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The Rebellion of Anōš Āzād

Keywords: Xusrō Anōšīrvān, *Sohrab and Rustum*, Dīnawarī, *Anōš Āzād*, *Xwadāy Nāmag*, Iranian Christianity, Firdawsī, Mār Aba, Procopius

Introduction

So, on the bloody sand, Sohrab lay dead;
And the great Rustum drew his horseman's cloak
Down o'er his face, and sate by his dead son.
As those black granite pillars, once high-rear'd
By Jemshid in Persepolis, to bear
His house, now 'mid their broken flights of steps
Lie prone, enormous, down the mountain side—
So in the sand lay Rustum by his son.

Matthew Arnold's poem *Sohrab and Rustum*, from which that quotation comes, is the Anglo-Saxon world's main point of entry into the mythical cycles of the Iranian National Epic. It is a free adaptation of one of the most famous Iranian legends of the mythical past: a tale of father and son, who meet unknowingly on the field of war and whose single combat ends in the death of the son. Like *Hamlet*, the *Oedipus*, and even *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum* can be understood as a warning against the self-destructive consequences of rivalry between father and son and attempted patricide. But Arnold did not *introduce* this theme into his adaptation from Iranian lore. He did not even exaggerate it, because conflict between father and son is a prominent theme throughout the Iranian National Epic, as it is in all mythology. So this theme is right where we would expect to find it in the most ancient part of the Iranian epic tradition.

And yet the theme of father and son rivalry is to the fore even in the parts of the Iranian epic tradition purporting to be historical. Sasanian reigns marked by heresy, military disaster, or failed foreign or domestic policy are never judged on their own merits or by their real consequences, but are rather condemned because the kings in question did not live up to the measure of their forefathers. Harsh criticisms of Pērōz, Kawād I, and Hormōzd IV spring to mind here, and these can be seen as *damnationes memoriae* from the following reign. We can also recall that native Iranian tradition accused Xusrō II of having his father Hormōzd IV murdered: an ignominious beginning to a reign which ended in death at the behest of his son Kawād II, and which ultimately ushered in the rule of Islam and the victorious Arabs.

Such tales of the humiliated pride and pomp of the 'Kisras' would have pleased a puritanical Muslim audience in the extreme youth of their religion. Modern-day Fanatics of the new caliphate or so-called 'Islamic State' would probably also take a kind of *Schadenfreude* in them now — if they could read them. But stories of royal degeneracy and the collapse of the Sasanids do not arouse the same pathos that we feel in the story of *Sohrab and Rustam*. Only one story in the Sasanian part of the Iranian National Epic commands similar feeling and this is the story of Anōš Āzād's rebellion against his father Xusrō Anōšīrvān.

Background

Amongst all Arabic prose histories of Sasanian Iran, Dīnawarī's account of the revolt of Anōš Āzād is not only the earliest that has come down to us, but also the fullest. Tabarī, who is usually

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believed to be the greatest Muslim historian, omits the story of Anōš Āzād altogether, though he dwells with great prolixity on other, seemingly trivial things. It is the poet Firdawsī, who offers by far the longest and most elaborate account of the revolt of Anōš Āzād within the Iranian Epic tradition. The anonymous *Chronicle of Seert* records a surprisingly different account of the Anōš Āzād story which is difficult to reconcile with the others.

But before immersing ourselves further in the Iranian Epic tradition, we need to take stock of the real history of the events in question. Only one non-Iranian source has picked up details of the rebellion of Anōš Āzād, and this is Procopius' *Wars*.¹ The revolt against Xusrō I, led by his son 'Anasozadus', as Procopius calls him, began in the 540s in the midst of a war with New Rome when the plague had broken out and Xusrō was thought dead. Procopius' *Bellum Persicum* introduces the mere fact of the revolt, and the full story is narrated in the *Bellum Gothicum*. Anasozadus was exiled by his father for many transgressions, chief amongst which was philandering with his father's wives. Hearing of his father's illness, Anasozadus raised up a revolt, which Xusrō's general Phabrizus crushed: Anasozadus is then taken captive and his eyelids are disfigured.

Indigenous Iranian tradition offers a somewhat different story. Xusrō's son Anōš Āzād was born to a Christian mother, who had refused to become a Zoroastrian.² Though Dīnawarī says at first that Anōš Āzād *differed* from his father in religion and later implies that he was a Christian, Firdawsī declares emphatically that the young rebel was a follower of Christ. The youth had been confined to gaol in Gondēšāpūr, but when news of Xusrō's illness reached him, Anōš Āzād escaped, recruited an army of Christians, threw his father's deputies out of Ahwaz, and began preparations to march on Ctesiphon. Apart from mentioning the capture of Anōš Āzād and the restoration of Xusrō's dominions, Dīnawarī does not explain how this insurrection was dealt with, and his narrative ends abruptly. The rest of the story is narrated only by Firdawsī in his *Šāhnāme*.

In Firdawsī's account, Anōš Āzād's insurrection begins when the Christian prince frees the madmen imprisoned at Gondēšāpūr, and all Christians — even prelates, apparently — flock to his banner. Some of the nobility were apparently also involved. A line, which editor Khaleghi-Motlagh cites as a variant reading, makes the mother of Anōš Āzād the financier of the rebellion. News of the insurrection reaches Xusrō, who then writes a letter to his lieutenant at Ctesiphon, Rām-Barzīn: Xusrō expresses his anger, and expounds a rather dim view of Christians. The end of the story, found only in Firdawsī, involves a battle between the armies of Anōš Āzād and Rām-Barzīn, and the rebel dies the death of a Christian martyr. Anōš Āzād's mother leads the Christians of Iran in mourning and prepares a burial shroud and grave for her son.

Finally, the *Chronicle of Seert* presents an account of Anōš Āzād's rebellion which is almost unrecognisable.³ We read only that one of Xusrō's sons revolted and took over Gondēšāpūr. Xusrō reacts by accusing the patriarch of Iran of having prompted the insurrection in the first place, and he then demands that that prelate put a stop to the revolt by threatening the dissidents with excommunication. This apparently works: the revolt ends, and Xusrō leaves his Christian subjects alone.

Sources

It is necessary to conjecture that the Anōš Āzād story underwent several transformations. The real events in question must have been transmitted first by hearsay and rumour. This is how the story reached Procopius in the mid 540s. Next, the story must have been written down — not by someone connected to the Iranian court but by the community most interested in the revolt and its outcome: Iranian Christians. This would probably mean that the story of Anōš Āzād was first put into writing in Syriac, the common language of Christian Iran, probably before the end of Xusrō I's reign in

¹ Proc. *Bella* II 24. 8; VIII 10. 17-22.

² Firdawsī, Nushin-Ravan, l. 743-980; Dīnawarī, p. 71-72. Cf. JACKSON BONNER (2015) 103-107. For the most recent translation of Firdawsī's narrative of Anōš Āzād's revolt, see JACKSON BONNER [<http://ctesiphon.humanum.fr/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Shahnameh-Bonner-derni%C3%A8re-version.pdf>]

³ *Chr. Seert* I, p. 70-71.

572. Later this document would have been put into Arabic by translators of Iranian literature during the Abbasid translation movement in the middle to late eighth century. The Arabic translation of the Anōš Āzād story was then worked into the farrago of texts which came to be known as the *Xwadāy Nāmag*, made systematic most famously (but not exclusively) by Ibn Muqaffa'.⁴ This would have been the text that reached all later authors who wrote about the Anōš Āzād story from the ninth century onwards. Finally, the *Chronicle of Seert* must have drawn on another collateral text: one that was concerned less with the events in question than with their resolution on a political level. This would have been a sixth-century Syriac text which was translated into Arabic and then excerpted by the compiler of that *Chronicle* no later than 1020 — and then lost.

Reports of Anōš Āzād's rebellion reached Procopius circuitously by word of mouth. In his first report of the Anōš Āzād story, Procopius attributes it to the highest level of the Armenian church: the historian apparently heard the tale from the Armenian general Valerian by way of a secret envoy who heard about it from the brother of the Bishop of Dvin.⁵ In the second instance Procopius attributes the story to Xusrō's personal physician Tribunus who had been sent by Justinian.⁶ But Procopius' account is not complete and raises a serious chronological problem. The *Bellum Persicum* places the Anasozadus revolt in about 543, but the *Bellum Gothicum* situates it in about 550, the final year of the five-year truce between New Rome and Iran signed in 545. This is a difficult problem which we must leave to one side for the moment and return to the Iranian epic tradition.

The *Šāhnāme*'s account of the Anōš Āzād rebellion suggests that it goes back to a Christian hagiography.⁷ Firdawsī's narrative is full of Christian imagery, and the tone of the story is generally sympathetic to Anōš Āzād as a Christian martyr. There are surprising references to Syrian ecclesiastical vocabulary, and the only partisan of Anōš Āzād who has a name is called Shammas: the normal Syriac word for 'deacon', which an uninformed translator could easily have mistaken for a personal name.⁸

But the emphasis on Christian burial is perhaps the most convincing proof that Firdawsī's source was ultimately a hagiography of Anōš Āzād. Procopius and Agathias both observed that inhumation was contrary to Persian sensibilities and repugnant to Zoroastrian custom, and was attacked in the persecutions of Bahrām V, whose chief mobad ordered the disinterment of all buried Christians.⁹ Burial and the rites associated with it must, therefore, have been something of a cultural shibboleth for Iranian Christians — to say nothing of a religious obligation. Anōš Āzād, accordingly, when on the point of death, specifically eschews the *dahma*, the aromatic balms, and all other trappings of a Zoroastrian funeral, and requests Christian rites, and his mother obliges. Such a story could not have been composed by a Zoroastrian, especially not one close to the Sasanian court. So a Christian, Syriac origin seems a reasonable inference. Firdawsī must have versified his source as he found it, and there is no reason to suspect that he invented it.¹⁰ Dīnawarī's narrative, which admittedly breaks off after Xusrō I's defeat of Anōš Āzād's army, must also go back to this source also.¹¹

⁴ JACKSON BONNER (2015) 45-50.

⁵ Proc. *Bella* II 24. 8.

⁶ Proc. *Bella* VIII 10. 8-22.

⁷ I developed this idea first in JACKSON BONNER (2011) 59-70, and developed it further in JACKSON BONNER (2015) 68-71. My theory has lately been endorsed in JULLIEN (2015).

⁸ Shammas appears in Firdawsī, Nushin-Ravan, l. 895. Other Syrian ecclesiastical terms include 'catholicos', 'patriarch', and 'bishop' (Firdawsī, Nushin-Ravan, l. 895; 957; 963).

⁹ Proc. *Bella* I 11. 35; Agath.23.1; *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum*, p. 254. The grim persecution described in the *Acta* is discussed in BROCK (1976) 9 with note 37.

¹⁰ *Contra* NÖLDEKE (1879) 473. Nöldeke merely *asserts* without proof what I *deny* without fear of contradiction.

¹¹ There is further circumstantial evidence to support this inference. Familial strife between mixed Zoroastrian and Christian families is a well-attested theme in Syriac hagiography. And there was, as Walker has recently observed, a fair amount of Syriac hagiography dealing with Persian martyrs, some of which dealt with royal and aristocratic Christians, and which reflected the tropes and motifs of the Iranian epic tradition: *The History of the Heroic Deeds of Mar Qardagh* is a case in point [WALKER (2006) 19-26]. So the putative 'hagiography' of Anōš Āzād would fit into a well-established genre.

As for the *Chronicle of Seert*, its interest in the Anōš Āzād story is so superficial that it does not even mention the rebel's name. Instead, the story that we meet is a rather fanciful description of the political intervention by Mār Abā, patriarch of the Iranian church, in stopping the insurrection of Xusrō I's son. This is not very believable, and we may rather infer that the source of this version of the story represents an effort on the part of the leadership of the Iranian church to distance itself from the revolt and to share in the credit for having stopped it. In other words, the source in question here was not a hagiography, nor a straightforward description of events: it was basically political talking points. The *Chronicle of Seert*, however, probably presents this propaganda in a much-condensed form.

Analysis

Procopius heard about the revolt from the highest levels of the Armenian Church and from a Christian adviser to Xusrō.¹² I consider this strong circumstantial evidence that Anōš Āzād was a Christian.¹³ And yet, Procopius does not say so explicitly. Moreover, in his *Bellum Gothicum*, Procopius shifts the date of Anōš Āzād's revolt to 550, even though he had clearly dated it to 542 in his *Bellum Persicum*. Why?

Whether or not Justinian and the Constantinopolitan court had heard of the insurrection of Anōš Āzād, there was no response to it. The Romans took no advantage of the coup. Perhaps the intelligence that had reached Procopius was dismissed as unreliable. But in the context of the *Great Game* that had arisen between Rome and Iran, I find hard to believe that Justinian would have failed to act on the warrant of a mere rumour if there were a possibility of gaining even a tiny advantage over his rival. The Goths, who had lately overrun Italy, had enticed Xusrō to attack Rome's exposed eastern flank, and those cunning barbarians had offered to Justinian's general Belisarius control of the Italian peninsula in order to induce him to rebel against his Emperor. Sending Belisarius to the East in order to support Anōš Āzād's coup would have removed Belisarius from the temptation of power in Italy and would have allowed Justinian undermine Gothic foreign policy and outflank his oriental rival. So there is reason to believe that intelligence of the coup did not reach the court at Constantinople, or that imperial affairs were in such disorder that no reaction could be organised.

In his *Bellum Gothicum* Procopius shifted the date of Anōš Āzād's revolt deliberately.¹⁴ He moved it to 550 when it would have been impossible to take advantage of it even if Justinian had wanted to do so. The Romans had already suffered the humiliating sack of Antioch, Totila's Goths had just taken Rome and overrun Italy again, and fighting was fierce in Lazica. Finally, Procopius must have concealed the religion of Anōš Āzād in order to avoid giving offense to the Emperor Justinian, since the rebel's religion would have been a good pretext for cooperation. Of course, Jullien has raised the objection that the Churches of Iran and Rome were not in communion at the time, and so she argues that the idea of cooperation between Rome and Anōš Āzād would in theory have been unthinkable.¹⁵ But doctrinal differences have always yielded to *Realpolitik* when necessary.

The fact that Dīnawarī purged the ending of the Anōš Āzād story from his *Kitāb al-Aḥbār al-Ṭiwāl* is curious. Throughout his book, Dīnawarī shows a general interest in revolts and uprisings, such as those of Bahrām Čōbīn, Beštām, and Bābak Khurramdīn.¹⁶ So there must have been a good reason for him to remove the conclusion to Anōš Āzād's uprising. I suspect that he did so because parts of the story's ending were offensive. Firdawsī's poem proves that part of the Anōš Āzād story included Zoroastrian anti-Christian polemic which included criticisms not of Christians but of Christ himself. An old man in the army sent to confront Anōš Āzād and his rebels delivers a vehement harangue about the deceptions of Jesus who foolishly brought about his own death upon the cross. If the 'glory of

¹² Proc. *Bella* II 24. 8; VIII 10-16.

¹³ *Contra* JULLIEN (2015) 113-114. Jullien endorses my thesis that the story of Anōš Āzād goes back to a Syrian source, but rejects his Christianity as 'une construction littéraire'.

¹⁴ JACKSON BONNER (2015) 105-106; *Contra* Börm who asserts with some hesitation that there were *two* revolts of Anōš Āzād [BÖRM (2007) 127].

¹⁵ JULLIEN (2015) 109.

¹⁶ JACKSON BONNER (2015) 6.

Yazdan' had truly shone upon Christ, as the old man says, the Jews would not have got the better of him.¹⁷ It was probably best to spare a Muslim audience violent criticisms of their second-greatest prophet, even if they would have agreed that Jesus was not God.¹⁸

Within the *Xwadāy Nāmag* tradition, only Firdawsī includes the entire story of Anōš Āzād. His version, as we have seen, goes back to the Syriac Iranian hagiography, which ended in the death, burial, and canonisation of Anōš Āzād. Firdawsī included the entire story for three reasons. First, Firdawsī's task was simply to versify such relics of Iranian literature as had come down to him without expurgation. Second, the story of rivalry between father and son fits perfectly into the *Šāhnāmeḥ*, one of the greatest parts of which is the story of Sohrāb and Rustam, a tale which Firdawsī had already versified to great effect. Third, rivalry between father and son, and the death of a son, were themes in Firdawsī's own life and they affected him greatly. In the midst of his canto on the reign of Xusrō II, the poet remarks that his son had died at the age of thirty-seven, and that the son 'had always been rude' to the father.¹⁹ Unfortunately, we hear nothing more of this conflict, but the poet's remark allows us to infer that his troubled relationship with his son preoccupied him greatly.

Finally, the *Chronicle of Seert* omits every important detail of the revolt of Anōš Āzād because it focuses on the political resolution of the revolt. Iranian church leaders did not wish to appear to have encouraged the revolt, or to have connived at it. Accordingly, the figure of Mār Abā, Patriarch of the Church of the East, is accused of having prompted the insurrection in the first place, and then he is given credit for having stopped it at the behest of Xusrō I. As superficially convincing as that narrative may seem, there are good reasons to reject it as an invention for political purposes. If Mār Abā had really intervened to stop the revolt, we should expect to find mention of this in his biography. But the *Life of Mar Aba* includes no such thing. The only notice that comes close refers to a disturbance in Khuzistan in about 550, probably related to the same schismatic communities in that region which Mār Abā had dealt with earlier in his career.²⁰ In fact, the outbreak of the disturbance is attributed to Satanic influences which would more fairly describe a doctrinal dispute than a Christian insurrection against a Zoroastrian king led by that king's own son!²¹

Conclusion

Like the tragedy of Sohrāb and Rustam, the story of Anōš Āzād still has the power to move us. It is still possible to sense the hope of Iranian Christians that a follower of Christ would one day sit upon the Sasanian throne. We can connect the hagiography of Anōš Āzād with the rumours and propaganda holding that Christ had appeared in a dream to Kawād I before his conquest of the city of Amida;²² that Xusrō Anōšīrvān had converted to Christianity on his deathbed;²³ and that Xusrō II had embraced Christianity before his flight into Roman territory as the rebel Bahrām Čōbīn advanced upon Ctesiphon.²⁴ There is even a legend, reported by Dīnawarī, that one of Christ's apostles arrived at

¹⁷ Firdawsī, Nushin-Ravan, l. 908-910. Cf. JACKSON BONNER (2015) 70-71. The criticism of Jesus that we find in *Šāhnāmeḥ* is reminiscent of anti-Christian polemics found in Armenian literature such as Elišē's *History* (p. 12-13; 24-27), and that of Sebeos (p. 123).

¹⁸ Quran 4:157-158.

¹⁹ KHALEGHI-MOTLAGH (1999). The phrase is *hame bud hamvara ba man durusht*.

²⁰ Mar Aba, p. 264; 225-226; cf. JACKSON BONNER (2015) 106-107.

²¹ Pigulevskaĵa, the Soviet scholar from Leningrad, assumed that that disturbance in Khuzistan in about 550 was the revolt of Anōš Āzād, and many scholars have followed her. But the evidence for this is very flimsy. It is easy to get the impression that Pigulevskaĵa went out of her way to portray the revolt of Anōš Āzād as a form of communist revolution. She confounds Anōš Āzād's rebellion with the Mazdakite uprising [PIGULEVSKAJA (1963) 288]. Pigulevskaĵa based this argument on a notice of Ibn Athir's to the effect that Anōš Āzād was a *zindiq*, or 'heretic' [PIGULEVSKAJA (1963) 225], and argues on the warrant of no evidence that this hybrid rebel movement was a response to a process of feudalisation.

²² *Chr. Seert* I, p. 132-133.

²³ Sebeos, p. 69-70.

²⁴ Th. Sim. IV 10. 1.

the court of Ardašīr, and that the first Sasanian king embraced the religion of Jesus.²⁵ Anachronism and improbabilities aside, a Christian Iranian counterpart to the Roman emperor was evidently a powerful and influential idea. We may even speculate that later Sasanian policy encouraged the cult of a royal Christian martyr, approved of his assimilation into the Iranian epic tradition of conflict between father and son, and thereby encouraged the loyalty of Iranian Christians.

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Summary:

The Rebellion of Anōš Āzād

This article analyses the sources of the Rebellion of Anōš Āzād, son of Xusrō Anōšīrvān. The truth of what happened during this important period of Iranian history may never be known. But historical sources have

²⁵ Dīnawarī, p. 46-47; cf. SCHILLING (2008) 89-112.

transmitted fragments of the story from various different perspectives – often in lacunary form. Reading the relevant sources together, and analysing them, allows us to determine why some sources are fragmentary or deliberately misleading. It is possible to infer why certain authors, such as Procopius and Dinawari, might have been motivated to suppress or distort certain details also.

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