Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire
Parvaneh Pourshariati is Assistant Professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Ohio State University. She is the author of many scholarly articles on ancient Iran.

‘This is a monumental work of first-class scholarship. Its publication represents a landmark, and it immediately becomes the point of departure for further work on the many subjects it deals with. I can think of few other books I have read over the years that can match this work’s astounding combination of originality, bold vision, clarity of presentation, meticulous examination of the sources, and practical puzzle-solving. I learned immensely from reading it. Dr. Pourshariati’s book is in my view one of the most important individual contributions to our understanding of the history of Iran since Christensen’s L’Iran sous les Sassanides, published seventy years ago. Especially remarkable is the breadth of the author’s agenda, and the way in which she has convincingly woven together different strands. These include: the political rivalry of the great families, the Sasanians’ collapse before Byzantine and Muslim attacks, the religious diversity of medieval Iran, questions of historiography, the substance of the Iranian popular epic, and the important details to be gleaned from seals and other documents. Any one of these would be (and for many scholars has been) a subject for full immersion for many years, but Pourshariati has integrated each into a complex and meaningful whole, even as she has made signal contributions to the more detailed study of each one.’

Fred M. Donner, Professor of Near Eastern History, University of Chicago

‘A fundamental reappraisal of a major issue in Near Eastern history, and a book that will be referred to whenever the subject is discussed, Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire is the most important re-examination of late Sasanian and early Islamic history since the work of Christensen in the 1940s.’

Hugh N. Kennedy, Professor of Arabic, SOAS, University of London

‘Dr. Pourshariati’s book proposes a reinterpretation of the structure of the Sasanian Empire and of the power struggle that followed the end of the Byzantine–Persian War of 602–628. The author argues that throughout most of its history the Sasanian state was a confederative structure, in which the north and east (the old Parthian territories of Media and Khurasan) were highly autonomous both politically and culturally. It was Khosrau II’s (590–628) disastrous effort to centralize the state that led to its collapse and to the Arab Conquests. Dr. Pourshariati also argues for a significant redating of critical moments in the Arab conquests in Iraq. Taken as a whole, Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire is original, innovative, bold, and generally persuasive.’

Stephen Humphreys, Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern History, University of California, Santa Barbara

‘Both impressive and intellectually exciting, Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire is a major, even pathbreaking, work in the field—a field which this book should revolutionize.’

Stephen Dale, Professor of History, Ohio State University
Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire
The Sasanian–Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran

Parvaneh Pourshariati
In loving memory
of my father:
Houshang Pourshariati
(1934–2004)

روانش خرد بود و تن چنان پالد
تو گفتی که می‌هر تدارد ز خال
فردوسی
## Contents

Note on transliteration and citation .............................................. xi  
Acknowledgments ................................................................. xiii

### Introduction
1
- The problem ................................................................. 6  
- Sources and methodology .................................................. 10

### 1 Preliminaries
19
- The Arsacids ................................................................. 19  
- Agnatic families ........................................................... 27

### I Political History
31

#### 2 Sasanian polity revisited: the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy
33
- Sasanians / Arsacids .......................................................... 37  
  - Christensen’s thesis ....................................................... 47  
  - Dynasticism ............................................................... 53  
  - Early Sasanian period .................................................... 56  
- Yazdgird I, Bahrām V Gūr, and Yazdgird II / the Sürens ............ 59  
  - Mihr Narseh Süren ....................................................... 60  
  - Yazdgird I ................................................................. 65  
  - Bahrām V Gūr ............................................................. 67  
  - Yazdgird II ................................................................. 70  
- Pirūz / the Mihrāns ............................................................. 70  
  - Izad Gushnasp Mihrān ................................................... 71  
  - Shāpūr Mihrān .............................................................. 74  
- Bilāsh and Qubād / the Kārins ............................................ 75  
  - Bilāsh ...................................................................... 75  
  - Sukhrā Kārin .............................................................. 76  
  - Qubād ..................................................................... 78
Contents

2.4.4 Shāpūr Rāzī Mihrān .................. 80
2.4.5 Mazdakite uprising .................. 82
2.5 Khusrow I Nowshirvān / the Mihrāns, the Ispahbūdān, and the Kārins .................. 83
2.5.1 Khusrow I’s reforms .................. 83
2.5.2 Interlude: Letter of Tansar .................. 85
2.5.3 The four generals .................. 94
2.5.4 The Mihrāns .................. 101
2.5.5 The Ispahbūdān .................. 104
2.5.6 The Kārins .................. 112
2.6 Hormozd IV / the Mihrāns .................. 118
2.6.1 Bahrām-i Māh Adhar .................. 119
2.6.2 Simāh-i Burzin Kārīn .................. 120
2.6.3 Bahrām-i Chūbin Mihrān .................. 122
2.7 Khusrow II Parviz / the Ispahbūdān .................. 130
2.7.1 Vistāhm Ispahbūdān .................. 131
2.7.2 Smbat Bagramuni .................. 136
2.7.3 The last great war of antiquity .................. 140
2.7.4 Shahrvārāz Mihrān .................. 142
2.7.5 Fārūkh Hormozd Ispahbūdān .................. 146
2.7.6 Khusrow II’s deposition .................. 153

3 The Arab conquest of Iran .................. 161
3.1 Question of sources: the futūḥ and Xwâdāy-Nāmag traditions .................. 161
3.1.1 Futūḥ .................. 164
3.1.2 Revisiting Sayf’s dating .................. 166
3.2 Shirūyih Qubād and Ardashīr III: the three armies .................. 173
3.2.1 Shirūyih Qubād .................. 173
3.2.2 Ardashīr III .................. 178
3.2.3 Shahrvārāz’s insurgency .................. 179
3.3 Būrāndukht and Azarmdukt: the Pārsīg–Pahlav rivalry .................. 183
3.3.1 The Ispahbūdān .................. 186
3.3.2 Analepsis: Arab conquest of Iraq .................. 190
3.3.3 Azarmdukt and the Pārsīg .................. 204
3.3.4 Būrāndukht and the Pahlav .................. 207
3.3.5 The battle of Bridge .................. 214
3.4 Yazdgird III: Arab conquest of Iran .................. 219
3.4.1 The conquest of Ctesiphon .................. 224
3.4.2 The conquest of Khuzistān .................. 236
3.4.3 The conquest of Media .................. 240
3.4.4 The conquest of Rayy .................. 249
3.4.5 The conquest of Gurgān and Šabaristān .................. 253
### Contents

3.4.6 The mutiny of Farrukhzād .......................... 260
3.4.7 The conquest of Khurāsān and the mutiny of the Kanārangiyān .......................... 265
3.4.8 The conquest of Azarbāyjān .......................... 278
3.5 Epilogue: repercussions for early Islamic history .......................... 281

4 Dynastic polities of Ṭabaristān .......................... 287

4.1 The Āl-i Bāvand ........................................ 288
4.1.1 Kayūs .......................... 288
4.1.2 Bāv .......................... 289
4.2 The Āl-i Bāvand ........................................ 294
4.3 The Āl-i Jāmāsp ........................................ 298
4.3.1 Jāmāsp .......................... 298
4.3.2 Pirūz .......................... 301
4.3.3 Jīl-i Jīlānshāh .......................... 302
4.4 The Arab conquest of Ṭabaristān ........................................ 303
4.4.1 Peace treaty with Farrukhzād and Jīl-i Jīlānshāh .......................... 304
4.4.2 Farrukhan-i Bozorg Dhu ’l-Manaqib .......................... 308
4.4.3 Yazid b. Muhallab’s unsuccessful conquest of 716–718 .......................... 310
4.5 Khurshid Shāh .......................... 314
4.5.1 The spāhbed Kārin .......................... 314
4.5.2 Sunbād’s murder .......................... 315
4.5.3 Khurshid’s death and the final conquest of Ṭabaristān .......................... 316

II Religious Currents .......................... 319

5 Sasanian religious landscape .......................... 321

5.1 Post-Avestan period .......................... 321
5.2 Orthodoxy – Heterodoxy .......................... 324
5.2.1 Two pillars: the monarchy and the clergy? .......................... 324
5.2.2 Kirdir .......................... 327
5.2.3 Aturpāt .......................... 334
5.2.4 Zurvanism .......................... 339
5.2.5 Zandiks .......................... 341
5.2.6 Circle of Justice .......................... 342
5.2.7 Mazdakite heresy .......................... 344
5.2.8 Jewish and Christian communities .......................... 347

5.3 Mihr worship .......................... 350
5.3.1 Mithra .......................... 351
5.3.2 Mihr worship in the Achaemenid and the Arsacid periods 358
5.3.3 The Pārsig–Pahlav religious dichotomy .......................... 360
## Contents

5.4 Mihr worship in the quarters of the north and east .................. 368
5.4.1 Mihr worship in Čabristân ........................................ 369
5.4.2 Mihr worship among the Mihrân ................................. 378
5.4.3 Mihr worship among the Kārin ................................... 379
5.4.4 Mihr worship in Armenia ........................................... 386
5.5 Conclusion ........................................................................ 392

6 Revolts of late antiquity in Khurásân and Čabristân .......................... 397

6.1 Bahrām-i Chūbin ............................................................ 397
6.1.1 Mithraic purview of Bahrām-i Chūbin’s rebellion .............. 398
6.1.2 Bahrām-i Chūbin and the apocalypse ............................ 404
6.2 The Ābbāsid revolution .................................................... 414
6.2.1 Inner-Outer Khurāsān ................................................ 417
6.2.2 Post-conquest Iran and contemporary scholarship ........ 420
6.3 Bihāfarīd .................................................................... 426
6.3.1 Interlude: Ardā Wirāz Nāma ....................................... 431
6.3.2 Mithraic purview of Bihāfarīd’s rebellion ...................... 432
6.4 Sunbād the Sun Worshipper ............................................. 437
6.4.1 Sunbād and Bahrām-i Chūbin: recurrent narrative motifs .... 441
6.4.2 Mithraic purview of Sunbād’s rebellion ......................... 442
6.4.3 Sunbād and the apocalypse ......................................... 445
6.4.4 Gentilitial background of Sunbād ................................. 447
6.5 Conclusion ........................................................................ 451

Conclusion ............................................................................. 453

Tables, figures and map ................................................................ 467

Key ....................................................................................... 467
Conquest of Iraq ..................................................................... 468
Conquest of Iran ..................................................................... 469
Seals ..................................................................................... 470
Genealogical tree .................................................................... 471
Map of the Sasanian empire .................................................... 472

Bibliography ............................................................................ 473

Glossary .................................................................................. 499

Index ...................................................................................... 509
Note on transliteration and citation

As this book deals with sources from many languages, it has been virtually impossible to be consistent in nomenclature. In general, we adopted the following ranking of languages in descending order of priority in our transliteration of foreign words: English, New Persian, Middle Persian, Arabic, Armenian, Greek, Avestan. A name or a term is then rendered in the first of these languages in which it is well attested. For instance, the third Achaemenid king in these languages is respectively Darius, Dāryūsh, Dārā, Darāb, Daru, Dareios, Daraiwânu. Since the first, English, form is already in common use, we render his name as Darius. Likewise, although Middle Persian spâbbed can be translated in English as general, or rendered in New Persian as ispâbbud, we have opted to keep its Middle Persian rendition in order to remain as true to its intended meaning as possible. Similarly, we will use New Persian Nîshâpûr, rather than Nishapur (English), Nîw-Shâbûr (Middle Persian), or Nîsâbûr (Arabic). These examples also underline another issue: names of places or offices may have changed over time, and so we will use the name that was prevalent at the period in question. Hence in the case of Nîshâpûr, the older name Aharshâhr is not used when discussing events in later Sasanian times. Similarly, instead of modern Istanbûl, Roman Byzantium, or late Roman Augusta Antonina, we will refer to the capital of the Byzantine empire during the Sasanian period by its official East-Roman name, Constantinople.

The context and/or the intended meaning will also determine our adoption of a particular transliteration. We shall, therefore, use Armenian Mirranes instead of New Persian Mîhrân, for the commander of Petra under Khusrów I; and we shall use Middle Persian kûst-î ādurbâdاغān, rather than its New Persian form kûst-î Azarbâyjân, for the quarter of the north. Likewise, to refer to the deity that plays a germane role in this work, the New Persian form Mîhr, or on occasion the older form Mîthra, derived from Avestan Mithra, is used in the Iranian context, whereas the English form Mithras is reserved for the Roman context (Roman Mithraism). In the index and the glossary, an attempt is made to provide cross-references to the most commonly attested forms.

In working with many different sources, the language as well as the script can cause problems. For scripts other than Arabic (like Aramaic, Pahlavi,
Armenian, Avestan, or Greek), we have followed the conventions of the translated source. To transliterate Arabic into Latin script, we have more or less followed the transliteration scheme used by the Encyclopaedia of Islam. As we had to deal with both Persian and Arabic sources, we felt that following the Encyclopaedia of Islam rather than the Encyclopaedia Iranica would yield a more consistent scheme. We have, however, simplified this system for the four letters خ، چ، گ، and ش، which we transliterate کب، زب، چب، and شب instead of the respective underlined forms کب، زب، چب، and شب. Thus we write کب گریم or Xešm. An additional complication of transliterating Arabic script is vowelization. This is reflected, for instance, in the name of the Iranian general هرمز. As his name is only attested in Arabic sources, we have maintained the Arabic transcriptions, although its Persian form would have been هرمز، derived from Persian هرمز. We also opted to render Persian ی فیه as یف instead of e or eh.

Works are cited following the Harvard style (author plus year of publication), except for the first citation, which is given in full. Articles in the Encyclopaedia Iranica and the Encyclopaedia of Islam are now readily available online. As we have availed ourselves of the online versions, our references to these may no longer have page numbers. We have dated each online article without a page reference to the present, that is to say, to 2007. For the benefit of the non-Arabic speaking reader, we have cited ِتَبَاری’s history, which is used extensively in this study, both in English (published in the series The History of Tabari) and in Arabic (de Goeje’s edition). For example, the citation تَبَاری 1999, p. 295, de Goeje, 988, means: page 295 in The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen, and page 988 in de Goeje’s edition. Furthermore, for the benefit of the Persian speaking reader, many citations of non-English sources are followed by a citation to its Persian translation, whenever such a translation is available. As خالعی خلخلی’s last volume of his critical edition of the Shahnāma has not yet been published, we had, unfortunately, only recourse to less critical editions. We ultimately opted for two, the Nafisi and Moscow editions, and where possible, we have cited both.

1 This mainly applies to the short vowels a, e, i, o, u, but even ی when denoting a vowel, can be rendered as ی or ی depending on the word. The vocalization ی is only used in Middle Persian or other older languages and never represents ی.

2 In case there is no author, an alternative key is provided. All dates are converted to the CE calendar.

3 E.g., the first citation would be: تَبَاری, The Sasanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen, vol. V of The History of Tabari, Albany, 1999, translated and annotated by C.E. Bosworth (Tabari 1999); with any subsequent citation to this work given by the form between parenthesis.

4 The same rule applies to papers that have not yet been published.
Acknowledgments

The acknowledgments of any book are my personal favorite. For they bear testimony not only to what sustains the solitary works of scholarship, but also to the debt that such endeavors carry. In lieu of acknowledgments, one could very well write a contextual social and psychoanalytic analysis of the stimuli that have sustained any piece of scholarship. And so it is with much regret that the author is following the trends in the field and is giving a short synopsis. This work would not have been possible without the support that the author has received through the years leading to the present study: Iraj Afshar, Peter Awn, Michael L. Bates, Kathryn Babayan, Elton L. Daniel, Fred M. Donner, Touraj Daryaei, Dick Davis, Rika Gyselen, Stephen Humphreys, Manuchehr Kashefi, Hugh N. Kennedy, Christian Maetzen, Jalal Matini, Robert D. McChesney, Sam A. Meier, Julie S. Meisami, Charles Melville, Margaret Mills, Michael G. Morony, James Russell, Pari Shirazi, Zeev Rubin, Sabra Webber, and Ehsan Yarshater, each bear a sustaining responsibility for a juncture of this journey. To Richard W. Bulliet, my promoter in the course of my graduate studies, I owe my initial training in historical enquiry. For this, I shall remain indebted to him. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my colleagues in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the Ohio State University, to the AAUW, SSRC, and the Department of Women’s Studies at OSU for their support, giving a special thanks to my colleague Joseph Zeidan for lending me his support when I was in dire need of it. To our chief librarians, Dona Straley and Patrick Visel, I owe a debt of gratitude for always coming to my rescue with charm and caring. I would also like to acknowledge the kindness and support of the staff at the Astan-i Quds-i Radavi and the Bibliotheque Nationale for accommodating me during my research visits to those libraries.

There are a few friends and colleagues who travel with you throughout the unsettling world that has become the academe, especially if you are a female of the species. My dear friends Sussan Babaie, Ariana Barkeshli, Habib and Maryam Borjian, Marina Gaillard, Jane Hathaway, Tameron Keyes, Larry Potter, Nader Sohrabi, Rosemary Stanfield-Johnston, Shahrbanou Tadjbaksh, and Faramarz Vaziri are among these. I remain indebted to Jane Hathaway for volunteering the truly Rustamian job of editing a first draft of this manuscript,
and to Rosemary Stanfield-Johnston, who read and edited a second version of two chapters of this work. My dear colleague, Stephen Dale, was one of the first not only to read the initial draft of a manuscript that had been submitted to him in trepidation, but also to support it subsequently. I am extremely grateful to him. The support of Fred M. Donner and Hugh Kennedy, who have also read a first draft of the present book, has been invaluable. For any infelicity, the author bears the sole responsibility. One of my greatest fans throughout this journey has been my very good friend and colleague, Asef Kholdani. Through many years of uncertainty in the course of this study, his support has been unrelenting. Hours of stimulating telephone conversations with Asef filled my void in the twilight zone of late antique Iranian studies.

A handful of momentous influences affect the lives of each of us. Had it not been for my cherished friend Mamad Shirazi, I would probably not have considered an academic career when the Iranian revolution metamorphosed the lives of many. His friendship through the past three decades has been the hallmark of my intellectual and emotional life. There are those who catapult you in life and those who sustain you through it. This work would, literally, have not been in front of you had it not been for the loving support of my husband, partner, and soul mate Hans Schoutens, my pillar in all of this. It is he who bears responsibility, among other things, for the meticulous index, glossary, and charts, and the whole layout and format of this manuscript. I would not have been here without him.

To I.B.Tauris, Iradj Bagherzadeh, and Alex Wright, I extend my sincere gratitude for seeing a work of this magnitude, quantitatively, through production, in a publishing atmosphere where pre-modern Iranian studies is not given the attention it deserves and needs. Besides my husband, a secondary dedication of this work is to Farhad, Shapoor, Shirin, Mallika, Kate, Taji, Soheila, Bahar, and Minou Pourshariati, Shahriyar Zargham, and the rest of my family. My adoptive family, the Schoutens, but most of all my adoptive mother and father, the late Josephine Van Passel-Schoutens, and Louis Schoutens, know full well the contribution that they have made to this study.

My primary debt, however, is reflected in the dedicatory page of the present study. Had it not been for the inspiration of my father, Houshang Pourshariati, the ideals that he cherished, the life he led, and the mark that he left on me, I would not have embarked on a journey that has now been more than four decades in the making. It is on account of the turn of the wheels that he is not here to see this. He is sorely missed. Above all, none of this would have been possible had it not been for my mother, Iran Pourshariati, whose nurturing sustained all else in order to make this contribution what it is.
Introduction

The history of Iran in the late antique, early medieval period (circa 500–750 CE) remains one of the least investigated fields of enquiry in recent scholarship. This, in spite of the fact that some of the most crucial social and political processes transpiring during this period in what Hodgson has termed the *Nile to Oxus* cultural zone, directly implicate Iranian history. The “last great war of antiquity” of 623–628 CE, between the two great empires of the Near East, the Byzantines (330–1453 CE) and the Sasanians (224–651 CE), was on the verge of drastically redrawning the map of the world of late antiquity. For almost two decades during this period, the Sasanian empire was successful in re-establishing the boundaries of the Achaemenid (559–330 BCE) empire at the height of its successful campaigns against the Byzantines. As Sebeos’ account bears witness, when in 615 the Persians reached Chalcedon, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (610–641) was about ready to become a client of the Sasanian emperor Khosrow II (591–628). When, in 622, a small, obscure, religio-political community in Mecca is said to have embarked on an emigration (hijra) to Medina—an emigration that in subsequent decades came to be perceived as the watershed for the birth of a new community, the Muslim *umma*—the Sasanians were poised for world dominion.

Unexpectedly, however, the tides turned. For in the wake of what has been termed “one of the most astonishing reversals of fortune in the annals of war,” and after the ultimate defeat of the Sasanians in the last crucial years of the war (621–628 CE)—itself a tremendously perplexing question—a sociopolitical upheaval unprecedented in the world of late antiquity began: the Arab conquest of the Near East. While the event truncated Byzantium beyond recognition by the 640s, its consequences were even more dire for the Sasanians. For with the

---

5 There is no consensus among scholars as to when, precisely, one must date the end of the Roman and the beginning of the Byzantine empire. Dates varying from the early fourth to the early seventh century have been proposed.

6 A district near present-day Istanbul (the former Byzantine capital, Constantinople), called Kadiköy, Chalcedon was an ancient maritime town in the Roman province of Bithynia.


8 Sebeos 1999, p. xxiv.
death of the last Sasanian king, Yazdgird III (632–651), in the aftermath of the Arab conquest of Iran, came the end of more than a millennium of Iranian rule in substantial sections of the Near East. The Sasanian empire was toppled and swallowed up by the Arab armies. What had happened? Why was an empire that was poised for the dominion of the Near East in 620, when successfully engaging the powerful Byzantines, utterly defeated by 650 by the forces of a people hitherto under its suzerainty, the Arab armies? This work is an attempt to make sense of this crucial juncture of Iranian and Middle Eastern history. It will seek to explain the success of the Arab conquest of Iran in the early seventh century, as well as the prior defeat of the Sasanians by the Byzantines, with reference to the internal dynamics of late Sasanian history. Our very conceptualization of the internal dynamics of Sasanian history, however, will involve a heretical assessment of this history, for it will take serious issue with the Christensenian view of the Sasanians as an étatiste/centralized polity, a perspective that ever since the 1930s, when Christensen published L’Iran sous les Sassanides, has become paradigmatic in scholarship.9 The overarching thesis of the present work is that, episodic and unsuccessful attempts of the Sasanians at centralization notwithstanding, the Sasanian monarchs ruled their realm through a decentralized dynastic system, the backbone of which was the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy.10

The theses proposed in this work have been formed after an exhaustive investigation and at times reevaluation of a host of external and internal sources pertaining to this period of Iranian history. Armenian, Greek, Syriac, and classical Islamic histories, especially the futūb (or conquest) narratives, have been utilized in a source-critical juxtaposition with literary and primary sources of Sasanian history, the Xᵛᵛadāy-Nāmag (Khudaynāmag or the Book of Kings)11 tradition(s) as they appear in classical Arabic histories but especially in the Shāh-nāma of Ferdowsi; Middle Persian literature produced in the late antique period of Iranian history; local Iranian histories; and, above all, the numismatic and sigillographic evidence of late Sasanian history. The present work, therefore, engages in a continuous and pervasive critical dialogue between the ways in which the Sasanians were perceived by their foreign, generally hostile, contemporary or near contemporaries, the ways in which they wished to be perceived from an imperial, central perspective, and the ways in which they were actually perceived by the powerful polities within their own periphery—polities which in fact forcefully articulated their own perception of the Sasanians. The end result, as we shall see, is that the historiographical strengths evinced by each of

9Christensen, Arthur, L’Iran sous les Sassanides, Copenhagen, 1944 (Christensen 1944). See also page 7 and §2.1.1 below.
10Throughout this study, the term Parthian, referring to various powerful Parthian families, is used in contradistinction to the term Arsacid. As we shall see in greater detail in §1.1, the Arsacids were the particular dynastic branch of the Parthians who ruled Iran from about 250 BCE to about 226 CE. For a definition of dynasticism as used in this study, see §2.1.2.
these depictions of the Sasanians come to form a critical commentary on the shortcomings inherent in the others. The final picture that is formed is explicitly and irrefutably confirmed by the one corpus of data that suffers the least harm in a people’s historiographical production of their history: the primary sources of Sasanian history, the numismatic and sigillographic evidence. For the recently discovered seals pertaining to late Sasanian history remarkably confirm one of the main theses of this study, namely, that throughout the Sasanian history there was a dichotomy between the Pārsī (Sasanians) and the Pahlavī, which forced the Sasanians into a confederate arrangement with the powerful Parthian dynastic families living in their domains. As late as the seventh century, some of the dynastic bearers of the seals insist on identifying themselves as either a Pahlav or a Pārsī.

As already mentioned, one of the central themes of this study is that the Sasanians ruled their realm by what we have termed the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy. This was a predominantly decentralized, and—borrowing a term from Cyril Toumanoff—dysastic system of government where, save for brief and unsuccessful attempts at centralization by the Sasanians in the third and the sixth centuries, the powerful dynastic Parthian families of the Kārins, the Mih-rāns, the Ispahbudhān, the Sūrens, and the Kanārangīyān were, for all practical purposes, co-partners in rule with the Sasanians. In Chapter 2, we shall abandon the centroist monarchical image of the Sasanians currently in vogue in scholarship, and, revisiting the Sasanians from the perspective of the Parthian dynastic families, we shall trace the ebb and flow of the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy and the tensions inherent in it. This Sasanian–Parthian confederacy ultimately collapsed, however. The inception of its debacle occurred in the midst of the “astonishing reversal of fortune in the annals of war,” when the tide turned and the Sasanians suffered their inexplicable defeats of 624–628 at the hands of the Byzantines. As we shall see, had it not been for the Parthian withdrawal from the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy toward the end of the rule of Khusrow II Parviz (591–628), the Byzantines might very well have become a client state of the Sasanians, and Heraclius a son instead of a “brother of Khusrow II.” The debacle of the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy during the last years of the Sasanian–Byzantine wars, however, had a far greater consequence for late antique Iranian history: the ultimate defeat of the Sasanians by the Arab armies and the eradication of their empire by the middle of the seventh century.

---

12The Middle Persian term for Parthian.
13For the geographical extent of these domains, see footnote 145.
14Our conceptualization of any given system of government as a centralized or decentralized polity, needless to say, ought not entail any value judgments as to the successful functioning of that polity.
15Toumanoff, C., Studies in Christian Caucasian History, Georgetown University Press, 1963 (Toumanoff 1963); see §2.1.2 below.
16While a detailed analysis of the Sūrens will not be undertaken in this study, they were in fact an integral part of this confederacy.
It was in the immediate aftermath of the final collapse of the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy, in the wake of Khusrow II’s deposition and murder in 628 CE, that the unprecedented chain of events that ultimately led to the total annihilation of the Sasanian monarchy after four centuries of rule commenced: the early Arab conquest of Sasanian territories. A second central theme of the present study—arrived at through a critical examination of the futūḥ narratives in juxtaposition with the Sasanian X̱dāy-Nāmag historiography—therefore, is that the early Arab conquest of Iraq took place, not, as has been conventionally believed, in the years 632–634, after the accession of the last Sasanian king Yazdgird III (632–651) to power, but in the period from 628 to 632.18 The conquest of Iraq occurred precisely during the period of internecine warfare between the Pahlav and the Pārsig. The two factions, engrossed in their strife in promoting their own candidates to the throne, were incapable of putting up a united defense against the encroaching Arab armies. The subsequent conquest of the Iranian plateau, moreover, was ultimately successful because powerful Parthian dynastic families of the kūst-i khwarāsān (quarter of the east) and kūst-i ādurbādāgan (quarter of the north) abandoned the last Sasanian king, Yazdgird III, withdrew their support from Sasanian kingship, and made peace with the Arab armies. In exchange, most of these retained de facto power over their territories.

The recalculation of the chronology of the early conquest of Iraq to the period between 628–632, in turn, has crucial implications, not only for the chronology of the conquest of Syria and the famous desert march of Khalid b. Walid, but also for a host of other significant events in early Islamic history. If, as we claim, the conquest of Iraq took place in 628–632, how then are we to perceive the role and whereabouts of the Prophet Muḥammad at the onset of the conquests of Iraq according to this alternative chronology? The conquest of Iraq is traditionally believed to have occurred after the death of the Prophet in 632 and, after the ridda wars (or wars of apostasy). If Prophet Muhammad was alive according to this newly offered scheme, how then will this affect our traditional understanding of early Islamic history? What of our conventional view of the roles of Abū Bakr and ʿUmar as caliph in this period of Islamic history? If Muḥammad was alive, what of apostasy?

Our chronological reconstruction of the conquest of Iraq could potentially have revolutionary implications for our understanding of early Islamic history. We shall offer one possible, conjectural answer to these crucial questions here, for by the time we have expounded our thesis, it will become clear

---

18 For an elaboration of this, see page 15ff below.
19 As we shall see, the implications of what might initially seem to be a minor chronological recalculation, are in fact far-reaching.
20 According to the generally accepted chronology, the Prophet Muḥammad was born sometime in 570 CE and died in 632 CE.
21 See footnote 900.
22 See §3.5.
that its implications will require a thorough reevaluation of a number of crucial episodes of early Islamic history, a task beyond the confines of the present study. One thing will remain a constant in the midst of all of this: understanding the nature of the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy and disentangling its gradual and final collapse will lead to a better understanding of the nature and rise of the Arabo-Islamic polity. So much for the implications of our thesis vis-à-vis early Islamic history. How are we to view the effects of the Arab conquest in the context of the post-conquest Iranian history?

The Arab conquest of Iran has long been viewed by some as a watershed in Iranian history. Through it, the pre-Islamic history of Iran is presumed to have led to its Islamic history. Examining the histories of Tabaristan, Gilan, and partially Khurasan, from the late Sasanian period through the conquest and up to the middle of the eighth century, we shall highlight the fallacies of this perspective. We shall argue that the Arab conquest of Iran ought not be viewed as a total overhaul of the political structures of Iran in late antiquity. For while the kingship of the house of Sasan was destroyed as a result of the onslaught of the Arab armies, the Pahlavi domains and the Parthian power over these territories remained predominantly intact throughout the Umayyad period. Here then we shall follow our methodology of investigating the history of Iran not through the center—this time of the Caliphate—but through the periphery. This then becomes a testimony to the strength of the Parthian legacy: as the Parthians had not disappeared with the advent of the Sasanians in the third century, neither did they leave the scene after the Arab conquest of Iran in the middle of the seventh century, their polities and cultural traditions long outliving the demise of the Sasanian dynasty.

This thesis is, in turn, closely connected to our assessment of the aims of the Arab armies in their conquest of Iranian territories. The course of the Arab conquest, the subsequent pattern of Arab settlement, and the topography of the ‘Abbasid revolution,23 all give evidence of one significant fact: the overthrow of the Sasanian dynasty was not an intended aim of the Arab armies, but only an incidental by-product of it, precipitated by the prior debacle of the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy. For the primary objective of the Arab conquerors was not the actual conquest and colonization of Iranian territories, but to bypass these, in order to gain access to the trade entrepôts in Transoxiana. Recognizing this, chief Pahlavi families reached a modus vivendi with the Arab armies.

In part two of the present study we shall turn our attention to the spiritual landscape of Iran during the Sasanian period. Providing a synopsis of the state of research on this theme during the past two decades, we shall then put forth the fourth major thesis of this study: the Sasanian/Parthian political dichotomy was replicated in the realms of spirituality, where the Pahlavi predominantly adhered to Mihr worship, a Mithraic spiritual universe that was distinct from the Zoroastrian orthodoxy—whatever the nature of this—that the Sasanians

23These latter two themes will be addressed in detail in a sequel to this study.
I

NTRODUCTION

ostensibly tried to impose on the populace living in their territoriest 3s the concentration of ?ahlav power had always been in their traditional homelands, Parthava24 and Media25—what the Sasanians later termed the küst-i khevarásán and küst-i ādurbadagan, the quarters of the east and north—so too was the preponderance of Mihr worship in these territories. Our evidence for the prevalence of Mihr worship in the northern, northeastern, and northwestern parts of the Sasanian domains will hopefully also become relevant, not only for further deciphering the religious proclivity of the Arsacids, but also for engaging the ongoing debate between Iranists and classicists about the provenance of Mihr worship in Roman Mithraism—a debate that has been resumed during the past three decades within the scholarly community.

Finally, we shall conclude our study with an analysis of the Mithraic features of the revolt of the Mihndid Bahram-i Chubin at the end of the sixth century, and the continuity of these Mithraic themes in the revolts of Bihafard and Sunbad in the middle of the eighth century. The upshot of our contention here is that, far from betraying a presumed synthesis of Iranian and Islamic themes, the aforementioned revolts evince startling evidence for the continuity of Mihr worship in Pahlav territories. In a sequel to this study, we shall trace the continuity of this Parthian heritage to the revolts of the Karinid Maziyar in Tabaristan and Babak-i Khurramdin in Azarbayjan, assessing the connections of these to the cultural heritage that we perceive to have affected the ‘Abbāsid revolutionaries. A word needs to be said about the issues that instigated this study, and further remarks about the author’s methodology, before we proceed.

The problem

In 1992, Walter Kaegi wrote his magisterial work Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests. Here he provided an explanatory exposé of the rationale behind his opus. “For some scholars of Islamic history,” he wrote, “this subject may appear to be ill-conceived, because for them there is no reason why the Muslims should not have defeated and supplanted Byzantium. No adequate Byzantine historical research exists on these problems, certainly none that includes the use of untranslated Arabic sources.”26 In 1981, Fred M. Donner had already written The Early Islamic Conquests, a work that in the tradition of nearly a century of highly erudite scholarship sought not only to “provide a new interpretation of the Islamic conquest movement, … [but also to argue that] Muhammad’s career and the doctrines of Islam revolutionized both the ideological bases and the political structures of Arabian society, to the extent

24 See footnote 77.
that they transformed the face of a large part of the globe." Kaegi and Donner’s works are symptomatic of the state of the field in late antique studies. For, at the very least during the past half century, the late antique and early medieval history of Iran has found itself in a paradigmatic quagmire of research, where the parameters of the field have been set by Byzantinists and Arabists. While a host of erudite scholars continue to exert their efforts in disentangling the perplexing questions surrounding the nature and rise of the Arabo-Islamic polity and its dizzying successes, and while a number of erudite works have addressed aspects of Sasanian history, except for general observations and artificial asides, no one has bothered to address the Arab conquest of Iran and its aftermath from a Sasanian perspective.

The last magnum opus on Sasanian history was Christensen’s L’Iran sous les Sassanides, published in 1936. The path for all subsequent research on the Sasanians, including that of Christensen, however, had already been paved by the masterpiece of the nineteenth-century semitist, philologist, and classicist, Theodore Nöldeke, Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sassaniden, which appeared in 1879. If Nöldeke had been the father of Sasanian studies, however, it was the Christensenian thesis that had set the subsequent paradigm for Sasanian historiography. Building on Nöldeke’s work, and using the then available primary sources of Sasanian history—sources which belong predominantly to the third and partly to the sixth centuries only—and relying more or less credulously on the Xadāy-Nāmag tradition of Sasanian historiography and other secondary accounts of this history, Christensen argued that the rise of Sasanians, after their defeat of the Arsacids in the third century, heralded a new epoch in Iranian history. From this period onward, and through most of their subsequent history, some lapses notwithstanding, argued Christensen, the Sasanians were able to establish a highly efficient and centralized system of...
government in which the monarchs functioned as the supreme rulers of the land. The lapses, Christensen argued, were significant and occasioned by decentralizing forces exerted on the monarchy by the various strata of the nobility of the empire, some of whom were of Parthian origin. In spite of these recurrent lapses, one of which incidentally, as he himself admitted, continued through most of the fourth century, Christensen insisted that the Sasanians were always able to reassert their control and rule their empire as a centralized monarchical system. The height of this monarchical power came with Khusrow I Nowshirvân (531–579), who implemented a series of important reforms in the wake of another surge of the nobility’s power and the revolutionary Mazdakite uprisings. Through these reforms Khusrow I was able to inaugurate one of the most splendid phases of Sasanian history. In the tradition of Ardashîr I (224–241) and Shāpur I (241–271), this exemplary king restored the normative dimensions of Sasanian kingship: a powerful, centralized monarchy capable of mustering its resources in order to ameliorate and stabilize the internal conditions of the realm, maintain its boundaries, and, when appropriate, launch expansionist policies. What had happened to the centrifugal forces of prior centuries, most importantly, to those of the powerful Parthian nobility? Allegedly, in the process of his reforms, Khusrow I had metamorphosed these into a “nobility of the robe,” bereft of any substantive authority. Meanwhile, in the late sixth century, for some inexplicable reason, two major rebellions sapped the power of the centralizing Sasanian monarchs, the rebellions of Bahram-i Chubin (590–591) and Vistahm (595–600). Curiously, both rebellions were launched by Parthian dynastic families. Unexpectedly, the Parthians had come to question the very legitimacy of the Sasanian kings. For a while they even usurped Sasanian kingship. The Mhráníd Bahram-i Chubin forced the Sasanian king Khusrow II Parviz to take refuge in the bosoms of their ancient enemies, the Byzantines. The Ispahbudhân Vistahm carved, for all practical purposes, an independent realm in an extensive stretch of territory that ran from Khurásân to Azarbâyjan. Even more Parthian insurgencies followed in the wake of these. Such outright rebellion against the legitimacy of the kingship of the house of Sâsân was unprecedented in the annals of Sasanian history. What is more, it was in the wake of the presumably successful and forceful centralizing reforms of Khusrow I that this trend was established. What had happened? Had Khusrow I not sapped the authority of the powerful Parthian families? Why had they come to question the very legitimacy of Sasanian kingship, unleashing havoc at the height of Sasanian supremacy? The Christensenian thesis could not address this. Neither could it address the reasons why the last Sasanian monarch of substantial power, Khusrow II Parviz (591–628), the same monarch during whose rule the Sasanian empire was poised for world dominion, was suddenly to lose not only the war, but his very head by 628 CE. Christensen, likewise, did not address the subsequent turbulent history of the Sasanians in

31 A more in depth analysis of his thesis will be given in §2.1.1.
any great detail. For him, as for all subsequent scholars of Sasanian history, the period from 628 to the last feeble Sasanian king, Yazdgird III (632–651), was simply too chaotic to be amenable to any systematic research. Christensen’s magnificent opus, therefore, stopped with the ascension of Yazdgird III, which was presumably when the Arab conquests had begun according to him and subsequent scholars of Sasanian history. And so the Christensenian reconstruction of Sasanian history came to an abrupt, perplexing end, leaving the student of Sasanian history baffled by the inexplicable spiraling demise of the dynasty.

One of the primary sources which Christensen had used in order to arrive at this thesis was an official historiography, patronized by the Sasanians and known as the X-*adây-Nâmag*, or the *Book of Kings*. The Sasanians, in fact, were the first to promote a literary account of Iranian history. Through this official historiography, the Iranian national history was traced from the first mythic Iranian monarch, Kayümard, to the last Sasanian king, Yazdgird III. While patronizing this national history, however, the Sasanians also undertook another feat: they deleted most of the annals of their defeated foes, the Arsacids (250 BCE–224 CE), from the pages of history, cutting in half the duration of their rule. In *Das iranische Nationalepos*, Nöldeke had already argued that in spite of this Sasanian censorial effort at deleting Arsacid history, the accounts of particular, powerful, Parthian families do appear in the pages of the Iranian national history. Thus, while there is next to nothing left of the history of the Arsacids in the *X-adây-Nâmag* tradition, several Parthian families did superimpose their histories during the Arsacid period onto the heroic sections of the Iranian national history. While Nöldeke and others underlined the continued cultural and political legacy of the Parthians to Sasanian history, and while some, including Christensen, even highlighted the continued presence of particular Parthian families in the course of Sasanian history, the Christensenian paradigm of Sasanian history continued to hold sway: with the defeat of the Arsacids and the murder of Ardavan in 224 CE, the Sasanians inaugurated a new era in Iranian history, establishing a centralized, étatiste, imperial power which, in collaboration with the clergy, imposed an orthodox creed on the flock living in its territories. But this was precisely the image that the Sasanians wanted to present of themselves. It might have been constructed under the influence of the model of *caesaropapism* effected in Byzantium from the fourth century. This étatiste model can certainly not be substantiated with reference to the primary sources of Sasanian history, for these, belonging primarily to the third

---


33In the Iranian religious tradition, Kayümard or Gayomart, literally meaning the *mortal man*, was the proplast of man. See Shaki, Mansour, ‘Gayomart’, in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *Encylopaedia Iranica*, New York, 2007a (Shaki 2007a).

34Shahibazi refers to this as the *Ciesset* method of historical writing; that is, the superimposition of contemporary histories onto remote antiquity.
and the sixth centuries, are far too disjointed to give us a picture of the nature of Sasanian administrative polity throughout its history.

Yet the Xewadāy-Nāmag image of the Sasanians was uncritically accepted by Christensen and adopted by those who followed him. So convinced were they by the Sasanian censorial effort in deleting Arscacid history, and so accepting were they of the Sasanians’ view of themselves as a benevolent and centralized monarchy, that none paid any heed to the implications of Nöldeke’s observation. When and how, then, had the Parthians engaged in their own historiographical endeavors in the official histories patronized by the Sasanians? One must certainly reckon with the oral dimension of Parthian historiography during the Arscacid period, as the late matriarch of Zoroastrian studies, Mary Boyce, underlined in her study of the Parthian Göşāns. Yet this does not explain everything. For if the accounts of Arscacid history were deleted from the pages of the Sasanian Xewadāy-Nāmag histories and if the few Parthian families that existed under the Sasanians were ultimately under the étatiste pressure of the Sasanian polity, how then, as we shall see, were the sagas of various Parthian families so intimately, systematically, and integrally intertwined with the stories of successive Sasanian kings and queens in these histories? In fact, as soon as the historical, Sasanian, section of the Xewadāy-Nāmag tradition begins to acquire flesh, whether in the classical Arabic histories or in the Shāhnāma of Ferdowsi, the Parthian dynastic families appear side-by-side of the Sasanian kings. Some of these towering Parthian figures of Sasanian history are, moreover, depicted very positively in the histories of the Sasanians. A corollary of the present thesis, therefore, is that while the Sasanians were successful in deleting Arscacid history, they seriously failed in obliterating the history of the Parthian families from the pages of history. The Sasanians were unsuccessful in this attempt, because the Parthians co-authored substantial sections of the Xewadāy-Nāmag traditions, and they did so during the Sasanian period and most probably afterwards as well. This is patently clear from an examination of the Xewadāy-Nāmag tradition, which observation necessitates a word about the sources for Sasanian history and our methodology.

Sources and methodology

To reconstruct Sasanian history one relies on the Xewadāy-Nāmag tradition as contained, for example, in classical Arabic historiography; on Middle Persian sources written in the late Sasanian or early caliphal period; on Armenian, Greek, and Syriac sources dealing with Sasanian history; and finally on coins, seals, inscriptions, and other products of material culture. The order of priority has been reckoned to be the reverse of what we have enumerated. These

36Nöldeke had already postulated this, but he had not examined it in any detail in his pioneering work on the Iranian national epic.
have been respectively termed the tertiary, secondary, and primary sources for Sasanian history.\footnote{Gignoux, Philippe, ‘Problèmes de distinction et de priorité des sources’, in J. Harmatta (ed.), *Prolegomena to the Sources on the History of Pre-Islamic Central Asia*, pp. 137–141, Budapest, 1979 (Gignoux 1979). It is not clear where exactly in Gignoux’s scheme we should put the X°*adíy-Nâmag*.}

Numismatists and scholars of material culture have long reprimanded historians for their inordinate emphasis and reliance on literary history, both foreign and native, at the expense of the material sources for Sasanian history. It is not for nothing that these latter have been considered primary for reconstructing Sasanian history. Seals, coins, and inscriptions speak clearly, succinctly, and usually far more reliably and explicitly than the corpora of literary narratives, foreign or native, that suffer from layers of ideological underpinning, editorial rewriting, and hazards of transmission over centuries. They are, therefore, crucial for reconstructing Sasanian history and can serve as a gauge of the reliability of the information that we cull from literary sources. This study makes ample use of coins and seals. Among the latter is Rika Gyselen’s recently discovered collection of seals pertaining to the late Sasanian period. These seals put to rest, once and for all, the debate about the veracity of the military and administrative quadripartition of the Sasanian realm following the much-discussed reforms of Khusrow I in the sixth century.\footnote{Gyselen, Rika, *The Four Generals of the Sasanian Empire: Some Sigillographic Evidence*, vol. 14 of *Conferenze*, Rome, 2001a (Gyselen 2001a). For an enumeration of these seals, see notes 473 and 477, as well as Table 6.3 on page 470.} They are by all accounts the greatest discovery of the past half century of primary sources for late Sasanian history; as such they are unprecedented in terms of their implications for this history. Remarkably, they corroborate, explicitly and concretely, our conclusions regarding the Parsig/Pahlav dichotomy prevalent throughout Sasanian history, for they give clear testimony to the continued significance of this dichotomous imperial identity late in Sasanian history.\footnote{Significantly, the author became apprised of these seals after she had already formed the theses of this study based on literary narratives.} Recent scholarship in numismatics has likewise contributed substantially to disentangling crucial episodes of late Sasanian history. Recent works of Malik and Curtis, and Tyler-Smith on Sasanian numismatics, in particular, have added to our understanding of the chronologies of, respectively, the reign of the Sasanian queen Bûrûndukht, and the crucial battle of Qadisiya between the Arab and Iranian armies. It is only within the context of the narrative histories at our disposal, however, that the full ramifications of these significant recent strides in Sasanian numismatic history can be established.

While crucial, the primary sources for Sasanian history suffer from a clear limitation: they belong predominantly to the third and sixth century, leaving a substantial lacuna for the centuries in between. This in itself might be a telling indicator of the course of Sasanian history and the *éstatiste* junctures of this history. Even numismatists acknowledge that our primary sources for Sasanian
history are remarkably disjointed and comparatively limited to begin with.\textsuperscript{40} Besides, seals, coins, and reliefs, while clarifying crucial dimensions of Sasanian history, do not always give us a narrative. Coins and seals are not storytellers. As such they do not provide a context within which we can evaluate the sagas of significant personae and social collectivities powering Sasanian history. For this we have to resort to what Gignou has termed the secondary and tertiary sources, the native and foreign sources for reconstructing Sasanian history.

Throughout this study we attempt to integrate—to the extent possible, but at times in detail—the strong and pervasive interdependencies of Iranian and Armenian sociopolitical, religious, and cultural history. Here, we shall underline the crucial significance of the rule of the Arsacids (53–428 CE)\textsuperscript{41} in Armenia into the fifth, and its legacies in the subsequent two centuries, in the context of the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy.\textsuperscript{42} To this end we make ample use of Armenian histories in our study.\textsuperscript{43} Explicit confirmation of the significant and central contribution of the Parthian dynastic families to Sasanian history abounds in the pages of Armenian histories.

Armenian historical writing was born under the aegis of the Christian Armenian Church in the fifth century.\textsuperscript{44} The birth of the Armenian alphabet, in fact, was integrally connected to the production of Christian Armenian histories. This overwhelmingly Christian dimension to Armenian historical literature, coupled with the increasing Byzantine pull on Armenia, ultimately led to a worldview in which Armenian chroniclers systematically downplayed the Iranian dimension of the kingdom’s political and cultural history.\textsuperscript{45} Yet, as we shall see, precisely because the heritage of Arsacid rule was a recent and vivid memory in Armenian historical memory, the Parthian dimension of Sasanian history was systematically highlighted and underlined in early Christian Armenian historiography. As Lang, Garsoian, and Russell have been at pains to point out, furthermore, in spite of the ideological proclivities of Armenian

\textsuperscript{42}The author has merely been able to peck at this important fount of information for Sasanian history and the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy. It is hoped that future studies will further integrate this crucial Armenian dimension of Sasanian history into the late antique history of Iran.
\textsuperscript{43}Thanks to the tireless efforts of scholars of Armenian history who have admirably edited and translated a substantial collection of the primary sources of this history, students of the late antique history of Iran who have no knowledge of Armenian, such as the author, can now overcome this linguistic barrier and access this important historical corpus. These sources will be listed in the course of this study.
\textsuperscript{45}Garsoian, Nina G., \textit{Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians}, London, 1985b (Garsoian 1985b).
INTRODUCTION

historians, it is still possible to disentangle the pervasive Iranian undercurrents of Armenian history.46 Pending further research, one might even postulate that the commentaries that Christian Armenian chroniclers made on the religious landscape of the Sasanian realm were informed more by the recent pagan heritage of Armenia itself than by the religious inclinations of particular Sasanian kings, and, therefore, constituted a Christian commentary on the legacies of the Armenian past.

Alternatively, the picture that Armenian histories painted of the religious panorama of the Sasanian domains might have been a depiction of the religious predilections of the Iranian Parthian dynastic families, who struck deep roots in Armenia. In this context, we underline not only the significance of Arscacid rule in Armenia to the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy, but also the clear evidence of Mihr worship in Armenia,47 and the connection of this to the evident prevalence of Mihr worship in the Pahlav territories in Iran. Besides Armenian histories, selective use has also been made of other foreign sources, especially Greek and Syriac sources relevant to the history of the Sasanians in late.

The Xšadāy-Nāmag traditions, the fštūḥ narratives, and other accounts of Iranian national history, as they appear in classical Arabic histories,48 are central to the present study. It has long been recognized that the Xšadāy-Nāmag traditions were incorporated into the classical Arabic histories which were composed in the ninth and tenth centuries. Some of these, such as Ṭabarī’s (839–923) Tarīkh al-Rusul wa l-Mulūk (Annales),49 Balami’s (d. between 992 and 997) Tarīkh50 Ṭaḥālībī’s (961–1038) Ghurar Akhbār Mulūk al-Furs wa Sīyārāh,51 Dinawari’s (d. between 894 and 903) Akhbār al-Ṭiwal,52 Ibn Balkhī’s Fārsnāma (written sometime between 1105 and 1116),53 and, finally, Yaqūbī’s (d. early tenth century) Tarīkh,54 incorporate the Xšadāy-Nāmag traditions systematically. We regularly resort to these in order to reconstruct Sasanian history. The most important of these works are those of Ṭabarī and Ṭaḥālībī.55

55For other chronicles, such as Birūnī, Muḥammad b. Abīmad, Āthbār al-Rāqiya, Tehran, 1984, translated by Abū Dānasir (Birūnī 1984), Birūnī, Muḥammad b. Abīmad, The Chronology
Among the most important sources containing the *Xwaradāy-Nāmâ* (or *Book of Kings*) tradition, however, is the *Shāhbnâma* of Ferdowsi (940–1019 or 1025). The *Shāhbnâma*, the poetic epic of the scholar/poet Ferdowsi, was itself based on a prose account compiled at the orders of a compatriot of the poet, Abū Maṇṣūr ‘Abdalrazzāq-i Ṭūsī (d. 962). One of the primary sources of the *Shāhbnâma*-i Abū Maṇṣūrī, was, in turn, the *Xwaradāy-Nāmâs*. Scholars of Iran have long admired the *Sháhbnâma* as one of the greatest poetic opera of Iranian national tradition, or of any ethnic community, for that matter. For an inordinate span of time, however, they have also dismissed the *Shāhbnâma* as a source for reconstructing Iranian history. Not only Iranists, but also solitary classicists who touch on Sasanian history, have generally regarded the *Shāhbnâma* merely as a literary epic, worthless for reconstructing Sasanian history. The reason: more than three fourths of this approximately 50,000-couplet epic poem details mythic and legendary accounts of Iranian history. And if one were to reckon the latter of no academic merit, one might just as well abandon the entire *Shāhbnâma* of Ferdowsi. One fourth of the book, however, presumes to detail Sasanian history. What do we do with this? Until quite recently, when Zeve Ruben reprimanded the field, Iranists threw the ill-fated baby out with the bathwater. And why did they do this? Because its medium was poetic and as such it was presumed to take poetic license and hence more liberties than, say, the works of Ibn Faradaq, Ibn Ishq, or Ṭabari, the last of which, incorporating the *Xwaradāy-Nāmâ* tradition, we, incidentally, do use regularly for reconstructing Sasanian history.

The present work uses the Sasanian sections of the *Shāhbnâma* of Ferdowsi systematically. And it will show that the *Shāhbnâma* is not merely one of the sources, but often the only source that provides us with details corroborating the information contained in some of the primary sources for Sasanian history, such as the crucially significant sigillographic evidence, or in some of the secondary sources for Sasanian history, such as the history of the Armenian Bishop Sebeos. This is so because, as Omidsalar, Khaleqi Motlaq, and others...

As we shall be investigating the Arab conquest of Iranian territories, the \textit{futûh} narratives of classical Islamic historiography become essential to our study. As Albrecht Noth notes, an overwhelming majority of histories that deal with the period of the first four caliphs, also deal with the theme of the Arab conquest of territories outside Arabia.\footnote{Noth, Albrecht, \textit{The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source Critical Study}, Princeton, 1994, second edition in collaboration with Lawrence I. Conrad, translated by Michael Bonner (Noth 1994), p. 31.} These are designated under the rubric of \textit{futûh} narratives.\footnote{For a more detailed discussion, see §3.1.1 below.} Examining the \textit{futûh} narratives in the context of the \textit{Xw-adây-Nâmâg} historiography, we shall establish that Noth’s contention that Iran is a primary theme in classical Arab historiography is unmistakably valid.\footnote{Crone, Patricia, \textit{Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of Islamic Polity}, Cambridge University Press, 1980 (Crone 1980), here, p. 16.} We shall also underline the ways in which the introduction of the \textit{bijna, annalistic}, and \textit{caliphal} structures of historical writing, as they appear in the works of Tabari and those who followed him, have seriously undermined the chronology of the early Arab conquest of Sasanian territories as well as that of early Islamic history. Nevertheless, here we highlight the substantial reliability and the tremendous value of Sayf b. Umar’s account, upon which Tabari and later authors predominantly based themselves, in his \textit{retention of the primary theme of Iran} in his narrative of the early conquest of Iraq. We shall demonstrate that a critical juxtaposition of the \textit{Xw-adây-Nâmâg} traditions with the \textit{futûh} narratives not only disentangles the complex web of the Sasanian–Parthian confederacy, but does so for a crucial juncture in Sasanian history: the early Arab conquest of the Sasanian territories in Iraq. This is one of the numerous instances where we resort to Armenian histories in order to gauge the reliability of the conclusions that we have reached.

For a variety of reasons having to do with the nature of classical Islamic historiography, Crone once remarked that the “obvious way to tackle early Islamic history is . . . prosopographical,” and proceeded to do this in her \textit{Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of Islamic Polity}.\footnote{Crone, Patricia, \textit{Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of Islamic Polity}, Cambridge University Press, 1980 (Crone 1980), here, p. 16.} A year after these words appeared in print, so did Donner’s work, \textit{The Early Islamic Conquests}, where he likewise engaged in a prosopographical study of important Arab figures of early Islamic history, specifically those who had participated in the conquest of the Fertile Crescent. In contrast, in the translated volume of Tabari’s work dealing with the early Arab conquest of Iraq, a majority of the important Iranian figures...
appearing in Sayf b. ‘Umar’s narrative have been reckoned to be creations of Sayf’s fertile imagination.\textsuperscript{65} Sayf, it appears, comfortably and systematically concocted Iranian names and genealogies. The resultant prosopographical map that we have been left with is one in which the Arabs fight a host of ghosts in Iranian territories. And as ghosts cannot be active participants in any history, it is not clear whom precisely the Arabs fought in their wars of conquest in the Sasanian territories. The present work indulges in a heavy dose of prosopographical research in order to bring back to life the ghosts of the Iranian protagonists in late antique Iranian history, specifically those of Parthian ancestry. The reader must bear with us as we attempt to reconstruct these in the course of our narrative.

Prosopographical research on the late antique history of Iran, however, especially when we are dealing with the Iranian side of things, is complicated by the nature of the sources with which we have to deal. Except in minor, but crucial, instances, our primary sources are of comparatively much less use than our foreign and native literary sources. These latter, in turn, have their own shortcomings, for whether we cull our data from the Armenian, Greek, Syriac, or classical Arabic sources, including the ḥadīth narratives, or even from the Xv‘yādeš-Nāmag traditions, the fact remains that they have been handed down to us through centuries of transmission and after undergoing transformations at the hands of authors not at home in Middle Persian naming practice. Consequently, depending on the source, the names of important Iranian historical figures have been metamorphosed through the languages in which they have been carried. As we shall see, the Shāhnāma of Ferdowsi—apart from some mild use of poetic license—comes closest to the original Pahlavi rendition of these names. The inflation of titles in Sasanian political and administrative culture exacerbates this problem. Particularly in Greek and Arabic sources, the titles of significant personae of Sasanian history are at times confused with their personal names. To complicate matters, in Arabic texts the names of important figures are often Arabicized. What aids us significantly in disentangling this confusing web in which Middle Persian names have been bastardized, and in identifying figures appearing in different sources under various names, titles, or epithets, however, is the crucial importance of genealogical heritage in Sasanian history. If tribal traditions ensured the retention of identities in early Arabic histories—albeit we know too well of forged genealogies—so too the agnostic social structure of Iran in late antiquity, and the crucial significance of belonging to an agnostic family, guaranteed the preservation of ancestral lines in Sasanian history.\textsuperscript{66} Genealogies were not simply the obsession of Arab genealogists. The upper crust of the hierarchical Iranian society, especially the Parthian dynastic families, were also adept at it. As this work deals with the saga of these families, it also serves as a prosopographical investigation into the fortunes of


\textsuperscript{66}See §1.2.
important Parthian dynastic families in Sasanian history. In the course of the many identifications that are made, there will doubtless be some inaccuracies and inconsistencies. These will not detract, however, from the greater scheme that the author is proposing, namely, the Sasanian-Parthian confederacy.

A word remains to be said about what this work does not purport to be. This is not a work on Sasanian administrative history, nor the much neglected domain of Sasanian economic history. For the former, the standard works remain those of Christensen, Rika Gyselen, and a host of other scholars of Sasanian history. The economic history of the Sasanian empire continues to remain a barren field and, unfortunately, we shall not rectify this. While the Sasanian-Parthian confederacy and the general contours of the dynastic sociopolitical arrangement in Sasanian history will be investigated through the course of the present study, the precise administrative mechanisms through which this Sasanian-Parthian confederacy came to be implemented lie beyond its scope. This study is likewise not a detailed investigation of Sasanian religious life. While we stand by our postulate regarding the Mithraic dimensions of Parthian religiosity in the Sasanian period, and while we hope to offer significant insights into the religious inclinations of some of the Parthian families, this is a study neither of Mithra worship, nor of the precise nature of the Mithraic worship prevailing among various Parthian families. All that we are proposing is that there is substantial evidence for the popularity of Mithra worship in the kust-i khwarâsan and kust-i adurbâdagan of the Sasanian domains and among particular Parthian families, and that this Pahlav version of Mithra worship was distinct from the place of Mihra not only in the orthodox Mazdean creed, but also in that which was current among the Sasanians (Pârsig). And even here one must probably reckon with the religious inclinations of particular Sasanian kings. In bringing to bear the results of the recent fascinating research on the Sasanian religious landscape, and while discussing evidence of Mihra worship among the Pahlav, it is hoped that subsequent scholarship on the post-conquest religious history of Iran will reckon with the multifarious religious landscape of the Sasanian empire. For at some point we need to abandon the notion, still prevalent

---

67 Except sporadically and in passing, moreover, scholarship has yet to engage the dialectic of the natural environment and human agency in Sasanian history. Michael Morony and Fred M. Donner's works, as well as Christensen, Peter, The Decline of Iranshahr: Irrigation and Environments in the History of the Middle East 300 B.C. to 1320 A.D., Copenhagen, 1993b (Christensen 1993b), are valuable exceptions to this.

68 I owe this terminology to my good friend and colleague Dr. Asef Kholdani. As the process of conversion in Iran took many centuries to complete, the dichotomous conceptualization of history of Iran into pre-Islamic and Islamic periods seems unwarranted and superficial for the purposes of this study. As this study hopes to establish, the political and cultural currents of Iranian history in the period under study fall more properly into late antique history of Iran, the Islamic periodization marking an artificial watershed imposed on this history.

69 The multifarious character of Islamic sectarian movements in early medieval Iran is itself a testimony to the source which led it. Madelung, Wilferd, Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran, Albany, 1988 (Madelung 1988); Madelung, Wilferd, Religious and Ethnic Movements in Medieval Islam, Brookfield, 1992 (Madelung 1992); Madelung, Wilferd, Religious Schools and Sects in Medieval
in some corners, that the strict hold of an orthodox Zoroastrian religious culture on its flock eased the way for the conversion of Iranians into a coherently formed and egalitarian Muslim creed. A systematic methodology for investigating the course of conversion in Iran, and detailed studies of a host of other issues in late antique history of Iran are yet to be devised and undertaken. While this remains to be the case, we need only to acknowledge, as does the present author, that our investigations of late antique history of Iran are preliminary.

Offering a number of dissenting perspectives, this study picks many fights. But it does so in the habit of a rebellious disciple indulging in a zandik reading of the orthodox creed. For in the final analysis, it has been the nurturing of the latter that has paved the way for the present analysis. This debt will become apparent in the course of this study.

---
