Legendary Patterns in Late Antique Biography

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# Legendary Patterns in Late Antique Biography

*The Parallel Lives of Ardashir I and Constantine the Great*

*By*

Matthew O'Farrell


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Cover illustration: Pietro da Cortona (Pietro Berrettini), Tapestry showing Constantine Slaying the Lion. 1636. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1959-78-11.

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Finally my wife Kristin, daughter Ivy and son Edwin, to whom I owe a great debt of time and attention and ought now return.

# Tables

# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| Acta. SS VIII | Stiltingus, J. Suyskenus, J. Perierus, J. and Cleus, J. 1762. *Acta Sanctorum Septembris*, Acta Sanctorum VIII, Antwerp. |
| ATU | Uther, H. 2004. *Types of International Folktales: A classification and Bibliography*. 3 vols, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia/Academia Scientiarum Fennica. |
| Bd. | Anonymous. *The Bundahišn: The Zoroastrian Book of Creation*. 2020. Ed. D. Agostini & S. Thrope. Oxford: Oxford University Press. |
| EDH | *Epigraphic Database Heidelberg*. Electronic resource 1986–. Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. |
| FGrH | *Brill's New Jacoby Online*. Electronic Resource. 1926–. Eds. F. Jacoby, I. Worthington, S. Schorn, H. Joachim-Gehrke and V. Bucciantini. |
| KNA | Anonymous. *Kâr-nâma-î Artakhsîr-î Pâpakân*. 1935. Ed. B.T. Anklesaria. Bombay.<br>Numeration is that used in Grenet, F. (Ed.) 2003. *La Geste D'Ardashir Fils de Pâbag*. Die: éditions A Die. |
| LoT | Anonymous. *The Letter of Tansar*. 1954. Ed. M. Boyce. Rome: Royal Institute of Translation and Publication of Iran, Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, UNESCO. |
| NPi | Skjaervø, P.O. and Humbach, H. 1983. *The Sasanian Inscription of Paikuli*, Parts 3.1 and 3.2. Wiesbaden: Dr Ludwig Reichert Verlag. |
| PG | *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca.* 1857–66. Ed. J.P. Minge. |
| PLRE | Martindale, J.R. 1980. *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: Volume II, 395–527 AD*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. |
| ŠhN | Ferdowsi. *Šāhnāmeh*. Persian Heritage Foundation, Persian Texts, New Series 1. 8 Vols. 1987–2007. Eds. D. Khaleghi Motlagh and M. Omidsalar. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers |
| ŠKZ | Huyse, P. 1999. *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka'ba-I Zardušt* (*ŠKZ*). Corpus Inscriptionem Iranicum pt. III. London: School of Oriental and African Studies. |

# A Note on Transliteration

This study covers a wide variety of texts from a number of different languages. As a result, a *completely* consistent transliteration is impossible. The following guidelines have been followed:

- Middle Persian follows the transliteration used in D.M. Mackenzie's *A Concise Dictionary of Pahlavi*.
- Modern Persian and Arabic follow the transliteration used by the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, with the following exceptions: the letter Khe is rendered "kh" *not* "ḵ" and "ibn" is used rather than "ebn".
- Armenian names follow the usage of the referenced translations.
- Where a translation has been quoted the transliteration of the original has been maintained.
- Where a conventional English spelling for a name exists it is used. Hence: Ctesias, *not* Ktesias, Sargon, *not* Šarrum-kin and Ardashir, *not* Ardaxšīr or similar.

# Introduction

On April 25th 387 CE, John Chrysostom addressed the populace of Antioch in what must have been an atmosphere of great relief.[1] Having heard the pleas of Antioch's friends and representatives, the emperor Theodosius I (r. 379–395 CE) had graciously declined to have the city's leading citizens rounded up and executed for their failure to prevent a riot in which the emperor's images were torn down and stoned. According to Chrysostom, this was entirely due to the efforts of Flavian, the city's elderly bishop, a version of events that may not have been completely, or at all, true.[2] A large part of Chrysostom's sermon claims to recount Flavian's representations before the emperor *verbatim*. As Chrysostom tells it, the saintly priest, blaming the disturbances on external, supernatural forces, admitted to the city's ingratitude and begged the disappointed emperor's pardon.[3] In representing Flavian's case for clemency as both an imperial and Christian virtue, Chrysostom saw fit to mention a similar act of mercy made by the emperor Constantine who had died five decades before. After describing the dead emperor's mild and philosophical response to the stoning of *his* images, Chrysostom, speaking as Flavian, made a striking statement.

> It is related of the blessed Constantine, that on one occasion, when a statue of himself had been pelted with stones, and many were instigating him to proceed against the perpetrators of the outrage; saying, that they had disfigured his whole face by battering it with stones, he stroked his face with his hand, and smiling gently, said, I am quite unable to perceive any wound inflicted upon my face. The head appears sound, and the face also quite sound. Thus these persons, overwhelmed with shame, desisted from their unrighteous counsel.
>
> This saying, even to the present day, all repeat; and length of time hath neither weakened nor extinguished the memory of such exalted wisdom. How much more illustrious is such an action than any number of warlike trophies! Many cities did he build; and many barbarous tribes did he conquer; not one of which we now remember; but this saying is repeated

1 On the dates of Chrysostom's homilies during the controversy, see Paverd 1991, 363–364.

2 Responsibility for the pardon may, in fact, lie with the recommendations of Caesarius, Theodosius' *Magister Officiorum*, a number of other petitions that were put to Theodosius after the riot, or a combination of some or all of these representations, see ibid. 135–149. On the extremely rhetorical and thereby tendentious nature of the sources for these events and their resulting problems as historical sources, see French 1998.

3 PG. 49.216 *f.*

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004523777_002

> over and over again to the present day; and those who follow us, as well as those who come after them, all will hear of it.[4]

Given the context of Chrysostom's speech, the persuasive intent of the rhetorical mode and the all-too-neat appropriateness of the analogy for the situation, one may express some scepticism as to the historicity of Chrysostom's example. Chrysostom was well within his rights to offer plausibility rather than fact; there was no reason after all, why the great Constantine *could not* have behaved in such a way and every reason why he *should* have.[5] One may also suspect that Chrysostom's self-contradicting assertion, that Constantine's vast earthly successes, his campaigns and foundations, had *entirely* faded from public memory a mere half century after his death, to have been another artifact of Chrysostom's rhetorical pose rather than a firm insight into the sociology of historical knowledge in the later fourth century.

Despite the artificiality of its context and the deeply suspicious use to which it was put, this statement has, on occasion, been used as evidence of the rapid transmutation of Constantine into a figure of legend.[6] Unfortunately, to link this statement to the development of *literary* legends, even as a brief example in passing, is an awkward elision of two rather different things. "Legend" is part of a knot of terms describing varieties of narrative that are, at least in English, often poorly delineated.[7] Invoking the "sayings" of the late emperor, Chrysostom appears to have been referencing, probably inventing, the rawest level of oral history – what has been called a society's "general historical knowledge" or its "unprocessed historical record"[8] – that is, informal history, beliefs about the past distributed among the individual members of a society at any given time. Yet there is no obligatory link between this, the gross, the collection of individual constructions of the past borne by ephemeral millions, and the net, the collection of literary remnants passed to posterity. Though it was certainly not the intent of these writers to do so, the quotation of Chrysostom's rhetoric in these contexts, accidentally links one to the other, inadvertently implying a process proceeding largely from the bottom up. The result is a misleading sense of how "historical legend", that is, narrative of a stereotypical nature in pre-modern texts that claim historicity, comes into being. The dissolution of historical individuals into recognisable bundles of images and

4 Ibid. Translation from Schaff and Stephens 1889, 485–486.
5 Kempshall 2011, 350 *f.*
6 Linder 1975, 45–6; Lieu and Montserrat 1996, 99.
7 Thompson 1977, 7–14.
8 Finnegan 1970, 198; White 1973, 5.

associations in the representation of history in text is a process in which the boundless and eternally faceless concepts of the "oral" and the "popular" are not the only, or even the most important, actors.

Of course, this interpretation of Chrysostom's statement is, in the broadest sense, quite true. It is almost certain that various demotic, perhaps quite fantastic, stories of Constantine were in circulation in Chrysostom's lifetime, but these and any "sayings" known to his audience are almost entirely closed to us. They died with the last person who heard them or gradually affixed themselves to other figures, leaving no discernible trace of their former attachment. What remains for us is another set of materials entirely, that information which those with the skills, the time and the inclination thought important enough to create, record and preserve. Such people are rarely as informative as one would like, particularly regarding *their* sources. Indeed, in any consideration of historical material there almost invariably comes a point where information peters out, where links stubbornly refuse to be made and historians find themselves staring at a map "without the least vestige of land".[9]

At this point, one may either admit that one can proceed no further, or one can, out of a *horror vacui*, start making assumptions about the nature and behaviour of processes one cannot observe. A form of the latter approach, the supposition of an underlying oral tradition, is very often applied in cases where historical narrative has become implausible and stereotypical. This approach has the great advantage of being essentially immune to examination, allowing the author to pass quickly on to more fertile pastures. It is very often, however, a deeply unsatisfactory answer to the problem of why, and how, the implausible and the stereotypical came to reside in representations of the past in the first place. It is to present, in a far less calculated way, an explanation akin to that made in Chrysostom's panegyric of thanks to his emperor and his bishop.

When considering this sort of narrative, what we may call *historical legend*, we should be wary of the assuming, like the first wave of European folklorists, that there exists in all cultures a living reservoir of narratives into which writers sometimes dipped.[10] This is not to claim that writers are always and everywhere austerely above the non-literate traditions current in their time.[11]

---

9 He had bought a large map representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.
Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*.

10 A summary of early trends in folklore studies and their relationship to Classical scholarship can be found in Hansen 2002, 1–10.

11 "Folktales, when written down, cease to be traditions." Hartland 1894, 91.

This is clearly not the case.[12] Nor is it to entirely discount an "oral" or "popular" component in the reproduction of legendary stories in historical literature. Rather it is to recognise that things are far more complicated than an either/or distinction and to take the, by now, not controversial position that the effects of literate transmission impact on literate and non-literate contexts alike.

Composing a textual representation of the past presumes both an opinion on the past and membership of a group whose skills presuppose some awareness of a precedent of previous representations in text. Writers are both bearers of the unwritten traditions of their societies *and* readers. Moreover, because those who portray the past write in the expectation of being read and understood, they compose according to codes they have already internalised. The replication of stereotypical representations of history is a feedback loop in which the repetition of an image both references and strengthens the symbolic power of that image, diffusing it ever more broadly into the consciousness of the society in which it dwells.

Thus, when a particularly powerful, but implausible, image or narrative can be discerned repeatedly, over a long period of time and in very different examples of historical or *historicising* writing, one has to consider that its ease of recognition may be its point – that it was, and is, intended to be read vertically, as a shorthand for a collection of interpretations drawn from recollections, conscious or not, of its previous applications. It is, in other words, an accepted *literary* image. In these cases the problem of stereotypical historical legend claiming historicity becomes less one of naïve oral transmission into "popular" texts opposed to a supposedly rational historiography, and more one of positioning events within a chain of, more or less, knowing literary comparison. This understanding simultaneously makes the extremely diffuse presence of a stereotypical narrative more explicable and opens up a number of interpretive approaches.

If ancient oral sources, about which we know, and can know, basically nothing, are made secondary considerations, the continuous reappearance of historical or *historicising* stereotypes, becomes a literary problem. Having recognised and defined a repetitive narrative, we may search for and collect applications of it across time. We may then extract from this archaeology of application a vertical profile of the narrative that gives us an overview of the historical circumstances with which it tends to be associated. Proceeding from this overview we may examine the development of particularly well-documented applications of the narrative horizontally, as a *historiographic* problem. This

12 Gurevich 1988, 4–11.

is itself a twofold process. First an attempt needs to be made to reconstruct the context and form in which narrative first entered into text as well as the motives driving its introduction. Next, the reception of the narrative into the literate matrix of the host society needs to be sketched out in order that we might understand *how* it was viewed, *who* was using it and *why*, as well as any development it may have shown over time.

The merciful Constantine seen in Chrysostom's speech within a speech was, in all likelihood, a self-contained, *ad hoc* construction referencing only the circumstances of its creation; as such it can hardly be considered a pervasive historical legend. The specific method by which it sought to arouse an effect and its place in the Greek, Christian literary tradition does, however, permit a demonstration of the concepts outlined above in miniature. Here Chrysostom relies on a vertical effect: albeit one whose referent is explicitly named. In technical terms he presented his hearers with a *comparatio*, and in doing so created an image of history disguised as a folksy commonplace. He did this in order to convey something unstated but meaningful. Striking a direct parallel between the merciful Constantine and the merciful Theodosius, Chrysostom invited his audience to collapse five decades of very significant political and religious change into a single point, suggesting an ideal of the eternally clement Christian ruler who was simultaneously both Constantine and Theodosius. Shifting to horizontal considerations, Chrysostom made this comparison in the context of a formal oration, a persuasive mode of communication that his culture traditionally associated with the extremely erudite. Moreover, the speech was the product of a particularly local and specific set of circumstances. Though published and circulated, the sermon was very much of its moment. As a symbol the forbearance of Constantine was of very transient appeal and appears to have had very little impact on the emperor's literary afterlife. There are however much larger, much older and much more resilient historical typologies lurking in the world's historical literatures, some of which are so ancient and so prevalent as to almost forbid analysis, and Constantine attracted his share of these as well.

In extant histories the emperor's origins and boyhood are rarely dealt with in any concerted way. Yet a set of Greek hagiographies, composed between the ninth to thirteenth centuries, confidently proffer a detailed account of Constantine's birth and youth. This story, though certainly woven into the historical narrative of Constantine's period, is both extremely unlikely and, at times, transparently supernatural. What is more, it is extremely familiar. The incredible tale of a lost prince and his daring escape recalls stories told of a number of other figures in Antiquity, sometimes quite exactly. Rather

ironically, one may find very strong parallels in Perso-Arabic texts carrying stories related to the so-called *Kārnāmag* tradition of Ardashir I († *c.*242 CE) the founder of the Sasanian Empire, the later Roman Empire's great eastern rival.

That completely unrelated biographies of the foundational figures of two very distinct and sometimes hostile polities should converge in this fashion demands an explanation that goes beyond the unexamined supposition of universal pan-Eurasian narrative patterns or an all-consuming oral tradition. Particularly as both Constantine and Ardashir, unlike many figures to whom these narratives are attracted, have left behind other, much more plausible accounts of their rise to power. We may take it for granted that the stories told in these biographies were long established and widely dispersed modes in the representation of history. What we lack is any concrete sense of how such modes *work*, in what ways and under what circumstances they were pulled into historical and historicising literature, what they said and how they accumulated their explanatory power. The historiographies of these two men grant us a rare opportunity to address such problems.

Answering such questions requires a more careful interrogation of the form of these stories than is normally made in consideration of "historical" material. The unlikely narratives of birth and youth seen in the Roman and Iranian traditions can be broken down into two distinct clusters of specific components or *sequences*. Doing so not only renders the narratives comprehensible to analysis but connects the Late Antique and Mediaeval accounts of Constantine and Ardashir to two much older traditions of historicising literature. The first is a pair of Mesopotamian legends concerning Sargon the Great (twenty-fourth-twenty-third century BCE) and the second a clutch of Greek versions of the life of the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, Cyrus II († *c.*530 BCE).[13] It has long been suspected that Cyrus' legends reflect Sargonic precedent and the transference from one to the other can be traced with some certainty to an urban environment that was both literate and heavily antiquarian; a likelihood that emphasises the significant role historical literature played in maintaining, renewing and retransmitting these narrative habits. This relationship suggests that both sequences have very long, trans-regional and multilingual precedents as representations of historical events; representations that lean suspiciously towards the apologetic and the laudatory.

It is in this light that one must reconsider the much later biographical traditions: a legendary account of the life of Ardashir represented in a single Middle Persian text and the New Persian epic *Šāhnāmeh*, and a particular set

13 The Middle Chronology is used throughout.

of Byzantine hagiographies of Constantine that come into view in the ninth century. Both the Iranian and Roman collections represent lengthy, and plainly composite, biographical works whose early sections reproduce the birth and youth narratives seen in the much older Mesopotamian traditions. Situating these texts in the broader historiography of each figure, it is sometimes possible to isolate the sources of the stereotypical and unhistorical sequences they carry. Where this is unclear or unavailable the texts themselves sometimes provide contextual clues as to when, and how, these episodes entered historical literature.

In both of these later traditions the representations of the birth and youth of the subject are not only unhistorical but were often quite deliberately and knowingly so. In these texts old narratives were recycled to create partisan, and sometimes quasi-official, entrants in a competitive historical dialogue. Here, it is the Byzantine legends of Constantine, whose antecedents are relatively clear, that give shape to trends that are only suggested in the Perso-Arabic material. I suggest that a general similarity in circumstance, and the later reception of that circumstance into memory, allows the inception and development of these episodes in the hagiographies of Constantine to be used as a possible model for understanding their analogues in the similarly conglomerate, but far less well-understood *Kārnāmag* tradition; particularly as all of these episodes may plausibly be argued to share a common ancestry through various streams of the ultimately Mesopotamian legends of Cyrus and before him, Sargon.

The *source* of this shared material lies in its long precedent as a literary shorthand for legitimacy. It is, however, the particulars of its *reception* into the Iranian and Roman composite traditions that explains how two very different communities came to incorporate the same narratives into long biographical texts in essentially the same way. The imperial ideologies of Late Antiquity combined old mindsets with a novel cultural-political matrix; the actions of both men played a similarly foundational role in the self-understanding of what might be called religious-imperial communities and were therefore categorised in the same way. These relics of polemic survived because once the argument they addressed had lost its urgency they could *also* be received as images of divinely approved foundation. Thus, the loop closed, as appeals to hallowed images of kingship were themselves hallowed.

I wish to emphasise that none of this requires a simplistic, totalising equivalence to be made between Ardashir and Constantine, their cultural contexts or the political orders they founded. The suggestion is rather that certain details of their lives and the institutional consequences of their actions were similar enough, in *outline*, to steer the propagation of their memories onto the same, well-trodden, literary paths. Both men took controversial political and cultural

stances; behind the narratives of glorious restoration and divine favour lurk traces of discontent, memories of grubby politics, dynastic murder, opportunism and irregular, or at least contested, succession. On the other hand, both men came to be seen as responsible for the marriage of political and religious ideologies within their kingdoms. As a result, both would come to assume the same stereotypical role, as their memories were used to justify an ideal social and political order. What I seek to do here is to draw attention to certain shared assumptions that conditioned the representations of this role.

What follows then is a study of a very big picture by reference to a very small mechanism. It is about how the controversial foundation of novel imperial ideologies became nested in much more ancient forms of imagining monarchy as those ideologies calcified around a particular interpretation of the past. As cosmocratic monarchies buttressed by religious claims developed on either side of the Euphrates between the third and seventh centuries, particular streams of literature arose in which the memories of their founders were sacralised. In these, shining facades were erected over chains of complex, difficult, and sometimes scandalous, events – facades whose unrealistic outlines are familiar and seem, at first glance, popular and spontaneous. Yet, the roots of some of these images lie, to a surprising degree, in knowing uses of narrative expectation, in attempts by literate partisans of the founder's political order to hold the commanding heights of historical memory against strands of criticism perceived as especially damaging to their subject. In these cases the presence of legendary narrative can be shown to be a historiographic problem, a use of the legacy of history to rewrite history, to cut straight paths through the complicated and contradictory landscape of memory.

CHAPTER 1

# Sequence One and Sequence Two

One generation passes away and another generation arises, but the earth abides forever; so too, in one form or another, does narrative. Not, to be sure, the multitude of day-to-day narratives birthed to describe one of an endless number of concrete and unique situations encountered by the living. With rare exceptions, these die almost at birth. There are, however, a number of narrative habits and expectations in our cultural inheritance that are functionally immortal. These may be simple or relatively complex and can take the form of just about any possible mode of expression, even a joke.[1] Any such unit of narrative may be extremely ancient, so ancient in fact, as to completely obfuscate its age and origin. It may appear so often, in so many languages over such a vast stretch of time, that the sheer weight of attestation confounds and imposes brutal linguistic demands on any who try to examine it.[2] Conversely, a narrative may be ancient and pervasive, yet also have clearly defined origins and operate only in a single cultural sphere.[3] As the birth and youth narratives of Ardashir and Constantine are structures of the former sort, it is necessary to first define certain limits in order to avoid becoming lost in the thousands of connections and possible digressions they present. While there is still considerable complexity to be found at every stage of this investigation, it is to be hoped that these limits will serve to confine it to a comprehensible frame.

## 1 Limits

Here I examine narrative as historiography, not narrative *per se*. I consider *only* a pair of recognisable, oft-entangled, narratives (to be defined below) and how these narratives affect the *portrayal of history*. I will focus on particular legendary-biographical texts associated with Ardashir I and Constantine I as these figures have not only produced oddly parallel biographical traditions but have also left behind them a relatively dense set of sources addressing their

1 An example of such a narrative, "Odysseus and the Oar" is given in Hansen 2014.

2 A truly comprehensive study of the survival of narrative structures would look something like Watkins 1995.

3 An examination of a narrative of this type, that of king Goujian of Yue, can be found in Cohen 2008.

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early lives. On the assumption that the presence of recognisable and implausible narratives links these Late Antique and Mediaeval traditions to much older patterns of royal representation I will do so as part of a broader, diachronic, investigation. Therefore, in order to establish the plausibility of such deep connections, and the sort of context with which they were likely to arise, I will first consider the very similar legends attached to two earlier west Eurasian rulers known to have actually existed before the third century CE. While admitting that analogous story patterns often appear attached to clearly unhistorical figures, I will not consider these in any real depth.

As the birth and youth narratives considered here represent the recurrent overlap of historical events and literary narratives the exclusion of unhistorical or uncertain figures may seem like special pleading. To properly consider figures of a more liminal historicity, however, would result in a multi-volume work whose comprehensiveness would not only be prone to digression but distract from my object: the employment of these narratives to represent history. More importantly, the comparison of historical legends to coexisting currents in historiography in order to tease out the circumstances of their creation, transmission, and preservation, cannot be applied to figures that are essentially *all* legend. Having said this, the "lives" of two Biblical figures of very dubious (Moses), or uncertain (King David) historicity are relevant and will be discussed in relation to some of the biographies presented here. It needs to be emphasised, however, that these are brought into the conversation either because they shed light on certain facets of the other traditions considered, or, because they are bound up in certain contextual problems presented by texts used in this study. Nor am I able, being neither a Hebraist nor a Biblical scholar, to do full justice to the considerable scholarship on either. This limited focus does not preclude the parallel existence of other iterations of these narratives. Nor (as will become clear) is it my intention to argue for straightforward or direct links between the traditions examined.

On account of its object and historical scope, I am often fairly speculative. It is sometimes necessary to speak in generalisations or to leave gaps in the data sketched out only by a theoretical reconstruction. While every effort has been made to be rigorous, it is simply not possible to directly address material that does not survive. In a similar vein, I engage here with a broad swathe of data from a number of distinct fields and have had to do so in a relatively condensed form; it is to be hoped that specialists in these fields may forgive any lack of detailed analysis they may occasionally perceive.

Finally, I consider two specific narratives and these alone. These narratives (when used in a historicising manner) are tightly linked to historical processes and circumstances *sui generis*, and not models for the creation and propagation

of myths or legends more generally. While some *very* abstract conclusions regarding the interaction of legendary patterns and historiography, or even hagiography, may be drawn from this discussion, it is not my intention to be creating general principles. Moreover, while I will argue that these narratives have a literary genealogy and thereby suggest a path by which they arrived in Late Antiquity I am not at all concerned with theorising their *ultimate* origins. These, despite the claims of certain, often ingenious, methodologies, are not safely recoverable.[4] Whatever they started as, once introduced into text these structures became explicable literary phenomena. Avoiding speculation on psychological or sociological origins also obviates any presupposition of the meaning of these narratives based on preferred axioms rather than the observation of their role in a historical and social context.

## 2 Terms

Narrative is, by nature, a slippery thing and its study is often beset by problems of terms; because recognisable narrative structures are not strongly bound by modern notions of genre, networks of shared features can create confusing patterns of overlap, no more so than when the stereotypical enters historiography. Does the presence of recognisable and unlikely components make a "historical" account a history in the sense that we would understand it, or something else? More specifically, does the resulting narrative reflect a sincerely held belief about the past, a mere entertainment, or a "possible world" that is near-enough true?[5] How are such shared components even to be classified and defined? In order to proceed a number of terms and concepts must first be established.

As noted above, the focus here is the operation of two motif assemblies, as they emerge in certain textual traditions of two roughly contemporary imperial peoples, and, by extension their interaction with and place in those societies' "general historical knowledge".[6] Throughout, the terms, *sequence*, *narrative* and *story* will be used fairly interchangeably to describe both assemblies. The

4 Recently, some truly extraordinary claims about the ability of computer modelling to reconstruct the date of certain stories back (in one case) into *pre-human* times have been made, see da Silva and Tehrani 2015 and d'Huy 2016. While the methodology suggested in these researches is interesting, and it cannot be doubted that stories are often extremely ancient, given the nature of the source material, one has to wonder at how much confidence we might place in such approaches.

5 See Doležel 1998.

6 Finnegan 1970, 195.

terms *motif* and *component* will be used to describe the individual parts constituting each *sequence* (to be described below). These terms are adapted from similar concepts developed for the study of myth and folklore, as is the general idea that sharing specific, stereotypical features denotes some relationship between disparate narratives.

Though I have taken some of the methodological approaches of Myth and Folklore Studies as a starting point, these sequences are, properly speaking, neither folklore nor myth and both terms may (in reference to the target narratives of this study) henceforth be disposed of as unhelpful. A more technically correct term for the historically bound narratives seen in the traditions under investigation here is *legend*.[7] The demarcation of what is a legend and what is not is a topic of some dispute; as with so much of the terminology for various forms of narrative, its meanings tend towards expansion and can be difficult to pin down.[8] I have accepted a rather straightforward, and fairly conservative, definition in which a *legend* is a story seen to be historical in a concrete sense.

Despite the liberties taken with plausibility, almost all of the individual texts considered below are historical, at least *historicising* texts; they recount the life, or part of the life, of a person known, or believed, to have existed and as such they are located in the actual past rather than the timeless parallel world of myth or the hazy half-world of a heroic age. In other words, they address the past that was still in some way visible through the material (monuments, inscriptions or coins for example) or institutional structures of their readers' worlds. They tell stories believed, at least in certain contexts, to be "true". Further, the authors of these texts were often connected to some kind of formal historical practice; whether stylistically, through a conscious attempt to position their texts as historical narrative, by consultation of historical sources in constructing them, or by the use of their own work as sources for later histories.

Finally, as will become increasingly apparent, the reception of the Late Antique origin legends that comprise the bulk of this study was conditioned by the existence of religious groups with a close relationship to imperial ideology. Because of its importance in the following discussion the term "religion" also needs some clarification. Religion, as the term is generally used, is a relatively recent concept shaped by the specific experience of Early Modern Europe.[9] The idea of a division between sacred assumptions and secular politics would have made very little sense in most pre-modern communities. Moreover, the

7 The stress on the historical nature of legend follows Bascom 1965, 3–6.

8 See a review of the scholarship provided in Tangherlini 1990.

9 Nongbri 2013.

related notion that "religion" is a personal opinion, largely separated from communal life and legal or ritual praxis, is a spectacularly inappropriate way to approach the role of belief in ancient societies. In discussing the ideology animating Sasanian imperialism, it has been suggested that the term "political theology" ought to be used to avoid secular and liberal assumptions in discussing the supernatural positions of ancient polities.[10] This is a laudable goal, but alternative terms are difficult to apply without a great deal of awkward circumlocution, and total precision must bend to clarity. When used here, "religion" and "religious" are meant in a redescriptive sense: that is, as modern terms that usefully include and evoke features of ancient practice but are not meant to imply the presence of a modern paradigm.[11]

## 3 Approaches to Narrative

The study of repetitive, trans-regional features in ancient literature, historical or otherwise, has usually fallen outside of the purview of ancient historians or classicists.[12] Such problems have traditionally been of more interest to folklorists and students of mythology, two fields with considerable overlap. The sequences under discussion here are neither myths nor folktales, but they share with both a certain universality of application and recognition. It follows that some of the methods developed to study more clearly fictive uses of narrative patterns may also be apt for investigating the appearance of similar patterns in historicising works.

### 3.1 *Social Context*

In very broad terms, the twin problems of origins and meaning have dominated attempts to understand why certain narratives are so prevalent and so recognisable. From the inception of the study of myth in the late eighteenth century, right up until the middle of the twentieth, influential but extremely abstract and reductive strands in the scholarship viewed the meaning of mythic or legendary narrative as baked into the circumstances of its ultimate origin, almost

10 Becker 2014, 10–19.

11 Following the suggestion made at Nongbri 2013, 157–159.

12 At the birth of Folklore studies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attempts were made to examine Classical literature in light of evidence that many of its narratives were obviously allied to internationally dispersed story patterns. Such approaches generally failed to establish themselves for reasons that are outlined in Hansen 1997 and again in Hansen 2002, 6–12.

invariably heavily reconstructed.[13] Stereotypical narratives, however categorised, were all too often assumed to be independent of the social particulars of their context. It is extremely unfortunate that certain features of the birth and youth narratives examined here seem to link them to a particularly egregious example of this line of reasoning; the archetypical "Heroic Life" of which much was made in the previous century.[14] This saw a common set of features as underlying the narratives of just about every famous hero, king or religious figure, historical or otherwise, in the world's literatures. While the listed commonalities are indeed notable, the assumption of universal *meaning* that is simultaneously esoteric and universally explicable invited overenthusiasm; something clearly seen in the most popular iteration of the concept, Joseph Campbell's theory of a heroic mono-myth. Presenting no more evidence than a flat assertion that the claims of Jungian psychology were self-evidently true, Campbell, with some help from George Lucas, managed to entrench an eternal, omni-cultural "heroic journey" in the popular imagination.[15]

Structuralist interpretations, wherein the meaning of myth resided in the connections between bundles of constituent elements in *all* versions of the same story, offered a rather more nuanced schema but remained somewhat detached from the social realities in which narrative unfolds.[16] By the 1960s, however, attention was being drawn to the inadequacies of commenting on the meaning of stories without studying their milieu. A number of (mostly French) historians and classicists, used Structuralist methods yet insisted on grounding the study of every myth in the political and social environment of its likely origin and were sceptical of the ability of *any* outsider to completely understand the stories generated by a society.[17] Importantly, they also drew a sharp distinction between the behaviour of myth in literate and oral societies.[18]

This kind of sociocultural focus is a thoroughly sensible approach to the problems considered here. The presence of essentially the same sequences in what should be very disparate legendary biographies is only truly explicable by an exploration of the specific circumstances in which each set of shared sequences emerged and were collected. Moreover, to a very great extent the textual nature of these legends determines how we should interpret and analyse them. On the other hand, the excesses of those who sought meaning in

13 A general overview of schools of mythic interpretation is available in Csapo 2005.
14 Three influential studies in this vein are collected in Segal 1990.
15 Outlined in Campbell 1993.
16 Levi-Strauss 1955, 435–40.
17 The so-called "Contextualist" school, see Vernant 1970, 274, *f*; Vernant 1980, 186–206. For a general overview of this school, its concerns and methods, see Champagne 1992, 4–25.
18 Vernant 1980, 238–9.

the recognition of pattern alone serves as a warning. Grandly theoretical or quasi-mystical assumptions are best avoided. The association of historical individuals with the narratives considered here ought rather to be treated as a literary problem unfolding in particular historical contexts.

### 3.2 *Tales and Motifs*

If the scholarship of myth provides a general guideline for analysis, that of folktales, clearly fictive narratives of a stereotypical nature, provides a set of specific tools. Because widely dispersed folktales often express very strong, very repetitious similarities a certain reductionism has emerged in the scholarship dealing with them.

In the 1920s the folklorist Vladimir Propp's *The Morphology of the Folktale* famously posited an almost mathematical system to describe the content and syntax of Russian folktales. It was, however, the slightly later contributions of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson that came to hold a central place in the field. In their work a twofold classification of folktale structure was made: *tales* representing independent narratives and *motifs* representing shared components that made them.[19] Hence, as in Propp's system, any recognisable story is itself a bundle of smaller story parts, albeit, in a far less rigid way than Propp's functions. This distinction was the basis of the Aarne-Thompson Tale and Thompson Motif indexes, recently updated as the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) index, which, despite criticism, remains an important work in the field.[20] This granular approach has great value for clarifying terms in a limited study such as this. In particular, the flexibility granted by this split terminology is extremely useful; it will be noted that the terminology of *narrative*/*story*/*sequence* and *component*/*motif*, adopted above, is merely *tale* and *motif* slightly rephrased in order to better reflect the mutual attractiveness of these particular motifs to each other and their tendency to fall in a loose order.

However useful their classification schemes, folktales are generally understood to be fictive and (largely) informal. As such they are not good models for our narratives. These are much less organic and were usually referenced in the pursuit of some definite purpose. Containing readily recognisible symbolism, the use of these sequences was intended to suggest appropriate linkages and readings. The directness of the reference may vary. It can encompass a bluntly mimetic use in which a *known* precedent is used (even stated) to encode or

19 Detailed in Thompson 1977, 415–28.

20 Listed in the bibliography as Uther 2004. Thompson's motif indexes remain in use and are listed as Thompson (1955–1958). Some criticisms of the indexes can be found in Dundes 1997, and at Hansen 2002, 23.

"frame" an event explicitly in terms of another, and thereby draw a particular interpretation from its readers. It will be seen that Eusebius' comparison of Constantine to Moses is both obvious and explicit.[21] On the other hand, the reference may be far less direct and without any overtly specific antecedents, though this does not make it entirely unconscious. Here something similar to the concept of the "Floating Motif" used by David Aaron in his study of the literary history of the Ten Commandments is suggested. Aaron's definition of this concept is so pertinent as to be worth repeating at length. A Floating Motif is:

> … a highly adaptable set of themes that frequently travel together as part of a culture's ideological, linguistic, aesthetic or literary "fabric" amidst what Wolfgang Iser, in The Act of Reading, calls the "repertoire" …
>
> It is extremely difficult to speak about the content of a culture or of a cultural consciousness in terms specific enough to allow us to locate where a motif presides. Obviously, in order to be a motif, a theme (or a cluster of themes) must reside in more than one individual. That is, a motif requires repetition in order to be identifiable as a motif. Normally we recognize that repetition as taking place in multiple literary adaptations, for adaptability is another identifying characteristic of motif, which can readily end up in structures and functions of considerable diversity. In other words, *a motif involves form as much as it does content, where the form is always recognizable even though two literary adaptations may have little in common in terms of content. For the various adaptations to make sense, the ideas themselves must exist independently of any specific adaptation, literary or otherwise*. In that sense, the ideas must be part of the culture, or what Iser calls the "cultural repertoire".[22]

Though Aaron uses slightly different terminology, his proposition that defined bundles of themes (here *motifs* or *components*) have an intangible existence in public memory, his recognition that such bundles suggest particular meanings to the reader, and most importantly of all, the reflexive, cumulative, nature of that meaning, is very close to what I propose here. As his reference to Wolfgang Iser indicates, Aaron's concept bears a resemblance to Reader-Response theory. This approach sees writing as a sort of system building in which the writer leaves cues and suggestions for the reader to untangle and rearrange.[23] These

21 On "framing" and "keying" see, Damgaard 2013b, 11–12 and the references therein.

22 Aaron 2006, 48. Emphases are mine.

23 Iser 1978, 61 *f*. Emphases are mine.

cues are part of the *repertoire*, a very complex symbolic system accessed by the writer in order to guide the interpretation of his work.

> The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of *references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms*, or the whole culture from which the text has emerged – in brief, to what the Prague Structuralists have called the "extratextual" reality.
>
> ... the repertoire presents existing norms in a state of suspended validity – thus turning the literary text itself into a kind of halfway house between past and future.[24]

Thus, both sequences resemble the *tale* of Folklore Studies insofar as they have a general shape and a strong association with certain *motifs*. Like folktales, they too "live" in a network of assumptions, expectations and habits shaped by cultural inheritance, a network that a writer or storyteller can access and activate by the presentation of the right triggers. On the other hand, the repeated (and specific) use of both sequences as frames for the lives of great men in the historicising literature of very different cultures argues that these narratives differ somewhat from folktales and as such their interpretation demands a slightly modified approach.

## 4 Sequence One and Two

At this point it becomes possible to describe the specific objects of the study. Below I will rationalise the two target narratives and their constituent components. Henceforth they will be referred to as *Sequence One* and *Sequence Two*. Though many of their motifs are rather similar, each narrative is quite distinct. Both are, however, deeply entangled owing to a reliance on a common set of assumptions about royalty, applicability to similar sets of circumstances and the fact that each is set during a different time of the subject's life; something that allows them to occupy sequential positions in the Persian and Byzantine composite narratives.[25] Each sequence will be given a general description giving first an overview of its form, then a schematic of its constituent motifs.

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24 Ibid., 69–70.

25 This entanglement can be seen at Beckwith 2011, 1–12. Beckwith argued for a foundation myth containing elements of both sequences, which he called *The First Story*. Beckwith's association of these elements with the Proto-Indo-Europeans may well be correct, it would certainly explain their ubiquity. However, the *literary* lineage of these stories is decidedly non Indo-European.

Neither sequence is intended as a straitjacket; not all components are present in every iteration of either sequence and there is room for considerable flexibility in arrangement. One version of the birth of Ardashir, for example, manages to split a number of the components of Sequence One over two people, father and son. Additionally, both are adaptable and can absorb appropriate motifs, whether general such as solar imagery, or culturally appropriate, such as a gift of purple clothing, without issue. There is in each, however, an over-arching similarity, displayed throughout a large and diverse corpus of texts, suggesting a limited, but very pervasive, repertoire of narrative possibilities is at work.[26]

### 4.1 *Sequence One*

Sequence One is relatively simple, though still capable of considerable complexity; it deals with *birth* and its expressions bear, at times, a resemblance to a number of ATU types categorised as "Realistic Tales" or "Novellae"; particularly, ATU 920 *The Son of the King* (*Solomon*) *and the Smith*, ATU 870A *The Goose-Girl* (*Neighbour's Daughter*) *as Suitor*, ATU884 *The Forsaken Fiancée: Service as a Menial*, ATU930 *The Prophecy* and ATU931 *Oedipus*. The narrative conceived of here admits considerable flexibility; in particular it regards exposure of the child as an optional motif, a more intensive form of distancing the child from its descent, rather than a core component.[27] Exposure is notably not present in traditions of Ardashir or Constantine.[28] Sequence One may be summarised as follows:

> A boy is born to a royal house. The circumstances of his birth are, however, unusual: one of his parents is likely to have (outwardly) low(er) or outsider status and the birth is usually announced by an omen. The import of this omen is either embraced or feared by one or the other parent. Though the reaction to this omen dictates the tone of the story, the result is *generally* the same: the boy is "lost" somehow to the royal part of his ancestry and he is adopted and/or raised by parents of lower status.

26 It need hardly be said that this classification scheme is one designed for the two streams of related legends that are the subject of this investigation *only*. Some of the components listed below may be correspond to one or more of Thompson's motifs. Such correspondences will be given in footnotes.

27 The tendency to exaggerate the importance and symbolism of exposure *per se* can be seen in Klaniczay's summary of earlier theories addressing the birth of Cyrus, see Klaniczay 2000, 24–27.

28 Hansen links ATU920 to the birth of Cyrus, a story that will be examined in greater depth below, see Hansen 2002, 408–413.

> The boy comes to light in adolescence. His recognition is performed via a very limited set of means: a display of an activity that is understood as symbolic of kingship, a display of tokens proving parentage and/or a physical resemblance to the ruler. The sequence ends with an acknowledgement of the relationship by the sitting ruler. This is usually a happy occasion (the king often has no heir), but is not always.

The components of Sequence One are:

1. An omen of the subject's future greatness is made, usually in a dream but a horoscope might also be used.[29]
2. One of the subject's parents has an outwardly humble or otherwise undesirable station in life.[30]
3. Conversely, the subject also has some connection to a royal or otherwise distinguished ancestry.
4. If the omen is taken as ill, the subject is exposed or otherwise attacked as an infant.[31]
5. The subject is abandoned by, hidden from or lost to the royal parent in some way.
6. The subject is raised in a decidedly non-regal setting.[32]
7. The subject is recognised by a) games, b) resemblance and/or c) tokens.[33]
8. The subject is reconciled with his royal "father".

### 4.2 *Sequence Two*

Sequence Two is considerably more complex than Sequence One; because of this its components are often more comprehensively scrambled. It deals with *youth* and takes place at the court of a king, who is the antagonist of the narrative. In historical applications of this sequence, this king is a historical individual, a representative of the dynasty or order deposed by the actions of the subject.

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29 B144.1. *King prophesies hero's birth*. M311.1. *Prophecy, king's grandson will dethrone him*. M342.1. *King's downfall prophesied*. M312.0.4. *Mother's symbolic dream* (*vision*) *about the greatness of her unborn child*.

30 T281. *Sex hospitality to king* appears in a number of the Greek texts to be considered below, if the terms "king" and "hospitality" are generously interpreted.

31 M371. *Exposure of infant to avoid fulfillment of prophecy*. K1847.1.1. *King deceived about heir's birth*. R131. *Exposed child rescued*.

32 N836.1. *Adoption of Hero by king*. K2015. *Adoption by rich man*. N854.1. *Peasant as foster father*. L111.2. *Foundling hero*. L111.2.1. *Future hero found in boat* (*basket, bushes*).

33 H20. *Recognition by resemblance*. H111.1. *Recognition by royal garment*.

A young man comes to the court of a king. In instances where this sequence appears alone, he may be of low birth. In instances where it is joined with an iteration of Sequence One he is usually a junior nobleman. Because of his beauty and great skill in courtly activities he comes to occupy a position close to the ruler. At this point a number of components are common but are often tightly interlinked and do not always appear in the same order: 1) The youth will either a) engender a plot against the sitting king, usually at the instigation of a helper and/or some kind of encouraging omen, or b) be plotted against by the king who sees in him a threat to his rule. 2) A *public display*, one that highlights the inadequacy of the sitting king in comparison to the youth, is present in some cases, often involving a confrontation or combat with an animal or animalistic opponent. 3) A *warning* of some kind, again, usually some kind of omen, is almost always given to the king. The youth flees court for his father's homeland or kingdom; his father is often portrayed as dying, ill or dead. He is pursued by the agents of the king and sometimes performs a trick of some kind to delay or shake off his pursuers. He arrives safely, accepts the loyalty of his "countrymen" (often his father's retainers). This is the prelude to a military campaign that will depose the order or dynasty represented by or linked somehow to the youth's erstwhile patron.

The components of Sequence Two are:

1. The subject goes to court to serve (this presumes a free-standing use of Sequence Two).
2. The subject goes to court on account of his father's rank (presumes a preceding Sequence One)
3. The subject takes on a role close to the king (in the oldest, Mesopotamian, versions of this story, as the king's cupbearer).
4. The subject shows extraordinary aptitude in all things, but especially hunting and games.[34]
5. The subject is notably beautiful or youthful. He becomes very popular at court.
6. [The subject publicly kills or tames an animal or dangerous enemy, *possibly* as part of the plot.][35]

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34 H41.5. *Unknown Prince shows his kingly qualities in dealing with his playmates.* P35. *Unknown Prince chosen chief of children in play.*

35 This motif is bracketed as it is somewhat erratic and may or may not be indigenous to the older forms of the narrative, see the discussion of a possible parallel in the Alexander Romance on 156 below. H32. *Recognition by extraordinary prowess.*

7. The subject arouses jealousy or fear and becomes the target of the king's plotting.
8. Conversely, the subject engenders his own plot against the king.
9. At some point in either plot the king is warned that the subject presents a threat. This warning may be given by a courtier, by some kind of prophetic technology or by a specialist in the same (an astrologer, for example).[36]
10. The subject escapes the court and flees to his father's homeland.[37]
11. The subject's father is said to be ill or dead.
12. The subject is pursued by the king and/or the king's men.
13. The subject performs a ruse of some kind in order to avoid his pursuers.[38]
14. In his homeland the subject gathers an army, one which he will use to overthrow the king.

Daniel Ogden's recent work on the legends attached to Seleucus has given a considerable amount of attention to a very similar narrative, one employed in renditions of Seleucus' flight from Babylon to Egypt.[39] Ogden makes several useful observations about the behaviour of legendary story forms. He notes, for example, how they seem to exert pressure over historical narrative, are attracted to particular situations and open to augmentation.[40] *Mutatis mutandis*, Ogden's characterisation of his narrative also applies to my interpretation:

> This tale-type is itself merely the strongest node within a broader constellation of tale-types of dynastic establishment …[41]

Ogden's study concentrates on the particulars of the escape and its associated motifs, a golden token indicating kingship, the crossing of a water-boundary and the presence of a Girl As Helper. This leads him to make a slightly different emphasis than is made here.[42] I wish to stress the *rivalry* between the old and new kings leading up to the escape and its contrastive potential. This theme is extremely prominent in the Late Antique and Mediaeval texts to be discussed, and, I believe, key to understanding the attachment of this sequence to Ardashir and Constantine.

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36 M302.4. *Horoscope taken by means of stars*. M314.4. *Prophecy of future empire for fugitive hero*.

37 The *Kārnāmag* texts, when describing Ardashir's flight, demonstrate N831. *Girl as helper*.

38 At a stretch, this may be said to resemble R231. *Obstacle flight – Atalanta type*.

39 Ogden 2017, 68 *f.*

40 Ibid, 85 and 95.

41 Ibid., 71.

42 Ibid., 84 *f.*

Probably because of its strongly contrastive nature, a number of iterations of Sequence Two appear to have a suspiciously strong closeness with power, or at least, an inherent usefulness to the powerful. In this regard, Andrew Knapp's study of Near Eastern apologia, something he defines as a court-based, inherently propagandistic, and essentially reactive literary *mode*, provides an extremely useful interpretive suggestion.[43] Knapp stresses that the similarities seen in apologetic texts are the result of shared circumstance, that apologetic is not constrained by form and that one should avoid making too much of what seems to be a fairly limited registry of motifs to argue for dependence.[44] Apologists, argues Knapp, created according to need and did not participate in an institutionalised *genre*.[45] Knapp is right to reject apologetic as a formal category, but some of these points may be slightly too firmly stated. Several of the uses of Sequence Two considered here are very likely to be apologetic in Knapp's terms; additionally, the histories described by the Iranian and particularly the Roman iterations of Sequence Two appear to have been *very* deliberately fitted to a predetermined frame. If there was no specific apologetic *genre* in these societies, there would seem to have been at least one narrative *form* that tended to structure apologetic in a way that goes somewhat beyond the "motifs common to all societies of the ancient Near East".[46]

These sets of markers allow a range of unrelated texts generated by different, though neighbouring, cultures to be compared. This kind of approach can be problematic in that comparisons of disparate mythic or legendary material can be, and have been, used to draw sweeping conclusions where a more sympathetic treatment would reveal little cause to do so. In this case however, all the texts can be plausibly said to have been operating in the same extended literary ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, the use of both sequences as interpretations of history is demonstrably extremely old. Both have been reinterpreted to local context over and over again; accumulating, losing and reintegrating much material over centuries, giving rise to some severe surface differences between iterations. It was, however, ultimately their earliest uses, as frames for the lives of some extremely early and influential Mesopotamian rulers, that established their basic form, their meaning and their explanatory power.

It follows that the presence of very similar narratives in the literature surrounding Ardashir and Constantine is the product of styles and habits laid down in a long precedent of rearranging a certain kind of event in certain

43 Knapp 2012, 37–42.
44 Ibid., 57.
45 Ibid., 31–35.
46 Ibid., 49.

kinds of ways. Conversely a consideration of these relatively well-attested Late Antique traditions offers insight into the circumstances that suggest the use of such rearrangements and the processes by which they were introduced and replicated. At the same time, features shared by the Persian and Byzantine composite texts make them more similar to each other than to any text that might be accounted amongst their shared "ancestors". This is because the history described in these later texts was understood to be more than a simple record of an unusual dynastic change. Rather, they were narratives of state foundation created by members of a faith community who had come to see these foundations as pivotal moments in their own constructions of history. Driven by the same needs, remarkably similar editorial methods emerged, resulting in parallel recycling of old solutions, the legitimising styles of a new, divinely appointed *monarch*, in service of a new problem: the emergence of a new ideology of a divinely ordained *state*.

CHAPTER 2

# The Mesopotamian Background

## 1 Introduction

For a host of technical and historical reasons, the study of Latin- and Greek-speaking societies has traditionally been somewhat separate from those of "the East", be they Semitic, Iranian or otherwise. As has become increasing clear, this modern distinction does not reflect ancient reality. No ancient culture existed in complete isolation and the conspicuous outrage of a Judah Macabee or a Juvenal notwithstanding, it seems that the resulting trade in cultural goods vexed relatively few people.[1] To take just one example, ideological and diplomatic competition drove the later Roman and Sasanian courts not to the rejection but to the appropriation of the ceremonial and visual language of the other.[2]

In a deeper sense, some of the most fundamental symbolic infrastructure of all western Eurasian societies was (and is) held in common. The mythic and literary cultures of the Mediterranean rim cannot be excised from those of the Levant and Fertile Crescent, nor can many of the basic narrative commonplaces present in this system be said to belong to any one group.[3] The origin sequences used in the biographies considered here are stories of this type, part of the common stock of stories known to a very broad range of peoples. They are somewhat unusual, however, in that they have been consistently applied in historiographic, or quasi-historiographic works for millennia. Through the examination of a number of their earlier appearances it is possible to propose a descent for the historicising use of these sequences and, thereby, suggest some constants that may be seen to underlie the continued reappearance of these recognisably stereotypical narratives in ostensibly historical material.

1 As Thomas Sizgorich has noted in his study of Late Antique religious violence, the surface markers of culture, clothing, music and literature are not usually exclusive. True communal boundaries are marked instead by a sense of membership in a shared historic narrative. Moreover, even this boundary tends to be lax and must be patrolled by those seen to embody this narrative and deeply invested in maintaining it. See Sizgorich 2009, 8–11.

2 Canepa 2009.

3 In particular, it has increasingly been noted that much of the Greek tradition appears to have had roots in the cultures of Anatolia and the Near East, see Mondi 1990; West 1999, esp. 438*f.*; López-Ruiz 2014; Bacharova 2016.

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From an Occidental perspective the most significant uses of both sequences are ensconced in the memories of Sargon of Akkad and Cyrus the Great, a pair of Near Eastern rulers who lived more than a millennium apart. Biographical traditions of the first of these rulers had an extraordinarily long life and those of the second were probably developed from them. While speculations on the transference of legendary styles between rather ancient Mesopotamian rulers would seem to have very little connection to Mediaeval Greek and Persian texts, these sources offer a demonstration of narrative inertia, that is the cumulative effect of the repetition of narrative in establishing and replicating typology. The first instance is a case study in how both sequences came to establish themselves as historical discourse in a context of social disruption. The second is an example of how, once assimilated as history, these narratives become sensitive to the perception of repetition in events and thus apt to transference in the right circumstances. Such transmission leads to rebirth; as stock narratives become established in new contexts and new languages, new historicising literatures arise and thus the cycle may begin again. The transmission of the younger tradition into Greek is particularly suggestive in this regard.

### 1.1 *Sargon and Cyrus*

Both the story of the abandoned or adopted royal child and that of the courtly *wunderkind* are extraordinarily old. Ignoring unanswerable questions of origins or orality and admitting only figures of unchallenged historicity, the legendary traditions of two rulers from the ancient Near East represent in one case the earliest and in the other, the (arguably) best-known uses of each sequence as a historicising literary narrative: Sargon of Akkad (twenty-fourth-twenty-third century BCE) and Cyrus the Great of Persia († *c.*530 BCE). These legends take on an additional significance in this study because their apparent similarities have raised suggestions that they are related to each other and (via Cyrus) also to the much later *Kārnāmag* traditions of Ardashir.[4] Thus, very little of what is presented below about either Sargon or Cyrus is particularly radical. I wish however, to go a step further by introducing the possibility that the creation of a Greek Cyrus (modelled, though unknowingly and at some remove, on an Akkadian and Sumerian Sargon) lies behind certain poses struck in the early rhetoric and historiography used to describe the youth (and somewhat later, the birth) of Constantine. I want to suggest that because they incorporate some

4 To give only a sample, a connection between the various stories of Sargon and Cyrus has been suggested in Boyce 1968, 60; Drews 1974; Kuhrt 2003; Frye 1964, 42; Briant 2002, 14–16. A connection between Cyrus and Ardashir is suggested in Harmatta 2002; Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2010, 65.

of these same elements to describe origins, certain aspects of Constantine's hagiographic tradition may simply be late examples of very old, very pervasive and ultimately Mesopotamian styles of kingly origins.

Finally, the imposition of patterns drawn from Sargon's biographies over those of Cyrus flags a number of issues that will be seen again in consideration of the origin narratives given in the Late Antique traditions. Cyrus circulated his own account of his origins during his lifetime and several examples of his claims remain extant. These make no pretence to an unusual childhood, or a confrontational and personal usurpation; rather, they stress Cyrus' conventional royal ancestry and paint him as a fairly standard Near Eastern kingly figure fighting with (a) god on his side.[5] This discrepancy foreshadows certain problems in the far more complex memories of Ardashir and Constantine. The rebuilt, imaginary, Cyrus, that emerged in the two centuries after Cyrus' death, proves how things both can and cannot be: how prosaic recollections of origins, expressed here as conventional dynastic statements, can coexist with a body of colourful legend that contradicts them.

## 2 Sargon of Akkad

The earliest *known* historical figure to whom either sequence may have been applied in text was Sargon of Akkad. Sargon was the first ruler of an "imperial" state in Mesopotamian, and possibly world, history; his impact on the politics and culture of the region was correspondingly immense. His dynasty ruled over an extensive empire for almost two centuries and in founding it he broke with many of the political and social norms of his time. Almost nothing can be known for certain of Sargon's early life but his later actions argue that that he was something of a *novus homo*. Though the legend of his rise is connected to the already ancient city of Kish, Sargon did not make his capital there but in the relatively new city of Akkad, outside of Sumer.[6] Akkadian rule greatly upset existing political systems; Sargon and his successors are believed to have cemented their grip on power through expropriation and the promotion of new, loyal classes of people to religious and political preeminence.[7] It is perhaps because of such disruption, and the unease it generated, that Sargon's

5 Matthews 2008, *passim* but especially 25*f.* and 59*f.*

6 Heinz 2007, 68.

7 Ibid. *passim* and Foster 2016, 44–46, 140–142.

dynasty was forced to confront a number of rebellions over its lifetime.[8] The self-deification of Sargon's grandson Naram-Sin after crushing the largest of these revolts was perhaps the most egregious innovation of all and he was remembered bitterly long after the fall of Akkad itself.[9] Yet, despite such disquiet, Sargon's impact on Mesopotamian cultures was such that he quickly became seen as a model king, with tales of his deeds remaining popular for centuries after his death.[10]

Various legends of the life of Sargon are extant in later, sometimes much later, cuneiform texts.[11] Here, however, we are interested only in those texts that narrate his rise to kingship, not those dealing with his rule. This corpus within a corpus is very ancient and, often, very imperfectly recorded. Additionally, relevant material cuts across genres and represents a huge range of dates. With these caveats in mind, the picture of origins that emerges from our sources is most interesting; the very earliest account of Sargon's origins contains potential references to *both* sequences. Conversely, two later, much longer, documents recount what look like relatively unmixed versions of each. Of course, all of these attestations are patchy, however, in aggregate they point to the very early establishment within Mesopotamian literature of a relatively stable collection of origin tales that resemble our sequences and are comprised of many of their stock components.

### 2.1 *The Sumerian King List*

The earliest text considered in this study is Sargon's entry in the so-called *Sumerian King List*, a tradition whose earliest layers may have formed during the Ur III dynasty, very early in the second millennium BCE.[12] A chronicle-like or annalistic production containing much that is quasi-mythological, the *King List's* function is still a matter of debate but it is likely to have had a propagandistic purpose. Possibly its ostensibly bland accounting of rulers was intended to imply that there was only ever one "great kingship" at a time, thus supporting the predominance of Ur over the rest of Sumer and legitimising its conquests

8 An overview of Akkadian rule after Sargon, and the various revolts it faced, culminating in the bloody reign of Naram-Sin, can be found at Foster 2016, 6 *f.*

9 Foster notes that the very popular *Curse of Agade*, a poem that damns Naram-Sin for his impiety, presents an inversion of Naram-Sin's own victory inscriptions, see ibid., 13–14.

10 Lewis 1980, 1 and 102.

11 For a survey of this literature, see, ibid., 134–139.

12 The list is not in fact a single document, but known from a variety of non-identical exemplars from different places. The edition and translation used here is Jacobsen 1939.

beyond.[13] Whatever its authors considered the *King List* to be, its relevance here lies in its very brief commentary on Sargon's reign.

> In Agade Sharru(m)-kin –
> his.... was a date-grower –
> cupbearer of Urzababa(k),
> king of Agade, the one who
> built Agade
> became king and ruled 56 years.[14]

On account of its brevity Sargon's entry is an impossible text to classify according to the schema outlined above. The biographical details it provides are paltry: their relevance is only clear in the light of their repetition in later, longer works. The important lines to consider here are 32 and 33; *his.... was a date-grower/cupbearer of Urzababa*(*k*). On their own these lines would prove very little; the *List* is often formulaic and repetitive, and also mentions several other kings with unexpected backgrounds.[15] There was, besides, a long-lived Mesopotamian tradition of appointing a substitute king in times of strife, a custom that was believed to have accidentally made a king of a gardener at least once.[16] On the other hand, the particular *combination* of a humble, rustic background and the office of cupbearer to Urzababa, be it ever so brief, is an unusual amount of detail for the *List* and extremely relevant in the light of the presentation of Sargon's early life and rise made in two later traditions.

These are represented by considerably more elaborate texts in which Sargon's agrarian background and role as cupbearer were (separately) key features. Presuming that they ultimately descend from the same stories drawn on for the *King List*, it may be permitted to read some of the details of these later texts back into the older tradition; it would be, for instance, a fairly safe speculation that the most likely reconstruction of the lacuna in line 32 would be that Sargon's *father* was a date grower.[17] Each of the later texts has suggestive resemblances to one or the other of the target sequences, although both lack

13 For dates, see, ibid., 140–141; Cooper 1993, 19–20.

14 Jacobsen 1939, 111 (Col. VI, lines 31–6).

15 For example Etana, a shepherd, ibid., 81 (Col. II, line 16), Lugal-banda, also a shepherd, 89 (Col. III, line 12), a king whose name is damaged, a smith, 93 (Col. III, line 31), Kug-baba, a "barmaid" 105, (Col. V, lines 36–37).

16 Bottéro 1992, 138 *f.* It should also be noted that a shepherd was a common metaphor, and even title for royal office in the ancient Near East, see, ibid., 149; Matthews 2008, 118. See also Dvornik 1966, 266–268 and *passim*.

17 See note 20 below.

any resolution that would confirm their use of either. The probable reuse of Sargonic narratives for Cyrus may permit us to hypothesise the possible nature of some of the missing Sargonic material by selective reference to the various extant biographies of the Persian king. What can be known for certain is that the body of legend attached to Sargon contained both a tradition of lowly origins *and* a tradition of courtly intrigue bought on by divine interference in earthly politics. These have come to us as separate pieces, but the appearance of possible references to both in the much older *King List* may indicate not only the great age of each, but also their very early association. If so, the editorial choices made in the composition of the *King List* were very much a sign of things to come.

### 2.2 *The Birth Legend: Sequence One?*

Sargon's humble heritage is an integral part of a much later Akkadian pseudo-autobiographical text known from four Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian tablets, henceforth called the *Birth Legend*. Here, Sargon who was abandoned in a sealed basket on a river by his mother, an *ēntu* priestess, claims never to have known his father.[18] Given the often regal background and social significance of the *ēntu* priestess this statement is likely to have been a roundabout way of claiming royal blood; a subtle, but important point that bears heavily on the story's own relationships.[19] He is found and adopted by a tenant farmer before becoming king in an unspecified way on account of his connection to the goddess Innana/Ishtar.[20] As an exposure story the *Birth Legend* has an affinity with Sequence One, but is incomplete as the resolution of Sargon's abandonment is brushed off with a reference to the help of the goddess Innana. Despite this, the text and the tradition it represents display a number of the features of Sequence One (see Table 1).

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18 Oddly enough, the Sargon of this text claims to have known his father's *family* and states they inhabited a mountainous region; perhaps implying that they were rural outsiders, see, Lewis 1980, 24 (line 2–3). Note also that this statement contradicts one of the *Sumerian Legend* tablets in which Sargon's father is named, *cf.* Cooper and Heimpel 1983, TRS 73 obv, line 11.

19 On the issue of Sargon's mother in the *Birth Legend* see Lewis 1980, 37–42. On the *ēntu* priestess see note 164 below.

20 Ibid., 25 (lines 8–13), Sargon's adoptive father's job is discussed at 55–7. The word used probably denotes a tenant farmer who worked a wealthy man's orchard, most likely tending *date palms*. If so this statement may have been built up on the older tradition seen in the *Sumerian King List* above.

TABLE 1 Sargon, Sequence One

| | **Sumerian King List** 20th *c.* BCE? | **Birth Legend** 13th–8th *c.* BCE |
|---|---|---|
| Birth announced by omen | | |
| "Humble" parent | × | × |
| Royal parent | | × |
| Exposed/attacked as infant | | × |
| "Lost" to regal origins | | ? |
| Non-regal setting | ? | ? |
| Child recognised – Games | | |
| Child recognised – Resemblance | | |
| Child recognised – Tokens | | |
| Child adopted | | |

In a comprehensive survey of the surviving texts of this legend, Brian Lewis offered a date range of the thirteenth to the eighth centuries BCE for its origin, but noted that it was most likely a composite work in which the exposure of the future king was one of the older components of the story; the fact that the boy, as in the *List*, is raised by a farmer certainly supports this reading.[21] On the other hand, the *List's* mention of Urzababa and Sargon's position at his court is conspicuously absent. Like the *List*, the *Birth Legend* gives only a brief and unsatisfying hint of the beliefs held about Sargon in later times. It would *seem* to present a summary of a much longer exposure story featuring a lost "prince" that might have terminated in some form of recognition and adoption; indeed, much has been made of its strong similarities to the abandonment of Moses seen in Exodus.[22] We are once again, however, faced with evidence that admits only the possibility of a hypothetical, retrospective, comparison.

### 2.3 *The Sumerian Legend: Sequence Two?*

Far more encouraging is a probably older tradition that gives some shape to the putative connection between Sargon and king Urzababa mentioned in the *List*. Urzababa was believed to have been a king of Kish but he is unattested outside of mentions in historical and historicising literature. Sargon's supposed service under this king is expanded in two copies of a Sumerian

21 Ibid., 93–7.
22 Ibid., 149.

text probably composed in the Old Babylonian period (nineteenth–sixteenth centuries BCE), hereafter referred to as the *Sumerian Legend*.[23] Though also incomplete, the *Sumerian Legend* would seem to contain a suggestive number of the components of Sequence Two. As in the *List*, Sargon is the king's cupbearer. His early life is not described (though his father is named), and the narrative seems to be confined to a court drama. The text is, however, fragmentary and incomplete; in particular it lacks a denouement. What we do have appears to detail the opening stages of Sargon's usurpation of his master. The text has notable affinities to Sequence Two, particularly in its courtly setting, its use of a prophetic dream, the presence of a warning and a conspiracy against the subject (see Table 2).

TABLE 2 Sargon, Sequence Two

| | **Sumerian King List 20th *c.* BCE?** | **Sumerian Legend 19th *c.* BCE?** | **The Weidner Chronicle After 18th *c.* BCE?** |
|---|---|---|---|
| At court to serve | × | × | ? |
| At court as aristocrat | | | |
| Has role close to king | × | × | × |
| Shows extraordinary aptitude | | | |
| Beautiful/youthful/popular | | | |
| "Beast" combat | | | |
| Arouses jealousy | | | |
| Plot is made | | Against Sargon | |
| Antagonist is warned | | × | |
| Escape to "homeland" | | | |
| Father is ill or dead | | | |
| Pursued | | | |
| Trick performed in flight | | | |
| Leads army | ?(110, lines 28–30) | | |

23 Urzababa's entry in the *List* can be found at Jacobsen 1939, 107–9 (Col. IV, lines 12–14). The *Sumerian Legend* has been known since a fragment of it was published in Scheil 1916. It has since been extended by reference to another tablet, see Cooper and Heimpel 1983 (references to the text of these tablets refer to the reconstruction given in 76–8 of this article and are cited by tablet and line number).

The extant story opens with an edict from Enlil, the king of the gods, declaring that the reign of Urzababa is to be brought to an end.[24] Innana marks Sargon, Urzababa's cupbearer, as a replacement while Urzababa is struck by a feeling of unease.[25] While sleeping in the temple of Ezinu, Sargon has a nightmare in which he sees the goddess Innana drown Urzababa in a river of blood.[26] Another translation of this section has Sargon seeing *himself* being drowned in the river, an interpretation that makes more sense given what happens next.[27] Sargon's cries attract Urzababa's attention. The king interrogates his servant and learns of his vision.[28] Frightened, Urzababa makes his own interpretation of the dream and sends Sargon on a strange, presumably dangerous, errand involving carrying bronze to a smith in a temple.[29] Innana stops Sargon from entering the temple itself because he is impure due to being covered in blood.[30] When Sargon survives this ploy Urzababa dispatches him to Lugalzagesi, the king of Uruk with what looks like a letter either designed to enrage the recipient or containing orders to kill the bearer.[31] As the texts emphasise that the letter was not sealed, the final surviving section, giving part of Lugalzagesi's response, would seem to indicate that Sargon became aware of the trick and escaped death via a ruse of his own, though, unhappily, this section is fragmentary and the rest of the story is not preserved.[32] Another Akkadian text, the so-called *Weidner Chronicle*, also knew Sargon as a subordinate of Urzababa. This text, however, is so brief and so preoccupied with its writer's idiosyncratic religious concerns that it is of little use to a consideration of the legend other than to underline the pervasiveness of a courtly link between the two men.[33]

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24 Cooper and Heimpel 1983, TRS 73 obv, lines 6–9.

25 Ibid., 3N T296, lines 3–7.

26 Ibid., 3N T296, lines 12–14.

27 Foster 2016, 349.

28 Cooper and Heimpel 1983, 3N T296, lines 16–24.

29 Ibid. 3N T296, lines 30–45. In this translation it is not entirely certain what Urzababa has in mind. In the translation prepared by Foster the smith was supposed to kill Sargon by throwing him into a mould full of molten metal, see Foster 2016, 349.

30 Cooper and Heimpel 1983, 3N T296, lines 40–43.

31 Ibid., 3N T296, lines 25 *f*, TRS 73 rev. Commentary p. 82. It has been suggested that the *Sumerian Legend* doubled as a story about the invention of the clay envelope, see Alster 1987.

32 Or, not fooled by Urzababa's new invention, Sargon opens the envelope and reads the contents of the letter, see Alster 1987, 172–3.

33 The writer of the Wiedner Chronicle, presumably a priest or temple functionary, associated kingship entirely with observance of the proper rites at the temple of Marduk at Esagila, in particular, the provision of fish offerings. A piscine theme is thus present throughout. See Grayson 1975, 43–5, 148 (Chron.19, lines, 46–52).

Unlike the *Birth Legend*, the *Sumerian Legend* grants some texture to the versions of Sargon's early life circulating in Sumerian and Akkadian literature. In doing so it presents an interesting question regarding the relationship of this retelling to the events it claims to describe. We know essentially nothing about Sargon's actual origins and the plausibility of the *Sumerian Legend* leaves much to be desired. The overtly supernatural drivers of the episode and the suspicious passivity of Sargon, here merely the instrument of fate, do not well accord with historical plausibility or the proclamations of Sargon's own monuments recorded in later copies; these are straightforwardly militarist and triumphal, and one comes away with the sense that Sargon rather exerted himself in arranging his ascension.[34] How then to approach this narrative?

In attempting to answer this question, we see here one of the most interesting facets of the relationship between this stereotype of historiography and the events it seeks to pattern, one that we will see repeated in much later iterations of Sequence Two. Despite its supernatural cast, the *Sumerian Legend* is not a whole-cloth invention: one of its actors turns up in contemporary epigraphy. While Urzababa is known only from historical literature, Lugalzagesi is independently attested from his own inscriptions as well as some Old Babylonian copies of Sargonic inscriptions glorying in his defeat.[35] Thus, while the *Sumerian Legend* is an implausible portrayal, it does feature at least two real people: Sargon, of course, but also a king we know to have been Sargon's *enemy*. We also know what the story must have ended with Sargon's ascension, if not precisely how it gets there. If, as seems likely, Urzababa was a real king of Kish, then Sargon's rise is constructed here as a pair of *personal* confrontations in which a divinely ordained king faces rulers he had in fact (inferring from Sargon's boast that he had conquered Lugalzagesi) destroyed in battle. The narrative would seem to be a sort of historical theatre in which a particularly successful usurper is retrospectively accounted as a man of destiny while his opponents are cast in roles that force them to bear witness to this.

It may be suspected that this staging gives a misleading sense of Sargon's position and the tools by which his coup was arranged. It is completely possible

34 To give just one example, an Old Babylonian copy of one of Sargon's inscriptions reads: "Sargon, King of the World, with nine contingents from Agade conquered the city of Uruk, was victorious in battle, captured fifty governors and (Sargon) personally captured the King of Uruk" Frayne 1993, 16 (Sargon E2.1.1.3, lines 3–20).

35 For Lugalzagesi's inscriptions see Cooper 1986, 94–97 (Um.7.1–7.3). For the Old Babylonian tablet copies of Sargon's inscriptions mentioning Lugalzagesi, see Frayne 1993, 9–20 (Sargon E2.1.1.1, lines 22–31, E2.1.1.2, lines 25–34, and E2.1.1.6, Caption 2 and Colophon 2 [the inscription from which this copy was made seems to have included labelled images of Sargon and Lugazagesi]).

that Sargon *was* some kind of official under a king of Kish named Urzababa and that he came to power by means of purely internal court machinations.[36] Two of Sargon's own sons may have been murdered in coups of this kind.[37] The little we know of Sargon's ethnic identity and his actions on achieving rule suggest that he either had cultivated, or intended to cultivate, some kind of power base outside of the traditional ruling class of Kish, and indeed, Sumer.[38] In what was possibly a continuation of this policy, Sargon's immediate descendants would seize and redistribute land to their followers.[39] If this characterisation of the political and social context of Sargon's usurpation is correct, then the *Sumerian Legend* may be read as making a number of political claims. Because he was warned, Urzababa knew that the gods had withdrawn their approval of his kingship. His actions against Sargon were as pointless as they were impious. On the other hand, casting Sargon as the proxy of a god renders invalid any criticism of him, his descendants or their supporters as *arrivistes* motivated by little more than the will to power.

The *Sumerian Legend* contains three features associated with the apologetic mode: divine election, the unworthy predecessor and a passive subject.[40] Casting Sargon as cupbearer may have been a significant detail in this regard. In the Akkadian period the king's cupbearer was charged with overseeing the supply of the court's food, cutlery and certain ritual observances, thus it was a position of great trust and one that brought with it a certain closeness to the ruler.[41] Claiming this form of intimacy with Urzababa may be seen as a protestation of innocence. Sargon was no natural rebel, but a mere servant of Innana more sinned against than sinning. The personal connection and ultimately

36 Kuhrt noted that a surprising number of modern scholars have tried to reconstruct Sargon's early life on the assumption that one legend or the other reflects it somewhat accurately, Kuhrt 2003, 356–357. To clarify, I do not take such a position. I suggest here only the possibility that Sargon was a subordinate of Urzababa (not necessarily his cupbearer, on which see below). In line with the general approach taken here, I suggest that many of the specific claims made about Sargon's life before his accession are *post facto* reconstructions of events driven by political or ideological needs.

37 According to later omen texts, both Rimush and Manishtusu were killed by their own officials, see Goetze 1947, 256–257 (omens 13 and 14).

38 Heinz notes that Sargon's accession led to the emergence of new elites and patterns of patronage in Mesopotamia and that Sargon either founded, or, at least, based himself in, Akkad, distancing himself from the much older Kish, Heinz 2007, 70–82. Sargon was, besides, a Semite (rather than a Sumerian) and something appears to have been made of this identity in the later literature, Lewis 1980, 110.

39 On expropriation of land by and the new patronage networks formed under Sargon's dynasty, see Foster 2016, 1–2, 7–8, 35–36, 39–44.

40 Knapp 2012, 59, 62–64.

41 Foster 2016, 104.

fatalist logic of legitimacy undergirding the *Sumerian Legend* is suspiciously useful, so much so that it may be suspected that the oldest layers of the story took shape when the names Urzababa and Lugalzagesi retained some political significance. This is not, however, an easy proposition to prove.

According to Jacobsen's edition of the *Sumerian King List*, the oldest fragments of this document identifying Sargon as Urzababa's cupbearer and son of a date farmer date to early in the Old Babylonian period between the eighteenth and fifteenth centuries BCE.[42] The *List* itself is, however, much older and these fragments indicate only the latest possible date for the belief that Sargon was Urzababa's cupbearer. Jerrold Cooper, the co-editor of the *Sumerian Legend*, suggested that it was, like the *List*, a product of the Ur III dynasty, a brief Sumerian renaissance that followed the fall of Sargon's dynasty in the twenty-second century BCE.[43] It should, in his view, be understood as one of a number of "Sumerian 'historical-literary' compositions",[44] part of a literature concerned with political legitimacy and the rise and fall of dynasties developed at that time.[45] In this period Sumerian was losing ground to Akkadian as a spoken language and the literary efforts of the Ur III kings have been seen as attempts to preserve the unwritten bulk of Sumerian tradition.[46] There is a possibility then, that while the *Sumerian Legend* did originate in the Ur III period, it may have been a recording, an elaboration or a rationalisation of an even older tradition.

This leaves open the possibility that a story of courtly confrontation driven by omens *was* known during the Akkadian period. The *Sumerian Legend's* affinities with later apologetic texts suggest that it may have been propagated intentionally, perhaps by the dynasty's supporters, who had benefitted enormously from Akkadian rule and had responded to Sargon and his dynasty with adulation.[47] Yet there is no proof of this; aside from an obvious devotion to the goddess Innana/Ishtar, the Old-Babylonian copies of Sargon's monuments known to us do not seem to make reference to any of the material contained in either of the *Legends*.[48] It cannot be stated with any certainty that the tradition

42 Both lines are present on the tablets designated WB, and S, line 33 also appears on $L_1$, see Jacobsen 1939, 110. For Jacobsen's dating of these tablets, see 5 and 9.

43 Rowton 1960, 162; Cooper 1993, 18.

44 Cooper 1985, 37. Foster notes that the author appears to have been familiar with the conventions of Sumerian literature, see Foster 2016, 266.

45 Cooper 1993, 13–15.

46 West 1999, 61–62.

47 Westenholz 1979, 111. Foster notes that members of the new elite went so far as to take theophoric names ascribing godhood to Akkadian kings, see Foster 2016, 140.

48 Sargon's inscriptions, and those of his contemporaries mentioning him are collected, transcribed and translated in Frayne 1993, 9–39.

reflected in the *Sumerian Legend* was either contemporary or "official", that is, emanating from or encouraged by the palace. If the story was an unofficial production, its strongly legitimising nature would still argue for an origin in a group whose interests coincided with those of the dynasty. Perhaps the beneficiaries of Sargon's reforms felt the need to rework Sargon's beginnings as a court functionary in Kish into something much grander.

Like the *Birth Legend*, the *Sumerian Legend* says nothing concrete about Sargon's origins. Viewed in a certain light however, it hints at the forces at work in building Sargon's memory. If the story was created by someone working directly for the dynasty of Akkad or a member of a fellow travelling social group, the tradition and its preservation may imply the existence of a counter-narrative; one in which questionable origins and irregular succession were arrayed against Sargon and his dynasty by those who lost out in the transition to Akkadian rule.[49] Briefly, the *Sumerian Legend*, and its ancestors, may have been the product of a competition over the meaning of disruptive social innovations driven by dynastic change. This argument finds support in later, far better-attested applications of very similar narratives in historicising writing.

## 2.4 *Sargon Imaginaire*

Extant material strongly implies that a stable story-form about Sargon rising from farm boy to cupbearer to king established itself in the historical memory of literate Mesopotamian society by the Old Babylonian period, a story exemplified in the *Sumerian Legend*. The relationship of this story to the *Birth Legend* is not entirely clear though it seems very likely that the *Birth Legend*, in the form we have it, represents a much younger layer of Sargonic legend. Amélie Kuhrt believed that the *Birth Legend* was a later construction, one that stressed the innateness of Sargon's claim by making his mother implicitly royal rather than highlighting his reliance on divine aid. Kuhrt argued that this narrative was likely produced, or at the very least republished, in the service of the much later Assyrian king Sargon II (r. 722–705 BCE).[50] Kuhrt's study of Sargon's legends also makes the important point that though the *Birth* and *Sumerian Legends* may share a common origin, they circulated separately and concurrently.[51]

As a rural origin is given in the *List* alongside Sargon's role as cupbearer, Kuhrt saw it as conceivable that the exposure and adoption seen in the *Birth*

49 The concept of counter-narrative is taken from the theoretical framework used in Yael Zerubavel's consideration of Israeli national myths, see page 218 below.

50 Kuhrt 2003, 352, following on from the hypothesis made in Lewis 1980, 103–106.

51 Kuhrt 2003, 351–352.

*Legend* was a development of trends long established in the traditions feeding into the *Sumerian Legend* rather than a total innovation.[52] Yet it should be noted (and will be seen) that the link between the exposure or loss of a child and "royal" blood is a very strong one, and the extant *Sumerian Legend* gives no indication that its Sargon was of royal birth. On the other hand, we do not have anything like the full range of Sargonic origin legends that must once have circulated and any proposed genealogy of the stories will always remain speculative.

The precise relationship between the two extant traditions aside, what is certain is that the establishment of legends of Sargon made his memory a powerful cultural engine. In Assyria and Babylon, Akkad's cultural and linguistic successor states, the founder of Akkad was revered and his legends were preserved, replicated and emulated for centuries. With the adoption of Akkadian as a *lingua franca*, these traditions had the potential to spread much further into the broader culture of the Near East in the second millennium BCE. Akkadian versions of other Sargonic legends have been found in Hittite and Egyptian archives and Hittite kings appear to have made political use of this corpus, grafting themselves into the imagined history of Mesopotamia through references to Sargonic legend.[53]

Two Biblical traditions may also be suspected to be products of this spread. The birth of Moses given in Exodus has, as is well-known, very specific resonances with the *Birth Legend*.[54] A much more intriguing Biblical parallel may be found in description of the rise of King David in 1 Samuel. The two books of Samuel represent a sometimes confusing weld of historical or quasi-historical traditions among which can be discerned traces of a court story, the so-called *History of David's Rise*, analogous to the *Sumerian Legend*, and, as will be seen, the Ctesian version of Cyrus.[55] At the core of this story is the ascent of David from shepherd boy to courtly confidant to Saul, and finally, to the throne itself. God withdraws his blessing from Saul. Vexed and in need of a musician, Saul, on hearing of David's skill in war, rhetoric and music, invites him to court.[56] Saul is impressed with the good-looking young man and David rapidly becomes

52 Kuhrt suggests that the *Birth Legend* may be "… another version, which was perhaps a reworking of the story (i.e. the *Sumerian Legend*)" ibid., 354.

53 Bacharova 2016, 166 *f.*

54 Lewis 1980, 149 *f.*

55 The precise nature and boundaries of this theoretical tradition are debatable. It has been claimed to underlie variable sections of David's narrative ranging from 1 Samuel 15–2 Samuel 7, see Tsumura 2007, 15–15, 413–414 and the references contained therein.

56 1 Samuel 16:14–20, *cf.* the withdrawal of divine support from Urzababa and his subsequent troubled mind seen in Cooper and Heimpel 1983, TRS 73 obv. 8–9 and 3N T296.

his confidant and close servant.[57] This happy situation comes to an end when David's conspicuous bravery in battle, including his killing of Goliath, makes him a public hero at Saul's expense.[58] The increasingly paranoid Saul marks David for death but David hears of it and runs away.[59] After a series of adventures Saul dies and David becomes king. Samuel's account of the rise of David also contains two features that, while missing or perhaps (given the fragmentary nature of the text) lost from the extant *Sumerian Legend*, will be seen in other iterations of the narrative defined as Sequence Two: a public display of the inadequacy of the old king staged as the killing of a dangerous animal or an animalistic opponent (Goliath), and the protagonist's escape from court fleeing a plot against him.[60]

Given that the entire Biblical tradition long postdates the establishment of Sargon as a literary figure, it is tempting to conjecture that the writers of the tradition(s) preserved in Samuel worked with historicising patterns popularised, perhaps entirely unbeknownst to them, by a foreign literature centuries before, and that they did so in order to quell similar problems in their own historical discourse. Akkadian (albeit in a distinct form) was certainly known to the scribal class of Canaan during the second millennium BCE.[61] It is possible that some version of the tradition represented by the *Sumerian Legend* was introduced to the region at this time. Nothing, of course, can be stated for certain, and it is possible that the narrative resemblances are purely coincidental.

57 1 Samuel 16:21. David becomes Saul's weapon-bearer. The personal qualities of David that so struck Saul are understood to be marks of divine approval, see McCarter 1980b, 281.

58 1 Samuel 18:12 and 14–16. McCarter identified two distinct sources, poorly harmonised, as contributing to David's confrontation with the Philistine champion. The first (1 Samuel 17:1–11, 33–40, 42–48a–54) is more or less in harmony with David's introduction to Saul seen at 1 Samuel 16, but may be a revised version of an older account in which David's combat with Goliath was introduced. The second (1 Samuel 17:12–31, 41, 48b, 50, 55–58, 18:1–19, 29b–30) has David coming directly from his father's farm carrying food for his brothers who are in Saul's army. McCarter believed that this highly contradictory version may have resulted from the popularity of the image of David as a young shepherd when anointed by Samuel. See commentary in ibid., 295–298, 307–309. This kind of interpretation is doubted in Tsumura 2007, 434–436, 446.

59 1 Samuel 18:25–27 and 19:1–17.

60 Notice that in 1 Samuel 17:11 Saul baulks at fighting the Philistine champion along with the rest of his army, leaving the task to his servant. This theme of the public showing up of royal inadequacy will be seen again in instances of Sequence Two using a combat of some kind.

61 Canaanite Akkadian was separated from the Mesopotamian mainstream of the language when the region was subjected to Egypt in the fifteenth century BCE. The resulting dialect was quite distinct, yet, Canaanite scribes clearly understood the more standard Egyptian Akkadian, see Izre'el 1995. In any case, any Sargonic story had, at minimum, almost five centuries to spread to the region before the Egyptian conquest.

A number of thematic and, perhaps, situational parallels between the two are, however, suggestive. In Samuel, the clearly stated role of God in selecting rulers mirrors the deterministic logic of the *Sumerian Legend*. This, alongside David's conscientious obedience and conspicuous non-involvement in Saul's death, has led one commentator on Samuel to characterise certain sections describing the rise of David as drawn from a tradition constituting an "apology" for David's actions.[62] This would place the earliest layers of this narrative within a cross-cultural and exculpatory mode of royal productions while pushing its date right back to the reign of David himself.[63]

It is interesting to consider this hypothesis in light of the similar narrative seen in the *Sumerian Legend*. If we assume for the sake of argument that David was indeed a historical figure, then it would be highly suggestive that the legends of a towering figure in Mesopotamian history found an echo in the excuses of a minor Levantine king. The similarity of David and Sargon's legends may suggest the two traditions shared the same subtext, that of a coup staged by an outsider subordinate. If this conjecture is correct then we see here two irregular successions that have been reworked in a very similar way; we might understand each as older and younger iterations of a particularly influential apologetic style intended to demonstrate divine support for novel, controversial, monarchy.

The cultures of Mesopotamia and those drawn into its cultural orbit, remembered Sargon for the better part of two millennia; more precisely, they remembered a particular *image* of Sargon as a divine instrument and model king. This remembrance was expressed in a number of historical-literary compositions of which the *Birth* and *Sumerian Legends* represent only a fraction. Moreover, the extant shards of this literature can only hint at the mass of allied, non-literate traditions that must have arisen from, fed into and run in parallel with them. It is, however, the specific interaction of the written word and political perception that is of interest here. Sargonic legend was both ensconced in a broad literary system *and* an attractive model to those who wielded power.

This meeting of political need and scribal culture provides a certain stability of form, a permanent spine along which a single narrative could be and was projected, producing, assimilating and re-assimilating innovations as it went. While it is not necessary, or likely, that writing was the *only* medium in which

62 McCarter 1980a, 499 *f.*

63 A connection between the story of David and trends in Babylonian royal apologia, particularly in regards to that employed by Nabonidus, is proposed in Dick 2004. Knapp analyses the *History of David's Rise* as a composite of a number of traditions, some of which he believes must have been apologetic, see Knapp 2012, 133 *f.*

forms of the *Birth* and *Sumerian* legends travelled, the bilingual tendencies of scribal practice during the second millennium BCE make it probable that writing was a major driver of the spread of this material into the social circles capable of bequeathing *us* material. When kings wished to be praised or excused, their followers fell back on received representations, further entrenching them through the repetition. At times this generated texts with the potential to reproduce the subject as a new model. Ironically, constant comparison to Sargon may explain why "his" legends reappeared in distant lands long after Sargon was himself forgotten.

Sargon's origin legends presage a number of extra-narrative features seen in the evolution of the later texts considered here. The presence of the same details in "literary" and "historical" works presents us with the first case of what, it will be seen, is a recurring crossover of "genre" in this kind of production. Likewise, the lack of any prosaic account of Sargon's origins is, as shall be seen, significant in light of the tendency of both sequences to move into historical writing. It was, perhaps, a combination of literary presentation, a sympathetic readership and a favourable political climate that allowed these images of history to spread, establish and replicate themselves, eventually drowning out the dissenting voices they were intended to quell in the first place. In this way Sargon the man was destroyed by Sargon the paradigm. Evidence of just how completely Sargon's memory, and thereby the very terms of new, charismatic monarchy, had been captured by Sargon's legends, comes from Babylon of the sixth century BCE for it was almost certainly there that they became attached to another man whose career must have seemed no less remarkable than that of the ancient founder of Akkad.

## 3 Cyrus the Great

Some seventeen centuries after Sargon's death, a minor king leading a hitherto peripheral people once again conquered all of Mesopotamia. Unsurprisingly, accounts of the early career of Cyrus II (*c.*600 BCE–*c.*530 BCE), founder of the Achaemenid Empire or at least, the retellings of it, are in a far more complete condition than those of his Akkadian forerunner, mostly because Cyrus' biography would take an unusual turn in that its preservation would occur in cultures largely external to his empire. In one of history's more convoluted ironies, Cyrus' name came to be forgotten in his native land but was remembered fondly in Jewish, Greek and Roman historical traditions. Discounting a small number of inscriptions, brief entries in late Mesopotamian chronicles and a very few more-or-less contemporary accounts of his actions (of which more

will be said later) Cyrus' memory descends to us in two influential streams. In the Biblical tradition he is a literally messianic figure, however this was a marginal interpretation in Hellenistic and Roman traditions where the image of Cyrus was largely established by three influential works of Greek literature: the *Histories* of Herodotus, the *Persika* of Ctesias and the *Cyropaedia* of Xenophon.

Each of these authors offers a story that has very little to say about the early life of the real Cyrus, but much about the forms of Near Eastern narratives associated with monarchy current in their time. Clear parallels with Sargonic legend can be and have been seen in this material. Cyrus' biographies represent an important juncture in the history of our narratives. Their attachment to Cyrus renewed Sargon's bibliographic styles while effacing Sargon's name. It is probably also on the back of this second wave of biography that the historicising styles first seen attached to Sargon filtered down into the literary imagination of Sasanian Iran where they would reemerge as a set of narratives remaking the origins of the imperial family. Moreover, their presence in Greek historiography provides a likely explanation for the shape of the history portrayed in some of Constantine's hagiographies. Cyrus is, therefore, a probable nexus between later Roman and Iranian traditions.

Cyrus' own claims make him an unusual candidate for the kind of remodelling represented by either sequence. Cyrus was born into a royal house and he loudly declared this ancestry to all who would listen. Though he certainly claimed to work at the behest of a god, this was because as a king he was able to take on the role of a pious military subcontractor. Nonetheless, the unlikely transformations of conquering petty-king into two kinds of shepherd-boy-made-good allows some very useful inferences to be drawn regarding the behaviour of these narratives in the representation of history. In particular it shows how situation suggests typology, how the presence of a body of literate memory can frame new events in their terms even when any political or ideological need for the story seems to be lacking. Finally, Cyrus' "biographies" exist in a relatively expansive form and might contain material once associated with one or the other of Sargon's legends; at the very least, they show the sort of components that were associated with and could be drawn into the basic sequences of loss and confrontation in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE.

### 3.1 *Herodotus*

The earliest of the extant Greek writers dealing with Cyrus offers the most famous account. Herodotus offers a fairly complete, but strangely negative version of Sequence One (see Table 3). He casts Cyrus as the grandson of Astyages, the Median king he is to depose. Unsettled by a dream, Astyages is warned by

TABLE 3 Cyrus, Sequence One

| | **Herodotus, Histories** 444–424 BCE | **Justin, Epitome of Pompeius Trogus** 4th *c.* CE (1st *c.* BCE) |
|---|---|---|
| Birth announced by omen | × | |
| "Humble" parent | × | × |
| Royal parent | × | × |
| Exposed/attacked as infant | × | × |
| "Lost" to regal origins | × | × |
| Non-regal setting | × | × |
| Child recognised – Games | × | × |
| Child recognised – Resemblance | × | × |
| Child recognised – Tokens | | |
| Child adopted | ? | |

the Magi that his daughter's child will depose him.[64] In response, he inexplicably marries her to a foreigner of little social consequence.[65] Astyages then experiences a second dream, merely underscoring the first.[66] When Astyages' daughter falls pregnant he orders the child killed.[67] Harpagus, the official charged with this duty, wants no part of it and delegates it to a herdsman.[68] This man swaps the baby with his own stillborn, and raises it.[69] Years later, Cyrus' actions in a child's game in which he was elected king brings him before Astyages where his manner and resemblance to Astyages reveal his true identity.[70] The rediscovery of Cyrus triggers a series of revenge-fuelled court intrigues, most not involving Cyrus directly, that doom Astyages some years later.[71] Herodotus states that he knew of at least three other versions of Cyrus'

64 Notably, Astyages' first dream also involves a river, this time of urine, *cf.*, Herod, 1.107.1 and Cooper and Heimpel 1983, 77 (3N T296 lines, 20–24). For an analysis of the baffling logic behind Astyages' actions in this report, see Pelling (1996).
65 Herod., 1.107.2.
66 Ibid. 1.108.1–2.
67 Ibid. 1.108.3–5.
68 Ibid. 1.109–110.
69 Ibid. 1.112–113.
70 Ibid. 1.114–116.
71 Ibid. 1.117.1 *f.*

origin and that he had selected the one given to him by "certain Persians who do not wish to exalt Cyrus".[72]

Herodotus' protestation that his Cyrus narrative was drawn from Persian sources cannot be taken at face value. The claim has generated a range of opinions on its validity with some seeing Herodotus' Cyrus as no Eastern tale but rather a Hellenised artifact reflecting Greek concerns, part of a tragic story centred on Cyrus' pride.[73] Herodotus' information about the east more generally has a complicated and murky relationship with Greek expectations and forms.[74] His sources for Persian history have been variously supposed to be Greek, Greek-speaking members of the Persian bureaucracy, and even a Median exile.[75] Another school of thought is extremely sceptical that Herodotus had any sources at all.[76] It may be significant in this regard that Herodotus' shadowy predecessor, Charon of Lampsacus, transmitted the same two dreams Herodotus grants to Astyages.[77] That the symbols of Cyrus' rise are mirrored in his fall, a fall that comes after he begins to see himself as a divine figure, argues strongly that the story told here is largely a Greek one concerned with the tragic fall of a great man through his own arrogance.[78]

Before casting Herodotus' version aside, however, it should be noted that the presence of royal descent, exposure and adoption in his construction of Cyrus' early life admits the possibility of some connection, however tenuous, to something like the *Birth Legend*. Herodotus attributes rumours that Cyrus was suckled by a dog to a misunderstanding of the name of his foster-mother; another variation on the exposure type seen in the *Birth Legend* and elsewhere.[79] Addressing this story, even in order to refute it, indicates that several versions of the exposure of Cyrus were already widely known to the Greeks of Herodotus' time. It may be possible to view this discarded story in the first-century CE work of Pompeius Trogus, extant in the later abridgement of Justin. According

72 *'ὡς ὧν Περσέων μετεξέτεροι λέγουσι, οἱ μὴ βουλόμενοι σεμνοῦν τὰ περὶ Κῦρον ἀλλὰ τὸν ἐόντα λέγειν λόγον, κατὰ ταῦτα γράψω …'* ibid., 1.95.1.

73 As part of a series of tragic falls see Immerwahr 1966, 167–168. As informed by the conventions of stage tragedy, Saïd 2002, *passim*. As a story about hubris, Chiasson 2012.

74 His portrait of Babylon for example, was probably painted according to a pre-conceived image of that city, see Kuhrt 2002, 480–483.

75 Lewis 1985, 107–108, 116–117, Murray 1987, 110–111, Asheri 2007, 148.

76 The argument of Fehling 1989.

77 FGrH 262 F14 = Tertullian. De. An. 46.

78 It should be noted, however, that a parallel rise and fall story might be found in the Iranian religious-mythic complex. Jamshid, a mythical king of Iran, is supposed to have fallen victim to hubris losing the approval of heaven, and then his life, as a result, see Skjaervø 2012.

79 Herod., 1.110.1. Lewis 1980, 248–249.

to Pompeius Trogus, Cyrus was exposed and suckled by a dog before his rescue by the shepherd who became his foster-father. In this telling his nurse was subsequently given a name meaning dog.[80] Pompeius Trogus' account otherwise resembles that of Herodotus. Whether Pompeius Trogus was referencing a now-lost Greek tradition, elaborating a loose thread in Herodotus' own text to differentiate his own (or using some other author who already had) is impossible to say. It may be fairly assumed, however, that Herodotus did not invent the exposure of Cyrus *ex nihilo*.

Herodotus' exposure narrative gives a complete description of the loss, finding and re-adoption of a lost prince, and is far longer and much, much more detailed than the *Birth Legend*. It also has certain resonances with the birth of Moses (where the status of the exposer and rescuer are curiously reversed) but is more straightforwardly an account of succession. Because the outline of Herodotus' Cyrus narrative, alongside many of the details he employs in its resolution, will resurface in later Iranian biographical legends, it is worthwhile to consider the possibility that the ultimate basis of Herodotus' narrative *may* have been a legend that had originated in the east and had later trickled into the Greek-speaking world. Given the details they hold in common, there is a possibility that we see preserved in Herodotus a more detailed, though second-hand, version of an originally Sargonic exposure story akin to the *Birth Legend*.

Herodotus' narrative contains a number of details missing from the extant *Birth Legend* but key to Sequence One in its Late Antique iterations. The boy's birth is associated with dreams and omens, signs interpreted by a dream-interpreter or astrologer – in this case, the Magi who advise Astyages so poorly.[81] Additionally, Herodotus gives two forms of recognition that will feature so prominently in the much later Greek and Iranian texts. Cyrus comes to the attention of Astyages as a result of a game in which the other children, evidently more astute than their parents, have appointed him their king.[82] When Cyrus is brought before Astyages the old king cannot help but notice the boy's resemblance to himself. As a result, Cyrus' true identity is brought to light.[83]

By setting exposure in a longer narrative, Herodotus' Cyrus prefigures the pattern of loss and recognition seen in the Mediaeval Greek and Iranian historicising traditions of Constantine and Ardashir. Should we posit that this version of Cyrus reflects a genuinely Eastern story with some relationship to

80 Justin. Epit., 1.4.10–14.
81 Merely "soothsayers", *arioli*, in Justin, see ibid. 1.4.3.
82 Herod, 1.114.1.
83 Ibid. 1.116.1.

the traditions that made the Sargon of the *Birth Legend*, it would admit the possibility of reading other elements of Cyrus' story back into the extremely sparse and incomplete framework provided by the few surviving attestations of Sargon's; it would, in other words, allow us to hypothesise that the surviving text of the *Birth Legend* may represent only part of a now-lost tradition that was similar to the Herodotean Cyrus.

Unfortunately, as has already been mentioned, Herodotus' ultimate sources for Persian history are unclear and modern investigations have produced contradictory opinions as to their nature.[84] Though a Sargonic link to this Cyrus has been assumed from time to time, there is very little visible connective tissue and as tempting as the association is, it must remain entirely speculative.[85] What is certain is that something very like the relatively complex narrative of recognition and prophecy used by Herodotus appears in later historicising works, including Iranian texts that are extremely unlikely to have had any reliance on Herodotus or any other Greek tradition. It would seem probable, then, that Herodotus' Cyrus drew (at an unknown number of removes) on an originally eastern biographic pattern. Sargon's enduring popularity makes him a possible, perhaps even probable, model for this pattern, but more than this we cannot say.

### 3.2 *Ctesias*

A much more solidly Sargonic version of the life of Cyrus is offered by the fourth-century BCE writer Ctesias. Ctesias served as a doctor in the Achaemenid court of Artaxerxes II (r. 405/404–359 BCE) in Babylon. Despite having a wide readership in Antiquity the fragments of his *Persika*, his account of Persian history based largely on his own experiences at court, have had a cold reception in the twentieth century, one that has scarcely improved over time.[86] Once merely an incompetent historian, postcolonial trends in scholarship have opened the way for a new and much more sinister characterisation of the good doctor; Ctesias, goes one argument, *invented* "The Orient" as an iridescent riot of silk-draped Western fantasies and perfumed ideological contrast.[87] In this view, Ctesias was the first in a very long line of Orientalists who saw in the societies of the East only what they wished to see.

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84 For a general consideration of the relationship between eastern and Greek material in Herodotus see West 2003, *passim*.

85 Notably, Drews 1974, 338 *f.*, followed by Kuhrt 2003, 354–355 who comes to a rather different conclusion regarding its significance.

86 Ctesias does have his defenders, see Stronk 2007, Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2010.

87 A slightly dramatised paraphrase of Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987, 43 who does not hold Ctesias *personally* responsible.

Damned by German philologists on the grounds of accuracy, and decolonising historians for questionable anthropology, Ctesias is a difficult author to interpret. Unfortunately for those trying to squeeze the remnants of his writings for useful information about the Achaemenid Empire of the fourth century, Ctesias is unlikely to have either overcome his cultural prejudices or even to have been writing "history" as we understand it.[88] In his scathing assessment of this author's work, Robert Drews saw Ctesias' writings as a failure of method, a stage in the regression to an older Greek habit of viewing the East as a succession of disconnected wonders.[89] This approach was, in Drews' view, the inevitable outcome of a lack of a single, relatively contemporary event (such as the Persian Wars) to focus the work and allow autopsy, unselective, sensationalist use of the sources he did have and, in a rather blunt assessment, a lack of historical perspective in eastern literary practice itself.[90] Ctesias, says Drews, took the first step towards the re-enchantment of Eastern history in Greek; after him the East was ceded permanently to the poet and the epitomator.[91]

Fantasist or not, Ctesias does have the great advantage of having spent some considerable time in close proximity to people who rarely speak for themselves in Greek literature. By abandoning the rigid classification of Ctesias as a historian, some recent arguments have presented his work in a far more sympathetic light. The *Persika*, says this new approach, is a work that wore its fictions on its sleeve.[92] The dour metrics of plausibility and scope, in this view, entirely miss the point; the *Persika* was supposed to be enjoyed.[93] The soap-opera-like features that so upset a previous generation of scholarship are, in reality, key elements of the work's intent; harem intrigues make for interesting reading and were hardly insignificant, or invented, features of the contained world of the Achaemenid court with which Ctesias was familiar. Ctesias in this view would be the victim of a too-strict, and entirely modern, genre boundary

88 Ibid., 37–40. It has been pointed out (about Herodotus, but applicable here also) that even with the best will in the world, the meaning of any cultural practice is vulnerable to misinterpretation by outsiders, see Thomas 2012, *passim*.

89 Drews 1973, 115*f*.

90 Ibid. 97–107.

91 Ibid. 121–122.

92 "'Faction' or a kind of historical novel" Stronk 2007, 43–44.

93 The editors of a recent English translation of Ctesias' fragments reflected on Stronk's idea, making a comparison between the *Persika* and Giles Foden's 1998 novel *The Last King of Scotland*. In both cases, the author is seen to have drawn on his own experiences in the area, the recollections of members of a ruler's entourage and family as well as primary documentation (this last source unlikely in the case of Ctesias) to create a *version* of history that is an exciting blend of fact and fiction putting the author (a fictional proxy in Foden's case) at the centre of events. See Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2010, 3–7.

with "serious" historians on the one side and writers of entertainment on the other.[94] Additionally, it has been noted that the majority of derogatory comments made about Ctesias in Antiquity are not associated with his *Persika*, but rather with his *Indika*, and indeed, the fragments of this latter work suggest that it was largely a farrago of nonsense.[95]

If many of the attacks on Ctesias were predicated on what he was not, to get anything useful out of his work requires an acceptance of what he was and a certain attitude towards what he offers. As a reporter of contemporary events, it is undeniable that Ctesias had serious limits. Depending on one's interests, however, Ctesias was in a position to have heard some interesting things. If one is looking for a Polybian style meditation on the impersonal, institutional forces of history Ctesias is worthless. If, on the other hand, one is interested in the ideas about the past that were current in court circles under Artaxerxes II and their interaction with broader trends in legend, Ctesias is considerably better.[96] In his Cyrus the maligned author of palace gossip may have handed the student of comparative literature a real gift. Presenting a story with clear parallels to Sargonic precedent, one almost certainly drawn from the milieu of Babylon, a centre of Sargonic memory, Ctesias is very likely to have given us no suspiciously Hellenised rise and fall but a "true myth", an account drawn, in comparison to that of Herodotus, relatively unfiltered, from a Mesopotamian tradition.

The extensive summary of the *Persika* made by Photius in the tenth century fails here. Photius probably did not have the first books of this work at his disposal and begins his summary of Ctesia's narrative just after Cyrus has deposed Astyages. Photius does however indicate that Ctesias' version of events contradicted that of Herodotus at many points and also that Ctesias set his history against that older work.[97] Rather, Ctesias' Cyrus is reflected in a large fragment of the first-century Syrian author Nicolaus of Damascus excerpted in Constantine Porphrygenitus' tenth-century compilation *De Insidiis*.[98] Though it has been reworked at least twice, on the basis of recurring themes within the corpus and overlaps in fragments transmitted by other authors, in particular

94 Fehling suggests that Ctesias was not all that different from Herodotus in this regard, Fehling 1989, 212–215.

95 Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2010, 33.

96 "… an unskilled informant who has preserved more of the *literary tradition* than of the factual history of Persia." Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987, 43 mentioning the decline theory presented at Drews 1973, 116. "… an account of Persian court life *as the Persian aristocracy saw it*." Murray 1987, 113–4. (Emphases added).

97 Photius, Bib. Cod., 72.

98 Jacoby did not attribute Nicolaus' fragments to Ctesias. On the other hand, Lenfant's edition of the fragments of the *Persika* and the *Indika* does. References will henceforth be given to both. The most relevant fragment here is FGrH 90 F66 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.

TABLE 4 Cyrus, Sequence Two

| | **Herodotus, Histories 444–424 BCE** | **Nicholaus (Ctesias) Early 1st *c.* CE (*c.*394 BCE)** | **Dinon After 343/ 2 BCE** | **Xenophon, Cyropaedia After 362/ 1 BCE** | **Justin, Epitome of Pompeius Trogus 4th *c.* CE (1st *c.* BCE)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| At court to serve | | × | | | |
| At court as aristocrat | | | | × | |
| Has role close to king | | × | | × | |
| Shows extraordinary aptitude | | | | × | |
| Beautiful/youthful/ popular | | × | | × | |
| "Beast" combat | | Used as metaphor | Used as metaphor | | |
| Arouses jealousy | | | | × | |
| Plot is made | Against Astyages | Against Astyages | ? | | Against Astyages |
| Antagonist is warned | | Twice | × | | |
| Escape to "homeland" | Cyrus already in Persia | × | | | Cyrus already in Persia |
| Father is ill or dead | | Father said to be ill, dies later | | | |
| Pursued | | × | | | |
| Trick performed in flight | | × | | | |
| Leads army | × | × | | | |

Diodorus Siculus' account of the overthrow of the Assyrian king Sardanapalus, this text is likely to be reasonably close to Ctesias' original narrative.[99] The story is one of courtly confrontation and is an iteration of Sequence Two (see Table 4).

99 *Cf.* Dio. Sic. 2.23–25 & Lenfant 2004, F1pδ and F1pε*. In a comparison of all the Ctesian fragments of Nicolaus, Lenfant makes the point that a comparison of two fragments ascribed to Nicolaus, the rise of Cyrus and the conspiracy of the Mede Arbakes and the Chaldean Belesys against Sardanapalus contain, aside from a direct reference to the earlier event

In this fragment the young Cyrus is the son of a man so poor as to be reduced to banditry.[100] He attaches himself to a richer man by means of a Median law allowing self-enslavement.[101] He comes into the service of two palace officials and is finally taken under the wing of Astyages' cupbearer where his grace and skill attract the king's attention.[102] Becoming cupbearer in turn he is informed that before his birth his mother, while pregnant, dreamt a dream similar to that which Herodotus gave to Astyages. His father calls astrologers for an interpretation. One of them, referred to only as the "Babylonian", foretells Cyrus' rise; Cyrus is enthusiastic.[103] While travelling with the astrologer Cyrus meets a lowly Persian by the name of Oibares whose name, ethnicity and disposition are interpreted as good omens.[104] Convinced of his destiny, Cyrus creates an anti-Median conspiracy among Astyages' subjects then, with Oibares' help, engineers his escape from Astyages' court claiming he needs to see his ailing father.[105] His intentions are revealed to Astyages first by the now-dead astrologer's brother and next by a singer or concubine who casts the event in an animal metaphor.[106] Cyrus tricks those sent to pursue him before leading a desperate revolt from Persia that ends with the capture and deposition of Astyages.[107]

The Sargonic precedent of something like the *Sumerian Legend* is evidenced by a number of parallels. Cyrus is here a complete outsider, of very low stock, as was the Sargon of the *Sumerian King List*. He too is made the cupbearer to the man he is to depose and the action pivots on a prophetic dream which, just as in the *Sumerian Legend*, drives the story's antagonist to attempt to kill the subject. While this Cyrus is an active conspirator and far less passive than the Sargon of the *Sumerian Legend* (so far as we know), it is still made clear

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in the later (*cf.* FGrH 90 F3 = Lenfant 2004, F1pε* and FGrH 90 F66.12 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.12). Narrative and thematic parallels, the use of omens and the fixer role played by eunuchs for example, suggest both a common origin and shared authorship. She argues also that the substance of Ctesias' narrative has not been radically altered by its redactions, see Lenfant 2000, 304–309.

100 In a start that does not inspire confidence, Nicolaus gives the name of Cyrus' father, as *Ἀτραδάτος*, FGrH 90 F66.3 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.3.

101 FGrH 90 F66.2–3 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.2–3. König made the suggestion that the name of Cyrus' tribe, *Μάρδος*, has here been misunderstood, with *mardos* supposed to represent Old Persian *martiya* which König argues meant the subordinate in a vassalage-type arrangement, König 1972, 47. This seems unlikely: *martiya* in Old Persian simply means "mortal" and, as a substantive, "man", see Kent 1953, 203.

102 FGrH 90 F66.4–5 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.4–5.

103 FGrH 90 F66.6–9 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*. 6–9.

104 FGrH 90 F66. 11–13 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*. 11–13.

105 FGrH 90 F66.14–23= Lenfant 2000, F8d*.14–23.

106 FGrH 90 F66.24–26.= Lenfant 2000, F8d*.24–26.

107 FGrH 90 F66.27 *f* = Lenfant 2000, F8d*.27 *f.*

that his actions stem from divine approval; his mother dreams a great future for her son while sleeping in a temple, a rather specific parallel to the Sargon of the *Sumerian Legend*.[108] Cyrus will see his own confirmatory omens later in the action.[109]

This account, filtered as it may have been by Nicolaus and much later by a number of anonymous Byzantine compilers, is the first of our texts to detail a flight from court to the subject's homeland. There is some very weak evidence in the two *Sargon Legends* that such an escape to a homeland may once have been part of the spectrum of legends once attached to Sargon: his father's people are mentioned in the *Birth Legend* and his father is named in the *Sumerian Legend*.[110] It would be unsafe, however to put much weight on these given that the end of the older composition is missing and the younger skips over Sargon's rise almost entirely.

One fragment of a rather more obscure Greek author, the fourth-century writer Dinon, also reflects Ctesias' Cyrus. Dinon probably based his work largely on Ctesias and, indeed, the larger of his two fragments concerning Cyrus is *very* similar to the equivalent part of Nicolaus. In both texts Cyrus absents himself from court with Astyages' permission; in Nicolaus, and presumably in Dinon, as part of the plot conceived against his master. Nicolaus has the king told of his foolishness by one of his "dancers and flute players", whereas Dinon makes the announcement via a certain Angares, supposedly a famed singer.[111] Both texts deliver the warning using a very similar animal metaphor.

The second fragment of Dinon is transmitted in Cicero's *De Divinatione* and tells of Cyrus' vision of a prophetic solar dream and its interpretation by the Magi.[112] Here Cyrus sees the sun about his body and seeks it three times in vain. In light of other texts, the form of the dream is an interesting one. Without its context this fragment is difficult to place in Dinon's narrative. Because it announced a thirty-year rule it may imply that Cyrus was king at this point, however, Nicolaus has a theophany given to Cyrus just before he defeats Astyages so it may have fallen there.[113] This solar imagery and a threefold repetition are also displayed in the Middle Persian *Kārnāmag* wherein Pabag has a nocturnal vision of Sasan (Ardashir's biological father and supposed scion of

108 *Cf.* FGrH.90 F66.9 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.6, Herod, 1.107.1 (also a river of urine), Cooper and Heimpel 1983, 77 (3N T296. Line 12) (blood).

109 FGrH.90 F66.41 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.41.

110 Lewis 1980, 24 (lines 2–3), Cooper and Heimpel 1983, 76 (TRS 73, Obv, line 11.).

111 *Cf.* FGrH. 90 F66.26 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.26 and FGrH 690.9.

112 FGrH. 690.10 = Cic. De Div. 1.46.

113 Ibid. 90 F66.41 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.41.

the lost Kayanid line deposed by Alexander): "… as if the sun shone down from the head of Sasan and lit the whole world."[114]

It is possible, though not provable, that Dinon here used another, now lost, Eastern tradition, though whether this was once part of the complex associated with Sargon, merely a very standard form of prophetic dream, or both, is impossible to say.[115] Certainly solar imagery has been near-universally associated with Eurasian monarchy for a very long time; the coincidence is however, a rather interesting one.[116] It may also be relevant that a glowing, post-coital vision is also granted to Constantius in two of the hagiographies considered below and that one of these texts has Constantius attribute this vision to Apollo.[117]

None of this is to say that the "Babylonian purity" of Nicolaus/Ctesias' account is a straightforward proposition. The very commonalities used by Lenfant to identify the relationship between fragments – a liking for prophecy and eunuchs, and the effeminate presentation of both Sardanapalus and Astyages for example – might also be used to argue for a considerable overlay of an authorial voice fascinated by dramatic stories and dubious stereotypes.[118] Additionally, an argument has been made that Ctesias merely refashioned Herodotus' Persian material with a light admixture of eastern information.[119] It has also been pointed out that the narrative as presented by Nicolaus is somewhat odd; the helper roles of Cyrus' offsider Oibares and that of the Babylonian astrologer seem to overlap and Oibares' trajectory from rags to riches mirrors that of Cyrus to a suspicious degree.[120] Moreover, Oibares' introduction to the narrative is strongly reminiscent of a dream prophecy made in the story, also attributed to Ctesias via Nicolaus, concerning the fall of Sardanapalus.[121] As

114 *dīd ciyōn ka xwaršēd az sar-ī Sāsān be tāft ud hamāg gehān rōšnīh kart*, KNA, 1.9.

115 Repetition, particularly in threes, is an extremely common device in prophetic dreams across the ancient Near East, though one that was supposedly uncommon in the Classical world, see Oppenheim 1956, 208.

116 On the near-ubiquitous use of solar symbolism in relation to kingship, see Dvornik 1966, *passim*.

117 Guidi 1907, 308, line 29–309, line 6. That the *Opitz Vita* once also contained a similar vision can be seen when Constantius remembers it at Halkin 1960, 12. See also page 133 note 35 below.

118 See, again, Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987, 37–40.

119 An argument taken up in Cizek 1975 who attempts to explain Ctesias (and all the extant Cyrus narratives) entirely through the filter of trends in Greek literature. This argument is problematic as it both takes Ctesias at his word about the existence of "Persian records" and doesn't account for the parallels with the *Sumerian Legend* noted by later scholarship.

120 König 1972, 48.

121 Belesys sees talking horses bringing fodder to the sleeping Arbakes, see FGrH 90 F3 = Lenfant 2004, F1pε*.

a possible result of the narrative containing an extra character, Astyages is warned of Cyrus' intentions twice in rapid succession. As Oibares is the name of Darius' helper in Herodotus' account of the accession of that king, the possibility that Oibares exists in Nicolaus only as a riposte or reference to the older work arises.[122] On the other hand, the manner of Oibares' introduction to the narrative, and the meaning ascribed to his name may argue a genuinely eastern origin for the duplication.[123]

Despite such problems, I would argue that the Mesopotamian core of Ctesias' narrative is *relatively* intact.[124] Though the influence of Greek literature has been seen in the staging of other fragments of this writer, Ctesias' Cyrus narrative is likely to be based on much older Mesopotamian traditions.[125] Cyrus' flight from court has no parallel in surviving Sargonic material, however, given the incomplete state of the *Sumerian Legend*, and the attachment of a flight to David, it is possible that this too was adapted from an earlier set of Sargonic legends.[126] Because of its resemblance to instances of Sequence Two seen in the Late Antique traditions of Constantine and Ardashir, and our ability to pin its likely origin to Babylon, of the three versions of Cyrus considered here, that of the *Persika* is by far the most relevant to our problem. As we shall see below, its mere existence argues for both the durability of the tale as a historicising form and its ability to transfer when the appropriate circumstances presented themselves. Of course, the *Persika* itself was not somehow separate to this process. Ctesias' work had a far wider readership, and a far better reception in

122 Herod, 3.85–7.

123 *ὁ γὰρ Οἰβαρας δύναται Ἑλλάδι γλώσσῃι ’ἀγαθάγγελος*. (FGrH 90 F66.13 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.13) Oibares might be reconstructed as **Vahī-bara*, "He who brings better things". In addition to the possibility of an Iranian onomastic link, the chance meeting and its prophetic interpretation is in line with Mesopotamian traditions of prophecy, see König 1972, 47 and Panaino and Basello 2009, 395–396. As Nicolaus' Oibares is carrying a basket of horse manure when he meets Cyrus, the possibility of a *very* sophisticated joke on the part of Ctesias might also be considered.

124 Beckman has suggested that this narrative may be connected to the propaganda of Artaxerxes II who wanted to darken Cyrus' reputation in order to attack his brother Cyrus the Younger. This assumes that the story would be interpreted negatively, an assumption that appears at odds with the story's Sargonic associations: Beckman 2018, 163.

125 Holzberg 2003, 630.

126 The narratives contained in Samuel may be helpful for understanding the presence of the "helper" Oibares. It may be significant that David is supposed to have escaped Saul's court with the aid of his friend Jonathan, Saul's son, or his wife Michal, Saul's daughter see 1 Samuel 19:9–17 and chapter 20. Note that David's excuse for his absence from court is the attendance of a family sacrificial rite. Cyrus' cover story is that he needs to go home to perform sacrifices on Astyages' behalf and to tend to his father, *cf.* 1 Samuel 20:6 and FGrH 90 F66.20–23= Lenfant 2000, F8d*.20–23.

antiquity than its broken fragments do now.[127] It is an extremely relevant question as to how much more influential its portrait of Cyrus might have been in the Hellenistic and Roman periods than it has been in more recent times.

### 3.3 *Xenophon*

Whether Ctesias is considered as a novelist, a novelistic historian, or a "poet" in the most technical sense, he was hardly alone in fictionalising Persian history for Greeks.[128] His was not even the most egregiously confected vision of Persian "history" offered to fourth century audiences extant. That honour must go to Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, written after 362/1 BCE. To characterise fairly, the *Cyropaedia* was never intended, and was probably only rarely, and mistakenly, seen as what we would deem a historical work.[129] It was part of a rash of Greek political utopias in the fourth century and not even the first to use a fictionalised Cyrus as a protagonist, or at least interlocutor.[130] Containing chunks of novel-like narrative, since Antiquity the *Cyropaedia* has itself been the springboard for other self-consciously fictional works. In more recent times this has seen the *Cyropaedia*, like the *Persika*, classed as a novel-like text if not a novel proper.[131] Unlike the *Persika*'s ambiguous blend of historical narrative and rollicking tales, the fictions of the *Cyropaedia* are more clearly pronounced, as is its didactic intent.

The *Cyropaedia* uses the life of Cyrus to spice up what is essentially a political treatise directed at a Greek audience.[132] As such, the story told here is of very questionable value as a source for anything other than Xenophon's own views of statecraft.[133] This said, the frame narrative used is not entirely without interest. In building up his fictional Cyrus, Xenophon notably contradicts the king's other legendary biographies, restructuring his succession as to push the very broad bounds of accepted history in the process. Yet one can still recognise

127 See page 46 note 93 above.

128 For Ctesias as a "poet" (defined as a writer of things that *might* be true), see Stronk 2007, 50.

129 For the reception of the *Cyropaedia* into the early modern period see, Tatum 1989, 3 *f.*

130 The Cynic Antisthenes also composed a now-lost work in which Cyrus was the central character. The very little of it that now remains indicates a moral concern and at least part of it was a series of questions and answers regarding virtue, see Paquet 1975, 31, 34 and 37, (Frag. 15, 42 and 54).

131 Fictional biographies are classed as "fringe" novels by Holzberg, see Holzberg 2003, 17–19.

132 Probably targeted at the ruling classes of contemporary Athens, see Due 2003, 590.

133 Beckman has claimed that the narrative of the *Cyropaedia* reflects (in part) the propaganda of Cyrus the Younger, Xenophon's patron and failed claimant to the Persian throne. Once again, I do not find this argument convincing. Beckman 2018, 162–163.

some of the standard motifs of Cyrus' early life, even if they are twisted into nearly unrecognisable shapes.

Using the first part of his narrative to frame a series of tedious lectures on logistics, morality and statecraft, Xenophon casts Cyrus as the natural and legitimate grandson of Astyages. Here there are no ominous dreams, no plots and not a hint of infanticide.[134] The twelve-year-old Cyrus is called to court where, after demonstrating his brilliance and a propensity to lecture, he becomes, briefly, his grandfather's cupbearer.[135] From this point the narrative diverges completely from precedent. Cyrus and Astyages part on good terms, Cyrus goes on to serve as his grudging uncle Cyaxares' superficially loyal vassal before peacefully succeeding him via marriage.[136] Here Xenophon presents a succession that he contradicted in another work; a geographic detail Xenophon noted in his *Anabasis*, a first-hand account of travel through Persian territory, mentions warfare when the Persians seized the Median kingdom.[137]

Yet contradiction does not entail ignorance. Amongst the seemingly endless dialogue that follows Cyrus' departure from Astyages' court one can sometimes spot elements that may reference the older Greek accounts, and, by this route, several familiar motifs emerge of which Cyrus' temporary role as cupbearer is only the most obvious. The same disparaging references to Median decadence, luxury and tyranny are present, though these claims are suspiciously unverifiable and Greek sounding in all iterations; in any case, they are here left to stand unused as justifications for Cyrus' usurpation.[138] On his departure to aid the Medes against the Assyrians, Cyrus sacrifices to the gods who loudly display their approval. His father Cambyses is pleased not only by the sign of divine favour but by the fact that as Cyrus can read the will of the gods directly, he has no need of soothsayers *who may deceive him*.[139] Cyrus' deathbed scene also contains a description of sleep that implies his direct receipt of messages from the gods.[140] Xenophon here appears to be subverting a crucial part of the older Greek narratives by playing up the very ambiguous role of astrologers in other versions of Cyrus' life.

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134 Xen. Cyr., 1.2.1.

135 Ibid. 1.3.1–12.

136 Ibid. 8.5.19 and 28.

137 Xen. An. 3.4.8.

138 For example, *cf.* FGrH 90 F66. 14–15 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*, 14–15 & Xen. Cyr., 1.3.2–4. The circularity of relying on an entirely Hellenic set of references to cast the Persian Empire as "decadent" was brilliantly skewered in Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987, 22–28. The same argument holds for these depictions of the Medes.

139 Xen. Cyr., 1.6.2.

140 Itself preceded by a prophetic dream ibid. 8.7.2–3 & 21.

This seeming reference to the liminal nature of the dream interpreter is just one of several correspondences, oppositions really, to the other Greek Cyrus narratives. One line of argument is that, in line with the didactic intent of the *Cyropaedia*, morally dubious events or speech associated with Cyrus can be refigured, or in the case of the Herodotean Astyages' operatic paranoia, completely ignored.[141] Low sentiment might simply be transferred to one of Cyrus' foils; the appeal to materialism displayed in the Assyrian king's speech to his soldiers, for example, is not unlike the choice between ease and toil Cyrus offers his countrymen in Herodotus.[142] It would seem that almost everything about Xenophon's Cyrus is an ideal, existing as a response to established Greek narratives and answering them rather than drawing anything directly from an Eastern source.

One section of the *Cyropaedia* is, perhaps, more interesting than it appears at first glance. While hunting with his uncle Cyxares, Cyrus' easy command and ready charisma prompt the jealous older man to note wryly that Cyrus is clearly already their king.[143] This section looks to have some relationship with the motif of recognition through games seen in Herodotus.[144] Insofar as we can still speak of the presence of either sequence in Xenophon's subversion of the other Greek Cyrus narratives, the hostility of Cyxares towards his nephew, and his general lack of royal virtue, aligns him with their depictions of Astyages.[145] As a "public" display, constructed as an aristocratic game and forcing recognition (albeit sardonic) of the subject's innate kingliness, it may be possible to detect here a thematic resonance with public confrontations seen in the Late Antique and Mediaeval biographies of Ardashir and Constantine. In these cases too, the conspicuous subdual of animals is used to contrast the fitness of the subject and the unfitness of his adversary.

As a self-consciously didactic work of Hellenising political theory, the *Cyropaedia* holds some interest as evidence of the reach of the standard fictions about Cyrus, the feedback effect generated by their literate transmission and their fluidity within certain limits. Xenophon's Cyrus may reflect even less of the historical figure than the others do, but he is almost certainly compounded,

141 Due 1989, 118 *f.* & again in Due 2003, 591–593. Conversely, Tatum argues that the virtue of the Cyrus of the *Cyropaedia* is in fact a cover for a sly manipulator of others, Tatum 1989, 96 *f.*

142 The Assyrian king offering a rhetoric of cowardly materialism was discussed at Tatum 1989, 92. With this in mind an interesting contrast can be made between Xen. Cyr., 3.3.45 & Herod, 1.126.

143 Xen. Cyr., 1.4.9.

144 Herod, 1.114.

145 Cyaxares is the "negative pole of the *Cyropaedia*", see Tatum 1989, 115.

albeit second-hand, of some of the same elements. Though he set out to do something completely different with the character – for this Cyrus, unlike the others, is explicitly a *character* – Xenophon was bound to participate in the common stock of existing biographical information that surrounded it.

## 4 The Problem of Transmission

Two of the three major Greek retellings of the origins of Cyrus have a plausible connection with Eastern traditions, with the story told by Ctesias being a more secure proposition than that recorded by Herodotus. In a situation rather unlike the shadowy antecedents of Sargon, but one that looks forward to some of the problems associated with the Late Antique traditions, a clear disjuncture is discernible between the claims made in these legends and the claims made by their subject. The few extant, contemporary witnesses to Cyrus' origin contradict *all* of the Greek accounts. Taking his claims at face value, while Cyrus displayed a pragmatic sensitivity to the expectations of his new subjects, his publicly proclaimed sources of earthly legitimacy remained based on his family's long association with kingship. Cyrus' family were the kings of Anshan; his messaging, and that of his successors, emphasised his connection to this royal line. While Sargon may well have been an outsider at court who directed a coup from within, the historical Cyrus was most certainly not; he was a petty king on the make, a royal conqueror not at all embarrassed by his descent. Such a man was highly unlikely to want, or need, the kind of obfuscatory apology that puts a baby in a basket or transmutes a farm boy into a king. Nor were his own people likely to have created stories that described the most successful member of their own ruling house as a break in that dynasty.

The legends reflected in the Greek sources can be best explained as mystifications of Cyrus' origins occurring in circles outside of the core ethnic-political group of his empire. Given the motifs reflected in the Greek accounts, and the location of Ctesias during his service at the Achaemenid court, it is possible to narrow the probable location of this process down to the Mesopotamian regions of his new empire, most likely in Babylon and the literary networks linked to the culture of that city. How and why this happened are not questions that can be answered with any degree of certainty. However, contextual clues may allow us to model the process by which a subject group came to foist a particular history of their imperial masters upon the world even while said masters were indebted to an entirely different vision. In Babylon, Cyrus was read not as an individual, but as a locus of types. Trained by the antiquarian bent of

their culture to see patterns in history and recently reminded of the greatness of Sargon, the Babylonians recycled him, pressing his stories, unbidden, over the image of Cyrus.

### 4.1 *Achaemenid Self-Presentation*

The Cyrus that Cyrus wished the world to see is very clearly described in his own words in his famous account of his conquest of Babylon, the so-called *Cyrus Cylinder* (CB). Though the cylinder itself was intended to be buried under a temple foundation and was therefore addressed to the gods, smaller fragments of this text have been found, suggesting that it was composed with public distribution in mind.[146] As such it offers a fairly reliable report of the sort of messaging the new Persian regime intended for an Akkadian speaking audience. Cyrus' self-description is most telling.

> I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the world, son of Cambyses, the great king, king of the city of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, the great king, ki[ng of the ci]ty of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, the great king, king of Anshan, the perpetual seed of kingship, whose reign Bel and Nabu love, and with whose kingship, to their joy, they concern themselves.[147]

As befitted the ruler of Babylon, Cyrus here made use of some very traditional Mesopotamian themes. He references the ancient political concepts of Sumer and Akkad and also cites Babylonian gods as dynastic sponsors. The core of his claim, however, lies in his link to an existing, Persian, dynasty. Old Persian inscriptions confirm that the pose struck for outsiders reflected the internal ideological structure of Persian monarchy. Cyrus' self-identification as a member of a known royal dynasty was the habit of later Persian kings also, even (especially!) the probable usurper Darius I (r. 522–486 BCE) who, sharing a great-great grandfather with Cyrus' son, carried protestations of his familial

146 The recent discovery of two fragments of a Babylonian copy of the *Cyrus Cylinder* suggests that it, along with its claims of descent from the rulers of Anshan, was also likely to have been widely copied and distributed, see Curtis 2013, 45. The translation of CB used here is that made by I.L. Finkel, ibid., 42–43.

147 CB 21–22.

legitimacy to a suspiciously repetitive and fervent degree.[148] This is best seen in his famous trilingual inscription at Behistun (DB).[149]

> I am Darius the great king, king of kings, king in Persia, King of peoples/countries, son of Vishtaspa, grandson of Arshama, an Achaemenid.
>
> Darius the king proclaims: My father is Vishtaspa (Gr. Hytaspes); Vishtaspa's father is Arshama (Gr. Arsames): Arshama's father is Ariaramna (Gr. Ariaramnes); Ariaramna' father is Cishpish (Gr. Teispes); Cishpish's father was Hakhaimanish (Gr. Achaemenes).
>
> Darius the king proclaims: For this reason we are called Achaemenids. From long ago we are noble. From long ago we are royal.
>
> Darius the king proclaims: Eight of our family were kings before; I am the ninth; nine kings we are in succession.[150]

Darius' descendants would connect themselves to Darius in their own inscriptions, retaining Darius' stress on Achaemenid origins and thereby his claim to a connection with the family of Cyrus. Because it has already been suggested above that the Sargonic legends, the *Sumerian Legend* in particular, may represent apologia built in response to the succession of an outsider, these are inconvenient data. It is true that Cyrus *and* Darius posed as tyrannicides in the service of a god; they were, however, insiders by birth and had not the slightest whiff of the sheepfold about them.[151]

Of course, the antagonist of the Greek Cyrus narratives is not Nabonidus, the king of Babylon, but Astyages, the king of the Medes. Herein lies a possible solution to the problem of double origins. Two contemporary accounts give slightly different descriptions of the relationship between Astyages and Cyrus: the first is a clay cylinder found at Sippar commissioned by Nabonidus himself, and the second, the so-called *Nabonidus Chronicle*, is a later, short account of

148 The later Achaemenid inscriptions have been gathered and translated in Lecoq 1997. Darius may have forged two inscriptions of "Cyrus" in the palaces of Pasargadae in order to link Cyrus more strongly to Darius' own branch of the Achaemenid family, see Stronach 1990, 198–200, *contra* Lecoq 1997, 81–82.

149 The translation of DB used here is that made in Kuhrt 2007, 141–157 (including commentary).

150 DB I.1–5.

151 Cyrus claimed to have been chosen by Marduk, CB 12, Darius to have been the client of Ahura Mazda, DB I.5. Despite the regal origins of both men, the Greeks appear to have taken strongly to the association of rusticity with the beginnings of Achaemenid kingship. Plutarch, for example, tells of a supposed Persian coronation rite that recalls Cyrus' supposed origins as a shepherd, Plut. Artaxerxes, 3.1–3.

the reign of that king. Cyrus is named in both as the king of Anshan.[152] The text on the cylinder, using a word of obscure meaning, has been interpreted to say that Cyrus was Astyages' subordinate and that he rebelled against his master.[153] The *Chronicle*, on the other hand, would seem to say that Astyages moved against Cyrus for reasons unknown, only to have his army revolt and (perhaps) hand him over to Cyrus.[154] The claim in both that Astyages was led away into captivity after his defeat is interesting in light of its correspondence with the Greek traditions; it does not however, mean that the lenient treatment he receives in the Greek texts should be regarded with anything other than suspicion.[155] Cyrus, then, may have overthrown his overlord, and may have done so by means of conspiracy. He was thus both king and rebel. The memory of this coup may have lent itself to a particular interpretation when Cyrus came to rule Babylon itself.

### 4.2 *The Babylonian Interpretation*

The possibility that Sargonic narratives were transferred to Cyrus in Babylon has been raised before. Of course, it is now impossible to know either the exact channels by which any such identification was propagated or the precise social demarcation of any component of the legend. Robert Drews argued that it must have been via the popular oral tradition of this city and its cultural hinterland that the story known to Ctesias passed into Greek. This assumption is made on the grounds that written accounts of Sargon's life would have denied Cyrus or his followers the use of Sargon's legend to those familiar with the Akkadian-Sumerian literary tradition.[156] It is important to note that Drews did not characterise the popular historiography of Achaemenid Babylonia as purely oral or demotic; rather he saw it as codependent with a long literary-historical tradition. The written and unwritten histories of Sargon

152 For the translation of the cylinder copy of this text found at Sippar, see the translation and commentary of P.A. Beaulieu in Hallo 2000, 310–313 (2.123A). Reference to the king of Anshan to be found at 311 (2.123A, i.8–ii.25). According to Beaulieu's own classification of Nabonidus' inscriptions, this is Inscription 15, see Beaulieu 1989, 34. For the *Nabonidus Chronicle* see Grayson 1975, 104*f*, (Chronicle 7), the reference to Cyrus as king of Anshan is made at 106, II, line 1.

153 Hallo 2000, 311 (2.123A, i.8–ii.25). The word used to describe Cyrus seems to state that Cyrus was once Astyages' subordinate and this was the interpretation preferred by Beaulieu. Others have interpreted this passage as claiming Cyrus as the servant of the gods Sin and Marduk, see ibid. n. 7.

154 This has an interesting resonance with the conspiratorial Cyrus seen in Herodotus and Ctesias. See Grayson 1975, 106 (Chronicle 7.II, line 2).

155 On the "sparing" of Croesus in Herodotus, see West 2003, 419–20.

156 Drews 1974, 392.

were, in his view, linked; moreover, they had traded a great deal of material over the centuries.[157] A demonstration of this sort of interdependence might be discerned in the application of Sargon's memory in Babylonian politics on the eve of the Persian conquest.

Extant evidence indicates that Sargon was still known in Achaemenid Babylonia. We may safely assume this to have been true of the literature known to elite and religious circles; the youngest extant fragment of either of Sargon's origin legends is a Neo-Babylonian scribal exercise indicating that the *Birth Legend* was used as a school text in this period.[158] Yet we also have direct attestation of Sargon's use in the explicitly antiquarian propaganda of the unpopular Nabonidus just before Cyrus' conquest of Babylon. Nabonidus appears to have been fascinated by the dynasty of Akkad and expended a great deal of effort in a conspicuous display of his reverence for their relics.[159] He even directed a successful excavation at Akkad itself, culminating in the restoration of the temple of Eulmash.[160] In the course of restoring the temple of Shamash at Sippar, he repaired a statue of Sargon and then arranged for offerings to be made to it.[161] The preparation of offerings to a statue of Sargon, from the reign of Nabonidus and into that of Cambyses (r. 530–522 BCE), is mentioned in accounts recovered from the archive of the Ebabbarra temple.[162] Nabonidus also boasted of his restoration of a foundation inscription of Naram-Sin found during these excavations.[163] Like Sargon, Nabonidus installed his daughter as an *ēntu* priestess in Ur.[164] It would appear that not only was Sargon remembered, but that Nabonidus had revived the memory of the dynasty of Akkad in order to lend legitimacy to his own. Moreover, the public nature of these gestures implies that the imitation of Sargon had purchase outside of a scholarly audience.

Building on such observations, Kuhrt contested the idea of an organic, non-official origin, noting that the cuneiform tradition itself had (at least) two currents, i.e., the *Birth* and *Sumerian* legends, and that the *Birth Legend*

157 Ibid., 392–393. For interactions between oral and written literatures more generally see Finnegan 1970, *passim*. For the serious problems inherent in the idea of a stable cuneiform "canon", see Robson 2011, 571–2.

158 Fragment C of the *Birth Legend*, as described by Lewis 1980, 18–21.

159 Beaulieu 1989, 141–143.

160 Inscription 16 according to Beaulieu's classification, see ibid., 34–35. An English translation of the relevant part of this text can be found at Foster 2016, 271–272.

161 Nabonidus' restoration of Sargon's statue is recorded in a sympathetic chronicle-like text from his reign, see Lambert 1968/9, 7 (Ob. III. 20 – Rev. IV. 32.).

162 Kennedy 1969.

163 Hallo 2000, 312 (2.123A ii.47–iii.7. and iii.8–10).

164 *Cf.* Lambert (1968/9), Ob. III. 14–16 & Frayne 1993, 35 (E2.1.1.16). On this, by Nabonidus' time, extremely ancient tradition, see Weadock 1975, 101–105.

especially would have been very useful to the dynasty.[165] Accepting the likelihood that the *Birth Legend* was composed in the service of Sargon II, Kuhrt seems to have come close to theorising that Cyrus, or his followers, propagated a similarly conscious, top-down imitation of Sargon. The upshot is that Herodotus does actually reflect, at however many removes, a story recycled by Cyrus' house while the much older tradition of courtly confrontation (represented by the *Sumerian Legend*) had become by this time, a "popular, moralising tale".[166] Oral and literate distinctions were, in this view, less important than the functions fulfilled by the different narratives, both of which were in any case composed of flexible "popular" motifs.[167] Unfortunately, both the claims made in Achaemenid epigraphy, and the version of events "known" to Ctesias, present serious problems for this theory.

As we have already seen, aside from Herodotus' account, there is no indication that an exposure narrative was adopted even quasi-officially.[168] If any version of a Sargon legend was officially adopted nothing like it is ever referenced in extant Achaemenid inscriptions where legitimacy is strongly predicated on a clear descent from royal ancestors. Adoption of any form of the legends known to us would have required two antagonistic streams of legitimisation to be officially propagated at the same time. Similarly, if the *Birth Legend* were used in such a way the presence of something much more like the *Sumerian Legend* in Ctesias is difficult to explain. Had any kind of official conflation of the origins of Cyrus with something like the *Birth Legend* occurred we might expect Ctesias to have known of it. As he presents a version of events that excludes the possibility of any kind of exposure, yet one that does appear to have been drawn from Mesopotamian precedent, we can only assume that he had not.

It is possible that Ctesias presented another current narrative simply as a challenge to Herodotus. It is possible that the arrangement of components seen in the *Sumerian Legend*, being (as far as we can tell) much older than those of the *Birth Legend* were more established in Babylonia and had simply overwhelmed the resuscitated younger tradition in the century or so after Cyrus' death.[169] It is also possible that one of the traditional criticisms of Ctesias is actually correct; he really did gather his information from people

165 Kuhrt 2003, 352–356.

166 Kuhrt 2003, 356.

167 Ibid.

168 For what it is worth, Herodotus also claims to have tried to distance himself from the more egregious dynastic stories. See page 43 note 72 above.

169 On the other hand, Foster conjectures that, based on the small number of extant copies, the Sumerian Legend may not have been as popular as other literature dealing with Akkad, Foster 2016, 265.

well outside of the literate class and based some of his work on the informal history current in the period. Another possibility is suggested by Ctesias' similarities to the *Sumerian Legend*: Cyrus was identified with Sargon in Babylon but was either unable to control or uninterested in controlling the narrative, resulting in the spread of concurrent, contradictory, stories descending from the various streams of Sargonic stock.

Such a position finds support in what we know of Cyrus' propaganda efforts in the city. It seems likely that the transposition of Sargonic motif to Cyrus came about as a result of an *ad hoc* propaganda strategy designed for a particular audience at a specific time. The post-conquest phase of Cyrus' rule saw him make, or at least claim to make, a concerted effort to appear a properly *Babylonian* king. Though he damned his predecessor, Cyrus too was at pains to demonstrate his appreciation of the city's past and performed similar acts of conspicuously civic and antiquarian piety.[170] Sargon, whose memory Nabonidus seems to have tried to appropriate, may well have been drawn into Cyrus' program. It is not even necessary to imagine that any special effort was expended to do so; Cyrus may have done no more than pay the ancient king due respect in a public fashion, letting the audience draw whatever conclusions they may.[171] A conflation of the two kings in the public imagination would have been natural and would certainly have drawn no *direct* refutation from the new order. The association was neither insulting nor, necessarily, fatally contradictory.

Thus a variety of public traditions contradicting official legitimising ideologies could have coexisted with them. If Ctesias drew his report from information he received in Babylon, his informant may have been a local who knew a version of Cyrus' life that was the uncontrolled result of a legitimising gesture to the Babylonian past performed almost two centuries before. While there is a strong likelihood that the basis for any such identification was not entirely organic, considering the Persian kings' use of multi-lingual appeals to known bloodlines, it is probably wrong to characterise it as formal imperial tradition, even inside Babylonia.[172] Cyrus' brilliant career offered

170 So it would seem from the document known as the *Verse Account of Nabonidus*, which despite its name is extremely hostile to that king. This text has a rather sinister aspect as the ascendant Cyrus subjects Nabonidus' works to a *damnatio memoriae*. See Pritchard 1969, 315 (VI).

171 Kuhrt noted that the offerings made to Sargon's statue into the reign of Cambyses would have required royal permission, see Kuhrt 2003, 356.

172 Darius' multilingual Behistun inscription, in which he very firmly states his royal descent (connecting his patrilineal line back to Teispes, the man Cyrus also claimed as his ancestor), was copied into various languages and circulated across the empire. *Cf.* translations

to the Akkadian-speaking public heroic interpretations that were closed to Nabonidus, whom, perhaps, they knew *too* well. The suggestion in cuneiform sources that Cyrus might have held a subordinate position under Astyages and defeated him through some kind of subterfuge may have offered parallels to the *Sumerian Legend*'s description of the relationship between Sargon and Urzababa, strengthening the comparison.[173] With his staggering record of military success, and, one assumes, a charisma distinctly lacking in his predecessor, Cyrus simply made a far better Sargon than Nabonidus ever would.[174]

Ctesias' claim to have seen Persian records can be completely disregarded. Not only is the existence of such records dubious, but the statement that one has extracted one's information from an old book is a pervasive literary strategy that usually signals no such thing.[175] It is suggested here that a watered-down version of Kuhrt's argument is a very plausible explanation for the shape of the extant evidence. The association of Cyrus with Sargon probably arose as part of an imperial pose; it was the unintentional result of the collision of two sets of performative, antiquarian, rhetoric; the first used by an Akkadian speaking king attempting to shore up his support, the second adopted by a foreign king for the consumption of an audience expecting deference to its customs. It was almost certainly not, however, an "official" production.

### 4.3 *Cyrus as Sargon*

Persian Babylonia provides the most plausible link between two sets of historicising legendary narratives that share a suggestive amount of detail. The origins of Cyrus reported by extant Greek authors probably reflect, at varying degrees, long-established narrative patterns of the literatures and oral traditions of Mesopotamia. Of these Ctesias is likely to offer the version most representative of the earlier stream of tradition and the least altered for Greek tastes. The conflation was probably not an intentional one emanating from the palace, but something triggered by perceived similarity of circumstance and a recent foregrounding of Sargon's memory in Babylonian politics. The result was a spread of similar traditions, a few of which reach us by way of Greek literature. The features shared by works are the result of deeply ingrained habits

in Lecoq 1997, 187, 212 (DB. 2–3 & 70); Curtis 2013, 42 (Line. 21). Babylonian copies of Darius' inscription have been found, see Schmitt 2013 (with references).

173 See page 60 notes 157–162 above.

174 Kuhrt 2003, 355–356.

175 Claiming a source in ancient books or reliable informants is a strategy seen in Greek novel, Mediaeval European history and Persian historical epic alike, see Davis 1996, 48–50 and Hansen 2003, *passim*.

of representing novel monarchy whose survival was due, in no small part, to their circulation in text.

In general, the historiography of Mesopotamian societies was not strongly invested in specific chains of causation and result. It leant instead rather more towards the exemplary. The general character of Achaemenid inscriptions suggests that the Persians inherited a similarly vertical and typological vision of the past.[176] In both cultures, the actions of the powerful tended to be seen not as discrete events in limited contexts but echoes and examples in their turn. This characterisation of past events as paradigmatic archetypes resembles the effect seen in non-literate historical traditions wherein only a distant past and the present are real in any meaningful sense.[177] In this context, imagining hard social, or even ethnic, distinctions between written and oral historical modes may not be especially productive. When all of history is understood as instructive, distinctions between instances and individuals begin to blur. It is only with an enormous effort, or a truly remarkable event, that a new lesson may be added to the curriculum.

The subject of an enormously long-lived literature, Sargon's life and deeds remained just such a reference point centuries after the fall of his own state. Such was the power of Sargon as a model king and the cumulative effect of centuries of legend making, that more than a millennium and a half after his death he was still a viable model for Nabonidus to display for the benefit of a hostile audience.[178] In this atmosphere and in a historical mindset in which the power of example was paramount, Cyrus' post-conquest actions and poses collapsed the temporal distance between the two men. Simply by going through the expected motions, Cyrus could easily have triggered an association with Sargon that Nabonidus had inadvertently prepared for him, an association with proven legitimising power and literary potential.

## 5 Cyrus as Model King

It was through his actions that Cyrus accidentally unlocked a pair of origin stories lodged deeply in the broader cultural system of the Akkadian and Sumerian languages. In Babylonian eyes Cyrus was an all-conquering foreigner

176 Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1999, 99–100, 110. An exception is made for Darius' inscription at Behistun which at times appears to verge into record.

177 Vansina 1985, 168–173.

178 In his later reign, Nabonidus appears to have overtly promoted the moon god Sin to the head of the Babylonian pantheon at the expense of Marduk. This probably made him extremely unpopular in Babylon itself, see Beaulieu 1989, 62–65.

from a small kingdom whose antecedents were perhaps somewhat obscure; he was, however, known or believed to have deposed his overlord. Thus, Cyrus was open to interpretation according to either typology of Sargonic origins and was eventually accorded both. Neither, of course, reflected the position of Cyrus and his house, but if they ever heard the comparison made, it would have cost them nothing to play along, even while loudly proclaiming their descent. The reemergence of each sequence represents a revitalisation of latent expectations triggered by a perceived parallel in recent events, the recurrence of ancient plots maintained and strengthened by historicising literature, as frames for the description of reality.

The reasoning for this particular transference appears to have been purely situational. Though the sequences themselves are allied with textual traditions of a suspiciously apologetic flavour, and it will be argued, would be used so again, they do not seem to have developed as such here. Rather the transference of Sargonic narratives to Cyrus probably occurred informally, within a subject group of his empire. Be this as it may, the association of each sequence with Cyrus renewed these biographic narratives and generated new literatures in turn. It will be contended below that the effects of this revitalisation live on in much later Greek and Persian historiographies of superficially similar situations ending with the ascent of a novel monarchy. The literary contexts of these traditions are far better understood than those of their Mesopotamian ancestors, and, together, they offer a much more detailed picture of the origins and uses of each sequence as a representation of history.

A relationship, based on narrative similarities, between the legendary biography of the Sasanian king Ardashir I, represented in the texts of the so-called *Kārnāmag* tradition, and the Cyrus legends seen in Greek has been suggested several times before. Yet the vector for any such transmission remains, in the total absence of written evidence, extremely vague. Moreover the problem touches on a fundamental and, given the seeming disappearance of the Achaemenids from Sasanian record, confounding set of issues in Sasanian studies. Certain episodes in the *Kārnāmag* contain enough parallels to the Greek material to allow the assumption that forms of Cyrus' origin narratives did indeed find their way into Persian-speaking contexts. The precise means by which they did so, however, are never likely to be known. Regardless, some granular sense of the social and political function of each sequence *as history* may be teased out by a comparison of the *Kārnāmag* traditions to other extant representations of Sasanian origins.

The popularity of the Greek Cyrus may be suspected of having a more direct hand in the appearance of both sequences in representations of Constantine's early life throughout the Greek and Latin historical tradition culminating in

the compiled biographies seen in the Byzantine hagiographical tradition from the ninth century. Because a relatively large amount of material about Constantine survives it is possible to trace his association with each sequence with considerably more precision than in the other cases considered here. It will be seen how the emperor's early life was remade typologically in a two-fold process. In the first instance, recent history was wilfully bent, beginning with certain reinterpretations of events seen in the earliest layers of the rhetoric and historiography surrounding Constantine. Some time later a fantastic version of Constantine's conception was created, one possibly spurred by the existence of a hostile polemic hingeing on a half-remembered detail of his mother's occupation. Carried in the Byzantine historical and hagiographic traditions, these sequences would later emerge as the earliest sections of later composite hagiographies. The antecedents of Constantine's origins as reported in these hagiographies, display a marked similarity with what may be inferred about those used in the *Kārnāmag*.

In Iranian and Roman Late Antiquity we can see both Sequence One and Sequence Two return to their ancient apologetic roots. Their availability to the authors of the later composites was the result of earlier historicising counter-polemical stances that had worked their way into the historical discourse of each society. This parallel evolution of source material is merely the most obvious of a number of cognates that can be perceived in the Iranian and Byzantine traditions. Both are fundamentally communal texts concerned with proffering an image of history in accordance with a developed political and religious position in some way contingent on proving the acceptability of actions of their subject. Both share a compiled-biographical structure, and both may have been created to serve a similar commemorative function. In a larger sense, the creation of these biographies reveals much about the inherent symbolism of each sequence as historical representation. In particular the processes leading up to the emergence of the composites reveals how the semantic weight of either sequence shifts over time. First employed to deflect or forestall specific and pressing critique, they were much later recognised as fit material for communal histories of a purely laudatory nature.

CHAPTER 3

# Ardashir

## 1 Introduction

Slightly more than seven hundred years after Cyrus' death, Ardashir, the scion of a family of minor nobility from the old Achaemenid homeland of Fars, would recreate Cyrus' achievement in rendering much of Mesopotamia part of a vast empire subject to a Persian-speaking dynasty. Ardashir's ascent (*c.*224 CE) was a watershed in the cultural history of the region. Under the rule of Ardashir's descendants, the Sasanian dynasty, a specific religious and ideological posture was developed, codifying a group of cultural assertions that would outlast the state itself. The vision of history confected under the Sasanians portrayed the dynasty as the latest iteration of an eternal line of world-kings through the appropriation of the heroic figures of the pan-Iranian epic complex, alongside the (often interlinked) religious legends of the Avestic tradition, and the dynastic legends of the Arsakid era aristocracy.[1] Key to this conception was the self-identification, initiated by Ardashir himself, of the Sasanian Empire with the concept of *Ērān*, the setting of much of this imagined history and the homeland of its heroes.[2]

It is one of the many ironies of Sasanian studies that the man ultimately responsible for this intense interest in building *a* past remains something of a cipher. The factors that drove (or allowed) Ardashir to suddenly overthrow nearly five hundred years of Arsakid rule, the role of Ardashir's own understanding of religion and history in his decision to do so, even his precise descent, are often unclear. Of course, no historical figure is a real, three-dimensional, person: rather, each is the retrospective representation of a real person, a pastiche of texts and habit. Ardashir is, however, often a particularly sketchy representation, an amalgam of contradictory images. By the final centuries of his dynasty, Ardashir had fallen deeply into exalted stereotype: in the *andarz* or wisdom literature of the later empire he had become a somewhat faceless model king

1 On the disparate sources of the Iranian historical tradition, see Nöldeke 1979, 9–31, Boyce 1968, 57–58, Yarshater 1983, 367–370 and Shahbazi 1990, 209–213.

2 The history propagated by the dynasty incorporated a great deal of preexisting religious and epic material, see Boyce 1954, 49 *f.*; Gnoli 1989, 132 *f.* The first known use of *Ērān* as a political concept appears on Ardashir's coinage in the early stages of his conquest of the Arsakid state, see Alram 1999, 18–19.

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expounding an idealised version of "his" empire's ideological conclusions.[3] Yet, at the heart of Ardashir's ascent, and thus the empire of his descendants, there lay an inescapable act of usurpation and social climbing, accompanied by a great deal of violence against the established aristocratic order.

Sasanian dynastic ideology came to be organised by a claim of eternal kingship buttressed by reference to Iranian religious epic. This edifice rested on a particular interpretation of the meaning of Ardashir's ascent. This narrative was vulnerable to dispute and was weakest at the point at which the dynasty emerged from obscurity.[4] In this context it is most revealing that a number of differing accounts of the foundation and early years of Ardashir's empire are extant and that some of them make use of origins narratives very similar to those seen in the Greek "biographies" of Cyrus. As in the case of Cyrus, the existence of contradictory stories grants these stereotypical accounts particular interest.

### 1.1 *Competing Traditions*

The first account to be considered is that given in the *History of the Prophets and Kings* of Ṭabarī (839–923 CE). The story told by Ṭabarī and later historians presenting a similar account corresponds best to the very limited number of extant contemporary witnesses to Ardashir's early career.[5] Ṭabarī's account is doubly remarkable as its concessions to Late-Sasanian mythic self-image are minimal and tepid. Ṭabarī's sources for this section are opaque but his account holds out the tantalising possibility of the survival of an extremely early, or even *hostile*, Iranian historiography throughout the Sasanian period.

The second account is a composite drawn from a number of similar Perso-Arabic sources. It is contended that this radically streamlined Ardashir reflects a version of events that was current in the late Sasanian period and

3 On Middle Persian wisdom literature in general see Boyce 1968, 51–55 and 60–61, on the traces of such literature attributed to Ardashir see Tafazoli 2010/2011, 215–219. On the potential of Ardashir as a model king in later Sasanian times see Daryaee 2003.

4 A possible example of a posthumous attack on Ardashir is the hypothesised reproduction of an originally Christian story that Ardashir had been converted to Christianity via the resurrection of his horse in a later work of anti-Sasanian propaganda. See Payne 2016, 189; Schiling 2008. It should be noted, however, that a very similar story, linked to Zoroaster's conversion of Gushtasp, is mentioned in the seventh book of the *Dēnkard* (VII.4.70), a tenth-century Pahlavi text, and is further developed in the much later *Zardoštnāmeh*, a thirteenth-century biography of Zoroaster composed in New Persian. Both episodes can be found in Amuzgar and Taffazoli 2001–2002, 100–101, 182–183. A French translation of and commentary on the relevant section of the *Dēnkard* can be found in Molé 1993, 55, 186.

5 Later authors offering an account similar to that of Ṭabarī are addressed and considered in Widengren 1971.

which *may* have been carried in the chronicle tradition usually referred to as the *xwadāy nāmag*. No example of this work is extant but attestations and structural commonalities in later Perso-Arabic sources all but confirm that some kind of Middle Persian chronicle did exist: its nature and date have, however, been debated for some time. Because we have no primary documentation it is impossible to state anything with certainty about the historiography of the later Sasanian period, yet commonalities in later historical works allow us to make certain inferences. Any such chronicle was certainly composed late in the dynasty's life, it was, if not official, broadly pro-Sasanian; at the very least it appears to have taken the dynasty's mythic-historical claims as given.[6] The composite offered below attempts to reconstruct an account of the rise of Ardashir that was worked into Perso-Arabic historiography at a very early point. It is a version of events that, it would seem, was both acceptable and widely circulated in the late Sasanian era. The gap between this Ardashir and that described by Ṭabarī bears witness to the fraught nature of these events in the historical discourse of the Sasanian state. It also hints at considerable variation in the historical beliefs current in the empire and a change in the "official" line over time.

It is in this growing disjuncture between memories of the seizure of power and the legitimising posture that arose in tandem with this act that we see each sequence reemerge. Legendary stories recounting the origins of Ardashir, his son Shapur I and grandson Ormazd I first appear in the sixth century and stretch into the historical literature of the Islamic period. A very similar, sequential narrative of the early years of the Sasanian dynasty making use of a number of these stories is extant in two texts: the early eleventh-century New Persian epic *Šāhnāmeh* of Ferdowsi and a Middle Persian tract of obscure origin copied in India in the early fourteenth century, the *Kārnāmag-ī Ardāšir-ī Pābagān* (KNA). The similarities between these texts suggest that they descend from a common ancestor, a hypothetical Middle Persian *Kārnāmag-ī Ardāšir-ī Pābagān*.

The narratives seen in the *Šāhnāmeh* and KNA ought to be reconsidered as reflections of such a work with an emphasis on their use(s) of Sequence One and Two. In this way one may say some *general* things (suitably qualified) about the shape of this hypothetical text by reference to its surviving descendants and a number of other texts that appear to have made selective or partial use of the story they tell. Due to the general paucity of Middle Persian material, modern scholarship has tended not to speculate on the antecedents of KNA or its internal development in anything but the most general way. This

6 Shahbazi 1990, 213–215. Huyse 2008, 151–152, Hämeen-Anttila 2018, 226.

understandable reluctance to extrapolate too much from a single text and a lack of transitional or related texts sometimes leads to an implicit conflation of KNA with the underlying tradition that produced it. This has generated a certain ambiguity in terms and titles that must be resolved before any study of the background and nature of this material can be attempted. Henceforth, the following terms are used in this manner:

– *Kārnāmag*: a general term for the long narrative of Ardashir and his immediate descendants given in KNA and the relevant section of the *Šāhnāmeh*.
– hKNA: the hypothetical source text that is the shared ancestor of KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh's* account of the early life of Ardashir.
– KNA: the extant Middle Persian text.

Comparative and internal data drawn from KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh* suggests that hKNA was a collection of earlier, discrete pieces; a collection composed with intent and containing components with predictable behaviours. The origin sequences seen in the *Kārnāmag* were initially created *ad hoc* to obfuscate or contradict a far less appealing set of memories. The emergence of these sequences demonstrates the need for specific kinds of counter polemic and points to the existence of conflict over the meaning of the empire's foundation; specifically, to attacks on the dynasty's lineage and legitimacy. Over time, ideological and social trends encouraged by Ardashir's dynasty would see these counter-polemics given new readings. By the empire's end, its fusion of imperial politics and a religiously inflected historical imaginary had secured it a providential role in the imagined history of a religious community. At some later point, members of this community produced hKNA, a biographical text that cast imperial foundation as a remarkable episode in communal history. In the creation of this text, the ostentatiously divine themes and regal associations of the old dynastic arguments were extremely useful.

Though it is possible to theorise about the use of each set of sequences, even to offer a broad chronology of their emergence, very little can be said for certain of the specific means by which they were introduced and circulated. In attempting to address this problem, the introduction of a heuristic from outside of the Sasanian literary-historical tradition may be helpful. Viewing the *Kārnāmag* as a tradition built out of disparate, originally counter-polemical material collected to propagate a communal historical narrative of state foundation, allows a broad, but often very useful, parallel to be found in one specific hagiographic tradition: a group of legendary hagiographies of Constantine the Great emerging in the ninth century. These can be shown to contain a number of structural, narrative and contextual parallels with the *Kārnāmag*. These too are composite historicising texts presenting a foundational political figure making use of the same pair of narrative stereotypes to describe his origins.

Moreover, unlike those of the *Kārnāmag*, the origin narratives used in these Byzantine traditions have left us a relatively full archaeology of their origins and descent. A consideration of the development of these narratives, particularly their early and deep entanglement with rhetoric and historiography, offers possibilities for a better understanding of their Persian analogues.

## 2 Ṭabarī

Ṭabarī's *History of the Prophets and Kings* offers what may be the most credible extant version of Ardashir's rise.[7] His account of the beginnings of the Sasanian dynasty presents a relatively large amount of very plausible detail and thus tends to play an important role in modern reconstructions of the Sasanian rise to power.[8] Probably because it is both implicitly negative *and* (as we shall see) supported by contemporary evidence, it is easy to assume Ṭabarī's to be a relatively factual version of events. Yet, this account is not as straightforward as it first appears. Though he is now best known as a historian, Ṭabarī was primarily a jurist and this legal background brought with it a certain approach to sources. As an expert in the interpretation of Islamic law, Ṭabarī was an impressive researcher well used to sifting information and judging its relative worth.[9] He also had access to many texts long since lost to us. Unfortunately, in this section Ṭabarī was far less precise than he could have been.

Writing history in a legalist style, Ṭabarī did not generally attempt a synthesis of his materials. Yet he only rarely and very unsystematically names any sources in his account of Sasanian origins.[10] This makes it difficult to determine where specifically Ṭabarī found this information, or indeed, even where the seams in this account *are*. Ṭabarī's report appears to be a composite that mixes some Sasanian claims (such as a Kayanid genealogy and the attribution of a unifying, restorative impulse to Ardashir's actions) with a slab of very old, and unusually plausible, data, casting serious doubt on these claims. His depiction of the revolt of the Sasanian clan and their internal bickering leads one to concur with the opinion of Ehsan Yarshater that Ṭabarī had access to sources

7 Ṭabarī, 2–20. The translation used here is Bosworth 1999.

8 For example, Christensen 1971, 85–88; Widengren 1971, 714–717; Daryaee 2010.

9 On Ṭabarī's method and influence see Robinson 2003, 35–36.

10 On the importance of the *isnād* or transmission chains in Ṭabarī's style of Islamic historiography, see, ibid., 84, *f.*

at odds with the dynasty's fully developed ideology.[11] Despite nods to the Sasanian self-portrayal as restorers of ancient monarchy, Ṭabarī's is not a flattering portrait; his Ardashir is the ruthlessly amoral scion of a social-climbing family and a probable fratricide to boot. It is the presence of this data that makes Ṭabarī's history a key text in the problem of Sasanian origins.

According to Ṭabarī, Ardashir was the son of Pabag who was the son of Sasan.[12] Ṭabarī indicates knowledge of several genealogies for Sasan but the key linkage in all of them is to Dara, a member of the mythical Kayanid dynasty destroyed by Alexander. This was a key aspect of Sasanian claims and a form of it is present in nearly all extant versions of Ardashir's genealogy. Yet here this is rather undercut by a description of Sasan that makes him a member of the petty nobility of Fars.[13] Ṭabarī tells us that Sasan was the "custodian" of the shrine of Anahita in Istakhr; this allows the possibility that the earliest Sasanians had some kind of quasi-priestly standing but this is quite conjectural.[14] Whatever his family's exact position was, it is made clear that Pabag himself was subservient to Gozchir, the king of Istakhr. In his teens, Ardashir was fostered to another subordinate of his father's overlord and assumed his foster-father's position on his death. Receiving visions of a great destiny, Ardashir rebels, inciting his father to overthrow Gozchir.

At this point a suggestive contradiction creeps into the narrative, hinting that it was remembered somewhere that it was actually Pabag, not Ardashir, who initiated the revolt. Pabag writes to Ardawan, presenting the revolt as a *fait accompli*. He seeks both its recognition and the transference of Gozchir's crown to his *other* son Shapur. Ardawan ignores the letter and Pabag dies. Ṭabarī states that Shapur took his father's place as king of Istakhr.[15] When Ardashir does not recognise his brother's authority Shapur marshals his army.

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11 "Read carefully, it depicts Papag as an ambitious ingrate, and Ardashīr as a usurper in his own house. It stands in sharp contrast to the romanticized and highly favourable account of the *Kārnāmag*." Yarshater 1983, 476–477.

12 Because of conflicting reports in the sources, it is not at all clear whether Sasan was Ardashir's father, Pabag's father or an ancestor to both, see Frye ibid., 116–117; Shaki 1990 and below.

13 It is worth noting that Balʿamī, who adapted Ṭabarī's work into Persian later in the tenth century, elaborated on Sasan's rank; *malek nabud valikan ān hameh deyeh hā va rustā rā mehtarī va savarī kardī.* ("He was not a king, but the chief and leader over a group of villages"). This is stated before Sasan's link with the fire temple at Istakhr, *cf.* Balʿamī, 875 and Ṭabarī, 814, 4.

14 Ṭabarī, 4. In another deviation from Ṭabarī, Balʿamī states that Pabag inherited the custodianship of the temple after Sasan's death, see Balʿamī, 876. See also Daryaee 2010, 244–245 and *passim*.

15 Balʿamī implies that Pabag *preferred* Shapur to Ardashir, Balʿamī, 877–878.

On his way to deal with his recalcitrant brother, Shapur is accidentally, though conveniently, killed by a falling building.[16] Ardashir returns to Istakhr where his other brothers (one imagines them nervously inspecting the roof) assemble to proclaim him king. Ardashir's continued killing of local kings finally draws Ardawan's attention. An insulting exchange of letters results in a final confrontation in which Ardawan is killed, and Ardashir assumes his crown.

As stated above, Ṭabarī's sources for these family intrigues are not clear but amongst the vagaries are two points of intense interest. First, Ṭabarī mentions the ninth-century writer Hišām al-Kalbī as a source for Gozchir's name.[17] Al-Kalbi was, among other things, a genealogist with an unusual interest in non-Islamic information but a somewhat dubious reputation in Muslim scholarship.[18] He may well be suspected as the source for Ṭabarī's earlier claim that Gozchir's family was linked to that of Sasan by marriage.[19] Whoever stands behind these details, they are particularly interesting in light of the fact that in later sources Ardashir's family tends to disappear from "Ardashir's" revolt. This scrap of genealogical data linking Sasan and Gozchir also hints at the survival of independent genealogies throughout the Sasanian period. Such records, fabricated or not, would come to sit uncomfortably in the later state ideology.[20]

Second, as is well known, Ṭabarī's report has tangible supporting evidence in contemporary epigraphy and numismatics. In the opening of his famous trilingual inscription at *Naqš-ī Rostām* (ŠKZ), Ardashir's son Shapur I gives his genealogy as follows:

> I, the Mazda worshipping *bay* [*bay/θεός*] Shapur, King of Kings of *Ērān* and not-*Ērān*, whose *čihr* is of the gods [*ἐκ γένους θεῶν*], son of the Mazda worshipping *bay* Ardashir, king of kings of Iran, whose *čihr* is of the gods, grandson of king Pabag, am the lord of *Ērān*.[21]

16 Ṭabarī, 8. According to Balʿamī, Shapur was undone by a rebellion among his brothers who preferred Ardashir, see Balʿamī, 878. Ṭabarī tells of a plot of Pabag's sons against Ardashir after Shapur had been removed, see Ṭabarī, 9 and Balʿamī, 879.

17 Ṭabarī, 5.

18 Khalidi 1994, 50–54.

19 If these details were completely fabricated, it is unlikely to have been at the hands of al-Kalbī as Ṭabarī mentions "others" who report similar information, see Ṭabarī, 6.

20 At Widengren 1971, 525, the existence of non-compliant genealogies is implied.

21 ŠKZ §1, the Middle Persian section is largely effaced and reconstructed from the parallel Parthian and Greek. Determining the precise meanings of *bay* and *čihr* is a problem that a comparison of these terms with their Greek equivalents does very little to solve; the formula does not arise from Greek and the concepts expressed would seem to be only clumsily rendered in that language, see Sundermann 1988. *Bay* derives from Old Persian *baga* meaning "god" and Daryaee has argued that this is to be understood in

The progression of titles in the space of two generations from *šāh* to *šāhānšāh* conforms to Ṭabarī's version of events. An even more telling detail arrives later in the same inscription when Shapur lists family members and officials, living and dead, for whose souls he has provided offerings. Here a little more genealogical data is given.

> … for that of *xwadāy* [*κύριος*] Sasan, *šāh* [*βασιλεύς*] Pabag, *šāh* [*βασιλεύς*] Shapur the son of Pabag, *šāhānšāh* [*βασιλεύς βασιλέων*] Ardashir …[22]

Undefined in the inscription and variable in the historical tradition, it is unclear what Sasan's relationship to Ardashir was. His title, *xwadāy*, that is, lord in a very general sense but not *specifically* king, would appear to fit Ṭabarī's description of a local magnate.[23] What is far more interesting is that Ṭabarī's source knew of the existence of Ardashir's brother Shapur, a figure who tends to go missing in other representations of this moment. The patronymic title of the elder Shapur given in ŠKZ is reflected on his few extant coins where he styles himself as *šāh* and *pus bay Pābag* – king / son of the *bay* Pabag.[24] Another possible reference to Shapur son of Pabag might be found in Shapur I's son

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the Hellenistic sense of a divinised king, see Daryaee 2008, 62 *f*. Panaino and Soudavar, reflecting Sundermann's argument that the Middle Persian terms contain culturally specific concepts that were meaningless in a Greek context, have suggested that the king was understood as a *reflection* of the gods. The argument is made from the symmetry of Sasanian investiture reliefs, which, it is argued, show the king "mirrored" in a god and a linguistic argument that the Middle Persian *kē čihr az yazdān*, (the Greek version of which reads *ἐκ γένους θεῶν*), ought to be understood to mean "whose *image* is of the Gods", "not *of the race* of the Gods", *čihr* meaning both image and origin, semen or seed in Middle Persian and cognate with Modern Persian *čehreh*, one of several words meaning face or image, see Panaino 2003, 278–281 and Soudavar 2003, 41 *f*. These positions recall the argument of L'Orange who, though he addressed much later Sasanian symbolism in art, also saw the king taking on the shape of a god, L'Orange 1953, 42–3. If one accepts the meaning "image" for *čihr*, there is still the problem, as Daryaee points out, of the use of the title *bay*, rendered in the Greek version of ŠKZ as *θεός* (the Parthian logogram reads ALHA) and used in early Sasanian coinage. This seems to indicate that a stronger sense of the king's divinity was indeed intended. Panaino discusses *bay* in detail, admitting that it was likely a Hellenistic import but suggesting that it possessed a two-fold meaning, a divine quality applicable to both gods and kings (in their role as upholders of the proper order), but quite separate from the title *yazd* which certainly indicates a god and was not used of human beings, see Panaino 2003, 274–278, 281–3.

22 ŠKZ §36.

23 On the evolution of and range of meanings expressed by *xwadāy* see Shayegan 2011.

24 Based on three coins of Shapur son of Pabag held by the British Museum, listed in the catalog as 1845,EIC.35, 1894,0506.112 and 1935,0219.2. The use of the ambiguously divine *bay* was an innovation in the coinage of Fars/Persis, see Alram 1999, 68, 71 pl. 8.

Narseh's (r. 293–302) inscription at Paikuli in which he presented himself as the choice of the community of the realm, though this is far from certain.[25]

If Ṭabarī's presentation of context is in any way accurate, the origin of the Sasanian dynasty might be reconstructed as a dispute between two branches of the ruling family of Istakhr capped by an intra-clan squabble in which Ardashir asserted his authority over the rest of his family. It is tempting to speculate that Pabag may have intended only a local kingship within the Parthian system, but this can only be conjecture. On the other hand, the elder Shapur's presence in the younger's inscription suggests much about what was permissible in the earliest layer of Sasanian historical memory: clearly the version of events Shapur I was comfortable with included his uncle, and in this sense had more in common with Ṭabarī than some later, and much less ambiguous, accounts of his father's rise to power.

As unsatisfying and as problematic as it is, the account of Ṭabarī, and those who followed him, offers the most detailed and plausible version of Ardashir's origins and the circumstances of his rise that we have.[26] Moreover, regardless of whether or not his account is accurate in every particular, Ṭabarī's knowledge of obscure details missing in other branches of historiography provides evidence of the survival of a detailed, and possibly very early, account of Sasanian origins into the Muslim era. Used carefully, Ṭabarī offers us a baseline against which the presentation of this period in other traditions may be considered. At the very least it offers *a* version of events that must have existed, and possibly circulated, throughout the Sasanian era. The negative slant and very survival of this account raises some puzzling questions given its ambiguous sources and relative rarity in later texts. It would appear that Ṭabarī either stumbled upon a freak survival of a very early layer of Sasanian historiography, or, just perhaps, found one that was intentionally non-compliant, one curated with the intention of defying the crystallising historical myths of the later Sasanian dynasty. Indeed, a comparison with material drawn from late Sasanian sources suggests that this version of events would eventually fall from favour.

25 Due to the fragmentary nature of the text in both languages, is not clear whether the *Šāpur šāh* (not *Šāpur šāhānšāh*) mentioned at NPi, 59 (§68) (vol. 3.1) is Shapur son of Pabag or Shapur I. See Skjaervø's speculation on this matter in ibid., 105 (vol. 3.2).

26 Translations and considerations of later writers who seem to have followed Ṭabarī can be found in Widengren 1971, 764–772.

## 3 The Late Sasanian Chronicle Tradition?

As has already been stated, much of the Perso-Arabic historiography of the Sasanian era is generally believed to be linked to a Sasanian chronicle tradition that was probably first compiled in the sixth century, the so-called *xwadāy nāmag*, the "Book of Kings".[27] Though such a work clearly existed, no primary work of this tradition is extant and conjectures as to its nature must be made on the basis of attestations in later literature and commonalities in content and structure visible in much later works in New Persian or Arabic. Though it has been claimed that these can give us an "excellent idea of its content", the exact timing, content and shape of the underlying system of texts leading to extant sources is extremely poorly attested.[28] Nethertheless, certain (very) broad conclusions about the reception of late Sasanian historiography in general, if not the *xwadāy nāmag* in particular, may be safely drawn.

In later sources Sasanian history is usually presented as a series of royal biographies of extremely uneven length, often rather similar in structure (particularly where the king is obscure or unremarkable) and integrated into a mass of historicised religious and legendary material, we may therefore posit that some kind of annalistic work does indeed lie behind this arrangement. One may strongly suspect the stabilising influence of such a tradition in the very conventional structure (coronation speech, reign length and list of royal foundations) of many Sasanian reigns seen in the *Šāhnāmeh*, in much of Ṭabarī and other early historians of the Muslim era; even more so because the existence of something of this kind is claimed in a sixth-century source, strangely enough, in Greek. In his *Historiae*, Agathias claims to have had second-hand knowledge of the Sasanian royal archives from his friend Sergius, a Syriac Christian who worked as an interpreter.[29] Agathias proffers a list of Sasanian kings, alongside some minor details that also turn up in much later Perso-Arabic sources and it seems likely that in this case, unlike Ctesias, reference to "Persian books" was something more than a literary device to disguise the author's reliance on hearsay.[30] Sergius may not have known any elaborate, composite work of historical research, but he may well have had the chance to view a chronicle in the sense of "the names of the Sasanian kings in the right chronological order, with the dates of their respective reigns and a reference to some key

27 Useful discussions of this tradition can be found in, Nöldeke 1979, 23–26; Boyce 1968, 57–59; Yarshater 1983, 359–363; Shahbazi 1990; Hämeen-Anttila 2018.

28 Boyce 1968, 58.

29 Agathias. Hist, 2.30.2. On Agathias' use of this material, see Suolahti 1947; Cameron 1969/1970, 112 *f.*

30 Briant 2002, 6.

events. Nothing more and nothing less."[31] We are probably safe to claim that this work (which is likely, but not certain to have been the *xwadāy nāmag*) positioned the Sasanians as the representatives of a dynasty ever present in an invented history going into deep antiquity.[32] We might also agree with Ehsan Yarshater that it was "more or less official" in so far as it presented history in terms set by the dynasty itself.[33]

The details, however, remain problematic. Older scholarship seems to have viewed the *xwadāy nāmag* as not only the major source for the historical narrative of the Sasanian era but as a more or less unitary (and reasonably extensive) text. Conversely, a number of commentators have suggested that it was actually a tradition, perhaps "genre", of texts of different dates and authorship.[34]

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31 Huyse 2008, 149–150. See also Hameen-Antilla 2018, 95.

32 There is some difficulty in determining the correct terminology to describe the nature of this invented historiography. There has been a long-standing habit to refer to the late Sasanian historical complex as "national", as in Nöldeke 1979 and Yarshater 1983. The term nation, however, implies a great deal and is an awkward description to use in relation to any pre-modern society. The theorist of nationalism, Anthony Smith, argued that Sasanian aristocratic culture did in fact come to constitute a self-aware cultural identity that was both aggressively propagated and could be considered a "lateral", that is, class bound "proto-nationalism", see Smith 1986, 76–8; Smith 2004, 184–190, 202–204. Conversely, Daryaee has argued that the Late Sasanian tradition was in fact driven by the gradual establishment of a codified religious system and was, as a result, less "national" than it was "sacred", see Daryaee 1995. An interesting perspective on the question can be found in Frank 2013, 87–89. Here it is suggested that the establishment of a new, multi-ethnic political order (the Carolingian kingdom), and the resultant increase in literacy came to label a number of peoples, hitherto thought of as distinct, into an abstract "Germanic" identity. Driven by the elite's need for political myths and genealogical material, the same forces acted as a sort of filter through which legendary and historical material from *all* of these traditions was selectively welded into a single Pan-Germanic complex. This argument is somewhat similar to that made regarding the integration of Arsakid era material into the Sasanian tradition in Boyce 1954. It follows that, even if the resulting tradition is one of ethnogenesis, dynastic need and the distorting effect of a state that contained multitudes may have been a stronger impetus than any broad sense of ethnic solidarity in the inception of the Sasanian historical tradition. The term "national" is, in any case, far too loaded with modern baggage to be of much use and will be avoided henceforth.

33 Yarshater 1983, 359.

34 Because so much material has been lost, it is difficult to determine just *how* diffuse Sasanian chronicles may have been; the general supposition appears to have been that the various iterations were linked by a shared foundation. For example, while proposing that there must have been different redactions; Shahbazi, in a similar vein to Nöldeke, argued that "there was only ever one core" Shahbazi 1990, 208, 215–218; Nöldeke 1979, 23–25. In his examination of the statements of Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī regarding his now lost sources, Zeev Rubin was more sceptical and argued for a *very* diffuse tradition, the product of multiple redactions of rather disparate sources, yet still noted a unity in the "chronological core", see Rubin 2008, 43–51, 54.

It has recently been argued that the *xwadāy nāmag* was an extremely short work that provided only a bare, chronological outline of the Sasanian era.[35] We cannot go into these arguments in any depth here, what is important to note is that nobody actually doubts that some kind of dynastically flavoured historiography generated in Late Antiquity shaped the representations of the Sasanian era made in the Perso-Arabic historical tradition. Thus, even if the minimalist interpretation of the *xwadāy nāmag* is correct it would, in all probability, remain an important and influential production.

Likewise, as Roger Scott has shown in his consideration of the nearly thousand-year arc of the "genre" in Byzantium, chronicle was an extremely conservative and self-referential format, one in which expected forms and details would survive largely unchanged for centuries. Those writers wishing to argue a point were often forced to reshape known material rather than innovate.[36] Thus even a very diffuse tradition can display very strong commonalities across iterations. If the analogy is admitted, then the strong similarities in the presentation of the Sasanian dynasty found across the Perso-Arabic historical tradition may be explained by a common foundation, an influential and early collection of data that largely stabilised the *form* of successive, often very different, redactions.

Philip Huyse, in consideration of a similar question, has theorised an "official" chronicle tradition, which he dates roughly to the reign of Khosrow I (531–579 CE), representing the merging of some kind of bare, archival tradition with a collection of legendary traditions drawn from the oral historical traditions current at the time.[37] The resulting account, it follows, would be one in which relatively little, quite often historically unreliable, information was clustered around events seen as extraordinary or especially significant. Even if the existence of an expansive and detailed chronicle in the Sasanian period is somewhat arguable, Huyse's observation is an extremely useful heuristic with which to approach later redactions of Sasanian history.

Finally, and importantly, we know very little about the broader environment of secular Middle Persian literature and even less about how any chronicle tradition may have interacted with it. Nor can it be *completely* discounted that any such chronicle was augmented and redacted in the Sasanian period itself. Moreover, the reception of Middle Persian material into the Islamic

35 Hämeen-Anttila 2018.

36 Though addressing Byzantine chronicles, Scott's discussion of the accumulative conservatism of their contents provides a useful way of viewing the rather more hypothetical Sasanian tradition, see Scott 2009.

37 Huyse 2008, 151–152.

period is just as opaque as any other aspect of early Muslim historiography, a problem compounded by the likelihood that the vast majority of writers of this period could only have been familiar with works of this kind via translation into Arabic or early New Persian.[38] We know of a number of no-longer extant translations of the *xwadāy nāmag* into Arabic, most famously that of Ibn al-Moqaffaʿ (d. *c.*757) any of which may have cut or added material.[39] As Zabihollah Safa observed, this tradition was almost certainly accumulative; it should, therefore be kept in mind that opportunities existed for all sorts of material to be moved in and out of the frame provided by any actually "official" Sasanian chronicle.[40]

Here, however, we are only concerned with a single episode in early Sasanian history. Thus, it is not necessary to go too deeply into the intractable problems of lost books, official influence, orality, memory, adulteration and translation across the entirety of post-Sasanian historiography. In this case, similarities in later Perso-Arabic works allow us to tentatively posit a brief narrative of Ardashir's rise that was either carried in the late Sasanian chronicle tradition and/or was very quickly worked into the more expansive works that seem to have relied on it as a chronological and stylistic frame. A version of events that was both acceptable to the ideology of the later dynasty and, thanks to its association with a rather basal source text, very influential.

The most valuable source in this regard is the tenth-century chronographer Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī who claimed that he had access to seven different works bearing titles that might be interpreted as translations of a Sasanian chronicle, or, in some cases, "biographies" of Persian kings.[41] Further, he recorded the unsuccessful attempts of other scholars to harmonise their own collections of translations.[42] His report of their mutual despair has left us a snapshot of just how unclear the tradition was, even a thousand years ago. Yet Ḥamza also bequeathed us a valuable, though short, summary of the contents of some of the works he had seen.[43] With the caveat that we know neither how

38 On the general impenetrability of the earliest layers of Islamic historiography, see Robinson 2003, 18 *f.*

39 On Ibn al-Moqaffaʿ see, Latham 2011. It has been claimed that the anonymous Arabic work known as the *Nihāyat al-Arab* contains material drawn from al-Moqaffaʿ's translation, see Khatibi 1997, 142–145. The disparate nature of Sasanian dynastic history, and the inadequacy of attributing all Islamic era references to a chronicle to the translation of Ibn al-Moqaffaʿ alone is rightly emphasised in Bonner 2015, 46–50.

40 Safa 2011, 85–86.

41 Ḥamza, 1–2. See also Rubin 2008, 35–43.

42 Ḥamza, 1–18.

43 Rubin believes that Ḥamza made his summary from the works of Ibn al-Moqaffaʿ and al-Barmakī, Rubin 2008, 42, see also Hameen-Antilla 2018, 59 *f.*

aggressively Ḥamza summarised his sources nor whether these sources were in fact translations of the same work, his report suggests a great deal about the structure and probable contents of the underlying tradition.

Ḥamza organised his information by reign, but the extent of his information regarding each king is variable; indeed some are so minimal that Ḥamza describes nothing but his portrait.[44] Both this arrangement and the length of each ruler's biography *broadly* lines up with more expansive texts. Since Ḥamza would seem to have more directly consulted the same tradition that ultimately underpins these, we might plausibly apply the bland, stereotypical, reign structure (name, coronation speech, cities built, reigned X years) seen in Ferdowsi's (and sometimes Ṭabarī's) rendition of kings like Narseh or Bahram II back into the "gaps" in Ḥamza's work to get some sense of what he skipped over. Thus, Ḥamza's summary suggests a great deal about the structure of the texts he saw. Importantly, it also gives an account of Ardashir whose echoes can be seen in other works of the Islamic era. We may thus, tentatively retrieve *a* version of Ardashir that can plausibly be considered to have been more or less acceptable during the dynasty's final centuries.

Versions of Ardashir very similar to Ḥamza's can be seen in the roughly contemporaneous work of the Alexandrian Ibn Beṭrīq/Eutychius and also, somewhat, in the twelfth-century history of Fars by the anonymous writer known as Ibn al-Balkhī.[45] Some parallels can be perceived in the *Book of Lengthy Histories* of the historian Dīnavarī (d. 896–903), though this is a difficult and highly synthetic source of which more will be said below.[46] In the broadest

44 For better or worse, Ḥamza also made extensive use of a picture book containing the portraits of Sasanian kings and seems to have described this source when his other texts offered nothing of interest.

45 There is some question as to the nature and length of Ibn Beṭrīq's chronicle. Michael Breydy argued that all save one of the extant manuscripts of this work follow a heavily interpolated Antiochene recension in circulation by the early eleventh century, see Breydy 1985, v–xiv. Should Breydy be correct, the version of Ardashir's life seen in the majority of manuscripts is not the work of Ibn Beṭrīq himself. References to Ibn Beṭrīq refer to the 1987 Italian translation of B. Pirone. This translation follows the majority of manuscripts. Pirone noted Breydy's reservations but also believed that the "interpolation" was itself a valuable document, see Pirone 1985, 8–9. Pirone's position is the correct one to take in this case; interpolated or not, the version of Ardashir presented in this longer work certainly reflects an Iranian source and remains a suitable reference point for reconstructing the sort of Ardashir one would be likely to have seen in late Sasanian material.

46 The only complete translation of Dīnavarī into any modern European language is an unpublished work by M.R. Jackson Bonner who has very kindly allowed me both sight and use of it. All quotations are taken unaltered from his translation and cited according to his pagination. The corresponding pages in Guirgass' 1888 edition, from which the translation was made, are noted in brackets.

outlines, these sources agree with Ṭabarī, yet they offer nothing like as much detail, and present Ardashir's motivations as a unifying impulse with the result that a rather different view of the situation is imparted to the reader. A very rough reconstruction, drawn from all of the above sources, would look something like this:[47]

- Ardashir was the son of Pabag (Dīnavarī, Ḥamza, Ibn Beṭrīq, Ibn al-Balkhī)
- He sought to restore the kingdom destroyed by Alexander. A Kayanid ancestry (through Pabag) is sometimes claimed. (Dīnavarī, Ḥamza, Ibn al-Balkhī).
- He arose in Fars, and became king of Istakhr (perhaps Dīnavarī, Ḥamza, Ibn al-Balkhī).
- He was dismayed by the religious and/or political disunity he saw about him, and sought to reclaim the rightful place of Fars. (Dīnavarī, Ḥamza, perhaps Ibn Beṭrīq).
- He wrote letters demanding the submission of the regional kings. (one letter in Dīnavarī, Ḥamza, Ibn Beṭrīq, Ṭabarī).
- He killed many of the regional kings, a specific number is sometimes given. (Dīnavarī, Ḥamza, Ibn Beṭrīq, Ibn al-Balkhī).
- Having crushed all opposition he reformed the kingdom. This may have included a reassembly of the religious texts "destroyed" by Alexander. (Ḥamza, Ibn Beṭrīq notes that he was considered very just).[48]
- A list of his cities and foundations.

A similar, though somewhat fuller, story can be found in the anonymous work known as the *Nihāyat al-Arab* and its fourteenth-century Persian translation known as the *Tajārab al-Āmam*.[49] The narrative given in these works has points of contact with that of Ṭabarī but puts a notably positive spin on events; notably, Pabag is considered the king of Istakhr. The *Nihāyat's* putative connection to Ibn al-Moqaffa''s translation of the *xwadāy nāmag* adds weight to the idea that the letter-writing reunifier seen here reflects a version of Ardashir associated with late Sasanian historiography.

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47 The relevant references are, Dīnavarī, 282 (44); Ṭabarī, 17; Ḥamza, 30–31; IbnBeṭrīq, 10.1, 3; Fārsnāmeh, 19–20. 60. Ibnal-Balkhī's two entries on Ardashir (particularly the second) seem to mix up a number of different sources and certain claims are unclear. He is included because the general outlines of his account accord with Ḥamza and IbnBeṭrīq.

48 Ardashir's supposed reconstruction of the written religious traditions destroyed by Alexander was known to Maqdisī whose account of Ardashir's rise is otherwise flattering but perfunctory (see Maqdisī, 160) and was present, despite the author's presentation of a surprisingly realistic picture of Ardashir as a rebel against Ardawan, in the later history of Gardīzī, Gardīzī, 21.

49 Nihāyat 177–185, Tajārab 176–181. On these texts see Khatibi (1997). I am extremely grateful to William Bullock-Jenkins for his help with the former text.

The *tendenz* of this portrait aligns with the portrayal of Alexander as a destroyer and consequent characterisation of the Parthian era as a time without a king, a stance that reflects the fully developed form of Sasanian ideology in which the Arsakid dynasty was largely consigned to oblivion.[50] It is telling what these sources do *not* include. While the account of the *Nihāyat* implies some political manouvering in Fars (and records a conspiracy of Ardashir's brothers), these sources generally contain no truly detailed description of local context. There is no trace of Shapur, son of Pabag, in the shorter reports even Ardawan goes unmentioned, rolled up into one of the many regional kings crushed by Ardashir on his way to the throne. While Shapur I offered sacrifices for his eponymous uncle's soul, his remote descendants seem to have either forgotten their inconvenient relation or chosen to ignore him. A distinct separation is therefore visible between this version of events and the version of dynastic origins acceptable in the early third century, insofar as we can infer from a comparison of this reconstruction with ŠKZ and Ṭabarī.

Even allowing for the possible brevity of the foundational source, it has to be asked why, judging from the reconstruction made here, the texts accessed by Ḥamza *et al.* would seem to have offered accounts of the Sasanian dynasty's foundation far less likely than that which Ṭabarī's research managed to build in the tenth century. It is plausible that the "chronicle" Ardashir was simply the result of the idealisation of very minimal data. There may have been relatively little formal Middle Persian historiography addressing this period. Huyse pointed to the perfunctory treatment of many early kings, abundant anachronisms and the sudden explosion of detail from the fifth century onwards seen in sources of the Muslim era and noted how the shape of the data is very similar to the patterns displayed in oral-historical cultures where detailed memory can be expected to stretch back a mere few generations and only the far distant

50 On the Middle Persian Alexander, see Gignoux 2007. The period of Arsakid rule is extremely vague and confused in Perso-Arabic sources. Ferdowsi disposed of the entire Parthian era in fewer than thirty lines, ŠhN 6., 138–9, lines 64–86. That this was a result of deep inadequacies in the Persian source material is demonstrated by the attempts of Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī and Bīrūnī (incorporating Ḥamza's earlier work) to work out chronologies for the various Persian dynasties. Noting from the outset that Persian history is defective in this regard, Ḥamza presents two differing chronologies of the Arsakid era, see Ḥamza, 1, 5–6, 15–16. Bīrūnī, also expressing exasperation at the variance and imprecision of the Persian sources, came somewhat closer to the mark through the use of *Manichaean* texts to fix the interval between Alexander and Ardashir, see Bīrūnī. Chron, 118–122. Whether or not this shortening was a deliberate attempt to downgrade the Arsakids, as argued in Shahbazi 1990, 218–224, or "innocently arrived at" as suggested in Yarshater 1983, 386–387 is very difficult to say.

past and the present are real in any useful sense.[51] Thus, the first generation of chronicles, those that shaped later historical writing, would simply have had no recourse to anything but the barest or most sensational data from earlier times.[52]

It ought to be noted, however, that such historical amnesia is sometimes extremely puzzling. We have already seen how Ṭabarī had access to at least one fairly detailed, and quite negative, account of the dynasty's foundation. We shall see how the presence of a number of legendary narratives may testify to an engagement with these details. Further indications of a selective historical sense, one inclined to the suppression of data, can be perceived in works bearing the stamp of the chronicle tradition. Famously, the dynasty's own inscriptions were not used as a source. To take a particularly egregious example, the late third-century king Narseh (r. 293–302), the son of Shapur I, left a large bilingual inscription at Paikuli offering his excuses for the deposition of his grandnephew Bahram III.[53] Additionally Greek and Latin sources inform us that Narseh fought a not very successful war against Rome. Despite this, *literally nothing* other than formulaic boilerplate (coronation, speech, ruled so many years, built these cities) is reported of his reign in most Perso-Arabic sources. A lack of detailed knowledge (perhaps an attempt to clean up the record?) is most evident, however, in these sources' habit of listing Narseh as Bahram III's uncle or even brother.[54] Even allowing for the fact that inscriptions are not circulating texts, the lack of any reference to them, indeed, the generally very poor state of antiquarian knowledge of the third and fourth century in a tradition so organised by royal biography, is very strange indeed.

It is certainly possible, as Mary Boyce believed, that the sixth-century chroniclers were singularly limited, possibly inept, researchers.[55] Yet the survival of early Sasanian monuments, and the traces of a wider historical Middle Persian literature to be found in later Perso-Arabic sources, admit the possibility that some information was purposefully excluded from the earliest stages of the

51 That is, it displays a "floating gap", see Huyse 2008, 152, and Vansina 1985, 23–24. On the supposed retrojection of sixth-century norms into the mythic past see Shahbazi 1990, 211–213, *contra* Hameen-Antilla 2018, 228–229.

52 A similar argument, that very little specific data about Ardashir was available in the sixth century, is made in Daryaee 2003, 36.

53 This inscription has been edited and translated in Skjaervø 1983.

54 A list of sources (including Jordanes!) claiming an erroneous descent for Narseh can be found at Weber 2012, 157, n. 13. Ibn Baṭrīq, 10.15 should be added tot his list. Weber believes that the confusion arose from the father to son succession of three Bahrams before Narseh, though, interestingly, a Nestorian source provides the correct descent, Weber 2012, 157–158.

55 Boyce 1968, 58–59.

chronicle. The chronicle tradition may have impressed a certain structure on later historiography of the Sasanian state, but we have already seen that it could hardly have been the only version of the past in circulation. We should perhaps imagine the chronicle as a statement of position, an outline of the "true" nature of history as the dynasty saw it during its last two centuries.[56] It coexisted and competed with a number of other productions, some antagonistic, some complimentary, and some outdated. If the reconstruction made above is any indication of the general trend, we might posit that late Sasanian historiography omitted certain details in an effort to move away from the relatively unapologetic account of dynastic origins current in the early third century. This may have occurred as the circumstances of Ardawan's deposition, the existence of Shapur son of Pabag and, perhaps, the memory of the bloody swathe that Ardashir and his son had cut through the ruling classes of their time became more and more of a liability. The sensitivity of such matters and the need to emphasise the more metaphysical aspects of Sasanian claims in response might be sensed in the target of this study, a third set of recollections of the earliest Sasanian rulers.

## 4 The Kārnāmag

### 4.1 *The Nature of the Kārnāmag*

As the official or quasi-official version of Sasanian origins shifted towards a streamlined narrative in which history was cleaned up through the omission of detail, a number of far more baroque recollections of dynastic beginnings also began to circulate. A motley collection of texts record stories of lost princes and courtly confrontations attached to Ardashir, his son and his grandson. Notable amongst these are, Agathias' *Histories* (sixth century), Moses Khorenats'i's *History of the Armenians* (conservatively dated to the eighth century), Dīnavarī's *Book of Lengthy Histories* (ninth century), Ṭabarī's *History of the Prophets and Kings* (early tenth century), Thaʿalebī's *History of the Kings of the Persians* (eleventh century) and a Graeco-Armenian text composed at some point between the later fifth and tenth centuries. The striking familiarity of these narratives, their untenable historicity, and their evident coexistence with *other* accounts argues that the quasi-historical sequences once associated with Cyrus had somehow become established in the West-Iranian repertoire and had once again been transferred to new individuals in the Sasanian era.

56 Yarshater 1971, 359.

How this may have come to pass is obscure due to the extremely ambiguous nature of the sources bearing on the problem. With the exception of Agathias, all extant attestations of either sequence are Mediaeval and come to us with hazy antecedents. The Perso-Arabic material in particular is built on an opaque source tradition of which much can be speculated but little can be known for certain. Moreover, the extent to which any specific memory of the Achaemenid period survived in Fars by the third century CE, particularly whether any such memory was at play in the earliest constructions of Sasanian political ideology, is not clear and has long been a subject of debate.[57] Leaving the intractable problems of origins and transmission to one side, we are left once again with the presence of ancient, historicising narratives in a historical discourse that often contradicts them. Having already seen that rather different accounts of Sasanian beginnings were in circulation and that the acceptable narrative appears to have moved over time, we know that this discourse was a disputed one. It is against this backdrop of contested memory that the reappearance of these much older narratives ought to be evaluated.

Similarly, it is in the context of the consequences of the development of Sasanian political ideology that we should consider the two texts that appear to connect all of these scattered attestations. The first, Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāmeh*, is a New Persian epic completed in 1010 recounting a history of Iran from creation to the Arab conquest. The second, the *Kārnāmag-ī Ardāšir-ī Pābagān* (*The Book of the Deeds of Ardashir, the Son of Pabag*, hereafter KNA), is a Middle Persian prose text of unclear ancestry recounting the life of the first three Sasanian kings. In these we see the origin legends, referenced piecemeal across a number of texts, come together into a longer narrative of the establishment

57 To give some idea of how slippery the question of Achaemenid memory is: in Eddy 196, 65 *f.* (and *perhaps* Boyce and Grenet 1991, 106 *f.*) a distinctly religious memory of the fallen empire, of which Ardashir claimed to be the heir, was posited. Conversely, in Yarshater 1971, 519–520 it was argued that the Sasanians had no *specific* memory of the Achaemenids and were, if anything, far more influenced by the ideologies and styles of the late Arsakid period, though, this verdict is complicated by a possible persistence of Achaemenid names and titles in Fars, see Panaino 2003 and page 90 note 76 below. In an attempt to reconcile the ambiguities, Daryaee argued that the earliest Sasanians did retain some kind of distorted memory of the Achaemenids (and were certainly in contact with groups with much more specific information), but that the dynasty's historiography came to be dominated by the quasi-religious epic cycles they had associated with their political posture, Daryaee 1995. The question is further complicated by the evident reverence shown to Achaemenid relics in the late Arsakid and Sasanian periods, see Canepa 2010. Finally, Shayegan 2012a makes a very involved argument for an Arsakid memory of the Achaemenids mediated by the *Babylonian* tradition. The problem is unlikely to be resolved to anyone's satisfaction any time soon.

of the dynasty that is both far less ambiguous than that of Ṭabarī and far more detailed than that of the chronicle tradition reconstructed above. While not the same in every particular, both narratives appear reasonably similar; certainly, the sources used in this part of the *Šāhnāmeh* and KNA must have been very close indeed.[58] Given the geographic and temporal span that separates these texts it would seem almost certain that both are descended from a common ancestor, defined above as hKNA.

The date of hKNA is difficult to determine. Its reflection in the *Šāhnāmeh*, a storehouse of Sasanian historical traditions, and the existence of a Middle Persian text point suggestively to the Sasanian period itself, as does the sporadic appearance of its component episodes in historical literature from the sixth century on. The date of KNA is, however, somewhat unclear. All extant manuscripts descend from that contained in the much larger Pahlavi Codex MK, the miscellany of a Parsee family containing a sizeable chunk of all extant Middle Persian literature. The relevant section of MK was copied in Gudjerat in 1322, but the text used by the copyist may have been considerably older.[59] In the introduction to his French translation Franz Grenet has suggested, based on his reading of the title given to the king of Kabul in KNA, 14.19 as *tegin*, that the *terminus post quem* of this text is 706. Complicating matters further Grenet pointed out that New Persian grammatical forms can be seen in places, suggesting a date after the ninth century; conversely, he also noted that other parts of the text are considerably more conservative.[60] It may also be significant that KNA makes no reference to Arabs. On balance, KNA would seem to have been a post-Sasanian redaction, possibly a summary, of an older text.[61] Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāmeh* is therefore the only firm point in the chronology of the shared source. Unfortunately, not only is the *Šāhnāmeh* also quite late, its own sources remain ambiguous and controversial.[62]

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58 Nöldeke 1979, 11–12; Safa 2011, 149 *f.* See however Davis 1996, 51 *f.*; Grenet 2003, 29.

59 The Middle Persian text of the KNA used here was Anklesaria's 1935 edition. I would like to thank Prof. Almut Hintze at the SOAS for her kind advice in this regard. Translations into English are mine but, due to the perverse nature of Book Pahlavi script, sometimes made with reference to the transliteration and translation of Grenet 2003.

60 Ibid., 26.

61 The opening lines of KNA read: *pad kār nāmag ī ardaxšir ī pābagān ēdōn nibešt ēstād ka* … "In the Book of Deeds of Ardashir, son of Pabag, it is written that …" KNA, 1.1.

62 Ferdowsi was traditionally seen to have been working from written sources, see Nöldeke 1979, 62–67. In the 1990s the idea that Ferdowsi was connected to an oral tradition was raised, see Davis 1996 and more pointedly in Olga Davidson's *Poet and Hero in the Persian Book of Kings*. This last book drew an extremely heated refutation in Omidsalar 1998. I have more sympathy for Omidsalar's position than Davidson's, however, given the lack of material from the Sasanian and early Islamic periods, the nature of any texts that may

hKNA may not, however, be entirely closed to us. The presence of a number of origin narratives conforming to Sequence One or Two within these texts presents an opportunity to theorise the underlying material by means of analogy. Here the recurrence of narrative can be employed as an interpretive tool. To begin with, it must be noted that in all probability hKNA was not a unitary text. To expand Theodor Nöldeke's suggestion regarding KNA, it was, rather, a *compilation* of shorter narratives drawn together by their relationship to Ardashir and the foundation of the state.[63] The recognisable origin narratives seen intermittently in a number of texts and presented together as part of a single narrative in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh* were generated separately for immediate political reasons; either as responses to critiques of the background of the Sasanian dynasty, or attempts to circumvent criticism of Ardashir's actions by remodelling them according to a well-known pattern of monarchical representation. hKNA was made at a later date for rather different reasons. It was, to extend the suggestion of Mary Boyce, the product of a religious community deeply shaped by the experience of Sasanian political theology.[64] In it a number of older narratives were drawn together to cast imperial foundation as communal, sacred history.

### 4.2 *Overview and Setting of the Kārnāmag*

In broad terms the *Kārnāmag* is a relatively expansive account of the downfall of Ardawan IV and rise of Ardashir to rule over an *Ērān* left divided by the actions of Alexander.[65] As in the traditions of Cyrus reviewed above, the *Kārnāmag* imposes a series of fanciful narratives over a stage populated by historical individuals. Ardashir and his immediate heirs are given untenably complicated childhoods while the conflict of Ardashir and Ardawan is cast as a narrative of prophecies and personalised courtly brinksmanship strongly reminiscent

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have informed the *Šāhnāmeh* will forever remain somewhat conjectural. Moreover, as Qazvini suggested more than sixty years ago, the success of Ferdowsi's text probably extinguished not only its competitors but also one of its most likely sources, the prose *Šāhnāmeh* of al-Razāq, Qazvini 1953, 21.

63 "*Das Kârnâmak zerfällt in mehrere Abschnitte, die ziemlich lose miteinander verbunden sind, die aber darin ihre Einheit haben, das sie sich alle auf die Durchführung der staatlichen Einigung Irän's beziehen*." Nöldeke 1878, 28.

64 Boyce 1968, 60. The general thesis, if not the specific conclusions, of Daryaee 1995 is also relevant to this hypothesis.

65 Iran is characterised as being split between two hundred and forty "dynasts" (*kadag xwadāy*) in KNA, 1.1. In 1.6 the "misrule" (*dušxwadāyīh*) of Alexander is mentioned in relation to the flight of Dara, Ardashir's royal ancestor. It is likely that the composite was in line with a conservative, or priestly, view of Iranian history in which Alexander had a very poor reputation, see Gignoux 2007.

of the Ctesian Cyrus. This mixture of the historical and the unlikely has, on occasion, led some influential commentators to describe the narrative seen in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh* as a "romantic" tradition; this has, however, rather unhelpful connotations.[66] While monographs on the heroic works and deeds of individual Sasanian kings may have constituted a genre of Middle Persian literature, this does not mean that hKNA was composed as an entertainment.[67] The combination of highly sensitive subject matter and the use of stereotyped forms of royal biography seen in its descendants invites us to consider a nakedly ideological reading.[68] Indeed, another "historical monograph" with a political edge has been perceived in our sources: a so-called romance describing the life of the usurper Bahram Čōbīn, who sought to depose the Sasanians and may have called upon an Arsakid ancestry to do so.[69]

66 KNA was explicitly called a "romance" or "romantic" in Nöldeke 1878, 23; Boyce 1968, 60. KNA, and the tradition it represents, was considered somewhat unserious or "popular" in Frye 1964, 47–48, and Yarshater 1983, 365. Such appraisals neglect the extent to which the imitation of legendary or epic patterns could be and was used as a legitimising tactic in the Sasanian and Islamic periods. On this last point I am indebted to Ghazzal Dabiri who deals with this issue extensively in her book based on her doctoral dissertation, Dabiri 2007, and has allowed me to see the relevant sections.

67 Boyce argued that other Middle Persian works similar to KNA existed, though she remained agnostic on the matter of the priority of these in regards to any chronicle tradition, see Boyce 1968, 60. This supposition finds some support in the so-called "old introduction" to the *Šāhnāmeh*. This document is, in fact, the introduction to the now-lost prose *Šāhnāmeh* of al-Razāq that was attached at some point to an edition of Ferdowsi's more famous work of verse, see Qazvini 1953, 23–27. This introduction makes a rather interesting claim in its statement of method: al-Razāq's client al-Maʿmarī, requests books (in the plural form: *kotob*) from a number of men of the old Persian gentry. The introduction states that these included "books of kings, books of the deeds of kings and the lives of each", *nāmeh-haye šāhān va kārnāmeh-haye šāhān va zendegānī har yekī*. See ibid., 34–35 and Rubin's discussion of this passage at Rubin 2008, 49.

68 Such a reading has been suggested in Daryaee 2003, 36–38 where it is suggested that KNA was the product of Khosrow I's use of Ardashir as a model in order to impose a particular view of Sasanian history.

69 Bahram Čōbīn's linkage to the Arsakid dynasty in the later sources suggests that he appealed to an Arsakid ancestry during his revolt. Czeglédy argued that this linkage was actually a pro-Sasanian slur meant to delegitimise Bahram in the "romantic" tradition attached to him, Czeglédy 1958, 25–28. By contrast, Pourshariati, whose general thesis sees the old grandee clans as quasi-independent organs of the state, particularly strong in the east, would seem to incline towards a more straightforward explanation for the presence of this ancestry in our sources, Pourshariati 2008, 122, *f*. Payne argued that this "text" was in fact an anti-royalist political document, one that insinuated that the Sasanians had converted to Christianity, see Payne 2016, 189–190. The continuing appeal of ancient Arsakid antecedents in the east of the Sasanian state, alongside Bahram's heroic image, may have been part of the reason why he was later claimed as an ancestor by the ninth-century Samanid dynasty, see Bīrūnī. Chron, 48, see also, Bosworth 1973, 58–59.

The greater part of the *Kārnāmag* describes the life of Ardashir. Of most interest here is the relatively long account of Ardashir's early life. Ardashir's father is Sasan, the scion of the Kayanid line deposed by Alexander, now disguised as a shepherd.[70] Sasan's identity and Ardashir's birth are signalled to Ardashir's maternal grandfather and adoptive father-to-be, Pabag, the sub-king of Fars, by a prophetic, solar, dream.[71] Fifteen years later, the young Ardashir's fame reaches Pabag's overlord Ardawan IV, who demands the boy come to his court. Ardashir's skill in hunting and polo impresses all until one of Ardawan's sons attempts to claim credit for a remarkable shot Ardashir makes during a hunt in which he sends an arrow through the body of a fleeing onager.[72] Demoted to stable boy, Ardashir attracts Ardawan's concubine who tells him that Ardawan has been warned by astrologers that anyone who escapes from his court in the next three days would depose him.[73]

With the concubine's help Ardashir flees to his homeland, outpaces the pursuing Ardawan, collects the *xwarrah* (the avatar of divinely approved kingship, here incarnated as a ram of unusual size) accepts the allegiance of the nobility of Fars, and finally defeats Ardawan.[74] A tightly compressed Sequence One may be discerned in the exchange of Sasan and Pabag, but the truly significant episode for this study is Ardashir's time at Ardawan's court where many parallels to the Ctesian Cyrus may be found. The *Kārnāmag* goes on to recount a number of wars fought by Ardashir against minor kings in the region of Fars. Attached to this collection of struggles are two additional cycles describing the complicated childhoods of Ardashir's son Shapur I, and grandson, Ormazd I. These are more clearly Lost-Prince stories making use of Sequence One: their use of an aristocratic game (polo) and recognition through resemblance strongly recalls the Herodotean Cyrus. All of these sections will be considered sequentially below.

Bearing strong resemblances to ancient Mesopotamian precedent while offering highly implausible accounts of sensitive events, one may suspect that each of these narratives was created with a particular intent in mind. It has

70 ŠhN 6. 139–140, lines 87–98 = KNA, 1.6–7. Sasan is an itinerant soldier in Agathias, Pabag, significantly given the role of such professionals in Cyrus' legends, an astrologer, Agathias. Hist, 2.27.2–3.

71 ŠhN 6., 140–142, lines 99–135 = KNA, 1.8–20. The titles used for Pabag in these texts *šāh* (king), *šahryār* (king), and *marzbān* (governor or warden, akin to *marquis* in the most literal sense) are, in the light of what Ṭabarī has to say, likely to be gross inflations of Pabag's rank.

72 ŠhN 6., pp. 143–146, lines 143–195= KNA, 2.4–20.

73 ŠhN 6., pp. 148–151, lines 214–265 = KNA, 3.1–12.

74 ŠhN 6., pp. 151–156, lines 266–342-= KNA, 3.13–5.13.

been suggested, on the strength of its preoccupation with the province of Fars, that KNA's ultimate origins lie in the historical traditions of this province.[75] Attention has been drawn to the fact that one section of the narrative, Ardashir's battle with the princeling Haftowad and his dragon or worm, has very local focus mentioning some fairly obscure and specific place names.[76] This is an attractive argument. Not only is Fars the likely origin of a large amount of extant Middle Persian literature, but the episode of the birth of Ormazd is unlikely to have originated anywhere other than the Sasanian homeland. An origin in Fars would also place the roots of this material in a region thick with the dynasty's partisans lending strength to the idea that apologetic and/or laudatory concerns drove their construction. Moreover, the relatively early appearance of *hostile* versions of episodes seen in the composite narrative well outside of Fars indicates that these legends were aggressively propagated and that the dynasty's detractors sometimes recognised their underlying intent.

### 4.3 *Ardashir: Sequence One?*

hKNA almost certainly opened with a short introduction intended to position the coming narrative in time and signal its ideological flavour. The remnants of this can still be seen in the, possibly summary, redaction seen in KNA and in Ferdowsi's introduction to his description of Ardashir:

> In [*pad*] the Deeds of Ardashir, Son of Pabag, it is written that after the death of Alexander the Roman there were two hundred and forty dynasts in *Erānšahr*.[77]

Ferdowsi claims to work from knowledgeable informants, but the import of his introduction to Ardashir's birth is the same:

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75 In the forward to his translation of KNA Grenet emphasises the local horizons of the text, Grenet 2003, 32 *f*. This leans very much on the work of Henning, who develops an earlier argument made by Marquart: see below.

76 Henning posited that the name of this king, rendered in the Book Pahlavi of KNA as *'pt'w-bw't'* and Ferdowsi's Perso-Arabic script as *hftw'd* is connected to an Achaemenid title **haftax$^{u}$wapātā*, "ruler of a seventh" that he reconstructed from an Aramaic title *hptḥpt'* attested in a letter written by an Achaemenid governor of Elephantine written in the fifth century BCE. Developing some geographic observations made by Marquart, Henning suggested that the story of Haftowad and his dragon or worm is actually a distorted memory of Ardashir's destruction of a local dynast, a "*Piratehäuptling*", in the south of Fars who had somehow retained an Achaemenid-era title. To explain the dragon, Henning speculated that this individual was associated with an Indian snake-cult. Marquart saw instead a repetition of an ancient Iranian dragon slaying myth: see Marquart 1901, 44–45; Henning 1977.

77 KNA, 1.1.

After the time of Alexander, what do they say about who ruled over the world
So says a wise *dehqān* of Čāč [Tashkent], after him there was no one on the ivory throne
There were great men of the race of Āraš, bold, rebellious, graceless men
In every corner of the world, each had his own little kingdom
Thus they sat content on their thrones, so they were called the petty kings
Two hundred years passed in this way, you would say that in that time there was no king in this world.[78]

With the stage set, the *Kārnāmag* moves directly to the narrative of Ardashir's birth and early life. This can be broken down as a fusion of Sequence One (the prophetic dream of Pabag, the shepherd "disguise" of Sasan, complex parentage involving a lowly parent, and adoption) to Sequence Two, another "adoption" of Ardashir, this time to Ardawan, a courtly contest, revelation, plot, flight and conquest (see Table 6). As a rendition of the origins of the empire's founder, these are strong contenders for the core narratives of the composite. It is unclear, however, whether these two sequences emerged as a single piece or whether they arose separately. Moreover, as will be seen, the very earliest attestation of a *Kārnāmag*-like narrative seems to be an inversion of Sequence One unattached to any broader context. Leaving this question undecided, we will here, briefly, consider each of Ardashir's sequences in turn.

In Ardashir's origin story the expression of Sequence One is a fairly curt affair that moves several of the component motifs around in unusual ways (see Table 5). The hostility and paranoia that marked the Herodotean Cyrus' relationship to his grandfather and triggered the "loss" of the protagonist is present but deflected to Alexander's destruction of the Kayanid line. The role of the lost prince is thus transferred from the boy to his father, the "shepherd" Sasan, who is then entirely supplanted, via adoption, by the boy's grandfather the "king" Pabag. This staggered paternity is a rather odd detail that was evidently both old and seen as important. A hostile version of the same story, including a double paternity, was known to Agathias in the sixth century.[79] A notice in the *Bundahišn*, a ninth-century Zoroastrian compilation has Pabag marry Sasan's daughter.[80] As has already been noted, thanks to variations and generalities in the source material, Ardashir's exact relationship to his dynasty's eponymous forebear is unknown. Ardashir attracted a number of contradictory genealogies and Sasan, in consequence, was given a number of contradictory

78 ŠhN 6., p. 138, lines, 66–71.
79 See page 110 below.
80 Bd. xxxv.36.

TABLE 5 Ardashir, Sequence One

| | **Agathias, Histories *c.*559 CE** | **Moses Khorenats'i, History of the Armenians 8th *c.* (?)** | **Ferdowsi, Šāhnāmeh 1010 CE** | **Al-Thaʿlebī, 11th *c.* CE** | **KNA copied 1322** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Birth announced by omen | × | Mentions dream of Pabag | × | × | × |
| "Humble" parent | Sasan *and* Pabag | | × | × | × |
| Royal parent | | | Sasan and Pabag's daughter | Sasan and Pabag's daughter | Sasan and Pabag's daughter |
| Exposed/attacked as infant | | | | | |
| "Lost" to regal origins | Child raised by Pabag | | Sasan, *not* Ardashir | Sasan, *not* Ardashir | Sasan, *not* Ardashir |
| Non-regal setting | × | | Sasan works as shepherd | Sasan works as soldier | Sasan works as shepherd |
| Child recognised – Games | | | | | |
| Child recognised – Resemblance | | | | | |
| Child recognised – Tokens | | | | | |
| Child adopted | Dispute over paternity | | By Pabag | By Pabag after Sasan's death | By Pabag |

roles.[81] Though the weight of epigraphy and the Perso-Arabic historical material would strongly support a reconstruction of Ardashir as Pabag's son and Sasan as either his grandfather or ancestor, there is nothing that specifically

81 "… stories about Ardaxšīr's origins are so varied that they suggest a search for legitimacy via every tradition that had been passed down by the Persians, some constructed and perhaps those unknown." Daryaee 2010, 241.

forbids the latter as Ardashir's father and an argument has been made for this possibility.[82]

Some speculation of this type has pointed to the flexible family law of the Zoroastrian tradition in which a number of fictive bonds were available in order to produce an heir for a man, living or dead, who lacked one. While one suspects that Pabag's adoption of his grandson did indeed have a cultural resonance obscure to the modern reader, this is not a particularly convincing explanation for the emergence of the *Kārnāmag* story. That Sasan was Ardashir's biological father appears to have been a minority position; moreover, the outward rusticity of the *Kārnāmag's* Sasan marks him as a wishful construct. Here the imposition of a particular narrative logic seems a much more tenable proposition.[83] It remains most interesting, however, that different men, possibly from two generations of the same family, came to be seen as somehow sharing in Ardashir's paternity, particularly as our other sources show that the all-important Kayanid lineage could be far more easily introduced by placing Sasan in Pabag's lineage. The *Kārnāmag's* unorthodox use of Sequence One suggests that the solution lies in the interaction of the goals of the historicising narrative frame with certain sticking points in historical memory.

In order to highlight some of the political assertions woven through the *Kārnāmag's* version of Ardashir's ancestry, it is necessary to refer again to the account of Sasanian origins given by Ṭabarī. Some minor differences in the two accounts become significant when the *Kārnāmag* narrative is viewed as a historicising tradition rather than a romantic one. Ṭabarī offers a very condensed version of Kayanid descent similar in outline, if not detail, to that provided by the *Kārnāmag* and indeed, most of the Perso-Arabic historiographic tradition, yet some of Ṭabarī's sources knew Pabag as the *son* of Sasan and a member of the Kayanid line.[84] Conversely, the *Kārnāmag* texts separate the two men and in doing so cut Pabag out of the Kayanid succession entirely.[85] Further, the *Kārnāmag* opens by assuming Pabag to have been Ardawan's appointee in Istakhr.[86] This, again, contradicts Ṭabarī who states that Pabag was *not* king in Istakhr until he had deposed his overlord Gozchir, a deed for which he most

82 In Macuch 2014 all extant variations of Ardashir's paternity are examined in the light of the convolutions made possible by the acceptance of fictive bonds and levirate marriages in Medieval Zoroastrian family law. See also Frye 1983, 117.

83 Shaki 1990, 80.

84 Ṭabarī, 2–3. The most important extant variants of Ardashir's paternity, and Sasan's place in it have been tabulated at Macuch (2014), p. 84.

85 KNA, 1.6–7 and 1.20 = ŠhN 6., 139–140, lines 87–98, 142, line 135. According to Agathias, Pabag wasn't even a maternal ancestor, Agathias. Hist. 2.27.3.

86 KNA, 1.3.

certainly did not have Ardawan's permission.[87] Thus the *Kārnāmag* presents both a stable political stage in Fars and, in contrast to Ṭabarī, *extremely* clear lines of succession. Compare these statements of Ṭabarī addressing the political fallout of Pabag's death:

> Bābak died around that time, and Sābūr, son of Bābak, was invested with the crown and ruled in his father's place as king …
>
> He [*Ardashir*] found there [*Istakhr*] a number of his brothers, some of them older than himself …[88]

with the bald announcement made in the opening passages of KNA that "Pabag had no son to bear his name."[89]

On this basis we may suggest that hKNA contained no mention of squabble within the house of Sasan following Pabag's death, of Shapur son of Pabag, or indeed, of any hint of the contested succession described by Ṭabarī and others. Because Ṭabarī's tenth-century account of Sasanian origins accords reasonably well with contemporary data, the genealogy presented in this section of the *Kārnāmag* would seem interested in creating a version of the history of Fars in the early third century that offers an alternative to rather more challenging recollections that must also have been current in the later Sasanian period. It does so while retaining enough of the original context to ring true-*ish* as a historical account.

More subtly, the *Kārnāmag's* Pabag is distanced from Ardashir's Kayanid bloodline, albeit in a way that is careful to insist on his historically implausible status as the legitimate ruler of Istakhr.[90] He becomes a somewhat peripheral ancestor to Ardashir's dynasty. In this way, far more dynastic, if not narrative, weight can be placed on the shoulders of the shadowy figure of Sasan.[91] This stress may have been possible, and, from some perspectives preferable, because the actual Sasan, the *xwadāy* of ŠKZ, was likely to have been a blank canvas, a person probably not well known outside of Fars and possibly only

87 Ṭabarī, 7–8.

88 Ibid. 816, p. 8.

89 *Pābag rāy hēc frazand ī nām burdār nē bud*, KNA, 1.5. On the possible technical, legal, meaning of *nām burdār* (something like *name-bearer*), see Macuch 2014, 86.

90 Ferdowsi has Pabag as the king of Istakhr by the grace of Ardawan, ŠhN 6., 139, line 81, *beh estaxr bod bābak az dast-ī uye* (i.e. Ardawan). The Middle Persian version gives Pabag the considerably grander title of "governor and king of Fars", though still as Ardawan's appointee, KNA, 1.3, *Pābak marzbān šāhryār-ī Pārs bud ud az gumārdag-ī Ārdawan bud*.

91 Note that the reversed story seen in the *Bundahišn* also removes Pabag from the Kayanid line.

dimly recalled even there. It may be inferred from Ṭabarī's account that Pabag carried some baggage – while most accounts, even "official" ones, seem to have had no issue casting him as Ardashir's father it is possible that the creator of hKNA did see a problem. If the information carried by Ṭabarī's sources had any circulation at all, Pabag would have been known as an upstart local king who seized his crown through an illegitimate act of violence, an action made hardly better by his son's greater act of usurpation.[92] Indeed, a statement made in the *Dēnkard*, a ninth-century Zoroastrian compendium, argues that Ardashir's descent was indeed worthy, indicating the existence of some doubt on this point even within Zoroastrian circles.[93]

Dubious genealogies are hardly unusual in any culture, but the early and awkward transference of paternity and stellar lineage away from Pabag was constructed in a very specific way; Pabag is shifted from progenitor to literary archetype. Faced with the immovable facts of Ardashir's close association with Pabag, and Pabag's reputation as a rebel and social climber, somebody employed Sequence One to square the circle. Pabag's illegitimacy is very tacitly addressed by his severance from the Kayanid line, yet, with his sins unmentioned, he remains king enough to be able to perform the role of the royal father. It is to Pabag that the dream-omens of Ardashir's birth are given and it is Pabag who performs the act of recognition by adopting the Kayanid Ardashir to a royal house whose claims are considerably more *de facto* than *de jure*. Meanwhile, Sasan becomes a strange version of the lost prince as sperm donor, completely disappearing from the narrative after fathering Ardashir.[94]

Because Ardashir's son Shapur mentioned his eponymous uncle in his inscription at Naqš-ī Rostam, it would follow that the emergence of this truncated Sequence One can be dated to sometime between the later third and sixth century when Agathias recorded his version of it. As Shapur does not seem to have been embarrassed by his relation, it is possible that this narrative coalesced as the relationship between Sasanian claims and their subjects' acceptance of them changed. Perhaps the increasingly mythic nature of Sasanian claims met resistance or indifference from the surviving great families of the

92 Note Agathias' explicit reference to Ardashir's *usurpation* of Ardawan and how it was a proof of a low and wicked character. Agathias. Hist, 4.23.8.

93 This passage is translated and considered in Adhami 2003.

94 According to Agathias, Sasan disputed Ardashir's paternity after Ardashir took the throne, Agathias. Hist, 2.27.4. This generates the faintly ridiculous image of a wandering soldier and a leather-worker *cum* hedge wizard arguing over the paternity of a great king and strengthens Cameron's case that the story Agathias heard from Sergius (which, Agathias was particularly insistent to claim, was present in the royal archives, see ibid., 2.27.5), represents a hostile reworking of some part of what would become the *Kārnāmag* tradition.

old Parthian state.[95] Any such resistance may well have preserved memories of the "true" situation in Fars in Ardashir's time as a means of demonstrating the unworthy origins of his dynasty. This reconstruction would suggest that disputes over lineage and legitimacy were central to the appeal of Sequence One as a historicising frame. As we shall see, the *Kārnāmag*'s repeated use of this sequence to link other early Sasanian kings to aristocratic houses *and* the pattern of the development of a similar origin story for Constantine lend support to this supposition.

### 4.4 *Ardashir: Sequence Two*

After Ardashir's adoption to Pabag, the *Kārnāmag* immediately moves forward some years, transferring the juvenile Ardashir to the court of Ardawan. The narrative then proceeds to a rendition of Sequence Two that is much longer than the origin narrative that preceded it (see Table 6). Ardashir's court sequence is strongly reminiscent of the Ctesian Cyrus, though, as it has been integrated with a use of Sequence One, he does not enter the palace through the servant's entrance, but via adoption into the inner circle of the royal house after Ardawan hears glowing reports of his skill and demeanour. He then, like Cyrus, proceeds to move in the highest circles, excelling in all things until the outcome of an altercation with Ardawan's son removes his ability to signal his effortlessly royal nature. A clear analogue of this hunting scene is not detectable in any of the extant Cyrus traditions reviewed above. On the other hand, a Biblical parallel in David's slaying of Goliath before Saul, has already been mentioned and a remarkable parallel in very early descriptions of the attempt of Diocletian or Galerius to kill the young Constantine by means of an animal combat will be examined later. In addition, the power of this set piece may have received a relatively recent boost in the form of a widespread legend of Alexander's taming of Bucephalus current in Late Antiquity.[96]

The details of Ardashir's escape from court display a marked resemblance to the Cyrus known to Ctesias and also, probably, Dinon. A series of oddly specific parallels can be discerned: Ardawan is warned by a group of astrologers of his deposition at the hands of a man who will leave soon his court, and is later given an exposition of the symbolism of the *xwarrah* by his minister. Astyages, it will be recalled, is warned twice, once by an astrologer and again by a singer or court harpist. Ardashir escapes with a helper, here Ardawan's concubine,

95 Choksy, for example, saw the nobility's acceptance of Sasanian claims as increasingly pragmatic from the later fourth century, Choksy 1989), 49–50. Certainly, it would seem that the greater nobility quickly resumed its accustomed role in the making and breaking of kings after the Sasanian revolt, see Pourshariati 2008, 56–59 and *passim*.

96 See page 173 below.

TABLE 6 Ardashir, Sequence Two

| | **Moses Khorenats'i, History of the Armenians 8th *c.* (?)** | **BHG 714 5th–10th century** | **Ferdowsi, Šāhnāmeh 1010 CE** | **KNA copied 1322** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| At court to serve | | | | |
| At court as aristocrat | ? | × | × | × |
| Has role close to king | ? | × | × | × |
| Shows extraordinary aptitude | ? | | × | × |
| Beautiful/youthful/popular | ? | | × | × |
| "Beast" combat | ? | Transferred to killing of Ardawan | × | × |
| Arouses jealousy | ? | | × | × |
| Plot is made | | Against Ardawan | | |
| Antagonist is warned | × | × | × | × |
| Escape to "homeland" | Ardashir said to flee | | × | × |
| Father is ill or dead | ? | | × | ? |
| Pursued | ? | | × | × |
| Trick performed in flight | | | Staged Pursuit | Staged Pursuit |
| Leads army | ? | | × | × |

who, like Oibares, plays a pivotal, practical role in the young Ardashir's efforts to grasp his destiny. Ardashir's escape comes (at least in the version offered by Ferdowsi) after Pabag has died and Ardawan has disinherited Ardashir.[97] Cyrus offers his father's (faked) illness as an excuse to leave Astyages' court. Ardashir, like Cyrus, flees towards his homeland. Like Astyages, Ardawan is pulled from his leisure to an abrupt realisation of what is happening and orders a pursuit of the boy.[98]

97 ŠhN 6., 149, lines 231–234.

98 This sudden pulling of the antagonist from rest or leisure involving the pleasures of court (alcohol, concubines or singers) to action is a minor motif of Sequence Two, one that appears to be part of the contrastive slant of the episode, *cf.* FGrH 90 F66, 26 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*, 26; FGrH 690.9 (Dinon); ŠhN 6., line 280 *f.*; KNA, 3.14, 4.1; Lact. De Mort., 24.7.

Though Ardashir does not trick his pursuers as the Ctesian Cyrus does, the chase *is* staged, with Ardawan stopping to ask for directions only to be informed that Ardashir's destiny, in the form of the *xwarrah*, is literally catching up with him.[99] The result, combined with the hunt sequence, is a heavy-handed signalling of the underlying meaning of the chase. Having symbolically, and publicly, refused Ardashir's claims during the incident at the hunt, Ardawan now has his loss of divine right made visible. As if to emphasise the point, the fact is repeatedly recounted to him by passers by and finally has to be explained by his minister.[100]

Ardashir, of course, reaches the sea and the safety of his homeland.[101] Having arrived, the province of Fars rallies to him, allowing him to depose Ardawan and claim his crown. Again, as in the application of Sequence One, a comparison of this section of the *Kārnāmag* with the account of Ṭabarī reveals the *tendenz* of the narrative. In Ṭabarī's telling, the Sasanian clan's political horizons were very constrained; Ardashir was indeed fostered out, but only to a subordinate of Ardawan's underling, the regional king of Fars, certainly not to the court of the Great King himself. Likewise, the revolt of Pabag's family would seem to have been a purely local affair that it took Ardawan some time to notice or respond to.[102] It is most likely that Ardashir and Ardawan never actually met before the climactic battle in which Ardawan was killed. Why then is Ardashir given such an immediate association with his victim in the image of history proffered by the *Kārnāmag*? The question is doubly puzzling

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99 On the *xwarrah*, see Gnoli 1999.

100 The fatalistic assessment of Ardawan's chances after the *xwarrah* has caught up with Ardashir is made by Ardawan's minister at KNA, 4.24 = ŠhN 6., 155–156, lines, 325–329.

101 Ogden considered the flight made by the Ctesian Cyrus and the Ardashir of KNA as part of a complex of legends, one iteration of which was attached to Seleucus. He theorises that a key motif of these stories is the crossing of a water boundary, in this case, reaching the sea, see the summary and tables provided at Ogden 2017, 71–75, and the consideration of Ardashir in particular at 82–84. It will be argued below that in the "historical" cases considered in this study, the flight of the subject from court follows a contrastive episode and leads on to an account of the acquisition, or inheritance, of military means, that is, it serves to connect a *symbolic* confrontation with a considerably more realistic one. It may be of interest in this regard, however, that the fleeing Constantine had to cross the English Channel in order to reach his father.

102 According to Ṭabarī, it was the illegal construction of the city of Ardašir Xwarrah/Gur that drew a response from Ardawan, see Ṭabarī, 11. The construction of this city and the hilltop fortress of Qaleh Dokhtar (a cliff top fortress whose construction must have presented quite a technical challenge) *before* Ardawan's defeat suggest that Ardashir had a considerable amount of time to prepare. Ardawan was evidently distracted. Whether he had underestimated the threat, needed time to marshal sufficient forces to counter it, or had more pressing concerns is difficult to determine, see Huff 2008, 35 *f.*; Daryaee 2010, 249.

as giving Ardawan a starring role would seem to run counter to the general tendency in later Sasanian historiography to ignore and degrade Ardawan and his dynasty as much as possible.[103]

Placing Ardashir in Ardawan's court may resurrect Ardawan's memory in a way that is hard to reconcile with the preferred positions of late Sasanian historiography, but, in conforming to Sequence Two, it also provides a recognisable staging in which Arsakid, or pro-Arsakid, claims could be negated: first by the juxtaposition of a prodigious youth of high descent with a jealous tyrant whose rule is based on force alone; and secondly by a clear indication, via the omen, that the youth's ascent is divinely ordained. This is seen most clearly in the Middle Persian version where a great deal of emphasis is placed on the divine will. When Ardashir hears the concubine's report of the horoscope cast for Ardawan he replies:

> If the divine *xwarrah* of *Ērānšahr* comes to our aid we will be saved and come to a good end.[104]

It is also telling that, despite his already demonstrated superiority to his Arsakid hosts and Pabag's reference to the "miraculous power" he holds, Ardashir remains dormant until this sanction is given. In fact, there is a hint that the court episodes seen in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh* that hKNA may have been at pains to minimise any unseemly dissent that might be discerned in its narrative. Pabag's loyalty, or rather his inability and unwillingness to defy Ardawan, is emphasised in each; first in his quick obedience to Ardawan's summons and then in his letter, warning Ardashir not to take any rash actions after being punished for presumption.[105]

Thus the *Kārnāmag*'s use of Sequence Two developed the claims of Ardashir's bloodline set up by the use of Sequence One; it provided the young Ardashir a stage on which his actions, and the heavens themselves, validate his fitness to rule in full view of the illegitimate house of Arsakes. Bringing victor and vanquished together in this way ensures that the personalised, *contrastive* theme of Sequence Two is dominant: the exchange of words at the hunt serves to crystallise the meaning of the entire episode. It is a highly artificial edifice in which very little – aside from some geographic detail, the names of the players and

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103 Representative of this trend is the word used in KNA 1.1 to describe the rulers of the pre-Sasanian period: kadag-xwadāy, *dynast*, literally *house-lord*.

104 KNA, 3.11. Ferdowsi, possibly due to a reluctance to make explicit references to the old gods, put a much more neutral response in Ardashir's mouth, see ŠhN 6., 151, lines 259–60.

105 ŠhN 6., 143–144, lines 151–162, 147 lines 199–208 = KNA, 2.8–9, 2.24–30. Note, Knapp 2012, 64.

the establishment of Sasanian rule – can be viewed as even remotely plausible. In this it typifies the odd mixture of the real and the stereotypically unreal that makes hKNA and its descendants difficult to categorise and has led to a number of appraisals suggesting a romantic intent and/or a popular origin.[106]

Here Sequence Two was employed to construct *a* past in which the Arsakids were deposed by something much higher than mere force of arms. The association of this sequence with Ardashir ought to be viewed as argumentative, as advancing certain positions for the consumption of a live historiography. It was a presentation of alternative facts in which some of the harder edges of Ardashir's story were made to disappear. Like the fanciful paternity with which it was fused, this tale of courtly confrontation and escape speaks to a tension between the grand restorative claims of the Sasanian state and the dynasty's obscure and middling origins. That this lack of pedigree was keenly felt can be seen elsewhere in the *Kārnāmag*.

hKNA appears to have closed with the origin stories of Ardashir's son Shapur I, and his grandson Ormazd I. These were extremely similar narratives in which Sequence One was used to give each of the Sasanian princes a maternal link to a fallen aristocratic house. Though both made a case for Sasanian legitimacy they did so in an extremely ambivalent way, grafting the earliest Sasanian kings to noble families that Ardashir has pledged to destroy. In both, the legitimacy of the pre-Sasanian ruling classes is simultaneously rejected and claimed in terms so purely typological as to forbid any connection with historical reality. These stories can, however, tell us a great deal about the *conditions* of historical memory in the Sasanian period as well as the structure and

106 "Das Buch von den Thaten des Artachšîr … kann nicht als ein geschichtliches Werk gelten", Nöldeke 1878, 22, "The *Kārnāmag was written at a time when information regarding the particulars of Ardashir and his successors was available*. Thus, we see that the *Kārnāmag* was, like epic narratives, a collection (*az … ānbāšteh ast*) of customary wonders and or fictions, "national" beliefs and legends. It follows that the *Kārnāmag* was not written with the intent of giving an account of the historical circumstances of the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, nor was the goal of the author to coin a fresh or creative story for Ardashir. Rather, with the passage of time, stories and particular narratives regarding the founder of the Sasanian empire had come into being among Iranians; stories that were naturally mixed up with epical concepts (*afkār*). We see parallel concepts in the life of Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenid empire, the history of whose life and deeds were, not long after his death, also mixed up with legends and stereotypical marvels." Safa 2011, 148 (emphasis mine). "The native, popular story" Frye 1964, 47, "evidently the work of priests … generally romantic character …" Boyce 1968, 60, "the compilers of the *Kārnāmag* followed popular beliefs that were bound neither to historical truth, nor to the legal strictures of the Sasanian (period). The *Kārnāmag* was, without doubt, the product of a region of partisans and well-wishers of the dynasty, men learned in Pahlavi literature", Shaki 1990, 80. Note however, "Most probably it was created with the purpose of providing the rising Sasanian dynasty with a past equal to its ambitions" Cereti 2011.

sources of hKNA. The presence of not one, but *two* such narratives in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh* is yet more evidence that Sasanian antecedents presented serious political problems and that a number of genealogical claims were circulated to address this issue. The use of essentially the same story for father, son and grandson suggests that the stereotypical nature of the narrative itself was seen to hold explanatory power. Finally, the repetitive nature of these stories, alongside certain features of the birth of Ormazd, suggests that the two stories were conceived independently and were poorly harmonised at a later date.

### 4.5 *Shapur: Sequence One*

Ardashir's son Shapur I ruled from *c.*239–270. His precise date of birth is not known but he must have participated in his father's campaigns against the Arsakids and was probably crowned as co-ruler in his father's lifetime.[107] Shapur was, by pre-modern standards, an excellent king. According to the bulk of the Perso-Arabic sources his reign was marked by a successfully aggressive policy against Rome, extensive building projects and economic and technical expansion.[108] In Greek and Latin historiography he is infamous as the sacker of Antioch and the captor of Valerian, an event that historians of the Islamic era linked to the construction of the famous barrage and citadel at Shustar in Khuzestan, though one that they sometimes confused with the confrontation of Shapur II (r. 309–79) and the Roman emperor Julian a century later.[109] Gorged on this surfeit of royal glory, most of the chronicle tradition would seem to have had very little use for the circumstances of Shapur's birth and youth.

Someone, however, did. A tradition forging a blood link between Shapur and the Arsakids by way of his mother was known to several writers of the Islamic era. Dīnavarī, believing Ardawan to have lived some time before Ardashir's emergence, imagined Shapur's mother as the last of Ardawan's descendants.[110] Most of the extant material knows her as Ardawan's daughter. Ṭabarī included a version of this story very close to that provided in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh*, fatally contradicting his just completed narrative of the battle of Hormazdagan by pivoting from the young Shapur's bravery before Ardawan to describe his conception *after* the death of Ardawan. The story itself is a relatively clean version of Sequence One (see Table 7).

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107 Ṭabarī, 826, 27; Balʿamī, 884; Masʿudī. Muruj, 160.

108 See, for example ŠhN, 6., 245–249, lines 61–103; Masʿudi. Muruj, 163–164; Ḥamza, 33–34. Mixed up with other material detailing Shapur's sieges of Nisibis and Antioch Is a statement that Shapur was most just and saw to the improvement of the provinces at Ibn Beṭrīq, 10.5.

109 See page 115 note 162 below.

110 Dīnavarī, 280, 282 (42, 45).

TABLE 7 Shapur I, Sequence One

| | **Dīnavarī, Book of Lengthy Histories late 9th century CE** | **Ṭabarī, History of the Prophets and Kings 9th–10th *c.* CE** | **Ferdowsi, Šāhnāmeh 1010 CE** | **KNA copied 1322** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Birth announced by omen | | | | |
| "Humble" parent | | | | |
| Royal parent | Ardawan's relative | Ardawan's daughter | Ardawan's daughter | Ardawan's daughter |
| Exposed/attacked as infant | | | | |
| "Lost" to regal origins | Raised by Ardashir's minister | Raised by Ardashir's minister | Raised by Ardashir's minister | Raised by Ardashir's minister |
| Non-regal setting | × | × | × | × |
| Child recognised – Games | × | × | × | × |
| Child recognised – Resemblance | × | × | × | × |
| Child recognised – Tokens | | | | |
| Child adopted | × | × | × | × |

Minor differences exist between the various versions of this episode, but a composite summary is possible. Shapur is made the son of an Arsakid princess who is sentenced to death by Ardashir for her bloodline (Dīnavarī, Ṭabarī) or an attempt to revenge her father by poisoning Ardashir (*Šāhnāmeh*, KNA).[111] Ardashir's minister is given the task of carrying out this sentence when the condemned woman states that she is carrying Ardashir's child.[112] In the version reported by Ferdowsi and KNA, Ardashir is informed but angrily insists on the penalty.[113] Unwilling to kill a potential heir, the minister hides the woman in his own household, castrates himself, seals his severed genitals in a box

111 Ṭabarī, 23–24; ŠhN 6., 194–196, lines 15–47; KNA, 10.1–11.

112 Dīnavarī, 282–283 (45); Ṭabarī, 24; ŠhN 6., 96–197, lines 49–53; KNA,10.13.

113 ŠhN 6., 197, lines 54–55; KNA, 10.14–15.

and asks Ardashir to put said box in his treasury.[114] Years later, when Ardashir laments his lack of an heir, his minister asks the king to open the box and secures an amnesty. The minister tells Ardashir that an heir exists. Ardashir summons the boy along with a crowd of other aristocratic youths to the palace, where he immediately recognises his son.[115] Confirmation comes however during the polo match when Shapur is the only boy bold enough to enter the royal pavilion in search of a lost ball.[116]

The story, with its emphasis on recognition by resemblance and the use of a game, is strongly reminiscent of the finding of the Herodotean Cyrus, though, as the revolution has already occurred, the reunion between generations here represents the joyous replication of a dynasty rather than its tragic fall. Ardashir's lack of an heir is very similar to the predicament (one assumes) of the Herodotean Astyages, and to that of his own "father" Pabag as described in KNA.[117] One might also note that Ardashir's minister's understandable reluctance to be held responsible for the death of a potential heir is like that shown by Harpagus in the much older story.[118] The claims made in this story contradict almost all the other evidence that can be drawn from the period. Shapur's mother is listed in ŠKZ as a certain Lady (*bānūg*/*κυρία*) Myrōd.[119] Since none of our sources mention the Arsakid princess's name, there is no way of *dis*proving that Myrod was an Arsakid. Shapur was, however, almost certainly very much alive when the Arsacids fell from power.

As the contradictory narratives presented by Ṭabarī and the likely depiction of a young Shapur in action in his father's victory relief at Fīrūzābād argue, Shapur was probably already his father's anointed successor in the early 220s. Assuming that the battle of Hormazdagan occurred sometime around 224, the latest possible date for Shapur's birth would fall sometime in the first decade of the third century, at a time when Shapur's father, grandfather and uncle were petty nobility in open defiance of their overlord. It is unlikely that any member of such a family would have been considered an appropriate match for the Great King's daughter.[120] Additionally, the prodigious tenth-century *literatus*

114 Dīnavarī, 283 (45); Ṭabarī, 24–25; ŠhN 6., 197–198, lines 56–72. Castration is not present in KNA, 10.16. On the self-castration of a trusted advisor as a motif, see Ogden 2017, 174 *f.*

115 Dīnavarī, 284 (46); Ṭabarī, 25–27; ŠhN 6., 197–202, lines 78–123. This sequence is largely followed in KNA, 11, but, possibly due to the summary nature of this redaction, there is no polo game.

116 Dīnavarī, 284 (46); Ṭabarī, 26–27; ŠhN 6., 202–203, lines 124–139.

117 KNA, 1.5, 11.4.

118 *Cf.* Herod, 1.109–110; KNA, 10.16; ŠhN 6., 197, lines 56–62.

119 ŠKZ §37.

120 Wiesehöfer places the overthrow of Gozchir in 205–6, see Wiesehöfer 2011.

Masʿudi, quoting some *andarz* (wisdom) literature credited to Ardashir, mentions that Ardashir selected Shapur as he was the best of his children; it cannot, therefore, have been exclusively held, even by those sympathetic to the dynasty, that Shapur was an only child.[121]

Again, the existence of the story becomes far more explicable if it is understood as an argument about history rather than a history in the modern sense. Like the narratives that would become attached to Ardashir, the reworked birth of Shapur staked a political claim in the record, one with a recognised subtext that may have eased its assimilation into the wider network of historical "knowledge". Sequence One was used to create a link between the family of a usurper and that of the usurped. Though the Arsakid bloodline is abjured and attacked either as responsible for an ancient crime or a cowardly attempted murderer, it is simultaneously claimed in the person of Shapur.[122] Thus, in the hidden birth of Shapur, the house of Sasan is able to claim an Arsakid descent, a rather more concrete, and, evidently, enduring, alternative to the later myths of state. Simultaneously, as in Ardashir's own adoption to Pabag, an extremely simplified succession is presented.

### 4.6 *Ormazd: Sequence One*

It would appear that hKNA followed Shapur's recovery with the secret birth and discovery of Shapur's own son Ormazd I. Ormazd's origin story is another iteration of Sequence One (see Table 8) and very strongly resembles that of his father. Though seemingly perfunctory, this story is far more interesting than it appears. Its portrayal of an irascible Ardashir forced to deal with powerful rivals in a fractious realm, its specific and limited geographic staging and subtext of considerable violence make the argument of this story rather transparent. While this episode's backhanded anxiety over heredity is of a piece with the birth of Shapur, a number of features suggest that it was not only intensely local, but also quite early. Its seeming repetition of the themes and motifs associated with the preceding episode suggests very strongly that in both cases a recognisable narrative form was employed in order to prove a point. Moreover, the awkward doublet formed by these sequential episodes argues against them having been composed at the same time. Rather, the interchangeable nature of father and son is further evidence of the composite structure of hKNA.

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121 Masʿudi. Muruj, 160. Masʿudi also mentions an autobiography *cum* mirror for princes (entitled a *Karnāmaj*!) and an admonitory letter supposedly sent to his officials at ibid. 162–163.

122 See page 102 notes 112 and 113.

TABLE 8 Ormazd I, Sequence One

| | Ṭabarī, History of the Prophets and Kings 9th–10th *c.* CE | Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, Annals 10th *c.* CE | Ferdowsi, Šāhnāmeh 1010 CE | KNA copied 1322 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Birth announced by omen | × | | × | × |
| "Humble" parent | × | Ormazd's mother the subject of a "well known story" | × | × |
| Royal parent | Shapur | | Shapur | Shapur |
| Exposed/attacked as infant | | | | |
| "Lost" to regal origins | Hidden from Ardashir | | Hidden from Ardashir | Hidden from Ardashir |
| Non-regal setting | × | | × | × |
| Child recognised – Games | Ormazd holds a polo stick | | × | × |
| Child recognised – Resemblance | × | | × | |
| Child recognised – Tokens | | | | |
| Child adopted | × | | × | × |

Worn down by years of fighting, Ardashir asks an astrologer what it would take to settle the realm. The astrologer replies that Ardashir must mix his line with that of his enemy Mihrag.[123] Ardashir takes exception to this prophecy and has Mihrag's family killed, but one of Mihrag's daughters escapes.[124] Years later Shapur meets her in a village after a polo game; Ṭabarī's version suggests that Shapur attempted to rape her, but the version known to Ferdowsi and the

123 The getting of this prophecy is described at Ṭabarī, 40–41; ŠhN 6., 204–205, lines 164–182; KNA, 12.1–6.

124 Ṭabarī, 40–41; ŠhN 6., 205–206, lines 187–200; KNA, 12.7–8.

writer of KNA did not see things this way.[125] Knowing that his father would be angry, Shapur keeps his relationship and the resulting son a secret, until one day Ardashir sees the boy playing polo. Impressed by the boy's bearing and noting the resemblance to himself, he demands to know the boy's paternity.[126] The boy claims to be the son of Shapur, who is forced to admit the truth. Ardashir, thinking the result of the prophecy to be not so bad after all, forgives his son and accepts his grandson.[127]

Mihrag is an obscure figure with an ambiguous position in the chronology of a number of texts using *Kārnāmag*-like narratives. If he existed at all he can only have been one of the petty kings of Fars killed by Ardashir in his takeover of the province.[128] In KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh* he is described as a magnate "also from Fars" who waged war on Ardashir after the death of Ardawan.[129] Further, they claim that Mihrag attacked Ardashir taking advantage of the fact that Ardashir was engaged with Haftowad, perhaps another petty king of Fars, who is depicted as a sort of dragon-cult leader ruling from a coastal fortress.[130] Interestingly, KNA describes Mihrag's attack as *mihrōdruǰīh*, that is, oath breaking, leaving open the possibility that Mihrag was remembered in the composite as a traitorous *ally* of Ardashir.[131] Ṭabarī tells a slightly different story; he describes Mihrag as a local king, and tells us that he refused Ardashir's call to obedience in the events following the death of Shapur son of Pabag. Ṭabarī states that Ardashir killed Mihrag just after he had finished with Haftowad and just before he founded the city of Gūr.[132]

Mihrag's kingdom, we are told by Ṭabarī, lay in the vicinity of this city, an assertion that complicates the chronology of the account seen in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh*. Gūr also known as Fīrūzābād, was founded by Ardashir and probably intended to solidify his power in Fars through the granting of land to his

125 Ṭabarī, 41; ŠhN 6., 205–210, lines 205–249; KNA, 13.

126 The context of the game differs. Ṭabarī has Ardashir see the boy play with a polo stick while he is travelling, but Ferdowsi and the Middle Persian *Kārnāmag* stage the recognition in almost exactly the same terms as Shapur's. Ṭabarī, 41–42; ŠhN 6., 210–211 lines 250–261; KNA, 14.1–9.

127 Ṭabarī, 42; ŠhN 6., 211–214 lines 262–295; KNA, 14.10–19.

128 At Widengren 1971, .715, he is called a figure of "royal legend".

129 *Mihrag ī Anōšagzādān az ham Pārs*. KNA, 8.1, at ŠhN 6., 177, line 622 we are told that he is from a place whose name is rendered as *jhrm*. Bosworth renders Mihrag's kingdom as "*Abarsās*" in his translation of Ṭabarī, though see 10, n. 32.

130 Mihrag's refusal of Ardashir's summons is given in Ṭabarī, 10–11. In the *Kārnāmag* tradition Mihrag takes advantage of Ardashir's war with Haftowad to strike at Sasanian territory, see ŠhN 6., 177–178, lines, 622–626, KNA, 7, 8.1.

131 KNA, 8.1.

132 On the letters sent by Ardashir, see page 81 note 47 above.

followers.[133] Ṭabarī's source(s) supposed the act of its foundation to have been the trigger for Ardawan's belated attack on the upstart dynasty.[134] Significantly, the *Kārnāmag* places the attack of Haftowad, the fall of Mihrag and the extermination of his house as occurring *after* the fall of Ardawan. It follows that hKNA would also have placed the foundation of the city after Ardawan's defeat and before Mihrag's death.[135] If Mihrag is in fact a memory of a real person, the little evidence we have argues that the chronology presented by Ṭabarī is more plausible and that Mihrag died before Gūr was founded.[136] If the Sasanians rose to power by deposing their overlord, as insinuated by Ṭabarī, it would seem unlikely that any local ruler close to Ardashir's projects at Gūr would have viewed them with equanimity. Moreover, as we shall see, Ardashir and the younger Shapur had few qualms and a rather forceful way of dealing with those who refused or hindered them. Finally, taking up arms against Ardashir on the ascent, after he had developed the area, secured a local powerbase and possibly after he had appropriated Arsakid resources, does not seem a particularly sensible course of action.

The stories of Mihrag's fall and Ormazd's link to his family may thus be suspected to refer, if to anything, to the Sasanian conquest of Fars, that is, to the dynasty's *pre-imperial* stage. Additional support for the thesis that Ormazd's origin narrative was a story with early, extremely local origins and constrained political applications can be found in the unlikely nature of its subject. Ormazd I ruled for only a single year and he almost certainly had no time to perform any noteworthy deeds. Indeed, later writers gave Ormazd short shrift. They relate only a few general details, not entirely to his credit: he was brave, he was physically massive and might have piously persecuted Manichaeans; he

133 Such is the argument of Huff 2008, 37–39.

134 Bosworth 1986. Ṭabarī reports Mihrag killed, Gūr founded and Ardawan's angry response, at Ṭabarī, 10–11. The actual foundation date of the city is somewhat vague, though Ardashir's nearby palace-fortress of Qal'aye-Dokhtar certainly predates his defeat of Ardawan, see Huff 2008, 44. On a possibly relevant, though entirely anecdotal, note regarding the association of famous battles and cities: in 2012, while being driven from Shiraz to the ruins of Bīšāpūr, I was told by my driver that Shapur I had captured a Roman emperor in the narrows of the mountains through which we were travelling. I replied that the incident in question had actually occurred at Edessa in modern Turkey. Though this information was politely acknowledged, I doubt that it had any lasting impact on my driver's rather more attractive version of local history.

135 Ardašīr-Xwarrah is founded immediately after Ardawan's death at KNA, 5.13; ŠhN 6., 165, lines 657–658.

136 On the date, as well as the political and ideological significance of Ardašīr-Xwarrah, see Huff 2008, 42 *f.* Daryaee, accepting that it was Pabag and the elder Shapur who took the lead in the revolt against the king of Fars posited that Ardashir moved to Ardašīr-Xwarrah *during* Pabag's revolt, see Daryaee 2010, 248.

was not, however, up to his father's standard.[137] In his summary Ḥamza noted that the identity of Ormazd's mother, whom he names as Gardzād, was the subject of a "well-known story", but this might be editorial comment and may not reflect the contents of the works he was summarising.[138]

Describing a series of events with little relevance outside of Fars, very probably occurring *before* the ascent of the dynasty to the imperial throne, resulting in the birth of a short-lived king with few memorable qualities to the daughter of a magnate with even less claim on the record, the presence of the birth of Ormazd in the *Kārnāmag* is a most informative inclusion. It is actually possible that Ormazd's story is one of the older parts of hKNA; that the story of the imperial, Arsakid origins of Shapur I was prefigured by the earlier use of a very similar story to attach his son to a family of local dynasts in a discourse aimed specifically at the local politics of Fars.

Given the likely perfunctory nature of any records at this time and the maddening imprecision of extant royal epigraphy (for what little it is worth, no Gardzād is mentioned in the list of personages made in ŠKZ), there is no reason to believe that exact genealogies of the first generations of the ruling family would have been recalled precisely or even widely known going into the fourth century. It would have been eminently possible for a blood connection between Mihrag and Ormazd to be drawn in Fars where memories of both men would have been strongest and the link would have been politically convenient. Because it is doubtful whether Mihrag would have continued to have been considered a useful ancestor during the later stages of the empire, even inside Fars, an early date for the formation of this legend, maybe only one or two generations after Ormazd's death *circa* 273, seems fairly plausible.[139]

That Shapur's maternity was remodelled in unreal and stereotypical terms is unsurprising; new imperial houses are obligated to explain themselves, especially those that have ascended through force of arms. That Ormazd became attached to a much less important family via the same story form indicates that the genealogical objections to the Sasanian dynastic project were serious indeed. Both narratives would seem to be connected to lingering memories of Ardashir's assault on the aristocratic establishment of his time. The wars cementing Sasanian rule over the old Arsakid state took some time to complete and *probably* began with a movement by Pabag (*not* Ardashir) against his

137 Ṭabarī, 40; Ḥamza, 34. Thaʿalebī gives a very positive report, Thaʿalebī, 498–499. Ibn al-Balkhī says that he was like his grandfather and that he persecuted Manichees, Fārsnāmeh, 63.

138 Ḥamza, 34.

139 De Jong uses a similar line of reasoning to date the origin of KNA close to the rule of Ormazd, De Jong 2013, 38.

direct overlord in Istakhr.[140] What is more, these wars left a clear impression in the wider culture. Indeed, even the most sympathetic renderings cannot avoid mentioning of the considerable violence enacted by Ardashir during this period.

Ṭabarī and Balʿami recite a litany of kings felled before Ardashir's armies, giving some texture to the round number of dead dynasts given by Ḥamza and Ibn al-Balkhī, but the period attracted a number of more romantic treatments as well.[141] A very violent version of the Princess and the Pea, for example, attached itself to Ardashir's, or Shapur's, conquest of a citadel in Iraq, became proverbial and was freely attributed to various kings.[142] Ṭabarī mentions a Bahraini king named Sanatruq who, despairing but maintaining an admirable sense of drama, leapt to his death from his city's walls as Ardashir besieged them.[143] Likewise, Ḥamza tells an unpleasant story of Ardashir's treatment of the population of a Bahraini city that rebelled against him.[144]

This version of Ormazd's origin shares with the Arsakid origin of Shapur not only a narrative frame, but the air of an excuse; they are "apologies" that do not so much deny the destruction of noble houses as obviate the implications of their destruction by the construction of assimilative genealogies. Of course, none of this *precludes* the idea that Shapur actually did marry, or at least father a child with, the daughter of one of his father's fallen enemies; unlike the supposed Arsakid origin of Shapur himself, this is actually a rather likely scenario. What *is* odd is that any such arrangement would have become *phrased* in such a predictable, repetitive way. Ormazd's birth is, if anything, an even stronger expression of the motifs of Sequence One than Shapur's; prophecy

140 Widengren 1971, 734, Daryaee 2010, 244–246.

141 Ṭabarī, 9–20, Balʿamī, 879 *f.*

142 This being the story of Dayzan's daughter; Dayzan is the lord of an impenetrable fortress, located by Ṭabarī at Hatra, besieged variously, by Ardashir (Ibn Beṭrīq, 10.1), Shapur I (Ṭabarī, 31–37), or (probably a case of elision with Shapur I) Shapur II (Dīnavarī, 289). Falling in love with the besieging king, Dayzan's daughter betrays her father and opens the fortress with the promise that the king will marry her. In Ṭabarī's telling, the girl's inability to sleep on the mattress provided for her (she is bruised by a leaf that has fallen between the layers of silk) causes her to reveal to the king the extraordinary luxury in which her father had kept her. Shocked at her ingratitude and convinced that she will betray him in turn, the king has her torn apart between two horses or tied by her hair to a single horse and dragged to death. Ṭabarī cites a number of poets who used the incident and Bosworth has theorised that the incident entered Arabic language folklore via Ibn Moqaffaʿ or Hišām al-Kalbī, see ibid., 31–32, n. 97.

143 Ṭabarī, 15, Balʿamī, 883.

144 Ardashir supposedly rebuilt the walls of the city over the top of the corpses of the city's inhabitants. Ḥamza, 33.

has returned in the shape of an Indian magician, as has the attribution (via adoption) of a rustic or inferior origin for one or the other parent.[145]

The question and answer that opens the story of Ormazd's birth demonstrates the connection between these stories and the social upheaval associated with the early dynasty. Mixing the blood of Ardashir and Mihrag, Ormazd will settle the realm simply by existing.[146] Ormazd's fanciful birth was an argument for Sasanian legitimacy, as in the case of his father, achieved by the total appropriation of a more prestigious bloodline. Sequence One, with all its associations with kingly origins, was used as a suitable form for answering critiques of *lineage*; it was, at least in these cases, a counter-polemical historical posture.

The presence of two very similar stories, the chronological ambiguities presented by each, and the dubious historicity of both demonstrates the composite nature of the *Kārnāmag* tradition, as well as its underlying structure of constructed, episodic, and historicising biographical narratives sharing a legitimist concern. It also indicates the existence of a specific set of commonplaces seen as apt for constructing this legitimacy. Ormazd's story is likely to have been an early expression of this revisionist literature. Far more constrained than the claim to imperial blood built for his father, the possibility that it belongs to an early, and local, layer of historical commentary makes it, in some ways, more interesting; particularly as a contrast to the constructed origin narratives of his grandfather Ardashir, which appear to have spread very far very quickly.

### 4.7 *Other Attestations of Kārnāmag Origin Narratives*

Some very early attestations of the origin sequences contained in the *Kārnāmag* are not Iranian. The earliest is the extremely hostile account of Ardashir's paternity presented in Agathias' sixth-century *Histories*.[147] Agathias' report is almost a mirror image of Sequence One, a story in which all the contradictions of a prince with "humble" antecedents are played straight in order to tarnish its subject. Agathias' Pabag is a leather worker *cum* astrologer. Sasan is a wandering soldier who lodges with him. Somehow divining a great future for his guest's progeny, Pabag sends his own wife to Sasan's bed. Agathias links this information to the Persian records supposedly underlying his later summary

145 In the version of the story given by Ṭabarī, Mihrag's daughter was raised by shepherds, Ṭabarī, 41. Her guardian is a farmer (*warzīgar*) according to KNA, 12.8. He is given a promotion by Ferdowsi where he is introduced as a *mehtar* (a word used by Ferdowsi in the general sense of an aristocrat, in this context, a local chief or headman), ŠhN 6., 206, line 196. In all cases, the boy is, like Shapur before him, removed from the royal context and bought up by social inferiors.

146 ŠhN 6., 204, lines 161–162, 205, line 181–182; KNA, 12.1–4.

147 Agathias, Hist., 2.27.2–3; Khorenats'i, 217.

of the chronicle tradition, but the story is far too derogatory to be in anyway official. Averil Cameron explained it as "Syrian bias" drawn from a "popular tradition" suggesting Agathias' informant Sergius as its likely source.[148] The supposition of a hostile remodelling is very probable, though it cannot be proved to have been Syriac and assumptions that the story was drawn from a "popular tradition" are complicated by the perverse relationship of Agathias' narrative to that seen in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh*; most notably, the incongruous pairing of an artisan's trade with that of an astrologer and an unclear paternity resolved by a compromise between Sasan and Pabag.[149]

Two later Armenian sources show that some kind of *Kārnāmag*-like text or texts circulated in Armenia in the early Middle Ages. In the eighth century the Armenian historian Moses Khorenats'i dismissed the signs and wonders he read of in a Persian life of Ardashir translated into Greek by a Persian convert to Christianity.[150] Though Khorenats'i offers very little detail, his scathing appraisal of the supernaturalisms of this work mentions Pabag's dream and a horoscope leading to Ardashir's flight. Khorenats'i's curt dismissal of this source makes it impossible to know its precise contents, but we can say that it seems to have portrayed Ardashir's birth and time at court as a continuous narrative.[151]

A more cryptic indication that some kind of biography of Ardashir featuring a courtly confrontation was circulating in Armenia is BHG 714. This is an interpolation in a single, twelfth-century manuscript of a Greek translation of the late fifth-century Armenian historian Agathangelos. This interpolation is not present in Armenian manuscripts of Agathangelos but does, on orthographic grounds, appear to have been a translation from an Armenian original.[152]

148 Cameron 1969/1970, 109.

149 Agathias. Hist., 2.27.4–5.

150 Khorenats'i says that his account of Ardashir is based on a book, "The History of the First (Kings)" composed by a "Barsuma" known as "Rastsohun" (MP. *rāst saxwan* = "true speech"), a Persian taken captive under Julian the Apostate, and translated into Greek by another captive, Eleazar *neé* "Khorohbut". He briefly dismisses the fabulous elements of this work, mentioning, among other things, Pabag's dream, an association of Sasan with a fiery vision, a prophecy of the "Chaldaeans" and a plot of Ardashir. He promises to relate from it only information that is both plausible and true, Khorenats'i, 213–214.

151 *Cf.* Ibid.; ŠhN 6., 140 *f.*, 152 *f.*; KNA, 1.8–20, 4.11 *f.*

152 Plut. VII.cod. Gr. 25. Held in the Laurentian Library. The Armenian origin of this interpolation and its relationship to the account of the life of Gregory the Illuminator used by Metaphrastes was noted as early as 1762 when the MS was published in the Acta Sanctorum, see Acta. SS. VII, 315, 324, n.l (text published 320–323). The connection between these texts, KNA and Ferdowsi was first noted in Nöldeke's German translation of KNA but seems to have received very little attention in more recent times, see Nöldeke 1878, 324. The interpolation itself is certainly a later addition and not connected to the

Because the version of Agathangelos used by Simon Metaphrastes included this interpolation, the translation must have entered one stream of the Greek tradition between the fifth and the tenth centuries.[153]

The interpolation describes a prophecy seen by Ardawan, the treachery of his maidservant and the defection of his nobility to Ardashir in terms that argue strongly for a link to the same tradition that underlies the court sequence seen in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh*. If so, this version appears to have been subject to some very specific editing. The interpolation is part of a history focussed on the downfall of the Arsakids and the conversion of Armenia to Christianity. It takes place at Ardawan's court and seems to portray Ardashir as an established nobleman rather than a young ward or hostage.[154] Additionally, his confrontation with Ardawan during the hunt and his flight from court are missing. Specific parallels can be seen, however, in the *Kārnāmag* texts' renditions of the hunting scene and the interpolation's construction of the fall of Ardawan. Consider first the interpolation's staging of the Persian nobles' ultimatum and Ardawan's death at the hands of Ardashir:

> King Artabanes [*Ardawan*], hanging his head for many hours and looking at the floor, foresaw the future fall of his kingship and looking at the envoys said: "I am the cause of this insolence, for I have honored some [of you] with offices and magistracy or have allowed others to become rich by royal gifts making many people owners of estates and possessions."[155]

The climax, which is illegible in the interpolated manuscript and therefore taken from Metaphrastes, also suggests a familiarity with the "Persian" rendition:

> The latter [*Ardashir*] (*for* he had good hands in shooting with a bow and was always very zealously successful in this) pretended a flight but being persecuted cast an arrow to the breast of the persecutor, which became irresistible thanks to the shooter's strength, and piercing Artabanes'

original text, see Thomson 2011. An English translation joining the two has been made recently in Muradyan and Topchyan 2008 and has been adapted for use here, though its very brief commentary sheds very little additional light on the problem.

153 The final paragraph of the interpolation is unreadable in the MS but can be reconstructed by reference to PG. 115.948.B–C.

154 The interpolation describes Ardashir as *ἦν τινί τῶν μεγιστανων*, Acta. SS. VII, 321. (section 4 in text).

155 Ibid., 322 (section 7 in text). This and the following translation are based on that made by Muradyan and Topchyan.

> armour, passed through the breast and issued from the back and at once showed Artabanes dead.[156]

Compare the above with the version of the hunt given by Ferdowsi:

> Ardashir raced ahead as he drew near he put an arrow in his bow
> He struck the side of a jack, arrow and feathers passed right through the onager
> Ardawan arrived at this time he saw the young man's deed
> "Who shot this onager" He said "his hand is blessed!"
> ...
> Ardawan grew very angry at this, he shouted at the young man [Ardashir]
> He spoke harshly "this is my fault, your upbringing was mine
> Why should I take you hunting and feasting with my retainers
> So that you outdo my son, making much of your nobility and bravery?"[157]

Finally, the version of this incident given in KNA:

> One day, Ardawan, with his entourage and Ardashir had gone hunting. An onager suddenly passed by on the plain, Ardashir and Ardawan's older son rushed after it. Ardashir reached it and shot an arrow such that the feathers went through its belly and out the other side.[158]

In the Armenian interpolation, the story has been cut down in such a way as to subvert the Persian narrative and deny Ardashir the clearly expressed approval of heaven. In the first instance, Ardashir is introduced as a man of high rank, already a member of Ardawan's entourage. No precocious youth, he is given no aristocratic activities by which he might signal his innate right. Ardawan's fall is thus the result of bad luck, misplaced trust and opportunism, capped by the Persians' loyalty to their clan over their king. Yet Metaphrastes' statement that Ardashir used a trick shot to kill Ardawan suggests that the author of this version is likely to have known the *entire* story. It is also telling that even here, the horoscope, the signal of divine interest and predestination, may be minimised or sidelined but just as in Agathias, cannot be erased.

Any reconstruction of the relationship between the extant Perso-Arabic texts and the source of this Armenian version, whatever it was, can only be

156 PG. 115.948.B–C.
157 ŠhN 6., 145, lines, 181–184, p. 145, lines, 189–192.
158 KNA, 2.13–14.

conjectural. Indeed, very little at all can be said for certain about it. The authors of a recent consideration of this interpolation believed that the writer's sympathies lay with Ardawan, and certainly he is here a rather tragic figure.[159] Assuming that the interpolation's Armenian source was an adaptation of a Persian tradition, some Hellenisation may be just discernable; its author may have had Herodotus' calculating Cyrus in mind when describing Ardashir's appeal to a council of Persian and "Assyrian" noblemen.[160] The most significant feature of this narrative is, however, the way in which certain features of the Perso-Arabic texts are either not present, or have been altered in order to change their meaning. As in Agathias' recasting of Sequence One, we see here the survival of the components of Sequence Two in a narrative hostile to the subject. Ardashir's revolt is thus given a fated, but ultimately negative, spin which stands in high contrast to the overtly approving tone of the "mainstream" of the tradition. The interpolation should remind us that the descriptions of events contained in the *Kārnāmag* are politically charged claims about the proper shape of history, claims that evidently did not pass uncontested into posterity.

It should also be noted that in addition to his reuse of a divinising court story, the writer behind the interpolation was either not interested in or did not know of the salacious stories of low birth and possible fratricide attached to the emergence of the Sasanian dynasty. Since, from the perspective of Armenian Christian writers, the advent of Ardashir was the origin story of a family of aggressively meddlesome pagans who had victimised a dynasty of converts and vigorously supported the partisans of the old religion in Armenia, the first option does not seem likely.[161] One would expect them to have eagerly employed the most derogatory material possible to describe such people. It follows that the darker versions of Sasanian origins were often simply not known or accessible. Here one of the origin sequences used in hKNA would seem to have crowded out competing narratives, forcing a hostile group to rework

159 Muradyan and Topchyan 2008, 1–2.

160 *Cf.* Acta. ss. vii, 321–322 (5–6 in text); Herod, 1.125–6; FGrH 90 F66. 16–19= Lenfant 2004, F8d* 16–19.

161 The work of Łazar P'arpec'i and Eḷishē, two historians who probably worked during the sixth century, give some indication of the hostility of Armenian Christians towards the powerful and decidedly non-Christian house of Sasan. In recounting the war of Yazdegird ii (r. 439–57) against Armenian rebels who had rejected his demand that they abandon Christianity, both writers cast their Iranian antagonists as royal persecutors of the most traditional type. See, for example, the characterisation made of the king in Eḷishē, 68, *f.* and P'arpec'i, 75 *f.* Parallels to the Syriac tradition of martyr *acta*, and indeed even to Manichaean traditions of the death of Mani, can be seen in the portrayal of magi and officials surrounding the throne pouring poison into the king's ear.

rather than oppose it. In this odd addition to an Armenian hagiographic history, we perceive how useful the employment of recognisable motif is when presenting an argumentative history.

The use of heroic and stereotypical modes of representation generated a virtuous circle of reproduction, a sort of historiographic version of Gresham's Law. Overtly their subtext was widely understood and covertly, their propositions, even denied, were difficult to dislodge. As the curious case of the "Syriac" and Armenian inversions demonstrates, the origin narratives seen in the *Kārnāmag* spread very far, very fast and well outside of the social group that could be expected to find them edifying visions. Indeed these narratives were even capable of colonising negative appraisals of their subject. It is not possible to prove, but it may be suspected that origin narratives, something like the Persian text mentioned by Khorenats'i, circulated widely in some written form and may even have been translated into the empire's other languages. Having rendered more complicated accounts of Sasanian origins uncommon, it "leaked" thence into historical writing in much the same way that a tendentiously Christian, Syriac novel of Julian came to reshape later Greek and Arabic accounts of that emperor's death.[162]

Khorenats'i's scepticism aside, we may be reasonably sure that by the early Middle Ages the birth and court narratives associated with the *Kārnāmag* had expanded to fill much of the available historiographic space surrounding the foundation of the Sasanian dynasty. Whether or not they were widely believed, they continued to be considered more or less suitable material for historical writing into the Islamic period, even when it is clear that they were not the only source available to the writer. Ṭabarī's patchy use of this sort of material has already been noted. Another striking example of the acceptance of these narratives as somehow historical can be found in one of the earliest known attempts to craft a universal history in Arabic, Dīnavarī's *Book of Lengthy Histories*.

Dīnavarī's work is an early example of a literary and synthetic approach to historical narrative, something that makes his account of the life of Ardashir

162 A text that manages the seemingly impossible task of becoming a work of praise directed towards the deeply uninspiring Jovian, see the translation of Gollancz 1928, see also Drijvers 2011. Large parts of its account of Julian's unsuccessful expedition worked its way into Arabic historiography, though, in telling of a captive emperor punished by Shapur II, somehow mixed up with a Persian account of the captivity of Valerian under Shapur I, see Ṭabarī, 58–65 n.b. 58 n. 165 (and also 59 n. 4 in Nöldeke's translation and commentary); ŠhN, 6., 325–33, lines 443–566. Each part is presented separately in Mas'udi. Muruj, 181–186, 323–324. Jovian's refusal to lead a non-Christian people was also picked up in Greek church histories, see Socrates, HE, *3.22*; Sozomen, HE, 6.3; Theodoret, HE, 4.1.4.

difficult to parse. In this section he would seem to have consulted more than one source, one of which must have carried a *Kārnāmag*-like narrative of the birth of Shapur, albeit one different to that seen in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh*.[163] Dīnavarī's account has much in common with that of the *Nihāyat al-Arab*. Both Dīnavarī and the *Nihāyat* grant paternity to Pabag in genealogies similar in outline (though not exactly the same as) those offered by Ṭabarī;

> … there arose Ardašīr son of Bābakān, and he was Ardašīr son of Bābak son of Sāsān the younger son of Fāfak son of Mahrīs son of Sāsān the elder son of Bahman the king son of Isfandyāđ son of Buštāsif …[164]

He follows with a brief, chronicle-like appraisal of Ardashir's politics and motivations similar to that seen in Ḥamza *et al.*

> He arose in the city of Iṣṭaḫr and he gained the ascendancy in the restoration of the kingdom of Fārs to its rightful place.[165]

The *Nihāyat* too mentions Ardashir's restorationist motives. After describing Ardashir's conquest Dīnavarī and the *Nihāyat* pivot to a narrative describing the birth of Shapur I, a narrative that is clearly derived from some version of the origin of Shapur seen in the *Kārnāmag*.[166] Dīnavarī's account of Shapur himself, with its focus on successful war with Rome and constructions at Shushtar, is similar to that made by Ferdowsi and might ultimately derive from some redaction of the chronicle. The birth of Ormazd is given no special significance.[167] It is important to note two things. First, like the Armenians, Dīnavarī saw components of the *Kārnāmag* as suitable material for history. Indeed, his parallels with the narrative given in the *Nihāyat* suggest that Shapur's birth legend may have already been incorporated into whatever version of the chronicle tradition was used by Ibn al-Moqaffaʿ. Second, like Ṭabarī who followed his detailed account of Ardashir's origins with a contradictory account of the birth

163 Bonner 2015, 41*f*, especially 50–53.

164 Dīnavarī, 282 (44).

165 Ibid.

166 Ibid. 282–284. (44–46).

167 Ibid. 288 (49). Ormazd reigned for one year but Dīnavarī gives him thirty, also crediting him with the execution of Mani and the destruction of his followers. Mani actually died under Ormazd's brother and successor Bahram I. In fairness, the identity of Mani's killer was a point of confusion in later sources with various writers crediting different Bahrams or even Shapur II. There is an intriguing echo of Dīnavarī's claim that Ormazd I was a persecutor of Manichees at Maqdisī, 162 (where Ormazd is given the credit for Mani's execution) and the later work of Ibn al-Balkhī, see, Fārsnāmeh, 20, 34.

of Shapur drawn from a *Kārnāmag*-like source, he either did not have, or did not decide to use, the *entirety* of the *Kārnāmag's* narrative.[168]

## 5 The Usefulness of Typology

Between the straightforward, if unflattering, account of a dynastic coup known to Ṭabarī and the streamlined accounts seen in the texts that probably hark bark to late Sasanian historiography, the various origin narratives built up out of Sequence One and Two presented a sort of third option. They resolved some of the spikier details of dynastic foundation, dubious origins, usurpation and violence, not by ignoring them, but by presenting them according to received typologies. These typologies worked in concert with and expanded claims to divine right made at the very beginning of the dynasty, yet do not seem to have been integrated into the frame provided by the chronicle tradition in any consistent way. Moreover, in extant material the texture of these narratives is uneven. For these reasons the string of ostentatiously legendary stories of Sasanian origins seen in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh* probably began life as disconnected, *ad hoc* responses to the political ruptures accompanying the establishment of the dynasty. Much more can be made of this happy convergence of legendary forms with dynastic need. The reappearance of Sequence One and Two in accounts of the early Sasanian dynasty should be considered as deliberate. There is a strong possibility that each narrative was purposefully extracted by and then preserved in a series of relatively early legitimising rhetorics, some of which may have been composed in circles close to the royal house itself.

The decidedly non-Iranian literary precedent of Sasanian birth and court narratives examined above has not passed unnoticed. Indeed, their similarities to legends of Cyrus the Great known from the Greek literary tradition have been recognised for at least a century and a half.[169] This linkage would connect components of the *Kārnāmag* with two forms of biographical representation whose oldest attestations are Mesopotamian and may date from the second millennium BCE. The problem with postulating such a link lies in demonstrating it in anything but the most general way. The temporal and

168 On the difficulties involved in unravelling Dīnavarī's sources for Ardashir's reign, see Bonner 2015, 50–53.

169 Links to Cyrus in general and to Ctesias' Cyrus in particular were postulated as far back as Bauer 1882, 68–69 and have been widely accepted ever since, see Nöldeke 1979, 5–8, 11–12; Pagliaro 1927, xix–xx; Boyce 1968, 60; Grenet 2003, 31, 65; Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2010. Harmatta linked KNA to Herodotus' alleged use of Old Persian "*novelle*" (defined *extremely* broadly), see Harmatta 2002, 197 *f*.

linguistic gap between the Mesopotamian sources of the Akkadian *cum* Greek Cyrus and the Middle Persian Ardashir, even more so than the corresponding gap in our understanding of Hellenistic Fars, simply cannot be bridged by the paltry sources to hand.

Because of the state of the sources and the legendary cast of the material itself, reconstruction of the roots of the Sasanian historical tradition requires the creation, *ex nihilo*, of strings of invisible transmitters.[170] In this kind of inquiry there is something of a habit of relying heavily on the supposition of an oral tradition; in particular, the *Gōsān* or minstrel described by Boyce.[171] In the specific cases reviewed above, where relationships with non-Iranian, literary stereotypes of historicising royal biography are strongly indicated, a much more interesting heuristic exists, one that better addresses the nature of the narratives in question and does so in a specifically Iranian context. With reference to the apologetic precedent of the narratives themselves, this approach argues that received narrative typologies were used in a deliberate and considered manner at the highest levels of society.

More than thirty years ago, in a short comparative study of the titulature used in Achaemenid and Sasanian inscriptions, Prods Oktor Skjraevø demonstrated extraordinarily close correspondences in the epigraphy of the two dynasties that lacked any specific connection.[172] Skjraevø's suggestion, that the reason for these similarities might lie in generations of self-reinforcing scribal *habit*, was later expanded by Rahim Shayegan. Shayegan demonstrated a set of parallels in the images used to describe rebellion and its punishment in the Behistun inscription of Darius I, the Paikuli inscription of Narseh, and the mythical rebellion of the sorcerous tyrant Zahak in Ferdowsi's *Šāhnāmeh*.[173] Shayegan's texts span fifteen hundred years and cut across orality, literature and epigraphy, suggesting that a stable collection of commonplaces had long been associated with the concept of revolt against rightful authority.[174]

170 A detailed and *extremely* complicated argument for the absorption of a memory of Cyrus' life and legend into the later Iranian legendary complex presented in the *Šāhnāmeh* is made in Dulęba 1995.

171 Boyce 1957. "… Boyce's article (1957) has been received rather uncritically and the existence of sung epic poetry in the Sasanian and Islamic periods has been considered proven, which it is not." Hämeen-Antilla 2018, 154.

172 Skjaervø 1985.

173 Shayegan 2012b, 109 *f.*

174 Some traditions attached to the (rather confused) Perso-Arabic accounts of the capture and mutilation of Valerian by Shapur I (sometimes mistakenly attributed to Shapur II) may also have belonged to the set of images hypothesised by Shayegan, namely, that of the parading of the rebel on a donkey. There is certainly an asinine overtone in the version of a Roman emperor's (Valerian's) punishment reported by Ferdowsi, see ŠhN 6., 324,

Moreover, though they appear in poetic or epic contexts, the images considered in Shayegan's study are more than purely artistic conventions. Their sometime application to historical events, in the case of the Paikuli inscription *contemporary* events recorded in monumental form, indicates that they were understood to impart a particular meaning and employed to generate a specific response.

The origins seen in the *Kārnāmag* were not as directly official as the Paikuli inscription. Despite this, Shayegan's omnipresent and immortal imagery of quashed rebellion is a very good model for understanding how Sequence One and Two work, why they work and how they become blended with historiography. It has been argued above that the centuries-deep memory of Sargon probably exerted enough pressure on the memory of Cyrus to reshape it before it was received into Greek. It has been suggested that this occurred because surface similarities in circumstances suggested the comparison to an audience primed to recognise it. Though the Sasanian origins used in the various texts considered above were more deliberate and directed constructions than the Babylonian reception of Cyrus appears to have been, their power lay in their reference to the same combination of circumstance and precedent.

The Sasanian origin legends reviewed above highlight how the needs of monarchies play a central role in the replication of each sequence. Pressed to defend himself, and able to reward those who came to his defence, the person of a monarch was a likely focal point for the reintegration and re-propagation of long-entrenched, apologetically inclined narratives recognisable at all levels of society. Likewise, those sympathetic to a monarch's legacy were inclined to continue to confront criticism with elevated stereotype long after the subject's death. It may have been the need to defend Ardashir and his family that triggered the reappearance of Sequence One and Sequence Two in the historicising literature of the Sasanian period. We might usefully place the origins of these components of the *Kārnāmag* in attempts by the dynasty's partisans to recast its controversial antecedents in accordance with old legitimising patterns. An almost total lack of context for the Sasanian era makes claims of purposeful, partisan, and often literate transmission highly speculative. Yet, it will be seen in the next chapter that this is exactly how Sequence One and Two made their way into the historiography of the later Roman Empire.

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lines 434–7, more straightforward mutilations (of the feet and heels) are reported in Ṭabarī, 65 (the emperor is, however, sent back to Rome on an ass) and Masʿudi. Muruj, 184–185. See Shayegan 2012b, 153–155.

## 6 The Kārnāmag as Compilation

If discrete political and dynastic problems encouraged the association of Ardashir and his descendants with old stereotypes of royal childhood, how are we to understand their coming together, that is, how may we position hKNA in the milieu of Sasanian or post-Sasanian letters? It has been argued that KNA was the product of the priestly class, sympathetic to the dynasty and conversant with Iranian legend.[175] A slightly altered version of this hypothesis is quite plausible; hKNA is indeed likely to have been priestly production. Whatever its *actual* religious positions the Sasanian state became strongly associated with a hieratic form of Zoroastrian practice. A priest or a scribe subscribing to such beliefs, most likely based in Fars, would seem to have been the sort of person most interested in portraying the foundation of the state as divinely approved and the most able to collate and publish the biographical text we can perceive under our much later sources. This authorship is suggested by certain details in KNA and their residual parallels in the *Šāhnāmeh*.[176] Yet most telling is KNA's placement of Ardashir in Zoroastrian sacred history. While a connection to a Kayanid ancestry is standard in all variations of dynastic origins, the *Kārnāmag* makes this connection in terms strongly connected to Zoroastrian legend. Ardashir is firmly and explicitly associated with the *xwarrah*, the divine charisma that the Zoroastrian tradition allots to kings, heroic figures and Zoroaster himself.[177] Thus the *Kārnāmag* expands the restorationist-dynastic claim seen in the "chronicle" setting Ardashir into an explicitly Zoroastrian pattern of restorative, Kayanid monarchy, a pattern seen most clearly in the post-Sasanian apocalyptic literature.[178]

We may assume that the motives of this hypothetical author were less archival or antiquarian than they were identitarian; they sought to provide an account of institutional origins that, while historically dubious, was typologically and ideologically correct. Despite the intermittent presence of

175 See page 100 note 106 above.

176 See page 216 note 63 below.

177 See page 98 note 100 above. The *Zamyād Yašt*, an Avestan text of unclear date, pays extensive homage to the *xwarrah*, note the description made of it in Karde III (22) "(The Glory) which belongs to spiritual and corporeal adorable ones, the born and unborn Renovators and Saviours." Text, translation and commentary in Hintze 1994.

178 Note the understanding of history as a series of rises and falls outlined in the *Zand-ī Wahman Yasn* a post-Sasanian Middle Persian apocalypse. More specifically note the language used of Ardashir at III.25 ("the arranger and restorer of the world") and the apocalyptic hero Kay Wahrām (who "… will arrive in the fullness of *xwarrah*" and "… rearrange these *Ērānian* lands") at VIII.1. Note also the description of the same character at Bd. XXXIII.32.

some of them in the wider tradition the birth and court sequences seen in the *Kārnāmag* do not appear to have been intrinsic components of the later dynasty's official or semi-official historical stance. Nor was the story told by the *Kārnāmag* ever universally accepted, even within the Zoroastrian tradition itself. None of this discounts the probability that hKNA was created to argue for a worldview in accordance with the sacralised ideology of state. It was *a* narrative of Sasanian origins, it was clearly not the *only* narrative of Sasanian origins. Here the issues of dynastic legitimacy responsible for the replication of ancient narratives used as sources were not the primary concern. Rather the overtly supernatural cast of these narratives, and their adherence to regal type, were adapted to argue a parallel cause. The hKNA was a sectarian text in which the foundation of the Sasanian Empire was turned into an incident in confessional history.

## 7 Reconsidering the *Kārnāmag*

Enough circumstantial evidence can be extracted from the various texts referencing narratives of the *Kārnāmag* tradition to suspect that the narrative forms identified as Sequence One and Two were not only present in the historiography of the Sasanian period but were purposefully employed in a contested historical discourse. Some time later a number of these *ad hoc* solutions were compiled into a longer biographical history of the foundation of the state, focussed on the person of Ardashir. The nature of the evidence makes it difficult to arrive at any more granular sense of the *Kārnāmag*; much can be suspected, but very little can be said with certainty about when each episode may have emerged, still less about the forms in which they may have been propagated. In order to proceed, some form of comparison is required.

In its use of ancient counter-polemical narrative sequences to impose meaning on dynastic origins, its eclectic structure, its likely collation then publication at the hands of adherents of a religious-imperial identity, and suspiciously apologetic position in the wider historiography, the hKNA and its descendants bear a remarkable, and hitherto unnoted, resemblance to a set of hagiographic legends of Constantine that come into view from the ninth century. These too are heterogeneous collections of legendary narrative and historical data produced for communitarian consumption within a discourse in which contradictory information was, at least theoretically, available. The proposed connection is yet more intriguing as these texts also make use of Sequence One and Two to describe their subject's early life. The key difference between the Iranian tradition and the Greek hagiographies is that the

antecedents of the latter are far better preserved; as a result, it is possible to deconstruct Constantine's origin legends in ways that it is not possible to do for those of Ardashir and his successors.

Both sets of texts are, of course, the products of a very distinct cultural environments; yet this notwithstanding, the parallels between the two invite investigation. By examining the strata of Constantine's legends we can see clearly how, and when, a version of Sequence Two was adopted and how it was initially used, very deliberately, as part of an early polemical discourse directed against the memory of rulers who had denied Constantine's claims. Constantine's association with Sequence One is less clear, however, suggestive mentions of his mother's occupation indicate the same kind of anxiety about lineage that is to be suspected in the *Kārnāmag's* contortions of the infancy of the earliest Sasanian kings. In short, Constantine offers not only a possible chronology of the emergence of each sequence but a closer look at the particular problems that suggest them and the rhetorical screens that select, recycle and propagate them anew.

CHAPTER 4

# Constantine

In the Sasanian era the origins and early life of Ardashir and his descendants were several times reimagined as kingly fables. These were stories in which a gap in the record, or a selective use of historical memory, provided a structure for arguments asserting the legitimacy of the course of events; arguments expressed as variations on a pair of themes deeply embedded in the literatures of the region. Thus abstracted, untidy, even uncomfortable aspects of the rise of the early Sasanian dynasty were spun into the glittering threads that priestly hands wove back into the tableau of dynastic origins displayed in the *Kārnāmag* tradition. So much can be strongly inferred from the little information available. What is missing is any but the broadest sense of the means by which these narratives were reproduced, the motives for doing so or the audience intended to consume them.

Ardashir was not, however, the only Late Antique ruler whose life and actions came to occupy a pivotal place in the historical schema of a religious-imperial worldview. The favour shown to Christianity by the emperor Constantine I secured him a similar role in the Christian literatures of Eurasia. Because of the retrospective perception of his significance in the Christian era, versions of Constantine's deeds and victories multiplied as the cultural power of Christianity waxed, eventually to be recounted from Britain to Syria. In consequence, renditions of Constantine's life, sometimes augmented to be of greater local significance, are abundant. Of this great mass of material, what interests us here is a small number of texts belonging a single family of Greek hagiography. At the core of these are three long, composite biographical works framed as historical narratives and largely drawing material from the Byzantine historical tradition. Enmeshed in these texts are representatives of the same birth and youth narratives, Sequence One and Sequence Two, employed across texts connected to the *Kārnāmag* tradition. Unlike the extant iterations of the *Kārnāmag*, it is possible to break these longer texts down and trace the ancestry of their components with some precision.

In doing so, useful details emerge regarding the timing, origins and behaviour of both narratives over time, details that may be put to work in a consideration of the Persian tradition: most notably, the distinctly different and clearly separate origins of each, and the deep entanglement of both with an argumentative historiography, again, hingeing on problems of *legitimacy* and *lineage*. This is not to argue that the careers or characters of these men were exactly

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parallel. What links the two is the terms and processes of their later reception: each man presented roughly comparable problems of interpretation while "founding" *roughly* comparable memorialising systems; each attracted, as a result, the same patterns of interpretation. In the *Kārnāmag* tradition and the ninth-century hagiographies, Ardashir and Constantine became the same *kind* of king: a divine appointee charged with ending the old world that the new may be born.

## 1 Core Texts

Key here are three Greek texts that Alexander Kazhdan deemed especially significant in his argument that the eighth and ninth centuries saw the peak of literary interest in the emperor's life. Named for their editors, they are the *Guidi*, *Opitz* and *Halkin Vitae* (hereafter they shall be referred to collectively as the *vitae*).[1] These categories are based on the schema of Freidhelm Winkelmann, who sorted the MS tradition into six main streams. His system was adopted by both Kazhdan and Samuel Lieu in their considerations of the Byzantine legends of Constantine and is used here.[2] Representing a range of dates between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries, these texts are conglomerations of components, drawn from a complicated and obscure network of texts that, in turn, rests on a largely invisible mass of even earlier traditions.

The earliest *vita* of Constantine considered by Winkelmann is somewhat extraneous to this study. This work, henceforth the *Winkelmann Vita*, was reconstructed on the basis of three hagiographies derived from the same tradition (BHG 365z, 336 & 366a).[3] On the basis of an eighth-century MS fragment and the presence of a reference to the (Western) Sylvester Legend, Winkelmann dated this tradition to the sixth century, though he left open the possibility of an earlier date, suggesting either the reigns of Theodosius II or Justinian I as possible dates of compilation.[4] The source texts of this *vita* may represent summaries of a shared prototype, though Winkelmann thought this unlikely.[5] This tradition seems to have had very little interest in Constantine's youth. Conversely, much effort is expended on Constantine's reverential treatment of church officials, his foundation of Constantinople, and funeral.

1 Kazhdan 1987, 200, 211.
2 Winkelmann 1973, Lieu 1998, 152–5.
3 Text and commentary given in Winkelmann 1987.
4 Ibid., 631.
5 Ibid., 625.

Though neither sequence is present in this *vita*, it has some minor relevance to our study insofar as it indicates the optional nature of these narratives and appears, like the *vitae*, to have been an attempt to build a relatively lengthy, historically plausible, laudatory narrative out of heterogeneous material.

In this regard, the introduction of this text is of particular interest. Opening with the (likely) murder of Carinus, an immediate attempt, with a subtext of tyranny, is made to position events within a political context in which a chronology is implied, as in the *Kārnāmag* texts.[6] Both the *Guidi* and *Halkin vitae* open with similar attempts at place-setting, implying that a similar thought process underlies their construction. As inaccurate as some of their statements are, all of these texts are attempts to compound groups of disparate material into a plausible past. While tendentious, the *Winkelmann Vita* contains little that could be considered legendary. The later *vitae*, however, give a detailed, and very familiar, account of Constantine's early life.

## 2 Constantine's Early Life according to the Vitae

Each *vita* gives a very similar version of Constantine's birth and youth. The story is made up of two parts, unfolding according to Sequence One and Sequence Two respectively. In outline the narrative proceeds as follows.

1. Constantius, while travelling on official business, stops at an inn. He has sex with Helena, who is working there in some capacity.[7] Constantius experiences a post-coital dream-vision from which he senses that the encounter may be of some significance. He gives Helena gifts, including a purple cloak, and leaves.[8] Constantine is born nine months later. Years pass and Constantius sends his companions out on a mission of some kind: in the older version of the story, they are looking for a suitable boy for Constantius to adopt in place of his imbecilic legitimate son. They stop at the inn where they are served by Helena and her son. When Constantine makes a move towards their horses, Constantius' agents discipline him, causing him to get upset. Helena tells the men that they should not act in this way towards the king's son. The men demand proof of this assertion, and Helena displays her gifts. On returning to Constantius, the men tell

6 Ibid., 632–633.

7 In the *Guidi Vita*, Constantius is making an embassy to the Persians and Helena is the daughter of his "guide" (*ξεναγωγός*), Guidi 1907, 308, lines 2–20.

8 Devos 1982, 219, sec. 7; Guidi 1907, 309, lines 22–24; Halkin 1959b, 74 sec. 2, line 8; Dräger 2010, 14 (3.3). Absent but implied in Halkin 1960, 11, sec. 1.

the emperor of the young Constantine, stressing the boy's kingly bearing and resemblance to his father. Constantius arranges for Helena and Constantine to be brought to him, and joyfully "adopts" Constantine.

2. Constantine is moved to the court of Diocletian or Galerius, for his own safety (to hide him from the designs of Constantius' legitimate wife), as a royal hostage, or in order to continue his education. Constantine excels, but in doing so arouses jealousy and fear in the heart of the host tetrarch: in some versions, an omen announces his destruction of the old religion. The tetrarch is moved to plot against Constantine's life. In two of the *vitae* this plot takes the form of a combat against animals in the arena. Constantine is, however, protected by God, and thus escapes, fleeing to his dying father in Britain. In some versions he expects to be pursued and takes measures against this possibility. Constantine arrives just in time to receive the dying Constantius' blessing.

Though the core of the narrative presented in these three texts is extremely similar, there are significant differences in detail, differences that point to the use of different sources and, just as importantly, the endurance of particular *themes* in each sequence.

## 3 The Vitae

BHG 364 – the *Guidi Vita*. This was a very popular *vita* of probable mid- to-late ninth-century date.[9] Although like the *Winkelmann Vita* it too begins with the murder of Carinus and a summary of the political situation at the beginning of Diocletian's rule, this text displays a keen interest in Constantine's origin. Indeed, almost all of the motifs used here are also present in the other two *vitae* to be considered, making the *Guidi Vita* either very influential in or very representative of Byzantine beliefs about this subject in this period. It contains a full and elaborate rendition of Sequence One, in which Constantine is said to have been the product of a one-off liaison in an inn, and then to have worked there with his mother before being recognised by his father's agents and adopted back into the imperial household. It also alludes to components of Sequence Two in briefly describing his escape from the murderous designs of Diocletian and Galerius. Though the *Guidi Vita* may be viewed as indicative of trends in the reconstruction of the emperor as a type during the Middle Ages, its portrayal of origins does not make extensive use of Sequence Two. In

9 The Greek text was edited and published in Guidi 1907. For a translation of which see Lieu and Montserrat 1996, 97, *f.*

contrast to the rich presentation of Sequence One, the iteration of Sequence Two presented here is vague and anaemic, lacking details seen in texts more than four hundred years older. In this matter, the *Guidi Vita* appears to follow Eusebius whose presentation, as will be shown, omitted certain "heroic" details that had previously been attached to this moment.[10] The ur-compiler of the *Guidi Vita* either did not know or chose not to incorporate these details. They would reappear, however, in the work of other hagiographers addressing the life of Constantine.

BHG 365 – the *Opitz Vita*, dated to sometime between the end of the ninth and the end of the eleventh centuries.[11] A mixture of earlier material including Eusebius, Theodore Lector and Socrates: both Opitz and Bidez saw the work of the Anomoean historian Philostorgios as underpinning some of this *vita*, though possibly mediated by recompilations in some obscure fashion.[12] Kazhdan and Lieu also noted its use of unorthodox, even non-Christian, texts.[13] These exotic sources may explain why we can see here some very old elements of Constantine's biography resurfacing in the narrative. The beginning of this *vita* is fragmentary, with most of Constantine's youth in the inn (Sequence One) missing. The real interest of the *Opitz Vita* lies in its greatly expanded presentation of Sequence Two. Here the plot made by the antagonist Tetrarch (in this case Galerius) against the young Constantine is fleshed out, with aristocratic hunting games becoming the means by which he seeks to kill the young prince. This version of events sees the young Constantine, aided by God, ward off a lion, a bear and a leopard.[14] Likewise, this *vita* states that Constantine lamed post-horses behind him in order to avoid pursuit.[15] Neither of these elements occur in Eusebius but can be traced right back to the early fourth century, within Constantine's own lifetime: similar claims appear in the works of Lactantius and the shadowy Praxagoras of Athens.[16]

The *Opitz Vita* provides considerably more detail than either of these works, and may, particularly in the animal combat, offer a window into a much older layer of the representation of the plot against Constantine. This representation,

10 Eusebius, VC., 19–21.

11 The text of this *vita* was published in Opitz 1934. Parts of its lost beginning have been published in Bidez 1935 and Halkin 1960. The author of the *Opitz Vita* made an explicit citation of Philostorgius, see page 169 note 158 below.

12 Bidez 1935, 404. A list of parallels to be found in this section of the *vita* is made at Opitz 1934, 591–593. See also, Bidez 1935, 404 and page 169 below.

13 Kazhdan 1987, 202, Lieu 1998, 153–154.

14 Amidon 2007, 241, n. 8 notes that a similar turn of phrase can be found at Bidez 1935, 422 and Lactantius, De Mortibus, 24.

15 Bidez 1935, 422.

16 See page 167 below.

it will be seen below, was probably a deliberate, tendentious and dramatic remodelling of a rather anodyne reality. By repeating this ancient staging in a hagiographic biography, the *Opitz Vita* signals a certain continuity in the *meaning* of this representation. Constantine's public defeat of beasts was a stage on which a contrast between legitimate and illegitimate monarchy could be made. Moreover, it was one in which a usefully ambiguous divine power might very easily be conscripted. It was therefore just as useful in the fourth century as it was in the ninth or tenth. A comparison with the final *vita* considered here is most telling in this regard: in this text some of these themes are even more developed and even more explicitly referenced.

BHG 365n – the *Halkin* or *Patmos Vita*, dating to the twelfth to thirteenth century.[17] In addition to its probable cannibalism of earlier *Guidi*-like *vitae*, this *vita* makes use of Alexander the Monk's *De Inventio Crucis*.[18] A thoroughly garbled presentation of historical detail drawing heavily from the *Passio Eusignii*, the *Halkin Vita's* reworkings of the narrative familiar from the *Guidi* and *Opitz vitae* grant it much literary and ideological interest, if not historical significance. In staging Constantine's youth, it shares the general outline of the two previous *vitae*, though it has altered a number of details. This is most significant in its rendition of the beast combat in the arena. In the *Halkin Vita* this has been greatly expanded with Constantine taking Galerius' place in a ritualised combat involving a public acclamation of the king's virtue.[19] Thus the *Halkin Vita* explicitly, and rather heavy-handedly, acknowledges this as a *contrastive* episode in which the hand of the divine was at work.

The *Halkin Vita's* rather obvious staging offers support for what has been argued above in relation to Ardashir: Sequence Two is an argument of a very specific type. It exists to strike a comparison between the illegitimacy of the man "deposed" and the legitimacy of the man who deposed him alongside a clear statement of the latter's divine election. A victorious, public combat is merely an unsubtle extension of the claims of beauty, skill in war, and courtly manners generally asserted in this kind of story though it is not required, and the extant legends of Sargon and Cyrus do not appear to use one. The parallel use of such a set piece in the court narratives of Ardashir and Constantine is rather interesting: we see here the attraction of a single motif to a specific story form in very different cultural contexts. The implications, meaning and

17 Edited and printed in Halkin 1959b and Halkin 1959a.

18 Halkin 1959b, 70–71. Alexander the Monk wrote at some point between the sixth and ninth centuries but is extremely difficult to date with any certainty; Kazhdan 1987, 199–200.

19 Halkin 1959b, 77, sec. 3, lines 21–31.

possible antecedents of this component will receive more attention later in this chapter.

As composite "biographical" texts claiming historicity but using typologically stereotypical narrative forms to portray birth and youth, the *vitae* are comparable to the texts of the *Kārnāmag* tradition. Here we will extract these components and deconstruct their development before their incorporation into the longer, composite narratives represented by the *vitae*. We will do so with reference to a number of texts from the Greek and Latin historical and hagiographic tradition dating from the fourth century through to the Middle Ages. The resulting "stratigraphy" shows each component to have been the product of an entirely separate development. Moreover, it suggests that the roots of each may be found, definitively in one case, in political or ideological claims, or difficulties, current in Constantine's own lifetime.

## 4 Sequence One: The Inn Narrative

The outlines of Constantine's conception and boyhood in an inn, the tokens left to his mother, and his recognition then "adoption" by Constantius narrated in all of the *vitae* are so similar that a tight relationship between all three may be supposed. A seventh-century model text for the *Guidi Vita* has been postulated that, if it did indeed exist, might explain the commonalities, though in the absence of anything concrete, this must remain disputed.[20] To complicate things further, crossover certainly occurred with later authors reusing and augmenting the *Guidi* and *Guidi*-like *vitae*.

The *vitae* themselves are, however, composites and as such somewhat secondary to the question of the *ultimate* source of the inn episode. Nearly fifty years ago Winkelmann proposed that a legendary "*Frühgeschichte*" of Constantine underpinned the appearance of this episode in a number of texts and similar conclusions had been drawn some time before.[21] This idea is revisited here in light of the threefold appearance of Sequence One in the

20 An earlier *vita* is "unquestionable" according to Linder 1975, 51. On the possibility of a model text for the *Guidi Vita*, see Kazhdan 1987, 201.

21 "*Das Kernstück der Passio, ein gutes Drittel des Textes, enthält nämlich eine legendäre Kindheits- und Frühgeschichte Konstantins I., die auch in den vielen, weitverbreiteten hagiographischen Konstantinviten in irgendeiner Form zu finden ist.*" Winkelmann 1970, 286. A seventh- or eighth-century origin for the romantic version of Constantine's conception and birth (based on the likely date of the *Passio Eusignii*) seems to have been proposed by Heydenreich 1893, 14; Coleman 1914, 121–122; Winkelmann 1970, 288 (regarding its "*Vorlage*").

unevenly harmonised Iranian tradition considered above. A case for the relatively early emergence of such a "document" of Constantine's early life, and for its independent nature, can be made with reference to its narrative type, and this narrative's possible usefulness as a counter to a polemic hostile to Constantine and centred on his mother.

The appearance of components associated with Sequence One across Constantine's historiography is mapped out in Table 8 below. The story appears to arrive very suddenly, very late, and complete with very little precedent in the historical literature. This may, however, be deceptive: a number of brief, sometimes very early, references to Constantine's maternal ancestry are of significance to understanding the probable antecedents as well as the *why* of this legend. Thus, a number of extremely brief references to Helena's low status, unattached to any other motif of Sequence One, have been included in this schema.

Fixing a date for the emergence of a text that might qualify as Winkelmann's *Frühgeschichte* is rather difficult. Some kind of tradition linking Helena to prostitution, or, at the very least, an extramarital relationship, must have been available by the ninth century: Theophanes Confessor appears to reference (angrily) something very like it and, of course, the author of the *Guidi Vita* staged Constantine's conception in bluntly transactional terms shortly afterwards.[22] While any such reconstruction can only be hypothetical, a knot of details in a number of fairly obscure, and extremely disparate, texts would seem to argue for a relatively early date for the earliest stages of this tradition, *perhaps* as early as the sixth century.

### 4.1 *The Passio Eusignii*

By far the most significant source for the development of Sequence One is BHG 369 – the *Passio Eusignii*, a work postulated to have descended from a seventh-century archetype.[23] Supposedly an account of the interrogation of the soldier-saint Eusignius by the emperor Julian, the *Passio Eusignii* spends a surprising amount of time talking about the life and deeds of Constantine.[24] Often speaking in the first person, the text's subject "Eusignius" claims to have

22 Indeed, the contrast between the denunciations of Theo. Chron., AM.5814 (31–32) and the matter-of-fact statement at Guidi 1907, 310, lines, 17–20 is quite disconcerting.

23 Kazhdan found this text difficult to date, though posited a *terminus ante quem* for its Greek version of the very late tenth century: Kazhdan 1987, 203–204. Winkelmann had already suggested that its "*Vorlage*" went back to the seventh century, see Winkelmann 1970, 287–288. Something like this story seems to have entered Armenian versions of the *Life of Sylvester* by the end of the seventh century, see page 138 note 58 below.

24 The edited text is printed in Devos 1982.

been a companion of Constantius and then of Constantine himself. He is portrayed as a witness to a number of important events in the younger emperor's life, including his conception and his foundation of Constantinople. The *Passio Eusignii*'s rendition of Constantine's conception and later recognition is clearly closely related to the version of Sequence One given in all three *vitae*. Indeed, this version of the incident was believed by Kazhdan to have been much closer to the "original" story of Constantine's birth than that given in the *Guidi Vita*.[25]

Although its construction of Constantine's conception and birth does indeed demonstrate a strong link to the *vitae*, particularly the *Halkin Vita*, the *Passio Eusignii* contains a major structural difference in that Constantine's rediscovery does not lead to him serving at the court of Galerius. The *Passio Eusignii* represents a different arrangement of sources, one in which Sequence Two was not employed. Because the chronological and historical accuracy of the *Passio Eusignii* is rather poor, it can be postulated that its source for Constantine's origin contained very little information connecting it to a broader historical context. Moreover, because this tradition moves from Constantine's readoption to a recounting of some of the campaigns he shared with his father whereas the *vitae* move directly to the court of Diocletian or Galerius, it would seem plausible that the narrative of any *Frühgeschichte* ended at Constantius' acknowledgement of his son. As in the births of Shapur and Ormazd, we may see here evidence of a discrete narrative entirely concerned with the birth, loss and recovery of an important individual.

While the *Passio Eusignii* does considerable violence to the reader's sense of plausibility in the advanced age of its protagonist and his lengthy, public, dressing down of a reigning emperor, it contains several curious details that may offer some support for a relatively early date for the core of this narrative.[26] First, the author portrayed the saint as a member of the group of men who first accompany Constantius to Helena's inn and then, years later, recognise the boy while seeking a replacement for Constantius' feeble-minded son.[27] It is tempting to see this as an inter-textual reference with the author expecting his audience to be already familiar with the story the saint was now telling

25 Kazhdan's brief discussion of this story and his cursory stemma of its likely development is largely followed here, see Kazhdan 1987, 214.

26 An interesting detail is the interjection of the army in Eusignius' favour (urging him to keep speaking), Devos 1982, 222, sec.11. Compare this with the army's assurance to Jovian that it rejected Julian's paganism in the Syriac tradition reported by Socrates, *cf.* Socrates. HE. 3.22; Gollancz 1928, 211–212.

27 *ἡμεῖς εκ τοῦ πολέμου τῶν Σαρματῶν ἐπανήλθομεν, και κατελύσαμεν* & etc. Devos 1982, 220, sec.1 and *f.* The other *vitae*, even the *Halkin Vita* which is often very close to the *Passio Eusignii* portrayed both episodes in the third person.

in the first person. While such a trick would push the date of the narrative back, it is essentially impossible to prove.[28] Second, the *Passio Eusignii* sets Constantine's conception in the context of a campaign of Constantius against the Sarmatians: a realistic enemy for a Roman emperor of the third or fourth centuries.[29] Third, Constantius' active and soldierly retainers are *protectores*, a late Roman, originally Latin, military title that had become largely courtly or ceremonial by the time of Justinian I.[30] It should be noted that this title has disappeared in the *Guidi Vita*.[31] On a related note, Kazhdan remarked that some Latinisms in this text *might* be interpreted as evidence of an early composition: these may, however, simply reflect a conscious effort on the part of the author of the *Passio Eusignii* to use anachronisms in order to grant his production an air of unearned antiquity.[32] Finally, with its frank depiction of a Christian hero born from an act of prostitution, the source of the *Passio Eusignii* would appear to be linked to a hagiographic style current in the sixth and seventh centuries in which inns and disreputable people figured heavily in the lives of the holy.[33]

Alongside the *Passio Eusignii*, three quite disparate texts offer some very suggestive data concerning the date of Constantine's birth legend and the limits of its original form. The first is the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon*, another hagiography whose staging of the birth of its subject is extremely similar to that made in the *vitae* and the *Passio Eusignii* and is occasionally mentioned in

28 "*Die eigentliche Passio des Eusignios macht nur den Eindruck einer blutleeren konstruierten, breiten Rahmenerzählung*", Winkelmann 1970, 286.

29 In the *Guidi Vita* both the battle against the Sarmatians and the *protectores*' quest for a new heir has been changed to an embassy to a certain *Οὐαραχθης* the "king of the Parthians". Lieu suggests that this might refer to one of a series of three Bahrams who ruled the Sasanian empire from 271 to 294, Lieu and Montserrat 1996, 142. Kazhdan believed that the *Guidi Vita*, though based on the same tradition as that of the *Passio Eusignii*, was edited by someone with a better grasp of chronology and historical literature, Kazhdan 1987, 214, *cf.* Lieu and Montserrat 1996, 143.

30 *προτίκτορ* in Devos 1982, 219, sec.7, and Halkin 1959b, 75, sec.2, line 14 *f.* The *protectores* are first attested in the third century as trustworthy veterans forming an inner circle around the emperor and fulfilling the roles of military staff, bodyguards and imperial agents, very much, in fact, as they are presented in the *vitae*. In time they became a sort of staff-college. Whether or not they had been "rendered ornamental" by the time of Justinian, as argued by Frank, is unclear, though he presents good evidence that it is unlikely that they had any military role of the sort described by "Eusignius" by this time. On the title and its evolution see Frank 1969, 34–43, 84 *f.* and especially 213–217. See also Kazhdan 1991b, 1753.

31 Here the *protectores* have become "ambassadors" (*πρέσβεις*) drawn from Constantius' court, Guidi 1907, 310, line 1.

32 Kazhdan considered both possibilities, Kazhdan 1987, 203–204.

33 Magoulias 1971.

discussions of this group. The second is a supposed fragment of a sixth-century Syriac history in which a similar story is granted to the emperor Anastasius. The last is a much later Mediaeval Latin adaptation of this episode. Certain details of the latter two texts suggest that the same underlying logic, guided by a limited number of narrative possibilities, is common to the use of this narrative in the Iranian and Roman traditions.

### 4.2 *The Life of Theodore of Sykeon*

Attention has been drawn to the fact that a very similar origin is given to Theodore of Sykeon in BHG 1748 – a hagiography that may date to the seventh century.[34] Here the saint's father is called Kosmas and is a *magistranos* travelling on official business: like Constantius he stops at an inn and spends the night with a prostitute. In a post-coital dream the prostitute sees a star fall into her womb, from which Kosmas predicts great things.[35] Nine months later a child, Theodore, is born to her. He has a number of remarkable, suspiciously kingly, qualities: he is, for example, unbeatable in games.[36] The parallels to the story told across the *vitae* are strong and the possibility exists that Constantine's birth and early life in an inn was modelled on this tradition of *vita*. Yet the haziness surrounding the origin of this version of Constantine's boyhood, and the ancient linkage of Helena to the extremely disreputable occupation of hospitality makes the priority of these traditions uncertain.[37] It is possible, as suggested by Kazhdan, that the similarity is a mere coincidence.[38] It is also possible that the influence ran the other way: several points argue that this may be so.

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34 A connection was considered at Kazhdan 1987, 215. The same author would again mention both stories in the same breath at Kazhdan 1990, 136.

35 Festugière 1970, 3–4, sec.3 lines 23–24 and sec.4, lines 6–8. Translation in Dawes and Baynes 1977, 88–89. An extremely unexpected parallel, and testament to the transcultural royal overtones of this particular portent, can be found in a threatening letter given by the Japanese warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a man so low-born he could not even pretend to a noble lineage, to the ambassadors of the king of Korea in 1590: "I am the only remaining scion of a humble family, but my mother once had a dream in which she saw the sun enter her bosom, after which she gave birth to me. There was a soothsayer who said, 'Wherever the sun shines, there will be no place which shall not be subject to him. It may not be doubted that one day his power will overspread the empire'". Translation in Aston 1878, 232.

36 Festugière 1970, 5, sec.5, lines 21–25. Translation in Dawes and Baynes 1977, 89.

37 On the grounds that the inn story was not known to chroniclers by 600, Kazhdan would seem to have argued for a much later date *and* to have assumed that the *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* preceded it, see Kazhdan 1987, 214–215 and Kazhdan 1990, 136.

38 Kazhdan 1987, 215.

Theodore and Constantine's origin stories take place in nearby provinces; Theodore is born in Galatia, Constantine in Bithynia. Helena's name, and possibly Helena herself, had some kind of association with Drepanum in Bithynia in the fourth century, though the precise nature of this association is unclear; regardless, it later came to be believed that she originated from there.[39] Additionally Helena was already associated with hospitality by the end of this century.[40] Besides, there are in Theodore's *vita* hints not only of the adaptation of a more worldly style of biography, but an awareness of the adoption. Visions of this sort, says a holy man, presage the advent of kings, yet this symbolism is here averted twice, the second time very specifically. The boy will instead be a bishop or a great saint.[41] The next source considered here, set once again in the general vicinity of Anatolia, may add some additional weight to this possibility.

### 4.3 *"John of Ephesus"*

Appended to a fourteenth-century manuscript of Bar Hebraeus is an insertion claiming to have been taken from the (lost) fifth book of the sixth-century historian John of Ephesus. This addition describes the birth of the emperor Anastasius in the context of his foundation of the fortress city of Dara, in terms very similar to those used by the *Passio Eusignii* and the *vitae*.[42] In this fragment, a travelling merchant lodges with a childless couple living in the countryside near the future site of Dara.[43] Experiencing a prophetic dream in which a wonderful tree emerges from the farmer's courtyard, the merchant strikes a deal with the couple in which he promises to pay for any son that God may see

39 *Cf.* Drijvers 1992, 9–12; Barnes 2011, 37–38. Barnes theorises that Constantinus and Helena may actually have met in an inn while Constantius was travelling on official business.

40 See the discussion of Ambrose's panegyric to Theodosius below.

41 A prediction is made by the boy's father that the son will become a bishop … *καρπὸν δῳη σοι τοῦ τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς ἀξιωθησόμενον κλήρου* … More interesting is the prediction made by a local holy man that while the interpreters of such things hold that a star is the sign of a king, it is not to be read as such in this case. *Ἀστὴρ μὲν γὰρ λαμπρὸς βασιλικὴν δόξαν νροσημαίνων διακρίνεται παρὰ τοῖς τὸ κρίνειν εἰδόσιν ὁράματα σοφοῖς· ἀλλ'οὐχ οὕτως ἐπὶ σοὶ τοῦτο λεκτέον*. Festugière 1970, 4, sec.3 lines 23–24 and sec.4, lines 6–8. Translation in Dawes and Baynes 1977, 88–89.

42 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Huntingdon. 52 (*f.* 189r–v). This fragment was brought to my attention by Marianna Mazzola, who has generously allowed me sight and use of a draft of her translation pending its publication.

43 Anastasius was actually born in Dyrrachium in Illyria, quite some way from Dara, see the references in PLRE 2., 78. Van Ginkel suggests that only the last part of this fragment was drawn from a sixth century source, that the legend forming its bulk may have grown up from a scribal error that transmuted Dyrrachium into Dara and that a confused version of this legend underlies IbnBeṭrīq's claim that Anastasius fortified his hometown, Van Ginkel 1995, 57, n72–73.

fit to bring them.[44] Some time after the merchant has left, the couple produces a "beautiful" son whom they raise until he is seven, when the merchant returns and claims the boy, "recognising" him. The boy is given a royal education by his guardian and is eventually raised to the throne as a result of a dream seen by the "high priest" of the imperial capital. *If* this fragment were indeed taken from John, it would demonstrate that a childhood very similar to that used in our later texts was applied to another Roman emperor as early as the sixth century: an emperor only decades dead at the time of writing.

Unfortunately, certain stylistic and structural discrepancies have been raised against the attribution to John.[45] Yet, although the fragment does not involve sexual contact, with its returning traveller, prophecies, prodigious child and oddly staggered paternity it bears a striking resemblance not only to the hypothetical *Frühgeschichte* of Constantine, but also to the sixth-century account of Ardashir's paternity given by Agathias. "John's" returning merchant is, in fact, far more similar to Agathias' Sasan, the travelling soldier, than it is to Sasan the shepherd in disguise portrayed in the *Kārnāmag* texts. If Averil Cameron was correct in describing Agathias' version of Ardashir's conception as a hostile, Syriac, story fed to him by his informant Sergius, "John's" fragment suggests that a more positive version of the tale may also have circulated in Syriac speaking circles during this time.[46] There is, in any case, nothing that unambiguously disproves the claimed authorship or shows the story to be a later production: it would seem unlikely that any legend about Dara would have originated after the city's capture by the Rashidun Caliphate in the seventh century. The probable seventh-century date for the archetype of the *Passio Eusignii* raises the possibility that it used even older material and, perhaps, thereby, that a similar version of Constantine's birth was already in circulation during the sixth century and that "John", whoever that was, may have adapted it in defence of

44 *Cf.* Herod., 1.108.1. On the significance of tree imagery in eastern traditions, particularly vines as an Achaemenid symbol, see the discussion and references in Eddy 1961, 20, 26–30; Cizek 1975, 540; Pelling 1996, 69 (and n. 8).

45 Van Ginkel 1995, 56–57.

46 In defence of his community's claim to represent orthodoxy, the actual John of Ephesus took up a tradition of using hagiographic tropes as sticks to beat "persecuting" emperors, and other Chalcedonians, see Wood 2010, 176–178, 186–191. Moreover, given the liminal credal and geographic position of Miaphysite groups within the Roman Empire, John and other Miaphysite writers could attach themselves to, or remove themselves from, Roman authority depending on the attitudes of individual rulers, see ibid., 210–215. In such a context, a Miaphysite writer's attachment of a positive kingly, *topos* to the "friendly" Anastasius would make a great deal of sense.

a controversial emperor sympathetic to a Miaphysite position.[47] In any case the convergence between the Syriac/Iranian and Syriac/Roman forms is rather interesting: there was, it would seem, a very specific, albeit cross-cultural, way to phrase divine interest in a royal childhood.

### 4.4 *The "Libellus"*

A much later Mediaeval Latin text, the *De Constantino Magno eiusque Matre Helena Libellus* (henceforth the *Libellus*), demonstrates the surprisingly tight limitations of this phrasing. The tradition of this text is hazy: it may date (in some form) to some time before the late thirteenth century.[48] A rather obscure and very late text, the *Libellus* tends to receive relatively little attention in considerations of the *vitae* tradition despite its clear links to it.[49] Despite its Latinity, and a large-scale adulteration of the narrative with an extraneous romantic element, the self-contained plot of the *Libellus*, terminating at a happy reunion of father and son, may be the most "pure" extant representation of the underlying *Frühgeschichte* used by the *vitae* and the *Passio Eusignii*.

In the *Libellus* Helena is a young Christian noblewoman of Trier. Constantius rapes her in a hotel while she is making a pilgrimage to Rome, leaving tokens with her afterwards out of (it would seem) guilt. Helena lives in obscurity with her young son, the product of her assault, until, at the age of ten, he gets involved in a plot by a pair of merchants to defraud the "Emperor of the Greeks" of his daughter's dowry by presenting Constantine as the "Western" emperor's son.[50] The plot succeeds and Constantine is married under false pretenses to the daughter of the eastern emperor. A "shipwreck" episode follows in which the merchants abandon the couple to die on a deserted island. Both the merchant's

47 Anastasius was a *silentarius* in the imperial court and came to the throne via the machinations of Zeno's widow Adriane. His accession "disinherited" Zeno's brother Longinus and triggered a revolt in Zeno's homeland of Isauria. Moreover, Anastasius had leanings towards Monophysitism and this made him unpopular in the capital. See, Tinnefeld, Savvidis and Degani 2006.

48 A romance of Constantine's childhood, appearing in Italian and Latin and sharing many of the features of the Byzantine inn-story, was noted by Wesselofsky 1877, 173–176. The Latin version, reproduced by Wesselofsky is taken from the *Chronicon Imaginis Mundi* of Jacques D'Acqui († *c.*1334), yet this claims to have been taken from a *Chronica Treverensi*, which, again, seems to link the story to Trier. Another candidate for the earliest attestation of this legend in a Western language *may* be in the *Historia Imperialis* of Giovanni Mansionario († *c.*1337), who cited an unknown "*Historia Britonum*" as the source for this episode, see Coen 1881, 30–33. The *Historia Imperialis* is still unedited and difficult to access. I have had no opportunity to examine its text.

49 Lieu 2005,398–399.

50 Dräger 2010, 16–18 sec.4–6.

plot and abandonment of the couple is alien to the Greek tradition but at this point the plot returns to its familiar trajectory. Constantine returns to Rome alongside his wife and is reunited with his mother.[51] Buying a guest-house, Helena becomes, as she was in the rhetoric of Ambrose a millennia before, a *stabularia*.[52] In the meantime, the nobility of his blood draws Constantine to military exercises.[53] His success in such games before Constantius, now the emperor of the Romans, attracts the emperor's attention.[54] An interrogation follows culminating in Helena's display of Constantius' gifts.[55] An adoption of Constantine as Constantius' son, the just punishment of the merchants, and Constantine's unchallenged inheritance of both halves of the empire follows.[56]

The *Libellus*' restructure of the recognition sequence, forced by the addition of the extraneous "shipwreck" plot line, moves the recognition of the boy by Constantius' agents from an inn to a display of military games in before

51 Ibid., 34–38 sec.14. Constantine is about twenty at the time his father recognises him and Helena states that he was away from her for five years, 46 (*cf.* 19.14 & 20.3).

52 *Cf.* Ambrose, De Obitu Theodosii. 42; Dräger 2010, 38, sec.15.9.

53 Dräger 2010, 38–40, sec.15–16, *stabularia* 15.9, *Constantinus … instinctu … quem sibi natura ex nobili sanguine procreate ingeniavit* 16.1.

54 Ibid., 40–42, sec.16–17.

55 Ibid., 40–48 sec.17–20, the gifts are an ornament, likely a clasp or brooch (also the conclusion made by Dräger, ibid., 107–108), worn, according to the text, exclusively by emperors, *ornamentum … quo illo tempore soli imperatores in humeris ornari et insignari consueverunt*, and a ring from Constantius' finger. In two of the *vitae* the gift is a purple cloak, a garment whose association with the imperial office was well known *cf. πορφυρόβαφον ἔμπλουμμον ἐπενδύτην* Guidi 1907, 308, lines, 23–24 and *χιτῶνα πορφυροῦν καὶ μανιάκην χρυσοῦν* Halkin 1959b, 74, sec.2, line 8. The *Opitz Vita*'s use of a very similar story can be safely assumed, as it was at Halkin 1960, 11, n. 4 and (following him) Amidon 2007, 240, n. 2. An ornate fibula, worn on the shoulder, was part of court regalia in Late Antiquity and specific forms of it were reserved for the emperor and empress, see Stout 1994, 83 *f.* A passage cited by Stout, Procopius. De Aedif., 3.1.18–23, detailing Justinian's granting of symbols of office to five Armenian "*σατράπαι*" mentions both a cloak, χλαμὺς (though seemingly cloth-of-gold rather than purple) and a brooch *περόνη*. Procopius' description of these brooches matches those seen in depictions of emperors from the third to sixth century, most famously, that worn by Justinian himself in the apse mosaic of San Vitale in Ravenna. The statement in such a late text that jewellery worn on the shoulder marked imperial rank is, in light of the clear imperial associations of the purple cloak given in the Byzantine *vitae*, intriguing. It is possible that some version of the story had simply swapped one unmistakable imperial badge for another (which a later redactor felt the need to explain). In any case, the presence of what was probably fairly obscure symbolism for a Mediaeval reader in the West strengthens the case for an ultimately Greek origin for this tradition, with this small detail indicating that the ancestral prototype of the *Libellus* differed slightly from those of the *vitae*. On the possible significance and remarkable prevalence of rings in royal legends see Ogden 2017, 24 and *f.*

56 Dräger 2010, 50–54 (21–22).

Constantius himself. As a result, the work has a strong, specific, parallel with resolution of the origin narratives of Shapur and Ormazd used in the *Kārnāmag* tradition. The *Libellus*' comparative potential in this regard is so far largely untapped and more will be made of it later.

## 5 Date, Authorship and Intent

While all of the evidence adduced above is quite circumstantial, it does admit the possibility that the story of Constantine's birth in an inn, and by extension, any written *Frühgeschichte*, may be very old indeed: possibly reaching back as far as the sixth century and perhaps even further. A relatively early origin in writing would certainly help to explain the story's impressive geographic and linguistic span. Two references to it, seemingly as an independent narrative, in literatures at the fringes of the Byzantine world, bespeak a very wide circulation. A brief reference to Helena as a prostitute in the history of Moses Khorenats'i shows that something like it was known in Armenia by (according to the most conservative date for this author) the eighth century. Thompson believed Khorenats'i's source to have been an Armenian version of the *Acta Silvestri*, a tradition that probably originated in Rome in the fifth or sixth century.[57] Two versions of an Armenian translation of Sylvester's *vita* made at the end of the seventh century are extant and both briefly mention a version of Constantine's conception involving prostitution and later recognition.[58] The most accessible Latin edition of the *life of Sylvester* does not seem to characterise Helena in this way and it follows that Khorenats'i's source incorporated this "fact" somewhere in its transmission.[59] In considering this edition, Thompson suspected that the Armenian versions incorporated some early iteration of the *Passio Eusignii*.[60] Ibn Beṭrīq, writing in Arabic in Fatamid-ruled Egypt in the

57 Khorenats'i, 230 and n. 602.

58 Thomson 2005, 59–65.

59 The *Acta Silvestri* was very popular and presents, as a result, a monstrously complicated philological problem. A critical edition of its Latin versions has gone unpublished for decades, and I have here relied on an early twentieth-century edition of the *Sanctuarium seu Vitae sanctorum*, a collection of Latin hagiographies produced by Mombritius in the fifteenth century, Mombritius 1910, 508–531, a less than adequate edition, see Lieu 1998, 170, n. 12. For a recent overview of the tradition of the *Acta Silvestri* as a whole and its relationship to Constantine, see Sessa 2016.

60 Translations of the relevant section of both Armenian versions are made at Thomson 2005, 80–83; for the link to the *Passio Eusignii*, see 80, n. 80.

early tenth century, gives what looks like a cleaned up version of this story in his chronicle.[61]

On the other hand, the story told in the *Passio Eusignii* was certainly not an official production and could have played no role in dynastic propaganda: its possible readings, as demonstrated by the remarkably blunt language used by "Eusignius" and Moses Khorenats'i's explicit statement that Helena actually *was* a prostitute, are antithetical to the reverent image of Helena propagated either in the dynasty's own self-presentation or the productions of those seeking their favour.[62] For this reason, it also seems extremely unlikely that this was the way that the lost, fourth-century biographies of Praxagoras and Bemarchios portrayed Constantine's boyhood. We might hazard a guess that it arose after the extinction of Constantine's dynasty perhaps some time before the later sixth century.

The story of Constantine's birth and early life in an inn has been described as a reflection of the themes of Greek or Roman comedy and far more recently as a "folk-tale and (…) romance of the Hellenistic recognition type".[63] It is certainly true that the recognition of a lost child was an extremely widespread trope in Mediterranean literature, however the recognition scene used here is of a rather specific type; it is neither tragic (as it is in the story of Oedipus), nor the opportunity for humour (as for example, in *Poenulus* where the saucy possibility of accidental incest hangs over the happy reunion). Moreover, though tokens (specifically a purple cloak) are very prominent in this tradition, it also uses the same forms of identification seen in the Herodotean Cyrus and the *Kārnāmag's* account of Shapur and Ormazd; the boy looks like his father and performs a game-like action symbolic of kingship. This version of Constantine's boyhood is, therefore, a member of a group of narratives that presage the glory of a historically significant individual.

As in the Iranian examples, it may be suspected that pressing political and ideological concerns suggest the use of this narrative to sympathetic authors: that the granting of this kind of origin was a tool by which a retrospective shine could be put on the antecedents of a controversial ruler. The appearance of a similar plot (without sex, or tokens, but including a spontaneous recognition) by "John" in a (presumably) partisan description of the solid, but rather unremarkable, Anastasius, an emperor who faced serious objections to his

61 Ibn Beṭrīq, 11.2.

62 A review of contemporary evidence for this view is given at Drijvers 1992, 39*f.* More recent work drawing attention to Helena's elevated position in Constantine's dynastic propaganda can be found in Dam 2007, 302*f.*, and (in contrast to the lack of female family members in the self-presentation of the other Tetrarchs) Hekster 2015, 313–314.

63 Heydenreich 1893, 14; Linder 1975, 51.

legitimacy, is a case in point. While "John's" attempt to elevate Anastasius in this way failed, the immeasurably greater cultural impact of Constantine's reign and actions provided much more fertile soil for the entrenchment of this pattern.

A childhood containing the motifs classed as Sequence One, is, in both the Byzantine and Iranian cases, a script generated under the right conditions. It is a later attempt to plaster over events with the potential to be seen as a rupture in the harmonious operation of societies in which kingship is a quasi-divine office and rapid change is viewed with deep suspicion. In Constantine's case, as it seems to have been in Ardashir's, it was the result of a sharply polarised debate about the political or cultural ramifications of an individual's life in which the *descent* of that individual had become a point of contention. Proceeding from such sticky points of historical memory and used to create *a* past, the narrative form cannot be seen as completely external to historiography. Despite its incredible narrative, its ability to slide into self-consciously historical works should come as no surprise.

### 5.1 *The Status of Helena*

Constantine's mother Helena has an impressive legendary edifice of her own, largely due to her later association with tales of the discovery of the true cross.[64] As colourful, and intrinsically interesting, as this edifice is, it would be unwise to be unduly distracted by it. Helena's story can never be wholly separated from that of her son. As he passed into the realm of holy legend so did she; moreover the image of the mother would, at times, exert an enormous influence over that of the son. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the version of Constantine's birth reflected in the *vita*. As has been shown, this account betrays a number of similarities to other stories of royal origins and as such bears the marks of a retrospective construction. Yet, at the same time the setting of this narrative would seem to be strongly, and very specifically, connected to information about Helena that emerged very early in the historiography of her son.

Though contemporary sources addressing the subject are hardly detailed, it is certain that Constantine's mother Helena and his father Constantius were

64 On the means by which Helena became associated with the *Inventio Crucis*, a story with which she originally had no connection, see Drijvers 1992, 81 *f.* In the west, imaginings of Helena's status tended to make her an aristocrat, one such story focussed on Trier, possibly through confusion with Helena, the wife of Crispus see ibid., 21 *f.* (this is the line taken in the *Libellus*, see Dräger 2010, 12 (2.1–2)). Others on Britain, probably through intense romanticisation of Constantine's brief though eventful association with that province, see (for example) Matthews 1983 and Harbus 2002.

not social equals and that this fact was widely known very early on: a lowly Helena was in circulation in the fourth century.[65] If an oblique reference to Constantine's unworthiness in Libanius' funeral oration for Julian (†.363) does, as it appears to, cast aspersions on Constantine's descent, Julian and his supporters may be conjectured to have harboured some bitterness on this point.[66] Indeed, it was probably the succession issues raised by Constantius' second marriage, and their brutal conclusion, that ensured the survival and propagation of Helena's status in the record. Constantine was, according to Eutropius (writing around 370), the product of a déclassé marriage.[67] The writer of the *Origo Constantini*, despite his clear sympathy with Constantine, and a parroting of his propaganda, was even less polite: Helena, here named, was *vilissima*.[68] The history of the decidedly non-Christian Eunapius, a rough contemporary of the former writers, probably stands behind the later account of Zosimus, who calls her a *γυνή οὐ σεμνός* and claims that she was never Constantius' wife.[69] It appears to have been in response to a very similar position that Theophanes Confessor, writing in the very early ninth century, was moved to comment:

> Other Arians and pagans accuse Constantine the Great of being illegitimate, but they too are lying. For his imperial line goes back even earlier than Diocletian. Indeed his father Constantius was a grandson of the emperor Claudius and he fathered Constantine the Great by his first wife Helena.[70]

Slightly later George the Monk stated that the "liars and fools" who had spread rumours to the effect that Constantine was the son of a prostitute had been repeatedly refuted.[71]

In the fourth and fifth centuries, however, Christian authors do not seem to have denied the charge. Jerome, writing around 380, calls her a *concubina*, as does Orosius some thirty-five years later, though both may have been borrowing from Eutropius.[72] A section of the *Passio Artemii*, an eighth-century

65 For more detailed discussions of this problem and a list of the relevant sources, see Drijvers 1992, 15–19; Barnes 2011, 30–35.

66 Libanius, Orat. 18.8.

67 Eutropius, Breviarium, 10.2.

68 Anon. Val. Origo Const., 2.

69 Zosimus, 2.8.2. On Zosimus and Eunapius see Treadgold 2010, 110. Paschoud saw the connection between Helena and hospitality as a "*tradition païenne*" Paschoud 2000, 206.

70 Theo. Chron. AM.5814.

71 George the Monk, Chron., 485–486.

72 Jerome, Chron., 228; Orosius, 7.25.16; Drijvers 1992, 17–18.

hagiographic text, associated with the fragments of the Anomoean Christian historian Philostorgius (late fourth century), has Julian describe Helen as a low woman, no better than a prostitute, and Constantine as an illegitimate usurper.[73] It would seem that Philostorgius was sensitive to the genealogical problem presented by "Julian": he cast Constantius II's massacre of his uncles and cousins as a posthumous order from Constantine, whom they had poisoned: shifting blame in order to obviate questions of succession posed by Julian's ascension.[74] Ambrose, on the other hand, reframed the terms of the argument, *stressing* Helena's humble origins and using them as evidence of Christian piety in his oration on the death of Theodosius I (d. 395). This text is also notable for being the earliest *specific* linkage of Helena with hospitality and the first indication that this was a widely known "fact".[75] Helena is here first introduced among other pious imperial figures as company for the late emperor in heaven.[76]

> This woman, so they say [*adserunt*], was an inn-girl [*stabularia*] at first, and thus she was known to Constantius the elder, who afterwards came to rule. A good inn-girl, who so diligently sought the stable of the lord; a good inn-girl who was not unknowing of that innkeeper who cared for the wounds of the man hurt by thieves; a good inn-girl who preferred to be thought of as dung that she might attain Christ. Christ raised her therefore, from the dung-heap, to rule. Just as is written: he raises up the helpless from the earth, and elevates the poor man from the dung.

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73 *Ὁ δὲ Κωνστάντινος ἐξ Ἑλένης αὐτῳ γέγονε φαύλης τινὸς γυναικὸς καὶ τῶν χαμαιτύπων οὐδὲν διαφερούσης* … Philostorgius, 2.16a.

74 Philostorgius. 2.4, 2.16. See also Bleckmann and Stein 2015, 106–107.

75 That the author of the Suda also saw this potential (though in an unrelated context) is shown in his entry on the sainted empress herself; here he writes, at some length, on the humble tasks she performed, in later life, in service to monks and holy virgins. These tasks refer not to any memory of Helena's early life but to the legend that grew up around her visit to the Holy Land during which, it later came to be supposed, she put herself at the service of religious communities there; on the lateness of this legend, see Drijvers 1992, 139. An early version of this story is present in Rufinus, HE., 10.8. The story was used in the ecclesiastical histories of Socrates, HE.,. 1.17; Sozomen, HE., 2.2; Theodoret, HE., 1.17 and seems to have reached a very wide audience. In a discussion of the term *stabularia* and Ambrose's use of it, Barnes argued that Helena's status was not as low as either Eunapius' polemic or Ambrose's carefully Christianising oratory would have us believe, Barnes 2011, 30–33.

76 Ambrose, De Obitu Theodosii., 40–42. A hint of counter-polemic might be discerned in *stabulariam hanc primo fuisse adserunt sic cognitam Constantio seniori.*

The *Paschal Chronicle* (*c.*630) describes Constantine in glowing terms yet calls him the illegitimate son of Helena in a sentence very similar to the words of Julian in the *Passio Artemii* attributed to Philostorgius.[77] Theophanes' angry denial of similar assertions has already been given. The issue was still in play a century or more later when the anonymous encylopaedist responsible for the massive literary compilation known as the *Suda* began his entry on the emperor Constantine with the following observation: "He was born of *obscure lineage* to Constantius the emperor …"[78]

While the source for this entry was probably the ferociously orthodox George the Monk, his second entry on Constantine indicates that he also knew the decidedly less sympathetic Eunapius. This writer's low opinion of the great man, very likely coupled with an extremely unflattering description of his mother, scandalised the encyclopaedist's religious and patriotic sensibilities so much that he, alas, refused to record anything Eunapius had to say on the matter.[79]

Theophanes' attribution of Constantine's illegitimacy to "pagans and *Arians*" is interesting but may simply be spleen vented against the stock enemies of Orthodoxy: as Constantine was "the emperor" so Arius remained "the heretic".[80] It is, in any case, unclear what interest a subordinationist author would have in asserting Helena's illegitimacy. Kazhdan theorised that the prostituted Helena was a weapon of Iconoclast writers in their propaganda battle with the Iconodules.[81] The extraordinarily blunt language of the *Passio Eusignii*, which calls Constantine "the son of a whore" and the "son of sin", combined with its emphasis on the power of the cross, the Iconoclast symbol *par excellence*, is interesting to consider in this light.[82] Yet, while Kazhdan was correct to see political and ideological concerns in the *vitae*, his linkage of this particular section to the Iconoclast dispute is far too narrow a lens through which to view it. As has been shown above, the ingredients for Helena the "prostitute" were much older than Iconoclasm.

Rather, the scraps of data we have suggest that a complex of related anti-Constantine polemics, focussing on the emperor's descent, character and his often brutal intra-dynastic politics, quickly wrapped themselves around the

77 *ὁ παῖς αὐτοῦ Κωνσταντινος ὁ νόθος ἐξ Ἑλένης αὐτῳ γενόμενος*, Pasch. Chron. p. 517, *cf.* Philostorgius, 2.16a.

78 *οὗτος ἐξ ἀφανῶν τίκτεται τῷ βασιλεῖ Κωνσταντίῳ* … Suda κ2284.

79 Suda κ2285. Something very like Eunapius' view is probably extant in Zosimus, 2.8.2. On Zosimus' use of Eunapius, see Treadgold 2010, 109–114.

80 Kazhdan 1987, 196, 243–244.

81 Ibid., 248–249.

82 *πόρνης υίος … πορνογέ(ν)νητον*. Devos 1982, 218, sec.6.

emperor's memory as the cultural consequences of his reign became more and more apparent. Sozomen, for example, writing between 439 and 450, fervently denies the charge that the emperor had converted to Christianity on account of his execution of his son Crispus and wife Fausta on, possibly false, charges of adultery.[83] Helena's background could easily have became the focus of another critique, one that gained strength with the extinction of her line and the ascension of Julian, who was a product of Constantius I's far more prestigious marriage, who had no reason to love his great-uncle and every reason to cast doubt on the credentials of his cousins. Though Julian's reign was brief, the damage would have been done: a classist critique of Helena would have firmly implanted itself in the mainstream of Byzantine, indeed Christian, historiography.

Whether or not Constantine actually *was* illegitimate is a question that is of no relevance here. What is certain is that some strands of historiography presented him as so via his mother. Humble birth, at least as far as it implied rusticity or lack of education, seems to have been a fairly standard part of a polemic in Constantine's own time and Constantine's partisans were not above making attacks on lineage either. Lactantius, an author whose Roman patriotism was genuine, if conflicted at times, mutters darkly of the barbaric origin of both Galerius and Maximinus Daia then goes on to make much of the pastoral origin of the latter.[84] Likewise, the author of the *Origo* found several of the actors in the death of the Tetrarchy to be disappointingly common.[85] In light of this, and the fact that her position was still being defended five hundred years after her death, Drijvers' suggestion that Constantine's mother was a potential source of embarrassment to him looks well founded.[86] Yet, perversely, Constantine and his sons had *drawn attention* to Helena, to the possible detriment of a far more traditional appeal to genealogy.

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83 Sozomen, 1.5.

84 Lactantius, De Mortibus., 9.2, 18.13 & 19.6.

85 Anon. Val. Origo Const., 2 (Constantine), 4 (Severus), 5 (Licinius).

86 Drijvers 1992, 15. An interesting parallel may be found at Pan. Lat. VII(6). Speaking on the occasion of the wedding of Constantine and Fausta, daughter of Maximian (307), the orator at first (2) makes much of the union's potential for the production of imperial children. Then, after describing Constantine as the image of his father (3.3–4) he praises Constantine for his early *marriage* to a woman he does not name. Nixon and Saylor Rodgers present this as evidence that Minervina, the mother of Constantine's heir Crispus, was a wife and not a concubine (195, n. 10), but given that Crispus' position may have struck contemporary observers as oddly familiar, one may wonder at the orator's insistence.

Of the *vitae*, only the *Guidi Vita* mentions the claim that Constantius was the descendant of Claudius II Gothicus.[87] Even here this is something of a throwaway line of which little is made in contrast to the lengthy description of Helena's visit to Jerusalem.[88] Claudius was almost certainly not present in the basal layers of the inn story: he was included as a learned pendant by whoever was responsible for cleaning up the *Guidi Vita*. A footnote in the *Guidi Vita*, this relationship is actually one of the oldest known components of Constantine's representation, making its (extant) debut in a Latin panegyric delivered around 310 where it has been interpreted as Constantine's assertion of a hereditary claim in preference to the institutions of the Tetrarchy.[89] In the panegyric the exact nature of this relationship is left ambiguous, as it is in the poems Optatianus presented to the emperor himself, it would seem that the exact relationship was purposefully left vague.[90] Two other fourth-century sources look to have improvised: in the *Origo* Constantius descends via Claudius' brother, in Eutropius' *Breviarium* via his daughter.[91] In the *Historia Augusta*, Constantine's genealogy, like so much else in this work, may have been the subject of a joke. Claudius must be described carefully, says the author, *intuitu Constantii Caesaris*.[92] A letter from "Decius", in the *Historia Augusta* a compulsively sardonic recommender of future emperors, describes him as a *constantissimus civis*.[93]

Though Julian accepted and mentioned this genealogy in his own writings, early references to it in Greek appear to be relatively uncommon.[94] This "fact" evidently made it into the Greek historical tradition somewhere, perhaps through a Greek translation of Eutropius, as it is also mentioned by Theophanes.[95] The vagueness of the claim indicates that it was never particularly central to dynastic propaganda. Indeed, Roman succession was not absolutely predicated on hereditary right, certainly never to the extent that it was in Parthian or Sasanian Iran.[96] In Byzantine eyes the relationship to Claudius,

87 Guidi 1907, 307, line, 30.

88 Ibid., 642–649.

89 Pan. Lat. VI(7),2. Rodgers 1989, 235–240.

90 Optatianus, Carmina. 8.27, 10.29.

91 Anon. Val. Origo Const., 1, Eutropius, 9.22.1.

92 Hist. Aug. Claudius. 1.

93 Hist. Aug. Claudius. 16. Decius' voice was also used to "recommend" Valerian, see ibid. Valeriani Duo. 6.

94 Julian, Caesares., 313 D, and 336 B, and Julian, Panegyric to Constantius. 6 D.

95 As in Eutropius, Constantius is Claudius' grandson, Theoph. Chron. AM5796.

96 This is not to claim that descent was considered *un*important, see, Hekster 2015, 2–12 and *passim*; Börm 2015. Iranian dynastic longevity was probably the result of a Parthian political form, largely maintained under the Sasanians, that distributed and decentralised

surely a very obscure figure by the ninth century, could be decorative, but was hardly critical. Conversely, in the *Kārnāmag* texts ancestry is everything; while Sasan himself is something of a bit player, his bloodline is pivotal to Ardashir's legitimacy and maternal descent from various great houses was usefully attributed to his son and grandson.

Though they make use of a very similar narrative, the *vitae* pay very little attention to Constantine's paternal descent in this section, a feature that Claudius' usual absence from the narrative merely highlights. Constantius was not Sasan, he was a known quantity, undoubtedly a "king" and neither he nor his position seems to have been the point in question. Rather the story's setting in an inn suggests that it was bent around certain lurid "facts" known about Helena, almost certainly with the intention of offering an explanation of what, to later eyes, seemed an unlikely, or unseemly, pairing. Should we see Sequence One to have been, as in the Iranian examples, a form of argument about *lineage*, it ought not to be surprising that the legend formed around the mother rather than the father in this case. Helena, unusually prominent for a female member of an imperial house in her time, was a very probable locus of intra-dynastic resentment.[97] To further aggravate matters, she rapidly became a Christian heroine. All of this made her an extremely attractive target for those inclined to dislike her son and/or his legacy.

The numinous conception of Constantine in an inn seems to have been a relatively early attempt to blunt the kind of genealogical criticism outlined above by reference to a narrative type easily adapted to the situation. As implausible as the construction of Constantine's birth made in the *vitae* is, its portrait of Helena probably rests on two questionable "facts" imprinted into historical memory, and, indeed, historiography at a very early point: she had low origins and a connection to hospitality. The meaning of these facts was a point of ideological contention, and both positive and negative inferences were drawn from them. These points and the argument over their significance are likely to have been the kernel around which the other stereotypical aspects of Constantine's birth accreted into a lost-prince story unfolding according to Sequence One. As it did so, the bitter pill of Helena's ambiguous status was dissolved in the syrup of a readily digestible, and clearly understood, narrative stereotype.

The question has to be asked why *this* narrative was chosen for inclusion in the strand of hagiography represented by the much later *vitae*; why was the "founder" of the Christian empire given such a grubby start in life in a late,

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power into the hands of the great nobility under the (surprisingly durable) understanding that "high-kingship" was the property of one family, see Pourshariati 2008, 53–56.

97 Van Dam 2007, 302–306; Hekster 2015, 231.

and extremely favourable, strand of biography. The dynastic and religious disputes that had ensured the survival of a lowly Helena were not exactly live issues in the ninth and tenth centuries. To greatly oversimplify, Constantine's dynasty was gone, but his ideological heirs had won, Julian's partisans were long dead, and there was no question of returning to the old ways, nor were the intricacies of Constantius' marriages of any pressing political importance. And yet, all three of the *vitae* continued to present Constantine as the result of a one-off act of prostitution, whether implied or explicitly stated.[98] We know from Theophanes and the Suda that less than flattering versions of Constantine's family life were in circulation, even that Eunapius was still being read at around the time that the *Guidi Vita* was composed; but while this shows that the insinuations made by such writers were remarkably persistent, it does not follow that they would have been so widespread as to trigger the recycling of this story in response.

Rather, it was the continuing validity of the typology employed by the counter-polemic that ensured its reuse after the polemic itself had become sterile. The birth of Constantine as given in the *vitae* made the "facts" of Helena's situation fit a much older set of images conditioned by the category of person Constantine was seen to have been: a king whose ascent was due to the providence of a god, in this case the Christian god.[99] Ironically, it defended the validity of Constantine's birth by the assimilation of some aggressively negative interpretations of his mother's background. Its Helena is a pornographic slur turned literary archetype. Helena's prominence turned her into a target while her background helped draw this pattern to her son, allowing an exalted complication of Constantine's parentage that would have been much harder if she had been known as Constantius' social equal. It also made it possible for the young Constantine to be brought up away from his father and without his father's knowledge, providing not only the complicated childhood, but also the later recognition and "adoption" also associated with this sort of tale.[100] Into

98 The *Opitz Vita* is missing its opening, however, given its similarities to the others this can be the only possible course of events in the missing section.

99 This idea is near universal in stories of this type, to look only at Constantine, we see his conception described as, *ἐκ προνοίας Θεοῦ*, Devos 1982, 219, sec.7, and a *τέρας*, Guidi 1907, 309, lines 12–13. He is summoned to his father's kingdom *τῇ θείᾳ ερονοίᾳ*, Halkin 1959b, 75, sec.2, line 25. At Dräger 2010, 48, sec.20.11, Constantius pronounces his belief that, *nec sine deorum sublimium dispositione talis concubitus accidere potuit de quo talis proles nasceretur* …

100 To review: in the *Birth Legend*, Sargon is adopted and raised by a farmer of some kind, see Lewis 1980, 25 (lines 8–12), the much older tradition represented by the *Sumerian King List* would seem to have held that his father grew dates (though the line in question falls partially in a lacuna), Jacobsen 1939, 111 (Col.IV, line 32). David was the son of a

such a frame, dream omens and other indications of divine interest could be, and were, easily worked.

It might be objected that the tradition may equally have been an expression of Christian ideals of poverty and humility, an attempt to turn the tables on Helena's detractors through an application of the new ethics, just as Ambrose sought to do in his oration. While the story was doubtless generated and circulated by someone sympathetic to Constantine's legacy, the story's *pattern* has very little to do with Christianity *per se*. Note that this Helena was no Magdelen. Nowhere, save the *Libellus* in which she is raped, does her brief relationship with Constantius cause her any qualms or difficulties.[101] Compare this to the rapid repentance of Theodore of Sykeon's mother and aunts.[102] Though appealing to hagiographers, the story itself is in essence a *royal* tradition that had been adapted to Christian use, one entirely indifferent to sticky questions of possibly illicit sex. In fact, as a set of providential coincidences, culminating in the acknowledgement of a supernaturally gifted royal child, it bypasses earthly norms entirely.

### 5.2 *The Recognition(s) of Constantine*

In two of the *vitae* a clearly supernatural indication of the future greatness of Constantine is given at his conception: the *Guidi* and *Opitz vitae* have Constantius experience a vision (in the *Guidi Vita*, one with clearly solar overtones).[103] It is however, the use of tokens, almost always including a transparently royal purple cloak, which provides the most obvious proof of the young Constantine's paternity. As has already been mentioned, this has led some commentators to link this episode to the widespread literary motif of recognition. Somewhat overlooked is that the use of tokens is triggered by another type of recognition and then confirmed by a third. The forms of

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shepherd, just before being anointed by Samuel he was out herding sheep, 1 Samuel. 16.11. The Ctesian Cyrus was the son of a bandit, FGrH 90 F66.3 = Lenfant 2004, F8d*.3. The Herodotean Cyrus, on the other hand, was adopted by shepherds, 1.101–103, Justin. Epit., 1.4.8–13. Sasan, Ardashir's supposed natural father and link to the Kayanid dynasty, posed as a shepherd before his identity was revealed to Pabag, ŠhN 6., 140, line 97; KNA, 1.6. Perhaps also present in an insult ("son of a Kurd") sent by Ardawan to Ardashir in a letter reported by a possibly unrelated tradition, see Ṭabarī, 11. The version of Ardashir's conception given by Agathias stresses Pabag and Sasan's low status (the first is a leather worker, the second a travelling soldier) and involves an act of sex-hospitality verging on prostitution, see Agathias, Hist., 2.27.1–3.

101 Repentance or consequences for fornicators were common in Byzantine hagiography, see Kazhdan 1990, 136–137.

102 Festugière 1970, 5, sec.6, lines 2–4, translation at Dawes and Baynes 1977, 90.

103 Guidi 1907, 308, line 29–309, line 5. See above page 133 note 35.

these recognitions are rather limited and a distinct similarity can be discerned throughout all of the Mesopotamian, Iranian and Roman traditions considered here. The significance of these similarities is worthy of some consideration.

It will be recalled that Herodotus' Cyrus comes to the attention of Astyages as a result of what, on its surface, appears to have been a childish game:

> Now when the boy was ten years old, it was revealed in some such wise as this who he was. He was playing in the village where these herdsmen's quarters were: there he was playing in the road with others of his age. The boys in their play chose for their king that one who passed for the son of the cowherd.[104]

There would, on first glance, appear to be very little correspondence with the event that brought Constantine to the attention of his father's agents in the *vitae*. In the *Guidi Vita* the men simply start to tease the boy and cause him to run to his mother.[105] The *Passio Eusignii* however, contains a very significant difference:

> ... the boy, delighted, rather drawn by fate to his royal patrimony, went out towards the horses. One of the *Protectores*, on going out, checked on the animals and saw Constantine sitting on one of the horses. Irritated, he struck the boy and said to him, "Don't be bold little boy, you're not yet a soldier."[106]

This detail resurfaces in the *Halkin Vita*:

> With the pleasure of a little boy, or perhaps rather summoned by divine providence to his imperial inheritance, he was enticed by the horses. One of the bodyguards came out and saw him sitting on a horse, and crossly gave him a slap, saying: "Don't be naughty. You're too young to go riding."[107]

104 Herod., 1.114.1. Translation, Godley 1920.

105 Guidi 1907, 310, lines 3–6.

106 Devos 1982, 220, sec.8.

107 Halkin 1959b, 75, sec.2, lines 24–28. I am grateful to Prof. Samuel Lieu and Mark Vermes for their permission to use their unpublished translation of the *Halkin Vita*. The final sentence of each is almost the same and the verb used to admonish the boy in both texts is the explicitly militaristic *στρατεύω*.

In this movement towards the horses, Constantine makes a gesture of military, and thereby princely, inclinations. Though the effect is somewhat undercut by the boy's subsequent tearful appeal to his mother, both of these texts link this action to divine providence and both view an inclination to military things as an intrinsic quality of those born to rule: as in the case of Cyrus' play acting, a child's diversion signals something more. The innateness signalled by the game is confirmed by a physical inspection of the child. Cyrus is called to account for ordering the punishment of the son of an aristocrat in his capacity as "king". Standing before Astyages he makes a frank admission of his actions. Astyages, however, is troubled:

> While he spoke, it seemed to Astyages that he recognized Cyrus; the fashion of the boy's countenance was like (he thought) to his own, and his manner of answering was freer than customary: and the time of the exposure seemed to agree with Cyrus' age.[108]

Likewise, after the display of tokens triggered by the disciplining of Constantine, the men return to Constantius and report their find. In the words of the *Guidi Vita* (an extremely similar account of this interview is given in the *Opitz Vita*):[109]

> After he had welcomed them gladly he asked them what strange and foreign things they had seen in the East; and they all described different things, but the most eminent of them explained to the emperor about Helena and the boy, and said the distinguishing mark of royalty was on the face of the boy who had been born to her and was being bought up in Drepanum: "Truly, he is the image of you my lord," he said.[110]

A very similar double recognition, by prowess and resemblance, can be discerned in the Iranian traditions attached to Shapur and Ormazd, most clearly in Ferdowsi's rendition. Here, when informed of the existence of his son, Ardashir orders a number of aristocratic boys to be dressed in the same clothes and to play polo before him.

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108 Herod., 1.116.1. Translation, Godley 1920.

109 Halkin 1960, 12, lines 2–10.

110 Guidi 1907, 311, lines 2–8. Translation, Lieu and Montserrat 1996, 110.

> Ardashir came to the square in early in the morning with some of his confidants
> He cast his gaze on square, as he saw the children, he let out a deep sigh
> He pointed with his finger and said, "There is an Ardashir!"
> The minister replied, "Oh king, your heart will reveal your son to you!"
> Ardashir spoke to a servant, "Go, take their ball with your stick
> Stick with the fair children, hammer the ball before me
> So that a bold one comes out from the children, a lion among the horsemen
> He will hit the ball before my eyes, he will take no notice of our assembly
> He will be without doubt my son, of my stock, my line, my true relation!"
> The servant performed the king's order, he struck the ball before the riders
> The children ran after it like arrows, as they drew near Ardashir
> They grew downcast and held back, brave Shapur came forward
> Before his father he took up and hit the ball, returning it to the other children.[111]

Ferdowsi's version of Ormazd's recognition is extremely similar to his account of the recognition of Shapur while playing polo, though Ardashir does not, in this instance, know that his grandson is hidden among the players. In instances it is the boy's skill in a game, followed by his boldness before royalty that marks him as something more: as in Herodotus, "his manner of answering was freer than customary":

> Not one of them went after the ball, they stayed in place, downcast
> Ormazd ran out from among them, in front of the king like a swift wind!
> Quickly he returned the ball in front of his grandfather, and the king's entourage began to talk of him.[112]

KNA is similarly curt.

> Ardashir said nothing, the children were silent, on account of Ardashir's majesty, none dared approach. Ormazd boldly came forward, he confidently took up the ball, and struck it with a shout.[113]

111 ŠhN 6., 202, lines 120–132.
112 Ibid., 211, lines 257–259.
113 KNA, 14.7–8.

Far more interesting in this context is the version of this story given by Ṭabarī:

> When Hurmuz was several years old, Ardashīr rode out one day and turned aside to Shābūr's dwelling because he wanted to tell Shābūr something. He went into the house unexpectedly. When Ardashīr had stretched himself out comfortably, Hurmuz came forth, having by this time grown into a sturdy youth. He had in his hand a polo stick that he was playing with, and was crying out in pursuit of the ball. When Ardashīr's eye fell on him, this perturbed him, and he became aware of the resemblance in the youth to his own family, because the qualities of Persian kingship characteristic of Ardashīr's house could not be concealed and could not be disregarded by anyone, because of certain specific traits visible in members of that house: a handsome face, a stout physique, and other bodily features by which Ardashir's house was distinguished.[114]

Characterising Constantine's attempt to play with some horses as "prowess" may seem something of a stretch. However, through a comparison with the Latin *Libellus* it can be shown that this action is of a piece with the princely games seen in the Iranian iterations of Sequence One. This text, it will be recalled, turned Helena into a Christian noblewoman and grafted a romantic plot containing a kidnap and shipwreck into a frame provided by some version of the Greek story related in the *vitae*. The integration of this romance, and the casting of Helena as a Christian noblewoman, have altered the plot of the *Libellus* making it impossible for Constantine to be recognised by his father's agents in an inn. In consequence the recognition had to be remodelled for an older Constantine. How this was done is most telling in light of the Iranian *comparanda* given above:

> Constantine however, in accordance with his noble origin, of which he was completely unaware, devoted himself to knightly games.[115]

It should surprise no one that Constantine is *very* good at such games:

> He took to exercise himself in military games [*hastiludiis*], tournaments [*torneamentis*] and other knightly[116] activities. So much that in time,

114 Ṭabārī, 41–42.

115 Dräger 2010, 40, sec.16.1.

116 The translation of *miles* and its derivatives as "knight" and "knightly" has been suggested not only by the semantic drift of this term towards a higher class of fighter in the

> among all the knights and nobles who were in Rome at that time, and everyday from every part of the world, an uncountable host flowed together in that place, accustomed to exert themselves unceasingly in such diversions, he collected such fame that it was believed that there was no man to be found in the city of Rome who was better than Constantine in such things.[117]

He is so good in fact, that he draws the attention of the emperor, his father:

> Those military games and tournaments went on for days and, with Constantine overcoming more and more opponents, the emperor undertook to ask who he might be.[118]

Constantius is told, first by Constantine and then by Helena, that Constantine's mother is a poor woman and that his father is nobody in particular, but he is dissatisfied. Perhaps because he senses something more in the young man:

> The emperor, no more contented with the woman's answer than he was before, had his doubts. He commanded that she, and her son, come and eat at his own table among the noble ladies …[119]

It is among these noble ladies, rather than in the company of the gruff and soldierly company of the *protectores*, that the fateful display of tokens is made. A formal dinner being, explicitly, a test of character, though the author's insistence that manners trump heredity appears rather weak in light of the story's previous insistence on the innateness of royal talent:

> It was the habit in antiquity to observe great discipline at banquets, consequently, men, and most especially women, were accustomed to do so. They were esteemed noble or ignoble according to the greater or lesser discipline they showed: more so they displayed themselves greater or lesser in habit and virtue. For it was not descent at that time, but the nobility of habit and virtue in men that was assessed: the emperor, silently considering the matter, called Helena to him after the feast, saying "It is not at all as you say regarding your son and his wife, and unless

---

Mediaeval period, but the text's own association of this term with the sort of ritualised combat games popular amongst the upper classes of this time.

117 Dräger 2010, 40, sec.16.2.

118 Ibid., 40, sec. 16.7.

119 Ibid., 42, sec.18.1.

> you tell us the truth in this affair, you should understand that you have greatly offended the imperial majesty, and you will know that you cannot escape the recompense owed."[120]

Thus Constantine's attraction to the horses was eventually transmuted into a public display of military talent, one that is of a type with Cyrus' play-acting as king and *remarkably* similar to Shapur and Ormazd's display of skill in polo. In all cases this motion is an outward display of innate nature expressed as natural ability in a game reflecting the habits of the ruling class.[121] This signalling of innateness is an inescapable aspect of many of the biographical texts associated with Sequence One. In these cases, the predictably limited means of staging this display supports the proposition that they are typologically, and thereby thematically, linked. To reiterate, this is not to claim that all historicised instances of the recognition of a lost royal child are directly dependent, rather it is to suggest that by Late Antiquity there were fairly tight constraints when constructing a historicising narrative of this type. There was, as it were, a narrow matrix of narrative possibilities dictated by the argument inherent to the story form itself.

### 5.3 *Summary of Sequence One*

The evidence reviewed above offers very little *concrete* information that would allow us to pinpoint the origin, or basal form(s), of the story of Constantine's conception in an inn. It gives us, however, some context in which to frame the story's emergence and in doing so suggests something about what its purpose may have been. Helena's status seems to have been, essentially, the *only* thing remembered about Constantine's early childhood. The brief indications in Libanius and Philostorgius that Julian and/or his cultural partisans employed this "fact" give a possible reason as to why this was so. Whether veracious or not, the image of Helena as a menial, shading into a depiction as a prostitute, seems to have been propagated, apparently quite successfully, not very long after the extinction of Constantine's dynasty. Ambrose's panegyric certainly has the feel of an attempt to break an unpleasantly ubiquitous "fact" (*adserunt*!) to harness, to twist a slur into evidence of sanctity. Ambrose could not, however, have been the only person moved to the defence of the dead

120 Ibid., 42–44, sec. 18.4–6.

121 Note the following Stith-Thompson motifs; H32 *Recognition by extraordinary prowess*, H31.8 *Recognition by unique ability to shoot, swim and drink*, H41.5 *Unknown prince shows his qualities in dealings with his playmates*.

emperor's legitimacy, nor, perhaps, was his invocation of Christian humility the most effective solution to the problem of Helena.

Somebody else chose a far less radical, if indifferently Christian, means of reconciling the great man with his disreputable mother: in this telling Helena took on the traditional role of the adoptive lower-class parent. In doing so her profession became the point of admission for the signs and portents long associated with royal birth and was thus obviated, even, ironically, exalted. That such a construction was considered an effective tool in partisan historical argument can be seen in the attachment of a similar story to Anastasius, possibly as early as the sixth century. Indeed, in light of Helena's extremely early connection with hospitality, there exists the tantalising possibility that "John's" Anastasius was a variation on a theme more commonly attached to Constantine by the sixth or seventh century. Regardless of the truth or otherwise of this particular supposition, the aggregate of the circumstantial evidence clinging to this narrative supports both an early date for its emergence and the memory of Helena as the catalyst for its formation. Like the Iranian material considered above, this story engaged with problems of lineage; though here, driven by rather different circumstances, the intent was defensive. The story sought not to shore up an existing dynasty by claiming a prestigious bloodline, but to defend the reputation of a royal hero of an ascendant, imperial religion by explaining away a useless one.

## 6 Sequence Two: The Flight from Court

If the unlikely story of Constantine as a lost prince presents us with a great deal that is suggestive, but very little that can be fixed, the antecedents of the next episode used in the *vitae* are far clearer. The evolution of the story of Constantine's time at the courts of Diocletian and Galerius, his escape and inheritance of his father's legions is relatively common and can be mapped in a number of texts. Indeed it can even be traced back to a strand of rhetoric current in Constantine's own lifetime, one circulating well before his final victory over Licinius in 324. The rapidity of the story's bend towards the type represented as Sequence Two, and the egregiously selective rearrangement of very recent events performed in order to make this happen is quite visible (see Table 10).

In outline, the story proceeds as follows: Constantine is transferred to the court of Diocletian, or Galerius, either as hostage, for his own safety (in some cases where this story is fused to Sequence One, to hide him from Constantius' wife) or to complete his education. Here he performs exceptionally well but

TABLE 9 Constantine, Sequence One

| | Pan. Lat. VI(7) *c.*310 CE | Origo Constantini late 4th *c.* CE | Eutropius, Breviarium after 364 CE | Ambrose, De Obitu Theodosii *c.*395 CE | Philostorgius, Church History late 4th *c.* CE | Zosimus, Historia Nova *c.*500 CE | Chronicon Paschale 631–641 CE | Armenian Life of Sylvester 7th *c.* CE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Birth announced by omen | | | | | | | | |
| "Humble" parent | | × | × | Helena's humility emphasised | Helena's low birth referenced in Passio Artemii | Helena of low birth | Constantine Illegitimate | Helena is a prostitute |
| Royal parent | Link to Claudius Gothicus | | Link to Claudius Gothicus | | | | | × |
| Exposed/ attacked as infant | | | | | | | | |
| "Lost" to regal origins | | | | | | | | × |
| Non-regal setting | | | | | | | | × |
| Child recognised – Games | | | | | | | | |
| Child recognised – Resemblance | | | | | | | | |
| Child recognised – Tokens | | | | | | | | × |
| Child adopted | | | | | | | | × |

| Passio Eusignii 7th *c.* CE | Moses Khorenats'i, History of the Armenians, 8th *c.* CE? | Theophanes Confessor, Chronicle late 8th–9th *c.* CE | George the Monk late 9th *c.* CE | Suda late 10th *c.* CE | Guidi Vita 9th *c.* CE | Opitz Vita late 9th–11th *c.* CE | Halkin Vita 12th–13th *c.* CE | Libellus 14th *c.* CE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Post-coital dream | Dream recalled by Constantius | | |
| Helena is a prostitute | Helena is a prostitute | Denied, Helena was Constantius' wife | Denied, Helena was smeared | Constantine of low birth, knew Eunapius | × | × | × | |
| × | × | Link to Claudius Gothicus | × | × | × | × | × | Helena also noble |
| | | | | | | | | |
| × | | | | | × | ? | × | × |
| × | | | | | × | ? | × | × |
| | | | | | Horses as symbol of military inclinations | ? | Horses as symbol of military inclinations | × |
| | | | | | In report to Constantius | In report to Constantius | | |
| × | | | | | × | ? | × | × |
| × | | | | | × | × | × | × |

TABLE 10 Constantine, Sequence Two

| | **Pan. Lat. VI(7) *c.*310** | **Lactantius, De Mortibus Persecutorum *c.*314–315** | **Eusebius, Vita Constantini after 337 CE** | **Origo Constantini late 4th *c.* CE** | **Praxagoras of Athens early 4th (?) *c.* (Photius 10th *c.*)** | **Aurelius Victor, Liber de Caesaribus *c.*360 CE** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| At court to serve | | | | | | |
| At court as aristocrat | | × | Educated at tyrant's court | × | For education | As hostage |
| Has role close to king | | × | × | × | | |
| Shows extra-ordinary aptitude | | × | × | | | |
| Beautiful/ youthful/popular | | × | × | | | |
| "Beast" combat | | × | | Barbarised enemy | × | |
| Arouses jealousy | | × | × | | | |
| Plot is made | | × | × | Implied | Against Constantine | Against Galerius |
| Antagonist is warned | | | | | | |
| Escape to "homeland" | | × | × | | × | × |
| Father is ill or dead | Liminal | × | Arrives at Constantius' deathbed | | | × |
| Pursued | Not pursued but travels by imperial post | × | | Implied | | Fears pursuit |
| Trick performed in flight | | × | | × | | × |
| Leads army | Campaigns in Britain | Inherits legions | Inherits legions | Campaigns in Britain | Inherits legions | Inherits legions |

| Ps. Aurelius Victor, Epitome late 4th–5th *c.* CE | BHG 1279 (Gelasius?) if Gelasius before 400 CE | Zosimus, Historia Nova *c.*500 CE | Alexander the Monk 6th–9th *c.* CE | Theophanes Confessor, Chronicle late 8th–9th *c.* CE | Guidi Vita 9th *c.* CE | Opitz Vita late 9th–11th century CE | Halkin Vita 12th–13th *c.* CE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | |
| × | × | × | Educated at tyrant's court | × | Constantine moved for his safety | Constantine moved for his safety | For education |
| | × | | | | × | × | |
| | × | | × | × | | × | × |
| | | | × | × | | | |
| | | | | | | × | × |
| | | Averted: Constantine driven by will to power | × | | | × | |
| | Against Constantine | Against Galerius | Against Constantine | Both Diocletian and Calerius against Constantine | Against Constantine | Against Constantine | Against Constantine |
| | | | By omen | By divination | × | | By omen |
| × | × | × | Flees "like David" | Flees "like David" | × | × | × |
| × | × | | Constantius is not on deathbed | Constantius is not on deathbed | × | × | Not specified |
| × | | Implied | | | | Fears pursuit | |
| × | | × | | | | × | |
| Inherits legions | Inherits legions | Inherits legions | | | Inherits legions | Inherits Constantius' office | Inherits, but not immediately |

arouses jealousy and fear on the part of his host. This leads to a plot being made against him; the instigator of this plot is variable as the two tetrarchs often become confused or elided, particularly in later works.[122] In the very earliest forms of the story, however, the culprit is clearly, and correctly, Galerius. The plot generally takes the form of arranging some kind of "accident". In some sources this is said to occur during a dangerous game, usually a combat against dangerous animals. Constantine, often with the aid of God, is warned of the plan, or overcomes the attempt on his life. He escapes court and flees to his father in Britain, there he receives the dying Constantius' blessing and inherits his kingdom.

The story is, as far as we can tell, a tendentious reworking of actual events. According to Barnes' reconstruction, Constantine served Diocletian and Galerius between the years 293 and 305.[123] Constantine, recently cut out of the succession, was probably released from court at this time. Though Galerius must have viewed Constantine as a threat, he had no excuse with which he might detain him and probably couldn't have refused a request from his colleague Constantius.[124] Constantine really did join his father for a campaign against the Picts in the north of Britain in 305, a campaign that is confirmed by an inscription found in Italy dating to January 306 and mentioned in a panegyric delivered to Constantine in the latter half of the first decade of the fourth century. Yet this campaign would largely disappear from extant sources, almost completely effaced by the thrilling tale of Constantine's race to his father's deathbed. Likewise, Constantine's taking of leave would take on an entirely sinister resonance. The result is a transparently contrastive, easily divinised episode in which Constantine becomes a paragon of princely virtue and his "guardian" is shown to be unworthy of rule. In this it recalls, sometimes very directly, the entirely artificial contrast made between Ardashir and Ardawan; here however the transformation of a relatively anodyne series of events into a narrative stereotype can be (imperfectly) observed in some of the earliest extant rhetoric and historiography surrounding Constantine.

122 The identity of the plotter was Galerius according to Lactantius and (possibly) the *Origo*, never specified by Eusebius, "Maximianus" according to Praxagoras and the *Vita Metrophanis et Alexandrii* (thereby, possibly Gelasius), but Diocletian according to Philostorgius, Galerius according to Alexander the Monk, sequentially Diocletian *and* Galerius according to Theophanes and the *Guidi Vita*, Diocletian in the *Opitz Vita* and Galerius again in the *Halkin Vita*.

123 Barnes 1982, 42.

124 So argued at Barnes 2011, 61–63, largely followed by Bardill 2012, 82.

### 6.1 *Lactantius and the Disappearing Campaign of 305*

The earliest document relevant to the development of this story is *Panegyricus Latinus* VI(7), which may have been delivered in Constantine's presence in Trier sometime between 307 and 311.[125] Amid the rhetor's fulsome praise of his subject is a *very* ambiguous reference to Constantine's exit from the court of Galerius in 305, his meeting with his father and their joint campaign against the Picts in modern Scotland. The rhetor pivots from a ringing description of Constantius' military accomplishments, itself part of an endorsement of Constantine's heredity, to a description of the meeting of father and son just before Constantius sailed for Britain:[126]

> For you were summoned even then to the rescue of the State by the votes of the immortals at the very time when your father was crossing the sea to Britain, and your sudden arrival illuminated the fleet which was already making sail, so that you seemed not to have been conveyed by the public post, but to have flown in some divine chariot.
>
> For no Persian or Cydonian weapons ever hit their targets with such sure blows as you, when you reached your father's side as he was about to depart this earth, a most timely companion, and assuaged by the security of your presence all those cares that preoccupied his silent foreboding mind. Good Gods, what felicity you bestowed upon Constantius Pius even on his deathbed! The Emperor, about to make his journey to heaven, gazed upon him whom he was leaving as his heir. For no sooner had he been snatched from earth than the whole army agreed upon you, and the minds and eyes of all marked you out, and although you referred to the senior rulers the question of what they thought should be done in the interests of the State, the soldiers anticipated in their eagerness what those leaders soon approved by their decision.[127]

This account of Constantius' death is something of a montage and its chronology seems to be very condensed. The orator had, however, already mentioned that Constantius' final campaign took place in Britain and clearly places Constantine's acclamation there.[128] It would follow that the seemingly rapid death of Constantius painted here should be, and was, understood as dramatic licence and not an assertion that Constantius was actually *on* his deathbed

125 A case for August 310 is made at Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 213–214.
126 On the hereditary claims made in this speech, see Börm 2015, 246–251.
127 Pan. Lat. VI(7), 7.5–8.2 (trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 228–229).
128 Pan. Lat. VI(7), 7.1 and 9.1.

when Constantine arrived. Further, there is no *unambiguous* indication in this speech that Constantine's life was in danger. Constantine's arrival is said to have been extraordinarily rapid, but this may simply be part of the flowery, quasi-divine imagery the orator was employing. Indeed, the senior emperors are, at least superficially, deferred to in the matter of succession. An inscription dating to early January 306 proves that Constantius had campaigned in Britain during 305 and that the operation was claimed as a success.[129] The *Origo Constantini*, a short, probably late-fourth-century text, offers the further detail that Constantine met Constantius in Boulogne and that Constantius died in York *after* he had subdued the Picts.[130]

The version of events given in Pan. Lat. VI(7) is therefore plausible, if ornate. The orator certainly spared no effort in elevating Constantine's descent, but appeals to heredity were not unusual among the younger players in the tetrarchy at this time.[131] We have already seen that Constantine's link to Claudius II, of which much is made here, was somewhat vague: indeed it may have been a reactive claim trundled out whenever Constantine's more contemporary connections had embarrassed him.[132] Such matters aside, there is very little in the chain of events presented in this oration that would count as an *outright* invention. In this, Pan. Lat. VI makes quite the contrast to *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, Lactantius' biting polemic against the persecuting tetrarchs written circa 314/315.

> ... he [Constantius] sent letters that he might recall his son, whom he had sought before, but in vain, in order to see him. He [Galerius] truly wished nothing less, for he had often made attempts to ensnare the youth [Constantine] in traps, for he dared do nothing openly, lest he incite the civilians, and what he feared most, the hatred of the soldiery, against himself. So, under cover of games and exercises he threw him [Constantine] to the beasts, but to no avail, for the hand of God, who, in the moment of crisis delivered him from his [Galerius'] hands, protected the man. Having been often asked, he [Galerius] was no longer able to deny [Constantius], he gave to Constantine his leave [*sigillum*] one evening and commanded him to set out the next morning carrying imperial commands, he meant to find some other opportunity to hold Constantine back or to send

129 The relevant inscription, EDH.HD032314, was found in Toscana and is dated to the 7th of January 306. In it Constantius and Galerius claim the title *Br*(*itannici*) *m*(*aximi*).

130 *ad patrem Constantium venit apud Bononiam*, Anon. Val. Origo Const., 2.

131 Warmington 1974, 375–377; Rogers 1989, 237–238. See now also Börm 2015.

132 Humphries 2008, *passim*.

> ahead letters so that Constantine would be arrested by Severus. When Constantine discerned these intentions, he rushed to leave while the emperor was sleeping after dinner. He hastened through many way stations, making away with all the post horses as he went. The next day the emperor, who had purposefully remained in bed until noon, commanded him to be called. He was told that Constantine had set out immediately after dinner. He began to rage and roar. He sought the post horses, that he might draw Constantine back, and when it was announced to him that they had been taken away, he could barely hold back the tears.
>
> Constantine, with incredible speed, reached his father as he lay dying. He commended him to the soldiers and passed on his imperium into his son's hands. And thus, on his bed, he met his death, just as he had wished. Having assumed imperial authority, Constantine Augustus had no higher priority than to return Christians to the faith and to their God: this law was the first of his regarding the restoration of the holy church.[133]

Lactantius completely altered the staging of Constantine's exit, and in doing so, thoroughly reworked recent history. Unlike the orator behind Pan. Lat. VI(7), Lactantius has no interest in the campaign of 305, preferring to conflate the death of Constantius with the arrival of Constantine. In doing so Lactantius gives a fairly complete version of Sequence Two, complete with some surprisingly specific parallels to Ctesian and Iranian *comparanda*: the depiction of a dying father and an escape while the king is asleep or relaxing.[134] As will be seen below, it is in outline *this* version of events that would dominate the later historiography of this moment; it is certainly this tradition of interpretation that stands behind the *vitae*.

The fact that Lactantius is the first extant source reporting this version of Constantine's inheritance raises the possibility that the story was one circulating in Constantine's court and met with the emperor's approval, at least tacitly. Constantine may have met Lactantius while serving under Diocletian in Nicomedia where Lactantius taught rhetoric. In later life, Lactantius became the tutor of Constantine's son Crispus and must certainly have been associated with Constantine's entourage in the 310s. Some commentators have seen Lactantius as an influential voice during this time. It remains, however, difficult to say with any certainty just how close Lactantius' relationship with the

133 Lactantius, De Mortibus., 24.3–9, my translation.
134 Ibid., 24.7.

emperor was.[135] It does seem unlikely, however, that the emperor whose actual religious beliefs are still a matter of debate, was, or could be, as extravagantly forthright as his learned courtier. *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, once described as a "horrible pamphlet" and "the shrill voice of implacable hatred" is an unashamedly partisan and particularly vicious polemic, one that makes a rather wishful interpretation of the forces that guided the emperor's actions: its claim that Constantine leapt from his father's deathbed consumed by a need to defend the church, for example, is not at all convincing.[136]

It is, therefore, uncertain whether the version of Constantine's escape from Galerius' court that Lactantius presents in *De Mortibus* was his own invention, or a Christian adaptation of an already existing story coined to reinterpret Constantine's role in events of 305. What Lactantius does demonstrate is that the origin of the version of events carried in the *vitae* is a very old rhetorical device. That it was known to one of Constantine's courtiers might suggest that forms of it had a broader circulation among those charged with presenting the emperor to the world. Finally, the date ranges for *Pan. Lat.* VI(7) and *De Mortibus* allow us to date the emergence of the story to between 307 and 316.

That Lactantius was not the author or only source of this staging is suggested by the number of appearances, and variations, of the story of Constantine's escape in fourth- and fifth-century texts, not all of them Christian. Aurelius Victor's *De Caesaribus* and the *Epitome* of Pseudo-Aurelius Victor both carry a version of it: likewise, the *Origo Constantini* combined a report of the campaign of 305 with certain references to something like the story of flight offered by Lactantius.[137] Published after Constantine's death in 337, Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* offered a retelling for a specifically Christian audience in which the emperor was framed as Moses.[138] The fragmentary Christian historians

135 It is possible that Constantine met Lactantius during his stay in Nicomedia during 293–305. In any case, it seems that the emperor must have thought very highly of the orator as Lactantius became Constantine's son Crispus' tutor in "*extrema senectute*", Jerome, De Viris Ill., 80. *De Mortibus Persecutorum* was written between 313 and 316. Older theories (such as that outlined in Stevenson 1957, 675–676) date the text to after 317 based on problems with the chronology of the *terminus post quem*, but this view is no longer held, see Barnes 1973, 32–35. Lactantius' movements are not precisely known, but he is generally assumed to have been in Gaul with Constantine in the first half of the second decade of the fourth century; Odahl put Lactantius at Constantine's court in Trier in 313, Barnes in 311 or 312, De Palma Digeser as early as 310, Odahl 1995. 336–337; Barnes 2011, 61; Digeser 2000, 32. A close personal and ideological relationship between the two men has been posited Odahl 1995, 336–342; Digeser 2000, *passim*.

136 Momigliano 1963, 107.

137 Victor, De Caesaribus., 40.2–3; Psuedo Victor, Epitome., 41.2, 2.

138 A comparison spelt out at Eusebius, VC., 1.12.

Gelasius and Philostorgius probably also used it, at least in part.[139] On the other hand, another iteration of this story appeared in the *bios* of the emperor written sometime after 324 by Praxagoras of Athens who was certainly not a Christian. We cannot say whether Bemarchios' lost biography of Constantine also had Constantine escape from court.[140] We can, however, infer that this version of events was spread rather efficiently: as in the case of the Armenian interpretation of Ardashir's usurpation of Ardawan, the implausible narrative seems to have crowded out other interpretations. Zosimus' *Historia Nova* written circa 500 makes a hostile interpretation of Constantine's escape that reads like a rephrased version of the flight offered by Lactantius.[141] It would follow that *his* likely source, Eunapius – as we have seen, no friend of Constantine's legacy – had no source to hand that offered an alternative report to that of Constantine's propagandists.

This staging of Constantine's time at court was a clearly deliberate remodelling of recent history in which the chance to advertise a successful generalship, traditionally a (perhaps *the*) key aspect of the imperial persona, was put aside in favour of an oddly interpersonal vignette.[142] The result was a collection of narratives with affinities to the collection of motifs identified as Sequence Two and particularly strong parallels to Ctesias' Cyrus. The argument inherent in this reconstruction is explicable from this resemblance: the plot against Constantine and his subsequent taking of leave is a stereotypical presentation of contrast in which a divine presence can be enlisted to signal a preferred candidate. The assimilation of varieties of this form into historiography established this legendary narrative, to a great extent, as *the* story and in doing so, laid down a certain method in the interpretation of this episode. By constructing this time as one of personal, courtly confrontation, certain comparisons and motifs, both biblical and secular, were made possible.

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139 This section of the *Opitz Vita* is counted as Philostorgius, 1.5a.7–8. The supposition that Gelasius may have used this story is based on its appearance in BHG 1279, the *vita* of Metrophanes and Alexander, see Winkelmann 1982, 150–151, sec.2.

140 Photius, Bib., Cod. 62. In the fourth century a sophist named Bemarchios wrote an "Acts of the Emperor Constantine" in ten books, see Suda. β259. Most of what we know about this writer comes as a result of his feud with Libanius in the 340s. The information conveyed by Libanius, though tendentious, suggests that Bemarchios was very successful and that he crafted several works in honour of Constantius II, see Janiszewski 2006, 371–380.

141 Zosimus, 2.8.2–3.

142 This is doubly strange as Constantine lacked military prestige at this point in his career, see Börm 2015, 247–248.

### 6.2 *The Warning, and the Plot*

The instances of Sequence Two examined above have tended to deal with the accession of an "outsider". This is, however, an inappropriate descriptor to apply to Constantine. In 305 Constantine was in his thirties, a seasoned, if not renowned, soldier and the son of a ruling Augustus.[143] Indeed, Lactantius' very compact description gives Constantine's service under Diocletian and Galerius a decidedly military and traditionalist slant. His is a picture of an idealised Roman barracks princeling, one that emphasises Constantine's excellent military service and the love shown to him by the armies and the people. It is true that Constantine is distinguished *decoro habitu corporis*, but this is not given undue weight.[144] The author of the *Origo* would offer a similarly martial picture sometime later.[145] The specific reasons for Constantine's presence would change and the emperor would become far younger than he actually was, but it is never argued that he was anything other than an eligible claimant.[146] This carries a certain accidental realism into even the most extravagant re-imaginings of this episode. In most applications of Sequence Two an explicit warning has to be made to draw the old king's attention to his subordinate and this is usually supernatural; even the most mundane of those considered above, that of the singer before Astyages, has a metaphorical quality that aligns it to the dreams or prophecies seen elsewhere.

Conversely, from Lactantius on, the danger that Constantine presents to his host is usually purely mundane: he is a very competent, charismatic prince with powerful connections and the tetrarch needs no visions to discern this. Throughout the tradition, the reasons writers give for the jealousy directed at Constantine remain stable; as the boy grows up his virtue and physical perfection become so manifest as to be frightening.[147] Three sources buck this trend, moving the episode more strongly towards type by associating the tetrarch's unease with an omen. Alexander the Monk's *De Inventio Crucis*, a text of uncertain date, the *Guidi Vita*, and the *Halkin Vita* each have the tetrarch receive a warning via augury or haruspicy.[148] In the words of the *Guidi Vita*:

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143 Barnes has argued that Constantine was in fact slated to succeed his father before being shunted aside by Galerius in a dynastic coup in 305. It follows that the story that he was a hostage postdates this, see Barnes 2011, 54–60.

144 Lactantius, De Mortibus, 18.10.

145 Anon. Val. Origo Const., 2.

146 See page 183.

147 Lactantius, De Mortibus., 18.10–11; Eusebius, VC., 1.20.1; Theoph. Chron. AM.5788 & 5793; Bidez 1935, 421, sec.2, lines 20–24; Halkin 1959b, 77, sec.3, lines 17–20; PG 87/3, 4052.B.

148 Guidi 1907, 312, line 20–313, line 5; Halkin 1959b, 77, sec.3, lines 17–20; PG. 87/3, 4052.B.

> For the retinue of Diocletian and Heraclius, who passed their lives in superstition and foretelling the future by the observation of birds and the inspection of livers, suddenly realized that he was destined to attain supreme power, and moreover that he would be a God-fearing emperor who would destroy and abolish the superstition of the Greeks and would be a very great proponent of the kingdom of Christ, and for this reason they began to prepare manifold traps of all kinds to do away with him; they resorted to this in their guiltiness and wickedness.[149]

At first glance it would appear that this is Christian boilerplate, very reminiscent of the way Eusebius described the trigger for Valerian or Diocletian's persecutions in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*.[150] In the context of the above texts, however, these serve as the catalyst for the subject's flight and therefore operate more like the astrology that warns Astyages and Ardawan of their coming depositions or Sargon's dream of the goddess Innana. The addition of these omens highlights how in Christian iterations of this narrative, the threat – the "outsider-ness" for lack of a better word – has become purely ideological: heaven is not primarily concerned with Constantine throwing down a dynasty or an individual king, be he ever so unworthy. Rather his reign is to destroy an unworthy belief system. This epochal, institutional reading is, however, an adaptation of a form that is predicated on a very immediate and personal comparison, and nowhere is this clearer than in the actual mechanics of the plot.

### 6.3 *Contrast through Combat*

Lactantius claims that Constantine was to be killed by wild animals *sub obtentu exercitii ac lusus*, that is, before an audience in the performance of an aristocratic diversion.[151] However, in extant material composed in the period between the fourth century and the *Opitz Vita* this detail is relatively difficult to find. The lost *bios* of Praxagoras certainly included it, according to Photius:

> His father sent Constantine to Diocletian in Nicomedia in order that he be educated. He then says that Maximinus, then ruling Asia, sought to ensnare the youth in tricks. He set Constantine to fight an enraged lion,

149 Guidi 1907, 312, line 21–313, line, 5. Translation, Lieu and Montserrat 1996, 111.

150 According to Lactantius, Diocletian blamed the presence of Christian officials for the failure of omens, 10.1–3. Likewise, Eusebius believed that Valerian's persecution was ultimately triggered by Christian "interference" in the performance of magic or divination, Eusebius, HE., 7.10.4. The same author made accusations of sorcery, heavily slanted towards divination, against Maxentius and Maximinus, ibid., 8.14.5, 8 & 9.9.3.

151 Lactantius, De Mortibus., 24.4.

> but Constantine prevailed and slew the beast. Having become aware of the trap, he fled to his father.[152]

The author of the *Origo* presented something that might be read as an alternative version of the same story, possibly an older one though it is difficult to tell given the brief nature of the text. Here, the public context is in battle and the enemy is an animalised barbarian; in consequence, the episode has an in all probability coincidental resemblance to David's killing of Goliath before Saul.[153]

> After the resignation of the empire by Diocletian and Heraclius, Constantius sought him from Galerius; but Galerius set him before many dangers. First, while fighting as a young cavalryman against the Sarmatians, he caught a ferocious barbarian by his hair and threw him before the feet of the emperor Galerius. Next, sent by Galerius into a swamp, he went in on his own horse and made another route to the Sarmatians, and having killed many of them, he reported a victory to Galerius.

On the other hand, the version of events recounted in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*, published shortly after Constantine's death, is roughly similar to Lactantius' account in its damning portrait of Diocletian and Galerius and its assertion that Constantine fled an (undescribed) plot against his life to meet his dying father in Britain.[154] Eusebius would follow Lactantius in depicting the arousal of jealousy and fear in the emperor's erstwhile guardians. He was, however, far less clear about the actual mechanics of the plot than he was about the providential action of God in its prevention.[155] While Eusebius echoes Lactantius'

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152 "*Μαξιμῖνος … καὶ πρὸς μάχην λέοντι ἀγρίῳ καθίστησι τὸν νεανίαν·*" Photius, Bib. Cod., 62.

153 "*… sed hunc Galerius obiecit ante pluribus periculis …*" Anon. Val. Origo Const., 2. Or perhaps David's own murder-by-proxy of Uriah the Hittite, see 2 Samuel, 11.15.

154 Eusebius, VC., 1.20.2–21.1.

155 God's role in the tradition of the plot is prominent but inconsistent. Lactantius has an interventionist deity delivering the young Constantine from Galerius' plot directly. Strangely, the deity does not see fit to *warn* Constantine of anything, perhaps assuming that the young man has worked it out himself. Lact. De Mort., 24.5. The non-Christian Praxagoras seems to have assumed this to be the case in his account, Photius, Bib. Cod., 62. On the other hand, Eusebius credited God with granting Constantine knowledge of the efforts being made against him, Eusebius, VC., 1.20.2. The *Vita Metrophanis et Alexandri* also has God grant knowledge of the plot to the young Constantine. The relevant section of the *Guidi Vita* is almost identical, but is emphasised by talk of "divine providence" in Constantine's recitation of his adventures to a dying Constantius where a "narrow escape" is also mentioned, *cf.* Winkelmann 1982, 150, sec. 1, line 30–sec. 2, line 3; Guidi 1907, 313, lines 6–10, 313, lines 1–9. In the *Opitz* and *Halkin Vitae* no divine assistance is offered to *perceive* the scheme in advance but Lactantius' activist God returns

insistence that a subterfuge was afoot, he does not specifically mention a beast combat. Nor, indeed, do most surviving Byzantine sources reporting the conspiracy against Constantine's life.

In the *Opitz* and *Halkin vitae*, we see a much fuller iteration of the beast combat than would be expected, given the general rarity of this set-piece up until this point. The association of the historian Philostorgius (fourth–fifth century) with the *Opitz Vita*, including a mention by name in the text, would strongly suggest that this writer stood behind its portrayal of the attempt on Constantine's life. While this is very likely, there are some complications with the attribution that should be considered. From Photius we might surmise that Philostorgius' quarrel with orthodoxy was far more forcefully stated and much more objectionable than that of Eusebius.[156] If Photius' reaction is anything to go by, the undiluted version of his history must have been a truly frightful book in the eyes of the later Byzantine reader.[157] The author of the *Opitz Vita* was himself very doubtful as to this historian's veracity in regards to the emperor.[158] When Bidez associated the fragment of the *Opitz Vita* containing the combat with Philostorgius he suggested that its author did not have access to a "pure" version of Philostorgius' history but a redaction at some remove from the original.[159] Conversely, in their recent edition of Philostorgius, Bruno Bleckmann and Markus Stein suggest that orthodox writers found Philostorgius' polemics against non-Christians useful and sometimes recycled them without thinking too much about the theology of their source.[160]

Bidez demonstrated a clear parallel between Photius' description of Constantine's return to his father in Britain (fragment 1.5.9) and the same scene in the *Opitz Vita*. Yet Photius' summary only suggests the presence of the animal combat and does not *confirm* any details that would differentiate Philostorgius' account of the attempted murder from the vague account given by Eusebius

to stiffen Constantine's arm in the earlier text, *cf.* Bidez 1935, 422, sec.2, lines 1–7, 11–12; Halkin 1959b, 77, sec. 3, lines 37–42 and 44–45.

156 Photius opens his review of Philostorgius' history with a description of the work as anti-Orthodox polemic and its author as a liar. He is less scathing in his surviving reviews of Eusebius, *cf.* Photius, Bib. Cod., 40 (1–3 in Amidon 2007), and Photius, Bib. Cod., 13. On the argumentative and partisan nature of Philostorgius and ecclesiastical history in general, see Bleckmann and Stein 2015, 88–90.

157 Philostorgius probably presented Constantine as an "Arian" who was the target of a determined Nicaean conspiracy to corrupt the church, see Ferguson 2005, 139–152.

158 "*Οὐκ οἶδα δὲ εἰ ἀληθῆ ταῦτα εἴρηκεν Φιλοστόργιος ὁ φιλοψευδέστατος κατὰ Κωνσταντίνου τοῦ καλλινίκου καὶ εὐσεβοῦς …*" Opitz 1934, 566, lines 36.18–20.

159 Bidez 1935, 404.

160 Bleckmann and Stein 2015, 100–101.

in his *Vita Constantini*.[161] Attribution of the preceding animal combats to Philostorgius merely because they appear in the *Opitz Vita*, which we know used Philostorgius, would be dangerously circular. As Philostorgius' fragments stand at the time of writing, it cannot be *conclusively* proved that he presented the attempt to kill the young Constantine as an animal combat, though he does seem by far the most likely candidate. The existence of an anonymous, but oddly influential, "Arian" historian in the later fourth century has been posited to explain certain parallels in Philostorgius, the *Paschal Chronicle* and Theophanes among others.[162] If this work existed it might be proffered as Philostorgius' source for this episode. The exact nature, even the existence, of such an author is however, unclear. Additionally, as shown above, there is every reason to assume that variants of Constantine's escape had become widespread and abundant by the time Philostorgius was writing.[163]

The lost *bios* of Praxagoras of Athens is an intriguing text in the consideration of this problem in that it admits the possibility of a non-Christian line of transmission into the ninth century. Photius' summary states that according to Praxagoras a lion was used in the plot and a lion is indeed the first animal set on Constantine in the *Opitz Vita*, the second in the *Halkin Vita*.[164] Likewise Constantine would seem to have become aware of the plot without divine guidance in both of the later texts.[165] The fact that these *Christian* authors of *hagiography* have missed the chance to compare the young Constantine to David is an interesting one, particularly as some other texts recycling this

161 Philostorgius 1.5, 1.5a.9. The parallel was made at Bidez 1935, 422 who focussed on the fact that in both texts Britain was described as "called Albion". There is the slightest hint that an animal combat set-piece of the type described in the *Opitz Vita* was present in the text seen by Photius in the patriarch's use of *παραδόξως* to describe Constantine's escape from Diocletian's plot. The *Guidi Vita* also describes Constantine's escape as an "unexpected salvation", *ἀπροσδόκητον σωτηριαν*, but does not specify why. The reference might be to the supernatural warning Constantine is supposed to have received, see Guidi 1907, 314, line 10.

162 On the hypothesised, anonymous Arian historian of the later fourth century, see Mango, Scott and Greatrex 1997, lxxx–lxxxi. The "Arianism" of this writer is disputed at Ferguson 2005, 71–76.

163 Van Nuffelen 2021.

164 Bidez 1935, 422, line 5; Halkin 1959b, 77, lines 25 (defanged), 39 (unharmed). Janiszewski argued Constantine's duel with a lion may reflect a real combat that occurred at Nicomedia, see Janiszewski 2006, 365–366.

165 *Cf.* … *τῆς δὲ ἐπιβουλῆς αἰσθόμενος* … Photius, Bib. Cod., 62; *ὁ δὲ Κωνσταντῖνος βεβαιοτάτην συναίσθησιν τῆς εἰς αὐτὸν ἐπιβουλῆς εἰληφώς*.… Bidez 1935, 422, sec. 2, lines 11–12; *Ὁ τοίνυν εὐσεβὴς Κωνσταντῖνος τὸ δρᾶμα μαθὼν πρὸς τὸν ἑαυτοῦ πατέρα Κώνσταντα ἀπέδρας*. Halkin 1959b, 77, sec.3, lines 44–45.

episode made just this comparison in the absence of an animal combat.[166] Praxagoras is, however, an extremely unlikely source. There is a discrepancy in detail: Praxagoras gave the name of the responsible tetrarch as Maximinus (Galerius is probably meant) whereas the *Opitz Vita* blamed Diocletian.[167] In a wider sense, we have almost no information regarding this work beyond Photius' summary, and there is no reason to suspect that it was ever widely read or particularly influential.[168] The safest assumption remains that the (more or less direct) source for this detail was Philostorgius, and that the reappearance of animal combats in the *Opitz Vita* is the result of a rediscovery of his work, or an extract of it.

If the episode of the animal combat portrayed in the *vitae* does, as seems likely, descend from a rather fuller version of the same story seen in *De Mortibus* recorded by Philostorgius, it would suggest that some relatively basal version of the plot to kill Constantine was far more detailed than extant works of the fourth century would lead one to believe. Whatever the precise transmission, the resurrection of Constantine's struggle with dangerous animals in the *Opitz* and particularly the *Halkin vitae* makes for interesting comparative reading. In these texts we see how later hagiographers read, and indeed augmented, this narrative according to its "correct" typology: as a public contrast between a corrupt king and a brilliant, divinely elected, prince. Moreover, as in the contortions of the *Libellus* outlined above, we can see a strong thematic and narrative convergence with Iranian tradition describing the life of Ardashir.

The *Opitz Vita* claims that the plot was to take place during "certain festivals" at which the custom was for the emperor and his *domestici* to fight declawed and defanged animals.[169] Terrified by what he sees in Constantine, Diocletian instructs the animal handlers to substitute intact specimens during Constantine's bout. Constantine, however, defeats the beasts with the aid of a sudden flash of divine insight. Diocletian pretends to be angry with the

166 Before David fights Goliath he mentions that he had previously killed lions while guarding his father's sheep, 1 Samuel 17:35–37. Alexander the Monk and Theophanes explicitly compare David's flight from the court of Saul to Constantine's flight from that of the Tetrarch, yet no mention is made by either writer of a victory over fearful odds, only that a plot was underway. PG 87/3.4052, & Theo. Chron. AM 5793. Incidentally, a comparison of *Constantius* to David is made when he publicly anoints Constantine his heir in BHG 1279, Winkelmann 1982, 145, lines 16–19.

167 Bidez 1935, 422, sec.2, line 9 *f*. Oddly, in the *Halkin Vita* the responsible tetrarch is given as Galerius.

168 Lieu and Montserrat argued that these works would have been largely limited to the literati, Lieu and Montserrat 1996, 100.

169 Bidez 1935, 421, sec.2, line 19–422, line 1.

handlers, but Constantine sees through him and escapes to his father.[170] In short, a cowardly, tyrannical and illegitimate king unsuccessfully attempts to murder the Lord's Anointed. The plan backfires spectacularly, becoming a public affirmation of the suitability of the intended victim that reflects very poorly on the instigator. The writer of the *Halkin Vita* largely followed the same story, but made some rather unsubtle additions in order to ensure that the import of the scene could not be missed. In this telling, Galerius pretends to be ill and Constantine takes his place in a mock animal combat that is explicitly described as a ritualistic confirmation of the emperor's virility performed before a crowd.[171] The crowd, we are told, was expected to shout its approval of the mock combat, crying:

> Wonderful is the courage [τὰ ἀνδρείας] that fate [ἡ τύχη] has granted the emperor. Hooray for the fortune of the Romans![172]

Though it is not stated in the text, one presumes that the reader is supposed to imagine Constantine receiving this acclamation after seeing off Galerius' killers. In the *Halkin Vita*, Galerius miscalculates so badly that the staged display of kingly prowess becomes *real*; Galerius has play-acted his own deposition, the means of Constantine's murder have become a symbol of his inherent right to rule and one begins to suspect that they were intended as such all along. By augmenting the story in this way the *Halkin* author merely strengthened a reading pre-existing in his source.

Though the direction of the plot is reversed, a comparison of the confrontation described in the *Opitz* and *Halkin vitae* to the hunt incident described in the *Kārnāmag* tradition may be a fruitful one. In both cases the heroic killing of an animal is performed in a public, courtly context overseen by the subject's future enemy. In the *Kārnāmag* texts the parallel incident is implicitly, but strongly, framed as proof of Ardashir's claim and a condemnation of its usurpation by Ardawan's dynasty: a usurpation represented by Ardawan's siding with his own son in the argument over credit for a remarkable shot. An explanation is required, however, for why both Late Antique traditions contain an animal combat while, on the basis of its reconstruction above, the most influential Near Eastern presentations of Sequence Two, Sargon and Cyrus, probably did not.

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170 Ibid., 422, sec. lines 1–39.

171 Halkin 1959b, 77, sec.3, line 33–35. Translation by Lieu and Vermes.

172 Ibid., 77, sec.3, lines 30–31.

There was, of course, a very widespread, very old, idea that a king was a guardian of human order, and thereby a master over nature.[173] The expression of this idea in the image of the king hunting, or killing, wild animals was popular in the Near East (almost to the point of mania in Sasanian Iran), but considerably less so in Rome where hunting, though certainly an aristocratic activity, was much less explicitly connected to imperial ideology.[174] On the other hand, blood sports were extremely popular in the empire, and participation in *exercitii ac lusus* cannot have been out of the question for Roman aristocrats in the early fourth century. Lactantius' construction of the plot would be a rank nonsense if it were. Yet the hunt and the arena were still somewhat unusual places for a simulacrum of an emperor to find himself in. To complicate matters further, there existed a singularly *un*appealing precedent for the participation of an emperor in games.[175] It is possible that the parallel staging of Ardashir and Constantine's confrontations over, as it were, the carcass of an animal, is a coincidence. It would seem significant, however, that two of these courtly animal combats have a strong, and specific, parallel in the Alexander Legend.

In the A recension of the *Alexander Romance* of Pseudo-Callisthenes, the oldest of many, Philip is given Bucephalus, a man-eating horse that no one can tame. Philip has previously consulted soothsayers who inform him that the man who tames the horse will be his successor.[176] The A recension was compiled around the third century CE but there is some evidence that a forerunner of the *Romance* was in existence as early as the first century CE.[177] Moreover, since Plutarch also knew a version of the taming of Bucephalus, the

173 On the widespread interpretation of hunting imagery as a signal of the divine potency of a king, see the arguments made in Allsen 2006, 149, *f.* and *passim*. On the *Alexander Legend*, see below.

174 Ibid., 15–16, Canepa 2009, 157–1. Though the source is too old to be directly relevant, Tacitus' disdain (or, perhaps, grudging admiration?) for the Parthian expectation that their ruler would get around on horseback, participate in hunts and host banquets is perhaps emblematic of this general cultural divide, see Tacitus, Ann., 2.2. The divide is particularly obvious when Tacitus is read alongside Balʿamī's summation of Shapur I's education: *čun qolām dah sāl šod, ū rā hameh adabhā bayāmukht, savāri va harčeh andar bāyist malakzādegān bāšad.* "When the boy was ten, he taught him all the polite arts, that he would be a horseman, and everything necessary for a prince." Balʿamī, 888.

175 Commodus is said to have been obsessed with games, including the killing of animals, and is famous for having taken part in them. These actions were most certainly not to his credit, see Dio Cassius, 73.17–21. Such predilections were part of the *Historia Augusta's* very negative appraisal of Commodus, a judgement that may have been made *well* after Constantine's death, see Hist. Aug, Commodus, 12.12.

176 Ps. Callisthenes, 15.

177 Burstein 1989, 276.

episode itself is certainly older.[178] In any case, the *Romance* is likely to have interpreted the details of Alexander's life through the lens of widely known commonplaces.[179] What is of interest here is the meaning attached to the performance. Consider the following passage from the Greek version:

> Alexander reached the age of fifteen.[180] One day he happened to be passing the place where the horse Bucephalus was locked up and he heard his terrifying whinny. He turned to his attendants and asked where the neighing came from.
>
> "My lord", replied Ptolemy the general "this is the horse Bucephalus, whom your father had caged up because he is a man-eater."
>
> When the horse heard Alexander's voice he whinnied again, but not in the terrifying tones he usually used, but gently and tamely, as if a god were directing him. When Alexander approached the cage, the horse immediately stretched out both his forefeet towards the prince, and licked him with his tongue, acknowledging him as his own master.
>
> When Alexander saw how remarkable the horse was, and saw also the pieces of dismembered human corpses lying around him, he elbowed the horse's guards aside and opened the cage. Then he grabbed the horse by his mane and lept on him, bridleless as he was, and rode him through the middle of Pella. One of the grooms ran to Philip, who was outside of the city at that time. The king at once remembered the oracle, and he went to Alexander and embraced him with the words "Hail Alexander, ruler of the world!" From that day on Philip was full of joy over his son's future.[181]

It should be remarked that in this tradition Philip's relationship to Alexander is a complicated one. In the *Romance*, Philip is not Alexander's father; Alexander's paternity has been mixed up in what might be an Egyptian "king in the mountain" style tradition concerning Nectanebo II, the last native Egyptian pharaoh who disappeared after his defeat at the hands of the Persians.[182] Despite

178 Plut. Alex, 6 is rather similar to the version given in the *Romance* (though considerably more restrained). On the likely date of the *Romance's* compilation, see Hägg 1983, 125 *f.*; Stoneman 2008, 19.

179 Cizek 1978, 596 *f.*

180 This age may be significant, *cf.* KNA, 2.5.

181 Ps. Callisthenes, 17 translation is that of Stoneman.

182 Stoneman 2008, 15–16. Another interpretation of Pseudo-Callisthenes, though couched in a rather dated general thesis, makes an interesting case that an Egyptian legend concerning Nectanebo II (here described as something like an Egyptian "national hero") was a large component of Alexander's youth in this tradition, see Braun 1938, 19–23.

Philip's acceptance of the omen it is clearly stated that his feelings towards the boy are mixed. Even more telling is that the taming of Bucephalus represents the striking of a contrast to Philip's detriment.[183] Philip cannot control the horse and will be replaced by the man who can. Further the horse responds to the divine potential he recognises in the boy. Two further points are of interest: first Pseudo-Callisthenes appears to have replaced what was initially a mundane trick with inherent numinous power; second, Alexander is said to have been in his early teens when he brought the monster to heel.[184]

In this light, consider the challenge made by Ardashir when, while hunting wild asses (*gōr*), Ardawan's son steals the credit for his shot. Keep in mind that the legitimacy of Ardashir's family, as opposed to Ardawan's, has already been stressed in the lead-up to this event. Ferdowsi tells it in a rather condensed form:

> Ardashir said to the prince the field abounds in asses and arrows
> You try and make that shot again, lying is a sin to the proud (*sarkešān*)[185]

Unusually, the Middle Persian version is longer, and much more interesting:

> Ardashir grew angry at this and said to Ardawan's son "One cannot take on skill and manliness by means of force, misfortune, lies and injustice. This is good ground and there are plenty of onagers on it. Let us try this again you and I, right here, and we will make a showing [*pad dīdar āwarēm*] of our virtue, bravery and ability." Ardawan took this badly and afterwards barred Ardashir from mounting a horse.[186]

As in the *Alexander Romance*, the *Kārnāmag* texts give a contrastive slant to the episode. Here too public display of inborn ability/right, manifested as mastery over an animal, is contrasted with ineffectual inability and unworthiness in a courtly, public setting. Ardashir's proof is a far more physical proposition than that made by the quasi-divine Alexander of the *Romance*, but Ardashir too, we are reminded, has a "miraculous power" inside of him.[187] Likewise, Constantine is shielded by the hand of God, or granted divine insight at the

183 Philip doubts that Alexander is his son, as well he may, Ps. Callisthenes, 14.

184 In a very similar scene, Plutarch has Alexander tame the horse by clever observation of its behaviour, see Plut. Alexander, 6.5–7.

185 ŠhN 6., 146, lines 187–188.

186 KNA, 2.18–19.

187 Pabag begs his "son" not to throw away his *warz*, defined at Mackenzie 1986, 87 as "miraculous power" (*xwēštan warz ō wany butih ma ābespār*), KNA 2.30.

crucial moment. It is in this light that we should consider the response of the crowd in the ritualised combat described in the *Halkin Vita*.[188]

While the *Halkin Vita* is very distant from its ultimate sources, its rather obvious over-emphasis draws attention to the particular response cued by the framing of what, it must be remembered, was always a highly artificial scene. Thus even this late text almost certainly reflects the subtext of its most basal source material: that is, the beast-combat emerging from the cloud of polemic surrounding the living Constantine was meant to be read in exactly the same way as it was by the writer of the *Halkin Vita*. It is not unlikely that the horse taming carried by more sensationalist versions of Alexander's biography had prepared this reception for a Roman audience. The third and fourth centuries saw a renewed focus on the threat from "Persia", and Alexander seems to have been a popular analogy during the period of the Tetrarchy and beyond. Galerius' capture of Narseh's harem during his eastern campaign of 298, for example, looks suspiciously like an incident from the Alexander tradition. Alexander is referenced three times in the *Panegyrici Latini* dating from this period. Additionally, some of Constantine's own coinage probably used Alexandrine imagery.[189]

That an *imitatio Alexandri*, conscious or otherwise, contributed to the *Kārnāmag* tradition is, admittedly, a harder proposition to support. It was once widely, though not universally, suspected that an early Middle Persian translation of Pseudo-Callisthenes circulated in Sasanian times, underpinning much of the positive strand in the historical tradition that emerged from this period.[190] More recently, this idea has been seriously challenged.[191] In the absence of such a text, characterising Alexander's Iranian reception is complicated by the omnipresence of hunting imagery in the Sasanian/Persian tradition, an absence of contemporary evidence and the presence of polarised views in the later strands of the tradition.[192] On the one hand, Alexander was supposed to have been an enemy of religion and a quasi-demonic wrecker of the divinely

188 See page 172 above.

189 *Cf.* Rufus, 3.13.10–11; Plut. Alex., 20.11–13, 21.1; Ps. Callisthenes, 41.12; Eutropius, Brevarium, 9.25. In the *Panegyrici Latini* comparisons are made between Alexander and Maximian (x(2).10.3), and Constantine (vi(7), 17.1 (according to Nixon and Rodgers), xii(9), 5.1). On Constantine's *imitatio Alexandri* see Bardill 2012, 11–19.

190 For example, Nöldeke 1979, 29–30; Yarshater 1983, 377.

191 Recent work has put the existence of a Middle Persian translation into serious doubt. A very convincing case has been made that the extant Syriac translation was made directly from Greek around the seventh century, see Ciancaglini 2001, the references within and also the history of doubt on this point referenced at Gignoux 2007, 89.

192 On the overwhelmingly hostile view of Alexander espoused by Middle Persian sources, see the collection and translation made in Gignoux 2007.

ordained Kayanid kingdom, and this was the interpretation intended by the *Kārnāmag*.[193] On the other, it is not at all clear whether the views expressed in these works represent a widespread historical opinion or the particular views of the Persian-speaking, Mazdean priestly and scribal classes.[194] In any case, fanciful stories of Alexander were certainly circulating in the empire's *Syriac* literature. As the empire's linguistic and religious minorities were in general not subject to strict segregation, and bilingualism must have been common, it is not impossible to imagine that chunks of the *Alexander Romance* may have flowed into the Middle Persian consciousness via the empire's influential Syriac-speaking population.[195] Finally, Shayegan has recently suggested that a more positive Alexander was assimilated into the legendary complex known to Iranian aristocrats of the Parthian era, well before the Sasanian revolt.[196] As the religiously inclined ideology of the later Sasanian state probably took some time to crystallise, such a proposition is not at all out of the question.[197]

The idea of a contrastive set-piece combat expressing themes of inadequacy is, in all likelihood, much older than Alexander, as is its association with a symbolic animal in an expression of Sequence Two: David kills Goliath, an inhuman, bestial enemy, before Saul, and Nicolaus turned one of his two prophecies of Astyages' deposition into a struggle *between* powerful animals:

> And one of them [Astyages' concubines] sang the following words in her song: "Although the lion had the wild boar in his power, he let him go into his lair; he has become mightier there and will give the lion much grief and despite being weaker will end up subduing one stronger." As she sang, Astyages took her words as referring to him.[198]

193 Alexander is accused of misrule (*dušxwadāyīh*) in KNA, 1.6. A particularly dismal assessment of Alexander is made by Ḥamza al-Isfahani, Ḥamza, 26–28.

194 Daryaee 2019 suggests that a positive portrait of Alexander as a legitimate king existed in Sasanian times but the evidence he provides (Theophylact Simocatta's report of a dream of Khosrow II and a very small, near contextless, Middle Persian papyrus fragment) is extremely tenuous.

195 Ciancaglini 2001, 135–138. Persian influence in Syriac literature and the broader cultural interactions between the empire's constituent groups are discussed in the essays appended to J.T. Walker's translation of the Syriac *Legend of Mar Qardagh*, see Walker 2006, 121 *f.*

196 Shayegan 2012a, 297–307.

197 See for example, Gnoli 1989, 138, n. 13; Shaked 1994, 112 *f.* A strong version of this thesis was made in Gignoux 1984. It is applied to the dynasty's historiography in Daryaee 1995.

198 FGrH 90 F66, 26 = Lenfant 2004, F8d* 26. Translation Llwellyn-Jones and Robson 2010, 165.

Yet, insofar as the popularity of the legend of the taming of Bucephalus may have revitalised this set of images and their attendant readings, there is a distinct possibility that the memory of Alexander of Macedon had a hand in the parallel presence of an animal in the confrontations of Ardashir and Constantine with their "guardians".

### 6.4 *Flight*

However it is described, the consequence of the unsuccessful plot against Constantine is the final act of the episode: Constantine's escape from his would-be murderer and arrival at his father's deathbed. When discussing the *Kārnāmag*, it was noted that several parallels can be made between that version of Ardashir and the escape of Cyrus as described by Ctesias. Here a number of the same correspondences can be seen, suggesting that this piece of ancient pro-Constantine rhetoric is also somehow linked to an even older Near Eastern style of royal biography detailed above. We have already seen how the similarities between the Ctesian Cyrus and the *Kārnāmag* have long been noted in scholarship, yet to my knowledge, Constantine's escape to Britain has, to date, not attracted the same kind of comparative treatment.

Just like the plot and the animal combat it was joined to, Constantine's flight was almost certainly a tendentious reinvention of circumstance, part of a package of possible truths developed for political effect in the second decade of the fourth century. Springing from an argumentative construct, the iterations of Constantine's escape are the products of a narrative crafted with some deliberation. That the results of this selective presentation often harmonise with details seen in the even more fictitious flight of Ardashir and the utterly implausible Ctesian Cyrus suggests that the same themes and issues were being addressed according to the same model. Unlike animal combat, this part of the narrative is fairly consistently reported throughout the reception of this tradition. With the exception of the *Opitz Vita*, which alone displays a Lactantian feature, the *vitae* tend not to give a very granular picture of this escape. They are, however, very clearly based on the same tradition and should, therefore, be assumed to have been operating within the range of interpretative possibilities set by the narrative form used by their "ancestors".

It is notable how, at its climax, Sequence Two entwines itself with plausible historical data and redirects it. In very broad terms, the biographies of all of these men present a flight towards the subject's father's powerbase; according to Ctesias, Cyrus' father was the satrap of Persia whereas in the *Kārnāmag* tradition Pabag is (supposedly) the ruler of Fars. Constantius is usually connected to the west of the empire in general and Britain in particular. This is followed by an uncomplicated inheritance of the father's power confirmed either by

the father's followers or the father himself; that is, the military resource used by the subject to elevate himself to rule. For all the transcendent imagery they employ, an ironic *Realpolitik* permeates all three traditions. In what is possibly the only accurate part of Ctesias' narrative, Cyrus' plot hinges as much on his father's control of Fars as it does on the approval of heaven. Similarly, Constantine's crown is the gift of his father's soldiers, while Ardashir leverages local loyalty to his family into a rebellion against his suzerain. Thus the flight surreptitiously blends a reasonably accurate portrait of their subjects as military leaders into the mystical signs of innate regality shown before the old king in a highly staged circumstance preceding it. All three traditions honestly describe the means by which each man acquired power while greatly simplifying the political context in which they were employed. They are, bluntly, concessions to cynicism generated where the imposition of a legendary frame met inescapably worldly politics.

Because of this parasitic relationship with political and historical realities, it is not so much the outlines of the flight from court as common details that suggest a relationship between these very disparate texts. The subject's father is stated to be ill, dying or dead; having escaped while his antagonist relaxes, the subject is pursued by the antagonist's agents, or the antagonist himself; finally he performs a trick of some kind in order to shake his pursuers.

Cyrus uses his father's (feigned) illness as an excuse to return to Fars where his agent has prepared the province to fight Astyages.[199] Likewise, the death of Pabag is explicit in *Šāhnāmeh* and Thaʿālebī's eleventh-century history and implicit in the Middle Persian *Kārnāmag* where Pabag disappears from the story after sending Ardashir an admonishing letter.[200] In this last source, the missing death is underlined by the construction of Ardashir's arrival in Fars: the young prince is greeted by a group of local noblemen who pledge themselves and their resources to Ardashir's cause.[201] In the *Šāhnāmeh* this scene is portrayed as an assembly of nobility related to Pabag, Sasan and Dara.[202] Though there is no formal bequest made in this tradition, in both cases the province itself is made to confirm Ardashir's succession to Pabag's throne. The scene feels almost like an idealised late Roman acclamation committed to verse:

199 FrGH 90 F66, 20 = Lenfant 2004, F8d* 20.

200 KNA, 2.30.

201 Ibid., 5.4.

202 ŠhN 6., 157–158, lines 343–364. A powerful ally named Banāg/Bawāg is named in both traditions, ibid., 159–160, lines 376–397 = KNA, 5.5–8.

> Every man gathered there, the swordsmen, the counsellors
> Rose to their feet on hearing these words, all repeating the true secret of their hearts
> "All of us of Pabag's line, rejoice in your appearance
> And those too who are Sasanians, we bind our belts about us for war
> Body and soul alike we are yours, our joys and our sorrows fall to you."[203]

Constantine's situation was an especially serendipitous one for the application of this form as his biography required little invention: Constantine really did come from Galerius' court to that of his father, and he really was at his father's deathbed in York to accept the acclamation of his father's soldiers sometime in 305. Similarly, Lactantius' claim that Constantius petitioned Galerius for the return of his son is likely to have been based on accurate information.[204] What is demonstrably *unlikely* is that the elder emperor made this request because he knew himself to be dying.[205] As shown above, the escape, with its dramatic deathbed scene, involved a chronological reshuffle, one in which a successful border campaign was discarded. This elision of Constantius' death into Constantine's arrival was intended to heighten the drama of Constantius' anointing of Constantine as his son and heir; something that the author of Pan. Lat. VI(7), was already making a great deal of.[206] Although his description is brief, Lactantius too is careful to have Constantius recommend Constantine to the soldiers while Eusebius makes him hand over his share of the empire via "natural succession" in the company of his other children.[207] An extraordinarily fawning description of the handover expressed in a Biblical analogy made its way into BHG 1279 and the *Guidi Vita*, perhaps by way of Gelasius.[208] The

203 ŠhN 6., 158, lines 357–361.

204 Lactantius, De Mortibus., 24.3. A request is perhaps implied by the use of *patri remisit* at Anon. Val. Origo Const., 2; Barnes 2011, 61–2.

205 Something claimed at Lact. De Mort., 24.2–3 and again at Eusebius, VC., 1.21.1. Börm suggests that Constantine may have been sent to his father by Galerius in order to get more experience in the field and that Constantius' death might have been unexpected, see Börm 2015, 246, n. 38.

206 Pan. Lat. VI(7). 8.2–3.

207 Lactantius, De Mortibus., 24.8; Eusebius, VC., 1.21.2. Eusebius has already shown his hand at 1.18.2 where he gives God the credit for arranging Constantine's presence at the transmission of his inheritance.

208 Comparing father and son to first Jacob and Joseph and then David and Solomon, it is evident that the author of BHG 1279 shared Eusebius' insistence on a "proper" inheritance and a liking for Biblical analogies, see Winkelmann 1982, 151, sec.2, lines 27–29, 3, 152, lines, 15–18.

writers of the other *vitae* were less expansive, but were also careful to emphasise a handover of responsibility.[209]

Constantius' ill health was probably exaggerated, and his death hastened in order to address immediate questions of dynastic precedence: although the eldest of Constantius' sons, Constantine was not the product of his father's most prestigious marriage. Constantine's younger half-brothers represented a threat, one that Constantine's own sons would resolve in a more permanent fashion immediately after their father's death. These half-brothers occasionally resurface in Byzantine historiography and they are still, just, visible in some of the *vitae*.[210] In the 310s however, Constantine's precedence was a rather more pressing issue. Moreover, his selection by the army, though thoroughly traditional, was irregular insofar as it was unapproved by and forced upon the ruling Augustus. It is probably no coincidence that a stress on hereditary succession, and primogeniture, has been detected in the surviving oratory on Constantine immediately following his father's death.[211] Constantius' deathbed scene, as imagined by Constantine's literary partisans, engages with these problems: kingship is simplified as an inheritable office and Constantius was made to unambiguously anoint his eldest son as his heir. Constantius' other children, like Ardashir's brothers, were edged out of the record, and eventually disappear almost completely.

The desire to clean up succession is a fairly common one in monarchies the world over and a sick or dying father inevitably entails a handover of power; therefore, the parallel presence of such a figure in all of these texts may be considered coincidental. Yet, two minor details of Lactantius' version argue for the use of the same model employed in Ardashir's court episode in the most basal layers of this scene. First, according to Lactantius, Constantine fled after dinner when Galerius had retired for the night. Galerius then stayed in his tent until midday the next day when he called for Constantine, hoping to delay his departure.[212] Because the *Origo* claims that Galerius was an inveterate drunk, this detail may have been a reference to another aspect of

209 Bidez 1935 423, sec.2, lines 5–10, The *Halkin Vita* simply gives a notice, alongside a date that Constantine succeeded his father, Halkin 1959b, 77–78, sec.3, lines, 45–47.

210 Eusebius invoked primogeniture, Eusebius, VC., 1.21.2, the *Paschal Chronicle* implied that the other children were too young to inherit, Pas. Chron., 517. Zosimus presents Constantius' Praetorian guardsmen as choosing Constantine hoping for a reward and thinking very little of the alternatives, Zosimus. 2.9.1. We have already seen that some versions of the inn story gave Constantine a legitimate son with a mental disability, and that Theodora's jealousy was invoked to explain the movement of the young Constantine to the court of Diocletian in the *Guidi* and *Opitz vitae*.

211 Warmington 1974, 374 *f.*; Rogers 1989, 237–238.

212 Lactantius, De Mortibus., 24.7.

pro-Constantine invective current at the time.[213] On the other hand, it is interesting how Galerius' laxity resembles that of Astyages and Ardawan and how all of these men contrast with the active nature of their wards. This detail does not seem to have been transmitted very successfully and does not appear in any of the *vitae*: its presence in Lactantius is, however, a suggestive indication of the sort of associations that the creators of this narrative wished to arouse by its propagation.

Second, Lactantius tells us that in order to avoid pursuit, Constantine made away with the post-horses as he fled to Britain.[214] This detail occurs in the *Origo* as well as the epitomes of Aurelius Victor and Pseudo-Victor, though in these texts Constantine is supposed to have lamed or killed the horses as he went.[215] Eunapius' work probably also included it, as a similar detail is reported by Zosimus, after whom the story seems to disappear for some time.[216] Like the animal combats, Constantine's laming of horses suddenly reappears in the *Opitz Vita*.[217] Again, the influence of Philostorgius may be suspected, but cannot be proved. This detail, a trick in flight, offers another parallel to eastern material in the earliest layer of Constantine's propaganda. Recall how Nicolaus tells us that the departure of Cyrus from the court of Astyages was followed by the king's dispatch of a party to recover him; Cyrus eludes them by preparing a banquet and leaving the sleeping pursuers early in the morning.[218] Similarly, in the *Kārnāmag* texts Ardashir is pursued by Ardawan himself, and though this flight is missing a stratagem, it *is* staggered by its portrayal as a race in which Ardawan must move faster than the *xwarrah* but is forced to stop several times to ask for information, receiving instead news of his inevitable failure.

Thus, specific parallels in the staging of Constantine's flight, alongside a heavy emphasis on the deathbed scene in the traditions that fed the *vitae*, offers a further indication that the entire story was conceived of as a defensive, legitimising strategy designed not for the consumption of posterity, but to play an immediate role in the internecine struggles of the death throes of the Tetrarchy. By discarding the campaign of 305 and compressing the supposed plot against Constantine into an escape to Britain culminating in the immediate death of Constantius, Constantine's partisans could reframe recent history in such a way as to glorify their subject while accessing a set of associations long attached to Cyrus. The result of this restructure was another

213 Anon. Val. Origo Const., 4. Compare this to Eutropius, Brevarium, 10.2.
214 Lactantius, De Mortibus., 24.6.
215 Anon. Val. Origo Const., 2; Victor, De Caesaribus, 40.2; s. Victor, Epitome, 41.2.
216 Zosimus, 2.8.3.
217 Bidez 1935, 422, lines 18–21.
218 FGrH F66.26–29 = Lenfant 2004, F8d* 26–29.

historical argument addressing problems of legitimacy through reference to a well-known narrative form. As in the case of the *Kārnāmag's* Ardashir, Constantine's time at court is presented as a confrontation between innately legitimate *de iure*, and usurping, illegitimate, *de facto* kingship, leading to an escape and thence a completely legal assumption of worldly power. As in the Iranian tradition, this construction dovetails nicely (in fact, rather better) with the constraints of historical memory, erasing just enough detail to paper over irregularities, be they temporal, familial or legal, while remaining plausible in essence.

### 6.5 *Young Constantine's School Days*

An unusual feature of the tradition of Constantine's time at court, and another indication that a narrative archetype is in play in its representations, is the tendency to portray the emperor as a very young man. Constantine's age has always been a very plastic fact; much of the modern dispute over the date of his birth is the result of the emperor's self-presentation as a much younger man.[219] As Barnes has shown Constantine was probably born in the 270s, and by 305 he was well on his way to middle age.[220] Constantine almost certainly joined the entourages of Diocletian and Galerius as an imperial hostage, or at least, as a member of the extended tetrarchic "family", as reported in some of the earlier sources, and indeed the *Guidi Vita*.[221] During this time he served as an officer in the armies of the senior emperors: this martial image is rather clear in *De Mortibus* and must have been preserved somewhere in Greek as well.[222] Yet something rather odd happens very early in the tradition: in a number of sources, some quite influential, the realities of the politics of the later third century recede somewhat while the suggestion arises that Constantine moved to court in order to receive an education.[223] Given that there is reason to suspect that the most widespread take on this period used a particular

219 Barnes 1982, 39–41, reiterated at Barnes 2011, 2–3 & 55–56.

220 Ibid.

221 Guidi 1907, 312, lines 12–17.

222 See page 185 note 234.

223 Forms of *παιδεύω* appear across the tradition. Aside from its use by Eusebius it is used by "Praxagoras", Photius, Bib. Cod. 62, and Alexander the Monk, PG, 87.4049, and as a passive infinitive at Halkin 1959b, 76, sec.2, lines, 48–49; Guidi 1907, 312, line 20. These last three contain a reference to Constantine learning "Greek wisdom" (and war in the case of the *Halkin Vita*) during this time, suggesting a connection. In the *Guidi* and *Opitz vitae*, Constantine's movement to another court is explained by Constantius' need to remove the boy from the grasp of his jealous wife Theodora. Interestingly, in the *Vita Metrophanis et Alexandrii*, a text sometimes linked to the lost historian Gelasius, the young Constantine learns "*ἱερα γραμματα*" from Constantius before his success as a general provokes Galerius

typology, *and* the extreme youth of other kings associated with this typology, the linkage of this period with courtly education is worthy of a closer look.[224]

The most famous reference to Constantine's education can be found in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini*, though his "education" during this period is strongly implied rather than directly stated. Eusebius states that Constantine grew to manhood, like Moses, at the court of a tyrant and then goes on to mention the excellence of his rhetorical education.[225] Unlike Lactantius, Eusebius wrote at some distance from his subject and the scenes he described.[226] Writing just after the emperor's death and certain of the epochal significance of his reign, Eusebius, frankly, gushes. Lactantius' model soldier-prince is to be considered in the same light as a Biblical hero; he now possesses a humane education and an exaggerated physical perfection.[227] While this Constantine remains a soldier and man of action, he is more forcefully a supremely polished, almost superhuman, specimen of divinely ordained kingship.[228] Eusebius' motives in building such a portrayal were bound up in his attempt to create an analogy to the extra-Biblical portraits of Moses known to him through Philo and Josephus.[229]

Eusebius' penchant for Moses is well known, but somewhat distracting in this case. A longer consideration of Eusebius' Moses and its significance to his Constantine will be made below. For the moment it should be recalled how Ardashir's (almost certainly entirely confected) sojourn at the court of Ardawan contains a similar approach to the court as both paedagogy and display, and a similar focus on physical, cultural and sporting refinements.[230] It follows that the features used by Eusebius to describe Constantine by way of Moses were neither unique nor limited to one cultural or religious mode. Excepting its overt religiosity, Eusebius' Constantine may not have been particularly original either. There is a possibility that the "official", or, at least, preferred, version

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to plot, Winkelmann 1982, 150, sec.1, lines 8 and 25 *f.* This may simply be a development of the glowing portrait of Constantius painted at Eusebius, VC., 1.13–18.

224 Moses enters Pharaoh's court as a baby. Nicholaus describes Cyrus as a *μειρακίσκος* when he first attaches himself to Astyages' court, FGrH 90 F66, 3 = Lenfant 2004, F8d* 3, (on the grounds of the likely Mesopotamian origin of this story, it is tempting to speculate that a very young Sargon also existed, though we are likely never to know). In KNA Ardashir is fifteen when summoned by Ardawan, KNA, 2.5. Pseudo-Callisthenes also gives Alexander's age at the taming of Bucephalus as fifteen, see, Ps. Callisthenes, 17.

225 "παίδευσει λὸγων" Eusebius, VC., 1.19.

226 Barnes 1981, 265–267.

227 Eusebius, VC., 1.12.2, 19.1–2.

228 *Cf.* Ibid., 1.19.2; Philo, Moses, 1.5.

229 Rapp 1998, 287, *f.* A more expansive discussion of this analogy will be made below.

230 To take just the most concise statement, see KNA, 2.11–12.

of events had moved in this direction during Constantine's lifetime, and that it had done so independently of the bishop of Caesarea.[231]

Photius' choice of language in his very short summary of Praxagoras of Athens' apparently very sympathetic *Bios* of Constantine leaves open the possibility that an early non-Christian biographer made a portrayal of this period that explicitly stressed education and youth:

> His father sent Constantine to Diocletian in Nicomedia in order that he be educated [*παιδευθησόμενον*].[232]

Praxagoras wrote after 324 and his *bios* likely predated Constantine's death; indeed, it may have been intended as a gift to the man himself, perhaps in the 330s.[233] If this dating is correct and if Photius' use of *παιδεύω* is an accurate reflection of the source text, then Praxagoras is the first "extant" author to make explicit reference to an education at the court of Diocletian, something only (strongly) implied by Eusebius. Praxagoras would then indicate that the idea of an education at court, possibly alongside a radical revision of the emperor's age, was both in very early circulation and agreeable to Constantine himself. This is a lot to extract from a single verb in a second-hand description of another author's (lost) book. If, however, Praxagoras really did complete his work in the final decade of Constantine's life, the possibility remains that Eusebius simply baptised the suspiciously young and unnaturally brilliant student he discovered dwelling in a common version of the recent past.

The disposition of the *vitae* shows how both versions of the "young" Constantine were passed into Byzantine record. The more contextual, older, reading is still present in the *Guidi Vita*, where Constantine's military accomplishments are foregrounded in Constantine's own, reported, voice.[234] In the two other *vitae* considered here, however, the Eusebian strand of interpretation has became greatly exaggerated. This is likely a side effect of the weld of sources underlying these texts: the narratives of the *vitae* transition

231 For all the focus on education in these texts, the *Origo* suggests that some contemporaries must have viewed Constantine as rather poorly schooled, *litteris minus instructus*, Anon. Val. Origo Const., 2.

232 Photius, Bib. Cod., 62.

233 A summary of the debate on the date of this work can be found in Smith 2007, 359–361. Smith believed that the work predates Constantine's death. Janiszewski argues that it was published between 324 and 325, see Janiszewski 2006, 361–362. Photius' summary of Praxagoras mentioned the foundation of Constantinople in 324, providing the *terminus post quem* for his source, see Photius, Bib. Cod., 62.

234 *Cf.* Guidi 1907, 313, line, 23–314, line, 1.

immediately from the rediscovery of the Constantine to Diocletian's court. Indeed, the transition between the two episodes is most abrupt; in the *Guidi* and *Opitz vitae* Constantine is moved away from his father's court for his own safety; Constantius' legitimate wife being extremely upset at the dynastic implications of her husband's bastard.[235] In the *Halkin Vita* he is simply sent straight away "to be educated" with very little explanation,[236] the result being that Constantine is implied to have been very young indeed, perhaps in his early teens.[237] Thus, though it is usually specified that Constantine was appointed to the emperor's staff or bodyguard, the court of the Tetrarch as portrayed in the *vitae* reads, at times, as a sort of aristocratic boarding school rather than the armed camp portrayed by Lactantius.[238]

Barnes has argued that Constantine encouraged a youthful depiction of himself in order to explain his inaction during the persecutions of Diocletian and Galerius, and this may well be so.[239] Yet, considering how artificial and stereotypical the entire court sequence is, it is notable how a younger Constantine also cuts with the grain of the contrastive logic of the episode. As a much younger man and "student", opportunities arise for Constantine to demonstrate superiority in a broader range of aristocratic pursuits than war. Yet another contrast may be made between intrinsic right and mere worldly power by way of preternatural ability in regal activities. In a Sasanian context this meant hunting, literacy, polo and chess; in Late Roman or Byzantine eyes, this meant "Greek Wisdom" and a "Rhetorical Education".[240] So it was that the

235 *Cf.* Guidi 1907, 312, lines 17–19; Halkin 1960, 12, Bidez 1935, 421, lines 4–7.

236 Halkin 1959b, 76, lines 47–49.

237 In the *Halkin Vita* Constantine is just ten when he is found! Halkin 1959b, 75, sec.2, line 25. Here the argument that Constantine was born in the early 270s is accepted as by far the most likely, Barnes 1982, 39–41 a position restated with vim at Barnes 2011, 2–6. Barnes argues that Constantine's own messaging stressed his "youth", at least in part, to dissociate himself from the works of the other Tetrarchs, particularly to explain his silence during the persecutions. This is certainly the case at Eusebius, VC., 2.51. Yet, the audience for such misdirection was not exclusively Christian: the emperor's supposed youth during this time is referenced in a context indifferent to Christianity, see Pan. Lat., VI(7). 8.5 and 21.6. In this oration Apollo is invoked, but not Christ.

238 In two of the three *vitae*, Constantine either becomes a *δομέστικος*, Bidez 1935, 421, sec.2, lines 13–15, or is enrolled *ἐν τὴν δομεστίκων σχολῇ* Guidi 1907, 312, line 15. This title had a very wide application in Byzantine times; these texts would seem to mean that the author imagined that Constantine was admitted into the Tetrarch's household guard as an officer. See Kazhdan 1991a; Kazhdan 1991c. Lactantius records Constantine's rank during this time as *Tribunus ordinis primi*, Lactantius, De Mortibus., 18.10. The later texts perhaps represent a similar scene setting reimagined in contemporary terms.

239 Barnes 2011, 55.

240 Eusebius, VC., 19.2.

court of Galerius played host, simultaneously, to an elder Constantine known as a successful general and a very young Constantine constructed as a model of princely learning.

### 6.6 *Overlapping Models in the Representation of Constantine*

As with so much else pertaining to Constantine, understanding the formation of his legend is complicated by an all-pervading, retrospective sense of the importance of his legacy in the Christian era. As hagiographic texts, the *vitae* commemorated Constantine's life as that of a great hero of the Christian faith and the "founder" of an empire that, theoretically at least, served as the temporal shell for its expression. Yet the idea that Constantine's reign represented a significant event in Christian history goes much further back than the ninth century when the tradition represented by the *vitae* emerged. Eusebius was certain of the emperor's epochal importance even before Constantine died in 337. Firmly convinced of God's providential role in history, Eusebius saw his movement as a distinct *ethnos*, the true heirs of God's chosen people.[241] Constantine, first saviour, then patron of this *ethnos*, warranted comparisons to the heroes of its Biblical past.[242] Thus, first in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, then again in the *Vita Constantini*, the Roman emperor became the reflection, and possibly the proof, of the deeds of the Biblical patriarch Moses.[243]

A considerable amount of scholarship has examined the meaning and implications of this comparison. It has been argued that Moses was chosen because he was both a statesman and a prophet, a characterisation that became rather too exalted in Byzantine times when the model for Christian kingship shifted to the much more flawed figure of David.[244] This position is broadly accepted here: certainly the Moses comparison does not seem to resurface in the mainstream of extant Byzantine historiography. In the context of the argument outlined above, however, it is more important to briefly look into the background of the analogy. Eusebius' Moses was neither created entirely *ex scriptura* nor was it completely opposed to the non-Christian mainstream. Further, it is to be suspected that the prominence of the *Vita Constantini* in modern scholarship has masked the extent to which Eusebius was *refining* an older rhetoric into a Christian product.

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241 Convincingly argued in Johnson's study of the *Preparatio Evangelia*, see Johnson 2006 especially p. 94 *f.*

242 On the meaning of *ethnos*, see ibid., 33–51.

243 Hollerich 1989a, *passim*.

244 Rapp 1998, 290, echoing sentiments expressed at Hollerich 1989b, 426.

It is significant that while the narrative arc of Exodus provided Eusebius' grand soteriological thrust, it is not so much the Biblical Moses as the extra-Biblical Moses of Jewish legend that is relevant in consideration of Eusebius' construction of Constantine's early life. Eusebius first compared Constantine to Moses in his description of the end of the battle of the Milvian bridge, an account written from documentary sources between 313–316.[245] Yet it was not until the opening of the *Vita Constantini* that the parallel became all-encompassing, moving from the description of a specific event to Constantine's entire career.[246] While the Moses of the scriptures does have traditional Near Eastern kingly attributes, the period of his youth at Pharaoh's court is not given an expansive treatment in Exodus.[247] It follows that to create the parallel childhood seen in the first book of the *Vita Constantini*, Eusebius must have leant heavily on extra-canonical biographies of Moses that *did* expand on this period.[248] The works of this type most accessible to him would have been those of Philo, Josephus and Clement, but Moses was also the subject of a number of non-Biblical Jewish and quasi-Jewish traditions; some of which we might reasonably expect Philo and Josephus to have known and used.[249] Unfortunately from this point it becomes very difficult to unpick any specific thread from the much larger patterns of stereotypical representation.

Take for example the first book of Philo's biography of Moses in which the subject is explicitly portrayed as a king.[250] On a second reading, many features, including some of the *topoi* of Hellenistic kingship theory that Philo made use of, are very similar to, or framed in, the same terms used in the expressions of Sequence Two seen in the historicising works surveyed in this study: the court setting, the effortless mastery of all things, the extraordinary beauty and complex parentage.[251] In any case, the scriptural model on which all is predicated is itself almost certainly linked to older habits of royal representation, most

245 Van Dam 2011, 84–92.

246 Eusebius, HE., 9.9.5–8, Eusebius, VC., 1.12, 19–21, 38.2.

247 Moses' entire early life is left unspoken in the transition from Exodus 2.10 to 11. The case for the presence of Near Eastern royal motifs in the scriptural Moses is made in Matthews 2008; particularly relevant is p. 60 *f.*

248 Through Alexander Polyhistor Eusebius knew a lost history of the Jewish people by a man with the oddly Iranian name of Artapanus who probably lived in Egypt during the second century BCE. Also known in some form to Josephus, this work certainly contained an expanded account of Moses at court that included a plot and an escape, see Holladay 1983, 189–193, 209 *f.* (fragment 3).

249 Obbink 1966; Meeks 1968; Matthews 2008, 25–36.

250 Philo, Moses, 1.148, 334; Dvornik 1966, 280–281 and *passim*; Goodenough 1969, 181–189.

251 Philo, Moses, 1.18–25. On the use of similar elements by Josephus, and an argument that these were directed at a non-Jewish audience, see Feldman 1992.

obviously to the *Birth Legend* of Sargon.[252] The mere fact that Philo reproduced the courtly prodigy in the gap provided by scripture speaks volumes: Moses was a heroic, kingly founder, raised at the court of an unworthy king and his image developed in a very predictable way.[253] The sources of Eusebius' sources were themselves participating, at various removes, in the same pool of motifs discussed here.

It has recently been suggested that Constantine himself consciously used Moses as a model. If true this would place the construction of the court sequence entirely within a Christian context and obviate much that has been suggested here.[254] This does not seem particularly likely: while it is entirely possible that the not especially modest emperor would project himself in Biblical terms in later life, whether he would have done so in the early 310s is another matter entirely.[255] Moses had some purchase in the mindset of Graeco-Roman society but probably would not have been an obvious rhetorical model for a Roman emperor in the early fourth century.[256] It would seem significant in this regard that Lactantius, possibly the most belligerently Christian author of his time, sticks to a relatively traditional characterisation of Constantine and draws no Biblical parallel in doing so. Moreover, one would not expect an explicitly Biblical parallel to have appealed to the non-Christian Praxagoras. Conversely, Photius records Praxagoras' other works as a history of Alexander and a history of the kings of Athens.[257] It is an appealing speculation that this author had a liking for, or at least an exposure to, the established forms of royal biography and would easily have recognised the cues provided for him in the sort of rhetoric reflected in Lactantius.

Eusebius *does* record an unambiguous reference to Moses made by the emperor in an address to a Christian audience.[258] The suggestion cited above, that Moses was being consciously invoked as a model, would date this speech to 313.[259] Such an early date is, however, a minority position, with the bulk of commentators leaning towards a date in the early 320s.[260] Seeing the court

252 Lewis 1980, 149. A more complicated relationship between the two was argued in Childs 1965.

253 Notice how, according to Josephus, Moses' success as a general triggered a plot against him, resulting in his flight from the Egyptian court, Josephus, Ant., 2.11.1. (254–256).

254 Recently in Damgaard 2013a; Damgaard 2013b.

255 Williams 2011, 51–56.

256 On the status of Moses in non-Jewish, non-Christian thought in antiquity, see Gager 1972.

257 Photius, Bib. Cod., 62.

258 Eusebius, Oratio Ad Sanctorum Coetum. 17.

259 An early date is accepted as key to the argument in Damgaard 2013a; Damgaard 2013b.

260 An outline of the problems in dating this speech, and the scholarly positions, is given in Bardill 2012, 299–302. Though Barnes is sympathetic to the idea that Constantine was

sequence as a Moses reference from its inception would require us to accept not only an early date for this speech, but also a view of Constantine as some kind of crypto-Christian as early as the first two decades of the fourth century and the proposition that Moses would have been a useful model in the first place. Yet, for most of his political life Constantine's messaging was religiously ambiguous and very much in line with third-century precedent. Moreover, a very wide range of religious positions was possible in this era and Constantine himself is likely to have believed different things at different times.[261] Eusebius' Moses is, in all likelihood, a secondary layer, an imposition of a Biblical (or para-Biblical) precedent over a generically supernatural, legendary historical *topos* that shares the same ancestry.

The possibility should be considered that a much more traditional and religiously flexible model, consciously or not, was the original referent of this episode. Perhaps tellingly, Eusebius begins the *Vita Constantini* with a traditional rhetorical tool, the claim that his subject was superior to admired historical figures. Constantine was greater than Cyrus, claims Eusebius, because Cyrus died a shameful death at the hands of a woman. Constantine was, Eusebius continues, better by far than the bloodied and irresponsible Alexander because he ruled mercifully and left behind him an orderly inheritance.[262] Cyrus and Alexander were very conventional model kings in Graeco-Roman rhetoric and this is an oddly negative appraisal. Given Eusebius' somewhat adversarial attitude towards the Greek tradition, these denunciations might be understood as a rejection of traditional posture; a turning of rhetoric against itself in order to more closely bind Constantine to the Christian tradition.[263] On the other hand, Cyrus, or at least the Graeco-Roman image of Cyrus, possessed stolid and adaptable virtues; the Christian writer Philip of Side, for example, may have made of him a model of chastity in the early fifth century.[264] Conversely,

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a Christian sympathiser from a relatively early age (and marshals the content of the *Oratio ad Sanctorum Coetum* in his support) he rejects the early date, assigning it a date of April 16th or 17th 325, Barnes 2011, 52, 115–117. A cautious reconsideration is given at Bardill 2012, 300–301.

261 The thesis advanced in Bardill 2012, 218 *f.* is largely accepted here.

262 Eusebius, VC., 1.7.

263 These two may have been chosen to avoid comparison to other Roman emperors, see Williams 2011, 50. A far more systematic deconstruction of the past through the reinterpretation of traditional *exempla* is attributed to Orosius in Van Nuffelen 2012, 63 *f.*

264 De Gestis in Perside, 19, lines 1–10. In a disputation on religion before a Sasanian monarch, Cyrus is used as a virtuous pagan, a model of chastity who surrounded himself with attractive women in order to test his dedication to heavenly virtue. An examination of this section (19 line 25–21 line 10) as a possible fragment of Philip of Side can be found in Heyden 2006, 223. On the "romantic" Cyrus, see Davis 2002.

a manual of rhetoric, possibly dating to the reign of Diocletian, recommended Cyrus as a model for orators creating divine origins for the disbelieving, but captive, audiences of imperial orations.[265] Cyrus had besides, very good press in the Biblical version of history that Eusebius was so attached to. Eusebius himself had earlier described him in terms that should sound familiar.[266] In other words, in the early fourth century, Cyrus was a figure both well established and acceptable to almost everyone.

As has been noted above, Ctesias' *Persika* was likely to have been far more popular than its extant state would lead one to believe. By the 310s this work, and its account of Cyrus at the court of Astyages, had been in circulation in Greek for more than twice as long as the Moses of Philo or Josephus. That an escape found an aggressive rewrite of Constantine's movements between 305 and 306 resembles, in outline and specific points of detail, the escape made by Ctesias' Cyrus, argues that some kind of equivalence was being proffered. This is not to suggest that Constantine's propagandists spent long nights highlighting choice passages from the *Persika*. Seven hundred years is a more than adequate span for stories to detach from a specific author and there is no need for the transmission to have been so direct. The originator of the episode may indeed have "used" Ctesias, but he may equally well have simply drawn a Ctesian artifact from the general stock of stories attached to Cyrus.

### 6.7 *Summary of Sequence Two*

As can be seen by a survey of its origins, the thrust of the court episode used in the *vitae* was nakedly apologetic: thanks to Lactantius, it can be shown that all of its variations stemmed from a habit of tendentious representation developed in the second decade of the fourth century. Whether consciously or not, this frame relied on a series of images with a very long precedent in historicising West Eurasian literatures of royal origins: in a Roman context the most accessible of these were connected to Cyrus. We have touched on how themes of beauty, skill and youth were progressively emphasised in the tradition of Constantine's time at court. Yet the development of this image is merely the *entrée* to the point. The story was, from its inception, intended to recast the rather unremarkable return of Constantine to his father as a most dramatic, *contrastive* event and to argue Constantine to be a worthy ruler, far more deserving than his erstwhile "guardians" and their *protégés*. Like the counter-polemic marshalled in defence of Helena, the story of Constantine's

265 These pragmatic instructions are given in Menander Rhetor, 371.

266 Eusebius, Commentary on Isaiah, 7.20, 10.20–21, 14.1–3, 44.24, 44.27–28, 45.1–7, 45.13.

escape and flight long outlived its intended context because its themes are inextricably linked to notions of divine selection.

As such, it remained useful well after there was any need to defend Constantine or his dynasty. As Christianity became the dominant cultural force in "Constantine's" empire, the interpersonal, dynastic polemic born of civil strife began to be read instead as a heroic moment of communal foundation, one in which the contrast of holy emperor and unholy persecutor was primary. An old form of divinised personal contrast became instead the conduit through which God intervened in history to establish the predominance of a religious *community*; it was due to this latter reading that the court sequence and escape were much later deemed suitable for incorporation into hagiography.

## 7 Constantine and Ardashir: Parallel Lives?

As Hippolyte Delehaye noted in his foundational study of the "genre", hagiography was nothing if not unselectively omnivorous and entire lives could be, and were, spun out of just about anything.[267] As biographies of a ruler whose existence was indisputable and whose works would still have been visible, the *vitae* are actually fairly concrete examples of this species of literature. Drawing not only from historical memory, but also the historiographic tradition, the "corrections" seen in the *Guidi Vita*, and the use of the unorthodox Philostorgius in the *Halkin Vita* show that their writers even made the occasional effort to research or engage critically with their sources. And yet, the birth and youth sketched in these texts reflect very little of the real Constantine. Rather, in drawing these periods the *vitae* recycle two confected images, images propagated and in some cases published, by those with an interest in defending Constantine or his legacy. Each narrative developed separately and drew, perhaps largely unconsciously, on motif clusters associated with royal biography. Finally each narrative was polemical, or counter-polemical, designed to advance or defend a position within a broader argument about the meaning of Constantine's accession.

An argument generated by Helena's social standing, or lack thereof, generated an interest in Constantine's infancy, but also seems to have drawn all discussion of the topic into itself. Constantine's "lowly" birth, Winkelmann's hypothetical *Frühgeschichte*, is only sketchily attested before its incorporation into the *vitae*; further, all of the evidence presented above relies on links to

267 Delehaye 1961, 40, *f.*

be inferred between very disparate, though remarkably similar, material. In aggregate, however, this evidence allows the hypotheses that this narrative emerged relatively early *and* that it was a more or less conscious attempt to link Constantine's birth to traditional patterns indicating a divine manifestation. This latter possibility is highlighted by Anastasius' attachment to a functionally identical story. "John's" Anastasian fragment also flags narrative and thematic similarities to the various stories of Sasan connected to the content of the *Kārnāmag* tradition, which, as argued above, probably used this pattern to assimilate prestigious bloodlines into the Sasanian clan. Thus, read in their likely political contexts, the resulting web of texts, as tenuous as it is, would seem to share a common anxiety about issues of lineage. Finally, what little evidence we have for dating these productions suggests a trend for this narrative to emerge after, but not very long after, the deaths of their subjects and to do so outside of what might be deemed official channels.

Decades earlier, a concerted effort by Constantine's partisans to simultaneously blacken the reputation of Galerius and argue for the precedence of Constantine within his own family quickly swept all before it, dominating the historiography of Constantine's ascension into the Byzantine era: even Eunapius, and then Zosimus, who loathed Constantine, would be reduced to rephrasing his partisans.[268] As outlined above, Lactantius' handling of this episode makes it likely that the courtly confrontation, running through the Byzantine historical tradition and thence into the *vitae*, has its roots in a rhetorical construct propagated in Constantine's lifetime, one that may have emanated from his court. It has been suggested that a reference to the Ctesian form of the solidly respectable Cyrus was, consciously or not, intended when this episode was constructed. The early date, confected nature and propagandistic tone of this construct have significance for how we read other "royal biographies" displaying a similar narrative, particularly the very similar, though *much* more artificial, court sequence built for Ardashir and visible in the *Kārnāmag* tradition.

Using the development of Constantine's confrontation with Galerius as a guide to the "parallel" Sasanian episode, we might suspect that this part of the *Kārnāmag* also descends from a rhetoric that sprung up very soon after Ardashir's coup, maybe from within his court, but certainly encouraged or admitted by it. Sequence Two is a natural fit for the needs of, for lack of a better word, a "usurper". It contrasts a new king with his predecessor directly and in

268 Zosimus, 2.8.3. Janiszewski hypothesised that Eunapius' source for the life of Constantine was Bemarchios' (flattering) biography. If so, that work is very likely to have contained some version of the flight, see Janiszewski 2006, 373.

doing so claims a divine sanction, or at least a supernatural inevitability, for his succession. Being built up on centuries of literary and sub-literary precedent, it also activates a number of historical, or quasi-historical, associations that reinforce this message and encourage its spread. In this way the near-total dominance of the tendentious, chronologically mangled, version of Constantine's "escape" and the odd treatment of the *Kārnāmag* tradition affixed to the interpolated history of Agathangelos may be the result of a parallel process.

Thus, certain elements of the *vitae* seem to be mirrored in the *Kārnāmag* and the development of these similar elements may be suspected to have been driven by the same concerns: inconvenient lineage and a pressing need to aggressively assert legitimacy. So far largely unexamined is how and why the much later composite traditions represented in the *vitae* and the *Kārnāmag* selected, collected and arranged these stereotypical narratives in essentially the same way, and what this says about the intertwined nature of religious, political and communal history in these Late Antique societies. It will be argued that the legacy of both men came to be seen as central to what might be dubbed an imperial-religious community and that this created roughly parallel memorialising systems. Being, simultaneously, very traditional figures of earthly power *and* heroes of an imperial faith, Ardashir and Constantine occupied a special category of biography. Though the religious ideas that would come to animate "their" states were novel, their outsized role in founding them maintained, even encouraged, their association with royal poses of an extremely ancient type.

CHAPTER 5

# Synthesis

## 1 Overview

The preceding pages have presented a rather complicated argument that proceeds from the very general to the specific. Having first outlined two collections of motifs, defined here as *sequences*, this study has attempted to demonstrate a history of the use of like narratives in a number of very disparate examples of historicising royal biography over a very great span of time. This argument attempts to join up and expand a number of links already suggested in the various scholarships addressing this material. Consequently, a number of commonalities in the themes of these texts, their meanings and the circumstances that brought them into being have been suggested. A considerable space has been dedicated to an examination of the content and context of two traditions of composite royal biography using these stereotypical narratives: the *Kārnāmag*, an episodic, legendary version of the life of Ardashir, that came into being at some point between the sixth and eleventh centuries, and the *vitae* of Constantine, a set of very similar hagiographies that emerge in the ninth century. I have attempted to produce a diachronic reading of the narrative forms that underlie each tradition with reference to the context of the emergence of their components, and their development within the Perso-Arabic and Byzantine historical-literary tradition. In this way, the oddly parallel, and demonstrably implausible, depictions of the subject's birth and youth seen in these later texts may be explored and explained.

Having positioned the birth and youth components of the biographies presented by the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* within the same long arcs of representation, I will here consider the meaning of their parallel presence in unrelated Iranian and Byzantine traditions. With reference to all of the case studies considered above, I will first present a theory of the symbolism encoded in Sequence One and Sequence Two, the technologies by which each was replicated and their interaction with broader trends in historiography. From here I will move to a specific examination of the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae*. An argument will be made that the cultural forces driving the compilation of the longer narratives seen in the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* texts were, in *certain* regards, rather similar and somewhat novel. The actions of Ardashir and Constantine came to be seen as foundational to social-religious groups that were both identified with an imperial state and invested in the memory of its founder. The

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parallel fusion of two unrealistic, but very ancient and immediately recognisable representations of divinely approved kingship argues that the stories told in the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* are neither historical romance nor (strictly) hagiography. Rather, they are both historicising communal narratives, created to assert the ideal past of a religious-imperial identity tracing its descent to the subject.

## 2 Key Assertions

### 2.1 *Themes*

In the consideration of the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* made above, it was noted how the stereotypical stories of birth and youth seen in both seemed to conveniently address problems of lineage and legitimacy hinted at in other surviving literature about Ardashir and Constantine. After an examination of the political and historiographic context of their emergence it was suggested that the most basal layer of these components was "apologetic" in the sense argued by Knapp: that these components arose as counter-polemic to attacks on character.[1] Further, it was implied that each was generated either officially, within the rhetoric of the subject or his house, or unofficially, within groups sympathetic to the subject's legacy. Finally, it was briefly noted that due to their shared reliance on displays of supernatural approval and intrinsic, aristocratic disposition, they each have a tendency of long outliving the controversies that gave rise to them.

On the basis of those traditions whose context remains somewhat explicable, when used in an apologetic manner each sequence tends to be generated separately in response to different accusations. Because they describe sequential periods in the subject's life, the composite biographical traditions represented by our core texts were able to join them together via some kind of bridging mechanism; a letter from an overlord, a request for the education of the newly discovered prince or the suspicion of a jilted wife. Placed thus side by side, one is struck by how the originally separate narratives both centre on very similar displays of virtue and/or supernatural approval and how both confirm these by acts of recognition. The underlying, legitimising, message of these displays is the key theme of both sequences and in great part explains their appeal as apologetic strategies. Further, as the signs themselves are either supernatural or superhuman, they tap into concepts that remain attractive to the laudatory historiography of a much later period.

1 Knapp 2012, 18*f.*

The supernatural signs employed across these traditions express the explicit, and often extremely unsubtle, approval of heaven. It is the function of the various omens or dreams seen throughout the texts considered above to state that the ascent of their subject is preordained and inevitable: indeed, an unambiguous interpretation of these signs stating exactly this is often provided. The need to produce and explain such statements, ostensibly to another character in the narrative, but actually to the reader, probably explains the presence of so many prophetic professionals, be they astrologers, augurs or dream interpreters, across these texts. In those instances of Sequence One where an omen is employed, it is usually a dream announcing the subject's birth and foretelling their glorious career. The flavour of the omen depends on whether the nascent child is viewed as continuator or usurper: Astyages and Constantius both abandon their descendant after a dream, but the historical context being re-made is rather different and the story is massaged to accommodate this.[2] The omen is fulfilled, for good or ill, in the "father's" recognition of the lost child.

The omens associated with Sequence Two, on the other hand, present a rather more straightforward proposition. As the examples discussed above would seem to show, the thrust of this narrative is *always* aggressive. In narratives of this type, the intent is to describe a personal contrast between a supposedly ineffectual, corrupt or impious ruler and the man who will replace or topple him. The recognition of the subject is performed by the sitting ruler and is never positive. From Urzababa's reaction to Sargon's dream to the omen revealed to Galerius in the *Guidi Vita*, the antagonist of Sequence Two is made to see his own deposition, or, in the case of Galerius/Diocletian, the fall of his order, at the hands of the subject. Wrapping up such numinous signs in what is essentially a narrative of confrontation offers a clue as to their purpose. The implication is that by acting against the subject, the antagonist of the narrative is knowingly defying a divine decree.

In both sequences, these supernatural signs are enhanced by an array of mundane but extraordinary traits. Of course, implying a clear distinction between the divine and the physically perfect is far too firm a separation as the body itself functions as a token of divine approval: Pabag's reaction on seeing the physical perfection of his grandson *cum* son is explicitly a recognition of the fulfilment of his prophetic dream.[3] In line with very basal conceptions of the office, kingship is understood to be an innate quality, signalled by displays

2 One study has argued that the Herodotean Cyrus, and possibly Sargon, is representative of a tradition containing a "murderous grandparent" Schellekens 2006. This assumption of hostility towards the lost child is, in my opinion, far too restrictive.

3 KNA, 2.2 = ŠhN 6., pp. 142–143, lines 136–138.

of excellent manners, aptitude in the activities associated with the ruling class and, to cover all possible angles, family resemblance. Thus, all the external badges that signal the royal estate, what Clifford Geertz called the "symbolics" of power, are described as baked into the subject himself.[4] The use, across both sequences, of games as a means of inducing this recognition functions as a kind of dress rehearsal for the actual exercise of power.

Between them, the components of each sequence collect a number of very basic, often overlapping, expectations of the royal office in societies where the ideology of rule was far more overtly transcendental than it is now.[5] It should be noted however, that both Sequences express such expectations in an oddly contradictory way and this betrays their ultimately argumentative nature. The kingship of the subject is, simultaneously, intrinsically legitimate, expressed in every aspect of his physical being *and* completely contingent, dependent on the will of a god. Given their attachment to moments of dynastic or social change, we may strongly suspect that the last element was almost always read as primary in the traditions considered above. What we do *not* see here is a "sacral king" who makes the rains fall and the crops grow.[6] Nor, though one would intuitively expect Constantine to have been a model for the type, do any of the traditions considered above much resemble any of the categories applied to the "saint kings" of the European Middle Ages.[7] Rather, the expectations embedded in these stories return to their Mesopotamian roots: they align with a theoretical framework in which a king is understood as the *appointee* of a god, whose approval may be withdrawn at any moment for any reason.[8]

The Iranian conceptual framework of Ardashir's flight makes this quite clear: the untranslatable *xwarrah* functions as a near-physical mark of the right to rule. It is gained and lost by means of a message written in the stars. On

4 Geertz 1993, 122–125.

5 A central contention of Dvornik 1966, a work that is, despite its title (*Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy*), fundamentally a study of the history of *monarchy*. The commonality of the themes and badges of the royal office across western Eurasia is usefully discussed at al-Azmeh 2001, 11 *f.* Numinous monarchy was defined as the "political commonsense of humankind" at Oakley 2006, 1–9.

6 At Fowden 1993, 88, it is argued that Constantine saw himself as such a figure.

7 For a review of the trends in the study of this figure, see Klaniczay 2000, 2–16. See also Góski 1968.

8 This seems to have been the operating assumption in Babylon and Mesopotamia more generally. The Babylonian New Year festival offers a striking example of this line of thought. Here the king was stripped of his regalia and forced to offer his assurances to Marduk that he had faithfully discharged his duties, see Kuhrt 1987. Similarly, the Iranian tradition also saw the relationship between the ruler and heaven as contractual, see Dabiri 2010, 18 *f.*

the other hand, the fundamental, though unstated, assumption that kingship is a transferrable gift and that heaven is, underneath it all, somewhat fickle, makes the traditions underpinning the early sections of the *vitae*, or at least their reception into Christianising versions of history, a little ironic. Regardless, in both cases this emphasis on divine approval, be it displayed in the progression of the subject from rags to riches or in literal prophecy, obviates awkward problems of lineage and smooths over the unromantic, but effective, power politics on which the thrones of both men actually rested.

### 2.2 *Patterns of Emergence*

If we accept that the themes expressed in each sequence are useful for reconstructing a particular kind of event that is seen to be recurrent, and thereby attractive to the apologetic mode, it follows that both tend towards reactive and counter-polemical uses. As such they should be considered as more deliberate creations than they would appear to be at first glance. The above examination of the development of the traditions that fed the relevant sections of the biographies presented in the *Kārnāmag* and *vitae* attempted to position the separate emergence of various iterations of these narratives within live arguments over the meaning of history, or rather, over the meaning of a particular point in history. While the quality and quantity of evidence for each of these narratives varies wildly, a number of broad conclusions may be tentatively proffered in regard to the timing of their creation and the authorship that brought them into being.

Of the two narratives, Sequence One is the hardest to analyse. The few clues that may allow us to date its expressions are largely speculations based on context. Little in the suggested precedent would offer a guide: Sargonic evidence is so minimal as to be useless, and the Herodotean Cyrus was, in any case, the product of a process that took place outside of the core group of his empire and as such, probably not created with apologetic intent. The repetitious instances of Sequence One seen in the *Kārnāmag* and the various pieces of Perso-Arabic historiography that used hKNA, its components or descendants, offer a considerably better base for analysis. Ardashir's own birth, as depicted in these texts, is not only an extremely novel arrangement of the components of this sequence, but also bound up in the much larger problem of the extremely confused status and murky origins of Sasan. As such, it offers few clues that would allow us to place it; our only real clue is Agathias, whose work indicates some version of this story must have been in circulation by the later sixth century. It is in the somewhat overlooked, extremely repetitious accounts of the birth of his son and grandson that we find some interesting suggestions. With the caveat that firm evidence is both lacking and vague, these appear to have

formed some time after the lives of their subjects though how long after is not easy to say. Given Ormazd's relative obscurity, and the local horizons of his legend, it is to be suspected that his birth is the older of the two and may have postdated his death by mere decades. We might tentatively date the story of Ormazd's birth to the early fifth century.

The origin of the story of Constantine's birth in an inn is likewise obscure, though it certainly cannot have been official. On the assumption that the formation of the *Passio Eusignii* dates to some point in the seventh century, this may serve as the *terminus ante quem*. Two pieces of non-Constantinian material, the life of Theodore of Sykeon and the legend of Anastasius' miraculous birth near Dara, suggest both the popularity of this kind of narrative and the possibility of an even earlier date. So too, do certain internal clues: the presence of an archaic, or at least old-fashioned, military office, and the very long association of Helena with hospitality and Drepanum.

The thread running through all of these narratives is problematic lineage. Ardashir's clan was, at best, the cadet branch of a dynasty of local sub-kings and their eponymous ancestor Sasan remains something of a cipher. Given the hints that the bloodletting accompanying Ardashir's rise was accompanied by a symbolic violence directed against the dynastic-religious infrastructure of aristocratic families, it is interesting that the *Kārnāmag* presents Ardashir as the representative of a mythic dynasty but casts Ardashir's immediate descendants as continuations of specific aristocratic families.[9] The fact that a number of the most powerful aristocratic families of the Arsakid period survived the Sasanian accession and retained powerful roles in Ardashir's state would seem particularly significant in any reading of these stories.[10] Linking Sasanian princes to known bloodlines reflects a need to ground the grand claims of Kayanid descent in more concrete markers of rule. Marriage stresses continuity by producing children that bridge old and new orders; the much later claim that Hussein, the son of Ali and the grandson of Mohammad, married a Sasanian princess probably reflects a similar need to harmonise old and new.[11]

It may be possible to discern a similar controversy driving the placement of Constantine's birth in an inn; though here the terms of the argument were weighted more towards the cultural than the dynastic. Helena's background

9 Boyce positioned dynastic fires as an extension of ancient Indo-Iranian worship at hearth fires, and saw the early Sasanians as deliberately targeting these, see Boyce 1975. This argument was developed in De Jong 2006.

10 Such is the general thesis of Pourshariati 2008.

11 Savant 2015, 102–108.

was well known in the fourth century. It was, moreover, a likely target of those hostile to the perceived consequences of Constantine's reign. It is possible that the reign of Julian emboldened or focussed such voices at a time when this sort of attack would still have been politically relevant. Ambrose's slightly later oration suggests both an acknowledgement of such a controversy and an attempt to turn it into something more palatable. Following this reasoning it is reasonable to suggest that variants of Sequence One were most likely to have arisen sometime after the death of their subject and that the sequence was attractive in cases where a controversy had arisen over *lineage*. Because the stories proffered in the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* appear to contradict early Sasanian and Constantinian dynastic postures, we might also suggest that though Sequence One tended to be replicated defensively by writers and orators sympathetic to the subject, it was unlikely to be adopted in any strictly official version of dynastic origins.

Sequence Two is somewhat easier to pin down. Its demonstration of divine election and its inherently contrastive message attack and defame a specific figure: as such, its political applications are more focussed and more immediately useful than those of Sequence One. Moreover, thanks to the relative density of sources surrounding Constantine, an example of its use as apologetic rhetoric is clearly illustrated. To return to a very early point in the study, when discussing the *Sumerian Legend* it was suggested that the reader was nudged towards viewing Urzababa's actions towards Sargon as futile and impious, and this inclination would seem to hold true in the later traditions considered here. Further, it was suggested that painting Urzababa in this way might have been a propagandistic claim made not very long after Urzababa's fall. That a similar confrontation emerges from the rhetoric of Constantine's rise in the second decade of the fourth century should sharpen this suspicion. One suspects that the entirely confected confrontation of Ardawan with a young Ardashir in KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh* may represent a late, and baroque, development of a similarly early attempt to set the record straight.

Should we take the development of Constantine's flight from contemporary rhetoric to historical fact to hagiographic component as broadly parallel to the processes that built up Ardashir's escape from Ardawan, we arrive at some interesting possibilities. Later Roman panegyric was a culturally specific institution that probably had no exact analogue in the Iranian tradition: though it should perhaps be noted that Arsakid kings had been described as (and mocked for) presiding over Hellenised courts and Greek-style oratory may not have been completely alien to a third or fourth century Iranian context.[12] Of

12 Plut. Crassus, 32–33. Some Greeks may have returned their admiration, see Livy, 9.18.

course, it does not follow that an early Sasanian court would know *no* laudatory oratory. While Boyce's theorised minstrel tradition might be a somewhat overused heuristic, very elaborate poetic panegyric was a well-established feature of later Persian-speaking courts, and the practice may have arisen from Sasanian antecedents.[13] If Ardashir's dispute with and flight from Ardawan is, as Lactantius' report of the plot against Constantine seems to have been, a story taken up in the rhetoric of the subject's court, it would locate the origins of both historical narratives in a particular kind of elite performance.[14]

Late Roman orators and Iranian court entertainers were, it needs to be said, not the same thing; both were, however, essentially spinners of images, ultimately reliant on patronage. When representing the recent past, the focus of each kind of performance was the figure of the ruler, whose approval brought reward and whose preferred outlook set the limits and the tone of the act itself. Into this frame could be worked the stock tales of the speaker's culture.[15] The result here was an invitation to the audience to a vision of the past that was both laudatory and exculpatory, one in which the ruler's fallen foes were damned and current conditions are made both inevitable and divinely sanctioned: a style of historical presentation that was very much in vogue in this period.[16] Should this version have met with approval it would be taken up more generally as other professionals followed suit. The result would be a number of related, ultimately ephemeral, compositions asserting a similarly argumentative, demonstrative, claim about what just happened and why it happened.[17] A particularly successful claim of this sort may coalesce into *the* preferred position with those making representations to the ruler expected to be willing to repeat it. Such claims were not exactly the one and only official position. Rather, they were features expected of formal, laudatory works performed in the presence of the ruler or intended for his eyes; as such, they could and did exist in parallel with more prosaic accounts of the recent past.

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13 The *locus classicus* for the transmission of Iranian traditions is Boyce 1957. On the legacy of Iranian court poetry, see Meisami 1987, 1–14 and Mottahedeh 2015.

14 On this point too I am indebted to Ghazzal Dabiri.

15 "For the epideictic oratory of the empire, especially the panegyric literature of which there was so much, relied heavily for its effectiveness on a repertoire of symbolic evocation. The repeated allusions to stock examples (historical figures "good" and "bad" emperors, kingly figures like Cyrus and Alexander), stock virtues, and stock themes form the technical armory of evocation." Cameron 1991, 84.

16 Flower 2013, *passim*.

17 On demonstrative rhetoric as a category, its convergence with panegyric, influence over Mediaeval Latin historiography and ethical emphasis, particularly its relationship with *exempla*, see Kempshall 2011, 138–171. On the mechanics of Roman imperial panegyric in Late Antiquity, see Rees 2002, 6–19, especially p. 12.

In the Roman context, we know that panegyrics were sometimes published and circulated.[18] We can also be fairly sure that Lactantius' version of Constantine's flight can't have been the only attack on Galerius' memory in "print"; the existence of a number of similar constructions can be seen in what is perhaps another version of the plot offered by the *Origo* and the fact that Lactantius' polemic is a very unlikely source for Greek texts making use of similar details.[19] It would seem that various texts of this type were in circulation and that these served as the interface between the representations of Constantine's courtiers and historical literature. It is much harder, given the lack of evidence and scholarship's tendency to locate Sasanian material in more demotic oral traditions, to work out how a Sasanian court narrative might be transmitted in writing.

While the close association with literacy and civic context of Greek and Latin panegyric would seem to render it quite distinct from the courtly context and oral-poetic form we tend to assume for Iranian praise poetry, the two forms may have had more in common than is generally assumed. Certainly, Roman panegyric had the potential to adopt a more courtly "Iranian" style. From the late fourth century until the middle of the fifth, epic panegyric in Latin was devised as a means to broadcast the ruler's political messages to the senatorial aristocracy. In this form the speaker became the client of his subject while the audience, in this mode entirely cut out of the transaction, was merely expected to heed well what was being said.[20] Conversely, it is not necessary to assume that Iranian performance was purely oral or completely spontaneous.[21] Had the kernel of the court narrative seen in the *Kārnāmag*, Ardashir's confrontation with Ardawan, his acquisition of the *xwarrah* and his flight, become an approved historical claim in an early, courtly, context, it is not unlikely to have attracted a considered, written, composition at some point. Any such work could serve as the base for not only the entry of the narrative into historiography, but also its elaboration and further romanticisation over time.

### 2.3 *Precedent and Replication*

The utility of both sequences as argument is based on the easy recognition of their symbolism, that is, on a wide understanding of what they mean. This recognition rests not only upon the explicit symbolism of the themes described above, but also the association of both sequences with previous historicising

18 Potter 1999, 27–28.

19 Such as, for example, Praxagoras, see Janiszewski 2006, 365–366.

20 Gillett 2016.

21 Shayegan 1999, 5–13.

uses. This precedent is conveyed in a system of non-direct transmission whereby the very system of attachment, modification and *ad hoc* reattachment continually renewed these narratives by the creation of new exempla. This process strengthened their explanatory and (in the literal sense of the word) propagandistic power by spreading them ever further and freighting them with ever-more-useful associations.

The apologetic use of these forms is, therefore, circular and self-referential, hallowed images of kingship employed to deflect critique are, on account of their generic appeal to divinity, assimilated to laudatory literature, whence they propagate themselves further as suitable models for the deflection of critique. A notable exception to this directly apologetic tendency is Cyrus, whose life seems to have accidentally acquired Sargonic forms in Babylon. Even here however, it may be suspected that Cyrus' later biographies accidentally inherited established apologetic forms by way of the antiquarian preoccupations of the legitimising rhetoric of Nabonidus.

This would seem to be a rather facile argument, essentially positing that success breeds success, and as such it would be an unsatisfyingly circular explanation. Perhaps a better analogy would be a Newton's Cradle; a particularly forceful use of these narratives, captured in influential literary traditions, creates literary assertions that begin to shape literate, non-literate or para-literate expectations alike. It is to be suspected that the long association of Sargon, a figure of near-mythic status in Mesopotamian society, with a complex parentage and a courtly confrontation, entrenched these forms in a number of influential cultural repertoires and firmly associated them with the ideal of kingship. As literate and non-literate versions of his early life were transmitted and retransmitted, they continuously reformed and re-patterned each other.[22] Sargon's life would not be the only example of this process in Antiquity.[23]

Thus it was the inertia granted them by centuries of repetition that made these particular motif assemblages into what one theorist of modern, national, mythmaking would describe as *intuitive* images: forms deeply, and unconsciously, associated with a concept, in this case divinely appointed but in some sense "new", monarchy.[24] Cyrus, despite not employing these narratives to assert his own legitimacy, could become a springboard for later apologia, simply because he came to be seen as exemplary and a model for emulation.

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22 A similar idea is expressed at Drews 1974, 393.

23 A persistent Iranian imagery of rebellion has been discussed above (page 118). It has also been noted that the conception of Hatshepsut, as recorded in that queen's own inscriptions, mirrors that of the Alexander of the *Romance* and may reflect an even older Pharaonic tradition, see El-Abbadi 2004, 264, Erskine 2013, 178.

24 Zerubavel 1995, 110–113.

The *ultimate* basis of these narratives, the cultural matrix that made them effective in the first place, lurks somewhere behind the smiths and shepherds of the *Sumerian King List*. It is entirely possible that one or both sequences were well established in the unwritten culture of pre-Sargonic times. Any such supposition, however, would be almost completely speculative and lie, in any case, well outside the scope of this inquiry. It is the extremely long-lived historical-*literary* tradition surrounding Sargon that was, literally, fundamental to the processes of reception that link the *Kārnāmag* to the *vitae*.

Continuous dispersal by and reintegration into literature provided these particular arrangements of motifs with more and more points of possible crossover into other cultural contexts; one may suspect, for example, that the centuries-long use of Akkadian in parallel with other languages throughout the Near East during the second millennium BCE may have played some role in shaping certain traditions describing the relationship between David and Saul, or "folkloric" accounts of the birth of the kingly prophet Moses. Cyrus, whose life we know to have attracted extensive treatments in Greek, serves as a more concrete example of this kind of crossover. At any point in this long trajectory, other suitable motifs or culturally specific modifications from other constructions of the ideal royal life could easily be worked into the frame provided by either narrative. The beast combat seen in Ardashir and Constantine's court narratives, for example, may not have been native to the Sargonic pattern of interpersonal confrontation. Yet the former is certainly a suitably heroic image, one in harmony with the contrastive theme of the latter and, therefore, easily drawn into its iterations.

Extant literature therefore allows a plausible relationship to be traced between disparate, historicising iterations of both sequences and suggests likely points of crossover between language groups. Text in a variety of forms would seem to have played an important role in transmitting each narrative into and across repertoires. Moreover, the continuing presence of either narrative in text provided points of reference for its imitation and further dispersal. Having argued that the traditions of the birth and youth of Ardashir and Constantine are the deliberate products of considered engagements with troublesome historical problems it would seem significant that any such texts would have been most accessible to those most likely to recycle them in the service, or defence, of "new" rulers: orators, poets, historians and the like. This is *not* to claim an absolutely direct dependence on a model text in every case. Nor is it to cast the replication of these sequences in history as a purely literary exercise; these narratives were selected precisely because they had a much broader presence in their cultural setting. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the literate form the hinge between old *topoi* and new "history". Consequently, whether intending

a specific comparison or merely relaying set-pieces absorbed in the course of their lessons, their *reapplications* of either sequence may have involved somewhat more textual guidance than is usually considered.

### 2.4 *Effects in Historiography*

Finally, a noticeable, though probably unintentional side effect of the use of these narratives to recast history is their tendency to push competing narratives out of the broader historiography over time. With the caveat that we have lost an enormous amount of material, we have seen how nothing *except* historicised legend remains of the early life of Sargon. In the cases of Cyrus, Ardashir and especially Constantine, legendary narratives built up on these sequences appear to have marginalised, sometimes almost obliterated, any other account, even officially propagated accounts, of their subjects' early lives. Some instances of the adaptation of these implicitly adulatory narratives by writers hostile to the legacy of the subject firmly underscore this point.

Several factors would seem to have driven this tendency. Firstly, very few concrete details of the early lives of any of these men would have been easily available in later times, leaving the exaggerated relicts of exhausted polemics and counter-polemics as the most accessible sources for later writers. More abstractly, a retrospective sense of the social and cultural importance of the dynasties and/or systems that later writers believed to have been "founded" by these men assigned them to an established category of representation. In this way arguments about history adapted, at least indirectly, from historical literature *became* historical literature.

Introduced to argue a point by reference to precedent, both sequences took on a very different meaning when their subject became viewed as an exemplary and significant figure, particularly one associated with some kind of momentous social or political break. When this occurred the subject was shunted into the very category of extraordinary kingship that his defenders had drawn on as a rhetorical device; a proposition that could be supported by a circular reference to the alignment of the subject's early life with that of other exemplary and significant figures. This tight association of both sequences with the idea of royal greatness and the all-permeating mass of convention underlying the messaging of each created a certain idealism of form. Uses of either sequence tended towards the possibilities predefined by their older incarnations, leading to a remarkable consistency in very different cultures and circumstances. We see this most vividly in the small details; in the highly constrained form of recognitions made in Sequence One; the way that the antagonist of Sequence Two is made to relax as the subject escapes; or the way that the *Halkin Vita*

added "missing" elements to and exaggerated or underlined particular themes in its source material for the emperor's youth.

It is this categorising process of reception that allows a pivot from a general demonstration of a loose narrative and circumstantial relationship between all of the historicising narratives considered above to a specific examination of the meaning of the structural and narrative similarities seen in the opening sections of the *Kārnāmag* texts and the *vitae*. It will be contended that the eventual (albeit heavily idealised) identification of rule with a specific religious community within the Roman and Sasanian empires, took these very old claims of numinous kingship, generated in the heat of ideological or political dispute, in a somewhat novel, and unusually parallel, direction. Without positing equivalence, we may discern beneath these composite traditions the emergence, preservation and eventual fusion of both sequences through a broadly similar, religious-communal, processes of commemoration.

## 3 Religious-Imperial Historiography

That various Late Antique Roman and Iranian writers came to attach roughly the same narratives of royal birth and youth to a divisive king is perhaps not particularly surprising. Novel, "usurping" monarchies face similar problems and, as I hope to have shown, the "correct" depiction of royal origins in each society had been conditioned by what was, ultimately, a single system of precedent. What sets the stories told in the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* apart is their selection and arrangement of these narratives into composite biographies through which a politically significant religious community connected its own history to that of the subject, and the transmission of these composites through the literate commemorative systems of that same community. In this way the partisan polemics and counter-polemics of an earlier stage of historiography were transformed into retrospective proof of the action of the divine will in history and the resulting composites became more than the sum of their parts.

From the third century until the fall of the Sasanian dynasty in the seventh, both Rome and Iran had seen their imperial ideologies become increasingly closely associated with a single religious community. The theological and historical claims of these communities lent a certain style to each empire's claim to universal rule and their identity would come to be closely entwined with that of their host polity. These merged identities, be they expressed in artistic, literary or ceremonial forms, were based on an imagined ideal; reality was far less clean. The vision of a Christian, Orthodox and universal empire

projected from Constantinople was, perversely, extremely prone to fracture. On the one hand, the creation of a canon allowed interpretations at odds with those sanctioned by the imperial centre. On the other, the nature of ecclesiastical organisation itself had the potential to make any such dissent dangerously regional.[25] In *Ērānšahr* the emphasis of the "dominant" religious system, as well as the institutional balance between throne and altar, was rather differently weighted and Sasanian rulers generally had a freer hand in religious matters; their religious policies could, therefore, be far more flexible and much better suited to managing a very diverse confessional landscape.[26] Moreover, participation in government or possession of elite status was never closed to non-Zoroastrians.[27] These are, however, general statements that require some clarification.

In broad terms, the Kings of Kings came to fashion the various non-Zoroastrian communities of their empire into useful tools of imperial control; rewards and punishments would be used in order to keep hierarchs and their followers working with imperial officials. In turn, the king, as an outsider, could be invoked as an arbiter in internal disputes.[28] Yet managerial absolutism had its limits; holding close political relationships with Christian and Jewish leaders does not signal that the king was free to dabble with any system that took his fancy. The ideology of Sasanian rule, the very term *Ērān* itself, was bound up in the legendary of a particular stream of a broader religious complex whose

25 Hence Fowden's concept of *commonwealth* as a broken universalism, Fowden 1993, 6–8. The trials of keeping a universal, imperial faith together are illustrated in detail in Allen 2001.

26 Shaked argued that Sasanian Zoroastrianism was an extremely diverse set of beliefs whose priestly and demotic registers, in particular, differed sharply. More controversially, he cast Sasanian kings as essentially managerial in their approach to *all* religions, Shaked 1994, 71*f*., 109–115. These statements drew an article-length response from Boyce arguing that some kind of orthodoxy did in fact exist during this time and that the house of Sasan was dedicated to it, see Boyce 1996. Though Shaked's theories may have been slightly overstated, it should be noted that, in deep contrast to the later "Iranian" tradition (see for example, ŠhN 6., 336, line. 594.) Manichaean portrayals of the magi's role in the death of their prophet stress that the magi damned him by persuading the king, who was angered by Mani's failures as a doctor, and did not solely rely on the citation of dogma, see Allberry 1981, 241: 43, 15–25; Henning 1942, 949, 950–951; O'Farrell 2021.

27 On the regional and historical means of constructing elite status outside of Iranian, Zoroastrian circles, see Payne 2012.

28 Payne has argued that the Syriac-speaking churches of Sasanian Iran were managed in a deliberate and relatively careful manner, and, that as a result, these communities eventually became worked into the political and symbolic fabric of the state. This culminated in the use of Christian symbolism and a knowing engagement with Christian factions during the Sasanian occupation of the Roman territory during the reign of Khosrow II (r. 590–628), see Payne 2016, 164*f*.

adherents were largely, but not exclusively, speakers of Iranian languages.[29] While it is not probable that the particular variant of this religion dominant in Istakhr was a widespread, centralised or even particularly consistent set of beliefs at the time of the dynasty's climb to power, it does seem likely that a rather *more* centralised and *more* organised institution, one increasingly textual and sometimes entwined with the organs of state, had emerged by its final century; possibly with the encouragement of the state itself.[30]

Late Middle Persian religious works, and thence a number of Perso-Arabic texts, would claim that the Sasanian state had made "twins" of religion and kingship; though one needs to be *extremely* careful in appraising this claim in regard to the power of priests at court, there is a very small, very hard, kernel of truth in it.[31] The edifice of legend that built up around the king's office was not an afterthought. Shapur I mentioned his foundation of ritual fires and sacrifices in ŠKZ, indicating his allegiance to very traditional Indo-Iranian rites, but over the empire's life this would grow into an appeal to a much more specific narrative embedded in this tradition.[32] Through the foundation of large fire temples, the very geography of the empire came to be remade in the image of the old religious-epic cycles.[33] Kings sponsored and worshipped at these temples, and one should note that in the seventh century the Romans under Heraclius destroyed a temple particularly beloved of the dynasty.[34] The king was, certainly by the sixth and seventh centuries, very clearly identified as an adherent of priestly Zoroastrian beliefs, and outsiders perceived this stance as central to his empire.[35]

The king was not alone. The unreasonably vicious kings and magi of the Syriac *acta* are exaggerated caricatures but the characterisation of many of the

29 The diversity of this system has caused a great many problems due to the lateness of most Zoroastrian literature and a general assumption that as a religiously inflected polity the Sasanian empire must necessarily always have strongly desired and actively sought religious uniformity; an assumption drawn from an intrinsically Abrahamic framework, see Rezakhani 2015, 62. A very useful comparison has been suggested to Hinduism (a concept that is itself something of a modern construct, see ibid., 62–63; Nongbri 2013, 110–112, Kryenbroek 2008, 13; Becker 2014, 9).

30 See page 213 below.

31 An argument that this position was a wishful post-production is made in Gignoux 1984.

32 ŠKZ, §32–40 and *f.*

33 Canepa 2013. Later references to royal visits to the great fire of Ādur Gušnasp (*cf.* KNA, 1.10) in the modern Iranian province of West Azerbaijan are listed in Boyce 2011. Bahram V (r. 420–428) was supposed to have dedicated a Turkish king's crown to this temple, Ṭabarī, 96–97. Ardashir is said to have prayed at Ādur Farnbāg in Fars before his battle with Ardawan at KNA, 5.10.

34 Ādur Gušnasp was sacked by Heraclius in 623, see Sebeos 38 [124] (81).

35 Agathias. Hist., 2.26.5.

subjects of these documents tells us something important about the empire's ideological structure in that the targets of persecution were very often converted Iranian aristocrats.[36] Moreover, if the Syriac material can be taken as representative, apostasy from Zoroastrianism was policed by the magi. It would follow that the *Iranian* aristocrats of the Sasanian empire were also expected to conform to some variety of traditional practice and that their priests were responsible for enforcing communal boundaries.[37] In this way, the jealous magi of the multi-confessional empire of the *šāhānšāh* somewhat recall the priests, monks and ascetics of the various Christian groups inside and outside of the Roman Empire.[38] In both cases groups of religious professionals sought to keep their charges inside a communal boundary, in both cases this boundary was in no small part drawn by the positioning of the community within a particular historical narrative.[39]

Of course, the evolution and internal conflicts of Roman Christianity are relatively well recorded and we have nothing like as much detail for developments in Iran. We do, however, have some evidence of the existence of disagreement and the potential for rupture along regional or doctrinal lines in the Sasanian period. The famously ecumenical bigotry of the high priest Kartir (mid-late third century) may or may not have been empty posturing, but, commissioned by a man so sure of his position as to carve his inscriptions into those of the imperial house, these words testify to the will, if not an ability, to aggressively enforce *some* kind of religious position from the very centre of the state at a fairly early point in its existence.[40] Kartir used the word *zandīk*, which probably derives from a term meaning "interpretation", to describe an

36 Payne 2016, 48–56.

37 Joel Walker's study of the Syriac *acta* of Mar Qadagh provides a very useful illustration of this careful communal demarcation within the shared culture of the Sasanian Empire. The hero of this text is an aristocratic Iranian convert whose conversion is prosecuted by Zoroastrian priests. Interestingly the writer of this text was clearly familiar with the conventions of *Iranian* heroism and used them unsparingly, see Walker 2006, especially 53–54 and 121 *f.*

38 On the religious classes as patrollers of boundaries, see Sizgorich 2009, 108–143.

39 Sizgorich saw a distinct inclination to "primordialism" in Christian communal historical discourse, with groups leaning on myths of communal origins, particularly stories of martyrs, to orientate themselves with regard to others, ibid., pp. 46–79. Two recent works on Christians in the Sasanian empire show this technique used to work Christianity into the landscape while stressing the distinct origins of Christian communities, see Payne 2016, 59–78; Smith 2016, 129–153.

40 Kartir's four inscriptions were collected, transliterated and translated in Gignoux 1991. The word *zandīk* (represented here as *zyndyk*) was used in the three copies of his résumé engraved at Naqš-e Rostam (KNRm), Naqš-e Rajab (KNRb), and on the Kaʿbaye Zardošt (KKZ). The word is however only preserved in KKZ. Gignoux translates it as "Manicheans".

unspecified religious group, perhaps variants of his own tradition of which he disapproved.[41] Priestly education and transmission of scripture remained primarily oral far into the Sasanian period and it is likely that a wide variety of interpretations had emerged as a result.[42] Later sources would, for example, cast the still very poorly understood Mazdakite movement as a religious innovation within the body of Sasanian "Zoroastrianism".[43]

A corollary to this doctrinal variance, particularly the Mazdakite affair, may perhaps be found in the fact that Zoroastrian and Islamic tradition would assign the compilation of written scriptures and commentaries, something that seems to have occurred in the late Sasanian period, to imperial command.[44] If this claim is true, it shows an imperial interest in controlling and tightening the religious canon and engagement with the priestly class. Even if it is exaggerated, it shows that Sasanian kings came to be viewed as legitimising sources of religious authority whose weight could be used to define a particular vision of orthodoxy. In either case, it shows how a particular religious identity became more and more fused with the mythic ideological claims of the imperial centre; a fusion that appears to have survived, and may perhaps have been intensified by, the fall of the empire itself. Conversely, a trace of opposition to Sasanian primacy within this mythology may be seen in the extremely obscure, and very difficult to date, *Letter of Tansar*; here a regional king seems to complain (obliquely) about Sasanian usurpation of the Iranian legendary complex.[45] This trace of aristocratic opposition to Sasanian innovation is particularly relevant in light of a recent argument that some of the old Arsakid-era

41 An etymology cited at Masʿudi. Muruj, 67–168, where *zandīk* is held to mean Manichaean. See also Tafazoli 2010/2011, 117.

42 On the long ascendancy of orality in Iran, particularly in regard to scripture, see Huyse 2008; Tafazoli 2010/2011, 67–69.

43 Crone 1991, 26–30.

44 Though modern scholarship has found it very difficult to determine what Mazdakism *was*, it has sometimes been posited as the cause of deep structural changes in the Sasanian polity, Christensen 1971, 364 *f.*; Shayegan 2003, 376–378 see however, Pourshariati 2008, 83–94. It has been argued that the perception that these disturbances were religious in nature was the trigger for the deliberate creation of a more structured and centralised creed, a system that is reflected in today's Zoroastrianism, Jong 2015, 98–100. Khodadad Rezakhani, who also saw Mazdakism as aiding the creation of a canonical Zoroastrianism, would seem to place the construction of "orthodoxy" after the Arab conquest, see Rezakhani 2015. As noted above, later sources sometimes claimed that it was *Ardashir* who ordered the rationalisation of the faith; this was probably an attempt to attribute reform to a long-dead model king, see Daryaee 2003.

45 LoT., 36–37, 43–44, 66.

families held onto local interpretations of Iranian religion during Sasanian rule.[46]

One should not overstate the parallels in what were very different arrangements with starkly different antecedents and attitudes. We may say, however, that both Roman and Sasanian imperialisms produced, or at least, *claimed* to have produced, a core confessional group, a religious-imperial community whose identity was nested in historical beliefs that were linked somehow to the mythology of state. The terms of the religious imaginary proffered in Constantinople were more canonically defined, more uniform and almost certainly far more centralised than that on offer in Ctesiphon and Fars for most of the Sasanian period, but in the broadest terms each community, at least the *ideal* of each community, came to play a similar role in the mindset of their host polities. It is this similar alignment of interests and the shared need to produce communal histories that included empire that pushed the opening sections of the *vitae* and the *Kārnāmag* onto a similar path.

### 3.1 *Imperial Narrative and Communal Narrative*

It has been argued above that the birth and youth components of the composite traditions labelled as the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* are likely to have originated separately in times when and contexts where the meaning of history was both disputed and of political concern. They were both laudatory and apologetic, accessing particularly traditional streams of royal representation made effective by a complex network of texts and expectations. Though connected to this mass of precedent, the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* share two features that separate them from their predecessors and make them particularly relevant to each other. On the one hand, both possess a parallel structure; each tradition has reintegrated both narratives in essentially the same way, presenting them as parts of a longer narrative that is both "biography" and an account of imperial foundation. On the other, the construction of longer narratives was, in both cases, mediated by the presence and needs of an imperial-religious community. The question becomes one of interpretation and transformation. How and why do relics of polemic and counter-polemic survive to get taken up into much later historiographies of glorious discontinuity?

Several general explanations have already been advanced for this durability: stereotypical narratives travel far and fast and have on this account a ready availability; the divine symbolism used in both narratives is applicable across a wide range of the theories of numinous kingship common to pre-modern societies; and finally, that a retrospective appraisal of a figure as exemplary

46 Pourshariati 2008, 360 *f.*

aligns him with previous exemplars lodged in the repertoire. The Iranian and Byzantine composite traditions considered here present a shared additional factor in that stereotypical descriptions of events were received and filtered through the institutional results of the events described. The most useful analysis of the production, audience and intent of these composites would, therefore, proceed from an investigation of them as the products of similar social processes. This institutional slant is evident in the case of *vitae* which fall, more or less neatly, into the (admittedly extremely broad) Christian "genre" of hagiography. It is not so obvious in the case of the *Kārnāmag* which is, for various reasons, something of an isolate. The functional and structural equivalence seen in each tradition directs us to a number of considerations of group identity and intergroup relations in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

In Rome the imperial creed was a streamlined construct built over a considerably less unitary religious landscape. What would become Orthodox Christianity, as is well known, developed slowly and unevenly through a highly literary process in which a stock of stories was created and then shared throughout various, relatively decentralised, communities.[47] A sudden and unexpected association with temporal power made necessary a slew of new negotiations and aggravated what had been purely internal problems of theology and precedence into problems of state. The situation in Ardashir's putative *Ērānšahr* was quite different. Various forms of the beliefs that are now usually described as "Zoroastrian" were already extremely traditional and aristocratic. The Arsakid dynasty and its *Pahlav* or Parthian aristocracy appear to have appealed to the same gods, known versions of the same legends and to have performed rites very similar to those so prominent in Sasanian productions. Unlike the Sasanians however, Arsakid rulers made no, or very little, public or political use of their religious beliefs.[48] There is a brief indication in a later Middle Persian religious text that one Arsakid king may have sponsored a codification of religious texts, but if this happened it would seem to have had very little effect on what was by Sasanian times an ancient and very eclectic religious tradition that was transmitted orally and was by nature "more inclined to collect and conflate than exclude".[49]

Thus a subtle but important difference: in its Christian phase, Roman imperialism allied itself to the representatives of one of a number of competing truths extracted from a heavily textual system predicated on access to absolute truth. Sasanian imperialism, on the other hand, would favour a particular facet

47 Cameron 1991, 89 *f.* and *passim*.

48 De Jong 2015, 94–96.

49 Boyce 1979, 135; Shaked 1994, 115–119.

of a scruffy and diffuse set of largely unwritten religious traditions sharing a common ancestry. In doing so, it has been argued, the dynasty eventually oversaw the transmutation of an extremely varied, inherently accumulative and informally polytheistic tradition into a more rationalised system of a considerably more henotheist or monotheist bent; a system that is largely reflected in the Zoroastrianism that survives to the present day.[50] Though the timing and conditions differed, the end results were, in abstract, rather similar: a particular community, defined in idealised terms, became seen as the vessel of the "soul" of the state.[51] As these identifications were neither organic nor uncontested, a secondary result of this process was the need to locate this relationship in a recognisable historical narrative; to harmonise the history of the community with that of "their" polity in a way that both presented the union as natural and preordained and bolstered the authority of communal leaders.[52] It is, more than anything else, this grafting of two separate storylines that guided the creation of our target texts and governed their constructions of the early lives of the "founders".

Occurring as they do at the juncture of literature, the propagation of an imperial ideology and religious identity, the question of just how to describe the place of the *vitae* and the *Kārnāmag* presents modern interpretive frames with a very slippery problem indeed. Though I have, up until this point, avoided the term nationalism as inherently misleading, this particular set of connections suggests that these texts *could* be approached through particular interpretations of the phenomenon of national identity. This was the approach taken by Philip Wood in his recent study of the emergence of a Christian Syriac identity from the fifth century.[53] "National" and "nationalism", it must be repeated, are enormously loaded concepts that bring with them very serious problems. In a narrow sense, they have a precedent of being too easily applied in Sasanian studies. More generally, a powerful set of arguments maintains that they are completely inapplicable to a pre-modern context.[54] Wood, however, used the concept of *ethnie*, defined by Anthony Smith as pre-modern

50 De Jong 2013, 45–59; De Jong 2015, 98–100. On the extent of this variety, see Crone 2012, 371*f.*

51 Fowden 1993, 31–36.

52 "What was being fought over by pagans and Christians in the fourth century, therefore, was the right to interpret the past." Cameron 1991, 138. We can clearly see this need weaponised in the doctrinal debates of the early Christian empire, see Flower 2013, 106–117, 202–207 and *passim*.

53 Wood 2010.

54 Notably, the work of Ernst Gellner and Benedict Anderson, see Gellner 2006; Anderson 2006.

group consciousness based on a sense of shared identity, as a way into the problem.[55] This allowed him to borrow from theorists of national identity without going so far as to suggest direct equivalence between the nation state and the political-religious formations of the Roman east.[56]

Wood used these approaches to describe the creation of a distinct, at times somewhat anti-imperial, Christian consciousness within the Roman state. In one part of his argument he pays particular attention to the role that the creation of legendary histories played in crafting notions of Syriac, in particular Edessene, identity. A key element of this process was a legend, already known to Eusebius, that Jesus had replied to a letter from Abgar V (r. 4 BCE–50 CE) the king of Edessa. The legend goes on to state that after Jesus' ascension, the apostle Thomas had sent a representative, Addai, in order to expound the faith to Abgar.[57] An elaborate fifth-century reworking of this legend, the *Doctrina Addai*, describes how Addai converted Edessa's elite and established a church there. In Wood's analysis, the *Doctrina Addai* was a top-down, *composite* work aimed at creating a Christian past for the city, casting its church as an ancient foundation in which its nobility was enthusiastically involved.[58] Moreover, containing a number of "Addai's" sermons, the document was also a presentation of what Edessene Christianity was, and was not, according to the words of its "founder".[59]

Though intended to advance the claims of Edessa, the Abgar legend was attractive to the adherents of other Syriac-speaking Christian factions who linked to it to build the histories of their own communities. The next work discussed by Wood, the *Acts of Mar Mari*, tells the story of the mission of Mari, a disciple of Addai. This text has also, according to Wood, baptised a number of *Manichaean* conversion narratives to create what is possibly a Diophysite *subversion* of the claims made in the *Doctrina Addai*.[60] Finally, the *Cave of Treasures*, a rendition of Biblical history with a particular focus on the north of Mesopotamia, also utilised the legend of Agbar's letter to strengthen its assertion that Syriac speakers held a superior place in Christian history.[61]

In these texts Wood demonstrates how a discrete historical legend was worked into a number of longer, legendary histories of origins, which were

55 Smith 2004; 184–90, 202–4.
56 Sizgorich also adapted the work of theorists of modern identity in his work on Late Antique religious violence, see Sizgorich 2009, 49–51.
57 Eusebius, HE., 1.13.
58 Wood 2010, 83–88, 93–95.
59 Ibid., 91–92.
60 Ibid., 112–117.
61 Ibid., 121–124.

then used to shape civic and religious identities within a distinct ethnic or linguistic frame. Particularly in the case of the unusual sourcing of the *Acts of Mar Mari*, his study reveals how connected claim and counterclaim often are; how the mere assertion of the historicity of an event redraws the terrain over which new, even very hostile, historical assertions must be made. The target composite traditions of this study, and the forces that coalesced them, would appear to present many similarities in their technique and intent. Yet, in one important respect, they are quite different. The Syriac legendary traditions cited by Wood represent the productions of a fractious set of communities located within, but not of, a theoretically universal imperial orthodoxy. They are, to a greater or lesser extent, declarations of separateness from the mainstream of their host polity. The Constantine of the *vitae* and the Ardashir of the *Kārnāmag* represent the antithesis of this. These are foundation histories of imperial orthodoxy itself; they collapse what was in actuality the contest of a number of related identities and practices into a single vision of a monolithic, imperially backed, mainstream creed.

This claim rests on more than the incorporation of the heavily divinised symbolics of Sequence One and Sequence Two. Both composites display a preoccupation with the construction of the physical and institutional infrastructure of the imperial creed. The *vitae* are careful to mention Constantine's construction of Constantinople as a Christian capital, the pious foundations he, or his servants, built and his summoning of the council of Nicaea. The *Kārnāmag* is accessible in full in only two texts, one of which (KNA) is rather curt and the other (the *Šāhnāmeh*) seemingly shorn of overt references to the old religion. Yet in KNA it is still possible to perceive a similar emphasis. Ardashir's progress is marked by the appearance of fire temples; the empire's great fires appear allegorised in the dream foretelling his birth, and both his escape from and victory over Ardawan are the occasion for the foundation of fires in thanksgiving.[62] Other incidental features, Ardashir's performance of the *wāǰ* prayer and the probably anachronistic presence of a chief priest at his court betray late, and priestly, religious assumptions.[63] Moreover, an interpolation appearing just after the death of Ardawan (between sections 5 and 6) in two of the later manuscripts descended from MK, one from the late nineteenth century and the other of uncertain date, leaves very little doubt as to the significance of this moment in the eyes of the Parsee community who preserved this text:

62 KNA, 2.10, 5.10, 5.13.
63 Ibid., 8.11, 10.9.

> And so he [*Ardashir*] sat on the throne of Ardawan, he laid down [*ārāst*] the law and summoned the great and the humble of the army and the Archimagus [*mowbed-ī mowbedān*] before him. He declared "Possessing this great kingship which the gods have given to me, I will do good. I will work justice and arrange [*ārāst*] the holy Good Creed [*dēn-ī weh*, ie, Zoroastrianism] and tend the inhabitants of the earth as my children."[64]

Henrik Nyberg, rejecting an earlier claim that this interpolation was present in a manuscript of KNA predating MK, posited that it had been extracted from another, now untraceable, manuscript.[65] The passage would appear to be late; it also has a suspiciously strong air of familiarity to anyone who has read through any of the innumerable speeches from the throne composed by Ferdowsi. Yet the lateness of this addition to the composite does not render it valueless as an interpretive tool. Indeed, the presence of this neat set-piece merely confirms how the moment of the proclamation of a long-dead empire remained relevant to a relatively small, rather inward-looking, and decidedly *un*-imperial community. The tone and possible date of the interpolation is somewhat suggestive; in the nineteenth century the Parsee community was confronted by both Protestant missionary efforts and forms of exegesis imported from Europe, assaults which the Parsee community of this time found itself poorly equipped to face. The need to confront these challenges would eventually lead to significant changes in how Parsees approached their texts and interpreted their tradition.[66] It would be interesting if it was in this context of the reorganisation of communal identity that a copyist felt the need to augment a text that already presupposes a tight link between the foundation of the Sasanian state and the Parsees' religion.

As in the hagiographic traditions represented by the *vitae*, the *Kārnāmag* tradition entwines the triumph of a single figure with that of an institution while retrojecting some of the assumptions of that institution back to a point at which they had certainly not yet developed. Similar retrojections can be seen in Middle Persian and Zoroastrian New Persian accounts of the life of Zoroaster.[67] The constituent narratives of the *Kārnāmag* never achieved the

64 This interpolation is listed as Appendix A in Anklesaria's edition, and is transcribed and translated at Grenet 2003, 76–79. I have translated only the first, most relevant, part.

65 Nyberg 1964, xi–xii.

66 Maneck 1994, 313 f.

67 We may note, for example, the idea (serving as the basis for the *Jāmāsp Nāmeh*) that Zoroaster's successor Jamasp became Vishtaspa's chief priest, an arrangement that mirrors the idealised form of Sasanian political power. This scheme would even be replicated in apocalyptic, the short text *Māh-ī Frawadin Rōz-ī Hordād* (32–33) envisages a similar

historiographic dominance attained by the legends of the youth of Constantine. Yet, that Ferdowsi knew the story indicates that hKNA found some circulation. Moreover, the later interpolation of KNA highlights an ongoing engagement with KNA as a narrative of origins; well after the empire had ceased to exist this account of its foundation could still be referenced to provide, if not a group history, a group *with* a history. Like the *vitae*, the *Kārnāmag* reaches back to a moment of triumph, in both cases, described as a time in which a perfect harmony existed between throne and altar. Thus political and communal histories are fused in the person of the subject and an idealised model of the (later) religious state is offered through an account of its beginnings.

### 3.2 *Function*

This is of course a very convenient view of the past, one that glosses over or minimises controversies and assumes that the received forms of religious life were established in an instant, under the tutelage of a king sponsored by god, and not through a slow and tortuous process of internal conflict. The *vitae*, for example, do address the "defeat" of Arianism at Nicaea, and sometimes pour scorn on "Arian" claims, but Arianism was merely an early and prominent example of the numerous, increasingly arcane, doctrinal disputes within Roman or Byzantine Christianity. On the other hand, for most of its existence the Sasanian dynasty would appear to have been comfortable with a wide variety of religious practice. Certainly, demotic forms of the "Zoroastrian" religion in this period appear to have been a great deal more varied and syncretic than one would expect from the later Pahlavi books.[68] The stories told by the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* are then history as it *should* have happened, a presentation of the past desired by the future, created by partisans of a particular cause and designed for internal consumption.

As such, each of these traditions might be seen as very self-conscious examples of what Margaret Somers has called *public narrative*, that is, the narrative of an institution providing an overarching frame that organises its members' sense of self.[69] They might equally be defined as attempts to build what Yael Zerubabbel has called a *master narrative*, the line considered mainstream within a collective's historical memory.[70] Zerubabbel's terms are especially attractive as her examination of the development of Israeli national identity

king-high priest dichotomy at the end of time, Jamasp-Asana 1913, 106. Translations of the texts concerning of the life of Zoroaster can be found in Molé 1967 and Amuzgar and Tafazzoli 2001–2002.

68 De Jong 2006, 223–233; Crone 2012, 279 *f.*

69 Somers 1994, 619.

70 Zerubavel 1995, 214 *f.*

sees master narrative as built up of a system of lurid and inherently polarising points; of claims and the subversion of claims; that is, *counter narrative*. The exemplary death of a handicapped Zionist hero, for example, becomes the subject of grim jokes in anti-war literature within a few generations.[71] In a similar vein, one consideration of the construction of identity in the successor states of the Soviet Union shows how the creation of a communal past in Armenia seized on apposite moments in what was imagined to be communal history, and encoded them heroically, demonstrating, at times, an absolute impatience with complexity or qualification.[72] It will be recalled that the creation and propagation of the stereotypical origin sequences considered above also seem to have hinged on points of polemic or counter-polemic. The sectarian slant of the composite traditions, combined with their granular and episodic form, into which only the most retrospectively affirming versions of events were admitted, demonstrates a considered and deliberate attempt to construct a formal master narrative out of disparate materials bequeathed by posterity. The result in both cases was a string of claims, a particular arrangement of switches, arranged into "the" history, and proffered as a presentation of self to self.

A similarly identitarian imperative can be discerned in the imperial imaginaries that began to emerge in Roman and Iranian Late Antiquity. Though his political significance and closeness to Constantine have sometimes been exaggerated, it is worth looking at Eusebius' anthropological thought as an early example of the sort of thinking that would later inform the identity of the Christian empire. Eusebius identified Christianity with the Hebrews (whom he was *very* careful to distinguish from the Jews) of the Old Testament. As carriers of the unbroken chain of true revelation, to Eusebius Christians, though ethnically diverse, were a distinct people united by a creed that stretched back into deep Antiquity.[73] In this conception, the overt parallel Eusebius drew between Constantine, Roman emperor, and Moses, saviour and lawgiver to the "Hebrews" is rather telling.[74] Should we follow Eusebius' analogy to its logical conclusion, Constantine, a Moses clad in purple, would lead to the establishment of a state with a strongly confessional character. In his various elisions of ethnicity with creed and sacred history with contemporary affairs, Eusebius

71 Ibid., 39*f.*
72 Suny 2001, 884*f.*
73 Johnson 2006, 94*f.*
74 On the parallels Eusebius sought to draw from Biblical history, see Williams 2011, 18–57.

was participating in a stream of Christian thought that had begun to see the Roman Empire as playing a providential role in the divine plan.[75]

With the correct claims properly emphasised, the reign of Constantine was, for Eusebius and those who came to share in his interpretation, a point from which an uncomplicated and harmonious vision of the unfolding of a specifically *Christian* polity might be sketched. The *vitae*, compiled much later in an avowedly Christian empire containing a number of distinct ethnic and linguistic identities, continued this line of interpretation. Through Constantine it was possible to conflate a Christian identity with an imperial style of political order. The stereotypical and heroic accounts of Constantine's early life became, in other words, part of a suggested master narrative, stories produced by certain Christians for other Christians, either in the expectation (or hope) that the state would take on a unitary, confessional identity, or, later, the belief that it already had.

It will be recalled that Kazhdan proposed that the earliest layers of the "Constantine Legend" seen across the *vitae* texts may have emerged in Iconoclastic propaganda at some point around the year 800, and that Iconophiles responded by reworking such material to be more to their tastes. If true, this factional origin would seem to complicate the idea that the story told in the *vitae* was a demonstration of imperial and religious unity; in fact it merely illustrates the point.[76] Iconoclasts and Iconophiles alike agreed that a single, imperially backed religious identity ought to exist, they merely disagreed (vehemently!) over the style of that identity. If Kazhdan was correct, then we need only imagine that returning to Constantine was a way of asserting the claims of one or the other faction as foundational. This would have drawn counter-reactions, but given both parties shared some very basic historical assumptions, this would probably not have required drastic rewriting.

If Roman Christian theorists from the fourth century looked to Biblical precedent to determine what, exactly, a Christian empire ought to mean, appeals to *Ērān* offered the Sasanian dynasty a more natural, and considerably more concrete, conceptual basis. *Ērān*, as stated above, was a concept drawn from a widespread complex of religiously tinted legends. The notion itself would seem to have already had a recognisable geographic, quasi-ethnic, component as early as the third century, though if this were so, the exact boundaries of either are

75 On the increasing equation of Christianity with Hellenistic kingship theory and Roman imperialism, see Dvornik 1966, 611 *f.*; Fowden 1993, 89–99; Oakley 2006, 73. On the use of this equivalence as a rhetoric of progress, infiltrating the older idea of *Romanitas*, see Wood 2010, 23–37. On Eusebius' Roman focus, and seeming lack of interest in non-Roman Christians, see Smith 2016, 25–27, 60–61.

76 Kazhdan 1987, 246–249.

now somewhat hazy.[77] In any case, from the beginning of the Sasanian period, *Ērān* was linked to assertions of the legitimacy of the imperial house; as such, a particular interpretation of its meaning had to be constructed and imposed. The early, top-down identification of *Ērān* with the new empire masked the heterogeneous nature of the belief system from which the idea was drawn. As the later dynasty began to align itself more and more with a particular, priestly perspective, the actually diffuse nature of the underlying religious system must have become increasingly problematic.[78]

We may see in this disjuncture, as in the Christian empire, the attraction of foundation narratives that simplified "Iranian" religious identity as imperial, eternal, and unitary.[79] It is likely that hKNA, the root of the *Kārnāmag* narratives known to us today, was conceived of as a collection of narratives amenable to this centripetal interpretation; a collection edited, and then published, in order to confirm *a* past for those already invested in a particular historical outlook. Of course, circumstances make the emphasis of each composite tradition slightly different. The Sasanian dynasty survived and would come to pose as *renewers*, merely the latest members of a dynasty coeternal with the "*Ērān*" of legend. As these legends overlapped with aspects of traditional religion, the dynasty's later doctrinal inclinations could be, and were, portrayed as a natural occurrence, merely a seamless continuation of the claims made at Ardashir's rightful seizure of the crown. In the Roman context, the discontinuity between the old and new was far more evident and as a result, an influential strand of Christian historical thought came to see Constantine as a *founder*, a man who had swept away the old beliefs and begun the era of Christian rule. In this conception, any dynastic concerns were entirely secondary to the cosmic significance of the outcome. Despite this, their commonalities – the association of a religious institution, often in an anachronistic form, with a moment of state foundation, and the sublimation of religious difference into a highly idealised imperial creed – suggest that both traditions were compiled to serve a very similar communal-identitarian function.

77 On the development and origins of the concept of *Ērān*, see Gnoli 1989. On its possible geographic conception in the third and fourth centuries, see Gignoux 1971. On the difficult ethnic, religious and political meanings of this term, see Shaked 2008; Daryaee 2010.

78 De Jong has argued that the Sasanians oversaw an "intense restructuring, or veritable recreation, of Zoroastrianism", which culminated in the "closing" of the canon after the Mazdakite revolt, De Jong 2015, 96–100. Crone argued that heterodox "Zoroastrianisms", many of which she viewed as Mazdakite-leaning, were central to several quasi-Islamic rural uprisings in the Abbasid period, see Crone 2012.

79 A rather stronger version of this argument is proposed in Daryaee 1995.

### 3.3 *Context and Audience*

This communal imperative is fairly evident in the general situation of the *vitae* texts. Emerging in the ninth century, the tradition carried by the *vitae* was the product of a period in which classicising modes of historiography were largely in abeyance, and the private, ostentatiously literary audiences for which such works were crafted long gone.[80] Though much of the material of the *vitae* has been culled from more traditionally historical material, their sequential, declarative narratives and narrow, sacred subject matter reflect a rather different expectation of historical narrative and thereby, the desires of a rather different audience. The disposition of surviving manuscripts appears to reflect this change in consumption. This, alongside the likely context in which these texts emerge, allows a number of conclusions to be drawn regarding their origins and uses.

The *Halkin Vita* was composed by a monk near Thessaloniki. It was found in a codex that seems to be a miscellany of hagiographies and other religious writings.[81] Because over a quarter of this codex is given over to St Christodule, the eleventh-century founder of the Monastery of St John on Patmos, it was probably compiled in that institution.[82] The *Opitz Vita* is fragmentary and incomplete, with parts redacted from various manuscripts. Texts of the *Guidi Vita*, however, are relatively abundant and sometimes found in menologies, that is, chronological texts containing the lives of saints arranged by their feast days.[83] The creation of this sort of compilation can be attested from the early ninth century though less formal collections of lives certainly predate this.[84] The production of hagiography – stories of the saints, their lives and actions – was tied to a larger, public, mechanism of religious commemoration.[85] Additionally, the preparation of menologies seems to have involved the collection and editing of material and language in order that the lives of the saints might reach a broader audience.[86] As noted by Kazhdan, the "author" of the *Guidi Vita* seems to have done some work in squaring up his source text(s); there is a possibility that this *vita* was originally prepared for inclusion in some such collection.[87] Finally, it was almost certainly created

80 Croke 2010, 28–42.

81 The coda of the *Halkin Vita* contains the author's greetings to his brothers (presumably on Patmos) sent from a town near Thessaloniki. Halkin 1959a, 372, sec.24.

82 Halkin 1959b, 64–67.

83 Winkelmann 1973, 268.

84 Rapp 1995, 33–34.

85 The broad audience and public uses of hagiographic texts in the early to middle Byzantine period are touched on in Efthymiadis 1996, 64–5, and more generally in Bourbouhakis 2010.

86 Rapp 1995, 34 *f.*

87 Kazhdan 1987, 213–214.

in a monastery where the motive to produce edifying devotional works, the means to transcribe them and a library of research materials were most likely to come together. Though it may not have been the first composite produced according to this pattern, the semi-liturgical and commemorative setting of the *Guidi Vita* might plausibly be taken as representative of the tradition of the *vitae* more broadly.

The origin of hKNA and the audience for the story reflected in the extant *Kārnāmag* texts are more difficult to interpret. As indicated above, on the basis of some geographic details seen in parts of KNA, and its account of the descent of the short-lived Ormazd I from a seemingly insignificant local king, hKNA was probably compiled in Fars; when this happened is a much harder question to answer. It may have been at some point in the later Sasanian era; certainly, there are hints that other royal biographies did exist, and the strongly legitimist and "orthodox" message of the *Kārnāmag* would suit this time and place.

There is also, however, an intriguing possibility that it was put together sometime *after* the Sasanians' fall from power. The cities of Fars had resisted the first wave of conquest and the province was, for some centuries afterwards, a stronghold of the old religion; presumably, being the heartland of the old empire, in its most hieratic and "canonical" form.[88] Up until about the ninth century Zoroastrians still had, in places, relatively large urban populations and access to the financial and political support these provided.[89] Moreover, the conquest itself had deep psychosocial consequences; the loss of the empire had made Iranian identity, once the ideological centre of the polity, just one more component of a heterogeneous, Arab-dominated, Islamic empire. This loss of status was particularly keenly felt by those who stuck to the old religion.

Coming to terms with this shift produced a climate of retrospection. Those who had converted faced the problem of reconciling the prestigious identities formed in the old order with the claims of the new. They dealt with this by grafting their cultural and imperial legacy onto the story of Islam: identifying the figures of Iranian myths with Abrahamic analogues, or merging the old royal family with that of the prophet, for example.[90] This option was obviously not open to Zoroastrians who could only view the new religion as alien and its triumph as a cosmic disaster. The first few centuries of the post-conquest period saw the emergence of Zoroastrian literature that attempted to come to terms with this situation. Polemical, admonitory and legal texts urged the community to remain separate and hold on as their social position became

88 Choksy 1997, 20–22, 87–88.

89 Ibid., 96–98.

90 On the negotiation of an Islamic Iranian identity through fusion see Dabiri 2013; Savant 2015.

less and less attractive.[91] Alongside this, a cyclical apocalyptic tradition was adapted to both explain Islam and predict an eventual return to power.[92] In this context, a glorious interpretation of Ardashir's rise, an event that the later Sasanian tradition had already interpreted as both religious and restorative, may have been extremely attractive.

Whether post-Sasanian or not, any Middle Persian form of the composite would, for most of its existence, have been received and interpreted against this backdrop of loss and promise. The memory of the empire as a previous incarnation of an idealised Zoroastrian order appears to have continued in Zoroastrian political cosmology for a very long time. During his stay in Isfahan in the 1670s the Huguenot traveller Jean Chardin reports having temporary possession of a book in which he believed much of the old Persian religion to have been recorded. Chardin's account of this (seemingly quite miscellaneous) volume is rather short but bears witness to how the merger of communal and sacred history begun in the Sasanian era was still playing out amongst the Zoroastrian minority in Safavid Iran.

> The book was made in the time of Yazdegird the fourth [!] the last of the idol-worshipping [!!] kings of Persia with commentaries that were added eight hundred years ago when the public practice of their [ie. the Zoroastrians'] religion was abolished. It speaks a great deal of the reign of this last king and of many other matters other than those of religion.[93]

Chardin follows with a description of his understanding of Zoroastrian religious doctrine, historical understanding and institutional practice in which he makes certain claims, such as their detestation of Alexander and Mohammed, that indicate fairly good sources.[94] In the midst of this Chardin made a very short, but, in light of the earlier quote, extremely interesting, observation.

> It is one of their most constant traditions that their religion shall again come to power, and will become dominant in Persia, and that the empire shall return to them (*que l'Empire leur sera rendu*). They and their children maintain this hope.[95]

91 Boyce 1984; Choksy 1997, 99–100, 110–137.
92 Choksy 1997, 54–56.
93 Chardin 1735, 2., 181.
94 Ibid., 185–186.
95 Ibid., 184.

Consisting of only a few manuscripts and their archetype (contained in Codex MK), evidence for a Middle Persian *Kārnāmag* as a tradition external to its adaptations in Perso-Arabic texts is extremely limited. The little we do have places the text in a tightly constrained and priestly context. The surviving manuscripts of KNA do not come from Iran but from the Parsee community of northwest India. Presumably an ancestral *Kārnāmag* text made its way there from Iran sometime before the relevant section of MK was copied in 1322, either in one of the very poorly recorded waves of migration, or in one of the sporadic exchanges of texts and priests that occurred over the centuries.[96] Very little, however, is known for certain about the history of the community before the early modern period. The Zoroastrian community in India had, over time, been reshaped by its circumstances; it spoke Gujarati and had adopted a number of distinctly Indian mores under the guise of ancestral practice.[97] Despite this, the Parsees remained a distinct, endogamous minority whose social position fell usefully outside of the social classifications of their neighbours.[98] Their Indian context and an uneven collection of sacred texts led to some divergence in custom and practice from their Iranian brethren.[99] The most marked contrast between the two groups was, however, the social acceptance and economic success enjoyed by the Indian community and the rather more precarious existence of their coreligionists in Iran.

Yet, the Parsees never forgot that their community had its roots in Iran; indeed the Iranian community was appealed to in several cases of religious dispute.[100] While, unlike Iranian Zoroastrians, they had few pressing reasons to dream of its restoration, the memory of empire continued to play a role in the Parsee conception of communal and thereby *sacred* history. Around 1600, Bahman Kay Qobād Sanjāna, a Parsee from a priestly family, composed a "history" of the founding of his community in Modern Persian verse, the so-called *Qesseh-ye Sanjān*, or the *Story of Sanjan*. Like all accounts of ethnogenesis the *Qesseh* contains much more of the writer's own beliefs and concerns than of historically accurate detail. In this telling, the foundation of the community

96 Boyce 1984, 166–176.

97 Maneck 1994, 54–58.

98 Axelrod 1980, 153–155.

99 Boyce argued that both communities remained "orthodox" in doctrine with only minor changes in practice Boyce 1984, 173–175. In contrast, Maneck argued that Parsee beliefs were, in general, secondary to the maintenance of communal praxis and thereby identity. In consequence, beliefs were far more susceptible to change than rituals, see Maneck 1994, 29–37, 73–80.

100 Maneck 1994, 73–80, 214 *f.*

was a single event in which the ancestors of the Parsees, driven from Iran by Muslim oppression, came to India as refugees; almost certainly, a dramatic simplification of a much slower, far more complex process of migration that may have begun with trading settlements in the Sasanian era itself.[101] Its depiction of the settlement as a contract between Iranian migrants and an Indian prince explains certain oddities of Parsee practice as the conditions of their acceptance and asserts a cooperative, yet firmly marked, communal boundary which the Parsee community displays itself as promising to enrich Indian society while remaining separate from it.[102]

What is notable for this study is the vision of religious history from which the migration and settlement recounted in the *Qesseh* proceed. After a fairly long introduction, the author gives a brief history of the course of the Zoroastrian faith reflecting a rise and fall tradition of staggered apocalyptic into which the Sasanian empire, its representation of Alexander as a destroyer, a restorative Ardashir and the fall of the Sasanians are folded.[103]

> In King Vi<u>sh</u>tāspa's days, religion's path
> was brought to light by Holy Zoroaster.
> He'd told of things to come in the Avesta
> "Oppressive kings will show themselves to you,
> Three times the Good Religion will be broken
> each time the faithful will be crushed and wounded.
> The name of those same 'kings' will be 'Oppressor',
> and hence the noble faith become despairing."
> I speak now of Religion's work, so listen,
> how once again the noble faith was weakened.
> At length King Alexander came upon them,
> he burnt religion's holy books in public.
> Three hundred years this faith was brought down low,
> and tyranny oppressed its faithful people.
> Then after, for a while, the faith found refuge
> when Ardas<u>h</u>ir took sovereignty of it.
> And once again the noble faith could flourish,
> it came to be illustrious in the world.
> ...
> When Zoroaster's thousandth year had come

101 Cereti 1991, 13–15; Maneck 1994, 39–41.
102 Axelrod 1980, 152–153.
103 Boyce and Poonawala 1986.

the limit of the Noble Faith came too.
When kingship went from Yazdegird the king
the infidels arrived and took his throne.
From that time forth Irān was smashed to pieces!
Alas! That land of the Faith now gone to ruin![104]

Unlike KNA, the *Qesseh* was composed in a living language. Persian being the Mughal language of administration, the poem would have been readily understandable, at least to the better-educated members of the community, without priestly training. The poem also has a distinctly local angle; the *Qesseh* seems assert the prominence of the community at Sanjan within the broader Parsee community. These factors indicate, perhaps, that a wider audience was intended.[105] Yet, it is notable how the *Qesseh* assumes the claims of later Sasanian historiography; it has adopted the restorative Ardashir of the later Sasanian era and interpreted "his" empire as both the ancestral homeland and a vehicle for the exercise of religious virtue. Indeed, this work proceeds from same fundamental political and religious assumptions made in the *Kārnāmag*, albeit from a later stage of eschatology. If the later interpolation of KNA speaks to a continuing priestly, literary, engagement with this interpretation, the *Qesseh* may indicate that the themes of this "historiography" circulated more broadly within the community. The *Qesseh* itself would be used as a source for another Persian history of communal origins.[106] KNA's survival in the miscellany of a Parsee family may have been the result of this sense of social and theological continuity with the empire. The text both reflected events seen as critical in the formation of Parsee self-image and, composed in a language strongly associated with those times, may have appeared to have been an especially authoritative account of them.

The *vitae* were produced, and largely received, within a reduced, but still viable Christian Roman Empire. They appear to have been linked to a style of formally commemorative literature that was largely produced in explicitly religious communities for a somewhat general consumption. hKNA and its Middle Persian descendants shared with the *vitae* a very probable authorship by religious specialists, yet the dating of these texts, their uses and intended audience are much less clear. Though it would seem that translations into New Persian or Arabic were available at a relatively early point, Muslim writers appear to have

104 This translation is that made in Williams 2009, 71, lines 82–86, 73, lines 95–100.
105 The author claimed that a *dastur*, a priest of some standing was his source, see ibid., 67, lines 69–70.
106 This later work is treated in Cereti 1991.

largely viewed their contents as mere source material for Sasanian history. The survival of a Middle Persian version in a Parsee codex hints that the memory of empire continued to play a foundational role in Zoroastrian consciousness and suggests that within this community the story told in the *Kārnāmag* had a far deeper meaning. Unlike the Greek *vitae* the increasing obscurity of the Middle Persian script and language would have limited the direct audience for Middle Persian renditions of the *Kārnāmag* to relatively small, overwhelmingly priestly, circles. Yet, as demonstrated by the much later *Qesseh*, the most important of the *Kārnāmag's* historical postulates came to be assumed more broadly within the community. Thus, though their readership was probably narrower than that of the *vitae*, hKNA and its descendants appear to have addressed a similar need. Should we take the development of the story told in the *vitae* as a model, we may suggest that the *Kārnāmag* was a historical representation produced by members of a religious institution; an institution whose relationship, or former relationship, with power gave the memory of empire an unusually central position in a community's identity and historical consciousness. Both traditions aimed to provide and preserve a harmonious account of the formation of a pious state for those whose identity depended on the idea that such a thing existed, or had existed.

## 4 Parallel Afterlives?

The social, structural and ideological convergences that can be discerned in the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* should alter our understanding of them; the form and role of the story told in the *Kārnāmag* in particular makes a great deal more sense when compared to that seen in the *vitae*, its Byzantine "analogue". Indeed, hKNA and KNA might even be helpfully classified as the same kind of work. Some years ago a long debate between Averil Cameron and Timothy Barnes over the nature and genre of the *Vita Constantini* highlighted the strangeness of Eusebius' text and in doing so made an interesting, and here, very relevant, point. Though disagreeing on most issues, both Cameron and Barnes, referred to the *Vita* as hagiography.[107] In Barnes' view it was a particularly awkward species of hagiography and certainly not a "life in the ancient sense".[108] Cameron

107 In short, Cameron believed the *Vita Constantini* to have been a basically unitary work and that it sits within the genre of Late Antique *Lives* of holy men (described in Cox 1983), an argument made at Cameron 2000, 82. *Contra* Barnes believed it to have been published posthumously and as a compilation of two works, a formal panegyric and "something like a biography" Barnes 1981, 265, *f.*

108 Barnes 1989, 110.

countered some time later that this was a meaningless distinction, "what is hagiography if not the writing of lives?"[109] Cameron meant to link Eusebius' biography to a number of non-Christian, Late Antique, lives of "holy men". Yet, it is her implication that hagiography was a continuation of older trends that is of interest here. In this sense, both composite traditions may be thought of as functionally "hagiographical" insofar as they are biographical, religious and communally commemorative. In their parallel incorporation of hoary forms of royal apologetic and their portrayal of state foundation as the alliance of a religious institution with temporal power, they are, however, hagiographies of an unusual and very specific type.

The conditions under which Ardashir and then Constantine came to power gave rise to very standard controversies associated with "usurping" or contested succession. In turn, these controversies aroused very standard responses that were simultaneously apologetic and panegyrical. These included historical assertions that made use of traditional origin narratives long associated with great men. It has been argued from historical context and an examination of the origins of Constantine's legend that here the origin narratives used in the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* were likely to have arisen as deliberate rhetorical or literary efforts made either by courtiers with an interest in defending the subject directly, or by later writers operating independently but somehow invested in defending the legacy of their subject in a contested historiography. Because the ideology of rule in both Rome and the Sasanian empire came, by degrees, to be identified with a religious community, these argumentative positions would long outlive their subjects, outlast the target controversies and eventually transform into something else entirely.

Later members of these communities came to judge each man, rightly or wrongly, as a foundational figure; a king whose rise, insofar as it brought about their alliance with temporal power, was divinely ordained. As a numinous figure in communal history, each man attracted a biographic treatment that doubled as a just-so story of origins in which the cult of state and its boundaries were firmly and clearly established at the inception of the state itself. The relics of old *personal* controversies became proofs of a divinely favoured, *communal* monarchy. Both recognisably kingly and ostentatiously divine, they were seen to "invoke the appropriate attitude of admiration towards their subject."[110] The result was two traditions in which relatively new styles of empire were (partially) expressed in what should have been incongruous terms. On the one hand, the use of a pair of enormously ancient and extremely traditional

109 Cameron 1997, 148.
110 Zerubavel 1995, 85.

origin narratives portraying the king as the personal client of a god displays an approach to monarchy and the supernatural supports of monarchy that would not have been out of place in the cities of ancient Mesopotamia. On the other, the prominent insertion of a religious institution into each composite tradition moderates this personal relationship, granting it a providential status in which the king becomes a heroic conduit for social and political processes much larger than himself.

So far as we can tell, in a dry, factual sense, the accessions of Ardashir and Constantine were similar only in outline. Ardashir was a *parvenu* who had deposed a centuries-old dynasty and cowed or co-opted the grandees of their realm with a program of terrifying violence that probably continued into the reign of his son. Constantine was an insider who had eliminated a series of other insiders in what was, for the time, a fairly unexceptional, if extremely thorough, manner: *his* sons fought amongst themselves and his dynasty was extinguished with the death of a man who cursed his memory. Yet, directed by broadly similar religious and social forces, the interpretations of both lives would eventually come to align and this alignment produced the stories told by the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae*. Created within and preserved by explicitly religious communities, both testify to a similar merging of political and spiritual history in the person of a king imagined as a champion of the community. They are parallel "rhetorics of insularity", statements crafted to give an authoritative beginning and an antique solidity to religious and political axioms that developed later.[111] Nowhere is this clearer than in their conspicuous application of stereotypical narratives to describe the early life of the subject.

111 De Jong 2000, 58.

# Conclusion

From deep Antiquity onwards two distinct motif complexes, *sequences*, may be discerned in the historical literatures of a number of very different cultures over a great span of time. The continuous use of these sequences to pattern royal biography has made accounts of the early lives of a number of men remarkably similar, both in outline and, surprisingly often, specific detail. The examination offered here has used the presence of these sequences to link the legendary-biographical traditions of four kings into a comparative study with the aim of better understanding the meaning, the role and the movement of each sequence through and across cultures. Commencing with an examination of the Mesopotamian background of each sequence this study has focussed on the *Kārnāmag*, a legendary biographical tradition of Ardashir I, and a number of hagiographical *vitae* of Constantine. Both of these traditions are part of relatively well-preserved historiographies, and both may be examined in the light of other versions of the events they recount.

An analysis of the various components of these composite biographies strongly suggests that in both cases each sequence was introduced deliberately in order to make an *argument about history*. This observation has been expanded into a set of more general guidelines about the attraction of both sequences to controversial monarchy, and the role played by literary and/or rhetorical practices in their replication. Being in many cases crafted references to a known precedent, the power of both sequences was inherently circular, the product of centuries of apologetic and explanatory use, and far less organic than is sometimes assumed. Lastly, the fact that the narratives of the *Kārnāmag* and the *vitae* integrated both sequences in what appears to be a parallel way, argues that both composite traditions were the products of roughly similar processes. Eager to present the reigns of Ardashir and Constantine as foundational moments in *confessional* history, literate partisans of two imperial-religious communities selected those versions of events they saw as most in tune with the accepted signs of divinely favoured rule. Repurposing old rhetoric and remaking yet again the stock tales of Eurasian kingship, the creators of both traditions displayed a pleasingly symmetrical unity of habit, one that makes it possible to end with the "same" quote with which we began.

If the manuscripts have recorded the date correctly, on March 8th 1010 Ferdowsi completed his *Šāhnāmeh*.[1] Now the sole surviving work of its kind, this immense epic would ensure the poet a revered place in Persian literature.

1 Khaleghi-Motlagh 1999.

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Ferdowsi's life's work would also make the poet a looming, though frustratingly cryptic, presence in any discussion of the mythologies and historiographies emerging from the Sasanian period. This is in no small part due to his poem's role in driving competing *Šāhnāmehs*, including many of his own sources, into extinction.[2]

An eleventh-century Persian-speaking Muslim from Tus, located in what is now the north-eastern extremity of modern Iran, Ferdowsi is unlikely to have ever heard of John Chrysostom, and he would certainly never have read the homily on Theodosius' forgiveness of the Antiochenes quoted at the very beginning of this study. It is probable, however, that he would not have been surprised to have been told that in the course of composing his enormous poem he had reproduced (with considerable concision) the long-dead bishop's sentiments by presenting an argument for the impermanence of material fame contrasted with the invincibility of the pertinent example and the cutting aphorism.

> Where are Ferīdūn, Zahhak and Jam?
> The lords of the Arabs, the kings of ʿAjam?
> Where are the great of the line of Sasan?
> From the family of Bahram, to the house of Saman?
> Zahhak was a wicked king
> He was unjust and heedless
> The blessed Ferīdūn was praised
> He died but his deathless name did not
> Words remain, a memorial in the world
> Words are better than kingly blood.[3]

A later writer tells us that the *Šāhnāmeh* was initially poorly received by its dedicatee Mahmud Ghazna and that the eunuch bearing Ferdowsi's promised payment arrived just in time to meet the poet's funeral cortège.[4] John Chrysostom, whose position in the church allowed him to be far less subtle in his irritations of the powerful than any sane court poet would ever dare, had died in exile.[5] Poet and bishop, however, have had the last laugh; though a significant figure in the history of India and central Asia, Mahmud Ghazna himself is not only dead but famed for shortchanging Ferdowsi, and who now even remembers

2 Qazvini 1953, 20–21.
3 ŠhN 6., 137, lines 52–56. "blood" here renders *gowhar* "jewel, essence, descent".
4 Neẓāmī ʿArūżī 1910, 81.
5 Socrates, HE., 6.21.

the emperor Arcadius? Speaking through their productions these writers have now a far more substantial existence than the kings under whom they served and the states in which they lived. This is hardly uncommon; with relatively few exceptions, yesterday's powerful speak in "words" (*sokhan*) or "sayings" (*ῥῆμα*) that were not of their choosing. Their lives and deeds are not so much recorded as they are staged, portrayed retrospectively in terms defined by personal need, the goals of faction and the power of habit.

Chrysostom and Ferdowsi would have agreed on very little, yet in a sense they were members of the same club. It was, and is, the habit of writers, orators and poets everywhere to esteem other practitioners of their craft as bearers of eternal profundity, to preserve, reference, quote and imitate each other. This mutual esteem is key in understanding the interaction of such men with the production of history in relation to power. As Ferdowsi implied in the passage translated above, this ability to set the terms of remembrance is a power, possibly the *only* power, that writers hold over rulers. It is perhaps too perfect that Neẓāmī ʿArūżī, the writer who recorded the story of the churlish Mahmud's change of heart and the late arrival of Ferdowsi's payment, claimed to have heard it from a poet.[6] Ferdowsi's echo of Chrysostom's rhetoric might be read as a self-interested plea for the importance of his craft, but in a broader view the parallel reflects something much deeper. The bishop of Constantinople and the *dehqān* of Tus both saw posterity as theirs to shape, a right held by virtue of their membership in a group with access to the tools of communication, mastery of a cultural inheritance transmitted through these tools and the ability to sculpt this inheritance anew.

If writers, rhetors, and poets shaped this inheritance, the targets of their appraisal were shaped by it. In its day-to-day practice, pre-modern monarchy was a territorial and solitary business. The thirteenth-century Shirazi poet Saʿdī put it best when he stated that ten dervishes might happily sleep on a carpet but the same clime would not hold two kings.[7] Yet kings, like the literary men who served or reflected on them, were bound to each other by a web of symbols and expectation that knew few borders and all languages. Legitimate rule was a living, indiscriminately accumulative institution, one that was seen to have a certain continuity through vast stretches of time. An Armenian historian of the tenth century offers a vivid demonstration of this mindset in his depiction of Constantine's Christian rule:

6 Neẓāmī ʿArūżī 1910, 80. The poet in question was Moʿezzī.

7 Saʿdī, Golestān, 1.3.

> Now, it was said [in the past] that at the time when Joab removed the kingdom from the sons of Amon, he took the crown from the treasury of their house and sent it to be placed on King David's head, and from him to Solomon, and from Solomon to Rehoboam and then to Abia, Asaph, and Jehosphat. Following these, likewise, all the kings of Judah [wore it], and finally Zedekiah and Jehoiachin [were crowned by it]. Nebuchadnezzer, king of Babylon, captured [the crown] and was coronated by it in Babylon; not only did he wear the crown but so did his successors also, until King Cyrus of Persia, after whom [the crown] reached King Darius of Persia, whom Alexander of Macedonia slew. This crown, now captured by [Alexander] remained in the empire until Antiochus. Arshak the Brave of Bahl chased the [Macedonians] and took the crown. It remained with [the Parthians] until Shapuh who was called king of kings, who also submitted himself willingly to Constantine the Great.[8] Therefore, Constantine wanted that his God-pleasing kingdom be the owner of the original and prophetic crown.[9]

As a metonymy for legitimate kingship, the *idea* that a specific object was transmitted through a line of kings as a token of heavenly favour before making its way to a figure of whom the author greatly approved is meaningful. What is most telling is the uncomplicated conception of divine right on display in this Christian text: through possession of the crown Jewish, Babylonian, Macedonian, Greek, Parthian, Sasanian and finally Roman kingship all fall into the same category. Though bookended by Abrahamic states, one cannot help but suspect that the intervening chain of "pagan" possessors cited here lends David's crown, as it were, extra weight.[10] A king was a king, and kingship was the gift of heaven, something most apparent when heaven changed its mind.

The long persistence of the lost prince and the courtly superstar in historicising texts across the west of Eurasia was largely the product of those moments when "David's crown" changed hands. They emerge from a meeting of narrative habits internalised by men like Chrysostom and Ferdowsi and the sort of partisan work they were sometimes expected, or moved, to produce. Much of what

8 On the strange claim that Shapur II had submitted himself to Constantine, see Smith 2016, 156–176.

9 This quote was taken from the tenth-century history of Ukhantes of Sebastia who claims to have taken it from the ninth-century history of Pseudo-Shapuh Bagratuni, Arzoumanian 1988, 92.

10 In this vein, one might also point to the entirely fanciful genealogy constructed for Basil II in which the emperor was connected to Constantine, Alexander and *Arsakes*. Ševčenko 2011, 12–19.

the members of this extended clique knew about the past had been created or passed on by other men just like them. By Late Antiquity continual reuse of both sequences considered in this study had made each a commonplace in this system. Thanks to their age and their extremely early association with royalty, they were bound to no particular place, time or language. Both sequences had, however, a useful omnipresence and an aptness for the explanation of a situation that was not only recurrent but often greatly in need of explanation.

Those who introduced each sequence into the various legends of Constantine and Ardashir referenced just such a set of images, forms deeply ingrained in the broader cultural repertoire of western Eurasia. They are likely to have done so in rhetorical or compositional contexts that were argumentative and formal. Neither sequence could have been solely transmitted in text, but succession that was unusual or in some way irregular provided a nexus of circumstance, need, and professionalism likely to trap both sequences in writing and thence, to provide a model for later imitation. The parallel legends of the origin and youth of the early Sasanians and of Constantine were products of this confluence of power, circumstance, and craft, one in which the mechanics of praise and excuse were tightly linked. The long texts in which we now see such legends integrated – the *vitae*, the *Šāhnāmeh* and KNA – are products of a secondary stage, one in which two such images were placed next to each other in order to produce a more complex message. This complexity was demanded by new developments in monarchy, developments that brought with them new visions of the role of the state in history and new relationships between organised confessional groups and power.

In their reliance on the same motif complexes, their compound structure and parallel social role, the long biographies seen in the composite Iranian and Roman texts are alike in ways that are useful for the analysis of both. On the one hand, the narratives used to build the legend depicted in the *vitae* show that decidedly archaic and ultimately non-Roman expressions of monarchical style were effective in the fourth century and that they survived well into the Christian empire. On the other, thematic and structural parallels with a Byzantine biographical tradition allow us to assess the *Kārnāmag* as something *like* a hagiography, at least as something *like* one particular stream in the hagiography of Constantine. It is my hope that the suggestions drawn from the comparative and historical approach taken here offer new ways of looking at the composite biographies and the texts connected to them. In particular I hope to have offered a useful heuristic for the understanding of the *Kārnāmag* tradition that links KNA and the *Šāhnāmeh*, a tradition whose interpretation has suffered from a lack of context, an almost complete dearth of comparable material and a tendency towards a vague, and to my mind erroneous,

categorisation as "romantic" or "popular". If we instead view large parts of the *Kārnāmag* as evidence of the use of specific argumentative strategies in the Sasanian period and the "text" itself as a kind of social and institutional history forged by certain trends in Late Antique imperialism, a more nuanced and more interesting view of this odd biography becomes possible.

Finally, I hope to have presented a case for a situational and diachronic approach to recurring narrative in portrayals of history. Where it can be shown that a particular unreality has a history of its own, it is worthwhile to take this history into account. Where a narrative parallel overlaps with correspondences in circumstance, technology, and need, otherwise unrelated texts or traditions become relevant to each other. The product of layer after layer of the appropriation, propagation and recycling of claims and images, monarchy was a particularly powerful driver of this sort of confluence. Continuous appeal to proven symbolism generated a net of very widely shared expectations and a number of shortcuts and shorthands for suggesting them. These cues are extremely complex but they are not *always* completely inexplicable; it is sometimes possible to trace the genealogy of a strand of representation back to the point at which it became fixed in the wider consciousness. When one does so, one may find that very different fruit grows on the branches of the same tree.

Monarchs everywhere claimed to represent an eternal, stable, and legitimate order. Were this actually true, neither sequence would ever have emerged as a way of explaining the past. The presence of one, the other or both sequences in a historical or historicising account is a sign of disjuncture, an indication that attempts were made to present sudden shifts in power as a correction, a return to the proper order of things. Emerging in a particularly successful set of historical-literary assertions of divine election made at the very dawn of empire itself, both sequences were adapted, translated and rewritten over and over again with a distinct tendency to cluster around moments of controversial or extraordinary succession. As they spread out from the cultures of the ancient Near East, both narratives remained attractive to the laudatory and apologetic practices likely to record them; thus they were pushed ever deeper into the symbolic vocabulary of monarchy. So it came to pass that the lives of a very few people were composed well before they were born.

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