Introduction:  
Further Engaging the Paradigm of Late Antiquity*

Parvaneh Pourshariati  
The Ohio State University

For close to four decades now, scholars of the late Roman, early Christian, early medieval, and early Byzantine worlds have gradually formed the diachronic concept of the “Late Antique” period as an extension of classical studies. The chronological boundaries of the field have been put, roughly in the period between 200 and 800. Its genesis has been, in no small measure, due to the long and sustained tradition of in-depth scholarly investigation of Greco-Roman history and culture. One of the primary locomotives of the debate on “Late Antiquity”, furthermore, has been the question of the continuity of the Greco-Roman heritage in the wake of the gradual growth of Christianity in the classical world. (Browne 1971)

Beyond these primary concerns, however, other pertinent queries have gradually come to engage the scholars in the field. One of the more pressing of these in recent decades has been whether or not one should or could have a synchronic as well as a spatial view of “Late Antiquity.” Moving beyond the Greco-Roman heritage, the questions asked have become more complex: how far chronologically, and how wide geographically, should scholarship cast the net? Through which prism or prisms, should we study the new social and economic, religious and political trends and institutions of “Late Antiquity.” (Clover and Humphreys 1989; Walker 2002; Morony 2008) trends that ultimately came to construct the heritage of our modern age? In response to these inquiries, the study of the Germanic conquests in the west, the history of the Caucasus, Ethiopia, and Yemen, of Mesopotamian Jewry, Nestorian Christianity and the Slavs, among others, have gradually entered into the debate on “Late Antiquity.” (Ibid.)

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As all have recognized, Iranian studies has been a latecomer to the debate. When, in 2002, Joel Walker wrote his excellent assessment of the state of the field, he could justifiably claim that “although ‘the world of late antiquity’ [has] ostensibly [come to] include… the whole of Sasanian and early Islamic Near East, the current shape of the field… remains heavily weighted towards the Mediterranean world of the Roman Empire and its successor states in Western Europe” (Walker 2002, 68). It would be half a decade later, in 2008, when scholarship would revisit the question of Iranian studies in reference to “Late Antique” studies, this time by Michael Morony (2008). In “Should Sasanian Iran be Included in Late Antiquity?” Morony provided yet another succinct and helpful synopsis of the history of the debate, and moved on to pose a significant question: In gauging the applicability of the concept of “Late Antiquity” to the Sasanian Empire, Morony asked, “[w]hat happens if we focus on similarities instead of differences?” He then proceeded to enumerate “17 similarities between the Late Roman Empire and the Sasanian Empire.” These similarities, he argued, underlined the legitimacy of including the Sasanian Empire in the world of “Late Antiquity” (Morony 3-17). Entering into a healthy debate with Morony, on the other hand, and in response to him, Rahim Shayegan argued against the applicability of the paradigm of “Late Antiquity” to the Iranian world: “Late Antiquity,” he maintained, “is defined by a social and religious revolution that was unique to the Roman world….” (Morony 2). Since the “Sasanian [world] neither partook of the Roman social revolution… nor did it have a universal religion, it is difficult to see how it could be late antique.” Iranian Empires, Shayegan continued, also “had a different imperial tradition that allowed for diversity within their borders.” (Shayegan as quoted in Morony 2) Finally, most recently, in the introduction to their excellently edited volume on *Late Antiquity: Eastern Perspectives, From the Sasanians to Early Islam*, Teresa Bernheimer and Adam Silverstein undertake an interesting and lengthy discussion of the pros and cons of including the “east” in the “westernists’” construct of “Late Antiquity.” (Bernheimer and Silverstein 2012, 1-12)

Yet, one might argue that some of the presumptions on the basis of which the inclusion of the Iranian *ecumene*, especially the Sasanian Empire, in the world of Late Antiquity have been encouraged, still remain open to debate. While scholarly investigation into the history of Iran in the period *circa* 200 to 1000 CE has revived during the past two decades—albeit at a snail’s pace—

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1 “The social revolution was the emergence of a new administrative elite under the Tetrarchy and Constantine that replaced the Patrician aristocracy… The religious revolution was of course the emergence of Christianity as a universal religion.” Rahim Shayegan as quoted in Morony 2.