Note: This paper is a draft of the third chapter of my book manuscript, *Autocracy and the Foreigner: the Political Thought of Ibn al-Muqaffa’*. In this book, I examine the political thought of Ibn al-Muqaffa’ – a luminary of early Arabic prose. Ibn al-Muqaffa’’s Arabic translations and original writings reflect his attempt to Arabicize and Islamicize an ancient, pre-Islamic model of just rule – a “circle of justice.” The term “circle of justice” names a rhetorical trope used frequently in medieval Arabic literature to represent a hierarchical social order, in which a divinely inspired king places men in particular social classes (namely: the military, tax collectors, and the agricultural classes). Justice, here, connotes a balance among social classes that facilitates political order and agricultural prosperity. The structure of the circle is reminiscent of ideal accounts of the social structure of Sasanian Iran, a pre-Islamic society esteemed for its order and stability in medieval Arabic sources. While early traces of the “circle” appear in Sumerian inscriptions, it can also be seen in middle-Persian works such as the *Letter of Tansar* (a veritable Zoroastrian “City of God”) and the *Denkard* (a collection of Zoroastrian customs). In this chapter, I introduce the pre-Islamic origins of this “circle of justice” and show how Ibn al-Muqaffa’ transforms the circle into an Islamic model of authoritarian rule. To do so, I demonstrate how, in his exposition of the “circle of justice,” Ibn al-Muqaffa’ invokes and re-deploys key Islamic terms (e.g. independent judgment (*ra’y*), companionship (*ṣaḥāba*)). I suggest that Ibn al-Muqaffa’ couches his argument in Islamic terms to render this pre-Islamic model of authoritarian rule more palatable and relevant to his Muslim audience. While this analysis exposes the pre-Islamic roots of authoritarian rule, it also demonstrates how Ibn al-Muqaffa’ refashions the model as an “Islamic ‘circle of justice’” that is still invoked today, as in the pre-amble to Afghanistan’s 2008 National Development Strategy.

\[\text{1}\] Many thanks to Danielle Allen, John Woods, Elizabeth Urban, Jennie Han and Joe Yackley for helpful comments on an earlier version of this draft.
Chapter 3. Ibn al-Muqaffa‘s “Circle of Justice” in Context

Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ should be recognized not as just a literary figure but also a political theorist who imports the argumentative trope of the “circle of justice” into an Arabic tradition and transforms it into a model for political reform. When Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ translates the Letter of Tansar from middle-Persian into Arabic, some time around 750 C.E., he introduces a Sasanian “circle of justice” into an Arabic tradition. In the original letter, Tansar (chief priest of the Sasanian king Ardashīr I, who ruled from 224-40 C.E.) responds to criticisms against the king levied by the king of Tabaristan. Tansar advocates for a model of the just world often called “the circle of justice.” This just world represents Ardashīr’s supposed vision of how to order the dynasty by making Zoroastrianism the state religion, and setting men in four social ranks.2

The Circle of Justice

As we have seen, the “circle of justice” is a model of political stability that results from keeping social “estates” (namely farmers, soldiers, tax collectors and the sovereign) localized to respective domains.3 We can better discern how medieval authors understood this “circle” when we look at a saying that later Arab and Persian kings, ministers and historians (starting around

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2 This account of a rigid, quadripartite society is articulated by someone working in the Sasanian administration. For this reason, we should consider this letter representative of state ideology and not of lived experience in Sasanian Iran. See Louise Marlow, Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge, UP, 2002), pp. 68-72. That said, it is this ideal state ideology that I suggest Ibn al-Muqaffa passed on to Abbasid rulers and that I wish to here analyze.

the eleventh-century C.E.) invoked to represent its meaning. This saying is attributed to king Ardashir, and it reads:

There is no authority (sultan) without men,  
and there are no men (rijāl) without money,  
and there is no money without cultivation (‘imāra),  
and there is no cultivation without justice and good governance (husn siyāsā). 4

Historians believe this saying was translated into Arabic by the end of the Umayyad period in the mid-eighth century C.E. For this reason, we can assume that the saying circulated during Ibn al-Muqaffa’s lifetime. This maxim suggests that the welfare of various social groups depends upon one another, and that the king and his employees are to ensure that no group will be oppressed. 5 Modern scholars refer to this trope as the “circle of justice,” 6 in all probability because later medieval writers represented this model graphically in circular form. 7

Precursors to the “Circle of Justice”

In his translation of the Letter of Tansar, Ibn al-Muqaffa presents the “circle” as a Sasanian model, in which the king Ardashir I has restored men to their rightful social ranks to reinstate political order and economic prosperity. Yet the “circle of justice” has a provenance that precedes the Sasanian empire of the third through seventh centuries C.E. As Linda Darling, a scholar of the “circle of justice” and its provenance, explains:

4 We find this saying attributed to Ardashīr in ‘Ahd Ardashīr Iḥsān ‘Abbās ed. (Beirut, 1967), p. 98. It is located in the second part of ‘Abbās’ edition entitled “Scattered Sayings of Ardashīr.” The editor implies that these sayings were popular in Arabic at the time the work ‘Ahd Ardashīr was translated into Arabic. We can assume that literature that contains this saying enters the Islamic tradition in the late Umayyad period (661-750/40-132) through translations of texts like ‘Ahd Ardashīr. See J. “The Last Days of al-Ghazzālī and the Tripartite Division of the Sufi World.” The Muslim World. Vol. 96 (January 2006), p. 96. Iḥsān ‘Abbās claims that the text ‘Ahd Ardashīr, a corpus of Ardashīr’s political wisdom, existed in Arabic by the middle of the eighth-century (see the introduction to ‘Abbās ed. of ‘Ahd Ardashīr, 1967, also sited in J. Brown, “The Last Days of al-Ghazzālī” p. 108, ft., 16).
5 See S. Kumar’s “The value of the Adab al-Mulk as a historical source” The Indian Economic and Social History Review Vol. XXII, No. 3., 1985, p. 311.
6 e.g. Linda Darling in her 2002 article “Do Justice, Do Justice, For That is Paradise.”
7 While this model of the just world is mostly presented in circular form, there are also later medieval representations of in other shapes (e.g., hexagon, octagon, etc.).
...although Muslims attributed this idea to the Persians, the Persians inherited it from the Assyrians and the Assyrians from the Sumerians. By the time of the rise of Islam, it had been promulgated for three millennia...

We find traces of this model of just rule in Sumerian inscriptions, Babylonian proverbs, an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, Plato’s *Republic* and Sasanian tracts and inscriptions.

In this chapter, I will analyze Ibn al-Muqaffa’’s poetic contribution to political theory by exploring how he transforms the “circle” into an Arabic model of political reform. While the next chapter, devoted to Ibn al-Muqaffa’’s *Letter on Companionship*, shows how Ibn al-Muqaffa' blends a Sasanian conception of sacral kingship with early Islamic conceptions of companionship to generate his model of just rule, this chapter offers a more cursory survey of Ibn al-Muqaffa’’s works to demonstrate how this author contributes to a history of theorizing about the “circle of justice,” from the time of *The Code of Hammurabi* through the writing of Ibn Khaldūn’s *Introduction*. With this historical analysis, I trace how a model of authoritarian rule became part of an Islamic tradition, and I show that this Islamic tradition clung to this model in its later attempts to advocate for social reform and democracy.

Drawing on the work of prior scholars, I will introduce some precursors to this model of just rule that appear in ancient Sumerian, Babylonian, Greek and Persian sources. I will then turn to the Sasanian tradition to explore how these tropes are integrated into a particular model of Zoroastrian kingship. Next, I will analyze Ibn al-Muqaffa’’s own writings to show how he transforms such Sasanian conceptions of just rule to suit his Arabic setting. To allude to the model’s lasting importance, I will then turn to later invocations of the circle in the writings of

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king Kai Kā’ūs, Niẓām al-Mulk and Ibn Khaldūn. I will conclude by analyzing the invocation of the “circle” in the preamble to *National Development Strategy of Afghanistan*, to show that this model continues to be invoked today and to illustrate the very different political ends to which this invocation has been put. While Ibn al-Muqaffā‘ invokes this model to encourage his Abbasid ruler to assume greater authority over his populace, the authors of the new development strategy of Afghanistan appeal to the “circle” as the foundation for a new democracy. Such diverse invocations reflect the great staying power of this model in Near Eastern contexts – though the meaning of “justice” that the circle conveys changes radically over time.

*Ancient Features of the “Circle of Justice”*

Ancient inscriptions and tracts on governance introduce three ideas about just rule that are later integrated and developed into a unified theory of social order in Sasanian invocations of the “circle of justice.” These ideas are: that the divine chooses one person to rule on earth; that this man is inspired with God’s light, which helps him order society from its chaos; and that the ruler, or ruling class, places men in social ranks to facilitate social balance and stability. I will now introduce a few ancient Pre-Sasanian sources that allude to these ideas. I do not do so to hunt for the origins of these ideas. Rather, I seek to illuminate the pre-Zoroastrian, pre-Islamic existence of such concepts that spanned disparate ancient contexts. Such observations help us see how the “circle” transcends a given space and time and integrates diverse cultural conversations on just rule.
Sacral Kingship

Sometime around 2350 B.C., in the last days of the Sumerian period, an inscription was carved on a stone vessel. This inscription reflects the idea that the chief deity chooses a particular person to rule. It suggests that this divine choice provides the basis for all worldly order, in which subjects adhere to the king’s command, the ruler has no rival, and an organized economic system provides the basis for development and prosperity. This saying is attributed to the last Sumerian ruler Lugalzagesi, who many believe united the kingdoms of Sumer. It begins,

When Enlil (chief deity of the Sumerian religion) gave to Lugalzagesi the kingship of the nation, directed all eyes of the land (obediently) toward him, put all the lands at his feet from east to west, made them subject to him; then, from the Lower Sea (along) the Tigris and Euphrates to the Upper Sea, he (Enlil) put their routes in good order for him. From east to west, Enlil permitted no rival; under him the lands rested contentedly, the people made merry, and the suzerains of Sumer and rulers of other lands conceded sovereignty to him...

A notion of sacral kingship was also present in the ancient Persian Achaemenid context. This Persian ideal suggests that God chooses the king, who then saves the world from disorder and binds the political with the cosmological in a way that promotes stability and productivity on earth. We find on an ancient Persian coin, for example, an inscription from the reign of the Persian King Darius the Great (Dārayavahuš) (522-486 BCE),

Saith Darius the King: Ahura Mazdāh (the Zoroastrian God), when he saw this earth in commotion, thereafter bestowed it upon me, made me king; I am king.

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10 See Linda Darling’s “Do Justice, Do Justice, For That is Paradise”, p. 2, in which she suggests this inscription represents a “circle of justice” and shows it as stressing a link between divine favor, right rule and economic prosperity.


12 Louise Marlow suggests this Persian model of kingship originated in earlier Indic traditions. These earlier traditions shared a similar interest in constructing a social order that would represent the harmony of the cosmos. See Marlow’s Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought, Chapter on the reception of Persian ideas.
By the favor of Ahura Mazdâh I put it down in its place; what I said to them, that they did, as was my desire...\(^{13}\)

This inscription represents the ancient Persian ideal that a king, such as Darius, exists to quell disorder and to direct people in productive social activities.

The idea that God chooses one man to rule and order the earth appears in numerous later invocations of the “circle of justice,” in which God selects a king and this selection provides the basis for all political order. We find, for instance, in the eleventh-century C.E. the Saljûq minister Nizâm al-Mulûk invokes this idea in a mirror for his prince Malikshâh. He depicts Malikshâh as that sacral king whom Allah has chosen to order the realm. Nizâm al-Mulûk explains,

> Since the decree of God was such that this should be the era by which bygone ages are to be dated and that it should crown the achievement of former kings, whereby He (God) might bestow on His creatures a felicity granted to none before them, He caused The Master of the World, the mightiest king of kings to come forth from two nobles’ lines...as far back as the great Afrasiyab (the Primordial King of the Turkish race). He furnished him with powers and merits such as had been lacking in the princes of the world before him, and endowed him with all that is needful for a king...\(^{14}\)

This divine inspiration, which embodies the wit and wisdom that a king needs to rule, appears often in the form of light. This notion of divine light, as the foundation for right rule, also appears in early, pre-Sasanian sources. This light will appear in the “circle” as the wisdom that helps kings restore the world to its natural, social balance.

The idea of the king as a source of divine light is common to several ancient contexts, underscoring its enduring power. Babylonian sayings stress the idea of the king as a source of


divine light on earth, and that with this light the king creates worldly order from its chaos. In *the Code of Hammurabi*, for example, Hammurabi is to “…appear like the sun to the black-headed people and make light the land, and create well-being for mankind.”¹⁵ Yet this conception of the king as divine light also appears in biblical times in Egypt, when King David asserts that, “He that ruleth…shall be as the light of morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds.”¹⁶ The king’s light is here likened to a sunrise that re-initiates the political world in its natural, diurnal pattern. This notion of the king as a reflection of God’s power and light on earth also appears in the Greek context in Plutarch, who explains “…God hath placed the sun and moon in heaven, as manifest tokens of his power and glory, so the majesty of a prince is resplendent on earth, as he is his representative and vicegerent.”¹⁷ This ancient trope of the king as representing divine light also appears in later Zoroastrian sources that represent the king as embodying God’s divine light (or *farr*). For example, King Darius adds celestial entities to his coinage to represent his *farr*.¹⁸ Likewise, fire was later added to Sasanian coinage to represent the king’s radiance.¹⁹

In addition to being imbued with divine radiance, the Sasanian sacral king will organize the people into discrete social estates, to restore social balance and thereby promote economic prosperity. This subject leads me to the third trope – that the ruler must order social classes into

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¹⁶ See Robert Dankoff’s edition of *the Wisdom of Royal Glory*, p. 5. Dankoff is citing Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 57; 150-1; 344.


¹⁸ See Abolala Soudavar’s entry “FARR(AH) ii. ICONOGRAPHY OF FARR(AH)/X•ARΞNAH” in Encyclopaedia Iranica Online (Published August 24th, 2010); See also his book *the Aura of Kings: Legitimacy and Divine Sanction in Iranian Kingship* (Costa Mesa: Biblioteca Iranica, 2003).

¹⁹ See Abolala Soudavar’s entry “FARR(AH) ii. ICONOGRAPHY OF FARR(AH)/X•ARΞNAH” in Encyclopaedia Iranica Online (Published August 24th, 2010).
a harmonious system of ranks. This trope existed in various ancient contexts, including ancient Athens. In this context, we find an ideal form of social order that resembles the one that will later appear in the “circle.”

Justice as Social Harmony

The sociology implicit in the “circle of justice” – that a ruler sets men in particular ranks so that they may best contribute to society – is reminiscent of one we find in Book II of Plato’s Republic. In Book II, Socrates discusses the evolution of a just city as founded on the essential roles that particular individuals must play. In this section of the Republic, there is a transition from a “city of pigs” (one that consists of farmers, craftsmen, merchants and laborers who satisfy basic human needs), to a “feverish” city (one that requires non-essential goods, such as perfumes, gold, ivory, etc.), to one that goes to war (and has a military), to a city with guardians (who attend to everyone’s natures in the city and place the people in their respective positions). While the structure of Book II reminds us of the general structure of the “circle of justice,” the existence of the military, money and tax collectors makes the ideal organization of social groups in the Sasanian context very different than the ideal organization of groups that we find in Plato’s city (which has no tax collectors and whose guardians have no money). Such

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20 By sociology, I mean the account of ways that social groups are understood to work together to constitute the just city.
21 The idea that men need to occupy particular social positions is also present in ancient Indian sources. For example, Kautilya (c. 300 B.C.) mentions in the Arteshastra, an ancient Indian text on statecraft, important roles distinct men must play (e.g. those of the king, the minister, the treasury and the army) to generate political sovereignty. See Kautilya’s Arteshastra, trans. R. Shumasastry, 5th ed. (Mysore: Sri Raghueevar Printing Press, 1956), p. 287. Linda Darling cites this reference in her article “Do Justice, Do Justice, For That is Paradise,” p. 14, footnote, 6.
22 See Plato’s Republic, A. Bloom tr. (New York, 1991) Book II, 374 b-c. Here, there is the assertion that each man should stick to his particular craft, or techné, to contribute to the good of the city. This notion is similar to the one that we find implicit in the “circle of justice” of “one man, one art.”
24 See Ibid., Book II, 372e.
25 See Ibid., Book II, 373d-e.
26 See Ibid., Book II, 374e.
differences in the contents of these just societies (i.e. in the nature of their estates and the social functions they serve), indicates that writers who use the trope do not think that social order in itself promotes harmony and justice. Rather, different intellectual traditions identify specific kinds of social order as necessary for a just world. By emphasizing the military and domestic financial matters in the Sasanian “circle,” Ardashīr idealizes economic and social security as the foundation for a just society. Yet the emphasis on distinctions among social groups as essential to the proper functioning of the realm is also integral to the Sasanian conception of the circle of justice – the subject to which I now turn.

*Sasanian Depictions of Just Rule*

These tropes (of sacral kingship; of the king as the embodiment of divine glory and of the ruler’s role in ordering the polity into social estates) are integrated in the Sasanian model of the “circle of justice,” which Ibn al-Muqaffa’ later imported and transformed in the Arabic tradition. I next trace the contours of this model of the just world, to indicate the framework that Ibn al-Muqaffa’ invoked and transformed within the Abbasid context.

Historians do not have clear evidence for the particular social structure of the “circle” in the Sasanian context. They do know, however, that this model was based on Zoroastrian models that were developed in the earlier Achaemenid period. They argue that Ardashīr sought to use these ancient Zoroastrian conceptions of sacral kingship and of how to order the world to centralize the Sasanian Empire.27 For this reason, historians often base their knowledge of the ideal Zoroastrian social structure of Sasanian Iran on Zoroastrian documents that existed in earlier Persian contexts (such as the *Denkard* and *Avesta*) that were translated during the

27 See Aziz al-Azmeh’s *Muslim Kingship*, p. 23.
Sasanian Period. For this reason, I will invoke these sources (e.g. the *Avesta*) below as representative of Ardashir’s ideology.

**Sacral Kingship and Royal Glory**

To institutionalize a Zoroastrian model of sacral kingship in the Sasanian context, Ardashir depicts himself as a sacral king, inspired with authority from the Zoroastrian God Ahura Mazda, who orders Iran according to Zoroastrian tenets. Ardashir is known, in later Arabic sources, for having made Zoroastrianism the single religion for the Sasanian dynasty. Later Arabic sources record him as having stated that,

> Religion and Kingship are twin brothers and neither can dispense with the other. Religion is the foundation of kingship, and kingship protects religion. For whatever lacks a foundation must perish and whatever lacks a protector disappears.

Here, the ruler’s job is to safeguard religion on earth. Ibn al-Muqaffa himself attributes such a perspective to Ardashir in the *Letter of Tansar*, encapsulating the ruler’s philosophy that “…church and State were born of one womb, joined together and never to be sundered.” This idea of the interdependence between religion and secular authority appears in the Zoroastrian encyclopedia the *Denkard* itself, which states: “Know that from the exposition of the Good

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31 As I mention above, the Zoroastrian Pahlavi literature, such as the Denkard, dates mostly from the ninth-century C.E. Yet, these texts are based on doctrines that were developed over the history of Zoroastrianism. For this reason, scholars of Sasanian Iran, such as Jamsheed Choksky, consider them to be valid sources of information on Zoroastrian doctrines and practices of the Sasanian era. See Choksky’s “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran” Online.
Religion sovereignty is the existence of Religion and Religion is the existence of sovereignty of the provinces.”\textsuperscript{32} Sovereignty here represents secular, or this-worldly, rule.

Ardashîr also links his reign to the Zoroastrian religion on his coinage, by printing that he is the “Mazdaean king, Ardashîr, king of kings of Iran, whose lineage is from the Gods.”\textsuperscript{33} Yet perhaps the best way to discern how Ardashîr presents himself as a Zoroastrian sacral king is to examine the investiture scene Ardashîr commissioned at Naqsh-e Rustam.

\begin{center}
\textit{Investiture Scene of Ardashîr at Naqsh-e Rustam}\textsuperscript{34}
\end{center}

In this rock relief, Ardashîr receives a symbol of political sovereignty (i.e. a diadem) from the Zoroastrian God Ahura Mazda. Ardashîr is here depicted on a horse on the left,\textsuperscript{35} standing above the body of the last Parthian king, Ardawân. Ahura Mazda here faces the king and appears on a horse on the right that stands over the evil spirit of Ahriman.\textsuperscript{36} In

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Denkard, Book III, cited in M.F. Kanga’s “Kingship and Religion in Iran,” p. 222.
\item \textsuperscript{33} See Daryaee’s \textit{Sasanian Iran: Portrait of a Late Antique Empire}, pp. 16-7.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Photograph courtesy of John Woods. Thanks very much to John Woods for sharing this photograph for this manuscript.
\item \textsuperscript{35} I believe that Ardashîr is the figure on the viewer’s left because he is depicted as wearing the korymbos, the hairstyle in which Sasanian kings wore a bun on the top of the head.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Daryaee’s \textit{Sasanian Iran (224-651): Portrait of a Late Antique Empire}, p. 15.
\end{itemize}
Zoroastrianism, Ahriman represents the evil spirit or the Lie, which is contrasted with Ahura Mazda who represents the good and the Truth. This juxtaposition of Ardashīr and Ahura Mazda, joined by this symbol of political authority, represents God’s investiture of Ardashīr with divine wisdom. It depicts Ardashīr as the good and the Truth, who will guide the people of Iran. In fact, this inscription mentions Ėrānšahr (the “Empire of the Iranians”) as the territory over which Ardashīr will rule. This place, esteemed in the Avesta as the mythical homeland of the Aryans, is here depicted as the ideal homeland for the Iranian people. This inscription thus depicts Ardashīr as a sacral king, who will guide the Persian people with Ahura Mazda’s wisdom and teachings. Yet it is significant for the theory of sacral kingship that this image depicts Ardashīr as the human representative of the supreme deity and not as a God in his own right. He is a human ruler, blessed with good fortune at this particular historic moment, whose wisdom and glory can be retracted at any time. According to Zoroastrian belief, royal glory was what marked the king for right rule. For this reason, Ardashīr’s founding myth states that he is in fact chosen by the gods who bestow divine light or farr upon him.

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37 The Avesta is one of the primary collections of texts of Zoroastrianism. It was composed over the course of several hundred years beginning around 550 B.C.E., and parts of it are preserved in the Denkard. Historians of Sasanian Iran, such as Daryae, say that the Avesta was put into writing in the Sasanian era.
39 Daryae’s Sasanian Iran (224-651): Portrait of a Late Antique Empire, p. 15.
41 See Jamsheed Choksky’s “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran” online, in which he cites Madan’s edition of the Denkard 290.20-291.8, 338.14-22.
42 See “The Book of Feats of Emperor Ardeshir, Son of Papak,” the legendary story of the founder of the Sasanian dynasty17.6-19.9, cited in Jamsheed Choksky’s “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran” Online.
Ardashīr uses a Zoroastrian notion of ideal social estates to create an ideal system of social order for Sasanian Iran. Scholars of the Sasanian period often call attention to the idealization of a rigid, quadripartite, hierarchical system of social ranks, composed of the king and three social strata (the traders, nobles and peasants). Modern scholars of this period find that the Sasanian focus on social hierarchy was derived from Zoroastrian conceptions of social organization, found in its sacred texts. So, for instance, Aziz al-Azmeh presents a Zoroastrian text that represents an ideal four-fold division of the human body as representative of the ideal social structure of Sasanian Iran. This text presents the head (representing a priestly class); the belly (husbandmen); hands (warriors); and feet (artisans), representing these four organs (or classes) as representative of an organic whole. In general, modern scholars present four classes (priests, warriors, administrators and common people) as the major estates in the Zoroastrian model of social order. In this model the sacral king towers above the people and places them in social ranks. His divinely inspired wisdom helps him situate people in their rightful places. According to this model, the king’s refusal to consider the general will renders the polity orderly and stable. There is a general notion that the ruler’s wisdom is far superior to that of the people and that order is preserved because they obey his commands and respect their social placement.

In what follows, I will address ways in which Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ invokes and develops the “circle.” In looking ahead from this Sasanian context, we see that King Ardashīr is known in

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43 See R.C. Zaehner’s *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, p. 284.
44 See for instance, see Aziz al-Azmeh’s discussion in *Muslim Kingship*, p. 119; Jamsheed Choksky’s discussion in “Sacral Kingship in Sasanian Iran” Online.
45 See Azmeh’s *Muslim Kingship*, p. 119. Azmeh is here analyzing a ninth-century Zoroastrian text. While this text was written after the Sasanian period, historians (such as Jamsheed Choksky) find these latter sources provide useful resources for discerning Zoroastrian ideology.
46 See Bausani, *The Persians*, pp. 50-67. There is, however, apparently a tripartite social organization espoused in the Zoroastrian text the *Avesta*. See Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought*, p. 70, n. 20.
later Arabic sources to have integrated the political tropes of sacral kingship, divinely inspired wisdom or glory and a clear order of social ranks into a model of the just world that served to promote social harmony and economic prosperity. This model of social order, balance and hence justice is one Ibn al-Muqaffa’ subsequently translates and transforms into a blueprint for Abbasid reform.

The “Circle of Justice” in Ibn al-Muqaffa’ s Writings

Ibn al-Muqaffa’ plays a key role in translating the “circle of justice” into an Arabic tradition and transforming it into an Islamic model of rule. He presents the ancient history of this tradition by translating works from middle-Persian into Arabic. When he translates the Letter of Tansar, for instance, Ibn al-Muqaffa’ presents Arabic readers with the classic Sasanian formulation of the “circle” I discuss above. In this translation, Ardashīr has upheld the doctrine that Zoroastrian religion and kingship are connected intimately in his own social role.47 He appears as the divinely inspired ruler who sets men into four estates (the clergy, military, scribes, and tillers of the land).48

When Ibn al-Muqaffa’ translates a particular story from middle-Persian into Arabic, he recuperates a more democratic historical expression of the “circle of justice,” which emerges from the bottom-up. This story, “the King’s Son and his Companions,” is part of the larger collection of fables, known as Kalīla wa-Dīmna. This story of “the King’s Son and his Companions” stresses the bonds of friendship and interdependence that unite social estates in the “circle.” It depicts the sacral king as one social actor among his three companions (a farmer, a merchant and an aristocrat). Each of these men represents a social rank in a hierarchical system.

48 Ibid, 38.
reminiscent of Sasanian Iran. Yet, these companions are not isolated from one another. They are companions who help one another subsist by performing God-given roles. Brought together by a common need for subsistence, the companions in this story perform their respective jobs to enrich themselves and to provide for their friends. Such a democratic foundation story, in which the people come together to satisfy their needs and are aided in doing so by the bonds of friendship that unite them, is reminiscent of the one in Aristotle’s *Ethics*. When Ibn al-Muqaffa’ translates this fable, he reveals that the ancient tradition he inherited contained a more democratic conception of sacral kingship, in addition to the more familiar autocratic one.

Yet Ibn al-Muqaffa’ not only translates these models of the “circle of justice” into Arabic, he also transforms them into something distinctly Islamic and Abbasid in his original writings. In his *Letter on Companionship*, Ibn al-Muqaffa’ urges his caliph to assume his role as a sacral Islamic king and to set the people into four distinct social estates. In this text, Ibn al-Muqaffa’ instructs his caliph in how to use his divinely inspired judgment to order social estates from the top-down down (drawing on the tradition he had translated in the *Letter of Tansar*). However, Ibn al-Muqaffa’ here contributes to this tradition by transforming traditional concepts from the “circle of justice” into Islamic concepts that would resonate for Abbasid readers. For example, Ibn al-Muqaffa’ depicts the ruler’s divinely inspired wisdom (i.e. the notion of *farr* in

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49 Danielle Allen reads Aristotle *Nichoachean Ethics* to argue that “friendship” is a crucial element for generating and maintaining democratic citizenship. See Allen’s *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), p. 136. Aristotle also stresses friendship’s role in holding the polity together in *The Politics*. See, for example, Aristotle’s *Politics* II. 1262b 7-10, in which he argues that friendship is “the greatest of blessings for the state…” that protects it from revolution and secures the state’s unity.

50 In chapter four of this manuscript, “Re-reading Ibn al-Muqaffa’’s *Letter on Companionship,*” I expound upon the contours of the “circle of justice” that Ibn al-Muqaffa’ develops in this text in much greater detail. For the sake of this chapter, however, I seek merely to show how Ibn al-Muqaffa’ contributes to a historical tradition of theorizing about this model of just rule. For this reason, I here enumerate his contribution in broad strokes.
the Sasanian tradition) as his independent judgment (or *ra'y*). In general, this term represents the independent judgment jurists issued when sources of Islamic law (the Quran, sunna and hadith) did not treat a matter explicitly. Yet, Ibn al-Muqaffa here radically transforms this category of independent judgment to represent the divinely inspired wisdom of the Islamic caliph, whom Ibn al-Muqaffa believes should act as the sole arbiter of the law. Ibn al-Muqaffa’s re-appropriation of the term *ra'y* to represent the caliph’s divinely inspired sacral authority offers an example of how he transforms this “circle” into an Islamic model.

In his *Letter on Companionship*, Ibn al-Muqaffa also transforms the “circle of justice” by depicting one of the four social estates in his “circle” as the “companions” or *ṣaḥāba*. This Arabic term for companionship, *ṣaḥāba*, typically refers to the companions of the Prophet Muḥammad. In early Islamic sources, these companions appear as reliable transmitters of the prophet’s statements and deeds and hence as guardians of Islamic tradition. In Ibn al-Muqaffa’s “circle” these companions represent the “bravery” and “piety” of early Islamic history. They represent the highest social rank, next to the ruler, who are to guide the populace through example. When Ibn al-Muqaffa’s depicts these companions as a social estate in his “circle,” he transforms this ancient model into an Islamic and Abbasid one.

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51 This term for independent judgment (i.e. *ra'y*) has an important history in early Islamic law, which I trace in chapter four of this manuscript.
52 The sunna and hadith represent the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.
54 Again, I go into much greater detail on the meaning and development of this category of “companions” and Ibn al-Muqaffa’s redeployment of it in the *Letter of Companionship* in chapter four below.
55 While Tansar outlines four estates of the clergy, military, scribes and tillers of the land, Ibn al-Muqaffa’s speaks of the ranks of: the army; tax collectors; proto-jurists; and the king’s companions or *ṣaḥāba*. These last two groups, of proto-jurists and companions, are distinctive to Ibn al-Muqaffa’s Abbasid “circle of justice.” I will go into greater detail on each of these ranks in Ibn al-Muqaffa’s theory and how it differs from a Sasanian “circle of justice” in chapter four, devoted to Ibn al-Muqaffa’s *Letter on Companionship*, below.
Finally, Ibn al-Muqaffā’ depicts an Islamic notion of humility as integral to his “circle of justice.” In his *Major Work of Ethics*, Ibn al-Muqaffā’ instructs kings, ministers and secretaries in ethical conduct appropriate for coming to inhabit their ideal respective estates in the just world (i.e. the “circle of justice”) that he envisions. In this discussion, he instructs these groups in how to constitute a “circle of justice” from the bottom up (drawing on the tradition he translated in *Kalila wa-Dimna*). He teaches each group the ideal sorts of behavior they must embrace to inhabit their social rank. Yet in his advice to all of these social groups, he instructs them to be humble. Ibn al-Muqaffā’ even instructs the prince “to satisfy your Lord, to satisfy the wielder of higher authority if there is one above you, and to satisfy the righteous one who follows you.”

This requisite humility that each social group, even the king, must maintain represents an Islamic posture of submission that holds the “circle of justice” in place. Through his discussions of humility in this context, Ibn al-Muqaffā’ makes an Islamic ethic the very foundation for establishing a “circle of justice.”

When Ibn al-Muqaffā’ integrates these Islamic notions of judgment, companionship and humility with the “circle of justice,” he radically transforms this model of the just world, and he refashions the “circle of justice” into an Arabic and Islamic model for political reform. If we consider how these concepts (of divinely inspired judgment, companionship, and humility) relate to one another, we can see how Ibn al-Muqaffā’ makes this model ever more circular. Ibn al-Muqaffā’’s just world is held together neither by the ruler’s superior wisdom alone, nor solely by the bonds of companionship that emanate from the people’s Islamic virtues, nor simply by the

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56 In chapter five of this manuscript (devoted to the *Major Work of Etiquette*), I analyze the particular discussions Islamic notions of humility in this text and their relation to Ibn al-Muqaffā’’s “circle of justice” in much greater detail. Here, I seek merely to signal how Ibn al-Muqaffā’ invokes Islamic notions of humility in this text to transform this model of just rule and infuse it with Islamic content.

57 See Elizabeth Urban’s English translation of this text in the appendix to this manuscript, p. 3; Kurd Ali, *Risā‘il al-Bulaghā’*, p. 60.

58 Thanks to Jennie Han for encouraging me to think about the theoretical implications of this circularity.
requisite humility and respect that all men must have for one another as God’s gifts and creations. Rather, Ibn al-Muqaffa‘s “circle of justice” is held in place by all three of these forces. Causal arrows do not here move in one direction. Rather, Allah inspires the people and the sovereign to political action continually, and he unites them in community.

Later Medieval Invocations

The “circle of justice” continued to be invoked by various Near Eastern authors in Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish sources throughout the medieval periods and later. And yet each author inflected it with a political vision that he hoped to inscribe into his polity’s public imagination. For example, king Kai Kā’ūs, minister Nizām al-Mulk and historian Ibn Khaldūn, invoke and transform the circle to advocate for the diverse just worlds they envision. These authors lived in disparate locations, wrote in different languages and held distinct social positions. I introduce the invocations of these distinct three authors to allude to diverse contexts in which the “circle” was invoked (e.g. the Daylamite, Saljūq and Mamluk dynasties) and the different political ends to which they sought to put it.

Kai Kā’ūs invokes the “circle” in a mirror that he writes for his son Galinshāh. Kai Kā’ūs is the king of the Daylamite dynasty of Ziyarids (928-1090 C.E.), a vassal kingdom to the Saljūq Sultans. The model of the just world, which the author invokes as advice on how to be a good minister and how to be a good king, embodies principles relevant for how to maintain social order and justice that Kai Kā’ūs wants his son to uphold. The author’s

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59 For more information of the Dailamites, see the article by V. Minorski. “Daylam.” Encyclopaedia of Islam Online: http://www.brillonline.nl.proxy.uchicago.edu/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0158
60 The Saljuq dynasty ruled parts of central Asia and the middle East from the eleventh through fourteenth centuries C.E. They were a Sunni dynasty of Turkish origin that was influenced greatly by Persian political thought.
invocations of the “circle” are connected intimately with the model of kingship that he espouses for his son.

The ideal king who Kai Kāʾūs urges his son to become has traits of both an ideal Persian king, who controls and orders the social world, and of a good Muslim, who beholds God’s world in gratitude. Kai Kāʾūs urges his son to “look upon the world and behold its equipment, plant and animal, food and raiment and all kinds of goodness, for all these are useful appointments created in accordance with (God’s) wisdom.”62 Kai Kāʾūs asks his son to be grateful to the Lord of bounty for the world and its gifts, and to signify his gratitude by following the tenets of Islam.63

But the king must also exhibit control over the populace to maintain social stability. Kai Kāʾūs explains that the key difference between a king and his subjects is that kings command, while subjects obey. “…The welfare of the kingdom lies in the effectiveness of (the king’s) authority. If there is no effective authority, ruin overwhelms the state, and effective authority cannot be maintained except by strict control.”64 This theme of gratitude for the world coupled with a commitment to control it when unruly, relates to the king’s need to understand the inner workings and relations between the two most important social groups and the kingdom: the peasantry and the military.

The king recites a variation of the “circle of justice” in his own narrative voice, highlighting the importance of these two social groups. He writes,

Make it your constant endeavor to improve cultivation and to govern well; for, understand this truth, good government is secured by armed troops, armed troops are maintained with gold, gold is acquired through cultivation and cultivation

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62 Ibid., p. 10.
63 Kai Kāʾūs, A Mirror For Princes (Qābūs Nāma), Levy tr., p. 12.
64 Ibid., Levy tr., p. 229.
sustained though payment of what is due to the peasantry by just dealing and fairness. Be just and equitable, therefore.\footnote{Ibid., p. 213.}

In his invocation of the “circle,” Kai Kāʾūs suggests that social stability and economic prosperity come from treating the peasants and the military fairly, and ensuring that the people get what belongs to them.\footnote{Ibid.} So the “circle of justice” here implies not only a right ordering of social groups, but a protection of the revenues of the people as well. In Kai Kāʾūs’ model of the just world, there are particular social spaces in which distinct classes contribute to the just kingdom by performing their unique and essential roles (farmers, soldiers, tax collectors)\footnote{People are suited for particular social jobs, and should be placed appropriately. See Ibid., p. 215-216.} and they are to be rewarded for their social contributions.

Kaī Kāʾūs’ invocation of the “circle of justice” is reminiscent of Ibn al-Muqaffa’\'s. Both authors stress the significance of a sacral king, who can build a just world by setting men in distinct social ranks. Yet they also emphasize the requisite humility God’s subjects (including the ruler) must show in supporting the fair treatment of all social classes and ensuring they get their due.\footnote{In contrast, however, Kai Kāʾūs seems more concerned about the fair treatment of the peasantry and their role in his agricultural economy than was Ibn al-Muqaffa’, who speaks of the well-being of the peasantry only indirectly, in his assessment of tax collectors and their exploitation of peasants.} Such integration of the themes of the power of the sacral king to control the world, on the one hand, and his need to cultivate God’s gifts, on the other, blend Persian and Islamic elements in these theories of just rule.

Similarly, in Niẓām al-Mulk’s mirror, just as in Ibn al-Muqaffa’\’s \textit{Major Work of Ethics}, Allah inspires the sovereign both to guide the ranks beneath him and to look upward in gratitude for his social position. The famous Persian minister Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 1092) invokes the “circle of justice” in the \textit{Book of Government (Siyar al-Mulūk)},\footnote{I use Hubert Darke’s English translation of Niẓām al-Mulk’s \textit{Book of Government (Siyar al-Mulūk)} for the analysis in this section. Niẓām al-Mulk’s text was written in Persian originally.} which he dedicates to the Saljuq king
Malikshāh (d. 1092). For Niẓām al-Mulk, the “circle of justice” is a flexible device through which he can instruct Malikshāh on how to govern, legitimize his rule and de-legitimize the positions of his opponents. Additionally, unlike Kaī Kāʿūs,’ Niẓām al-Mulk introduces an ethical concept to the “circle of justice”: the concept of desert. While there is a notion that the peasants deserve a basic level of fair treatment in both Kaī Kāʿūs’ text and in this one, Niẓām al-Mulk introduces the idea that high-level social positions are privileges and that people must be worthy and deserving of them. In Niẓām al-Mulk’s “circle of justice,” people get fired. Those who commit improprieties can keep their jobs only if they respond to corrections. If they oppress others, they are deemed ungrateful and are replaced with someone more “deserving.” In this society, those who cannot be grateful for their social roles, and those who cannot perform the activities required to participate in the social contract of the “circle of justice,” are excluded from it — not everyone gets to participate in the circle.

In fact, Niẓām al-Mulk implies that there are some people (namely, the Bāṭiniyya) who will never be worthy of participating in the circle, and who must be kept out to guarantee its survival. The Bāṭiniyya was the name given to a sect of Shiʿites that was interested in esoteric (bāṭin) readings of religious texts. In fact, one could read Part Two of Niẓām al-Mulk’s book as an exposition of those groups who have crept into the circle surreptitiously, who are unworthy of being there, and who render the world unjust. The Bāṭiniyya represent those whom the minister believes will never “deserve” to be part of the circle. Niẓām al-Mulk wrote part two of this

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70 While he does not cite the four-line version of the circle, Niẓām al-Mulk alludes to it. See Niẓām al-Mulk, Book of Government (Siyar al-Mulūk), H. Darke tr., p. 10-11; 139. For additional analysis on these two invocations of the “Circle of Justice” and their relevance to political theory see J. London ‘the Circle of Justice’ History of Political Thought, XXXII: 3, 2011, pp. 432-7.

71 For an introduction to the Bāṭiniyya see Marshall Hodgson article “Bāṭiniyya” in the Encyclopaedia of Islam Online: http://www.brillonline.nl.proxy.uchicago.edu
book a few years later than the first part probably in 1091 C.E.\textsuperscript{72} when the Bāṭiniyya were gaining power and coming to challenge the authority of Sunnis in general and the Saljūqs in particular. Niẓām al-Mulk was a devout Sunni Muslim, staunchly opposed to Ismāʿīlī Shiʿism and fearful of the rising power of the Bāṭiniyya, at whose hands he ultimately dies. This invocation of the circle reveals how the author integrates political dogma and religious creeds into his message. He inflects the circle with anti-Ismāʿīlī propaganda, demonizing Ismāʿīlis and depicting their social presence as synonymous with political chaos.

Unlike Kai Kāʿūs and Niẓām al-Mulk who allude to the “circle of justice” in mirrors for princes that advise rulers on how to hold society in balance, Ibn Khaldūn turns to this model of the just world to criticize it as an incomplete explanation for why societies rise and fall. While Ibn Khaldūn charges earlier historians with imparting false information, failing to investigate causes and conditions,\textsuperscript{73} and presenting factually impossible accounts,\textsuperscript{74} he criticizes the sages to whom he attributes the “circle of justice” only for developing accounts that were not exhaustive.\textsuperscript{75} He quotes the Sasanian king Anūshirwān as introducing one version of the “circle,” which reads:

The king rules by the army; The army by money; Money comes from taxes (kharāf); Taxes come from cultivation; And cultivation comes from justice; Justice comes from righteous governing officials, honest ministers; And the king is to check up on the condition of his subjects himself and to discipline them so that he governs them and they do not govern him.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{72} See footnote 1 in H. Darke tr., Niẓām al-Mulk, \textit{Book of Government (Siyar al-Mulāk)}, H. Darke tr., p. 143.


\textsuperscript{74} He recounts, for example, a story that the historian al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 957/346) told of a copper city in the desert of Sijilmāsa. He argues that this story Mas‘ūdī tells goes against the historical information that is known about this city, as well as basic information on the building and planning of cities. See Ibn Khaldūn’s \textit{Muqadimma}, Shaddādī ed., Part I, p. 55; Ibn Khaldūn’s \textit{Muqadimma}, F. Rosenthal tr. (New York, 1958), p.75-76.


Ibn Khaldūn argues that his own analysis of this model of the just world is more extensive and complete than the insight ancient pre-Islamic authors offer, and he directs readers to his own analysis of this ancient saying in his section on authorities and dynasties. In this section, he presents the just society we find in the saying of Anūshirwān as just one phase in a cyclical model of politics.77

From Ibn Khaldūn’s account of the different phases of dynasties, and of the corresponding lifestyles of their inhabitants (e.g., nomadic or sedentary; rustic or urban) we notice how he adds to the accounts of the “circle of justice” advanced by Anūshirwān. For Ibn Khaldūn, the just society must be more than a mere economic arrangement of social groups (farmers, members of the army, etc.) or something that emanates from the acts of a divinely inspired king. It is a moral orientation that individuals living in the dynasty must possess, linked with kinship and altruism. Ibn Khaldūn’s invokes the circle to persuade his readers that the “circle of justice” is but a phase in the great order of things. It represents a period of kinship and solidarity that waxes and wanes with human attachments to worldly desires and to civilizations. As soon as one group grows senile, sedentary and unjust another group will come along and take its place.

This invocation differs greatly from those advanced by Ardashīr, Tansar or Niẓām al-Mulk, who sought to use the circle to elevate their system of secular power, and to order the world in the ruler’s image. Ibn Khaldūn’s invocation shows us how far we have come from Achaemenid and Sasanian times, when kings Darius and Ardashīr made coins to represent

77 If we put together disparate ideas from Ibn Khaldūn’s chapter on authority and dynasties (the chapter in which he argues that he will interpret the “circle of justice”), we see that the society that most closely resembles the “circle of justice” occurs in the early phases of a dynasty, when group solidarity is at its peak and when the political leader (who is essential to order society) cares for the good of the community. As society becomes sedentary, more populated and urban, Ibn Khaldūn argues that the community grows unjust.
themselves as sacral kings, who minted their divinely inspired authority on symbols of nominal value. By the time Ibn Khaldūn invokes the “circle” in his *Introduction*, he has transformed these early notions of sacral kinship, divinely inspired authority, and the king’s role of ordering the polity from perennial aspects of just rule, into short-lived human achievements that will soon be overturned by the grander forces of world history. His invocations of the “circle” urge us to focus on something greater than our professional roles and material existence.

*Afghanistan’s National Development Strategy*

That the “circle of justice” is invoked in 2006 as the model for building a new democracy in Afghanistan highlights the enduring power of this ancient concept. In the very first lines of the executive summary of *Afghanistan’s National Development Strategy*, the authors explain “the Government of Afghanistan’s model of governance and development today derives from an ancient concept of this region called the ‘Circle of Justice.’” The authors stress “the Islamic teachings on the Circle of Justice have identified justice with the rule of law, based on the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam.” While Arabic, Muslim authors in the Abbasid dynasty, like Ibn al-Muqaffa’, credit this model to the Persians, the people of Afghanistan today treat this model as Islamic. This document mentions some of the “Islamic teachings” of this model as stressing the government’s need to build safe roads, build irrigation works to make farmers more productive, to resolve disputes justly, and to protect the poor and weak. The authors then go on to present the structure of their own constitution as being “fully consistent” with this “Islamic circle of justice.”

Some 1249 years after Ibn al-Muqaffa’ invokes the “circle” in a letter to his Abbasid caliph, urging him to augment his role over the populace and to set men in their rightful ranks, Afghan authors espouse the circle as a democratic model that ensures fair treatment and
protection for its citizens. It was only once Ibn al-Muqaffa translated this model into Arabic that it could be Islamicized and reconfigured as an Islamic model of just rule. While the meaning of justice in the “circle” has changed radically over time, its connection with Arabic and Islamic traditions could only take place after authors, such as Ibn al-Muqaffa, transformed this model into a blueprint for reform in an Islamic dynasty. In this way, Ibn al-Muqaffa develops the idea of an “Islamic” circle of justice, as a model for how to reform an Islamic polity.