

Editor's Introduction: Eastern Perspectives on Late Antiquity

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*At the sight of Antioch's fall you would start
At Greek and Persian turned to stone
With the fates at large as Anûshirvân
Under banner imperial drives his troops
In sea of armor closing in
On Byzantium's emperor saffron-robed*

Al-Buḥturī (d. 248/897), *qaṣīdah* on the Īwān Kisrā¹

This volume of the peer-reviewed, open access *Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations* presents several articles (and a provocative postscript) centering on the theme of “New Perspectives on Late Antique Iran and Iraq.” The articles featured here originated with a pair of conference panels convened in 2016. The first was held during the summer of 2016 at the Eleventh Biennial Iranian Studies Conference at the University of Vienna, August 2–5, 2016; the second followed in the fall of that year, convened during the 50th Anniversary Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association held in Boston, November 17–20, 2016. The articles by Touraj Daryaee, Isabel Toral-Niehoff, and Shai Secunda in this volume are revisions of their contributions to the first panel in Vienna; those by Thomas Carlson, Mimi Hanaoka, and Jason Mokhtarian are revisions of their contributions to the second. Richard Bulliet, who has graciously contributed the afterword to this volume, served as respondent at the Boston panel.

The inspiration for this volume (and the two conference panels that gave rise to it) initially came from the felicitous conjunction of two factors in 2015. First, the Mizan digital scholarship initiative was launched in spring 2015, with the stated mission of “encouraging informed public discourse and interdisciplinary scholarship on the culture and history of Muslim societies.” Supported by generous funding from ILEX Foundation and housed in the Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations at Boston University, Mizan was founded to provide an online platform for scholars of Islam and intersecting fields to engage a broad audience, whether fellow academics or the general public, particularly through publications that demonstrate the relevance of historical and interdisciplinary approaches to investigating issues of contemporary concern in the study of Islam and Muslim societies. Second, not long after the launch of the Mizan platform in spring 2015, project management was presented with the opportunity to participate in the Association for Iranian Studies (then the International Society for Iranian Studies) conference in Vienna the following summer. Imagining this as a fruitful venue to explore the topic that is the subject of this journal issue, we soon realized that a single conference panel was inadequate for doing so, which led to the follow-up panel in Boston later that same year. Organizing and convening these panels allowed us to bring a number of distinguished scholars together to explore questions of shared concern on not one but two occasions; in the end, these panels provided us with a very diverse array of contributions on our theme, reflecting the breadth of contemporary scholarly engagements with the subject of Eastern Late Antiquity.

When the Mizan initiative was founded, one of the core areas of research and publication we designated as central to the project was termed “Global Late Antiquity.”² This topic represents a firm commitment to presenting and promoting scholarship that locates the rise and development of Islam in the context of the late ancient Near East and Mediterranean, particularly by focusing on the ways in which early Islam was heir to, and profoundly shaped by, that larger cultural, political, economic, and religious world that tied together Jews, Christians, Zoro-

astrians, and other communities during the time of Eastern Roman and Sasanian Persian hegemony. Naturally, when one speaks of a “Global Late Antiquity,” the underlying issue that self-evidently informs the locution is a concern to emphasize an eastward shift in the study and presentation of the period.

It was especially appropriate that the first of our two conference panels on the theme of “New Perspectives on Late Antique Iran and Iraq” was held in Vienna, for it was here that Alois Riegl, who taught and worked at the Imperial Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry (now the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts or MAK Vienna), originally coined the term *Spätantike* or “Late Antiquity.” Riegl perhaps could not have anticipated the popularity and wide-ranging application of the term—or, for that matter, the energetic debate over its meaning and use—well over a century later. It is worth remarking here, if only momentarily, that the notion of *Spätantike* as a distinct phase in Mediterranean and Near Eastern history originated with Riegl’s attempt to address the hybrid visual style found in the material remains of early Christian or Coptic Egypt—the synthesis of the paradigmatically “classical,” “western,” and “universalizing” visual language of imperial Rome with that of an Oriental subculture depicted (and to some degree denigrated) as “provincial,” “vernacular,” and “traditional.” In Riegl’s analysis, each of these visual idioms exhibits distinctive qualities in their approach to depiction and ornamentation; in the late Roman period, both were suffused with Hellenistic and, increasingly, Christian elements as well, proposing complementary but ultimately divergent solutions to similar problems and challenges met in the process of cultural synthesis.³

Thus, at its foundation, the concept of Late Antiquity was originally intended as a framework for analyzing, describing, and gauging the significance of phenomena that are conspicuously interstitial, hybrid, and marginal (or at least are perceived as such).⁴ It has until relatively recently been invoked primarily in the study of the late Roman Empire, particularly in analysis of such developments as the advent of the eastern-facing and enduring Byzantine polity centered on Constantinople, the transition to a post-Roman political and social order in Western Europe,

and the impact of Christianization in both the Latin west and the Greek east. However, from the start, various “Oriental” others—Egyptian, Anatolian, Syrian, Mesopotamian—have had to be taken into consideration as well. While Riegl may have taken for granted the centrality and hegemony of Rome and Eurocentric norms of the “classical” in his approach to the period, his and other formative studies of Late Antiquity already contained the seeds of a dramatic expansion of the field—if not the complete subversion of the assumptions that originally informed Riegl’s approach.

The study of Late Antiquity has developed tremendously in recent decades, building upon formative scholarship that asserted a distinctive identity to the period between the era of Constantine and the rise of Islam, marking the crucial transition from the ancient world to the Middle Ages and modernity. This has had a profound impact on a number of scholarly disciplines and deeply influenced the way we think about the relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the connections between European and Middle Eastern civilization; and the nature of the period formerly mislabeled the “Dark Ages.” While scholars no longer follow Gibbon and other historians who saw this period as largely marked by decline—a placeholder for the transition between a glorious classical civilization and the culture of the Renaissance that is so often seen as birthing European modernity—long-established biases and disciplinary imbalances in the field are only slowly being overcome.⁵

In adopting a more sophisticated and ecumenical approach to Late Antiquity, a particularly pressing task is achieving a greater balance between western and eastern perspectives on the period, with “eastern” defined in the broadest possible way. Similarly, the assumption of a natural emphasis on the third through fifth centuries CE—the era of major transformations in the Roman order, particularly the political decline of the empire in Western Europe, significant institutional changes in the Roman state, and the confrontation between Christianity and polytheism—for defining the boundaries of the period must also be questioned. Once mainly the purview of scholars of the later Roman Empire and associated phenomena, the term “Late Antiquity” now connotes a

much wider nexus of cultures, communities, and socio-historical processes that converged in the Mediterranean and Near East from the Christianization of Rome to the rise of Islam and beyond. This is the direct consequence of the wide recognition that the processes of exchange and synthesis between Hellenistic, Roman, and “Oriental” cultures so characteristic of the period cannot be conveniently constrained by the Roman imperial *limes*. At least since the time of Peter Brown’s groundbreaking work in the 1970s and 1980s, Sasanian Persia has been enfranchised as a critical participant in those processes; increasingly, Islam has as well, not least of all as their culmination.

The political, economic, social, and religious ramifications of the late antique cultural convergence are indisputably significant for any proper understanding of western, indeed world, history. Moreover, although regions, events, and communities within the Greco-Roman cultural sphere still receive a disproportionate amount of attention in the study of this period, scholars are increasingly working to incorporate the study of Levantine, Arabian, African, Central Asian, and Iranian communities in their approach to a field that is slowly achieving a more holistic, which is to say global, perspective on the cultural, political, and social dynamics of the era. In terms of its central religious dynamics, the spread, institutional development, and eventual hegemony of Christianity still enjoys a certain pride of place in attracting the lion’s share of scholarly attention, but the study of other religious communities, particularly Palestinian and Babylonian Jewry, has benefited enormously from integration into Late Antique Studies, and in turn played a reciprocally influential role in shaping the field.⁶

Yet much work remains to be done, and in particular, greater integration of Iran and Iraq into this dynamically shifting field is long overdue, despite the fact that the role of the centuries-long confrontation between the Roman and Sasanian Empires in stimulating the major transformations of the period has been acknowledged by scholars for decades.⁷ Long the exclusive province of specialists in ancient Iranian history and philology, Sasanian Studies has in recent years been revitalized by scholars seeking to shift focus and bring the field into conver-

sation with other scholarly discourses. Specialists in both Late Antiquity and Sasanian Iran stand to benefit from bringing these fields into a more profound and fruitful dialogue.

For such dialogue to be truly impactful, it must be multivectoral and interdisciplinary, taking the complex dialectics of the period into consideration. The contributions of Touraj Daryaee and Shai Secunda to this volume both focus on Sasanian Iran, but do so from rather different perspectives; nevertheless, the theme that unites them is the necessity of considering late antique phenomena from a comparative or broadly ecumenical perspective, for the attempt to appraise evidence in isolation will inevitably lead to misprision, if not significant misinterpretation. Daryaee's piece, "The Sasanians and the Late Antique World," addresses a central historiographic question in Sasanian Studies, namely the degree to which the advent of the Sasanians effected a similar transformation in the affairs of Iran and Central Asia to that effected by the Christianization of Rome. Daryaee argues that we must see Christian Rome and Sasanian Persia as not only coeval but coevolving; in particular, both imperial polities articulated ideologies according to which their ambitions of world dominion were justified through claims of direct divine sanction and election.⁸

In contrast, Secunda's contribution, "East LA: Center and Periphery in the Study of Late Antiquity and the New Irano-Talmudica," is a brief résumé of the most critical historiographic questions provoked by the recent flourishing of Irano-Talmudica as a major field of inquiry. As a scholar who has himself contributed much to the growth of this fledgling field, Secunda is well positioned to reflect upon some of the implications of its distinctive emphasis on both comparative work and greater integration with Late Antique Studies, an endeavor marked with both considerable promise and conspicuous pitfalls. The field of Irano-Talmudic Studies largely represents an attempt to bring research on Sasanian culture to bear in illuminating a textual corpus that has by and large been the exclusive domain of specialists working in Rabbinics and guided by its methodologies and priorities.

However, the integration of Sasanian Studies and Jewish Studies has advanced through other types of inquiry as well. Jason Mokhtarian's contribution to this volume, "Zoroastrian Polemics against Judaism in the Doubt-Dispelling Exposition," shows that we must also take the literary perceptions and representations of religious others found in the Zoroastrian textual corpus into account in constructing a new image of Sasanian society. *Irano-Talmudica* provides us with a window through which that imperial society can be more sharply glimpsed from the perspective of minority groups such as Babylonian Jews, especially as the traditions of the *Bavli* offer a particular view of everyday social relations in the urban centers of Sasanian Iraq. But we must be mindful that Sasanian society itself apprehended its minority populations in particular ways. The empire gazed back at the Jews, so to speak, as we learn by considering the complementary (or in the present case, rather less than complementary!) perspective afforded to us through the discourse of religious polemic preserved in the Zoroastrian canon.

Given this journal's primary (but by no means exclusive) orientation towards the community of scholars in Islamic Studies, the effort to better integrate the study of Late Antiquity and Islam seems especially important as a recent development in these fields. The rise of Islam is no longer seen as violently disrupting the older Mediterranean-Near Eastern world order or abruptly drawing the curtain on the classical world; the caliphal dominion, especially in the Umayyad period, is now generally recognized as the realization of various long-term historical trajectories that linked Rome, Iran, and Arabia.⁹ Admittedly, there can be no doubt that the Arab conquests precipitated both immediate change and long-term transformations. Indeed, Richard Bulliet's conjectural afterword to this volume, "What If the Arabs Had Failed to Conquer Iran?", demonstrates that imagining the hypothetical persistence of a Sasanian polity after the seventh century CE—that is, an Iran that somehow resisted direct takeover by Arab forces after the fall of Iraq—yields an image of both Iran and the Islamic world that is dramatically different from that which is familiar to us.¹⁰

Yet even those epochal transformations that are generally acknowledged as inevitable may, upon close consideration of the evidence, may seem far less so. Thus, as Thomas Carlson shows in his contribution, “The Long Shadow of Sasanian Christianity: The Limits of Iraqi Islamization in the Abbasid Period,” the marginalization and disappearance of Christianity in Iraq may have taken much longer than even the currently prevalent gradualist models of conversion to Islam in the Arab heartland would suggest. The spread of Christianity from the Eastern Roman Empire to Iraq, Iran, and beyond is one of the most underappreciated aspects of religious change in Late Antiquity; the persistence of major Christian communities in Iraq throughout the Abbasid period appears to constitute important evidence of a long Late Antiquity, flying in the face of concepts of the Arab conquests as ushering in rapid and ineluctable disruption of the previous status quo. It is clear that in addressing the legacy of the Arab conquests and the emergence of Islamic dominion and eventual hegemony over what had previously been the Roman-Sasanian condominium over the eastern Mediterranean and Near East, a cautious equilibrium between themes of continuity and change must be sought.

Over the last decade or so, there has been a consistent production of books and articles in Islamic Studies that invoke the term “Late Antiquity.” It is an open question whether the popularity of this term in the subfield of Qur’ānic Studies in particular really reflects a substantial engagement with a larger scholarly discourse or recent historiographic developments in that field.¹¹ However, that the rise of Islam is now widely recognized as meaningfully anchored in the religious and political affairs of the Mediterranean-Near Eastern *oikoumene* cannot be doubted, even though there is still a dearth of significant scholarship demonstrating how the dynamics of the latter meaningfully explain or illuminate the former. Moreover, the substance and ramifications of the long-term continuities between pre-Islamic Late Antiquity and classical Islamic traditions and institutions have still hardly been explored; and work on early and classical Islam perhaps still does not engage Persian-Sasanian concepts, institutions, and materials adequately enough.¹²

While there have been a number of recent publications that seek to explore Eastern Late Antiquity, what perhaps distinguishes this volume is that we have sought to put a particular focus on the Islamic (or “post-conquest”) period, on the refractions of older themes and repercussions of older trends up through the Islamicate Middle Ages—Late Antiquity in the longest of *longue durée* approaches.¹³ The preeminent example of this we offer here in this volume is the contribution of Isabel Toral-Niehoff and Jesús Lorenzo Jiménez, “Al-Ḥīrah, the Naṣrids, and Their Legacy: New Perspectives on Late Antique Iranian History”; the authors show with great clarity that traces of the culture, tradition, and institutions of late antique Iraq can be detected in rather far-flung settings of the medieval Islamic dominion and beyond. Here it is especially noteworthy that it is the legacy of Christian Ḥīrah, itself a point of convergence for various vectors of late antique culture, that comes to fruition in al-Andalus centuries later. However, it is a mistake to focus exclusively on seeking specific late antique survivals and remnants in the Islamic world at the expense of acknowledging the persistence and adaptation of mores, dispositions, and mentalities across the divide of the Arab conquests.

One of the most persistent legacies of Late Antiquity in medieval Islamic culture was the impact of conceptions of the late antique past itself for defining identity and inflecting worldviews centuries later. Muslims had a keen understanding of themselves as heirs to various classical pasts, whether Hellenistic, Iranian, or Israelite, and were fully aware that the empire of Muḥammad and his community was forged in the foundry of the Roman-Sasanian conflict. The literal remains of that confrontation are the subject of the poem from which the epigraph to this essay is drawn, the melancholy *qaṣīdah* the Abbasid poet al-Buḥturī (d. 248/897) composed in reflection upon the abandoned monumental hall of the Sasanians at Ctesiphon. But figuratively speaking, the mentality informing the poet’s backward glance aligns with a characteristically late antique tendency, the impulse to come to terms with the past, reconcile oneself to it, reshape it, and deploy it as an instrument for self-fashioning and

legitimation.¹⁴ That is, Buḥturī's ode on the ruins of the Īwān Kisrā represents a kind of imaginative artifact of Late Antiquity in its own right.

In this vein, Mimi Hanaoka's contribution to this volume, "Local Histories from the Medieval Persianate World: Memory, Legitimacy, and the Early Islamic Past," shows that these local histories from major cities and regions of the medieval Islamic world such as Qom, Bukhara, and Nishapur reflect a delicate balancing act; they engage in an enterprise of modeling authority and legitimacy in reference both to native pre-Islamic traditions and ideals and to the monumental legacy of the Prophet, Companions, and other sainted figures associated with both the conquests and the Arab heartlands of Islam. The degree to which these sources sought to engage and rework foundational narratives and myths of the conquest period centuries later stands in stark contrast with other contemporary textual corpora such as the dynastic histories of Muslim Anatolia Hanaoka considers, which by and large do not engage in fashioning self, landscape, and community according to late antique Islamic models. For complex reasons, the legacy of the late antique past continued to be meaningful in some parts of the Islamic world centuries later, while it was immaterial in other places where different discursive models prevailed.

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Notes

All digital content cited in this article was last accessed via the URLs provided in the notes below on October 21, 2020.

1. Trans. Charles Greville Torrey in *Classical Arabic Poetry: 162 Poems from Imrulkais to Ma‘ari* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1985), 242.

2. See the short essay “About Global Late Antiquity” on the main Mizan Project site (<https://mizanproject.org/about-global-late-antiquity/>).

3. The literature on Riegl, his work, and his cosmopolitan late Habsburg context has blossomed in recent years. See Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History: Empire and the Politics of Scholarship, 1847–1918* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013) and the bibliography therein.

4. It should also be emphasized that the concept originated in the discipline of art history. The study of some varieties of late antique material culture (e.g., early Christian art, architecture, epigraphy, and other material remains) is well established, while that of other varieties languishes and remains marginal. The study of material culture and visual evidence is generally poorly integrated with the discourses of historical and textual-philological analysis that dominate in the field of Late Antique Studies.

5. Scholarship that invokes Late Antiquity as the primary framework for historical inquiry often positions Gibbon’s work, emblematic of the historiographic paradigm of “decline and fall,” as a foil to more progressive and nuanced approaches to the period. Although such a perception is obviously justified to some degree given the title of Gibbon’s classic *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, his view of the matter has been overstated; see the Introduction to Garth Fowden’s *Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). Pirenne’s conception of the transformative impact of the rise of Islam on Europe has likewise often been seen as a

narrative of decline, and has likewise occasioned contemporary reevaluation and reflection.

6. On the critical questions provoked by the attempt to incorporate Jewish phenomena into a late antique framework largely shaped by Romanocentric and Christocentric scholarship, see Mira Bamberg, "Late Ancient Judaism: Beyond Border Lines," *Marginalia*, Sept. 17, 2015 (<https://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/late-ancient-judaism-beyond-border-lines-by-mira-balberg/>).

7. See in particular the emphasis placed on the Sasanians in Peter Brown's seminal *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750* (New York: Norton, 1989).

8. Scholars working primarily from the perspective of Western Late Antiquity such as Peter Brown and Garth Fowden have asserted such coevolution, but without much corroboration from the Sasanian sources. Efforts like that of Daryaei here to support such claims from the perspective of specialist scholarship on the Iranian side are rarer and largely recent. For a sustained treatment of parallels in imperial discourse and visual idioms, see Matthew P. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 45; Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

9. Garth Fowden's monograph *From Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993) remains a watershed publication in this regard, as does the celebrated reference work edited by G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar, *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Among recent reference works, both Eric Orlin et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Ancient Mediterranean Religions* (New York: Routledge, 2016) and Oliver Nicholson (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) represent attempts to integrate Islamic phenomena into their respective projects as fully as possible. Mention must also be made here of the trilogy of concise works published by Bowersock over

the last several years, which together present a vivid and compelling argument for approaching the emergence of Islam in late antique perspective: see his *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012); *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and *The Crucible of Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

10. On the Arab conquest of Iran in late antique and early Islamic perspective, see the long-form essay by Khodadad Rezakhani published here on Mizan in two parts: “The Arab Conquests and Sasanian Iran (Part 1): Some General Observations on the Late Sasanian Period,” *Mizan Project*, Feb. 3, 2016 (<https://mizanproject.org/the-arab-conquests-and-sasanian-iran-part-1/>), and “The Arab Conquests and Sasanian Iran (Part 2): Islam in a Sasanian Context,” *Mizan Project*, Feb. 18, 2016 (<https://mizanproject.org/the-arab-conquests-and-sasanian-iran-part-2/>).

11. On this problem, see my review essay “Positivism, Revisionism, and Agnosticism in the Study of Late Antiquity and the Qurʾān,” *Journal of the International Qurʾanic Studies Association* 2 (2018) (forthcoming), which discusses Bowersock’s aforementioned *The Crucible of Islam* and a recent volume of essays in *Qurʾānic Studies*, Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (eds.), *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qurʾan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

12. For example, it is noteworthy that one of the most successful demonstrations of discursive continuities between late antique Christianity and early and classical Islam of the last decade, Thomas Sizgorich’s *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), not only neglects Sasanian phenomena but also skirts any discussion of Islamic origins and the Qurʾān.

13. Compare the other recent journal volumes dedicated to the theme of Eastern (or Iranian) Late Antiquity: *Journal of Persianate Studies* 6.1–2 (2013), edited by Parvaneh Pourshariati, and *Iranian Studies* 48.1 (2015), edited by Jason Mokhtarian and David Bennett. Both of these volumes seem to place more emphasis on the pre-Islamic side of the ledger, whereas our approach is perhaps more closely anticipated by the

edited volume by Teresa Bernheimer and Adam Silverstein, *Late Antiquity: Eastern Perspectives* (Exeter: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2012). That there is significant overlap between the contributors to these three volumes and the present volume is indicative of the still-marginal status of Eastern Late Antiquity as a subject of scholarly inquiry.

14. See Averil Cameron, “Remaking the Past,” in Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar (eds.), *Late Antiquity*, 1–20.

