

## Ethnic and Territorial Boundaries in Late Antique and Early Medieval Persia (Third to Tenth Century)

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In the early third century, an empire was created in Persia that its ideological architects named *Ērānšahr*. It is not clear why Zoroastrian priests and the first Sassanian ruler, Ardaxšīr I, chose this name for the territory under their control, but the Italian scholar Gherardo Gnoli, in a brilliant essay, has delineated the concept in the Sassanian period.<sup>1</sup> There is very little which one can add to his study in terms of the idea of *Ērān*, but what can be discussed is a further elucidation of the issue of ethnicity and the boundary of *Ērānšahr* as defined in the imperial inscriptions of the third and fourth centuries, private inscriptions of the sixth century, Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts of the ninth and tenth centuries, and Persian texts of the eleventh. Given the broad chronological span of these sources, they can be used to examine how the concept of *Ērān* and being *ēr* 'Iranian' changed in Persia between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. This essay will also delineate how the concept of boundary and ethnicity presented itself to different religious communities within the Sassanian Empire. To understand the transformation of the meaning of

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<sup>1</sup> Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran: An Essay on its Origin* (Rome, 1989). Aman Allah Ghoreyši, *Irān-Nāmak, Negareši now be Tārīx va nām-e Iran* (Tehran, 1994), has discussed the same issue in a more general manner. In 1994, the second biannual conference of Iranian Studies at Bethesda, Maryland, was dedicated to and entitled 'Iranian Cultural Identity'. Two papers presented in that conference are relevant for my discussion of ethnic and territorial boundaries: E. Yarshater, 'Persian Identity in Historical Perspective', and R. N. Frye, 'Iranian Identity in Ancient Times' (published in *Iranian Studies*, 26.1–2 (1993), 144–45). Frye questioned Gnoli's suggestion that the idea of *Ērān* or a territorial boundary originated in the Sassanian period. He suggests that a concept of ethnicity and territory must have been already in existence during the Achaemenid period.

*Ērānšahr* and *ēr*, the essay is divided into two parts, dealing with ethnicity and boundary, respectively.

### Ethnicity

The Zoroastrian holy book *Avesta*, which was composed in various stages between 1000 and 500 BCE and committed to writing during the Sassanian period, contains the first instance of the ethnic epithet *Arya* (*airiia-*) in the sense of 'noble'. In the *Avesta* we see that the *Arya* were an ethnic group viewing all others as *an-Arya* ('non-Aryan'), an important point for the Sassanian period under discussion, as Sassanians perceived their neighbours, either Romans or Turks, as adversaries in Avestan terms. The Roman territory was equated with the land of the (Avestan) *sairinam dahyunam*/(Middle Persian) *sarmān dehān*/(Greek) *sarames*. According to the *Bundahišn*, 'the country of Sarm is Rome' (*sarm deh ast hrōm*). In the epic and in other Middle Persian texts, *Sarm/Salm* appears as the eldest son of Frēdōn who was given the land of Rome to rule (Pahlavi Texts 25. 5): 'From the offspring of Frēdōn, Salm who (ruled) the country of Rome and Tūr who ruled the country of Turkestān, they killed Ēraz who was the ruler of Ērān.'<sup>2</sup> It is the latter region that receives special attention, mainly because of Avestan geographical concerns. The Turanians (*tūiriia-*) were equated with the Turks of the Sassanian period, an association best illustrated by the Persian epic poem *Šāhnāme*, which describes the territorial conflicts between the two groups. Thus the *Arya* appear as perpetually at war with their non-Aryan neighbours. The Achaemenids who built the first Persian Empire (550–330 BCE) referred to themselves as *Arya*. In his inscriptions, Darius I called himself *ariya ciça*, 'of Aryan lineage'. It is this particular ethnic designation that the Sassanians would retain or revive five centuries later.

The Zoroastrian tradition is the background against which the concept of *Ērānšahr* must be examined. In Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts, *arya/ēr* is the name applied to Zoroastrians. That Zoroastrianism made no distinction between religion and ethnicity is shown by a Middle Persian text dealing with apostasy (*Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 40. 1–2): 'Those whose judgment is this, that one should not believe in the Mazdean religion, in (whose) judgment it is said that (one) should leave the Mazdean religion, and repudiate the religion and follow a non-Iranian (*an-ērīh*) faith; then how is it, and what is their sin? The answer is this, that an adult deserves death for leaving the Good Religion, he deserves death for accepting a non-Iranian religion (*dād ī an-ērīh*); (as for) his belonging to a wrong religion, he also (shares) in the sin which they believe in or do in (their) religion, and on account of having the same religion

<sup>2</sup> *az frazandān ī frēdōn salm kē kišwar ī hrōm ud tūr ka turkestān pad xwdāyāh dāšt ēraz ērān dahibed būd uš ōzad*

See Touraj Daryaee, 'Šegefti va barjestegī-ye Sīstān', *Iranshenasi*, 8.3 (1996), 536 and 542.

he is equally sinful with them.'<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the passage cited above is from a post-Sassanian text written in the ninth century CE, when the Zoroastrian population had been reduced to a subaltern community under Muslim rule.<sup>4</sup> In the Middle Persian literature, the concept of *ēr* received further elaboration. Both 'Iranians' (*ērānagān*<sup>5</sup>) and 'Iranian-ness' (*ērīh*) were set in contrast with 'non-Iranianness' (*an-ērīh*), while 'Iranian virtue' (*ēr-mēnišnīh*) was the opposite of 'non-Iranian virtue' (*an-ēr-mēnišnīh*).<sup>6</sup> Such binary oppositions originated in Zoroastrian texts, and the concept of belonging to or being *ēr* is a Zoroastrian invention. Could non-Zoroastrians have also claimed to be *ēr*? This conceptual distinction is evident in such stock phrases as 'Iranian man of good religion' (*mard ī ēr ī hudēn*).<sup>7</sup> Was it possible to be an 'Iranian of evil religion' (*\*mard ī ēr ī agdēn*)? The answer to this question cannot be found in the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts, but other texts and inscriptions may help us clarify the issue.

In Middle Persian texts, the word *agdēn* ('evil religion') always applies to Islam, not to Christianity. This by no means implies that Christians escaped persecution. In a third-century inscription, the famous Zoroastrian priest Kerdīr boasts of having successfully punished several religious groups, including Christians: 'And Jews and Buddhists and Hindus and Nazarenes and Christians and Baptists and Manichaeans were smitten in the Empire.'<sup>8</sup> While Kerdīr's bias against non-Zoroastrians needs no further emphasis, Middle Persian texts show that the general attitude towards

<sup>3</sup> *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, Part I, transcription and translation by M. Jaafari-Dehaghi (Paris, 1998), pp. 168–69: 'awēšān kē-šān dād ēd kū pad dēn ī māzdēsnañ āstawānīh nē abāyēd būd ēn pad dād be gōwīhēd dēn ī māzdēsnañ be hilēd dēn abāz stāyēd [ud] bē ō an-ērīh šawēd ēg-iš cē ēwēn u-š wināh cē u-š wināh ī ham-dēnīh [ī] an-ēr abar ōh šawēd ayāb čiyōn bawēd [ud] nakkīrāyīh ī az ēn wināh čiyōn ast ēg-imān rōšnīhā awiš framāyēd guft. Pāsox ēd kū purnāy dēn ī weh be hišt rāy marg-arzān dād ī an-ērīh-iz grift rāy marg-arzān ī-š andar ēstišn pad ān ī abārōn dād wināh-īz ī awēšān pad dād dārēnd [ud] warzēnd ud pad ham-dādīh rāy abāg-išān ham-wināh.'

<sup>4</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation: Zoroastrian Subalterns and Muslim Elites in Medieval Iranian Society* (New York, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*, passage 47, in Davoud Monchi-Zadeh, *Die Geschichte Zarēr's* (Uppsala, 1981), p. 44; Bizhan Ghaybi, *Yādgār ī Zarērān* (Bielefeld, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Gnoli, *Idea of Iran*, pp. 147–48.

<sup>7</sup> *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 66. 1. See also R. Schmitt, s.v. 'Arya', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. by Ehsan Yarshater (London, 1985), p. 682. It is nonetheless true that the 'good religion' is to be understood in this context as Zoroastrianism.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Back, *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften: Studien zur Orthographie und Phonologie des Mittelpersischen der Inschriften zusammen mit einem etymologischen Index des mittelpersischen Wortgutes und einem Textcorpus der behandelten Inschriften* (Tehran, 1978), p. 414: 'ud jahūd ud šaman ud brāman ud nāsrā ud kristiyān ud makdag ud zandīk andar šahr zad bawēnd.' For a commentary, see also Philippe Gignoux, *Les quatre inscriptions du mage Kerdīr* (Paris, 1991).

Christians was ambivalent. The term employed for Christians in these texts — *tarsā-gān* ('reverent ones,' but also the 'God-fearing ones') — carries a positive connotation, which may have been applied to Christians by Zoroastrians with less radical views than Kerdīr's. The inscription of Kerdīr distinguishes between native Christians (Middle Persian *nās-rā*, from Syriac *naṣrāyē*) and Roman-Christian prisoners of war (Middle Persian *kristiyān*, from Syriac *krestyānē*).<sup>9</sup> During the late fourth and early fifth centuries, a close relation had been established between the Christian church of Persia and the Sassanian state.<sup>10</sup> No less than six metropolitans and more than thirty bishops attended the synod of Seleucia in 410,<sup>11</sup> an indication of a quite numerous Christian population of a potentially important political role within the Sassanian Empire. The king may thus have differed in his attitude towards Christians from the leading Zoroastrian priests, especially after the Christian-Persian church had come into existence in the fourth century, with the blessing and under the control of the Sassanian state.

In the eyes of the king, both non-Zoroastrians and Zoroastrians were simply just *mard/zan ī šahr*, 'male/female citizen of the Empire'. Such people would have also been viewed as *ērān šahrīgān*, 'residents of Ērān', in opposition to *an-ērān šahrīgān*, 'non-residents of Ērān' (foreigners). Other legal terms in use included *šāhān šāh bandag*, 'servant of the King of kings';<sup>12</sup> *dehgān ī šāhān šāh*, 'subject of the King of kings';<sup>13</sup> and, in the late third century Paikuli inscription, *hmky štry GBR[An]*, 'men of the whole realm'.<sup>14</sup> A similar distinction was made for slaves, as a *bandag ī šahr* or 'resident slave'<sup>15</sup> received under Zoroastrian law a treatment different from that of a *bandag ī an-šahrīg* or 'foreign slave'.<sup>16</sup> In short, the imperial concept of citizenship (*ērīh*) and ethnicity was at times at variance with Zoroastrian views.

<sup>9</sup> It is also noteworthy that the Byzantines are mentioned in some Middle Persian texts as *kilīsiyīg* and their dwelling at *yōnān* 'Greece'.

<sup>10</sup> S. Brock, 'Christians in the Sassanian Empire: A Case of Divided Loyalty', *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), pp. 3–4.

<sup>11</sup> Brock, 'Christians in the Sassanian Empire', p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Hērbedestān* 11. 7, in *The Hērbedestān and Nērangestān*, ed. and trans. by F. M. Kotwal and Ph. G. Kreyenbroek (Paris, 1992), pp. 60–61.

<sup>13</sup> *Madīyān ī Hazār Dādestān* 20. 9, in *The Book of a Thousand Judgments (A Sasanian Law-Book)*, ed. by A. Perikhanian (Costa Mesa, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Paikuli 13/5, in *The Sasanian Inscription of Paikuli*, ed. and trans. by P. O. Skjærvø (Wiesbaden, 1983), p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Depending upon context, the meaning of *bandag* can vary from the strictly legal 'slave' to a less narrowly defined 'servant'. See M. Macuch, 'The Talmudic Expression "Servant of Fire"', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 26 (2002), 125.

<sup>16</sup> M. Shaki, s.v. 'Citizenship', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. by Yarshater, pp. 632–33.

Šābuhr I (240–70 CE), King of Ērān, made the first attempt to implement a single, universal religion, and he chose Manī for this political endeavour.<sup>17</sup> Much like Christianity in the fourth century, third-century Manichaeism received official status because of the political advantages it offered. From a strictly royal point of view, it was now possible to have a religion in Ērānšahr that was not Zoroastrianism. As W. Hinz has noted, 'with the exception of Bahrām II, all of the Sassanian kings of the third century were but lukewarm Zoroastrians'.<sup>18</sup> Šābuhr's support of Manichaeism led to the rise of two competing views of Ērānšahr in the third century, one based on the Zoroastrian religion and the other imperial, possibly based on ethnicity (as opposed to religion).

One way to understand the meaning of *ērīh* for non-Zoroastrians is to examine briefly contemporary Jewish attitudes. Both the *Babylonian Talmud* and the evidence from the Dura synagogue indicate that Jews had the ability to and indeed did become part of the Sassanian society and state (*mard ī šahr*). They took Persian names, wore the high Persian hats (*kulāf*), while the leader of the Jewish community (Middle Persian *reš galūt*) was allowed to wear the Persian badge of status and authority, the *kamar* belt.<sup>19</sup> The highly critical views that Palestinian Jews had of the 'outlandish' costumes of certain Persian Jews even suggest that some Jews may even have been members of the imperial administration.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore quite possible that Jews from the core area of the kingdom — Xūzestān, Fārs, and Media — viewed themselves as part of the Sassanian state and loyal subjects of the king, in short *ēr*. In that sense, it may be worth mentioning that it was only in Sassanian Persia that Jews were recognized as *Aryalēr* by the state. We should, however, remember that the Jewish community, much like other religious communities in Late Antiquity, viewed others as outsiders. As a consequence, they were treated as a separate entity by the State. Thus, both Jews and Christians were recognized as separate religious communities or *millets*, to use an anachronistic, yet relatively well-known term in use under the Ottomans. Other religious communities, such as the Manichaeans, were never granted that status and, as a consequence, had very different views of ethnicity and Ērānšahr.

<sup>17</sup> W. Hinz, 'Mani and Kardēr', in *Atti del Convegno internazionale sul tema 'La Persia nel Medioevo'*, Roma 31 marzo–5 aprile 1970 (Rome, 1971), pp. 498–99.

<sup>18</sup> Hinz, 'Mani and Kardēr', p. 493.

<sup>19</sup> J. Neusner, 'How much Iranian in Jewish Babylonia?', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 95.2 (1975), 187–88.

<sup>20</sup> Neusner, 'How much Iranian', p. 188.

## Boundary

The issue of boundaries in Sassanian Persia is a very confusing one.<sup>21</sup> This is because the classical sources tend to supply one set of notions about Persian borders that is different from that of other sources. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, Herodian, and Zonaras, Sassanians made all efforts to revive the Achaemenid Empire and restore the old Persian imperial borders.<sup>22</sup> Sassanian royal inscriptions have a different view, as they are based on political realities, while the inscription of Kerdīr provides an ethnic view of the boundary. By contrast, Middle Persian, along with some other Persian, texts produce a very different picture of imperial frontiers, imbued as they are with Persian mythical views of the world. We need therefore to clarify such views in order to understand the complexity of boundary issues in late antique Persia.

According to the Avestan hymn to Mithra (*Mihr Yašt* X. 15), the world was divided into seven climes or tracts (Avestan *karšuar*, Middle Persian *kišwar*): Arāzahī; Savahī; Fradaḏafšu; Vidaḏfšu; Vouru.barəšfi; Vouru.jarəšfi; and Xvaniraθa.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> There are several texts mentioning the eastern boundaries of *Ērān*. For example, *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr: A Middle Persian Text on Late Antique Geography, Epic, and History*, ed. and trans. by T. Daryaee (Costa Mesa, 2002), pp. 8–9: ‘In the brilliant Balx, the city of Nawāzag was built by Spandyād, the son of Wištāsp. And he set the miraculous Wahrām fire there and struck his lance there and he sent a message to Yabbu Xāgān, Sinjēbīk Xāgān, and Čōl Xāgān and the Great Xāgān and Gohram and Tuzāb and Arzāsp, the king of the Hayōns: “behold my lance, whoever beholds the movement of this lance is like they have rushed to Iran”’ (‘andar baxl ī \*bāmīg šahrestān [ī] nawāzag spandyād ī wištāspān pus kard. u-š warzāwand ātaxš wahrām ānōh nišast u-š nēzag ī xwēš ānōh be zad u-š ō yabbu xāgān ud sinjēbīk xāgān ud čōl xāgān ud wuzurg xā[gā]n ud gōhram ud tuzāb ud arzāsp ī xiyōnān-šāh paygām frēstēd kū ō nēzag ī man be nigerēd har kē pad wazišn ī ēn nēzag nigerēd čē andar ō ērān-šahr dwārēd’). According to this passage, a lance could be used to mark the boundary, while Balx was on the frontier of *Ērān*. Another view of the eastern frontier may be found in the *Wizīdagihā ī Zādspram*, in *Anthologie de Zādspram*, ed. and trans. by Ph. Gignoux and A. Tafazzoli (Paris, 1993), pp. 58–59. Here Nawāzag is the ‘border of *Ērān* and *Tūrān*’ that ‘was written and manifest on its hoof’ (‘sāmān ī ērān ud tūrān pad nibištāg abar sumb paydāg būd’). According to the Persian Muslim author Bērūnī (*Athār al-Bāghīya*, ed. by J. Homāyī (Tehran, 1998), p. 220), the Aryan archer *Āraš* once shot an arrow to demarcate the frontier between *Ērān* and *Tūrān*. With the connivance of Spandarmad (or of Ohrmazd, according to the *Frawardīn Yašt*), the arrow struck a walnut tree somewhere between Faragana and Tabaristān. This event was celebrated by Persians as the day of *Tīr rōz* or *Tīragān*. See Zabih Allah Safā, *Hamāse Sarāyī dar Irān: Az qadimtarin ‘ahd-i-tarikhī ta qarn-i chahardahum-i hijri* (Tehran, 1984), p. 568.

<sup>22</sup> Herodian, *History* 4.2.2, ed. by C. R. Whitaker (Cambridge, MA, 1969); Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, ed. and trans. by H. B. Foster and E. Cary (Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 483; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 27.4–6, in *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354–378)* trans. by Walter Hamilton (Hammondsworth, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, ed. and trans. by Ilya Gershevitch and Karl F. Geldner (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 80–81.

This is in fact the earliest complete list of the seven climes or tracts of the world to be found in the *Avesta*.<sup>24</sup> This division must be as old as the time of Zoroaster, for in *Yasna* 32. 3 he mentions ‘the seventh world’ (*būmīā haptai 9ē*).<sup>25</sup>

A division of the world into seven regions (Sanskrit *dvīpa*) is attested in India as well, which suggests that this conceptual partition is of Indo-Iranian origin.<sup>26</sup> According to Sassanian sources, especially *Bundahišn*, the shape of these climes is as such that ‘one half [is] in the middle and six parts around’ (‘nēm-ē mayān (ud) šaš pārag pērāmōn’). The location of each of these *kišwars* is explained as follows: ‘The part in the north-east direction is the clime of Sawah, the part in the south-west direction is the clime of Arzah, two parts are in the south-eastern direction, the climes of Fradaḏafš and Widadaḏafš, two parts are in the north-western direction, the climes of Wōrūbaršt and Wōrūjaršt, two parts in between Xwanirah.’<sup>27</sup> The emphasis is on the central clime. Indeed, (Avestan) *Xvaniraθa* (Middle Persian) *Xwanirah* was the most important of the seven climes: ‘and from these seven climes, all the goodness was created more in Xwanirah’.<sup>28</sup> Everything important to both Zoroastrianism and

<sup>24</sup> See also *Rašn Yašt* 15–19; *Vendidād* XIX. 39; *Vispered* X. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *The Gāthās of Zarathushtra and the Other Old Avestan Texts*, ed. by Helmut Humbach, Josef Elfenbein, and Prods O. Skjærvø, vol. 1 (Heidelberg, 1991), p. 132.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Boyce and Frantz Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1 (Leiden, 1989), p. 134. According to Georges Dumézil, *The Destiny of a King* (Chicago, 1973), p. 11, the original Persian world-view corresponded to the Indic five climes of the world. The Indic concept of the terrestrial world was that it was divided into five *dīśah* or *pradīśah* regions, corresponding to the Irish word *cóiced* ‘fifth’ used to describe ‘provinces’ in Ireland. Thus according to Dumézil, this must have been the original Indo-European division of the world, and not the division into seven regions, which Dumézil believed to be of Mesopotamian origin, following Willibald Kirfel, *Die Kosmographie der Inder* (Hildesheim, 1920; repr. 1967), pp. 28–30. On the basis of the Gāthic evidence, and assuming a Mesopotamian influence, this could not have taken place but in the second millennium BCE, while by Zoroaster’s time this view of the world was already well known and influenced Persian beliefs. It is indeed possible that during Zoroaster’s lifetime (c. 1000 BCE) Mesopotamian ideas entered into Central Asia (if that is where Zoroaster lived) and thus influenced Zoroastrian theology, but very little evidence exists for such contacts. As a consequence, and in view of both Indic and Iranian evidence, I am inclined to treat the division of the world into seven parts as an early, Indo-Iranian concept. See also M. Schwartz, ‘The Avestan World View’, in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. II, ed. by Ilya Gershevitch (Cambridge, 1985), p. 643. The sacred numbers in the Indo-Iranian and particularly Zoroastrian tradition were 3 and 7; see A. S. Shahbazi, ‘Persepolis and the Avesta’, *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, 27 (1994), 86.

<sup>27</sup> *Bundahišn*, ed. by Mehrdad Bahār (Tehran, 1990), p. 70: ‘pārag-ē pad kust ī xwarāsān sawah kišwar (pārag-ē pad kust ī) xwarwarān arzah kišwar, dō pārag pad kust ī nēm-rōz fradaḏafš ud widadaḏafš kišwar, dō pārag pad kust ī abāxtar wōrūbaršt wōrūjaršt kišwar dō pārag ān ī mayān xwanirah.’

<sup>28</sup> *Bundahišn*, ed. by Bahār, p. 70: ‘ud az ēn haft kišwar hamāg nekīh andar xwanirah wēš dād’.

Persian sacred history takes place in this clime: 'Because the Kayānids and the heroes were created in *Xwanirah* and the religion of the Mazda worshipping religion was created in *Xwanirah*, and then it was taken to other climes. Sošyāns will be born in *Xwanirah*, who will make the Evil Spirit powerless and bring about the resurrection and the final body.'<sup>29</sup> The ancient kings, the Kayānids, and all other important characters dwelt in this central clime. Mazda-worshipping religion (Zoroastrianism) came about in *Xwanirah*, and Sošyāns, the saviours of the world, will also appear from that clime. According to the *Avesta*, only *Xwanirah* is inhabited by humans. The size of this clime and the number of living beings therein are equal to the other six climes combined. The latter are not only isolated from each other, but also from *Xwanirah*. Water (Lake Vouru.kaša) surrounds the central clime and thus separates it from demons and noxious creatures that exist in the other six climes. In other words, *Xwanirah* is the *oikoumenē*, while half of the world is devoid of humanity and civilization, its only inhabitants being demons.

The Sassanians who established an empire firmly entrenched in Zoroastrian ideas gave special credence to this idea of a world divided into seven parts. As a consequence of political developments of Late Antiquity, Sassanian kings altered the Avestan world-view in order to adapt the mythical view to the geopolitical realities. One of the most important changes introduced to the Avestan world-view in Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts was the migration of humans to the other six climes, which were previously thought of as not inhabited by humans. Thus humans resided now in all the seven climes.<sup>30</sup> This change is clearly reflected in an important Zoroastrian text of encyclopedic nature, the *Bundahišn*. According to this text, humans riding the mythical cow Srīšwag were able to cross the water into the other six climes. Out of fifteen couples born in the primordial times who formed the initial 'tribes' (*sardag*), nine moved to the other climes on Srīšwag's back. Six tribes were supposed to have remained in *Xwanirah*, but the text lists seven: Arabs, Persians, Māzandarānians, Turanians (Turks), Romans, Dahae, and Indians.<sup>31</sup>

Another important change during this period was the equation of *Xwanirah* with the Sassanian Empire.<sup>32</sup> According to the Avestan world-view *Airyānəm Vaējō* (Middle Persian *Ērān-wēž*) was located in eastern Persia (Central Asia), by the river known as *Vaṅhvī Dāitiyā* (Middle Persian *Weh Dāitiya*), which is the ancient Oxus River, now Amu Darya.<sup>33</sup> Thus, *Ērān* was part of the *Xwanirah* but in time it began

<sup>29</sup> *Bundahišn*, ed. by Bahār, p. 70: 'ēē kayān ud wīrān andar xwanirah dād ud dēn ī weh māzdēsnañ pad xwanirah dād ud pas ō abārtg kišwar burd sošyāns andar xwanirah zāyēd kē gannāg mēnōg a-gār kunēd ud rist-āxēz tan ī pasēn kunēd.'

<sup>30</sup> *Bundahišn*, ed. by Bahār, p. 71. According to *Mēnōg ī Xrad* 15. 10, ed. by A. Taffazoli (Tehran, 1986), p. 31, the primary source of food in the six tracts is milk.

<sup>31</sup> Mehrdad Bahār, *Pajūhešī dar Asāfirī-ye Irān* (Tehran, 1984), p. 179.

<sup>32</sup> Gnoli, *Idea of Iran*, p. 175.

<sup>33</sup> *Gāthās of Zarathushtra*, ed. by Humbach, Elfenbein, and Skjærvø, p. 33.

to grow larger. This change was brought about by the ideology of the Sassanian kings, who saw *Ērānšahr* as a territory where Persians lived. *Ērānšahr* was not a part of the Avestan mythical world, but a precise region inhabited by Persians and ruled by them ever since the Achaemenid period. In his trilingual inscription at Ka'be-ye Zardošt, King Šābuhr I (240–70 CE) describes the frontiers of *Ērān* in the following manner: 'I am the ruler of *Ērān-šahr* and hold these *šahrs*: Persia, Parthia, Xuzestān, Mēšān, Assyria, Adiabene, Arabia, Āzerbaījan, Armenia, Geogris, Segan, Albania, Balaskan, up to the Caucasus Mountains and the Gates of Albania, and all of the mountain chain of Pareshtar, Media, Gurgan, Merv, Herāt and all of Abaršahr, Kermān, Sīstan, Tūrān, Makrān, Paradene, India, Kušānšahr up to Peshawar and up to Kašgar, Sogdiana and to the mountains of Taškent, and on the other side of the sea, Oman.'<sup>34</sup> The frontiers of *Ērānšahr* are thus defined in terms of the third-century imperial ideology of the early Sassanians. For a good comparison, we learn about territories considered to be *Ērān* and *an-Ērān*, respectively, from the inscription of the Zoroastrian priest Kerdīr: 'Persis, Parthia, Xūzestān, Babylonia, Mesene, Adiabene, Atropatene, Isfahān, Rāy, Kermān, Sagastān, Gurgān up to Pešāwar.'<sup>35</sup> To Kerdīr, the concept of *Ērān/Ērānšahr* is tied to the Zoroastrian religion and most important to him was the distinction between *Ērān* and *an-Ērān*. The frontier separating the two was that of Zoroastrianism. By comparing the ethnic and imperial definitions of the imperial frontiers, it becomes clear that the Empire of the Sassanian kings who proclaimed themselves 'Kings of Kings of *Ērān* and *non-Ērān*' (*šāhān šāh ērān ud anērān*) was a much broader concept.

During the late Sassanian period (sixth to seventh centuries) another view made its appearance, which was different from the views of *Avesta*, the *Bundahišn*, and the third-century inscriptions. *Ērānšahr*, or the area inhabited by the Persians, was now identified with the whole of *Xwanirah*, the central clime where humans initially lived. Inhabitants of *Xwanirah* were now seen as migrants into the other, previously uninhabited climes of the *Avesta*. This innovative view was not solely the result of Zoroastrian activism, but also of imperial propaganda (no doubt supported by Zoroastrian priests). The tribes living in the *Xwanirah* according to the *Bundahišn* were now placed in each of the six climes, with the exception of the Māzandarānians and the Dahae and the corresponding addition of Egypt and Syria as the sixth clime. This was naturally the list of the people the Sassanians knew and with whom they were in contact, but who were now assigned places in the Avestan world divided into seven parts.

<sup>34</sup> Back, *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*, pp. 285–88; Philip Huyse, *Die dreisprachige Inschrift Šābuhrs I. an der Ka'ba-i Zardušt*, vol. 1 (London, 1999), pp. 22–23. An identical list appears in Naqš-e Rostam; see Richard Nelson Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* (Munich, 1984), p. 371.

<sup>35</sup> Gignoux, *Les quatre inscriptions*, p. 71: 'Pārs ud pārt ud xūzestān ud āsūrestān ud mēšān ud Nōdšragān ud dūrbādagān ud spahān ud rāy ud kermān ud sagastān ud gūrgān tā frāz ō pešwar'; Back, *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*, pp. 421–22.

At this time *Ērān*, also known as *Ērānšahr*, 'the Domain of the Iranians,' gained an amazing boundary, which had little to do with both *Avesta* and the political realities of the Sassanian period. This is evident when examining a work of geography in Middle Persian, the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (The Provincial Capitals of *Ērānšahr*).<sup>36</sup> This work provides an unusual perspective on Persian views of the world, in which *Ērān* is allotted a remarkably large territory, in fact the whole of *Xwanirah*. It is interesting to note that the cities mentioned in this text do not represent all the regions where Persians held sway and, moreover, this is not the administrative set-up of the Sassanian Empire.<sup>37</sup>

The *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* divides the Sassanian Empire into four *kusts* or regions: the north-east (*kust ī xwarāsān*), the south-west (*kust ī xwarbarān*), the south-east (*kust ī nēmrōz*), and the north-west (*kust ī ādūrbādagān*).<sup>38</sup> The south-western region includes such territories as Africa (*frīgā*) and such cities as Mecca (*mekkā*) and Medina (*madīnag*). How were these added to the Sassanian notion of *Ērān/Ērānšahr*? Simply put, the division into four regions originated in the administrative reforms implemented by Kawād I and his son Xusrō I in the 500s, but only accomplished during the reign of Xusrō II (590–628), when imperial ambitions drove the Persian armies to Africa and under the walls of Constantinople. In Arabia, while Oman had been intermittently under Persian control during the third century, Persian forces invaded Yemen during Xusrō I's reign (575). Arabic sources also attest to the fact that during the 500s the Persians were in Mecca and they were probably also involved in Medina. According to *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, both cities of eastern Arabia were in *Ērān/Ērānšahr*.<sup>39</sup> As for Africa, it is well known that Xusrō II's forces invaded and occupied Egypt between 619 and 628. There are also reports that Persian forces, following the occupation of Egypt, made incursions westward into Libya and southward into Ethiopia.<sup>40</sup> Though short-lived, this far out venture of Xusrō II's

<sup>36</sup> *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, ed. and trans. by Daryae.

<sup>37</sup> R. Gyselen, 'Les données de géographie administrative dans le *Šahrestānīhā-ī Ērān*', *Studia Iranica*, 17 (1988), 206.

<sup>38</sup> The regions of *Ērān* are listed in diagonal order, a manner reminiscent of King Darius's gold and silver tablets from Persepolis. In the tablets, the Achaemenid Empire is said to stretch 'from the land of the Sakas to Ethiopia and from India to Sardis' and this may be an element of the oral tradition lasting from the Achaemenids to the last Sassanian kings. See Touraj Daryae, 'Čand nokte darbare-ye matn pahlavi-ye šahrestanha-ye iranšahr', *Iranshenasi*, 12.4 (2001), 797–98. For similarities between Achaemenid and Sassanian inscriptions, see O. P. Skjærvø, 'Thematic and Linguistic Parallels in the Achaemenian and Sassanian Inscriptions', in *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, vol. II (Leiden, 1985), pp. 593–603; Philip Huyse, 'Noch einmal zu Parallelen zwischen Achaemeniden und Sāsānideninschriften', *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran*, 23 (1990), 173–83.

<sup>39</sup> M. J. Kister, 'Al-Hīra, Some Notes on its Relations with Arabia', *Arabica*, 11.2 (1968), 145–46.

<sup>40</sup> R. Altheim-Stiehl, 'The Sassanians in Egypt – Some Evidence of Historical Interest', *Bulletin de la Société d'archéologie Copte*, 31 (1992), 92.

forces remained in Persian memory for a relatively long time. Tabarī reports that Xusrō's horsemen reached as far as Africa (Arabic *Ifriqiyah*),<sup>41</sup> which most likely refers to North Africa. Persian involvement in Ethiopia is mentioned in a medieval Persian epic, the *Kūšnāme* (Book of Kūš).<sup>42</sup> In this text the hero born from the union of a Persian man and an African woman is sent on behalf of the *Ērānians* to conquer the Ethiopians. He does so bravely, but lately decides to switch sides, and another battle is fought in the kingdom of Kūš. I believe this medieval Persian epic encapsulates the late Sassanian encounter between Persians and Ethiopians, however much the episode was embellished in epic fashion. One last piece of evidence comes from the Georgian chronicle, the eighth- or ninth-century *History of King Vaxt'ang Grogali*. The chronicle reports that the Georgian hero *Vaxt'ang* accompanied the Persian king to the land of *Abasēt'i*. The locale is described as follows: 'a land which was surrounded by water and reeds, in which neither ships nor even quadrupeds could move. It is on the borders of Persia.'<sup>43</sup> This evidence suggests not only a fascination with Ethiopia, but also some kind of historical connection between the two peoples which is reminiscent of Herodotus's account of Cambyses's plan of invading Ethiopia.

If these historical accounts are indeed the point of reference for the geographical outlook of the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, then during the late Sassanian period an image of the world must have developed among Persians, which was ultimately derived from imperial policies of the sixth and early seventh centuries. This was a period of reinvigoration of the Empire during which Sassanian Persia reached its largest limits and exerted influence far beyond its political borders. *Ērān/Ērānšahr* had now expanded and reflected a new Sassanian imperial image of the world. When Xusrō I took the title of 'Lord of the Seven Climes' (*haft kišwar xwadāy*)<sup>44</sup> this concept harkened back to the Avestan ideas as reflected in *Kayān* or *Zamyād Yašt*, in which the Kayānid kings are not only endowed the (Avestan) 'Kavīyan Glory' (*kauuaēm x'arəno*),<sup>45</sup> but also known as those 'who ruled over the seven climes of earth' (*yat xšāiata paiti būmīm haptai θīiam*). What had changed, however, was that

<sup>41</sup> Tabarī, *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, trans. by Clifford Edmund Bosworth, vol. v (New York, 1999), p. 376.

<sup>42</sup> *Kūšnāme*, ed. by Jalal Matīnī (Tehran, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*, trans. by Robert W. Thomson (Oxford 1996), pp. 210–11. The Armenian version has 'Habašet', to the land of the K'uš'. It is interesting to note that the Armenian version of this text maintains that the Kušāns were descendants of the 1,000 prisoners taken from 'the land of the K'uš' and deported to Persia. See *Rewriting Caucasian History*, trans. by Thomson p. 212.

<sup>44</sup> Davoud Monchi-Zadeh, 'Xosrov ut Retak', in *Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne*, vol. II (Leiden, 1982), p. 63.

<sup>45</sup> For the concept of 'glory' (*xwarrah*) as used on coins of the late Sassanian rulers, see Touraj Daryae, 'The Coinage of Xusrō II: Propaganda', *Journal of the American Numismatic Society*, 7 (1997), 41–54.

while holding to this title, non-Ērānians had been pushed onto the other six climes and *Xwanirah* had been equated with *Ērān/Ērānšahr*.<sup>46</sup>

To return now to ethnicity and its association to boundaries, it is also evident that non-Zoroastrian Persians identified with *Ērānšahr*. A good example of such views is the inscription on a coffin found in Constantinople. The coffin was that of a Christian Persian named Xordād, the son of Hormizd-Āfrīd, who had travelled to Byzantium probably in the 800s,<sup>47</sup> long after the Arabs had conquered the Sassanian Empire and replaced the rule of the Sassanian king with that of the Caliph. Hormizd-Āfrīd's homeland was now within the eastern part of what Arab Muslims called 'the house of Islam' (*dar al-Islam*). Nevertheless, the inscription mentions Hormizd-Āfrīd's son as being 'from the dwelling of *Ērānšahr*, from the district of Čālagān, from the village of Xīšt' ('az mān ī ērānšahr, az rōstā (ī) čālagān, az deh (ī) xīšt'). Quite literally, this inscription thus suggests that in the absence of the Sassanian Empire, *Ērān/Ērānšahr* had lost its religious significance for non-Zoroastrians. *Ērānšahr* could therefore be called homeland by a Christian Persian. In my opinion, this semantic transfer was a consequence of the recognition of the Christian Persian church in the fifth century. After c. 400, regardless of their religion, all Persians had constructed a set boundary in their minds, which coincided with the frontiers of *Ērānšahr*, although its extent may have been defined in various ways by various religious communities. The territory referred to as *Ērān/Ērānšahr* in the funerary inscription of Xordād may well be the third- to seventh-century Empire extending from the Amu Darya to the Euphrates. To Zoroastrian priests of the early Sassanian period, it included only the lands mentioned in Kerdīr's third-century inscription. Imperial frontiers, however, had considerably expanded, and the idea of a much larger *Ērān/Ērānšahr* survived well into the Islamic period. According to the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, *Ērān/Ērānšahr* extended from Central Asia to Africa. This view was to become part of the Persian literary tradition. The *Preface to the Šāhnāme of Abū Mansūrī* defines *Ērānšahr* as 'from the Amū Daryā (Oxus) river to Misr (Nile) river and these other regions are around it, and from these seven regions, *Ērānšahr* is more magnanimous in every part'.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the mythical division of the world into seven climes was eventually introduced into political reality as represented on the maps of the early Islamic period,

<sup>46</sup> One can also suspect that *Xwanirah* is the land of settled dwellers and equated with the civilized clime, in which case *Ērān* is the only civilized region.

<sup>47</sup> F. de Blois, 'The Middle-Persian Inscription from Constantinople: Sassanian or Post-Sassanian?', *Studia Iranica*, 19 (1990), 209–18.

<sup>48</sup> Muhammad Qazvīnī, 'Moghadame-ye šāhnāme-ye ghadīm', in his *Bīst maghāle-ye Ghazvīnī*, ed. by Abbas Ighbāl, vol. II (Tehran, 1984), p. 49. In editing the text, Davoud Monchi-Zadeh corrected this passage in accordance with the traditional boundaries of the Sassanian Empire and thus replaced the Nile with *forāt* 'Euphrates'. See Davoud Monchi-Zadeh, *Topographisch-historische Studien zum iranischen Nationalepos* (Wiesbaden, 1975), p. 8. In my opinion, this is simply a violation of the original text.

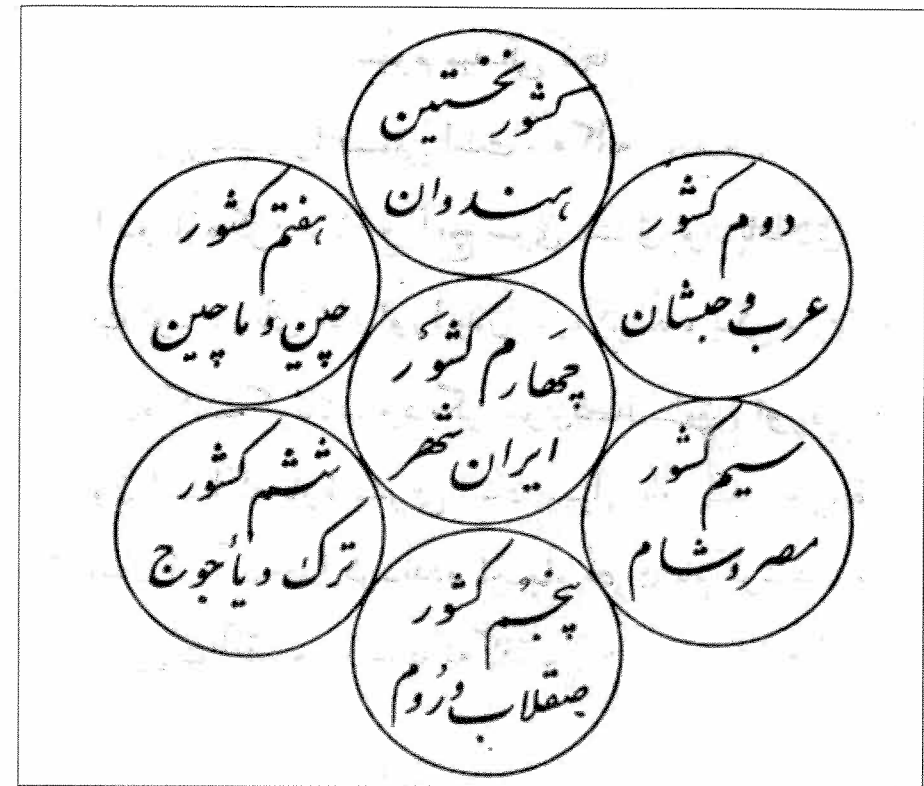


Figure 1. The World according to the *Šāhnāme-ye Abū Mansūrī*.

such as that of Bērūnī matching the description in the *Preface to the Šāhnāme of Abū Mansūrī* (Fig. 1). Bērūnī explicitly linked his representation to the Persian image of the world.<sup>49</sup> This inverted map is a somewhat modified version of the Avestan division of the world: instead of one clime for each direction of the compass, Bērūnī placed two climes to the east and another two to the west, with just one clime for north and south, respectively. Nevertheless, *Ērān/Ērānšahr* stretches from Egypt to the land of the Turks (Central Asia), much like in the descriptions of the *Preface to the Šāhnāme of Abū Mansūrī* and in the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*. The contemporary geopolitical situation was naturally much different from the situation described on this map, but the scribe had to follow the ancient Persian image of the world, in which *Ērānšahr* was at the centre with all other lands surrounding it. Moreover, more accurate maps of the world known to the Persian Muslims still represent *Ērānšahr* in the middle, albeit under the modified name of 'cities of Persia' (*šahrhā-ye bārs*) (Fig. 2).

<sup>49</sup> Muhammad ibn Ahmad Bērūnī, *Āthār al-Bāghīyā*, ed. by Akbar Danasirisht (Tehran, 1984), p. 196.

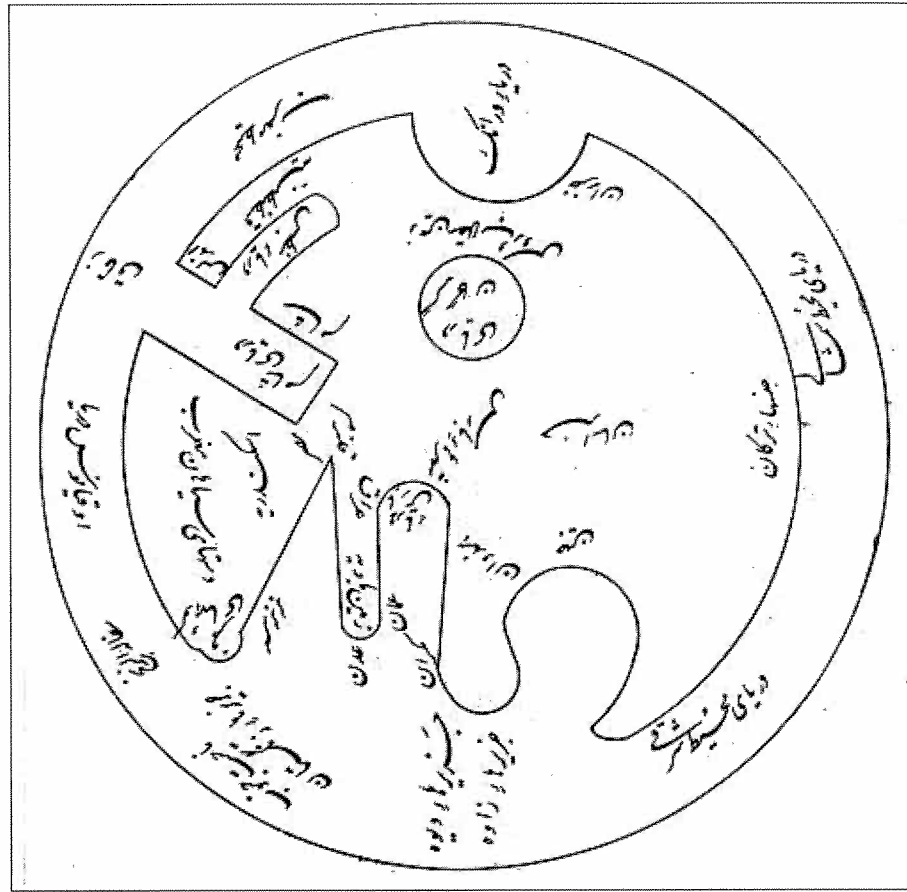


Figure 2. The World according to the Persian Scholar Bērūnī.

### Conclusion

While the concept of *Ērān* and Iranian-ness (*ēr*) had its roots in Zoroastrianism, imperial and religious views began to diverge already in the third century.<sup>50</sup> During

<sup>50</sup> This is most evidently shown by means of comparing the inscription of Šābuhr I with that of Kerdīr. Besides provinces mentioned in the latter, the former includes the following: Arabia (*'rbystn-y*), Armenia (*'rnm-y*), Iberia (*wyršn*), Machelonia (*sykn*), Albania (*'rd'n*), Balāsagān (*bl'skn*), Alānān (*'l'nn*), Tabarestān and Gēlān (*pryšhwr*), Hyrknia (*wrkn*), Margnia (*mrgw*), Harē/Areia (*hryw*), Abršahr (*'prhštr*), Tūrān (*twrgn*), Makūrān (*mkwrn*), Paradene (*p'rtm*), Hindustān (*hndstm*), Kūšānšahr (*kwšnhštr*), Pēšawar (*'L pškbwr*), Kāšgar (*'L k'š*),

most of the Sassanian period, an *ēr* was not necessarily or exclusively a Zoroastrian Persian, as shown by the inscription of a Christian Persian from Constantinople. This was certainly agreeable to Sassanian monarchs whose imperial ambitions were often restricted by Zoroastrian religious exclusions. Manichaeans, however, did not hold to the idea of *ēr*. It is possible that, since both Christian and Jewish communities were recognized by king and state, Manichaeans did initially identify with *Ērānšahr*. The Jewish community was recognized in the third century, the Christian one in the fifth. By contrast, Manichaeans were persecuted and driven out of the Empire. This may well explain why Manichaeans, along with Arabs, Chinese, and Romans referred to the Sassanian territory as Fars, Persis, or Persia,<sup>51</sup> but not *Ērānšahr*. Since they had been excluded from *Ērān* and denied Iranian-ness, they could not accept the Sassanian definition of imperial boundaries. This in turn suggests that during Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, different religious communities had different notions of ethnicity in relation to *ēr* and the frontiers of *Ērānšahr*. While various religious communities (particularly the Jews) defined themselves in opposition to and separate from others, it was the Sassanian state that granted those willing to serve the family of Sāsān and support the Empire the status of citizens, *Ērānagān* and *mard/zan ī šahr*. Those who either challenged the Sassanian rule or were not accepted by the state, such as the Manichaeans, were not only persecuted and driven out of the Empire, but also denied the status of citizens. They, in turn, refused to view themselves as citizens of *Ērānšahr* and to recognize the Empire of *Ērānšahr*.

There is much continuity in the history of the world representation in ancient and medieval Persia. However, it is with the coming of the Sassanians and their establishment of *Ērān/Ērānšahr* as imperial territory that the Persian image of the world was drastically altered. While rooted in the Younger *Avesta*, the concept of *Ērān/Ērānšahr* was remodelled to accommodate the new ideological needs of the imperial propaganda. This is particularly evident in the new meaning attached to the central region *Xwanirah*, initially the only one of seven climes to be inhabited by humans. Now *Ērān/Ērānšahr* was squarely placed in *Xwanirah* and given the river *Vaṅhvī Dāitiyā* (Amu Darya) as northern frontier. Further changes were introduced during the early Sassanian period to this geographic concept. First, Persians and a host of other peoples were placed in *Xwanirah*, while others were 'pushed out' into the previously uninhabited six climes. Later, most likely during the late Sassanian period, *Ērān/Ērānšahr* was eventually identified with the whole of *Xwanirah*. As a consequence, other peoples allowed to live in *Xwanirah* during the early Sassanian period were now pushed out into the other Avestan climes. The Sassanians thus manipulated Avestan geographical views to make *Ērān/Ērānšahr*, the Empire, not just the privileged area of the world, much like the Achaemenids had done before

Sogdiana (*swgd*), Taškent (*š'šstn*), and Oman (*mzwnhštr*). See Back, *Die Sassanidischen Staatsinschriften*, pp. 286–88.

<sup>51</sup> Gnoli, *Idea of Iran*, pp. 152 and 156.

them, but also the central clime. Such changes are most evident on maps produced by early Islamic geographers and writers who saw *Ērān/Ērānšahr* as the central clime surrounded by the other six regions of the world. In reality, this was a late Sassanian innovation that not only transposed successfully the Avestan *Airyānəm Vaējō* onto the Empire, but also included territories recently conquered by imperial armies, all of which were now redefined as *Xwanīrah*.

## Acculturation and Ethnogenesis along the Frontier: Rome and the Ancient Germans in an Archaeological Perspective

SEBASTIAN BRATHER

Fifteen years ago, against the grain of common views opposing Romans to ancient Germans, Patrick Geary boldly affirmed that ‘the Germanic world was perhaps the greatest and most enduring creation of Roman political and military genius’.<sup>1</sup> The current historical and archaeological research indeed insists on the close interactions between Rome and the northern barbarians. Processes of acculturation and ethnogenesis took place, sometimes concomitantly, and influenced both sides. From their inception, such contacts induced a variety of changes, and the multitude of interactions taking place make it difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint a clear-cut historical moment for the onset of exchange between the two apparently different worlds.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, the barbarian perspective will be given special emphasis grounded in the archaeological evidence.

### *First Contacts since Caesar*

Caesar first produced a narrower definition of the ancient Germans. The term *Germani* had probably been known before him, but the dichotomy between Germans and Celts is apparently the product of the political thought of this influential Roman politician and commander. He, and no one else, established the Rhine as a frontier

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford, 1988), p. vi.

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Gotter, ‘“Akkulturation” als Methodenproblem der historischen Wissenschaften’, in *Wir, ihr, sie: Identität und Alterität in Theorie und Methode*, ed. by Wolfgang Ebbach (Würzburg, 2000), pp. 373–406, here p. 387.

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**BORDERS, BARRIERS, AND  
ETHNOGENESIS**

Frontiers in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

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