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# The Role of Zoroastrian Priests in Consolidating and Mitigating Crises in the Sasanian Political System

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## ABSTRACT

Despite extensive research on the status of Zoroastrian priests during the Sasanian era, the mechanisms through which they contributed to the consolidation of political power and the management of crises within the Sasanian system have not yet been examined in a coherent and analytical manner. Accordingly, employing a descriptive–analytical method and drawing on library sources and historical texts, the present study seeks to elucidate the role of Zoroastrian priests in consolidating and mitigating crises in the Sasanian political system and to identify the mechanisms through which these functions were fulfilled. It addresses the following question: How, and through what mechanisms, did Zoroastrian priests perform their role within the Sasanian political system? The study hypothesizes that Zoroastrian priests contributed significantly to the consolidation of the power structure by conferring religious legitimacy upon the monarchy, standardizing sacred texts, monopolizing education and judicial authority, and linking religion with political identity. During periods of crisis, they also helped contain political turmoil and restore governmental legitimacy through mechanisms such as arbitrating among claimants to power, compiling religious texts, and managing the religious legitimacy of the monarchy. On this basis, the present study focuses on these consolidating and crisis-mitigating functions and examines the constructive mechanisms through which the priests helped preserve and perpetuate the Sasanian political system, without making any claims regarding all other consequences or functions of this institution during the Sasanian era. The findings indicate that these two functions were mutually interconnected and enabled the Sasanian system to withstand recurrent crises for centuries. In the long term, however, these same mechanisms led to the concentration of power in the hands of the clergy and the expansion of religious conservatism, thereby diminishing the system's adaptability in confronting the fundamental challenges of the late Sasanian period, including the Arab conquest.

**Keywords:** *Iran, Sasanian state, Zoroastrian priests*

## Introduction

One of the fundamental characteristics of the Sasanian political system was the relationship between the monarchy and the institution of Zoroastrianism. Although this relationship underwent changes during the four centuries of Sasanian rule in response to political and religious developments, it generally constituted the principal framework for legitimizing political power. Within this context, the Zoroastrian priests played a prominent role in preserving and reproducing this legitimacy. By religiously endorsing kings, the priests not only consolidated the ideological foundations of the government but also maintained an active presence in various political and social



spheres. Their involvement extended beyond ceremonial functions and manifested itself in activities such as mediating power struggles, preventing religious fragmentation, compiling religious texts to contain social unrest, and supporting the continuity of the class order. Nevertheless, one important dimension that has received comparatively little attention in existing scholarship is the priests' "crisis-mitigating" role alongside their consolidating function. Previous studies have generally focused either on the authoritarian and repressive aspects of the priesthood—including religious trials and restrictions on intellectual activity—or interpreted the priests as instruments serving the political will of kings. Historical evidence, however, indicates that the priests actively participated in managing and containing political crises during critical periods. In events such as succession crises, this religious institution sought to reduce tensions and prevent the collapse of the political order by adopting measures such as temporarily moderating social policies, arbitrating among claimants to power, and redefining and compiling religious texts. A functional duality can therefore be observed in the role of the priests: on the one hand, they acted as agents consolidating the power structure; on the other, they intervened as crisis-mitigating forces during periods of instability. Explaining this duality and its relationship with the political, social, and economic conditions of each period requires a systematic and differentiated analysis. Accordingly, by focusing on the priests' practical functions under crisis conditions, the present study seeks to identify and analyze the mechanisms through which they intervened in the management of political crises and to distinguish these functions from their enduring role in consolidating the political system. Such an analysis will facilitate a more precise understanding of the reasons for the relative resilience of the Sasanian system in the face of recurrent crises.

## Literature Review

Research on the relationship between religion and the state during the Sasanian period has a substantial history and may be divided into several principal categories. Most of these studies, however, have either been confined to general descriptions of the relationship between religion and the state, focused exclusively on the consolidating function of the priests, or overlooked their role in managing political crises. Imanpour's articles, "The Role of Zoroastrian Clergy in Strengthening the Sasanian Government and Zoroastrian Religion" (1990) and "Foundations of the Influence and Status of Zoroastrian Clergy in the Sasanian Period" (1992), are among the studies addressing the clergy's role in consolidating Sasanian power. These articles focus primarily on how the priests acquired influence and social status, paying less attention to their practical functions during critical periods. In *Religion and State in the Sasanian Era* (2001), Bayani examines the religious origins of the Sasanian dynasty, the status of Zoroastrianism before the dynasty's emergence, the process through which the religion was revived during the Sasanian era, the establishment of the government, and the official recognition of Zoroastrianism. Nevertheless, this work largely offers a general and cursory description of these matters and does not provide a profound and precise analysis of the relationship between religion and the state. In particular, it lacks a systematic examination of the priests' dual functions—consolidation and crisis mitigation—and does not penetrate the deeper layers of interaction between religious and political institutions. Salehi and Sattarian (2008), in their article "The Role of Zoroastrian Clergy in the Social Structure of Sasanian Iran," examine the clergy's social position and functions within Sasanian society. Although this study addresses important dimensions of priestly influence, it continues to emphasize their consolidating and authoritarian role without examining their "crisis-mitigating" function.

The present study differs fundamentally from previous research in three respects:

First, attention to the dual function of consolidation and crisis mitigation: Whereas previous studies have focused primarily on the consolidating and authoritarian role of the priests, the present study systematically analyzes, for the first time, their “crisis-mitigating function” alongside their consolidating role and demonstrates that these two functions existed in a dialectically complementary relationship.

Second, a focus on practical and flexible mechanisms: Unlike previous studies that have predominantly portrayed the priests as a rigid and repressive institution, the present study analyzes specific historical examples—including Tansar’s role in founding the system, Kartir’s interventions in succession crises, and Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān’s measures to restore public confidence—and demonstrates that, under crisis conditions, the priests employed flexible strategies such as compiling religious texts, arbitrating among claimants, and managing the religious legitimacy of the monarchy.

Third, a distinction between “permanent consolidation” and “temporary crisis mitigation”: For the first time, the present study distinguishes these two levels of function and demonstrates that crisis mitigation constituted a specific strategy for periods of disruption and instability. This distinction contributes to a more precise understanding of the reasons for the Sasanian system’s relative resilience in the face of recurrent crises. In other words, the principal innovation of the present research lies in portraying the priests not merely as “agents of power consolidation” or “instruments of repression,” but as “crisis managers” and “active participants in the reproduction of order” who, through a nuanced understanding of circumstances, maintained a balance between religious principles and political necessities.

It should be noted that, given the extensive social, economic, political, and religious roles performed by the priests during the Sasanian period, a comprehensive examination of every dimension of this institution’s activities would require a separate study. The present research therefore focuses exclusively on one important aspect of the priests’ role: their functions in consolidating the political order and managing crises of legitimacy. It seeks to examine the mechanisms that proved effective in this regard.

### **Religion and the State in the Premodern Period: From Consolidation to Crisis Management**

In premodern political systems, the relationship between religion and the state is best understood as a form of institutional and functional overlap. Religion was not merely a source of political legitimacy but also a framework for defining the social order and interpreting crises. In such structures, political power necessarily relied on systems of meaning derived from religion to consolidate itself; conversely, religious institutions expanded their social influence and consolidated their authority through their relationship with political power. This relationship may be explained through the model of “legitimacy synergy,” in which religion, by sanctifying political power, elevates it from merely coercive authority to legitimate authority, while the state, by supporting the religious institution, contributes to its reproduction and consolidation (1).

Within such a relationship, ideological institutions perform two fundamental yet apparently contradictory functions. The first is “consolidation,” which is directed toward preserving the existing order, reproducing the power structure, and preventing social ruptures. The second is “crisis management,” which becomes active under conditions of disruption and instability and seeks to contain tensions and restore equilibrium to the political system. The consolidating function of these institutions is fulfilled through mechanisms such as legitimizing the ruler, naturalizing social inequalities, and regulating behavioral norms. In other words, ideology ensures the continuity of the existing order by rendering it “self-evident” (2). Under crisis conditions, however, these same institutions are

compelled to demonstrate functional flexibility and manage crises by reinterpreting ideological doctrines, changing recommended patterns of conduct, or even temporarily moderating previously established principles.

This duality may be analyzed as a “twofold function of ideology”: ideology performs a consolidating role under ordinary conditions but becomes an instrument for reconstructing order in times of crisis. In other words, ideological institutions do not merely preserve the status quo; during crises, they function as intermediaries that facilitate the transcendence of crisis by redefining meanings and sources of legitimacy. This indicates that ideology, contrary to static conceptions of it, possesses a dynamic and context-dependent character whose functions change according to historical circumstances (3). Consequently, a precise understanding of the relationship between religion and the state in premodern systems requires simultaneous attention to both functional levels: how religious institutions consolidated the power structure while also helping to readjust and even redefine it during periods of crisis.

### **The Relationship Between Religion and the State in the Sasanian Period and Its Role in Creating Political Cohesion**

Following the collapse of Parthian power and Ardashir Babakan’s victory over Artabanus IV, one of the most fundamental challenges confronting the nascent Sasanian government was dismantling the decentralized system of regional principalities and establishing political unity throughout Iran. Ardashir clearly understood that such an objective could not be achieved solely through military and administrative instruments; it also required the formation of durable solidarity based on a shared system of values. He therefore regarded political cohesion as dependent upon a comprehensive religious–national ideal capable of aligning diverse social groups within the new order. Within this framework, religion was perceived as the most important factor in creating social convergence and ensuring the durability of political unity. From Ardashir’s perspective, a society lacking common beliefs and values would remain vulnerable to fragmentation and collapse even if it temporarily achieved unity (4).

This conception of the relationship between religion and the state is reflected in later historical narratives representing Ardashir’s political thought. In these accounts, Ardashir, as the founder of the Sasanian state, is portrayed as representing an ideology that emphasized the necessary association between political order and religious tradition. Although contemporary evidence from Ardashir’s reign, particularly inscriptions and coinage, does not confirm such a proposition with equal explicitness (4), the body of later narratives indicates that Iranian political memory associated the foundation of the Sasanian state with the relationship between the monarchy and Zoroastrianism. The celebrated proposition that “religion is the foundation and kingship its pillar” may therefore be analyzed as a representation of the intellectual and ideological tradition concerning the relationship between religion and the state during the Sasanian period (5). According to this conception, religion as a source of legitimacy and kingship as the instrument for realizing and protecting political order were understood as mutually dependent and complementary.

At the practical level, this outlook led to the formation of an institutional relationship between the monarchy and the Zoroastrian clergy. From the beginning of his reign, Ardashir sought to strengthen the ideological foundations of his government by securing the support of the priests; in return, the clergy contributed to the consolidation of political power by conferring religious legitimacy upon the king. Despite subsequent political transformations, this alliance—as the concrete embodiment of the convergence between religion and the state during the Sasanian era—continued until the end of the period (6). Continuing this policy, Shapur I further strengthened this relationship by reinforcing religious institutions, including through constructing fire temples and supporting the Magi (7).

The ideological representation of this solidarity can be observed in the material and symbolic sources of the Sasanian period, particularly inscriptions and rock reliefs. In these works, scenes depicting Ohrmazd conferring the royal diadem upon the king systematically represent the divine legitimacy of the monarchy. Such images signify not only the religious status of the King of Kings but also the profound interweaving of religion and politics within the Sasanian governmental structure. Moreover, official rituals such as coronation ceremonies held beside sacred fires performed a symbolic function in reproducing this relationship and constituted public demonstrations of the unity between religion and the state (6).

Overall, the religious policies of Ardashir and his successors may be regarded as a conscious effort to transform religion into an instrument for creating political cohesion and consolidating governmental order. While strengthening the foundations of the Sasanian state's legitimacy, this approach also provided an ideological framework that facilitated the reproduction and continuity of political order in the face of internal and external challenges.

### **The Consolidating Function of the Priests in the Sasanian Political System**

The consolidating function of the priests in the Sasanian political system must first be sought in the process through which the Sasanian Empire itself was founded. The priests' support for the nascent Sasanian state led them to demand a greater share of and influence over political power and even to obtain certain exclusive privileges. The Sasanians correctly understood that priestly support for the monarchy was indispensable if the government—unlike its Parthian predecessor—was not to depend exclusively upon tribal and clan leaders, since this earlier model had already failed the test of history (8).

The priests' role in legitimizing Sasanian rule may also be observed in narratives concerning the beginnings of the dynasty. One of the most prominent examples is the account of Tansar in the *Letter of Tansar to Gushnasp*. In this work, Tansar is presented as a distinguished priest who played an important role in supporting Ardashir and explaining the religious and political foundations of the nascent Sasanian government. Despite the importance of this account as a representation of Sasanian political thought, it must be recognized that information concerning Tansar derives primarily from later sources and that inscriptions and documents contemporary with Ardashir contain no direct account of his activities. Tansar's role therefore cannot be treated as a definitive report of events at the beginning of the Sasanian era; rather, the narrative should be understood as reflecting how the relationship between the monarchy and the religious institution was imagined and reconstructed within Sasanian historical tradition. According to this account, Tansar, as the representative of the religious institution, helped legitimize Ardashir's authority, connect the new monarchy with the Zoroastrian religious tradition, and explain the necessity of harmony between religion and government. Reports concerning the compilation and organization of religious texts during Ardashir's reign, although requiring critical historical scrutiny, similarly demonstrate the importance later traditions attributed to the connection between the foundation of the Sasanian state and the institutional organization of Zoroastrianism (9-12). The Tansar narrative may thus be analyzed as an example of Sasanian legitimating discourse in which cooperation between the priests and the monarchy is presented as one of the foundations of political order. By transforming a local rebellion into a movement endowed with religious legitimacy, Tansar prevented the fragmentation of power and prolonged civil wars among local claimants. For the first time, Ardashir entrusted Tansar with compiling and organizing the Avesta (13, 14). By recognizing the version he had compiled as authoritative and declaring other texts to stand outside the religion, Tansar took the first step toward establishing an official state religion (15, 16). It was consequently determined that Tansar would henceforth interpret all the

ordinances and laws of the Mazdayasnian religion (7). Some scholars accordingly regard Tansar as an authoritative and uncompromising figure operating behind Sasanian rule and directing its plans and decisions (9). This interpretive monopoly constituted the very mechanism through which religious standardization and the elimination of competing narratives prevented ideological crises and religious disputes that might have endangered the newly established unity. Although the *Letter of Tansar to Gushnasp* is a later source and its historical value for reconstructing events at the beginning of the Sasanian era remains disputed, it is one of the most important texts reflecting Sasanian and later understandings of the religious foundations of monarchical legitimacy. Written in response to Gushnasp's criticisms, the letter defends Ardashir's policies and presents an image of the ideal relationship between religion and government (17, 18). In this narrative, Ardashir is portrayed as the restorer of religious order and Iranian traditions, and his efforts to revive religious rites and ordinances and prevent the history and lineage of the Iranians from falling into oblivion are emphasized (10). Irrespective of the extent to which this narrative corresponds to the realities of the early Sasanian period, the *Letter of Tansar* demonstrates that, in Sasanian intellectual tradition and subsequent representations, monarchical legitimacy became closely associated with the revival of religion and Iranian traditions. By connecting Ardashir's legitimacy with the restoration of religious order and the reconstruction of Iranian traditions, Tansar therefore sought to strengthen the foundations of legitimacy for the nascent Sasanian government. Besides providing a framework for explaining the legitimacy of Ardashir's kingship, this relationship between monarchy and religion portrayed his political opponents as adversaries of the religious and political order favored by the Sasanians. The religious discourse associated with monarchy could therefore become an instrument for strengthening political cohesion and reducing disputes over legitimacy during the initial stages of Sasanian state formation. The justification of Ardashir's wars constitutes another central element of the letter. Tansar describes conditions before Ardashir's emergence as chaotic and corrupt: people concerned solely with securing their livelihoods, widespread corruption, disobedience toward religion, wisdom, and government, and the destruction of all values. Under such conditions, Tansar maintains, war and bloodshed constituted the only means of restoring dignity and glory to Iran. He portrays these actions not as purposeless violence but as a cosmic necessity: just as wind, rain, and sunlight are vital and necessary for the earth, Ardashir's wars were required to establish stability and order in the world and to revitalize religion and the state (10). This metaphor of natural order, which portrays warfare as the remedy for crisis, effectively theorizes state-building violence within a Zoroastrian framework. In this text, the new Sasanian political order is justified through an analogy with natural order. Overall, the priests' consolidating function in the Sasanian political system—exemplified most fully by Tansar—comprised three principal strategies: first, transforming a local rebellion into a religiously legitimate movement to prevent political fragmentation; second, standardizing religion and monopolizing interpretation to prevent ideological crises; and third, linking religion with politics and providing a divine–natural justification for violence in order to exclude opponents from the moral sphere and mitigate crises through symbolic exclusion. These three strategies proved sufficiently successful not only to rescue the Sasanian system from the crisis of its initial collapse but also to establish a model for all subsequent priestly functions in education, adjudication, succession, and legitimation.

## The Crisis-Mitigating Function of Zoroastrian Priests in the Sasanian Political System

### *The Priests' Preventive Structure of Crisis Management*

During the Sasanian period, the priests' activities extended beyond the performance of religious rituals to such areas as education, adjudication, the compilation and transmission of religious traditions, and the administration of fire temples. Through these activities, the values and norms supported by the government were reproduced throughout society (19). By legitimizing the political order, establishing unity in the interpretation of religious teachings, and adjudicating according to accepted standards, the priests strengthened monarchical authority and reduced disputes concerning legitimacy. The significance of these functions must therefore be evaluated in terms of how they were employed within the Sasanian political system and connected with monarchical legitimacy. From childhood, princes were required to receive various forms of religious and ethical instruction and to be examined by *hērbads* and *mowbeds*. Because a Zoroastrian priest was generally the king's moral guide and spiritual adviser, he exercised substantial influence over all affairs of state throughout the king's reign (6). Through educational screening and by ensuring that future kings were aligned with the religious–political order, this examination-based system helped prevent succession crises. Moreover, some forms of writing and book production were monopolized by the Zoroastrian clergy, thereby placing part of society's cultural and educational institutions under their control. In addition to composing numerous religious works, the priests influenced history, society's intellectual environment, and the Sasanian court through works such as the *Khwadāy-Nāmāg* (4). Through their participation in preserving and transmitting religious and historical traditions, the priests reproduced narratives concerning the origin and legitimacy of Sasanian monarchy, thereby strengthening the king's position and the political order. By limiting the plurality of legitimating narratives, this process contributed to ideological cohesion and reduced disputes concerning the monarchy's legitimacy. The priests' social and religious status also meant that significant sections of society accepted their interventions in religious and, to some extent, customary affairs; their endorsement consequently conferred greater authority and legitimacy upon governmental decisions and actions (6). The priests likewise enjoyed exclusive authority in judicial and educational matters. By transforming religious ordinances into judicial rulings and establishing a unified authority for resolving disputes, this judicial monopoly helped prevent crises of disorder and injustice. The educational apparatus of the period formed part of the religious establishment. Except in certain areas of instruction, the clergy personally controlled most aspects of education, including determining curricula and conducting teaching in practice. In other words, beyond the numerous social activities in which they participated, the priests exercised authority and influence over the education and upbringing of people ranging from the lower classes to monarchs. Primary education and at least part of higher education were administered by the clergy (20). Every society requires an educational structure and system suited to its particular historical circumstances and capable of addressing its diverse needs. With the beginning of the Sasanian period, reviving religion and establishing its firm relationship with the political and governmental structure became principal objectives, requiring the education of human resources in fields aligned with religion and politics (21). This integrated educational system under priestly control was the principal instrument of preventive, intergenerational crisis mitigation; through planned socialization, it prevented the emergence of generations holding conflicting values. During the Sasanian period, the earliest centralized religious instruction was provided by Zoroastrian priests in fire temples, where worship, prayer, religious ceremonies, and public education were conducted. These fire temples provided the foundations for subsequent educational institutions and should therefore be regarded as the earliest

schools (22). They also consolidated the foundations of the Sasanian “fire-worship ritual,” since they served as centers for learning religion and religious rites across the empire’s different regions (23). Overall, through the standardized education of princes to prevent succession crises, the monopolization of historiography to prevent crises of identity, judicial monopoly to prevent crises of disorder, networks of fire temples and schools to prevent local divergence, and the controlled education of non-clerics to prevent administrative inefficiency and class divisions, the priests created a system in which potential crises were neutralized before they could emerge. More precisely, crisis mitigation in the Sasanian system was not a reactive measure but a structural and preventive mechanism whose backbone was the Zoroastrian clerical institution.

### *The Priests’ Role in Mitigating Crises During Transfers of Power*

During certain periods of Sasanian history, particularly when succession crises arose, the priests assumed a more influential role alongside political and military notables in the process of selecting the king. The king was chosen with the participation of representatives of different social classes; where disagreement arose among them, the opinion of the *mowbedān mowbed* held particular significance. He also presided over the coronation ceremony (6, 24). Although this mechanism cannot be generalized to the entire Sasanian period, the available evidence indicates that when succession became a political crisis, the priests’ enhanced role in arbitration and in legitimizing the new king could reduce conflict and facilitate the transfer of power. A practical example of this crisis-mitigating function may be observed in the career of Kartir, an accomplished priest who consolidated his position as the “representative of the clerical organization within the government” during the reigns of several Sasanian kings and even played an influential role in bringing Bahram II to power (24).

### *Farr and the Religious Legitimacy of Sasanian Kings*

In Zoroastrian texts, *farr* is understood as a divine gift and a force associated with merit, prosperity, and the performance of one’s duties; possession of it was not limited to kings. Nevertheless, in certain political representations from the Sasanian period—particularly its later phases—the concept of royal *farr* became an element expressing the legitimacy of rulership. This development should be analyzed within the context of Sasanian efforts to connect their monarchy with Iran’s religious and historical traditions. In Sasanian political thought, imperial legitimacy rested upon several elements, including royal lineage, military victory, the support of political elites, and religious endorsement. Within this framework, *farr* gradually became an important concept in the discourse legitimizing monarchy. Some scholars have emphasized the relationship among *farr*, royal authority, and the religious representation of Sasanian rule, regarding it as an important component of the period’s royal ideology (25). The available evidence nevertheless indicates that the political application of this concept was not constant throughout the Sasanian period and changed over time. The priests’ role in relation to *farr* must be examined within the same framework. They were not the exclusive possessors of *farr* or an authority directly empowered to confer or withdraw it; rather, as interpreters of religious tradition and representatives of the religious order, they participated in explaining the religious foundations of kingship and affirming the legitimacy of rulers. The relationship between *farr* and kingship therefore enabled successful rule characterized by religious merit to be defined within a framework extending beyond mere political power (26). In later Zoroastrian narratives, the loss of *farr* is associated with defeat, injustice, or a ruler’s deviation from the ideal religious order (25). This interpretation, however, cannot be taken to indicate the existence of an institutional mechanism through which the priests could directly revoke a king’s

legitimacy or appoint his successor. Rather, the concept's political significance lay in providing a religious framework for evaluating rulership and enabling the religious institution to participate in political legitimation. Divine *farr* should therefore be understood as part of the symbolic system legitimizing Sasanian monarchy. Through their interpretation of religious doctrines, participation in religious rituals, and affirmation of royal authority, the priests helped reinforce this legitimating system—a role that, together with political, military, and social factors, contributed to preserving the authority of the Sasanian government.

### *Collecting, Compiling, and Establishing an Authoritative Text of the Avesta*

One of the most consequential manifestations of the priests' crisis-mitigating role in the Sasanian political system may be found in their flexible organization of religious texts under crisis conditions. Political and social crises are rarely exclusively military or economic; at a deeper level, they are often associated with crises of legitimacy and declining confidence in religious–political institutions. Under such circumstances, the priests used the collection of Avestan texts to prevent the collapse of public consensus. Tansar and Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān provide the most prominent examples of this crisis-mitigation strategy.

Tansar's efforts to collect and compile the Avesta at the command of Ardashir Babakan represented a strategic measure for mitigating crises within the nascent Sasanian system (27). Following approximately four centuries of relative neglect of Zoroastrianism during the Parthian period, Iranian society had become characterized by religious plurality and disorder, which could challenge the political legitimacy of the newly established Sasanian Empire. Recognizing this vacuum, the priests, as the principal custodians of Zoroastrianism and under Tansar's leadership, attempted to produce a single official version of the Avesta by convening the first major clerical assembly. This measure pursued two inherently crisis-mitigating objectives: first, establishing religious unity as the foundation of political unity; and second, excluding and eliminating competing intellectual and religious currents that could become centers of disobedience or separatism. Although the project did not entirely resolve religious disputes and controversies surrounding the Avesta continued, its significance lay in the priests' initiation of the centralization of spiritual authority in the service of political power. The suppression of opposing views and exclusion of competing currents reveal the negative dimension of crisis mitigation: anything threatening the religious–political cohesion of the Sasanian system was eliminated from society as a heresy or deviation from the Zoroastrian “right path” (6). The project of compiling the Avesta thus constituted a form of “cultural engineering” intended to manage the political crises of the period in which Sasanian power was being consolidated.

The measures undertaken by Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān—the distinguished priest of Shapur II's reign—in response to religious disputes and declining public confidence in the Avesta provide another example of using the compilation of the Avestan text to prevent crisis. According to traditional accounts, disputes arose during this period between Zoroastrian priests and adherents of other religions regarding the contents of the Avesta. This situation diminished public confidence in religion and weakened the religious institution's position within society, thereby posing a serious danger to the Sasanian Empire. In a system where part of the King of Kings' legitimacy depended upon Ohrmazd's approval and the possession of “divine *farr*,” any doubt concerning the authenticity of religious texts implied doubt about the legitimacy of the entire political system. This constituted a crisis of legitimacy that could result in extensive rebellion, the emergence of competing sects, and even the dynasty's collapse. In response, acting under Shapur II's command and in cooperation with an assembly of Zoroastrian priests, Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān collected, studied, and compared all available versions of the Avesta and retained those he

regarded as authoritative. To end the disagreements, Magi from different parts of the empire collected Avestan texts and sent them to Ādurbād (27). Although ostensibly an act of “collection,” this measure was in fact a strategic crisis-mitigation intervention, because Ādurbād carefully reviewed and organized the Avestan *nasks*. Without altering the foundations of the religion, the undertaking facilitated public access to its teachings and prevented a crisis of “popular alienation from religion.” The most ingenious crisis-mitigating measure in this account, however, was Ādurbād’s religious ordeal. To remove all doubts concerning the Avesta’s authenticity and secure public confidence, he swore an oath before the public. Because the people still did not fully trust him, he submitted to a religious ordeal. Religious texts relate that molten metal was poured upon Ādurbād’s chest without injuring him; consequently, everyone accepted his words and remained steadfast in the Mazdayasnian religion (28). From the perspective of crisis-mitigation analysis, this ordeal by fire—irrespective of whether it was historical or legendary—performed two functions. Its first function was to restore public confidence through a controlled “miraculous representation,” which, in a religious society, constituted the most powerful instrument for terminating interpretive disputes and crises of skepticism. Its second function was to consolidate the priests’ interpretive monopoly: by demonstrating Ādurbād’s “divine election,” every alternative interpretation of the Avesta could be regarded not merely as incorrect but as contrary to the will of Ohrmazd. The crisis of interpretive plurality—which could have led to religious schisms and consequently to political crisis—was therefore brought to an immediate end under divine sanction. Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān’s actions should thus be regarded as the consummate representation of the priests’ strategic flexibility under crisis conditions. Although they outwardly remained committed to the “stability and authenticity” of religious texts, in practice their collection of the Avesta and even their use of extraordinary ordeals enabled them to reconstruct social consensus at critical moments—including periods of public doubt concerning the system’s religious legitimacy—without disrupting the traditional framework. From this perspective, flexibility in interpreting religious teachings during crises was not a weakness but the most powerful crisis-mitigation instrument available to the Zoroastrian priests. It enabled them to respond to the intellectual and spiritual needs of a changing society without altering the power structure and to prevent the collapse of the Sasanian political system’s legitimacy at critical historical junctures.

## Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrate that Zoroastrian priests performed a dual yet coherent function within the Sasanian political system. On the one hand, they were principal agents in the ideological consolidation of political power through religious legitimation, the standardization of doctrines, and the monopolization of sacred-text interpretation. On the other hand, under crisis conditions—including succession disputes, religious divisions, internal rebellions, and public doubts concerning the system’s legitimacy—they performed an active “crisis-mitigating” role by adopting strategies such as arbitrating power struggles, temporarily moderating social policies, collecting Avestan texts, interpreting and representing religious concepts that legitimized monarchy, and even employing extraordinary ordeals, such as Ādurbād ī Mahraspandān’s ordeal by fire, to restore public confidence. Through their interaction, these two functions contributed to strengthening the legitimacy and continuity of the Sasanian political system. The consolidating function reproduced the existing order and prevented fundamental ruptures, whereas the crisis-mitigating function prevented the system’s complete collapse during periods of disruption by temporarily readjusting relationships and meanings. What elevated the priests beyond the status of mere “instruments of power” was precisely their relative autonomy and capacity for the “flexible management of

crises.” Even in the absence of powerful kings or during transitions of power, the clerical institution could draw upon its symbolic and institutional capital to act as an equilibrating force and preserve political stability. Nevertheless, this dual function also contained an internal tension: although the priests’ crisis-mitigating interventions prevented collapse in the short term, over the long term they contributed to the growing concentration of power in the hands of the clergy and the expansion of religious conservatism, which themselves became obstacles to structural reform and effective responses to emerging challenges.

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## Authors’ Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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