This volume considers the ways in which Persia has been preserved in Rome in various iconographic and monuments, as well as in a multitude of literary, theatrical and other artistic expressions. It testifies to a long and important historical relationship between these two civilizations. The “traces” of Persia left in Rome allow us to traverse the history of the interaction between Rome and Persia from the Roman Imperial era to the 20th century, windings one’s way through innumerable twists and turns. The book is also the summation of an impressive volume of research, some of it earlier published as notes and articles by A.M. Piemontese, devoted to various singular aspects of this historical interaction and confrontation. Various recent discoveries and new perspectives have been added to the impressive bibliography of this scholar in the last thirty-five years. The number of topics and themes presented here is so wide and varied that we can do no more than attempt to consider the work in toto, as a seminal call for further research.

The origin of the relationship goes back to the Roman perception of the campaigns of Alexander the Great in the Achaemenian Empire. The memory of these events is what produced the substantial enmity between the two worlds, and the apocryphal story of two embassies sent by Rome to Alexander in 334 BC and in 323 BC may be considered a representative part of the myth. In fact, the painting “Alexander proelium cum Dario” by Filoxenes of Eretria was transported in Rome after it was painted for the king of Macedonia, Cassander (r. 305-298 BC). Other paintings reproducing these episodes – among them various ones attributed to Apelles –, and the famous Pompeian mosaic kept in the Archeological Museum of Naples probably representing Alexander’s victory at Gaugamela, all reflect something which was part of the Roman world even before the Imperial age. Over time the emulation of Alexander became something of a cultural and ideological trope: the Roman conquest of Syria gave rise to a new conflict, this time with the presumed inheritors of the Achemenian empire, the Parthians. The confrontation with this empire was particularly hard, and the defeats suffered by the Romans at Carrhae, Harran, and Hellenopolis in 53 BC, as well as their successes in the Parthian wars of Septimium Severus, 195-198 CE, entailed deep introspection respectively triumphal celebration in Rome. The Arch of Septimium Severus is the object of a long digression (pp. 24-28), representing the real incipit of this book. Rather than just addressing war, Piemontese also enlists various episodes of more peaceful relations, like Augustus’s pacific request of the spolia et signa of the Roman army in
20 BC (p. 21), or the story of the presence in Rome of the two princes Rhodaspes and Seraspadanes around the same period.

Piemontese devotes a long discussion to Mithra and the Mithraic cult and the attendant “Manichaean network” (la rete manichea) in which he analyzes the strong impact these oriental faiths had on the Roman world (pp. 28-41). He similarly probes the figure of Zoroaster, which was transmitted to the West by way of the story of the Magians as early as the first century after Christ, during the reigns of Augustus and Phraates IV. Through Syriac literature the story of the Magians was adopted by Christians, subsequently to become a widespread tradition, especially during the Middle Age (see Marco Polo and Johan von Hildesheim). Less well known is the presence of the Persian Saints that survives in Rome: Abdon, Sennen, Mario, Martha, Audifax and Abacuc are the names of figures venerated until the present day in some of Rome’s outer boroughs. Abdon and Sennen suffered martyrdom in Rome in 250. Probably nobles in the Sasanian empire, they were executed by Emperor Decius who deported them to Rome after capturing them in Qardū on the upper Tigris. Their bodies are likely to have been moved to the Ponziano Cemetery at the time of Emperor Constantine and Pope Silvester. Their remains were subsequently transported to the Church of San Marco, near the Capitol, and other relics were kept other churches in town. Another Persian saint is Milex, a bishop of Susa (Šūš) who was martyred by the Sasanian king Shahpur II (around 341-345). He was represented, together with Abdon and Sennen, in a fresco of the 6th century. Other saints were Mario, Audifax, Martha and Abacuc. Their “santuario martiriale,” located quite far from the center of town, in the area of the ancient via Cornelia, involved also other Roman churches, in particular S. Onuphrius on the Janiculum.

The third chapter, “Il regno antico evocato nel paesaggio persiano” (pp. 140-323), addresses the more recent period, integrating it in a temporal continuum: Persian historical figures are represented in various paintings and frescoes. In keeping with the Renaissance spirit, Cardinal Giordano Orsini (d. 1438) promoted a “historical and figurative catalogue” in which the Sybilles played an important role as “mediatrici tradizionali di vaticini pagani e cristiani”. The Sibilla Persica was represented in the Palazzo Orsini in ca. 1425-1430, located on the via Papalis. The same Giordano Orsini promoted the representation of a fresco, now destroyed, with the Illustrious men, here reproduced as the “six ages of history”. These paintings were reproduced in six illustrated manuscripts which preserved the ancient iconography: they included seven Achemenians kings and Zoroaster, who is painted near Abraham. The Parthian kings were excluded, but the Sasanian King Cosdroe (i.e. Cosroes/Khosrow) is represented in the sixth age. The “catalogue” ends with Tamberlanus (Timur) with a reference