

A Deliberation on the Position of *Vuzorg Farmzar* and his Jurisdiction during Sassanid Era, Relying on Historical and Epigraphic Evidences

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Received: 2012/4/29

Accepted: 2014/3/8

Abstract

In its course of evolution, the Sassanian rule accepted a change in temporal exigencies, condition and manner of governance of each ruler where more attention was paid to the institutional establishment, grades/ranking, titles, symbols and administrative hierarchy. In a way, the organizational manner, to a larger extent, could engulf the period into a curtain of ambiguity. One of those ranks was *Vuzorg Farmzar* that apart from having equivalents in different periods of time, with respect to its real application, encountered with sectional and temporal confusion as well. As such, an increase or decrease in jurisdiction of the above rank was influenced more by policies of each emperor. According to this fact, the issues which are to be dealt with in this article are: Which title was synonymous to the word “grand vizier” or “Vuzorg Farmzar” in the early Sassanid era? In which era of Sassanid dominion, the title “Vuzorg Farmzar” was addressed as “*Hazarpat*”? How was the factional evolution of the position of “*Hazarpat*”? This research is concerning to show that the word “*Bidakhsh*”, is a title that

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in the early Sassanid era was employed to endow titles of person such as “grand vizier” or “Vuzorg Farmzar” and after some time it was completely forgotten. The word “Hazarpat” was one of the other titles which was equivalent to “Vuzorg Farmzar” in the middle Sassanid era and we can distinguish three Functional phases for it: It was a militaristic position in the early Sassanid era, a militaristic- civil jurisdictive position in the middle era and a militaristic position once again at the end at of Sassanid era.

Taking into account historical sources and epigraphic records, the current research tries to find out the basis and essence of “Vuzorg Farmzar” and titles synonymous to it as well as their actual or the honorary functions during the era In order to clarify, the extent of governance and administration establishment, on the top of which was the “grand vizier” (Vuzorg Farmzar). To achieve this goal, the connections of the titles such as “*Bidakhsh*”, “*Hazarpat*”, “*Vuzorg Farmzar*” and “*Sepahbad*” are questioned, by determining the existence, primacy and recency of these titles in epigraphic records and also in the historical sources in which the functional jurisdiction of these titles mentioned, the accuracy or inaccuracy of these hypothesis would be distinguished.

Keywords: Sassanid; *Vuzorg Farmzar*; *Bidakhsh*; *Hazarpat*; *Sepahbad*; Epigraphic Evidence.

Introduction

Following centralization, the national-religious government of Sassanid destroyed the feudal and aristocratic systems of Parthian era

and relying on the perfect administrative-military malgamation became one of the flag-bearers of the civilized world of that time (Girshman, 2007: 327). There

emerged a four-fold social division based on the Zoroastrian tradition which included priests, military personnel, secretaries and common people and lifeless and official customs based on Zoroastrian principles minimized sovereignty (Javadi, 2001: 308-9).

A big administrative establishment of Sassanid also brought into existence a list of ranks, titles, symbols and hierarchy setup in each of the four-fold society where each rank-holder under his jurisdiction and obligation put up own plans into action; although their power declined with the passage of time and so were their policies applied at a particular interval. As such, a definition about the manner of administrative organization, its basis and actual application of some of the posts and titles cannot be presented.

“*Vuzorg Farmzar*” and its equivalents utilized during Sassanid

are manifestations of this aspect. Sometime, the above rank was defined as *Bidakhsh*, quite often as *Vuzorg Farmzar* and occasionally as *Hazarpat*, however; their applications in different periods of time intermixed with complexity. Ever-increasing administrative and military transformation of Sassanid had much impact on the essence of historical sources and caused contradiction between different written resources. Until an exact comparison of this resource with those of epigraphic evidences, mysteries of basis and essence of administrative systems, titles and ranks would not be resolved.

Jurisdiction of *Vuzorg Farmzar*

Hazarpat also called “*Vuzorg Farmzar*” was on the top of the entire administrative setup. This position was usually awarded to a person attached to the royal family

or representative of a very famous lineage/house. As such, during the reign of Yazdgird I and Bahram V, this post was held by Mehr Nersi and Soren Pahlav. This post commanded the advisor-general of the king and his jurisdiction was much wider (Diakonov, 2003: 323). Discussing the higher ranks in the Sassanian government, Masudi brings the ministerial post just second to the chief Zoroastrian priest and BozorgFarmdar has been used as a bigger official (Haghighat, 1995:16; Nafisi, 2004:273). A list of ranks presented by Yaghubithat apparently related to the early 5th century i.e. contemporary to the reign of Yazdgird I, Vuzorg Farmzar has been quoted immediately after the name of the emperor and then followed by Mobidan e- Mobid (chief priest), Hirbadane- Hirbad, Dabirbad and Sepahbad who had a person called Padogospan under his

command (Christensen, 1989:362). This contradiction in historical anecdotes arises out of transition that had been taking place in the course of the Sassanian history. In other words, it is indicator of particular policies of the king in sensitive and critical stages.

There are many traditions indicating the word '*vazir*'. Some say, the word *vazir* was derived from 'vichir' or 'vajir' of Pehlavi or from Avestan 'vichira' means one giving the religious decree. IbnKholakan calls the word 'vazir' as derivative of Arabic word (*vazr*) means load and writes: heavy load of national affairs is upon the shoulder of the vazir. In fact, vazir has been called as load carrier. Others consider that the word derived from *vazr* means a high mountain, refuge, place of asylum for the king and another group considers this word itself taken out from "vechir" and says:

vechir is derived from vichra means taking the decision (Haghighat, 1995:9-10). The above definitions show to what extent this post was important. Apart from his responsibility and obligation, in theoretical domain as advisor general of the king, he was considered the highest practical pillar of the government.

As mentioned in historical traditions, "Vuzorg Farmzar", was above all of the administrative and military rank holders and in the later stage he was just like the present day president and prime minister. Some of the linguists believe that Vuzorg Farmdar was derived from the word "Fartehdar" (local hereditary chiefs) and perhaps, often in Fars territory, this word was employed for one who was superior to others after the king. In some of the documents, there is description of the title "Darandarzbad" i.e. counselor or

court advisor that once mentioned after Mobidan e- Mobid (chief priest) and before Sepahbad and perhaps it can be imagined that it was some time employed at the place of Vuzorg Farmzar (Nafisi, 2004: 278). Some researchers however believe that "Darandarzbad" was not the specialized rank rather an honorary title bestowed upon different people (Ibid: 302).

By the same, only four Vuzorg Farmzar has been named in historical records. "Abarsam" during Ardeshir, "Khosrow Yazdgird" during Yazdgerd I, Mehr Nersi entitled "Hazar Bandag" during Yazdgird I and BahramV as well as Soren Pehlav during Bahram V (Christensen, 1989:172; Nafisi, 2004:278). Azin Goshnesb during Hormuzd IV, Mah Azer Goshnesb, a minister of Ardeshir III, Farrukh during Buran or Poran and Buzurgmehr, a semi-historical minister of Khosrau

Anushirvan can complete this list (Zarrinkoob&Zarrinkoob, 2000:84). Although some of the researchers believe that the words Buzurgmehr and Buzar Jomehr could misread as these words were other forms of the word Bozorg Farmzar that was later presumed as the name of a particular person and some believe that the fictional Bozorg Mehr is the same Borzuye Tabib who translated Kalila-o Demneh from Hindi to Pahlavi (Mede to Pahlavi 1971:78). The obligation of Vuzorg Farmzar was to administer all matters under the jurisdiction of the king. His authority was to the extent that he accomplished most of the affairs using his discretion. In the absence of the king, he was the viceroy of the government (A group of European Scholars, 2002:171). The holder of this post took into account political affairs as well as city planning; signed contacts and occasionally

took the command of elite forces during wars (Ghirshman, 1995:373). Therefore, from the point of view of intellect and behavior, such a person must have been faultless, flawless as well as prudent, farsighted and full of characteristics. Referring to ministerial decree it is said: Iranian kings gave high regards to their ministers, more than any other contemporary kings and said that vizier is an organizer of state affairs, a national jewel. Vizier as a tool was prepared all the time to kill enemies or adversary at distant nations (Christensen, 1989:174).

This post, similarly, remained on the top of all ministries or courts that were administered through secretaries (Javadi, 2001:334). Despite his highest rank after the king, his power of influence at the administrative apparatus of Sassanid was on the verge of decline. As such, the period of Khosrow Anushirvan that was the

end of the height of the ancient Iranian empires, the jurisdiction of the great vazir declined (Ibn Balkhi, 1984:91-92). By this way, the king could personally appoint three people to share the works of the great vazir (Christensen, 1989:682). Masudi in *Muruj al-Zahab* remembers the seven-member council of ministers where the aforementioned Vazir Bozorg was the most prominent figure. He writes: "Ardeshir laid down seven layers of administrative division, prime minister followed by priest who was in charge of religious and judicial affairs as well and the head of all priests and laid down four sepahbadi: first to Khorasan, second to the western province, third to the southern province and fourth to Damascus; four other classes of those who were tactful enough and helped him in state affairs were classified (Masudi, 1986:239). In the authors' point's of view, this tradition

indicates that the social and political power and influence of grand vizier were declining in relation to power and position of other high ranking officials.

However, the narrative of Masudi cannot be generalized to the whole Sassanian empire because the indication of four sepahbads (commanders) at four directions of the empire is related to the period of Khosrow Anushirvan and thereafter. As a whole, it can be said that distinguished persons and particular ranks, with a slight change, formed the council of governance during all Sassanid dynasties (Christensen, 1995:47).

Taking into account the administrative centralization and absolute despotism, despite some occupations being hereditary during Sassanid, it cannot be imagined that the important posts like the grand vizier would have been hereditary

(Ibid, 42). To be assured from the virtue and honesty of the grand vizier, officials were deputed to review him and incase the vizier was found to be dishonest and negligent, the king deposed him and in some cases he was sentenced to prison. There is a description about the vizier of Bahram Gaur whom he reprimanded and deposed (Khawaja Nizamul Mulk, 1985:35). Referring to Stein, Christenson writes: Kavaz I and Khosrow I, to minimize the power of Vuzorg Farmzar, coined new occupations and titles and part of his obligation and credentials were transferred to the new occupants. As such, Kavaz created “stabd” or the head of ceremonies and seized the tenure of provincial affairs from the grand vizier. Also, the administrative and military division of Khosrow Anushirvan and employment of four Sepahbads to four corners of the empire was in

order to evolve a despotic rule (Christensen, 1989:676).

Although the management of administrative divisions was the most important duties of viziers of Sassanid government but it cannot be claimed that chiefs of all courts/ministries were selected by the vizier because historical sources in this domain mostly point to the role of the king. Supervision on court affairs was one of the obligation and duties of the grand vizier but in some cases as well as during the reign of a particular king, it was possible that a number of courts were taken out from the vizier and the king had direct supervision on them. As such, Khosrow Anushirvan personally conducted the selection of record keeper who headed higher affairs hence; the vizier had no role in his selection (Ibn Balkhi, 1984:49). It is mentioned about Mehr Nersi, the

famous vizier of Bahram Gaur whom the king sent towards Rome with 40,000 troops and asked him to press for revenue and other things because no one has capability to do so other than Mehr Nersi. He along his group reached to Constantinople and had remarkable behavior and the Great Roman Empire made peace with him hence; he accomplished all orders of Bahram and returned (Ibn al-Athir, Vol. 4: 289; Mirkhond, 1994:187; Tabari, 1973:625). This indicates that in certain special and sensitive cases, the grand vizier played the role of an envoy and had jurisdiction over foreign affairs, as well.

With the view that the grand vizier acted a viceroy in the absence of a king, at the time of their departure of Bahram Gaur to Hindustan; the rein of the empire was handed over to Mehr Nersi (Mirkhond, 1994:177-78). Also, the

grand vizier Feroz called Sokhra, succeeded to the throne once the king wanted to leave for a battle with Turks (Dinvari, 1992:88). Apart from his role and deep responsibility in the internal and external affairs as well as military and administrative apparatus, the grand vizier also accomplished spiritual needs of the king. As such he could satisfy the heart of the king and made him happy through his counseling and advice. This person possessed the knowledge of different sciences and philosophy as well as deep insight in art, poetry, music as well as astrology and medicine so that he could treat the king whenever he fell sick (Christensen, 1995:50).

In the authors' points of view, it seems the above narratives have no conformity with the reality because there was a court physician to treat the king and was specialized in medicine as has been indicated in

historical sources (Ibid, 59). The vizier being proficient in different field of sciences does not mean he was expert in all the fields rather his acquaintance with all sciences. Perhaps, the logical reason is: since the vizier or premier was chief advisor of the king in all ceremonies, at the time of unhappiness, suffering and anxiety arising from governmental crisis, he tried to relieve the king. Perhaps the belief of the group who considered a physician as the vizier of Anushirvan must have been due to this narrative.

Titles of *Vuzorg Farmzar*

Reviewing “Zarathustra Kabe” epigraph and historical narratives, some of the researchers have cited the domain of jurisdiction and obligation of “Vuzorg Farmzar” and present the actual performance of the aforementioned post/rank under the

title “Bidakhsh”. One of the projected titles of Sassanian era, “Bidakhsh” was employed in different forms in languages between 1st and 8th centuries. In Armenian language, it is indicated as “bdeasx” by historians such as Agathangelos and Fastous. In Georgian language, it is seen as “pyths”, “bths”, “pitiaxe”, “bthsy” and “bytyhr”. In Latin sources of 4th century AD, it has been mentioned as “vitaxa” (Sundermann, 1990:242-43). Based on the initial phoneme of this word, a group of etymologists found it as “-P” means “king and powerful” and in another interpretation as “king’s eye”. A second group of etymologists who found the beginning of this word with “b-” believe that “Bidakhsh” referred to “second ruler” or “viceroy (Nayebul Saltaneh) (Ibid, 243-44). It seems that “Bidakhsh” had a position as the assistant and minister of the king. Since this title was synonymous

to the position of a person who had the greatest and the highest rank and authority after king in Georgia at the older times (Fry, 1989:338). What make it closer are the interpretations of “viceroys”, “presidents” and “grand viziers” as “Bidakhsh”. According to Lukonin, the title “Bidakhsh” during Sassanid was seen up to the end of 3rd century AD (Lukonin, 1998:136).

In the intervals of Sassanian history, the grand vizier was addressed as “Hazarpat”. As such, Armenian historians remember Mehr Nersias “Hazarpat” in the court of Yazdgird II and Mehr Nersi in a letter addressed to Armenians introduced himself as “Vuzorg Farmzar” of Iran and Aniran (Chaumont, 1973: 148). During Achaemenid too, “Hazarpati” was employed to officials with one thousand army units in which one of the units was deputed to protect the life of the king. The management of

these special royal guards was in the hands of the second important person of the empire i.e. the prime minister. In fact, the prime minister also had the title of “Hazarpat” (Ehtesham, 1976:76-80). Some of the historians consider “Hazarpat” as a title for the grand vizier during the early Sassanian era that was changed into “Vuzorg Farmzar” at the end of this period (Havar, 1996:165; Christensen, 1989:170-72; Gignoux, 1992:424). In the list of courtiers of Ardashir and Shapur I in the “Zarathustra Kabe”, a person with the title “Papak Hazarpat” has been mentioned that follows after the title of “Bidakhsh” (Wiesehofer, 1998:227). According to Lukonin, “Hazarpat” was a military rank which meant the commander of one thousand troops or the commander of royal guards (Lukonin, 1998:136). In the court list of Ardashir I in the “Zarathustra Kabe”, there had been

mentioned a name “Rakhsh” as the “Sepahbad” who had a much lower position than “Bidakhsk” and “Hazarpat” and there is also a similar name and title in the epigraph of Narsiin the Paykuli as what was mentioned in Ardeshir time. Almost all researchers assume that the highest military position in the third century A.d epigraphs was “Sepahbad” (Tafazzoli, 2006: 20). Fry thinks that we confront with the names in the epigraphs of the ShapurI that some of them were mentioned because of their family relations and some because of their positions (Fry, 2001: 479). He assumes “Sepahbad” as a military title meaning the commander of military (Ibid: 595). Parikhanian believes that “Rakhsh” as mentioned in the court list of the Ardeshir I in the “Zarathustra Kabe” epigraph, was one of the members of “Sepahbed” clan (Parikhanian, 1998:31). In

relation to the rank of “Hazarpat” to the grand vizier during early Sassanian era, the authors of the current study have tried to review the list of courtiers of Ardeshir and ShapurI. The most remarkable point in the study of military rank is the absence of “Sepahbad” or the commander of the army during Shapur I. Meanwhile, the list of courtiers during his father, this rank was mentioned lower than the “Hazarpat”. As such, if we accept “Sepahbad” of the list of courtiers of Ardeshir I as a military rank or the commander, it cannot be placed lower than the “Hazarpat” (the commander of royal guards). Likewise, a complete omission of this rank seems impossible during Shapur I who enjoyed a complex administration with more military ranks. In the meantime, in the list of Shapur I, the rank “Aspbad” as the head of cavalry came after “Hazarpat” hence;

“Sepahbad” is not considered as a military rank or post rather an indication to hereditary nobility of person holding rank is debatable. An insight on the above case, the military operation of “Hazarpat” in the “Zarathustra Kabe” epigraph is an undeniable point and with due attention to his prominent place in the list of courtiers, this rank had primacy upon all other ranks and was the highest military rank visible in the historical and epigraphic Sassanian records of 3rd century AD. The authors also believe that assuming lack of militaristic essence of “Hazarpat”, by reviewing epigraphic evidences and it is seems illogical to place “Bidakhsh” at higher than “Hazarpat”, or a designation with two ranks and distinction of their places in a single court. The domain of responsibilities of “Bidakhsh” and “Hazarpat” cannot be considered in the form of

“grand vizier” and this itself is in contradiction to the interpretation of “Hazarpat” as the grand vizier during early Sassanid era.

The evidences from seals indicate that the engraving of four-dimensional “Aran Sepahbadaan” or military commanders including “Hazarpat”. Other than written resources especially Dinvari, a “Sepahbad” named Vistkham and had the title of “Hazarpat” is also seen on the seal. This particular seal is related to the western imperial domain of second half of the 6th century AD. However, the actual performance of “Hazarpat” on the seal is surrounded with ambiguity (Gyselen, 2005:39-41).

Conclusion

The Great Sassanid Empire, borrowing principles from past civilizations, completely transform its policies and founded a noble

kingship whose strength under the shadow of subtle administration and organization, could lead to a complex hierarchy, ranks, titles and posts. Ambiguity and complexity of administrative divisions of Sassanid era as well as actual performances of ranks and titles is the outcome of changes and reforms brought by kings following their particular policies. The changes were to such an extent that also led to some contradictions in historical texts. However, in the time intervals, the existence of ranks and emergence of evidences cannot be ignored. The other reason is due to lack of essential archeological evidences as well as absence of comparison between historical sources. However, this procedure too often does not respond to questions and remove the curtain from unknown facts hence, necessitate more discovery and findings.

With the passage of time and under different circumstances, some of the Sassanid ranks and titles have found their equivalents. “Bidakhsh” is one of the most prominent court positions of Sassanid era that has accumulated the only high place in the list of courtiers in the “Zarathustra Kabe” epigraph. With a comparative studies of historical texts and epigraphic evidences as well as a review of results of linguistic studies we can reached to such an important conclusion that the post of “Bidakhsh” during early Sassanian era was the same “Vuzorg Farmzar” and “viceroys”. On the other side, with the view that in the list of courtier of the “Zarathustra Kabe” epigraph that is part of the most ancient historical Sassanid documents, the title “Hazarpat” comes after the title of “Bidakhsh”, it is unacceptable that the two posts with same responsibility would have

existed at the same period. On the other side, a reflection on court ranks of Ardeshir and Shapur I in the aforementioned epigraphs itself attest the militaristic performance and primacy of “Hazarpat” in the hierarchy. Reviewing the Lukonin narratives that emphasized the omission of “Bidakhsh” from the list in the later 3rd century AD, it can be concluded that “Hazarpat” would have taken its place. By this way, what is certain is that the title of “Hazarpat” in the early Sassanid era or the epigraphic records presents its own real meaning i.e. the commander of royal guards and subsequently the grand vizier was addressed with the title of “Hazarpat”. This aspect is indicator of the domain of military jurisdiction along with civil authority of the grand vizier. In the later Sassanid era, the title of “Hazarpat” bestowed upon the commander of royal guards as well

as other army chiefs and commanders. As such, this title was engraved on a seal for Vistkham who was “Sepahbad” of the western flank of the empire. It must be remembered that Dinvari also mentioned a “Sepahbad” with the same name and title. Therefore, the “Hazarpat” on this seal must not merely be considered as honorary title. It can be imagined that with respect to political centralization of western flank and the seat of governance, and also according to historical sources and epigraphic records of the 3rd century AD, “Hazarpat” was a position for commanding the royal guards, Vistkham by preserving the position of “Hazarpat”(commander of royal guards) was possibly appointed to the post of “AranSepahbadi”, too. Therefore, the title “Hazarpat” on the seal of “Aran Sepahbad” of western flank was the actual

performance. Despite the sectional confusion seen with respect to the title of “Hazarpat”, it can be concluded that the above position during the early Sassanid era was merely a militaristic. In the middle era, both military and civil jurisdictions were placed under “Vuzorg Farmzar” and then at the end of Sassanid era, with descending to its militaristic origin, under the title of “Aran Sepahbad”, it had the absolute authority.

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تأملی بر مقام "وزرگ فرمذار" و محدوده‌ی قدرت او در عصر ساسانی

با استناد به منابع تاریخی و شواهد کتیبه‌ای

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تاریخ پذیرش: ۹۲/۱۲/۱۷

تاریخ دریافت: ۹۱/۲/۱۰

در راستای مسیر تکاملی حکومت ساسانی، تغییراتی به مقتضیات زمان، شرایط و شیوه‌های حکومتی هر یک از پادشاهان صورت پذیرفت که بیش از همه متوجه تشکیلات سازمانی، مناصب، القاب، عناوین و سلسله مراتب موجود در هر یک از تشکیلات زیربنایی جامعه گردید؛ به گونه‌ای که چگونگی سازماندهی این عصر را تا حدود زیادی در پرده‌ای از ابهام فرو برده است. یکی از این مناصب، عنوان "وزرگ فرمذار" است که علاوه بر دارا بودن واژگان معادل که هر یک در دوره‌ای خاص مرسوم و پس از آن منسوخ گشت، به لحاظ کارکرد واقعی نیز با آشفتگی مقطعی و زمانی مواجه بوده است؛ به گونه‌ای که افزایش یا کاهش حوزه اختیارات منصب فوق‌الذکر متأثر از سیاست‌های خاص هر یک از پادشاهان در نوسان بوده است. با توجه به این امر، پرسش‌هایی که مقاله‌ی حاضر برای پاسخ دهی به آن‌ها سامان یافته است، عبارتند از: در اوایل کار ساسانیان، چه عنوانی معرف شخص وزیر بزرگ (وزرگ فرمذار) بوده است؟ در چه دوره‌ای از حکومت ساسانیان، وزرگ فرمذار را "هزارپت" خطاب می‌کرده‌اند؟ سیر تحول عملکردی منصب "هزارپت" به چه شکل بوده است؟ یافته‌های مقاله‌ی حاضر به بیان این مهم می‌پردازند که واژه‌ی "بیدخش"، عنوانی است که در اوایل دوره‌ی ساسانی برای ملقب نمودن شخص وزیر بزرگ به

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کار رفته و پس از مدتی به طور کلی منسوخ گشته است. عنوان "هزارپت" نیز یکی دیگر از عناوینی است که در دوره‌ی میانی حکومت ساسانیان معادل با منصب "وزرگ فرمذار" بوده و می‌توان سه دوره‌ی عملکردی را برای آن متصور بود؛ به گونه‌ای که در اوایل دوره‌ی ساسانی یک منصب لشگری بوده و در دوره‌ی میانی اقتدار لشگری- کشوری را توأمان با یکدیگر داشته و در اواخر دوره‌ی ساسانی به ماهیت صرف لشگری خود رجعت نموده است.

در این پژوهش سعی شده است با استناد به منابع تاریخی و شواهد کتیبه‌ای به اصل و ماهیت وجودی منصب "وزرگ فرمذار" و عناوین معرف آن و همچنین کارکرد واقعی یا افتخاری آن‌ها در گذر زمان پرداخته شود تا بر اساس آن سیمای حکومتی و تشکیلات اداری دولت که در رأس آن شخص وزیر بزرگ قرار داشته است، در حد مقدور آشکار و زوایای تاریک آن روشن گردد. در نیل به این مقصود به بررسی تعامل میان عناوین "بیدخش"، "هزارپت"، "وزرگ فرمذار" و "سپاهبد" پرداخته شده تا بر اساس موجودیت و تقدم و تأخر جایگاه عناوین در شواهد کتیبه‌ای و همچنین گواهی روایات تاریخی مبنی بر حوزه‌ی عملکردی عناوین مذکور، درستی یا نادرستی فرضیه‌های موجود مشخص گردد.

واژگان کلیدی: ساسانی، وزرگ فرمذار، بیدخش، هزارپت، سپاهبد، شواهد کتیبه‌ای.