

## A Study on the Administrative Organizations and their Authorities in the Sassanid Era

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**Abstract:** Remarkable research has been carried out regarding the Ancient Iran particularly in the recent years and this indicates the attention of researchers to the rooted civilization of the Ancient Iran. The present paper is a novel work due to its focus on administrative organizations of that civilization. The Ancient Iran has some unique advantages and features, and accurate research into the old history will fade away doubt and suspicious from many facts. The present paper is focused on the administrative organizations of Sassanid era. During 1360 years from the establishment of Medes government unit fall of the Sassanid dynasty, only five dynasties governed in Iran. Sovereignty over a huge geographical area in the ancient era that is about six times greater than the current Iran, despite its natural geographical, human, and economic diversity, has required precise organization of these boundless spaces. By studying important organizations and entities in the Ancient Iran and particularly underscoring Sassanid era, this paper seeks to found out the important role of administrative rights in that era. This paper tries to analyze bases and contents of administrative organizations of the Ancient Iran through documents.

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**Key words:** Administrative organizations, authorities, Sassanid era

### Introduction

This paper studies administrative organizations and their authorities in the Sassanid era. Iran, a country that has no doubt had the most advanced and efficient administrative system, has been disregarded. The first and maybe the most important reason is that we were not aware of the importance of historiography and most events of our ancient era have been written by the Greeks whose prejudice against the Persians has been famous. And also lack of related references does not permit us to know limits and authorities in that time accurately. In fact, it is only in the smallest countries possible to govern that land directly and totally from the capital without one or more administrative media. In a non-centralized system, all political, governmental, and administrative decisions are induced from center to the lowest level. The major feature of this system is a comprehensive centralization.

- 1) Centralization of competency in legislating rules;
- 2) Centralization of organizations and removal and assignment of officers and public servants;
- 3) Centralization of laws enforcement and general affairs management;
- 4) Centralization of state properties and unity of state budget and legal personality of the government.

With regard to the novelty of the research subject, a similar research has not been found by the researcher and most writers have sought to discover

the historical matters and so administrative organizations have not drawn any attention.

### 1. Sassanid Power

#### 1.1 Sassanid Power

Rehabilitation and modernization of Iran was undertaken by a new dynasty whose center was in Fars, the ancient land in the south west of Iran where the first tribal people of Persia have resided near one thousand years ago. The imperial throne was taken by a dynasty of national kings who introduced themselves as the heirs of Achaemenian and knew monarchy as their own right by depriving Parthian from this advantage (Girshman, 1998, p. 345). From the early second century AD, Sassanid dynasty developed its power in the Persia gradually. Sassan was the great grandfather of Sassanids and the ancestor of Ardeshir Babakan, founder of Sassanid dynasty, Hirbod of Anahita Temple in Estakhr and it seems that he has been appointed to the Pars local nobles. Sassan married cleverly with the royal family. As a result of this marriage, Babak was born (Zarinkub, 2005, v. 4, p. 6). In fact, early Sassanid inscriptions have not talked about family relationships of Sassan and Babak clearly. Simultaneously, Pahlavi text of "Ardeshir Babakan record" (part one, paragraphs 3-20) has regarded Babak as the Pars ruler from Parthian and introduced Sassan as one of the survivors of the Achaemenid dynasty that was shepherd (Zarinkub, the same, p. 7).

#### a. Centralization of Governance

Ardeshir Babakan, the founder of Sassanid dynasty, established a government in Iran that

centralization of governance, unity of all Iranian lands, and establishment of Zoroastrianism as the official religion of Iranians were among its major features. Advent of Sassanid dynasty was the origin of political, social, religious, and economic developments in the Iranians life.

#### **b. Nationalism**

By establishment of Sassanid sovereignty by Ardeshir Babakan, unity of Iranian lands was gradually actualized. However, this unity was not gained easily but it indeed commenced a new era in the Iranian history. Emergence of the Sassanid powerful sovereignty in Iran was not an accidental event. The new stable power obtained by final victory of Ardeshir Babakan over Ardavan V of Parthia was a reaction to the Parthian feudal system in Iran (Zarinkub, 2005, v. 4, p. 11). In the other words, Iran in this period and even from Alexander time was ruled by 240 sheriffs or 90 kings (Daryayi, 2004, p. 12).

### **2. Administrative Organizations and their Authorities**

#### **2.1 Sassanid Ministries**

Sassanid government has certainly been the most regular and modern government of its time. There is no accurate information about the government and divisions. However, since Sassanid government was exactly imitated in the Court of Bani Abbas Caliphs and these principles remained for years in all Islamic courts, it can be found out that how the Iran government was at Sassanid era. In these courts, there have been more or less independent organizations and each of them was called Divan (i.e. court); and since this Dari word exists in Pahlavi, it is clear that the same word has been used in the pre-Islamic periods. The number of Divans varied in the Islamic period in different eras and areas.

#### **2.2 Court of Ministry and Duties and Authorities of Prime Minister**

The court of ministry that was regarded as the most important Divan in the Sassanid era was managed by someone named Hezarbod. In the Achaemenid era, Hazarapati (in Greek: Khiliarkhos, who was first the chief of one thousand bodyguards) was the first person in the country and the king managed the country affairs by him. This title remained in the Parthian kingdom period and reached Sassanid era. This word was the formal title of the prime minister and indicates that the prime minister has been called Vozork Farmdar until the end of Sassanid era. Another title of minister was Darandarzbod which means court counselor. Among

those who reached this high position, the names of Abarsam in Ardeshir I era, Khosrau Yazdgerd in Yazdger I era, Mehr Narseh known as Hezar Bandag in Yazdgerd I era and Suren Pahlou in Bahram V era are known. There is little information about authorities and power of Vozork Farmdar. No need to say that his duty was to handle the country under king supervision, yet he did most affairs at his own discretion. Moreover, when the king was on a trip or at war, prime minister was regarded as the regent as well (Antonio Panaino, 2003 p. 116). In brief, since he was the special counselor of the kind and handled all the country affairs, he could interfere in every matter. Vozork Farmdar was be a person who had the complete wisdom and imperfect behavior and was the best one in every field and owned an adequate theoretical and practical intellect and abundant imprudence so that when he dealt with a wanton king, he could guide him to the right path.

### **2.3 Court of Public Finance**

#### **a. Duties and Authorities**

With the conquest of Ctesiphon by Ardeshir Babakan in 226 AD, Sassanid Empire was established based on unity of religion and government by Ardeshir who was among children of Zoroastrian priests of Fars region. In this Bureaucratic system, a person named as "Vaster Yushan Salar" was at the top of public finance organization and was bound to both gain tax and guide the country economy to the path of development; so he was called sometimes as "Vaster Yushanbaz", i.e. the chief of farmers (chief of receiving tax of farming lands) and sometimes as "Vatkhshabaz", i.e. the chief of craftsmen and merchants and artisans (chief of receiving per capita tax and care in trade and industry) (Iranshahr, National Commission for UNESCO, v. 1, p. 1124).

#### **b. Source of Government Revenues**

The most important sources of government revenues in the Sassanid era were namely, fixed incomes (taxes and duties) and non-fixed incomes (plunders).

#### **1) Types of tax**

Per capita taxes were obtained from all people who were able to work (i.e. between 20 to 50 years old). So, all children, teenagers, women, old men, patients, handicapped persons, servants, and the poor were exempted from this tax. Also Zoroastrian priests, nobles, guards, teachers, and servants of the king were exempted from this tax. But the government officials and all mature healthy men who were able to work (20 to 50 years old) were bound to pay it (Jahez, 1410 AH, p. 189).

**2) Tax Reforms of Anushirawan**

To prevent offence of tax officers and to reform public finance, Anushirawan ordered to take a census of the population (Tabari, 1983, v. 1, p. 568).

Then he classified those who were bound to pay per capita taxes into four different groups in terms of financial power and so for each group, a fixed per capita tax is specified as per below.

**3) Tax Exemptions**

If the king visited one of the ministers, his name was registered in the newspapers and records and then 1) tax collectors and government and treasury employees were not permitted to take tax from him, but it was customary that he undertook paying his tax and sent taxes of his properties directly to the king treasury. 2) his flocks and herds and horses and all livestock were cauterized... 5) if he paid his tax late, he was never prosecuted and they gave him the opportunity to send his tax directly to the king treasury whenever he wanted. 6) in Nowruz and Mehregan Holiday, his gifts were superior to all gifts and submitted to the king before all other gifts (Ibn Asir, 1402 AH, v. 2, p. 455). Besides private exemptions, the whole population of a region was exempted from paying tax in specific circumstances including drought and famine. An example of these exemptions occurred in Pirouz reign period (459 to 484 AD).

**2.4 Court of Justice****a. Trial Principles and Legal References in the Sassanid Era**

In the Sassanid era, judicial power was in the hands of Zoroastrian priests and according to the Hezardastan Code (i.e. report of a thousand verdicts) {important votes of the courts} multiple courts heard the actions all over the country under the supervision of a priest (as a religious ruler) supervised by other priests (like chief justice). Besides religious trial that was specific to the Zoroastrian priests, there was a kind of court martial in urgent cases in the Sassanid era (Berthollet, Alfred, 1975, p. 79). The main legal and ethical criteria were good thoughts, good words, and good behaviors.

**b. A Brief Overview of Matikan**

Very few legal documents have been obtained from the early Middle Ages of Iran. Instead, little but valuable laws that have been left in Pahlavi and Syriac languages have drawn the attention of researchers. Texts of these laws do not fully respond major matters including social relations and people life. However, the mentioned texts give the necessary knowledge about features of social system of that time.

Publication of laws in Pahlavi language was an important event. E.W. West for the first time in 1896 in the famous book Bases of Iranian Philology (Grundriss der Iranischen Philologie) reports existence of these laws. He reported exploration of a manuscript in Pahlavi language and wrote that this manuscript contains some pieces of Iranian laws in the Sassanid era and they are thought to belong to the third to sixth centuries AD. A stereotyped version of the above mentioned laws was published in 1901 in Mumbai. Later, this document was called Matigan Hazar Datistan (Bean, George, 1969, p. 116).

**c. Courts of Sassanid Era**

The courts in the Sassanid era can be divided into two general and specialized courts.

**1) General Courts**

General courts are divided into two below groups:

Religious court

Customary court

Judges of religious courts were Zoroastrian priests and judges of customary courts were non-priest people that had judicial education and were called Dadvar.

**2) Specialized Courts**

Specialized courts are divided into two kinds of courts:

Military court

Tribal court

In the Sassanid era, since the most sensitive judicial centers were managed by the priests, judicial destiny of people was determined by them. The collusion of Zoroastrian priests with the government and statesmen did not provide a reliable environment for a simple and fair trial. Accusations, heresy tags and religious prosecutions by Magi and Zoroastrian Mullahs reflected instability and lack of judicial security in the Sassanid era.

The chief of Police headquarter was responsible for detecting crimes and arresting the criminals. It has been said that "in the Sassanid empire, police headquarter was a powerful and effective organization. In every location, there was a force under commandment of a competent officer. In the cities, any unit was supervised by a chief called Ku'eban. Ku'eban was responsible for city disciplines and detecting crimes and arresting the criminals wherever a crime occurred. This officer knew procedure law and courts practice, and enforced votes and orders of the courts. He was responsible for proving criminal actions and recognizing the identity of the criminals. When the action was raised before the judge, the judge investigated the quality of arrest, time of crime commitment, and duration of custody; and if there was a conflict there, he asked the officer about the reason. And if the judge recognized that the accused person was innocent, he immediately ordered

his freedom". It must be noted that the book "Avesta" and its interpretations as well as the set of verdicts of the religious scholars have constituted the legal bases in the Sassanid era (G. Asatrian, 2009, p. 58).

d. **Judicial Staff**

Judicial staff in the Sassanid judiciary was as per below.

e. **Arbitrator or Judge**

He was responsible for recognizing the accuracy of the parties' claims. In the other words, the arbitrator or the judge was the only person who was permitted to vote in the criminal and civil actions.

f. **King Authorities in Judicial Affairs**

In the Sassanid era, the peasants were categorized into four classes:

- Priests
- Military forces
- Teachers
- Taxpayers

There was a chief for any of these classes. The chief of each class had two inspectors. One inspector was responsible for census of the class and the other one was bound to investigate the income of each class. In this era, sometimes a board of inspection was selected for a specific matter. For example, at the time of Shapur II, Idshiu that was a bishop had an adulterous nephew and sought to prohibit him from sin commitment. This libertine person accused Idshiu to be in relation with Roman Emperor and to disclose the king secrets for him. First the Prince Ardeshir who later became Ardeshir II investigated this matter, then the chief justice and two priests investigated it and finally it was raised before the chief of Khajeh Sarayan. A board of inspection composed of Magi Andarzod, Sarvshurz, and Darbak was formed on Hamdad instruction, and another board comprised of the supervisor of royal treasury and the chief justice was established and chief of privacy and chief of khajeh Sarayan were its consultants. For example, Tabari has quoted that the inspection officer for the troops salary (on behalf of the King Khosrau Anushirawan) visited all the soldiers and when he read the King name, he finally allocated a wage for him that was only one Dirham more than the maximum wage of other soldiers. Also it is said in a narrative about Anushirawan justice that a cruel Sepah Salar that was governor of Azerbaijan seized house and land of an old woman without paying the consideration. The old woman complained to Anushirawan. The King sent a slave to Azerbaijan to see how the city conditions and grains and fruits states were and whether there was any pest or not, but he said the slave confidentially to ask about the old woman state and report him (Christine San, 2008, p. 398).

### 3. **Positions in the Sassanid Era**

#### 3.1 **Important Positions of the Sassanid Era and their Authorities**

##### 3.1.1 **The King**

a. **Conditions**

In the Sassanid era, only the royal family could reign. In fact, anyone from the Sassanid family who was the son of the ruler was permitted to take the reign. Otherwise, he could not become the king of Iran and be crowned.

b. **Authorities**

The king has been the ruler of Iran and has had infinite power and authorities. The whole country and its people were considered as the king peasants. The Iranian army was ruled by the king and he dispatched forces to different locations whenever he wanted. The whole treasury and government assets were in the hands of the king and he could spend, donate, or take them. The Iranians called rulers of cities as Shah (i.e. king) and this shows how much powerful the local rulers were. So, the king was called Shahanshah. The difference between local Shahs and Shahanshah was that they could not make the reign hereditary in their family, and the king could dethrone them whenever he wished so.

##### 3.1.2 **Religious Positions**

The king has had many consultants who guided him in managing the affairs. Without them, the king was not able to govern the country. In cases where the kings did not listen to the others, they suffered from losses or lost their reigns. However, a king had never a full-blown power and the mentioned conditions were variable in some cases.

##### 3.1.3 **Administrative Positions**

a. **Vozork Farmdar**

After the chief justice, the most important person in the Sassanid court was Vozork Farmdar (i.e. great governor).

Anyway, there is no doubt that in the Sassanid era, "Vozork Farmdar" was superior to all civilian and military officials and was like chancellor and prime minister of the next eras.

b. **Chief of Teachers**

One of the important positions in the Sassanid era was the chief of teachers (or Aran Dabirbaz). Sometimes he was considered as among Shahanshah and sometime political missions were assigned to him (Nafisi, 2005, p. 294).

c. **Head of Warehouse (Aran Ambargaz)**

In the Sassanid era, weapons were stored in some depots called Ambarg and an arsenal called Ganz (i.e. treasure). The word Ambarg is the same thing that is called today Anbar (i.e. warehouse).

Aran Ambargaz is the one who is the head of these warehouses or one of them. Théophylacte has said that six positions were hereditary in Iran; three positions were civilian and three others were military namely, Aran Sepahbaz, Aran Aspvarbaz, and Aran Ambargaz. So, this position had the third rank among military positions and one of the most important military positions (Nafisi, the same, p. 298).

d. The Public (Vaster Yushbaz)

As mentioned earlier, Vasteryushan Salar was sometimes called as Vaster Yushbaz. In a list of positions in the Sassanid era mentioned in the book *Al-Tanbih va Al-Ashraf*, this position (Vaster Yushbaz or Hotokhshbaz) has been mentioned after all other positions and this indicates that it has been after chief justice, great governor, Aran Sepahbaz, and Aran Dabirbaz because this class was composed of the lowest Iranian people. In all authoritarian civilizations, aristocratic governments, and royal regimes, farmers and workers have always constituted the lowest class, and as per the newer organization, the third class.

e. Consultant (Darandarzbaz)

One of the important positions in the Sassanid era has been the consultant and advisor and it seems that sometimes Vozork Farmdar is also called Darandarzbaz. Essentially in the Sassanid court, the term "Andarzbaz" meaning consultant and counselor was prevalent, and they were apparently teacher and those works that required specific knowledge and awareness were assigned to them like Andarzbaz of Vaspohergan that was teacher of the princes, Magi Andarzbaz who taught the Magi, and Sagestan Andarzbaz who was the counselor of Sagestan (Sistan) affairs, and Maquqan that has been another record of the term Magi (Nafisi, 2005, pp. 300-301).

f. Chief of Tax Collectors (Aran Amargan)

Among tax officers, there was a group that was responsible for tax collection and called Amargar. The person who was their chief was called "Aran Amargan" and was sometimes the deputy of Vozork Farmdar.

g. Governor (Ostandar)

Some greater areas of Iran were called Ostan (i.e. province). This word was transmitted into Armenian language and since it means a city or area that belonged to the king in this language, it is clear that king properties were first called Ostan, and Ostandar was responsible for governing them. Then this title was applied for the governors of the great areas called Ostan.

### 3.1.4 Military Positions

a. Aran Spahbaz

There were Lieutenant generals in different parts of Iran who were responsible for commanding all troops. The word Sepahbod was prevalent in the Iranian languages from long time ago; in the Ancient Persian language, "Spadhapati", in Pahlavi "Spahbaz", in Armenian language "Sparapet", and even in Syriac language it has been recorded as "Aapabad" (Herodot, 1961, p. 211).

Yet in the Sassanid era, the word Spahbaz has been developed and it was applied for any commander of a great area army. At the time of war, Spahbaz was the absolute authority of his territory and even Marzbans were ruled by them.

b. Marzban

Parthian kings of Iran divided their country into four great parts and each part has been assigned to an independent ruler. Since these four parts had been located at the four corners of the country, these rulers were called Marzban (i.e. border ruler). These rules remained in the Sassanid era too. Apparently in the Sassanid era, the position of some of them was hereditary and some of them have had special titles. For example, Marzban of Abarshahr was called "Kenarang". Sometimes they had military missions and went to the battlefield.

c. Argbaz

The position of Argbaz in the Sassanid era was according to the position of Artishtaran Salar and sometimes higher than the position of Aran Spahbaz. This term was prevalent in Iran before Sassanid era too, because Ardeshir Babakan had gained this position for Darabgard City before the reign as a result of the attempts of his father Babak with the aid of Bazrangian family. From then on, this position was regarded as among the important positions of Sassanid era and was apparently specific to the royal family. It was the highest title assigned to the military forces of the royal family. For example, at the time of Ardeshir Babakan, Abarsam that was the second person of the country, and at the time of Yazdgerd I, Mehr Shahpour had this title. This word has been made of the word "Arg" and "baz"; Arg means castle inside the city and was also used in Iran until recently and many cities like Tehran, Tabriz, Mashhad, Shiraz, etc. had all one Arg; and Argbaz has inevitably meant military ruler of the city.

d. Poshtigban Salar

Poshtigban Salar has been one of the military positions and is called "Poshtiban Salar" in Dari language. The owner of this position was the commander of military guards of the king.

e. Paygan Salar

Paygan Salar was among other military positions and means commander of infantry men. In

any area, the infantry men and their commander were under dominance of the ruler of that area; they were responsible for the security of that place and acted as an executioner at the time of punishment.

f. Asvaran Sardar

Versus Paygan Salar that was commander of the infantry men, there was a commander for the cavalry-men and he was called Asvaran Sardar. All over the Sassanid era, cavalry men were the most important part of the Iranian army. The same applied to the Parthian era and so Asvaran of the nobles was regarded as the second person of the country. In fact, the Iranian aristocrats were divided into two parts, non-military people and the military, i.e. Asvaran; and the most government lands were their estates.

### Conclusions

Judgment and trial have been made in the form of private judgment and arbitration from the old days and have now been transformed into a sophisticated system. It has been developed align with the degree of civilization of the governments, and political, social, and scientific considerations and requirements of the societies. In the other words, dynamism is the integral part of the components of the judicial system.

Development of the trial entity is a continuous and full-of-vicissitudes trend in the ancient land of Iran and it has had a direct relation with the government type, common religion, political and social situation. In the Parthian era, the judicial system was not transformed and minor changes were made in the judicial methods. The king was the chief of the judiciary. No one could violate or criticize the king speech. If a person did not gain his rights in the local courts, he could complain to the king. The king accepted the public twice a year, at Nowruz and Mehregan times, and people could raise their complaints of the king and other persons. The king and people, if there was any complaint against them, were prosecuted by the chief justice, Mir Bazan Mirbod and Iran Zabirbaz who were the religious and judicial officials.

Before the advent of Islam in Iran and in the Sassanid era, the judiciary was in the hands of Zoroastrian priests, and the book Avesta and consensus (i.e. total verdicts of religious scholars) were the bases of laws.

After collapse of Sassanid Empire and dominance of the Arabs over Iran, the judicial verdicts were based on Sunni jurisprudence. When the Safavid came to power and Shiite religion prevailed, the judicial system was regulated based on Shiite jurisprudence; and the religious and customary affairs were differentiated from each other. Religious courts were managed under supervision of

jurisprudents and customary courts were handled by the government. The same trend existed in Zand and Afsharieh periods. In Qajar era and at the time of Nasser al-Din Shah, a judicial system known as Adlieh was established and people complaints and disputes were heard in Divankhaneh. Legal actions were heard by the priests and non-legal actions were settled by the government officials. In the cities, legal affairs were settled by the priests and criminal and military affairs were settled by the governments. The king was regarded as the chief of Divankhaneh.

The studies carried out regarding position of the judiciary in the developing and developed countries and also the Islamic countries reveal this point that in the macro structure of most of the mentioned countries, the structure of an organization named as ministry of justice has been foreseen for organizing the judicial affairs. On the other hand, with regard to the importance of the mentioned ministry, extensive duties and authorities have been provided for this sector in the constitutional laws of the above mentioned countries.

So with respect to the prior studies, the fact revealed more than ever is that the ministry of justice in the Islamic Republic of Iran must have the appropriate tools and facilities consistent with the expectations of other government entities, and so reviewing systems attached to the ministry of justice as one of the determinants of the role and position of the mentioned ministry must be taken into account.

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