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Celestial Kingship: The Sasanian King as the Terrestrial Agent of Shahrewar

Sorour KHORASHADI *, Raheleh KHERADMAND , Mehdi MOUSAVI KOUHPAR 

Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract: *The Sasanian dynasty sacralized kingship through divine sanction, using royal iconography to legitimize authority. This article aims to study how Sasanian royal iconography served as a visual strategy to legitimize political authority by sacralizing kingship. Moving beyond stylistic analysis, it offers an interdisciplinary approach, connecting art to theological texts and sociological theory. By analyzing rock reliefs, coins, and metalwork alongside Zoroastrian literature and Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority, the research demonstrates how kings were portrayed as divine warriors. The findings reveal that this imagery deliberately aligned rulers with Shahrewar, the divinity of justice and rulership, casting them as his earthly agent and executive representative. This strategy not only justified Sasanian rule but also fostered political unity, underscoring the powerful role of visual culture in shaping ideological and collective identity.*

Keywords: Sasanian King, Zoroastrianism, Mithra, Anahita, Shahrewar, Iconography

Introduction

The Sasanian Empire (224-651 CE) represents a pivotal era in ancient Iranian history, characterized by a profound and deliberate fusion of religious and political authority. The Sasanian kings did not merely rule; they cultivated a sacralized kingship that portrayed them as divinely sanctioned guardians of Zoroastrian cosmic order (asha). This synthesis was not innovation *ex nihilo*, but a strategic reactivation of ancient Iranian traditions, wherein legitimate kingship was viewed as a divine mandate granted by Ahura Mazda. Achaemenid royal inscriptions had already established this paradigm with formulaic precision. Darius I at Bisotun proclaimed: "By the favor of Ahuramazda I am the king; Ahuramazda bestowed the kingdom upon me."¹ This

* Corresponding author. Email: s.khorashadi@modares.ac.ir

¹ Kent, 1953: 12.

ideological construct portrays the Shahanshah as the executor of divine purpose, reinforcing his legitimacy and consolidating his power: “Saith Darius the king: this is what I did by the favor of Ahuramazda in one and the same year after I became a king.”² Within this enduring ideological construct, the monarch was framed as the executor of divine purpose, a concept the Sasanians would amplify, systematize, and, crucially, render visually manifest to an unprecedented degree.

The founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardashir I,³ exemplified this dual role from the very outset by assuming guardianship of the Anahita temple at Istakhr, thereby physically consolidating royal and priestly authority.⁴ In his correspondence with the last Parthian monarch, Artabanus, Ardashir proclaimed his rule as a divine grant, asserting that Ahura Mazda had bestowed kingship upon him and provided direct aid in his military triumphs.⁵ To project this claim beyond the court and into the public imagination, the Sasanian kings anchored their rule in a mythical past, tying their lineage to the legendary ideal rulers of the Pishdadiyan and Kayaniyan dynasties.

The *Avesta* itself provided liturgical precedent for this ideology, as adherents implored Ahura Mazda to dispatch virtuous rulers to govern on earth as his representatives: “May we reach Thy good rule, O Wise Ahura, for all time. May a good ruler, man or woman, thus assume rule over us in both existences, O most munificent one among those who exist.”⁶ Figures such as Hoshang, celebrated in the *Avesta* as the archetypal celestial monarch were praised for their steadfast resistance against evil in direct liturgical terms: “We honor the virtuous Faravashi of courageous Hōšang for his steadfast resistance against the demonic forces of Mazandaran and deceivers, thus safeguarding humanity from their malevolent designs”,⁷ and Kay Xosrow, whose reign embodied sacred sovereignty before his final ascent to the heavens, served as legitimizing archetypes.⁸

The primordial king Keyumars was revered as the inaugural manifestation of Ahura Mazda’s kingship in the material realm. The primary texts describe his cosmic status explicitly: “The first to conceive noble thoughts, the first to utter virtuous words, the first to perform righteous deeds. The first custodian of sacred fire, the primordial warrior, the inaugural protector... The first to understand the cosmic order, and the truth, the obedience of the divine word, the celestial kingship.”⁹

The adoption of the formula *kē čīhr az yazdān* “from the race of gods” in Sasanian royal inscriptions and the association of the king’s *xwarrah* with the Kayanids were

² Kent, 1953: 119.

³ Maksymiuk, 2024: 437-439.

⁴ Yücel, 2021: 45-48.

⁵ Ṭabarī, 818.

⁶ Humbach, 1991: 2:137.

⁷ Poordavood, 2015: 75.

⁸ Daryaei, 2009: 40.

⁹ Qolizadeh, 2015: 158.

central to this strategy.¹⁰ The *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* narrates how Ardashir's *xwarrah* manifested as a mighty ram, vividly capturing this transfer of divine glory in a direct historical dialogue:

riding with a very large and agile ram. Ardavan asked Dastvar: "what does that ram riding with him signify?" Dastvar replied: "long life to king, the divine authority of the Kayanians, the *Xwarrah*, has reached Ardashir. There is nothing to be done. Therefore, do not tire yourselves or your horses and do not ruin them"¹¹

These textual claims, however, beg a further question: how were such abstract theological concepts translated into a visual language potent enough to convince diverse audiences of the king's superhuman status? This article is guided by a central research question: Through what visual and symbolic mechanisms did Sasanian royal iconography construct the image of the king as the terrestrial agent of Shahrewar, the Zoroastrian divinity of just sovereignty, and how did this visual construct serve to legitimize political authority? The hypothesis advanced here is that Sasanian art did not merely reflect a pre-existing theology but actively manufactured a political theology through a systematic program of visual metaphors. Rather than asserting a direct, literal identification between the king and the deity, a claim for which explicit epigraphic or textual evidence is absent, this study argues that royal iconography strategically aligned the monarch with Shahrewar's specific sphere of divine functions and companions. Through the curated depiction of divine investitures, martial prowess, sacred regalia, and the company of deities like Mithra and Anahita, the king was cast as the earthly counterpart and executive agent of the cosmic struggle against chaos (*druj*). The authors acknowledge that Sasanian royal ideology undoubtedly underwent transformations over the dynasty's more than four-century rule. However, the objective of this article is not to reconstruct this diachronic ideological process in its entirety. Rather, it seeks to analyze the persistence and strategic function of a specific visual pattern, the alignment of the king with the attributes of Shahrewar, within a delimited corpus of elite art. The selected case studies are thus representative of this particular symbolic framework, not of all ideological shifts across the Sasanian period. To test this hypothesis, the study examines a delimited corpus of rock reliefs, coinage, and metalwork, applying an interdisciplinary framework that synthesizes Panofsky's iconographic analysis with Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority. This framework is designed to reveal how abstract Zoroastrian concepts, particularly *xwarrah* and the king's role as a sacred warrior, were translated into tangible, persuasive visual forms, rendering the monarch's supernatural mandate empirically visible and thereby legitimizing his rule within a framework of sacred power.

¹⁰ Daryaei, 2010; Maksymiuk, 2018: 598-601.

¹¹ Farahvashi, 2011: 41.

Methodology: An Integrated Framework for Decoding Sasanian Visual Ideology

This study is structured around the central research question formulated at the close of the Introduction; through what visual mechanisms and symbolic strategies did Sasanian royal iconography construct the image of the king as the terrestrial agent of Shahrewar, and how did this visual construct serve to legitimize political authority? To address this question in a manner that is both empirically grounded and theoretically coherent, the research employs an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates art historical analysis, textual criticism, and sociological theory. The distinct contribution of this framework lies in the operationalization of these disciplines into a unified, multi-stage analytical procedure, moving beyond a mere listing of approaches to their genuine synthesis.

The core of the art historical method is adapted from Erwin Panofsky's foundational framework for iconographic analysis.¹² This structured, three-stage approach provides a transparent and replicable analytical path. It enforces a strict separation between the act of describing what is seen and the act of interpreting what it means, allowing the reader to trace the logic of the study's conclusions at every step.

Stage 1: Pre-iconographic Description (Formal Analysis): This initial stage involves a pure, factual description of the visual data without recourse to cultural or textual knowledge. For a Sasanian rock relief, this entails cataloging: the number and identity of human, divine, and animal figures based purely on their visual characteristics; their relative scale and spatial relationships; their postures and gestures (e.g., a right hand extended to receive a ring, a left hand resting on a sword hilt); the presence of specific attributes (e.g., a diadem with fluttering ribbons, a halo, a crown with a korymbos, a lotus flower underfoot); and the overall compositional layout (e.g., a static, standing scene versus a dynamic, equestrian one, or a triptych arrangement). For numismatic and metalwork evidence, this stage also notes the object's physical characteristics, inscriptions, and mint marks.

Stage 2: Iconographic Analysis (Connection to Zoroastrian Texts and Culture): In this secondary stage, the formally described motifs are connected to their specific cultural and literary context to establish their conventional meaning within the Sasanian-Zoroastrian worldview. This is where the study's corpus of primary sources becomes paramount. The ring exchanged between two figures is identified as the diadem of sovereignty, a symbol of divinely granted *xwarrah* described in texts like the *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān*. The halo is linked to the Avestan concept of *x'arənah-*, a visible luminescence of divine favor.¹³ The identification of deities, Ahura Mazda, Anahita, and Mithra, is based on a triangulation of their visual attributes, their textual descriptions in Avestan *Yashts* (e.g., *Ābān Yasht* for Anahita, *Mihr Yasht* for Mithra),

¹² Panofsky, 1939, 1955.

¹³ Gershevitch, 1959; Gnoli, 1999.

and their established roles as helpers of Shahrewar as defined in the *Bundahišn*.¹⁴ The sword and archery equipment are decoded through the lens of Shahrewar's cosmic function as the patron of metals and righteous weapons, a role explicitly detailed in the *Bundahišn*. This stage moves the analysis from pure form to culturally specific symbol.

Stage 3: Iconological Interpretation (Weberian Sociological Synthesis): The final, interpretive stage uncovers the intrinsic ideological and political meaning of the artwork, revealing the underlying principles of Sasanian statecraft. Here, the iconographic data from Stage 2 is actively interpreted through the lens of Max Weber's tripartite theory of authority. He distinguishes between three types of authority: A- *Traditional Authority*: Based on long-standing customs and traditions; B- *Charismatic Authority*: Derived from the personal qualities and charisma of a leader; C- *Legal-Rational Authority*: Based on formal rules and laws, often associated with modern bureaucracies and democratic governments.¹⁵

This research argues that Sasanian visual culture functioned as a technology that bridged a fundamental gap; *xwarrah* was an institutional, conditional, and potentially depersonalized divine mandate (a form of traditional authority), while charismatic authority, in Weber's sense, is personal, proven through extraordinary feats, and emotionally compelling.¹⁶ The iconological interpretation reveals how royal imagery synthesized these concepts. The depiction of the king's heroic archery, life-threatening lion hunts, and the ritualized subjugation of cosmic enemies visually performed his extraordinary qualities, transforming the abstract possession of *xwarrah* into a concrete, observable, and awe-inspiring charismatic persona. Thus, the artworks are interpreted as active instruments in what Weber termed the *routinization of charisma*,¹⁷ forging an emotional bond with the viewer and legitimizing a political order by grounding it in a perceived cosmic struggle between order (Shahrewar) and chaos (*druj*).

Shahrewar, Heavenly Sovereignty: The Theological Foundations of Sacral Kingship

Within Zoroastrian cosmology, Ahura Mazda is revered as the supreme ruler of the cosmos, the uncreated creator whose dominion encompasses both the spiritual (*mēnōg*) and material (*gētīg*) realms. His kingship, however, is not an abstract theological proposition; it is symbolically embodied and actively exercised through the Aməša Spəntas, the Bounteous Immortals who function as both aspects of the divine essence and autonomous celestial beings. Among these, Shahrewar occupies a position of unique relevance to the ideology of sacral kingship. In the celestial realm,

¹⁴ Agostini & Thrope, 2020.

¹⁵ Weber, 1978: 212, 223, 242.

¹⁶ Weber, 1978: 241-245.

¹⁷ Weber, 1953.

Shahrewar represents Ahura Mazda's divine sovereignty, justice, and rightful dominion. In the material world, he symbolises the righteous king's power, triumph, and responsibility to uphold order against chaos.¹⁸

The very name of this Aməša Spənta encodes a political theology. The Avestan compound *xšaθra-vairya* derives from *xšaθra-*, kingship, dominion, power, and *vairya-*, worthy of choice, desirable.¹⁹ This etymology is significant; it implies that legitimate sovereignty is not merely a matter of force or inheritance, but a quality that must be desired by the righteous and chosen by the divine. The Middle Persian exegesis preserved in the *Bundahišn* elaborates on this dual nature:

Šahrewar's duty is to advocate before Ohrmazd on behalf of the poor. The foundation of all authority is from Shahrewar. Some say, 'dominion [šahr] desirable [war],' which can be explained as 'sovereignty at will'.²⁰

This passage is crucial for understanding the Sasanian visual program, Shahrewar is simultaneously the cosmic source of all legitimate authority and the compassionate advocate for the vulnerable. The ideal king, as his earthly agent, must embody both dimensions, wielding power and dispensing justice.

The Avestan liturgical texts further illuminate the character of this divinity. In the *Šīrōza*, Shahrewar is praised alongside compassion and mercy: "We offer praise to Shahrewar, the Aməša Spənta; we offer praise to molten metal; we offer praise to mercy and compassion which is the comfort of the helpless."²¹ The juxtaposition of *molten metal* with *mercy and compassion* is not a random poetic association; it reflects a deep theological logic. Metal, the material over which Shahrewar presides, embodies both the hardness of righteous power and the fluidity of just judgment. The king who aligns himself with Shahrewar must therefore be both warrior and judge, wielding the metallic sword of justice while extending mercy to the helpless. The connection between Shahrewar and metal is of particular importance for the iconographic analysis that follows. The *Bundahišn* provides an extensive account of this relationship:

It is because metal belongs to him in the material world that all desire for lordship, power, fulfillment of desire, and prowess in disputation are possible through weapons. All weapons are metallic. The spirits' weapons, with which they overcome the demons, are all metallic. As it says: "We worship the good-swinging club on the heads of the demons." Mihr of wide pastures and the sun also carry metal weapons during the day in order to strike down the demons. Metals in the material world belong to Šahrewar. If someone comforts or harms metal, then Šahrewar is also comforted or harmed.²²

¹⁸ Boyce, 1979: 203-205; Panaino, 2018.

¹⁹ Hassan-Doust, 2016: v. 2, 1456.

²⁰ Agostini & Thrope, 2020: ch. 26.

²¹ Poordavood, 2015: 431.

²² Agostini & Thrope, 2020: ch. 26.

Beyond his cosmic functions and guardianship over metal, Zoroastrian texts attribute specific qualities to Shahrewar that are essential to the ideal kingship. He embodies two key attributes: *xwadāyīh* (lordship/autonomy) and *kāmag* (desire/will). Additionally, he is associated with the *xwarrah* of the seven *faršgards* (cosmic regions), which is bestowed upon ideal rulers. As the texts state: “šahrewarīh and good xwadāy is for kay Gushtasp who is from the benevolent generation.”²³ This highlights that legitimate rule requires both the autonomous authority and the divine will channeled through Shahrewar.

This passage is foundational for understanding why the Sasanian king is never depicted without his sword, why investiture scenes consistently show the king receiving the diadem with one hand while the other rests upon his weapon, and why the archer-king motif carries such profound symbolic weight. The king’s metallic weapon is not merely a tool of war; it is a material instantiation of Shahrewar’s cosmic function, a visible sign that the king participates in the divine economy of righteous power.

Shahrewar’s cosmic adversary is Saurva (*Sauruua*), the demon (*daēuua*) of evil sovereignty, tyranny, and chaos. Zoroastrian eschatology foretells that at the final renovation of the world (*frašō.kərətī*), Shahrewar will confront and definitively defeat Saurva, thereby eliminating tyrannical rule from creation.²⁴ This eschatological framework transforms earthly kingship into a microcosmic anticipation of the final cosmic battle. Every Sasanian king who vanquishes rebels, suppresses heresy, and protects the faithful is, iconographically at least, rehearsing Shahrewar’s ultimate triumph. This is the theological foundation upon which the visual program of the divine warrior-king rests. Shahrewar does not operate in isolation. According to the *Bundahišn*, he is accompanied by a retinue of divine helpers (*hamkārān*) who assist him in his cosmic functions:

Fourth among the spirits is Šahrewar, who chose the metals for himself among the material creations. He created the sun, Mihr, the sky, Anagrān, good Sōg, Ardwīsūr, divine Hōm, divine Burz, and Dahmān Āfrīn as helpers and assistants. For the solidity of metal is from the sky, and the basic essence of the sky is metallic, arranged by Anagrān. Anagrān means “infinite light” – a golden abode, studded with gems, joined on high to the place of the Amahraspands. Because of this partnership, during the onslaught of evil the demons cannot destroy the metals.²⁵

This passage is of paramount importance for the present study, as it identifies the very deities who appear alongside the Sasanian king in investiture iconography.

²³ Anklesaria, 1964: 115.

²⁴ Bahar, 2023: 27.

²⁵ Agostini & Thrope, 2020: ch. 26.

Mithra (Mihr) and Anahita (Ardwīsūr) are not generic Zoroastrian divinities but the specific cosmic allies of Shahrewar. Their presence in royal iconography is therefore not decorative but programmatic; it visually situates the king within the divine retinue of the Aməša Spənta whose earthly representative he claims to be.

Anahita, the goddess of water and fertility in ancient Iranian mythology, is one of the most prominent companions of Shahrewar. However, to reduce her to a mere fertility goddess is to miss a crucial dimension of her character, one that the Sasanian court strategically exploited. The *Ābān Yašt* (*Yašt* 5), the longest and most elaborate of the Avestan hymns dedicated to a single divinity, elevates Anahita to the status of a divine patron of heroes and legitimate kings. The *Yašt* recounts a narrative sequence in which legendary rulers and heroes, offer lavish sacrifices of a hundred stallions, a thousand oxen, and ten thousand sheep to Anahita, seeking her divine intervention and support in their battles.²⁶ Notably, the *Yašt* records that Anahita granted the petitions of the righteous kings, Hoshang, Jamshid, Freydon, Kay Xosrow, but rejected the offerings of those who sought power for unrighteous ends. This selective divine patronage establishes a crucial theological principle; Anahita's support is not automatically granted to any ruler but is conditional upon the king's righteousness and alignment with cosmic order (*asha*). The Sasanian kings' conspicuous veneration of Anahita, and her prominent placement in their iconography, must be understood as a visual claim to precisely this conditional divine favor.

Mithra, another ally of Shahrewar, oversees the protection of warriors and serves as the divine judge of truth (*asha*) and falsehood (*druj*). Within the Iranian mythological framework, Mithra embodies the ideals of heroism, righteous power, courage, and perpetual vigilance against demonic entities. The *Mihr Yašt* (*Yašt* 10) portrays Mithra as a divine warrior who resolutely enters the fray to protect those who uphold the righteous cause of Ahura Mazda against the forces of evil. From his celestial chariot, Mithra, a commander of the divine hosts, guides heroes along the path of righteousness, ensuring their actions are free from tyranny and oppression.²⁷ The *Yašt* describes Mithra as "ever awake" (*jāgarəbuš*), "ever watchful" (*axvafna*), a divine sentinel who oversees the fulfillment of covenants and the punishment of oath-breakers. This aspect of Mithra's character, vigilant, judicial, and martial, aligns precisely with the ideological needs of the Sasanian monarchy, which presented itself as the guarantor of order against internal and external chaos.

In summary, the Zoroastrian theological framework provided the Sasanian court with a rich conceptual vocabulary for articulating claims to sacral kingship. Shahrewar, as the Aməša Spənta of just sovereignty, offered a divine archetype of the ideal ruler, powerful yet compassionate, martial yet just, wielding metallic weapons in a cosmic

²⁶ Mowlae, 2013: k. 5-15.

²⁷ Gershevitch, 1959: k. 27-35.

battle against tyranny and chaos. His companions, Anahita, the divine patron of legitimate kings, and Mithra, the ever-watchful warrior-judge, provided additional theological resources for constructing a multi-dimensional royal persona. The following section will demonstrate how Sasanian visual culture drew upon these theological categories to construct an iconographic program that cast the king as the earthly agent of this divine retinue, translating abstract Zoroastrian concepts into a persuasive visual language of power.

Sasanian Kings as Divine Warriors: Iconographic Analysis

The Sasanian Empire employed art as a potent ideological instrument to legitimize kingship, framing monarchs as divine intermediaries and paragons of Zoroastrian cosmic order. Through rock reliefs, coinage, and precious metalwork, Sasanian rulers visually encoded their authority within a carefully constructed theological framework. These artworks emphasize the king's dual role as sacred warrior and divinely ordained sovereign, whose legitimacy derived from the visible, performed possession of both institutional *xwarrah* and personal, charismatic qualities. The iconographic program strategically aligned the monarch with Shahrevar, the Aməša Spənta of just sovereignty, by deploying the deity's core attributes, martial prowess, metallic weaponry, and the companionship of Mithra and Anahita, as a visual lexicon of legitimate rule. What follows is a systematic analysis of this program, structured around three thematic axes, the king's interaction with deities, the symbolic vocabulary of royal attire, and the visual performance of superhuman power.

Holy Deities and the King: Constructing a Divine Lineage

Sasanian art does not merely highlight the king's temporal power; it systematically emphasizes his divine and spiritual attributes, portraying him as a paragon of virtue and the terrestrial agent of Shahrevar's benevolent and just rule. While earlier Iranian periods largely avoided anthropomorphic representation of Ahura Mazda, Sasanian rock reliefs introduced a revolutionary iconographic formula: the deity physically present, bestowing royal authority upon the king. This theme of divine investiture appears in nine extant Sasanian rock reliefs, each carefully calibrated to its specific audience and setting.

The earliest example, the investiture of Ardashir I at Firuzabad [Fig. 1], establishes the foundational visual vocabulary. Here, two male figures of equal stature stand facing one another, separated by a fire altar. The figure on the left extends a ring toward the figure on the right; both wear similar crowns and elaborate garments. A defeated enemy lies prostrate beneath the right-hand figure's feet. The identity of the figures is established through a triangulation of visual attributes and textual

sources. The presence of the fire altar, the primary symbol of Zoroastrian worship, identifies the scene as a sacral exchange. The ring, as attested in the *Kārnmāg ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* and later Zoroastrian literature, represents the diadem of sovereignty, a material manifestation of *xwarrah*. The equal scale of the two figures is a deliberate visual statement: the king is not subordinate to the deity but stands as his earthly counterpart. This relief functioned as a public declaration, carved into the living rock of the dynastic heartland, that Ardashir's newly founded dynasty was not a product of military usurpation but of divine election. In Weberian terms, it visually codified the traditional authority inherent in *xwarrah* while simultaneously performing a charismatic moment, the direct, personal transfer of sovereignty from god to king.



Fig. 1. The investiture of Ardashir I. Firuzabad. Photo by Hadi Karimi [Public Domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Investiture_Relief_of_Ardeshir_by_Hadi_Karimi.jpg].

This theme is developed further in the relief at Naqsh-e Rostam [Fig. 2], which introduces a more complex courtly setting. Here, the king and Ahura Mazda are joined by courtiers positioned behind them, witnessing the divine bestowal of the kingship ring. The compositional expansion serves a specific function: it transforms the intimate, cosmic transaction of Firuzabad into a public ceremony, witnessed by the Sasanian elite. This visualization reinforces the ideological message of divine kingship by presenting Ahura Mazda as physically present within the royal court, thereby sanctifying not only the king but the entire Sasanian political structure. The presence of witnesses, the nobles and officials who formed the backbone of the Sasanian state, suggests that the primary audience for this relief was the courtly elite itself, whose loyalty was essential to the stability of the regime.



Fig. 2. The investiture of Ardashir I. Naqsh-e Rjab. Photo by Hooman Mallahzadeh [Public Domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Coronation_of_Ardashir_Babakan.jpg].

The iconographic program reaches its theological culmination in two reliefs that transport the investiture scene entirely into the celestial realm. At Taq-e Bostan, the investitures of Peroz I [Fig. 3]²⁸ and Ardashir II [Fig. 4] introduce a radical compositional innovation: the king is positioned directly before Ahura Mazda with no earthly courtiers present, while divine figures, Anahita in one case, Mithra in the other, stand as witnesses and companions. In the relief of Peroz I, three standing figures are depicted: Ahura Mazda on the left extends the diadem, the king stands in the center, and a female figure identified as Anahita stands behind the king, also holding a ring. All three figures are of equal scale and wear elaborate crowns. In the relief of Ardashir II, the king receives the diadem from Ahura Mazda while standing upon a defeated enemy; behind him, a male figure with a radiate halo, identified as Mithra, stands upon a lotus flower, holding a barsom bundle.²⁹

²⁸ Harper & Meyers, 1982: 123, fig. 43.

²⁹ The Discussion on the identification of the personages see Overlaet, 2013.

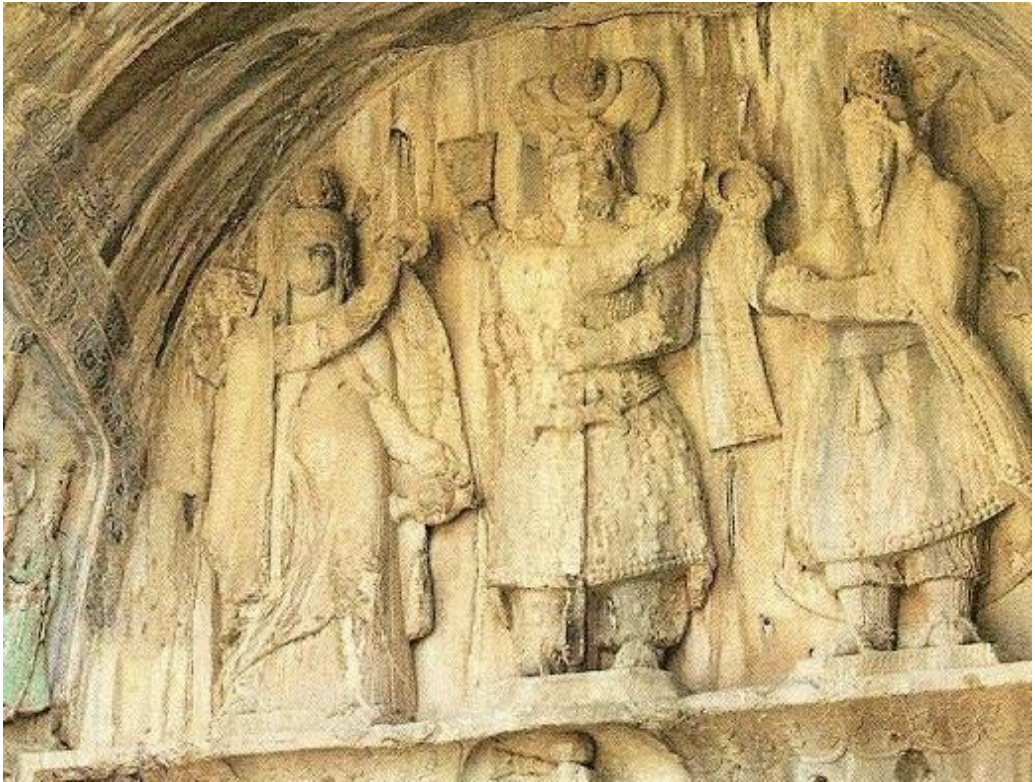


Fig. 3. The investiture of Peroz I?. Taq-e Bostan. Photo by Zereschk [Public Domain: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Knight-Iran.JPG>].

The presence of Anahita and Mithra is not arbitrary; it is theologically precise. According to the *Bundahišn*, these two deities are the primary companions and helpers of Shahrewar, the Aməša Spənta of just sovereignty and the patron of metals and weapons. Anahita, celebrated in the *Ābān Yašt* as the divine patron of heroes and legitimate kings, was invoked by legendary rulers, who offered her lavish sacrifices to secure victory in battle.³⁰ The Sasanian dynasty's connection to Anahita was institutional from its inception: Pabag, father of Ardashir I, served as custodian of the Anahita temple at Istakhr, and Ardashir himself conducted his coronation within its precincts.³¹ By depicting Anahita as physically present in the investiture scene, and, in the case of Narseh at Naqsh-e Rostam [Fig. 5],³² replacing Ahura Mazda as the bestower of the diadem, Sasanian iconography visually inserted the monarch into the prestigious lineage of legendary kings enumerated in the *Ābān Yašt*. Anahita also appears on the Sasanian coins [Fig. 8].

³⁰ Mowlaee, 2013: k. 5-15.

³¹ Ṭabarī, 814.

³² *Contra* Overlaet, 2012.

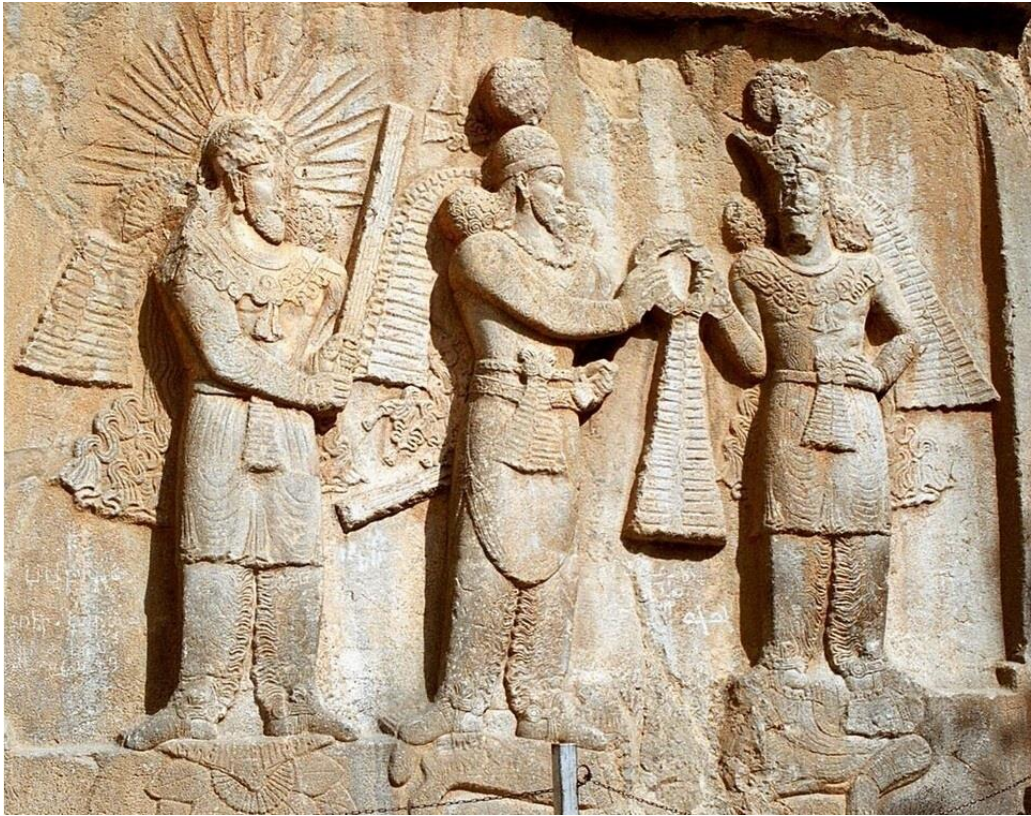


Fig. 4. The investiture of Ardashir II. Taq-e Bostan. Photo by Philippe Chavin [Public Domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taq-e_Bostan_-_High-relief_of_Ardeshir_II_investiture.jpg].



Fig. 5. The investiture of Narseh. Naqsh-e Rostam. Photo by Diego Delso [Public Domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Naghsh-e_rostam,_Ir%C3%A1n,_2016-09-24,_DD_08.jpg].



Fig. 6. The investiture of Ardashir I. Naqsh-e Rostam (I). Photo by Wojciech Kocot [Public Domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Imp105-Grobowce_Naqsh-E_Rustam.jpg].

Mithra's presence is equally significant. The *Mihr Yašt* portrays him as a divine warrior who actively intervenes in the cosmic struggle against falsehood, riding forth in his chariot to protect the righteous.³³ His depiction in the investiture of Ardashir II, armed, haloed, and standing upon a lotus, visually defines the king's role in Mithraic terms; he is not merely a passive recipient of divine favor but an active participant in the cosmic battle. The lotus under Mithra's feet, a symbol with rich polyvalent associations in Iranian and broader Near Eastern iconography, evokes purity, water (linking Mithra to Anahita), and solar radiance, underscoring the multi-layered nature of Sasanian symbolic language. These celestial investitures represent the ideological apex of the Sasanian program. They cast the king not as a supplicant but as an inductee into a divine triad, charged with Mithra's duty to combat falsehood and Anahita's mandate to secure righteous victory. The king is visually positioned as the earthly extension of Shahrewar's divine retinue. The absence of mortal witnesses in these reliefs is itself significant: the audience is now the gods themselves, and the event depicted is not a ceremony but an eternal, cosmic reality. This visual strategy directly parallels Weber's concept of charismatic legitimation, where authority is validated not by institutional procedure but by demonstrated proximity to the divine.³⁴

³³ Gershevitch, 1959.

³⁴ Weber, 1978: 241-245.

The theme of divine investiture is further elaborated in four equestrian reliefs, where dynamic scenes depict both king and deity mounted on horseback, with vanquished foes symbolically subjugated beneath their steeds. The Naqsh-e Rostam relief of Ardashir I [Fig. 6] is the most programmatic of these. Two mounted figures face each other; a ring is exchanged between them; a defeated enemy lies trampled under each horse. The figures are depicted with nearly identical attire, physical features, and bodily proportions. Inscriptions identify the figures. The visual homology between king and God, identical posture, scale, and dress, is a radical claim of ontological proximity. The inscriptions seal this visual argument linguistically: Ahura Mazda is designated as *bar* (deity), while Ardashir is identified as *mazdesn bar* (Mazda-worshipping lord/deity).³⁵ The defeated enemies beneath the steeds, Artabanus, the last Parthian king, under Ardashir's horse, and Ahriman, the spirit of darkness, under Ahura Mazda's, visually equate the king's earthly military campaigns with the deity's cosmic struggle. By conquering earthly enemies in a pose mirroring Ahura Mazda's triumph over Ahriman, the king's military campaigns are transfigured into acts of sacred, cosmic maintenance. Defiance of the king is thus reframed as heresy, a direct assault on the divine order protected by Shahrewar and executed by his terrestrial agent. This visual argument was particularly crucial in the Early Sasanian period, when the dynasty was actively consolidating power against both internal rivals and external adversaries.³⁶ The equestrian investiture reliefs of Shapur I³⁷ and Bahram I³⁸ at Bishapur reiterate this motif, demonstrating its enduring ideological utility across successive reigns.

Despite Mithra's prominence in Zoroastrian theology and his close association with Shahrewar, direct depictions of the deity in Sasanian art are relatively rare. Beyond the investiture of Ardashir II, Mithra appears on coins of Hormizd I [Fig. 7] and Bahram I, where he stands opposite the king on either side of a fire altar. The limited number of direct depictions, however, belies the deeper influence of Mithraic iconography. The motif of the king pursuing and hunting rams [The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 34.33], for instance, recalls the iconography of Mithra hunting the primordial bull in Mithraic tradition.³⁹ This visual echo, whether a conscious citation or an instance of shared symbolic vocabulary, further aligns the Sasanian king with the divine warrior par excellence, reinforcing his role as the earthly agent of cosmic order.

³⁵ Oryan, 2013: 20.

³⁶ Pourshariati, 2008: 97.

³⁷ Vanden Berghe, 1983: 59.

³⁸ Vanden Berghe, 1983: 62.

³⁹ Bivar, 1998: 81.



Fig. 7: AV Dinar of Hormizd I. Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.
[https://www.cngcoins.com/Lot.aspx?LOT_ID=25222.
CC BY-SA 3.0; accessed on August 10, 2026].



Fig. 8: AR Drachm of Hormizd I. Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.
[<https://www.numisbids.com/sale/7569/lot/540>.
CC BY-SA 3.0; accessed on August 10, 2026].

Attire: The Semiotics of Sacred Kingship

In Sasanian art, the king's body itself becomes a canvas for theological and political claims. Royal attire does not merely denote status; it systematically encodes the king's alignment with the divine realm and, specifically, with the attributes of Shahrewar.

The Sword and the Diadem: In Sasanian investiture scenes, the king is consistently depicted with a sword hanging at his left side, his left hand resting upon its hilt, while receiving the diadem of sovereignty with his right hand.⁴⁰ This gesture is not casual; it is a precise visual articulation of the king's dual identity. The diadem, received directly from a deity, never from a mortal, signifies the divine source of royal authority. The sword, gripped but not drawn, signals the king's permanent readiness to exercise the martial dimension of that authority. As discussed above, Shahrewar bears cosmic responsibility for the guardianship of metals and the fashioning of weapons from them. The consistent pairing of the diadem and the sword in investiture iconography thus functions as a visual shorthand for the Shahrewar-aligned kingship. The right hand receives divinely sanctioned sovereignty; the left hand grasps the metallic instrument through which that sovereignty is defended and enacted.

The fluttering diadem itself carries significant symbolic weight. In the investiture relief of Ardashir I at Naqsh-e Rostam [Fig. 6], the diadem's flowing ends appear to be caught by a divine wind, as if Ahura Mazda himself animates the symbol of kingship. This imagery reinforces the notion of divinely ordained power, paralleling Weber's emphasis on ritual acts and visible signs as mechanisms that sustain charismatic legitimacy over time.⁴¹

The Korymbos and Celestial Symbols: One of the distinctive elements of Sasanian royal headgear is the korymbos [Fig. 9], a globular element atop the crown often adorned with motifs such as stars, crescents, or wings. These celestial symbols function as charismatic insignia, materializing Weber's notion of the "extraordinary qualities" that set the leader apart from ordinary mortals.⁴² The star and crescent, in particular, evoke the cosmic dominion of the king, visually associating him with the celestial sphere over which Shahrewar presides.

⁴⁰ E.g. The investiture relief of Shapur I at Naqsh-e Rostam, see Vanden Berghe, 1983: 128.

⁴¹ Weber, 1978: 246-254.

⁴² Weber, 1978: 241.



Fig. 9. Khosrow II korymbos detail (after Mousavi Haji & Sarfaraz, 2010: 252)

Pearls and Mithraic Association: Among the prevalent decorative elements of Sasanian royal garments are pearls, frequently adorning the king's robes, crowns, and diadems. Pearls, in Iranian and broader Near Eastern symbolic systems, carry associations with Mithra, one of Shahrevar's divine companions.⁴³ Their presence on royal attire thus functions as a subtle but persistent visual citation of the Mithraic dimension of Sasanian kingship, reinforcing the ideological and cosmological linkages between the monarch, his divine protectors, and the celestial hierarchy.

The Halo (*Xwarrah* Made Visible): In Sasanian art, the king is consistently distinguished by the halo encircling his head, a feature present in investiture scenes as well as in hunting iconography [The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. inv. 1970.6]. This halo is the visual correlate of *xwarrah*, the divine glory that, according to Zoroastrian theology, is bestowed by Ahura Mazda upon righteous rulers. However, the halo is not merely a passive symbol of an abstract possession; it is an active visual claim. Its presence in hunting scenes, where the king performs superhuman feats of martial prowess, suggests that *xwarrah* is not a static attribute but a dynamic quality that is both demonstrated and renewed through heroic action. The *Bundahišn* teaches that Ahura Mazda created four types of *xwarrah*, with the kingship *xwarrah* bestowed upon those deemed worthy.⁴⁴ The iconographic program thus visualizes a reciprocal relationship: *xwarrah* enables the king's superhuman feats, and those feats, in turn, visibly confirm the king's possession of *xwarrah*. This dialectic, as argued in the Theoretical Framework, is the visual mechanism through which Sasanian art bridged traditional and charismatic legitimacy.

Supernatural Power: The Visual Performance of Charisma

Weber's concept of charismatic authority stipulates that exceptional qualities must be proven through extraordinary feats: miracles, victories, or heroic acts that set the leader apart from ordinary mortals.⁴⁵ Sasanian royal iconography dedicates an entire visual genre, the royal hunt, to the performance of precisely such proof. The hunt was not merely a leisure activity; it was a ritualized demonstration of the king's superhuman capacities, staged for both courtly and divine audiences.

⁴³ Bivar, 1998: 73.

⁴⁴ Bahar, 2023: 109.

⁴⁵ Weber, 1978: 241-245.

The Archer King: The iconic representation of the archer king, skillfully wielding a bow from horseback, symbolizes the prowess of ancient Iranian warriors who excelled in the demanding discipline of mounted archery. This ideal of the warrior-king archer has deep roots in Iranian royal ideology. Darius I, in his inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam, emphasizes physical prowess and martial skill as central to the ideal Persian king: “Trained am I both with hands and with feet. As a horseman I am a good horseman. As a bowman I am a good bowman both on foot and on horseback.”⁴⁶ Weber’s theory would frame this self-presentation as a classic charismatic validation: the leader’s skills are presented as divine gifts, and their demonstration serves as proof of his exceptional status.

Despite the temporal and cultural distance from the Achaemenid period, Sasanian royal self-representation consistently echoed these martial ideals. Shapur I’s inscription at Hajiabad proclaims his mastery of archery and establishes a public standard: “This archery is mine, Bay Shapur king of kings of Iran and non-Iran whose face is of divine origin... Now let anyone who is skilled shoot an arrow from this stone marker to that stone marker. Then whoever shoots an arrow is skilled.”⁴⁷ By setting a measurable benchmark of archery proficiency and inviting others to match it, Shapur transforms a personal skill into a public, competitive proof of charismatic superiority. The inscription’s location, carved into rock, mirrors the monumentality of the investiture reliefs, suggesting that archery was not merely a royal pastime but a constitutive element of the king’s public, sacred persona.

The *Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* further mythologizes this connection. Ardashir’s archery is presented as a divine gift, its superhuman quality emphasized through hyperbolic description: “a wild ass passed by the plain... Ardashir caught up and shot an arrow at the wild ass with such force that the arrow penetrated the animal’s belly up to the fetching and passed through the other side, and the wild ass died on the spot.”⁴⁸ The impossible penetration, the arrow passing entirely through the body of the beast, is a narrative equivalent of the visual hyperbole of the hunting plates. Both serve the same function: to render the king’s charisma empirically undeniable. This tradition persisted in later Sasanian literature; in the *Khosrow and Ridad*, the page’s bravery and skill are highlighted through archery: “Such is my horsemanship and archery that any beast which manages to pass beyond the reach of my steed’s head may deem itself fortunate indeed.”⁴⁹

The association of archery with Mithra in the *Mihr Yašt* reinforces the sacred dimension of this martial skill. Mithra’s chariot is equipped with “a thousand well-made vulture-feathered arrows, golden-mouthed, each having as barbs two small horns... hailing from supernature they fall, hailing from supernature they fly on to the evil heads of the evil gods.”⁵⁰ A Pahlavi text similarly evokes the legendary archer-king Gushtasp: “With his words a spear reached the demons, like an arrow unleashed by the brave and free warrior, Gushtasp, was angrily thrown towards the enemy’s armor to pierce them.”⁵¹ By depicting the king as a master archer,

⁴⁶ Kent, 1953: 140.

⁴⁷ Oryan, 2013: 37.

⁴⁸ Farahvashi, 2011: 50.

⁴⁹ Amouzegar, 2006: 67.

⁵⁰ Gershevitch, 1959: 137.

⁵¹ Qolizadeh, 2015: 214.

Sasanian iconography visually aligned him with Mithra's cosmic archery, transforming the secular skill of mounted archery into a sacred act of cosmic maintenance.

The Royal Hunt as Ritual Performance: Sasanian silver plates depicting the royal hunt represent the most detailed and narratively rich expressions of the king's charismatic persona. Unlike the static, formal investiture reliefs, which functioned as permanent public monuments, these precious metal vessels were portable luxury objects, likely produced as diplomatic gifts for the elite, both within the empire and beyond its borders.⁵² Their audience was thus not the general populace but the nobility, foreign dignitaries, and rival courts. The message, however, remained consistent: the Sasanian king possessed superhuman capacities that set him apart from ordinary rulers.

The iconography of the king mounted on a galloping horse, drawing his bow while pursuing wild beasts, lions, boars, and gazelles, is a technical impossibility rendered visually convincing through artistic convention. The king is shown in a posture of absolute mastery; his horse at full gallop, his body twisted to face his prey, his bow drawn to its fullest extent. The very difficulty of this act underscores the king's exceptional skill. In Weberian terms, this is charismatic authority in its purest performative form the leader's extraordinary qualities are not merely claimed but visually demonstrated.⁵³ The *Qabysnameh*, a later Ziyarid text, confirms the perilous nature of such hunts, warning: "Do not chase wild beasts on horseback, for there is no benefit in hunting wild beasts and nothing will be gained except risking one's life, as two great kings have perished among wild beasts: one, my grandfather Woshmgir ibn Ziyar, and the other, my cousin Amir Ashraf Al-Ma'ali."⁵⁴ This external testimony underscores the prestige and danger associated with the royal hunt, reinforcing its function as charismatic proof.

The choice of prey is itself symbolically significant. In Zoroastrian cosmology, lions are associated with evil forces; Ahriman created the lion to oppose Ahura Mazda's holy creations. The *Bundahišn* states: "One who kills four wolf-lions accrues as much merit as if he had killed one short-tailed garzag."⁵⁵ Similarly, Pahlavi texts affirm that killing a wolf or lion generates spiritual merit: "Whoever kills a cheetah or a wolf shall receive the same merit for killing a lion-wolf as for burning the bodies of those animals."⁵⁶ The lion hunt thus carries profound symbolic significance, it is not merely a display of martial prowess but a ritual act of cosmic warfare, the king vanquishing the creatures of darkness just as Mithra hunts the primordial bull and just as Shahrevar, at the end of time, will defeat the demon of tyranny. In ancient Iranian epics, lion hunting epitomizes heroic prowess, symbolizing military might and skill. Legendary warriors like Rustam and Esfandiar exemplify this: Rustam faced a lion in his first trial, and Esfandiar vanquished male and female lions in his second.⁵⁷ Lion hunting thus serves as a test of ultimate valor and strength.

⁵² Harper, 1978; Harper & Meyers, 1981; Maksymiuk & Skupniewicz, 2024 (with literature).

⁵³ Weber, 1968: 49.

⁵⁴ Al-Ma'ali, 1933: 51.

⁵⁵ Agostini & Thrope, 2020: 117.

⁵⁶ Mirfakhraei, 2011: 21, Clause 16.

⁵⁷ Ferdowsi, 2008: 434-438.

A rock relief of Bahram II at Sar Mashad shows the king battling lions while protecting the royal family, who stand behind him.⁵⁸ This relief illustrates a subtle but significant shift in the iconography of royal protection. Previously, the king's martial prowess was primarily displayed against foreign enemies and cosmic adversaries. Here, the threat is natural, ferocious lions, and the beneficiaries of the king's heroism are explicitly his family, the dynastic line. This shift may reflect the evolving political needs, when internal dynastic stability and succession became increasingly central ideological concerns.

The hunting iconography reaches its most elaborate form in the Late Sasanian period, exemplified by the famous grotto of Khosrow II at Taq-e Bostan.⁵⁹ Here, the hunt occupies entire walls of the rock-cut ayvān, with the king depicted multiple times within a single continuous narrative. This proliferation of the royal image, the king shown again and again, in successive stages of the hunt, suggests a culmination of the charismatic strategy. The king is no longer merely a participant in a single heroic act; he is the omnipresent agent of a cosmic, endlessly repeated triumph over chaos.

Conclusion

This study set out to answer a key question: Through what visual and symbolic mechanisms did Sasanian royal iconography construct the image of the king as the terrestrial agent of Shahrewar, and how did this visual construct serve to legitimize political authority? The preceding analysis has demonstrated that Sasanian art did not merely reflect a pre-existing Zoroastrian theology; it actively manufactured a political theology through a systematic and adaptable program of visual metaphors.

The hypothesis advanced at the outset proposed that Sasanian iconography strategically aligned the monarch with Shahrewar's sphere of divine functions, justice, metalwork, righteous warfare, and cosmic victory over chaos, without asserting a literal, epigraphically attested identification between king and deity. The evidence, as synthesized through the three-stage Panofsky'an-Weberian framework, strongly supports this hypothesis. The iconographic alignment between royal and divine figures (Table 1) is demonstrably systematic, operating across multiple media (rock reliefs, coinage, and metalwork) and across the entire Sasanian period. However, it must be acknowledged that this alignment remains at the level of strategic visual metaphor rather than explicit theological doctrine. No Sasanian inscription or text directly states that "the king is Shahrewar" or that "the king is the terrestrial manifestation of Shahrewar." The interpretation offered here is therefore grounded in the cumulative weight of symbolic correspondences, the king's sword linking him to Shahrewar's patronage of metals, his companions Mithra and Anahita flanking him in investiture scenes, his martial prowess echoing the cosmic struggle against druj, rather than in any

⁵⁸ Ghasemi, 2022: 58, fig. 1.

⁵⁹ Tanabe, 1982, 1983.

single “smoking gun” textual proof. This candid acknowledgment distinguishes the present study’s claims from earlier, less cautious formulations.

Three interrelated findings emerge from this research. First, the visual program of Sasanian kingship was theologically precise. The deities depicted alongside the king in investiture scenes, Ahura Mazda, Mithra, and Anahita, were not chosen at random; they are precisely the divine companions of Shahrevar as enumerated in Zoroastrian cosmological texts. This precision indicates a close collaboration between the Sasanian court and the Zoroastrian priestly elite in crafting royal imagery. Second, this theological program was translated into visual form through a sophisticated synthesis of traditional and charismatic legitimation strategies. Weber’s typology of authority (Table 2), applied critically rather than mechanically, reveals that Sasanian art bridged a fundamental gap: *xwarrah* was an institutional, traditional mandate rooted in ancient Iranian cosmology, while the iconography of the superhuman warrior-king, the archer on horseback, the lion-slayer, the vanquisher of cosmic enemies, performed a charismatic proof that rendered this abstract mandate empirically visible and emotionally compelling. Third, this visual ideology was not static. The diachronic analysis, though necessarily compressed within the scope of this study, indicates that the emphasis within royal imagery shifted over time: from the dynamic, militaristic investitures of the Early period (e.g., Ardashir I at Naqsh-e Rostam) to the more static, theologically complex court scenes of the Middle period (e.g., Ardashir II at Taq-e Bostan), and finally to the elaborate hunting iconography of the Late period, where the king’s personal, charismatic heroism increasingly occupies the visual field. By structuring the analysis diachronically, the study demonstrates that this strategic alignment was not a static monolith but a flexible and enduring visual discourse, one that was continuously re-articulated to address new political and religious circumstances without abandoning its core theological claims.

These findings carry implications beyond the specific case of Sasanian Iran. They underscore the potent role of visual culture, monumental, portable, and precious, as an active agent in the construction of political legitimacy, capable of translating abstract theological concepts into socially persuasive, embodied performances. The Sasanian case exemplifies how premodern states, lacking the modern apparatuses of mass media and bureaucracy, could nevertheless achieve a remarkable degree of ideological cohesion through the strategic deployment of images.

Table 1. The Terrestrial Representation of Shahrevar in Sasanian Royal Iconography.

Aspect of Shahrevar	Description	Visual Representation in Sasanian Kingship
Divine Sovereignty (<i>Xšaθra Vairya</i>)	Embodies “desirable dominion” and Ahura Mazda’s cosmic rule	Kings depicted receiving diadem directly from Ahura Mazda, never from mortals
Patron of Metals and Weapons	Oversees metal and the creation of weapons for divine combat	Kings consistently depicted with sword; metallic weapons as instruments of cosmic order
Protector of the Vulnerable	Advocates for the poor and ensures justice	Royal inscriptions and coinage emphasize king’s role as just ruler
Companionship with Deities	Allied with Mithra, Anahita, and other divine beings	Mithra and Anahita depicted flanking king in investiture scenes
<i>Xwarrah</i> (Divine Glory)	Associated with the divine glory bestowed upon ideal rulers	Halo encircling king’s head; <i>korymbos</i> with celestial symbols
Martial Prowess	Association with weapons and cosmic combat	King depicted as master archer and lion-slayer
Cosmic Struggle	Ensures triumph of order (<i>asha</i>) over chaos (<i>druj</i>)	Defeated enemies trampled beneath royal steed, paralleling Ahura Mazda’s triumph over Ahriman
Connection to Legendary Kings	Ideals reflected in Hoshang, Kay Xosrow, and other Kayanids	Sasanian kings aligned with legendary rulers through visual and textual references

Table 2. Weber’s Tripartite Typology of Authority and its Application to Sasanian Kingship.

Type of Authority	Weber’s Definition	Sasanian Application
Traditional Authority	Based on long-standing customs and sacred traditions	<i>Xwarrah</i> as an institutional, hereditary mandate rooted in ancient Iranian and Zoroastrian cosmology; the king as vessel of an ancient, sacred office
Charismatic Authority	Derived from the personal, extraordinary qualities of a leader; must be continuously proven	Visual performance of superhuman prowess: lion hunts, archery feats, and military victories that render the king’s <i>xwarrah</i> empirically visible
Legal-Rational Authority	Based on formal rules and administrative structures	Sasanian bureaucratic apparatus: coinage, administrative seals, and the office of <i>mowbed</i> (chief priest), which routinized charismatic leadership into institutional structures

This study is not without limitations. The corpus, while carefully delimited, remains a selective sample of Sasanian visual production. Seals, sealings, architectural decoration, and textiles, all of which participated in the dissemination of royal ideology, were excluded due to considerations of scope and functional specificity. A comprehensive analysis incorporating these media would undoubtedly enrich and potentially complicate the picture presented here. Furthermore, the regional dimension of Sasanian iconography deserves deeper investigation. The rock reliefs are concentrated in Fars, the dynastic heartland; how did royal imagery function, and how was it received, in the empire's more distant provinces, or among the powerful Parthian noble families whose loyalty was essential yet never guaranteed? Comparative studies, situating Sasanian visual strategies alongside those of contemporary empires such as Rome and the Kushans, would also illuminate the extent to which this visual ideology was distinctively Iranian versus part of a broader late antique language of power. Finally, as acknowledged in the Theoretical Framework, alternative sociological lenses, particularly Assmann's concept of cultural memory⁶⁰ and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power,⁶¹ remain underexplored in the Sasanian context and offer promising avenues for future research.

In conclusion, the Sasanian kings were not merely temporal rulers. Through a carefully curated visual program, they were cast as the earthly agents of Shahrewar, wielding metal weapons in a cosmic war, flanked by divine allies, and radiant with the visible proof of *xwarrah*. Recurring motifs, the king as warrior, associations with celestial symbols, and emphasis on protecting the realm, collectively reinforced this image. Sasanian art thus functioned as a strategic medium to solidify authority, linking the king's rule to cosmic order and unifying subjects under a shared ideological framework. This fusion of religious and political power did not simply reflect Sasanian ideology; it actively produced it, forging a vision of sacred kingship whose legacy would long outlast the dynasty itself.

⁶⁰ Assman, 2011.

⁶¹ Bourdieu, 1991.

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ORCID

Sorour KHORASHADI  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2085-5968>

Raheleh KHERADMAND  <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8370-9886>

Mehdi MOUSAVI KOUHPAR  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9532-3002>

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