

THE SASSANIAN DYNASTY

(CE 224-641)

THE ZARATHUSHTI RENAISSANCE

SASSAN

It all began with **SASSAN**, the **High Priest** of the Great Fire Temple at Istakhr, the Capital City of the Province of Pars in the Parthian Empire. **His high influence, unwavering conviction and domineering spirit changed the course of history.**

Not content with the practice of Zarathushtrianism, solely in the province of Pars after the fall of the Hakhamani Empire, he planned a resurgence of the religion of Zarathushtra as the State Religion of the entire Empire.

He married the *Princess Ram Behest* (about **CE 200**), daughter of *Gozhir*, the ruling Parthian *Khshathra Pavan* (Governor) of Pars.

Gozhir was reluctant to undertake this responsibility of opposing the two suzerain Parthian Kings, **VOLOGASES VI (Valakhesh)** and **ARTABANUS IV (Ardavan)**, both of whom claimed the throne. Vologases VI, elder brother and legitimate heir to the throne, held power after the death of their father, **VOLOGASES V (CE 191-208)** in **Ecbatana**, Capital of Parthia. Artabanus IV revolted **CE 216** and ruled the southern part of the Empire from **Ctesiphon** as the Capital.

The Parthian brothers were busy, engaged in several battles against the Romans (under **Caracalla CE 211-217** and **Macrinus CE 217-218**). While trying to gain lost ground in Mesopotamia both failed to notice the rising power in Pars.

Sassan grabbed this opportunity for the revival of the past Hakhamani glory and encouraged the Zarathushti Commander, **PAPAK** to take over the Parthian Satrapy of Pars.

PAPAK

& THE LAST OF THE PARTHIANS

ARTABANUS IV (Ardavan) CE 216-224
And his brother
VOLOGASES VI (Valakhesh) CE 208-224

(Silver Drachm of Papak and son, Ardeshir
Courtesy the British Museum)



Coin:

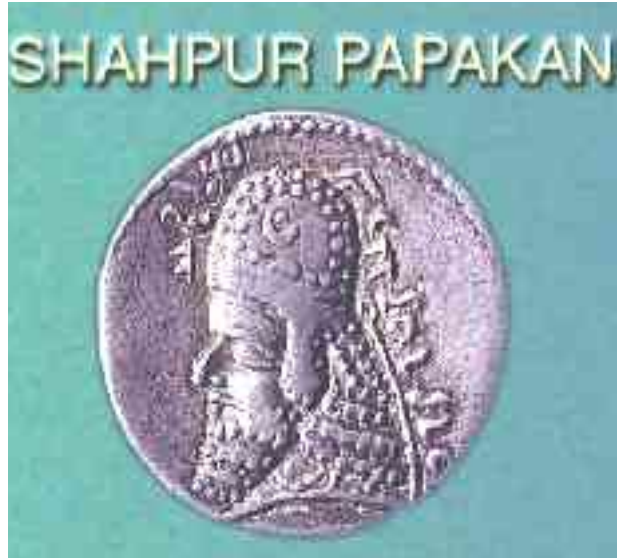
Obverse: 'Ma(ZdiSN) BaGI BaBaKI MaLKA' (**Defender of the Faith - Mazdayasna, Papak, King**). The crown is the radiate Parthian cap with earflaps.

Reverse: 'BaGI ARTa(K)HShaTRI MaLKA' (**Defender Ardeshir, King**).

Papak, the **Commander of the army** in the Parthian Province of Pars, with his two warrior sons, Shahpur and Ardeshir, took up arms against **Gozhir** and defeated him in battle **CE 211**.

SHAHPUR, son of PAPAK

(Silver Drachma - courtesy the British Museum)



Obverse: Bust is shown facing left (in the manner of all Parthian coins since Pars is still a Province of the Parthian Empire. All Sassanian coins subsequently show bust facing right). **Beautiful calligraphic legend** (first coin, ever, to show a calligraphic legend) reading right to left starting from right shoulder and ending at forehead. *'MaLKaN MaLKA BaGI SHaHPUHRI'* (**King of Kings, Defender Shahpur**). The crown is the bejewelled radiate Parthian cap with the star and crescent motif and earflap on each side.

Papak placed his elder son, **Shahpur as King of Pars**, a move not recognised by the suzerain Parthian King, Vologases VI. During a minor border skirmish Shahpur was killed ?CE 220. His younger brother, Ardeshir took the throne as **Ardeshir V of Pars** CE 220-224 until he became Ardeshir I, the suzerain King of Kings of Airan.

It is of interest to note that this Shahpur, King of Pars (CE 211-?220), son of Papak and elder brother of Ardeshir has been mistaken by some historians to be Shahpur I (CE 240-27), son of Ardeshir I and even with Shahpur II (CE 309-379).

ARTABANUS IV

(Silver Drachma)



Coin:

Obverse: *The obverse side of all Parthian coins show bust facing left and bear no legend.*

Reverse shows seated archer and legend in Greek – ‘BASILEUS BASILEU ARCASES ARTABANUS DICAIOU EPIPHANOUS PHILHELENOS’ [**King of Kings, (descendent of) Arsaces, Artabanus the Just, the exalted and the friend of the Greeks**]. The mintmark in front of the legs of the seated archer is that of **Ekbatana** (the Capital of Parthia and the present city of Hamadan).

This Parthian prince, **ARTABANUS IV**, younger brother of the legitimate heir had rebelled against his elder brother **VOLOGASES VI**, who inherited the throne after the death of their father, Vologases V CE 208. In exile, he ruled the southern portion of the Parthian Empire with Ctesiphon as his Capital. In CE 224 Artabanus challenged Ardeshir in the **Battle of Ctesiphon**.

In the thick of the battle Ardeshir killed Artabanus and decimated the opposing army. He then occupied the Capital, Ctesiphon.

VOLOGASES VI

(Silver Tetradrachma)



Coin:

Obverse shows bust facing left. There is no legend but the mintmark of Ekbatana is shown behind the bust. The mintmark behind the bust is that of Ekbatana.

Reverse: Legend in the Pahlavi script - '*VaLaGaSY MaLKA*' (**Vologases, King**). Enthroned King faces Greek divinity, Tyche, offering him a wreath of victory]

During the same year **CE 224** Ardeshir defeated and captured the elder brother, **VOLOGASES VI** in the **Battle of Hormus**. Vologases died in captivity in Ctesiphon two years later in **CE 226**. Some historians often incorrectly mention this date CE 226 as the year of establishment of the Sassanian Dynasty.

Ardeshir declared himself the suzerain **King of Kings 18 April CE 224** of the entire Parthian Empire, which he then renamed '**AIRAN**' (*Derivative of Airyana vaeja/ Airyana/ Airyan, / Airan/ later, Iran*), thus restoring the glory of the past Hakhamani Empire of his ancestors.

By CE 226 Ardeshir I, the suzerain King of Kings of Sassanian Airan, had consolidated the Empire both, by subduing those vassal Kings, who would, at first, not recognise him and by the allegiance of those who readily did.

ARDESHIR I (CE 224-240) **2nd son of Papak**

Tetradrachm Coin of billon, an alloy of silver & other metals)



Coin:

Obverse: 'ARTa(K)HSHaTR MaLKAN MaLKA AIRAN' (***Ardeshir, King of Kings of Airan***).

Bust faces right as on all coins of the Sassanian Dynasty. The crown is still the Parthian Cap with earflaps, but heavily bejewelled. Hair at the back is in the form of a plait. Border of Cape on neck and shoulders is bejewelled.

Reverse: 'NURA ZI ARTa(K)HSHaTR' (***Fire of Ardeshir***).

Massive Achaemenian-type Fire Altar with heavy Plates for fire supported on mushroom-shaped stools by 'Lion's Paw' pillars (as seen in the Achaemenian thrones in the relief at Persepolis).

(Silver Drachm showing Sassanian Crown)



Coin:

Obverse: 'MaZDISN BaGI ARTa(K)HSHaTR MaLKAN MaLKA AIRAN MiNUCheTRI MeN IeZDAN' (***Defender of the faith - Mazdayasna, Ardeshir, King of Kings of Airan, of celestial Aryan origins***). Tiara with single layer of pearls tied at the back by ribbon. Silk cloth decorated with pearls covers Orymbos. Hair on sides and back and beard in many plaits cut short. Pearl necklaces.

Reverse: 'NURA ZI ARTa(K)HSHaTR' (***Fire of Ardeshir***). Massive Achaemenian type Fire Altar with heavy Plates for fire supported on mushroom-shaped stools by 'Lion's Paw' pillars (as seen in the Achaemenian thrones in the relief at Persepolis).

Campaigns:

At first, the provinces of Karman, Susa and those along the Tigris River resisted Ardeshir's claim to suzerainty. He started his campaigns by subduing them. The Kings of the other provinces submitted by oaths of allegiance. By the **end of CE 226** he was the undisputed suzerain KING of KINGS of the entire Parthian Empire, now renamed **AIRAN**.

In the East he conquered the provinces of Khorasan, Khwarezm, the Kushan Kingdoms and as far as Sindh and levied tribute on King Junah.

In the West the Romans under **Severus Alexander CE 222-235** had reoccupied Mesopotamia between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers.

***CE 228:** Ardeshir crossed the Tigris, spread his army into several divisions over Mesopotamia and rapidly overran the Province, conquering all major Roman fortresses. He then turned to the Roman Capital, Antioch.

***CE 229:** Ardeshir sent envoys to Antioch with a message to tell Severus to "vacate the lands of my Hakhamani ancestors" which he regarded as his own "by right of inheritance." Severus replied by treating the envoys as prisoners. Ardeshir crossed the Euphrates with reinforced divisions. Severus used bad judgment by deploying his army into 3 detached divisions. Ardeshir annihilated the southern division aimed at Susa and the Middle division commanded by Severus himself. Severus' northern division entered Media through Armenia but was crushed.

***CE 232:** Alarmed by these defeats and by further advance by Ardeshir at Nisibis and Carrhae, Severus sought peace, which was concluded in **CE 232**. After the murder of Severus and of his successors, **Maximinus CE 235-238** and **Gordian CE 238**, Ardeshir conquered and annexed Armenia, which was ruled by Khusru, brother of Artabanus. Khusru was killed but his baby son, Tiridates was taken away to Rome and trained in the art of warfare. He returned later as the Commander of the Roman Army with **Diocletian CE 286** during the reign of Varahran II to re-conquer Armenia.

Government: The ruling hierarchy was as follows: -

Malkan Malka: The Emperor was the suzerain Ruler, the King of Kings

Khshtradaran: The King (Governor) of each Province

Vispuran: The Prince

Vazurkan: The Feudal Lords (The Grandees)

Azatan: The nobles

Religious considerations:

The Grecian polytheism and idolatry encouraged by the Parthian Governors was overthrown. The **Fire altars**, which had fallen into disuse, were restored and step by step the ancestral Faith of Zarathushtra with its ritual ceremonies re-established. He raised the Priesthood to a position of honour and dignity. To ensure uniformity, an **Assembly of the Maghupats** was convoked. It has been recorded that 40,000 of the most highly respected and learned Maghupats from all parts of the Empire were assembled. They reduced their own numbers to 4000, then to 400 and

finally to 40, from whom 7, known most for their piety and learning were selected. The 7, in turn, chose *ARDA VIRAF as the Pontiff* of the Empire. The Maghupats were united into a *Great Council of the Nation*. The precepts of the Faith were collected in a sacred volume to set a standard, which required all to conform to. A necessity to explain the Zand Text with a translation and interpretation was found. Thus, a nation well supported by priesthood and with a strongly centralised religion was re-established after an absence of nearly 500 years.

Administration:

Its basis was good justice and an army kept alert on war footing - *"There can be no power without an army, no army without money, no money without agriculture and no agriculture without justice."*

On his deathbed Ardeshir placed the crown on his son's head and said, *"Never forget, that as the King you are, at once, the defender of the Faith and of the Nation. Consider the Fire Altar and the throne as inseparable as to sustain each other."*

Contemporary Roman Emperors



Severus Alexander CE 222-235



Maximinus I CE 235-238



Gordian III CE 238-244