

collections. Prostitution, though a social nuisance, was evidently a fact of life, especially in a large garrison city like Aleppo, and certainly did not merit violent, still less capital, punishment. That this kind of flexibility was possible shows the vitality of the principle of *ijtihād* mentioned above.

The final chapter deals with domestic violence, and although Semerdjian has found only a relatively small number of cases, it is clear that they too do not conform to stereotype. The courts certainly regarded wife beating and rape as reprehensible, although one of the oddities of the evidence is that many rape victims appeared in court several months pregnant. Nevertheless, women did have the courage to prosecute rapists in court, in spite of the fact that they found it difficult to produce convincing evidence. On a personal note, I have just completed an edited book, *The Urban Social History of the Middle East c 1750–1950*, (Syracuse University Press, 2008): I wish that I had had access to Semerdjian's manuscript before mine went off to the publisher, as her book adds several fascinating dimensions to discussions of the practical application of Islamic law in an urban context.

Peter Sluglett

REIDAR VISSER and GARETH STANSFIELD (eds):

An Iraq of Its Regions – Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?

xxii, 274 pp. London: Hurst & Co., 2007. £19.99.

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It was said that at the most ferocious period of Iraq's civil war in the years 2005–07, you could be abducted and killed at a roadblock if you pronounced a certain word in a particular way. You would be asked the question: "What do birds eat?" and if you replied with the common word for millet then your fate would depend upon how you pronounced it. If you said "*dakhan*", you had to hope that the roadblock was manned by members of one of the militias loyal to the various Shii Islamist groupings; but if you said "*dukhn*", your only hope was that the men pointing their guns at you were from one of the many branches of the Sunni Islamist insurgency.

This seemed therefore to be a deadly marker of sectarian difference. Yet the varied pronunciations of the word had nothing to do with sectarian affiliation, but rather with the regional, and to some extent class and urban or rural origins of the speaker. The fact that they were pressed into the service of a civil war in which people were killed simply for being thought to belong to the "wrong" sect in the "wrong" place on the basis of a regional accent, is further depressing testimony to the ways in which the sectarian affiliation of Iraqis seized the imagination of all those who participated in or witnessed the horrors of post-2003 Iraq.

Yet behind the sectarian, and sometimes ethnic, labels that were so congenial and profitable for various political forces as they carved out places in Iraqi politics following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, lie other social realities. These are equally important for deciding the distribution of power, but are often overlooked. It is all the more refreshing, therefore, to be given the opportunity to read a book in which one of these – the many facets of regional and regionalist politics in Iraq – are explored.

There can be no better guides than the two editors of this volume. Reidar Visser has contributed greatly to the historiography of Iraq, particularly in his studies of Basra and the south, whilst Gareth Stansfield has been a realistic analyst of the

vicissitudes of politics in the northern, largely Kurdish, regions of Iraq. Both of them have been properly wary of taking at face value the labels applied – and implicitly the motives imputed – to the many actors in Iraqi politics. They have also been healthily critical of the ways in which those same actors have manoeuvred around each other in the search for political advantage. These qualities come through in this volume, both in its explicit purpose and in the questions asked by its contributors.

In a series of essays which encompass many of Iraq's geographical regions, as well as the modern history of the Iraqi state and its demarcation, and the more ancient history of "*al-iraq al-arabi*", the authors bring to bear precisely the kind of sociological and historical knowledge that makes sense of the politics of place in Iraq. This much overlooked aspect of Iraqi politics rightly deserves more attention, not simply because of the part it has played in the formation of a distinctly Iraqi political field, but also because of the ways in which the collapse of the centre in 2003 allowed the politics of the local to reassert itself. Indeed, as Visser points out in his introduction, this is one of the major challenges facing those determined to reconstruct the Iraqi state: how to bring the forces of local power into an orderly structure that will form the basis for a more stable Iraqi politics of the future?

On paper, the enabling legislation is there, in the 2005 constitution and in the 2006 law for the formation of regions. In practice, there is everything still to play for. As Stansfield's more downbeat conclusion suggests, the formal structures may not in fact be sufficient to control or tame the passions aroused by political ambition, fear and insecurity. Based perhaps upon his close acquaintance with Kurdish politics in Iraq, he can see that regional self-government is by no means a panacea and could be seen as just the beginning of the problem. He is equally well aware of the fact that there may be a disjuncture between the careful constitutional arrangements drawn up by powerbrokers and the groundswell of popular opinion and protest that has little respect for the formal rules of the game.

Indeed, as a number of the essays in this book make clear, there are not only a number of understandings of "regionalism" in Iraq, but these may well undermine the formal institutions of the public state. In this respect, the chapters by Visser, Zeidel, Denselow and Schofield make clear that "regionalism", in the sense of localism, is often at the heart of power in Iraq, operating behind and sometimes at variance with formal state institutions. This can encourage some provincial Iraqis to regard territorial state boundaries as a minor irritation in their pursuit of more meaningful associations, whether this be in trade, family weddings, armed resistance or employment. For them, the political field is not delineated by the frontiers of the Iraqi state, but this does not necessarily mean that they are any less attached to that state for a host of prudential and other reasons.

By the same token, "localism" is a way to get ahead when a fellow "son of Tikrit", or, as at present, a "son of Hindiyya" sits at the centre of the web of power and patronage in Baghdad. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has shown himself no less averse than many of his predecessors to using networks of provincial association to boost his power and extend his reach across Iraq. For many in Baghdad, this is a perfectly appropriate restoration of the balance between central and provincial power and it has also been turned to the advantage of some in the provinces. The question remains, however, about the attitudes of those who see this as the prelude to the kind of dominant central state power which many in Iraq have had good cause to fear during the past half century. As the editors of this book suggest, Iraqis are involved in a race against time in which the *de facto* dispensation of power that is re-emerging at the centre may well pre-empt and undermine the *de jure* authority

of institutions that could, as the title of the book suggests, provide the “cornerstones of a federal democracy”.

Charles Tripp

BEATE DIGNAS and ENGELBERT WINTER:

Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals.

xvi, 347 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. £17.99.

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This is the expanded and revised English translation of the German original, *Rom und Persereich im Spätantiken: Zwei Weltmächte zwischen Konfrontation und Koexistenz* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), co-authored by Dignas and Winter. The merits of the German edition are further reinforced in this English translation by the introduction of several of the suggestions made by reviewers of the German publication. The present work is primarily a sourcebook for the student and scholar of Late Antique and Near Eastern history. It is a welcome addition to the often-overlooked study of the Sasanian Empire in comparison with its Western neighbour. The German original attracted some criticism, mainly from Near Eastern specialists, because of the “eurocentrism” of the authors’ perspective, and it is apparent that this spectre of criticism haunts the authors who have made efforts to address this accusation throughout this revised translation. In some respects this is inevitable as the book focuses on providing textual rather than archaeological evidence. As the majority of the extant written sources are Roman, it is natural that the narrative and analysis are heavily influenced by the concerns and perceptions of the written source material. A clearer portrait of the Sasanian Empire would have entailed a more extensive presentation of the surviving material evidence for this period, something which is outside the stated scope of the authors. Undoubtedly, the book would benefit from this combined approach; yet the authors are conscious of this limitation and their awareness is commendable even if they do not necessarily always succeed in their intent to present the history of Roman–Sasanian relations “not according to Western needs” (p. 2).

The book is divided into two parts: the first consists of a useful concise historical summary of Roman–Persian relations from the third to seventh centuries AD (Part I: Narrative, pp. 9–52), including a short survey of Roman–Parthian relations between c. 250 BC and the beginning of the third century AD. The second, and more extensive, part (Sources and contexts, pp. 53–265) is divided into nine thematic chapters where the primary source material (Greek, Latin, Persian, Syriac, Arabic and Armenian) is presented in new English translations coupled with brief introductions to the sources, their authors and commentaries on main points of the texts. These thematic sections are further divided into sub-chapters. The volume is complemented by fourteen maps, adapted from other scholarly works and differing from those included in the German original, and eighteen illustrations of Roman and Persian material evidence. Three comprehensive, updated appendixes offer a list of Roman and Persian rulers, a chronological table of important dates and events and a glossary. The book concludes with an extremely useful forty-two page bibliography and indexes of sources, translated sources, names and place names, in addition to the general index. There are relatively few errors but some typographical mistakes and, more seriously, some erroneous geographical attributions in the maps.