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Review Essays

The Fall of the Sasanian Empire to the Arab Muslims: From *Two Centuries of Silence to Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: the Partho-Sasanian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran*

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Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire: The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran. Parvaneh Pourshariati. London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2009. xiv, 537 p.

One of the most important and hotly debated issues in Middle Eastern and early Islamic history is the Arab Muslims' conquest of the Near East (Donner; Kennedy). The question of how the Muslims were able to defeat the Eastern Roman Empire and obliterate the Sasanian Empire in the seventh century CE has also been central to world history. F. Justi wrote the first complete account of the fall of the Sasanians and the conquest in his chapter on ancient Iranian history in the *Grundriss der Iranischen Philologie* (see References). A. Christensen's *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, published several decades later, in 1944, has remained the most important work on Sasanian history and civilization. Nineteen years after Christensen's magnum opus, Richard N. Frye published the *The Heritage of Persia* on the history of ancient Iran with a keener eye on the Muslim conquest covered in its last chapter. Frye's later book, *The Golden Age of Persia: The Arabs in the East*, on late Sasanian and early Islamic Iran is one of the best interpretive essays and the most important account of the social and intellectual environment of this period.

Historians of Islam have also provided a narrative of the conquest as told from the Islamic accounts, F. Gabrieli's (1968) book being one of the earliest and best of such accounts. B. Spuler's work on early Islamic Iran is perhaps the most complete work on this period of Iranian history (1952). M. Hinds

published “The First Arab Conquest of Fars” (1984), taking on a provincial or micro-history of the conquest. Noteworthy as well, is M. Morony’s work, which takes into account both Islamic and Syriac Christian material cultures to analyze the aftermath of the conquest in the Sasanian province of Iraq (Pahlavi *Sūrestān*) (Morony, 1984; Spuler, 1984-86: 39-40). Morony investigated the different populations of Sasanian Iraq, including the Zoroastrians, and their situations in that period. Morony also concentrated on the relation of Muslims to the conquered Iranians (Morony 1982: 73-88; idem, 1987: 203-10) and patterns of Arab settlement on the Iranian Plateau.

Iranian writers also published histories about the conquest of Iran and its aftermath. M. Azizi’s *La domination arabe et l’épanouissement du sentiment national en Iran* (1938), along with ‘A.-H. Zarrinkub’s works *Do qarn sokut* (1966) and “The Arab Conquest of Iran and Its Aftermath” (1975) provided the hitherto most extensive studies of the conquest and subsequent developments from a nationalist perspective. Zarrinkub studied the social and political situation of Iran on the eve of the Muslim conquest as well as the first two centuries of the Muslim rule in Persia. Zarrinkub used Muslim sources to discuss the movement of the Arabs into Iran, the relation of the Zoroastrians with the Muslims, the status of the *mawālī*, and the question of *jezya* and *kharāj*. His Persian work has been the standard book for the Persian audience for the past half a century. It is only recently that new works are being accepted as an alternative to Zarrinkub’s view.

Zoroastrians have also written about the conquest of the Sasanian Empire and the situation of the Iranians under Muslim rule. For them, Middle Persian texts were an important source of inspiration. M. S. Irani’s “The Province of Khorasan after the Arab Conquest” focused on the resistance of the Iranians to the Muslim invaders (Irani: 530-37), while B. Faravashi, an important scholar, attempted to present a set of reasons for the fall of the Sasanians (Faravashi: 477-84). More recently, J. Choksy, as part of a major work in “subaltern studies,” has conducted a very judicious study, giving a convincing narrative of the Muslim conquest of Iran, as well as the Zoroastrian-Muslim relations in the Islamic period. This study also examines how the Zoroastrians lost their power and why the Muslims became the dominant force in Iran.

Despite this scholarship, many historians are not satisfied with the standard scenario given for the fall of the mighty Sasanian Empire and believe that the questions surrounding the Arab conquest have not been fully resolved. Most recently, Parvaneh Pourshariati’s massive tome has attempted to provide another set of reasons for the decline and the fall of the Sasanian Empire. I believe her book is the most thought provoking work that has appeared on the subject in the past decade.

Pourshariati's volume focuses on several issues in the history of late antique and early medieval Iran. First, she attempts to explain the internal political structure of the late Sasanian period, which according to her is directly related to the success of the Arab armies in the seventh century. I think she has taken an important step in questioning the traditional approach to Sasanian studies, namely the consensus established by Christensen, which viewed Sasanian Iran as a centralized state with an administrative political hierarchy. Pourshariati believes that the Sasanian Empire essentially remained a "confederacy" of which the Pārsīg (Persian) and Pahlāv (Parthian) were the main components. This is an important and innovative suggestion. Rika Gyselen's seminal work in publishing the bullae belonging to the *aspbeds* or cavalry leaders, who all identify their ethnicity as Pārsīg or Pahlāv is the main source for Pourshariati's supposition.

Pourshariati's fractured or "confederate" view is analogous to Tommanoff's study of the dynastic system of Armenia. These dynasties or the *nakharars* in Armenia played an important role in the affairs of the Armenian kingdom, from the defense of the kingdom to the election and legitimacy of the king. Similarly, according to Pourshariati, in Sasanian Iran the houses of Karin, Suren, Mehrān, and Ispāhbed had great influence in royal decision making and in how the empire was operated. Pourshariati concludes that we must abandon the idea of a "centralized" empire of late antiquity: one way to do this is to look at the events from a "Parthian" perspective, which I would call a "view from the edge." Pourshariati's approach is certainly influenced by what we may call the "Columbia School," created by Richard Bulliet. While Bulliet's (1994) work focuses mainly on the Islamic East, Pourshariati's work adapts his methods to the Sasanian period. No doubt we can learn much about late antique or Islamic history by questioning the bias of power-oriented sources. To do so, we must understand a given region or period through extensive study of its material culture, instead of relying primarily on textual sources produced by centers of power.

In chapter one of the book (: 19-30), Pourshariati gives an overview of the Parthian Arsacids, from their origin to the Sasanian period. This is a very useful introduction for setting up her thesis, but the real material is found in chapter two (: 33-160). Here the author explains the importance of the *Kb^w adāy-nāmag*, the royal/national historical records, and the reasons for their composition. She suggests that the crisis during the ascent of Khosrow II to the throne was an important impetus for the re-composition of the *Kb^w adāy-nāmag* and, furthermore, that this rewriting was characteristic of Sasanian attempts to obliterate Arsacid history. It is certainly true that the Sasanians attempted to rewrite of history, particularly during the reign of Khosrow I

(Daryaei, 2009: 28-31) as a result of the religious and political crisis in the empire. But we should not forget that these crises were the outcome of an attempt by Sasanian kings to level the power of the noble houses, and it seems that Khosrow I was to a large extent successful.

In the early Sasanian period, based on the evidence from Shāpur's *Ka'ba-ye Zardosht* inscription, a semi-centralized kingdom existed, where independent kings, local dynasts and even Arsacids were among the cohorts under the rule of the King of Kings. I would contend that the difference between the Arsacid and the early Sasanian period was that the Sasanians made sure that the king's brothers and sons took over important seats throughout the empire so that as time went on, their power and reach superseded the local rulers and dynasts. This loose ruling system has been the subject of a detailed study by M.L. Chaumont, which Pourshariati surprisingly appears to have missed. While she did not have to survey every major work on the topic, when it comes to the idea of what she calls "confederacy" or "feudalism," Chaumont's article would clarify many of the issues that are discussed by Pourshariati about who ruled which part of the Sasanian Empire in the third century.

The gradual establishment of Sasanian hegemony on the Iranian Plateau and beyond probably caused the relocation of many of the Arsacid families into Armenia and the subsequent problems in Armenia. This brings us to Pourshariati's view on the structure of the Sasanian Empire and its comparison with Armenia. In Chapter Two, she covers Arsacid Armenia (the time of the rule of the Aršekunis) and the reasons for the bitter hostility between the two states: not only was Armenia Arsacidized, but it was also—although initially "Mithraic"—Christianized in the fourth century.

Pourshariati claims that Armenia, its structure and society, was much like the pre-Islamic Iranian world. Although this may be the case, I believe this similarity is between Arsacid Iran (247 BCE-224 CE) and the Aršakunis who ruled Armenia till 428: both are very different than the Sasanian Empire. Armenia in late antiquity represents the "archaic" Arsacid social stratification, tradition, and the dynastic and ruling system. That is why the *nakharars* created a weak decentralized kingship in Armenia, which had similarities to the Arsacid system. But the Sasanians never seem to have had such a problem. In the Sasanian period, when there was noble meddling in the royal affairs, it was far less frequent and it never had the impact on the Sasanian imperial system as in Armenia or during the Arsacid period.

Toumanoff's ideas, which Pourshariati uses for her thesis about the Sasanian period, only applies to the Caucasus (as Toumanoff intended) and not to Sasanian Iran. While it may be true that a "feudal"-looking regime was in place in the third century, the Sasanians left no doubt that only the family of Sāsān would be kings, whether they were in Kermān or Armenia. The nobility

certainly placed its pressure on the king of kings, especially when he was weak, although the Sasanians attempted to remedy this through the designation of a “minister” from the fifth century onwards. Pourshariati is certainly correct to remind us that in the pre-modern period, notions of an all-encompassing centralized system did not exist. But the Sasanians, just like the Romans, did try their hardest to make sure an organized system of rule and power from top to bottom existed.

This centralization is apparent in the Sasanian period in a variety of ways, from the minting practices of the late fifth century to the administrative seals and even the production of a single unified historical narrative of *Ērānshahr*, i.e., the *Kh^oadāy-nāmag*. We should not forget that while the Arsacids wanted to flaunt their ancestry and have their ethnic designation on the bulla of their generals, the Sasanians were concerned not with the idea of Pārs (Fārs) or any other specific ethnic designation, but rather *Ērānshahr*, i.e., the “Realm of Iranians.” They designated the people as *Ērān* “Iranians,” and only made an exclusion with the term *an-Ērān* “non-Iranians.” Thus, the Sasanians had an inclusive vision of their empire and the people in it. Any law of the king (*dād*) applied to all of the subject, no matter whether they were Arsacid, Sistānis, Kermānis, or Pārsīg. With the exception of the bullae of several Sasanian generals from the sixth and seventh centuries, there is simply no evidence to suggest otherwise. Similarly, except the mutinies of Wahrām Chōbin and few others in the late Sasanian Empire, there was no talk of provincialism or ethnic separatism. What was at work in the Sasanian period was the idea of *Ērānshahr*, just as there was the idea of Rome around the Mediterranean.

I would then suggest that Sasanian Iran was much more centralized than Armenia. It was armed with the ideological weapon of *Ērānshahr* along with the Zoroastrian religion, and started a campaign for complete domination by the house of Sasan. Until the fifth century, this campaign of centralization was in process, but by the time of the reforms of Kawād I and Khosrow I in the late fifth and early sixth centuries the old nobility was fragmented, and the minor nobility (*azādān*) had been brought in to support the king of kings. Perhaps one can see impotence of the nobility during the Arab Muslim conquest in this light. It can be argued that the major nobility could not come to the aid of the monarchy to withstand the Arab Muslims because it had been substantially weakened, decimated and/or co-opted into the Sasanian imperial system.

What we can learn from Pourshariati in this section is to rethink the issues of centrality vis-à-vis feudalism, confederacy and the interaction between different sections of nobility. She teaches us not to blindly follow the available “centralized” data and tries to move from the center, be it Ctesiphon or Estakhr, and to take the larger picture into consideration. Pourshariati also

teaches some of the more conservative historians such as myself to be more imaginative and view the period from different localities and find alternative sources for their endeavors.

Pourshariati postulates that the importance of the Parthians from their inception and throughout the Sasanian rule was so “overwhelming” that, in the popular tradition, the Sasanian rulers were connected to the Parthian king, namely Ardawān V. Indeed, she is correct that in works such as Tabari and those similarly inspired by the Sasanian tradition of the *Khb^wadāy-nāmag*, there is the story of the marriage of the Ardashir I to an Arsacid noble lady, which also appears in the Middle Persian epic *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*. I believe that Pourshariati is correct in her view that the Sasanians needed to legitimize their rule by making connections to the Parthians.

The Sasanians, in fact, attempted to legitimize their rule by connecting themselves to a series of ancient real and imaginary rulers. Among these were the Kayanian kings of the *Avesta* (their main mode of identification from the fifth century), king Dārā, and through him not only to Darius III, but the local kings of Persis and the Parthians. Such attempts at legitimation may suggest that the Sasanians were of a much more humble background than other rulers. Shāpur I in his third-century inscription could only name three or four generations before him, while Sāsān seems to have been local nobility as he is simply mentioned as a *khb^wadāy* (lord) and not a *shāh* (king) (Huysse, 1999: 49).

In the third century, the Sasanians also paid homage to the elite in Ērānshahr, which seems to have been made up of the remnant Greek population in the poleis and the Arsacids. One could say that the trilingual style (Middle Persian, Parthian, and Greek) of early Sasanian inscriptions is connected to this heritage. But after the inscription of King Narseh at the end of the third century, Parthian and Greek are omitted and never seen again. If the Arsacid houses were so powerful throughout the Sasanian period, as Pourshariati suggests, then why hasn't a single Parthian inscription been found? Even in Khorasan, Parthian as a written tradition is non-existent after the third century.

Throughout the remainder of the second chapter, Pourshariati uses the *Shāhnāma* and Armenian sources to highlight the importance of the Arsacid houses such as the Suren and the Karins. In this discussion, the author illuminates the inner politics and history of the Sasanian period. Again, we gain access to a view from the “other” edge, i.e., Armenia, through sources not usually utilized by historians of late antique Iran. From her coverage of Yazdgerd I through Khosrow II, Pourshariati makes fresh and incisive remarks about the political events. Her agenda in this section is to demonstrate the dormant

power of the Parthians during the Sasanian period, and I think she is relatively successful in this endeavor.

The use of the *Shāhnāma* as a historical source is a tricky issue, and Pourshariati has used it in multiple chapters. On the one hand, those who deal with the *Shāhnāma* as a literary work are against its use as a historical source. They contend that epics are not meant to transmit historical information, but rather are sources for entertainment and education. On the other hand, the late historian Zeev Rubin in an article on the fiscal reform of Khosrow I, has shown how accurate and important the later part of the *Shāhnāma* could be for economic and historical information (Rubin: 227-97). Pourshariati has followed this line, showing how much we can learn by examining the *Shāhnāma*.

But the *Shāhnāma* is simply the Sasanian narrative of the past and their history of what they came to call *Ērānshahr*. The Armenian noble houses left us clan or family histories, but in Iran this was not the case. While the individual houses of Armenia such as the Mamikonian and others commissioned their dynastic histories, the Sasanians made sure that there was only one book of kings. The reason why Iranians did not write history in the same way as the Armenians, at least until the early Islamic period, was that the Sasanian kings had absolute power to commission, and to therefore determine the written content, of the history. In other words, "history" was held captive by the court and existed only as royal chronicles (Klima, 1977). In a sense, Armenian historical written tradition mirrored its politically fragmented state whereas that of Iran reflected its centralized political system.

Pourshariati mentions that the Arsacids appear side by side with the Sasanians in the *Shāhnāma*. She argues that this appearance is connected to their great importance and power in late antiquity. While it is certainly the case that Arsacids are in the *Shāhnāma*, they are relegated to the epic past and not the historical present. As Ferdowsi states: "Since their (i.e., Arsacid) branch and root were cut short, the learned narrator holds no record of their annals, I have heard nothing of them but their name, nor seen anything in the Book of the Kings" (VII: 116 Moscow edition, 1978). Only the name of the founder of the dynasty, Ashk (Arsac), and some rulers such as Shāpūr, Gudarz, Bizhan, Narsi, Hormezd, and Ārash, as well as Ardavān (or Artabanus V, the last Arsacid king) are mentioned. The *Shāhnāma* remembers the Arsacid rule as a time of chaos when *Ērānshahr* became weak (Yarshater: 473). If the Pahlāv were any more powerful, wouldn't they attempt to rescue themselves from oblivion and omission from the national history? Indeed the Arsacids were forgotten except by the Romans, Classicists, and philhellenes. One wonders how much the Pahlāv generals of the sixth and seventh centuries, whom Pourshariati calls the

“Parthians,” knew about the Arsacids of old and what the connection was between them. A dynastic family (Arsacids) who ruled several centuries before to the rise of the Sasanians are not the same as a group of generals and nobility who originated from northeastern Ērānshahr and called themselves Pahlāv.

Pourshariati’s third chapter is equally if not more exciting than the first two. She states that her investigation of the chronology of the late Sasanian Empire and the Arab Muslim conquest is “methodologically heretical.” As she explains the events, she questions and even disregards the *hejri* dating system because it has caused much confusion for the study of early Islamic history. Following A. Noth (1994), Pourshariati discusses the problems of conquest or *fotuh* literature, in which an almost epic tradition of the Arab Muslim conquest was created by the early Muslim writers after the fact. I believe she is completely correct in this regard and should be lauded for her attempt to emancipate the history of the late Sasanian Empire and that of Iran and Iraq from the Islamic narrative that is dominant in academia and Middle Eastern Studies.

Pourshariati proposes that the conquest of Iraq did not take place with the enthronement of Yazdgerd III (r. 632-51), but rather between 628-32, when the last Sasanian king had not even assumed power! Even more intriguing is her assertion that the Prophet Mohammad was alive when the conquest of Ērānshahr took place, and that the rule of Ardashir III (628-30) was the main period of such battles as Obolla and Madhār, which according to her have been incorrectly dated by almost every historian of the period (633-34). This begs the question whether it was the Prophet who led or orchestrated the conquest of the Sasanian Empire? That question is one that Pourshariati does not answer and simply states that by answering one set of questions, other questions and problems arise.

Amidst this “heretical” chronology, Pourshariati does very interesting and important work in writing the history of the late Sasanian Empire based on what she calls non-*fotuh* and *Kb^w adāy-nāmag*-based sources. Her discussion of the ten to twelve Sasanian rulers and pretenders to the throne after the death of Khosrow II opens up the long neglected study of the period from the perspective of Iranian Studies. She tries to explain the discrepancy between the “official” established chronology and the confusing list of rulers who minted coins with dates that surpass their alleged period of rule. To be sure, this is a difficult question, and from Nöldeke in the nineteenth century to my own work the answers to it have been very different from those offered by Pourshariati. Before reiterating the established explanation let us look at one example of Pourshariati’s argument. It is documented that Queen Bōrān ruled for a year and a half, while she has coins with the year 3 minted, mainly in Sistān and the eastern regions. Pourshariati suggests that queen Bōrān actually ruled

in two different periods, between 629 and 632, when Yazdgerd III came to the throne. This makes her the last Sasanian ruler before the young Yazdgerd III and places the loss of Iraq on the shoulders of Bōrān as well.

As a follower of the tradition, I have suggested that there is an alternative to pushing back the date of the post-Khosrow II ruling queens and kings to fit the numismatic evidence. After Kawād II killed most of the legitimate heirs to the throne, the door was open for different contenders from the extended family of Sāsān throughout the country. Kawād II had finished off the *x^warrāh* of the Sasanian Empire and queen Bōrān made a last attempt at restoring it (Daryaei, 1999: 1-6), but there were many “kings” on the Iranian plateau who tried to seize power.

I would suggest that in the period from Bōrān to Yazdgerd III's rule, several contenders simultaneously minted coins in their own names (Malek: 229-51; Emrani). There is a list of names from the textual sources as well as coins with the names of some of these rulers. They include Khosrow III (630-32), Khosrow IV (630-36), and Pērōz II (631-32), who ruled approximately at the same time. Other contenders, such as Hormezd V, or Farrokh-Hormezd, the general who may have had a hand in the death of Āzarmigdokht (Mochiri, 1:13-16, 2: 203-205) also minted coins in Khuzestān and Fārs (Gyselen 2004, 66).

The connection of the chaos in late the Sasanian Empire with the political power of military generals was discussed by Nöldeke in the nineteenth century and Howard-Johnston (2006: 224-25). It was not only the Pahlāv generals in Khorasan who had a hand in the political decision making. One can suggest that there are two phenomena which have a direct bearing on the situation in the seventh century: the political power of the military and the conscription of a nomadic army.

Both phenomena can be found in Roman history as well. The Roman Empire faced a period of instability in the third century, the period of the “Barrack Emperors.” At this time, different military camps promoted their generals to as emperor. Many of these soldier-emperors were assassinated and replaced rapidly. At the beginning of the fifth century, the Roman army conscripted nomadic Germanic forces, leading to what has been called the “barbarization” of the Roman army. This in turn weakened the Roman army and made it unable to withstand the Germanic takeover of Rome and its empire.

In the Iranian case, the breaking of the strength of the old military order and great houses of the nobility took place in the sixth century, and they were replaced by the Dehgāns (Tafazzoli). Z. Rubin has pointed out that in the sixth century we encounter the “barbarization” of the Sasanian army, where nomadic tribes, such as the Deylamites and others were conscripted (Rubin:

285). Thus, one may suggest that the new Sasanian army's loyalty was first and foremost to their tribal commander in charge. There are many similarities between this situation and the Abbasid period, when Turkic soldiers were taken into the Caliph's army and their loyalty eventually remained with their general. How cohesive such an army could have been is difficult to judge, but it could not have been as uniform as before Khosrow I's reforms of the military. According to Zakeri, Khosrow I's military reforms and the division of the army were dangerous innovations that made the generals very powerful (Zakeri: 32). It would have been much easier for such an army to serve their own interests and that of their general vis-à-vis the Arab forces during the conquest, than to serve the Sasanian king of kings. Khosrow I had decimated the old Sasanian military order and the noble houses. Because they did not have the same force as in the early Sasanian period, they did not—and could not—rescue the empire.

Like Rome, the Sasanian Empire saw its own Barracks Emperors. While the important family of Pahlāv and its army resided in northeastern Ērānshahr, there were other armies that seem to have had a hand in the raising and killing of the Sasanian kings. We are told that an army in Mesopotamia, which was initially headed by Shahrwarāz, placed Āzarmigdokht on the throne at Ctesiphon. He was replaced by Homrezd V who also controlled Mesopotamia and northwestern Ērānshahr. Yazdgerd III was finally placed on the throne by Mehr-Khosrow, who was backed by another army in Khorasan. We also hear of the army of Azerbaijan (the northwest) which had been led by Khorokh Hormezd (probably Hormezd V), Bōrān's chief minister and perhaps general (Sebēos: 89; Shahbazi). These actions by the Sasanian military were an important factor in bringing the chaos and demise of the empire. By the time the Arabs had arrived, the Sasanian armies were divided and their loyalty to the crown shaken. How much of this was uniformly orchestrated by the "Parthians" is difficult to say, but they certainly had an important part in it, which Pourshariati has brought to light.

Finally, I would like to respond to Pourshariati's assertion that the traditions of *foṭuḥ* and Islamic narrative provide a "wrong chronology" of events, and to her attempt to introduce *Khwadāy-nāmāg*-based sources to support her claim that the conquest of Ērānshahr and Mesopotamia took place during the period between Ardashir III and the end of Bōrān's rule (628-32). I would like to provide a piece of a *Khwadāy-nāmāg*-based source, or as close as we can get to it, which provides the following schema of the late Sasanian Empire (*Bundahishn*, Ch. 33: 19-21):

*ud ka xwadāyih ō yazdgird mad 20 sāl xwadāyih kard adān tāzīgān pad was maragih ō ērān dwārist hēnd yazdgird pad kārezār abāg ōyšān nē škuftan ō xwarāsān ud turkeštān šud asp ud mard ayārih xwāst ušān ānōh ōzad.
pus ī yazdgird ō hindūgān šud spāh gund āwurdan ud pēš az āmadan ōy xwarāsān ōzad ud ān spāh ud gund wišuft ērānšahr pad tāzīgān mānd ud ušān ān ī xwēš dād ag-dēnih rawāgēnēd was ēwēn ī pēšēnagān wišobēnēd ud dēn ī mazedsnān nizārēnid ud nisā šōyīšnīh nisā nigānīh nisā xwarišnīh pad kard nihēd.*

And when the rulership came to Yazdgerd [III], he ruled for 20 years; then the Arabs rushed with many numbers to Ērānshahr; Yazdgerd [III] was not able to battle them; [he] went to Khorasan and Turkestan and asked for horses and men for assistance; he was killed there.

The son of Yazdgerd [III] went to India and brought army troops, and before arriving, he was killed in Khorasan and that army and the troops were destroyed; Iran was left to the Arabs and they have made that law of evil religion current, many customs of the ancients they (have) destroyed and the Mazda-worshipping religion was made feeble and they established the washing of the dead, burying the dead, and eating the dead.

In these passages the Arab Muslim conquest is placed exactly at the time of Yazdgerd III's rule and not earlier, otherwise our Zoroastrian scribes would have noted it. They obviously did not get their material from the tradition of Islamic narrative, and mention the *Kh^wadāy-nāmāg* in this text. This is not the only Pahlavi text that ascribes such an event to the time of Yazdgerd III. In fact, every Pahlavi text that mentions the conquest mentions the name of Yazdgerd III and not Ardashir III or Bōrān for the time of Arab conquest. Furthermore, independent of the Sasanian royal chronicle, contemporary Syriac sources such as the Chronicle of Khuzestān makes it very clear that the conquest had begun after the death of Bōrān and not during her rule (Greatrex and Lieu: 229-37; Robinson: 14-39).

Chapter Four deals with the history of Tabarestān and the Pahlāv connection, while Chapters Five and Six are in themselves an independent book, and have much to say about the history of religion in Iran from the Sasanian rule through the time of the Abbasids. I think here, Pourshariati is trying to do too much in one book. Sasanian religious landscape (Ch. 5) and the revolts of late antiquity (Ch. 6) are each topics with their own set of sources and expertise to which people such as Sh. Shaked to W. Madelung have dedicated a lifetime of study. Still, what gives credence to Pourshariati's coverage of these periods is her locating the "Parthians" and their religious tradition. She does a fair job in briefly reviewing the important religious personages and the idea of "orthodoxy" and Zurvanism in the Sasanian period.

The place where I absolutely disagree with Pourshariati's work is in her idea of "Mīhr worship" (pp. 350 onwards), which is one of those notions that

most, if not all, serious scholars of Sasanian and Iranian studies understand as a strange concoction of the Iranian nationalist imaginary. Indeed, Mehr is an important *yazata* in the Zoroastrian tradition and Pourshariati does cover this aspect of Mehr soundly until she arrives at what she calls the “Pārsīg-Pahlāv religious dichotomy.” At once one is taken back to the Wikanderian imaginative views of the early half of the twentieth century, where gods and *männerbund* in secretive societies rushed through the air and the earth in a strange frenzy. Even more apparent is the influence of other great Iranist of the same Uppsala School, G. Widengren, in the thought process of Pourshariati. Widengren, whom she cites, was very much interested in the mysterious and esoteric world of Iranian feudalism and its influence on Mithras as well (Widengren, 1966: 433-55).

This aspect of Widengren’s study has long been discredited. While Pourshariati may be correct that there was a difference in religious tradition and even worship among the northern Pahlāv and the southern Pārsīg, the evidence for this supposition is non-existent and waits to be discovered. Mehr-worship, or as popularly known in Iran *Mehr-parasti*, is one of those myths constructed in Iran to claim a hand in the construction of the cult of Mithras in the Roman Empire. This was due to the direct connection F. Cumont and the early Mithra-scholars made between the Iranian Mithra and the Roman Mithras. There has now been a lively debate about the relation and possible influence of Mithra of the Iranian World on that of the cult of Mithras in the Roman world. Most scholars nowadays disassociate the direct connection and see in Mithras the stamp of the city of Rome and Roman astrological tradition at work. Although one can not ignore the “Iranian” or Iranian-like symbols and stories attached to the cult of Mithras, we do not find a single Mithraeum anywhere east of Syria, and the overwhelming number of Mithraeums are in Europe and not in Iran. There is simply nothing of this sort in Iran, and although Mehr is an important deity, there is no evidence that Mehr was ever the single focus of worship in the Parthian, Sasanian, or the early Islamic period.

In the Indo-Iranian world, Mitra/Mithra played the role of the judge who punishes falsehood (Gershevitch: 7). Mithra’s primary function seems to have been the personification of “covenant,” “contract,” and “treaty,” and later on in the Indic world, he came to be considered as the personification of “friendship,” which originally could have been derived from the concept of “alliance” (Schmidt: 345-93). What make the Iranian notions of Mehr relevant for the cult of Mithras are the Armenian and the Pontus regions, where a good amount of syncretism took place. It is there that we can see Mithra make its important appearance, leading to the question of whether the “cult” is in-bound or out of bounds with the Zoroastrian tradition.

In the first century CE, the Parthians and the Romans had come to an agreement over Armenia, in which the king of Armenia was picked by the former and crowned by the latter. We have a description of King Tirdates' coronation by the Emperor Nero in the work of Cassius Dio (Book LXII). The Armenian king Tirdates, unlike any other king who came before the Roman Emperor, came forth with his sword, which must have had important symbolic meaning for both sides, and met Nero in Naples. There he made the following oath: "Master, I am the descendant of Arsaces, brother of the king of kings Vologases and Pacorus, and thy slave. And I have come to thee, my god (θεόν), to worship thee as I do Mithras (Μίθραν)..." (Dio, LXII).

In fact we know that there was a temple dedicated to Mithra in Armenia. Aghathangelos provides us with the details of the destruction of the temple at Bagayarič: "He (Tirdates) came to the temple of Mihr, called the son of Aramazd, to the village called Bagayarič in the Parthian tongue. Then he destroyed it down to its foundations" (Sebēos: 790).

In the fourth century when the Iranian king wrote to his Armenian counterpart, the very idea of oath conjured up only Mithra. A good example of such a tradition is found in Moses Khorenats'i, where Shaapur II in a letter tells king Tiran:

The most valiant of the Mazdaeans (*Mazdezants' k'aj*), the equal of the sun (*bardzakits' aregakan*), Shapuh, king of kings, in our bounty have remembered our dear brother Tiran, king of Armenia, and send many greetings.... And we shall in no way harm your kingdom, we swear by the great god Mihr... (Sebēos: 17).

Khorenats'i tells us that Tiran trusted Shābuhr II because "he lost his senses," but a more probable supposition is that Tiran felt assured of his safety because the Iranian king had sworn to Mithra not to harm him, and Tiran understood the importance of swearing to Mithra. This means that an Armenian writer in a Christian milieu could not, or intentionally did not, clearly understand the socio-religious implication of this oath to Mithra that binds the two people. In the late sixth century, when Wahrām Chōbin had taken flight to Azerbaijan, he was surprised that he was not aided in his campaign against Khusrow II by the Armenians. According to Sebēos, to persuade the Armenians he wrote a letter which stated:

If I shall be victorious, I swear by the great god Aramazd, by the lord Sun and the Moon, by fire and water, by Mihr and all the gods, that I will give you the kingdom of Armenia, and whoever you wish you may make king for yourselves (Sebēos: 21).

The oath taken by Wahrām Chōbin is again quoted by Thomas Artsruni in exactly the same fashion (Astrusi, 2:153). Now Wahrām Chōbin would not have invoked these deities if they were not understood in the Armenian World, even in the late sixth century. This becomes clear when we remember that these deities were the “ancestral deities of his [King Tirdates’] forefathers, falsely called gods” (Agathangelos: 778). The worship of such a deity as Mithra in Armenia is again mentioned in Elishē’s testimony. When Mehr-Narseh made the proclamation that Armenians must revert to Zoroastrianism, according to Elishē, the Christian Armenians respond to his letter by stating that “we no longer believe in fables,” suggesting that they once did believe in these “fables,” and the “fable” discussed has to do with Mithra/Mehr (Artsruni / Thomson, 1982: 35).

All of this may give us a notion that Mehr (Mithra) had a special function and position. When we remember that in Armenia there was also a temple for Ohrmazd and another to Anahid (Anahita), then it becomes apparent that the Zoroastrian deities in Armenia were infused with good dose of Hellenic religious tradition. We know that in the Sasanian period, no temples to Ohrmazd or Mehr existed in *Ērānshahr*, and that this was part of the iconoclastic policy of the Sasanians. Still, in all of the Armenian sources cited above, Mehr operates within the confines of the Zoroastrian tradition, as a deity of oath and contract. One can even push for an Iranian influence on the Roman cult of Mithras, as B. Lincoln has rightfully demonstrated (Lincoln: 76-95). But east of Armenia there are no temples, no Mehr-worship in the strict sense of the word, and Mehr operates strictly within the confines of evocation of the Zoroastrian tradition. (I will not discuss whether Behāfarid and Sonbād’s revolts, among others, had “Mithraic” component, as claimed by Pourshariati, as my views and that of most scholars in this field are drastically different.)

We can conclude by stating that Pourshariati has stirred up a lot of ideas and issues which had been either dormant or slow to develop in the field of Iranian Studies. She has certainly pushed the envelope on the standard view of “Two Centuries of Silence” coined by Zarrinkub. Her single most important contribution is that this book will receive a hearty response and consequently open up the discussion about Sasanian historical studies, the late Sasanian Empire, the nature of the Arab Muslim conquest, religion and practice in Iran, and the notion of late antiquity as a period of study in Iranian history and that of Eurasia. She should be lauded for her effort to make connections between historical events that had not been perceived or discussed before. Pourshariati has also made us aware of how to be careful in studying the Sasanian Empire and the problems that this period had gone through. She has

certainly made an important contribution by drawing Iranian history in late antiquity away from the Arabo-centric and Islamo-centric approaches that have dominated North American academia. Iranian history of this period can stand on its own, and shed light from the east on the great events of late antiquity and the early medieval period. Reading this book will provide plenty of ideas for the researcher and a thought-provoking agenda for those interested in the history of the Iranian world.

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