

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

‘PERSIANISM’ UNDER SCRUTINY: MNEMOHISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ACHAEMENID EMPIRE*

Rolf Strootman and Miguel John Versluys, ed., *Persianism in Antiquity*. Oriens et Occidens, 25. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017. Pp. 557. Hardback, €84.00. ISBN 978-3-515-11382-3.

The cultural heritage of the Achaemenid Empire has been as long-lasting as it has long been ignored. Since the 1980s, in the footsteps of previous, isolated pioneering insights, the Orientalistic clichés and Hellenocentric bias in the interpretation of its history have been decisively and systematically identified. Ever since, scholars have been searching for different perspectives on, and less biased approaches to, this ‘Forgotten Empire’.¹ Still there remains scope for attaining a renewed understanding of how deeply the idea of the Achaemenid Empire remained rooted in those who lived through its aftermath, whether in a remote or in a more recent past. In other words, there is much work to do on those who did not forget that empire.

Persianism in Antiquity, which owes many intellectual debts to the agenda of the Achaemenid Studies Workshop, deals with the cultural and political memory of Persia, both from coeval and later perspectives. Throughout this remarkable collection of twenty-one essays, the notion of Persia generally mirrors the Achaemenid Empire itself as a ‘dynastic household with its own cultural and political projects’.² Since the recurring attempts to reinforce the idea of continuity with an illustrious and ‘authentic’ past (mostly reconstructed) belong to typically cultural dynamics, it is not surprising that many papers also intersect with the field of the ‘invention of tradition’, as well as with that of collective (cultural) memory. Concurrently, some of them offer a Global History perspective, recently embodied by a new academic strand that also investigates Sasanian history in a non-Eurocentric perspective. Such a

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¹ Cf. J. Curtis and N. Tallis, ed., *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia* (London, 2005).

² The generic use of the term ‘Persia’ has raised some criticisms (Stronk, *BMCR* 2018.04.02), but the issues presented by such terminology within this collection are discussed preliminarily—and convincingly—by the editors.

blossoming conceptual framework could not but contribute to put this work at the forefront of some of the most urgent historiographical issues about Persia and its cultural heritage. In this respect, one of the most relevant aspects is the effort to renounce the traditional perspective that studied East and West as opposite contexts.

An important contribution by the editors (Rolf Strootman and Miguel John Versluys: 9–32) conveniently serves its purpose as introductory essay: it is a brief outline of the theoretical issues concerning the reception, appropriation, reuse, and reinvention of Persia as a cultural concept already in Antiquity, from a long-term perspective. The reader is offered a number of insights of historical and contemporary relevance, and with a significant theoretical effort to define concepts that inform the whole collection. This is why this preliminary piece not only provides a reliable conceptual stage to scholars who are already familiar with the subject matter, but also offers it to different, less specialised audiences. A crucial feature of this introduction is that any tradition about Persia, derived or invented by those to whom this concept assumed a cultural meaning, is worth considering as a cultural product in itself. Moreover, since any real or invented tradition must be understood on the basis of the context of its reworking, the editors promptly conceptualise the differences between ‘Persianism’, ‘Persianisation’, and ‘Iranism’. These different terms serve the purpose of distinguishing among subsequent, manifold historical processes of contextual appropriation and reworking of the ‘cultural memory of Persia’ (17). Instead of giving prominence to the acculturation process that goes under the name of ‘Persianisation’ (i.e., the selective adoption of cultural traits as an outcome of the influence of Achaemenid Persia, viz. the Achaemenid court) and considering some cultural items as peculiarly ‘Persian’ and ‘diffused’ as such, the editors are rightfully willing to give more importance to ‘Persianism’, a notion that aims at separating the study of interactions from ethnic issues, and at investigating transculturation as a complex set of contacts between peoples as permeable entities, not as confined ones.³

³ It encompasses those multiform, creative, socio-cultural, or political responses associated to the selective appropriation and invention of a remembered (or constructed) Persian past, in socio-political contexts that are chronologically or geographically distant from Persia as a historical entity, and for specific purposes (see also the interesting discussion of the term and of related concepts in Fowler, 357–9). This must be distinguished from the notion of Iranism, later adaptations of the idea of Persia, from the Sasanian period on, subtending the increasing ambition to political and cultural unity (and continuity) of a Great Iran. For previous uses of the word Persianism, cf. M. Ali Amir-Moezzi, ‘Šahr̄bānu’, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2005 (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sahrbanu>, last accessed 02.01.2020); U. Jaeger, ‘Rhyton’, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, 2016 (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/rhyton-vessel>, last accessed 02.01.2020); M. Cool Root, *From the Hearth: Powerful Persianisms in the Art of the Western Empire* (Leiden, 1991).

This is why the reader is carried across different historical stages and contexts, which have all abundantly contributed to increasing the fascination (and the stereotypes) of an undifferentiated, but persistent, picture of a Persian cultural heritage. This journey explores the most relevant mnemohistorical stages of different kinds of Persianism. It starts with the very origin of the ideas of Persia and of Iran, passing through Classical Antiquity, the crucial Hellenistic age, the Sasanian and Roman phases (when mutual and ‘dialectic cross-fertilisation’ (12) between these ideas was more intensive), and concludes with the enduring legacy of these concepts in our contemporary world, where ‘the post-Achaemenid memory of the Achaemenids underlies the notion of an East–West dichotomy that still pervades modern political rhetoric’ (Strootman, 177). The diachronic range of the studies gathered in this volume is broad enough to effectively outline what may be meant by ‘Persianism’ beyond its theoretical definitions. The first part of the book, ‘Persianization, Persomania, *perserie*’, consisting of six contributions, seems aimed at enhancing the introductory theoretical framework. The second section, ‘The Hellenistic World’, gathers seven papers and is mostly centred on eastern Mediterranean perspectives on Persian past, from Ptolemaic Egypt to Seleukid and post-Seleukid Asia. The eight contributions of the last part of the volume, ‘Roman and Sasanian Perspectives’, shift their focus to Roman and Sasanian perspectives on the Persian (i.e., Achaemenid) past and to their interactions. In the following pages I shall outline and discuss the main themes of each paper.

Persianisation, Persomania, *perserie* (33–144)

Albert de Jong (35–47) promptly puts Persianism to the test, by surveying its theoretical suitability through the case study of the ‘Persian’ communities of Anatolia. Some continuous and unbroken traditions of Achaemenid practices here are considered examples of ‘continuity without memory’ (37) rather than examples of conscious continuities. Now we must here recall that the assumption of a lasting memory of the Achaemenids among Iranians is an especially thorny issue among Iranists: not surprisingly, some scholars will deny the ‘historical amnesia’ of the Achaemenids among later Iranian sources postulated here. However, de Jong does have a point in saying that it remains rather difficult to gather substantial evidence to claim any ‘revival’ of Achaemenid practices or traditions among the Parthians and the Sasanians—let alone in later times—based upon a postulated ethnocultural unity of these groups over time. In particular, his statement that the construction of a shared ‘Iranian’ identity between them is only a modern assumption standing on a language-based ethnicity, and that there is no clear evidence for such ethnocentric perspective of an ‘Iranian world’ in Antiquity appears to be fair enough. All the more so, because identity cannot be seen as something pre-

existing or fixed and any attempt to track down a common identity in that distant past would be historically weak and ambiguous. In this respect, de Jong's comments may be applied to the case of the iconography of the Çan sarcophagus and the grave goods at the Deve Hüyük cemetery, which have sometimes been considered as ethnically recognisable 'Persian' evidence. However, even though these materials clearly signified a recognisable military and social philo-Achaemenid identity by displaying ideological discourses around it, mobile items—and material culture in general—are not intrinsically ethnic. Analogously, the plurality of interpretations about the 'Persian' personal and divine names in the epigraphic record of Asia Minor is a sufficient argument for de Jong to demonstrate the complexity—not to say the ineffectiveness—of any attempt of 'Iranian' ethnic generalisations. As a consequence, what is eventually maintained by the author is all the more embraceable: his case studies would appear to fit neither in the theoretical framework of Persianisation nor in that of Persianism, since there would be no creative mnemonic adaptations of an imagined Achaemenid past but only 'attempts of various local communities to remain distinct and to choose ... in which areas of distinction investments were thought to be necessary' (47), viz. religion and lineage.

The possible range of application of Persianism is reassessed by Margaret C. Miller (49–67), who shows how relevant cultural recovering and appropriation of the past can be by shifting her focus towards Athens. Here, a great number of cultural responses to the coeval Persian Empire would seem promising to help clarify the difference between Persianism and *perserie*. Incidentally, Miller previously elaborated the concept of *perserie* in her well-known 1997 book, where she defined it as the selective incorporation of elements belonging to the Persian standard of elegance by the Athenian elite, as discernible symbols of their social distinction and prestige. These 'Persian cultural patterns' are interpreted by Miller as the peculiar projection and negotiation of Persian power symbols of the Western satrapies of the Empire, rather than of its heartland (though I would suggest that there is a lot more to say about the reverberation of heartland imperial images towards local satrapies). Yet, Greek literature gave different readings of this 'Persian cultural patterns' throughout time. This is why Miller chooses to investigate how classical Athenian material (rather than literary) culture contributed, both in public and private social spheres, to the construction of a myth of 'ancient Persia'. As always, her sensitive reading of the disparate evidence collected sketches out a framework for future research. Miller also provides intuitive insights by analysing remarkable parallels between visual representations of processions in Athens and the logic of Persian processions (a subject that already fascinated M. Cool Root). This whole fifth-century documentation, though, seems to offer more relevant notions to understand *perserie*, while a nascent Persianism in Athens is rather to be seen in the fourth century BCE.

Miller's reading of the evidence is even more striking if we think that the cultural contacts she accounts for need to be ascribed either to a chronological phase of direct conflict with the Achaemenid Empire, or to its aftermaths.

Miller's perspective finds parallels with the contribution of Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones (69–86), who focuses on visual forms of Persianism, i.e., Greek images of the Persian kings and their courts on vase paintings of the fourth century (mainly 380–330 BCE). As Llewellyn-Jones correctly states, although the Persian threat towards mainland Greece radically decreased after the Peace of Callias, in the fourth century Persia remained in fact a topical concern: tragedy, lyric, philosophy, rhetoric, and *Persika* all clearly reveal a fascination with the Persians, as well as an urge to rethink recent history. This fascination finds an echo also in the artistic vision of Persia during the late classical period. According to the author, however, these vase-scenes did not mock the Persians, nor did they ever make any caricature of the king, or his court. Indeed, nowhere else than in artworks are visionary representations of Persia so abundant, as though the will of Greek artists was to 'fixate on the most eye-catching of all the Orientalist clichés' (72). However, besides the peculiar Hellenic taste for Achaemenid visual motifs, derived from an alchemic mixture of autopsy, literary description, artistic traditions, and imagination, artists were not only using 'authentic Persian iconographic sources in an informed way' (77), but also deriving details from real and well-known Persian-court lifestyle practices. Obviously, pictures were filtered through Greek lenses and depicted a fabulous hedonism, based on the exotic, splendid, and opulent image of the Great King and his court. However, such an artistic vision of Persia during this period—it is argued—was neither disapproving nor scornful of Persian ways. Llewellyn-Jones' argument thus outlines a stimulating perspective, which might be worth considering in order to further enrich our comprehension of Greek literary documents and their approach to the Persians.⁴

The following contribution by Omar Coloru (87–106) aims to investigate early modern Iranian perception of Achaemenid and Sasanian monuments, sites, or natural landmarks. Travel journals written by modern European travellers who visited Iran between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries undoubtedly offer a useful database, which is paramount in investigating coeval Iranian perspectives on these archaeological sites. Coloru is well aware that the information registered in these diaries should not be trusted uncritically and that the processes through which a tradition is elaborated are not always to be ascribed to locals. Not only were the travellers themselves sometimes actively involved in these processes, but their guides too, who might have wanted to match the expectations of their foreign employers. Moreover,

⁴ Something similar has already been done: cf. the dossiers published in the University of Strasbourg online revue *Archimède* 4 (2017).

they were affected by some ‘proto-orientalistic’ bias, since they Eurocentrically saw the locals as thoroughly neglecting their past. With considerable skill Coloru recognises not only a ‘mutual misunderstanding between the travellers and their local informants’ (88; cf. also 106), but also an othering process (89) behind these mechanisms. Within this ample range of problems, Coloru’s aim is to define to what extent these traditions of the past were generated by the phenomenon of Persianism. What emerges from his investigation of several typologies of Iranian traditions about previous Persian antiquities is that the loss of knowledge about them was caused by the loss of the ability to read cuneiform script. This contributed to the diffusion of popular beliefs. All those monuments, sites, landmarks, and scattered ruins of the past were thus surrounded by some sort of mythical halo, and any hint of illustrious Persian history had already been filtered through Sasanian ideology and later Jewish or Islamic traditions. Later on, all those elements had been inscribed into accounts that were functional for the social memory of the locals, but which did not meet at all with the expectations of European travellers, imbued with the Classics, and thus deformed their perspective upon modern Iranians. It is fascinating to think that such cultural encounters between travellers and locals allegedly triggered the need to reinvent the past by some sort of mutual misunderstanding, and it is even meritorious that the author here lucidly recognises that it can only partly be considered a form of Persianism: the social memory of early modern Iranians was in fact expressing ‘continuity of a tradition under different forms’, rather than a deliberate revival of Persian culture (105).

Judith A. Lerner (107–19) explores Persianism in ‘Iran’⁵ in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the particular shape of the visual revival of Achaemenid ceremonial imagery drawn from Persepolis. Lerner’s thesis is that such appropriation was strongly related to the modernisation agenda of the Qajar dynasty, since Persepolis and its figurative rock-carvings had become a source of artistic inspiration for a modern representation of power. The key point is the shift from Sasanian to Achaemenid imagery, that would have been due to the precise political aim ‘to forge a national identity and to build a modern nation-state’ (109). This assumption would be proven by a brief survey of the Qajar reliefs, both during the early reign of Fath ‘Ali Shah and during a later Qajar period—the third quarter of the nineteenth century. The presence of some *topoi* of Persian art, though mediated through successive dynasties and powers, can be observed already in the first period; however, the second one offers a stronger tie with iconographic motifs and other forms of artistic expression explicitly derived from Persepolis. Lerner accounts for this shift by the peculiar conjuncture of coeval Persia, where the interest for

⁵ Stronk (*BMCR* 2018.04.02) commented on the anachronistic use of this name in the paper, but see 107 n. 1 and 118 n. 29 in this book.

contacts with European countries was gaining momentum, on the wave of Rawlinson's translation of Darius' trilingual inscription at Bisitun (1836–49). However, she ascribes the recovering of Achaemenid symbols to the need of Persia to present itself to foreign—especially European—powers as a strong nation, with a strong identity and as the most direct heir of the first great empire in the world. This view, albeit plausible, is now debatable in its *reductio ad unum*. Though Rawlinson's reading of the Bisitun inscription and his contacts with the Shah must be taken into great consideration, one cannot easily postulate the true intentions of the Qajar on the basis of the declarations of a European. Also, it is true that members of the Persian political and intellectual community showed new awareness of an Achaemenid past. One should wonder, though, whether such forms of neo-Achaemenism (as Alessandro Bausani terms it), rather than the result only of local nationalism, were not due primarily to forms of cultural accommodation, displayed to match with European taste and interests.

The last paper of Part I is by David Engels (121–44). It dwells upon Oswald Spengler's vision of the history of ancient Iran. Within the perspective of history as a *philosophical enterprise*, this discerning study explores a segment of the evolution of modern historiography on the Achaemenids. In the light of Spengler's philosophy of history, Engels aims to 'reconstruct the importance of "Persianism" as an ideological cardinal point of the history of the Orient' (124). Therefore, this time *Persianism* is scrutinised as a mental attitude that actively biases historical research. It will serve to be reminded here that the long-lasting stereotype of Iranian history as a coherent succession of Oriental despotisms since Antiquity has persistently inhibited scholars from considering it other than in systemic opposition to Classical Greece. In this framework, though, it would appear that Oswald Spengler has been a rare exception (together with Eduard Meyer, one might say). Even though imbued with a deterministic philosophy, with his assumptions on the existence of high cultures, of historical biologism, and of the soul of a culture, Spengler did not describe the history of Near and Middle Eastern society in the first millennium BCE as a hiatus between Antiquity and Modernity, but searched for parallels with other high cultures, anticipating an independent perspective for studying ancient Iran. He assigned then to ancient Iran (namely, the Achaemenids and the Seleukids) the role of a pre-cultural period, a preparatory phase for a wider 'Arabian' culture. We may agree with Engels when he says that this assumption, in spite of giving prominence to ancient Iran as an independent cultural context, generated some basic problems and 'fell into another trap of "Persianism", i.e., the tendency to reduce Iranian history to a mere produce of the influences of its more prominent neighbors' (143). Indeed, from the standpoint of political history, in Spengler's perspective the Achaemenid empire was to be considered as a mere epilogue to Babylonian civilisation.

However, while correcting some isolated assumptions of Spengler's morphology of history, Engels has the merit of not discrediting the philosopher's theory as a whole: Spengler's underestimation of the Achaemenid Empire was probably due to his historical model, as well as to his misinformation about ancient Iranian history—partly due to the scarce and contradictory evidence for ancient Iran in his time.

The Hellenistic World (145–266)

Damien Agut-Labordère's insightful contribution (147–62) is devoted to Hellenistic Egypt and it is the third in the volume, that, with its accurate observations, contradicts the negatively stereotyped historical memories of the Persians. The author describes how Egyptian banqueting practices and forms of sociality during and after the Achaemenid period (between the fourth and the third centuries BCE) were influenced by the powerful and prestigious appeal of Achaemenid court style. It is by this feature of Persianism (because it appears already during the empire's existence) through Persianisation (since it also persists after Alexander's conquest) that the author acutely suggests that 'the Persians were not entirely negatively perceived by the Egyptians, contrary to the historical memory constructed by the Ptolemies' (147). Agut-Labordère carefully re-examines six epigraphical documents referring to violent Achaemenid looting of Egyptian temples (311–217 BCE): he argues that this dossier would be an intentional Ptolemaic manipulation of Egyptian cultural memory, meant to raise a collective political memory to support their war against the Seleukids. His assumption is convincingly demonstrated by discussing the main stages of the scholarly debate about these documents and by proceeding to a (new) detailed examination of their drafting. It clearly emerges that only those texts composed by Egyptian priests together with the representatives of Macedonian royal power indicate the Persians as responsible for the pillaging; in the remaining texts, they are not blamed. It would appear that, within Egyptian cultural memory, the Assyrians, rather than the Persians, are considered guilty of profane pillaging. Within this perspective, it is credible, as the author stresses, that the restitution of stolen sacred items to the clergymen of Lower Egypt, as the epigraphical corpus generally attests, was probably a way to ensure the cooperation of local elites, owing to the Ptolemies' needs for the war against the Antigonids and the Seleukids. Therefore, the author coherently concludes that the narrative elaborated by the Ptolemies exploited a common trauma resulting from the experience of pillaging (Assyrian for the Egyptians, Persian for the Macedonians) to distort cultural memory and create a new political memory by making the Seleukids 'the forerunners of the Achaemenids' (160–2).

The contribution by Sonja Plischke (163–76) focuses on the transmission of the royal title ‘Great King’ after the fall of Darius III. The aim is to understand whether this title was part of a mental image for the idea of governing Asia already in Seleukid times and, as such, a form of Persianism from its inception. Here Plischke joins the lively debate on whether the Seleukids should be seen as heirs of the Achaemenids, or as new Macedonian rulers, with a thoughtful assertion: that during the Seleukid rule continuities and breaks with the traditions of the Achaemenids coexisted. However, as for the long-established title of ‘Great King’, it would appear that during the Hellenistic empire of the Seleukids this royal title was not very common. Alexander himself apparently did not use it. Beyond a few exceptional cases, e.g., the so-called Antiochos Cylinder of Borsippa (that cannot be considered an early form of Persianism) or the case of Antiochos III (whose epithet ‘Great’ was not a self-attributed title), Plischke’s study shows that the early Seleukids did not use royal Achaemenid titles as a self-designation as ‘heirs to the Persians’. Moreover, by means of a very detailed and valid analysis, it also confirms that broad statements around the early Seleukids’ continuity with the Achaemenids should be weighed carefully if not altogether avoided.

Rolf Strootman’s brilliant paper (177–200) focuses on the Arsakids of Parthia and the Fratarakā of Pārsa, post-Achaemenid kingdoms, which appear to have emphasised their Iranian identity in their socio-political self-presentation. He argues against the traditional assumption that these dynasties appropriated the Achaemenid legacy (clearly, a form of Persianism) in opposition to the Seleukids. It has been traditionally surmised—in a dichotomous East–West approach—that such return of the locals to indigenous Iranian identity was a reaction to the Seleukids’ attempt to impose ‘Hellenisation’. This perspective is aligned with that of ‘Seleukid-period Iran as a Dark Age under foreign occupation’ (181). Strootman rather considers Persianism ‘as a dynamic and culturally entangled phenomenon’ (179) with a fully embraceable perspective on cultures and peoples not as confined or isolated, but in a constant intercultural connectivity. For this reason, he argues against the ‘billiard ball’ approach to cultures as segregated units and prefers an ‘entanglement’ perspective to a ‘continuity/influence’ one. He judiciously refuses the heuristic equivalence between indigenous cultures and authentic ones, or the idea that these kind of ‘traditional’ cultures might be a form of resistance to imperial rule. All the more so, if we think that the Seleukids were chameleon kings and were able to maintain good relations with the Iranian aristocracies from the outset, through a strong net of dynastic marriages and regular social connections. Strootman suggests that, after the suppression of the mid-third-century revolt of the Parthians and the Bactrians, Seleukid rule in Iran did not come to an end, but rather granted the rebels a more prominent political role (as the attested title of *basileus* suggests), which was later reflected in the early Parthian coinage of the Arsakids. The coinage, in particular, would show the

first ‘use of Persianistic idiom by a dynasty of Seleukid sub-kings’ (187). In this regard, the comparison with the coinage of the Anatolian satraps of the late fifth century is a strong argument—although one problem with Strootman’s use of it is that whether or not their coins actually show individualised portraits is still a debated issue and would have required specific discussion. That being said, though, if such coinage imagery derived some of its cultural features and iconography (*kyrbasia*, chlamys, Greek alphabet and language) from the Aegean regions of the Achaemenid Empire, rather than interacting with eastern Iranian models, this would be further evidence that the Parthians remained integrated into the Seleukid Empire, at least until the rise of Mithridates I, when their titles changed from royal to imperial. The peculiar concurrent adoption by the Fratarakā of Pārsa of elements of Achaemenid-period iconography analogous to those of the Arsakids in their coinage can be explained with the model of the ‘mobile royal court’, a sort of itinerant army camp creating connectivity and facilitating the spread of information while travelling around the Empire to execute its functions (as it previously did in the Achaemenid Empire), and operating as a ‘neutral’ Middle Ground promoting social interactions and transcultural exchange between different elites. In conclusion, Strootman elegantly surmises that cooptation of Iranian aristocracies after recurrent moments of revolt was a tool for rearranging imperial power networks. Also, the argument that the development of a new iconography of power in a Persianistic sense by these regional dynasties was intended to describe their cultural identity as concurrently trustworthy to attend to the imperial ruler’s needs and able to represent the local interests as well, cleverly reconciles conflicting literary and archaeological evidence.

In the following chapter, Matthew Canepa (201–22) discusses different Persianistic visions among the dynasties of what he calls the wide ‘Western Iranian world’—namely the regions between Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia—after the fall of the Seleukid Empire. The reformulation of royal court culture is a phenomenon that can be traced back already to the end of the Achaemenids, in discontinuity with the practices of the former imperial centre among the scattered and diverse post-satrapal dynasts. However, what Canepa says about the changing topography of power, which became more intricate after Alexander’s death, implies that power imageries shifted from an attempt to adhere to post-Alexandrine representation of kingship to allegedly derivate—though more likely recreated—Achaemenid royal traditions. Early post-satrapal royal imagery deliberately showed innovative traditions and symbols intended to stem from ancient Persian traditions. In fact, though resemblance to images of Achaemenid kings was surely sought as a deep-rooted tradition, it was not always achieved (except, perhaps, the paradise tradition). However, the aim was rather to find a visual language evoking as much as possible the Achaemenid authoritative tradition to serve as a con-

temporary form of contrast to the dominant Macedonian charismatic kingship. Thus, a style of clothing and an overall resemblance with a ‘general style of Iranian aristocratic clothing’ became ‘the departure point for new, increasingly experimental images of Iranian royal power for these new dynasties’ (207), like the Arsakids or the Fratarakā. In other words, Canepa states that these Persianistic representations were projecting alternative and competing visions of royalty, contending in particular with the Seleukid representations of kingship with a powerful, ‘wider Iranian idiom’. Occasionally, they featured an interesting mixture of Hellenistic and Macedonian aspects, showing that the aim of these elites was not direct assimilation, but rather the claim towards a new, fluid, encompassing, and intertwining kingship, subsuming both Hellenistic and Iranian sovereignty traditions. In a framework of ‘interchange among the Arsakids, Perso-Macedonian dynasties and the Hellenistic and Roman West’, reinvention of royal practices, traditions, or symbols (as the headgear) acted as ‘the crucible that forged a new “Middle Iranian” kingship’ (202). Thus, a renewed visual culture of royal imagery provided an eclectic space of display for the elites: their reuse and reshaping of what Canepa defines as ‘Western Asian Hellenism’, alongside with innovative Iranian images, was part of a strategy for the expression of power ‘in the established language of Hellenism but also the newly-emerging and potent “Persianism” ... or “Iranism”, [intended to politically control] lands under contention’ (213). This multifaceted and polyglot ensemble of royal imagery was a highly cementing idiom, aiming to reach Iranian as well as philhellenic powerbases and deployed to cement together royal and regional identities. Canepa’s view seems rather appealing: *mutatis mutandis*, analogous peculiar forms of elites’ interaction with both the topography and the rituality of power can be observed also in Western Asia Minor during the first fifty years of the Achaemenid conquest.

Charlotte Lerouge-Cohen (223–33) convincingly argues that references to the glorious Achaemenid past selected by the Pontic dynasty of the Mithridatids in the Hellenistic period should be understood as a form of Persianism.⁶ The reference to their descent from illustrious ancestors, far from being entirely historical, would often appear to be at least partly invented. More generally, it was a tendency, shared by other Hellenistic rulers, and aimed at legitimising and endorsing their power. However, according to Lerouge-Cohen, such a claim is not to be interpreted as aimed to gain prestige and legitimacy in front of a confined, ethnically identifiable audience (for instance, an ‘Iranian’ one). Rather, those ‘Persian’ genealogical origins were probably emphasised to match the expectations and cultural background of a larger—and far more diverse—‘Hellenistic’ audience in which those selected and recreated parts of Persian history were certainly included and admired. It is

⁶ Pace Wheeler, *CJ-Online* 2018.09.09.

even possible that the reference to such genealogical bonds were interwoven with a pressing political issue of the time: the competition with Rome for hegemony in Asia Minor. Incidentally, it seems to me that the peculiar destiny of an Archaic inscription found in Kyzikos in the late nineteenth century may contribute to Lerouge-Cohen's argument: it granted some economic privileges to certain individuals (Aisepos, Medikes, his son Manes, and their descendants) who had gained the gratitude of the local community in the late sixth century BCE. Its rewriting in the Mithridatic age may be ascribed to the descendants' desire to recall their ancestors' privilege for contingent reasons. However, reusing and tracing back that very privilege might also have had something to do with the interest in underlining the connection with a precise genealogy, which unfortunately cannot be easily defined, but whose onomastics had at least a Phrygian, if not Persian, taste. This is too specific an analogy with what Lerouge-Cohen surmises about the existence in the region of a common Hellenistic cultural background, rather than a mere expression of anti-Persian or anti-Greek sentiments. In fact, the clever simultaneous lineage claimed by Mithridates Eupator for himself—on the one hand derived from the Achaemenids and on the other from a more recent Macedonian heritage (by means of the Seleukids)—would also support this argument, and appear to doubly justify this king's claim to rule over Asia. In this framework, Lerouge-Cohen's statement that the reference to noble origins had to match with the kingdom's most popular traditions and figures is certainly well supported: the larger the number of people culturally involved in the process outlined in this paper, the better for the local dynasties aiming to discredit the Romans in their struggle for power.

Bruno Jacobs (235–48) weighs in with a penetrating paper on analogous political processes studied by Lerouge-Cohen, but also involving a religious dimension. In particular, Jacobs investigates what sort of knowledge of the Achaemenid past Antiochos I of Kommagene might have had. In his inscriptions of the Nemrud Dagi, in fact, he declared his religious zeal towards both Iranian and Greek deities. In this way, the monarch was boasting a distinguished heritage that strongly connected Greek and Persian roots. Jacobs rightfully begins his enquiry by analysing the term 'Persian' and what it meant in Antiochos' times: as the chronological gap was significant, the connotations of the word could turn out to be ambiguous. Moreover, Jacobs stresses that we have little or no knowledge of the forms in which this religious zeal took place: neither of the festivals celebrated in the sanctuaries arranged by the monarch of Kommagene, nor about religion under the Achaemenids. A similar issue arises about the cult of the ancestors. What, instead, seems methodologically possible is a comparison between the dress of the sovereigns represented on the 'gallery of the ancestors' and that of the officials on the Persepolis reliefs. What emerges from this comparative analysis is that some features of the Persian kings' clothing on the ancestor's reliefs are quite different from those

of the Achaemenid period. Some iconographic details reveal the importance of coeval and post-Achaemenid regal trends as cultural filters and ‘bridge’ between the past and Antiochos’ representations. For all these reasons, in Antiochos’ political vocabulary, the use of the word ‘Persian’ did not necessarily entail an actual knowledge of the Achaemenid context: rather, by means of those representations, he seems willing to suggest an Achaemenid ambiance. Surely, some words to describe that environment had remained the same, while the material objects to which such terminology referred had possibly changed. In this perspective, the past was dressed (and reconstructed) with coeval devices (and present demands). As for the names of the gods in the inscriptions, a similar operation must have been underway: also by those names (whose Iranian counterpart, not by chance, was added at a later date), Antiochos was building an Achaemenid past, with the concrete aim to show visitors of his Nemrud Dagi sanctuary how, in his world vision, Greek and Persian traditions were harmoniously combined. Indirectly, he was thus claiming to be the heir of the two most important cultures of the past. Among the merits of Jacob’s interpretation, two are worth stressing: it is built on what is known, rather than on speculations, and it is methodologically very solid.

Benedikt Eckhardt’s stimulating study offers a plausible example of politically motivated Persianism (249–65). Biblical traditions usually describe the centuries of Persian rule (538–322 BCE) as a positive period. Yet the texts involved are not securely dated to that period, and extra-biblical information remains scant. Eckhardt argues that the historical memory of the Persian period preserved in some Old Testament books might be a subsequent manipulation, following a recent dating of the final versions of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to the Hasmonean Period. Thus, the interest in an historical construction of a splendid Persian past might lie in the ideology demands of the Hasmoneans, who, with the decline of the Seleukid Empire, needed to refer to an illustrious past in their struggle for legitimacy, as well as to re-found Jewish identity in contrast with their current enemy, Antiochos IV. In their reading of the biblical texts, the Hasmoneans reserved the role of heroic resistance to themselves, while Antiochos was a godless, sacrilegious king, who had persecuted Jews. The premise for the rise of such a villain, though, lay in Alexander’s achievements. By contrast, the decline of Darius III seemed to have marked the end of a benevolent Achaemenid era, full of positive contributions to Jewish history and identity, such as the permission to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. If Eckhardt’s interpretation holds true, the Hasmonean dynasty used Persianism to support its ideological needs. It is also possible that the evaluation of the Persian kings as models for religious tolerance and guarantors of Jewish tradition also affected the historical image of Nebuchadnezzar; on the one hand, the analogy between the Neo-Babylonian king and Antiochos IV as oppressors ‘must have been obvious’; on the other, there is evidence that such comparison was fuelled by the later Seleukids themselves, who actively

accepted Nebuchadnezzar as a model for their imperial ambitions. The book of Esther would further illustrate how Hasmonean historiography influenced the biblical socio-cultural reconstruction of 'Persia'. A thoughtful postscript rounds off Eckhardt's analysis, and comes across as a very solid argument *e contrario*: in a speech reported by Josephus, Herod the Great, who held power as a mediator with the Romans, maintained that Achaemenid rule was nothing more than 'another imperialistic intrusion into Jewish life' (264). In other words, under Herod's rule in Jerusalem the Hasmonean narrative was no longer of use: thus Herod's speech, whether authentic or not, would stand as counterproof of a longstanding tradition to reformulate the historical memory of Persian rule in order to support current ideological demands.

Roman and Sasanian Perspectives (267–456)

This section opens with a perceptive paper by Valeria Sergueenkova and Felipe Rojas (269–88), which sheds light upon an aspect that usually has a low priority, i.e., how Anatolian pride in the Achaemenid past was not necessarily to the detriment of Rome. In the competition for gaining influence, authority, and privileges both at a regional level and in front of Rome, Anatolian communities re-enacted their own past, boasting about their connections and historical continuity with Persia. The enquiry is driven by analyses of several case studies, which all suggest the local communities' will to corroborate their current claims, by making reference to an illustrious past. The contribution aims to discover how and why these peculiar forms of Persianism had been put on display in Roman Anatolia. Rather than being concerned with the authenticity of the documents they analyse, or with the ethnic identity of those who were imagining that specific past, the authors highlight the performers' strategies of history-making and their interaction with the audiences, even when the phenomena described are not clearly decodable. Such strategies were at work in multiple ways, as in the manipulation and the re-inscription of documents, staging re-enactments of practices, and the identification of (natural or prehistoric) landmarks in the landscapes, which were all said to be Persian or to be evidence of the antiquity of Persian activity. Why the Anatolians would identify their past with the Persians—given that the Parthians, the greatest and most direct enemies of the Romans, were considered in the Roman discourse as the cultural heirs of the Persians—is a question that the authors convincingly answer: the Persians were evoked because of the antiquity and the prestige of their previous presence in those multi-layered territories.⁷ Even when locals simultaneously celebrated

⁷ *Contra* Wheeler (*CJ-Online* 2018.09.09), who sees continuity here, rather than Persianism.

multiple traditions and drew on manifold memory horizons, it was not a contradictory cultural activity. The authors state that the emphasis put on Persia and on a Persianising local identity ‘was as good as any’ (287). While this point might be debatable, one must agree with the authors’ idea that it was not antithetical to—or to the detriment of—Rome: in fact, it was in Rome’s interest to see cultural or political emanations from a previous empire, like the Achaemenid one, as a legitimate display of imperial power, rather than as a threat. This idea may find interesting parallels in the recent re-interpretation of the Mithras Mysteries offered in 2017 by Attilio Mastrocinque, who places them within the framework of the interests of Roman emperors.⁸

On that very note, the association of the notion of Persianism with the very Roman cult of Mithras is surmised by Richard Gordon (289–325).⁹ The religious awakening of the Persian god ‘Mithras’ in Rome—starting with a passage in Statius’ *Thebaid* alluding to ‘Mithras in his Persian cave’ (1.719–20: *Persaei sub rupibus antri ... Mithram*)—raises questions about what Statius’ audience might have known of such deity. According to Gordon, three inferences might be made: (i) that a ‘Roman cult of Mithras’ was already in existence in the 80s CE; (ii) that Statius derived his verse from a poetic text, rather than a relief; (iii) and that this text envisaged Mithras as a hero having stolen the bull he subdued from a cave. Previous interpretations (from Franz Cumont down to Ugo Bianchi) commonly traced back some features of the Roman cult of Mithras to Iranian origins, and traditionally explained it through ‘diffusion’ perspectives, despite little direct evidence and the absence of any Hellenistic connecting phase. From Gordon’s point of view, though, it is more plausible that the Graeco-Roman understanding of Mithras arose over a process of reception, or rather ‘appropriation’, involving re-interpretations, creative distortions, and re-contextualisations of the cult, if not a re-invention of a tradition, whose ‘Persian’ taste was for some reason later appreciated. This process might have followed multiple stages, or forms of Persianism, which Gordon scrupulously, though quite anonymously, classifies and studies in detail (which he names ‘Persianism 01 to 05’). At the very core of the Roman development of a cult of Mithras, anyway, there was the activity of independent and ‘small-time religious entrepreneurs’ (Mithraic ‘mystagogues’ in Gordon’s Weberian terminology) mediating the tradition, whose interest for such practices could have been nourished by some written sources (‘on a much greater scale than we could guess from the internal evidence’, 311; ‘there must have been an enormous quantity of Persianist material in circulation’, 324). Gordon’s paper surely opens a wider window into the Roman reception of the Mithraic cult:

⁸ A. Mastrocinque, *The Mysteries of Mithras: A Different Account* (Tübingen, 2017).

⁹ On this matter cf. the sceptical position of Stronk (*BMCR* 2018.04.02).

his renowned expertise on this subject makes the interaction with Persianism particularly effective.

Eran Almagor (327–43) discusses the ways in which Greek authors and men of letters of the Imperial period looked back at the Achaemenid Persian past with renewed attention and interest. The construction of the memory of Persia frequently embraced Rome's interest in fuelling an association between the Achaemenids and its current enemies, the Parthians, suggesting that the contemporary struggle was just a reiteration of an uninterrupted conflict between East and West. Though being distant in time, then, Persian imagery based on previous stereotypes and representations was at the centre of Imperial Greek literature, and we should seriously consider with Almagor the Persianism displayed by such authors as a filter for our contemporary image of Persia. This reference to the Persian Empire was frequently based on *Persika* literature (as a table at 338–9 helpfully summarises), which also allowed authorial re-enactments and re-appropriations of famous Persians, such as monarchs or satraps. The popularity of subjects drawn from the time of the Persian Wars among the oratorical declamations of the Second Sophistic, is not surprising; apparently, they were considered as an essential section of any good, incisive speech. And, again, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and *Moralia* frequently referred to Persian motifs. As for this ancient writer, though, Almagor uses examples from his biographies to hypothesise that his allusions to and mentions of Achaemenid Persia might not only be read as a hint to coeval Parthians, but also as an allegorical, though implicit, reference to Rome and its imperial system. In other words, Almagor surmises—unfolding here new challenging fields of research—that one should not rule out the possibility that, for Greeks who had lived their formative years under the Roman Empire, reviving Persia (i.e., Persianism) was also a dissimulated solution to conceptualise their current political reality.

Michael Sommer's contribution (345–54) offers further arguments in support of the idea that a bespoke and ahistorical set of 'Persian' features provided a suitable framework within which to set the eastern enemies of Rome, namely the Parthian and Sasanian kingdoms. In other words, Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian kingdoms might have been perceived by some Roman intellectuals—like Ammianus Marcellinus—as 'all manifestations of the same political entity, Persia' (350). The paper first discusses Greek attitudes towards ethnic descriptions of alterity as a pre-existing narrative. It starts with a critical analysis of Herodotus' Persian ethnography, defined as a 'crude collection of oddities' (347). According to Sommer, the peculiarity of Herodotus' description would not lie in its contradictory narrative, but rather in being a medley of ethnographic details, constructing alterity to satisfy an intellectual curiosity of his times, instead of being driven by historical exactitude. The consequent portrayal of the Persians was nonetheless quite

different from the usual Greek stereotypical descriptions of northern ‘barbarians’, which suggests that Herodotus’ Persians were somehow admitted to being part of the civilised world. At a later time, however, when a new empire was rising in former Persian lands, there were historians who readily defined its kings as ‘Persians’: a continuity not only visible superficially by the ethnic labels used, but also at a deeper level, through resurfacing stereotypes. That Persianism preserved its prominence would also be evident from Ammianus Marcellinus’ ‘Persian digression’ in his *Res Gestae*, in which noteworthy physical or mental traits have become *topoi* and echo those used by Herodotus himself, classical motifs traditionally associated to the Persians are equally taken up, and continuity between the Achaemenids, the Sasanians, and the Parthians becomes a logical outcome. According to Sommer, this section could be considered as part of a wider narratological task, i.e., the will to depict the Persians, in front of the audience, as an enemy that could be ‘reduced to a few pithy attributes’ and ‘abominated’ (354). Now Sommer’s conclusion is certainly correct and his analysis is quite a polished one: later (even modern) historians have undoubtedly exaggerated Herodotus’ multi-dimensional representation of the Persians, by selecting and continuing some topical patterns to make the Persians a monolithic (and eternal) enemy. However, in a general perspective, a more nuanced interpretation of Herodotus’ characterisation of the Persians, one that does not simply write it off as a partially stereotyped one, is to be pursued. Obviously, such an analysis could not have been the main brief in Sommer’s contribution, which stands almost alone on this terrain. Herodotus’ list is part of a broader narrative, which not only includes constant recourse to oral traditions but also occasional rewritings of Persian royal ideology: many studies have recently offered new and interesting hints to understand these ‘offstage’ mechanisms and they could surely have made a useful background to a more shaded interpretation of his ‘collection of oddities’ around the Persians.

Richard Fowler (355–79) explores the subject of Persianism through the peculiar case of the experience of the Parthian kings of ancient ‘Jewish’ writers.¹⁰ Fowler’s interest lies particularly in the Jewish perception and interpretation of the Parthians’ public reuse of Achaemenid kingship traditions. Given that Persian kings like Cyrus the Great are positively considered in Jewish texts and that the experience with Rome had instead been rather negative (especially the disastrous events of 70 CE), there would be no reason to expect any negative outlook on both Parthia and Persia from writers like Josephus. In fact, his *Jewish Antiquities* devotes a lot of attention to Parthia, although rarely connecting it with a Persian past. However, it is actually possible to compare some of Josephus’ narrative materials about Parthian

¹⁰ For more details on the use of the word ‘Jewish’ in this paper cf. Fowler, p. 363.

royal figures, dress code, or court protocol with topical Jewish and even Greco-Roman depictions of Achaemenid Persia. Josephus' occasional slip into such ideologically charged discourses is viewed with some indulgence by Fowler, who calls it 'accidental Persianism' (376). In fact, Josephus' general attitude towards royal benevolence or royal mistreatment suggests that he did not consider these to be peculiar either to the Parthians or to the Romans. It appears that Josephus—possibly because of his commitment to the Flavian dynasty and of his persistent bond with Jewish society—represented kingship as a matter of politics, rather than a matter of culture. That is perhaps the reason why, in Fowler's view, historians cannot find in this author a reflection of the Arsakids' self-representation as successors of the Achaemenids, i.e., a form of Persianism conceived as a reference to the Achaemenid past in order to satisfy the ideological needs of a given later period. Rather, the meaning of Persianism in Josephus should be considered as a 'combination of patronage and menace, philanthropy and danger, that the Achaemenids offered to their Jewish subjects, and that every subsequent imperial dynasty down to Josephus's own time repeated' (379). As Fowler prudently states, whether Josephus reflected the Parthians' 'Persianism' or he himself had been 'Persianising' them remains a topic for further enquiry. What ultimately emerges from his study is that, in any case, the main task in a study of Persianism cannot simply be to detect it, but also to understand it within its range of possible conveyers.

Joseph Wiesehöfer's stimulating paper (381–91) argues that the Rag-i Bibi rock relief (modern Afghanistan) is important in understanding the Sasanian worldview, though apparently not in a Persianistic perspective. The monument, probably dating to around 260 CE, shows the sculpture of a riding Sasanian king who hunts an Indian rhinoceros, in the company of some Kushan-dressed figures and, possibly, a second Sasanian king. Despite the damages caused to the sculpture during the Taliban rule in the area, some elements related to royal ideology are still observable. While these elements may evoke 'Achaemenid' taste and reminiscence, Wiesehöfer remains sceptical about the existence of a direct and explicit Persianistic agenda in Sasanian times, not least one concerning 'a post-Achaemenid construction of cultural memory by a re-invention and re-appropriation of the Persian past' (388). In fact, in the relief scene Sasanian kings are shown side by side with the leaders of a conquered land, thus suggesting peaceful integration and inclusion of Kushānshahr into Ērānshahr—'Land of the Aryans'. This is not accidental in Sasanian ideology, since it seems to emphasise—through shared symbolic references and iconography—the legitimacy of a common Iranian identity in opposition to those who were excluded from it (Anērān). In support of his interpretation, Wiesehöfer compares the relief with the triumph reliefs in Fars, where the imagery vocabulary about victories over the Romans is based on a conceptual reversal of typical Roman images. Thus, Wiesehöfer's endorsement of a dialectical intertextuality between the pictorial arts of the

Romans and the Sasanians as forms of visual competition is quite interesting indeed. The Sasanian multi-layered idea of Ērān seems to have progressively conformed to the needs of ‘an integrative power ... on an imperial level’ (385–6). The relationship with its enemies (namely the Romans and the Hephthalite-Turkish) was an important part of the process of identity definition of the empire, just as in the sixth-seventh century CE the process of literacy expressed the need for the creation of a historical Iranian community. In other words, it would appear that the Sasanians were more interested in building the concept of a great united Iranian power in the making, rather than depicting their current power as an Achaemenid inflorescence.

Touraj Daryaee’s reading of the Sasanians’ agenda (393–9) is complementary to Wiesehöfer’s. Daryaee analyses the definition of a conceptual spatial unity of Ērānshahr in the mention of rivers and defensive walls, both in inscriptions and early or middle Persian texts. The geographical definition of the empire was not only, as Gherardo Gnoli showed, a geographical term, but an attempt to uphold an Achaemenid cultural and political heritage as well. The boundary of this heterogeneous Ērānshahr was, under the Sasanians, the product of a series of natural and artificial barriers delimiting imperial space; its identification was not meant only from a physical point of view, but from a mental and psychological one as well. What the Sasanians meant to do was to ‘create an imperial space that fitted their sacred tradition’, for instance the Avestan Zoroastrian idea of the seven climes, which they also seem to have manipulated to fit their political agenda. In stating that he was the king of Ērān and an-Ērān, Šāpur I declared his interest also in the non-Iranian periphery of the empire: one would say that this was already an Achaemenid idea. By mythologising Iranian origins and creating new traditions for each region conceived to be part of a civilised Ērānshahr, the aim of the Sasanians was to give their current imperial space a unifying culture and identity: this also happened through the addition of a new monumental imprint in Achaemenid imperial sites. Even the religious practices of the mid-Achaemenid period—like the cult of Anahita—were evoked again. In other words, Daryaee states that if the creation of a notion of Ērānshahr had been a longstanding process, during the Sasanian period it was a deep-rooted form of Persianism. Each in its own framework, either contribution (Daryaee’s or Wiesehöfer’s) provide equally convincing and well-researched arguments, but, when compared and contrasted, they leave the reader with the impression that the issue of whether the Sasanians had a Persianistic agenda or not remains unresolved. The inevitable result of these investigations seems to be the need of further studies, without excluding the possibility that the Sasanians might have resorted to diverse forms of Persianism depending on the situation.

The last (and longest) paper is by M. Rahim Shayegan (401–55). It investigates post-Hellenistic and Late Antique forms of *Persianism*. This study is broadly carried out through three main axes: (i) the reception of Achaemenid

material culture or inherited social and intellectual practices without the historical recognition of what the object of reference or emulation was; (ii) the agency of other cultural actors in transmitting historical awareness of an Achaemenid past to the post-Hellenistic and Late Antique Iranian communities; (iii) the persistence of some Achaemenid communication mechanisms and cultural patterns in the composition of inscriptions during the Sasanian period and afterwards. As for (i), Shayegan maintains that, however unaware or misinformed the reception of such a past might have been, one should admit it within the investigative field of Persianism. Two main case studies are analysed in this respect: namely, the *fratarakā* and Dārāyānids emulation—but with undetermined historical awareness—of iconographic motifs of Achaemenid monuments and reliefs; and the Sasanian prince Šāpur, who placed an inscription in Darius' palace at Persepolis, without knowing the identity of its builders. As for (ii), it also entails several case studies, such as the reintroduction of the title 'king of kings' at the time of the Arsakids, which was the result of Babylonian scribal intermediation and not a voluntary Arsakid recovery. Another case study concerns the possibility that the role associated with the title of *karanos* was the antecedent of the military and administrative functions of the Arsakid *bidaxš* and *stratēgos* of Mesopotamia and Parapotamia. And, finally, another case deals with the Persianisms of Pontic, Commagenian, and Arsakid rulers, i.e., the conscious recourse not only to Seleukid, but also to Achaemenid origins, to support their right to rule. However, as Shayegan knows well, such claims are often described from a second-hand perspective—for instance, by Roman authors—and the question whether or not these documents offer literary *topoi* without historical content must thus be addressed. In general, it is preferable to see these forms of Persianisms as 'oblique impressions', i.e., as 'part of Roman projections' (438). However, Shayegan is also confident that, between the lines of such documents, it is possible to view an active and conscious will by the Sasanians to identify themselves with the Achaemenids in order to mark their distance from the Parthians towards Rome. As for (iii), the inscriptions being a form of interplay between royal discourses and their indigenous or foreign audiences, it is especially noteworthy how the Sasanians appealed to Achaemenid discursive mechanisms, though how this tradition perpetuated itself in time remains unclear. The comparison between the ideological communication strategies carried out by pivotal Sasanian inscriptions (as Šāpur's *res gestae* and Narseh's *Paikuli*) and the Achaemenid Bisitun narrative with its oral counterparts suggests identical discursive patterns and a dissemination process of crucial information, targeted to different addressees. By his interesting example of the reception of intangible cultural patterns, Shayegan stresses the importance of investigating beyond the immediately tangible testimonies of cultural reference in order to achieve a holistic perspective on Persianism.

By Way of Conclusion

In all noteworthy research, initial hypotheses and expectations usually encounter a number of hurdles, but can yield further developments as well. Such appears to be the impression after a cover-to-cover reading of *Persianism in Antiquity*. Most of its contributions positively manage to explain different forms of Persianism coeval with or subsequent to the Achaemenid Empire, with or without geographical proximity to it (Llewellyn-Jones, Lerner, Agut-Labordère, Strootman, Gordon, Almagor, Daryaei), and allow the category to be displayed in its full theoretical possibilities, as an instrument of cultural connection between past and present (Canepa, Lerouge-Cohen, Jacobs), also featuring a suitable framework for current concerns (Eckhardt, Sergueenkova and Rojas, Sommer). Other studies, rather than defining what can be identified as Persianism, offer valuable insights into what cannot be considered as such (Plischke, Wiesehöfer) and show that conceptual categories have their limitations when used to explain disparate pieces of evidence (de Jong), or can be further qualified (Miller, Coloru, Fowler), thus enriching the main working definition with new shades and interpretative insights (Engels, Canepa). However, it must be said that beyond the inherent limits of Persianism as a heuristic tool, the contributors to this book have found it profitable and have brought out its multifaceted usefulness, providing important foundations for future work. Most importantly, the main outcome of this book is making Persianism a theoretical tool that helps historians in focusing on cultural connections on many levels. In this regard, rather than being an ‘elusive chimaera’,¹¹ this conceptual category has in the end proved to be a worthwhile framework and has earned the status of independent topic in historical investigation as a phenomenon of cultural memory in its own right. To put it in Gordon’s fitting words, ‘ancient literary evidence cannot be used as “sources” without regard to the interests being played out or to the origins of the initial information’ (324).

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¹¹ Cf. Wheeler, *CJ-Online* 2018.09.09.