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Oman and late Sasanian imperialism

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Abstract

Arguments about the nature of late Sasanian imperial involvement in Oman have become quite polarised over the past few decades. Historians and archaeologists have used their different caches of evidence to suggest quite variant conclusions concerning the extent of the Sasanians' imperial involvement in southeast Arabia and the impact that this involvement may have had on the prosperity of Omani local agriculture and the economy there. This article, however, seeks to demonstrate that the evidence of literary sources for the late pre-Islamic history of southeast Arabia, written primarily in Arabic by Muslims several centuries after the events being described, can be placed alongside other written evidence for the late Sasanian empire to suggest a picture of late Sasanian imperial involvement in Oman that is not all that far removed from the conclusions reached by many archaeologists working in the region. The article demonstrates that late Sasanian imperial interest in Oman may not have led to the intense settlement and agricultural development of the coastal plain sometimes suggested, but that there was nonetheless a significant place for Oman within *Ērānšahr*, the territory of the king of kings.

Keywords

Oman; Iran; Sasanians; empire and imperialism; late antiquity

The late 6th and early 7th centuries was a time that many contemporaries considered beset with calamitous and world-changing events. The Greek historians Agathias, writing in the early 580s shortly after the death of the Sasanian king of kings Khusraw I (r. 531–79), declared that in his lifetime 'bewildering vicissitudes of fortune have occurred… nations have been wiped out, cities enslaved, populations uprooted and displaced, so that all mankind has been involved in the upheaval' (Agathias 1975: 4–5 [= Pref. 10]). Slightly less than a century later, an anonymous Armenian chronicler labelled the Sasanian ruler Khusraw II (r. 591–628), 'the Sasanian brigand… who consumed with fire the whole inner [land], disturbing the sea and the dry land, to bring destruction on the whole earth' (Anon. 1999a: I, 13). Both these historians were referring primarily, of course, to the wars between the Roman and Persian empires that played out in large part across northern Mesopotamia and the Caucasus. And yet it was not only these northern regions of the late antique Near East that were caught up in these great imperial conflicts. As historians of the Arabian Peninsula have emphasised frequently, many peripheries of that region were also embroiled in the diplomatic and military manoeuvrings of the two great powers of late antiquity.[1] Perhaps the most notable manifestation of the increasing imperial interest in Arabia came sometime around the early 570s, when the Sasanians appear to have launched an invasion of South Arabia (roughly the area of modern Yemen) that culminated in direct Persian rule over that region (Bosworth 1983: 606–7; Rubin 2007; Potts 2008: 206–11; Gajda 2009: 149–67; Howard-Johnston 2010: 396–98). Also well known among archaeologists and historians working on the eastern Arabian regions adjoining the Gulf is the argument that the same period—the late 6th century—also witnessed a more direct form of Sasanian imperial involvement in Oman.

[1] By way of just one example, mention can be made here of the link posited between Roman and Persian interference in Arabia from the late 6th century and the subsequent success of Muḥammad's mission there in the early 7th in Crone 1987: 45–50, 245–50.

It is with the case of Oman, however, that modern researchers have failed so far to arrive at even a vague consensus on either the nature of that late Sasanian imperial involvement in the region or even on which sources are best suited to study and interpret it. To put it broadly, there is an emerging disconnect between the evidence presented by archaeological research, on the one hand, and the Arabic literary sources for Oman's history, on the other. Over four decades now, John Wilkinson, the foremost scholar of Oman's history and the available Arabic sources for studying it, has been arguing that the late 6th century, from sometime during the reign of Khusraw I, witnessed direct and intense Sasanian imperial involvement in the coastal plain of Oman (the modern Batinah [i.e. al-Bāṭina] and Muscat [i.e. Masqaṭ] governorates) that led to an unprecedented scale of agricultural development and prosperity (Wilkinson 1973; 1975: 98–99; 1977: 130–33; 1979: 888–89; 1983: esp. 190–92; 2010: 37–39, 55–63). Alongside this argument for Oman's relative prosperity under late Sasanian rule, Wilkinson also offers a fairly detailed picture of how that rule over the region was administered. It is worth offering a summary of the main points of Wilkinson's argument here in his own words (Wilkinson 1979: 888–89):

> Certainly by the end of the 6th century and up to the conversion of Islam, when the Arabs evicted the Persian ruling classes from Oman, it is clear that Ṣuḥār was the main Persian centre on the coast with a standing army based in the fortified quarter of Dastajird: two other coastal sites were also important, Damā at the southern end of the Batina, and Jurrafār (> Jurfār; Jullafār > Julfār) which was the main centre on the Arab side at the entrance to the Gulf. In the interior power was exercised from the fortified centre Kisrā Anūshirvān (?) developed at Rustāq (the extraordinary Qalʿat al-Kisra is still intact there, whilst the name of Rustāq, although Arabized has never been changed): it was here that the governor for interior affairs headed a semi-feudal, semi-bureaucratic hierarchy of *marāziba*, *asāwira*, and *hanāqira*, who directly controlled the full Persian territory of Mazūn, whilst through a Julandā appointed from the Shaikhly Shanuʿa Azd clan, he directed affairs in the semi-autonomous Arab territory in northern Oman…

Other historians have not gone as far as Wilkinson in building a picture of the late Sasanian administration in Oman, but some have made cases to support parts of his argument. Touraj Daryaee, for example, has recently highlighted the significance of the occupation of eastern Arabia and Oman by the Sasanians and has spoken of their efforts to create of the Gulf a *mare nostrum* akin to the Roman Mediterranean (Daryaee 2003; 2009). Michael Morony has also seen the greater Sasanian involvement in several areas of the Arabian Peninsula over the late 6th and early 7th centuries as having inspired significant economic growth there, although he disagrees with Wilkinson over one essential point (Morony 2001–2): while Wilkinson has argued that Omani cultivation underwent a decline in the early Islamic period from its late Sasanian high-point, Morony instead sees the 'incipient development of irrigated agriculture in the late Sasanian period that continued into early Islamic times' (Morony 2001–2: 32; cf. Wilkinson 1973: 42; 1977: 133–34, 137–55). In much scholarship, however, Wilkinson's argument about the late Sasanian administrative setup in Oman forms a rarely questioned basis for further research (for example, Potts 1990: II, 336–37; Al-Rawas 2000: 35; Morony 2001–2: 30).

The problem comes when these arguments, based largely off written sources from at least two centuries later, are tested against archaeological work in the region. Many archaeologists working on pre-Islamic Oman have made use of Wilkinson's arguments to help them interpret their data within discussions of the Sasanian period (for example, Potts 1985: 88–93; 1990: II, 328–40). Already by 1987, however, work around Sohar had started to undermine a key part of Wilkinson's argument: where the latter saw the Sasanian period as one of unprecedented levels of cultivation based on the construction of irrigated water channels (Ar. *aflāj*, sing. *falaj*), of the twenty-three *falaj* systems investigated as part of the Sohar hinterland surveys, only one showed any evidence for pre-Islamic construction and nothing to suggest that this need be dated to the Sasanian era (Costa & Wilkinson 1987: 54). More significantly, a comprehensive

survey and re-evaluation of the evidence for Sasanian-era occupation in eastern Arabia published in 2007 by Derek Kennet demonstrated that—according to the archaeological evidence—the late Sasanian period was one of significant relative decline in eastern Arabia's history and that it was at this time 'an impoverished region with a low population that was not closely integrated into the Sasanian economy' (Kennet 2007: quotation at 110–11).[2]

There is a problem here and it persists even though some historians working with the literary texts have expressed conclusions rather different to some of those drawn by Wilkinson, Daryaee and Morony, and more in line with the archaeological evidence (see esp. Abu Ezzah 1979: 56, 61; Ulrich 2011).[3] In part, there is the commonly encountered issue here of different academic specialisms with historians and archaeologists holding different expectations of each other's material. There is also the problem of the comparative lack of study dedicated to the archaeology of the Sasanian empire (compared to that for the Roman empire), which means that it remains a rapidly shifting field. As Kennet has noted, it is possible that Wilkinson was influenced when proposing his theory of the intensity of rural development in the late Sasanian empire by work in Iraq led by Adams that suggested a similar chronology there of late Sasanian prosperity and early Islamic decline (Kennet 2007: 108; see Adams 1965: 69–83); Wilkinson was not to be aware, of course, of subsequent suggestions for a re-dating of much of Adams' material upon which this chronology was based (Kennet 2004: 82–85).[4] The differences of opinion about late Sasanian Oman actually fit within a wider debate among Sasanian historians about the most appropriate sources to be used for studying Sasanian history: given that we have relatively few sources produced within the Sasanian empire itself, to what extent should we

[2] There is further analysis of numismatic material to support this conclusion in Kennet 2008.

[3] It is also perhaps significant that in a more recent article about the Sasanians in Arabia, Daniel Potts (2008) makes no reference to Wilkinson's conclusions.

[4] For other reservations expressed about Adams' methodology, see Morony 1994. It is possible now that a downturn in agricultural prosperity may be visible already in late Sasanian Iraq, as has been suggested in Christensen, P. 2016: 67–83.

use later Arabic and Persian texts from the Islamic period to help us interpret that primary evidence that does survive?[5]

It is clear that the Sasanians were interested in southeast Arabia, including Oman, to some extent: there is some archaeological evidence to support this.[6] Quite what this interest was and how it was manifested in the late 6th and early 7th centuries has not, in my opinion, been established yet with particularly clarity at all; for if we are to make use of late, post-Sasanian literary texts to understand what was going on in Oman in the late Sasanian period, we have to think much more carefully and critically about how we interpret that evidence. This means placing it alongside the archaeology, on the one hand, but also alongside other, more contemporary literary sources for late Sasanian history. Now that more and more archaeological work is being carried out in southeast Arabia—and especially along the Batinah coastal plain in Oman—it is very important that we sort out the foundations of historical interpretation (see, for example, Mouton 2009; Mouton & Schiettecatte 2014; During & Olijdam 2015; Kennet *et al*. 2016). This article will attempt to provide a fairly thorough reassessment of the historical sources on late Sasanian Oman, in large part to provide archaeologists working in southeast Arabia with a clearer idea of what historical sources actually say and what models we can suggest for interpreting them. It is important to note that the aim here is not simply destructive—a survey of what the sources not do tell us—but also constructive: when we bring together all the relevant sources and interpret them critically and carefully, what picture does emerge of late Sasanian imperialism in Oman? A second aim is to

[5] See, for example, Gyselen 2009. For a defence of the value of at least some later Arabic and Persian texts supposedly based ultimately on the 'Book of Kings' (*Khwadāynāmag*) traditions or other lost Sasanian-era compilations, see Rubin 1995; Howard-Johnston 2010: 341–53; Bonner 2012.

[6] Most importantly, see discussion of the recently discovered fort (probably Sasanian) at al-Fulayj, a little under ten miles inland (southwest) from Ṣaḥm on the Batinah coast, in Kennet *et al*. 2016: 163 (a fuller publication on this site is under preparation). There is perhaps also some evidence for another Sasanian military post in the region in de Cardi 1972.

encourage further discussion of the southeast Arabian dimension of Sasanian imperialism among specialists in the history of that empire.

An Arab-Persian treaty in Oman?

Plenty of sources composed after the fall of the Sasanian empire give an indication of the interest among certain rulers of that empire in the Arabian side of the Gulf, especially during the reigns of the founder of the dynasty, Ardashīr I (r. 224–40), and then, slightly later, Shāpūr II (r. 309–79) (Piacentini 1985; Potts 1990: II, 228–41, 328–34; 2008: 198–203; Hoyland 2001: 27–28). Discussions of Sasanian activity in southeast Arabia in the late 6th and early 7th centuries, however, are actually far less commonly encountered, which requires us to think carefully about suggestions that there was an 'increased Sasanian presence' in Oman from the mid-to-late 6th century (quotation from Potts 1985: 92). The main evidence for the conclusions of Wilkinson (discussed above) and those who follow him comes from local Omani sources. The Omani narrative of late Sasanian intervention in their land was first known to western scholars from the *Kashf al-ghumma* of Sirḥān b. Saʿīd al-Izkawī (d. 1150/1737), the relevant sections of which were translated into English in the 19th century, and this formed the basis for the earliest modern discussions of the issue (Ross 1874; Miles 1919: I, 23–28).[7] By far the most important source, however, is the *Ansāb*, attributed to one Salama b. Muslim al-ʿAwtabī, from which al-Izkawī's account is ultimately derived and which offers more information than that preserved in the *Kashf al-ghumma*.

The identity of the author and the date of composition of the *Ansāb* is a confusing issue. All extant manuscripts of the work are fairly late and the oldest, held in Durham University Library

[7] For the relevant text in Arabic, see now the most recent edition in al-Izkawī 2012: I, 160–70; V, 152–54. For a brief discussion of the authorship and date of the *Kashf al-ghumma*, see Al-Rawas 2000: 10–12.

(Ms. Or. Ar. 20), was copied in 1089/1678. It is clear that the work is considerably older than that, but how much older remains a matter for debate. One source of confusion is that someone by the name of Salama b. Muslim al-ʿAwtabī is also credited with two other works—a *Kitāb al-Ḍiyāʾ* and a *Kitāb al-Ibāna fī al-lugha al-ʿarabiyya*—but they seem to date to a rather different period than the *Ansāb*. The complexity can be demonstrated by the fact that Wilkinson, who is as well acquainted with the text as anyone could possibly be, has changed his mind quite a bit over the years. In 1976, he suggested that the author of the *Ansāb* was probably the grandson of the author of the *Ḍiyāʾ* and that the former could be dated to the early 5th/11th century (Wilkinson 1976: 153–54). Then in 1978, he pushed the date back to the early 6th/12th century (Wilkinson 1978: 197). In 1988 he stuck more or less to this date, but most recently, in 2010, he has suggested that the *Ansāb* may date to the late 4th/10th or early 5th/11th century (Wilkinson 1988: 133; 2010: xxxv). Isam Al-Rawas has also suggested a 5th-/11th-century date (Al-Rawas 2000: 7–8). In what is the most detailed study to date, however, Hassan al-Naboodah has advanced several new and generally convincing arguments. Most importantly, he argues that although the author of the *Ansāb* was almost certainly an Omani, he was probably not a member of the ʿAwtabī family, and that the main bulk of the text was completed in or shortly after 345/956–57, although later copyists' additions are evident (al-Naboodah 2006).[8] It seems, therefore, that although we do not know the identity of the *Ansāb*'s author—so we will call him Ps.-ʿAwtabī—we are probably dealing here with a mid-4th-/10th-century text.[9]

Ps.-ʿAwtabī's *Ansāb* is, as the title suggests, a genealogically arranged history, with a considerable focus in the second half of the work on the Omani Azd; there is quite a bit of historical information about pre- and early Islamic Oman dispersed throughout this part of the

[8] That the text we have was redacted at a secondary stage after the work's original composition was also pointed out in Wilkinson 1976: 153.

[9] For what it is worth, the compiler of the manuscript catalogue of the Omani Ministry of Heritage and Culture has also dated the work to the 4th/10th century (Anon. 1999b: 49 [no. 33]).

work. Of particular interest for those working on late pre-Islamic Oman is the lengthy passage detailing the relationship between the Persians and the Azd shortly before and around the time of Muḥammad's mission (al-ʿAwtabī [attrib.] 2006: esp. II, 762–66 = Durham Ms. Or. Ar. 20, ff. 201a – 202b). Ps.-ʿAwtabī tells us of a peace treaty (Ar. *muhādana*) between the Persians and the Azd in Oman which ran down to the time the latter converted to Islam. The Omanis invited the Persians to convert to Islam as well, but they refused and a war broke out, the result of which was the expulsion of the Persians from Oman. Due to the significance of this text for most analyses of Sasanian involvement in Oman, I have provided a fuller translation in an appendix to the present article. Here I will just provide a translation of an extract which has formed the basis for the most detailed of Wilkinson's conclusions about the extent of late Sasanian involvement in Oman (al-ʿAwtabī [attrib.] 2006: II, 762):

> He said: The Persians did not return to Oman after Mālik b. Fahm had taken control of [the land] and expelled them from it until his rule and that of his descendants after him came to an end. [That is when] rule over Oman passed to the family of al-Julandā b. al-Mustakīr al-Maʿwalī—some say al-Mustakbir al-Maʿwalī—and rule over Persia passed to the descendants of Sāsān, the family of the *kisrā*s.
>
> There was a peace treaty (*muhādana*) between them and the family of al-Julandā in Oman, in which [it was stipulated] that there would be 4,000 *asāwira* and *marāziba* together with a tax collector for them there nearby the kings of the Azd. The Persians would stick to the coastal plain and the Azd would be kings in the mountains, the desert and other such places on the fringes of Oman. All affairs were to be in their charge. Any Persian, member of his family or subject with whom 'Kisrā' became angry and whom he perceived as a threat to his person or kingdom, he would send to Oman to be imprisoned there.
>
> Things remained thus for the Azd with that peace treaty until God made Islam manifest in Oman and the Prophet's (*ṣ*) fame spread throughout the lands.[10]

Much (although certainly not all) of the evidence Wilkinson uses in his studies cited in this article to support his detailed picture of extensive Sasanian involvement in Oman from the mid-

[10] There is a slightly fuller philological annotation of this passage in the appendix.

to-late 6th century comes from this short passage. Over the following pages we will test some of Wilkinson's more important assertions and see how far the evidence really supports them.

A 6th-century treaty dividing the land?

Much of Wilkinson's argument is based on an analysis of this treaty that Ps.-ʿAwtabī describes here. To start with it is important to be clear about one matter in particular: we are not offered here the text of a treaty, but rather a survey of at least some of the conditions it purportedly stipulated. This is, therefore, a literary text—one probably composed in the 4th/10th century no less—and not a documentary source. It is also not actually explicit that Ps.-ʿAwtabī is talking about the mid-to-late 6th century here. It is simply stated that Persian rule did not return to Oman until the Sasanian period, so anytime between the 3rd and early 7th centuries, and then the Persian king is referred to slightly later as 'Kisrā'. Now the name 'Kisrā' is, of course, the Arabicised form of the name Khusraw held by two Sasanian kings, Khusraw I Anūshirwān (r. 531–79) and Khusraw II Abarwīz (r. 591–628), to whom Ps.-ʿAwtabī goes on to refer slightly later in his text (see the appendix). In Arabic-Islamic texts, however, 'Kisrā' is also a generic title used for any Sasanian king, in the same way that 'Qayṣar' was used as a title to describe the Roman and Byzantine emperors. Slightly later in this passage (in a section translated in the appendix), the text clearly uses the title 'Kisrā' to refer to the Persian king previously identified as Shīrawayh/Shiroē, who reigned briefly in 628.

Sometime in the late Sasanian period for this kind of intervention in Oman is a perfectly plausible assumption; it was Khusraw I, after all, who, as mentioned earlier, famously sent an invasion force to Yemen in the early 570s, and as we will see later an occupation of Oman could have fitted into the same strategic aim. But it is only one possibility and there is little in Ps.-ʿAwtabī's text that can confirm that the agreement stipulated was arranged in the time of

Khusraw I. It is worth adding here that other evidence adduced to support the idea that Khusraw I was particularly interested in Oman is also problematic. Hassan al-Naboodah has cited a sentence from Qudāma b. Jaʿfar's (d. *ca*. 337/948–49) *Kitāb al-Kharāj* in which it is stated that, 'Khusraw built many cities in the coastal area of the Gulf. One of them was Muscat in Oman' (al-Naboodah 1992: 81, citing Qudāma b. Jaʿfar 1988: 78). Al-Naboodah was clearly cautious about accepting this as accurate, but it has been cited since as evidence for 6th-century Persian interest in Oman (Daryaee 2009: 64). I would personally, however, agree with al-Naboodah's cautious stance here, since although there do not seem to be any other references to Khusraw's foundation of Muscat in Oman, there are plenty of other references—including in Qudāma's own work—to his foundation of a city with the same name (Ar. Masqaṭ) in the Caucasus (al-Balādhurī 1866: 194; Ibn Khurradādhbih 1889: 124; Qudāma b. Jaʿfar 1889: 259; al-Masʿūdī 1894: 77–78). There is significantly more evidence for mid-6th-century Sasanian interest in new fortification work in the Caucasus (see Banaji 2015: 35–38); furthermore, the topographical encyclopaedist Yāqūt (d. 626/1229) notes the existence of three different places called Masqaṭ and confirms that it was a location on the Caspian Sea south of Darband (Ar. Bāb al-Abwāb) that was founded by Khusraw I (Yāqūt 1866–73: IV, 529).

There is much more analysis to come of aspects of Ps.-ʿAwtabī's claim that the treaty gave the Persians control over the Batinah coastal plain and the Azd control over the inland mountains and beyond, since it is such a key component of Wilkinson's argument for late Sasanian agricultural prosperity in Oman, but it is important to note up-front that, again, there is a possible contradiction later on in the account with the details given in this treaty: Ps.-ʿAwtabī tells us in a different account of the conversion of Oman to Islam (see the appendix) that ʿAbd and Jayfar, the two sons of al-Julandā and leaders of the Azd, were among the *ahl al-rīf*, that is those who inhabited the fertile, cultivable land, which might suggest the lower Batinah coastal plain. There is certainly no evidence in Ps.-ʿAwtabī's text to support

Wilkinson's idea that there was a formal Persian-controlled province called 'Mazūn', distinct from Azd-controlled 'Oman' (esp. Wilkinson 1973: 46–47; 2010: 62). Most of Wilkinson's evidence for this comes from other sources, but they are all inconclusive and often late in date. For example, he cites a passage from Ibn Ruzayq's 13th-/19th-century *al-Ṣaḥīfa al-qaḥṭāniyya* which states that the famous Omani scholar Jābir b. Zayd was born in Firq near Nizwā in '*umān al-mazūniyya*', which Wilkinson takes to be a reference to the Sasanian province. Other evidence he cites comes from Arabic poetry and satirical texts in which the label 'Mazūnī' is used to refer derisively to someone's non-Arab origins.[11] This certainly shows that Omanis could be made fun of in the Islamic era for their ancestors' supposed subjugation to the Persians, but it does not mean that there was a clear distinction between a Persian province called Mazūn and the rest of Oman. It is, in any case, unclear that Nizwā, located in the southern (i.e. inland) foothills of the Hajar mountain range, would have been in the territory ascribed by Ps.-ʿAwtabī to the Persians. In most 7th-century sources, the term Mazūn does not seem to be anything other than a name for the general area and not for a precise political or administrative entity (see, for example, the *Khūzistān Chronicle* in Nöldeke 1893: 47; Guidi 1903: 38).

Persian military and administrative centres

Wilkinson offers some very precise locations for the military and administrative centres of the late Sasanian presence in Oman and it is important to consider these briefly. He suggests, for example, that Sohar was 'the Sasanid capital in Oman, with a permanent military force based on its fortified quarter at Dastajird' (Wilkinson 2010: 57). The evidence for this again comes from a couple of passages in Ps.-ʿAwtabī's account (see appendix), the first of which states

[11] For examples of these kind of references, see al-ʿAwtabī (attrib.) 2006: II, 659 [= Hinds 1991: 79–80]; al-Bakrī 1945–51: IV, 1222–23; Yāqūt 1866–73: IV, 521–22; and also the comments in Marquart 1901: 43.

that when ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ came to Oman as Muḥammad's envoy he came ashore at a place called Dastgerd (in the Arabic, Dastajird) near Sohar, and the second that the Persians retreated to this Dastgerd during their war with the Omanis and were besieged there before they surrendered. Now Dastgerd is clearly a Persian toponym and, indeed, one that seems to have been somewhat generic in the late Sasanian world (Yāqūt 1866–73: II, 573–74; Gyselen 1988: 198). It is, therefore, perfectly plausible that any Sasanian centre in southeast Arabia could have had that name. There is nothing explicit, however, in Ps.-ʿAwtabī's account, or any other, to confirm that this Dastgerd in Sohar was a Sasanian fortified centre, and it is perhaps notable that when ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ landed there he is not said to have encountered any Persians. It is also notable that no archaeological work has yet uncovered a securely dated sizeable Sasanian-era settlement in or around Sohar.[12]

Wilkinson also suggests, and in this has recently been supported by Daniel Potts and some others, that the Sasanians also developed the inland settlement of al-Rustāq, in the northern foothills of the Hajar mountain range, as 'a major fortified centre for control of the east-coast hinterland' (Wilkinson 2010: 58–59; see also Potts 2008: 210–11; al-Ḥārithī 2012: 26). The evidence for this suggestion, however, is especially thin. The first piece of supporting evidence is that in the fort in the centre of al-Rustāq today is a tower that, at least by the late 19th century when Lieutenant-Colonel Samuel Barrett Miles visited, was known as 'Burj Kisrā b. Shirwān' (Miles 1910: 423–24). To my knowledge, not a single earlier source testifies to that name nor to Khusraw I ordering any construction work at al-Rustāq and it does not seem reasonable to suggest that, 'The fact that it was also known in local tradition as Burj Kisra ibn Shirwân *clearly indicates that* it dates to Kisra I' (Wilkinson 2010: 59, my italics).

[12] See the discussion in Kennet 2007: 97–100. Archaeological evidence for any Sasanian-era activity around Sohar is largely confined to two 6th-century C^{14} dates from sites connected to copper mining in the region of 'Arja/al-Zahrā', about twenty miles inland from Sohar. This has led to the conclusion that some copper mining may have resumed in this region in the late Sasanian period (it had previously ceased during the 1st millennium BCE), but more dramatic resumption of activity cannot seen until the 9th century; see the discussion in Costa & Wilkinson 1987: 107, 136, 138, 184–85; Weisgerber 1987: 148–49.

The second piece of evidence is that the name al-Rustāq does seem to derive from the Middle Persian administrative term *rōstāk*. In some discussions of provincial administrative hierarchy in the late Sasanian period, it is suggested that a province is said to have been known as an *ōstān* and these were divided into districts known as a *shahr* (sometimes *ōstān* and *shahr* appear the other way round in the hierarchy), these were divided into subdistricts known as a *tasōk* (Ar. *ṭassūj*) or a *rōstāk* (Ar. *rustāq*) or in the post-Sasanian period by the Arabic term *nāḥiya* (Morony 1984: 129; Piacentini 1994: 97–99; Zakeri 1995: 42). A 5th-/11th-century Muslim author, Miskawayh (d. 421/1030), claiming to offer a translation into Arabic of extracts from an autobiography by Khusraw I (the so-called *Sīrat Anūshirwān*, more on which below), provides the fourfold provincial hierarchy (in Arabic) of *balda – kūra – rustāq – qarya* (Miskawayh 2003: I, 133; see also translations with commentary in Grignaschi 1966: 18, 31–33, n. 15; Rubin 1995: 269). Arthur Christensen, in his admittedly now dated survey suggested that a *rōstāk* was the agricultural hinterland ('champ') of a small town or village (*deh*) (Christensen, A. 1944: 140). So we do know that a *rōstāk* was a Sasanian administrative term—albeit that our evidence is quite poor and so it is difficult to see especially precisely what it designated—and that the Omani toponym al-Rustāq seems to be derived from that term, but otherwise all we can do is speculate. We have no actual evidence to confirm that the Omani Batinah's al-Rustāq was known by that name in the pre-Islamic period. In any case, there seems to be very little evidence for any argument that it could have designated a military or fortified centre, although probably a relatively minor administrative one.

A semi-feudal military occupying force?

On one aspect of the Persian occupation of Oman, Ps.-ʿAwtabī is quite clear: the occupying force would comprise 4,000 '*asāwira*' and '*marāziba*' together with a tax official (Ar. *ʿāmil*).

Now the number 4,000 is probably not a precise and accurate figure. Multiples by ten of the number four are generally symbolic in Arabic literary accounts and we can probably read the number 4,000 here as symbolising a small-to-medium-sized force (Conrad 1987; 1988). It is perhaps significant that Ibn Isḥāq's (d. *ca*. 150/767–68) account of the Sasanian conquest of Yemen during the reign of Khusraw I has the commander Wahriz lead an army of 4,000 men (al-Ṭabarī 1879–1901: I, 957 [= Bosworth 1999: 251]). The number 4,000 is often used for the size of armies and the number of dead/captives/defectors in accounts of the early Islamic conquests as well.[13] That said, the number could be a roughly accurate guide. The total number of soldiers in the late Sasanian army has been estimated at around 300,000 and so a force of roughly 4,000 probably constituted a fairly small investment of manpower in Oman (Howard-Johnston 2012: 108–10). Excavations at the Gorgān Wall, constructed sometime between the early 5th and mid-6th centuries to defend the frontier of the Sasanian empire in northeast Iran, have led to suggestions that this vital strategic network of fortifications was manned by 15–30,000 men with another 50–60,000 in nearby reserve, so Oman certainly comes across, as we would expect, as a far less significant strategic concern for Sasanian rulers (Sauer *et al*. 2013; Payne 2014: 293–94).

Much more important than the precise number of Persian occupiers, however, is the nature of their occupation and this is where a careful analysis of the terms '*marāziba*' and '*asāwira*' is vital. Wilkinson's analysis of these two terms led to his conclusion that they represent 'two grades in some sort of feudal organisation and their large numbers in Oman imply extensive territorial control' (Wilkinson 1973: 45). In using the term 'feudal', Wilkinson is not, of course, suggesting close parallels between the situation in late 6th-century Oman and the feudalism of medieval Europe. He is rather suggesting that the men sent to Oman by the Sasanians were

[13] For some examples, see al-Balādhurī 1866: 116, 142, 204, 251, 280. See also the discussion in Kennedy 2001: xii–xiii, esp. at xiii: 'There seems to be a suspiciously high incidence of armies of 4000 in the Umayyad period'.

recompensed for their service there with land grants along the Batinah and that this contributed both to the Sasanians' close control of that area and its perceived agricultural prosperity in the late Sasanian period. Now, we have already seen that Ps.-ʿAwtabī's figure of 4,000 should perhaps be taken to imply a small-to-medium sized occupying force, rather than a 'large' one, so it remains unclear quite how extensive this Persian settlement really would have been in the Batinah. We have also seen that archaeological evidence, for the time being at least, does not confirm the suggestion of widespread agricultural prosperity at this time. Can we infer, nonetheless, that there was a sort of feudal system of Sasanian occupation in Oman?

In large part, Wilkinson's thoughts on the implications of the terms '*marāziba*' and '*asāwira*' are based on a wider debate among specialists in Sasanian history concerning the nature of the Sasanian state: was it a strong, centralised power that raised taxes directly and paid its soldiers (perhaps even in a standing army) and administrators salaries, or was it a looser structure in which local nobilities retained much more control of the land and revenue-raising power for themselves in return for which they provided their own supplies for service in the army of the king of kings when required? (For an idea of the debate, see Zakeri 1995: 13–22, 91; Howard-Johnston 1995; Rubin 1995; 2000: 652–59; Pourshariati 2009; Payne 2013; Sauer *et al*. 2013: 613–19.) Whichever side of the argument they come down on, many would agree that there was some attempt at centralisation of the tax regime and army organisation during the reign of Khusraw I, although how long-lasting those changes were remains debated (for example, Christensen, A. 1944: 364–72; Rubin 1995; Pourshariati 2009: 83–118). Another serious problem when thinking about issues of Sasanian landholding in Oman is the availability of source material against which to contextualise Ps.-ʿAwtabī's use of the terms '*marāziba*' and '*asāwira*'. These two terms are quite common in Islamic-era discussions of late Sasanian history, but what precisely do they mean?

The Arabic term *marāziba* is the plural of *marzubān*, itself the Arabicisation of the Middle Persian title *marzbān*. Those holding the office of *marzbān* have traditionally been seen as the military governors of frontier districts (Christensen, A. 1944: 102, 136–40; Morony 1984: 28, 532). In Arabia, they were apparently appointed when the Sasanians took direct control of a territory, as with al-Ḥīra in the early 7th century and Yemen in the late 6th century (Morony 1984: 143, 151–52; Gajda 2009: 161–67). There is a certain logic to this since, as pointed out already in the 4th/10th century by Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Kh^{w}ārizmī (d. 387/997), Middle Persian *marz* does mean 'boundary' or 'march/frontier' (Ar. *ḥadd*) (al-Kh^{w}ārizmī 1895: 114; see also Gyselen 2002: 162). Zeev Rubin suggested that they were territorial lords on the frontiers rather than salaried administrators, but there does not seem to be any clear evidence for such an assertion (Rubin 2000: 657–58). By the time of the Arab conquests, however, officials known as *marzbān*s seem to have been encountered across the Sasanian empire and not just in the frontier provinces, so some historians have seen them, at least by the 7th century, as military governors all over the empire and not just on the frontiers (Zakeri 1995: 33–42). James Howard-Johnston has suggested that they were very high ranking military officials serving under the senior commanders known as *spāhbed*s and that although they were professional soldiers primarily they may have had administrative responsibilities too (Howard-Johnston 2012: 118–20).

The main reason for all these differences of opinion is that we have hardly any contemporary information about Sasanian provincial administrators bearing the title *marzbān* (a point made clearly in Gignoux 1984a). No such office is mentioned in the lists of officials in either the early Sasanian rulers' inscriptions, nor in the 6th- or 7th-century Middle Persian literary text the *Sūr ī saxwan*, which otherwise offers some important information on official hierarchies (Daryaee 2007). The Pahlavi papyri from the Sasanian occupation of Egypt in the early 7th century do not seem to offer any evidence for the existence or role of *marzbān*s (Weber 1984;

Howard-Johnston 2012: 121). Among all the seals that give some indication of official administrative and military positions across the empire, only one so far has been published, most recently dated to the late 5th/6th century on stylistic grounds, whose inscription refers to the title *marzbān*: 'Ādurnarseh (son) of Victorious-Pērōz, margrave of Asōrestān' (*ādurnarseh ī pērōz pērōz asōrestān marzbān*) (Lerner & Skjærvø 1997: 72; Gyselen 2008: 28–29, 57 [no. 17]). Although parts of Asōrestān could be considered a western frontier region, it was the metropolitan province that included the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon, so it may not be compatible with theories that *marzbān*s were always frontier governors (though cf. Gyselen 2002: 183). Sasanian-era Armenian and Georgian sources do refer to officials with the title *marzbān* (Arm. *marzpan*) and, according to one interpretation of the material they present, by the 6th century there were three concurrent *marzbān*s in the Caucasus—at Dvin in Persarmenia, Tpʿilisi in Kʿartʿli/Iberia and Pʿartaw in Ałuankʿ/Albania—together with one more in Ādurbādagān, perhaps at Ganzak (Howard-Johnston 2012: 118–20; Rapp 2014: *passim* but esp. 78–79); there also seem to have been some officials in the Caucasus known as a *marzbān* administering a small handful of much smaller jurisdictions (Garsoïan 2009: 109). This is, of course, compatible with suggestions that *marzbān*s were officials specifically in frontier regions and, for what it is worth, the *Sīrat Anūshirwān* does use the term *marzbān* on at least a couple of occasions in a manner consistent with assumptions that it refers to a frontier province's governor (Miskawayh 2003: I, 136–37; Grignaschi 1966: 23–24; Rubin 1995: 280–82).

It does seem consistent with some contemporary evidence, therefore, that Oman might have been the kind of location to which a Sasanian official known as a *marzbān* could have been appointed. The use of the plural *marāziba* in Ps.-ʿAwtabī's text is, however, almost certainly inaccurate. As already mentioned, in Arabic sources discussing the Islamic conquests in the early-to-mid 7th century we hear of many Sasanian *marzbān*s, including ones for Arabian

territories such as Yemen, al-Ḥīra, al-Baḥrayn/Hajar and al-Zāra (Zakeri 1995: 34–39). Ps.-ʿAwtabī's text (see the appendix) does tell us about a *marzbān* in Oman at the time of the Persian king Shīrawayh/Shiroē, but there are grounds to be cautious here since one of the names given for him, Bādhān, is the same name as that given to the more widely attested last *marzbān* of Yemen (Gajda 2009: 162–65, 167). Basically, there might have been a Sasanian official known as a *marzbān* in charge of Oman at some point, but if so then Ps.-ʿAwtabī is the earliest extant text to tell us anything about him.

Ps.-ʿAwtabī's use of the term *asāwira* at first glance may make slightly more sense than the use of *marāziba* to describe the Sasanian forces occupying Oman. The term is an Arabicisation of Middle Persian *aswārān*, who are commonly described as having been heavy, mailed cavalry, although Mohsen Zakeri has suggested that after Khusraw I's famous reforms they became a universal branch of the cavalry, no longer divided between heavy and light (Morony 1984: 198, 258; Zakeri 1995: 51–56). The *aswārān* seem to have shared something of a culture glorifying the warrior ideal and were probably drawn, by the mid-to-late 6th century, from both the nobility and smaller landholders, the so-called *dehqānān* (Piacentini 1994: 101–2; Rubin 1995: 288, 291; Zakeri 1995: 49–68).[14] They were well-known to Islamic-era authors because some of their number joined the early Muslim armies and settled as a community in Basra that survived with a distinct identity until they joined the revolt of Ibn al-Ashʿath against the Umayyad viceroy in the east, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf, in 81–82/701 and were suppressed following the failure of that uprising (Morony 1984: 207–8). There are suggestions that before Khusraw's reforms the *aswārān* were a self-financing group who paid for their own weapons and armour, but through these reforms Khusraw was attempting to lessen the power of the nobility and turn

[14] See also Grignaschi 1966: 44, n. 91, where he notes that he translates the term *asāwira* in the *Sīrat Anūshirwān* as 'chevaliers' and not 'cavaliers', 'en vue du fait incontestable qu'à l'époque sassanide ce terme indiquait une classe de la noblesse'.

these cavalrymen into units who received central support for their arms and armour (al-Ṭabarī 1879–1901: I, 897–88 [= Bosworth 1999: 157]; Altheim & Stiehl 1954: 135–38.).

Key to our concerns in this article is the debate over whether the *aswārān* were, by the late 6th century, given land-grants in return for their military service. Wilkinson's most recent presentation of his argument concerning Oman's late Sasanian agricultural prosperity driven by the settlement of these *asāwira*/*aswārān* mentioned by Ps.-ʿAwtabī has suggested that they were granted land in Oman in return for their military service there (Wilkinson 2010: 59–60). This is based on Zakeri's argument that by the late Sasanian period, the *aswārān* were allotted land for life, on condition of military service, and that this land could not be passed on to their descendants, although he suggests that in frontier provinces the land could become hereditary in return for the responsibility to defend the frontier also being hereditary (Zakeri 1995: 54–55). The evidence for this, however, seems to stem primarily from two tricky and confusing texts and is not so clear cut as to provide very strong support for Wilkinson's arguments about Oman.

One text to offer evidence in support of Zakeri's argument is the so-called *Sīrat Anūshirwān*, which, as has already been mentioned, is in its extant form a series of passages preserved in the 5th-/11th-century universal history of Miskawayh which purport to be an Arabic translation of extracts from an originally Middle Persian autobiography of Khusraw I (Miskawayh 2003: I, 132–39; French translation with commentary in Grignaschi 1966: 16–45). According to Mario Grignaschi, these extracts from the *Sīrat Anūshirwān* 'constituent le texte le plus importante de l'historiographie sassanide qui nous ait été conservé'. He argues that they seem to stem from an official late Sasanian source and were probably the work of someone active around the early 7th century (Grignaschi 1966: 7–8). Zeev Rubin, however, is more sceptical and disagrees with suggestions that this is anything other than a literary text, albeit one that 'does seem to derive from a good Sasanian tradition' (Rubin 1995: 277–78). The *Sīrat*

Anūshirwān is certainly, in its extant form, a literary text and one that accords very well with Miskawayh's own concerns to present a work of history that showed how good politics and administration was underpinned by *tadbīr*, the correct management of affairs (see further on this Khalidi 1994: 170–76). In any case, it can hardly be used to support an argument that the soldiers settled in Oman would have been given land in recompense for their service there. One passage in the *Sīrat Anūshirwān* does refer to the granting of land by Khusraw I to the leaders of a group of the Turks who had entered the Sasanian empire to serve as soldiers on its northern frontier. Khusraw (or Ps.-Khusraw) here writes, 'I gave orders that those Turks and their households be divided into seven categories. I appointed leaders for them from among them and granted them land (*wa-aqṭaʿtuhum*)' (Miskawayh 2003: I, 137; discussion and other translations in Grignaschi 1966: 24, 43, n. 77; Rubin 1995: 281–85; Howard-Johnston 2012: 111–12). This may be evidence for the so-called 'barbarization' of the late Sasanian army and that some soldiers recruited from outside the empire were paid with land grants (Rubin 1995: 285), but it does not confirm that regular Persian *aswārān* were paid in this way. That the *aswārān* were, for a time at least, paid directly by the government is suggested in the fairly commonly encountered anecdotes in Islamic-era sources about the parades at which they received their pay (Rubin 1995: 287, 289–91; cf. Altheim & Stiehl 1954: 136–38).

The second text to offer potentially relevant evidence here is the probably early 7th-century Sasanian law book, whose text survives in Middle Persian, the *Mātakdān ī hazār dātestān*. This does suggest that there was a register of cavalrymen (*asābar nepīk*) in the Sasanian empire (Macuch 1981: 39, 41–42, 163, 165, 173–74, n. 3 [= MHDA16, 11, 13, 15–16; 17, 1; 19, 2–5]).[15] The passages about this register, however, give little clear information about its purpose. Another passage mentions that horsemen could be allotted 'a thing intended for equipment'

[15] This could (but equally could not) be the same as the *dīwān al-muqātila* (from which soldiers were provided with their arms), the *dīwān al-ʿaṭā'* (from which they drew stipends) and the 'register of names, ornaments and horses' brandings' (*dafātir al-asmā' wa-al-ḥilā wa-simāt al-dawābb*) referred to by al-Yaʿqūbī 1883: I, 186–87.

(‘eine Sache für die Ausrüstung’) (Macuch 1993: 516, 519, 522, n. 2 [= 77, 6–9]). The term translated as ‘for equipment’ is *pad ēmōzan* and it has been suggested that this refers to inalienable and non-hereditary land-grants with which the *aswārān* were paid (Perikhanian 1983: 660–61; followed by Lukonin 1983: 700; Zakeri 1995: 54–55; see also Macuch 1993: 522). Apparently, however, this reading of *pad ēmōzan* is doubtful and, in any case, we could be sceptical about any suggestions of a clear identification of these things ‘for equipment’ as land-grants (Rubin 1995: 294–95, n. 159 [where it is also noted that the reading is doubtful]; and Howard-Johnston 2012: 111).

There seems to be no clear evidence, therefore, that any Persian soldiers and officials settled in Oman would have constituted a semi-feudal class of landholders. There is just as much (perhaps even more direct) evidence that the *asāwira*/*aswārān* represented salaried cavalrymen in the late Sasanian period as there is to argue that they were actually recompensed for their service through land-grants. It has been suggested that any success of Khusraw’s reforms to make the army more dependent on the Sasanian state would have been winding back by the late 6th century and the revolt of the non-Sasanian Bahrām Chōbīn in 590 does suggest that the some elements of the nobility were becoming stronger in the late 6th century, but there is simply no evidence that such independent strength was based around an ‘enfeoffed estate’ of *aswārān*.[16] Even if the latter were such an ‘enfeoffed estate’, we should bear in mind Brian Ulrich’s point that those garrisoning Oman need not have owned their land in that province; they could just as well have been compensated with land elsewhere in the empire (Ulrich 2011: 379). And even after all this, there is actually some room to suggest that Ps.-ʿAwtabī was entirely incorrect to have assumed that the Sasanian force stationed in Oman would have been *aswārān*. Some reports concerning the far better attested late 6th-century Sasanian occupation

[16] See esp. Rubin 1995: 291–97; 2000: 652–60 (esp. 657 for the ‘enfeoffed estate’). For Bahrām Chōbīn’s revolt and the claims made by his supporters, see Pourshariati 2009: 122–30; 397–414; Payne 2013: 24–29.

of Yemen tell us that although the commander, Wahriz, was one of the *aswārān* (Ar. *min al-asāwira*), the troops he led were Daylamīs, famous foot-soldiers from the mountainous region of northern Iran bordering on the Caspian (Ibn Qutayba n.d.: 664; al-Ṭabarī 1879–1901: I, 899, 952–53 [= Bosworth 1999: 160, 245]; Miskawayh 2003: I, 129).[17] If Daylamī foot-soldiers and not cavalry troops were used as the Sasanian soldiers to exercise their control in one part of the Arabian Peninsula in the late 6th century, this might suggest they may have been in other southern parts of that region too.

Some final thoughts on Ps.-ʿAwtabī's Arab-Persian treaty

After all of this, can we offer any firm conclusions about whether the report in Ps.-ʿAwtabī reflects a genuine late Sasanian situation in Oman? The unfortunate answer is not really. There is a suspicious use of *topoi* and terms frequently encountered in Arabic accounts of the Islamic conquests—especially surrounding the 4,000 '*asāwira*' and '*marāziba*'—but these could still be referring to the vague contours of an actual historical situation. It is also worth pointing out that the broad situation Ps.-ʿAwtabī describes for the pre-Islamic period—control of the Batinah coastal plain by an imperial power centred on Iraq and Iran that faced resistance from local Omani groups based around the Hajar mountains—does curiously reflect what also seemed to be the case for at least some of his own probable lifetime. In 280/893, a force sent by the Abbasid government and capitalising on the civil war that had broken out in Oman following the deposition of the imam al-Ṣalt b. Mālik in 272/885, brought the Ibāḍī Imamate in Oman to an end and temporarily managed to establish their control over the Batinah and even inland as far as Nizwā. Following this Abbasid invasion, much of the Batinah region in

[17] According to al-Masʿūdī (1894: 260) Wahriz was the *marzbān* of Daylam. That Daylamīs were an important part of the Sasanian army, see Howard-Johnston 2012: 96, 112, 122; Potts 2014: 165.

particular remained under non-Omani control through much of the period during which Ps.-ʿAwtabī probably composed his *Ansāb* (Al-Rawas 2000: 171–201; Wilkinson 2010: 321–60). It is quite significant that Ps.-ʿAwtabī's own discussion of these events in the *Ansāb* immediately precedes his account of the pre-Islamic treaty between the Persians and the Azd in Oman (al-ʿAwtabī [attrib.] 2006: II, 746–61). Again, this does not mean that his discussion of the pre-Islamic treaty is necessarily invented. After all, if it made geopolitical sense for one Iraqi-Iranian empire (the Sasanians) to have controlled the Batinah but not cared too much about direct control over the interior of Oman, that same situation may have made sense to a later Iraqi-Iranian empire (the Abbasids and their successors). We do, however, need to bear in mind that Ps.-ʿAwtabī seems to have wanted to present a connection between the situation in his own day of external domination over Oman and that which existed at the moment when Muḥammad's message was first brought to Oman in the early 7th century.

One way around this potential impasse would be to look and see if there is any contemporary evidence for Sasanian treaties with peoples along any of their other frontiers that may offer obvious parallels for the Omani situation described by Ps.-ʿAwtabī. Although quite a few detailed surveys of treaty arrangements between the Sasanians and Romans can be found in pre-Islamic sources, these do not necessarily shed much light on the ways in which the late Sasanians would have dealt with their much less powerful neighbours (on these, see Greatrex & Lieu 2002; Wiesehöfer 2007: 132–33; also the interesting thoughts in Payne 2013). It is for Sasanian relations with various local powers in Armenia and the Caucasus that we can find some comparable treaty information, although we should remember that those northern regions were far more important to the Sasanian empire's geopolitical situation than the Omani Batinah. There are very few examples for this northern region of Persian treaties that discussed any kind of separation of the land in the same way that Ps.-ʿAwtabī suggests was the case for Oman. In a treaty drawn up with the nobles of Persarmenia in 484 following Vahan

Mamikonean's revolt of 482–84, the clauses generally centred around the freedom of the Armenian Church, that the Persians should rule justly, that the Armenians should be able to deal directly with the Persian king rather than through distant intermediaries, and the Persian demand that native Armenian cavalrymen serve in the Sasanian army. Vahan Mamikonean himself ultimately ended up being appointed as a *marzbān* (Łazar Pʻarpecʻi 1991: III.89–94; Anon. 1999a: I, 4–5).[18]

There is nothing particularly similar to the Oman situation here, although there is a closer parallel from the late 6th century. In a discussion of the end of Georgia's Kʻartʻvelian monarchy after the death of Bakur III in *ca*. 580, the continuation of the *History of Vaxtang Gorgasali* attributed to Juanšer Juanšeriani (wr. between *ca*. 790 and 813) tells us of the new arrangement with the Sasanians that:

> Bakur's sons remained in the mountainous territory of Kaxetʻi. The descendants of Mirdat, the son of Vaxtang who governed Klarjetʻi and Javaxetʻi, remained in the rocky area of Klarjetʻi. All the rest of Kʻartʻli, Somxitʻi and Vaspurakan [Aspʻuragan] was held by the Iranians.[19]

There is here then a potential parallel late Sasanian situation in which the Persians left certain mountainous territories in the hands of local powers while directly occupying and governing other areas for themselves.

Ultimately, therefore, in light of all this discussion we might choose to see Ps.-ʻAwtabī's presentation of late Sasanian imperialism in Oman as loosely reflecting an actual situation in which some kind of Persian force occupied the Batinah coastal region while not looking to extend that control into the more mountainous interior. Even if we do, however, we cannot use

[18] For context, see the discussions in Greenwood 2008: 5–9; Pourshariati 2009: 71–75. For the significance of the recruitment of Caucasian cavalry units for the Sasanian army, see Garsoïan 2009: 97–99.

[19] For a discussion of this source, see Rapp 2014: 172–74, 331–51, and of this passage in particular at 340–43 (with translation at 341–42).

the details provided by Ps.-ʿAwtabī to draw any firm conclusions about the nature of that occupation—and certainly not any impact it may have had on local landownership and cultivation—or where precisely in Oman it was centred, or why and from when the Sasanians were interested in directly occupying Oman. I personally think that precise answers to questions concerning the impact on the local land, society and economy that any Sasanian occupation of Oman would have had, or where the Persian occupiers settled most densely, are unlikely to be available using the literary sources that we have at our disposal. Current and future archaeological work may help fill in some of these details, it may not. In what remains of this paper, however, I want to suggest that there are enough useful sources to start making some tentative suggestions about why late Sasanian rulers and their officials may have had some interest in maintaining a direct if loose military occupation of the Omani coastal plain.

Oman and Ērānšahr

We can start by looking into what contemporary (i.e. 6th- and 7th-century) evidence we have for late Sasanian interest in southern Arabia. This is perhaps most forthcoming for South Arabia/Yemen. The well-known Mārib Dam inscription (*CIH* 541) set up by the Ethiopian ruler of South Arabia, Abraha (r. *ca*. 535–65), and dated to March 548 mentions that he received envoys from various late antique powers, including one from the Persian king (Smith 1954: 437–41; Robin 2015: 164–67; discussion of embassies in Gajda 2009: 135–37). Then we have the so-called *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, a brief geographical presentation of the extent of the territory of the king of kings. In its extant version this text cannot have been compiled any earlier than the late 2nd/8th century, since it mentions the Abbasid caliph Abū Jaʿfar al-Manṣūr's foundation of Baghdad, which is usually dated to 145/762, although many have suggested that it may well still offer us a late 6th- or early 7th-century Sasanian worldview

(Gyselen 1988: 192; Daryaee 2005: 132–33; 2010: 101–3; Pourshariati 2009: 39–40.). Even so, there are reasons to be cautious about the information it offers, since it has been persuasively argued on the basis of comparison with documentary evidence (mostly seals and bullae) that its author does not seem to have had much good access to official sources (Gyselen 1988: 206).[20] For what it is worth, however, the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* places almost the whole Arabian Peninsula, including Yemen explicitly, within the territory of the Sasanian empire (Daryaee 2002c: §§33, 50). Perhaps most importantly, there is an extremely brief extract preserved in Photius' (d. *ca*. 893) *Bibliotheca* from the lost history of Theophanes of Byzantium—a work which originally seems to have covered the years 567–577/78 in ten books—which mentions the Sasanian conquest of South Arabia/Yemen in the early 570s.[21] All this does provide enough contemporary evidence for Sasanian diplomatic interest in South Arabia/Yemen in the 6th century followed by direct occupation of that region in the 570s.[22]

When it comes to southeast Arabia/Oman the evidence is in some ways more specific and in other ways less so. One of the earliest Sasanian rulers certainly claimed suzerainty over the territory of Oman, known as Mazūn in most late antique texts: the region is listed among those claimed by Shāpūr I (r. 240–70) in his trilingual inscription (in Parthian, Middle Persian and Greek) on the so-called Kaʿbah-ye Zardosht at Naqsh-e Rostam in Fārs (a couple of miles northwest of Eṣṭakhr/Persepolis).[23] Over the following centuries, however, things become slightly murkier. Although Shāpūr I's inscription lays territorial claim to Oman, the very

[20] It should also be mentioned that in a later article, Rika Gyselen has dated the text to the mid-4th/10th century and suggested that it reflects an Abbasid situation rather than a late Sasanian one (Gyselen 2009: 187).

[21] Theophanes' text is provided in Greatrex and Lieu 2002: 137; for discussion, see Rubin 2007: 190; Gajda 2009: 155–56; Howard-Johnston 2010: 397. The precise date of the Persian occupation of Yemen is unclear; Howard-Johnston has suggested 571, but for a full range of the dates debated see Gajda 2009: 152–53. On Theophanes of Byzantium and his lost work, see Treadgold 2007: 290–93.

[22] It should be mentioned that Daniel Potts has also attempted to make the case that some surviving seal evidence points to Sasanian administration in South Arabia, but this is based on an interpretation of the title *nēmrōz spāhbed* that goes far beyond that offered by other modern scholars (Potts 2008: 204–6).

[23] A translation of the text can be found at http://sasanika.org/library-categories/primary-sources/middle-persian-inscriptions/ (accessed 20 September 2016). For discussion of Oman's appearance there, see Potts 1985: 88–89; Daryaee 2009: 58; 2010: 100. For further discussion of this important inscription and its context in general, see Rubin 2002; Canepa 2009: 52–78.

slightly later inscription, also at Naqsh-e Rostam, of the Zoroastrian chief priest (MP *mowbedān mowbed*) Kerdīr does not, at least not explicitly (Daryaee 2010: 101). From the 6th century, we then start to see clearer evidence of territorial claims at least being made over Oman.

Our first relevant text is the *Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Pābagān*, which despite concerning itself with the deeds of the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardashīr I, was probably written in the late Sasanian period and perhaps even redacted later still (Boyce 1968b: 60). In this text, we are told that one of Ardashīr's opponents in Fārs, Haftān Bokht, had a son whose army comprised Arabs and Omanis (MP *tāzīgān ud mazūnīgān*).[24] This, of course, does not mean that Oman was part of the Persian empire, but indicates that it was considered plausible for Omanis to serve in a Persian lord's army. The aforementioned *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* does not actually mention Oman explicitly as part of the Sasanian empire, which might be significant, but does generally suggest that the whole of the Arabian Peninsula and the coastlines of the Gulf were within the empire's territory.

Much more significant is an important passage defining the geography of the earth from the so-called *Letter of Tansar*. Yet again, we are confronted here with a source without a particularly clear history of transmission. No Middle Persian text of this source survives; rather what we have is an early 7th-/13th-century Persian translation in Ibn Isfandiyār's *Tārīkh-e Ṭabarestān* of Ibn al-Muqaffa''s (d. *ca*. 137/754–55) Arabic translation of a Middle Persian text.[25] That Middle Persian original is most commonly dated by modern scholars to the mid-6th century and is considered a production of the Sasanian court (Pourshariati 2009: 86; Payne

[24] In an early edition and English translation, this was read as 'Arab and Egyptian soldiers'; see Ântiâ 1900: 25. Most other scholars, however, have agreed that the correct reading is *mazūnīgān*, i.e. 'Omanis', rather than 'Egyptians'; see Marquart 1901: 43; Daryaee 2009: 59; Miri 2009: 15.

[25] Ibn Isfandiyār's Persian text is available as Mīnowī 1975; there is an English translation in Boyce 1968a. For a discussion of Ibn Isfandiyār's work, see Melville 2000.

2013: 22).[26] In this *Letter*, the four quarters of the earth are described and we are told that (Mīnowī 1975: 89; Boyce 1968a: 63):

> The fourth part is this land which is called Pārs and which has as its title 'The Land of the Humble', from the river of Balkh up to the furthermost borders of the land of Ādharbāyegān and of Persarmenia, and from the Euphrates and the land of the Arabs up to Oman and Makrān and thence to Kābul and Ṭokhārestān. This fourth part is the chosen stretch of earth.[27]

Here we have a text, quite possibly late Sasanian in origin and outlook, that considers Oman to be an integral part of the territory of what is here called 'Pārs'.[28]

Some other non-Persian sources can help us to reinforce this image of Oman as an integral part of late Sasanian conceptions of what constituted '*Ērān*' or '*Ērānšahr*', the empire of the king of kings. The 'long recension' of the *Aškharhatsʿoytsʿ*, an Armenian geographical text often ascribed to Ananias of Širak and probably composed between 591 and 636 (Hewsen 1992: 7–15, 33–34), offers us a summary of an apparent fourfold division of the Sasanian empire. It is perhaps significant that it uses Armenian transliterations of the Middle Persian terms for the four parts of the empire, which suggests some acquaintance with a Middle Persian source. Within this summary, the southern quarter (Arm. *kʿust i nmroj* [= MP *kūst ī nēmrōz*]) includes a territory called 'Maazun', i.e. Oman (Marquart 1901: 16–17, 43–44; Hewsen 1992: 72; Greenwood 2008: 18–19, 25–26). A late 6th-century Syriac history, *The Chronicle of Ps.-Zachariah* (wr. in or slightly after 568–69), has a chapter on world geography and includes the Gulf coast of Arabia within the territory of the Persian empire (Greatrex *et al*. 2011: 439–43). Finally, there is the question of how closely Church of the East administrative geography mirrored that of the Sasanian empire. Rika Gyselen has suggested that they mirror each other

[26] Cf. however Grignaschi 1966: 9 (dates it to the reign of Yazdgerd III, r. 632–51); and Boyce 1968a: 11–22, where she argues (without clear evidence) for the text being a 6th-century edition of a 3rd-century document.

[27] Boyce's translation is slightly adapted here.

[28] That the term 'Pārs' in the extant Persian *Letter of Tansar* probably reflects use of the term *Ērānšahr* in the Middle Persian original of the text, see Gnoli 1989: 153–54.

quite closely: 'En partant de l'hypothèse que les sièges des diocèses sont nécessairement installés dans un *šahrestān*, on a déduit qu'il existe un parallélisme dans l'organisation des provinces établies par l'État et celle de l'Église chrétienne' (Gyselen 1989: 69). This could be significant since by the mid-7th century at least, the Omanis (Syr. *mazūnāyē*) were supposed to be under the authority of the metropolitan of Rēv-Ardashīr on the coast of Fārs (Fiey 1968: 210–11; Ioan 2009: 100). In the Sasanian period, Church of the East bishops of Mazūn are attested in 424 (John), 544 (David) and 576 (Samuel) (Fiey 1968: 215–16).

By the late 6th/early 7th century, therefore, we have a reasonable amount of evidence, some of it admittedly circumstantial, that Oman was considered at least nominally part of the integral territory of the Sasanian empire, or *Ērānšahr*.[29] The region is, however, entirely absent to date from all the Sasanian seals and bullae that have been published: 'S'il est plausible que les Sassanides aient eu des comptoirs sur l'autre rive de la Mer d'Oman, il y a peu d'évidences quant à une occupation effective appuyée sur une administration provinciale élaborée. De toute manière, si celle-ci a existé, l'archéologie n'en pas encore apporté des témoignages' (Gyselen 2002: 194; see also Gyselen 1989: 88). Now, as mentioned, there is enough evidence to suggest that at some point in the later Sasanian period Oman was at least claimed by and likely directly incorporated into the Sasanian empire; if Shāpūr I's inscription does attest to direct Sasanian control over Oman, rather than a vague and unrealised territorial claim, this presumably came to an end at some point in the century or so following his death. For what it is worth, Omani sources do talk about an earlier expulsion of the Persian from Oman, before the time of Muḥammad (Wilkinson 2010: 37–39). The lack of official documentary evidence, however, makes it quite difficult to understand how Oman would have fitted into the Sasanian imperial organisation after its direct incorporation.

[29] On the development of the idea of *Ērān* and *Ērānšahr*, in which the Sasanians played a crucial role, the classic study is Gnoli 1989: esp. 129–74.

For a long time, the broad outlines of late Sasanian imperial organisation as a whole was a contentious topic among modern scholars. The presentation in Arabic, Persian and Armenian sources of an empire divided, at least since the time of Khusraw I, into four quarters (MP *kūst*) was considered something of a mirage (Gignoux 1984a: 4–8, 26; 1984b). Now, however, seals and bullae have been published which explicitly refer to each of these four quarters and to the high-ranking officials (MP *spāhbed*) who administered them (Gyselen 2001; Pourshariati 2009: 94–101). With this newfound confidence in the quadripartite administrative division of the late Sasanian empire, it is important that two texts—the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* and the *Aškharhatsʿoytsʿ*—place Oman and southern Arabia more generally within the southern quarter (*kūst ī nēmrōz*).[30] James Howard-Johnston has even suggestion that one of the main duties of the commander of this southern quarter (*kūst ī nēmrōz spāhbed*) was 'the projection of Sasanian power inland from the Gulf coast of Arabia' (Howard-Johnston 2012: 124).

So, how does all of this help us to understand the nature and purpose of late Sasanian imperialism in Oman? We can start by thinking about possible connections between late Sasanian intervention in Oman and that in South Arabia/Yemen. We have seen that there is good evidence for the Sasanian occupation of the former Himyarite realm in South Arabia in the 570s and it has been suggested that an occupation of Oman could have been connected to this (Potts 1990: II, 335–36; 2008: 210–11). The Sasanian occupation of South Arabia/Yemen has frequently been interpreted as the final stage of what had been a form of proxy war in the southern Arabian Peninsula between the Roman and Persian empires; James Howard-Johnston has suggested Khusraw I's Arabian endeavours in the 570s were part of a strategy aimed at countering the increasing threats the Persians faced on many other fronts (Howard-Johnston 2012: 107; further context in Whitby 1988: 250–75; Greatrex & Lieu 2002: 135–50; Sarris

[30] To just raise one caveat, the quadripartite division of the Sasanian empire described by al-Dīnawarī (d. before 290/902–3), who is frequently assumed to have had access to some version of the *Khwadāynāmag*, does not include Oman and the relevant quarter is only defined as 'Fārs and al-Ahwāz to al-Baḥrayn' (al-Dīnawarī 1960: 67).

2011: 229–32). It is possible that consolidating their authority over Oman could have featured as part of such endeavours, since the Romans had earlier exhibited some strategic interest in southeast Arabia and Khusraw may have been keen to ward off any future resurrection of that interest.[31] Linked to this is the possibility that the late Sasanians may have been interested in controlling the Batinah coastal plain to stop attacks on the Persian side of the Gulf being launched from there. Glen Bowersock has made the case that the Sasanians were very aware of the threat posed to Fārs from an invading force following the Arabian coastline (Bowersock 2004; also Howard-Johnston 1995: 188). Since the Persian kings broke off their relationship in about 602 with al-Nuʿmān b. al-Mundhir, through whom they had previously attempted to exercise control over much of the Arabian Peninsula, this could explain their decision to begin taking a more active interest in Arabia's affairs for defensive reasons (see, for example, al-Azmeh 2014: 120–21; Toral-Niehoff 2014: 208–11; Fisher & Wood 2016: 275–76). Since the earliest invasion of Fārs during the era of the Islamic conquests did come across the Gulf from Oman, such concerns about security in the region would have been apposite (Hinds 1984/1996; Daryaee 2002a; Piacentini 2002).

Several historians have suggested that control of trade was the main reason behind Sasanian interest in the Arabian side of the Gulf as a whole (Wilkinson 1977: 132; 2010: 56–57; al-Naboodah 1992: 82–83; Daryaee 2003: 16; 2009: 61–66; Ulrich 2011: 381–82). Others, however, have expressed some legitimate concerns about this argument (Kennet 2007: 110–11). In terms of hard evidence, it has been suggested that pearling first took off on a large scale in the Gulf during the Sasanian period, but this would not really be relevant for the Batinah coast of Oman (Carter 2005: 145). In later sources we read anecdotes about traders from around

[31] The main evidence for slight Roman interest in southeast Arabia comes from Philostorgius's account (2007: 40–42 = III.4–5) of the missionary activity in the 4th century in the Arabian Peninsula of Theophilus; for a general discussion of this mission, see Gajda 2009: 39–41. Although Philostorgius is not explicit about the easternmost reach of Theophilus's activities, it has been suggested that they reached the coast of Oman (Fiey 1968: 215; Potts 1985: 89–90; 1990: II, 330–32). It has also been suggested that Theophilus's mission was intended as a Roman counterpart to Sasanian encroachment in the Arabian Peninsula (Bowersock 2004: 265–66, 272).

the Gulf coming to Oman: a good example is the ancestor of the famous early Islamic Muhallabid family Abū Ṣufra, who in polemical accounts is said to have been a Persian Zoroastrian weaver from Kharg originally called Baskhara b. Bahbūdhān who migrated to Oman (Ibn Rusta 1892: 205–6; Hinds 1991: 12–13, n. 10; Morony 2001–2: 33–34). Radiocarbon and strontium isotope analysis from two burials in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates has now confirmed that during the Sasanian period some migrants did come to southeast Arabia from other parts of the Sasanian empire, although in what capacity we can only guess (Kutterer *et al*. 2015). Otherwise, although certainly not implausible, the trade argument seems to be based on thinly evidenced claims for the prosperity of Gulf merchant activity in late antiquity together with a historiographical trend that sees empires as the geo-political manifestations of economic systems.[32] Far better indications for any late Sasanian prosperity around the Gulf comes from Fārs (Whitehouse & Williamson 1973; Carter 2005: 167–68). It has even been suggested that there was an official late Sasanian policy to direct Indian Ocean trade to ports in Fārs rather than southeast or east Arabia (Howard-Johnston 1995: 204–5).

There is perhaps a bit more to arguments that the Sasanians were interested in exploiting the resources of Oman, although it is only for South Arabia/Yemen that we have any direct evidence for such interest (Morony 2001–2: 34). Oman's copper mines in particular could have offered the Sasanians a source of raw materials not overwhelmingly present in many parts of their empire and a tiny amount of archaeological evidence does suggest that there was a small-scale operation at the copper mines in 'Arja/al-Zahrā', near Sohar, in the Sasanian period (Costa & Wilkinson 1987: 107, 136, 138, 184–85; Weisgerber 1987: 148–49; Morony 2001–2: 32–33). If, as has been suggested, the Romans did ban the export of copper to the Sasanians during

[32] For hints of the latter, see Daryaee 2009: 58: '[O]ne can discern an economic system created by the Persians in Late Antiquity that was passed on to the Arab Muslims and benefitted the caliphs in Mecca, Kufa, and Damascus'.

the 6th century, then this may have led to eyes turning towards Oman for this resource (Lukonin 1983: 744). Other historians, however, remain sceptical and it is interesting that copper is not discussed among the principal exports from Oman and al-Baḥrayn in one survey of eastern Arabia's late antique and early Islamic exports based on literary texts, which mentions only pearls and dates (al-Naboodah 1992: 87–88; Kennet 2007: 110).

We can certainly guess at the potential significance of Oman to help meet Sasanian rulers' need for resources and to control maritime activity in the Gulf. We do not, however, have much firm evidence to support such guesswork. The contemporary evidence we do have suggests a clearer ideological (and perhaps administrative) than an economic interest in Oman. Zeev Rubin has argued the late Sasanians had a very real interest in promoting their suzerainty over South Arabia/Yemen and some texts display the remnants of an ideological campaign designed to consolidate these claims (Rubin 2007: 196). To make this case, he uses passages from several books of the *Dēnkard*, but especially one from the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*. In Touraj Daryaee's translation (slightly adapted), this states (Daryaee 2002c: §50):

> The city of Ḥimyar (MP *simrān*) was built by Frēdōn, the son of Adwēn. And he killed Masrugh, the king of Ḥimyar, and he again brought the land of Ḥimyar under the sovereignty of *Ērānšahr*.

Richard Payne has recently argued that we should consider very seriously the late Sasanian kings' (and their subjects') thoughts about their cosmological responsibilities, arguing that much of their warfare with the Romans in the 6th and 7th centuries was driven by their efforts to underscore a particular political cosmology of Iranian world domination and that their taking of tribute played a key role in this, allowing the king of kings to express his authority symbolically without having to eliminate his rivals in practice (Payne 2013). This is very

interesting because, as Rubin has demonstrated, parts at least of the southern Arabian Peninsula could play a role in such cosmological ambitions.

It was, after all, Fereydūn (Frēdōn) who was believed to have created the cosmological order by dividing the world between his three sons, Īraj, Tūr and Salm (Payne 2013: 15). In the extract above from the *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* we see this Fereydūn being held responsible for bringing South Arabia/Yemen within the territory of *Ērānšahr*. In the 4th-/10th-century redaction of the Sasanian-era *Khwadāynāmag* traditions by the poet Ferdowsī (d. *ca*. 416/1025–26) in his famous Persian *Shāhnāmah*, each of Fereydūn's three sons was married to a daughter of the king of Yemen and he included in the share of the earth given to his son Īraj both Persia and the desert, by which in context the Arabian Peninsula may have been intended (Ferdowsī 1876–78: I, 88–105).[33] We have seen then that there is good evidence that by the mid-to-late 6th century Oman was considered an integral part of *Ērānšahr*. There is also some evidence from this period that Sasanian kings were beginning to make serious cosmological claims about the extent of their rule and that southern Arabia—more expressly Yemen but perhaps Oman as well—played its part in these claims.[34] This suggests that exercising some kind of control over Oman was part of late Sasanian rulers' policy of reassuring their subjects that they were exercising their cosmological responsibilities of maintaining the integrity of *Ērānšahr*.

This ideological interest in Oman in the late Sasanian period, however, tells us little about the nature of late Sasanian imperialism in the Batinah coastal region. On that issue, we can only guess on the basis of the literary texts and suggest a model on the basis of comparison with the nature of Sasanian imperialism in other provinces. (This is perhaps an area in which

[33] That the Arabian Peninsula was intended is more explicitly suggested in Ferdowsī 2007: 36.

[34] As well as in Payne 2013, the interest of late Sasanian kings in giving prominence to their cosmological affinities with the ancient (and mythical) rulers of Iran known as the Kayanids is demonstrated in Gnoli 1989: 137; Daryaee 2002b. See also the suggestion that it was during the reign of Khusraw I that there was an attempt to commission an 'officially approved version' of the *Khwadāynāmag* and that this effort 'was reinvigorating the idea of Iran and giving renewed ideological impetus to the empire' (Howard-Johnston 2010: 343).

current and future archaeological research may help improve our picture in some ways.) It seems clear enough now that the Sasanians took a rather localised approach to frontier defence in different regions of the empire, which meant that Sasanian imperialism could manifest itself in different ways in different regions (Howard-Johnston 1995: 180–97; 2012: 96–108). It is clear, of course, that what was going on in Oman is in no way comparable to the efforts put into defending the empire's northern frontiers to the west and east of the Caspian Sea, in the Caucasus and along the Gorgān and Tammīsheh Walls (Sauer *et al*. 2013). So there are clearly limits to a comparative approach for understanding the nature of late Sasanian imperialism in Oman. Nonetheless, some final thoughts can be made. A recent study of the career of the Armenian warlord Smbat Bagratuni (d. *ca*. 617) is potentially illuminating. Scott McDonough has suggested here that late Sasanian rulers, especially Khusraw II, oversaw a pattern of political decentralisation and provincial regionalism, which led them to promote aristocratic warlords as their representatives, giving them wealth, titles and official patronage to help them consolidate their power over local rivals on behalf of the king of kings (McDonough 2016).

Now Armenia is not Oman, but if this policy were more widespread it would argue against the case for heavy, direct late Sasanian intervention in Oman. Instead, we could envisage a situation in which the Sasanians promoted the Julandā family, giving them the necessary support to overcome their local rivals. Ps.-'Awtabī's account does suggest that this might have been Sasanian policy for inland Oman, but not the Batinah coastal plain. Other sources, however, do give indications of a policy of more indirect Sasanian control over the coastal regions as well. The antiquarian Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 245/859) tells us in his discussion of the market fair at al-Mushaqqar in al-Baḥrayn that, 'The "kings" there were from the Banū Tamīm… The Persian kings used to put them in charge over it, as with the Banū Naṣr over al-Ḥīra and the Banū al-Mustakbir [i.e. the Julandā family] over Oman' (Ibn Ḥabīb 1942: 265). He then confirms that al-Julandā b. al-Mustakbir oversaw two market fairs on the southeast Arabian

coast, at Sohar and Dabā (Ibn Ḥabīb 1942: 265–66; cf. al-Yaʿqūbī 1883: I, 313–14).[35] Wilkinson, in his model of late Sasanian Oman, does acknowledge the possibility of Omani Azdī access to the coast at Dabā, but Sohar is supposed to have been the centre of Persian imperial administration in the region (Wilkinson 1973: 46; 2010: 62). The Julandā family could, therefore, have been Persian clients meant to exert their authority over the entirety of southeast Arabia, in a similar way to the more famous Lakhmids/Nasrids over other parts of the Arabian Peninsula.[36] The caveat, of course, is that the Sasanians broke off their arrangement with the Lakhmid/Nasrid elites around 602 and it has been suggested that as a result of this the Persians started to intervene more directly in Arabian peninsular affairs. So one model could be that in the mid-to-late 6th century the Persians came to an arrangement with clients in Oman, the Julandā family, to oversee their interests in that region, but then began to exercise more direct intervention in the early 7th century.[37] The account of a treaty we have in Ps.-ʿAwtabī could then represent a synchronisation of these developments. This is only, however, one possible model and not one that should be accepted without further evidence.

Literary and archaeological evidence for late Sasanian Arabia

In this article, I have made an attempt to see how the literary and archaeological evidence for late Sasanian Oman might be fitted together. Despite the seemingly growing gap in the conclusions suggested by the two bodies of material, it is—I have hoped to demonstrate—

[35] Dabā (alternative vocalisation Dibā) is on the east coast of the peninsula dominated by today's UAE, a little under 100 miles north of Sohar, the modern settlement of that name being split between the emirates of Fujairah and Sharjah and the Omani governorate of Musandam.

[36] For the operation of Lakhmid/Nasrid power, see most recently (and with further references), Toral-Niehoff 2014; Fisher & Wood 2016. That '*julandā'* was perhaps a title bestowed by the Sasanians upon their Omani clients that eventually came to be taken as a proper name, see Wilkinson 1975: 99.

[37] Patricia Crone has suggested that the well-known leader of opposition to the Medinan caliphate during the *ridda* wars, Laqīṭ b. Mālik Dhū Tāj, was 'possibly another Sāsānid protégé', but there is little evidence for this (Crone 1987: 49, n. 166; cf. Abu Ezzah 1979: 55, 62, n. 23a).

possible to construct models which seem to allow for a combination of both. In this sense, this article can sit together with another recent publication which demonstrated that the at first seemingly divergent literary and archaeological evidence for the presence of Christian monasticism on the Arabian side of the Gulf can in fact be reconciled, through a careful and contextualised reading of the narrative sources, to present a coherent picture (Payne 2011). We have seen that although Ps.-ʿAwtabī's account of relationships between the Sasanian rulers and local Omani tribes offers interesting information about the way the pre-Islamic period in southeast Arabia was remembered in the 4th/10th century, it is not very clear how much of the information it provides presents an accurate picture of the situation in the 6th and early 7th centuries. We have also seen that in any case even this, our single most detailed account of Sasanian involvement in Oman, does not actually provide enough information about Persian imperial administration in the region to support some of the conclusions advanced previously by scholars working off literary evidence. Instead, this re-evaluation of the evidence in Islamic-era sources in light of the sparse material on Oman provided in contemporary late Sasanian sources has suggested a different model for interpreting why the Sasanians were interested in controlling Oman and how late Sasanian imperialism might have been felt by the local inhabitants of southeast Arabia. Ultimately, the literary evidence for late antique Oman such as it is can only offer us models at the moment. We can hope that continuing archaeological work in the region might help to provide further evidence in support of or against some aspects of those models. For that archaeological evidence to be put to most appropriate use, however, it is important to sort out what literary sources can offer us to understand the context of late Sasanian imperialism in Oman—to be clear about precisely what they say and how we might distinguish that from our own interpretations of what they say—and this article has attempted to offer such a basis.

Ps.-ʿAwtabī on the late Sasanian presence in Oman[38]

[762] He said: The Persians did not return to Oman after Mālik b. Fahm had taken control of [the land] and expelled them from it until his rule and that of his descendants after him came to an end. [That is when] rule over Oman passed to the family of al-Julandā b. al-Mustakīr[39] al-Maʿwalī—some say al-Mustakbir al-Maʿwalī—and rule over Persia passed to the descendants of Sāsān, the family of the *kisrā*s (*raḥṭ al-akāsira*).

There was a peace treaty (*muhādana*) between them and the family of al-Julandā in Oman, in which [it was stipulated] that there would be 4,000 *asāwira* and *marāziba* together with a tax collector for them there nearby the kings of the Azd. The Persians would stick to the coastal plain (*al-sawāḥil wa-shuṭūṭ al-baḥr*) and the Azd would be kings in the mountains, the desert and other such places on the fringes of Oman. All affairs were to be in their charge. Any Persian, member of his family or subject with whom 'Kisrā' became angry and whom he perceived as a threat to his person or kingdom, he would send to Oman to be imprisoned there.

Things remained thus for the Azd with that peace treaty until God made Islam manifest in Oman and the Prophet's (*ṣ*) fame spread throughout the lands. That was in the time of Khusraw Aparviz, the son of Hormuz, son of Khusraw Anushirvan. The Prophet (*ṣ*) wrote to Khusraw Aparviz calling him to Islam, but he tore up the Prophet's (*ṣ*) letter. When he heard of this, the Prophet (*ṣ*) said, 'O God, tear up his kingdom to shreds!' Luck abandoned Khusraw after the Prophet's (*ṣ*) summons and God passed his authority over to his son, Shīrawayh, who killed him.

[38] From al-ʿAwtabī (attrib.) 2006: II, 762–66. [= Ms. Durham Or. Ar. 20, ff. 201a – 202b.] I have translated from the printed edition, and in the notes I mention differences in the Durham Ms. only if they affect the understanding significantly.

[39] In Ms. Durham Or. Ar. 20, f. 201a, the name is given as al-Julandā b. al-Mustanīr al-Maʿwalī and the gloss 'some say al-Mustakbir al-Maʿwalī' is omitted.

[763] Shīrawayh then wrote to Bādhān, his *marzubān* over Oman, who is [sometimes] rather known as Fastkhān,[40] but was anyway his *marzubān* and tax collector over Oman: 'Send on your behalf a trustworthy man who speaks Arabic and Persian and who has read the scriptures (*rajul*^{an} *ʿarabiyy*^{an} *fārsiyy*^{an} *ṣadūq*^{an} *maʾmūn*^{an} *qad qaraʾa al-kutub*) to the Ḥijāz to bring back to you news of this Arab who claims to be a prophet'. (With his words ''*arabiyy*^{an} *fārsiyy*^{an}' he meant someone who speaks and can understand Arabic and Persian.[41]) So Bādhān—also known as al-Fastkhān[42]—sent a man from Ṭāḥiya called Kaʿb b. Barsha al-Ṭāḥī, who had converted to Christianity and read the scriptures. He came to Medina and went to the Prophet (*ṣ*) and spoke with him. He saw in him the characteristics he found in the scriptures and recognised that he was a prophet sent [by God]. The Prophet (*ṣ*) explained Islam to him and so Kaʿb converted and returned to Oman. He came to Bādhān—also called al-Fastkhān[43]—who was in Oman and told him that the Prophet (*ṣ*) was a prophet sent [by God]. Bādhān replied, 'This is a matter on which I wish to speak face-to-face with the king'. Bādhān put in charge over his followers in Oman a man among them called Maskān and then left to the king 'Kisrā' in Fārs.

The Messenger of God (*ṣ*) then wrote to the inhabitants of Oman, where the king at that time was al-Julandā b. al-Mustakīr[44] and sent a messenger to him summoning him and his followers to Islam. He responded positively [i.e. he converted to Islam] and sent a messenger to the Persians in Oman, who were Magians, calling on them to convert to this religion and to answer Muḥammad's (*ṣ*) call. They refused, however, and so al-Julandā expelled them completely from Oman by force.

[40] In Ms. Durham Or. Ar. 20, f. 201a, the name is spelled Fasṯān.
[41] This gloss is in the text and is presumably Ps.-ʿAwtabī's or a later copyist's.
[42] On this occasion in Ms. Durham Or. Ar. 20, f. 201a, the spelling looks like al-Fastjān.
[43] Again, in Ms. Durham Or. Ar. 20, f. 201a, the spelling here is al-Fastjān.
[44] As the editor points out (p. 763, n. 81), in most sources Muḥammad sends his messenger to two sons of al-Julandā, not al-Julandā himself who was presumably dead by then. In Ms. Durham Or. Ar. 20, f. 201b, the name here is al-Julandā b. al-Mustakbir.

There is another version (*wa-qāla ākharūn*): the Prophet (*ṣ*) wrote to the inhabitants of Oman summoning them to Islam and to the people of the fertile land (*al-rīf*), among whom were ʿAbd and Jayfar, the two sons of al-Julandā; their father al-Julandā had died by that time. In his (*ṣ*) letter to the Omanis it said:

> From Muḥammad the Messenger of God to the inhabitants of Oman.[45] To start: Affirm the *shahāda* that there is no god but God and that I, Muḥammad, am the Messenger of God. Pay the *zakat* and build mosques, **[764]** otherwise I will attack you.[46]

According to al-Wāqidī with an *isnād*: The Prophet (*ṣ*) wrote to Jayfar and ʿAbd, the two sons of al-Julandā the Azdī, in Oman. He sent ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ b. Wāʾil al-Sahmī to them with his letter. His letter was a document smaller than a hand-span, in which [it said]:

> In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. From Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh to Jayfar and ʿAbd, the two sons of al-Julandā. Greetings to those who follow guidance. To start: I call you both to Islam. Convert to Islam! I am the Messenger of God to all people, 'to bring warning to those who live and so that the doctrine (*al-qawl*) is shown to be the truth against the unbelievers'.[47] If the pair of you acknowledge Islam, I will confirm you in your rule, but if you refuse to acknowledge Islam then your rule will come to an end and my cavalry will set up camp in your lands and my prophethood will have authority over your rulership.[48]

The scribe of this was Ubayy b. Kaʿb, while he (*ṣ*) dictated it. He folded the document up and sealed it with his blessed seal. The wording on the seal was: 'There is no god but God, Muḥammad is the Messenger of God'.

[45] This first sentence is missing in Ms. Durham Or. Ar. 20, f. 201b.
[46] This is not the same text of this letter as found in some other sources, on which see Ḥamīdullāh 1983: 161–63 (no. 76).
[47] Q36.70.
[48] This is the more 'standard' text of the letter as found in Ḥamīdullāh 1983: 161–63.

He said: ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ came with the Prophet's (*ṣ*) letter to ʿAbd and Jayfar, the two sons of al-Julandā, in Oman. The first place he entered was Dastgerd near Sohar. He came to rest there at noon and sent [a messenger/letter] to the sons of al-Julandā, who were in the Omani desert (*bi-bādiyat ʿUmān*). The first of them to meet him was ʿAbd b. al-Julandā, the wiser (*aḥlam*) of the two men and the better character, who sent ʿAmr on with the Prophet's (*ṣ*) letter to his brother, Jayfar b. al-Julandā, and he delivered it to him sealed. He broke the seal and read it through to the end. Then he handed it to his brother ʿAbd, who read it just as his brother had. He turned to ʿAmr and said, 'What you are calling us to on behalf of your master is no trifling matter. I'll think it through again and let you know'. **[765]** He summoned together a group of the Azd and they sent [a messenger] to Kaʿb b. Barsha al-ʿAwdī [*sic*] asking him about the Prophet (*ṣ*), to which he replied, 'The man is a prophet. I recognised his characteristics and he will overpower the Arabs and non-Arabs'. So he [i.e. ʿAbd] accepted Islam and converted together with his brother at the same time. Then he sent [messengers] to the leaders of his tribes, took their pledges of allegiance to Muḥammad (*ṣ*) and brought them to his religion. He made them deliver up the *ṣadaqa*; ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ had ordered that it be taken and so he did so as the Prophet (*ṣ*) had commanded.

Jayfar then sent [messengers] to Mahra, al-Shiḥr and their districts. He summoned them to Islam and told them all about it, and they converted with him. Then he sent [messengers] to Dabā and its surroundings up to the edge of Oman. Everyone to whom Jayfar's messenger came converted to Islam and accepted his summons except the Persians who were in Oman at that time. The Azd gathered around Jayfar b. al-Julandā and said, 'We will not remain neighbours of the non-Arabs after today!' They agreed to expel Maskān and those Persians with him. Jayfar summoned the *marzubān*[49] and the *asāwira* in Oman and said, 'A prophet has been sent among us Arabs and they have chosen one of two options for me: either you leave

[49] In Ms. Durham Or. Ar. 20, f. 202a, the plural is given, i.e. *marāziba*.

us or we will fight you'. The Persians decided to fight and made preparations for war with the Azd.

At that point, the Azd gathered, made mutual covenants and agreements, and set out towards Maskān and his followers among the *marāziba* and the *asāwira*. They fought him and killed him alongside many of his followers and commanders after a terrible war. The rest of his followers fortified themselves in the city of Dastgerd in Sohar, a city which the non-Arabs in Oman had built. When the fighting between the two sides had gone on for a long time, they sued the Omanis for peace. They granted that to them on the condition that they give the Omanis all the copper, silver, armour and pack animals and then be carried with their families and retinues on a ship until they crossed over to the land of the Persians. They agreed to that and left Oman for Fārs. The Azd took control over Oman.

[…]

[766] Someone I do not doubt told me that the Persians were in Oman in a treaty arrangement together with the Arabs. When the Messenger of God (*ṣ*) came to Oman, they answered his summons and presented it to the Persians. Those who refused refused and resigned themselves to handing over their property; then they left Oman. They vacated their properties, which became these *ṣawāfī*, and the properties of those Persians who left remained behind.

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