

HISTORY, EPIC, AND NUMISMATICS: ON THE TITLE OF YAZDGERD I (*RĀMŠAHR*)

TOURAJ DARYAEE*

The early Sasanian kings proclaimed to be from the race of the gods. This is clear from their royal inscriptions as well as the legends on their coins starting with Ardashīr I to the fourth century CE. Ardashīr's inscription at Naqš-e Rostam reads:

ptkr-y ZNH mzdysn bg-y 'rthštr MLK'n MLK' 'yr'n
MNW ctr-y MN yz'n BRH bg-y p'pk-y MLK'
pahikar ēn mazdēsn bayardaxšīr šāhān šāh ērān
kē čīhr az yazdān pūs baypābag šāh

“This is the image of the Mazdaean Majesty,
Ardaxšīr, King of Kings of Ērān, whose origin is from the
gods, son of the Majesty King Pābag.”¹

With Ardashīr II (379–383 CE), the Sasanian kings began to adopt alternative titles which did not connect them to the gods anymore. By the end of the fourth century CE, the kings only proclaimed to be *mzdysn* “Mazdaean” and *MLK'n MLK'* “King of Kings”, and the legends for unknown and yet unexplained reasons became much

* Department of History, California State University at Fullerton, Fullerton CA 92834, USA (tdaryaee@fullerton.edu).

¹ I have adopted H. Humbach and P.O. Skjærvø's (1983: 27) translation. For the inscriptions see Back (1978: 281).

shorter. However, with Yazdgerd I (399–420 CE), a new title is inscribed on his coins which reads *l'mšty*. The late eminent Austrian numismatist, Robert Göbl, translated the title as “Delight of the Empire” (Göbl 1983: 330). As he noted, the legend usually begins at 11 o'clock and runs counterclockwise and continues in a second line due to the length of the legend (Göbl 1983: 330). There is no problem with Göbl's concise description of Yazdgerd's coinage, but I believe the title needs to be translated somewhat differently in light of the historical and epic material. This brief essay will discuss the origin and meaning of the title as well as its importance not only for Sasanian numismatics, but also for Sasanian history and epic, which demonstrate their often-interrelated aspects.

THE OBERVERSE LEGEND

There is little need to describe the silver coinage (*drahm*) of Yazdgerd I since it portrays the king's bust on the obverse as most Sasanian coins do (Figure 1). His name *yzdkrt* “Yazdgerd” is struck on the right side of the bust and the title of *l'mšty* on the left side of the bust. As mentioned, I believe the title needs to be translated differently in light of the historical evidence. The word *l'm / rām* can be translated as “peace”, “ease”, “pleasure”, “joy”, or “satisfaction”, but as we will see, in Yazdgerd's case “peace” is the most plausible option. Considering the relatively contemporaneous Manichaean material, in which *r'myšn* means “peace” and *r'myn-* “to bring peace”, Yazdgerd's legend should be translated similarly.

Avestan *rāmaya-* “to calm”, and *rāman-* “peace” also further this suggestion. Such Middle Persian words as *rāmēnīdār* “one who brings



Figure 1. Drahm of Yazdgerd I (ANS 1940.209.60).

peace”, *rāmišn* “peace”, and also Persian *ārāmiš* “peace” all support the same reading (Nyberg 1974: 166). The second component of the title is well known, where *štyl* / *šahr* > (Old Persian) *xšaça-* renders “dominion, kingdom, empire, realm”.² We should not forget that on the right side of the bust the name of the ruler, *yzdkrt*, is also inscribed. Thus the legend should be read as *yzdkrt l’mštry* / *yazdgerd rāmšahr*, which translates as “Yazdgerd, who maintains peace in (his) dominion”.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE TITLE

We must try to identify the possible reasons for which Yazdgerd I chose to have this title struck on his coinage. It is noteworthy that the Arabic and Persian sources are unanimous in portraying Yazdgerd I in a negative light. He is given the epithet of *al-athīm* “sinner” in the Arabic historical sources, which corresponds to his Persian title of *bezehkar* “sinner” (al-Tabarī, p. 70). Al-Jāhiz states that he “changed the traditions of the Sasanian dynasty, agitated the earth, oppressed the people and was tyrannical and corrupt” (Zeki Pasha 1914: 163; Frye 1983: 143). In the *Mujmal al-Tawārikh* his reign is summed up in one paragraph with the introductory sentence of “He did nothing except tyranny” (*Mujmal al-tawārikh*, p. 68). But we have to remember that this “sinfulness” of Yazdgerd I is only apparent from sources which were derived from a Sasanian tradition under Zoroastrian priestly influence.

There are several reasons for which Yazdgerd has received the title of “sinner” as opposed to *rāmšahr*, which was struck on his coins. First, he is known to have reduced the power of the grandees (*wuzurgān*) and the Zoroastrian priests (*mowbedān*) (*Mujmal al-tawārikh*, p. 143). In fact Socrates Scholasticus (8.7.9) states that Yazdgerd I ordered that the tribe of magi (μάγοι) should be decimated (Ἀπεδεκάτωσε). This statement ties in with Yazdgerd’s religious policy not only towards the Zoroastrians, but also the other religious communities within his empire.

² Also Avestan *xšaθra-*; Parthian *hštr*; Manichaean Parthian and Manichaean Middle Persian *šhr* “world, kingdom, aeon,” Pazand *šahr*; also Persian *šahr* “city, dwelling,” (Nyberg 1974: 183).

In the Judeo-Christian material we find that Yazdgerd I is seen in quite a positive light. In these sources he is portrayed as a benevolent king who was religiously tolerant of all and allowed them to live comfortably among others, thrive, and even become strong as a community. His open mindedness towards other religious groups may be seen even in the Zoroastrian sources, where he is connected with the Jewish community. We know that Yazdgerd married Šišinduxt, the daughter of the Jewish exilarch (Darmesteter 1889: 41-42; Gray 1916: 465). A Middle Persian Zoroastrian text, the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* has a passage in this regard (ŠĒ 47):

*šahrestān (ī) šūs ud šūstar šišinduxt zan ī yazdgird
šābūhrān kard čiyōn duxt ī rēš-galūdag yahūdagān
šāh mād-iz ī wahrām ī gōr būd*

“The city of Šūs and Šūstar were built by Šišinduxt, the wife of Yazdgerd, the son of Šābuhr, since she was the daughter of Reš Galut, the king of the Jews and also the mother of Wahrām Gōr.”

In the Talmudic sources, as well, Yazdgerd I is mentioned with respect and honor as being knowledgeable about Judaism (Neusner 1983: 915). In the Syriac texts he is given the epithets *malkā zakāyā wʿanaṣīhā* “the victorious and glorious king” (Asmussen 1983: 940). It is during his reign that Christianity in the empire became officially tolerated, and it was this action of Yazdgerd I which opened the path for the increase in the number of Christians in Persia (Socrates Scholasticus 8.7.9).

His foreign policy clearly demonstrates why he would have been considered *rāmšahr*. Yazdgerd I was responsible for bringing an end to hostility with the Roman empire. The Roman emperor Arcadius had sent Marutha the bishop of Maiferqaṭ, to make peace arrangements with the Sasanians, which came to fruition in 409 CE (Frye 1983: 143). Agathias, who rarely has anything kind to say about a Persian king, states these words about Yazdgerd: “he never waged war against the Romans or harmed in any other way, but his attitude was consistently *peaceful*” (Agathias 4.26.8).³

³ For the treatment of the Sasanians by Agathias see Cameron (1969-70).

So his tolerance and peaceful treatment of all people in the empire would have been one reason for which he adopted the title of *rāmšahr*. Secondly, his peaceful relations with the Romans, which ended a long period of the Perso-Roman wars, would have been a second reason for him to strike the legend *rāmšahr* on his coinage.

RĀMŠAHR AND SASANIAN IMPERIAL PROPAGANDA

The title is interesting in that no preceding Sasanian king ever used the title of *rāmšahr*. It must be noted that after Yazdgerd I, in the fifth century CE, the kings began to strike coins with the title, *kay* “Kayānid”. This demonstrated their affinity with the Kayānian rulers mentioned in the *Avesta*. This Avestan orientation became a main component of Sasanian imperial ideology from the fifth century onwards (Daryaei 1995; Shahbazi 2001). The inclusion of the Middle Persian *xwarrah* “glory” from the reign of Xusrō II in 591 CE also furthered this interest in the Kayānian dynasts by the Sasanians. What is significant is that the title *rāmšahr* “who brings peace in (his) dominion” may also be connected with the Kayānian kings, at least as the Sasanians understood the title.

It can be said that the adoption of the title *rāmšahr* already signified Sasanian adoption of Kayānian ideology. This is based on the occurrence of the title for Kay Wištāsp, the patron of Zoroaster in Middle Persian texts.⁴ This fact is clearly seen in the epic text, the *Ayādgār ī Zarērān* (The Memoir of Zarēr), which goes back at least to the Parthian period. In this text Kay Wištāsp is given this title (Monchi-Zadeh 1981: 46; Gheiby 1999: 21). The epic story which must have been current in the Parthian period and then adopted by the Sasanians and perhaps even performed, is about the religious wars between the Iranians and Tūrānians. The minister of Kay Wištāsp, named Jāmāsp foretells the unavoidable fate of the Persian heroes and noble sons in the face of the enemies’ onslaught. Kay Wištāsp becomes despondent

⁴ The *Dēnkard* (DkM, 600.12) supplies *rāmšāh* for the title of Kay Wištāsp, which should be emended to *rāmšahr* (Shaki 1986: 265). Still, in the Persian texts we find *rām* [*w*]ištāspān (*Mujmal al-tawārikh*, p. 52).

over this news. Jāmāsp, in telling him that it may be possible to protect these nobles through building of a magical fortress, calls the king *rāmšahr kay wištāsp šāh* “Kayānian king Wištāsp, who maintains peace in (his) dominion,” which is similar to *yazdgerd rāmšahr* “Yazdgerd who maintains peace in (his) dominion” on the king’s coinage.

Based on this evidence one can suggest that in fact the idea of adoption of Kayānian ideology by the Sasanian kings did not begin with the adoption of the legend *kay*, but in the late fourth, early fifth centuries CE title of *rāmšahr*. It was only after the adoption of the title *rāmšahr* by Yazdgerd I that the preoccupation with Kayānid ideology and history led to the title of *Kay* and finally bore the legend *xwarrah* (Glory), both being struck on the Sasanian coins. This Kayānid ideology would last until the end of Yazdgerd III’s rule in the seventh century. In effect the Kayānid cycle of Sasanian imperial ideology began with *rāmšahr* and not *kay* in the last year of the fourth century CE.

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