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Pārsā, Pārsi, *pahlom*: Defining Status Through Proximity with Fire

Fire stood at the heart of religio-political ceremonies of pre-Islamic Iran, and provided a ranking system by which the “closest to the fire” was the most important person. Within this context, the word pārsā that defined proximity to fire led to a series of words that designated the leaders of society as well as the notion of excellence.

Introduction

In the course of a study to find antecedents for dervish orders in the pre-Islamic era, as well as a possible linkage with Roman Mithraic Societies (Mysteries), the latter's rank of *perses* (“Persian” in Greek) seemed to offer a promising starting point, because no specific ceremonial function was ever associated—in Greek or Latin—with the word “Persian,” and no satisfactory explanation had ever been provided by Mithraic specialists as to why the third ranked officer of the Mysteries was named *perses*.

In this perspective, the words *pārsa/pārsava* that the Achaemenid kings used to qualify themselves provided the possibility of a linkage to an ancient Iranian function, especially since this denomination too was often understood as “Persian.” In his seminal work on Achaemenid inscriptions, Pierre Lecoq had come to the conclusion that, *pārsava* and *parthava* were the Median and Persian dialectical pronunciations of the same ethnic—or function—designation, and were words that eventually produced MP *pahlav* and NP *pahlu* (side); *pārsā* was thus the person who stood on the side of something, which Achaemenid iconography suggested to be a fire altar (fig. 1).¹ On all Achaemenid royal tombs, from Darius (r. 522-486 BC) onward, the king is depicted next to a fire altar. For fire to be seen, it had to be in the dark, and that is why on the top right of these altar scenes, a moon is depicted, both as a crescent and a full globe. The king was thus presiding over a ceremony held at

¹ P. Lecoq, *Les inscriptions de la Perse achéménide* (Paris, 1997) : 146 ; A. Soudavar, “Astyages, Cyrus and Zoroaster: Solving a Historical Dilemma” in *IRAN*, vol. L (2012) : 55-59.

nighttime. Moreover, the fire altar was placed on a throne that has convincingly been argued to be a moveable one; it represented therefore the king's own fire, since it moved with him.²

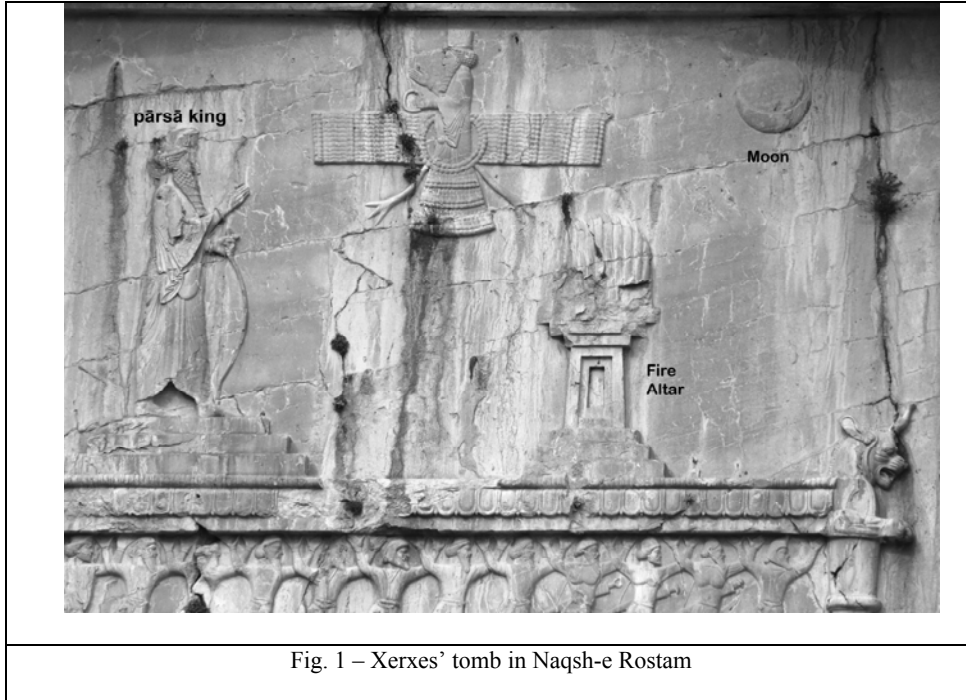


Fig. 1 – Xerxes' tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam

Interestingly, the king who stands next to the fire altar has a bow in his hand. Because of the weapon he holds, and the *padām* he does not wear,³ he cannot qualify as a Zoroastrian priest. He is thus a warrior priest and not a *magu* (*mowbad*). The same tradition continues on the coinage of the kings of Persis, as well as the Sasanians, who all stand weapon in hand by a fire altar.⁴ In other words, it was the king himself who was the keeper of the royal fire and not a Zoroastrian priest. As such, he was referred to as *pārsā*.

² Soudavar, "Astyages," 60-6 ; F. Saidi, "The Two Versions of the Achaemenid Throne," *Bulletin of Asia Institute*, vol. 20, year 2006 (2010), 79–86.

³ The Zoroastrian *padām* is a separate mouth piece to stop the official's breath from contaminating the fire; it is not to be confused with the chin cover of the Iranian headgear that, for instance, Anatolian satraps used to wear, which was an integral part of their headgear.

⁴ Soudavar, "Astyages," 58.

While, in Old Persian, *pārsā* referred to a function linked to fire, in New Persian, it means “pious,” and is mostly used as the epithet of renowned dervishes such as Shaykh Abu-Nasr-e Pārsā (d. 1461). But it also designates non-Moslem priests performing ceremonies at night time by a pond.⁵ We have thus, at the two ends of the Achaemenid-to-present-time spectrum, a word that refers to a congregation leader with a religious tinge. Logic dictates that, in between, there must have been Sasanian links, i.e., fire priests named *pārsā*, some of whom perhaps acted as the counterpart of the Roman Mithraic *perses* in the Iranian milieu.

Four Sasanian seals from the Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque Nationales in Paris, belonging to dignitaries or officials, will allow us to justify this contention (fig. 7). But to do so, we need first to discuss a monogram that often appears in Sasanian iconography.

The NWRA monogram




The most widely used monogram in Sasanian iconography is one that also appears on two rather impressive seals whose owners bear the title *bāp*. The first has the following legend engraved around the bust of its initial owner: *Bāp Haredār* (*b`p hld`l*), i.e., Bāp the Protector/Guardian (fig. 2).⁶ The legend on the second one reads: *Bāp rok i Mishan mogbed*, i.e., the Blunt Bāp who is the *mowbed* of Mishan (fig. 3).⁷

On a third seal (fig. 4), the epithet *bāp* is followed by the word *rād* (master, spiritual leader): *Bāp Rād* (the Father who is a spiritual leader). It is less imposing than the previous two seals but has a winged lion, symbol of the sun and Mithra, in lieu of the monogram.



⁵ Mostowfi, Hamdollah, *The Geographical Part of the Nuzhat-al-qulūb*, ed. G. Le Strange, (Leyden, 1915):148-49; A. Soudavar, “The Vocabulary and Syntax of Iconography in Sasanian Iran” *Iranica Antiqua* (2009): 434-35.

⁶ Based on an image in which the end letter was not very clear, A.H. Bivar had read this legend as *Bāp sardām*, and Ph. Gignoux had read it as *Bāp khordād* (personal communications). For the meaning of *haredār* as guardian, see C. Cereti, “On Zoroaster’s genealogy” in *Iran, questions et connaissances*, (vol. 1) *La période ancienne*, ed., Ph. Huyse, (*Studia Iranica – Cahier 25*), (Leuven, 2002): 35.

⁷ Rika Gyselen has suggested (private correspondence) that this legend should be read as *Bāffarag, mogbed de Mešūn*. However, the presence of the epithet *bāp* on so many other seals militates for a different reading. It is interesting to note that the word *rok* in New Persian is usually accompanied with *rāst* (رست و راست), a word that is constantly evoked in the Mithraic context.

		
<p>Fig. 2- Seal of Bāp Haredār. Private Collection</p>	<p>Fig. 3 - Seal of Bāp Rok. (Cambridge History of Iran, III/2, p. 105b)</p>	<p>Fig. 4- Seal of Bāp Rād. Dr. Busso Peus sale cat. no.395-lot430</p>

We thus see that the title *bāp* is followed on all three by reverential adjectives proper to individuals of high spiritual standing. As a title, *bāp* is clearly the counterpart of the top rank in the Mysteries, the *pāp*, *pāpā* or *pater*, and a title that continues in dervish orders of today as *bābā* or *pir*. All of these titles meant “father,” and characterized congregations whose leaders were fatherly figures, by virtue of which their members were considered his sons, and brothers to one another. Hence, the general appellation of brotherhood for such congregations.

	
<p>Fig. 5 – Detail of fig. 3</p>	<p>Fig. 6- Coin of the Hephtalite Khingila (Stephen Album sale cat. 246 lot 175)</p>

The monogram in question appears on the hat of the first two *bāps* and can be deciphered as NWRA, which is the Aramaic ideogram for “fire.” Indeed, the individual components of the monogram can be dissected into N, W, R and A (fig.5). A similar monogram opposite a fire altar on a Sogdian coin brings

added confirmation to our interpretation (fig. 6).⁸ Because of this symmetrical positioning, the fire altar and the monogram must be equivalent in meaning. But fire was always closely associated with Mithra, especially for sealing an oath. In fact, Mary Boyce sees Mithra's association with the Sun as arising:

“through an original association of Mithra, Lord of the covenant, with fire; for it appears from both Iranian and Indian sources that it was ancient custom to swear to covenants by Mithra, their personified power, in the presence of *fire*, which, as the flame on the hearth, sustaining life, or the sun in the sky, controlling times and seasons, represented *rta/asha*, the due order of things.”⁹

In ancient brotherhoods, the initiate had to take an oath that bound the members of his congregation together. It was administered under the aegis of Mithra, because as “Lord of the covenant,” he was meant to oversee it. Oddly, we know the word for those who broke the covenant but not those who upheld it. The former are called *mehr-druj*, i.e., the ones who lied to Mithra. If there was a term for he-who-broke a covenant, there must have been one for-he-who-upheld it. That word, I suggest, was *mehr-bān*, which etymologically meant: the one who guarded, or upheld Mehr/Mithra (i.e. the covenant). But it was a word that neither sat well with Zoroastrians who saw Ahura Mazdā as their supreme deity, nor Moslems for whom the only god was Allāh. It was bound to disappear or be transformed; it gradually became an adjective and gained the meaning of “kind person.” But in the *Shāhnāme*, it was still used to describe a “man of oath,” or a member of the community of military leaders (*gav*, *pahlavān*).¹⁰ And that is why, a dynasty that ruled over Nimruz (Sistān) in the 14-15th century was referred to as the Mehr-bānids. More importantly, the poet Sa’di (1184-1283) makes direct references to the bond and honor code that existed among the *mehr-bānān* (*mehr-bāns*) as upholders of the covenant:

شمشیر نگسلاند پیوند مهربانان
The sword will not brake the bond between the *mehr-bānān*,
آبروی مهربانان پیش معشوق آب جوست
The honor code of the *mehr-bānān* is worthless before the beloved.¹¹

⁸ One should note, however, that two of the lower letters have been turned upside down; but the monogram still yields the same meaning of NWRA.

⁹ M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (3rd repr.), (Leiden 1996), I:28-29.

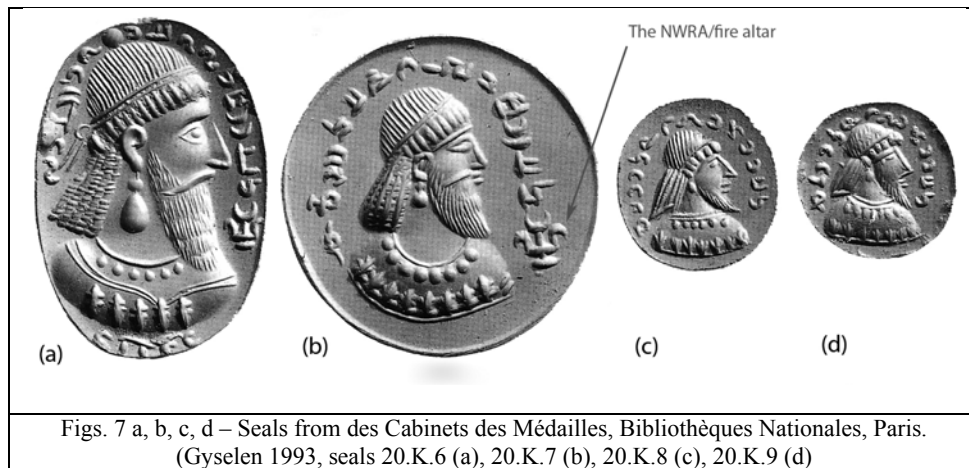
¹⁰ See Dehkhodā (www.loghatnaameh.org) “*mehrbān*,” for instance when *gav* (champion fighter) and *dalirān* (the bold fighters) are described as *mehr-bān* by Ferdowsi: ای گَو مهربان , کند مهربان ; بادلیران تو را

¹¹ See www.ganjor.net : Sa’di’s *ghazals* nos. 455 and 88.

Thus, Mithra oversaw brotherhoods in the Roman context, as well as the Iranian one. And similar to the top rank of the Mysteries (*pāp/pater*) that corresponded to the MP epithet *bāp*, we shall now argue that the Roman office holder of third rank (*perses*) had a Middle Persian counterpart, namely *pārsā*, who was the fire keeper.¹²

The *pārsā* seals

Of the four seals of the Bibliothèque Nationale (fig. 7), the first two (a and b) are elaborate official seals that have a modified NWRA monogram: they are complemented by a little bar underneath, which acts as a pedestal in order to visually transform them into a fire altar. Interestingly, the letters of the word *rāsty* are placed directly above this fire symbol in order to convey a concept that appears in a stanza of the Avestan hymn to Mithra (*Yt.* 10.3): Fire, which is presented therein as a companion to Mithra, is said to grant “the most righteous path (*razishtem*) to those who do not deceive the contract (*mithra*).” In other words, the *rāsty* that stems out of the fire symbol alludes to the “righteous path” of *Yt.* 10.3, even more so since, etymologically, it derives from the same root as the Avestan *razishtem*.



¹² It is beyond the scope of this article to show that second rank of the Mysteries, *heliodromos*, had a Sasanian counterpart named *mehr-astāt*. I have briefly referred to it in Soudavar, “Astyages,” (64) and will give a full account in my forthcoming publication on Mithraic Societies.

Furthermore, the legend on seal (a) reads *rāsty ay rasty* (rectitude means deliverance). It's a literary conceit that combines *rāsty* with an almost identically sounding word derived from the verb *rastan* (to obtain salvation or freedom), and expresses the promise of the brotherhoods: out of the oath taken over the fire will spring the righteousness that will lead to happiness and salvation. It is this adage that Teymur (Tamerlane, r. 1370-1405) will adopt as his motto (راستی راستی), and will incorporate it along with the three-dot symbol of dervish orders into his seal and coinage (fig. 10).¹³

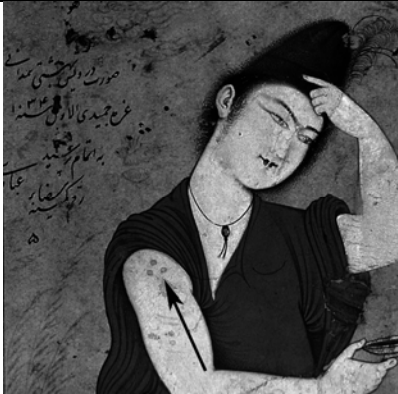
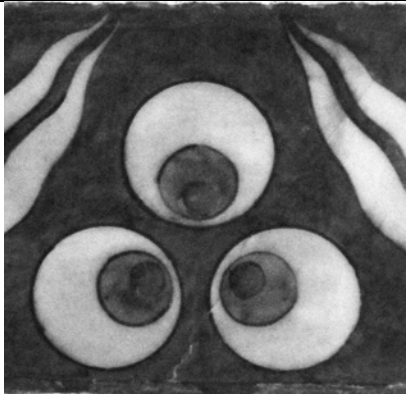

The three-dot symbol represented Tishtrya on Sasanian coinage as an emblem that portended the auspiciousness of the *farr/xvarenah*.¹⁴ As such, it had a close association with Mithra who was the main purveyor of *farr*. Because of the simplicity and compactness of its design, this symbol seems to have had wide spread appeal. It was used by dervishes as a burn mark (fig.8); it was adopted by the Ottomans as an imperial emblem because their power base was the Janissary Corps whose patron saint was a Khorāsānian dervish by the name of Hājji Bektāsh Veli (fig. 9); and by the Freemasons (fig.11).¹⁵ If the Ottomans came to use the same symbol that Tamerlane had adopted, it was not because they particularly loved the one who had defeated them and had put Ildirim Bāyazid (r. 1389–1402) in a cage, but because they all cherished the principles of brotherhood as transmitted to them by the dervishes of Greater Khorāsān; the Ottomans through Hājji Bektāsh Veli, and Teymur through Khwājeh Ahmad Yasavi. Dervish congregations carry in fact many emblems from a pre-Islamic past.

¹³ A. Soudavar "Histoire d'une imposture ou naissance d'un mythe : « Tamerlan »" in *Le pouvoir en actes. Fonder, dire, montrer, contrefaire l'autorité*, ed. E. Marguin-Hamon, (Paris, 2013) : 191 ; Ebn-e Arabshāh mentions that his seal and his coinage had three circles, and gives a sketch of it: كان نقش خاتمه راستی راستی، یعنی صدقت نجوت، و میسم دوابه و رسم سکنه علی الدرهم و ; Ebn-e Arabshāh, Shahāb-od-din Ahamad, *'Aja'eb-ol-maqdur fi navā'eb-e Teymur*, (Damascus, 2008) : 277

¹⁴ Soudavar, "Vocabulary," 428-31.

¹⁵ The Freemasonry dots appear below the title of an article by James Russell, who avows to be a Freemason himself, and signs his name flanked by the three dots, otherwise known as Honor Dots in the parlance of Freemasonry; J.R. Russell, "On Mithraism and Freemasonry" in *Armenian and Iranian Studies*, vol. 4 (1995): 269-87. I have briefly explained the three dots in Soudavar, "Histoire," 191, but its full scope must await the publication of my book on Mithraic Societies.

All the elements of seal (a), therefore, reinforce brotherhood ideals that have a Mithraic tint, and suggest that it must have belonged to a brotherhood official. Likewise, the second seal (b) that displays a similar composition, but with a slightly different legend, must have belonged to another such official. Its legend reads *l'sty p'lswm*.

	
<p>Fig. 8- Three-dot detail of Dervish Beheshti's portrait. Golestān Palace Museum, Tehran.</p>	<p>Fig. 9- Three-dots detail of tile from Topkapi Palace, Istanbul.</p>
	<p><i>On Mithraism and Freemasonry</i></p> <p><i>J.R. Russell, P.:M.:</i></p>
<p>Fig. 10 – Coin of Teymur with three dots. Private collection.</p>	<p>Fig. 11 – A Freemason's use of the three-dot emblem. (Title of J.R. Russel's article as printed)</p>

A similar inscription appears on the other two seals, but with different spellings in their last word: engraved as *plswm* on (c) and *pls`m* on (d). Ryka Gyselen has read this MP word as *pahlom* (best, excellent) for (c), but has been unable to suggest a reading for the other two,¹⁶ while Oktor P. Skjaervo believes that the difference in spelling must be due to engraving mistakes and slippage, and that

¹⁶ R.Gyselen, *Catalogues des sceaux, camées et bulles sassanides (I. Collection générale)*, (Paris, 1993), seal 20.K.7-9.

all three were meant to be *plswm* (i.e., *pahlom*).¹⁷ I think there are two problems with such a supposition. First, to blame oddities to the engraver is too facile a solution, and it makes obstruction of the fact that if he didn't care about mistakes, his learned patron, i.e., the owner of the seal, would have noticed it and be irritated whenever he used it, because the caste of Persian bureaucratic officials were meticulous and highly educated. Second, to treat the spelling differences—for the second word as engraving mistakes—even though the spelling of the first word is uniformly correct on all three, is statistically unacceptable. One must therefore find another explanation for this anomaly.

Also, the spelling of *pahlom* itself is problematic, for, occasionally it is spelled *plswm* or *plswmy* (as in the Paikuli inscriptions) but read as *pahlom*.¹⁸ Even though “l” and “s” are transposable, the transformation of *pls* into *pahl* is not a common phenomenon, and if it also occurs in relation to *pārsa* (which has given us *pahlav* and *pahlu*), chances are that the two phenomena are interconnected.

The solution to all of these problems lies in the very structure of *pahlom*, which incorporates an ordinal suffix *-om* that, for instance, transforms *panj* (five) into *panj-om* (fifth). It is applied here to a *pahlav/pahlu* that originally referred to the person standing next to fire altar. The application of the ordinal suffix implies a hierarchy based on proximity to the fire, one that gave the highest rank to the closest person. Thus, *pahlu-om* (*pahlom*) designated the person closest to the fire. It pejoratively acquired the meaning of best, excellent, or more generally, a person of high rank.¹⁹

This supposition finds its proof in a legal sentence from a document that explained the succession process for the trusteeship of an endowed Fire. Maria Macuch has translated this passage as follows:

Macuch: “MHDS 16.8-11, *ka gōwēd kū ēn ātaxš hamē az frazandān-ī man mard-ē(w) ī pahlom dārēd hamē ān ī hast ān ī pahlom dārišn*. If he declares:

¹⁷ Personal communication.

¹⁸ H. Humbach & P.O. Skjaervo, *The Sasanian Inscription of Paikuli*. I-III, (Munich, 1983), lines A14.05, B11.02.

¹⁹ Significantly, the Parthian version of *pahlom* is written *prtr*. It is probably a condensed form of *parth-tar*, or *pahlav-tar*, in which instead of the ordinal suffix *-om* the relative suffix *-tar* is used, therefore the Parthian version expresses the notion of “closer/nearer” vs. the Persian one that gives “closest.”

‘This fire: let it always out of my children be held by the best man, (then)
among the (children) he has it should always be held by the best (man).’²⁰

There is, however, a basic problem in this translation because “best” is not a legally definable term (or condition) in the court of law. That is why, in most Islamic *vaqf* documents, which follow the models established in Sasanian times, the successor to the donor is the male progeny closest to him. Thus the *pahlom* of the above succession condition must read as “the closest,” i.e., the one who generation-wise, and age-wise, is closest to the donor.²¹ The sentence should thus be translated as:

If he has stipulated that this fire must be held by the closest male among his progenies, then, from among all those alive, it should be held by the closest (i.e., to the donor).

With this in mind, we may have to revisit some of the translations of the Paikuli inscriptions where the words *p'ls'n* and *p'lswb'n* appear in tandem and have been translated as “Persians and Parthians” by Humbach & Skjaervo, for instance in the following passages:

A4.03-A6.03: ... the princes and grandees and nobles and Persians (*p'ls'n*)
and Parthians (*p'lswb'n*) were informed...

B5.02-B11.02: ... the remaining princes and grandees and governors
(*ktkhwt'y*) and nobles and Persians and Parthians who were the greatest and
of highest rank (*pahlom*) and the noblest subjects...²²

²⁰ M. Macuch, “Language and Law: Linguistic Peculiarities in Sasanian Jurisprudence” in *Languages of Iran : Past and Present, Iranian Studies in memoriam David Neil MacKenzie* (*Iranica* 8), (Wiesbaden, 2005): 100. From the context, Macuch opines that *pahlom* might mean “pious,” a meaning that is also suggested in B. Faravashi, *Farhang-e zabān-e pahlavi* (4th ed.), (Tehran, 2002): 430. But like the piety attached to NP *pārsā*, it’s a tangential meaning and not original.

²¹ Typically, *vaqf* documents (as well as English trust documents) consider priority in succession, first through generation levels (*tabaqeh*), and second by age. For instance, if the donor has an elder child A who himself has an early child Aa, and the donor has a younger child B, younger than his nephew Aa, then upon the death of the donor, if A is no longer alive, between Aa and B, it is B who has priority.

²² Humbach & Skjaervo, “Paikuli,” A4.03-B11.02. The two underlined words are translations that I have corrected because: a) for *pahlom*, I have substituted the result of our above discussion; b) as for *kad-khodā*, which the authors have translated as “houselord,” I have used “governor,” because its first part (*kad*) refers to a dwelling or city and the whole word means “city-lord,” even more so since *kadag-khodā* or Lord of a *kadag* (i.e., a lesser *kad*) appears as an official title on a seal (R. Gyselen *Sasanian Seals and Sealing in the A. Saeedi Collection* (*Acta Iranica* 44) 2007: 288); “houselords” obviously didn’t need official seals.

In Paikuli, the Sasanian king Narseh (r. 293–302), who ascended the throne by displacing his grand-nephew, is trying to prove his legitimacy by invoking the approval of those who, in later Persian literature, are called *arkān-e dowlāt* or Pillars of the State. His was not a democratic state where ordinary people, whether Persians or Parthians, had a voice that mattered. If anything, ordinary Persians and Parthians were rebels to the state, and not its pillars, especially the Parthians who constituted the power base of the Arsacids. As for the Arsacids themselves, they were portrayed as Ahrimanic in the rock relief of Ardashir I (r. 224-42) at Naqsh-e Rostam (fig. 12), and could no longer figure among the grandees of the state.

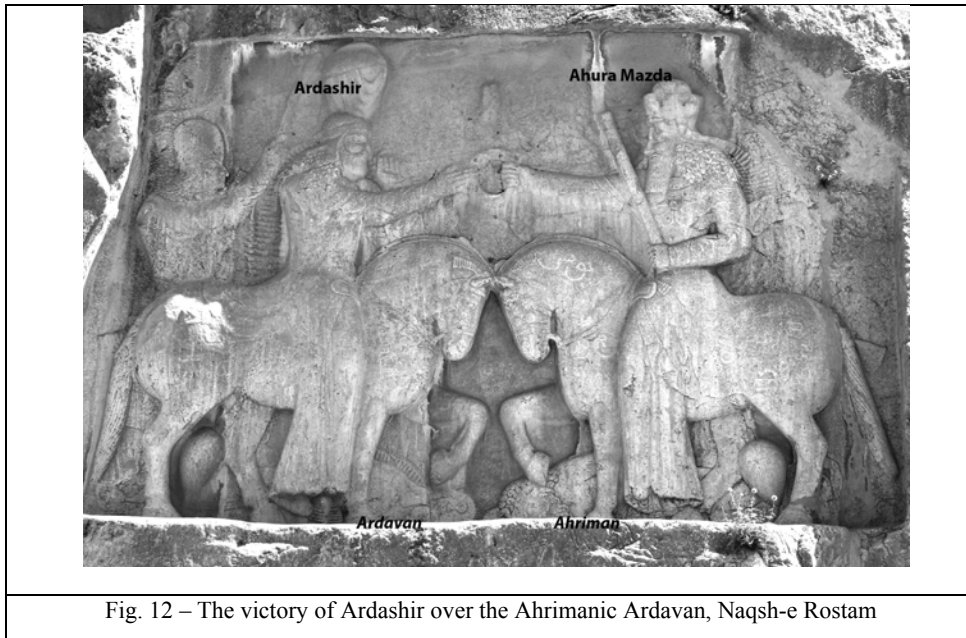


Fig. 12 – The victory of Ardashir over the Ahrimanic Ardavan, Naqsh-e Rostam

Thus, in the string of dignitaries that Narseh is enumerating, after the princes, nobles, grandees and governors, one should expect other persons of high rank. Conspicuously absent in this translated string of dignitaries are in fact members of the priesthood and the military. We may then assume that the *p'ls'n* therein refers to high priests (those who stood close to the fire), and that the *p'lswb'n*

refers not to the Parthians but to army commanders whom the *Shāhnāme* calls *pahlav* or *pahlavān*.²³

زواره شدش بر سپه، پهلوان Zavāreh became the *pahlavān* (commander) of the
army
سپه پهلوان بود با شاه جم The army commander (*pahlavān*) was accompanying
King Jamshid

More importantly, in the *Shāhnāme*, the *mowbed* (priest) and the *pahlavān* were usually put on equal footing and considered as Pillars of the State:

نه موبد بود شاد و نه پهلوان Neither priest was happy nor *pahlavān* (commander)

Furthermore, when a prince is said to join the *pahlav* of Pārs:

سوی پهلو پارس بنهاد روی He set out towards the *pahlav* (commander) of Pārs

one can obviously not translate it as the Parthian of Pārs, but “commander of the army of Pārs.” Moreover, in describing the social hierarchy that the Sasanian Ardashir I instituted, the historian Mas’udi places the caste of fire-keepers (سَدَنَةُ بَيُوتِ النَّيْرَانِ) right after the Princes and Nobles.²⁴ Clearly, the fire-keepers had an important role and function in society.

Finally, if Middle Persian is designated as *Pahlavi*, it cannot mean Parthian, because there existed another language recognized as Parthian, and both were used in Paikuli. It also seems rather odd that the Sasanians would name their language after those they had defeated. Pahlavi therefore meant something other than Parthian.

Be that as it may, the original *pārsa*, or fire priest who stood close to the fire altar, evolved in two different ways in the Iranian context. It produced NP *pārsā*, which referred to pious and revered dervishes, but also gave NP *pahlavān*, which designated a military commander. On the Roman side, though, the officer in charge of fire in the Mysteries was still called by his Iranian name *pārsā*, which for the Greeks sounded the same as Persian. He was thus called *perses*.

²³ See the online *Shāhnāme* at tira.ir.

²⁴ Mas’udi, Abol-hasan `Ali, *Moruj-oz-zahab va ma`āden-el-jowhar*, ed. A. Dāghar, (Qom, 1988 (1409)), I:269.

Coming back to three seals (b), (c), and (d), which had different spellings for the word *pahlom*, we may conjure that the engravers wished to deliver a double message. First, through an adage similar to the one engraved on seal (a), they projected that righteousness (*rāsty*), which stemmed out of Fire, produced excellence (*pahlom*). Second, in full understanding of the meaning of *pahlom*, they were imbedding the hierarchical title of the seal owner into this adage, i.e., as the closest person (to the Fire) he was a *pārsā*. Therefore, by modifying the spelling of *pahlom*, and through punning and the insertion of an additional “ā,” the engravers of seals (b) and (d) were simply emphasizing the *pārsā* title of the seal owner.

The Pārsis

Even more problematic than the word *pārsā* is the Pārsi appellation of the Zoroastrian Iranians who migrated to India, and mostly settled in Gujarat. The Gujarātīs had seen a fare share of Iranian traders who had come from the port of Sirāf in the southern province of Fārs (Pārs); and they may have referred to them as *pārsis*. But the Zoroastrians who settled there came mostly from inland Iran and the Greater Khorāsān. Some may have come overland and some may have taken a maritime route, through Hormuz. Either way, it is highly unlikely that they would have identified themselves as *Pārsis*, i.e., from Pārs (Fars). On the other hand, as reflected in their saga entitled *Qesseh-ye Sanjān*, their migration to India goes through different stages that revolve around the sacred fire that they were carrying. They move it first to the hill of Bahārūt, then to Bānsdah, to finally settle in Navsāri.²⁵ Significantly, this fire was referred to as “Iran Shāh,” i.e., the fire of Iranian Kings, and was characterized as *ātash-bahrām*, the victorious fire. Clearly, those who took such pain to transport this fire to India were claiming to carry the kingly fire that the Sasanians depicted on their coinage, that very fire that the Arsacids had dispersed but Ardashir I had reignited at the top of the tower that he had erected in the center of his circular capital of Ardashir-khwarrah.²⁶ It then stands to reason that those who brought this fire to India would consider themselves as *pārsās*, i.e., fire keepers. But for Gujarātīs, there was no need to make a distinction between the fire-

²⁵ A. Williams, “The Re-placement of Zoroastrian Iran: A New Reading of the Persian *Qesse-ye Sanjān* of Bahman Key Qobad Sanjana (1599)” in *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 22, year 2008, (2012) : 86.

²⁶ Soudavar, “Astyages,” 58-61.

keeper *pārsā* and the *pārsi* traveler from Fars. They were all looked upon as Persians, in the same way that the Romans of the Mysteries called their fire keeper *perses*, i.e. Persian.

There is an intriguing verse in the *Qesseh-ye Sanjān* that describes the pilgrimage of certain Pārsis to the newly established Fire in Bānsdah:

bedinsān pārsi dar bānsdah niz ze har jā āmadandi bā basi chiz
In this way did the **Persians** come to Bānsdah,
from many places, with many offerings²⁷

While the word *pārsi* therein is not incompatible with the meter and can hardly be construed as a plural noun that acts as the subject of the plural verb *āmadandi*, the plural word *pārsān* is a better substitute for it, both in terms of grammar and the flow of the poem.

bedinsān pārsān dar bānsdah niz ze har jā āmadandi bā basi chiz
In this way did the **fire-officers** come to

It may thus indicate that they originally referred to themselves as Pārsāns rather than Pārsis. It is a tenuous argument, especially since no extant manuscript of the *Qesseh-ye Sanjān* betrays such a substitution.²⁸ But, on the slim chance that it may help to uncover an earlier use of the word *pārsā* in India, I thought it worthwhile to raise the question.

Conclusions

The perception that Zoroastrianism was an all encompassing religion that regulated every aspect of Iranian life has misled many to look for solutions in the Avesta whenever problems of interpretation arises in regards to ancient Iran. Thus, for many, if *pārsā* doesn't appear in the Avesta, it cannot allude to a position vis à vis fire, because that is supposedly the prerogative of the Zoroastrian priesthood. But long before Zoroastrianism appeared on the Iranian plateau, its inhabitants had customs and rituals that could not be swept away instantaneously by the advent of a new religion. Fire was the centerpiece of

²⁷ Williams, "Replacement," 86.

²⁸ Alan Williams who kindly confirmed (personal communications) that only *pārsi* appears in all the manuscripts, also believes that *pārsi* sits well in the poem. Having doubts about my own ability to dissect the meter of a poem, I put the question to a number of Persian colleagues (A. Karimi-Hakkak, B. Mokhtāriān, N. Motallebi-Kāshāni). While they concurred with Williams on the acceptability of *pārsi* (even though it creates a slight hiccup, or *sekteh*), they all thought that *pārsān* was a better fit and more fluent.

many a ritual, from India to Europe. It should therefore come as no surprise to us that the keeper of the sacred fire had a name that does not appear in the Avesta. It was a name that reflected the centrality of fire in all rituals, and one that produced a notion of hierarchy based on proximity to fire. The Avesta had its own fire keeper, the *aθravan*. But it was a term that did not last, neither within Zoroastrianism nor outside, because Zoroastrians gradually reverted back to the old Iranian appellation of *magu/mowbed* to designate their priests. On the other hand, *pārsā* survived through a multitude of avatars, as it sprang from a more powerful tradition, one linked to the mighty Achaemenids whom many wished to emulate, even within Zoroastrian communities.