and nonassimilation were enhanced by the fact that the Babylonian elite discouraged assimilation. A historical problem seems to be created by the comparison between the very low percentage of the Judean exiles in the general population of Achaemenid Babylonia (less than 1 percent) and their demographic strength in later Babylonia (one million Jews in Parthian Babylonia according to Josephus and a Jewish majority in parts of northern Babylonia according to the Babylonian Talmud). Yet two considerations lessen this problem: the first is the extreme under- representation of the Judeans in the Babylonian sources, and the second is the fact that the Jewish mission took place in Babylon like in other parts of the Diaspora in the post-Achaemenid periods, especially under the tolerant Parthian rule. Proselytes are indeed recorded in the Babylonian Talmud.

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Jewish Leadership in the Babylonian Diaspora: Second–Sixth Centuries
Geoffrey Herman

The foremost leader in Babylonian Jewry in the Sassanian era (224–651 CE) was the exarchate. Based in the empire's capital, the exarchate was the official representative of the Babylonian Jews before the crown. Rabbinic literature is the main source so the image of the exarch reflects the exarch's mixed relationship with the rabbis. The rabbis criticized the exarchate as a symbol of Persian cultural assimilation and for the lack of identity with rabbinic ideals, but the role was also the focus of Babylonian Jewish patriotism vis-à-vis Palestine.

The Title
The title "exarchate" is English for what is known in the Aramaic sources: Be'ei Galuta. The term often appears in the collective de-Be'ei Galuta, or de-Be'i Nesha'b, in the sense of a clan. The title alludes to its special affinity to Babylonia—the Exile, par excellence, from biblical times, thereby evoking the biblical past of this community. The alternative designation, de-Be'ei Nesha'b, uses the Aramaic form of the Hebrew term Nesha'b—the supreme political leader. This title may refer to the exarch's claim to be scions of the biblical house of David.

Source
The Palestinian Talmud (PT) and Babylonian Talmud (BT) are the contemporary sources on the Sassanian exarchate for the third to fifth centuries CE. They do not, however, provide a great deal of reliable information, as they are only peripherally concerned with the exarchate. Although geonic sources (7th–11th centuries CE), especially the Epistle of Rav Sherira Gaon and Seder Olat haZita (SOZ), have also served many scholars in the past, they possess almost no independent historical value on the Sassanian exarchate. Useful indirect contemporary sources include Persian epigraphic sources on the Sassanian empire and Syriac sources on Persian Christianity. The latter, particularly when relating to the catholics, the Christian leader of equivalent status to the exarch, offers a valuable comparative aspect for the fourth to fifth centuries CE and helps fill the void in knowledge on the exarchate for the fifth to seventh centuries CE when the Talmudic sources run out. The historical portrayal of the exarchate is largely determined by the methodological approach toward the sources. The popular portrayal of the exarchate generally found in earlier scholarly literature is largely the result of a historicizing tendency prevalent among many scholars of ancient rabbinic literature, coupled with a certain romanticism and a lack of attention to the complex makeup of the BT, which incorporates diverse chronological and geographical strata and refashions earlier traditions. A critical reading of both the Talmudic and geonic sources, sensitive to their nature, genre, and inherent biases, yields notable differences, and is the basis for the following survey.

Origins
There can be no certainty about the beginnings of the exarchate. The critical reading of the rabbinic sources points toward the last third of the third century CE as the period when scholars can say with reasonable certainty that an exarchate existed, and it was probably within this timeframe that it first emerged. It probably began with the advancement of an influential Jewish clan to a position of representation during the reign of King Čapar II (241–271 CE), who was tolerant of non-Zoroastrian minorities. Rabbinic literature, accepting the exarchal claim to descent through the Davidic line of Zerubbabel in uninterrupted succession, saw no difficulty in anachronistically depicting the exarchs alongside much earlier rabbinic figures.

Location
Location played a key role in the emergence and the authority of the exarchate. The same was true for the catholics, and the comparison is illustrative. In the late third or early fourth century, the bishop of the winter capital city—a city usually
called Seleucia by the Christians, Weh-Ardashir by the Persians, and Mehoza by the Jews—first achieved hegemony over the Christian population of the entire Sasanian Empire. Seleucia essentially maintained this primacy for Persian Christianity throughout the Sasanian era. With regard to the exarchate the situation is only a little more complex. Two Babylonian cities, Nehranea and Mehoza, are closely associated with the exarchate. Both of these cities were close to the powers that be, Mehoza, founded in the early third century, was both the provincial capital and the royal winter capital city. Its centrality is self-evident. Nehranea, a more ancient city, was in the vicinity of Perdez Sipir, the next most important administrative and military city in the region. Nehranea and Mehoza were linked by the Royal Canal (Nabur Matta) and probably belonged within the same Sasanian administrative district (sabrestan), also called Weh-Ardashir, which extended along the Royal Canal.

There are some indications that the direct influence of the exarch through the Jewish communities was confined to the sabrestan of Weh-Ardashir, nearly reflecting Weh-Ardashir’s position as a provincial capital. At the same time, the notion of the exarch as a central monarchical authority over the entire Jewish community of Babylonia (or the Sasanian Empire) reflected the position of Weh-Ardashir as the royal capital.

The exarchs are depicted in the BT as wealthy and Persianized. Their duties would have assumed a reasonable acquaintance with Persian language and culture and a capacity to function in Persian high society. Their location—in the wealthy, urbanized, and more Persianized setting of the capital city also supports this characterization. Rabbinic sources reflect and comment on this reality, both subtly through the incorporation of Persian loanwords in exarchate-related traditions, and directly through stories and anecdotes. Stories (e.g., BT Gitin 14a-b; BT Shabbat 70a-b; BT Berakhot 46b) describe the exarchal circle as possessing Persian names, using Persian language, wearing Persian dress, and preferring Persian table etiquette. The luxurious lifestyle of the exarch included horses, golden carriages, silk garments, gardens, and servants. Food is central to this image. Wild prey was served on his table. He is depicted as hosting banquets with multiple courses for large numbers of guests. Rabbis were among his guests.

Only a few rabbis are regularly associated with the exarch. Some of these, however, are of considerable importance. Some might have been under the employ of the exarchate, possibly as judges. The exarchate would claim judicial hegemony and exclusivity. In addition echoes of the exarchal prerogatives are heard in the realms of corporal and even capital punishment. The royal patronage apparently enjoyed by the exarchate may have favored the judicial claim and associated influence. The punitive powers the exarchate exercised. However, an examination of the Talmudic evidence on the judiciary indicates that the exarchate’s claim to judicial power was part of an ongoing polemic over hegemony within Babylonian Jewry and was contested. The punitive powers described in the Talmud, which often seem extrajudicial, may have been limited, possibly to the regional jurisdiction of Weh-Ardashir.

The rabbis’ attitude toward the exarchate was not uniform. In some sources there is neutral discussion relating to the exarch; elsewhere there are expressions of pride and enthusiasm. More common, however, are critical and hostile comments. Many stories portray the exarch as antagonistic toward the rabbis and their knowledge and treating them in a highhanded manner. The criticism fits into four principle categories: regional—Halachic, sociocultural, religious, and ideological, although there is some overlap between the categories.

First, there was criticism based on regional and Halachic differences with the exarch symbolizing the local rabbinic law, or where representative rabbis from that region, such as Rav Naḥman, were treated as representing the exarch. Disparaging anecdotes originating in places such as Kafri, Pumbedita, and Nehranea are aimed at Mehoza. The focus was Halachic and the association between the local rabbinic school and the exarchate was intended to delegitimize the Halachic traditions of the locale.

Second, sociocultural condemnation stemmed from the perceived Persian lifestyle of the exarchs and their ostentatiousness. This criticism reflected a broader conscious cultural conflict between rabbinic and nonrabbinic value systems and between varying approaches toward the assimilation of Persian cultural traits. The social differences between urban Mehoza and the more peripheral Jewish centers accentuated the Halachic differences between the distinct geographical regions as already mentioned.

Third, religious criticism was based on the claim that the exarchs did not conform to the rabbinic lifestyle, rules, and values. They were judged as lax in the observance of Sabbath and dietary laws. Religious and social censure merged in the allegations that their lifestyle was not commensurate with the sober condition of postdestruction exile and expectancy for redemption.

Fourth, the ideological criticism was based on a challenge to the leadership claims of the exarchate. It appears to have been rooted in the antirulership tradition prevalent in rabbinic literature. This has both biblical roots and expressed particular reserve concerning Gentile court affairs. It focused on the exarchs’ use and abuse of power, especially toward rabbis, often drawing allusions from the Bible. It is also questioned, from a theological perspective, the existence of a Jewish "king" before the redemption. An exarchate was not legitimate before the redemption or actually impeded this redemption (BT Sanhedrin 38a).

This criticism was articulated creatively through anecdotes describing encounters between rabbis and exarchs or through the egress of suggestive scriptural verses. The banquet was a common setting for the interaction between rabbis and exarch. Rav Sheshet was called on to respond when an exarch declared before him: "You sages might be wise, but the Persians are more expert than you in table etiquette." (BT Berakhot 46b). Elsewhere Rav Sheshet demonstrated that a limb torn from a living animal was served on the exarch’s table (BT Gitin 67b). Rav Hisda (PT Sota 9:15 [24c]; BT Gitin 7a) evoked a verse from Ezekiel 21, 31: "Thus says the Lord, remove the turban and lift off the crown" in what seemed to be a challenge to the monarchical aspirations of the exarchate. Rav Hisda, a rabbi of priestly descent, interpreted "turban" as symbolizing the high priesthood, and "crown" for the monarchy. He asserted that the exarchate was advancing his "monarchical" pretensions despite the absence of an accompanying high priesthood. Monarchy and high priesthood must fall or rise together.

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE JEWISH DIASPORA: VOLUME 2 (COUNTRIES, REGIONS, AND COMMUNITIES)
The symbolism of the exilarchate for Babylonian Jewry found its more positive manifestation in the realm of Babylonia's competition and polemic with Palestine. This dynamic of regional authority and rivalry mirrored the broader reality of two world-reaching empires in constant conflict. In the course of the Sasanian period, the prestige of the Babylonian Jewish Diaspora community grew until it began to view itself as equal or superior to the Jewish homeland. The exilarch would now come to embody Babylonia's alleged ascendancy over Palestine. The representative leaders of the two Jewish communities were believed to descend from the ancient Judaic royal line. The following literary and historical progression probably occurred. Patriarchal assertions of Davidic ancestry are first attested in the third century CE. An equal claim echoed forth from the exilarchate at some point in time. A series of separate but probably interdependent rabbinic anecdotes feature Judah I, the typological patriarch of rabbinic literature, and his contemporary. R. Hyya, a key Babylonian rabbi who had migrated to Palestine (PT Kilaim 9.4 with parallels); BT Horayot 11b; BT Sanhedrin 30a). R. Hyya's two sons also feature in some of these traditions. The earliest trace would appear to have been in Palestinian sources originating in the rivalry between the disciple circles of R. Hyya I and Judah I. Within these stories, R. Hyya and his sons functioned as a foil for the patriarch. The role of the exilarch was to symbolically affirm the superiority of Babylonian lineage. The earliest echoes of these traditions, then, would appear to reflect local Palestinian struggles over religious influence. This superiority of lineage then serves in the BT as a basis to assert the judicial superiority of Babylonia over Palestine (BT Sanhedrin 5a-b). In BT Sanhedrin 38a, however, the exilarch is, in fact, condemned alongside the patriarch. A story of a plot to depose the patriarch from the leadership of the rabbinic academy (BT Horayot 10b–11a) also appears to address the rivalry between Babylonia and Palestine through its leadership but focusing on the tensions within the academy. One can read here how R. Meir and R. Natan conspired to overthrow the second-century Palestinian patriarch, Simeon b. Gamaliel. The story refers to R. Natan, a Babylonian rabbi, acquiring a position of eminence within the academy by virtue of his father's status. Geonic commentators believed his father was the exilarch. This story may be addressing the issue of exilarchal involvement in the world of the academies.

The history of the exilarchate during the latter part of the Sasanian era is no less enigmatic than the beginning. As the Talmuds reached completion the principle source is lost. Geonic sources provide sporadic cases of persecution in the late fifth century, including the execution of an exilarch in 470–471 CE, and SOZ describes in some detail an unsuccessful Jewish revolt lead by an exilarch named Mar Zutra, that resulted in his execution. Some have viewed this period as a whole as falling under the shadow of religious persecution. The historical credibility of SOZ, however, has been questioned and the persecution appears to have been limited in duration. One should not, then, be too hasty in interpreting this lacuna in the source material as signaling the end of the exilarchate. The condition of Persian Christianity in this period, and in particular, the experience of the catholicon, is suggestive and serves to neutralize the lacunose narrative based on the geonic sources. With respect to the relations between religion and state in the late

Sasanian era, a more balanced picture is evident, suggesting the continued existence of representative leadership of religious minorities for most of this period.

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Jews in Iran

Irena Vladimirska

General Population: 65,688,435 (CIA figures)

Jewish Population: Estimates range from 30,000–40,000 (CIA figures)

Percent of Population: Less than 1 percent

Main Cities Populated by Jews: Tehran, Shiraz, Hamadan, Isfahan, Noshabad, Babol

Migration Routes and Ethnic Background: Sephardic Jews of Persian Empire, Bukharan Jews, Caucasian Jews, and a small Ashkenazi community arrived during World War II

Language Spoken: Nearly all speak Persian; Judeo-Persian or Bukharan dialects are also often spoken.

Historical Overview

732–722 BCE: In the first Babylonian Captivity, Jewish citizens of Gilgal and eastern Galilee are resettled to the territory of Assyria by Tiglath-Pileser the 3rd. Jews from the territory of the Israeli kingdom are resettled to the territory of Moesopotamia and Medin several years later.

598–587 BCE: The Jewish population of Iran increases considerably because of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of the Judean kingdom. Jews settle in the inner provinces of Babylonia, such as Eschatana and Shushan.

539–423 BCE: Under the rule of Cyrus (539–530 BCE), Darius (521–486 BCE), and Xerxes (486–483 BCE), Jews are guaranteed their religious, social, and political rights as subjects of Achaemenid Empire.

30–50 CE: Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–50 CE), in his book Embassy to Gaius, and Flavius Josephus (37 CE–100 CE) in his The Wars of the Jews, repeatedly mention a