

The Importance of Ancient Iran

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In spite of the vast literature that historians of the ancient world have produced on Rome, comparatively scant attention has been paid towards its great rival to the east, the Sasanian Empire of Iran. This is precisely the situation that vexes Touraj Daryaee, professor of Iranian history at the University of California, Irvine. In his *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire*, Daryaee presents us with what is, remarkably, the first academic volume in English to be published on a political domain that once stretched from the snowy heights of the Caucasus to the banks of the Indus.¹ Daryaee's work – which examines the Sasanians from a political, social, religious, and economic point of view – will be an essential read for all students of the classical world and the ancient "Near East". It also provides some insight into the vibrant connections that existed between pre-Islamic Iran and India.

The Sasanians ruled Iran from 224 CE until 651 CE, making them contemporaries with, to the east, the Guptas in India and the Chinese Jin, Sui, and Tang dynasties and to the west, to the late Roman empire and Byzantine. Under Sasanian rule, Iran was a vital centre in the exchange of goods, ideas and people between these empires and other lands. The Sasanians were heirs to the great Achaemenian and Parthian empires, though it is unclear to what degree the late Sasanians knew about these imperial forerunners due to their reliance upon oral tradition for historical knowledge.

Decentering the Ancient World

Perhaps their greatest contribution was the idea of Iran itself. The Sasanians proclaimed themselves the legitimate rulers of Iranshahr, the "realm of the Aryans", a land with a distinct cultural identity, rooted in a mythical history and the Zoroastrian religion. And while they sponsored Zoroastrianism, the Sasanians presided over a period of great religious ferment and change, witnessing the

Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire

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spread of Manichaeism, the "heresy" of Mazdak, a growing Christian population within the realm, and, finally, the coming of Islam.

Given the significance of the Sasanian Empire to the world of late antiquity, Daryaee is justifiably frustrated that it remains so underappreciated in academic circles. "The centre of the ancient world was not exclusively Rome", he reminds us, "unless historians of antiquity make it so" (p xvi). However, unlike the case for Rome, the historian of pre-Islamic Iran faces an incredible dearth of written sources with which to work. Ancient Iran's reliance upon mostly oral rather than written tradition, and the limited extent of archaeological work undertaken in the former Sasanian domain, makes reconstructing Sasanian history a daunting task.

Daryaee has relied upon a handful of rock inscriptions carved mostly by royal figures, the fragmentary remains of written texts in the middle Persian language,² more fragmentary literature in little-studied languages such as Parthian and Khotanese, and a corpus of secondary and tertiary sources in Greek, Latin, Armenian, Arabic, and classical Persian. Coins, seals, silverware, and other artwork provide additional clues.

Drawing on these resources, Daryaee first sets out to reconstruct the political history of the empire. The early Sasanian rulers declared themselves to be descendants of the gods. This special link between gods and kings was clearly indicated by Ardashir I (224-40 CE), the first Sasanian ruler of Iran, when he ordered a massive relief hewn into a stone cliff at Naqsh-e Rostam in commemoration of his defeat of the last Parthian monarch, Ardavan. Ardashir sits on horseback over the dead body of Ardavan, receiving a ring symbolising sovereignty from Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda in Avestan), the principal Zoroastrian

god. Ohrmazd, also on horseback, looms over the dead body of the evil spirit Ahriman: thus, Ardashir affirms both his divine right of sovereignty and the Sasanians' place in the dualistic Zoroastrian schema (p 5). The relationship between the Sasanians and the Zoroastrian religion – and especially the Zoroastrian church – is a theme that Daryaee investigates closely throughout his work.

Another equally important theme is relations with Rome and later the Byzantine Empire. In a second relief at Naqsh-e Rostam, Shapur I (240-70 CE), Ardashir's son, depicted himself humbling two defeated Roman emperors, telling us elsewhere that Caesar (in this case, the Emperor Gordian) "lied" and once more casting the state of affairs in the dualistic notion of good versus evil, order versus disorder. Yet, by the time of Yazdgerd I (399-420 CE), the Byzantine ruler Arcadius asked the Iranian monarch to be the guardian of his son. The continuation of this tradition between future rulers indicated periods of stability in relations between the courts in Ctesiphon and Constantinople.

Social Segmentation

The *shahanshah*, or "king of kings", stood at the apex of the Sasanian social order. Delving into the social history of the empire, Daryaee expounds on the fourfold class division that was recognised by the state and legitimated by the Zoroastrian religious establishment. Directly below the king was the Zoroastrian priestly class whose members also held bureaucratic offices and functioned as judges in courts. Following the priests were the warriors, the largest segment of the nobility, and under them were husbandmen and farmers, whose functions of cultivating the land were so greatly praised in the Zoroastrian tradition (pp 42-47). The similarities to varnas are not accidental, of course: due to the common Indo-Iranian roots, social divisions outlined in the Avesta, the Zoroastrian holy text, mirror those found in the Vedas.

Apart from these three classes were the artisans and merchants, a large and growing segment of an urbanising Sasanian society which, Daryaee argues, the Zoroastrian establishment regarded

negatively. As a consequence, Zoroastrians tended to stay away from artisanship and commerce, leaving, for example, the establishment of overseas merchant colonies to Iranian religious minorities such as the Christians (pp 47-49).

Daryae's claims are questionable. First, in making such a sweeping statement about Zoroastrian attitudes towards commerce he relies almost exclusively upon a single passage in one middle Persian text, the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad*.³ Second, Daryae does not take into account the obvious example of the Parsi Zoroastrians of India who fled Iran in the early Islamic era. Recent archaeological work has indicated that the Parsi migrants were a mercantile people. Rukshana Nanji (Deccan College) and Homi Dhalla (World Zarathushti Cultural Foundation) suggest that the Parsis might have landed at Sanjan in Gujarat due to a pre-existing Iranian Zoroastrian trading settlement there.⁴ Evidence of other Zoroastrian trading settlements elsewhere in

India, such as in Kerala from the ninth century, indicate that the Parsis were hardly an exception.⁵

Religion and Empire

Under the Sasanians, Zoroastrianism became the officially sanctioned religion of Iran, though scholars dispute to what degree a "state church" existed.⁶ The Sasanian period is of great significance to the world's remaining Zoroastrian communities since, according to religious sources, Ardashir I and his priest Tansar canonised the Avesta into 21 *nasks* or divisions, creating "a structure by which Zoroastrianism would survive till today" (pp 70-71). Religious authorities decreed that Zoroastrians must visit fire temples three times a day, wear the sacred *kūstīg* girdle (the *kusti* in the Parsi tradition), celebrate six *gahanbar* festivals, and consign dead bodies to *dakhmag* (today's so-called "towers of silence"), a practice that lives on in India. In spite of kingly support and a powerful priestly class,

Daryae is careful to note that Zoroastrianism was "never unified in the Sasanian period": rituals and beliefs often varied greatly from one to the other province (p 96).

While it enjoyed state support and was the majority faith, Zoroastrianism was only one of many religions in the Sasanian realm. Daryae is to be commended for examining the empire's diverse religious make-up. Jews enjoyed a close relationship with the Sasanian leadership and one king, Yazdgerd I, is said to have taken a Jewish wife who later gave birth to Bahram V Gur (421-38 CE) (p 78). Due to the Sasanian policy of importing skilled artisans from Roman territories, Christianity found its way into the heart of the empire and began attracting many members of the nobility. With some clear exceptions, the Sasanians had a relatively tolerant outlook towards religious minorities as long as they did not bring disorder to the realm. "While the Sasanians began as a Zoroastrian dynasty", Daryae comments,



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“in time, they became the mediator and arbiter of justice and order among the Jews, Christians, Mandeans, Buddhists, Hindus, Zoroastrians, and other religious communities in the empire” (p 97).

Daryaee also dwells on two religious movements which profoundly shook the empire: Manichaeism and Mazdakism. The religion of Mani, which blended Zoroastrian, Christian, and other west Asian religious beliefs, eventually spread to Rome, India and China. In Iran, Daryaee claims, Shapur I even side-stepped Zoroastrianism and attempted to use Manichaeism as a political tool for consolidating his diverse realm:

in order to have a universal empire, a universal religion which could cement loyalty to the king and state was much desired (p 14).

This is a questionable assertion. Daryaee offers us no real proof to back his conjecture; indeed, although Shapur might have tolerated Mani and expressed interest in his ideas, his coins and rock inscriptions indicate the king’s steadfast devotion towards Ohrmazd and the Zoroastrian religion. Centuries later, however, we do have some proof that Shapur’s descendant Kavad I (488-96, 498-531 CE) used another movement for political gain: the egalitarian creed of Mazdak, who advocated the sharing of wealth, property, and even women. Although Mazdakism enabled Kavad to push certain reforms and subvert the power of the nobility it was ultimately crushed by Khusro I Anushirvan (531-79 CE).

Trade and Its Politics

Daryaee’s discussion of the Sasanian economy gives us a profound appreciation of Iran’s global influence and importance in the late classical era. Iranian merchants took to the seas and established commercial outposts in Arabia, east Africa, India, modern Sri Lanka, Malaya, and China. These settlements helped funnel goods to and from the imperial heartlands of Iraq, Khuzestan, and Persis (modern-day Fars), areas which experienced a concurrent boom in agriculture and urbanisation. Sasanian rulers introduced silver *drahms* of such uniform weight that they were accepted as currency in far-off corners of the global economic system. This coinage was

imitated in neighbouring lands, including India (p 145).

By the sixth century, Daryaee notes, Sasanian economic policy was bent on disrupting Byzantine trade with China as well as India. Iranian influence on the “silk road” and the presence of Iranian maritime commercial outposts thwarted Byzantine efforts to procure cheap silk, leading the contemporary historian Procopius to complain bitterly that it was “impossible for the Ethiopians (commercial allies of Constantinople) to buy silk from the Indians, for the Persian merchants always locate themselves at the very harbours where the Indian ships first put in...and are accustomed to buy the whole cargoes” (p 138).

Iran’s relations with India were hardly limited to commerce, however. Daryaee provides clues on the cultural exchange between the two civilisations – an exchange mediated by proximity and trade as well as Sasanian domination of Sindh. In surviving textual accounts, India appears as a source of knowledge and high culture. According to the *Dēnkard*, a Zoroastrian middle Persian work, Shapur I ordered that scientific writings from India be incorporated into the Avesta (p 83). Bahram V Gur imported Indian minstrels to his court (p 23). Khusro I Anushirvan, the famed philosopher-king, facilitated the translation of Indian treatises on astronomy, medicine, kingship, and games such as chess and backgammon (p 30). Another text that was translated into middle Persian – and later Arabic – was the *Panchatantra*. Since they also looked westward for knowledge, the Sasanians, as Daryaee observes, “made possible the meeting of Greek and Indian sciences and their absorption into Persia” (p 119-20).

Daryaee’s work ends abruptly without much reference to the Arab invasions which finally brought down the empire in 651 CE and introduced Islam to Iran. Given that Daryaee often reiterates the importance of the Sasanians in establishing much of the foundations of Persian Islamic civilisation, a concluding chapter on this theme would have greatly strengthened his book. *Sasanian Persia* also suffers from poor editing which sometimes contributes to serious confusion over the

dates of reign for particular kings (and one queen).

Regardless, Daryaee has provided us with a richly detailed account of one of the world’s great empires – an empire which has too often been neglected or completely forgotten by scholars. Historians often speak about “filling in the gaps” in the existing scholarship. *Sasanian Persia* no doubt accomplishes this goal in a significant way. Hopefully, it will also inspire further work that will help restore Iran’s critical importance to the late ancient world.

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NOTES

- 1 Previous work has included Arthur Christensen’s volume in French, *L’Iran sous le Sassanides* (1944) and Klaus Schippmann’s *Grundzüge der Geschichte des sasanidischen Reiches* (1990) in German. In 2008, Daryaee also published a slim work that dealt exclusively with the political history of the empire, *Sasanian Iran (224-651 CE): Portrait of a Late Antique Empire* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers).
- 2 One of Daryaee’s earlier publications is his translation and commentary of a rare surviving geographical text. See *Sāhrestānīhā ī Ērānšāhr: A Middle Persian Text on Late Antique Geography, Epic, and History* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers), 2002.
- 3 The name of the text translates as “Judgments of the Spirit of Wisdom”. The text is a work of *andarz* (wisdom or advice) literature covering both religious and non-religious matters.
- 4 See “The Landing of the Zoroastrians at Sanjan: The Archaeological Evidence” in John Hinnells and Alan Williams (ed.), *Parsis in India and the Diaspora* (New York: Routledge), 2007, p 53.
- 5 The oldest evidence of a Zoroastrian settlement in India is a copper plate from Quilon in Kerala dating from approximately 880 CA. See Carlo Ceretti, “Some Primary Sources on the Early History of the Parsis in India” in Fereyduun Vahman and Claus V Pedersen (ed.), *Religious Texts in Iranian Languages* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskaberne Selskab), 2007, pp 211-12.
- 6 See, for example, Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia* (London: I B Tauris), 2001, pp 211-12.

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