

RLST 124I: Varieties of Ancient Judaism
Spring 2009
Handout #7 (May 12, 2009)
“Persian Jews”

Sassanid Empire: Persian ruling dynasty established in 226 CE, which instituted rigid class hierarchies, autocratic military rule, and Zoroastrianism as the “official” Persian religion; in constant military conflict with the Roman Empire, until collapsing under the spread of Islam in the 650s

dualism: a theological orientation that posits a struggle between good and evil that is conducted at the individual, communal, and cosmic levels; dualistic religions usually assume the eventual triumph of “good” over “evil,” but assign different levels of potency and authority to the powers of evil

Zoroastrianism/Magianism/Mazdeanism: a dualistic ethical monotheism of the Near East, in which believers worship a single god of wisdom and truth (*Ahura Mazda*) and work to resist the forces of evil (in extreme formulations, posited as almost a second god); *Mazda* is not worshipped with sacrifices, but in fire temples managed by special priests (*magi*); the religion is named for *Zarathustra* (or Zoroaster), the prophet (of the 6th? 18th? 10th? 6th? cen. BCE) of *Mazda* (although greatly diminished, Zoroastrianism remains a “world religion,” with adherents possibly numbering in the millions)

Mani/Manicheanism: an ascetic dualistic monotheism founded by Mani (in the third century), combining aspects of Mazdeanism and Christianity; Manicheans believed that seeds of Light were trapped in a web of Darkness (the created world), and that the Savior (Christ) had come to free the seeds of Light

Pahlavi: the official court language of the Sassanids

Aramaic: the official scribal language of the Sassanids

“castes”: a sociological term used to describe highly rigid systems of social hierarchy; in Sassanian Persia, these castes are usually divided into four: priestly, warrior/noble, scribal/bureaucratic, merchant/artisans. The King of Kings is above all of the castes, and the slave population is below all of them.

exilarch (*resh galuta*): literally, “Leader in Exile” (Greek and Aramaic terms); used of the leader of the Mesopotamian community of Jews from about the third century (the end of the Parthian period); the first claimant to the title of exilarch was Huna I (*circa* 200 CE), although traditionally the office was imagined extending all the way to the Babylonian Exile. Under the Arsacids, the exilarch enjoyed some autonomy in running the Jewish communities; his authority fluctuated under the Sassanids

academies: major schools of rabbinic study in the Babylonian amoraic period (*circa* 200-500 CE) that seem to have emerged under a partnership between Babylonian sages and exilarchs; the two major academies (at Sura and Pumbedita), supposedly founded by *Rav* (Abba Arikha) and *Samuel* toward the mid-third century CE

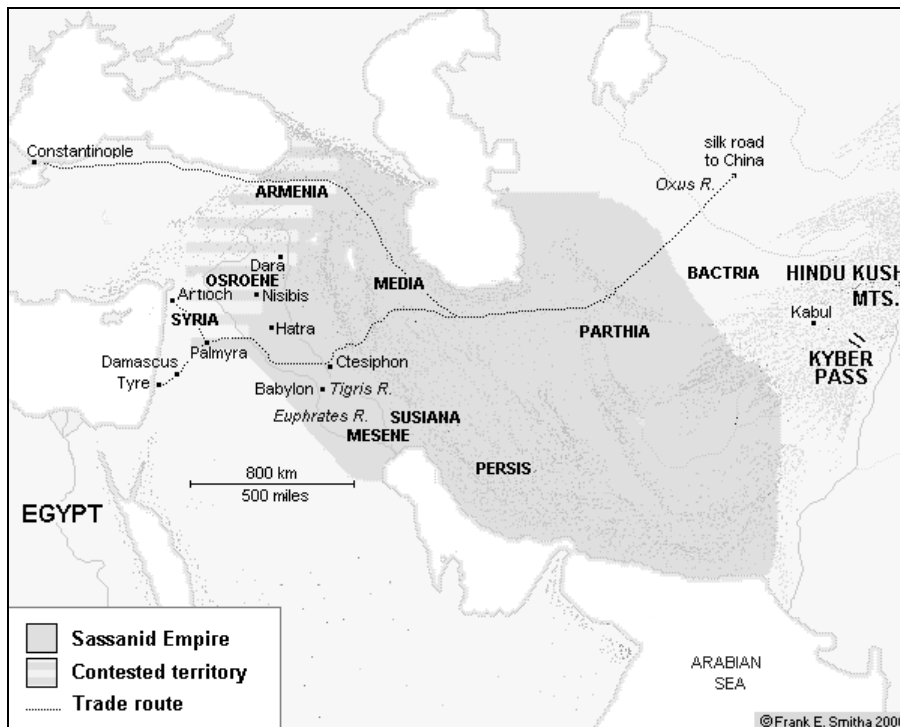
Persian Empires*

- 539-330 BCE *Achaemenid Empire* (Cyrus the Great)
- 330-323 BCE *Hellenistic Empire* (Alexander the Great)
- 323-171 BCE *Seleucid Empire* (Seleucus I [general of ATG])
- 171 BCE-226 CE *Parthian (Arsacid) Empire* (Mithridates I)
- 226 CE-651 CE *Sassanid Empire* (Ardashir)

* Dates refer to the rise to prominence of each Empire throughout the Mesopotamian basin, not the founding of the ruling dynasty.

Sassanid Empire

- 226: Adrashir takes the Parthian capital, establishes a dynasty named after his supposed ancestor *Sasan* (a Zoroastrian priest)
- 240: Adrashir abdicates in favor of his son, **Shapur I**; appoints a *chief magus* (Zoroastrian high priest), but also is a patron of *Mani*
- 277: Shapur's successor, **Bahram II**, has *Mani* executed; persecutions of non-Zoroastrians persist during this period
- 309-379: **Shapur II** ("crowned" before his birth) reorganizes Persia politically and religiously: instituting a rigid class system and organizing the *magi* to introduce Zoroastrian "orthodoxy"; persecutions of Christians and Manicheans
- 363: Julian dies in invasion of Persia; his successor cedes major cities to Shapur II, and Christians emigrate from Persia to Rome
- 470: Exilarch Huna executed by the Persian king as part of a general crackdown on Jewish communities
- 530-560s: Ongoing military conflicts between Chosroes (Khosrō) and Justinian I



Left: Map of Sassanid Persia (from <http://www.fsmitha.com/h1/map20per.htm>)
 Right: Bust of Shapur II (from http://www.livius.org/sao-sd/sassanids/shapur_ii_bust.jpg)