

Introduction

I, Ahura Mazda, first fashioned forth the Aryan Expanse (*airiianəm vaējō*) by the Good Lawful River, to be the best of places and settlements.

But then the Evil Spirit, full of death, hacked out its adversarial counterfeit (*paitiīrəm*): a dragon, the red, and the winter, fabricated by the Demons.¹

The *Iranian Expanse* is a study of the natural and built environments of power in Persia and the ancient Iranian world from the consolidation of the Achaemenid Empire in the sixth century BCE to the fall of the Sasanian Empire in the seventh century CE. Its chapters analyze the formation and development of some of the most enduring expressions of power in Iranian royal culture: palaces, paradise gardens and hunting enclosures, royal cities, sanctuaries and landscapes marked with a rich history of rock art and ritual activity. It explores how these structures, landscapes, and urban spaces constructed and transformed Iranian imperial cosmologies, royal identities, and understandings of the past. Implicit in this book's arguments is the understanding that royal engagement with natural, urban, and architectural space was not merely an ornament or a natural outgrowth of Iranian kingship, but a fundamental tool by which kings in Iran established their dominance, manipulated cultural memory, and appropriated, subsumed, or destroyed the traditions of their competitors. Understanding the continuum between the conceptual, spatial, material, and practical bases of Iranian kingship and their role in forming, supporting, and changing Iranian royal identity lies at the book's methodological core.

Setting as its goal a sustained analysis of the role of the natural and built environments in the construction and transformation of Iranian royal identities, this book opens an analytical space that can encompass multiple competing understandings and expressions of Iranian kingship and their competitive or appropriative relationship with sites, traditions, and images of pre-Achaemenid or non-Iranian royal traditions. Although

it focuses on the ancient evidence and does not contain extended discussions of theoretical literature, this book often engages debates in the humanities and in the social and behavioral sciences. I approach these issues not simply as theoretical problems, but as important methodological tools that have the potential to shed light on historical processes. This book's arguments grow from the conviction that both personal cognition and collective cultural identities are highly implicated in the natural and built environments. Moreover, the personal and collective memories that constitute those identities often crystallize at specific sites, natural or man-made: they shape and were shaped by the built and natural environments.² It should not be surprising that a change in one could be understood to yield a change in the others. A wide variety of external resources can "scaffold," that is, support and shape, human cognition and offer affordances for meaningful perceptions and actions, including those relating to personal or collective memories.³ Within theories of an extended mind, "when parts of the environment are coupled with the brain in the right way they become parts of the mind," though the inverse of this statement is equally true: when parts of our mind, relating to both cognitive and somatic processes, are coupled with the environment in the right way they become part of the environment.⁴

This is a problem that occupies not only contemporary theoretical approaches but was deeply implicated in ancient Iranian understandings of existence. According to Iranian religious theorizing, everything in the living, material world (Av. *gaēθiia-*, Mid. Pers. *gētīg*) also participates in a world "of thought" (Old Av. *manahiia-*,

Young Av. *mainiiauuu-*, Mid. Pers. *mēnōg*), that is, the conceptual, spiritual dimension of existence.⁵ While I am not arguing that contemporary theoretical approaches map onto ancient Iranian concepts, the importance of the relationship between the conceptual world and the living, material world in a number of Iranian religions challenges us to take such “hylonoetic” continua between place, space, and human minds and bodies seriously when approaching the relationship between Iranian royal identities and the art and archaeological evidence. This was at the forefront of the minds of the patrons and designers of the great Iranian palaces, sacred spaces, and landscapes and gardens, from Achaemenid Pasargadae to Sasanian Ayvan-e Kisra: Iranian sovereigns knew that meaningful places and powerful natural and architectonic spaces not only shaped human subjectivities and behavior day to day, but had the potential to bring into alignment and restore to primordial perfection the deeper realities of both the living and the spiritual worlds.⁶

Conceptualizing Iran and Building Iranian Empires

As a work of cultural and religious history as much as art, architecture, and archaeology, this book deliberately defines “Iranian” and “Iranian kingship” broadly. Certain philological points of view might attend solely to texts produced in an Iranian language, such as Avestan, Persian, or Parthian, while conversely, field archaeology often uses “Iran” or “Iranian” as merely geographical designators referring to sites within the Islamic Republic of Iran or the Iranian plateau. Instead, in this book “Iranian” refers to a range of overlapping linguistic and cultural spheres that extended well beyond the borders of the modern nation-state or geographical region. This encompasses peoples or ruling aristocracies that produced religious or official texts in an Iranian language and whose kings proudly proclaimed they were Iranian (Av. *airiia-*, Old Pers. *ariya-*, Mid. Pers. *ēr*, Bactrian *ariao*).⁷ But it also includes many that did not, yet were ruled by kings who nevertheless showcased cultic practices drawn from Iranian religious traditions or courtly practices intended to engage or appropriate ancient Persian royal traditions or competing contemporary Iranian cultures of kingship. After Alexander, large parts of the former Achaemenid Empire were ruled by dynasties that celebrated their Iranian family roots and connection to the Persian royal legacy, and cultivated certain Iranian religious practices,

though their main mode of royal expression was Greek and the majority of the peoples they ruled were not Iranian. This certainly includes the postsatrapal dynasties of Anatolia and the Caucasus, but this characterization could equally apply to the early Seleucid dynasty.

Despite clear differences and temporal distance, the dynasties under study shared one or more common religious and cultural practices. Not all dynasties participated in all traditions, and even those that did fostered a variety of different, often conflicting and competing formulations of Iranian royal and religious identities. But the styles of kingship and court cultures they fostered, including specific modes of feasting, hunting, and worshipping, and the palaces, paradises, cities, and sanctuaries built for these purposes, contributed to and laid claim to the developing aristocratic common cultures associated with Iranian kingship that flourished during their lifetimes. Some dynasties engaged and adapted eastern Iranian religious, ritual, or mythical traditions drawn from or related to those contained in the Avesta, a compilation of the earliest Iranian religious texts that served as the “holy book” of later Zoroastrianism, but whose texts descended from an centuries-long process of oral composition and transmission. These traditions included Iranian eschatological or cosmological frameworks, cultic protocols and purity conventions, epic stories of a long line of Iranian kings and heroes fighting the forces of evil, concepts of Royal Fortune (e.g., Av. *xʿarənah-*; Mid. Pers., Parth. *farrah* or *xwarrah*; Arm. *pʿaṙkʿ*), and legendary sites or lands, including the “Iranian Expanse” (Av. *Airiiana-Vaējah-*, Mid. Pers. *Ērānwēz*).⁸ Other dynasties, especially in Anatolia, foregrounded vaguer memories of “the lore of the Persians” or Persian cultic traditions descendant from Achaemenid rather than eastern Iranian traditions. All traced their family roots to a venerable line of Iranian ancestors, be they scions of a historical dynasty like the Achaemenids or of a mythical line like the Kayanids. All worshipped one or more Iranian gods like Ahura Mazda, Anahita, Mithra, or Verethragna, though the deities might also bear the names or cultic attributes of other non-Iranian deities. In certain cases, the king or external observers even deemed such divinities to be “gods of the Iranians” or understood their worship to be specifically implicated in the god’s or king’s Iranian identity. For example, the Elamite version of Darius I’s Bisotun inscription designates the great god Ahura Mazda as “the God of the Iranians”; he is called “the Iranian Aramazd” when a late antique Armenian text recounts his worship by Armenian kings; and Sasanian royal

titulature incorporates “Mazda-worshipping” or even “the Mazda-worshipping Iranian” as an expected title of the ruler of the “Empire of the Iranians” or his princes.⁹ Perso-Macedonian kings like Mithradates VI of Pontus or Antiochus I of Commagene venerated gods such as Zeus Stratius or Zeus-Oromasdes with ritual protocols involving fire cults, massive sacrifices, or specific ritual implements, such as sacred twigs drawn into a wand (cf. *Av. barəsmān-*). They foregrounded these gods and ritual practices to connect them to the royal traditions and religious practices of their royal Persian ancestors and, possibly, to a wider Iranian religio-cultural realm.¹⁰

Ancient Iranian religious and political theorizing produced several detailed geographical and cosmological explanations of Iran’s place in the world and its symbolic topography.¹¹ In all formulations, Iran enjoyed a religiously or imperially sanctioned terrestrial centrality, with differing real or imagined lands forming the center. This cosmological vision appears in various places in the Avesta.¹² It was elaborated in later Middle Persian priestly commentaries as well as late antique and medieval epic poetry. According to the earliest formulations, the earth was divided into seven continental sections (*Av. karšuuar*, Mid. Pers. *kišwar*); the central continent (*Av. Xʷanirāθa*; Mid. Pers. *Xwanirah*) was the largest and the only one originally inhabited by humans.¹³ At the center lay “the Aryan” or “Iranian Expanse” (*Av. Airiiana-Vaējah-*, Mid. Pers. *Ērānwēz*). It was, according to the Great God Ahura Mazda, “the first and the best of places and habitations” and the homeland of Zoroaster.¹⁴ Moreover, the Iranian Expanse was the place of Ahura Mazda’s primordial creations of earth, water, plant, animal, and human, where the first king, Yima, ruled over an undivided earth and a golden age, and where early heroic struggles against evil, and original acts of sacrifice and revelation, all transpired.¹⁵ All other lands inhabited by Iranians constellated around it, and eventually, all other nations and peoples, who spread throughout the world.¹⁶ In other Avestan texts we hear of the “Aryan Lands” more generically, or, in the Hymn to Mithra, the “dwelling place of the Aryans,” which includes a similar, though smaller, group of lands without Airiiana Vaējah, suggesting that multiple variant formulations of this geography coexisted.¹⁷

Over the years, scholarship has generated numerous conflicting theories of the “original” location of the Iranian lands as reflected in the Avesta. While debate will continue on the exact location of a few of the lands mentioned in the Avesta, the oldest portions were clearly related to regions of the Oxus River valley, the

Pamirs, and the Hindu Kush, corresponding roughly to present-day Afghanistan and Tajikistan, southern Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and northern Pakistan with a small, but important, sliver of eastern Iran centering on the Helmand River.¹⁸ The Avestan list extends from this core into Western, Central, and South Asia, often following river valleys. With the *Vaṅhuū Dāitiīā*, the “Good Lawful River,” at its headwaters, the ancient Oxus (OIr. *Waxš*, mod. Amu Darya) river flowed northwest through ancient Bactria into Sogdiana. Beginning in the Hindu Kush and flowing southwestward, the *Haraxʷaitī* (mod. Arghandab) and *Haētumant* (mod. Helmand) joined and flowed into Lake Hamun, one of the holiest sites of Zoroastrianism. Western Iran and, most notably, Persia do not appear.

Despite certain continuities between the Avestan material and later religious and political texts, it is clear that neither the concept of the Iranian lands nor their geographical or mythical locations were stable throughout history. Iranian cosmology, geography, and identity were labile and subject to active manipulation. Like any culture, Iranian royal culture was iteratively recreated in every generation, with numerous redefinitions and counterformulations, subject to frequent ruptures as well as influenced and significantly affected by the cultures of their non-Iranian neighbors, subject populations, and, at times, overlords. Previous scholarly debates have centered primarily on oral and textual discourse to trace the development of Iranian religious and political identity. In contrast, this book gives equal weight to the material and spatial “deep history” of Iranian identity—that is, the role of places, spaces, objects, and ritual practice in the continual reconstruction and transformation of Iranian royal and religious identities. The interactions among such cosmological theorizings and their spatial and material emplacement and enactment lie at the core of this book.

Rupture and Renovation in Iranian History and Iranian Identity

The history of Persia and the ancient Iranian world is marked with both remarkable continuities and deep ruptures. With rise of the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), Iranian ideas and institutions of kingship became the supreme idiom of legitimacy, power, and prestige in Western Asia, overshadowing and subsuming those of earlier kingdoms and empires. For nearly two hundred years the Persians ruled an empire that extended from the Aegean to the Aral Sea and from Egypt to the Indus

with periodic expansions into the Balkans and Central Asia. The empire welded together an incredibly diverse array of lands, many of which themselves ruled their own empires or had until very recently been independent kingdoms or city-states. The founder of the Persian Empire was Cyrus the Great (550–530 BCE), originally the king of Anshan in Elam, who began a rapid conquest of the Iranian plateau, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, overthrowing the Neo-Babylonian Empire and sweeping aside local kingdoms and would-be empires from Media to Phrygia.¹⁹ Cyrus's son Cambyses (530–522 BCE) expanded the empire into Egypt in 525 BCE before dying in somewhat mysterious circumstances. The primary beneficiary of the period of chaos following Cambyses's death was Darius I (522–486 BCE), a nobleman who took power after putting down rebellions throughout the empire, including in its Persian, Elamite, and Median heartlands. Darius I expanded the empire further and substantially reorganized it. Building on Cyrus the Great's early eclectic experimentations, Darius I fashioned a powerful and coherent royal ideology expressed with a new unified royal art and architectural style, one that his descendants elaborated. Darius I and his successors clearly defined the cosmological place and role of the king as well the lands and peoples of the empire, which was theoretically coterminous with the inhabited earth (*būmī*-).²⁰ Just as importantly, Darius I was instrumental in consolidating and defining an Achaemenid dynastic and Persian imperial identity for the ruling dynasty and its aristocracy.

As well as patronizing many non-Iranian cults, the Achaemenid kings were adherents of an early form of the Iranian religion later known as Zoroastrianism.²¹ With the rise of Darius I, evidence appears in abundance that the worship of Ahura Mazda, “the god of the Ariyas,” was a hallmark of Achaemenid royal and dynastic identity.²² Auramazda (Av. Ahura Mazdā) is prominent in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, and the Old Persian versions of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions are rife with allusions to, and deliberate plays off of, the ethics, cosmology, and eschatology of many of the ancient Avestan texts, which are also detectable in other genres of Achaemenid imperial discourse. These concepts also underpin a variety of ritual performances, royal policies, and artistic and architectural expressions.²³ In addition, Darius I's narrative of his rise to power deploys ancient Iranian “epic” themes, also preserved in the legends of the Avesta, such as the “evil brother,” though not the epic narratives or personages

themselves.²⁴ The priestly elite and (likely) the nobility of the Persians and Medes were well versed in the tales of the legendary kings of the Avesta, and a few Avestan names appear in the Western Iranian onomasticon of the nobility, though, of course, not among the names of the Achaemenid kings and their family.²⁵

The Achaemenids' descriptions of their empire did not map onto that of the Avestan description of the Iranian lands, but do play off of it in the same way their royal narratives engage epic formulae.²⁶ The Achaemenid inscriptions, rock reliefs, and the decorative programs of Achaemenid palaces portray the Persian homeland (Old Pers. Pārsa) and its people at the center of the empire, with all other lands and people constellated around it.²⁷

These are the lands, which I took, far from Persia; I lorded over them, they bore me tribute, what was proclaimed to them by me, that they did; my law held them: Medians, Elamites, Parthians, Arians, Bactrians, Sogdians, Chorasmians, Drangians, Arachosians, Sattagydiens, Gandharans, Indians, Haoma-drinking Scythians, Pointed-hat Scythians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Arabians, Egyptians, Armenians, Cappadocians, Lydians, Ionians, Scythians beyond the Sea, Thracians, Petasos-wearing Ionians, Libyans, Ethiopians, Omanis, Carians.²⁸

Here as in their palaces' sculptural programs, the Achaemenid imperial formulation echoes and plays off of Avestan cosmology, with a similar movement from center to periphery with relative proximity to the center affecting a land's relative civilization and its people's “moral preeminence.”²⁹ The empire's lands (Old Pers. *dayhu*-) encompassed the eastern Iranian lands (Av. *dajhu*-) of Bactria (Old Pers. Bāxtriš, Av. Bāxdōi), Arachosia (Old Pers. Haraுவதிš, Av. Haraxaitī), and Aria (Old Pers. Haraiva, Av. Haroīuua), as well as the eastern portions of Drangiana (Old Pers. Zranka, Av. Haētumaṇt), southern Sogdiana (Old Pers. Suguda; Av. Gaūua, Suyda), and northwestern Gandhara/Parapamisos (Old Pers. Gāndara, encompassing Av. Rāya, Caxra, and Varāna).³⁰ Darius I understands himself to be “an Ariya of Ariya lineage” (Old Pers. *Ariyaciça*-), who worships “Ahura Mazda, the god of the Ariyas.” He proclaims that he invented a writing system for the “Ariya” language, a politically constructed court language of power and authority, but one that was nevertheless clearly connected with his self-definition.³¹ In some early enumerations of their subjects, non-Iranian-speaking peoples, such as the Elamites, stand nearer to the privileged center than Iranians, though in later iterations Iranians take precedence over the Elamites. Still, while other Iranian peoples played an important role in

the empire, often contributing more militarily and paying less in tax, Persia was the center of gravity of the empire and Achaemenid kingship was the dominant political, visual, and spatial culture: Iran does not yet appear as a political concept. Moreover, the *xʷarənah*, the luminous Royal Glory of the rightful Iranian king and central pillar of Avestan kingship prominent in post-Hellenistic Iran, is completely absent from royal texts, as are any direct references to the mythical Iranian dynasties, though the Old Persian onomasticon hints these concepts were in circulation during the Achaemenid period.³²

It is important to emphasize in this regard that the religious practices of the Achaemenids differed in profound ways from later Zoroastrianism, especially its “orthodox” form, which only takes shape in the late Sasanian period. Some scholars emphasize the historical and doctrinal differences with later periods by using the term “Mazdaism,” while others favor “Achaemenid” or “Persian religion,” to emphasize the heterogeneous nature of Achaemenid religious practices, which include sacrifices made to many non-Iranian gods, as indicated most notably by the predominance of Elamite gods in the Persepolis archive.³³ Such distinctions have met strong protest that these are “invented religions,” which is a fair enough point.³⁴ The fact remains, however, that terms such as “Zoroastrianism” or “Zoroastrian” are no less modern scholarly impositions on the ancient material than “Mazdaism” or “Mazdaean.” In fact, after Darius I, a self-proclaimed Mazda-worshipping identity becomes a hallmark of Achaemenid royal identity and appears repeatedly in the Achaemenid primary sources, whereas Zoroaster is completely absent.³⁵ In the Achaemenid period as in other periods, it makes no more methodological sense to fill in lacunae with later evidence than it does to evaluate the “purity” of Achaemenid, Seleucid, or Parthian practices by checking them against the strictures of post-Sasanian Zoroastrianism. This may sound simply like a debate over nomenclature, but such terms are laden with methodological and ideological assertions or assumptions of rupture or continuity, be they acknowledged or not. Many of the primary questions on which this book focuses deal precisely with royal efforts to shape and change cultic practices and sacred topographies and the traditions associated with them, including the transfer or transformation of sites of deep significance for Iranian royal identity and even the outright fabrication of “newly ancient” sacred sites associated with primordial events, mythical toponyms, and ancient heroes.

Iran after Alexander

While the 220 years of the Achaemenid Empire were foundational for the development of Iranian kingship, the nine centuries between the Achaemenids’ fall and the coming of Islam were the true crucible of medieval and modern Iranian identity. Like that of Islam, Alexander’s conquest of the Achaemenid Empire brought about one of the deepest ruptures in the cultures of the ancient Iranian world and with it defined one of the most important, yet least understood periods of Western Asian history. The effects of this turbulent, yet brilliantly creative period are a primary focus of this book.

From the very start of his invasion, Alexander was attuned to Achaemenid modes of governance, and formulated his own claims in reaction to them.³⁶ Alexander sought, in his own way, to portray himself as a legitimate successor to the last Achaemenid king, Darius III, and left in place many Achaemenid political structures. Yet, while Alexander became intimately familiar with Achaemenid royal practices, how he chose to deploy them was shaped and constrained by his ambitions to be something more than just a Persian king of kings, and by the objections of his traditionalist Macedonian army.³⁷ In contrast to Egypt and Babylon, in the Achaemenid Empire Alexander found no ready tradition of divine kingship that he could exploit, and his attempts to use Persian royal traditions often appear to have backfired.³⁸ Far from a king who seamlessly incorporated himself into the Achaemenid model, Alexander experimented with aspects of Persian royal practice that suited him and invented or ignored the rest.

Although Alexander’s brief reign was certainly epoch making and cataclysmic, the period of Seleucid control of Iran (ca. 310–ca. 140/39 BCE) had a much greater impact on the later formation of ancient Western Asia and Iranian kingship. Even if its role is often unacknowledged in the indigenous sources, the new half-Macedonian, half-Iranian dynasty founded by one of Alexander’s most able Successors reshaped Persian institutions and introduced many profoundly important innovations. While Alexander tried to present himself as both a Macedonian and an Achaemenid, the Seleucids developed a markedly different strategy, no doubt observing that Alexander’s solution left the Macedonians uneasy and the Persians largely unconvinced. Instead of directly appealing to the Achaemenid dynastic identity, the Seleucids chose to downplay it and elide the Achaemenids from Western Asia’s history and political landscapes. Moreover, the Seleucids set out to

impose a competing topography of power that disturbed and superseded that of the Achaemenids. Already by the second generation of Seleucid kings, the dynasty had succeeded in appropriating, superseding, or ruining all major Achaemenid sites and institutions to the point that the Achaemenids' role in Iranian history was all but omitted. In the Sasanians' official history, the Achaemenid dynasty is not known by that name. The last Achaemenid king "Darius son of Darius" (*Dārāy ī Dārāyān*) is simply the last of the legendary Kayanid kings of Iran overthrown by Alexander.

The Seleucids appropriated many Persian traditions but did not portray their dynasty or their traditions of kingship as necessarily continuous with Achaemenid kingship. The Seleucids subsumed many Persian traditions, most notably in architecture, but just as often Seleucid royal culture sidelined and replaced Achaemenid institutions, presenting a radically new royal image. As Macedonian kings, the Seleucid dynasty introduced a new political culture that connected Iran to the wider Hellenistic world. While Greek art, architecture, and religious practices eclipsed those of the Achaemenids, the Seleucids' strategic synthesis of Macedonian, Babylonian, and Persian traditions became, in effect, a new rival tradition of Iranian kingship. We have no evidence that the Seleucids directly engaged with Avestan ideas of Iranian kingship; however, the fact that their empire displaced Persia as the locus of power over the Iranian world allowed or compelled new visions of Iranian royal identity to emerge.³⁹

Not long after the foundation of the empire, the Seleucids faced a series of satrapal revolts, which yielded the independent Greco-Bactrian kingdom and detached Parthia from the empire. Arsaces (ca. 247–211 BCE), who was venerated by his descendants as the founder of Arsacid dynasty, carved out a kingdom from the former provinces Parthia and Hyrcania and repelled Seleucus II's attempt to reassert control over the provinces.⁴⁰ The Arsacid Empire (ca. 247 BCE—ca. 228 CE) held sway over Western Asia for the greatest duration of time of all Iranian empires, and with the survival of the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia until 428 CE, the Arsacids were the longest-ruling of all ancient Iranian dynasties.⁴¹ The Arsacids cultivated the Western Iranian dialect spoken in Parthia, and as a court language, it became an idiom of poetry and epic. The Arsacids conquered the Iranian plateau before sweeping over Mesopotamia and pushing the Seleucid Empire to their western capital of Antioch-on-the-Orontes.

The rise of the Arsacids, their competition with the Seleucids, and that empire's subsequent decline yielded

one of the most creative and important periods of Western Asian art and architectural history.⁴² Neither art objects nor archaeological material nor textual sources from the Parthian period survive in great abundance, yet all streams of evidence indicate that the Arsacid Empire was a pivotal period of change. It oversaw the decline or radical transformation of many of Western Asia's most enduring institutions and cultural practices, including those of Babylon, Achaemenid Persia, and Seleucid Asia.⁴³ Within Parsa itself, the forms of the languages that the Achaemenid Empire used for official inscriptions and record keeping, Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian, fell out of use, and knowledge of their cuneiform writing systems disappeared permanently. Within Babylon, cuneiform writing and archives survived along with the temples for the first two centuries of Parthian rule as a local tradition before disappearing almost entirely in the early first century CE.⁴⁴ Conversely, the Arsacid period produced a new court culture and royal architecture, especially palatial architecture, that had a deep and lasting influence. The fact that the Parthian Empire succeeded in maintaining its territorial integrity while facing simultaneous pressures from Rome at the height of its military strength and from waves of Central Asian nomads is a testament to the resilience of the imperial structure. Indeed the Parthian Empire fell to revolution rather than invasion.

Despite the Seleucids' and Arsacids' ascendancy over the Iranian world and the Romans' eventual dominance over Anatolia and the Levant, kingdoms ruled by Persian dynasties in Anatolia, the Caucasus, and northern Iran presented rival claims to the Persian and Macedonian royal legacies. Between Antiochus III's defeat at Magnesia (190 BCE) and Rome and Parthia's final absorption of Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia in the first century CE, sovereigns of this wider Western Iranian world presented powerful visions of a new post-Achaemenid "neo-Persian" kingship. But for a different outcome of a few battles against the Seleucids or the Romans, many of these "alternative visions" of post-Achaemenid Iranian kingship could have become dominant, rivaling or even displacing that of the Arsacids. Some, like the Orontids of Armenia and Ariarathids of Cappadocia succeeded in retaining or reestablishing power over their ancestors' former satrapies. Still more kingdoms emerged from Seleucid attempts to fracture and destroy overly ambitious client kingdoms and, finally, from the Seleucid Empire's own demise. In the course of the dissolution of the Seleucid Empire, these dynasties sought to reinvigorate, reinvent, and fore-

ground an array of Persian royal practices and claims. Like the ascendancy of the Arsacids in the east, that of kings such as Mithradates VI and Tigranes II in the west brought the claims and expressions of a reborn Persian kingship into renewed prominence and power. What is noteworthy is that these rival visions were predicated primarily on regional memories of Persian identity not on those of the eastern Iranian royal and religious traditions. This western post-Achaemenid “Persianism” was only one royal discourse among many, and for a time it presented an important rival vision of a new Iranian kingship.

At the same time that the Seleucid Empire lost the Iranian plateau to the Parthians, the Greco-Bactrian kingdom fell to several waves of Central Asian mounted warriors, including the Saka, known in Chinese sources as Sai-wang, and Yuezhi, whose name we know only from Chinese sources.⁴⁵ The Indo-Scythians established kingdoms in eastern Iran and, once pushed out by Parthian and Yuezhi encroachment, moved into northern India.⁴⁶ The former satrapy of Chorasmia had flourished after emerging from the Achaemenid Empire as an independent state, and its appearance has been associated with the construction of extensive irrigation systems, numerous fortresses and walled cities that incorporate principles of Hellenistic fortification design, and temple complexes.⁴⁷ Disturbed by the same nomadic incursions, Chorasmia regained prosperity under local dynasties, whose ascendancy has been associated with renewed expansion. Chorasmian and early Kushan urbanism adapted principles of Seleucid and Greco-Bactrian urbanism and defense that parallel early Parthian developments, yet, with the Kushan Empire’s eventual pivot toward India and Chorasmia’s relative isolation, these regions do not play a central role in our study of the main lines of Iranian urban and palatial design.⁴⁸ Their numismatics provide important evidence of divergent yet creative efforts to claim the Iranian royal heritage in the east, but given the nature of the evidence, lie outside of the scope of this book.

From the “Iranian Expanse” to the “Empire of the Iranians”

Between the establishment of the Seleucid Empire and the rise of the Sasanians, eastern Iranian epic history and Avestan cosmology began to move from the realms of religious and poetic discourse to the core of Iranian identity, with the late Parthian period marking an important point of transition. The spread of eastern Ira-

nian epic traditions along with the sacred texts and practices of the Zoroastrian religion is not understood with great precision; however, its historical transformation from a religious and poetic discourse to a political one can be sketched in broad brushstrokes. The Old and Middle Iranian texts that preserve or allude to these creation myths and heroic legends bear the marks of many changes, “updates,” amalgamations, expansions, and elisions as they passed through multifarious chains of first oral and then textual transmission.

The Arsacids began this Middle Iranian program of rewriting the past to consolidate their hold on their Iranian power bases throughout their empire. By at least the late Parthian period, the legendary Avestan kings and heroes had been organized into “dynasties,” and the Avestan legends had been elaborated in the vernacular and “updated” to make sense of the recent and distant past as well as the current state of affairs. These narratives provided a “historical structure with which all Iranians could identify.”⁴⁹ The vernacular epic traditions of eastern Iran not only spread across Western Asia, but with Parthian influence, thoroughly imbued the local legends, worldview, and self-identity of the Iranian world, evident everywhere from Armenia and Iberia to Mesopotamia and Pars.⁵⁰ “Wherever the Parthians settled, as administrators or in estates, evidence for Iranian epic conventions pops up.”⁵¹ These courtly, heroic, and romantic tales did not subsist in the realm of liturgy or scholasticism, but formed the core of a fresh Middle Iranian epic tradition and historical consciousness. Even in texts that were heavily redacted in the Sasanian period, the Arsacid kings are celebrated for preserving the Avesta, and stories of the noble Parthian families are interwoven with those of the legendary Kayanid dynasty (Av. *Kauii*-).⁵² For example, the medieval historian Ṭa’ālebī preserves what might be a rare fragment of the Parthian royal narrative, celebrating the Parthian king Pakores for finding and caring for the “the Banner of the Kayānids.”⁵³ Similarly, Ṭa’ālebī records that the same Arsacid king Pakores sought to avenge Alexander’s murder of Dārāy ī Dārāyān and to punish Rome (*Rūm*), vocations and claims that Ardaxshir I and his successors soon took over with a vengeance.⁵⁴ Much like the Sasanians, many Arsacid kings took the field to beat back incursions on their northern and eastern frontiers, and the Arsacid king Artabanus II died fighting nomadic incursions. Several of the Iranian heroes celebrated for their valor in battles against the Turanians conspicuously bear the names of Arsacid kings. These include Godarz (Gotarzes), Gew (Geo),

Milad/Merhdad (Mithradates), and Farhad (Phraates), providing a legendary precedent for, and commentary on, contemporary conflicts with the steppe.⁵⁵

This amalgamation of eastern Iranian religious cosmology, royal epic, semilegendary history, and local tales produced a potent political discourse that could be leveraged to make coherent sense of the world and to mobilize power bases. However, this production of politically useful epic history was by no means restricted to the Arsacid dynasty. Many of the courts of the Arsacid client kings and rivals, most notably those of Sistan, elaborated regional legends that extolled eastern heroes like Rostam or Shahriyar.⁵⁶ Moreover, some of these legends revolved around specific sites, like Lake Hamun and the sanctuary of the Future Savior.⁵⁷ Many of these legends were so popular and powerful that the Arsacids and, eventually, the Sasanian courts co-opted them and subordinated them to their official narratives. These tales survived in regional oral histories, which were integrated with official Sasanian narratives of the *Xwāday-nāmag*.⁵⁸ This process continued well into the Middle Ages when dynasties such as the Samanids, Tahirids, Saffarids, Ghaznavids, and Ziyarids used such legends to manufacture their own royal genealogy, and many of the texts bear the marks of their mediation and alteration.⁵⁹

While no evidence attests to Kushan epics elaborated from the Iranian sacred historiographical tradition, we know that the Kushans definitely engaged with it and incorporated it into their royal self-presentation and possibly even their dynastic identity, if not to the extent that the Arsacids and Sasanians did. The Kushan numismatic pantheon is extremely broad and includes many gods whose names have Avestan equivalents, but which do not appear or, like *xʷarənah* (Bactrian Pharro), are not represented anthropomorphically in western Iran. Among this vast pantheon the first king, Yima, appears in a rare coin of Huvishka, where he is identified as *lamšo*. He wears a unique headdress on which a bird with outstretched wings perches, but his pose and accoutrements are similar to those of a Kushan king, with legs splayed, holding a spear and wearing a cape, implying a certain qualitative and functional similarity with the living sovereigns.⁶⁰ Perhaps not coincidentally, this coin appears in the late second century, shortly after the first Kayanid name appears among the Arsacid kings: Osroes I (Av. *Haosrauuah*). In addition to its South Asian symbolisms, it is even possible that the goads that Kushan kings often hold in their right hand could have had alluded to Yima's use of a goad to make the earth expand and grow, as recounted in the Avesta.⁶¹ The goad

is especially prominent in another rare coin of Huvishka, where the king holds aloft this multivalent symbol while riding an elephant.⁶² These Arsacid and Kushan claims, no doubt, caused the early Sasanians to seethe with jealous rage and were a primary impetus for their own efforts to seize control of this tradition and reshape it around their dynastic vision.

The Sasanian Empire (224–642 CE) was the last great Iranian empire to rule over Mesopotamia, Iran, and portions of the Caucasus and South and Central Asia before the coming of Islam.⁶³ Supplanting the Arsacid Empire, the Sasanians brutally and efficiently welded together a centralized empire that extended from the Tigris to the Indus. Competing on a truly global stage, they supplanted Roman political and mercantile influence from the Red Sea to the South China Sea. The Sasanian Empire elaborated Iranian sacred cosmology to fit contemporary political realities and underpin the Sasanians' place within it. Over the course of late antiquity, Sasanian art, architecture, and court culture created a new dominant global aristocratic common culture in western Eurasia, fascinating the Sasanians' Roman, South Asian, and Chinese contemporaries, and deeply imprinting the world of Islam. Under the Sasanians, the ancient Iranian epic traditions, whose roots can be traced to the Avesta, and even the Zoroastrian religion itself, took the forms in which they are recognizable today.

Although the Sasanians were a dynasty that disturbed the status quo of nearly five centuries of Arsacid rule, they were also quick to assert that they were rightful heirs of an ancient line of Iranian kings and heroes. This theme appears across a wide range of evidence, inflecting both propaganda intended to quell internal dissent as the Sasanians consolidated their hold over their new empire, and diplomatic discourse with the Romans.⁶⁴ Yet, while the Sasanians steadfastly claimed to be continuators and revitalizers of ancient traditions, the ancient traditions themselves were not stable. As well as the eminent kings of their own dynasty, shortly after they seized power the Arsacids began to count as ancestors the historical, yet imperfectly understood Achaemenids, and by the late empire, even Alexander the Great.

Amplifying a process that began before the dynasty took supreme power, the first kings of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardaxshir I and Shabuhr I, fashioned a new vision of the past soon after they overthrew the Arsacids. The Sasanians created a new ideology of kingship that encompassed or superseded all previous Iranian traditions, especially those of the Arsacids, but also

those of the Kushans. They calculatingly seized or destroyed all sites and traditions that could be leveraged to buttress a claim to royal power.⁶⁵ The Sasanians began an intensive campaign to delegitimize the Arsacids and replace them at the center of all traditions of Iranian kingship and Iranian history.⁶⁶ The Sasanians blotted out the Arsacids from Iranian historiography, despite the fact that the Parthian families continued to play important roles in the empire.⁶⁷ Several texts drawn from or reflecting the Sasanian epic history, the *Xwadāy-nāmag*, such as the *History of Ardashir Son of Pabag* (*Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*), Tabari's histories, the *Tansarnāma*, and the *Šāhnāma*, reduce the nearly five centuries of Arsacid control largely to a period of illegitimacy and fragmentation. According to the *Kārnāmag*, during this time Iran had been ruled by 120 tribal chiefs (*kadag-xwadāy*) before Ardashir I's rise. This corresponds to the period of the "tribal chieftains" or "petty kings" (*mulūk al-ṭawā'ef*), as Islamic historians such as Ṭabarī describe the Arsacid era, during which Ardashir IV was merely the king of "the mountain regions."⁶⁸

The Sasanians' political cosmology and royal identity changed over the course of the empire. Because the bulk of our evidence reflects the late Sasanian worldview, it is hard to judge the extent to which the Kayanian elements were prominent in early Sasanian court discourse. Yet it is clear that both western "Persian" and eastern Iranian elements play an important role in the first century of the empire, followed by a progressively heavier emphasis on Avestan sacred cosmology and historiography. Despite the change in emphasis, or at least visibility, these two traditions were not understood to be in opposition. Much like the Sasanians' active manipulation of Achaemenid ritual and artistic traditions in their homeland, these historically and culturally heterogeneous discursive traditions and cosmologies were fused and refashioned to produce a coherent explanation for—and tangible evidence of—the Sasanians' sense of their place in history and present role in the world.⁶⁹

The line of inquiry I wish to introduce shifts the emphasis to archaeological evidence and the architectural, visual, and ritual techniques by which the early Sasanian dynasty shaped the past. The last two decades have nurtured a growing scholarly debate on cultural memory in the work of historians, art historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. Although none speaks directly to the late antique experience, this debate offers some broadly useful insights. For example, the term "site of memory," or *lieu de mémoire*, has

become a common critical term to speak about issues of the past, place, and collective memory in such a context.⁷⁰ My usage of the term applies only to late antique Iran and contrasts with its sense in contemporary discourse, where such sites function as symbols of modern societies' alienation from their past. In the late antique Iranian world, a site of memory more often than not was the portal to the past and the means by which the kings of kings actively participated in cultural memory. I argue that the Sasanian kings of kings approached the past and could gain control of it, or introduce dramatic changes to it, through the natural and built environments of their empire. I refer to these joint practical, artistic, and architectural efforts as technologies of memory, whereby certain images, structures, and activities facilitated a vital and compelling experience of the past. To fully understand the early Sasanians' efforts to come to terms with the past, as archaeologists and art historians, we must widen our conceptual categories to view the interrelation of these elements.

The early Sasanian kings adapted the ancient Iranian religious traditions of the "Iranian Expanse" into a political concept, which they transposed onto, and continually updated to match, the contemporary realities of Western Asia. Reflecting an early integration of local Persian traditions with eastern Iranian traditions, the first kings of the dynasty emphasized the Iranian character of their realm and introduced for the first time the political concept of Eranshahr (*Ērānšahr*), the "Empire of the Iranians."⁷¹ The word "Ērān," an archaic genitive plural that literally translates to "of the Iranians," is first used in this political sense in Ardashir I's official titlature.⁷² Ardashir I named himself "King of Kings of the Iranians" (*šāhān šāh Ērān*) in his coinage and inscriptions. The word "Ērānšahr" is first attested in the inscription of Shabuhr I at Naqsh-e Rostam, but then becomes ubiquitous in both political and religious discourse.⁷³ After his Roman and Kushan victories, Shabuhr I then expanded the Sasanian royal title to "King of Kings of Iranians and Non-Iranians" (*šāhān šāh Ērān ud Anērān*), which remained standard until the mid-fifth century.⁷⁴

The inscriptions of Shabuhr I are one of the most important surviving primary sources from the Sasanian Empire, providing a view into early Sasanian history, court structure, royal funerary cult, onomastics, and much else. They are no less important for the view they provide of the early Sasanian imperial worldview and the expansion in Iranian political cosmology. Shabuhr I describes his Iranian and non-Iranian empire as including

Persia, Parthia, Khuzistan, Mēšān [Characene], Assyria, Adiabene, Arabia, Azerbaijan [Atropatene], Armenia, Georgia, Iberia, Albania, Balāsagān [Caspian Coast] as far as the Caucasus and the Alan Gates, all the Alborz Mountains, Media, Gurgān [Hyrcania], Merv, Herat [Aria] and all Khurasan, Kerman, the Land of the Sakas [former Drangiana and Arachosia], Turan [east-central Baluchistan], Makran [coastal Baluchistan and Indus delta], Paradan [Quetta], India [Middle Indus Valley], the Kingdom of the Kushans [Bactria] as far as Peshawar [Gandhara] and as far as Kashgar, Sogdiana, Tashkent, and Mazun [Oman] beyond the sea.⁷⁵

Much as in the Achaemenid formulation, Pārs lies at the center of Iran, and all provinces of *Ērān ud Anērān* spiral out from this core. Indeed, this and other early Sasanian royal inscriptions parallel many other aspects of the Achaemenid inscriptions, including themes and even lexical choices. They do so to such an extent that they suggest that a discourse of kingship formed by the Achaemenids, and preserved in Persian cultural memory, influenced Ardaxshir I's and Shabuhr I's late antique formulation of power. Much like the Sasanians' active manipulation of Achaemenid ritual, architectural, and artistic traditions in their homeland, these historically and culturally heterogeneous discursive traditions and cosmologies were fused and refashioned to produce a coherent experience of and tangible evidence for the Sasanians' sense of their place in history and present role in the world. But no matter its referents, Sasanian Eranshahr was clearly a new creation for a new political reality.

Among the first Avestan traditions to appear in the Sasanian primary sources, in this case seals and inscriptions, is the concept and royal ideology of *xwarrah*, the luminous Royal Fortune of the rightful Iranian king.⁷⁶ Numismatic evidence suggests that the Arsacids and Kushans experimented with representing the concept visually, either therio- or anthropomorphically as a self-standing deity or through crown attributes, or in the case of the Kushans, the disk nimbus and, most dramatically, flames rising from the king's shoulders. We have these iconographic hints only in the Arsacid and Kushan periods, but this concept played an increasingly prominent role in both artistic and narrative portrayals of the Sasanian king. Appearing in Middle Persian as *xwarrah* or *farrah*, the Royal Glory linked the Sasanian king to every rightful Aryan ruler since Yima. In the *Zamyād Yašt*, *x'arənah* is described as "belonging to the Aryan lands," and "unobtainable" (*ax'arəta-*) by either non-Aryans or corrupt kings, from whom it would flee in the form of a bird or other animal.⁷⁷ The *xwarrah* marked its carrier with divine favor and legitimacy through a somatic glow. The Sasanians took the ancient

Iranian idea of a spiritual force empowering the rightful Iranian sovereign and developed its visual as well as ideological attributes. As the ancestors of the Kayanids and the culmination of this primordial heritage, only a member of the Sasanian bloodline could legitimately carry the *xwarrah*, and wear regalia and ornamental patterns associated with it. It at once confirmed the king's legitimacy and marked him as a divine creature.

By the late empire, the Sasanian court had produced the *Xwadāy-nāmag* (*Book of Lords*), which presented the dynasty as the heritors of an Iranian tradition of kingship that stretched back to the dawn of humanity.⁷⁸ The *Xwadāy-nāmag* fashioned a continuous royal genealogy that traced the lineage of the Sasanian dynasty through the half-remembered Achaemenids to the mythological Kayanid dynasty. Although they had the same home province as the Achaemenids, spoke a descendant of their language, and lived among the ruins of their monuments, primordial kings and heroes such as Jamshed, the dragon slayer Fredon, or legendary Kayanid kings like Kay Husraw, eventually provided the Sasanians with a much richer store of legend and royal precedent and soon subsumed the native provincial Persian traditions. Not surprisingly, after the fourth century we no longer hear report in the Greek and Latin sources of Sasanian claims to the Achaemenid Empire in their quarrels with the Romans.⁷⁹

The composition and spread of the *Xwadāy-nāmag*, in effect, converted Iranian oral history into a textual tradition. The text selected among a variety of versions of Iranian history, many of which still continued to circulate in oral form and textual form independently.⁸⁰ The text wove them together with new material to create a coherent narrative that presented the Sasanian dynasty not only as the culmination of all traditions of Iranian kingship but as paradigmatic analogues of the Kayanid kings of hallowed antiquity. The royal comportment, courtly life, achievements, and enemies of the Kayanids are essentially one and the same as those of the Sasanians. The core of this amalgam of sacred legends and contemporary political realities is traditionally attributed to the reign of Husraw I, though the court chronicles of later Sasanian kings later augmented and continued it, such that a continuous history from the beginning of time to the fall of Husraw II and early reign of Yazdgird III appears to have existed at the time of the Arab conquest.⁸¹ The courtly *Xwadāy-nāmag* was one of several sources that later Muslim historiographers and geographers drew from in reconstructing pre-Islamic history as well as local oral histories. In the