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# An introduction to gender structure and social inequality in the Sasanian Empire, Iran

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## ABSTRACT

The Sasanian dynasty was one of the empires of ancient Iran, dating from 224 to 651 A.D. The research investigates the social inequality between men and women in Sasanian Empire in Iran. The exertion of some kinds of gender discrimination and men superiority has appeared in archaeological records and Sasanian text such as *Ardaviraf Nameh*. The presentation of women in archaeological evidence such as visual arts is rare in comparison to men. The research follows a comparative method in data analysis. Based on the above evidences, this research examines women's social status and their role in Sasanian society in comparison to other groups such as men and children.

**Key words:** Gender, social inequality, patriarchy, women, Sasanian Iran.

## INTRODUCTION

The Sasanian dynasty was one of the empires of ancient Iran, dating from 224 to 651 A.D. (Frye 2001: 274). The Sasanian Empire extended from Afghanistan in the east to Mesopotamia, and some parts of Anatoly and Armenia formed its western borders (ibid 225). The Sasanians were a powerful rival of the Roman Empire (Frye, 1984).

The investigation of Sasanian written resources such as legal texts, inscriptions and material evidence, especially visual arts (such as rock reliefs) shows that Sasanian society was a lineage based on patriarchy (Christensen, 1944). In such a patriarchal system, the oldest man usually governs and makes the most important decisions, and in the case of females, members of their husbands' family are usually predominant (Bates and Pollouge, 2006). The family was part of a bigger paternal unit, recognized as *tokhm-e-naf* and *gohar*, and could differ in size (Wiesehofer, 2001:220). The patriarchal system is based on the society's gender construction; gender can act as an organizing element in making social distinctions (Joyce, 2004) and gender differences form an important aspect of the society's social complexity (Nelson, 2005: 131).

In Sasanian Iran, males were privileged per se and men were superior to women. The patriarchy influenced all the social and political dimensions of Sasanian life and acted as an organizing principle. Reflections of this system can be traced in cases such as inheritance, succession, guardianship, naming, document registration and even gravestone inscriptions. Individuals' social participation, available progress opportunities and political power

depended on the status of the person in the patriarchy. It seemed that women and some other gender-age-related groups such as children were of a lower status in comparison to men. Also, unable individuals and people with bodily injuries or some illnesses suffered a low social status (Razi, 2000).

The research investigates some parts of the Sasanian patriarchal system and the position of women within it. However, archaeological evidence of different social classes is very limited. The only exception is the royal dynasty, which will be the focus of the research. Women had limited participation in political power and there is scarce representation of them in the visual arts (as one of the most current Sasanian materials) or mentioning of them in inscriptions or even religious texts. In this research, text acts as complementary material. At first archaeological evidence will be presented and evaluated, then written sources will be evaluated as complementary data; finally all data will be analyzed inside a comparative framework.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCES

Women's restricted appearance in material culture is proof of the social inequality between men and women per se. In little archaeological evidence are women presented or mentioned, so we know little about them. In contrast to noble men, we know a few (fewer than 20) royal or high-rank women (ShapourShahbazi, 1998).

Of 80 studied samples (which were studied by the author) such as stucco fragments, mosaics, golden and

silver vessels, rock reliefs, seals and gems, women are only shown in 19 cases (23.75 percent), in 11 cases (13.7 percent) accompanying men and only in 8 cases (10 percent) independently.

Contrary to women, royalty and noblemen have an active role in Sasanian material culture. Generally, they are displayed in different scenes, mostly showing bodily activities such as fighting, hunting, shooting and attending feasts. The importance of paternal lineage and origin appears in archaeological evidence. Norsi appeared in his investiture rock relief in Fars with a boy (probably his successor), Kermanshah Shapur III with his father Shapur II and Ardashir I, the founder of the dynasty in Fars, appeared with two boys in his investiture. Bahram II, in different kinds of his coins was accompanied by his crown prince Bahram III. These are some examples emphasizing paternal lineage. The emphasis on representing noblemen and repeating this in different materials indicates men's special status and active role in Sasanian society (in comparison to other groups). Actually, Sasanian archaeological evidence is gender-based, implicitly indicating the superiority of men in social life. Of 34 Sasanian rock reliefs, women are displayed in only 5 cases (14.7 percent). This percentage in the case of other materials, such as stucco, gems or seals is very low. The gender discrimination exerted on women and men's superiority especially in power institutions can be inferred from royal family materials; as an example, the investiture of power to queens in Sassanian art is an unknown phenomenon (ShapourShahbazi, 1998: 60).

### Visual symbols of predominance

Material culture contains meaning and acts as an instrument making social relations visual (Sofaer, 2007: 2). The importance and symbolic power of material culture in many cases is utilized to represent the relation of domination against obedience (Diaz-Andreu, 2005: 26). Men's superiority to women is represented symbolically in the visual arts. In some investigated cases, this superiority is evident. The second Bahram's rock relief in Sarmashhad, Fars shows him fighting a lion while his queen is placed behind him and Bahram is holding her hand, protecting her against predacious lions.

Bahram II's rock reliefs in Barm-e Delak and Thang-e Ghandil (both in Fars province) are other examples where the queen appears shorter than the king and approaches her left hand to her lips as a symbol of respect (Shapour Shahbazi, 1998: 59).

A silver plate probably belonging to Bahram V (now in Her Baltimor Hall) shows him in a family sense with his queen; Bahram is leaning on a throne and has put one of his feet on his lady's body, yet the queen is sited formally in reverence to the king.

In the above-mentioned cases, women's gestures and bodily postures are of considerable importance, women's holding of hands, women's symbolical reverence for men or men been displayed as taller and stronger are the symbols of women's obedience; in these scenes, they are protected by men or accompany them. Women usually appear in a formal position in the presence of men while they can appear comfortable (like Bahram V and his queen) or as strong powerful people.

## WRITTEN RESOURCES

### Inscriptions

Inscriptions such as recorded texts on stones and rocks can be regarded as the first Sasanian sources. They are rarely formed independently; instead, they are usually in relation

to rock reliefs, *ostoodans* (a kind of crypt tomb), memorials (such as Norsi's memorial tower) or architecture (such as Mehr-Norsi's bridge). They generally show short texts marking the related building.

In total, 51 inscriptions have been investigated. Of this number, 28 belong to *stoodans* (probably of ordinary people). *Stoodan* inscriptions as gravestone texts introduce the deceased. The remaining ones belong to the royal dynasty, including 1 piece of monumental architecture, 3 buildings, 15 rock reliefs, 2 independent inscriptions, and 2 monumental inscriptions. Most of the royal inscriptions mark the name, title, individual's father's name, paternal lineage and activities.

They play a considerable role in investigating gender construction from different aspects. Generally, the inscriptions follow a definite order: introducing the king of kings, the name of his father, his grandfather and in some cases the ancestor of the paternal lineage or the head of the dynasty. They also mention the king of king's special activities and characteristics (in an ideal form).

Both of them emphasize patriarchy, the importance of lineage and extraction, paternal relations and masculine activities for Sasanians. It seems that all the Sasanian socio-political systems were influenced by patriarchy. To mention women is very rare. Of 23 royal inscriptions, women are mentioned only in 1 case (4.34%) (Shapour's I inscriptions on the Kabe Zardosht tower in Fars). If inscriptions point out women (like *stoodan* inscriptions), they introduce them via their relation to a man (father or husband). Pointing to the paternal lineage is very common (especially in legal documents) in the case of both men and women, although men are introduced by their career or social status (the best examples are the Kabe Zardosht or Haji Abad inscriptions). Of 51 studied inscriptions, 50.9% introduce individuals based on paternal lineage.

Assignment to a male relative is more serious in the case of women and even appears in their name, such as Shapour Dokht, which means the daughter of Shapour. *Stoodan* inscriptions usually introduce deceased females by their husbands and in some cases, via their fathers, the last case probably related to virgins. Recognizing women via paternal lineage appears in the Kabe Zardosh inscription, which is one of a few resources to indicate women. They usually appear as the mother, wife, or daughter of men; to mention women independently by their status is unusual (see Akbarzade, 2005: 43–8). Personal seals are good examples, for instance Queen Deenak's seal: Lady Deenak, Queen of Queens (Mashkour, 1988: 225) or in the Kabe Zardosh inscription: Azar-Anahid, Queen of Queens (Akbarzade, 2005: 46). However, the situation of royal dynasty ladies is a little different.

### Juridical texts

Sasanian juridical texts are full of instructions and laws emphasizing family permanence via male successors, assigning children to their father and paternal lineage, male superiority in legal cases and women as individuals who need men's support and control as they can not guarantee the continuance of the family and lineage.

According to Sasanian juridical texts such as *Matikan-e Hezar Datestan*, "the family was based on patriarchy, paternal lineage, polygamy, extended and marriage to close relatives preferred" (Yarshater, 2001: 43; Christensen, 1991; Mazdapour, 1990). The family had a chief (*salar*), who was the father originally (Mazdapour, 1990: 71). Another Pahlavi text, *Shayest and Nashayest*, recognizes four degrees of leadership (*salari*), the first one being "the leadership of the head of family which is called *Khane-Khoda*. A common form of marriage was the *Patakshayee*

marriage; after marriage, a woman was recognized as a mother, and as the lady of the household, she was the follower of her husband's power. Her new status was to be obedient to her husband, and all her connections with her family were cut off (Wiesehofer, 2001: 224).

Due to the permanence of patriarchy, Sasanian authorities set distinct laws on inheritance and substitution. All Iranian families from all different socio-economic ranks emphasized on their durability via male legal successor" (Yarshater, 2001:4); in case of the absence of a male successor, the duty of assigned inheritor was the reproduction of a male successor as the boy of the deceased" (Wiesehofer, 2001: 225).

Another topic that has been explained in detail is the issue of custody of underaged individuals, women and families without any male member (Wiesehofer, 2001: 225; Gorg Yaraghi, 1999). "To appoint a guardian was always the duty of masculine members of family or lineage, such a guardian was a man as usual." When the father passed away, the guardian was the oldest son or in the case of the absence of a mature son, the closest male relative of the deceased (Wiesehofer, 2001). In juridical sources, women and children are given the same status legally. They are treated as individuals who must be supported by men; "some members of household including the head of it, his sons and his grandsons had their own special rights and the others, including women and children had some other rights" (Wiesehofer, 2001; Gorg Yaraghi, 1999). Here, there is a clear division and distinction between mature male members and the others.

Polyandry as one form of marriage applies to a marriage of a woman to more than one man (Bates and Pollouge, 2006: 497); a temporary convenience marriage of married women was a current form in the Sasanian era. Women could marry nominally for the reproduction of a male successor for her first husband. If a husband had some valid reasons or some special commitment, he could handover his wife as well as her properties to another man for a determined period. In such cases, the woman was still the legal wife of her first husband who was her guardian now, and children from her convenience marriage considered as the children of her first husband (Wiesehofer 2001). Anthropologists believe that polyandry is common in societies with a bad sever life condition, where the land is scarce and having a husband is actually considered some kind of economic burden (Cohen 2005: 128). In the case of Sasanian society, polyandry and the reproduction of a son as a legal successor guarantee the possibility of saving properties in the paternal lineage and preserving its continuity.

Another subject as a legal case is polygamy. While polyandry is due to the reproduction of a male successor for men and signals male dominance implicitly, polygamy is probably the symbol of male superiority. Polygamy is the symbol of high social status; men with more than one spouse benefit from special socio-economic privileges (Cohen, 2005; Giddens, 2004).

### Religious texts

*Avesta* (the holy religious book of Zoroastrians) as the most important Sasanian book proposes a stratified pattern for society. In this stratification, different members of society are divided into four main groups: clergymen (*Athrovan*), warriors (*Rathshr*), farmers (*Vasterio feshount*) and administrators (*divan salaran*) (Razi, 2000; Chirstensen, 1991). Such a division was a kind of social stratification based on masculine groups; there was no room for women. The category evidently signals a patriarchal social order of Sasanians. It seems that such stratification is the product of

Sasanians and that most of *Avesta's* contents were compiled by Sasanians. According to its contents (such as the category mentioned above) and the testimony of some Pahlavi texts such as *Ardaviraf Name* and some inscriptions such as the Kardir inscriptions in Fars, *Avesta* (or at least some parts of it) was collected in the Sasanian era.

*Avesta* explains the characteristics of an ideal woman as: a young lady from a good origin, loyal, reputable, good-natured, good housekeeper, modest and who likes her father, ancestor and husband as her chief (*salar*), yet beautiful and shapely. Such a lady is the best of women (Razi 2000: 301). Such a definition emphasizes characteristics such as obedience and respect to male relatives and the paternal lineage.

*Ardaviraf Name* as another religious Pahlavi text stresses women's control, especially their sexuality, as a source of power and encourages women to obey their husband or father (Gignoux, 2003). It clearly reflects the social order of the Sasanian empire, which is expressed in the form of some moral instructions in *Ardaviraf Name*.

### SASANIAN GODDESS

The goddess Anahid (Anahita) was the only goddess considered in Sasanian Iran. Anahid is introduced as a female (actually a virgin) in *Avesta*, and appears as a beautiful virgin with a lovely figure (Pourdavoud, 1928: 121). Anahid does not show a feminine nature in her behaviour, characteristics, and functions. She rides the wheel, and her worshippers and temple custodians are all men. Anahid's most important temple was in Istakhr, Fars. The head of the Sasanian Dynasty Ardeshir and his father Papak and their ancestor Sasan were custodians of her temple (Schippmann, 2004). In the fifth *Yasht* of *Avesta*, *Aban Ysht*, which allocates to the goddess Anahid the name of many kings and heroes, mentions who worships the celebrated Anahid, praying, sacrificing and requesting (Razi, 2000: 351); most of their demands are victory, kingdom and the conquest of different countries. Actually, Anahid is a goddess in whom men are interested: the goddess of war and victory, which are defined evidently as masculine features in Sasanian society.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Many different studies and pieces of research have been carried out on the role of gender inequality between women and men in the formation of states, complex governments and their continuity (Savage, 2000; Bromfill, 1995). In the case of the Sasanian Empire, the weak appearance of women in society and in material culture, especially visual arts and written resources, the repeated emphasis of the patriarchy and men's representation displaying masculine activities point to different forms of socialization, different kinds of gender behavior and different roles of women and men in Sasanian society.

Desirable behavioral features for noblemen are represented in the visual arts as some ideal patterns. It seems that activities and skills that need high bodily expertise such as fighting and hunting are the main subjects of the visual arts; such activities are portrayed as specifically for men and women are not allowed to participate. There is no proof of women performing in such activities.

Gender inequality, which appears in the form of women's control and male dominance and the importance of masculine activities (as a social value), plays a considerable role in organizing Sasanian society socially and politically. Instead of benefiting from social rights like

men, women are proposed as second-class gender group. They are treated as men's property; such kind of treatment is common between different groups of Sasanian society. Actually, women act as instrument for the survival of the family and its lineage. Maybe one reason for the social inequality and discrimination against women is that they were not recognized as permanent members of the family because they leave their paternal family after marriage and become followers of their husbands, and children also belonged to men legally. There was no chance of protecting and continuing the paternal lineage for women. Actually, in the absence of a patriarchy system, with every marriage some parts of resources and properties went out of the family. It seems that marriage to close relatives acted an obstacle somehow, which was prescribed especially in religious texts such as *Ardaviraf Nameh*.

Another probably related issue is social movements such as Mazdakite. Mazdakite is a social uprising (Pourshariati, 2008: 82) more than being some kind of religion. The Mazdakite sect flourished for a short time under the Shah Kobad (531A.D.) and was then put down with a massacre (Glasse, 2002:261). It can be proposed that one reason for Mazdak's defeat was the breaking of the social order of patriarchy (in a short-term period). The Mazdak movement suggested a kind of common ownership of properties and women on a large scale and it made women's control (especially their sexuality) impossible. Common ownership put the survival of the paternal lineage in serious danger. The socio-political elements of Sasanian society were based on legal marriage, and the permanence of the paternal lineage via male successors. Women were treated as an object in all these processes, the female body acting as a container for reproduction and keeping a male successor for lineage.

High-status women, especially royal dynasty ladies, had a slightly different condition. They owed their position to their high rank, which actually came back to their paternal assignment to the Sasanian lineage. In the case of royal family ladies, their rank outshone the gender construction. Normally they could not access political power but in a critical condition (for example in the absence of any male candidate), it did occur. In general, women appeared as subordinates, companions and in the support of men. They were denied access to any form of power (political power or even power in the family). The issue is reflected in Sasanian law, juridical and religious texts in some prescriptions for controlling women. Archaeologically, most of the evidence relates to royal dynasty men, yet the archaeological representation of women is limited. During more than 400 years of the Sasanian kingdom, we only know 2 queens (in comparison to more than 29 kings). Contrary to men, there is no material evidence of women except on a few coins.

Until now, there has been no evidence of physical violence against women; it seems that the control of women and exerting masculine power was very subtle yet symbolic. It powerfully influenced different aspects of social life, especially household structure. The only powerful Sasanian goddess is/was also at men's service. In *Avesta* there are a considerable number of vows and sacrifices for the goddess Anahid by men but there is no mention of women. It seems that granting a metaphysical power to a goddess (with a feminine appearance) is an ideological strategy to cover social inequality and the impossibility of women accessing real power.

In Sasanian Iran, the permanence of a patriarchal empire and preserving social order and paternal lineages as household units needed women to be controlled. All the Sasanian social laws and religious prescriptions supported this order. The Sasanian Empire was based on the centralization of power in the hands of a limited group of men; women were not good choices for succession because the power might go out of the Sasanian lineage in the case of women's marriage.

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