

# Rome and the Sasanian Empire in the Fifth Century A.D: A Necessary Peace

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## Contents

Abbreviations	vi
Introduction	1
Methodology	6
The Fifth-Century Roman-Sasanian Relationship and Political Realism	6
Structure	10
Sources	12
Chapter 1) Changing Priorities	16
1.1) The Third and Fourth Century Imperial Competition	16
Roman and Sasanian World Views: The Imperial Other and Conflicting Ideologies	17
Political Necessities and Internal Expectations	29
Sasanian Necessities	30
Roman Necessities	37
Religious Motivations	42
Strategic Concerns and Realities	44
Conclusion	49
1.2) The Fifth Century: New Threats and Shifting Priorities	50
Military Resources and Limitations	53
Roman Priorities	61
Attila and the Huns	62
Geiseric and the Vandals	75

Sasanian Priorities	83
Hephthalites	83
Internal Unrest and Civil Wars	91
Consequences of the Shifting Priorities	96
Conclusion: The Stimulus for Peace	101
<b>Chapter 2) Diplomacy: The Protocols of Peace</b>	<b>105</b>
The Treaties	108
Diplomatic Developments	121
Formalisation and Diplomatic Protocols	121
The Role of the <i>Magister Officiorum</i>	124
Embassies: Regular Diplomatic Contact	127
Ambassadors and Envoys	130
Nature of the Treaties	134
Diplomatic Language and Ideology	141
Frontier Defence: Payments, Tribute or Subsidies?	149
Conclusion	153
<b>Chapter 3) Third-Parties &amp; Frontier Zones</b>	<b>159</b>
Indirect Control	160
3.1) Armenia and the Armenians	162
The Contest for Control	162
Armenian Ambiguity	166
The Role and Influence of the Armenian <i>Nakharars</i>	169

Towards a definition of 'Armenia'	169
The <i>Nakharars</i> and the Imperial Patrons	174
The Diplomatic Solution: 387 - The Partition of Armenia	178
The Aftermath of 387: Domination and Direct Rule	182
3.2) Arabia and the Arab Tribes	186
The Contest for Control	186
Imperial Patrons and Dynastic Clients	193
The Roman Arabian 'Frontier'	193
Indirect Control and Imperial Competition	196
Christianity	200
The Diplomatic Solution: The War and Peace Treaty of 421-2	202
Phylarch and Direct Control	205
3.3) Conclusion	208
Chapter 4) Religion: Loyalty, Minorities and Mistrust	210
The Christian Roman Empire	213
The Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire?	221
Christianity in the Sasanian Empire	225
Sasanian Christianity and the Epoch of the Fifth Century	232
Conclusion	238
Conclusion	240
The Changing Relationship	240
The Establishment of Peace	241

Religion	243
Holistic Connections and the Roman Sasanian Peace: Political Pragmatism and Necessity	243
Bibliography	248

## Abbreviations

AMS	<i>Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum</i>
Amm. Marc.	Ammianus Marcellinus
Agath.	Agathias
Aur. Vic.	Aurelius Victor
Dio.	Cassius Dio
<i>Chron. Pasch.</i>	<i>Chronicon Paschale</i>
<i>CJ.</i>	<i>Codex Justinianus</i>
<i>CTh.</i>	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i>
Const. Porph.	Constantius Porphyrogenitus
Eunap.	Eunapius
Eus.	Eusebius
VC	<i>The Life of Constantine</i>
HE	<i>Ecclesiastical History</i>
Eutr.	Eutropius
Evag.	Evagrius
Fest.	Festus
Hdt.	Herodotus
SHA	<i>Historia Augusta</i>
Aurel.	<i>Aurelian</i>
Car.	<i>Carinus</i>
Heliogab.	<i>Elagabalus</i>

<i>Sev. Alex.</i>	<i>Severus Alexander</i>
John. Eph.	John of Ephesus
Jord.	Jordanes
Josh. Styl.	Joshua Stylites
Julian	Jul.
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orations</i>
KKZ	Kerdir's Inscription
Lib.	Libanius
Men. Prot.	Menander Protector
<i>Not. Dig.</i>	<i>Notitia Dignitatum</i>
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orientis</i>
<i>Occ.</i>	<i>Occidentis</i>
NPi	Paikuli Inscription
<i>Pan. Lat.</i>	<i>Panegyric Latini</i>
Proc.	Procopius
<i>BP.</i>	<i>Persian Wars</i>
<i>BG.</i>	<i>Gothic Wars</i>
<i>BV.</i>	<i>Vandal Wars</i>
<i>De. Aed.</i>	<i>On Buildings</i>
SKZ	<i>Res Gestae Divi Saporis</i>
Soc.	Socrates
Soz.	Sozomen

*Syn. Or.*

*Synodicon Orientale*

Theodt.

Theodoret

Theoph.

Theophanes

Theo.Sim.

Theophylact Simocatta

Zach.

Zachariah

Zon.

Zonaras

Zos.

Zosimus



## Introduction

For, loyally observing the behests of Arcadius, he [Yazdgard I] adopted and continued without interruption a policy of profound peace with the Romans... When this treaty had been executed, both sovereigns then continued to administer the affairs of their respective countries as seemed best to them.<sup>1</sup>

What the sixth century Roman historian Procopius describes here, in relatively inconspicuous and understated terms, is the beginning of an unprecedented period of peace between the previously hostile and antagonistic Roman and Sasanian Empires in the fifth century A.D. Priscus also informs us that the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian relationship was so peaceful that Constantinople's *magister militum per Orientem*, usually one of the most-hard pressed Roman generals, responsible for defending the empire against the Sasanians, was able to turn to 'self-indulgence and effeminate leisure' but says little else to expand on this.<sup>2</sup> Like Procopius and Priscus, modern scholarship has also largely ignored the fifth-century peace between these two empires, limiting it merely to footnotes or passing mentions in its analysis of the more prevalent military conflicts and confrontations.<sup>3</sup> Although there is general acknowledgement that the fifth century was an unprecedentedly peaceful period in Roman-Sasanian relations there has so far been scant research into how and why this peace was established and maintained.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have seemed satisfied to place the motivation of the peace on the increased threats faced by both the Roman and Sasanian Empires on their other frontiers in this period and to quickly move on, otherwise paying little, or rather no attention, to the development and continuation of the peace throughout the fifth century.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Proc. *BP.* 1.2.

<sup>2</sup> fr. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Greatrex (1993: 1) 'The fifth century was in general a peaceful period for Rome's eastern frontier'. Drijvers (2009: 447-448) '[Only] Two short wars were fought'. Equally, in their otherwise exhaustive and meticulous annotated sourcebook, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*, Dignas & Winter dedicate only five pages to the period of peace in the fifth century.

<sup>4</sup> On the recognition of this see above (n.2) and also: Millar (2006: 70), Luther (2014: 183) and Blockley (1992: 47). It has recently been argued that there was perhaps a third, even shorter, conflict; however, this has not been conclusively proved or agreed upon as of yet (Luther, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Wiesehöfer (2007: 60) 'Over the next [fifth] century the Hephthalites ('White Huns') gave the Sasanians much more trouble than the Romans, with whom the kings of Iran came to a mutual agreement around 440'. Rubin (2000: 641-2) 'A Plausible explanation for the change from persistent warfare in the third and fourth century to

The wider fifth century was a turbulent and tumultuous period. It witnessed the collapse and fragmentation of the Western Roman Empire into various barbarian kingdoms, and the establishment of new power groups such as the Huns, Vandals and Hephthalites, who although they did not last the test of time, played a fundamentally important role in shaping the course of events in this period.<sup>6</sup> As such, the stability of Roman-Sasanian relations in this period is even more note-worthy. Traditionally however, scholarly attention on the fifth century has overwhelmingly focused on the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. Only recently has this trend been answered, with studies that pay more attention to the survival and subsequent development of the Eastern Empire.<sup>7</sup>

What work has been done on Roman-Sasanian relations in the fifth century has focused on specific and localised events, predominantly military in nature, such as the two short-lived conflicts that erupted in 421 and 441, rather than the nature or development of the peace itself.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, although there is a rising awareness that the Roman-Sasanian relationship was more nuanced than one simply dominated by warfare, and that other forms of interactions did take place, this ironically has not yet reached scholarship of the peaceful fifth century.<sup>9</sup>

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the peaceful relations in the fifth century is provided by the other external problems'. Drijvers (2009: 448) 'Until the beginning of the sixth century tranquillity dominated the relations between Rome and Persia. Both powers were occupied with other foes: the Sasanians with the Hephthalite Huns on their north-eastern border, and the Romans with the Huns, Goths, Vandals and Isaurians.' Rubin, (1986: 678) 'These two great powers, whose main concern was primarily the defence of their territories against barbarian inroads from the east and from the north'.

<sup>6</sup> Whereas plenty of research has been conducted on Attila and the Huns in the fifth century, for example Gordon (1966) and Thompson (1996), the Vandals, who played just as an important role in this period, have received less scholarly attention. Indeed, only one comprehensive modern study has been done on the Vandal kingdom of North Africa; the seminal work of Merrills and Miles, *The Vandals* (2010). While the most important neighbours of the Sasanian Empire in this century, the Hephthalites, have received even less individual study. Although it must be noted this is largely due to a lack of currently available evidence.

<sup>7</sup> The main examples of this growing awareness of the important developments in the Eastern Empire include; Millar *A Greek Empire: Power and Belief under Theodosius II* (2006), Kelly *Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity* (2014) and Williams & Friell *The Rome that Did Not Fall: The Survival of the East in the Fifth Century* (1998).

<sup>8</sup> Greatrex's 'The Two Fifth Century Wars between Rome and Persia' (1993), Rubin's 'Diplomacy and War in the Relations between Byzantium and the Sassanids in the Fifth Century A.D.' (1986), Luther's 'Ein ,übersehener' römisch-persischer Krieg um 416/417?' (2014) and Bullough's 'The Roman Empire vs. Persia' (1963). Although Bullough's piece does seek to answer the nature of the peace he addresses this from a strictly military perspective and his research is largely conducted by seeking parallels between modern military relationships between different states.

<sup>9</sup> For the growing scholarly attention on the more peaceful and cooperative interactions between the Roman and Sasanian Empires see, among others: Dignas & Winter *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (2007), Drijvers 'Rome and the Sasanid Empire: Confrontation and Coexistence' (2009) and Canepa *The Two Eyes of the Earth* (2009).

Consequently, no systematic study of the nature and long-term development of the Roman-Sasanian relations in the fifth century has been conducted.

As stated above, current scholarship has tended to focus on individual events in the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian relationship and, in this regard, it has provided valuable insights that have improved our knowledge and understanding of a traditionally under-researched area and period, particularly from an eastern perspective. Works produced by Greatrex, Blockley and Rubin have illuminated some of the main treaties and conflicts that took place during this period and have proved instructive to this research. However, these individual events are too often viewed in isolation, as largely independent of one another, and as such they are frequently granted too much importance in the development of Roman-Sasanian relations in the fifth century.

In this regard, both Greatrex and Blockley have analysed the background and importance of the partition of Armenia in 387 and correctly stated, and explained, its importance in the establishment of the fifth-century *détente*. They argue that the Armenian solution was the defining event in the establishment of the peace.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Greatrex states that; ‘the partition of Armenia was the critical event which permitted the two powers to bury their differences.’<sup>11</sup> However, although the resolution of the Armenian problem was undoubtedly important, on its own it could not have cemented peace between two fierce rivals who competed in a variety of locations and for a variety of different reasons. Indeed, it must be remembered that the shared imperial border stretched from Armenia in the north to Arabia in the south and that, therefore, although the Armenian partition helped to solve tensions in the north, it could not have, and did not, prevent conflicts from breaking out elsewhere, such as in Mesopotamia and Arabia. More correctly then, the 387 treaty should be seen as one part of a wider development and process towards peace that took place throughout the fifth century, not as its ultimate instigator and enforcer. Furthermore, although Greatrex has previously acknowledged the importance of the new Hunnic threats and the rising importance of the Danube frontier at the expense of the eastern frontier, in forcing the imperial

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<sup>10</sup> Greatrex ‘Background and Aftermath of the Partition of Armenia in A.D. 387’ (2000) & Blockley ‘The Division of Armenia between the Romans and Persians at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century’ (1987). Rubin (1986: 678) also puts substantial importance on the partition in cementing peace.

<sup>11</sup> 2000: 35.

neighbours to reach an accord, he does not connect this to the 387 treaty.<sup>12</sup> It is these connections, between the different important individual events and changes in the fifth century, which motivated and enabled imperial *détente*. As such, they should not be viewed separately or as independent of each other but rather as interconnected and interdependent. As such, this investigation will seek to highlight and explain these connections between events such as the 387 treaty, to show how they all affected the development of other important events in the Roman-Sasanian relationship during the fifth century, such as those signed in 421 and 442, that dealt with similar issues.

Additionally, it is not surprising that in a field traditionally dominated by the study of military interactions and conflicts, research on Roman-Sasanian relations even in the peaceful fifth century has thus far been dominated by a focus on conflict and competition.<sup>13</sup> The short imperial conflicts of 421 and 442 have received the majority of scholarly attention, rather than the treaties that ended them, despite their rather limited importance and strategic consequence. Indeed, Procopius states that during the 421 war the Sasanians did ‘no damage’ and quickly retreated ‘without accomplishing anything’.<sup>14</sup> While, similarly, the war of 440 was less a war and more a brief and insubstantial incursion.<sup>15</sup> As such, it was the treaties that ended these conflicts, not the military campaigns, that provide more insight into the development of the fifth-century relationship. For instance, although Greatrex, Luther and Holum provide strong analysis on when these wars started, who started them, what tactics and strategies were employed, who led the armies, when they ended and who can be regarded as the victor, all of which helps to understand the ways in which the empires competed in the fifth century, they are not seen in the context of the wider development of the fifth-century relationship.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, more important issues are left unanswered: why these conflicts were not prevented by earlier treaties that had been thought to have established peace in the first place, what impact they had on the continuation of peace

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<sup>12</sup> 2000: 44.

<sup>13</sup> See n. 3 above.

<sup>14</sup> *BP*. 1.2.11-25.

<sup>15</sup> Greatrex & Lieu, 2002: 44.

<sup>16</sup> Greatrex ‘The Two Fifth Century Wars Between Rome and Persia’ (1993), Luther ‘Ein ,übersehener’ römisch-persischer Krieg um 416/417?’ (2014) and Holum ‘Pulcheria’s Crusade A.D 421-22 and the Ideology of Imperial Victory’ (1977).

afterwards and what unresolved issues needed to be overcome in order for a stronger and more stable peace to be established.

Importantly, Rubin was the first to discuss and analyse the nature of the Roman-Sasanian peace, and as such his work provides useful frameworks for this investigation. Rubin correctly recognised that the peace was not an abstract affair that could be linked to one specific event or incident and that it was, therefore, not quickly and instantly implemented, but was rather an adaptive and on-going process. The underlying premise of his work is to 'show that over the fifth century AD it was the Persian monarchs who were mainly interested in peace'.<sup>17</sup> As such, although he does analyse the treaties that ended the 421 and 441 conflicts, he does so from a strictly imperial level, and not in relation to the changing geopolitical conditions and circumstances of the fifth century.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Rubin does not take into account other issues, both internal and external, that affected Roman and Sasanian attitudes and their political needs in relation to other concerns and threats facing them when negotiating and adhering to these treaties. For example, the changed circumstances that saw the Hunnic threat to Constantinople coming from Attila's powerbase beyond the Danube in the middle of the fifth century rather than from beyond the Caucasus as it did at the start of the century are not brought into consideration.

In short, events in the fifth century, although now understood in great detail, are too often viewed in isolation; as largely independent from one another, and not as part of the wider interconnected late antique world. As a result current scholarship has thus far lacked a more holistic approach to the development and nature of the fifth-century détente as part of the wider late antique world. In contrast, this investigation will seek to analyse these individual events as interconnected and part of the wider developments and changes that took place in the fifth century and Roman-Sasanian relations in this period. It will argue that the fifth-century peace was the result of an adaptive and reactive on-going process throughout the century, and not of any one event or incident. As such, this thesis will analyse the peaceful Roman-Sasanian relationship in the fifth century not as a self-contained entity, isolated and separate from the rest of the late antique world but as just another part of the wider

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<sup>17</sup> Rubin 'Diplomacy and War in the Relations between Byzantium and the Sassanids in the Fifth Century A.D' (1986).

<sup>18</sup> 1986: 677.

geopolitical changes that took place in the fifth century. This approach will be achieved through the utilisation of a range of modern theories about international relations that will allow a nuanced understanding of the motivations of both empires in establishing and maintaining peace throughout this period.

## Methodology

### **The Fifth-Century Roman-Sasanian Relationship and Political Realism**

In the field of international relations there are a variety of competing theories on how interstate relations should be understood. However, the one that seems most suited to the nature and characteristics of the late antique world is political realism.<sup>19</sup> The core ideal of political realism is that all interstate relations and behaviour can be explained by the overriding need each self-interested state has to pursue its own security and survival above all else, and that result of this competing need between states is an anarchic world system that is permanently permeated with violence and the potential for violence.<sup>20</sup> As such, realist theory argues that war and the preparation of war forms the basis for all interstate relations, and that international order is based ultimately on power and military force alone. In such an unrelenting anarchic world it is believed there is little or no international law and that the

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<sup>19</sup> For more discussion about other international relations theories, such as liberalism and constructivism see: Smith, Hadfield & Dunne (2008) and Dunne, Kurki & Smith (2006). Liberalism argues that individuals and private groups were the motivating factors in the development of international relations, and that the needs and desires of these individuals and groups dictated how their state interacts with its neighbours (Moravcsik, 1997). Although on the surface this may seem suitable for the Roman and Sasanian Empires wherein individuals, primarily the emperors and the Shahs, and dominant groups such as the nobility had an impact of foreign relations. However, liberalism seems to argue for a degree of separation between these elites and the state, and this was not so clear cut in the two empires where the emperors and shahs were inexorable tied up with the running and apparatus of the state itself. Constructivism, in contrast, views international relations as social constructs, in that they were affected by the social pressures and actions within each individual state (Fierke, 2013: 187-190). As such, constructivism goes against the materialistic approach advanced by realism and liberalism in highlighting these social dimensions as the primary motivations behind interstate relations. Yet, the Roman and Sasanian Empires were absolutist states with little scope for social pressures or ideas to affect the foreign policies of the emperors and Shahs, who were primarily interested in maintaining their own position, and the best way to do this was to secure the security of their empires. Political realism has already been used to help explain interstate relations in Classical Greece (Low, 2009) and in Rome's initial rise to supremacy (Eckstein, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Doyle, 1997: 18; Eckstein, 2006: 12; Waltz, 1979: 102-4, 2008: 137; Mearsheimer, 1994: 10-13.

establishment of long-term peace between two rival states is possible only in extremely rare circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, all the major powers in the late antique world, including the Romans and Sasanians, held the same aggressive, belligerent and expansionist aims in their relations with other states, peoples or tribes. Political realism therefore fits with many of the defining characteristics of late antiquity, which was a period dominated by a constant and unrelenting military competition for dominance and supremacy, wherein each state thought only of their own safety, security and position above all else. Thus, realist theory implies that the anarchic nature of interstate relations necessitated Constantinople, Ctesiphon, and their other neighbours, to act violently against one another; they could not do otherwise and expect to survive.<sup>22</sup> Thus:

States do not live in isolation, but in systems: that is, groups of states where the behaviour of each state is a necessary factor in the calculations of all the others.<sup>23</sup>

This statement reinforces the underlying notion of political realism that all individual states act in a similar manner in the pursuit of their own security, and also that one relationship in this interstate system cannot be seen in isolation and independently from all the others. Therefore, political realism, once again, fits with the aim of this thesis to view Roman-Sasanian relations as just another part of the late antique world that was affected by developments elsewhere in this world. Likewise, using political realism to investigate the Roman-Sasanian relationship permits a long-term view of the processes that affected the relationship and also encourages us not to focus overwhelmingly on the Roman point-of-view.

In understanding international relations political realism places importance on the idea of the balance of power between states.<sup>24</sup> Realists argue that if states cannot achieve superiority through the direct military domination of their neighbours they will aim to achieve it through the creation of a balance of power that puts them in an advantageous position over their

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<sup>21</sup> Doyle, 1997: 43.

<sup>22</sup> Eckstein, 2006: 3.

<sup>23</sup> Eckstein, 2006: 13.

<sup>24</sup> Waltz, 2008: 138.

rivals.<sup>25</sup> This facet of political realism again fits closely to the overall nature of Roman-Sasanian relations, as the balance of power played an important role in the imperial competition. Certainly, scholars have frequently commented about the existence of a balance of power when discussing the Roman-Sasanian relationship.<sup>26</sup> Many Roman-Sasanian conflicts were believed to have been undertaken in an effort, not to conquer or destroy the other but, to gain an advantageous position in the imperial balance of power.<sup>27</sup> Competing for supremacy and advantage in the balance of power between them became the main concern of both empires, especially at the end of the third century when it became increasingly clear that neither was fully capable of destroying the other. This then reinforces the importance of using political realism to understand the relationship between the Roman and Sasanian Empires, as it was only in the fifth century that their relationship witnessed a stable and long-term balance of power. Indeed, as shall be shown throughout this work, the creation of a different type of balance of power, one based on mutual acceptability and not military advantage, was central to the fifth-century peace between the Romans and Sasanians.

As already made clear, the harsh reality of the realist late antique world meant that the attention of states was focused on short-term survival and success, and this made long-term peace difficult to both establish and maintain.<sup>28</sup> However, it did not necessarily make peace between two rival states an impossibility; it merely meant that it would take a unique set of circumstances for it to become a reality. In this regard, it was the centrality of the balance of power in realist theories, and also in the Roman-Sasanian relationship itself, that played an important role in the development of peace in the fifth century. Balances of power are fragile, and any sudden or dramatic shifts in the distribution of power can create situations of special crisis and special circumstances; as happened in the fifth century.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Doyle, 1997: 161.

<sup>26</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 28; Blockley, 1992: 138.

<sup>27</sup> Lee (2007: 4) highlights Galerius' campaign in 297 as one such attempt to militarily redress the balance of power.

<sup>28</sup> Millar (1982: 1, 23) reinforces this idea in the foreign relations and imperial strategy of the Roman Empire, which he claims responded to situations in a rather ad-hoc and reactionary manner. He uses these arguments to discredit the idea of any long-term grand strategy of the Roman Empire that was propagated by Luttwak (1976). Millar's arguments are also furthered and attested for in the strategy of the Later Roman Empire by Errington (2006).

<sup>29</sup> Doyle, 1997: 52; Eckstein, 2006: 23; Lebow, 2013: 87. Whittaker (1994: 195) says this was especially true for the Roman Empire.



A major part of this thesis will therefore focus on explaining what these changes were and analysing the effect they had on Roman-Sasanian relations. The first of these changed conditions was the division of the Roman Empire into distinct eastern and western halves after 395. This division ensured even greater parity between the Eastern Roman and Sasanian Empire, and accordingly large-scale Roman attacks against the Sasanian Empire decreased, which in turn stabilised the balance of power between them. The next important change in the fifth century that affected the Roman-Sasanian balance of power will be shown to have been the emergence of new powers, namely the Huns, Vandals and Hephthalites, that threatened the dominant position of the Roman and Sasanian Empires in the late antique world. The growth of these new powers, and the threat they posed to both empires, forced the Romans and Sasanians to carefully manage their relationship with one another in order to guarantee their security and position.

As shall be shown below, these new threats forced the Romans and Sasanians to adapt how the balance of power between them was maintained. Previously, in the third and fourth centuries it had been both maintained and challenged exclusively through the use of military power, as each empire tried to establish and maintain themselves as the dominant power over the other. However, in the fifth century this was no longer an option for both empires as their military attention and resources were shifted to concentrate on containing the threat posed by the new barbarian powers. Consequently, diplomacy and negotiation began to play a more prominent primary role in the balance of power compared to the secondary role it had previously fulfilled.

It will thus be argued that it was the unique conditions of the fifth century, which developed in response to the changed geopolitical situation in this period, that overcame the traditional Roman-Sasanian conflict and made peace a pragmatic necessity for both empires. Indeed, as seen above, realist theory argues that any contact between states will inevitably cause friction and conflict, due to the fact that the separate interest and competing interests of individual states are rarely compatible with each other. However, in the fifth century this was not true as both the Romans and Sasanians had a shared interest in peace with one another, in order to combat the new threats posed by the Huns, Hephthalites and Vandals. Thus, the peaceful fifth century ironically confirms realist paradigms as the Romans and Sasanians were chiefly interested in peace with their traditional rival in this period strictly in order to ensure their

own survival and security in the face of the new threats in the fifth century. Correspondingly, it was only at the start of the sixth century, after the threats on their other frontiers had disappeared or least diminished, that the two empires once again reverted to their traditional hostility, thus reinforcing the idea that this peace was based primarily on short-term survival.<sup>30</sup>

By analysing the fifth-century relationship through the prism of political realism it will be shown that peace was not a simple choice or sudden desire for imperial harmony and reconciliation on behalf of the Roman and Sasanian Empires, but was forced on them by the anarchic nature of the ancient world, as other events and forces elsewhere pushed them into an uneasy yet pragmatically necessary ceasefire. Equally, it allows us to see that peace was not an immediately acknowledged or implemented solution to the instantly recognised threat of the rising barbarian powers but a policy that developed steadily, in an adaptive and flexible manner to problems as and when they arose, and as imperial attention was correspondingly increasingly forced elsewhere. Indeed, that it was not a coherent policy pursued consistent throughout the fifth century without exception, as seen by the outbreaks of war between them in 421 and 442.

## **Structure**

Although this thesis agrees with the general consensus that it was the new external threats that the Roman and Sasanian Empires faced which provided the initial impetus for peace, it will seek to expand on this by, not just investigating the need for peace but, taking a more holistic approach and also investigating the nature and development of both the establishment and maintenance of peace throughout the fifth century. In this regard, all aspects of the fifth-century imperial relationship, both competitive and cooperative, will be analysed. To do this, the structure of this thesis will roughly be split into two halves. The first half will investigate the traditional *casus belli* between the two empires to show why military

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<sup>30</sup> The fifth century peace therefore accords with Eckstein's (2006: 19) assessment of peace in the confines of the realist interstate system: 'International affairs, then, are essentially competitive and conflictual, and it is difficult for states to exist harmoniously with each other for long periods.'

conflict was the prevalent form of imperial interaction in the third and fourth centuries. This will then move on to explain exactly how the Huns, Vandal and Hephthalites enforced a mutual and simultaneous shifting of priorities in the fifth century for empires that resulted in the traditional imperial rivalry becoming of secondary strategic importance to both empires. The second half of the thesis will analyse the arguably more important question of how this peace was established and maintained for a century in a relationship that had traditionally been characterised by mistrust, suspicion and resentment. This will be done by investigating the development of diplomacy in the fifth century, and how it enabled the Romans and Sasanians to find innovative and mutually acceptable solutions to traditional grievances.

Current scholarship has often taken for granted the role the new barbarian threats played in forcing the Romans and Sasanians to reach an accord, without fully explaining what made them more dangerous than previous threats in causing this shifting of imperial priorities. Therefore, this thesis will seek to address this overlooked question by highlighting not only what made them different to the other barbarian threats the empires had faced before and had to face elsewhere in this period, but also why they were a much more immediate threat than the empires posed to each other in the fifth century. In this regard, the territorial and political ambitions of these new barbarian powers, that were much more ambitious and potentially damaging to the survival and prosperity of the Roman and Sasanian Empires, will be contrasted with the ambitions the two empires held towards one another, which by the end of the fourth century had stagnated into little more than the desire to control individual frontier cities and fortifications. Alongside this focus on the Vandals, Huns and Hephthalites, it will also be shown that the East Roman Empire, especially after the 395 division, and the Sasanian Empire alike did not have the necessary military and economic resources to fight multiple wars on different frontiers and that, consequently, they had to shift their attention away from the traditional imperial rivalry to focus on these new threats.

Yet, the reason why this peace was necessary is only the first, and arguably the easiest step, in understanding the Roman-Sasanian peace in the fifth century. Therefore, this thesis will also analyse how peace was established and maintained throughout the fifth century. It will show how those aspects of the relationship that will be identified as traditionally been deep-rooted grievances between the two imperial neighbours were overcome. These most frequent *casus belli* will be identified as the contested frontier in Mesopotamia, the frontier

zones of Armenia and Arabia and religious concerns, while other ideological differences also played a part. In all of these things, especially in regards to the contested frontier regions, the need to create a balance of power that was acceptable to the strategic needs and concerns of both sides will be highlighted as being central to the overall successful establishment and maintenance of peace.

## Sources

The limitations inherent in the available primary sources that deal with the Roman-Sasanian relationship, especially in the fifth century, will need to be overcome if a nuanced understanding of the peace is to be achieved. In this regard, and in relation to the stated methodology of ensuring the fifth century is not investigated in isolation but as part of the wider late antique world, it is essential to utilise and analyse all available sources regardless of period or perspective.

There are relatively few contemporary historians from the fifth century that have survived, and those that have, such as Priscus, Eunapius and Olympiodorus, have done so only in fragmentary form. Although these sources are highly informative in relation to specific events that took place in the fifth century and will be used throughout this study, on their own they do not provide the comprehensive narrative that is needed.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the fragmentary nature of the fifth-century historians must be supported from elsewhere in order to gain a full understanding of the period; this will be achieved in two ways.

First, the use of third, fourth and sixth-century Roman historians, such as Herodian, Cassius Dio, Ammianus Marcellinus, Procopius and Agathias, will be used to evaluate the different stages and periods of the Roman-Sasanian relationship in the *longue durée*.<sup>32</sup> The use of sources dating from the preceding and succeeding centuries is essential in understanding the

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<sup>31</sup> For a detailed conclusive study on the nature and usefulness of these fragmentary historians see: Blockley (1981) and Treadgold (2007). For specific detail on Priscus of Panium see: Gordon (1964).

<sup>32</sup> For various discussions on the value of these Roman historians, especially towards our understanding of the Roman-Sasanian relationship see, on Ammianus Marcellinus: Matthews (1989b); Kelly (2009); Drijvers & Hunt (1999); Brock (1975); Austin (1973); Teitler (1999); Cameron (1964). On Procopius see: Kaldellis (2004), Börm (2007) and Cameron (1996). On Cassius Dio see: Millar (1964); Alföldy (1971). On Herodian see Alföldy (1971). On Agathias see: Soward (2013), Cameron (1969) and Kaldellis (1999). For general insights on the nature of Roman historians and history writing see: Mellor (1999), Feldherr (2009) and Rohrbacher (2002).

wider development of the imperial relationship, and many of its common and recurring characteristics and institutions. Using earlier and later sources in this way, will allow us to highlight any differences or changes that can be found to have existed uniquely in the peaceful fifth century.

For example, through the use of the fourth-century Ammianus Marcellinus we know that during the reign of Shapur II the Sasanian Empire was challenged on its north-eastern frontier by the Chionitae. Yet, unlike the threat of the Hephthalites on the same frontier in the fifth century, the Chionitae did not force the Sasanians to seek a long-term or wider *détente* with the Romans and they were eventually able to suppress the Chionitae, and even utilise them as federate troops.<sup>33</sup> Thus, this shows us that there was a major difference in the impact these different Hunnic enemies had on the Sasanian Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries, and that, therefore, the nature and reason of this difference needs to be investigated in order to understand the underlying motivations for peace.

The second solution to overcoming the fragmentary nature of fifth-century sources is to make use of eastern Sasanian sources when and where they are available.<sup>34</sup> However, the use of Sasanian sources presents its own problems as literary sources originating from the Sasanian Empire are exceedingly rare. Therefore, in order to ascertain Sasanian perspectives we are more reliant on archaeological remains, primarily rock reliefs and coinage. During the early period of Sasanian rule, in the third century in particular, the Sasanian Shahs were enthusiastic patrons of rock reliefs and inscriptions that celebrated and recorded their achievements. Ardashir I, Shapur I, Narseh and even the Magian Kerdir, all left extensive and informative rock carvings.<sup>35</sup> These archaeological remains grant us good understanding of how individual Shahs wished to be seen and remembered by their internal audience. Alongside these rock reliefs, later neo-Persian and early Islamic writers are also important to this research. Writers such as Tabarī, and works like the *Chronicle of Seert* and the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), although written at a much later date, are vitally important and will play a

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<sup>33</sup> 15.13.4; 16.9.4; 17.5.1.

<sup>34</sup> For a useful round up of the available sources both archaeological, literary, contemporary and otherwise see: Wiesehöfer (2001: 153-165).

<sup>35</sup> For a general discussion of Sasanian rock reliefs and inscriptions see: Herrmann & Curtis (2002); Herrmann et al (1989); Herrman (2000) and Canepa (2013).

central role in enhancing our knowledge of how the Sasanians acted and reacted to the changing conditions of the fifth century.<sup>36</sup>

The difficulty of using Roman and Sasanian sources side by side, each of which come with their own traditions and expectations, is that they often contradict one another when discussing the same event. Roman writers may well ignore or gloss over a defeat suffered at the hands of the Sasanian rival, while Sasanian sources might equally ignore certain clauses in a treaty which conceded territory to the Romans. One such example of this is the differing accounts given by Roman and Sasanian sources on the death of the emperor Gordian III in 244. In this example, the Roman histories state that Gordian was killed due to the machinations of the treacherous Philip the Arab, whereas the Sasanian sources claim that Gordian was killed in battle with Shapur I. In this instance, the historical background of the Roman sources, which betray a deep distaste for Philip the Arab, as well as other evidence that supports the fact that the battle at Mišīk, where Shapur I states Gordian was defeated, did actually take place, indicates that the Sasanian sources are likely more reliable.<sup>37</sup> However, it is important to note that it is not always possible, and indeed not always wise, to focus on whether Roman or Sasanian sources were the most correct in a study such as this. In fact, such contradictions between Roman and Sasanian recordings on the same event are often more useful in showing that the two empires had similar aims and vested interests in the way they wished certain events to be portrayed and remembered. Thus, despite the evident difficulty in using Roman and Sasanian sources side-by-side, as described above, it is essential to take this widely inclusive approach in using all available sources in order to attain a holistic understanding of this period.

The use of third-party sources will also help to add further depth to our understanding of this period, and help navigate the often partisan perspectives inherent in Roman and Sasanian sources. The development of the Armenian alphabet and the subsequent growth of written Armenian histories in the fifth century was a major development in granting new perspectives

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<sup>36</sup> For illuminating analyses of Tabarī's work and reliability, as well as the *Chronicle of Seert* and *Book of Lords* see: Howard-Johnson (2010a: 324-331; 341-353; 366-370). Also on Tabarī see: Conrad (1993).

<sup>37</sup> For the Roman sources blaming Gordian's death on internal intrigue see: Eutropius (9.2-3), Festus (22) and Zosimus (1.18-19). For the Sasanian sources which describe his death in battle with Shapur I see: *SKZ* (§3-4). For more details of this differences see: Dignas & Winter (2007: 77-80); MacDonald (1981), and also Daryaee (2008a: 7) who argues that Gordian was more likely to have been killed by his own followers, after his defeat rather than at the battle itself. See n.65 from Chapter 1.1 for more discussion on this.

on the Roman-Sasanian relationship in this period. Trapped as they were between the two imperial powers Armenian historians, such as Sebeos, Agathangelos, Elishé and Lazar P'arpets'i, provide valuable, and often unique, insights into the imperial relationship.<sup>38</sup> Equally, the use of Syriac writers such as Joshua Stylites, who lived in the constantly fluctuating Mesopotamian frontier region, will also be essential in negotiating the strict imperial perspective prevalent in Roman and Sasanian sources by showing the fluidity and interconnectedness of the political-cultural environment within which the two empires coexisted.<sup>39</sup> These third-party sources once again provide a more holistic understanding of the fifth-century imperial relationship allowing us to view it from multiple perspectives and reinforcing that it did not act as an isolated entity in itself. Importantly, the use of Armenian and Syriac sources will therefore help to cement the underlying methodology of this thesis by investigating the relationship as part of the wider interconnected late antique world, and show that the aspirations of different peoples, states and polities all had an effect on one another.

Therefore, although individually each of these sets of sources comes with their own problems, by using them in conjunction with each other such limitations can be overcome. Each can be compared and corroborated against the other in the process of identifying why and the how the fifth-century peace came about. Only by this methodology, through a willingness to utilise all available sources, can we gain a wider appreciation of the imperial relationship and analyse the peace from multiple perspectives.

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<sup>38</sup> On the general usefulness of Armenian histories for our understanding of the Sasanian Empire see Greenwood (2013). For brief but useful discussions on the origins, dating and veracity of the individual Armenian historians see: Thomson (2009: 156-7); Dignas & Winter (2007: 179; 181). For a more exhaustive study on the historical veracity of Sebeos see Thomson, Howard-Johnson & Greenwood (1999: xl-lxxiv).

<sup>39</sup> On the historical value and usefulness of Joshua Stylites see Trombley & Watt (2000: xii-xxxvii)

## Chapter 1

### Changing Priorities

#### 1.1) The Third and Fourth Century Imperial Competition

The third- and fourth-century Roman-Sasanian relationship was dominated by military competition and antagonism. The first Roman-Sasanian war, instigated by Ardashir, the founder of the Sasanian Empire, in 230, which saw the Sasanians quickly overrun Roman territory and capture a number of important cities, was to be only the beginning of an almost unending series of military campaigns and counter-campaigns in this early period of the imperial relationship, as each side strove for supremacy. Shapur I, Ardashir's successor, quickly carried on his father's legacy by campaigning against the Romans almost continually between 244 and 260. Roman attacks against the Sasanian Empire took place in 240/1, 260, 283 and 363, led by a succession of emperors including Gordian III, Carus and Julian. Constantine would also have been among this list except for his untimely death in 337 in the middle of preparing a new eastern campaign against the Sasanians. Further Sasanian attacks against their western neighbour were launched by Narseh in 296 and Shapur II in 338, 350 and 359. In these wars, a number of Roman emperors suffered disastrous defeats at the hands of the Sasanians. Gordian III and Julian were killed in battle, and Valerian was infamously captured and taken prisoner by Shapur I. Likewise, Roman dreams of the conquest and humiliation of the new imperial rival resulted in the capture of Shah Narseh's family and harem, and the siege of the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon.

The prevalence and ubiquity of conflict throughout this period was the result of a variety of political, ideological and strategic reasons. Mistrust, suspicion and resentment were the foundations of the early Roman-Sasanian relationship, as Romans regarded the Sasanians as 'treacherous and deceitful' and, likewise, the Sasanians considered Roman words and actions



to be clouded by 'deceit' and lies.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in attempting to understand both the need for peace in the fifth century and how this peace was maintained it is important to first recognise and analyse the ideological, political and strategic causes of conflict between the two imperial neighbours in the first two centuries of their relationship. This chapter will therefore focus on the political-military nature of the Roman-Sasanian relationship in the third and fourth centuries to analyse why competition and warfare were so fierce, and even necessary to both empires, in this period.

### Roman and Sasanian World Views: The Imperial Other and Conflicting Ideologies

All states express their own identity and place in the world by categorising and labelling those around them.<sup>2</sup> As such, a state's ideology inherently silhouettes itself against its neighbours and the outside world.<sup>3</sup> In the same regard, a state's foreign policy shapes, and is shaped by, its ideology and wider world view. Both the Romans and Sasanians viewed themselves as the supreme state in their world, with an innate, and pre-destined, right to rule and dominate those around them. Such similar, yet directly opposing, ideologies affected how the Romans

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<sup>1</sup> Themistius *Or.* 11.148d; *Amm. Marc.* 17.5.2-4; *SKZ* § 4.

<sup>2</sup> Corbery & Leerssen, 1991. Miles (1990: 10) takes this idea further, arguing that perception and representation of foreign peoples was even more important than the reality. On the importance and implication of the 'other' in the ancient world see: Gruen (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Definitions of ideology, and other terms that regularly come up in the study of the ancient world, such as society, group, power and polity, are generally inadequate (Van Dijk, 1998: 1), or highly dependent on what the historian is trying to say and or what they are talking about, whether a state, a people, or a specific section of society, predominately the elites. Indeed, there are many different notions or ideas of what ideology means or represents, whether as 'the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group' (Van Dijk, 1998: 8), 'the systems of representation' (Hall, 1996: 26) or, as the Oxford dictionary puts it a 'system of ideas and ideals'. As such, it could even be stated that the term itself has become obsolete or anachronistic in that it suggests such things were too neat and easy to control, which in the ancient world especially, without the means of fast effective communication, is patently false. All of these different understanding seem to agree on a certain underlying principle of ideology however, that different ideologies are used predominately in the discourse of power, whether in the form of legitimation or manipulation. Therefore, throughout this study the term ideology will be used when discussing how a state or its leaders viewed themselves in relation to their world, both internally and externally, and how they legitimised this position within that world.

and Sasanians regarded and acted towards one another, predominantly forcing them into political, ideological and military conflicts.

Roman imperial ideology and cultural identity developed in response to their expansion as an imperial power, reinforcing and justifying their own superiority and domination over their neighbours. As such, the Roman worldview was fundamentally shaped by the ideas of universal rule and their rightful place as a world empire. Roman literary ideals consistently promoted the idea of Rome as '*imperium sine fine*' (empire without end) and 'lord over kings, victor and ruler over all nations'.<sup>4</sup> Such strong claims for universal rule prevented the Roman Empire from coexisting peacefully with its neighbours. Accordingly, from an early stage the Romans viewed the regions beyond their own borders as the *barbaricum*, an area inhabited by unrestrained and uncivilised savages.<sup>5</sup> This allowed the Romans to promote the image of their neighbours, especially the Germanic tribes across the Rhine and Danube, in an extremely negative light, as little more than animals; as unruly, unpredictable and uncivilised barbarians.<sup>6</sup> This was a complete contrast with their ideological view of their own lands, which they believed existed in perfect civilised order.<sup>7</sup> Although one must be careful in utilising literary traditions to comment on a Roman ideology, as what a state or people truly thought is usually most evident in their actions, the fact that the Romans predominantly interacted with their neighbours in the form of military conquest and domination does suggest they would have developed an inherent sense of superiority over their neighbours.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as such, the Romans often justified their imperial conquests and aggressive relations with their barbarian neighbours, especially during the Early Empire, as a civilising mission; the introduction of Roman civilisation through the sword.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vergil *Aen.* 1.279; Cicero. *Dom.* 90. Diodorus (11.4) also expresses this Roman ideal as he states that their empire extended to the end of the earth.

<sup>5</sup> Halsall, 2007: 45-57.

<sup>6</sup> Prudentius, *Contra Symmachum* 2.807-819. Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity* (2006) explains through different contributions the negative representation of these barbarians.

<sup>7</sup> Mathisen (2006: 32) and (Heather, 1999: 235) state it was in this promoted opposition between the civilised Romans and their barbaric neighbours that the imperial government created a feel-good factor among the population about belonging to the Roman Empire.

<sup>8</sup> In this awareness of the difficulty of discussing ideology Ando (2000: 20) and Brunt (1978: 159) are important.

<sup>9</sup> Habinek, 1998: 151-169. In his study of Ovid's *Tristia* poem Habinek argues that it shows the Romans saw themselves and their imperial expansion as a civilising mission.

Although the initial impetus for the Romans' negative image of the barbarian was older than the Roman Empire itself it did not diminish over time. The persistence and prevalence of this ideology in the Later Roman Empire is attested by contemporary sources:

At that time, as if the trumpets were sounding the war note throughout the Roman world, the most savage people roused themselves and poured across the nearest frontier.<sup>10</sup>

As highlighted here by Ammianus, a 'soldier and a Greek' with great experience in the Roman army and the dangers facing the empire at this time, the larger barbarian tribal federations of the third and fourth centuries, such as the Goths, Franks and Alemanni, were a direct threat to the Roman Empire, and as such, despite centuries of deepened interactions, the Romans still considered them as 'the most savage people'.<sup>11</sup> The increased threat the barbarians posed to the empire in this period ensured that the negative and hostile representation of the barbarians only strengthened further in late antiquity. As their dominant position in the world was increasingly challenged by these tribes the Romans were ever more eager to present their enemies as destructive and uncivilised savages, in order to reaffirm their own superiority and position in the world.<sup>12</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus was certainly typical of this Roman attitude towards their barbarian neighbours. For instance, apart from his comment above, he later argues that deceiving and slaughtering barbarians was perfectly acceptable simply because they were barbarians.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, his ethnographic discussions on both the Huns and the Arabs present them in the most stereotypical and negative light.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Symmachus informs us how Valentinian II (375-392) sought to reassure the Romans that the empire was still superior to their barbarian neighbours by feeding captured Sarmatians to wild animals in the arena; clearly these captured barbarians were not considered worthy of either mercy or clemency.<sup>15</sup> The persistence of this ideology across all periods of Roman history, despite the other numerous political, religious and strategic changes that continually

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<sup>10</sup> Amm. Marc. 26.4.5.

<sup>11</sup> 31.16.19. In his role in the *Protectores Domesticii* Ammianus personally took part in many battles and campaigns, such as at the siege of Amida and Julian's eastern campaign in 363 (18.6).

<sup>12</sup> Heather, 1999:234-258; Mathisen 27-35.

<sup>13</sup> Amm. Marc. 28.5.1-7. For this interpretation of this passage see: Heather (1999: 234).

<sup>14</sup> On the Arab digression see: Amm. Marc. 29.36.4. On the Hunnic digression see: Amm. Marc. 31.1-2. For more general discussion on Ammianus' description of Rome's neighbours, which is argued to be overwhelmingly stereotypical see: Teitler (1999) den Boeft (1999), Hopwood (1999) and Drijvers (1999), and also Wiedemann (1986), who argues this stereotypical approach was due to the his audiences' expectations, which Ammianus did not want to disappoint.

<sup>15</sup> Amm. Marc. 28.5.7, 31.16.8; Symm. *Rel.* 47.

altered and transformed the empire and its society, shows how intrinsically important the idea of the difference between civilised Romans and their barbaric neighbours was to the Roman ideological worldview and their place within it.

However, Rome's ideology of the savage barbarian was harder to enforce and perpetuate in relations with the civilised powers of the east, especially the Sasanian Empire.<sup>16</sup> The difficulty in continuing this chauvinistic ideology towards the Sasanians was not merely a result of the military might of the imperial rival (by the mid-third century even the German tribes could boast of many military victories over Roman armies), but was due rather to the cultural and political sophistication of the Sasanian Empire.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the Germanic tribes across the northern frontiers the Sasanian Empire was a highly developed and cultured state. This ensured that they did not fit neatly into the traditional Roman worldview that saw all those beyond its own frontiers as savage and uncivilised.<sup>18</sup> The sophisticated nature of the Sasanian Empire forced an adaption of the Roman understanding of the regions outside of their own empire. Thus, the Romans instead viewed the Sasanians as the extreme other, as an inversion of Roman culture and cultural norms; a strange and dangerous *alter orbis*.<sup>19</sup> This is indicative in the exclamation from the sixth century historian Agathias; 'How different are the ways of

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<sup>16</sup> On this same difficulty with the earlier Parthians see: Campbell (1993).

<sup>17</sup> In this regard, Isaac (2004) and Walbank (1983: 66) argue that Roman racism was based on culture rather than race. Scipio's discussion with Laelius about the barbarity of Romulus in Cicero's *Republic* (1.37.58) is evidence of this. Correspondingly, contrary to the deeply entrenched thoughts of the twentieth century, ethnicity is now increasingly believed to be increasingly linked to culture rather than race or biological descent. For more discussion on the role of ethnicity and the understanding of ethnicity in Rome's relations with the northern barbarians see Halsall (2007: 35-45).

<sup>18</sup> On the ambiguity and difficulty of the Sasanians fitting into the traditional and stereotypical Roman view of non-Romans see: McDonough (2011) and Drijvers (2011). Although Roman portrayal of their neighbours could sometimes be more nuanced than this and show them in a good light this always depended ultimately on what the Roman writer was trying to do. In this regard, there was a clear distinction between the image and use of barbarians in an internal sense, where they were used to criticise Roman society or politics, and the image and use of barbarians in an external sense, where they were used to reinforce Roman superiority and create a disdained other to act as a counter to Roman civilisation (Dench, 1995: 68, 101; Woolf, 2011: 92). For example, it is often stated that Procopius' positive image of the Hephthalites was merely an attempt to criticise the corruption and decline of Roman leaders and political institutions (Kaldellis, 2007: 69-75). Dench (1995: 85-94) uses the example of the Romans' portrayal of the Sabines to show how this worked. However, the fact even regions that had been effected by Roman influence for a long period and even became Roman provinces, such as Britain, were still always considered somewhat savage reveals how enduring this idea of the barbarians as uncivilised and unruly truly was (Woolf, 2011: 93).

<sup>19</sup> Drijvers (2011: 67).

the Persians!’<sup>20</sup> Indeed, of all the Roman historians who wrote on the Sasanian Empire Agathias was arguably best placed to comment on the customs and culture of the imperial neighbour, due to his use of translated extracts from the Sasanian royal annals.<sup>21</sup> However, this information was interspersed with the traditional moralising and anecdotes prevalent in all Roman historiography, while Agathias himself was writing during the renewed imperial conflict in the sixth century and was quite hostile towards the Sasanians.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, caution must be used when deciding, what information was true, and derived from these useful sources, and what was mere literary effect. The effect that the existence of such a dangerously different and strange neighbour had on the Roman perception of, and relationship with, the Sasanian Empire is again confirmed by Agathias:

It is quite obvious that each of the various nations of mankind considers that any custom whatsoever which is both universally accepted in their society and deeply rooted in their past cannot fail to be perfect and sacrosanct, whereas whatever runs counter to it is deemed deplorable, contemptible and unworthy of serious consideration.<sup>23</sup>

As the Roman historian highlights here, there could be no trust or even peaceful coexistence with a state or culture that would have been considered so ‘deplorable, contemptible and unworthy’, as there was nothing more dangerous or threatening to one’s place in the world than something that was the direct opposite to it. Thus, the development of the idea of the Sasanian *alter orbis* had a direct consequence on the Romans ‘real’ relationship with their eastern neighbour. Indeed, Roman writers were fiercely hostile to any blending of Roman and Sasanian culture or traditions.<sup>24</sup> For example, Diocletian was heavily criticised for the introduction of Sasanian-style court ceremonies into the Roman Empire<sup>25</sup> while Julian was condemned ‘for being wedded to Asiatic manners’.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, Diocletian’s persecution of Manichaeism which was seen, wrongly, as a Sasanian religion and part of their ‘scandalous

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<sup>20</sup> 3.9.8. Canepa (2009: 38) believes that this strangeness was further reinforced by the disappearance from imperial imagery of the more romantic ideas of the wealthy, beautiful and exotic ‘Easterner’, which coincided with the rise of the Sasanian Empire and decline of the Parthian *regna*.

<sup>21</sup> 4.30. This information was translated for him by Sergius, a leading interpreter in Roman diplomatic missions to Ctesiphon (Cameron, 1969-70: 69).

<sup>22</sup> For more general information on the veracity, usefulness and context of Agathias see: Cameron (1969-70); Chaumont (1984).

<sup>23</sup> 2.23.8.

<sup>24</sup> Livy 38.17.5-11.

<sup>25</sup> Eutr. *Brev.* 1.9.26; Aurelius Victory, *Historia Augusta* 39.2-4.

<sup>26</sup> Amm. Marc. 16.7.6.

customs', resulted from a fear that it would 'inflict harm' on and 'infect the people' of Rome.<sup>27</sup> Thus, although not presented as barbarians in the same way as Rome's western and northern neighbours, the idea of the Sasanian other, as a state and people fundamentally different to Rome and the Romans, ensured that the imperial rival was viewed with fearful suspicion and was regarded as Rome's most dangerous enemy.<sup>28</sup>

This perception of the Sasanian *alter orbis* also undoubtedly affected, and was affected by, the corresponding Roman understanding of the Sasanians as the self-proclaimed heirs to the ancient Achaemenid Empire. To Roman elites and emperors, who considered themselves the heirs of Alexander the Great, there could be no further evidence that the Sasanian Empire was inherently different and intrinsically opposed to the Roman Empire.<sup>29</sup> The existence of such opposing ideologies ensured that Roman-Sasanian relations were bound to be turbulent; there could be no middle ground between the heirs of Alexander and the heirs of Darius.

From their earliest interactions the Romans viewed Sasanian military aggression as a logical and natural result of their Achaemenid heritage. Hence, both Herodian and Cassius Dio attest that:

[Severus Alexander] was suddenly sent reports by the governors in Syria and Mesopotamia informing him of the following: the Persian king Ardashir had defeated the Parthians and had dissolved their rule in the East. He had put to death Artabanos, who used to be called Great King and had worn two diadems. Moreover, Ardashir had conquered all of the barbaric areas around and was forcing them to pay tribute. He was still not satisfied and was not staying within the borderline of the river Tigris but crossing its banks and thus the borders of the Roman Empire. He was overrunning Mesopotamia and threatening Syria. He was determined to re-conquer for Persia the whole territory across from Europe and cut off by the Aegean Sea and the Sea of Marmara, which as a whole is called Asia, because he viewed this as his inheritance, arguing that the whole area, as far as Ionia and Caria, had been administered by Persian satraps from the time of Cyrus, who was the first to transfer power from the Medes

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<sup>27</sup> *Diocletian's Edict against the Manichaeans, 297: Collatio legume Mosaicarum et Romanarum 15.3.1-8*. For more detailed discussion on Diocletian's policy of persecution towards Manichaeism see: Brown (1969).

<sup>28</sup> For example, Julian calls the Sasanians the 'most pernicious people' (Amm. Marc. 23.5.19)

<sup>29</sup> Spencer, 2002; Dignas & Winter, 2007:1.

to the Persians, to the time of Darius, the last of the Persian kings, who's power the Macedonian Alexander had destroyed. He claimed that it was now his task to renew his empire for the Persians just as they had possessed it in the past.<sup>30</sup>

He [Ardashir] accordingly became a source of fear to us; for he was encamped with a large army over and against not Mesopotamia only but Syria also and boasted that he would win back everything that the ancient Persians had once held as far as the Grecian Sea. It was, he said, his rightful inheritance from his forefathers.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike Herodian, Cassius Dio does not make it explicitly clear who these 'forefathers' are; however, it is obvious enough that he means the Achaemenids, and the Roman elites themselves, who were well versed in Greek history and literature, would have readily identified them as such. Writing their histories in the third century, both Cassius Dio and Herodian were near contemporaries to the events they describe above and, therefore, likely had a true understanding of how this new eastern menace was perceived by Rome at that time. Although Herodian's reliability is often criticised, due to his preference for rhetorical and literary techniques over historical accuracy, Cassius Dio is usually acknowledged as a dependable and trustworthy historian.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, these two accounts taken together, alongside Ammianus Marcellinus' reminder that the idea of Sasanian Achaemenid heritage still existed in the later fourth century, should leave no doubt that this was indeed how the Romans perceived the Sasanians, and how they understood their aggressive actions throughout the third and fourth centuries.<sup>33</sup> This dangerous Sasanian ideology was evidently a deep cause for concern and fear in the Roman Empire; it made their new eastern neighbour innately more dangerous than the previous Parthian *regna* had ever been. Achaemenid heritage gave the Sasanians a direct claim to Roman territories and, as both Herodian and Cassius Dio make clear, Ardashir, and his successors, were not afraid to embark on campaigns of 're-conquest' to reclaim what they considered their 'rightful inheritance'.

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<sup>30</sup> Herodian 6.2.1-2.

<sup>31</sup> Dio 80.4.1.

<sup>32</sup> For the unreliability of Herodian see: Alföldy (1974: 89-111), Zimmermann (1999: 119-43); Dignas & Winter (2007: 54-55). For the reliability of Cassius Dio see: Dignas & Winter, (2007: 55), Alföldy (1971); Millar (1964: 28-46). Indeed, it has been claimed that Cassius Dio played an official role in imperial diplomacy, had access to diplomatic communications and therefore may have encountered Ardashir's demands first hand (Dignas & Winter, 2007: 55).

<sup>33</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus (17.5.5.6) informs us that Shapur II demanded Constantius return all territories which his 'ancestors' had ruled.

Although it is readily accepted that the Romans viewed the Sasanians as the self-proclaimed heirs to the Achaemenid Empire, whether the Sasanians actually held this ideology themselves has been hotly debated. Certainly, some scholars have argued that this was strictly a Roman invention, resulting from their need to rationalise and understand Sasanian actions through their own Greco-Roman tradition and historic view of the world, and that this was a tradition the Sasanians knew, or even cared, little about.<sup>34</sup>

However, non-Roman sources show that the Sasanians were more than aware of Achaemenid history, and that the early Shahs utilised their memory for their own purposes. Indeed, both al-Tabarī and the *Letter of Tansar* reveal that Sasanian knowledge of the Achaemenid past formed an important part of their early ideology, foreign policy and worldview:

[Ardashir] has devoted all his thoughts to attacking the Greeks [Romans] and pursuing his quarrel against that people; and he will not rest until he has avenged Darius against the successors of Alexander, and has replenished his coffers and the treasury of the state.<sup>35</sup>

[Ardashir] [arose] in Fars seeking, as he alleged, to avenge the blood of his paternal cousin Dārā [Darius III], son of Bahman, son of Isfandiyāy, on whom Alexander had made war and had killed two of the latter's chief commanders. As he said, he wished to recover the kingdom for its rightful holders and for those who had held it continuously in the previous time of his predecessors and forefathers, before the "Party Kings" [Seleucids and Parthians] and [wished] to gather it together again under one head and one monarch.<sup>36</sup>

Although the *Letter of Tansar* was supposedly written during the reign of Ardashir himself, as a royal dispatch to a loyal governor, it is more likely that it was created during the reign of

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<sup>34</sup> On the influence of Greco-Roman historical knowledge effecting Rome's understanding and perception of the Sasanians see: Blockley (1992: 114). Scholars who claim this was a Roman invention include; Kettenhofen (1984: 183-4), Potter (1990:370-80; 2006: 222-4) and Huyse (2002). In contrast, Blockley (1992: 104) argues that although this Achaemenid heritage was unlikely to be merely a Roman invention, it does not indicate a Sasanian will to world domination as later Christian universalism did for the Romans. Scholars who argue for the importance of Achaemenid heritage to the Sasanians themselves include: Fowden, (1993: 22), Dignas & Winter (2007: 55), Daryaee (2006: 493), Shahbazi (2001: 61) and Walker (2007: 795). Pourshariati (2008: 33) indicates that such emulation or claim to Achaemenid heritage would not have been beyond the Sasanians always tried to 'connect their humble origins to remote antiquity'. For the most conclusive analysis of this important question see Shayegan (2011).

<sup>35</sup> *Letter of Tansar* p.42 (tr. Boyce 65).

<sup>36</sup> Tabarī 814.



Khusro I (531-579).<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, whichever Shah commissioned it, the significance of Achaemenid heritage to Sasanian ideology, especially towards the Roman Empire, is revealed to be highly important by this letter. Similarly, although Tabarī, a Muslim writer from the tenth century A.D, was far removed from the events described here he is generally thought to be a reliable and accurate source.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, it is believed that Tabarī incorporated the classical traditions of the *X'adāy-Nāmag (Book of Kings)*, an official historiography sanctioned by the Sasanians themselves, in his own work and therefore it could be suggested that Tabarī would have, intentionally or unintentionally, presented important ideals, such as Achaemenid heritage, to his audience that the Sasanians themselves had wished to present to their audience when patronising the *Book of Kings*.<sup>39</sup> Thus, there is no reason to doubt that these two eastern sources show that Sasanian Shahs, especially early Shahs, actively presented themselves as the direct successors to the Achaemenid kings, with an innate duty to win back lost territories and take revenge upon the heirs of Alexander, who had destroyed the older Iranian empire, the Romans. That this ideology had a direct effect on Roman-Sasanian relations is evident in both these passages, which make it clear that Ardashir would not contemplate peace until he had taken revenge against the heirs of the man who had destroyed his ancestors' empire.

Those who argue that the Achaemenid past played no part in Sasanian ideology point out that, from Ardashir onwards no Shah made direct reference to their Achaemenid predecessors. The *Res Gestae Divi Saporis*, an officially sanctioned inscription that records the achievements and successes of Shapur I, especially those against Rome, is often regarded as the quintessential evidence of this failure to specifically mention Sasanian claims to Achaemenid heritage.<sup>40</sup> However, just as Augustus did not record his failures in his *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, Shapur would have had no interest in recording the fact that he did not actually manage to fully re-conquer his 'rightful inheritance' and restore the borders of the Achaemenid Empire.<sup>41</sup> This royal inscription was, after all, a piece of official and personal

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<sup>37</sup> Whitby, 1994: 235; Fowden, 1993: 29. For general surveys on the *Letter of Tansar* see Boyce (1968).

<sup>38</sup> Conrad, 1993. For an informative study on different aspects of Tabarī's history see the edited volume by Kennedy (2008).

<sup>39</sup> Pourshariati, 2008: 9-13; Yarshater, 1983: 360-363.

<sup>40</sup> Kettonhofen, 1984: 184-5.

<sup>41</sup> Börm (2008b: 426-7) and Dignas & Winter (2007: 57) also agree with this understanding of Shapur's *Res Gestae*.

aggrandisement, it was designed to celebrate Shapur's greatness; not highlight his failures. Nevertheless, despite this lack of explicit reference to the Achaemenids there are still hints that Shapur was keen to highlight his connection with his illustrious forebears. The most readily apparent of these is Shapur's use of the title *Shahanshah* (King of Kings), which had been used previously by Achaemenid kings.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the accompanying title of 'King of Iran and non-Iran' attests to Sasanian claims of universal rule and further justified Shapur's aggressive military campaigns in the west.<sup>43</sup> The location of the inscription, Naqš-i Rostam, is also suggestive. This was the site where the majority of former Achaemenid kings were buried in rock tombs, and had consequently developed into an important place of Achaemenid memory.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the inscription itself was carved into the *Ka'ba-i Zardušt*, a fire sanctuary built during the reign of Darius I, the Achaemenid king the Sasanian Shahs were so eager to avenge.<sup>45</sup> Thus, that Shapur's *Res Gestae*, a monument constructed primarily to celebrate his victories over the Roman rival, was specifically located at such a historically meaningful site seems unlikely to have been a mere accident or coincidence. It was done for a specific purpose; to justify Sasanian foreign policy towards the Roman Empire by linking it with the Achaemenid past. Lastly, just like the famous Achaemenid inscriptions, such as that at Behistun, Shapur's *Res Gestae* was trilingual.<sup>46</sup> Such consistent similarities and allusions to Shapur's illustrious predecessors were no accident but were rather subtle hints and claims to Achaemenid heritage.

Indeed, although direct reference to this Achaemenid heritage may be absent from Sasanian royal proclamations the Achaemenid past was an intrinsic part of Sasanian culture. Iranian literary and oral tradition ensured that Alexander the Great was long remembered as the destroyer of the Achaemenid Empire.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that the new Sasanian dynasty was eager to utilise and exploit this tradition by fitting themselves into the ancient battle between east and west. It granted them complete ideological justification for their aggressive policy against their western rival. The widespread success of this ideological use of

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<sup>42</sup> SKZ §1.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Canepa (2009: 54) and Börm (2008: 426) both agree this title was used to express Sasanian aspirations, or at least ideology, towards universal rule.

<sup>44</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 58.

<sup>45</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 57.

<sup>46</sup> For the use of trilingual inscriptions during the Achaemenid Empire see: Koch (1992: 13-28)

<sup>47</sup> Yarshater, 1983: 377-91, 472-72; Börm, 2008b: 426.

the past is further evident in a Christian ecclesiastical document produced by the Church of the East in the fifth century that refers to Khusro I as the 'new Cryus'.<sup>48</sup>

As such, to suggest that the Sasanians had no knowledge of their Achaemenid predecessors seems misplaced.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, the belief that the Achaemenid past played no part in the ideological formation of the early Sasanian state seems Roman-centric. The fact that both eastern and western sources indicate the importance it did have in the formation and development of the Sasanian worldview and imperial ideology speaks for itself; Sasanian claims to Achaemenid heritage was not just a Roman idea.

The importance of Achaemenid heritage to Sasanian ideology, their imperial worldview and claims to universal rule, played a fundamental role in shaping their relations with the Romans in the third and fourth centuries.<sup>50</sup> It fulfilled the same role as the Roman idea of the savage barbarian and strange Persian did in justifying their ideology of superiority, and subsequent aggressive foreign policy.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the Sasanians utilised their claims to Achaemenid heritage to create an image of Rome as a powerful and dangerous other.<sup>52</sup> The repeated desire for revenge against the Romans, as the heirs of Alexander the Great, did not permit peaceful coexistence between the two imperial neighbours. Together, these two opposing Roman and Sasanian ideologies resulted in the continuation and intensification of military competition as it allowed for only aggression and antagonism. Hence, conflict, not peace, was to be the main form of Roman-Sasanian interaction.

For the early Shahs this need to legitimise their actions was intensified because, as a new dynasty that had come to power through the military overthrow of the previous Parthian

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<sup>48</sup> *Syn. Or.* p.69-70.

<sup>49</sup> Fowden (1993: 29) and Whitby (1994: 234) both agree that the Sasanians had knowledge of the Achaemenid past. For further details of the argument for Sasanian knowledge of the Achaemenids see Frye (1983: 293) and Brown (1971b: 160-163).

<sup>50</sup> Also acknowledged by Shayegan (2013: 806). Indeed, Canepa (2009: 51) even suggests that the Sasanian use of Achaemenid heritage was done in direct response to the traditional tradition of *imitatio Alexandri* amongst the Roman emperors.

<sup>51</sup> Drijvers, 2009:452; Wiesehöfer, 2005. As is seen in the *Book of Lords*.

<sup>52</sup> Wiesehöfer, 2005.

Arsacids rulers, they quickly needed to assert their legitimacy to their new subjects and internal audience.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, as Herodotus informs us, ancient Iranian tradition, a tradition which was fundamentally important to the Sasanians, disapproved of changes in leadership simply for the sake of power.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, Achaemenid heritage played a central role in the early years of the Sasanian dynasty as it allowed them to declare that they, not the Arsacids, were the rightful rulers, and that therefore their rebellion and takeover of the empire was entirely legitimate. Furthermore, during the final years of the Parthian *regna* the Romans had been able to successfully launch devastating invasions into Parthian territory without any real or substantial defence and without any prospect of a counter-attack, most famously under Trajan in 115 and Septimius Severus in 197.<sup>55</sup> This failure undermined confidence in the Arsacids and led directly to the internal turmoil that eventually resulted in their overthrow by Ardashir in 224.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, by claiming Achaemenid heritage, which guaranteed the Romans would be regarded as their natural enemies, the Sasanians were able to win the support and backing of their new subjects by showing that they, unlike the Arsacids before them, would not be cowed by the might of Rome. Hence, this ideological claim to Achaemenid heritage allowed the Sasanians to present the Romans as their ancestral enemies and, therefore, cement their internal legitimacy by showing they would be stronger and better rulers than the Arsacids, whom they had usurped.

These opposing ideologies both provoked, and were provoked by, the fierce antagonism which existed between the Roman and Sasanian Empires in the third and fourth centuries. How an enemy or neighbour is perceived has a direct effect on a state's relationship with them.<sup>57</sup> Hence, the Roman view of the Sasanian Empire as a strange and suspicious *alter orbis* ensured that they were treated with distrust and enmity. While, in casting themselves as the heirs of the Achaemenids the Sasanians equally ensured the Romans were viewed as their

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<sup>53</sup> Sundermann, 1963; Rubin, 2000: 645. On the importance legitimacy and legitimate rule had for the Sasanians see: Dignas & Winter (2007: 232-241) and Winter (1989).

<sup>54</sup> As shown by the fact Cyrus the Great was legitimised by being portrayed as the grandson of the last Median King and the fact Darius was described to have been fighting against an illegitimate imposter rather than the real heir (Hdt. 1.107-8).

<sup>55</sup> For the conquest of Mesopotamia and Osroene by Septimius Severus see: Hirt (2008).

<sup>56</sup> Lee, 2007: 4.

<sup>57</sup> This was especially true for the Roman and Sasanian Empires (Blockley, 1992: 113).

natural enemy. Furthermore, for the first time in their history the Roman's ideology of *imperium sine fine* and universal rule was matched and opposed by a rival state; a state with the means to pursue to own similar claims to universal rule. Nothing could have been seen as a more direct threat to the very existence and prosperity of the Roman Empire than this. Likewise, for the Sasanians, Achaemenid heritage played an important role in both their internal legitimacy and external aspirations and justifications. Accordingly, in this ideology, the Romans were portrayed as the ultimate enemy. Thus, the historical ideologies and universal claims of both sides permitted only conflict and antagonism, not peaceful coexistence. The major consequence of these two diametrically opposed and conflicting ideologies was the seemingly unending Roman-Sasanian conflict.

#### Political Necessities and Internal Expectations

It is neither nature nor justice which gives monarchies to men, but the ability to command an army and to handle affairs competently.<sup>58</sup>

War and the royal office are agreed to be the greatest of all things among mankind.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the gap in centuries between these two statements, the first being a Byzantine lexicon thought to date from an earlier Hellenistic source and the second coming from the sixth century Roman historian Procopius, they both show the realities of ancient kingship. They underline that, in the ancient world, military success and reputation was the central prerequisite of a ruler's legitimacy, and this was no different for the rulers of the sophisticated Roman and Sasanian Empires. Indeed, that Ardashir had initially overthrown the Parthians militarily indicates that the early Shahs were first and foremost men of war.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, the Cult of Victory had always been a fundamental part of Roman society and this did not change throughout the history of the Roman Empire.<sup>61</sup> The military nature of ancient leadership, together with the ideological competition that erupted between the two states, meant that

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<sup>58</sup> *Suda* s.v. 'Basileia' (Austin 37).

<sup>59</sup> Proc. *BP*. 2.24.26.

<sup>60</sup> Blockley (1992: 101) goes as far to state that the Sasanian Empire could be seen primarily as a 'heroic warrior kingdom'.

<sup>61</sup> Evident in the poetic verses of Claudian (*Ill cos. Hon.* 201-11, *cos. Stil.* 3.130-73), that the altar of Victory was the last pagan artefact to be removed from the Senate House in Rome (Symm. *Rel.* 3.3) and Vegetius' (1.1) remembrance of the glorious military victories in Rome's past.

military successes against the neighbouring empire were highly sought after and valued as indicators of a ruler's legitimacy and ability to defend the dignity and prestige of their empire.

### **Sasanian Necessities<sup>62</sup>**

An ideology that depicted the Roman Empire as the natural enemy of themselves and their people ensured that military successes against Rome were essential to the internal position of the early Sasanian Shahs. The special place that the Roman Empire held in the foreign policy and military objectives of the Sasanian Empire, especially in the third and fourth centuries, is evident in the way it was portrayed by the Shahs during this period. For instance, in his *Res Gestae* Shapur I lists all the lands he had campaigned in but only his Roman campaigns were described in great detail.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the nature of the *Res Gestae divi Saporis* as a piece of royal and personal aggrandisement is most readily apparent in the Shah's celebration of his victories over successive Roman emperors.<sup>64</sup> Shapur informs his audience that in a pitched battle 'Gordian Caesar was killed and the Roman force was destroyed', that he had made Philip the Arab a 'tributary', that he had 'annihilated at Barbalissos a Roman force of 60,000' and finally, and perhaps most significantly, that he 'made prisoner ourselves with our own hands Valerian Caesar'.<sup>65</sup> Shapur was also eager to reveal that he renamed the site of his great victory over Gordian, Mišik, Peroz-Shapur (Victorious Shapur) and that during his campaigns he captured innumerable Roman cities, including, Zeugma, Seleucia, Antioch and Dura.<sup>66</sup> To his internal audience reading this inscription there could be no doubt that Shapur was master

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<sup>62</sup> The foremost study on the political history of the Sasanian Empire is that by Schippmann (1990).

<sup>63</sup> SKZ.

<sup>64</sup> On the nature and purpose of Shapur's *Res Gestae* see: Kettenhoffen (1982).

<sup>65</sup> SKZ §3-4, 11. Despite Shapur's claim to have defeated and killed Gordian in battle, there is a major contradiction between Roman and Sasanian sources on the fate the emperor. In opposition to Shapur's account Roman sources state that Gordian was killed by some of his own men, led by Philip the Arab (*SHA Gord.* 29.30; *Eutr.* 9.2-3; *Fest.* 22 *Zos.* 1.18-19). However, in this debate it should be noted that the Roman defeat at Mišik did indeed take place (Gignoux, 1991: 9-22) and that Shapur's credibility and legitimacy may well have been harmed by lying about such a success. Furthermore, whereas the *Res Gestae divi Saporis* was constructed only thirty years after the event, the Roman sources which portray Gordian's death as a result of treachery were written much later. As such, Shapur's account was much more contemporary. For more on the reliability of Shapur's *Res Gestae* in this regard see: Stolte (1971). These Roman sources also all show a clear distaste for Philip the Arab, likely due to the peace he was forced to accept by Shapur and therefore may well have been attempting to cover up a military humiliation by the Sasanian enemy by blaming Gordian's death instead on the much maligned Philip (*Zos.* 3.32.4; *Dignas & Winter*, 2007: 80). For more detailed discussion on the divergent accounts and events of Gordian's death see: Körner (2002: 84-87) and Edwell (2008: 171-2).

<sup>66</sup> SKZ §4.

over the Roman enemy and that he was therefore unquestionably a strong and fit ruler. He reinforced the celebration of these victories by commissioning rock reliefs and other visual artefacts, such as the Bishapur relief, all of which displayed the defeated emperors in forms of submission, to further broadcast his humiliation of the Roman Empire.<sup>67</sup> Shapur also had a double gold dinar issued to celebrate his most famous triumph; the capture of the emperor Valerian.<sup>68</sup>

As such, it is no exaggeration to state that Shapur's victories over the Roman Empire became the cornerstone of his royal and personal standing and played a vital role in securing his internal legitimacy and position. Shapur I was not the only ruler to utilise victories over the Roman rival in this way. Narseh's Paikuli inscription, which was intended to stress his legitimacy and right to rule after his turbulent succession, uses a different phrase to describe the Roman Empire compared to the other neighbours of the Sasanian Empire. According to Narseh in this inscription, in contrast to all other local powers, who revealed their allegiance to the Sasanian Empire by 'standing by Narseh in advice and counsel', the Romans were said to have 'stood in supplication'.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, Shapur II commissioned a rock relief to celebrate his defeat of the emperor Julian in 363, located at Taq-i Bustan.<sup>70</sup> The lengths that the Shahs of the third century in particular went to celebrate and promote their military supremacy and mastery of the Roman rival underlines that such military successes were an integral part of their internal legitimacy and right to rule.<sup>71</sup>

The political constitution of the Sasanian state meant that the Shahs' relationship with the powerful nobility in their empire also dictated military aggression and success against the Roman rival was a necessity.<sup>72</sup> One of the many assumptions made about the Sasanian state was that it was much more centralised, and controlled by the direct power and authority of

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<sup>67</sup> Ghirshman, 1962: fig.197.

<sup>68</sup> Canepa, 2009: 55. The impression the capture of a Roman emperor had on contemporaries and later observers is also apparent in the continuation of depictions of this event, such as with the Paris Cameo and illustrations from the *Shahnama* (Ghirshman, 1962: fig.195; Enderlein & Sundermann, 1988: 190).

<sup>69</sup> NPi 91-2.

<sup>70</sup> Ghirshman, 1962:fig.233.

<sup>71</sup> On the overall importance of military victory and reputation to Sasanian kingship see: Daryaee (2008b), McDonough (2013); Choksty (1988).

<sup>72</sup> Blockley, 1992: 101; Whitby, 1994: 234.

the Shahs, compared to the supposedly more 'lethargic' and indirectly ruled Parthian *regna* that it replaced.<sup>73</sup> However, this idea contradicts the fact, and a fact that is regularly acknowledged, that the Shahs needed to appease the noble families who held power in virtually every corner of the empire.<sup>74</sup>

In this regard, as well as being a homage to their Achaemenid predecessors, the title *Shahanshah* or King of kings underscores the nature of Sasanian kingship within the wider state, as the Shahs' position was secured through winning the loyalty and support of the other powerful magnates and families in the empire. The principal groups of nobility with which the Shahs had to contend with, and win the support of, were the *Shahrdaran*, virtually independent kings of their own territories, and the *Vuzurgan*, who were made up of the great noble families of the Suren, Karin and the Lords of Undigan, who although also nominally owed loyalty to the Shahs equally retained much independence in their own homelands.<sup>75</sup> That these powerful nobles were almost autonomous in their own lands is evident in the fact that the Shahs never founded new cities in any territory belonging to any of these families in fear of angering them.<sup>76</sup> Likewise, the quasi-feudal, personal and hereditary composition of the Sasanian Empire ensured that all major offices of state were held hereditarily by these various, but exclusive, noble families.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, Shahs could not even raise or levy new taxes without agreement from the nobility, while their military power was also largely dependent on the loyalty of the powerful noble families. Even more important than this, however, was the traditional role the nobility performed in choosing and legitimising their Shahs.<sup>78</sup> This traditional right fulfilled a crucial role in internal Sasanian politics as, if a ruling Shah angered them, the nobles could remove their support in favour of another royal candidate, so long as he was from the Sasanian family of course.<sup>79</sup> Thus, although they were absolute rulers, the Sasanians Shahs could not rule their empire without the consent and cooperation of the nobility.

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<sup>73</sup> As first argued by Christensen (1944: 97). Rubin (2000: 652) also notes this tendency in scholarship concerning comparisons between the Sasanian and Parthian Empires.

<sup>74</sup> Brosius, 2006: 151-179; Pourshariati, 2008. For more on the importance of the nobility to both Roman and Sasanians rulers in general during this period see: Börm (2010)

<sup>75</sup> Rubin, 2000: 652; Blockley, 1992: 101; Wiesehöfer, 1996: 171-5.

<sup>76</sup> Rubin, 2004: 245.

<sup>77</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.6.13-14.

<sup>78</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.5, 1.11.31-33; Börm, 2007:113, 2008b: 433; Wiesehöfer, 1996: 169-171.

<sup>79</sup> John of Antioch fr. 178; FHG 4: 165; *Letter of Tansar*; NPi. Brosius, 2006: 151.



The early career of Shah Narseh presents a prime example of the need to gain the support of the nobility in holding onto the Sasanian throne. After the death of the Shapur I in 272 the Sasanian Empire was plunged into a period of internal turmoil and civil war during which successive Shahs including Hormizd I, Bahrām I, II and III ruled for only very short periods.<sup>80</sup> The internal stability and dominance of Ardashir and Shapur I had been achieved primarily through their military achievements, however, their three immediate successors, especially Bahrām I and III, were too young to be able to create their own legitimacy through military victory.<sup>81</sup> The two competing candidates for the throne after Shapur I, Hormizd and his cousin Bahrām I, both lacked military reputations, which ensured that neither could garner enough support from the nobility to guarantee their internal supremacy and smooth succession to the throne. This resulted in a civil war between these two rivals for the throne, which Bahrām I was finally able to win. However, his son and heir, Bahrām II, was to suffer the same troubles in his own reign, as he was also unable to achieve the necessary military reputation to win the support and loyalty of the nobility. As a result of this, Bahrām II was only able to maintain his internal position by winning the support of the powerful Zoroastrian priest Kerdir.<sup>82</sup> In return for this support Bahrām II was forced to grant many concessions to Kerdir and the Zoroastrian Magians which allowed them to pursue Zoroastrian aggrandisement in the Sasanian Empire, predominantly through the form of persecutions against the empires religious minorities, such as Christians and Manichaens.<sup>83</sup> However, although his support was instrumental in propping up the throne of Bahrām II it is likely that Kerdir's pre-eminence caused dissatisfaction amongst the nobility during the reign of his successor, Bahrām III, as they saw their own influence wane in the face of Kerdir's ascendancy.<sup>84</sup> As a result, the nobles turned their support to the only other remaining candidate for the throne, Narseh, who, with their support, was subsequently able to win the Sasanian throne. The importance of noble

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<sup>80</sup> Hormizd ruled for two years (270-272/3), Bahrām I ruled for merely three years (273-6), Bahrām II ruled for a more stable period of seventeen years (276-293) and Bahrām III was only able to hold on to power for less than a year (293).

<sup>81</sup> Potter, 2009: 290.

<sup>82</sup> *KKZ* § 8-9.

<sup>83</sup> *KKZ* § 9-10.

<sup>84</sup> Although Daryaee (2008a: 12) states that this is no definitive evidence for this competition between the nobility and Kerdir, it does seem that after Narseh's successful rebellion, which was supported by the nobility, against Bahrām III, who was supported by Kerdir, the power of the Zoroastrian Magians was curtailed. This then would suggest that this was one of the expectations of Narseh from the nobility once he had gained the throne.

support in Narseh's eventual succession to the throne was highlighted by the Shah himself, who justifies his rebellion against Bahrām III by stating that the nobles asked him to do this.<sup>85</sup>

As emphasised by the failed reigns of Hormizd and Bahrām I, as described above, military skill and success were central to winning the support and cooperation of the nobility. Indeed, Joshua Stylites underlined its importance by stating that Balāš lost his throne because 'the military thought nothing of him'.<sup>86</sup> Military success and a strong military reputation could be used to mollify, placate and overawe the influential and ambitious nobles. Successfully military campaigns not only won Shahs the much needed military prestige and legitimacy their position demanded, it also provided them with material advantages, such as foreign wealth, land and captives, all of which could be distributed amongst the noble families in order to win, or retain, their support.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, despite the ideological and propagandist exhortations of Ardashir and Shapur I in their inscriptions that celebrate their victories over the Roman Empire they both betray the overriding practical aim of their military campaigns against the Romans in the west; material and economic gain. For instance, Ardashir is said to have refused peace with Rome until he had 'replenished his coffers and the treasury of the state' and, likewise, Shapur stated that he 'burned, ruined and pillaged' his way through Roman territory.<sup>88</sup> The Romans themselves were also seemingly aware of the overwhelming Sasanian desire for plunder and booty, with Libanius stating that they were interested predominantly in plundering Roman territory for wealth and material resources.<sup>89</sup> This view is also maintained by Zosimus, who records the Sasanian prevalence for 'ravaging the cities of the East'.<sup>90</sup> The importance of material gains from military campaigns therefore helps to explain why Roman Empire was so important to the foreign policy of the Shahs, as, compared to the vast majority of the Sasanians' other neighbours, the Romans were vastly wealthy and, as such, a lucrative source of income that the Shahs needed to secure their internal position.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *NPi* 18.

<sup>86</sup> 18-19.

<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Lee (2007: 102) highlights that the main economic and material gains from late antique warfare came from wealth and human resources.

<sup>88</sup> *Letter of Tansar* p.42 (tr. Boyce 65); *SKZ* §11.

<sup>89</sup> *Orations* 18.207.

<sup>90</sup> *Zos.* 2.43.7-8.

<sup>91</sup> On the economically lucrative nature of successful Sasanian campaigns against the Roman Empire see: Procopius (*BP.* 1.7.3-4, 1.13.1-2) with Lee (2007: 102). Although it must be noted these two sources focus on the later Sasanian invasions of the sixth century.

However, military successes against the Romans were not used solely to retain the support of the nobility, no matter how important this was. The Shahs also needed the material resources won from successful western campaigns to improve the infrastructure of their empire, and in building up their own personal powerbase, independent from the influence and interference of the nobility.<sup>92</sup> As the supreme commander of the army, anything a Shah won on campaign, whether booty or captives, belonged solely to him. Thus, even after necessarily dividing a portion of this among the nobility, the Shah would still be left with substantial material and economic rewards. The Shahs were quick to utilise these hard-won resources to improve their own internal position and the prosperity of their empire. In the course of their military campaigns in Roman territory the Shahs took considerable amounts of Roman citizens captive and forcibly deported them into the Sasanian Empire. The capture and large-scale deportation of Roman citizens gave the Sasanians the chance to exploit Roman technical skills and expertise to develop the infrastructure of their own empire, through the construction of roads, bridges and palaces.<sup>93</sup> This is confirmed by Tabarī, who informs us that Roman captives, once resettled in Sasanian lands, were used to stimulate and sustain the urbanisation and irrigation projects undertaken by the Shahs in improving the economic prosperity of their empire.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, the technical skills and expertise of the Roman captives, even the imprisoned Valerian, were used in sophisticated construction projects such as the Sostar dam.<sup>95</sup> Thus, the improvement of the infrastructure and prosperity of the Sasanian Empire that successive Shahs achieved throughout their reigns was itself

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<sup>92</sup> For the steady improvement of the infrastructure of Sasanian lands under the early Shahs see: Tabarī (898).

<sup>93</sup> For more detailed discussion on the large-scale Sasanian deportations of Roman populations see: Dignas & Winter (2007: 254-263) and Lieu (1986: 475-505). The *Martyrology of Pusai* (*Acta martyrum et sanctorum* 2.208-10) highlights that the Shahs hoped to benefit from the knowledge and skill of the deported Romans in their deportation policies. The importance of the large-scale capture and deportation of foreign, especially Roman, peoples is evident in the fact it is a recurring feature of Sasanian propaganda. For instance, Shapur I boasted that he had forcibly deported innumerable Romans into his own lands (*SKZ* § 15-16). The Nestorian chronicle the *Chronicle Seert* (PO 4.220-1) also attests to the resettlement of Roman captives into a variety of Sasanian cities. The influence these Roman builders had on the architecture of the Sasanian Empire is evident in the western structural and decorative styles found in Sasanian palaces and cities such as Bisapur and Gundesapur (Dignas & Winter, 2007:256).

<sup>94</sup> 826-827. Ammianus Marcellinus (24.3.10) mentions numerous cities within the Sasanian Empire which indicate an increase in urbanisation under the Shahs did take place. Heather (2006: 61-2) remarks that this irrigation policy generated a 50% increase in settlement and cultivation land in Sasanian controlled Mesopotamia.

<sup>95</sup> Ghirshman, 1962: fig.174; Tabarī 827-8.

largely dependent on the influx of forcibly resettling foreign populations, which was the result of successful foreign military campaigns against the Roman Empire.

Perhaps the most important aspect of these resettled Roman citizens was that they were subordinate only to the Shahs themselves.<sup>96</sup> This was an important development in the advancement of royal power as it ensured that, unlike other citizens of the Sasanian Empire, these resettled Romans had no obligation to any of the noble families and owed their loyalty solely to the Shahs. Hence, in the case of civil war or a lack of noble support for a foreign campaign the Shahs would have had their own personal pool of manpower to call upon. Similarly, any taxes levelled against these new citizens of the Sasanian state went directly to the Shahs themselves.

Evidently, the acquisition of wealth increased the Shahs' personal fortune, while the deportation of Roman citizens allowed them to develop their own reserve of royal manpower away from the influence and interference of the noble families, as well as helping to improve the economy and infrastructure of the state as a whole.<sup>97</sup> Importantly then, military success allowed the Shahs to distance themselves from total dependence upon the unpredictable nobility and granted them an increased level of independent action and sustainability.

Therefore, Sasanian military aggression against the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries was not undertaken strictly for territorial expansion but rather for the honours, reputation and wealth it bestowed upon a successful Shah.<sup>98</sup> The Shahs needed such things to support and enhance their internal position and domination. Thus military success, particularly against the wealthy Roman Empire, was vital in appeasing the powerful and influential noble families, by providing them with steady distribution of prestige and plunder, and cowing them by reminding them of the Shahs' superior might and the military force he could muster. Furthermore, it also allowed the Shahs to develop and expand their own

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<sup>96</sup> Proc. *BP.* 2.14.3. Although the example from Procopius focuses on captives taken from Antioch in 540, the deportation of large numbers of Roman captives across the imperial frontier to be settled in Sasanian lands was a recurring theme of Sasanian military campaigns against the Roman Empire. Therefore, it can be argued that making Roman captives subordinate only to the Shah, as his personal spoils of war, was also a recurring theme in earlier Sasanian campaigns in the third, fourth and even fifth centuries.

<sup>97</sup> Isaac, 1992:266.

<sup>98</sup> Blockley (1992: 102) also agrees with this assumption.

powerbase which was independent from the machinations of the nobility. The importance of military successes against the Roman Empire is clearly evident in the number of invasions launched across the western frontier during reigns of the third and fourth century Shahs, Ardashir I, Shapur I, Narseh and Shapur II.

### **Roman Necessities**

Military achievement was equally important to the Roman emperors, it had always been a major factor in Roman history, both in internal politics and foreign policy.<sup>99</sup> Certainly, it was a central expectation of the imperial office that emperors would both defend and expand the borders of the empire. A Roman leader could not expect a long or successful career if he did not possess the necessary military credentials. This was especially true during the third century crisis, when emperors were increasingly proclaimed by regional armies rather than by the Senate and People of Rome as was traditional in previous centuries.<sup>100</sup> During the third century the Roman Empire was beleaguered by threats on all of its frontiers, from the Germanic tribes in the west and north to the Sasanian Empire in the east. Therefore, it was increasingly expected that emperors would be military experienced and skilled in order to defend the empire against these increased threats. In the same way, unlike their predecessors, the citizen-emperors of the Principate, the so-called soldier-emperors of the third and fourth centuries were even more so expected to personally lead armies against the enemies of Rome.<sup>101</sup> Emperors who did not have the necessary military reputations or that did not achieve military successes shortly after their proclamation were quickly killed and replaced.<sup>102</sup> Consequently, emperors found it necessary to promote and celebrate their

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<sup>99</sup> For more detailed discussion on the long-term development of the military image and legitimacy of Roman emperors see: McCormack (1990).

<sup>100</sup> *Pan. Lat.* 8/5.14.1-3; Loewenstein, 1973: 335. Indeed, it was this development that led to the break-away empires such as the Gallic and Palmyrene Empires see Drinkwater (1987) and Smith (2013: 175-181).

<sup>101</sup> On the rise, nature and development of the soldier-emperors see: Sommer (2010b), Hekster (2008:57-64), Whitby (2004: 179-181), Johnes (2008) and Körner (2002). The Porphyry Statue of the Tetrarchs also emphasises the new militaristic nature of Roman emperors in this period.

<sup>102</sup> The career and short reign of the emperor Maximinus, the first of the soldier-emperors at the start of the third century in 235-238, is testament to the new involvement of the army and increased importance of military reputation in the election of new emperors during this period (Herodian 6.8).

military successes in order to cement their legitimacy and internal position.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, even emperors who favoured a more defensive imperial strategy, especially towards the Sasanian Empire, such as Constantius still felt obligated to promote their military skill and expansionist ambitions.<sup>104</sup> Thus, Synesius' comment that the military was the 'one solid safeguard of kingship' was apt for the Roman emperors, to whom military reputation, prestige and achievement was a central aspect of their legitimacy and right to rule.<sup>105</sup>

The rise of the Sasanian Empire in 224, which played a leading role in fomenting the third century crisis, had a lasting effect on the character of the Roman Empire.<sup>106</sup> The pressure to achieve military renown, in order to secure the throne and internal dominance, led numerous emperors to instigate wars against the Sasanian Empire.<sup>107</sup> That such eastern victories became an increasingly important expectation for emperors in the third and fourth centuries is most evident in the fact that Carus was proclaimed emperor in 282 with the explicit goal of destroying the rival empire.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, Julian's comment that he sought 'a worthier foe' than the Goths once he became sole ruler of the Roman Empire and his subsequent campaign against the Sasanians in 363, indicates that a victory over the Sasanians were more valuable and won Roman emperors more military glory than any other.<sup>109</sup>

Roman imperial and foreign policy was based largely on the deep reverence for, and need to preserve, the empire's *decus* and *maiestas* (imperial prestige).<sup>110</sup> In terms of their relationship with foreign peoples this meant that any who challenged or did injury to this imperial prestige were considered irrefutable enemies of the Roman Empire and Roman emperors. In this regard, there can be no doubt that during the reigns of Ardashir and Shapur I the Sasanians,

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<sup>103</sup> Orators always focused on the military qualities of the emperor when lauding their virtues (Themis. *Or.* 1.2a-b; Jul. *Or.* 1.37c; Gregory of Nazianus 4.80). Officially sanctioned and organised panegyrics always described military victories and successes above all else (*Pan. Lat.* 10.8, 11.3, 8.2-5, 9.18).

<sup>104</sup> Themis. *Or.* 2.18c.

<sup>105</sup> *De Regno* 21. Indeed, the premise of Mattern's (1999) study on Roman foreign relations is that gaining military reputation and legitimacy was more important to the emperors than the material benefits or strategic advantage of any military campaign.

<sup>106</sup> Heather, 2006:58-67.

<sup>107</sup> For this pressure for renown and glory see Lendon (1997).

<sup>108</sup> Dionem fr. 12 (*FHG* 4.198).

<sup>109</sup> Amm. Marc. 22.7.8

<sup>110</sup> Potter, 2004: 229. This need to protect Rome's imperial prestige is evident in the attempts to persuade Commodus after the death of his father in 180 that to abandon the war against the Marcomanni and Quadi would be 'dishonourable' (Herodian 1.6.5). On the general importance of honour and prestige in the running of the Roman Empire see Lendon (1997).

by capturing numerous Roman cities and humiliating a succession of Roman emperors through either defeat, death or capture, had done serious injury to Rome's *decus* and *maiestas*. Accordingly, the Sasanians were viewed with bitter enmity, as enemies and rivals who demanded swift and decisive Roman vengeance. This determination for retaliation against the Sasanian Empire ensured that victories against it were particularly celebrated and sought after by Roman emperors. By defeating the Sasanian enemy emperors could show not only that they were skilled military leaders but also that they would defend the prestige of the empire. Such impetus for military confrontations was strengthened by the belief that only Sasanian Empire could truly challenge and threaten Rome.<sup>111</sup> Likewise, defeats suffered at the hands of the Sasanians were met with derision and contempt.<sup>112</sup> For example, after Galerius' initial defeat to Narseh in 297 he was publically humiliated by his Augustus, Diocletian, who forced him to walk behind the imperial cart in full regalia for a mile.<sup>113</sup> This was a fitting punishment for one who had allowed Rome's imperial prestige to be trampled upon by the hated Sasanians. Thus, it was considered not just desirable, but politically necessary, to defeat the Sasanians in war.

Roman emperors went to great lengths to assure their subjects, supporters, and even rivals, that they were capable of defending against, and defeating, the dangerous eastern neighbour. Severus Alexander (222-235), the first Roman emperor to be challenged by the new Sasanian power, started the precedent for promoting, and indeed overemphasising, any victory against the imperial rival. He celebrated Ardashir's eventual retreat as a tremendous victory, despite the fact that the Shah was forced to withdraw due to exhaustion among his troops, who had been fighting since his initial rebellion against the Arsacids that had begun in 208, rather than any defeat suffered at the hands of the Roman emperor and his army.<sup>114</sup> Henceforth, successive emperors, from Carus in 282 to Julian in 363, were keen to win and make use of the titles *Parthicus maximus* and *Persicus maximus*, which celebrated military victories over the rival, in order to promote their supremacy over the eastern neighbour,

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<sup>111</sup> *Pan.Lat.* 8(5) 10.4. Although we must be aware that this panegyric was officially sanctioned by Diocletian to celebrate his victory over Narseh in 298 and therefore he was likely to want to boost the perceived threat of the Sasanians to make his victory seem even more impressive.

<sup>112</sup> For instance, Philip the Arab gained a bad press for his acceptance of Shapur I's peace demands in 244, which were described as a 'most dishonourable peace' (Zos. 3.32.4).

<sup>113</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 14.11.10; *Eutr.* 9.24.

<sup>114</sup> On the reasons for Ardashir's retreat from Roman territory see Herodian (6.6.4-6). On Alexander Severus' celebration of this as a great victory see: Dignas & Winter (2007: 75-6); *Historia Augusta* (Sev. Alex. 56-7).

whether they had actually defeated the Sasanians in battle or not.<sup>115</sup> This overriding desire to celebrate and reinforce the idea of Roman military ascendancy and victory over the Sasanian Empire among Roman emperors was arguably best exemplified during the reign of Constantius II, however.<sup>116</sup> In 343 Constantius conducted a modestly successful incursion into the Sasanian Empire which, after returning to Constantinople, the emperor celebrated as if it were a major victory. He organised a grandiose entrance and subsequent procession through the city that was said to have outstripped even the most lavish triumphs of the past.<sup>117</sup>

The importance that military victories over the Sasanians' had for Roman emperors was again evident in Tetrarchy. That the legitimacy and authority of the Tetrarchy was largely dependent on their ability to defend the Roman Empire, especially against the previously all-conquering Sasanians, is readily apparent in the celebrations following its defeat of Narseh in 298. All four members of the Tetrarchy were awarded the titles *Persicus maximus*, *Armeniacus maximus*, *Medicus maximus* and *Adiabenicus maximus*, which promoted their joint-mastery over the eastern rival.<sup>118</sup> Likewise, similarly to Shapur I, Galerius, the Tetrarch who led the army against Narseh had a special bronze medallion minted to promote his success. This celebratory coin featured the legend *Victoria Persica*, and on the obverse it depicted his capture of the Narseh's family and harem.<sup>119</sup> However, it is arguably the unrivalled triumphal Arch of Galerius in Thessaloniki which most reveals the importance this victory over the Sasanians had for the Tetrarchy.<sup>120</sup>

However, it was not just the emperors themselves who celebrated victories over the Sasanians to the full. Roman writers and historians also reserved extra praise and admiration for emperors who achieved military success over the imperial rival. Diocletian's victory over Narseh in 298, which completely altered the balance of power between the two empires in Rome's favour, was widely celebrated by Roman writers and historians alike. For this success Diocletian was lauded by the *Historia Augusta* as the 'father of a new golden age', by Aurelius Victor as the emperor who did most to protect his people and by Julian as the 'ruler of the

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<sup>115</sup> Carus (*CIL* 8.12522 = *ILS* 600). Julian (*Amm. Marc.* 22.12.1-2, 25.4.26).

<sup>116</sup> McCormack, 1990:39.

<sup>117</sup> Athanasius, *Historia Arianorum* 16.2; Polemius Silvius, *Laterculus* 31.

<sup>118</sup> *CIL* 3 824 (= *ILS* 642); *CIL* 3 6979 (= *ILS* 660).

<sup>119</sup> Dressel, 1973: 306-7; Dignas & Winter, 2007: 86.

<sup>120</sup> The sheer scale of the dimensions and decorations which adorned this arch marks it out as one of the greatest Roman triumphal arches (Dignas & Winter, 2007: 86; Laubscher, 1975; Meyer, 1980: 374-444).



entire world' who had instilled fear into the Sasanians.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the majority of the criticism towards Hadrian's surrender of Trajan's conquered eastern territories in 117 comes from the third and fourth centuries indicates that victory over the eastern rival was now more important than it had ever been.<sup>122</sup>

The political necessity for eastern conquests quickly became an ideological obsession for some emperors.<sup>123</sup> In this regard, parallel to the growing fear and hostility felt towards the Sasanian Empire in the third and fourth century, the *imitatio Alexandri* ideal amongst Roman emperors also became more prevalent. This was the desire to emulate the military success of Alexander the Great, and of even more recent Roman exemplars, such as Trajan, who had enjoyed spectacular military successes over the eastern Achaemenids and Parthians, respectively. Thus, the *Itinerarium Alexandri* exhorted to Roman emperors:

You have a hereditary duty towards the Persians, insomuch as they have trembled for so long at Roman arms.<sup>124</sup>

The resurgence of this politico-cultural aspiration for eastern conquests was undoubtedly shaped by the increasing political importance victories over the Sasanian Empire had, and also the increased danger the Sasanians presented to the Roman Empire.<sup>125</sup> The most famous, and debated, example of this drive to emulate Alexander was Julian, whose 363 campaign was presented by many contemporary and later Roman writers as an attempt to emulate Alexander's conquest of the Achaemenid Empire.<sup>126</sup> Regardless of the debate surrounding whether Julian, or any other emperor, actively sought to emulate Alexander by attacking the Sasanian Empire in 363, that later Roman writers sought to compare Roman leaders who marched east to Alexander and that Alexander-comparisons became a major topos of Roman

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<sup>121</sup> SHA *Heliogab.* 35.4; Aur. *Vict. Caes.* 39.8; Jul. *Or.* 1.18a-b.

<sup>122</sup> Aur. *Vict. Caes.* 14.1; Eutr. 8.6.6.

<sup>123</sup> Fowden, 1993: 22; Daryaee, 2007.

<sup>124</sup> *Imitatio Alexandri* 5.

<sup>125</sup> The connection between the resurgence of *imitatio Alexandri* and the rise of the Sasanian Empire is evident in the evocations of Alexander's legends by Roman emperors, or at least Roman writers writing about Roman emperors, from 224 onwards (Diocletian: Malalas 12.39; Constantine: Euseb. *VC.* 4.15.1; Julian: Amm. Marc. 24.4.26-7; Honorius: Claud. *IV Cons. Hon.* 257-8, 379). This connection has also been acknowledged by Smith (2011: 50).

<sup>126</sup> Soc. *HE* 3.21; Greg. Naz. *Orat.* 5.14; Eunap. fr. 28.3. Those who support the idea that Julian actively sought to emulate Alexander include Athanassiadi-Fowden (1981: 192, 224-5) and Wirth (1978: 455-68) Those who argue this idea was more likely the result of Christian attacks on Julian, who tried to malign the pagan emperor as a means of showing his arrogance and folly include Lane Fox (1997) and Smith (2011).

literature and historiography reinforces how important the memory of Alexander the Great was in the cultural and historical milieu in which the Romans viewed themselves.<sup>127</sup>

This array of interconnected political realities and necessities underlines the primacy the Sasanian Empire had in the fear, ambitions and enmity of the Romans in the third and fourth centuries; they were considered Rome's most dangerous enemy, and therefore, most deserving of defeat and humiliation. Consequently, for emperors to defend the *decus and maiestas* of the Roman Empire, and to ensure their own reputation and legacy, it became fundamentally necessary for them to defeat the Sasanian rival.

### Religious Motivations

The religious relationship between the Roman and Sasanian Empires was highly important and set many precedents for future inter-state relations, as, for the first time in history, two intolerant and jealous monotheistic religions came into contact. The existence of two official state religions, or at least state sponsored religions, Roman Christianity and Sasanian Zoroastrianism, further added to the political demands and internal expectations that encouraged aggressive relations between the imperial neighbours.

From Constantine's conversion in 312, and the subsequent promotion of Christianity as the favoured religion of the emperors, Roman emperors increasingly regarded themselves as the champions and protectors of Christianity.<sup>128</sup> As God's divinely chosen ruler the Roman emperor was compelled to both protect and help spread Christianity all across the late antique world. This Roman sponsorship and protection of Christianity frequently had an adverse effect on how the Sasanians viewed Christians in their own realm, and beyond, throughout the third and fourth centuries. The Shahs increasingly thought of Christians within their empire as a potential Roman 'fifth-column' and they were treated accordingly, especially during times of conflict with Rome, when this perceived disloyalty could potentially do the most harm to the Sasanian Shahs and their empire.<sup>129</sup> Such persecution of Christians provided

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<sup>127</sup> Trajan (Dio 68.29.1); Caracalla (Dio. 77.7.1); Alexander Severus (SHA Sev. Alex. 5.1-2, 25.9) were all compared to Alexander after launching eastern campaigns. On the overall importance of the memory and legend of Alexander to the Romans see: Spencer (2002).

<sup>128</sup> Eus. VC. 4.24; Odahl, 2004: 271.

<sup>129</sup> Barnes, 1985: 136.

extra impetus to Roman aggression and eagerness for war, as they felt morally compelled to protect and avenge their fellow Christians.

Equally, alongside their Achaemenid heritage and military prestige, the early Sasanian Shahs utilised Zoroastrianism to justify and legitimise their right to rule.<sup>130</sup> Sasanian rock reliefs from the third century depict Shahs receiving their investiture from Ahura Mazda, in order to promote the idea that they were divinely chosen to rule the Sasanian Empire.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, similarly to the Roman emperors, the early Sasanian Shahs could not be seen as Ahura Mazda's chosen rulers if they did not adequately defend and promote Zoroastrianism itself. One of the most effective ways, in the ancient monotheistic mind at least, to promote one's own religion was to persecute the religion of others.<sup>132</sup> This led to the frequent religious persecutions of Jews, Christians, and Manicheans in the Sasanian Empire.<sup>133</sup> Although the persecution of the Jewish and Manichean religions had no adverse political consequences in foreign relations, the persecution of Christians was an entirely different matter. Persecuting the Roman emperors' fellow Christians brought the indignation and righteous anger of the Roman Empire upon the Zoroastrian Sasanian Shahs. In response to this direct challenge and threat to their position as protector of Christianity successive Roman emperors launched military campaigns to help protect God's worshippers who were being mistreated in the Sasanian Empire.<sup>134</sup>

For these reasons, religion and religious considerations quickly became yet another source of tension and conflict throughout the Roman-Sasanian relationship. Religion as a *casus belli* both provoked and intensified conflicts between the two empires.

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<sup>130</sup> *Mas'ūdī, Murūg* 1 § 568; *Will of Ardashīr I* (ed. Grignaschi 49); *SKZ* § 51.

<sup>131</sup> Ghirshman, 1962: fig. 168; Daryaei, 2008a: 5.

<sup>132</sup> Due to monotheisms being less inclusive and more jealous than polytheism (Leppin, 2007: 98) and the fact that in late antiquity political loyalty was thought to be linked with religious identity (see p.207 n.6 for more details on this).

<sup>133</sup> *KKZ* §9-10.

<sup>134</sup> Barnes, 1985:126.

## Strategic Concerns and Realities

This endemic cycle of military conflict, as well as being inspired and stimulated by ideological and political motivations, was caused by the strategic concerns and realities of the geopolitical situation and the constantly fluctuating balance of power the two empires found themselves confronted with. It has been claimed that the world empire ideal in antiquity presupposed control of both the Mediterranean basin and the Iranian plateaux.<sup>135</sup> In this regard, the most strategically important region in the imperial competition was the contested Fertile Crescent in Mesopotamia that connected the Roman controlled Mediterranean basin to the Sasanian dominated Iranian plateaux. The fact that the Fertile Crescent straddled both empires ensured it was a vitally important strategic battleground, forming, as it did, the main frontier between the two rivals. Indeed, its contentious military and political division between the two rivals was arguably the fundamental geopolitical *casus belli* in the Roman-Sasanian relationship. Moreover, Mesopotamia quickly developed into the agricultural, administrative and political heartland of the Sasanian Empire. Therefore, the proximity of the Roman frontier, which was heavily militarised and fortified, especially after the reign of Diocletian, made the Sasanians extremely wary. Thus, either the Roman or Sasanian Empire had to dominate and control the Fertile Crescent or they would have to learn to coexist peacefully.<sup>136</sup> Yet, try as they might, neither the Romans nor the Sasanians were ever able to fully control the important Fertile Crescent, and during the third and fourth centuries they were completely unwilling, and unable, to coexist peacefully. This strategic and diplomatic deadlock destined the early Roman-Sasanian relationship to one of perpetual conflict.

Due to their aggressive imperial ideology and internal needs the Sasanian Shahs proved a much more belligerent, zealous and energetic rival than the Parthian Arsacids had been before them. In the third century this aggressive energy took the Romans, who had perhaps been lulled into a false sense of security by the military inactivity of the Parthians, by surprise and allowed the early Sasanians to raid deep into Roman territory and raze important frontier cities. Accordingly, in attempting to counter the new ascendant Sasanian power in the east, Roman imperial and strategic attention at the end of the third and fourth centuries focused predominantly on containing and countering the new eastern threat, which necessitated an

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<sup>135</sup> Fowden, 1993: 18-19.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

increased Roman military presence in Mesopotamia, on their eastern frontier.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, it has been argued that this need to match Sasanian power on the eastern frontier was the overriding impetus behind Diocletian's military, economic and political reforms at the end of third century.<sup>138</sup>

Consequently, after the rise of the Sasanian Empire Roman imperial and military strategy underwent a pivot to the east, which was a clear shift compared to previous centuries when imperial defence had been focused on the western frontiers along the Rhine and Danube.<sup>139</sup> The founding of Constantinople in 330 as the new imperial capital of the empire, and the fact that from Diocletian onwards the principal Augustus in any political division or collegial rule of the empire always stationed themselves in the eastern provinces both further underline that such a shifting of imperial attention towards the east took place. Similarly, the fact that Sasanian controlled Mesopotamia formed the agricultural and political heartland of their empire, highlighted by the decision to make Ctesiphon the imperial capital, dictated that Sasanian military and imperial focus in the third and fourth centuries was also necessarily focused on the dangerously close imperial frontier with Rome in Mesopotamia.<sup>140</sup>

Such a joint strategic focus and desire to dominate the contested imperial frontier quickly ensured that military conflict and competition became the underlying status quo of Roman-Sasanian interactions. The quintessential indicator of this was Ardashir's scathing reply to Severus Alexander's diplomatic overtures that war, not negotiation, would settle their disputes.<sup>141</sup> This declaration from the founder of the Sasanian Empire set the tone for the next two centuries of imperial interactions, and Ardashir was quick to put this boast into practice. After launching his first campaign against the Romans in 235/6 he rapidly besieged

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<sup>137</sup> Heather, 2006:66. Again this is reinforced by Julian's remark that he sought 'a worthier' foe than the Goths shortly before launching his attack against the Sasanian Empire (Amm. Marc. 22.7.8).

<sup>138</sup> Thus, Heather (2006: 62) states that; 'Army, taxation, bureaucracy and politics: all had to adapt to meet the new Persian challenge'. Heather reinforces this by suggesting that despite the rise of the larger Germanic tribal federations in the same period the fact that they never came close to generating a common purpose or identity, each tribal group having different ambitions and being just as likely to fight one another as Rome, ensured the Sasanians remained the priority in the third and fourth centuries. On Diocletian's reforms see: Kuhoff (2001) and Barnes (1982).

<sup>139</sup> Heather, 2006: 66.

<sup>140</sup> Daryaee, 2008a: 15.

<sup>141</sup> Dio. 80.4.1; Herodian 6.2.4, 6.4.5

and captured Nisibis, Carrhae, Dura and Hatra, invading as far as Syria and Cappadocia.<sup>142</sup> This was not a swift and decisive knock-out blow to the Roman Empire, however, rather it was only the first round of a seemingly never-ending cycle of attack and counter attack that plagued, and defined, the Roman-Sasanian relationship for the next two centuries.

The competition for supremacy in the imperial frontier was intensified early on by the elimination, and assimilation, of the semi-independent states which had previously acted as buffer zones between the Romans and the Parthians.<sup>143</sup> After overthrowing the Arsacids, Ardashir's first move was to consolidate his power on the fringes of his newly won empire. For border cities such as Hatra this meant conquest and complete annexation into the Sasanian Empire.<sup>144</sup> Likewise, from the start of the third century the Romans themselves pursued a strategy of fully integrating allied cities and frontier kingdoms under imperial control. For example, Oshroene was integrated into the empire by Severus Alexander in 214 and, later, the break-away border city of Palmyra suffered the same fate during the reign of Aurelian in 272.<sup>145</sup> Whereas, previously, such buffer zones had helped to mollify potential conflict between the Romans and Parthians by keeping them apart, the Roman and Sasanian Empires were now in direct and uninterrupted contact along a vast frontier which stretched from northern Arabia in the south to mountainous Armenia in the north. The potential for conflict and aggression was greatly amplified by this dangerous proximity.

Arguably the primary method in the competition for supremacy and domination of the frontier was the construction of new, and the reinforcement of existing, fortifications. Indeed, one of Diocletian's first moves in his efforts to counter Sasanian ascendancy on Rome's eastern frontier was the creation of a vast fortified zone; the *strata Diocletiana*.<sup>146</sup> The Sasanians equally attempted to entrench their position in the region through the construction of extensive fortifications, such as Pirsabora, the fortified city of Veh-Ardashir and Maozamalcha, on their side of the frontier, while the Nahrmaalcha (royal canal), that ran from

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<sup>142</sup> Herodian 6.2.1; Dio. 80.3.4; Zon.12.15; Tabarī 820.

<sup>143</sup> Trimmingham, 1979: 21; Potter, 2004: 217.

<sup>144</sup> Dio. 80.3.1-2; Wiesehöfer, 1982.

<sup>145</sup> Potter, 2004: 217; Zos. 1.61.

<sup>146</sup> Amm. Marc. 23.5.2; Mal. *Chron.* 12.17-22; Zos.1.34.1. On the archaeological evidence of the forts that made up the *Strata Diocletiana* see: Kennedy & Riley (1990), Mouterde (1930), Dunand (1933) and Poidebard (1934). For a general discussions of this fortified line see Konrad (2011) and Millar (1993:174-190).

the Tigris to Ctesiphon, provided the innermost line of defence.<sup>147</sup> Likewise, islands in the Euphrates were also reinforced to act as a bulwark against Roman and Sasanian invasion, respectively.<sup>148</sup> Fortifications were used for a variety of reason in the context of the Roman-Sasanian competition, to consolidate Roman or Sasanian control of a region, to defend from attacks across the frontier and to act as staging posts for larger military campaigns. By the end of the fourth century Mesopotamia bristled with Roman and Sasanian fortifications that faced each other across the frontier.<sup>149</sup>

This rapid consolidation of the imperial frontier not only brought the two empires into direct contact with one another in Mesopotamia, but it also made those areas, such as Armenia, the Caucasus and Arabia, which remained outside of direct imperial control, even more important. Both empires competed with one another to bring these regions into their own sphere of influence and control. That these frontier zones had avoided direct assimilation by either empire was rare, and this meant that they quickly became unanswered questions and bones of contention in the Roman-Sasanian competition. If the balance of power was to be tipped conclusively in the favour of either side, gaining supremacy in these frontier zones, especially strategically important Armenia and economically important Arabia, was vital. This was especially true after the competition for control of the Mesopotamian frontier reached a stalemate in the fourth century. Yet, just as complete domination of the Fertile Crescent proved elusive, so too did the empires experience great difficulty in achieving mastery over these frontier zones. Neither side had the military capability or capacity to keep their rival out for long. Consequently, the attention of the two imperial powers, especially in the fourth century increasingly focused on winning the loyalty and support of the local native elites in these frontier zones, rather than on strict military conquest, in an effort to increase their own influence and to harm the ambitions of their rival.<sup>150</sup> This policy instigated the promotion of indirect rule in Armenia and Arabia, which was anomalous with the increasing drive towards centralisation and direct control of the Mesopotamian frontier. This irregularity only

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<sup>147</sup> Amm.Marc. 24, 25.1.10; Matthews, 1989a: 145-55.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* 24. Island fortifications in the Euphrates have been uncovered at Anatha (Edwell, 2008:72, 86) and Bijan (Gawlikowski, 1985).

<sup>149</sup> Archaeological evidence and papyri from Dura-Europos shows that numerous smaller fortifications also existed in the vicinity of the larger forts (Edwell, 2008: 64, 172), further emphasising how fortified the frontier between the two empires was.

<sup>150</sup> Blockley, 1992: 18.

furthered the ambiguity, uncertainty and suspicion which pervaded the Roman-Sasanian relationship in these regions, which in turn only served to foster their position as a cause of conflict between the two empires.

The evidence that such a relentless, yet inconclusive, battle for military supremacy between the two empires took place was in the constantly fluctuating balance of power between them. The parity and equality of military resources and power between the two powers ensured that neither empire was ever able achieve full domination of the other or cement their superiority for long.<sup>151</sup> This resulted in a cycle of transitory and short-lived military supremacy to the advantage of one side or the other, which set the tone for the Roman-Sasanian relationship throughout the third and fourth centuries. Each side continually sought to regain, or cement, ascendancy in the frontier and the overall balance of power through military victory. The establishment of such a distorted and one-sided settlement of the frontier was always deeply resented by the other side, and was consequently destined to be challenged whenever the opportunity arose. Hence, such militarily enforced settlement of the imperial frontier was conducive only to further conflict and bloodshed. This was borne out in the campaigns of Gordian III, Galerius and Shapur II all of which were attempts to enforce a change in the balance of power which saw them in an inferior and more vulnerable position on the imperial frontier.

These strategic concerns and realities ensured that each empire viewed the other as the overwhelming threat to their own imperial security and prosperity. Certainly, Libanius viewed the Sasanians as the only foreign power that could truly threaten the very existence of the Roman Empire.<sup>152</sup> The geopolitical circumstances the two empires found themselves in in the third and fourth centuries left little opportunity for compromise, mediation or common ground. Every success the opposing empire achieved was viewed with alarm and suspicion by their imperial neighbour. As such, almost every aspect of the Roman-Sasanian relationship in the third and fourth centuries was expressed by a pervasive sense of rivalry which only ever resulted in violent military conflict and antagonism.

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<sup>151</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 70.

<sup>152</sup> Lib. *Or.* 59.65.



## Conclusion

This endemic imperial rivalry, which was inspired by competing ideologies, political needs and strategic realities, meant that military conflict between the Romans and Sasanians in the third and fourth centuries was not just an option, but a necessary inevitability. The political, ideological and strategic *casus belli* which beset Roman-Sasanian relations in this period were all interconnected, they did not occur in isolation but rather they intensified and strengthened one another; ultimately resulting in the pervasive hostility and suspicion that plagued imperial relations. For this reason the nature of the third and fourth century relationship was wholly incompatible with the establishment of peaceful coexistence.

Therefore, in order for a more peaceful Roman-Sasanian relationship to develop a major change was needed. A shifting of imperial priorities towards different, and more threatening, enemies needed to take place simultaneously in both the Roman and Sasanian Empires; the rise of new barbarian powers in the fifth century would provide such an impetus.

## 1.2) The Fifth Century: New Threats and Shifting Priorities

The greatest difference between the fifth century and those that had preceded it, from the Roman perspective at least, was the permanent split of the Roman Empire into two distinct western and eastern halves after the death of Theodosius I in 395. This split was to have a dramatic impact on the history, internal character and imperial strategy of both halves of the Roman world. It affected not only their respective military strength, but also their strategic position and priorities.

Throughout the fifth century both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires faced barbarian threats that far surpassed those of the third century.<sup>1</sup> The anonymous treatise *De Rebus Bellicis* highlights the danger the Roman world faced on all its frontiers:

We must recognise that the madness of tribes baying all about hemming in the Roman Empire and treacherous barbarians...menace every stretch of our frontiers.<sup>2</sup>

Although the anonymity of *De Rebus Bellicis'* author prevents any insight into his background, this passage does nevertheless reveal the truth of the Roman's situation in the fifth century, when they faced increased threats across all their frontiers.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, that the *De Rebus Bellicis* was written during the later fourth and fifth century made it contemporary to the events it described above.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, its assessment of the situation facing both halves of the Roman Empire at this time must be taken seriously. The Western Empire had to contend with a large variety of aggressive and competing tribal federations, such as the Franks, Alemanni, Goths, Vandals, Suevi and the Burgundians. In contrast, the main threat to the Eastern Empire now came from the encroachment of the Huns into Europe and the Vandal challenge to Roman domination of the Mediterranean, rather than the Sasanian Empire. After 395, however, the ability of both halves of the Roman world to counter these threats was hindered by the fact

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<sup>1</sup> Clover, 1973: 104.

<sup>2</sup> *De Rebus Bellicis* 6.20 (trans. Thompson).

<sup>3</sup> For general information on the content and date of the *De Rebus Bellicis* see: Thompson (1952), Brandt (1988) and Vendramini (2009).

that neither could call upon the unrivalled resources of a united Roman Empire, which had been available to them in the previous centuries. Therefore, they had to be more flexible and adaptive in their foreign policies. For a variety of reasons the Eastern Empire proved to be more capable of this than their western counterpart.<sup>5</sup> The failure of the Western Empire to adapt to these new circumstances, both internally and externally, resulted in its steady fragmentation and eventual collapse in the fifth century.<sup>6</sup>

For the foreign policy of the Eastern Empire the changed strategic circumstances of the fifth century resulted in the eastern frontier, which faced the Sasanian Empire, losing the overwhelming importance it had at the end of the third and fourth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, throughout the fifth century successive Eastern emperors, from Arcadius onwards, pursued a continuation and extension of Constantius II's cautious policy towards the Sasanian Empire. This was a defensive policy that was unwilling to risk unnecessarily military engagement in the east, in order to allow Constantinople to focus its military attention on the new Hunnic and Vandal threats. Thus, it is no exaggeration to state that, during the fifth century a shifting of priorities took place in the defence of the East Roman Empire. The construction of the Theodosian and Sea Walls in the fifth century, which protected Constantinople in all directions, was illustrative of the new strategic reality facing the Eastern Roman Empire; it could no longer focus overwhelmingly or predominantly on the Sasanian frontier.

An analogous shifting of priorities also took place in the Sasanian Empire in the fifth century. Upon their ascent to power the Sasanians operated in relatively benign circumstances that allowed them to freely concentrate their energy and military resources in the profitable wars in the west, against Rome.<sup>8</sup> However, towards the end of the fourth century and throughout the fifth century the Sasanians' north-eastern frontier was threatened by successive Hunnic

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the differing fortunes of the east and west after the final division of 395 see Williams & Friell (1998).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of the fall of the West Roman Empire see Halsall (2007) and Heather (2006). There is certainly much more literature of the fall of the West, which can be found within the bibliographies of these two works.

<sup>7</sup> This previous importance is seen in Julian's dismissal of a campaign against the Goths in favour of 'a worthier foe', which turned out to be the Sasanians (Amm. Marc. 22.7.8).

<sup>8</sup> Howard-Johnson, 2010b: 41. This focus on Rome is revealed by the successive large-scale campaigns of Ardashir and Shapur I in the early third century (Herodian 6.2.2; SKZ).

invaders and hostile tribes, principally the Hephthalite Huns, which reduced the importance and immediate priority of the Roman frontier.<sup>9</sup> The sustained threat of the Hephthalites on their north-eastern frontier was the catalyst for many calamities that beset the Sasanian Empire during the turbulent fifth century including, raids, invasions, internal instability, famine and the capture and death of a Shah. Thus, it is also no exaggeration to suggest that for the Sasanians the fifth century represented their very own third century crisis. The Roman frontier was no longer the overwhelming priority it had previously been in the ambitions and strategic considerations of the Shahs.

It was the Hunnic raid, or invasion, of 395, and to a lesser extent those that followed it in 397 and 398, through the Caucasus that did most to precipitate this shifting of priorities in the strategic considerations and priorities of both empires. This invasion was a unique event in Roman-Sasanian relations in that, for the first time, both empires were attacked by the same foe.<sup>10</sup> After bursting through the Caucasian Gates the Huns rampaged through the territories of both empires, causing destruction and death, and carrying off much plunder and many captives. A Sasanian Syriac source, the *Chronicon miscellaneum ad annum domini 724 pertinens*, is illustrative of the damage wrought by the Huns in 395:

And in this year [395], the accursed people of the Huns came into the lands of the Romans and passed over Sophene, Armenia, Mesopotamia, Syria, Cappadocia, as far as Galatia; they took a great number of captives and turned back so that they might return to their country. But they went down to the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris, in the province of the Persians, and reached the Persians' royal city [Ctesiphon]; they did no damage there, but laid waste many villages by the Euphrates and the Tigris, and killed and took a great number of captives. But when the Huns heard that the Persians were marching against them, they prepared to flee, and [the Persians] pursued them and killed one of their detachments, and took back from them all the spoils they had they had seized and freed males captives from them 18,000 in number.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Amm. Marc. 15.13.4; 16.9.4, 17.5.1. The 'Chionitae' are indentified as the first of these different waves of invaders. These were later followed by the Kidarites and Hephthalites.

<sup>10</sup> Priscus, fr. 11; Liber Caliphorum (*Chron.* 3.4) with Greatrex & Lieu, 2002: 17-19.

<sup>11</sup> 136.20-137.9 (trans. M. Greatrex). See Greatrex (1999: 66-68) and Palmer (1993: 5-12) for further information and discussion on the nature and origin of this useful source.

Although Roman sources do not provide as much detail as their Sasanian counter-part above, it was still nevertheless mentioned by Claudian, Jerome, Sozomen and Socrates.<sup>12</sup> That Roman and Sasanian sources both recorded this invasion shows how important it was, and the effect it had on both empires. Indeed, despite the fact that the Sasanians eventually beat the Huns back, the effect the invasion had on the strategic concerns and fears of both empires, in terms of where they now considered the true threat to their survival to be, cannot be underestimated. Both empires had suffered badly at the hands of these aggressive newcomers; many Roman citizens had been captured and lands razed, while the invading Huns had also, however fleetingly, threatened Ctesiphon itself. Moreover, the fact that Yazdgard I returned many of the Roman captives he recovered from the Huns, as the source later tells us, suggests that the Shah quickly realised the need to establish better relations with the Romans in the face of this new threat.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the diplomatic manoeuvres of Anthemius in the same period, as we shall see below, reveals the Romans also becoming aware of the need for an imperial détente as a result of this invasion, and its wider repercussions. The effect this invasion had on the Roman-Sasanian relationship is further evident in the fact that the Sasanians often made reference to it when attempting to persuade the Romans to make contributions for the defence of the Caucasus.<sup>14</sup> Evidently, it can be suggested that this experience of the new Hunnic threat made the need for imperial stability, even peace, between the two traditional rivals clear, as their military and defensive priorities necessarily shifted to counter these new dangers.<sup>15</sup>

### Military Resources and Limitations

In order to understand why this shifting of priorities took place in the fifth century, and why both empires could not simply conduct military campaigns on two frontiers simultaneously it

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<sup>12</sup> Claudian, *In Rufinum* 2.28-35; *In Eutropium* 1.245-51, Jerome *Ep.* 60.16, 77.8; Soz. *HE* 8.1.2-3; Soc. *HE* 6.1.5-8; Priscus (fr.11).

<sup>13</sup> 137.9-22.

<sup>14</sup> Josh. Styl. 9.

<sup>15</sup> For more information and discussion on the Hunnic invasion of 395 and its immediate consequences see: Greatrex (1999).

is vital to analyse the military resources of the two imperial armies.<sup>16</sup> Only by gaining an insight into the size of both imperial armies during the fifth century can we comment on the military capabilities and strategies employed by the empires in this period.

When thinking about the strength and size of the Roman army in the fifth century it is important to remember that the division of the empire in 395 meant that the emperors in Constantinople did not have access to the manpower resources of the western provinces as their predecessors once did.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in this regard, even the less permanent collegial tripartite division of the Roman Empire amongst the sons of Constantine in 337 curtailed Roman strategic capabilities towards the Sasanian Empire in the fourth century.<sup>18</sup> During this division Constantius did not have the necessary military resources or manpower to conduct large-scale aggressive campaigns against the Sasanians, and was therefore forced to adopt a more defensive strategy. Indeed, the increasing trend for the division in late antiquity and the subsequent existence of multiple emperors, each with their own separate regional armies, increasingly limited both the offensive and defensive capabilities of the Roman Empire, and its divided parts. Therefore, it is not surprising that the permanent split of the Roman Empire in 395 resulted in a similar change of strategy and policy towards the Sasanian Empire in the fifth century.

The great difficulty in deciphering the size of the Roman army in the fifth century is that most of the available sources come with their own problems of credibility and reliability, and those accounts that do exist tend to contradict one another.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, these sources also predominantly describe the army of the third and fourth centuries, and even then most of the numbers given seem exaggerated.<sup>20</sup> For example, Lactantius stated that, under Diocletian

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<sup>16</sup> For more detailed and extensive discussions on the size of Later Roman army see: Jones (1986: 679-89), Luttwak, (1979: 188-90), Treadgold (1995: 43-64), Potter (2004: 455-9); Whitby (2004: 159-60).

<sup>17</sup> A similar situation also existed in the west at the start of the century when Stilicho lacked the resources and manpower to simultaneously defend Italy, combat Alaric, carry battle to the east and protect the Gallic frontier.

<sup>18</sup> Blockley, 1992: 13. There are many useful studies on the nature and development of the Later Roman army of which Le Bohec (2006) and Southern & Dixon (1996), Tomlin (1987) are important. While Sarantis & Christies (2013) provide an up-to-date account of the nature of research on the Later Roman army.

<sup>19</sup> For some insight on Later Roman troop numbers see: Coello (1996).

<sup>20</sup> For the problems facing scholars using the ancient sources to deduce the size of the Roman army see Treadgold (1995: 43-87).

the army of the united empire quadrupled in size at the end of the third century,<sup>21</sup> John Lydus that military strength was divided between 389,704 soldiers and 45,562 naval troops,<sup>22</sup> Zosimus described the might of western half of the empire as 286,000 soldiers<sup>23</sup> and finally Agathias, referring rather vaguely to 'earlier emperors', relates that they commanded an army 645,000 strong while then criticising Justinian for allowing it to dwindle to a mere 150,000 troops.<sup>24</sup> However, Agathias' criticism must be tempered by the fact that the larger armies of the earlier emperors were the armies of the united Roman Empire, whereas the smaller number of 150,000 would have been the number of troops in the Eastern army alone.<sup>25</sup>

Alongside the testimonies of these writers we also have the records of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, which has been used to estimate the size of the eastern mobile field army to around that of 104,000 troops, which was supported by 248,000 troops of the *limitanei*.<sup>26</sup> The *Notitia Dignitatum* was an official military register kept by a senior notary, the *primicerius notariorum*, and just like the surviving narrative accounts mentioned above it too comes with its own problems.<sup>27</sup> This document, dating from the early fifth century, gives a paper total for the overall strength of the Roman army and its individual units, or at least what they were officially supposed to be, rather than an accurate number for troops that were actually still in active service at the time. As such, its unreliability has long been recognised, with claims that it was out of date, subject to periodic revision and that it listed units that were known to have been destroyed in battle as still in active service, and as a result it is considered to be full of errors or misinformation, whether intentional or unintentional.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Synesius, unintentionally perhaps, highlights the problem of this document with his statement that, 'For a war we need hands, not a list of names'.<sup>29</sup> Although the *Notitia Dignitatum* is no doubt

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<sup>21</sup> *On the Death of the Persecutors* 7.2.

<sup>22</sup> *On the Months* 1.27. Harries (2012) is particularly cautious of John Lydus' estimations as she believes that such precise figures suggest they come from official lists which were usually wrong themselves; as will be shown was the case with the *Notitia Dignitatum* (below).

<sup>23</sup> 2.15.1-2.

<sup>24</sup> 5.13.7. It is believed that Agathias omitted the *limitanei* from his calculation of the size of Justinian's army (Jones, 1964: 679-89; Haldon 1999: 99-10; Potter, 2004: 455-9)

<sup>25</sup> Treadgold, 1995: 46.

<sup>26</sup> This number of *limitanei* is cited from Jones (1964: 1450).

<sup>27</sup> For a general overview of the benefits and limitations of the *Notitia Dignitatum* see: Lee (2007:17), Elton (1996b:271-72, 2007:271), Bury (1920), Treadgold (1995: 43-49), Hoffman (1969-70) and Kulikowski (2000).

<sup>28</sup> Harries, 2012: 211; Lee, 1998: 211; Tomlin, 1972: 255; Jones; 1964: 1420.

<sup>29</sup> *Letters* 78.

at times inaccurate and often in a confused state it nonetheless remains an important document. This importance comes from the insights it can provide about the deployment, disposition and location of individual units, and therefore the priorities of Roman army and empire as a whole.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, unlike its records of the western army, which were more frequently tampered with, the *Notitia's* description of the eastern army comes from a fairly fixed point, the start of Arcadius' reign. Therefore, compared to most of the other sources on the size of the Roman army this record comes directly from the fifth century itself. That it recorded the composition and disposition of the Eastern army at the turn of the fifth century is significant as it can thus make clear the shift of Constantinople's military attention to northern frontier, as shall be seen below.

From such a comparison of the available sources on the size of the later Roman army it seems much more likely that the smaller numbers for the eastern army given by Agathias and the *Notitia Dignitatum* are more accurate, as rather than focus on the army of the united Roman Empire they give us details on the East Roman army. In this regard, it is generally believed that fourth century campaign armies numbered between 15,000-30,000 men.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the largest army assembled during this period, when the empire was united, was Julian's in 363 which totalled 65,000.<sup>32</sup> This relatively modest number is at odds with the supposed size of the united Roman army given by Lactantius and John Lydus. Furthermore, using the accounts of Procopius and Joshua Stylites in conjunction, we can determine that the largest army assembled in the early sixth century, which was used to fight the Sasanians in 502, contained 52,000 troops.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, although we lack direct evidence for the size of the East Roman army in the fifth century itself, it is seems evident that a decrease from those available in the third and fourth centuries did take place.

Additionally, throughout the latter half of the fourth century, the Roman army suffered many damaging defeats which drained its strength. For instance, Shapur II's conquest of Amida in 359 resulted in the loss of a full seven legions<sup>34</sup> while Julian's unsuccessful 363 campaign

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<sup>30</sup> Millar, 2006:45.

<sup>31</sup> Lee, 2007: 76. As seen in the Battle of Strasbourg (Amm. Marc. 16.12).

<sup>32</sup> Zos. 3.12. Although there is some ambiguity in Zosimus' account, as it is unclear if he included Procopius' smaller force of 18,000 in his total of Julian's campaign army.

<sup>33</sup> *BP.* 1.8.4; *Chron.* 54. The veracity of these accounts is much more reliable given that Procopius was well versed in Roman-Sasanian warfare and that Joshua Stylites is generally held as a reliable historian.

<sup>34</sup> Amm. Marc. 18.9; Lee, 1998: 221.



resulted in the loss of an estimated 15,000 Roman soldiers<sup>35</sup> and the infamous debacle at the Battle of Adrianople in 378 resulted in the complete loss of 10,000-26,000 men: two-thirds of Valens' army, which likely comprised a majority of the field army units from the eastern half of the empire.<sup>36</sup> That the majority, and arguably the most serious, of the military defeats suffered at the hands of external foes throughout the fourth century were suffered by the eastern army further reduced its size, capability and flexibility at the start of the fifth century. The numerous civil wars that erupted between different Roman factions and generals in the fourth century likewise affected the strength of the Eastern Roman army at the start of the fifth century. Eutropius informs us that the civil war between Constantius II and Magnentius in 351 'destroyed forces which were sufficient for many foreign wars and which might have provided many a triumph and much security.'<sup>37</sup> Hence, a much reduced and demoralised Eastern Roman army would logically find it increasingly difficult to defend all the frontiers of the empire effectively, especially if two of these frontiers were threatened simultaneously.<sup>38</sup> As a result, great care was taken to avoid becoming embroiled in war on two fronts. Conservation of military manpower and the avoidance of military overstretch became a key imperial policy of East Roman Empire in the fifth century.

Compounding the decreased size of the army, and further curtailing Constantinople's ability to fight multiple wars simultaneously, was the reluctance of Roman citizens to join its ranks. Indeed, Ammianus Marcellinus informs us that men were so keen to avoid serving in the army that they would cut off their 'thumb to escape military service', this became so common that those who undertook this drastic action were given a 'special name', *murci*.<sup>39</sup> That Roman emperors were forced to pass numerous laws which attempted to stop desertion and encourage recruitment in this period reinforce the fact that they experienced great difficulty in recruiting troops from among citizens of the empire. One such law dictated that new recruits were to be branded upon joining the army to prevent desertion, while another made it a legal hereditary obligation for the sons of soldiers to enlist when they came of age.<sup>40</sup> That these laws were repeatedly imposed and re-issued by successive emperors underlines how

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<sup>35</sup> Lee, 2007: 78 (citing Hoffmann, 1969/70: I.444).

<sup>36</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.13.18.

<sup>37</sup> 10.12.

<sup>38</sup> On the damage to morale suffered by these defeats see: Ferrill (1988: 64-68).

<sup>39</sup> Amm. Marc. 15.12.3.

<sup>40</sup> *CTh.* 7.22.4-10, 10.22.4, 7.1.14.

serious they were about trying to solving this problem.<sup>41</sup> However, the immediately available solution to this immediate problem was to increase recruitment amongst barbarian peoples, as Theodosius I did to a great extent north of the Danube after Adrianople.<sup>42</sup> In contrast to the recruitment of Roman troops, barbarian *foederatii* proved much cheaper and much more eager. Although this solved the immediate manpower shortage such dependence on federate troops, it has been argued, had harmful consequences on the discipline and effectiveness of the Roman army.<sup>43</sup> In order to have access to these allied troops Roman emperors logically needed to maintain friendly relations with at least some of their barbarian neighbours. If the availability of barbarian troops was closed to the empire, as happened in the 440s when Attila established Hunnic supremacy over the Ostrogoths and Gepids in the Danube region, it could prove highly damaging. The potential loss of barbarian recruiting ground was especially dangerous for East Roman army in the fifth century, which, as already stated, was rebuilt in part with troops from beyond the Danube frontier, that were needed to complement Roman recruits.<sup>44</sup> Thus, this recruitment difficulty and reliance on barbarian troops further restricted the strategic capability of the East Roman Empire to conduct military campaigns on two fronts.

The reduced size and strategic flexibility of the Roman army resulted in the avoidance of multiple wars on different fronts becoming a central tenet in Roman imperial strategy in late antiquity; the risk of overstressing the already limited military resources was simply too great.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the Roman focus on the avoidance of becoming embroiled in different wars on different frontiers at the same time was recognised by several Roman historians, including Priscus and Menander Protector.<sup>46</sup> This new strategic reality forced the early abandonment

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<sup>41</sup> Harries (2004: 82-87) suggests that the repetition of laws in the Roman Empire was indicative, not of their failure as is traditionally believed, but of their importance to the emperors.

<sup>42</sup> Zos. 4.30.1; Lee, 1998: 223. Heather (1998: 160-4) takes this further as she states that Theodosius signed a general compromise settlement with the Goths in 382 under which they were obligated to do military service for the empire.

<sup>43</sup> This process is usually called the barbarisation of the Roman army. For a more detailed discussion on the theories and arguments surrounding the barbarisation of the Roman army in Late Antiquity see Williams & Friell (1998: 83-5) and Le Bohec (1996).

<sup>44</sup> Williams & Friell, 1998: 96.

<sup>45</sup> Blockley, 1992: 139; Kaegi, 1983. Although Williams & Friell (1998: 98) doubts the limited size of the Roman army at the start of the fifth century they do concede that the 'flexibility to meet urgent needs did not exist'. Heather (2006: 62) makes a similar argument.

<sup>46</sup> Priscus, fr. 10; Men. Prot. fr. 26.1

of successive campaigns against the Vandals in North Africa in the fifth century whenever the Balkan frontier was threatened or overrun by the Huns. Although the Roman army had some early successes at the start of the fifth century, when it was able to concentrate its forces on a singular threat or frontier, such as against the Huns in 408 and the Sasanians in 421/2, the abandonment of the Vandal campaigns proved conclusively it was unable to face war on two frontiers at once. Indeed, by the sixth century even the enemies of the Roman Empire were aware that dividing its military attention and resources was the key to their own success, as revealed by the Ostrogothic king Witigis advising the Sasanians to attack the Romans at the same time as himself.<sup>47</sup>

Investigating the size of the Sasanian army and its overall military capabilities is an even more difficult task than analysing the Later Roman army.<sup>48</sup> The only literary evidence we have about the size of Sasanian armies come predominantly from Roman sources. For example, Joshua Stylites informs us that in 502, after Kavād had captured Amida, he put 20,000 troops into winter quarters<sup>49</sup> and Procopius and Malalas both state that in 530 40,000 troops marched against Dara and that at the same time 30,000 marched against Satala, with a further 10,000 in reserve.<sup>50</sup> However, caution must be used when using Roman sources for information on the size of the Sasanian army as Roman historians may well have inflated their numbers in order to make Roman victory seem even greater or to explain away an unavoidable defeat. As such, we are more reliant on archaeological evidence, particularly the investigation of the size of Sasanian forts and tents, from which we can gain important insights on Sasanian troop numbers, especially for specific units and frontier garrisons. Through such investigations it has been estimated that the size of the late Sasanian army was around the 320,000 mark,<sup>51</sup> however, this number is largely conjectural. Despite lack of clear knowledge about the size of the Sasanian army it seems clear that Ctesiphon had to act under the same strategic restrictions as Constantinople, due to a lack of financial and manpower resources.<sup>52</sup> This was

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<sup>47</sup> Proc. *BG.* 2.22.15-16.

<sup>48</sup> On this difficulty see: Howard-Johnson, 2006: Study I, 165-69. For an insightful overview of the Sasanian military see: McDonough (2013).

<sup>49</sup> *Chron.* 55.

<sup>50</sup> Proc. *BP.* 1.13.23-41; Malalas. 18.4, 26.

<sup>51</sup> Howard-Johnson, 2012: 109-10.

<sup>52</sup> Blockley, 1992: 106.

made clear during the reign of Shapur II who initially sacrificed a peace with Rome so as to 'be secure on one front and free to deal with his permanent enemies', the Chionitae on the other, and then only once he had pacified that threat was he able to turn his attention back to the Roman frontier.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the feudal nature of the Sasanian Empire meant that the Shahs did not have a fully professional standing army always ready at their command, and were instead reliant upon the cooperation of the nobles, from whom the Shahs drew much of their military manpower.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, due to geography and politics, mustering of an army was both slow and uncertain. Such uncertainty severely hindered the ability of the Sasanians to fight multiple wars simultaneously and limited the flexibility and speed at which they could respond to new threats on different frontiers. Sasanian military inflexibility was further compounded by the fact that major campaigns required the personal leadership of the Shah, who could obviously not be in two places at once, again severely limiting the scope of potential Sasanian military action across two frontiers simultaneously.<sup>55</sup> As a result of these inherent limitations, the Sasanians preferred to avoid direct war and conflict whenever possible, this suggests they too were concerned about conserving their military resources and manpower as much as possible.<sup>56</sup>

The scope for military action for both empires was much more restricted in the fifth century than ever before. Both the Roman and Sasanian Empires alike had to carefully decide where and when to deploy their relatively limited military resources. Accordingly, during this period they predominantly decided to use them not against each other, but against the mounting threats of the Huns, Vandals, and Hephthalites.<sup>57</sup> The shifting of Roman military focus away from the eastern frontier to the northern frontier to defend against the new Hunnic threat is confirmed by the difference in the number of troops stationed on these two frontiers in the fifth centuries. During the fifth century the *Notitia Dignitatum* reveals that in 400 42,000 troops of the *comitanses* were stationed in the Balkan provinces to defend against the Huns

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<sup>53</sup> Amm. Marc. 16.9.2.

<sup>54</sup> On the lack of a Sasanian standing army see: John Lydus (*De. Mag.* 3.34.1-4). On the dependency on troops from the nobility see McDonough (2013: 603-4).

<sup>55</sup> Whitby, 1994: 234-40.

<sup>56</sup> *Livre de la couronne* 193; Blockley, 1992: 139.

<sup>57</sup> Blockley (1992:90) also supports this view: 'Both the Romans and Persians, when faced with unrest on their northern frontier, tended now to be cautious in their dealings with each other along their common frontier.'

whereas only 20,000 were deployed in the previously all-important eastern provinces.<sup>58</sup> Evidently, even at the beginning of the fifth century, the main threat to the Eastern Empire was now understood to come from Huns across the Danube, not the Sasanians on the eastern frontier, and the Romans re-orientated and shifted their military focus to accommodate this. This difference seemingly changes dramatically when the numbers of *limitanei* of the east and north are compared, with 88,500 stationed throughout the east and 45,500 in the Balkans. However, the fact that it was the *comitanses* who were largely expected to meet large invasions and enemy raids still suggests that it was in the north that such incursions were more expected and feared.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the empires signed a treaty in 442 wherein they agreed not to construct any new fortifications on the joint Mesopotamian frontier could suggest that the number of eastern *limitanei* would have diminished throughout the fifth century.<sup>60</sup> This is arguably given more credence with another comparison with the Danube frontier where new fortifications were constructed and existing fortifications rebuilt in the Roman Balkans throughout the same period, which would have required increased troop numbers to man and defend them.

### Roman Priorities

The Roman Empire had faced many barbarian threats throughout its history, even during the initial rise of the Sasanian Empire in the third century the Rhine and Danube frontiers were consistently under pressure from Germanic tribes; yet even still, the eastern frontier which was threatened by the Sasanian rival always remained the main ideological, political and military priority. However, this changed dramatically in the fifth century with the rise of Hunnic power beyond the Danube frontier under Attila and the establishment of the Vandal kingdom in North Africa. Yet, what made these threats so uniquely dangerous to the Roman Empire that they forced a shifting of priorities that reduced the mighty Sasanian Empire to

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<sup>58</sup> Williams & Friell, 1998: 103. This shows that although the *Notitia Dignitatum* may well be misleading on the actual numbers of the Roman army it is a more reliable document in terms of strategic deployment.

<sup>59</sup> Williams & Friell (1998: 104) also agree with this statement.

<sup>60</sup> Proc. *BP.* 1.2.15.

secondary importance. It is to this important question that we must now turn our attention to.

### **Attila and the Huns**

The people of the Scythians [Huns] were great and many, and formerly divided into people and into kingdoms and were treated as robbers. They used to not to do much except through rapidity and through speed. Yet later they surpassed in their greatness all the forces of the Romans.<sup>61</sup>

This passage from Nestorius neatly and succinctly illustrates the development of Hunnic power and their relationship with those around them in late antiquity. As Nestorius points out above, when they first moved into Europe and came to the attention of the Roman Empire the Huns were divided amongst themselves and were viewed as little more than an occasional nuisance, due to the small scale raids against Roman provinces, and as merely another group of barbarians whom the Romans could use for their own purposes. The Romans were eager to utilise the military skill and prowess of the Huns for their own benefit, making extensive use of Hunnic *foederati* troops.<sup>62</sup> For example, Hunnic soldiers were used by Theodosius I in his victory over Maximus in 388<sup>63</sup> and by Bauto in his defeat of the Juthungi.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, even Alaric was forced to abandon his march on Rome in 409 when news reached him that the Romans were bringing Hunnic allies against him.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, many Roman generals and officials hired Huns as personal bodyguards.<sup>66</sup> Despite this early Roman exploitation, the potential for Hunnic ambition and power was never far from the surface, and in an ominous sign of things to come, the first Hunnic chief to be recorded in Roman sources, Uldin, declared that he and his people were capable of '[subduing] every part of the earth'.<sup>67</sup> Yet, despite their ferocity, for so long the division and internal instability among individual Hunnic groups prevented them from becoming a major force or threat to the Roman Empire, and as always the Romans were eager to keep them divided. The career of Uldin illustrates this as, despite

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<sup>61</sup> Nestorius 366.

<sup>62</sup> Thompson, 1996: 36-41; Maenchen-Helfen, 1973: 50.

<sup>63</sup> *Pan. Lat.* 12(2).32.4.

<sup>64</sup> In further evidence of their divisions at this point Thompson (1996: 36) highlights that at the same time Valentinian II was battling a different group of Huns near Gaul.

<sup>65</sup> *Zos.* 5.50.1

<sup>66</sup> Both Rufinus and Stilicho made use of Huns for their personal protection (Claudian, *In. Rufin.* 3.76; *Chron. Min.* 1. p.650).

<sup>67</sup> *Soz. HE* 9.5.

his successful raid into Thrace in 404, the Romans were easily able to convince his subordinates to betray and desert their chief through bribery, thus destroying his power and threat to the empire.<sup>68</sup> This diplomatic manipulation set the precedent for Roman policy towards the Huns and proved highly successfully yet again against a successor of Uldin, Donatus.<sup>69</sup>

Unfortunately for the Romans however, as Nestorius so rightly pointed out, they would not always find it so easy to manipulate and defeat their Hunnic neighbours through such clandestine diplomacy and intrigue. As time went on the Romans found it increasingly difficult to contain the growing power of the Huns. For example, in 422 the East Romans were forced to conclude a treaty with the then Hunnic leader, Rua, after he had invaded the province of Thrace wherein they agreed to make annual payments to him of 350 pounds of gold.<sup>70</sup> However, the true turning point in the history of the Huns, when they did manage to surpass the 'forces of the Romans', came during the reign of Attila the Hun, the so-called Scourge of God, who was finally able to unite the different Hunnic groups under his own authority. It was through this Hunnic unity that Attila was able to create a vast and formidable empire centred on the Hungarian Plain in the 440s that presented a formidable challenge to the Romans.<sup>71</sup>

The Hunnic threat in the fifth century posed a more sustained danger to both Constantinople and Rome alike than any of their other neighbours. Indeed, the Huns achieved remarkable military and diplomatic successes against the two halves of the Roman world that dwarfed those of most of their neighbouring tribal federations. Even more so than the Franks, Goths and Arabs, who continuously raided across the frontier, whenever the Huns, particularly under Attila in 440s, rampaged into the empire across the Danube and into the Balkans it resulted in unprecedented damage. Ammianus Marcellinus' fear that the Gothic 'host might suddenly burst through [the Danube] river' seems rather a more apt description of the Hunnic

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<sup>68</sup> Proc. *De Aed.* 4.6.33. Soz. *HE* 9.5; Soc. *HE* 6.1; Thompson, 1996: 33.

<sup>69</sup> Olympiodorus fr. 18.

<sup>70</sup> Croke, 1977.

<sup>71</sup> Indeed, as Gordon (1996: 57) stated; 'The chief threat to the empire in the first half of the [fifth] century came from the Huns'. For more detailed information on the emergence and growth of Hunnic power beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries see Heather (1995).

danger in this regard.<sup>72</sup> As such, it is worth quoting at length Jerome and Callinicus, both of whom relate in detail the full horror and devastation Hunnic invasions caused in this period:

Behold, the wolves, not of Arabia, but of the North, were let loose upon us last year from the far-off rocks of Caucasus, and in a little while overran great provinces. How many monasteries were captured, how many streams were reddened with human blood! Antioch was besieged, and other cities washed by the Halys, Cyndus, Orontes and Euphrates. Flocks of captives were dragged away; Arabia, Phoenicia, Palestine, and Egypt were taken captive by their terror. Not even if I had a thousand tongues, and a hundred mouths, and a voice of iron could I recount the name of every catastrophe.<sup>73</sup>

The barbarian nation of the Huns which was in Thrace, became so great that more than a hundred cities were captured and Constantinople almost came to danger and most men fled from it...And there were so many murders and blood-lettings that the dead could not be numbered. Ay, for they took captive the churches and monasteries and slew monks and maids in great numbers.<sup>74</sup>

These two accounts, of the 395 raid and Attila's in 447, vividly recall the threat the Huns posed to the empire in all its ferocity. In comparison, the accounts of even the great Sasanian invasions of the third, fourth and sixth centuries do not compare to the horror and damage caused by these Hunnic invasions.<sup>75</sup> It could be stated that both Callinicus and Jerome wished to portray the Huns as exceptionally destructive barbarians as a means to show that non-Christian barbarians were even more of an enemy to the Romans and Christianity than other threats. Indeed, in both accounts there is a focus on the damage the Huns wrought on monasteries and churches. However, as shall be shown below, such devastation of Roman territory at the hands of the Huns was not exaggerated and was to such an extent that it forced Constantinople to focus increasingly on the defence of the northern frontier at the expense of the eastern defences.

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<sup>72</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.8.5.

<sup>73</sup> Jerome, *Epp.* 60.16.77.

<sup>74</sup> Callinicus, *Vita S. Hypatii* p.139. 21.

<sup>75</sup> Such as, Shapur II's invasion of Mesopotamia (Amm. Marc. 18.7). Even during his capture and burning of Antioch Khusro spared the churches (Proc. *BP.*2.9).



Previously, Roman strategy in the fourth century when dealing with Gothic invaders into the Balkan provinces was relatively simple, cheap and effective:

This gave our forces the opportunity to build high barriers to confine the other huge hordes of barbarians in the defiles of the Balkan range, hoping, of course, that this destructive enemy host, penned between the Danube and the wilderness and unable to find a way out, would perish from lack of food, all the necessities of life having been removed to the fortified towns, none of which the barbarians even then attempted to besiege owing to their total ignorance of operations of this kind.<sup>76</sup>

Ammianus Marcellinus' account here of the strategy used by the Romans after the Goths had overrun the Danube and Balkan provinces in 377 shows that traditional Roman tactics once the frontier had been breached was to simply seek sanctuary behind the fortified walls of their cities and fortresses and out-wait their enemies. However, in the 440s the East Romans could not rely on such easy defensive strategies to defeat Attila, as, unlike other barbarian invaders, the Huns were skilled in siege-craft and were able to capture even the most heavily fortified Roman cities and military installations. Accordingly, the Hunnic threat during this period forced the Romans to spend vast amounts of resources preparing improved defences; constructing new and strengthening old fortifications around towns, cities and military installations.

At the start of the fifth century the Praetorian Prefect, Anthemius, recognising the steadily increasing threat of the Huns, initiated a number of new policies and strategies to defend against this new threat. First, he organised a non-aggression pact with the Sasanian Empire in 408 that ensured peace on the eastern frontier and allowed Constantinople to redeploy more resources and manpower to the defence of the Balkan provinces.<sup>77</sup> Secondly, he began an extensive rebuilding and refortification programme of the Danubian frontier defences and the Balkan provinces. Anthemius scrutinised and reinforced 'all naval bases, harbours, shores, all points of departure from the provinces even remote places and islands'.<sup>78</sup> A similar order

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<sup>76</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.8.1-2. This also corroborates Maenchen-Helfen's (1973: 94) claim that before Attila the Huns only presented the same sort of threat as the Isaurians and Arabs, in that although they could occasionally make inroads into Roman territory they could always be pushed back or paid off.

<sup>77</sup> *Soz. HE* 7.8; *Soc. HE* 9.4. For detailed discussions on this treaty see: Kelly (2008: 58) and Blockley (1992: 53).

<sup>78</sup> *CTh.* 7.16.2. This was an official order given by Anthemius himself.

was repeated by the *magister officiorum* Nomus in 443.<sup>79</sup> This refortification of the Danube frontier also involved a seven year ship-building programme that restored the Danubian river fleet<sup>80</sup> and the reinforcing of frontier forts by ensuring they were once again manned by sufficient troops.<sup>81</sup> Yet, it was the construction of a second line of walls around Constantinople, the imposing Theodosian Walls, which was the most effective in the long-term defence of the Eastern Roman Empire.<sup>82</sup> This huge defensive structure enclosed the city and the peninsula it rested on within highly defensible walls. The Theodosian Walls ensured that, even if the Danube frontier, or indeed any other frontier, was overrun the capital itself would still be more than adequately protected. The Theodosian Walls certainly proved their worth throughout the fifth century, thwarting Attila's invasions in 441/3 and then again in 447, forcing him to turn back without even making an attempt on the city.<sup>83</sup> Thus, it is clear that as the fifth century progressed the Romans recognised that the greatest threat came not from the Sasanian Empire but from the Huns.

Despite such extensive preparations and refortification projects, throughout the 440s Attila and his Huns were able to overrun the Roman frontier defences along the Danube and raid deep into the Balkan provinces in both 441 and 447. The great strength of the Hun armies was their skill as mounted archers, which granted them unmatched manoeuvrability and 'incredible swiftness'<sup>84</sup> that allowed the Huns to completely outmanoeuvre Roman armies, as revealed in the campaign of 447 when Attila managed to corner and trap their army in the Chersonese.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, Ammianus Marcellinus and Zosimus both comment on the unparalleled mobility of the Huns, stating that it gave Hunnic forces a dangerous capacity for tactical and strategic unpredictability.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, the martial skill of the Huns was so feared

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<sup>79</sup> *Nov. Theod.* 24. 'We command that each *dux*...shall restore the soldiers to ancient number...and shall devote himself to their daily training. Furthermore, we entrust to such dukes also the care and repairs of the fortified camps and the river patrol boats'. The fact the same order was issued again reveals that the original inspection and improvement did not do enough to protect the provinces by stopping Attila at the frontier.

<sup>80</sup> *CTh.* 7.17.1. Kelly, 2008: 59; Blockley, 1992: 53.

<sup>81</sup> Priscus fr. 9.2.

<sup>82</sup> *CTh.* 15.1.51; *Soc. HE* 7.1.3.

<sup>83</sup> Kelly, 2008:106; Heather, 2005: 309.

<sup>84</sup> Claudian, 330. On the skilled archery of the Huns see: Olympiodorus (fr. 18), Sidonius (*Carm.* 2.266) and Procopius (*BG.* 1.27.27).

<sup>85</sup> Priscus fr. 9.1; Theoph. *Chron. a.m.* 5942.

<sup>86</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 31.2.7-9; *Zos.* 4.20.4. For more on this speed and tactical unpredictability see Jerome (*Ep.* 77.8, 60.16.77) and Agathias (1.22).

that Jerome reluctantly admitted that '[t]he Roman army is terrified of them'.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, the Eastern Romans suffered numerous losses at the hands of the Hunnic king without ever achieving any clear victory,<sup>88</sup> although the general Arnegisclus did manage to inflict heavy losses on the invaders before he was killed in battle during Attila's 447 campaign.<sup>89</sup> These successive and damaging losses on the Danube frontier consequently had a direct effect on the ability and willingness of the Romans to pursue military campaigns against the Sasanians in the same period.

Although the ability of barbarian forces to defeat Roman field armies was not particularly unique in this period it was the Huns' skill at siege warfare that truly distinguished them from other barbarian threats.<sup>90</sup> Various sources recount cities besieged by the Huns, describing towers that could be wheeled up to the ramparts, battering rams and assault ladders.<sup>91</sup> Hunnic knowledge of siege-craft ensured that in all of his invasions Attila was able to capture and destroy a large number of Roman cities. This long list of devastated cities included Margus,<sup>92</sup> Constantia,<sup>93</sup> Viminacium,<sup>94</sup> Singidunum, Naissus, Ratiaria and Arcadiopolis,<sup>95</sup> the only cities that avoided capture were Adrianople and Heraclea.<sup>96</sup> Yet, perhaps the most damaging was the destruction of Sirmium, the keystone of Roman defence on the Danube frontier. In terms of damage to imperial prestige and reputation its capture was as significant as the loss of Carthage to the Western Empire in 439.<sup>97</sup> The level of destruction following the capture of these cities was exceptional. For example, Procopius states that the city of Viminacium was destroyed to its 'uttermost foundations', and although his comment that this had been done 'long before' does not pointedly identify the Huns as its destroyers, it does

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<sup>87</sup> *Ep.* 60.17. This fear of the Hunnic military reputation was still felt in the sixth century (*Proc. BP.* 1.21.16; *BV.* 1.18.17), thus indicating the psychological effect this had on the Roman army.

<sup>88</sup> *Theoph. Chron. a.m.* 5941-2.

<sup>89</sup> Thompson (1996: 102) claims that although this battle ended in defeat for the Roman forces it did irreparable damage to Attila's army and that afterwards the Huns never won another victory against either half of the Roman Empire.

<sup>90</sup> Roman military defeats against barbarian forces included the battle of Adrianople in 378 (*Amm. Marc.* 31.13) and the sack of Rome in 410 amongst others.

<sup>91</sup> *Priscus fr.* 6.2; *Jord. Get.* 42.220; *Proc. BG.* 1.4.30-35.

<sup>92</sup> *Priscus fr.* 2.

<sup>93</sup> *Theoph, Chron. a.m.* 5942.

<sup>94</sup> *Proc. De. Aed.* 4.5.17.

<sup>95</sup> *Theoph, Chron. a.m.* 5942.

<sup>96</sup> *Priscus fr.* 9.1; *Theoph. Chron. a.m.* 5942. Callinicus (*Vita S. Hypatii.* p.139. 21) states that a 'hundred cities were captured'.

<sup>97</sup> On the loss of Sirmium see: *Priscus (fr. 11.2)*. On the importance of Sirmium see: Thompson (1996: 89) and Williams & Friell (1998: 67).

reveal the devastation that was visited on the Balkans throughout the wider period that served to slowly turn Roman attentions north.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, even Antioch, after its fall to the Sasanians in 540, did not suffer such wanton destruction and was able to rise again relatively quickly. Such destruction of Roman cities and territory would have undoubtedly even further limited the empire's ability to fight wars on multiple fronts simultaneously during the fifth century. The loss of so many cities, their wealth, resources and populations, in such a small span of time had huge repercussions on the wealth and power of the Eastern Roman Empire. Count Marcellinus underlined this as he related that 'Attila ground almost the whole of Europe into dust'.<sup>99</sup> This again therefore reinforces how necessary it was for the Romans to switch their focus away from the Sasanian Empire in order to be able to fully defend themselves against the more ruthless and destructive Hunnic threat in the north.

Yet, despite the military skill of the Huns generally, it was Attila himself who made the defining difference in the conflicts between the Hunnic and Roman Empires. In this regard, Attila's decision to attack the East Roman Empire only when it was distracted elsewhere was of vital importance to his success.<sup>100</sup> This tactic ensured he only attacked when the empire was most vulnerable and he had the greatest chance of success.<sup>101</sup> For example, before his first major invasion in 441 the Roman Danubian frontier was heavily defended and too strong to attack directly, therefore, it was not until thousands of Roman troops had been redeployed for the expedition against the Vandals in North Africa that Attila decided to attack.<sup>102</sup> This patient decision ensured that throughout this campaign Attila met with no significant opposition from the Roman field army.<sup>103</sup>

The military supremacy of the Huns was subsequently felt in the peace treaties signed between the Huns and Romans in the 440s, as Attila was able to force humiliating and damaging clauses on the Eastern emperor, who had no other choice but to concede. It was

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<sup>98</sup> *De Aed.* 4.5.17.

<sup>99</sup> *S.a.* 447.

<sup>100</sup> For example, he launched an attack on the Roman Empire in 441 only after Constantinople was engaged in the short war of the same year with the Sasanians (Marcellinus 422.3).

<sup>101</sup> Also acknowledged by Kelly (2015: 203-5) who says Hunnic incursions into the Roman Empire were always carefully timed and 'risk-sensitive'.

<sup>102</sup> Prosper, *Chron. a.* 442; Theoph. *Chron. a.m.* 5942.

<sup>103</sup> *Proc. De. Aed.* 4.5.6.

the Romans' grudging acceptance of these treaties that the supremacy of Hunnic Empire, and danger this posed to Constantinople's own position in the Danube region, is most evident. As was tersely acknowledged by Priscus:

Because of the overwhelming terror that gripped their generals, the Romans were compelled to accept cheerfully every injunction, no matter how harsh, in their eagerness for peace...This was the disaster that happened to the Romans after the war, and the result was that many killed themselves either by starvation or hanging. The imperial treasuries were also empty.<sup>104</sup>

Although the historical works of Priscus only survive in fragments they are an extremely useful source of information on Roman-Hunnic relations in the fifth century. As a Roman diplomat Priscus was dispatched to Attila's court in 449 to negotiate with the Hunnic king on behalf of Theodosius II and, therefore, he was well placed to comment on the effectiveness and power of the Huns under Attila.<sup>105</sup> In the above passage he highlights that Constantinople's inability to counter Attila's military incursions meant they had no choice but to glumly accept any and all of the Hunnic King's demands. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, Priscus shows that the Huns of the fifth century were not only able to inflict military defeats upon the empire but also diplomatic ones. This Hunnic capability further entrenched their supremacy over Constantinople. It was the enforcement of these uncompromising treaties that revealed Attila's talent as both a gifted military leader and a shrewd diplomat; he was a leader who could wield diplomacy as dangerously as the sword. Thus, it became increasingly important to send skilled diplomats to negotiate with Attila, as was evident in the fact that the negotiations that took place in 450 were conducted by the *magister militum praesentalis*, Anatolius, and the *magister officiorum*, Nomus. The dispatch of Anatolius and Nomus was a clear statement of how seriously Constantinople took the Hunnic threat, as previously the sending of such high-ranking officials as envoys was a dignity usually reserved only for the Sasanian Empire.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> fr. 9.3, 2.1. It can be argued however that Priscus' anger resulted mainly from the fact that the senatorial class, from which he came, had to help fund the payments to Attila, as seen in his indignation that '[e]ven senators contributed to the amount of gold...They paid only with difficulty...so that men who had once been wealthy were putting up for sale their wives' jewellery and their furniture.'

<sup>105</sup> On the advantages and limitations of Priscus as a historical source and general study of his writing see Rohrbacher (2002: 82-92) and Treadgold (2007: 96-103).

<sup>106</sup> Priscus fr. 15.4.

The Treaty of Margus (435), the first signed between the East Roman Empire and Attila, set the precedent for the majority of the issues and clauses that would recur, with increased severity, in the succeeding treaties of 443 and 448, therefore, it is worthwhile to make note of the main points of this treaty. Fortunately, Priscus's discussion of the Treaty of Margus has survived intact and therefore our information on the different clauses of the treaty is relatively complete. In this treaty Attila dictated that Constantinople was prohibited from providing sanctuary to fugitives or exiles from Hunnic territories and had to return all those already living in or serving the empire, the Romans were forbidden from making alliances with enemies of the Hunnic Empire, Hunnic merchants were permitted to trade on equal terms with their Roman counterparts and the Roman Empire was to pay an annual subsidy of 700 pounds of gold.<sup>107</sup> Ratifying this treaty at the start of his reign was important for Attila as it allowed him to expand his empire in the east and north, free from the threat of Roman aggression or interference.<sup>108</sup> In contrast, Constantinople's willingness to sign such a treaty, which was designed to limit Roman power and influence in and around the Danube, underlines the fear they had of the rising power of the Huns. Throughout his reign Attila further entrenched his supremacy over Constantinople by forcing the Romans to sign increasingly damaging and humiliating treaties, all of which largely increased the severity of the clauses described above.

Arguably the most important, and revealing, clause of the Treaty of Margus was the doubling of the annual subsidy paid to the Hunnic king that had previously been only 350 pounds of gold under Attila's predecessor, Rua, in the treaty of 422.<sup>109</sup> Such a substantial increase in Roman payments was a clear example of the more belligerent and exploitative policy that Attila pursued throughout his reign compared to his predecessors. Certainly, it became the cornerstone of Attila's policy towards Constantinople to demand an increase in payments in every treaty he forced upon the Romans. In the Peace of Anatolius (443) the annual subsidy rose to 2,100 pounds of gold with the empire also forced to pay a single payment of 6,000 pounds of gold in arrears.<sup>110</sup> The payment of these subsidies was a double edged-sword. Not

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<sup>107</sup> fr. 1.

<sup>108</sup> Bury, 1958:273; Blockley, 1992: 60; Gordon, 1966: 69.

<sup>109</sup> For the treaty signed between Rua and Constantinople see: Croke (1977).

<sup>110</sup> Priscus fr. 5. In contrast, Theophanes (*Chron. a.m.* 5942) gives the annual tribute as 1,000, even though Priscus was his source. Bayless (1976: 176) informs us that immediate payment of arrears was unprecedented, and this therefore again reinforces the notion that the Huns were a uniquely dangerous threat.

only did it further entrench Attila's own internal position within the Hunnic Empire but it was also a constant drain on Roman resources and damaged Roman imperial prestige.<sup>111</sup> The damaging effect this had on Roman prestige is evident in Nestorius' statement that the Huns were now 'the masters, and the Romans, slaves', and Priscus' criticism that the Romans 'obeyed every instruction of Attila, and considered what he commanded as the orders of a master'.<sup>112</sup> Likewise, after the signing of the 447 treaty Attila himself began to proclaim that Theodosius II was now his slave, due to the fact he paid him what Attila regarded as tribute.<sup>113</sup>

Besides the payments of these large tributes, or subsidies (depending on whether you were Attila or Theodosius II), the second most important recurring clause of Roman-Hunnic treaties was the sending back of, and Constantinople's prohibition to grant sanctuary to, fugitives from Attila's realm. This clause made it impossible for the Romans to disrupt the internal stability of the Hunnic Empire through political and diplomatic machination, as they had done in the past against Uldin and Donatus, as they could not support any of Attila's rivals against him. This, therefore, further limited Constantinople's scope of action in trying to counter or break up the Hunnic Empire. From Attila's perspective this clause was likely designed to cement his control over the subject tribes, such as the Ostrogoths, Gepids and Sorosgi, of his realm.<sup>114</sup> Likewise, for Attila it was equally a matter of pride and prestige; tribes that he considered his subjects should not be allowed to serve in the Roman army.<sup>115</sup> For the Romans, adherence to this clause would have been a cause for deep concern as it restricted their access to barbarian *foederati* troops, which were an essential component in the Roman army during this period. This is especially true in the defence of the Danube frontier, in which Gothic troops played an important role.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, part of the reason Theodosius II did not abide by the Treaty of Margus for long after its signing was that he believed the fugitive tribes were

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<sup>111</sup> Although the economic impact these payments had on the Roman Empire has frequently been downplayed, Whitby (2000: 711) is keen to stress that the consequences were serious.

<sup>112</sup> Nestorius 368; Priscus fr. 5.

<sup>113</sup> Priscus fr. 15.2; *Chron. Pasch.* p.587. Bury (1923: 277) suggests that Attila now thought of himself as the overlord of Europe, and that would not have been much of an exaggeration.

<sup>114</sup> Zos. 4.34.6; Victor, *Epit.* 48.

<sup>115</sup> Blockley (1992: 59) highlights that Attila's predecessor, Rua, also had a similar attitude to other tribes taking service within the Roman Empire, thus suggests that stopping this supply of federate troops to Rome was a consistent aim of Hunnic leaders.

<sup>116</sup> Theoph. *Chron. a.m.* 5931.

too useful as soldiers to let go of without a fight.<sup>117</sup> Thus, this clause further entrenched Hunnic supremacy over Romans and subject barbarians alike.<sup>118</sup>

The treaty of 448, wherein Attila demanded that the Romans abandon a wide belt of land south of the Danube, all the way to Naissus saw this policy reach its zenith.<sup>119</sup> The subsequent Roman withdrawal from these territories had severe repercussions on their ability to recruit barbarian *foederati* from this lucrative region of available manpower, not to mention the damage it would have done to the already weakened frontier defences in the Balkan provinces.<sup>120</sup> Thus, Attila struck a major blow to the Eastern Roman Empire that surpassed anything that even the Sasanian Empire had achieved. He had cut right to the heart of the Eastern Empire's military capability and infrastructure, and this more than anything made him a more immediate priority than the Sasanian Shahs.

As hinted at above, these continued military and diplomatic successes allowed Attila to further cement his position as the uncontested leader of the Hunnic Empire, which subsequently made it even more difficult for the Romans to defeat him either militarily or diplomatically. The failed assassination attempt of Attila in 449, orchestrated by Theodosius II's advisor, the eunuch Chrysaphius, made this clear.<sup>121</sup> The strength, power and prosperity of the Hunnic Empire were based entirely on the personal charisma, skill and ability of Attila.<sup>122</sup> As such, throughout his reign the king did everything he could to cement his position of authority and leadership. The assassination of his brother and co-ruler, Bleda, epitomised

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<sup>117</sup> Thompson, 1996: 85.

<sup>118</sup> The importance of this is evident in Priscus' (fr. 14.) comment that the Romans attempted to send spies amongst Attila's subject peoples, particularly the Ostrogoths, in order to undermine and weaken his authority. Whitby (2000: 705) and Williams & Friell (1998: 64) believe this political demonstration of power was Attila's true concern in his demands for the return of fugitives rather than his concern about manpower. However, it is unlikely that a shrewd leader like Attila would regard this as mutually exclusive, and that more likely they both played a determining factor in this recurring policy.

<sup>119</sup> Priscus, fr. 9.3; 11; *Nov. Theod.* 24.5. Naissus formed the new limit of the Roman northern frontier.

<sup>120</sup> Luckily for the Romans they were able to convince Attila to reverse his demand for this abandonment of the Danube territories relatively quickly, in 450.

<sup>121</sup> Bury, 1958: 276; Blockley, 1992: 66. The seemingly rushed nature of this botched assassination attempt reveals how desperate Constantinople was to be rid of Attila. Williams & Friell (1998: 80) argue that Chrysaphius organised this attempt in order to secure his own internal position within the empire in response to the rise of the Isaurian general, Zenon, rather than for the protection of the state.

<sup>122</sup> Maenchen-Helfen, 1973: 95; Whitby, 2000: 704.



this ruthlessness.<sup>123</sup> As already seen, Attila used his demands for large sums of gold from Constantinople to simultaneously weaken the Eastern Empire and strengthen his own position.<sup>124</sup> Certainly, the extraction of Roman gold was instrumental in securing his internal dominance, as it allowed the king to lavish large rewards upon his followers to secure their continued loyalty. A unified Hunnic political entity, such as Attila's empire, depended entirely on the constant supply of wealth and luxuries, usually through the form of plunder won in warfare. This meant that as long as Attila was in control of a unified Hunnic Empire the Roman Empire would be plagued by persistent and devastating raids.<sup>125</sup> Consequently, Constantinople's failure to resolve the threat posed by Attila through either diplomatic manipulation or subterfuge ensured that military action was the only possibility to protect the northern frontier, and this was only possible while peace was maintained on the eastern frontier.

Yet, ironically, it was Attila's unending success against the Eastern Empire, and their inability to repel him that actually saved them in the end. In 450 the attention of the Hunnic king moved towards the Western Roman Empire. Attila viewed the west as a more lucrative target compared to the Eastern Empire, which he had already preyed on extensively and exhausted throughout the 440s. Therefore, in preparation for this western campaign Attila was keen to arrange a peace with Theodosius II in order to secure his eastern flank; this was achieved in the treaty of 450.<sup>126</sup> In this treaty Attila also swore not to trouble Theodosius with charges of receiving fugitives, gave the Danubian territories that he had forced Constantinople to withdraw from in 448 back and returned Roman prisoners, without requesting ransoms. These staggering concessions reveal how eager Attila was to leave the Eastern Empire behind, in a secure peace, in favour of his western campaign.<sup>127</sup>

Unfortunately for Attila however, this campaign ended in disaster when he was decisively defeated at the hands of Aetius at the Battle of the Catalaunian Fields in 451. This defeat

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<sup>123</sup> Marcellinus 445.1. 'Bleda, king of the Huns, was assassinated as a result of the plots of his brother.' Also; Jordanes (*Get.* 181) and *Chron. Gall.* (452.131).

<sup>124</sup> Indeed, both Kelly (2015) and Kim (2013: 69-73) agree that it was tribute, not conquest, that Attila sought from the Romans.

<sup>125</sup> Thompson, 1996: 196; Kelly, 2008:201. Such political reality endorses Ammianus Marcellinus' claim that the Huns' 'greed for gold is prodigious' (31.2.9-10).

<sup>126</sup> Priscus fr. 15.4; Blockey, 1992: 67. This shows that even Attila could not risk becoming involved in war on two fronts.

<sup>127</sup> Thompson, 1996: 136.

precipitated a far worse disaster for the Hunnic Empire, the death of Attila himself during his own wedding party in 453.<sup>128</sup> Following Attila's death the central element of the Hunnic Empire, Attila's personal charisma, skill and authority, was extinguished and with it the Hunnic unity that had made them such a force to be reckoned with. Soon after, 'a struggle broke out among Attila's heirs...and together they destroyed their father's empire',<sup>129</sup> none of the dead king's sons could fill the void he left, despite attempted invasions of the Roman Empire across the Danube in the 460s. The Huns, after fighting amongst themselves and against their former subject peoples, eventually dissolved back into their former lives as minor raiders and mercenaries. However, this did not mean the end to turmoil on the northern frontier. Indeed, the Romans spent the remainder of the fifth century dealing with the fallout of the Hunnic Empire's collapse, as they attempted to orchestrate and organise the regions beyond the Danube, which had erupted into conflict between the Huns' former subjects, to their own benefit. The emperors Leo (457-474) and Zeno (474-475) alike found it difficult to resolve the power-vacuum that was created in the Danube regions after the collapse of the Hunnic Empire, and they both faced rebellions and revolts from the now-free and dangerous Ostrogoths.<sup>130</sup> Consequently, the northern frontier remained a priority until the migration of the Ostrogoths, under Theodoric, to Italy towards the end of the century. The fact that Attila turned his attention away from the east reveals just how much its resources had been exhausted by his campaigns, the Hunnic king believed the Eastern Roman Empire had nothing left to plunder. Ironically, this reinforces the claim that during the fifth century Constantinople did not have the resources available to pursue a hostile and antagonistic relationship with the Sasanian Empire at the same time as trying to contain the threat posed by Attila and the Huns.

Evidently, Attila the Hun, and the empire he forged in the 440s, was largely responsible for the shifting of Roman priorities away from the Sasanian Empire in the fifth century. The rise of Hunnic power, centred on the Hungarian Plain, during this period threatened the very core of the Eastern Roman Empire. This was only compounded by the ability of the Huns to

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<sup>128</sup> Attila's death at his own wedding is well attested (Jord. *Get.* 254); however, there is a divergence on exactly how he died. Theophanes (*Chron. a.m.* 5946) claimed it was an accident, Marcellinus (454.1) suggested it was more likely the plotting of Ildico and Malalas (14.10) puts responsibility on the machinations of Aetius.

<sup>129</sup> Jord. *Get.* 259-63. Also; *Chron. Min.* i p. 482.

<sup>130</sup> Jones, 1966: 91.

successfully besiege and capture large fortified cities, which represented a dramatic change in the balance of military power in Europe.<sup>131</sup> Before Attila, the Sasanians were the only unified force that could realistically launch coherent and effective attacks against the Roman Empire.<sup>132</sup> Thus, during the reign of Attila the Romans were now faced with two powerful and organised neighbours. Yet, unlike the Sasanians, the Huns were regarded as unpredictable, completely disinterested in peaceful coexistence and not trusted to abide by truces or treaties,<sup>133</sup> and this made them a more dangerous threat, and explains why the Romans chose to prioritise them above the traditional imperial rivalry.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, the battle for control over, and access to, the important recruiting grounds of the Balkans between the Romans and Huns, also explains the shifting priorities from the east to the northern frontier in the fifth century. The Balkans were central to Roman military strength, in terms of recruitment and manpower, therefore, focusing military attention on this frontier was fundamentally more important to the empire than fighting over isolated forts on the eastern frontier against the Sasanians.

### **Geiseric and the Vandals**

Even the hostile critic of Theodosius II's foreign policy, Priscus, was aware of the circumstances that conditioned the Roman response to the Huns in the 440s, informing us that 'having been humbled by Attila, [the Romans] paid him court while they tried to organise themselves to face other people'.<sup>135</sup> These 'other people' were predominantly the Vandals, led by their king, Geiseric. Throughout the fifth century the Vandals proved just as dangerous a threat to the Eastern Roman Empire as the Huns were.<sup>136</sup> Priscus's comment here also reinforces the notion that the Romans themselves were aware of their military restrictions

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<sup>131</sup> Heather, 2006: 303.

<sup>132</sup> Whittaker, 1994: 213. Despite the increasing danger posed by western Germanic tribes they did not come close to the threat posed by the Huns under Attila (Heather, 2006: 97).

<sup>133</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.2.11.

<sup>134</sup> Clover (1973: 107) equally seems aware of the importance of the Hunnic threat on Roman's need for détente with the Sasanians in this period, stating that 'They [440s] were also of prime importance to the Huns and east Romans. Many of the policies these powers adopted at that time influenced the direction of international relations for a decade or more.'

<sup>135</sup> fr. 10.

<sup>136</sup> Indeed, Blockley (1992: 62) comments that all other threats, from the Sasanians, Saracens, Isaurians and Huns became secondary to the Vandals.

and actively worked to avoid becoming embroiled in wars on two fronts. However, there was a crucial difference between the Huns and Vandals that made them arguably an even more assiduous threat; the latter's desire to conquer and occupy Roman territory. Unlike the Huns, the Vandals were not merely interested in extracting Roman plunder and wealth, but in establishing a territorial kingdom for themselves on Roman soil. The ambition and power of the Vandals was evident in Geiseric's ability to coerce the Western Emperor, Valentinian III, to license a legitimate marriage proposal between his son, Hunneric, and Eudocia, the emperor's own daughter.<sup>137</sup> The Vandal takeover of North Africa in the 420s and 430s played a decisive role in the eventual disintegration of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century and, more importantly for this study, the shifting of East Roman Empire's attention away from the Sasanian frontier.

Although the Huns, quite rightly, earned the reputation as the most destructive and barbaric enemies of the Roman Empire in late antiquity, the Vandals were equally effective and fierce.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, even the combined forces of the East and West Roman Empires under Boniface and Aspar could not save North Africa from the Vandal onslaught in 431/2.<sup>139</sup> Furthermore, during the reign of Marcian (450-457) in the East and Valentinian III (425-455) in the West the Vandals were even able to sack the city of Rome and take the imperial family, including Valentinian's wife Eudoxia and his two daughters, Eudocia and Placidia, hostage.<sup>140</sup> Accordingly, in order to combat this threat the Romans needed to commit vast financial resources and military manpower. Once again, this would come at the expense of the resources previously used against the Sasanian Empire in previous centuries.

Just like the Huns, the seemingly innate ferocity and military prowess of the Vandals was augmented by the skills of their leader. Alongside Attila, Geiseric proved himself to be one of the most skilful barbarian leaders of the fifth century, able to couple diplomatic expertise with

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<sup>137</sup> Proc. *BV.* 1.5.1-6; Heather, 2006: 293.

<sup>138</sup> The fearsome nature of the Vandals led Bury (1923: 246) to claim that '[t]he Visigoths were lambs compared to the Vandal wolves'

<sup>139</sup> Possidus 28. Friell, 1998: 137; Blockley, 1992: 60.

<sup>140</sup> On the sack of Rome itself see: Procopius (*BV.* 1.5.4) and the Codex Justinianus (1.27.1). On the capture of the imperial family see Procopius (*BV.* 1.5.3) and Victor of Vita (1.25).

military talent.<sup>141</sup> The calculating nature of the Vandal king was epitomised in his exploitation of the Western Empire's eagerness for peace in 435 to sign a treaty that granted him uncontested control of Mauretania and part of Numidia, which he used to consolidate his power and replenish his forces, safe from the threat of Roman retaliation, before completing his conquest of North Africa in 439 that culminated in the capture of the important maritime and commercial city of Carthage. The exploitation of this first treaty and subsequent conquest of North Africa granted Geiseric enough leverage to force Rome to agree to an even more humiliating treaty in 442 that recognised full Vandal dominion over the wealthiest province in the Western Empire.<sup>142</sup> The details of the 442 treaty further reveal the political and diplomatic skill of Geiseric. Not only did it grant him full suzerainty and recognition over the territories of Proconsular Africa, Byzacena, Tripolitania and part of Numidia but also laid plans to marry the emperor's daughter to Hunneric, Geiseric's son.<sup>143</sup> The acceptance of this marriage arrangement was a tremendous victory for the Vandal king, it made him a player in internal imperial politics itself, thus granting him prestige and influence that he could utilise in both external and internal battles. It was this political ambition and desire to become a key player in imperial politics that marked Geiseric out from being merely a simple raider and military leader. He had long-term ambitions on the imperial throne itself, not for himself but rather for his descendants, and it was this ambition that made him more dangerous than most other barbarian warlords in this period. The Vandal king's involvement in imperial politics was most apparent and divisive in the 460s when he came into conflict with the Eastern emperor Leo, over who should sit on the western throne. Leo supported Anthemius, a skilled general and grandson of the Anthemius who had done so much to prepare the Eastern Empire against the Huns during the reign of Theodosius II, who eventually became Western Roman Emperor in 467, while the Vandals put their considerable support behind Olybrius, who Geiseric had thrown his patronage behind and married to his captive, Placidia, the second daughter of Valentinian III.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Jord. *Get.* 168.

<sup>142</sup> On the treaty signed in 435 see: Prosper (435). On the treaty of 442 see: Victor of Vita (1.4), Procopius. (*BV.* 1.14.13) and Valentinian II (*Nov.* 33, 18).

<sup>143</sup> Proc. *BV.* 1.1-9; Victor of Vita. 1.4.

<sup>144</sup> Merrills & Miles, 210: 117-124.

The loss of North Africa was a disaster for the Western Roman Empire, it was its most economically prosperous and largest grain-producing province.<sup>145</sup> Although superficially this may have seemed a problem for the Western Roman Empire alone, the Vandal conquest of North Africa also had important and dangerous implications for the Eastern Empire. With the fall of Carthage and the loss of North Africa the Mediterranean Sea was no longer the Roman *mare nostrum*, dominated solely by Roman sea power. The loss of such uncontested control over the Mediterranean meant that the Constantinople's provinces and maritime trade routes were now also open to naval attack and raids by the Vandals.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, one of Geiseric's first actions as ruler of the new Vandal kingdom in North Africa was to construct a powerful fleet with which he could attack coastlines all across the Mediterranean and disrupt commerce.<sup>147</sup> The biggest fear for the Eastern emperors was that Geiseric would use his position in North Africa as a staging post to attack the vital province of Egypt, the economic heartland and breadbasket of the Eastern Empire.<sup>148</sup> As has been stated elsewhere, 'Vandal sea-power throughout Geiseric's reign was based as much on the threat of action as it was on its execution'.<sup>149</sup> Thus, even the idea that Egypt could be endangered was reason enough for Constantinople to focus on the Vandal threat. Indeed, it was stated that this threat caused panic in both the imperial court in Constantinople and Alexandria, the provincial capital of Egypt.<sup>150</sup> This fear was partly realised in 439 when the Vandals launched a Mediterranean-wide offensive, focused on the capture of Sicily, which forced the Eastern Empire to respond with direct military intervention in 440.<sup>151</sup> Geiseric's actions were such a deep cause of concern for the East Romans that they now thought it prudent to improve and fortify the harbour defences of Constantinople.<sup>152</sup> Thus, just as the Hunnic threat had motivated the construction of the Theodosian Walls, the Vandal threat was the catalyst for the building of the Sea Walls around the capital, which protected it from naval attack and blockade.<sup>153</sup> The

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<sup>145</sup> Both Bury (1958: 254) and Williams & Friell (1998: 137) underline this as they suggest that the fall of Carthage was just as horrifying and damaging as the fall of Rome in 410. On the wealth of North Africa in late antiquity and its importance to the West Roman Empire see Heather (2006: 172-180) and Merrills & Miles (2010: 141-177).

<sup>146</sup> Thomson, 2009: 165; Williams & Friell, 1998: 137.

<sup>147</sup> Blockley, 1992: 62.

<sup>148</sup> *Vita Danielis Styl.* 56; Kelly, 2008: 91.

<sup>149</sup> Merrills & Miles, 2010: 114.

<sup>150</sup> *Vita Danielis Styl.* 56.

<sup>151</sup> Theoph. *Chron. a.m.* 5941; Cassiodorus, *Chron. a.* 440; Hydat. *Chron.* p.23; *Nov. Val.* 9.

<sup>152</sup> Bury, 1958: 254.

<sup>153</sup> Kelly, 2008: 91.

construction of fortifications was costly and the fact that the Romans were willing to sanction such military building programmes to protect against the distant Vandals while letting their defences in the east deteriorate further indicates a shifting of priorities.<sup>154</sup> Evidently, despite the power of the Sasanians to rival Roman military power and the ability of the Huns, and later, the Ostrogoths, to deploy considerable forces against Constantinople it was the naval power of the Vandals that was regarded as the principal threat.<sup>155</sup>

Underlining the importance Constantinople placed on this new Vandal threat was the East Roman reaction to it. Following an appeal by the Western Roman Emperor, Valentinian III, the East Romans sent successive naval expeditions to try and dislodge the Vandals from North Africa and Carthage in 434, 441 and 468.<sup>156</sup> Certainly, Constantinople showed its concern about the growth of Vandal power and responded to this plea vigorously, gathering troops and naval forces from all over the empire for these expeditions.<sup>157</sup> The largest of these campaigns was prepared and conducted under Leo in 468:

Because Leo embarked upon ten thousand ships called *liburnae* a host such as time for all its length had never yet wondered at, he brought the [praetorian] prefecture to uttermost penury, by putting it under strain and compelling it to meet the expenses of four hundred thousand fighting men engaged upon a war...there was expended upon that ill-fated war...sixty thousand pounds of gold and seven hundred thousand of silver; and of horses, weapons and men as many as you might well estimate to have died across time known to man. After all this, the entire staff suffered shipwreck. For since the money in the treasury and the emperor's private resources, were not enough to meet the requirements, the entire reserves of the campaign forces were destroyed in the failures of the war. Not to make a long story of it, as a result of this dreadful debacle the treasury was no longer able to meet the demands it had to meet.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> On the deterioration of eastern fortifications see Blockley (1992: 108). On the treaty of 442 see Procopius (*BP.* 1.2.15).

<sup>155</sup> Howard-Johnson (2010b: 37) also agrees with this assessment.

<sup>156</sup> Theoph. *Chron. a.m.* 5941. On the plea of the West for aid see: *Nov. Val.* 9. On the naval expedition sent by Theodosius in 440 see: Prosper (*Chron. a.* 441).

<sup>157</sup> Kelly, 2008: 92.

<sup>158</sup> John Lydus, *On the Magistracies of the Roman State* 3.43-4.

Although John Lydus is not always the most reliable source, for instance his information on the number of troops, ships and horses are thought to be exaggerated here, his figures for the financial cost of the campaign seem accurate, which is perhaps no surprise from a sixth century imperial bureaucrat.<sup>159</sup> Indeed, the tremendous cost of the 468 expedition is supported by Candidus, who informs us that ‘The official in charge of [financial] matters revealed that 47,000 pounds of gold came through the Prefects and through the Count of the Treasuries an additional 17,000 pounds of gold and 700,000 pounds of silver, as well as monies raised through confiscation’.<sup>160</sup> Thus, this account, makes it clear that this campaign, and its ignominious defeat, was hugely costly to the Eastern Empire, resulting in the devastating loss of financial and military resources that almost bankrupted the imperial treasury.<sup>161</sup> The huge cost of this campaign therefore highlights how much of a priority dislodging the Vandals from North Africa was for the Eastern Empire in the fifth century. Leo had stretched every financial and military sinew of the empire in organising this campaign. Its importance was also underlined by the fact the emperor’s own brother-in-law, Basiliscus, a man who would later fight for the imperial throne itself, was placed in command. The catastrophic defeat of this force had lasting repercussions in Constantinople, the most damaging of which was Theoderic Strabo’s rebellion in Thrace in 478.<sup>162</sup> Although Leo’s expedition was by far the largest and suffered the most damaging defeat, the earlier Vandal campaigns were also immense undertakings. For example, the 440 naval expedition sent by Theodosius II consisted of 1,100 ships.<sup>163</sup> The utilisation of such vast resources in these campaigns reveal that the main priority of the Roman Empire was no longer the Sasanian Empire and that the Vandal Kingdom of North Africa, together with the Hunnic Empire, was now considered the more important. Unquestionably, the only way Constantinople was able to bring this sort of military power to bear against the Vandals was if their eastern frontier was secure and free from the threat of attack, which would allow them to divert and redeploy troops to North Africa. Indeed, the principal Roman Arab allies of the fifth century, the

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<sup>159</sup> Lee, 2007: 106; Hendy, 1985: 221-3. For more on the reliability of John Lydus see Kelly (2004: 9-18).

<sup>160</sup> Fr. 2 = *Suda* 10. 245. Procopius (*BV*. 1.6.1) also records the high cost of organising this campaign.

<sup>161</sup> Using John Lydus as his reference-point Börm (2008a: 333) has estimated that the failure of this campaign cost the Roman treasury 65,000 pounds of gold and 700,000 pounds of silver. Heather (2006: 406) blames the failure of this campaign for the eventual collapse of the Western Empire thus further reinforcing its cost.

<sup>162</sup> For more detailed discussions of these repercussions, including the murder of the *magister militum* Aspar see: Blockley (1992: 75-8).

<sup>163</sup> Prosper *Chron. a.* 441.



Salihids, were almost wiped out by the Vandals at the Battle of Cape Bon when they had been redeployed to take part in the naval expedition.<sup>164</sup> Such military endeavour, focus, and ultimately failure, obviously had a drastic effect on the subsequent resources and strategies of the East Roman Empire. The resultant factor being the need for peace with the Sasanian Empire, both during and after these expeditions.

The fact that Constantinople was willing to spend such extensive resources to combat the Vandal threat, which necessitated the weakening of the frontier defence elsewhere, predominantly the frontier with the Sasanian Empire, is even more indicative of the priority given to them when it is compared to the cautious policy of Constantius II who strove to avoid similar large-scale military campaigns due to the sheer amount of resources they required.<sup>165</sup> The repeated attempts to re-conquer North Africa required the long-term commitment of resources and military manpower from successive emperors, a commitment which stretched the empire to its limit. The cost of such re-conquest campaigns is acknowledged in the criticism of Justinian's later re-conquest of the west, the *renovatio imperii*, which is frequently blamed for crippling the resources of the empire.<sup>166</sup> Evidently, therefore, the availability and ability to utilise such resources necessitated the maintenance of peace with the Sasanian Empire throughout the fifth century.

Despite the arduous preparations and massive manpower and financial resources that went into these naval expeditions they all ended in failure, in 431/34, 442 and once again in 468 due to Vandal resistance or abandonment due to Hunnic invasions across the Danube frontier respectively.<sup>167</sup> The effect of the Hunnic invasions in compelling Constantinople to recall the expensively assembled Vandal expedition in 442 shows conclusively that the East Roman Empire did not have the capability to fight military campaigns on two separate frontiers simultaneously. Geiseric, it would seem, was more than aware of this strategic limitation, as

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<sup>164</sup> Zach. 228-229; Shahid, 1989: 51.

<sup>165</sup> Blockley, 1992: 106.

<sup>166</sup> Schramm, 1984; Pohl, 2005: 472-3. For in-depth discussion on the role played by Justinian's *renovatio imperii* see: Schramm (1984).

<sup>167</sup> The 431 campaign ended in stalemate with the Romans holding onto Carthage (Blockley, 1992: 60). The 442 campaign ended with the recall of eastern forces due to Attila's invasion (Prosper, *Chron. a. 442*; Theoph. *Chron. a.m.* 5942).

Jordanes informs us that Geiseric sought an alliance with Attila and frequently, by the sending of gifts, tried to induce him to attack the west.<sup>168</sup> Although this tactic was designed to divert and stretch the military resources of the Western Roman Empire, the same restrictions and limitations were also felt in Constantinople. It seems a remarkable coincidence that the two peoples so instrumental in forcing Roman accord with the Sasanians were on good terms themselves. Indeed, in 450 when Attila did finally turn his attention towards the west he did so due to the fact he was 'laying up a store of favour with Geiseric'.<sup>169</sup> This close connection between the threats in North Africa and the Balkans would have only further reduced the eastern frontier and the Sasanian Empire to secondary importance.

The rise of Vandal power in the fifth century challenged Roman dominance of the Mediterranean Sea and threatened, in the minds of the Romans at least, the loss of the vital imperial province of Egypt in a way the Sasanian Empire no longer did. Thus, the fact that Constantinople's primary motivation in launching its campaigns against the Vandals in this period was fear and the desire to protect their own lands and position reinforces the importance of political realism in understanding the changing priorities in the fifth century; they were launched first and foremost for Constantinople's own security not that of the Western Empire. For the eastern emperors the Vandals were a relatively unknown threat, whereas they had ample experience of the military ambitions of the Sasanians, which by the end of the fourth century rarely extended beyond the capture of individual forts or cities in the Mesopotamian frontier. In contrast, the Vandals had shown both the willingness and capability to conquer and occupy Roman territory. Hence, the potential loss of Egypt to the Vandals was a more urgent and pressing concern than that posed by the Sasanian Empire. Yet, perhaps the most conclusive piece of evidence for the priority of Vandal campaigns over any focus on the Sasanian Empire comes from the year 441. Even at this point in time, when Sasanians attacked Armenia, Roman troops were not repositioned to combat this; North Africa remained the priority.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> *Get.* 184-5.

<sup>169</sup> Priscus fr. 15. For further information on the role of Geiseric and the Vandals in Attila's offensive against the Western Empire see: Clover (1973).

<sup>170</sup> Soc. *HE* 7.18.20; Williams & Friell, 1998: 65; Thompson, 1973: 87. In fact, the Sasanians were forced to abandon this attack on Rome when their northern frontier was itself threatened by Hephthalites.

## Sasanian Priorities

Since Ardashir's overthrow of the Parthians in 224 the Sasanian Empire had been in a stable position, internal disruptions and civil wars were relatively rare, while the steady expansion of Sasanian power and dominion ensured, apart from the Roman challenge, the empire was never truly threatened by outside powers.<sup>171</sup> This all changed in the fifth century however, as the presence of successive Hunnic powers, principally the Hephthalites, on the northern frontiers drastically altered the balance of power in this region away from the Sasanian Empire. Corresponding to this shifting balance of power the Sasanian Empire faced a period of unparalleled internal unrest and civil strife. These changed circumstances had a direct effect on the Sasanians' relationship with the traditional Roman rival.

## **Hephthalites**

From the mid-fourth century onwards the Sasanian Empire was threatened by successive waves of Hunnic invaders, the Chionites, Kidarites and eventually the Hephthalites.<sup>172</sup> The threat and pressure of these Hunnic invaders was felt on the north-eastern frontier as early as 350 when the Sasanians were forced to abandon their war with Rome in order to combat the Chionite in the east.<sup>173</sup> The fact that it took eight seasons of concerted military effort to subdue the Chionite, arguably the weakest of the 'Hunnic' threats to the Sasanian Empire, reveals just how dangerous these new threats were and serves to justify the claim for a shifting of Sasanian military priorities in this period.<sup>174</sup>

However, it was not until the mid-fifth century that the empire's north-eastern frontier, and the empire as a whole, became truly threatened. This threat came from the so-called White Huns or Hephthalites, who created a powerful empire in 'Scythian Mesopotamia', Central

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<sup>171</sup> For more information on the geopolitical circumstances of the early Sasanian Empire see: Howard-Johnson (2010b).

<sup>172</sup> Bivar, 2003. Both Schottky (2004) and Göbl (1978: 107) argue that the term Huns is correct when talking about these different groups.

<sup>173</sup> Amm. Marc. 16.9.3-4

<sup>174</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the earlier Sasanian conflicts with the Chionite and Kidarites see: Chegini & Nikitin (1996). Daryaee (2008: 23) notes a distinct military shift to the east during the early reign of Bahrām V.

Asia.<sup>175</sup> The unique threat the Hephthalites posed to the Sasanian Empire was recognised by the Roman historian Procopius:

The Hephthalite are a stock of Huns in face as well as in name; however they do not mingle with any of the Huns known to us, for they occupy a land neither adjoining nor even very near to them; but their territory lies immediately to the north of Persia; indeed their city, called Gorgo, is located over against the Persian frontier, and is consequently the centre of frequent contests concerning boundary lines between the two peoples. For they are not nomads like other Hunnic peoples, but for a long period have been established in a goodly land. As a result of this they have never made any incursions into Roman territory except in the company of the Median army. They are the only ones among the Huns who have white bodies and countenances which are not ugly. It is also true that their manner of living is unlike that of their kinsmen, nor do they live a savage life as they do, but they are ruled by one king, and since they possess a lawful constitution, they observe right and justice in their dealings with both one another and their neighbours, in no degree less than the Romans and Persians.<sup>176</sup>

This account comes from Procopius' ethnographic digression on the Hephthalites as a precursor to his narrative of Peroz's campaigns against them. The most striking aspect of this passage is Procopius' presentation of the Hephthalites as territorially and politically stable and diplomatically sophisticated as the two imperial powers themselves. Although the veracity of this portrayal of the Hephthalites has been debated, in terms of whether it was historically true or whether a mere literary motif to symbolise the Romans own barbarisation, it is nonetheless important for our study of the threat these Huns posed to the Sasanian Empire in the fifth century.<sup>177</sup> The truth of this assessment is likely somewhere in the middle as, although the Hephthalites were not as politically sophisticated as either of the two empires, they were nevertheless able to inflict humiliating military, political and diplomatic defeats on the Sasanians. Certainly, Procopius' account shows that he was aware the Hephthalites were more of a threat to the Sasanian Empire than their predecessors, the Chionite and Kidarite, had been, and this comparison with the Roman and Sasanian Empires

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<sup>175</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 97. Dignas & Winter also believe that the Hephthalites were the Sasanians' most important enemy in the fifth century.

<sup>176</sup> *BP*. 1.3.1-6.

<sup>177</sup> Whereas Veh (1970: 459) states that Procopius' ethnographic and political account of the Hephthalites here is based on good sources, and it is therefore reliable and trustworthy, Kaldellis (2004: 69-75) argues that this was used as a pointed attack against Procopius' own perceived barbarisation of the Roman Empire.

may well have been an attempt to explain to his Roman audience why this was so; as well as subtly making his own point about the Roman state and constitution.

As also alluded to by Procopius above, the Hephthalites were militarily formidable, and more than able to rival Sasanian armies. Indeed, the military skill and reputation of the Hephthalites so terrified the Sasanian army that they were frequently completely 'unwilling to encounter' the enemy in battle. The Armenian historian Lazar P'arpets'i confirms the Sasanian fear of the Hephthalites:

Even in times of peace the mere sight or mention of a Hephthalite terrified everybody, and there was no question of going to war openly against one, for everybody remembered all too well the calamities and defeats inflicted by the Hephthalites on the king of the Aryans and on the Persians.

The fear their military prowess instilled in the Sasanians allowed the Hephthalites to defeat the forces of successive Shahs in numerous confrontations, which in turn enabled them to enforce humiliating and damaging treaties on the Sasanian Empire. The severe nature of the Hephthalite demands in these militarily enforced treaties even forced the Sasanians to approach their traditional Roman rival for assistance. The fact that the Sasanians requested both financial and military aid from the Romans, no matter how they were portrayed internally, is indicative of the threat the Hephthalites posed, and how stretched Sasanian military and economic resources had become in their attempts to counter them. Roman assistance was especially sought after for the construction of defensive installations in the Caucasus; a potential invasion route into both the Roman and Sasanian Empires. The defence of the Caucasian Gates became a recurring feature of imperial diplomacy, especially after the Hunnic raid of 395, which damaged both empires alike. Afterwards the Sasanians believed they were entitled to Roman assistance, as it was their troops who were defending the Caucasian Gates, and thus that they were defending the Roman Empire as well as their own. However, as the Hephthalite threat increased further the Shahs later also sought Roman financial contributions directly for their military campaigns against the Hephthalites even beyond the distant north-eastern frontier.<sup>178</sup> Peroz, for example, made repeated demands for either

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<sup>178</sup> Priscus fr. 41.1.

Roman troops or money to help defend the north-eastern frontier throughout his reign.<sup>179</sup> The Roman Emperor at the time, Zeno, fortunately for the Sasanians, and Peroz himself, was willing to provide this financial assistance; providing money for the ransom of the Shah and subsequent payments for further military campaigns.<sup>180</sup> The unique danger the Hephthalites posed, and their effect on Roman-Sasanian relations, is once again underlined in this regard as it was only aggressive campaigns against this barbarian threat, not the Chionite or Kidarites, which were partly funded by Constantinople.

Although the Sasanians, under Bahrām V Gor (420-439), were initially victorious against the Hephthalites, the balance of power soon began to shift away from the Sasanians.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, Bahrām's successor, Yazdgard II (438-457), who suffered numerous defeats to the Hephthalites throughout his reign, soon found it necessary to station himself permanently in Khurasan after 442, so that he could focus on defending his vulnerable north-eastern frontier against their incursions.<sup>182</sup> In the reign of Peroz (459-484) the Sasanians launched three large, yet unsuccessful, campaigns across the northern frontier in an attempt to destroy the Hephthalite threat. The failure of these campaigns resulted in the complete opposite however, as the military supremacy of the Hephthalites was ruthlessly established. The first two of these campaigns ended in defeat and humiliation for the Sasanians, in 469 their Shah was captured and forced to prostrate himself before the enemy king,<sup>183</sup> territory was ceded and a damaging peace was forced on the empire. To complete this humiliation the Hephthalites forced Peroz to hand over the chief priest (*mowbed*), the heir to throne, Kavād, and his sister as hostages and assurance that the Shah would abide by its clauses. However, Peroz once again tried to re-assert Sasanian dominance in 484. It was this final campaign that resulted in Peroz's death and the destruction of the Sasanian army, and saw Hephthalite power truly reach its zenith as made clear by Procopius:

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<sup>179</sup> Blockley, 1992: 72. Peroz made veiled threats towards Rome in order to try and force them to pay such subsidies, however it is likely that this was only a diplomatic tactic and that he would never have truly risked a war with the Romans when he was fully committed to challenging the Hephthalites.

<sup>180</sup> Josh. Styl. 9-10; Dignas & Winter, 2007: 98.

<sup>181</sup> *Zand I Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalypse*. The high praise Bahrām receives in this work is indicative of the importance establishing Sasanian supremacy over the Hunnic invaders had at this point in their history.

<sup>182</sup> Daryaee, 2008: 23.

<sup>183</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.3.23-4.

Thus Peroz was destroyed and the whole Persian army with him. For the few who by chance did not fall into the ditch found themselves at the mercy of the enemy...At that time, then, the Persians became subject and tributary to the Hephthalites...the time these barbarians ruled over the Persians was two years.<sup>184</sup>

Similar accounts from Lazar P'arpets'i, Theophanes, Sebeos and Joshua Stylites confirm that Peroz's defeat against the Hephthalites in 484 was a major military and political disaster for the Sasanian Empire, arguably one of the worst in its history.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, the fact that such a variety of sources agree on this is itself telling. With its Shah killed and army utterly destroyed the empire was forced to cede even more territory in Central Asia, Khusaran and Afghanistan, and pay even greater annual subsidies to the Hephthalites.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, it has even been claimed that after this disaster the Sasanians became tributaries of the Hephthalites.<sup>187</sup> The success these treaties had in reinforcing and cementing the Hephthalites' hard-won military supremacy over the Sasanian Empire reveals their diplomatic sophistication and underlined the existential threat they posed; just like Attila and Geiseric, they were able to follow military victories with even more impressive diplomatic ones.<sup>188</sup>

The Hephthalite threat was further compounded towards the end of the fifth century when they wrestled control over the economically vital Silk Road.<sup>189</sup> In previous centuries Sasanian control and monopoly of the Silk Road cemented their ability to profit from east-west trade which was central to their economic prosperity. Consequently, the loss of such a valuable trade route and its vital revenues was a major blow to the empire that would have undoubtedly had a detrimental effect on the empire's overall economic strength, and therefore also on its military capabilities. Moreover, if the economic power of the Sasanians was already stretched in combating the Hephthalite threat in the north-east they would surely be unwilling, and arguably unable, to risk war with the Romans in the west.

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<sup>184</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.4.25-28.

<sup>185</sup> Theophanes, *Chron. a.m* 5968; Sebeos, 8.67; Joshua Stylites 2; Lazar P'arpets'i, 214-15. Archaeological and numismatic evidence also supports the fact that Peroz was roundly defeated on three separate occasions as coins throughout his reign depict the Shah with three different crowns, thus suggesting three separate restorations to the throne (Bivar, 2003).

<sup>186</sup> Bivar, 2003.

<sup>187</sup> Blockley, 1992: 83-84.

<sup>188</sup> It is also important to note that there were likely more Sasanian-Hephthalite military confrontations than mentioned above or even recorded by our sources that went unrecorded by contemporary historians (Howard-Johnson, 2010b: 43-4).

<sup>189</sup> Blockley, 1992:88.

The aforementioned need for Roman assistance in combatting the Hephthalites further underlined how stretched Sasanian resources were in this period. As such, this same need for Roman money in the defence of the north-eastern frontier logically necessitated peaceful relations with the Romans themselves, as the Romans were unlikely to provide financial assistance if they were at war with the Sasanians. Likewise, if the Sasanian Empire already lacked the necessary economic resources to defend one frontier they would surely strive to avoid becoming embroiled in a second costly war on another front. Whilst the Roman, albeit sporadic, willingness to provide this financial assistance clearly reveals that they too were equally in need of peace and that they were willing to pay for it.<sup>190</sup>

The threat of the Hephthalites, and the Sasanians' inability to defeat them in the fifth century was intensified by the relatively weak strategic and geographic position of the empire's frontiers. Whereas the Romans were able to utilise the Danube, Rhine and Alps in its frontier defence, to control the movement of foreign peoples, the Sasanian Empire had no such natural barriers and was far more permeable and open to invasion. In the north the Caucasus was breached by the Caucasian Gates, the large Gurgan grasslands acted as a convenient assembly point for advances further westward and Khusaran provided easy access to the Iranian Plateaux.<sup>191</sup>

In response to this dearth of natural protection the Sasanians engaged in large-scale building projects along their frontiers throughout the fifth century to protect against Hephthalite attacks. Indeed, fifth-century Sasanian frontier defence, especially in the northeast, was characterised by linear defensive walls.<sup>192</sup> The Darband Wall,<sup>193</sup> the Alan Gates,<sup>194</sup> the Wall of Tammishe and the Wall of the Arabs and the impressive Gorgan Wall (*Sadd-e Iskandar*) were all constructed in this period.<sup>195</sup> The fact that all but the Wall of the Arabs were constructed

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<sup>190</sup> Elishé pp.61; Josh. Styl. 10. On the sporadic nature of these Roman payments see: Blockley (1992: 75) and Priscus (fr. 51.1).

<sup>191</sup> Howard-Johnson, 2010: 43.

<sup>192</sup> Ball, 1999: 315; Frye, 1984: 3. This goes against a prevalent argument in scholarship that would suggest linear walls as defensive systems were absent in the east, compared to their large-scale use in the west (Hodgson, 1989; Napoli, 1997).

<sup>193</sup> Howard-Johnson, 2012: 100; Kettenhofen, 1994.

<sup>194</sup> Chegini & Nikitin, 1996: 58; Bader et.al, 1995: 49-50.

<sup>195</sup> For more detailed discussions on the Gorgan Wall see Nokandeh et.al (2006: 121) and Sauer et.al (2013). The Gorgan Wall is also known as the Red Snake and the Barrier of Peroz.



on the northern frontiers reinforces the notion that Sasanian military attention in the fifth century was focused on the Hephthalite threat in this region, not on the West against the Romans.

Arguably the most important of these defensive walls was the Gorgan Wall, the largest continual defensive structure ever constructed in antiquity, which was designed to defend the vulnerable north-eastern frontier near the Gorgan Plain against Hephthalite invasion.<sup>196</sup> The Gorgan Wall, constructed on the orders of Peroz, the Shah who was so determined to destroy Hephthalite power, stretched for 195km from the Caspian Sea to the Turkmen Steppe and provided a continuous barrier between the Sasanian Empire and the Hephthalite realm across the north-eastern frontier.<sup>197</sup> Thirty-three forts were constructed at regular intervals to house the thirty thousand troops it took to man and defend the wall permanently, with extra protection added by a ditch.<sup>198</sup> That the wall was actually manned to such a large extent for a large time-period is borne out by archaeological evidence which has identified large quantities of dense refuse in ditches near the forts themselves where the soldiers would have been stationed and lived, while there is also evidence of some form of man-made reservoir that would have been essential in keeping the garrison supplied with water.<sup>199</sup> Therefore, the fact that such an enormous fortification project was undertaken on the northern frontier further underlines that military attention was now primarily focused on protecting the empire against its northern enemies. Likewise, the construction of so many defensive walls in a relatively short space of time, especially the unrivalled Gorgan Wall, would undoubtedly have been a significant drain on resources.<sup>200</sup> Indeed, as already stated the expense involved in undertaking such building projects was evident in the fact that the Sasanians often demanded financial help from the Romans for their construction.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> For an exhaustive and conclusive study of all aspects of the Gorgan Wall see: Sauer et.al. (2013).

<sup>197</sup> Nokandeh, et.al, 2006: 154. For the dating of the wall to the reign of Peroz see: Nokandeh et.al (2006: 162). Indeed, archaeological dating puts construction between 429-86, while the Muslim writer Ibn Isfandiyyar (1.2 = Browne, 1905: 27) also supports a fifth century construction, stating that it was erected in the reign of Peroz.

<sup>198</sup> Payne, 2015: 293, Howard-Johnson, 2012: 102-110; Rekavandi et.al, 2007: 113-131. That 30,000 troops were needed to man the wall is borne out by the number of barrack blocks in each individual fort.

<sup>199</sup> Nokandeh et.al, 2006: 151; Boucherlat & Lecomte, 1987: 7.

<sup>200</sup> Important in understanding the level of financial and manpower resources these constructions would have needed from the Sasanians is evident in Bachrach's (2010) study of the Roman fortification of Gaul after the third century crisis, which provides a useful comparison.

<sup>201</sup> Priscus fr. 41.1.

Therefore, that the Sasanians were willing to expend huge amounts of financial resources on constructing these defensive walls and equally large military manpower on manning it suggests that the military and strategic priority of this period was the frontier with the Hephthalites, and not the Roman frontier.<sup>202</sup> The sheer amount of resources required for the creation, maintenance and garrisoning of the Gorgan Wall alone would undoubtedly have had a direct correlating effect on the military capabilities of the Sasanians Empire on its other frontiers. Certainly, for large defensive walls such as the Gorgan Wall to be manned permanently in the fifth century, as the archaeological evidence suggests it was, a redeployment of troops from elsewhere was necessary. In this regard, the fact that in the fifth century the Sasanians pursued a policy of peace with Constantinople, and did not invest in any new fortifications on their western frontier, suggests that these troops likely came from the previously all-important imperial frontier.

The Hephthalites' ability to defeat Sasanian armies, enforce the payment of tribute and annex territory forced the empire to shift its focus away from the traditional Roman rival to combat this new danger. Certainly, the fact that in 442 Yazdgerd II's moved his permanent residence to the north-eastern frontier in 442 in response to the rising Hephthalite threat, shows that this frontier, rather than the one with Constantinople, was now regarded as the primary priority.<sup>203</sup> Due to how hard-pressed they were to defend this frontier against Hephthalite incursion and the vast resources expended in doing so the Sasanians necessarily needed a stable frontier with the Roman Empire which would allow them to focus fully on the north-east. This need for peace with the Roman Empire is attested by Elishé who suggests that the Sasanian attack against the Romans in 441 was designed only to intimidate the western neighbour into peace in preparation for a new Hephthalite campaign.<sup>204</sup>

Once more, the signing of the Roman-Sasanian treaty in 442 in which both sides agreed not to build any new fortifications on the Mesopotamian frontier must be seen in relation, and as connected, to the Sasanian fortification of the Caucasus and the Gorgan Plain; thus reinforcing

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<sup>202</sup> Howard-Johnson (2012: 101-02) acknowledges the high costs of constructing these fortifications.

<sup>203</sup> Litvinsky, 1996: 141.

<sup>204</sup> Pp.63; Marcell. *Chron. s.a.* 4.41.1. Theodoret (*HE* 5.37) indirectly supports this notion, as he claims that the main reason it succeeded in gaining peace was because the 'the Romans were occupied elsewhere' and thus they were unwilling to fight on two fronts simultaneously or switch their focus to their eastern frontier.

that a shifting of priorities took place at this time. Similarly, Peroz was eager to conclude a new treaty with the Romans before launching his campaigns against the northern enemy.<sup>205</sup> Such eagerness to pacify the western frontier before launching a campaign in the north shows that the Sasanians were concerned about overstressing their military resources and actively sought to avoid war on two fronts.<sup>206</sup> It took the arrival of the Turks and their subsequent alliance with the Sasanians to once again alter the balance of power back in the favour of the empire.<sup>207</sup>

### **Internal Unrest and Civil Wars**

Alongside its struggles against the Hephthalites, and also because of them, the Sasanian Empire was wracked by internal unrest, dynastic struggles and civil war on an unprecedented scale in the fifth century.<sup>208</sup> During the late fourth and fifth century the internal position of the Shahs was weaker and more vulnerable than ever before. This weakness allowed the nobility and Zoroastrian Magians, as well as dynastic rivals, to challenge the Shahs.<sup>209</sup> Ardashir II (379-383), Shapur III (383-388), Bahrām IV (388-399), Shapur 'IV' (414), Hormizd III (457-459) Balāš (484-488) and Ğāmāsp (497-499) were all deposed as a result of this internal instability.

Although the Shahs that ruled the Sasanian Empire were among the most powerful monarchs in the ancient world they nevertheless still had to appease and negotiate with other powerful elements within the empire, principally the powerful Zoroastrian clergy and the influential nobility. The internal balance of power within the empire and between these groups was never static, with each group always vying for advantage, it was constantly in a state of flux. The very need for partnership between Shahs, nobility and Magians shows the delicate, and often vulnerable situation, of the Sasanian monarchy.<sup>210</sup> Shahs could not rule without the

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<sup>205</sup> Daryaee, 2008: 25.

<sup>206</sup> Payne (2015: 296) also acknowledges that the Sasanians could not afford to fight on two fronts at this time.

<sup>207</sup> Tabarī 895-7.

<sup>208</sup> As acknowledged by Christensen (1944: 260).

<sup>209</sup> Howard-Johnson, 2010: 44; Daryaee, 2008: 26.

<sup>210</sup> Drijvers, 2009: 443.

consent and cooperation of the nobility and this therefore made the nobles a powerful and influential force within the empire, one that could, and did, act against the Shahs' wishes and interests. In this regard, one of the many assumptions made about the Sasanian state was that it was much more centralised and controlled by the direct power and authority of the Shahs compared to the more 'lethargic' and indirectly ruled Parthian *regna* that it replaced.<sup>211</sup> Yet, this idea contradicts the fact, and a fact that is also regularly acknowledged, that the Shahs had to contend with the powerful noble families who held power in virtually every corner of the vast empire.<sup>212</sup> Zoroastrianism, and powerful religious officials, such as the third-century Magian Kerdir, arguably played an even more important role in Sasanian society than they did in the Roman world, and could equally put pressure on the Shahs.

The principal groups of nobility with which the Shahs had to contend with and win the support of were the *Shahrdaran*, the virtually independent kings of their own territories, and the *Vuzurgan*, who were made up of the great noble families of the Suren, Karin and the Lords of Undigan, who also nominally owed loyalty to the Shahs but equally retained much independence in their own homelands.<sup>213</sup> Shahs could not raise or levy new taxes without the agreement of these nobles, while, as already explained, their military power was also largely dependent on the loyalty of the powerful noble families. Thus, to an undesirable extent a Shah's power was beholden to, and dependent upon his relationship with, the powerful *shahrdaran* and *vuzurgan* nobles. Furthermore, by tradition, the nobility played a vital role in choosing and legitimising their Shahs, therefore, if a ruling Shah angered them the nobles could, and did, remove their support in favour of another royal candidate.<sup>214</sup> This was perhaps best exemplified by a council of leading Sasanian aristocrats deciding the fate of the former Shah, Kavād, in 496.<sup>215</sup>

Parallel to pressure Shahs were always potentially open to from the dissatisfied nobility, the end of the fourth century also witnessed the beginnings of an independent Zoroastrian church hierarchy that would develop throughout the fifth century. In the early years of the Sasanian Empire the fortunes of the Zoroastrian religion and the young Sasanian dynasty were

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<sup>211</sup> Rubin (2000: 652) also notes this tendency in scholarship concerning the two eastern empires.

<sup>212</sup> Brosius, 2006: 151-179.

<sup>213</sup> Rubin, 2000: 652; Wiesehöfer, 1996: 171-5.

<sup>214</sup> John of Antioch fr. 178; FHG 4: 165; *The Letter of Tansar*; Paikuli Inscription. Brosius, 2006: 151.

<sup>215</sup> Proc. BP. 1.5.

intricately interwoven, each depended on the other for strength and protection. This closeness ensured that the Zoroastrian Magians played a fundamental role in the running of the state from the outset, they controlled the judicial processes and could even exert control on the selection of the Shahs.<sup>216</sup> Yet, in the later half of the fourth century the close relationship between altar and throne diminished, as shall be seen in more detail later. The ambitions and intolerance of the Magians increasingly came into conflict with the more pragmatically driven Shahs who had to rule an ethnically and religiously diverse realm. The main consequence of this divergence was the aforementioned strengthening of an independent Zoroastrian church. This development gave the Magians greater independence from the Sasanian dynasty and therefore much greater scope for autonomous political manoeuvring.<sup>217</sup> This development had a negative effect on internal stability and unity of the Sasanian Empire in the fifth century, not only did the Shahs have to appease the ambitions of the nobility but they now also had to placate the wishes of the Magians. The crystallisation of the Zoroastrian hierarchy and the subsequent bureaucratic apparatus now available to the priests ensured that the administration and running of the empire could relatively easily survive the death of a Shah.<sup>218</sup> This therefore worked to the advantage of the ambitious clergy and their allies in the aristocracy as they could rid themselves of an unwanted ruler without endangering the safety of the empire itself.

Indeed, the initial outbreak of internal instability in the fifth century began with Yazdgard I's toleration of Christians, which the Magians saw as a direct challenge to their own power and position within the empire. Indeed, we are told that 'The Magi hate Yazdgard, because he mistreated them upon his rise to the throne, decreased the power of their leaders'.<sup>219</sup>

Balancing the ambitions and expectations of these two groups with their own needs was a particularly challenging aspect of rule for the Shahs. The external pressure created by the sustained threat of the Hephthalites only made this balancing act even more fraught with difficulty and danger. As the military power of the Sasanian army was increasingly challenged and overcome, so too was the military legitimacy of the Shahs, which led to a weakening in their internal position. Consequently, fifth century rulers were especially vulnerable to

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<sup>216</sup> Blockley, 1992: 103; Widengren, 1961: 159; Christensen, 1944: 263

<sup>217</sup> Daryaei, 2008: 21.

<sup>218</sup> Daryaei, 2008: 26.

<sup>219</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 1.205-7.

internal intrigues and plots as the internal balance of power shifted away from them in favour of the nobility and clergy who took advantage of successive Shahs' struggles in conflicts with the Hephthalites to boost their own power and position within the internal balance of power within the Sasanian Empire.<sup>220</sup> Further damaging to the strength of the empire was the fact that in these civil wars and dynastic struggles the Hephthalites were once more able to assert their power over the Sasanians, by frequently acting as kingmakers. They intervened in Sasanian civil wars on two occasions. First, during the reign of their eventual enemy, Peroz, they helped him to defeat his brother Hormizd III and gain the throne in 459.<sup>221</sup> Likewise, Kavād, Peroz's son, also owed his throne to Hephthalites military support, who in exchange for their assistance were granted financial and territorial concessions from the new Shah upon his ascension in 489/9.<sup>222</sup>

The precedent for the internal troubles that destabilised the empire began early in the century, with the murder of Yazdgard I's heir, Shapur, in 414 after the death of the old Shah.<sup>223</sup> The nobility and Zoroastrian priests, angered by Yazdgard's tolerant religious policy and his favouring of the Arab Nasrids, which saw their own influence within the empire marginalised, did not want his son to continue the same policies. Therefore, they chose to rebel against Shapur and promoted their own choice, Khusro 'I', to the throne instead. However, this Khusro was not able to hold onto power for long, even with the support of the nobles and Magians as Bahrām, later Bahrām V Gor, another son of Yazdgard, recruited an army from among the allied Arab Nasrids, marched against Khusro and forced him to abdicate, taking the throne himself. Although Bahrām soon followed the example of his father and signed a new treaty of religious tolerance with the Roman Empire in 422 the nobility and priests were unable to attack the new Shah in the same way they did his brother because of the overwhelming successes he enjoyed against the Hephthalites.<sup>224</sup> However, the ability of the nobility, priests and rival family members to resist and dethrone ruling Shahs only increased throughout the fifth century as other Shahs could not match Bahrām's military success and

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<sup>220</sup> Daryaee, 2008a: 25; Brosius, 2006: 151.

<sup>221</sup> 117-9. Chegini & Nikitin, 1996: 44; Dignas & Winter, 2007: 98.

<sup>222</sup> Litvinsky, 1996: 143; Howard-Johnson, 2010: 44.

<sup>223</sup> Daryaee, 2008: 22.

<sup>224</sup> *Zand i Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalypse*.

failed to defeat the Hephthalites. For example, Balāš, who was unfortunate enough to succeed the defeated Peroz inherited the humiliating treaty with the Hephthalites was quickly considered a weak figure and was just as quickly dethroned by the nobility and Magians.<sup>225</sup>

Yet, it was the reign of Yazdgard II that best exemplifies the internal instability that troubled the Sasanian Empire in the fifth century. Prior to his ascension, three of Yazdgard II's predecessors had fallen victim to internal strife caused by the plots of the influential Zoroastrian clergy and nobility. His grandfather Yazdgard I and his grandfather's rightful heir Shapur both met with suspicious deaths that were celebrated by their enemies in the Zoroastrian clergy and nobility.<sup>226</sup> Therefore, Yazdgard II was justifiably anxious about his internal position and the loyalty of the different factions within his realm. In response Yazdgard II pursued a number of controversial policies in attempting to cement his power. The *History of Karka* informs us that one of his first acts as Shah was to initiate a purge of the royal court, executing many nobles with suspected loyalty, and even his own daughter.<sup>227</sup> Next, he had eight thousand Magians castrated to serve as his personal servants, as traditionally eunuchs were believed to be more loyal than other ambitious advisors might be, and presumably also as a warning to other Magians thinking of acting against him.<sup>228</sup> Persecution of religious minorities, particularly Christians, who were tainted by their connection to Constantinople, was a traditional policy thought to improve internal unity by appeasing the influential reach of the Zoroastrian hierarchy and also fulfilling the Shah's traditional role as a patron of the Zoroastrianism.<sup>229</sup> Yazdgard II therefore also made use of this, with his reign witnessing the most violent and large-scale religious persecutions of the fifth century.<sup>230</sup> Although these policies superficially suggest Yazdgard II was little more than a bloodthirsty tyrant, the political realities of the fifth century meant that these were necessary in order for the Shah to overawe his enemies and unite the powerful factions in his empire under his rule. Hence, the reign of Yazdgard II shows how important securing internal stability was for those wishing to rule and the lengths they would go to achieve it.

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<sup>225</sup> Daryaee, 2008: 25.

<sup>226</sup> McDonough, 2006: 74.

<sup>227</sup> *AMS* 2.518-9.

<sup>228</sup> Kolesnikov, 2012.

<sup>229</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 214.

<sup>230</sup> Elishé 12; Lazar P'arpets'i 86-7.

In relation to the Roman-Sasanian fifth-century peace the major consequence of these civil wars was that they distracted the Shahs, and the empire as a whole, from the imperial rivalry with Constantinople. Certainly, even to the most warlike Shah securing their internal position and authority was always more important than launching an attack against the Roman Empire. For example, earlier, in the third century, Bahrām II's (276-293) eagerness to establish peaceful relations with the Roman Empire during the reign of Diocletian was a result of his preoccupation with domestic affairs.<sup>231</sup> A vulnerable north-eastern frontier coupled with unpredictable internal concerns necessitated peace on the western frontier. Interestingly however, the very weakness of the Shahs during this period was also paradoxically caused by this necessary peace with the Romans. The legitimacy of the Shahs was based on their military reputation and ability to gain glory and plunder through foreign conquests. Therefore, the successive defeats suffered at the hands of the Hephthalites and the détente with Constantinople meant that such glory and plunder was in short supply throughout the fifth century. Similarly, a traditional method of winning the loyalty and support of the nobility was to shower them with gifts from the royal treasury, a treasury that was previously enriched through foreign conquests, and that was now stretched.<sup>232</sup> Therefore, when trying to secure their internal dominance within the empire Shahs of the fifth century did not, for the most part, possess the necessary martial reputation to promote or fall back on. This internal weakness and vulnerability was not addressed until the reigns of Kavād I and Khusro at the end of the fifth century and start of the sixth century who introduced many reforms to curb the power of the nobility.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 27. On the peace treaty between Bahrām II and Diocletian see: *Pan. Lat.* 10. (II) 7.5, 9.2.

<sup>232</sup> Tabarī 826.

<sup>233</sup> Brosius, 2006: 151-179; Daryaee, 2008a: 30-1.



### Consequences of Shifting Priorities: Military Expenditure, Economic Loss and Strategic Limitations.

For the Roman emperors and Sasanian Shahs alike combatting these new threats and internal conflicts took vast resources, the expenditure of which limited and restricted their ability and willingness to fight wars on multiple fronts. As such, an imperial détente was not only desirable in the fifth century but was strategically, militarily and economically necessary for the survival of both empires.

Enormous expenditure on military matters which afflicts the financial system.<sup>234</sup>

Shipbuilding, wall building and above all expenditure on the soldiers: for in this way each year most of the public revenues are consumed.<sup>235</sup>

As made clear by these two military treatises the construction of military defensive installations, military infrastructure and the launching of military campaigns was hugely expensive. Indeed, the greatest expenditure of any ancient state was on the military. For the Roman Empire military expenditure was estimated to be anywhere between one to eight million *solidi* per year.<sup>236</sup> Importantly in this regard, as shown above, in the fifth century shipbuilding, fortification building and the launching of military campaigns took place at an exceptional rate in both empires, as they attempted to counter the new Hunnic, Vandal and Hephthalite threats. Therefore, it is unsurprising that, as John Lydus informed us, Leo's hugely expensive, and ultimately unsuccessful, Vandal campaign in 468 almost completely bankrupted the Roman treasury.<sup>237</sup> Likewise, the construction of numerous large-scale defensive structures, especially the Gorgan Wall, meant the fifth century was equally as expensive for the Sasanians. Indeed, after Peroz's humiliating defeats against the Hephthalites it was said that his successor, Balāš, 'found the Persian treasury empty'.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> *De Rebus Bellicis*. 5.1.

<sup>235</sup> *Peri Strategikes* 2.4.

<sup>236</sup> Friell & Williams, 1998: 127.

<sup>237</sup> Hendy, 1985: 221-3; Börm, 2008: 133.

<sup>238</sup> Johsua Stylites 18.

Sasanian economic resources would have been further stretched and impaired by the drought and resulting famine that struck the empire in this period.<sup>239</sup> The devastating economic consequences this natural disaster had on the Sasanian Empire is recorded by Tabarī:

During his [Peroz's] reign a great famine came over the land for seven years continuously. Streams, qanats, and springs dried up; trees and reed beds became desiccated; the major part of all tillage and thickets of vegetation were reduced to dust in the plains and the mountains of his land alike; bringing about the deaths there of birds and wild beasts; cattle and horses grew so hungry that they could hardly draw any loads; and water in the Tigris became very sparse. Dearth, hunger, hardship, various calamities became general for the people of his land. He accordingly wrote to all his subjects, informing them that the land and capitation taxes were suspended, and extraordinary levies and corvées were abolished, and that he had given them complete control over their own affairs, commending them to take all possible measures in finding food and sustenance to keep them going.<sup>240</sup>

Thus, coupled with the cost of fortifying their north-eastern frontier and campaigns against the Hephthalites, the loss of tax revenues and damage to the Sasanian population caused by this famine further ensured that the Shahs were in no position to risk wars on multiple fronts.<sup>241</sup> Indeed, from Tabarī's portrayal, who as previously stated was generally reliable, it could even be suggested that the Sasanian Empire was even more stretched than the Romans in the fifth century. As such, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the fifth century was one of the most expensive and costly centuries in the history of both the Eastern Roman and Sasanian Empires, both military and economically.

Another substantial expenditure of ancient states, especially imperial powers, was the payment of subsidies to foreign powers or allies.<sup>242</sup> Importantly, once again it was during the fifth century that Roman and Sasanian payments to their neighbours reached their zenith, in both amount and regularity. The Romans made payments to Attila, eventually rising to 2,100 pounds of gold per year, and peace with the Sasanian Empire was also partly maintained through smaller payments. The unique danger of Attila is again underlined in this regard as

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<sup>239</sup> Daryaee, 2008: 26.

<sup>240</sup> Tabarī 873-874.

<sup>241</sup> Daryaee (2008: 25). Brosius (2006: 184) describes this famine as the 'most devastating disaster which ever befell the Sasanian Empire'.

<sup>242</sup> Williams & Friell, 1998:133.

he was the only foreign ruler to have directly demanded, and then received, increased payments from the Roman Empire.<sup>243</sup> Likewise, the Sasanians also had to pay vast amounts of money to the Hephthalites.<sup>244</sup> Indeed, the damaging effect of the payment of these subsidies forced the Sasanians to replace gold dinars with the cheaper silver drachm as the principal currency of the empire.<sup>245</sup>

Arguably even more expensive than the recruitment of armies, naval forces and the construction and upkeep of fortresses however was the cost of being invaded:

See how death suddenly bore down on the whole world and the force of war struck so many people. The rough terrain of thick forest and high mountain, strong rivers with their fast currents, forts protected by their positions and cities by their walls, places made inaccessible by the sea, harsh locations in the wilderness, caves and caverns beneath gloomy cliffs – none of these was able to provide a safe refuge from the hands of the barbarians...Those not overcome by force succumbed to hunger. The unfortunate mother fell with her child and husband, the master submitted to servitude along with his slaves. Some lay as food for dogs, and blazing houses snatched life from many and provided their funeral pyre. Throughout settlements and estates, throughout fields and cross-sorrow, destruction, burning, lamentation.<sup>246</sup>

This account from Orientius underlines the devastating effect invasions and raids had on the infrastructure, wealth and population of a territory. Although it has been noted that Orientius' work was 'self-consciously' literary and heavily interested by poetic works, such as Ovid, it does nevertheless underline the wider effects invasions could have on a population and provinces.<sup>247</sup> Hence, the fact that both the Romans and Sasanians suffered numerous invasions at the hands of the Huns and Hephthalites who rampaged through their lands, plundering their wealth, killing and capturing their people, throughout the fifth century meant that imperial provinces near the threatened frontiers regularly agonised under similar economic devastation as is related by Orientius above. Furthermore, invaded provinces took a long time to recover from such destruction and, therefore, the economic consequences of

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<sup>243</sup> Blockley, 1992:108.

<sup>244</sup> Daryae, 2008:26.

<sup>245</sup> Sims-Williams, 2008: 94.

<sup>246</sup> *The Admonition* 2.165-84. Although this passage discusses the plight of Gaul after invasion it is useful nevertheless as it reveals the devastation an invaded province and its population would have experienced.

<sup>247</sup> Lee, 2007: 107 (citing Roberts, 2002: 410-12).

invasions usually long outlasted the more immediate and obvious strictly military or strategic effects. The plight of the Balkans, particularly Thrace and Illyricum, during this century was almost unbearable, with it being stated that Attila 'ground almost the whole of Europe into dust'.<sup>248</sup> While, similarly, Sasanian lands were also said to have been 'ravaged by the [Hephthalites]'.<sup>249</sup>

Archaeology provides us with direct evidence for the tremendous levels of destruction caused by invasions. It confirms that Hunnic invasions of Roman territories in the fifth century were especially disruptive to the economic prosperity of the Balkans. Cities such as Nicopolis suffered almost total ruin and devastation to both its urban centre and hinterland.<sup>250</sup> This level of destruction is further confirmed by the fact that Theodosius II, and even the later Anastasius (491-518), did not levy any taxes against Thrace, 'on account of the peasantry being diminished in number by barbarian inroads'.<sup>251</sup> The loss of an entire province's taxation would have undoubtedly been a huge blow to the already stretched revenues of the East Romans during this period. Therefore, the fact that Thrace was only one specific region out of many in both empires that suffered regular invasion in the fifth century provides an insight into the overall economic devastation imperial territories would have experienced due to their leaders' inability to adequately defend them against the new Hunnic and Hephthalite powers.

The economic difficulties both empires faced in the fifth century, together with their military and manpower limitations, which were of course linked, hindered their ability to fight wars on multiple fronts; they simply could not afford it either economically or militarily. The main consequence of this was the need to prioritise different threats over others. It was in these circumstances that the need for a Roman-Sasanian *détente*, that would allow them to concentrate on the new barbarian threats on their other frontiers. Neither Constantinople nor Ctesiphon could afford a long protracted war, or series of wars, against one another. An imperial ceasefire would allow them to concentrate their resources against the Huns, Vandals

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<sup>248</sup> Marcellinus 447.

<sup>249</sup> Joshua Stylites 18.

<sup>250</sup> Poulter, 1995: 34-5. Indeed, even when it was rebuilt later the damage done in the 440s meant that it was done so at a much smaller scale.

<sup>251</sup> *CJ.* 11.52.1, 10.27.2.10.

and Hephthalites, who were a much more pressing and immediate concern. A Roman-Sasanian peace also ensured that both sides could afford to spend less money on the previously all-important fortifications in the imperial frontier in Mesopotamia and Armenia. Certainly, such a deterioration of Roman fortifications on this frontier with the Sasanian Empire did take place in the fifth century.<sup>252</sup> Most insightful and conclusive in the idea that economic and military restrictions played a defining role in the need and formation of imperial peace in the fifth century was the fact that the economic situation of both empires did not improve until the beginning of the sixth century and it was in this period in which Roman-Sasanian conflicts were renewed.<sup>253</sup>

### Conclusion: The Stimulus for Peace

The ability of the Huns to capture and destroy Roman cities seemingly at will in the Balkan provinces, and to force the Romans to abandon a large swath of land south of the Danube, was a more dangerous threat than that posed by the Sasanians in the east. Likewise, although with hindsight we know the Vandals had no real ambitions to conquer Egypt, the potential of losing the economic heartland and breadbasket of their empire was a real and pressing threat to the East Romans. This fear dwarfed any concerns Constantinople may have had about the territorial ambitions of the Sasanian Empire in this period. The Hephthalites equally presented a fundamental threat to the position of the Sasanian Empire in their north-eastern territories. Certainly, even during the height of the imperial competition the Romans had never been

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<sup>252</sup> Blockley, 1992: 90; Haupt & Horn, 1977: 489-90. As Lewin (2009: 244-245) points out, although the *Notitia Dignitatum* shows that forts along the *strata Diocletiana* were still occupied at the start of the fifth century when we next hear of these eastern forts in Procopius (*BP.* 2.1.1-8), narrating the outbreak of the Roman-Sasanian war of 540, we are told they were abandoned to such an extent that the Arab allies of the two empires fought over them in what had become desolate terrain. Likewise, Isaac (1990: 211) argues that the frontier between Palmyra and Sura was also in disrepair at this time. Although there is evidence that smaller individual, and rather isolated, fortification projects did take place on the imperial frontier at different times in the fifth century by both sides (*Chr. Ede.* 70), this was not on the same scale as the more whole-scale fortification of the Mesopotamian that had taken place throughout the late third and fourth century.

<sup>253</sup> On the renewed Roman-Sasanian conflict in the sixth century see Dignas & Winter (2007: 36-44). For the Roman economic recovery in at the start of the sixth century, principally during the reign of Anastasius see Jones (1966: 95).

able to kill a Shah in battle, force the giving of the heir to the Sasanian throne as a hostage,<sup>254</sup> or win large swathes of Sasanian territory, all of which the Hephthalites achieved relatively quickly. This difference in threat-level undoubtedly made the Hephthalites a more pressing concern than the Romans, whose major long-term ambition against the Sasanian Empire, the reclamation of Nisibis, was much less dangerous in comparison.

As such, the stimulus for the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian peace came from the tremendous threats posed by Attila, the Vandals, the Hephthalites and Sasanian internal instability that forced a shifting of priorities away from the traditional imperial rivalry and competition.<sup>255</sup> Therefore, as has been repeated throughout, in order to combat these new threats the two empires both needed stability and détente on the joint Mesopotamian frontier.

In this regard, the construction of large-scale fortifications and refortification projects undertaken by the Romans along the Danube frontier to counter the Huns and the Sasanians along their north-eastern frontier to defend against the Hephthalites throughout the fifth century must be seen in relation to the signing of the Roman-Sasanian treaty in 442. As shall be seen in more detail below, in this treaty the imperial powers agreed not to construct new fortifications and military installations or to improve existing ones on the shared frontier in Mesopotamia.<sup>256</sup> The signing of this treaty thus underlines that the military priorities of the two empires in the fifth century had shifted away from the traditional imperial competition in response to the pressure of the new barbarian powers that threatened their other frontiers.

From the Roman perspective, this shift is further confirmed by the *Notitia Dignitatum* which shows that in the fifth century more field army troops were deployed to the Danube frontier than on the eastern frontier for the first time. Such a drastic redeployment of *comitanses* troops from the eastern frontier the northern frontier makes clear that Constantinople now saw the Huns in the Danube region as the main threat, not the traditional Sasanian rival. Similarly, the unparalleled prevalence of civil war and contests for control of the throne and internal supremacy meant that Sasanian leaders were now more concerned with securing their own internal position, that was intrinsically linked with the rising power and influence

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<sup>254</sup> For the roles that hostages did play in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy and relations see Lee (1991).

<sup>255</sup> Howard-Johnson (2010: 42) agrees with this assertion.

<sup>256</sup> Proc. *BP* 1.2.15

of the Hephthalites, than in launching military campaigns in attempt to try and gain a few extra forts or cities in the Mesopotamian frontier.

Thus, in the fifth century the immediate threats posed by the Huns, Hephthalites and Vandals were now rightly regarded as the true threats to the survival and success of both the Roman and Sasanian Empires alike. This shift in military priorities therefore underlines the fact that international relations were shaped first and foremost by the need for security and survival, as espoused by political realism. Importantly, for the justification of understanding the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian relationship through the prism of realist theory, realists argue that states were rational actors in the pursuit of security, and such a shifting of priorities to face more dangerous threats was a rational decision.<sup>257</sup> Likewise, this shifting of priorities towards the respective northern frontiers mediated the intrinsic need both Roman emperor and Sasanian Shah had for military glory and conquest, which they had traditionally gained from launching military campaigns against one another, by providing a new enemies and arenas from which these could be gained.

However, as mentioned earlier, the Roman-Sasanian relationship was plagued by resentment and suspicion that was caused by the existence of various bones of contention and long-held grievances between them.<sup>258</sup> Consequently, even the rise of new threats did not immediately solve all the inherent problems and *casus belli* between the two empires. In order for the now necessary peace to be established these other issues too needed to be fully addressed and overcome. A solution to the constantly fluctuating and bitterly contested balance of power on the Mesopotamian frontier and Fertile Crescent, that was acceptable to the strategic needs and concerns of both sides, had to be found. Similarly, the ambiguity of, and extension of the imperial conflict into the frontier zones, especially in Armenia and Arabia, had to be solved peacefully. Likewise, the ideology of the two empires, which was so antagonistic and directly opposed to the existence of the other had to be replaced, or at least modified, to allow for a change in the nature of the relationship itself. That these ideological differences were only exasperated further by the existence of two rival religions, Roman Christianity and

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<sup>257</sup> Mearsheimer, 1994: 12.

<sup>258</sup> Lee, 2007: 4.

Sasanian Zoroastrianism, each of which heightened suspicions and even frequently motivated religiously inspired campaigns against the neighbouring empire equally needed to be overcome.



## Chapter 2

### Diplomacy: The Protocols of Peace

Diplomacy is generally understood as the direct dialogue, or negotiation, between different states, principally with the aim of maintaining stable international relations.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the *Oxford Dictionary* defines diplomacy as the ‘management of international relations by negotiation’. However, this understanding of diplomacy is based on the modern ideal of diplomatic contact that is controlled and regulated by international law, and entrenched protocols and traditions, all of which are designed to help stimulate peace-making and peace-maintenance. In contrast, ancient diplomacy, especially in the Roman era, was less a dialogue or negotiation between states and more the direct dictation of one side to the other, usually at the conclusion of a military campaign. For example, in the third and fourth centuries Roman-Sasanian peace treaties were always used by one side or the other to enforce their superiority and domination.<sup>2</sup> Roman diplomacy, and ancient diplomacy in general, was intrinsically interwoven into military conflict; as just another aspect of warfare.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to the idea of diplomacy as simply an adjunct to war, the Romans traditionally viewed military victory as the only means of achieving peace, not negotiation. Thus, Polybius states that, ‘[t]he Romans rely on force in all their undertakings, and consider that having set themselves a task they are bound to carry it through’,<sup>4</sup> while in his treatise on reestablishing Roman military supremacy in the fourth century Vegetius advises that, ‘[t]hose who seek peace must prepare for war’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, even the Latin word for peace, *pax*, in the form of the *Pax Romana* or *Pax Augustus*, came to denote Roman domination.<sup>6</sup> As such, diplomacy traditionally took a back seat to military force in the establishment of peace. However, as we have seen, throughout their relationship neither the Romans nor the Sasanians were capable

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<sup>1</sup> Watson, 2005: XV; Eilers, 2009: 1.

<sup>2</sup> NPi § 91; *Pan. Lat.* 22.5. For more on Roman-Sasanian peace treaties in the third century see: Winter (1988).

<sup>3</sup> Woolf, 1993: 172.

<sup>4</sup> 1.37.7.

<sup>5</sup> *Re De Militari* 3.

<sup>6</sup> Woolf, 1993: 176-8; Blockley, 1992: 151; 166.

of gaining the upper-hand over the other to such an extent that they could military impose peace for an extended period.

Equally, in relation to the nature of the traditional Roman diplomacy, realist theory argues that peace between states in an anarchic world, as late antiquity was, could never be achieved as there was an inherent absence of international or interstate laws able to regulate relations between different states. Logically, these limitations and level of diplomacy was wholly incompatible with the need for peace the two empires had in this period. However, as shall be shown, Roman-Sasanian diplomacy did develop towards this modern understanding of diplomacy in the fifth century, with the establishment of some 'aspects of international law' and the advancement of diplomatic contact, such as the sanctity of envoys and the need for a *bellum iustum*, the increased specialisation of diplomats and the establishment of diplomatic protocols and expectations, all of which helped to regulate imperial diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> Importantly in this regard, insofar as realism is concerned, war under heavily militarised conditions, and the Roman and Sasanian Empires were two exceptionally militarised states, could only be avoided with the careful regulation of the balance of power, which was itself dependent on strong and effective diplomacy, and as we shall see the creation of a mutually acceptable balance of power along the imperial frontier was central to the establishment and maintenance of peace in the fifth century. Importantly, in this regard, as shall be seen below, the main aim of the fifth-century treaties was the creation of a mutually acceptable balance of power that would mediate the traditional *casus belli* in the imperial relationship and allow both empires to focus their military attention and resources on the new dangers that threatened them.<sup>8</sup>

Interstate diplomacy and international relations are always a product of their time and develop in relation to new conditions and circumstances.<sup>9</sup> As such, whereas the perennial military conflicts of the third and fourth centuries ensured that imperial diplomacy did not need to move beyond the limited scope as an adjunct of warfare, the changed conditions of

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<sup>7</sup> Wiesehöfer, 2006:132. Blockley (1998: 413) also states that Roman-Sasanian diplomacy did make some steps towards some sort of international law.

<sup>8</sup> Drijvers' (2009: 450) claim that 'diplomacy [was] employed to preserve the balance of power between the two empires' supports this.

<sup>9</sup> Watson, 2005: xviii.

the fifth century necessitated true diplomatic negotiation and relations between the two empires.<sup>10</sup> In this regard, the two underlying factors that provided the impetus for the advancement of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy in this period was the rise of the new external threats and the diminished resources which limited their ability to conduct military campaigns on multiple frontiers.

The connection between the creation of improved diplomacy and the emergence of the new threats that endangered the two empires in the fifth century is evident by the fact that a lot of diplomatic debate focused on the defence of the vulnerable Caucasus, a shared imperial frontier that was increasingly threatened by the Huns.<sup>11</sup> This correlation is further evident in the clear difference in the number of major treaties signed in the third and fourth centuries compared with those signed in the fifth century when the Vandals, Huns and Hephthalites had begun to pressure the empires. In the third century only two major treaties were signed, in 244 and 299, and likewise in the fourth century only two were signed again, in 363 and 387. This stands in stark contrast to the fifth century when four important treaties were signed, in 400, 408/9, 422 and 442.

In order to establish and maintain the peace that would allow them to defend against these new threats the Romans and Sasanians needed to create stronger diplomatic practices that was able to create a mutually beneficial balance of power, by responding to, and containing, a variety of deep-rooted grievances and tensions. These tensions and pressures included internal considerations and concerns, antagonistic imperial and national ideologies, religious competition, cultural competition, economic interests and strategic concerns. The absence of such diplomacy in the third and fourth centuries ensured that Roman-Sasanian relations were heavily militaristic; there was simply no other alternative to renegotiate peace treaties or overcome problems peacefully. However, in the fifth century, largely through a process of trial and error, that constantly adapted and adjusted to overcome new concerns and problems as and when they arose they managed to create strong diplomatic practices that

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<sup>10</sup> In this regard Campbell (2001: 3) states that 'diplomacy takes place when those in control decide that it is in their material self-interest'.

<sup>11</sup> Greatrex (1999: 65) comments on the effect the Hunnic invasion of 395, which took place through the Caucasus, had on the mentality and thinking of both empires. He also highlights that a similar Hunnic invasion of some sort also occurred in 397 which would have likely reinforced this notion.

were able to act as a real alternative to war.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the advancement of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy in the fifth century has led to imperial diplomacy often being regarded as the precursor of modern diplomacy.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter will therefore investigate the process that resulted in the development of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy that moved it away from being simply another form of warfare to one that was capable of maintaining a peace for a century. To do this we will examine the developments that imperial diplomacy underwent in this period and the ways in which it differed from diplomatic contacts between the two empires in the third and early fourth centuries.

### The Treaties

It is perhaps prudent to first analyse the individual treaties that worked to establish and maintain peace between the two empires in the fifth century, the most important of which were those signed in 363, 387, 400, 408/9, 422 and 442.

The first treaty that had important consequences for the peace was that of 363, which was signed following the death and defeat of Julian.<sup>14</sup> This treaty was signed amidst the milieu in which both empires began to realise that they were not capable of fully conquering or militarily dominating the other. This ensured that the treaty signed between Jovian (363-364), Julian's successor, and Shapur II was of a different nature to that signed between the two empires in 299, which was forced upon Narseh after he was defeated by Galerius. These two treaties are often viewed as juxtapositions of one another, insofar as in 299 the Romans, who had just won a decisive victory against the Sasanians, negotiated from a dominant position from which they forced many humiliating concessions from their defeated rival.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, but in contrast, in 363 the roles were reversed and it was the Sasanians who were able to use their new-found military dominance after Shapur's victory over Julian to reverse the treaty of 299 in the own favour. Like the Romans before them in 299, the Sasanians forced humiliating

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<sup>12</sup> Blockley, 1992: 151, 166; Drijvers, 2009: 450; Whitby, 2008: 123

<sup>13</sup> Verosta, 1964: 496.

<sup>14</sup> Amm. Marc. 25.7.9-14.

<sup>15</sup> Blockley, 1984.

concessions from the Romans, primarily the surrender of the strategically important frontier cities of Nisibis and Singara.<sup>16</sup> These two treaties have thus been viewed as evidence of the constant toing and froing of the Roman-Sasanian balance of power, which was consistently dominated by military competition. However, there was one major difference between these two treaties that reveals that rather than being two-sides of the same coin the treaty of 363 began the transition away from the limited diplomacy of the third century, that the 299 treaty epitomised, to the more sophisticated and pragmatic diplomacy of the fifth century.

After Galerius' victory in 299 Diocletian was eager to entrench Roman superiority by completely restructuring the frontier between them. To do this the emperor sent the *magister memoriae*, Probus, to present the defeated Narseh with a set of non-negotiable demands, forcing him to cede large swathes of territory beyond the Tigris, the so-called *regiones Transtigritanae*, such as Sophene, Ingilene, Corduene and Arzanene.<sup>17</sup> This pushed the Roman frontier far beyond the Tigris, the previous limit of Roman territory. Diocletian awarded the *regiones Transtigritanae* to Rome's allied Armenians; a situation that foreshadowed the importance Armenian allies were to play throughout the fourth and fifth century.<sup>18</sup> This completely altered the balance-of-power in the Mesopotamian frontier to Rome's advantage.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Roman-Sasanian trade was restricted solely to Roman controlled Nisibis, which created a Roman monopoly on the profits from custom dues, at least from official trade.<sup>20</sup> As advantageous as this treaty was to Rome it was major blow to Sasanian power and prestige, one that would not be forgotten quickly, and one that festered as a cause of resentment and hostility over the next half century.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the Sasanian resentment of this treaty is evident in Shapur II's assertion to Constantius in 358 that he would take back all the lands that had been stolen from Narseh by Diocletian's 'deliberate deceit'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *CJ.* 4.63.4; *Amm. Marc.* 25.7.9-14.

<sup>17</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 25.7.9; *Fest.* 14.25.; *Pet. Pat. fr.* 13-14. See also Blockley (1992: 5).

<sup>18</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 18.5.3; *Jul. Or.* 1.22 b-c.

<sup>19</sup> For more detailed discussion and debate on the territorial settlement of the 299 treaty see: Luttwak, (1979: 154-5), Blockley (1984) and Dignas & Winter (2007: 122-131).

<sup>20</sup> *Pet. Pat. fr.* 14. *FHG* 4.189.

<sup>21</sup> This view of the 299 treaty is supported by Barceló (1981: 74), Klein (1977: 185) and Wirth (1980: 336-7). However, this view is countered by Dignas & Winter (2007: 130) who argue that given the decisive nature of the Roman victory the demands imposed by Diocletian were relatively modest and restrained.

<sup>22</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 17.5.2-4.

In contrast, when the Sasanians had the upper hand in 363, after their victory over Julian, and negotiated from the position of power they pursued a more pragmatic settlement. Indeed, from the Sasanian point-of-view, Tabarī highlights the more conciliatory tone of this treaty and its negotiation between Shapur II and the new Roman emperor Jovian.<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly, their primary aim was to win back the territories they had lost in 299 and readdress the imperial balance-of-power, and they certainly wished to extract the most advantageous position they could from this treaty; however, rather than follow Diocletian's heavy-handed example Shapur II proved to be a much shrewder diplomat. For example, rather than take back all the territories the Sasanians had lost in 299, and more, which he undoubtedly had the power to do, Shapur instead chose to restore only the five most strategically important *regiones Transtigritanae* to his empire, along with Nisibis and Singara, but allowed the Romans to retain control of all territory beyond the Nymphius River, primarily Sophene and Ingilene.<sup>24</sup> In allowing the Romans to hold onto Sophene and Ingilene Shapur can be seen to have been trying to establish and cement a new balance-of-power in Mesopotamia that was also acceptable to the Roman Empire in the hopes that this would secure the treaty, and the territorial division of Mesopotamia that provided greater strategic defence to the Sasanian Empire, in the long term. Indeed, as Ammianus Marcellinus highlights, another major aspect of this treaty that underlines Shapur's wish for it to be adhered to long-term was the inclusion, for the first time in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy, of an agreed time-period for which the treaty would hold; thirty years.<sup>25</sup>

For these reasons, the treaty of 363 marked an important change in the Roman-Sasanian relationship and imperial diplomacy. Shapur II's pragmatic decision to allow Rome to retain the territories beyond the Nymphius River ensured that both empires were now relatively satisfied with the balance-of-power and territorial division in Mesopotamia.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, although the more warlike Roman writers and historians regarded this treaty as the most humiliating in their history, Roman recognition of the treaty as generally acceptable was seemingly acknowledged by the Roman sources themselves, with the majority taking, if not a positive attitude to the 363 peace treaty, at least a balanced and understanding view of its

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<sup>23</sup> 843.

<sup>24</sup> Zon. 13.14.4-6; Zos. 3.31; Amm. Marc. 25.7.9-11.

<sup>25</sup> 25.7.14. 'Thus a peace of thirty years was concluded'.

<sup>26</sup> Lee, 1993: 22. This is shown by the fact that neither attempted to alter it again for over one hundred years.

outcome.<sup>27</sup> Roman acquiescence with the treaty was further ensured by the decision to allow the Roman populations of Nisibis and Singara to evacuate before the Sasanian takeover.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the 363 treaty was the first example of either empire taking a more pragmatic and long-term approach to diplomacy, rather than utilising it simply as a means to enforce their military domination upon the other. Such a diplomatic settlement was more likely to succeed long term than its predecessors as it did not push the balance of power to the overwhelming advantage of the Sasanian Empire, but instead created an equilibrium that was also more acceptable to the Romans. The success of this pragmatism was evident in the fact that from this time onwards both empires sought only economic and political, not military or territorial gains against one another and neither tried to conquer new land in the Mesopotamian frontier until the sixth century.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these important developments the 363 treaty nevertheless still left many of the entrenched problems and *casus belli* of the Roman-Sasanian relationship unanswered, such as the position of Armenia and the nature of trade restrictions. Although there was a clause that attempted to deal with Armenia it was rather ambiguous, the wording unclear and the bounds of Sasanian authority and influence in the region left vague and ill-defined, all which soon caused trouble between the rivals, each of who perceived the Armenian clause differently. The Sasanians believed the treaty awarded them a free hand in Armenia, to conquer and incorporate it as and when they were able. In contrast, the Romans argued that they had only agreed to withdraw their troops from Armenia and not to support the Armenian king, Arsak, militarily, not that they had granted the Sasanians full suzerainty over the region.<sup>30</sup> The second limitation of the 363 treaty concerned trade and commerce. As in 299,

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<sup>27</sup> Libanius (*Or.* 1.134, 18.277-8), Eutropius (10.17), Eunapius (fr. 29.1.3-6,10-15), Festus (29) and Agathias (4.26.6-7) all regarded the treaty in this negative light. Likewise, although Ammianus Marcellinus (25.7.9-14) saw this treaty as a reversal of Diocletian's gains, he takes a less hostile view of it than most other Roman writers. Other Romans who took a similar attitude to Ammianus Marcellinus in acknowledging the necessity of the peace include Cedrenus (1.539.16-21), Joshua Stylites (242.28), Orosius (7.31.1-2) Rufinus (*HE* 11.1), Socrates (*HE* 3.22.5-7), Sozomen (*HE* 6.3.2), Zonaras (13.14.4-6) and Zosimus (3.31.1-2). While those who saw the treaty itself in a positive light include, Gregory Nazianzenus (*Or.* 5.15), Jerome (*Chron.* 364), Malalas (13.27), Philostorgius (*HE* 8.1), Themistius (*Or.* 5.66a) and Theodoret (*HE* 4.2.2-3). Although it must be noted that the Christian ecclesiastical historians amongst these likely took such a positive view as a way of criticising the disastrous circumstances the pagan Julian had left the Roman army in.

<sup>28</sup> Malalas 13.27; Amm. Marc. 25.9.

<sup>29</sup> Blockley, 1992: 240.

<sup>30</sup> Blockley (1984: 36, 1987: 225) and Greatrex (2000: 36) both comment on the ambiguities caused by the Armenian clause in this treaty.

Nisibis, now controlled by the Sasanians, was left as the only official trading-centre between the two empires, which meant that the Sasanians now had the monopoly on custom dues from which the Romans could no longer profit; this was therefore a major blow to the Romans and soon became a source of grievance to them.

Consequently, although this treaty was an important step in the development of stronger diplomatic practice and towards what would develop into the fifth-century peace it was not capable of maintaining a stable and long-term peace on its own.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, during the reigns of Valens (364-378) and Shapur II Roman-Sasanian tensions were still evident and continued to simmer; although, Armenia, not Mesopotamia, was the source of this tension and the target of two empires' military ambition.<sup>32</sup>

The next major treaty on the road to peace was signed in 387. It was this agreement, signed between Shapur III and Theodosius I, that finally solved the Armenian problem.<sup>33</sup> The failure of previous treaties to resolve Armenia as a *casus bellus* between the Romans and Sasanians was due to the political and cultural conditions within Armenia itself. As shown in 299 and 363, Roman-Sasanian peace treaties predominantly focused on the territorial division of Armenia. However, the nature and traditions of Armenia and the Armenians made any settlement based on land and territorial division unfeasible and always doomed to fail.

Throughout the Roman-Sasanian relationship the Armenian elites, the *nakharars* exploited, manipulated and instigated imperial conflict by persistently switching sides between the two competing empires, ignoring any territorial divisions the imperial powers had put in place. The constant switching of allegiance by the *nakharars* led to a fluctuating balance of power in Armenia that made any long-term stability in the region impossible. Therefore, in 387, after a growing realisation that the Armenians were a source of conflict between them, the empires devised a new type of settlement to solve their disputes in Armenia that was not based on

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Greatrex (2000: 44) claims that the only reason no major conflict erupted soon after was due to the 'intervention of events elsewhere'. This supports the main theory of this thesis that the emergence of new threats in the fifth century was the primary impetus behind the peace.

<sup>32</sup> For Roman-Sasanian conflict in and over Armenia in the period 363-387 see Ammianus Marcellinus (27, 29, 30) and the *Epic Histories* (5.1, 34, 38)

<sup>33</sup> For more detail on why Armenia was such a source of conflict between the two empires see Chapter 3.1.



any land or strict territorial division, but rather on loyalty and cultural leanings; they partitioned and divided authority over the Armenian elites themselves.<sup>34</sup> This new partition was entrenched by an agreement that neither side would accept the allegiance of an Armenian *nakharar* who belonged to the other.<sup>35</sup> This led to the creation of two distinct Roman and Sasanian spheres of influence amongst the *nakharars*. This innovative diplomatic solution, which required a great deal of trust, stabilised the balance of power in the shared northern frontier.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, this important treaty, with its subtle solution of the Armenian problem, was based on the awareness and appreciation of the need for true diplomatic cooperation. This then was a significant step in laying the foundations upon which the fifth-century peace was maintained.<sup>37</sup> Importantly, from a realist perspective, once again, a willingness to establish more stable relations, through the creation of a mutually satisfactory status quo is evident in this treaty. Also important, since this treaty was signed within the thirty-year time limit of the treaty of 363, there was no discussion about frontier territory in Mesopotamia in 387, evidently both empires were still satisfied with the Mesopotamian balance of power.<sup>38</sup> However, as shall be seen below, just like the 363 treaty, the treaty of 387 still left a number of grievances unanswered that needed to be solved if peace was to be maintained, namely, religion, the southern frontier zone in Arabia and commercial interests.

After the Hunnic invasion of 395, which wrought great damage on both empires, imperial peace treaties had an added sense of urgency. This reinforces that this invasion escalated the Roman-Sasanian realisation of the need for détente. Certainly, this new threat, and the subsequent shifting of imperial priorities, was an important factor in the continued adherence to the treaties of 363 and 387.<sup>39</sup> This greater urgency to establish a détente is evident in the

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<sup>34</sup> *Epic Histories* 6.1; *Proc. De. Aed.* 3.1.12-15.

<sup>35</sup> *Men. Prot. fr.* 6.1.

<sup>36</sup> More detailed discussion on the nature, development and success of the 387 treaty can be found in Chapter 3.1.

<sup>37</sup> Rubin, 1986:678; Greatrex, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Blockley (1992: 139) has even argued that there was a tacit agreement between Shapur II and Valens to limit their fighting during the 370s to Armenia and Iberia. This would suggest that both sides accepted the territorial division of Mesopotamia and did not want to disrupt the status quo on that frontier. Blockley also argues that the Armenian solution of 387 was simply inserted alongside the main treaty clauses established in 363.

<sup>39</sup> Greatrex (2000: 44) agrees with this assessment.

fact that the next two treaties, in 400 and 408/9, were concluded while the two empires were already at peace, and not at the conclusion of war, for the first time in Roman-Sasanian relations, again reinforcing that in the fifth century Roman-Sasanian diplomacy had moved beyond being simply an adjunct to warfare.

Arcadius and Yazdgard I, both quickly realising the threat the Huns posed to their empires, worked hurriedly to produce a treaty that would further stabilise imperial relations in order that they could focus on this new threat. The need to organise a new peace treaty, while they were still officially at peace, was likely also heightened by the fact that the thirty-year time limit imposed in the 363 treaty had now expired.<sup>40</sup> Thus, in 400 Arcadius sent an embassy to Yazdgard, led by Anthemius, the man responsible for reinforcing Roman defence against the Huns in the Danube, to negotiate a new treaty.<sup>41</sup> Significantly, Roman writers document only one aspect of the treaty of 400, the joint defence of the Caucasian frontier against the Huns, which suggests that it was predominantly concerned with the reconfirmation of the wider status quo agreed upon in the previous treaties of 363 and 387. That joint frontier defence was the only new clause added to the older agreements furthers the claim that this treaty was signed in direct response to the increasing threat of the Huns to both empires after the Hunnic raid of 395.<sup>42</sup> Although at this early stage no firm agreement was made, negotiations

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<sup>40</sup> Although Claudian (*In Eutropium* 2.474-84) informs us that at the start of his reign, and before the signing of the treaty, Yazdgard threatened war and began planning for skirmishes against the Roman Empire, given his earlier actions of first raising items of concern and potential dispute with the Romans and also his later peaceful policy towards the west this may be seen as a manoeuvre by the Shah to force Arcadius to realise the need for a new peace treaty. Especially after that of 363 had now officially expired.

<sup>41</sup> There is much debate about when this initial treaty between Arcadius and Yazdgard took place. This debate focuses on whether it took place in 400, as stated here, or earlier. The argument for the treaty taking place in 400 makes use of Theodoret's (*HR* 8) note that while travelling in the Sasanian Empire in 400 he passed Anthemius, who was travelling back from the court of the Shah. Unfortunately, however, Theodoret does not provide precise details that would make this certain. Indeed, it is only from this passage in Theodoret that Anthemius' embassy in 400 is known. Yet, that Marutha, who played an important role in these negotiations, was known to be in the Sasanian Empire in 400 also adds weight to the treaty taking place in the same year (Blockley, 1992: 48). Furthermore, it could also be argued that Arcadius would have been too distracted by the threat of Gainas to organise a treaty with the Sasanian Empire before 400.

<sup>42</sup> As Blockley (1992: 51) makes clear, there is no direct evidence of this. However, he makes two pertinent points that are important and deserve consideration here. First, he states that if John Lydus (*De Mag.* 3.52-3) is to be believed, negotiations about the joint defence of the Caucasian Gates had been going on since Theodosius I and, therefore, since no agreement had been made then it is likely that negotiations also continued during the reign of Arcadius. Secondly, Blockley points out the passage of Cedrenus (1.586) where it is stated that in these same negotiations Arcadius sent one thousand pounds of silver to the Sasanian Shah, which was clearly a payment of some sort, and one that Yazdgard could well have put to use in the defence of the Caucasus.

over shared frontier defence were to become a recurring theme of fifth-century Roman-Sasanian diplomacy.

Central to the success of this embassy, at least in reinstating the agreements of 363 and 387, was the bishop Marutha, a member of Anthemius' delegation, who used his personal reputation with Yazdgard to help the two sides reach an accommodation.<sup>43</sup> Such utilisation of envoys and ambassadors with a personal connection, or at least familiarity, with the others' court was to become a regular aspect of diplomacy, and was important for increasing levels of trust and reliability between them.

The imperial *détente* was reasserted again in 408/9 at the start of Theodosius II's reign with the signing of a new treaty.<sup>44</sup> Anthemius, now the leading political figure in the Eastern Empire, was once again involved. This treaty again reconfirmed the agreements put in place with the treaties of 363, 387 and 400 and sought to further reinforce the status quo that had now existed for half a century. Importantly, Anthemius also managed to persuade the Sasanians to accept the insertion of a new trade clause that made the wider agreement even more acceptable to the Romans.

Since 363 Nisibis was the only officially sanctioned trade hub between the two empires and with the city still in the hands of the Sasanians the Romans were unable to profit from official customs dues. The 408/9 treaty solved this by widening the circle of official trade centres to include Callinicum and Artaxata, as well as Nisibis.<sup>45</sup> The fact that this new trade clause included a city in Roman territory (Callinicum), Sasanian territory (Nisibis) and Armenia (Artaxata) shows a more pragmatic approach to commercial relations and an awareness of the resentment caused from one side holding an economic monopoly over the other. The Sasanians were likely aware that granting this concession to the imperial neighbour would

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<sup>43</sup> Marutha's personal friendship and trust with the Shah was cemented when the bishop used his medical skills to help cure Yazdgard's son and relieve the Shah himself of a chronic headache (Soc. *HE* 7.8.1-3).

<sup>44</sup> Socrates (*HE* 7.8) and Sozomen (*HE* 9.4) both date this treaty to 408/9. While the *Codex Justinianus* mentions a treaty signed in 408/9.

<sup>45</sup> *CJ* 4.63.4. The dating for this clause, like the treaty itself, has been debated, with claims (Lee, 1993: 62-63) that it was simply a reiteration of an early treaty, most likely 363 or 387. However, whatever the date this particular clause was first signed in, the argument that it was done so earlier nevertheless still fits into the overall theory that will be presented here, more detail below, that all of the treaties signed in the fifth century that played an important role in the establishment and maintenance of peace. That all of these treaties were part of a process towards the creation of a more mutually acceptable status quo, of which 363 and 387 were an important part, each of which were largely reiterations of their earlier counterparts.

make the wider balance of power, that the Sasanians wished to preserve, more acceptable, and therefore it should be viewed as an attempt to further stabilise and cement the *détente*.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, it has also been claimed that this clause was an effort of mutual cooperation in attempting to regulate cross-frontier travel, and that therefore it was a strong example of the growing *détente* between the two empires.<sup>47</sup> It was also in this treaty that the much debated adoption of Theodosius II by the Yazgard I was said to have been agreed; more discussion of this debate can be found below.<sup>48</sup>

The most important aspect of this treaty however was the agreement that it should be enforced for one hundred years.<sup>49</sup> The inclusion of such a long time-limit indicates how vital long-term stability and peace was for both empires in this century, due to the increasing threat of the Huns. Certainly, it is also important to view this treaty in the context of Anthemius' wider strategy, which was aimed at defence against the Huns in the Danube. His desire to quickly reconfirm a lasting peace with the Sasanian Empire was necessary in order to be able to focus all of Constantinople's military resources on defending the northern frontier.

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<sup>46</sup> Lee (1993: 64) views this differently and highlights the fact that the 408/9 treaty states that this was done to prevent trade being used as espionage. However, presumably it would be easier to prevent espionage if trade continued to be limited to the single city of Nisibis rather than widening the net to include Callinicum and Artaxata as well. Dignas & Winter (2007: 133) and Blockley (1984: 36) agree that the original clause handing over Nisibis to the Sasanian Empire in 363 was related to the Sasanians' desire to break the previous Roman monopoly on trans-border trade. Therefore, this would also suggest that any further clause on this aspect was related to the nature of trans-border trade, not espionage. For the importance of trade agreements in Roman-Sasanian peace treaties generally see: Winter (1987).

<sup>47</sup> Greatrex & Lieu, 2002: 33.

<sup>48</sup> This discussion can be found on pp.141-144. However, once again, the dating here has also been debated with Greatrex & Bardill arguing for an early date. Greatrex & Bardill (1996) present three factors that they believe point to an early date for the adoption. First, they state that Malalas (349) states that Arcadius' death was sudden, and that therefore, Procopius' (*BP.* 1.2.1-10) claim that the agreement was reached on the emperor's deathbed cannot have been true. Second, that Antiochus, the Sasanian emissary sent to negotiate the deal was sent arrived at Constantinople several years before Arcadius' death (*Priscus* fr. 7). Thirdly, that Antiochus was dispatched to Constantinople on Arcadius' request, and that by the time of the emperor's he had become an important man of influence in the Roman court. Therefore, they argue that the Sasanian emissary must surely have been in Constantinople long before 408 if he was an influential man by the time of Arcadius' death. As such, Greatrex & Bardill (1996: 173) suggest that this agreement took place in 402, rather than 408/9. These claims for an early date for the agreement over Yazgard's adoption of Theodosius have therefore also been used to argue that the treaty of 408/9 must have taken place at a different time. Although, Procopius (*BP.* 1.2.1-10), who first wrote about the adoption, alongside Theophanes (*Chron. a.m.* 5900) both say the agreement did indeed take place in 408/9.

<sup>49</sup> Soz *HE.* 9.4.

The next major Roman-Sasanian treaty that helped stabilise peace was signed in more traditional circumstances than its two immediate predecessors; after a military conflict. It was signed to end the short conflict that broke out between Theodosius II and Yazdgerd I, and carried on under his successor, Bahrām V in 421.<sup>50</sup> That a new treaty was needed to end this conflict reinforces that the fifth-century peace was the result of a gradual process that could, and did, hit obstacles that needed to be overcome throughout the century. The 421 conflict began due to the treatment of Christians in the Sasanian Empire and side-switching amongst Arabian allies.<sup>51</sup> Despite some initial fighting in Mesopotamia and Armenia both sides soon realised their true priorities were still on their other frontiers.<sup>52</sup> This realisation was helped by the fact the Huns had crossed the Danube shortly after the beginning of imperial hostilities, which forced the Romans to return their military focus to the northern frontier. Similarly, Bahrām also faced Hephthalite pressure at around the same time on his empire's north-east frontier. Consequently, in 422 a general peace was signed based on the *status quo ante bellum*. However, the outbreak of this war had shown that, despite the relative success of the earlier treaties the détente was still vulnerable to traditional Roman-Sasanian *casus belli* and that further negotiation and compromise would be needed if the mutually necessary peace was to be maintained and other such imperial conflicts avoided in the future.

The precedent set in the 387 settlement of Armenia proved useful in solving the problem caused by the switching of allegiance between the Roman and Sasanian Empires by Arabian allies in 422, as a similar solution was once more utilised. Both empires agreed that the switching of allegiance amongst the Arab tribes needed to be stopped if the status quo was to be stabilised across the whole frontier and, as such, they added a new clause to the general agreement that forbade either side accepting the loyalty of a tribe that was already allied to the other.<sup>53</sup> Thus, similar to the situation in Armenia after 387, two distinct spheres of influence and authority were created. Significantly, for understanding the nature of the fifth-century peace, it is important to note that the flow of Arabs switching sides was usually in Constantinople's favour and that because Arabia was much more strategically important to

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<sup>50</sup> More detailed of the 421 war, its causes and consequences can be found in Chapter 2b and Chapter 3.

<sup>51</sup> Rubin, 1986: 681.

<sup>52</sup> For more information on the course and development of this conflict see: Socrates (*HE* 7.18), Malalas (14.23) and Theodoret (*HE* 5.37.6-10).

<sup>53</sup> Malchus fr. 1.4-7.

the Sasanians than it was to the Romans this was a major concession on behalf of the Romans.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside addressing the Arab situation, the 422 treaty granted religious toleration for Christians in the Sasanian Empire and for Zoroastrians in the Roman Empire.<sup>55</sup> It is important to note that this religious aspect was likely included in an annexe of the treaty, rather than as a full clause.<sup>56</sup> The clause which restricted trade to the three cities of Artaxata, Callinicum and Nisibis was also reconfirmed in 422.<sup>57</sup> While, the Romans once more seemed to have made some sort of agreement to continue contributions for Caucasian defence.<sup>58</sup>

Decisively for the quick negotiation and implementation of the 422 treaty, Helion, a Roman ambassador, was granted plenipotentiary powers to end the conflict as quickly and effectively as possible.<sup>59</sup> The granting of these powers, which gave Helion full negotiating powers and the full authority to act on behalf of the emperor as he saw fit, was unprecedented in Roman diplomacy and highlights how eager the emperor, Theodosius II, was to end the conflict with the Sasanian neighbour in order to refocus on defending against the Huns. Previously, Roman ambassadors were not allowed to act independently and had to refer all decisions to the emperor, or were given strict orders prior to their mission. Therefore, that Helion was granted these powers shows the urgency felt in Constantinople to end this distracting conflict quickly due to the more dangerous threats on other frontiers.

The next important treaty, and test of the two states' willingness to maintain peace, came in 442 after the outbreak of the second, and last, fifth-century war in 441.<sup>60</sup> The causes of this war were different than that of 421, the principle causes being Roman fortification of frontier

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<sup>54</sup> For more detailed discussion on this treaty and the overall importance of the Arab tribes in the Roman-Sasanian relationship see Chapter 3:3.

<sup>55</sup> *Soc. HE* 7.20; *Theoph. Chron. a.m.* 5921; *Mich. Syr.* 8.5; *Priscus fr.* 41.1. See also Schrier (1992).

<sup>56</sup> Blockley, 1992: 56. The importance of annexes in the flexibility and adaptability of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy are discussed in more detail below (pp. 137-140).

<sup>57</sup> *CJ* 4.63.6.

<sup>58</sup> Tabarī (868, 872) states that yearly payments were made whereas al-Thaalibi (p.560) claims that the Romans purchased peace with a payment of two million dinars and other gifts.

<sup>59</sup> *Soc. HE* 7.20.

<sup>60</sup> It is important to note that both Greatrex (1993) and Croke (1984) have dated this war to 440, rather than 441 as is suggested here.

towns and the lack of Roman contributions to the defence of the Caucasus.<sup>61</sup> That the Sasanians were willing to go to war over these contributions, or lack thereof, reveals how important they were to the Sasanian defence against the Hunnic threat in the fifth century. Tellingly, the temptation to coerce Constantinople to fulfil their financial promises in this way was amplified by the fact 'the Romans were occupied elsewhere' at this time.<sup>62</sup> As such, when Yazdgard II attacked, Constantinople's military focus was on their other frontiers, against the Huns and Vandals; therefore, they were unlikely to refuse Sasanian demands in the fear this would lead to conflict on their eastern frontier at the same time that they could not afford.<sup>63</sup> As such, the irony of the outbreak of this war is that it reinforces the primacy of the threats the empires faced at this time had, and that each empire always looked first and foremost to their own needs.

As was now becoming traditional, the treaty of 442 re-established the status quo that had been developing since 363, as the main clauses of the treaty of 422 and its predecessors were reconfirmed. The Romans also made a vague agreement about re-continuing their contributions to frontier defence in the Caucasus, although as before this agreement was never confirmed by an official clause and thus was, once again, not made an official obligation of the peace treaty.<sup>64</sup> Procopius also states that in this treaty both sides agreed to forbid the construction of any new fortifications along the frontier.<sup>65</sup> Prohibiting the construction of any new fortifications on the frontier was a major step in guaranteeing the continuation of the status quo on the Mesopotamian frontier, it underlines that neither side was interested in attempting to alter it to their own advantage at the time of this treaty. Thus, the inclusion of

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<sup>61</sup> Luther, 2014: 185; Rubin, 1986: 683-4. Rubin argues that Roman failure, or even refusal, to pay contributions in this instance was a clear example that they did not value peace in the same way as the Sasanians. In that, they were willing to throw it away in order to save money on what was, in the grand scheme of things, an expenditure of little financial consequence. However, as will be made clear below, the payments of such contributions or subsidies was never a fully integrated clause of any treaty between the empires and therefore, by refusing to pay the Romans were not breaking any treaty or even the wider peace.

<sup>62</sup> Theodt. *HE* 5.37. The other threats that occupied the Romans were the Huns (Marcellinus, *Chron.* 441.1) and the Vandals, against whom the Romans were preparing their first major expedition against.

<sup>63</sup> For more on the development of this war see: Theodoret (*HE* 5.37.5-6), Moses of Chorene (3.67) and Elishé (7/61-2). There has been much debate on whether Theodoret was writing about this war or the earlier conflict of 421: with Lee (1987) arguing for 440 and Croke (1984) arguing for 421.

<sup>64</sup> Josh. Styl. *Chron.* 9-10; Malalas 18.449.

<sup>65</sup> *BP* 1.2.15. However, Procopius' narrative is unclear here, as the historian confuses the two wars and treaties of 422 and 442. Yet even if this was agreed in 422 rather than 442 it still nevertheless reveals the same desire to strengthen the stable relations by seeking to further cement the well-established status quo between the two empires. Dignas & Winter (2007:137) state that this clause was agreed in 442, not 422.

this clause, in relation to the previous extensive fortification-building on this frontier in the third and fourth centuries and their extensive new fortification building on the Danube and the Gorgan Plain respectively in the fifth century underlined the shifting of priorities that took place at this time. Indeed, the fifth century was the only time in the Roman-Sasanian relationship that neither side attempted to alter, or bolster their position in the contested Mesopotamian frontier like they did constantly in the third, fourth and sixth centuries.<sup>66</sup>

Analysing these treaties in chronological order shows they were all largely reconfirmations of one another and developed the status quo first established in 363 with new clauses added to help resolve new or unanswered problems as and when they arose.<sup>67</sup> Although this may seem rather a simple and superficial conclusion it is nevertheless an important one, it granted the Roman-Sasanian relationship a stability and constancy that it had previously lacked. Furthermore, it is evident that throughout the fifth century the Romans and Sasanians were equally willing to try and resolve the traditional grievances and causes of war, with both granting concessions to the other when they were needed in order for them to be able to concentrate their military forces on other frontiers.

However, despite the Roman-Sasanian need to create a stable and lasting *détente* there is often a major gap between the willingness to do something and the ability to achieve it. Certainly, the more primitive Roman-Sasanian diplomacy of the third century, that was predominantly another form of warfare and competition, was incapable of creating and maintaining a mutually acceptable balance of power, therefore, it is important to now investigate the developments that took place in diplomacy during in the late fourth and fifth century that enable such a peace to be established.

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<sup>66</sup> Howard-Johnson, 2012: 101-102.

<sup>67</sup> Rubin, 1986: 678.



## Diplomatic Developments

As evident in the description of the major treaties in this period, Roman-Sasanian diplomacy underwent a number of key developments in the fifth century that affected its ability to act as a real and viable alternative to war in addressing the problems between them. These key developments included regular diplomatic contact, the use of time limits in treaties, the increased importance and power of envoys and a shift in imperial ideology and diplomatic language.

### **Formalisation and Diplomatic Protocols**

Arguably the most prevalent development in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy in the fifth century was how rigid and ritualised its protocols and formalities became. It was this that marked Roman-Sasanian diplomacy out as unique from other diplomatic relationships in the ancient world, and different to both empires' diplomatic relations with their other neighbours. Numerous accounts from both empires underline how ubiquitous and important diplomatic conventions became. The *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) informs us of the strict rituals that were expected to be performed when a Roman embassy was welcomed into the Sasanian Empire:

Lodgings were prepared along the highway, a task which the governor [*marzbān*] performed. Clothing and food were prepared and there was no lack of carpets and bedding. When the prime minister [*kardār*] was informed of an arrival and ascertained why the ambassador came to the king a racing-camel and a scribe were dispatched to Shah Ardashir in order that an escort should be sent out to welcome the envoy.<sup>68</sup>

Although this extract comes from an earlier period than the fifth century it is useful in highlighting some of the rituals and formalities that existed even in the early stages of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy. It tells us that upon receiving an ambassador into their empire the Sasanians were expected to provide accommodation, cover the cost and expenditure of the ambassador's travels in their territory and to provide an escort to ensure his safety. The *Shahnama* also emphasises the role played by high ranking officials, the *marzbān* and *kardār*,

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<sup>68</sup> 218.

in ensuring these protocols were fulfilled, further emphasising the importance of making certain they were followed correctly and promptly.

Similarly, the later Roman account given by Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, a ruler of the Byzantine Empire in the tenth century, of the sixth century Sasanian embassy to Constantinople, led by the ambassador Yazdgushnasp, reveals the diplomatic formalities and rituals upheld on the Roman side of the border.<sup>69</sup> Although many of the same elements of diplomatic protocol were still practiced, such as providing an escort for the foreign embassy, covering its expenses, providing accommodation and the involvement of high ranking officials, there was evidently an expansion of such formalities in the intervening period; the late fourth and fifth centuries. This expansion is especially evident in the language used by Constantinus Porphyrogenitus, throughout his account the word 'necessary' features eight times, while 'customary' also makes regular appearances, when recording what was expected when receiving an embassy from the Sasanian Empire. Accordingly, every aspect of the embassy's journey in Roman territory was carefully regulated by traditions and customs, from the amount of horses and pack animals they were provided with (five horses and thirty pack animals), to a customary time limit of one hundred and three days that they were expected to follow rigidly when travelling from the frontier in Mesopotamia to Constantinople. However, this is not to suggest that embassies and envoys were treated harshly, in fact they were afforded every respect by the host empire, all their expenses were paid for, just as they were in the third century, they were given gifts, and even a choice of travelling options when crossing from Helenopolis to Nicomedia, whether 'on foot' or 'by light vessels'.

To ensure these expectations were upheld every stage of the embassies' journey was prepared, supervised, organised and hosted by a series of officials. In his passage Constantinus Porphyrogenitus mentions the *magister, praefectus orbis, silentarius, comes privatorum, sacellarius, optio, magistrianus, ducici, labaresioi*, 'men from the workshop' and 'men from the arsenal' all with individual, and often highly specific, responsibilities. For example, the *comes privatorum* bore 'the expense of the bed linen' that was to be provided to the Sasanian envoy, whereas the *silentarius* '[received] him [at the frontier] and [guided] him safely through Roman territory.' Thus, although not a straight comparison with the

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<sup>69</sup> *De Caer.* 89-90.

*Shahnama*, this does suggest that the number of officials involved in maintaining the rituals inherent in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy had increased in the intervening century.

Although not direct counterparts, viewing the *Shahnama* and Constantinus Porphyrogenitus' account side-by-side in this way permits an insight into the evolution of diplomatic protocols between the third and sixth century, and highlights how important the late fourth and fifth century was in this development. Clearly, a huge amount of infrastructure, expenditure, expertise and imperial officials' time was expended on ensuring diplomatic contact with the Sasanian Empire went as smoothly as possible and that all formalities and rituals were met in exemplary fashion. Furthermore, analysing the two sources side-by-side allows us to counter some of the inherent flaws in the *Shahnama* as a source of historical information. The *Shahnama* was composed by Ferdowsi in the eleventh century and was thus far removed from the Sasanian history it describes, while the fact that it was primarily a poem, designed to be performed orally, not a historical record, meant poetic technique and devices frequently took priority over historical accuracy.<sup>70</sup> However, despite these concerns the *Shahnama* does still retain useful information, the veracity of which can be ascertained only through collaboration with other sources. Thus, in this regard, that Constantinus Porphyrogenitus' work, which is usually regarded as well informed and reliable, relates similar protocols as those mentioned by the *Shahnama* reinforces that they did take place, and they were important, in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy. Indeed, that Porphyrogenitus' work, the *De ceremoniis aulae byzantine*, was an encyclopaedia compiled from records gleaned from the imperial archive to act as practical advice to imperial agents further confirms the authenticity of these diplomatic practices as something that was expected to be adhered to.<sup>71</sup> In this regard, the reliability of Porphyrogenitus' work on this embassy is further strengthened by the likelihood that his information came from Peter the Patrician.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> For the underlying poetic nature of the *Shahnama* see: Davidson (1994).

<sup>71</sup> For more on his work see: Dignas & Winter (2007: 247-48), Toynbee (1973) and Sevchenko (1992).

<sup>72</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 248.

Failure to comply with these strict formalities and rituals could cause offence but also, on occasion, result in the failure of the embassy as a whole.<sup>73</sup> That these protocols were evidently so ubiquitous and important in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy suggest that the new diplomatic relationship between the two empires in the fifth century was based on building up trust that had previously been absent.<sup>74</sup> Trust not only to fulfil these ritualised expectations but also trust that neither would attempt to upset the fragile balance of power that maintained the peace. As such, all these formalities and rituals were all attempts to build up the trust, through ‘costly signalling’, in making small but significant gestures, that was necessary for diplomacy to work as a real substitute for war.<sup>75</sup>

### **The Role of the Magister Officiorum**

Constantinus Porphyrogenitus’ account of Yazdgushnasp’s embassy to the Roman Empire also exposes another important aspect of Constantinople’s foreign policy in this period, particularly its relationship with the Sasanian Empire, the expanding influence and importance of the *magister officiorum*. The role and authority of the *magistri* expanded in the fifth century, especially in relation to diplomacy. Priscus, as previously stated, a man familiar with Roman diplomacy in this period, reinforces the importance of the *magistri* during the fifth century:

[the emperor] of necessity confides in this official, for the *magister* is privy to all the emperor’s plans, since he is responsible for the sending of messengers, interpreters and soldiers of the imperial guard.<sup>76</sup>

After this statement Priscus provides examples of emperors seeking the advice of their *magister officiorum* in shaping imperial responses to events beyond their own borders. For

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<sup>73</sup> Amm. Marc. 17.5.1-2; Proc. BP. 1.2.15; Theo.Sim. 3.9.

<sup>74</sup> This can be linked to Kydd’s (2005: 5) idea that ‘The key mechanism that makes reassurance [and trust] possible is ‘costly signalling’, that is, making small but significant gestures that serve to prove that one is trustworthy’. Whitby (2008: 123) argues that good faith and trustworthiness were especially important in international relations and diplomacy in Rome’s eastern frontier. Therefore the creation and execution of these rituals and protocols was important in maintaining such good faith and trust between the two empires. Lee (1991: 2009) also stresses that the lack of Roman ‘dirty tricks’ and difference in the use of hostages in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy was a further sign of the building of trust between the two empires.

<sup>75</sup> Indeed, in relation to this idea of slowly building up trust in diplomacy, Menander Protector (fr. 26.1 2.80-132) criticised a Sasanian diplomat for negotiating in bad faith.

<sup>76</sup> fr. 2.1/59-66.

example, he states that Martialis gave Theodosius II advice on how to best deal with Attila and likewise he tells us that Marcian was advised by Euphemius about events in the Caucasus in the 450s.<sup>77</sup> Thus, viewed together with Constantinus' description of their activities Priscus' comment that the emperors routinely sought the advice of the *magister* underlines how important they had become; they were involved in almost every aspect of diplomacy and foreign relations.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the *magister officiorum* were also regularly involved directly in negotiations: both Helion and Hermogenes, led embassies to Ctesiphon, in 422 and 505/6 respectively.<sup>79</sup> They were also responsible for ensuring many of the aforementioned diplomatic protocols were conducted properly, such as sending an official to welcome Sasanian envoys and embassies at the frontier, sending other officials of various rank to greet and guide the embassy on the different legs of its journey in Roman territory, preparing official letters or *mandata* to be given to the envoy and more generally the housing, entertaining and monitoring the embassy.<sup>80</sup>

However, despite the increased importance of the office there did not seem to be a corresponding rise in the expectation that those promoted to the *magistri* needed any qualifications or previous experience. Indeed, in the fifth and sixth centuries only two men had previous experience in foreign relations or diplomacy before they were promoted to the office of *magister officiorum*; Anthemius and Peter the Patrician.<sup>81</sup> Kinship, friendship and patronage, as with most things in the Roman Empire, predominantly played the deciding factor in the selection of this official rather than experience or talent.<sup>82</sup> Yet, previous experience or not, the existence of an official in overall charge of the diplomatic relationship with the Sasanian Empire made imperial diplomacy much more coherent and structured than the ad hoc approach that had previously existed.

Priscus also highlights that the *magister officiorum* was in command of a corps of interpreters, the *interpretes diversarum gentium*, whose existence is further confirmed by the *Notitia*

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<sup>77</sup> On Theodosius II and Martialis see Priscus (fr. 2.1/59-66). On Marcian and Euphemius see Priscus (fr. 33.2).

<sup>78</sup> Lee, 1993: 41.

<sup>79</sup> Lee, 2008: 110.

<sup>80</sup> Const. Porph. *De. Caer.* 89-90.

<sup>81</sup> Lee, 1993: 41.

<sup>82</sup> As evident in the careers of Paulinus and Valerius (*Chron. Pasch.* p.578-9). However, evidence for the background and past experience of the majority of the *magistri* is patchy and inconclusive, therefore it is impossible to say with any certainty whether past experience or any other qualifications were important or not (Lee, 1993: 43).

*Dignitatum*.<sup>83</sup> A body of interpreters is central to successful diplomacy between any states, it would be virtually impossible to establish a firm, stable and reliable diplomatic relationship if mutual linguistic understanding was absent. Thus, their existence in fifth-century Roman-Sasanian diplomacy was essential in creating the much-needed détente. They were utilised in the translation of documents, recording treaties, they also acted as translators for Sasanian envoys and they were sent on diplomatic missions and embassy when necessary.<sup>84</sup> Alongside the creation of the corps of interpreters was the establishment of the *scrinium barbarorum*, which was responsible for preserving the records of diplomatic contact.<sup>85</sup> Together with the increased importance of the *magistri* as an overseeing official, these developments helped to cement diplomacy as an important and proficient body of Roman foreign policy. This new diplomatic proficiency undoubtedly played a leading role in the Constantinople's ability to maintain such a delicate peace with the Sasanian Empire throughout the fifth century.

That the *magister officiorum* gradually acquired more influence and responsibility in foreign relations has led some scholars to argue that during the fifth century a quasi-foreign legation now existed in the Roman Empire.<sup>86</sup> This argument centres on the idea that since the *magistri* increasingly became responsible for important aspects of foreign relations, such as receiving foreign delegations, the corps of translators and archives, in which written treaties were presumably kept, that they therefore also had a certain degree of responsibility and control over the direction and pursuit of foreign relations more generally.<sup>87</sup> Although caution is needed in this regard, there is no doubt that *magistri*, and those under their control, became increasingly relevant to the empire's foreign relations.<sup>88</sup> As such, this could suggest that during the fifth century the Romans began to appreciate the need to better understand the world beyond their borders, if they were to be able to react effectively to new threats and changing circumstances. Such a nuanced approach is evident in establishing peace with the Sasanians in order to combat the new threats of the Huns and Vandals in order to avoid overstretching their military resources.

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<sup>83</sup> *Or.* 9.46. These interpreters are also mentioned to have existed in the western Empire (*Occ.* 11.52).

<sup>84</sup> Garsoïan, 1983:574.

<sup>85</sup> *Const. Porph. De. Caer.* 89-90.

<sup>86</sup> For example Jones (1986: 369) described the *magister* as 'a sort of minister of foreign affairs'.

<sup>87</sup> This argument is highlighted by Blockley (1992: 136-5), although he himself is not convinced.

<sup>88</sup> On the caution needed in this regard see Blockley (1992: 135-6).

The evolution of the *magister* from an official initially involved exclusively in palace administration to the most important official in foreign relations was surely connected to the new importance diplomacy had as an independent arm in imperial relations in the fifth century. This importance necessitated that the emperors had someone they could trust to conduct and oversee diplomacy, and who were they more likely to trust than the men in charge of the palace, where the emperors now spent the vast majority of their time.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, the importance of this development for the creation and maintenance of the fifth century détente with the Sasanian Empire is shown by the fact that the *magister officiorum* dealt mainly with the imperial neighbour.<sup>90</sup> Having an official in overall charge of diplomatic contact with the Sasanian Empire would have greatly aided the continuation of a policy of peace with the eastern neighbour throughout the fifth century.

### **Embassies: Regular Diplomatic Contact**

Unceasing embassies were sent to and fro between the sovereigns of Persia and the Roman Empire, for which there were continual occasions.<sup>91</sup>

It was a long-standing custom for both states that after major envoys lesser ones should be sent to give thanks for the reception and friendly treatment of the major envoys.<sup>92</sup>

Menander Protector and Socrates here both confirm the regularity of diplomatic contact in the fifth century, and from their accounts it is no exaggeration to state that such regular contact had become another aspect of Roman-Sasanian diplomatic ritual and protocol. Socrates wrote his *Ecclesiastical History* in the fifth century itself and, therefore, his account is contemporary to this 'continual' diplomatic contact.<sup>93</sup> Menander gives a more specific insight into the distinction and difference between the two main types of embassies that were

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* This assessment of the *magistri's* development is supported by Lee here.

<sup>90</sup> For instance, Lee (2008: 112-3) argues that the *magister officiorum* was not involved in treaty-making with barbarian neighbours. Although, he does admit the evidence for this is inconclusive.

<sup>91</sup> Soc. *HE* 7.8.2.

<sup>92</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 18.6. Menander also mentions this distinction between major and minor embassies again at 20.1 and 23.8.

<sup>93</sup> Due to his access to the resolutions of church councils, imperials letters and church communications Socrates was generally a well-informed and reliable source. For more information on Socrates see Leppin (1996).

most regularly dispatched in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy.<sup>94</sup> Whereas ‘major’ envoys and embassies had the power to discuss and negotiate the wider peace treaties Menander states that the ‘lesser’ embassies merely carried out routine or preliminary diplomatic business.<sup>95</sup> Although Menander Protector was writing in the sixth century, the fact that he says this was a ‘long-standing custom’ suggests that this practice also existed in the fifth century. Indeed, the existence of both major and minor embassies in the fourth century is confirmed by an inscription on the seal ring of a Roman ambassador dispatched to the Sasanian Empire during the reign of Shapur III which reinforces Menander’s account above.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, the fact that this practice existed in both the fourth and sixth centuries indicates that it also took place in the fifth century. This practice undeniably had a transformative effect on the regularity and frequency of official contact between the two empires. Certainly, such a delicate peace as that between the Roman and Sasanian Empires in the fifth century was dependent on regular diplomatic contact, and we have already seen that as many treaties were signed in the fifth century as that in the third and fourth centuries combined.

As Socrates noted, regular diplomatic contact between the two empires was also upheld through the existence of ‘continual occasions’. These diplomatic occasions included the sending of a messenger to confirm the accession of any new Roman emperor or Sasanian Shah to either throne to their counterpart across the frontier,<sup>97</sup> and also the sending of a messenger ahead of an embassy to state its general purpose and to request its reception.<sup>98</sup> Imperial messengers and diplomats were also dispatched regularly for a variety of more general missions including, delivering messages, gathering information, clarifying interests, negotiating treaties and paying respect. This new tradition of ‘unceasing embassies’ and exchanges of envoys provided a regular and direct point of contact between the two sovereigns, and created a framework to defuse any potential conflicts and settle disputes.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Blockley (1992: 250) however, argues that this only shows that follow-up embassies were a long-standing custom, not the major and minor distinction. However, either way it reveals that diplomatic contact between the two empires increased in the previous century.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 1992: 152, Canepa, 2009: 129; Wiesehöfer (2006: 133).

<sup>96</sup> Stock, 1978; Lee, 1993: 170.

<sup>97</sup> John Eph. *HE* 6.22. Chyrsos, 1976; Whitby, 2008: 123; Canepa, 2009: 123.

<sup>98</sup> Lee, 1986: 458.

<sup>99</sup> Canepa, 2009:1 29.



Hence, when an envoy was sent on a mission with the task of being little more than a simple messenger and bearer of gifts, which often happened, it was still an important role, as it ensured regular contact between the two courts.

Alongside the embassies that were sent directly 'between the sovereigns of Persia and the Roman Empire' local and frontier diplomacy was also important in the creation of diplomatic practices that were capable of maintaining peace between the two empires. Frontier diplomacy was instrumental in avoiding the outbreaks of local conflicts, which always had the potential to flare up into wider military entanglements.<sup>100</sup> For example, in 485 when tensions were raised after Arab tribes allied to the Sasanians conducted raids against the Roman Empire, Shah Balāš, eager to avoid being dragged into a wider conflict, ordered local dignitaries, including a Christian bishop, the regional military commander and the Arab client leader himself to meet with the local Roman *dux* to resolve the dispute.<sup>101</sup> The fact that they were able to arrange a satisfactory settlement to these hostilities quickly and efficiently shows the effectiveness of local diplomacy.<sup>102</sup> What this incident also makes clear is that it was not just the major, or even the minor, embassies that were responsible for maintaining the fifth-century peace but every aspect, no matter at what level, of the Roman-Sasanian diplomacy was utilised in maintaining peace throughout this century.<sup>103</sup>

The existence of such capable and adaptive local frontier diplomacy added another layer of flexibility to Roman-Sasanian diplomacy. It ensured local dignitaries could deal with unexpected problems immediately without having to refer everything back to the emperor or Shah, which would have taken too long and risked smaller conflicts escalating into larger ones. Although some scholars have argued that direct central imperial involvement was largely absent from frontier diplomacy and that, by necessity, local dignitaries had to act on their own initiative, which was of course true, the incident above shows that emperors and

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<sup>100</sup> Proc. *BP.* 1.16.6; Theo. Sim. 3.9.2.

<sup>101</sup> *Syn. Or.* 532-4.

<sup>102</sup> Blockley (1992: 130) uses this incident to suggest that the fact all negotiations to end these raids took place at a local level and between local dignitaries shows there was no overall central government leadership in frontier policy. However, the fact that these negotiations were ordered by the Shah counters this in itself. While his motivations for becoming involved in this dispute, to avoid a wider war with Constantinople, suggest that Balāš, and the central government did have an aim; preserving the peace that had been carefully established and maintained by his predecessors. Therefore, surely the local dignitaries would have been informed of what was expected of them at the start of their negotiations.

<sup>103</sup> Other aspects of successful frontier diplomacy are recorded by Procopius (*BP.* 1.16.6), Theophanes (*Chron. a.m.* 6064) and Theophylact Simocatta (3.9.2).

Shahs did have direct influence and overall authority over them, and that the wider aims and policies the imperial rulers wished to pursue always retained a dictating influence on the decisions of local officials.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, the fact Balāš ordered his subordinates to solve this problem confirms that. Local dignitaries and military commanders would have been informed of what was expected of them and what strategy the emperor or Shah wanted to pursue at the start of their commission, just as the leaders of major embassies were, and none would have been willing to go against the wishes of their emperor or Shah.

Frequent diplomatic contact was essential in maintaining peace throughout the fifth century. The regularity of such interactions shows that the *détente* was not an easily implemented policy but was the result of an on-going diplomatic process; a process that required constant and consistent attention. Regular contact was yet another feature of the signalling of trust and good-faith between the two empires that was necessary in the maintenance of peace in the fifth century. Moreover, increasing regular diplomatic contact was fundamentally important in improving the ad-hoc and disjointed diplomacy of earlier centuries.

### **Ambassadors and Envoys**

Although all diplomatic communication between the empires took place ruler-to-ruler, emperor and Shah never met face-to-face, even Jovian and Shapur II in 363 who were on the same battlefield did not meet personally or conduct negotiations in person.<sup>105</sup> Rather, the imperial rulers used intermediaries, usually high ranking officials, to represent them in negotiations. It could be argued that since the rulers never met or negotiated in person, but did so through proxies, this was a block to true trust or negotiation.<sup>106</sup> However, the avoidance of direct ruler-to-ruler negotiations served a purpose that, once again, separated

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<sup>104</sup> Those who argue this include Blockley (1992: 135) and Scholten (1998: 467). For more detailed discussion on the influence and authority of the Roman emperors over their foreign policies and frontiers see Millar (1982) and Sidebottom (2007: 8-11).

<sup>105</sup> Amm. Marc. 25.7.5-8. However, it is important to note that Tabarī (843) claims that Shapur II and Jovian did meet face-to-face, that they 'both fell on the ground before each other' and that Shapur 'embraced [Jovian] for what he had done' before negotiating the 363 peace treaty.

<sup>106</sup> Indeed, even Jovian and Shapur II were on the same battlefield after Julian's death in 363 they did not negotiate in person but continued to use intermediaries (Amm. Marc. 25.7.5-8).

Roman-Sasanian diplomacy from imperial diplomatic relations with their other neighbours. When negotiating directly with barbarian rulers Roman emperors used these meetings as chance to overawe the leader and his subjects by demonstrating his, and by extension the Roman Empire's, magnificence, wealth and power through ostentatious displays that the barbarians could not match.<sup>107</sup> In this regard, Roman emperors used direct negotiations as another means of competition, to try and assert their supremacy over the barbarian leader. However, unlike barbarian rulers, the Roman emperor and Sasanian Shah could match or even surpass one another in ostentatious display.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, face-to-face negotiations between the Roman and Sasanian rulers could lead to competition between the emperor and Shah that could actually hamper negotiations or, if one was outshone by the other could create internal trouble for the losing party. This Roman-Sasanian avoidance of direct meetings can therefore ironically be seen as further evidence of the development of diplomacy away from being simply an adjunct or different form of competition.<sup>109</sup>

Consequently, the success of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy was always largely dependent on the skill of those chosen to be ambassadors and envoys. Their importance was recognised in the fifth century when ambassadors were granted full negotiating powers and authority. Helion, who led the embassy that negotiated the peace treaty of 422, was the first to be granted such plenipotentiary powers by a Roman emperor (it is not surprising to note that he held the position of *magister officiorum*). It is unsurprising, and also informative, that such plenipotentiary powers were granted to ambassadors in the fifth century, when the Romans needed peace with the Sasanian Empire.

Accordingly, due to their importance, only officials of the highest rank, chosen from among the *illustri*, led diplomatic missions. The priority of the diplomatic relationship with the Sasanians is once more evident in the fact that envoys sent to the neighbouring empire were always of higher rank than those sent to negotiate with other neighbours. The only exceptions to this being the Huns under Attila and the Vandals under Geiseric who were both sent *illustres* to negotiate with, which reinforces the importance these two groups played in

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<sup>107</sup> Amm. Marc. 30.3.4-6; Eunap. 18.6.

<sup>108</sup> Lee. 2008b: 112.

<sup>109</sup> Although, when hosting an embassy from the neighbouring empire ostentatious displays of magnificence were still important (Const. Porph. *De. Caer.* 1.89).

Constantinople's foreign policy in this period.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, during and after the fifth century, it became common practice for the *magister officiorum* to lead Roman embassies. An official of equally high rank, the Shah's personal chamberlain, led Sasanian embassies.<sup>111</sup> Accordingly, sending an envoy to lead an embassy who was not considered to hold the appropriate rank could cause anger and resentment, as Constantius' selection of an *ex-pro-magistro equitum* to lead an embassy to Shapur II did in 358.<sup>112</sup> There are various reasons for the use of such high ranking individuals as ambassadors. First, it was undoubtedly a sign of respect to the neighbouring empire and its ruler. Secondly, it was connected to the aforementioned protocols and rituals of imperial diplomacy. Thirdly, given how important Roman-Sasanian diplomacy became in the fifth century, both emperor and Shah alike needed people they could trust to lead embassies on their behalf, and men of high rank and station were likely thought to be more reliable in this regard. This would have been especially true during the fifth century when lead envoys were granted plenipotentiary powers by the Roman emperors, someone of lesser rank would simply have not been deemed worthy of acting with the full authority and consent of the emperors.

Surprisingly, given the importance of ambassadors and envoys and the evolution of diplomacy in other areas, the Romans never established a specialist core of professional diplomats. Apart from the lead-envoy, embassies were made up of any number of officials from different sections of Roman society and politics that included civil officials, military officers, members of the imperial guard, clergy and physicians.<sup>113</sup> The selection criterion for diplomats varied widely and was very individual in nature, as such, the reasons they were chosen equally varied widely, from status, present needs, personal desire and influence.<sup>114</sup>

However, envoys and ambassadors did become more specialised in one important aspect; past experience. In the fifth century the practice of sending the same envoy on multiple missions, especially to the Sasanian Empire, became more prevalent. Marutha was sent twice

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<sup>110</sup> Priscus fr. 9.2; Malchus fr. 5.

<sup>111</sup> Lee, 2008: 108-9.

<sup>112</sup> Eunap. VS. 6.5.2-10.

<sup>113</sup> Lee, 1993: 46; Scholten, 1998: 454.

<sup>114</sup> Blockley, 1992: 136. Although there were examples of envoys being chosen for the skill and training in oratory and rhetoric (Amm. Marc. 27.5.15; John Lydus *De. Mag.* 3.53).

to the Sasanian Empire under Theodosius II, Anatolius was sent on three occasions to negotiate with Attila while Phylarchus was sent to the ruler of Dalmatia in 462/3 and then to Geiseric in 467.<sup>115</sup> This increased again in the sixth century, Rufinius undertook seven missions to the Sasanian Empire, Hermogenes three, Zacharias of Sura four, Peter the Patrician three, while Constantianus and Sergius also both led two embassies each.<sup>116</sup> Previously, in the fourth century there was only one example of the same envoy being sent on multiple embassies, Victor, the *magister equitum*, who was sent on a diplomatic mission to the Goths in the 360s and then to the Sasanian Empire in 377.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, Marutha's success in the treaty of 400 made clear how envoys with a personal connection or well-established reputation in the imperial or royal courts were especially adept at negotiating peace treaties, the bishop was described as 'mediator of peace and concord between the East and West'.<sup>118</sup>

The utilisation and sending of the same ambassadors and envoys on multiple missions to the same neighbouring power was likely stimulated by the increased diplomatic contact between the two empires in the same period. It would have become a necessity to use the same individuals numerous times when such contacts took place more regularly.

Evidently, the fifth century was an important period of transition in the development of this aspect of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy. Although there is only one explicit example of an individual being sent on multiple embassies to the Sasanian Empire in the fifth century this does not mean it did not happen on other occasions, as, traditionally, Roman historiography and historians were primarily interested in recording wars with foreign powers, and to a lesser extent the major peace treaties that ended these wars.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, the fact that there were only two short wars between the Roman and Sasanian Empires in the fifth century and that the vast majority of diplomatic contact between them would have been regular, but largely negligible, at least in the eyes of Roman historians, they would not have attracted much interest. Thus, the fact that there is more historical evidence of the same envoy being sent on

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<sup>115</sup> *PLRE* vol. 2; Anatolius 10; Phylarchus. Other examples of envoys being sent on multiple missions include, Pelagius, Censorius and Trygetius (Lee, 1993: 46).

<sup>116</sup> *PLRE* vol. 2, Rufinus 13; vol. 3, Hermogenes 1; For Zacharias see: Blockley (1980: 91-92). For Constantianus and Sergius see: Procopius (*BP* 2.24.3, 28.2).

<sup>117</sup> *PLRE* vol. 1, Victor 4.

<sup>118</sup> *Syn. Or.* p.255.

<sup>119</sup> As seen by the overwhelming focus on warfare in Ammianus Marcellinus, Zosimus and Procopius. For more detailed studies on Roman historiography in general and the later historians themselves see: Rohrbacher (2002), Treadgold (2010), Feldherr (2009), Drijvers & Hunt (1999) and Kaldellis (2004) among many others.

multiple diplomatic missions to the Sasanian Empire in the sixth century is likely due to the increased interest Roman historians would have once again in this relationship, as the two empires were once again at war.

Such past experience had many advantages for the potential success of an embassy: familiarity with the empire, court and personnel, greater experience in how to best solve any problems that arose and, perhaps most importantly, the chance to build up personal contacts and establish a good reputation.<sup>120</sup> Certainly, the aforementioned success of Marutha who, through being dispatched on numerous missions to the Sasanian Empire, was able to use the contacts and knowledge of the Sasanian court that he built up on these missions, to negotiate flexible and mutually acceptable treaties is evidence of this. Additionally, the fact that leading ambassadors were now of a higher rank is indicative of the new importance diplomatic contact with the neighbouring empire had in the fifth century. As with the role of the *magistri*, the use of the individual ambassadors in multiple missions to the Sasanian Empire would have benefited the continuity of the policy of peace that was the aim of imperial diplomacy in the fifth century.

### **Nature of the Treaties**

Treaties were the foundation of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy. Indeed, signed treaties had formally ratified every major change in the imperial relationship since the third century. Thus, as the fifth century peace developed and the imperial neighbours sought solutions to long-standing grievances the treaties themselves had to become more nuanced and durable than those of the third and fourth centuries.

Menander Protector, who although not an eye-witness to the treaty he describes below had, as a member of the emperor Maurice's entourage, access to reports from the ambassadors, provides a reliable insight into how later treaties became more sophisticated, long-lasting and robust:

When matters had progressed to this stage of orderly development, those whose task it was took the texts of the two documents and polished their contents, using language of equivalent

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<sup>120</sup> Zach. *HE* 9.7.

force. They then made facsimiles of both. The originals were rolled up and secured by seals of wax and the other substance used by the Persians, and were impressed with the signets of the envoys and of the twelve interpreters, six Roman and six Persian. Then the two sides exchanged the treaty documents, the Zikh [Yazdgushnasp] handing to one in Persian to Peter, and Peter the one in Greek to the Zikh. Then the Zikh was given an unsealed Persian translation of the Greek original to be kept as reference for him, and Peter likewise was given a Greek translation of the Persian. After this the conference ended.<sup>121</sup>

Although the treaty described here, signed in 562, comes from the sixth century many of the key aspects mentioned developed in the fifth century. Menander makes clear that writing down the individual clauses of treaties, making multiple copies of them, recording them in the language of both empires, securing them with official seals, the use of interpreters and high ranking officials were all important in the ratification of the 562 peace treaty.<sup>122</sup> Zosimus and Joshua Stylites also reveal that Roman-Sasanian treaties were written down and recorded in detail.<sup>123</sup> Other important elements of treaty-making not mentioned here by Menander Protector include, the inclusion of time limit to treaties, the fact that negotiations took place either on the frontier or in the courts of the emperor or Shah who was receiving the embassy and the necessary ratification of both rulers, through the use of 'special letters' which were dispatched to Constantinople and Ctesiphon.<sup>124</sup> All of these aspects were important in ensuring Roman-Sasanian treaties after the late fourth century were less ambiguous and open to interpretation than their predecessors in the third and fourth centuries.

In the early stages of the Roman-Sasanian relationship negotiations took place exclusively on the battlefield, in a very ad-hoc and irregular manner.<sup>125</sup> This was indicative of the early relationship itself, as one that was dominated simply by militaristic concerns, where strategic advantage was all that mattered and diplomacy was just another form of imperial warfare and competition. Negotiations that took place on the battlefield were, consequently, always

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<sup>121</sup> fr. 6.1. For more information on the nature of Menander's work and his reliability see: Blockley (1985) and Baldwin (1978).

<sup>122</sup> For more information on the importance of this treaty in our overall understanding of Roman-Sasanian treaties in general see: Lee (2008).

<sup>123</sup> Zos. 3.31.2; Jos. Styl. 98.

<sup>124</sup> Lee, 2008: 108-9.

<sup>125</sup> Canepa, 2009: 123; Garsoïan, 1983: 574.

likely to be rushed and incomplete, as evident in the ambiguities that arose from the Armenian clause in the 363 treaty which was negotiated in the battle-chared lands of Mesopotamia. Importantly, however, as imperial diplomacy developed so too did the chosen sites of negotiations. From 387 onwards, treaties were predominantly negotiated on the neutral frontier zone or the Roman or Sasanian court respectively, where embassies would be afforded the greatest respect, rather than on a battlefield strewn with corpses. This was seemingly much more conducive to genuine diplomatic discussions and was much more likely, as was the case as seen by the treaties of 400 and 408/9, that took place independently of any military action and helped to address traditional Roman-Sasanian grievances, to result in peace settlements that truly tried to resolve recurring disputes and causes of conflict, rather than ones that simply attempted to reinforce the military supremacy that one side had won on the battlefield. Furthermore, the move away from battlefields as the principal negotiating ground furthered Roman-Sasanian diplomacy's shift away from being just another part of military conflicts.

The first example of a Roman-Sasanian treaty being written down and officially recorded was the treaty of 363.<sup>126</sup> This development was vitally important in the stability and reliability of imperial peace treaties and soon became a defining characteristic of imperial diplomacy.<sup>127</sup> Roman-Sasanian peace treaties, especially during the fifth century, contained a vast array of complicated and at times highly specific clauses, ranging from time limits, religious toleration and economic concerns. Thus, preserving treaties through multiple written copies, in the languages of both empires, was essential if they were to be successful and not to be misinterpreted as, ironically, the Armenian clause in the 363 treaty was. It was only through such written recording of treaties that such ambiguities could be solved. Unlike the more simplistic treaties with their western and northern neighbours, the Romans could not rely simply on memory to ensure that all these clauses were abided by. The creation of a corps of bilingual interpreters in the Roman Empire was central to this, while the fact the Sasanians

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<sup>126</sup> Lee, 2008: 110.

<sup>127</sup> Further evidence of the written recording of Roman-Sasanian peace treaties comes from Zosimus (3.31.2), Malalas (13.27); Joshua Stylites (98).



also recorded treaties in the same way could well suggest such a corresponding corps existed in the Sasanian Empire.

Related to the tradition of keeping a written copy of treaties was the dispatching of letters of ratification to the Roman emperor and Sasanian Shah that were used to officially sanction any peace agreement. Likewise, given that the details of expenses incurred by Sasanian embassies while travelling in the Roman Empire were kept in the *scrinium barbarorum*, it is likely that the written record of individual treaties were also stored there, or some other place of importance.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, parallel to the sacrosanct nature of embassies and envoys, the fact that these letters were considered 'sacred' is further evidence of how seriously and inviolable the two empires considered any and all diplomacy contacts or agreements between them.<sup>129</sup> The recording and archiving of peace treaties would have been a major step in creating more stable and durable peace-agreements.

The most subtly adaptive aspect of Roman-Sasanian treaties was the use of annexes. As shown by Menander Protector, these were verbal agreements made between the two empires that were never fully integrated clauses, but were instead kept separate from the full treaty.<sup>130</sup> Annexes were implemented for the most divisive, sensitive and difficult to control aspects of the imperial relationship, particularly, Roman contributions to frontier defence and religious concerns. Providing solutions for these divisive issues in annexes meant that strict adherence to them was not an essential requirement of peace in the same way as the main clauses. Annexes were used in this way for these concerns for two main reasons. First, to avoid domestic criticism that internal affairs were being dictated by a foreign power, due to the detrimental effect this claim could have on the internal standing of either signatory. Secondly, to ensure that failure to continuously adhere to these difficult to enforce agreements did not act as automatic *casus belli*.<sup>131</sup> The implementation of annexes was thus

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<sup>128</sup> Although Lee (1993: 36) notes that there is no direct evidence that either Romans or Sasanians stored treaties in any sort of archive he stresses that it is difficult to imagine they never. Certainly, there would be no point in writing such treaties down if there was no intention of storing them.

<sup>129</sup> Malalas 18.72.

<sup>130</sup> As seen in Menander Protector's (fr. 6.1 2.398-407) account of the 562 treaty wherein it can be implied that matters concerning religious persecutions were dealt with separately from the full treaty itself after the sworn agreement.

<sup>131</sup> For more on the importance and use of annexes in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy see Blockley (1992:161).

important in the adaptability and flexibility of Roman-Sasanian peace treaties and wider imperial diplomacy. It ensured that the carefully organised treaties were not subject to the most troublesome and hard to control aspects of the imperial relationship. As such, the utilisation of annexes shows that both sides were willing to try and solve, or at least contain, problems between them that could have even effected their internal politics in the search for a more stable relationship.

In the third and early fourth centuries treaties were made solely between the two rulers in power at the time, not between the two states as a whole, and this meant the duration of treaties were limited to the lifetime of the two signatories, and once one died the treaty was considered void.<sup>132</sup> This was not very conducive to the creation of long-term peace as treaties could quickly and unexpectedly become worthless. For that reason, towards the end of the fourth century, when the two states were actively seeking a more stable relationship, the two empires attempted to overcome this problem by introducing specific time limits for the duration of treaties. As previously noted, the first inclusion of time-limits took place in 363, in which a thirty year duration was agreed, and then the next came relatively quickly afterwards in the treaty of 408/9, which was given a time limit of one hundred years. The one hundred year time limit of 408/9 was especially important as it suggests that both states were interested, and actively seeking, long-term peace in the fifth century. The implementation of time limits ensured that treaties of 363 and 387 could always be added to with the introduction of new clauses throughout fifth century, as they were in 400, 408/9, 422 and 442, without having to renegotiate the whole treaty upon the death of one of the original contracting rulers. This development was a fundamentally important innovation in improving the continuity and longevity of individual peace treaties and, thus, the overall success and sustainability of Roman-Sasanian diplomatic agreements.

Comparing the development and use of time limits in the fifth and sixth centuries reinforces the uniqueness of the fifth century, and the fact that it was only in this period that the two empires, out of necessity, pursued long-term peace. This is evident in the thirty-year time limit of 363 and the even more enduring one hundred year time limit agreed in 408/9. In

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<sup>132</sup> Blockley, 1992: 161.

contrast, during the sixth century when the Hunnic, Vandal and Hephthalite threats had either disappeared or receded and the two empires returned their military attention to one another, time durations for imperial treaties became less important. For example, the peace treaty of 506 included only a seven-year time limit.<sup>133</sup> This reduction shows the changing conditions of the sixth century in which peace was no longer necessary. Indeed, even when sixth century peace treaties were signed with larger time-limits, such as the famous 'Eternal Peace' that was signed between Justinian and Khusro in 532, which was meant to usher in an indefinite peace, 'for the duration of both their [the Roman and Sasanian Empires'] lives',<sup>134</sup> they did not last the test of time.<sup>135</sup> For example, the Eternal Peace lasted for less than a decade before the outbreak of war. Clearly, without the immediate threats on their other frontiers time-limits became less important, and were therefore not as strictly adhered to as they were in the fifth century.

Evidently the inclusion of time limits, especially long-term time limits, into imperial peace treaties was central to the establishment and maintenance of peace in the fifth century. While their adherence shows that it was only during the fifth century that peace was needed by both empires alike. Time limits were also essential in allowing the treaties to act as reconfirmations of one another, as new clauses could simply be added to the treaties that had already been agreed and that were still in effect without having to negotiate a whole new peace treaty.

That treaties in the fifth century were expected to cement more stable relations through the creation and maintenance of a mutually acceptable status quo, rather than reinforce the military supremacy of one empire over the other, is apparent in the evolution of the language used to describe them. Treaties in the third and fourth centuries were usually labelled with militaristic terms similar to Vergil's famous *debellare superbos*;<sup>136</sup> however, in the fifth century terms such as 'peace' and 'agreement' were increasingly used.<sup>137</sup> This change in language is indicative of the fact treaties between the empires were taken increasingly

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<sup>133</sup> Proc. *BP.* 1.9.24.

<sup>134</sup> Malalas 477.15-16.

<sup>135</sup> For more information on the Eternal Peace see Greatrex (1998: 213-221), and also Procopius (*BP.* 1.12-22).

<sup>136</sup> This famous phrase comes from the *Aeneid* (1)

<sup>137</sup> Blockley, 1992: 159.

seriously by both sides, as seen in the unwillingness of either side to break them, even when an opportunity to overtake or outmanoeuvre their imperial rival arose. For example, when, in 451, the Persarmenians revolted from Sasanian rule and asked for Roman assistance the emperor Marcian refused and quickly sent an embassy to the Sasanian Shah, Yazdgard II, to assure him there would be no Roman interference.<sup>138</sup> Likewise, when the Romans were at war with their Lazi allies in 456 the Sasanians refused Gobaz's, king of the Lazi, request for them to accept his allegiance and therefore come under their protection.<sup>139</sup> These examples, especially the first, underline the success of Roman-Sasanian treaties in the fifth century, such as 387, which sought to end side-switching among the empires' allies. Evidently, although the desires of local frontier elites to switch sides still existed in the fifth century, in contrast imperial desire to exploit one another's problems had been overcome by contemporary circumstances and the more resolute and flexible diplomatic treaties of the period. That neither side was willing to break these carefully negotiated treaties underlines how much imperial stability was needed in this period. Due to the threats on their other frontiers continued peace on the imperial frontier was more important than short-term gain or advantage.

The evolution of peace treaties during the fifth century meant that Roman-Sasanian diplomacy was now capable of establishing and maintaining a stable imperial relationship. Treaties were more durable and resilient against the inherent tensions and changes that could quickly take place in the Roman-Sasanian relationship and within the Roman and Sasanian Empires themselves. They were undoubtedly done on more 'equal terms' than the peace treaties in previous centuries were existed merely to reinforce the short-term military dominance of one side against the other.<sup>140</sup> The inclusions of longer time limits and annexes makes it clear that the purpose of peace treaties in this period was to provide long-term stability, and not to reinforce short-term control or supremacy as they had been used previously.

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<sup>138</sup> Elishē p.124; Lazar P'arpets'i. p.289.

<sup>139</sup> Priscus fr. 33.1.

<sup>140</sup> For the use of this term see: Menander Protector (fr. 20.2.33) and Theophylact Simocatta (3.17.2).

## Diplomatic Language and Ideology

A major consequence of the changing nature of Roman-Sasanian relations in the fifth century and the increased importance and prevalence of diplomatic contact was the formation of an ideology based on cooperation and inter-dependency alongside the growth of diplomatic language of legitimacy between the two empires. The hostile and antagonistic ideology, epitomised by the idea of the *alter orbis*, of the third and fourth centuries was steadily substituted by ideas of interdependence, typified by the principles of 'fraternal cooperation', brotherhood and a 'family of kings' between Roman and Sasanian rulers.<sup>141</sup>

The ideological ideal of brotherhood between the Roman emperor and Sasanian Shah was a defining feature of diplomatic language between the two rulers.<sup>142</sup> Diplomatic correspondence between Roman emperors and Sasanian Shahs had long contained symbolic metaphors of 'fraternal cooperation' and the 'family of kings'. For example, in letters dispatched between Constantine, Constantius and Shapur II they called each other 'brother',<sup>143</sup> while the traditional enquiry of asking about the 'health of their brother' became a traditional element in the receiving of envoys.<sup>144</sup> In this regard, the tradition of sending an envoy to announce the accession of new emperors and Shahs can be seen as a way of welcoming the new ruler into the 'family of kings'. The Sasanians took this idea even further, in their ideological worldview the Roman and Sasanian sovereigns were related genetically, not just symbolically, to one another.<sup>145</sup>

At the start of the fifth century this familial diplomatic ideology became an important tool for reconciliation and stability. It was from the fifth century that the most famous example of the Roman and Sasanian sovereigns depicting their relationship as that of a father and son emanates. Procopius tells us that Arcadius, fearing for the future of his young son and heir,

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<sup>141</sup> Blockley (1992: 46) uses the term 'fraternal cooperation' while 'family of kings' is used by Dignas & Winter (2007: 232).

<sup>142</sup> Malalas 17.10, 18.44, 18.76;

<sup>143</sup> Amm.Marc. 17.5.3, 10.

<sup>144</sup> Men. Prot. fr. 6.1.180; Proc. BP. 1.16.1.

<sup>145</sup> Daryee, 2006b: 389-90; Canepa, 2009: 126. This may have been another attempt by the early Shahs to legitimise their rule by linking themselves with the region's most long-standing neighbour.

Theodosius II, appointed Yazdgard I to act as his guardian in order to secure the succession.<sup>146</sup> Although the veracity and historicity of Yazdgard's adoption of Theodosius has often been debated, the adoption still holds significant importance in understanding the ideology between the two empires in this period, regardless of whether one believes it true or false.<sup>147</sup> It highlights the underlying assumption that Roman emperor and Sasanian Shah were of equal rank and that, therefore, it was at least theoretically conceivable for them to be related through adoption or even marriage.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, when viewed in the context of the wider 'cross-cultural diplomatic language' with its emphasis on depicting the Roman and Sasanian Empires as the 'two eyes' of the civilisation and ideals of 'fraternal cooperation' and 'family of kings' such a symbolic 'adoption' does not seem so outlandish.<sup>149</sup> Certainly, that Agathias, who was critical and disbelieving of the adoption, informs us that the story 'was repeated by both the upper classes and the common people' suggests that the Romans themselves did not find such an arrangement tremendously incomprehensible or beyond the realms of possibility.<sup>150</sup> Likewise, that Yazdgard's adoption of Theodosius was also mentioned and discussed by Zonaras, Theophanes and Cedrenus further suggests that there may have been some truth, and that it was not just a literary tool or fantastical story of Procopius'.<sup>151</sup> The fact that more contemporary sources such as Sozomen, Theodoret and Socrates do not mention the adoption has elsewhere been explained by the fact that these church historians were writing at a time when Constantinople was once more hostile to the Sasanians, following the outbreak of the war in 441, and that therefore they would not wish to promote the fact that a non-Christian Sasanian Shah had been the guardian of Theodosius in his youth.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Proc. *BP.* 1.2.1-10.

<sup>147</sup> Blockley (1992: 52) also agrees with this assessment. Likewise, Kaldellis (2004: 62-65) points out that such stories and anecdotes, if this is what this was, still hold importance in showing a man's or state's character. Therefore, as stated above, the tale of Yazdgard's adoption of Theodosius could have been used by Procopius to show the peaceful characteristic of the Roman-Sasanian relationship in this period. While Cameron (1969-70: 149) says that it was 'true only in the sense that there was some such diplomatic gesture'. Those who argue that the adoption should be taken seriously include Börm (2007: 306), Canepa (2009: 126), Greatrex & Bardill (1996) and Greatrex (2008). In contrast Güterbock (2011: 27) argues that it lacks any true historicity, while McDonough (2011: 58) also seems sceptical stating that it had 'something of a legendary cast'.

<sup>148</sup> Garsoïan, 1983: 579.

<sup>149</sup> This theory, with the importance of viewing the adoption in the wider evolution of diplomatic language and ideology, is stressed by Canepa (2009: 126, 295).

<sup>150</sup> 4.26.

<sup>151</sup> Zon. 13.22.1-4; Theoph. *Chron.* a.m. 5900; Cedrenus 1.586.3-7.

<sup>152</sup> Greatrex & Bardill, 1996: 178.

Indeed, there is evidence, mainly from eastern sources, which suggests that there was some truth in Yazdgard's adoption of Theodosius II. The *Synodicon Orientale* contains a letter from Yazdgard in response to Roman bishops who had spoken out on behalf of Christians in the Sasanian Empire in which the Shah claimed that 'the East and West form one power under the rule of my authority'.<sup>153</sup> Although this may have been a simple boast by Yazdgard, in the same regard as earlier Shahs' demands towards ownership of Roman territory, when viewed through the prism of the adoption and Yazdgard's otherwise cautious and peaceful policy towards the Roman Empire it could also suggest that he felt he had some level of authority in the Roman Empire, and undoubtedly acting as the young emperors' guardian would have ensured he felt justified in this belief. Indeed, a Shah who had thus far purposefully followed a path of caution, stability and reconciliation with the Romans would not make such a potentially antagonistic remark if he did not believe it to some degree. Additionally, Moses of Chorene informs us that there was some peaceful Sasanian intervention and involvement on both sides of the imperial frontier in this period.<sup>154</sup> That this was done during a period that Arcadius was suffering from illness and faced trouble in Constantinople from John Chrysostom can be argued for further evidence that there was some form of special cooperation between the two rulers that may well have led to, or have been part of, Yazdgard's eventual adoption of Theodosius. Therefore, alongside the aforementioned ideological connections, this evidence of more practical Sasanian involvement in the Roman Empire suggests that the adoption was not merely a metaphorical story created by Procopius and that if it was indeed true, at some level, Yazdgard at least took his position as Theodosius' guardian quite seriously, and this would have had important consequences for the peaceful relations in the fifth century.<sup>155</sup>

Certainly, for the Sasanian Empire it was not unprecedented for a trusted ally to be entrusted with the guardianship of an heir to the throne; Bahrām V himself was sent to be raised and educated by the Nasrids at Hira when a young man.<sup>156</sup> Likewise, the notion of some guardians being appointed for young emperors was not unheard of in the Roman Empire. For instance,

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<sup>153</sup> *Syn. Or.* p.256.

<sup>154</sup> 3.52.

<sup>155</sup> Although Canepa (2009: 295) argues that it should be taken seriously he stresses that it should not be interpreted legalistically.

<sup>156</sup> Tabarī 854-5; *Shahnama* 2078-80. Hence, the criticism of this event amongst Roman scholars may be a result of the the traditional Roman-centric approach to the Roman-Sasanain relationship.

Rufinus had been appointed guardian of Arcadius in his own youth, and Stilicho also claimed guardianship over both Arcadius and Honorius at this time.<sup>157</sup> There is also some Roman evidence that supports the adoption of Theodosius by Yazdgard, which focuses on the position of a Persian emissary, Antiochus, in the court of Arcadius and Theodosius.<sup>158</sup> We are informed that this Antiochus was sent by Yazdgard in response to a request by Arcadius,<sup>159</sup> and that after Arcadius' death he was responsible for 'bringing up' Theodosius and acting as his tutor.<sup>160</sup>

Indeed, cooperation between the empires in the fifth century expanded to even more sensitive dynastic matters, as evident in the striking example of a Roman envoy, Constantius, helping to solve a dispute between Yazdgard I and his son Bahrām, the future Bahrām V.<sup>161</sup> Thus, showing that this cooperative ideal did not only exist in western Roman literary tradition and also suggesting that both were keen to ensure stability amongst in their neighbour as a means to achieve stability on the joint frontier itself.<sup>162</sup>

Adopting an heir to the Roman throne would have appealed to Yazdgard for a variety of reasons. First, it would have added to his personal prestige and boosted his internal reputation as, as the guardian of the Roman emperor, he could claim he had authority of the Roman Empire itself. As such, it would provide him with the necessary reputation, in relation to supremacy over the Roman Empire, which was expected of a Sasanian Shah, which was otherwise lacking in a policy of peace with the western neighbour. Secondly, Yazdgard was acutely aware of the need for stable relations with his western neighbour in the wake of the Hunnic invasion of 395 and accepting Arcadius' proposal would have been a sure way to ensure this stability.

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<sup>157</sup> Greatrex & Bardill, 1996: 174.

<sup>158</sup> For a detailed discussion on Antiochus see Greatrex & Bardill (1996).

<sup>159</sup> Synesius ep. 110; Priscus fr. 7.

<sup>160</sup> Malalas 361; Theoph. *Chron.* a.m 5900.

<sup>161</sup> Tabarī 857.

<sup>162</sup> *Shahnama* 2092, 2.293. Blockley, 1992: 54; Rubin, 1986: 679.



The pressing need for détente in the fifth century saw the expansion of the familiar language and ideology between the rulers into a wider ideology of imperial interdependence. The first example of this came from the *Breviarium* of Festus in the later fourth century who described the Roman and Sasanian Empires as the ‘two mountains’ of the world.<sup>163</sup> The fact that Festus was writing shortly after the treaty of 363 reveals once again how important this treaty was in the development of Roman-Sasanian relations in the later fourth and fifth centuries. Yet, Festus was only the first of many to promote this new idea of imperial interdependence, other historians soon added to it. A fifth-century letter from the *Synodicon Orientale* and Theophylact Simocatta described the empires in similar terms, as the ‘two shoulders’ of the civilised world and the ‘two eyes’ of civilisation, respectively.<sup>164</sup> Likewise, Peter the Patrician compared the empires to ‘two lamps’ and stated that ‘like eyes, [the two empires] are adorned by each others’ light’ and that if one of these lights went out the other was doomed to also fail.<sup>165</sup> He further stressed this interdependence by arguing that conflict between the two neighbours would now only led to their mutual destruction. Finally, Malalas viewed the Roman and Sasanian empires as the two centres of civilisation.<sup>166</sup> This ideal of interdependence was also indirectly highlighted by Priscus who, when commenting that he hoped Attila would attack the Sasanians instead of the Romans, informs that another Roman, Constantiolus, was quick argue that a crippled Sasanian Empire would be disastrous for Constantinople as it would dramatically alter the balance of power in the whole region to the detriment of the Roman Empire.<sup>167</sup> Again, this confirms the realist importance of the balance of power in Roman-Sasanian relations, an importance that the Romans themselves were aware of.

Although Theophylact Simocatta, Peter the Patrician and Malalas come from the sixth and seventh centuries, the peaceful fifth century, with its emphasis on stability, détente and even, at times, cooperation would have played a transformative role in how later writers thought about the imperial relationship. Thus, during and after the fifth century the Romans and Sasanians now also viewed themselves as partners in civilisation with their survival dependent

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<sup>163</sup> 4.44.

<sup>164</sup> *Syn. Or.* 37; *Theo. Sim.* 4.2.2-3.

<sup>165</sup> *Pet. Pat. fr.* 13-14.

<sup>166</sup> Malalas 18.44.

<sup>167</sup> *Priscus fr.* 11.2.

on the survival of the other. Importantly, in this regard, in the Roman Empire in this period belonging to a specific cultural group, or having an identity tag, such as Barbarian, Greek, Roman, Christian or Pagan was fundamental in understanding your place in wider Roman society, therefore, the joint Roman and Sasanian identity of Civilised evidently created a sense of shared identity and joint destiny that was useful in cementing stronger diplomatic relations.<sup>168</sup> Indeed, international relations theory argues that those states that are similar tend to gravitate towards one another for help and alliances.<sup>169</sup>

The fifth-century ideology of imperial interdependence was in stark contrast to the earlier imperial ideologies in the third and fourth centuries that, as already seen, were thoroughly antagonistic and matched the realities of the relationship itself. Therefore, just as this earlier ideology was based on, and a result of, the unending conflict during at that time so too did the ideology of independence develop from the realities of the relationship in the fifth century period; the need, and the necessity of peace. Furthermore, the fact that Roman historians were willing to record and propagate this idea shows that it was not just the Sasanians who believed it as is sometimes claimed.<sup>170</sup> Indeed, it has been stated elsewhere that inter-state diplomacy is the result of the recognition that the performance of one is of permanent consequence to the other.<sup>171</sup>

Thus the realisation among Roman and Sasanian rulers in the fifth century that the changed and unique conditions of the fifth century meant that they needed imperial stability and détente to survive the threats on their other frontiers was likely the catalyst for the development of this new ideology of interdependence.<sup>172</sup> Certainly, that it has been acknowledged that interdependent language in diplomacy predominantly took place when either one empire or the other was in a weakened position, and therefore unable or unwilling to engage in competition and use antagonistic language towards the other, is revealing

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<sup>168</sup> Miles, 1999: 10.

<sup>169</sup> Doyle, 1997: 76. Waltz (2008: 101) crystallises this idea as he states that: 'policy proceeds imitation, with occasional attempts to outflank' meaning that, in the bipolar world the two competitors became even more similar due to their very competition and this was indeed the case with the Roman and Sasanian Empires.

<sup>170</sup> However, we must be careful not to stress this point too much as it can equally be claimed that this may well have been Roman internal propaganda to show that the Sasanian Empire was pleading for peace. Rubin (1986) claims that it was always the Sasanians who championed peace and cooperation while the Romans continually worked to undermine this.

<sup>171</sup> Watson, 2005: 1-2.

<sup>172</sup> Drijvers, 2009: 450.

here.<sup>173</sup> Accordingly, that both used more conciliatory language in highlighting their interdependence at this time underlines the fact that both the Romans and Sasanians were in a weakened state in the fifth century, and that neither could afford to engage in imperial competition or ratchet up imperial tensions. Thus, 'recourse to equal language [was] a sign of need', the need in the fifth century being peace.<sup>174</sup>

Indeed, when one compares the diplomatic language and ideology of the third, fourth and even sixth centuries, when the empires were in fierce competition with one another, with the fifth century there is a clear contrast for which the peace was more than likely responsible. For example, in the preceding and succeeding centuries diplomatic correspondence between the sovereigns was always tinged with a competitive edge; the rival rulers always endeavoured to promote their supremacy over the other. Indicative of this are the letters sent from Shapur II to Constantius in 358 and Kavād I to Justinian in 529:

From Shapur, king of kings, partner of the stars, brother of the sun and moon, to my brother Constantius, greetings.<sup>175</sup>

Koades [Kavād], Emperor of Emperors [King of kings], of the rising sun, to Flavius Justinian Caesar, of the setting moon.<sup>176</sup>

In the ancient world the sun was regarded as the greater heavenly power than the moon,<sup>177</sup> hence, in styling themselves as the 'sun' in contrast to the Roman emperor as the 'moon' Shapur and Kavād were emphasising their superiority over their rival in symbolic terms. The Roman responses to these letters were equally symbolically competitive. Thus, it is clear that even in diplomatic contact between the empires in these centuries the emperors and Shahs always tried to reinforce and promote their pre-eminence. Unfortunately, there are no direct examples of fifth-century correspondence between the two rulers; however the letter sent from Kavād II to Heraclius, who enjoyed cordial relations, in 628 is informative:

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<sup>173</sup> Whitby, 2008: 126.

<sup>174</sup> Whitby, 2008: 126.

<sup>175</sup> Amm. Marc. 17.5.3.10.

<sup>176</sup> Malalas 18.44.

<sup>177</sup> Whitby, 2008: 126.

From Kavād, king of kings to Heraclius the most clement Roman emperor, our brother. We send greatest greeting to the most clement Roman emperor, our brother.<sup>178</sup>

In the struggle to secure his throne Kavād was desperate for Roman assistance, which is reflected in his communication with Heraclius here, in which there is no evidence of competition or rivalry, neither practical nor symbolic. Evidently, when both empires either needed or wanted peace competitive language was avoided in favour of more conciliatory language. Therefore, although there is no direct evidence of imperial communications in the fifth century it is safe to assume that since both the Romans and Sasanians needed peace at this time communications between the two rulers would have followed a similar formula as that between Kavād II and Heraclius, rather than the competitive tones found in the third, fourth and sixth centuries.<sup>179</sup>

This is also evident in Roman depictions of Shahs during times of conflict. In the war-torn sixth century, and also the third and fourth centuries, Shahs were predominantly described as boastful and greedy.<sup>180</sup> Whereas, in contrast, the peaceful fifth century Shah Yazdgard I, who was largely responsible for setting the foundations of the more stable relationship, was viewed with much more admiration.<sup>181</sup>

The ideological contrast between the peaceful fifth century and competitive sixth century is further evident in Justin's refusal to adopt a Sasanian heir to the throne at the start of the sixth century, as Yazdgard I had done for Theodosius II at the start of the fifth century. Procopius tells us that, Ğāmāsp, the Shah in question, was faced with a similar dilemma to the one Arcadius had confronted at the start of the fifth century in 518; the survival and smooth succession of his heir, Khusro, to the throne. Therefore, following the example set by Arcadius he approached the Roman emperor, Justin I, and asked him to act as Khusro's guardian in order to secure his succession:

I [Kavād] ask of you a certain favour in return for this, which would bind together in kinship and in the good-will which would naturally spring from this relation not only ourselves but our

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<sup>178</sup> *Chron. Pasch.* p.735.5-7.

<sup>179</sup> Lee (1993: 37) argues for the veracity of such letters between the sovereigns. He also states that, just as with the treaties themselves these letters were likely recorded and preserved.

<sup>180</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 17.5.1; 18.4.1; Joshua Stylites on Kavād 20-1.

<sup>181</sup> *Proc. BP.* 1.2.13; *Josh. Styl.* 8-9.

subjects, and which would be calculated to bring us to a satiety of the blessings of peace. My proposal, then, is this, that you should make my son [Khusro], who will be my successor to the throne, your adopted son.<sup>182</sup>

In making this request Kavād stressed the importance of the family of kings ideal by suggesting that this adoption would strengthen the ‘kinship’ between the two rulers and empires which would then result in ‘the blessings of peace’. However, after much debate Justin refused to adopt Khusro in the terms asked by Kavād, as an equal, stating that he would only adopt the Sasanian heir in terms ‘befitting a barbarian’. Procopius suggests this refusal was due to the Roman fear that adopting Khusro on equal terms would give the Sasanian a legitimate claim to the Roman throne<sup>183</sup>; this fear ironically proves just how potent the ideal of Roman-Sasanian ‘fraternal cooperation’ and a ‘family of kings’ could be under the right circumstances. More importantly however, the fact that this request had come with the promise of a cessation of hostilities is even more indicative of the changed priorities of the Roman Empire in the sixth century. Whereas, in the fifth century the Romans needed peace and were willing to make pragmatic and practical concessions in order to make this happen, in the sixth century they were evidently unwilling to make even a largely symbolic gesture for the promotion of peace. As such, it is clear that once the mediating threat of the Huns and Vandals in the fifth century had been removed the Romans no longer had the same desire or need to secure peace with their Sasanian neighbour. Indeed, even if the veracity of this is contested, just like the earlier Yazdgard-Theodosius example, it nevertheless shows that Procopius was aware of the changed nature of Roman-Sasanian relations in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Consequently, when peace was not necessary, the neighbouring empire had no interest in helping to stabilise and secure the internal state of their imperial rival as they had when peace was necessary. Gaining an advantage, no matter how momentary, was once again all that mattered in the sixth century. Evidently the ideals of ‘fraternal cooperation’ and ‘family of kings’ only truly existed when peace was absolutely necessary.

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<sup>182</sup> Proc. *BP.* 1.11.1-9.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

## Frontier Defence: Payments, Tribute or Subsidies?

The most conspicuous aspect of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy in the fifth century was how little it focused on military concerns. After 363 military clauses were rare, no territory was gained or ceded by either side, and neither did any fortresses or cities change hands. Instead, when military matters were discussed they were primarily concerned with cooperation and frontier defence.

The mountainous Caucasian frontier separated, and protected, the Roman and Sasanian Empires alike from the steppe tribes in the north and it was, therefore, on this frontier that imperial negotiation often concentrated. Only a few routes led through this frontier and into the empires, the most important of which were the Caucasian Gates; it was this route that the Huns took during their invasion of 395.<sup>184</sup> Consequently, shared and often competing interest in the Caucasus was a major tradition of the Roman-Sasanian relationship. John Lydus provides a succinct analysis of the role played by the Caucasus in the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian diplomatic relationship and its importance in defending both empires against Hunnic incursions:

The Persians were not strong enough to protect their own and the previously Roman territory...In consequence then after the luckless reign of Jovian, talks took place between our *hyparch* Salutius and the most eminent Persians, and later with Yazdgard, to the effect that both states would share in the costs and establish a fortress at the described entrance [of the Caucasus] and set up a garrison in these places in order to stop the barbarians from pouring through.<sup>185</sup>

Although John Lydus' chronology in this account has been much debated, it is nevertheless still useful in highlighting the main aspects of imperial cooperation in the joint defence of this frontier in the fifth century.<sup>186</sup> The historian's assessment that it was the threat of the Huns that instigated imperial collaboration is pertinent and validates what has been claimed elsewhere in this study. Indeed, as seen already, the Hunnic raid of 395 that began in the

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<sup>184</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 189.

<sup>185</sup> John Lydus, *De Mag.* 3.52.

<sup>186</sup> Blockley (1985: 63-6) argues that John Lydus was mistaken in stating that negotiations about Roman contributions began as early as 363. He argues that the first firm date for Sasanian requests for Roman payments come from 464/5 (Priscus fr. 41.1).

Caucasus made painfully clear the need to reinforce imperial defences in this frontier.<sup>187</sup> An important consequence of this invasion, and one that is stressed here by John Lydus, was that it proved that neither the Romans nor the Sasanians were able to defend this vulnerable frontier sufficiently on their own.<sup>188</sup>

Importantly, John Lydus also demonstrates that Roman cooperation predominantly took the form of financial contributions to the upkeep of the forts that protected the passes through the Caucasus. The use of payments increased in Later Roman diplomacy in terms of cost, duration and purpose.<sup>189</sup> Once again, as in most aspects of Roman foreign relations there was a distinction between those paid to barbarian neighbours and those made to the Sasanian Empire. This distinction was undoubtedly a reflection of the overall difference in complexity in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy compared with other peoples. Whereas payments to the Sasanians were granted for very specific ventures, usually for mutual assistance, such as the defence of the Caucasian frontier, payments to Constantinople's other neighbours were much more formulaic and generic.<sup>190</sup> Despite their rarity and exactness, Roman financial contributions to the Sasanians for frontier defence were the most contentious issue in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy throughout the fifth century. This contention was due to the ambiguity and political-ideological connotations that surrounded Roman diplomatic payments to foreign powers in late antiquity. They were open to interpretation and could be manipulated to suit all political agendas. Emperors viewed such payments as diplomatic subsidies or rewards to loyal allies, while, in contrast, his internal critics, opponents and

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<sup>187</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.10.3-8. Greatrex (1999: 65) shows that the Sasanians frequently made use of the fearful memory of this raid to coerce the Romans into making contributions to the defence of the Caucasus.

<sup>188</sup> That neither could defend the frontier successfully alone is also supported by Priscus (fr. 41.1).

<sup>189</sup> For the use of payments in the Republic and Early Empire see Gordon (1949: 60). For the expanded use of payments in the Later Empire see Blockley (1992: 149-51). It is frequently claimed that Roman payments and subsidies to foreign peoples in late antiquity was a sign of Roman weakness in this period, as highlighted by Lee (2007:119). However, such payments were not unique to late antiquity, rather they had been a common feature of Roman diplomacy since the Republic. The increased use of financial payments in imperial diplomacy in late antiquity was not an admission or sign of weakness but rather a pragmatic adaptation to the changed circumstances of the fifth century. As already noted, after 395 and the division of the empire the emperors in Constantinople no longer had unrivalled military manpower or superiority as they did in previous centuries, however what they still had was economic superiority over their neighbours, even the Sasanian Empire. Therefore, the use of economic payments to foreign peoples, whether subsidies or tribute, was simply the emperors in Constantinople making use of the resources at their disposal.

<sup>190</sup> In relations with barbarian neighbours payments were still predominantly concerned with military matters such as alliance building, paying for *foederatii* troops or immunity from attack (Eus. *VC*. 4.5; Zos. 1.24.2).

external recipients viewed them as either a degrading of Roman imperial prestige or sign of Roman subservience respectively.

Although negotiations about Roman payments to the Sasanian Empire were always framed in the context of cooperation by both sides it has been argued that the Sasanian Shahs were primarily interested in extracting Roman wealth, for prestige and political advantage.<sup>191</sup> Certainly, successive Shahs were eager to present Roman payments as tribute to their internal audience in order to claim that they had made the Roman emperor and empire their tributary, and in doing so strengthen their internal prestige and reputation.<sup>192</sup> Sasanian exploitation of Roman financial contributions in this way was a direct consequence of the fifth-century imperial *détente* itself which denied Shahs the chance to win military renown and prestige through military victories over the Roman rival, which, as we have already seen, was a traditional element in the internal legitimacy of the Sasanian Shahs in the third and fourth centuries. Therefore, portraying Roman payments as tribute to their internal audience allowed them to advertise their supremacy over the western rival in a different way that did not risk the *détente* they needed.

Conversely, as useful as portraying Roman payments for the defence of the Caucasian frontier as tribute was for the Sasanians it had damaging consequences for the internal position of the Roman emperors who granted them. Emperors who made payments to the Sasanians usually earned the ire and disdain of the subjects who saw it as insult to the dignity and prestige of the empire.<sup>193</sup> To counter this Roman emperors frequently portrayed Shahs who asked for Roman financial contributions to their internal audience as bankrupt beggars pleading for Roman assistance, which was only agreed to out of their magnanimous 'generosity', and could therefore be presented as a sign of Roman superiority over the Shahs.<sup>194</sup>

This opposing rhetoric from both sides reveals the ideological battle that took place over the nature of subsidies. The Sasanian exploitation of Roman contributions to frontier defence in

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<sup>191</sup> Börm, 2008a.

<sup>192</sup> For example, upon informing us that Philip the Arab had paid him 500,000 *denars* for peace Shapur I states that this made the Roman emperor his 'tributary' (SKZ § 8). For similar Roman exploitation of imperial diplomacy to promote their own superiority over their rival to their internal audience see *Panegyric Latini* (10.10.6-7, 22.5).

<sup>193</sup> Theo. Sim. 3.9.10; Men. Prot. fr. 9-12; Zon. 14.10.22-29.

<sup>194</sup> Corripus, *In. Laud. Iust.* 3.347; Malalas 18.44; Josh. Styl. 18.44.



this way and the political damage it could have explains why they were contentious and why Roman emperors were often reluctant to make such payments.<sup>195</sup>

The divisive nature of subsidies meant that they were negotiated and agreed to in annexes of the treaties rather than integrated as full clauses.<sup>196</sup> Annexes were utilised for areas of imperial contact or concern that were ambiguous and difficult to control for both empires. Their use ensured that Roman refusals to make diplomatic payments were not perceived as a breaking of the wider treaty.<sup>197</sup> As such, annexes were useful in avoiding, or at least mitigating, the criticism that domestic affairs had been dictated by an external power.<sup>198</sup> The inclusion of Roman contributions to frontier defence as an annexe rather than a specific clause allowed the emperors to argue that they were not obligatory but discretionary and, therefore, allowed them to refute the idea that they were tributaries of the Sasanian Empire.<sup>199</sup> Certainly, the Sasanians never considered Roman failure to pay these subsidies as a breach of the treaties or the wider peace itself, although as seen in the outbreak of conflict in 442 Roman refusal could cause resentment.<sup>200</sup> Thus, when Kavād declared war after Anastasius' refusal in 502 Procopius claimed, with some justification, that it was the Sasanians, not the Romans who broke the treaty.<sup>201</sup>

However, to suggest that Sasanian demands for Roman payments were concerned exclusively with internal prestige and political needs disregards the economic and external problems, in the form of the Hephthalites, the Sasanian Empire faced in the fifth century. Certainly, John Lydus has already shown that the Sasanians were unable to defend the Caucasian frontier on their own,<sup>202</sup> while Procopius confirms the economic problems that confronted fifth-century Shahs:

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<sup>195</sup> Leo twice refused Sasanian requests for money (Priscus, fr. 41.1, 47; Joshua Stylites, 9-10).

<sup>196</sup> Blockley, 1992: 161.

<sup>197</sup> Blockley, 1992: 150.

<sup>198</sup> Men.Prot. fr. 6.1 2.398-407.

<sup>199</sup> Josh. Styl. 8; Priscus fr. 41.1.3-27.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.* 161.

<sup>201</sup> *BP.* 1.17.3

<sup>202</sup> John Lydus, *De Mag.* 3.52.

A little later Cabades [Kavād] was owing the king of the Ephthalitae [Hephthalites] a sum of money which he was not able to pay him, and he therefore requested the Roman emperor Anastasius to lend him this money.<sup>203</sup>

This passage reveals that the Sasanians were struggling to fulfil all their own economic obligations and that this led them directly to request financial assistance from the Romans. Indeed, the costly construction of the Gorgan Wall, the successive failed military campaigns against the Hephthalites, as well as the resulting tribute they then had to pay to them, and the famine that struck during the reign of Peroz all weakened the economic power of the Sasanian Empire in this period. Thus, seen in the context of the wider fifth century, Roman financial assistance would have been highly valued and sought after by the Shahs.

The consequences of the Hunnic threat and economic woes in motivating Sasanian requests and demands for Roman subsidies throughout the fifth century is further confirmed by Peroz's demand in 464/5 that the Romans 'supported them [the Sasanians] with money for the war against the so called Kidarite Huns [Hephthalites].'<sup>204</sup> If Peroz had wanted Roman payments purely for his own internal prestige he would have surely continued to demand them in connection with the defence of the Caucasus frontier, which had a proven record of success in convincing the Romans to agree rather than demand them for a completely different reason.<sup>205</sup> This real need for Roman financial assistance in defending against the Huns is further revealed by Kavād I's offer to hand over an important Caucasian fort to Anastasius at the end of the fifth century.<sup>206</sup> A Sasanian Shah, whose primary duty it was to expand the empire and defend territories already held, would not contemplate giving up such an important and strategic military asset, and in doing so lessen Sasanian dominance in Transcaucasia unless he really was lacking the economic and military power to maintain it adequately. These two examples thus suggest that Sasanian demands for Roman financial

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<sup>203</sup> *BP.* 1.7.1-3.

<sup>204</sup> Priscus, fr. 41.1.

<sup>205</sup> That the Romans had no interest in supporting the Sasanians in this war, which had no strategic value to them, is evident in their refusal of Peroz's request (Priscus fr. 41.1). This Roman refusal again therefore confirms that the fifth-century détente and cooperation was based entirely on necessity and self-interest.

<sup>206</sup> Proc. *BP.* 1.16.4.

assistance did have underlying economic motive, the impetus of which was provided by the threat of the Huns, both in the Caucasus and north-eastern frontier.

Another argument given by those who believe Roman payments to the Sasanians had little to do with real economic need or considerations was that they were small in comparison to subsidies paid to other neighbours in this period.<sup>207</sup> For instance, in 443 the Romans agreed to pay Attila an annual subsidy of 21,000 pounds of gold and a single payment of 6000 pounds of gold whereas Sasanian demands were usually a more modest 400 to 500 pounds of gold.<sup>208</sup> However, this disparity must be seen in the context of Constantinople's respective relationship with Attila and the Sasanians. Payments made to the Sasanian Empire were willingly given for the purpose of mutually beneficial frontier defence, whereas payments to Attila were forced upon the Romans to purchase immunity from aggression and stave off attack from a barbarian leader who was endangering the survival of the empire itself. Thus, the amount paid to the Sasanians was more than enough for their purposes and they were still considerable amounts; 400 to 500 pounds of gold could pay the wages for troops sufficient to garrison the fortifications protecting the Caucasian passes.<sup>209</sup>

Sasanian demands for smaller payments may also have derived from their need for continued détente with the Roman Empire in the fifth century. In Roman-Sasanian diplomacy making unacceptable demands of the other, knowing they would be forced to refuse, was a common ploy to make declaring war justifiable.<sup>210</sup> As such, it could be suggested that the Sasanians only made demands for 400-500 pounds of gold as they did not want to anger the Romans to such an extent that it might have risked damaging the détente. In this regard, it is important to note that Roman payments to the Sasanian Empire in the sixth century, when both empires were once again more interested in competition than peace, increased exponentially. For example, Procopius informs us that in 532 Constantinople agreed to a payment of 11,000

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<sup>207</sup> Rubin, 1986: 684; Börm, 2008a: 334.

<sup>208</sup> For payments to Attila see: Priscus (fr. 9.3). For payment amounts to the Sasanian Empire see: Zacharias Rhetor (*HE* 8.5) and Procopius (*BP*. 2.10.14). For a full list of and comparison of Roman tribute paid to different neighbours throughout late antiquity see the useful chart created by Lee (2007: 121).

<sup>209</sup> Although we have limited information on the pay of Sasanian troops, by commenting on the payment received by Roman troops it is possible to justifiably use this as a watermark for what was likely received by Sasanian troops. In this regard, Treadgold (1995: 134-156) has concluded convincingly that Roman soldiers received between 9 to 12 nomismata per year, fluctuating under different emperors and circumstances. Therefore, if we apply this same number to Sasanian troops Roman annual payments of 400 to 500 pounds of gold per year would have been a considerable sum in helping Ctesiphon to pay their soldiers.

<sup>210</sup> Josh. Styl. 8; Herodian 6.2.2-5; 4.5; Whitby, 2008: 123.

pounds of gold and that likewise in 551 the Romans agreed to pay the Sasanians 2,600 pounds of gold.<sup>211</sup> This therefore could suggest that, unlike in the fifth century when the Sasanians did not wish to anger the Romans and risk the peace, in the sixth century when the Roman and Sasanians were once again at war, and Justinian needed stability in Mesopotamia in order to pursue his western campaigns, the Sasanians were keen to exploit this for their own advantage.

The nature of payments, as predominantly concerned with frontier defence against the Huns again reinforces the overall importance these other threats had in the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian relationship. While, the subtle use of annexes that allowed the Sasanians to ask or demand payments yet also ensured Roman refusal did not result in direct hostilities underlines the pragmatism and flexibility of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy in this period.

### Conclusion

The steady development of imperial diplomacy in the later fourth and fifth centuries at the same time as the increasing danger of the Huns, Vandals and Hephthalites threatened the two empires on their other frontiers was no mere accident or coincidence, it was a necessary move that was prompted directly by the changing circumstances of the fifth century.<sup>212</sup> The development of imperial diplomacy in this period saw it move away from being merely another form of competition, to being able to act as a substitute and avenue for the creation of peace between the two empires in the fifth century. Importantly, the fact that it was only in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy that this change took place, and that in their diplomatic relations with their other barbarian neighbours the Romans still used diplomacy as just another form of warfare and means of domination, reinforces that this change was stimulated

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<sup>211</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.22.3; *BG*. 1.15.3-7. Again Lee (2007: 121) is useful in showing the increase in Roman payments to the Sasanian Empire in the sixth century.

<sup>212</sup> Indeed, Blockley (1992: 125) explicitly states that the underlying aim of the Roman and Sasanian attempts to create better diplomatic ties between them was 'the avoidance of war and the exploration of the limits of cooperation'. Blockley also states that the development of diplomacy in the fifth century was the only sustained attempt by any two powers in antiquity to find a durable alternative to war.

by the political and military necessities both empires faced in the fifth century, rather than any general desire to become more peaceful states.<sup>213</sup> Developments in the role of the *magister officiorum*, the sending of individual ambassadors in multiple embassies and the written recording of peace treaties gave fifth-century Roman-Sasanian diplomacy greater continuity and stability that was essential for any long-term détente or stability between them.

The development of diplomacy over time throughout the fifth century reinforces that the détente itself was a process that was constantly adapted to overcome new obstacles and challenges as and when they arose. Likewise, the fact that these treaties were signed in order to allow the two empires to protect themselves from the more dangerous threats on their other frontiers shows that their own security was the primary motivation and thus the pertinence of understanding the nature of the fifth century peace through the prism of political realism.

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<sup>213</sup> On the prevalence of the traditional militaristic use of diplomacy in relations with other barbarian neighbours see Ammianus Marcellinus (28.5.9) on Roman treaties with the Burgundians and Socrates (*HE* 9.5) on Uldin.



## Chapter 3

### Third-Parties & Frontier Zones

As the Roman-Sasanian competition increased in intensity and geographic extent in the third and fourth century different regions and frontier peoples were pulled deeper into the conflict.<sup>1</sup> When imperial conflict in Mesopotamia ground to a stalemate in the fourth century both empires sought to win the loyalty of the local elites in the frontier zones of Transcaucasia, Armenia and Arabia in an order to tilt the overall balance of power in their favour.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the imperial détente was that it took longer to implement in the frontier zones than in it did Mesopotamia, where the two empires faced each other directly. As already seen, the balance of power in Mesopotamia was stabilised relatively early in 363 whereas the settlements in Armenia and Arabia were not reached until 387 and 422 respectively. Although the largest clashes between imperial armies predominantly took place in Mesopotamia it was imperial tension and suspicion in the frontier zones that usually instigated wider conflicts. As such, it is important to investigate why this was the case and to understand why these frontier zones so often acted as *casus belli*.

The focus of this chapter will be Armenia and Arabia. These two geographically distant regions have been chosen for a number of reasons. First, they both feature extensively in the Roman and Sasanian sources, implying that the two empires themselves, or the historians of the two empires at least, regarded these regions as significant. Secondly, it was in these two frontier zones that larger wars and conflicts frequently erupted in the third and fourth centuries. Thirdly, the Armenian and Arab elites, the Armenian *nahkharars* and Arab tribal leaders,

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<sup>1</sup> Waltz (2008: 100-105) discusses the importance of frontier zones in realist interstate relations in bipolar systems, which is particularly relevant to this study, by stating that middle-states (such as frontier zones) could act with impunity because they were aware that their actions would have no measurable effect on the overall power of the two major states. Indeed, as shall be shown below, this was the case with the frontier Armenian and Arabian elites in the Roman-Sasanian relationship.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, 2011: 30.

became third-parties in the Roman-Sasanian relationship to a much greater extent than Lazi or Tzani and were frequently able to exert their own ambitions and influence on the two more powerful imperial powers. For these reasons, in the search for peace in the fifth century securing a mutually acceptable *détente* in Armenia and Arabia was an intrinsically important and necessary step.

### **Indirect Rule**

The frontier zones should not be seen as areas of strict military and territorial demarcation between the empires, as was the case in Mesopotamia, but rather as areas of varying and constantly fluctuating degrees of indirect rule.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is important to stress that the empires competed to control the local powerful families and dynasties rather than specific territory. This contest for the loyalty of local Arab, Armenian, Lazi and Tzani elites affected the very nature of the imperial competition and presence in these regions; imperial authority was secured through indirect rule rather than direct domination.

It was this indirect rule which made a diplomatic solution to imperial tensions in these regions so difficult. Indirect rule, with its inherent ambiguities and opacities, is never as clearly defined as strict territorial control. As such, unlike in Mesopotamia where the 363 treaty established a mutually acceptable balance of power relatively easily based on the control of specific territories and particular forts and cities such a settlement was simply not possible in these indirectly ruled frontier zones. The local frontier elites, with their own ambitions and needs, played too significant a role for this to happen. Indeed, the nature of indirect rule gave extra importance and influence to the local elites upon whom imperial authority rested which they could exploit to their own advantage. The competition for the loyalty of the self-serving local elites in Armenia and Arabia was a source of much antagonism and ambiguity that heightened

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, local elites had always maintained a certain level of political autonomy in the frontier zones between the Roman Empire and its eastern neighbour, whether the Parthians or the Sasanians (Sommer, 2012: 241). In this regard, the question posed on the earlier position of buffer zones and frontier peoples between Roman and Parthian Empires is equally relevant for the later relationship between the Roman and Sasanian Empires; 'The question is therefore not; was Palmyra a city belonging to the Roman Empire, but rather: how far did Roman influence and control reach Palmyra?' (Sommer, 2005: 287). This can easily be rephrased to fit into the context of later Roman-Sasanian relations; the question is not therefore whether Armenia (or Arabia) was control by the Roman Empire (or the Sasanian Empire) but rather: how far did Roman (or Sasanian) influence and control reach Armenia (or Arabia).



mistrust and suspicion between the Romans and Sasanians. No lasting peace would have been possible while the two empires continued to compete, or were induced to compete by the frontier peoples, militarily, diplomatically or even culturally for supremacy over these strategically important lands. Equally, as we have already seen neither empire had the resources to become embroiled in conflict while they were so threatened by their respective Hunnic threats on their northern frontiers. This imperial distrust, the relative autonomy of Arab and Armenian elites and the fact that neither empire had full control ensured previous attempts to resolve tensions in these regions, which were based on territorial divisions, were doomed to fail. Consequently, solving these problems and reaching an accommodation that was able to overcome the difficulties inherent in competitive indirect rule was not only desirable but a necessity in the fifth century if the much needed peace was to be firmly established. The improvements in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy in the fifth century allowed the empires to find subtle and innovative solutions to the challenging conditions of these important frontier zones that had previously eluded them.

In order to analyse how the Romans and Sasanians managed to resolve Armenia and Arabia as causes of conflict between them in 387 and 421 respectively it is important to investigate a variety of aspects of these frontier zones in relation to what made them so important to the relationship between the Roman and Sasanian Empires. Primarily, the geopolitical and strategic importance of Arabia and Armenia, the nature of the conflict between the Roman-Sasanian conflict in these frontier zones, the ability of the local elites to act as 'third-parties', and manipulate the empires into confrontation and finally the ways in which the two powers finally reached a diplomatic solution.

## 3.1: Armenia and the Armenians

### The Contest for Control

The geopolitical and strategic importance of Armenia ensured it always played a defining role in Roman-Sasanian relations. Indeed, it remained a major grievance and source of dispute between them from 244, when Philip the Arab was forced to renounce Roman control of Armenia, until the Arab conquests in the seventh century. Both sides wanted to dominate the region in order to strengthen their own position and advantage over the other. The strategic importance of Armenia, interposed as it was, and is, between the Near East and Middle-East was that it acted as a cross-roads between the east and west, simultaneously separating and connecting Greek *poleis*, Rome and Byzantium from the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian Empires respectively in different stages of its history. Likewise, and arguably more important for Roman-Sasanian relations in the fifth century, it performed a similar role in both separating and connecting the northern steppe nomads and the sedentary civilisations based in Mesopotamia.<sup>4</sup> Control of this important cross-roads provided many benefits and was constantly contested between the two empires.

For the Romans control of Armenia granted them two key strategic advantages over their Sasanian rival. First, it acted as a buffer zone, protecting the richer provinces of Syria and Mesopotamia.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, the region was frequently used as a staging post for Roman attacks on the Sasanian Empire. For the Sasanians then, control of Armenia was strategically important in their efforts to shut this Roman 'corridor' of attack.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, when launching campaigns against their imperial rival the Romans always enlisted the help of their Armenian allies. For instance, the military assistance of the Armenian king was fundamental to Galerius' victory in 298.<sup>7</sup> Even more tellingly, in 363 Julian, convinced of the invincibility of the Roman army, refused all offers of assistance from his allies except from the

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<sup>4</sup> Russell, 2005: 25. Lang (1983: 505) supports this assessment saying that the Caucasus range had always separated the Eurasian Steppe from the more civilised centres in Mesopotamia and Anatolia.

<sup>5</sup> Poirot (2003: 1) confirms Armenia's use as a buffer zone in Roman-Parthian relations, in which although it did not have the fundamental strategic importance as it did in Roman-Sasanian relations was still important.

<sup>6</sup> Lang, 1983: 518-9.

<sup>7</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 128.

Armenian king, who he insisted played an important role.<sup>8</sup> However, it did seem that the Sasanians were more aware of the region's underlying military and strategic importance in the overall balance of power. They were quicker to realise that control of Armenia was the key to overpowering and outmanoeuvring their western rival. This is most evident in Shapur II's decision to concentrate his military efforts on Armenia even after his victory over Julian left Roman Syria and Mesopotamia almost defenceless and anxiously awaiting Sasanian invasion.<sup>9</sup> This concern with the position of Armenia was also confirmed by the Sasanian protocol wherein whenever a contingent of Armenian cavalry arrived at Ctesiphon they would be received by a delegate sent by the Shah who would enquire about the welfare and situation of Armenia.<sup>10</sup>

It can also be argued that Armenia held more political and ideological importance for the Sasanians than it did for the Romans. This political importance came from the fact that Armenia was ruled by a branch, and was the last refuge, of the Arsacid family, whom the Sasanians had overthrown during Ardashir's initial rebellion in 224.<sup>11</sup> The survival of a branch of the old ruling family was a threat to the Sasanians and a challenge to their legitimacy. Indeed, the Armenian Arsacids regarded the Sasanians as their sworn blood enemies.<sup>12</sup> To counter this challenge it became an entrenched Sasanian policy to promote members of their dynasty, usually a son of the ruling Shah, to the Armenian throne, in a challenge to the Arsacid Armenian monarchy and in a bid to weaken their hold on the region and bind it close to Ctesiphon.<sup>13</sup> This close connection between the Sasanian Shah and Armenian king, when he was elected by the Sasanians themselves of course, was confirmed by the fact that when invited to attend royal banquets the Armenian king shared the seat of the Shah.<sup>14</sup>

Its position as a cross-road between the Roman and Sasanian Empires ensured it was an important area in, and prospered from, east-west trade, evident in the fact that Artaxata was

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<sup>8</sup> Amm. Marc. 23.2.1.

<sup>9</sup> On the expected Sasanian attack on Roman Mesopotamia see: Zosimus (4.4.1) and Socrates (*HE* 4.2). On the fact that Shapur attacked Armenia instead see: Ammianus Marcellinus (27.12). Shapur II also used Armenia as a means of striking a blow against the Roman Empire (*Lib. Or.* 59.71-72; *Eus. V.* 4.56).

<sup>10</sup> Chaumont, 1986. This is strikingly similar to the diplomatic protocol in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy which dictated that the Shahs asked Roman envoys about the health and well-being of the emperor.

<sup>11</sup> Agathangelos 18-20.

<sup>12</sup> Thomson, 2009: 157.

<sup>13</sup> *SKZ* § 18, 20. Here the son of Shapur I, Hormizd-Ardashir, is described as the 'Great King of Armenia'. Garsoïan (2004: 73) also acknowledges this policy.

<sup>14</sup> Chaumont, 1986.

selected as one of only three official trade hubs between the two empires and the wealth of Dvin.<sup>15</sup> Merchants travelled from all over the ancient world, from Persia, Syria and Palestine, to trade and exchange goods in Armenia.<sup>16</sup> The region also benefited from plentiful and lucrative natural resources, the most famous of these were the Pharangion gold mines which were a huge source of wealth.<sup>17</sup> The importance of Armenia's economic resources in the imperial competition was evident in Kavād I's insistence on these mines being returned to Sasanian jurisdiction during the negotiations of the Eternal Peace in 530/1. Human resources were equally considerable, Armenia was densely populated,<sup>18</sup> and thus provided a ready supply of skilled soldiers that both Constantinople and Ctesiphon were keen to utilise and exploit for their own benefit.<sup>19</sup>

Armenia was also the site of religious competition between the empires. Each empire tried to spread their respective Christian and Zoroastrian religions amongst the Armenians as a means of furthering their overall influence in the region. Indeed, Armenia was one of the few regions outside of *Eran* that the Sasanians attempted to forcefully impose Zoroastrianism.<sup>20</sup> Moses of Chorene grants an insight into how religion both instigated and intensified imperial conflicts in Armenia;

Remember the sworn agreement of your father Constantine, which was [made] to our king Tiridates; and do not give this country of yours over to the godless Persians, but assist us with your forces, in order to create as king the son of Tiridates, Khusro. For God has made you lord not only of Europe but also of the Middle-lands.<sup>21</sup>

Although the veracity of Moses of Chorene is hotly debated, not least due to his bias towards the Armenian Bagratuni clan, he is still nevertheless a useful source of information. His use of Greek, Jewish and Syriac sources meant that he was the most well-informed of the early Armenian historians.<sup>22</sup> This 'sworn agreement' Moses mentions refers to the alliance

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<sup>15</sup> On Artaxata see: Menander Protector (fr. 6.1; *CJ* 4.63.4). On Dvin see: Procopius (*BP*. 2.25.1-3). In general see: Dignas & Winter (2007: 174).

<sup>16</sup> Malalas 18.63. The historian's assessment is confirmed by the huge variety of coins found in the region (Chaumont, 1987: 433).

<sup>17</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.15.26-9; Malalas 18.50-1; Strabo, *Geography* 11.14.9.

<sup>18</sup> Amm. Marc. 27.12.2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007:174; Greatrex, 2005: 493.

<sup>20</sup> *KKZ*; *SKZ* § 17-18.

<sup>21</sup> 3.5.

<sup>22</sup> Thomson, 2000: 662.

between the newly converted Constantine, and the Armenian king Tiridates, the first major political leader to officially convert to Christianity in 301, it underlines the idea of the Christian Roman Empire as protector of Christian Armenia.<sup>23</sup> The letter itself, sent from Armenian bishops to Constantius, highlights that religious concerns quickly developed into a cause of conflict and hostility between the two empires in Armenia. Internal religious divisions and tensions in the region frequently resulted in the intervention or involvement of the imperial powers who viewed themselves as the ultimate protectors and guardians of Christianity and Zoroastrianism respectively. For example, in 365 Shapur II systematically sacked and destroyed major Christian towns and in 499 Yazdgard I began a policy of forced conversion to Zoroastrianism in Armenia.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Christian Armenians would attack Zoroastrians and Zoroastrian sites; they 'uprooted the fire shrines' and 'killed the Magians'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the religious history of Armenia during the Roman-Sasanian competition became one of forced conversions, deportations and martyrdoms which acted as a breeding ground of imperial hostilities.

It was this combination of strategic, economic, political and religious considerations that stimulated imperial competition over Armenia. Control over this vital region pushed the empires into conflict in 296 and provoked Constantine's for war in 337.<sup>26</sup> Both sides frequently justified military attacks and hostilities against one another by criticising their actions in Armenia. The first example of this came in 252 when Shapur I justified his attack against the Roman Empire by claiming the Romans had done 'wrong to Armenia'.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, in the protracted conflict between Shapur II and Constantius in the fourth century both legitimised their actions by citing Armenia. For example, Shapur defended his right to attack the Romans by claiming that 'I owe it to myself to recover Armenia...which my grandfather [Narseh] was deprived by deliberate deceit' while he himself was accused by the Romans of 'laying unlawful hands on Armenia'.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, even after the treaty of 363 had created a mutually acceptable settlement in the Mesopotamian frontier Armenia still caused, and was

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<sup>23</sup> On Tiridates' conversion see: Agathangelos (877) and *Epic Histories* (3.21). Although Agathangelos' claim to be a Roman scribe and eye-witness of the conversion has been doubted (Lang, 1978).

<sup>24</sup> Lang, 1983:520-1.

<sup>25</sup> Joshuan Stylites 21 (249.25-8).

<sup>26</sup> Barnes, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> *SKZ* § 4.5.

<sup>28</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 17.5.6, 26.4.5-6.

the site, of conflict as evident in Valens' preparation of a campaign to win back Roman dominance in the region in the 360s and 370s.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the exact reasons and justifications given by the Romans or Sasanians at different times, Armenia was undoubtedly a major and frequent *casus belli* between them.

### Armenian Ambiguity

Despite this importance, however, Armenia, or more specifically the Armenians themselves, were a confusing and ambiguous presence to both the imperial powers and modern scholars alike. Tacitus, writing about the earlier Roman-Parthian relationship, remarked about the Armenians:

They have been an ambiguous race from ancient times, both in the instincts of the people and in their country's situation, since, extending a broad frontier along our provinces, they stretch deep into the Medes; they are interposed between and more often disaffected toward these greatest of empires, with hatred for the Romans and resentment of the Parthian.<sup>30</sup>

Although writing in the first century Tacitus' assessment is still pertinent to the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian relationship as the Armenians were still trapped between two larger powers both of whom sought to impose their own authority on Armenian lands; the fundamental situation of the Armenians did not change dramatically between the centuries. Likewise, that the Armenians were considered an 'ambiguous race' was as true in the fifth century as it was in the first. Indeed, even modern scholarship finds it difficult to penetrate Armenian ambiguity and establish a concrete definition of ancient Armenia was.<sup>31</sup> This difficulty arises from competing ideas about how Armenia should be understood; whether as a precise geographical entity with clearly defined borders or rather more loosely as a specific ethnic group bonded together through shared cultural heritage, but not fully united fully either

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<sup>29</sup> Greatrex, 2000: 44.

<sup>30</sup> *Annals* 2.56.

<sup>31</sup> Highlighted by Dignas & Winter's (2007: 173) assertion that 'it is not easy to say what exactly "Armenia" was' and Greatrex's (2005: 496) warning that caution is needed when speaking of Armenia

politically or geographically.<sup>32</sup> As we shall see, this is not just a scholarly debate, Roman and Sasanian understanding of Armenia and the Armenians affected the success or failure of their diplomatic solutions in the region. Moreover, any attempted definition of Armenia was, and is, always liable to radical change due to date, context and perspective. As such, given that throughout late antiquity there were three differing perspectives, Roman, Sasanian and Armenian, and two different contexts, the imperial competition in the third and fourth centuries and the need for imperial détente in the fifth century, this ambiguity was compounded. Such uncertainty only furthered imperial suspicion and mistrust creating more sources of tension and conflict.

Central to the Armenians as an ‘ambiguous race’, and also highlighted by Tacitus, was the aforementioned position of Armenia as a cross-road between the Roman west and the Sasanian east. This geographic ‘situation’ created a hybrid culture in Armenia that contained influences from its two larger imperial neighbours.<sup>33</sup>

Armenia and Persia had been historically, geographically, politically and culturally connected since the time of the Achaemenid Empire, therefore, the Armenian *nakharars* in particular traditionally had closer ties with the Sasanian Empire than they did with the Romans. For example, Roman writers frequently describe the similarities in the dress and manners of the Armenian and Sasanian nobility.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the socio-political situation in Armenia and the Sasanian Empire were also similar; both were dominated by great noble houses who held their position and wealth hereditarily. In this regard, there were also strong ties of kinship between the similar Armenian and Sasanian nobility due to frequent intermarriage between them.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, even the Christian Tiridates did not break all his connections with the Sasanian Empire, he remained in contact with prince Hormizd, even before his exile.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Thomson (2000: 662) wonders if Armenia was a strict geographical entity where were its actual borders and frontiers; if a people, what were the bonds that bonded them; religious, cultural or political.

<sup>33</sup> Lang (1983: 517) speaks of ‘hybrid manners and culture’.

<sup>34</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 11.14.5.

<sup>35</sup> Thomson, 2009: 157.

<sup>36</sup> Zos. 2.27.

Consequently, there was a strong sense of kinship and commonality between the Armenian and Sasanian elites throughout their history.

However, this Sasanian cultural hegemony was increasingly challenged by Roman influence after the third century. In 301 Armenia, under Tiridates III (287-330), became the first state to officially embrace Christianity, therefore coupled with Constantine's conversion in 312 and later establishment of Christianity as the *religio franca* of the Roman Empire a new powerful Christian connection between the Romans and Armenians was established. Thereafter, Roman emperors and Armenian kings viewed themselves as 'dear brother[s]', with 'Christ the lord as the common denominator' in the 'steadfast friendship between the [Roman and Armenian] kingdoms'.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, official correspondence occasionally emphasised their shared religion.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, despite their occasional doctrinal debates there is equally evidence that friendly relations between Roman and Armenian bishops were still possible under the right circumstances.<sup>39</sup> The Romans were quick to use this new religious connection to further their own political and cultural influence in the region, at the expense of the Sasanians.<sup>40</sup> That this religious influence did result in political influence is highlighted by Moses of Chorene who relates that, even when the Armenians had become aggrieved by the actions and attitude of their king, Artashir, they rejected the idea of 'hand[ing] him over to the lawless [Sasanians] to be derided and mocked' and instead sent him to be judged by the Christian Roman emperor, Theodosius I.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the cultural influences from the Roman and the Sasanian Empires the Armenians, especially the powerful *nakharars*, retained and maintained their own cultural identity, of which they were fiercely proud and protective. This native Armenian culture predominantly expressed Armenian identity in terms of conflict, particularly in the struggle to maintain its own distinct character,<sup>42</sup> therefore, the imperial competition for both political

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<sup>37</sup> Agathangelos 877.

<sup>38</sup> Elishé 3.77 (in a letter to Theodosius II); Sebeos 46.151-2 (in a letter to Constans II).

<sup>39</sup> Firmus of Casaerea, *Epistle* 22.

<sup>40</sup> Garsoïan, 1997: 81; Ajdojsttz, 1970: 3. As Chaumont (1986: 427) makes clear, 'Christianisation tended to strengthen Armenia's link with the Roman Empire and to set back the Iranian cultural influence.'

<sup>41</sup> 3.63.

<sup>42</sup> Russell, 2005: 49. Adontz (1979: 8) goes as far as to suggest that Armenian culture as a whole would be dramatically altered as a result of political domination by either empire.



and cultural domination of Armenia, and the *nakharars* resistance and exploitation of this, created the perfect environment for the formulation and strengthening of the native culture.

This hotbed of cultural competition, rivalry and hybridity further complicated matters, causing ambiguity and misinterpretation in the policies and understanding of the imperial powers towards Armenia and the Armenians. It was because of this ambiguity and suspicion that the Romans believed the region was particularly vulnerable to Sasanian influence, believing that it 'was always in a state of disorder, and for this reason an easy prey for the [Sasanians].'<sup>43</sup> That they both had significant cultural influence in Armenia ensured that they felt they had vested interests in Armenia that they were not willing to see diminish to the advantage of their rival. It also affected the political outlook of the Armenians themselves, as *nakharar* loyalties, whether in support of one empire over the other, or even in more internal politics, were never consistent and always apt to quick and often dramatic change.<sup>44</sup> This confusing and complicated situation increased the potential for conflict as both empires attempted to utilise their cultural influence to increase their political control.

### The Role and Influence of the Armenian *Nakharars*

#### **Towards a Definition of 'Armenia'**

As already noted, there has been much debate about the nature of Armenia and how it should be understood. Having a clearly defined idea of what Armenia was is essential in understanding the role it played in Roman-Sasanian relations.<sup>45</sup> As such, it will be argued here that Armenia should be regarded not as a geographically stable or politically cohesive whole but as a distinct ethnic group that was united by a shared cultural heritage and traditions that were separated into competing political centres; in the same circumstances as the Greek

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<sup>43</sup> Proc. BV. 1.1.16.

<sup>44</sup> Thomson, 2009: 156.

<sup>45</sup> The importance of which is seen by Garsoïan's (1971) instructive and insightful attempt to 'redefine' what Armenia was in the fourth century.

*poleis* of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.<sup>46</sup> This analogy rests on the fiercely independent Armenian noble families, the *nakharars*, fulfilling the same role as the earlier autonomous *poleis* did in Greece. Certainly, like the Greek city-states, the fifty major *nakharar* clans, including the Mamikonean, Bagarunti, Artsauni, Guaramid, Chosroid and Kamsarakan, prized their autonomy and right to rule within their own territories independently, without interference from the Arsacid Kings, Romans or Sasanians, above all else. Also, similarly to the earlier Greek *poleis*, the Armenian noble clans competed fiercely with each other for supremacy and prestige. Indicative of this internal Armenian disunity was the fact that even the fifth-century Armenian historians were divided in their loyalty between the clans. For example, whereas Moses of Chorene was pro-Bagtrid his counter-part Lazar P'arpets'i supported their rivals, the Mamikonean.<sup>47</sup>

The power and position of the clans rested fundamentally on their landed power and jealously guarded rights and privileges, the most important of which was autonomy in their own territories.<sup>48</sup> Their territories were extensive, for example, the Mamikonean clan held sway over all the lands of Tao, Begrevand and Taron while the Bagratuni controlled vast Sper.<sup>49</sup> The head of each clan (the *tanuter*) ruled their lands, in which they held judicial and administrative power, as virtual kings.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, one contemporary Armenian remarked of the position of the *tanuter* in their lands that 'every magnate was on his throne'.<sup>51</sup> Armenia had been divided into several virtually independent kingdoms or principalities since the Seleucid period, therefore, by the time of the Roman-Sasanian relationship autonomy and hereditary rights were a deeply entrenched part of the *nakharars'* mentality.<sup>52</sup> The power and control of the *nakharars* over the lands they ruled was cemented by the fact that the vast majority of the Armenian population were peasants who owed military and labour services to them.<sup>53</sup> Alongside this, the later development of the Armenian Church also deepened the political control and power of the *nakharars*, as bishoprics were established in correspondence with

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<sup>46</sup> Halsall (2007 :38) argues that 'the only common factor in defining ethnicity is belief; in the reality of your group and the difference of others', and indeed this belief in regarding themselves as distinct from both imperial powers was apparent in the actions of the *nakharars* during this period.

<sup>47</sup> Thomson, 2000: 662-3.

<sup>48</sup> Garsoïan, 2005; Thomson, 2009: 159.

<sup>49</sup> Thomson, 2009: 159.

<sup>50</sup> Garsoïan, 2004: 77.

<sup>51</sup> *Epic Histories* 4.2.

<sup>52</sup> Lang, 1983: 510.

<sup>53</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 176.

the territorial divisions between the clans and the bishops themselves were largely anointed from the ranks of the different clans. Indeed, even the office of *Catholicos*, the leader of the Armenian Church, was reserved for the Pahlavuni clan until 439 as a hereditary right; thus showing that even Christianity could not escape *nakharar* domination.<sup>54</sup>

Although the Arsacid kings were the nominal head of state in Armenia, they were not absolute monarchs in the same way as the Roman emperor or Sasanian Shah. Instead, their leadership was based more on hegemonic authority that was begrudgingly accepted and frequently challenged by the *nakharars*. This political system and the internal position of the kings was dependent upon negotiation and the granting of privileges and offices to the princes in exchange for their loyalty, which was perpetually tentative nevertheless. For example, the Mamikonean clan used their position, and the monarchy's need for their loyalty, to obtain the rank of chief military officer (*Sparapet*) as a hereditary right of their family from the kings. Likewise, their chief rivals, the Bagratuni, were granted the office of the *t'agakap*, which gave them right to crown incoming kings, a very useful card to hold in the turbulent internal politics of Armenia.<sup>55</sup> The Mamikonean and Bagratuni monopoly of the most important offices enabled them to cement their supremacy and authority over other *nakharars*. Again this corresponds to the earlier Greek hegemonic institutions such as the Delian and Peloponnesian Leagues wherein the most powerful members exercised authority over the other smaller members. It is also illustrative that the Spartan and Athenian leaders of these leagues were able to establish firmer and more stringent control over their fellow *poleis* than the Arsacid kings were able to over their turbulent *nakharars*. Thus suggesting that, inter-*nakharar* politics were even more unstable than that of the relations between different *poleis* in Classical Greece.<sup>56</sup>

The mountainous and isolated geography and topography of Armenia aided the *nakharars* in defending and maintaining their autonomy and made it extremely difficult for foreign powers to fully conquer and militarily dominate the region as a whole; again the parallels with the Greek *poleis* in the fourth and fifth centuries are striking in this regard.<sup>57</sup> Another parallel to

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<sup>54</sup> Thomson, 2009: 160.

<sup>55</sup> Thomson, 2009: 159; Lenski, 2002: 154.

<sup>56</sup> On the relationship between Greek *poleis* see: Hansen (2006: 127-131) and Low (2009) among many others.

<sup>57</sup> Thus the historical development of Armenia in this period supports Adontz's (1970: 8) theory that physical environment and geographical setting determine the evolution of different nations and peoples. For further

the Greek *poleis* was Armenia's political fragmentation, each individual *nakharar* was always concerned predominantly with their own success and position.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, it is wrong to regard Armenia as politically united whole, and, as such, it is difficult, and usually incorrect, to make any generalisations about Armenian policy towards their imperial neighbours given that these *nakharars* rarely acted in unison and often rebelled against the authority of the Arsacid Armenian monarchy. The different, competing and fluctuating ambitions of the individual *nakharars* ensured that their foreign policies towards the Romans and Sasanians were also individual, competitive and fluctuating.

There was one underlying element that united the otherwise disparate *nakharars* whatever their political differences, competing ambitions or even loyalties to the imperial powers, however; shared culture. This shared cultural heritage ensured that the competing *nakharars* felt ties of kinship with each other due to their shared Armenian culture. The bonds that connected this politically diverse ethnic group as Armenians were just as strong as those that created the sense of shared Hellenism in Classical Greece.<sup>59</sup> The most important aspects of this shared culture in creating ties between the noble clans were language and religion. Shared language is arguably the strongest unifying force in creating a sense of shared identity in any group. The strongest historical example of this is once again the importance of Greek language in fomenting the development of a distinct Greek identity.<sup>60</sup> Language as a collective and unifying force between the *nakharars* reached its zenith in the fifth century with the creation of the Armenian alphabet.<sup>61</sup> The development of an independent Armenian alphabet was central to the strengthening of a distinct Armenian identity as it allowed the noble clans

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details on the effect mountainous country can have on the development of societies, both internally and externally see: Jameson (1989: 13).

<sup>58</sup> Ajodjsttz, 1970: 4. Ajodjsttz also points out that Armenian historians frequently highlight this lack of unity and cooperation was the source of all the country's woes.

<sup>59</sup> For more detailed studies and analysis of the role shared Hellenistic culture played in uniting the otherwise disparate Greek *poleis* see: Swain (1996). Herodotus (8.144.2) gives the reasons why the Athenians would never betray the Greeks to the Achaemenid Persian, shared Greek religion, shared Greek language, shared Greek blood and shared way of life. Important for the theory of the similarity between the Armenian *nakharars* and the Greek *poleis*, these were the same things that united the Armenian clans.

<sup>60</sup> Strabo, *Geography* 11.14.5. This common link through language is once again very similar to the cultural links between the independent Greek *poleis*. For information on the importance of Greek language in developing a distinct language see: Harrison (1998) and Swain (1996: 17-43).

<sup>61</sup> Preiser-Kapeller, 2010: 140; Ajodjsttz, 1970: 2.

to communicate with one another in their own language rather than in that of the Romans or Sasanians.

As already stated, Armenian cultural identity was at its most dynamic and forceful when it strove to protect its own distinct character from outside influences, therefore, in this regard, Tiridates II's early conversion to Christianity in 301 was important. Similarly to the earlier Greek religion, this new shared Christianity created collective traditions and cooperative obligations between the competing *nakharars*. Conversion to Christianity had a two-fold effect: first, it bound the disparate and divided Armenians closer to each other, at least the majority in the western regions who did convert, and secondly, it distanced the Armenians from the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire while also, especially after Constantine's later conversion in 312, resulting in closer ties with the Roman Empire. Yet, the later development of the Armenian Church, headed by the *Catholicos*, helped to cement Armenian religious independence by distancing them from the influence of their Roman counterparts, thus ensuring they did not become religiously dominated by Constantinople. The aforementioned invention of the Armenian alphabet was again important in entrenching this distinct Armenian religious and cultural identity as it meant that Armenian bishops could debate doctrine with their counterparts in the Roman west as well as engage in religious discourse amongst themselves, insulated from Roman interference.

Hence, Armenia is best understood, and was defined, by its *nakharars* who were politically separate and independent, with different and often competing ambitions and aspirations, yet, at the same time connected culturally. This definition of Armenia is also reinforced by the policies pursued by the imperial powers themselves in trying to dominate the region. From a Roman and Sasanian point of view Armenia existed as an arena of varying degrees of largely indirect rule. Central to this policy were the *nakharars* whose loyalty the empires competed over as means of extending their own influence in the region.<sup>62</sup> In such a culturally ambiguous, politically fluid and geographically isolated environment as Armenia the pursuit of indirect rule rather than direct rule, installed strictly by military domination, proved much

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<sup>62</sup> Gregoratti (2012: 2) highlights the central importance of controlling the *nakharars* in gaining any sort of mastery or dominance over Armenia.

more effective. The more powerful, influential, or in strategic terms, more needed, a particular clan was, the more autonomy the imperial powers were willing to grant them in exchange for their loyalty. Yet, whenever the Romans or Sasanians gained a seemingly unassailable ascendancy over the other in Armenia and tried to bring their allies under increased direct control which was detrimental to the preservation of the *nakharars'* autonomy they were quick to switch their allegiance to the other empire, who would promise to respect their independence. Therefore, the position of the Armenian *nakharars* in their relations with the Roman and Sasanian Empires was in a constant state of flux, wholly incompatible with stable peaceful relations.

### **The *Nakharars* and the Imperial Patrons**

The nature of the imperial competition in Armenia and their pursuit of indirect rule meant that the *nakharars* were able to act as third-players in Roman-Sasanian relations, exploiting and manipulating the imperial rivalry for their own benefit.

Corresponding to the definition of Armenia as defined primary by the autonomous *nakharars* rather than as a cohesive and united state, individual *nakharars*-Roman-Sasanian relations should equally be viewed independently. Each individual clan had different and often vastly contrasting foreign policies towards to two imperial powers. The social and political structure of the *nakharars* within internally divided Armenia granted them flexibility in their foreign relations.<sup>63</sup> Their autonomy and flexibility permitted the division, or distribution, of individual clan members between multiple layers of loyalty between the two empires; as a way of hedging their bets. For example, during 450 the Mamikonean clan had one member of their family leading a rebellion in Persarmenia while simultaneously another kinsman was serving as a Roman general.<sup>64</sup> For the clans this granted great political flexibility and manoeuvrability, limiting the risks of total defeat or imperial domination. However, from the Roman and Sasanian perspective this proved an insurmountable block to full control or annexation of

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<sup>63</sup> Garsoïan, 1997: 79.

<sup>64</sup> Preiser-Kapeller, 2010: 143.

Armenia. While, the fact that there were fifty such clans gives an insight into how varied and complicated this competition for influence could be.

Internal Armenian politics were dominated by the ceaseless tension between the monarchy and the *nakharars*; Arsacid control over their kingdom was never fully secure or stable.<sup>65</sup> This tension was caused by the *nakharars'* belief that their rights and privileges predated and superseded royal power and were therefore more sacrosanct.<sup>66</sup> The reticence of the *nakharars* to acknowledge the over-lordship of the Arsacid monarchy was shown in that they only reluctantly, and often by force, attended the royal court, despite the fact that the kings were forced by custom to seek the counsel of the *nakharars* on all important matters.<sup>67</sup> The relationship between the monarchy and the *nakharars* was based primarily on obligation and reward. Certainly, the fall of many Arsacid monarchs came as a direct result of losing the support of the *nakharars* who would often break into open revolt if they felt the king was not acting in their interest by protecting their rights or rewarding them sufficiently for their loyalty. Indeed, we have already seen that in order to win the support of the Mamikonean and Bagratuni clans the Arsacid kings were forced to grant them the important offices of the *Sparapet* and *t'agakap*. The Armenians had a special term to describe this type of relationship; *carayut'iwn*.<sup>68</sup>

As confirmed by the Armenian historian Sebeos, who clearly states that the *nakharars* only served the Roman emperor or Sasanian Shah in return for riches, honours and other rewards, this *carayut'iwn* relationship was also at the heart of their relations with the two empires.<sup>69</sup> Thus, if the imperial powers wished to win the loyalty and support of the clans they had to pay for it.<sup>70</sup> An important passage in Procopius' *De Aedificiis* illuminates other aspects of *nakharar*-Roman relations in this regard, namely, the obligation of military service, bestowal of ritual symbols of office from the emperor and the promise of autonomy in their own

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<sup>65</sup> Lenski, 2002: 154.

<sup>66</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 159; Lenski, 2002: 154.

<sup>67</sup> *Epic Histories* 3.8; Preiser-Kapeller, 2010: 162; Garsoïan, 1997: 78.

<sup>68</sup> On the overall structure and different aspects of the *carayut'iwn* relationship see: Preiser-Kapeller (2010).

<sup>69</sup> 30.104-105, 30:88.33-35.

<sup>70</sup> This is also supported by Lenski, (2002: 155) who reminds us that loyalty within Armenia always came at a price, and both the Romans and Sasanians were willing to pay this price.

lands.<sup>71</sup> Mutual commitments and reciprocal oaths were integral to these relations, as one side, the emperor or Shah, played the role of patron and protector while the other, the *nakharars*, fulfilled that of faithful and obedient client.

Alongside rewarding those already in their service, the Romans and Sasanians both used a mixture of coercion and negotiation to try and entice other *nakharars* into allegiance with them.<sup>72</sup> For example, we have already seen that in 299 Diocletian gave administrative control of the newly won *regiones Transtigritanae* to Armenian nobles in the hope of winning their continued loyalty. Likewise, the Roman general Sittas ‘attempted by all means of promises of many good things to win over some of the Armenians by persuasion and attach them to his cause’.<sup>73</sup> Yet, it was the Sasanians, with their traditional cultural and political links with the Armenian nobility, who always seemed best able to gain *nakharar* support through diplomatic means.<sup>74</sup> The Sasanian Empire was similarly feudal, and like Armenia was dominated by powerful aristocratic families with whom the Shahs had to negotiate loyalty with the promise of rewards or punishment. Thus the Sasanians had more experience in this type particular type of client-patron relationship and greater awareness of the ambitions and motivations of the *nakharars*. This deeper understanding is evident in the existence of the Rank List of the Armenian Magnates which was kept by the Sasanians to help keep track of the different *nakharars*.<sup>75</sup>

Yet, if the Arsacid kings, as the nominal rulers of Armenia, had such difficulty in securing the long-term loyalty of the Armenian nobility it is easy to imagine the trouble the external Roman and Sasanian powers would have encountered. This is evident in the fact that the Romans eagerly attempted to make any agreement or treaty with individual *nakharars* extremely formal and durable by making ‘pledges in writing’ and oaths of loyalty which were recorded on ‘tablets’ and sealed.<sup>76</sup> It was hoped formalising treaties in this way would make alliances with individual *nakharars* more robust and long-lasting. The difficulties faced by both empires

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<sup>71</sup> 3.1.17-28.

<sup>72</sup> Amm. Marc. 20.11.2, 27.12.3; Proc. BV. 2.16, BG 1.37-38.

<sup>73</sup> Proc. BP. 2.3.2.

<sup>74</sup> Amm. Marc. 26.12.1-4.

<sup>75</sup> Garsoïan, 1984: 242.

<sup>76</sup> Proc. BP. 2.3.8-9: Oaths were always used in these negotiations (Sebeos 20:91.32-34, 16:66).



in this regard were exacerbated by the fact they were in direct competition with one another for the loyalty and allegiance of these important clans.

The *nakharars* quickly realised that the rewards they could receive for their assistance from the Romans and Sasanians were even greater than those offered by the Arsacid monarchy, and they were even quicker to exploit this to their own advantage, by constantly switching their much-sought after allegiance, thus gaining from the pragmatic generosity of emperor and Shah alternately. It was the endemic imperial competition over Armenia in the third and fourth centuries, and the imperial need for strong allies to challenge one another, that made entering and leaving the service of the Roman emperor or Sasanian Shah a readily available option for the *nakharars*.<sup>77</sup> Neither side, no matter the previous actions of individual *nakharars*, could afford to turn them away. If a clan's leader, *tanuter*, believed the emperor or Shah was not upholding their obligation in the *carayut'iwn* arrangement, or that they could gain more from the rival empire, they felt fully justified in switching their allegiance. This side-switching was common, to the point of it becoming normality, as illustrated by the examples of Meruzan Arcruni<sup>78</sup> and Atat Xoryoruni and Samuel Vahewni,<sup>79</sup> all of whom switched their allegiances between the imperial powers when they felt more money, prestige or power was being offered by the other empire. Although Procopius believed that material benefit was the primary motivation for this, this was not the only incentive for such wavering loyalty.<sup>80</sup> As we have already seen, the *nakharars* were hugely protective of their hereditary rights and privileges. Therefore, confirmations, or even expansions, of these rights by the imperial powers also motivated this prevalent side-switching. Likewise, any threat to these rights and privileges from one imperial power, in an attempt to increase their own direct rule in the region, would send the *nakharars* hurriedly into the arms of the other empire.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, for the *nakharars* keeping a destabilised equilibrium between the two imperial rivals and fomenting conflict between them was in their best interests.

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<sup>77</sup> Peiser-Kapeller, 2010: 156.

<sup>78</sup> *Epic Histories* 4.23:147.

<sup>79</sup> Sebeos 16.88.

<sup>80</sup> 1.15.18, 1.15.31.

<sup>81</sup> Proc. *BV*. 1.34.

Despite the constant switching of allegiances, throughout the third and fourth centuries neither empire could afford to stop trying to win the support of the *nakharars* and risk losing ground to their rival. Consequently, the Romans and Sasanians both poured vast resources into this competition, in order to win native loyalties and gain the upper hand in Armenia. However, this played directly into the hands of *nakharars*, who continually exploited the imperial competition for their own advantage. This endemic switching of allegiance by the *nakharars* resulted in a balance of power within Armenia that was in a constant state of flux. The ability of the *nakharars* to easily manipulate and exploit the imperial competition was thus an important catalyst in Armenia remaining a *casus belli*. In order to overcome these tensions and establish the much needed *détente* in the fifth century the Romans and Sasanians had to control the clans by nullifying their independence and ability to easily switch allegiance; a flexible and mutually acceptable diplomatic solution was the only answer.

#### The Diplomatic Solution: 387 – The Partition of Armenia

Previous Roman-Sasanian attempts to reach a settlement in Armenian had always failed, usually because of their restrictive simplicity and one-sidedness. They were predominantly agreed as a result of military conflict, wherein the victorious empire would use their superior military position to try and cement their dominance in the region by forcing undesirable concessions from the other; as was the case in the treaties of 299 and 363. Third and fourth century treaties followed two rather limited and formulaic models; the complete surrender of all authority in Armenia by one empire, paving the way for its complete domination by the other, Roman suzerainty with a Roman nominee on throne or vice-versa with Sasanian suzerainty. However, the ability of the *nakharars* to exploit imperial competition made these solutions wholly incompatible with the social and political realities of Armenia itself, while equally, neither empire would be willing to completely abandon their position in the region.<sup>82</sup>

Throughout the third and fourth centuries the desire for strategic advantage far outweighed the need for peaceful accommodation. However, the rising threats on the empires' other

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<sup>82</sup> Blockley, 1984: 28.

frontiers towards the end of the fourth century changed this, and both now realised they needed stability on the imperial frontier in order to combat these new threats. In this regard, the failure of either side to win indisputable military domination of the region alongside the ability of the *nakharars* to exploit and perpetuate imperial hostilities forced the Romans and Sasanians to acknowledge that there could be no long-term stability in Armenia without acknowledging one another's interests. Certainly, Armenia was increasingly recognised as a source of conflict between them by the two empires themselves.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, the Romans and Sasanians needed to develop an entirely new solution to the problem, one which would be mutually acceptable, while also simultaneously negating the possibility of any interference or obstruction from the *nakharars*. The difficulty of such a proposal was evident in the fact that negotiations for the treaty that managed to accomplish this complex feat, which was signed in 387, took almost six year to negotiate.<sup>84</sup>

After the death of Manuel Mamikonean in 385, who had temporarily united the *nakharars* and pushed back against the Romans and Sasanians alike, Armenia and the noble clans were once more violently divided between pro-Roman and pro-Sasanian factions, each led by a different Arsacid King; Arsak IV and Khusro III, respectively.<sup>85</sup> Yet, rather than be drawn into another conflict the two empires decided to exploit this situation for their own benefit. They agreed to divide Armenia between themselves according to this current division amongst the *nakharars*, represented by the two different Armenian kings.<sup>86</sup> Thus, we are told that '[t]hey confirmed this plan and divided the country in two. The portion of the Persian side belonged to King [Khusro], and the portion on the [Roman] side belonged King [Arsak]'.<sup>87</sup>

The partition, which was enshrined in the treaty of 387, was based on the cultural divide that had been expanding and deepening within Armenian society since Tiridates' conversion in 301 and the inherent political divides between the *nakharars* that were now crystallised by

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<sup>83</sup> Amm. Marc. 30.2.1.

<sup>84</sup> Orosius 7.34.8; Themistius *Or.* 16.212d-213a; *Pan. Lat.* 2 (12) 22.4-5.

<sup>85</sup> On the career and death of Manuel Mamikonean see: *Epic Histories* (5.37-44). On the divisions between the two Arsacid kings see: Greatrex (2000: 43).

<sup>86</sup> *Epic Histories* 6.1.; *Proc. De. Aed.* 3.1.12-15; Procopius made a chronological mistake as he credits this to the reign of Theodosius II (408-450).

<sup>87</sup> *Epic Histories* 6.1.

the existence of two competing pro-Roman and pro-Sasanian groups.<sup>88</sup> Thus, the basis of this partition was based not on land but on the spheres of cultural and political influence.<sup>89</sup> It was hoped that since those *nakharars* who found themselves in either the new Roman or Sasanian sections were culturally and politically naturally more inclined to their new, now entrenched, imperial patrons there would be less potential for them to rebel or seek to change sides.<sup>90</sup> For instance, the clans in the new Roman sphere of influence, mainly those located in western Armenia and Akilisene, were highly Christianised and had long a historic tradition of Greco-Roman influence.<sup>91</sup> The Sasanians now held sway over the majority of the *nakharars* in east and south of Armenia and those in close proximity to the important regions of Iberia and Colchis, areas which had traditional cultural and political connections with Persia.<sup>92</sup> That this was not a territorial divide is evident in the inclusion of a clause that dictated that the middle regions of Armenian, Basean, Bagravand and Taran, where no firm loyalty or preference for either empire was readily apparent, were not included in the partition.<sup>93</sup>

The underlying aim of this treaty was therefore seemingly to provide a more stable balance of power in Armenia by neutralising the ability of the *nakharars* to switch sides. Thus, by dividing Armenia into two distinct spheres of influence the clans under Roman influence were isolated from the Sasanian Empire, and vice-versa. This separation was entrenched by a clause that forbade the empires from accepting the allegiance of a clan that belonged in other's sphere of influence.<sup>94</sup> That this clause was respected and upheld by the imperial powers is revealed by Lazar P'arpets'i and Joshua Stylites, both of whom describe occasions where

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<sup>88</sup> Adontz, 1970: 9. On scholarly debate surrounding the date of this partition see Blockley (1987) and Chaumont (1986). That the negotiations for this treaty began in the early 380s but were not concluded until 387 underlines how difficult this settlement was to agree and organise, as it was completely different to any previous Roman-Sasanian diplomatic agreement (Themistius *Or.* 16.212d-213a).

<sup>89</sup> Greatrex, 2000: 43. For this reason Procopius (*De. Aed.* 3.1-2) is often criticised (Blockley, 1987: 232-233) for his insistence that a physical barrier did exist. Yet, it must be remembered that Procopius was writing in the sixth century when the two distinct spheres had become more rigidified and stable, therefore he may have been importing his own time onto his narrative here. It was for this reason that Blockley (1987: 226) and Ajojsttz (1970: 4) believe that the partition was designed only to abolish Armenia as an independent kingdom, not as a political or social entity, at least at the level of the *nakharars*.

<sup>90</sup> Blockley, 1992: 43.

<sup>91</sup> Blockley, 1987: 224.

<sup>92</sup> Moses of Chorene 1.42.

<sup>93</sup> These regions later almost unanimously sided with the Sasanian Empire. Thus, again reinforcing the idea that the Sasanians were more adept at winning the loyalty and support of the *nakharars*.

<sup>94</sup> This clause was later reconfirmed in the treaty of 562, as Menander Protector (fr. 6.1) informs us that the imperial powers agreed that 'those [*nakharars*] who in time of peace defected, or rather fled, from one to the other shall not be received, but every means shall be used to place them, even against their will, in their hands of those from whom they have fled'.

Constantinople refused to become involved with *nakharars* in the Sasanian spheres despite direct appeals for Roman help.<sup>95</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the earlier period, when for example Valens was more than willing to support Armenian *nakharars* in their conflict with Shapur II.<sup>96</sup> The 387 agreement thus negated the ability of the clans to switch sides and destabilise the carefully negotiated Roman-Sasanian balance of power in Armenia and successfully neutralised them as a third-party and cause of conflict in the imperial relationship. Rather than being forced into a reactionary response by the *nakharars*, as was the case throughout the third and fourth centuries, the Romans and Sasanians in 387 had finally managed to pre-empt and outmanoeuvre them.

The treaty of 387, and the subsequent partition of Armenia into Roman and Sasanian spheres, was an instrumental component in establishing peaceful relations between the two empires in the fifth century.<sup>97</sup> It removed the most destructive grievance and source of conflict and since, unlike the previous treaties of 299 and 363, it respected and recognised the interests and concerns of both empires; it was able to produce a lasting and effective settlement. Given that both the Romans and Sasanians were long aware of Armenia as a source of conflict between them it may seem surprising that such a joint diplomatic solution was only considered at the close of the fourth century; however this is indicative of the internal problems in both empires at this time that forced imperial focus away from competition and towards needed accommodation.

That it was the special circumstances, the shifting of priorities, both internal and external in the fifth century that pushed the two empires towards accommodation in Armenia is evident in the problems they both faced at this time. The Sasanian Empire was wracked by internal unrest, Ardashir II, Shapur III and Bahrām IV all had short and turbulent reigns and were forced to concentrate on their internal position while Theodosius himself had to confront the usurper Magnus Maximus in the west.<sup>98</sup> The success of the powerful *nakharar* Manuel Mamikonean, who rallied the other clans to his side and created a truly independent Armenia

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<sup>95</sup> Lazar P'arpet's'i, 33.36; Josh. Styl. 249.15-23.

<sup>96</sup> *Epic Histories* 5.1.

<sup>97</sup> Rubin (1986: 678), Isaac (1992: 10) and Greatrex (2000: 44) supports the importance of the Armenian partition in ushering in the peace of the fifth century.

<sup>98</sup> Blockley, 1992: 44. Greatrex (2000: 41) similarly argues that the willingness for accommodation was absent during the reigns of the earlier rulers Shapur II and Valens.

by pushing out both the Romans and Sasanians, also undoubtedly motivated the new impetus for accommodation at the end of the fourth century.<sup>99</sup>

### The Aftermath of 387: Domination and Direct Rule

The *Epic Histories*, by stating that the Romans and Sasanians agreed to ‘nibble away at [the *nakharars*], to impoverish them, to intervene and reduce them to submission’, reveals that they intended to use the 387 partition as a means to increase their direct control over Armenia by cementing their domination over the *nakharars*.<sup>100</sup> This drive toward direct rule was only possible if each empire was wholly convinced that the other would not interfere in their sphere and that was granted by the 387 treaty. However, both still feared the ability of the *nakharars* to destabilise the détente in Armenia. For the Sasanians this fear is evident in their suspicion of any Armenian with strong connections to the Roman Empire; such people were always suspected of being Roman spies or malcontents.<sup>101</sup> Thus, to further guarantee the separation of the *nakharars* in the two different imperial spheres, to isolate them from the court of the other and minimise the potential of side-switching a law was passed in 408 that carefully controlled diplomatic travel in Armenia; any diplomat who broke these travel restrictions faced exiled and crippling fines.<sup>102</sup> This law was then clearly designed to limit the chance of diplomatic dealings between Constantinople’s *nakharars* and Sasanian diplomats and the potential damaging consequences that could result from such meetings. The passing of this law can therefore be suggested as evidence of the Romans trying to further entrench the outcome of the 387 treaty with a move to cement its attempt to separate the *nakharars* and make their Armenian allies even more dependent upon them.

Yet, for all the success the 387 partition and the subsequent law of 408 had in helping to establish peace between Constantinople and Ctesiphon it did not solve the Armenian question entirely as both powers continued to face difficulties in the region.<sup>103</sup> The continuing

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<sup>99</sup> *Epic Histories* 5.39-43.

<sup>100</sup> 6.1.

<sup>101</sup> Traina, 2009: 4.

<sup>102</sup> *CJ.* 4.63.4.

<sup>103</sup> Thomson, 2009: 157.

power of the *nakharars* within each individual sphere would not allow this, as the later entreaty by the Emperor Maurice (582-602) to his Sasanian counterpart shows:

They are a perverse and disobedient race...they are between us and cause trouble. Now come, I shall gather mine and send them to Thrace; you gather yours and order them to be taken to the east. If they die, our enemies die, if they kill, they kill our enemies; but we shall live in peace. For if they remain in their own land we shall have no rest.<sup>104</sup>

After recounting this tale Sebeos, comments that, '[t]hey both agreed'. Sebeos was a Christian bishop who wrote in the tenth century and whose historical aim was to explain the Arab conquests over Christian lands, in this mission his primary focus was on the reign of Khusro II (590-628). Therefore, his history provides great insights into late Sasanian activities in the seventh century, particularly Khusro's relations with Maurice. As such, his knowledge of Roman-Sasanian relations in Armenia at the turn of the seventh century, such as in the above passage, should be viewed with confidence.<sup>105</sup> Importantly, the letter shows that after 387 both leaders increasingly felt they now had full authority over the *nakharars* in their respective spheres. Furthermore, Maurice's suggestion that deporting the Armenians themselves would help to solve tensions reinforces the idea that Armenia should be understood by, its people, primarily the *nakharars*, rather than as a strict geographical entity, and that the Romans and Sasanians were aware of their role in fomenting conflict between them.

Central to increasing direct imperial rule in Armenia and part of the empires' move to reduce the *nakharars* to submission was the abolition of the Arsacid monarchy that still remained intact in both the Roman and Sasanian spheres.<sup>106</sup> Abolishing the monarchy would further isolate the clans and deepen their dependence on their new imperial patron, as loyalty to the emperor or Shah, depending on which side of the partition the individual *nakharars* were on after 387, would then be the only possible path to rewards, wealth and honours; thus further reducing their freedom of action and political flexibility.

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<sup>104</sup> Sebeos 15.86.

<sup>105</sup> Thomson et.al, 1999: xi. Indeed Howard-Johnson (2011: 94-5) later also remarks that Sebeos' work was 'authoritative' and that he 'handled his sources scrupulously'.

<sup>106</sup> Preiser-Kapeller, 2010: 172.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that although it was the Sasanians who traditionally sought to overawe the Arsacids, whereas the Romans had supported them, it was in the Roman sphere that the monarchy was first abolished.<sup>107</sup> This suggests that Roman support of the Arsacids in the third and fourth centuries was undertaken primarily to undermine the Sasanians. Indeed, once Roman-Sasanian competition in Armenia had been negated by the 387 treaty the Romans lost little time in getting rid of the Arsacid monarchy. In 390 the pro-Roman Arsak died, but, rather than nominate a successor the Romans instead installed a governor, the *comes Armeniae*, as the nominal ruler of Roman Armenia; thus stamping their full authority on the *nakharars* in their sphere of influence.

It was not until 428 that the Sasanians were similarly able to achieve their long-term goal of abolishing the Arsacid monarchy. The support Khusro IV received from the *nakharars* initially prevented the Sasanians from getting rid of him; however, this support was quickly and irreversibly withdrawn when Khusro attempted to curb the traditional rights and privileges of the clans.<sup>108</sup> Furious with such an attack on their power the *nakharars* petitioned the Sasanians to remove him from the throne; a petition the Shah was happy to oblige. Unfortunately for the noble clans however, rather than nominate a new Arsacid monarch, the Sasanians chose instead to install a governor (*marzban*) upon them.<sup>109</sup> Thus, the Sasanians, were able to use the *nakharars'* ambitions against them. Certainly, Moses of Chorene believed that the *nakharars* had committed political suicide by supporting the abolition of their monarch.<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that the Sasanians had to wait until the *nakharars* withdrew their support of the king reveals the power and influence they still held.

The abolishment of the Arsacid monarchy allowed the Romans and Sasanians to wield full administrative, political and military control over their respective spheres of Armenia; no longer was Armenia a buffer or periphery between the two imperial powers but it was now a

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<sup>107</sup> Examples of the Sasanian policy of attempting to abolish the Arsacid Monarchy include Arsak being sent to the 'Prison of Oblivion' (Proc. BP. 1.5.16-17) and the execution of Queen Pharandzem (Amm.Marc. 27.12.5-8). Blockley (1992:34) argues that the abolition of the Arsacid monarchy had always been central in Sasanian policy.

<sup>108</sup> Thomson, 2009: 160.

<sup>109</sup> Bahrām V was especially keen to remove the Arsacid monarchy (Lazar P'arpets'i 1.14).

<sup>110</sup> 3.64. However, Elishé (6.5-7) disagrees with this, stating that after the removal of the monarchy Armenia simply became a satrapy administrated by the *nakharars* rather than a full Sasanian possession.



fully integrated part of both states.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, parallel to the abolition and the restricting of the *nakharars* political manoeuvrability the Romans sought to integrate them fully into the imperial administration apparatus as a means of further asserting their domination over the clans. In this regard, soon after 387 the *nakharars* under Roman influence were obliged, just like the rest of the provincial elite, to offer the emperors *aurum coronarium* upon their ascension to the throne or after military triumphs.<sup>112</sup> This stronger direct control and absorption of the clans into regular imperial administration allowed the Romans to slowly challenge and eventually eradicate the hereditary aspects of the *nakharars*' vested rights and privileges, thereby undermining the very legal and traditional foundations on which their power rested.<sup>113</sup>

The initial division of Armenia into two distinct Roman and Sasanian spheres gave both empires the opportunity and framework to further their own direct control of these areas. The subsequent abolition of the Arsacid monarchy and continued neutralisation of the *nakharars* were essential in removing the Armenians as a third-party and cause of conflict in the Roman-Sasanian relationship. This policy of reducing the influence and power of the Armenian *nakharars* throughout the fifth century was instrumental in creating a more stable balance of power in Armenia and ensuring continued peace between Constantinople and Ctesiphon throughout the fifth century.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> In this regard, it is noteworthy that from 387 onwards the abolishment of the Arsacid monarchy, and indeed internal Armenian history, was only recorded by Armenian historians (Traina 1999, 2004). Thus suggesting that for the imperial powers the history of Armenia and the Armenians was no longer worth recording as they had been removed as major and independent players and it was now one in the same as their own.

<sup>112</sup> *CTh.* 12.13.6.

<sup>113</sup> This was finally achieved by Emperor Zeno, in retaliation for their support of the rebellion of the *Magister Militum Per Orientem* Illios in 484-88 (*Proc. De. Aed.* 3.1.17-18). The fact that they were able to offer the usurper such support shows there remained considerably intact up until this point.

<sup>114</sup> We must be careful not to over-emphasise this success and as it would be wrong to suggest that the power and influence of these clans were neutralised forever. Indeed, the *nakharars* still continued to be exempt from taxation and the billeting of military garrisons. The earlier mention entreaty of Maurice indicates a resurgence while Traina (2009: 5) argues that the traditional *nakharars* political and social structures outlived both the Roman and Sasanian Empires.

## 3.2: Arabia and the Arab Tribes

### The Contest for Control

Throughout the ancient world the Arabs had been a permanent factor in east-west relations.<sup>1</sup> The Near East was permeated by the symbiotic and interdependent relationship between the cities, their settled urban populations, and Arab nomads, and this mutuality ensured that they were always an important consideration for the powerful and centralised imperial states in the region.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, nomadic Arab tribes were not just limited or secluded to the Arabian Peninsula but were spread throughout the Near East. Ammianus Marcellinus' statement that they could be found in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Palestine and the 'lands of the Blemmyes' and Nilus' assertion that the Arabs '[inhabit] the desert from Arabia as far as Egypt's Red Sea and the river Jordan' confirms this.<sup>3</sup>

Older imperial powers such as the Assyrians protected their frontiers by controlling Arab tribes indirectly; thus setting an early precedent for the later Roman and Sasanian policies.<sup>4</sup> Arabs and Persians had been historically intertwined since the time of the Achaemenid Empire who utilised the Arabs as military allies, and the Sasanians pursued similar alliances with their ancient neighbours.<sup>5</sup> The Romans equally had a long history with the Arabs, who they predominantly utilised as military allies; the first systematic example of which was Marcus Aurelius' relationship with the Thamud confederacy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> They were not defined by obscure insignificance as has been previously claimed by scholars such as Kavar (1956: 181).

<sup>2</sup> Gichon, 1991: 321; Millar, 1993: 428; Donner, 1999: 24; Sommer, 2005: 289. John Cassian (*Collationes* 6.1) informs us that the Romans had two distinct designations for the settled Arab populations, the *Arabes*, and the nomadic tribes, the *Saraceni*. Trimmingham (1979: 1) says that this division of the different types of Arabs could be further expanded upon by stating that these groups could be divided again into cultivators, peasants, townspeople, nomadic herdsmen and nomadic raiders.

<sup>3</sup> Amm. Marc.14.4.1-7; Conca 1983: 12 (Nilus 3.1). The geographic diffusion of the Arab tribes is also acknowledged by Strabo (*Geog.* 16.1.27-28) and Pliny (*NH.* 5.65, 6.144).

<sup>4</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on historical Arab-Persian links see: Bosworth (2000, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Contact between the Arabs and Persians was ensured by the geopolitical situation both peoples found themselves in (Toral-Niehoff, 2013: 116; Hoyland, 2003: 13-35; Bosworth, 1983). The importance of the Arabs to the earlier Achaemenid Empire is revealed by their honour position in the sculptured reliefs at Persepolis (Schmidt, *Persepolis II.* 1969. Pp. 112) and is also commented on by Herodotus (3.5, 7.86-7).

<sup>6</sup> Fisher, 2008: 313; Sartre, 2005: 360.

In the early stages of the Roman-Sasanian relationship powerful client-cities such as Palmyra and Hatra straddled the imperial frontier, acting as buffer-zones between the empires.<sup>7</sup> During this period it was with these two important cities that the symbiotic relationship between the settled populations and the nomadic Arab tribes was most prevalent.<sup>8</sup> Hatra and Palmyra exercised political control over the nearby Arab tribes who, in return for the benefits offered by the city, such as wealth and honours, helped to protect the cities and guard their important trade routes. Yet, as the Roman-Sasanian competition intensified both sought to stamp their full authority on these important Arab cities in order to better secure the frontier against one another. Unlike the Parthian *regna* which granted Hatra a largely autonomous position the Sasanians imposed complete domination on their territory and wanted to fully incorporate the city into their empire; which they achieved with the city's capture in 244.<sup>9</sup> The Roman destruction of Palmyra under Aurelian was also a consequence of the city's defiance of Roman rule under Zenobia, who built an independent Palmyrene Empire out of Rome's eastern provinces.<sup>10</sup> The elimination of these two cities, which had previously exercised political authority over the nomadic Arab tribes created a power vacuum in the region and had important consequences for Roman-Sasanian-Arab relations.

With the destruction of Palmyra and Hatra the tribes became more fierce and independent.<sup>11</sup> The tribes no longer benefited from protecting these trade routes as there was no one to reward them for doing so. The Roman campaign against Arab tribes in 290 during the reign of Diocletian underlines the damage such independent tribes could do; a Roman emperor now found it necessary to attack them directly.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Diocletian's reorganisation of frontier acknowledged the ferocity of the tribes with the abandonment of the most distant military outposts, namely Hegra, Dumat and al-Jandal.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, even in the fourth century when the two empires had gained more control and influence over the Arab tribes in the

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<sup>7</sup> Trimmingham, 1979: 21.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the Arabs tribes' relationships with Hatra and Palmyra see: Dirven (2013), Sommer (2003, 2004) and Smith (2013: 33-55).

<sup>9</sup> Dio. 80.3.1-2; Dignas & Winter, 2007: 154; Wiesehöfer, 1982. Sommer (2004: 239) presents a model for the Parthian *regna* imperial structure of which Hatra was an important part.

<sup>10</sup> On the Palmyrene Empire see: SHA (*Tyranni Triginta* 15.1-4, *Gall.* 13.5) and Stoneman (1992). On Aurelian's capture and destruction of the city see: Zosimus (1.61).

<sup>11</sup> Shahid, 1984a: 32; Dignas & Winter, 2007: 163-4.

<sup>12</sup> Millar, 1993:399.

<sup>13</sup> Sartre, 2005: 361.

region they were still a danger and menace towards the trade routes they had previously helped to protect and keep safe.<sup>14</sup>

In response, the Romans and Sasanians increasingly sought to subsume the roles previously played by Hatra and Palmyra in order to exercise political authority and indirect control over the tribes. In this way they could redirect the ferocity of the Arabs away from themselves and towards imperial goals, predominantly against the rival empire. Although describing the position of the Arabs in earlier Roman-Parthian relations Strabo's account is nevertheless illustrative of the newfound role they played in the Roman-Sasanian relationship in the fourth and fifth century:

The Euphrates and the land beyond it constitute the boundary of the Parthian Empire. But the parts this side of the river by the Romans and the chieftains of the Arabians as far as Babylonia, some of the chieftains preferring to give ear to the Parthians and others to the Romans, to whom they are neighbours.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, just as in Armenia, the two empires competed against one another for the loyalty of these frontier peoples who they used against one another in conflict and warfare; from the Roman perspective the Arabs increasingly resembled the western *foederati*.<sup>16</sup> After the destruction of Hatra and Palmyra tribal identity became ever more important to the Arabs, they increasingly viewed themselves at the tribal level as a *sirkat* (confederation).<sup>17</sup> Thus, it was at the tribal level that the empires interacted with the Arabs in the fourth and fifth centuries rather than the centralised powers of Palmyra and Hatra as they had before.<sup>18</sup> As highlighted by Strabo, imperial control of the Arab tribes was indirect, rather than full direct domination, and once again this was as true in the fourth and fifth century as it was in the historians own time.<sup>19</sup> Correspondingly, as the Romans and Sasanians increasingly replaced Hatra and Palmyra the Arab tribes accordingly became more dependent on their imperial

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<sup>14</sup> Hier. *Vit. Malchi* 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Geog.* 236-7.

<sup>16</sup> On Arab tribes being used to conduct raids against each other by the imperial rivals see: Malalas (18.32), Procopius (*BP.* 1.17.43-5) Zachariah (*Chron.* 8.5a) and Theophanes (*Chron. a.m.* 6021). On the Roman Arab allies resembling *foederatii* see: Shahid (1962: 31); Sartre (2005: 358).

<sup>17</sup> Graf, 1978: 15.

<sup>18</sup> Shahid, 1984a: 31; Sartre, 2005: 358.

<sup>19</sup> Toral-Niehoff, 2013: 119. Although she does argue that in Sasanian-Arab relations this indirect rule was replaced by direct rule in the sixth century.

patrons for economic rewards and political stability. For example, the Nasrids wore a crown (*tāj*) that was bestowed on them by the Sasanian Shahs.<sup>20</sup>

The imperial rivals utilised their Arab allies in a number of ways; frontier defence, protection of trade routes,<sup>21</sup> in campaigns against one another,<sup>22</sup> and in other major military campaigns; such varied use underlines how valuable the Arabs were as military allies for both empires.<sup>23</sup> The *Notitia Dignitatum*, which reveals that the Roman army deployed a vast array of different Arab troops, such as mounted archers,<sup>24</sup> camel cavalry<sup>25</sup> and even infantry,<sup>26</sup> reinforces this importance. Certainly, it was for their military prowess that the Arabs were most respected for by the Romans.<sup>27</sup> The importance of the Arab tribes to the Sasanian Empire was evident in Yazdgard I's decision to send his son, and heir, Bahrām V, to be raised and educated in al-Hira at the court of the Nasrids.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, at the start of the fifth century Yazdgard I attempted to use his Nasrid allies as a counter-weight to the Sasanian nobility.<sup>29</sup> This utilisation of Arab allies for military purposes would have been even more important in the fifth century when both imperial armies were already stretched in defending against the Huns, Vandals and Hephthalites. For these reasons the competition for the allegiance of the tribes was fiercely contested. Influence over the tribes and the military support they offered was vitally important in attempting to win supremacy in this frontier region.<sup>30</sup>

This increased inter-connection between the imperial powers and the Arab tribes, alongside the knowledge that the tribes developed through interaction with outside states and foreign peoples, resulted in various tribes beginning to develop into larger confederations or groupings from the third century onwards.<sup>31</sup> This growth strengthened the importance and

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<sup>20</sup> Tabarī 821, 858.

<sup>21</sup> Shahid, 1989: 478.

<sup>22</sup> Amm. Marc. 24.2.4; Proc. *BP*. 1.18.35-37.

<sup>23</sup> Zach. *The Syriac Chronicle* 228-229.

<sup>24</sup> *Or*. 32.28.

<sup>25</sup> *Or*. 34.

<sup>26</sup> *Or*. 37.34.

<sup>27</sup> Amm. Marc. 23.3.8; Proc. *BP*. 1.17.40-45; Evag. *HE* 4.12, 5.20.

<sup>28</sup> Tabarī 854-5.

<sup>29</sup> Rubin, 1986: 679.

<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Nappo (2009: 74) has claimed that by the sixth century Constantinople's sole priority in Arabia was to gain the support of the tribes in their renewed war with the Sasanians.

<sup>31</sup> Fowden, 1993: 120. On the influence of outside forces affecting the development of the Arab tribes both culturally and politically see: Millar (1993: 399) and Trimmingham (1979: 4)

negotiating power of the allied tribes when dealing with their imperial patrons. However, Arab power did not reach its apex until the seventh century and until then, especially in the fifth century, the Arabs remained military allies of the empires, whose prosperity was dependent upon the goodwill of their imperial patron.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, in the Roman mind-set the Arabs did not have an independent existence and were regarded merely as another element of imperial machinery, as a tool in their frontier defence and in the competition with the Sasanian Empire. This was to have major consequences on the nature of the Roman-Sasanian frontier in Arabia and proved a major stumbling block in the search for peace between the two empires.

This Roman perception of the Arab tribes as merely another part of imperial apparatus manifested itself in Roman attitudes to Arabia itself. They viewed the region as a strange and distant land, and in strategic terms as an unimportant backwater,<sup>33</sup> with Procopius even stating that it was 'completely destitute'.<sup>34</sup> This perception was also shaped by the strategic reality of Arabia, where the main danger to the Roman Empire came from small-scale raids that, although could sometimes pose local problems, never threatened the overall strategic integrity of the empire.<sup>35</sup> Roman disdain of this threat, and therefore arguably also of Arabia itself, was seen in the response of the *magister militum per Orientem* to the Governor of Phoenicia and Palestine's pleas for help and reinforcement against the raids of the Arab Queen Mavia in 376, who was said to have 'laughed at the appeal'.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast, Arabia was of vital strategic importance to the Sasanian Empire.<sup>37</sup> Their capital, Ctesiphon, the important city of Veh Ardashir and the agriculturally important south-west provinces of Mesopotamia, Fars and Khuzistan, were all within striking distance of northern

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<sup>32</sup> Fowden, 1993: 120; John. Eph. *HE*. 3.3.54.

<sup>33</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.19.8-16; Malalas 16.5. Isaac (1992: 268) also supports this view as he states that Arabia was relatively strategically unimportant for the Roman Empire.

<sup>34</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.19.6-8.

<sup>35</sup> Millar, 2006: 68. Indeed, Ammianus Marcellinus (e.g 14.4) only refers to small-scale Arab raids and never anything approaching a larger incursions or invasion. For further information on Arabs as a raiding threat rather than a serious military danger see: Isaac (1984).

<sup>36</sup> Soz. *HE* 6.38.3-4.

<sup>37</sup> *SKZ* § 1-3; *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* 25, 25.

Arabia and thus susceptible to Arab raiding, especially those directed by the Romans.<sup>38</sup> As such, the Sasanians concentrated substantial resources on protecting their interests and cementing their military presence in the region. This was done with the construction of a large defensive line that stretched from Hīt in the north to Basra in the south which consisted of small forts that protected the Sasanian communication network in the region and major fortifications and fortified cities which added sturdier protection against Arab raids.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Shapur's Ditch (*Khandaq-ī Šapūr*), a formidable defensive structure garrisoned by elite troops, the cataphractes (*dosar shahbā*), was constructed to add to the protection of the forts and cities themselves.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the Arabian Peninsula, especially in the north and east, was a vital region of imperial defence for the Sasanians.

Many of the important trade routes that connected the Roman west to the luxuries and spices of the east went through Arabia and, therefore, control of, or at least a dominant position in, the peninsula granted considerable economic benefits. Indeed, the wealth obtained from controlling the Arab tribes, which was essential in controlling and protecting these trade routes, was evident in the enviable prosperity of Hatra and Palmyra before their destruction.<sup>41</sup> Thus, even more so than Armenia, Arabia was as an economic battle-ground throughout Roman-Sasanian relations in which each empire tried to monopolise control of the region's economic resources and trade routes. The Romans long had a fascination with the riches of Arabia. In 25/6 BC the famous expedition of Aelius Gallus was launched to investigate the region and uncover its true economic value for possible Roman take-over or intervention.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the second century annexation of the Nabataean kingdom was completed in the hope of monopolising and benefitting from control of the region's valuable trade routes.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Howard-Johnson, 2012: 94. Indeed, the *Bundahishn* (33.16) reveals the danger posed to Sasanian territories by hostile tribes. This is also confirmed by Farrok (2007: 198-9).

<sup>39</sup> Examples of the smaller forts have been uncovered at Ruda, Ukhaydir and Qusayr, while remains of one of the larger fortifications have been excavated at Qasr Yeng (Howard-Johnson, 2012: 97-98).

<sup>40</sup> Conrad, 2009: 185; Toral-Niehoff, 2013: 119.

<sup>41</sup> For Hatra's wealth see: Strabo (*Geog.* 26.1.27). For Palmyra's wealth see: Pliny (*NH* 5.88) and Gawlikowski (1996).

<sup>42</sup> Strabo *Geog.* 16.780-783; Pliny *NH* 6.32. The expedition itself quickly turned into a disaster for the Romans that resulted in a large loss of life and achieved little in the way of positive gains.

<sup>43</sup> On the Roman takeover of the Nabataean kingdom see: Dio (68.14.6).

Arabia was arguably one of the most economically important regions of the Sasanian Empire. Control of the north-east coastal regions of the Arabian peninsula allowed them access and domination of the Persian Gulf and its valuable trade routes to the wider world,<sup>44</sup> and this in turn cemented the Sasanians' position as the primary intermediary in east-west trade that was fundamental in their overall economic prosperity.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it was the revenues generated from control of the Persian Gulf that provided the foundation of early Sasanian economic strength. Consequently, the Sasanians sought to further entrench their position in north-east Arabia to protect their economic interests in the Persian Gulf throughout their history. The economic importance of Arabia meant that it was gradually encircled and penetrated by the imperial powers; the Sasanians established trading posts in the Straits of Hormuz and Ayla while Roman merchants tried to utilise Arabia to bypass the Sasanian monopoly and custom dues on east-west trade.<sup>46</sup>

Both empires were eager to assert their superiority in Arabia itself and over the Arabs tribes as means to protect themselves and increase the pressure on their rival. Despite the difference in importance with which the two empires viewed the strategic importance of Arabia, Roman interest was ironically augmented by its importance to the Sasanian Empire. Roman interference and involvement in a region that was strategically and economically vital to their rival would have caused trouble for the Sasanians and diverted their attention away from other regions where the Romans had more interest in themselves. Thus, Arabia, particularly in the north of the peninsula, was an important cause and zone of conflict throughout the Roman-Sasanian relationship; Arabia and the Arab tribes played an important role in the imperial competition, in both fomenting and taking part in conflicts.

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<sup>44</sup> *SKZ* (§1-3); *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr* (25, 52) both express the importance of the Persian Gulf to the Sasanian Empire. On the importance of the Persian Gulf to the Sasanian economy see: Wiesehöfer (2006: 191-197), Daryaee (2003) and Brosius (2006: 182-183).

<sup>45</sup> Piacentini, 1985: 59.

<sup>46</sup> Conrad, 2009: 186.



## Imperial Patrons and Dynastic Clients

### **The Roman Arabian 'Frontier'**

The nature of the Roman Arabian frontier has become a major scholarly debate.<sup>47</sup> Yet, analysing how this frontier functioned is integral to understanding the overall relationship between the Arabs and the imperial powers and also reconfirms the importance that imperial indirect control over the tribes and frontier had in this period. Indeed, it is prudent to emphasise here that during this period Arabia did not exist as a distinct geographical entity with clearly demarked and recognised boundaries but was a region made up of a large variety of different tribes of various sizes, each with their own claim to different lands; in that way it was similar to the situation of Armenia. It was largely because of these ambiguous conditions that Procopius remarked that it was impossible for the Roman emperors to 'possess himself of any of the country', emphasising the difficulty with which the empires had in dominating this region.<sup>48</sup>

As a desert frontier the Arabian frontier was by necessity different to the more linear frontier defences of the Rhine, Danube and Hadrian's Wall.<sup>49</sup> A static fortified defensive line would simply not work in a desert environment where control of water supplies and transit routes were the main forms of defence.<sup>50</sup> Certainly, no evidence of an extensive network of interconnected fortifications has been uncovered in the region.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, there is no comparable

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<sup>47</sup> This debate has resulted in a variety of opinions; Bowersock (1976: 222) argues for the idea of defence-in-depth, similar to that in Mesopotamia; Graf (1978: 20) focuses on the importance of the *foederati*, Mayerson (1986: 36) believes in an open frontier with little fortifications or military presence, while Parker (1987: 48) argues for a fortified frontier with the specific aim of deterring raids from the Arab tribes. It will be argued here that the nature of the frontier is likely to be found in a compromise between the models of Graf and Mayerson. Such debate has only been compounded by the lack of Roman sources that provide detailed information or insights about this frontier compared to the information that the likes of Ammianus Marcellinus (18.5.2) and Zosimus (3.14.1-2) provide on other sections of the Roman-Sasanian frontier.

<sup>48</sup> *BP*. 1.19.14-16.

<sup>49</sup> Breeze, 2011: 118.

<sup>50</sup> It was the need to control water supplies and transit routes that convinced Parker (1987: 48) that the frontier was based on the fortification of these sites to protect them from Arab raiders. However, Parker focuses on the use of Roman forts rather than the correct employment of *foederati* to protect this region.

<sup>51</sup> Graf (1978: 2) acknowledges that this may be due to the desert conditions which can be harmful to archaeological remains. However, previous Nabataean military outposts have been uncovered by archaeologists in the same region. Nevertheless, the preoccupation of identifying individual forts and military installations as an Arabian *limes* still pervades the study of this region and its frontier. This preoccupation is not just limited to the Arabian frontier and is evident in the various volumes of the *Roman Frontier Studies*. Bowersock (1976: 219)

evidence in Roman sources of a clearly demarked and fully recognised frontier being ‘pierced’ as Zosimus describes in regards to the Mesopotamian frontier.<sup>52</sup> Rather, the sources that do comment on the Arabian frontier describe it as ‘frontier district’ that existed both inside and outside of the empire simultaneously.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, Roman defensive strategy in Arabia must be understood not as a linear series of interconnected forts, but as an open frontier zone, with differing and fluctuating zones and degrees of Roman control, both direct and indirect.<sup>54</sup> Roman troops were not capable of adequately defending an open frontier district of this type; indeed, in previous centuries they had proved themselves unable to defend against the raids of hostile Arab tribes.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, the nomadic Arabs, who travelled widely across the fringes of the Roman eastern frontier, living neither fully inside nor outside the empire, were perfectly suited to this type of frontier defence.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, it was the Romans’ Arab allies, with whom they negotiated with for power and responsibility, and who were well used to fighting in the desert environment, that were charged with protecting this frontier against raids from independent tribes and Sasanian-allied Arabs alike.<sup>57</sup> The defence of this open frontier zone therefore necessitated that the Romans cultivated a network of alliances with local Arab tribes who were each used to defend different sectors of the frontier.<sup>58</sup> The tribes were utilised in a defence-in-depth approach with the establishment of an inner and outer shield of allied Arabs; with the outer shielded guarded by lesser tribes with lesser duties.<sup>59</sup> This ensured that even if one tribe was defeated or defected there were others immediately ready to take their place. The

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confirms this by explaining the difficulty of using the term *limes* about Arabian Frontier. It is this preoccupation which regularly clouds our understanding of the more important aspects of frontier defence such as the how and why in favour of the arguably less significant where.

<sup>52</sup> 3.14.1-2.

<sup>53</sup> *Pan. Lat.* 6.(7)2; *Soz. HE* 4.15.

<sup>54</sup> Fisher (2013a: 2, 2011: 74) supports this model with his idea of ‘second circle’ frontier spaces which were areas in which Rome and their allies negotiated for power. Similarly, Isaac (1988: 133) refers to the Arabian frontier as a frontier district administered by a *dux*, although in late antiquity the *dux* was eventually replaced by an Arabian phylarch as the allies become increasing more important and formalised into the Roman military and administration. This model of a frontier zone without an extensive fortified line but rather a zone of political influence and military alliance did have previous *exempla* from the reign of Augustus and his policy with various German tribes (Graf, 1978: 4).

<sup>55</sup> Peters, 1978: 319. *Proc. BP.* 1.17.41 -2; Jerome *PL.* 22:col.1086.

<sup>56</sup> Fisher, 2011:29. Parker (1987:48) recognises the freedom of movement permitted along this frontier.

<sup>57</sup> Mayerson, 1989:76; Bowersock, 1986:35. On the dangers posed by hostile tribes, especially those allied to the Sasanian Empire see: Procopius (*BP.* 1.17.40-41), Rufinus (*HE.* 7.10) and Jerome (*PL* 22:col.1086).

<sup>58</sup> *Proc. BP.* 1.19.10, 1.20.10.

<sup>59</sup> Shahid, 1989: 479.

fundamental importance of the Arab tribes to frontier defence in Arabia is evident in the differences between Roman policies towards the tribes as *foederatii* compared with relations with Germanic *foederatii* in the west. Unlike those in the west, Arab allies were usually stationed in their home regions. This difference underlines the centrality of the allied tribes to Roman defence in this region and their utilisation of different tribes to defend the open frontier zone due to their native skill at defending such difficult terrain.

There were two main reasons the Romans decided upon this frontier strategy in Arabia after the third century. First, their perception of Arabia as strategically unimportant meant that Constantinople would not have thought a strong permanent Roman military presence was necessary. Secondly, and importantly for the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian détente, it allowed them to redeploy their own military manpower elsewhere to frontiers they considered more important, such as the Danube and for the Vandal campaigns.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the abandonment of Roman military installations in the Arabian frontier such as Qasr Bshir and Yotvata in the fifth century further reveals the shifting of priorities away from the eastern frontiers in the fifth century, of which the Arabian frontier was a part.<sup>61</sup>

Sasanian use of Arab allies in frontier defence was similar.<sup>62</sup> The Shahs cultivated a close relationship with the Nasrid dynasty, whose powerbase was centred on al-Hira.<sup>63</sup> The Sasanians used their Nasrid allies to act as a protective shield ahead of their own fortifications against raids from other tribes, and thus add another layer of protection on this strategically vulnerable frontier.<sup>64</sup> There was one major difference between the frontier strategies of Romans and Sasanians and their utilisation of the Arab tribes, however, whereas Constantinople used a variety of different tribes to defend different sections of the frontier Ctesiphon granted their Nasrid allies hegemony over all their other allied tribes.<sup>65</sup> This made

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<sup>60</sup> For evidence that troops stationed on the Arabian frontier were routinely redeployed to other frontiers and for other military campaigns see Shahid (1989: 51). Who describes how the Salihids were redeployed from the Arab frontier to take part in Leo's Vandal expedition of 468.

<sup>61</sup> Fisher, 2004: 50; Ball, 2000: 101; Shahid, 1989: 95.

<sup>62</sup> Lecker (2002: 109-115), Donner (1981: 44-48) and Kister (1968: 155-156) show that Sasanian policy in Arabia was built on indirect rule, through building alliances with local dynasties.

<sup>63</sup> Toral-Niehoff, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Toral-Niehoff, 2013: 119; Tabarī 958

<sup>65</sup> Proc. BP. 1.17.40-41; Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of John the Hesychast* 13.

them a much more organised and coherent defensive shield with which to defend Sasanian interests in the region. Indeed, as we shall see, the greater efficiency of this system and use of their allies was evident in the later sixth-century Roman imitation of it, with the promotion of the Jafnids as the overall leader of Constantinople's Arab allies.<sup>66</sup>

### **Indirect Control and Imperial Competition**

The nature of the Roman frontier helps to explain why, despite Roman disdain for the strategic importance of Arabia, it was nevertheless a region of imperial conflict. The similar use of Arab allies in the frontier strategy of the Romans and Sasanians, intensified and escalated the importance of the local Arab tribes. Consequently, just like in Armenia, the loyalty of the local frontier peoples was highly sought after and competed over as a means to promote imperial authority and influence in the region.<sup>67</sup> Although a sixth century example, this competition was exemplified by the Ramala conference (524) when Romans, Sasanians and even the Himyar and Ethiopians all solicited the aid of the Nasrid ruler al-Mundhir after the massacre of the Najrani Christians.<sup>68</sup> Certainly, the open nature of the Arabian frontier itself facilitated such imperial competition, not only for the loyalty of the various Arab tribal powers and the indirect control this granted the imperial powers of them but also in the use of these allies against the imperial rival.<sup>69</sup> Correspondingly, the Arabs, trapped as they were between the rivals, were increasingly forced to pick sides.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, even after Constantine's conversion religious neutrality was no longer even an option for the Arab tribes trapped in between the Roman and Sasanian Empires.

In this competition for allies the Romans and Sasanians focused their negotiations and alliances on individual Arab leaders rather than the tribes as a whole. As such, imperial-Arab relations were highly personal, based fundamentally at the level of the emperor or Shah, as the imperial patron, and the Arab tribal chief, as the client. Two rulers and political leaders

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<sup>66</sup> *BP.* 1.17.40-41.

<sup>67</sup> Procopius (*BP.* 2.1.1-5) makes it clear that both empires used their Arab allies as a means to pursue their own military agendas and interests. Likewise, Photius (*Bib.* 3) relates that both empires tried to coax the allies of the other to change sides.

<sup>68</sup> Fowden, 1993: 119-20.

<sup>69</sup> Fisher (2013a: 7) agrees that imperial influence over Arabs tribes was based on indirect control.

<sup>70</sup> Shahid, 1984b: 13.

are more likely to share, in general terms at least, similar values, attitudes and ambitions as well as recognition of common interest, and from the perspective of the imperial patrons this made them easier to control.<sup>71</sup> The imperial powers were better able to influence and exert pressure on individual leaders and families than they would have been able to if they were dealing with a centralised polity with strong political institutions.<sup>72</sup> Such a focus on elite family dynasties is apparent in later Roman historiography which noticeably only describes individual rulers, such as Arethas and Alamoundaras, and not the wider tribal group.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, even Syriac sources only speak of 'Beth Harith' or 'Beth Mundhir', 'The House of Harith' or 'The House of Mundhir', never the names of the clans themselves.<sup>74</sup>

Arab leadership was highly personal, internal dominance was dependent upon possessing sufficient charisma, ability and reputation.<sup>75</sup> Importantly, one of the ways in which a leader could prove he possessed these attributes was to maintain a close relationship with the Roman or Sasanian Empire. For an individual Arab leader, the patronage of either Constantinople or Ctesiphon provided them with the resources and prestige necessary to maintain their dominant internal position. It provided the leader with personal honours and titles, which granted political legitimacy and reputation, and also wealth, which could be distributed amongst the leaders' followers to cement their loyalty.<sup>76</sup> As such, tribal leaders were always eager to endear themselves to the imperial powers through acts of loyalty or military service in the hopes of gaining these rewards. Indeed, similar to imperial-*nakharar* relations, the fundamental nature of imperial-Arab relations was based on service and reward.<sup>77</sup>

Conversely, when imperial support was taken away the power and position of the individual leaders and their dynasties became extremely vulnerable. For example, even the Sasanians'

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<sup>71</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 169; Hoyland, 2009: 118; Shahid, 1989: 35. The Paikuli Inscription reveals that this was just as true for the Sasanians as it was for the Romans. Hence, it is correct to view the imperial allies in the level of individual leaders or dynasties rather than kingdoms, therefore, labels such as Jafnid and Nasrid which designate specific elite families are more appropriate than the more traditional terms of Lakhmid and Ghassanid, which suggest that the empires were dealing with coherent and centralised polities (Fisher, 2011).

<sup>72</sup> The Romans had a tradition of negotiating with individual leaders and dynasties rather than polities as apparent in their policies towards the Germanic tribes in the west.

<sup>73</sup> Proc. *BP.* 2.28.12-14.

<sup>74</sup> John Eph. *HE* 67.148. As pointed out by Hoyland (2009: 119).

<sup>75</sup> Lancaster & Lancaster, 2004: 35.

<sup>76</sup> Fisher, 2013b: 7.

<sup>77</sup> Malalas 18.35; Proc. *BP.* 2.19.15-18. As evident in the in the career of Mavia who Sozomen (*HE* 6.38) describes in terms reminiscent of a *foederati*.

powerful and long-lasting Nasrids allies crumbled when the Shahs removed their patronage.<sup>78</sup> This reliance on the imperial patron to maintain their internal position within the tribe granted the empires considerable influence and control over the Arab chief, which they exploited ruthlessly.

However, Arabs clients were not utterly helpless or passive in their relationship with the imperial patrons or within the wider imperial competition. As emphasised by Joshua Stylites, 'to the Arabs of both sides this [Roman-Sasanian] war was a source of much profit, and they wrought their will on both kingdoms'.<sup>79</sup> The Arab ability to profit from the imperial competition is best evident in the career of Prince Imru'ulqais. Imru'ulqais left a grave inscription at al-Namāra in the Syrian frontier between the Roman and Sasanian Empires that dates from 328, and is thus the oldest uncovered Arabic inscription, that detailed the Arab leader's achievements and successes.<sup>80</sup> From Imru'ulqais' inscription it is clear that the self-proclaimed 'King of all the Arabs' switched his loyalty from the Sasanians to the Romans during the unstable reign of Bahrām III. This switch was likely caused by the internal problems Bahrām faced during his reign, which meant he was likely unable to provide the Arab leader with his expected rewards, and which Imru'ulqais needed to cement his own individual position within the tribe. Consequently, this would have encouraged Imru'ulqais to switch his allegiance to the Romans, who could provide him with these rewards.<sup>81</sup>

The most important aspect of the Imru'ulqais' career is that it highlights Arab willingness and ability to change allegiance to whichever empire was willing to reward them the most, or if they believed their loyalty was not being rewarded sufficiently by their current patron.<sup>82</sup> That Arab tribal leaders were first and foremost concerned with their own position and success above any loyalty to either empire is evident in the trouble that could arise when the promised imperial payments were stopped or even reduced. For example, Libanius claims that Julian's refusal to continue the traditional payments to allied tribes caused much

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<sup>78</sup> Fisher, 2011(b): 264.

<sup>79</sup> 17. The fact that Joshua Stylites knew about this, even so far northward of Arabia, indicates just how important the Arab tribes had become in the overall Roman-Sasanian relationship.

<sup>80</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 168; Bellamy, 1985: 31-52.

<sup>81</sup> For evidence of his earlier alliance to the Sasanians see: Tabarī 834. While the grave inscription itself shows his later pro-Roman stance (Bellamy, 1985: 31-51)

<sup>82</sup> Theo.Sim. 5.1.7-8, 5.13-14; Amm. Marc. 25.6.9-10.

resentment amongst that Arabs and that it was in fact a displeased Arab who eventually threw the spear that killed the emperor.<sup>83</sup>

Other examples of Arab leaders changing sides included Aspebetos and Amorkesos. Like, Imru'ulqais, Amorkesos changed his allegiance from Ctesiphon to Constantinople.<sup>84</sup> Two reasons have been put forward as to why Amorkesos did this, first it has been claimed that he wanted to convert to Christianity, but his Sasanians patrons would not allow this.<sup>85</sup> Secondly his dynasty, the Jafnids were known enemies of the Nasrids, and that, therefore, this conflict may have forced him to move on. This second reason was also likely linked to the third; Amorkesos' lack of recognition by the Sasanians in terms of the rewards they granted him.<sup>86</sup>

Arab side-switching was detrimental to stable imperial relations between the two empires as it created an unstable and fluctuating balance of power both in Arabia itself and in the wider Roman-Sasanian frontier. The imperial need for frontier allies together with the Arabs' willingness to switch allegiance for their own benefit ensured both empires viewed the machinations of the other in this frontier with suspicion and were on constant alert against any collusion between their rival and local Arab tribes. Such an unstable political and diplomatic environment was a block to any attempt to establish an accommodation between the two imperial powers that needed to be removed in order for both empires to be able to fully focus on their more vulnerable and threatened frontiers elsewhere. If a mutually acceptable balance of power, which was necessary for the success of the wider *détente*, was to be established the Arabs ability to manipulate conflict and destabilise imperial relations had to be overcome.

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<sup>83</sup> *Or.* 24.6.

<sup>84</sup> Malchus, fr. 4.113.

<sup>85</sup> Mayerson, 1991: 291. Aspebetos also changed his allegiance to Constantinople for religious reasons (Shahid, 1989: 4). This further shows the importance of Christianity in the competition for allies and supremacy in Arabia between the two empires.

<sup>86</sup> Shahid (1989: 64-65) lists these reasons; however, he disagrees with the third cause for Amorkesos change in allegiance.

## Christianity

One of the ways in which the Romans attempted to create stronger ties of loyalty and imperial control over their allies was through Christianity; they quickly recognised its usefulness in binding their tribal allies closer to them, both politically and culturally.<sup>87</sup> Christianity provided Constantinople with the means to transform their previously ad-hoc relationship with the Arab tribes into something much deeper and more lasting.<sup>88</sup> Certainly, the tribes which enjoyed the longest and most profitable relationship with the empire, the Salihids and Jafnids, were strongly Christian.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, due to the traditional negative association of the Arabs with barbarity, conversion to Christianity was essential in making the tribes more acceptable as allies.<sup>90</sup> For example, upon the conversion of one tribe to Christianity Theodoret viewed them not as savage barbarians but recognised in them ‘an intelligence, lively and penetrating...and a judgement capable of discerning truth and refuting falsehood.’<sup>91</sup> Likewise, the strong relationship between the Romans and the Salihids was based on shared faith in Christian Orthodoxy.<sup>92</sup> The usefulness of Christianity in bolstering the relationship between the Roman imperial patron and the Arab clients is evident in the use of both Roman and Arab bishops in negotiations between Constantinople and their tribal allies.<sup>93</sup>

The ecclesiastical hagiographer Cyril of Scythopolis informs us that Christianity was also used to win Arab allies away from the Sasanians; emperors often dispatched missionaries to entice Arab tribes to adopt Christianity and transfer their allegiance to Constantinople.<sup>94</sup> For instance, Cyril relates that the Arab leader Aspebetos only converted to Christianity after St Euthymius cured his son of an illness that a Zoroastrian *magus* had been unable to.

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<sup>87</sup> Soz. *HE*. 6.38.9; Evag. *HE* 5.7; Proc. *BP*. 1.12.2-4; *De Aed.* 3.7.6; Agath. 3.12.17.8. Fisher (2011a: 34) takes the arguably cynical view that Constantinople did this primarily for political reasons and not for any feeling of religious missionary spirit.

<sup>88</sup> The Later Roman Empire made frequent use of Christianity to help create stronger links between itself and its allies (Ivanov, 2009: 307; Greatrex, 2005: 491).

<sup>89</sup> Indeed Constantinople’s initial alliance with the Salihid’s was based primarily on their conversion (Soz. *HE* 6.38). On the importance of Christianity in strengthening ties in Roman-Arab alliances see: Procopius (*De Aed.* 3.12.7-8), Evagrius (*HE*. 5.7) and Agathias (3.12.7-8).

<sup>90</sup> Indeed, previously Ammianus Marcellinus (14.4.1-4) had commented that they were ‘desirable neither as friends nor enemies’. Nilus (*Narrationes* 4.1-5) believed Christianity was the only thing that could save the Arabs from their barbarity. Procopius (*BP*. 1.15.22-5; 2.28.25-30) also highlights this.

<sup>91</sup> *Curatio*. 1. 250.

<sup>92</sup> Shahid, 1989:488; Trimmingham, 1979: 179.

<sup>93</sup> Malchus fr. 2.

<sup>94</sup> *V.Euth.* 15. This tactic has also been noticed by Rubin (1986: 680).



Furthermore, many Arab bishops were involved in important Church synods, such as Antioch and Chalcedon in 341 and 451, respectively, alongside their Roman counterparts, thus proving that conversion brought the Arabs evermore into the wider Roman and Christian world.<sup>95</sup>

Conversely, the spread of Christianity amongst the Arab tribes was viewed with suspicion and contempt by the Sasanians. Indeed, Socrates tells us that tribes who converted to Christianity were 'regarded with fear by the Persians'.<sup>96</sup> Conversion to Christianity automatically made tribes enemies of the Sasanian Empire, as Christianity was viewed strictly as a Roman religion.<sup>97</sup> Such use of Christianity in encouraging allies to switch sides only aggravated the Sasanians more, creating greater hostility, and was one of the main factors in the outbreak of the first fifth-century Roman-Sasanian conflict in 421.

Unfortunately, evidence for Sasanian attempts to convert their own Arab allies to Zoroastrianism is lacking.<sup>98</sup> Yet despite this, it is important to note that although the Sasanians and their principal allies, the Nasrids, did not share a religious connection they nonetheless had arguably a better, more stable and long-lasting relationship than Rome did with any of her allies, even the Salihids and Jafnids.<sup>99</sup>

However, just like in the political sphere, the Arab tribes were not merely passive pawns to Roman religious domination and often used religion themselves as a means to pursue their own independent interests, both political and spiritual. Arab leaders were occasionally motivated to manipulate Roman susceptibility to Christian loyalty and brotherhood, and converted as a pragmatic measure, primarily in order to create the illusion of strong connections to Constantinople in order to either seek their patronage or increase existing rewards offered by the emperors.<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, even when Arab leaders seemed more sincere in their Christian belief this too could cause problems for the Romans. For

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<sup>95</sup> Soc. *HE* 3.25. For the identification of the three Arab bishops who attended Chalcedon in 451 see Trimmingham (1979: 118).

<sup>96</sup> *HE* 6.38.

<sup>97</sup> Soz. *HE* 8.38. Indeed, even the loyal Nasrids, once their last king, Nu'mān b. al-Mundhir, had converted to Christianity were no longer considered trustworthy (Toral-Niehoff, 2013: 120).

<sup>98</sup> Through Conrad's (2009: 186) argument that the Sasanians supported the spread of Nestorian Christianity, during the fifth century at least, and supported the Jewish Himyarites it would seem that the Sasanian Empire was actively engaged in trying to weaken the Roman religious hold on Arabia.

<sup>99</sup> Evident in the fact that although Rome's principal allies changed throughout the fourth and sixth centuries the Sasanians remained in alliance with the Nasrids throughout this period and were rewarded with undaunted loyalty.

<sup>100</sup> Trimmingham, 1979: 116.

example, in 376 the Arab tribal queen Mavia launched a devastating campaign against her Roman patron, not for conquest or glory but because of a doctrinal debate with Constantinople. Mavia rebelled in order to have her own bishop of choice, Moses, ordained as the spiritual leader of her people instead of the Arian bishop that Valens had forced upon them.<sup>101</sup> The largely Monophysite Arabs were also willing to support their fellow doctrinal believers against persecution from the Roman emperors.<sup>102</sup>

As such, Roman use of Christianity was not stable and reliable enough to create lasting dependency between themselves and their Arab allies, while it also only served to increased tension and suspicion with the Sasanian Empire. Thus, if the Arab tribes were to be brought under increased imperial control, as was necessary to create a more stable balance of power, a bilateral diplomatic solution, not unilaterally action, was needed. Just as in Armenia, joint imperial diplomatic action was the only means to prevent the manipulation and exploitation of Roman-Sasanian relations by a third-party.

### Diplomatic Solution: The War and the Peace Treaty of 421-2

Throughout the third and fourth centuries the innate ambiguity and geographic diffusion of the Arabs ensured that the imperial neighbours found it difficult to account for them in peace treaties.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, the geographic spread of the Arabs all across the Near East meant that it was impossible to come to a traditional territorial division involving the tribes as they were simply incompatible with this sort of settlement. This diplomatic difficulty was evident in the absence of any mention of the Arab allies at all from the treaties of this early period.

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<sup>101</sup> Rufinus *HE* 11.6; Soz. *HE* 6.38.1; Soc. *HE*. 4.36. This incident could suggest that Christianity was not the omnipotent link between Rome and its allies that it is sometimes overly portrayed as and could actually be equally divisive.

<sup>102</sup> Shahid, 1984b: 18.

<sup>103</sup> This ambiguity was caused by the many divisions within Arab society and the fact that it was in a constant state of transition and flux as commented upon by Trimmingham (1979: 3) and Moorhead (2001: 195). Indeed, this ambiguity spawned the many different Roman terms used for the Arabs such as *Sarakenoi*, *Skenitai*, *Scenitai*, *Scenitas*, *Arabes* and *Thamudenoï* (Ptolemy, *Geog.* 6.7.21; 6.7.23, 6.7.4; SHA *Aurel.* 11.3; Fest. 3.16).

As such, that the 422 treaty dealt specifically with the Arab tribes shows that the Roman and Sasanians had finally recognised their overall importance in the imperial relationship, and that the needed stability on the eastern frontier could not be secured without addressing the Arab problem. This treaty was signed to end the conflict that broke out between the two empires in the year before in 421. The principal cause of this war was the Roman acceptance of Christian fugitives from the Sasanian Empire, especially from among Arab tribes allied to the Sasanians.<sup>104</sup> Thus, the outbreak of this short conflict reinforces the culpability of the Arabs, and religion, as a cause of the conflict between the Romans and Sasanians.

The main clause of this treaty tried to overcome the ability of the Arab tribes to exploit imperial relations by ensuring that 'neither side would accept the Saracen [Arab] allies of the other'.<sup>105</sup> It prohibited either empire from accepting the loyalty of a tribe that was already allied to the other.<sup>106</sup> This agreement was essential in preventing the ambition and self-interests of Arab leaders from instigating or intensifying imperial conflicts, as they had done in 421. Similarly to the earlier 387 treaty that dealt with the Armenian *nakharars*, the 422 treaty outlawed side-switching amongst the Arab tribes and created two separate and distinct spheres of control based on influence and not land. The treaty of 422 was thus another important step in the creation of a mutually acceptable balance of power, it added further stability and reliability to the pre-existing status quo on the joint frontier. That the main flow in Arab side-switching was from the Ctesiphon to Constantinople underlines that Roman agreement to this clause was a major concession on their behalf. Therefore, the signing of this treaty shows a pragmatic desire to establish peace on the eastern frontier in the fifth century Constantinople was willing to lessen its advantage over the Sasanians in a region that was strategically unimportant to itself, but highly important to Ctesiphon, if it secured the wider détente that the Romans needed.<sup>107</sup>

Yet, even this treaty, and the Roman-Sasanian desire to overcome Arab side-switching and the instability it caused was subject to the self-serving compulsion of each empire and their

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<sup>104</sup> Rubin, 2008: 641.

<sup>105</sup> Malchus fr. 1.4-7.

<sup>106</sup> Shahid, 1989: 36-37.

<sup>107</sup> This refutes the claim made by Rubin (1986: 677) that it was the Sasanians who were most interested in working towards peace in the fifth century.

neighbours in the search for their own security above all else. As was made clear by the aforementioned side-switching of Amorkesos, and the Roman acceptance of his allegiance even in the face of their treaty obligations to the Sasanian Empire. Amorkesos' career is therefore yet another example of the benefits of viewing imperial relations in this period through the prism of political realism, and an example that deserves further explanation here. As already described, Amorkesos left Sasanian service because he was not receiving the rewards he needed, and believed he was due, in order to secure his own internal position as leader of his tribe. As a result, he led his tribe on an attack upon the wealthy Roman island of Iotabe in 473. The capture of this valuable commercial island gave the tribal leader access to the economic resources he needed to maintain his internal dominance. Although Amorkesos' reasons for leaving Sasanian service and attacking Roman territory are easy to understand, Leo's subsequent acceptance of his loyalty is harder to explain.<sup>108</sup> However, there are a number of factors that explain this, and that were connected to the wider situation facing Leo and the Roman Empire in the fifth-century which, ironically, underline some of the constraints and factors that necessitated the *détente* with the Sasanian Empire. First, as already seen, Roman military attention was focused elsewhere, primarily in North Africa, and therefore Leo would have been unwilling to devote military resources needed to retake Iotabe by force.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, Roman troops had been redeployed away from the Arabian frontier, to take part in the Vandal campaign of 468, especially the Arab allied Salihid, who had previously been an important cog in Roman frontier defence in this region, and therefore Leo did not have the ready manpower to fight Amorkesos and win back the island.<sup>110</sup> Secondly, and connected to the redeployment of the Salihids, Leo needed a new tribe to take over at least part of the role the Salihid had played in this frontier, and Amorkesos and his powerful tribe were willing to fulfil this role in exchange for rewards and payment.<sup>111</sup> Thirdly, and finally, as John Lydus informed us, after Leo's disastrous Vandal campaign in 468 the Roman Empire was almost bankrupted. As such, for these reasons, Leo was all but forced to accept Amorkesos' loyalty and current lordship over Iotabe and at least still continue to receive some of the economic revenue from the island rather than to take a hostile attitude towards him and receive

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<sup>108</sup> Shahid's (1989: 64-67) analysis of Amorkesos' career is helpful in this regard.

<sup>109</sup> Indeed, as Fisher (2004) points out, it was not until Roman attention had shifted back to the eastern frontier in the sixth century that they launched to retake Iotabe.

<sup>110</sup> Shahid, 1989: 51.

<sup>111</sup> Blockley, 1992: 78.

nothing. In this regard, upon being accepted as Constantinople's ally Amorkesos was charged with securing the trade routes that led from Southern Arabia to the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean Sea.<sup>112</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the example of Amorkesos in general the diplomatic solution that the two empires implemented after the war of 421 held firm throughout the fifth century. The 422 peace treaty ensured that the relationship between the empires and their Arab allies were much more stable and manageable which in turn resulted in a much more stable and balance of power between the empires in the fifth century.

### **Phylarch and Direct Control**

Soon after the treaty of 422 Constantinople reinforced their allies' separation from the Sasanian Empire, and thus their potential for side-switching, by passing a law in 443 that made it legally forbidden for the *annona* to be stopped or withdrawn from Arab allies.<sup>113</sup> That this was done can be seen as an attempt to overcome the traditional Arab temptation to switch sides by guaranteeing them the ready supply of rewards that was the foundation of their loyalty to the empire; if these rewards were never withdrawn or diminished they had no need to seek them from the Sasanians. The fact that this was now an official Roman law further shows that the Romans were trying to incorporate them fully into imperial administrative structure in order to assert more direct control over them, and also shows how important they were to frontier defence in this region, in that Constantinople could not risk angering or alienating them.

Indeed, parallel to the creation of the separate Roman and Sasanian spheres of influence, the Romans sought to create deeper diplomatic and administrative ties with their Arab allies throughout the fifth century. In this regard, the office of the phylarch was established to

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<sup>112</sup> Shahid, 1989: 96.

<sup>113</sup> *Nov. Theod.* 24.2.

formalise relations between Constantinople and its allied Arab tribal leaders.<sup>114</sup> The term phylarch first appeared as a neutral label to describe local Arab chiefs but quickly evolved in the fifth and sixth centuries to acquire official administrative and military significance within the Roman hierarchy on the Arabian frontier.<sup>115</sup>

The development of the office of the phylarch into the official Roman administration was vital in integrating allied leaders directly into the Roman imperial apparatus.<sup>116</sup> Formalising the relationship with the Arab allies in this way granted Constantinople greater control over their allies, it deepened their dependency on the Romans and thus ensured they were less likely to switch sides. During the fifth century this prestigious title was bestowed upon the leaders of the Salihid dynasty, who remained fiercely loyal and effective allies throughout this period.<sup>117</sup>

However, the continued development and expansion of the phylarch, namely the promotion of one Arab ally as leader over all the others and the concentration of power on this one individual leader was to have damaging consequences on the delicate equilibrium and stability on the empires' southern frontier in the sixth century. As Roman-Sasanian hostility reignited in the sixth century the Arab frontier became even more than before a major battleground between the two empires. In this battle the Sasanian allied Nasrids, who had long had the overwhelming patronage of the Shahs, were easily able to defeat the disparate and divided Roman Arab allies. Therefore, in response Justinian decided that the only way to combat the Sasanian advantage in Arabia was to imitate their policy and, thus, in 528 he created a chief phylarch from the Jafnid dynasty who were granted control and authority over the rest of Constantinople's allied tribes.<sup>118</sup>

This was in stark contrast to the situation in the fifth century wherein, although the Salihid were the Romans' chief allies, who were granted greater rewards and prestige, they were

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<sup>114</sup> Fisher, 2013(a): 7; Soz. *HE* 6.38.14-16. Sommer (2010a: 221) states that historically such 'upgrading of a local dynasty was connected to the Roman enemy moving closer' and therefore this policy of 'upgrading' the Roman Arab ally would further reinforce the increasing importance that the Arabian frontier had in the Roman-Sasanian imperial competition.

<sup>115</sup> Fisher, 2008: 315.

<sup>116</sup> Mayerson, 1991: 291. Indeed, Fisher (2013a: 8) claims that 'phylarchs were in one respect a form of indigenous prefect'.

<sup>117</sup> Shahid, 1989: 497.

<sup>118</sup> Kawar, 1956: 183. For the Roman initiation of this policy in the sixth century see: Procopius (*BP*. 1.17.40-41).

never granted control over other allied tribes.<sup>119</sup> The employment of many different tribes was much easier for the Romans to manage and maintain control over as they could balance the ambitions and powers of the individual tribes and their leaders against one another. In contrast, the increased rewards, influence and power granted to the Jafnid phylarch of the sixth century catalysed the transformation of politically weak peripheral groups into more cohesive and autonomous political entities, which allowed them to act more independently of Constantinople; the Romans had lost the direct control they had so carefully cultivated in the fifth century.<sup>120</sup> In the long-term, growth in power and independent action among their allies was disastrous for the control and authority of the empires.<sup>121</sup> Indeed, both the Jafnids and Nasrids alike started to represent themselves rather than simply being dictated to by their imperial patrons in diplomacy between the two empires.<sup>122</sup> Correspondingly, the promotion of the Jafnids as a counterweight to the Nasrids and the many wars fought between them on behalf of the imperial powers created deep animosity between the two Arab dynasties. Most damagingly for the maintenance of stable Roman-Sasanian relations, this animosity increasingly led to the Arab rivals to launch military attacks against one another independently of their imperial patrons.<sup>123</sup> Such independent action on the behalf of the two empires' primary allies in the region was detrimental to imperial stability; no longer was peace dependent solely on the wishes and needs of the Romans and Sasanians but was once again vulnerable to the ambitions of third-parties.

Thus, the fifth century can be regarded as the sweet-spot for the position of the phylarch, from the Roman perspective at least. In contrast the sixth century, which once again witnessed the outbreak of war between Rome and the Sasanian rival, saw the Arab allies becoming increasingly politically self-conscious as independent action and attacks on the opposing power were once again desired and encouraged.

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<sup>119</sup> Shahid, 1989: 497. Procopius (*BP.* 1.19.10; 1.20.10) reports than previously different phylarchs had been in charge of different sectors of the frontier.

<sup>120</sup> Fisher, 2011(a): 72, 2008: 312. Although it is important not to overstate this point as even now the Arab tribes should not be seen as full states but still in terms of dynastic leadership. Indeed, their power was still largely based on the goodwill of the imperial patron (John. Eph. *HE.* 3.3.54).

<sup>121</sup> On the increased difficult of imperial control over their allies in the sixth century see: Joshua Stylites (79), Blockley (1992: 85) and Greatrex & Lieu (2002: 48).

<sup>122</sup> Nasrid al-Mundhir treated directly with Rome in 523/4 and 530 (Malalas 18.61; Zach. *HE.* 8.3.; Evag. *HE.* 4.12).

<sup>123</sup> The Jafnids and Nasrids fought numerous conflicts against one another. (*Proc. BP.* 2.28.12-13, 8.11.10, 1.28.13-14).

### 3.3: Conclusion

Roman-Sasanian interactions and relations in the frontier zones of Armenia and Arabia, and the respective settlements of 387 and 422 underline the importance of the development of imperial diplomacy in the fifth century. Only the increased diplomatic sophistication and flexibility that developed in the fifth century, together with the enforced need for *détente*, was capable of creating and maintaining peace in these ambiguous and contested frontier zones.

The situation in both Arabia and Armenia reinforces the notion that neither the Romans nor Sasanians could realistically expect to enforce accommodation through military conquest, especially in the fifth century when their military attention was focused elsewhere. Even in the unlikely event that one power did gain temporary military supremacy over the other the ability of the local elites, whether Arabian or Armenian, to act as third-parties and manipulate and exploit the imperial competition by switching sides, in order to maintain their autonomy and promote their individual ambitions, made any attempt at conquest unstable in the long term. Together with the ambiguity about who and what the Arabs and Armenians were, the uncertainty about their allegiance only furthered their role as a cause of conflict and mistrust between the empires.

In both frontier zones the diplomatic solution was strikingly similar, with the empires agreeing to divide the contested regions into two distinct and separate spheres of control based on influence and loyalty of the native elites. The most important clause in the treaties was the prohibition of accepting any side-switching among the local elites by the imperial neighbours. These agreements were essential in denying Arab tribal leaders and Armenian *nakharars* the ability to manipulate imperial relations and disturb the balance of power. Furthermore, that these partitions guaranteed non-interference from the neighbouring empire allowed the Romans and Sasanians to pursue increased direct control in the respective spheres. This direct control ensured that the desires of the empires, which during the fifth century were for peace, were now the overwhelming factor in shaping imperial relations in these regions; they were no longer open to influence from the local elites. Thus, the 387 and 422 settlements were successful because they restricted and curtailed the political autonomy of local frontier elites. The willingness of the Romans and Sasanians to address the underlying causes of war in these



frontier zones and implement solutions that both were now increasingly aware of the need for a stable imperial frontier due to the threats each empire faced on their other frontiers; neither could afford to be distracted by other threats or risk overstressing their military resources defending multiple frontiers simultaneously.

## Chapter 4

### Religion:

#### Loyalty, Minorities and Mistrust

In the ancient world religion was a ubiquitous presence that permeated every aspect of politics and society, it was not a divisible and separate entity as it is in the modern secular west. In its simplest form this is evident in ancient historiography that focused attention on divine portents and sought to explain military defeats and victories in relation to a leader's, or peoples', religious activity and piety.<sup>1</sup> This ubiquity of religion increased further in late antiquity with the rise of monotheistic religions, principally Christianity and Zoroastrianism in the Roman and Sasanian Empire, respectively. More than ever before religion became inescapably involved and connected with every aspect of life in late antiquity, politically, culturally and socially.<sup>2</sup>

In this regard, late antiquity saw the culmination of the wider process by which empire and monarchy were inexorably linked with belief in the One God. Unlike the dominant polytheistic paganisms of previous centuries monotheistic religions were less inclusive and multifarious, with much more universalistic aspirations.<sup>3</sup> As such, the rise of monotheistic religions in both empires meant that the defining political-religious characteristic of late antiquity was the conviction that knowledge of the One God both justified imperial rule and made it more effective.<sup>4</sup> In the Roman Empire imperial power and legitimacy was increasingly centred on Christianity, while Zoroastrianism fulfilled a similar role in the Sasanian Empire. Consequently, the increased ubiquity and importance of religion meant that it was now intrinsically involved

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Socrates (*HE* 7.23.9-12) described Theodosius II's defeat over the western usurper John as a miraculous event and that the Hunnic leader Rua was killed by a thunderbolt and his army laid low by a plague that were both sent by God in answer to the emperor's piety (7.3).

<sup>2</sup> On the increased importance, immediacy and ubiquity of religion in late antiquity see Cain and Lenski (2009) and Frakes et.al, (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Leppin, 2007: 98.

<sup>4</sup> Fowden, 1993: 5.

in both internal politics and external foreign relations; it was both affected by them and had an effect on them.

The growth of religion as an important factor in political power and legitimacy also led to it having a corresponding importance in ideas of social identity. Indeed, Christian identity could not be fully understood unless it was viewed in the broader context of ethnic, cultural and political identity.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, as the power and influence of the leading monotheistic religions grew, religion was regarded as the ultimate determining factor of loyalty and allegiance in the structure of society.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, that religion was inexorably linked with political loyalty has already been seen in the relationships between the two empires and the Arabs and the Armenians in the important frontier zones between them.<sup>7</sup>

The development and nature of the religion was thus, by its very ubiquity and indivisibility, destined to play an important role in Roman-Sasanian relations, especially as monotheistic Christianity and Zoroastrianism were the state sponsored religions of the Roman and Sasanian Empires respectively. Indeed, as shown elsewhere religion was an important consideration in imperial relations in the frontier zones and in the ideological competition between the empires. At the same time the later growth of independent Christian and Zoroastrian church hierarchies also meant that these new powerful religions could act upon their own ambitions and aspirations, separate from the political needs of the Roman emperor and Sasanian Shah. This ambiguous and multi-layered nature and characteristic of late antique religion gives an insight into why religion was such a cause of conflict and hostility between the Christian Roman Empire and the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire, it was not something that either could easily control or regulate as it simultaneously existed both within and beyond imperial parameters. Therefore, it is important to analyse what effect religion as a wider entity had on Roman-Sasanian relations in the fifth century. In this regard, we will seek to analyse how the development of these religious ideals and their importance to both states affected how the two empires reacted to one another's religion and fellow worshippers and how in the same

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<sup>5</sup> Schott, 2008: 4.

<sup>6</sup> This is revealed by the conversation between Shapur II and his Christian subject Pusai (*Acts of Pusai* AMS 2 p.214). Diocletian's insistence on persecuting and halting the spread of 'Persian' Manichaeism is another indicator of this (*Collatio legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum* 15.3.1-8). It is also for this reason that Brown (1969: 98) suggests that religious persecutions above all reveal the fears and assumptions of the persecutors themselves rather than any political or social reality.

<sup>7</sup> Wiesehöfer (1993) has also recognised that this was the case in the Roman-Sasanian relationship.

regard these ideals and developments, together with the internal needs and desires of emperors and Shahs alike, finally led to conditions more favourable to the establishment of peace in the fifth century.

As already emphasised, mistrust was a major stumbling block in peaceful relations between two polities. As such, in the Roman-Sasanian relationship the inherent mistrust between the two neighbours was amplified by the central role and ubiquity of Christianity and Zoroastrianism in each empire. Indeed, the effect of this mistrust amid the growing link between religious identity and political loyalty in late antiquity was evident even before Christianity became the religion of the Roman emperors, the effects of which would only have increased with Christianity's eventual promotion from Constantine onwards. For example, Diocletian's Edict against the Manichaeans issued in 297 reveals the effect this religious mistrust had on the Roman-Sasanian relationship:

The Manichaeans, about whom you reported to Our Serenity with much insight, as we have heard, have come into existence and entered our realm only recently from our enemy, the Persian people, just like new and unexpected portents, and they inflict harm on civilised states; and we have been afraid that, as tends to happen, by scandalous customs and the bad laws of the Persians over the course of time will try to infect people of a more innocent nature, modest and quiet Romans and our whole empire with their malign poison.<sup>8</sup>

This edict, issued by Diocletian in response to the growth of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire at the end of the third century, emphasises the fundamental characteristic of the role religion played in Roman-Sasanian relations. It was not a strict competition between Roman Christianity and Sasanian Zoroastrianism that generated imperial mistrust and fostered imperial conflict but rather it was the expansion of foreign or rival religions in each empire that was believed to threaten their internal stability.<sup>9</sup> Diocletian evidently believed the spread of this foreign 'Persian' religion would have had damaging consequences on the internal stability of the Roman Empire. Therefore, as shown by this extract, Manichaeism was

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<sup>8</sup> *Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum* 15.3.1-8. Eusebius (*HE*. 7.31) described Manichaeism in a similar manner comparing it to a poisonous snake entering the Roman Empire from 'barbarous' Persia.

<sup>9</sup> For a general survey and information on Manichaeism see: Hutter (1993), Scott (1989), Lieu (1992) and Brown (1969).

persecuted in the Roman Empire due to its perceived link with the Sasanian neighbour, a link that existed only in Roman suspicions, in the belief that its continued existence would damage the loyalty of the Roman Empire.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the edict highlights the fears and suspicions that religious mistrust aggravated in Roman-Sasanian relations and the direct effect this had on the internal policies and concerns of the empires. Indeed, just as Diocletian was wary of the spread of Manichaeism in 297, the Shahs of the fourth centuries believed the spread of Christianity in their domain would equally have an insidious effect on the internal stability of their empire and loyalty of their subjects. As Christianity became increasingly linked with the Roman Empire the Shahs feared that the growth of their rival's religion in their empire would lead to the growth of fifth columns from amongst the adherents of the rival Roman religion, whose loyalty would be to their fellow worshippers across the imperial frontier, rather than the state in which they lived and owed political loyalty. This fear became a key factor in the religious sphere of the Roman-Sasanian relationship and ensured that religion was often the cause of imperial suspicion, mistrust and even conflict.

Evidently, it was once again the internal concerns and political necessities of the Roman emperors and Sasanian Shahs that was the overriding impetus for the overall nature of Roman-Sasanian relations. If the fifth-century peace was to be maintained this internal religious mistrust and the resulting effect it could have on the imperial relationship itself needed to be overcome. This was especially true for the Sasanians, who as we have already seen, faced extensive internal turmoil in the fifth century.

### The Christian Roman Empire

[Constantine] openly declared and confessed himself the servant and minister of the supreme King. And God forthwith rewarded him, by making him ruler and sovereign, and victorious to such a degree that he alone of all rulers pursued a continuous course of conquest, unsubdued and invincible, and through his trophies a greater ruler than tradition records ever to have been before. So dear was he to God, and so blessed; so pious and so fortunate in all he

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Manichaeism had no official connection with the Sasanian Empire in which it was also persecuted (Brown, 1969: 92).

undertook, that with the greatest facility he obtained authority over more nations than any who had preceded him.<sup>11</sup>

This extract from the *Vita Constantini* by the emperor's biographer, Eusebius, reveals that Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312 had a profound effect on the development of the Roman Empire. Eusebius, being both pro-Constantine and pro-Christian, had a clear bias in emphasising the importance of Christianity which ensures we must be careful when using his work in highlighting the effect Christianity had on the Roman Empire. Yet, it is nevertheless undeniably true that Constantine's conversion and subsequent support of Christianity marked an important epoch in the nature and development of the Roman Empire.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, although the veracity of Eusebius' work and his qualification to write the biography of an emperor who he had limited contact with has regularly been questioned, the fact that Constantine's conversion had a dramatic effect on Roman imperial ideology cannot be questioned.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as made clear by Eusebius here, the success of the emperors and the empire alike was now intrinsically linked with Christianity. Since the emperors were now thought to be 'entrusted by god with his commission' everything they did was thought to be influenced and affected by their relationship with God.<sup>14</sup> Over the course of the fourth century Christianity became increasingly firmly positioned at the heart of Roman imperial ideology. Thus, their legitimacy, military victories, imperial expansion and internal standing were all embedded and connected to the new official Christian religion

In regards to their foreign relations the new centrality of Christianity created two underlying causes of tension with the empire's neighbours, especially the Sasanian Empire. The first of these was the new Roman ideal of one god, one emperor and one empire that was linked to the new perceived role of religion in indicating loyalty and drove the Roman desire for internal religious and doctrinal uniformity as a means of cementing internal stability.<sup>15</sup> Such religious unity could only be achieved through the weakening of other religions and the subsequent

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<sup>11</sup> VC. 1.6.

<sup>12</sup> On the importance of Christianity to the Roman state and the Roman emperors after Constantine see: Dvornik (1996); Odahl (2004) and Vivian (1987).

<sup>13</sup> For a more general survey on the veracity and authenticity of Eusebius see Cameron & Hall (1999) and Drake (1988).

<sup>14</sup> Proc. *De. Aed.* 2.6.6. This is no more evident than in Theodosius' enforced penance to God by the bishop Ambrose after the massacre at Thessalonica in 390 (Ambrose, *Letter* 51.4, 6, 11, 13).

<sup>15</sup> Eus. VC. 1.5.24.

promotion of Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Part of this entailed the attempted creation of an orthodox doctrine that would unite all Christians under the same banner. In this regard, successive emperors organised numerous church councils or synods, such as Nicaea in 325 and Chalcedon in 451 to overcome doctrinal debates and disputes.<sup>17</sup> However, the heated debates and animosity that arose in these councils only deepened the doctrinal divides and further entrenched the schisms between different Christian groups. Consequently different strands of Christian belief and doctrine such as Nestorianism, Arianism, and Monophysitism that were all deeply opposed to one another erupted throughout and beyond the Roman Empire.<sup>18</sup> That these different creeds were opposed to the imperially sponsored orthodoxy that was established in Nicaea and later Chalcedon they were viewed as traitors to the ideal of one god, one emperor and one empire. Thus, Roman emperors and orthodox Christian leaders viewed them with utter enmity, as heresy deserving only persecution and eradication. Accordingly, in his Edict of Thessalonica (380) Theodosius I declared that ‘they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics and shall not presume to give their conventicles the name of churches. They will suffer in the first place the chastisement of the divine condemnation and in the second the punishment of our authority’.<sup>19</sup> Although this particular example of persecution was limited to Constantinople and Theodosius himself was arguably more moderate than this proclamation suggests, it nevertheless highlights the perennial danger and potential harassment those identified as heretics suffered at the hands of imperial and orthodox authorities in this period.<sup>20</sup>

These doctrinal schism and hatreds were not confined within the Roman Empire, however, and they soon began to affect the Romans’ relations with their neighbours. Indeed, Nestorius, a leading bishop during the reign of Theodosius II, linked the success of Constantinople’s foreign policy with the persecution of heresies. He told the emperor, ‘Give me, King, the earth purged of heretics, and I will give you heaven in return. Aid me in destroying heretics, and I

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<sup>16</sup> Soc. *HE* 7.19.5; Barnes, 1985: 130.

<sup>17</sup> Soc. *HE* 1.8; Soz. *HE* 1.19; Theodt. *HE* 1.6.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on these splits and disagreements, and how they fostered hatred and disdain between the different Christian groups see: Humfress (2007: 218-242), Ste. Croix (2006: 202-250) and Ehrman & Jacobs (2004: 115-227).

<sup>19</sup> *CTh.* 16.1.2. Edict of Thessalonica (ed. Bettenson, 2011: 22).

<sup>20</sup> For this more restricted understanding of the Edict of Thessalonica and Theodosius’ moderation see Hunt (2007), Errington (2006: 218) and Mclynn (2005: 79-88).

will assist you in vanquishing the Persians'.<sup>21</sup> Roman loathing of the Arian Vandals reveals that they were particularly zealous when confronting neighbours who followed a Christian creed different to their own; they were not just savage barbarians but now also heretics, not just military enemies but religious enemies.<sup>22</sup> Such spilling over of Christian schisms and hostilities into foreign relations was to have a profound effect on the religious relationship with the Sasanian Empire and its Christian population in the fifth century as the Church of the East began to develop its own distinct identity, independent of Roman Orthodoxy, as shall be seen below.

The weakening of other religions predominantly took the form of persecutions against non-Christian religions in the empire such as Judaism, Zoroastrianism, paganism and Manichaeism.<sup>23</sup> Although Roman persecutions against Zoroastrians did not occur as frequently as those against paganism there is no doubt that they did take place. Indeed, Zoroastrian persecutions are mentioned by Priscus:

The Romans, wishing to turn the Magi who had long lived in Roman territory from their ancestral customs, laws and forms of worship, harassed them and did not allow the fire, which they call unquenchable, to be kept always burning as the law requires.<sup>24</sup>

Priscus' statement that the motivation for this attack was the Roman desire to turn Zoroastrian worshippers against 'their ancestral customs, laws and forms of worship' underlines that the desire for internal religious uniformity was always the underlying impetus for religious persecutions in the Roman Empire. Later in this passage Priscus, who as we have already seen was generally well informed when it came to Constantinople's diplomatic relations with neighbouring powers, relates that this Zoroastrian persecution brought about a direct response from the Sasanian Shah, Peroz, who complained bitterly about these attacks and demanded that they be stopped. This Sasanian reaction shows that, unlike the persecutions against Judaism and paganism, Roman attacks against Zoroastrians had direct consequences on the empire's foreign relations. As the traditional patron of Zoroastrianism, as well as the pressure Zoroastrian Magians could exert on them in the interests of their

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<sup>21</sup> Soc. *HE* 7.29.5.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, 1969:98.

<sup>23</sup> On persecutions of Jews, Samaritans and pagans see: *Novella* 3. On persecutions of Manichaeism see: *Novella* 18, issued by Valentinian III.

<sup>24</sup> fr. 31.



religion, Sasanian Shahs were compelled to react to such Roman persecutions against their fellow believers. Thus, despite the fact that Roman persecutions of non-Christian religions were conducted predominantly for the internal political needs and concerns of the emperors they nevertheless still served to foment and escalate wider imperial hostilities.

The second cause of tension Christianity instigated with the Sasanian Empire was a result of its proselytising nature that constantly sought to convert non-believers into believers. Indeed, this was a central tenet of the religion as revealed by the Christian Bible itself:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations.<sup>25</sup>

Such biblical proclamations ensured that the Roman emperors after 312 felt they had a religious duty to convert other peoples to Christianity, even those beyond their own borders. Consequently, successive emperors sanctioned or even directly organised Christian missions to regions beyond their borders to try and convert the local populations.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, emperors would often use military victories over their neighbours to enforce Christianity upon them.<sup>27</sup> For the Sasanians the spread of this perceived Roman religion caused contention as it often encroached into their territories or lands where they had traditionally held cultural and political influence, which was now challenged by Roman influence. However, the most important consequence of Christianity's proselytising efforts on Roman-Sasanian relations was the subsequent moral obligation emperors, as the 'bishop of those [Christians] outside [the Roman Empire]' felt to protect these converts and their fellow Christians even beyond their own borders.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, from Constantine onwards Roman emperors used the status or position of Christians in foreign lands as a *casus belli*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Matt.* 28.19-20. The gospels of Mark (16.15) and Luke (24.47) also contain similar passages.

<sup>26</sup> Ivanov, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Constantine insisted upon religious clauses in his treaties with the Goths in 332 and the Sarmatians in 334 that allowed him to claim that he had converted them to Christianity (Gelasius *HE.* 3.10.10).

<sup>28</sup> *Eus. VC.* 4.24; Whitby, 1988: 201; Odahl, 2004: 271. For more on the implications of this statement on Roman foreign relations see: Angelov (2014).

<sup>29</sup> One such example of this was Justinian's re-conquest campaigns in the sixth century that were portrayed as a religiously motivated to punish the Arian Vandals' crimes against Orthodox churches and worshippers (*CJ.* 1.27.1).

In the early years of the Christian Roman Empire this protective obligation principally took the form of military campaigns, particularly against the Sasanian Empire.<sup>30</sup> These religiously inspired campaigns were frequently targeted against the Sasanian Empire which had a substantial Christian population. It should come as no great surprise that it was Constantine who set the precedent for such religious wars. A letter sent from Constantine to Shapur II highlights the main aspects of Roman religiously inspired campaigns:

You can imagine with what joy, I heard that also many fine areas of Persia are adorned with this group of people, I mean the Christians (for it is on their behalf that I am speaking), just as I desire. May many blessings be granted to you, and in equal amounts blessings to them, as they also belong to you; in this way the almighty Lord will be a father to you, merciful and benevolent. I now commend these to you, because you are so powerful, I place them in your care, because your piety is eminent. Love them according to your customary humanity; for by this expression of your faith you will procure an immeasurable gratification for yourself and for us.<sup>31</sup>

Although the veracity of this letter has been questioned, as mere literary effect, it nevertheless reveals important aspects of the Roman-Sasanian relationship that stimulated Roman religiously inspired attacks against the Sasanian Empire.<sup>32</sup> Namely, that there was a large Christian population in the Sasanian Empire and it also reinforces that the Roman emperors regarded themselves as the protectors of all Christians everywhere. Yet, most decisively Constantine's veiled threat to Shapur that he commended him to look after the Christians in his realm shows that Sasanian persecutions of the Christians in their empire would bring about a Roman response. To reinforce this point, earlier in the same letter Constantine related to the Shah the humiliating defeat and death of Valerian that he described as a direct result of his Christian persecutions. This thinly veiled threat would have been easily recognised by Shapur; to persecute Christianity was to invite disaster. Unfortunately for the Christians in the Sasanian Empire, however, Shapur II and his successors were not overawed by such Roman threats. Importantly then, this letter also shows that Roman crusades were aimed at protecting Christians and Christianity, not eradicating Zoroastrianism. Thus, it further underlines that Roman-

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<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *Against Faustus* 22.74-5; Barnes, 1985: 132; Blockley, 1992: 143; Holum, 1977; Lee, 2007: 205-210.

<sup>31</sup> Eus. VC. 4.13.

<sup>32</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 216; Harries 2012: 177. Angelov (2014:2 91) argues that 'nothing in the letter suggests that Constantine was threatening the Persians with war in defence of the Christians'; however, such a letter to Shapur would have undoubtedly meant to have served a purpose, and in relation to Constantine's later preparation for a religiously inspired military campaign against the Sasanians, its purpose must surely have been to warn Shapur against the persecution of Christians and the consequences such an act would have reacted from Constantine.

Sasanian religious hostility did not result from a direct competition between Christianity and Zoroastrianism but was rather the consequence of the spread of what were perceived as foreign religions in the empires and the rulers own internal needs and concerns.

Shortly after his letter to Shapur II in the late 330s Constantine began preparations for a military campaign against the Sasanian Empire, the motivation for which was the wish to be seen as the liberator of Christians suffering in the Sasanian Empire.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, unlike previous campaigns against the Sasanian rival this was to have a distinctly religious impetus. The emperor's personal tent was to be constructed to resemble a church, he was to be accompanied by bishops, would carry a special bible with him throughout the campaign and he planned to be baptised in the river Jordan.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately for Constantine, however, he died in 337 before he could launch his crusade against the Sasanian Empire.<sup>35</sup>

However, Constantine was not the only emperor who regarded the plight of Christians in the Sasanian Empire as a *casus belli*; Theodosius II launched a religiously motivated attack against the Sasanians in 421.<sup>36</sup> The background to this war reinforces the claim that it was the existence of foreign religions in both empires that most inspired wars between the two empires. In 420 persecutions against Christians in the Sasanian Empire began in response to the Christian burning of a Zoroastrian fire temple. Upon his arrest the leader of this attack, the zealous bishop Abdas, was commanded to rebuild the fire temple. When the bishop subsequently refused the Zoroastrian Magians encouraged and pressured the then Shah, Yazdgard I, to respond to this attack against both his authority and Zoroastrianism itself with a large-scale persecution of Christianity.<sup>37</sup> In a bid to escape the resulting persecutions many Christians fled to the Roman Empire where they begged Theodosius II, as the guardian of Christianity, not to ignore their suffering.<sup>38</sup> As Theodosius' internal legitimacy and reputation was founded on his Christian piety, even more so than many of his contemporaries, he could

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<sup>33</sup> Barnes, 1985: 126. However, as Constantine granted his nephew, Dalmatius, the title 'King of Kings' in the preparations of this campaign it is also likely that they was also a more political and dynastic element to this planned attacked (Harries, 2012: 186).

<sup>34</sup> Eus. VC. 4.56.

<sup>35</sup> Eus. VC. 4.60.

<sup>36</sup> Holum, 1977.

<sup>37</sup> Soc. HE 7.18.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine *De civ. Dei*. 18.52; Cyr.Scyth. *Vit. Euthym*. 10.

not be seen to refuse his follower Christians in their time of need or else his internal position may have been weakened.<sup>39</sup> Thus, when Yazdgard's successor, Bahrām V, demanded that these refugees be handed back the pious emperor proved himself 'ready to do anything for the sake of Christianity and duly refused',<sup>40</sup> and for this first time in the fifth century the Romans and Sasanians went to war.<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, in order to win God's support for this campaign religious preparations were given just as much importance as military preparations in its planning. For example, a rich donation was made to the poor in Jerusalem, a golden cross was sent to Golgotha and a special solidus, the so-called 'Long-Cross Solidus', was minted and decorated with Christian symbolism.<sup>42</sup> However, this conflict came to an abrupt end when Attila once more began to attack the Romans across the Danube and forced the Romans to sue for peace, which the Sasanians were willing to grant. A peace treaty was quickly signed wherein both sides agreed to religious toleration throughout the territories.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that Theodosius was willing to disturb the *détente* that he had until now he had carefully maintained in 422 underlines how much of a divisive issue religion was in the imperial relationship.

Evidently, after Constantine's conversion to Christianity, religion played a profound role in the political relationship between the imperial neighbours and would be a significant factor in maintenance of stable Roman-Sasanian relations in the fifth century. The effect Christianity had in foreign relations caused tension with Sasanian Empire. This was especially true when it was employed to strengthen Constantinople's political and cultural ties with local elites in important frontier zones where the Sasanians were traditionally dominant, such as Armenia. Christianity allowed the Romans to penetrate Sasanian territory in a way that military force

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<sup>39</sup> There are numerous examples of Theodosius linking the military success and defence of the empire to his Christian piety. For example, when news of the defeat of the usurper John in the west reached Constantinople the emperor stood up in the middle of the Hippodrome, halted the races and declared; 'Let us then, if you wish, set aside our enjoyment, go to church, and send up prayers of thanks to God, for his hand has killed the tyrant' (Soc. *HE* 7.22-23.11). Likewise, when an earthquake struck Constantinople in 447 and took down sections of the Theodosian Walls that protected the city and left it vulnerable to Hunnic attack Theodosius led a barefoot procession to the Hebdomon, all the while praying for God to protect them (Malalas 14.22; Callinicus, *Life of Hypatius* 52).

<sup>40</sup> Soc. *HE* 7.17.3-6-8.

<sup>41</sup> Soc. *HE* 7.18.2.

<sup>42</sup> Holum, 1977: 163.

<sup>43</sup> Soc. *HE* 7.20.13; Soz. *HE* 9.3.3.

could not.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the fact that the Roman Empire was willing to launch large-scale military campaigns against the Sasanians in order to protect Christians within their empire would have certainly raised doubts about the loyalty of Christians living in the Sasanian Empire.

### The Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire?<sup>45</sup>

My son, religion and kingship are brothers who cannot do without each other, for religion is the foundation of kingship and kingship is religion's protector. And that which does not have a foundation collapses and that which does not have a protector perishes.<sup>46</sup>

Know that kingship and religion are twin brothers each one of which cannot do without its partner. For religion is the foundation of kingship, and kingship is the protector of religion. Kingship cannot do without its foundation and, and religion cannot do without its protector, for that which has no protector perishes and that which has no foundation collapses.<sup>47</sup>

As these two passages make clear, Sasanian kingship and religion, Zoroastrianism, were interconnected and interdependent, both provided protection, legitimacy and support to the other. The fact that they are both held to be advice passed from the founder of the Sasanian Empire, Ardashir, to his successor, Shapur, indicates that this was especially true in the early period of the empire. Alongside these two sources, Agathias also informs us that the Sasanian Royal Annals spoke of Ardashir's involvement in Zoroastrianism.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, as a newly established dynasty that had won its position through military revolt, the Sasanians needed to quickly establish their legitimacy and right to rule.<sup>49</sup> As Herodotus informs us, ancient Iranian tradition, a tradition which was fundamentally important to the Sasanians,

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<sup>44</sup> Fowden, 1993:24. This was especially important at the end of the fourth and start of the fifth century when Roman military force was increasingly focused elsewhere.

<sup>45</sup> For a general survey on the Zoroastrian religion, with particular focus on the Sasanian period see: Boyce (1979, 1996), Shaked (1994) and Rose (2011).

<sup>46</sup> *Mas'ūdī, Murūg* 1 § 568. In this passage the founder of the Sasanian Empire Ardashir is giving this advice to his successor Shapur I

<sup>47</sup> *Will of Ardashšīr I* (trans. Grignaschi 49).

<sup>48</sup> 2.26.3.

<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Sundermann (1963) argues that the need for 'legitimacy of rule' was a central concern in Sasanian kingship.

disapproved of changes in leadership simply for the sake of power.<sup>50</sup> Thus, this interconnection between their kingship and Zoroastrianism was a vital means of providing more meaningful and justifiable legitimacy than mere military victory; it allowed the Sasanian dynasty to claim that their right to rule was divinely ordained.

Accordingly, to promote their legitimacy the early Shahs stressed their relationship with the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Maza, and their position as a 'Mazda-worshipping' monarchy through a variety of means.<sup>51</sup> Foremost amongst these were the many rock reliefs commissioned by early Shahs.<sup>52</sup> Ardashir was the first to celebrate his divinely ordained right to rule through rock reliefs that emphasised his personal relationship with Ahura Mazda, the principal Zoroastrian deity. For example, in the rock relief at Firuzabad that, he commissioned to celebrate his coronation, Ardashir is described as; 'his Zoroastrian majesty...who is descended from the gods'.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, in the rock relief celebrating his investiture at Naqš-e Rostam Ahura Mazda is centre stage as the god hands the ring of sovereignty to Ardashir.<sup>54</sup> His successor Shapur I, evidently followed his father's advice above, continued this tradition by declaring in his famous *res gestae divi saporis* that he owed all his military successes to the gods, who he was descended from ('*bay*') and whose '*dastgerd*', or protégé, he was.<sup>55</sup> Alongside rock reliefs Sasanian coinage was also used to spread the image of the Shahs as Mazda-worshippers and patrons of Zoroastrianism.<sup>56</sup> Coins minted during the reigns of Ardashir I, Shapur I and their immediate successors contained depictions of Zoroastrian fire temples on their reverse.<sup>57</sup> Equally, the Shahs undertook vital services to the gods such as the establishment of fire-temples and granted privileges to the Magians, all of which promoted Zoroastrianism in the empire and the Shahs' role as its patron.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> As shown by the fact Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, was legitimised by being portrayed as the grandson of the last Median King. Likewise, Darius was described to have been fighting against an illegitimate imposter rather than the real heir (1.107-8). In these two examples it was important that both Cyrus and Darius legitimised their actions with more than just a desire for power.

<sup>51</sup> This is a title that appears throughout Sasanian royal imagery. For a general survey on the importance of this religious element in Sasanian kingship see: Choksy (1988).

<sup>52</sup> On early Sasanian rock reliefs see Huff (2008). Wiesehöfer (1996) informs us that these royal inscriptions were usually set up at 'sacred sites' which would have granted their creators further legitimacy.

<sup>53</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 134; Ghirshman, 1962: fig. 168.

<sup>54</sup> Ghirshman, 1962: fig. 168.

<sup>55</sup> SKZ § 51. On this definition of *dastgerd* see Henning (1958: 96).

<sup>56</sup> On early Sasanian coinage see Alram (2008). On Sasanian coinage in general see Schindel (2013).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Daryee, 2008(a): 71; SKZ § 18.

Therefore, although not a state religion in the same sense as Christianity was in the Roman Empire, Zoroastrianism was nevertheless a considerable force in the internal composition of the Sasanian Empire, especially in the third and fourth centuries.<sup>59</sup> This royal patronage of Zoroastrianism and the close relationship between throne and altar also benefitted the Zoroastrian Magians. It ensured they held a powerful position within the empire that allowed them to exert pressure on the Shahs and influence foreign and internal religious policies. This Magian influence in the decision-making processes of the Sasanian Empire had important consequences on the development of the empire's relationship with the Christian Roman Empire, as shall be explained below.

Valiant king, the gods have given you your empire and success. They have no need of human honour; but if you convert to one religion all the nations and races of your empire, then the land of the Greeks [Romans] will also obediently submit to your rule.<sup>60</sup>

This extract comes from *The History of Vardan and the Armenian War* by fifth century Armenian historian Elishé. Although his history primarily focuses on the Armenian revolt against the Sasanian Empire in 450 it does also contain useful information on Sasanian religious customs, particularly matters of Zoroastrian purity, and as such the above statement about Sasanian and Magian thoughts on religious uniformity should be regarded as accurate.<sup>61</sup> This Magian statement to Yazdgard II is strikingly similar to Nestorius' declaration to Theodosius II that was mentioned above. Thus, it is evident that, similarly to the one god, one emperor and one empire ideal in the Roman Empire, the Magians promoted the idea that internal unity, stability and military success could only be achievable through religious uniformity. This policy, or religious ideal, had obvious appeal to the Magians as its end result would be Zoroastrian ascendancy and supremacy throughout the Sasanian Empire. However, it also appealed to the Shahs politically and pragmatically as it promised internal unity and

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<sup>59</sup> Those who argue the case for the Zoroastrian state religion include: Garsoïan (1983: 585), Asmussen (1983: 933), Daryaee (2008a: 69) and Williams (1996: 38). While those who argue against this are: Wiesehöfer (1996: 214), Brosius (2006: 188), Gignoux (1984a: 80); Drijvers (2009: 444). Whereas, Dignas & Winter (2007: 212) state that although it was not a true state religion the Zoroastrian Church did share many hierarchical and structural similarities with the Christian Church.

<sup>60</sup> Elishé p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> For more information on Elishé see: Thomson (1998, 2001)

stability in a land that was recently ravaged by civil war and also guaranteed the support of the Magians. Accordingly, we are informed that:

His Majesty, Ardashir, the king of kings, son of Pabag, acting on the just judgement of Tosar [a Magi], demanded that all those scattered teachings to be brought to court. Tosar assumed command; he selected those which were trustworthy, and left the rest out of the canon. And thus he decreed: From now on only those are true expositions of the Mazdean religion, for now there is no lack of information and knowledge concerning them.<sup>62</sup>

Although the *Dēnkard*, from which this passage comes, has somewhat dubious reliability due to its heavy emphasis on myth it does nevertheless contain useful information on Zoroastrianism.<sup>63</sup> Importantly for this passage, that its description of Ardashir's attempt to introduce and implement a Zoroastrian orthodoxy is similar to the allusions made by the more reliable Elishé above on the importance of religious uniformity to the early Sasanians it has a greater degree of historical reliability than other sections of the *Dēnkard*. That this was one of Ardashir's first religious acts upon ascending the throne reinforces the importance Zoroastrianism had to the early Shahs. Evidently, Ardashir believed that the creation of a unified Zoroastrian doctrine would reinforce the religion's centrality in the empire and prove an even greater source of support.<sup>64</sup> These two aspects of early Sasanian religious-imperial life further underscores the similarities between the two rival empires, as, as already witnessed, Christianity attempted the same things in the Roman Empire. Such similar aims and ambitions in two competing religions, as already revealed, created internal pressures for the two empires' rulers.

The idea of internal loyalty being linked with religious conformity and uniformity may well have been a superficial one, enforced only when the power of the Magians was ascendant, but it was nevertheless to have lasting consequences for Christians living within the Sasanian Empire, especially after the Roman Empire had become a Christian one. Also, the use of Zoroastrianism as a means to political legitimacy for the early Shahs could suggest that their adherence and loyalty to the religion was borne more out of political need rather than

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<sup>62</sup> *Dēnkard* 'Acts of Religion' (Shaki, 1981).

<sup>63</sup> For more information on the *Dēnkard* see: Shaki (1981) and Gignoux (1994).

<sup>64</sup> On the Sasanian Zoroastrian Orthodoxy see: Boyce (1996).



religious zealotry; this will look even more the case when we analysis the religious situation of the Sasanian Empire in the fifth century in more detail below.

### Christianity in the Sasanian Empire

As shown above the religious-ideological ideal of the Sasanian *Ērānšahr* was centred on the idea of a well-ordered land of Persians with a shared Zoroastrian faith.<sup>65</sup> However, the reality was quite different, the empire was in fact multi-ethnic and multi-religious with substantial Jewish, Christian, Hindi and Manichaeian populations.<sup>66</sup>

Around this time Christianity also spread in Persia for the following reasons. Between the Romans and Persians frequent embassies constantly take place...this is why Christianity spread among the Persians.<sup>67</sup>

Shapur [II] built the city of Vēh Šāpūr, brought captives from various places and settled them there. He also had the idea of bringing thirty families apiece from each of the ethnic groups living in the cities beyond his realm, and settling them among the deported captives, so that through intermarriage the latter should become tied down by bonds of family and affection, thus making it less easy for them to slip away gradually into flight and return to the areas from which they had been deported. Such was Shapur's crafty plan, but God in his mercy turned it to good use, for thanks to the intermarriage between the deported population and the native pagans, the latter were brought to knowledge of the [Christian] faith.<sup>68</sup>

As these two passages reveal, a considerable portion of the Sasanian population was made up of Christians that continued to grow and mature throughout the centuries. Indeed, that these sources, one eastern and one western, agree with each other on the existence of a large Christian population provides further veracity that this was the case and it was not just a Roman or Christian idea or posturing. These sources show that the very nature of the Roman-Sasanian relationship, with its continuous diplomatic and military contacts, was partly responsible for this growth and spread of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire.

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<sup>65</sup> Daryaee, 2010: 91.

<sup>66</sup> *KKZ* § 9-10.

<sup>67</sup> *Soc. HE* 7.1-20.

<sup>68</sup> *Acts of Pusai AMS* 2 p.209.

Importantly, for this growing Sasanian Christian population, beyond the borders of the Roman Empire Constantine's conversion to Christianity had arguably its most profound effect within the Sasanian Empire, but rather than benefitting them it proved detrimental.<sup>69</sup> The new identification of Christianity as the religion of the Roman emperors changed the attitude of the Shahs to their Christian subjects, who were now viewed as Roman auxiliary troops. It was for this reason that Christianity during and after the fifth century was regarded as a foreign religion, and therefore as having a subversive and destabilising effect on the Sasanian Empire.

This change in the conditions of Sasanian Christians after 312 amid the idea that their religious identity affected their political loyalty is evident in the toleration Christianity enjoyed in the reigns of the early Shahs, from Ardashir to Hormizd II, before Constantine's conversion, compared to their treatment after this date wherein they faced more frequent and fierce persecutions.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, as shown by the passage from the *Acts of Pusai* above, before 312 Shapur II himself, upon establishing forcibly deported Christians in his empire, kept them together, granted them freedom of worship and other privileges in order to keep them happy and loyal. Indeed, when Christianity was periodically persecuted in the Roman Empire pre-conversion the Sasanians offered sanctuary to Christians as part of their wider conflict with the Roman rival, as a means to undermine the emperors, as was evident during the persecutions initiated by Valerian and the flight of the Nestorians to the Sasanian Empire.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the Middle-Persian word for Christians, *tarsāgān*, has positive connotations as it means 'reverent ones' or 'God fearing ones' and, therefore, suggests that Christianity was not inherently hated throughout the history of the Sasanian state, and that the Shahs' later systematic persecution of it in the fourth century was driven by political needs and considerations.<sup>72</sup>

As such, there were two principal conditions that inevitably led to persecution; tensions with the Roman Empire and the internal ambition and influence of the Zoroastrian Magians, both of which had important consequences for the Roman-Sasanian relationship.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Hage, 1973; Decret, 1979.

<sup>70</sup> Asmussen, 1983: 936. Bahrām II was the only exception in this early period. This exception was due to the exceptional power amassed by the *mowbed* Kerdīr during Bahrām II's reign.

<sup>71</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* PO 4 pp.22-3, PO 4.220-1, Garsoïan, 1983: 570; Frye, 1981: 264.

<sup>72</sup> Daryaei, 2010: 91.

<sup>73</sup> Brock, 1982: 1-18; McDonough, 2006: 69.

As they worshipped the same god the Shahs believed Christians within their own empire were more likely to be loyal to the Roman emperor than they were to the Sasanian state, especially in times of war, highlighting the late antique belief that political loyalty was determined by religious identity.<sup>74</sup> This view was propagated by the Magians who wished to see this rival religion chased out of the empire. They believed that the Christians could not be trusted because; ‘they hold the same faith as the Romans, and they are in entire agreement together: should a war interpose between the two empires these Christians will turn out to be defectors from our side in any fighting’<sup>75</sup> and ‘although they [Christians] live in our land, they share the doctrine of Caesar our enemy’.<sup>76</sup> Indicative of the suspicion of Christians’ political loyalty being affected by their shared religion with the Romans was Simeon’s, the leading bishop in the Sasanian Empire, refusal to levy the double tax mentioned above by Shapur II. Simeon’s refusal to pay these taxes were seen as a result of his Christian loyalty to Constantinople, as seen by the Shah’s resultant exclamation; ‘Simeon wants to make his people rebel against my kingdom and convert them into servants of Caesar, their coreligionist’.<sup>77</sup> Thus, the loyalty of Christians within their empire was questioned by the Shahs, who viewed them with mistrust and as a potential Roman ‘fifth-column’ in their empire.<sup>78</sup> This suspicion was partly justified by the actions and beliefs of some Christians, as evident from the writings of Aphrahat which suggest that many Christians did hope and pray for a Roman victory of the Sasanian Shah.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, it must also be remembered that in his letter to Shapur II Constantine actively linked the Sasanian Christians to himself and the Roman Empire, thus initiating Christianity as a political factor in the imperial relationship.

Accordingly, some Sasanian officials and Magians believed the only way to counter this was to convert the Christians to Zoroastrianism, as made clear by Lazar P’arpets’i:

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<sup>74</sup> Brock, 1982: 5.

<sup>75</sup> *Acts of Peroz AMS* 4 p.258-9. This speech was given by the Magian Mihrshabur during the trial of Peroz in 422.

<sup>76</sup> *Martyrologium of Mar Simon, Acta martyrum et sanctorum* 2.135-6 (ed. Bedjan 2 135-6).

<sup>77</sup> *Acts of Simeon* (ed. Kmosko B. 4).

<sup>78</sup> Barnes, 1985: 136.

<sup>79</sup> Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 5.2. For more detail and discussion on Aphrahat and the implications of his *Demonstrations* see: Barnes (1985).

If you [the Shahs] were to render them [the Christians] familiar with our religion...they would love you and the land of the Aryans and would reject and draw away from the [Roman] emperor and his religion and his empire.<sup>80</sup>

The primary method that they believed would secure this conversion was persecution. Indeed, as shown by an important Zoroastrian inscription persecutions became an important tool of the Magians in their attempts to eradicate other religions and ensure their position as the overwhelming and predominant religion of the Sasanian Empire:

And the false doctrine of the Ahreman and the dēws [demons] disappeared from the empire and were expelled. And the Jews, Buddhists, Brahmans [Hindi], Nazarenes, Christians, Baptists and Manichaeans were broken up, and their idols were destroyed and the dwellings of the dēws were annihilated and turned into places and seats of the gods.<sup>81</sup>

This celebration of persecutions against the other religions of the Sasanian Empire comes from the biographical inscription of the *mowbed*, Kerdir, the most powerful Zoroastrian Magian in the third century, at Naqsh-e Rājab.<sup>82</sup> Kerdir's inscription is an important source of information on Zoroastrianism within the Sasanian Empire as it provides direct insight into how its chief priest wished both himself and his religion to be viewed; however, as with all forms of personal aggrandisement caution must be used when analysing this inscription.<sup>83</sup> It highlights the first danger to Christians within the Sasanian Empire; the internal ambitions and influence of Zoroastrianism and its Magians.<sup>84</sup> As a monotheistic religion with universal aspirations Zoroastrianism viewed Christianity, and all other religions, as a direct challenge to its position.<sup>85</sup> As celebrated by Kerdir in his inscription, this fear and desire for supremacy often resulted in persecutions of other religions, Christianity among them. Indeed, the Magians promoted the idea that toleration of the Christians would anger the true Zoroastrian god.<sup>86</sup> Persecutions were most prevalent when the Magians were at their most powerful and

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<sup>80</sup> 43.

<sup>81</sup> *KKZ* § 9-10.

<sup>82</sup> Certainly, Kerdir presented himself as the most powerful at any rate (*KKZ* § 8-9). Indeed, the mere fact that he was permitted to inscribe his biography in stone is testament to his power as this was normally a prerogative reserved solely for royalty (Daryaee, 2008b: 75).

<sup>83</sup> For more on the usefulness and considerations of the Kerdir's inscription as a both a source of information and historical statement see: Dignas & Winter (2007: 213-16) and Mackenzie (1989: 35-72).

<sup>84</sup> Daryaee, 2010: 94.

<sup>85</sup> Fowden, 1993: 31-35.

<sup>86</sup> Lazar P'arpets'i 42-4.87.

able to exert pressure and influence on the Shahs in demanding action against rival faiths, as evident in the fact that the persecutions mentioned above were organised during the height of Kerdīr's power. The danger this posed to other religions is evident in the efficiency with which the Magians attacked the Manichaean faith in the third century.<sup>87</sup> The correlation between Magian ascendance and religious persecutions was again evident during the reign of Bahrām V when the Magians, having regained the initiative, were able to induce the new Shah to initiate attacks against the Christians.

In contrast, when the Shahs' internal position was secure they often sought to protect their Christian subjects from the zeal of the Magians.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, Yazdgard I was widely criticised in eastern sources for his toleration of Christians and Jews, earning the epithet the 'sinner' (*Ramšahr*).<sup>89</sup> The fact then, that Shahs were willing to offer protection to the Christian population when they were able, and when it would prove beneficial, once again reinforces the notion that they were more interested in political interests such as stimulating internal stability rather than simply zealously promoting Zoroastrian religious uniformity.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, when it benefitted the internal infrastructure of the empire to utilise the skills of the Christians the Shahs were eager to offer their patronage, privileges and sanctuary as incentives for their loyalty. This policy was evident in the social and religious policies of Shapur I and II.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the eventual separation between religion and kingship that was so central to the early Shahs that occurred in the fifth century, allowed the Shahs to distance themselves from the religious machinations and prejudices of the Zoroastrian Church, as shall be explained below. Indeed, the motivation behind the Magians' move for a more independent and organised Zoroastrian Church in the late fourth and fifth centuries may have been due the Shahs' willingness to tolerate other religions which was unacceptable to them.

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<sup>87</sup> Hutter, 1993; Scott, 1989.

<sup>88</sup> Brock, 1982: 6.

<sup>89</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 1.205-7.

<sup>90</sup> This is also supported by the fact that even Shapur II, who as we have already seen, stressed his connections with Zoroastrianism for political purposes, predominantly legitimacy, courted Mani, the spiritual leader of Manichaeism, for a time. If Shapur was truly dedicated to Zoroastrianism itself he would surely not have done this (Kreyenbroek, 2008).

<sup>91</sup> For the position of Christians during the reign of Shapur I see: Elishé (3.18). For the position of Christians under the reign of Shapur II see: *Chronicle of Seert* (½ 261, 11. 3.).

As already highlighted, in late antiquity religion was regarded as the underlying factor in determining political loyalty, and this fact was to have severe repercussions for Christians living in the Sasanian Empire,<sup>92</sup> as shown by the *Martyrologium of Mar Simon*:

Shapur [II] found an opportunity, after the death of the blessed Constantine, emperor of the Romans died, to pick a quarrel with his sons, because they were young, and [so] he was continually going up to raid the lands of the Romans. And for this reason he was especially stirring hatred against the servants of God who were in the territory under his dominion, and he was longing and scheming to find a pretext for the persecution of the faithful. And he contrived a stratagem to crush with a double levy all the Christians who were in the dominion of the Persians.<sup>93</sup>

This passage, describing the beginning of the long and bitter conflict between Shapur II and Constantius II, underlines that conflicts with the Roman Empire frequently led to persecutions of Christianity within the Sasanian Empire.<sup>94</sup> Shapur seemingly believed that attacking the Roman Empire and persecuting Christianity were two sides of the same coin. Indeed, the similar actions of successive Shahs in the fourth century suggests that they increasingly believed that military campaigns against their Roman rival could not succeed without also attacking the Roman religion within their own territory. Consequently, Sasanian persecutions of Christianity usually ran parallel to imperial conflicts.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, Shapur II's decision to antagonise the sons of Constantine by attacking the 'servants of God who were in [his] territory' suggests that he was aware that the position of Christians even beyond their own borders was considered a cause of war by the Roman emperors and a useful way of instigating conflict. Furthermore, the connection between conflicts with the Roman Empire and Christian persecutions can also be suggested to highlight the overriding political concern of the Shahs, internal stability, as the persecution of their Christian population was a guaranteed method

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<sup>92</sup> McDonough (2006: 68) argues that persecutions took place predominantly with the pragmatic aim of centralisation and an attempt to redress the anxieties about the loyalty of minorities, not as straightforward attempts to forcibly convert them to Zoroastrianism. This view is also supported by Nöldeke (1979: 114), Frye (1983: 320) and Neusner (1983: 915).

<sup>93</sup> *Martyrologium of Mar Simon, Acta martyrum et sanctorum* (ed. P. Bedjan 2 135-6).

<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the long conflict between Shapur II and the Roman Empire led to forty years of almost continually Christian persecution (Dignas & Winter, 2007: 220).

<sup>95</sup> Bahrām V's short-lived war of 421 was yet another example of this (Soc. *HE* 7.18).

of winning the support of the Magians, whose support would have been essential during campaigns against the Roman rival.

Evidently, as long as internal order and external security were not threatened minority religions were tolerated and allowed to prosper, but if they caused any disorder internal or damage to the empire persecutions were always the likely result.<sup>96</sup> Thus, it was the internal concerns and fears of the Shahs that resulted in Christian persecutions. Indeed, as we have seen the legitimacy and position of the Shahs of all periods was linked to internal stability and loyalty.<sup>97</sup> In this regard, if the Magians, a considerable support to the Shahs and influential in the internal balance of power, pressured the Shahs to launch persecutions they were all but forced to do so unless the Magians withdrew their support. However, it was Christianity's link with the Roman Empire and Roman Emperors after 312 which generated the most mistrust and occasional hostility from the royal government. This situation led to a political paradox that suggested peace could not be established until Christian persecutions were brought to an end, but persecutions were unlikely to end until peace was established. Hence, it would take a unique set of circumstances and subtle political and religious manoeuvrings to overcome this. These unique circumstances began to take root in the fifth century as the military focus of the empires shifted elsewhere and, as shall be seen below, the traditional interconnection between Sasanian kingship and Zoroastrianism began to diminish in the fifth century. If the perceived loyalty to Constantinople and Sasanian dependence on the Magians for internal support could be removed or disproved, Christians would come under less scrutiny and likely suffer less persecutions and this in turn would help to defuse any religious antagonism with the 'protector' of all Christians in Constantinople. Fortunately for the Christians, and for the maintenance of the Roman-Sasanian *détente*, these two changes did take, and were interconnected, in the fifth century.

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<sup>96</sup> Daryaee, 2008a: 97.

<sup>97</sup> Evident in the fact that Yazdgerd I had coins minted that proclaimed him as he 'who maintains peace in his dominion' or *Ramšahr* (Daryaee, 2008b: 21).

## Sasanian Christianity and the Epoch of the Fifth Century

Sasanian kingship was not static or unchanging and this meant that, despite the early importance of Zoroastrianism, its relationship with the religion developed over time, adapting and reacting to political changes and circumstances.<sup>98</sup> The importance Zoroastrianism had in both kingship and state in the third and even fourth centuries was in no way guaranteed to still exist in fifth century, and indeed it did not. Arguably the biggest change in the relationship between Sasanian kingship and Zoroastrianism took place towards the end of the fourth century as the traditional alliance between throne and altar diminished.<sup>99</sup> The impetus for this change was the crystallisation of a Zoroastrian church hierarchy that enabled the Magians to become a more independent institution within the state.<sup>100</sup> The rise of this more independent Zoroastrian Church meant that the Magians' were no longer reliant on the Shahs for their power and influence. Indeed, in the early third and fourth centuries even powerful *mowbeds* such as Kerdir still owed their position to the patronage of the Shahs.<sup>101</sup>

The main consequence of the strengthened organisation and independence of the Zoroastrian Church and the loosening of its ties with the Shahs was that in the fifth century the Shahs were no longer regarded as the ultimate patron of Zoroastrianism, nor were they any longer viewed as being descended from the gods. They were now simply regarded as secular rulers who happened to be a 'Mazda-worshipper'.<sup>102</sup> This change is evident in the terminology used to describe Shahs after the fourth century: in the third and fourth centuries they had used the title '*bay*', with its aforementioned religious connotations; however, in the fifth century and beyond this was increasingly replaced by the more secular '*xwadāy*' designation.<sup>103</sup> This resulted in a weakening of the internal strength of the monarchy in the face of a more assertive, independent and ambitious Zoroastrian clergy, the results of which have already been noted in the increased internal turmoil of the fifth century. This new relationship between the Shahs and Zoroastrianism was more apparent than in the reign of

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<sup>98</sup> Daryaei (2008b: 60) rightly points out that the concept of kingship in the third century was totally different to that of the sixth century.

<sup>99</sup> Choksy, 1988: 49-52.

<sup>100</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 214; Daryaei, 2008a: 21.

<sup>101</sup> *KKZ* § 8-9.

<sup>102</sup> Daryaei, 2008a: 21.

<sup>103</sup> Daryaei, 2008b: 63. This term has similar connotations to the term *xvarna* discussed by Dignas & Winter (2007: 234) which refers to a Shah's 'royal radiance' or 'royal majesty'.



Yazdgard I, who, at the beginning of the fifth century, ordered the execution of Magians who had angered him, a move which his earlier predecessors in the third century would never have risked.<sup>104</sup> Thus, although damaging, this development nevertheless also gave the Shahs more scope for flexible action in their religious policies; it forced the Shahs to look elsewhere within their empire for alternative sources of internal support

In the Shahs' search for other sources of internal support, the growth of Christianity at the end of the fourth and into the fifth century into a large and influential religion which was at times able to challenge the traditional supremacy of Zoroastrianism provided an important opportunity. Indeed, despite the persecutions and suspicions of the fourth century, by the fifth century Christianity had become a large and well-established religion within the Sasanian Empire, with six metropolitan sees and over thirty bishoprics by 410.<sup>105</sup> This expansion of Christianity had a drastic effect on how Shahs went about achieving internal stability, especially in relation to the turmoil caused by their traditional support in Zoroastrianism and the nobility. Throughout the fifth century successive Shahs, from Yazdgard I onwards, became directly involved with the Christians in their empire in order to establish greater ties of loyalty between them and the throne, in the hope of utilising them as an alternative, or counterweight, to the Magians who had turned into a source of internal instability, in the same way Yazdgard hoped to counter the power of the nobles with the Nasrids, as mentioned earlier. Equally, the Sasanian Christians displayed a willingness to prove their loyalty to the empire and the Shahs, undoubtedly motivated by their desire to avoid persecution and attack. This bilateral enthusiasm for accommodation between the Christians and the Shahs culminated in royally organised Christian councils, or synods, throughout the fifth century that paved the way to closer ties and trust between the Shahs and the Christians, by distancing Sasanian Christianity from Roman Christianity; thus circumventing the idea that they were politically linked by a shared religious belief. Indeed, as we have already seen, one way to placate mistrust and foster more reliable relations between two different parties is

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<sup>104</sup> Soc. *HE* 8.7.9.

<sup>105</sup> Soc. *HE* 7.1-20; Brock, 1982: 3; Daryaee, 2010: 92.

through constant signalling. The actions of both the Shahs and the Christians in the fifth century is a prime example of this.

The first of these official synods was organised by Yazdgard I in 410 at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the outcome of which is described below:

In the eleventh year of the reign of Yazdgard, king of kings, victorious. After peace and tranquillity were restored to the Lord, [this king] gave freedom and rest to the congregations of Christ and allowed the servants of God to exalt Christ publically in their body, either with their death, or during their life, he drew aside the storm of persecution of all of the flocks of Christ, indeed, he ordered in all his empire that the temples destroyed by his fathers might be magnificently reconstructed in his own time; that those who had been tested for God who had suffered prisons and tortures, should go in liberty; that the priests, the chiefs, together with all the holy order should circulate with complete freedom and without fear.<sup>106</sup>

This description of the council's decisions comes from the *Synodicon Orientale*, a collection of letters and correspondence from the Church of the East, the primary Christian institution in the Sasanian Empire, dating predominantly from the fifth century. As such, on matters concerning Sasanian Christianity in this period it offers a direct and unique insight. From this description of the agreement it is justifiable to compare it to the Edict of Milan, signed in 313 that declared religious toleration throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>107</sup> Christians were now permitted to worship publically, Yazdgard allowed the restoration of churches and freed imprisoned bishops and, perhaps most importantly, Yazdgard agreed to enforce the decisions of this synod, thus showing that Christianity was now officially part of the Sasanian state again, under the Shahs protection and authority.<sup>108</sup> This synod also witnessed the creation of a new hierarchical organisation of the Church of the East with its own ecclesiastical laws, independent from its Roman counterpart, that was authorised through the joint agreement of the bishops and Shah.<sup>109</sup> This gave both internal stability and external protection to the

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<sup>106</sup> 17-18.

<sup>107</sup> On the Edict on Milan see: Eusebius (*HE* 10.5.1-15.).

<sup>108</sup> McDonough, 2008a: 87. In this regard, it is telling that the Magians were highly critical of Yazdgard for this as it limited their own ascendancy in the empire (*Chronicle of Seert* 1.205-7). While the Christians, even those in the Roman Empire praised Yazdgard for his decision (*Proc. BP.* 1.2; *Soc. HE* 7.8)

<sup>109</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 223; Brosius, 2006: 192.

newly created Church of the East. In return, the Church of the East swore its total allegiance to the Sasanian throne.

Socrates stated that Yazdgard was prompted to organise the 410 synod and grant Christianity toleration by the Roman ambassador, and Christian bishop, Marutha; however this claim was likely due to a desire to attribute this as a Christian or Roman victory on behalf of the historian's patron, Theodosius II.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, this Roman-Christian desire to portray this advancement of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire as a victory of the true religion is further evident in the fact that Roman historians subsequently began to claim that Yazdgard himself had converted to Christianity.<sup>111</sup> More likely, Yazdgard's decision to support Christianity at this time was due to his own aforementioned internal needs and concerns. Nevertheless, the reign of Yazdgard and the 410 synod can quite rightly be seen as a harbinger of a shift in the nature of Sasanian Christianity.

Yet, despite the success of the 410 Synod it was not enough to protect the Christians against the wrath and power of the Magians. Nor was the creation of the Church of the East and its deepened links with the Sasanian throne enough to stop the Romans, under Theodosius II, once more coming to the aid of Christians when they once again faced persecution in Sasanian territory in 421/2, and declaring war on the Sasanian Empire, and thus once again causing Sasanian suspicion about where the Christians' loyalties laid.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, in response to the causes of these persecutions and the resultant war with Constantinople, additional synods were convened to reinforce the loyalty and obedience of the Christians to the Sasanian throne and also to further sever the ties between the Church of the East and the Roman Church authorities and emperor.

The most important of these was the 424 synod that annulled the traditional right of appeal Sasanian bishops had to the Patriarch of Antioch and made the *Catholicos* of the Church of the East responsible only to God.<sup>113</sup> This decision made the Church of the East a completely

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<sup>110</sup> *HE* 7.1-20. McDonough (2008a: 87) and Dignas & Winter (2007: 223) also argue that Marutha was responsible for this.

<sup>111</sup> *Soc. HE* 7.8.1-3.

<sup>112</sup> Luther (2014: 191) has also claimed that such internal religious tensions possibly caused an earlier imperial conflict in 416/17. Although the existence of this conflict has not yet been conclusively agreed upon and Luther himself admits it would have been a much shorter and more localised conflict than even those in 421/2 and 441.

<sup>113</sup> *Syn. Or.* p.296; Asmussen, 1983: 341.

independent entity separate from Roman interference and the influence of the Patriarch of Antioch and severed all official ties between the Roman emperors, Roman Christian authority and the Sasanian Christians.<sup>114</sup> That the 424 synod came relatively soon after the end of the 421 war with Constantinople suggests that it was organised in direct response to the cause of the persecutions which led to the war with Constantinople.

Next, in 484 at the Beth Lapat synod the Metropolitan of Nisibis, Barsauma, persuaded his fellow Christians to adopt a different form of Christological confession than that used in the Roman Empire. He explained the necessity of such a move to Shah Balās; ‘unless the confession of Christians in your territory is made different from that in Greek [Roman] territory, their affection and loyalty towards you will not be firmly fixed’.<sup>115</sup> This speech to Balās confirms that Christian leaders realised it was important for their safety and toleration in the Sasanian Empire to create a distinct and separate identity from the Christians in the Roman Empire. Therefore, it was also in this synod that the Church of the East declared its allegiance to the Nestorian creed.<sup>116</sup> This decision to adhere to what the Romans considered to be a heretical doctrine created a lasting divide with the Orthodox Roman Christian authorities and the emperors. Consequently, the Magians were no longer able to so easily charge the Christians as sharing the same faith as the Shahs’ greatest rival and questioning their loyalty as they had done throughout the fourth century. Likewise, the Roman emperors no longer viewed themselves as the protectors of Christians within the Sasanian Empire as they were now considered heretics and traitors to the faith. As such, the Roman emperors were no longer willing to launch attacks against the Sasanian Empire to protect heretics who had purposefully disavowed the true Christian faith and Nicene Creed. The 484 synod was thus important in both the Roman-Sasanian religious relationship and in the relationship between the Church of the East and the Sasanian state.

Balāš (484-488), yet another fifth century Shah who had trouble with the nobility and Magians, called the last synod of the fifth century in 486 during which the right to marry was granted to all ranks of the Christian clergy.<sup>117</sup> This made Christianity much more acceptable to Persian cultural traditions than celibacy which they abhorred. This was a major concession

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<sup>114</sup> Dignas & Winter, 2007: 223.

<sup>115</sup> Barhebraeus, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* 3.65.

<sup>116</sup> Brosius, 2006: 193; Wiesehöfer, 1996: 204.

<sup>117</sup> Brock, 1982: 4. On Balāš’ internal troubles see Joshua Stylites (18-19).

and change on behalf of the Christians to show themselves as Persian.<sup>118</sup> The 486 synod therefore reinforces the willingness for accommodation between the Shahs and their Christian subjects, both wanted to cement the ties of loyalty and acceptance between them, in order to better their own position within the empire.

As a result of these synods, from the fifth century onwards Christians, in particular leading bishops such as the *Catholicos*, became trusted allies and advisors of the Sasanian Shahs. Fifth and sixth century sources increasingly record the presence of bishops at the courts of the Shahs and refer to them as ‘friends of the king’.<sup>119</sup> Indicative of the new importance and acceptance of Christians at the Sasanian courts was the fact that all four of the major diplomatic exchanges with the Roman Empire during Yazdgard I’s reign were conducted by Christian bishops.<sup>120</sup> Alongside the growing importance of bishops in diplomacy Christians were also increasingly trusted with domestic responsibilities. For example the *Catholicos* Ahaī was sent to investigate and report on piracy in the important province of Fars.<sup>121</sup> The fact that Christian bishops were trusted with leading such important political and diplomatic missions, especially as envoys to the Roman Empire, clearly reveals that during the fifth century they were no longer considered Roman spies or a Roman ‘fifth-column’, but instead now acted as alternatives to the Magians, and could be relied upon to uphold the interests of the Sasanian Empire. Furthermore, that Sasanian kingship was no longer rooted to a strict alliance with Zoroastrianism, by the fifth century the Shahs viewed themselves as kings of both Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians alike. The state sponsored synods of the fifth century ensured that the Christian problem was no longer an imperial problem but a problem solely for the Zoroastrian Church.<sup>122</sup> The separation of the Church of the East from the Roman Christian authorities that was orchestrated and cemented by the fifth century synods was instrumental in this development, and this separation was equally instrumental in the peaceful relations between the two empires in the same period by circumventing a traditional source of conflict and suspicion between them. The effect of these fifth century synods in establishing Sasanian Christianity as a distinct entity, different and independent of Roman

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid* 9.

<sup>119</sup> *Chronicle of Seert* 1.69, 1.71.

<sup>120</sup> McDonough, 2008a: 88. Predominantly Marutha.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>122</sup> Evident in the fact that post-fifth century accounts, principally the Syriac martyrologies, it is usually individual Magians who insisted on putting Christians to death, not the Shah (Daryaee, 2010: 95).

Christianity was arguably most evident in the historical recording of the seventh century Sasanian conquests of large swathes of the Roman territory, that rather than reading as unabashed anti-Christian were instead anti-Chalcedonian.<sup>123</sup>

Although these synods were primarily organised to strengthen the ties of loyalty and dispel the antagonism between the Shahs and the Christians, that would allow the Shahs to utilise them as an alternative and counterweight to the power of the Zoroastrian Magians, they also had important consequences on the Roman-Sasanian relationship. From the first synod in 410 to the last in 486 Christian attempts to become more acceptable to the Sasanian Shahs correspondingly distanced them from the Roman emperors. This growing distance between the Nestorian Church of the East and the Orthodox Roman emperors ensured that Constantinople was less and less likely to launch military campaigns against the Sasanian Empire in order to protect them. This is evident in that the persecutions during the reigns of Yazdgard II and Peroz, unlike the persecutions of 421, did not result in Roman retaliation or interference; Roman emperors were unwilling to launch costly military campaigns to protect heretics.

## Conclusion

The pragmatic nature of the religious policies of the Shahs has repeatedly been stressed throughout this chapter and their fifth-century religious policy, emphasised by the 410, 424, 484 and 486 synods, was no different in that respect. Accommodation with the Christian population was a political necessity due to the internal instability of the Sasanian Empire in the fifth century that granted the Shahs of the fifth century three important benefits. First, it gave them patronage over the talented leaders of the Church of the East and created a relationship of obligation between bishops and Shahs. Secondly, it enabled Christianity to act as a counterweight and alternative to the power and ambitions of the Zoroastrian Magians.

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<sup>123</sup> *Chron. Pasch.* p.728; *Theoph. Chron. a.m.* 6106. Fowden (1993: 35) also notices this, although he does state that the difference between anti-Christian and anti-Chalcedonian feeling is sometime ambiguous.

Thirdly, and most importantly for the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian peace, it separated Sasanian Christianity from its traditional link with the Roman Empire and ensured that the Romans, who viewed all opposing Christian creeds as heresy, would no longer be willing to launch crusades or attacks against the Sasanian Empire on behalf of the Christians living there. This third factor then was important in the establishment and maintenance of peace between the two imperial rivals in the fifth century as it overcame yet another potential *casus belli* between them. Importantly, the removal of religion as a cause of war between Constantinople and Ctesiphon was thus linked more to the overriding need for security, the internal security of the Shahs, that is stressed by political realism, more so than any other development. This therefore once again reinforces the usefulness of understanding the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian relationship within realist ideals.

## Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the Roman-Sasanian relationship in the fifth century in an attempt to understand the reasons for, and the nature of, the peace between the two empires in this period. A holistic approach was taken in order to analyse the imperial relationship as an integral part of the wider late antique world, not as something distinct and separate. This ensured that equal focus was given to both the need for peace, due to changes beyond imperial borders and the changed internal conditions of both empires (Chapter 1), and also on how it was established and maintained (Chapters 2 and 3). This approach allowed us to identify, and then analyse, the different motivations that stimulated and necessitated peace between the two empires in this period, as well as the obstacles which needed to be overcome for this peace to take place.

### **The Changing Relationship**

Chapter 1 analysed the development of the Roman-Sasanian relationship in the *longue durée*, by comparing the priorities of the two empires in the third and fourth centuries with those in the fifth century.

In the third and fourth centuries the Roman and Sasanian Empires were firmly focused on competition with one another. A variety of political, religious, strategic and ideological concerns were all seen to have stimulated and necessitated imperial conflict. Just as peace eventually became necessary to the survival of the two empires in the fifth century, during the third and fourth centuries conflict with the other was necessary for the success and prosperity of the empires as a whole, and also for the internal position of the emperors and Shahs. By investigating the causes of these earlier wars the obstacles that needed to be overcome in the fifth century for the *détente* to be established were ascertained. In this regard, the traditional Roman-Sasanian *casus belli* were identified as, the fluctuating balance of power in the Mesopotamian frontier, the side-switching of the Armenian *nakharars* and Arab tribes, conflicting and antagonistic ideologies, religious suspicions and the need for internal legitimacy and stability.



In the second part of this chapter (Chapter 1.2) the role the aggressive and dangerous Huns, Vandals and Hephthalites, as well as increased internal instability in the Sasanian Empire, played in forcing a shift in the imperial and military priorities of both empires in the fifth century was analysed. The effect that the emergence of these new barbarian powers had on the geopolitical condition of the late antique world was the underlying motivation for imperial peace. By analysing imperial resources, especially of the East Roman Empire after 395, it was shown that neither Constantinople nor Ctesiphon had the military power or economic resources to fight multiple wars on different frontiers simultaneously and, consequently, they were forced to decide carefully where and when to deploy their resources in response to the most pressing threats. Accordingly, their focus shifted towards the new barbarian threats that posed a much more immediate and direct danger than the imperial rivalry, which by the end of the fourth century had stagnated into the competition for the control of individual frontier cities or forts. Thus, because of their limited resources, and need to avoid imperial-overstretch, the Romans and Sasanians soon realised the need for a *détente* with one another, in order to focus their attentions elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the Roman redeployment of troops from the mobile field armies from their eastern frontier, as emphasised by the *Notitia Dignitatum*, together with the joint 442 agreement not to construct new fortifications on the imperial frontier and the deterioration of existing fortifications on this frontier does support the idea of a mutual Roman and Sasanian shift away from the imperial competition and frontier.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Establishment of Peace**

Chapter 2 and 3 investigated how the two empires managed to overcome the traditional *casus belli* between them.

The creation of a more sophisticated and adaptive diplomatic relationship in the late fourth and fifth centuries was central to the establishment and maintenance of the Roman-Sasanian peace in the fifth century. The key developments in Roman-Sasanian diplomacy during this

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in his theory of imperial overstretch, which bears many parallels with the situation facing the Romans and Sasanians in the fifth century, Münkler (2007:112-15) argues that the avoidance of imperial overstretch was synonymous with withdrawal from frontiers, and the potential of overstretch was mainly a danger when an empire's resources were running low.

<sup>2</sup> On the deterioration of eastern fortifications in this period see: Blockley (1992:108).

period included the formalisation of diplomatic protocols, the increased prominence of the *magister officiorum*, the creation of a corps of translators, the use of experienced ambassadors, regular diplomatic contact and the inclusion of time-limits for treaties. The fact that the majority of these developments were unique to Roman-Sasanian diplomacy underlines that it was only in this relationship that long-term stability and constancy was both needed and desired, they were designed for the specific needs of the Roman-Sasanian relationship in the fifth century, not for any wider desire for more peaceful relations with the empires' neighbours as a whole. As a result, unlike imperial diplomacy in the third and fourth centuries, which was both fundamentally and structurally reactive and ad-hoc, Roman-Sasanian diplomacy in the fifth century was much more preemptive and important in its own right. Imperial diplomacy became a real and viable alternative to warfare. Furthermore, the diplomatic language and rituals that resulted from this improved imperial diplomacy helped to generate a new ideology of interdependence that provided an alternative to the entrenched ideology of conflict that had previously existed.

Chapter 3 analysed the nature of the Armenian and Arabian frontier zones as causes of Roman-Sasanian conflict, primarily in regard to the role the Armenian *nakharars* and Arab tribes played as third-parties in both fomenting and exploiting imperial conflict. It was shown that, due to the ability of the local frontier elites to easily switch allegiance between the two empires, the imperial balance of power in these regions was in a constant state of flux; conducive only to warfare and suspicion, not peace. Therefore, to overcome this, and provide the stability that both needed, the Romans and Sasanians embarked upon a new and innovative solution that was based on diplomatic negotiation and flexibility. Rather than attempt to divide the frontier zones between them territorially, which they had attempted to do in the past and which had always failed, they instead decided to divide these regions into distinct spheres of influence, based upon the loyalties of the different local elites themselves. Key to this decision was the agreement that both sides would not to accept the allegiance of an Armenian *nakharar* or Arabian tribe that belonged in the other's sphere, no matter what short-term advantage it might give them.

Such subtle solutions to the problems of these frontier zones would not have been possible if not for the overall development of imperial diplomacy in the same period.

## **Religion**

Religion was ubiquitous in the late antique world, especially in the imperial relationship wherein two official 'state' religions came face-to-face for the first time. As such, Chapter 3 investigated the effect Christianity and Zoroastrianism had on the establishment of peace in the fifth century.

Although the existence of two competing monotheistic religions in the Roman and Sasanian Empires undoubtedly added yet another layer of suspicion between them, it is important to stress that direct Christian-Zoroastrian competition was not the underlying impetus behind most religiously motivated conflicts and hostilities between the two empires. Rather, it was the position of Christians in the Sasanian Empire, who the Shahs believed were more likely to be politically loyal to the Christian Roman Empire than the Zoroastrian Sasanian Empire due to the fact they shared the same religious belief. Thus, the steady development of the independent Church of the East, from 410 onwards, as a distinct entity separate from the Roman Christian authorities was instrumental in allaying the suspicions of the Shahs. The fact that the new royally supported Church of the East had different practices and traditions than Roman orthodoxy meant that Roman emperors increasingly viewed Sasanian Christians as heretics and consequently were no longer inclined to launch military campaigns against the Sasanian Empire to 'save' them, as they had done previously.

This separation between the Church of the East and Roman Orthodoxy ensured that religion caused less hostility and suspicion than it had done in previous centuries.

## **Holistic Connections and the Roman-Sasanian Peace: Political Pragmatism and Necessity**

As stated at the outset, the fifth century relationship and the unique period of sustained Roman-Sasanian peace can only be truly understood if all aspects of the late antique world, and the internal developments of the two empires themselves, are viewed together. Therefore, although these inter-connections have been highlighted throughout the investigation, it is important to describe them in more detail now in order to reinforce what

has been stated as the primary motivations of the fifth-century Roman-Sasanian peace throughout this work; namely the emergence of the new barbarian powers and the empires' own individual interests.

For example, from the Sasanian perspective the increased threat of the Hephthalites in the fifth century and the successive defeats they suffered at their hands made the Shahs more vulnerable to internal unrest. Military success and reputation was a central factor of a Shah's legitimacy, therefore, these defeats damaged this legitimacy and open him up to internal intrigue and attack. In this regard, the Shahs' failures against the Hephthalites allowed the other powerful internal groups within the empire, namely the nobility and the Zoroastrian Magians to challenge them. This forced the Shahs to create stronger ties of loyalty and support with other important groups within their empire as alternative sources of support and as political counter-weights to the Magians and nobles; chief amongst these alternative sources of support was the Sasanian Christians. Thus, the Shahs' desire to further secure their own position against the internal instability of the fifth century led to an accommodation with their Christian subjects that resulted in the creation of the Church of the East. This reconciliation between the Shahs and their Christian subjects meant that they were no longer viewed with suspicion, as a Roman fifth-column, and suffered fewer persecutions, which in turn meant that the Romans were less likely to launch military campaigns to protect them. Thus, the internal needs and pragmatic decisions of the Shahs in the fifth century played an important role in the Roman-Sasanian peace. Evidently, the Sasanian Shahs did not organise ecclesiastical synods and sponsor the Church of the East in the fifth century in the clear knowledge that it would engender better relations with the Roman Empire but rather because it was in their own internal interests to do so

Similarly, the need to defend their imperilled north-eastern frontier against the Hephthalites, and the sheer amount of economic and military resources this required meant that the Sasanians needed peace on their other frontiers, principally in the west with the Roman Empire in order to avoid becoming overstretched. The need for peace with the Romans consequently forced the Sasanians to be more pragmatic and adaptive in their diplomatic dealings with Constantinople in order to create stability on the imperial frontier that they needed to face the Hephthalites in the north-east. This need for pragmatism and adaptability in turn stimulated the development of Roman-Sasanian diplomacy in the fifth century, as the

more reactive and limited diplomacy of the third and fourth centuries, which was incompatible with the creation and maintenance a mutually acceptable balance of power, was slowly replaced by a more adaptive and sophisticated diplomatic relationship.

These interconnections, and the consequences they had on other developments elsewhere, also supports the realist understanding of international relations, that every state always acts first and foremost in its own interests and towards its on security. That the Roman-Sasanian settlements in the frontier zones of Arabia and Armenia in the fifth century were driven by their own individual interests and concerns confirms this. Both empires wanted better control over their allies, to protect their own empire against external threats, including the neighbouring empire, and to increase their direct control over these regions in order to better benefit from the strategic and material benefits they granted, they did not necessarily want to help the other to do the same. Indeed, the realist ideal can also be seen in the actions of the non-imperial powers in this period. For example, the Huns, Vandals and Hephthalites did not attack the Roman and Sasanian Empires simply because they were savage barbarians but because it was in their own interests to do so, either in the protection and expansion of their own territory or because their own internal political considerations made it necessary to do so. Likewise, even the Armenian *nakharars* and Arabian tribal leaders who operated at a smaller level than both the empires and the barbarian powers always acted in their own interests. These frontier elites did not consistently switch sides between the two empires merely to cause trouble for their imperial neighbours but because this was the best means available to them to advance their own power and position. This realist focus on pragmatism and individual ambition was likewise true for the internal power groups within individual states as shown by the actions of the Sasanian nobility, Magians and even the Shahs, all of who primarily acted in their own interest even when this went against what was best for the empire as a whole.

Importantly, from this understanding of the fifth-century *détente* the two short wars that were fought between the empires in 421 and 441 do not appear as anomalies, or signs that one empire or the other wanted peace more than the other, but rather they reinforce the

point that it was political necessity that dictated the foreign relations of the Roman and Sasanian Empire.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, the 421 war that broke out during the reigns Theodosius II and Yazdgard I broke out due to the internal pressures both rulers faced; pressures that could only be alleviated by pursuing policies that led to war with one another. From Yazdgard's, and his successor Bahrām V's, perspective the war was a result of their need to appease the Zoroastrian Magians, who, as we have seen, could cause trouble for Shahs when antagonised. After bishop Abdas and his followers destroyed the Zoroastrian fire temple the Magians put so much pressure on Yazdgard to retaliate against the Christians in the Sasanian Empire that he was eventually forced to do so, despite the anger this would cause in Constantinople and the damage it would do to the cautious relationship Yazdgard had up, until this point, carefully pursued with the Roman Empire. Theodosius was also forced to pursue policies that led to outbreak of war in 421 due to his own internal concerns. Throughout his reign Theodosius had based his legitimacy and right to rule on his Christian piety, consequently, when the Sasanian Christians fled to the Roman Empire seeking sanctuary Theodosius was forced to accept them, despite the fact that Bahrām had already warned this would lead to war.

Likewise, the Roman breaking of the 422 treaty by accepting the loyalty of the Arab tribal leader Amorkesos, as described earlier, similarly reinforces the primacy of self-interest in dictating the actions of the all the major players in the late antique world.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, just as political necessity forced the two empires into peace for the vast majority of the fifth century, internal needs also caused these two small-scale wars in the same way. The fact that political necessity and their leaders' own individual security were the underlying factors in the Roman-Sasanian peace, and that because of this wars such as those in 421 and 441 did take place, also reinforces the argument that the establishment and maintenance of peace was an on-going process that adapted and responded to changes as and when they arose throughout the fifth century. As such, the fifth-century peace must be seen as the consequence of a series of interconnected events, political needs and pragmatic decisions, not as the result of single treaty or event. Likewise, there was also no underlying or coherent

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Rubin (1986) argued that it was the Sasanians, not the Romans, who desired peace, however, as seen in this study both needed peace as much as each other.

<sup>4</sup> See p.201-3 for more details.

desire for a more peaceful relationship on behalf of the two empires, rather it was the result of self-interest and necessity. Certainly, the fact that once the unique conditions of the fifth century changed, or were overcome, the traditional imperial competition and conflict resumed in the sixth century reinforces this and underlines that the fifth-century peace should be understood more as an enforced cease-fire rather than the sudden development of a joint imperial inclination towards peace.

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