

## How did Kartir become Kartir?

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### Abstract

The empowerment of Zoroastrian Magi as a social class was intertwined with the emperors' power to the extent that the political power of Magi can be regarded as a discontinued historical process with ups and downs. This paper attempts to reassess an apparent contrast between historical narratives and archeological findings (e.g. rock reliefs) concerning the political empowerment of Zoroastrian Magi in the beginning of Sassanid Empire until the reign of Narseh. According to the historical narratives, the Sassanid founding fathers, Ardashir and his Successor Shapur I, emphasized ecumenism (i.e. the possession of political sovereignty and religious power by emperor.) However, according to the rock reliefs of the 3rd century, shortly after Shapur I, with the rise of Bahram I, a structural split occurred between the emperor's power as the sovereign and the power of Magi. Bahram I's reign is the first historical period in which Zoroastrian Magi, represented as a social class, obtained a political superiority. Roughly speaking, in this epoch which spanned for almost two decades (the reign of Bahram I, Bahram II, and Bahram III,) one institutionalized reading of Zoroastrianism developed by an elite Magi, i.e. "Kartir", became dominant over others and turned steadily into the Imperial religion. The above contrast can be formulated, as follows: given the fact that an ecumenical power is the ultimate form of sovereignty in a monarch system, why and how a Kartir could gain authoritatively a significant share of power? Through adopting an historical approach, the authors pursue the roots of answer in three related political phenomena: First, the quarrel between Bahram I and Narseh; second, the trial and the execution of Mani the prophet; and third, the institutionalization of Zoroastrianism as the Imperial religion.

**Keywords:** Zoroastrian Clergy; Ecumenism; Kartir; Bahram I; Narseh; Bahram II; Bahram III.

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## **Introduction**

The social class arrangement of the Sassanid era can be illustrated relying on royal inscriptions of the third century AD, Pahlavi texts, Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, and the late Persian texts, some of which are based on the very same Pahlavi writings (Shaki, 2013:654). Ardashir Pabagan, the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, terminated the relative freedoms that had been created for poor classes, especially peasants, after Alexander's invasion and tried to "halt social changes as much as possible. In his will, Ardashir warns his successors to prevent from changing the class status from their current rank to another, because the transition of people from their ranks accelerates the transition of power within the kingdom, from one emperor to another, be it through dethronement or killing" (Ravandi, 2536: 624/1; Mahmoud Abadi, 1999: 218-219).

Based on an ancient social classification, Avesta has divided the Iranian society into three classes: the clergy (Athraivan), the warrior (Rathaeshtar), and peasant (Vastroyofshuyant). There is only one section in the Avesta (Yasna 19<sup>th</sup>, paragraph 17), which mentions a fourth category, called the class of artisans (Hoapati). With the advent of the Sassanid Empire, a new formation emerged in the society such that a distinct class called "the Secretary" was created, and resultantly, the peasants and artisans merged into the fourth class. This classification was influenced by the political situation of that time (Rajabi, 2003: 432/5; Mahmoud Abadi, 1999: 219).

Given the inconsistency between the historical narratives and the archaeological evidence concerning the position of the clergy class at the beginning of the Sassanid Empire, we initially intend to have a glance at some inscriptions of the third century AD

and then review some of the historical narratives. Through a comparative study of historical texts and archaeological evidence, the authors seek to realize the emergence of the class of clergy during Sassanid.

## **Literature Review**

So far, many scholars have addressed the issue of the clerical class during the Sassanid era as well as the character of Kartir, the details of all are not possible in the present article. However, from among them, the insightful writings of famous authors such as Hinz, Gignoux, Boyce, Rajabi, Tafazzoli, Shahbazi, Malekzadeh, and Daryaei can be mentioned. These scholars have investigated some aspects of Kartir's persona and his political role based on the inscriptions of Kartir and the historical texts. Notwithstanding, none of them has discovered the hidden secret behind the sudden rise of Kartir in terms of a "historical approach" as intended in the present research.

## **The Status of the Clergy in the Early Sassanid Era based on Inscriptions**

There is a social class division in the early Sassanid, a legacy of the Parthian time. Shapur I in Haji-Abad inscription describes the quality of his archery in the presence of Shahrदारān, Vispohrān, Wozorgān and Azadān. Although this inscription guides us in recognizing the privileged classes, it is hard to draw any definite relationship between this rock relief and the quad partite hierarchical structure of the society (clergy, warrior, secretary, and peasant-artisan) in Shapur I's reign (Abolghasemi, 1996: 133/1; Mahmoud Abadi, 1999: 220). A noteworthy point in the list of Haji-Abad inscription is the absence of the title of Mobadan-e Mobad,

as the leaders of the clerical organization. This is in collision with the conventional quadruple division of the society that puts the clergy at the top. Therefore, in line with some researchers (Sarfaraz and Firuzmandi, 2002: 251) it seems justified to believe that in the beginning of the Sassanid period religious affairs were headed by the king of the kings (Shâhanshâh), the emperor himself.

Narseh, the son of Shapur I, also followed the hierarchy of ranks mentioned in Haji-Abad inscription in Paikuli rock relief. In the Greek version of this inscription, Shahrदारân are the very same local kings (selected from among the sons of the king of the kings), relying on whose presence, the title of Shâhanshâh had been emerged. According to the Greek text, Vaspohrgân are members of the Sassanid dynasty, without being directly linked to Shâhanshâh. Wozorgân, are the leaders of the most important royal families and finally, Azadân, are the other grandees and the nobility (Rajabi, 2003: 424/5). However, it should be mentioned that according to other scholars (Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 11), Paikuli inscription has been written only in two versions, i.e. Sassanid middle Persian and the Parthian language.

According to some historical narratives, throughout the reign of Ardashir, he was the trustee of Estakhr's fire temple and bore the title of "Emperor-Magi" (Wieschöfer 1987:371-374). At the time of his successor, Shapur I, there is also no reference to any religious title in Ka'ba-ye Zartosht relief. We encounter the name of Kartir with the title "Hirbad" in Ka'ba-ye Zartosht only as the 51<sup>st</sup> title among the Shapur I courtiers' names (Nasrollahzadeh,2005:161-162). It is worth noticing that not only in Shapur's inscription in Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, but also in Narseh's inscription in Paikuli, the list of the titles are hierarchical, initiating with the name of

kings, then the names of the royal family, and continuing with the most notable nobility and officers (Khorashadi et al, 2017). These archeological evidence indicate two things: first, in the beginning of Sassanid Empire, Zoroastrianism had not been institutionalized; and second, throughout the reigns of Ardashir, Shapur I, and Narseh, the Warrior class was superior to the supposed class of Clergy.

### **The Status of the Clergy in the Sassanid Era based on Historical Texts**

Investigating the sequence of classes and the list of titles in texts such as Kar-Namag i Ardashiri Pabagan (Kar-Namag i Ardashiri Pabagan, 1963: 199-200), the Letter of Tansar (The Letter of Tansar, 1975: 57), Ahd -e Ardashir (Abbas, 1969: 78), Arda Viraf-Namag (Gignoux, 1993: 58-59), Sur Afarin (Daryaei, 2004: 56), Tarikh al-Yaqubi(Yaqubi, 1983: 219-220/1), Murujal-dhahab (Masudi, 1965: 239-241/1), Al-Tanbih-al-Eshraf (Masudi, 1986: 97), Tarikh al-Tha'alibi (Tha'alibiNishaburi, 1989: 305-306), Tajarib al-Umam (Ibn Miskawayh Razi, 1990: 120), Al-Taj (Al-Jahiz, 1964: 67), and comparing them with the survived inscriptions, we can find contradictory information. Contrary to the historical narratives, claiming the existence of a stable social class in the quadruple social classification ("the clergy, warrior, secretary, and peasant-artisan",) not only this sequence does not apply to the early period of the Sassanid society, but also there is doubt about the claimed social stability. The reason is that ascribing titles and positions anachronistically to early periods of the Sassanid Empire distorts the authenticity of some narratives and completely rules out the attribution of those lists to the early Sassanid period. In fact, while assessing the texts and

comparing them to the archaeological evidence, we come to realize that the sequence of classes varied in different ways from one time to another in accordance with the ruling policies of the emperors.

### **The Emergence of “Mobad-e Mobadan”**

In some narratives, it is argued that the emergence of “Mobad-e Mobadan” title dates back to the time of Ardashir I when he appointed a person called Mahrād as “Mobad-e Mobadan” (Christensen, 1989: 177); however, while describing the events at the time of Ardashir, Bal’ami mentions a person called Haman who was appointed as “Mobad-e Mobadan” by Ardashir (Bal’ami, 1998: 84). Referring to the oldest appearance of the title of Mobad-e Mobadan in Syriac sources in 358 AD, Daryaie states that “Adurbad-i Mahrspandan”, the famous clergy at the time of Shapur II, was probably the first Mobad who could receive such a title (Daryaie, 2003: 83). Contrasting with Daryaie, Shapur Shahbazi believes that, although the first reference to the mentioned title is at the time of Shahpur II, it does not necessarily indicate that the title Mobad-e Mobadan had not existed in the beginning of the Sassanid era. Rather, it merely suggests that the title was not observed in contemporary Sassanian documents until the time of Shapur II (Shapur Shahbazi, 2014: 249- 250). As we will expand it in the next sections, contrary to what Shapur Shahbazi argues, we think that if Mobad-e Mobadan were an existing title since the beginning of the Sassanid era, it would have emerged at least throughout Kartir’s empowerment, a period which coincided with the institutionalization of Zoroastrianism as the imperial religion. However, although Kartir gradually became the absolute religious authority of the Empire, there is no self-

identification in Kartir’s inscriptions as Mobad-e Mobadan.

The question arising here is that if Kartir did not hold the so-called title of Mobad-e Mobadan, then to whom this pompous title might have belonged? In other words, even if we agree with Shapur Shahbazi that Mobad-e Mobadan was an existing title in the time of Kartir, then given the ambitious character of Kartir— as represented in his inscriptions— it would be unlikely that he has does not self-identify himself as Mobad-e Mobadan, i.e. the head of the clergy.

There are some hypotheses regarding the absence of the title of Mobad in the inscriptions of the third century. The first one is based on the principle that the rank and the dignity of Mobads in the early Sassanid period (at the time of Ardashir and Shapur I) had not reached a point that they could be placed among the intimates and special relatives of the emperor. The second hypothesis suggests that the absence of the title of Mobad is because of the absence of the mentioned title at that time. According to the third hypothesis, at that time it was customary to set up fireworks or sacrifice in honor of the spirit of Zoroastrian Mobads (Gignoux, 1982: 260-262). The authors point out that the title of Mobad is not absent from all inscriptions of the third century; however, the questionable point is about the ones in which the title of Mobadan -e Mobad appeared.

The Letter of Tansar is one that provides worthwhile knowledge of Iran in the early mid-centuries. Tansar is a pseudonym referred to “a wise Iranian and great Mobad of Ardashir -e Pabagan”. According to some scholars, probably Abarsam, one of the grandees at the time of Ardashir I (224-250 AD), has been the very same Tansar, the famous Zoroastrian cleric (Daryaie, 2003:

82). However, this hypothesis has been completely rejected (Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 44 -45). Others have also considered Kartir and Tansar to be the same (Pigulevskaia, 1998: 169; Herzfeld, 1975: 166; Sprengling, 1953: 214-215); but Mary Boyce's detailed argument— that are too long to be included in the present paper— clearly reject this view (Boyce, 1968: 10-11). Now, we intend to see who Kartir has been by studying the historical texts and the existing archaeological evidence.

### **Who was Kartir?**

According to the historical narratives, the clergy were the allies of the Sassanian dynasty and got involved in politics since the advent of the Sassanid Empire (Ibn Miskawayh, 1990: 116). According to Schippmann, this involvement was to such an extent that, alongside the centralization of power, one can identify the "governmental religion" (def. an institutionalized reading of religion dictated by the governing system) as two initial tendencies in the Sassanid Empire. (Schippmann, 2005: 88). Since the relationship between religion and sovereignty fluctuated in different periods of the Sassanid history, for the reasons we will explain in details, we disagree with Schippmann. We think that one cannot easily argue that a governmental religion has existed since the early days of the Sassanid dynasty. The emergence and the relationship between the governmental religion and the "official religion" (def. a religion with the most believers) fluctuated significantly in accordance with the politics of the day.

Among the wills of Ardashir are the statements that he had made while appointing his son as the next emperor, "O' my heir! Know that the religion and the kingship are counterparts, so none of them

can exist independently. Religion is the basis of emperorship and the emperor is the guardian of religion. Whatever that lacks either a foundation or a guardian will eventually perish" (Shoushtari, 1971: 67; Mohammadi, 1995: 70; Masudi, 1986: 242-243). According to Gignoux, this narrative, and other similar ones in the beginning of the Sassanid Empire, expresses Ecumenism which is the ideal relationship between religion and emperorship (Gignoux, 1984: 72-73).

Since not all of Ardashir's problems were resolved through adopting religious prejudice and prioritizing one religion to others, his successor, Shapur I, adopted a moderate religious policy. While following Ardashir's about supporting Zoroastrianism, Shapur I felt that his supports should not lead the clergy to interfere in sovereign affairs; for this reason, although Shapur I was supporting Kartir, he also advocated the great adversary of the fire temple, namely Mani (Zarrinkoub, 1998: 424-425).

One of the most surprising Iranian figures in the third century was the Great Magi, Kartir. In his rock relief in Naqsh-e Rujab, Kartir mentions that he received religious titles one after another from emperors: "Emperor Shapur called Kartir "Magupet (=Mobad)" and "Hirbad (the fire temple custodian)". Emperors Hormizd and Bahram I, [the children] of Shapur, called Kartir "the Mobad of Ahura Mazda". Bahram Shâh [son of] Bahram I called Kartir "the guardian of Bahram's psyche and the Mobad of Ahur Mazda" (Frye, 1979: 193). It is worth mentioning that, given the fact that Kartir's name and his initial title as "Hirbad" is ranked only as the 51st in Shapur's list of the courtiers on Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, Kartir's self-descriptive inscription is not devoided of exaggeration (Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 162).

This implies that Kartir did not have a considerably important position at the time of Ardashir either; rather, he was appointed as the head of the clergy association during the reign of Shapur I (Mahmoud Abadi, 1999: 224; Hinz, 2006: 251). The curious point is that, while enumerating the courtiers of his father, Shapur I does not specify any religious titles in Ka'ba-ye Zartosht inscription.

At the time of Hormizd Ardashir, Kartir was promoted to the rank of Hormizd Mobad (the Great Magi of Ahura Mazda) (Duchesne-Guillemin, 1996: 337). Shâhanshâh (the Emperor) granted him a cap and a waistband, and thereby Kartir was placed among the nobles. In fact, it is the time that we first come across the title of Mobad, meaning the great Magi (Magu) (Hinz, 2006: 251).

#### **Kartir on Threshold of Ascension**

The ruling period of Bahram I, which coincided with the prosecution and execution of Mani, can be regarded as the beginning of Kartir's political empowerment (Ibid: 251). During that period, Kartir succeeded in convincing the emperor to facilitate the trial and the execution of Mani who was the most prominent rival to Kartir (Boyce, 1975: 44). The death of Mani paved the way for the emergence of an institutionalized Zoroastrianism. Kartir introduced a specific interpretation of the official religion, Zoroastrianism and represented it, to use Kartir's terminology, as the "imperial religion" (Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 165). We strongly believe that within Kartir's articulation of this issue, there exist a nuanced difference between the "official religion" and "imperial religion" that has been dismissed in the available scholarly interpretations of the historical narratives.

To cash out this scholarly shortcoming, we shall explain the relationship between the emperors, religion, and politics in greater details. In this regard, according to the historical narratives, Bahram seemingly rose to the throne with the help of Kartir. Until that period, ecumenical emperors such as Ardashir Pabagan and Shapur I personally determined their successors. In fact, they established their sovereignty so strongly that the nobility, courtiers, and the high-rank Zoroastrian clergy could not dare to interfere in the election of the crown prince (Christensen, 1987: 355, 360). What is astonishing to us is the sudden policy change of the royal family toward the clergy after the mentioned ecumenical emperors.

Shapur I was among the main supporters of Prophet Mani and allowed him to carry out his so-called universal religious mission. In response, Mani translated an excerpt of his teachings to the middle Persian for Shapur I and entitled it "Shâpuragân" (Boyce, 2007: 142; Tafazzoli, 1991: 301). Mani was allowed also to continue his religious activities freely during the reign of Hormizd I (Daryaei, 2013: 50; Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 210). But why did Mani suddenly fall? Why was he considered a threat to the Sassanid Empire? Why did Kartir suddenly obtain power and how could he participate in electing the kings and Shâhanshâh (the emperor)? How could Kartir get the approval of Bahram I, Shâhanshâh, for the trial and execution of Mani?

According to the historical narratives, electing the successor of Shâhanshâh, witnessing his oath, bestowing the crown on him, interrogating him (if necessary), and even dethroning him were among the prominent duties of the clergy. In fact, electing the successor of Shâhanshâh was determined throughout the power struggle

among princes, Mazdayasna clergymen, and the nobility (Christensen, 1989: 150, 359-361). Occasionally, the clergy could trump others. According to Denkard, after Shâhanshâh, Mobadan -e Mobad was the wisest of human beings and even had the right to investigate Shâhanshâh (Sami, 1965: 51-52; Mahmoud Abadi, 1999: 254).

It is clear that the turning point for the power of the clergy dates back to Bahram I because prior to him, during the reign of Ardashir and Shapur I, shâhanshâh was single handedly the religious and the political authority who could autonomously determine his successor. This type of authority, ecumenism, which seems to be unique to Ardashir and Shapur I, was supported by the numismatic findings, according to which, at the end of Ardashir's reign, he was co-ruling over the Empire with Price Shapur I (Daryaei, 2013: 39; Malekzadeh Bayani, 1972: 10; Alram, 1986: 186-189; Göbl, 1971: 42.L). Furthermore, based on the same numismatic evidence, we can see that Hormizd Ardashir was chosen as the ruler of Armenia and the crown prince by Shapur I (Khorashadi and Vahdati Nasab, 2014: 213-214). So there is no doubt that the ecumenical emperors like Ardashir and Shapur I have had the ultimate authority in choosing their successors.

It seems that Bahram I was apparently the first Shâhanshâh to rise to throne through the external force of the clergy (in our case, Kartir). Bahram I's reign coincided with the political empowerment of Kartir. This supposed coincidence is highly worth contemplating. Why did Bahram I's reign coincide with the political empowerment of Kartir?

According to the customary law of the Sasanians, the right to rule belonged to the "first born child" of Shâhanshâh (Shapur

Shahbazi, 1993: 430-431). However, Shapur I decided to choose his third son Hormizd Ardashir (or Hormizd), as his crown prince (Shayegan, 2005: 462; Chaumont, 1968: 82). After Hormizd Ardashir, and according to the principle of the "first born child", the eldest son of Shapur I (i.e. Bahram Gilan-Shâh known as Bahram I) must have become Shâhanshâh. Although Bahram I became Shâhanshâh, he could not rise to the throne without the help of Mobad Kartir. Here, there seems to be an underestimated relationship between Bahram I's rise to power, Kartir's empowerment, and the execution of Mani who started to being seen as a threat to Empire.

Based on the inscriptional evidence, Narseh, the sixth Sassanid king, the youngest son of Shapur I and the youngest brother of Bahram I (Henning, 1954: 419; Rajabi, 2003: 5/149; Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 192), considered three Bahrams (Bahram I, II, and III) as the usurpers of throne. Instead, he thought of himself as the righteous successor of his brother, Hormizd I (Khorashadi and Vahdati Nasab, 2014: 245). Prior to the reign of Bahram I, the Sassanid Shâhanshâh used to choose his successor. However, in order to overcome his rival brother, Narseh, Bahram I needed Kartir's support. It seems that this was the only way through which Bahram I could achieve the crown and overcome his younger brother, Narseh. This issue suggests that the young brother, Narseh, must have had a vitally important advantage over his elder brother, Bahram. This hypothetical advantage was such strong that it compelled his elder brother to appeal to Kartir's support. We will describe this hypothetical situation in details soon.

### **Kartir at the Summit of Authority**

Like his father, Bahram II could also rise to the throne relying on the Kartir's political authority (Duchesne-Guillemin, 1998: 309/3). In the reign of Bahram II, Kartir was honored with the title "Bakhtavan -e Varhran" (Boyce, 2007: 144-145). Moreover, he was also entrusted with the ancestral task of the Sassanid dynasty, i.e. guarding the Anahid Temple. Eventually, he received the title of "Hamshahr Magibad and Davar" from Bahram II, meaning that, in addition to his unlimited religious power, he was allowed to hold the highest judicial authority (Hinz, 2006: 255). It is believed that the idea of having a unique religious and political authority was re-actualized during the reign of Bahram II (Lukonin, 2005: 380). Therefore, the basis of the Zoroastrian religion was strengthened and non-Zoroastrian religions were prosecuted under the command of Kartir (Tafazli, 1991: 303; Shapur Shahbazi, 1988: 516). However, we believe that although there was a link between religious and the political authorities during the time of Bahram II, it was drastically different than the early times of the Sassanid Empire. In contrast with the early time of the Sassanid Empire, throughout which religion and political power were in the hands of the ecumenical emperor, in the reign of Bahram II religion and politics were monopolized respectively by the clergy class and Artēštāran (Arteshtaran). In this period, one of the seminal deeds of Kartir's was the institutionalization of Zoroastrianism as the only legitimate religion of Empire.

Among the characteristics of an imperial religion is the presence of the clergy as the only source of hermeneutical authority, the existence of religious extremism, and religious discrimination. However, an

"official religion" is characterized by features such as religious tolerance and the lack of hermeneutical authoritativeness. Accordingly, an imperial religion, unlike the official one, is monopolistic, seeking an ideological unity rather than a socio-cultural integration among different lands and territories (Nouri, 2015). Based on such an institutionalization, as we can see it in Kartir's inscriptions, he started purging other religions (such as Christianity, Manichaeism, and Judaism,) founding new fire temples, and disposing of the heterodox Mobadan and religious reformers (Akbarzadeh, 2006: 17; Tafazzoli, 1991: 303). According to the rock reliefs of Bahram II, we can also see the presence of the clergy at the highest level of power structure (Khorashadi, 2010: 256-262). We think that the ruling period of Bahram II was a turning point for Zoroastrianism to become the imperial religion whereas, prior to this time, the Zoroastrian religion was officially accepted in the Sassanid community. This difference also explains partially why Shapur I and Hormizd I were not hostile to the heterodox clergy such as Mani. Moreover, we believe that such a difference also explains why in none of the inscriptional evidence and rock reliefs prior to the reign of Bahram II, there is no trace of the clergy at the top of the power structure.

According to Kartir's inscription, he had become very wealthy during the reign of Bahram II since he claimed he has established many of Bahram II's fire temples with his own money, and arranged several worshipping ceremonies annually (Boyce, 2007: 145). Concerning his highly arrogant title "Bakhtavan Varhran Ormuzd Mobad", scholars offered various interpretations. According to MacKenzie, Back, and Chaumont, this phrase implies that Kartir had saved the spirit of Bahram and caused his



salvation. (Mackenzie, 1989: 63; Back 1978: 203; Chaumont, 1960: 347, 357). Henning believes that this phrase refers to the deceased Bahram (Henning, 1954: 40-45), while both Gignoux and Brunner (Gignoux, 1991: 113; Brunner, 1974: 98) translated it as "the forgiven Bahram". Grenet has also interpreted this phrase as follows: "Kartir, the Mobad of the deceased Bahram I, and the Mobad of Ormuzd" (Grenet, 1990: 91). It is worth noting that some of these scholars have identified "*Bahram*" specified in the inscription as Bahram I and argued that this title had been granted to Kartir by Bahram II because he helped him execute Mani. In fact, all these interpretations assume the power of Kartir, his contribution to killing Mani, and saving the spirit of Bahram I from the so-called Manist heresy (Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 167). However, we believe that the contradictions in these narratives are quite clear. It is not clear in these narratives if Bahram killed Mani in order to please the Magi or if Kartir sought to save the spirit of Bahram from, as it were, Manist infidelity? Why did Bahram seek to gain the satisfaction and gratification of the Magi, and particularly Kartir?

Interpreting the highly arrogant title "Kartir Bakhtravan Varhran Ormuzd Mobad", Huyse suggests that the phrase should be known as "Kartir whose psyche has been saved by Bahram." According to Huyse's construal the word *Bahram* does not refer to Shâhanshâh, rather it stands for the Iranian deity of victory, Bahram. The name of Bahram as a deity is repeatedly pointed in his inscriptions while Kartir was discussing the establishment of Bahram's fires temples (Huyse, 1998: 118). According to Nasrollahzadeh, this interpretation is the most explanatory view since the attribution of the title "savior of the kings' psyches" to

Kartir explains Kartir's ambition (Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 167).

We believe however that, compared to the rock relief of Bahram II in Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 1), Kartir's self-description is not too ambitious. Kartir was the only person who did not belong to the royal family but left some inscriptions behind (Boyce, 2007: 139). Indeed, his inscriptions outnumber all the Sassanid kings (Tafazzoli, 1991: 302; Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 175-176). Kartir's inscription in Naqsh-e Rostam is strange due to one more phenomenon; namely, it does not follow the Sassanid iconographic tradition. According to the Sassanid iconographic tradition, after the image of Shâhanshâh as the central character, there were kings, royal family members, and then courtiers in order. This is represented in, for instance, Ka'aba-ye Zartosht. However, in the rock relief of Bahram II at Naqsh-e Rostam, Kartir is unconventionally depicted prior to the royal family and the great King of Armenia. On the one hand, Kartir has raised his hand as a sign of respect and servitude to the superior descendants of the royal family, and on the other hand, he has been depicted prior to royal family. Kartir's positionality in this rock relief is not justifiable even though he had an outstanding political role in the court of Bahram II. The most prominent state authorities were also positioned after the kings according to the sequence rule of people's status in relation to the position of Shâhanshâh. The sequence of officials in the list of the courtiers in Shapur inscriptions on Ka'aba-ye Zartosht confirms our argument.

What seemed puzzling to many scholars was that, despite the fact that he left several memorial rock reliefs behind, Bahram II did not follow his predecessors in displaying his coronation ceremony. Although Lukonin (Lukonin, 2005: 317) and Hinz (Hinz, 2006:

296) think that the Barm-e Delak rock relief is a symbolic illustration of Bahram II's coronation featuring Shâhanshâh and Kartir praying on the sides of the hearths (Fig. 2), why do we not see any anthropomorphic deities on this scene? In the coronation ceremony rock reliefs of emperors before and after Bahram II, there are anthropomorphic deities whose presence legitimized the coronation symbolically. Due to the lack of anthropomorphic deities in Bahram II coronation rock relief, we think that a critical religious-political change must have happened in the structure of power in the reign of Bahram II. As noted earlier, institutionalizing the official religion (Zoroastrianism) and turning it to the imperial religion was carried out at Bahram II's reign. How did this change affect the coronation ceremony? Finding an appropriate answer to this question requires revisiting some of the pillars of the religious-political thought in the Sassanid era.

Relying on some seminal texts such as Avesta, Ahd-e Ardashir, Kar-Namag i Ardashiri Pabagan, *The Letter of Tansar, Kalila and Demna*, and *Khwaday-Namag*, as well as the inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings, some scholars enumerated five pillars for the foundations of the religious-political thought in the Sassanid era, thus: 1. A king with Khvarenah (Farah Izadi) who was divinely chosen by Ormuzd 2. The will of Ormuzd 3. Royal lineage 4. Asha (cosmic, political, and social order) 5. Ecumenism (i.e. the unity of religious and political authority) (Zamani and Tavousi, 2004: 49). Therefore, according to this articulation, any sovereign with Khvarenah (Farah Izadi) is someone who is chosen by Ahura Mazda. Such a person should have belonged to the royal lineage and possessed an ecumenical power. Such a person, and his family, thereby should

have always been in charge of religion and sovereignty. In response, the chosen person should strictly adhere to Asha, the cosmic, political, and social order (Ibid: 54). Considering that one of the conditions for benefitting from the divine glory (Khvarenah) was ecumenical power, we think that the violation of this ecumenism by Bahram II signaled a dramatic change in the political structure. According to the historical texts and archaeological evidence, Ardashir, Shapur I, and most probably, Hormizd had ecumenical power. We think that the advent of Bahram I is the beginning of a collapse of the ecumenical power.. However, his coronation ceremony depicted on Bishapur rocks (Fig. 3), featuring his predecessor Ormuzd, is an indication that the power division took place around the middle or later period of Bahram I's reign. If so, then the rock relief of Bahram II in Barm-e Delak might be considered as a symbolic representation of the full-fledged rupture of ecumenical power and the division of power between Kartir and Bahram II. Indeed, due to the collapse of ecumenism, we believe that Shâhanshâh (Bahram II) was no longer the sole representative of God on earth, and therefore, he was not qualified to receive the crown directly from an anthropomorphic deity in his coronation ceremony as depicted in his rock relief. Rather, he was bestowed the crown by the religious authority, Kartir, the head of Mobad. For this reason, Bahram II, as the "king of the kingdom", and Kartir, as the "king of religion", are praising Ormuzd in this rock relief.

### **Descent of Kartir**

Due to the short reign of Bahram III (Javadi, 2001: 297; Rajabi, 2003:147/5), it is too difficult to investigate the status of Kartir throughout Bahram III's four-month period.

The last time we encounter the name of Kartir, is in Narseh's inscription in Paikuli (Boyce, 2007: 146; Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 168). In the list of people accompanying Narseh in Paikuli, the name of Kartir is seen under the title of Mobad Ormuzd (Frye, 1989: 354; Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 191-192); but because the text of the inscription is severely damaged, one cannot understand how the relationship between the new Shâhanshâh and Kartir was (Schippmann, 2005: 32). The significant minutia in this inscription is the humbly simple title of Kartir.

In contrast with Bahrams, Narseh decreased the power of the clergy. He even issued a permission to revive Mani's forbidden teachings. Moreover, claiming to follow Ardashir's will, Narseh took the custody of the Sassanian dynasty temple from Kartir and gave it back to the emperor, himself (Lukonin, 2005: 194-197; Mehr Abadi, 2003: 810). Recalling the religious-political thought foundation of the Sassanid Empire, it seems that Narseh's intention to restore the ecumenical power (the simultaneous authority of religion and sovereignty) also had an important message: that Bahrams, due to violating ecumenism, should not have possessed the divine glory (Khvarenah) and thereby they were illegitimate rulers. Indeed, by restoring ecumenism, Narseh followed a twofold plan: to acquire the privilege of the divine glory (Khvarenah), and to change the imperial religion (Kartir's institutionalized Zoroastrianism) to an official religion. In fact, by changing the imperial religion to the official one, Narseh sought to realize the political ideal of his grandfather, Ardashir, concerning the unity of the religion and the kingship by Shâhanshâh as the representative of Artēštāran (Arteshtaran) class. The advent

of Narseh coincided with Kartir's decline. If the general policy of the early emperors up until Bahram I was to preserve an ecumenical power (emperor's being the religious-political authority), this policy drastically changed from the reign of Bahram I to that of Narseh through the empowerment of the clergy (i.e. Kartir). However, when Narseh came to power, he restored ecumenism. An important thing to notice is that Kartir's empowerment corresponds with the reigns of Bahrams. In this respect, Bahrams' political deeds should not be interpreted as their real desire to support the clerical system and the institutionalization of religion; rather, in order to seize the crown in the rivalry over the throne, Bahrams were obliged to give a significant political privilege to the clergy (especially to Kartir). This idea becomes more palpable once we revise the extent to which the rising of Bahram I is intertwined with Kartir's empowerment.

As we have previously pointed out, the hereditary law in the Sassanid Empire was based on the "right to rule for the first born child". This means that basically the eldest son of the deceased emperor was the legitimate ruler. Accordingly, the rise of Bahram I to the throne was in accordance with this rule, however, in Paikuli inscription, Narseh calls Bahram I "the illegitimate ruler." After a rivalry with three generations of Bahrams, Narseh rose to the throne and he modified the rock relief displaying Bahram I's coronation through adding an inscription of his own. The severity and intensity of Narseh's reactions to Bahram's legitimacy indicates that he should have had a dismissed right to rule. A right that could trump the hereditary law of the first-born child for rulership (Khorashadi and Vahdati Nasab, 2014: 251- 254).

Unlike Bahram I, who, despite being the eldest son of Shapur I (Hinz, 2006: 190-195), only belonged to the royal family on his paternal side, Bahram I's stepbrother, Narseh, belonged to the royal family on both maternal and paternal sides. Due to belonging to the royal family on both sides, indeed Narseh was superior to Bahram I to rule (Khorashadi and Vahdati Nasab, 2014: 253-254). Because of this issue, Bahram had to gain his legitimacy through bestowing various privileges to the courtiers, nobility, the clergy, and above all, to Kartir. Given that there is no information available on the brief reign of Hormizd I, it is too difficult to realize why Hormizd I's descendants did not inherit the crown and why after Hormizd I's demise, there has been a devastating rivalry among his brothers over the throne. However, Bahram I's rise to power was undeniably problematic at the time. The problem becomes even more acute when we face Kartir's inscriptions. This document includes some peculiar information about the tradition of incestuous marriage which, we think, is directly related to the rivalry between Bahram I and Narseh.

### **The Tradition of Incestuous Marriage According to Kartir**

The main source about Kartir's life is his rock reliefs (Hinz, 2006: 251, 255). Kartir has four seminal inscriptions in Pahlavi script in Naqsh-e Rujab, Ka'ba-ye Zartosht, Sar Mashhad, and Naqsh-e Rostam (Akbarzadeh, 2006: 17-18). In some of the inscriptions (i.e. Sar Mashhad and Ka'ba-ye Zartosht), he mentions that one of his numerous religious achievements was to support the tradition of *xwēdōdah* (def. incestuous marriage) (Boyce, 2007: 141; Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 169). Some scholars argued that what Kartir meant was that he

was the person who allowed marriages between family members at the time of Bahram II. According to these scholars, if incestuous marriage were prevalent before the reign of Bahram II, it would not have been necessary for Kartir to specify it as a seminal deed he made (Fazel, 1999: 112). Some others think that Kartir merely used a "political trick" to make such marriages seem illegal before the reign of Bahram II. In other words, Kartir meant to imply that the offspring of incestuous marriages borne before the reign of Bahram II were illegitimate (Khorashadi and Vahdati Nasab, 1393: 216-217). We believe that, given the fact that the early emperors of the Sassanid dynasty (such as Ardashir and Shapur) have had *xwēdōdah* — a phenomenon which has also been represented in the titles and names of Queens in Shapur I's inscription on Ka'ba-ye Zartosht (Gignoux, 1986: 29; Hinz, 1969: 124, 126; Hinz, 2006: 190) — the latter interpretation seems to be more consistent and explanatory. Once we recall that the early Sassanid emperors (like Ardashir, Shapur I, and probably Hormizd I) were ecumenical rulers, then we can infer that they thought of *xwēdōdah* as a legitimate form of marriage. If so, then it seems absurd to think that Kartir could legitimize something which had already been legitimate in the earlier times. Building on the latter interpretation of Kartir's inscription, we can explain Kartir's political trick in the following way: after the reign of Hormizd I, Narseh was the righteous heir to throne due to his double-sided royal lineage. His father was Shapur I and his mother was Shapur I's own daughter, Adur Anahid (Khorashadi and Vahdati Nasab, 2014: 252). This means that Kartir's goal to propagate the incestuous marriage was a machination by means of which he could

dispose of Narseh, the offspring of Shapur I's incestuous marriage before Bahram II.

What is worth noting in the religious historiography of the Sassanid era is the elimination of the name of a charismatic character like Kartir from the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts. In response to this important question, researchers have suggested various opinions. It is believed that, since Kartir abused Zoroastrianism as a tool to meet his political goals, he was ignored in the Zoroastrian historiography (Tafazzoli, 1991: 304-305). Daryaei and Malekzadeh, based on Kartir's inscriptions, believe that this dismissal is due to Kartir's so-called ascension. According to them, the description of Kartir's ascension to Paradise, Purgatory, and Hell was not in accordance with the Mazdayasnaei ascension orthodoxy and took place through magic. In other words, despite his political influence, the Zoroastrian Mobads purged Kartir from the Sassanid religious historiography because he politicized religion and institutionalized a heterodox Zoroastrianism (Daryaei and Malekzadeh, 2015: 283-287).

### **Conclusion**

Although the clergy class is the most privileged one in the social hierarchy of Avesta, this categorization does not correspond to each period in the Sassanid history. More specifically, this categorization is not applicable to the earliest stage of the Sassanid Empire. The inscriptional evidence of the third century are the most illuminating documents about the social class order, from the time of Ardashir I until the beginning of Narseh's reign. The order of the names, titles, and social classes follow the same pattern in the inscriptions of Shapur I and Narseh. However, throughout the period between Shapur I and Narseh, the survived

inscriptions of Mobad Kartir demonstrate a remarkable alteration in the order of social classes and religious system. Once we compare Kartir's inscriptions to those of Bahram II, the depth of socio-religious changes can become more palpable. Alongside the importance of the content of Kartir's inscriptions, his privileged positionality in the perspectival structure of the rock reliefs of Bahram II (representing him as the top rank courtier) indicates a rupture in the social class structure from the reign of Ardashir I until the reign of Narseh. As we argued, since the establishment of the Sassanid dynasty to the reign of Narseh, we can identify three social class orders and three religious systems: first, the ecumenic age. This age refers to the reigns of Ardashir, Shapur, and Hormizd I, throughout which there is no sign of the clergy as the most privileged social classes. In this period, the religion can be called an "official religion" and the emperor is in charge of both politics and religion. Second, the middle period, coinciding with the reigns of Bahrams (Bahram I, Bahram II and Bahram III). In this period, the clergy become the most privileged social class, the sole authority of religion, and an organization to institutionalize it. This institutionalization turned the official religion to an "imperial religion". Third, the later period which coincides with Narseh's reign. At this stage, Narseh revive the ecumenism of the earliest period.

Given the fact that the early emperors (i.e. Ardashir, Shapur, and perhaps Hormizd I) as "Shâh-Mobad" held an ecumenical power, one wonders why Bahrams, the emperors of the middle period, accepted (or decided) to share their power with the clergy. The answer to this question, we believe, is intertwined with the situation of the royal family after the

death of Hormizd I. A comparative study of the historical narratives, inscriptional evidence, and the rock reliefs suggests that the rise of Bahram I to the throne has been the beginning of a change in the policy of the royal family towards the religious organization. It seems that Bahram I's coronation was impossible without the help of Kartir's. Compared to his younger brother Narseh, who was the righteous heir to the throne, Bahram I did not have the legitimacy to rule. Because Narseh was the offspring of Shapur's marriage to his own daughter, Queen Adur Anahid, he was superior to the eldest son of Shapur I, Bahram I, to rule over the Empire. However, thanks to Kartir's political aid, Bahram I could overcome Narseh.

Bahram could rise to power at the cost of sharing the emperor's ecumenical power with the Assembly of Zoroastrian Magi. Our hypothesis regarding the empowerment of the clergy in the reign of Bahram can be also verified by the narrative of Mani's execution. Mani whose prophetic mission had been supported by Shapur I and Hormizd was abruptly regarded as a heretic movement and a threat to Empire at the time of Bahram I. We believe that the motive behind Mani's prosecution was indeed a political one in a religious disguise.

Kartir could take the most advantage of the emerging opportunity to institutionalize Zoroastrianism, and turn the official religion

to an imperial religion. Because Bahram II was dependent on Kartir's help to rise to power even more than his predecessor, Kartir became the sole authority for religious hermeneutics and thereby obtained his utmost power. However, the situation drastically changed after the short-term reign of Bahram III and the rise of Narseh. According to Narseh's inscription in Paikuli, Narseh tried to revive the ecumenism of Ardashir and Shapur I and therefore adopted a strategy in contrast with Bahrams. In Narseh's coronation ceremony rock relief in Naqsh-e Rostam (Fig. 4), unlike that of Bahram II (in which Kartir has been positioned at the top), there is no single sign of the clergy even at the bottom of the relief (Khorashadi, 2010: 222-223). Therefore, it is quite obvious that since the advent of the Sassanid dynasty to the ruling period of Narseh, the social class order and the religious system fluctuated periodically. A noteworthy point is that Bahrams must not have liked, or been interested in, Kartir's empowerment because they deliberately engaged in a gamble that resulted in their loss of ecumenic power. Indeed, it can be argued that in order to win the support of the assembly of the Mazdayasna clergy, in order to achieve the rulership, they inevitably had to give such a ransom to the clergy; a mutual cooperation that helped Bahrams to get to power and also made Kartir the sole religious authority.

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**Fig. 1a.** Rock Relief of Bahram II in Naqsh -e Rustam (Ghirshman, 1991: 170/2).



**Fig. 1b.** Another Section of the same Rock Relief (Nasrollahzadeh, 2005: 350).



**Fig 2.** Rock relief of Bahram II in Barm -e Delak (Source: Hinz, 2006:293).



**Fig 3.** Rock Relief of Bahram I in Bishapur (Ghirshman, 1991: 167/2).



**Fig. 4.** Rock Relief of Narseh in Naqsh -e Rostam (Soud Avar, 2004: 175).

## کرتیر چگونه کرتیر شد؟

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### چکیده

صدرنشینی تشکیلات روحانی در جامعه ساسانی، فرایندی مقطعی و تبدیل آن به دستگاه دینی-دولتی، فرایندی تدریجی بود که به تاسی از سیاست‌های وقت، قوت و رخوت می‌گرفت. آنچه بن‌مایه این جستار شد، تناقض فاحش میان روایات تاریخی با شواهد باستان‌شناختی مبنی بر تقدم طبقه روحانیان در ابتدای کار ساسانیان است؛ زیرا شواهد کتیبه‌ای و نگارنده‌های صخره ای قرن سوم میلادی حاکی از آن‌اند که نخستین بار در بازه فرمانروایی بهرام اول تا پادشاهی نرسه، دستگاه روحانیت در صدر طبقات اجتماعی جای گرفت؛ به‌گونه‌ای که «دین رسمی» زرتشتی نیز به «دین دولتی» بدل گشت. نظر به اینکه اردشیر و شاپور اول، حاکمیت توأمان دین و دولت را خود در دست داشتند، میدان دادن به دستگاه روحانیت توسط بهرام‌ها، قرین فروکاستن از قدرت سلطنت بود؛ پدیده‌ای که نمی‌بایست به مذاق هیچ پادشاهی خوشایند می‌نمود. بنابراین چه موضوعی جولانگاه تاخت‌وتاز کرتیر و جلوسش بر اریکه مذهب گشت؟ نتیجه مطالعات از دریچه «رهیافت تاریخی» حاکی از آن است که بروز اختلاف میان نرسه و بهرام اول بر سر تصاحب سلطنت و در پی آن اعدام مانی پیامبر، پروازگاه کرتیر تا عروجش در زمان بهرام دوم شد. اندکی درنگ بر محاکمه و مرگ مانی، انگیزه‌های سیاسی این رویداد را بیش از انگیزه‌های مذهبی آن قوت می‌بخشد.

واژه‌های کلیدی: طبقات اجتماعی، روحانیان، کرتیر، نرسه، بهرام‌ها.

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