Introduction: Religious Diversity in Late Antique and Early Medieval Iran

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The papers published in this volume of the *Journal of Persianate Societies* were read during the workshop organized at Sapienza University of Rome on 21 November 2019 to celebrate the opening of the Mediterranean regional branch of the Association for the Study of Persianate Societies (ASPS) based at the Research Centre for Cooperation with Eurasia, the Mediterranean, and Sub-Saharan Africa (CEMAS) at the Sapienza University of Rome and the beginning of a new series of seminars entitled “Parlane con Sapienza, Uno Sguardo Oltre,” dedicated to the societies and history of the Middle East and North Africa. These lectures were meant to foster our university’s “third mission” activities, by targeting diverse audiences.

The Mediterranean regional branch will both strengthen the scientific debate and expand the international academic network of ASPS by engaging scholars interested in studying the vast territory stretching from the Mediterranean to the Indo-Gangetic plains from Antiquity to the modern period. At the same time, the cycle of conferences on the Middle East will allow us to better understand the complexity of regions and societies in continuous transformation by opening a dialogue that goes beyond the boundaries of the academic world and involves different constituents of the civil society. On the occasion of the first workshop, scholars in the field of Iranian Studies have delivered lectures focusing on religious diversity in late Antique and early Medieval Iran. The multi-faceted approaches characteristic of the paper that were submitted for publication will provide an in-depth perspective on such a challenging socio-cultural context.

Considering the tradition of Iranian Studies in Italy and in many Mediterranean countries, the focus of our branch will be on the pre-modern history, religions, literatures, and languages of the Iranian world and the role they played in global and entangled histories. According to the original plan, following this first workshop in which we discussed the religious dimension
of the history of ideas in Inner and Outer Iran spanning late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the Mediterranean branch of ASPS aimed at organizing yearly meetings focusing on other aspects of the Persianate world and inviting researchers to join us in Rome on a regular basis. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic severely limited our activities in the past two years, but we hope to resume working on the original agenda already in 2022.

The process of publishing this special issue of the *Journal of Persianate Studies* gave me the opportunity to work in close cooperation with the journal’s executive editor, Saïd A. Arjomand, and with its associate editor, D. Gershon Lewental, both of whom I thank for the great collaboration. Moreover, on the occasion of one of Prof. Arjomand’s visits to Rome, he suggested that we move the journal’s office to Sapienza University of Rome, which was readily accepted by the presidency of our university.

The article by Carlo G. Cereti, Mehdi Mousavi Nia, and Mohammad Reza Ne’mati, “Ray and Pahlaw in the Context of Sasanian Iran,” discusses the sources on pre-Islamic Ray—located near present-day Tehran. It presents historical records and archeological data on the early history of the city in the Median, Achaemenid, Seleucid, and even Parthian periods, attempting to reunite primary and secondary sources to better describe the role that the province of Ray played during the Sasanian period. Combined archeological and historical evidence shows that Ray has played an important and pivotal role in the history of Iran from the first years of the formation of the Sasanian Empire to the very last years of the empire, leaving a lasting memory in the Islamic literary tradition.

Mojtaba Doroodi and Farrokh Hajiani did not participate in the workshop itself, but later submitted a paper: “Dakhma and Astōdān; Two Distinct Structures: A Comparative Analysis of Dakhma and Astōdān in Ancient Manuscripts and Relics Discovered in Fars Province,” which closely fits the focus of this special issue and was therefore accepted. The words *dakhma* and *astodān* are often used interchangeably, although they may well refer to two distinct structures. The two authors studied the archeological evidence, using it as a basis to discuss the precise semantic field of terms such as *dakhma*, *dakhmagāh*, *astodān*, and *sangāb*.

Specific aspects of the Sasanian and post-Sasanian Zoroastrian legal system were presented by Amin Shayeste Doust and Carlo G. Cereti in their contribution, “The Purpose and Practice of Divorce in Sasanian and Post-Sasanian Texts,” that, like the preceding one, was not part of the original program of the workshop. In their article, the authors discuss the continuing survival
of pre-Islamic social phenomena and institutions deep into the Islamic age by studying the purpose and practice of divorce in late Antique and early Medieval Iran, making an effort to show the different types of divorce in Sasanian and post-Sasanian sources, emphasizing the controversy and contradictions among Zoroastrian jurisconsults and legal texts to identify different legally sanctioned perspectives regarding divorce.

In his brilliant paper, “Ohrmazd’s Divine Mercy and the End of the World between Apocatastasis and Apocalypse,” Antonio Clemente Panaino focuses his attention on the central importance of the concept of apocatastasis—the full regeneration of the world and the annihilation of hell—within the framework of the Zoroastrian doctrine of the end of the world, as well as on its origin and development, postulating a necessary distinction between this idea and the doctrine of apocalypse. Furthermore, the author suggests that the idea of apocatastasis does not belong to the earliest Iranian tradition, but was the product of a slow process of adaptation of new theological ideas, partly of Christian origin, that emerged during a period of social crisis.

Domenico Agostini did not participate in the workshop itself, but later contributed a relevant article based on his own work on the important Middle Persian cosmological and cosmogonical work known as Bundahišn. His paper, “Some Observations on Ahriman and his Miscreation in the Bundahišn,” presents and studies the crucial role played by Ahriman and his creatures in the cosmogonic drama from creation until the end of times, according to the well-known Zoroastrian dualistic system. It further describes the forms and the effects of the onslaught of Ahriman and his evil creatures and how Zoroastrians explained the nature and the presence of evil and its real influence on the good creation and creatures of Ohrmazd.

In his Ph.D. dissertation, Massimiliano Vassalli studied Zoroaster’s legendary bibliography found in the seventh book of the Dēnkard using a literary and philological approach. At the time of the workshop, he could not participate and only later contributed a very interesting paper, deriving from his doctoral work: “How to Develop a Fabula: The Case of Dēnkard VII.” Book VII, as Marijan Molé suggested, does not provide an objective view of Zoroaster’s life, but rather reflects the Zoroastrians’ conception of their “prophet” at the time of its writing. Vassalli’s article examines the book as a cultural product and a narrative fabrication of late Antique Zoroastrianism, studying some of the main compositional techniques that form the internal structure of the narrative, with the aim of understanding which literary elements were used to facilitate the passage from one sequence of events to the next, and from one chapter to another.
Paolo Ognibene’s “Linguistic and Religious Continuity in Outer Iran” takes us to the northern boundaries of the Iranian world, where nomadic populations shaped the destiny of the steppes. Classical sources give plenty evidence for the presence of Scythians, Sarmatians, and Alans in the region north of the Black Sea. While not all scholars may agree with Vasily Abaev’s idea of a “strict continuity” in the languages of these peoples, none deny the existence of at least some form of linguistic contiguity between them. The aim of Ognibene’s article is to investigate whether we can speak of continuity/contiguity when discussing their religious systems. We know that official Zoroastrianism had not spread to these peoples, but can we identify common elements in their religious systems?

The very interesting paper by Gianfilippo Terribili, “Visitation and Awakening: Cross-Cultural and Functional Parallelisms between the Zoroastrian Srōš and Christian St. Sergius,” highlights intercultural religious elements shared by Zoroastrian and Christians by studying the similarities between the two heavenly entities, the Zoroastrian Srōš (Sraoša) and the Christian St. Sergius. Comparing the Zoroastrian and Syriac Christian traditions, the study considers evidence describing a phenomenological complex that includes the manifestation of celestial entities through a revelatory dream or vision and the consequent awakening of the individual consciousness. The parallelisms will be viewed in the perspective of historical and cultural dynamics characterizing the socio-political horizon of the late Sasanian Empire, especially during the reign of Khosrow I Parviz (r. 590–628).

The reign of Khosrow Parviz and his interaction with Byzantium is discussed in an innovative perspective in Andrea Piras’ paper, “Apocalyptic Imagery and Royal Propaganda in Khosrow II’s Letter to the Byzantine Emperor Maurice.” More specifically, the author studies a letter sent by Khosrow to Maurice (r. 582–602), preserved in the work of the Byzantine historian Theophylact Simocatta (fl. 620s). The letter, dating to March 590, displays a particular language, focused on the ideological oppositions between order and disorder, and legitimacy and usurpation. The author suggests that Khosrow’s claims to his kingdom made use of a discourse of catastrophic imagery motifs resembling apocalyptic beliefs. The chaotic situation provoked by the inversion of the world order because of an attempt to usurp the throne are akin to demonic anarchy. Therefore, the apocalyptic doctrines and the royal propaganda share a common language: a political discourse based on the justifications of kingship and the demonization of the enemy.

While most of the papers included in this special issue discuss subject related to the vast domain of Zoroastrianism, Saïd Amir Arjomand’s “Manichæism as a World Religion of Salvation and Its Influence on Islam,” discusses the other
great dualistic religion characteristic of Iran especially in the early Sasanian period. While Zoroastrianism was felt to be the official creed of Sasanian élites, Manicheism from the beginning acts as a universal faith, bent on gaining converts in the different cultural areas of the antique world. Māni created a new religion of salvation out of the Mazdean religion of ancient Iran and named himself as its final prophet. The decisive impact of Manicheism as a salvific religion on Islam is evident in the Qurʾan's prophetology and Christology, its conceptions of prophecy, wisdom and knowledge, and the idea of the salvation of the soul through light. Just as Māni had claimed of himself, Mohammad in the Qurʾan is the “Seal of the Prophets (khātem al-nabīyīn),” though he is formally designated as the Messenger (rasul) of God. Moreover, the author strives to demonstrate the influence of Manichaeism on the emergence of Sufism alongside with the development of light symbolism in the Sufi conception of the journey of the soul in the realm of light as the final stage of mystical union with God, and in the formulation of the Sufi doctrine of the Mohammadan Light (nur-e mohammadi).

Herewith, I wish to thank the people who made this volume possible. First of all, I need to thank Saïd Amir Arjomand, who was the first to support the idea of establishing the Mediterranean branch of the Association for the Study of Persianate Societies in Rome. Moreover, I need to thank from the depth of my heart two successive rectors of Sapienza University of Rome, Prof. Eugenio Gaudio and Prof. Antonella Polimeni, who both pushed and continue to push for promoting Iranian Studies in our studium urbis. This volume would not have seen the light without the painstaking editorial activity by Dr. D. Gershon Lewental, whom I wish to thank, and the collaboration of Brill staff, that made things easier for all of us. Moreover, I wish to thank all authors who have spared some of their precious time to contribute an article to this volume, I hope that their collaboration with the Mediterranean branch of ASPS will continue in forthcoming years. Finally, a special thanks goes to the persons that introduced me to the Association for the Study of Persianate Societies and to its prestigious journal: Fatema Soudavar Farmfarmaian, Parvaneh Pourshariati, and Darioosh Borbor, who in September 2015 invited me to attend the Seventh Biennial Convention of our association that took place in Istanbul on the beautiful and historical shores of the Bosporus.