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An In-Depth Investigation into the Lion and Sun Symbolism in Iran's Flag Prior to 1979

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Abstract

After the advent of Islam, the phrase "Zillullah fi al-arz" ("Shadow of God on Earth") replaced the Sassanian expression "Who is the face of the gods." This concept of "Zillullah" remained firmly present in Iranian royal ideology after Islam and continued with full strength until the Qajar era. This research, which is descriptive-analytical in nature and based on library sources, seeks to answer the main question: What symbolic elements underlie the design of the triangular silk textile featuring the Lion and Sun motif (dated 1284 AH / 1242 SH), which was likely used as the first Qajar flag? The "Lion and Sun" emblem of Iran, first minted during the reign of Fath-Ali Shah (1772-1834 CE) and adorning the Iranian flag until 1357 SH (1979 CE), originates from the same ideological background. The lion, depicted reclining without a sword, and the sun, portrayed with a feminine face rising behind the lion—considered the most powerful of animals and the king of the wilderness—symbolize kingship. The radiant sun represents one of the strongest symbols of "Farr" (divine glory) in Sassanian royal tradition (224-651 CE). Thus, the Iranian king, symbolized by the lion with the sun above his head emitting rays of light, is interpreted as the most "Farr" human being. The presence of the Lion and Sun motif on a background adorned with Quranic verses indicates a religious dimension in addition to its symbolic meaning.

Keywords: *Textile with Lion and Sun motif, the concept of "Zillullah" (Shadow of God), "Farr-e Izadi" (Divine Glory), "Sahib-Qiran" (Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction), Qajar period (1789-01925 CE).*

Introduction

In the Zoroastrian religion, the *Divine Glory* (*Farr-e Izadi*), known in Middle Persian as *"Khvarenah"* (khavarenah), was one of the most essential pillars of achieving success and prosperity. *"Farr"* was granted only to individuals who were *Asha-van*, meaning followers of *"Asha"* (truth or righteousness), and due to their alignment with truth, they were deemed worthy by Ahura Mazda to be endowed with *"Farr"*.

«Among all types of *"Farr"*, the *"Kingly Farr"* (*Farr-e Kayani*) was the most powerful, bestowed by Ahura Mazda upon a king who embodied all the virtues praised in the Zoroastrian faith—such as being righteous (*Asha-van*), brave, sharp-sighted, highly sacrificial for the gods, just, handsome, and more.» (Zabolinezhad, 2024, p. 104)

"Kingly Farr" was a cornerstone of kingship over the Iranian realm (*Iranshahr*), signifying divine approval and granting legitimacy to a monarch's rule over Aryan lands. However, *"Farr"* was both acquired and temporary—it would remain with a person only as long as they maintained the virtues required to possess it. In the *"Zamyad Yasht"1*, regarding the *"Farr"* of King Jamshid and the departure of *"Farr"* from him, it is stated: «Praise be to the Mazda-created mountain, the giver of comfort, Ishah; *Ushidena*, the Mazda-created *Kingly Farr*, and the unspeakable Mazda-created *Farr*... I praise the mighty Mazda-created *Kingly Farr*—the much-admired, superior, devout, effective, and swift one— that is greater than all other creations... "...For his *Farr* and radiance, I praise him—the mighty Kingly *Farr* created by Mazda—with prayer proclaimed aloud and with force. I praise the mighty Kingly *Farr* created by Mazda with *haoma* mixed with milk, with *barsom*, with the language of wisdom and *nashra*, with good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, with strength and with eloquent speech. ...which belongs to the *Amesha Spentas*: the far-seeing, noble, mighty, brave, and Ahuric sovereigns, who are eternally eternal... ...that for a long time belonged to Jamshid the good herdsman; such that he ruled over the seven regions of the world and prevailed over the demons, corrupt humans (*drəgvant*), sorcerers, faeries, tyrannical spirits, and *karapans* (heretical priests). ...During his reign, there was neither cold nor heat, nor death nor envy born of the daevas. Such was the world before he spoke falsely—before he defiled his mouth with deceitful words. But when he uttered a falsehood, the

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Farr visibly fled his body in the form of a bird. When Jamshid the good herdsman saw that the *Farr* had left him, he became sorrowful and confused and faltered before his enemies (the daevas), then hid himself in the earth.

1 «*ZAMYĀD YAŠT* or *Yašt19*, the last in sequence of the great pieces of the *Yašt* hymn collection of the Younger Avesta; it is followed by two short and insignificant pieces, *Yt.* 20 (*Hōm Yašt*), a name shared with the major text of *Yasna* 9-11.15) and *Yt.* 21 (*Vanand Yašt*). The text honors Zamyād Yazad, the divinity (of the) Munificent Earth, the protective divinity of the 28th day of each month. The Middle Persian name of the divinity is transmitted with instable quantity of the vowel of its first syllable. Whereas the Pāzend introduction to *Yašt* 19 as rendered in Geldner's edition writes *zaṃyāṯ̰ yazaṯ̰*, the Pahlavi commentary on the *Sīh-rōẓag* has *zāmyād* (written *z'my't)* as also found in Manichean Middle Persian (*z'my'd*). The instability mirrors the ablaut difference between the Avestan genitive *zəmō huδåŋhō yazatahe* and the corresponding accusative *ząm huδåŋhəm yazatəm* as listed in parallel in the catalogues of the thirty day-names, *Sīh-rōẓag* 1.28 and 2.28. The former runs: "(day) of the Munificent Yazata Zamyād—these places, these regions—of Mount Uši.darəna …, of all mountains … and of the Kavyan Glory and of the Unseized Glory" (*zəmō huδåŋhō yazatahe—imå aså imå šōiθrå—garōiš uši.darənahe … vispaēšąmca gairinąm … kāuuaiieheca xᵛarənaŋhō … axᵛarətahe xᵛarənaŋhō*). In *Sīhrōẓag* the attribute *yazata* "divinity" is also found with Miθra (*S.* 16) and Vāta "wind" (*S.* 22). »(https://www.iranicaonline.org/, 26/05/2025)

The *Farr* broke away for the first time—the *Farr* of Jamshid, the *Farr* of Jam, son of Vivanghan, flew out in the form of the bird *Vareghna*. This sundered *Farr* was taken by *Ramhvar*, of the vast pastures—he of a thousand ears and a thousand eyes.

...The second time the *Farr* broke away, the *Farr* of Jamshid, the bodily *Farr* of Siparuyonghan, flew out again in the form of the bird *Vareghna*. This sundered *Farr* was taken by *Fereydun*, son of the house of Abtin, who—except for Zarathustra—was the most victorious of men.

...The third time the *Farr* broke away... This sundered *Farr* was taken by *Goshtasp*, son of Nariman—who, except for Zarathustra, was the mightiest of men in bravery and manliness...» (*Zamyad Yasht*, Kardeh 1–7: 485–491)

The Role of Divine Glory (Farr-e Izadi) in Qajar Monarchical Doctrine:

In ancient Iranian royal ideology, it was believed that kings possessed "farr-e izadi" (divine glory), a sacred radiance bestowed by the gods, signifying their divine right to rule. This concept portrayed monarchs as earthly embodiments of deities, especially within the Zoroastrian tradition. Following the advent of Islam in Iran, direct depictions of God became prohibited. Consequently, the notion of kings as divine incarnations transformed into the idea of the monarch as the "Shadow of God on Earth" (Zell-Allah fi al-Arz). This adaptation preserved the sanctity and legitimacy of kingship within an Islamic framework. The Qajar dynasty embraced this concept, maintaining the belief in the divine nature of their rule.

The Lion and Sun emblem, first minted during Fath-Ali Shah's reign, symbolized this ideology and adorned Iran's flag until 1979. The lion represented kingship and bravery, while the sun signified divine glory, collectively reinforcing the monarch's sacred authority.

The motif of the lion, without a sword and in a reclining posture, appears while the sun—with its feminine face—rises from behind it. The image of the lion, as the most powerful of beasts and the king of the wild, is undoubtedly interpreted as a symbol of kingship. The sun, with its radiant beams, is among the most potent emblems of *farr* (divine glory) in the Sasanian royal tradition.

Thus, the lion—the king of Iran—with the sun above its head and emanating rays, is perceived as the embodiment of the most *"farr-endowed"* individual. Likewise, the Qajar kings, who, in the tradition of their royal predecessors, referred to themselves as *"Zill Allah"* (Shadow of God), were expected to possess the

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attributes of the one whose shadow they were—namely, the illuminative and generous qualities of *"farr"*. (Figs. 2 and 3)

As inscribed on the seal of Abbas Mirza (1789-1833), the crown prince and regent of Fath-Ali Shah:

هر شیر دل که دشمن شه را عنان گرفت از آفتاب همت ما این نشان گرفت

"Every lion-hearted one who seized the reins from the king's enemy, This stature he gained from the sun of our resolve."

Regarding the concept of Sasanian*" Kayanian Farr"*, it is noteworthy that this form of divine glory was considered *acquired* and temporary—it was bestowed by Ahura Mazda only as long as the king upheld the Good Religion. In contrast, the Qajar understanding of *"Kayanian Farr"* was hereditary and considered permanent. For instance, in the year 1243 AH [1827–1828 CE], following imaginary victory over the Russian army, Fath-Ali Shah minted the *Nishan-e Zafar* (Order of Victory) and adopted the honorific *"Khosrow Sahib-Qiran"* (Sovereign of the Auspicious Conjunction). (Fig. 2) «The term *"Sahib-Qiran"* denotes one born at a moment when the celestial conjunction (*qiran-e a'zam*)—a rare and powerful alignment of planets—occurs at both conception and birth. Such a conjunction, it is believed, happens only after many years and signifies a destiny of long and illustrious reign. It is said of Alexander that at his birth, Venus and Jupiter were in conjunction; likewise, the one born under a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter was thought destined for greatness. Prior to the Timurid era, this term held descriptive rather than titular meaning and was not used as a proper noun.» (Dehkhoda, 1951, Vol. 7, p. 32)

With the advent of the religion of Islam supplanting Zoroastrianism, the traditions of the Zoroastrian faith have nevertheless remained alive and enduring—permeating the soul and collective memory of the people of the Iranian plateau. These traditions continue to manifest themselves in various forms and expressions across different aspects of cultural and spiritual life.

It is important to note that these pre-Islamic traditions were not extinguished in the Islamic era; rather, they demonstrated a remarkable capacity for survival and coexistence. They were not perceived as oppositional to the pure teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad and the Infallible Imams. Instead, they exhibited a degree of compatibility and harmony with Islamic doctrine. As recounted in the *"Zamyad Yasht"*, the divine glory *"farr"* fled three times—or in three phases— from King Jamshid, taking the form of a bird or eagle (interpreted as a falcon or hawk). The first *"farr"* was bestowed upon Mithra (or Yazata Mehr). Given the etymology of the word *khvarnah* in Proto-Indo-Iranian—meaning "essence of the sun"—as well as the adjective *"xšaēta"* (radiant), which appears in the ancient Avestan language alongside the name *"Yima"* (Jamshid), it is evident that the most significant representation of *"farr"* among the ancient Iranians and Indo-Aryans was the solar radiance encircling the head of Mithra. This concept would later manifest visually as a halo surrounding the upper torso or head, and notably, as the solar orb placed above the crowns of Sasanian kings. For instance, in the famous boar hunt scene of Khosrow Parviz (r. 590–628 CE) at Taq-e Bostan[2], we observe this symbolism clearly. On the right side of the relief, Khosrow is depicted aiming his bow at a wild boar, notably without any halo surrounding his head. However, on the left side—where the king is portrayed after his successful hunt—a luminous halo of *"farr "*encircles his head, signifying the restoration or affirmation of divine glory through a victorious royal act. (Fig. 4)

This complex consists of a series of properties from prehistoric to historical periods such as Morad-Hassel Tepe,

an ancient village, a Parthian graveyard and a Sassanid hunting ground. The most significant property of the complex belongs to the Sassanid one which comprises of two porticos (large and small Ivans) as well as outstanding bas-reliefs from the same period» (https://whc.unesco.org/26/05/2025)

«In royal ideology, the act of hunting wild beasts was akin to triumphing over one's enemies. Thus, the radiant sunburst (*shamsa*) appearing behind Khosrow in the relief signifies the "Khosrowan Sun"—a symbol of divine *farr*—which in this context is attained through the slaying of the wild boar.» (Soudavar, 2004, p. 21) Among the other prominent emblems of *"farr"* in the Sasanian royal tradition is the *dastar* (diadem or

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headband). As is known, one of the meanings of the word *dast* in Persian is "victory," and therefore, the compound *"dast–ār"* denotes "bringer of victory"— a defining attribute of *"farr"*. Significantly, the written forms of the words *"dast"* and *"farr"* in Pahlavi *"hezvāresh"* (ideogrammic writing) are identical. In Sasanian art, we often find the *"dastar"* entwined with the ring of kingship—the *"farrmandi"* (symbol of sovereignty)—in scenes of royal investiture. Likewise, in depictions of the king's triumph over adversaries, we observe a winged female figure—deriving from Greco-Roman artistic tradition and identified with *"Nike"*, the Greek goddess of victory—presenting the *"dastar"* to the monarch. Furthermore, all Sasanian kings are portrayed wearing a *"dastar"* beneath their royal diadems.

The twin wings affixed to the crowns of certain Sasanian rulers—such as Bahram II (274-293CE) and Khosrow II (Parviz)—also serve as symbols of the *"Kayanian Farr"*. According to tradition, the *"farr"* fled from Jamshid in the form of a bird or eagle (*arghen*, commonly interpreted as a falcon or hawk) on three occasions: first to the Yazata Mithra; second to Fereydun; and third to *Apam Napat* (Son of the Waters), from whom Garshasp reclaimed it. Moreover, the seventh manifestation of the deity *Verethragna* (Bahram)—the god of victory and the protector of Aryan warriors—was a swift-flying bird, which explains the presence of wing motifs in Sasanian iconography associated with this deity. The combination of ram, twin wings, and *"dastar"* further reinforces *Verethragna's* role as the bestower of *"farr"* and the divine supporter of rightful kingship.

Among the other significant symbols of *"farr"* is the pearl—emerging from the transformation of the dual-pointed orb, itself a transfiguration of solar radiance—which is undoubtedly associated with the goddess Anahita. The third instance of *"farr"* fleeing from Jamshid, as recounted in the traditions, was retrieved by the efforts of Āzar-Hormozd from the clutches of Zahhāk and delivered to *Apam Napat* (the Son of the Waters), who took it to the depths of the waters. Hence, the pearl— dwelling in the heart of the waters and distinguished above all by its luminous reflectivity—is attributed to the goddess Anahita, who bestows it as a manifestation of divine *"farr"* upon the worthy individual.

Likewise, the lotus flower—due to its growth from aquatic origins—and the pomegranate— regarded as the fruit symbolizing abundance, fertility, and generative power—are also associated with Anahita. As James Hall notes in his *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, regarding the connection between the pomegranate and fertility goddesses: «The pomegranate was the symbol of the Greek goddesses Demeter, Persephone, and Hera/Juno, and was believed to awaken sexual instinct and induce pregnancy. It was therefore regarded as related to goddesses of fertility.» (Hall, 2008, pp. 276–277) Thus, both the lotus flower and the pomegranate, through their association with Anahita, came to be recognized as symbols of divine *"farr"*.

The Manifestation of Divine *"Farr"* in the Emblem of the Lion and Sun:

The rise of Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar (circa 1789–1791 CE) bore remarkable resemblance to the ascension of Ardashir I (224–241 CE), the founder of the Sasanian dynasty. Both figures emerged during the final years of dynasties weakened by internecine conflict, aristocratic rivalry, and fractious infighting. These were eras marked by political disintegration and chaos, wherein the memory of a once-mighty and splendid empire lingered in the shadows of decline and fragmentation.

Both monarchs—formidable and astute men of noble local lineage—seized upon these moments of disorder and absence of centralized power. Capitalizing on the disarray, and driven by innate cunning and opportunism, they did not shy away from deceit or brutality in their pursuit of establishing a new sovereign dynasty.

Having first overcome numerous foreign adversaries, each then turned to confront domestic rivals. Ardashir, for instance, eliminated Shapur, the eldest son of Papak and his designated successor, through stratagem. Once in power, he proceeded to neutralize his remaining brothers. Similarly, Agha Mohammad Khan—excepting one—ordered the execution of all seven of his brothers, both in the course of claiming the throne and subsequently in order to consolidate his authority.

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Agha Mohammad Khan, much like Ardashir I—whose principal objective after seizing the Arsacid throne was to trace his lineage back to the Achaemenid Empire (522–486 BC) and proclaim its revival after a hiatus of nearly five and a half centuries, while also seeking a union of religion and state—endeavored to link his ancestry to the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736 CE). His successors went even further, claiming descent from the *Khaghan*[3] of China and referring to themselves as *Khaghan* in official discourse.

3 «KHAGAN (Ḵāqān, "supreme ruler"), title of Xianbei (a leading nomadic group in northern China) origin that entered Persian during the first Turkish empire and has been used by medieval Muslim historians in reference to various rulers, including heads of Turkish federations, the emperor of China, etc.» (https://www.iranicaonline.org/, 26/05/2025)

«Although Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar refused to accept Nader Shah's crown at his coronation in 1786 CE (1200 AH / 1170 SH)—a crown adorned with four plumes, each symbolizing one of the territories of Afghanistan, India, Turkestan, and Iran—he did consent to gird upon himself the royal sword that had been consecrated at the mausoleum of the Safavid dynasty's founder. In doing so, he pledged to wield that sacred weapon in defense and support of Shi'a Islam. This act, implicitly, signaled a renewal and reaffirmation of the Shi'a faith.» (Elgar, 1977 pp. 58–59) Yet regrettably, the successors of these two powerful monarchs—Shapur I (r. 241–273 CE) and FathAli Shah Qajar shared little in common, neither in personal attributes nor in their approach to governance during their respective reigns.

Fath-Ali Shah, who served as the governor of Shiraz during his time as crown prince, harbored an intense sense of self-importance and narcissism. He was deeply envious of the enduring legacies left by the powerful monarchs of ancient Iran, to such a degree that he regarded himself as their equal. Consequently, he spared no effort to ensure that in terms of courtly opulence and monumental legacy, he would not fall short of their grandeur.

He donned the *Kiani Crown*, seated himself upon a throne he styled in the manner of the legendary *Takht-e Tāghdis*, and—emulating the rock reliefs of the Sasanians—commissioned large-scale reliefs carved into mountainsides across the realm, depicting himself adorned with crown and regalia. (See Figs. 5 and 6)

Of particular note and worthy of reflection is the issuance of the "Order of Victory" (*Neshān-e Zafar*) by Fath-Ali Shah in Tabriz in 1243 AH (1827–28 CE), commemorating the "glorious triumph of the exalted Shahanshah of Iran over the Russian Empire." In this emblem, Fath-Ali Shah—who fancied himself the reincarnation of Khosrow Parviz—adopted the honorific title "Khosrow Sāheb-Qerān" ("Khosrow, the Lord of the Great Conjunction"). On the obverse and reverse of the medallion, he inscribed four verses extolling his own victorious might.

Obverse of the Medal

The engraver of destiny, the Supreme Creator has arrived, The master of worth, the Victorious King has appeared. By his sword, the enemy's ranks are shattered, And by his name, the coin of triumph is struck in gold.

Reverse of the Medal

Upon the body of gold is inscribed the name of the King of Kings,Impressed with his seal, as if his image graces the moon. It brings healing to the hearts of the broken, How beautiful is it—this is God's own hue (*Ṣibghat Allāh*) .

What depths of folly and ignorance must a king and his courtiers descend into, and how oblivious the common people must remain, for the lords of the realm to lead the nation into ruin—yet they strike a "Medal of Victory" nonetheless!

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Of course, even in this dark age of ignorance, there were still discerning statesmen who dared to confront the king's folly. One such figure was Abu'l-Qāsem Qā'em-Maqām Farāhānī (pen name *Sana'i*), who delivered a scathing poetic rebuke to Fath-Ali Shah's so-called triumph:

The coin of sovereignty bore you no blessing— Once more, that senseless king, son of senseless kings!

The Lion and Sun Emblem

Another medal struck during this era bears particular significance, for its symbol graced the flag of Iran until 1979 (1357 SH). This is the *Lion and Sun* emblem.

On this medal, the lion is depicted without a sword, lying calmly, while the sun—with a feminine face—rises from behind the lion. The lion, representing the most powerful of beasts, may be interpreted as the king, from whose presence the world-illuminating sun emerges to shine upon all creation. Thus, the Qajar kings—who, following the tradition of their forebears, styled themselves as "*Ẓill Allāh*" (Shadow of God)—were expected to mirror the attributes of their divine archetype: radiance, illumination, and the divine gift of *"farr"* (royal glory).

Indeed, inscribed on the reverse of a Lion and Sun medal belonging to Abbas Mirza is this verse:

Every lion-hearted soul who reined in the enemies of the king, Earned this emblem from the sun of our valor.

Sir John Malcolm (1769-1833), in his *History of Persia*, describes Fath-Ali Shah's Lion and Sun emblem as follows:

«...An order of distinction in gold and silver, bestowed by the monarch upon generals and officers of rank who, in their battles against the enemies of the realm, had achieved renown and merit.

In recent times, the *Order of Merit* bearing the emblem of the Lion and Sun has been awarded to several ambassadors from European nations who had been in negotiation or conflict with the Persian state. It was also granted by royal decree to officers and soldiers who had shown bravery during the war with Russia. One British officer who had recently been in Persia remarked that recipients took great pride in possessing this decoration and strove earnestly to obtain it.» (Malcolm, 2004, p. 15) (Fig. 3)

As for how the concept of *"Shadow of God"* (*Ẓill Allāh*) manifested in Iranian society, the European historian du Binguet (1816-1882) writes:

«...All the people of Iran belong to the Shah, and the Shah treats them however he pleases. Every Iranian takes pride in being the Shah's servant, so much so that the suffix *'quli'* (slave or servant) is commonly appended to the names of many dignitaries. The Shah is also regarded as the owner of all the wealth in the land. From time to time, he strips those he disapproves of their possessions and bestows their property upon his subordinates. He may, at his own discretion, take possession of any woman or girl, regardless of her class. This practice not only provokes no resentment or unrest, but is in fact considered an honor.» (du Binguet, n.d., p. 181)

According to the traditions of ancient Iranian kingship, it was believed that monarchs endowed with *"farr"* (divine glory) bore the visage of the gods and were considered their material embodiment on earth, ruling among followers of the *"dēn behi"* (the righteous faith, i.e., Zoroastrianism). This doctrine persisted even after the advent of Islam in Iran, though modified to align with Islamic theology: since representing God in any physical form is explicitly prohibited in the Qur'an, the king came to be viewed not as a divine image but rather as God's shadow upon earth (*Ẓill Allāh fi'l-arẓ*). Thus, this title replaced the Sasanian notion of *"kay-chihrah az yazdān"* (the king, of the visage of the gods).

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As is stated in the *Naṣiḥat al-Mulūk* (The Counsel of Kings), a work attributed—rightly or wrongly—to Imam Muhammad al-Ghazālī (6th century AH / 12th century CE):

«You shall hear in the traditions that *al-sulṭān ẓill Allāh fi'l-arẓ*—the sovereign is the shadow of God on earth. That is to say, he is the manifestation of God's awe and majesty on earth, appointed by God to rule over His creation. Therefore, it is incumbent upon people to love the one whom God has granted kingship and divine glory, and to obey and follow their monarchs.» (Imam Muhammad al-Ghazālī, 1988, p. 81)

The concept of *"Ẓill Allāh"* (Shadow of God), which had maintained a powerful presence in the post-Islamic Iranian monarchy up until the Qajar period, continued into that era. However, it gradually diminished in significance due to the increasing influence of Shi'a clerics in the absence of powerful Safavid monarchs. With Shi'a scholars asserting their role as the deputies (*nā'ib*) of the Hidden Imam, the authority of the king as the Shadow of God began to wane.

As Shaykh Kāshif al-Ghiṭā', a prominent jurist during the reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar (1212– 1250 AH / 1797–1834 CE), stated unequivocally:

"The king is nothing but the servant and appointee of the jurists—and he himself acknowledges his servitude."(Khalili, 2005, p. 30)

Although the rising power of the Shi'a clergy had undermined the monarch's role as *"Ẓill Allāh"*, Qajar kings sought to gain the favor of the *ulama* (the notables), and the general populace—over whom the clergy held considerable sway. As such, they made conspicuous displays of religiosity and piety:

«Mujtahids, scholars, and descendants of the Prophet (*sādāt*) were viewed with great reverence throughout society. They effectively held spiritual leadership over the people and wielded uncontested influence in most social affairs within their domains. For this reason, they were often referred to simply as *'Āqā'* (Master), and efforts were made everywhere to honor them. Even if the *sādāt* were not learned, their lineage to the Prophet earned them exceptional respect, and even their transgressions were readily overlooked.» (Zarrinkoub, 2000, p. 847)

As for Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, it is said that he was so ostentatious in his religious devotion that he bordered on religious traditionalism. He even claimed that one day, a man in clerical Shi'a attire gazed upon him with such a penetrating look that it awakened in him a vision of himself as a king. Following this spiritual encounter, and after enduring many hardships, he ultimately rose

to the throne of Iran. It was also reported that he never abandoned his night prayers, even amidst the chaos of devastating conflicts such as the war in Tbilisi. In his religious pretensions, he would refuse to issue execution orders on Thursday nights, out of reverence for the Hidden Imam—a devotion for which he ultimately lost his life.

A well-known example of his cunning is seen in the famous oath he swore on the Qur'an, in which he vowed not to keep Ja'far Qolī Khān (a Zand prince) (died in 1789) in Tehran for more than one night. He proceeded to execute him, but ensured the body was removed from the city before the second night began—thereby fulfilling the literal terms of his vow and avoiding perjury. Despite his notorious stinginess and greed for wealth and jewels, Agha Mohammad Khan took it upon himself to sponsor the gilding of the dome of Imam Husayn's (626-680) shrine in Karbala, a gesture that further underscored his performative piety.

Certainly. Here's a refined, high-level English translation of the Persian passage with historical and literary nuance preserved:

Fath-Ali Shah Qajar, who ascended the Qajar throne following the reign of his uncle Agha Mohammad Khan, spent his two-year tenure as Crown Prince governing Shiraz. During this period, he became deeply

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enamored with the grandeur and majesty of the relics left behind by Iran's ancient civilizations—particularly that of the Sasanian Empire. A man of literary taste and poetic inclination, Fath-Ali Shah held a special affection for the *Shahnameh*[4]. In its recitation, he envisioned himself as a reincarnation of the legendary kings from the *Kayanian* and *Sasanian* dynasties, especially Khosrow Parviz (r. 590–628 CE). He considered the magnificent ancient monuments of Iran as tributes to these monarchs—and, by extension, reflections of himself.

The Shahnameh is the longest poem ever written by a single author, but length can hardly account for its enduring fame. Ferdowsi's role in the formation of the Persian language and literary culture is similar to that of Goethe for the

Germans, of Pushkin for the Russians, or of Shakespeare for the English-speaking world.

(https://shahnameh.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/, 26/05/2025)

His self-aggrandizement and narcissism were stirred by these enduring testaments to past royal glory, driving him to view himself as their equal. In response, he made every effort to ensure that the splendor of his court and the monuments he commissioned would not fall short of those left by his illustrious predecessors.

In this spirit, Fath-Ali Shah adorned himself with the Kayanian crown, seated himself upon a throne of his own conception—akin to the mythical Takht-e Tāqdis (Throne of Glory)—and commissioned the composition of an epic entitled *Shāhanshāh-nāmeh,* in emulation of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. Furthermore, imitating the Sasanian rock reliefs, he ordered grand stone carvings depicting himself wearing the Kayanian crown and seated upon the Qajar throne. These were etched into mountain faces across the empire, often in close proximity to Sasanian bas-reliefs, as a deliberate gesture linking his legacy to that of ancient kings.

«Fath-Ali Shah Qajar, who played a central and personal role in initiating this cultural revival, was deeply drawn to the grandeur of ancient Iranian monarchs—especially the Kayanian and Sasanian kings. He longed to emulate their regal majesty as portrayed in the Shahnameh: seated upon an ivory and ebony throne inlaid with gems, adorned in brocade robes and jewel-encrusted weapons, wearing the Kayanian crown, fastening the royal girdle around his waist, and surrounded by princes clad in opulent garments and armed with bejeweled swords, while statesmen and military commanders bowed in reverence before his throne.» (Zaka, 1985, p. 52) (See Figs. 5 and 6)

Fath-Ali Shah's fascination with Iran's ancient rulers was so intense that he ordered court painters such as Mirza Baba (1785-1830) and Mohammad Hasan (1835-1865) to produce portraits in the early Qajar court style of both legendary and historical figures of Iranian heritage—such as Jamshid, Kay Kāvus, Anushirvan (512-579), Hormizd V (nd-631), Khosrow Parviz, Genghis Khan (1162-1227), Tamerlane (1320-1405), Shah Ismail I (1487-1524), and others—all depicted wearing the Kayanian crown. He even revived the Nowruz Salām ceremony—a ritual inherited from the ancient Iranian custom of royal public audiences on Nowruz—organizing it according to the descriptions found in the *Shahnameh* and Iranian folk traditions; as cited in Zaka's account:

More than any other Iranian dynasty, the Qajar kings sought to project their power and significance—both domestically and abroad—through the medium of art. Drawing from the preIslamic tradition of employing the visual arts to assert royal authority and magnify the image of kingship, they frequently commissioned both individual and group portraits depicting the royal family or audiences with foreign envoys.

Most striking among these were portraits of Fath-Ali Shah with his sons, which closely imitated the style of Sasanian rock reliefs. This deliberate emulation of earlier Iranian dynastic art was neither accidental nor limited to painting or sculpture…

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The Qajar revival of Iran's ancient grandeur extended far beyond the visual arts; it was part of a broader cultural movement that sought to reconstruct the Persian language, history, and identity, and this renaissance began with the consolidation of Qajar rule.» (Floor, 2002, pp. 30–31)

In 1243 AH / 1201 SH (1827 CE), following what he triumphantly regarded as a great and glorious victory in the Russo-Iranian wars, Fath-Ali Shah Qajar issued a new medal of honor titled the

"Order of Zafar" (Victory). In tandem with this act of self-aggrandizement, he formally styled himself *"Khosrow-e Sāheb-Qerān"*—a title evoking the legendary kingship of Khosrow Parviz, the Sasanian emperor. (See Fig. 3)

On the medal awarded to his son and crown prince, Abbas Mirza, the following couplet was inscribed:

Jahāndār-e 'Abbās, shāh-e javān Vali'ahd-e dārā-ye rowshan-rawān

"The world-ruling Abbas, the young king, Heir to the throne, endowed with a luminous soul."

The epithet *"rowshan-rawān"* (luminous soul) was one of the honorifics of Khosrow Anushirvan, meaning someone possessing inner brilliance, clarity of mind, wisdom, and divine charisma *"farr"*.

(Nāzem al-Aṭebbā; Dehkhoda Dictionary, Vol. 26, p. 161)

Fath-Ali Shah was also among the very few post-Islamic Iranian monarchs to break the longstanding taboo against depicting royal images by minting coins bearing his own likeness. Furthermore, he commissioned the creation of the first official Iranian state emblem—the Lion and Sun motif—which, by royal decree, became a national symbol and remained on the Iranian flag until 1979. In its early form, the emblem featured a reclining lion without a sword, while a feminized sun emerged behind it. The lion, as the mightiest of beasts and the king of the animal world, symbolized royal authority. The sun, radiating its light, was one of the ancient emblems of *"farr"* (divine glory) in the Sasanian tradition. Together, they embodied the Qajar monarch as the most *"farr-endowed"* of all men—the king anointed by divine light and majesty.

Moreover, consistent with the ancient tradition in which monarchs were called *"Ẓill Allāh"* (the Shadow of God), Qajar kings, too, upheld this title. And just as a shadow must reflect the qualities of its source, so too was the king expected to embody divine attributes such as illumination, generosity, and justice—all intrinsic to the concept of *"farr"*.

Even Lord Curzon (1859-1925), writing seven centuries later in *Persia and the Persian Question*, described the resplendent titles of the Qajar monarchs with a mixture of awe and irony:

«He is the King of Kings, the Shahanshah, the Shadow of God, the Pivot of the Universe, the Splendor of Jamshid, the Star of the Army, the Almighty in Power, and Celestial in Grandeur. Iranians still heed Saadi's counsel: 'Any flaw approved by the Sultan becomes a virtue. And whoever seeks otherwise shall stain his hands with his own blood.'» (Curzon, 1983, p. 565)

Imitation of the relics of ancient Persian kingship was not confined to the reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar alone, but was, in fact, a defining and conspicuous feature of the entire Qajar era. For instance, a commemorative medallion from the Qajar military arsenal (Qurkhaneh), dated 1301 AH (1884), bears the emblem of the Iranian lion and sun on its reverse, above which two angels hold the Kayani crown aloft above the lion's head (Fig. 10). The date 1301 AH is inscribed below the image. The similarity between these angels and the figure of the "Victory Angel" in ancient Sasanian reliefs—who offers a diadem, one of the symbols of *"Farr"* (divine glory), to Shapur I (241–273) in the Bishapur triumphal relief depicting his victory over the Roman Emperor—is striking. Likewise, the ring-bearing angel conferring the *"Farr"* in the Taq-e Bostan rock relief from the reign of Khosrow Parviz shows remarkable continuity. Such imagery offers a fascinating and admirable glimpse into the persistence and resilience of Iran's ancient artistic and symbolic traditions, surviving centuries of foreign domination and upheaval.

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In another notable example, a medallion minted in 1298 SH (1919) during the reign of Ahmad Shah (1898-1930)—the last Qajar monarch—displays the conjoined profiles of Ahmad Shah and Naser al-Din Shah (1831-1896) beneath the Kayani crown. Flanking the portraits are inscriptions that read: "al-Sultan bin al-Sultan Ahmad Shah Qajar" and "al-Sultan Naser al-Din Shah Qajar." The significance of this medallion lies in its unprecedented depiction of two sovereigns side by side on a single coin or medal. At a time when the sun of Qajar rule was setting, Ahmad Shah sought to draw legitimacy and reflected glory from Naser al-Din Shah, whose fifty-year reign— though marked by autocracy and national decline—was nostalgically remembered by the Qajars as a golden age of stability and grandeur. This attempt at retrospective legitimation mirrors a precedent in ancient Iran: Shapur III (383–388 CE), an ineffectual and feeble ruler, tried to compensate for his lack of personal merit and acquired *"Farr"* by invoking the inherited glory of his illustrious father, Shapur II (309–379 CE), one of the most formidable monarchs of the Sasanian Empire.

The victory of Shapur II over the Roman Emperor generated a very powerful *farr* (divine glory), which his descendants relied upon. As a result, near the scene of Shapur II's royal investiture at Taq-e Bostan, his son, Shapur III, even dispensed with divine endorsement, placing his own figure beside that of his father in a small grotto... relying solely on inherited *farr*.» (Soudavar, 2004, p.88) (Figs. 11 and 12)

The relationship and influence of religion and religious institutions upon governance and society in both the Sasanian and Qajar periods were profound and determinative. However, a detailed treatment of that subject would entail reiterating points already discussed.

Conclusion

In this context, the lion—shown without a sword—appears while the sun, with a feminine face, rises from behind it. The lion, traditionally regarded as the most powerful of beasts, unmistakably symbolizes the Qajar monarch, from whom the radiant sun of justice and majesty emerges, illuminating the world. Thus, following the traditions of their predecessors, Qajar kings proclaimed themselves *"Ẓill Allāh"* (Shadow of God), and as a shadow must reflect the qualities of that which casts it, the monarch was expected to embody the divine attributes of radiance, generosity, and the dispensing of *" farr"*.

As previously discussed, the Qajars saw themselves as the final inheritors of the *"farr"*, the traditional divine glory of Iranian kingship. However, unlike ancient kings who claimed to be the "face of God", the Qajars—through the Islamicized concept of *"Ẓill Allāh"* —portrayed themselves as God's shadow on earth, with their commands treated as absolute, akin to divine will or prophetic tradition. As inscribed on the back of a medal bearing the emblem of the Lion and Sun associated with Abbas Mirza, we read:

"Every lion-hearted man who took the reins from the enemy of the Shah Derived this mark from the sun of our resolve."

The placement of the Lion and Sun motif against a Qur'anic background suggests not only the symbolic but also the religious significance of this emblem.

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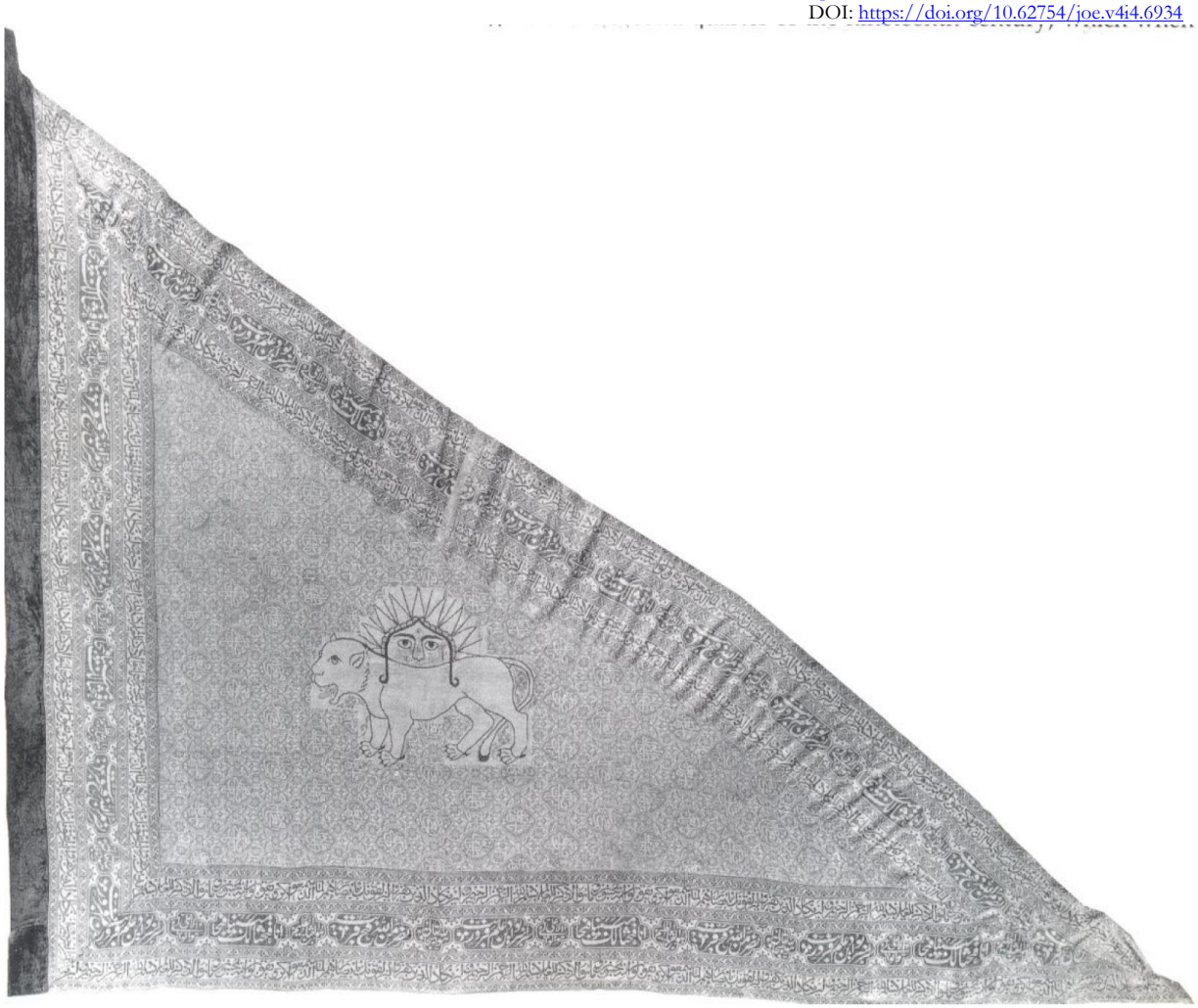

Triangular Silk Panel with the Lion and Sun Motif and Qur'anic Inscriptions

(1284 AH / 1242 SH / 1867 CE),Victoria and Albert Museum

A triangular silk panel featuring the emblem of the Lion and Sun set against a background and borders adorned with verses from the Qur'an. This textile likely served as a royal standard or ceremonial flag during the Qajar era, bearing the official insignia of Qajar sovereignty.

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Obverse of the *Neshān-e Zafar* (Order of Victory) of Fath-Ali Shah

(1243 AH / 1201 SH / 1827 CE) ,Bronze – Private Collection of Rabino

The obverse of the *Order of Victory* medal commissioned by Fath-Ali Shah Qajar, cast in bronze. This piece, issued to commemorate his supposed triumph in the Iran-Russia wars, bears the royal title *"Khosrow Sāheb-Qerān"* (Khosrow, the Lord of the Auspicious Conjunction), reflecting the Shah's self-fashioning in the image of Sasanian kings.

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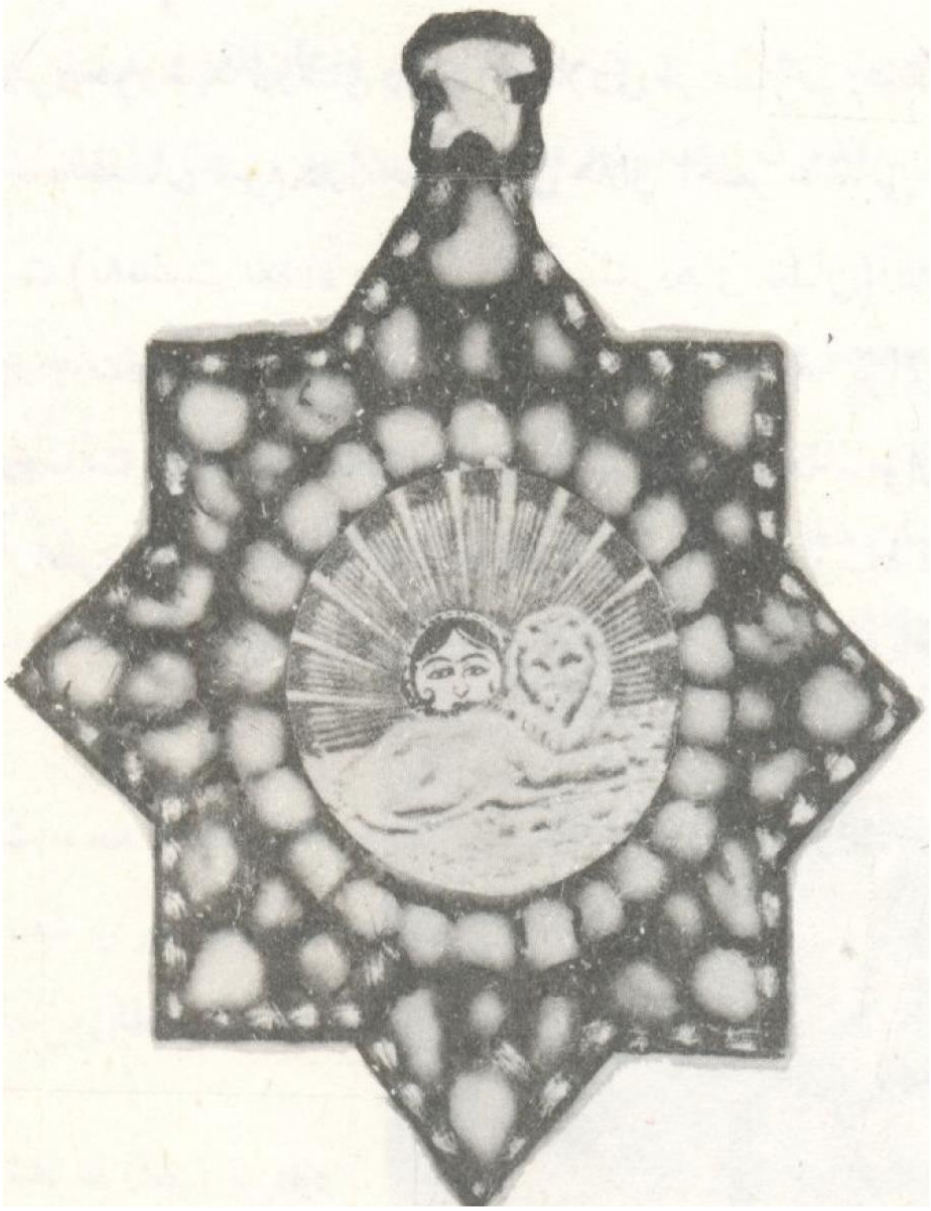

The First *Lion and Sun* Emblem of Iran

(Reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar, 1212–1250 AH / 1170–1208 SH / 1797–1834 CE)

Gold, set with diamonds – Private Collection of Rabino

This is the earliest known official emblem of the *Lion and Sun* motif adopted during the reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar. Crafted in gold and encrusted with diamonds, the emblem symbolizes both royal authority and divine legitimacy. The lion represents kingship and strength, while the sun—emerging with a female face—evokes ancient Iranian notions of *"farr"* (divine glory). This mark eventually became the national symbol of Iran until 1979.

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Relief of Khosrow II's Boar Hunt, Taq-e Bostan

(Reign of Khosrow II, 590–628 CE) Rock relief – Taq-e Bostan, near Kermanshah, Iran

This grand Sasanian rock relief depicts *Khosrow II Parviz* heroically engaged in a royal boar hunt. The king is shown mounted, surrounded by attendants, and portrayed with regal splendor. The scene embodies the Sasanian ideal of divine kingship *"farr"*—linking mastery over nature with political legitimacy. Taq-e Bostan served as both a political statement and a sacred landscape, immortalizing the king as the rightful and divinely favored ruler of Iran.

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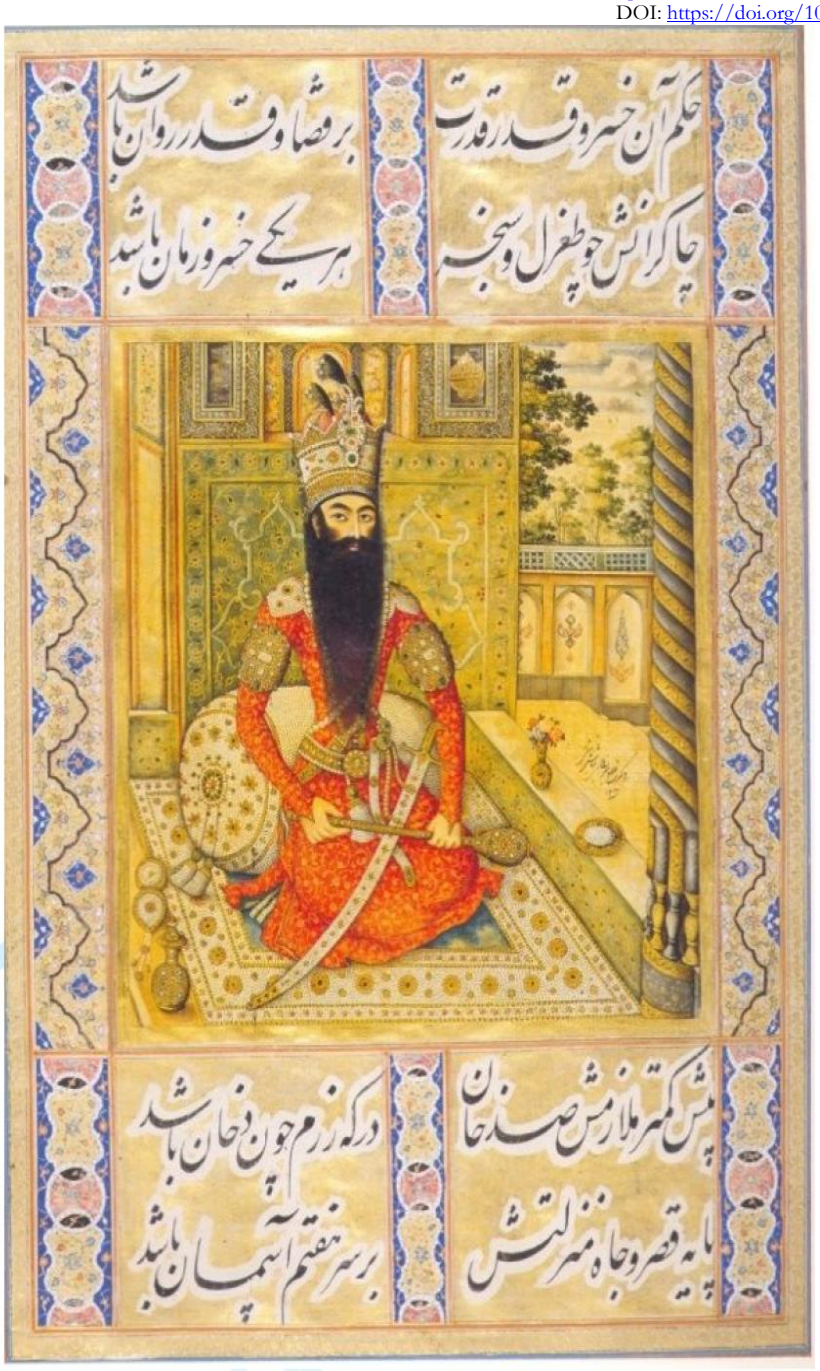

Portrait of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar Wearing the Kayani Crown

From the *Divan-e Khaghan* ,Opaque watercolor and gold on paper ,Artist: Mirza Baba Date: 1217 AH / 1175 SH / ca. 1802 CE, Location: The Royal Library, British Library (UK)

This finely illuminated portrait by *Mirza Baba*, court painter of Fath-Ali Shah, presents the Qajar monarch enthroned and adorned with the Kayani Crown, symbolically linking him to the pre-Islamic kings of Iran. With lavish use of gold and royal regalia, this miniature reflects both the artistic conventions of early Qajar painting and the monarch's conscious appropriation of Sasanian and Kayanian royal imagery to assert his legitimacy, majesty, and *"farr-e izadi"* (divine glory).

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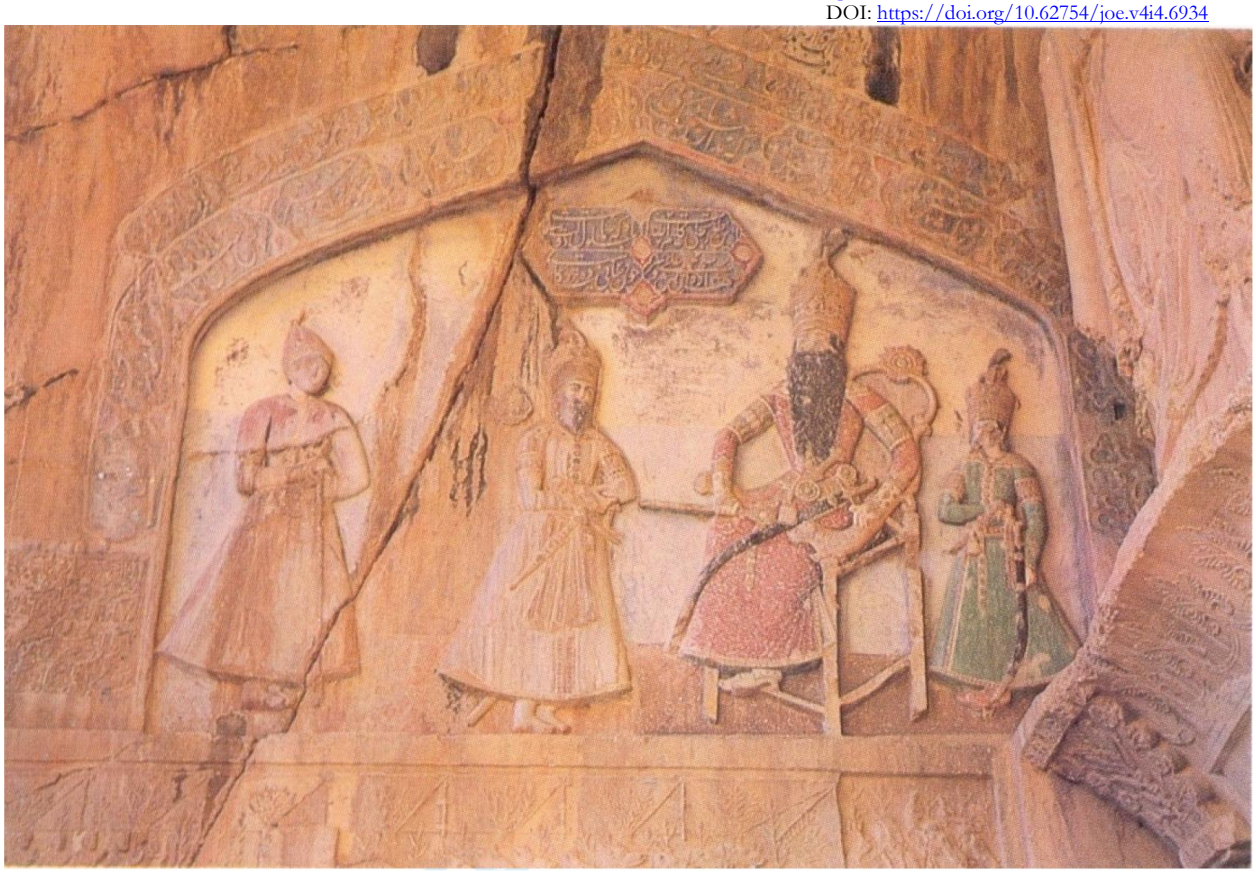

Rock Relief of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar at Taq-e Bostan

Date: Reign of Fath-Ali Shah Qajar (1212–1250 AH / 1797–1834 CE) Location: Taq-e Bostan, Kermanshah, Iran.

This grand bas-relief, carved adjacent to the Sasanian rock reliefs at Taq-e Bostan, depicts Fath-Ali Shah Qajar seated majestically on a royal throne, adorned with the Kayani crown. The scene consciously emulates the iconographic tradition of the Sasanian kings—particularly the imagery of Khosrow Parviz— and vividly reflects the Qajar dynasty's deliberate attempt to revive and appropriate the ancient concept of *"farr"* (divine royal glory) from pre-Islamic Persian kingship.

Surrounding the monarch are princes, courtiers, and high-ranking military officials in a formal audience (bar-'am), echoing the ceremonial grandeur described in the *Shahnameh* and royal Sasanian iconography. This relief stands as one of the rare monumental stone carvings produced in the Islamic era that deliberately engages with and reinterprets the aesthetics of pre-Islamic Iranian sovereignty.

As such, it symbolically bridges a millennium of royal imagery, asserting the Qajar claim to the enduring legacy of Persian kingship.

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Obverse and Reverse of Abbas Mirza's Medal

Material: Gold, Date: Qajar Period, Reign of Fath-Ali Shah (1212–1250 AH / 1797–1834 CE) Private Collection of Rabino

This gold medal, attributed to Abbas Mirza—crown prince and military reformer of the Qajar dynasty—features on its obverse the Lion and Sun emblem, rising behind the lion in a pose symbolic of royal authority. Above, inscriptions highlight the prince's titles, including "Jahāndār Shah Abbas the Young," invoking the poetic and political vocabulary of ancient Iranian kingship.

The reverse bears an epigraphic couplet celebrating divine sanction and princely valor:

"The world-conquering lion who seized the reins of the enemy— From the sun-like zeal of our sovereign, he earned this badge."

Notably, the term *"Roushan-Rowān"* (Enlightened Soul), associated with Abbas Mirza in this inscription, was a title once used for Khosrow I (Anushirwan), the just Sasanian king. The presence of Quranic verses in the surrounding inscriptions further underscores the Qajar fusion of Islamic legitimacy with revived preIslamic royal symbolism.

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Relief Depicting the Victory of Shapur I over the Roman Emperor at Bishapur

This monumental stone relief commemorates the triumph of Shapur I, the illustrious Sasanian king, over the Roman Emperor. Situated at the ancient city of Bishapur, the relief vividly portrays the moment of conquest, symbolizing the assertion of Persian imperial power against the dominant Roman Empire.

The scene reflects not only a military victory but also the divine favor and legitimacy bestowed upon Shapur I, reinforcing his *"farr"*—the royal glory central to Iranian kingship ideology. This relief stands as a lasting testament to the Sasanian dynasty's political and cultural influence, an artistic heritage that Qajar rulers would later consciously emulate to assert continuity with their ancient predecessors.

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The Aqdas Insignia, Gold Inlaid with Diamonds (1287 AH / 1245 SH, Naserid Era)

Tehran Museum of Anthropology

This exquisite insignia, crafted from gold and richly adorned with diamonds, dates to the Naserid period. It exemplifies the luxurious artistry and imperial symbolism characteristic of Qajar-era regalia, embodying both royal authority and the continuation of Persian ceremonial traditions.

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Commemorative Medal of the Visit to the Armoury, Silver (1301 AH / 1259 SH)

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Tehran Museum of Anthropology

Ahmad Shah Medal for Officers, Silver (1337 AH / 1295 SH)

This silver medal was struck to commemorate a visit to the royal armoury during the Qajar era. The design features symbolic motifs reflecting the continuation of ancient Persian royal iconography, merging traditional artistry with contemporary Qajar ceremonial practices.

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Relief of Shapur III before Shapur II at Taq Bostan (383–388 AD)

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