

**PERSIA AND THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE [284 - 651]**  
**Balance of Power and Spheres of Influence Stability in Asia Minor**

TIMOTHY R. GRAYSON

15 October 1998

## **PERSIA AND THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE [284 - 651]**

### **Balance of Power and Spheres of Influence Stability in Asia Minor**

The Sassanid Persian empire, which existed during the period 226-651, and the later Roman empire<sup>1</sup> from 284 through 651 were at war with each other as often as not. The frequent and often fierce battles were punctuated by mostly civilized periods of peace between them. A quick read of the period's history provides this basic information. Of greater import, but requiring further research, is that while these two great empires were adversaries, they were also neighbors who called upon each other for favours and assistance, which is an uncommon characteristic among mortal enemies. Much evidence exists for one to reasonably interpret their relations as less dire than commonly suggested. Furthermore, with notable exception near the end of this period -- the end of the Sassanid Persian empire and the decline of the Rome being its consequence -- these wars between Persia and Rome were not fought for gross expansion and total regional dominion. More likely, they were fought to maintain a balance of power stability and create insulating spheres of influence in the region, providing one of the western world's first encounters with Realpolitik.

This conjecture is more than suitably supported by re-analysis of the volumes of credible interpretation of primary sources by 20th century historians. Primary sources that have formed the basis for these interpretations, and which are reference points for further development of the thesis are, among others, the histories written by Procopius and Theophanes. For this paper, however, the secondary sources listed in the bibliography, which include works by Bury, Ostrogorsky, Diehl, Runciman, and Baynes, are superb.

A number of *persistent conditions* in the geo-politics of these two empires endure throughout this period. They are an important base of knowledge for any understanding and assessment of Roman-Persian relations. First, the empires were continually at war. Second, their

---

<sup>1</sup> While it is fair to consider the Empire to have become 'Byzantine' in the middle of the fifth century, under Leo, for the sake of clarity, the later Roman empire and its successor, the Byzantine empire, are referred to solely as Rome.

mutual border remained in flux but relatively stable until the last fifty years of the period.<sup>2</sup> Third, adjoining and in some instances between the empires were a number of smaller kingdoms, principalities, and tribal territories of strategic importance to the empires. Fourth, both empires had long and difficult to defend frontiers with aggressive 'barbarians' on the other side. Fifth, religion -- particularly Christianity -- was a source of political friction among and between the empires. Sixth, Emperors and Kings made personal and official appeals for aid to one another. Seventh, the empires shifted alliances as strategic advantage required.

Given the persistent conditions as described, simply suggesting that these empires were enemies and would have fought each other to submission were it not for the interference of other barbarian enemies is seriously lacking. Charles Diehl represents historians with this point of view. Yet even he suggests a geo-political purpose was at work:

In Asia, Persia had been the perpetual enemy of the Romans for centuries. There was a ceaseless temptation to strife and a pretext for warfare in the coincidence of the two frontiers, and the *rival influence which the two States exercised in Armenia in the Caucasus, and among the Arab tribes of the Syrian desert.* [emphasis mine]<sup>3</sup>

Let us extend this view with the contention that the persistent conditions, which admittedly were subject to the will of each individual monarch, suggest that the wars fought between the Persians and Romans were most often carried out to maintain a stable balance of power between the empires and protective spheres of influence in the region.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the underlying purpose of these two geo-political objectives was often, among other reasons, either religion in the 'client' states surrounding the two empires or economics.<sup>5</sup>

Persia and Rome were not combatants isolated in a vacuum. Their respective, long frontiers were shared with various tribes and kingdoms of barbarians: the Romans had continual strife with Avars, Goths of every stripe, Slavs, Lombards, Bedouins, and a variety of others along its northern and southern extremes; Persia's principal non-Roman nemesis was the dangerous threat to

---

<sup>2</sup> The actual border was not rigidly demarcated and fixed at one place through the whole period, but from a global perspective its shifts were within a consistent and relatively narrow band of territory.

<sup>3</sup> C. Diehl, "Justinian. The Imperial Restoration in the West," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II: The Rise of the Saracens and the Foundation of the Western Empire. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913) p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Stratos is of similar opinion: *Selon notre opinion celles-ci doivent probablement se trouver dans des faits dus aux nécessités géopolitiques et concerner principalement la sécurité, les questions religieuses ou encore les problèmes afférents à des sujets de nature économique.* (A. Stratos, "Byzance et la Perse," Studies in 7th-Century Byzantine Political History. (Reprinted from: Revue des Deux Mondes, April 1981, Paris) (London: Valorum Reprints, 1983) p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'client states', although possibly an inaccurate description, refers to those surrounding kingdoms, principalities, and tribal territories that while independent were at times protectorates or allies of one or the other of the empires.

its north-eastern frontier, the Ephthalites or White Huns.<sup>6</sup> These barbarian threats caused the empires to regularly move limited men and arms to defend their vast frontiers.

Fighting separate battles on different fronts requires further dispersal of already limited military power among battle-lines. It is tactically dangerous and usually affords insufficient strength to deal with either enemy effectively. Wise commanders, such as the Persian kings and the Roman emperors, and their respective generals and advisors, would reduce the number of wars and fronts being fought -- ideally to one -- by agreeing to truces with and making concessions to one of the enemies. This pattern: war between the empires being brought to an end for some duration in order that one or both of the empires could concentrate forces on other enemies, reappears throughout the period. Conversely, both Persians and Romans were frequently willing to petition for peace with their other enemies so that they might engage the other empire instead.

Even if the western part of the Roman empire were not considered, there were several occasions when Rome was faced with hostility from more than one enemy, at more than one location, in the east. One such instance serves to highlight the real value of the Roman ability to fight one enemy at a time. As Ostrogorsky puts it:

The Persians were now able to take the offensive again, and in 626 Constantinople had to face the terrible danger of a two-faced attack from the Persians and Avars. It was this which Heraclius had always *feared and had tried to avert by buying off the Avars with humiliating concessions*. [emphasis mine]<sup>7</sup>

Victory in this case, due in part to Rome's tactics and superior sea power, was Rome's. However, we see the Emperor's awareness of and willingness to employ the tactics needed to prevent dual-front wars. Furthermore, the tactic's failure in this instance -- an infrequent occurrence, as the empires were willing to make large, "humiliating" payments for (temporary) truces -- provides an insight into the costs associated with not having either (a) the ability to purchase armistice, or (b) an insulating sphere of influence with surrounding territories.

Regarding the empires seeking relief to deal with other enemies, Bury notes various instances when the Persians sued for peace. For instance, Isdigerd "the clement" declared war on the Empire immediately upon his accession in 440, but equally promptly a peace was concluded. The new circumstance that prompted the reversal was that, "Isdigerd was soon engaged in a war

---

<sup>6</sup> J.B. Bury, A History of the Later Roman Empire. From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565). (London: MacMillan & Co., 1923) p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> G. Ostrogorsky, History of the Byzantine State. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Limited, 1956) p. 92.

with the Ephthalites."<sup>8</sup> Again in 503, a Hunnic invasion of the Persian north-east pushed the King, Kobad to make peace with the Romans.<sup>9</sup>

Consider that while these empires were avowed enemies, concluding truces with barbarian invaders to fight each other, they were also inclined to seek assistance and protection from one another. Such acts are not especially common among enemies *except* when a more powerful enemy appears.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, we must remember that, as with the wax and wane of each empire's fortunes, the willingness to approach the enemy for assistance was dependent upon prevailing circumstances, and, moreover, upon the personality of the reigning monarch. Nevertheless, at several times did Persian kings make requests for aid and assistance from the Emperor.

- Kawad (Persian King at 488) demanded contribution from Anastasius for defenses of Caucasian Gates, in Armenia, which Anastasius refused. Kawad was deposed in 496, but, "Having been restored *by the Ephthalites* under a promise of paying a large sum of money (499), he again applied to Anastasius for help. The Emperor would only agree to lend the money on a written promise of payment." [emphasis mine]<sup>11</sup>
- "[Chosroes II, the new monarch (591),] was forced to throw himself upon the mercy of the Emperor. . . . [T]he King of kings arrived at Circesium and craved Rome's protection, offering in return to restore the lost Armenian provinces and to surrender Martyropolis and Dara."<sup>12</sup> Maurice gave him men and money, and Chosroes regained his throne. Maurice restored the Empire's eastern frontier.<sup>13</sup>
- "[King] Siroe on his death-bed named the Byzantine Emperor as his son's guardian . . . Siroe declared his son and heir to be the slave of the Byzantine Emperor"<sup>14</sup> and made a request of Heraclius to take the boy.

---

<sup>8</sup> J.B. Bury, A History of the Later Roman Empire From Arcadius to Irene (395 A.D. to 800 A.D.). (London: MacMillan & Co., 1889) p. 306.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 309.

<sup>10</sup> Here one encounters the Realpolitik philosophy that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend.' Numerous times the empires pursued such policies, engaging or otherwise invoking the other's enemies into hostilities with the other empire.

<sup>11</sup> E.W. Brooks, "The Eastern Provinces from Arcadius to Anastasius," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume I: The Christian Roman Empire and the Foundation of the Teutonic Kingdoms. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911) p. 491.

<sup>12</sup> N. Baynes, "The Successors of Justinian," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II: The Rise of the Saracens and the Foundation of the Western Empire. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913) p. 280.

<sup>13</sup> Oddly, personifying chutzpah, Chosroes II later (ca. 602-604) 'avenged' Maurice's murder by making a drive against the new Emperor, Phocas. This attack, opportunistic or not, began the long and ultimately empire-destroying final wars of the 7th century. (G. Ostrogorsky, History of the Byzantine State. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Limited, 1956) p. 77.)

<sup>14</sup> According to Nicephorus 20 f. he wrote to Heraclius: 'In the same way as you say that your God was presented to the old man Symeon, so I present your slave, my son, into your hands.' (G. Ostrogorsky, History of the Byzantine State. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Limited, 1956) p. 93.)

In the first example, the lesser -- or at least less pressing -- enemy was sought out for a money grant to pay off a more pressing problem. Anastasius acted prudently, if not smartly in a geo-political sense. The result was a costly attack by the Persians with no gain extracted by Rome. In the second case, a similar circumstance resulted in the Emperor presuming that he would have a Persian enemy regardless of what he did, and deciding to obtain some concessions while helping the Persian aspirant to the throne. As stated, the Romans netted a geo-political gain, re-extending their sphere of influence. Later, in the mid-seventh century, Heraclius would also pick sides and gain a concession from a Persian usurper.<sup>15</sup> In the final example, the threat to the King was internal. But, the language used by the Persian king is most telling -- or disturbing, if one were to interpret the Roman-Persian situation as being unidimensional. While Heraclius had other tactical designs, this request implied an acknowledged change in the balance of powers.

It would be excessive optimism to consider these infrequent situations as 'friendly' or indicating a warming between the empires. Alternatively, they may indicate the extent to which the inter-empire warring was pragmatically designed to maintain balance and consistency, if not stability. That is, perhaps these empires -- or certain leaders, at least -- were not intent upon beating down and dominating the other; perhaps each was the other's known devil, and the great concern was to ensure that devil did not grow too powerful.<sup>16</sup> Analysis of motives and actions of various Emperors and Kings, by a diverse group of historians, would suggest that to some extent wars between these two empires were started, continued, and stopped (apparently without conclusion) for just such a reason. Baynes, describing Tiberius (578-582), says:

He fought not for conquest but for peace, he struggled to win from Persia a recognition that Rome was her peer, that *on a basis of security* the Empire might work out its internal union and concentrate its strength around the shores of the eastern Mediterranean. [emphasis mine]<sup>17</sup>

There is substantial evidence and analysis to suggest that balance of power was generally recognized, and that to greater or lesser degrees one empire's attempt to alter the balance resulted in reprisal from the other. Diehl tells us that in the early sixth century, "The old king Kawad declared war, worried by the encroaching policy of Byzantium, and specially menaced by the increase of Roman influence during Justin's reign in the Caucasus region . . ."<sup>18</sup> This analysis is repeated

---

<sup>15</sup> N. Baynes, "The Successors of Justinian," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II: The Rise of the Saracens and the Foundation of the Western Empire, Cambridge: (Cambridge University Press, 1913) p. 299.

<sup>16</sup> An inherent weakness of imperial expansion was overreach, when the borders to be protected and monitored grow beyond the means available to do so. Because Persia and Rome kept each other in balance, they protected each other from just such potentiality is a workable hypothesis. It is addressed somewhat in the final part of this paper.

<sup>17</sup> N. Baynes, "The Successors of Justinian," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II: The Rise of the Saracens and the Foundation of the Western Empire, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913) p. 277.

<sup>18</sup> C. Diehl, "Justinian. The Imperial Restoration in the West," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II: The Rise of the Saracens and

consistently, such as by Oates: "[Chosroes] had not . . . foreseen the grandiose schemes of conquest which Justinian, freed from the threat to his eastern frontier, proceeded to undertake in the west, and it is probable that fear for the safety of his own dominions combined with personal ambition to dictate his next move."<sup>19</sup> And, Bury echoes the sentiment with the more explicit final word, ". . . if Justinian were allowed to continue his career of conquest undisturbed the Romans might come with larger armies and increased might to extend their dominions in the East at the expense of the Sassanid empire."<sup>20</sup>

Direct military action upon the other empire was certainly one option available to the Emperor or King, as the case may be, when he felt the potential for vulnerability. And, given the frequency of war between the empires, it might seem to have been the first option. But, wars were costly in money and resources: both sides took significant personnel losses in each of their skirmishes. Evidence suggests that Romans and Persians deftly employed diplomacy as a means to achieve their geo-political objectives. That is, both empires attempted at various times to keep the other down by diplomatic means.

Runciman provides a description of Roman diplomacy:

Beneath the veneer of pomp Byzantine diplomacy was subtle, far-sighted and somewhat unscrupulous. Treaty obligations were always carefully observed; but the Byzantines saw nothing wrong in inciting some foreign tribe against a neighbour with whom they were at peace. . . . It was a basic rule in Byzantine foreign politics to *induce some other nation to oppose the enemy*, and so to cut down the expenses and risks of a war. [emphasis mine]<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding that the Romans may have had additional objectives in mind, the action Runciman describes here is balance of power diplomacy and Realpolitik. These tactics are not especially dissimilar to those employed centuries later by Richelieu, Castlereagh, Bismark, and even Nixon/Kissinger. If we first assume that both empires were employing such tactics, and second that these two empires were the most powerful players in the regional theatre, we can make a valid argument that both were conspiring generally with insubstantial players (in their spheres of influence) to keep the other empire occupied and thereby prevented from developing the strength to dominate. As Runciman continues: "An active diplomacy was kept up, to embroil foreign

---

the Foundation of the Western Empire. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913) p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> D. Oates, Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> J. B. Bury, A History of the Later Roman Empire From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565). (London: MacMillan & Co., 1923) p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> S. Runciman, Byzantine Civilisation. (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1932) p. 158.

nations with each other and so maintain an equilibrium that would prevent any potential enemy from invading Imperial territory.”<sup>22</sup>

Justinian was a clear example of how an emperor could employ diplomatic measures along with arms to develop and create a larger strategy for achieving his goals. Bury writes:

Justinian was not less energetic in increasing the prestige and strengthening the power of the Empire by his diplomacy than by his arms. While his generals went forth to recover lost provinces, he and his agents were incessantly engaged in maintaining the Roman spheres of influence beyond the frontiers and drawing new peoples within the circle of Imperial client states.<sup>23</sup>

Many of these foreign nations were independent kingdoms in the same regional theatre. Some, such as Armenia, might be actual client states while others would simply be independent nations kept within the sphere of influence of one of the empires. That the loyalties between smaller nations and empires changed periodically made the geo-politics of the area fluid. The underlying reasons for the shifting allegiances and the desire to maintain the satellites within a particular imperial orbit included religion and economics. It is on these independent nations that we need to dwell at some length, as they were a key underlying driver for the trouble between the empires.

The direct border between Rome and Persia was a relatively short 250 miles, approximately half of which was either desert or mountain.<sup>24</sup> That frontier, in the fertile fields of Mesopotamia, was nonetheless of little strategic importance with the exception of a few fortress cities such as Nisibis, Edessa, and Daras. There were relatively few naturally protected places to maintain the border, and little of value above and beyond the people and land itself. The border gets a little longer when several key, northern client states, such as Armenia, Iberia, and Lazica, near the Black Sea, are added to the overall distance. Particularly in and for these, but also for some of the other satellite states that created the cushion-border between the two great empires, the Persians and Romans found cause to battle. The simple underlying reason is that these nations were of strategic importance: providing or denying access to key geographic areas, providing high-quality mercenaries, providing natural resources of various types.

Let us further examine the importance of some of these Black Sea client states. Since 296 when the King Narseh invaded Armenia, this territory at the south-east end of the Black Sea, at the

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 155.

<sup>23</sup> J.B. Bury, A History of the Later Roman Empire. From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565). (London: MacMillan & Co., 1923) p. 292.

<sup>24</sup> J. Garry and P. Gay, editors, The Columbia History of the World. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972) pp. 234-235.

bottom of the Caucasus mountain range, was perhaps the most fought over and fought on territory in the region. Ultimately it was partitioned between the two empires. Armenia's strategic importance was that it provided a gateway to the Black Sea and an excellent staging ground for invasion into either empire. It also provided soldiers and, allegedly, gold for its patron empire.<sup>25</sup> Rome particularly required gold since its balance of trade (primarily with the Orient) was usually negative as it needed to import silk and other luxury items. Additionally, perhaps more than any other border state, Armenia was a hotbed for battles between Persia and Rome because of its religion, which is addressed more fully below.

Another key territory fought for because of its strategic location on the Black Sea is Lazica, located in the Caucasus, on the eastern shore of the Sea. As Stratos, says, "Les deux empires se battirent sans cesse pour la domination de la Lazique que chacun voulait posséder."<sup>26</sup> The Lazi converted to Christianity and Lazica became a Roman client state after appealing to the Empire for protection from their prevailing Persian overlord.<sup>27</sup> As a Roman protectorate, Lazica was charged with the responsibility of preventing the Persians with access to and above the Black Sea through the Caucasus passes.<sup>28</sup> Bury sums up the matter succinctly:

The importance of the Lazic war, for the Romans, was that by holding the country in 557, they prevented Chosroes from access to the Euxine and thereby ability to rival the Romans on the sea.<sup>29</sup>

Having Armenia and the Lazica as part of an extended empire was a matter of strategic importance, but equally, these territories became battlegrounds because of Christianity. The effect of religion, particularly of Christianity, on Roman relations with Persia is no less a morass than the impact of Christianization in any other facet of this period. But, it must be recognized as a significant driving force in the animosity between the two empires.

Perhaps the primary reason why Persia was disgruntled by the Christian fact was its loss of strategic territories to the Roman sphere of influence, as noted earlier. That is, Roman territories such as Lazica and Armenia were not being lost to Roman conquest, but rather to an internal culturo-religious desire to detach from Persia. Charles Diehl ties together the diplomatic efforts to

---

<sup>25</sup> *L'Arménie avait non seulement des mines, mais ses rivières charriaient surtout des sables aurifères.* A. Stratos, "Byzance et la Perse," *Studies in 7th-Century Byzantine Political History*. (London: Valorum Reprints, 1983) p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> A. Stratos, "Byzance et la Perse," *Studies in 7th-Century Byzantine Political History*. (London: Valorum Reprints, 1983) p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 36.

<sup>29</sup> J.B. Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565)*. (London: MacMillan & Co., 1923) p. 120.

maintain a balance of power and an increased sphere of influence with the expansion of Christianity:

With great skill Byzantine diplomacy, by spreading Christianity in those regions, had inclined the peoples to wish for the protection of the orthodox Emperor, and so had obtained possession of important strategic and commercial posts for Greek use. This policy of encroachment was bound to lead to a rupture, . . .”<sup>30</sup>

Stratos goes further to suggest that this state of affairs was unacceptable to the Persians because the pull of Christianity to the orthodox centre, Constantinople, was affecting populations in other areas of Mesopotamia and in Persia as well.<sup>31</sup>

To elaborate on an earlier analysis of the importance of Armenia to the two empires, note that the second quarter of the fifth century saw Christianity bloom in Armenia. Naturally, the Armenians would then feel more comfortable with their Christian brethren rather than the Zoroastrian Persians, and they took action to make that change. Equally naturally, they had Rome's full support. Ostrogorsky describes the religious developments and the military results:

[C]ultural stirrings in neighbouring Armenia . . . found means of self-expression through Christianity. . . . [T]he Bible was translated into Armenian. Since Theodosius the Great's day part of the country had been under Byzantine rule, though most of it remained under Persian overlordship. Byzantium had strongly supported this deepening sense of native self-consciousness which was so intimately connected with the establishment of the Christian Church in Armenia. But the Armenian problem, together with the intervention of the Byzantine government on behalf of the persecuted Christians in Persia, led to a fresh outbreak of hostilities between the two great powers. The war did not bring any territorial changes.<sup>32</sup>

A second reason for the Persian king to be concerned by religious matters was Christian proselytizing inside Persia and among the territories adjacent to both empires. This was, of course, a common lead-in to conquest by the Romans with "missionaries reinforcing diplomats" and priests clearing the way for politicians.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, the success that Christianity was having in converting those to whom it took its message created the gravest concern for the Persian monarch. Bury provides an example:

All might have gone well [under Yezdegerd] if the Christian clergy had been content to be tolerated and to enjoy their religious liberty. But they engaged in an active campaign of

---

<sup>30</sup> C. Diehl, "Justinian. The Imperial Restoration in the West," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II: The Rise of the Saracens and the Foundation of the Western Empire. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913) p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> A. Stratos, "Byzance et la Perse," Studies in 7th-Century Byzantine Political History. (London: Valerium Reprints, 1983) p. 37.

<sup>32</sup> G. Ostrogorsky, History of the Byzantine State. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Limited, 1956) p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> C. Diehl, Byzantium: Greatness and Decline. (New Jersey: Rutgers, 1957) p. 59.

proselytism and were so successful in converting Persians to Christianity that the king became seriously alarmed.<sup>34</sup>

In another important area, commerce and trade, the Persian and Roman empires maintained a relationship which was generally in Persia's favour. That is, the routes for import of luxury goods from China and the Orient were predominantly controlled by Persian merchants or authorities. The monopoly created an added financial burden on Rome, by way of tariffs, when trade flowed, and during war with Persia resulted in a complete drought of luxury products from the Orient.<sup>35</sup> It was, to say the least, a problem that the Romans could not accept in the long term. But, any action to alter this balance was vigorously opposed by the Persians, by sanction and by arm.

One example of effort to alter this economic status quo is seen in Justinian's attempt to avoid the land routes to the Orient controlled by the Persians. To do so, he enlisted the alliance and assistance of the Ethiopian kingdom, which had for some reason been shut out of the silk trade by the Persians, to import luxury merchandise via the Indian Ocean and Red Sea route to the Suez.<sup>36</sup> The result was a free flow for a short period, until the Persians took action and floated a fleet to control the Indian Ocean and Red Sea water routes as well. The Ethiopians remained loosely allied to the Romans and hostilities endured between the parties for some time thereafter.

The issue of economics is generally tightly interwoven into the other causes for war that are otherwise addressed herein. As we have seen, petitions for peace were accompanied by demands for money. Thus collection of tribute was an economic sector of its own. Additionally, the matter of Rome particularly needing access to gold and other natural resources, was discussed briefly above. The economic value of such resource would include holding and protecting Egypt, which was a crucial part of the Empire because its riches in grains, etc. that could be exported to the other, urban parts of the Empire. It was cushioned from Persia by the occasionally allied Arab tribes that populated the desert of the Arabian peninsula.

It may be that the empires' creating protective spheres of influence among adjacent states has been over-simplified and romanticized herein. And, there would probably be good purpose to put the geo-political reality into perspective. Not only did the expansion of spheres of influence create diplomatic and possible military action between the empires fighting over a territory's alliance, but it actually caused problems for the empire that succeeded in allying the client state.

---

<sup>34</sup> J.B. Bury, A History of the Later Roman Empire. From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565). (London: MacMillan & Co., 1923) p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> A. Stratos, "Byzance et la Perse," Studies in 7th-Century Byzantine Political History. (London: Valorum Reprints, 1983) p. 41.

These clients often created as many problems as they solved for the empire. They tended toward capricious loyalty, regularly seeking the best bargain from a protector (knowing how important their little territory was to each giant) and causing wars in the process. Stratos summarizes the difficulty and dilemma in extending the imperial sphere of influence:

Mais ce n'était pas toujours facile, car la plupart du temps ces Etats-tampons voisins causaient tant de troubles, provoquaient tant de problèmes que les deux empires se trouvaient dans l'obligation d'intervenir par la force, génératrice de nouvelles guerres. Tel était le cas des tribus arabes qui vivaient sur les territoires frontaliers de Byzance ou de la Perse.<sup>37</sup> p. 34

One final persistent condition from which one can infer that the battles and wars between Rome and Persia were not necessarily expansionary death duels is that, notwithstanding the circumstances of the seventh century, the frontier between the two empires did not dramatically change over the course of the more than four centuries considered. Certain territories and cities changed hands or were sacked by invading armies, but generally the frontier remained materially within a consistent south-west to north-east band across Mesopotamia and around the previously-mentioned Black Sea territories.

In thinking about this fact, one should bear in mind the following: "The Persians normally observed treaties, and they had no intention of leaving their homes and moving en masse into the Roman territories, as the barbarians did."<sup>38</sup> The suggestion is that the intent to capture territory from the Romans, simply for the sake of having it (i.e., not for geo-politically strategic reasons), generally did not exist in Persia. Similarly, Oates suggests that the Romans were not in an expansionist<sup>39</sup> mode:

In general a state of rough equilibrium was maintained, and this is expressed on the Roman side in the transition from a frontier which had been an offensive base to a *less ambitious defensive line*. [emphasis mine]<sup>40</sup>

If the border did not change, and we presume that wars were not conducted for entertainment, the question remains, what was the purpose? Or, alternatively, what did change hands? Apart from the exchange of strategic border territories and cities that were taken and retaken as noted earlier, the easy and obvious answer is: money. Each peace treaty that ended a

---

<sup>36</sup> Technically, these would be the Ethiopians of the kingdom of Axum.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> J. Garraty and P. Gay, *The Columbia History of the World*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972) pp. 234-235.

<sup>39</sup> For the sake of clarity it is important to distinguish between expansion of the formal borders of the Empire and extension of its sphere of influence over adjacent territories. The suggestion is that the Romans were not intent or prepared to expand beyond their previous furthest territorial limits. I believe, however, that they were quite eager to expand the breadth of their influence over adjacent 'independent' kingdoms.

<sup>40</sup> D. Oates, *Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq*. (London: Oxford University Press., 1968) p. 93.

period of war came with a specified amount of tribute or compensation to be paid by the petitioner. As previously stated, these payments were quite material economically.

A somewhat less obvious transaction was the exchange of the currency of 'influence'. By ceding money or territory, and in fact by simply petitioning for peace, the empire so doing would lose some of its influence within the regional theatre. To reclaim that currency and expand the empire's influence again would require reformed efforts in diplomacy, religious proselytizing, and so forth. At the end of each war, during the ensuing years of peace, these were the actions that the empires took over and above their other battles and troubles.

At times throughout this paper, the argument has been qualified to acknowledge that the events of the last fifty years, specifically the conquering and pillaging march of Chosroes throughout the Roman empire -- indeed to the Bosphorus -- and the ensuing reclamation of Imperial territory by Heraclius, were an anomaly to the consistent pattern of relations between Rome and Persia during this period.<sup>41</sup> These events are important to this hypothesis and argument because the result of their aberration from the balance of power 'restraints' that had previously been maintained by the empires in their battles against one another was ultimately to weaken both empires and alter radically the geo-politics of the region.

Chosroes' possibly arrogant advances deep into Roman territory may have been fueled by misguided belief that Rome had been weakened enough to overtake. Obviously ignoring the possibilities that a new general may (successfully) fight back, or that overreach would weaken Persia itself, he proceeded. However, there is good reason to believe that it was the sacking and pillaging of Jerusalem, including the theft of the True Cross, that altered the course of events. Heraclius had begun to mount a counter-offensive but was too poor to do so effectively until the Church came to the rescue. Baynes eloquently summarizes the impact:

[The Church] agreed to lend at interest its vast wealth in plate that the gold and silver might be minted into money; for this was no ordinary struggle: it was a crusade to rescue from the infidel the Holy City and the Holy Cross. Christian State and Christian Church must join hands against a common foe.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Oversimplifying the events and circumstances to their salient facts, this final Persian war was commenced by Chosroes under the pretense of avenging Maurice's murder (ca 602-604). The Persians over-ran vast parts of the Roman empire from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The culmination was the sacking and pillaging of Jerusalem. Heraclius arrived from Carthage and did away with the Emperor, Phocas, and, with the aid of the Church, defended and counter-attacked. Clever stratagem and some luck resulted in a routing of the Persians and an Imperial reclamation of all its former territories to the borders of 591. Infighting in the Persian imperial court ultimately weakened Persia to the point where it could not withstand enemies, and in the middle of the seventh century was ended by Arab forces that eventually overtook most of Asia Minor. (G. Ostrogorsky, History of the Byzantine State. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Limited, 1956) pp. 98-99.)

<sup>42</sup> N. Baynes, "The Successors of Justinian," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II: The Rise of the Saracens and the Foundation of the Western Empire. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913) p. 292.

By taking what was arguably the most important Christian artifact from the Holy City, Chosroes turned the battle into a holy war.<sup>43</sup> Until that time the Church had not actively participated in the geo-politics of the area, or especially between the empires. When it did, the balance of power shifted due both to the righteousness inherent in a holy cause and to the money available for the war. The power relations in the region became unsettled.

The importance of the balance of power and the ramifications of its unsettling are vividly seen in the ultimate end of this final, disastrous Persian war. The Persian empire was broken and the Sassanid dynasty came to an end. But more significant is that the victor of these wars, Rome, was also ultimately a loser because it had been drained by the high cost to man, machine, and money. Furthermore, instability and (possibly momentary) weakness created an opportunity for another power to vanquish these lions in autumn. This was precisely the result, as within three years Caliph Omar breached Roman territory and took what Heraclius had fought so hard to win back.<sup>44</sup>

Ultimately, what we know for sure is summarized in the persistent conditions of the relations between Persia and Rome, as provided herein. One may take a superficial -- but possibly correct -- approach to the matter and believe that, despite or because of the religious and commercial issues, the wars between Persia and Rome were about conquest and domination. Moreover, had the Persians not been occupied with the Ephthalites so frequently, they would have much earlier attempted to overrun the Roman empire as Chosroes did at the beginning of the seventh century. Heraclius' decision not to take his Persian conquests but revert to the borders of 591 might, however, tend to dispel that argument somewhat. Nevertheless, the end result prior to the Islamic conquest, at least somewhat justifies such a read.

Yet, a simple analysis such as that leaves many facts and circumstances unexplained. It also would tend to paint these Emperors and Kings, their advisors and courts, as especially unaware and perhaps little more than savage. But this was a time of development of Christian ideals with an underlayer of Classical Greek thought, and of a fairly lengthy period of general border stability in the east. Moreover, the facts provided in the available traces of the past point to an understanding and use of geo-political means to achieve imperial ends. It is with this understanding and awareness that we must interpret the four hundred years of battles and wars between the two great empires of the area. Perhaps we should credit Rome and Persia of this period for the development of western practice in policies of balance of power and spheres of influence international politics.

---

<sup>43</sup> G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Limited, 1956) p. 93.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 99.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnott, Peter, The Byzantines and Their World. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973.
- Baynes, Norman, "Constantine's Successors to Jovian: And the Struggle With Persia," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume I: The Christian Roman Empire and the Foundation of the Teutonic Kingdoms. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911.
- Baynes, Norman, "The Dynasty of Valentinian and Theodosius the Great," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume I: The Christian Roman Empire and the Foundation of the Teutonic Kingdoms. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911.
- Baynes, Norman, "The Successors of Justinian," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II: The Rise of the Saracens and the Foundation of the Western Empire. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913.
- Brooks, E.W., "The Eastern Provinces from Arcadius to Anastasius," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume I: The Christian Roman Empire and the Foundation of the Teutonic Kingdoms. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911.
- Bury, J.B., A History of the Later Roman Empire From Arcadius to Irene (395 A.D. to 800 A.D.). London: MacMillan & Co., 1889.
- Bury, J.B., A History of the Later Roman Empire From the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian (A.D. 395 to A.D. 565). London: MacMillan & Co., 1923.
- Bury, J.B., Cook, S.A., and Adcock, F.E., ed., The Cambridge Ancient History Volume IV The Persian Empire and the West. London: Cambridge University Press, 1926.
- Diehl, Charles, "Justinian. The Imperial Restoration in the West," The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume II: The Rise of the Saracens and the Foundation of the Western Empire. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913.
- Diehl, Charles, Byzantium: Greatness and Decline. New Jersey: Rutgers, 1957.
- Garraty, John and Gay, Peter, The Columbia History of the World. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972.
- Hendy, Michael, The Economy, Fiscal Administration and Coinage of Byzantium. Northampton: Valorium Reprints, 1989.
- Hussey, J.M., ed., The Cambridge Medieval History, Volume IV: The Byzantine Empire, Part II: Government, Church and Civilisation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.
- Oates, David., Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq. London: Oxford University Press., 1968.
- Olmstead, A.T., History of the Persian Empire. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- Ostrogorsky, George, History of the Byzantine State. Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Limited, 1956.
- Runciman, Steven, Byzantine Civilisation. London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1932.
- Stratos, Andreas, "Byzance et la Perse," Studies in 7th-Century Byzantine Political History. (Reprinted from: Revue des Deux Mondes, April 1981, Paris) London: Valorium Reprints, 1983.

Treadgold, Warren, A History of the Byzantine State and Society. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.