

Michael Richard JACKSON BONNER* (Canada)

A Brief Military History of the Later Reign of Šāpur II

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This is a brief history of the wars of Šāpur II from the middle of the fourth century to the death of that king in the year 379. These conflicts represent the military operations of the Sasanid state at its height before a gradual decline under the successor to Šāpur II.

The peace established by the Treaty of Nisibis in the year 298 held until the death of the emperor Constantine. That Roman prince had meditated a Persian campaign, but plans for the invasion perished with him. The settlement at Nisibis had been greatly to Iran's disadvantage, and the Sasanian court would not long endure Roman influence over Mesopotamia, Armenia, and Iberia.

But there was another stimulus to war. The rise of the emperor Constantine had achieved the public establishment of the Christian religion. That emperor, and most of his immediate successors, connected the worship of Christ with the happiness and prosperity of the Roman empire, and perhaps of the entire world.¹ The churchman Eusebius claims to preserve a letter sent by the emperor Constantine to his Persian colleague congratulating him on the presence of Christians within Iran. "May the very best come to you", wrote Constantine, "and at the same time the best for those Christians, since they also are yours...I entrust them to you, putting their very persons in your hands, because you too are renowned for piety".² This letter was sent most probably when Šāpur was still very young.³ But the Sasanid court would have recognised in the words of Constantine a challenge to the Persian king's authority over his Christian subjects, and an oblique threat lest those Persian Christians be mistreated.

A similar threat was also perceived along Iran's western frontier, but it was felt most keenly in Armenia. The Armenian king Tirdat III and some of his nobility had embraced the Christian religion early in the fourth century. The new religion was intended to distinguish the Armenian nation from the two great powers which surrounded it, but this was a doubtful and short-lived advantage. Many among the Armenian nobility adhered to their ancient cults and disdained the worship of Christ, which they viewed as a foreign influence and a divisive religion. Nobles who held this opinion believed their customs and religion to be similar to those of Iran, and were pleased to make common cause with Šāpur against their Christian compatriots. But when the Roman empire had adopted the religion of Christ, that state appeared to be a natural ally of Armenian and Iranian Christians alike.

No one can have been surprised that Šāpur invaded Armenia not long after the death of Constantine in 337. This was the beginning of nearly twenty years of constant and doubtful fighting. Clashes at Singara, Eleia, and Constantia produced no decisive outcome; and Nisibis endured three sieges which the historian Festus judged to be more injurious to the army of Šāpur than to the city.⁴ One of these sieges involved the singular tactic of assaulting Nisibis with a gigantic wave.⁵ The river Mygdonius that runs past that city was dammed behind a vast wall of earth; and when it was released, the immense force of the water destroyed a portion of the outer bulwarks of Nisibis. Jacob, bishop of that city, kept morale high as the citizens laboured to rebuild their defences. The writings of Theodoret of Cyrrhus, a Christian partisan from Antioch, assert that Šāpur beheld Jacob upon the battlements of Nisibis and mistook him for the emperor Constantius. Though Šāpur was greatly disturbed by this, the Christian writer claims that a worse calamity befell the Persian king.

* <http://www.mrjb.ca>; mrjb@email.com

¹ See the letter of the emperor Constantine to Šāpur II, which Eusebius claims to have translated into Greek. Even if it not genuine, it must represent the Roman attitude to the importance of Christianity to good government (*Vita Constantini* IV 9-13).

² I have made a paraphrase of *Vita Constantini* IV 13.

³ On the date of the letter, see FRENDO (2001) 57-69.

⁴ Festus, 27. The sources for these battles are set forth in DODGEON, LIEU (1991) 165-210.

⁵ Theodoret, *Historia Religiosa*, I 11-12; Theodoret, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, II 40.1-14.

The prayers of the holy man raised up a vast cloud of gnats and mosquitoes which assailed the Iranian force: the insects filled the hollow trunks of Šāpur's elephants as well as the ears and nostrils of other animals, and Šāpur's host fled in confusion.

But the progress of Šāpur was retarded less by the prayers of a bishop than by the demands of nature and the fortifications erected by Diocletian. The vast pool of water which Šāpur had created would have attracted many insects to annoy his troops and the wet earth would have needed some time to dry before the Iranian army could renew its assault upon the city. It was in this interval that the inhabitants of Nisibis repaired the walls of their city.

The obstinacy of the Persian king won no important victory, nor did the system of Roman defences persuade him to retire altogether. This conflict might have continued as a war of attrition to the utter exhaustion of the belligerents. But at some point in the early 350s, Šāpur suddenly relinquished the siege of Nisibis, and his armies vacated Mesopotamia. A very serious threat had imposed itself upon north-eastern Iran, and Šāpur hastened to the relief of that beleaguered frontier.

One thousand years before Attila had impressed the Romans with the terrors of his name, his ferocious ancestors were already considered enemies of civilisation.⁶ The origin of the Huns was in the high steppe of the Ordos region of Inner Mongolia which is surrounded on three sides by the Great Bend of the Yellow river. Immediately to the south lay the dominions of the Zhou dynasty. Hunnish predations upon that settled state terminated in the destruction of the Zhou capital at Haojing seven hundred and seventy-one years before our era. The Huns spread terror throughout China until the tyrant Qin Shi Huangdi expelled them from the Ordos region, and connected the stout ramparts of the Great Wall as a grim boundary between civilisation and the abode of demons and the northern barbarian.

The ruin of the Qin dynasty proceeded amidst rebellion and factional strife, and the Huns returned to the Ordos region. The leadership of the Hunnish king Bagatur forced the Han empire to pay an annual tribute, and he led the westward expansion of the Huns into the Tarim Basin where he conquered the people known Tocharian, or Yuezhi. Bagatur united all Inner Asia within the bosom of a single nomadic state, but his son Laoshang crushed the Tocharians and forced them to flee southwest, where they overthrew the remnants of Greek civilisation in Bactria and overran Iran. This was in the second century before Christ. Hereafter internal feuds divided the Hunnish state; and with time a northern and a southern faction became permanent distinctions. A series of humiliations by other nomads deprived the northern Huns of an empire and confined them to the region of the Altai.

The fortune of the southern Huns was different. The leader of this division was a man by the name of Bi. Bi formed an alliance with China and the southern Huns became federates of the Han dynasty. A portion of the Hunnish people were settled within the borders of China: a policy which was attended by reciprocal dangers. As the Han state dissolved into three mutually hostile kingdoms, the power and influence of the Huns grew. The dynasty of the Northern Wei was established by a military dictator known as Cao. Fearing Hunnish power, he separated that nation into five divisions over which he placed Chinese superintendents, and he detained the leader of the Huns within the Chinese capital Luoyang. Cao had employed contingents of Huns in his internal wars, but unification of China was achieved not by the armies of Cao but by the Jin dynasty.

The Huns had long been degraded by reason of the imprisonment of their chief. But this was destined to end soon. Towards the end of the third century of our era, civil wars threatened to topple the Jin empire. Liu Yuan, a direct descendent of Bagatur, declared his independence from the authority of the Jin and announced himself as the legitimate continuator of the Han dynasty, from which he claimed to be descended. In the year 308, Liu declared himself emperor. Support flowed to the new dynasty as well from external barbarians as from Chinese renegades; and the Hunnish state, now commanded by Liu Cong, triumphed upon the ruins of Jin China in the year 311. The capitals of Luoyang and Chang'an were delivered to fire and sword and reduced to ashes. Two Jin emperors were taken prisoner and forced to serve their Hunnish masters as cupbearers before their ignominious execution.

Dynastic squabbling within the Hunnish state was followed by Chinese revenge. In the year 349 the general Ran Min seized power and commanded the murder of all foreigners within China: his purpose was to destroy the Huns and their vassals, but it is said that anyone with a high nose and a full beard was murdered.⁷ Organised migration followed organised slaughter. The fugitive Huns put an immense distance

⁶ My reconstruction of Hunnish history follows KIM (2016) 12-16; *contra* SINOR (1990) 177-180.

⁷ KIM (2016) 30.

between themselves and the turbulent state of China. They appeared upon the eastern borders of Iran when Šāpur's main force was engaged in that doubtful struggle along the Roman frontier. The sudden end to this conflict, without a formal armistice, demonstrates that the arrival of the Huns was apprehended as a grave emergency requiring the presence of the Sasanid king and the full weight of the Iranian army. The Persian historical tradition passes over this momentous occasion in silence. The best contemporary Roman historian has left us some slim but informative notices in which the Huns are invoked under the classicising name of *Chionitae*.⁸

Nearly ten years must have been consumed in fighting and diplomatic engagements with the Huns until Šāpur returned to his western front in the year 359. Gurumbad, king of the Huns, and much of his people, would soon fight at the side of Šāpur, along with contingents of Kushans.⁹ But first, the Roman praetorian prefect in the east, Musonian, met in secret with an Iranian governor by the name of Tamshapur. The praetorian prefect suggested to the governor that he persuade the Persian monarch to put an end to warfare between their empires. This secret conference revealed weakness and hinted at distant military difficulties in the Roman west, and this intelligence was communicated to the royal court at Ctesiphon. Šāpur was determined to profit from Roman distraction, and swiftly dispatched an embassy demanding that the Treaty of Nisibis be overturned. The ambassador delivered Šāpur's letter to Constantius whom the Sasanian king acknowledged in the language of flattery as his brother. But the force of the letter was not fraternal:

“I shall state my proposal in brief terms, mindful that what I am about to say I have oft repeated. Even your own ancient records testify that the empire of my forefathers reached as far as the river Strymon and the boundaries of Macedonia. It is fitting that I should demand these lands...But...I have never allowed myself to do anything for which I had cause to repent...And thus it is my duty to recover Armenia and Mesopotamia, which had been wrested from my grandfather by fraud.” [Amm. Marc. XVII 5. 3-8]¹⁰

The Persian king's letter appears to relinquish the Sasanian claim to the lands between Asia Minor and Macedonia – a prudent omission since the Roman capital had been transferred to Byzantium. The Sasanian claim to those lands was perhaps always fanciful, and Iranian policy now appeared to acknowledge publicly that the annexation of the Roman empire was impossible. The rest of the letter is less conciliatory. Constantius is instructed to heed the lesson of the wolf or the beaver. Those animals, as it was said, would detach voluntarily the bodily organs for which they were hunted;¹¹ the wolf would relinquish a tuft of hair, and the beaver would gnaw off his testicles. With an oblique hint at these strange examples, Šāpur declared that war would be renewed if the Roman emperor failed to relinquish Armenia and Mesopotamia.

The reply of the emperor disavowed the activities of his praetorian prefect, and asserted his indifference to the peace which had been suggested.¹² “It was not through slackness,” the emperor Constantius declared, “but through self-restraint that we have sometimes accepted rather than offered battle, and when we are attacked we defend ourselves with the most forceful spirit of a clear conscience.” [Amm. Marc. XVII 5. 14]¹³ Warfare was resumed in the spring of the year 359.

The native Iranian tradition offers a paltry commemoration of the last twenty years of Šāpur II's reign. We are forced to turn to the work of a Roman historian, whose singular task was to carry the history of Tacitus down to his own day. Ammianus Marcellinus was a Greek-speaking native of Antioch.¹⁴ He was a man of liberal education, and in his early twenties he been attached to the staff of Urisicinus, commander of the Roman army in the east. When warfare was renewed in Mesopotamia, Ammianus had attained the maturity of about thirty years, and his account of the conflict is the record of a soldier and a man of letters. His history is the work of an eye-witness composed in Latin; but it is marred by a mannered and ornamental

⁸ Amm. Marc. XVI 9; cf. HOWARD-JOHNSTON (2010) 41-43.

⁹ Ammianus' expression *Eusenos* should be emended to *Cusenos*.

¹⁰ my translation.

¹¹ The letter refers to animals *quae cum advertant cur maximo opere capiantur, illud propria sponte amittunt ut vivere deinde possint inpavidae* [Amm. Marc. XVII 5. 7].

¹² A modern writer has suggested that Constantius may have authorised back-channel communication in order to be free to deny and condemn it later; MARCOS (2012) 507-510.

¹³ I have summarised the letter. The last phrase is *fortissimo benevolentiae spiritu*.

¹⁴ ROHRBACHER (2002) 14-41; BARNES (1998) 54-64.

style, involving at times a strained and unnatural syntax, a poetic vocabulary, and occasional lapses colloquial usages. He often struggles to express a trivial meaning amidst laboured antiquarianism and pompous literary allusions. But we rarely have an alternative to Ammianus.

We must assume that Iranian spies had attempted to induce defections, had probed Roman cities for weaknesses, and had recommended an attack upon the northern Mesopotamian city of Amida. These operations would have preceded Šāpur's invasion by a long interval. The military historian mentions one Roman defector: Antoninus, a former merchant and accountant to the Roman commander of Mesopotamia, and a man who had ascended the ranks of the Roman bureaucracy and abused his position to find out secrets.¹⁵ The traitor had purchased a remote estate upon the river Tigris; and with the help of loyal servants who had mastered the art of swimming across the river, Antoninus communicated to the Persian governor Tamshapur the inner affairs of the Roman orient and every preparation which had been made for warfare. Persian authorities then ferried the defector, his family, and all his possessions across the river into Iran. The campaign that followed could not have proceeded without the intelligence provided by Antoninus, and it is probable that he was not the only defector.¹⁶

Iranian disinformation seems to have attempted to convince the Romans that an invasion would be further south in Osrhoene – not at Amida as must have been planned from the beginning. According to Ammianus, notice of the Persian advance was transmitted by means of a parchment hidden within a scabbard at Antioch, and this obscure document indicated that the Persian king had crossed the Greater Zab and Tigris rivers, led on by the traitor Antoninus.¹⁷ The Roman response was to investigate the truth of this report. Ammianus, escorted by a centurion, was sent on a mission of reconnaissance. The military historian claims that an Iranian satrap, who bore the Roman name of Jovinian, had passed his youth as a hostage in Syria; and his secret sympathy with the Romans prompted him to defect.¹⁸ We must assume that Jovinian was something akin to a double-agent; otherwise he would not have maintained his position, nor would he have been privy to any important political or military information. Jovinian received Ammianus and the centurion and sent them on with a guide who led them to a lofty cliff. There Ammianus and his companions waited for two days. On the third day, Ammianus beheld upon the wide plain below him the mustering of the Iranian army. Šāpur was conspicuous at the head of a vast host, and upon his left was Gurumbad, king of the Huns; and the king of the Albanians was on his right. There followed a great multitude populated by various chieftains of high rank and the strongest soldiers of the countries that surround Iran.¹⁹

The Romans seem to have expected an attack near Edessa or Carrhae. The countryside was evacuated, people took shelter in fortresses, and the river Euphrates was fortified with towers, stakes, and catapults. Fields were set on fire to prevent the Persians from gathering fodder.²⁰ But these tactics neither slowed nor deterred the Iranian invasion, for the Roman defector Antoninus led the enemies of his people northwards towards Amida through a part of Mesopotamia which had not been ravaged.²¹

Amida endured a siege of seventy-three days.²² The defenders of that city fought manfully against Persian siege engines and endured the hideous sight of the elephants which had accompanied the warriors of Sakastan.²³ The bodies of the slain accumulated within Amida, and an outbreak of the plague elicits from Ammianus less sympathy for the victims than a series of learned allusions to the *History* of Thucydides and the *Iliad*.²⁴ Spontaneous sallies²⁵ and raids²⁶ troubled now one side and now another, but Ammianus' oblique

¹⁵ Amm. Marc. XVIII 5. 1-4.

¹⁶ An Iranian effort to seduce a part of the local Roman population may be reflected in an anecdote about Šāpur's manipulation of a beautiful woman captured at a fortress in northern Mesopotamia [Amm. Marc. XVIII 10]. This lady's husband dwelt in the city of Nisibis, and Šāpur promised to reunite that couple and thereby achieve the conquest of that city.

¹⁷ Amm. Marc. XVIII 6. 17.

¹⁸ Amm. Marc. XVIII 6. 20.

¹⁹ Amm. Marc. XVIII 6. 22-23. The name which Ammianus renders as *Grumbates* must be the same name as *Gurumbad* attested in Bactrian documents dated between AD 420 and 460; SIMS-WILLIAMS (2008) 93.

²⁰ Amm. Marc. XVIII 7. 1-4.

²¹ Amm. Marc. XVIII 7. 7-11.

²² Amm. Marc. XIX 9. 9.

²³ Ammianus (XIX 7. 6) hates elephants *quorum stridore inmanitateque corporum nihil humanae mentes terribilius cernunt*.

²⁴ Amm. Marc. XIX 4.

²⁵ Amm. Marc. XIX 5.

hints at the inexperience of Gaulish auxiliaries and a conflict between two commanders at Amida suggest that the Romans were bound to lose. But when the Persians finally stormed Amida, Ammianus blames neither a want of Roman endurance nor the strength of the Persian attack, but rather the collapse of a heap of earth behind a part of the city walls.²⁷

The fall of Amida was the first of many disasters²⁸ which beset the Roman world at the end of Constantius' reign. Ammianus describes distant and domestic disturbances, an eclipse of the sun and other grim celestial portents, and an uprising in the west which ended in the proclamation of Julian as sole emperor of the Romans.²⁹

Amidst these calamities, Šāpur pressed his advantage against his western foe. He besieged and captured Singara with the aid of a gigantic battering ram.³⁰ Everyone in that city, including the two legions which had defended it, were carried off into captivity. An offer of peace and the demand of capitulation were sent to Bezabde and refused. The fall of that city is blamed on a perfidious bishop who had been given leave to parley with the Persian king. It is reported that he either asked the king to retire in peace or that he indicated to him precisely which portion of the city wall was weakest and best to bombard. Ammianus claims to disavow the more insidious rumour, but after the parley it was not long before the Persian battering ram had pierced the wall of Bezabde.³¹ Šāpur tried and failed to capture the fortress which Ammianus calls Virta, and then withdrew. The emperor Constantius failed to retake the city of Bezabde, and the Iranian garrison proved that it was as skilled in resisting as in prosecuting a siege.³²

The military contest had ended plainly to the advantage of Šāpur, and the Roman emperor could not risk further warfare while Julian steadily gained control of the Roman world. But neither could Constantius relinquish the east to Šāpur. The Romans turned therefore to diplomacy, and attempted to ensure the loyalty of their Armenian and Iberian clients.³³ Šāpur must have known of the unstable position of Constantius and the advance of Julian, and there are some slender notices in Ammianus which suggest that Šāpur took advantage of this trouble. Šāpur increased a general state of alarm and confusion by means of a campaign of disinformation. He put about the rumour that the Iranian army had gathered again and was prepared for another imminent attack.³⁴ Iranian scouts and supposed deserters transmitted conflicting information,³⁵ and Constantius was detained in the east while Julian invaded Thrace and prepared to occupy Byzantium. But as the Roman world appeared to descend into civil war, Šāpur returned to his capital and Constantius retired to Antioch where he developed a fever which soon killed him.³⁶ Julian became sole emperor, and civil war was avoided by Constantius' endorsement of his cousin upon his deathbed.

Šāpur II had humiliated the Romans. Bezabde was fortified with new walls and a garrison of veterans, Singara was deprived of its defences and left a solitary ruin, and when Constantius visited the site of Amida he found it a heap of ashes. At this grim sight, the Roman treasurer remarked dryly that the enormous burden of maintaining the defence of cities such as Amida was likely to exhaust the imperial treasury and to no good purpose.³⁷ The Roman state and military apparatus had been thrown into confusion. A great number of Roman civil and military leaders had been captured or executed. Ursicinus, commander of the Roman army in the east, was blamed for the fall of Amida and dismissed. Courts martial followed, as did trials and condemnations for high treason. Šāpur must have rejoiced at these humiliations, but the aims of his renewed warfare had not yet been achieved and the ignominious Treaty of Nisibis still held.

²⁶ Amm. Marc. XIX 6. 7.

²⁷ Amm. Marc. XIX 8.

²⁸ Ammianus' word is *sollicitudines* (XIX 12. 1), which may be something of an understatement.

²⁹ Amm. Marc. XX.ii-iv. For a modern summary of the events of Julian's elevation and march to Constantinople, see BOWERSOCK (1978) 46-65.

³⁰ Amm. Marc. XX 6.

³¹ Amm. Marc. XX 7. 13.

³² Amm. Marc. XX 11.

³³ Amm. Marc. XXI. 6. 7-9.

³⁴ Amm. Marc. XXI 7. 6-7. Roman intelligence could not verify this rumour.

³⁵ Amm. Marc. XXI 13. 4.

³⁶ Amm. Marc. XXI 13. 8; 15. 1-3.

³⁷ Amm. Marc. XX 11. 5: *En quibus animis urbes a milite defenduntur cui ut abundare stipendium possit imperii opes iam fatiscunt.*

Šāpur made several offers of peace to the new emperor, but Julian refused them.³⁸ In his youth, the philosophical emperor had written a humorous treatise on the lives of his imperial predecessors in which he laments the Roman failure to conquer Persia.³⁹ Now Julian resolved to surpass his predecessors and to punish the insolence of that haughty nation once and for all.⁴⁰ In a harangue before his assembled army, Julian compared the present antagonism with Iran to Rome's ancient struggle against Carthage and to the Numantine and Social wars.⁴¹ But the outcome of the war with Iran was otherwise than the issue of those memorable contests. The war was to end in the death of the emperor, the shameful retreat of the Romans, and reversal of the Treaty of Nisibis.

The Roman plan was to march boldly into the heartland of the Iranian empire, seize the capital of Ctesiphon in a pincer movement, and install the pretender Hormozd upon the Persian throne.⁴² The Iranian strategy appears to have consisted alike of diplomatic and military subterfuge. The Roman emperor had commanded the king of Armenia to gather and send an army;⁴³ but no such force appeared and it is possible to suspect that Iranian influence persuaded the Armenian monarch to withhold help to the Romans. Julian's progress from Antioch down the river Euphrates was harried only once by a Persian raid until the Roman army came to the environs of the Persian capital.⁴⁴ Despite a small ambush at the walls of Mahoze, the Romans stormed that city, and a member of the illustrious Surēn family assailed the Roman pack-animals and then withdrew.⁴⁵ The Romans proceeded to the ancient Royal Canal which connected the two great rivers of Mesopotamia.⁴⁶ A tributary of this aquifer was the canal dug by the emperor Trajan. This channel delivered the waters of the Royal Canal into the Tigris above the city of Ctesiphon: a tactic which Trajan had employed to threaten Ctesiphon with total inundation. The Persians had blocked Trajan's canal; but without opposition the Romans released the blockage, and that artificial river carried the Roman fleet from the Euphrates to the Tigris above the Iranian capital.

When the Roman army was disembarked, Julian gave the order to burn the ships that had carried his troops, equipment, and provisions.⁴⁷ The observations of an ancient military historian are often of high value to a modern writer, but Ammianus failed to recognise a series of feigned retreats and a campaign of disinformation which lured the army of Julian into a trap. Ammianus acknowledges the influence of Persian deceit, but he is at pains to excuse Julian's foolish command. The testimony of a Doctor of the Roman Church, an archbishop of Constantinople, and one of the Three Holy Hierarchs surpasses the work of the military historian on this matter. Gregory Nazianzen claims with perfect credibility that a clever Persian, pretending to be in conflict with Šāpur, had won Julian's confidence and had promised to lead him by a shortcut in order to avoid a bend in the river Tigris. To make this easier, the false defector convinced the emperor to incinerate his fleet.⁴⁸

Below the walls of Ctesiphon, Iranian heavy cavalry assembled in close formation before the Roman army. Ammianus took note of the densely-fitted plate mail which clad the horsemen, and the raw hides which covered their steeds: a dazzling spectacle under the light of the Mesopotamian sun. Behind them stood the infantry, armed with bows and arrows and oblong shields fashioned of wickerwork and hides. Last were the elephants, objects of fear and loathing, which Ammianus compares to walking hills.⁴⁹ A short battle

³⁸ Libanius, *Orationes*, XII 76; XVII 19; XVIII 164.

³⁹ Julian, *Caesares*, p. 324.

⁴⁰ Amm. Marc. XII 12. 1.

⁴¹ Julian also claims that *abolenda nobis natio molestissima gladiis nondum nostrae propinquitatis exaruit cruor* [Amm. Marc. XXIII 5. 19]. These comparisons may rather reflect the antiquarianism of Ammianus than the real address of an emperor before a battle, but it must be admitted that such historical reminiscences would have appealed to Julian and perhaps to his officers also.

⁴² These aims can be inferred only with great difficulty from Ammianus' text [MATTHEWS (1989) 138-140]. Hormozd was the brother of Šāpur II and had defected to the Romans in the reign of Constantius. For brief summaries of the campaign see BOWERSOCK (1978) 106-119; BROWNING (1975) 181-216.

⁴³ Amm. Marc. XXIII 2. 1-8.

⁴⁴ The raid is described in Amm. Marc. XIII 3. 4.

⁴⁵ Amm. Marc. XXIV 4. 1-7.

⁴⁶ Amm. Marc. XXIV 6.

⁴⁷ Amm. Marc. XXIV 7. 3-5. The deceit of the Iranian defectors was confessed under torture (*tortique perfugae aperte faterentur se fefellisse*).

⁴⁸ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oratio* V 11-12.

⁴⁹ Amm. Marc. XXIV 6. 8.

ensued, and Ammianus claims that two-thousand five-hundred Persians were slain. Again the army of Šāpur withdrew, some within the walls of the capital, and others dispersed themselves throughout the surrounding countryside. Neither the emperor nor his historian apprehended the severe danger to the Roman forces; and buoyed up by the appearance of a victory, Julian attempted to sacrifice ten bulls to Mars the Avenger. Nine of these animals fell to the ground willingly, and the tenth burst his bonds and fled. When the fugitive animal had been caught and slaughtered, the reading of its entrails was grim, and the fanatical emperor cried out to Jove in superstitious indignation.⁵⁰

Šāpur was preoccupied with more serious matters. Only twelve ships survived Julian's rash order, and a swift retreat was now impossible. Šāpur immediately ordered the incineration of the circumjacent fields in order to restrict the Romans to a single place and to hinder the arrival of any allied force. Famine began to afflict Julian's forces, his soldiers loudly demanded a retreat, and the word of the Etruscan soothsayers (which Julian vehemently rejected) warned against battle. Julian resolved to withdraw to Corduene, and on that melancholy journey divisions of the Persian army harried the Roman force. There were some small skirmishes over the course of a few days. Julian plunged himself into the midst of a mellay, having forgotten his coat of mail. A cavalryman's spear pierced Julian's right side and lodged itself in his liver, and the last pagan emperor of the Romans expired in his tent a few hours later – but not, Ammianus assures us, before pronouncing a turgid oration upon the course of his life and the necessity of death.⁵¹

Word of Julian's death reached Šāpur, who ordered an immediate assault upon the Roman rear guard. But the strength of Roman discipline held, and a retreat followed the elevation of the new emperor Jovian.⁵² The Iranian army renewed its harassment of the Romans as they withdrew up the Tigris. Weary, famished, and mutinous, Jovian's force had not even crossed into Roman territory when Šāpur's offer of peace was made and accepted near Dura. Ammianus foolishly suggests that Šāpur *surrendered* in fear of Roman revenge, for the Persian king plainly *dictated* terms to a humbled opponent.⁵³ The retreat of Jovian from the field gave way to a rout at the negotiating table. At the head of the Roman embassy were Arintheus and Salutius, two officers among Jovian's senior staff, whose diplomatic antagonist was a member of the Surēn family who vastly outwitted his Roman rivals. Ammianus laments that it would have been better to fight ten battles than to yield to a single Persian demand, but Surēn asked for and received Arzanene, Moxoene, Zabdicene, Rehimene, Corduene, as well as Nisibis, Singara, Castra Maurorum and fifteen other fortresses.⁵⁴ This treaty was to hold for thirty years.

The transfer of the city of Nisibis to Iranian control was a moment of high importance in both the history of the Near East and that of the Christian religion. The emperor Jovian commanded the evacuation of the populace of Nisibis, for which he allowed a mere three days.⁵⁵ The Iranian standard was hoisted above the city by its new governor, a Persian magnate called Binesh. The Roman army threatened with death the civilian population who would not vacate Nisibis, and Ammianus describes the melancholy scene which followed. No sound was heard but universal wailing, weeping throngs clung to the doors of their houses; and the countryside was filled with displaced persons transporting as much property as they could carry and going wherever they could find refuge.⁵⁶ Many were received at Amida, and the famous Syrian theological school at Nisibis was removed to Edessa where it was united with a similar institution under the leadership of St Ephraim the Syrian.

The Treaty of 363 had two important effects. Although Ingilene and Sophene remained Roman, all lands to the east and south-east of the river Nymphius and Tigris rivers were ceded to Iran. The Treaty of Nisibis had therefore been undone, and the Iranian sphere of influence was enlarged along the border with Rome. The cession of the fortresses at Singara and Nisibis destroyed the Roman defensive system in eastern Mesopotamia.⁵⁷ Iran now controlled the main routes to the Euphrates and Syria, the Tur 'Abdin plain, and

⁵⁰ Amm. Marc. XXIV 6. 17.

⁵¹ Amm. Marc. XXIV 3. 6-23. "...Advenit, O socii, nunc abeundi tempus e vita," and "gaudensque abeo gestiensque ubicumque me velut imperiosa parens consideratis periculis obiecit res publica, steti fundatus, turbines calcare fortuitorum adsuefactus" may be considered highlights of Julian's supposed last words [Amm. Marc. XXV 3. 17].

⁵² Amm. Marc. XXV 6.

⁵³ Amm. Marc. XXV 7.

⁵⁴ Amm. Marc. XXV 7. 9.

⁵⁵ Amm. Marc. XXV 7. 11; XXV 9. 4.

⁵⁶ Amm. Marc. XXV 9. 5-6.

⁵⁷ BLOCKLEY (1984) 35.

the Sinjar mountain range. The thirty years' duration of the treaty provided time for Iran to consolidate her new position. Meanwhile, Šāpur busied himself in Trans-Caucasia and the north-east.

Roman meddling in the east had precipitated the rise of power more militant and aggressive than any enemy which they had yet confronted. With time an implacable hatred of Iran seemed to require an Iron Curtain⁵⁸ running south from Armenia down into the sand of the Arabian desert, and the eventual partition of Armenia between Iran and Rome at the close of the fourth century. No such arrangement had been known before: the empires of Assyria, Babylon, Media, and the Achaemenid Persians and their Macedonian conquerors had all intended to unite the various peoples of the Near East in a single political and economic body. But now two great powers competed for mastery, and were forced to defend an ambiguous frontier in dangerous proximity to the Mediterranean Sea and which consigned to Iran lower Mesopotamia, the estuary of the Persian Gulf, and its profitable maritime trade with India.

Warfare against the Huns of Central Asia had grimmer consequences. Two slim notices in the *Epic Histories* of Armenian historian P'awstos Buzandatsi describe warfare in the northeast against a foreign enemy. That Armenian historian invokes the foreigners under the archaizing name of Kushan. But to judge by later developments, Šāpur's antagonists were most certainly the same confederation of Huns whom he had confronted in the 350s, but they had been united under a new ruling house. In the year 367 Šāpur led his forces in person and was defeated.⁵⁹ He had brought with him a large contingent of Armenian soldiers, many of whom were captured by the enemy, but they fought with equal bravery and loyalty. It was said that, in the midst of battle, Šāpur was surrounded by Huns and was rescued by an Arsacid eunuch. A later confrontation in about the year 375 ended in a worse humiliation.⁶⁰ Šāpur, who had not commanded the host a second time, avoided capture and death; but of the army which he had assembled not a single Iranian soldier survived: only two Armenians, Manuel and Koms Mamikonean, escaped to bring word of defeat to Šāpur.

The most serious consequence of Šāpur's contest with the Huns was the collapse of Sasanian power in the east. The relics of the ancient Kushan state had been collected under the authority of an Iranian viceroy who bore the title of Kushanshah.⁶¹ The dominions of the Kushanshah must have been established as a buffer state between Iran and the hostile nomads of Central Asia. Iranian might impressed itself gently upon the peoples whom the Kushans had ruled: coins minted by the Kushanshahs amalgamated the symbols of Zoroastrian, Central Asian, and Indian religions; and a vague titulature appealing alike to the peoples of Bactria and Gandhara implies the necessity of maintaining the favour of a heterogeneous population.⁶² But towards the end of the fourth century this buffer was overwhelmed by the Huns, repeated efforts to retain it failed, and these grim reverses foreshadowed the troubles which nearly destroyed the Iranian empire in the century that followed.

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⁵⁸ LANG (1970) 142-143.

⁵⁹ P'awstos Buzandatsi, section V 7.

⁶⁰ P'awstos Buzandatsi, section V 37.

⁶¹ Obviously, the establishment of this power occurred at some point in or after the reign of Ardašīr I, but the precise dates and even the order in which Kushanshahs reigned are doubtful (SCHINDEL (2016).

⁶² CARTER (1985) 215-281.

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Summary

A Brief Military History of the Later Reign of Šāpur II

This is a brief history of the wars of Šāpur II from the middle of the fourth century to the death of that king in the year 379. These conflicts represent the military operations of the Sasanid state at its height before a gradual decline under the successor to Šāpur II.

Keywords: Šāpur, wars, Sasanid, Huns