Empire and Authority in Sasanian Babylonia:
The Rabbis and King Shapur in Dialogue

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Introduction

The study of “rabbis and others” has contributed profoundly to rabbinists’ knowledge of late antique Jewish identity and culture, especially with respect to the Greco-Roman and Christian contexts of the rabbinic world. For decades now, scholars interested in Palestinian Judaism have published widely on the subject of the Jewish-Gentile dichotomy as expressed in the Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrash, drawing our attention to how rabbinic texts use internal and external “others” to construct identity and engage problems and anxieties otherwise untreatable.1 Rabbinic texts frequently narrate voices of others in order to place

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rabbinic ideas in relation to unrabbinic ones, thereby enhancing the rabbis’ own prestige over against these others while simultaneously negotiating boundaries of self-identity through an “us-them” dialectic. Rabbinic texts typically do not discuss non-Jewish others with any ethnographic slant, but rather employ them as characters, symbols or icons in self-reflective narratives that explicate Jewish traditions and rabbinic issues. This inward tendency of course does not preclude the formative role that various historical and cultural contexts play in texts about “rabbis and others,” since these texts’ rhetorical or ideological meanings are often informed by the non-Jewish socio-cultural systems in which they were produced. This interplay between text and context is particularly germane in dialogues in rabbinic literature between the sages and their “imperial others” in Rome and Persia, since such dialogues contain traditions and attitudes towards the imperial ruling classes who tacitly promoted their own political propaganda and religious ideologies within broader socio-cultural and political spheres of life in Roman Palestine and Sasanian Babylonia to which the Jews were subject.

In this article I explore these issues as they play out in three Babylonian talmudic texts that depict the sages in dialogue with a classic “Persian example of Midrash interpreted in its Hellenistic context, Burton L. Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates: Studies in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).


3 See, for instance, an explanation of historical narratives that helps to illuminate how the talmudic and Zoroastrian narratives about Shapur invoke the king as an icon or symbol in their internal literary expression of a worldview, in Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 88: “Viewed in a purely formal way, a historical narrative is not only a reproduction of the events reported in it, but also a complex of symbols which gives us directions for finding an icon of the structure of those events in our literary tradition.” The definition of culture by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 89 also elucidates the ways in which the sages used historical personages as symbols to communicate meaning: culture is a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”

4 This article adds to the recent increase of scholarly attention paid to the Sasanian context of the Talmud, a sub-field in rabbinics spawned largely by the research of Yaakov Elman; for a representative overview, see esp. Elman, “Middle Persian Culture and Babylonian Sages: Accommodation and Resistance in the Shaping of Rabbinic Legal Tradition,” in *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud*, 165–97, and idem, “Talmud ii. Rabbinic Literature and Middle Persian texts,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online ed., 2010, at www.iranica.com/articles/talmud-ii, including bibliographies. For a recent collection of essays that demonstrate the diverse methods used in the field, see also Carol Bakhos and M. Rahim Shayegan, eds., *The Talmud in Its Iranian Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).
sian other,” the Sasanian king Shapur. The Talmud contains references to both Shapur I (239/40–270/72 CE [?]) and Shapur II (309–379 CE). The king to whom each of these texts refers is sometimes decipherable based on internal factors (discussed in more detail below). In other texts we can demarcate between Shapur I and II based on factors such as historical events and the mention of Ifra Hormiz (Shapur II’s mother). In a number of talmudic texts, however, the reference to Shapur is too vague to be meant or interpreted as referring to one of the two kings specifically; in these instances, the name King Shapur is used generically, not unlike the imperial ethnic appellation, “the Persians.”

The first two of the three talmudic texts that I examine in detail in this article (b. B. Metsi’a 119a and b. Ber. 56a) are clearly about Shapur I. The third passage (b. ‘Abod. Zar. 76b) is ambiguous. I have included it here because it buttresses the arguments that I make regarding the role of Shapur as an icon of authority in the Talmud. Despite the difficulties of categorizing our texts, the references in the Talmud to Shapur qua other point to a similar ideological attachment to the Persian kings.

While each of the three talmudic texts examined in this article deals with a separate halakhic issue (i.e., civil law, dream interpretation, and dietary law), what their narrative components share is their invocation of Shapur I as a generally positive figure who represents Persian imper-
ial authority and whose Judaized words and/or deeds demonstrate or praise rabbinic thought. These texts about Shapur achieve this effect on both a formal level, in that the creators insert the sage-king encounters as constructive illustrations of the text’s halakhic conclusions, and on the level of content, i.e., in the king’s pro-rabbinic stance. In our three texts, Shapur qua other cooperates as a manufactured interlocutor who is a symbol of a Persian (but significantly not Mazdayasnian) figure of imperial authority interested in hearing about, and in one case even performing, the rabbis’ amazing laws. These texts create a discursive opportunity wherein the Babylonian rabbis could not only self-aggrandize their reputation as players on the Sasanian royal scene, but also latently engage issues of Babylonian rabbinic authority and identity, including how they reckoned such issues vis-à-vis the Persian empire itself.

In the three texts analyzed in this article, the rabbis use the sage-Shapur dichotomy in order to address several specific topics related to Babylonian rabbinic authority and identity: (a) the authority behind the codification of tractates and, more generally, the relationship between rabbinic authority and the rule of the Persian empire (b. B. Metsi’a 119a); (b) the efficacy of rabbinic knowledge over the fate of the Roman and Persian empires (b. Ber. 56a); and (c) the boundaries of Babylonian Jewish identity in relation to Persia and “others” more generally, especially with respect to sexual and dietary practices (b. ‘Abod. Zar. 76b).

The Sasanian Context of the Talmud’s Images of Shapur I

That the rabbis choose Shapur I and not another Sasanian monarch to represent a non-rabbinic voice of authority can in part be explained by the fact that they and their audience who lived in Sasanian Babylonia, both during and after Shapur’s reign, were exposed to Persian imperial propagandistic and Zoroastrian priestly traditions about the king. Although our three sage-Shapur dialogues in the Talmud do not contain any direct citations from Middle Persian (MP) sources, the Sasanians’ sustained control over Shapur’s legacy in ways that promoted their ongoing political and religious hegemony was a source of ambient cultural influence for the rabbis’ literary creations about the king. While there is little doubt that Jewish and Persian societies in Sasanian Iran each maintained a unique notion of history and connection to the past,9

9 For more on this idea from an anthropological point of view, see, for instance, Kath Weston, “Canonical and Anticanonical Histories,” in Ethnographica Moralia: Experiments in Interpretive Anthropology, ed. N. Panourgia and G. E. Marcus (New...
including the role played by formative political and religious figures, these societies also shared an ideological plane of collective memory whereby one society’s historical narratives were never isolated from those of other societies within its realm of social or intellectual contact. In the webs of memory among Sasanian Mesopotamian inhabitants who lived in a multicultural world, the Persian imperial ideology about its own kings and past played a particularly significant and *sui generis* role, typically driven by the empire’s quest for authority over internal and external others. MP sources of a wide variety offer insight into these aspects of ancient Persian civilization.

The logic behind the connection that I make between the rabbis’ representations of Shapur I and Sasanian socio-cultural developments (e.g., imperial ideology and Zoroastrian historiography) presupposes a direct relationship between the Bavli as a literary corpus and western Sasanian society and culture. One of my goals in contextualizing the Talmud’s images of Shapur I is to expose some of the “integral unity” of late antique Sasanian society through which I can define the rabbis’ use of Shapur I as a shared symbol of authority, thereby using a “culture-specific, contextualist approach” to the Bavli’s representations.

Unfortunately, scholars who compare talmudic and MP sources face a complex task beset with significant difficulties. In my recent disser-

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10 For a classic book that deals with the relationship between memory, society, and authority, see Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditte (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), and the helpful summary by Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993) 79: “For Halbwachs … the problem of memory is also one of social power. What we remember depends on the contexts in which we find ourselves and the groups to which we happen to relate. The depth and shape of our collective memory reflect this configuration of social forces that vie for our attention.”


I outline numerous factors that affect and frequently hinder the strict juxtaposition of these two corpora, including: (a) the potential for anachronism in citing post-Sasanian Pahlavi sources as reflective of Sasanian-era phenomena and thus as intrinsically comparable to talmudic sources; (b) the differing internal evolution of talmudic and MP sources, in particular their relationship to past scriptural writings, processes of codification, and types of genres; and (c) the varying geographical and socio-cultural contexts of production between the two corpora. Once we take into consideration these interdisciplinary factors, it becomes clear that while there exist specific MP sources that are of high value for the comparative study of pre-Islamic talmudic and Zoroastrian phenomena, the wholesale use of MP texts in comparison with the Bavli is irresponsible, in large part because of the nascent state of MP studies. Before drawing conclusions based on strict textual comparisons, comparativists ought to collectively define key “proofs of comparability” or attempt to “delimit the legitimate province of an influence.”

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13 For a more thorough discussion with notes, see Mokhtarian, “Rabbinic Portrayals of Persia,” 1–37.
14 For example, “The Book of a Thousand Judgments” (Madayan i Hazar Dadestan) a compilation of late Sasanian case law, and much of the Zand, the translation-cum-commentary on the Avesta.
15 Sasanian historians have long relied on the idea that post-Sasanian Pahlavi sources are reflective of Sasanian Zoroastrian phenomena. While there is no doubt that certain passages of some post-Sasanian sources emanate from earlier oral and/or textual backgrounds dating back centuries, Iranists’ ability to deconstruct post-Sasanian books based on the internal features is not nearly as advanced as talmudists’ ability to parse and date rabbinic traditions. Moreover, MP scholars have not reached a clear consensus on the consequential topic of the extent to which the Zoroastrian priesthood’s social rupture caused by the Arab conquests affected the MP literature produced in the eighth century onwards. The lack of research into MP literature is, therefore, a major hindrance to Irano-Talmudica, though scholars are making progress on the issue, including through comparative models; see, for instance, Alberto Cantera, Studien zur Pahlavi-Übersetzung des Avesta (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), who dates some of the Zand to the Sasanian era, and the review by Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Cantera, Pahlavi-Übersetzung des Avesta,” Kratylos 53 (2008) 1–20; Yaakov Elman, “Towards an Intellectual History of Sasanian Law: An Intergenerational Dispute in Hôrbedêstañ 9 and Its Rabbinic Parallels,” in Talmud in Its Iranian Context, 21–57; Yuhun Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, “Relentless Allusion: Intertextuality and the Reading of Zoroastrian Interpretive Literature,” ibid., 206–232; Shai Secunda, “The Sasanian ‘Stam’: Orality and the Composition of Babylonian Rabbinic and Zoroastrian Legal Literature,” ibid., 140–60. The application of commonly used methods and theories in rabbinics on MP sources is helpful in advancing MP studies but, pending further research into MP literature, should avoid any automatic assumption that parallel formal features in talmudic and MP sources, such as an anonymous voice, retain the same internal significance in the history of the oral and written transmission of Zoroastrian works as the stammtaitic layer possesses in the Babylonian Talmud.
16 This term is taken from Jonathan Z. Smith, Imagining Religion: From Babylon to
ence”¹⁷ between them according to essential determining factors such as genre, social context of production, and history of transmission.

In addition to these methodological difficulties, comparing talmudic and MP texts is further complicated by the general evasiveness that the rabbis and Zoroastrian priests express towards one another in their writings. This feature of late antique writing that suppresses explicit references towards “others” forces comparativists to bear the burden of proof in gauging which “literary affinities”¹⁸ between talmudic and MP sources are corroborated evidence of intercultural activity rooted in the socio-historical experiences of the rabbis and Zoroastrian priests, versus which are phenomenological similarities that we are constructing out of a desire to discover influences.

Faced with these potential pitfalls, the field of Irano-Talmudica requires the development of creative methodologies that help to circumvent some of the inherent problems of comparing talmudic and MP primary sources. One practical approach is to emphasize the utilization of the vast resources of secondary literature in Iranology, especially those on the topics of Sasanian society and religious culture. In addition to prudently comparing literary sources, talmudists can continue to make lasting contributions to their discipline through the integration and application of Iranists’ basic theses to their research on the rabbis’ broader socio-cultural horizon in Sasanian Iran. For instance, Iranists’ frequent picture of Sasanian Mesopotamia as a culturally interactive time and place replete with “others” has a direct bearing on the long-standing proclivity in talmudic studies for internal methodologies that primarily define Babylonian rabbinic culture in relation to other rabbinic (or Jewish) cultures, rather than non-Jewish ones.¹⁹ Internal modes of talmudic textual analysis that do not engage this aspect of the rabbis’ larger social context rest in part on an incorrect presupposition that Babylonian rabbinic culture and identity-formation existed in iso-
lation from surrounding cultures, a presupposition that past studies in Iranology serve to challenge and contradict. Thus, as this example helps to show, one method of contextualizing the Bavli is to integrate the study of Sasanian society and religious culture into talmudic studies in a way that both heeds the limits of juxtaposing literary sources and respects the present state of each of the two historically distinct academic disciplines (i.e., their extant data, established nomenclature, current state of knowledge, scientific standards, key debates, and major theses).

My choice of Shapur I as a test case for contextualizing the Talmud in Sasanian Persia stems largely from the fact that both the Talmud and MP sources explicitly refer to the monarch with relative frequency. For talmudists, the Persian empire’s inscriptions and Zoroastrian historiographical writings about Shapur I are an additional research tool that helps delineate the broader Sasanian frames of reference in relation to which the talmudic authors were themselves operating. Not surprisingly, however, there are chronological problems with the comparison of talmudic and Persian sources about Shapur I. The richest MP sources about this monarch are typically found in either (1) early Sasanian inscriptions from the era of Ardashir and Shapur or just thereafter (ca. 230–300 CE), or (2) post-Sasanian Zoroastrian historiographical narratives written from a priestly perspective, the contents of which may or may not reflect Sasanian-era attitudes and traditions, depending on which text and/or literary strata we are citing. Thus, this dearth of information in MP regarding the indigenous attitude towards Shapur emanating from the fourth through at least the fifth centuries lessens MP sources’ evidentiary value to the project of contextualizing the Bavli’s images of Shapur, since it was during these same centuries that there was prolific rabbinic activity. The textual comparisons are clearly chronologically challenged.

Despite this, there is contextual value in analyzing the Talmud’s images of Shapur in light of MP epigraphic and historiographical sources. For example, included in the golden age of the official art form of Sasanian rock reliefs dating from the reign of Ardashir (224–239/40 CE) until the early fourth century is the first lengthy Sasanian

\[20\] As noted by Georgina Hermann, Sasanian rock reliefs, most of which are attested in the region of Fars, began in the reign of the first monarch Ardashir, who “initiated one of the most coherent and remarkable periods of rock relief art”; Hermann, “The Rock Reliefs of Sasanian Iran,” in Mesopotamia and Iran in the Parthian and Sasanian Periods: Rejection and Revival c. 238 B.C–AD 642: Proceedings of a Seminar in Memory of Vladimir G. Lukonin, ed. J. Curtis (London: British Museum, 2000) 35–45, esp. 36.
imperial narrative, attested in Shapur I’s trilingual *res gestae* on the walls of the Ka’ba-ye Zardusht (“Zoroaster’s Cube”) at Naqsh-i Rostam near Persepolis (ŠKZ).21 This and other inscriptions composed during the early Sasanian era, when combined with the other material evidence from Shapur I’s era, such as numismatic remains,22 together serve as primary first-person testimonies for the reconstruction of the early Persian empire’s ideological underpinnings and construction of an authoritative imperial identity. In addition, MP literary works such as *Karnamag i Ardaxsher i Pabagan* (“The Book of the Deeds of Ardashir”) and *Denkard* (“Acts of the Religion”), which were written from a sacerdotal perspective centuries after Shapur’s reign, depict the monarch in historical narratives that reflect their late and/or post-Sasanian attitudes towards Shapur’s reign and era.23 When seen in totality, both the epigraphic and literary sources depict Shapur as the figure of early Sasanian imperial authority par excellence and his era as one of Sasanian self-definition resulting from the solidification of imperial and cul-

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23 MP texts about Shapur I include passages in the *Karnamag* and *Denkard* discussed below, as well as in the geographical treatise edited by Touraj Daryaee, *Šahrestāntha i Erānšahr: A Middle Persian Text on Late Antique Geography, Epic, and History* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2002), lines 13, 25, 43, 48, on 14–16 and 18–20, where it describes the king’s city-building. In other Pahlavi texts that discuss the Sasanian kings in abbreviated list form, Shapur I is typically ignored; for two examples, see (1) the long narrative about the destruction endured by Eranshahr over the millennia in the *Bundahishn* in Behramgore Tehmuras Anklesaria, *Zand-Akāsīh: Iranian or Greater Bundahišn: Transliteration and Translation into English* (Bombay: Published for the Rahnumae Mazdayasnan Sabha by its Honorary Secretary Dastur Framroze A. Bode, 1956) ch. 33.1–22, 272–79, alongside the transcription by Fazlollah Pakzad, *Bundahišn – Zoroaṣṭričke Kosmogonie und Kosmologie, Band I, Kritische Edition* (Tehran: Centre for the Great Islamic Encyclopaedia, 2005) 362–69; and (2) a discussion of the rite of ordeal in Jaleh Amouzgar and Ahmad Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième livre du Dēnkard: transcription, traduction, et commentaire* (Paris: Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes, 2000) ch. 22, 70–71.
tural institutions, the response to its Parthian heritage, and military gains over Rome.24 Each of these historical developments played a part in the Sasanian construction of a dynastic identity that promoted its imperial authority among inhabitants over the empire. For centuries after his reign, the early Persian monarch Shapur I remained a symbol of authority, including in the Babylonian Talmud.

Shmuel, Shapur, and Questions of Authority in Sasanian Mesopotamia

The Jewish sage in the Babylonian Talmud with whom king Shapur most frequently interacts is the first-generation Amora Shmuel (d. ca. 254(?))25. The Talmud portrays the king and his subject as having an affable relationship: in one text Shmuel juggles eight glasses of wine for the king’s entertainment (b. Sukkah 53a),26 while in another the two trade quips over the image in Zechariah 9:9 of the Messiah coming on a donkey (b. Sanh. 98a). In this latter dialogue, Shmuel is cited using


25 This date for Shmuel’s death during the reign of Shapur I is based on the gaonic source the Epistle to Rav Sherira Gaon; for more on these topics, see Isaiah Gafni, The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era: A Social and Cultural History (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1990) 36–45, 239–65. The relationship between Shmuel and Shapur in the Talmud was the focus of several works by German scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; see, for example, Jakob Horovitz, Mar Samuel und Schabur I: Zur Erklärung der letzten Zeilen des Talmudtraktats Baba Mezia (Breslau: M. and H. Marcus, 1936); David Zvi Hoffman, Mar Samuel: Rector der jüdischen Akademie zu Nehardea in Babylonien; Lebensbild eines talmudischen Weisen der ersten Hälfte des dritten Jahrhunderts, nach den Quellen dargestellt (Leipzig: O. Leiner, 1873) 45–48; and Siegmund Fessler, Mar Samuel, der bedeutendste Amora (Breslau: E. Frank, 1879). For another discussion, see Jacob Neusner, A History of the Jews in Babylonia (5 vols., Leiden: Brill, 1965–1970) 2.64–72.

26 This image of Shmuel entertaining the king by juggling may stem from a common motif found in MP literature about entertainment at the Sasanian court; see, for instance, the text edited and translated by Davoud Monchi-Zadeh, “Xusrōv i Kavatān ut Rētak: Pahlavi Text. Transcription and Translation,” in Hommages et Opera Minora. Volume VIII: Monumentum Georg Morgensterniae II (Acta Iranica 22; Leiden: Brill, 1982) 47–92, which contains the word tās-bāzī, “juggling with cups” (see 76–77 n. 103), the same stunt Shmuel performs for the king in b. Sukkah 53a.
several vernacular MP loanwords when talking to the king (such as *xar hazār gōnag*, “a donkey of a thousand colors”\(^\text{27}\)) – a literary detail that highlights the sage’s marked comfort with Persian culture.\(^\text{28}\) Whether Shmuel and Shapur were in reality ever acquainted or not is unfortunately impossible to deduce from our available evidence. It seems unlikely that any of the Shmuel-Shapur talmudic texts, which are often short and anecdotal, reflect actual encounters between the two men, though based on our knowledge of Sasanian history, it is not completely unimaginable that the early Sasanian court, a place of *savoir vivre* where intellectual culture was mediated and produced, could have called upon the renowned sage, “the judge of the Diaspora” (*b. Sanh.* 17b), to be a representative of the Jewish communities in Babylonia.

Faced with the limits in our evidence, what we can know for certain is that the Talmud links Shmuel and Shapur not only because they are contemporaries, but also because both represent rabbinic and imperial authority at the dawn of an expanding and transformative Persian political order. In third-century Sasanian Babylonia, the Jewish sages and Sasanian monarchy were both gradually becoming power-holders over their respective communities, organizing their legal hegemony via claims to authority by divine right, pure lineage, and authoritative chains of traditions. When the Talmud juxtaposes Shmuel with Shapur, it is concerned with this analogy between rabbinic and Persian authority.

The association between the two leaders is even more pronounced in the later strata of the Talmud, where on two occasions Rav Nahman (d. ca. 356) and the anonymous authors conflate them into a single identity. The generations after Shmuel explicitly refer to the sage by the name King Shapur, invoking the Persian other as a voice of authority.

(Rav Nahman) said to (Rava): Have I not told you not to say anything to me while I sit in judgment? For Huna, our friend, said about me: King Shapur and I are brothers regarding the law. This man is a well-known robber, and I want to punish him.\(^\text{29}\)

As centuries passed in Jewish Babylonia, Shapur I’s “otherness” became more readily absorbed into the rabbinic worldview as a designation for the sage Shmuel. This is especially true with respect to issues related to money (e.g., charity, bribery, etc.), which is the most common leitmotif

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\(^{28}\) For more on Shmuel’s acculturation to Persian norms, see Elman, “Middle Persian Culture,” 165–197, 174.

\(^{29}\) *b. Qam.* 96b. This excerpt appears amid a discussion regarding the penalties for robbery and, more specifically, in a case regarding stolen oxen.
in the Talmud’s representations of Shapur I and II, since according to rabbinic tradition Shmuel is traditionally thought to have been the preeminent authority over monetary legal matters. The text above clearly uses Shapur-as-Shmuel to connote the concept of authority, invoking the king as a means of expressing that two rabbis’ opinions were equally authoritative. Another text (b. Pesah. 54a) shows how the anonymous voice of the Talmud interprets earlier traditions’ use of the name King Shapur as referring to either Shmuel or Rava, the two sages who appear most frequently in the Talmud’s depictions of the monarch. Presumably, this text’s equation of Shmuel with Shapur is meant as an allusion to Shapur I, whereas the equation of Rava with Shapur is one to Shapur II.

But perhaps there were two people named Anah? Rava said: I shall say something that King Shapur did not say. And who is (this)? Shmuel. There are those who say that Rav Pappa said: I shall say something that King Shapur did not say. And who is (this)? Rava.

In this text the references to the Persian kings named Shapur are but another way of referring to the two great sages who were their contemporaries. In the tradition cited above, the stammaitic authors explicitly spell out the Amoraic name-swap, asking the rhetorical question (“And who is (this)?”) as a way to explain the meaningful conflation between the king and sage.

Before turning to our three talmudic dialogues, we should say more about the topic of legal authority in third-century Sasanian Babylonia, in particular the early Sasanian context of Shmuel’s principle that “the law of the empire is the law” (dina de-malkhuta dina). Shmuel’s principle, albeit cited in narrow civil cases, is a rabbinic formulation on what I argue was one of the central problems with which Babylonian rabbis who lived in the early Sasanian era were forced to deal – namely, the

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30 In other words, in calling Shmuel by the king’s name the Talmud is stating that the rabbi’s opinion is the authoritative one in such matters. For other relevant references, see also b. Hag. 5b on bribery; b. B. Metsi’â 85a (= b. Shabb. 113b) on Shapur’s wealth as compared to Rabbi’s stable-master (< MP âxwarr); b. B. Metsi’â 70b, b. B. Bat. 8a and 10b on Shapur giving money to charity and the poor; and b. B. Bat. 172b on loans.
31 The Talmud is here attempting to reconcile the contradiction between Gen 26:20, where Anah is called Zibeon’s brother, and Gen 26:24, where he is called his son.
32 b. Pesah. 54a and b. B. Bat. 115b. The manuscripts of this text vary, especially with respect to the second tradition; e.g., MS Vatican does not have the second reference to Rava.
33 Cf. b. Ned. 28a, b. Git. 10b, b. B. Qam. 113a, b. B. Bat. 54b and 55a. For several treatments of this phrase, see Shmuel Shilo, Dina De-Malkhuta Dina (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic, 1974); Leopold Löw, “Dina de-Malekhuta Dina,” Ben Chananja 5 (1862) 36–40; Neusner, Jews in Babylonia, 3.43–44.
interrelationship between (a) Babylonian Amoraic rabbinic law and authority, and (b) Sasanian imperial authority and policy over Jewish (and other non-Zoroastrian subjects’) legal issues, especially in matters of civil law like property ownership. Early Sasanian Iran was a time of intense self-definition for Jewish, Sasanian, and Zoroastrian elites, all of whom faced internal and external tensions about their group identity, including with respect to their legal authority. For the Babylonian rabbis, the fact that the transition from Tannaitic to Amoraic eras roughly coincided in time with the changeover from a loosely-centralized, Central Asian Arsacid rulership to a powerful Persian imperial machinery emanating from the same region (Fars) and political tradition as the ancient Achaemenids, engendered a need for them to redefine their group identity and legal authority from various perspectives. The Sasanian Zoroastrian priesthood, whose clergy functioned in various administrative, ritual, and scholarly capacities throughout the Sasanian era, also greatly contributed to the changing dynamics of authority structures in late antique Iran.

Once “the bond snapped” (as Rav describes the change of empires in <Abod. Zar. 10b–11a>), the Babylonian Amoraim, after centuries of near silence, began to construct an ideology of Babylonian rabbinic authority that would allow their Jewish culture to persist and modernize in the new socio-political environment of Sasanian Babylonia. One way that they achieved these goals was to appropriate symbols of Persian imperial authority as part of their own ideological project. Shmuel’s principle of dina de-malkhuta dina, combined with how the Talmud employs “Shapur as other” as part of their pro-Babylonian rhetoric, shows that the rabbis construe the authority of the early Sasanian empire as upholding Babylonian rabbinic authority and identity.

The topics of religious and imperial authority were also of great interest to the early Sasanian kings. For the Mazdayasnian king Shapur I, policy decisions about the empire’s sundry religions, including how the empire should define itself and assert Zoroastrianism, were as much if not more affected by political considerations as by religious zeal or

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fidelity. \(^{37}\) With respect to the non-Mazdayasnian religious communities living under Sasanian rule, the early Sasanian policy appears to have been to allow the leaders of each to exercise jurisdiction over legal cases involving members of their own group, thereby maintaining an umbrella of imperial authority over its provinces without spawning rebellions or resentment among the masses – a tactic reminiscent of the Persian Achaemenids’ strategy. \(^{38}\) Taxes paid to the imperial government, among other services, were presumably central features of any such agreement. \(^{39}\) Driven by political realities of a vast new imperial reign, the earliest Sasanian kings did not rule through the imposition of a universal religion on the masses. The consolidation of power and/or establishment of institutions among the Zoroastrian elite likely gained momentum during but especially after the reign of Shapur I, a trend documented in the rise of the high priest Kirder, who may or may not have attempted to spread Mazda-worship and persecute Jews and others. \(^{40}\)

\(^{37}\) This is a debated issue in Sasanian history, on which see Shaul Shaked, “Religion in the Late Sasanian Period: Eran, Aneran, and other Religious Designations,” in The Sasanian Era, ed. V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart (The Idea of Iran 3; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008) 103–17, where the author emphasizes the political motivations behind the early Sasanians’ religious policies, and Philip G. Kreyenbroek, “How Pious was Shapur I?” ibid., 7–16, where the author explores the king’s religiosity. In ŠKZ, Shapur discusses religious matters at length and characterizes the Sasanian throne as a divine calling. While there is little doubt that Shapur I worshipped Ohrmazd and other deities like Anahid, founded sacred fire temples, practiced consanguineous marriage, and favored priests, ancient Iranists continue to debate the extent to which Zoroastrianism existed as an organized, single doctrine of belief and practice in his reign. Shapur’s relative openness towards other religions is attested in the rise of Mani, who had the king’s permission to preach his message across the empire, and his book, Shabuhragan (“Dedicated to Shapur”), on which see David Neil MacKenzie, “Mani’s Šābuhragan I,” BSOAS 42 (1979) 500–34; idem, “Mani’s Šābuhragan II,” BSOAS 43 (1980) 288–310; Manfred Hutter, Manis Kosmogonische Šābuhragan-Texte: Edition, Kommentar und literaturgeschichtliche Einordnung der manichäisch-mittelpersischen Handschriften M 98/99 I und M 7980–7984 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992). The general impression that Pahlavi sources give of Shapur’s religiosity is one of a believing Mazdayasnian who promoted the good religion and ordered the Avesta to be collected and reconstituted, but who was at the same time open to the value of non-Mazdayasnian knowledge (see more below).

\(^{38}\) For more on this topic, see Mokhtarian, “Rabbinic Portrayals of Persia,” 139–45.


\(^{40}\) There is a vast literature on this important figure in early Sasanian history; see, for instance, Philippe Gignoux, Les quatre inscriptions du mage Kirdîr: textes et concordances (Paris: Peeters, 1991), esp. 69–70 for the reference to the persecution of Jews and other religious minorities in the inscriptions; Moshe Beer, “Gezerotav shel Kartîr al Yehudei Bavel,” Tarbiz 55 (1986) 525–39; idem, “Al Shalosh Gezerot she-Nigzeru al Yehudei Bavel me-Me’ah ha-Shelishit,” Iran-Judaica, ed. A. Netzer and S. Shaked (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1982) 25–37; and especially the most recent treatment of
During his reign, Shapur I devised a political ideology that managed the diversity of religious communities in the empire. For instance, his military victories over Rome and his subsequent policy of deporting inhabitants of Aneran (“Non-Iran”), including Hellenized Christians, to various regions in the Persian empire including Mesopotamia warranted the honorific inscribed on the king’s res gestae (ŠKZ) and preserved as the figurative Sasanian title by subsequent Persian kings until the reign of Shapur III (383–88 CE): “I am the Mazda-worshipping god Shapur, King of Kings of Iran and Non-Iran.” Shapur’s third-century propagandistic epic defines the Sasanian King of Kings as the divinely administered imperial authority over all of the provinces of his and his enemy’s realm, regardless of ethnic or religious make-up.

In addition to Shapur’s third-century epigraph, the MP narrative Karnamag (the Karn.) and Ferdowsi’s eleventh-century New Persian epic Shahname (“The Book of Kings”) also emphasize Shapur’s role as the defining figure of imperial authority. These later works from the late Sasanian and/or early Islamic period use the third-century monarch in


For more on the significance of this formative event in Iranian religious history, see, for instance, Christelle Jullien, “La minorité chrétienne ‘grecque’ en terre d’Iran à l’époque sassanide,” in *Chrétien en terre d’Iran: implantation et acculturation*, ed. Rika Gyselein (Studia Iranica, Cahier 33, vol. 1; Paris: Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes, 2006) 105–42; and Kalmin, *Jewish Babylonia*, 5–8 and n. 39; and for Shapur’s description of this event in the ŠKZ, see Back, *Die sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*, 324–26, where the inscription records that the deportees from the Roman Empire (= Aneran) were settled in Persis, Parthia, Khuzestan, and Mesopotamia, among other provinces.


For a critical edition, see Frantz Grenet, *La geste d’Ardashîr fils de Pâbag: Kârnâmâg r Ardaxšēr r Pābagān* (Die: Editions A Die, 2003). The exact date of the Karn.’s composition is not entirely clear, as a result of the book having undergone several stages of redaction, the last taking place perhaps as late as the ninth century. Based on linguistic evidence that points to the grammar of certain passages resembling MP more than New Persian phenomena, as well as on several historical references made in the book, scholars have dated certain passages, especially at the beginning of the book, to the first half of the seventh century CE. For more on the dating of this text, see Grenet, *La geste*, 26, and Maria Macuch, “Pahlavi Literature,” in *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran*, ed. R. E. Emmerick and M. Macuch (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009) 116–96, esp. 172 and 178–79.
narratives championing the legitimacy of the Sasanians’ claims to imperial authority through King Ardashir’s genealogical descent from the Parthian noble families of Ardawan and Mehran. In one romanticized narrative in the Karn., for instance, the Zoroastrian priests describe how the “Chief Priest of the Empire” (mowbedən mowbed) goes against Ardashir’s orders and saves Shapur I’s mother, who is Ardawan’s daughter and Ardashir’s concubine, from execution after she attempts to poison Ardashir. In this story Shapur I represents the heroic boy who perpetuates the Sasanian imperial authority that was almost lost with the recklessness of his father Ardashir. In general, the ideological aim of this narrative represents a late or post-Sasanian priestly construct that promotes a point of view supporting the legitimacy of the early Sasanian kings as rightful heirs of authority from the Parthians. The generic continuity of ancient Zoroastrianism was a powerful notion to the priestly authors of Pahlavi historiography.

As we have seen, the third century was a time of great change in the Near Eastern world. In around thirty years of rule, Shapur I was able to manage the nascent empire in ways that promoted its imperial authority over rapidly expanding populations, including non-Iranians. This political process caused ruptures to the old structures of authority in Sasanian Babylonia, including ones that would influence the rabbis’ conception of their own authority relative to the Persian Empire. Shmuel’s principle of dina de-malkhuta dina in this way reflects third-century imperial culture. Moreover, the third-century transformations instigated by Shapur’s reign also continued to be a relevant topic of contemplation for later eras. In Jewish and Zoroastrian writings dating from the third through tenth centuries, the second Sasanian king became a symbolic figure who stood for the issues of his transformative era – that is to say, as the Sasanian era unfolded, the Sasanian monarchy and its inhabitants continued to re-imagine and recalculate their own definitions of identity and authority vis-à-vis their predecessors, upon whose authoritative traditions and laws they relied and expanded. For the Babylonian rabbis, Shapur and Shapur’s era thus became literary subjects that they could invoke in order to engage issues of Babylonian rabbinic identity and authority that were inextricably linked to earlier sages from Shapur’s era like Shmuel. The following three talmudic texts about the sages and Shapur in dialogue demonstrate how the Babylonian sages use Shapur as a “Persian other” in narratives in which they negotiate their group identity and conception of authority.

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45 Grenet, La geste, 100–01.
The Authority of Codification: Shapur Praises Rabbinic Law

The first sage-Shapur dialogue that we will examine (b. B. Metsi’a 118b–119a) closes the tractate. It contains a brief, two-sentence dialogue in which the rabbis report their approval of Rabbi Shimon’s halakha to King Shapur, who then praises the Tanna using the MP loanword ᴏʀɪन (“praise, blessing”) in a stately hortative construct (“Let us bring praise upon R. Shimon!”). The specific civil law under discussion in this passage – ownership in the case of neighboring gardens – does not carry any relevance for why Shapur appears in this text. In other words, there appear to be no specific Sasanian or Zoroastrian legal influences with respect to the Jewish civil case being discussed here that would cause the rabbis to invoke the Persian king. Instead, the author/editors of this sugya use the Shapur narrative in order to latently engage two specific issues of rabbinic authority: (a) rabbinic legal approbation, i.e., the Palestinian Amora Resh Lakish’s endorsement of the Tanna Rabbi Shimon’s ruling, and (b) the codification of a Bavli tractate in relation to the imperial authority of the Persian king. The voice of the “imperial other” Shapur adds a second, Persian layer of approval to Resh Lakish’s endorsement of Rabbi Shimon’s law.

Mishnah: (If there are) two gardens, one above the other, with vegetables between them, (who owns the vegetables)? … R. Shimon said: Any that the owner of the upper garden can reach by hand and grab belong to him, and the rest belong to the owner of the lower garden …

R. Shimon said: Any that the owner of the upper garden can reach by hand and grab belong to him, and the rest belong to the owner of the lower garden.47 They said in R. Yannai’s academy: Only if he does not strain himself. Rav Anan, and some say R. Yeremiah, asked: If (the owner of the upper garden) can reach the foliage but not the roots, or if he can reach the roots but not the foliage – what is the law? Let it stand. Ephraim the Scribe, a disciple of Resh Lakish, said in the name of Resh Lakish: The halakha is in accordance with R. Shimon. They reported (this) to King Shapur. (King Shapur) said to them: Let us bring praise (afрин) upon R. Shimon!

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46 See Sokoloff, A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, 158, including his reference to the Aruch. This word appears in MP inscriptions, on which see Back, Die sassanidischen Staatsinschriften, 186, and is common in the Pahlavi corpus.

47 This citation from the Mishnah is repeated in its fuller context in the previous folio page.

48 This word has variant spellings as well as differing commentarial interpretations; e.g., see MS Hamburg and the Aruch Completum, which read ḥapriya from the root p-r-y, “to bear fruit, grow, propagate.” For other manuscript variants in the last lines of this passage, compare MS Vatican’s addition of Resh Lakish and the notes in R. N. N. Rabbinowicz, Variae Lectiones in Mischnam et in Talmud Babylonicum, vol. 13, Baba Mezia (Munich: E. Huber, 1883) 358.
After the law of Rabbi Shimon declaring that the upper owner keeps whatever vegetables he can reach by hand, Rabbi Yannai’s academy is cited giving a stipulation on this practice – namely, that the upper owner must not “strain himself” while reaching for the vegetables, a stipulation of Rabbi Yannai that is also found in the Yerushalmi discussion to this mishnah. The text then raises Rav Anan’s question regarding the law in the case of an owner who can reach the foliage of the vegetables but not their roots (or vice versa), a problem that the Talmud treats in detail earlier in the tractate (b. B. Metsi’a 118b). The combination of facts that (a) the stammaim in b. B. Metsi’a 119a leave the issue unresolved (“Let it stand,” a phrase found over four hundred times in the Bavli), and (b) some later glosses omit Rav Anan’s section, both indicate that the foliage/roots dispute could be moot in Rabbi Shimon’s third opinion, because the case it is considering is one in which the upper owner can reach the foliage and the roots together. In any case, the subsequent statement of Ephraim in the name of Resh Lakish, the entirety of which is in Hebrew, reaffirms the authority of Rabbi Shimon’s law, using a common apodictic expression of legal authority (“the halakha is in accordance of Rabbi Shimon”).

When seen against this literary context, the two-line Aramaic dialogue between the sages and Shapur appears to represent an anonymous coda attached to a rabbinic debate. If Rav Anan’s question and answer are ignored, then the legal discussion is dominated by Palestinian figures (Rabbi Yannai, Resh Lakish) until the appearance of King Shapur. Three factors substantiate the point of view that the sage-Shapur dialogue is an editorial interpolation: (1) the change in language from Hebrew to Aramaic, (2) the vagueness and illogic of the antecedent in the narrative’s first sentence (i.e., to whom is “they” in “they reported” referring?), and (3) the ambiguity of what exactly they reported (Resh Lakish’s endorsement of Rabbi Shimon’s law, or just Rabbi Shimon’s law?).

In the last two lines of the passage and tractate, King Shapur appears as a figure of external imperial authority whose open-minded receipt and praise of a Tannaitic law empowers rabbinic legal decisions – for if the King of Kings approves of a law, then it must be righteous. The Persian monarch is depicted as recognizing rabbinic laws as legitimate. The creators of this text consciously invoke the discourse of the Persian ruler with the Persian word afrīn, a literary detail that reveals how the authors appropriated a MP word as a reality of their environment, thereby accentuating Shapur’s Persian alterity through linguistic representation. By concluding the tractate with a Persian imperial other who
Shapur and the Codification of the Avesta
According to Denkard IV

In b. B. Metsi’a 119a the Talmud depicts Shapur I as an imperial ruler who is presented with and then venerates a Tannaitic law. This image of Shapur as a king who praises non-Mazdayasnian thought and oversees the codification of religious knowledge invites comparison with the king’s reputation in MP literature. For example, in the Denkard (Denk.), a 169,000-word digest of Zoroastrian thought, Shapur I is portrayed as a Mazdayasnian monarch who welcomes foreign knowledge into the Avestan canon.

In one rich narrative about the transmission of the Avesta (Denk. 4, in Madan’s printed edition, 412ff.), which may have originated in the reign

Despite the argument of some modern commentaries, the reference to Shapur in this passage is not an instance of the Talmud calling the sage Shmuel by the king’s name. There are several pieces of evidence that support the conclusion that Shapur is meant here. First, this text is referencing Shapur because of the fact that if it were referencing Shmuel, then the expected logic of rabbinic thought would be broken — it does not follow that Shmuel would need to be told by Resh Lakish about Rabbi Shimon’s ruling, which is in the Mishnah, nor prodded by Resh Lakish’s endorsement of Rabbi Shimon’s law to utter praise upon the Tanna. The second indicator that our text references Shapur is the tradents’ deliberate use of afrin. The appearance of a Persian word identifies the king with his “other” ethnic group.
of Khusrow I (531–79 CE), King Shapur contributes to the long process of the canonization of the Avesta by “collecting” writings about science, philosophy, and other subjects from the edges of the Sasanian empire as far as India and Rome. Given the general lateness of the Pahlavi sources that treat the history of the Avestan canon and the Avestan manuscripts themselves, Iranists continue to debate the Avesta’s exact development and precise date of composition based on internal factors. The following Pahlavi narrative is generally thought to have several historically corroborating claims, such as the existence of various regional traditions of the Avesta and the codification of the scriptures by the Sasanians and, pending more intensive study, could be convincingly interpreted as a tenth-century written record of what was originally a late Sasanian oral tradition. An excerpt of the well-known narrative reads as follows.

The Denkard is a synoptic work edited in the ninth and tenth centuries CE. Though some of its contents stem from earlier eras, it also frequently shows signs of being highly Islamicized. The passage treated here comes from the fourth book of the Denkard, of which there exists no recent critical edition. Book 4 is a compilation of theological, philosophical, and historiographical passages and, as a result, has a particularly complex transmission history that Iranists have yet to untangle; see, for example, the characterization by Philippe Gignoux, “Denkard,” Encyclopædia Iranica, online ed., 1994, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/denkard, where he observes that “Book IV seems particularly incoherent in its organization.” The passage that I cite here contains several details that might be interpreted as evidence that its contents originally stem from earlier Sasanian traditions. One of these details is the fact that the narrative (only a part of which is cited) describes the reign of the sixth-century Khusrow I at much greater length than the other kings, even referring to him as “His present Majesty Khusrow” (im bay Xusrōw). In general, Sasanian historians often argue, based on the totality of the evidence, that Khusrow I’s era was one of prolific literary activity, making the origins of this narrative in the Denkard to his time not implausible. From a philological point of view, however, the narrative shows signs of being a late form of MP; see, preliminarily, the three usages of the suffix -ıḥa as a plural noun (sahrıḥa, nibeḡıḥa, zamıḡıḥa), a grammatical development marking the transition from MP to New Persian. Further philological comparison of this passage’s linguistic features to those in other MP texts could potentially yield a more accurate rendering of its date of composition and/or whether it is recording older traditions verbatim.

When exactly the Avesta was dispersed, collected, and redacted is still debated, but there is emerging a general consensus, much of which is based on the paleographic evidence of the Avestan script, that it was the Sasanians, with their so-called “Sasanian archetype,” who were the first to record the Avesta in written form. Linguistic evidence suggests that the Sasanians initially based the canon on varying oral traditions from different regions of Iran (especially Arachosia, Parthia, and Sogdia) during the Achaemenid and Arsacid eras, and then began to “Westernize” it according to their own Persian-Sasanian perspective. For more on this subject, see Almut Hintze, “The Avesta in the Parthian Period,” in Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse, ed. J. Wiesehöfer (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998) 147–62.

This passage in the Denkard poses many linguistic challenges to the translator, especially its complex syntax, challenging lexicon, and scribal corruptions; for a repre-
Walaxsh the Arsacid ordered that a memorandum be sent to the provinces (telling them) to keep, in the state in which it had come down in (each) province, whatever was pure in the Zand-Avesta, (and) the teaching derived from it – all of which, (having been) dispersed in the land of Iran by the havoc and turmoil of Alexander and the robbery and pillaging of the Romans, is written or preserved orally by an authority.

His Lord Ardashir, the King of Kings, son of Pabag, acting on the righteous authority of Tansar, requested that all of those scattered teachings be brought to his court. Tansar took charge. He accepted one part of them, and he excluded the rest from authority. And he gave forth the following order: “Every exposition that shall be from the Mazdayasnian religion is


53 This word is ēwar, “pillaging,” and cf. ēwar in Francis Joseph Steingass, A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary (London: Routledge, 1892) 117.

54 This is the word ēk, “one,” and Shaki’s rendering of it as *ēwar, “certain, for sure” is without grounds (“Dēnkard Account,” 115 n. 4). Interestingly, the Bavli can be of use to Iranists in deciphering whether Shaki’s reading is suitable in this context, since it contains the loanword ēwar in eight passages (b. Git. 56b, b. B. Qam. 117a, b. B. Metsī’ā 8b, b. B. Bat. 46a and 168a, b. Hul. 59b, b. Mo‘ed Qat. 7b, b. Shebu. 10a). While the Bavli’s loanwords in no way represent definitive evidence of the semantic range of Pahlavi words, it is significant that the Bavli uses the loanword adverbially and in pseudo-dialogues between talmudic figures. In the Bavli there is no connection of the word ēwar to the consequential topic of choosing authoritative texts.
III. Shapur, the King of Kings, son of Ardashir, further collected non-religious writings on medicine, astronomy, movement, time, space, substance, accident, becoming, decay, transformation, logic, and other crafts and skills that were scattered among the Indians and in Rome (and) other lands, and

restricted to us, since (from) now on there is no deficiency of understanding and knowledge from it.”

The phrase fraž à amáh (literally, “up to us”) is translated here as “restricted to us,” because the adverb or preverb fraž, which typically expresses forward movement (“forth”), can also sometimes be used in a restrictive sense.

The word froð is being used here to express deficiency; see, for instance, the MP word froðmand, which means “deficiency, shortcoming.”

Cf. the translation of Shaki, “Dēnkard Account,” 119: “(From now) on (only) those are true expositions which are based on the Mazdean religion, for now there is no lack of information and knowledge concerning them.”

Shaki, “Dēnkard Account,” 116, n. 6 reads star-göwišnih for the more common star-ošmar, “astrology.”


This word appears to be superfluous; Nyberg’s manuscript reads: *OLE, òy, “he she, it.”

The correct form of this word is debated among linguists in part because of the commonly found ambiguity in cursive Pahlavi script of a loss of one วล in the combination วล + วล = วล. Other possible interpretations include sāhīgān, given by Shaki, “Dēnkard Account,” 116, and David Neil MacKenzie, A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) 79, or sāhīgān, given by Shaked, Dualism, 100, n. 3, where the author proposes the reading “the (royal) quarters.”

Transliteration: āyštīn. This disputed word has been interpreted in different ways. Both Humbach, Gathas, 54, and Zaehner, Zurvan, 32, among other translators, understand the word as (h) argestān, meaning something like “academic disciplines; systems; school.” Alternatively, Shaki, “Dēnkard Account,” 116 n. 10, reconstructs this as *arist<ag>ān meaning “unmixed principles,” while Shaked, Dualism, 101 n. 9, interprets it as “provinces,” from arg, “castle.”

So translates Shaki, “Dēnkard Account,” 119, with whom I concur. Other translators: (a) “books taken from other (sources) than the (Zoroastrian) religion,” or (b) “writings deriving from the religion.” The grammatical problems here are (1) whether dēn refers specifically to Zoroastrianism, which it often does, or to religions more generally, and (2) the meaning of the ambiposition az … bé. When the preposition bé is used in conjunction with another preposition (e.g., bé … ênya, bé … tā), which it appears to be doing here with az (though in reverse order), it most typically means “except” or other similar expressions of lack (e.g., bé az, “without”); for other meanings, see also Nyberg, Manual, 2.46–47.
he collated them with the Avesta. He ordered every correct copy to be placed into the royal treasury, and he brought forth for consideration the establishment of all the disciplines(?) upon the Mazdayasnian religion. According to this Zoroastrian narrative (which may reflect an oral tradition dating back to the time of Khusrow I), Shapur I orders “each of the correct copies” (har ān ē drust pačēn) of the Avesta, including its newly “collated” (abāz handāxt) scientific and philosophical writings that had been scattered around the world, to be deposited into a “treasury” (ganj) for safekeeping. As Stausberg has correctly argued (against the previous readings of Boyce), Ardashir’s request that “all of those scattered teachings be brought to his court” is not a reference to the Avesta itself.67 Indeed, in the picture painted in this text, the Avestan canon in Shapur’s time contains not only the Zoroastrian priest Tansar’s regional Avestan traditions, parts of which Tansar “authorizes” (dast-war) during Ardashir’s reign in the third century, but also all types of foreign knowledge. This view that the Avesta incorporates foreign knowledge is corroborated by other passages in the Denk. that express a similar openness towards procuring the divinely inspired writings of other regions of the world. With a permeable Avesta open to such topics as medicine, movement, and time, Shapur is able to establish an imperially authorized and authenticated encyclopedia of wisdom composed of both Zand-Avestan and non-Iranian scientific and philosophical thought, an amalgamation of knowledge that extant Zoroastrian texts attest took place. It is well known, for instance, that Sasanian Zoroastrian scholars actively sought and translated Greek writings, influences which are discernible in, among other texts, chapter two of the Bundahishn.68

65 Other translators have translated this verb abāz handāxt as “added” (Zaehner, Zurvan, 8), “collated” (Shaki, “Dēnkard Account,” 119), “collocated again” (Hum bach, Gathas, 54), or “caused to fit” (Shaked, Dualism, 101).

66 The word ēstēnīdan is a noun composed of the present stem of ēstādan (ēst-), “to stand; be, continue” with the causative suffix -ēn, plus the infinitive ending, and means “establishment” or “perpetuation.” Shaked, Dualism, 101, translates this word as “establishing.”


68 For studies on Greek influences on the Pahlavi corpus, see, by way of example, the entry by David Neil MacKenzie, “Bundahishn,” in Encyclopaedia Iranica, 4.547–51, especially 548, where he states that the main author of the Bundahishn lived at the end of the Sasanian era and possessed encyclopedic knowledge of Avestan cosmology and the Greek sciences, including astronomy; and Philippe Gignoux, “Un témoin du syncrétisme mazdéen tardif: le traité pehlavi des ‘Sélections de Zādsparam’,” in Transition...
On one level, the narrative in the *Denkard* about Ardashir and Shapur reflects back on the early Sasanian empire’s attempts to gain imperial authority over its internal (i.e., Arsacid predecessors, Zoroastrian heretics, etc.) and external (i.e., non-Zoroastrian) “others” through a systematic amalgamation of its emergent Sasanian Zoroastrianism with ancient, non-Iranian forms of knowledge. Rather than attempting to impose any sort of universal Zoroastrianism on the masses, Shapur I broke down the “us-them” dichotomy with respect to the imperial canon’s authority. From a political perspective, his Sasanian Avesta helped the early empire’s ability to sustain its rule over its vast territories, since the canon simultaneously consolidated the empire’s varieties of Zoroastrianism, accommodated foreign ideas, and put the monarchy and sacerdotal class in a position to manipulate, codify, and house a Sasanian encyclopedia of knowledge that suited their politico-religious needs. The intentional permeability of the Avestan canon was therefore one means by which the Sasanian-Zoroastrian upper classes could gain control over knowledge in the empire, and then assimilate it to their worldview (as seen in another passage in the *Denk.* transcribed and translated by Shaki). On the canonization of the Avesta was complete in Shapur’s era, the later Sasanian kings Shapur II (309–379 CE) and Khusrow I, according to the same narrative in the *Denk.* 4, proceed to rout out all internal Zoroastrian heresies, hold disputations, rule against minorities’ anti-Zoroastrian behavior when deemed necessary, and spare itself the need to revisit others’ ideas.

This last goal summarizes what I believe to be the main ideological point of the passage – namely, that the Avesta was thought to subsume all foreign knowledge for the specific purpose of enhancing the empire’s abilities to concentrate on examining, and thus ruling in view of, Zoroastrianism at the highest levels of truth. In Shapur’s worldview specifically, or more precisely Shapur’s worldview according to the later priestly authors of the *Denk.*, part of the early empire’s authority therefore sprang from the controlled permeability of its Avestan canon to accommodate foreign knowledge. Of all the kings in the Sasanian period, it was Shapur I who remained the figurehead of this policy.

Now that we have examined a central Pahlavi text about Shapur I alongside the short sage-Shapur dialogue in *b. B. Metsi’a* 119a, the ques-

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tion naturally arises: did this Zoroastrian historiographical narrative influence or in some way cause the rabbis to depict Shapur the way they did in *b. B. Metsi’ā* 119a? Further, and more basically, what is the value in comparing these two texts in the first place?

The answers to these complex questions are both yes and no, depending on what we mean by them. In presenting this comparison of sources, I do not wish to argue that this specific Pahlavi narrative in the *Denk.* directly influenced *b. B. Metsi’ā* 119a. There are no strict literary parallels between the two narratives to suggest that conclusion. In their depictions of Shapur, the rabbis do not borrow Sasanian or Zoroastrian literary motifs of the king. However, if these texts about Shapur are representative of larger historical and historiographical trends in Sasanian Persia, as I have argued, then the ideologies that they are espousing can be understood as intrinsically comparative with one another. In both of our sources, for instance, the authors avail themselves of the legacy of Shapur I in rhetorical texts intended to support their ideologies of canonicity and legal authority. More specifically, the post-Shapur authors of the *Denk.* and *b. B. Metsi’ā* 119a invoke Shapur in texts in which they construct an ideology of authority behind the codification of the religious knowledge of their ancestors whose glory they want to perpetuate and from whom they derived their authority. While in the *Denk.* Shapur construes some of the ancient Avesta’s authority as emanating from its collation with non-Iranian knowledge, in *b. B. Metsi’ā* 119a the monarch receives and praises Tannaitic law, concluding the lengthy tractate with his stamp of authority. In each of these narratives, the “us-them” dichotomy is broken down with respect to the codification of their respective canons; both groups, in other words, need their “other(s)” to complete their process of authorization.

In light of all the evidence, I argue that the ideology driving the two-line Aramaic coda about Shapur I in *b. B. Metsi’ā* 119a is broadly related to the legacy of the king as the figure of early Sasanian authority exemplified in Sasanian imperial and Zoroastrian historiographical sources. Furthermore, depending on how we date these two texts, it appears possible that their creators lived within a relative time span of several centuries, and perhaps even around the same time. Indeed, the most promising conclusion that comparativists could reach is that portions of the post-Sasanian compilations emanate conservatively from the late Sasanian era in the sixth to seventh centuries, the same general time period as the latest strata of the Talmud. If intercultural exchanges between Persians and Jews are assumed, the modes of transmission of information about Shapur’s legacy can safely be conjectured as having
included imperial propaganda, oral traditions, and shared historical memory, among other means.

The Power of Rabbinic Knowledge over the Fate of Empires

The second sage-Shapur text that we will examine is part of the Talmud’s “Dream Book” in *b. Ber.* 55a–57b.\(^{71}\) In 55b–56a, King Shapur asks Shmuel to predict what he will see in his dream that evening. Shmuel responds that the king will dream about his capture by the Romans and personal humiliation in being forced to be a pig herder. Predictably, the king thinks about these images and then later that night dreams about them. Unlike *b. B. Metsi’a* 119a, where Shapur praises Jewish law, in this text Shapur is made to participate in his own domination through his inquiry into rabbinic wisdom about dream-interpretation. The following passage invokes Shapur as a symbol of imperial authority in order to demonstrate the supremacy and efficacy of rabbinic knowledge over the fate of its rulers.

R. Shmuel bar Nahmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: A man is shown nothing (in his dreams) except (the images) of his own thoughts, as it is said: *O King, as for you, your thoughts came upon your bed* (Dan 2:29).

Or, if you want, I can cite from here: *That you may know the thoughts of your heart* (Dan 2:30).

Rava said: Know that this is so – a man is never shown (in his dream) a date-palm of gold, or an elephant going through the eye of a needle.

Caesar said to R. Yehoshua b. R. Hanina: You Jews say that you are very wise. Tell me what I will see in my dream tonight. (R. Yehoshua) replied to him: You will see the Persians come and seize you, and they will make you grind date stones in a golden mill. (Caesar) thought about (this) all day, and he saw it.

King Shapur said to Shmuel: You Jews say that you are very wise. Tell me what I will see in my dream. (Shmuel) replied to him: You will see the Romans come and seize you, and they will make you tend pigs with a golden staff. (King Shapur) thought about (this), and he saw it.\(^{72}\)

On a formal level, the Rabbi Yehoshua/Caesar and Shmuel/Shapur dialogues function as *aggadic* illustrations of Rabbi Yonatan’s theory that a


\(^{72}\) My translation here mostly follows MS Oxford, though there are some variations in the manuscripts (esp. MS Paris) in word choice and order. The printed manuscripts have mistakes that do not accord with the other manuscripts.
man dreams only what he thinks. The two biblical prooftexts cited, one by Rabbi Yonatan and the other by an anonymous first-person narrator, allude to the story in which Daniel saves all the wise men of Babylon from King Nebuchadnezzar’s murderous wrath by successfully guessing (with God’s assistance) and interpreting the king’s dream – one that, just like Caesar and Shapur’s dreams, forecasts the end of his empire. In our text, these two figures of Roman and Persian imperial authority press the rabbis on their purported abilities (“You Jews say you are very wise”), thereby creating a literary tension through the monarchs’ challenge to the rabbis’ claims of interpretive power: can rabbinic knowledge of dreams be translated into practice and transform the world order for the better? Never ones to disappoint, the rabbis perform “dream-control” on the monarchs, putting the idea of personal humiliation into their minds and thus, as Rabbi Yonatan’s theory claims, into their dreams. With their knowledge of dreams, the rabbis boldly and consciously cause their “imperial others” to endure terrible nightmares. Dream-interpretation, and by implication its prophetic nature, is a form of power that the rabbis can use to transform the world. Both dialogues use the “imperial others” as generic symbols of authority over whom the rabbis can exert their own interpretive prowess.

The two dialogues in our text (Yehoshua/Caesar, Shmuel/Shapur) exhibit a strong formal parallelism with one another, repeating the same question and answer structure, except for the images of punishment, which the printed manuscripts invert. In the descriptions of the two punishments, there is the adjective “golden” attached to the instrument of use (“golden mill/staff”) to create the effect of irony – the defeated monarchs should not be allowed to forget about their past glory during their enslavement. The motif of the personal capture of a king by the enemy is in fact quite common in the early Sasanian inscriptions, such as, for instance, the emphasis in Shapur’s inscriptions of his apprehension of Valerian. Unlike in other talmudic texts, the juxtaposition of Rome and Persia here does not have any patriotic overtones because each empire is depicted as being defeated by its martial “other.” But while this juxtaposition of narratives stems from the fact that the two empires were enemies, the link between Caesar and Shapur is not based on any chronological correspondence, since if this “Caesar” was Trajan or Hadrian who “had strife with the Persians,” as Rashi says, it is noteworthy that the motif of “personally capturing” the Roman emperor is common in Shapur I’s Sasanian epigraphica, in which the Persian king is often depicted as having captured the Roman emperor; see, for instance, Back, *Die sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*, 313–14.
then his enemies would have been the Parthians, not the Sasanians. Instead, these two rulers represent two stock characters symbolizing imperial authority who give fabricated consent to the rabbis’ mind-games. In their fictional encounters with Shapur and Caesar, the rabbis imagine a world in which Jewish knowledge can be a tool used to defeat their rulers.

David Winston has noted a Zoroastrian parallel to Rava’s statement in *b. Ber. 55b–56a*: “Rava said: Know that this is so – a man is never shown a date palm of gold, or an elephant going through the eye of a needle.”

Rava’s statement serves as an elucidative reiteration of R. Yonatan’s principle that a man sees in his dreams only what he has thought. Rava’s aphorism implies that a man would never dream about an elephant going through an eye of a needle, because he would never think of such a thing. This image of an animal “going through the eye of a needle” also appears in other religious literature, including the Gospels (e.g., Matt 19:23) and the Qur’an (Sura 7.40) (where the animal is a camel and not an elephant), and the post-Sasanian Zoroastrian polemical treatise written in Pazand entitled “The Doubt-Dispelling Argument” (*Skand Gumanig Wizar [ŠGW]*) (which dates to about the ninth century). This parallel demonstrates that the Talmud and ŠGW contain a shared cultural aphorism ubiquitous in religious texts as an expression of epistemological impossibility. These texts use the aphorism as a way to express the near impossibility of an event or deed. Of these references, the Bavli’s two usages have more in common with the Zoroastrian parallel than the others. For example, the Bavli and the ŠGW both apply the saying in the context of a discussion on the types and limits of knowledge, as well as how those limits are applied to aspects of everyday life, whereas the Christian and Islamic usages typically occur in discussions of eschatology and redemption.

The aphorism appears in the ŠGW in a chapter that attacks atheistic belief by asserting the types of knowledge that one can ascertain about God. After outlining three types of “knowledge of anything” – namely, (1) necessary knowledge, (2) knowledge by analogy, and (3) knowledge according to what is possible – the ŠGW then uses the image of the elephant going through the eye of a needle as an example of knowledge of non-existent things.

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76 Compare also *b. B. Metsi’a* 38b, where the aphorism is used in reference to the scholars of Pumbeditha.
Another form (of knowledge) besides those (is of) something that, at the limit of the necessary, did not exist (and) is not possible.

For example, one can say that the world can be secretly placed inside an egg, or that an elephant can pass through an eye of a needle, as if one were to become bigger and (the other) smaller; or (that there exists a) substance without an origin, and a fight without limits, and a being which exists without containing time and space, or with unlimited space, and a movement which (exists) without emptiness.

And to speak (and) think of other such things (is) vile, untrue, and impossible.\(^\text{77}\)

The general contention of this Zoroastrian discussion of epistemology is that one is forbidden to contemplate hypotheticals that are scientifically impossible, since no “good thought” (humenišnīh) or “good speech” (hugōvišnīh), two key ethical Zoroastrian precepts, can be produced from such thinking. In Zoroastrian theology, the comprehension of the sacred being is possible only through pure and truthful intellect, and therefore contemplating things not grounded in reality leads one astray.

With respect to the existence of God, the Zoroastrian polemicists argue against atheism, because knowledge of God can come through observing God’s creations. To cite two of their examples, one can comprehend God by gaining “inevitable” and “analogical” knowledge based on observing the perfection of human physiology and elements of nature.

In other words, the fact that the four natural elements of fire, water, air, and earth exist in the world individually and in harmony with one another is proof of the existence of the sacred being. Ruminating on objects or scenarios that are outside of God’s grand creation, such as “an elephant going through the eye of a needle,” does not, according to the ŠGW, lead one to gain proper knowledge of God.

**King Shapur as an Arbiter of Babylonian Rabbinic Identity**

Our third and final Shapur narrative from the Talmud appears at the conclusion of tractate ‘Avodah Zarah in a Babylonian Amoraic discussion about the purification laws for a knife bought from a Gentile. After a halakhic debate on the issue, the Persian king is depicted interacting

\(^{77}\) The translation is based on Jean de Menasce, Škand-gumānīk vičār: la solution décisive des doutes: texte pazand-pehlevi transcrit, traduit et commenté (Fribourg: Librairie de l’Université, 1945) 66–67, with some slight changes. See also the less reliable translation by Jacob Neusner, “A Zoroastrian Critique of Judaism (Škand Gumānīk–Vičār, Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen: A New Translation and Exposition),” *JAOS* 83 (1963) 283–94.
with the Rav Yehudah and the half-manumitted slave Bati bar Tovi. In this narrative, which is one of the Talmud’s longest about either Shapur I or II, the Persian king performs the purification for Rav Yehudah but denies the same courtesy for Bati. When Bati complains to the king about this disrespectful treatment, Shapur responds that he was uncertain about Bati’s Jewishness because of his lack of Jewish morals. The Persian “other” Shapur thus functions in this story as the adjudicator of Babylonian Jewish identity, ultimately deciding which man is Jewish enough to warrant the purification rite. The authors of this narrative employ Shapur’s voice as a means to engage their own internal anxieties over dietary and sexual mores in Sasanian Babylonia, a topic on which the editors saw fit to end the Bavli tractate on idolatry.

And the knife (from a Gentile) – one polishes it and it becomes purified. Rav Huna said: One sticks it in the ground ten times. Rava said: In hard ground. Rav Kahana said: But (only for) a knife which is not serrated. Similarly, it was also taught: A knife in good condition that is not serrated – one sticks it in the ground ten times.

Rav Huna the son of Rav Yehoshua said: (Only) to eat cold foods with it, as in the case of when Rav Yehudah and Bati bar Tovi were sitting in front of King Shapur (and) a citron was brought before them. (King Shapur) cut off (a slice) and ate it. He cut off (another slice) and gave it to Bati bar Tovi. (King Shapur then) stuck the knife into the ground ten times, cut off (a slice) and gave it to Rav Yehudah.

Bati bar Tovi said to (King Shapur): And is that man (i.e., Bati bar Tovi) not a Jew? (King Shapur) said (to Bati bar Tovi): Regarding this master, I am certain of his (nature), but regarding this master, I am uncertain of his (nature).  

Others say thus – (King Shapur) said to (Bati bar Tovi): Remember what you did last night?

The mishnah at the beginning of this passage (m. ‘Abod. Zar. 5.12) teaches that one must “polish” a Gentile knife in order to cleanse it. After this law is cited, several Babylonian Amoraim add a list of pre-
conditions for an alternative method of purification—i.e., sticking
the knife into the ground ten times. This second measure for purifying a
Gentile knife also appears in the anonymous layer of the Yerushalmi’s
discussion of this same mishnah: “A knife should be stuck in the ground	hree times, and that is enough,” a statement that is followed by Rav
Yehudah’s clarification that this applies only in the case of a small
knife. Before the Shapur narrative begins in b. ‘Abod. Zar. 76b, the
three Babylonian Amoraim (Rav Huna, Rava, and Rav Kahana) debate
the practice of cleansing a Gentile knife in the ground, and successively
ratchet up its governing terms: (a) ten times, (b) hard ground, (c)
non-serrated, (d) in good condition (baraita), and (e) cold food. All of these
short apodictic statements, which are not found elsewhere in rabbinic
literature, are recorded in Hebrew, creating a contrast between them
and the Aramaic aggada about Shapur that Rav Huna son of Yehoshua
explicitly cites (“as in the case of”) as an illustration of two of the five
conditions cited earlier on the subject—(a) (Shapur sticks the knife into
the ground ten times) and (e) (Shapur is cutting an etrog, a cold food).
The Shapur narrative in b. ‘Abod. Zar. 76b is an example of how the
rabbis employ the Persian other to negotiate issues of self-identity as
they relate to rabbinic power and authority in Sasanian Babylonia. At
stake in this narrative are the boundaries of Babylonian rabbinic identity
as delimited by legal practices outlined in the Bavli. As Kalmin has
shown, this passage is concerned with the dichotomy of rabbis versus
non-rabbis, invoking here the trio of powerful men (king, rabbi, influen-
tial ex-slave) as test cases for the practice of the specifically Babylonian
rabbinic law on how to purify Gentile knives. As expected, in the end of
this polemical narrative, only Rav Yehudah is deemed worthy of the
rabbinic practice. According to the story, Shapur, who is knowledgeable
about Jewish dietary laws, ends up deciding the “Jewishness” of his two
guests, determining that only the rabbi warrants a ritually cleansed uten-
sil, while Bati and the king himself are let off the obligation. For the
Babylonian rabbinic authors of this aggada, empowering Shapur with

83 Only MS Munich places the word “or” at the beginning of Rav Huna’s statement.
84 For a comparison of these Bavli and Yerushalmi passages, see David Brodsky, A
Bride without a Blessing: A Study in the Redaction and Content of Massekhet Kallah and
Its Gemara (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 294–95. In brief, the Yerushalmi says that
a small knife should be stuck in the ground three times but a large one should be
heated up with sparks. The Tosefta (t. ‘Abod. Zar. 8.2) says that all knives should be
heated up. The Yerushalmi and Tosefta’s halakhic differences with b. ‘Abod. Zar. 76a-b
are in part due to the fact that the Babylonian rabbis understand the word nitsotsot to
mean “drops” instead of “sparks.”
and 133, n. 8.
such a consequential decision helped to ease the tension of their boundary-making, thereby allowing them to create their group identity through an interplay of individuals outside of their social context.

One of the latent messages of this narrative is that the Babylonian rabbis sought to base their identity on something beyond a Jew’s self-definition or willingness to practice rabbinic law, as in the case of the non-rabbi, half-slave Bati. Instead, this text reveals that the rabbis conceived of Babylonian rabbinic identity as also being shaped by how “others,” including a Persian imperial king, categorize and understand a Jew’s actions. In other words, Bati is not solely in control of his Jewish identity since it takes “others” to define him as a Jew in order for him to be within the group’s boundaries. As a symbol of authority, Shapur decides who is a part of the rabbinic class, based on what he knows of their moral character (“Regarding this master I am certain of his [nature”). The moral of this story is that a man should not act like Bati and be enticed by Persian sexual habits, according to the second tradition, lest the Persians define him more like them and less like the rabbis. In this narrative, therefore, the Persian king becomes the defender of rabbinic practices against the threat of Gentile (and specifically Persian) promiscuity or dietary corruption. The rabbis utilize Shapur’s external “otherness” as a means of casting aspersions on one of their internal, non-rabbinic “others.”

Conclusion

This article has explored the Sasanian context of three talmudic sage-Shapur dialogues with the goal of unraveling the ways in which the third-century king became a “shared object of culture,” symbolizing authority among the rabbis and Persian elite over the course of many centuries. This feature of Sasanian religious culture presumably also extended to Christians, Manichaeans, gnostics, and other organized religious groups that resided in or around Mesopotamia in late antiquity. Each of these groups had an evolving ideological stake in the way they described past Persian kings in the literature it produced. In the three talmudic texts examined in this paper, the rabbis invoke Shapur I as a figure of authority in order to highlight Babylonian rabbinic claims to power. When seen from within a Persian context, the Talmud’s images of

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Shapur I, though not exhibiting signs of direct textual parallels with MP sources, nevertheless resonate well within the wider Persian imperial and Zoroastrian priestly constructs of the second Sasanian king, which promoted his reputation as a ruler who succeeded in managing an era of radical change in the social order. During and after Shapur I’s reign, the Persian monarch thus became a literary figure who superficially represented the ubiquitous changes to the structures of society in early Sasanian Iran in relation to which later Jewish sages and Zoroastrian priests continued to define their own authority.