

Religious Intolerance and the Decline of an Empire: The Flaws of Zoroastrian State Doctrine in Sasanian Persia

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The Sasanian dynasty, which lasted approximately 400 years after Ardashir I's defeat of the Parthians in 224 CE, would mark one of the greatest historical eras of Persian civilization. Having defeated Emperor Valerian's forces in 260 CE under the reign of Shapur I, the Sasanians rivaled the Romans in military strength, made significant and far-reaching cultural contributions to regions in Asia and Europe, revived the Achaemenid model of statecraft, and centralized authority under the doctrine of Zoroastrianism. The collapse of this dynasty, following the Arab invasions and the flight of Yazdgerd III, the last Sasanian king, in 651 CE, would signify the end of *Iranshahr* (or 'the land of the Iranians'), a culture defined by Persian language and territory, and the beginning of a long period of foreign invasions and rule. Even the legacy of the Safavid Empire, who some declare to be the second golden age of Persia, raises historiographical doubts as to its 'Persian-ness', due to the presence of Turkic cultural elements. Gene Garthwaite identifies three key factors that are considered to be causes of the Sasanian decline: court decadence and degeneration, military overextension and exhaustion, and finally, the rigidity and intolerance of Zoroastrian state doctrine and its political manifestation in the context of the priestly class. Although there is mention of the cruelty and profligacy of Khusrau II's court, the first part of this argument is generally considered to be of lesser significance and antagonistically perpetuated by Arab sources, and in terms of military preparedness, timing and poor administration of

Sasanian forces and the Byzantine threat left the Persians vulnerable to the Arabs.

Garthwaite argues that although popular opposition to Zoroastrianism and its role in Sasanian rule was certainly a contributing factor to the decline of the Empire, this overlooks much more decisive events and issues of *realpolitik*, in particular, the emergence of the Arabs as a military power while the Byzantines were regaining influence. It is not my contention to debate this, for obviously historical and regional events play unavoidably crucial roles in the decline and fall of empires. However, although sources are somewhat conflicted on the role of Zoroastrian politics, they are generally in agreement on four fundamental points. First, although many different groups in Iranshahr practiced many different religions, from Mazdakism to Christianity, Zoroastrianism was the official state religion of the Sasanian elite, and those who enforced its tenets and patronized its growth were those in the highest positions of authority. Second, Khusrau's II reign is considered to have been the most damaging to the stability of the Sasanian Empire due to a shift from religious toleration to repression and increased patronage of the clerical elite, which left subsequent rulers with an empire that was facing bankruptcy, popular unrest and court corruption. This is also significant in that it demonstrated a stark contrast to the ecumenical approach to non-Zoroastrian religions that was adopted by Khusrau I, whose reign marked the apogee of Sasanian stability and achievement. Third, although most conversions to Islam were made by force, Zoroastrian state doctrine and political favour to those who adhered to it was an alienating prospect to many Iranians, and this made it easier for the Muslim armies to find willing converts in the Persianate world. Finally, the Arab conquerors adopted many Zoroastrian and Persian elements, and this opened up a Perso-Arab discourse that revitalized Iranian culture. With these four points in mind, it can be argued that Zoroastrianism as the state religion and institutionalized doctrine was a prevailing factor in the decline of the Sasanian dynasty, but was also an important contribution to the continuance of Persian culture in a period of foreign rule.

Zoroastrianism as Sasanian State Doctrine

Although the history of Zoroastrianism pre-dates the Achaemenid period and was widely practiced during this time, it was not until the establishment of the Sasanian dynasty by Ardashir that it was not only restored following the rule of the Parthians, but also became intrinsic to the ruling structure. Although this is mentioned directly in contemporaneous sources, such as the political manual written for Ardashir by his chief *mobad*, Tansar, Garthwaite explains that the implementation of Zoroastrian state doctrine was well documented by the 9th century in the *Denkard*, the Pahlavi history of Zoroastrianism. The Parthian empire was a loose conglomeration of kingdoms without a firmly established central authority. “Consequently, the establishment of state orthodoxy can be seen as an attempt by the new dynasty to legitimize itself in opposition to its former Parthian overlords.”¹ The domination of the Zoroastrian faith is confirmed by Jamsheed K. Choksy in *Conflict and Cooperation*, which addresses the Zoroastrian encounters with Islam. In addition to the Pahlavi sources that Garthwaite mentions, Choksy draws on a variety of contemporaneous outsider perspectives, ranging from Greek, Latin and Aramaic to Chinese and Arabic, which confirm that Zoroastrianism was “supported by royal patrons” of the Sasanian state, and had “spread to each social class and every geographical area, attracting nobles, priests, scribes, traders, landlords and farmers, among others.”² The eschatology of Zoroastrianism was such that it appealed to a wide variety of people, as man was considered his own saviour so long as he followed the triad of good thoughts, good words and good deeds. However, according to Sir Rustom Masani, only “those righteous souls who have devoutly followed the precepts of Zarathustra” could enter heaven, and this necessitates the carrying out of the various purification, initiation, consecration and liturgical rituals that complete Zoroastrian worship.³ Therefore, such a complex eschatology required the establishment of a priestly class that would facilitate mass worship, as well as the construction of fire temples and other places of worship. In the earlier stages of Sasanian institutionalization of

¹ Gene R. Garthwaite, *The Persians* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 94.

² Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation* (New York: Columbia, 1997), 4.

³ Sir Rustom Masani, *Zoroastrianism: The Religion of the Good Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 74-75.

Zoroastrianism, the priestly class of *mobads* was appointed by the *shahanshab*, and could gain his favour through loyal service and sound religious council. The role of the *mobad* is described by Shapur I's chief priest, Kartir, in the inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam:

...[Shapur] gave me authority and power in matters of the divine services at court and in kingdom after kingdom, place after place, throughout the whole empire in the magus-estate. And by the command of [Shapur], King of Kings, and the provision of the Yazads and the King of Kings in kingdom after kingdom, place after place, many divine services in magnificence and many Warharan fires were established, and many magi became happy and prosperous, and many fires and magi were imperially installed... And Hormizd, King of Kings, conferred on me miter and cincture and created for me a higher rank and dignity, and at court and in kingdom after kingdom, place after place, throughout the whole empire he gave me more authority and power in matters of the divine services, and created for me the title "Kartir, Ahura Mazda's magus-master" after the name of Ahura Mazda, the Deity.⁴

This excerpt from the inscription suggests an eminent position that was nevertheless subordinate to the absolute reign of the *shahanshab*, and consisted of religious, not political, advisory and administration. However, according to Garthwaite, "the balance of power between Sasanian rulers and Zoroastrian rulers seems to have shifted" during the earlier period of the dynasty as Zoroastrianism became more intrinsic to the institutions of the state, "and the emergence of pre-eminent priests, the *mobadanmobad*...whose title approximated the *shahanshab*'s," resulting in the clergy becoming a much more politically independent and powerful class.⁵ Richard N. Frye argues that because Zoroastrianism was a politically sanctified institution as well as a religion, and was practiced by all of the Sasanian kings, it lent itself too easily to opportunism

⁴ "The Naqsh-e Rostam Inscription," *Kartir's Inscriptions*, <<http://www.iran-tarikh.com/persia/kartir.htm>>.

⁵ Garthwaite, *The Persians*, 100-101.

which weakened its appeal to the Iranian population: “one might say that in the later years of the Sasanian Empire, the state dominated the church, whereas in the west the reverse seems more true, or perhaps one could say ‘used’ rather than ‘dominated’ in both cases.”⁶ Garthwaite concurs with this interpretation when he cites the example of Shapur’s support for Zurvanism, a Zoroastrian branch that saw Ahura Mazda as one of two divinities existing under Zurvan, which was opposed by the traditional orthodoxy, “all of which suggests that the importance of Zoroastrianism as an institution with its own self-interest in which it could support the ruler in general but oppose him in specific instances.”⁷ As Frye contends, the notion that Zoroastrianism functioned as an institution that was politically imposed which directly benefited the state, and not a religion that promoted its eschatology to potential converts, such as Islam or Christianity, was a significant factor to alienation of the Iranian people by the Sasanian state.

Consequences of Religious Intolerance: Comparing the reigns of Khusrau I and Khusrau II

Not only were the *magi* of the Sasanian empire estranged to the population, including those groups and individuals who practiced ‘unorthodox’ forms of Zoroastrianism, it also actively persecuted other religious groups and convinced some rulers to facilitate their intolerant efforts. These policies and attitudes were evident in the earliest stages of Sasanian rule. According to the Persian literary scholar Jan Rypka, Kartir, who is credited with incorporating Zoroastrian religion into the state doctrine, speaks in nothing less than a boastful tone in the inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam when describing his efforts at eradicating any hint of an ecumenical Zoroastrian state. “On his last monument, he described his career and related that he had persecuted Jews, Christians, Nasoraens, Maktiks, Brahmans and Buddhists.”⁸ Rypka also places responsibility for the death of Mani on Kartir, as it was he who had the founder

⁶ Richard N. Frye, “The Reforms of Chosroes Anushirvan (‘Of The Immortal Soul’),” *The History of Ancient Iran*, <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/fryehst.html>>.

⁷ Garthwaite, *The Persians*, 103.

⁸ Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co, 1968), 31-32.

of Manichaeism (which incidentally incorporated many of the dualistic principles found in later forms of Zoroastrianism) imprisoned, whereupon he soon died.

However, as Garthwaite explains, the increasing amount of patronage for fire temples and emphasis of a Irano-Zoroastrian identity in the Sasanian period could not have occurred without a central authority that was at least somewhat ecumenical in its approach to the vast array of actively practiced faiths in Iranshahr, which included Manichaeism, Judaism, Nestorian Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Mazdakism. “Without toleration for the empire’s ethnically and religiously diverse population, centralization of authority and administration, limited though it was, would not have been possible, nor would there have been the requisite stability to maintain.”⁹ Thus, the power of the *mobads* fluctuated over the course of the dynasty, which was arguably at its most tolerant during the reign of Khusrau I (531-579 CE), considered to be the apogee of Sasanian achievement and stability. His royal title, Anushirvan (meaning ‘of the immortal soul’) was indicative of public perception and admiration for his reforms and achievements, which included the re-establishment of central authority and the introduction of the Circle of Justice, which delineated the inexorable relation of just rule to the military, taxation, agriculture, peasantry. Although his rule represented a return to orthodox Zoroastrianism, which included a strict hierarchy with priests remaining at the top, Frye nonetheless maintains that it was also a period of extraordinary religious acceptance.¹⁰ In an empire defined by an orthodox doctrine, and an era driven by religious radicalism, Khusrau’s perspective was guided by an advantageous predilection towards rationalism and a firm understanding of past cultures. This can be seen from Khusrau’s own words, which are conveyed in A. Shapur Shahbazi’s entry on the Sasanian dynasty in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*:

Paul the Persian reflects [Khusrau’s] mind when he says, in his dedicatory preface to Aristotle’s *Logic*, which he translated for the King, that philosophy is superior to faith; since in religious learning doubt always exist, while philosophy is the mental acceptance of explained ideas...[Khusrau] himself states that ‘we examined the

⁹ Garthwaite, *The Persians*, 99.

¹⁰ Frye, “The Reforms of Chosroes Anushirvan (‘Of The Immortal Soul’).”

customs of our forebears,' but, concerned with the discovery of truth, 'we [also] studied the customs and conducts of the Romans and Indians and accepted those among them which seemed reasonable and praiseworthy, not merely likeable. 'We have not rejected anyone because they belonged to a different religion or people.' And having examined 'the good customs and laws' of our ancestors as well as those of the foreigners, 'we have not declined to adopt anything which was good nor to avoid anything which was bad. Affection for our forebears did not lead us to accept customs which were not good.'¹¹

Khusrau granted asylum to 'pagan' philosophers who were expelled from Athens by the Christian empire, ensured their protection under the terms of a treaty signed with the Byzantines, and even granted freedom of religion to Jews and Christians despite the ecclesiastical sympathies to that empire. However, these ecumenically-based political conciliations would prove politically fatal, and the progressiveness of Khusrau's religious tolerance would leave Iranians bereft of the morale and strength that cultural self-preservation provided in a time where competing empires were also defining themselves through religious identity, such as the Christian Byzantines and the Muslim Arabs.¹² When Khusrau II came to power, approximately ten years after Khusrau Anushirvan, the Byzantine emperor Maurice refrained from taking any hostile action towards the Sasanians as a sign of goodwill. However, these first few years of peace saw Khusrau's court descend into a state of corrupt and decadent disarray, and the population would bear the brunt of his indulgences through heavy taxation and a new wave of religious persecution against non-Zoroastrian groups. Although Garthwaite argues that his rule was characterized by enormous military gain and cultural growth, he nevertheless concedes the following:

¹¹ A. Shapur Shahbazi, 'Sasanian Dynasty', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/ot_grp7/ot_sasanian_dyn_20050301.html>, March 1, 2005.

¹² A. Shapur Shahbazi, 'Sasanian Dynasty', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/ot_grp7/ot_sasanian_dyn_20050301.html>, March 1, 2005.

Khusrau II seems to have shifted from a policy of toleration for Christians early in his reign to one of persecution. He patronized the construction of fire temples and the Zoroastrian religious establishment, which may have antagonized the general population. Furthermore, subjects in the empire may have resented the costs both of the war and of the maintenance of the religious establishment.¹³

Shahbazi takes a much more critical stance, going so far as to say that while Khusrau I's reign represented the apex of Sasanian achievement and toleration, "the age of [Khusrau II] saw the zenith of splendor and corrupt leadership."¹⁴ In addition to the harsh quality of his rule, Khusrau reigned at not only during a time when the Byzantine empire had shifted alliances against the Sasanians and were re-gaining military strength, but also when the Arab armies began their march toward Iranshahr. The aggressiveness of their invasion was, according to Choksy, partly motivated by Khusrau's shredding of a letter from Muhammad demanding acceptance of Islam. After hearing of the Sasanian king's dismissal of his proclamation, the Prophet declared, "his kingdom will be torn from him in the same manner."¹⁵ After his death, Khusrau reportedly left the Sasanian court in such a state of disarray and bankruptcy that it could never adequately recover to mount an effective defense against the Arab armies.

Having lived under the intolerant and repressive regime of Khusrau II, as well as in a society that was heavily controlled by the Zoroastrian clergy, most of the Iranian population was willing to accept Islam as Muslim forces presented it to them. Duchesne-Guillemin makes the general claim as the court appointed nine different rulers coming to power between the time of Khusrau's death in 628 CE and the fall of the dynasty in 651 and struggled to keep itself from imploding, the Sasanian Empire "opposed only half-heartedly the Muslim

¹³ Garthwaite, *The Persians*, 112.

¹⁴ Shahbazi, "Sasanian Dynasty."

¹⁵ Choksy, *Conflict*, 51.

expansion.”¹⁶ The extent to which the self-preservation of the *mobads* and their interests as a political class brought public unrest to a boil is succinctly described by Reuben Levy in *An Introduction to Persian Literature*.

With the material resources of the country wasted by the excessive demands of the Byzantine wars, the people had been driven into a desperate state of poverty, anarchy reigned among the upper classes as well as in the royal house itself, and there was dissatisfaction with the priests of Zoroastrianism. This was the national religion, whose priesthood, ‘a state within a state,’ formed a powerful group standing close to the throne. They had looked first to their own interests and cared even less for the spiritual welfare of the people than for their material needs. There had consequently been a decided stirring of revolt against their claim to authority amongst men in their flock with higher ideals, and it had taken the guise, as often, of political unrest.¹⁷

Conversions to Islam occurred on a mass scale and were, for the most part, imposed on captives as the Muslim armies moved closer to Ctesiphon and the other major centers of Sasanian power. However, opposition was scarce and they were even welcomed in some cases by inhabitants who belonged to the class of artisans and peasants whose very way of life was considered heretical to the Zoroastrian institutions. Furthermore, according to Levy, the ritual demands and requirements for acceptance into Islam were minimal compared to what the privileged clerics of Zoroastrianism required of their followers. “...It was no great matter to the mass of people to substitute Allah for Ahura Mazda, the principle of good and light, and Shaitan or Iblis (the Devil) for Ahriman, the principle of evil and darkness...all they were told was: ‘If you worship as we worship and eat of our slaughtering, the you are Muslims.’”¹⁸ It is also important

¹⁶ Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Symbols and Values in Zoroastrianism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 11.

¹⁷ Reuben Levy, *An Introduction to Persian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 8.

¹⁸ Reuben Levy, *An Introduction to Persian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 16.

to note, in the context of the lower class' almost wholesale acceptance of Islam, that equal status among all believers was emphasized under Islamic law, and the class divisions enforced by the *magi* and the Sasanian state were not tolerated. Of course, this egalitarian stance would not extend to non-believers, such as those who continued to practice Zoroastrianism and refused to align themselves with the new regime.

Subaltern Zoroastrianism Under Muslim Dominance: The Perso-Arab Discourse

Although Zoroastrianism was essentially relegated to the margins of religious acceptance in Iran following the Arab conquest, some of its aspects were incorporated by Muslim rule such that a new Arab-Iranian dialectic emerged which would completely change the course of Iranian history and revive its culture. As Choksy maintains, "The destinies, and hence the history and historiography of both communities cannot be separated from each other," and "represent the enormity of the social changes that resulted when the two confessional groups collided then slowly intermeshed in medieval times."¹⁹ Naturally, the Zoroastrian elite, once at the helm of the Sasanian state, were reduced to subaltern status under the Arabs, while the minority religions that were restricted were able to practice in relative freedom at least until the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate. Frye writes that the "the organization of minority religions in the Sasanian empire served to protect Zoroastrianism after the Arab conquest, when the change from dominant, state religion to one of minority status was made, and this enabled Zoroastrianism to survive to the present."²⁰ One of Khusrau I's reforms was to change the very notion of Persian class, from a three level hierarchy of priests, warriors and peasants, to one which included the scribes and bureaucratic officials below the warrior nobility. According to Frye's *The Golden Age of Persia*, "The scribes and other members of the secular administration were very influential, especially at the end of the Sasanian empire when the frequent change of rulers enhanced the

¹⁹ Choksy, *Conflict*, 6.

²⁰ Frye, "The Reforms of Chosroes Anushirvan ('Of The Immortal Soul')."

importance of the stability of the bureaucracy.”²¹ The Arabs adopted a version of this model and would initially turn to the bureaucrats to administer their new territories. These scribes also played a crucial role in preserving Middle Persian texts, particularly secular ones that were later translated into Arabic, which preserved the Sasanian heritage as well as contributed to the development of Islamic culture. Relocation of Zoroastrian groups following the Arab conquest, as Frye demonstrates, was not part of a conscientious effort at Zoroastrian persecution, but part of a long historical pattern. “Arabs were not only neighbours of the Persians but Arabs had been exiled by the Sasanian government to various parts of the Sasanian empire, including the east...the practice of deporting entire cities or districts which were rebellious was an ancient one in the Near East and the Sasanians simply followed old practices.”²² As Choksy argues, these practices demonstrate a discourse between the colonizing Arabs and the colonized Iranians, whereby those that do not “affiliate with the emergent ruling class” are marginalized. The Arabs, in exiling communities of Zoroastrians, were continuing the historical practice of removing elements that challenged the new hierarchy, but were willing to incorporate them provided they reject the old Sasanian institutions. Thus, in many ways the Arabs adopted and perpetuated the same kind of religious bigotry practiced by the Zoroastrian elite of the Sasanian dynasty.

Although there are numerous factors that have been attributed to the fall of the Sasanians, the institutionalization of Zoroastrianism as the guiding state doctrine, which created an elite clerical class and alienated the Iranian population through religious intolerance was the principle flaw of the dynasty’s statecraft. Nevertheless, many of the cultural aspects of the Sasanian state, which itself was founded upon the principles of Zoroastrianism, contributed to the reinvigoration of Persian culture under foreign rule, and were also incorporated into the Arab administrative models. Central authority depended upon a more accommodating approach to the diversity of religions in Iranshahr. This was a principle that was understood by Khusrau I, who was by far the most universalist ruler in terms of religious conciliation, who made an effort to not only institutionalize toleration of other religions, but reached out to them

²¹ Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 25.

beyond the borders of his own kingdom. Khusrau II, however, placated the *magi* with more restrictions on minority religions, while they increasingly looked to their own interests instead of providing spiritual guidance to their followers. Iranians, particularly the peasant class who were considered lowly and even heretical, thus felt no real affinity for a religion that had not only lost its spiritual appeal, and through its politicization had become anathema. When the Arabs overthrew the Sasanians in the 7th Century, conversion to Islam was met with little resistance and even welcomed by those Iranians who were disillusioned by state-imposed Zoroastrianism. As a result, the Zoroastrian elite was reduced to subaltern status. However, the confrontation between the Arab and the Persian, and colonization the latter by the former, would irrevocably enmesh the two cultures to create an entirely new Persian historical identity.