
The Christian Reception of the Xwadāy-Nāmag:

Hormizd IV, Khusrau II and their successors

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Abstract

This article considers the Islamic-era sources that report the history of the last Sasanian kings. It focuses on scenes that seem to indicate Christian influence and asks what this tells us about Christian transmission of the Middle Persian royal histories and about the position of Christians in the empire more broadly. In particular, it discusses three scenes from al-Ṭabarī: his presentation of Hormizd IV as a ‘pluralist’ monarch; the changing attitudes of Christians to Khusrau II and the presentation of Khusrau’s short-lived successors.

There are no contemporary internal narrative sources for late Sasanian history.¹ Though seals, coins and field archaeology have much to contribute, the core narrative for Sasanian history is drawn from a cluster of medieval texts that purport to describe the history of the Iranian world between the third and seventh centuries.² The Sasanians’ fame as a model for civilised government in Abbasid Iraq accounts for the survival of such material, which is transmitted through collections of writings on etiquette and of heroic tales of the past, as well as through more formal universal histories, such as the works of al-Ṭabarī, al-Tha‘ālibī and al-Dīnawarī, and the New Persian epic poem, the *Shāhnāme*.

These works all relied on a family of closely related Middle Persian histories of the Persian shahs that circulated under the title of the *Book of Kings* (*Xwadāy-Nāmag*). Judging by the structural similarities of the Islamic-era texts, the underlying Middle Persian sources were constructed around the accession speeches and the royal succession, and were sometimes elaborated with accounts of aristocratic heroism or the kings’ relationship with the Zoroastrian priesthood.³

¹My thanks to M. R. J. Bonner for discussion of several points in this article, which was completed as part of a British Academy Post-doctoral Fellowship.

²P. Gignoux, “Problèmes de distinction et priorité des sources”, in J. Harmatta, (ed.), *Prolegomena to the Sources on the History of pre-Islamic Central Asia* (Budapest, 1979), pp. 137–141 and P. Gignoux, “Pour une nouvelle histoire de l’Iran sasanide”, in *Middle Iranian Studies*, (eds) W. Sklamowski and A. Tongerloo (Leuven, 1984), pp. 253–262 on the hierarchy of sources in Sasanian history.

³M. Macuch, “Pahlavī literature”, in *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran. Companion Volume I to a History of Persian Literature*, (eds) R. Emmerrick and M. Macuch (London and New York, 2009), pp. 116–196, at 172–181; M. Omidsalar, *Poetics and Politics of Iran’s National Epic, The Shāhnāme* (New York, 2011), pp. 37–39; T. Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Sasanidenzeit* (Leiden, 1879), pp. xiv–xx.

However, many of the later historians who used the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* tradition preserve passages that portray the shahs with a peculiarly Christian bias, whether through an interest in the ‘Christian policy’ of the later shahs or the ‘Christianisation’ of older secular motifs.⁴ This article seeks to analyse these passages and place them into the broader context of historical traditions at the end of the Sasanian period, both that of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* tradition and that of the Christian ecclesiastical histories.

Khusrau Anushirvan and the *Xwadāy-Nāmag*

The bulk of this investigation will concentrate on the material preserved for the period 590–640, but it is important to situate these writings as part of a wider movement of historical writing that had reached its height in the reign of Khusrau I Anushirvan. Philip Huyse has recently situated the creation of Sasanian written history into a broader shift from orality to literacy in the late Sasanian period. He plausibly suggests that the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* began as a collection of ancient tales that were incorporated into the Sasanians’ imagined Kayanid ancestry, which then became a literary canon under Khusrau I and was revised again under his successors.⁵

This literary movement produced a record of the past centred around the shah, while also promoting a series of ‘virtues’ that could be articulated by the shah’s own court, rather than the courts of rival magnates. Most notably, the literature of ideal behaviour and etiquette emphasised literacy, in an era when the deeds of the magnate families were recorded by wandering minstrels, the *gosānān*.⁶ Thus the impressive economic and military reforms that Khusrau I orchestrated were accompanied by an attempt to revise Sasanian history, to downgrade the independent histories of the aristocracy and to present the whole empire as working in symbiosis with the shah against its foes in the Roman world and Central Asia.⁷

During this rewriting of history, the histories of the Sasanians’ Arsacid predecessors were expunged while the shahs were presented as the idealised upholders of the social and religious order.⁸ In particular, the shah was presented as a defender of aristocratic values.

⁴The belief that Sasanian monarchs were closet Christians has been explored in A. Schilling, *Die Anbetung der Magier und Taufe der Sāsāniden. Zur Geistesgeschichte des iranischen Christentums in der Spätantike* (Louvain, 2008).

⁵P. Huyse, “Late Sasanian society between orality and literacy”, in *The Sasanian Era. The Idea of Iran vol. III*, V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart, (eds) (London and New York, 2008), pp. 140–153, esp. pp. 150–153. See also A. Sh. Shahbazi, “On the *Xwadāy-Nāmag*”, in *Iranica Vāria: Papers in Honor of Professor Ehsan Yarshater*, (eds) J. Duschesne-Guillemin and P. Lecoq (Leiden, 1990), pp. 208–229, esp. p. 214.

⁶For the deliberate elevation of literacy, see *Husraw I Kawādān ud Rēdag-ē. Khosrow fils de Kawad et un page*, (ed.) and translated by S. Azarnouche, *Studia Iranica Cahier 49* (Paris, 2013), esp. section 8 for attendance at school and 10 for the emphasis on scribal skills. See further, M. Boyce, “The Parthian *Gōsān* and Iranian minstrel tradition”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, April (1957), pp. 1–45. For Khusrau’s alleged abolition of the *gosānān* as a privileged class, see Ps. al-Jāhiz, *Kitāb al-tāj*, translated by C. Pellat, *La livre de la couronne* (Paris, 1957), p. 55.

⁷On the threat of *tūran* in the propaganda of Khusrau I, see J. Howard-Johnston, “State and society in Sasanian Iran”, in *The Idea of Iran III: The Sasanian Era*, (eds) V. Curtis and S. Stewart (London, 2008), pp. 118–131 and R. Payne, “Cosmology and the expansion of the Iranian empire, 502–628 C.E.”, *Past & Present*, CCXX (2013), pp. 3–33. Also see P. Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran* (London and New York, 2008), pp. 85–89 on the *Letter of Tansar*, translated by M. Boyce (Rome, 1968).

⁸M. Boyce, *The Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (reprint, London, 2001), p. 127 on the rewriting of Arsacid history; J. Choksy, “Sacred kingship in Sasanian Iran”, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute II* (1988), pp. 35–53 on the shah as a mortal representation of Ahura Mazda in the Dēnkard. On the shah’s sole right to interpret the Avesta, see *The Testament of Ardashir*, (ed.) and translated in M. Grignaschi, “Quelques spécimens de la littérature

These sentiments are most clearly expressed in the *Letter of Tansar*, which emphasises the duty of the aristocracy to serve the shah in a stable and deferential social order. It presents the four estates of the Iranian world as an ideal social system that was restored by Ardashir, the first Sasanian shah, (and then again by Khusrau I): “We are the Iranian people and there is no trait of nobility we hold dearer than . . . humility . . . in the service of kings”.⁹ Indeed, the density of material transmitted on Ardashir in al-Ṭabarī, and the editing of stories from the reign of Ardashir under Khusrau, both point to the importance of the third-century past in creating a justification for political reformation in the sixth-century present.¹⁰

The focus on the shah, supported by his aristocracy, would remain in later history writings produced in Iran, even in an era when the empire was in the process of disintegration. Several Christian authors thought of their works as continuations of earlier royal histories, but, it will be argued here, they did so as supporters of one shah or another, rather than as opponents of the Sasanians.

The Royal Histories after Khusrau I

Sasanian history did not lose its usefulness for later generations, both in the reigns of Khusrau’s successors and in the Arab caliphate that followed. But the later compositions do not have the same focus as the reports for Khusrau I’s reign, with its lengthy descriptions of the shah’s foreign and domestic policy. The material preserved in al-Ṭabarī for Hormizd IV and Khusrau II is considerably more sketchy and does not provide the same sense of a contemporary commentary on these monarchs’ reigns.

This period, roughly 590–630, began with two civil wars within Persia. In the first of these, Khusrau II overthrew and killed his father Hormizd before being defeated in turn by the non-Sasanian rebel Vahram Chobin. It was only with the help of the Roman emperor Maurice that he regained the throne, only to face a second civil war a few years later, this time against his uncle Vistahm.

The early part of Khusrau II’s reign was marked by Roman–Persian entente and good relations between the shah and his Christian subjects, but the murder of the Roman emperor gave Khusrau an ideal *casus belli*. He produced a man claiming to be Maurice’s son Theodosius and launched an invasion of the Roman East. Khusrau’s forces occupied large tracts of the Levant for almost two decades, until his armies were defeated in a surprise attack by the new emperor Heraclius, while the shah himself was disposed of in a palace coup.

Khusrau’s son, Kavād II Shiroë, only reigned for a few months before succumbing to the plague. He was succeeded by a series of short-lived monarchs, among them Shahrbaraz, one of Khusrau’s generals who had commanded the Persian army of occupation and who may

sasanide conservés dans les bibliothèques d’Istanbul”, *Journal Asiatique* CCLIV (1966), pp. 1–141, at p. 70. Note also P. Kreyenbroek, “Iran ix. Religions in Iran: Religions in pre-Islamic Iran”, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* for the ban on lay exegesis of the Avesta.

⁹*Letter of Tansar* § 28. In addition, it forbids nobles from squandering wealth (§24) and presents current literate production as the restoration of the Kayanid wisdom destroyed by Alexander (§11–12). On Khusrau restoring the social hierarchy, see Ps. al-Jāhiz, pp. 52–55.

¹⁰Such stories of the reign of Ardashir include the *Kāmāmag ī Ardaxšēr ī Pābagān*, translated F. Grenet (Die, 2003) and the *Letter of Tansar*, as well as numerous anecdotes from the *Book of the Crown*. I am influenced here by J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago and London, 1961).

have acquired the Persian throne through Roman intervention. The last of these monarchs was Yazdegard III, whose reign witnessed the devastating Arab invasion of a state atrophied by long civil wars and the termination of the Sasanian dynasty.¹¹

This period was a time of hugely significant and dramatic events for all the powers of the Near East. Yet, ironically, it is also a period that is poorly served by the surviving Iranian historical tradition. For James Howard-Johnston, in his recent book *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, the existence of this sketchy account of the period 590–640 suggests that the later versions of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* all derive from a text produced under the last shah, Yazdegard III. Howard-Johnston argues that a historian writing under Yazdegard III produced an overview of the reigns of his predecessors, and of their role in allowing the failed invasion of the West and the collapse of the empire.¹² This argument reprises an observation by Nöldeke on the composition of Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāmeḥ*, the major New Persian recension of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag*: "The . . . conformity between the Arab sources and the *Shāhnāmeḥ* goes as far as the death of Khosrow II and points to the fact that the authority they had in common was written shortly after that moment." Most significantly, Nöldeke argued, a date of composition under Yazdegard would explain why Kavad Shiroë is condemned for Khusrau's murder: in spite of Khusrau's massive taxation of the state, Ferdowsi's sympathies run against Shiroë, since it was his coup that ushered in the period of instability that allowed the Arab conquests.¹³

While Nöldeke's argument for the redaction of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*'s Middle Persian source in the reign of Yazdegard is persuasive, it is not necessary to assume that *all* of the material for 590–630 across the different source traditions was composed at that point, or that a redaction made in Yazdegard's reign was followed by all of the other versions of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag*.¹⁴ Indeed, a major problem with the second hypothesis is Ferdowsi's ignorance of the main narrative of Khusrau's war with Rome. While other sources in the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* tradition do attempt to describe the war, principally al-Ṭabarī, Ferdowsi's account of the great shah concentrates instead on details of court gossip and intrigue involving Khusrau's wife Shirin and the minstrel Barbad. Howard-Johnston's solution to this problem of omission is to see Ferdowsi deliberately suppressing details that were available but had become embarrassing to his eleventh-century sponsors, the Ghaznavid sultans, who would not have wanted to be reminded of Roman prowess at arms.¹⁵

However, Howard-Johnston's inventive solution seems to accord too much editorial intervention to Ferdowsi himself. The image of an authoritative compilation of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* in Yazdegard III's reign does not do justice to the contours of the material across the different source traditions, nor to the places where the material becomes especially

¹¹See the reconstruction in J. Howard-Johnston, 'Heraclius' Persian campaigns and the revival of the eastern Roman Empire', in his *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity: Historical and Historiographical Studies* (Ashgate, 2006), VIII.

¹²J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Seventh-Century Middle East* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 345–348.

¹³T. Nöldeke, *The Iranian National Epic*, translated by L. Bogdanov (reprinted Philadelphia, 1971), p. 23.

¹⁴Nöldeke's assumption that the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* was a single text, transmitted via Ibn al-Muqaffa' (*Geschichte*, xiv–xxviii) is effectively rebutted in M. R. J. Bonner, *An Historiographical Study of Abū Ḥanīfa Aḥmad ibn Dāwūd ibn Wānand al-Dīnawarī's Kitāb al-Aḥbār al-Ṭīwal* (Oxford, unpublished D.Phil., 2013), pp. 79–85.

¹⁵Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses*, p. 351.

dense, whether in the semi-mythical reigns of Ardashir I and Shapur I or in the tumultuous period that followed the death of Khusrau II. Indeed, many traditions treat Yazdegard himself very briefly; Ferdowsi is the exception here.¹⁶ Instead, I suggest that Ferdowsi's omission of Khusrau II's war is only a problem if we assume that Yazdegard's reign witnessed the production of a single authoritative version of *Xwadāy-Nāmag*. A simpler solution is to imagine numerous different 'continuations' of the text, in an era riven with political disagreements, without the dissemination of a single authoritative version. I suggest that Ferdowsi was simply ignorant of most of the factual details of Khusrau II's reign as they were not presented in his sources.

Significantly, it is not just Ferdowsi who omits Khusrau II's Roman war: al-Mas'udi and al-Tha'ālibī also omit the wars entirely, focusing on court intrigue during Khusrau's reign before jumping to his assassination by Shiroë.¹⁷ Al-Dīnawarī's account is very bland, and limited to a single page of stereotyped narrative.¹⁸ War scenes were probably absent or deficient in several versions of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag*, suggesting that there were numerous different continuations of the history(s) composed under Khusrau I. Their coverage petered out during Khusrau II's reign, where the shah's great fame could not always be matched with detailed descriptions of his achievements. A good comparison might be with the cleared rock faces prepared for the monumental inscriptions of Khusrau II in Bīsotūn. Here a whole cliff side was cleared for an inscription in the style of Khusrau's third-century predecessors, but it was never used, and the rock face remains empty. As in the literary tradition, we have clear evidence that Khusrau was conscious of his own legacy, and the need to connect it to his predecessors, but also that his project was curtailed by his sudden defeat.¹⁹

The Medieval Recensions Compared

Ze'ev Rubin grouped the histories that employed the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* into six families: (A) the history of al-Ṭabarī (and a related text, the Sprenger manuscript); (B) the related accounts of al-Dīnawarī and the *Nihāyat al-'Arab*; (C) the Christian histories (principally Agapius, Eutychius and the *Chronicle of Seert*); (D) the histories of al-Tha'ālibī and Ḥamza al-Isfahānī; (E) the eclectic works of al-Mas'ūdī and al-Birūnī and (F) Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme*.²⁰ He could

¹⁶The treatment of Yazdegard in al-Ṭabarī (*Tā'rikh al-Rusūl wal-Mulūk*, (ed.) M. de Goeje (Leiden 1879–1901), I, p. 1067, with translation and notes of C. E. Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī volume V; The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen* (Albany, NY, 1985) is extremely brief. He observes 'his power was like a vision in a dream'. In al-Dīnawarī, *Akhbār al-Ṭiwāl*, (ed.) W. Guirgass and I. Kratchowsky (Leiden, 1888) there are no more sections headed under the names of individual shahs after the death of Shiroë (p. 111). Al-Dīnawarī may rely primarily on an Arabic source on the conquest of the Persians ('*ajam*), rather than on the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* tradition, and this provided the poetry at p. 115.

¹⁷See below.

¹⁸al-Dīnawarī, pp.110–111.

¹⁹The cleared rock face, and the presence of unused blocks of dressed stone and late Sasanian column capitals nearby is described in H. Lushey, "Bisotun ii. archaeology", in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. See also J. Howard-Johnston, "Kosrow II", in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

²⁰Z. Rubin, "Musa ibn 'Isa al-Kisrawi and other authors in Sasanian history according to Hamza al-Isfahani", unpublished paper presented at Oxford, 2008. I will not discuss al-Dīnawarī in any detail here. His coverage of the period after the accession of Hormizd IV does not show the kind of Christian-influenced material we find in al-Ṭabarī, and his treatment of the war with Rome is very brief. The passage in al-Dīnawarī (for example pp. 46–47) describing the activities of Christian missionaries is discussed in A. Schilling, "L'apôtre du Christ, la conversion du

have also have mentioned the various versions of the *Xwadāy-Nāmaq* tradition that were produced on the edges of the Iranian world in Georgia, Armenia and Sogdiana.²¹

Rubin's categories D and E are probably the simplest accounts of Khusrau's reign. Detailed discussion is given for Vahram Chobin's rebellion, Khusrau's restoration by the Romans, Vahram's flight to the Turks and his eventual assassination. This material probably derives from a *Romance* dedicated to Vahram Chobin and his attempted usurpation.²² Khusrau's reign itself is really a vehicle for poetic descriptions of the Sasanian court, dominated in al-Tha'ālibī by the re-imagination of Khusrau's queen Shirin as a romantic heroine.²³ Shiroë's coup and his execution of Khusrau is justified as a reaction to Khusrau's treatment of his uncle Vindoë and motivated by his 'oppression', but there is little sense of what this oppression consisted of beyond Khusrau's false imprisonment of Shiroë as a result of a horoscope reading.²⁴ Al-Tha'ālibī's account is much longer than al-Mas'ūdī's and he provides a very different version of the succession of short-lived kings that succeeded Shiroë. The variation in these king lists further suggests the absence of an authoritative version of the *Xwadāy-Nāmaq* under Yazdegard III from which all the later accounts derive.²⁵

Like categories D and E, the *Shāhnāme*'s account of the same events also omits the Roman war of Khusrau II, but Ferdowsī gives considerably more prosopographical detail for the different contenders for power. He devotes considerable space to the characters of Gordië, Vahram's sister; to Shirin and to 'Goraz', the general known to other sources as Shahrbaraz, who was involved in the plot against Khusrau.²⁶ As we have seen, the ending of the poem gives an unusual prominence to Yazdegard III, which is not matched in most other sources,²⁷ but one feature of Ferdowsī's paeon to the last Sasanian needs special emphasis. In Ferdowsī, it is Christian monks who find Yazdegard's body after his murder. They lament that: "No one has heard of such an event since the time of Jesus, that a wretched slave should

roi Ardašir et celle de son vizier", in C. Jullien (ed.), *Controverses des chrétiens dans l'Iran sassanide* (Paris, 2008), pp. 89–112.

²¹S. Rapp, "The Iranian heritage of Georgia: Breathing new life into the pre-Bagratid historical tradition", *Iranica Antiqua* XLIV (2009), pp. 645–694; T. Greenwood, "Sasanian echoes and apocalyptic expectations: A re-evaluation of the Armenian history attributed to Sebeos", *Le Muséon*, CXV (2002), pp. 323–397; B. Marshak, *Legends, Tales and Fables in the Art of Sogdiana* (New York, 2002). These references are taken from Payne, 'Cosmology'.

²²Nöldeke, *Geschichte*, pp. 474–478, following al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, (ed.) and translated by C. Barbier de Meynard, *Les prairies d'or* (Paris, 1874) [revised by C. Pellat (Beirut, 1979)], II, pp. 223–224. Bonner, *Historiographical Study*, p. 21, notes that al-Dīnawarī is highly dependent on this *Romance* for his treatment of Hormizd IV (p.82 ff.).

²³Al-Tha'ālibī, *Ghurur akhbār mulūk al-Furs*, (ed.) and translated by H. Zotenberg, *Histoire des rois des Perses* (Paris, 1900), pp. 692–711.

²⁴Al-Tha'ālibī, pp. 712–714 and 721.

²⁵Al-Tha'ālibī, pp. 722–724; al-Mas'ūdī, II, pp. 233–234. For the actual reconstruction of these reigns, made with the help of the coinage, see A. Panaino, "Women and kingship. Some remarks about the enthronisation of Queen Boran and her sister Azarmigduxt", in *Eran und Aneran: Studien zu den Beziehungen zwischen dem Sasanidenreich und der Mittelmeerwelt*, (eds) J. Wiesehöfer and P. Huysse (Stuttgart, 2006), pp. 221–240. See also the comparison of succession lists in the histories in T. Daryaee, "When the end is near: Barbarised armies and barracks kings of late antique Iran", in *Proceedings of the 6th European Conference of Iranian Studies*, (eds) M. Macuch, D. Weber and D. Durkin-Meisterernst (Wiesbaden, 2010), pp. 43–52, at p. 45, note 11.

²⁶*Shāhnāme*, translated by J. Mohl, *Le Livre des Rois*, 7 vols. (Paris, 1878), VII, pp. 269–288.

²⁷Note, however, al-Maqdasi, *Le Livre de la Création et de l'histoire d'Abou Zeid Ahmad ben Sahl el-Balkhī publié et traduit d'après le manuscrit de Constantinople*, translated by C. Huart, 6 vols. (Paris, 1899–1919), V, p. 205, which includes the scene of Yazdegard's death at Merv and specifically references the *Xwadāy-Nāmaq*. Another briefer account, which is much more typical of the Muslim Arabic sources, is given as part of a continuous narrative of the Sasanian kings at vol. III, p. 176.

give a king hospitality and then murder him . . . Alas for this son of Ardashir.” Moreover, it is these monks who build a tomb for Yazdegard and anoint his body.²⁸

The appearance of the monks at the end of the poem, and their positive portrayal by the poet, stands in marked contrast to the alleged attitudes of earlier shahs in the poem. The rebellion of Khusrau’s Christian son Anoshazad acted as a warning against mixed marriages with Christians, who are seen as natural allies of the Romans,²⁹ while Shapur II’s Roman opponent Julian is (inaccurately) represented as a Christian and an opponent of Zoroastrianism.³⁰ The anti-Christian tone of much of the text seems to conform with the idea that Ferdowsi made use of contemporary translations from Middle Persian material by Zoroastrian priests.³¹ Equally, the positive attitude displayed towards Christians in the poem’s conclusion may suggest that this anti-Christian bias was not present in the material available to Ferdowsi for Yazdegard III’s reign, material that is more likely to have been composed close to the events themselves, given the increasing dominance of Islamic culture in the former Sasanian lands following the conquests.

Al-Ṭabarī and the Christian Sources

The impression we have gleaned from Rubin’s groups D–F is of a variety of continuations of Khusrau I’s *Xwadāy-Nāmag* for the reigns of Hormizd IV and Khusrau II, in which the romance(s) of the great rebel Vahram Chobin are probably the most important shared source, leaving little substantive material on either shah, in spite of the latter’s fame.

Rubin’s comparison of al-Ṭabarī’s text with the unpublished manuscript Sprenger 30 (group A) showed that they exhibit slight differences in their material on the reign of Khusrau II. He observes that both employed a shared source on Khusrau’s wars, but that this was only able to provide minimal information, namely the dates for Maurice’s murder, the invasion of the Roman Empire and the fall of Jerusalem (all dated by Khusrau’s reign). Most unusually for the Arabic and New Persian tradition, these dates are accurate. In addition, al-Ṭabarī and the Sprenger manuscript also share a pro-Christian tone for their (brief) description of Khusrau’s war, emphasising the fact that Khusrau was fighting on behalf of Theodosius, the exiled son of Maurice, and including Heraclius’s prayer for victory against the Persians. Where they differ, Rubin argues, they have been padded out with additional details taken from the Qur’an or other versions of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag*.³²

Rubin’s argument for adding a Christian veneer to al-Ṭabarī’s account of the war is supported by the links made by Howard-Johnston between al-Ṭabarī and the seventh-century Syriac *Khuzistan Chronicle*. For instance, both texts observe that the Christians hid

²⁸ *Shāhnameh*, VII, pp. 394–395.

²⁹ *Shāhnameh*, VI, pp. 173–194. It has been suggested that parts of Ferdowsi’s account of Anoshazad derive from Christian sources such as a Syriac martyrology. See M. R. J. Bonner, *Three Neglected Sources of Sasanian History in the Reign of Khusrau Anushirvan*, *Studia Iranica Cahier* 46 (Paris, 2011), pp. 65–68.

³⁰ *Shāhnameh*, V, pp. 348–385.

³¹ Nöldeke, *Iranian National Epic*, p. 16; W. Barthold, “Zur Geschichte des persischen Epos”, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* [Journal of the German Oriental Society] XC VIII (1944), pp. 121–157, at p. 151.

³² Z. Rubin, ‘Ibn al-Muqaffā’’, p. 82; J. Howard-Johnston, “Al-Ṭabarī on the Last Great War of Antiquity”, in his, *East Rome*, VI, at pp. 6–7.

the True Cross in a vegetable garden, where it was discovered by the Persians.³³ For both al-Ṭabarī and the author of Sprenger, this common source, composed by Christians, was the main means of filling a gap in their narrative, even if they did turn to other material to supply additional details. Like the *Khuzistan Chronicle*, this common source may have originally been in Syriac, but this need not have presented any impediment to al-Ṭabarī since he had access to translated Syriac sources for his sections on the wars between the emperor Julian and Shapur II³⁴ and for the martyrdoms of Najran.³⁵ Nor is the account of the wars of 604–628 the only part of this version of the *Xwadāy-Nāmaq* that shows the influence of Christian material: the account of Hormizd IV's speech to his notables also has a positive tone that seems to derive from court Christians, as do parts of al-Ṭabarī's account of the death of Khusrau II and the accusations of Shiroë against his father.

Thus the Christian material in al-Ṭabarī's account of the Sasanians is clustered in the period after c.590. A similar pattern is also broadly visible in the remnants of the Syriac historiography of the time, reconstructed from later chronicles. The thirteenth-century bibliophile 'Abdisho' identified the 590s as a period when the composition of ecclesiastical history flourished in the Church of the East.³⁶ Two of the historians that he mentions, Mikha of beth Garmai and Allahazkha, both of whom wrote in the reign of Khusrau II, dated their works according to the reign of the shah, as indicated by the fragments preserved in the chronography of Elias of Nisibis.³⁷ These citations point, in general, to the availability of material originating in Syriac that later Arabic historians might employ. They also point, in particular, to the plausibility of Rubin's identification of al-Ṭabarī's source material for the wars, since this section alone is dated by the years of Khusrau, a device that is absent from al-Ṭabarī's earlier *Xwadāy-Nāmaq* material.

A third fragment of medieval information is also helpful here. The thirteenth century *Book of the Bee* by the Christian Solomon of Basra includes a list of the Sasanian kings, ending not with Yazdegard III but with Khusrau II. This list, Solomon observes, was drawn up in the twelfth year of Khusrau's reign.³⁸ Thus it seems to confirm the thesis that many histories of the Sasanians did not extend to the conclusion of the dynasty, and that Khusrau's reign was itself an important occasion for historical composition. It also suggests the reception

³³Howard-Johnston, "Al-Ṭabarī", p. 12. Cf. al-Ṭabarī, I, p. 1002 and *Khuzistan Chronicle*, (ed.) I. Guidi, *Chronicum Anonymum in Chronica Minora I*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 1–2 (Paris 1903), p. 25. On the *Khuzistan Chronicle* see J. Watt, "The portrayal of Heraclius in Syriac historical sources", in *The Reign of Heraclius (610–41): Crisis and Confrontation*, (eds) G. Reinink and B. Stolte (Leuven, 2002), pp. 63–79; J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis. Historians and Histories of the Seventh-Century Middle East* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 128–135; P. Nautin, "L'auteur de la 'Chronique anonyme de Guidi': Élie de Merw", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* CIC (1982), pp. 303–313. There is a partial English translation of the *Chronicle* by M. Greatrex in *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars, Part II AD 363–630. A Narrative Sourcebook*, (eds) G. Greatrex and S. Lieu (Abingdon and New York, 2002), pp. 229–237.

³⁴Al-Ṭabarī, I, pp. 840–843, with translation and notes of T. Nöldeke, "Ueber den syrischen Roman von Kaiser Julian", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* XXVIII (1874), pp. 271–292.

³⁵Al-Ṭabarī, I, pp. 920–925; W. Hirschberg, "Nestorian sources of north Arabian traditions on the establishment and persecution of Christianity in the Yemen", *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* XV (1939/1949), pp. 321–338.

³⁶J.-M. Fiey, *Jalons pour l'histoire de l'église en Iraq* (Louvain, 1970), pp. 9–10 summarises 'Abdisho's material. See also Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana*, 4 vols. (Rome, 1728), IIIa for a Latin translation.

³⁷Quoted in Elias of Nisibis, *Chronography*, (ed.) and translated E. W. Brooks, *Opus Chronologicum* Scriptorum Syri ser. 3, 7–8 (Paris, 1909–10), pp. 124–125. See also Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino-Vaticana* (Rome, 1728), IIIa, p. 216.

³⁸Solomon of Basra, *Book of the Bee* LII, translated by E. Wallis-Budge (Oxford, 1886), p. 123.

of Sasanian royal history by Christians in the reign of Khusrau, for whom this shah was a particular source of patronage (and whose reign provided a dating criterion) in a way that his predecessors were not.

The structural trends visible in this medieval material, of an explosion of Christian material in the 590s and the Christian use of Sasanian history in the same era, are further showcased in the tenth–eleventh century *Chronicle of Seert*. This is an Arabic compilation of earlier histories, most of which were originally composed in Syriac. The compiler's reluctance to edit his texts makes it an important repository of information for earlier historiography.³⁹ The *Chronicle's* deployment of Sasanian history is especially noteworthy: for the shahs from Vahram II he periodically uses material drawn from the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* tradition which shares the core features of the narratives of al-Ṭabarī or al-Dīnawarī – most notably accounts of the wars of the shahs and their foundation of new cities.⁴⁰ Though these sections often include information on Christian affairs, especially the relationship between the catholicoi of the Church of the East and the shahs, the core of these Persian sections remains the deeds of the Sasanian dynasty.

This focus changes markedly with the reign of Hormizd IV: here we are given much more on the politics of the shah's court and his relationship with a range of Christian elites, both lay and ecclesiastical. The material here is also more integrated with earlier narrative strands within the *Chronicle of Seert*. Whereas the sections of earlier parts of the *Chronicle* were divided according to institutional bias (Sasanian shahs, catholicoi, Roman emperors or tales from the school of Nisibis), the material for 590 onwards integrates these different interest groups into much more rounded, richer narratives.⁴¹ In addition, the post-590 part of the *Chronicle* shows the work of many hands: numerous historians attempted to integrate a variety of earlier historiographical trends as they wrote about their own times.⁴²

The sparse version of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* that is discerned early on in the *Chronicle* (i.e. pre-590) seems to be just one of these earlier historiographical traditions that formed the background for the ecclesiastical history writing of the 590s. The entry on Hormizd IV begins with a note “taken from the Persian royal annals”, implying that the integrated narrative in this section, with its wide international awareness and concern for the relationship between church and catholicos, was seen as a continuation of the tradition of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* and was made during the reign of Khusrau II.⁴³ Indeed, a similar argument could be made for the Syriac *Khuzistan Chronicle*: this text's early date of composition confirms the pattern seen in the *Chronicle of Seert*, of the Christian adoption of Sasanian history after c. 590, as does the fact that the Syriac *Chronicle* begins with the reign of Hormizd IV and continues to focus on the Sasanian realm, even after the fall of the empire itself.

³⁹Most notably, the compiler is unwilling to reconcile different versions of the same events and often merely juxtaposes them in successive sections: for example, *Chronicle of Seert*, (ed.) and translated by A. Scher *et al.*, PO 4, IV and V.

⁴⁰*Chronicle of Seert*, PO 4, II, IX; PO 5, XLIII, LXV; PO 7, V, XI–II, XIV; PO 13, XLIII.

⁴¹A feature of the sections included in *Chronicle of Seert*, PO 13 (the period c.590–640).

⁴²Note how the narrative of the Sasanian shahs is, for the most part, kept separate from ecclesiastical material until the account of Hormizd IV and his relationship with the Catholicos Isho'yahb I: *Chronicle of Seert*, PO 13, XLII. See my comments in P. Wood, *The Chronicle of Seert. Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 122–123, 128–131, 172–174.

⁴³*Chronicle of Seert*, PO 13, XLIII (443–444). This material in the style of the *Xwadāy-Nāmag* (as preserved by al-Ṭabarī) is continued at LVIII (465), which implies it was composed shortly after Khusrau II's restoration.

To summarise, I argue that the reigns of Hormizd IV and Khusrau II were major watersheds for Christian deployment of Sasanian history. The reign of Khusrau was used as dating criteria, and the behaviour of the shahs was placed at the centre of Sasanian Christian historical writing in a way that had never been seen before. It is from these circles, I propose, that al-Ṭabarī and other Arabic historians, both Christian and Muslim, have drawn several narratives for the period 590–640. Although the material in al-Ṭabarī has a Christian provenance and bias, it also differs from the accounts preserved in the *Chronicle of Seert* and elsewhere. The following section considers the changing attitudes of the different strands of al-Ṭabarī's account of the Sasanians and that of the Christian historians.

Christian Visions of the Last Shahs: Hormizd IV

Al-Ṭabarī's account of the wars of Khusrau is not the only section of his history to bear a significant Christian imprint. Two other sections also merit investigation. The first of these is a speech attributed to Hormizd IV where the shah responds to a request by the Zoroastrian mobads to persecute the Christians. The shah refuses, and tells the mobads that they should be content to inspire others to join their religion through good deeds, rather than coercion. He goes on to remind them that the shah's rule is like a footstool with four legs: all the different religions are required to keep it standing.⁴⁴

The claim here is not for a Christian shah, but for the shah as a defender of religious pluralism against evil Zoroastrian advisers who sought to establish a religious monopoly. We should, of course, be very wary of seeing this as an accurate picture of Hormizd's policy. Rather it is an act of wishful thinking by Christians, intended to articulate an ideal relationship between the shah and the Christians and to portray their Zoroastrian opponents as intolerant bigots who did not have the stability of the empire at heart.

Very similar ideas can be traced in the previous generation in stories originating in more obviously Christian texts. Stories of the catholicoi embedded in the *Chronicle of Seert* emphasise their close personal relationships with the shahs from the beginning of the sixth century.⁴⁵ In the same vein, the *Life of the catholicos Mar Aba*, a convert from Zoroastrianism, drew an important distinction between the justice of the shah Khusrau I and the religious laws of the mobads. Here, when Aba is accused of turning traitor and going over to the Romans by an 'apostate' to Zoroastrianism, he responds by presenting himself before the shah – to defend himself and to admit the shah's right to put him to death as a Persian subject. Significantly, Khusrau does not punish Aba himself, but gives him over to the head mobad to try as an apostate.⁴⁶

The description of Hormizd IV in al-Ṭabarī fits into a longer trend in the writings of the Church of the East that sought to emphasise Christian loyalty to the shah and drive a distinction between him and his evil Zoroastrian advisors. This distinction, and the story as a

⁴⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, I, p. 991.

⁴⁵ *Chronicle of Seert*, PO 7, XXVI (153); XV (130); XI (122).

⁴⁶ *Chronicle of Seert*, PO 7, XXVII (160). Cf. the comments of P. Peeters, "Observations sur la vie syriaque de Mar Aba, catholicos de l'église perse (540–52)", in *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati V: Storia ecclesiastica—Diritto* (Vatican City, 1946), pp. 69–112. The more detailed Syriac *Life of Aba* is now edited and translated in F. Jullien, *Histoire de Mar Abba, catholicos de l'Orient. Martyres de Mar Grigor, général en chef du roi Khusro Ier et de Mar Yazd-panah, juge et gouverneur. Corpus Christianorum Scriptorum Orientalium 659, Scriptorum Syri 255* (Louvain, 2015).

whole, need not necessarily have been aimed at the court. Rather its intended audience may have been other Christians, who might well have resented the presence of certain bishops and lay Christian elites as courtiers. Christians at court might be exonerated from charges of ‘collaboration’ with the Zoroastrians by emphasising the distinction between the shah and the Zoroastrian clergy.

If the original of al-Ṭabarī’s story was composed in Syriac, it may have been the product of the increasing prominence of Christian elites within the empire. These elites may have sought to normalise their political role at court at the same time as they sought to find the boundaries between what was considered Iranian culture and Zoroastrian religion (adopting Iranian martial values and Zoroastrian festivals while decrying the practice of incest or sorcery by Christians).⁴⁷ In presenting the magi as persecutors, they were not only identifying them as a class of enemies, whose religious customs should be avoided by true Christians, but also distancing the Sasanian state (and the shah himself) from ‘Zoroastrianism’, and promoting ‘loyalist’ participation in the state by Christians as something desired by a benevolent shah.

In al-Ṭabarī’s account, the Christian image of Hormizd as defender of a ‘pluralist’ state meshes easily with the image of Hormizd as defender of the poor. After the court scene with the mobads, al-Ṭabarī provides an illustration of Hormizd’s justice, where he enforces the law against the young Khusrau when the prince tramples the crops of a farmer and his horse’s tail is docked in punishment.⁴⁸

Hormizd’s statement on religion need not be an accurate report, but it may show Christians under Hormizd adapting the royal propaganda of the shah as protector of the down-trodden in order to present him as a defender of pluralism. Indeed, Vahram Chobin’s ties to aristocratic families with close connections to the Zoroastrian clergy, and his growing rivalry with the shah, who may then have reached out to other interest groups, provide a plausible political context for this story.⁴⁹

The Christians of Iraq and the Return of the True Cross

After Hormizd’s fall, the material of Christian provenance in al-Ṭabarī takes on a series of new agendas, adapted to the changing prospect of patronage by Hormizd’s successors. As we have seen in Rubin’s argument, Christian sources, dated to the reign of Khusrau, proved important for al-Ṭabarī in his attempts to record Khusrau’s wars with Rome. The 590s had seen Christian leaders cooperate closely with Hormizd’s regime: the Catholicos Isho‘yahb I reported to the shah on Roman troop movements in Mesopotamia while bishop of Arzun. The *Chronicle of Seert* reports that Isho‘yahb fell foul of Khusrau, not for his religion but for his proximity to Hormizd and his failure to help in Khusrau’s restoration. Ironically,

⁴⁷A. Taqizadeh, “Iranian festivals adopted by Christians and condemned by Jews”, *Bulletin of SOAS* X (1942), pp. 632–653; J. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh. Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley, 2006). For the condemnation of incest and sorcery, see the references collected in Wood, *Chronicle of Seert*, pp. 144–145.

⁴⁸Al-Ṭabarī, I, pp. 989–990. See al-Dīnawarī, p. 80 for the celebration of the poor at Hormizd’s reforms.

⁴⁹On Vahram and his use of a Zoroastrian ‘messianic fervour’, note the suggestions of Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall*, pp. 122–123. On the connections between the aristocracy and the Zoroastrian church (qua holders of property), see M. Macuch, “Pious foundations in Byzantine and Sasanian law”, in *La Persia e Bisanzio*, (eds) A. Carile, L. Ruggini and G. Gnoli (Rome, 2004), pp. 181–195.

Isho'yahb was being treated like other Iranian elites in a system where office was closely tied to support from the shah, and his fall is, in a sense, an indication of the inclusion of Christians into normal processes of court patronage. When Isho'yahb was excluded from office he was replaced by an appointee of Khusrau, Sabrisho', whose election immediately followed Khusrau's return from Rome.⁵⁰

Sabrisho' came to play the role of an international holy man after Khusrau's restoration, receiving fragments of the True Cross from the Emperor Maurice after sending him his blessed garments and hosting a major Roman embassy at Ctesiphon. Khusrau's restoration, therefore, saw the deliberate co-option of the catholicos by the shah, at once emphasising his favour to the Church of the East while limiting its potential for independent or compromising behaviour.⁵¹ Khusrau's use of Sabrisho' as his main diplomatic channel to the Romans also allowed him to claim a kind of legitimacy as a Christian ruler – as a sponsor of holy men and of a collector of relics who was employed by a Roman emperor – which courted the favour of his own Christian subjects.⁵²

Khusrau's readjustment of his domestic policy towards Christians goes unnoticed in al-Ṭabarī. But his co-option of Sabrisho' and his public relations with Maurice help to explain the contours of al-Ṭabarī's treatment of the early part of the war with Rome, after Phocas's assassination of Maurice. Al-Ṭabarī reports that Khusrau invaded Roman Mesopotamia accompanied by Maurice's son, a figure who vanishes from the later parts of the invasion narrative in all sources.⁵³ The inclusion of Maurice's son here (though unnamed) in a part of the text, that seems to depend on a Christian source, confirms the positive reception of the shah's propaganda by domestic Christians.⁵⁴

However, al-Ṭabarī's account of the later part of the wars displays a distinctly different attitude towards Khusrau, since it emphasises the fall of Jerusalem and Heraclius's prayers for victory before his advance into Iraq.⁵⁵ Though al-Ṭabarī only gives us fragments of information, they suggest a marked shift in attitude towards the divine mandate of the protagonists: from a God-loving Khusrau, who stands up for the rights of Maurice's son against a usurper, to the sacker of Jerusalem, righteously opposed by the divinely favoured Heraclius.

Once more, al-Ṭabarī provides none of the details that allow us to comprehend this change in attitude. Yet this piece of information does illustrate the attraction of Heraclius's

⁵⁰ *Chronicle of Seert*, PO 13, XLII (440–442); *Khuzistan Chronicle*, p. 17.

⁵¹ *Chronicle of Seert*, PO 13, LXV–LXVIII.

⁵² On the diplomatic relationship between Maurice and Khusrau, see D. Frendo, "Byzantine-Iranian relations before and after the death of Khusrau II: a critical examination of the evidence", *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 14 (2000) and L. Sako, *Le rôle de la hiérarchie syrienne orientale dans les rapports diplomatiques entre la Perse et Byzance aux Ve– VIIe siècle* (Paris, 1986). Also note the diplomatic role of the return of captured relics by Khusrau at Rusafa: E. K. Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain. Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 136–141. Rumours of the conversion of Sasanian shahs had become relatively common by the late sixth century. See sources and discussion in Schilling, *Taufe der Sāsāniden*; C. Jullien, "Christianiser le pouvoir: images des rois sassanides dans la tradition syro-orientale", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* LXXV (2009), pp. 119–131, at pp. 127–131; S. Minov, *Syriac Christian Identity in Late Sasanian Mesopotamia: the Cave of Treasures in Context* (Jerusalem, PhD dissertation, 2013), pp. 300–303.

⁵³ Al-Ṭabarī, I, p. 1002.

⁵⁴ Compare ps-Sebeos, translation and commentary R. Thomson and J. Howard-Johnston, *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos* (Liverpool, 1999), Ch. 33, p. 63.

⁵⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, I, p. 1003.

propaganda to Iraqi Christians. Heraclius promoted a martial Christian identity among his allies in the peoples of the Caucasus, and this seems to have also had a powerful resonance further south.⁵⁶ In addition, the change in attitude must also be seen against the background of Khusrau's progressive alienation of the Church of the East: Sabrisho's reign was followed by a marked volte-face by the shah against the Church of the East, culminating in a small number of high-profile martyrdoms of Persian apostates to Christianity and the shah's dissolution of the catholicosate.⁵⁷ The fact that the source that al-Ṭabarī employs is probably an eastern Christian continuation of the Persian royal tradition is highly suggestive of the ultimate alienation of the Church of the East from the regime, a process that would have a direct part to play in the assassination plot against the shah.

Christian influence on al-Ṭabarī's Sasanian material is also visible in one final section: Kavād Shiroë's list of accusations against his father and the lists of conspirators against Khusrau. For the Muslim Arab compilations, it is the Iranian aristocrats and Shiroë who are responsible for Khusrau's fall, rather than the Romans, a perspective that may have been intended to flatter the (short-lived) new regime.⁵⁸ Al-Ṭabarī's extensive account provides prosopographical details: Shiroë has been forced to act by two nobles, Fayruz and Shamta, the son of the Christian aristocrat Yazdin. The murder itself is committed by one Mihr Hormizd, an aristocrat whom Khusrau had unjustly mutilated.⁵⁹

The *Khuzistan Chronicle* contains a similar narrative to al-Ṭabarī, possibly based on similar sources. Interestingly, the *Chronicle* makes the conspirators personally responsible for the killing. It notes that Shamta was unable to kill the shah and that Nehormizd had to do the deed, an observation that may reflect publicly witnessed events, or a later wish to distance Shamta from the event after his later falling out with Shiroë. The *Chronicle* reports this in the next scene, when Shamta is forced to flee to Hira, where he remains in hiding until he is captured and executed in the reign of Shahrbaraz.⁶⁰

In contrast to the *Khuzistan Chronicle* and to al-Ṭabarī, the account of Thomas of Marga, a ninth-century monastic author writing in Syriac, gives Shamta a much larger role, as the sole conspirator against Khusrau, and as Shiroë's kingmaker. Thomas ignores any strife between Shiroë and Shamta, and focuses instead on Shiroë's restoration of the catholicos and Khusrau's role as an enemy of Christianity: "Shamta went into Khusrau's quarters with his servants and killed him, and there was peace for the churches".⁶¹ All three of these accounts emphasise the role of Shamta, but Thomas's account may reflect rumours early in Shiroë's reign when Shamta's supporters were proud of his role in defeating the tyrant Khusrau. Tales of Khusrau's murder that were recorded later would have had good reason to be more circumspect: the short reigns and bloody ends of his successors, and the ultimate collapse of

⁵⁶J. Howard-Johnston, "Heraclius' Persian campaigns and the revival of the eastern Roman Empire", in his *East Rome*, VIII.

⁵⁷B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le Perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VII^e siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1992) II, pp. 118–119.

⁵⁸For example, al-Tha'ālibī, pp. 722–227.

⁵⁹al-Ṭabarī, I, p. 1061.

⁶⁰*Khuzistan Chronicle*, pp. 28–29. Earlier sections of the *Chronicle* (pp. 15–17) are also distinctly biased towards Yazdin, Shamta's father.

⁶¹Thomas of Marga, *Book of the Governors*, I, xxxv, edited and translated by E. Wallis-Budge (London, 1893), p. 63/ translation 112–115.

Iran that followed them, may have made Khusrau's reign seem like a golden era, even to his critics.

Thus it may be possible to distinguish between three contemporary or near-contemporary presentations of Khusrau's murder. Al-Ṭabarī's account distances Shiroë from the killing, making the killer a man who had suffered from Khusrau's injustice. The *Khuzistan Chronicle* emphasises the direct role of the conspirators and possibly downplays Shamta's role in the murder. Thomas's account is the most partisan, and makes Shamta the hero of the moment. This interpretation could have only been possible in the immediate aftermath of the murder, before Shamta's fall from grace (let alone the anarchy that followed).

The complexity of the political situation is further implied in the cluster of reports surrounding the confrontation of Shiroë with his father. In al-Ṭabarī's account, Shiroë goes to the imprisoned Khusrau and sets out a list of accusations: that he mistreated and killed Hormizd; that he imprisoned his sons; that he made many political prisoners; that he took other men's wives as mistresses; that he increased taxes; that he laid up treasures for himself; that he kept his troops far from home for long periods of time and, finally, his treatment of Maurice and his refusal to return the True Cross.⁶² These accusations have parallels in the other recensions of the Persian royal annals: al-Tha'ālibī has Shiroë justifying Khusrau's execution by his treatment of his uncle Vindoë, as well as his taxation and his demands for long military service.⁶³ But many of the other accusations in al-Ṭabarī look like anachronisms, a list gathered from many different sources that reflect later concerns. Likewise, Khusrau's rebuttal of a number of these claims suggests a later attempt to vindicate Khusrau after the abortive reign of his son and the period of anarchy that followed. A good example of this is the story that Khusrau justified his imprisonment of Shiroë because of a prophecy that he would kill his father. This presents Khusrau as fated to behave as he did, rather than as a comprehensible human agent who could be subject to praise and blame. The fiction of the prophecy coexists with Khusrau's more practical claim that his taxes were necessary for the stability of the state. Thus both forms of rebuttal can be seen as later attempts to rehabilitate Khusrau after Shiroë's death, whether in the immediate aftermath,⁶⁴ or in the romanticised elaboration of the shah's reputation that occurred in the early Islamic period.⁶⁵

However, the accusation surrounding the True Cross is not included in this rebuttal. If al-Ṭabarī did build his list of accusations from multiple sources, then this would also explain its absence from Khusrau's rebuttal, which was only conceived as a response to one version of the anti-Khusrau tradition and did not consider his treatment of the True Cross as an objection. The accusation about the True Cross is also probably an anachronism but an early one: Shahrbaraz, Khusrau's former general and the successor (and murderer) of Shiroë's son

⁶²Al-Ṭabarī, I, p. 1046. See also *Nihāyat al-'Arab fī Akhbār al-Furs wa-l-'Arab*, partially translated by E. Browne, *Journal Asiatique* n.s. XXXII (1900), pp. 195–259, at p. 253. On this source see M. Grignaschi, "La Nihāyat al-'Arab fī Akhbār al-Furs wa-l-'Arab", *Bulletin d'études orientales* (Damascus) XXII (1969), pp. 15–67.

⁶³Al-Tha'ālibī, p. 721. Al-Dīnawarī gives his version of the accusation list on pp. 112–113, and adds Khusrau's deposition of the Arab king 'al-Nu'mān III, a detail that may respond to Islamic-era concerns.

⁶⁴In the reigns of his daughters Boran and Azarmidukht. Al-Dīnawarī, p. 111, also notes that Shahrbaraz claimed the illegitimacy of Shiroë's line on the basis of his murder of Khusrau.

⁶⁵This elaboration is especially visible in the tales of Shirin and Barbad at Khusrau's court that al-Tha'ālibī provides.

Ardashir III, was confirmed in his power by the Roman general David after his return from the west, and the return of the True Cross was a leitmotif of his policy. In the *Chronicle of Seert*, Shahrbaraz appears as a Roman client, accepting Roman claims to Christian universal rule.⁶⁶ Thus the accusations against Khusrau may be intended to confirm Shahrbaraz as a friend of the Romans while claiming legitimacy for him among the Christians of Iraq, invoking the memory of Maurice to portray Khusrau as a deceiver.⁶⁷

The changing biases of al-Ṭabarī's Christian material are only readily explicable using the more detailed accounts of the *Chronicle of Seert* and the *Khuzistan Chronicle*. But this itself is an indication of the political confusion of the period, when a variety of Christian chroniclers proved unable to maintain a single political focus in their accounts of the period. That some of these historians have concentrated on the shah Khusrau in addition to the traditional genre built around the catholicoi is both the reason for the presence of material with an interest in Christian matters in al-Ṭabarī and an indication of the changing status of the Church of the East. Al-Ṭabarī's account of Hormizd's speech or Khusrau's support for Maurice's son Theodosius are both indications of 'loyalist' politics by the Christian historians, who had begun to adopt the previously alien tradition of the Persian royal annals into their own historical writing. If their account of Hormizd as a 'pluralist' monarch might show wishful thinking on their part, Khusrau's reign saw royal attempts to harness Christian legitimacy in the invasion of Rome, a moment when Persian elites began to be proactive in creating a Christian image for themselves. And, by this point, Christian historians seem to be participating in a widening conversation about Christian leadership in the Sasanian world.

In spite of the proximity of the church's leaders to the regime, this was a period where hopes for a Christian monarch were repeatedly thwarted. The variety of explanations for Shiroë's execution of Khusrau, and the rebuttals ascribed to Khusrau, all illustrate the complexity of Khusrau's legacy in the years that followed. Christian members of the Sasanian world were equally shaken by this turmoil in succession, as Heraclius, Shiroë, Shahrbaraz and Shamta all suggested the hope of a monarchy that would prove favourable to the Christians of the Sasanian world.

Conclusions

The late Tom Sizgorich described how the *topoi* and narrative forms of late Roman Christianity began new careers in the Muslim *umma*. For Sizgorich, these stories were examples of a language of power, a means of organising both past and present, that allowed Muslims to express their rule in an indigenous medium and represent themselves in terms of

⁶⁶ *Chronicle of Seert*, PO 13, XCIII (554–556). Cf. *Khuzistan Chronicle*, pp. 29–30. See further the discussion by C. Mango, "Deux études sur Byzance et la Perse Sasanide", *Tiavaux et Memories IX* (1985), pp. 93–118 and Howard-Johnston, 'Al-Ṭabarī', pp. 12–14 (on Shahrbaraz's letter).

⁶⁷ Though if Shahrbaraz appealed to Christian sentiments in his Roman alliance, he was far from making common cause with other patrons of Christianity at the Sasanian court. Indeed, he was responsible for the deaths of both Shamta, son of Khusrau's Christian financier Yazdin, and Ardashir III, son of Shiroë, whose birth had been foretold by a Christian holy man (*Chronicle of Seert*, PO 13, XCII (552)).

a prestigious, sacred past.⁶⁸ Christians in Iran, of course, were not military victors over Iran in the way that the Muslims were. Those Christian leaders who did prosper at court always did so with the support of the shah, but the growing influence of Christians, even if this need not reflect an actual expansion in Christian numbers, brought with it a closer relationship to Iranian culture.⁶⁹ Sasanian history represented a means for Christians to organise their own understanding of the world using an indigenous medium – the history of the shahs – to contextualise themselves and their own past into the empire’s history and its contemporary life. Later Arabic sources, especially al-Ṭabarī’s history, allow us to see the outlines of this act of adaptation, through which Christians sought their own positions in the Sasanian world, both at the court of Khusrau II and in the post-Sasanian memory of these same events. <philip.wood@aku.edu>

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⁶⁸T. Sizgorich, “Narrative and community in Islamic Late Antiquity”, *Past and Present* CLXXXV (2004), pp. 9–42; T. Sizgorich, “Do Prophets come with a sword?” Conquest, empire and historical narrative in the early Islamic world”, *American Historical Review* CXII (2007), pp. 993–1015.

⁶⁹Note the increasingly prominent use of Christian symbols on the seals of Sasanian officials: R. Gyselen, “Les témoignages sigillographiques sur la présence chrétienne dans l’empire sasanide”, in her *Chrétiens en terre de l’Iran I: Implantation et Acculturation* (Paris, 2006), pp. 17–78.