Piety and Power in Early Sasanian Art

Carol Bier, The Textile Museum
Official Cult and
Popular Religion
in the Ancient Near East

Papers of the First Colloquium
on the Ancient Near East – The City and its Life
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Piety and Power in Early Sasanian Art

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Royal Imagery: An Insider’s View

Sasanian art has long been considered a royal art: An art in service of royalty. Indeed, traditions of kingship in Iran became a paradigm for kingship throughout the world (though not always recognized as such). But the significance and strength of Iranian kingship no doubt led, in part, to scholarly paradigms in which nearly all in historical Iran has been cast in the shadow of kingship.

But there are other ways to look at kingship in Iran. This paper explores the representation of royal images in early Sasanian art from a religious perspective, a view perhaps eclipsed by the ever-present focus on royalty. Discussion rests primarily on the analysis of visual sources pertaining to Ardashir I. Key to the arguments presented are the monumental rock reliefs commissioned most likely during his reign, and coins of his issue. Also relevant to the discussion are royal images pertaining to Ardashir’s immediate successors.

Among the most famous of early Sasanian reliefs is the Triumph of Shapur I at Naqsh-i Rustam (fig. 1). A Roman emperor is seen kneeling before the mounted Shapur (fig. 2). This image is striking for the directness of its imagery, depicting one monarch bowing before another, thus, immediately defining a non-Roman context: For where in the Western world would we see a Roman emperor kneeling before a foreign monarch? This perspective immediately defines us as outsiders, and provides

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1 This paper incorporates revisions suggested as a result of two lectures: “Images of Power and Piety: The Art of Sasanian Iran,” presented to the Baltimore Society of the Archaeological Institute of America on November 9, 1990 and “Piety and Power: Royal Imagery in Early Sasanian Iran,” presented to the Iranian Studies Seminar at the University of Pennsylvania on January 24, 1991.

2 It is worth noting initially that throughout my life I have viewed Iran to the east, but from a Japanese perspective, Iran lies to the west. The models for my research have been drawn from that Western perspective looking east, and from the personal perspective of an American brought up in the United States in a Judeo-Christian household of mixed cultural heritage. Thus, my views are drawn from monotheistic traditions, but without an internalized tradition of kingship to which to make reference.

us an opportunity to view the world of Iran from the inside rather than from the outside looking in. We may thus look into the mind of a tradition removed – one at times antithetical to our own. Our point of reference is external, our point of view from the West.

Critical viewing of Persian royal imagery provides an exceptional opportunity for us as outsiders to enjoy a view from the inside. For in looking at art, we may see what the Persians saw, and even understand some of what they understood if we look closely and carefully.

There is something to these royal images, something beyond their pomp, that enables us to see what is culturally relevant and meaningful to the contemporary viewing audience of the third century. Art offers the possibility of an insider's view without the necessity of an intermediary literal translation: we may see what the ancients saw. This transcendental aspect of art is due, in part, to its force as a visual medium.

Sasanian Art

Sasanian art was produced in Iran under the Sasanian monarchs who held sway from the middle of the third century AD until the Arab conquests in the middle of the seventh century AD. It is royal images, primarily, that have come down to us. There are some 30 rock reliefs (all, of course, in situ), all with images of the king – standing or on horseback), being invested with the authority of kingship by the gods, in battle, or in triumph, engaged in the hunt, or enthroned in audience.

In addition to the rock reliefs, there are coin series, all with royal portraits obverse (fig. 3). Because the coins are both inscribed and bear images specific to each king's reign, they have frequently served as the primary means by which to identify who is represented in the rock reliefs. While inscriptions in the reliefs are most often lacking, on coins the image of each king is precisely identified by caption.

Another category of visual materials is silver vessels, which are problematic for several reasons. First, seemingly royal personages on the silver do not often have precisely corresponding images in Sasanian coins or rock reliefs. Their identification

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4 For seminal studies which examine internal expressions of kingship in art of Iran and the ancient Near East see Root 1979 and Winter 1989, respectively. For more general discussion regarding the power of images, see Freedberg 1989.
6 For an introduction to Sasanian numismatics, see Göbl 1971.
7 See Erdmann 1951.
8 For a critical introduction to the complexities of this subject, see Grabar 1967.
is thereby difficult if not impossible, often relying on stylistic comparison which may be imprecise at best because of the nature of surviving comparative evidence, yet this is most often the only available basis from which to propose a date and attribution. Secondly, the use of Sasanian royal imagery seems to have survived well into post-Sasanian (Islamic) times, from the 7th – 10th centuries and beyond. Unlike rock reliefs (in situ) or coins (official art), such stylistic and iconographic survivals may represent either artistic continuity, or conscious and conscientious Neo-Sasanian movements expressed in the visual arts. Thirdly, the admixture of forgeries with authentic objects, located today in museums and private collections in Europe, the United States, Israel, Japan, and Iran, may not always be identified definitively as one or the other.

An additional category of visual source materials is gems and seals, which falls, like coins, in the realm of official art. Glyptic imagery shares the benefits of precise identification where inscriptions exist, but shares problems of uncertainty and imprecision where captions are not present.

Finally, based on Western notions of the proliferation of Sasanian art to the East and West, there are literally hundreds of textiles from tombs in Egypt, church treasuries in Europe, excavations in the Caucasus, Central Asia, northern India, and China, which have been attributed at one time or another to Sasanian manufacture. When grouped together, however, these attributions represent a wide diversity of stylistic and technical features, suggesting that some, perhaps many, are not themselves Sasanian. Rather, they may reflect a wider distribution of textile products which rely on Sasanian imagery. Related materials, which rely upon traditions of Sasanian royal imagery, exist in the treasuries of Shosoin and Horyuji from temples at Nara.

Royal Aspects of Early Sasanian Art

Having reviewed briefly the categories of visual evidence pertaining to Sasanian kings, let us return to the confrontation between Shapur I and the Roman emperor (figs. 1, 2), and other representations of Shapur in triumph (fig. 4) carved on the...
sides of a gorge near the site of Bishapur, where Shapur had built his palace. In several rock reliefs depicting the events his reign, Shapur consistently had himself presented as succeeding in his campaigns against Rome. Shapur’s endeavors are known historically both from Western sources and from his own famous long inscription on the monument known as Kaabah-i Zardusht, of which there are at least three versions, partially repetitive. Located at Naqsh-i Rustam, Paikuli, and Sar Mash-had, these inscriptions list the territories he conquered and brought under his control. Clearly, he commissioned several rock reliefs to depict events referred to in the inscriptions. The several rock reliefs, in effect, present a collapsed view of history, depicting Shapur simultaneously having taken three Roman monarchs.

Sasanian Royal Imagery and the Representation of History

Shapur I ruled in the mid-third century AD and led several campaigns against the Romans. One of those who sued for peace was Philip the Arab, who styled himself Persicus Maximus. The discrepancy of perspectives in history is indeed ironical. But art speaks a truth, if an ideal truth.

The significance of royal representation has a long history in Iran. Bishapur and Naqsh-i Rustam lie in southern Iran in the province of Fars, a region rich with natural outcroppings of rock suitable for carving. The Achaemenid kings had earlier ruled from Fars, which became heartland and homeland for the Sasanian dynasty centuries later. The Sasanian capital at Istakhr lay near Naqsh-i Rustam. Across the plain from nearby Persepolis, the site of Naqsh-i Rustam had an even longer history of carved monuments. Not only was it a site singled out by the Achaemenid kings for their rock-carved tomb chambers and funerary reliefs, but an earlier relief from Elamite times survives there as well.

Sasanian images of royalty evolved from those of the Achaemenids, as well as from those of even greater antiquity, including earlier developments in the art of the ancient Near East. In the earliest Sasanian art, this inheritance was combined with stylistic, if not iconic, influence from Roman portraiture, which is especially notable in the coins and rock reliefs of Ardashir as seen in the use of high relief, the modeling

14 For the rock relief depicting the Triumph of Shapur I, see Herrmann 1980. For Shapur’s palace, see L. Bier 1982, and Ghirshman 1956-1971.
16 Shapur’s inscriptions have been studied by several scholars, with varying interpretations. For recent translations citing earlier studies, see Frye 1984, Appendix 4, and Baek 1978. For a comparative study of Achaemenid and Sasanian inscriptions with particular focus on dominions, see Skjaervo 1985.
17 One may wonder how the history of art might have differed had there been such rocks for carving in Mesopotamia!
of anatomical features, and the more naturalistic facial portraits. These features, in fact, distinguish early Sasanian art from all that preceded it in Iranian and ancient Near Eastern portraiture.

Like its predecessors, the image of the king in early Sasanian art assumes hierarchical status and hieratic scale, his importance conveyed visually not only in art but also in ceremonial strictly regulated for the court. This historically rooted aspect of Sasanian images of royalty has without doubt contributed to our understanding of Sasanian art as we know it in the West: it is indeed a royal art. But, in consideration of the strength of this royal imagery, Sasanian art has been taken to be an art in service of royalty. And, in the process of unthinking interpretation, the overwhelming and incontrovertible evidence for Sasanian art's being a royal art has at once obscured its religious aspect, which I believe is equally important at least in the early decades. The religious aspect of Ardashir's art was perhaps even more important than its royal aspect for intended viewers of the third Christian century. One may reexamine early Sasanian art and identify in it a strongly religious component, which is clearly present and carefully articulated in the monuments of Ardashir I, first monarch of the Sasanian dynasty.

Zoroastrianism in Third Century Iran

The Sasanians were Zoroastrians, practitioners of a state religion that followed the teachings of the Prophet Zoroaster [=Zarathustra]. They called themselves maza yaasnayan ("Mazda worshippers") after their supreme deity Ahura Mazda, Ohrmazd in Middle Persian. What we know about Sasanian Zoroastrianism is complicated by the fact that most, if not all, of the internal sources were written down after the fall of the Sasanian dynasty. Zoroastrian written traditions post-date the Muslim conquests of the 7th century, and the richest set of sources, called the Pahlavi Books, survive only in much later manuscripts although they may date from the 9th century. Of contemporary interest are the Greek and Roman sources, but these view Sasanian Iran and Zoroastrianism from the outside, and are written by enemies and non-co-religionists. Our "knowledge" of early Sasanian Zoroastrianism is thus colored by the perceptions and the biases of contemporary commentators, shaded or eclipsed by the hindsight of conquest.

Newly studied Armenian sources have permitted scholarly reconstruction of Zoroastrianism as the religion of Armenia prior to their conversion to Christianity.

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18 For Roman influence evident in the art of Ardashir's successor, Shapur I, see Mackintosh 1973.
19 Sources are enumerated and discussed in Boyce 1979 and 1984.
by the third century, which renders important new interpretations. 21 But to recon­struc t Sasanian Zoroastrianism of the third century, one is beset by the complica­tions of historiography, both contemporary (of that time) and that of later times. The result is that what we think we know about Sasanian Zoroastrianism may not always be in fact true. It is certainly subject to new understandings and revised interpreta­tions.

The role of scholarship and its development over the past century and a half is also a complicating factor. Scholarship, as practiced in the West since the Age of Enlightenment has become a Western tradition. Within this tradition historically there has been strong, if unconscious, emphasis placed on the development of linear chronologies, and on representationalism and the interpretation of literal symbols. In the study of Sasanian art, this emphasis is evident in attempts to define religious symbolism in the figure of Ohrmazd, to identify figural images of other gods such as Anahita and Mithra, and to interpret symbolic images of other gods recognized by their hypostases or hvarnah. 22 The gods’ role in the investiture of kings has been addressed often, as have questions concerning deification of the king. 23 In contrast, for the study of Achaemenid art, the emphasis has focused on the identification of the winged being who is present in several royal reliefs. 24 There are several existing parallels for this kind of interpretation: myth and art in Classical Greece, with the continued representation of Greek gods on Hellenistic and Parthian coins, who are identified by inscription and/or attributes, the Roman cult of the emperor, the figural symbolism of gods of the Hindu pantheon, and the iconography of Buddhism.

These aspects of historiography and development of Western thought have af­fected our understanding of Sasanian history, art, and religion. But it is still no simple matter for an outsider to get beyond these literal representations to an understanding of meaning in another cultural context. Let us look at art rather in a different way: look to the art as evidence. The method may be both critical and compara­tive, but could not be undertaken without the extensive publication activities of the last decade. The Iranian revolution provided a set of unusual and paradoxical circum­stances that precluded the continuation of both excavation and field research in Iran with its incredible inheritance of cultural monuments of antiquity. This has created a situation in which the energies of individuals, institutions, and foreign governments, and the private wealth of royalists has been redirected towards a variety of efforts that have sought to preserve, cherish, and promote Iran’s rich cultural heritage. Such publication series as have emerged during this decade include the Encyclopaedia Iranica, with initial support of the National Endowment for the

23 Most recently, Choksy 1988.
Humanities; more recent volumes of the *Cambridge History of Iran*; the *Persian Heritage* series and *Bibliotheca Persica* with editorial offices at Columbia University under the directorship of Ehsan Yarshater; *Acta Iranica*, a serial publication begun with a Cyrus Commemoration under Imperial patronage, since pursued under the direction of an international board of scholars with editorial offices in Holland; three or four volumes of the Achaemenid History Conference (now having completed its first decade), which has drawn in an increasingly large group of international scholars who have taken a revisionist approach to Achaemenid history in attempting to discount the cultural and historical biases that pervade the Greek sources; the resuscitated *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* formerly of the Iranian Institute in New York in the 1940s (under the direction of Arthur U. Pope), revived as *Bulletin of the Asia Institute of Pahlavi University*, Shiraz, and now under the renewed editorship of Richard Frye joined by Bernard Goldman and Carol Bromberg with editorial offices in Michigan; *Studia Iranica* and an invaluable bibliographic resource, *Abstracta Iranica*, both out of Paris; two new series of monographs on Iranian studies from the Sorbonne; a revived *Iranische Denkmäler*; the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum*; and the ongoing publication of substantive periodicals such as *Iran* (British Institute of Persian Studies), *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* (German Archaeological Institute – Tehran/Berlin), and the *Journal of Iranian Studies* (Society of Iranian Studies, New Haven). This list includes translations and critical editions of primary sources, documentary photographs and drawings of major monuments, scholarly syntheses in all areas of Iranian studies, annotations and commentary, historical analyses, revisionist criticism, abstracts, reviews, summaries and evaluation of primary and secondary sources. Although this list is quite incredible, it does not even begin to enumerate the archaeological finds in China of Sasanian artifacts, or recent works on the subject published in Japan. The entire field of Sasanian studies is, indeed, ripe for review, reassessment, and reinterpretation.

**Ardashir I in Art and Literature**

Ardashir established himself as the first Sasanian monarch after defeating the reigning Parthian ruler, Artabanus V, whose territory encompassed what is today Iraq and Iran. His victory is commemorated in a very large rock relief near Firuzabad in Fars.️ Ardashir ruled for eighteen years from c. 224-242 AD. Literary accounts of the life of Ardashir do not survive from his reign as the first king of Sasanian Iran. The two most important sources, the *Karnamag-i Ardashir-i*

️ Illustrated in Herrmann 1977, pp. 77, 87-89.
Papakan\textsuperscript{26} and the Letter of Tansar\textsuperscript{27} are preserved in later manuscripts, and there is still much controversy as to their historical value for the early Sasanian period.\textsuperscript{28} Information recorded during his own lifetime does survive, however, in the form of inscriptions, coins, and rock reliefs, which present contemporary images of Ardashir as king. Critical examination of this evidence may be used to reconstruct in part the acts of Ardashir and certain aspects of his role as king in establishing the Sasanian empire, thereby providing an additional means for evaluating later accounts of his life and official acts.\textsuperscript{29}

The problems of dealing with Middle Persian literature are manifold.\textsuperscript{30} Little survives in its original form. For the most part the literary output of the Sasanian dynasty must be reconstructed from later Arab and Persian sources, written, compiled, or translated from Pahlavi, written down after the Islamic conquests. And there is evidence for an ephemeral oral literary tradition.\textsuperscript{31} The situation is further complicated by this time because of the absorption of foreign literary influences, particularly in form, style, and composition, to say nothing of the introduction of the Arabic language itself, and a rich new vocabulary in New Persian.\textsuperscript{32}

In the accounts of Ardashir, problems of interpretation center around the historicity of the material presented. Just how much may be regarded as truthful, and how much must be considered as later accretions, extraneous elements of epic legend, myth or historical misinterpretation? Scholars have disagreed concerning the extent to which these later sources may be considered authentic for an understanding of earlier events. Christensen, for example, has taken the extreme position of regarding the Letter of Tansar as a fictitious literary composition of the 6th century, even though its content purports to record a letter written by Tansar, chief priest (herbad) in the court of Ardashir I, to a dissenting local king in the north of Iran. Boyce, in the introduction to her translation of a surviving text of the letter, presents succinctly the views of several modern authorities and the problems encountered by current scholarship in the field. Boyce accepts Tansar as a historical figure of the third century AD, but she agrees with the interpretations of others who recognize 6th century elements in the composition and content of the letter. She believes, nonetheless, that it contains a core of authentic information from the reign of Ardashir I.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{26} For translations, see Antia 1900 and Nöldeke 1878.
\textsuperscript{27} For translation and commentary, see Boyce 1968b.
\textsuperscript{28} A good summary and discussion of the controversies is presented by Boyce in her introduction, Boyce 1968b, pp. 1-25.
\textsuperscript{29} This is the subject of my doctoral thesis, in progress.
\textsuperscript{30} Summarized in Boyce 1968a.
\textsuperscript{31} See Boyce 1957.
\textsuperscript{32} Evidence is summarized in Frye 1975.
\textsuperscript{33} Boyce 1968b, pp. 20-22.
Religious Aspects of Early Sasanian Art

The problems involved in trying to distinguish Ardashir, the historical figure, from Ardashir the epic hero and founder of a dynasty, are not dissimilar from the problems in dealing with his representation as king in art.\(^{34}\) It is here a question of distinguishing the personal features or activities of a historical individual from the traditional presentation of kingship with its associated signs, symbols, and attributes. Consideration of the thirty known rock reliefs dating to the Sasanian period, the majority of which are located in the province of Fars, reveals the predominance of several themes which are also present in literature: the king in battle, the king engaged in the hunt, the king being invested with royal power by a god, the king performing a pious act. In five reliefs depicting Ardashir he is shown in several of these roles. Three are scenes of investiture (Firuzabad, Naqsh-i Rustam [fig. 5], Naqsh-i Rajab). One is a pitched battle with three pairs of contestants (Firuzabad), the last a scene with Ardashir and his son Shapur receiving homage from the Armenians (Salmas in Azarbajian).\(^{35}\) A sixth relief (Darab in Fars) is arguably a triumph of Ardashir as well.\(^{36}\)

Comparison of stories relating to the life of Ardashir in the *Karnamak* and the *Shahname* with Herodotus' description of the rise to power of Cyrus reveals certain characteristic traits possessed by the king: victory in battle, prowess in the hunt, the blessing of the king by the gods. It becomes quite apparent that an epic quality is present in the portrayal of Ardashir in both art and literature.\(^{37}\)

We have an immediate advantage, however, in dealing with the art in that it is contemporary with Ardashir's reign. We can be secure with the authenticity of Sasanian rock reliefs and their attribution to specific kings by the accompanying inscriptions or by the correlation of the king's crown type with that on his coins, a feature of comparison which is unique to Sasanian coinage (fig. 3) because of the documented chronological development of crown types and the precision in the rendering of details. We are aided further because Ardashir was the first king of a new dynasty. This awareness of his position is reflected in his rock reliefs because his choice of royal iconography clearly indicates a deliberate departure from Parthian traditions of the preceding centuries. For example, in each of the three scenes of investiture Ardashir is shown facing Ohrmazd, who reaches out with his right hand to offer the beribboned royal diadem (fig. 5). To my knowledge there are no Parthian illustrations of Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd).\(^{38}\) Of several representations in Parthian art of a

\(^{34}\) Bier ms1977b.

\(^{35}\) Illustrated in Hinz 1969, pp. 115-143.

\(^{36}\) For renewal of the Ardashir attribution, see Levit-Tawil 1992.

\(^{37}\) Bier ms1977b.

\(^{38}\) Indeed, the identification of Ahura Mazda in Achemenid reliefs has been questioned; see Shahbazi 1974 and 1980. See also, Tanabe 1984.
ruler holding the ring (of kingship?) a donor is present only in the relief of Artabanus V from Susa. But there the recipient is not the king but a local satrap, Khwasak, who is identified by inscription. It is the donor, Artabanus, who is king himself.

Investiture of the king by a god has a long history in the art of the ancient Near East, but the introduction of Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd) to the iconography of kingship at this time seems to be specifically attributable to Ardashir. The identification of Ohrmazd is definitive by virtue of the trilingual inscription carved on the chest of the horse in the rock relief showing Ardashir’s investiture at Naqshi-i Rustam (fig. 5). The inscription in Middle Persian and Parthian reads “The image [is] this of Hormizd, the God”; in Greek: “This is the image of the god Zeus.” Ardashir is likewise identified by inscription. The identification of Ohrmazd in the two other investiture reliefs, which lack inscriptions, is confirmed by his position as donor of the royal diadem, and by the presence of identical attributes and details of dress.

The significance of the presence of Ohrmazd in the reliefs of Ardashir goes far beyond the importance of the rock reliefs as art. It must be seen as a reflection of Ardashir’s role in the restitution of a state religion in which Ohrmazd figured most prominently, particularly in view of the lack of a local or dynastic precedent for his image.

Consideration of the composition of the relief of Ardashir’s investiture at Naqsh-i Rustam (fig. 5) gives even more precise information which must reflect his attitude towards the equality of religion and state. The relief shows a paired composition with Ardashir and Ohrmazd of equal stature facing each other, each mounted on a horse above his respective enemy. The fallen figure beneath Ardashir wears a helmet bearing an insignia identical to that worn by Ardashir’s opponent in the Firuzabad battle relief. He is usually identified as Artabanus V, the strongest Parthian king whom Ardashir overthrew.

The enemy below Ohrmazd wears a coiffure with two snakes. He is identified as Ahriman, the personification of evil and archetypal enemy of Ohrmazd.

Church and State in the Reign of Ardashir I

Before turning to an interpretation of this relief, it will be instructive to consider further evidence for the pairing of church and state in the reign of Ardashir. This evidence derives from a coin reverse type issued during his rule (fig. 6). The central motif is a composite image which has been identified as the royal throne superim-

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39 Ghirshman 1962, fig. 70.
posed over a fire altar. Five flames rise from above the throne.\(^{41}\) The form of this throne, with lion-paw legs and knobs that resemble lathe decoration, is similar to that shown consistently in the carved rock reliefs of Achaemenid kings on the cliffs at Naqsh-i Rustam across the plain from Persepolis (fig. 7). With its earlier Elamite relief and Achaemenid tombs, this site was obviously venerated for many centuries before Ardashir had his own relief carved there. The fire altar on Ardashir's coins also corresponds in form to that on the Achaemenid reliefs at Naqsh-i Rustam. It is seen to consist of a stepped plinth, a pillar, and a graduated platform. Whether the images of throne and fire altar indicate a conscious emulation on the part of Ardashir can only be speculated. Of particular note, however, is their unusual combination—superposition—on his coins. As symbols of church and state, this arrangement verily illustrates passages referring to the "paired twins" of church and state, especially for example, "le foi ne peut se soutenir sans le trône royal, ni la royauté subsister sans la foi. Ce sont deux fondations entrelacées et qui presentent combinées à notre esprit."\(^{42}\) This symbiotic relationship is also mentioned in the Letter of Tansar: "For church and state were born of one womb, joined together",\(^{43}\) as well as in numerous Arabic sources recording Ardashir's advice to his son as he acceded to the throne: "Sache, o mon fils que la religion et la royauté sont deux frères, qui ne peuvent exister l'une sans l'autre. Car la religion est le fondement, et la royauté est la protectrice."\(^{44}\) In each of these instances, however, the passages quoted are fairly consistently cited as not being authentic for the reign of Ardashir, nor are they considered consistent with his acts as first king of the Sasanian dynasty.\(^{45}\) Many scholars today, following Christensen and Frye, discount these later sources for their relevance to Ardashir, particularly with reference to his pairing of church and state.

Contemporary visual evidence from the third century, in the form of rock reliefs and coins, however, clearly supports these statements although denied by Christensen and Frye. That the relationship of paired twins, church and state, had been secured by Khosro I (or perhaps even by the time of Kavad) whorestablished the orthodoxy introduced by Shapur II, is not here questioned. But the evidence presented here tends to confirm late Sasanian and post-Sasanian sources that attribute the restoration of the Zoroastrian faith and the pairing of church and state to first king of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardashir.

Ardashir's investiture relief at Naqshi-i Rustam (fig. 5) may now be viewed from another perspective, which offers further information regarding the political and

\(^{41}\) The reappearance of this imagery in religious contexts in the reign of Shapur II is discussed by Mochiri 1989.

\(^{42}\) trans. of Shahname by Christensen 1936, p. 92.

\(^{43}\) Boyce 1968b, p. 33.

\(^{44}\) Christensen 1936, p. 92, quoting 'Uyunu'l Akhbar d'Ibn Qutaiba; similarly in Mas'udi, p. 162, cited by Christensen 1936, also in the introduction to the Karnamak, p. xxvii.

\(^{45}\) Christensen and Frye 1956.
Piety and Power in Early Sasanian Art

religious ideals purported by Ardashir. The interpretation of subject matter and content in this relief, in combination with its paired composition, may go beyond simply the pairing of church and state to an expression of the Zoroastrian ideal of Rehabilitation, the supremacy of good and the devastation of evil. In the Denkart, Ohrmazd is described as being unable to change the nature of evil, but he can annihilate evil by rendering Ahriman powerless. It is this point which likely confirms the identification of Ahriman in the relief. The absolute powerlessness of Ahriman is likened to a human body at death. Furthermore, in the Denkart, it is stated that what the Destructive spirit fears most is “the coming together in full force of the dignities (khwarr) of kingship and the Good Religion in one person, because such a conjunction must destroy him.” Is this not exactly what Ardashir is claiming in his cogent relief? To follow further the Denkart, his relief illustrates the weakening of vice and the increase of virtue as a result of the investiture of a good ruler who is also a pious person: “When these two dignities meet in one man, then will the Aggressor be completely vanquished and creation saved and purged. From this the final Rehabilitation proceeds.”

Rehabilitation is clearly intended, illustrated by the balance and composition of this investiture scene. This relief of the investiture of Ardashir at Naqsh-i Rustam is likely the latest in his series of reliefs, and is one which seems to illustrate a fully developed iconographic program. Here we may see the potential value of art as contemporary and primary visual source material that may contradict, or contribute to what we otherwise think we know or don’t know from historical or literary sources.

In the absence of contemporary written evidence by which to establish the early Sasanian view of Zoroastrianism in the third century, we may turn to the visual evidence as a source from which to learn. By looking at Ardashir’s art, two important points emerge. First, Ardashir’s royal imagery, at least in these instances, expressed the ideals of kingship. Secondly, both his political and religious imagery seem to be conscientiously selected to express the foundations of a new, consciously Iranian dynasty, one carefully carved and constructed out of his illustrious past dating back to the time before the conquests of Alexander when Iran became subject to the imposition of foreign rule.

We may conclude that Ardashir must be recognized and credited with initial attempts to establish parity between the Sasanian church and state. Whether he actu-

46 Ahriman’s end, based on the Bundahishn is discussed in Zaehner 1976, pp. 143-144.
47 Discussed in Zaehner 1976, pp. 143-144. The pertinent passage is also translated in Boyce 1984, pp. 52-53.
48 Translated by Zaehner 1976, pp. 95-96.
49 Zaehner 1976, p. 96. Curiously, the cover of the paperback edition illustrates this relief but it is incorrectly identified as “A Sasanian carving on a rock panel at Persepolis (sic) showing Shapur (sic) being invested as king by Ohrmazd.”
ally succeeded is not evident either in his reliefs or his coins, but that he held these ideals can hardly be questioned in view of the images on his coins and royal monuments.

But a reading of this art, while not requiring a literal linguistic translation, does require, nonetheless, readiness on the part of the viewer to interpret visually and respond on more than merely a visual level. And it fits within the larger context of royal imagery and an iconography of rulership within the visual arts of Iran.

Several other aspects of this imagery are pertinent to a cursory inquiry into its nature and meaning both for those for whom it was made, and for us, who are now inquiring. For us, the outsiders, royal imagery presents the royal image, but it is a unique form of documentation. First, it is the expression of an ideal, not of a reality. Secondly, it expresses a contemporary ideal, spatially and temporally defined and therefore it has in a sense its own reality. In this sense it is presentational rather than representational. Thirdly, it may serve as a visual primary source, in light of the first two considerations. Finally, and perhaps most important, it seems to provoke response. In this sense, it serves as reification of royalty: it is the royal image, not merely a representation of it.

Conclusion: Royal Imagery and Religion

Taking as our point of departure the royal imagery of early Sasanian Iran, one may look perhaps more broadly at royal imagery on a global scale. Looking at royal imagery now through the prism of religion, it takes on a different aspect. For surely we can see that royal imagery has served many purposes: it no doubt represents (represents) kingship itself. This is probably true within any culture in which kingship serves to organize, manage, direct, and lead the population politically, socially, and economically. Its iconography is an iconography of rulership: that practiced by Augustus Caesar and Louis XIV (Sun King). We may see today the similar use of iconography to reify a ruler in the leadership of Saddam Hussein. Though not a king, his rebuilding of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar as his own and appropriating the symbolism of Babylon and ancient Mesopotamia for modern Iraq utilize in a related manner the power of images.50

Through visual means of re-presentation, the image of the king may express legitimacy, declare dynastic claims to the past, proclaim authority, build cultural self-esteem (nationalist feelings and ethnicity by today’s definitions), publicize and propagandize dynastic triumphs, reify rulership. And here, now, we may see royal imagery playing yet another role upon the stage of life – decrying the forces of evil and promoting eternal good rule according to Zoroastrian notions of kingship.

50 Baram 1991; see again, Freedberg 1989.
Royalty in the Service of Religion

There is another aspect that we as foreigners (I think here, especially Westerners) — outsiders to the tradition — must not neglect. That is that royal art itself is powerful, given its intended audience. For royal imagery and the iconography of rulership in the art of Iran, art itself does not merely embody power, but art itself has power.

Art has power. Art is power. Art entreats the viewer in its contemporary context in a way that we are coming to realize changes over time – the impact of art changes over time. Art may perpetrate ideas; art conveys ideas. It could be used in so many ways either as a tool of insurrection to counter the establishment, or as a tool of control to reinforce the establishment or to establish a new establishment.

Looking at early Sasanian art as outsiders, we are not the audience for whom this art was intended. And its meaning may not have transcended the temporal and spatial changes of cultural dominion. This new interpretation seeks to view Ardashir’s monuments as identifying his aspirations regarding equality of royalty and religion, promoting as a unified force the notions of a just and pious ruler, which must have served as a point of embarkation for the first monarch of the Sasanian dynasty.

Thus, from an external vantage point, we may find an internal view of piety and power in early Sasanian art, enabling us to see these monuments of royal imagery in their original context, the intended one. In the process, we may better understand the intentional meaning of this art which promoted religious ideals in the attempt to advance political goals.

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fig. 1 Triumph of Shapur I, Naqsh-i Rustam, Iran. Photo by Carol Bier and Lionel Bier, 1975.
fig. 2 detail of above
fig. 4 Triumph of Shapur I, Bishapur, Iran. Photo by Carol Bier and Lionel Bier, 1975.
fig. 5 Investiture of Ardashir, Naqsh-i Rustam, Iran. Photo by Carol Bier and Lionel Bier, 1975.


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fig. 7 Achaemenid tomb relief, Naqsh-i Rustam, Iran. Photo by Carol Bier and Lionel Bier, 1975.