

Foreword

This volume brings together the contributions to the conference ‘Expressions of Empires: Indirect Rule in the Sāsānian Commonwealth,’ which was held in Jena from 7 to 9 September, 2023. This conference formed a pivotal element of the Jena research project ‘Vassal Rule in the Sāsānian Commonwealth,’ which was funded by the German Research Foundation. The conference aimed to examine the methods of imperial rule in the Sāsānian Empire from multiple perspectives. The contributions presented herein demonstrate the multi-layered nature of these methods. All of the elements may encompass a variety of social, economic, architectural and religious components. In the Sāsānian Empire, however, a distinctive form of governance emerged, characterised by indirect dependent rule, known as vassalage.

The personal allegiance of vassal rulers to an imperial centre constituted an efficient method of exercising power. From the 3rd to the 5th century AD, vassals fulfilled several pivotal roles within the empire, including border security, tax collection and administration, with a high degree of autonomy. It was not until the reforms of the 5th and 6th centuries by Kavād I and Ḥosrau I in the later phase of Sāsānian rule that the economic and military conditions were created to establish direct rule across the board. This development is marked by the replacement of many traditional vassal rulers with imperial officials. However, the rulers of the empire miscalculated the capacity of their governance, which proved incapable of assuming the responsibilities of its vassals on a permanent basis. The empire began to disintegrate, thus contributing to the downfall of Sāsānian rule.

The project ‘Vassal Rule in the Sāsānian Commonwealth’ examines the Sāsānids methods in dealing with the vassal rulers, who were partly inherited from their predecessors, the Arsacids, and to what extent the structures of the Sāsānian Commonwealth were influenced by those of their predecessors. The study examines the reasons for the Sāsānid abandonment of the vassalage system as well as its replacement with costly direct rule in many areas (Armenia, Arabia) from the 5th century onwards. Furthermore, an examination of the political framework conditions and the degree of autonomy afforded to the vassal rulers is conducted.

Consequently, the concept of vassalage can be regarded as a pivotal component of the Sāsānian ‘social structure.’ The institution itself was a key factor in the imperial centres’ administrative, cultural, and religious influence over the peripheral regions.

The study focuses on key regions of the Commonwealth, for which a substantial body of research is available and which have been at the centre of numerous studies in recent years. In this manner, the fundamental structures and functions of Sasanian vassalage are exemplified and described.

The research project aims at developing a model that can effectively articulate the structures of indirect rule exercised by the Sāsānid rulers in their broader context. In addition to the analysis of the differences and similarities between different regions, particular attention will be paid to the approaches adopted by individual Sasanian rulers. The model thus conceived will serve as a basis for further research into vassal rule and invites comparison with other ancient empires (Rome, Arsacids).

The papers presented at the Jena conference amount to a significant contribution to these research goals, as they provide a broad and multi-faceted perspective from numerous scholars well versed in the topic. Consequently, the research project is thoroughly informed by contemporary research ideas and theories even as it is being developed.

The contents of this volume have been organised in such a way as to explore historical issues pertaining to the centre of the Commonwealth first. The arrangement of these issues in chronological order has been attempted where feasible. **Marek Jan Olbrycht** opens his analysis with a discussion of the collapse of the Arsacid Parthian Empire and the strategic measures implemented by Ardašīr I, the founder of the Sāsānid dynasty. The author places particular emphasis on the weakening of Arsacid rule due to internal dynastic conflicts, and the importance of the great Parthian noble families (especially the Sūrēn and Kārin). Ardašīr I was successful in establishing an alliance between Persis, Carmania, Adiabene, Bēṭ Garmāi and other regions. The ‘grand strategy’ he devised focused on the control of key economic and trade centres, with a particular emphasis on the southern regions of Iran and the Persian Gulf. Olbrycht emphasises that Ardašīr’s seizure of power did not constitute a radical break with the past, but rather a transformation of the Parthian order, with many political structures remaining intact. The Sāsānids regarded themselves as the legitimate successors within a supra-regional Iranian power structure.

In the second contribution, **Hansjoachim Andres** considers the so-called ‘Achämenidenerbe’ as reported by the Romans in the context of Sāsānian-Roman diplomacy in 357/358 CE. The central question posed by the author, whether the Sāsānid rulers invoked the Achaemenids to justify their territorial claims against the Romans, is specified by a distinction between mere knowledge of the Achaemenids and a historical conception in the sense of Mediterranean historiography – a concept which he argues hardly existed in Sāsānian Iran. An analysis of two divergent sources – Ammianus Marcellinus, who mentions the Achaemenid heritage, and John Zonaras, who does not – suggests that references to the Achaemenids were more likely to be Roman propaganda. Ammianus’s account may be based on semi-official Roman sources portraying the enemy as arrogant and irrational. Thus, the Achaemenid heritage emerges

as a Roman construct designed to legitimise their own positions in diplomatic conflicts.

Frank Schleicher's study illustrates the complexity of Sāsānian rule in the border region. Focusing particularly on Ardašīr II, who became King of Kings of the Sasanian Empire in 379, it examines the power structure of Adiabene in the second half of the 4th century. Schleicher demonstrates that, although Ardašīr II was entrusted with the kingship of Adiabene in 344 and 376, it was actually Sāsānian officials such as Tamšāpūr who administered the area, particularly the military. Ardašīr II mainly resided outside his realm, presumably at the court of his brother Šāpūr II, exercising his authority only indirectly. His limited presence in contemporary sources, such as the writings of Ammianus Marcellinus, can be explained likewise. However, the *Syrian Martyr Acts* do attest to his authority over the region. The analysis makes the argument for the Adiabene kingship under Ardašīr existing only in name, while the region had already been fully integrated into the central administrative structures of the empire.

In his contribution, **Touraj Daryaee** examines the development of the Sāsānian army from the early 3rd to the 7th century. Starting from the reforms undertaken by Ardašīr I, who established a formidable military force that played a pivotal role in the expansion of the empire, the army's efficiency was particularly evident under Šāpūr I, marked by conquests in the Persian Gulf and the Roman-Persian border region. New siege techniques and the use of heavy cavalry transformed warfare. In the 5th century, threats from the Iranian Huns resulted in the adoption of the stirrup and far-reaching reforms under Kavād I and his son Ḥosrau I, including the division of the empire into four military districts. Recruiting nomads, such as the Dailamites and Kurds, altered the army's ethnic composition and reduced its long-term loyalty to Sāsānian central power. As the noble families lost power and regional commanders rose to prominence, the military system became more decentralised, a trend that continued in part under Muslim rule after the Arab conquest.

These contributions are followed by an examination of Sāsānian rule in the more peripheral regions of the empire. **Giorgi Ugulava's** analysis considers the ongoing threat to the ancient kingdom of Iberia (modern-day eastern Georgia) from Persia, as seen through the lens of Georgian tradition. Located at the intersection of Roman and Iranian interests, Iberia adopted a flexible stance between the two great powers. Despite its close cultural, political, and economic ties with Sāsānian Iran, Georgian historiography typically depicts the Persians in a negative light. Ugulava attributes this attitude to three main factors: aggressive Sāsānian expansion in the 3rd century; the political weakening of the Iberian monarchy in favour of the nobility, who were said to be more pro-Persian; and Christianisation, which signalled a shift towards Rome. Although Persian religious policy, especially under the Sāsānids, was not systematically hostile to Christianity, it was stylised as such in later sources. The source situation is problematic, marked by later retrospectives and coloured by political intentions. Ugulava particularly advocates a differentiated, pan-Caucasian view.

Nicolas Preud'homme examines the limited effectiveness of Sāsānian rule in the western Caucasus from the 3rd to the 7th century AD. Although diplomatic relations with Lazica and neighbouring regions had been established as early as the 3rd century, the Sāsānids never succeeded in gaining permanent control of the region. Archaeological finds and literary sources provide evidence of Persian attempts to exert influence, such as through the exchange of symbolic gifts or the establishment of short-lived vassal states. During the Lazic War (541–562), the Sāsānids encountered shifting loyalties among the local elite. Furthermore, geostrategic difficulties, religious differences (especially the rise of Christianity), weak economic integration, and the pragmatic policies of the peoples of the Caucasus prevented a lasting Persian presence. Thus, Sāsānian rule hardly extended beyond structurally limited imperial access to a geopolitically important yet difficult-to-control region.

In her paper, **Lara Fabian** examines marriage and kinship policies in the South Caucasus during the 3rd–4th centuries AD – a period of profound political and religious upheaval. Dynastic marriages served not only to secure power, but to legitimise local rule and integrate local rulers into the networks of Rome, the Sāsānids and the steppe peoples as well. The study uses the examples of the first Christian kings, Mirian III of K'art'li, Tiridates the Great of Armenia, and Uṛnayr of Albania, to show the strategic use of marriages with local, Iranian, Roman, or North Caucasian partners. While Mirian is depicted as 'Iranian' and linked to the Sāsānids, Armenian sources highlight Tiridates' connection to Rome. Such representations reflect cultural patterns of interpretation rather than historical facts. Controversial practices such as polygyny and endogamous marriages can likewise be observed amid the tension between Iranian tradition and Christian norms. Overall, it is evident that dynastic marriages were a pivotal means of attaining political stability and navigating cultural identities in the early Christian Caucasus.

Jakob Riemenschneider's contribution analyses the portrayal of indirect rule in the Late-antique Orient by three classical Greek historians: Procopius of Caesarea, Agathias of Myrina, and Theophylact Simocatta. The focus is on the political dependencies between Rome, Persia, and their respective vassal states, particularly in the Caucasus region. Riemenschneider demonstrates how authors of this genre of history adopt and perpetuate established narratives concerning 'natural' loyalties, cultural identity and tradition. Constants that emerge from this analysis include mistrust of imperial representatives, sudden changes of loyalty in the event of a breach of contract or aggression, and the importance of religious or cultural continuity. Riemenschneider argues that many motifs, such as a people's connection to their ancestral land, are more literary tropes than real historical observations. The analysis thus exposes a double dependency: firstly, that of the vassal states on the empires; and secondly, that of historiography on its own traditions.

The third part of the volume brings together papers addressing various aspects of religion, language and identity. In his contribution, **Andreas Klingenberg** examines

Sāsānian religious policy as both an instrument of rule and a source of conflict, from the reign of Ardašīr I to that of Ḥosrau II. The close intertwining of religion and kingship becomes apparent, as does the fact that the kings of kings often derived their legitimacy from Zoroastrianism. Ardašīr used religious symbolism and measures, such as establishing royal fires, to consolidate his power. Under his successors, such as Šāpūr I and the influential priest Kartīr, Zoroastrianism became more institutionalised, often at the expense of religious minorities, including Jews, Christians, and Manichaeans. The intensity of religious repression fluctuated depending on the political situation; for instance, during periods of tension in foreign policy with Rome or during internal power struggles. Despite repeated persecution, Christians and Jews remained significant population groups, some enjoying stable conditions and official recognition. Overall, Sāsānian religious policy served political rather than theological purposes, and was closely linked to the stabilisation of royal authority, particularly in the Commonwealth's peripheral regions.

Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst analyses chapter 15 of the Armenian Chronicle of Pseudo Sebeos. He focuses on the role of the Armenian aristocracy amid the tensions between Byzantium and the Sāsānian Empire. The text discusses Emperor Maurikios's and King Ḥosrau II's plans to remove the Armenian princes from their homeland and deploy them in border regions to combat external threats. While the Byzantine part of Armenia is affected by forced resettlement, Ḥosrau honours the nobles. Sebeos demonstrates his familiarity with Persian affairs, providing a comparatively impartial account. This work provides rare insights into the Late-antique world order from an Armenian perspective, reflecting the structural differences in how rulership was exercised by the great powers.

Haydar Lashkry examines the development of Kurdish identity in the context of the Sāsānian and early Islamic periods. Sāsānid rulers classified nomadic groups, such as the Kurds, rather flexibly depending on their political needs, sometimes integrating them and at other times marginalising them. This strategic categorisation continued under Islamic rule and served to exercise imperial control. The term 'Kurds' referred less to an ethnic group than to social types: specifically, non-sedentary pastoral communities. Early Islamic authors such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Dīnawarī adopted Sāsānian narratives and reinterpreted them within an Islamic framework. This article demonstrates to what extent cultural prejudices and political interests shaped perceptions of the Kurds, which have been passed down through the ages.

The volume concludes with two contributions that examine Sāsānian rule from a material perspective. **Alireza Shahmohammadpour** analyses control and management of land in the Sasanian Empire based on the so-called *Čahār-Tāq* structures, that are primarily understood as fire temples of central religious significance. Not only were these buildings sacred, they also played an economic and administrative role, insofar as they were often built in isolated locations in fertile areas or near resources such as mines. Architecturally, they differ significantly from mosques, which explains their

comparatively rare conversion after the Islamic conquest. Notably, many later Imam-zadeh shrines are located close to these fire temples, suggesting potential functional continuity. Both types of building appear to have been associated with religious land ownership and endowments (*waqf*). The architecture enables us to draw conclusions about power relations, social hierarchies, and sacred land use in Late-antique Iran.

Lana Chologauri examines Late-antique silver vessels from Georgia that are directly or indirectly connected to the Sāsānian Empire. These artefacts, which include the renowned Sargveši cup featuring portraits of Bahrām II and the Armaziskhevi bowl bearing a Middle Persian inscription, primarily date from the late 3rd century. They reflect the diplomatic relations between Iberia and Iran during this period. Another focus is on locally produced objects such as the Magraneti and Khovle bowls and the Aragvispiri jugs, which combine Roman forms with Iranian iconography. The unique 6th/7th-century Chermiskhevi bowl marked by Christian symbols attests to renewed Persian influence. Overall, the vessels demonstrate Iberia's role as an interface between Rome and Persia, documenting political alliances and cultural exchange, as well as the persistence of Iranian artistic traditions in the Caucasus.

Insofar as every author has different preferences concerning the spelling of Iranian and local names and terms, complete standardisation within the text has not been an aim of the editors, while the prosopographical and geographical terms listed in the index have been adapted in most cases (including within quotations) if they appear in several articles. The index lists Iranian terms – as far as possible – according to the convention of the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft* or the spelling preferred in the *Encyclopædia Iranica*. If Georgian terms appear in Stephen Rapp's transcription, which is widely used today, this transcription was given preference in the index. For the remaining terms, an attempt was made to follow the 'majority.' If a modern term exists (e.g. Abkhazia), this was used. Terms that belong to the main topic of individual articles (Achaemenids, Iberia) were not specifically marked in these articles.

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