

SASANIKA
Late Antique Near East Project



SASANIKA PROJECT:

by

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One of the most remarkable empires of the first millennium CE was that of the Sasanian Persian Empire. Emanating from southern Iran's Persis region in the third century AD, the Sasanian domain eventually encompassed not only modern day Iran and Iraq, but also the greater part of Central Asia and the Near East, including at times, the regions corresponding to present-day Israel, Turkey, and Egypt. This geographically diverse empire brought together a striking array ethnicities and religious practices. Arameans, Arabs, Armenians, Persians, Romans, Goths as well as a host of other peoples all lived and labored under Sasanian rule.

The Sasanians in fact established a relatively tolerant imperial system, creating a vibrant communal life among its Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian citizens. This arrangement which allowed religious officials to take charge of their own communities was a model for the Ottoman *millet system*. Likewise, the establishment of the Nestorian Church takes place during the same period, as did the codification of the Zoroastrianism's holy scripture, the *Avesta*. The Gnostic Prophet Mani popularized his vision in the Sasanian period, which spread from China to the Roman world. Finally Mazdak is recognized as the first socialist reformer in the world who preached communal pattern of ownership living under Sasanian rule.

Clearly, the later empires in the Near East, Asia, and the Mediterranean world were impressed with the achievements of the Sasanian era and looked to it as a source of social, economic, and artistic inspiration.

Sasanian courtly manners were to be adopted by the Late Roman (Byzantine) Empire, as well as Chinese, Central Asian, and later Muslim Caliphs. The idea of *proskynesis* or ritual prostration, the hiding of the king behind a veil, and the elaborate crowns associated with king Khusro I in the sixth century made him and his empire synonymous with the idea of royalty. In fact his arabized name, *Kisra*, became associated with opulence and royalty in the Near Eastern world.

It was also during the sixth century that Sasanian scholars endeavored to translate Greek, Babylonian and Hindu scientific works and literature into Middle Persian (Pahlavi), thus preserving these invaluable storehouses of knowledge. Following the Sasanian lead, the later Arab Muslims at Baghdad actively sought to save Greek literature and philosophy from oblivion, as well as Sanskrit texts such as *Kalila wa Dimna* and the oral traditions of the Near East embodied in the book of *One Thousand and One Nights* through Pahlavi literature.

In terms of art, none could rival the Sasanian's designs on silk which were recognized from Japan to Egypt as the most beautiful designs. The Semorgh (Semorgh) design, which was the mythical Zoroastrian bird, and that of the ram, symbolizing Xwarrah / Farr (symbolizing Glory/Fortuna), were woven onto Chinese, as well as Egyptian silk brocades. Sasanian silver dishes were also a source of emulation by various kingdoms in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and

known for their design, beauty and craftsmanship. Sasanian style of dress and interest in details also made it the choice costume, usually associated with royalty. The Sasanian artistic and religious imagery had a broad influence on the Byzantine, Buddhist and Chinese art, as well as on the succeeding Islamic art.

Such games as the backgammon, chess, and polo were brought about or invented in the Sasanian period. The earliest surviving text on the games of chess and backgammon is written in Middle Persian, when during the time of Khusro I appears to have been the place of its final redaction. Polo which is considered a kingly sport was also a Sasanian invention. Other lesser known Sasanian sport contests such as jousting (*nēyzaḡ-warīh*), predated the European jousting and may have influenced the latter.

In terms of economy, Sasanian coins which appear to be the first flat coins in the world to be circulated had immense importance for trade. As an important economic medium, Sasanian silver coin (*Drahms*), were recognized and copied by the people in Central Asia and the Islamic Near East. After the Arab Muslim conquest of the Sasanian Empire, the coinage type used by the early Muslim was the Sasanian coins with the image of the Sasanian king. This was because for half a millennium, these coins had been recognized as dependable medium of exchange. The Sasanian term for "market" (*Wāzār / Bāzār*) is the location where the local economy was conducted and Middle Persian (*Kārwān*) "Caravans" intersected these local economies. These words are all from the time of Sasanian rule which entered the lexicon of the Islamic Near East.

With all of these important developments in the Near East during the late antiquity, it is all the more amazing that the Sasanians have been neglected. This is especially the case in the field of historical and cultural research, as they were an important cultural and center of civilization center during the late antiquity (200-700 AD). The state of the study of late antique Near East clearly reveals the disparaging contrast with that of the Roman Empire. The conferences on the history of this period are usually designated as the "Roman Period," or as a neutral term, "Late Antiquity and Islam." That is between the Romans and the Islamic Civilization, the Sasanians largely ignored. It is the aim of the *Sasanika: Late Antique Near East Project* to bring to light the importance of the Sasanian civilization in the context of late antique and world history.

Sasanika has several aims:

- 1) Integration of the Sasanian Empire into the field of late antiquity, as well as the field of world history. This will bring a more balanced and complete picture of an important era in world history. Connection and exchange of information with the journal, *Antiquité tardive / Late Antiquity*, The Society for Late Antiquity (<http://www.sc.edu/ltantsoc/>), and encouragement of involvement in the biennial conferences such as the *Shifting Frontiers Conference* sponsored by the Society for Late Antiquity, will promoted Sasanian civilization.

- 2) The creation of a web-site dedicated to Sasanian civilization (*sasaninet*), will bring together the scholars and enthusiasts, and publish the latest information in the various regions and disciplines. These would include the latest published works in the various journals and languages in the world. Information on the archaeological activity dealing with Sasanian sites or sites containing Sasanian material. Creation of a map site to pinpoint cities, archaeological sites and important monuments belonging to the Sasanian period. Lastly, translations of documents in Arabic, Armenian, Bactrian, Chinese Georgian, Middle Persian, Parthian, and Sogdian on the Sasanians. The final work will be an electronic Encyclopedia Sasanika.
- 3) The establishment of panels on Sasanians studies, dedicated to a specific theme in Sasanian studies. These would include a) The state of Sasanian studies (Middle East Studies Association, November 2004 in San Francisco); b) The Sasanians and Roman Empires; etc. The conferences will be conducted at California State University, Fullerton that has state of the art conference rooms, and includes on its premises the Marriott hotel.
- 4) Publication of Sasanian material culture. The California State University, Fullerton has an agreement with the National Museum of Iran to publish its Sasanian seals in the future. An agreement has also been made to publish the Sasanian coins and seals at the Museum of Money in Tehran in the future, as well as private collections in the world.
- 5) One of the most important tasks that the Sasanika project would like to undertake is to re-discover and re-attribute many artifacts that are Sasanian in origin but due to lack of adequate information or record which is not at all unusual for this period are attributed incorrectly to other historical styles or period in museums and collections across the globe. It is extremely crucial that the project of this magnitude be undertaken so we began to assemble a much accurate record of the enormous number of artifacts that were produced in the span of 450 years of Sasanian dynasty in the Near East of which very little seems to have been left. This is a great venture that can only be undertaken with the help of not only all of us who are avid lovers of this period's cultural achievement but all who are interested in discovering and attributing to our common human heritage and its development.