

1 Introduction

God effected that the whole world should be illumined from the very beginning by two eyes, namely by the most powerful kingdom of the Romans and by the most prudent scepter of the Persian State. For by these greatest powers the disobedient and bellicose tribes are winnowed and man's course is continually regulated and guided.

ΚΟΣΡΩ II, in a letter to the Roman emperor Maurice, in *Theophylakt Simokatta* 4.11.2–3, trans. Whitby

With this cosmic metaphor, a Sasanian king of kings, Κ_osrow II, articulated the Roman and Sasanian empires' shared ideal of the universal, ancient, and sacred nature of their cultures' kingship, where the king mediated between heaven and earth. These conceptions of kingship, while often generating conflict, drove exchange between the two cultures, especially with regard to the main tools that the Roman and Iranian courts utilized to project their conceptions of universal rule: elaborate systems of ritual, and visual, architectural, and urban environments. This book focuses on a pivotal period in political and religious history, poised between the ancient and medieval worlds in the Mediterranean and the Near East, and offers an analysis of the conditions and motivations that enabled these two hostile systems of sacred universal sovereignty not only to coexist, but to foster cross-cultural exchange and communication even in the face of an undying rivalry.

This book is not intended as a history of diplomatic, economic, institutional, or military dealings between the Roman and Sasanian empires, although those topics enter into its consideration.¹ Rather, this is a study of how the two greatest cultural, political, and military forces in the late antique Mediterranean and Near East devised a sacral, yet extrareligious visual and ritual language of legitimacy and debate to communicate and compete over the course of their coexistence (224–642). It examines the two empires' motivations and methods for appropriating the creations of each other's court culture. Thus this study focuses on expressions that often inhabit the margins of cultural identity. Images, performances, and ideologies of kingship, in fact, often present some dissonance when compared with the bare facts of power. Indeed, the dissonance between historical fact and ideological fiction often illuminates what lies behind the rhetoric. It is in the wordless self-descriptive language of art and ritual that we gain access to

the regimes' religiously extracanonical, yet very real understandings of their cosmological place.

Cross-cultural interaction between late antique Rome and Iran is a subject that has received scholarly attention that can be described only as either cursory and infrequent or downright problematic. Although a number of studies have gestured across cultural lines, a sustained cross-cultural examination of late antique Roman and Sasanian imperial art and ritual has never been carried out, due, in part, to modern disciplinary divides, the relative obscurity of the languages of the primary sources, and, since 1979, the difficulty of conducting research in Iran.² The curatorship of the material and the scholarly literature have diverged along modern disciplinary lines, with historians interested mostly in questions of military and diplomatic interactions, and art historians sporadically touching upon a few formal parallels. Furthermore, research into the motivations, practices, and consequences of cross-cultural interaction has largely been left to theorists working in contemporary cultural studies.

In the preliminary stages of this study, I became aware of difficulties and omissions concerning the visual and ritual interchanges between the Roman and Sasanian empires. With one or two exceptions, the few previous studies relating to this subject parsed out evidence of cross-cultural interaction from the larger visual and ideological developments occurring in Rome and Sasanian Iran, ghettoizing it and effectively reinforcing an idea of a cultural "iron curtain" between the two political and cultural realms. It became increasingly clear that a new theoretical model that could speak to the specific problems of the historical situation and subject was not only desirable in and of itself but necessary to make sense of the evidence, both visual and textual, which suggests a complexity of interaction much deeper than the traditional explanations of a passive movement of objects from silk trade and war booty would allow.³ I began to think about this problem of cross-cultural interaction not just in relation to commerce or war, but in terms of a commerce of ideas and identities, that is, how the two empires constructed their individual imperial identities and expressed power. I discovered that the two empires' relationship was very closely intertwined with their internal self-conceptions.

Unlike previous studies, which have focused on formal parallels attributed to a passive osmosis of tribute, booty, gifts, and trade, this work concentrates on the cultural processes and practices that drove exchange and facilitated communication between the two realms, encompassing both friendly interchange and hostile, agonistic statements of competition. I ar-

gue that a hybrid, international culture of kingship developed from their interactions, and the two realms creatively recrafted it in a competitive, yet mutual process of agonistic exchange. The Sasanian and Roman sovereigns encountered each other's cultural and ideological goods, expressed competitive claims, observed the resulting interchange, and ultimately remodeled themselves in response to these visual and ritual assertions.

This study offers an approach to Sasanian and Roman royal interaction that considers the visual material in context with other expressive elements of Sasanian and Roman kingship, such as ritual and discursive enunciations of power. Such an approach is as useful for studying the two realms' interaction as it is for understanding their expressions individually. Examining the visual evidence of cross-cultural interaction as an expressive element contextualizes it within the larger processes of imperial identity formation that drove the exchange, and places the motivations for cross-cultural interaction at the center of discourse.⁴ Although I apply the same theoretical vocabulary to the Roman and Sasanian material, this does not mean that I automatically assume complete equivalency for any and every ritual or artistic practice. Rather, the application of a common vocabulary is a methodological tool meant to highlight and articulate the dissimilarities and novel approaches between the two realms as much as the common solutions and conversations, and more clearly delineate the impact of cross-cultural interaction on the realms' indigenous ritual-visual practices.

I begin with the Sasanians' rise from a regional dynasty to a great imperial power. With respect to the Romans' own perceptions of history and Rome's tenure as Mediterranean hegemon, I start somewhat in the middle of things: twenty years after the creation of the Sasanian empire, the emperor Philip would celebrate the city of Rome's millennial birthday. While the rise of the first Sasanian king in 224 and the death of the last in 651 are logical limits for a study of the Sasanian empire, these dates inscribe a somewhat nontraditional temporal division onto the Roman realm. Confronted by the great variety of changes in Roman culture, many have succumbed to a temptation to reify boundaries in the continuum of Roman history by inventing names for them, usually in a hortatory and oppositional sense, such as Principate versus Dominate or Roman versus Byzantine, obscuring the Romans' native sense of the continuity of their culture.⁵ On the other hand, the Roman empire's relentless rhetoric of continuity has also enabled portrayals of late Roman culture as static and unchanging.⁶

The four centuries on which this study focuses saw vast changes in both realms. The late Roman and Sasanian empires both experienced a shift in

their cultural center of gravity with Rome's loss of its Western provinces and the concomitant rise of Constantinople, and the Mesopotamian capital of Ctesiphon eventually overshadowing the Sasanian dynasty's homeland of Pārs as the symbolic center of the empire.⁷ Both empires saw increasing centralization at the expense of local power bases, with sixth-century contemporaries Justinian I and Kōsrow I responsible for intensifying this movement to autocracy in their respective realms.⁸ While the Roman and Sasanian cultures became ever more focused on the court and sovereign, the arena of competition in which the two powers met and engaged broadened, moving well beyond the borderlands to encompass much of Eurasia; the two realms' political intrigues against each other extended into the outer reaches of Central Asia, Ethiopia, and the Indian Ocean. The demography of both realms also changed considerably. Invasions of nomadic peoples and wartime deportations altered the ethnic and religious makeup of provinces and cities, and, while it affected the Roman empire much more profoundly, Christianity emerged as a demographic and political force in both empires.

Open warfare punctuated by battlefield negotiations was the hallmark of the initial seven decades of the empires' coexistence.⁹ During this period of open hostility, the empires could view each other as a barbarous "other." After Diocletian put the Roman empire back on its feet, a new military parity in turn allowed the emergence of a more fraternal relationship between the two realms and the development of a sophisticated system of diplomacy. The sovereigns' newly formed fraternal relationship endured even the hostilities that emerged again in the fourth century between Šāpūr II and Constantius II and Julian. The fifth and early sixth centuries brought the courts even closer together, with the symbolic familial relationships even extending into more tangible relationships. By the age of Kōsrow I and Justinian I, this relationship was part of the customary state of affairs and could even be cast as ancient and divinely ordained. The final transformative conflicts that emerged within and between the two empires in the seventh century vastly altered both and in many important ways laid the groundwork for Islam and the European Middle Ages.

Perhaps there are more convenient starting points for an analysis of Roman imperial art and ritual both before and after the beginning of the two empires' coexistence, but this rude interruption of the unfolding of Roman history is part of the problem that this book seeks to address. The Sasanians disrupted the status quo and became one of the more important external forces driving change in Roman culture. Unlike many attempts to divide Roman history into periods, this study makes no claim for its temporal span other than that it represents the period during which the Romans and

the Sasanian dynasty coexisted. The endpoint of this study marks a more clear division. Along with the death of the last Sasanian king of kings, the rise of Islam extinguished the Sasanian empire and drastically altered the geographical and demographic composition of the Roman empire.¹⁰ Both cultures ceased to exist as they once did, although their traditions of kingship and cross-cultural interaction lived on in their Islamic and Iconoclast successors.¹¹

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