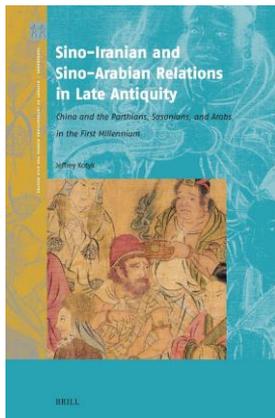


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Jeffrey Kotyk, *Sino-Iranian and Sino-Arabian Relations in Late Antiquity. China and the Parthians, Sasanians, and Arabs in the First Millennium.*

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It is an intimidating task to review a book, which the reviewer believes, would become a seminal work, very important, widely cited, affecting entire research of Central Asian Late Antiquity and early Middle Ages. The book which, the reviewer expects to abridge the fields of Sinology and Iranian History, which despite overlapping fields of interest, remain rather entrenched in their approaches. On the other hand, it is clear that the review of such a book can hardly list all its virtues or discuss all its important points. Given all the above, reviewing recent book of Jeffrey Kotyk, is not an easy task.

It is impossible not to agree with Kotyk's own words "the Chinese sources [...] ought not to remain limited to Sinology, but that historians of wider global history ought to consider these sources in their own right"(8). Bringing more light on Chinese perspective to Eurasia and specifically Iran and including the Chinese sources in the study of the region is a demanding and ambitious challenge which Kotyk stands to.

The topic of Sino-Iranian relations in the Late Antiquity and early Middle Ages is hardly a new one. It has been already explored by the scholars like Berthold Laufer,¹ Edward H. Schafer,² and Matteo Compareti,³ yet Jeffrey Kotyk's work remains novel in several aspects. Firstly, Kotyk assumes purely historical approach. His methodology is well-set in literary sources. His employment of visual material is very disciplined

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¹ Laufer, 1919.

² Schafer, 1963.

³ Compareti, 2021.

and deliberately limited to the motifs of clear semantic content. This way Kotyk achieves certain methodological clarity, avoiding speculations and interpretations already within the processed material. It is not that Kotyk avoids the study of cultural flows, influences or exchange of ideas. Quite opposite, analysis of adoption of cultural traits is an important and substantial part of his book. In this, he manages to avoid the fluid, unclear matters of transition of stylistic features, some possible distant symbolic relations of particular images or possible transition of technological or military aspects which might be invented independently as a result of necessity to respond similar opponents, as David A. Graff had demonstrated with regard to tactical developments of Byzantine and Chinese Tang Dynasty armies.⁴ Jeffrey Kotyk's material avoids ambiguity and includes the facts only. This is why he does not admit to the base material the unclear iconographies like those of Sino-Sogdian sarcophagi or functioning of the image of exotica in Chinese art, as they do not provide clear meaning and cannot be unequivocally associated with defined recognized religion and the motifs there remain the subject of the discussions. This methodological discipline is one of the great values of the book.

At the same time, the analytical process is not deprived of wider perspective or academic imagination. These features are simply not allowed to the basic material which is not blend with conclusions or suppositions. This precision expands further and Kotyk avoids getting tempted to extend his study to all generally "Iranian" world or using methodological picklock of inflating "Greater Iran". As much as possible, his lecture remains focused on Iran and China, with the Sogdians, the Tocharians or the Kushans being obvious comparative material but he manages to avoid hasty identification of the cultural elements between these groups.

Another important and valuable feature of Jeffrey Kotyk's book is the focus on the sources of, as much as possible realistic, historical approach, avoiding the clearly mythical records. When studying the transfer of the astrological or religious ideas, which from modern perspective, do not qualify as science, Kotyk takes rational approach treating the examined phenomena as displays of historical processes. The difference between the earlier mentioned fables and historical transfer of ideas, religions, philosophies or ideologies lies in the former not reflecting the actual exchange while latter involved movement of individuals, populations, scriptures. Kotyk avoids including guesswork (educated or not) into the base of his work which results in very sound, well-founded argument (whether one agrees with later conclusions or not).

One of the useful features of Kotyk's book are numerous quotations provided together with Author's translations. The quotations do not act as critical translations. They are simplified illustrations of the lecture and do not explain the process of

⁴ Graff, 2016.

transliteration and reconstruction of the forms translated from Chinese. As was stated above, the work is mainly historical and the philological details would not change the content of the analyze but would unnecessarily extend the size of the book.

The two chapters of the book which follow Introduction relate to description of political relations between the Chinese courts and Iran. Chapter 2 (10-28) describes Chinese views on Arsacid Iran. Unsurprisingly, their value grows with time, starting from somehow ambiguous statements and gaining details in time. The growing details come with increased amount of Buddhist material, usually hostile towards Iranian religions and the rulers supporting them. What seems important are the narratives of Kushano-Parthian wars which are described in religious context. It is significant to note that the Chinese sources confirm that the conflict between the Kushans and Iran predated coming to power of the Sasanians.

Unsurprisingly, the Sasanian dynasty (Chapter 3, 29-78) is far better represented in Chinese records even though the majority of the period China was divided into smaller states. Nevertheless, the time of disunity and periodical reign of the foreign dynasties, led to opening China to external influences which continued into Tang Dynasty. Development of the group of polities defined later as the Silk Road cultures strongly enhanced trade while migrations on the Eurasian steppe resulted in creation of nomadic empires reaching eastern and western extremities of the landmass. Number of Chinese accounts about Iran inevitably increased which is well documented by Kotyk. Their figure inflated further with the fall of the Sasanian dynasty, creation of the exiled court in China and Chinese involvement in the attempts to reinstate Sasanian power in Iran. Kotyk diligently marks the analogies between the Western and Chinese sources however seems to disregard exaggerations or inaccuracies which are natural in description of the state not directly bordering China. Also, Chinese sources, naturally emphasize the relations between the Turkic Khaganate and Sasanian Iran. This seems to result from the fact that both Iran and China shared common threat from the Turks. Kotyk does not seem to observe this Turkic bias in Chinese literature however until appearance of the Iranian diaspora, the Turks were the intermediary between Iran and China, being thus, the main common point of reference. Even taking this into account, Chinese records confirm remarkable amount of information known from the western sources, which make them important point of reference however they are unlikely to credibly counter Iranian, Arabic, Armenian and East Roman literature.

The following three chapters are dedicated to the religious and ideological dimensions of the Sino-Iranian relations of Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages. As much as description of situation of Chinese Buddhists in Iran, in Chapter 4 (79-101), is an astounding development to the studies of Iranian Buddhism, giving the sense of concreteness, typical for Jeffrey Kotyk, to existing publications, Chapter 5 (102-139) with the no-nonsense description of Iranian religions in China, creates absolutely new set of data in the field. It is possibly a far fetched assumption that all the Iranians were

the followers of the Zoroastrianism and that no Iranian creeds predating Zarathushtra's reformation survived. This regards especially the religions of the peoples speaking the languages of the Iranian linguistic group which were never subdued to the Sasanian power and therefore were less likely to be converted by force to the reformed creed. Here Kotyk relaxes his methodological grip and allows the tomb of Wikrak as an evidence of Zoroastrianism (103-104). What seems intriguing is that the description of theatrical Iranian ritual which involves an Iranian priest transfixing himself with a sword (112-114) cannot find Zoroastrian analogies. At the same time, special swords to mock transfixion were found in Roman mithraea. This, in connection with direct reference to the name of Mithra may suggest survival of the Iranian form of Mithraism. It is a fact that the Chinese sources contain direct mention of Zoroaster (117) but that does not exclude presence of the non-Zoroastrian religions, specifically in the context of spread of Manichaeism. Important feature of Chinese perception of Iranian religions is that it included Christianity. This proves how fragile was understanding of Western matters in China. Syncretic or eclectic religious forms as well as conflicts were discussed in the last paragraph of this chapter, which highlights how vividly the religions functioned and how keenly adopted each others elements.

Astrology and Astral Magic are the subject of Chapter 6 (140-176) which is the only chapter that employs illustrations. Although the studies of the topic are spread among other publications of Kotyk, the spread of Iranian astrological lore in China seems a topic of great importance and Chinese illustrations have a potential to serve to interpret some pieces of Iranian iconography. The images which accompanied the Iranian ideas are likely to have the Iranian originals as well. This would offer a new field in interpretation of Iranian art which currently seems entrenched on solely Zoroastrian positions. Astrology has a potential to provide alternative explanations.

Chapter 7 (177-257) is an excellent, in-depth analyze of the records of the goods traded between Iran and China. Kotyk thoroughly studies the terms related to trade and reveals that some of the terms cannot be associated with Iran despite superficial similarity. He outlines the land and maritime trade, however with the detailed lists of materials, some words should be said about the possible logistics of the land transport. The lists include mass commodities of substantial weight. Their transportation in the seaborne vessels is easily imaginable however caravan trade seemingly must have favored high value goods with large margins (weapons of high quality steel, silver objects, textiles, aromas, luxury foods). The fact that Chinese did import commodities poses immediate question of how was that made possible, and another, typical for 2025 and its complicated trade relations – what about the tariffs? Specifically, the transit tariffs which on one hand might have greatly affected the value of the goods at the end of the chain, on the other hand, if these were somehow suspended, than what benefit had the transit states in facilitating the trade?

The book is concluded by Chapter 8 (258-289) discussing the Chinese records of early Islam. This is a chapter of capital importance, especially for understanding of the expansion of Islam into Central Asia. The Chinese views on late Sasanian history and creation of Islam reveal certain biases, presumptions and lacks of knowledge. They are of utmost importance for understanding the Chinese views on the matter or functioning the bias in this particular era, but expecting them to provide material to challenge existing historiography would be overly enthusiastic.

Sino-Iranian and Sino-Arabian Relations in Late Antiquity. China and the Parthians, Sasanians, and Arabs in the First Millenium by Jeffrey Kotyk is a book of utmost importance for any researcher of culture of Eurasia in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages, as well as any historian of the era. I am certain that it will be widely cited and discussed. As Kotyk phrases himself: “I [...] offer a readable guidebook with both Sinologists and Iranologist in mind” (7). In my opinion he exceeded the goal and provided the book for much wider academic audience. His other postulate to “consider Asia as a whole” (9) definitely shows that he realized that the book would echo not only among the researchers of these two civilizations and has a potential to become one of the important handbooks in study of Eurasian history.

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