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SUB SPECIE MAIESTATIS:  
REFLECTIONS ON SASANIAN COURT RITUALS

Albert de Jong

*Apud Persas persona regis sub specie maiestatis occultitur*

Iunianus Iustinus

The Sasanian kings, who ruled Iran and Mesopotamia from the third to the seventh centuries CE, were Zoroastrian kings. This is clear from the monumental inscriptions some of them left behind, from their coins, from the iconography of royal art in rock reliefs, seals and silver plates, and, of course, from the whole body of literature devoted to their dynastic, political and military history.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the Sasanian kings were Zoroastrians should not, by itself, pose too many problems. With the exception of the comparatively short period of Seleucid domination (from Alexander of Macedon (330 BCE) to the early second century BCE), the dynasties that ruled (parts of) the Iranian world before the Sasanians (the Achaemenians from 550 to 330 BCE; and the Parthians from the third or second century BCE to 224 (or 226) CE) were also Zoroastrians. In most scholarly literature, however, the religious sentiments and politics of the Sasanian dynasty are considered to have been of a much stronger quality and intensity than those of their forerunners. The Sasanian kings themselves carefully fostered this image of a greater attachment to Zoroastrianism in their dynasty, but it is in reality little more than a pious fiction. The question is not whether Sasanian kings did or did not adhere to Zoroastrianism—this they obviously did—but whether their ideas on their predecessors correspond to reality. This does not seem to be the case. The dynastic history of Iran that was created in the Sasanian period

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<sup>1</sup> For introductions to the Sasanian Empire, see A. Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sasanides* (Copenhagen, 1944); J. Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD* (London, 2001), pp. 151–221; E. Winter/B. Dignas, *Rom und das Perserreich. Zwei Weltmächte zwischen Konfrontation und Koexistenz* (Berlin, 2001), all with references. Convenient collections of (chiefly Greek and Roman) sources are found in M. Dodgeon/S. Lieu, *The Eastern Roman Frontier and the Persian Wars, AD 226–363* (London, 1991); G. Greatrex/S. Lieu, *The Eastern Roman Frontier and the Persian Wars. Part 2: AD 363–630* (London, 2002).

culminated in a (lost) text known as the *Xwadāy-nāmag* or “Book of Kings.”<sup>2</sup> Although the text itself did not survive, the outlines of its view of the pre-Sasanian history of Iran are sufficiently known through later adaptations of the text in Muslim authors. Most strikingly, the Achaemenian dynasty has been almost totally effaced from memory, surviving only in the tragic figure of its last monarch, Darius III (Dārā the son of Dārā), whose chief function in the narrative is that he was defeated by Alexander.<sup>3</sup> Between Alexander and the rise of the Sasanians, the period of the Seleucid and Parthian dynasties in Iran, we find the so-called “petty kings” (Middle Persian *kadag-xwadāy*, Arabic *mulūk al-ṭawāʾif*), who chiefly represent the fragmentation of a realm (Iran) that was meant to have been united. This fragmentation, which eventually led to the restoration of Iran under the Sasanians, was evident not only from the military failures and internecine quarrels of the “petty kings”, but also from the fact that they had built too many fire-temples without the proper (i.e. royal) authorization.<sup>4</sup> These fire-temples were subsequently destroyed by the first Sasanian king, Ardašīr I (r. 224–240), who “restored” a centralized kingdom with a centralized church in Iran. It is very well possible that something similar in fact happened, but the general tendency of Sasanian sources (and sources based on these Sasanian traditions, which are the main sources to have survived) of presenting the rise of the Sasanians in terms of the establishment of order out of chaos makes it difficult to disentangle facts from fantasies in this respect. The third-century

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<sup>2</sup> For the *Xwadāy-nāmag*, see especially E. Yarshater, “Iranian National History”, *The Cambridge History of Iran 3. The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 359–377; A. Sh. Shahbazi, “On the *Xwadāy-nāmag*”, *Iranica Varia. Papers in Honor of Professor Ehsan Yarshater* (Acta Iranica 30; Leiden, 1990), pp. 208–229.

<sup>3</sup> This historical amnesia with regard to the Achaemenians is still hotly debated. For recent overviews of the question, see Ph. Huysse, “La revendication de territoires achéménides par les Sassanides: Une réalité historique?”, *Iran. Questions et connaissances. Actes du IV<sup>e</sup> Congrès Européen des Études Iraniennes I. La période ancienne* (Studia Iranica Cahier 25; Paris, 2002), pp. 297–311; T. Daryaei, ‘Memory and History: The Construction of the Past in Late Antique Persia,’ *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān* 1, 2001/2002, pp. 1–14.

<sup>4</sup> This is evident from the *Letter of Tansar*, a Sasanian text purporting to have been written by the priest Tansar in the reign of Ardašīr I, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty. The text only survives in a Persian version, included in the thirteenth-century *History of Tabaristān* of Ibn Isfandyār. For the passage on the fire-temples, see M. Boyce, *The Letter of Tansar* (Roma, 1968), p. 47 (translation), with her notes on pp. 16–17.

sources we have—chiefly “official” inscriptions—do not help us much further, because they are the first indications of this type of historiography. This is particularly true of the four inscriptions of the priest Kerdīr, which contain a very large number of historical problems.<sup>5</sup> Kerdīr claims, *inter alia*, to have founded fire-temples, persecuted all non-Zoroastrian religions and to have brought back to orthodoxy all Zoroastrian priests in the many provinces and lands of the new empire. Some of his claims are certainly unfounded; the persecutions of Jews, Christians and others are almost entirely absent from the literature of these religions themselves and seem never to have taken place.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Manichaeans, in whose traditions Kerdīr does occur, the Zoroastrian church supposedly organised by Kerdīr has completely forgotten him. He simply does not occur in any Zoroastrian Middle Persian text, a fact that still awaits analysis. With his campaign against the religions being a pious fiction, we should seriously consider the possibility that his other claims, chiefly the restoration of orthodoxy, were equally produced by his desire to meet the requirements of a high priestly authority in the service of a powerful king.

The fact is that we know very little of the religious sentiments of many Sasanian kings; we know several who seem to have been devout Zoroastrians, but we also know some who seem to have had a keen interest in other options, chiefly Manichaeism and the Gnostic movement associated with the name of the “arch-heretic” Mazdak.<sup>7</sup> Some Sasanian queens were themselves non-Zoroastrians and others were said to have had a keen interest in, for instance, Judaism.<sup>8</sup> Alongside this evidence

<sup>5</sup> The inscriptions have been gathered and translated conveniently by Ph. Gignoux, *Les quatre inscriptions du mage Kirdīr. Textes et concordances* (Studia Iranica Cahier 9; Paris, 1991; see also D.N. MacKenzie, “Kerdīr’s Inscription”, *The Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam. Naqsh-e Rostam 6. The Triumph of Shapur I*, ed G. Herrmann (Iranische Denkmäler 13; Berlin, 1989), pp. 35–78.

<sup>6</sup> This problem is discussed (with references) in A. de Jong, “Zoroastrian Religious Polemics and their Contexts: Interconfessional Relations in the Sasanian Empire”, *Religious Polemics in Context*, eds A. van der Kooij/Th. Hetteema (Leiderdorp, forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> For Sasanian interest in Manichaeism, see M. Hutter, “Manichaeism in the Early Sasanian Empire”, *Numen* 40, 1993, pp. 2–15; for Kawād and Mazdak, see now P. Crone, “Kavād’s Heresy and Mazdak’s Revolt”, *Iran* 29, 1991, pp. 21–42.

<sup>8</sup> This subject is discussed in De Jong, “Zoroastrian Religious Polemics.” There appears to be no basis for the suggestion in J.K. Choksy, *Evil, Good, and Gender. Facets of the Feminine in Zoroastrian Religious History* (Toronto Studies in Religion 28; New York, 2002), pp. 85–86, that these non-Zoroastrian queens were supposed to lead Zoroastrian lives. There were large numbers of non-Zoroastrians at court, in all sorts of ca-

for interest in other religions than Zoroastrianism, we have, of course, iconographic, numismatic and textual evidence to show that the Sasanian kings all protected and sponsored Zoroastrianism, but the exact relations between court and church are very imperfectly known. This is caused at least partly by the fact that it is more than likely that with a few exceptions, the Middle Persian books that have been preserved—and they are our chief source of information on Zoroastrian theology—do not originate in court culture. These texts were mainly collected, edited and copied in the ninth century, in a time when the number of Zoroastrians was rapidly decreasing and when royal support for the religion was a vague remembrance from the past.<sup>9</sup> We cannot estimate the loss of ideas, texts and traditions properly, but there seems to have been a pattern of preserving “useful” texts rather than an attempt to preserve what was still there. Many aspects of Iranian learning characteristic of the Sasanian period, especially the more technical subjects of courtly learning, such as geography and the sciences, *belles lettres* and behaviour at court have been lost in their Middle Persian versions, but survive in translations and learned works from the new dominant religion, Islam.<sup>10</sup> We can, therefore, estimate the extent of Sasanian traditions fairly accurately, and it is not difficult to see why they were lost in their original version. For the administration of a large empire, geography is a much more necessary science than for a community that cannot be expected to gather enough funds for travelling through the country. Besides, the knowledge of geography was there for many to use; it is only the language in which it was available that had changed.<sup>11</sup>

A few specimens of courtly literature have survived in Middle Persian. The most important of these is the charming story of *King Husraw and his Page*, which has been studied mainly for its unusually large amount of *hapax legomena*, because its core consists of catalogues of the

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pacities, and not a single author has ever recorded that specific requirements were made of them, with the exception of the court etiquette to be discussed below.

<sup>9</sup> For a survey of these Middle Persian texts, see now C.G. Cereti, *La letteratura pahlavi* (Milano, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> The most important study of this process is D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society* (London, 1998), pp. 1–60.

<sup>11</sup> Dan Shapira's assessment that there was no geographical science in Sasanian Iran (“Was there Geographical Science in Sasanian Iran?”, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 54, 2001, pp. 319–338), presented with his customary learning, fails to convince in this respect.

best types of food, music, women, perfumes, etc.<sup>12</sup> The text does not only survive in Middle Persian, but also in Arabic; it is found in al-Tha'ālibī's *History of the Kings of the Persians*, alongside other translations of Middle Persian texts; interestingly, the (Zoroastrian) religious information in the Middle Persian text has been carefully removed from the Arabic version, which shows at the very least how easy it must have been to adapt Zoroastrian texts to a new environment.<sup>13</sup>

The present contribution will present some materials on the subject of court ceremonial or court rituals and attempt to analyse them in terms of what they can tell us about the relations between Zoroastrianism and the Sasanian dynasty. The information we have for that subject is enormous in quantity and consists of texts, images, and objects. The Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts, by contrast, are very silent on these matters, but an attempt will be made to relate the development of court rituals as much as possible to discussions in the study of Sasanian Zoroastrianism.

The representation of the Sasanian kings in texts ultimately deriving from Sasanian traditions, in Arabic and early Persian literature, differs remarkably from representations of these kings in the literature produced by Christians in and around the Sasanian Empire. This is probably what one would expect, but in a subject as vulnerable to stereotypes and *topoi* as descriptions of royalty, one is likely to find many things one had expected beforehand. The differences between these Arabic and Persian texts on the one hand and the Christian texts on the other take many shapes. The most important difference concerns the moral evaluation of the king's character, a subject explicitly forbidden to speculate about according to Persian etiquette, at least where it concerns the living monarch.<sup>14</sup> Christians, not bound by such rules, regularly present the kings as spiteful and hateful characters, driven by lust and greed and consumed by a desire to destroy everything the Christian authors themselves held sacred. Arabic and Persian sources have a few kings they clearly do not like, but in general they present the king as mild, just, and wise. A second eye-catching difference concerns the kings' health. Persian and Arabic sources usually present the king as a handsome man, excelling in sports, able-bodied and in excellent health. Christians, on the other hand,

<sup>12</sup> For the text, see D. Monchi-Zadeh, "Xusrōv I Kavātān ut rētak. Pahlavi Text, Transcription and Translation", *Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne II* (Acta Iranica 22; Leiden, 1982), pp. 47–91.

<sup>13</sup> H. Zotenberg, *Histoire des rois des Perses* (Paris, 1900), pp. 705–711.

<sup>14</sup> *Kitāb al-tāj*, p. 61. For references to this text and its translation, see note 32 below.

excel in giving details of the many diseases and ailments tormenting the kings and their families. Leprosy, skin-diseases and especially headaches are the favourite diseases Christian authors found in the Sasanian family. These diseases serve as an easy plot to introduce either miracles, in the form of unexpected healings brought about by Christians at court, or to introduce an even more desirable accomplishment: martyrdom. Martyrdom is achieved in those cases where wicked Zoroastrian priests, or sometimes Jews, manage to convince the king or his courtiers that a certain Christian had worked magic on the poor suffering prince or princess.<sup>15</sup> In the *Church History* of Socrates of Constantinople, such a plot suddenly present us with a glimpse, however imaginary, of a subject rarely found in any source: the private devotion of the king. The king regularly withdraws to a private oratory, to pray in order to be healed. This oratory, called *oikiskon* ("little room"), does not, of course, offer the king a real retreat from the world. It rather serves as a machine for evil Zoroastrian priests, who hide under the floor and speak in the name of their gods, asking the king to punish the Christians or else continue to suffer his unbearable headaches. In this case, the priests are found out and the Christians are richly rewarded.<sup>16</sup> The story, without any doubt, does not reflect actual history. The stories in Arabic and Persian literature, on the other hand, presenting the king as handsome and healthy, do not inspire much confidence for those who are looking for "hard facts" either. As narratives and interpretations, however, these stories are of great interest and these narratives—both in words and in sequences of acts or ritual—are the subject of the present contribution.

Zoroastrian rituals have been at the centre of the history of Zoroastrianism as it has been pursued in the past forty years.<sup>17</sup> The evidence for most Zoroastrian rituals, however, in any period before Persian Zoroastrian literature (i.e. the thirteenth century), is very meagre. We have

<sup>15</sup> The theme of sickness in the Sasanian family is also prominent in Manichaean sources. As is well known, Mani introduces himself as a physician. For that image, see H.-J. Klimkeit, "Jesus, Mani and Buddha as Physicians in the Texts of the Silk Road", *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale. Da Alessandro al X secolo* (Roma, 1996), pp. 589–595.

<sup>16</sup> Socrates, *Church History*, 7.8.3–17.

<sup>17</sup> To illustrate this, it suffices, perhaps to refer to three major efforts at interpreting (early) Zoroastrian history, which share virtually nothing but the claim to be based on "ritual" as the main tool of interpretation: M. Molé, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l'Iran ancien. Le problème zoroastrien et la tradition mazdéenne* (Paris, 1963); M. Boyce, *The History of Zoroastrianism I. The Early Period* (Leiden, 1975); and J. Kellens/E. Pirart, *Les textes vieil-avestiques I. Introduction, texte et traduction* (Wiesbaden, 1988).

many words (ritual terminology) and we have at least three clusters of rituals that are known in somewhat greater detail. These are the *barašnūm* and other rites of purification, the rituals associated with death, and the rites of animal sacrifice.<sup>18</sup> For these, we can reasonably well set up a sequence of texts and acts, but for most other rituals, this has either never been attempted or is plainly impossible.<sup>19</sup> The development of the *Yasna* as ritual, for instance, is extremely vague and its history is almost entirely unknown.<sup>20</sup> A further problem in the study of Zoroastrian rituals is that the evidence we have has led us to focus mainly on priestly rituals with priestly interpretations.<sup>21</sup> Zoroastrianism is a "non-congregational" religion, which means that the community does not gather regularly—for example, once a week—for shared rituals.<sup>22</sup> There are, of course, the Gāhāmbār or seasonal community festivals, participation in which is compulsory or at the very least highly meritorious, and there are other community festivals, but essentially, there is a remarkable distinction between the daily and regularly returning rituals performed by priests and the ritual life of lay Zoroastrians, which is private or family-based.<sup>23</sup> Since the majority of Pahlavi texts were written

<sup>18</sup> For the *barašnūm*, see A. de Jong, "Purification in absentia: On the Development of Zoroastrian Ritual Practice", *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, eds J. Assmann/G.G. Stroumsa (Studies in the History of Religions 83; Leiden, 1999), pp. 301–329; for the rituals associated with death, see M. Boyce, "Corpse, Disposal of, in Zoroastrianism", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 6, 1993, pp. 279–286; for animal sacrifice, see A. de Jong, "Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Zoroastrianism: A Ritual and its Interpretations", *Sacrifice in Religious Experience*, ed. A.I. Baumgarten (Studies in the History of Religions 93; Leiden, 2002), pp. 127–148.

<sup>19</sup> This situation is likely to change in the future, with the publication of the third volume of the *Nērangestān* by F.M. Kotwal and Ph.G. Kreyenbroek, as well as in several of the contributions offered to the present volume.

<sup>20</sup> The best work we have in this respect is probably Almut Hintze's contribution to the present volume.

<sup>21</sup> The standard reference work on these priestly rituals still is J.J. Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees* (Bombay, 1937<sup>2</sup>), which will hopefully one day be replaced and updated by Dastur Kotwal and Professor J.K. Choksy.

<sup>22</sup> The focus of the present contribution is firmly on pre-modern Zoroastrian traditions, although these can never be wholly separated from modern varieties of Zoroastrianism. Even though it is written in the present tense, these statements should be taken to reflect the situation of pre-modern Zoroastrianism and do not necessarily represent the ritual reality of modern Zoroastrians.

<sup>23</sup> Traces of the religious lives of lay Zoroastrians are certainly to be found in reports on the religion of the Persians in Greek and Latin literature (for which, see A. de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Religions in the

by priests, and often on technical priestly subjects, there is a definite unbalance in the repertoire of Zoroastrian rituals we can distinguish and interpret. Here again, it would seem to be unwise to discard the very rich ritual life of contemporary Zoroastrians, focussing especially on the Gāhāmbār and family rituals, as a late phenomenon, but it is very difficult to reconstruct the history of Zoroastrian dress, family customs, the preparation of certain foods or the distribution and use of the large number of symbolic objects—mirrors, flowers and herbs, sweets, etc.—which are characteristic but very different in both the Parsi and the Irani Zoroastrian communities.<sup>24</sup>

The virtual exclusion of lay Zoroastrians from participation in the ritual life that is believed to sustain the world and the religion, would almost naturally lead to the development of special and meaningful lay rituals. This, at least, is what emerges from the study of most other religions and there is no reason to suspect that Zoroastrianism would in any way be different. In her brilliant study of the religious lives of elderly Kurdish Jewish women in Jerusalem, for instance, Susan Sered has shown how such a process might work.<sup>25</sup> These women are illiterate and are excluded by convention and by their gender from participating in central aspects of Judaism: the study of Torah and the gatherings in the synagogue. At the same time, their activities—whatever it is they are doing, mainly house-keeping, visiting a day centre and visiting tombs of Jewish saints, graves of soldiers, and other symbolic places in the state of Israel—are all very religious. That is to say, these women assign special religious significance to activities that the men observing them or even their children do not consider overly religious: food preparation,

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Graeco-Roman World 133; Leiden, 1997), as well as in Christian texts from the Sasanian period, chiefly in Syriac and Armenian.

<sup>24</sup> For non-priestly aspects of Parsi Zoroastrianism, see Ph.G. Kreyenbroek/Sh. Mushi, *Living Zoroastrianism. Urban Parsis speak about their Religion* (Richmond, 2001). A very rich source of information on all subjects mentioned (clothing, food, private rituals, etc.) is Ph.J. Godrej/F. Punthakey Mistree (eds), *A Zoroastrian Tapestry. Art, Religion & Culture* (Ahmedabad, 2002). For the rituals and the devotional year of Irani Zoroastrians, K. Nīknām, *Az nowrūz tā nowrūz. Ā'in-hā va marāsem-e sonnatī-ye zar-toštīyān-e īrān* (Tehran, 1379/2000), is very convenient.

<sup>25</sup> S. Sered, *Women as Religious Experts. The religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem* (New York, 1992). An early attempt to use Sered's insights in the study of Zoroastrianism is an essay I submitted for the Jamshid Soroush Soroushian Memorial Volume (De Jong, "Women and Ritual in Medieval Zoroastrianism"), which will hopefully be published soon.

the cleaning of the house and especially the care of the dead, more particularly of those who have died in military service. To give an example, Yom Kippur, the holiest or most solemn day of the Jewish year, a day of fasting spent by them and by their husbands in synagogue, does not have a great religious significance for these women, whereas Pesach, which is much more family-based and has a very extensive repertoire of house-cleaning and the preparation of special types of food, is the centre of their year. Sered makes a strong case for the re-recognition of the concept of "domestic religion" in order to explain the religious lives of these women and largely follows Robert Redfield's model of a "great tradition" and a "little tradition" within Judaism: the simultaneous existence of various separate but interlocking repertoires of religious beliefs and practices.

If it is possible to reconstruct meaningful layers of religious beliefs and practices in the lives of groups that enjoy less social prestige than the group responsible for the "normative" variety of a religion—the variety that is often considered to be "real" embodiment of a tradition—it seems reasonable to at least ask the question if such a special repertoire of beliefs and practices could also have existed among groups who occupy the highest positions in social stratifications. For Sasanian society, that would mean that we could ask the question whether court ceremonial and court etiquette can fruitfully be analysed as a special branch of Zoroastrian rituals.<sup>26</sup> Sasanian court rituals have rarely been taken seriously as Zoroastrian rituals but in a sense they are. That is to say, the Sasanian monarchs were Zoroastrians and the ritual life at court must have expressed this religious identity, or at least cannot have clashed with it too overtly. Much can be gained, it seems, if we try to understand Sasanian court rituals as a valid expression of a highly specialised segment of a Zoroastrian society.

The first thing that can be noted at the Sasanian court is the relatively humble position of the chief representatives of Zoroastrianism as a religion: the priests.<sup>27</sup> They are there, of course, but they do not perform the

<sup>26</sup> The obvious comparison to be made is with Byzantine court culture, which is generally held to have reflected and strengthened the Christian identity of the Byzantine Empire in a very strong way. See, for instance, A. Cameron, "The Construction of Court Ritual: The Byzantine *Book of Ceremonies*", *Rituals of Royalty. Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, eds D. Cannadine/S. Price (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 106–136.

<sup>27</sup> The position of priests at court has not been stable throughout the Sasanian period. In the late Sasanian Empire, especially the period after the destruction of the Mazdakite

most important ritual functions and they do not seem to have designed the rituals.

These rituals are known in great detail, but it is very difficult—if not impossible—to devise a chronological patterning of court culture. Many Arabic and Persian authors attribute the most important aspects of Sasanian court culture to the earliest Sasanian monarchs, Ardašīr and Šāpūr. Most modern scholars believe that they can only refer to the Sasanian Empire of the sixth century.<sup>28</sup> There is an enormous amount of work to be done in this respect and the remarks in the present contribution should only count as being very provisional. Some of the more thorny questions pertaining to Sasanian Iran will not be addressed here, especially the problem of feudalism.<sup>29</sup> More dramatically, perhaps, the most extensive work done on the subject, the work of Geo Widengren, will be ignored in the present contribution. It focuses heavily on a dragon-slaying drought-defeating New Year king in the capital of the empire, whom the present author considers to have been a scholarly myth, at least for Sasanian Iran.<sup>30</sup> The question of origins, finally, will only be assessed here very briefly, but it must at least be mentioned. Sasanian court ceremony bears an uncannily close resemblance to Byzantine court ceremony and even closer, perhaps, to the court life of the 'Abbāsīd caliphs in Baghdad. It is held almost axiomatically in modern

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movement in the late fifth and early sixth century, priests are much more conspicuous than in earlier periods.

<sup>28</sup> For a good introduction to these problems, see Z. Rubin, "The Reforms of Khusro Anūshīrwān", *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East 3. States, Resources and Armies*, ed. A. Cameron (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam; Princeton, 1985), pp. 227–297.

<sup>29</sup> Feudalism as a heuristic instrument of historical research has come under attack even for the societies that were thought to have invented it, the Western European kingdoms in the Middle Ages. See M. Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals. The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994). For Sasanian Iran, the concept has been used very enthusiastically by F. Altheim/R. Stiehl, *Ein asiatischer Staat. Feudalismus unter den Sasaniden und ihren Nachbarn* (Wiesbaden, 1954), and by G. Widengren, *Der Feudalismus im alten Iran* (Köln, 1969). Their interpretations of Sasanian society seem bizarre at the moment. For cautious remarks on the subject, see M. Zakeri, *Sāsānid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society. The Origins of Ayyārān and Futuwwa* (Wiesbaden, 1995), pp. 13–22.

<sup>30</sup> Summaries of Widengren's ideas are to be found in G. Widengren, "The Sacral Kingship of Iran", *The Sacral Kingship / La regalità sacra* (Studies in the History of Religions 4; Leiden, 1959), pp. 242–257; *id.*, "Iran, der große Gegner Roms. Königsgewalt, Feudalismus, Militärwesen", *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.9.1 (Berlin, 1976), pp. 219–306, esp. pp. 229–236.

scholarship, that both the Byzantines and the 'Abbāsids simply copied Sasanian court ritual. In the case of the 'Abbāsids, this is extremely likely and it is done even self-consciously.<sup>31</sup> In the case of the Byzantines, it is less likely, but certainly not impossible. It is important, however, to stress one fact: the Sasanians did not design or devise these rituals. Several key aspects of them are, in fact, much older and seem to derive ultimately from the rituals governing the life of the god in his temple and the life of the king in his palaces in the cities of ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>32</sup> Such key elements as the use of a curtain to separate the king from his audience and to create a special epiphany by drawing it away; the arrangements of thrones and stools for relatives, equals, and intimates; and the set order of meals, beverages, and fragrances offered to the king can be traced back several millennia. As interesting as the high antiquity of several of the ceremonies may be, however, it cannot really contribute much to a proper understanding of their meaning in Sasanian Iran.

We shall look at some of the rules and rituals at court in detail and then try to make some sense of them. For practical purposes, a single text has been chosen as the most important witness: the celebrated *Kitāb al-tāj*, or "Book of the Crown", attributed (falsely) to the famous ninth-century Arabic author al-Jāhīz.<sup>33</sup> The amount of additional information

<sup>31</sup> Much information can be found in A. Al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship. Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian, and Pagan Politics* (London, 1997). L. Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 66–90 gives a fascinating interpretation of some of the most important underlying intellectual trends.

<sup>32</sup> J. Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, 2001), pp. 114–170, is a highly readable introduction with a strong focus on the temple cult. See also A.L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia. Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago, 1977<sup>2</sup>), pp. 183–198. For connections with Iranian traditions, see A. Panaino, "The Mesopotamian Heritage of Achaemenian Kingship", *The Heirs of Assyria*, eds S. Aro/R.M. Whiting (Melammu Symposia 1; Helsinki, 2000), pp. 35–49, with references.

<sup>33</sup> The text was edited by A. Zakī Bāšā (A. Zéki Pacha), *Kitāb al-tāj ft axlāq al-mulūk al-jāhīz* (Cairo, 1914; henceforth KT). A convenient translation with a good introduction can be found in C. Pellat, *Le livre de la couronne* (Paris, 1954; henceforth LC), who shows that the book must have been written by an Iranian, whose knowledge of Persian culture was vastly greater than the elegance of his Arabic. For the text, see also the interesting observations by F. Gabrieli, "Etichetta di corte e costumi Sāsānidi nel *Kitāb Ahlāq al-Mulūk* di al- jāhīz", *Rivista degli studi orientali* 11, 1926–1928, pp. 292–305. For the Middle Persian genre of the *Tāj-nāmag* or "Book of the Crown" and its many reflexes in Arabic literature, see the survey in M. Mohammadi, *La traduction des livres pehlevi en arabe dans les premiers siècles de l'Islam. Tome 1: Les "Tad-jnamaghs" et "Ayennamaghs"* (Beyrouth, 1964; in Arabic), pp. 18–228.

in Arabic and Persian texts (al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha'ālibī and al-Mas'ūdī in particular, with a late reflex in the Persian *Sīyāsat-Nāmeḥ* of Niẓām al-Mulk) is truly staggering, but for the purposes of our analysis this single text will, hopefully, prove adequate.

The body of a king had to be intact. Deformations, missing body parts, blindness and failing mental capacities automatically disqualified a person for becoming king. This opened the way, as one can imagine, for maiming and especially blinding potential rivals, thus barring them from any claim to the throne. These procedures are mentioned with great regularity.<sup>34</sup> As long as he was mentally and physically unobjectionable, everything else about the king and his body could be helped. For public occasions, occurring daily as far as we know, but especially for larger or more important public appearances, the king's body was perfumed, his face was covered in make-up, his beard was gilded and his body was clothed with vestments shining with gold and jewels. His head was covered with a diadem and more elaborate headgear, leaving only knotted tresses of hair floating freely or tied with coloured ribbons.<sup>35</sup> The horse of the king was by definition the finest horse around and those who accompanied the king had to make sure that their horse was no match for the king's, and also that it would neither whinny nor urinate.<sup>36</sup> The whereabouts of the king at night were unknown. No one was allowed to know where the king would sleep. Several authors mention the fact that the king had forty bedrooms and chose one at random; he often ended up sleeping in none of them, but falling asleep on a chair, using his arm for a pillow.<sup>37</sup>

The most detailed rules governed public and private audiences in the palace. These are the occasions where the curtain comes in. The king would be seated on a bench with three pillows, wearing his costly gar-

<sup>34</sup> See the comments of C.E. Bosworth to al-Ṭabarī's remark that it was a Persian custom not to raise "anyone to kingly power who had a physical defect." C.E. Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī V. The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakmids, and Yemen* (Albany, 1999), p. 42 with n. 128. See also J.N. Bremmer, "Medon. The Case of the Bodily Blemished King", *Perennitas. Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich*, ed. G. Piccaluga (Rome, 1980), pp. 68–76.

<sup>35</sup> Such descriptions of the king are collected by M. Abka'i-Khavari, *Das Bild des Königs in der Sasanidenzeit. Schriftliche Überlieferungen im Vergleich mit Antiquaria* (Texte und Studien zur Orientalistik 13; Hildesheim, 2000), a most uncritical work that is mainly useful for its patient listing of passages from Ferdowsī's *Šāhnāmeḥ*.

<sup>36</sup> KT 77–78; LC 106–108.

<sup>37</sup> KT 124; LC 144.

ments, right under the jewel-studded golden crown, which was so heavy that his head could not support it: it was suspended from the ceiling by means of an "invisible" golden chain.<sup>38</sup> A curtain separated the king from the rest of the audience hall. At some occasions, the curtain could suddenly be drawn away. This seems to have happened at the largest type of public audiences, involving not only the courtiers themselves, but also many others drawn to the palace from among the common people. On many occasions, however, the king remained hidden from sight behind his curtain, eating alone until the moment came for laughter and enjoyment. At that moment, the king summoned the keeper of the curtain, *xurram-bāš*,<sup>39</sup> and gave him instructions: such and such a song must be played or jokes must be told. While the king was conferring with the *xurram-bāš*, no one was allowed to speak. During the laughter, music and general merriment, the king would drink wine and receive written requests from the courtiers and assess those. Those who tried to take advantage of the king's inebriated status would eventually be punished.<sup>40</sup>

The court knew a very strict, but never very stable hierarchy expressed in sitting arrangements: princes of the blood, high priests, military leaders, fellow kings and emperors all had their assigned places in the audience hall. They sat at specified distances from the curtain. Interestingly enough, a place of considerable honour was reserved for jesters and musicians, who also performed an important role in the daily gatherings. Generally, of course, one can say that Zoroastrianism values happiness and laughter and merriment. We know so little about music in Zo-

<sup>38</sup> For these matters (with the relevant references to the plaster copy of this type of crown with chain that was found in the Umayyad palace in Khirbat al-Mafjar), see Sh. Shaked, "From Iran to Islam: On Some Symbols of Royalty", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7, 1986, pp. 75-91. The bench with the three pillows is most famously illustrated on the Sasanian engraved rock crystal that is the centre of the so-called "Cup of Solomon" from the treasury of the abbey of Saint-Denis, currently in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris.

<sup>39</sup> This is a problematic title. It seems to be proper Persian and means "be happy." If the title is genuine (it has not been preserved in Middle Persian), it must derive from the words spoken by this official to introduce people to the king. Such phrases are extant only in Arabic, but the one given by pseudo-Jāhīz is not an invitation to be happy or at ease, but one to hold one's tongue (KT 28; LC 56). The prescribed formula for greeting the king is much better attested. It consisted chiefly of the wish "May you be immortal!" (Middle Persian *anōšag bawēd*).

<sup>40</sup> KT 28-29; LC 56-57.

roastrian history, however, that it is difficult to assess the importance of musicians at the royal court. One thing is clear: the presence of jesters, clowns and musicians signalled the stability and prosperity of the Empire.<sup>41</sup> When all was quiet in the Empire; when there were no wars along its long and indefensible borders; and when there were no heretics threatening to disrupt everything, jesters would perform their tricks and singers would sing their songs. In cases of adversity, however, they were banned from the audience hall, together with the tables and stools, thrones and most of the courtiers. Only a select number of people remained, sharing a single table next to the king, on which there would be bread, salt, vinegar and vegetables only. Meals were sober and there was no time for merriment. When the affair had been settled, court life would resume as usual.<sup>42</sup>

Many more details could be added, but it is perhaps more interesting to ask some pertinent questions and see where all this is leading. We shall encounter more antiquarian details as we survey the field. As anyone who has ever worked on these materials will realise, the life at court clearly is the reflection of an image of society. In various gatherings and ritual institutions, the classes of society, the religious communities of the Empire, as well as representatives from outside the Empire—ambassadors and spies—were all represented and recognised at the Empire's centre. At the two main festivals of the year, Nowrūz and Mihragān, the ties that bound the various groups and communities to the king were re-established in a very intricate display of exchanging gifts.

Since the king was the undisputed centre of the system, his central and unique position was constantly given shape. Literally everything that pertained to the king was different: his perfumes, his dress, the way he wore his hair, the presence or absence of diadem, turban, or crown, where he would sleep or sit or eat. When the king spoke or ate, no one was allowed to speak; when the king moved his hand towards his plate, no one was allowed to approach his plate any longer; when the king took a bite of food, no one was allowed to chew. When the king was bled or used medicine, no one was allowed to do so. Most of these examples are from the *Kitāb al-tāj*, a text that is literally obsessed with this notion of

<sup>41</sup> The combination of kings and clowns inevitably brings to memory the breathtaking study of D.D. Shulman, *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* (Princeton, 1985), which is a most valuable study, particularly because it shows that court rituals can be developed in very unexpected religious directions.

<sup>42</sup> KT 173–174; LC 190–191.

the display of royal difference.

The required characteristics of the king also found many external shapes: his manliness and strength were underscored by his hunting trips and sports competitions. His being in control of the Empire was made manifest in his ability to enjoy music, wine, and laughter. His patronage of Zoroastrianism is evident from endowments made to important fires, the sponsoring of festivals and other religious institutions. His most important role as guarantor and dispenser of justice found a well-known ritual form in the greatest of the public audiences, those associated with Nowrūz and Mihragān, during which—at least in theory—every single inhabitant of the Empire could come forward and demand justice.

Pseudo-Jāḥiḻ as a very interesting description of such a public audience, which one may suspect to have been an engineered ritual beginning of such ceremonies. He says that during the public audiences of Nowrūz and Mihragān, complaints against the king took precedence: they were heard first. Such complaints as there were were gathered. The king would summon the Grand Mowbed, the Grand Secretary and the Chief of the Fire-Priests—whoever he may be—and a herald shouted: "Let he who has a complaint against the King come forward!" At that moment, when the complainants came forward, the king would kneel before the Grand Mowbed, among his accusers, and give a lengthy speech. In this speech, he outlined that the greatest evil of all is to be found in an unjust king. The Grand Mowbed would hear the case and examine it. If the complaint was found to be just, the king had to make amends. If not, the complainant was arrested, punished for all to see and thrown into jail. When the complaints against the king were finished, he would rise, praise God, put on his crown, sit on the throne and explain to his intimates that in the King's justice, the most intimate friend and the most unknown subject, the weakest and the strongest were all equal.<sup>43</sup> In reality, one would have to believe that it would be extremely hazardous for anyone to bring forward a complaint against the king, and very unlikely that his main priest, the *mowbedān mowbed*, would ever rule against him. The text of pseudo-Jāḥiḻ strongly suggests that the accusations against the king, their treatment by the Grand Mowbed, and their settlement were carefully doctored and that these accusations were, in fact, a ritual manifestation of the king's justice.

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<sup>43</sup> KT 159-163; LC 179-182.

Where the social, political, and economic aspects of these rituals are fairly clear, in the sense that we can understand how they work—and they seem to have worked very well—the ideological and religious aspects of the rituals are much less clear. Obviously, the easiest solution would be to say that there are no religious aspects, that they are all secular rituals. This, however, does not seem to be the case, but it is by no means easy to assess the relations between these rituals and the religious traditions of Zoroastrianism. The argument presented here will, therefore, be rather schematic, but hopefully, it will be clear.

There is a definite tension between the Zoroastrian idea that every man and every woman can equally contribute to the common goal, the maintenance of the religion and the battle against evil, and the very unique position of the king.<sup>44</sup> The system of monarchy requires that the king must not be entirely like his subjects. The stricture of Zoroastrianism on this requirement is that he cannot be entirely unlike his subject, that is to say, he cannot be a god. These, it seems, are the boundaries that are constantly being negotiated and probably one of the main reasons why the ritual worked. There is massive evidence in Zoroastrian traditions for the practice of associating people very closely with the gods. There is no evidence whatsoever of people actually turning into gods.<sup>45</sup> The ninth-century theologian Zādspram can mention the *yazadān-cihrih* or “divine nature” of Zarathustra without any problems and the Sasanian kings an use almost the same words to claim their divine rights to the throne, because no contemporary would ever assume that they had in that sense crossed the line between what is normal—attempting to em-

<sup>44</sup> For the much-discussed “religious equality” of all men and women, see A. de Jong, “Jeh the Primal Whore? Observations on Zoroastrian Misogyny”, *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, eds R. Kloppenborg/W.J. Hanegraaff (Studies in the History of Religions 66; Leiden, 1995), pp. 15–41, esp. pp. 23–25; De Jong, “Purification in *absentia*”, *passim*.

<sup>45</sup> There are, as always, some troublesome exceptions. Yima, the first king, seems to develop into a god sometimes. For Yima, see Sh. Shaked, “First Man, First King. Notes on Semitic-Iranian Syncretism and Iranian Mythological Transformations”, *Gilgul. Essays on Transformation, Revolution and Permanence in the History of Religions. Dedicated to R.J. Zwi Werblowsky*, eds Sh. Shaked/D. Shulman/G.G. Stroumsa. (Studies in the History of Religions 50; Leiden, 1987), pp. 238–256. Ferīdūn also receives divine honours in some late prayers and turned into a god in Manichaeism, eventually even reaching “Western” types of Gnosticism: A. Böhlig, “Jacob as an Angel in Gnosticism and Manichaeism”, *Nag Hammadi and Gnosis*, ed. R. McL. Wilson (Nag Hammadi Studies 14; Leiden, 1978), pp. 122–131, esp. pp. 127–129. Both, however, seem to be special cases and at least for more recent men, deification is unknown.

body the aspects of the world of good—and what is insane—claiming to be a god.<sup>46</sup> Jamšīd's life-story circles around this problem and it is well-known that, in later traditions, he ended up in hell and was only gradually moved up to Lord of Limbo because of his confession to Zarathustra.<sup>47</sup>

Foreign observers and later Muslim reports, it is true, interpreted things differently and emphatically affirmed that the Sasanian kings presented themselves or thought of themselves as gods. Their reliability, however, appears to be heavily compromised by discussions on proper religious behaviour with regard to the king in their own religious traditions, Christianity and Islam.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> For Zādspram, see *Wizīdaghā ī Zādspram* 12.9 in Ph. Gignoux/A. Tafazzoli, *Anthologie de Zādspram* (Studia Iranica Cahier 13; Paris, 1993), *ad locum*. The Sasanian kings, in the early inscriptions, refer to themselves with the words *kē cīhr az yazdān*, "whose origin/essence/nature is of the gods." These words have been discussed very often and there seems to be a general consensus that they do *not* present the kings as gods, but lay a claim to the divine rights of the kings to their throne. Most references to recent discussions, but disappointingly little in terms of interpretation, can be found in Ph. Huyse, *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka'ba-I Zardušt (ŠKZ)* (Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum III.I.I; London, 1999), vol. 2, pp. 11–12. The best discussion still is W. Sundermann, "Kē cīhr az yazdān. Zur Titulatur der Sasanidenkönige", *Archiv Orientalní* 56, 1988, pp. 338–340. Much the same should be said about the practice of reserving the title *bay* ("Lord") for the kings. There is no doubt that the word can also mean "god", but it seems to have acquired the more general meaning of "lord" in a comparatively early period. See, for instance, R.N. Frye, "Gestures of Deference to Royalty in Ancient Iran", *Iranica Antiqua* 9, 1972, pp. 102–107; M. Boyce, "Varuna the Baga", *Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne I* (Acta Iranica 21; Leiden, 1981), pp. 59–73. Huyse's decision to retain the meaning "god", because Iranians would always have known the "original" meaning of the word is logically obscure.

<sup>47</sup> For this episode, see the *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 31, in A.V. Williams, *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* (Historisk-filosofiske Meddelelser 60; Copenhagen, 1990), with commentary *ad locum*.

<sup>48</sup> For a survey of such information, see M. Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras. Geschichte – Gegenwart – Rituale*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 2002), pp. 209–210. For Muslim discussions, see al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*; for Byzantine realities (though mostly of a later date), see G. Dagron, *Empereur et prêtre. Étude sur le "césaropapisme" byzantin* (Paris, 1996). Underlying many of the discussions are the difficulties of interpreting the cult of the emperors in the Roman Empire. See, for instance, S. Price, *Rituals and Power. The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1984); M. Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott. Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart, 1999). Interesting observations, partially overlapping with suggestions made in the present contribution, are given by P. Veyne, "Qu'était-ce qu'un empereur romain? Dieu parce qu'empereur", *Diogenes* 199, 2002, pp. 3–25.

The elaborateness of court ceremony has another important effect: it separates the personality of the king as much as it can from his function. The chief complaint of most authors against those kings, who went out of favour, is that they could not live up to their function, but allowed personal feelings and ideas to influence the affairs of the realm. The most notorious example is the universally hated king Yazdegerd I. This king, who earned the epithet "the Sinner" (*bazakkar*) in the Sasanian tradition, is also said—not surprisingly—to have introduced fundamental changes in the most important royal ritual, the public audiences at Nowrūz and Mihragān.<sup>49</sup> He is characterised by al-Ṭabarī as follows:

[H]e was rough and harsh and possessed many defects. One of the worst and most serious of these last, it is said, was that he did not use his keenness of intellect, his good education, and the wide-ranging varieties of knowledge he had thoroughly mastered in their proper place, and also his extensive delving into harmful things and his use of all the powers he possessed for deceiving people, using his sharpness, wiles, and trickery — all this together with his keen mind, which had a propensity toward evil-doing, and his intense enjoyment in employing these faculties of his.<sup>50</sup>

Here too, there seems to be an opening for an important distinction: the office of the king has clear religious implications and meanings, but these do not pertain to the king as person. It is a strange fact that there are no kings in heaven. We know of several legendary and historical men, who travelled to the hereafter in this life: Ardā Wīrāz, Kerdīr, king Wištāsp, the patron of Zarathustra, and Zarathustra himself. None of them ever mentions meeting or seeing a "king" (Middle Persian *šāh*) in heaven.<sup>51</sup> Ardā Wīrāz sees sovereigns and rulers in heaven, but the title "king" is conspicuously absent from his account.<sup>52</sup> It would seem, therefore, that kingship is an office left behind when the king dies, because as on earth, there can only be one king in heaven and that is Ohrmazd.<sup>53</sup> Heaven, certainly in the *Book of Ardā Wīrāz*, is described as a palace, with Ohrmazd as king and his fellow gods as his intimate courtiers; with the same organisation of gifts and displays of sovereignty. Since this imagery is absent from the

<sup>49</sup> KT 163; LC 181–182.

<sup>50</sup> Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī* 5, p. 70.

<sup>51</sup> For the theme of heavenly journeys, see S. Shaked, "Quests and Visionary Journeys in Sasanian Iran", *Transformations of the Inner Self*, eds Assmann/Stroumsa, pp. 65–86.

<sup>52</sup> For the journey of Ardā Wīrāz, see Ph. Gignoux, *Le livre d'Ardā Wīrāz* (Paris, 1984).

<sup>53</sup> For Ohrmazd as king, see the remarks in de Jong, "Jeh the Primal Whore?", p. 34.

Avesta, one can assume that it was copied from earthly practices, but in Sasanian times, of course, these traditions must have been old and people may have been inclined to see the relation in reverse terms.

The dramatic language and performance of hiding and revealing forms an important part of court ritual. Certainly, the large audiences, with the king dressed in gold and jewels, sitting under the crown on his bench, holding a sceptre, in a magnificent giant hall that was painted, decorated with mosaics and gold revealing cosmic symbols, would in the eyes of many almost reveal the king to be a god. But the "almost" is important here. Man can neither be nor create a god. In his breathtaking analysis of the "construction" of religious images in Graeco-Roman antiquity, Richard Gordon has suggested how subtly ancient Greeks and Romans could "gamble with the impermissible", by at once asserting and denying that statues or painted figures are alive: "'Living' is broken down into its denotations: breath, sight, feelings, movement, skin-sheen, facial expression. So far as one or two of these denotations may be taken as 'sufficient' evidence of 'life', the images live. But the whole inventory is never present, and the attempt to pass into the realm of the impermissible always fails."<sup>54</sup> Something similar seems to apply to Sasanian (and other) court rituals. Zoroastrians believed that piety and justice could manifest themselves in persons. One of the ways in which they could do that is, simply, success.<sup>55</sup> The display of the king in the grand audiences certainly presents the king as a cosmic ruler, but it would always be possible—and we indeed find this—that the wealth and good looks of the monarch are presented not to paint him as a semi-divine being, but as the chief model of piety and justice, the accomplishment of mankind.

This leads to a central problem: the notion of *xwarrah* or "divine glory." This notion has been discussed extensively and is often thought to have been the single most important aspect of Iranian kingship, from its inception up to and including the rise of the 'Abbāsids.<sup>56</sup> Every animal in Sa-

<sup>54</sup> R.L. Gordon, "The Real and the Imaginary: Production and Religion in the Graeco-Roman World", *Art History* 2, 1979, pp. 5–34, esp. pp. 10–11 (reprinted in: R.L. Gordon, *Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World. Studies in Mithraism and Religious Art* (Aldershot, 1996), nr. 1).

<sup>55</sup> *Sad dar Bondahesh* 88 and *Sad dar Nasr* 56, for instance, both contain the ruling that the observance of the rules concerning urinating will ensure that one's words will be well received by the king and that one will be successful in one's dealings.

<sup>56</sup> For the notion, see A. de Jong, "Khvarenah", *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, eds K. van der Toorn/B. Becking/P.W. van der Horst (Leiden, 1999<sup>2</sup>), pp. 481–483, with references. For *xwarrah* in the Sasanian Empire, see below.

sanian art as well as every pearl, ruby, emerald, ribbon, and tress on the king's body has been explained by art historians as visible manifestations of *xwarrah*.<sup>57</sup> If *xwarrah* can manifest itself so profusely in Sasanian art, one would almost have to believe that it was a very common commodity, which it certainly was not. The fact is, that *xwarrah* is almost entirely absent from royal inscriptions. There are a few exceptions: in the inscription of king Narseh (r. 293–301) in Paikuli, the (less than fortunate) king is urged by one of his supporters to bring back the Glory and the realm and his throne and honour that used to belong to his ancestors. On the coins of some late Sasanian monarchs, moreover, we find the legend *GDH 'pzwt* (*xwarrah abzūd*), which could mean "Glory has increased."<sup>58</sup> The coins offer a real problem; especially the late occurrence of the legend may illustrate the increasing importance of the concept of *xwarrah* in Sasanian royal ideology. It is important, however, to stress that in the Paikuli inscription the king does *not* claim to possess *xwarrah*, but is urged to reclaim it by a second party. On the coins, the phrase can mean many things, but the most natural interpretation of the phrase appears to be that Glory has increased in the realm, not that it attaches in any special way to the king.

In similar cases, the possession of *xwarrah* is quite commonly attributed to the king: the Sasanian dynastic history almost routinely ascribes possession of *xwarrah* to the ruling monarch. Obviously, the dreams and portents in the *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*—images of radiance and the appearance of the royal Glory in animal shapes—fulfil this function.<sup>59</sup> In the Islamic traditions on the Sasanian kings, the concept is ubiquitous. We have no textual evidence, however, to suggest that the Sasanian kings claimed *xwarrah* for themselves.

<sup>57</sup> I may perhaps be forgiven for referring to only one book, precisely because it is such a remarkably good book. J. Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor* (Baghdader Mitteilungen 5; Mainz, 1982) contains an admirable discussion of the relations between art and religion in Sasanian Iran, on pp. 264–276. Throughout the book, one finds references to the ram, birds, hunting and the body of the king, all interpreted in terms of *xwarrah*.

<sup>58</sup> For the inscription of Narseh, see P.O. Skjærvø, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli 3.1 Restored Text and Translation* (Wiesbaden, 1983), § 18 on pp. 34–35; and P.O. Skjærvø, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli 3.2. Commentary* (Wiesbaden, 1983), p. 51; for the Sasanian coins (of Husraw II, r. 590–628), see the discussion of R. Gyselen, "Un dieu nimbé de flammes", *Iranica Antiqua* 35, 2000, pp. 291–314 (although it will be evident that I do not share her interpretation).

<sup>59</sup> For editions and translations of this text, see Cereti, *La letteratura pahlavi*, pp. 192–200.

The imbalance between these perceived art historical data and the virtual absence of textual data makes the assumption that *xwarrah* was a central concept in Sasanian royal ideology difficult to uphold. The notion does not seem to have been exploited widely—at least not overtly—in royal ritual, royal art or royal ideology. If this is found to be true, one can suggest only one likely background to this fact: *xwarrah* is this mysterious element bestowed by the gods, which one can never presume to possess oneself. That would be the closest one could get to a Zoroastrian parallel to the Greek notion of *hybris*. Others are necessarily the judges of one's possession of *xwarrah*. To claim *xwarrah* for oneself is a dangerous presumption, but there is an even more important danger: that others would believe that the king could actually dispense some of his *xwarrah*. That, I would suggest, would be the breaking point at which the borders that cannot be crossed, between man and god, would have been crossed. There are, of course, examples in the Islamic world, for instance, and in medieval Western Europe, of the king dispensing *baraka*, blessing and healing, but there are no indications of similar beliefs in Sasanian Iran—where the king dispenses justice only—and they are in fact unlikely to have existed.

It has become fashionable in some circles to see or present religion, art, and statehood as symbolic languages or taxonomies of power.<sup>60</sup> While we may not all be as fashionable as that, it would seem that such a perspective could enable us to reconstruct the intricate ways in which these three symbolic languages interacted and influenced each other. That is a vast project, which cannot be dissolved into ready-made categories or concepts,<sup>61</sup> but which will ultimately enable us to gain a better understanding of the complex and uneasy relations between religion and court in a Zoroastrian empire.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Gordon, "The Real and the Imaginary", *passim*.

<sup>61</sup> Much can be gained if we abandon questions such as "Did the Sasanian practise 'divine kingship' or 'sacral kingship'?" although one can easily admire the learning evident from J.K. Choksy's attempt to answer that question: J.K. Choksy, "Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran", *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, N.S. 2, 1988, pp. 35–52.

<sup>62</sup> An exemplary study in this respect is M. Whitby, "The Persian King at War", *The Roman and Byzantine Army in the East*, ed. E. Dąbrowa (Kraków, 1994), pp. 227–263.