

***Richard E. Payne, Cambridge (UK): Hagiography and the Christianization of Local Elites in the Provinces of Late Antique Iran***

During the late sixth and early seventh centuries, the hagiographers of northern Mesopotamia came to represent saints in the terms of Iranian aristocratic culture. These histories of saints commenced with extended accounts of the noble lineages from which the saints descended, tracing the Sasanian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Seleucid, and Achaemenid origins of noble families. Gernot Wiessner and Joel Walker have revealed the extent to which one of these texts – the *History of Mar Qardag* – was conversant with Iranian court culture. This paper seeks to connect the novel cultural production of late Sasanian northern Mesopotamia with the new Christian elite, known from sigillographic and historiographical sources, that emerged along the axes of the reformed fiscal system. As Khosro I's fiscal reforms demanded closer interaction between the high nobility and the local nobles of the provinces, the Christian clergy developed a literature that permitted Christian elites to assert their social status in the terms of their great noble compeers. Christian religious professionals thus served as vehicles of Iranization, defined here in terms of shared elite practices rather than ethnicity. The Iranization of northern Mesopotamian elites, their adaptation of the language and practices of nobility, depended less on the formal institutions of the Sasanian state than on their collaboration with the Christian clergy, who brokered access to literary traditions endowing these elites with storied lineages and associating them with the stardust of ancient kings.

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