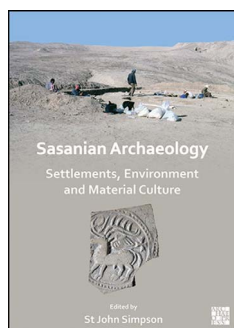


ANTIQUITY 2024 Vol. 98 (402): 1735–1737
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2024.176>

ST JOHN SIMPSON (ed.). 2022. *Sasanian archaeology: settlements, environment and material culture*. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-80327-418-8 paperback £75.



The study of Sasanian remains dates back to medieval historians and travellers such as Istakhri, Muqadasi and Ibn Balkhi, the author of the twelfth-century *Fārsnāma* (the historical geography of Fars). These historians provide an inventory of archaeological sites, primarily describing major cities within the empire's heartland, including Ardashir Khwarra (or Firūzabad), Dārābgird and Ctesiphon. From the eighteenth to mid-twentieth century, the study of the Sasanian period (224–651 AD) has been shaped by subjects such as numismatics, glyptic studies, art history and architectural analysis. Research on isolated and often out-of-context stuccoes, gilt silvers, cut glass, coins, glyptic and bullae—at the expense of archaeological fieldwork and analyses—has significantly influenced and misled our understanding of Sasanian archaeology.

The challenge of providing a comprehensive overview of the archaeological remains from the Sasanian period in Iran has been tackled through three different approaches. The aforementioned art historical examination predominantly focused on the most distinguished masterpieces within the material remains, emphasising architecture and minor arts. Then, perhaps the most effective way, is the regional method, exemplified by Dietrich Huff's comprehensive survey of Sasanian period archaeology: it grapples with the challenge of handling a large volume of archaeological materials that need to be regularly updated (Huff 1986). The third approach has been undertaken by St John Simpson in the present book, combining a survey of archaeological sites incorporating the material culture, the geographical settings and the environment. This approach has been highly effective in examining a wide variety of archaeological records.

The book is organised in three major parts, each with an introduction and a conclusion by the general editor. Part 1 deals with royal foundations, in brief, and rural settlements and Sasanian *aménagement du territoire* in eight contributions. The Introduction offers a useful overview of Sasanian settlement patterns—mostly in Mesopotamia—ranging from major towns to small sites and installations across the empire. It does not, however, cover recently excavated sites in Iran such as decorated manor houses and their adjacent buildings along the Saymareh River, which suggest a dense Sasanian settlement pattern in the region, at least during the final century of the empire, the seventh century. The choice of content in Part 1 is surprising as it mainly brings together previously published studies, such as James Neely's excellent report of his 1970s surveys in Khuzestan, published in 2016. Similarly, Jason Ur and Karim Alizadeh's 'The Sasanian colonisation of the Mughan Steppe' is a 2013 reprint. The title of their contribution suggests that the Plain of Mughan in north-western Iran was forcibly occupied during the Sasanian Empire. But the Mughan Steppe marks the northern

border of the province of Adurpadgan, a key region in the empire's administrative division. Therefore, it is not surprising that efforts were made to secure this borderland by constructing a series of forts and other defensive structures. Following that is a reprint from 2008 on the fieldwork conducted on the well-researched linear barriers of the Gorgan Plain. It offers a succinct and clear overview of the archaeological evidence pertaining to military and defensive constructions along the Gorgan River and in the Plain of Gorgan. The book's sole contribution to the study of Sasanian religious remains is another reprint of the excavation results from the site of Mele Hairam in present-day Turkmenistan. This contribution would have benefited from being analysed within a broader context, alongside other significant religious monuments in Khorasan, such as Bandiyan and Baz-Hur. The excavation results at Kirpichli depe in Dehistan, present-day Turkmenistan, appear for the first time here and include an interesting snapshot into a less-known region. The archaeological site, stretched over a series of mounds for approximately 2km, yielded finds dating from the sixth to the eighth centuries. This material parallels the finds from the Gorgan Plain. Another interesting archaeological report details the Iranian excavations at Tol-e Qal'eh Seyfabad, in Fars, an important economic and administrative centre in the Bishapur province. The site expanded due to its strategic location at the junction of trade and royal roads connecting the centre of Fars with the Persian Gulf and the northern and western parts of the Sasanian Empire. The next contribution, a reprint from 2013, is a particularly noteworthy synthesis of survey results in the hinterlands of the Persian Gulf, including several previously unexplored areas such as the Mohr, Bastak, Lamerd and Dezhgah districts. The archaeological evidence reveals a significant reduction in the number of settlements, from 119 sites during the Sasanian period to 52 sites in the early Islamic period and shows that the Sasanian administrative system controlling the hinterland districts did not survive the Arab invasion in the seventh century. Further data come from studying the maritime trade network in the Bushehr region and its hinterland based on the excavated finds from Siraf, now in the British Museum, which is the focus of the final contribution of part 1. This chapter re-evaluates clearly the significance and reasons for Siraf's development as a major emporium in the Persian Gulf in the late Sasanian/early Islamic period.

Part 2 starts with background details about the environmental studies on the Sasanian Empire with five interdisciplinary contributions. This is a novelty in the archaeology of the Iranian Empires as it deals with the impact of environment and natural resources. The editor's introduction provides an interesting overview of various agricultural resources such as crops and fruits as well as supply of fuel by drawing on mostly on textual evidence. He rightly notes that archaeobotanical studies of Sasanian sites are in their early stages but already provide valuable insights from sieving and floatation during excavations of late Sasanian contexts at Tell Baruda at Veh Ardashir (Ctesiphon), the results of which are largely unpublished. Further examples come from the late Sasanian funerary remains at Shahr-e Qumis as well as burnt almonds and carbonised figs, discovered in a seventh-century room at Qasr-e Abu Nasr. Other fields of inquiry in this part are faunal and zooarchaeological studies, the first on charcoal and wood in fuel residues in Sasanian and early Islamic layers at Merv, a place not particularly favoured by the abundance of trees and wood. The increased use of fruit and plantation woods in the late or post-Sasanian period suggests the destruction or decline of lowland riparian zones. The next contribution discusses the exploitation of wood resources

for firewood at Kush in Ras-al Khaima, an arid region on the southern fringes of the empire. This is followed by a contribution on two Sasanian faunal remains from excavated sites in the Hamrin Basin, in the Diyala region. The last contribution deals with fracture patterns of bones retrieved from the excavations at Merv. It would have been helpful to include new data from the empire's core region such as the Iranian Plateau.

Part 3 consists of three contributions treating Sasanian pottery and glazed ceramics, two are on Sasanian glass and one on Sasanian scabbards and swords. The 120-page chapter on Sasanian pottery is the lengthiest contribution. Research in Sasanian pottery poses problems owing to the subject's diversity and lack of formal and decorative motifs. In the excavation of large settlements such as Ctesiphon and Bishapur, luxury objects and fine art (mosaics, stucco, glass, coins) were favoured in research rather than everyday crafts such as pottery. As a result, pottery assemblages from the excavations of important centres have been inadequately examined and published. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in studies aimed at refining the definition and dating of Sasanian pottery through diverse methodologies. The present comprehensive study employs an extensive range of excavated material criteria to establish more precise chronological markers. The geographical structuring of the research emphasises the variety of ceramic materials across Iran, Mesopotamia and neighbouring territories within the Sasanian Empire.

The book concludes with an extensive bibliography covering most primary and secondary sources in European languages and Russian. The bibliography would have benefited from including titles in Persian related to recent discoveries. Nonetheless, St John Simpson's edited book will be highly praised as a major study tool for the archaeology of the Sasanian Empire.

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