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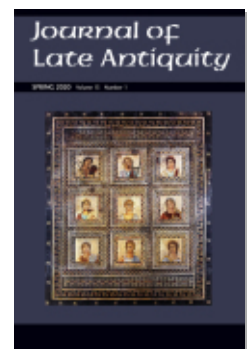
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*Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* ed.  
by Eberhard W. Sauer (review)

Thomas Benfey

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***Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia***

EBERHARD W. SAUER, ED.

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

Pp. xx + 336. ISBN 978-1-474-45230-4

Reviewed by Thomas Benfey  
(Princeton University)

The Sasanian Empire remains poorly understood, given its prominence in Eurasian history. The situation is improving, however, in no small part thanks to Eberhard Sauer's Gorgan Wall Project; here Sauer's team conclusively established this massive border wall's Sasanian origins, and, by extension, Sasanian Iran's considerable military might, and broader capacity for undertaking major infrastructure projects. As Sauer points out in the introduction to his new edited volume here under review scholarship on Sasanian Iran has tended toward an over-reliance on the analysis of literary sources, and many of the articles gathered here further demonstrate the potential of archaeological and environmental evidence to reshape our understanding of this empire's history.

Simpson's contribution is a useful overview of what archaeology and satellite photography have to say about Sasanian urbanism. The main takeaway here, as in much of the volume, is that Sasanian cities bear the stamp of a powerful state, with the capacity to implement coordinated responses to various needs—military and agricultural, for instance—on a grand scale.

Shumilovskikh, et al. show us ancient and medieval Iran from a novel vantage point: arboriculture, as reflected in pollen cores, from a wide variety of sites. Additional information, concerning the ebbs and flows of pastoralism over time, is

furnished by coprophilous fungal spores and insect remains. This data suggests many interesting trends: a peak in arboriculture, and agriculture more broadly, in Fars during the Achaemenid period; a shift further north for the most intensive cultivation under the Sasanians; and a move toward pastoralism everywhere in the aftermath of the Muslim conquests.

Mashkour, et al. focus on animal exploitation in border regions in the Caucasus and northeast Iran, drawing on the bone assemblages found in these areas. Much of the article concentrates on Dariali Fort, in what is now Georgia, where a particularly great concentration of animal bones, with dates extending from the Sasanian period until early modern times, is available for analysis. Across all of the locales surveyed, the data points to a reliance on sheep, goats and cows during the Sasanian period, as far as animal exploitation is concerned; domesticated pigs are not well-represented in the bone records, nor does hunting seem to have played a major economic role at any of these sites.

Continuing with the frontier theme, Lawrence and Wilkinson compare fortification and settlement patterns in the Sasanian Empire's various border regions. As one might expect, the policies pursued in a given place were matched to the local landscape and environment. The authors make the intriguing observation that the Sasanians tended to make use of long walls and trenches where a more decentralized society lay across the border—not in the northwest, where they faced the Roman Empire, but in the southwest, Caucasus, and Gorgan Plain.

Hopper's contribution, likewise frontier-oriented, looks at movement along the Gorgan Wall, primarily as reflected in settlement patterns and hollow ways—lines in the landscape, discernible

in satellite photography, that correspond to well-traveled routes. Although these hollow ways are difficult to date with much precision, this evidence further underscores the level of strategic planning that went into the construction of this massive fortification, and the development of nearby land.

The first part of Ball's article is a cogent appeal to give the archaeological evidence for a Sasanian presence in third- and fourth-century Bactria and Gandhara greater weight in discussions of the history of these individual regions and the Sasanian Empire alike. Ball's argument that Sasanian Iran was more oriented toward the East than to the West, on the other hand, while generally a salutary corrective to much existing scholarship, depends on a selective presentation of the sources (historiography in Arabic drawing upon the Sasanian historical tradition, much of which focuses on relations with Rome, is ignored completely), and, often, a blurring of the history of the Sasanian Empire with that of Iranian-language speakers more broadly, under the term "Iranian."

Patterson focuses on the Sasanian state's policies toward minority religions, seeking an explanation for these policies in pragmatism, rather than the religious motives explicitly given for them. While Patterson's attempt to move away from taking this evidence at face value is commendable, the conceptual framework here is somewhat reductive; Patterson's distinction between the "Realpolitik" motivating Sasanian kings and the "genuine religious concerns" of the realm's Zoroastrian priests understates the extent to which religious doctrine shaped premodern people's notions of reality, as well as the political savvy of Sasanian clerics such as Kerdīr.

Greenwood's article is a fascinating look at the influence of Iranian legal culture (i.e., Sasanian or Parthian—it is often difficult to tell) in Armenia. As he persuasively argues, surveying Justinianic legal codes, Middle Persian loan-words and calques in Armenian historiography, and Islamic-era historical compilations, this influence was pervasive, and its mark continued to be felt well beyond the lifespan of the Sasanian Empire itself. Naturally, given the relatively low amount of Middle Persian law texts available, such evidence has the potential to reshape our knowledge of Sasanian legal culture as well.

Callieri's contribution concentrates on the reliefs commissioned by the first Sasanian ruler, Ardašīr I. The author advances the intriguing hypothesis that the somewhat drastic stylistic shift between these works' earlier and later strata was the result of Ardašīr's movement of Syrian craftsmen, trained in Greco-Roman traditions, to his own realm—such deportations are generally thought to have begun only under Ardašīr's successor, Šāpūr I.

Sauer, et al. provide a large-scale comparison of Sasanian and Roman military capabilities, as reflected in the respective empires' infrastructure. One key point here is that Sasanian bases became much larger than their Roman contemporaries over time, and that this can be taken as an indicator of the former's growing military superiority over the latter. While this article advances many interesting ideas, the authors could have accounted better for the substantial (and, eventually, fatal) challenge to the Sasanian Empire's defenses presented by nomadic imperialists such as the Hephthalites and Arabs; these groups' military successes are not simply explicable in terms of Sasanian "overconfidence."

Morley's article helpfully emphasizes the importance of the Arabian peninsula throughout Sasanian history, and convincingly links the timing of intensified Sasanian engagement in the region to broader geopolitical and economic trends. The importance of internal political developments among the Arabs could have been stressed more, however; the picture of Sasanian-Arab relations presented here is somewhat one-sided.

In his treatment of the dominant role played by the Sasanians in the Indian Ocean trade, Howard-Johnston makes a persuasive case for an influential "business lobby" at the Sasanian court, despite the general neglect of economic matters in the literary sources. The author argues that this group's mark can be found in many policies pursued by the Sasanian state—including Khusrō I's important break with the Turks and their Sogdian allies (rivals to Sasanian merchants) in the sixth century.

Generally speaking, this work usefully brings together a range of perspectives on Sasanian history. I could have done without Sauer's polemics against "relativism," however, which seem to be the key to some of the volume's broader shortcomings: the tendency to present Sasanian history simply in terms of technocratic notions of "success" and "failure," and the occasional bracketing-off of culture and religion from political and economic "reality." In any event, as Sauer argues in his introduction, these articles do suggest a somewhat greater capacity for long-term planning, level of military strength, and cultural influence than has been generally credited to the Sasanian Empire, and altogether constitute an important contribution to the study of Late Antiquity.

*The Cult of Mithras in Late Antiquity: Development, Decline and Demise (ca. A.D. 270–430)*

DAVID WALSH

Leiden: Brill, 2019.

Pp. xii + 146. ISBN: 978-90-04-38080-6

Reviewed by Eberhard W. Sauer  
(University of Edinburgh)

This attractively illustrated monograph, on the Mithras cult throughout the Roman world from the late third century onward, is based on the author's doctoral thesis at the University of Kent, Canterbury, where he is now a member of Kent's Centre for Late Antique Archaeology. The introduction focuses on the cult of Mithras and changing scholarly views on religious change in Late Antiquity. In the past, it was widely accepted that temple destruction and coercive Christianisation played a significant part in the decline of polytheism in general and Mithraism in particular—a view still shared by many contemporary scholars, if alternative views are gaining ground. Walsh, sceptical of conventional wisdom from the start, seeks to re-evaluate the evidence by comparing and contrasting the fate of Mithraic monuments in different regions. Mithraism was not static and unchanging, and Chapter 1 explores the development of the cult in the late Roman world, postulating considerable changes over space and time. These range from a proven surge in coin offering to alleged ritual fragmentation of cult images. Investment in constructing and repairing mithraea progressively diminished in the course of the third to fourth centuries, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, and possible explanations for this are discussed in Chapter 3. These include a speculative decline in initiation rituals resulting in a