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Sasanian Imperial Ideology: From Anāhītā Fire In Pārs To Ādur Gušnasp Fire Temple In Ādurbādagān

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Abstract

The article analyzes some developments in the ideology of the early Sassanids. The author briefly overviews Ardashīr I's rise to power, highlighting his political ambitions that formed the basis for Sasanian imperial policy and ideology. The Sasanians came to power with political ambitions to restore the Truth and Persian Glory and eliminate the remnants of Hellenism that survived the Parthian period. The author discusses political and ideological reasons, which motivated the early Sasanians to declare the fire temple of Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān as the empire's most sacred fire. This step and Shāpūr I's official declaration of Zoroastrianism as the state religion transformed Ādurbādagān into the empire's most sacrosanct land, increasing the province's imperial and strategic value as the centre of ideology and propaganda. Finally, it is shown that the granting "cathedral" rank to the Ādur Gušnasp fire temple and attaching themselves to this officially proclaimed the empire's most sacred victorious warriors' class fire of the highest grade was a significant shift in the first Sassanids' imperial ideology.

Keywords: Sasanian ideology, Zoroastrianism, Iran, Adurbadagan, Azerbaijan

Introduction

The Sasanian period was a significant part of Iran's history. Some scholars consider the rise of the Sasanians as the result of a coup d'état by the Medes and Persians against the Parthian Arsacids. Others have claimed that the Sasanian period was characterized by a Sasanian-Parthian confederacy ^[1]. Nevertheless, regardless of their Parthian roots, the Sasanians declared that their political mission to be the restoration of the Truth and Persian Glory ^[2].

Intriguingly, rather than the fire temple of Anāhītā in Pārs, from where they rose to power, the first Sassanids proclaimed the holy shrine of Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān to be the empire's most sacred fire attaching themselves to this victorious warriors' class fire of the highest grade ^[3]. The early Sasanians granted the rank of "cathedral" to Ādur Gušnasp fire of Media, which was the last surviving fire of the Great Fires of State that had been established sometime in the Parthian period ^[4].

Sasanian imperial ideology ^[5] had numerous changes during the reign of the Sassanid Persians ^[6], which has incited significant interest in the political, religious, and ideological reasons behind these political and ideological shifts, particularly the proclamation of Ādur Gušnasp fire in Azerbaijan as the empire's most sacred fire. Indeed, the early Sasanians' proclamation of Zoroastrianism as the state religion and Ādur Gušnasp as the empire's "cathedral" rank fire temple exemplifies the developments in Sasanian imperial ideology and strategy, which followed the transformation of Azerbaijan into the religious and ideological "core" of the empire and the centre of official Zoroastrian propaganda. This significant move had administrative and military consequences that were addressed in the multi-targeted reforms of Kawād I (488-531) and Xusrō I Anōšīrvān (531-579) ^[7].

House of Sāsān rise to power: brief overview

The House of Sāsān rose in Iran in the late Parthian period following the internal struggle for power between the different branches of the House of Arsacids. There is evidence that a certain Sāsān, possibly a Parthian soldier or someone of Indo-Parthian origin, worked or was stationed in the house of Pābaq, who was the ruler of Istakhr in Persis/Pārs/Fārs. Some scholars indicate that Sāsān may have been a custodian of the great fire temple of Anāhītā where Pābaq was a priest.

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The epic treatment in Firdowsi's masterpiece *Šāhnāme*, which was based on the Sasanian chronicle "Xwadāy-namāg", states that Pābaq's daughter (or Pābaq's wife as he had a vision of his wife giving birth to a great king)^[8] was married to Sāsān, and the princess gave birth to Ardashīr I^[9].

Indeed, the rise of the House of Sāsān and the origin of Ardashīr I remains mysterious, however, most scholars follow Tabari's account in the *Šāhnāme* that Pābaq's daughter married Sāsān and gave birth to Ardashīr^[10].

When Ardashīr came to power, he proclaimed his official genealogy to be "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." However, Darayee interprets this as: "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 Persian kings, Dārāyān I and Dārāyān II) all suggest a falsification of his lineage^[11]."

Nevertheless, Ardashīr I officially proclaimed himself a king of Persian origin and a descendant of the great Achaemenids^[12]. However, the hostilities and internal struggles for power between the great Parsiq (Persian) and Pahlav (Parthian) families (Houses) continued until the Muslim conquest of Iran^[13].

In 224 CE, on the same day of the decisive battle on the plain of Hormizdagān, slaying the Parthian king Ardawān IV, Ardashīr proclaimed himself šāhanšāh. Later, Ardashīr I had himself officially coronated in the captured Parthian imperial capital Ctesiphon and established the Sasanian empire^[14].

Imperial religion, ideology, and Adurbādagān

One can interpret that Ardashīr I's official genealogy and the stone reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam give information about his official origin and the political essence of his power: the reinforcement of Zoroastrianism and the restoration of the Glory of Persians and Persian rule in the previous lands of the Achaemenids. Ardashīr's official genealogy claims he was from the family of King Dārāy and supports the belief that he was the descendant of the Achaemenids and that his political ambitions to follow and protect Persian Glory^[15].

The relief at Naqsh-e Rostam shows Ardashīr I receiving the ring (seal) of kingship as šāhanšāh of Ērānšahr from Ahura Mazdā propagates the divine blessing (xwarrah) to his kingship and indicates his duty to follow and enforce Zoroastrianism. The propaganda and ideology in the *Kārnāmag ī Ardashīr ī Pāpagān* (Book of the Deeds of Ardashīr, Son of Papak) also support and proclaim the legitimacy of Sasanian rule and ambitions^[16].

Indeed, Ardashīr I and his son Shāpūr I had political ambitions to restore Persia to imperial glory by creating a centralized Sasanian empire in a Zoroastrian oecumene^[17] and the institutionalization of Zoroastrianism as the sole religion of the state^[18]. The rock-carvings at Naqsh-e Rostam show Ardashīr I giving the ring or seal of rule to his son Shāpūr I, which could be interpreted as meaning that his son was mandated to follow his father's policy and ideology and enforce Ardashīr I's legacy. Truly, like his father, Shāpūr I expressed his devotion to fire as an icon of the religion and officially proclaimed Zoroastrianism the state religion^[19].

Therefore, from these images, one may assume that

Sasanian imperialism^[20] was the backbone of Shāpūr I's imperial policy, which was ideologically based on Zoroastrianism as the sole imperial religion and Achaemenid Persian Glory. Consequently, official state propaganda distanced the Sassanid Persians from the Parthians and associated them with the Achaemenid Persians^[21].

In fact, Shāpūr I was focused on enforcing a centralized Sasanian state in a Zoroastrian oecumene and eliminating the last signs of Hellenism that had survived the Parthian period. He used Sasanian imperialism to strengthen the central power and Zoroastrianism in lands surrounding Ērānšahr. Shāpūr I established many Bahrām fires for his soul (Xusraw Šāhbūhr), his daughter (Xusraw Ādur-Anāhīd), and many others. He also established sacred fires and supported communities of priests in Syria, Cilicia, Cappadocia, and Armin (Armenia or Arminiya)^[22].

Politically and ideologically, the establishment of the sacred fires network was aimed to strengthen the power of the šāhanšāh and symbolized the unification of the state, the authority of the hierarchy of priests, and the ubiquitous nature of Zoroastrian religion. The early Sasanians categorised the fire temples, particularly the three Great Fires of State, one of which, the fire of Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān, was declared the victorious warriors' (artēštār) class fire of the highest grade^[23].

Interestingly, in the Seleucid and Parthian eras, the province of Ādurbādagān (Parthian or Arsacid Pahlavi: Āturpātākān) was one of the strongholds against the spread of the Greek and Roman pantheon in Iran. It is also highly likely that Āturpātākān was the place where the prophet Zarathustra was born^[24, 25], and where the Holy Avesta was kept in the holy shrine of the Ātur (Old Persian) or Ādur Gušnasp fire temple in Šiz (now Takht-e Sulaiman, Azerbaijan)^[26, 27].

Ādur Gušnasp, an Ataš Bahrām (Parthian: Ātaš-i- Wahram or Pahlavi: Ādur Bahrām -"fires of Victory," was the Zoroastrian name for the God of War and Victory), was the most sacred and "cathedral" fire of the highest grade in Zoroastrianism, which had been established in the late Achaemenid or Parthian era in Ādurbādagān in Media^[28]. Each new king, as Shāpūr I proclaimed, was obligated to make a pilgrimage after their coronation to Ādur Gušnasp, provide royal gifts, and celebrate Nowruz (No Ruz).

Intriguingly, despite the Sassanids proclaimed their Achaemenid Persian origin, they followed the Arsacid Parthians' tradition of donations which at the time were donated to the Ādur Burzēn-Mihr fire. This was the second fire the Sasanians categorised as one of the Great Fires of State. The fire was established sometime in the 5th or 4th century BC in Parthia (the northeast of Iran), but at the time of the Sassanids, it had been occupied and destroyed^[29].

Ideologically, the proclamation of the Ādur Gušnasp fire of Media as the victorious warriors' class fire of the highest grade, to which the Sasanians officially attached themselves, demonstrated Persia's superiority over Media and Parthia^[30].

Next, aiming to secure themselves as the ruling dynasty, the early Sasanian strategy was focused on putting the politically powerful and religiously and ideologically influential Zoroastrian clergy or Magi/Magus (maguš) under the šāhanšāh's control. Some scholars believe the Maguses, who played a cathedral role at the time^[31], were a class of priests and/or a tribe from Media.^[32, 33] Diakonoff argued

that the Maguses supplied the Medes with court priests as early as under the last Median king Astyages^[34].

Therefore, as followers of Achaemenid Persians, the early Sasanians attempted to control the Maguses of Median and/or Persian origin because they considered it a high-priority political and ideological task to secure Persian power over Media and the Medes^[35]. It is also possible that the Sasanians knew of Gaumāta's or the Maguses'/Medes' revolt^[36].

In this regard, Ardaxšīr I's and his son Shāpūr I's attempts to control the Zoroastrian clergy were a key element in their imperial strategy that was promoted by Kirdēr the herbed (priestly teacher), who was the famous and powerful religious leader of the time. They gave him a position close to the šāhanšāh's court, ordering him to categorize the Great Fires and ceremonial protocols. Shāpūr I granted Kirdēr the title of mobedān mobed (priest of priests). Kirdēr was affiliated with the fire temple of Ādur Gušnasp in Azerbaijan and had another name Kirdēr-Gušnasp^[37]. The other highly influential and powerful mobedān mobed during Sasanian King Šāpūr II's reign was Ādurbād-ī Mahrspandān ("Ādurbād, son of Mahrspand"), who was also affiliated with Ādur Gušnasp^[38].

Politically, by ensuring the Zoroastrian priests were close to the court, the early Sasanians demonstrated the unity of State and Church, which were interconnected and mutually dependent. Ardaxšīr I's chief priest Kirdēr stated that the "Church and State were born of one womb^[39]." The early Sasanians needed Zoroastrian priests to act as their counselors in religious affairs to support the dynasty's claim to legitimacy^[40, 41]. Shāpūr I authorized Kirdēr, who was a Zoroastrian fanatic, to eliminate Mithraism along the Medes and Maguses of Media and to strengthen Zoroastrianism in the lands challenged by Christian Byzantium, allowing him to establish the fire temples around the empire and in Syria and Armenia.

Next, one can interpret that the Sassanid Persians' proclamation of Ādur Gušnasp as the empire's most sacred and "cathedral" fire was a step to be politically and ideologically distanced (as proclaimed Achaemenid Persian descendants) from the Achaeimends' favored but ruined by the Macedonians the fire-temple of Anāhītā^[42], even though this temple played a key ideological role in the Sassanids' rise to power as Goddess Anāhītā blessed restorers of the Truth and Achaemenid Persian Glory. It should not be excluded that the early Sasanians needed to prove that they were the rightful restorers of the Truth (which "must needs be restored by a man of true and upright judgment") and the Glory of Persians over the Medians and Parthians^[43].

Furthermore, as the proclaimed descendants of Achaemenid Persians, the early Sassanids may have been ideologically obligated to demonstrate anti-Hellenistic reaction^[44], to separate themselves from the Arsacid Parthians, which they claimed were "unworthy interlopers^[45]" affected by Greek traditions.

Therefore, by granting "cathedral" rank to the last surviving Great Fire of State of Ādur Gušnasp in Ādurbādagān, which the Macedonians had never damaged, and attaching themselves to this victorious warriors' class fire of the highest grade, the early Sassanids chose to distance themselves from Alexander ransacked the Anāhītā fire in Fārs demonstrating a strong anti-Hellenistic reaction. This step indicated the further development or adjustment of the early Sasanian ideology as follows:

- from Sassanids' origin as the restorers of Truth and Achaemenid Persians' Glory;
- to the fighters or protectors of Truth and Persian Glory, as Sasanian victorious (pērōzgar) warriors (artēštār).

Furthermore, the proclamation of Ādur Gušnasp fire the most sacred imperial sanctuary had other additional political and ideological grounds.

Indeed, the fire temple of Anāhītā had been sacked by Alexander of Macedon, who had burnt there the 12,000 ox-hides on which the original Avesta was written in golden lettering and which had been placed in the Fortress of Archives in the city of Istakhr in Pārs^[46]. However, another copy of the Holy Avesta^[47] copied on calf skins was kept in the fire temple of Ādur Gušnasp in Azerbaijan^[48, 49].

In this regard, it should be noted that King Darius III's General Aturpāt (Atropates), the satrap of Media, had been able to secure the holy fire in Ādur Gušnasp. In 324 BC, Aturpāt pacified the unrest against the Greeks and Alexander decided to keep him as king of the land, which later became the independent (or semi-independent, vassal of Arsacid Parthia) kingdom of Atropatena (Greek) or Āturpātākān (Parthian or Arsacid Pahlavi). Atropates' daughter was married to Perdicas, Alexander's close ally and a commander of the Macedonian cavalry^[50].

Thus, ideologically, it is safe to assume that Shāpūr I's decision to declare Ādur Gušnasp, the sole survivor of the three Great Fires of State, as the empire's most sacred fire-temple had the logic of the so-called "ideological clean up" of the Macedonians' destruction of the Anāhītā fire temple and burning there of the Holy Avesta symbolizing Shāpūr I's full departure (political and ideological) from the vestiges of Hellenism surviving from the Parthian period and marked a policy of remedying the great impact that the Greeks had had on the country as the destroyers of the Achaemenids to whom the Sassanid Persians attached their genealogy.

Further, politically, selecting Ādur Gušnasp as the cathedral fire temple allowed Shāpūr I to secure direct control over the powerful Zoroastrian priests or Maguses affiliated with this temple. It also allowed him to keep the religious clergy within official Sasanian policy, eliminating any avenue for anti-dynastic propaganda or even a revolt by the Medes or Maguses.

As the early Sassanids officially declared their mission to be the restorers of Truth and Persian Glory, by linking their genealogy to the Achaemenid Persians, it could be assumed that they selected the "pure clean" fire temple as the most sacred fire of the Sassanid Persians' empire because it had never been ruined or humiliated by Alexander of Macedon.

Consequently, the Sassanians attached themselves to Ādurbādagān's Ādur Gušnasp fire, where the Holy Avesta was preserved and proclaimed it to be the empire's most sacred fire. By categorizing Ādur Gušnasp as the "cathedral" fire temple, the early Sasanians transformed Azerbaijan into the empire's religious and ideological centre, with military and administrative consequences ensuing^[51].

There is no doubt that the fire temple of Anāhītā in Pārs, from where the Sassanids rose to power, was the heart of the Sasanian dynasty, who declared themselves the guardians of the temple^[52]. The value of the fire for the Sasanians was demonstrated in the spring of 632 CE when Yazdgerd III was crowned at the Anāhītā fire temple in Istakhr, where he had been hiding during Iran's civil war^[53].

However, the declared political and ideological ambitions of

the early Sasamians reasonably dictated them to distance from the Anāhītā fire temple, humiliated by Alexander the Great by the burning of the Holy Avesta, following the proclamation Ādur Gušnasp of Media as the “cathedral” and the most sacred fire of the empire ^[54].

Furthermore, the attachment of the Sasanians to Ādurbādagān’s Ādur Gušnasp fire sent a strong political message to those inside the empire and to their neighbors, particularly the Roman/Byzantium Empire. Starting from Julius Caesar, the Roman and later Byzantine emperors’ ambitions were compared to those of Alexander the Great in the East. They propagated themselves as the successors of Alexander and were full of ambitions to re-conquer and defeat Persia ^[55]. In this light, the early Sassanids’ distancing from Alexander’s ransacked fire of Anāhītā had an additional political and ideological essence, particularly messaging to the Romans that the Sassanids were ready to fight for Persia and Persian Glory as the victorious warriors of the Ādur Gušnasp fire temple.

Next, it is necessary to stress that the Sassanids’ key geopolitical and religious rival Byzantium acknowledged the imperial, military, and ideological value of and Ādurbādagān as the Sasanian empire’s most religiously sacrosanct land holding the empire’s most sacred fire of Ādur Gušnasp. In 623, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, during the last Byzantine-Sassanian war of 602-628 CE, occupied Azerbaijan and sacked Ādur Gušnasp intending to crush the Sassanids’ will and power to fight. As Greenwood mentioned, Heraclius had recognised the potential for striking at the central Ādurbādagān province of the Sasanian empire from the north, using Armenia as a bridgehead ^[56]. Some scholars have argued, that because Emperor Heraclius’ letters before the war and the Byzantines’ return to Jerusalem of the Holy Cross, which had been captured by the Sasanians in 614 and stored in Ādurbādagān’s capital Ganzak ^[57], this war was religious revenge ^[58]. Heraclius ruined the great and most sacred fire temple of the Sasanians, extinguishing the fire in Ādur Gušnasp and polluting the lake’s water in the fire complex with corpses ^[59].

Later, in 651, the Muslim Arabs sought to paralyze the Sasanians by focusing their final attack on Azerbaijan where Yazdgerd III was attempting to establish his new army.

Finally, the early Sassanids’ proclamation of Ādur Gušnasp as the empire’s most sacred fire temple with the rank of “cathedral” and the institutionalization of Zoroastrianism as the state religion reveal the evolutionary developments in early Sasanian imperial policy and ideology. These developments transformed Azerbaijan into the religious and ideological “core” of the Sasanian Empire. As Hakimfar rightly highlighted, when the Magi were converted to Zoroastrianism under the empire’s chief priest Kirdēr-Gušnasp of Ādur Gušnasp, Azerbaijan became the ideological centre for the propagation of the Zoroastrian religion ^[60].

Conclusion

Official Sasanian propaganda presented the Sasanians as the restorers of Truth and Persian Glory and rulers of the lands that previously belonged to the Achaemenian dynasty. The Sasanians portrayed themselves as successors to the Achaemenid Persians. The early Sasanians strove to eliminate the Parthian era remnants of Hellenism and institutionalize Zoroastrianism as the only religion of

Ērānšahr. King Shāpūr I declared Zoroastrianism to be the imperial religion and proclaimed the last surviving Great Fire of State, Ādur Gušnasp in Azerbaijan, to be the empire’s most sacred fire. Shāpūr I further attached the Sasanians to Ādur Gušnasp victorious warriors’ class fire of the highest grade and granted it the rank of “cathedral”.

In this light, it can be assumed that the early Sassanids’ attachment to the Ādur Gušnasp fire indicates a further development in their imperial ideology and policy that moved from the restorers of Truth and Achaemenid Persian Glory to the protectors or fighters for Truth and Persian Glory.

It is also rational to believe that the political and ideological distancing of the early Sassanids from the Anāhītā fire, from which they rose to power but was ransacked and humiliated by Alexander of Macedon’s burning of the Holy Avesta, was needed to prove their full and absolute departure from the impacts of the Greek world.

Ideologically, attaching themselves to the Ādur Gušnasp, the early Sasanians presented themselves to Ērān and Anērān (non-Iran) as great warriors.

Politically, it could also be considered as the strong message to Rome/Byzantium, which claimed ownership of Alexander the Great’s heritage that the Sassanid Persians were legitimate descendants of the Achaemenid Persians and protectors or “victorious warriors” of the great Achaemenid Persian heritage.

In the meantime, by keeping the Achaemenid’s favored Anāhītā fire in their hearts and guarding it, the early Sassanids, nevertheless, obligated every new šāhanšāh after the official coronation to make a pilgrimage and donate royal gifts to the Ādur Gušnasp fire to signify its highest rank.

Further, the Sasanians reacted to internal political demands by granting Ādur Gušnasp the honor of being the empire’s “cathedral” rank fire. This acknowledgment established direct political control through the mobedān mobed (priest of priests) over the powerful, rich, and influential Zoroastrian priesthood of Persian and Medes origin. The highest priests, Kirdēr-Gušnasp and Ādurbād-ī Mahraspānd, who were both affiliated with Ādur Gušnasp, were close to the crown and advised the šāhanšāhs.

Therefore, by declaring Ādur Gušnasp to be the empire’s most sacred and “cathedral” fire, the early Sasanians transformed Ādurbādagān into the religious “core” of the state and the ideological centre of imperial Zoroastrian propaganda.

Notably, Azerbaijan was a province controlled by the great Pahlav House of Ispahbudhan, which had close relations with the other powerful great Pahlav House of Mehrān, the shāh’s dynasty in Arrān (Albania). Both families were influential in Sasanian internal politics, as recalling that šāhanšāh Xusrō I’s mother was a Ispahbudhan noblewoman and the Sasanian military elite were mostly from either the Ispahbudhan or Mehrān Houses. Therefore, in an attempt to reduce the great feudal lords’ power in the empire’s internal politics, a high priority of the House of Sāsān was to keep “an eye” on the Ādurbādagān and Arrān noble (šahrdārān) families’ politics. By controlling the nobles’ activities, the House of Sāsān focused on preventing any possible revolt or coup d’etat by the Pahlav Houses, however, general Bahrām Chōbīn of Mehrān did briefly become šāhanšāh Bahrām VI, claiming that the Sasanians were usurpers.

Thus, the transformation of Azerbaijan into the religious

centre of the empire was beneficial to the Sassanids' ideology, military, administrative, and internal politics. However, Azerbaijan's proximity to the empire's war zones meant the province was vulnerable, a fact that both the Sasanians and their enemies were aware of.

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