Nicolas Assur Corfù: Die Bedeutung des Kranzes im spätantiken Orient. Zu Thronbesteigung, Kranzübergabe und Religionen im Sasanidenreich. Basel: Schwabe Verlag 2025. 283 p., 83 ill. CHF 58.00. ISBN: 978-3-7965-5273-1.

The development of history into a scientific discipline was a gradual process, not without its opponents. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Basel was home to one such opponent, the 'last romantic', Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887).[1] His work bears interesting parallels to the volume under review here, "Die Bedeutung des Kranzes im spätantiken Orient. Zu Thronbesteigung, Kranzübergabe und Religionen im Sasanidenreich" ["The significance of the wreath in the late antique Orient. On accession to the throne, the presentation of the wreath and religions in the Sasanian Empire"] by Nicolas Assur Corfù. This independent scholar, who studied at the University of Basel – where Bachofen briefly held a professorship – has published articles not only in the disciplines of classical and Near Eastern archaeology, but also as a chemist. Schwabe Verlag, founded in 1488 and hence the world's oldest continuously operating publishing house, not only published the second edition of Bachofen's "Das Mutterrecht" ("The Mother Right", 1897), but also Corfù's rather ambitious study.[2]

Why ambitious? Like Bachofen, whose dry titles such as "Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten" ["An attempt on the sepulchral symbolism of

1 Trained in law and classical philology, Bachofen soon abandoned the methodological constraints of both fields. Most famously in "Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur" (1861), he advanced a universal theory of cultural evolution from promiscuous hetaerism over matriarchy to patriarchy, grounded less in evidence than in an elaborate hermeneutics of myths and symbols. Bachofen influenced such diverse thinkers as Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), Thomas Mann (1875–1955), and Ludwig Klages (1872–1956).

2 The author of the present review has himself recently published a comprehensive work on Middle Persian Zoroastrianism and its relationship to the socio-economic reality of the Sasanian Empire. It deals with similar questions with very different results, but no further reference will be made to it in what follows; see M. Maurer: Kosmos, Gesellschaft, Religion. Zoroastrische und manichäische Sozialordnungsdiskurse in der langen Spätantike. Boston/Berlin 2024 (Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten 80). See also M. Maurer: A Most Orthodox Empire? Priestly Discourse in Sasanian Iran and Beyond. In: JAOS 144 (1), 2024, pp. 63–82.

the ancients"] or "Römische Grablampen nebst einigen andern Grabdenkmälern vorzugsweise eigener Sammlung" ["Roman grave lamps together with some other sepulchral monuments, mostly from my own collection"] often concealed decidedly bold theses and speculations, Corfù too dares to take a big leap in his innocuously titled book: a revision of the entire history of research on Zoroastrianism. While he, like Bachofen, is a precise observer of ancient iconography, and his work at least points to problems in research on Zoroastrianism and the Sasanian Empire, his speculations must be rejected from a historical perspective. Corfù – apparently unhindered by any substantial knowledge of Iranian philology – presents a book that, in its Bachofenesque digressions, inaccessible style, and often incomprehensible organization, tests the reader severely. Anyone who dares to read it will be rewarded with an erratic journey through "Orient" and "Occident", from the Paleolithic (p. 167) to the Shahnama (written around the year 1000 CE; pp. 174–175).

The central thesis of the book is that the Sasanian Empire was of a "primarily secular character" (p. 13).[3] By this Corfù means that in the Sasanian Empire a separation of powers prevailed between "priests" and the state, and that the latter had a religiously neutral stance (pp. 183–184). This thesis is developed initially on the basis of a re-evaluation of the Sasanian rock reliefs and their accompanying inscriptions. The author shines especially in his detailed descriptions of reliefs. He focuses on those that depict the presentation of a ring or wreath to a Sasanian king. They are generally referred to in existing research as investiture reliefs, with one of the figures identified as a Sasanian king and the other as a Zoroastrian god, most often Ohrmazd, the Middle Persian form of the Avestan Ahura Mazda, the supreme god of Zoroastrianism. Still, as Corfù is right to point out, this interpretation rests on very little evidence. In this instance, Corfù deserves credit for drawing attention to our tendency to accept the standard interpretation of these reliefs without further reflection. Another strength of the book is the inclusion of an extensive appendix, consisting of several tables and 83 illustrations, which makes the discussion of reliefs and coinage easy to follow. However, to support his basic thesis – that the Sasanian Empire was of a "primarily secular character" – Corfù is compelled to discard some of the most fundamental sources

3 All quotations have been translated from the original German.

for Sasanian history on flimsy pretexts, often resting on Corfù's rather unorthodox understanding of Iranian philology. These philological shortcomings, at least, set him apart from the discoverer of the mother right.

The book consists of an introduction, four main chapters, an excursus on religion in the Sasanian Empire, and a brief summary. In their argument, however, the four main chapters rely on the "critical reassessment" found in the excursus, in which Corfù offers numerous claims that are peculiar at best and more often simply incorrect.

The first chapter deals with the question of the selection and enthronement of the Sasanian rulers. In particular, the roles of the nobility and the priests are critically contrasted. A tendency to rely excessively on comparisons with Mediterranean culture is evident in this section already (pp. 15–33), and while many of the issues noted above are already visible at this stage, the unsystematic engagement with secondary literature is especially striking. One would expect at least references to important specialist studies on the relationship between the nobility and the royal court in the Sasanian Empire, e. g., to the works of Jairus Banaji,[4] Parvaneh Pourshariati's well-known (albeit controversial) work on the Sasanian Empire,[5] or Michael Alram in the discussion of Sasanian coinage. Older studies relevant to the topic, such as Gregor Ahn's "Religiöse Herrscherlegitimation im achämenidischen Iran" ["Religious legitimisation of rulers in Achaemenid Iran"], are not mentioned either.[6] Another problem that runs through the entire study is also evident here: Corfù generally evaluates primary sources according to how well they support his argument. Later, in a very brief passage, the entire Greco-Roman historical tradition is casually dismissed as a source for Sasanian history, along with the relevant texts surviving in Arabic, New Persian, and Syriac (p. 148). But in Chapter II, as in later chapters, there are still many favorable

4 Most notably: J. Banaji: Late Antique Aristocracies. The Case of Iran. In: J. Banaji: Exploring the Economy of Late Antiquity. Selected Essays. Cambridge 2018, pp. 178–203.

5 P. Pourshariati: Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanian-Parthian Confederacy and the Arab Conquest of Iran. London 2009.

6 G. Ahn: Religiöse Herrscherlegitimation im achämenidischen Iran. Die Voraussetzungen und die Struktur ihrer Argumentation. Leiden 1992 (Acta Iranica Sér. 3,17).

references to Greco-Roman and post-Sasanian authors. Even the Shahnama can be a valuable source, if need be (pp. 174–175).[7]

Chapter III, "The 'wreath handover' in the Sasanian Empire" (pp. 35–44), and chapter IV, "Figures, antiquaria and inscriptions in all rock reliefs" (pp. 45–72), are the most worthwhile to read. Here, Corfù introduces all the relevant monuments before analyzing them in detail.

But since Corfù also treats the inscriptions in these chapters, his handling of philological material must be briefly addressed. This is the study's most glaring shortcoming, raising the question of whether anyone with even a remote familiarity with Iranian philology reviewed the manuscript. The problems are too many to address here, so I will merely focus on some of the most pervasive and representative ones. Corfù continually draws on dictionaries, often to prove the absence of terms in a certain corpus, but he understands neither their scope nor their limitations. On page 49, for instance, he claims that David N. MacKenzie in his "Concise Pahlavi Dictionary" gives both *kulāf* and *kulāh* as meaning "cap, bonnet", yet seems unaware that only the former is a Middle Persian form; MacKenzie distinctly designates the latter as a New Persian cognate.[8] Neither does he seem to notice that the dictionary is based almost entirely on the Book Pahlavi literature, i. e., Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts surviving in manuscript, to which he elsewhere ascribes little value as sources.[9] At the heart of Corfù's argument, but sadly based on an etymological fallacy, is his translation of *mazdēsn* (and its older forms), Middle Persian for "Mazda-worshiping", as "honouring wisdom".[10] Given the frequency with which the term *mazdēsn* occurs in the Sasanian royal inscriptions and titulature, this is a serious problem, as Corfù places a great deal of weight on his idiosyncratic translation of the term in arguing for the religious indifference of the Sasanian rulers (e. g., p. 146). He does not seem to understand that the translation of "Mazda" as wisdom underlying his own originates from Avestan. For example, on page 158, he notes that MacKenzie's Dictionary lacks an entry for "Mazda." This should not come as a sur-

7 A recent reevaluation of that text can be found in J. Hämeen-Anttila: Khwadāynāmag. The Middle Persian Book of Kings. Leiden/Boston 2018 (Studies in Persian Cultural History 14).

8 D. N. MacKenzie: A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary. London 1990, p. 52.

9 MacKenzie (note 8), pp. IX–X. A similar problem is apparent on Corfù, p. 59.

10 He makes this assertion for the first time on p. 23, n. 65.

prise, since it is not Middle Persian, but Avestan. *Mazdēsn* preserves it as a fossilized compound. Ironically, the Greek version of the ANRm-b inscription even maintains it as a loanword, a clue Corfù fails to recognize as such (pp. 66–67).

The importance of the Avesta seems to be generally lost on Corfù; for instance, the word *yazdān* in the early royal inscriptions is not translated as "gods" because of the Greek versions of the text, where it is translated as θεοί, as he seems to think (p. 70). The translation is supported primarily by the use of the word in Book Pahlavi and by the Avestan form *yazata-*. He also cannot explain where an Elamite translation of "Auramazda" as "wise lord" might come from (p. 142). This fundamental lack of understanding of Iranian (language) history renders many of the book's explanations worthless (e.g. pp. 68–71 on Middle Persian *bay*, lord). This becomes particularly striking in his attempts to re-date inscriptions (and, as we shall see, even the Avesta) – for example, his notion that Parthian and Greek inscriptions were added beneath a Middle Persian one at Naqsh-e Rostam after the Sasanian period is scarcely credible. (p. 65).[11]

It is important for Corfù's argument to challenge the standard identification as divinities of the figures in Sasanian reliefs that present what has typically been termed the "ring of investiture"; and in this connection, he is mostly focused on figures that have been identified as Ohrmazd. More broadly, any influence that Corfù sees as potentially religious is downplayed. Apart from the question of the figure generally identified with Mihr on the relief Taq-i Bustam 1 (pp. 42–43, identification refuted on p. 184) and some other minor details, an important point of attack is one short inscription on Ardashir I's (r. 211–224) 'investiture' relief at Naqsh-e Rostam (ANRm-b). There, the figure handing over the ring is referred to as Lord Ohrmazd in both Middle Persian and Parthian, while the accompanying Greek translation labels him as "God Zeus." Corfù does not provide a satisfactory explanation for this, which is a glaring problem for his entire argument (p. 67).

In Chapter V, Corfù sets out his own interpretation of the reliefs (pp. 73–120). He views them as depicting a symbolic act, in which a personified abstraction presents the king with a wreath as a symbol of triumph. This argu-

11 Another example of Corfù's re-datings without a factual basis can be found on page 138; here he speculates whether the Coptic Manichaean homilies might not rather date from the post-Sasanian period.

ment is introduced with an extensive examination of the wreath symbol in Iranian culture (pp. 73–87). He then argues for a "re-import" of the symbol, suggesting that the idea of the wreath as a royal emblem originated from the fusion of ancient Near Eastern prototypes (pp. 88–99) that were exported to the Mediterranean. The motif, he claims, later (re-)entered the Sasanian Empire through the Roman coin imagery of the third century (pp. 99–113).[12] The adoption of Western motifs in West Asia is, of course, entirely possible and is also documented in the area. Unfortunately, the argument in favor of the transfer from the Ancient Near East to the Mediterranean region is not well-supported.

To explain the symbol, Corfù draws on group theory from mathematics, which seems largely superfluous, as he simply claims that the compositional and hence semantic structure of the Sasanian images was taken from the Roman examples (pp. 110–112). Of course, Corfù is compelled to interpret the Roman coin images as likewise non-religious – an interpretation which, he seems to believe, is confirmed by his identification of the female figures presenting the wreaths "only" as personifications of the abstractions mentioned in the coin inscriptions (pp. 113–114). On the one hand, this separation seems out of line with Roman religion, where (as in ancient Iran!) abstractions could be venerated as divinities, nor does it suit what we find on the specific coins he presents. Why would an abstract personification of *orbis*, a grammatically masculine noun, be depicted as a female figure? And why could the figure not simply represent Fortuna or Victoria? The intricacies of symbolism appear to have captivated both Bachofen and Corfù. Beyond that, the notion that the reliefs might be sepulchral in nature (p. 118) again recalls the master from Basel. Yet, despite all of these shortcomings in Corfù's method and argumentation, his fundamental point that the precise meaning of the wreath scene remains uncertain is nonetheless valid.

The digression on religion in the Sasanian Empire (Chapter VI, pp. 121–184) that follows is perhaps the least persuasive part of the book. Here, as already noted, Corfù embarks on a re-evaluation of ancient Iranian religious history – a task for which, as will hardly come as a surprise, he is not exactly qualified. It is noteworthy that earlier in the book he has been happy to draw

12 Here again, the selective handling of sources is a cause for annoyance. Corfù discusses the Hellenistic-Iranian cult found in the ancient Hellenistic kingdom of Commagene – but omits the deity Zeus-Oromasdes found at Nimrud Dagh, a clearly dated parallel to the inscription ANRm-b (pp. 98–99).

on Zoroastrian religious material to explain why certain iconographic elements cannot depict superhuman beings (pp. 48–49; 65–66 – I am not convinced by his argument). Here as before it would be pointless to try to clear up every misunderstanding; thus I will confine myself to a few representative examples and fundamental claims. There is, for one thing, his argument, that the – in his view – much younger Avesta took the name of Ahura Mazda from the Old Persian inscriptions composed by the Achaemenids (p. 136); here he ignores the clear linguistic dependence of Old Persian expressions on Avestan, as in the name of the god Miθra, which we find instead of *Miça-.[13] And his attempts to re-date Kerdir's inscriptions – according to him, post-Sasanian productions whose creators intended them to be mistaken for early Sasanian texts – are often difficult to understand and largely based on rhetorical questions (pp. 136–141). Just to point out one shortcoming of Corfù's argument: if the absence of Kerdir from the Book Pahlavi texts dealing with Sasanian history is taken as proof of him being a fictitious invention, yet the inscription is claimed to have been produced as a piece of falsifying Zoroastrian propaganda at precisely the time when the Book Pahlavi corpus emerged, shouldn't he appear in those very Book Pahlavi texts?

The discussion of Zoroastrianism, its symbols, and rituals (pp. 143–184) that follows suffers from the same problems already observed. Here Corfù's engagement with the secondary literature remains noticeably shaky as well. He claims, for instance, that reading Michael Stausberg's "Die Religion Zarathustras" (2002) and "Zarathustra und seine Religion" (2011) shows Zoroastrianism to be "[...] a mystical, declarative teaching that avoids clear statements. Similar to the Catholic catechism, it is largely based on a question-and-answer dialogue." (p. 143). This is clearly not the message of either of these books.

The author's only very superficial familiarity with and understanding of the relevant research is particularly evident when he attempts, in just a few pages, to redate the entire Avesta to the post-Sasanian period (pp. 175–179). These five pages can provide material for endless discussions, so I will just point out one especially striking shortcoming. Corfù claims that an oral composi-

13 For parallels in terms of content see, e. g., P. O. Skjærvø: Avestan Quotations in Old Persian? Literary Sources of the Old Persian Inscriptions. In: S. Shaked/A. Netzer (eds.): Irano-Judaica IV. Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture throughout the Ages. Jerusalem 1999, pp. 1–64.

tion simply could not have been transmitted over the span separating the presumed composition of the Avesta (around 1000 BCE) from its eventual recording in writing in the first millennium CE. Corfù appears unaware of the extensive scholarship on orally transmitted texts such as the *Vedas* or even the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Clearly, the often overly monolithic portrayal of Zoroastrianism – a tradition marked by great diversity across centuries and regions – in parts of the scholarly literature makes a book like Corfù's possible. Where representations of complex topics standardize them too much, there is room to uncover supposed inconsistencies, even with little expertise. What is a meaningful way to talk about Sogdian or Armenian forms of Zoroastrianism? And how can the relationship between priests and empire best be conceptualized? Nevertheless, it is, at best – and by virtue of its existence, rather than its content – a reminder of the need to work on these problems. Ultimately, the book's attempt to portray the Sasanian Empire as a secular state is undermined by its own linguistic and methodological flaws. Unlike Bachofen, who had a broad knowledge of sources and a tremendous command of the relevant languages, Corfù offers unorthodox interpretations without the means to support them. After all that has been said, the question arises: Why should "Die Bedeutung des Kranzes im spätantiken Orient" receive such an extensive review? On the one hand, it is an indication of pressing problems in the study of Sasanian Iran and Zoroastrianism. On the other hand, the rather inadequate books of a certain Schwabe author active in the nineteenth century, and mentioned several times already, have come a long way over the past hundred-odd years. Therefore, a bit of caution might be advisable.

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