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Sasanian Persia, Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia

Ajdar Mehriban Xoşbəxt¹ 

Abstract

The Sasanian era is one of the important periods of Iranian history and archeologists and historians have come up with many books and articles on this period. *Sasanian Persia, Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia*, is a new book that also includes articles in this regard, edited by Eberhard W. Sauer and published by the University of Edinburgh Press.

Keywords: Sasanian Persia; Rome; Archeological Excavations.

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Introduction

The Sasanian era is one of the important periods of Iranian history and archeologists and historians have come up with many books and articles on this period (see Rahbar, 2023; Nourallahi, 2022; Panjehbashi & Mohazzab Torabi, 2022; Benmaran, 2022; Roustae Farsi, *et al*, 2022; Maksymiuk, 2021; Matloubkari, & Shaikh Baikloo Islam, 2022; Skupniewicz, 2022; Khanmoradi, *et al*, 2023, Rostami & Aryamanesh, 2020). *Sasanian Persia, Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* is a new book that also includes articles in this regard, edited by Eberhard W. Sauer and published by the University of Edinburgh Press (Sauer, 2017).

The book consists of four parts, with each having three articles. **Part One:** Surplus Production, Urban Growth, and the Environment, includes three articles. The first article entitled “Sasanian Cities: Archaeological Perspectives on the Urban Economy and Built Environment of an Empire”, is written by St. John Simpson, who has investigated Sasanian cities that have so far given less attention. Simpson discusses evidence from three urban areas of Iraq, Iran, and Turkmenistan and uses them to show the physical appearances of residential neighborhoods and trade exchanges.

The second article is “Palaeoecological Insights into Agri-Horti-Cultural and Pastoral Practices Before, During and After the Sasanian Empire”, jointly written by Lyudmila Shumilovskikh, Morteza Djamali, Valérie Andrieu-Ponel, Philippe Ponel, Jacques-Louis de Beaulieu, Abdolmajid Naderi-Beni and Eberhard W. Sauer. They have investigated Pollen data obtained from the radiocarbon sediments of several peat bogs and various rivers across Iran to yield valuable data about farming styles in the Sasanian period. Data have also indicated farming and animal husbandry.

The third article is “Animal Exploitation and Subsistence on the Borders of the Sasanian Empire: From the Gorgan Wall (Iran) to the Gates of the Alans (Georgia)”, co-authored by Marjan Mashkour, Roya Khazaeli, Homa Fathi, Sarieh Amiri, Delphine Decruyenaere, Azadeh Mohaseb, Hossein Davoudi, Shiva Sheikhi and Eberhard W. Sauer. Here, the contributors compare the livelihood economics of a military Fort in modern-day Georgia and areas adjacent to the Gorgan Walls in northeastern Iran. This study also investigates the dietary diversity in terms of animal consumption in the Sasanian era. Goats/sheep and cattle were used to supply the majority of animal proteins, which could be supplemented by other sources such as poultry, fish, and even wild birds. A large number of animal remnants found from Georgia’s Dariali Fort and other settlements in the Sasanian era shed light on how animal species were exploited to serve human’s needs.

Part Two of this book is called “Frontiers and Frontier Landscapes”. This has an Article by Dan Lawrence and Tony J. Wilkinson entitled “The Northern and Western Borderlands of the Sasanian Empire: Contextualising the Roman/Byzantine and Sasanian Frontier” which discusses the archaeological landscapes of the Sasanian Empire. This article mainly focuses on the complicated border, south of

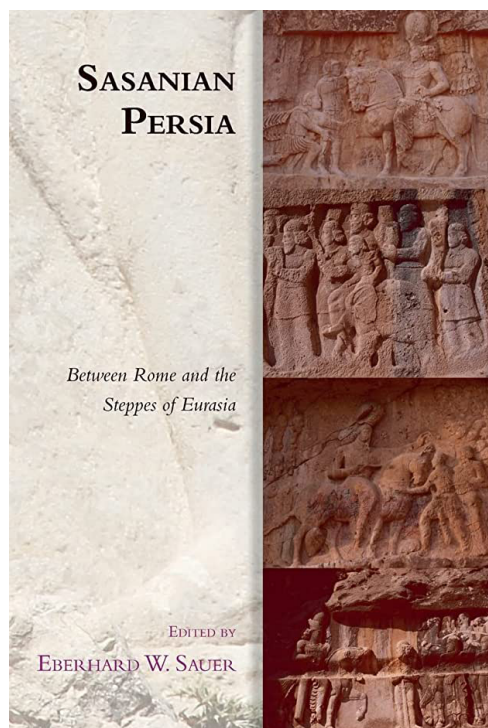
the Caucasus, especially modern-day Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Dagestan. It also investigates the role of linear barriers such as the Gorgan Walls in northeastern Iran and the Ghilghil-chay Walls and Darband in the Caucasus, irrigation systems, fortifications, and deployments in forming landscapes.

Another article by Kristen Hopper is “Connectivity on a Sasanian Frontier: Route Systems in the Gorgan Plain of North-East Iran”. In this paper, Hopper investigates the roads of this era based on archaeological evidence and discusses European tourists’ travelogues, which describe the roads that pertained to subsequent historical eras of Iran. Therefore, data of this kind help the author shed light on those road systems using archaeological evidence.

“The Sasanian Empire and the East: A Summary of the Evidence and its Implications for Rome” is yet another article by Warwick Ball, who investigates the Gorgan Wall, a set of fire temples in Bandidan and Sarakhs, Bactrian documents, the Ghulbiyan painting, and the rock relief of Shapur at Rag-e Bibi to reveal the importance of this part of Iran in the Sasanian era.

Part Three of the book is entitled “Contested Territories and Cultural Contacts Between Persia and Rome”, which includes three articles. The first “Minority Religions in the Sasanian Empire: Suppression, Integration and Relations with Rome” by Lee E. Patterson, discusses the role of politics between Sasanian rulers and religious sections of that time. Later, the author explains how rulers were opposed to Zoroastrian clerics and why the persecution of Christians in the empire was politically not religiously motivated.

The second article “A Contested Jurisdiction: Armenia in Late Antiquity” by Tim Greenwood reevaluates the laws of Roman Armenia during the reign of Justinian. The author reasons out that the laws reflected legal procedures that went beyond newly-established Roman provinces, under the control of Iranians.



Sasanian Persia, Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia, Edited by Eberhard W. Sauer, Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 338 pp, ISBN: 9781474401012

Another article in this part of the book is “Cultural Contacts Between Rome and Persia at the time of Ardashir I (c. ad 224–40)” by Pierfrancesco Callieri, who investigates the architectural and artistic conditions of the era. He comes to the point that the contacts between Iranians and Romans started from the reign of Ardashir I, with architects and stone carvers from eastern provinces of the Rome Empire being involved in the construction of a Fire Temple in the city of Firouzabad.

Part Four of the said book “Imperial Power Balance and International Relations”, also consist of three articles.

The first article in this section “Innovation and Stagnation: Military Infrastructure and the Shifting Balance of Power Between Rome and Persia” is jointly written by Eberhard W. Sauer, Jebrael Nokandeh, Konstantin Pitskhelauri and Hamid Omrani Rekavandi. In the paper, the contributors deal with defense fortifications in these two ancient empires, suggesting that the physical dimensions of the castles had considerably shrunk in the Roman Empire while referring to innovative works in the Sasanian era. According to archaeological evidence, in the later period, the Sasanian army was pioneering in terms of its organizational abilities, innovation, and the effective use of available resources.

Another article “The Arabian Frontier: A Keystone of the Sasanian Empire” by Craig Morley discusses the Sasanians’ direct and indirect control over the Arabian Peninsula, economic boom, and security. For this, the empire’s activities on the southern borders of the peninsula reached its peak in three distinct eras i.e. in the early Sasanian era, mainly during the reign of Ardashir I and Shapur I and II, and maybe during the sixth century, when conflicts with the Roman Empire reignited.

The last article of this book “The India Trade in Late Antiquity” was written by James Howard-Johnston. Both great powers of the West enjoyed Indian trade in the fifth century; however, their tense relations after the 502-505 war, Iranians imposed sanctions on Indian trade, which Justinian sought to lift, but to no avail. Hence, Iran served as the hub through which south and east products, including garments from India and Sri Lanka, could be transported to Europe.

Overall, this book is a comprehensive one that shows collaboration of many researchers. The book provides a new approach to the political, religious, and geographical aspects of the Sasanian era and thus gives valuable data.

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