

Karin Mosig-Walburg: *Das frühe Sasanidenreich und Rom. Eine Forschungskritik.* Gutenberg: Computus Druck Satz & Verlag 2023. 863 p. € 129.00. ISBN: 978-3-940598-56-1.

The increased scholarly interest in the late-Roman period during the last fifty years or so, has also resulted in a fascination for the Sasanid empire and interaction between Rome and Persia as evidenced by a growing number of publications in recent decades by historians, archaeologists and religious scholars. The historian Karin Mosig-Walburg is one of them. She is an expert on the early history of the Sasanid empire, in particular the Roman-Persian relations of this period on which she has published widely. Her monograph “Römer und Perser vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr.”¹ published in 2009 is an important contribution to our understanding of the relations between the Roman and Sasanid empires especially in the field of warfare and peace treaties. The time frame for the book discussed here is the same, i. e. 224 when the Sasanids came to power in Persia with the rise of Ardashir, and 363 when the Roman emperor Jovian concluded a peace treaty with Shapur II that calmed relations between the two superpowers after a considerable time of warfare.

This is an unusual book not only because of its size (863 pages including bibliography [pp. 779–846], list of references to primary sources [pp. 847–853] and indices [pp. 854–863]) but also because of its contents. Basically Mosig-Walburg discusses a number of controversial issues concerning Roman-Sasanid relations and the internal history of the Sasanid empire, the opinions scholars have expressed on them and why these opinions are correct or above all incorrect in Mosig-Walburg’s view. She is of the opinion that new views based on proper analysis of source material on, for example, the politics of the Sasanid rulers vis-à-vis the Roman empire are neglected in favour of older views, and that scholars present assumptions as facts. I will give a few examples later in this review, but first the structure of the book.

The book is divided into five parts. Chapter 1 (pp. 19–82) are comments on the image of the military policy of the two empires toward one another and

1 K. Mosig-Walburg: *Römer und Perser vom 3. Jahrhundert bis zum Jahr 363 n. Chr.* Gutenberg 2009.

their non-military interaction as expressed in the scholarly literature.² Chapter 2 (pp. 83–479) then examines Mosig-Walburg’s assessment (“Forschungskritik”) of this image with detailed references to and citations from the various publications she discusses and criticizes.³ Chapters 3 (pp. 481–550) and 4 (pp. 551–668) follow the same pattern but in this case they deal with the internal affairs and developments of the Sasanian empire in the late third and early fourth century.⁴ Chapter 5 (pp. 669–765) is an appendix in which Mosig-Walburg shortly discusses the development of scholarship of the Sasanid empire and examines and reviews specific publications by a number of authors among them Matthew Canepa, whose “The Two Eyes of the Earth. Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran”⁵ is an important contribution to our understanding of Roman-Sasanian relations through Roman and Sasanian court ritual and their interaction; the Iranologist and historian Touraj Daryaee, one of the leading experts in the field; and Giusto Traina, who has expertise on Armenian affairs and Armenian-Sasanian relations. But Chapter 5 also discusses publications that deal with mainly Roman issues such as Yann Le Bohec’s work on the Roman army in the third century and Klaus Altmayer’s work on the reigns of the emperors Carus, Carinus and Numerianus as forerunners of the tetrarchy.⁶

Sasanian western policy and Roman eastern policy are the two sections that make up Chapter 1. In the first section (pp. 19–25) Mosig-Walburg discusses whether the Sasanids’ policy towards Rome was determined by the idea of

- 2 Title Chapter 1: “Anmerkungen zum Bild der gegenseitigen Politik der beiden Großmächte und ihrer nicht-militärischen Interaktion in der Forschungsliteratur.”
- 3 Title Chapter 2: “Forschungskritik zum Bild der gegenseitigen Politik der beiden Großmächte und ihrer nicht-militärischen Interaktion.”
- 4 Title Chapter 3: “Anmerkungen zum Bild der innenpolitischen Entwicklung des Sasanidenreiches von der zweiten Hälfte des 3. bis in das 4. Jahrhundert n. Chr. in der Forschungsliteratur.” Title Chapter 4: “Forschungskritik zum Bild der innenpolitischen Entwicklung des Sasanidenreiches von der zweiten Hälfte des 3. bis in das 4. Jahrhundert n. Chr.”
- 5 M. P. Canepa: *The Two Eyes of the Earth. Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2009 (*The Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 45).
- 6 Y. Le Bohec: *L’armée romaine dans la tourmente. Une nouvelle approche de la “crise du IIIe siècle”*. Paris 2009 (*L’art de la guerre*); K. Altmayer: *Die Herrschaft des Carus, Carinus und Numerianus als Vorläufer der Tetrarchie*. Stuttgart 2014 (*Historia-Einzelschriften* 230).

restoring the territory of the Achaemenid empire, an idea that some historians still adhere to. That this is an *interpretatio Romana*, and therefore a myth, is made convincingly clear by Mosig-Walburg. This also applies to the second issue (pp. 25–37) that relates to the first: the oft-expressed claim in the scholarly literature that the policy of the Sasanids towards the Roman empire was aggressive – more aggressive than that of the Parthians – and that they were responsible for most of the Roman-Persian wars in the third century while the Romans strived after coexistence. She argues that this was not the case and that most of the third-century wars were started by the Romans and that the Sasanids had no intention of expanding their territory across the Euphrates. An exception is the long-reigning king Shapur II (309–379), who from 337 waged an aggressive political campaign to recapture the territories his grandfather Narseh (293–303) had lost to Rome at the treaty of 298. Mosig-Walburg contends against the notion that Sasanid rulers had to fight wars and win victories to prove their kingship (pp. 37–43). There are no indications in the sources that that was the case, and the idea may have its origins in Roman ruler ideology. Basically, politics of the Sasanid kings was not more aggressive towards Rome than that of the Parthians; in general the western policy of the Sasanids did not differ much from that of their Parthian predecessors. That the Sasanian empire was militarily more developed and that the economic circumstances under the Sasanids had improved which gave them the means to build up their military apparatus is also rejected by Mosig-Walburg, because it underestimates the Parthian military possibilities (pp. 43–47). Mosig-Walburg observes more continuity between the Parthian and Sasanian empires, and she does not see the dynasty change as a break with the past and as a new beginning in particular in relations with the Roman empire as expressed in most scholarly literature.

She also denies the oft-expressed view that Roman prisoners of war were a boost to the Persian economy as a workforce and raised the level of (building) technology and infrastructure because there were craftsmen, architects and artisans among them (pp. 47–53). First, she argues, we do not know how many prisoners of war were involved and of whom they consisted, and second, she considers it an underestimation of the technical and infrastructural qualities of the Persians: there was no need for Roman expertise and knowledge. That may well be so and perhaps the issue has been exaggerated by scholarship, but it cannot be denied that there is significant material evidence for Roman technical and architectural influence in the Sasanian em-

pire. And Roman influence did not necessarily have to come from prisoners of war but also, and perhaps especially, through friendly interaction and exchange.

Mosig-Walburg contends that Rome's eastern policy towards the Sasanids consisted of both offensive and defensive tactics (pp. 53–63). However, the offensive strategy prevailed. Central was control over northern Mesopotamia. Diplomacy and peaceful exchange were crucial elements in the relationship between the two superpowers. The Sasanids adopted diplomatic relations with Rome from the Parthians and adapted them to their own circumstances (pp. 63–72). According to many scholars, religions such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity played an important role in the relationship between both empires. However, Mosig-Walburg does not agree because the source material does not provide any reason for such an assumption (pp. 74–82). According to her, the relationship between the two superpowers was determined by “Realpolitik” without explaining what she exactly means by that. That may be so, but in doing so, she underestimates ideological factors, including religious aspects, that can play a role in relations between states. Her discussion of Constantine's letter to Shapur II included in Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* (4.9–13) serves as an example. In his letter Constantine asks Shapur to protect the Christians in his empire, and although the authenticity of the letter is still being disputed, the fact alone that such a text exists indicates that Christianity started to become a factor in Roman-Persian relations from the reign of Constantine onward.

Chapter 2 covers the same themes as chapter 1, but goes into greater detail and profundity. Among other topics, Mosig-Walburg discusses the suspected aggressive actions taken by Shapur I and the other third-century Sasanian kings towards Rome (pp. 122–195), the peace treaties between the two empires (pp. 278–299), the role of Hatra in the context of Roman-Persian relations (pp. 300–320) as well as the position of the Palmyrene Odenathus (pp. 321–336). Mosig-Walburg refers to and quotes extensively from modern scholarly literature as well as primary sources. In the context of this review, it would go too far to summarize and discuss profoundly all the many aspects of Roman-Sasanian relations that Mosig-Walburg concerns herself with in this chapter. However, to give some idea: in the case of the supposed Sasanid idea of the restoration of the Achaemenid empire she discusses the publications of some important scholars who have written on the topic: Engelbert Winter / Beate Dignas, Touraj Daryaee, Matthew Canepa, Hervé

Inglebert, Josef Wiesehöfer and M. Rahim Shayegan (pp. 83–108). In this chapter, she revisits the topic of religion, particularly Christianity, as a factor in the conflict between the two empires (pp. 425–479). Again Constantine’s letter to Shapur II is central to her discussion of the religious issue. Authors such as Timothy Barnes and Klaus Rosen are heavily criticised for arguing on the basis of the letter that Constantine had also religious motives for preparing a military campaign against Persia. Mosig-Walburg is right that Christianity was never the cause of war (“Es wurde kein Krieg um das Christentum geführt”, p. 430) in the period she examines, let alone a crusade as some historians have incorrectly argued, but Christianity clearly did affect the relations between the two states. Perhaps not as dramatic as suggested by some scholars but that religion did play a role in Roman-Persian relations, as I myself have argued and for which I am severely criticised by Mosig-Walburg (pp. 428–430) and could be a reason for clashes, is hard to deny. That was especially the case in northern Mesopotamia with increasing numbers of Christians living on both sides of the frontier and considerable movement and exchange going on between Roman and Sasanian Christian communities who shared to the same idea of Christian universalism. Within the late Roman empire, the power of the Church and its leaders increased considerably and affected decision-making by the imperial authorities; these leaders also took to heart the interests of Persian Christians. It is worth noting that Armenia and Iberia, both buffer states, already had a Christian population. It seems to me that Mosig-Walburg is too oblivious to the religious factor in Roman-Persian relations and too quick to call it a construct of modern historians. Mosig-Walburg seems not to like interpretations of the source material – she calls them suppositions and speculations. In her opinion, it cannot be true if it is not explicitly mentioned in the sources. On top of that, she has little regard for the complexity and diversity of the source material.

It’s unfortunate that chapters 1 and 2 have not been combined. They do not stand alone since they deal with the same themes and issues. The chapters have a significant overlap, and arguments are frequently repeated.

There is also overlap in chapters 3 and 4 which deals with the period between the death of Shapur I in 270 and the rise to the throne of Shapur II in 309. As mentioned above, Chapter 3 contains Mosig-Walburg’s observations on the internal political affairs and chapter 4 her “Forschungskritik” (see note 4); it would have been helpful, as in the case of chapters 1 and 2, when both chapters had been combined. In most scholarly literature this period of Sa-

sasanian history in which fall the reigns of Hormisdas I (270–272/273), Bahram I (273–276), Bahram II (276–293), Narses (293–302), and Hormisdas II (302–309), is considered one of weak rulers, internal strife between the nobility and the Zoroastrian priesthood on the one hand and the kings on the other. Mosig-Walburg is contesting that opinion again because the sources do not endorse it. And with sources, she means the Sasanid sources, i. e. coinage, royal inscriptions and rock reliefs and the four inscriptions of the Zoroastrian priest Kirdir, as well as texts in the Syriac and Manichaean tradition about the religious policy of the Sasanid rulers.

This book is a genuine “Forschungskritik”, a collection of notes and comments on scholarly literature. It is therefore not surprising that it lacks a central thesis except for the fact that Mosig-Walburg emphasises throughout the book that historians should keep to information provided by the sources and not speculate or theorise.⁷ Mosig-Walburg is of the opinion that many historians have drawn conclusions and reconstructed Sasanian history and Roman-Sasanian relations for which according to her there is no basis in the source material. She mentions that she is even particularly annoyed by this, especially when assumptions are not labelled as such but misleadingly presented as facts.⁸ Of course, historians should always keep to the testimony of the sources, but they also have an obligation to interpret that information and make connections between the diverse kinds of information with the aim of creating a reliable reconstruction of events in the past. The fact that Sasanian source materials are scarce may lead historians to speculate, but there is nothing wrong with that as long as they keep to the testimony of the sources. Unfortunately, she says little about the complexity of the source material or its methodological approach. Moreover, Mosig-Walburg has paid little attention to what Graeco-Roman sources can tell us about Sasanian history and Roman-Persian relations.

This book is unusual, as I mentioned at the beginning of this review. The focus is on correcting and refuting what Mosig-Walburg believes to be mistaken views. According to her, they are mistaken because they are method-

7 E.g. p. 32: “Es kann nicht oft genug betont werden, daß das Zeugnis der Quellen als alleinige Grundlage bei der Beurteilung der Politik der Sasaniden zu dienen hat.”

8 P. 484: “Hinzu kommt als ein besonderes Ärgernis, daß allzu häufig bloße Vermutungen/Behauptungen nicht einmal als solche gekennzeichnet, sondern vielmehr irreführend als Fakten formuliert bzw. dargestellt werden.”

ologically unsound conjectures and assumptions that lack basis from the sources. Mosig-Walburg is very straightforward and direct when she criticizes other scholars who speculate and present their assumptions as facts. Her focus is on the sources and on “Realpolitik”, a term she regularly uses but which she does not elaborate on further. Due to its nature, the book does not make for exciting reading. It is not a book to read from cover to cover, but rather to consult. Furthermore, its often lengthy sentences make it challenging to read, particularly for scholars who are not well-versed in German. The book has its own uniqueness, but it is useful. In spite of my critical remarks, this is a learned study that contains a lot of information that scholars interested in Sasanian history and Roman-Persian relations should be thankful for.

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