



# From Oxus to Euphrates: The Sasanian Empire

## Synopsis of Panels

### Panel One: The History of Iranshahr

#### **Touraj Daryaee: “The Sasanian King, Iranshahr and the Walls of His Garden”**

The presentation discusses the idea of Iranshahr as created by the Sasanians; It will also discuss the projection of the idea of an empire as a garden, where there is beauty and justice within as juxtaposed with the outside world which is desolate and lawless. The talk explores the ideological and mythical aspects of the idea of Iranshahr and the image and responsibility of its king in Late Antiquity.

#### **Stephen H. Rapp Jr.: “Caucasia in Late Antiquity: Between the Byzantine and Iranian Worlds?”**

The presentation shall reconsider the frequent claim that late antique Caucasia was caught between the Romano-Byzantine and Iranian worlds. Instead of occupying an interstitial space, the kingdoms of Armenia, eastern Georgia, and Caucasian Albania were socially and culturally integrated into the Iranian world, a condition that can legitimately be traced back to the Achaemenid regime. The Christianization of these realms is typically presented as the moment when Caucasia forever entered the Byzantine (and hence “European”!) fold. In fact, a critical and contextualized reading of contemporaneous sources reveals the continuity of Iranian and especially Iranic (Persianate) culture deep into the medieval epoch and beyond. At the same time, the experience of the cohesive region of Caucasia demonstrates Iran’s integral place in the late antique world.

#### **Khodadad Rezakhani: “The End of the Sasanian Rule: the Center and the Periphery of Eranshahr in the Seventh Century”**

The presentation will concentrate on the internal dynamics of Eranshahr and the position of its ruling dynasty, the Sasanians, before and immediately after the Arab Conquests of the mid-Seventh Century. It will also consider the relationship of this domain with populations living on its peripheries, namely the Arabs themselves, as well as the political powers of Central Asia and East Iran.

### Panel Two: Peoples and Religions of the Sasanian Realm

#### **Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina: “Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism in the Sasanian World and Beyond”**

The killing of the prophet Mani, the eponymous founder of Manichaeism, in the 3rd century CE was one of the most evocative moments in Sasanian and Late Antique history. This presentation will showcase how the Zoroastrian hermeneutical tradition in Middle Persian (Pahlavi) literature can contribute to a richer understanding of Sasanian historiography. The talk will do so by surveying the subject positions of various actors in different time periods: from the Manichaeans writing in Parthian and Coptic, the Zoroastrians producing hermeneutical, legal, and polemical texts, and the Islamic heresiographers, each of whom attempted to make meaning of the death of Mani at the hands of the Sasanians.

#### **Scott McDonough: “Queen Shirin and the Churches of the East: Christianity in Sasanian Iran”**

Queen Shirin and the Churches of the East: Christianity in Sasanian Iran Queen Shirin, wife of Kusrō II Parvīz (r. 590, 591–628), is a central figure in the mythology of the late Sasanian Empire. As a Christian, she also appears prominently in historical accounts of the Empire’s diverse Christian communities: Church of the East, Syriac and Armenian Miaphysite, Caucasian Albanian, and Chalcedonian, most notably at a semi-legendary public disputation between the churches held for the royal court in 612. As such, Shirin, the Christian and courtier, provides a perfect window through which to survey the complex place of the Churches of the East under late Sasanian rule: as subordinate “minority” populations, rapidly expanding religious communities locked in complex intra- and inter-confessional competition, and as vital supporters of Sasanian dynastic power.

#### **Simcha Gross: “Kings or Slaves? Babylonian Jewish Claims of Royal Genealogy in their Sasanian Context”**

In recent years, Babylonian Jewish texts have been paralleled with other texts produced in the Sasanian Empire, by Zoroastrians, Syriac Christians, Manichaeans and more. This presentation moves beyond single moments of contact to focus on how the larger Sasanian imperial context shaped the very way at least some Jews (and Syriac Christians) conceived of community, identity, and power, in particular with regards to claims of royal lineage.

### Panel Three: Art and Culture in the Sasanian Period and Beyond

#### **Samra Azarnouche: “Mythical and Political Narrations in Sasanian Era: Middle Persian Texts and Literature in Context”**

There is no doubt that the Iranians of the Sasanian period attained a high degree of literary culture and that the production and diffusion of written works, especially within the Court, were highly developed, without sacrificing the importance of oral tradition or the commemorative role of inscriptions. This being the case, we are relatively ignorant of the content and structure of these texts, and the titles and extracts that Arab chroniclers have left us, while extremely valuable, are not representative of this literature as a whole. In addition to the massive loss of material, Middle Persian literature suffers from two particular drawbacks: the defective writing system and the late date of the extant material. In fact, the majority of these texts were compiled or redacted after the Sasanian period. We will attempt to respond to the question: What can the Middle Persian texts—mostly religious texts—teach us about the history and the literature of Sasanian Iran? Can we establish a methodology for distinguishing between what is Sasanian and what is not? Numerous case studies will lead us to observe how the Sasanians made use of literary narratives for propagandistic purposes and how Zoroastrian authors described Sasanian kings in mythological terms for the purpose of legitimization.

#### **Judith A. Lerner: “Knowledge and Revival of Rock Relief Sculpture in Post-Sasanian Persia: The Qajars’ Use of an Ancient Iranian Art Form and of Sasanian Imagery”**

Rock relief carving has had a long history in Iran, beginning in the third millennium BCE, and reaching its apogee under the Achaemenid and Sasanian dynasties (ca. 559–331 BCE and 224–651 CE). With the establishment of Islamic rule in the middle of the seventh century, rock carving on a monumental scale was abandoned, only to be revived, more than a millennium later, by the second Qajar ruler, Fath ‘Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834). This talk will document this revival: the reasons for it and why its subject matter first echoes the major themes of Sasanian imagery—enthronement and the hunt—and then gives way to visual themes from earlier Achaemenid art.

#### **Ida Meftahi: “Sasanian Reflections on the Modern Stage”**

Centering on the modernist-nationalist theatrical stage of the first half of the twentieth-century Tehran, this presentation explores the ways in which ancient Iran served as a source for inspiration and innovation in performing arts. It further examines the metamorphosis and visualization of Sasanian figures, symbols, and motifs to (fictional) stage narratives, aesthetics, and semiotics in dance and operetta productions.