

Touraj Daryae and Khodadad Rezakhani

Michael Morony, An Academic Biography

A volume of articles in honor of Michael G. Morony, focusing on Sasanian history, might appear a strange way to pay tribute to an eminent historian of the early Islamic period. Michael Morony is known as a prominent social and economic historian of Iraq and Syria in the seventh-ninth centuries, with special focus on issues relating to land acquisition and use, taxation, agricultural policies, and related administration. His book *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* is the definitive work on the subject, providing a thorough assessment of all of the above issues, as well as matters of the administration of religious communities in the Sasanian province of Iraq. Other than providing a rich source of information about the situation in Iraq during the seventh and eighth centuries, the book also offers many methodological avenues through which one can study similar phenomena and institutions in other parts of the Islamic world. His other works, including his articles on conversion to Islam in the early centuries or his studies of land acquisition and exploitation, also firmly place him in the early Islamic period.

However, for the editors and author of the present *festschrift*, Michael Morony is also a prominent historian of the Sasanian period. This is mostly because he has been among the most active scholars of late antiquity in the lands east of Byzantium. Late antiquity, the period of history marking the gradual change from “Classical” antiquity to the “Middle Ages” is slowly being accepted as a periodization of the history of the regions outside the western Roman Empire. While in Byzantium it has now become the accepted form of periodization, marking the history of Eastern Europe, Syria, and Egypt from the third to the sixth/seventh centuries, in the regions further to the east the process has been slower. Dominated by the established notions of pre-Islamic and Islamic periods as two separate entities, divided by an unfordable gap caused by the “Islamic conquests,” late antiquity is occasionally deemed unsuitable for the history of the world outside the Roman Empire. Despite the insistence of Peter Brown, the father of the concept of late antiquity in the Anglophone world, that the Sasanian Empire should be studied within the same framework,

Touraj Daryae is the Maseeh Chair in Persian Studies and Culture and the Director of the Dr. Samuel M. Jordan Center for Persian Studies and Culture at the University of California, Irvine. Khodadad Rezakhani is the Humboldt Foundation Research Fellow at the Institut für Iranistik, Freie Universität Berlin.

the acceptance of such a notion has been problematic on both sides of the aisle. In a well-known volume of essays edited by Glen Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar on late antiquity¹ (Harvard UP, 1999), the Sasanians are glaringly absent, while an entry is devoted to the world of Islam. Similar omissions are conspicuous in other volumes, including a relatively recent volume by Oxford University Press Handbooks Series, the *Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (2012) where an entry on Central Asia is included, without a mention of the Sasanians.

The omission has not been purely caused by the reluctance of late antique historians to study the Sasanian domains within the same framework, but also by Sasanian historians often being unwilling to engage with the methodology. It is particularly in this respect that Morony's 2008 article "Should Sasanian Iran be Included in Late Antiquity" plays a pivotal role. It is here that Morony argues for the need to get beyond the superficial definitions of late antiquity as a period of "Christianization" of the Roman Empire and points to structural and administrative changes as phenomena through which the period should be studied. In this sense, he successfully posits that Sasanian history fits, rather snugly, within the new periodization and methodology.

The involvement of Michael Morony with the subject, however, goes back way beyond his 2008 contribution. As a historian of early Islam, he had already recognized, during his own doctoral work, that a line dividing the history of the region between pre-Islamic and Islamic periods cannot be so easily drawn. Morony's interest in Sasanian history, before the rise of Islam, indeed goes back to his undergraduate studies in UC Berkeley, where he studied Middle Persian with the giant of Iranian Studies, Walter Bruno Henning. Morony's other early mentor, M. A. Shaban, was himself well known for having altered the given paradigms for the study of Islamic history through his two-volume work, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1976). So, for Morony, paying attention to what came before the rise of Islam was only natural. His doctoral work at UCLA, mainly supervised by Gustave von Grunebaum and after his passing by Nikki Keddie, was finished in 1972. This doctoral thesis, which formed the basis of his book *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest*, was a monumental study of Iraq, the heart of the Sasanian Empire (*Dil-i Ērānšahr* in Middle Persian) immediately after the fall of the Sasanians. Study of social, administrative, and cultural issues was at the heart of the two-volume bound PhD dissertation, and much of it addressed issues that are normally considered the *forte* of Sasanian historians and Iranologists.

After earning his PhD from UCLA and a short sojourn in Texas, Morony was beckoned back to Los Angeles and received an assistant professorship in Middle Eastern History at UCLA, a position he still occupies as a professor. In this position, he has offered one of the rare courses in the United States, perhaps even in the world, on Sasanian History, and has constantly made the study of the Sasanian Empire an integral part of the curriculum at the Department of History. Many of his articles published in the 1970's and 1980's, addressing the issues of conversion and religious communities in Iraq, landholding methods, and administrative geography of Iraq, included the qualifier "late Sasanian-Early Islamic ..." in their title. While continuing his classes

on Sasanian history, most of his other work was also framed within the late antique periodization and naturally considered the Sasanian history closely.

But as far as it concerns the editors and contributors of the present volume, Morony's influence on the study of Sasanian history became most serious with his acceptance of supervision of one of the editors, Touraj Daryaee, in the mid-1990's. While within the field of Iranian Studies the late antique methodology was not yet accepted, Morony allowed Daryaee to explore the possibilities offered by UCLA. Study of Iranian languages and history under the tutorship of Hans-Peter Schmidt and Amin Banani, along with the supervision of his work by Morony, allowed Daryaee to produce a dissertation concerned with the effects of Islamic conquests on the administration of the province of Fars.² This work, which in many cases was a continuation of the same methodologies used by Morony himself in his study of Iraq, was definitely placed within the context of Sasanian history, and its author is best known as a Sasanian historian. This merging of the methodologies of Middle Eastern/Islamic History, Iranian Studies, and Late Antiquity, aside from a reflection of Daryaee's effort, was a testament to Morony's flexibility and intellectual interest outside his immediate specialization. Perhaps it can be best epitomized in Morony's Sasanian entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* that was closely assisted by Daryaee and shows a culmination of both scholars' efforts and chosen methodologies.

Morony's continued interest in late antiquity and Sasanian history was further demonstrated by his contributions in the early 2000's. These included a study of the society and magic in the late Sasanian period and an important article on population transfers between Byzantium and Sasanian Iran during late antiquity. Additionally, he edited two significant volumes of articles which collected many contributions focused on the economic history of late antique and early Islamic Middle East, with articles concentrating intensely on Sasanian archaeology and history. Morony at this point was also getting more and more interested in the issue of periodization and contributed articles on this matter, as well as papers and presentations on Sasanian history.

Morony's subsequent doctoral students, Cynthia Villagomez and Scott McDonough, were also guided to consider Sasanian history in their studies. While both mainly understood the Byzantine world, they are closely acquainted with the world of the Sasanian Empire and its related languages and sources. Taking advantage of the presence of another late antique historian, Claudia Rapp, Morony's students were well versed in both sides of the political borders of late antiquity, as well as its temporal neighborhood.

In 2004, another doctoral student of Sasanian history, Khodadad Rezakhani, started his doctoral work with Morony. As before, the supervisor was open to the student's curiosities and allowed for the exploration of opportunities offered by UCLA. The result was the study of many related subjects, ranging from Byzantine law to Merovingian and Carolingian language policies, as well as related languages. Morony's own interest in material culture, as well as economics of production, led Rezakhani to prepare a dissertation that was advised, alongside Morony, by a world historian and an archaeologist. In this way, the transfer of the methodology of late antique

history, aside from textual sources, was expanded to archaeology and further study of the economy of the Sasanian Empire.

The same trend then continued with Haleh Emrani, who had earned a MA in Sasanian history with Daryae and entered UCLA aiming to study Sasanian family law with Morony. Taking advantage of the present expertise in late antiquity, Iranian languages, and ancient and mediaeval law, she produced a dissertation which further extended the late antique methodology into the study of Sasanian history. Subsequent and current students advised by Morony continue to be influenced by his interest in Sasanian history. In this sense, Morony's influence on the future generations of historians, whether those primarily concerned with the Sasanian Empire or those studying other late antique entities, has become crucial. He has in many senses put the Sasanian Empire on the map of the study of late antiquity, and continues to be concerned with it and produces works of excellent scholarship on it.

In this context, Morony's important 2008 article was not in fact a start for either putting Sasanians within the late antique framework, nor was it a single effort. It is well placed in the context of his long-running association with Sasanian history, his study of late antiquity, his interest in Iranian Studies, and his supervision of students of Sasanian history and those interested in the late antique Middle East. Morony had asked his students to never produce a book-style *Festschrift* for him. So, the editors of the current volume, published in *Journal of Iranian Studies*, have decided to devote the *Festschrift* in honor of Michael Morony to Sasanian History. He never told us to not to publish a volume in his honor in a journal!

Notes

1. Bowersock, Glen W., Peter R. L. Brown, and Oleg Grabar, eds. 1999. *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
2. Touraj Daryae. "The fall of the Sasanian Empire and the end of late Antiquity: Continuity and change in the province of Persis." PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1999.

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