seem to have been subservient to the Arsacid kings, as Strabo (15.3.24) tells us and no real disturbance appears to have taken place in Persis.<sup>28</sup> Only once we hear of a revolt in Persis against the Arsacids, and that is contained in the *Chronicle of Arbela*<sup>29</sup> whose factuality is dubious at best.<sup>30</sup>



Dārāyān II

<sup>22</sup> Boyce and Grenet 1991, 110–111. Of course whether the Persians adopted these Hellenic ideas consciously or unconsciously is difficult to ascertain.

<sup>23</sup> Wiesehöfer 1994, 105–108; Wiesehöfer 1999, 335.

<sup>24</sup> Gariboldi 2004, 367, 374, 375.

<sup>25</sup> Chaumont 1975, 93, footnote 17; for the latest study on *xwadāy* see Shayegan 1998, 31–54.

<sup>26</sup> Skjærvø 1997, 93–104.

<sup>27</sup> Frye has made the observation that on the coins the reading of *mnčtry* is uncertain and that it is possible to read it as *Gōčīhr* / *Gōzīhr*, Frye 1975, 241. If this would be the case, then our Perso-Arabic sources may be referring to the following subsequent Persis king who was overthrown by Pābag!

<sup>28</sup> Wiesehöfer 2007, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Wiesehöfer 2007, 41.

<sup>30</sup> For a criticism of this passage see Kettenhofen 1995, 287–319.

The onomastic and iconographic evidence furnished by these coins suggests a remembrance of Achaemenid kings and an attachment to the cult of fire which is basic to Zoroastrianism. Standing on the ruins of the city of Istakhr, one can almost see the Ka'be-ye Zardošt, the image which is struck on the reverse of the coins of the *Fratarakās*, and on the other side, Persepolis looming over both sites. The fact that the coinage of Ardashīr I, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, is similar to the later Persis coins should tell us of a vibrant Persian tradition and the attachment of the various local rulers to it. Yet this does not necessarily suggest that Ardashīr was in any way related to these kings of Persis.

### The House of Sāsān

While there is much that can be said about the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, the origins of the house of Sāsān and of Ardashīr himself is still a mystery. There are so many different stories and legends in regard to the origins of Ardashīr and his family lineage that it makes one hesitant to readily accept any of the versions. One must be mindful that in order to gain legitimacy, an upstart would likely claim descent from the ancient rulers. If he was from a noble house he would have emphasized one version or one lineage, but stories about Ardashīr's origins are so varied that they suggest a search for legitimacy via every tradition that had been passed down by the Persians, some constructed and perhaps those unknown. Foreign sources are mostly unanimous of regarding Ardashīr's unknown lineage. Agathias mentions that Ardashīr's mother was married to Pābag whose lineage was obscure, but whose profession was a leather worker, while Sāsān is made to be a soldier who stays at the house of Pābag and Pābag gives his wife to Sāsān.<sup>31</sup> Syncellus states that Ardashīr was an unknown and undistinguished Persian,<sup>32</sup> while George of Pisidia mentions that he was a slave by station,<sup>33</sup> and the account of Zonaras who says he was from an unknown and obscure background,<sup>34</sup> should be taken into consideration.<sup>35</sup>

Ardashīr of course claimed Sāsān as the patriarch of the dynasty. V.A. Livshits brought to light an ostraca from Central Asia which contained the

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<sup>31</sup> Agathias 1.1.1.

<sup>32</sup> Syncellus 440–441.

<sup>33</sup> Heraclius II, 173–7.

<sup>34</sup> Zonaras XII, 15.

<sup>35</sup> All of the Classical sources including the four mentioned above are found in Dodgeon and Lieu 1994, 9–15.

epigraphic form *ssn* designating *Sāsān* as a deity. But because of its absence in the *Avesta* and the Old Persian documents, it is difficult to know how it was related to the Zoroastrian religion.<sup>36</sup> Recently, Martin Schwartz has shown that the deity represents *Sesen*, an old Semitic god which is found in Ugarit as early as the second millennium BCE.<sup>37</sup> Be that as it may, in the first century CE we find coins in Taxila with the name *Sasa*, which may be connected to *Sāsān* because the emblem on the coin matches the coat-of-arms for Šābuhr I.<sup>38</sup> We also have coinage from a certain Farn-Sāsān in Arochasia who may have been living in the third century and belonged to the Indo-Parthian clan in the East.



Farn-Sāsān from Arachosia (after Alram 1999)

Ph. Gignoux has suggested, *Sāsān* may very well have been known throughout Asia as a protective deity invoked against sorcery. This fact is shown by the existence of a seal which reads in part: *sāsān ham sāsān ī bay ud sāsān pāsbān* “O Sāsān, the same Sāsān who is god and Sāsān the protector.”<sup>39</sup> Whatever or whoever Sāsān was, he was not native to the province of Persis and Sāsān’s origins appears only to the east and west of the Iranian Plateau. Then why would Ardashīr trace his lineage to Sāsān who was not very well-known in Persis? Thus, as far as it can be gathered Sāsān is not native to Persis and appears to be a foreign element.

As mentioned, the stories vary about Ardashīr’s origin and his lineage vis-à-vis Sāsān.<sup>40</sup> Most scholars tend to take Ṭabarī’s account as authentic or more acceptable, where Pābag was the son of Sāsān,<sup>41</sup> while the *Kārnāmag ī Ardashīr ī Pābagān*,<sup>42</sup> like the *Šāhnāme*<sup>43</sup> states that Pābag’s daughter married Sāsān. I believe the *Bundahišn* tradition which may draw on older and non-royal traditions provides a much more interesting lineage (*Bundahišn* XXXV.36): *ardaxšīr ī*

<sup>36</sup> Livshits 1977, 176.

<sup>37</sup> Schwartz 1996, 253–257; Schwartz 1998, 9–13.

<sup>38</sup> Frye 1984, 200.

<sup>39</sup> Gignoux 2001, 72

<sup>40</sup> For all the existing suggestions see Frye 1989, 298–299.

<sup>41</sup> Ṭabarī 1999, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Grenet 2003, I.20, 58–59.

<sup>43</sup> Ferdowsi 2005, 142.

*pābagān kē-š mād duxt sāsān ī weh-āfrīd ...* “Ardaxšīr the son of Pābag, whose mother (is said) to be the daughter Sāsān, son of Weh-āfrīd ...”<sup>44</sup>

In the ŠKZ inscription Sāsān is mentioned not as a king, but simply as a *xwadāy* “lord,” or “nobility.”<sup>45</sup> But Pābag, Ardaxšīr’s father is mentioned in the very same inscription as a *šāh* “king.” Then why would Ardaxšīr claim descent from Sāsān who seems not to have had an illustrious lineage or be of royal stock? Tabarī mentions our mysterious Sāsān as the ruler and custodian of the Anāhīd fire-temple at Istakhr, while his son Pābag became king of Istakhr. This seems to be in accordance with the ŠKZ inscription and so it represents the official position. Early Islamic sources based on Sasanian tradition emphasize the religiosity of Sāsān and his devotion and even mention him as an ascetic.<sup>46</sup> In fact Sāsān’s lineage is located in India,<sup>47</sup> the bastion of asceticism. Only in this way could Ardaxšīr claim to have both priestly and royal lineage, meaning the story of Pābag as the king of Istakhr marrying the daughter of the priest (Sāsān) of the most important fire-temple at Istakhr.<sup>48</sup> It is in this manner that Ardaxšīr could manufacture the double (king-priest) lineage topos which is very much part of Sasanian religio-political tradition.<sup>49</sup> But it is perhaps not surprising that in the priestly tradition the religious origin of Ardaxšīr is emphasized, becoming connected with royalty, while the epic / royal tradition such as the *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* emphasizes the royal origin and then its connection with the religious tradition of Ardaxšīr.

Some iconographical features of Pābag’s coinage and imagery may provide us with some clues. On the earliest coinage of Pābag with his elder son, Šābuhr, his headgear is unlike any of the Arsacid or Persis kings. It is only Šābuhr who presents himself on the obverse (first) wearing the cap symbolizing kingship or political power.<sup>50</sup> The royal narrative informs us that Pābag dethroned the king of Istakhr, Gozīhr.<sup>51</sup> Pābag however, had designated his elder son, Šābuhr, and coins were struck showing the two on either side.<sup>52</sup> Ardaxšīr did not accept this

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<sup>44</sup> *Bundahišn: Zoroastrische Kosmogonie und Kosmologie* 2005. Pakzad, I believe correctly deletes <*ī pābag ud pid*> from the passage, p. 398. One may make a comparison with the Carolingians in Germany who are maternally descendant of Pipin of Heristal, see Geary 1988, 190. I owe this reference to Khodadad Rezakhani.

<sup>45</sup> ŠKZ 1; Huyse 1999, 22.

<sup>46</sup> Ḥamza al-Isfahanī 1363, 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Tarīkh Bal‘amī* vol. I, 599.

<sup>48</sup> *Tarīkh Bal‘amī* vol. I, 599.

<sup>49</sup> For all passages where the idea of the relation between religion and royalty see Gignoux 1984, 73–75.

<sup>50</sup> For these early coins, see Gyselen 2004, 88–89.

<sup>51</sup> Agathias 2.27, 61. For Pābag and his relationship to Ardaxšīr see Frye 1985, 445–455; also see Shaki 1990, 78–80.

<sup>52</sup> Lukonin 1987, 268–269.



and removed his brother and those who stood before him and subsequently had coins minted in the image of his father and himself. But in the coinage of Ardaxšīr-Pābag, the father has the kingly crown of Persis.



Graffito of Pābag at Persepolis Image of Pābag on Ardaxšīr's coinage

In our sources Pābag is said to have been the priest of the fire-temple of Anāhīd at the city of Istakhr and this must have been a stage for the rallying of the local Persian warriors who were devoted to the cult of this deity.<sup>53</sup> Pābag's priestly function can also be seen from a graffito at Persepolis.<sup>54</sup> Or could it be that the inability of the Persian royalty in the face of Arsacid power caused a priest-king to take the lead and revolt? This is a difficult question to answer, but it would not be the only time in the history of Iran that a holy man or religious leader rose up and attempted the conquest of the Iranian Plateau. Sāsān and Pābag were the priests/care-taker of the Anāhīd fire-temple at Istakhr and so

<sup>53</sup> For a study on the cult of Anāhīd see Chaumont, 1965, 168–171; and also 1958, 154–175. Tabarī 1994, 4 also gives further information.

<sup>54</sup> Herzfeld 1988, 309; Callieri 2006, 129–143. The electronic version of the article is also available online in Transoxiana, 2003, <http://www.transoxiana.com.ar/Eran/Articles/callieri.html>.

Pābag's function vis-à-vis the fire-temple may have given backing to Ardaxšīr's claim to rulership after the initial civil wars.<sup>55</sup>

Anāhīd is important, since she is an object of devotion for heroes, warriors and kings in the Zoroastrian sacred text, the *Avesta* (see Yašt V, *Ābān Yašt*). During the Achaemenid period, in the beginning of the fifth century BCE, Artaxerxes II also worshipped Anāhīd (Anahita) along with Mīhr (Mithra) and Ohrmazd (Ahurā Mazdā). Thus her cult must have been an old one in Persis and the temple may have been a location where the Persian tradition was kept alive. Her warlike character was the symbiosis of ancient Near Eastern (Ištar), Hellenic (Athena/Anaitis) and Iranian traditions which legitimated kingship in the Sasanian period.<sup>56</sup>

We may never know who Sāsān was but his dual function of priest-king of Persepolis-Istakhr is a nice topos. I would suggest that if Pābag was anyone of rank, he was a local ruler at best, taking Tabarī's suggestion that he ruled a small area by the salt lake of Bakhtagān in the south called Khīr.<sup>57</sup> And it is Pābag who first aspired to rule of Istakhr and took it over with his elder son Šābuhr, and not by the order of Ardaxšīr as Tabarī leads us to believe. This is made clear by his coins with his elder son, Šābuhr.



**Obverse:**

*bgy šhpwhry MLKA*

*bgy šābuhr šāh*

**Divine Šābuhr, King**

**Reverse:**

*bgy p'pky MLKA*

**Divine Pābag, King**

Pābag playing on the religious persona is made manifest from his graffiti at Persepolis which match his early coinage. One should also mention his name as an important pointer to his religious function as Pābag is a hypocastic from Pāb "father."<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, Ardaxšīr at the time may have been in the south far away from the Pābag-Šābuhr takeover of Istakhr. Could it be that Ardaxšīr was an usurper in his own family who upon seeing his father taking charge of Istakhr and nominating his elder son and the brother of Ardaxšīr,

<sup>55</sup> Razmjou has mentioned to me that he has identified the Anāhīd temple at Istakhr and has shown the location based on the pictures from Herzfeld's excavations which were kindly provided to me by Ali Mousavi.

<sup>56</sup> Piras 2004, 251.

<sup>57</sup> Khīr is mentioned to be around the southeastern tip of Lake Bakhtigān, Tabarī 1999, 4.

<sup>58</sup> Gignoux 2003, 54, hence Papa / Baba as father or head, leader is of importance. I would like to thank B. Mokhtarian and M. Schwartz for the discussion in relation to the etymology of Pābag.

began his campaign initially not against the Arsacid king Ardawān, but his own father and then brother? This scenario, I believe seems most likely. M. Alram has made the ingenious suggestion that Šābuhr and Ardaxšīr may be portraying the dead image of Pābag on their early coinage.<sup>59</sup> If so then Ardaxšīr is only rebelling against his own brother. This may also explain why Ardawān did not send troops at first to meddle in the family feud. Again, these are only points of speculation and it goes to show that whoever Ardaxšīr was, he probably did not have a strong claim to any throne and was not in line for rulership.

### Ardaxšīr: Divine Lineage and Rise

When Ardaxšīr came to power, he constructed an elaborate genealogy which is captured in the *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* (IV.19): *ardaxšīr ī kay ī pābagān ī az tōhmag ī sāsān nāf ī dārā šāh* “Ardaxšīr the Kayānid, the son of Pābag, from the race of Sāsān, from the family of King Dārāy.”<sup>60</sup> When looking at this line, however late, one gets the sense that every possible connection to divinity, royalty and nobility is being exploited by Ardaxšīr, which likely suggests that he was heir to none of them! The Kayānid dynasty in the *Avesta*, the mysterious protective deity Sāsān, and the connection to Dārāy (probably the conflation of the Achaemenids, Darius I and Darius II, and the Persis kings, Dārāyān I and Dārāyān II) all suggest falsification of his lineage.

Who else would have been better-informed about protective deities and the gods other than the care-takers of Anāhid fire-temple at Persis? Ardaxšīr’s eventual connections, however, would have given him the prestige of being the first human to be shown receiving the diadem of rulership from Ohrmazd, something that was not even shown in the Achaemenid reliefs. Perhaps a noble Persian would not have needed to be shown receiving the diadem from Ohrmazd; only an upstart needed to make the claim of being from the race of the *yazdān*. Looking at early Sasanians rock reliefs, A. Gariboldi has observed that they show the king and the gods as having similar physical features, size, clothes, horse and harnesses.<sup>61</sup> In terms of proportion, the Sasanian king is an exact mirror image of the *yazatas* / *yazdān*. One has to wonder about the power and belief of the early Sasanian kings about themselves and where they stood and what their function and relation to gods and men were. It is in this vein that we can understand

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<sup>59</sup> Alram 1999, 22.

<sup>60</sup> *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, in Nyberg 1964, 6.18–19; and most recently *Kārnāmg ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān* in Grenet 2003, III.19, 68–69.

<sup>61</sup> Gariboldi 2004, 32.

*Dēnkard* IV<sup>62</sup> and *Nāme-ye Tansar*<sup>63</sup> questioning Ardashīr's legitimacy and his attempt at changing the tradition.<sup>64</sup> I believe Ḥamza al-Isfahanī has an important observation which makes sense in this context when he states: "Ardaxšīr the son of Babak also when he killed the Arsacids (*mulūk al-twayif*) and became established and the people took obedience to him, he, in the manner of Alexander (Iskandar) recorded his life and orders and history and wars, he deleted the events that took place before and forgot them so that the popularity of his life and events become greater..."<sup>65</sup> This is why even the priestly tradition questions Ardashīr's legitimacy and he has to construct a super-natural lineage.

The inscription of Šābuhr I does, however, mention that Pābag was the father of Ardashīr, but Ardashīr was neither the only son, nor the eldest. Even here we see an ambitious man who was contemplating an empire from the fringes of the province of Persis. Perso-Arabic sources state that Ardashīr was the *argbed* of Dārābgird in eastern Persis when he began his campaign. However, we find the earliest physical evidence for Ardashīr at Ardashīr-xwarrah (Fērōz-ābād also known as Gōr), on the southern (fringes) of the province of Persis. I suggest that it is from here, far from Khīr, the stronghold of Pābag, and Istakhr, the stronghold of the kings of Persis, and still further away from the king of kings, Ardawān, that Ardashīr began his campaign.<sup>66</sup>



Fārs/Persis after Grenet 2003

<sup>62</sup> Adhami 2003, 226–227.

<sup>63</sup> Boyce 1968, 47.

<sup>64</sup> Also Ḥamza al-Isfahanī, 93; for Ardashīr's use of time reckoning and millennial activity set by Tansar, see Ḥamza al-Isfahanī, 92–93.

<sup>65</sup> Ḥamza al-Isfahanī, 176.

<sup>66</sup> Alram suggests that after the conquest of Istakhr he went to Ardashīr-Xwarrah.

Thus, whenever he is mentioned in his early career, Ardaxšīr is farthest away from the center of Persis, *i.e.*, Istakhr and the center of power. We do not have any evidence that the kings of Persis were antagonistic towards the Arsacids. Thus, there may have been an amicable relationship between the imperial center and the province of Persis.<sup>67</sup>

I would like to suggest that Ardaxšīr moved from the far away Dārābgird to Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah which was behind the mountains and still defensible, but closer to the center of power in Persis, Istakhr, when Pābag's revolt took place. However mountainous the road from Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah is to Istakhr, it is still an easier route to traverse than from Darabgerd to Istakhr. It is very important to note that the earliest rock relief portraying Ardaxšīr receiving the diadem of Rulership in a crude style with only a small retinue is from Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah. Following Tabarī and contrary to Alram, he could not have taken control of Istakhr and then moved to Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah and placed such a relief. Otherwise, if he had taken Istakhr, he would have first placed a much cruder coronation scene than the one that exists of him at Naqš-e Rajab. Ardaxšīr placed the first rock relief at Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah, the center of his revolt and then placed more elaborate one at Naqš-e Rajab, showing his family and retinue right after his take over of Istakhr in 211/212 CE.



Ardaxšīr-xwarrah after Alram & Gyselen

Naqš-e Rajab after Alram & Gyselen

Ardaxšīr's beginnings may be connected to his first rock-relief which shows him receiving the diadem of rulership from Ohrmazd in front of his retinue at Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah. Based on the date supplied by Šābuhr I's inscription at Haj-

<sup>67</sup> Interestingly, both cities connected with Ardaxšīr, Dārābgird and Ardaxšīr-xwarrah, are similar in layout (round cities). Did he create Ardaxšīr-xwarrah based on the Dārābgird plan or vice-versa? Our sources do tell us that Ardaxšīr had to go back and forth between Ardaxšīr-xwarrah and Darabgerd to subdue uprisings when he came to power. Thus, the similar fortifications could have taken later.

jābād,<sup>68</sup> I tend to agree with Wiesehöfer that that the year 205/206 CE<sup>69</sup> does not suggest the date of Ardaxšīr's uprising but rather Pābag's rebellion and movement from Khīr to Istakhr. This date coincides with the Arsacid king Walaxš's rule (192–207 CE) and the wars with the Roman emperor Septimius Severus.<sup>70</sup> We should remember that the Arsacids were not only involved in a bitter war with the Romans, but also with dynastic squabbles and provincial revolts. Septimius Severus, first in 196 CE, and then again in 198 CE invaded the Arsacid realm when he was able to sack Ctesiphon.<sup>71</sup> At the same time we hear of the revolt by the Medes and the Persians against the Arsacid king which caused internal problems.<sup>72</sup> I believe that in many ways the rule of Walaxš was the turning point in Arsacid history, in that the dynasty lost much of its prestige. The kings of Persis could not rely on their Arsacid overlords anymore to support them in the face of local uprisings, such as that of Pābag.

The troubles for the Arsacids did not subside with the death of Walaxš V, and his son Walaxš VI who assumed the throne contested by his brother, Ardawān V in 213 CE, ruling in Media.<sup>73</sup> Thus, all attentions was turned to the north of the Iranian Plateau and the Roman nemesis to the West. The reigning Arsacid king was not or could not pay much attention to the province of Persis. When Caracalla invaded Armenia and Mesopotamia, but more importantly in 216/217 CE he exhumed the bones of the Arsacid royals in Arbela the reigning Arsacid king of kings could not do anything.<sup>74</sup> One has to wonder how the population as well as the local and minor rulers and potentates of the Iranian Plateau perceived such a calamity and blow to the imperial prestige of the Arsacids.

## Conclusion

One should be reluctant to accept the “official” version of history where according to Tabarī, Ardaxšīr was the *argbed* of Dārābgerd at this time and told his father Pābag to revolt against the Arsacids in 211/212 CE. It is more probable that between 205/206 and 211/212 CE Pābag had taken the throne at Istakhr and chosen his eldest son Šābuhr as the heir. Ardaxšīr as an act of rebellion had moved from Dārābgerd to Ardaxšīr-xwarrah and built himself a fortification from where he could launch his attack against his elder brother when Pābag died.

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<sup>68</sup> Back 1978, 379.

<sup>69</sup> Altheim-Stiehl 1978, 116.

<sup>70</sup> Wiesehöfer 1987, 372.

<sup>71</sup> Frye 1975, 243.

<sup>72</sup> Colledge 1967, 168.

<sup>73</sup> Colledge 1967, 171.

<sup>74</sup> Colledge 1967, 171; Rawlinson 1873, 356.

His rock-relief at Ardaxšīr-Xwarrah was the symbol of his rebellion either against his father, but more probably against his brother. Pābag must have died sometime before 211/212 and so by this date both Ardaxšīr and Šābuhr minted coins with the title of MLK' "king," with the image of their recently deceased father on their coins.<sup>75</sup> Here one must cite the important notice in *Zainu'l-Akhbar* which tends to corroborate the thesis that Ardaxšīr indeed proclaimed to be a king in 211/212 CE. According to *Zainu'l-Akhbar* when Ardaxšīr began his conquest Ardawān came to face him. What is noteworthy is that the text states "and twelve years had passed from the rule of Ardaxšīr when he killed Ardawān."<sup>76</sup> This clearly places Ardaxšīr's claim to kingship and local coronation (at Istakhr or Ardaxšīr-xwarrah) in 211/212 CE. The event of 211/212 CE which is the defeat and death of Šābuhr also most probably coincides with his coronation relief at Naqš-e Rajab and his coinage without his father's image (phase 2a).



**Type I/2 BRE bgy p'pky [MLKA] Coin of Ardaxšīr after Gyselen 2004**

Between 211/212 CE and the defeat of the Arsacid ruler Ardawān in 224 CE Ardaxšīr consolidated his power in the province of Persis and the adjoining region. In 216/217 CE he would certainly begin his propaganda and campaign against the Arsacids as their prestige had been marred by the Roman actions at the Arsacid family sanctuary. How could a dynasty who can not protect their own family be able to defend the Iranians? The kings of Persis were defeated by 211/212 and others a bit later as they may have been involved in aiding the Arsacid king of kings and therefore would have been ill prepared to fight the upstart. Ardaxšīr might have felt that a new house had to wrest away control of the royal throne, as the old one (Arsacid) had been soundly humiliated. It seems that other brothers of Ardaxšīr were also worrisome to him and he had them killed at this time.<sup>77</sup> Once he had the province of Persis and the adjoining region in hand he called himself *MLK' 'yr'n / šāh ī ērān* "King of Iranians," as is apparent from his coinage (phase 2a).<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Alam (2003, 22) has made this ingenious suggestion that Pābag was already dead when his image were struck on the two brother's coinage.

<sup>76</sup> *Zainu'l-Akhbar*, 85.

<sup>77</sup> Widengren 1971, 725–726.

<sup>78</sup> Alam, Gyselen 2003, 93, 118.



mzdysn bgy 'rthštr MLK' 'yr'n Phase 2a (after Alram 1999)

The Type IIa(2)/2(2a) coinage of Ardaxšir which carries the legend: *mzdysn bgy 'rthštr MLKA 'ry'n*<sup>79</sup> indicating that he is a “king” and not the “king of kings,” which we find in his next coinage type, *mzdysn bgy 'rthštr MLK'n MLK' 'ry'n*.<sup>80</sup> The *šāh ī ērān* would probably refer to his conquest of Persis and wresting Istakhr from the hands of local rulers and those in his family who contended for its mastery. It is then that he had his rock-relief at Naqš-e Rajab, close to Istakhr, carved. Thus, one may surmise that the Naqš-e Rajab relief represents his victory over the kings of Persis and the control of Istakhr as the center. The familial coronation scene is at the center of this event. That may well be the reason that Ardawān is not under the hoof of Ardaxšir’s horse on this relief, as he is at the Naqš-e Rostam relief. The importance of the local kings also made Ardaxšir mindful to respect them as seen in the iconographical remains of this period. He also co-opted them into his genealogy and adopted their characteristic dress and cap, thus representing himself as the continuer of the old Persian tradition existing at Istakhr.



ArdaxširArdaxšir mzdysn bgy 'rthštr MLK'n MLK' 'yr'n mzdysn bgy 'rthštr MLK'n MLK' 'yr'n MNW ctry MN yzd'n Phase 2b Phase 3 (after Alram 1999)

Having consolidated his power in Persis and having subdued the *kadag-xwadāyān* “petty-lords” he conquered adjoining regions which would have alarmed Ardawān. Then the fateful battle of Hormozgan in 224 CE brought the

<sup>79</sup> Alram, Gyselen 2003, 118.

<sup>80</sup> Alram, Gyselen 2003, 119.



defeat and death of Ardawān and brought about a new phase of Ardaxšīr's rule. The Battle of Hormozgan was carved in the location where he rose up in Persis, at Ardaxšīr-xwarrah. By then he could claim to be the *king of kings* of the Iranians. This event till his capture of Ctesiphon and his official coronation brought about the carving of the Naqš-e Rostam relief as well as the variations in his imperial coinage (phase 3).

History of men like Ardaxšīr is fascinating in that not only were they able to change the course of history, but they were also able to imagine where they came from and how they came to acquire power. Darius, the great Achaemenid king was able to do this in the sixth century BCE by creating an Achaemenid empire on the heels of Cyrus the Great and Cambyses. Ardaxšīr built an empire on the heels of Pābag and Šābuhr. Both men created a lineage which connected them to more authoritative lines. But that is how one makes himself matter and legitimate in the eyes of those who were present, as well as and the historian who is trying to sift through these constructed ancestries, codified three centuries later and then translated into Arabic three centuries after that.

## Chronology

Date	Event	Relief	Coinage
205/206	Pābag leaves Khīr to Istakhr Ardaxšīr in Dārābgerd	No Relief	No Coinage
207–210	Pābag dies holding Istakhr Ardaxšīr's challenge to Šābuhr	Pābag's Graffito Ardaxšīr-xwarrah I	No Coinage Šāb/Ard Persis
211/212	Ardaxšīr takes Istakhr	Naqš-e Rajab	phase 2a
213–223	Ardaxšīr fighting local kings		phase 2a
224	Ardaxšīr defeats Ardawān	Ardaxšīr-xwarrah II Naqš-e Rostam I	phase 2b
226	Ardaxšīr crowned at Ctesiphon	Naqš-e Rostam I	phase 3

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## Abstract

The author deals with the rise to power of Ardašīr ī Pābagān and his family origins. The sources are either late (Perso-Arabic), or foreign and hostile (Greek and Armenian), or concerned with external religious matters (Syriac) which tend to be helpful mainly for chronology. Material culture, specifically coinage along with the rock reliefs are of the utmost importance to this investigation, and it is these sources that need to be juxtaposed with the literary documents to achieve a more balanced view of the origins of the Sasanians.

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