

SASANIAN IRAN – ECONOMY, SOCIETY, ARTS AND CRAFTS*

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PART ONE

POLITICAL HISTORY, ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

(N. N. Chegini)

It is probable that Vologases IV died some time in A.D. 208/209, after which the throne of the Parthians was disputed between his sons, Ardavan V (Artabanus) and Vologases V.¹ Ardavan ruled in central Iran and Vologases in Mesopotamia, striking coins at Seleukia.² The conflict between the two brothers lasted until the end of Parthian rule. In Rome, Caracalla succeeded his father Septimius Severus in 211 and the weakness of the Parthians resulted in a Roman incursion into Parthia, during which a great part of Media was pillaged and the Parthian tombs at Arbela were stripped. Although Ardavan succeeded in defeating the heir to Caracalla, Macrinus, the war against Rome and internal struggles strained the Parthian Empire to its limits.³ What is now known, following Simonetta's work, is that Ardavan did not issue tetradrachms because he did not control Seleukia.⁴

After the invasions of Alexander the Great in the early fourth century B.C., the region of Fars, the homeland of the Persians, had become one of the vassal kingdoms of first the Seleucids and then the Parthians, ruled by several local princes. The kingdom of Persia issued coins almost continuously between 280 B.C. and A.D. 200, using the title *prtrk* (Frataraka, i.e. governor) and later *MLK* (king). By the beginning of the third century, conflict within the Parthian royal family and war with the Romans had weakened central authority.⁵

One prominent king of Persia during the last years of the weakened Parthia was Gochihr of the **Bazrangi** family, although his name does not appear on coins.⁶ Sasan, after whom the dynasty is named, may have been the

* See Map 2.

1. Simonetta, 1956, pp. 77–82.

2. Ibid., p. 77.

3. Ibid., pp. 77–8.

4. Ibid., pp. 78–9.

5. Frye, 1975, pp. 239–41; Sellwood, 1983, pp. 299–306; Frye, 1984, pp. 271–85.

6. Al-Tabari, 1879–89, Vol. 1, p. 815; Herzfeld, 1924, pp. 35–6.

chief priest of the Adur Anahid temple in Istakhr. Papak, his son or a descendant (as Sasan, although mentioned, does not appear in the family line of the Sasanians listed in Shapur's great inscription of the Ka'be of Zoroaster at Naqsh-e Rostam, near Persepolis), succeeded him and the family gained more authority by defeating the local governors and deposing Gochihr. Papak's name appears on coins using the title *MLK*.⁷ According to the Arab historian al-Tabari, Ardavan V asked Papak to submit to his authority and to send his son Ardashir to the court, but he refused. When Papak died he was succeeded by his eldest son Shapur to whom Ardashir, the younger brother, did not give allegiance. When Shapur died in an accident in Persepolis, however, Ardashir became the head of the local dynasty.⁸

According to the Bishapur inscription of Shapur I, Ardashir proclaimed himself king in 205. The series of coins showing him with a Parthian tiara probably commemorates this event.⁹ Ardashir then campaigned in western Iran and conquered Susiana and Elymais in c. 222.¹⁰ Characene (Meshan), the vassal kingdom of the Parthians, was captured and a new governor appointed. At the famous battle of Hormizdagan (whose site is not known),¹¹ which probably took place not later than 224,¹² Ardavan V was defeated and killed.

After their crushing defeat, the remaining forces of the Arsacids (i.e. Parthians) fled to the mountains and resisted for a while. On the basis of evidence in the *Mujmal al-tawarikh*, Widengren suggests a second battle near Nihavend when Ardashir was marching towards the capital, Ctesiphon (Tespun).¹³ According to al-Tabari, Ardashir advanced to Ecbatana (Hamadan) and then conquered Armenia and Adiabene (Mosul). In 226 he entered the capital and styled himself *shahanshah* (king of kings) and his official reign started. A commemorative bas-relief was ordered to be cut on the rock at Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 1) and coins showing him with a new crown were issued (Plate I, 3).¹⁴

It is now accepted that Ardashir I defeated Ardavan V several times, overthrew some of the minor local rulers who lived under the Parthians and replaced them with newly appointed governors from his own family.¹⁵ If, however, al-Tabari's account¹⁶ is correct, an eastern campaign must have taken place during the rule of Ardashir I, and Seistan (modern Sistan), Abarshahr

7. Frye, 1984, p. 271; 1975, p. 239.

8. Ghirshman, 1954, p. 290.

9. Frye, 1983, p. 117.

10. Al-Tabari, 1879–89, Vol. 1, p. 818; Hansman, 1978, p. 155.

11. Rawlinson, 1876, p. 37.

12. Bivar, 1969a, p. 50.

13. Rawlinson, 1876, p. 37; Widengren, 1971, p. 743; Frye, 1975, p. 242.

14. IJenning, 1954, p. 44.

15. Bivar, 1969a, p. 50.

16. Ibid.



FIG. 1. Investiture relief of Ardashir I at Naqsh-i Rostam.
(Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)

(Nishapur), Merv, Balkh and Khwarizm were occupied. The overthrow of the Great Kushans, at least in the western part of their realm, is now considered the result of the rising power of the new dynasty in Iran.¹⁷ According to al-Tabari,¹⁸ the king of the Kushans (perhaps Vasudeva I) sent a mission of surrender. Whatever the circumstances, the kingdom of the Kushans was divided and the heartland of their empire in Bactria and the Kabul valley came under the control of the Sasanians.¹⁹ The Sasanian rulers of the captured territory are known today as the Kushano-Sasanian governors, although the date when they began to issue coins is not known.²⁰ It seems that during this period the Sasanian kings regularly appointed governors of the principal provinces.²¹

The extent of Shapur I's empire in the east is known from the content of his inscription on the face of the Ka'be of Zoroaster. This inscription is written in three languages, Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek, and lists the provinces of the Sasanian Empire in c. 260. It shows that Shapur was already victorious against the Romans and in Transcaucasia, and under him Sasanian control in the east

17. Frye, 1975, p. 242.

18. Bivar, 1969a, p. 50.

19. Ibid.

20. Bivar, 1979, pp. 317–32.

21. Ibid., pp. 320, 323–4.

was also expanded.²² The second part of the inscription, which is a description of the empire, gives Shapur's possessions as Merv, Herat and all Abarshahr, Kerman, Seistan, Turan, Makran, Paradan, Hind (Sind) and Kushanshahr as far as *pskbwr* (Peshawar) and up to the borders of Kash, Sughd and Chach (Kashgar, Sogdiana and Tashkent). This passage also lists all the provinces situated in the east of the empire.²³ In mentioning the Kushans, Shapur indicates the extent of his control to the east and north-east. It should be pointed out that the land of Khwarizm, although not appearing in the list of provinces, had already been captured by the Sasanians during the rule of Ardashir I. Al-Tabari mentions a campaign in which Ardashir conquered Khwarizm as well as Gurgan, Merv and so on. According to the *Chronicle of Arbela* (whose authenticity is open to doubt), the final assault on Khwarizm took place in 239/240 during Ardashir's rule.

The appearance of *Kushanshab* (king of the Kushans) as a Sasanian title shows that the Great Kushan kings had been defeated. Shapur I's success evidently ended the rule of the Great Kushans and split their kingdom into two parts, the northern and the southern. Branches of the Kushans ruled in the southern part, east of the River Indus, where they are known as Murundas.²⁴ The northern part, or core, of the Kushan territory became a province of the Sasanian Empire.

Struggles against the northern nomads

Shapur II (309–379) was forced to wage war for ten years against invaders whom Ammianus Marcellinus (XVII, 5) refers to as the Chionites. Shapur was clearly successful in his operation and managed to impose his authority on the invaders and stabilize his eastern frontiers.²⁵ The victorious return of Shapur must have taken place some time before 360; it was apparently at this time that the city of Abarshahr was founded and used as his headquarters.²⁶ His success in containing the Chionites resulted in the conclusion of an alliance under the terms of which the Chionites would help Shapur in his war against the Romans. In 360, when he laid siege to the fortress of Amida (the modern Diyarbakir in eastern Turkey), the Chionites with their king Grumbates supported him, according to the eyewitness account of Ammianus Marcellinus (XVIII, 7. 1-2).²⁷

A few decades later, it appears that Kushanshahr was no longer under the control of the Sasanians and was subject to new invaders.²⁸ This new power,

22. Henning, 1937–39; 1954, pp. 40–54.

23. Ilerzfeld, 1947, p. 182; Henning, 1947–48, p. 54.

24. Bivar, 1969a, p. 51.

25. Ibid., pp. 53–4.

26. Ibid., p. 53.

27. Ibid., p. 54; 1979, p. 327.

28. Bivar, 1969a, p. 54.

known to us as the Kidarites (after their leader Kidara, probably himself a Chionite chief), had appeared on the eastern frontiers by the end of the fourth century. Coins of Kidara, together with those of Shapur II, Ardashir II and Shapur III, have been found in the treasure of Tepe Maranjan near Kabul²⁹ and in the archaeological site of Butkara, Swat (in Pakistan). The Kidarites (who dominated Tokharistan and Gandhara) adopted the Sasanian title of *Kushanshah*, which indicates that they were the chief heirs of the Sasanian *Kushanshahs* and their administration.³⁰ We know that the new wave of invaders from Iran came at the time of Bahram V shortly before 440. It is reasonable to suppose that this new disturbance was caused by the arrival of the Hephthalites and that early in the fifth century they drove the Kidarites south from Bactria to Panjab, where the name Kidara appears on many gold coins.³¹

It is clear that from early in the fifth century, the Hephthalites had become the main power in the east: it was to them that the Sasanian prince Peroz appealed for assistance in defeating his brother Hormizd III in 457. Although Peroz (459–484) succeeded in recovering his throne, he was later defeated and captured by his former allies. According to al-Tabari, the name of the Hephthalite king was Akhshunvar (a Sogdian title, *khsundar* meaning 'king'); or Khushnavaz according to the poet Firdausi. Peroz was freed in return for leaving his son Kavad as hostage; and when Kavad was ransomed, Peroz returned and attacked the Hephthalites. This resulted in his defeat and death, and the loss of his army.³² After this defeat the Sasanians had to pay an annual tribute to the Hephthalites and some parts of the eastern region fell into the hands of the enemy. Kavad even asked the Romans to lend him money to pay the tribute.³³ In 498 or 499, however, it was through Hephthalite support that Kavad I regained his throne.³⁴

During the rule of Khusrau I Anushirvan (531–579) the Türks arrived on the Jaxartes steppes from Mongolia. In order to crush the Hephthalites, Khusrau allied himself with the Türk *kaghan* known in Arabic and Byzantine sources as Sinjibu or Silzibul. A fierce battle took place, the result of which was the defeat and dispersal of the Hephthalites and the division of their land. The southern part was taken by the Sasanians and the north by the Türks.³⁵ At the same time Khusrau I rebuilt the lines of fortification on the Gurgan plain of eastern Mazandaran. One such fortification was Sadd-i Iskandar ('Alexander's barrier'), or Sadd-i Anushirvan; a second was the wall of Tammisha, running

29. Bivar, 1979, p. 331; Curiel, 1953, pp. 107–9.

30. Göbl, 1976, p. 340; Bivar, 1979, p. 331.

31. Bivar, 1969a, p. 55.

32. Ibid.

33. Christensen, 1944, pp. 316–17.

34. Bivar, 1969a, p. 56.

35. Ibid.; 1975; 1983, p. 215.

from the mountains to the seashore and closing the eastern approach to Mazandaran. Khusrau is also supposed to have rebuilt the wall and defences of Darband in the Caucasus.³⁶

The Sasanian administration

At the head of the Sasanian state stood the king. In official inscriptions the Sasanian kings called themselves ‘Mazda – worshipping majesty, of the race of the gods’. According to Ammianus Marcellinus (XXIII, 6.5), the Sasanian king considered himself ‘brother of the sun and moon’. On reliefs, ‘in the language of transparent symbols, the King of Kings is shown as the earthly incarnation of the supreme deity’.³⁷

During the Early Sasanian period the administration of the provinces and districts did not differ greatly from that under the Parthians. It was during this period that the royal cities, almost equivalent to semi-independent kingdoms, were built (see below).³⁸ In the early inscriptions we find mentions of *shabrs* (vassal kingdoms) such as Merv, Kerman, Sakastan, Adiabene, Iberia, Makran, Mesene, Kushanshahr and Armenia, which had submitted to Sasanian rule. In many cases the rulers of these kingdoms were the sons of the monarch himself.

In the Early Sasanian period, Shapur I was the ruler of the kingdoms listed, all of which had to pay tribute and submit in varying degrees.³⁹ It was in the later part of the Sasanian period that a greater centralization took place: in theory the empire was divided into four parts, each governed by an official appointed by the king, with both military and civil powers. The title of the commander was *spāhbad*.⁴⁰

Royal cities

The Sasanian royal cities (under the administration of *ashabrab*) were the headquarters of the military garrison, centres of newly formed administrative districts and residences of the state officials.⁴¹ Ardashir I himself founded many cities, one of which was Ardashir-Khvarreh (‘Glory – or fortune – of Ardashir’). From a military outpost, it grew to become an administrative district with Gur

36. Frye, 1977, pp. 7–15; Bivar and Fehrevvari, 1966, pp. 40–1, Pl. 11 (a–b) and Fig. 1 (map of the region); Kiani, 1982a, pp. 73–9; 1982b; Bivar, 1983, p. 215.

37. Frye, 1983, p. 160.

38. Lukonin, 1983, p. 735.

39. Ibid., pp. 731–2.

40. Ibid., pp. 723–5.

41. Ibid., pp. 120–1, 162, 751, 1056.



FIG. 2. Taq-i Kasra at Ctesiphon. (Photo: © Barbara Grunewald.)

as its centre. It was laid out on a circular urban plan. In the words of al-Tabari, ‘Shapur I, like his father, founded or renamed cities and we can see an example of both in his inscription – Gundeshapur and Peroz-Shapur – while other towns mentioned by Arabic or Persian authors may be attributed to either Shapur I or II.’⁴² According to Christensen, ‘Other cities were Shad-Shapur, “Joyful is Shapur”, or ‘Ubulla in southern Iraq, Shapur-Khvast near Khurramabad, Vuzurg-Shapur or ‘Ukbara in Iraq, as well as others, but none in the eastern part of the empire. These cities, like Darabgird and Gur in Fars, were surrounded by walls and were presumably well fortified, a feature of Sasanian city planning.’⁴³ The most famous city founded by Shapur I was Bishapur, with a Greek plan. It was probably built in A.D. 262, six years after his triumph over the Roman emperor Valerian.

The administrative capital of the Sasanians was Ctesiphon. It consisted of a group of towns known as the *mada’in* (meaning ‘the cities’ in Arabic), two of which were Veh-Ardashir and Veh-Antioch-Khusrau; the district in which they were situated was called (at least during the sixth century) Shad-Kavad. Taq-i Kasra (Fig. 2), a building dating probably from the Early Sasanian epoch

42. Al-Tabari, 1879–89, Vol. 1, pp. 961–2.

43. Christensen, 1944, p. 361.

and extended or embellished during the rule of Khusrau I, was situated in the city. Ctesiphon was not only the seat of most Sasanian kings but also the most important of the Sasanian capitals in economic and strategic terms. Besides cities such as Ardashir-Khvarreh, Bishapur, Gundeshapur, Susa, Dastagird (held as a capital during the reign of Khusrau II and located east of Ctesiphon) and Ecbatana (a summer capital), the city of Istakhr in Fars also served as an administrative, religious and economic centre. It was the ideological heart of the empire, since the temple of the dynasty's fire – the coronation place of many Sasanian rulers – was situated there.

The reforms of Khusrau I

Khusrau's success in overcoming the religious movement of the Mazdakites (see Chapter 17) and managing to put the country's life in order gave him a great opportunity to start his reforms. One of these was the new policy on land taxation and the poll tax. According to al-Tabari, the change in the land tax had already begun during the reign of Kavad I.⁴⁴ The Arab historian reports that the farmers had had no right to harvest crops or gather fruit from their garden before the arrival of the tax collector; the long wait meant that their produce was frequently wasted. To avoid this, Khusrau introduced a new fiscal system. First, he ordered the lands to be measured. Next he fixed the amount of tax to be levied for each *griv* (Arabic *jarib*, one-tenth of a hectare) according to what was cultivated there; for example, 1 *griv* of wheat or barley = 1 drachm, and 1 *griv* of vineyard = 8 drachms. Under the new regulations, all persons between the ages of 20 and 50, except nobles, soldiers and priests, were compelled to pay the poll tax, whose amount ranged from 12 drachms (Arabic dirhams) to 4 drachms, according to wealth.

The taxes were collected according to the administrative sub-divisions of the country from village up to province, with the officer in charge of a province being responsible for overall supervision and the tax in each city being paid to the judge of that city. Al-Tabari reports that Khusrau ordered the list of the new tax rates to be kept in the royal treasury. With the implementation of these new measures and the appearance of organized tax collectors, Khusrau was able to maintain a regular income for the government. Supervision of the payment of taxes into the royal treasury was undertaken by the *chamarkar* (accountant), who was also responsible for issuing documents on the right of ownership and possession.⁴⁵ The great tax reform of Khusrau I marked a turning point in the Sasanian state administration. For the first time, the power of the landed nobility was restricted and all the taxes were in the hands of the king.⁴⁶

44. Al-Tabari, 1879–89, Vol. 1, pp. 961–2.

45. Lukonin, 1983, p. 726; Dennet, 1950, p. 15.

46. Al-Tabari, 1879–89, Vol. 1, p. 963; Christensen, 1944, p. 362; Lukonin, 1983, p. 746.

The economy

Since the vast majority of the population were peasants, the country's economy was based on land and agriculture. The archaeological survey of Khuzistan and the area north of Baghdad shows the great Sasanian interest in irrigation and cultivation. One of the great irrigation systems was the Nahravan canal, which supplied the water for a vast area of cultivation. The remains of Sasanian canals and dams can still be seen in various parts of Iran. These activities increased during the rule of Khusrau I, under whom large areas of land were brought under cultivation.⁴⁷

Thus the national economy continued to be based on agriculture rather than trade. In commerce, Sasanian coinage of silver and copper, more rarely of gold, circulated over a wide area and the bill of exchange appeared.⁴⁸ More money was in circulation in the towns, as shown by the great number of silver drachms found in Iran and neighbouring countries. In the rural districts, however, the wages of the peasants, soldiers and officials, and even some of the taxes, were paid in kind. The levying of dues and taxes in kind enabled the government to build up large stocks of essential goods that could be called upon in time of famine.⁴⁹

It is probable that silk was already being imported into Iran from China in Achaemenid times.⁵⁰ In the Sasanian era, two routes were used, one overland (still called the Silk Route) and the other the sea route around the coasts of South-East Asia, although this was less popular than the overland route.⁵¹ Silk was woven mainly in Syro-Phoenician and Chinese workshops; besides the woven silk from China, large quantities of raw silk yarn were also imported for weaving to purely Sasanian designs, creating a rival industry. The workshops of Susa, Gundeshapur and Shushtar were later famous for their products.⁵²

Luxury ceramics, glassware, textiles, amber and papyrus were imported and there was a transit trade in spices from China and Arabia.⁵³ However, Iran's position was as a middleman that benefited from the value of the traded items. The excavated finds from Begram, which can be ascribed to the Early Sasanian period, indicate commodities in transit such as decorated glassware and glass beads, ivories and manufactured metal. Although the Sasanian coin finds from China show the use of Iranian silver, this is not enough to prove

47. Frye, 1983, pp. 160–1; on Khuzistan, see Adams, 1961; on Iraq, see Adams, 1965.

48. Ghirshman, 1978, pp. 341–2.

49. *Ibid.*

50. Bivar, 1970, p. 1.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Ghirshman, 1954, p. 342; Bivar, 1970, p. 2.

53. Ghirshman, 1954, p. 342.

that Sasanian imports from China were substantially financed by a mass of silver coins.⁵⁴

Sasanian coins

All the Sasanian rulers struck coins, and these are an invaluable source of historical, cultural and economic information. A constant denomination and weight standard were adopted, and the coins bore the ruler's effigy on the obverse and a fire-altar on the reverse. On the obverse the king's portrait faces right, in contrast to the practice under the Arsacids – except on commemorative issues, frontal portraiture is rare (Plate V, 29). The name of the king and his titles are inscribed close to the edge. Each ruler has his own personal crown, which is a reliable guide to the whole range of Sasanian art and its chronology. Only one queen's portrait, that of Boran, appears on the coins (Plate VI, 35).

On the reverse the fire-altar with flames always appears, with three principal variations: by itself (Plate I, 1, 2, 3), with two flanking figures, or with a bust in the flames (Plate III, 14, 15). The significance of the two attendant figures in the second type has not yet been clarified. At the beginning of the issues the figures carry long rods, and later barsom-bundles in their hands, facing towards or away from the altar. In the time of Khusrau I they appear frontally (Plate IV, 23), and from the time of Bahram II (275–293) onwards at least one of the attendant figures, judging from the crown, represents the ruler (Plate II, 7, 8). Special reverse designs allude to investitures (Mithra or Anahita); special issues under Khusrau II (590–628) show a bust in a nimbus of flames (Plate V, 29), or the king standing.

The Sasanians adopted the traditional silver drachm of Attic weight, the most common currency of the Parthian period. The weight (almost 4 g) and the fineness of the metal used were, with few exceptions, well maintained. Besides drachms there were half-drachms, obols and half-obols, and tetradrachms of a poor silver alloy (billon). The striking of gold was also revived, but only for prestige and display issues. Some rulers did not strike gold coins and after Khusrau II their issue ceases.⁵⁵ The formulation of Sasanian coin inscriptions was determined by the political and religious motives of the dynasty. They are written in Sasanian Pahlavi with the use of ideograms. On the obverse the royal name and titles appear, and on the reverse the name of the royal fire, with later the place of minting and regnal year.⁵⁶

One of the chief characteristics of the Late Sasanian coinage is represented by the mint monograms that appear on the right side of the reverse and give

54. Bivar, 1970, pp. 2–4.

55. Göbl, 1983, pp. 322–8.

56. Ibid.



FIGS. 1, 2, 3. Ardashir I.



FIG. 4. Shapur I.

FIG. 5. Hormizd I.

FIG. 6. Bahram I.

PLATE I. (Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)



FIGS. 7, 8. Bahram II.

FIG. 9. Narseh.



FIG. 10. Narseh.

FIG. 11. Hormizd II.

FIG. 12. Shapur II
(gold dinar).

PLATE II. (Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)



FIG. 13. Ardashir II.



FIG. 14. Shapur III.



FIG. 15. Bahram IV.



FIG. 16. Yazdgird I.



FIG. 17. Bahram V.



FIG. 18. Yazdgird II.



PLATE III. (Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)



FIG. 19. Peroz.



FIG. 20. Valash.



FIG. 21. Kavad I.



FIG. 22. Jamasp.



FIG. 23. Khusrau I.



FIG. 24. Hormizd IV.



PLATE IV. (Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)



FIG. 25. Bahram VI.



FIG. 26. Vistahm.



FIG. 27. Hormizd V.



FIGS. 28, 29, 30. Khusrau II.

PLATE V. (Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)



FIG. 31. Kavad II.

FIGS. 32, 33. Ardashir III.



FIG. 34. Khusrau III.

FIG. 35. Queen Boran.

FIG. 36. Queen Azarmigdukht.

PLATE VI. (Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)



FIG. 37. Hormizd VI.

FIG. 38. Khusrau IV.



FIGS. 39, 40, 41. Yazdgird III.

PLATE VII. (Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)

the names of mint cities in abbreviated forms. These forms stand for the full Sasanian names of those cities authorized to possess mints. About 200 of these mint signs are known to us,⁵⁷ such as:

- 'W for Hormizd Ardashir (present-day Ahvaz)
- 'PR' for Abarshahr (Nishapur)
- 'RT for Ardashir-Khvarreh (Firuzabad)
- 'HM for Hamadan
- 'YL'N for Eran-Khvarreh-Shapur (Susa)
- BYŠ for Bishapur in Fars.

The army, warfare and armaments

Khusrau I's second most important reform was the reorganization of the army which, together with the implementation of the new taxation system, gave him a secure foundation from which to safeguard the empire. Previously, all nobles, great and small, had been obliged to equip themselves and their followers and serve in the army without pay, but Khusrau issued equipment to the poorer nobles and paid a salary for their services. Consequently, the power of the great nobles – who frequently had their own private armies – was reduced.⁵⁸ A permanent army of cavalry known as *aswaran* (Arabic, *asawira*), designating a heavily armed and disciplined force, existed.⁵⁹ According to Ammianus Marcellinus (XXIII, 6.83): 'They rely especially on the valour of their cavalry, in which all the nobles and men of rank undergo hard service.'

The weaker part of the army was the infantry, consisting of peasants subject to military service. Ammianus Marcellinus reports (XXIII, 6.83; XXIV, 6.8), 'The infantry are armed like the *murmillones* [gladiators], and they obey orders like so many horse-boys.' According to Procopius, the Persian infantry were used to destroy town walls after a victory. There were also auxiliary troops from the various nations allied to the central government such as the Armenians, the Hephthalites and the Dailamites.⁶⁰ Al-Tabari tells how a group of Dailamites under the command of Vahriz were sent to capture the land of Yemen.⁶¹ The command structure of the army was also changed under Khusrau I. Previously the entire army had been under the command of an officer known as the *spāhbad*. Now, four commanders were appointed, each in charge of the troops of one-quarter of the country.⁶² Each of these newly created

57. Bivar, 1963, pp. 169 et seq.; Tyler-Smith, 1983, pp. 240–7 (review of Mochiri, 1977).

58. Frye, 1983, p. 155.

59. Al-Tabari, 1879–89, Vol. 1, p. 2562; Vol. 2, p. 1604.

60. Inostrantsev, 1926, pp. 23–4.

61. Al-Tabari, 1879–89, Vol. 1, pp. 948–88.

62. Ibid., p. 894; Christensen, 1944, p. 365.

commanders had a deputy called a *marzban*. The soldiers were inspected every year in order to prevent them from escaping their duty, and to maintain their equipment. Conditions of service were arduous and all soldiers had to study and be familiar with a range of military instructions, information on which can be found in the Pahlavi book, the *Denkard*.⁶³

A fragment of a military treatise found in the ‘*Uyun al-akhbar* (Ibn Qutaiba Dinawari) confirms the existence of a military book during the reign of Khusrau I, who himself may have written such a treatise. Al-Tabari⁶⁴ records the equipment that members of cavalry units were required to carry at muster parades of Khusrau I: mail, breastplate, helmet, leg guards, arm guards, horse armour, lance, buckler, sword, mace, battle axe, quiver of thirty arrows, bow case with two bows, and two spare bow strings. According to Frye:

The reform of the army . . . was changed from the previous practice of the great feudal lords providing their own equipment and bringing their followers and retainers into the field to another system with a new force of *dihqāns* or ‘knights’ paid and equipped by the central government . . . Also, it should be remarked that the army reorganization under Chosroes [Khusrau I] was concentrated on organization and on training, rather than any new weapons or technical advances, and as previously the heavily armed cavalry remained the dominant force with archers less important. The masses, as usual, were still camp followers and little more than a rabble looking for booty, but a new nobility of service was created which became more influential than the landed nobility. Since payment in specie or even in kind did not suffice to recompense the ‘knights’, villages were granted to them in fief, and a large class of small landowners came into existence . . . Walls and forts also were built on the frontiers.⁶⁵

The Sasanians expended great effort in fighting Rome, Byzantium and the eastern nomads who invaded the Iranian frontiers. They clearly had a strong and efficient military force.⁶⁶ There were changes in the conduct of warfare over time, however, one of which was the development of the bow as a primary weapon with the arrival of the Huns during the mid-fourth century.⁶⁷

The relief frieze of Ardashir I at Firuzabad is a representation of cavalry warfare. It is known that the king personally took part in the battle.⁶⁸ Although the Ardashir relief does not depict the mace and battle axe, there is evidence of their use during the Late Parthian and Early Sasanian periods. The cavalry do not appear to have used shields in the Early Sasanian period.⁶⁹

63. West, 1982, pp. 86–90.

64. Al-Tabari, 1879–89, Vol. 1, p. 964; Bal‘ami, 1874, p. 1048; Christensen, 1944, pp. 362–3; Bivar, 1972, pp. 276–91.

65. Frye, 1984, p. 326; on the military reforms, see Bivar, 1972, pp. 273–91.

66. Bivar, 1972, pp. 273–91.

67. Ibid., p. 281.

68. Ibid., p. 275.

69. Ibid., p. 276.

P a r t T w o

CUSTOMS, ARTS AND CRAFTS

(A. V. Nikitin)

One of the best descriptions of Iranian customs and lifestyle in the Sasanian period is that given by Ammianus Marcellinus (XXIII, 6.75–80):

Among these many men of differing tongues there are varieties of persons, as well as of places. But, to describe their bodily characteristics and their customs in general, they are almost all slender, somewhat dark, or of a leaden pallor, with eyes grim as goats', eyebrows joined and curved in the form of a half-circle, not uncomely beards, and long, shaggy hair. All of them without exception, even at banquets and on festal days, appear girt with swords; an old Greek custom which, according to the trustworthy testimony of Thucydides, the Athenians were the first to abandon. Most of them are extravagantly given to venery, and are hardly contented with a multitude of concubines; they are free from immoral relations with boys. Each man according to his means contracts many or few marriages, whence their affection, divided as it is among various objects, grows cold. They avoid as they would the plague splendid and luxurious banquets, and especially, excessive drinking. Except for the kings' tables, they have no fixed hours for meal-times, but every man's belly is, as it were, his sundial; when this gives the call, they eat whatever is at hand, and no one, after he is satisfied, loads himself with superfluous food. They are immensely moderate and cautious, so much so that they sometimes march through an enemy's gardens and vineyards without coveting or touching anything, through fear of poison or magic arts. Besides this, one seldom sees a Persian stop to pass water or step aside in response to a call of nature; so scrupulously do they avoid these and other unseemly actions. On the other hand, they are so free and easy, and stroll about with such a loose and unsteady gait, that one might think them effeminate; but, in fact, they are most gallant warriors, although rather crafty than courageous, and to be feared only at a long range. They are given to empty words, and talk madly and extravagantly. They are boastful, harsh and offensive, threatening in adversity and prosperity alike, crafty, haughty, cruel, claiming the power of life and death over slaves and commons. They flay men alive, either bit by bit or all at once, and no servant who waits upon them, or stands at table, is allowed to open his mouth, either to speak or to spit; to such a degree, after the skins are spread, are the mouths of all fettered.

This picture is supplemented by the surviving Sasanian works of art, most of which depict scenes from the lives of kings or noblemen. Life at the royal court was governed by a strict code of protocol: the Byzantine system of court etiquette borrowed much from the court of the Iranian *shahanshah* (king of kings).⁷⁰ Sasanian inscriptions enumerating the members of the royal family

70. Lukonin, 1983, p. 710.



FIG. 3. Sasanian silver dish showing a royal hunt. (Photo: © British Museum.)

and courtiers, and the positioning of the king and nobles on reliefs, are in a standard order. Arab and Byzantine sources provide descriptions of the ceremony for the reception of ambassadors to the court of the *shahanshahs*. One of the traditional pastimes of the king and nobles was the hunt, for which special preserves or game parks were built. Ammianus Marcellinus (XXIV, 5.2) describes one such park that Roman soldiers saw during the emperor Julian's campaign in Mesopotamia in the year 363. Scenes of the royal hunt were the most common theme used to ornament Sasanian silverware (Fig. 3).

Sasanian cities and fortifications

So far, there has been adequate archaeological investigation of only a small number of the cities of Sasanian Iran: consequently, there are few examples from which to assess the system of urban design. The layout of many of the ancient Parthian cities appears to have survived unchanged into Sasanian times. Late tradition ascribes the founding of a large number of cities to Ardashir I (226–241). The new capital of Ardashir-Khvarreh (modern Firuzabad) built by Ardashir in Fars was of archaic layout. Circular in ground plan, it was surrounded by a wall with four gateways placed at the points of the compass. The various districts were delineated by main streets radiating from the centre and dividing the city into 20 sectors.⁷¹



FIG. 4. Tureng-tepe. Sasanian fort.
(Photo: © Mission Archéologique Française en Iran.)

Bishapur, built by Shapur I (241–271) in the seventh decade of the third century, had a regular ground plan in keeping with the rules for city design elaborated by Hippodamus of Miletus. Two main streets intersecting at right angles divided the city into four main districts, which were also of a regular layout. The architecture of Bishapur reveals clear Roman and Iranian influences and the Greek and Syrian masters and artists whom Shapur invited also had a hand in its construction.⁷² By contrast, the port city of Siraf on the coast

71. Huff, 1973, p. 193.

72. Ghirshman, 1956, p. 194.



FIG. 5. Takht-i Sulaiman. General view.
(Photo: © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Teheran.)

of the Persian Gulf grew up without a master plan. Its districts, which occupied an area of around 1 sq. km, lay against the fortress that protected the port and were surrounded by a wall.⁷³ The irregular layout of some contemporary Iranian cities would appear to date back to Sasanian times.

Most Sasanian cities were fortified. A system of fortresses and forts protected the borders of Iran, the approaches to the cities and the caravan roads. Their walls were built of stone blocks, cemented cobbles or sunbaked brick. At the corners, and at regular intervals along the walls, there were round towers with narrow, vertical arrow-slots. The tower of the Sasanian fort at Tureng-tepe in northern Iran had eight arrow-slots on the lower tier, widening from their mouths (Fig. 4).⁷⁴ Studies have been undertaken of the fort in Siraf, probably built under Shapur II (309–379) to protect the port against Arab attacks: its stone walls with round towers form a square, each side measuring 50 m; and the entrance in the middle of the south wall is defended by a barbican.⁷⁵

Some idea of fifth- and sixth-century fortifications is given by the walls and towers of Takht-i Sulaiman (formerly Shiz) in Iranian Azerbaijan (Fig. 5).

73. Whitehouse and Williamson, 1973, p. 35.

74. Deshayes, 1973, p. 144.

75. Whitehouse and Williamson, 1973.

Built of dressed stone embedded in cement, and crowned with battlements, the walls were about 4 m thick and reached a height of 12 or 15 m.⁷⁶ The remains of fortifications built in the Parthian period and rebuilt in the fifth and sixth centuries still stand near Gurgan: they once defended Iran's northern border against nomadic raids. A system of fortresses set every 3–6 km, and linked by an unbroken wall, stretched from the Caspian shore more than 180 km eastwards.⁷⁷

The acme of Sasanian military construction is represented by the fortifications of Darband, which stood across the road along the west coast of the Caspian; their construction began under Yazdgird II (438–457). The defences include the city's northern and southern walls, the citadel and a wall strengthened by stone forts that stretched 40 km to the Caucasus mountains. The fortifications were originally built of sunbaked brick and later of raw stone, but in the mid-sixth century, under Khusrau I (531–579), new walls were built of large stone slabs on the old foundations. To this day, the walls of Darband stand 20 m high in places.⁷⁸

According to tradition, Shapur I used Roman prisoners of war to build dams and bridges in Mesopotamia and Khuzistan. It appears to have been during his reign that the irrigation works were constructed on the banks of the Karun river near Shushtar; the most famous is the Valerian dam and bridge. Faced with stone slabs, this enabled the water level in one of the Karun's tributaries to be raised by 2 or 3 m. The length of the stone bridge, which is reminiscent of similar Roman structures, was over 500 m. Another bridge more than 400 m long has been preserved in Dezful, not far from Susa. There were several bridges across ravines and rivers on the ancient road that linked Ecbatana (modern Hamadan) and Susa.

Sasanian court architecture

Sasanian court architecture differed considerably from that of the Hellenistic and Parthian periods. From the outset it made use of a number of new principles that were then retained in later times. Some of them probably originate in the architectural tradition of Fars, which is as yet little known. In a number of cases a conscious imitation of Achaemenid models and Roman or Parthian influence are to be seen. The earliest monument of Sasanian court architecture is the palace of Ardashir I near Firuzabad.⁷⁹ Its design observes the principle of combining the *apadana* (official palace) and the *harem* (private residence).

76. Naumann, 1977, p. 34.

77. Kiani, 1982b, p. 12.

78. Kudryavtsev, 1982, p. 65.

79. Reuter, 1938, p. 534.



FIG. 6. Palace of Sarvestan. General view.
(Photo: © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Teheran.)

Measuring 55×104 m, the palace is laid out along the north-south axis. The northern part contains the throne room and the large rooms alongside it, roofed with low cupolas on squinches. The anteroom to the throne room is of the open *aiwān* (hall) type. The southern part contains the inner courtyard onto which the private rooms look out. The plaster decoration of the niches imitates the stone ornamentation on the portals of Achaemenid palaces. The walls, which are up to 4 m thick, are made of stone cemented with lime mortar.

Shapur I's palace at Bishapur reflects Graeco-Roman architectural influence. A cruciform throne room is contained within a square of outer walls 50×50 m, with a narrow gallery around the perimeter. The plaster decor – the meander and the plant designs – imitates the typical motifs of the art of Imperial Rome. The mosaics adorning the floor of the Grand *Aiwan* are in the Syro-Roman style – the dancing girls, musicians and theatrical masks depicted scenes from the Dionysiac cycle.⁸⁰

The combination of *aiwan* and domed premises was also used in later palaces. The same design was used for the palace at Sarvestan near Firuzabad (Figs. 6 and 7), which tradition ascribes to Bahram V (420–438). It has a more sophisticated roofing structure, however: the vaults of the two symmetrically located side rooms rest not on walls, but on a system of arches standing on square columns (Fig. 8).⁸¹ The next development in this traditional design is

80. Ghirshman, 1956, p. 193.

81. Shepherd, 1983, p. 1065.



FIG. 7. Palace of Sarvestan. General view.
(Photo: © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Teheran.)



FIG. 8. Roofing structure at the palace of Sarvestan.
(Photo: © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Teheran.)

represented by the palace of Aiwan-i Karkha near Susa, built under Kavad I (488–531). Its central hall, roofed with a cupola, is an open pavilion, the walls being replaced by open arches.⁸² Palace interiors were embellished with paintings (only small fragments of which have survived) and with plaster panels decorated with animal images or ornamentation. Palaces invariably had gardens and parks, for which special irrigation canals were dug.

The monumental architecture of the rule of Khusrau II (590–628) differs considerably from everything built earlier. The palace of Imarat-i Khusrau near Qasr-i Shirin, although laid out according to the traditional design, was built on an artificial terrace 8 m high.⁸³ The palace in Bisutun was built on a stone platform reminiscent of Persepolis. Colonnades came into use and elements of Achaemenid architectural decoration were copied. The Ctesiphon palace (which is of burnt brick) differs from the traditional Sasanian design; built probably in the Early Sasanian period on the site of an old palace of the Parthian kings, it largely followed its predecessor's layout, which resembles that of the Parthian palace discovered in Ashur. The façade is composed of six rows of blind arches and half-columns. The throne room is roofed with a parabolic vault spanning 26.5 m. The interior includes five large rectangular rooms, a corridor and a number of small rooms.⁸⁴

Sasanian religious architecture

Zoroastrian religious structures of the Sasanian period are of two basic types: isolated square structures with circumambulatory corridors; and open-sided domed pavilions whose cupola stood on squinches resting on pillars at the corners that were linked by arches. Such shrines might serve as the centre-piece of a complex architectural ensemble. An Early Sasanian temple of the first type has been discovered at Bishapur. In ground plan it resembles the Parthian-period temple in Hatra. The square central building, each side of which was 14 m long, had four entrances. Another structure had a roof supported by Achaemenid-style imposts in the shape of the front part of bulls' protomes. The walls were built of rough-dressed blocks of sandstone without mortar.⁸⁵ *Chahār-tāqs* (simple domes set on four pillar-like walls) were common throughout Iran and images of them may be found on Sasanian vessels.⁸⁶ The ensemble of shrines near Firuzabad included both a *chahār-tāq* and an Achaemenid-type fire-temple.⁸⁷

82. Shepherd, 1983, p. 1067.

83. Porada, 1965, p. 196.

84. Reuter, 1930; Shepherd, 1983, p. 1063.

85. Ghirshman, 1962a, p. 148.

86. Naumann, 1977, p. 43.

87. Vanden Berghe, 1961, p. 175.

At the site of Takht-i Sulaiman, a fire-temple has been discovered based on the same square plan with a domed roof, next to which were buildings for the priests, reception rooms and storehouses. A stone altar has been excavated similar to those shown on fifth- and sixth-century Sasanian coins. To the front of the temple complex, in the southern part of the site, there was a large lake. Together with the sacred fire, Anahita (the goddess of the heavenly waters) may well have been worshipped there. The ensemble dates from the fifth and sixth centuries.⁸⁸ There is an unusual temple, perhaps dedicated to Anahita, in Kangavar. It was probably raised on the site of an earlier temple to Artemis-Anahita that is mentioned by Isidore of Charax. The temple, which has not yet been fully excavated, stands on a stone platform 8 m high with a colonnade around the perimeter. Two gentle stone stairways lead to the platform. The structure has much in common with the architecture of the Achaemenid period but was probably built under Khusrau II.⁸⁹

Sasanian art and crafts

Early Sasanian art is of the proclamatory type. Designed to assert the divine nature of kingship and to reinforce the state religion, Zoroastrianism, it has much that is reminiscent of official Achaemenid art. The origins of the Sasanian pictorial canon appear to lie in the culture of pre-Sasanian Fars. Much, too, was drawn from Parthian culture: both Parthian investiture reliefs and inscriptions and the relief of the Sasanian *shahanshahs* stress the concept of legitimacy. Gracco-Roman cultural influence is discernible in several genres of Iranian art at various times. In the third century the 'western style' became widespread due to Shapur I's victories over the Roman emperors, the seizure of cities in Rome's eastern provinces and the migration of Greek, Syrian and Roman artisans and artists to Iran. At the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries there was a second wave of western influence; themes relating to the cult of Dionysus became common on precious metalware and glyptic, while Dionysiac scenes appear to have been included in the Zoroastrian festivity cycles.⁹⁰

The proclamatory nature of Early Sasanian art is best seen on cliff carvings. The choice of topics here is severely restricted: investitures, triumph and duel scenes or portraits of the *shahanshab* and his courtiers. The rules for the representation of the king and courtiers that emerged in the first years of Ardashir I's rule are much the same as those for the last kings of the local Persian dynasty that preceded the Sasanians, as illustrated on their coins.⁹¹ The

88. Naumann, 1977, p. 48.

89. Lukonin, 1977b, p. 105.

90. Lukonin, 1977a, p. 160.

91. Lukonin, 1969, p. 23.

earliest known relief of Ardashir was carved in the ravine of Naqsh-i Rajab. Ardashir is shown standing before the god Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda), who is crowning him king. Zoroastrianism personified its chief divinities at a relatively late period, and so Ohrmazd, the chief divinity, is portrayed in royal garb and crown. It was then, too, that the images of Anahita and Mithra were defined, as represented on coins of Hormizd I (271–272) and on reliefs of Narseh (293–303) and Ardashir II (379–383). A radiant crown was added to Mithra's kingly regalia while Anahita was shown dressed as the queen of queens.



FIG. 9. Bahram II's relief at Naqsh-i Rostam.
(Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)

In another investiture relief both monarch and divinity are depicted mounted, with the vanquished Parthian emperor Ardavan V lying beneath the hooves of Ardashir I's horse and the god of darkness, Ahriman, beneath those of Ohrmazd's steed (see Fig. 1). This graphic symbolism equates Ardashir's triumph with that of good over evil.⁹² In the Firuzabad relief Ardashir I's victory over Ardavan V is shown in a series of mounted duels, with Ardashir unhorsing the Parthian emperor and his heir Shapur, a Parthian grandee.⁹³ The poses of the steeds of both the defeated and their adversaries are reminiscent of images on Parthian reliefs such as those at Bisutun or Tang-i Sarvak in Elymais

92. Porada, 1965, p. 203.

93. Ghirshman, 1962*a*, p. 125.

province.⁹⁴ The victories of Ardashir I and Shapur I over the Romans were reflected in reliefs showing scenes of triumph.⁹⁵ They were modelled on portrayals of the Roman emperors' triumphs: for all the differences in composition, many details are identical.

Under Shapur I and Bahram II (275–293) (Fig. 9), reliefs were carved that depicted the royal court, with the figures of the king, the crown prince, the queen of queens and the courtiers being positioned in a strictly defined order. The Zoroastrian *mōbad* (high priest) Kartir (Kirdar) figures prominently in the reliefs of Bahram II. Four of Kartir's inscriptions are extant, containing his Creed and relating his activities. Alongside them, at Naqsh-e Rostam, there is a portrait of Kartir himself that is unique in Sasanian art (Fig. 10).⁹⁶ Also unusual is a relief showing Bahram II in single combat with lions at Sar Mashhad.⁹⁷

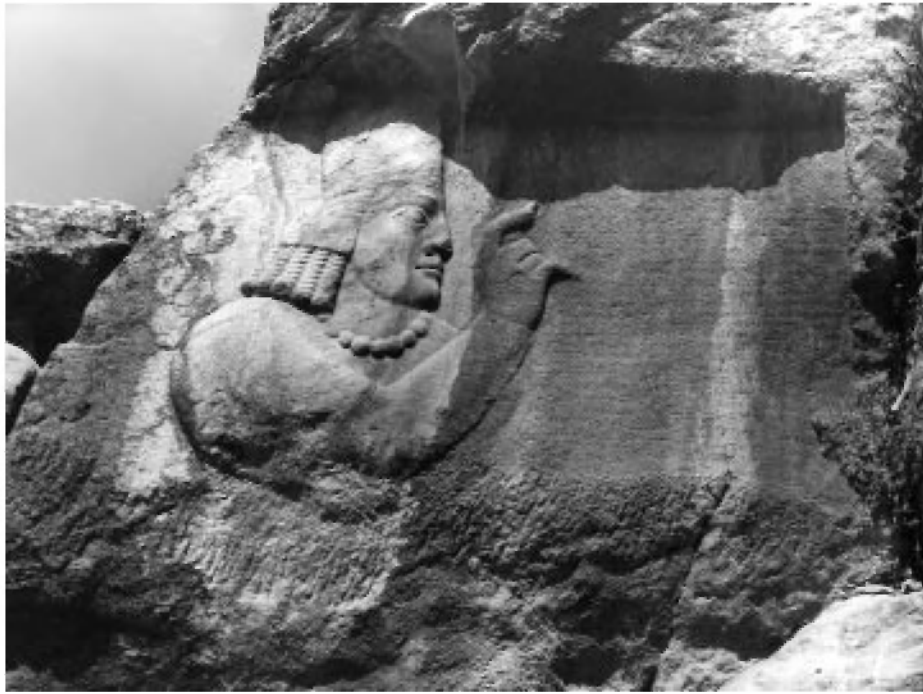


FIG. 10. Portrait of Kartir at Naqsh-e Rostam. (Photo: © Barbara Grunewald.)

94. Lukonin, 1977a, p. 146.

95. Ghirshman, 1962a, p. 158.

96. Lukonin, 1977a, p. 208.

97. Ghirshman, 1962a, p. 173.

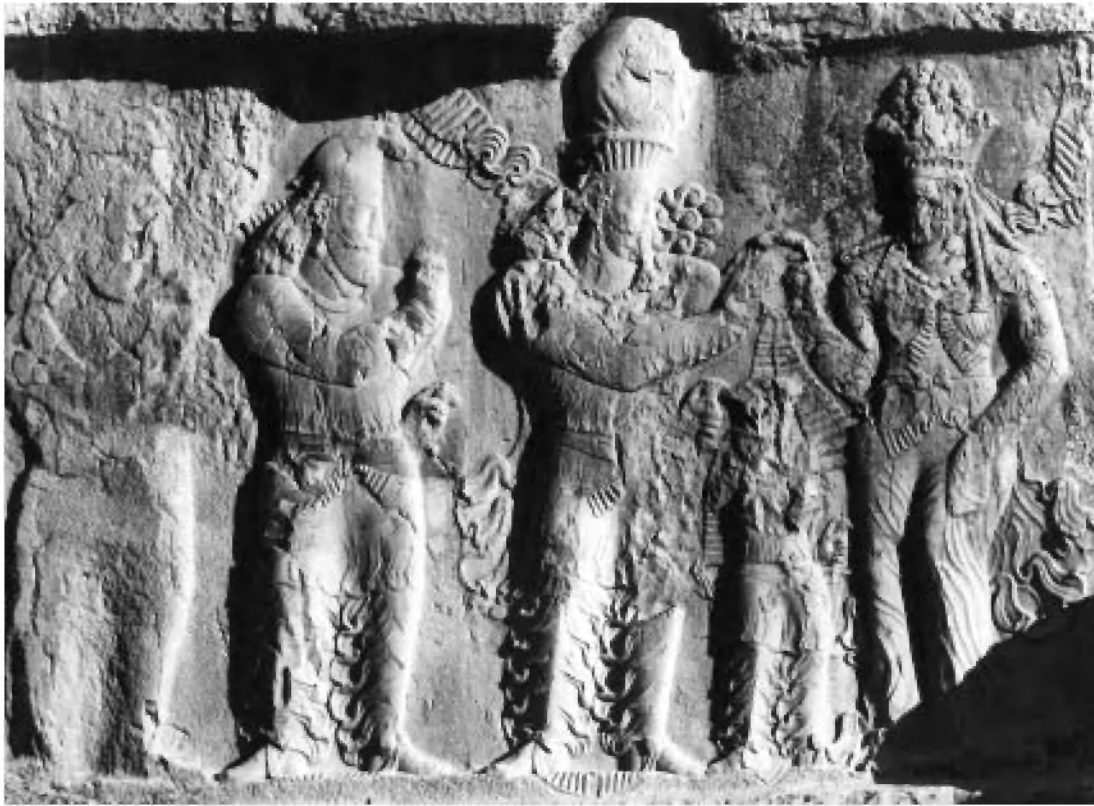


FIG. 11. Investiture relief of Narseh at Naqsh-i Rustam. (Courtesy of M. I. Mochiri.)

The *shahanshahs* who ruled after Bahram II have left only occasional reliefs, most of them investiture scenes. On the relief of Narseh at Naqsh-i Rustam he is crowned not by Ohrmazd but by Anahita, the patron of the Sasanian dynasty (Fig. 11). Apparently Narseh wished to stress the legitimacy of his claim to the throne he had seized and the end of Kartir's influence on the affairs of state. Ardashir II and Shapur III (383–388) each left one relief. The figures in fourth-century reliefs are more stylized and static; great attention was paid to decorative finish and to the representation of details of regal garb. Particularly interesting is Ardashir II's relief at Taq-i Bustan near Kermanshah (Fig. 12),⁹⁸ where the crown is given to the king by Ohrmazd who stands before him, while the god Mithra is shown standing on a lotus blossom behind Ardashir's back. Ohrmazd and Ardashir are trampling the figure of a fallen enemy (Fig. 13).⁹⁹

98. Ghirshman, 1962a, p. 190.

99. Lukonin, 1969, p. 147.



FIG. 12. Investiture relief of Ardashir II at Taq-i Bustan.
(Photo: © Barbara Grunewald.)



FIG. 13. Detail of Ardashir II's relief at Taq-i Bustan.
(Photo: © Barbara Grunewald.)



FIG. 14. The 'great grotto' at Taq-i Bustan. (Photo: © Barbara Grunewald.)

We know of no fifth- or sixth-century reliefs: the revival of the genre dates from the time of Khusrau II (590–628). The reliefs carved in the 'great grotto' at Taq-i Bustan during his reign differ from the earlier examples in both technique and content (Fig. 14). The central scene depicts an investiture – the king is shown in the centre, larger than the figures of the divinities. Below is probably the image of the *shahanshah*, mounted and in military array, executed



FIG. 15. Detail of a royal hunting scene at Taq-i Bustan. (Photo: © Barbara Grunewald.)



FIG. 16. Detail of a royal hunting scene at Taq-i Bustan.
(Photo: © Barbara Grunewald.)

almost as a sculpture in the round.¹⁰⁰ To the left and right, on the side walls of the niche, the king is shown hunting boar in a reedy marsh or gazelle and onager in a game park (Figs. 15 and 16). The scenes are executed in bas-relief with careful attention to detail. The image of the *shahanshah* is repeated several times. Taken together, the separate episodes make up a complete account that, in conjunction with the spatial aspect of the composition, is reminiscent of Assyrian reliefs. The arch-shaped façade of the niche is faced with stone blocks. In the centre are a crescent and ribbons towards which two winged Nikes are flying;



FIG. 17. Detail of ornamentation of the arch at Taq-i Bustan. (Photo: © Barbara Grunewald.)

100. Porada, 1965, p. 207.

the figures of the goddesses and the ornamentation at the edge of the arch reveal a strong Byzantine influence (Fig. 17).¹⁰¹

The work of Iranian metalsmiths is represented by dozens of examples in the major museum collections, testifying to the wide spread of these artefacts in antiquity. They include gold and silver cups, vessels, pitchers and rhytons executed in various techniques. Casting, engraving, embossing and crusta technique might be combined in one and the same object. The earliest Sasanian metalwork was decorated chiefly with portraits of the *shahanshah*, members of his family, princes or grandees. This tradition may date back to the Parthian period, when a famous medallion bearing the portrait of a Parthian emperor was set into the centre of a vessel. Early metal artefacts include a cylix from Sargveshi (Georgia) bearing the portrait of Bahram II, Queen Shapurdukhtak and the *Sakanshah* (king of the Sakas) Bahram, and a cup bearing the portrait and inscription of the *bitakhsh* (prince) Papak.¹⁰²

The subject that is most characteristic of Sasanian vessels, the *shahanshah* hunting on horseback, was only beginning to develop; it became widespread on fourth- and fifth-century artefacts. The king or crown prince is represented hunting lion, boar, ram or antelope. There are generally an even number of animals – two or four. The hunter attacks them with a bow or, more rarely, with a sword (Fig. 18). There are also images of kings hunting on foot; one example is a vessel bearing the portrait of Peroz (457–484) shooting caprid. The border around the edge of the vessel is a barricade of nets behind which the heads of beaters and dogs may be seen.¹⁰³ Other subjects relating to the image of the king include Yazdgird II feasting with the queen, or Bahram Gur (Bahram V) and Azada.

On sixth-century vessels, hunting scenes fade into the background – a vessel showing Khusrau I surrounded by his courtiers bears a royal hunting scene below the main composition.¹⁰⁴ Subjects from the Dionysiac cycle now became common – Sileni, maenads, theatrical masks and plant ornamentation – while scenes of the triumph of Dionysus that are typical of Roman and Byzantine metalwork were copied. Such vessels were probably used during Zoroastrian festivals.¹⁰⁵ A characteristic group is composed of rhytons in the shape of animal heads, a form common in Achaemenid times and known to the Parthians. Rhytons were used for ritual purposes while vessels bearing the king's portrait were traditional gifts from the *shahanshah* to his friends; many bore inscriptions showing the name of the owner and the weight.¹⁰⁶

101. Lukonin, 1977a, p. 187; Fukai and Iioriuchi, 1972, Pl. XXI et seq.

102. Lukonin, 1979, p. 35.

103. Trever, 1937, p. 6.

104. Porada, 1965, p. 217.

105. Lukonin, 1977a, p. 160.

106. Livshits and Lukonin, 1964, p. 155.



FIG. 18. Silver dish showing the king on a lion hunt.
(Photo: © British Museum.)

Little Sasanian jewellery is known. One of the most famous pieces is the so-called cup of Khusrau from the Abbey of Saint-Denis in France, which is decorated with coloured glass set in gold (Fig. 19). In its base is an inset disc of rock crystal carved in the image of an enthroned king.¹⁰⁷ In one hoard of coins in Iran an earring was found resembling those worn by Sasanian rulers as portrayed on coins. From Late Sasanian burials in Dailam come sword sheaths with gold and silver mountings decorated with filigree and granulation.

Sasanian gems are almost as common as coins and thousands have been described from various collections.¹⁰⁸ The bulk of the gems used were semi-

107. Shepherd, 1983, p. 1102.

108. Borisov and Lukonin, 1963; Bivar, 1969*b*; Gignoux, 1978.

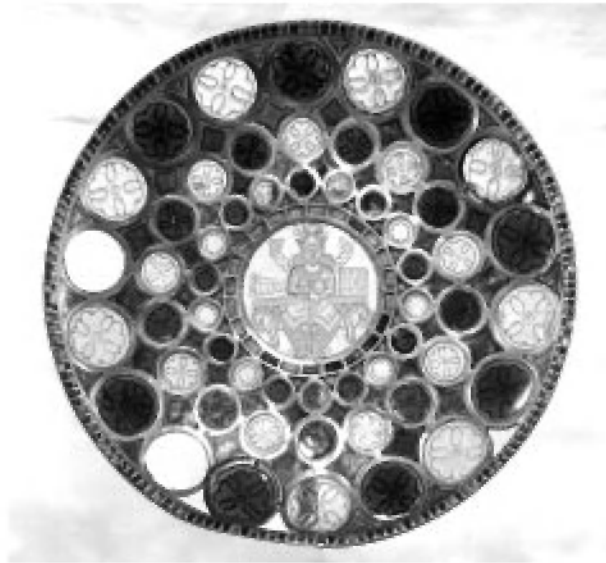


FIG. 19. Cup of Khusrau.
(Photo: © Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.)



FIG. 20. Amethyst ring. Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.
(Photo: © Vladimir Terebenin.)

precious stones: chalcedony, amethyst, cornelian and lapis lazuli. These were either carved into ellipsoids and worn on laces or set into rings (Fig. 20). They were also used as seals. The most varied representations can be found on them – portraits of kings, grandees and private individuals, horsemen, scenes of sacrifice or feasting, fabulous creatures, animals, birds and symbols or devices. The image was frequently accompanied by an inscription giving the owner's

name and title or an auspicious Zoroastrian phrase. The subjects reveal the influence both of ancient Iranian traditions and of Graeco-Roman culture. One group is of seals of officials which bear only inscriptions. Another group is of items that belonged to Iranian Christians, on which the symbol of the cross is sometimes combined with a subject from the Zoroastrian cycle. Each period had its own range of subjects and stylistic features. The images were executed either by careful working of the detail or in line technique. The chronological classification of Sasanian carved gems is still far from complete. The best-known early gems are the British Museum's stone bearing the portrait of Bahram, king of Kerman; the Hermitage Museum's amethyst showing the portrait of 'Queen of Queens' Denak (Fig. 21); and the Bibliothèque Nationale's gem representing a horseman. Stones of the later period are chiefly cut in line technique.



FIG. 21. Amethyst showing the portrait of 'Queen of Queens' Denak. Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. (Photo: © Vladimir Terebenin.)

Sasanian ceramic vessels vary greatly in form and size. Each region had its own characteristic pottery linked with the previous period. The most common forms were various kinds of pitchers made on a quickly turning wheel. We know of vessels on which the potter's name was inscribed on the raw clay before firing.¹⁰⁹ The ornamentation was usually restricted to rows of straight or wavy horizontal lines, stamps or appliqué work. Throughout the Sasanian period, pottery was produced (rhytons and small, pear-shaped pitchers) that imitated metal artefacts.¹¹⁰ Somewhat different are the Late Parthian and Early Sasanian vessels finished in green glaze that were common in Mesopotamia

109. Huff, 1978, p. 145.

110. Ettinghausen, 1938, pp. 664 et seq.



FIG. 22. Thick-walled spherical cups. (Photo: © Vladimir Terebenin.)

and Khuzistan.¹¹¹ Glassware is known from excavations in Kish, Ctesiphon and Susa and from Early Sasanian burials in northern Mesopotamia. The chief glass-making regions were Mesopotamia and north-western Iran. Sasanian glassware developed in isolation, although some forms are reminiscent of Syrian and Roman artefacts. Glass vessels were engraved; some extant examples are decorated with patterns cut from gold leaf and encased between two layers of glass. The most common forms were thick-walled spherical cups, with cut ornamentation made of slightly concave discs or oval facets (Fig. 22). Glass rhytons and amphorae were also produced.¹¹²

Weaving was a highly developed craft. Samples of Iranian silk cloth were kept in the church treasuries of Western Europe, and fragments have been found in Egyptian and Central Asian burials. Cloth was woven in the compound twill technique and was brightly coloured. The most common pattern was one of rhombic or round medallions with pictures of the *senmurws*, winged horses, animals or birds, placed either in vertical rows or at random. An idea of the ornamentation and colouring of cloth and the cut of the clothing may be gained from Central Asian paintings or the Taq-i Bustan reliefs, which show the

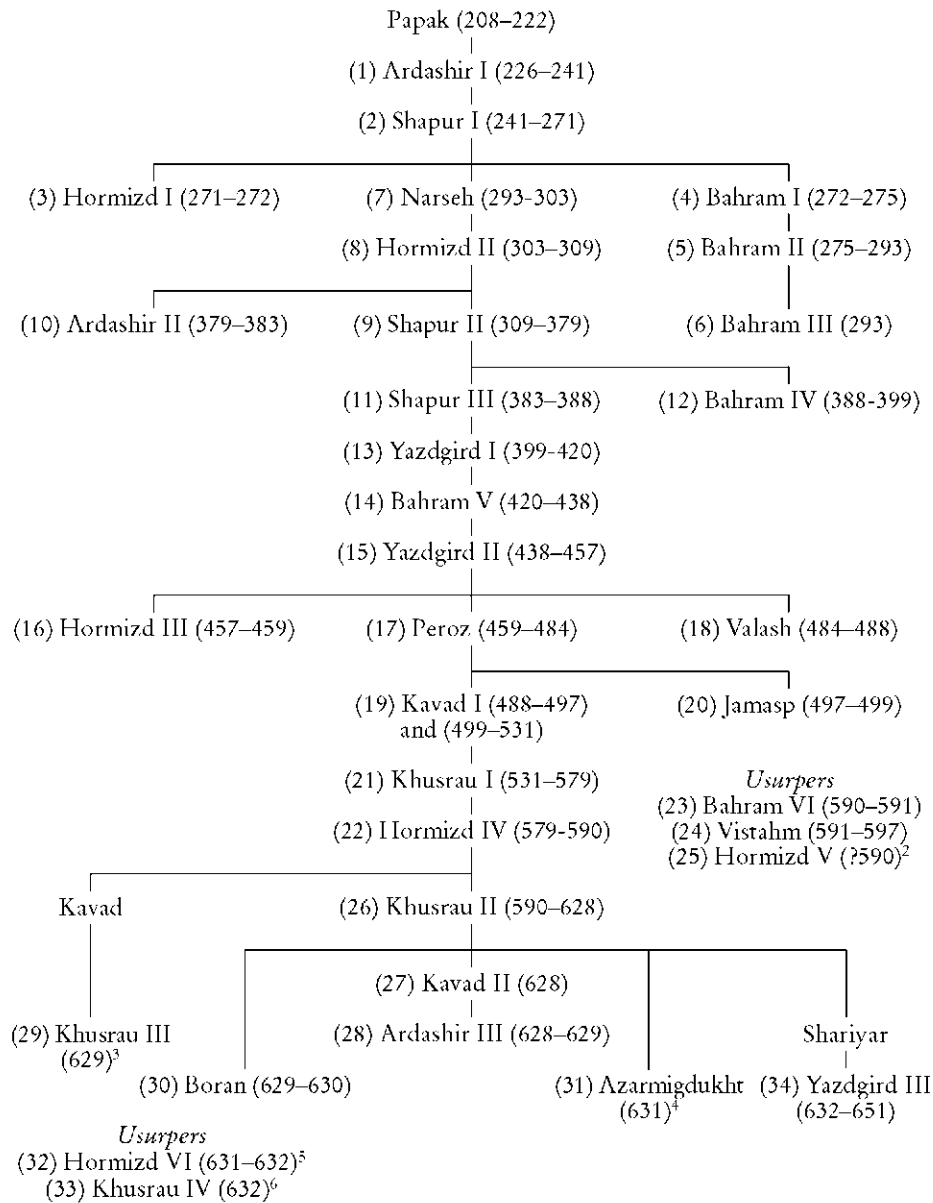
111. Riccardi, 1967, p. 93.

112. Fukai, 1977.

costumes of the king and courtiers. A royal hunting costume designed for wearing on horseback, and consisting of trousers and a short tunic, is depicted on Sasanian vessels. Iranian clothing is described by Ammianus Marcellinus (XXIII, 6.84): 'Most of them are so covered with clothes gleaming with many shimmering colours, that although they leave their robes open in front and on the sides, and let them flutter in the wind, yet from their head to their shoes no part of the body is seen uncovered.' The products of Iranian weavers were in demand in many countries, where they were considered luxury items. The patterns on Sasanian textiles were long copied virtually unchanged in Byzantium and were imitated in Central Asia and China.¹¹³ The artistic influence of Sasanian Iran may be detected in the cultures of many countries, from Western Europe to Eastern Asia. It made a major contribution to the subsequent development of the visual culture of the Muslim East.

113. Shepherd, 1983, p. 1107.

Table 1. The Sasanian Empire¹ (courtesy of M. I. Mochiri)



1. For some alternative dates, see Frye, 1984, p. 361. (Note, however, that some authors in this volume have their own datings.)
2. Mochiri, 1977, pp. 209–15.
3. Mochiri, 1972, pp. 17–18; 1977, p. 203; 1983, pp. 221–3.
4. Mochiri, 1972, pp. 11–16; 1977, pp. 203–5.
5. Mochiri, 1972, pp. 13–16; 1977, pp. 205–8.
6. Mochiri, 1977, pp. 174–202.