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Introduction

Toward a New History of Jews and the Sasanian Empire

In an obscure debate about inheritance, which hinges on a terse genealogical verse in Genesis, a rabbi in the Babylonian Talmud proposes an interpretation that he boasts is entirely original.[1]

> Rabbah said: "I will tell you something that not even King Shapur said!"
> And who is he [i.e., who is "King Shapur"]? Shmuel.

The nature of this boast is puzzling: What does the king of the Sasanian Empire, in this case Shapur I (r. 240–270 CE), have to do with rabbinic biblical interpretation? An anonymous interpolation explains that "King Shapur" in Rabbah's boast is simply a nickname for Shmuel, an earlier prominent rabbi. According to the interpolation, Rabbah is therefore making a run-of-the-mill brag about besting his eminent rabbinic colleague, Shmuel. Even so, the fact that Shmuel's high rank is conveyed through analogy to the Sasanian king is noteworthy. Such a comparison assumes that the rabbinic movement is a kind of microcosm of the Sasanian Empire, headed by prominent rabbis and kings respectively.[2]

And yet, as modern scholarship on the editing of the Talmud would suggest, the anonymous explanatory gloss in this passage was likely added decades, if not centuries, after Rabbah's boast was recorded, and

[1] b. Pesaḥ 54a = b. B. Bat. 115b. The same discussion is immediately repeated, but featuring later rabbis, a typical product of the centuries-long oral transmission of the Talmud; see Yaakov Elman, "Orality and the Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud," *Oral Tradition* 14 (1999): 52–99. This repetition appears to have led to garbled versions of the discussion in MS Munich 95 and MS Vatican 125.

[2] See Chapter 6 for further detail, and the Conclusion for an analysis of a related talmudic pericope.

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may not capture its original intention. Rabbah's boast may not have compared him favorably to an earlier rabbi whose sobriquet was King Shapur, but to King Shapur himself.[3] To make such a boast, Rabbah presupposes that King Shapur can serve as a benchmark for legal and interpretive creativity, such that claiming to be cleverer than him, however hyperbolically, is praiseworthy. Ideas about the king as a wise legal authority were indeed promoted by the Sasanian Empire itself, a claim Rabbah appears to have embraced and internalized.[4] However we understand the relationship of the anonymous interpolation to Rabbah's statement, the Sasanian Empire, its leading figures, and even its projections, penetrated the narrowly focused discursive universe of the rabbis.

Between the third and seventh centuries of the Common Era, numerous Jews lived in the Sasanian Empire, ruled by an Iranian and Zoroastrian dynasty whose territory extended from Syria to Central Asia.[5] Among these Jews was a network of figures known as rabbis, who, by the end of this period, produced the Babylonian Talmud, our chief literary source by and about Jews living under Sasanian rule. Across lengthy legal discussions, colorful stories, and even seemingly trivial rabbinic boasts, the Talmud is replete with references to kings, Zoroastrian priests, fire temples, imperial administrators, imperial laws, Iranian customs, Middle Persian words, and more quotidian details of life under Sasanian rule. Even a passing reading of the Babylonian Talmud makes clear the extent to which Babylonian Jews were deeply rooted in the Sasanian Empire and its realities.

Yet in historical accounts of Jews under Sasanian rule to date, the Sasanian Empire has chiefly served as a distant backdrop to a decidedly

[3] Similarly Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context* (Philadelphia, PA: 2013), 104–105.

[4] See Chapters 1 and 6.

[5] Although ancient sources note how populous Jews were in these areas prior to the Sasanian period – according to Josephus' hyperbolic description (*Antiquities of the Jews* 11.133), "countless myriads whose number cannot be ascertained" – estimates of the population size of the Jews of Babylonia are entirely conjectural. For sources, see: Geoffrey Herman, *A Prince without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era* (Tübingen: 2012), 2n9; and Simcha Gross, "Babylonian Jewish Communities," in *The Routledge Companion to Jews in Late Antiquity*, ed. Catherine Hezser (Abington, Oxon: 2024), 414–434. On some Jewish settlements in Iran, see Parvaneh Pourshariati, "New Vistas on the History of Iranian Jewry in Late Antiquity, Part I: Patterns of Jewish Settlement in Iran," in *The Jews of Iran*, ed. Houman Sarshar (London: 2014), 1–32. On Jewish deportees during the Sasanian period, see Geo Widengren, "The Status of the Jews in the Sassanian Empire," *Iranica Antiqua* 1 (1961): 134–137; and Aram Topchyan, "Jews in Ancient Armenia (1st Century BC–5th Century AD)," *Le Muséon* 120 (2007): 435–476.

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Jewish story.[6] The relative inattention to the Sasanian imperial context has not simply been a matter of neglect; it derives from three theses concerning Sasanian rule and its Jewish subjects that have served as the cornerstones for nearly all historical accounts to date.

First, scholars characterized Sasanian rule as detached and feudalistic, only intervening directly in the lives of its diverse inhabitants in extreme circumstances.[7] The empire instead preferred to organize its heterogenous populations, including the Jews, into semi-autonomous religious communities, led by official intermediaries. In the case of the Jews, the intermediary was the so-called Exilarch, the head of a dynastic Jewish family that claimed to descend from King David.

Second, owing to imperial sponsorship, these semi-autonomous religious communities were centralized, self-governing, and structured around their own stratified internal hierarchy. In the case of the Jews, the Exilarch again stood atop the social ladder, while the rabbis served as the formal judicial branch of the Jewish community. Rabbinic authority in Babylonia therefore "depended not upon popular acquiescence, though it was considerable, but upon the coercive capabilities of their courts," as Jacob Neusner put it.[8] By dint of their enforcement capabilities, Babylonian Jewish society was believed to be more strictly and uniformly "rabbinized" than contemporary Jewish communities elsewhere, especially in Roman Palestine. As a corporate religious community, Jewish experience under and attitudes toward the empire were considered to be roughly unified in nature, the parts thereof attesting to the whole.

Third, because of their segregation into semi-autonomous communities, Jews were isolated and insulated from their non-Jewish neighbors and Iranian influence, and they were not exposed to various facets of Sasanian rule. We should therefore anticipate few signs of Iranian acculturation among Jews, except for those elites, like the Exilarch, who were required to participate in the culture of the court, and particular rabbis who chose to engage, however sparingly, with the intellectual elites of other communities. Jews similarly had little impetus to consider proper attitudes toward a remote imperial presence or devise political strategies for how best to navigate life under Sasanian rule.

6 For a concise summary of this view, see: Isaiah Gafni, "The Political, Social, and Economic History of Babylonian Jewry, 224–638 CE," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: The Late Roman Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven Katz (Cambridge: 2006), 792–820.

7 For this position, see Chapter 1.

8 Jacob Neusner, "Rabbis and Community in Third Century Babylonia," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: 1970), 449.

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Together, these three theses fueled romantic accounts of the Jewish embrace of Sasanian rule as an opportunity to live in relative social, cultural, and intellectual isolation from their larger non-Jewish environment. The consensus view is encapsulated by Jacob Neusner when he notes that "the Iranians primarily contributed not doctrine or other sorts of 'influence,' but the opportunity for Jewry to work out its own affairs in its own way."[9] Isaiah Gafni similarly averred that "the Jewish community of Babylonia seemed to thrive, thanks to a policy of noninterference with their internal structures and lifestyle."[10] As a result, it was "precisely in this land of ancient roots, albeit imagined ones, that the Jewish community would evince the greatest degree of cultural autonomy."[11] The Sasanian Empire provided the general conditions for Jews to live in the insular, self-segregated environment to which, these scholars believed, Jews naturally gravitated.[12] Without external interference, Babylonian Jewish society remained highly stable for nearly a millennium.[13] These

[9] Jacob Neusner, "Jews in Iran: Jewish Settlement in the Western Satrapies of Iran," in *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, vol. 3, bk. 2, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge: 1983), 923. See similarly Neusner, "How Much Iranian in Jewish Babylonia," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95 (1975): 184–190; and the more nuanced view in Neusner, *Israel's Politics in Sasanian Iran*: *Jewish Self-Government in Talmudic Times* (Lanham, MD: 1986), xi.

[10] Gafni, "Political, Social, and Economic History," 794.

[11] Isaiah Gafni, "Babylonian Rabbinic Culture," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: 2002), 224.

[12] See also: Robert Brody, "Judaism in the Sasanian Empire: A Case Study in Religious Coexistence," in *Irano-Judaica* II, ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer (Jerusalem: 1990), 52–62; Brody, "Irano-Talmudica: The New Parallelomania?" *Jewish Quarterly Review* 106 (2016): 209–232, and further discussion in Chapter 1 below. The notion that Jews gravitated to insularity was common in Jewish historiography of much of the twentieth century. For critical historiography, see: Seth Schwartz, "Big Men or Chiefs: Against an Institutional History of the Palestinian Patriarchate," in *Jewish Religious Leadership: Image and Reality*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: 2004), 1:155–173, esp. 158–159. In Yaakov Elman's work, the peaceable conditions allowed most Jews to be insular while also enabling *some* rabbis to engage Zoroastrian elites in religious exchange: see Elman, "The Other in the Mirror: Questions of Identity, Conversion, and Exogamy in the Fifth–Century Iranian Empire. Part Two," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 20 (2010), 30; and Elman and Oktor Skjaervo, "Concepts of Pollution in Late Sasanian Iran: Does Pollution Need Stairs, and Does It Fill Space?" *Aram* 26 (2013), 21.

[13] Michael Morony, "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17 (1974): 113–135; Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Confrontation, Interaction, and the Formation of the Early Islamic Oikoumene," *Revue des études byzantines* 63 (2005): 173–174; Y. Zvi Stampfer, "Jews in Baghdad during the Abbasid Period," in *Baghdād: From Its Beginnings to the 14th Century*, ed. Jens Scheiner and Isabel Toral (Leiden: 2022), 731–764. See the extreme example of Richard Frye, *Golden Age of Persia: The Arabs in the East* (New York: 1975),

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three pillars of semi-autonomy, centralized self-regulating hierarchy, and insularity, continue to undergird historical research of Jews under Sasanian rule, and serve in classical works of Sasanian history as the lynchpins for the idea of Sasanian imperial laissez faire and its organization of its subject groups into semi-autonomous religious communities.[14]

This book advances a radically different, staunchly revisionist, account of Jewish life under Sasanian rule, and consequently of Sasanian rule itself. Building upon recent studies that have begun to profoundly alter our understanding of the Sasanian Empire, this book presents a more immanent and integrationist model of Sasanian rule, which Jews could not avoid, and within and against which they positioned and defined themselves. Rather than centralized, hierarchal, or neatly divided into rigid classes, this book demonstrates how Sasanian Jewish society was highly diverse, dynamic, and in constant flux, where status was determined not by guaranteed positions in a hierarchy, but by success in competition for recognition on a crowded playing field of social actors. Jews were not insulated from their surroundings, but instead interacted with neighboring communities and the empire regularly, drawing from and internalizing Sasanian and Iranian culture in the formation of their identities and in their jockeying for power and prestige. In short, Sasanian rule shaped the social and cultural worlds of Babylonian Jews, and Jews, in turn, formulated and negotiated their traditions and identities in this distinct imperial context.

By reconfiguring our understanding of Babylonian Jewish society, we must approach our surviving Jewish material and literary evidence, especially the Babylonian Talmud, as works situated within, informed by, and responsive to the realities of Sasanian rule. Rather than a passive source providing straightforward descriptions of Jewish life, the book argues that talmudic stories and discussions are often the very sites where Jews articulated and shaped attitudes towards their imperial surroundings. The Babylonian rabbis, and Jews in general, offer remarkable evidence for how communities thought about the Sasanian Empire and defined their place within it; how those deeply invested in a certain idea of Jewish

109–110: “The ghettos of minorities which probably existed in the Sasanian empire continued into Islam.” More nuanced developmental accounts include Marina Rustow, “Jews and the Islamic World: Transitions from Rabbinic to Medieval Contexts,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Jewish Studies*, ed. Dean Phillip Bell (London: 2013), 90–120; and Philip Wood, *The Imam of the Christians: The World of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, c. 750–850* (Princeton: 2021), 41–55.

[14] See discussion in Chapter 1.

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tradition reconciled its practice in a world saturated with Sasanian and Zoroastrian institutions and imagery; and how in their efforts to gain authority and recognition, the rabbis and other Jews defined themselves by and against notions of social distinction prevalent in the Sasanian Empire. Jews sought to realize their traditions and identities and to situate themselves within the political, social, religious, and cultural conditions generated by Sasanian rule.

EMPIRE AND INHABITANTS

Emerging as a local dynasty in Fars, in the south-west region of modern Iran, the Sasanians burst onto the world stage in the early third century CE, establishing an empire that rivaled the Romans to the west, to say nothing of those empires to its east.[15] Although the empire's borders expanded and contracted over the course of its more than four centuries of rule, they consistently extended from Syria in the west, the Caucasus and Caspian regions to its north, and far into Central Asia. Yet Mesopotamia, where the rabbis and likely most of the empire's Jews lived, held an elevated position in the Sasanian expanse. Known in Persian sources by the sobriquet "the heart of Iran," this agriculturally rich and economically lucrative floodplain served as the empire's breadbasket and was a critical source of imperial revenue.[16] Mesopotamia's strategic and economic importance meant that a Sasanian imperial

[15] Overviews of Sasanian history include Klaus Schippmann, *Grundzüge der Geschichte des sasanidischen Reiches* (Darmstadt: 1990); Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia: From 550 BC to 650 AD* (London: 1996); and Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: 2009).

[16] For the administrative geography of the Sasanian Empire, and the place of Mesopotamia in its western quadrant, see Philippe Gignoux, "Les quatre régions administratives de l'Iran sasanide et la symboliques des nombres trois et quatre," *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* 44 (1984): 555–572; and Christopher Brunner, "Geographical and Administrative Divisions: Settlement and Economy," in *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, vol. 3, bk. 2, *The Cambridge History of Iran*, ed. E. Yarshater (Cambridge: 1983), 747–777. For more on the ecology, urbanization, and productivity of Mesopotamia, see: Robert McC. Adams, *Land behind Baghdad; A History of Settlement on the Diyala Plains* (Chicago: 1965), esp. 69–83; Robert McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities: Surveys of Ancient Settlement and Land Use on the Central Floodplain of the Euphrates* (Chicago: 1981), 183; Peter Verkinderen, *Waterways of Iraq and Iran in the Early Islamic Period: Changing Rivers and Landscapes of the Mesopotamian Plain* (London/New York: 2015); St. John Simpson, "The Land behind Ctesiphon: The Archaeology of Babylonia during the Period of the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Archaeology and Material Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Markham J. Geller (Leiden: 2015), 6; James Howard-Johnston, "State and Society in Late

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presence was ubiquitous there. As it had for the Parthians, Seleucia-Ctesiphon in central Iraq served as the center of imperial power and prestige, hosting embassies and emissaries from the Roman Empire and beyond.[17]

The lands ruled by the Sasanians presented them with many opportunities for enrichment and power, but also a distinct set of challenges deriving from the heterogenous populations who lived within them.[18] Mesopotamia, in particular, was home to a diverse range of religious and ethnic communities, including Jews who had resided there continuously since the early sixth century BCE.[19] Jews and Christians lived cheek by jowl in major Mesopotamian cities, alongside Manichaeans, a variety of so-called pagans, and others.[20] Zoroastrian Iranians lived in

Antique Iran," in *Sasanian Era*, vol. 3, *The Idea of Iran*, ed. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Sarah Stewart (London: 2008), 118–120.

[17] Matthew Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley: 2009). Recently, Michael Shenkar, "The Coronation of the Early Sasanians, Ctesiphon, and the Great Diadem of Paikuli," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 11 (2018), 113–139, has challenged the applicability of the term "capital" for Seleucia-Ctesiphon, although not its fundamental significance as a site of Sasanian imperial administrative power and presence.

[18] Richard Payne, "Iranian Cosmopolitanism: World Religions at the Sasanian Court," in *Cosmopolitanism and Empire: University Rulers, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, ed. Myles Lavan, Richard Payne, and John Weisweiler (Oxford: 2016), 209–230.

[19] On the Jews of Mesopotamia in the Achaemenid period, see Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (Ithaca, NY: 2014); and Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE* (Leiden: 2020). For the Parthian period, see: Jacob Neusner, *The Parthian Period*, vol. 1, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia* (Atlanta, GA: 1965); Isaiah Gafni, *The Jews of Talmudic Babylonia: A Social and Cultural History* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: 1990), 26–35; David M. Goodblatt, "Josephus on Parthian Babylonia (Antiquities XVIII, 310–379)," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107 (1987): 605–622; David M. Goodblatt, "The Jews in the Parthian Empire: What We Don't Know," in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome*, ed. Yuval Shaḥar and Benjamin Isaac (Leiden: 2012), 263–278; Geoffrey Herman, "The Jews of Parthian Babylonia," in *The Parthian Empire and Its Religions*, ed. Peter Wick and Markus Zehnder (Gutenberg: 2012), 141–150; and Simcha Gross, "Hopeful Rebels and Anxious Romans: Jewish Interconnectivity in the Great Revolt and Beyond," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 72 (2023): 1–35.

[20] Erica Hunter, "Aramaic-Speaking Communities of Sasanid Mesopotamia," *Aram* 7 (1995): 319–335; and Michael Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Piscataway, NJ: 2005), 169–430. Albert de Jong, "The Cologne Mani Codex and the Life of Zarathustra," in *Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians: Religious Dynamics in a Sasanian Context*, ed. Geoffrey Herman (Piscataway, NJ: 2014), 133–136, questions the relative prominence of Aramaic speakers, given the possibility of differing epigraphic habits among Aramaic and Iranian populations in Mesopotamia. For Manichaeans, see

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Mesopotamia as well, drawn by social ties, economic opportunity, and the promise of administrative positions.[21] Mesopotamia's wealth and its crucial strategic and diplomatic station at the border of empires ensured that the empire always maintained a keen interest in the goings-on of the area's inhabitants. Governing and maintaining control over their diverse subjects was therefore crucial to the success of the empire.

Recent studies have begun to challenge generalizations about the feudalistic and distant character of Sasanian rule.[22] The economic, infrastructural, and military accomplishments of the Sasanians, they contend, could not have been achieved without a centralized government capable of sustaining them.[23] Excavations from regions as diverse as Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia reveal the Sasanians' ability to amass the necessary resources and labor to direct massive infrastructural and defensive projects, perhaps best exemplified by the intricate and powerful canal

Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Mesopotamia and the Roman Near East* (Leiden: 1994); and on Mani's language, see Riccardo Contini, "Hypothèses sur l'araméen manichéen," *Annali di Ca' Foscari* 34 (1995): 65–107. For Mandaeans, see most recently, Kevin van Bladel, *From Sasanian Mandaeans to Ṣābians of the Marshes* (Leiden: 2017).

[21] On the presence of Iranians in Mesopotamia, see Shaul Shaked, "Religion in the Late Sasanian period: Eran, Aneran, and other Religious Designations," in *The Idea of Iran*, ed. Vesta S. Curtis and Sarah R.A. Stewart, vol. 1 of *The Sasanian Era* (London: 2008), 109, 109n30; and Michael Morony, "The Effects of the Muslim Conquest on the Persian Population of Iraq," *Iran* 14 (1976): 41–42.

[22] In general, see: R. N. Frye, "Feudalism in Sasanian and Early Islamic Iran," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 13–18; Mohsen Zakeri, *Sāsānid Soldiers in early Muslim Society* (Wiesbaden: 1995), 13–22 and *passim*; Albert de Jong, "Sub Species Maiestatis: Reflections on Sasanian Court Rituals," in *Zoroastrian Ritual in Context*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Leiden: 2003), 354n29; Richard Payne, "Review of *Commutatio et Contention*," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6 (2013): 187–190. Indeed, the applicability of "feudalism" to medieval Europe has also been challenged: see Elizabeth Brown, "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe," *American Historical Review* 79 (1974): 1063–1088; and Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: 1994). Changes in scholarly understanding of Sasanian rule have been occasioned, in part, by the growing effort to integrate Sasanian history into the study of Late Antiquity, on which see: Joel Walker, "The Limits of Late Antiquity: Philosophy between Rome and Iran," *Ancient World* 33 (2002): 45–69; Touraj Daryaee, "The Limits of Sasanian History: Between Iranian, Islamic, and Late Antique Studies," *Iranian Studies* 49 (2016): 193–203; Teresa Bernheimer and Adam Silverstein, eds., *Late Antiquity: Eastern Perspectives* (Exeter: 2012); and Parvaneh Pourshariati, "Further Engaging the Paradigm of Late Antiquity," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 6 (2013): 1–14.

[23] James Howard-Johnston, "The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: A Comparison," in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, III: States, Resources and Armies*, ed. Averil Cameron (Princeton, NJ: 1995), 157–226.

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network that was so central to the lives of the Jews of Babylonia.[24] Inscriptions, seals, coins, and literary evidence attest to a complex administrative hierarchy and bureaucracy at all levels of society.[25]

The growing acceptance of a more direct model of Sasanian rule has drawn increased attention to the way the Sasanian Empire, like other ancient empires, sought to legitimate itself to its diverse populations and was sustained as much by persuasion as power.[26] The Sasanians communicated with their inhabitants through sophisticated artistic, performative, and ideational programs.[27] King and administrators alike cultivated relationships with elites, communities, and other subjects. Sasanian officials even took keen interest in the images subjects produced and the stories they told of life under Sasanian rule. This is evidenced, for

[24] E. W. Sauer, et al., *Persia's Imperial Power in Late Antiquity. The Great Wall of Gorgan and Frontier Landscapes of Sasanian Iran* (Oxford: 2013); St. John Simpson, "Merv, an Archaeological Case-Study from the Northeastern Frontier of the Sasanian Empire," *Journal of Ancient History* 2 (2014): 1–28; Richard Payne, "The Archaeology of Sasanian Politics," *Journal of Ancient History* 2 (2014): 80–92; Nikolaus Schindel, "The 3rd Century 'Marw Shah' Bronze Coins Reconsidered," in *Commutatio et Contentio. Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian and Early Islamic Middle East*, ed. Henning Börm and Josef Wiesehöfer (Düsseldorf: 2010), 23–36.

[25] Rika Gyselen, *La géographie administrative de l'empire sassanide* (Paris: 1989); Rika Gyselen, "Primary Sources and Historiography on the Sasanian Empire," *Studia Iranica* 38 (2009): 163–190; on the Sasanians' substitution of client kingdoms for direct rule, see Touraj Daryaee, "Palmyra and the Sasanians," in *Palmyra and the East*, ed. Kenneth Lapatin and Rubina Raja (Turnhout, 2022), 39–44; a process that played out longer in regions like Armenia, on which see Nina G. Garsoïan, "The Arshakuni Dynasty," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 1, *The Armenia People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. R. G. Hovannisian (New York: 1997), 75–81. These studies participate in a broader trend questioning older models of empires as disjointed and noninterventionist, e.g. Susan Sherwin-White and Amelie Kehrt, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (London: 1993); John Ma, *Antiochus III and the Cities of Western Asia Minor* (Oxford: 2000); and Paul Kosmin, *Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge, MA: 2014).

[26] For the theoretical interventions driving the consideration of how subjects acquiesce and submit to being ruled, see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: 1998), 28–34. For their application to the study of Roman imperialism, see Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: 2000); Greg Woolf, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West. Blackwell Bristol Lectures on Greece, Rome and the Classical Tradition* (Chichester, MA: 2011); for Achaemenid imperialism, see Lori Khatchadourian, *Imperial Matter: Ancient Persia and the Archaeology of Empires* (Oakland, CA: 2016).

[27] Touraj Daryaee, "The Changing 'Image of the World': Geography and Imperial Propaganda in Ancient Persia," *Electrum* 6 (2002): 99–109; Canepa, *Two Eyes of the Earth*; Howard-Johnston, "Two Great Powers"; and Howard-Johnston, "State and Society."

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instance, in the synagogue discovered in Dura Europos, which included six Middle Persian graffiti left by Iranian scribes and officials that recorded their favorable impressions of the paintings.[28] These are concentrated on the panel depicting the story of Mordecai's appearance before the Achaemenid king Ahasuerus, suggesting its resonance with contemporary Iranian officials, who saw it as evoking Jewish-Iranian cooperation in the present. The king choreographed encounters with communal elites and encouraged the production and dissemination of affirming descriptions of the king and of the empire. For instance, Yazdgird I (r. 399–420) sponsored the East Syriac ecclesiastical hierarchy, which publicly acknowledged his support of the church, and in time introduced a blessing on his behalf into the church liturgy.[29] Likewise, the king sought to repress and remove representations that undermined, belittled, or challenged the legitimacy or character of the empire.[30] Sasanian rule was attentive to the images communities produced, and sought where possible to shape them to their own advantage.

Yet even as scholars have argued for the more direct and immanent nature of Sasanian rule, they continue to perpetuate the three pillars of semi-autonomy, centralized self-regulating hierarchy, and insularity that largely silo the various subject groups from each other and from the empire.[31] The empire's communicative programs are therefore often treated as narrowly targeting elites, rather than intended to reach broader populations under its rule. Through a study of Jews in comparison with other subject communities, this book not only challenges the three pillars on which previous scholarship rests, but also demonstrates how Sasanian rule and its self-representation extended across rank, class, community, and religion to impact the social and cultural life of its inhabitants.

The Sasanian Empire was more than the nominal power within which different communities interacted and conversed. It was an inescapable, direct, and dominating presence that exerted pressures, circumscribed action, created cultural conditions, and encouraged behaviors, norms, and mores, using a variety of strategies, ranging from coaxing to violence,

[28] Touraj Daryaee, "To Learn and to Remember from Others: Persians Visiting the Dura-Europos Synagogue," *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 8 (2010): 29–37. For a discussion on the identity of these Persian officials, see Steven Fine, "Jewish Identity at the Limus: The Earliest Reception of the Dura Europos Synagogue Paintings," *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Erich Gruen (Los Angeles: 2011), 305–313.

[29] See Chapter 1, and Simcha Gross, "Being Roman in the Sasanian Empire: Revisiting the Great Persecution under Shapur II," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5 (2021): 390–397.

[30] See Chapter 6. [31] See Chapter 1.

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