To assessors of applications, Elahee Omidyar Mir-Djalali Dissertation Completion Scholarship:

I have known Ms. Safari for a little over 4 years, having first encountered her when she applied to the University of Calgary PhD programme. I was the Graduate Programme Director at the time, so I became familiar with her previous academic programmes and achievements in the course of my responsibilities in that regard. In the Fall 2019 semester, I taught a graduate seminar on Sasanian Persia; Ms. Safari enrolled in that course, since she was planning to do her PhD research on that region at that period. In addition, I have been a member of her supervisory committee and have thus helped to shepherd her through the various requirements of the PhD programme. She passed her candidacy exam in December 2022 and is now compiling her research in preparation for the writing of her thesis.

Ms. Safari is not a native speaker and writer of English, but she has progressed significantly in that respect in the time that I have known her: she speaks English much better than when I first knew her, and her writing in English has improved very dramatically as well. At the time of her candidacy exam, I remarked on that fact during the discussion after the oral exam, and others agreed. But I should also note that Ms. Safari has always shown an extraordinary ability to grasp ideas and concepts and the ability to develop new ideas—she expresses them more effectively now, but her intellectual capacity was always evident. What will greatly benefit Ms. Safari in her research is her fluency in Farsi; she is able to read current scholarship written in Iran by the descendants of the Sasanians (and will, effectively, also be able to read Middle Persian, the language of the Sasanians). In other words, her linguistic skills are precisely suitable for her work.

Ms. Safari’s research project is a re-evaluation of potential archaeological evidence for the building programmes of Shapur II; given the current perspective that such evidence is lacking, scholars suggest that the king did little in this area. Ms. Safari plans to re-examine the evidence to see whether it has been misinterpreted, to see whether evidence dated to earlier or later periods is either in whole or in part attributable to the reign of Shapur II. This is an important project; it has always been regarded as remarkable that one of the greatest Sasanian kings apparently left very little in the visual record. It is too early, of course, to determine what the conclusions will be. If Ms. Safari shows that physical remains reveal that more should be attributed to Shapur II, this represent a remarkable new assessment of his reign in this aspect. If she cannot find mistaken interpretations or other problems with attribution, she will nevertheless show that the current assessment is accurate and that Shapur II directed his attention to other matters not revealed in the physical record—in effect, she can showthat the lack of building programmes was a choice, not an accident of history or the vagaries of the survival of the physical record.

Given both her intellectual capacity and the importance of her project, I fully support Ms. Safari’s application for a Dissertation Completion Fellowship.

Yours Sincerely,

John Vanderspoel