

## The Long Shadow of Pre-Islamic Iranian Rulership: Antagonism or Assimilation

*D. G. Tor*

It has been observed that “each age’s vision of the past is formed by its present concerns. It is from the standpoint of the present that we look back on the past to tell us who we are, where we came from, how we became as we are today, where we may be going ....”<sup>1</sup> Amongst all the variegated human pasts which have cast their shadow over subsequent historical epochs, the pre-Islamic Iranian past surely cast one of the most enduring and deepest ones. Scholars have long acknowledged that the pre-Islamic Iranian past heavily influenced not only its Iranian heirs, who continued to treasure the memory of ancient glory, nor just the Arabs who conquered the Sasanian Empire and the lands within its cultural and mercantile orbit, but the entire Islamic empire and civilization that were built in the centuries following the conquest.

Other civilizations of Antiquity influenced the Muslims as well; yet the Muslims did not absorb all elements indiscriminately and equally from all, but absorbed only certain very specific and limited aspects from each. Thus, the Hellenistic influence in Islam was expressed largely in philosophy and science; the Greeks (apart from the Islamicized Qur’ānic figure of Alexander) are represented in Islamic literature and high culture by Galen, Plato, and Aristotle, not Pericles or Demosthenes.<sup>2</sup> The absorption of Iranian elements into Islamic culture was similarly selective; pre-Islamic Iran cast a very long shadow over the Islamic world, but not equally in all areas. Nowhere is the shadow cast by the Iranian Late Antique past more apparent than in everything connected to rulership.

Various aspects of the Islamic-era fascination with pre-Islamic Iranian kings and kingship have long been noted and analysed. Scholars have differed, however, regarding the

---

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Meisami, ‘The Past in Service of the Present: Two Views of History in Medieval Persia’, *Poetics Today* 14, 1993, 247.

<sup>2</sup> P. Crone, ‘Post-Colonialism in Tenth-Century Islam’, *Der Islam* 83, 2006, 19, notes: “Culturally, too, the pre-conquest Near East was resurfacing in a recognizable way ... Iranian rulers plus Persian culture and the Persian language on the one hand and that of Greek science and philosophy (without the rulers) on the other”.

significance of this Iranian strand in Islamic political and cultural life: Was the use of pre-Islamic Iranian political and cultural paradigms antagonistic to, and in competition with, Islamic culture and ideals? Certain scholars have viewed the recrudescence of various aspects of the ancient Iranian political heritage as in some ways a reaction, to at least a degree anti-Islamic in and of itself, against the new Islamic civilisation. Such scholars view the adoption and assimilation of the Iranian political tradition as an “outlet” for “Persian resentment”,<sup>3</sup> a “conflict ... between two conceptions of monarchy: the traditional Iranian ... and the Islamic.”<sup>4</sup> Such scholars view the two political traditions, Islamic and Iranian, as inimical to one another- a pre-modern “clash of civilizations”, as it were.<sup>5</sup>

This paper will suggest, first, that all of the seemingly separate and disparate manifestations of the Islamic fascination with Iranian rulership of Antiquity – ranging from the widespread revival of Sasanian titulature, symbols of rulership, and even genealogies, to the adoption of Sasanian rulership as an Islamic political model in Muslim literature and political theory – were actually constituent components of one larger, coherent phenomenon: namely, the incorporation of the ancient Persian ideal of rulership into Islamic civilization after the ideological failure of the caliphate; and, furthermore, that this phenomenon was not anti-Islamic, as has sometimes been posited, but that, on the contrary, this tradition was suitably modified and adapted in order to assimilate it harmoniously into Islamic culture and political life. The question, it should be emphasized, is not whether or not a national or cultural identity or patriotism existed – obviously, cultural identity has existed for all of recorded human history; rather, the undecided issue is whether or not the embracing of the ancient Iranian heritage of kingship stood in opposition to Islamic identity or as a natural complement to it; whether it was combined with Islam or directed against it.

Methodologically, this paper will accomplish its goal in two ways: First, it adopts a holistic approach by looking at a larger historical picture, both synchronously and across a far broader stretch of time than has previously been examined in this context, yet with due attention given to the relative chronology of various related phenomena. For one of the best proofs that the resurfacing of the Sasanian model of rulership was the result of an Islamic embracing and assimilation of that model, rather than of an antagonistic, anti-Islamic, neo-Sasanian revival, is the chronological and geographical breadth of the phenomenon. Obviously, if those who adopt the Sasanian model include not only tenth-century imperfectly-Islamicized Iranians, but a broad swathe of impeccably Muslim Arabs ranging from a tenth-century Andalusian litterateur to a fifteenth-century Arab *qāḍī* in Yemen, one arrives at very different conclusions than one would have, had the phenomenon

---

<sup>3</sup> W. Madelung, ‘The Assumption of the Title *Shāhānshāh* by the Būyids and ‘The Reign of the Daylam (*Dawlat al-Daylam*)’, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 28, 1969, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Meisami, ‘The Past in Service of the Present’, 257.

<sup>5</sup> Thus Gibb, for instance, asserts that “... the Sasanian strands which had been woven into the fabric of Muslim thought [in the ninth century] were, and remained, foreign to its native constitution... in open or latent opposition to the Islamic ethic, and the Sasanian tradition introduced into Islamic society a kernel of derangement, never wholly assimilated yet never wholly rejected”. Cf. H. A. R. Gibb, ‘The Social Significance of the Shuubiya’, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, Princeton 1982, 72.

been manifested across a far more limited time span and ethnic, social, political, and geographical range. The second methodological approach is the examination of the specific historical context in which the Sasanian ideal was first resurrected and in which it flourished, in order to cast light on the reasons behind the widespread adoption of the ancient Iranian governing tradition.

Previous studies which have examined the Islamic-era fascination with the political legitimacy and charisma of the Late Antique Persian kings<sup>6</sup> all have focused on one particular aspect of the phenomenon in isolation, be it the revenant pre-Islamic Persian themes in literature; the era of Dailamite political dominance; the usage of Late Antique Persian ruling titulature and genealogies; or the reverence displayed toward ancient Persian traditions of kingship and the embracing of the Sasanian model as the paragon of rulership. Yet, this atomistic approach leads to the same results as those obtained in the well-known story of the men told to go into a dark room and describe what they find there, each of whom touches a different body part of an elephant and then attempts to describe the entire animal on the basis of the isolated portion of anatomy he felt, resulting in such varying identifications as a snake; a tree-trunk; and a thin, leathery sail. In like manner, when scholars focus on only one isolated aspect of a broader phenomenon, divorced from both its phenomenological and historical contexts, they risk misapprehending not only the contours of the overall elephant, but also the significance of each of the constituent parts on which they had been focusing.

All of the various discrete manifestations of the revival of the Late Antique Persian ideal of rulership, then, really constitute one phenomenon, consisting of two complementary categories or sub-manifestations, one political and the other cultural: Namely, the practical use of the Sasanian tradition as a political means of legitimising rulership, and the adoption of Sasanian rulership as an Islamic political model in Muslim literary texts and treatises. The overall phenomenon itself was an attempt to fill a gaping hole in Islamic political life with the already available and successful model of the Iranian past.

The late eighth and early ninth centuries were critical in the formation of both the Islamic religion and, concomitantly, Islamic political theory and reality. This formative time witnessed the transfer of the religious authority of the caliphate to the nascent Sunni clerics – the *‘ulamā’*.<sup>7</sup> As noted by Crone, the Abbasids were, consequently, left bereft of a legitimising political rationale for governmental power; their only viable option, given their situation, was “thus to fuse the Sasanian tradition with Islam”.<sup>8</sup>

That is, since the Abbasids failed doctrinally as a Shiite revolution, and since nascent Sunnism had no place for them – neither as a ‘blessed dynasty’ nor as an imperial government – a vacuum in legitimising political ideology was created; in Lapidus’s words, “insofar as the Abbasid empire had in part been built up on the efforts to identify Islam

---

<sup>6</sup> On the charisma or divine glory of the Iranian kings, see Gherardo Gnoli, sv “Farr,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*; E. Yarshater, ‘Iranian Common Beliefs and World-View’, *Cambridge History of Iran*, iii, *The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian Periods*, ed. E. Yarshater, Cambridge 1983, 345.

<sup>7</sup> On this process see e.g. I. Lapidus, ‘The Separation of State and Religion in the Development of Early Islamic Society’, *IJMES* 6, 1975, 363–85; D. G. Tor, ‘Privatized Jihad and Public Order in the Pre-Saljuq Period’, *Iranian Studies* 38, 2005, 555–73.

<sup>8</sup> P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity*, Cambridge 1980, 62.

and the caliphate, this loss ... was politically catastrophic".<sup>9</sup> This was the reason for the political collapse of the Abbasid caliphate in the ninth century; but it was also the reason for the revival of Late Antique Iranian traditions of rulership, which, as one would expect, find their clearest expression following the Abbasid collapse;<sup>10</sup> since there was no viable Sunni Islamic political alternative, Muslim intellectuals simply adopted what must have seemed to them the best available working model – Islamicizing it, however, in the process.

The resurrection of the Sasanian model was, therefore, an attempt by Muslims to provide a solution to a perceived need or lack within Islamic civilisation, not to revert to an outside, rival or inimical civilisation. This will become much clearer when we review each of these sub-manifestations in historical context, and see the ways in which the Iranian tradition of rulership was made to harmonise with an Islamic framework.

Perhaps the earliest instance of this cultural survival of the Sasanian model, and its paradigmatic use, occurs in the 860s, during the reign of Muntaṣir. The timing is significant; it is no accident that the recrudescence of Iranian ideals of rulership occurred in the wake of the Abbasid political failure. According to Ṭabarī, writing in the early tenth century, the political paradigm to which people looked after Muntaṣir's involvement in the murder of his own father, Mutawakkil, was a Sasanian one:

I often heard people say, when the caliphate passed to al-Muntaṣir, that from the time he acceded to rule until his death he would live for six months, as did Shīrawayh b. Kistrā after he killed his father. This [account] was spread among the populace and notables alike.<sup>11</sup>

This co-optation of the Sasanian kings into the Islamic historical canon is even clearer in Mas'ūdī's recounting of this popular linkage in the public mind between the old Iranian kings of kings and the Islamic caliphs: in his version, which is attributed to an Abbasid official of Muntaṣir's time, there are two rulers who provide the historical model (in this case, literally: their portraits appear together on a carpet): Shīrawayh, who killed his father Khusraw Aparvīz (Khusraw II), and the Umayyad caliph Yazīd III, who murdered his cousin al-Walīd II. In this story, both the Umayyad and the Sasanian ruler are employed as prescriptive or normative models; since each of them ruled for only six months, it is clear to the courtier that Muntaṣir, too, will rule for only six months.<sup>12</sup>

What is important about these stories is, first, the indication they give that the absorption of the ancient Iranian heritage into the Islamic mythology of rulership appears to have occurred already in connection with the Abbasids, in the ninth century – well before the

<sup>9</sup> I. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge 1988, 125.

<sup>10</sup> It is significant that the first (and most famous) complaints about the Sasanian inspiration of Abbasid administrative practices were written by Jāhīz (d. 869), during precisely this time; see E. Yashater, 'The Persian presence in the Islamic world', *The Persian presence in the Islamic world*, ed. Richard Hovannisian and Georges Sabagh, Cambridge 1998, 70–73.

<sup>11</sup> Joel L. Kraemer (tr.), *The History of al-Ṭabarī, XXXIV, Incipient Decline*, Albany 1989, 219; Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-Ṭabarī*, ed. M. A. Ibrāhīm, Beirut n.d., ix, 252 (ed. M.J. de Goeje et al., Leiden 1879–1901, iii, 1496).

<sup>12</sup> Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma'ādin al-jawhar*, ed. M.M. Qamīḥa, Beirut n.d., iv, 148–49.

period of the heterodox Daylamites. The use of the pre-Islamic Iranian kings and heroes as an historical model or paradigm, according to this evidence, was alive in the minds of the most Islamized class of the empire, the Abbasid courtiers, and in this context at least was in no way part of some neo-Sasanian revival.

Regarding the actual political manifestations of the phenomenon, perhaps the most frequently noted revivification of the Late Antique Iranian political tradition is the eventual embracing, beginning in the tenth century, of Sasanian-era titles, particularly 'Shāhānshāh', frequently accompanied not only by the title, but by all the trappings of ancient Iranian kingship, real and imagined. Some scholars have attempted to ascertain the significance of this embracing of Sasanian political traditions by studying solely the example of the most extreme outliers, politically and religiously, of the phenomenon: Heterodox or imperfectly Islamized figures such as Asfār b. Shīrūya and Mardāvīj b. Ziyār, who built golden thrones, desired crowns modeled after those of the Sasanian kings, ordered the rebuilding of the audience hall of the Sasanian kings at ancient Ctesiphon, planned to conquer Iraq, and called or intended to call themselves by the Sasanian title of Shāhānshāh.<sup>13</sup>

It is not methodologically sound to take the extreme fringe of a political movement as one's representative sample; yet this is what some otherwise excellent scholars have done. Because they were examining the phenomenon of the revival of Iranian political models in an atomistic context, solely or largely as one of a number of manifestations of neo-Persianism on the part of undeniable religious deviants such as Asfār b. Shīrūya and Mardāvīj (the latter in particular was clearly well outside the religious mainstream – even the Shiite religious mainstream – if there is any truth to Ibn al-Athīr's contention that Mardāvīj proclaimed that the spirit of King Solomon had taken up residence in himself),<sup>14</sup> the scholars who followed this path have tended to conclude that the adoption of ancient Iranian elements of kingship was necessarily *eo ipso* the sign of a neo-Persian revolt directed against Islam, due either to a desire for "a restoration of the Persian empire and kingship", including the Zoroastrian religion;<sup>15</sup> or, in Minorsky's view, an anachronistic ninth century appearance of Persian nationalism.<sup>16</sup> Yet, while Asfār b. Shīrūya and Mardāvīj b. Ziyār may have utilized the memory and the heritage of ancient Iranian kingship as part of an un-Islamic program, this does not in itself mean that any and all use of that heritage was perceived by mainstream Muslims in the classical period as anti-Islamic. That is, just because the pre-Islamic Iranian tradition of rulership *could* be utilized as part of an anti-Islamic program, this does not mean that it was normally – let alone necessarily – perceived by the Muslims of that time as antagonistic to Islamic rule and traditions.

Indeed, we have just seen in the foregoing examples from Ṭabarī and Mas'ūdī that the

<sup>13</sup> Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil fī'l-tā'rīkh*, ed. C. J. Tornberg, Dār Šādir reprint, Beirut 1399/1979, viii: 192, 302; Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Šūlī, *Akhbār al-Rāḍī wa'l-Muttaqī*, ed. J. Heyworth Dunne, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, Beirut 1401/1982, ii, 62; Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, ed. Amedroz. Baghdad, n.d. (reprint of the 1915 Egyptian edition), i, 317–18; C. E. Bosworth, 'The Heritage of Rulership in Early Islamic Iran and the Search for Dynastic Connections with the Past', *Iran* 11, 1973, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn al-Athīr, *al-Kāmil*, viii, 298.

<sup>15</sup> Madelung, 'The Assumption of the Title Shāhānshāh', 86–87.

<sup>16</sup> V. Minorsky, 'La Domination des Dailamites', *Iranica: Twenty Articles*, Tehran 1964, 25–26.

caliphs' own Muslim officials, in the heart of Islamic Baghdad, considered Sasanian kingship to be as much a part of their political heritage and paradigm as they considered the Muslim caliphs to be – and even if Ṭabarī was inventing the incident, the fact that a pious Muslim of his stature was not only conversant with, but saw nothing wrong with utilizing the ancient Iranian example – at a chronological point well before Mardāvīj's career – shows us that the adoption of the Iranian kingly model was indeed, as Ṭabarī depicts, ubiquitous throughout Muslim society in the late ninth century, at least in the eastern lands, and not just limited to an imperfectly Islamicized or anti-Muslim fringe.

More importantly for our evaluation of these early adoptions of Sasanian titulature, we see that similar symbols and titles were adopted, both at that time and subsequently, by other dynasties that could not by any stretch of the imagination be accused of atheist, anti-Islamic, or Zoroastrian sentiments. Most famously, there were the ninth- and tenth-century Buyid rulers of western Iran and Iraq,<sup>17</sup> who went much further than the aforementioned rulers in their imitations of Sasanian glory, including the claim of descent from Bahrām V<sup>18</sup> – yet who also, as Madelung himself notes, took great pains to emphasize their status as 'defenders and restorers' of Islam.<sup>19</sup> In fact, 'Aḡud al-dawla, the greatest of the Buyid rulers, is even curiously entitled in one of his official documents 'King of Islam Shāhānshāh'.<sup>20</sup>

This analysis is confirmed by the fact that it was not only Shiites or those of dubious Islamic commitment who assumed or utilized the title of Shāhānshāh; other dynasties also did so, most outstandingly the highly Orthodox Samanids, Ghaznavids, and Seljuqs. Thus, as noted by Treadwell, the Samanids, like the Buyids, called themselves by this title on at least one medallion.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Bosworth has pointed out that official Ghaznavid panegyrists such as Farrukhī, Manūchihri, and 'Unṣurī, all applied this epithet to the Ghaznavid sultans in their court productions,<sup>22</sup> as well as other old Iranian titles such as 'Khudāvand'; 'Khusraw'; and 'Khusraw-yi Mashriq'.<sup>23</sup> The vehemently and avowedly Sunni Seljuqs officially proclaimed themselves as Shāhānshāh on the vast majority of their coins;<sup>24</sup> and even, in a strange echo of the Buyid titulature, 'Shāhānshāh King of Islam'.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the political significance of such titulature must be understood in the broader context of a widespread utilization of other pre-Islamic Iranian titles of rule. There is

<sup>17</sup> Bosworth, 'The Heritage of Rulership', 57.

<sup>18</sup> Qazvīnī, *Tārīkh-i Guzīda*, ed. 'A. Navā'ī, Tehran 1362, 409. See also Bīrūnī's disparagement of this claim; *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, tr. Sachau, London 1878, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Madelung, 'Assumption', 98.

<sup>20</sup> Madelung, 'Assumption', 108.

<sup>21</sup> Luke Treadwell, 'Shāhānshāh and *al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad*: The Legitimation of Power in Sāmānid and Būyid Iran', in F. Daftary and J. Meri, *Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam: Essays in Honour of Wilferd Madelung*, London 2003, 318–37.

<sup>22</sup> C.E. Bosworth, 'The Titulature of the Early Ghaznavids', *Oriens* 15, 1962, 219.

<sup>23</sup> C.E. Bosworth, 'The Titulature of the Early Ghaznavids', 223; *idem.*, 'Heritage of Rulership', 61.

<sup>24</sup> e.g. Toghril Beg: Tübingen Münzkabinett FB4 B1; Alp Arslan, Tübingen FB5 C3; Malikshāh, Tübingen FB5 D5; Berkyāruq, Tübingen 2002-16-149; Sanjar, Tübingen 96-32-41, and so forth.

<sup>25</sup> Tübingen FB5 C4, 94-22-46, and so forth.

abundant testimony to the prevalence at this time of the usage of other, lesser eastern Late Antique ruling titles. One of the most important and prevalent of these lesser titles was 'Ispahbadh', an ancient Iranian military title.<sup>26</sup> This was employed in particular around the Caspian Sea region, by local dynasties such as the Bāvandids, who ruled in Ṭabaristān for more than 700 years. According to the anonymous tenth-century work *Ḥudūd al-'ālam*, the Bāvandid kings, named after their eponymous ancestor Bāv, were called by the title 'Ispahbad-i Shahriyār' or 'Sipahbad-i Shahriyār-kūh' from Late Antiquity onwards.<sup>27</sup>

Another local Caspian-sea area dynasty employing the title Ispahbad was that of the Bādūspānid Ispahbads. This dynasty could truly be called a Late Antique relic, since it ruled in the mountainous areas of Māzandarān from pre-Islamic times throughout our entire period and beyond it.<sup>28</sup> They were also said to have used the title of Ustāndār, which was a Sasanian administrative term meaning literally 'the holder of an *ustān* or province'.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the minor dynasty of the Kākūyids also used the title 'Ispahbad', which they were actually granted by their Buyid overlords.<sup>30</sup>

Pre-Islamic Iranian regional titles, in fact, were common not only all over the Persian-speaking world – for instance, the local rulers of the eastern provinces of Jūzjān and Khuttal in the late ninth century are respectively known as the 'Gūzgān khudāh' and the 'Khuttalānshāh' or 'Shīr Khuttalān',<sup>31</sup> along with many similar examples noted by Frye<sup>32</sup> but even farther afield, and even outside of Iran. Thus, not only is the ancient term 'Ikhshīd' used for the ruler of Farghana in the late ninth century,<sup>33</sup> we see this title actually being bestowed by the caliph Rāḍī in the early tenth century as an honorific upon the caliphal general and then governor in Egypt, Muḥammad b. Tuḡh̄j.<sup>34</sup> This latter instance of the employment of pre-Islamic Iranian titulature, one should note, is almost exactly contemporaneous with Mardāvij's identical practice; we are therefore not dealing with an originally anti-Islamic practice that somehow became acceptable over time, but with the simultaneous and widespread adoption of this practice by figures who are beyond reproach on this score; it is difficult to view the revival of ancient Iranian titles as an anti-Islamic or Persian nationalist gesture if the Abbasid caliph himself is employing them as well.

Another, related aspect of the embracing of Late Antique Iranian political traditions of rulership was the use of genealogical connections, both real and imagined, with the pre-Islamic past as a legitimising means.<sup>35</sup> Again, this practice has been interpreted by various

<sup>26</sup> See C. E. Bosworth, 'Ispahbadh', *EI2*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Isfandiyyār, *Tārīkh-i Ṭabaristān*, ed. 'A. Iqbāl, Tehran 1366/1947, 322–23; Anon., *Ḥudūd al-'ālam min al-mashriq ilā al-maghrib*, ed. M. Sutūda, Tehran 1340/1962, 147.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Isfandiyyār, *Tārīkh-i Ṭabaristān*, 319–321.

<sup>29</sup> As C. E. Bosworth, 'Ustāndār', *EI2*, notes; see also Ibn Isfandiyyār, *Tārīkh-i Ṭabaristān*, 51, where he equates term specifically with "wālī."

<sup>30</sup> C. E. Bosworth, 'Dailamīs in Central Iran: The Kākūyids of Jibāl and Yazd', *Iran* 8, 1970, 73; H. Rabino di Borgomale, 'Les dynasties locales du Gīlān et du Daylam', *Journal Asiatique* 237, 1949, 313.

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Khurrādādhbih, *al-Masālik wa'l-mamālik*, ed. M. de Goeje, Leiden 1889, 40.

<sup>32</sup> R. Frye, 'Some Early Iranian Titles', *Oriens* 15, 1962, 352–59.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn Khurrādādhbih, *al-Masālik wa'l-mamālik*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> Ṣūlī, *Kitāb al-awrāq*, ed. J. Heyworth Dunne, Beirut 1982, ii, 44.

<sup>35</sup> In Meisami's words: "One aspect of this enterprise was the manufacture of legitimising

scholars, in relation to dynasties with bad press, as indicating anti-Islamic tendencies. Thus, the attempts by the anonymous local history of Sistan to invent a Sasanian genealogical *isnād* for the ninth-century Saffarid dynasty,<sup>36</sup> together with a poem about the Saffarids sporting a similar claim,<sup>37</sup> led Stern to conclude that this reverence for the Sasanian past indicated “a political manifest with a quite particular objective[:] ... Persian national restoration”.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Madelung interpreted the invention of a Buyid genealogy back to Bahrām II as “a restoration of the Sassanid empire”.<sup>39</sup>

The difficulty with these interpretations – wholly apart from the question of the nature of Saffarid ideology<sup>40</sup> – is that it was not just the unpopular dynasties which were indulging in this practice, but virtually everybody else as well. Thus, the Tahirids – again, a ninth-century dynasty, thoroughly Muslim, and earlier than the heterodox Daylamites – claimed descent from the ancient Iranian hero Rustam;<sup>41</sup> while the aforementioned Bāvandid dynasty of the Caspian region claimed that its eponymous founder, Bāv, was, according to one story, supposedly named to his position by the emperor Khusraw II; there was also a different claim, that the lineage itself went back to the Sasanian emperor Qubād.<sup>42</sup>

Bīrūnī, when discussing the bloodline of his Ziyārid patron, brags of their connection to the Bāvandid family, and asserts as fact the Qubāidian genealogy. He also makes a point of noting that Qubād was ‘the father of Anūshīrvān’, thus demonstrating that the name of Anūshīrvān (Khusraw I) still conferred glory.<sup>43</sup> This supposed bloodline, in fact, was still making an impression on people in the twelfth century; thus, Nizāmī ‘Arūdī Samarqandī, the Ghūrid court author, notes that Firdawsī “came to Ṭabaristān to the Sīpahbad Shīrẓād of the House of Bāvand, who was king in Ṭabaristān; they are a great noble family; their genealogy is connected to Yazdegird the son of Shahriyār”.<sup>44</sup> Nizāmī ‘Arūdī then quotes from Firdawsī’s *Shāhnāma* dedication to the Bāvandid ruler: “I will dedicate this book to

genealogies”. Meisami, ‘The Past in Service of the Present’, 249–50.

<sup>36</sup> *Tārīkh-i Sīstān*, ed. Bahār, Tehran 1935, 200–202. This assertion of Sasanian blood is reasserted in the section introducing Ya’qūb’s kinsman Azhār b. Yaḥyā, 204.

<sup>37</sup> Yāqūt, *Mu’jam al-udabā’*, Beirut 1420/1999, 262–63. On the very problematic provenance of this poem see Tor, *Violent Order*, 169–72.

<sup>38</sup> S. M. Stern, ‘Ya’qūb the Coppersmith and Persian National Sentiment’, *Iran and Islam: A Volume in Memory of Vladimir Minorsky*, ed. C. E. Bosworth, Edinburgh 1971, 545. Bosworth concurs, stating that “ideas seem to have appeared among their entourage which might be described as having a proto-Persian nationalist tinge ...”. See C. E. Bosworth, *The History of the Saffarids of Sistan and the Maliks of Nimruz*, Costa Mesa 1994, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Madelung, ‘Assumption’, 106. Despite Bīrūnī’s scepticism (*Chronology*, 45–46), Ibn al-Athīr, at least, presents the genealogy as authentic; *al-Kāmil*, viii, 264–65.

<sup>40</sup> On which see D. G. Tor, ‘Historical Representations of Ya’qūb b. al-Layth al-Ṣaffar: A Reappraisal’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 12, 2002, 247–75.

<sup>41</sup> Mas’ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbīh wa’l-ishrāf*, 347.

<sup>42</sup> C. E. Bosworth, ‘Bāvandids’, *EI2*; also idem, *The New Islamic Dynasties*, New York 1996, 165.

<sup>43</sup> Bīrūnī, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, tr. Sachau, London 1879, 47. As Touraj Daryaee notes (*Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*, London 2010, 29): “Khusro I (531–79) represents the epitome of the philosopher-king in Sasanian and Near Eastern History... Khusro I’s reforms and changes to the empire were to become a blue-print for Kings and Caliphs and Sultans alike.”

<sup>44</sup> Samarqandī, *Chahār maqāla*, ed. M. Qazvīnī, Tehran 1375, 80.



you instead of to Sultan Maḥmūd, for this book is entirely about the stories and deeds of your ancestors”.<sup>45</sup>

Barthold comments regarding the names of both the Bādūspānid and the Bāvandid dynasties: “The names of most members of both these dynasties (Shahriyār, Rustam, Yazdegird, Ardashīr, and so on), like those of the Ziyārīds and Buwayhids, show how long were retained, despite Islam, the traditions of the Sasanian epoch in these regions”.<sup>46</sup> It is also worth pointing out, however, that this coexisted alongside a very Islamic tradition, as indicated by the fact that, for instance, the same Bādūspānids with the very Iranian names also boast of a king who received the *laqab* “*shāh ghāzī*”.<sup>47</sup> In other words, in this case the Iranian model being adopted is, again, one of rulership (the names are of great kings and heroes of the past, not just random pre-Islamic Iranian names); and it clearly complements rather than flouts Islamic identity.

Perhaps the most interesting cases of this genealogical practice are those in which ethnic Arabs tout such connections to ancient Iranian royalty. Most spectacularly, according to the tenth-century author Tha’ālibī the Umayyad caliph Yazīd b. al-Walīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik, whose mother was a Persian slave, used to boast of his descent from the Persian King of Kings.<sup>48</sup> Then there is the case of the Sharwān Shāhs, an ethnically Arab dynasty that assumed a Persian identity and lineage, as indicated both in its changing prosopography and its forged pedigree back to Bahrām V or, alternatively, Khusraw I.<sup>49</sup> So widespread does this legitimising practice seem to have been, that we find not only political rulers, but even Abbasid court poets claiming Sasanian descent.<sup>50</sup>

The most decisive refutation of the view that the embracing of a genealogy derived from the pre-Islamic Iranian rulers stood in some way in contradiction to Islam, though, is the empirical fact that we also find the dynasties with the most highly reputable, orthodox Sunni reputations adopting this practice. Thus, as noted previously, the Tahirid dynasty claimed descent from the legendary pre-Islamic Iranian hero Rustam b. Dāstān.<sup>51</sup> Then there is the Samanid claim to Sasanian descent, well-documented in our sources. For instance, the Samanid-era geographical work *Ḥudūd al-ā’lam* states: “The Amir of Khurasan sits in Bukhārā. He is from the House of Sāmān and among the descendants of Bahrām Chūbīn. They are called ‘The King of the East’ [*malik-i mashriq*]. He has officials [*ummāl*] throughout all Khurasan”.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Samarqandī, *Chahār maqāla*, 80.

<sup>46</sup> W. Barthold, *An Historical Geography of Iran*, tr. Svat Soucek and ed. C. E. Bosworth, Princeton 1984, 240.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn Isfandiyyār, *Tārīkh-i Ṭabaristān*, 321.

<sup>48</sup> Tha’ālibī, *The Book of Curious and Entertaining Information: The Laṭā’if al-ma’ārif of Tha’ālibī*, tr. C. E. Bosworth, Edinburgh 1968, 73.

<sup>49</sup> Bosworth, ‘Heritage of Rulership’, 60; idem, *The New Islamic Dynasties*, 140–42.

<sup>50</sup> Abū’l Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, Beirut 1412/1992, xii, 61: “He is Muḥammad b. al-Ḥārith b. Buskhunnar, called by the *kunya* Abū Ja’far; according to what they claim, they were *mawālī* of al-Manṣūr. The clientage of service is attributed to him, not the clientage of manumission... and Muḥammad used to claim that he was among the descendants of Bahrām Chūbīn”.

<sup>51</sup> Mas’ūdī, *Kitāb al-tanbih wa’l-ishraf*, 347.

<sup>52</sup> Anon., *Ḥudūd al-ā’lam*, 89.

Another Samanid-era contemporary, the tenth-century Arab geographer Ibn Ḥawqal, writes of Transoxiana: “The kings of these lands and of the rest of Khurasan are the House of Sāmān, and they are among the descendants of Bahrām Chūbīn, whose reputation among the Persians for strength and courage has endured”.<sup>53</sup> Note that Ibn Ḥawqal, himself an Arab, sees nothing extraordinary or inimical to Islam in the persistence of this historical memory. The polymath Bīrūnī, for his part, writes that “nobody denies” the fact of Samanid descent from Bahrām Chūbīn, and claims the same distinction for the Khwarazm-shāhs and the Shīrvānids, whose most peculiar genealogical claims we have already seen.

To many of our medieval authors, moreover, the Samanids’ claim to Sasanian lineage indeed constituted a legitimising factor. Bīrūnī, who was no Shu’ūbī, comments on these claims, to which he personally gives credence: “The fact that claims to some noble lineage...are just and well-founded, always becomes known somehow or other, even if people try to conceal it, being like musk, which spreads its odour, although it be hidden”.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, the Ghaznavid-era historian Gardīzī adduces this Samanid genealogy, stretching through Bahrām Chūbīn and ancient Iranian royalty back to the legendary first king of Iran, Kayūmarth,<sup>55</sup> as does the thirteenth-century *Tārīkh-i Guzīda*, which introduces this genealogy with the assertion that “Sāmān was of the seed of Bahrām Chūbīn”.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, the Samanids were not the only impeccably Islamic and orthodox dynasty to adopt the Sasanian royal heritage as part of its legitimising project. Their successors in Iran, the ethnically Turkish Ghaznavid dynasty, for example, were also given a royal Sasanian genealogy. As Bosworth has noted, “The fictitious genealogy elaborated for the Ghaznavids ... links them with the Persian Sasanian past, and not with some ancient, princely family of the Turks, an affiliation which would have been just as easy to make and more plausible”.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Jūzjānī’s *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāširī* states that the Ghaznavid founder, Sebuktegin, “was among the descendants of Yazdegird Shahriyār”, and that after the killing of Yazdegird “his followers and dependents escaped to Turkistan and made alliances with [the locals]. After two or three generations had passed, they became Turks ...”.<sup>58</sup>

The Ghaznavid example is an important case in point, because it demonstrates that what was of the essence was not whether a bloodline actually went back to Sasanian times, or whether a family managed to cling to power and political importance throughout the centuries – but that Sasanian practices, titles, and genealogies, real or imagined, were embraced and adopted by Muslims as a legitimising political enterprise that was in no way perceived as conflicting with Islam.

Further confirmation that this legitimising political use of the Sasanian heritage was evidence of the Islamic capacity for assimilation, rather than of Iranian anti-Arab or anti-Islamic antagonism, can be found in the fact that the use of this heritage is not some passing Shu’ūbī phenomenon limited to the ninth through eleventh centuries, but, rather,

<sup>53</sup> Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, ed de Goeje, Leiden 1939, 468.

<sup>54</sup> Bīrūnī, *Chronology*, 48.

<sup>55</sup> Gardīzī, *Tārīkh-i Gardīzī*, 325.

<sup>56</sup> Qazvīnī, *Tārīkh-i Guzīda*, 376.

<sup>57</sup> C. E. Bosworth, ‘The Titulature of the Early Ghaznavids’, *Oriens* 15, 1962, 220.

<sup>58</sup> Minhāj-i Sirāj Juzjanī, *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāširī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥayy Ḥabībī, Tehran 1363, i, 226.

is of much longer duration. Thus, for instance, a fourteenth-century Indian dynasty of the Central Deccan both claimed descent from Bahrām V and widely employed Sasanian symbols.<sup>59</sup> In short, the embracing of Late Antique Iranian traditions of rulership was not some bizarre Late Antique recrudescence indicating anti-Islamic values; but, rather, merely one aspect of the quite widespread phenomenon of the incorporation of the pre-Islamic Iranian heritage into Muslim civilization and culture.

But perhaps the best proof that the assimilation of the ancient Iranian traditions of rulership was done not in opposition to the Islamic ideal, but in complement to that ideal, is to be found in the second sub-category of the Islamic adoption of the Late Antique Iranian past. This is what we defined as the cultural and literary adoption of ancient Iranian kingship as an Islamic ideal by the vast Muslim literary corpus. Here, too, we see once again that this embracing of the pre-Islamic past lasted long beyond the existence of anything that could be called a Shu‘ūbī movement.

The fact that this incorporation of the past becomes, if anything, more pronounced as time goes on indicates that we are not talking about a mere preservation or reversion to the pre-Islamic past, but a transformation and adaptation of it. Thus, from the tenth century onwards there is the significant appearance of entire books whose setting is a fictionalized royal court, either of pre-Islamic times or else containing outstanding pre-Islamic elements – from Firdawsī’s *Shāhnāma* in the tenth century to Niẓāmī Ganjavī’s *Haft Paykar* and Ibn Khudādād’s *Samak-i ‘ayyār* in the twelfth.<sup>60</sup> One of the best representatives of this Islamization and Iranization of the past, its remolding into one harmonious whole with medieval Islamic civilization, is Niẓāmī’s *Iskandar-nāma*, written around the year 1200,<sup>61</sup> in which the ancient Greek pagan king was transmuted into “the model of the Muslim hero, the Iranian knight, through his own merits worthy of acceding to the rank of prophet of the One God”.<sup>62</sup> Even more interesting than books written about or set in the Late Antique Iranian past, though, is the use of and reference to the pre-Islamic Iranian past as a living cultural heritage and model for emulation in the author’s own time. This is found throughout various literary genres, but is especially evident in advice literature, political writings, and above all the “Mirrors for Princes”.<sup>63</sup> There were two active periods of the composition of such works: the first occurring in the early Abbasid era, when Manṣūr was casting about for a legitimising ideology after the original Abbasid Kaysānī Shiism had proven unworkable; and the second during the early Seljuq period of the mid-eleventh century.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Mehrdad Shokoohy, ‘Sasanian Royal Emblems and their Reemergence in the Fourteenth-Century Deccan’, *al-Muqarnas* 11, 1994, 65–78.

<sup>60</sup> Niẓāmī Ganjavī, *Haft Paykar*, Tehran 1340/1961; Ibn Khudādād, *Samak-i ‘ayyār*, ed. Parvīz Khānlārī, Tehran 1342.

<sup>61</sup> On the dating of this work see F. de Blois, *Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey. Volume 5: Poetry of the Pre-Mongol Period*, second ed., London 2004, 366–70.

<sup>62</sup> A. Abel, ‘Iskandar Nāma’, in *EI2*, Leiden 1978, iv, 127–29.

<sup>63</sup> See A.K.S. Lambton, ‘Islamic Mirrors for Princes’, *Atti del Convegno internazionale sul tema: la Persia nel Medioevo*, Rome 1971, 419–42.

<sup>64</sup> “The genre of mirrors for princes had flourished under the early Abbasids, as Persian imperial ideals and administrative practices were introduced into Arabic-Islamic culture. But from the end of the third/ninth century until the late sixth/twelfth century there was no major development in

The first wave can be viewed as marking the introduction of “the Sassanian kings of Persia...as model rulers”, initially by Ibn al-Muqaffa’, then by his emulators such as Ibn Qutayba and pseudo-Jāhīz.<sup>65</sup> These works were all written in Arabic. The second wave of this genre begins appearing in the eleventh century – and, again, if we restore this cultural development to its historical context, we can trace it to the political and religious history of the time. It is surely not coincidental that this second flowering of the political advice and theory genres appeared after the Seljuqs had conquered Baghdad yet failed to restore political power to the Abbasid caliphs. Since it was now very clear who wielded the reins of power henceforth among Sunnis – to wit, military commanders who had no juridical authority under Muslim law – Muslims needed a new ideological model of political authority; and, since Persian was now the dominant language of culture throughout the eastern Islamic lands, and Persian dynasties were the political force which had arisen on the ruins of the eastern caliphate, most of the works of this second wave were composed in Persian.<sup>66</sup>

One of the earliest such works was the *Qābūs nāma*, written around the year 1082,<sup>67</sup> in which the princely author begins by proudly reminding his son that:

“Your grandmother, my mother, was the daughter of Prince Marzubān b. Rustam b. Sharvīn ... whose thirteenth-generation ancestor was Kābūs b. Qubād, the brother of King Anūshīrvān the Just [Khusraw I]; and your mother was the daughter of the King Ghāzī Mahmūd b. Nāšir al-Dīn”.<sup>68</sup>

It is fitting that Kay Kā’ūs should thus harmoniously blend at the outset the Islamic and the Iranian elements of his son’s genealogical pedigree, just as the work itself blends the same elements in its philosophical pedigree.

Thus, Khusraw Parvīz’s famous minister Buzurgmihr appears in various anecdotes throughout the work, always as a paragon of wisdom, ranging from his wise and repeated acknowledgment of his own human limitations to his pontificating on the reason for the fall of the Sasanians (Answer: “in their great affairs they relied upon petty officials”).<sup>69</sup> Similarly, the author tells his son to heed the collective distilled wisdom of the wise, particularly of Khusraw I, who is always referred to in this literature by the title “Anūshīrvān the Just”. Kay Kā’ūs joins Anūshīrvān with the Islamic past by informing the reader that

---

the genre until its resurgence in the early Saljuq period”. See J. Meisami, *Persian Historiography until the End of the Twelfth Century*, Edinburgh 1999, 145.

<sup>65</sup> F. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam*, Cambridge 1962, 67-68; C. E. Bosworth, ‘Administrative Literature’, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Religion, Learning, and Science in the Abbasid Period*, ed. M. J. L. Young et al., Cambridge 1990, 165-66.

<sup>66</sup> On this second wave see P. Crone, *God’s Rule*, New York 2004, 152-64. On the challenge posed by the Seljuqs to Sunni political theorists and jurists, see A. K. S. Lambton, ‘Aspects of Saljuq-Ghuzz Settlement in Persia’, *Islamic Civilisation 950-1150*, ed. D. S. Richards, Oxford 1973, 106, and D. G. Tor, ‘Sultan’, *Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*, ed. Gerhard Böwering, Patricia Crone, et al., Princeton, forthcoming.

<sup>67</sup> Kay Kā’ūs, *Qābūs nāma*, ed. Gh. Yūsufi, Tehran 1378, 263.

<sup>68</sup> Kay Kā’ūs, *Qābūs nāma*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Kay Kā’ūs, *Qābūs nāma*, 38-39, 46, 220.

the caliph Ma'mūn made a pilgrimage to Anūshīrvān's tomb and had the inscription on it translated into Arabic.<sup>70</sup>

The most famous of the eleventh-century 'Mirrors for Princes', Niẓām al-Mulḳ's *Siyāsat nāma*, likewise depicts the ancient Iranian kings as a model for emulation, together with the practices of various, selected Islamic rulers. In fact, the pre-Islamic rulers of Iran have been made over entirely in an Islamic image. A few examples of different types should suffice to illustrate this point. First, Niẓām al-Mulḳ co-mingles pre-Islamic and Islamic figures freely, using them both as paradigms. In his chapter warning against the mischief of women, the author's examples include pre-Islamic figures such as Kay Kā'ūs and Siyāvush, Darius, Khusraw and Shīrīn, and Buzurgmihr, interspersed with 'A'isha and the Prophet, Joseph, and the caliph Ma'mūn.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, in his chapter on Judges, Niẓām al-Mulḳ's two models are the Saḥāba and the Persian Kings of Antiquity, whom he praises for their accessibility and impartial justice.<sup>72</sup>

Second, Niẓām al-Mulḳ holds up the Sasanian kings in particular, and their viziers, as the embodiment and epitome of kingly virtue. Sometimes this consists in his quoting approvingly the statements of Sasanian kings on a particular subject;<sup>73</sup> on other occasions it lies in his citing their historical example and actions as illustrations of righteous or just government.<sup>74</sup> In the chapter on viziers, perhaps the one that lay closest to the author's own heart, *all* of the anecdotes are taken from the ancient Iranian past.<sup>75</sup>

Niẓām al-Mulḳ also praises his Islamic heroes, such as Maḥmūd of Ghazna, for following certain excellent pre-Islamic Iranian customs, for instance in paying his army in cash instead of land grants.<sup>76</sup> Thus, Niẓām al-Mulḳ, an Orthodox Shāfi'ī Muslim, approves of the Islamic adoption of Sasanian models; obviously, he perceives no opposition between the two models. In fact, he states outright that "The Sasanian kings [*mulūk-i Akāsira*] in justice, magnanimity, and manliness [*muruvva*] surpassed all other kings; especially Anūshīrvān the Just."<sup>77</sup>

Nowhere is the thorough Islamization of the Sasanian kings better seen than in Niẓām al-Mulḳ's use of them, particularly Anūshīrvān, as a model for proper *religious* attitudes. Thus, in his chapter on land grants and administration (chapter 5), Niẓām al-Mulḳ's only model is Anūshīrvān the Just, who is not only held up as the paragon of the righteous ruler – but to whom is also attributed great piety and respect for God.<sup>78</sup> Nor is this a lone aberration: In his chapter on the ruler's duty to maintain proper religion, Niẓām al-Mulḳ

<sup>70</sup> Kay Kā'ūs, *Qābūs nāma*, 50, 55. On the special role played by Ardashīr and Anūshīrvān in Islamic political thought, see L. Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, Cambridge 1997, 83–90.

<sup>71</sup> Niẓām al-Mulḳ, *Siyar al-mulūk*, ed. H. Darke, Tehran 1378, 243–46.

<sup>72</sup> Niẓām al-Mulḳ, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 56–59.

<sup>73</sup> Niẓām al-Mulḳ, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 251.

<sup>74</sup> Niẓām al-Mulḳ, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 30, 98.

<sup>75</sup> Niẓām al-Mulḳ, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 31–42.

<sup>76</sup> Niẓām al-Mulḳ, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 134–35.

<sup>77</sup> Niẓām al-Mulḳ, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 174–75; the laudatory statement appears on the latter page.

<sup>78</sup> Niẓām al-Mulḳ, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 43–55.

at one point somewhat bizarrely cites Ardashīr and the Qur'an as joint authorities.<sup>79</sup>

In the same chapter, his examples of ideal rulers include a promiscuous blending of figures from Iranian Antiquity and the Muslim past: Afrīdūn, Alexander, Ardashīr and Anūshīrvān the Just; 'Umar I and II; Hārūn al-Rashīd, Ma'mūn, and Mu'ṭaṣim; Ismā'īl b. Aḥmad Sāmānī; and Maḥmūd of Ghazna, concluding "[People still] recite blessings and praise for them".<sup>80</sup> Even the Sasanian viziers – or at least Buzurgmihr – are made over into paragons of religious virtue; in a section treating the *sententiae* of 'the great religious figures', Niẓām al-Mulk's virtuous examples include equally Buzurgmihr and 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.<sup>81</sup> He even views the religious disorders of his own time through the prism of pre-Islamic history and the Mazdakite disorders of Sasanian time, using Late Antiquity to teach a moral lesson about Islam itself.<sup>82</sup>

More importantly for our thesis, contrary to what previously has been thought, it is not the case that Muslims dropped the Sasanian paradigm in the eleventh century.<sup>83</sup> The legitimising use and incorporation of the pre-Islamic heritage of rulership continued throughout the pre-Mongol period; again, well after the end of any movement or phenomenon that could be labelled as Shu'ūbī or anti-Islamic- and it extended far beyond Iran.

Thus, we find the twelfth-century Amirs of Khuttal insisting upon their descent from Bahrām V.<sup>84</sup> In the same vein, Niẓāmī 'Arūḍī's twelfth-century advice manual tells us that for a scribe to be accomplished, he needs to master the Qur'ān, the Sunna, "the memoirs of the Companions, the proverbs of the Arabs, and the wise words of the Persians".<sup>85</sup> Similarly, the work portrays the ancient Iranian kings as paradigms of rulership, noting approvingly that good Muslim rulers such as Maḥmūd of Ghazna based themselves on the customs of kings "such as the Pīshdādī, Kayānī, and Sasanian kings and the caliphs, whose custom it was to contend for glory and compete in justice and virtue ...".<sup>86</sup>

Rāvandī's didactic history of the Seljuqs, *Rāḥat al-Ṣudūr*, written around the turn of the thirteenth century, employs the Sasanian model in a similar paradigmatic fashion. Thus, throughout his work, Rāvandī quotes approvingly, in various contexts, the alleged *ḥadīth* (for lack of a better term) of figures such as Ardashīr and Anūshīrvān regarding the conduct of kings. Thus, when explaining approvingly that Toghril modeled himself on "the laudable actions of the kings of yore", Rāvandī cites Ardashīr on proper royal administrative

<sup>79</sup> Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 80.

<sup>80</sup> Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 81–82.

<sup>81</sup> Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 179–80.

<sup>82</sup> Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyar al-mulūk*, 306, 257–78.

<sup>83</sup> Bosworth, 'Heritage of Rulership', 62: "The era in which powers established in Iran on the ruins of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate automatically tried to forge a connection with the glorious traditions of ancient Iran, draws to an end in the eleventh century".

<sup>84</sup> The *amīr* bears the very Persian name of Farrukh-Shāh; M. Fedorov, 'New he very Persian name of Farrukh Shage of other Late Antique Iranian epithets having to do with rulership. which it your neData on the Appanage Rulers of Khuttalān and Wakhsh', *Iran* 44, 2006, 201.

<sup>85</sup> Niẓāmī 'Arūḍī, *Chahār maqāla*, 22.

<sup>86</sup> Niẓāmī 'Arūḍī, *Chahār maqāla*, 39–40. On the question of the historicity of the Kayanids, see A. Christensen, *Les Kayanides*, Copenhagen 1931, 27–35; other scholars, however, are more skeptical.

practices;<sup>87</sup> when discussing the reign of Sultan Sanjar b. Malikshāh, Rāvandī again quotes Ardashīr to the effect that prosperity depends on justice and good administrative policy;<sup>88</sup> when expounding upon justice, he cites Anūshīrvān,<sup>89</sup> and so forth. What is striking is that all of these *sententiae* are adduced in Arabic, which Rāvandī then has to translate for his readership into Persian; that is, they came from an Arabic-language tradition, not a Persian one.

The influential thirteenth century work *Dastūr al-vizāra* also looks to the Late Antique Persian kings for inspiration. When searching for the ultimate example of Ozymandias-like fallen greatness in the ministerial sphere, it quotes a poem stating that “the memory of Buzurgmihr is obliterated in this era”.<sup>90</sup> In his chapter “In remembrance of the praises of kings and stories and songs about them which have remained eternal and perpetual in books of the time”, Iṣfahānī names “Ardashīr Bābak and his son Shāpūr” as the greatest and most virtuous of kings.<sup>91</sup>

Iṣfahānī, like Niẓām al-Mulk, also connects the pre-Islamic Persian historical tradition with the Islamic one. In his chapter on the discretion and vigilance of the vizier in service of the king, Iṣfahānī adduces an anecdote in which the first Abbasid caliph, Abū al-ʿAbbās, was sitting and holding an evening conversation whose subject was the glory of the Iranian kings of yore.<sup>92</sup> In other words, much of the Islamic literary corpus is characterized by an unself-conscious blending of the Pre-Islamic Persian tradition with the Islamic religious one.

The widespread adoption of the Sasanian model was characterized not only by chronological diffusion but also by ethnic and geographical diffusion. Thus, the final refutation of the idea that the incorporation of the Sasanian kings and their traditions into Islamic civilization was somehow inimical to Islam or a resentful Persian nationalist response to the Arabs is the fact that Arabs and Arabic literature, across the centuries, embraced the Sasanian model as well. Moreover, this phenomenon begins in the tenth century, precisely at a time when one would expect Arabs to have rejected the practice, had the revival of the Sasanian model been a mere expression of Shuʿūbism or anti-Arab feeling.

Thus, the tenth-century Arabic geographer Muqaddasī states that “Umar b. al-Khattāb ... said: Lo, I learned justice from Kisrā”.<sup>93</sup> Muqaddasī also considered the old Iranian lineage as bestowing legitimacy: he writes of the Samanids that:

<sup>87</sup> Rāvandī, *Rāḥat al-Ṣudūr va-Āyat al-shurūr dar Āl Saljūq*, ed. M. Iqbāl, Tehran 1364/1985f., 97.

<sup>88</sup> Rāvandī, *Rāḥat al-Ṣudūr*, 186. On the stock use of the tradition cited by Rāvandī, see A. K. S. Lambton, ‘Justice in the Medieval Persian Theory of Kingship’, *Studia Islamica* 17, 1962, 100.

<sup>89</sup> Rāvandī, *Rāḥat al-Sudūr*, 74. Rāvandī also combines sacred and ancient Persian history in his chapter on ‘The great ones and kings of yore’, 352-353. The Sasanian past, interestingly, also features in his discussion of the game of chess, and the improvements made to it by Buzurgmihr; 407-408; explained further on, 410.

<sup>90</sup> Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Iṣfahānī, *Dastūr al-Vizāra*, ed. Riḍā Anzābī Nizhād, Tehran 1364/1985f., 37.

<sup>91</sup> Iṣfahānī, *Dastūr al-vizāra*, 93.

<sup>92</sup> Iṣfahānī, *Dastūr al-vizāra*, 108.

<sup>93</sup> Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālīm*, ed. De Goeje, Leiden 1906, 18.

their origin goes back to Bahrām Gūr; therefore God has given them victory and power. They are among the best of kings in conduct and administration; the most sublime in the knowledge of God and the people of that knowledge. Among the sayings of the people: 'If a tree were to revolt against the house of Sāmān, it would wither'.<sup>94</sup>

If anything, there is a tendency, as we have seen in Niẓām al-Mulk's work, to Islamicize Iranian kings. This can be seen in a statement Muqaddasī makes when discussing Khuzistan:

Regarding al-Ahwāz, Shāpūr when he built it in two parts, called one of them by the name of Allāh, may He be magnified and exalted, and the other by his [own] name; then he united the two under one name, and its name was Hormuzdārāwshīr [sic] ...<sup>95</sup>

That is, even the ancient Iranian royal worship of Ahura Mazda/Ohrmazd has been Islamicised to the point where the Zoroastrian deity is explicitly equated with Allāh- and Muqaddasī was no Unitarian. Note that this is an Arab author writing in Arabic.<sup>96</sup>

Other Arabic sources, too, draw on the memory of Late Antique Iranian rulership: when describing the downfall of the Afshīn, for instance, Maqdīsī's tenth-century *Kitāb al-bad' wa'l-ta'rikh*, declaims an elegy in which the acme of glory and nobility is "*Banī Kā'ūs, awlād al-'ajam*".<sup>97</sup> Similarly, belletristic texts in both Persian and Arabic preserve and glorify the memory of Sasanian rulership. Thus, the *Kitāb al-aghānī* features the Persian kings in a poem about the transience of glory, in which both Khusraw I (Anūshīrvān) and Shāpūr are mentioned by name.<sup>98</sup> Likewise, "Bahrām Gūr son of Yazdegird son of Shāpūr" puts in an appearance as well.<sup>99</sup>

In like fashion, the anonymous eleventh-century Arabic work *Kitāb al-dhakhā'ir wa'l-tuhaf*, a catalogue of marvelous gifts, opens with the Sasanian kings – the only pre-Islamic gift-givers and recipients to be mentioned – starting with an account of various magnificent gifts exchanged by Khusraw I with neighboring rulers.<sup>100</sup> Other sections of the work begin similarly, with an account of Sasanian times and practices clearly setting a standard to which Islamic rulers are then compared- for example the chapter on receiving envoys;<sup>101</sup> again, this is an Arabic, not a Persian text.

More importantly, this work, too, depicts, as a natural matter of course, the caliphs as the continuators of Sasanian traditions and practices. For instance, it states:

<sup>94</sup> Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, 338.

<sup>95</sup> Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, 406.

<sup>96</sup> This is not to say that he was not influenced by the Iranian tradition- in fact, that is precisely the point. On this subject see J.H. Kramers, "L'Influence de la tradition Iranienne dans la géographie Arabe," *Analecta Orientalia*, Leiden 1954, i, 147–56.

<sup>97</sup> Maqdīsī, *Kitāb al-bad' wa'l-ta'rikh*, ed. Cl. Huart, Paris 1899–1919, ii, 300.

<sup>98</sup> Abū'l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī*, ii, 131.

<sup>99</sup> Abū'l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, *al-Aghānī*, ii, 137.

<sup>100</sup> Anon., *Kitāb al-dhakhā'ir wa'l-tuhaf*, ed. M. Ḥamīd Allāh and Ṣ. Munajjid, Kuwait 1959, 3–5.

<sup>101</sup> Anon., *Kitāb al-dhakhā'ir wa'l-tuhaf*, 127.



The Nawrūz gifts that were brought to the Kings of Persia every year by the *dahāqīn* of Iraq numbered ten million, and the Mihragān gifts one hundred million. Afterwards, in Islamic times, they were brought to the caliphs.<sup>102</sup>

The caliphate is here portrayed as a harmonious continuation of ancient Persian kingship.

This tendency is even more apparent in the chapter on plunder taken in conquests and shares of booty in raids. While the first example is of the Prophet, and the second pertains to the booty obtained by the Muslims in the Battle of Qadisiyya, the text then passes quite casually to the amount of booty accumulated in the treasury by Khusraw II, his son Shirawayh, and grandson Ardashīr, before passing back to the *jihād* of the early Muslim conquests.<sup>103</sup> That is, an eleventh-century Arabic text incorporates Late Antique Iran into one seamless whole with Islamic civilization – not in opposition to Islam, but by co-opting the Sasanian past in much the same fashion that the Qur’ān co-opts and refashions the Biblical past.

This characteristic, moreover, is found throughout Arabic literature. Thus, one of the great Arabic litterateurs of the tenth century, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, sets forth the Sasanian kings and viziers and their sayings as paragons of wisdom, justice, and statesmanship; Khusraw Anūshīrvān (Khusraw I), Khusraw Aparvīz (Khusraw II), Bahrām Gūr (Bahrām V), and the vizier Buzurgmihr appear repeatedly in this role.<sup>104</sup> At least some of the Iranian kings also assumed larger than life proportions. For example, Tawḥīdī writes “it is said of the things in which Khusraw excelled that his height was sixteen spans; his heart was seven spans; and he would eat every day a grilled foal from among the horses, as well as [several] she-kids ...”.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, the writer assumes a basic familiarity with the legendary royal Sasanian biographies and their protagonists on the part of his reader, launching into anecdotes without feeling it necessary to explain his references: “When Khusraw killed Buzurgmihr”; “Khusraw said to Maria, the daughter of the Byzantine Emperor”; and so forth.<sup>106</sup> In other words, this was part of a living tradition, the assumed cultural background of all readers of polite Arabic literature.

The incredibly far-flung geographical extent to which Iranian Late Antiquity became absorbed into Islamic culture is best illustrated, perhaps, by the adoption of the Sasanian model at the far Western end of the Islamic world, by the Andalusian Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (d. Cordoba, 940), in his work *al-‘Iqd al-farīd*. Here, as in the other writings we have examined, the Iranian kings and viziers of Late Antiquity, from Khusraw Aparvīz to Ardashīr,

<sup>102</sup> Anon., *Kitāb al-dhakhā’ir wa’l-tuḥaf*, 5.

<sup>103</sup> Anon., *Kitāb al-dhakhā’ir wa’l-tuḥaf*, 245.

<sup>104</sup> Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā’ir wa’l-dhakhā’ir*, ed. Wadād al-Qāḍī, Beirut 1999; Anūshīrvān : iv, 17–18; vi, 63; 9:103, ix, 159, 177; Aparvīz: iv, 120; 8:79; Khusraw: ii, 184–85; iv, 42, 96, iv, 169, 174; v, 132; vi, 130, 221; vii, 176; vii, 194–95; ix, 14; xiii, 184–85; Bahrām Gūr: vii, 183; Buzurgmihr: i, 22, 136; ii, 141; iii, 157; iv, 15, 80, 96, 113, 120, 153, 170, 171, 216–17; v, 12, vii, 157, and so forth.

<sup>105</sup> Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā’ir wa’l-dhakhā’ir*, ii, 80–81.

<sup>106</sup> Tawḥīdī, *al-Baṣā’ir wa’l-dhakhā’ir*, vii, 43 and vi, 129; similarly, one encounters references such as “Khusraw said to Shīrīn”; “Khusraw wrote to Hormuzd”; “When Khusraw Aparvīz was forced to flee from before Bahrām Chūbīn”; “Anūshīrvān wrote to the Ispahbad of Khurasan”; respectively vii, 155; vii, 181; viii, 79; ix, 182.

Anūshīrvān, and Buzurgmihr, are held up as the embodiment of justice, statecraft, and kingly virtue.<sup>107</sup>

The same Islamizing tendency toward the Sasanian past is also present in this work, in very pronounced form. First we find, in similar anecdotes, both Anūshīrvān the Just and a generic Sasanian emperor instructing their satraps regarding religious priorities: “Make use of people of valour and generosity; for they are the people of Allāh’s favourable judgment”.<sup>108</sup> Even more specifically Islamicizing is the depiction of Ardashīr’s instructions to his son: “O my son, bestow your speech upon people of high rank; your gifts upon the men of *jihād*; your joy in men of religion ...”.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, we have ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib asking “one of the Persian nobles” which of the Persian kings was most praiseworthy (the noble names Ardashīr and Anūshīrvān/Khusraw I).<sup>110</sup> Short of the Prophet’s endorsement, there is no higher Islamic certificate of approval.

Yet another salient fact that refutes the Shu‘ūbī partisan interpretation of the meaning and scope of Late Antique Iranian calques in Islamic culture is, once again, the chronological extent of the Sasanian incorporation into Arabic literature. As was the case with Persian literature, these calques continue to be used well past the eleventh century, and long after any possible Shu‘ūbī movement or controversy had disappeared. Thus, for example, the twelfth-century Baghdadi Ḥanbalite cleric Ibn al-Jawzī, in his work *al-Adhkiyā*, adduces anecdotes which feature Khusraw b. Hormuzd, Khusraw II, and Shīrūya.<sup>111</sup>

One even finds one of the leading fifteenth-century clerics of Yemen, Ḥamza b. ‘Abdallāh al-Nāshirī, in his work on hunting and falconry, featuring the Sasanian kings, their doings, sayings, and pronouncements. Thus various *sententiae* of “Khusraw” are quoted,<sup>112</sup> and anecdotes involving these kings and their prowess – among them Khusraw I, Bahrām b. Hormuzd, Bahrām V, Shāpūr, and Khusraw II<sup>113</sup> – are recounted. Even in a work of this sort, the Persian kings are held up and admired as exemplars. Thus, Bahrām V figures as the first person said to have hunted the merlin; and, in a different passage, the best of all Persian marksmen.<sup>114</sup>

To conclude: Islamic culture was not some weak and self-contained flower, wilting under the stressful threat of an assertive and revenant ancient Iranian tradition. First of all, Islamic culture was an assimilative one; and, second, it was not an indiscriminately assimilative one. It took what it needed – and only what it needed, and as needed – from

<sup>107</sup> Abū ‘Umar Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *Kitāb al-‘iqd al-farīd*, ed. I. al-Ibyārī, Beirut, n.d., Khusraw Aparvīz: i, 26, i, 41, 42, 43; ii, 244–45, 413; iv, 146; Ardashīr: i, 40; Anūshīrvān: ii, 413; vī, 395–98; Buzurgmihr: i, 245; ii, 226, 300, 360, 412; iii, 78–82; vi, 331.

<sup>108</sup> Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *Kitāb al-‘iqd al-farīd*, i, 120, 245–46.

<sup>109</sup> Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *Kitāb al-‘iqd al-farīd*, i, 38.

<sup>110</sup> Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *Kitāb al-‘iqd al-farīd*, ii, 267.

<sup>111</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Adhkiyā*, Beirut, 1418/1998, 208–209, 217–219.

<sup>112</sup> Nāshirī, *Intihāz al-furaṣ fī’l-ṣayd wa’l-qanas*, ed. ‘A. M. Al-Ḥabashī, Abu Dhabi 2002: “Khusraw said: A windy day is good for sleeping; a cloudy day for hunting; a rainy day for drinking; a sunny day for necessities;” p. 36; “A falcon is a better friend than patience; it never misses an opportunity”, 143.

<sup>113</sup> Nāshirī, *Intihāz al-furaṣ fī’l-ṣayd*, 97–98, 296–311, 312–13.

<sup>114</sup> Nāshirī, *Intihāz al-furaṣ fī’l-ṣayd*, 148, 281.

other cultures. Thus, precisely which element was adopted from the Late Antique Iranian past is significant, not random. Just as Greek culture was prized for its philosophy, Late Antique Iran was raided for its tradition of rulership.

To say that the ‘Islamic ideal of rulership’ was in conflict with the Iranian ideal that was actively embraced and absorbed into Islamic culture from the Abbasid era onwards is simply not accurate. The original Islamic ideal of the caliphate proved impossible to put into practice; this is why, according to classical Sunni theory, there have been no real caliphs at all since the first four; the Islamic ideal, after the death of the Prophet, existed for less than thirty years.<sup>115</sup> In short, the Iranian ideal saved the Islamic polity at a crucial moment, when the caliphate had failed and was in the process of collapse; it was one of the two legitimising factors – the other being the *jihād*– that was able to turn mere *amīrs*, or military commanders, into Sultans – legitimate political authorities.<sup>116</sup> The essential reason why the Iranian ideal was revived, reshaped, and given a new lease on life was precisely the lack of a viable mainstream Islamic ideal after the ideological implosion that followed on the heels of the Abbasid failure.

Nor did Islamic civilization adopt the ancient Iranian ideal unmodified; it re-shaped and Islamicized it. The neo-Sasanian attributes of independent Iranian dynasties are not a return to Late Antiquity. In light of the foregoing, it is possible to say of certain elements of Iranian Late Antiquity, particularly of its tradition of rulership, not that they survived, but that they were revived in a transfigured, Islamicised form. In the end, the Late Antique Iranian heritage of rulership did not fade, but, rather, “suffer[ed] a sea-change/into something rich and strange”.

### Acknowledgements

The author is deeply grateful to Patricia Crone and Edmund Bosworth for reading and commenting upon this article; and to Luke Treadwell, Chase Robinson, Teresa Bernheimer, and the other participants who commented upon the oral presentation of this research at the Oxford Centre for Late Antiquity seminar in January 2008.

---

<sup>115</sup> This is what Crone has referred to as “The de-politicization of the community of believers”; see P. Crone, *God’s Rule: Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Islamic Political Thought*, New York 2004, 30–32.

<sup>116</sup> On the legitimising function of *jihād* for the autonomous dynasties see D. G. Tor, ‘Privatized Jihad’, *passim*, and idem, *Violent Order*, Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6. This is not to preclude other, more minor means of legitimation- among them caliphal recognition; but that sort of buttressing tended to constitute the icing on the cake rather than the main ingredient: caliphal endorsement never clinched or doomed any dynasty’s bid for political rule, as can be seen from the time of the Saffarids to the hapless volte-faces caused by the caliphal execution of the warring sides’ bidding in the Seljuq succession struggles after the death of Malikshāh.