Richard E. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 56 (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2015). Pp. 301; $34.95, £24.95.

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Over the last five or six years Richard Payne, now at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, has been producing cutting-edge work in Syriac studies and on the place of the Syriac Christians within Sasanian Iran (225–651). He has been offering a needed synthesis within a field of study bifurcated between its Zoroastrian and Christian sides. Those of us who have been reading his work have been long awaiting this new monograph and the continued syntheses it might bring.

The synthesis offered by the book is found in the notion of mixture referred to in its title. Key here is the Zoroastrian concept of *gumēzišn*, indicating on one level humanity's current ontological status as a mixture of good and evil forces and engaged in a struggle to tip the balance to the former and away from the latter, but on another level "a cosmological project," one having an inherent politics and a sociology which tended in the Sasanian empire "to organize beneficent humans to accelerate the restoration of the world to the primordial state of perfection that would mark the end of the state of mixture" (10). Making this conception the center of his narrative allows Payne's book to then be "a study of this understanding's interactions with Christians," and allows the conception to reveal "its (*gumēzišn*'s) state-making potential, namely its capacity to create networks and to shape imaginaries in the empire's constituent provinces" (10).

Though throughout the book Payne paints a picture of a culturally diverse Sasanian empire, we should note at the outset that he also presents a Sasanian empire with a decidedly centralizing tendency. Sasanian Zoroastrian imperial ideology and its elites shaped Sasanian Christians' lives, not *vice versa*. That the remainder of the book will present variations on this theme is indicated in the book's beginning pages. A vignette is positioned here and drawn from an East Syrian text depicting Catholicos Sabrisho I (r. 596–604) arriving barefooted and refusing an equine escort to the court during his installation in his new ecclesial seat by Persian emperor

Khosrow II (570–628). For Payne this refusal to embrace the material trappings of imperial power indicates an attendant unwillingness to interfere in the workings of what ultimately constituted Sasanian imperial power. It was a synecdoche of sorts: "the virtuoso performance of Sabrisho offers an ideal point of departure for a study of how Zoroastrian authorities located Christians within their social and political order and how Christians created places for themselves in a political culture *not of their own making* (emphasis mine)" (5).

Chapter One, "The Myth of Zoroastrian Intolerance: Violence and the Terms of Christian Inclusion," is at once an adroit take on the issue of Sasanian Zoroastrian violence toward Sasanian Christians and the question of persecution, and one of the best introductions to the religious foundations of Sasanian political theory (pp. 27–38) found anywhere. It builds on re-reading the third-century inscription from the Zoroastrian priest Kerdir, in which the Middle Persian verb *zadan*, often understood to mean "to eliminate," is interpreted as meaning "to strike" (i.e., chastise). This allows the chapter to present Christian and Zoroastrian interaction in Sasanian society as part of a "hierarchy of better and worse rather than a binary of good vs evil" (26). This was as well part of "the idea of Iran," a refrain in the book signaling the concept of *gumēzišn*, and suggesting to contemporary readers that they adopt this hermeneutic and see Sasanian society through this version of the Sasanian imperial imaginary.

Chapter Two, "Belonging to a Land: Christians and Zoroastrians in the Iranian Highlands," centers on the *Martyrdom of Pethion*, a text coming temporally from the late fifth or early sixth century. This text represents the geographical shaping of the Sasanian imaginary by the mountains and valleys of Fars and the highlands of the Zagros Mountains to the west of Mesopotamia. Studies of Sasanian Christianity have tended to look to Khuzestan and Mesopotamia where Zoroastrianism was spread thinner. But this region, populated by Christian artisans taken captive during the early Sasanian period, fostered a Christian encounter with Zoroastrianism requiring strategies different from those employed in Mesopotamia and Khuzestan. Not only was the author of this *Martyrdom* more familiar with Zoroastrian terminology and concepts than usual, he engaged them at the level of their grounding in the Iranian landscape and the natural environment of the region.

The multifaceted concept of *xwarrah* (NP *farr*), or "glory," so important in Persian imperial ideology, comes into play, and is contextualized and analyzed in the Dinwar Valley of Mount Bisutun, which by the early sixth century was not only a locus of Zoroastrian gods but of Christian saints.

Chapter Three, "Christian Law Making and Iranian Political Practice: The Reforms of Mar Aba," has a legal focus. It counters the commonly asserted notion that a separate legal system for Christians was carved out during the Sasanian era. The surviving writings of East Syrian Patriarch Mar Aba I (r. 540–552) show the Patriarch attempting to impose certain constraints on Christian elites forming aristocratic houses and entering imperial networks. These "worldly Christians", when studied, allow us a glimpse into the world of the court and church leadership, which offers balance to the courtly arc of the book's overall hermeneutic.

Chapter Four, "Creating a Christian Aristocracy: Hagiography and Empire in Northern Mesopotamia," like chapter two, has a spatial orientation. But whereas chapter two focused on the landscape and Christian engagement with Zoroastrian cosmology's grounding in the natural environment, this chapter has an urban focus. The chapter is an extension of Joel Walker's work on the Martyrdom of Mar Qardaugh, bringing in the *History of Karka* coming from the same environment and inextricably connected to shrine sites of East Syriac martyrs. Payne's and Walker's texts and analyses "explicitly segment the Christian communities that gathered at the sites into aristocrats and commoners" (128), and thus allow us to see even more deeply in the lives of the Christian elites covered in chapter three focused on Mar Aba I.

Chapter Five, "The Christian Symbolics of Power in a Zoroastrian Empire," takes us into the late Sasanian period, the reign of emperor Husrow II (r. 590–628), and the extension of Sasanian imperial borders into Roman territory which occurred in his reign. Among the numerous fascinating developments covered here are Husrow II's relationships with the cult of St. Sergius, and the capture of the True Cross during the Sasanian incursion into Jerusalem, and its subsequent use as a talisman and diplomatic tool by the Sasanians. Though we are presented with a Sasanian court and emperor which could transgress Christian and Zoroastrian boundaries, the Sasanian emperor rendered here would ultimately maintain them.

The conclusion to the book is centered partly on the burial of the final Sasanian emperor Yazdegird III in 651. This was a burial performed by an East Syrian bishop rather than by a Zoroastrian *Mobed*. Payne writes about this perplexing event that "[w]ith the aristocracy having abrogated empire and religion simultaneously, only Christians remained, in this account, to treat the body of the sovereign appropriately" (199).

It is important not only to be reminded that the Sasanian Empire was Zoroastrian, but also to be shown *how* this was so. The Syriac corpus documenting the social and religious life of the Sasanian Empire is far more extensive, accessible, and contemporaneous than the Middle Persian Zoroastrian corpus (as those having ventured into Middle Persian numismatics and sigillography will attest). With the growth of Syriac studies as a field often outpacing Syriacists' grounding in Middle Iranian studies, Payne has rendered an extremely valuable service with this book. His repositioning of the Zoroastrian imperial world view to center stage, and the set of analytical tools he has provided us need to become part of our current framework. But it is also important to remember that Syriac Christianity possessed a cultural *longue durée* that Zoroastrianism did not. Sasanian Christians' connections to the Roman Empire, its religion and culture, gave them agency and mobility which Sasanian Zoroastrians did not have. Connections to Christian communities in Central Asia, China, and India were also held without parallel. Tabari's account of Yazdegird III's perplexing burial, unlike the Ferdowsi account on which Payne focuses, points to Sasanian royals having built churches and paid debts of the Church of the East, the Sasanian queen Shirin's conversion to the Christian faith, and her family's "beneficence to the Christians." This merited the body of Yazdegird III being interred in the "garden of the archbishops," situated in Merv, and his body being transported by church elites in the manner of the church's martyrs (Tabari, *History*, vol. 15, [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992], p.89).

The full story of what happened to Zoroastrianism once it lost its final empire has not yet been fully told. But Syro-Persian Christianity's connection to the Sasanian Empire can be better understood by looking to the Sasanian court's survival in Central Asia with Chinese support for a century after Yazdegird III's burial. This was a period in which the East Syrians' religion was given by

the Tang court the official nomenclature of "The Persian Teaching" (*Bo-si jiao*) rather than Persian Zoroastrians, and Persian royals were buried in Tang ancestral cemeteries throughout the seventh and eighth century. All of this suggests that the ultimately Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire presented to us by Payne might be painted in overly stark and contrasting tones, and as less of "a state of mixture" than may be warranted, at least in some cases, and that the conversation started by this book deserves to continue.