

BOOK REVIEW

Arsacids and Sasanians: Political Ideology in Post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Persia.
By M. RAHIM SHAYEGAN. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. xxx + 539. 9 b/w figs.; 7 maps; 15 tables. Hardcover, £65.00/\$110.00. ISBN 978-0-521-76641-8.

In this book, aimed at a specialized audience, Shayegan investigates the political ideology of the (early) Persian Sasanian empire. Shayegan envisages such a political ideology in the shape of an “Achaemenid revival,” that may have caused an (alleged) expansionist policy towards the Roman empire. The structure of the book appears conventional: an introduction (“Achaemenids and Sasanians”), four chapters (“Sasanian epigraphy”; “Classical sources: Dio, Herodian, Ammianus Marcellinus”; “Arsacids and Sasanians”; “*Imitatio veternae Helladis* and *imitatio Alexandri* in Rome”), followed by conclusion, epilogue, appendix, bibliography, and indices. However, the size of the chapters greatly diverges and so does their importance. Chapter one numbers 15 pages, Chapter two merely 9, and Chapter four 37; Chapter three, on the other hand, numbers some 292 pages and is divided in five subchapters, some of them split up into separate parts. The evident interrelation between the different chapters suggests that they might have been arranged in a more balanced way.

Much of the knowledge regarding the Achaemenid empire had vanished during the third century BC in the Near East. Nevertheless, the Arsacids (rulers of the Parthian empire) reinstated the Achaemenid title “King of Kings” (*šar šarrāni* in Babylonian cuneiform texts dating to the Arsacid period). After the Arsacids had conquered Mesopotamia in 141 BC, Greek and Roman authors suspected them of aiming for a reconstitution of the former frontiers of the Achaemenid empire. Up to now, mainstream conviction has held that the Arsacid “Achaemenid renaissance” emanated from Iranian quarters, even though written tradition in Persia itself was very weak: in the medieval *Šāhnāmeḥ*, the *Epic of Kings*, no Achaemenid kings, apart from Darius III (and Alexander the Great, as some will assert) figure. To be honest, apart from some 20 lines, the Parthians (in Persian: the *Aškāniān*) are absent as well, underlining a firm Sasanian origin of this work.

In spite of the testimonies of some sources, Shayegan makes sufficiently clear that the Arsacid connection with the Achaemenids “owed its existence to the permanence of the Babylonian cuneiform tradition ... which held records of Achaemenid history,” as he summarizes the situation (elaborated in Chapter three) on page xiii. This tradition linked both empires, creating a sense of historical continuity and notion of empire. The Arsacids got in touch with the Kingdom of Pontos as well and became thereby aware of how Pontos referred to the Achaemenids to sustain its political legitimacy. Pontos and Babylon thus formed the substratum on which both the “political ideology and cultural identity of the Arsacid empire was formed” (xiii). Shayegan moreover underlines that the Arsacid state was a highly centralized and ubiquitous state, an omnipresence to some extent served by Greek officials and reflected in the Babylonian documents as well. All these factors contributed to a successful state, in which similar values emerged as under the Achaemenids. Altogether, Shayegan adduces sufficient evidence to question the exclusive right of the traditional ascription of the “Achaemenid revival” under the early Arsacids.

Like the Arsacids before them, the Sasanians also were accused in Greek and Latin sources in the third and fourth centuries AD (namely Cassius Dio, Herodian, and Ammianus Marcellinus) of harboring ambitions to reconstitute the Achaemenid empire. Whether this was a mere *topos* for those authors or their allegation was based on their ability to value actual developments remains to be seen. Cassius Dio is outspoken, but the evidence is too scanty to allow firm conclusions; Herodian’s account is essentially based upon Dio’s. Though Ammianus’ scope is much wider, and may even have a Persian core, it is colored as well. Moreover, one might question how the Sasanians could have acquired any direct knowledge regarding the Achaemenids.

It seems unlikely that there was any (local) literary evidence on the Achaemenids in Sasanian times. Shayegan argues that the Sasanians became predominantly acquainted with the Achaemenids through Roman agency—largely as a consequence of the Romans’ policy (notably under the Severi) to assume Hellenistic ideals, the *imitatio Alexandri* referred to in Chapter four. Thereby the Romans essentially created their own enemy, presenting him with an almost ready-to-use ideology in the bargain. The literary evidence appears, however, too weak to prove decisively that early Sasanian territorial ambitions did go much further than Mesopotamia, Syria, and Armenia, in spite of those very literary sources. I believe, though, that Shayegan might well be right to assert that the idea expressed by Greek and Roman authors on Sasanian expansion should

be regarded as a *topos*. If there ever was a coherent ideology in post-Hellenistic and late antique Persia, it has, so far at least, not yet unequivocally emerged from local sources.

I find Shayegan's approach to the issue under scrutiny challenging, but am not yet completely convinced. His focus is predominantly on textual evidence, restrictedly on oral tradition, a very enduring phenomenon in largely illiterate societies. I would have welcomed an elaboration of his views in that field as well. The numismatic evidence is well used, as is art historical (Shayegan calls it archaeological) material. The Appendix (372–429: no page numbers present) is a welcome chronological table of published Arsacid cuneiform documents. The bibliography (430–502) is extensive, the indices (general, Greek terms, and locorum [with subdivisions]) are excellent.

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