

**Conference Report:**  
**Ērān: Central and West Asia in the First Millennium CE**  
**Research Forum**  
**(University of Lille, 15–19 July 2024)**

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The *Ērān: Central and West Asia in the First Millennium CE* Research Forum was held on 15–19 July 2024 at the University of Lille, France. Convened by Ekaterina Nechaeva (University of Lille) and Khodadad Rezakhani (University of Leiden), the event was the first in a series of what are planned to be three, week-long forums conducted as part of the *Ērān, Tūrān, and Hrōm: West and Central and Asia in the First Millennium CE* project. The *Ērān* Forum focused particularly on the Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE), while future forums are anticipated to emphasize the Turanian and Mediterranean worlds, but to keep the center of research on the Iranian world broadly.

The Sasanian Empire played a critical global role in Late Antiquity, but its scholars typically find themselves dispersed and peripheral as parts of larger projects focused on other areas and political powers. While recent decades have seen an increased interest in global studies of the first millennium, more still needs to be done to center the Iranian world, which is often sidelined by difficult, less accessible or available source material, especially in comparison to the Mediterranean and Roman worlds. There is also a tendency to collapse the Sasanian Empire between the better studied empires of Rome and China, and research has been further restricted by a shortage of coherent groups and agendas that seriously consider Central and West Asian Late Antiquity from a global viewpoint. Even at the Forum itself there was often a sense of “outsider” status. Several academics present

told me that they considered themselves primarily Byzantinists, Armenologists, Syriac scholars, art historians or a number of other identities before Sasanianists. Despite, or perhaps because of this, the Forum provided a valuable opportunity for cross-disciplinary collaboration and contact.

Part of the problem facing Sasanian scholars is a lack of networks connecting senior and junior academics. A primary goal of the Forum was to create just such a network, bringing junior scholars into a welcoming environment where they could benefit from research presentations by established and successful scholars; present their ongoing work to solicit critique and feedback from peers and mentors; and establish connections with colleagues working across chronological and political-cultural boundaries for the purposes of fostering global historical collaborations and inspiring interdisciplinary research. It was also hoped that the presentations of junior scholars would introduce senior academics to new trends, interests, and approaches. This emphasis on collaboration across experience levels was supported by daily lunches and conference dinners on Tuesday and Friday, as well as informal gatherings throughout the week.

Each day of the Forum was focused on a specific theme, reflecting the expertise and interests of participating senior scholars as follows:

- Historiography (Keynote: Touraj Daryaee; Seminars: Khodadad Rezakhani, Alison Vacca)
- Languages (Keynote: Lili Varahram; Seminars: Charles Häberl, Stephen Rapp)
- Religions and Cultures (Keynote: Albert de Jong; Seminars: Charles Häberl, Simcha Gross)
- Material and Visual Culture (Keynote: Eberhard Sauer; Seminars: Eve MacDonald, Judith Lerner)
- Material Culture and Economy (Keynote: Judith Lerner; Seminars: Nikolaus Schindel, Khodadad Rezakhani)

Days began with a keynote lecture and two seminars delivered by senior scholars that were open to the public free of charge, followed by afternoon workshops by junior researchers that were closed to the public. The morning seminars were intended as teaching events designed to provide an overview of a particular field and advice for engaging with it. As such, while these sessions were primarily conducted in a lecture format, a significant minority, for example Eve MacDonald and Alison Vacca, adopted a more collaborative approach focused on discussion and group work. The open nature of these mornings was intended to encourage outreach and make it possible for interested parties to attend regardless of their connection to Sasanian studies. Afternoon workshops, by contrast, took the form of several fifteen-minute presentations of pre-circulated papers (and in one case a pre-circulated sound file) followed by a 45-minute discussion. The purpose of these workshops was to solicit critique and introduce new research questions and methods, rather than to present completed, conference-style papers. As such, many of the papers represented ongoing research and prompted open discussions on how to improve the models and findings presented, although some junior researchers did deliver completed and even published material that was more typical of a conference setting. Due to the

unpublished nature of much of this work, afternoon sessions were open only to Forum presenters. This potentially restricted the variety of backgrounds represented in the discussion, but was necessary to protect work in progress by junior scholars. The Forum's popularity also resulted in a late addition to the program in the form of poster sessions at the end of each day, which expanded possibilities for participation. These posters have kept the memory of the Forum alive long after its conclusion, as several still decorate the *Ex-Patria* project's office and hallway at the University of Lille.

In total, 14 senior academics and 24 junior academics presented their research, totaling five keynotes, ten seminars, fifteen workshop papers, and nine posters over the week. Participants represented institutions from California to Beijing, with significant cohorts from Cardiff University, Free University Berlin, and the *A City of Many Cities* Project, which focus on the ways in which the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon was remembered. Just as the academics came from all over, their research on the Sasanian Empire also stretched from east to west, with a healthy but not overpowering number invested in researching the empire's neighbors, most notably the late Roman Empire.

In what follows, I have opted not to adhere strictly to the day-to-day sequencing of **the forum program**, but rather to trace thematic and geographical connections. Nonetheless, it is useful to begin by addressing many of the first day's papers, as the conversations had during these sessions formed a springboard for later discussions. In his seminar entitled "Sasanian Historiography: Between the East and West," **Khodadad Rezakhani** (Leiden University) emphasized the need not to reduce the Sasanian Empire to just Rome's enemy and Islam's precursor, as this results in an overemphasis on Mesopotamia and elides developments and events occurring further east. This argument has been developed by Rezakhani in his book *ReOrienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh, 2017), and indeed the geographical and temporal interests of participants ranged broadly across the week. That said, many of the speakers on the first day focused precisely on the Sasanian Empire's relationship with their western neighbor and eventual Arab conquerors. This established a helpful foundation for conversations later in the week, as not only are these two polities the most well known in relation to the Sasanians, but to exclude them would undermine the more holistic approach to Sasanian studies cultivated by the Forum.

The keynote delivered by **Touraj Daryaee** (University of California, Irvine), entitled "The Eyes of the King in the Sasanian Empire," addressed spy networks in the Sasanian court and questioned whether a formal institution of spies existed and how they might have operated. **Sean Strong** (Cardiff University) looked at ideas of Sasanian treason in Theopylact Simocatta in his paper "Bahram Chobin's Revolt: A Sasanian Asset and Ally of East Rome the Late Sixth Century?" This was followed by "Historiographical Narrative and Memory Shaping in Early Islamic Historiography: The *Nihāyat al-Arab* and the Arab-Islamic Conquest of Iran," presented by **Matteo Cecchetti** (University of Pisa), which examined the narratives of the Islamic conquests of Iran found in the anonymous ninth-century *Nihāyat al-arab*. The idea of narratives and how we use them also undergirded **Alison Vacca's** (Columbia University) more instructional and discussion-based seminar "Sasanians in Early Islamic Sources," which cautioned against approaching Islamic-era sources as unreliable and in need of "fixing."

Both posters during the first day focused on conflicts between Sasanians and Romans. **Christopher Lillington Martin** (Coventry University) considered the stone used for fortifying Dara during the reign of Justinian, and **Michael David Ethington** (University of Padua<sup>1</sup>) examined depictions of Husraw II in the Syriac *Life of Bar ‘Edta* and how these were affected by the Roman-Sasanian War of 602–28 CE. Ethington’s poster – “The ‘Peaceful Crown’ and the ‘Assyrian’: Shifting Views on Khosrow II Parvēz in an East Syriac Hagiography” – with its emphasis on Syriac sources, particularly demonstrated the need for research to go beyond the more familiar languages of Greek and Arabic to address the diversity of the Sasanian world.

The question of how to treat the Middle Persian corpus, which was central to the administration of the Sasanian Empire but includes many works compiled in the post-Sasanian period, was a focus of talks throughout the Forum and especially on the second day, dedicated to the language. This day began with a keynote lecture delivered by **Lili Varahram** (University of Tehran) entitled “Two Different Narrative Methods in Middle Persian Historical Texts.” In this paper, Varahram considered the importance of lists to the oral tradition that undergirded Middle Persian, as well as many Arabic sources on Sasanian history. Careful corrections and insights into the complex Middle Persian corpus were also delivered by **Nima Asefi** (IHSC Tehran/A *City of Many Cities* Project<sup>2</sup>), who identified what he suggested was the earliest known appearance of the term *Tāzīg* (“Arab”) in a document from the Pahlavi archive as part of his afternoon workshop presentation “Dangers in Central Iran in the 7th Century (Study of Two Middle Persian Documents from the Pahlavi Archive of Hastijan).” Meanwhile, **Alberto Bernard** (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris) sought to solve “The Puzzle of <mgwh>. New Readings from the Ṭabarestān Archive and the *Mādayān ī hazār dādestān*,” comparing the commonality of seals bearing the title of *maguh* with the curious absence of officials by this title in textual sources. Reconstructing the Sasanian administrative apparatus through Middle Persian sources was a topic returned to by the Forum’s final poster, “The Structure of the Sasanian Empire – Administrations and Governments” by **Nils Purwins** (Free University, Berlin), which provided a potential reconstruction of the Sasanian Empire’s tax administration.

Information on the Sasanian Empire also comes down from the many different cultures and language communities that comprised it. This led to the conference attracting a broad range of expertise focused on linguistic and religious minorities, both as Sasanian subjects in their own right and as resources for understanding the imperial center. The study of Christian groups within the Sasanian Empire could be split into two broad regional categories—the Caucasus and the Syriac world. As an Armenologist with interests in the broader Sasanian and Caucasian contexts, I was particularly happy to see a trio of speakers dedicated to this period: first, **Stephen Rapp** (Sam Houston State University) in the seminar “Caucasian Sources for Sasanian History (and What They Reveal about the Iranian World): An Introduction,” and then **Lana Chologauri**’s (Tbilisi State University) “Sasanian Silverware

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1. Michael David Ethington has since joined the University of Lille’s *Ex-Patria* project as a PhD student.

2. Nima Asefi has since completed his PhD at IHSC Tehran and begun a postdoctoral position at the University of Hamburg.

from Georgia and Its Political Significance” and **Stephanie Pambakian’s** (Ca’ Foscari University, Venice) “Anania Širakac’i’s Treatise on the Universe (7th c.): An Armenian Cosmology between the East and West.” For the Syriac world, **Yulia Furman** (Free University, Berlin) discussed “The Genre of Universal History in the Syriac Tradition,” considering how modern understandings of universality could obscure the local implications of the genre among Syriac Christian communities. The discussion of religious minorities also turned to the reflexive question of how these groups perceived Zoroastrian elites, which **Bahram Roshan Zamir** (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris) addressed in his poster, “Persian Martyr Acts’ Portrait of the Zoroastrians under the Sasanians.”

According to **Ab de Jong** (Leiden University) in his third-day keynote entitled “The Religious History of the Sasanian Empire,” a weakness of the field of religious studies as it has developed in the context of western, Christian universities has been its sidelining of Iranian religions. The *Ērān* Forum cannot be said to have entirely lived up to the challenge of giving equal time to non-Christian faiths in its discussion, but it did feature a pair of fascinating seminars by **Charles Häberl** (Rutgers University) on the Iranian Mandaean community and its colophons, which also served as an introduction to Semitic languages that richly informed subsequent presentations on Syriac and Hebrew linguistic communities. In addition, **Simcha Gross** (University of Pennsylvania), whose “Minority Religious Groups in the Sasanian World and Beyond: New Directions” followed Häberl as the second seminar of the third day, centered Judaism as its case study for understanding religious groups within the Sasanian Empire, meaning that the Christianities discussed were not merely being compared to each other. In fielding de Jong’s challenge, the Forum was most successful in the area that was arguably most important. The Iranian faith of Zoroastrianism—the religion of the Sasanian king of kings and his court—received equal if not greater coverage than Christianity.

In fact, Zoroastrian diversity was particularly highlighted at several points by scholars studying the eastern edge of the Sasanian Empire, where practices were often more varied than those reflected in Middle Persian sources. **Nooshin Sepidkar** (SOAS-University of London) presented a poster “Exploring the Evolution and Transmission of Zoroastrian Texts: The Pahlavi Yasna and Sogdian Ashem Vohu in Historical Context,” which studied the only surviving Zoroastrian prayer written in a language other than Avestan. The eastern climes of the Sasanian world were likewise broached by **Robert Schulz** (Berlin Graduate School of Ancient Studies). In “Is there a God PHARRO? About Syncretism and Local Interpretations in Gandhara,” Schulz hypothesized that the Pharro deity on Kushan coins could be tied to the Hindu Kubera, leading to discussion on the concept of syncretism and its role in the comparative study of religions. How to approach comparative research was a frequent question among attendees due to the broad range of topics the Forum addressed, and a repeated refrain was the need to recognize difference rather than seeking “smoking gun” similarities that might serve only to corroborate a researcher’s pre-existing assumptions.

The Forum’s final two days were dedicated to Sasanian material culture. Two talks—a seminar and a keynote—by **Judith Lerner** (ISAW, NYU) laid the groundwork for discussions on sigillography and artistic depictions. This was then expanded on by **Delphine Poinsoot** (Collège de France), who noted art history’s obsession with the human realism of western

Classical art and the way that this implicitly positions Sasanian art as inferior. Poinsett illustrated how this model might be challenged, examining the often quite complex standards of human presentation and animal emotional realism found in Sasanian art as a valuable form of expression in itself rather than something inferior to the likes of *Laocoön and His Sons*.

Archaeology often allows insights into Sasanian lived realities, a topic that was explored by the papers “‘A Tale of Pots and People,’ an Unwritten Material History of Everyday Life in the Bukhara Oasis During the Long First Millennium” and “Shaping Vessels in Shifting Economies: Unraveling Material Transformations of Tableware from Post-Yazdgerd to Samanid Times,” by **Jacopo Bruno** (Institute of Iranian Studies, Austrian Academy of Sciences) and **Layah Ziari-Bigdeli** (University of California, Irvine) respectively. The greatest chronological span of the entire Forum was tackled by **Naghmeh Mahzounzadeh** (Ca’ Foscari University, Venice) in “Diverging Trajectories: Arrowheads, Slingshots, and the Cultural Dynamics of Weaponry in First Millennium Iranian Plateau and Adjacent Region,” a preliminary part of her PhD project categorizing change over time in arrowheads and sling missiles between the sixth century BCE and the seventh century CE.

Studying material culture, however, is by no means an uncontroversial method for discovering “truths,” as demonstrated by a lively debate spawned by seeming contradictions between a seminar on Sasanian numismatics by **Nikolaus Schindel** (Austrian Academy) and a keynote on the archaeology of the Sasanian frontiers by **Eberhard Sauer** (University of Edinburgh) a day earlier, which demonstrated the high-quality production and broad distribution of coinage within the Sasanian Empire while also revealing a seeming paradox that coins were nearly entirely absent from military sites. The debate about how exactly these findings could co-exist led neatly into the last seminar of the Forum, where **Khodadad Rezakhani** (Leiden University) considered the question of the Sasanian economy, how much of it could be reconstructed, and what we are doing when we do economic history. This seminar nicely complemented that of **Eve MacDonald** (Cardiff University) the day before, which took a discussion format and asked what exactly it was that made Sasanian archaeology “Sasanian.”

In studying the architecture of the Sasanian world, two junior scholars at different stages of research, **Sarvenaz Parsa** (Free University, Berlin) and **Hamta Mousavi** (SOAS-University of London) presented on the construction of the *chahartaq*-type Zoroastrian fire temple. The former’s poster “Sasanian Fire Temples? Study of Chahartaqs and Their Architectural Groups” provided a useful survey of the different types, while the latter’s “Studies in the Architecture of Sasanian Zoroastrian Fire Temples vis-à-vis the Astrological Concepts of Chronocratoria and Melothesia” outlined Mousavi’s intention to survey the geographical coordinates of 110 such fire temples and provided a methodology for analyzing them in relation to heavenly bodies. This focus on intentionality in choosing monumental sites was also central to an innovative outlier presentation on the first day, “Reflections of Power: A Comparative Study of Reflection and Reflective Surfaces in Ancient China, Persia, India and the Greco-Roman World,” wherein **Goran Đurđević** (Beijing Foreign Studies University) showed how imperial powers heightened displays of royal glory through pairing monuments with pre-existing reflective bodies in a talk with impressive cross-cultural range. **Yusef**

**Saadat** (Ruhr University Bochum/*A City of Many Cities* Project) offered a reflection on the connections between Sasanian architecture and Zoroastrian eschatology, suggesting in his “The Way Činwad Bridge Gets Reshaped: A Possible Reflection of a Bridge Technology in Sasanian Era” that the titular bridge over which the deceased crossed reflects no-longer extant Sasanian irrigation technology.

Several scholars at the conference dealt not just with new approaches to research, but also with the question of how to engage students and lay audiences through novel collaborations and approaches. **Domiziana Rossi** (Cardiff University) collaborated with sound engineers to produce a sound file that acted as the basis for her presentation “Soundscapes of Eranshahr,” in which she reconstructed how Sasanian cities may have sounded and led a lively discussion on the balance such projects must strike between realism, audience engagement, and resources available. **Mohammad Rasoulipour** (Eranshahr project), the visual designer who created the *Ērān*, *Tūrān*, and *Hrōm* logo, presented a poster on the considerations that went into creating facsimiles of the faces of Sasanian notables. His “Portrait of a Shahanshah. Imagining the Likenesses of the Sasanian Nobility Based on Material Culture” addressed the limitations of this process in terms of technology and accuracy and situated it within a larger strategy for attracting lay audiences that includes comics, board games, and Iranian folklore ([all available online](#)). Online resources formed a significant part of the discussion of engaging outsiders to the field and allowing access to pre-existing scholarship. Layah Ziaii-Bigdeli currently manages the *Sasanika* database originally started by Touraj Daryaee, while conference-organizer Ekaterina Nechaeva is in the process of creating the *Ex-Patria* database for compiling data on trans-imperial travelers. Furthermore, the Forum ended with the creation of a Substack to allow for connections formed within it to continue into the future.

Discussions of how pedagogic approaches should be adapted to better introduce students to Sasanian history and avoid privileging Western research were features of several papers, and an elephant in the room that periodically reared its trunk was the question of whether there even was such a thing as Sasanian history! Simcha Gross noted that the field has no chairs or gatekeepers; Eve MacDonald questioned its archaeological boundaries; and Ab de Jong commented that since the Sasanian Empire began as a regime change (albeit one that ushered in a particularly long-lived dynasty), referring to discrete Parthian and Sasanian Empires is akin to referring to Rome as the Flavian Empire. Behind these insights was the understanding that the Sasanians are what we have made them, and our conversations throughout the week made and remade them in various forms. Returning to the first day, both Alison Vacca and Sean Strong warned against skewing our approach by “fixing” texts we deem “problematic” in our modern context or warping reality to fit our pre-existing understandings. That these warnings came from both sides of the senior/junior divide indicates the thoughtful climate of the *Ērān* Forum and highlights its success in generating two-way dialogue. The ideas presented at the Forum both in papers and informal discussion suggest opportunities for broad and exciting collaboration across disciplines in search of ever fuller understanding. The week has laid seeds that will surely bear fruit in future research and forums under and beyond the *Ērān*, *Tūrān*, and *Hrōm* banner.